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The Reorganization of Education in China

COMMENTS ON THE LEAGUE MISSION'S REPORT

By C. L. HSIA

AT THE May 1931 session of the Council of the League of Nations, the Chinese Government asked the technical organizations of the League to collaborate in the preparation and execution of a scheme of reform. For the centralization and control of the work of reform, the Economic Council was set up by the Chinese Government. It announced its intention of drawing up a program without delay, setting forth the most urgent tasks that could be successfully undertaken in the course of the coming years. It declared its conviction that the work of the first few years would be in the nature of an experiment, limited in its object and field of application, that would serve usefully to prepare the way for a more extensive plan covering a much longer period. Its intention was to determine by this method the most suitable means to be employed, and, by a process of partial but appropriate application, to set up, with the assistance of the provincial and local authorities, models for the new undertaking which it was endeavoring to bring into operation.

With regard to the reorganization of public education, the League contemplated, in particular, sending to China a mission composed of "advisers who would assist the development of the Chinese educational system and facilitate intercourse between the centers of intellectual activity in China and abroad."

Pursuant to the decision adopted by the Council on May 19, 1931, the International Committee on Intellectual Coöperation instructed its executive organ, the International Institute of International Coöperation, to appoint a mission of experts who would visit China for the purpose of studying the present situation in regard to public education and the long traditions of culture peculiar to the ancient civilization of China, and with a view to submitting recommendations on the most suitable procedure to be adopted to ensure a better adaptation of this educational system to present-day conditions of life. The mission was composed of Professor Carl H. Becker, of the University of Berlin, formerly Prussian Minister of Public Education; Professor M. Falski,

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Director of Primary Education at the Polish Ministry of Public Education; Professor P. Langevin, of the Collège de France; Professor R. H. Tawney, of the London School of Economics and Political Science; assisted by Mr. Frank P. Walters, Head of the Secretary-General's Office, League of Nations.

The mission arrived in China on September 30, 1931, and remained there about three months. The trend of events in the Far East in no way hampered the execution of the program which had been drawn up. The Educational Experts started their operations in Shanghai, where the Ministry of Education had sent its representative to meet them. They then visited Nanking, Tientsin, Peiping, Ting-Hsien, Hangchow, Chinkiang, Soochow. Only one member of the mission was able to proceed south, where he studied the teaching organization at Canton.

The Educational Experts have, in the "Introduction" of the Report, called special attention to the following considerations:

(1) The ideas set forth above and our judgments thereon are not based exclusively on our personal observations, but, to a very great extent, on the views expressed by Chinese experts. We have, however, made no statement which was not confirmed by our own observations.

(2) Although we belong to different countries and our training was in the case of each one of us different from all the others, we were unanimous in our conclusions regarding all the essential points. This Report, therefore, is not a compromise between various opinions; we jointly and unanimously drew up the conclusions reached.

The educational philosophy of the Experts is found in the Chapter on "The Spirit of Teaching."

The introduction, in the common interest, of primary instruction for more and more of the population until it finally applies to everybody. . . . This breaking-in augments the social utility and value of the work performed by the individual instead of widening his mind and permitting of his participating in the profundities or exaltations of the life of the species—as, we are beginning to conceive, it is, within the measure of his forces and his aptitudes, his right to do. And what is more, instead of constituting a true initiation into the collective life through contact with life, a preparation for the utilization of things through having concrete knowledge of them, a social gestation prolonging the uterine gestation and subject to the same great biological laws, the new education, a bastard younger brother of the old imparting of culture, suffered under the very dubious influence of the latter, imitating its exaggeratedly abstract, dogmatic, verbal and confined forms.

Again:

Introduced for reasons of a utilitarian nature rather than for the joy of understanding that it brings, scientific discipline has been, and, too often, still is, directed towards practical application, and smothered under the weight of that necessity. . . . The successive crises that occur in secondary education in the majority of European countries show that a

synthesis of the diverse elements of culture has not yet been attained, for want, as a rule, of sufficient confidence in the educative and human value of scientific discipline. . . .

It is, in fact, a material and spiritual liberation, that the understanding of the world and the power over the world given by that understanding, ought ultimately to represent for men. . . .

More and more the right of every child to be educated is being accepted, as social gestation which, while respecting and following the normal and spontaneous development of his mind, and, through seriously spent leisure hours, permitting the assimilation of new facts and new ideas and the free development of the personality, initiates him into the diverse aspects of human activity so as to facilitate for him the choice of that one best suited to his aptitude while leaving him in a position to understand the interest and the beauty of others as well as their relationship to his own. Such an education prepares the child for contact with men as well as with things, binds him as tightly and yet as freely as possible to other men in space and time, and develops in him a profound sense of the solidarity that unites him with all the others in the great adventure that the life of our species represents, the adventure which it rests with us to make marvellous or tragic.

THIS is what the Educational Experts call "the ideal . . . we—all of us—are still far from attaining." Education is for material and spiritual liberation and not to harness men to any particular task. The purpose of modern education should aim at the joy of understanding it brings, and not be of a purely utilitarian nature. This is a grand ideal and should be the ultimate aim of education. But no true and social-minded educationalist can shut his eyes to the great and pressing national and international problems of his generation, and his task it is to prepare and equip his pupils for the kind of warfare that is awaiting them. In a society constituted as it is today, no government is going to spend a large proportion of its revenue on educational institutions without making them serve what it considers to be the social and political needs of the hour. Every government must have an educational policy, and the emphasis on such a policy will vary according to the country's internal and external circumstances and the exigencies of the time. In a country like China, where the people are faced with great national and international crises, education there must be made in part utilitarian. States, like individuals, in the midst of starvation, oppression and mortal danger, must forego ornament and cultural luxuries. Some form of utilitarian education in China, therefore, is wholly defensible. In fact it should be made more efficiently and effectively utilitarian, though it is not necessary that this should be done to the exclusion of the higher and broader purpose of education.

To have a true perspective of the educational situation in China, we must take into account, on the one hand, the historical

circumstance in which modern education—a system of education after the Western model—was first introduced, and, on the other hand, the peculiar conditions and needs that obtain in China today.

The opening paragraph of the first chapter contains a two-fold criticism which runs right through the Report, namely, “schools and institutions are developing rather as independent organisms modelled on the forms and ideology of private education instead of being included in an organized system of public education related to immediate social problems.” One does not deny the justice of this criticism, but a little history will help us to a better appreciation of the existing state of affairs which most Chinese are more anxious to improve and reform than to defend. Through all the centuries the Chinese government and rulers never did much for the organization of education; nor did they consider it to be part of their duty. The state usually encouraged private efforts and honored men of learning. To spread and popularize learning was desirable, but not necessary. When the modern educational system was first adopted, the government, true to its traditions, established universities and professional schools, and it was not its immediate concern to open secondary and primary schools. The instructions given in these institutions of higher learning were intended to prepare an intellectual aristocracy of clerks and men of letters for the temporal and spiritual directors of the people.

Furthermore, modern education was introduced into China because the rulers believed that it would help to modernize China. A modernized China was the only way to save her from disintegration and dismemberment. Public education was, therefore, almost exclusively utilitarian in purpose. China had been governed for thousands of years by an intellectual aristocracy, and it was but natural that the rulers should hope to train up a new generation of modern scholars and scientists to lead the nation in the task of reconstruction and readjustment. The Government realized even then that it would be desirable to have universal education, but the task was tremendous and staggering in its magnitude, for the carrying out of which the Government had neither the means nor the necessary knowledge.

In the last decade of the 19th century, this was perhaps a right policy. But the plan miscarried for one reason or another and things did not work out as had been expected. Meantime political and economic conditions changed rapidly, while the educational policy of the Government remained practically the same. With the rapid change of modern conditions, leaders in those days did not anticipate and perhaps could not have anticipated the political, social and economic conditions of today. During the last few years

there has been a growing realization that the kind of education the youths are receiving in China is not sufficiently related to the needs of China. A change of China's educational policy is imperative. It may be advisable not to swing the pendulum too far. It is conceivable that the Chinese Government may adopt a double educational policy which will lay a sound foundation of universal and public instruction as recommended by the Report, supplemented by a system of carefully planned utilitarian education aiming at training intellectual and moral leaders of the nation.

In Part I , Chapter I, we read :

The result of all these conditions is the creation and development in China of schools and educational institutions not conducted on a strict system and not suitable to the needs and conditions of the country. The result is a favoring of schools of higher standard, generally rising far above the condition of the impoverished country, whilst the primary and vocational instruction most indispensable for the people is neglected. There is also the lack of social ideals within the schools, an abstract kind of instruction not directly connected with surrounding life and the necessities of the country's rebirth usually obtaining. This creates an enormous abyss between the masses of the Chinese people, plunged in illiteracy, and not understanding the needs of the country, and the intelligentsia educated in luxurious schools and indifferent to the wants of the masses. (p. 21).

This, as a general criticism of the educational situation in China, is far too sweeping, and might easily convey to those who are not acquainted with actual conditions in China a wrong impression; for the actual problems which the nation has to face are much more difficult and complicated. The writers may very well be asked to prove and elaborate the statement that "the primary and vocational instruction most indispensable for the people is neglected." In what way has the primary education in some parts of China been indispensable to the present-day China? What kind of vocational instruction would have benefited Chinese society? With the exception of Tsing Hua University and a few missionary institutions, it is not quite true to say that the intelligentsia has been educated in luxurious schools and indifferent to the wants of the masses. If the Educational Experts had taken the trouble to inquire, they would have found quite a large number of extremely poor students even in the so-called luxurious schools like Tsing Hua University, Central University in Nanking, and North-Eastern University in Mukden. These students are not exactly indifferent to the wants of the masses, but rather they are so absorbed with their own wants that they have had little time to think as yet of the wants of the masses.

NOBODY will deny the general criticisms found in Chapter II of Part I. "These institutions were not subjected to the internal modifications to permit of the utilization of the potentialities of the great traditions which were specifically Chinese." Again, Chinese "mistake the mere equivalent for an absolute identity" (p. 23). The Educational Experts must, however, realize that imitation is always easier than invention. Assimilation—by which is meant the transforming of a foreign idea or institution into something indigenous truly expressing the native genius of the people—takes time. A system of modern education truly suited to the cultural background of the Chinese race, as contemplated by the Educational Experts, cannot be evolved in a day. Thirty years is a comparatively short period for the evolution of a national system of education with its own philosophy and technique. There is nothing more challenging or inspiring to a Chinese educationist than this:

The autonomy of modernistic development in China requires a comparative study of all foreign civilizations, rather than the adoption of one to the exclusion of all others; for it must not be the aim of the development to Americanize China, but modernize China's own national and historical individuality. (p. 24).

In Part I, Chapters IV to VIII, the Educational Experts have quite rightly called the attention of the Chinese educational authorities to a number of important problems: the study of the Chinese language, the distribution of authority and funds between the central and local educational organs, the training and defining by law of the status of teachers, and the distribution of schools over the country.

In the rational utilization of schools undoubtedly there is unnecessary duplication in a city like Shanghai or Peiping, though the task of remedying the situation is not quite so simple as it may appear in Part I, Chapter IX. When the Educational Experts venture to estimate that with present available means it would be possible to teach not 8,785,000, but 17,570,000 children or even 22 million children, it only shows that they have not fully grasped some of the practical difficulties in China's primary education. The fundamental educational units between China and the West are not the same, when we take into consideration the difficulty of the Chinese written language, the poor school equipment and the qualifications of teachers. As a matter of fact, there is not yet at present such a great demand for schools as one might imagine.

The criticism about "social selection of school children and students," contained in Part I, Chapter X, is not entirely justified. The present state of affairs is the natural outcome of certain social conditions of the country, for which nobody can be held respon-

sible. Even in the immediate future the Government has no means of radically remedying the situation. With things as they are, education is the privilege of the comparatively leisured class. Circumstances will always favor the children of better situated parents or of such as are in some way privileged, unless the state penalizes the children of one class in favor of another class by, for example, subsidizing the poor family that send children to the school. The state would then immediately be faced with the impossible task of determining the financial resources of each family on the one hand and the burden of subsidizing an enormous number of poor families who desire to send their children to the school at the expense of the state. China is not prepared for either of these tasks. If there must be selection as a temporary expedient, it seems that the present selection is as good as any one can devise.

The recommendations given in Chapter XI, on the school system, deserve close attention and should be tried out in some districts. The organization or establishment of continuation schools in large towns is a matter that should receive the immediate attention of the authorities.

PART II of the Report is divided into three chapters, dealing with Primary Education, Secondary Education, and University Education, respectively. It proceeds on the thesis: "The development of schools in China ought to be organic and premeditated. Private initiative ought to let itself be influenced by a central pedagogic will in accordance with the necessities of the moment and the needs of the future" (p. 75). This should be the guiding principle of China's new educational policy.

Primary education deserves greater attention and care than it has been receiving in China. Both the authorities and people must get away from the pernicious idea that a secondary school is more important than a primary school and that a university is more important than a secondary school.

One thing the Report has helped to make clear is that the establishment and administration of primary schools is a function of the provincial and district governments. The Ministry of Education has, however, its share of duty to discharge through its department of primary education, which consists of planning, collaboration, offering of technical advice, and inspection.

The task of administration of village schools and of schools in scattered areas is much more difficult than the Educational Experts have realized.

Undoubtedly there is room for the better exploitation of buildings and teaching staff by increasing the number of pupils, but there are, however, definite limitations. The Educational Experts are apt to forget that they cannot always apply the best and most

up-to-date educational units and standards in dealing with the educational problems in China. Take, for example, an average primary school-teacher in China. He or she is not so well trained, nor is he or she so well paid as his or her colleague in the West. It is natural that the Chinese primary school-teacher cannot perform the same units of work as his colleague in one of the European countries where primary education has attained a high standard. The Chinese teacher must either take a longer time or a smaller number of pupils. Added to these facts there are other handicaps to overcome, such as the poor school equipment and the complicated ideographic language. Let us again remind the Educational Experts of the fact that all this effort in augmenting the number of children receiving instruction is trying to satisfy, at present, at any rate, only an abstract demand.

This brings us to the problem of compulsory universal education in China. The Educational Experts are right in saying that the plans and projects made by the Ministry of Education "are only sketchy general conceptions, which even in their present vague form cannot but cause grave doubts as to the possibility of their realization" (p. 86). It is not a matter that can be accomplished in a hurry. There must be a proper system of taxation, there must be a sufficient number of trained teachers who are properly protected, there must be a highly organized and efficient educational administration, and, finally, the Government and the people must think through and be prepared for the consequences of a nation of better educated citizens with the inevitable demand for a higher standard of living.

The Educational Experts offer this final advice: "For the carrying out of a plan of primary universal education, however, it is not sufficient for the central authority to formulate general principles. The plan must be worked out in detail for local areas" (p. 88). This is what they call the "early spade-work" before the introduction of universal instruction.

THE Educational Experts carefully explain the function of secondary education in Western countries, which they hope may be the broad aim of secondary education in China, as follows:

Whereas the universities, in addition to the research work which they accomplish in Europe, tend more and more to produce a higher intellectual class for certain determinate liberal professions; and whereas primary education, regarded as the very foundation of any system of national public education, is available to all without distinction, the secondary school is the laboratory in which the intermediate classes are trained, those which supply the majority of Government servants and business men in any country. The mission of the secondary school is to give, over and above primary elementary instruction, another form of education, complete in itself. (pp. 101-2)

It is obviously undesirable that these secondary schools should be modelled exclusively to meet university requirements. The only way to correct this bias is to make the school authorities realize that only a small proportion of their pupils will pass on to universities and that their main concern should be to give all the pupils an education complete in itself, so that they will have sufficient cultural equipment and common sense to enable them to play their part effectively and make themselves useful and good citizens. These people will inevitably form the backbone of every community. In China, as in Europe, secondary education should become "in ever-increasing measure . . . the nucleus of the policy of public education."

The Educational Experts did not touch upon the problem of character-building in schools. Unfortunately, scientific discipline and culture are not always associated with high moral character. It seems there is room for a certain type of private boarding school (cf. the English public schools) where devoted teachers and scholars will try to mould and build up a type of manhood and womanhood which may help to raise the moral tone and fibre of the nation.

"A university is at once a centre of intellectual activity and administrative organization. In order to perform its functions of research and education, it requires both a clear conception of the end to be attained and an adequate supply of the indispensable means, including a staff of skilled scholars and teachers, efficient officers, suitable equipment, and sufficient financial resources" (p. 136). These are the true requirements of a University and it is not difficult to see that universities in China lamentably fall short of these requirements.

Most of the criticisms directed against the organization of higher institutions of learning are only too true. The haphazard geographical distribution of Chinese universities; the multiplicity of separate institutions doing almost identical work in the same area, and the absence of a rational division of labor between them; the overemphasis on certain branches of knowledge to the neglect of others at least equally important; the unsatisfactory position of the teaching staffs, etc., have been the subject of repeated comment.

One must, however, point out that figures given on page 138 for the proportion of teachers to students are misleading, unless it is explained that in some universities the great majority of teachers are only on a part-time basis, lecturing two or three hours a week on one or two subjects. What they receive in way of remuneration cannot be considered salaries, but really lecture fees.

The criticisms of educational standards and methods all deserve close attention.

Among the proposals for reform, the establishment of a National Universities Council is an excellent suggestion. Among the advantages, this will tend to lessen the bureaucratic control of and interference with the university administration by the Ministry of Education. But it is wise not to burden the Council with too many details. It should occupy itself with the broad policy of higher education, the question of coöperation among universities and the making of important appointments. It is hoped that in the near future great principles of university administration and policy may be settled by the national legislative organ rather than by an executive department like the Ministry of Education. This will tend to increase the prestige and dignity of great universities, whose problems will become a national concern.

“Higher education needs to be greatly improved in quality. The number of Universities in certain cultural centers is at present excessive.” These are obvious, but nevertheless sound opinions. In fact, there is a great deal to be said for a drastic reduction of the number of full-fledged universities to a minimum number of two or three or at most four. The nation should mobilize its resources and personnel and concentrate its attention on just two or three institutions, until the time comes when there is a definite increase in the nation’s resources and a real demand for expansion. The students in these institutions should be admitted by competitive examination and be strictly limited in number. These universities shall set out frankly to fulfil two functions: they are, on one hand, the centers of intellectual activity, and, on the other hand, the training ground for the higher-grade public servants and leaders of various professions, the spiritual and temporal directors of the nation. The learning of the teachers and the result of their research are at the disposal of the state.

THE Educational Experts have rendered a very distinguished service to China. They have brought a truly scientific spirit and high idealism to their task. They have gathered and mastered a mass of facts and figures in a very short time, and studied and scrutinized them with great care and thoroughness. They have given China the benefit of their profound knowledge and technique and offered to the different departments of Chinese education sound advice and wise recommendations which will be of permanent value.

In their loyalty to a high educational idealism, they have disparaged the utilitarian aspect of education. They conceive education as the material and spiritual liberation of man, but make no attempt to show us how education can liberate a poverty-stricken society faced with oppression without and forces of disintegration within.

This material and spiritual liberation and scientific discipline will most probably, though not necessarily, lead men to have a materialistic outlook on life. Culture and science have their spiritual as well as their material plane. The great heritage of the Chinese race is its humane and artistic civilization. Science tends to harden rather than soften some of these qualities unless it is put on a spiritual basis and filled with a moral purpose. The building of a new manhood, still grounded on the classical traditions, but broadened and strengthened by scientific discipline, must be placed in the forefront of China's educational program. Unlike the West, education, rather than religion, has always been the basis of moral conduct. Character formation must be a part of the function of education in China.

The lack of classroom experience in China is partly responsible for some of the faulty conclusions and speculations. An average primary school-teacher in China is practically an untrained person according to the Western standard, and the material which he works with, the instrument he uses and his surroundings (which include his own family conditions and the coöperation or the lack of it he receives from the parents of the pupils) are totally different from that to which the Educational Experts are accustomed. Perhaps sometimes they were misled by statistics. For people who are not familiar with the country's political and social conditions the deciphering and interpreting of Chinese statistics is one of the most difficult problems in the world.