

CHINA'S CRYING NEED OF ROADS

Jan. 5.

THE letter from our up-country correspondent in Friday's issue of our paper called attention to the appalling condition of roads in this country, and his severe reprobation of the apathy of those responsible for the condition of the highways must have been echoed by all who have been unfortunate enough to have experienced the toil of plodding through the miry sloughs misnamed roads in China. A missionary once journeyed over one of those terrible roads and at the end of the day arrived at a little tumble-down village, covered with mud, wet to the skin, and exasperated in temper. The village bore took occasion to lecture him on the excellencies of "our *ta ts'ing kwoh*—great pure country." The phrase was repeated so often that at last the traveller lost his temper and replied, "Great pure country indeed! It should be called the *ta tsang kwoh*—great dirty country, for your roads are dirty, your inns are dirty, you are dirty yourself and now I am as dirty as everything else."

China is increasingly becoming the focus of the world's attention, and business men and diplomats visit her shores to learn for themselves the true conditions of her people and the prospects of trade development in the near future. The Chinese entertain these visitors generously and pass them on from one city to another showing them, with patriotic zeal, places of historic interest and public buildings, such as Provincial Assembly halls built on modern lines, or some of the many creditable industrial factories now so rapidly springing into existence.

These make a favourable impression on visitors—an impression entirely justified by China's progress. But were the strangers compelled to walk but half a mile over the main road between any two of China's interior cities, their good impressions would be dissipated like the mist of a summer morning.

China's roads as viewed by the traveller are disagreeable, but considered from the standpoint of trade and commercial efficiency they are a serious hindrance to national development. In the great Shansi famine of 1878-9 the workers engaged in famine relief were almost heart-broken because the grain purchased with relief funds and the starving people could not be brought together for lack of means of communication.

It costs China many times as much to transport merchandise from one point to another as it does America, although labour there is paid almost ten times as much as it is here. A wheelbarrow coolie will convey 400-lb. weight a distance of ten miles in one day, but if it rains he may be a week in making the journey. These delays in transit must all be borne by the consumer in the last analysis, and in this way China's lack of roads is a heavy, albeit an unconscious, tax on the unfortunate public.

Mr. C. T. Wang told the Pan-Pacific Association at a recent meeting that the Governor of Chèkiang had promised to construct a road two hundred miles long joining the cities of Hangchow and Shanghai. May he live for ever or, at least, may he continue in office until the promise is realized, and this is wishing him a very long life indeed. But the fact that the promise has been made shows that the construction of good roads is well within the compass of the ordinary Chinese official's ability. There is an abundance of cheap labour, and material for road construction may be had for the asking. In the days of the Manchus, not yet very far removed from us, farmers were compelled to repair the roads periodically when the Governor of the Province made his rounds or the Literary Chancellor travelled from one city to another to hold the customary examinations. It is true these "repairs" were a superficial performance. Neither the Governor nor the people had any idea of what a good road should be, but at least there

was, on the part of the official, the recognition of his responsibility to see that roads were made and on the part of the people their acceptance of the duty to repair the roads in their own districts. If this useful custom were revived and properly carried out in every district under the superintendence of the district magistrate, the farmers being put to work only in those winter months when the exigencies of the seasons impose idleness upon them, it would not be many years before China had a system of highways adequate for her needs. These would act as feeders to the railways and rivers to the great advantage and comfort of the people. Of course the whole burden of the construction of roads should not fall on one class, the farmers, particularly as that is the most industrious class in China to-day and the one that would benefit least by improvement in public roads. The other classes of the community would have to be taxed a sum at least equal to the value of the labour contributed by the farmers, and the money secured from this source utilized for the purchase of road-metal, repair or construction of bridges, etc. And this is just where opposition to the scheme would begin. The people would not object so much to the tax as to the opportunity its collection would give for the exercise of the yamên underling's incurable propensity to squeeze. If this baneful influence could be eliminated, the construction of roads in China could be accomplished, in the words of the sages, "as easily as turning one's hand."