

Those Returned Students

BY POU HUI ER

THIS expression recurs often in the conversation of those foreigners who *know-all-about-China*. Certain classes of Chinese also use the expression, or its vernacular equivalent, when discussing these hundreds of Chinese young men and women who have been educated abroad. One over-educated Chinese writer who lives in Peking and who recently was the subject of an official inquiry into his sanity, wrote an article a year or so ago (before the inquiry) in which he said the only accomplishment of the "returned-student" was an ability to wear foreign clothing and a knowledge of tennis.

The chief charges against the Chinese young man who has been educated abroad are as follow:

- 1—Impractical.
- 2—Disinclination to work.
- 3—Knows nothing about China.
- 4—Apes the foreigner.
- 5—Refuses to get down to essentials and begin at the bottom.
- 6—Inclination to look down on all things Chinese.
- 7—Acquisition of foreign cussedness rather than foreign virtues.
- 8—Just generally damned.

There probably are other crimes layed at the door of the Chinese returned student from America, England, and the Continent, but the reader should be able to supply the missing phrases. These various charges against the returned student are made by unthinking persons—and also by persons who should know better—but the criticism usually ends up by pointing out some glaring example of a failure, some young man who returned from abroad with a fine education but who has failed to make good in China. When you come back with a few examples of some who have made good, well they are "exceptions." "The returned students are failures, they are impractical; they don't know China," and so back through the usual line of platitudes. Then if you are patient enough to listen, it will be explained to you that the whole system of sending the Chinese young men and women abroad for education is wrong; that they should be kept at home and educated to work with their hands; that those who are now abroad should be recalled; and so on through a new line of reasons against the value of a foreign education of the younger generations of Chinese.

In the first place, these same arguments, or many of them are also used against the value of higher education in foreign lands, and especially in America. The impractical college graduate with a classical education has supplied many pages of material for the funny papers. He usually wants to begin as president of a great corporation and usually ends up as office boy. The young man without a college education, but with a knowledge of stenography and bookkeeping can usually run rings around the college grad for the first few years, but after that it is usually another story. But this leads us far afield.

The Chinese returned student! Would it be better to keep them all at home?

Dr. Y. T. Tsur, former president of Tsing Hau College at Peking, and himself an American returned student, in 1917 published a directory of the American returned students. The book contains about 500 names and although it hasn't been possible to tabulate all of them, the following statistics regarding present occupations of the first 110 names in the book will prove interesting:

Bankers	3
Business	3
Doctors	9
Editors	2
Engineers	25
Government	26
Lawyers	1
Teachers	29
Y. M. C. A. Sec'y	2

In addition to the foregoing there were three or four whose present occupations were not given. Perhaps they are the failures, which the pessimist likes to point out. The greatest number in the foregoing classification are teachers and almost to a man they are teachers of technical subjects, such as engineering, or they are heads of schools. Those in government service are mostly technical experts in the customs, ministry of communications, currency bureau, or in advisory—secretarial positions. Most of the engineers are in railroad and mining work, but a few are in the engineering departments of foreign firms such as Andersen, Meyer and Company, Standard Oil Company, American Trading Company and so on. But there we run into another stock criticism of the pessimist:

"Yes, I told you so. They are working with foreigners or they are running foreign things in China for the government such as the railroads, government banks, customs and such."

Well, if a person doesn't want to be convinced and has made up his mind that they are failures, there isn't much use arguing, but for those whose minds are still open, a few remarks on the **returned student** may be apropos:

According to the preface of Dr. Tsur's directory the movement for educating Chinese young men in western lands began in 1872 when the late Dr. Yung Wing took to the United States a band of thirty young boys under the auspices of the Chinese government. Including those sent over later, he had under his charge some 120 youths. They were all recalled before they had finished their courses, because it is said the Emperor heard that they were studying a lot of dangerous and useless things such as Latin and Greek. A record of the present occupations of these 120 boys would be most interesting. Unfortunately it does not exist, but we venture that among those still living would be found many of the leaders of China today. Their ages would not vary from fifty to sixty-five. In the eighties and nineties the movement to send students abroad came to a standstill. The defeat of China by Japan in 1894, the overpowering of China by the Powers in 1900 and the defeat of Russia by Japan in 1904 were a powerful influence in showing to China the superiority of western efficiency and organization over China's effect mediaevalism. The movement for western education received a new boost, but while a few students went to America and Europe, the great crowds went to Japan, hoping thus to absorb some of the prowess that had humbled the great western Russian Bear and China as well. Japan made the most of her opportunities and turned out Chinese graduates wholesale, the well printed and embossed diploma, being the chief element. Doctors, lawyers and engineers after a few months and the payment of certain fees, returned to China and hung up their shingles. Another curious commentary on Japanese education is found in the fact that most of the so-called "traitors" such Tsao Jui-ling, Lu Tsung Yu and many of the present military leaders, who are causing the country so much trouble, are from the ranks of the returned students from Japan.

In 1908 America returned the Boxer Indemnity funds and China to show her appreciation, began

sending large numbers of students to the United States. This emphasis has kept up and there are now on the average from 1,000 to 1,500 Chinese young men and women in the various American colleges and universities. In addition to the Indemnity students there are hundreds of students sent by their parents, by the provinces and by philanthropists. In the new relations of the nations of the world, the return of this Boxer Indemnity to China by America and China's use of the money for educational purposes will be pointed to as one of the most important pieces of diplomacy ever experienced in the world. Other nations which at first sneered at the scheme and poked fun at the "half-baked-American-returned-student," are now beginning to imitate the plan. France is trying to make up, or catch up by importing students wholesale. She is taking some 500 this year. Great Britain and Japan are also seriously considering the use of their remaining Boxer funds for educational purposes. It is to be hoped that the former nation will go ahead for the Western **Returned Student** is rapidly becoming an influence to be reckoned with in the new China. As Dr. Tsur says:

"Probably it is within the bounds of safety as well as propriety to say that it has been entirely due to their efforts and influence that the country is being modernized. To be specific, the early returned students from America, and a few from Great Britain, toiled hard to clear the ground, break the soil, and sow the seed. Those coming after them, though in larger numbers, had naturally a much easier task to perform. To them as a class must be credited, in spite of the very decided and far reaching contributions by other parties, the introduction of western ideas and ideals, the institution of fundamental reforms and the gradual transformation of the social and political order of the country along modern lines. More than anything else that will stand out as a monument to their achievement and influence is the change of the country from a monarchy to a republic, from an absolute despotism to a popular democracy, from an antiquated conservatism to a modern liberalism."

We may pardon Dr. Tsur's over enthusiasm regarding the present influence of democracy and liberalism in China, but we must agree that the Western **Returned Student**, added to the influence of Western Education as applied in China by the mission schools and colleges and the modern government schools staffed largely by American and European teachers and Western Educated Chinese teachers is rapidly changing China into a modern nation. It is also changing China into a democracy rather than a military—absolutism as has been the case with Japan. However, the Western **Returned Student** may still have his say regarding what the future Japan is to be. But that's another story!

But, how about the student himself? Certainly there are failures in their ranks. Some have never been able to fit into China, and haven't earned a tenth of the money that was spent on their foreign educations. In America and Europe you will find college graduates with thousand dollar educations doing menial work, because they were never able to fit in. In China we believe the proportion of successes among returned students is just as high or perhaps higher than the record of successes among college graduates in western lands. By success we don't necessarily mean bank presidents or captains of industry. The teacher who successfully trains the younger generations in useful pursuits and better conditions of living, is just as much a success, perhaps

more so than the man who makes a lot of money out of a cotton mill.

We want the Western **Returned Student** to stay "Western." He must fight constantly to retain his "Western ideas and ideals," and believe me it is a real and constant fight with the weight of reaction constantly pulling him back and down. Instead of criticizing him for remaining aloof from the dead level of the old life about him, we should compliment and encourage him. If China is to survive and come out of her valley of ignorant, superstitious stagnation, these young men and women have got to fight hard and constantly to be Western. Otherwise they soon forget and drop back. They may miss a lot of money by failing to fall back into the ancient methods of exploiting their countrymen, but they will leave China a better land for it. They may play tennis and stick to the Western one-wife, custom, and—it isn't necessary to point the moral here. There is another point:

Industrial development in China is still in its infancy. There isn't room for everybody to be an engineer, a contractor, a manufacturer. A few are paving the way now, and it is gratifying to note that practically all of the great industrial spurt of the last four or five years has been handled directly by American returned students, or has been influenced by them. Most of the cotton mills erected in China in the last few years are monuments to **returned student** enterprise. An official or old type business man may have supplied the money, but you can bet the idea and opportunity originated in the mind of some young secretary or adviser—perhaps the secretary was his son who had returned with a Western education.

It is true that the student may have been sent abroad too young, that he remained away so long that he forgot about China; that he doesn't have a very good knowledge of his own language. The old time starved and consumptive Chinese scholar understood his own language and literature thoroughly, but he didn't do much for either himself or his country. The **returned student** is going to develop a newer and simplified language that will be for every-body instead of the selected few. Furthermore it will be practical. Remember, when you damn the **returned student**, you are at the same time damning the whole system of Western education—something that has made your own Western country what it is. If you are a Chinese who are doing the damning, well, you don't count, or won't in a remarkably few years.

Shanghai, November 5, 1920.