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EDUCATION IN CHINA AND THE  
BOXER INDEMNITIES

By Roger S. Greene

Reprinted from The Chinese Social and Political Science Review, October 1923.

PEKING EXPRESS PRESS



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By Roger S. Greene

*(Paper read before the Chinese Social and Political  
Science Association, October 5th 1923.)*

Proposals have recently been discussed in three or four foreign countries for the return to China of the remainder of the Boxer indemnities or for the expenditure of remaining payments on projects that are likely to prove mutually beneficial to China and to the nations to which these indemnities are now due.

There appears to be general agreement that the funds thus made available can probably be employed to best advantage in promoting education in China, but as to the details of the plans which should be adopted there is still wide difference of opinion. The subject is not a new one, and it seems almost presumptuous to attempt to discuss it at all in the short time available to-night, but I shall venture, nevertheless, to suggest a few points for your further consideration.

Most of the projects that have been discussed evidently look to the introduction into China of ideas and methods which are thought to have contributed to the welfare and happiness of other countries. The importation of these foreign ideas and methods has been going on in a great variety of ways ever since foreign intercourse with China began, but in greatly increased volume during the past twenty-five years. It will perhaps be profitable, therefore, to examine critically our experience with this intel-



lectual import trade, before planning to enlarge it, in the hope that from such study some useful guiding principles may emerge.

Western learning has been introduced through foreign teachers coming to China and through Chinese students going abroad, and the education which these foreign teachers have attempted to give has been in the main an English, French, German, Japanese or American education, according to the nationality of the teacher. Now variety is an excellent thing and too much standardization may be deadening, but it does appear unfortunate that at a time like this, when unity is so much needed, the men who have studied abroad should be so heavily handicapped in their efforts to get together by the fact that their education has given them so many different and often conflicting points of view. In some cases they lack even a common technical terminology and cannot, therefore, easily discuss professional problems together. To a slightly less extent the same is true of those who have studied under different foreign auspices in China.

It would seem to be highly desirable, therefore, that in any future extension of Western learning in China a determined effort should be made to secure greater unity, so that instead of each group of students getting all its foreign ideas and methods through one foreign nationality, the whole student body may secure what is best from all over the world.

The question arises how this unity is to be secured. To my mind it can best be brought about through an educational system under Chinese control, in which foreign teachers, in so far as they are needed, will be chosen for their ability in their special fields without regard to nationality. It should be made possible for the great majority of Chinese students to get their education, including their professional training, in Chinese schools of high grade. When advanced students are sent abroad each should be



sent to that country where the studies in which he is interested can be pursued to the best advantage, rather than to the particular countries which have remitted parts of the indemnities. In the light of past experience it is at least an open question whether public funds can wisely be used to extend the exclusive educational influence of one or more different nationalities. This suggests the possible advantages of combining into one fund all sums remitted from the Boxer indemnities, including those which are now set apart for the maintenance of Tsing Hua College and its graduates in the United States, provided arrangements can be made to ensure efficient and enlightened management of these large resources. I do not for a moment mean to suggest that the fine work done by Tsing Hua College should be ignored, or that support should be withdrawn from it. The program which I suggest might well include the broadening of the scope of the College and the giving of such generous support as to enable it to play an even more important part in the future.

Through a single educational fund it would be possible to give a tremendous impetus to the development of a truly Chinese school system, adapted to the new requirements of the people, but also designed to conserve all that is best of the ancient Chinese civilization. There might be diplomatic difficulties in the way of such pooling of funds, but if after careful consideration that course seemed the wisest, we should not be too despondent about the prospects for securing its adoption. I am sure that many leaders in education in the United States would be very sympathetic towards such a proposal, even though its immediate consequence might be a lessening of the number of students going to the United States.

An American friend of mine, a professor of agriculture, with some experience in China, once remarked that if he were ever asked to undertake any important professional work in China, his first condition would be that he should



be allowed ample opportunity to study present agricultural methods in this country. If after such study he found that the methods which he had learned at home were better and were applicable to conditions here, he would be glad to contribute what he could.

This brings us to the second point which I feel should be emphasized in education as in other activities, the importance of thorough study of the field, its resources and its needs. Such study is obviously necessary before beginning any new enterprise, though we often neglect it, but there is not such general realization that the spirit of critical inquiry must be fostered, even after a new work has been successfully started. The Chinese teacher and student alike must learn to appraise at its true value all that has been handed down from the past, avoiding at the same time a dangerous complacency with all that is old and a rash eagerness to adopt all that seems new. Similarly the foreign teacher will be most useful if he comes to learn as well as to teach, seeking not only to adapt what he has to give to the actual conditions here, but also to find new truth, new ideas and new methods which he can take home with him.

These then are two fundamental ideas which I hope will find favor with those who must make the decision regarding the use of any funds released from the Boxer indemnities: First that they be used for the upbuilding of a single Chinese national system of education, and secondly that both the planning and the conduct of this work shall be dominated by that spirit of open-minded inquiry that we may call the research spirit.

Happily we now have a group of Chinese educators who are prepared by academic training and by practical experience to play a large part in a development of this kind. Some of them are already engaged in a critical study of the whole problem of education in China, both as to content and as to method. Such men deserve more



support than they can expect to get in the present embarrassed financial situation of the country.

The possibilities for usefulness of a large fund so administered are so vast and the subject is so full of interest to all who are engaged in any form of educational activity that many thoughts suggest themselves, when the discussion is once begun.

Personally I hope that there will be careful consideration before new institutions are started. There are so many universities and schools already organized which need strengthening and even transformation, that it would be a great pity to leave them to struggle on with inadequate resources in order to build again elsewhere from the ground up. The funds after all will be limited even if they are all pooled, and it would be easy to scatter them in such a way that little permanent good could be accomplished. On the other hand, care will doubtless have to be exercised to prevent new money from being used merely to relieve the government and private benefactors from responsibilities which they have already assumed. It should be possible so to use grants from the indemnity funds as to stimulate more generous contributions from other sources in the future.

Attention has been called to the need for public libraries, and very interesting proposals have been made for the application of part of the indemnity to the establishment of a series of such libraries in important centers. Would it perhaps not be better at the outset to enrich the libraries of the principal universities and normal schools and to induce them to carry on an extension work to be accompanied by the adoption of a liberal policy in making their collections accessible to the reading public outside the institutions themselves? There seems to be a possibility that for some time to come entirely independent libraries might not be fully utilized and that there might be difficulty in ensuring their proper administration.



There is certainly great need for more rural education, not only in the technique of producing and marketing crops, but also in preparation for citizenship and a larger life. Perhaps this work would be most effective if it were closely connected from the beginning with the agricultural and normal schools in a few carefully selected centres. Such an association might be of great value to the rural schools, but it would certainly be most stimulating to the professional schools to be brought into closer contact with the communities which they are primarily intended to serve. At present the weakness seems to be that young men are taught to become teachers of agriculture in order that they may in turn train other teachers of agriculture, but the mechanism by which the ideas taught can eventually reach the farmer does not seem to have received its due share of attention.

Probably a part of the funds devoted to education will still be used for a long time to send young men and women abroad for special study. In spite of all the difficulties of the revolutionary period the schools of the country have made such marked progress during the past decade that it is now possible for students to proceed much further in a modern education at home than they could fifteen years ago. The more thorough knowledge which a student thus gets of his own country is, of course, an enormous advantage to him, and the more advanced he is, the more experience he has had in practical work in his own country, the more wisely can the selection be made of those who are to have the benefit of foreign study. When men and women who have demonstrated their ability in a special field are sent abroad to improve themselves in that particular kind of work, for which a demand already exists in China, we shall have fewer disappointments both among the students themselves and among those who send them.

There has been a great deal of criticism among both Chinese and foreigners of the students who return from



abroad, often from those who have no sympathetic understanding of the handicap under which the returning student labors through the lack of a society organized to use the kind of service he is prepared to render, and through the pressure of family obligations far heavier than those borne by the average European or American.

The frequent unwillingness of a returned student to work up from the ranks is compared with the way in which young professional men serve a laborious apprenticeship in the West, as if all the beginners in Western countries took the long and harder route from choice, whereas, for most of them, there is no other way.

I have a fairly large acquaintance with one particular group of Chinese professional men educated in the West, and I know that the proportion of those who are now rendering useful service in their profession in China is very high. It has been particularly gratifying to observe the relatively large number who are willing to make a financial sacrifice for the sake of their own scientific development or in order to work more effectively for the immediate welfare of others.

Nevertheless, there is need for more care in the administration of scholarships for study abroad. At the beginning there was perhaps something to be said for the shot-gun policy of sending a large number of men abroad without any definite plan as to what each was to study or what he was to do when he came back, in the hope that by good luck there would be just enough square pegs for the square holes, and round pegs for the round holes, etc. It required a great deal of faith, however, to expect that under such a system there could be anything but a fairly large proportion of misfits. In the future it should be more and more possible to send abroad men and women to be trained for particular positions, and to arrange beforehand just what kind of studies they are to pursue and where. When students are sent without such definite



arrangements for the future there should at least be an understanding as to the general character of the work to be done, and their studies should be supervised by specialists who will have a sympathetic grasp of their problems. There should no longer be men preparing for a special profession only to find on their return that there is not yet any opening for them in such work.

Most of all, however, there is perhaps needed a realization that the critical part of a professional education is that period of practical work which follows the completion of the formal studies. To this period little attention has been paid until lately, and we have been inclined to feel that we have done our whole duty when we have helped the student to secure his degree. At this stage, as much as at any other, he needs help, information as to positions that may be open, friendly advice as to the kind of work that will best round out his training, and encouragement through the trials and disappointments which so many young people go through at the beginning of their careers. There should be means to give this encouragement in a practical form. A promising young teacher or investigator should not be allowed to run to seed for lack of the equipment or the technical assistance that he needs to enable him to do his work well. A part of the fund might well be used to provide help of this kind at critical moments. There is little use in giving young men and women a long and expensive training if we are to take no interest in their welfare after they start on their life work.

It is true that a few brilliant individuals will be able to make their way practically unaided, and such men often are the stronger for that experience, but there need be no fear that there will not be difficulties enough at best, and we need to take account also of the average men who are in danger of being lost through neglect, but may grow, if properly guided and helped, into a body of workers not



less important for the welfare of China than the smaller number of exceptional leaders.

The scholarships should be used more extensively to promote the development of young teachers and civil servants who have already embarked on their life work, whether they received their original professional training in China or abroad. After four or five years of experience many of them will be in a position to profit enormously from a year or two of further study, and of observation of methods in use in similar work abroad. The knowledge that such opportunities are open to those who make good, will have a most stimulating effect on the whole body of teachers and other technical workers, and will do much to reconcile them to the financial sacrifice which many of them make in order to remain in institutional work.

There is little novelty in the suggestions which I have made, and I fear, therefore, that my deep interest in the subject due to personal experience and fairly close observation of one department of education in China during the past nine years, may have led me to weary you by dwelling too long on some points regarding which there is no longer any serious difference of opinion. For this I must beg your indulgence. The urgent importance of the questions discussed must be my excuse.



