The Life Story of Dr. Yung Wing: Some Interesting Disclosures of Old Time Official Corruption in China—Light on the Taiping Rebellion

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By KIYOSHI K. KAWAKAMI

It is perhaps one of the ironies of fate that a man who fails to secure advancement and success in life should often be nobler in character and greater in talent than a man who attains fame and fortune without encountering any serious obstacle. The life of the author of this book, Yung Wing, is only one of the many exemplifications of this unfair treatment measured out to virtue and ability. To enjoy a smooth sailing in the rough seas of life one must often find it expedient to acquiesce in the compromises which are, after all, the foundation of our imperfect society. Yet to the idealist nothing is so distasteful as the very secret of success in the vulgar commerce of the world, and it is small wonder that Mr. Yung's ideals should make of him a man of disappointment. Entering into an official career in a country where the corruption of officialdom is such that every servant of the State is provided with a "solarium to encourage honesty" often ten times as large as his regular stipend, he found his convictions and practices diametrically opposed to the spineless and venality of his colleagues. He began his career with the ardor of a missionary and the enthusiasm of a patriot, and ended it with a mingled feeling of disgust and despair. His missionary spirit met only rebuff and ridicule, and his patriotic motives made of him a crank in the eyes of most mandarins. True, he succeeded by dint of sheet efficiency and ability in forcing himself into the recognition of the mandarinate, and was rewarded with a position of high honor and trust; yet his connection with his Government was severed under circumstances thoroughly characteristic of Chinese officialdom, which was rotten to the core. The significance of this book, then, is in the sidelight it throws upon the spirit and practices prevailing among mandarins rather than the life it chronicles.

Yung Wing was born of a humble family in 1828 in Southern China. When he was 7 years old his father placed him under the care of an English missionary. Some twelve years later an American missionary, when coming home from China, brought Yung with him to America and placed the boy in Monson Academy, at Monson, Mass. Having finished the studies in the academy, Yung entered Yale University, where he carried two first prizes in English composition. When he returned home to his mother the old woman asked him how much money his degree of A.B. conferred upon him. Imagine her disappointment when he told her that it conferred no money: Then began his struggle for employment. First he opened a law office in Hongkong, then became an interpreter in the Chinese customs office at Shanghai, but he was too proud "to associate himself with a pack of interpreters and […] who were know to take bribes." Next he found employment as a clerk in an English firm in Shanghai. When another English house offered him a position as a comprador he [...] declined it, saying that as a graduate of Yale he would not think of disgracing his Alma Mater by accepting the compradorship, which, though lucrative, was associated with all that is menial. It was this pride, this [sort?] of compromise, which asserted itself again and again through his career which made him unsuited to secure advancement in the public service of his country.

The most dramatic event in his life is his visit to the Taipings. That he was a dreamer and an idealist is indicated in this adventure. He thought that if the [rebels?] were willing to organize a government along modern lines and inaugurate progressive measures necessary for the regeneration of China he would cast his lot with them and render his service to their cause. He was driven to this desperate idea by the hopelessly corrupt condition of the Manchu Government, which he denounces in these severe terms:

> The whole official organization, from head to foot, was honeycombed and tainted by a system of bribery, which passed under the polite and generic term of "presents," similar in character to what is now known as "graft." Next comes the exploitation of the people by the officials, who found an [...] to build up their fortunes. Finally comes the inevitable and logical corollary to official bribery and exploitation, namely, that the whole administrative government was founded upon a gigantic system of fraud and falsehood.

[...] a visit to the camps of the rebels proved barren of any substantial result for the Taipings were found neither capable nor willing to carry out the progressive measures he had formulated for them. The real beginning of Yung's political career was his acquaintance with Tsan Kwoh-fan, the great patriot and generalissimo who quelled the Taiping rebellion, which for fifteen years wrought devastation through the country, sacrificing untold treasures and millions of human lives. Yung found no difficulty in persuading Tsan to establish an arsenal, and as its corollary a mechanical training school, which was intended to be the entering wedge to the great scheme of educational reorganization he had long desired to carry to effect. Encouraged by this initial success, Yung submitted to the Peking Government plans for educational reform, which resulted in the organization of an educational commission, whose duty it was to select 120 students and send them abroad for education.

Yung was made one of the two Commissioners, and came t American entrusted with the supervision of the students sent to this country. But his progressive ideas with regard to the training of Chinese students were libelously misrepresented by his conservative colleagues, who all their lives "had been accustomed to see the springs of life, energy and independence, candor, ingenuity, and open-heartedness all covered up and concealed, and in a great measure smothered and never allowed their full play."

The inevitable result was the abrupt termination of the educational mission, which, if continued, was bound to become a potent leaven in the rehabilitation of the decrepit empire. Disappointed, yet not discouraged, he made fresh efforts to save China from the quagmires of degeneration, but all his good influence was set at naught by the corrupt or reactionary officials. Thus ended his career, which had scarcely begun.

One of the interesting features of this book is the author's impressions of the great statesmen of China with whom he came in contact. To him Tsan Kwoh-fan is one of the greatest men China has produced, and compared with him Li Hung-chang and Chang Chi-tung are but pigmies before a giant. In Li Hung-chang he found a man "of excitable and nervous temperament, capricious and impulsive, susceptible to flattery and praise as a statesmen he was far inferior to Tsan; as a [...] and a politician his character could not stand a moment before the searchlight of cold and impartial history." Of Chan Chi-tung he says: "There was a cold, supercilious air enveloping him, which at once put me on my guard." But in Tsan Kwoh-fan he saw a man who, amid the constant temptations attending his unbounded power and glory, "kept the [...] of his official career untarnished and left a name and character honored and revered for probity, patriotism, and purity."

The author tells his story in a delightfully unconventional manner. His narrative of his boyhood and his school days both at home and in America is rather tedious to follow, but the labor of perusing these somewhat dull pages is fully compensated by those fascinating chapters wherein he describes his thrilling adventures during the Taiping rebellion, his bold attempts in connection with the Chino-Japanese war, and his dealings with various mandarins and the court at Peking.