

The Chinese Ambassador presents two samples

Peaceful Reforms in China

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IN THE 19TH CENTURY, the West took China to be the unchanging East; the cycles of Cathay were thought to be changeless. More recently China has acquired the reputation of a country devoted to violent revolution. It is certainly true that in the 20th century China has seen many revolutions, the latest of which, the Communist revolution, is more violent than that witnessed by any other Asian country. Nevertheless, China in the 20th century has carried out

peaceful changes of a fundamental nature. In ages to come it may be recognized that these fundamental reforms are more enduring than the violent changes attempted by politicians and ideologues. I have in mind particularly two reforms: the emancipation of women and the modernization of education.

Let me take up first the emancipation of women. My grandmother was born in the year when Queen Victoria ascended the

throne in England and my mother was born at the time of the Franco-Prussian War. During the lifetime of these two ladies there was no change in the status of women in China. Both of them had bound feet. Both were illiterate. Neither had ventured beyond five miles of their homes. I remember my mother trying to bind the feet of my sister around 1903 with my grandmother standing by and supervising the process. My sister cried out in pain. My grandmother admonished: "Child, if you don't have your feet bound, you will never be able to find a husband."

This was in 1903. My home is in the Province of Hunan, at that time one of the most conservative and xenophobic provinces of China. Along the Coast the emancipation of women began a little bit earlier, but as late as the beginning of the 20th century, so far as the status of women was concerned, Hunan remained what China had been for many, many centuries. In this respect Hunan was typical of the large majority of the provinces of China.

However, my mother did not persist in binding the feet of my sister, who, besides growing up with almost natural feet, acquired an elementary and secondary education as well as special training in physical education. She became a professional teacher of gymnastics. Of my girl cousins all had a complete elementary education as well as some years of secondary education. One of them, in addition, graduated from a college and became a member of the editorial board of a woman's magazine. Another cousin received training as a professional nurse and is today practicing her profession. Of my two daughters, one graduated from Purdue University and the other is doing graduate work in mathematical theory.

The Civil Code as promulgated by the National Government in the 1930's provided for equal rights for men and women,

including the equal right of inheritance of property. By law, all public schools up to and including the university level were by 1930 required to admit boys and girls on equal terms. All professions were opened to women. The legislators of China numbered almost ten percent women.

In 1936 when my Government was about to convoke a constitutional assembly, an electoral law was enacted providing for complete equality of rights between men and women. One day a deputation of women came to the office of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, who was then the Prime Minister. I was designated to receive the ladies; they represented women's clubs and federations of women's clubs from all parts of China. They came to demand equality of rights. I pointed out to them that the electoral law had already provided equality in voting and equality in being elected and asked them what else they wished. Their spokeswoman replied that as half of the population of the country was female, women should occupy half of the seats in the constitutional convention. I was stunned by such a demand and explained to the ladies that as the voters enjoyed secrecy of the ballot, there was no way for the Government to compel them to choose their candidates. In order to fulfill their conception of equality the Government would have to deny the basic feature of democracy, namely, secrecy and freedom of balloting. However, I thought that the ladies had a legitimate worry—that the average voter, led by tradition, would not take the conception of equality as provided by the law seriously. I enquired of them if they could be satisfied with periodical official statements by the Government urging the voters to discard any traditional prejudices against the female sex and to take the provision of equality of rights seriously. After a stormy session of argumentation the ladies reluctantly accepted the compromise that

I offered. For my part—I saw to it that the Government lived up to its promise. This occurred in 1936. It showed how far women in China had succeeded in winning equality of rights with men.

The emancipation of women in China in the 20th century is no doubt one of the most fundamental revolutions in China's entire history. What is more remarkable is that this revolution occurred peacefully without even the shattering of a window pane. Fortunately for China, the traditional status of women was not based on religious tradition. Foot binding, for example, was a matter of fashion. No ethical or philosophical, far less religious belief, led the parents to neglect the education of their daughters. Their discrimination was based on economic considerations.

This revolution came about mainly through contact with the West. It was obvious to the Chinese who had travelled abroad or who had seen Western women in China that women with natural feet could be beautiful and that educated women could make better wives, mothers and citizens. The reform, or if you wish, revolution, came first in society. Successful governments have only registered what society had already achieved. The inferiority of the status of women in China had no class basis. When the reform came, it started with the upper classes. The common people turned out to be more conservative than the wealthy, the landlords and the officials.

The other fundamental revolution in Chinese society in the 20th century was the change in the contents of education and the functions of the educated class. Chinese education before the 20th century was completely literary. Young people were taught to read the Classics and to write in the classical style. After acquiring the necessary literary proficiency they passed the Government examinations and thereby entered the ruling circles. The educated peo-

ple did not bother themselves with agriculture, industry or trade. They did not study law, science, engineering, or medicine; they were not supposed to be educated in practical affairs at all. The educational tradition was based on the theory that a knowledge of Confucian Classics made men virtuous and that virtuous men could bring order to society and peace to the world. In actual practice the so-called knowledge of the Confucian Classics degenerated into knowledge only of the classical language. To be sure, lip service was always paid to the ideas in the Classics, but the Government examinations tested, naturally, literary proficiency rather than the transmutation of knowledge into virtue.

In the '60s of the last century some reforming statesmen proposed to invite Western scholars to Peiping to teach Chinese students mathematics, astronomy and physics. The orthodox scholars of that time thought the proposal an outrage. It was said to be unthinkable that the ordering of society depended on science. It was still more unthinkable to the people of that time that Westerners should be invited to be teachers of the Chinese. The outcry of the opponents of reform led the students of that day to boycott the new school. However, rare individuals departed from the traditional path and began to seek a modern education, that is, a foreign education. After the defeat of China by Japan in 1894-95 agitation for modern education gained in momentum, and after the Russo-Japanese War even the Imperial Court had to make concessions. Finally the centuries-old examination system was abolished. Chinese students in large numbers went to Japan and then to the United States and other Western countries; modern schools sprang up everywhere. The old education passed away and the new educated man in China became, as his counterpart in the Western countries, a scientist, an engi-

neer, an agriculturist, a railroad builder, a factory manager, a doctor, and a lawyer.

The basic change in Chinese education was involved in political controversy but not in bloodshed. Again society took the lead and government followed. The result has been a thorough transformation of education and of the place of the educated person in Chinese society. No one political leader or party can claim the credit for this basic change in Chinese life. In essence the revolution in education, as the

revolution in the status of women, came about through a process which is completely democratic, that is, through the influence of public opinion. When Chinese society is capable of carrying out democratic reform, it is foolhardy to argue that China can only be saved by violent revolution. We must conclude that an examination of these two basic reforms of 20th century China should give us all added faith in the democratic process of peaceful reform.