

WANG-AN-SHIH.

A CHINESE SOCIALIST STATESMAN OF THE ELEVENTH
CENTURY.

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WHEN Dr. Aurel Stein was excavating in the Tun-huang oasis five years ago, among other highly interesting relics of the Han dynasty, two thousand years ago, he came upon a big hammer of wood such as is used for pitching tents. It was in such perfect condition and so useful, that he remarked, "I could not prevent my men taking it into daily use for its original purpose during the rest of my journey."

In much the same way we come occasionally upon the long buried human story which, when cleared of the desert sand, proves to be of unexpected use under the most modern circumstances. Possibly those who know more than I do about political economy and the various tendencies of the time which are loosely termed socialistic, may find this to be the case with the story of Wang-an shih,¹ the great Chinese statesman of the Sung dynasty.

The world is ready to concede that China is to-day learning and preparing to use many of the painfully acquired lessons of our western civilization. Perhaps it has occurred to but few to inquire whether or not China may possess in her wonderful history lessons which are not altogether lost to memory and which, both by way of example and warning, should prove useful to us in America and Europe! After all, China is an experiment in democracy vastly older than anything else which exists, and out of the treasures of her experience it should be possible to draw lessons not a few.

A certain Chinaman, the story runs, lived in the Liao-tung

¹ The most recent account of Wang-an-shih is to be found in the Russian work "Wang-an-shih and His Reforms," by A. I. Iwanowa, St. Petersburg, 1909. Much also of interest may be found in Rémusat, Panthier and Du Mailla. In English Giles's monumental *Chinese Biographical Dictionary* and *History of Chinese Literature* furnish much interesting information.

region where all the pigs were black. On one occasion, however, a litter was born in which there were some pigs which were white. Thinking that these must necessarily be a rarity at court and a worthy present for the Son of Heaven, the peasant drove them, with no little difficulty, toward the capital. Alas, great was his disappointment to find that here all the pigs were white. Once it was the fashion to draw all illustrations from the history of China as black pigs over against our own white ones. Men are beginning at last to perceive that history teaches much the same lessons everywhere, east and west, and that what one nation has learned in antiquity is not unworthy of the attention of the modern state.

I feel sure that Wang-an-shih has the right to a new lease of popular interest and I wish I could do something to restore the superseded tablet in the Hall of Confucius, not because of any conviction I have as to the soundness of his political views—of these I am not competent to judge—but because, in the first place, his passion for social justice, and his tremendous importance as one who organized great social reforms under the Sung emperors, make him inevitably interesting to those who watch sympathetically the experiment of popular government in China to-day; secondly because, in this age of political unrest and experiment amongst ourselves, the exponent of a somewhat extreme form of state socialism (I think we may fairly use the term) must awaken at least curiosity and attention.

The experiment made by Wang failed, for reasons we shall presently notice, but the man himself remains notable for the human qualities of sympathy and courage which are the monopoly of no one nation or time. The China of the eleventh century was composed, as throughout most centuries, of the proud, overbearing official classes, and the toiling, for the most part silent masses. The relation of the two has been compared by an old poet as that of the bean stalks which were used as fuel to the beans cooking in the pot.

“A kettle had beans inside
And stalks of the bean made a fire;
And the beans to their brother-stalks cried,
‘We spring from one root,—why such ire?’”

Wang-an-shih's sympathy² was always with the down-trodden and oppressed. He possessed also that calm courage which was proof against every discouragement arising from failure and against every

² “While Wang-an-shih laid great stress upon the foundation of prosperity being in the increased wealth of the nation yet his intense sympathy with the people and his anxiety for their welfare ennobled all his plans with a high standard of moral worth.”—J. C. Ferguson, *J. N. Ch. B. R. A. S.*, Vol. XXXV.

opposition arising from the contrary convictions and misunderstandings of rival politicians. It is worth noting that the third syllable of his name, *shih*, means "stone," and as a stone he endured the rebuffs of time and fate. The second syllable, *an*, means "peace," which was his constant aim, though he enjoyed little of it himself. The first syllable, *Wang*, means "king," and, to all who love high purpose and unshaken courage, a king he was.

Let us gather together a few of the biographical details which will give his story shape, and assist the reader to fix the place of Wang in Chinese history. The Sung dynasty (A. D. 960-1279) had come as a period of welcome relief to that period of practical anarchy (known as the "five small dynasties," A. D. 905-960) which had given the country five lines of monarchs in little more than fifty years. The new era began with the throwing of the yellow robe over the shoulders of a drunken common soldier much as in the later days of the Roman empire the soldiers of the Praetorian Guard might bestow the purple upon some Dalmatian or Illyrian comrade.

This was not a promising commencement, but it disappointed the prophets of evil. For a century the Sung dynasty continued famous for its political security as well as for the unique prestige of its artists, poets and philosophers.³ The evil days of the Mongol invasions, preceded by the bitter struggle between the Khitan and Kim Tatars and the establishment of the latter as the sovereigns of China north of the Yang-tsze-kiang for the last century of the period, had not dawned when Wang-an-shih was born, A. D. 1021, in Lin-ch'uan, in the province of Kiang-si. He was a son of a secretary of one of the Six Boards and soon vindicated his entry into a literary family. As a student he was exceptionally clever and historians of the time have left on record how he used to make his pen "fly over the paper" in the examinations. Through the influence of an important official, Ou-yang-hsiu, who admired some of his early essays, Wang gained official position at an early age, and became the magistrate in charge of a district in Chih-kiang. Here his interest in social reform exhibited itself in the vigor with which he attacked that perennial problem of Chinese administrators, the protection of the country from the floods caused by the overflowing rivers. Before long he was elevated to a position in the Department of Justice, and, in A. D. 1060, after serving with dis-

³ "Dès les premières années du 11^{me} siècle un élan extraordinaire était donné à la littérature nationale. Toutes les branches de la fois eurent part à cette renaissance. Des historiographes, des poètes, des philosophes, des commentateurs et des critiques érudits parurent en grande nombre."—P. St. Le Gall.

inction in various judicial capacities, was honored with the appointment, by the imperial mandate, to one of the highest offices in the judiciary in the kingdom.

The Emperor, Ying Tsung, showed his own personal regard by inviting Wang to court, but the young judge declined as being so far unworthy of the inestimable privilege of beholding the Dragon countenance. The sincerity of his modesty, it may be said, has been doubted by some of his rivals and detractors.

A year or two later, just at the time when the Norman William was pushing home his claim to the realm of Saxon England, a new monarch, Shen Tsung, assumed the throne of the Sungs and inaugurated his reign by acts of signal favor bestowed upon Wang. In rapid succession the offices came to him of the prefecture of Kiang-ning, the expositorship of the Han-lin College and, in A. D. 1069, the state councillorship. In this latter position he was the confidential adviser of the emperor and supreme head of the actual government. He had practically the position now held in England by the prime minister and in this capacity inaugurated a series of reforms, which, if undertaken to-day, would cause Mr. Asquith and Mr. Lloyd George by comparison to be relegated to the ranks of timid and cautious conservatives.

It speaks volumes for the tact and adroitness of the Chinese statesman in his hour of power that he should have been able to allay any misgivings which his royal master may have entertained. It speaks much also for the essential democracy of the Chinese people that the emperor should have permitted such far-reaching and all-embracing experiments. But it is to be remembered that Wang-an-shih based all his reforming zeal on an avowed loyalty (doubtless sincere) to the traditions of China. In everything that he attempted he professed the desire to interpret for new times the spirit of the ancient classics. In his most radical moments he was still the *literatus*, and the fact that the *literatus* was regarded as *propre à tout* went a long way toward disguising the revolutionary character of some of his proposals.

Let me take the opportunity to emphasize Wang's importance as a man of letters before I turn to consider his work as a reformer. The publication of new and more correct interpretations of the classics was almost his first labor. He realized from the outset that there would be the inevitable examination of his theories by the standards of Confucius and Mencius, and he wished to prepare himself and the people for the test. Many other books beside the "Five King" and the "Four Shu" helped him in this stage of his

work. "I have been," he said, "an omnivorous reader of books of all kinds, even for example, of ancient medical and botanical works. I have, moreover, dipped into treatises on agriculture and on needle-work, all of which I have found very profitable in aiding me to seize the great scheme of the canon itself."

He realized, again, the need he would have for the support of a people better instructed than heretofore in practical subjects. Hence he made a brave but eventually futile assault upon the old examination system, which was even then venerable, and even then stultifying. The reform at which he aimed was the substitution of a knowledge of practical things for the graces and elegances of style. Some result followed, at least for the time. "Even the pupils at village schools threw away their text-books of rhetoric and began to study primers of history, geography and political economy."

His love of literature, moreover, was by no means purely utilitarian, and his worst enemies have allowed that had he never essayed the responsibilities of statesmanship, he would still have remained a conspicuous figure among those who have been canonized as "men of letters." His work on the written characters of the Chinese language is not without its use to-day, and some of his poems have survived to engage the interest and skill of our modern translators. He wrote many of these amid the cares of office. The following, translated by Professor Giles, has an almost pathetic interest as the account of a *nuît blanche* during the stress and strain of the great economic revolution.

"The incense stick is burnt to ash,
The water clock is stilled,
The midnight breeze blows sharply by,
And all around is chilled.
Yet I am kept from slumber
By the beauty of the spring.
Sweet shapes of flowers across the blind
The quivering moonbeams fling."

All other interests, however, in the life of Wang-an-shih sink into insignificance in comparison with his great battle for social and political reform. I have already referred to the fact that he based his proposals upon the essentially democratic spirit of Chinese institutions in former epochs. He protested against the idea of being an innovator. He was as anxious as Confucius himself to be judged rather as a transmitter and a re-interpreter. This comes out very clearly in a letter he once wrote to a friend.

"I have been debarred," he said, "by illness from writing to you

now for some time, though my thoughts have been with you all the while. In reply to my last letter, wherein I expressed a fear that you were not progressing with your study of the canons, I have received several from you, in all of which you seem to think I meant the canon of Buddha, and you are astonished at my recommendation of such pernicious works. But how could I possibly have intended any other than the canon of the sages of China? And for you to have thus missed the point of my letter is a good illustration of what I meant when I said you were not progressing with your study of the canon. Now a thorough knowledge of our canon has not been attained by any one for a very long period. Study of the canon alone does not suffice for a thorough knowledge of the canon. For learning in these days is a totally different pursuit from what it was in the olden times; and it is now impossible otherwise to get at the real meaning of our ancient sages."

Wang was not altogether wrong in this respect.⁴ China has by no means derived all her ideas as to enlightened government and the science of political economy from the outside. Once when Sze-ma-kiang (Wang-an-shih's great contemporary) was told that the fabled beast, known as the Ki-lin, the omen of national prosperity, had been brought to the land as a gift from a foreign potentate, he made the memorable reply that the Ki-lin did not need to be sent from abroad, seeing that it appears of itself whenever the land is well governed.

So it has been with ideas of reform in China. They have been nourished by age-long dwelling upon the virtues of the "model emperors," Yao and Shun; they have been enforced by many and many an example of dynasties going down to ruin through neglect of popular rights, of kings dethroned or slain for riding through the standing corn of their subjects, and, on the other hand, of rulers idolized and honored because of their willingness to bear the burdens and responsibilities of sovereignty even to the sacrifice of life itself. Again and again are these ideas emphasized and expounded by the great political economists of earlier days. Especially do they have behind them the almost paramount authority of Mencius, who waged vigorous and unceasing war against trusts and "corners," favored

⁴The Chinese sages had a firm faith in administration. Cf. Legge: "He (Confucius) held that there was in men an adoption and readiness to be governed, which only needed to be taken advantage of in the proper way. There must be the right administrators, but given those, and the growth of government would be rapid, just as vegetation is rapid in the earth." Also Faber: "Mencius is, like his master, simply a teacher of political economy. To him the state is the sum of all human endeavors, natural and civilized, working together as a united organization."

the taxation of idleness (i. e., of consumers who lived on wealth which had been amassed by others), and maintained that of these three things, "the gods, the sovereign and the people," the people came first, the gods second and the sovereign last of all.

There can be little doubt that Wang-an-shih was much indebted to his predecessors, however startling his reforms appeared to his contemporaries.⁵ The "dismal science" had always been popular and had produced, in the seventh century B. C., one of China's very greatest men, Kuan Chung, minister of the court of Ch'i, who held the theory that the ideal state must be self-contained, that it must be agricultural in order to exist in time of war, that it must be manufacturing in order to get wealth in time of peace, and much else that is interesting enough in its own place.

What were the particular reforms for which Wang-an-shih contended? The basis was the desire to create a state monopoly in agriculture, industry and commerce. "The state," he said, "should take the entire management of commerce, industry and agriculture into its own hands, with a view to succoring the working classes and preventing their being ground to the dust by the rich."

His plan involved, first of all, the establishment of new departments of the government to meet the extended system of administration. The soil had to be re-measured, divided into equal areas, graded according to its fertility without regard to the number of inhabitants in the area, in order that a new basis of taxation might be discovered.

Then the produce of each district had to be dealt with. It was no longer to be sent to the capital for sale "on behalf of the imperial exchequer," a system wasteful both to the government and to the district, but to be used in the three following ways. First, it was to be used for the payment of taxes; secondly, for the needs of the district in which it had been produced; thirdly, the remainder was to be sold to the imperial government, at as cheap a rate as was practicable, in order that the government might, at its own discretion, either hold it for a rise in price, or dispose of it for the relief of any districts that might be in danger of scarcity or famine.

For the determination of values tribunals were established in

⁵ Thus a writer in the *China Review*, hostile to the reformer (whom he calls "the infamous minister of the Sung dynasty), although he writes of "Wang-an-shih, the Innovator," yet confesses: "His so-called new laws were general not new at all, but in most cases merely the obsolete rules of past dynasties which had proved either too burdensome or too tyrannical to be borne any longer. These he amplified or altered to such an extent as to enable him to claim the credit of devising them for the reformation of the government."

the various provinces of the empire whose function it should be to regulate day by day the price of labor on the one hand and, on the other hand, the cost of food and merchandise. By means of these tribunals the general public was protected from the avarice of merchants and the tyranny of trusts.

Tribunals were furthermore established for the distribution of state aid to the farmers by a system of loans, on which interest had to be paid at the rate of 2% per month. Aid was also given in the form of seed which was distributed for the sowing of the waste lands. These were to be cultivated by those who otherwise would have been unemployed, and the sole condition seems to have been the obligation to repay out of the harvest the cost of the seed.

The poor, so far as was possible, were exempt from all taxation, but the pressure on the rich was made correspondingly severe. From the taxes collected large reserves of money were held by the state in order that provision might be made for old-age pensions, relief for the sick and needy, and support for the unemployed in "hard times."

Wang-an-shih's care for the social amelioration of the people of the Eighteen Provinces in times of peace did not blind him to the need of guaranteeing security from invasion from without on the part of a foreign foe. Some of his enactments for the purpose of providing an army in time of need, without withdrawing the people from their avocations in time of peace, are worthy of mention. For instance, it was ordered that every family which included more than two males must be bound, in time of imminent war, to furnish one who should serve as a soldier. Every family also was obliged to keep a horse, to ensure a supply of cavalry whenever required. As, however, the horse and his fodder were supplied by the government, the balance of advantage lay with the potential cavalryman.

It is impossible to describe in detail the fortunes of this gigantic struggle, the obstacles which had to be overcome, the suspicions allayed. Suffice it to say that for ten years Wang-an-shih remained in power and succeeded in maintaining the confidence of his emperor and his hold on the nation. It would be unfair to say that it broke down without achieving any good result. Sometimes men gain happiness in the very hope of social betterment, although the hope itself is bitterly belied. A famous Chinese general once encouraged an army, exhausted and fainting with thirst, by announcing that a little further on they would reach an orchard of plum trees, laden with luscious fruit. The promise had no grounds in reality, but the mention of plums made the mouths of the soldiers water to

such an extent that their thirst was relieved, and they continued their march. So possibly many a toil-worn, mandarin-ridden peasant found his thirst for social justice assuaged by the manifestly sincere attempt of the great councillor to give them "the square deal."

Moreover, if the experiment broke down, there are manifold reasons which may be assigned apart from those which are the condemnation of the entire policy. No doubt the failure is in part to be ascribed to Wang's own political inexperience. For instance, when he abolished all restrictions on the export of copper, the result was that "even the common copper *cash* were melted down and made into articles for sale and exportation." Wang met the panic, says Professor Giles, "by simply doubling the value of each *cash*." But, in all probability, the major part of his failure is to be ascribed to the strenuous opposition of his contemporaries. This opposition was not, it may be noted, solely from rival statesmen, out of office. Even the populace was stirred to hostility, in spite of the fact that the innovations were in their interest, because the *fung-shui*, or "luck" of the land seemed to be affected and an outraged Nature was pouring calamities upon the nation in the shape of flood, earthquake and eclipse. Occurrences such as these, common though they were in every period of Chinese history and under every regime, soon engaged the attention of the censors. In vain Wang adopted the scientific attitude and declared that these things were the result of fixed and invariable laws. "Do you desire," he demanded, "that nature should impose upon herself other laws just out of consideration for you?" Other matters contributed to the growing popular distrust. The advantage to the individual agriculturist was not so speedily obvious as had been expected; the militia enrollment pressed heavily on families which had grown accustomed rather to sudden compulsion than to continued preparedness; the responsibility entailed by the adoption of the "tithing" or "grouping" system, whereby each group of five households was made answerable for the misdeeds of any of its individual members, was unwelcome; all these things together gradually converted the enthusiasm of the proletariat into lukewarmness and hostility.

Popular doubts and hesitations, moreover, found able expression and powerful support in the leaders of the old political order which Wang-an-shih's accession to power had displaced. Among these were: Han K'i, notorious, as one famous Chinese story shows, for his self-sacrificing solicitude for the empire; Su She, who, on account of his opposition to Wang, fell into disgrace and was dismissed from office at the capital to a semi-exile as governor of

Hwang-chow; Wang-an-kwoh, the reformer's own brother, himself a celebrated scholar but an uncompromising antagonist of the new order; also Yang Che, the celebrated metaphysician and pupil of the two Chêngs. Greatest of all was the historian, poet and statesman Sze-ma-kiang, who had at first been blinded and dazzled by Wang's brilliant genius, but had gradually become convinced of the peril of his schemes.

The love of the past which distinguished Sze-ma-kiang was not overshadowed by any visions of a millennial future such as Wang had conjured up. Ever a fearless counsellor, he was not slow to join issue with what he believed to be the wild and mischievous tendencies of a degenerate age. His motto, says Remusat, was: "*Le premier devoir d'un censeur est de dire la vérité,*" and he lived up to this conviction most consistently. The contest was, to quote again the great French scholar, "*un combat à armes égales.*" It was one between "*le génie conservateur qui éternise la durée des empires et cet esprit d'innovation qui les ébranle.*"

For some ten years the victory had rested with Wang-an-shih, though it must be confessed, neither the emperor nor his minister showed any lack of generosity toward the deposed Sze-ma-kiang. Much against his will, but in obedience to a sense of fitness we cannot regret, he was appointed to the presidency of the Han-lin Academy. He protested that his opinions were out of sympathy with those then prevailing in the great university. "All the better," replied the emperor, "for either you will persuade the rest to think as you do, or else they will convince you to think as they do." Sze-ma-kiang went, however, reluctantly, and, as I have hinted, we have good reason to bless the sage emperor for his appointment, since it was during these years of comparative leisure that the historian produced his monumental work, one of the great histories of pre-Manchu times, "*The Comprehensive Mirror.*" He lived, moreover, to witness, in the whirligig of time, the downfall of his rival, and to accept, with equanimity be it said, his own reinstatement. The two great leaders, representatives of such opposite principles of government, died in the same year, A. D. 1086, leaving China the poorer for the loss of two noble and unselfish statesmen.

So the great social revolution from which great results had been expected, came apparently to nothing, and left as little trace upon the years that followed as the great religious revolution of Amen-hotep IV left upon the Egypt of the aftertime. Ruined by the inexperience of its administrators, by the impatience of those who were the objects of the reformer's care and by the rapacity of

the underlings and satellites who collected the interest and disbursed the aid of the state, the policy of Wang-an-shih was reversed with few able or willing to protest. The disfavor into which he fell at court was both revealed and concealed by his appointment as governor of Nan King, and although ere long he was reinstated in the capital, he died without seeing the pendulum of popular favor or royal patronage swing again towards him. He died, as we have said, A. D. 1086, disillusioned and disappointed, but, nevertheless, displaying to the end the self-possession and stoical calm of the true Chinese sage.⁶

Yet, less than twenty years after his death, in the year A. D. 1104, his tablet was set up in the Hall of Confucius and he was hailed as the greatest thinker China had produced since the time of Mencius. A century and a half later the tablet was removed and, during the troublous times that came on China with the ravages of Jenghiz Khan and his successors, there was little or no disposition to recall his memory. It is even said (the suggestion is that of the Abbé Huc, in a passage which I have always wished were fuller), that the devastating career of the great Mongol conqueror owed not a little to those unquiet spirits, the last remains of Wang-an-shih's reformers, who had left their native land and flocked to the banners of the scourge of Asia.

Whatever one may think of the statesman and the political economist, it seems to me that Wang-an-shih as a man passionate and persistent in the cause of social justice, deserves his little meed of mention to-day. We see him, it is to be remembered, principally through the eyes and writings of his professed rivals and enemies, but making all due allowance for misrepresentation, we see him much as he must have been. He was a frugal man, overconfident in his opinions and obstinate. We may agree that the soubriquet by which he was known—"the obstinate minister"—was in all likelihood well earned. He was also denounced as a dirty

⁶ For a fair summing up of Wang's career, see Du Mailla, *Histoire générale de la Chine*, VIII, p. 305: "Les historiens chinois me semblent perler avec trop de passion contre les nouveaux règlements de Quang-ngan-ché, surtout contre le prêt des grains au printemps qu'on devait rendre en automne avec un léger intérêt; ce règlement étoit favorable aux cultivateurs indigènes; et par-consequent très avantageux à l'état dont il augmentait les richesses; mais il devoit être odieux aux usuriers qui ne subsistent que du sang des malheureux, et peut-être sont ce les clameurs de ces sangsues qui ont animé beaucoup de grands contre ce plan économique; je remarque que ces grands décrient ce ministre sans apporter des raisons solides contre ses opérations; ils attaquent l'homme pour détruire l'ouvrage, ce qui masque assez le disette de leurs preuves contre son plan. Quang-ngan-ché à mon avis étoit un grand ministre, que les Chinois, attachés trop aveuglement à leurs anciens usages, n'ont pas s-çu connoître, et à qui ils ne rendent pas la justice qu'il meritoit."

man who did not wash his clothes. It is possible, even in China, but after all rival statesmen say worse things of one another to-day.

In any case, to use again the illustration from the Tun-huang oasis with which I began, am I wrong in thinking that we have here in the story of Wang-an-shih a long buried hammer (we will not say "big stick") with which a few blows may yet be struck as we march on—"on to the bound of the waste, on to the City of God"? Let us hope that the blows may be struck mainly in the cause of tent-pitching, though it is too true travelers have to strike camp as well as to pitch, if they would move on. At least, when each day's march is done, let us not be shelterless, for it is as uncomfortable to-day as it was two thousand years ago to be left to the mercy of the desert winds and the drifting sands.