

Ma Chien-chung 馬建忠 (1844-1900), a  
frustrated French-trained early  
reformist: his views on  
diplomatic service and  
naval training<sup>(1)</sup>

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I

My subject, Ma Chien-chung, lives on in a phrase Japanese linguists use for someone whose interests are *passé*: "That fellow is a *Ma-shih wên-t'ung* 馬氏文通." ("Aitsu wa Bashibuntsû da." あいつは馬氏文通だ) Needless to say, however, that this kind of statement is not meant to deny that *Ma-shih wên-t'ung* (published posthumously in 1904) was an epoch-making work in its days. It was the first book of grammar of literary Chinese, ever produced in China under the influence of Latin grammar. This work, intended to enable Chinese youth to learn the classics easily and in a systematic way, represents only one aspect of the colourful life of its author, Ma Chien-chung, a versatile French-trained man who worked in the service of the Viceroy Li Hung-chang 李鴻章. He was a capable administrator or *entrepreneur*, and also a tough negotiator speaking fluent French.

Ma Chien-chung was already a mature man in his thirties, when he was sent to Paris in 1877 to study "diplomacy," "international law," and "jurisprudence," as an *attaché* to a governmental educational mission. The mission itself consisted of thirty young students of the Foochow Navy Yard School. They went either to France or England to learn ship-building or navigation.

Ma was a native of Tan-t'u county 丹徒縣, Kiangsu Province. He was

(1) This paper is a combined *résumé* of the following fully-documented two articles in Japanese and was read in a more or less abridged form at Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Princeton when the author visited the United States in the spring of 1972 on the United States-Japan Intellectual Interchange Program:

(1) "フランス留學時代の馬建忠—外交および外交官制度についての二つの意見書 (1878年)を中心として" (Ma Chien-chung in France: two treatises [in 1878] on diplomacy and diplomatic service), *Kokka Gakkai Zasshi*, Vol. 84, Nos. 5-6 (Aug. 1971), pp. 257-293.

(2) "馬建忠の海軍論—1882年の意見書を中心として" (Ma Chien-chung's views on navy and naval training: a treatise of 1882), in pp. 313-343 of KAWANO Shigetô 川野重任, ed., *Ajia no Kindaika* アジアの近代化 (Modernization of Asia), Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai 東京大学出版会, 1972.

a descendant, twenty generations removed of Ma Tuan-lin 馬端臨, the compiler of *Wên-hsien t'ung-k'ao* 文獻通考. The Ma family was converted to Christianity when Matthew Ricci came to China. Ma Chien-chung's own Christian name was Mathias. His father was an apothecary, who also practised medicine, and who later became a merchant dealing in rice and cotton clothes.

Besides receiving a traditional Chinese education, Ma studied Western learning in a French-Jesuit school, called Hsü-hui kung-hsüeh 徐匯公學 or the College of St. Ignatius in Zikawei near Shanghai for some seven or eight years, and thus acquired a good command of reading Latin, Greek, French and English. Afterwards, he was engaged for some years in Tientsin in the so-called *yang-wu* 洋務 under Li Hung-chang, — perhaps in diplomacy as a clerk or interpreter. Thus he had had already a fair amount of educational and training background behind him, when he came to Europe.

## II

He stayed in Europe from 1877 to 1880. He studied in Paris, serving at the same time as an interpreter at the newly-opened Chinese legation. In 1879 he received his degree of *licencié de droit* from the Faculty of Law of Paris.

The collection of his writings, *Shih-k'o-chai chi-yen chi-hsing* 適可齋記言記行 (pub. in 1896) includes six pieces written in France, which reveal his sophisticated insight into the modern Western world. He praised, for instance, progress as seen in the Western society in the following vein, evidently as a veiled criticism of his own country: "In the last one hundred years, the way of government has been completely changed, commerce has developed, and the means of living have continuously been diversified. Parliaments have been set up and public opinion can now be explicitly expressed. As for taxation, the actual sum collected is reported and there is no possibility of embezzlement. Judicial process is administered 'according to the actual facts of the case and the motivations and circumstances of the persons involved' 比事比情, and there are no 'cruelties of torture' 刑求之虐. People enjoy their life and vocation. Each person is absorbed in his own business and people do not disturb each other. . . . The streets are well cared for and kept clean. The roads are not bumpy. There is no need of keeping a noisy night watch with wooden-clappers. Public order is so well maintained that the city-gates are kept open at night." On the other hand, Ma was also critical of other aspects of politics of Western States, pointing out that Britain was governed oligarchically by the prime minister and a few of his colleagues; that in the United States a presidential election was accompanied by overt corruption and the spoils system; and that, although France was not an aristocratic State any more, personnel administration there was now largely in-

fluenced by party strife.

### III

Two of the six pieces mentioned — that is, “A letter from Paris in reply to a friend” 巴黎復友人書 and “A letter from Marseilles in reply to a friend” 瑪賽復友人書 deal with the formation, as a profession, of diplomatic service in the modern world, against the background of the history of international relations and diplomacy in Europe. Both letters were written in 1878. In these letters Ma Chien-chung stresses that a competent professional diplomatic service can be organized only if “persons with diplomatic talents” 使才 are “carefully selected” 嚴選 and “appropriately trained” 教導有方.

Ma's basic idea on diplomacy is that international relations are very complicated and “always changing from one time to another” 因時遞變 along with the “prevailing customs or tastes” 俗尚 of various nations so that “talent for grasping, and for adaptation to, changing circumstances” 隨時達變之才識 is needed. This kind of talent, in his opinion, can be trained only through “practical learning” 實學 designed to cultivate capabilities of “watching the times and effectively dealing with changing circumstances” 相時制變.

Now, let me summarize the first of the two letters mentioned, that is, “A letter from Paris in reply to a friend”: — “Diplomacy” 交涉之道 is able to function only in a situation where the “balance of power” 均勢之局 works. In the Western world, the balance of power gradually developed and was finally expanded to the extent of the whole of Europe during the period between the Treaty of Westphalia and the Congress of Vienna. In the meantime, the exchange of permanent diplomatic missions had become a common practice and the hierarchy of classes of diplomatic agents had been established. Still, international peace can not be maintained by the balance of power alone, because there is no mutual confidence between States and their relationships are profoundly influenced by power considerations and the calculation of interest. International law is of no avail. Scholars of the law of nations are divided into many schools, each subservient to the particular interests of a patron State. Under the circumstances, the *rôle* of diplomacy is very important in maintaining international peace and preserving national interests. In a world that has a balance of power the security of nations depends primarily upon the effectiveness of diplomacy, — especially upon whether they have reliable allies.

In the contemporary world, the qualities required for a diplomat are not the same as they used to be. In these times, newspapers can be published without restraint and public opinion is more and more clamorous. The power of parliaments is not small. Owing to steam ships and railways, people can travel more easily, popular customs or tastes change rapidly, commerce

and industry become more prosperous, and goods more plentiful. The diplomat in his post abroad has to read the local newspapers, listen to the debates at the parliament, mix with high society, and make friends with businessmen. In other words, it is not enough any more just to contact the monarch and a few of his confidants. What is required now is to grasp the political, social and economic conditions of the country in question in their totality and in their ever-changing fluidity. In order to select persons capable enough to achieve this kind of task as a diplomat, a stiff examination is conducted in subjects of "practical learning concerning diplomacy" 交涉實學.

After comparatively surveying the institutional features of the foreign service and the way of recruitment of diplomats in various countries, Ma Chien-chung now proceeds to discuss the contemporary French system.

In his opinion, most of the diplomats of France in the 19th century are not distinguished. A major reason for this is that the posts of ambassadors are usually occupied by party politicians instead of professional diplomats. Another reason is that only sons of the wealthy families have been accepted into the diplomatic service.

In 1877 new regulations for the diplomatic service examination were made in France. The examination subjects under the new system were comparative government and constitutions, the history of theories of international law, current international law, diplomatic history, commerce, economic geography, and two foreign languages, that is, English and German. The kinds of subjects mentioned clearly show that the examination was designed to select future diplomats as career professionals. However, this new arrangement was not free from either of the two defects pointed out above. First, the successful candidates had to go through two years on probation without pay and even after they were formally appointed third secretaries their salaries covered less than one fourth of their actual expenditures so that, virtually, the diplomatic service was still not accessible to "educated but indigent men" 寒微之士. Secondly, career diplomats could only be promoted as far as the rank of minister. The posts of secretary of foreign affairs and ambassadors were mainly reserved for parliamentary politicians.

What should be done to remedy this situation? Ma Chien-chung's own idea is (1) to conduct a stiff and careful examination, (2) to give the successful candidates a sufficient salary, and (3) to let them accumulate experience solely in diplomacy at home and abroad.

This much is what is discussed in "A letter from Paris in reply to a friend." As a matter of fact the letter was a statement of his views in answer to an enquiry on the part of a friend or superior in China, — probably someone in Li Hung-chang's *entourage*.

The second treatise on diplomacy of the same year of 1878 was a draft of "Regulations for a diplomatic service training school" 出使學堂章程, which Ma drafted also in reply to an enquiry, taking into consideration the actual

conditions in China.

In this treatise he began with a shattering criticism of the actual workings of the newly-opened Chinese legations. In his opinion, the present diplomatic service means nothing but an increase in opportunities for office seekers. Once having presented his credentials, an envoy seems to have nothing to do. He makes friends only with insignificant figures approaching him with base ulterior motives. He does not show an interest in such matters as the politics, education, public finance, law, or military affairs of the locality. The secretaries and *attachés* of the legation are appointed at the envoy's personal recommendation, on the basis of sheer connection and patronage. The envoy's term of office expires without his getting a command of the local language. . . .

In Ma's opinion a negotiator sent out to a "remote country" 絕域 should be a man of the calibre of senior minister. But it would be difficult to find a man of this level of talent. Talent can be cultivated only through careful training.

Ma Chien-chung thus proceeds to propose the following training plan:

A school should be set up in Shanghai. Every year ten young persons between 15 and 21 or 22, who have already finished the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* of Confucianism, should be admitted upon examination for a three-year schooling period. The education here will be mainly concentrated on language training, — in French and Latin. After the three-year training period the students would be put on probation for one year either at home or abroad to endure the toils and pains of practical business. Subsequently they would be sent to Paris to be given a two-year training in Western learning at the "Legation School" 使署學館. Here they would study international law, jurisprudence, treaties, public finance, taxation, and the diplomatic correspondence of various countries. They would learn English and German and also how to draft official correspondence both in French and Chinese.

Only those people who had successfully gone through the ordeal of a six-year training period may be appointed either secretaries of the Tsungli Yamen in Peking or third secretaries at the legation abroad.

What has been summarized above is the blue print Ma Chien-chung made in 1878. It was not until 37 years later, that is, in 1915 that the diplomatic and consular service examination was actually started in China.

#### IV

Now, the activities of Ma Chien-chung after his return to China in 1880 are succinctly described by the French historian Henri Cordier (1845–1925), who knew him personally, as follows:

"Back in China he was really a Jack of all trades in the service of Li Hung-chang, at one and the same time an interpreter of the French, a legal adviser, an expert on mining, a maritime customs tao-tai at Tientsin, an

examiner at the Admiralty Court, an inspector of the Peiyang Fleet, an administrator of the Taku Dockyard, a manager of China Merchants' Steam Navigation Co., . . . , or an emissary dispatched to Korea, Annam, or Calcutta."

As indicated in this quotation, Ma Chien-chung seems to have been involved in various capacities in the building up of Peiyang Navy in its formative stage. As a matter of fact, he is recorded to have been as of 1881 a "Naval Secretariat intendant" 水師營務處道員, — evidently a pivotal post in naval administration.

*Shih-k'o-chai chi-yen chi-hsing* includes a some fifteen-or-sixteen-thousand-word-long treatise, entitled "*Shang Li po-hsiang fu-i Ho hsueh-shih Ju-chang tsou she shui-shih shu*" 上李伯相覆議何學士如璋奏設水師書, which was originally drafted in the winter of 1882 at Li Hung-chang's request to make comments on Ho Ju-chang's 2800-word memorial on how to build up a navy powerful enough, especially to cope with the potential threat of the emerging modern navy of Japan. Ho Ju-chang (1838–1891), a Hanlin scholar-official, had served in 1877–80 as the first envoy of China accredited to the Japanese court.

Ma Chien-chung, who had been very active in this same year of 1882 as the drafting officer for treaty negotiations between Korea, which was then a tributary state of China, on the one hand, and the United States, Britain, and Germany respectively on the other hand, and also as a political agent dispatched to Korea to deal with the thorny situation caused by the military coup at Seoul, now proceeded to discuss the problem of navy building in an amazing depth and comprehensiveness in the treatise mentioned.

At first he emphasizes the historical significance of the invention of a steam ship in Europe. It wholly changed the strategic significance of the ocean for the security of China. The ocean, which had been an effective defence barrier, now made the Middle Kingdom easily accessible to the fleets of very remote western powers.

A major point that Ma shared with most of the contemporary discussions of the naval problem is that China's navy ought to have a unified chain of command with a "Board of Admiralty" 水師衙門 in Peking at the top of the hierarchy in stead of the decentralized pattern shown by the uncoordinated provincial navies then existant. Uniformity should be achieved also in standardization of vessels and weapons as well as words of commands, semaphore signaling, and all sorts of technical terms. In connection with this problem of unified command, Ma stressed that the navy should be an independent organization, distinctively separated from, and somehow superior in social prestige to, the army because of the highly specialized complexities of the modern navy and the enormous physical dangers both in peace and war to which naval officers and sailors were exposed. Ma Chien-chung takes up all the topics treated by Ho Ju-chang. These were centred around the six problems: where to set up naval stations and bases, how to organize fleets and squadrons, how to distinguish the kinds of ships to be purchased or built, how to conduct

the training of officers, how to deal with or abolish the rotten old-style navy, and also how to perform personnel administration. The most remarkable thing about Ma's treatise is, however, that he gives by far the largest attention and space to a discussion of the problem of drill or training and personnel administration. In other words, what concerns him most is how to create as a specialized profession in a modern sense a body of well-trained navy officers and sailors. Especially, his discussion is acutely focused on the formation of a navy officer corps with professional integrity and self-respect as seen in Britain and France. Ma set as goal an imposing nine-year plan of building a national navy, which is to consist of six iron-clads and thirty-six cruisers, with 260 officers (including ten admirals), five or six hundred non-commissioned officers, and some 10,000 sailors, of which the whole expenditure would amount to forty-five million taels. He proposed the following five-year plan for training officers:

A "naval school" 水師小學 should be set up in Canton, Foochow, Shanghai, and Tientsin. Every year young boys of 14 or 15, who have a fair command of literary Chinese, should be admitted to each of the four schools for one-year of schooling. English will be taught there. Students will learn mathematics, using textbooks in Chinese. They will also study military affairs as discussed in Chinese classics. After the one year of training, fifteen students from each school, that is, sixty altogether, will be sent upon examination to a naval "college" 大學院, located near the Board of Admiralty for two-years of schooling. Here the students will not only continue their English lessons, but also they will learn in Chinese something of mathematics, physics, astronomy or geography. They will also read books on the history of China and other countries. The reason why English should be a compulsory subject is that it is indispensable to enable the students to read at ease in future western books concerning their specialities so that they may keep their mind open and perceptive. Out of the sixty students ten will be kicked out upon examination after the two-year schooling period. The successful fifty graduates will be divided into four groups. Ten persons are to become ship-building officers, and five persons each to become respectively surgeons and paymasters. The remaining thirty, selected on account of their strong physique, presence of mind and moral courage, are to be trained in navigation and arts of sea war at a training ship which should be anchored at Port Arthur. The training at Port Arthur will be conducted for two years solely by foreign instructors. The sailing ships will be used for learning navigation on open sea.

Young people who will have successfully undergone the five-year training described will be appointed "midshipmen" 少從.

As for personnel administration for navy officers, Ma Chien-chung stresses the crucial importance of establishing settled rules for promotion, based on a combination of the length of active service and the verified depth of professional knowledge, and of setting up a unified and fixed scale of graded

salaries, corresponding to the respective ranks of officers, and salaries should be sufficient to build up the officer corps as a full-time job of a respectable "profession."

In short, what Ma Chien-chung wants to emphasize above all is that, although China can purchase any expensive war vessel right away if money is available, a careful prolonged training of more than ten years is necessary to produce a capable naval captain.

Finally, he discusses how to raise the necessary funds and proposes an increase in opium taxes, a new taxation on tobacco, a reform in currency, and the substitution of a western-modelled postal system for the traditional expensive network of "military post stations" 驛站. In connection with this matter, he describes the fiscal system then in operation in western countries as follows, unmistakably as an implied criticism of the actual conditions in China: "(In the west) almost nothing that people use is exempt from taxation. Nevertheless, people become more and more prosperous and national revenue steadily increases. Why? Because what is taken from the people is used for their benefit. If there is something useful to the people which they can not afford to produce by themselves, national revenue is spent for its production. Evils which can not be got rid of by the people are eliminated by spending national revenue. Government institutions are constituted in such a way that no embezzlement is committed. Any little drop of revenue goes into the public treasury. The reason is probably that there is enough communication between governors and the governed and the identity of the prince and the subjects is institutionally achieved."

Ma also declares elsewhere in the same treatise: "Although millions of public revenue are expended, not even a penny is wasted, nor is a penny over and above the actual sum of expenditures ever returned. This is not because the foreigners are wiser than the Chinese. This is again because institutions are different."

This detailed writing on naval training is concluded by an almost thrilling plea, uttered three times, to the effect that the heart of the matter is not that "we are not able to do this," but that "we do not really want to do this," — "*fei pu-neng yeh, shih pu-wei yeh* 非不能也,是不為也", apparently a citation in a bit modified form of a famous passage in Mencius.

What happened to China's navy after this treatise was written in 1882 is a profoundly painful story. One may have some idea of it from the following contemporary account in Yao Hsi-kuang 姚錫光, *Tung-fang ping-shih chi-lueh* 東方兵事記略 (An Outline of the History of the War with Japan) (pub. in 1897): "Captain Lang was very strict in conducting the drills. He was thus bitterly disliked by the navy officers, many of whom were Fukienese. . . . A sinister scheme was carried out to throw him out. Admiral Ting Ju-chang 丁汝昌 was an army officer by training. Furthermore, he was not a Fukienese, but a native of Huai district. Accordingly he was in solitary



isolation with many Fukienese under his command. He eventually came to be restrained by the Fukien clique. His authority was not respected any more. After Captain Lang left, discipline in training totally collapsed...."

I venture to think that Ma Chien-chung was one of the very rare Chinese thinkers with experience in practical affairs, or perhaps the only person of the kind, who developed so early and so clearly an idea of the necessity of the formation of professions such as permanent diplomatic service or navy officer corps, — all after the European or rather French model and also on the basis of a critical perception of the actual conditions in his own country. His criticism was so bitter and sophisticated as to seem almost despairing.

## V

Incidentally, Ma Chien-chung took up a life of retirement in Shanghai early in the 1890s. Probably because he now felt frustrated in public life. He had been more than once vehemently attacked by the conservative *Ch'ing-liu* 清流 scholar-officials in Peking. And also he found himself on bad terms with his fellow sub-leaders under Li Hung-chang. Perhaps he was a little too "rationalistic" and "advanced" in his way of handling business.

The *North China Herald* reported on Wednesday, Sept. 5, 1900, in its "Summary of News" that "Ma Chien-chung, ex-Director of the China Merchants' Co., and a favourite protégé of H.E. Li Hung-chang, died suddenly on Monday morning at his residence here." This occurred right in the midst of the Boxer turmoil. According to his elder brother, Ma Liang, Ma Chien-chung had been working at the temporary residence in Shanghai of Li Hung-chang, when a 7000-word telegram came from the Russian court. He sat up all night translating this. Exhausted, he caught a fever, which turned out to be fatal. Thus ended the life of the Sino-French trained all-round man, the whole range of whose career has yet to be carefully studied.

