H. J. M. Kuang Hsu's Decree on Reform.

By S. T. Laisun.

In the beginning of 1875, Prince Tsai Tien, then in the fourth year of his age, and the second son of Prince Chun—the seventh son of the Emperor Tao Kuang, who reigned from 1820 to 1850—was selected by Tse-hsi-tuan-yu, etc., etc., Empress Dowager of China and Regent, to be the successor on the Dragon Throne of her son, the Emperor Tung Chih, who had just died at the premature age of about eighteen. In selecting Prince Tsai Tien, who took the reigning title of Kuang Hsü, to be the nominal Sovereign of the four hundred million inhabitants of China Proper, Manchuria, Inner and Outer Mongolia—which include what is known as the New Dominion, or Chinese Turkestan in Central Asia—and the islands lying off the maritime coasts of Chihli, Shantung, Kiangsu, Chêkiang, Fukien, and Kuangtung provinces, the Empress Dowager was led by motives of policy. There were princes more eligible for the Dragon Throne than Kuang Hsü, namely, the present Prince Pu Lun, who is known to foreigners as the Prince who went to the United States last year as Imperial Commissioner to the St. Louis Exposition, and the eldest son of the late Prince Kung, the sixth son of the late Emperor Tao Kuang. These two eligible princes had, however, unluckily for themselves, the misfortune to be quite young men at the time, likely to be desirous of standing up for their prerogatives and to have their own way in things; while the second son of Prince Chun, being then an infant of four, would naturally have nothing to say for himself for many years, which decided the choice of the Empress Dowager and Regent. Under the circumstances, amongst such sticklers for etiquette and precedents, as the Chinese, the period immediately following her selection of the infant Kuang Hsü to fill the Dragon Throne was one of some danger to the Empress Dowager and her partisans, there being several conspiracies to oust them and the new Emperor in favour of those who were more legitimate heirs of the newly-deceased Emperor Tung Chih. All these conspiracies were,
however, promptly crushed by the late Marquis Li Hung-chang, then Viceroy of Chihli, who, at the urgent prayer of the Empress Dowager, made a forced march with a body of his foreign-drilled troops to Peking, occupied the Imperial Palaces, or “Forbidden City” with them, arrested and punished the malcontents and conspirators and, so to speak, cleared the political atmosphere of the Capital. Li Hung-chang then returned to Tientsin and all was serene and quiet in Peking. The Empress Dowager, Kuang Hsü’s aunt, accordingly continued to rule as Regent, while the infant Kuang Hsü amused himself with his playthings, and between whiles studied under the late Wêng Tung-ho, who was chosen Imperial Tutor soon after the proclamation of Prince Tsai Tien as Emperor of the Chinese Empire.

At the age of seventeen (Sinoic, eighteen) His Majesty married on the 26th of February, 1889, his cousin, a Manchu princess of the Yeh-ho-na-la clan, and having thus, according to Chinese law, arrived at man’s estate was permitted by the Empress Dowager to nominally assume the reins of Government (with herself, of course, as principal adviser and director of affairs). From that time hence, until after the war with Japan in 1895, Kuang Hsü showed nothing extraordinary about his actions, being dominated by the influence and policy of his aunt, the ex-Regent; but the defeat of the Imperial armies when pitted against those of Japan opened his Majesty’s eyes that there must be something radically wrong with the country and its mode of government, and several commands were issued calling upon his ministers, viceroy and governors to consider measures that might be needed to strengthen the Empire. With all this there was, however, nothing doing. The psychological moment, however, at last came with the arrival of the reformer Kang Yu-wei and his party of earnest, progressive young men. The eyes of the mandarinate were gradually becoming opened and so, when the reformers came upon the scene in the beginning of 1898 from the South, nominally for the triennial literary examinations, the ground for reform was prepared for them, in a way. The first Imperial Decree advocating reform was issued on the 17th of January, 1898. So long, however, as the Emperor in his reforms did not interfere with the dominance of his aunt, Her Majesty smiled and kept her thoughts to herself. But when in the schemes of reform Kang Yu-wei and his party aimed at the removal, or rather confinement at Eho Park of Her Majesty the Empress Dowager, so that she could not interfere in any way with the reform movement, she, so to speak, put her veto on it, and backed up by the reactionary party, which, after all, composed the most powerful and greatest portion of both the Metropolitan as well as the Provincial mandarinate, brought about the famous coup d’état of the 22nd of September, 1898, by which Her Majesty removed Kuang Hsü
from power, became Regent in name once more (she had always been Regent in fact since 1875), ordered to execution Kang Yu-wei and many of his supporters of the smaller fry, and cashiered and removed from office those among them in high power, such as the then Governor of Hunan, Chén Pao-chên; Li Tuan-fen, then President of one of the Six Great Boards, etc. Kang Yu-wei, the chief of the reformers, managed to escape, but six bright, promising young men, one of them (Tan Sze-tung) the talented son of Tan Chi-hsun, then Governor of Hupeh province, were executed at Peking without trial within a few days of the coup d'etat. Then came again the era of bigoted conservatism, whose crowning act was the Boxer rising of 1900, which placed Peking in the hands of the Allies and drove the Imperial Court into exile as far as Hsian, the Capital of Shensi province. With the lessons taught by the Allies, the desire of better things came again into the hearts of those about the Empress Dowager, so that, beginning with the last two years and a half, we have seen many of His Majesty Kuang Hsiu's proposed reforms, which were denounced and vituperated by the majority of the mandarins and literary classes from 1898 down to 1901, actually put into execution by fresh commands of the Empress Dowager and obeyed by all without a demur, such as the abolition of the Governorship of Hupeh and Yünnan (the Governorship of Kuangtung is to be abolished at the end of this year); the establishment of colleges of modern learning and graded schools throughout the Empire; the abolition of harsh laws, and the sending of nobles, officials, and youths to foreign countries, either to study or travel. The Imperial Decree, the translation of which is given below, gives an idea of many of the more important objects of reform which occupied, and we know still occupies, the mind of its Imperial Author.

THE ERA OF REFORM TO BE MADE KNOWN TO ALL.

"Our love for our people and our anxiety to rescue the Empire from the lethargy and corruption which have fallen upon it, leading the way to destruction, caused us to inaugurate this era of reform of the government and to spread higher and more universal education amongst our people for their betterment and for the strengthening and enriching of the Empire. But we could not do this from the materials at hand and so we determined to bring in Western learning and sciences to our aid to supply what we lacked for our purpose. For Westerners are our superiors in that they possess more zeal and preserverance in their pursuit of knowledge. But we have heard conservative statesmen and scholars decry Western knowledge and declare that Westerners have no system in their education. These ignorant men do not know that the science of government and the system of education of Western
countries have been brought through a thousand and even ten thousand difficulties to their present perfection by zeal and perseverance, all leading to one principal aim—that of the betterment of the masses. So we find that Westerners are wise and far-seeing; they bring wealth to their families and comfort to their bodies; they have that which brightens the intellect and improves the person; they have even longevity at command. All these have been given them by their system of government and education. Whatever they find of benefit and use to their people, Westerners are always seeking to extend such in order that all may reap the advantage. We have considered and studied the benefit of Western learning and morning and night our heart is filled with the desire to introduce these reforms into our country. Are there people who think that we seek to introduce new things just for the pleasure arising from novelty? No; this surely is not so. We indeed yearn to nourish and better our people so that they may have and enjoy of the best that modern times can give. Our people are our children, given to us by High Heaven to nourish. They are the inheritance which our ancestors have handed down to us. Hence we consider that we have failed in the high duty belonging to us, as the Sovereign and Lord of our people, since we have been brought to recognise the bitter fact that our children are unhappy, comfortless, and poverty-stricken. Moreover there is also the fact that the nations around us are gathering about us; they have come to take away what we cannot keep. We are trying to prevent this and yet many of our people do not know of the bitterness, the troubles, and the difficulties which we are fighting hard to conquer in order to bestow the highest blessings upon our beloved children. The fault due to this ignorance of the people concerning our hardships lies with the incapable and useless officials of the land who, influenced by conservative people, do not try to inform our people truly of what we are doing for reform, while crafty and wicked persons try to spread unseemly rumours in order to stir up the people against this reform. We feel very indignant at this, and we now command that the whole Empire shall know exactly what the country needs in reform and to make all feel that we are determined upon reform. Once our whole people know the benefits accruing from reform we can then depend upon them to carry it out themselves, working as our right hand. Then will we have a strong China and a happy and contented people and our dearest wishes shall then have been accomplished. We hereby command that, commencing from the decrees of the 11th of June to the present one, all such decrees as touch upon reform work shall be copied by all our Viceroy's and Governors forthwith and printed in clear type to be sent to all the prefects, sub-perfects, district magistrates and directors of studies of the Empire, to be publicly read aloud
and explained to the people. We desire that these decrees be transmitted from man to man and from household to household in order that all may know and learn what we desire for our people's good. We hereby grant permission to Provincial Treasurers, Judges, Taotais, and Prefects to memorialise the Throne on anything concerning reform they may wish to inform us; they must not be backward and keep silent, and as for the sub-prefects and district magistrates they also may memorialise us but through their respective Viceroy's or Governors. The latter shall not be allowed to open these memorials but they shall see to it that every memorial be sent up to us intact and unopened, nor shall any attempt at coercion be allowed by the higher authorities on the lower. And we further command that our decrees on reform shall be placarded and framed outside the great gates of the various yamêns, irrespective of rank, so that all our people may have the opportunity of reading the contents and learn what is desired for their happiness and betterment."