



A Need for a Careful Study of the History of China

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SCIENCE.—SUPPLEMENT.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 1885.

A NEED FOR A CAREFUL STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF CHINA.

WHEN it is remembered that the Chinese writers have hardly any conception of history in our sense of the term, that their most renowned historians give us little more than annals or chronicles, the dead and fleshless bones of history, we cannot complain that Fries's history of China, which is a condensed translation of Chinese writers, is not a rich and flowing narrative. It is simply a bald outline of the succession of sovereigns and dynasties, of the tricks and vices by which the throne was often won, of the military achievements of the rulers, and of the divisions and reunions which the territory of the empire has undergone. Of the condition of the people through the long period of their national existence, of their progress in arts and learning, of the philosophy of their institutions, of the solution of the problem of their survival of all the destructive influences which have wrecked every other nation, we hear nothing in this book, because the Chinese chronicler has said nothing of all these to the translator and compiler.

It is greatly to be desired that some competent scholar should make a careful study of Chinese political history and institutions, in the spirit in which Sir Henry Maine has studied the institutions and laws of ancient and mediæval Europe and of India. There is reason to hope that not a little light could be thrown by such study on certain European institutions and traditions. Why should not the careful investigation of Chinese feudalism, which had run its course, and perished centuries before feudalism sprang up in Europe, yield results most interesting to the student of European feudalism? Why should not the careful study of the village organization in China, which probably has scarcely changed for three thousand years, add to the light which Mr. Maine's study of the village communities in India has thrown upon the primitive life of Europe? Who that has observed the common responsibility of the dwellers in a Chinese street, for the preservation of order in that street, has not been reminded of the old Saxon frank-pledge? Is the resemblance

Abriss der geschichte China's seit seiner entstehung.
Nach chinesischen quellen übersetzt und bearbeitet von
Sigmund Ritter von Fries. Wien, Frick, 1884.

accidental, or is there an historical basis for it? The day cannot be far distant when western scholars will be giving to such subjects the attention they deserve. A profound knowledge of the Chinese language, exhaustless patience in ransacking the voluminous literature of China, and a thorough investigation of existing usages and laws in towns and villages of China, will be necessary for the successful prosecution of such work. But the facilities for mastering the language are now so great, and the opportunities for coming into close contact with Chinese life and thought are so rapidly increasing, that the younger scholars need not despair of accomplishing what has hitherto been impossible, but what may prove a most valuable contribution to the history of institutions.

JAMES B. ANGELL.