

CHINESE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Meaning of Recent Elections—Entry of the Reformers—The New Programme

By G. Gramada

The election which took place last Sunday week in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was the consummation of a long political struggle between the Old Guard and the Reformers. The Reformers won. Out of 35 members of the Committee they control 20 votes, and it is more than likely that they will have the Vice-Presidency if not the Presidency of the Chamber. It is possible that for peace and harmony Mr. C. C. Nieh, who is independent, will be made President. But this is not certain.

The Old Guard have controlled the Chamber for about a decade. They have become influential and important because of this association. Last year an effort was made to overthrow them, but this was signally defeated. That the Reformers were successful this year was in no small measure due to the changing attitude toward public affairs.

THE TWO PARTIES.

The Old Guard consists mainly of compradores, bankers within the Concessions and the political merchant. The Reformers consist mainly of the younger business men, the heads of the specific commercial and industry guilds, the leaders in the Shanghai Commercial Federation and the League of Street Unions, and the younger element in the Canton and Ningpo Guilds. The Old Guard possesses wealth and prestige and to an extent, foreign support. The Reformers are closer to the masses of the Chinese people, are active in civic development and are slowly becoming captains of the infant industries of the country. Among these industries, however, cannot be counted cotton.

The membership of the Chamber has regularly been kept down to between 300 and 400, the effect of this being the creation of a monopoly in Chamber privileges. As new men came up, as new industries started, as new problems brought more merchants within the scope of public action, there was a constant demand for an increased membership to the Chamber. This demand the Old Guard has been able to resist. But as a result the Shanghai Commercial Federation and the League of Street Unions has been organized. The former body is made up of 52 specific trade and industry guilds, the latter consists of the merchants organized according to streets.

CAUSING CONFUSION.

The existence of three separate bodies of this nature has not been

conducive to peace and order in the Settlement because it has always been difficult to know which body is representative. For instance, the Municipal Council wrote to the Chamber of Commerce with regard to the appointment of a Chinese Advisory Committee. Immediately the Street Unions, the Canton and Ningpo Guilds protested. Yet the Council could not write to every organization in the city. It had to select one. And that one was the Chamber of Commerce, which is semi-official and should be representative. But the Chinese refused to acknowledge its authority. They said that it represented only the 300 members in it. What was the foreigner to do?

The Reformers propose to correct this evil by enlarging the membership of the Chamber so that it include all merchants whose business and standing entitle them to membership. They propose to make it possible for all the younger and new organizations to merge into the older one and to make it thoroughly representative. Whether this can be accomplished is dependent upon the ability of the merchants to get together and the willingness of office-holders and job-holders to sacrifice their personal interests. But the mere fact that the Reformers were elected by so large a majority is an earnest of a new spirit among the merchants.

In political affairs the old Chamber of Commerce always took the conservative side. This was in a measure due to the fact that the Old Guard represented large vested interests, and the tendency of wealth is toward conservatism. During the students' strike, officers of the Chamber made valiant attempts to get shopkeepers to open their doors. They failed. That the merchant body did not succumb to the wiles of politicians was due to the seriousness of the situation and the inherent placidity of the Chinese.

NEUTRALITY IN POLITICS.

The new programme is for the Chamber to keep out of politics and to remain a mercantile organization. That is difficult, almost impossible. For in China to-day politics permeate everything. But if the Committee of the Chamber makes neutrality in politics its goal it will come close to keeping out of trouble. The merchant has nothing to gain from either side in political squabbles. Both sides bleed him and impede commerce. What he wants is good government and a government that will protect trade

and industry. The Reformers say that they will advocate that the Chamber fight for that type of government. But they will oppose the use of the influence and prestige of the Chamber to uphold one politician against another, to support one Tuchun against another, to get one man into a job and another out of it. Can the Chamber stay neutral? The Reformers will have a chance to show.

TRADE RETURNS.

The Chamber has in a western sense been inefficient. It has made no important scientific studies of trade conditions. It has no trade or industry statistics. It has no noteworthy publications. It has done very little to stimulate trade. Its efforts toward cementing relations between Chinese and foreigners have been limited to the Union Club and several dinners a year. It has used trade inquiries to help its few members.

The Reformers talk about changing all that. They plan a statistical bureau along the most modern lines which will be in a position to supply adequate and correct information with regard to trade and industry in this port. They propose a survey of trade and industry with a view towards collating information on industries which exist but are not known.

A great handicraft and domestic industry exists in Shanghai which produces in the aggregate goods amounting to millions a year. But little is known of this industry. It is in no way protected, nor does it function in such a way as to benefit producer or consumer to the greatest possible extent. The Reformers want to know about this industry and to make it public.

Trade inquiries they say should be made as public as possible so that the inquirer and all who can supply him with goods can know about it. Often a purchaser could get greater value if he knew where goods were wanted. If he is a foreigner he is dependent upon a comprador, whose interests are seldom identical with his. If he is Chinese he is dependent upon a fleecing middleman. Publicity to trade inquiries may eliminate both of these, say the Reformers. Active and efficient cooperation with all foreign Chambers of Commerce together with correspondence with Chambers in other lands will do much to protect and strengthen trade.

Misunderstandings, the Reformers believe, have arisen because often the Old Guard have found it difficult to differentiate between their functions as merchants and their duties as officers of a public body. Information which might benefit them as individuals but which might also benefit their merchant competitors has been

withheld from the public. In other countries such information is regarded as public property and is given out without regards to private gain. This, the Reformers say, will be the practice of the new Committee of the Chamber.

CAN IT BE DONE?

Of course, every new brooms sweeps well. And all Reformers have good intentions. Will they be able to carry them through? On that judgement has to be reserved. But foreigners and Chinese will agree that it is absolutely necessary to have in this city one organization which can truly represent all the Chinese in the city and which shall have sufficient influence to enforce its decision and to keep its promises. Such an organization can become an important element for construction in Shanghai. If the Reformers fail, there will be new Reformers next year, for a vacuum must be filled.