

The Late Tong King-Sing

BY TONG KAI-SON.

MR. Tong King-sing was born in 1830, at Tongchia, a large village situated about twelve miles from Macao, in the district of Hsiangshan. His parents being poor, Mr. Tong was compelled to emigrate to Hongkong at an early age, where he started to earn his own living. Being of a studious mind, he soon joined the Morrison School, an institution founded and maintained by the English merchants at Hongkong and Macao, and named after Robert Morrison, (an eminent English missionary who came to China in 1805 and died in 1834) but which, at this time, was under the charge of Rev. S. R. Brown, a pioneer missionary of the American Board. Graduating from there, he entered the service of the colonial government at Hongkong, as interpreter and translator in the Supreme Court, where he remained for some time. Leaving Hongkong, he came up to Shanghai in the early sixties, and soon became Compradore to the firm of Messrs. Jardine, Matheson & Co. Being of a genial and obliging disposition, he soon won his way into the favor of Chinese and foreigners alike, and before long, his reputation for commercial ability and integrity reached the ears of the Chinese officials.

About this time, Mr. Tong began to ponder over the economic situation in China, and perceived to his deep sorrow that every commercial enterprise of any importance was in the hands of foreigners. Therefore, having secured the warm support of Chinese merchants at Shanghai and the encouragement of the high provincial authorities of Kiangsu, he succeeded in establishing the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company, when he was about forty years of age, and became its first Director.

After a successful management of the Company's affairs for many years, Mr. Tong became restless, and determined to divert his energies to other industrial directions. With this in view, he secured Mr. Chu Yu-chee as his colleague in the management of the C.M.S.N. Co.'s affairs, after which he devoted his attention to the flotation of a mining company which he named "The Chinese Engineering and Mining Company." This Company was formed with a capital of one million taels, fully paid up, its object being the exploitation of the coal deposits at Tongshan and its vicinity, situated about sixty miles from Tangku on the Peiho River. On account of his popularity and the absolute confidence which Chinese merchants reposed in him, Mr. Tong did not experience any great difficulty in getting the capital he required, and in 1882, the work of shaft sinking was begun.

But Mr. Tong had innumerable difficulties to contend against. In the first place, transportation of machinery from Tangku (the nearest port to Tongshan) was exceedingly slow and difficult, having to travel over a roadless country of about fifty miles from the Peitang river to the mines. Besides, the expenses of the clumsy methods of transportation were abnormally heavy.

Next, the opposition of the natives of the districts in which the mines were situated had to be overcome. So fearful were the people that the mining operations would disturb the influences of local "feng-shui," that they made several attacks on the works, to prevent the men from the task of shaft sinking, and the erections of the necessary structures, besides making repeated attempts to set fire to the buildings. So critical was the situation that no foreign or Cantonese employee dared to take his

family to Tongshan, and every one who could handle a rifle was provided with one by the Company, with a full supply of ammunition. Patrols were stationed around the works both day and night. In this work of protection and defense, both the foreign and Cantonese employees rendered conspicuous service, their brave behavior effectually cowing the natives.

The third difficulty which confronted Mr. Tong was the lack of means of transport for his coal from the mines to the sea. To remedy this defect, he started the tremendous undertaking of digging a canal from the Peitang River to Hsukwochuang, a distance of about forty miles. This undertaking he estimated to cost about two hundred thousand taels, but before it was completed, he had to spend nearly double of that amount, or about forty per cent. of his entire available capital.

The natives of the villages through whose land the canal had to pass, made strenuous objections, and some of them actually tried to prevent by force the work of digging. Instead of meeting force by force, Mr. Tong resorted to a different and far better plan. He ordered forty cart-loads of presents from Shanghai, such as foreign blankets, clothing materials, clocks and watches, preserved eatables, mirrors, wines, etc., and these he had distributed among the people who were opposing the digging of the canal. He also went personally to call upon the village gentry, and by his suave demeanor won them over to his side.

But just after overcoming this difficulty, he was confronted with another and far more serious one. He found to his dismay that the whole of his capital had been expended, while the works were far from completion, and not a ton of coal had yet been drawn out of the pits. In this emergency, he repaired to Shanghai, and so firm was the public confidence in him, and so tactful was his nature, that he got his friends to rally round him, from whom he succeeded in raising another half million taels as fresh capital. This set

him on his feet once more, and in 1884, he was rewarded by seeing the coal coming up from the bowels of the earth, ton after ton.

But he had not yet reached the end of his difficulties. The canal he had dug only reached as far as Hsukwochuang, which was seven miles from the mines, and owing to the slightly uphill grade of the country, he could not continue it from that point. In this dilemma, he constructed a tramway with wooden rails, using mules and ponies to draw the loaded coal trucks from the pits' mouth to the head of the canal at Hsukwochuang. But as the output of the coal kept on increasing, it was soon discovered that this improvised tramway was inadequate for the colliery's needs.

Mr. Tong, therefore, determined on a bold stroke. With the connivance of the late Marquis Li Hung-chang, then Viceroy of Chihli, he had a small locomotive constructed in his workshop at Tongshan, which he named the "Rocket of China," because of its rapidity in travelling through space, "like a rocket going through the air." The wooden rails of the tramway were replaced with metal ones, and in a short time, the whistling and tooting of the little pioneer locomotive was heard from morning till night. The country folks made vehement objections to what seemed to them the ill-omened appearance of a fiery monster, and alleged that its whistling and tooting were calculated to disturb the spirits of their ancestors in their peaceful graves. Some even presented claims for the alleged burning of their kaoliang crops by the sparks from the locomotive.

Shortly afterwards, word reached Mr. Tong's ears that the authorities at Peking had heard of his locomotive and were determined to call him to account. Nothing daunted, however, he at once started to lay his plans, to meet the fresh trouble that was coming upon him. As soon as the commissioners who had been appointed to proceed to Tongshan to make an

investigation left the Capital, his friends there at once warned him of their coming. As the commissioners travelled by slow and easy stages, they gave Mr. Tong ample time to get everything ready before their arrival. He had the locomotive taken to pieces, and the different parts either buried in the ground or securely hidden. When the commissioners did arrive, Mr. Tong, putting on his blandest smile, went down to Hsukwochuang to meet them, and escorted them to Tongshan, where he at once began a series of grand entertainments, on a scale never before witnessed within a hundred miles round. What with theatricals, presents, dinners and champagne *ad lib.*, the commissioners completely forgot the object of their mission, and unanimously voted Mr. Tong as the best of good fellows. Finally, they were asked to make a personal inspection of the works and the colliery yard, and see for themselves the "falsity" of the charge brought against him. Greatly pleased with what they saw, and with profound apologies for having caused so much trouble to their maligned host, the commissioners withdrew, and started on their way back to Peking, determined to defend Mr. Tong against all "calumniators." The upshot of the whole matter was that Mr. Tong's position was greatly strengthened, and he no longer apprehended molestation from the Chinese officials.

Not long after, he openly applied to Peking for Imperial sanction to build a railway to Lutai, to connect with the Peitang river, and when the required sanction was granted, he at once had the extension made. After this, the ice having been broken, he pushed his railway still further to Tongku, connecting his collieries with the sea. In 1889, the line was further extended to Tientsin, forming a continuous line of about eighty miles.

The line was also extended northwards to Linsi, to connect with the branch colliery there, about fourteen miles from Tongshan. When the entire line was taken over by the Imperial Government as

a government concern, Mr. Tong was appointed by Viceroy Li Hung-chang, as its first Director, which position he held for several years.

Having now successfully established the China Merchant S. N. Co., the Chinese Engineering and Mining Company, and the Northern Railways, Mr. Tong next directed his energies to the work of manufactures. For this purpose, he started the cement works and the fire brick establishment at Tongshan, in 1890, which after various ups and downs during the past fifteen years, have at last reached a firm business basis, their products being in great demand to-day especially in North China.

Mr. Tong also interested himself for many years in gold and silver mining in Mongolia, but his efforts in that direction were not so successful. In fact, the diverting of his attention to mineral mining proved a disastrous mistake, as he was unable to raise sufficient capital for the venture, and had perforce to borrow some of the funds of the Tongshan mines which were greatly needed to develop their own operations.

Mr. Tong also attempted to establish a model farm in North China, on modern scientific principles. He acquired a vast tract of land along the banks of the Peiho river, about four miles from Tongku, and there he started stock-farming, by means of imported cattle from Australia and America, and arboriculture by means of trees imported from California. He also introduced ploughing machines and modern agricultural implements of all kinds. But alas! he had evidently been badly advised, for after having spent about a hundred thousand taels, the soil proved to contain too much alkali, and the project had to be abandoned.

In the early eighties, the Chinese Engineering and Mining Company came very near being transformed into a British undertaking. At that time, the mines not earning sufficient to meet expenses, the Company's financial thermometer had

fallen very low. In fact, so discouraging were the prospects, and so pressing were the creditors, that Mr. Tong, with the utmost reluctance, came to the conclusion of selling out the entire undertaking to the highest bidder, and use the proceeds for liquidating the accumulated debts. A certain British firm in Shanghai was asked to buy it, and their representative went up to Tongshan to negotiate with Mr. Tong. But the would-be purchaser, seeing an opportunity to get hold of a good thing at a nominal price, offered so low a bid that Mr. Tong hesitated, and this hesitation saved the mines. Seeing H.E. Chou Fu, who was then Customs Taotai at Tientsin, one day, he happened to mention his trouble, when the latter inquired how much money be required. On being told that two hundred thousand taels of ready money would enable him to tide over his difficulties, H.E. Chou Fu then and there promised that he would help him out. Thus were the Kaiping Mines saved from changing ownership and they remained in Chinese hands until the year 1900, when, through the idiotic action of Chang Yen-mow, they were transformed into a foreign-Chinese limited liability company, with foreign directors and under foreign control.

In the latter part of the eighties, Mr. Tong took a trip round the world, visiting among other countries, South America, with which it was his object to establish commercial relations. It was his dream to inaugurate a line of Chinese-owned steamers for plying between China and Brazil, and he would have carried it out, had he met with sufficient encouragement and support. Taking advantage of his stay in Europe, Mr. Tong gave an address in Exeter Hall, on the Opium Question, and the sight of that old, care-worn man, appealing with intense earnestness and almost heart-broken accents for the abolition of the opium trade and the delivery of his countrymen from the opium curse, deeply moved the hearts of his hearers, and gained many adherents to the Anti-Opium League.

On his sixty-first birthday, which occurred in the year 1901, the foreign community in Tientsin showed their high esteem for him by giving him a grand banquet in Gordon Hall, when some highly eulogistic speeches were made, not only by his foreign friends, but by the Chinese officials present as well.

Mr. Tong died at Tientsin in September, 1892, deeply lamented by foreigners and Chinese. To show how highly he was esteemed in Chinese official circles, it is only necessary to mention that the late Marquis Li Hung-chang came personally to offer sacrifices at his funeral. Mr. Tong left behind him a large family. His eldest son who was educated in America as a member of the Chinese Educational Mission, died recently in Shantung while employed in Governor Yang's service. Through all his life, Mr. Tong manifested remarkable ability as an organizer. Whatever he undertook to do, he carried it through, surmounting what seemed insuperable obstacles, although he did not always meet with the success he deserved. He was greatly beloved and esteemed by his employees, to whom he was invariably considerate and kind. But the most important trait of his character was his stern probity and honesty. Although during his lifetime he held the Directorship of about a dozen business companies, he died a poor man. When it is considered how much another man in his place and with his opportunities would probably have made, his honesty was as rare as it was remarkable. He once remarked to his friends, "I prefer to leave behind me a good name rather than riches." His honesty was so inflexible that he would not compromise with anything which deviated from absolute straightforwardness. We will mention only one instance to show his character. Many times he received orders from the Chinese authorities of the different provinces for his coal, but coupled with the orders there was invariably attached a condition that a return commission of a

certain per cent of the cost was to go to the buyer. Mr. Tong was allowed to include this return commission in his price, but he steadfastly refused to accede to any such arrangement, and in consequence, lost many orders which went to Japan.

From the above too brief sketch of Mr. Tong's life, it will be seen that the title of

"Father of Railways, Mining and Steam-navigation in China," which has sometimes been given to him, is not unfittingly bestowed.

It is to be hoped that the perusal of Mr. Tong's career will lead some of China's able men to follow his example, especially with regard to the inflexible honesty of his character.

