**Editorial Letter to Accompany OPs 36 and 37**

Dear Members and Readers,

Henry's two latest Papers are self-explanatory. They can speak for themselves, and there is little or nothing I can add to their content, beyond adding that I much appreciated Ian Gill's contribution to OP 36 and especially Ian's information on his indomitable and talented mother.

However, since some historical background to Hong Kong before and between the two World Wars, may not come amiss, in a variation to my usual practice in the editorial letters I am including here a summary based on a few of my earlier writings about the British Crown Colony of the past.

By the late 19th Century, when Britain was at the height of its imperial power and hubris and other nations had not yet become serious rivals in global trade or sea power, Hong Kong impressed most of its visitors. As with the foreign settlements in the major treaty ports of China and Japan, its fine buildings, municipal amenities, and great port facilities contrasted sharply with the un-modernized condition of Chinese cities like Canton, and sleepy Portuguese Macao.

By then, it had long become fashionable for Westerners, especially those resident in China, to look down upon the "backward" Chinese (as compared with modernized Japan which had just defeated China in the war of 1894-95) and to treat them as an inferior breed. Regrettably, this was the prevailing attitude all over the world. More often than not, Chinese going abroad for work, business or education encountered hostility and contempt from the local populations. Ironically, this was as bad, or even worse, in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand as in older countries.

These attitudes towards the Chinese were also common in Hong Kong. They were brought about, and perpetuated, for a number of reasons. Hong Kong was a colonial possession where Europeans, and especially the British, were "top dogs"; the very much larger Chinese urban population mostly comprised poor coolies without their families whose unhygienic living standards were held to endanger public health, especially for Europeans; communication and understanding between the races was handicapped by the language barrier, unequal social, political and economic status, and by very different ways of looking at things.

For their part, the Chinese were proud of their "Middle Kingdom" and all its ways. From mandarin to coolie, all knew they were superior to other races, especially those from the far-away West. Their superiority was only matched by their general lack of interest in foreign ways and consequent ignorance of them.

Surprisingly, the great gap created in this way was probably beneficial to the stability of the Colony. Each side went its own way, did its own thing, happy and almost relieved to be able to ignore the other. Each looked down on the other and patronized it in its speech and attitudes. This was generally harmless, and it certainly preserved the peace. The "system" worked because there was something for everybody in Hong Kong, whatever one's race and station in life, and opportunities for individual and family advancement.

There is another element in the Hong Kong society of the day to be taken into account, one that was common to all European colonies of the time. There was an aversion in European society at home and abroad to 'mixed race" unions and in class terms to "marrying down" of any kind. "Colour" was another sensitive issue. This was equally the case among Chinese families where "arranged marriages" were the traditional norm, and in both communities little or no regard was generally had to the individual worth and achievement of the parties involved.

Briefly stated, this was the situation up to the Second World War. The initial disasters suffered by Western armies at the hands of an Asiatic power was a factor in mitigating the arrogance and assumptions of superiority that characterized the earlier behaviour of most Westerners in China. Generally, the events of the Second World War had a tempering effect.

Yet in my experience of Hong Kong society and government from 1956 on, old attitudes died very hard. It took time for a new outlook to blossom and replace the old. Until they did, the old means of escape were still available to both sides. Do your own thing, go your own way. When the government was still small in numbers for one or two decades later, this was not very difficult!

There is more detail, with many quotations and references, in my article "East and West in Hong Kong: Vignettes from History and Personal Experience", published in Dr Elizabeth Sinn's edited volume of essays Between East and West; Aspects of Social and Political Development in Hong Kong (Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1990).

Should this brief account prove of interest - some feed-back would be very welcome - a few of the topics mentioned above could be worked up as Occasional Papers for future issue. But you have to say!!!

Meantime, Henry and I wish you all Good Health and Good Fortune during 2016.

James Hayes, Series Editor

Sydney

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