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Pirates, Prostitutes and All That

Hotel Bela Vista
Macau
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U. S. A.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Today I got as close to Red China as the combined governments of Peking and Washington will permit an American reporter. I stood 100 yards away from the Porta do Cerco, the barrier gate which separates the Macau peninsula from the Chinese mainland. Just beyond the gate was a small red brick customs house with the red flag and five stars of Communist China waving above. I held up a pair of borrowed binoculars and watched the Chicom guard as he walked around his pillbox. As soon as he caught sight of me, he picked up a pair of binoculars and stared back. Between us there was only a dusty road, a few dusty dogs and a small Macau immigration shack, nothing else. But my guide asked me to step no closer and to please leave my camera in the car. The Macaenses don't want to offend their neighbor.

Later on, I had other looks at Red China: the Canal dos Patos, a narrow, muddy strip of water with refugee camps on one side and Chicom farmland interspersed with guards and pillboxes on the other. From the hill of the Residencia Episcopal (Bishop's house and private chapel), I could look out across Macau harbor at China's Lappa Island, perhaps one-quarter mile away. My guide, Manuel Leitão, announced that now he could count four of the Chicom's patrolling black gunboats. Yesterday there were only three, The day before, two. And he pointed to the black splotches on the hill further back on Lappa Island and declared that through binoculars (I no longer had my borrowed pair) you could see that they were "slave laborers" cutting out fortifications from the earth. Then, pointing to the side of Lappa Island which faces Taipa and Coloane, the two auxiliary islands which complete the Portuguese possession at Macau, Leitão explained that this was where the border was least watched and where most of the refugees came in. "They swim across at night. Those who cannot swim float across on their padded quilts. But they have to do it in a hurry because after 10 minutes the quilt becomes soaked and sinks. More than 50 per cent of those who try to come across are caught. Those who are worthwhile are kept for slave labor," Leitão explained. He did not mention what happened to those who were not worthwhile. But I could guess. Last week, the Hong Kong papers carried a front-page picture of a Chicom gunboat with

loudspeakers. According to the story, the Chicoms announced they had just executed three "U.S. - Chiang agents." In Macau, however, the shots that had been heard across the harbor the morning before were understood to have carried leaden quietus to three farmers who had lead a revolt against the Wanchai Commune, the Lappa Island unit of Peking's new work-live experiment.

If I found Hong Kong incredible with its cross-currents of fast-living prosperity and fast-working espionage, Macau is even more incredible. For here Red China is right out the window. I crossed Red China waters on the four-hour boat trip down from Hong Kong. I've watched the crowded blue buses pass through the barrier gate, plying their four-times-daily route to and from Canton. And all this from the vantage point of a sun-baked old world settlement which winds up and down a procession of hills, an opera buffa sort of a town which mighty China could flick off into the sea with the snap of its thumb and forefinger -- if it wanted to divert itself. For appearance sake, Macau still maintains a garrison of around 6000 soldiers. But no one believes the town is defensible.

Pirates and opium are passé in today's Macau. The law has supposedly attended to both. But prostitution still flourishes "behind the green doors" on the Rua da Felicidade (Happiness Alley). Gold and espionage are saleable commodities. And even the refugees are sometimes purposely allowed to push through Macau and on to Hong Kong as an harassment for the British. I took a night walk here, down the Rua da Felicidade, but it looked pretty off-season. The girls behind the green doors (open) were playing maj-jong with each other and some of the more desperate proprietresses came running after me in the alley in an attempt to interrupt the game. Interestingly enough, the green doors are right near the shops with the snakes. These are quite alive and caged in circular baskets, piled high. I was told that the snakes, when eaten, provide "strength" for the green doors, the more viscous and poisonous the better the "strength". Virility or no, I got myself out of there fast, lest one of those cage doors hadn't been latched.

The other amusement in Macau goes on 24 hours a day (for all I know, maybe the maj-jong games and snakes do too) and comes under the thoroughly respectable (and municipally remunerative) title of gambling. The Central Hotel, in the middle of the shopping street, is one of Macau's two authorized casinos. It features two games. One is Fan Tan, a rather repetitive procedure in which the croupier puts a number of white buttons under a cup and then proceeds to count them off in groups of four. You bet on whether the last grouping will contain one, two, three or four buttons. And people in Macau are apparently so fascinated by this that they surround not only the actual gaming tables, but surround them from fenced balconies on the floor above and lower their bets in baskets. Hong Kong and Macau money are equally acceptable, but 100-dollar notes (worth almost \$17.50 U.S.) require the manager's personal "chop" to be sure they are not bogus. The casino's other game is High-and-Low, which also failed to excite my wallet. High-and-low involves shaking three dice, with a

sort of roulette type board on which to place your bets and anticipate how they add up. Since it is off-season, I found the Central Hotel filled with local residents, from the cradle on up. I was shown the kerosene lamps which can be lit immediately should the electricity fail, the stone-pillowed opium couches in niches just off the Fan Tan rooms where the players used to relax their eyes from counting white buttons until ex-Governor Correia de Barros got sticky about things five years ago. Now I am told you have to get your opium on the Chinese mainland or in Afghanistan or Pakistan. And even the Green Door girls aren't up to snuff: "The prettier girls have moved on to Hong Kong, which is a much bigger city." But before I let you out of the Central Hotel, I want to point out the "Tea Room". It really is a tea room, too, but it exists specifically for the government and military personnel who are forbidden on the four gaming floors. To keep perfectly within regulations, the tea room waitresses act as runners with the government and military bets and a table-side board full of electric light bulbs keeps flashing on the results.

The Central Hotel is owned by Mr. Fu who annually pays the government \$2,000,000 Hong Kong (almost \$350,000 U.S.) for the license. Fu must know his business -- as well as his snakes. The Five Houses of Mr. Fu lie just on the other side of the Hotel Bela Vista here, one for each of the Mesdames Fu. Fu is 62 and at latest count had 27 children. And this doesn't even include the six "illegal" wives he keeps downtown, and whatever results he and the snakes have gotten from them.

Fu has at least one rival, Mr. Lobo. Lobo owns Macau's one radio station, real estate, hotels, and a good amount of this and that in Hongkong. Lobo has a series of houses all next to each other too. But they are for his sons and daughters. Lobo, being a foreigner, is permitted only one legal wife. However, I was told that the wealthy foreigners ignore this regulation, and that Mr. Lobo is very wealthy.

For many years, Macau has been the big gold transshipment center. Since Macau's owner, Portugal, is not a member of the world monetary system, there are no restrictions on importing and exporting. Red China is interested in barter and the Macaenses insist on cash, so the gold business hasn't flourished through the Porta do Cerco. But it has flourished with nearby Hong Kong. It seems the Bank of England imposes an annual quota on the amount of gold Hong Kong can receive. So the game has been for Macau to order its gold via Hong Kong and then smuggle it back -- at a higher price. For reasons I haven't understood, the gold shipments are now down to one planeload a week -- from Australia. And a lot of Macau's gold exporting is shifting to Bangkok. But I had better not go into this any deeper because I once interviewed a self-announced gold black marketeer named Pick from New York who told me the only crooks in this business were the Secretaries of the Treasury who established the regulations which they knew couldn't be complied with. The only other thing I remember about Pick is that he insisted on giving me this explanation at an 8 a. m. interview

(which he arranged, against my better judgment, through my managing editor) and that as soon as I found he had ordered breakfast for one (not this one), I walked out on both him and his gold standard.

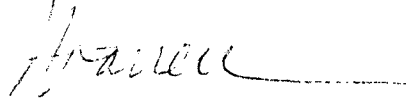
Macau, which the guidebook calls "The City of the Name of God" and the guide, "Mother of the Bay," has a long and colorful history. Portugal got there in 1557, shoved out some Dutch interlopers a half-century later by firing one successful shot right in the middle of their ammunition dump, and gained official title to the area in the last century, as a reward from the Chinese Emperor for policing the pirates who hid out in the coves along the mouth of the Pearl River. Until Hong Kong cut in on the deal, Macau had the monopoly on Chinese trade with the world outside. I visited Macau's Kun Yam Temple and saw the stone table and bench in its garden where Caleb Cushing and Viceroy Yi signed the first Sino-American treaty in 1844. I also saw the home of Dr. Sun Yat-sen at No. 1 Rua Silva Mendes which, although unoccupied, is opened to the public only one day a year, on his birthday. And I was told about the Protestant Cemetery, which holds the bones of Sir Winston's kin, Lord John Spencer-Churchill, "fourth son of the fifth Duke of Marlborough"; the jail ("few customers -- just opium smokers. Too many police and too small a town"); the race track ("during the last war there was a meat shortage and they ate up all the horses. Now there is just a section of grandstand left"); and the Grand Prix, a fairly new sports car race which occurs each November, contains a hairpin curve with a 30-foot drop right onto a fuel tank and attracts, among others, the Hong Kong correspondent of LIFE Magazine and his wife, who spell themselves with the same car for the various races.

I also saw, tucked between the red poinsetta and morning glory that cascade all over Macau, a Nationalist China barracks where some POW refugees still fly the old flag, within binocular distance of the barrier gate. I ate African Chicken at Angelo's Pousada (the chicken was doused with paprika and arrived cold; "Pousada" seems to be an alternate name for the Macau Inn, the town's best hostelry even though it has no lobby). I watched rope being threaded and firecrackers, Macau's No. 2 industry (after fishing), being manufactured in the local backyards for such customers as the Los Angeles Fourth of July celebrants. Since Macau has so many cabs, the pedicabs (rickshas powered by boys on bicycles) yield at the slope to the taxis, cars of pre-1951 vintage which are barged down from Hong Kong because the authorities there rule them out for age. I was also told that during the Korean War Macau was the point at which our Allies sold surplus U.S. trucks to Communist China, which promptly wheeled them around back to the warfront again. And I was told that Macau is still the No. 1 entry point for embargo goods which have an easier time reaching Red China through the barrier gate and the back door, than through the front door on the China Sea and the patrolling eye of the U.S. Seventh Fleet.

I was also reminded by Leonel Borralho, the local correspondent for the Hong Kong Standard, the United Press and Time Magazine, that "The Commies are free to come and go here because, really, if they wanted to take Macau all they would have to do is cut off our food supply." Actually, the Chicoms have another trick. They've put a dam-causeway across the West River backwash, source of Macau's fresh water during the rainy season, and now are forcing the Macaenses to drill through the island rock for a fresh water supply they are dubious of finding. But Borralho is not exactly fearful of imminent capture. After all, not even the Japanese bothered with Macau during World War II and, Borralho explained; "If the Commies take this place, they get nothing."

I suppose I could rationalize my overnight excursion here and say that Macau, along with Hong Kong, represent the only foreign entrepots the Chicoms have permitted to hang on. But I think I wasn't really looking for the arguments for neutrality and non-alignment when I came here. I was looking for something out of this world. And I found it. That is at least I think it's out of this world. My guide, Manuel Leitão, proudly informed me that Macau is now Portugal's overseas province -- "No longer a colony like Alaska".

Cordially,



WARREN W. UNNA

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