

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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ARD-6.
Staying in Hong Kong.

26th December 1964.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
366 Madison Avenue,
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

One of the first things that struck me on arriving in Hong Kong was that most people I met, whether Chinese, English or American, seemed a little surprised to hear that I was to stay more than a few days. It is true that the majority of new arrivals here are either tourists or people stopping here en route, and the attitude is not one that would attract one's attention in a place that exists only to cater to the needs of transients, but Hong Kong is one of the major cities of Asia, a seat of commerce and industry which amasses great wealth quite independently of its casual visitors, and as such it might be expected to show greater indifference to newcomers. To me this apparent assumption that outsiders regard Hong Kong as a place to be looked at, shopped in, and left behind as a brief and possibly colourful interlude has suggested a clue to the way in which the inhabitants of Hong Kong think of their country. It seems that few of the people I have met (and I must admit that they include no one from the rural areas of the Colony, who might be expected to feel a longstanding connexion with the soil) seem to look upon Hong Kong as a real home.

It is not difficult to suggest reasons for this attitude. As regards the non-Chinese residents, who together comprise between one and two percent of the population, it is simple enough; the great majority are expatriates, born outside Hong Kong and in most cases intending to live outside Hong Kong in retirement - here to make a career and then leave. A high proportion of the Chinese are also expatriates for one reason or another - some established in business or a profession here for many years, some refugees who have arrived in the last fifteen years. Unlike the non-Chinese, the majority of them cannot easily leave Hong Kong except for either China or Taiwan. For them the presence of these two, particularly of China, is much more real than a visitor might suppose. A great majority have family connexions of some sort with the mainland, even if these are not actively maintained. Thousands visit their relatives in China for the New Year celebrations, and even more people remit money to their families in China.

Apart from family ties, there are many reminders of the presence and importance of China. Quite apart from the more spectacular events, such as the selection of delegates to represent Hong Kong at the National People's Congress in Peking from time to time (they are selected in Peking rather than in Hong Kong) one sees Chinese products everywhere, marked as such - food, medicines of the traditional kind, magazines and films. There are several big bookshops owned by the Chinese Government or controlled by it. Well painted junks and tugs from Canton (the latter are about the last relics of the age of coal to be seen in Hong Kong) move constantly through the harbour with their red flags. Although the Bank of China maintains a stony impassivity in the very centre of the city, a large number of other banks which are controlled from China feature window displays of what is happening over the border.

How far does the Britishness of Hong Kong counterbalance this? In the first place, only a small proportion of the Chinese residents of Hong Kong are British nationals, though it is not so very difficult to acquire nationality. In practice, as the franchise is very narrow, the disabilities of being an alien are hardly noticeable until the question of foreign travel arises. But few of the Chinese here have any such symbolic link with Britain to match the strong, if implicit sense of being racially and culturally Chinese.

The colonial form of government does little to develop a sense of citizenship in Hong Kong's residents. Apart from an elective element in the management of public health, urban redevelopment and certain public amenities, representative institutions do not exist. And it is not only in this sense that the Government and its subjects are alien. The great majority of governmental activities are carried on under the direction of foreigners in a foreign, and for most people wholly incomprehensible language. All official documents are in English, by no means all of them being translated, and the proceedings of all courts and public offices are also in English, with interpretation where necessary. It is true that there has long been a Secretariat for Chinese Affairs (almost as if the Chinese were a minority in the community) to maintain contact with the Chinese and to arrange for the translation of the more important documents, and more recently a number of Government Information Offices have been set up, but the very popularity of both of these suggests a crying need.

Amongst those who are able to follow the activities of the Government more or less closely there are critical attitudes ranging from enthusiastic approval to indifference or frustration, but there seems to be a lack of interest in active politics. It is true that from time to time efforts are made to start popular political movements, but I am assured that these have all failed for lack of support. It is certainly true that the

Government bases its failure to take any steps in the direction of democracy on the lack of popular support. To quote a recent editorial in the South China Morning Post, which is in general sympathetic to the Government,

"Those who comprise the bulk of the Colony's nearly 4,000,000 people are much too involved in the everyday problem of existence to concern themselves with concepts like representative government. After all, abstract ideas do not feed, or clothe, or house, or educate a family."

Whatever doubts one may have about this sort of general proposition, it is clear that Hong Kong's geographical and strategic position forces on her a certain neutrality in terms of Asian politics in general, and there are good reasons for proscribing anything like serious political agitation. Given the considerable investment in time and energy in various civic and voluntary organisations, however, it is hard to be convinced that Hong Kong could not produce some viable form of self-government or partial self-government in those areas of her life that are not directly concerned with foreign affairs or public order.

If the Chinese residents in Hong Kong think of the Colony as a sort of foreign-run enterprise in which they are non-voting shareholders, the dividends - the chance to develop their own businesses, practise their professions, or simply live in freedom with the hope of making good some day - are satisfactory enough to make them the most cooperative of colonial peoples. Perhaps the most powerful, though least explicit of the factors which make for the curious feeling of dissociation which one senses in Hong Kong is the knowledge that in the foreseeable future the enterprise is to be put into compulsory liquidation. With the exception of the island of Hong Kong itself and the very tip of the Kowloon peninsula, the territory of the Colony is not under perpetual British sovereignty, but is held under a lease from China. The lease will expire in 1998, whereupon the whole of the so-called New Territories revert to Chinese sovereignty.

Although until a few years ago the New Territories were little more than a "back garden" to the cities of Hong Kong and Kowloon, the economic integration of the various parts of the Colony is now such that the nucleus under perpetual British sovereignty could not survive the loss of, among other things, much of its precious water supply, the more important industrial plants, half of the harbour, the principal dockyard, and part of the airport, (even assuming that survival was politically tolerable to China.)

Curiously enough, there seems to be little discussion of this situation, however much anxiety it may cause people, and this has been something of a surprise to me. It clearly accounts for the widespread interest in emigration, especially to the United States, but otherwise there is almost a

conspiracy of silence about Hong Kong's future, which one hesitates before breaking.

The effect of this impermanence on the morale of Hong Kong must be very great, even if it is incalculable. In terms of the Hong Kong style economy thirty-three years is quite a long time, even where investment in land is concerned, and in fact investment in Hong Kong does not yet seem to be affected by the lease, for the relatively laissez faire environment still ensures a remarkably quick return. (Three or four years ago a building could pay for itself in as little as two and a half years; even now five or six years is not unusual.) In human terms, a large proportion of the middle and lower age groups must expect ultimately to live under Chinese rule, whatever in time that may signify. They can scarcely avoid wondering what will then be the value of their businesses, their savings, and in the case of those who have received an English or other Western training, their skills.

Such considerations do not seem to have affected the remarkable economic growth of Hong Kong in the last ten years; they may even have served as a spur to rapid development. As time passes, however, they are bound to come more to the forefront in everyday practical matters. In the meantime, they may partly explain Hong Kong's curious lack of self-confidence.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony R. Weeks

Received New York, January 4, 1965