

**THE CHANGED FACES OF THE
HONGKONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION**

*It's the little things in life that make the difference
Between a humble room and a home.*

*It's the joy of laughter and sharing love,
Or empathising with daughter's pain in her bone.*

*It's the little things that make the difference
Between a humble room and a home.*

(Anon, English poem, circa 1828)

Hongkong was the 'humble' home to about 5 million, ethnic Chinese who, following the defeat of the late Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek in 1948 by the forces of the late Chairman Mao Tse Tung (Mao Ze Dong, as his name is, now, spelled), fled to the Hongkong-China towns, such as Shautaukok and Sheungshui, or swam ashore at places such as Tai Tam, or other inlets on the southern side of the Island of Victoria.

Some of these would-be, Chinese runaways did not make it: They were eaten by sharks as they tried to swim to, what they fervently believed was, freedom from Communist oppression.

Stories of peasants, having to eat the mice of the fields due to widespread famine, were common in those days of the 50,000 people per day exodus from the Chinese Communists, as the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) was, in the early 1960's, termed.

Very few Chinese people, living in Hongkong under the control of the British Administration of the late Governor David Trench, would have said too much of a positive nature about the PRC Government of those days, rightly or wrongly.

Even members of the Ma Family, of The Sincere Company Ltd, who, also, ran away from Shanghai, the PRC, did not have one good word to say about the 'revolution'.

The Mas have, now, changed the words to that little 'song'.

In those days, not one civil servant would have voiced support for a British-appointed Governor. And no civil servant would have criticised a determination of the Government of the day.

This is unlike the present Government Administration where the Financial Secretary, Mr Antony Leung Kam Chung, stated, on Friday, June 8, 2001: '*Mr Tung* (Tung Chee Hwa, the PRC-Government's appointed Chief Executive of the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the PRC) *has been doing a good job. His popularity has been affected by the economic situation ... As a member of the public, I believe he should serve for another term* (of 4 more years) *... If Mr Tung stands for election, his chance of service a second term is very high ...*'.

At the time that Mr Antony Leung Kam Chung made known his love for his immediate superior, he had been in office about 2 months.

How Mr Antony Leung Kam Chung could have known about the ability of Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa and how hard he had been working since being 'elected' to his post on July 1, 1997, only Mr Antony Leung Kam Chung could answer.

In the 1960s, in the days that the British ruled Hongkong as a type of paternal dictator, answerable to the Queen Elizabeth II, the Kowloon Canton Railway (KCR) was not much more than a collection of cattle carriages, sporting wooden chairs with few cushions and little in the way of air-conditioning.

It was not until about 20 years, prior to the handover of Hongkong to the Government of the PRC, that things started to change; the KCR was remodeled on its present form, having been electrified and having air-conditioning in the 2 classes, first class and economy class.

Today, 4 years after of rule under the Communist Regime of the PRC Government, it is a very modern and very efficient railway system, which is a pleasure on which to ride.

And the KCR is fast expanding, something, no doubt, the successive British Governments of Hongkong were unlikely to have envisaged in the 1960s and the 1970s.

In the days, long before the advent of the Cross-Harbour Tunnel Company Ltd, it took the best part of one hour and 30 minutes to take one's motor car from Hongkong to Kowloon.

On weekends, it would take even longer because one would have to wait an additional 40 minutes in order to board the very overworked vehicular ferry in North Point, the only method to cross Victoria Harbour in a motor car.

Then, another 30-minute would be required for the crossing from North Point to Kowloon.

And, then, another 10 minutes or so would be required to disembark and work one's way up the off-ramp and filter into the crowded roadway system of Kowloon.

The Iron Rice Bowl

In those days, too, Jardine Matheson and Company Ltd – once familiarly known as '*the iron rice bowl*'-- was '*the hong*', and Chairman Henry Keswick, the chief of all he surveyed.

It was said that Jardine Matheson was as powerful as the Government of Colonial Hongkong.

It partly controlled the Board of Directors of The Hongkong General Chamber of Commerce and, in turn, the Hongkong General Chamber of Commerce believed, and strongly endorsed, the Right of Divine Succession: Only hong and hong bosses may serve on the Board of Directors of The Hongkong General Chamber of Commerce.

The standing joke, of those days, was that The Hongkong General Chamber of Commerce was considering changing its name to the British-Hongkong General Chamber of Commerce.

In the early 1960s, there were no more than 8 Chinese members of this august trade body.

On the ground floor of what was, in the early 1960's, Jardine House – now known as Wheelock House – there was a plaque, adorning a commanding point in the foyer of the great Hongkong home of the company, which introduced, and tried to perpetuate, in perpetuity, the trade of opium to China in the 19th Century.

It commemorated all the European employees of Jardine Matheson that had given their lives for the Empire (of Great Britain, and Jardine Matheson, in that order) in World War I and World War II.

The names of the fallen Jardine (European) heroes were all cut into the huge bronze plaque in about 18 point.

The last 2 inches of the plaque, of thereabouts, had a sentence, which read along the lines that Jardine Matheson, also, recognised that there were some ethnic Chinese, employed by Jardine Matheson, during the 6 years of hostilities, 1939 to 1945, who, also, died in the War.

That sentence was cut in about 2 point.

Europeans of the 1960s, until about the late 1980s, held a privileged position in the Hongkong of the British 'raj'.

Today, the plaque of Jardine Matheson no longer exists in the HKSAR, as Hongkong is, now, called, following the assumption of sovereignty of the 416 square miles by the Government of the PRC on July 1, 1997, and the installation of the PRC Government's '*man-for-the-HKSAR*', Mr Tung Chee Hwa.

The plaque has gone – and, to a very great extent, so have the Europeans.

It is not just that the Jardine Europeans have gone, but, also, gone are the 100,000 or so Europeans that would, in the 1960's, have proudly said that they lived on The Peak, or in Jardine's Lookout, just off Tai Hang Road, prestigious addresses in those days, and today, too.

The Indian Exodus

Gone, also, are many of the ethnic Indians that traded in the old Hongkong, having arrived in the then British territory in order to be placed in servitude by Hongkong Indian moguls of those days.

They came to Hongkong, leaving behind them the squalor of Madras, or the back streets of Bombay, or Calcutta, or some little town in the backwater of southern India where there was no running water and where the only '*fossil*' fuel were the droppings of the animals on the forest floor, or the donkey's faeces that adorn the dirt roads.

No single company, listed on The Stock Exchange of Hongkong Ltd, bears an ethnic Indian name on its Board of Directors, today.

No single Indian entity in the HKSAR owns a sizeable part of any publicly listed company on The Stock Exchange of Hongkong Ltd, today.

Gone are days of Mr Obi Mohan (the felon) and his lot from the records of The Stock Exchange of Hongkong Ltd.

Gone are Mr Hari Harilela and his lot from the records of The Stock Exchange of Hongkong Ltd.

Gone are Mr Lachman Narain and his lot from the records of The Stock Exchange of Hongkong Ltd.

The ethnic Indian of Hongkong, before the PRC Government took over as supreme head of the HKSAR, claimed, erroneously, that he was entitled to the Right of Abode in England.

Due to arguments, persistent and loud in London, the ethnic Indian of Hongkong, who would never have been stateless, as he had claimed, because he, always, had the option to return to the country of his, or his father's, birth, obtained his British passport.

Very few ethnic Indian residents are seen in Central Hongkong, these days.

Gone are the Indian watchmen of the old Hongkong, complete with their hockey sticks or rusty shotguns, standing outside jewellery shops and factories.

Most of them have left Hongkong's shores because they can no longer do the type of business for which they were trained: Trading.

They have been all but replaced by Chinese traders, by and large.

Also, it is well known that, when the forces of Chairman Mao swept through the PRC, most of the ethnic Indians of the country were money lenders and guards and were considered pariahs and parasites of the economy of the old China.

Many Indians were given 24 hours to leave the PRC in 1948, carrying what they could on their backs: The PRC Government of 1948 wanted to see their backs, not their brown faces.

Few tears will be shed for the passing of the ethnic Indians in the 416 square miles that, today, constitute the southern-most tip of the PRC's territory.

But their presence is still noted and some streets still bear their names, such as Mody Road.

Jardine Matheson was among the first major company to change its domicile to Bermuda and to obtain a listing on The Singapore Stock Exchange, cancelling its listing on The Stock Exchange of Hongkong Ltd.

No plausible explanation was ever really given for the 2 moves, but it was well known, at the time of these 2 corporate manoeuvres, that the hierarchy at the great hong was at odds with the Government of the PRC.

Probably, it would not be unfair to state that Jardine Matheson was running for its (corporate) life.

Gone, also, from today's Hongkong are the Jardine executives with their whip hands on certain aspects of commerce of the territory.

There was a time when the past Managing Director of The Hongkong Land Company Ltd, Mr Trevor Bedford, could have walked into the office of Chairman of The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, then Mr Michael Sandberg, and demanded a \$HK3.27-billion loan in order to purchase the site on which now stands, Exchange Square One and Exchange Square Two.

Gone are those days, that is for sure.

Gone, also, is the requirement for top European restaurants to play fair with customers.

Today, one pays top dollar to eat at Gaddi's, the premier restaurant in The Peninsula Hotel, Kowloon.

But beware!

The chances are that the man in the kitchen is not that top-notch, European chef about whom the hotel publicises, but a Chinese underling, who may or may not know how to produce a spinach soufflé.

Regardless, if one is told that the spinach soufflé is not '*in season*', and one has to choose another dish, one is still charged the same tariff as though the great European chef had whipped up the dish.

And the hotel knows this, too.

Only major hotels in the HKSAR can afford to employ high-priced, European chefs to man the fine-dining establishments. The best European cuisine, therefore, can only be found in the best hotels.

That is the logical theory – provided that the chefs do their jobs.

More often than not, however, they are not on the job.

The Many Tongues

Prior to 1997, there were just a handful of Chinese dialects heard on the streets of the HKSAR, with Cantonese, the predominant dialect.

Not so today.

Today, Mandarin (Putonghua) is the dialect, commonly heard on the street, along with Cantonese.

And, with this change, there has come about a certain lack of any real concern for '*the other fella*'.

Walking through Pacific Place to Queensway Plaza, the fastest way to walk from the edge of Wanchai to the Central District, one could easily get knocked down by the tens of thousands of people in the morning and afternoon rush hours, as they scurry here and there, oblivious of the infirmities of others who, if they do not move out of the way, will be pushed out of the way.

This aspect of life in the HKSAR is dwarfed, however, as one experiences the crush of people at the Lowu Border Crossing point, the border between the PRC, Proper, and the HKSAR.

On holidays, one could, easily, get trampled under the feet of the hundreds of thousands of, mainly, Chinese of the PRC, Proper, all in a hurry to board the trains to go here and there.

It is a hurry to wait – for the HKSAR Immigration officials, for the PRC Immigration officials, for the trains/buses/minibuses, etc.

The British embodied a certain level of civility in their way of life: That has all but gone in today's Hongkong.

When the British ruled the roost of the old Hongkong, an account in a bank, no matter how large or small it was, was an account to be treasured.

Recently, The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Ltd announced penalties on account-holders, whose daily balance is less than \$HK5,000.

The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Ltd admitted that it lost nearly 200,000 accounts within one month of the imposition of the penalties, but, at the same time, it announced that it meant little to the giant banking group because it, still, had 2 million other account-holders.

For the smaller, Chinese banks of the HKSAR, they, quickly, scooped up the '*leftovers*', the unloved, and the '*unwanted*' of The Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Ltd.

And they did so with glee.

Gone, too, is the arrogance of most of the employees of the Civil Service of the HKSAR Government.

Most members of the Civil Service appear, today, to be willing to answer questions and to give full and comprehensive explanations to members of the public upon request.

They even smile, on occasion.

Not so in the past, under the successive British Administrations of Hongkong.

But, on the negative side of the ledger, the standard of the English language has fallen, appreciably, from pre-1997 days.

This is especially noted in the workplace, on watching television newscasts, on trying to listen to radio news broadcasts, and in handouts from public relations' companies.

The English language dailies in the HKSAR use copious amounts of international news reports in order to fill up their pages instead of employing reporters to ferret out news as in the old days when pride of journalistic achievement had a meaning.

Self-censorship by newspapers is not just a term in the HKSAR; it is a way for a newspaper, or its editor, to survive.

In the days of Sir Douglas Clague, when he, beneficially, controlled The STAR Newspaper – now defunct – he never interfered in the editorial policy of the Editor-in-Chief/Managing Director, Mr Graham Jenkins.

Such professionalism has gone, also, in the new HKSAR.

Gone, also, is the openness of Government.

Today, to try to talk, directly, to a member of a Government organisation, such as The Securities and Futures Exchange (SFC), is, almost, impossible unless one knows that person's direct telephone number or extension number.

And, even armed with that number, it is likely that one will receive no joy from telephoning the individual for it is likely that one would be shunted back to the public relations girl/boy, whose English may not be up to scratch and who, in any event, would not want to answer any question, directly, for fear of making a faux pas.

And such a faux pas could cost a person his/her job.

TARGET once asked the PR girl at the SFC on which basis SFC determinations were made: On a subjective basis or an objective basis?

It took one week for the reply to be received: On an objective basis.

TARGET knew, exactly, what the answer would be long before the question was put to the SFC, but needed an official confirmation in order to be on absolutely safe ground in order to be bullet-proof from attacks by this Government body.

Never ask Government a question unless one knows the answer is one way to stay out of trouble in the HKSAR of today.

The exceptions, of course, are when one has more money than the Government of the HKSAR or, alternatively, when one has friends in very high places in Beijing, the Capital City of the PRC.

For many HKSAR Government offices, one is never given answers to questions, at all.

Recently, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) stopped producing the ICAC weekly calendar of their legal cases against HKSAR residents.

When TARGET asked the reason for the stoppage, the answer came back that it was due to orders from on high.

The PR man said that TARGET could still obtain the information by visiting the HKSAR Courts, on a daily basis, and copying down, outside the respective court, the cases of the day.

The initial excuse, given to TARGET, was that there were insufficient people to type the weekly list of cases, coming to Court.

Any excuse is better than none?

That is another side of the many faces of the HKSAR of today.

The biggest and most pronounced change in the people of the HKSAR, now numbering about 7 million, is that there is an apathetic approach to life.

The idea that there is more freedom in the HKSAR today, compared with yesteryear, is wrong: There is only the appearance of more freedom.

Many people feel that they do not know, from one day to the next, what will happen to them.

The Independence Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) encourages people 'to rat' on their neighbours, their employers, or anybody where a person thinks that corruption exists.

And the report will, all, be in confidence; one does not need to worry about being discovered as the whistle-blower.

This was true, during the time that the British controlled the old Hongkong, but it was advertised on television in a way that encouraged people to come forward in order to voice an opinion about somebody.

Prior to the advent of the PRC Government, assuming control of the HKSAR, one never needed a bodyguard.

Today, every mogul has not one bodyguard, small armies of them.

Mr Stanley Ho, for instance, has not less than 3 bodyguards, escorting him wherever he goes.

Mr Li Ka Shing has even more bodyguards, as do his children, Richard and Victor.

The have-nots of the HKSAR are terribly jealous of those that have power and riches.

Government policies can change rapidly and, unlike when the British controlled the territory, no policy is carved in stone.

People do not know, therefore, from one day to the next, what their fate may be in respect of the law.

Government and big business are more intertwined than ever before; and, it is only too apparent that big business has the whip hand on Government.

Mr Tung Chee Hwa would argue that his Administration is a fair one and equal opportunity is afforded to all, but one only has to look at who got what since the coming to power of Mr Tung to realise that there is, and has been, great favouritism, bestowed on the chosen few.

Under such an Administration, apathy reigns supreme in the hearts of the multitude.

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