

THE CONRAD AND THE HKSAR: QUANTITY OR QUALITY ?

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The name has not changed: It is still known as Hongkong – which is the short form for the territory, The Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

But, while the name may be the same, there have been subtle changes to these 416 square miles, which once boasted of being among the largest manufacturer of garments, wigs, electronics, and toys in the world.

But The Conrad has changed, and Hongkong has changed. And many of the changes may be viewed as being retrograde steps in their respective evolutions.

The Conrad does not serve Beurre D'isigny (butter) of Sainte-Mere, France, in its (once?) premier Italian restaurant, Nicholini's, and the pouring Champagne is no longer Laurent Perrier from Reims of the Champagne District of France, or Veuve Clicquot Champagne, from the same region.

Today, the pouring '*champagne*' is Ca del Bosco, a charming, little sparkling wine from Erbusco, Italy. It is a very nice little wine, but it is '*little*', and it shall always be little.

It is, also, a lot cheaper than its French counterparts, which tower over it by a very great height.

The Conrad's former '*whip*', Mr Dario Regazzoni, the man who put The Conrad on the international hospitality map, has gone, having taken '*early retirement*', it is said.

The Conrad is now under the management of Mr Dennis Clarke, an American, representing the internationally famous, hotel management company, Hilton Hotel Corporation.

Mr Clarke has the title of Area Director of Operations – Asia, Managing Director of Hongkong. He is, also, Vice President, Hilton Hotel Corporation (Mr Regazzoni held the rank of Senior Vice President when he sat in The Conrad's hot seat).

It is without question that Mr Clarke will look, mainly, at the hotel's bottom line, as most, high-powered US hotel executives have been taught to do.

The question: Will The Conrad change its name to something along the lines, '*Hilton of Hongkong*', reflecting the new changes at the inn, in both the style and ranking, internationally, and where Hilton Hotel Corporation wants the hotel to be positioned, worldwide?

The HKSAR has, like The Conrad, metamorphosed, from the Hongkong, under the British for more than 150 years, to today's political '*animal*' which is, slowly but surely, gnawing away at the freedoms which were held so dearly in the past, and which were taken for granted by the Chinese and European communities of the territory.

These freedoms were guaranteed under English Common Law; and, the people of Hongkong were afforded all protections under that Law.

Like the changed butter, now served up in Nicholini's, unless one looks, carefully, tasting the butter with a critical palate, one may not notice that there has been a change.

After all, who would notice the change in the taste of a blob of butter – except one who was determined to give to the restaurant patrons, the best butter that money could buy in order that those patrons came to know that this was the best, and that they were eating the best.

The parallel of what has happened to Nicholini's, over the past few years, and what has happened to Hongkong, in the same period of time, is a true and fair analogy.

The HKSAR of today is a far cry from yesteryear, and the '*butter*' on the table of the HKSAR does not taste the same: It is a poor second.

There is an eerie, seething unrest in certain quarters of the HKSAR, as some people have come to learn that the changes, now being brought about, and having already been brought about, quietly, surreptitiously, and, in some cases, in a clandestine manner, are eating away at their lives in a manner not thought possible just a few years ago.

People of immense wealth appear to have become more vocal than when the British were running the Government of Hongkong.

And one begins to wonder as to who is running the show: The PRC's '*chosen one*', Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa, or powerful, Chinese moguls, domiciled in the HKSAR?

The many pillars of free speech are being eroded as the concrete of days of yore starts to show signs of having contracted a kind of cancer.

The standard of spoken English has deteriorated, markedly, and it appears that people no longer feel it important to be able to communicate in the language of international trade.

The Police Force does not require its constables to wear the red patch on the epaulets, beneath the constable's number, a sign that that constable has attained a certain level of proficiency in respect of the English language.

Information agencies of the HKSAR Government are, now, manned by Chinese people who, in many cases, appear to try to obstruct the flow of sensitive information, rather than assist enquiries and to guarantee its dissemination.

In The Conrad, some of the longer-term, discriminating residents have moved to neighbouring hotels, and, in most cases, without those former Conrad residents, giving any reason for their decision to the new management.

For the competition at Pacific Place, where The Conrad commands one of the best locations, they relish the changes, taking place at The Conrad, for they will benefit, financially, from, dare one say, the downgrading of facilities, offered to the guests, and of the clear, culinary, cost-cutting measures.

In the HKSAR, it is apparent that many people no longer look upon these 416 square miles as being a permanent home.

They look afield to securing permanent residences in Australia, New Zealand, the US, Canada, England, and other parts of the world where those governments welcome the Chinese emigrants, especially those who are well heeled.

The HKSAR's loss are these governments' gains, in the same way that The Conrad's losses are the other hotels' gains.

The Urban Council has been disbanded (the HKSAR Government would claim that the disbanding is, merely, a change in name) in the HKSAR, and it has been replaced by District Councils where the Government of Chief

Executive Tung Chee Hwa has the whip hand.

Thus, the erosion of the people's voice continues, quietly, surreptitiously, clandestinely, even at the lowest levels of the people's representation.

Chefs at The Conrad come and go, with one famous French chef, having left, recently, under somewhat mysterious circumstances.

Mr Philippe le Clerc, a world-renowned chef who worked in the world-famous, Trois Gras Restaurant of Rouen, France, is now in Shanghai, the PRC, preparing to start at his new job on October 7.

He was in The Conrad for about one month, having been hired to head the cooking team at Brasserie-on-the-Eighth, the idea, being, that this outlet could become a strong competitor of Nicholini's. This plan, now, shall never come to pass.

For the average patron of The Conrad, such comings and goings of chefs will never be known; and, there is, in fact, no reason that they should know of such matters.

But the absence of well-respected and competent chefs will, eventually, come to be known as the quality of the cooking and of its presentation starts to deteriorate, or, at least, changes.

And, then, discriminating gourmets will start to find other venues to frequent in order to satisfy their palates.

A similar facet of change will take place in the HKSAR as soon as it is known that the Government '*chefs*' are being changed as fast as one changes one's underpants/knickers, whatever the case may be.

And, in fact, it has, already, started to happen, with discriminating, long-term residents of the HKSAR, having started to relocate to regions of the world where they feel there is a future.

Even the staunchest advocates, of the destruction of British colonialist power of yesteryear, are, now, wishing that those halcyon days of Hongkong could return.

But those days are gone: One cannot back the clock.

As The Conrad will, one day, change its name in order to reflect the changes which have come about since the departure of its former '*whip*', Mr Dario Regazzoni, so will the HKSAR have to change its name in order to reflect the changes that have taken place since the departure of the British '*raj*', on June 30, 1997.

The Conrad, under its new '*broom*', is likely to be profitable, yet again. Perhaps, it will be even more profitable than ever before.

But the profit may have to be at the expense of the excellence of the quality, which made The Conrad famous; and, such quality was the hallmark of the days when Beurre D'isigny flowed in abundance.

Then, again, perhaps mediocre quantity, in the world of the HKSAR, today, is more important than the excellence of the quality of yesteryear, both culinary excellence and governmental excellence?

In the same way, perhaps, the same could be said of most of the senior Government officials of the HKSAR?

Pity The Conrad!

Pity the HKSAR!

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