CHINA  HONG KONG
AND
1997

By

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1984
China, Hong Kong, and 1997  Elsie Elliott

I am writing this article mainly for people like British Members of Parliament, ex-patriates in Hong Kong, and for any Chinese or others who have been influenced to believe that 1997 is a kind of doomsday for the people of Hong Kong.

The vast majority of Hong Kong Chinese (I hesitate to use arbitrary statistics but would make a guesstimate that this means over 90% of the population) are going about their work totally unconcerned about this date, 1997, which is being used as a bogey-man by the privileged of Hong Kong in their last-ditch effort to keep themselves in power.

Jaundiced views about China, that she cannot be trusted, are very far from the truth. Socialist she certainly is. I hope she will remain socialist, because that is the only way in which the large population of China can hope to be fed and clothed. It is the only way in which the enormous wealth of China's resources can be developed and enjoyed with any measure of equality by one quarter of the world's population.

As a non-Chinese I have no right to put the case for China, especially as I claim no expertise in political matters. But as I have lived half my life among Chinese people, I am accepted by Hong Kong Chinese as one of themselves, having taken their part against some of the colonial injustices that exist. For the same reason, I have recently been accepted by members of the Chinese Government as an honoured guest, a position I much prefer to that of colonial overlord. I believe that I can identify with the feelings of Chinese patriots who love their motherland no matter who rules in Beijing. At the same time, I am totally British and have opposed any injustices which I considered shameful to my own country.

These are my credentials, added to the fact that I have spent some time both in old and new China.
2. Before 1949

I lived for three years in China, 1948 - 1951. Life for the people at that time could not have been harsher. The Japanese War had ravaged the country for many years, and the struggle between the Kuomintang and the Communists continued for a further four years after that. Food was scarce and clothing more scarce. There was an atmosphere of hopelessness. The Revolution of 1911 to free China from the Manchu had brought no progress after nearly 40 years.

The city where I lived during most of those three years, Nanchang, the capital of Kiangsi Province, had been the centre of the revolution against the Kuomintang. When the Red Army arrived in 1949, we stood on the street and watched their tremendous welcome. Not a shot was fired in the city, but the Kuomintang returned at night to bomb the bridge. The damage was repaired by the Red Army within a day or two.

Nanchang at that time was a drab city. Its roads were neglected and scarcely usable. Drainage was primitive. Water had to be obtained from wells. The electrical power was so inadequate as to be useless. The only transport within the city was the rickshaw, and outside, old rice trucks, or the train if one could get on it as it was usually full of troops. Inflation under the Kuomintang was incredible, prices rising at least 100% daily and often two or three times daily. Wages were fixed by the price of rice on pay day, and money had to be spent at once or it became valueless.

This was the state of most of China at the time when the present Chinese Government took over in 1949. Added to this, there was a flight of capital and expertise from the big cities such as Shanghai. These merchants took their wealth and expertise to Hong Kong, Taiwan and other places, adding to the hardships of China. Merchants are renowned for their love of money rather than their patriotism, though there were, and still are, some who
put country before self.

The new Government wasted no time in mobilising manpower to deal with the worst problems: transport, communication, utilities, inflation, and repair of dykes against flood and natural disaster.

The war was over, and China began to live again.

3. Nanchang Revisited

We left Nanchang in 1951, and I did not see it again until July, 1984, when I went to view the changes. I did expect to see some changes. I did not expect to find a new city. It was totally unrecognisable. The only places I managed to identify were the old Government Offices, the American Hospital, and the bridge, now made of concrete, no longer of wooden planks.

I found new wide roads with trees bordering both sides, following the style of Chang An Road in Beijing which leads to Tien An Men Square. Nanchang too has its memorial square honouring the revolutionaries, set out like Tien An Men, on the 1st August 1927 Road. There are many other new roads. The city now has bus services, trucks, cars, and the usual stream of bicycles now a familiar sight in Chinese cities. Every family seems to have a bicycle, and they can now buy electrical appliances such as fans, sewing machines, TV. As one worker in Canton put it, "In the past we used to look for food; now we look for more furniture." And this seems to be the present trend, judging from the packed department stores, and in the case of Nanchang, all local people, as it is not a tourist area.

What struck me most was the energy of the people. Although it was mid-July with the temperature at 36 - 38°, they all seemed to be bustling hither and thither. I saw none of the drabness, the lethargy, the hopeless-ness I remembered from the past. The girls were wearing brightly coloured dresses, skirts and blouses, and the
men could have walked in any western city. There were no beggar children such as used to worry me 35 years ago.

Perhaps the greatest change is in the buildings. Wherever the eye can see, there are new buildings or sites under construction and reconstruction. At the Hsuen Wai Production Brigade, I asked how they could get all the workers to build so many new chicken sheds, factories and houses all at the same time. Mr. Hsu, the secretary, an old farmer, told me that they have to hire 600 workers from outside the brigade. This fine old farmer remembered the old days, and waxed eloquent as he described the poverty and worries of the "pre-liberation days", when his clothes were patched, and he had to spend his money the minute he sold his vegetables because of inflation. "Now look at my comfortable life," he said. "I have a nice cup with a lid, a carved table, a comfortable settle. I have enough money to buy food with some to spare. When I retire my wife and I will have a pension equal to $3/4 of our earnings." Mr. Hsu described the work of the Brigade, how they had developed, constructed, learned new techniques, paid all the capital costs and their taxes, and still had enough to share a bonus among the workers. In two years' time, he said, the per capita income, already among the highest in the country, would rise considerably. What he appreciated most was the sense of security. No one had to worry about finding work, about education, about food, clothing or old age. For most this seems to be the best and most secure system obtainable, and I feel sure that such a community must have little to worry about in the matter of crime, anti-social behaviour, or psychiatric problems. In fact, while we stayed in Nanchang, we were not given keys to our rooms. "No one steals," we were told. And that was correct, no one did, though we left doors and suitcases unlocked. That had not been our experience in 1948, when anything left lying around disappeared - which is not surprising in view of the poverty of the people then.

During this stay in Nanchang, we visited the Brigade, a textile and dyeing factory (the largest in Kiangsi, providing services for the whole community from birth to
death), a revolutionary museum, a library, an ancient art museum housed in a temple, and a hospital. China has plans for reconstruction, and each of these places we visited (except the museum to the revolutionary heroes which is preserved in its original state) was busy building and expanding.

In each place I visited, I asked the same question: "Do you think a Cultural Revolution of that kind could happen again?" because that is the main excuse used by the enemies of China to raise anxiety in Hong Kong. In each case the answer was similar and very positive: "We made a big mistake and our people suffered terribly. Now we are recovering and everyone is happy. We shall never again make the same mistake now we have seen both ways and we know which is right."

Apart from Nanchang, which is an inland city and therefore most likely to be neglected, I have seen Canton and Beijing several times during the past two years. There is little difference. Everywhere, China is reconstructing, trying to make up for the lost years of the Cultural Revolution. I think I can understand this feeling of guilt that years have been wasted and must be made up. I had wasted ten years of my own life in a narrow-minded church, and just wanted to work double time to make up for the wasted years. And this is exactly what China is doing. To imagine that China would create problems in Hong Kong is ludicrous. I feel disgusted with those who condemn China without attempting to understand her traumas, and the courage with which she is making determined efforts to improve the lives of the people, and to co-exist with the world. It seems to me that it is the capitalists who are determined not to co-exist with China on the Hong Kong issue.

4. Unjustified Comparisons

China's enemies like to compare progress in Hong Kong with that in China. They refer to our high standard of living, and the luxury goods on the market in Hong
Kong for anyone to buy - anyone who has money. They never seem to compare the squatter huts of Hong Kong with the new homes of China. I did not see a squatter hut in any city I visited, not one. In Hong Kong the Government even officially admits to having half a million people living in huts and sub-standard housing. I would put the number nearer to one million.

To compare the progress in the two economies is like comparing two totally different objects. In considering China's progress, the following factors have to be taken into consideration:

1. China started out in 1949 with a country wrecked by war and an economy depleted by the flight of wealth and expertise. Hong Kong benefitted from the flight of capital.

2. China was cut off by all nations when she defended herself from the United Nations forces in Korea; a boycott was put on Chinese goods. Hong Kong benefitted from that war, picking up much of the trade lost by China.

3. China was excluded from the United Nations and from recognition by some countries until 1971. This limited China's role in the world and denied her a market for goods. Hong Kong gained a market from China's loss.

4. During and after the Vietnamese War, China was surrounded on all sides by enemies and had to look after her defences. Hong Kong gained enormous benefits from the Vietnam War, not only in supplying goods to the war zone, but also as a rest and recreation centre for affluent American troops.

5. Chinese industrial progress was hindered by the pull-out of Russian experts. This led to the self-help attitude which made the cultural revolution possible, with disastrous results for China.

6. China is an enormous country inhabited by a quarter of the world's population. Some of its territory is hardly accessible. To make economic progress to
benefit everyone in such a large country is well-nigh impossible. Hong Kong is compact, communications are good, trade contacts have a long history, and Hong Kong had all the factors for a successful economy.

This is not intended to belittle Hong Kong's success, but to point out that comparison between Hong Kong and China is impossible.

China deserves the applause of the world, and it is puzzling to understand why she has so many enemies of the same ethnic origin. By no means do they form the majority, but that they exist at all is difficult to understand. Surely this is a time when all Chinese should unite to help China take her rightful place as one of the great nations of the world, with a potential to world leadership in peaceful co-existence. Yet there are Hong Kong people so selfish that they are afraid of the smallest sacrifice for the honour and dignity of their country.