HONG KONG IN THE 1950s AND '60s: REMINISCENCES

DAN WATERS

Introduction

What was it like in the “good old days” sailing through the Red Sea in mid-summer with no air-conditioning? Pretty warm I can assure you. That was why, on liners, so called posh passengers sailing between Britain and Hong Kong used to choose their cabins ‘port (side) out starboard home.’ There was a bit more breeze that way. When I sailed through the canal in the summer of 1942, shortly before the Battle of El Alamein, I was on a terribly overcrowded troopship with appalling food, living conditions and severely rationed drinking water. There were rumours bromide was put in the tea to dampen libido.

After the Desert campaign finished in May 1943 we, the troops, were inspected by Winston Churchill who proudly proclaimed: ‘When the War is over, all a man will need to say is, “I fought with the Eighth Army”.’ After victory in North Africa there was the Salerno Invasion and the Anzio Beachhead, both in Italy. I was wounded three times. Half a century later in the 1990s, a puzzled x-ray technician said to me at the Tang Shiu Kin Clinic in Hong Kong: ‘Do you know? You’ve got pieces of metal in you body!’

It was a bit of an anticlimax, in 1946, when I returned to the building business established by my great-grandfather in 1853. Then my father died and I became managing director. I enjoyed working on churches and other ancient buildings but I did not really wish to do that for the rest of my life. To supplement my work I also went back to college as my studies had been disrupted by the War. I later taught building science part-time.

Colonial service

Early in 1954 I applied for a job in Trinidad and went along to the...
old Colonial Office in Great Smith Street. Sir Christopher Cox, who headed the interview panel, said: ‘Waters, you would be more suitable teaching building subjects in Hong Kong than in Trinidad. Go away and think about it!’

*Rose, Rose I Love You* was the first song originating in the People’s Republic of China to become popular in Britain. Yet the composers never received royalties. They could not afford to be seen drawing money from a capitalist country. And as I listened to the refrain in *Merry England*, it all tied in. Serving in the Colonial Service in Hong Kong seemed terribly exciting and romantic. It made me think of *Camp Coffee*, *Zam Buk* ointment and other similar branded goods with scenes of Empire on bottles and tins which I grew up with as a child.

‘You’re not going to the Far East?!’ an acquaintance exclaimed. ‘The Communists have just acquired half Korea. There’s fighting in Vietnam and Malaya. Hong Kong will be the next to fall!’

In spite of adverse comments I accepted the offer from the Colonial Office which was shortly to become Her Majesty’s Overseas Civil Service. After all a considerable amount of a map of the world was still coloured red. Hadn’t Winston Churchill proclaimed: ‘I have not become the King’s first minister to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire’? At the time I could have been posted to any one of something like 55 different colonies or dependent territories within the British Commonwealth. For me, ‘Go East young man!’ was the watchword. Nevertheless, some said that the Hong Kong Royal Naval Dockyard was shortly to be closed down.

So, in spite of discouraging remarks, I “burned my boats,” sold the family business as a going concern, and went shopping. I spotted cabin trunks made of sheet metal. ‘Oh no,’ the shop assistant exclaimed, ‘you only need those, Sir, if you are going to some humid place like Hong Kong!’ ‘I’ll have two!’ I replied.

*Shipboard*

In the early 1950s, if one flew to Hong Kong, one normally went by seaplane, landed on water and slept the night in a hotel. The journey took five days. But up until 1959 most of us travelled by sea. The
Peninsula and Oriental Line had four passenger ships: the *Chusan*, the *Carthage* and the *Corfu*. I sailed on the Royal Mail Ship *Canton*. As a newly joined Hong Kong government servant I went on half pay as soon as I stepped on the boat. It took 31 days from Southampton to Hong Kong.

In first class one dressed every night for dinner, except the first night and nights in port. With a long voyage some passengers were like bears with sore ears. For others there were games like deck quoits, dancing, the ceremony of “crossing the line” and shipboard romances. Others were seasick. Regarding romance the pretext for “Romeo” at night was to take a girl up to the boat deck to show her the Southern Cross. One lady boasted: “I was taken up twice on one night and both men pointed to the wrong constellation!”

There were sea birds and flying fish to watch out for, and some wonderful sunsets in the Indian Ocean. Just as the brilliant sun dipped below the horizon you could occasionally see a green flash. Looking over the ship’s rail at night one could frequently see phosphorescent, microbial animal and plant life in the tropical waters. Sometimes one could see this when one flushed the toilet in the darkness of one’s cabin.

At Port Said gilly gilly men (Egyptian magicians) were allowed on board to entertain passengers. Or you could go ashore, visit the Pyramids and elsewhere, and catch the ship at the other end of the Suez Canal (that was the way people travelled on the so-called overland route, before the Suez Canal was completed in 1869.)

Aden, with low taxes, was a good place for shopping. Or one could visit the museum there to look at a stuffed Manatee with its broad, flattened tail. Fond of sitting on rocks, these sea creatures were said to have provided the substance for seamen’s tales about mermaids. Other customary ports of call for British passenger ships were Bombay, Colombo, Penang and Singapore. P. & O. ships were manned partly by lascar seamen with stewards from then Portuguese Goa. There was a splendid array of cuisine with China, Indian and Ceylon teas. The Indian curry cook could serve a different curry for every lunch of the 31-day voyage.

Some Britons preferred to travel on foreign ships which were not
so "starchy" and where you did not have to dress for dinner. French ships called at Saigon and Jibuti and the voyage ended at Marseilles. Italian ships berthed at Genoa. Other passengers preferred freighters. These were more relaxed still and life was not so "organised." Not more than 12 passengers were allowed or there had to be a doctor on board. Whereas most airports look similar, with a freighter you called at interesting, out-of-the-way little ports, each with its own special smell. By freighter, the journey from Britain to Hong Kong could take up to seven or eight weeks. Halcyon days indeed!

Hong Kong

When I arrived in Hong Kong World War Two had ended less than a decade before. Yet some Britons living here still believed there were two kinds of expatriates. There were those who had been "in the bag" (prison camp) (where, in Stanley for example, some of my younger friends were born) and, secondly, those of us who came to Hong Kong after the War. The fact that some of us in the second group had seen more action than many of those who had been interned did not really count as far as old Hong Hands were concerned.

The camaraderie which develops when people face danger or privation together came to the fore when I received a ticket for parking in King's Road. When I later told my old boss he said, 'Pity: the case has gone too far now. If you'd told me earlier I could have got it quashed.' My boss had a friend, a senior police officer, who had been in prison camp with him.

In 1954, Hong Kong's population was something like two-and-a-half million, compared with 600,000 at the end of the War. Immigrants were coming here from China in frantic attempts to evade communism. Accommodation was terribly overcrowded with people in some cases sleeping, on a shift basis, three to a bunk. With China all but cut off from the rest of the world we had lost our entrepot trade and, with backs to the wall, it was a case of export or starve. There was considerable unemployment.

Religion was burgeoning although many were said to be 'rice Christians.' Namely, joining for the handouts. People knew life in Hong Kong was not perfect. But it was a jolly sight better than living
in China. They did not complain. In any case Government did not answer letters written to newspapers but people did not generally criticise Government. That was why, when a column called ‘Tiger Talk’ was written by an English solicitor in 1962 and published in the Sunday Tiger Standard, it attracted considerable attention.

The district of West Point, where legalised brothels for Chinese had been situated up to the mid-1930s, was still an important entertainment district in the mid 1950s, with restaurants with 100 or more Chinese tables capable of seating in excess of 1,200. Sing song girls, the Chinese version of the Japanese geisha, could still be found there.

My Chinese wife, born in 1936, lived in Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation. After the War Canadian Sergeant Major John Osborn, who was born in Norfolk the same county where I was born and raised in England, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. It is the most prestigious British award for gallantry on the field of battle. It was the only such award ever made in the colony.

During the Japanese occupation my wife recalls seeing arms and legs lying in the streets first thing in the morning. Breakers of the curfew had been mauled by Japanese police dogs. Women did their best to make themselves look old, ugly and undesirable. People wandered the hillsides and seashores as hunters and gatherers looking for anything to eat. Occasionally, human flesh was on sale in butchers’ shops, something sometimes denied today. As my wife’s family owned a salt-fish shop they were better off than most. They had food and something to barter. My wife and her two sisters survived the occupation although their father never forgave them and his wife for not having a son to “buy water” for him at his funeral (Today a symbolic ceremony based on filial piety and the washing of the corpse by the eldest son.).

When I arrived in Hong Kong in the mid 1950s conditions had already improved considerably. Although there was rationing still in Britain, you could buy just about anything in Hong Kong — provided you had the money. I stayed together with other government servants in Winner House, a small hotel at North Point, a district sometimes known as Little Shanghai. A number of Fukienese also lived there.
There was a great deal of respect for Britain in the 1950s and when I bargained with a stall holder to buy a piece of electrical equipment he said to me: 'This is not Japanese you know, It's best quality. It's British!' As late as the mid-1960s one of my Chinese staff, teaching surveying, refused to use a theodolite because it was made in Japan. War time memories died hard!

Almost wherever one went in the colony during the 1954-55 winter one could hear the song, \textit{Whatever will be, will be}, blaring out over loudspeakers or being hummed or sung. I was told that I should not tip more than 20 cents for odd tasks and, at the end of the month, I should tip my hotel room boy and my waiter each $10. I could go out then and have a haircut, a shave, a shampoo and a manicure for $2.80, and, being a generous sort of chap, I gave the 20 cents change as a tip. As I have said, I did not arrive immediately after the Second World War when people were prepared to work for two bowls of rice a day.

There was no income tax in Hong Kong until 1939 when a 10 per cent "war tax" was levied. This was supposed to come off when the war ended but it never did. When I arrived in the mid-1950s the maximum salaries tax one could pay was 12 \(\frac{1}{2}\) per cent. It had been increased from 10 per cent in 1950.

I started teaching at the old Technical College in Wood Road, Wan Chai. On my first visit a "big man coolie team" was grunting and manhandling heavy engineering equipment up the stairs. We did not move to Hung Hom until 1957. With the help of "academic drift" my old College became the Polytechnic University, on the Hung Hom campus, in 1994.

Shortly after I arrived in the colony there was a rumour a leopard was on the prowl in the New Territories. It was probably no more than a rumour but I do believe that there were instances of South China Tigers briefly visiting the New Territories in the 1950s. If you don't believe me you should read \textit{The Hong Kong Countryside}, by zoologist GAC Herklots (1951).

I was taken the rounds of Hong Kong by a Yorkshire colleague within a few days of my arriving. First we went to the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China (as it was known then) where I opened an
account. It was an old colonial style building with paddle fans suspended from ceilings. This structure was replaced by an air-conditioned building in 1959, which was, in turn, replaced by another new Standard Chartered building opened formally in 1990. In the 1950s many buildings were old, roomy, colonial style, low-rise buildings, with colonnades, wide balconies and large windows or French doors in order to allow for "through draught." That was important. Windows usually were fitted with louvres or jalousies.

I was taken to meet the Director of Education whose office was then in the lovely old French Mission Building (now the Court of Final Appeal) at the top of Battery Path. I had to sign the visitor's book at Government House. 'Unless you do this,' I was warned, 'you will not be invited to the garden party on the Queen's birthday.' In spite of what people would often have you believe they were generally proud to receive an invitation from the Governor. Just as today they like to receive an invitation to the reception, in the Convention and Exhibition Centre, on China’s National Day. (When a HKBRAS group visited Government House in January 1997, shortly before The Handover, just about every member was keen to sign the book.) There was no doubt, too, that Hong Kong people felt greatly honoured if they were decorated by the Queen just as they feel honoured today if they receive a Hong Kong Special Administrative Region award.

My Yorkshire colleague, back in early 1955, also introduced me to a reliable comprador. In this sense, I mean a grocer. In fact I still deal with the Asia Company to this day. Compared to the aseptic, soulless supermarkets I have wonderful memories of street-corner comprador shops stocked with goodies, including kam wa hams hanging from ceilings. I am, of course, talking of times when cheung saams were far more common and years before Big Macs and Kentucky Fried Chicken had made their debuts in the Territory. Regarding the latter, one person commented to me, 'We Chinese have a 1,000 ways to cook a chicken. Kentucky will never make it!' But although they failed once they returned to Hong Kong, Kentucky Fried Chicken has been a success story.

When I arrived I had to register and obtain an identity card. I was quite embarrassed. On arrival at the North Point office, as I was a European, I was taken by my Chinese colleague straight to the front of
the long queue. After a few words from him and a few glares from odd people lined up, formalities were completed. My barging in seemed, more or less, to have been accepted.

In January 1955, I remember going to a new workshop which was being built for the government Public Works Department at So Kon Po, on Hong Kong Island. There, old women were straightening nails, for reuse, which had been knocked out of timber formwork into which concrete was poured. They were paid $1.50 a day. Tradesmen were paid $5.00.

What were my other impressions of the winter of 1954/55? I could not get over how crystal clear the sky was as I stood on Hong Kong Island gazing northward over the Kowloon foothills. Leading on, jumping to 1964, businessman KA Watson of the Traffic Advisory Committee, said: 'Hong Kong might one day have a smog problem as bad as Los Angeles unless action is taken to eliminate vehicle exhaust fumes.' No one took much notice.

In those days if one spoke of 'the Government' one meant the one in Whitehall. But if one wrote 'government,' with no definite article and a small 'g,' then one meant the administration in Hong Kong. Interestingly, during the 1957/58 legislative year, only one question was asked in the Legislative Council among the eight unofficial (non-government) Councillors and they only, between them, made a total of 12 speeches.

Hong Kong was a pretty colonial place in those days and there was always a military parade with bands marching along the streets of Kowloon on the morning of 21st April. It was a public holiday and the Queen’s Birthday. It was a jingoistic occasion with a few Britons carrying furled umbrellas and wearing bowler hats. In the 1950s the Murray Parade Ground was regularly used, near the Garden Road-Queen’s Road corner, opposite the cricket field where Chater Garden is situated today.

We went into “whites” on about 1st May and this, for most of us in government at least, meant shorts with shirts tucked in and knee-length socks. We changed back to heavy clothing on about 1st November. My old boss, typical of the more senior, used to come down on the Peak
Tram with an open-neck shirt and an off-white, wet-wash Saigon-linen suit. He had a necktie in his pocket to put on for meetings. He carried a Hong Kong (rattan) basket: no briefcase for him. One thing you did not do, in those days, was to mention the expiry of the lease and the hand back of the Territory to China in 1997. I did once, at a reception, and regrets it. You could hear a pin drop. It really was a ‘borrowed place on borrowed time.’

When I arrived conscription was still in force and every able-bodied British subject had to serve. If you were young, in your twenties, you usually joined the Regiment (the Volunteers). People like me, in my thirties, served in the Special Constabulary (in 1959 it became the Auxiliary Police). Those over 40 were drafted into Essential Services, such as air-raid warden duties. New recruits such as me, in the police European contingent, did three months basic training and 10 days at camp every year. At the latter the European contingent was grouped with the Portuguese and Eurasian contingent. There was a separate camp for Chinese. This was said to be largely for language reasons. Of course we all turned out during the five days of the 1956 riots. These were sparked when a junior civil servant pulled down a Nationalist flag, on the “Double Tenth” (10 October), from a Shek Kip Mei resettlement block in north Kowloon. The riots were very much Communists against Nationalists. Later, triads stepped in and took advantage of the situation.

Routinely, we Special Constables went on street patrol a couple of nights a month and raided opium dens and brothels. One of the interesting places we enjoyed going to was Circular Path, to the south of Queen’s Road Central. With urban renewal this path has now disappeared. It contained, among other accommodation, a number of back-street workshops where reputedly stolen jade items and the like were “re-worked.”

I remember being on police patrol in Central, in April 1956, when we received news that the twice knighted, grand old man, Sir Robert Ho Tung, had passed away. He was 93, although for much of his life he did not enjoy good health. A Eurasian, he had “gone the Chinese way.” With his fabulous wealth he lived the life of a Chinese gentleman. It is sometimes said, ‘All rivers which run into the China Sea turn salty.’ In other words, all ethnic groups living in China get assimilated sooner or later.
Sir Robert had a wonderful funeral procession with 16 bands. In those days popular tunes at Chinese funerals were; *Abide with me, Polly Wolly Doodle all the Day, and Yes, we have no Bananas!* They were good, rousing tunes and most Chinese did not understand the words any way. Bamboo ramps were a common sight in the 1950s to bring coffins and corpses down to street level. Ramps disappeared with traffic congestion and with the introduction of high-rise buildings, about 1960. Major Chinese festivals occur in the calendar when there are marked changes of seasons. People are then likely to feel "under the weather." When the body is at a low ebb a sick person is more likely to die. In 1956, it was said that Sir Robert had “passed over” Ching Ming and should be able to carry on at least to Dragon Boat Festival. However, it was not to be.

In March 1955 I had managed to obtain a government quarter at 56 Conduit Road. At the time it resembled a quiet country lane, gay with flowers, where you could occasionally hear barking deer calling from Victoria Peak. A few people were still carried up to Mid-Levels by sedan chairs which, until the end of the fifties, were parked at the bottom of Wyndham Street.

I engaged a Chinese amah to whom I paid $130 a month. She spoke Pidgin English and talked of “going topside” when she meant going upstairs. Indeed some of us old Hong Kong hands still use pidgin expressions. I, for example, still talk of a makee-learn, for someone learning a job, and I say small chow when I mean canapés which are provided at receptions. A Chinese colleague complained that, at $130, I was overpaying my amah. He gave his $70 a month. He also said that his amah had no time off. If she had anything important to do she would request a few hours off work. Several people had gold teeth in those days and the saying was that one should have enough gold in one’s mouth to pay for one's funeral. The present-day, gold-coloured building, at Admiralty, is nicknamed the “Amah's Tooth.”

When I first lived in Conduit Road there were a number of quite palatial mansions standing in their own grounds, often with tennis courts, in the Mid-levels. One example was the house on the site, at No.41, on which I live today. The old building was demolished in the mid-1960s. From 1951 to '61 it was occupied by the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCC). The film, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, based on Han
Suyin’s autobiographical novel, *A Many Splendoured Thing*, was partly shot there in the mid-1950s. In real life the boyfriend, a war correspondent killed in Korea, was British. In the film he miraculously became an American.

I frequently walked past the FCC on Saturday nights when riotous parties were in full swing. The old number 41, “Fairview,” was the first private residence in the territory to have a lift. This came right up from road level. The house depended on water from a watercourse, on Po Shan Road, for flushing toilets. There is an artist’s embellished painting of the old “Fairview” in the Hong Kong Museum of Art’s collection at Tsim Sha Tsui.

Remaining from the days when it was occupied by a private family, the master bedroom had four bell-pulls. These were connected to the bedrooms of his four concubines. In fact, during his lifetime he was said to have had eight (some say nine) concubines. This was by no means unusual. When a rich Hong Kong man went to the United States in the 1930s, a headline in a newspaper read, ‘Here comes the man with 20 wives!’

A Chinese could legally take a concubine up until October 1971, just as up until the 1960s most weddings were customary Chinese marriages. Some concubines taken before October 1971 remain legal secondary wives to this day. There was, of course, a customary ceremony for concubines too and they had their place in the hierarchy of the family. I did know families however where, when the principal wife found out the old man had “another woman,” she was brought in to live with the family. There, the principal wife could keep an eye on her. She was not infrequently made by the first wife to live and eat with the servants. Later, if the first wife died, the concubine, who was usually quite a bit younger, sometimes took her place as a “fill the room” (*t’infong*) as a succeeding main wife is known.

Another important event, in October 1971, was the legislation that came into force making it compulsory for everyone to have at least one day’s holiday a week. Up until then, certainly in the 1950s, there would be no problem with crowds on beaches. But no, it was not all work and no play and I swam in the Cross-harbour Race in 1955 and took part in the 42 mile ‘Round the Island Walkathon’ the following year.
When I arrived in the mid-1950s, only one government department - Medical and Health — was headed by a Chinese. But he was not a local and came from Malaya. Today, of course, the boot is on the other foot. Only persons of Chinese nationality can become Government Secretaries.

Although the Peak Reservation Ordinance was not brought back into force after World War Two, there was, nevertheless, quite a bit of covert racism - certainly among staff in the college where I taught. My old boss told me, when he learned I intended carrying on studying Cantonese, 'Only policemen and cranks learn Cantonese.' Immediately I thought, 'Yes, and I'm one of the cranks!' One British colleague would openly say to other Europeans that he had lived in Hong Kong for 20 years and was proud that he could not count, in Cantonese, beyond three. 'After all, this is a British colony!' He used to say that no Chinese had crossed the threshold of his home as a guest. 'As a tradesman, yes. But not as a guest.' Another colleague who was not quite so racist frequently said, 'The Chinese are all right, but they need a European behind them.'

But then I recall being stationed in the Suez Canal Zone in 1942 in, at the time, the largest military camp in the world. At Qantara railway station there were 10 toilets labelled as follows:

- Officers European
- Officers Asiatic
- Officers Coloured
- Warrant Officers and Sergeants European
- Warrant Officers and Sergeants Asiatic
- Warrant Officers and Sergeants Coloured
- Other Ranks European
- Other Ranks Asiatic
Other Ranks Coloured

ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service - women)

But of course race was not just something for westerners. It was not so dissimilar for some Chinese. I have a friend who said to her daughter, 'All right, you can go to Britain to study. But you must promise you will never marry a westerner.' Such views are still not so uncommon. There is an obituary in the HKBRAS Journal, Vol. 27, 1987, page 5, for RAS member KMA Barnett OBE. The writer suggested that Barnett's 'occasional sourness could be traced to a resentment that his (most happy) marriage to a Chinese had blocked his promotion.' The writer also said that Barnett was inclined to believe that AIDS was a divine (or nature's) deserved punishment for societies which tolerated, even glamorised, "deviants."

In the case of my own Anglo-Chinese wedding, although I did receive a certain amount of ostracism from a few colleagues in the early days, most accepted my marriage without too much difficulty. Certainly I received no objections from my employer, the Hong Kong Government. In my case I was married in the morning and, in the afternoon, my Chinese wife and I were invited to the Governor's garden party on the lawn at Government House. This was held annually, on the Queen's Birthday, 21st April, which was then a public holiday. We held a Chinese dinner that evening, in the old Sun Ya Restaurant on Nathan Road. The cost was $130 per Chinese table each seating 12 persons.

Many people, certainly pre-World War Two, took the view that stratification was correct and necessary as lifestyles of the Chinese and westerners differed so considerably. The Chinese, at least outwardly, were not too disturbed by racial discrimination. They took it all quite stoically. After all, they knew who was really superior. Was not their country the Middle Kingdom, with a complex culture and a continuous civilisation going back 5,000 years? They did not want to live on the Peak anyway, it was far too humid up there. Yes, like the British, at heart the Chinese knew who the superior beings really were. Today, while there is still some class distinction and snobbery in the Territory, both among Europeans and Chinese, the old days of racial discrimination have fortunately largely gone. Mixed marriages make the world go round.
Government servants completed four-year tours up until the early 1960s. When we went on leave, being seen off was a grand occasion. One would normally organise a reception for a number of friends. They boarded the ship. Occasionally, there was a bit of gate crashing by people known as “professional see’ers off” who enjoyed the company and a few free drinks.

Brass bands would play *Auld Lang Syne* on the quay and paper streamers would be thrown to friends on shore. As the ship pulled away the streamers would break and the “umbilical cord” would be severed, as it were. After a four-year tour a government servant would earn something like seven months leave plus 30 days travelling each way. That meant you were away from the colony for about nine months. Being seen off was an important affair for Chinese too and, in the 1950s when the growing of rice was not profitable any more and the “vegetable revolution” was underway, many New Territories’ Chinese made their way to England to work in restaurants. On being seen off just about the entire village would sometimes turn out!

On one occasion I was on leave in England and a fellow passenger on a train spotted my suitcase. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘you’re from Hong Kong. Tell me. Do they still put paint on with their hands?’ I had to admit that painters stick their woollen-gloved hand into a pot of paint when they paint metal railings and the like. They still do. It’s labour saving. It’s surprising what people remember about Hong Kong after they have left.

**Pestilence**

The colony was not a healthy place in its young days and many expatriates died young, as a wander through what we used to call the Colonial Cemetery (now the Hong Kong Cemetery) in Happy Valley reveals. There were cases of bubonic plague up until the 1920s with an especially bad epidemic in 1894. There was a worrying outbreak of cholera in the early summer of 1961. Stalls were manned by nurses in the street, for example by the Star Ferry. There was no wasting of time and no paperwork. All you did was roll up your sleeve. Now, from the days of pestilence and being an unhealthy place, Hong Kong has a life expectancy greater that most western countries, including Britain and the USA.
Meters, flyovers and service charges

It was not until 1962 that Hong Kong had its first parking meters and at about the same time service charges were first levied in restaurants. Also at this time, in spite of high immigration figures, unemployment consistently stood at well below two per cent. Inflation was negligible. The Territory saw its first flyover, outside Saint Teresa’s Church on Prince Edward Road in Kowloon, in 1963.

‘One damn thing after another’

In the early 1960s, we are referring to a time when something like 30 million inhabitants died of starvation on the Chinese Mainland. This was as a result of the failure of the ‘Great Leap Forward.’ There were long queues in Hong Kong post offices sending food parcels to relatives in China. All in all, the 1960s was a challenging decade and, as one government servant phrased it, ‘It was one damn thing after another.’ But the Territory was a great survivor and frequently managed to come back stronger than ever.

Typhoons

When I first arrived in Hong Kong my boss told me there is a bad typhoon every seven years. In fact, there is no set pattern if you check as I have. An estimated 11,000 people died in the 1937 typhoon, more than the 8,750 total Allied forces, Japanese and Chinese estimated to have been killed when the Japanese attacked Hong Kong in December 1941. There was an inadequate typhoon warning system in those days. Up until the 1930s a gun was fired from Blackhead Point, in Kowloon, either when a typhoon was approaching or when the mail ship arrived. Not infrequently, the two events were confused.

Typhoon Wanda, in 1962, is sometimes remembered as the last typhoon from which bitter lessons were learned on how to batten down. It coincided with a high tide, with an 11-foot rise in water level and a storm surge that caused bad flooding. This happened right up to Tsang Tai Uk (the big house of the Tsang family), the fine, Hakka walled village at the end of Sha Tin Hoi (Sea). This Hoi has long since been reclaimed. With Wanda, something like 2,000 ships and small craft were sunk or damaged. There were 130 deaths. With gusts of 164 mph
our concrete framed building, where I lived in Argyle Street, Kowloon, swayed. You could hear glass breaking, there was a constant job of mopping up. Water seals were sucked out of toilets.

A problem of people

As Claude Burgess, Colonial Secretary from 1958 to '63, was fond of saying, Hong Kong has a problem of people. They have swum in on pigs' bladders across Mirs Bay and Deep Bay and come in by just about every means possible. Up until 1980 there was a touch base policy. Any illegal immigrant who reached the urban area was allowed to stay. But after that date all illegal immigrants caught have been repatriated.

In 1962, the Communists had a trial run and opened the 'flood gates.' Over a period of 25 days something like 70,000 men, women and children were allowed to surge into Hong Kong. The communist guards stepped back and directed the masses. They walked over the hills. Hong Kong was overwhelmed. And then, just as abruptly as they had opened, the flood gates shut. It seems to have been a move by the People's Republic to embarrass the colony. They wanted to show that they could take over Hong Kong at any time.

Water shortage

Hong Kong was invariably short of water, from the early years of British rule when everyone depended on streams and wells. Up to comparatively recent years the water supply situation was a common subject of conversation.

In 1963, 'the year Hong Kong ran dry,' we were down to four hours of water on tap once every four days. In resettlement estates people started queuing for water eight hours before it was turned on and at Diamond Hill, it was reported, 20,000 people were dependent on one hydrant. Thieves stole water. Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists and Christians all prayed for rain. Water was shipped in by tankers from higher up the Pearl River.

People would say at a reception, 'I must slip off early. Our water is turned on tonight.' Of course we, who lived in flats, also stored water. Bathing in a small amount of water was an art. Children went in the
bath water first, then the wife, and father, who was the dirtiest and the smelliest, went in last.

One man put an advertisement in the *South China Morning Post*. It read:

**Wanted**

Gentleman in Kowloon with water supply on Monday would like to meet attractive lady from Mid-Levels with water supply on Wednesday: purpose, sharing bath water.

Those were the days before Plover Cove and High Island Reservoirs were built and before large amounts of water were piped in from China. Then, on 4th May 1964, Hong Kong had 2.44 inches (62 millimetres) of rain in 24 hours, its biggest downpour in 19 months. Again, during parts of July and August 1967, we were also down to four hours of water every four days. In some respects that was even more frightening because, as that was the year of prolonged riots in Hong Kong, we had no prospects of obtaining more water from China.

**Runs on banks**

Also in 1965 there were runs on banks, largely fuelled by rumours. Two banks which suffered were the Canton Trust Commercial Bank and the Hang Seng Bank.

**Rainstorms**

Although the 1960s was generally a dry decade there was a very heavy rainstorm one Sunday morning on 12th June, 1966. The heaviest downpour was over Aberdeen where 6.18 inches (15.69 centimetres) fell in one hour. That day we had 15.8 inches (40.13 centimetres) of rain in 24 hours. That compares with May 1889 when 27.44 inches of rain fell in 24 hours. By comparison, London has an average annual rainfall of about 23 inches, less than Hong Kong has had in one day.

**Riots**

To round the decade off there were also the 1966 Star Ferry Riots
and the 1967 Riots. The former were sparked by a five cent increase on the lower deck of the Star Ferry. Nevertheless, the root cause was largely the community’s displeasure with social conditions, shortage of schools, housing and the like. It was reported that in 1966 in the district of Tsz Wan Shan, in Kowloon, with a population then of 70,000, there was not a single telephone. The Kai Fong Association requested that at least a few public phones be installed. Soldiers marched down Nathan Road with fixed bayonets during the 1966 Riots. The protracted 1967 riots were a spill over from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. Firecrackers were banned from then on. The military kept in the background during the 1967 Riots because of fear that China might react. The riots badly affected community stability and, in 1968, office space in Chung King Mansions, in Tsim Sha Tsui, was advertised at 60 cents a square foot.

The 1966 and 1967 riots were really a watershed. From then on government started to listen to the populace more. Social conditions improved and Hong Kong started a process of de-colonisation. In 1972, government servants were instructed to use the word ‘territory’ rather than ‘colony,’ other than in an historical context. The Colonial Cemetery became the Hong Kong Cemetery and so on. A Hong Kong identity and a larger middle class began to form.

It is interesting to recall that the sparks which ignited the 1956, the 1966 and the 1967 riots all occurred in Kowloon. Hong Kong Island has generally been a more peaceful place. That was why, when I came to the colony in the mid-1950s and there was talk of building a cross-harbour tunnel or a bridge, some Hong Kong Island residents expressed fear, if this happened, of being ‘swamped’ by ‘hordes’ from Kowloon.

Corruption

Corruption had long been a serious concern in Hong Kong and, as the Territory became richer, the problem became more serious. When a colleague of mine said there was a price for everything our old boss soon shut him up. That was part of the trouble. Most Europeans did not appreciate the magnitude of the problem. I recall a Chinese girl telling me, in 1955, that her grandfather had been caught by a policeman smoking opium. The old man gave the copper $20 and the whole matter was conveniently forgotten about. Squeeze affected the Chinese
community at all levels. It was not just the big guys.

The late Sir Murray (later Lord) MacLehose, Governor from 1971 to 1982, soon appreciated the problem. Hong Kong has him to thank for setting up the Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC), in 1974. It was a bold step but it has been effective.

For me personally, during my career with Government, I was never directly affected by corruption in any shape or form. Nevertheless, one needs to ask when does tipping and present-giving stop and when does corruption begin?

Personalities

People and personalities have played important parts in Hong Kong's history. Sir John Cowperthwaite, Financial Secretary (FS) from 1961 to 1971, although very successful, worked more on an ad hoc basis than his successors. He saw limited need to collect statistics which would (he believed) encourage government to draw up economic plans and interfere in the private sector and the free movement of market forces. He believed government should not 'get involved.'

Yet, in spite of the post of FS being stressful, many of them were a long-lived breed. Some who served Hong Kong either before or just after World War Two carried on drawing their pensions into their nineties. A great deal of credit must go to our past Financial Secretaries for helping to lay foundations for the Hong Kong we know today.

Conclusions

Certainly the 1950s and the '60s were eventful decades and, during the latter part of the 1960s and '70s especially, Hong Kong made strides in leaving its colonial past behind. It took on a new mantle. Many things surreptitiously changed.

Entire skylines altered dramatically every decade or so. In the 1960s, Tsing Yi Island was being considered for the site for a nudist colony. Now it is heavily built upon. From 1857 until 1975 we had a cricket pitch in the centre of town. Gracious, old, colonial style buildings were torn down. We needed those to depend upon for the reassurances
they would have provided (had they been left) and for the urban lineage they would have represented. Those wonderful old buildings are no longer with us to provide anchors in times of need.

They were replaced within a few years by high-rise air-conditioned buildings. Many depend upon artificial lighting and ventilation and have windows which do not open. Today, so many live and work in an artificial atmosphere. This major change led long ago to people discarding shorts and open-necked shirts and wearing two-piece suits and more formal and more uncomfortable clothing. The new lifestyle meant the better off were stepping from their air-conditioned homes, carrying brief cases, into their air-conditioned cars and then being conveyed to their air-conditioned offices.

At the end of World War Two the Chinese Nationalist Government was waiting in the wings just over the border to take over Hong Kong. But the British beat them to it. If the Americans had had their way, and British rule had been terminated in Hong Kong in 1945 and the place had been returned to China, it is possible to speculate what would have happened. In 1949 Hong Kong, like other big cities in China, would have been taken over by the People’s Republic Government. This would have meant that, after 30 or so years of communist rule, Hong Kong would have been as backward economically as the rest of China. There would have been no ‘Hong Kong miracle.’ After 1978 the Territory would not have been able to form a nucleus for the economic development for the rest of China with its ‘Open Door Policy.’

Pigeons

Up until 1914 every marine launch of Hong Kong’s Water Police (as the Marine Police were known then) took a few pigeons on board. These were used to fly messages back to headquarters in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon. But in spite of the introduction of radio the pigeons were kept on strength. Members of the force contributed to buy them food. The flock of about 50 birds came to be looked upon much like the Barbary Apes at Gibraltar or the Ravens at the Tower of London. It was said when the pigeons departed from Marine Police Headquarters so would the British from Hong Kong.

The pigeons disappeared during the Japanese occupation but were
said to have returned 'mysteriously' in 1945. They were watched carefully during the 1967 riots. When I went back to Marine Police Headquarters a year or so after the 1997 Handover, from Britain to China, the pigeons were no longer there. 'They are flying around Tsim Sha Tsui,' I was informed.

In many respects the social history of the Territory, together with its myths and legends, has been as exciting as any novel.

Half a century ago many of us who lived and worked in colonial Hong Kong gave limited thought to the future and the forces of modernity. Even if we had, it is unlikely that we would have envisaged anything like the degree of change that has actually taken place during which the world map has been redrawn.

If a person is unable to adjust to change then, certainly, Hong Kong is not the place to be. If it is any consolation the pace of change is even more likely to accelerate in the future. In this paper I have looked at the past 50 years with special emphasis on the 1950s and ’60s. What will the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region be like in the middle of the 21st century?

But that has to be another story.