

The Future Of Hong Kong

BY A CORRESPONDENT

(Concluding Article)

SPEAKING before the J.C.I. World Congress recently, Sir Michael Hogan, the Chief Justice, said: "What have we got in Hong Kong? Virtually nothing; no good land, no mineral wealth; nothing but free air and the air of freedom. Our success, such as it is, is due, and due alone, to the unending resilience of the human spirit . . ." He went on: "Here in Hong Kong, private property plays, and very rightly plays, an important part in this policy of ours. It provides much of the dynamism on which our economy depends. Without it, how could we have created in so short a time, and sustained in this small impoverished corner of the world, the practical, purposeful, and almost prosperous community . . ."

Review

Can we gauge the future by a study of the past? For one hundred years Hong Kong was a small trading port in the South China Sea, quaint, fluctuating in usefulness and importance, but always of lesser account than either Shanghai to the north or Singapore to the south. These two were important cosmopolitan centres of trade with large hinterlands — Hong Kong by comparison was rather provincial.

Since the second world war, and particularly in the last ten years, this has all changed. Shanghai has virtually disappeared, while Singapore has lost ground and impetus due to political uncertainties which, strange as it may seem, Hong Kong, although apparently more precariously placed, has managed to avoid. Rather has Hong Kong prospered partly on the troubles of its neighbours.

Revolution in China in the late 'forties brought capital know-how and skilled workers to the Colony, followed by large numbers of refugees who, while presenting many social difficulties, provided a pool of cheap labour upon which the post-war industrial expansion has been founded. Disturbances in Malaya, in Singapore, in French Indo-China, in Dutch Indonesia, and now in British Borneo, have all in their turn brought increasing financial resources to Hong Kong as the capitalists and business men of those countries sought somewhere where such resources could be safely and more profitably employed. The free movement of money into and out of the Colony has played a very great part in increasing the confidence of potential investors, while any feeling of uncertainty as to the political future has been more than discounted by the rate of interest obtainable — from 10 to 15 per cent being quite normal.

Apart from its industrial and economic development, Hong Kong has changed in other ways in the last ten years. It is now a large city of three and a half million people, a city of many races living and mingling together with few racial barriers. It is an important tourist centre, attracting by sea and air some quarter of a million travellers a year.

The Colony has not been slow to develop this business. It has built a new air terminal and runway second to none in the East, and is building a new ocean terminal equal to any in the United Kingdom. Its hotels are noted for their service, comfort and exotic cuisine; two new ones bigger and better than any existing are reaching completion in the centre of Victoria, overlooking the harbour. These and other active steps, such as the introduction of rapid transit by hydroplane — and in due course by hovercraft — to the nearby Portuguese Colony of Macao — the Monte Carlo of the East — are just further examples of the energy and enterprise which is brought to bear in a free market.

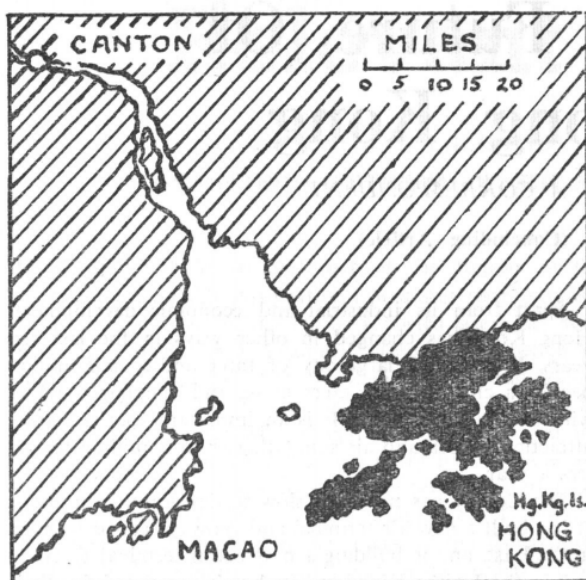
But despite these facts, and the last decade of expansion, the past provides little guide to the future. Hong Kong still lives, as it is said, "on borrowed time," and the apparent prosperity now so evident could be lost almost overnight by a sudden change in the attitude of the Chinese Peoples Government.

Social Conditions

Overhanging this boisterous prosperity, so apparent to the visitor of a few days, is the poverty of the mass of the community — or perhaps it would be more correct to say lack of wealth rather than poverty, since all but a few have the necessities of life, and earn them. The competition for work drives wages to subsistence level, and the standard of living is very low indeed by Western standards.

In particular, the great majority of the population is extremely ill-housed. Many families live in cubicles roughly seven feet by eight in size, formed by dividing up the floors of tenement buildings. In this space the family must eat, sleep and have its being; children study and relax. The sharing by many families of a communal kitchen, ablution and lavatory facilities, does not encourage environmental and personal hygiene, and it is remarkable that such a high standard of personal cleanliness is maintained despite these conditions.

Government-aided housing schemes, including Resettlement — which provides at the minimum a room of 120 sq



ft. for a family of five at a rent of H.K. \$16 (£1) per month — and flats of higher standard, giving a minimum of 35 sq. ft. per person at a rent of roughly \$10 per person per month, now provide accommodation for some three-quarters of a million people. New housing is being built under these schemes at the rate of 150,000 persons per annum. This is in addition to the contribution of private enterprise, which is building at the rate of some \$1 million per day but still not meeting the demand.

The circumstances of the Chinese Revolution made Hong Kong a refugee centre not only for people but also for the culture of China and the charity of the western world in the East. Thus, while the intellectual and educational leaders of China moved to Hong Kong, so also were the Western missionaries in the East forced to retire to Hong Kong and centre their activities there. In this small territory, the collective efforts of many devoted men and women, supported by funds raised throughout the western world, particularly in America and Europe, as well as within the Colony itself, have expanded the educational and welfare facilities in pace with the needs of the population, and sustained many by charity until they could find their feet in a new and strange environment. Nevertheless, the bulk of the work remains to be met by local government funds.

It is difficult for one unacquainted with Hong Kong to appreciate the social consequences of a sudden increase in population by the influx of peoples of different backgrounds, with different dialects or even language. People used to a country life thrust suddenly into a metropolis and forced to live closely packed in multi-storey tenements. People who have never seen paved streets, used electric lights nor experienced modern sanitation, were faced suddenly with fast-moving motor traffic and all the amenities and squalor of a large city. The integration of

these multi-various groups and outlooks into a single, purposeful community is a great achievement — it is an expression of the ability of the human mind to adjust and adapt itself to new conditions, given patience, tolerance and freedom.

Hope

The outstanding quality of the people of Hong Kong is the spirit of hope. It is strange that this should be so in a territory where the future is so dark and uncertain, but it is. The Chinese coolie — the foundation of the Colony's prosperity — is an inveterate optimist. His condition may be poor today but it will be better tomorrow. Today he lives in a squatter hut of cardboard, tomorrow in a resettlement room of 120 sq. ft. for his whole family, and next year he may obtain a one room flat of 200 sq. ft. in a multi-storey tenement block or housing scheme. To him this is wealth and prosperity indeed. He will work twelve hours a day, but his children will go to school and have a better future.

Time has no end, and Hong Kong may yet again surprise both itself and the world by its vigour and endurance in the remaining decades of the twentieth century.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

New York, Aug. 30—Sept. 5, 1964

The conference, which is being held concurrently with the annual conference of the Henry George Schools of North America, will be held at the Henry Hudson Hotel, West 57th Street, New York City.

Accommodation ranges from \$5 per day for four sharing a room to \$9 per day for a single room. All rooms have bath, radio, television, etc. Suites are also available. General facilities include a swimming pool, steam rooms and sun rooms.

DISCUSSIONS — LECTURES — VISITS

Visitors wishing to travel from the U.K. in a group by sea or air should write to the Secretary, International Union for Land-Value Taxation and Free Trade, 177 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London, S.W.1.