
POINTS OF THE COMPASS

Letter from Macao

By George Mikes

THE FORTY MILES SEA-JOURNEY between Hong Kong and Macao takes you from China to the Mediterranean. Hong Kong is a huge, busy, bustling metropolis, where the whole population is chasing money with breathless greed; Macao is small and sleepy. And it is engagingly Latin: Portuguese names and notices—repeated in Chinese, with huge, picturesque ideographs—little houses transplanted from the banks of the Douro and the Tejo, charming little squares, balconies, graceful arcades and an easy-going, indolent why-hurry?-life-is-here-to-enjoy atmosphere. One sees many more Portuguese faces than English ones. Even the Chinese coolies, in conical hats, carrying two large buckets on long rods placed across their shoulders and trotting along with tiny dancing steps, often have strong Latin features. The old story again. The British as colonisers kept scrupulously away from the “natives”—and if they slipped up now and then they had what was regarded as the decency to have nothing to do with their bastards; the Portuguese—less humane and harsher in a few other respects—mixed freely, procreated innumerable offspring and accepted them as their own. As Senhor Joaquim Morais Alves, President of Macao’s Loyal Senate, remarked:

“We Portuguese always slept with all women on all Continents. For centuries, missionaries and other good Christians upbraided us for being promiscuous and sinful and pointed to the English as noble and virtuous. Then attitudes changed. And now our past behaviour is held up as humane and democratic while the British are branded as a conceited master-race, having kept themselves apart!”

“Which has a moral, I’m sure,” I said, and he nodded.

GEORGE MIKES’ contributions to ENCOUNTER include “Letter from Fiji” (April 1968), “Letter from Cyprus” (March 1965) and “Alien’s Return” (September 1964).

“The moral is obvious. Commit all the vices: you never know when they’ll become virtues.”

The effect of 400 years of co-existence is, of course, mutual. Both languages—Portuguese and Chinese—succeeded in bastardising each other into a charming, yet ugly, Macao vernacular. And I was pleased to learn from Senhor Alves’ remark that Chinese wisdom mixed well with Latin clarity.

IF YOU LOOK RIGHT OR LEFT from the ancient Monte Fort, you see—right in front of your nose—lands belonging to Red China, the Chinese mainland, Chinese junks carrying food and other goods into Macao, displaying the compulsory red flag and the even more compulsory picture of Mao Tse-tung. But right in front of you there is the small-town life of a Portuguese Maupassant, fossilised in the last century or earlier. The local notables, the magistrate, the mayor, the various administrators, the pharmacist, the architect and some rich merchants chatting, gossiping and sipping beer in the Solmar, despising the hordes of—mostly Japanese—tourists who dash in for a hurried lunch, and feeling infinitely superior to them. (All over the world, the most liberal places included, there is still strong discrimination against two races: one is the *poor*—surely a separate race of humanity in most people’s eyes—and the second the *tourists*, regarded as the lowest form of human existence, the new un-touchables.)

A Macao journalist, Adam Lee, told me:

“If someone threw a hand-grenade into the Café Solmar at two o’clock, after lunch, the administration of Macao would come to a standstill. No one would remain to carry on...”

This, I found later, was a slight exaggeration. Another hand-grenade would be needed: one for the Solmar, the other for the Esplanada. But the *two* would certainly do the trick.

ONE KNOWS—and I knew—very little of Macao. I thought it was a minor Hong Kong, a small Portuguese colony next door to a small English one, only more interesting than its British neighbour because it was (so I imagined) a den of iniquity, a paradise for gamblers, smugglers, opium smokers and refugees from China. This preconceived image—as most preconceived images—was wrong: the truth, as usual, was not the “opposite,” just different. The picture never quite fitted; and then Macao changed, out of recognition, after 1967. In December 1966 and on a few occasions during the following weeks,

Macao hit the headlines of the world's press. But most people have only a vague recollection what happened and no idea at all what results these dramatic and curious events produced.

Macao lives under the shadows of its two neighbours—economically under Hong Kong; politically under China. The political upheaval of 1966-67 brought almost unbearable humiliation for Portugal. This dark and grim tragedy proved to be extremely beneficial for all concerned and the Communist rule of Macao (disguised as a right-wing, Salazarian-type, reactionary dictatorship) works admirably, apparently to everybody's satisfaction.

The place is also an iceberg. Perhaps not the aptest of metaphors for a place which I found almost as hellishly hot as Bangkok, but it is an iceberg in that both its real economic strength and its true political character are hidden, covered up, invisible.

Hong Kong is a huge metropolis, a vast expanse, a tremendous economic power compared with Macao. Hong Kong, with Kowloon and the New Territories, covers about 400 square miles, Macao six square miles altogether, but without Taipa and Coloane, the two not too important islands, peninsular Macao—*i.e.*, Macao proper—is only 2.1 square miles—smaller than London's Hyde Park. Hong Kong has about 4 million inhabitants, Macao less than 300,000.¹

The Portuguese came to Macao before Elizabeth I ascended the throne; the British occupied Hong Kong during the first decade of Victoria's reign. In other words, the Portuguese have been in Macao for more than 400 years, while the British, with their 126 years' residence in Hong Kong are sheer newcomers, *parvenus*.

Macao is affluent. Local official economists explain its prosperity in diverse ways but never mention its main source of income—which is part of the iceberg. Officials will speak about Macao's industries. True, Macao has flourishing fisheries and textile-works and is well known for some minor products: incense-sticks and fire-crackers being the most important among them.

¹ In 1960 there were only 170,000 people in Macao—less than 8,000 Portuguese among them. An official handbook explains that the increase in population was due to an "influx from neighbouring countries." As Macao has no neighbours, only one neighbour: China, this wording reflects an exceeding measure of delicacy and tact. (The name Macao derives from the Goddess A-Ma, patroness of seafarers. The Portuguese first called the Place A-Ma-Kao, the Bay of A-Ma. Hence Macao, or, in the local spelling, Macau.)

² The whole operation is described in detail by Richard Hughes in his *Hong Kong: Borrowed Place—Borrowed Time* (André Deutsch, 1968).

Tiny economic units tend to concentrate on curious products: what false teeth and sausage skins are to Lichtenstein, incense-sticks and fire-crackers are to Macao. Both joss-sticks and fire-crackers play an important part in certain Chinese ceremonies, and in any case, the Chinese have a mania for fire-crackers; a large amount of Macao's fire-crackers and joss-sticks are exported to the United States, a country with a large Chinese population. Lately, the competition from Taiwan has become fierce, but the fire-cracker industry is still flourishing.

Some Macao economists will speak of tourism which was practically dead for a long time after the 1966-67 troubles but slowly recovered and is flourishing again. Many "tourists" are simply Chinese from Hong Kong, who come to gamble in the casinos and at the dog-races—two institutions conspicuously missing from the amenities of Hong Kong. But there are many ordinary, foreign sight-seers, too. As one Macao official put it: "Hong Kong is bursting; Hong Kong is so rich that it is overflowing. We are bound to enjoy large benefits from Hong Kong's prosperity: tourists, commercial orders, industrial expansion."

The opium trade has been drastically reduced and checked under Chinese pressure but gold-smuggling (and this is the iceberg part of Macao's economy) is still flourishing. The headquarters of the world's largest gold-syndicates are located in a dirty little building in the Avenida Almeida Ribeiro.² It is said that more than fifty million dollars-worth of gold passes annually through the Shing Hing Bank. The export of gold from Hong Kong and the import of gold into Macao are quite legal. It is, of course, possible, that all the gold once imported, remains in the bank's cellars. But it is rumoured that most of this gold finds its way to strange hands, is melted down and transformed into doughnut-shaped oblongs and re-exported to Overseas Chinese who—as one bank-director put it—"like to have a small piece of gold." Few people speak of this gold-traffic and it is regarded as rather bad form to mention it. But as the Macao Government officially collects 42 per cent on all gold imports, it is easy to see that Macao makes more on gold than on fire-crackers.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to understand Macao without understanding its relationship with Hong Kong and China.

Hong Kong is one of the most beautiful and fascinating places in the world. It's a shopper's El Dorado, a gastronomical paradise, and the view is breathtaking. Yet Hong Kong is also a disappointing and exasperating place. The

rich are getting richer but the poor are miserable, overworked and downtrodden. Hong Kong regards itself as a Chinese city and, curiously enough, the rich merchants, industrialists, bankers, speculators and sharecroppers of Hong Kong are all inordinately proud of Mao, on a nationalist basis. They have a point, of course; it is due to Mao that China is not exploited, and carved up by the great powers as she used to be, but is respected and feared as a Great Power. But Hong Kong does not really want to know anything about power politics; politics in general is a dirty word. Hong Kong does not want "independence" because China might tolerate a British colony but certainly would not tolerate an independent Chinese state on her borders; the Chinese of Hong Kong do not wish to be involved in local party dealings either: entanglement means sticking one's neck out and who knows what tomorrow brings? So Hong Kong remains a cultural desert, engaged only and exclusively in money-making, with a greed and open rapaciousness that seemed to me to be unparalleled anywhere in the world. And that's why Hong Kong is not really a Chinese city: it is an *overseas* Chinese city. No sign of the gentleness, courtesy, spirituality and philosophical tolerance of many people on the Chinese mainland; it is the overseas Chinese whose main (if not only) interest is money-making, who are honest, efficient, decent but single-minded; and who are infinitely proud of the land they left never to return; of the land whose politics they loathe.

But Mao—at the moment—is no threatening monster, looming on the Hong Kong horizon. For me, during my two recent visits to Hong Kong, he created an altogether different impression. Hong Kong is full of his shops. And his shops are the best in the colony. Before entering a shop, I always watched out, and if I failed to see Mao's huge portraits on the walls and his thoughts displayed over all the walls—the signs that the shop was one of his—hesitated to enter. Goods were often better and always much cheaper than in other shops. And all enterprises were run on shameless—if somewhat outmoded—capitalist principles. Shoppers get discounts; gift-vouchers; shopping vouchers worth so many Hong Kong dollars. Every trick and device is used to keep a customer and make him come back. I have got fountain-pens, belts, fans and ties as gifts from Chairman Mao and I cherish them all. After the Red Guard Revolution and his subsequent near-destruction of the Chinese Communist Party, I have doubts about his political astuteness; but in my eyes he is a retail merchant of genius. I hope he will write a second little Red Book—

"Chairman Mao's Second Thoughts"—and will put in it all the advice he can give to fellow-shopkeepers. And I also hope that the new book will be made compulsory reading for all capitalist retailers who will have to chant a few pearls of wisdom before every meal, learn them by heart, and thus become worthier and more successful pillars of old-fashioned, *laissez-faire* capitalism.

THE BRIEF STORY of Macao's downfall is this.

Chou En-lai made a remark during the Red Guards hubbub that the revolution must be spread overseas. "Overseas," for the Red Guard, meant Hong Kong and Macao. They began with Macao.

They were greatly helped by the short-sightedness of the Macao government. It all grew out—as such grave matters often do—from a triviality. On 15 November 1966 an old building was being demolished in Macao, but as the demolition licence was not in order, the authorities ordered the workers to stop. This incensed the workers, they refused to obey and carried on with their job. Policemen were rushed in, they manhandled some of the workers and a fight ensued. As a result of this fracas—because it was no more at that stage—eight workers were arrested.

The high-handed police methods and the arrests made the workers really furious. They sent a deputation to the governor's residence, and demanded not only the immediate release of the arrested workers, but also compensation and an apology. They had to deal with the Deputy Governor, because the Governor himself, Brigadier Nobre de Carvalho, was actually on his way back to Macao from Portugal. The Deputy Governor, naturally enough, played for time; he wanted to place this baby in the Governor's lap. He succeeded with his delaying tactics but the time thus gained also gave ample time to the Communists across the border to seize this heaven-sent opportunity and work out their strategy.

On 25 November Governor Carvalho arrived, pooh-poohed the whole affair and—as military gentlemen are wont to do—decided that the smack of a firm hand was needed. Workers—by this time joined by young schoolboys (Macao has no university, only secondary schools)—sent a deputation every day to see the Governor; they were received, day after day, by the Governor's *A.D.C.* and turned away. On 4 December a huge crowd gathered, consisting of workers and students—the latter mostly boys or girls of 14 or 15 but some not older than

eight—and demanded, rather vociferously, to see the Governor. Their request was once again refused, whereupon they invaded the Governor's Palace. The Governor asked for police reinforcements.

From that moment things turned from bad to worse. One step inevitably produced the next—only too familiar to those who have followed the course of other riots and revolutions. The police handled the demonstrators roughly but there was no shooting; they used batons "only." Their job did not prove easy, fighting broke out in the Hall of the Governor's Palace and by the time the Palace got cleared, excitement reached a new pitch.

Street demonstrations followed, the workers and students chanting slogans and refusing to disperse. The authorities called in the police and the firemen, and water-hoses almost did their job. But not quite, so a few tear-gas bombs had to be used, too.

All this led to new outbreaks. The crowd entered Government Department (the building where the administrative offices are housed), smashed furniture and destroyed documents. Those who could not get in refused to remain idle and set about to demolish the statue of Jorge Alvares, the first Portuguese who set foot in Macao. They failed to pull the statue down—but did manage to break one arm. By this time the taxi-drivers joined the rioters and taxi-drivers are important people in Macao. They are renowned trouble-makers and—more important—members of a strong and politically minded union. At 4 p.m. the rioters broke into the inner government offices, smashed more furniture and burnt more documents. At 6.30 the Governor ordered a curfew to last till 7 in the morning. The curfew produced the first victims. Three Chinese broke it and were shot dead by the police.

Next morning the crowd went mad with anger. This resulted in further outbreaks and the outbreaks, in turn, in more shooting. Five more people were killed, mostly youngsters under 20. But the situation might have been saved for the Macao government even at this late hour. The curfew lasted for a week and by the time it was lifted, tempers had calmed down to some extent. A 13-strong Negotiating Committee was formed and demanded to see the Governor. The Governor first refused, then hesitated.

While he hesitated, Mao's men from across the border muscled in. The Chinese government regarded the matter as too trivial to step in, so it was the Foreign Affairs Committee of Kwantung Province who sent strongly and threateningly worded warnings and demands to the Governor. The Governor was a realist and

(this part of the story is based on hearsay only, but confirmed by all who are supposed to know) suggested to the Portuguese government to evacuate Macao and give it up. Before Mao could panic—this being the last thing the Chinese wanted—the Governor had received instructions from Lisbon to capitulate. This capitulation was humbling and humiliating. On 29 January 1967, the Governor had to send a delegation to the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and sign an agreement with the Committee of Thirteen whom he had refused to receive some time before. The Government of Macao had to admit that they had been wrong; that it was all their fault; and they agreed to pay a compensation of more than 2,000,000 patacas (about £140,000) to the victims. But even this was not all. The delegation, having signed this humiliating document, had to cross the Chinese border, meet the emissaries of the Kwantung Foreign Affairs Committee and sign an even more humiliating one, agreeing to ban all anti-Communist activities in Macao, disband all pro-Chiang Kai-shek organisations and stop the influx of refugees from China. As a result, a large number of Kuomintang agents and supporters had to leave Macao, among them one of the leading merchants. Chiang was silenced and the Taiwan News Agency expelled.

THE PORTUGUESE THOUGHT that this was the end, that such a humiliation could not be borne. In a sense, of course, this *was* the end: the end of Macao as a Province, ruled from Portugal. It is now ruled from Canton—or Peking—and what the Communists say goes. But the Communists do not, as yet, say too much and the situation—surprisingly and paradoxically—has improved for all concerned. Mao, obviously, could not tolerate old-fashioned, pre-Sun Yat-sen types of massacres (Sun, by the way, lived in Macao for a while) and the Governor was extremely foolish to believe that these Portuguese police-methods would work on the Chinese border. But the air has been cleared, and the situation much improved.

After the capitulation, of course, all tourist traffic was stopped; people were too much afraid to come. This clearly did not suit Mao—who gets more than half of his foreign currencies from Hong Kong and Macao. So the former wild slogan about "*Portuguese Imperialists Go Home!*" "*Down with the British!*" etc., etc., were washed off the walls and replaced by notices welcoming the visitor. Mao opened more of his shops and does a roaring business. Refugees from China are not allowed in, Chiang has been turned out and a great deal of the opium-racket stopped, but otherwise the Portuguese carry on, seemingly

as before. China has no objection at all to a dictatorial, right-wing government; she would have all the objections against a democratic régime which might suggest to Macao's neighbour that liberal democracy works. The tourists have returned, they come in larger numbers than ever before, the Casinos are brightly lit up every night, the dog races are more popular than ever. Macao may still be a volcano; but surely, it appears to be the happiest and most relaxed volcano in the world. (The Red Guards tried their tricks in Hong Kong, six months later, but the British fared better than their neighbours. *Their* police behaved with admirable restraint and good humour; their government stood firm. Perhaps Mao, too, was slightly terrified that he might lose his most valuable colony, Hong Kong, and has let the matter slide?)

So now we have a peculiar political situation in that Far Eastern corner. The great capitalists of Hong Kong (as I have pointed out earlier) are proud of Chairman Mao, on purely nationalist grounds. Mao is a nationalist hero and he also keeps a jealous and protective eye on his two favourite colonies, Hong Kong and

Macao, and runs his prosperous retail-shops on slightly outmoded, liberal-capitalist lines. The Communists rule Macao—a Portuguese territory—where the Communist Party is still banned and indeed (believe it or not) Communist China is not recognised. They rule—but don't exist.

How long will this last? I am no prophet: I don't know. The arrangement is reasonable, but to expect Chairman Mao to go on doing what is reasonable is itself the height of folly. Richard Hughes tells us of a very rich Macao merchant, Fu Tak-yam, who in 1946 was kidnapped by bandits while smoking opium in a Buddhist retreat. His family had to pay a ransom of £62,500. Eight years later one of his sons was kidnapped and the same ransom demanded. Fu refused to pay. "Why should I pay out all that money? I have enough sons, anyway," he said, viewing the situation from a sensible and practical point of view. Mao, it seems, has learnt from Fu. He seems to be saying, for the time being at any rate: "Why should I stop doing business? Why should I incorporate the two colonies? I have enough sons anyway."

A Curse from the Twelfth Century

May he that lured me into love
Yet shuns my lonely bed
Be turned into a demon
With three horns on his head.

May all men shun his company,
And may his shifty soul
Find in some grey bog-creeping bird
Its fit and flitting hole.

May the cold wedge of winter
Jam every crevice shut,
May wind and snow and iciness
Flick him from rut to rut.

May both his feet freeze off him,
And may his flesh corrode
Into a scrawniness of grass
At the dirt-edge of the road.

And may his way of walking
Be shiveringly bare
With the trembling of all rabbits,
The hurt limp of the hare.

Anonymous

translated by Graeme Wilson