

I SING OF A FREE HONG KONG

BY SMARLO MA

A veteran political commentator now living in New York reflects on his former home and its importance to China as a whole.

In October 1949 I began my journey to Hong Kong from Shanghai. As my train pulled out of the station in Shanghai, I gazed out of the window, my heart aching with sorrow. I was leaving the city I loved, leaving so many warm, sincere, thoughtful friends. The landscape of my motherland still entranced me with its beauty, its lofty peaks and endless plains. My countrymen were so endearingly simple, they watched the arrival of a new era and believed that life would continue as before. The fire of battle and the smoke of gunpowder erased their innocent expressions. I silently prayed for freedom's beacon to light the length and breadth of my motherland and allow my countrymen to become the true rulers of this great nation.

In Guangzhou, just before the train left the station, I knelt down and touched the soil of China and tearfully bid it farewell. How unhappy I was! My childhood and youth were gone. My life of wandering had begun. I had become an exile from my country, an orphan of my motherland. I arrived in Hong Kong on the evening of December 24, 1949. It was Christmas Eve, and the Kowloon train station was dazzling with light and bustling with crowds. But the happiness of others around me only increased my regret.

When I first arrived in Hong Kong, soon after the Chinese Communist Party had taken over China, Hong Kong people lived in fear over the possible invasion of the Communist forces, and the territory was awash in a sea of red star flags. There were many kinds of people who had flooded into Hong Kong in their unwillingness to accept the new Communist authorities. Some were wealthy capitalists and landlords, some were Kuomintang soldiers and officials in fear of the Communists' revenge, some were liberal intellectuals. The wealthy refugees lived in Hong Kong's Midlevels district. Some retired into seclusion, others created new businesses and many were very successful.

When I first arrived in Hong Kong mainland China was a wasteland; its economy was in tatters, people were full of anxiety, and the future was uncertain. But Hong Kong was already flourishing in its post-war recovery. One of my first impressions of Hong Kong was of its bookshops with every kind of reading

material reflecting every political persuasion. For a young man like myself with an intellectual bent and a love of knowledge, it seemed that I had emerged from Hell into Heaven.

The two great legacies of British rule in Hong Kong were its freedom and its rule of law. I had spent the first part of my life experiencing the chaos of war and the separate rule of the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, and like many Chinese who have lived in Hong Kong I felt impelled to ask: Why did a colony ruled by the British enjoy the most freedom in all of China? Why did so many talented and industrious people suffer and die in China, while the same people could develop in Hong Kong? Why did so many of China's great artists and writers produce their greatest works in the foreign concessions of Shanghai or in colonial Hong Kong? What had transformed the "barren rock" of Hong Kong under British rule into the Pearl of the Orient?

Colonial Hong Kong served as a bridge between East and West through which the British were able to earn a great deal of money, and China was able to benefit from modernization. Hong Kong was the place where I first tasted the forbidden fruit of freedom. In China I was imprisoned under the Kuomintang and under the Communist Party. In Hong Kong I wrote many articles criticizing the Hong Kong British authorities, but I never spent a day in jail.

Free Hong Kong's contributions to China include economic, political and cultural benefits. I especially want to mention the way in which Hong Kong has served as a "port in the storm" and a free forum to all kinds of human talent, regardless of whether the person's political beliefs are rightist, leftist or centrist. Whether political dissidents or artistic geniuses, skilled workers or commercial wizards, all have been able to develop their potential in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong British authorities did not discriminate according to the political persuasions of refugees who came to Hong Kong. The street where I lived in Kowloon had once been the home of the great writer Mao Dun. A left-wing writer, Zhang Hualai, wrote at the same time that while in Hong Kong he felt, "Even though this is not yet a liberated area, I have already lived a liberated life."

Now I wonder, if China experiences another great political upheaval, can Chinese people seeking to escape political hardship still rely on Hong Kong as their port in the storm?

Translated by Stacy Mosher