

I - 69.- 1 B. HONGKONG CONDITIONS - Social Problems Discussed By American  
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# HONGKONG CONDITIONS

## SOCIAL PROBLEMS DISCUSSED BY AN AMERICAN OBSERVER

### WEALTH, POVERTY AND DISEASE

The following commentary on conditions in Hongkong is contributed by an American observer, who has had considerable experience of social problems in the Far East and other parts of the world:

There is a European drama, written some forty years ago, entitled "Children of Light." It applies so aptly to Hongkong that I must explain it in the light of the present Cholera epidemic. It is built around a well-to-do gentry family living in a stately manor house on an estate. Above, in the clean, spacious rooms flooded with light, the members of the family discuss books, drama, philosophy, socialism, the soul, religion, and the success of some of their male relatives in the great city. It is an enchanting life and the talk is more than pleasant.

However, there is another side to the medal. The farm labourers—men, women and children—work endlessly on the estate, ignorant, sombre, inarticulate, and from their labour rivulets of wealth pour into the family coffers. They live in insanitary huts which the ladies of the family avoid in their pleasant walks. The servants of the family live in small, dark-basement rooms of the manor and they also are ignorant, sombre, inarticulate. And, of course, the ladies or gentlemen of the family never demean themselves by going amongst them.

All goes well until some strange disease breaks out among the servants and carries off one member after another and then spreads to the farm hands in the insanitary hovels. And then one member of the family, a frail gentleman, contracts the disease and dies within a few days. The children of light and themselves being overcome by the forces of darkness.

Apply this to Hongkong and you will find the picture very do-able. Here is one of the greatest ports in Asia, where incalculable wealth has been made by the fortunate of the European and Chinese races. Here are palatial homes flooded with light, here are modern hospitals, fine hotels where expensive drinks and food are served, here are lovely gardens, tennis courts, recreation fields for the fortunate, a good water and plumbing system—for the well-to-do, and fine roads over which roll an uninterrupted line of private cars. Europeans and Chinese of the well-to-do, clad in white or coloured silks, fill the streets, the boulevards and dining rooms. The Press carries photographs each day of weddings that cost more money than many "children of darkness" earn in a lifetime of hard toil. There are said to be around four hundred Chinese dollar millionaires in the city. How many European and American well-to-do people live here, or have made their wealth here, I do not know; but there are certainly many. Dividends on investments have often been astronomical in the past.

But the application to Hongkong is timely. Here is one of the greatest ports in Asia, where incalculable wealth has been made by the fortunate of the European and Chinese races. Here are palatial homes flooded with light, here are modern hospitals, fine hotels where expensive drinks and food are served, here are lovely gardens, tennis courts, recreation fields for the fortunate, a good water and plumbing system—for the well-to-do, and fine roads over which roll an uninterrupted line of private cars. Europeans and Chinese of the well-to-do, clad in white or coloured silks, fill the streets, the boulevards and dining rooms. The Press carries photographs each day of weddings that cost more money than many "children of darkness" earn in a lifetime of hard toil. There are said to be around four hundred Chinese dollar millionaires in the city. How many European and American well-to-do people live here, or have made their wealth here, I do not know; but there are certainly many. Dividends on investments have often been astronomical in the past.

But there is another side to the medal also.

Here in this Colony is a teeming Chinese population, masses of whom are ignorant, sombre, inarticulate, labouring eight to fourteen hours a day for a miserable wage. Unkempt, dishevelled women and children, clad in dirty, miserable rags, sometimes venture out onto the clean streets to shock the white-clad passers-by. In the crowded Chinese sections of the city they live massed together in buildings, many of which are pitch-black, insanitary, without any water or plumbing system; or many live in small insanitary hovels on the city's outskirts. The fortunate Chinese and Europeans would never dream of venturing among them.

**The Home of Disease**  
Go into these homes, and you see the origin of diseases that blossom in poverty, ignorance and dirt. Up narrow, dark stairways you come into a black room, filled with so-called beds. People sleep on dirty beds, on the floors under the beds, on tiers of beds, in the cock-loft and on beds suspended from the beams of the roof. People rent bed-space for a few hours, and then are rooted out to give place to others. Still other people sleep on the streets—in the paved streets in the shadow of banks or business houses. In such Chinese sections of the city you pass haggard coolies carrying baskets of night-soil or garbage. Baths? Who spoke of luxury?

At times the Press publishes reports that reflect conditions in which the Chinese poor live—the Chinese from whose daily toil countless small rivulets of profit flow into the coffers of the fortunate Chinese and Europeans. You read in the published Medical Report for 1938 that Chinese infant mortality is 243 per thousand, while the mortality of non-Chinese infants is 42 per thousand. You read of poor Chinese sentenced to prison or fined. One Chinese coolie who dumped the body of his child on a garbage heap, had Beri-Beri and died as he was carrying it to a hospital. Beri-Beri is a disease of semi-starvation.

Sometimes the Press publishes statistics which people do not read because they prefer more pleasant reading. But let us read them just once—change. Take the beautiful Queen Mary or Kowloon Hospital, or the Tsan Yuk Maternity Hospital, or the Queen Mary and Kowloon Hospitals, fitted with the latest medical science. From 12,000 to 15,000 patients pass through the portals of Queen Mary Hospital a year, and of these 40 per cent. are poor Chinese, too poor to pay.

They are paid for by Government in third-class wards at a cost of about 2000 per day. Kowloon Hospital also cares for about 40 per cent. free patients a year. Look more closely at these poor patients. Many of them suffer from Beri-Beri, Pellagra, and Tuberculosis, all diseases of semi-starvation. Tuberculosis is not exclusively that of course, but it is also that, plus a disease of infection that quite naturally spreads in the insan-

more fortunate. Or, take the records of Tuberculosis cases. Here are a few typical cases of tubercular patients I have learned about:

A Chinese woman factory worker, 34 years of age, 12 years in the Colony (not a refugee). She works 12 hours a day and earns HK\$10 to \$12 per month. She rents one room for \$5 a month. The factory is overcrowded and insanitary. Who can live a decent life free from disease on such a wage?

Another case is of a Chinese book-keeper, 25 years resident in the Colony. He works 14 hours a day, earns \$15 a month, sleeps in the shop where he works.

Another record is of a Chinese coolie, 29 years in the Colony, working eight hours a day at heavy physical labour, drawing wages of \$10 a month, and sleeping in a rented bed-space for \$2 a month.

Still another record is of a factory worker who pastes trade marks on electric torches for eight hours a day at a wage of \$7 per month, and rents a bed-space for 80 cents per month.

**Fertile Soil for Cholera**  
Is there any wonder that Tuberculosis and diseases due entirely to poverty, such as Beri-Beri and Pellagra, can take root in the Colony and within three weeks carry off over 400 human beings? Lowered resistance due to malnutrition furnishes fertile soil in which Cholera can take root and spread, and the large numbers of deaths from the disease show that the victims did not have the resistance to overcome the disease they had contracted, even when treatment was of the most scientific.

This Cholera epidemic has already cost the city hundreds of lives. It has further rendered destitute many families of working victims, while financial losses to the Colony must be very great. There is, for instance, heavy unprofitable expenditure on treatment of cases, on disinfection, and there is the interruption of seaborne trade as a result of restrictions placed on vessels and passengers arriving at other ports from Hongkong.

Since the war, the prices of food-stuffs and other life necessities have increased very much, yet wages have not kept pace with the rise in the cost of living. True, a few public-spirited employers have responded to appeals by the Medical Services and increased wages a little. But if you investigate the extent of their raised wages, you sometimes find that this is not more than \$2 per month. One important company raised wages from 30 to 50 per cent, but still it is doubtful if even this has brought more than just enough increase in wages to keep life in the human body and permit men to continue living and breeding. Is mere living and breeding the aim in life of the human being?

**Unfair Competition**  
Public-spirited employers who do raise wages say that they are exposed

(Continued on Page 41.)

## H.K. CONDITIONS

(Continued from Page 12.)

to unfair competition by those who lack essential humanitarian principles. Humanitarian principles seldom influence employers in any country. But it seems that Cholera alone ought to be a threat to their lives sufficient to make them increase wages merely as a measure of self-protection.

From the Press it is clear that efforts are being made to persuade employers to realise the danger to all people in the Colony if wages are not raised, and it is clear from facts that they should be raised by 50 per cent., whereas the minimum increase should not be under 33 1/3 per cent. These increases would enable men to maintain life at the lowest standard, and therefore the proposals are not exorbitant. From statistics available, it is also clear that the cost of foodstuffs included in the budget of the poorer classes has risen from 45 to 50 per cent. over the pre-war prices. Not only have foodstuffs risen in price, but rents have more than doubled.

All of this has resulted in a very low standard of living that is taking its toll of human life and in heavy expenditure on sickness and disease in the hospitals—for which the Colony must pay. It must also be borne in mind that the poor population have no reserves to fall back on, and that, apart from Government efforts in connection with destitute and refugees, organised relief for the poor is almost non-existent. Conditions call for energetic action if the health of the general population does not show still greater and more dangerous deterioration.

**Methods of Alleviation**

What is the solution of this very serious problem. I myself have my own viewpoint, and history shows that people in other countries have solved similar problems by other methods than those that will be applied here in Hongkong. Considering the present situation, it seems however that many steps could be taken immediately in this city. I have heard many proposals put forward by all kinds of people and many seem applicable, such as these:

1. Government could consider importing and distributing rice, other staple foodstuffs (soya beans, vegetable oils, green vegetables) and firewood, and selling them at cost price from stores distributed in various parts of the urban areas. From what I read, a similar course to this is now being followed in the United Kingdom.

2. An increase in the amount of foodstuffs—that is, vegetables—could be produced locally. This would cut out the cost of any freight and would ensure less difficulty of traffic from one region to another. This increase, it seems to me, could be produced by Government taking an active part in what can be grown economically in experimental farms, and indirectly by giving the farmers fertilizer which is available in large quantities, such as night-soil and garbage (dealt with by the Indore process), from a place as large as Hongkong.

3. Safeguards could be taken against profiteering by licensing dealers to sell the rice and firewood at rates set by Government.

4. Restriction of immigration to those who can secure productive enterprises, or to refugees who would face death if not admitted. This restriction, of course, is opposed by the advanced Chinese Press of the Colony, and they have much to be said for them. But some kind of restriction would meet the objections of many people that if food is sold at cost price and wages raised to a decent standard of living, there would be a colossal increase in the influx of people into Hongkong, with a resulting flooded labour market, lower wages, higher rentals, overcrowding and shortage of food stuffs—and more opportunities for the occurrence of epidemic diseases.

**Increased Wages**

5. Objections to an increase in wages and to shorter working hours have been met in every civilised country where employers have learned that a living wage and an 8-hour day—and still shorter hours for women and children and for men engaged in dangerous occupations—has resulted in more efficient work and in a reduction in the cost of production—and that, in spite of an increase in wage bills.

Many of us interested in social welfare learn that Government legislation has been introduced restricting shop hours in this Colony. This is a step in the right direction, though I do not know yet to what extent this has been done nor how it has been obeyed by shop-keepers. I happen to know that some shop employees work even fourteen hours a day.

In any case, it seems that Hongkong could set a standard of living for its inhabitants that could be an example to other cities in Asia. At present it does not set such an example, but adopts standards that are at times much lower than many modern cities of China of which I have personal knowledge. Civilisation can be measured, not by the wealth of a minority, but by the general welfare of the majority of its people.

## CORRESPONDENCE

### Conditions in Hongkong

(To the Editor, S. C. M. Post)

Sir,—I have read H. L. Gordon's reply to my article on social conditions in Hongkong. In reply to his statement that if we can't help the Government we ought to keep quiet, I wish to remark that it is the duty of intelligent human beings to think and speak, even if their thinking and speaking is obnoxious to specially privileged groups. That is presumed to be the basic rights of people in the "Democracies" and we are told that the present European war is a war for Democracy. As for helping the Government here—may I state that there was nothing in my article that would militate against Government. On the contrary, the various proposals which I catalogued at the end of my article are ideas which I gathered by conversations with a number of groups in the Colony—some of them official. Those proposals are all within scope of realisation by Government. They are most conservative proposals, but I listed them because it seems that they could be carried out under present conditions. If I were making proposals of my own, I would extend those mentioned.

For instance, I do not personally believe that increase of wages should be based on percentages. That would be quite good for the higher salaried workers in the Colony, but for workers who suffer the most, only the enforcement of a very substantial minimum wage could possibly alleviate their present suffering. A man working for six or seven dollars a month would not be substantially aided at all if his wages were raised even by 50, for that would mean only an insignificant two or three dollars a month. The greatest need is for a minimum wage that would enable a man to maintain himself and his family. This should cover the cost of food, clothing, housing, education, medical and other necessities.

My reference to insanity in connection with medical treatment meant only that it would be far saner and more economical for the Colony if wages were increased so people would not die or sicken from malnutrition and then have to be treated at Government expense at the rate of H.K. \$3. a day. It would be far saner, economically, to pay men wages of H.K. \$3 a day rather than to fill hospitals with cases of Beri-beri, Pellagra and Tuberculosis at Government expense. By this I do not mean that medical treatment should be reduced. Quite the contrary. But it would be saner to begin from the bottom by introducing measures that would automatically raise the health of the population. Higher wages and an eight-hour day would help in this direction.

Mr. Gordon says that conditions such as these in Hongkong existed in England and other countries fifty years ago and have not vanished or changed. That is no excuse for Hongkong. We must not lose sight of the many wealthy people in the Colony, none of whom pay Income Tax. Their wealth came from the labour of the people, yet they do not pay a cent in Income Tax. Only salaried personnel pay an Income Tax. Furthermore, conditions have changed in England and in a number of other countries within the past fifty years—thanks to the struggle of trade unions who represent the interests of the workers who, by collective bargaining, have forced changes for the better. Certainly employers will never willingly and voluntarily make any substantial changes unless under pressure. Furthermore, there are extensive social services in England and in other countries, which do not exist in Hongkong.

Mr. Gordon says I emphasise environmental rather than heredity influences, and he urges that "degenerate" elements of the population be prevented from reproducing their kind. Of course I emphasise environmental influences. No one can ever know much, scientifically, about this problem until there is economic equality. Poverty destroys untold ability and genius. The lack of wealth does not mean degeneracy, nor does the possession of wealth mean that the possessors of wealth are not degenerate. In fact, one has only to look at the sons and daughters of many wealthy families to see degeneracy. To my manner of thinking, it is degeneracy if men grind wealth out of the bodies of the common people; many attributes of the human being are lacking if men can do that. To me, it seems degeneracy of the worst kind if men can roll in wealth and gaze on mass poverty. I would call that animality were it not that I have so much respect for animals.

I do not like the smug complacency expressed in Mr. Gordon's letter. It smacks too much of some of the characters in plays of Ibsen and Shaw of the past. It seems to me that people might at least fear Cholera and other epidemics which draw no lines at class and wealth. Of course, there is inoculation; perhaps that contributes to complacency. However, there is the present disastrous war in Europe and here in Asia. We do not yet know what the final results will be. It will perhaps destroy most of what some people value to-day and which we call Civilisation. It may be that people who consider themselves superior and worthy of reproducing their kind to-day, in future will find themselves in the position of the poor of Hongkong who sleep on the pavements at night. Bombs destroy not only the poor, but also the wealthy, nor are money and other forms of wealth eternal. The Nazis are muttering dire threats against England—do they not mean poison gas? Of course, others can use that also. But—whither civilisation?

AN AMERICAN OBSERVER.

Agnes Smedley

American Conditions

Sept. 28

Sir.—H. L. Gordon makes dire threats against me: he threatens to go to the U.S.A. after this war and engage in the higher criticism, specializing in good taste, courtesy, and scientific thinking, and eliminating dogmatism, prejudice, racial superiority, and discussing the Negro problem, gangster crime, and other social sores.

Now he's talking sense! That's just the kind of men we need in the U.S.A. I'd like to propose that he avoid good taste and courtesy, but peel right in and speak the fact. But may I propose that he extend his list of activities. For instance:

1. Tell us why we are so dumb as to vote for one of the major parties against the other, when there's apparently no difference.

2. Why we despise the Negro yet our men have seen to it that there are almost no full-blooded Negroes left.

3. Why we have sold war materials to Japan and enabled the Japanese to destroy not only Chinese lives and cities, but American lives and institutions.

4. Why we have officials who specialize in "protests" to Japan, always threatening something and doing nothing.

5. Why we allow Fascist-minded men, to whom Hitler is the ideal, to run loose in our country and dominate our affairs.

6. Why is a Hearst?

And so on without number.

There's a lot of work for many Mr. Gordon's in the U.S.A., for we hope they will have much to teach us from Experience in England after this war. If Mr. Gordon really does what he threatens, he will have a big following.

AN AMERICAN OBSERVER.

*James Smedley*

Sept. 27 1950

### Complacency

Sir - I thank "American Observer" for calling me a "smug complacent." May I tell him what I propose to do about it?

I am leaving to-day *en voyage* for a tight little island now engaged in a smug complacent battle for the world in which "American Observer" lives.

When the battle is over I hope to revisit your correspondent's great country and there graduate in the higher criticism of other nations, specialising in good taste, courtesy and scientific thinking, and eliminating from my mind dogmatism, prejudice, racial superiority and anonymity.

I shall then be qualified to set right the U.S.A. on such matters as the negro problem, racial mixture, gangster crime, and other serious social sores, while "American Observer" is dictating to Hongkong about her sins and errors.

H. L. GORDON.