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Fragments of AA History

AA in Hong Kong - The First Twenty-One Years

The launching of Alcoholics Anonymous in Hong Kong was fueled, literally, in Thailand. Providence decreed that David D., an English businessman, should begin his last binge — a 48-hour solo fizzer — in Bangkok on August 30, 1969. Flying back to Hong Kong, he resolved to get a regular meeting going as soon as Clark G., who used to make once-a-month visits from Guam, next hit town.

David recalls, "Clark flew in, quite unexpectedly, on the first of September. We advertised immediately in the English-language press. And on Tuesday, September 2, the first scheduled AA meeting in the Colony was held at the Mariners Club on Kowloon side of the harbor. The attendance? Clark and me. Our ad worked — for us."

Twenty-one years later, Tuesday night at the Mariners is still the most important weekly engagement for many AAs in Hong Kong. For AA purposes, the Mariners has a lot going for it: an accessible downtown loca-

tion, a whiff of sea and the assurance of having reached a safe haven, and a restaurant to gather in before the meeting. It also has something of a colonial atmosphere — meaning wild colonial rather than stuffy colonial. The 8:00 P.M. meeting starts at 8:15, a traditional anomaly explained as "Iqbal time." Iqbal, a very early AA member, couldn't get there till 8:15. So we still, so to speak, give him a quarter of an hour to arrive.

David, Clark, and Iqbal — respectively British, American, and Pakistani — reflect three main (sometimes overlapping) strands in the membership as it developed: British and the Commonwealth; North American; and Asian. David and Clark were quick to register the new group with the general service offices in New York and London, the link with New York soon proving to be the more practical. The group began to grow. Ray H. became Hong Kong member number three. And soon George G.,

an active member from Phoenix, Arizona, turned up in the Colony.

In 1970, George, who then objected to any publicity about AA facilities, got a second meeting going which was more to his liking than the (advertised) Mariners Club one. The new Monday evening meeting place was the library of St. John's Anglican Cathedral on Hong Kong Island, another convenient place, very near the Hilton Hotel. Over the years, a strong relationship developed with the Cathedral, and eventually three weekly lunchtime meetings were being held within its precincts.

Thus two of our three main meeting places date back to our earliest days. For the third location, which is AA's present home — 10 Borrett Road, on the slopes of the Island overlooking the harbor — the group would have to wait sixteen years.

As elsewhere, early growth was not smooth or easy. Perhaps every new group has to have a taste of the difficulties faced in Akron, Cleveland, and New York in the late 1930s. Hong Kong old-timers all stress how fragile the young Fellowship was.

"You've got to remember," says one veteran, "that it took about three years, 1966 to 1969, for AA to get going in Hong Kong. And it was often touch and go whether the infant would survive. At times it looked plain impossible."

He went on, "It was not just that there were so few of us, and so many slips. AA was an expatriate activity; and for many expatriates, then per-

haps even more than now, Hong Kong was a place of transit rather than long-term residence. An AA member might think he'd be here for good. Then suddenly he'd be posted. Looking back, it seems we needed two things for survival. One was a sort of anchorman — someone who'd stay in Hong Kong and stay sober — to hold things together. Two, we needed a good supply of AA visitors to pep us up and remind us we were part of a worldwide show."

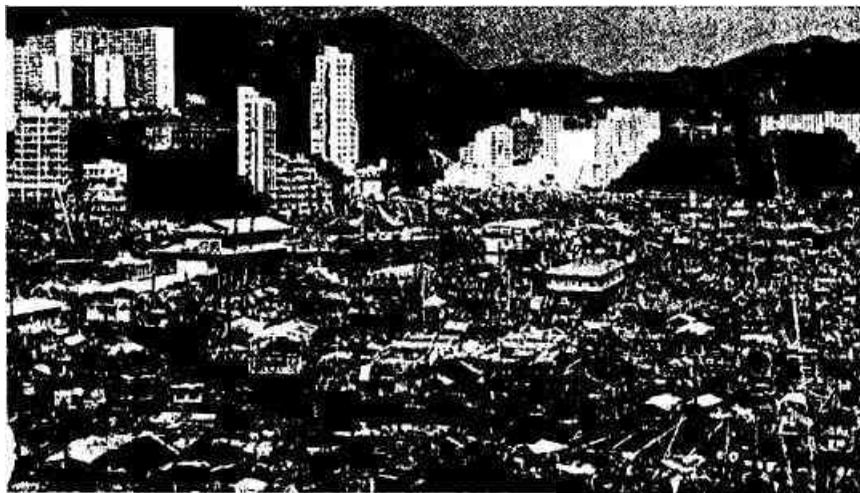
Fortunately, both these resources came into play. David D. is reluctant to admit it ("I just stuck around, luckily for me," is the way he puts it), but he undoubtedly filled the role of anchorman during the crucial period. By any calculation he was a prodigious twelfth-stepper, taking on the toughest cases. And for the first nine years he was the main AA telephone answering service. This burden he was eventually to hand over to a pair of second-generation stalwarts, Jayne and Malcolm S., a husband and wife team (she Australian, he British) who came into the Fellowship in close succession in 1975.

These three, long regarded as fixtures in Hong Kong, were to leave the Colony unexpectedly in 1989, David departing for Guernsey in the Channel Islands and Malcolm and Jayne for Australia. But by then, AA in Hong Kong had acquired sufficient structural strength to make it less dependent on heroic individual effort.

Turning to the influx of AA visitors one cannot exaggerate the benefits

they have brought. As a trading and financial center Hong Kong has always had a stream of overseas business people passing through. In the seventies and eighties, especially following the opening of China to foreign investment, many of them came bearing and sharing the AA message. Quite a few others, with local AA help, got sober in this hard-drinking

all go twelfth-stepping together. Everyone was everyone else's sponsor, or so it seemed. When I was twelfth-stepped, the gang stayed with me, day and night, for about seventy-two hours. It wasn't just meetings, it was being together after and between meetings — coffee sessions in hotels, poker sessions in someone's apartment, picnics in improbable places.



harbor city. AA in Hong Kong also owes much to visiting sailors from the U.S. Seventh Fleet. The sight of a flotilla entering the harbor is always welcome to AA eyes, for it promises especially good meetings in the days ahead.

Another thing that the old-timers emphasize is the camaraderie and intimacy that marked the first decade of AA in the Colony. During a recent visit back to Hong Kong, Malcolm S. summoned up some memories: "There were so few of us, we'd

"Everyone seemed to get into the act in my home — once even my son, then aged three. He'd so often heard Jayne and me answering calls from inquirers that one day when the phone rang, he knew just what to do. He picked up the receiver and politely announced, 'Alcoholics Anonymous. Can I help you?' The caller was a neighbor, distinctly nonalcoholic, to whom lengthy explanations had to be given.

"Today, maybe Hong Kong is a busier place and everyone has less

time. AA in the Colony is certainly stronger now and there's more of it, better organized. But those early years, back in the mid-seventies in my case, were great times to be alive and sober here."

It's time to mention some of the milestones marking the growth of the group. Conspicuous among them was the authorities' decision, in early 1985, to let us have rooms (at very little annual rent) in the old, high-ceilinged former military hospital at 10 Borrett Road. This gave the Fellowship a daily meeting-place — with 6:00 P.M. meetings now every day of the year.

One has to go back earlier for other milestones. This account is no more than a sketch of growth over twenty-one years, but here are a few key dates and developments.

In 1974, Tony B., a Cantonese-speaking Irish-American who had sobered up in New York, arrived in Hong Kong and lost little time in setting up a Chinese-language meeting in Kowloon. This was the start of many efforts, which continue, to carry the message to fellow-sufferers among our Chinese fellow citizens (who comprise ninety-eight percent of the population).

In 1978, AA acquired a mini-base, a ten foot by eight foot windowless box of a room, in Wanchai, then a red-light entertainment district. The room, in the Sailors and Soldiers Institute, had to be given up in the early eighties. Among many memorable meetings there was one attended by

seventeen AAs — possibly the most crowded AA meeting, per square foot, anywhere ever.

In 1979, a new weekly newcomers meeting began, which brought dozens of active alcoholics into the Fellowship. The meeting, discontinued ten years later, was regularly chaired by Dr. John. A class of 1979 entrant himself, he had been a headline-making binge drinker; the Hong Kong police learned the hard way that it was best to send at least a dozen men out to subdue him. As active in AA as ever, John now practices medicine in London.

During the early 1980s, closer links were developed with the Adventist Hospital, largely through Jayne S.'s perseverance. As a result, many AAs came to join the program either during or after detoxification at the hospital.

In 1986, through the good offices of Carole A., a genial restaurateur, and her nonalcoholic partner Bill Nash, a Saturday lunchtime meeting got going in the private dining-room of a high-class restaurant in town. "Oh, boy, this is real Gold Card AA," said a visiting American sailor as he first looked around. The label stuck: Many of us still refer to this weekly event as the Gold Card Meeting.

Nineteen eighty-eight saw the start of another big push to get Cantonese-language AA rolling, with dual-language meetings being launched in hostels in densely crowded Kowloon. The initiative came from our outstandingly durable Chinese member, Peter W.

During 1989, baskets for contributions were introduced at the main meetings. A real old-timer, back on a visit, exclaimed: "Good God, we were saying in 1970 that we really must get a basket. Let no one say that the Hong Kong Group does not get there in the end."

It has been remarked that AA is different wherever one goes in the world, and yet the same everywhere too. Some of the peculiarities of AA in Hong Kong have been touched on. Regular visitors to the Colony will be able to recall other oddities. For example, despite a variety of meetings in various locations and despite repeated attempts to "groupify" the meetings separately, so far we have always reverted in the end to being one single Hong Kong Group. Again, most of our meetings are discussion ones, with only one fixed speaker meeting a week. Generally we close the meetings with the Serenity Prayer, and often say it seated rather than standing.

There are historical reasons for most of these ways of doing things, but it would be tedious to relate them here. The important thing is that when Hong Kong AAs travel overseas (as many of us do frequently), we feel at home in other meetings. And most of our visitors tell us they feel at home here too.

From two people in 1969, the membership has grown to around 150 in all today, though the tally of those present at meetings can swing up and down remarkably depending on

who's in town and who's away. There are eighteen scheduled meetings a week, with an average attendance of around twenty. Our non-AA friends and sympathizers have multiplied over the years; and we rejoice in the progress made by fellow-pilgrims following other twelve-step programs like Al-Anon, NA, and ACOA. Al-Anon was on the scene in Hong Kong from the start (in 1969), or rather from before the start. NA meetings began, with AA support, in 1986.

We can now look back on a decade of survival, the 1970s, and a decade of expansion and consolidation, the 1980s. What of the 1990s? Well, most of us are optimists and we have high hopes that, among other things, Chinese-language AA will really get off the ground in the next few years. As regards the future of Hong Kong and the impending transfer of sovereignty in 1997, we seem to worry about it rather less than others — so maybe we're actually learning not to project too much and to be grateful for what we have: something of immeasurable worth.

It's a far cry from Akron to a harbor city on the edge of the South China Sea. That Alcoholics Anonymous should have traveled so far and taken root here is something for which we owe gratitude to *all* pioneers — worldwide and from 1935 onward. It is also, for us AAs here in Hong Kong, awesome evidence of that Power that makes the impossible come true.

David L., Hong Kong