

13 HONG KONG CAPERS

But revenge was far from our minds the next day as we got stuck at the airport because of overweight luggage. And yes, it was Myrtle's and ObOff's suitcases, of course, plus one other woman. The three of them threw such a fit about the guide's suggestion that they remove a few items, that the guide made peace by asking the ticket agent to give us bad seats in exchange for having overweight luggage. As we all trudged grumpily to the very back of the plane, one of the men muttered, "O great! Now we all get to die because those three have to carry their kitchen sink with them." Then another man said, "No, the back of the plane is safer than the front." "Is not." "Is too." Just then the captain fired the engines, thank heaven. We did not need fisticuffs. Isn't that a great word, dear reader? I really like that word fisticuffs and I think I will have to use it more often. At any rate, we finally took off and I swear that plane was struggling so hard to lift off from the ground that I sat forward and started nodding and moving my hands in a cupping and moving motion, muttering, "Come on, baby, you can do it, you can do it, come on, come on, a little more speed, come oooon...." And suddenly with a whump that poor plane got its fat belly off the ground and we were airborne. Myrtle was not my seatmate here because she had got stuck next to ObOff, and my current seatmate looked at me with great big eyes. I couldn't decide if that was because he thought the plane would crash or he thought I was losing my marbles and he probably should not be sitting next to me in case I blew. His face also looked a little green.

At any rate, we made it safely to Hong Kong, arriving about 6:00 that evening, and we got to our hotel about 8:30, a new hotel opened last year, reported our guide. It was nothing too special when we got inside. Our rooms were on the 18th floor, though, and the view from the window was spectacular, all the buildings with their windows lit up, all the lights reflecting off the waters of the harbor, the numbers of boats and ships plying the harbor waters - magic. Myrtle, as we remember, was afraid of heights, so she did not even glance out that window.

The next day we began our walking tour at 8:45 with our new Hong Kong guide, a personable young man my dear Myrtle immediately decided would be hers for the duration. She stuck next to his side like the proverbial glue as we walked the streets of Hong Kong and its fantastic market. I tagged along as third wheel for a while, jotting down bits of trivia. 8 is the lucky number in Hong Kong. There are 7 million people in this small place right now, with 100 new arrivals every day. Right now they are cutting down the mountain to landfill some parts of the harbor to build more buildings, and the harbor will be smaller. Space is precious and expensive. 50% of the people who live in Hong Kong live in government subsidized housing. Hong Kong became British in 1842 by the Treaty of Nanking, which is, of course, why people drive on the left. Traffic is very heavy but much more orderly than in Beijing. The traffic is mostly buses because it is too expensive to own and drive a car in Hong Kong.

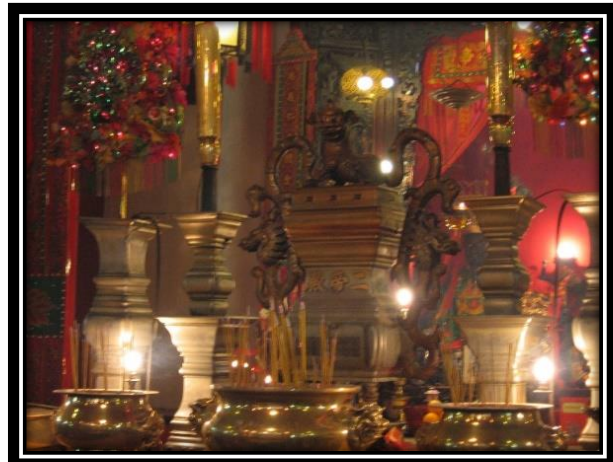
A man in our group asked with a grin, "More expensive than Bird Spit Soup?" Our guide laughed good naturedly and replied, "Well, bird spit right now is going for \$1300 a pound, with prices going up almost on a daily basis, so I am not sure about that."

The guide continued, "Hong Kong has three regions: Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and Lantau Island. 96% of the people living in Hong Kong are Chinese and the government of China calls Hong Kong a 'Special Administrative Region.' The escalator we are passing was built in 1994 and is the world's longest escalator, very difficult to design because it is so narrow. In the morning traffic goes 'downstream' and in the evening it goes 'upstream.'"



The day was cloudy and smoggy, but that did not deter people from swarming the streets and markets. Our first big stop of the day was the 200-year-old Man Mo Temple. Our guide asked us to gather outside the temple while he told us its history. "The temple is 60% Buddhist and 10% Christian. Buddhism here includes Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. These religions are now blended. Worshiping is an individual practice here. Most people worship at home and go to the temple two times a year at New Years and Thanksgiving unless they need something. The local residents of Hong Kong seek solace and help by lighting candles and incense sticks in the temple.

Two gods are worshipped here, Man, the Civil God of Literature, and Mo, the Martial God of War. Together these two gods protect the well-being of people. The Man Mo Temple is the largest of its kind in Hong Kong. The two gold-plated and elaborately carved chairs in the temple are for carrying the two gods Man and Mo in parades. The revenue generated by temple visitors is used to support local schools, hospitals, and philanthropic organizations.



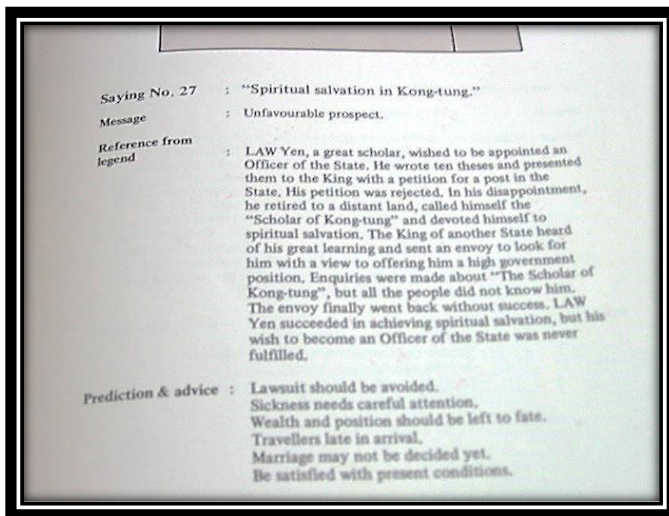
Here in the temple Joss sticks are burned two times daily, in the morning and the evening because smoke is the only communication with 'up there.' There are three sticks for the past, present, and future. You light a coil incense in the temple if you have a special need to pray for. You register with a monk, and the monk will light the candles. You can also place apples and oranges on the altar, then take them home and share them with your family. They are considered blessed. There is lots of smoke from incense in the temple."



Myrtle and I each lit three incense sticks for health and wealth for our families. In my opinion all the incense sticks burned well, with neat thin plumes of smoke going straight up with little puffs now and then as though an air current god blew gently on them. But Myrtle, always competitive, tried to ruin my meditative moment by saying, "I think my sticks are burning a little better than yours, JoJo." But I was zoned in the Buddhist moment and refused to rise to her bait. I only looked at her compassionately. This seemed to annoy her. But by then we had come to the section where you get your fortune told. The attendant asked me to shake the can of three sticks, which I did, but only two sticks landed where they

were supposed to, so I had to shake over, which seemed to both please and annoy Myrtle. Geez. But on my second throw my sticks showed the number 27. The attendant pulled the Number 27 fortune paper from the drawer file and handed it to me. As I began to open my envelope, the attendant helped Myrtle, who got her sticks to land correctly on the first try. She received her fortune envelope and had her fortune paper out of it even before I had a chance to look at what my paper said. Suddenly, she ripped my fortune paper out of my hand and thrust hers into my hand. Then she emitted an “Oh” and just as quickly snatched hers back and thrust mine back into my hand.

Then I looked at my fortune and read it carefully and decided that Myrtle must have found her own fortune better than mine, which as fortunes go, could have been a bit better, I thought ruefully. What do you think, dear reader?



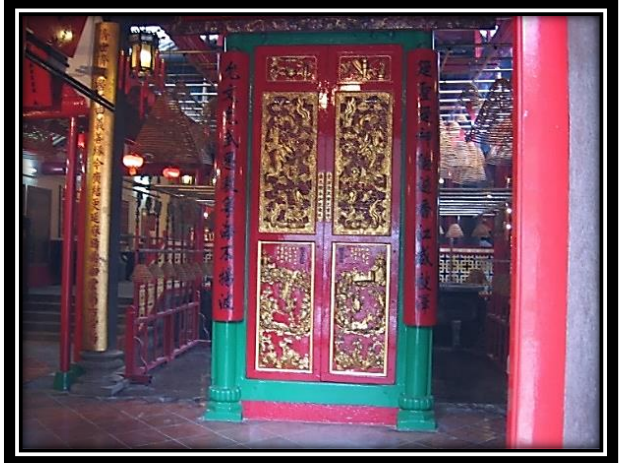
This was my fortune:

“Saying No. 27 ‘Spiritual salvation in Kong-Tung’

Message: Unfavorable prospect

Prediction and Advice: Lawsuit should be avoided, Sickness needs careful attention, Wealth and position should be left to fate, Travelers are late in arrival, Marriage may not be decided yet, Be satisfied with your present condition.” I looked up and found Myrtle looking over my shoulder as I read. Then she giggled and said with elaborate enthusiasm, “I

did not know you were planning to get married, JoJo! May I be the first to congratulate you, that is, after you have figured out how to avoid that lawsuit? Or is your new spouse going to be late in arrival? And my goodness! What sickness do you have? Should I consider quarantine?” And of course she kept on giggling even as I wanted to bop her. I said to her, “OK, show me yours, smarty pants.” But she refused, surprise, surprise. As we prepared to leave the temple, the attendant reminded us to burn fortune papers to dispel unlucky fortunes. Nevertheless, I decided to keep mine and burn it after I returned home. So there, Myrtle!



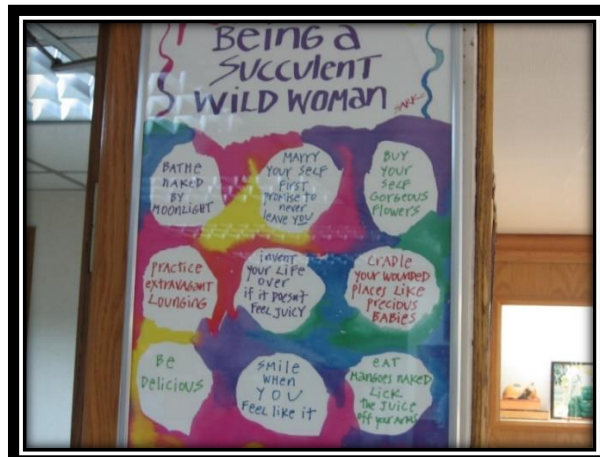
We left the beautiful Man Mo Temple and walked through the endlessly fascinating market. Our guide bought us some candied lotus root, which was divine, and we spent quite a bit of time in the dried seafood shop, which was, our guide informed us, a Hong Kong specialty.



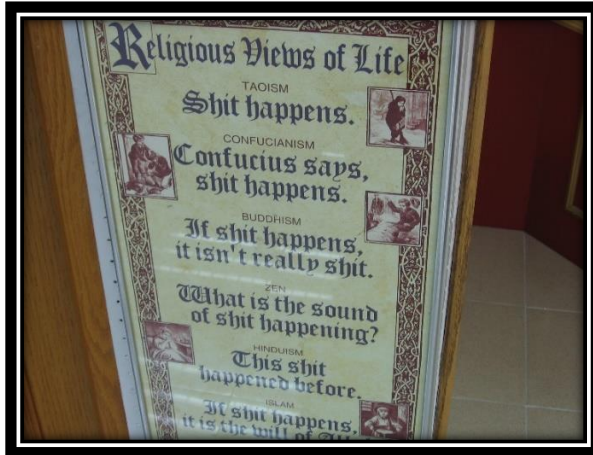
Our sampan ride in Hong Kong harbor was a definite highlight. When we reached the Jumbo Floating Restaurant, supposedly the largest floating restaurant in the world, able to seat 2500 diners, Myrtle asked our guide to please, please, please stop there just for a wee minute to let us see the inside. But he told us we need tickets. With sadness I report that it sank at sea in 2022 being towed to a new location.



Back on land, we visited the temple of the god Kwan Tai, who is the Chinese god of war and considered a symbol of brotherhood. He is also considered the god of Justice, and jewelry shops install his shrine for protection. The Chinese people pray to him for wealth, abundance and longevity. Just outside his temple I found Myrtle standing before a poster frantically writing. I took a look at the poster's heading, Oh Boy! "Being a Succulent Wild Woman." I wondered briefly if that poster was pasted there purposely to send a message to the god of War? Hmm.



This is what was on that poster, dear reader: “Bathe naked by moonlight, Marry yourself first and promise never to leave YOU, Buy yourself gorgeous flowers, Practice extravagant lounging, Invent your life over if it doesn’t feel juicy, Cradle your wounded places like precious babies, Be delicious, Smile when your feel like it, Eat mangos naked and lick the juice off your arms.” “Myrtle,” I said, “if you get any more succulent, they will need to start bottling you as a food additive.” That was such a good one Myrtle even wrote it down! Wow! Am I clever or what?! But then we came across some more wonderful street art. Even though we had read this wisdom before, we could not stop cracking up about it, and I decided I had to write it all down, which unfortunately took so long we lost our group and had a bit of a to-do to find them again.



Here is what these posters say:

“Religious Views of Life: Taoism: Shit Happens. Confucianism: Confucius says shit happens. Buddhism: If shit happens it isn’t really shit. Zen: What is the sound of shit happening? Hinduism: This shit happened before. Islam: If shit happens, it is the will of Allah. Protestantism: Let shit happen to someone else. Catholicism: If shit happens, you deserve it. Judaism: Why does this shit always happen to us? Atheism: I don’t believe this shit. Agnosticism: What is this shit?” Isn’t that wonderful? We could not stop laughing and repeating one or the other as we ran frantically to get back to our group. I remembered that our next stop was to be Victoria Peak, so we ran in that direction and soon came to the tail end of our group sauntering along with necks craned looking up at all the skyscrapers and their architectural amazements.



The views of Hong Kong from the top of Victoria Peak were so spectacular that I had to take a million photos, of course, and dear reader, you have no idea how many nail-biting hours I spent winnowing down my cache to only those you see here. Snotty Myrtle said, "You have a million of the same views, JoJo." I did not even attempt to show her that there were different angles and smog cover. Hmph.



On our last day in Hong Kong we had free time to wander, and wander we did! It was all great fun until Myrtle wanted to join the remote-control boat races in a pond in the park, and she started yelling at a boy who beat her, telling him he had cheated, and all the onlookers gaped at us in consternation until I reached down and scooped up a big handful of water and threw it into Myrtle's face, which caused her to stop mid-screach, spluttering. Then she started hooting with laughter, and the confused onlookers smiled uncertainly. Then she started bowing and Xie Xieing and laughing gaily until soon everybody was laughing and Xie Xieing and we were having a merry old time of it. I took the opportunity to grab Myrtle's hand mid-bow and drag her on our way. We were quite far away before the sounds of the pond merriment could no longer be heard. Jeez.

When she saw the sign about feeding the birds, I did not even let her think about things. I just jerked her arm hard and strode purposely on, causing her to go into a small pout. So I bought her some candied lotus root and all was well.



To be continued . . .