

## COMMENT DIT-ON "AIEEYAAA" EN FRANÇAIS?

IF YOU WERE in Hong Kong in the early 1990s you might recall an outrageous suggestion to move all of Hong Kong – lock, stock and garbage – to a sparsely-populated island off the coast of Scotland. This was during the panic after the bloody Tiananmen Square Massacre and before Hong Kong's Anschluss with the same friendly government that ordered in the tanks. Other island havens were suggested as well: the Falklands, some place off South Africa, and others I don't remember. And there was a more sensible plan (if any of the wild notions circulating at that time could remotely be considered sensible) for a Biblical-style Exodus of the entire population and infrastructure to the north coast of Australia. I'm sure that many property developers had wet concrete dreams about any and all of these plans, but no one seemed to agree on where to go. So most of us stayed here.

If a similar panic set in today – say, if the Politburo, in a fit of mass senility, decided to ban horse racing and Korean soap operas – at least there would be no argument about where to relocate every last living Hong Kong soul. We'd move to France. That's according to the TV ads.

Turn on the television any time of day and within any given 30-minute period you are likely to see an image of the south of France. It's usually more or less the same scenario: a sports cars races James Bond-like along winding Riviera coastal road up to a centuries-old villa with sweeping Mediterranean views. Men in tuxedos sip cognac while women

in impractical strapless gowns and beehive hairdos run in slow motion through endless chandelier-filled hallways and across Versailles-style ornamental gardens. Someone starts singing Italian opera. Suddenly our illusions are dashed by discovering that it's just another ad for some sterile glass-and-concrete high rise with imaginary hallways that exist only in the developer's square-footage calculations and, at best, a garden that would fit on a dinner plate. Somewhere in Hong Kong, of course. Or, worse, Shenzhen.

It's all south of France, south of France, south of France, even if the development is hilariously named after an expensive American neighbourhood like Beverly Hills or Central Park.

Why is Hong Kong property sold by conjuring up images of France? I doubt very much that homes in Saint Tropez are promoted with images of Tseung Kwan O. And why France? Every time I've been there the most noticeable feature has been the tons of dog poop on every pavement.

The answer is quite disturbing.

If you want to understand local culture, ignore the television shows but watch the commercials. TV shows present a confectionary view of life – a world of pretty pouting girls who can't act and pretty teased-hair boys who sometimes can. Hong Kong triad and *cinéma noir* movies depict the opposite, wallowing in the violent and ugly, with lots and lots of smoking. Such forms of entertainment tell you how this society perceives itself, how it wants to be, or what it's afraid of becoming. It's all fantasy.

Commercials are different. They pander to who and what we really are. The last thing they want to do is advocate social change or deep thought. Advertising people delight in discovering the deepest-held prejudices, superstitions, fears, selfishness and ignorance within a population, and exploiting those to sell goods and services. And what we see in those property ads is pandering to Hong Kong's blatant social and racial inferiority complex.

Think about it: why sell Hong Kong property by associating it with France? In one ad after another, we see European villas and landscapes, then cut to extraordinarily ornate interiors filled with arched windows, crystal chandeliers, heavy drapery, and masses of gaudy little curlicues and cherubs that are somehow associated with European elegance and refinement. Not a single one of these features can be found in the Hong Kong property being sold. In fact, they outright avoid showing you a single thing about the actual Hong Kong building, as if they're ashamed of it. As if you'll respond by saying "Yecch! Another marble-foyered, parquet-floored monument to reinforced concrete. Big frigging deal!" It might actually be a nice building, with a nice view, something really excellent in the context of living in Hong Kong. But they're not trying to sell you a place in Hong Kong. Hong Kong isn't good enough. You have to pretend it's Europe for it to be good enough.

Look at the people in those ads. One particularly irritating commercial features a series of short conversations between a lot of snooty-looking people at a swish banquet. Most of the actors are white Europeans. All have bored looks and flared nostrils (apparently rich people always put on a bored look and flare their nostrils; this makes them appear particularly posh). They're dressed in formal clothing of the type one would only wear to the Oscars or a Halloween party.



They speak with a variety of European accents, including French, Italian and vaguely Slavic, and of course a few genuine French words thrown in. There are three Chinese faces and voices, but the important thing is that they are among Caucasians. The setting, the dress and the mannerisms are all sepia-toned Old World European. Then suddenly there's an artists' impression of the reinforced-concrete and blue-glass Hong Kong building being promoted. An actual photo would be too jarring to the senses.

Even the property ads featuring Chinese people show the actors wearing western-style wedding outfits, riding horses European-style against unmistakably European-looking grassy countryside and gardens that would be impossible to maintain in Hong Kong.

Fine, they want to sell flats by selling snobbishness. No problem with that. But the message of all these property ads is: "Only Europeans have class." Or, put another way: "If you want to appear successful, aspire to be a *gwailo*."

Note that it's always continental Europeans, never North Americans, Australians or British, as if only Latin and Slavic accents have panache. This is understandable, though. One look at American tourists – and the USA's president – is enough to prove that America is a classless society in every sense of the word. And as far as the British, Hong Kong people have seen enough Brits close-up, reeking of beer, vomiting in the gutters outside of Wanchai girlie bars, to know first-hand that Britishness is not necessarily synonymous with class.

It isn't just the property ads spreading the message. Cosmetics commercials encourage you to bleach your hair red or blonde – hey! Just like a Caucasian. Happily, this fad is on the wane, but overtaken by the obsession to obliterate healthy and attractive complexions by unnaturally blanching one's face chalk white – hello! Just like a pasty-faced Anglo-Saxon who's never seen the sun in a place like Scotland.

Even in so-called real life, one can find evidence of this sense of inferiority. Right after the handover, when Hong Kong was at last free from white political and cultural domination, what was the first thing our

Dear Leaders did? Pounded their chests and shouted "We are Chinese at last!" And the second thing? Brought in the number one symbol of western cultural imperialism! Disneyland, though American, was the brainchild of a man who made his career by portraying (some would say bastardizing) – you know this already – *European* stories and fairy tales.

Look around you. The two leading mass-market Chinese fast food chains are misleadingly named after a famous Paris restaurant or have a *faux* French-sounding name. One of the biggest Chinese-owned fashion chains gave itself an Italian name. Do Parisian restaurants or Italian designers give themselves Chinese names? You bet they don't!

And then there's our self-proclaimed status as "*Asia's World City*". This vacuous, meaningless slogan reeks of apology. Assuming that being a "World City" is something to boast about, why do we prevaricate and claim merely to be Asia's whatever-it-is? Paris is "The City of Light", not "Europe's City of Light". New York is "The Big Apple", not "North America's Favorite Fruit". Why not claim Hong Kong to be "The World's City"? That would ooze confidence and bravado. But it would also imply that we are somehow on a par with or even superior to Rome, Berlin, Paris or Amsterdam. And of course we don't feel that way. The message being trumpeted from every direction is: Hong Kong, the place, and Hong Kong, the people, are second-rate. Our finest luxury apartments aren't good enough to sell without pretending they're European. We call our Chinese restaurants by French names. We bleach our faces and hair to look like Scots or Norwegians. We pin our hopes on foreign attractions to lure tourists. And we lower our chins, shuffle our feet, and mitigate our claim to be a world metropolis: "We're a World City...um, but only by low-cost, counterfeit Asian standards."

An individual exhibiting such self-degrading behaviours would be diagnosed as having low self-esteem and chronic depression. A psychiatrist would prescribe Prozac or Zoloft. Which might be a good short-term solution. I call on the government to put Prozac in the water supply, at least until we can finally lift our chins as a society and proclaim: "We are The World's City. And France is full of doggie poop."