

PERSONALITY

Mrs. Thatcher — the way she looked to me

by Dion Wright

HONG KONG'S Mandarin hotel did everything but strew bullrushes in the path of Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Britain, conqueror of the Falklands.

The small, well-dressed crowd that Hong Kong can produce on such occasions had been gathering half an hour before her entrance at 1 o'clock.

Guests striding for the lifts, keys in hand, had to pass a board announcing the day's engagements, and there they were seen to pause, dawdle over to the magazine counter and nonchalantly slip back into the lobby — to watch.

This was a bonus

Small groups of American tourists were unreservedly enjoying themselves. Who'd have thought they were going to get a real, live look at Britain's Iron Lady when they signed up their vacation package? A bonus, indeed.

Several English women, who just happened to be lunching at the Mandarin that day, were talking without listening.

A tall, blonde, handsome woman — perhaps a *grande dame* of the Peak — sat in a comfortable lounge chair intently regarding the front doors over the top of her newspaper. Young Chinese women dropped their beautiful masks to pause and look at who was looking, before tripping elegantly up the stairs.

The minutes ticked by . . . excitement grew . . . dark-uniformed hotel staff linked hands to form a cordon like waiters about to perform in the ballet *Swan Lake*.

Necks craned — voices hushed

Suddenly, the charge in the air intensified, necks craned, voices hushed and bodies tensed. There she was, the Prime Minister, at the door. A patter of applause went up as she entered. Special branch



Mrs. Thatcher faces the press in Hong Kong.

bodyguards were nervously alert, regarding the crowd.

You cannot tell how you are going to react to a powerful political figure and a leader. Perhaps, as we gazed, we would be washed in charisma.

But the first thing you notice is that she is much smaller than the image which had built up in my mind from watching her on television. She really does remind you of someone's aunt. Her dress, a stark contrast of simple white flowers on a jet black background, was mildly bizarre, even disturbing. Her hair was immaculate, and her legs looked good.

Nervous laughter erupted

She passed quickly through the people she had not come to see to ascend to those she had. She was gone; the crowd, left to look at itself, dispersed. There was already a queue at the coffee shop, barely twenty feet away.

Watching her lunchtime speech to Hong Kong businessmen on television she grew more insubstantial. She began her speech by thanking Mr. John Marden for his introduction, saying, "You seem to have already covered most of the things that I was going to say."

Hef curious sense of humour was met by nervous laughter that erupted a little too quickly. Her audience had certainly not come to hear anything resembling Mr. Marden's speech.

When the TV cameras managed to break free of Mrs. Thatcher to show the lunch guests, they did not look like men comfortably digesting a good lunch.

How they waited

They were tense with concentration. Swivelled on their chairs to have a clear view of the Prime Minister and hands cupped to ears so that not one word would be missed, they waited.

After ten minutes, they were still waiting.

Mrs. Thatcher's voice was lower than usual, a little gravelly, a little husky. It could have been a broadcast from America with Maggie, the Sales Director *par excellence*, going round with a hat drumming up business for Britain.

Hong Kong and China . . . yes, she was mentioning it. Everyone listened even harder. There was nothing to hear . . .

They listened harder

When presented with a set of six silver coins she said it would remind her — not that she would ever forget, of course — of Hong Kong in the future. That will be sometime in between the threatened miners' strike this winter and the next British election.

The afternoon moved on to when she would face the press who were in no mood to accept that confidence means confidentiality. They wanted feeding, not



patting.

She entered and went quickly to her place. The grave aunt looked out on the press. Her voice plummy with importance, she repeated the Sino-British communique issued three days earlier, her head gently nodding from side to side with the words "Co-operation, confidence, and commitment."

Her voice took on that peculiar higher-pitched drone of sincerity as she emphasised "Great Britain's moral duty to Hong Kong." She purred as she concluded, "So far, so good."

But it wasn't good. There had been nothing to bite on. Questions came from the press but were rebuffed. The barrister in Mrs. Thatcher was having little trouble.

Her eyebrows barely moved. She had two excellent shields: "I cannot go beyond the communique," and "We did not have time to go into details." This stopped anything of substance being yielded on the nature of future talks, sovereignty or how to preserve Hong Kong's economic status quo.

She grew and grew

She seemed to grow and grow, feeding on the more combative atmosphere. The Governor and Sir Percy Craddock, ambassador to Beijing, sitting close to her, appeared to shrink into their suits. She emanated control — control of a power that was soon to be glimpsed.

Effectively stymied in getting information from Mrs. Thatcher, the press could only turn to question her sincerity. But to Mrs. Thatcher, sincerity means determination, and she does not take kindly to doubts on that score. "Britain has a moral responsibility to Hong Kong" she again pronounced, surveying all imperiously.

The barrister had turned parliamentarian, an edge now in her voice. Her sentences began to be prefaced by the ominously familiar "Now look, . . ." as she leant towards the questioner, her chin resting on one hand and her eyebrows knitted, or slowly wagged her finger, her eyebrows arched. Even as she was roused, the eyes remained cold and concentrated.

Concern for future

Chinese reporters seemed occasionally plaintive rather than questioning, and you felt that their concern over their future was getting through to Mrs. Thatcher. She humorously chided one, saying she could speak to him much better if he removed his bulbous headphones and looked at her. She was firm but gentle, and safely fielded questions on the Nationality Bill.

But the European who carelessly misquoted her, saying "impartial" instead of "confidential," was immediately lashed:

"Pardon, what did you say? I beg your pardon?" she snapped.

This was the voice of the front-bench leader drawing her sword and issuing her challenge. The starkness of her dress gave her an elegant menace.

For a second she was larger than life. There was a glimpse of what might have happened at her meetings with the Chinese leadership: "Unequal treaties, Mr. Deng? The Chinese empire was defeated on its own soil. Hardly unequal."

Sense of humour

She again revealed her strange sense of humour by calling a near ten percent plunge in value of shares on the Hong Kong stock market a fluctuation. Would she also call a similar drop in votes for the Tory Party at a by-election a fluctuation?

If Mrs. Thatcher's style meant anything, it was that when she talks about moral responsibility, she means it. It is her antidote to the "P and S Syndrome" (prosperity and stability) now ravaging Hong Kong.

If Hong Kong people, after years of following stockmarket figures, are too politically unconcerned to respond to talk of moral responsibility, they will have to change. For little else is being offered.

Hong Kong people are being now asked not to calm their fears but to strengthen their nerves. Who better to ask this than Mrs. Thatcher — the "Iron Lady"? **BT**