



TV GUIDE

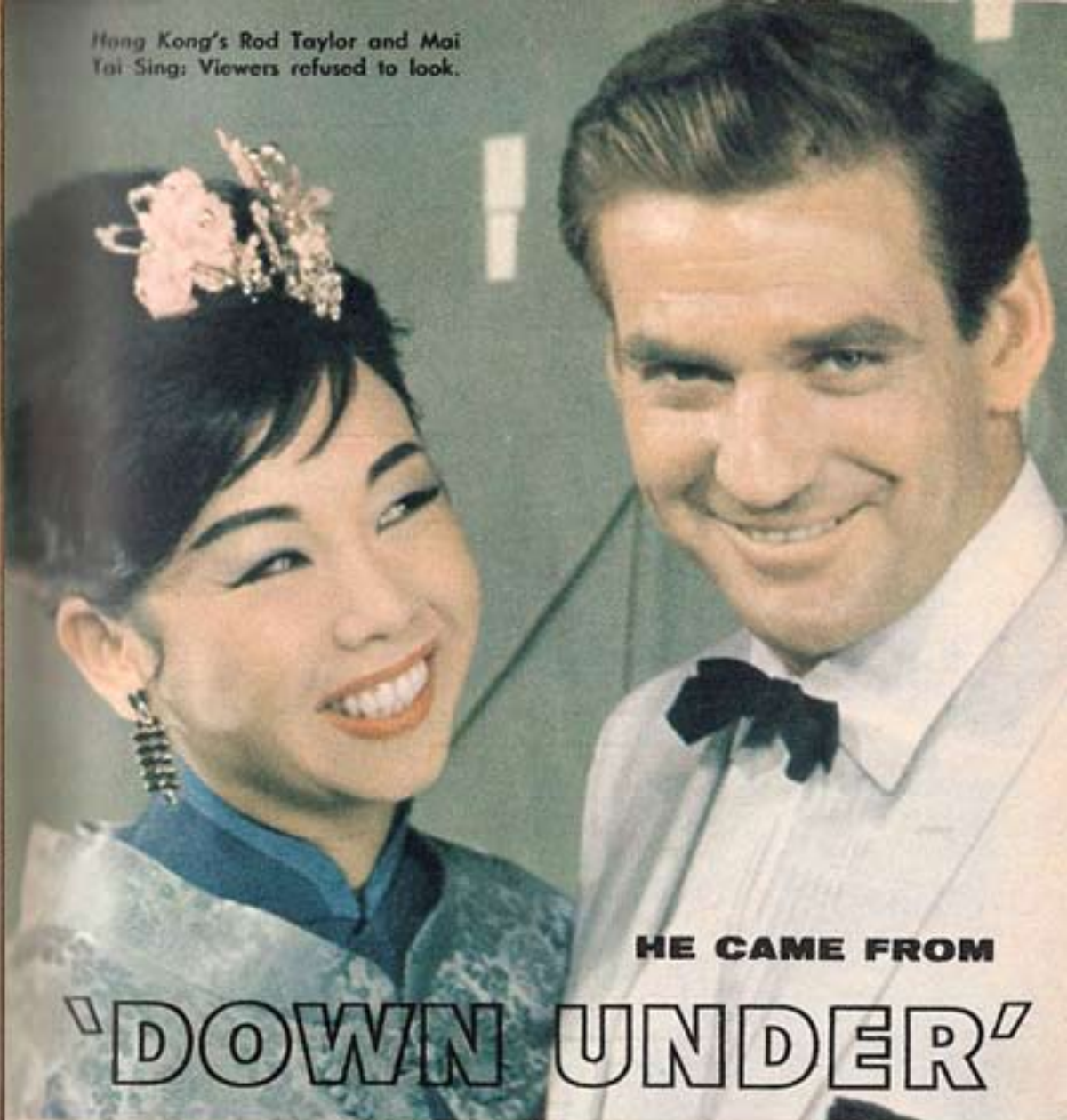
LOCAL PROGRAMS • APRIL 29-MAY 5

Startling reaction to PRESIDENT'S TELEvised PRESS CONFERENCES

From
the
good
old days:
STARS'
OWN
PICTURES,
COMMENTS

Rod Taylor of 'Hong Kong'

Hong Kong's Rod Taylor and Mai
Tai-Sing: Viewers refused to look.



HE CAME FROM 'DOWN UNDER'

Perhaps the most expensive star per thousand viewers in the history of television is a 31-year-old Australian named Rodney Sturt Taylor. (Sturt was his great-great-granduncle, an Australian explorer.)

This refugee from "down under" is star of *Hong Kong*, seen on ABC. The show has not done too *continued*

And so far, no matter
what Rod Taylor does,
his show
seems to stay there

well its first season. It competes directly—and, as some depressing Nielsen rating figures show, hopelessly—with NBC's *Wagon Train*.

Even forgetting its competition, there's still a question as to how well it could have done in its time slot. All season, with one exception (when its rating almost doubled), it has been on at 7:30 P.M. (ET), when the children, for the most part, are at the controls in the Nation's 47,000,000 TV homes.

Unfortunately neither Rod Taylor nor *Hong Kong* is exactly children's fare. The show is a Far Eastern, with dialog partly in baffling Cantonese (concocted by the show's technical advisor Dan Yee, proprietor of a La Cienega Boulevard chop suey palace). Its plots are spun off in the sort of cocktail-party shorthand that made *Peter Gunn* so enjoyable. A fair sample is calculated to send Junior off to bed in insecurity over why the police chief beat up the criminal, instead of treating him lovingly as on *The Lone Ranger*. Here Dan Yee's inscrutable Cantonese is no helpee whatsoever.

Nor, to viewers who relapse into nail-biting unless the bluebird of happiness is all the time landing on the window sill, is Taylor. In all his 14 years as an actor, man here and boy in Sydney, no one has ever accused Taylor of being reassuring. He has no great reputation, for one thing, and strangers are suspect in Hollywood and all other provinces. In appearance Taylor is the antithesis of Robert Horton; he is unclean-cut. His face is mashed in, something like Popeye's, with a long shovel nose and an indelicately large, jutting chin. He has a pair of shoulders like a bull's. He drinks. His Hollywood career got going on his spiritual and physical resemblance to the prize fighter Rocky Graziano.

Fortunately for Taylor, a proper British gentleman when he chooses to be, he has an inner temperament to match his outward ruggedness, for he certainly would have come unsprung years ago without this integrity. His outbursts of temper are notorious, brief, loud, unprintable, frequent and quickly forgotten. At 20th Century-Fox the four-letter sound of Taylor's stack blowing at some production stupidity (he owns 15 percent of *Hong Kong*) is as much a part of the workaday atmosphere as the carpenter's hammer, and attracts about as much notice. His impatience with such other brambles of his calling as phony publicity is scarcely less forthright. Asked by a lady to pose in an apron in his kitchen for a fan magazine, Taylor refused in Anglo-Saxon that is still ringing in her pink ears. "Sweetheart," he said, "no (unprintable) apron. No (unprintable) kitchen. The only (unprintable) dish I ever cook at home is instant coffee."

Naturally, his independence and the unabashed indifference with which he expresses it have created a number of Hollywood enemies, about whom he could not now care less. With *Hong Kong*, win or lose (and at this time it is lose, since there is only a faint hope it will return to the air next season), he has cleared with one leap the chasm that separates, in Hollywood, the actors from the stars. It has established his price and his prestige. Its ratings may droop from week to week at a flabby 10.6 or 12.7 ("which means," he says sarcastically, "that only 13,500,000 people are watching us"), as compared with *Wagon Train*'s robust 34.9 or 34.3, but its potency has been demonstrated.

Hong Kong's ratings shot up on the night of Jan. 25. That night an old episode was rerun at 10 o'clock, in addition to the new one shown at 7:30, making Taylor the star of TV's first double-feature, with two results.

One was the remark that next Fox and ABC would be giving away dishes. The other was a Nielsen rating of 18.1 on the late-late *Hong Kong*.

Although few people had ever heard of Taylor when he was announced last spring as the star of a \$9,000,000 series, he has been widely quoted as saying he turned down 19 TV series offers before accepting *Hong Kong*. Apparently this is true. Roy Huggins, *Maverick*'s creator, now TV production boss at 20th Century-Fox, says he desperately wanted Taylor for TV six years ago, after using him in one *Cheyenne*. He later offered him the Jack Kelly role in *Maverick* before he found Kelly. At the time (1957), *Maverick* promised to be a hit, but Taylor turned Huggins down. It was the end of a year in which he had earned only \$600, but Taylor did not like TV in general and Warner Brothers in particular.

The only child of a Sydney construction engineer, Taylor took up acting after high school, became enormously successful (by Australian standards) in radio, married a pretty model (Peggy Williams, from whom he is now divorced) and imported himself to Hollywood in 1954 after winning an acting award. After what he calls "a nine months' perish," in which very little happened except *Cheyenne*, MGM tested him for the Graziano role in "Somebody up There Likes Me," gave the part to Paul Newman but put Taylor under contract at \$450 a week. He is still under contract to Metro for one picture a year. In 1957, after several pictures, Metro allowed him to free-lance on *Playhouse 90*, *Climax!*, *Studio One* and other TV shows.

Not particularly interested in series TV after success in half a dozen pictures, Taylor and his agent Wilt Melnick last spring set a price and terms they thought prohibitive. To their surprise, CBS, Revue, ABC and 20th Century-Fox all wanted him for

pilots. *Hong Kong*, when he accepted it, was a half-hour show. Its pilot was being filmed in Hollywood when Peter Levathes, a Fox executive, sold it to Henry J. Kaiser in Hawaii. However, Kaiser wanted a one-hour show to compete with *Wagon Train*. So *Hong Kong* grew—longer, at any rate.

The expansion automatically inflated Taylor to TV's best-paid new star. In addition to his 15 percent ownership, he is paid \$3750 per episode, giving him \$97,500 in salary for the 26 shows filmed this season, with possible residuals on reruns.

It has also won him considerable plaudits, official and unofficial, for the one quality that shines through his ruggedness, cussedness and even his manners when he has them on. Not even his enemies quibble with Taylor's ability. Last winter some 400 American TV critics agreed on Taylor as the outstanding new male personality of 1960-61.