

IBM, CBS and Sears Form Videotex Venture

InfoWorld

The Newsweekly for Microcomputer Users

March 12, 1984

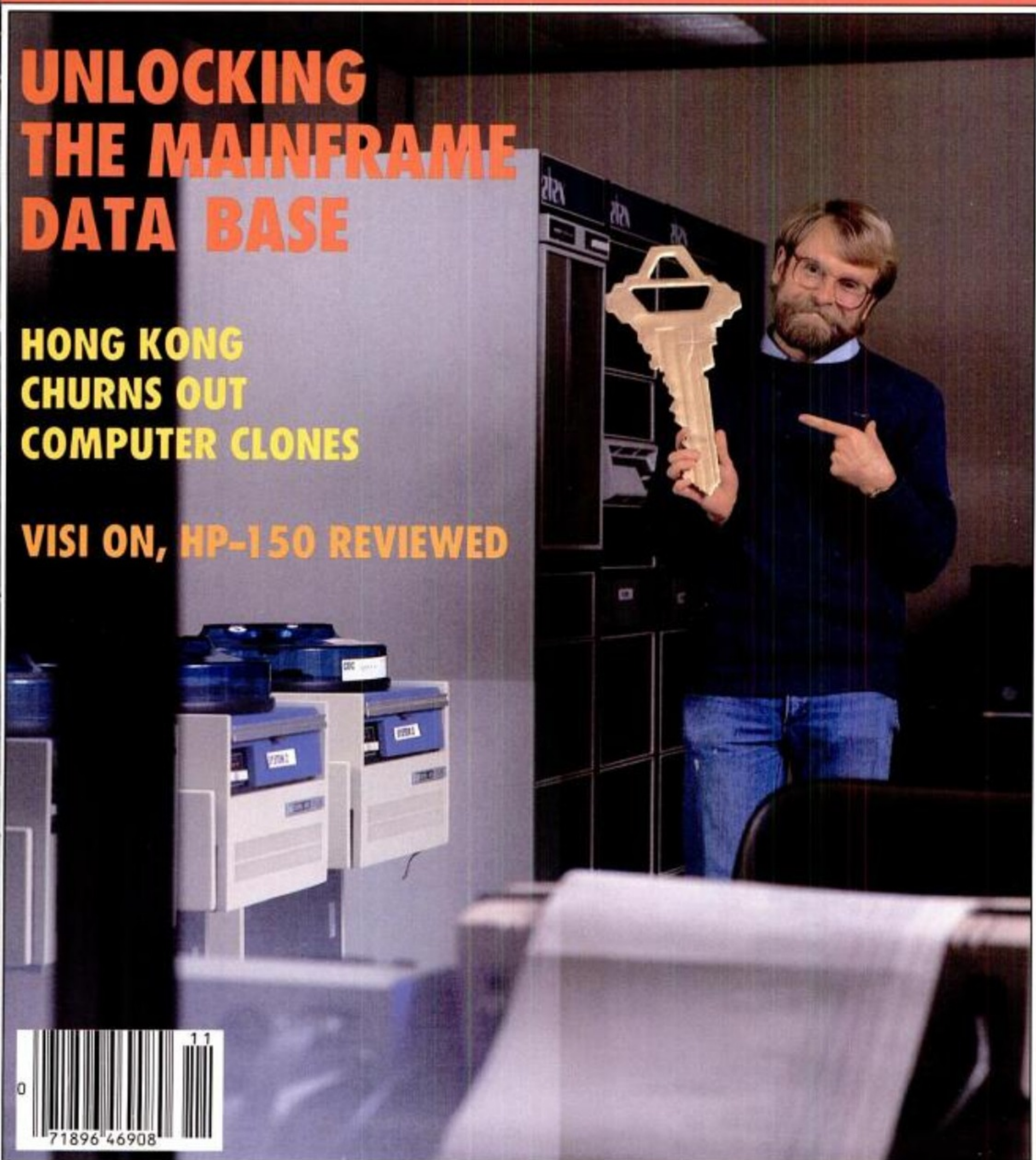
Volume 6, Issue 11

K 46908 \$1.50

UNLOCKING THE MAINFRAME DATA BASE

HONG KONG CHURNS OUT COMPUTER CLONES

VISI ON, HP-150 REVIEWED



company is gearing up to challenge the low-end Apple Macintosh and IBM PCjr with its own Laser 3000. The micro-processor it normally uses is the 6502A running at 2 MHz, but the computer can also accept Z80A and 8088 plug-in modules — thus potentially enabling it to run Apple II, CP/M and MS-DOS software. Supposedly it has twice the graphics resolution of the Apple II, with a resolution of 560 × 192 pixels. You can connect up to four 164K storage disk drives to the computer, as well as a plotter, light pen, joysticks, an acoustic coupler and a cassette recorder. The computer's price is expected to run at around \$650.

With the 1997 end-of-lease question still much in the air, Hong Kong's preoccupation with the People's Republic of China is understandable.

It may soon be possible, however, to page top Chinese leaders and bring them to task.

Hong Kong's Star Paging Holding recently scored a lucrative first-time-ever contract with the PRC to set up a paging system in Shanghai and in Beijing using a NEC-based system. Radio-paging is a big growth business in Hong Kong, where countless businessmen and entrepreneurs wander around with beepers waiting for fortune to call.

In fact, Hong Kong probably has one of the largest networks of digital micros in the world, built to sustain its paging industry.

Despite President Reagan's high-tech agreements with the PRC, high-tech traders still express considerable disgruntlement with the gap between the announcement of policy and the reality of trying to import American-made computers into China.

"It might take you 18 months just to get your license approved and to go through all the channels for just a few machines," one observer notes. "So this being Hong Kong, the attitude is 'Why bother with the license?' Just hire a truck and load it up. Or break the system into component parts and get Chinese visitors to carry them into China. After all, the Chinese border is not in business to protect Reagan.

"All you have to do to make a sale is to go to the local ComputerLand, buy a 64K machine, then take the Star Ferry across the harbor to Kowloon where you buy a 256K add-on memory board that you mail into China. It's all perfectly legal." It is estimated that some 500 - 600 Apple IIs have entered China in this way, in piecemeal fashion.

On the Hong Kong waterfront, there is a mile-long stretch of junks and lighters that travel unimpeded up the Pearl River into China every day. What their cargo contains is anybody's guess. ●

The black-market micros of Sham Shui Po

BY ALEXANDER BESHER

Contributor

Today in Hong Kong you can buy a custom-made personal "cloneputer" just as easily as you can get a suit tailored.

For as little as \$600, you can pick up an Apple II. And why pay \$5,000 for an IBM PC XT, when you can get a PC XT clone with a 10-megabyte hard disk and bundled clone software for \$3,000 or less?

The Mecca for fake PCs in Hong Kong is not found behind some opium den or in

squatting on the sidewalk and assembling circuitboards purely by rote without understanding what they're doing.

In the evening, Hong Kong's multi-colored neons light up more dazzlingly than any color graphics display. Outside the Golden Shopping Center street, vendors are serving up bowls of steaming noodles, barbecued spareribs and other snacks. Inside, the shop-lined corridors are buzzing with the frenetic activity of browsers and buyers. The shop owners, respectable looking gentlemen in white shirts and ties, put aside their soldering

'Take the MTR subway to Sham Shui Po and go out the Kweilin Street or Tongfook Street exit. You can't miss it.'

some back-street bazaar. Instead, it's a modern three-story building in Kowloon that boasts the proud name of Golden Shopping Center.

Ask any Hong Kong hacker or computer buff where to find it, and they'll give you easy directions: "Take the MTR [Mass Transit Railway] subway to Sham Shui Po and go out the Kweilin Street or Tongfook Street exit. You can't miss it. Look for the Mr. Floppy billboard. It's the only time you'll see an outdoor advertisement for disk drives in all of Hong Kong."

There are more than 500 stores in the Golden Shopping Center alone. An estimated 300 other computer stores are randomly spread out in the back alleys of the neighborhood. The center developed some three years ago as a mix of electronics stores and a few computer stores. Gradually the computer stores took over, especially when the market for fake Apples boomed.

The last time the police raided the stores was a year ago. And the last time anyone was prosecuted was last May, according to Sham Shui Po watchers.

Not included in the Sham Shui Po count of pirate outlets, of course, is Hong Kong's plethora of photo and electronics stores that may also be selling one or two clones along with their cameras and recorders.

The best time to visit the Golden Shopping Center is during the early evening. In the daytime, business is generally quiet, although you may spot some old beggars or street urchins

irons and circuit boards and quickly get into the spirit of the Hong Kong haggle whenever a customer enters their tiny stores.

"How much is that dBase II package?"

"Including diskettes and manual, only HK \$260 [about U.S. \$27]," the owner says.

"Thanks, I'm just looking. I'll be back later."

He follows you out of the shop. "I give you for only HK \$250 [U.S. \$25]. How about utility program, you want? Very available, only our shop has."

"You can beat them down to nothing," says my guide, an English expatriate who used to be a programmer in Liverpool. "You can beat them down to the price of diskettes."

He is a Sham Shui Po regular, having bought an Apple II clone for himself soon after he arrived in the territory. He put in a Hong Kong-made speech-synthesizer board after he married a Chinese woman.

"It's really great," he says. "She can't read English, although she can understand it. If she wants to check the *TV Times* to see what's on the tube at a certain time, she simply types the name of the program into the speech synthesizer, just copying the letters onto the keyboard without knowing what they mean. Then she'll hear what she's inputted, 'Tuesday, 8:00 P.M., Hill Street Blues,' so she knows what's showing that night."

Ninety-nine percent of all the shops in Sham Shui Po deal in fake Apples, but the