



Is it Goodbye to our Rickshaws?

THE FOUR REMAINING RICKSHAWS at the Star Ferry Terminal in Hong Kong strike a chord in my memory.

Nearly sixty years ago, I lived in a city in China where rickshaws provided the only taxi service. For long journeys, we had to choose walking for days on foot, or engaging sedan chairs, carried by men with bamboo poles. Both modes of transport used men like beasts of burden. The literal meaning of this mode of transport in Cantonese is “human-strength carriages” (*yan lik ch'e*). After the 1949 revolution in China, they were banned, and replaced by tricycle-drawn rickshaws. Now motorized taxis have replaced this dehumanizing kind of transport.

I noticed in those early days how the shoulder bones of the sedan chair carriers became deeply hollowed. The legs of all workers in this trade became bent (“bow legged” we call them in English). Yet they were willing to do that humiliating work because they had to earn a living.

When I arrived in Hong Kong in 1951, there were tram-cars, buses and taxis. Yet some rickshaw pullers and sedan chair carriers still plied their trade on the roads. Eventually, in the mid-seventies, no more licences were issued. Now only four remain, but their rickshaws have become quite a tourist attraction. Visitors like to cross the harbour on the popular Star Ferry, and

have their photographs taken sitting in a rickshaw at the Hong Kong terminal.

Now these rickshaw-pullers seem doomed to give up their trade, because they find fewer passengers at the new terminal where their location is not so accessible. The owners say their income has fallen from about \$100 to \$20 or \$30 a day. They have to sit all day with nothing to do, unable to earn a living.

Those red chairs with their green hoods are part of Hong Kong's heritage, and it will be a sad day when they disappear entirely from our sight, leaving their old owners jobless.

Yet, no matter what, the memory of our rickshaws will, hopefully, never be forgotten. They will probably end up in the Museums of History, along with our old hand-spinning and weaving machines that gave rise to our spectacular textile trade.

I am sure our Hong Kong citizens will empathise with these rickshaw owners if they have to change their way of life and retire from their useful role in our tourist trade. Let us wish them peace and happiness in their remaining years.