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Saving our Culture and Heritage

IN THE DAYS BEFORE modern transport brought the world closer together, each country had its own culture, architecture, native dress, language and customs. Now we can travel almost worldwide and find similar architecture in high-rise buildings – and identical dress.

The intermingling of all human beings of course has great advantages. It should eventually remove all racial discrimination, and hopefully, national and religious prejudices. When that time comes, all nations will respect each other as equal human beings. Unfortunately, that time has not yet arrived. Yet it must come if the world is to survive.

At the same time, let us consider whether we wish to lose completely our national identity. Surely that would be a tragedy. It could mean obliterating monuments of our past history. I am sure no Chinese would like to see the Great Wall, and the beautiful old architecture of the Forbidden City, for example, replaced by almost identical housing estates or international supermarkets. Of course, we must not let that happen.

Each country must choose the monuments it wishes to preserve for the future generation. Those who see a piece of land only in dollar value may choose to destroy their own culture. On the other hand, if some people struggle to preserve every

relic of the past, we could limit our future progress. We need to make a choice, and limit the choice to what we really need as our heritage.

In the recent row about the Star Ferry pier, I remained quiet because I, personally, do not consider it to be an antiquity, having existed for only forty-nine years. I clearly remember when it was built, and preferred its predecessor, because then we could walk almost from the pavement on to the ferry. The new pier seemed too long. I remember saying sarcastically, “Soon the ferry won’t be necessary and a bridge from Kowloon will serve the purpose.”

I remember too how I tried to save other buildings, like the old Hong Kong Post Office, the Tsim Sha Tsui Railway Station, and the clock tower with it. They were much older than the Hong Kong pier. Moreover, the railway was the only convenient way for people to commute to and from the ferry and the New Territories. In the end, we succeeded in preserving that clock tower, and I was happy to host the opening after it was refurbished.

Yes, we do need to preserve our old monuments – and trees! However, we need to choose between what is really worthy of preservation, and what of sentimental value only to a few people.