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The Old and the New Hong Kong

WHEN I FIRST CAME to live in Hong Kong, in 1951, all the buildings were four storeys or less in height. Goods were often transported, not by lorries or container trucks, but by coolies, who carried them on bamboo poles across their shoulders. People shopped mainly in street markets or in small shops. There were only a few department stores, such as Wing On and Lane Crawford. Can you imagine Hong Kong without any shopping malls? Looking back on those days, I sometimes feel quite nostalgic for the time when we could pop into the small shops and chat with the owners. It seemed very homely and friendly then.

At that time, none of the huge multi-storey housing estates existed. Instead we saw tin or wooden huts on the hills surrounding us. Some newcomers even lived in cardboard shelters on the pavements of old areas such as Sham Shui Po, Wong Tai Sin, Wan Chai, and Causeway Bay. Many of those people originated from the Mainland, and worked at home doing embroidery, making flowers, packing boxes of matches or biscuits, and earning about a dollar a day, according to their speed of work. That was about enough to feed one adult. Consequently, mothers and children also had to earn their rice. Those were bitter days for the poor of Hong Kong. Now, fifty years later, it is difficult for young people today to imagine what life was like in those days.

A question to discuss with your friends might be: “Is Hong Kong better in every way now? Have there been any changes for the worse?” Perhaps you can question your parents or grandparents about life fifty years ago.

Among the advantages are: better housing, free education, social welfare benefits, less corruption, better laws to protect the poor, new technology, good transport, worldwide trading facilities, and others you may think of.

Are there any disadvantages in the situation today? You may consider the effects of industrial progress on the environment, the lost beauty of the harbour, then known as “the Pearl of the East”, the disappearance of convenient street markets, foodstalls, and old buildings that reminded us of our past history. In fact, we could spend hours discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the old and new Hong Kong. Perhaps we can think of ways in which to preserve more of our Hong Kong heritage, and that friendly, homely atmosphere that usually disappears from a city of tall buildings, huge shopping malls and supermarkets.