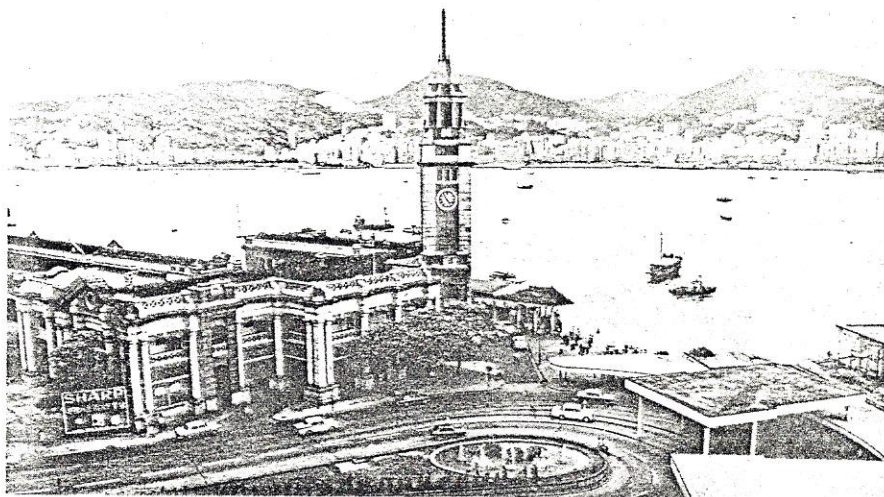


*The Southern tip of the Kowloon Peninsula is one of Hong Kong's transportation centres. In this picture are the Kowloon-Canton Railway (under the clock tower), the Star Ferry pier to Hong Kong, and bus and taxi ranks. On the water are a harbour tour junk, walla wallas (motor boats which maintain services to vessels anchored in the harbour) and ferries.*



# SEVEN MINUTES TO KOWLOON

**M**ainland China's moves to improve links with other nations focus attention even more sharply today on Hong Kong — where Western China-watchers and Chinese West-watchers have been eyeing and listening in to each other for years.

The British Crown Colony, serving as a kind of two-way mirror, trading post, and gateway, continues to play its role as the chief link between the Chinese People's Republic and the outside world, even as new international relationships develop.

But bustling Hong Kong engages in other pursuits of more immediate concern: turning out textiles, toys, and transistors; dispensing duty-free bargains to tourists; netting whopping catches of fish with one of the world's biggest fishing fleet, shipping and transshipping vast stocks of goods in the Orient's most thriving trade.

In all these pursuits, Hong Kong has a vital "link" of its own, a watery artery on which much of its daily life depends — a ferry route, less than a mile long, joining together the city's two main districts, industrial Kowloon and commercial Victoria.

Plowing back and forth 20 hours a day across the narrowest neck of Hong Kong's spectacularly scenic harbour, the dozen sturdy vessels of the 'Star' Ferry Company are one of the oldest and most familiar sights in Hong Kong.

Through the jade green waters of possibly the heaviest trafficked sealane in the world, the 'Star' Ferries take about seven minutes to cross from the railroad-bus-rickshaw terminal at

Kowloon Point to the soaring skyscrapers of the downtown Victoria business area.

The 'Star' Ferry ride, which costs just 30 cents HK First Class and 15 cents HK Second Class, is said to be one of the cheapest boat trips anywhere.

Although First Class is crowded with more seats, and you have to climb several ramps to get there (while Second Class is at dock level), about half the passengers prefer it. Not so a few years ago, when the ferry company decided to increase the First Class fare. A boycott was called, slogans were daubed on the boats, and three days of strikes and demonstrations caused a serious crisis in the city.

The 'Star' Ferry Company began hauling the denizens of Hong Kong from Tsimshatsui on Kowloon Peninsula to Victoria on Hong Kong Island back in 1898, when it took over the franchise and a fleet of paddlewheel steamboats from a prosperous Indian merchant named Dorabjee Nowrojee. 1898 was a notable year in Hong Kong. The city was enlarged tenfold by leasing 365 square miles of adjacent territory from China for 99 years, and the first railway line was opened to Canton, connecting Hong Kong and China proper.

The logbook of ferry service across the harbour recorded little more than an occasional baby born on board or suicide attempts overboard until one night in February 1925, when one of the ferries was hijacked by a band of pirates and forced to sail up the Pearl River Estuary towards Portuguese

Macau. A ransom of \$50,000 was demanded for the kidnapped passengers. But the Royal Navy came to the rescue, tracked down the captive vessel, and freed all the commuters unharmed. Another ferry was assigned as a protective escort to patrol the route after dark for years afterwards.

In World War II, after Japanese forces had overrun Hong Kong, the 'Star' Ferries saw military service. The Japanese Navy stripped a number of them of their engines and used the hulls as tugs and dumb lighters to transport war material. One boat, the *Golden Star*, was sunk by Allied bombing along the China coast. After the war, other ferries were salvaged when they were found up the Pearl River in Canton.

**T**oday the steady click of the gleaming brass turnstiles, traditionally guarded by Goanese and Pakistani inspectors, tabulates over a million passengers a week boarding the green and white diesel vessels for a shuttle ride across Hung Hom Fairway, the central channel of Hong Kong harbour.

At 6 a.m., when the sun's orange disc pushes up out of the South China Sea, the heavy hawsers are loosened, and the first ferries churn out across the waterway with their tunout of pre-dawn risers. Soon the boats are densely packed with noisy thousands of workers heading for the electronics and clothing factories of Kowloon, while throngs of tie-and-shirted office employees chug past them in mid-channel bound for the banks, shipping

companies, and insurance firms of Victoria's central district. In more colourful dress, the girls of Hong Kong are off to work in bright tunics and slacks, side-zipped *cheongsams* and a full gamut of skirt lengths.

The day rolls on, bringing crowds of Chinese businessmen poring over their early editions of Wah Kew Yatpo, while their Punjabi and Malay competitors peruse their copies of *South China Morning Post* and *Hongkong Standard*. Riders without reading matter scan the flashy ads extolling Japanese cameras, Danish beer, American oil, Swiss watches, or else the prominent warnings to beware of pickpockets: "If you are robbed, shout for help!" Less likely to attract readership are the company by-laws posted in fine print, admonishing passengers not to "sing any indecent or obscene songs," "Swear or use any obscene or offensive language," nor to bring along any "livestock, salt fish, vegetables or poultry (whether dead or alive) in open parcels..."

Afternoon brings the shoppers aboard: ladies from the exclusive residential areas of Stanley and The Peak returning from forays to the fashionable department stores, and multitudes of women toting the familiar string-handled paper bags of the inexpensive Mainland China-owned emporiums.

Night falls, and the ferry crowds to Hong Kong Island take on a lighter mood. A Japanese Rock group with

shoulder-length hair, enroute to play in a Wanchai night club, jokes with a cluster of bejeweled ladies in evening finery and their tuxedoed escorts. Deep-tanned merchant seamen eye the lissome ladies bound for the girlie-bars of the Suzy Wong district. Sloe-eyed faces everywhere are lifted to catch the cool of the night breeze.

Crossing back to Kowloon, an elderly messenger, working overtime, carries jet-bound airline mailbags suspended on a shoulder pole on his way to Kai Tak Airport. Weary shopkeepers sag into their deck seats close by the gangway exit. Sleeping infants in their "baby packs" droop their tiny heads against their mother's backs.

The ferries steer through the reflections of thousands of multi-coloured lights glowing on the ring of silhouetted hills around the harbor.

It is 2 a.m. at the Kowloon Terminal and the last ferry nudges into the dock. A denimed sailor with a bamboo stick hooks the hawser and a few hundred passengers disembark, rushing along the ramps to be first in the taxi queue, or to haggle down the price with a rickshaw driver. The red double-decker buses and the Kowloon Railway's suburban trains have already closed down for the night. Other night passengers trudge home on foot, passing the array of glamorous tourist hotels along the never-empty streets of Tsimshatsui.

For the three-quarters of a century that the 'Star' Ferries have been operating their cross-harbor route, Hong Kong officials have been discussing whether a bridge or a tunnel wouldn't be a better idea. Advocates of the tunnel argue that an underwater roadway would better withstand the dozen or more typhoons that strike the city each summer.

A few years ago the tunnel proponents won their argument and a \$45 a million underpass, cutting the Kowloon-Victoria time to 4½ minutes was opened.

But traffic experts' predictions of a bottleneck at both ends of a tunnel during rush hours have come true. Because of the city's surging growth, the tunnel has not eased the traffic situation much. Thus, a subway system is now being built, at a cost of over \$1 billion.

Meantime, the ferries continue to perform as prime movers on the Hong Kong scene, making 185,000 crossings every year, with a perfect safety record for as far back as anyone remembers.

And when the big summer winds blow up from the tropics, and all the boats in the harbour are ordered into the typhoon shelters, the people of Hong Kong tell the weather by the 'Star.' The ferries are usually the last to take cover in a typhoon, and when the first 'Star' appears in the harbour again, everyone knows that the storm is over.

—Jack Goldfarb

*Transport ancient and modern: a Star Ferry speeds across Hong Kong Harbour between Tsimshatsui (Kowloon) and Victoria (Hong Kong side) while a three-masted sailing junk, its sails set to catch the breeze, slowly moves up the harbour.*

