



## *Chu Yin-Ping, Sampan tour guide*

I'm in the sampan tourism business. I've also worked on the land as a fast food cook for students, and as a salesperson, but I enjoy working on the boat the most.

### **Stolen childhood**

I grew up on boats. As a child, I was kidnapped and sold to a sampan woman, my adoptive mother, because she'd no children of her own. Around the same time, she had given birth, but the baby had died. Another boat person lent her HK\$30 to buy me, because with no child my mother would have no one to depend on when she got older. You see, 60 years ago, boat people were too poor to get married. If a man came along and paid for your daily expenses, he was considered a husband. But he would leave when work took him elsewhere.

I have no idea who my real parents are, but I'm certain that my biological parents aren't boat people, because boat people don't sell their kids. Usually, boat people give their

kids away to each other, if they don't have the means to feed them. Back then, a lot of boat people bought kids... The reason that I call Jun my sister is because we grew up together, and her mother fed me when my mother and I didn't have enough food. We called each other sisters as we still do to this day. There are seven 'sisters' altogether, all with different mothers. We're not biologically related. I am the youngest.

I had an adoptive father who gave me money for school. Because of this, I called him 'Father', and took on his surname. I was about seven or eight years old. As a Mainlander, he went to and fro for work, sailing around the South China Sea. Then, one day, he went to China and the border was closed, separating us. From what I know, father was a Western chef – meaning that he cooked for Westerners. He used to give us money each month for living expenses, and so when he left we had no one to depend on. We had no income, and so I ended up leaving school and rowing sampan with my mother.



### Hard times

The old boats had no motors on them, they were rowed. That boat [points to an old photo] was owned by my mother and me, while this one is owned by me and my sister. It's 32 years old. Back then, there was no bridge to Ap Lei Chau, so we'd transport people across the harbour for five or 10 cents a time. Sometimes we wouldn't have enough to feed ourselves, and I would go to another sampan for my meals. Boat people are very nice people

– if you didn't have enough to eat, and they did, they'd be happy to give you food. That's what life was like. The boat was our all, our livelihood. Everything was on the sampan, it was our home. Cooking, bathing – basically, everything happened on the boat. But there's a huge difference between the boats then and now. The old boats were much smaller. You could put very few things in them, and the passenger capacity was less too – you'd need two old sampans to match the capacity of the new ones.

We slept on the floor of the boat, and, I can tell you, it's much more comfortable to sleep on this one! There were no wooden benches on board, we only had wicker chairs. At night, we would stack up the chairs, wipe the floor clean, and then cover it with a bamboo curtain. We'd cover ourselves with blankets, close the curtains around the boat, and go to sleep.

The reason we slept on the boats is because we were 'Boat people', and very poor. We didn't even really bathe. We just had a pail of water that we used to soak a towel in, before rubbing down our bodies; the water we had left was used to clean the floor. Bathing and showering are relatively recent things, from the time when showers were built close to the docks...

### 'Dai goo leung'

Some of the females weren't literate, so how else could they make a living at times than to sell their bodies? The sex workers were called *dai goo leung*, meaning 'big sisters'. They weren't respected by land people who didn't know them, but after the exchange, the ones who did, the customers, would treat them to meals, and take them out to have fun. Those customers really enjoyed the company of *dai goo leung* because they were naïve sea people who made them laugh.

There were a lot of misconceptions about *dai goo leung* among non-customers – that *dai goo leung* were very bad people, who were ruthless for money and food. Selling bodies was, in fact, a way of feeding parents and younger siblings.

The *dai goo leung* were very different from the sex workers of today. There was no make-up or lipstick, because there wasn't the money for it. There weren't really nice clothes, just a traditional *cheung saam* type of outfit and hair in a long braid to receive customers.

### Winds of change

Whatever our mother did, we followed, but once we grew up, got married, and had children of our own, we didn't want our children to go through the tough times we had had to.

The government gave our children free schooling, and we tried to earn as much money as we could for them. We didn't want them to live on the boat like we had. At the very least, land people usually have access to better education, and are more literate. Even if boat people can speak well, we can't read or write.

There have been huge changes in Aberdeen. For example, the typhoon shelter only came about 30 years ago, and back in the days before motorised sampans, there were few large boats here, if any. The water was normally very still, there were no waves. Now that there's been so much reclamation on both sides of the water, the channel's much narrower and the waves are higher and stronger, and no one's able to row here any more.

One year, back in the days before this was a typhoon shelter, there was a very strong typhoon that destroyed a lot of our boats, so we demanded that the government build an enclosure to protect our homes. Typhoons used to be very destructive here. We'd have to take down the



cover of the boat, fold it on the deck, then dock the boat. After this, we'd head to the land to take cover.

I remember us running into the Tin Hau Temple, to the goddess of the sea, who we boat people revere whether we fish at sea or pilot a sampan – but, if you were to ask me which religion I am, I couldn't tell you. We believe in Tin Hau and *Kwun Yum* [Kwan Yin, in Buddhism, an enlightened being who forgoes nirvana to help others become enlightened] but we're not an organised religion like Catholicism. We simply believe in our gods in our hearts – for peace of mind.

At the temple, there were people handing out rice and other foods. If our boats were destroyed in a typhoon, then Christian groups would come and help us, giving us food, rice, flour and a place to shelter on land. When Hong Kong was still a British colony, we were treated quite well.

### Running a tight ship

In Aberdeen today, there are fewer than 100 sampan people, and in Yau Ma Tei and Sai Kung there are a few, though in Yau Ma Tei people are leaving. In today's money, it costs several hundred thousand Hong Kong dollars to buy a sampan, but back then, they were only a few thousand dollars.

Every three months, we have to maintain the boat, which costs about HK\$3,500, and a month's worth of petrol is about HK\$2,000. You have to keep the motor of the boat running when stationary, because if you were to stop the engine, the boat would be carried away by the

waves. If you don't have the engine on, you need to tie the boat to the dock. However, the harbour patrol fines us if we tie the sampan to the dock during the day. We're only allowed to do this at night.

You need a licence to pilot sampans and have to go through an examination. Without this licence, the harbour patrol will fine you. But, even with the licence we're not allowed to leave the typhoon shelter. The licence we have is only valid for the typhoon shelter in Aberdeen. In the past, when we still rowed the boats, we could go as far as Cheung Chau.

### Seafood, glorious seafood

It is safe to leave the boat next to the dock at night. Other boat people won't steal from us. We're satisfied if we're fed, we don't want more. I buy crab for my kids, and still cook 'Typhoon shelter crab' for them, but not so much for myself... Perhaps it's because I've eaten so much of this type of food that I don't care to eat it much any more.

'Typhoon shelter food' got its name from land people who saw us cooking the fish, clams and shrimps that we know how to cook best. They associated our food with the typhoon shelter, so they named the dishes 'Typhoon shelter clams', and 'Typhoon shelter shrimps'.

Today, fish is our main source of nutrition. Even my grandchildren love to eat it. Being the most important dish at every meal, the fish dish is always first. Then comes the vegetable dish, and lastly the shrimp and crab dishes – which are extras.

Cooking on the boat is really simple. This, here, is

our kitchen [she tells her husband to stand up, and lifts up the cover of a bench]. We have one pot, and a wok. Nowadays, we use gas stoves, but in the old days, we didn't have money for gas so we used firewood lit with matches, as there weren't lighters back then. Boat people who were a little better-off would burn coal, but us poor people would look for branches and dry them in the sun before burning them.

It was very simple. We cooked in a simple way, but the food we ate was no less tasty than the food that was cooked on land.

### Joining oars

Another change that has occurred for boat people in Aberdeen has been getting into the tourism business. There are three docks that do business with tourists here. The other docks in Aberdeen don't just focus on tourists as we mostly do. Instead, they taxi fishermen, and others, around the harbour.

'Big Bus' [a well-known tour company] partners with us. A few of us older sampan ladies registered a company called 'Ocean Court' with the government, because we want to be independent and don't want to take pensions. But just because we're associated with them, it doesn't mean that we can't do other business. We aren't controlled by them, we're free to do what we want.

It happened like this: the person responsible for the tour company approached us, knowing that our business already consisted of tourists. He asked if we could give rides to their customers, who would already have paid by

the time they got into our boats. We said 'Yes', because we want to promote our culture, and preserve it. They asked where we would take the tourists, so I gave them a sample ride and they were very interested, and partnered with us as a business.

On the tour, we take the tourists to see places within the typhoon shelter that show the culture of boat people. We show them how boat people lived on the water, though right now, boat people live a much better life with TVs and washing machines – everything. Back then, we only had oil lamps at night. We tell the tourists how much our lives have improved.

We don't collect money from the tourists – the sampan tour is part of their package. The tourists hand us their tickets from the tour company, and at the end of the month, I take the jar of tickets to the company and collect our earnings.

Business has improved a little bit through the partnership, but if you talk about standard of living, I think it was better before. Comparing HK\$100 I earn now with HK\$50 before, the HK\$50 was worth more 40 years ago due to inflation.

### The good old days

A lot of these postcards on the 'wall' of my boat were taken a long time ago. Tourists who are visiting Hong Kong for the first time would never think that they show the same places that they see today; but people who were here 50 years ago, perhaps as sailors, might recognise the old Hong Kong.

Sometimes, when I give tours to the older cruise ship tourists, I feel nostalgic because some of them have been to Hong Kong, sometimes 40 years ago, and talk about what it used to be like. Usually, they say that they no longer recognise Aberdeen... It's actually possible that I did business with these people back then; and I feel very close to these tourists. There's a sense of familiarity as if we're old friends, because of the memories we share. Sometimes, they come back for another tour with their children before leaving.

Even though I'm not literate and have had no education, my understanding of the world is no less than that of my children who have. The reason is that we illiterate boat people interact with others. We can't read or write, but we can speak, and with foreigners who don't understand us we use hand signals to communicate.

### All I want is freedom

I've always lived in Aberdeen, but we live in public housing now. We used to live in Wong Chuk Hang, but then everyone was moved out because of the MTR station they're building there. The housing estate I now live in is called Shek Pai Wan Estate.

I work on the boat during the day, and could sleep here at night; but my children urge me and my husband to sleep on land, saying it's more comfortable. If you ask me, though, I miss the freedom of the boat. Public housing is very small, about 300 square feet, and there's barely space for six to seven people. Nevertheless, most of the sampan people of my age do live indoors. We're the last generation



of sampan ladies. Mind you, my mother died in her 90s, and my sister's mother is 90-something and still alive.

If you ask many of us, we like being on the boats, because of the sense of freedom. We're a simple people, and have a hard time adjusting to the rhythm of life on the land. We aren't as stressed out, we don't scheme, and we aren't sly like land people. We're simply genuine people...

What inspired me to decorate the boat this way? In the front and middle, I change the decorations according to

the festival. For example, when it's Christmas, I decorate the boat with Christmas decorations – anything suitable for the holiday season is fine. When it is Mid-Autumn festival, I hang lanterns.

Other than that, because fish and shrimps are auspicious to us boat people, I have those types of decorations as well, in the back of the boat. They are our 'cultural decorations'.



### **Looking to the horizon**

How do I feel about the future of the sampan? I don't really think about the future. Boat people don't. We live for the present. For example, you see me now, I am healthy and lively. Tomorrow, I might also wake up healthy, and feel very happy that I can earn another day's money. But the day after tomorrow? I'm not sure. I won't ask, because I don't want to ask.

If we get sick, we aren't like other people who have enough money to go to private doctors. We need to depend on the government. With public healthcare, waiting times are really long and you're likely to die before you receive treatment...

So I don't think about the future. Boat people of my generation don't. Our children do, but we do not. ■