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Venice of the East

By Valery Garrett, January 29, 2004

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An ancient fishing village faces the future

Tai O may be called the Venice of the East, but it's not a tourist spot. Off the beaten track, at the western-most tip of Lantau Island, this historic hamlet is a backwater, a microcosm of life in old China. But since a multi million-dollar facelift has been approved for the oldest fishing village in Hong Kong, it may not stay that way much longer.



Tai O

For now though, little disturbs the peace of Tai O. By mid morning, life has settled down to a steady rhythm formed over five centuries. Fishermen sit under an awning on a junk in the bay, folding nets in readiness for the afternoon's sail to distant waters. A sampan speeds out of the inlet, a stocky fisherwoman squatting at the prow. At a stall in the street near the pier, an old man carefully folds paper around each dried fish. Next door, a woman brings out steamed buns made from peanuts, sugar and sesame seeds, ready for children returning from school.

In the distance, the sweep of mountains resembles a Chinese painting, with shades of grey deepening from pearl to charcoal. Behind them a plane sinks silently on its final approach, a reminder that Chek Lap Kok airport is just out of sight.

The tide is out, the air heavy with the smell of fish, and egrets flutter and dive in the muddy effluent. Huts of grey sheet metal stand on stilts like unsteady storks in the rocky estuary. These are home to the Tanka fisher folk, said to be descendants of ancient sea going gypsies.

Inside a hut, the morning's chores over, housewives play mah-jong, the rattle of tiles accompanying the steady thump of piano keys across the way. Never idle, an old crone in a black samfu squats in the doorway, shelling shrimps for supper. The discordant warble of Chinese opera wafts from an open window. Nearby, old men sit silently under an ancient banyan tree, the air roots hanging down like coarse brown string.

At the entrance to the village, an iron footbridge has replaced the rope ferry, once the only way to cross the inlet dividing the village in two. On the other side, Peggy Chan is pecking away at an old typewriter in the Rural Committee Rooms by the main square. She moved here recently from Kowloon, hired by the Tai O villagers to communicate with the Hong Kong government over local affairs.

Tai O needs her help. As well as the renovations and modernisation triggered by a disastrous fire in July 2000, even bigger changes are planned. Under discussion is a new bridge linking Hong Kong and Macau, via Lantau, and even a container port to be built here on the western shores of the island.

Peggy says the villagers are all for the plans. Mr Cheung, a retired fisherman, joins in: "A new bridge will make it easier for us to get to China, and it should improve the economy. Many people will come to Tai O." But in the next breath they both say how much they like the tranquillity here. "We want change, but not too much," they laugh ruefully. When asked about the proposed container terminal, they shake their heads silently.

The villagers are mindful of their traditional way of life, which continues to survive, despite constant redevelopment in the rest of Hong Kong. They recently assembled a collection of old artefacts - a rice grinding machine, a salt rake, traditional clothing, and other memorabilia. These were displayed in the Committee Rooms, but now the villagers are keen to have a permanent exhibition funded by the Hong Kong government. "A museum would help preserve our heritage," Mr Cheung says.

Perhaps Kwan Tei can lend a hand. Next door to the Committee Rooms is the temple built in the early Ming dynasty, dedicated to the God of War, and everybody's hero. Nearby is another guardian spirit, To Dei Gung, the earth god, in his red tiled shrine. Villagers offer sustenance and ask for help, and in return keep him informed of everything going on.

A narrow lane meanders through the village and emerges at the headland where the creek spills out to sea. The Hau Wong temple has stood here since 1699, built to honour a loyal general to the last Song emperor. Picnic tables nearby afford a superb view of the hamlet behind and the open sea ahead.

Opposite the temple, on the other side of the creek, are the disused salt pans, looking like a muddy, stony field today. They are reached by a rickety wooden bridge, which crosses the inlet in the heart of the village. Here houses overlooking the water have tiny balconies where families sit and call across to each other. Tai O was once the centre of salt making in Hong Kong, a 2000-year-old industry ending when the salt pans finally closed here in 1969.

Back at the village square, a path runs west along the coastline, skirting the fish market where a man arranges scallops to dry like a row of bright orange boiled sweets. At the bend in the path is the Hung Sing temple, built in 1748. Worshipped by all who go to sea, legend has it he is the Dragon King of the Southern Seas, helping all who venture out on them.

The acrid smell of fermenting shrimp paste heralds the village speciality. Shrimps and salt are being fed through a mincing machine, and the mixture stored in tall blue plastic tubs. Men scoop out the pink slurry, slop it onto rattan trays set on trestle tables, and with a sweep of the hand, spread the paste to dry in the sunshine. Bottles are sold in the village - a tiny helping of the paste adds piquancy to a dish.

At the very end of the path, near the once busy ferry pier, Tai O Police station stands deserted in the late afternoon sunshine. Built in 1902, it was one of the oldest in the New Territories until it closed a decade ago,

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What will you do this Valentine's Day?

- A quiet dinner with the one I love
- A steamy night in with my partner
- Alone, crying my eyes out watching Bridget Jones' Diary
- At the Hyatt, in a bed filled with 20,000 roses
- It will be like any other day

due to a declining population. In its heyday in the 70s and 80s, lookout posts were constantly manned when scores of freedom swimmers and illegal immigrants came ashore.

Out in the far west, the sun is setting, casting its golden rays on a shimmering sea. It seems nothing can disturb the tranquillity of Tai O. For the moment, at least.

Box

Tai O is about a two-hour trip from Central, Hong Kong via the MTR to Tung Chung. From there Bus #11 runs to and from Tai O at 30 min intervals.

Passengers transiting Hong Kong can take the frequent shuttle bus service, #S1, from Chek Lap Kok airport to Tung Chung leaving every 6-8 minutes from the passenger terminal building on Ground Floor. The bus to Tai O from Tung Chung takes about 45 minutes. Allow at least two hours in Tai O.

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