



Remembering Iconic Ferries of a Fragrant Harbor

By Geoff Walker

Literally translated, Hong Kong means “**Fragrant Harbor**”, so named by the “Hong” when Hong Kong became a British Colony in 1842 at the conclusion of the Chinese Opium Wars. How “Fragrant” the harbor may have been in those times is a matter of some conjecture, causing one to struggle with the rationale behind the name.

The **Hong Kong to Macau Ferries** were an icon, plying the route between Hong Kong and the Portuguese enclave of Macau, which lies about 40 miles to the west at the estuary of the Pearl River. The service was established soon after Hong Kong’s colonization and continued into the 1980s, albeit with upgraded services and ships. Nowadays of course, there is a 55km Bridge spanning the waters between Hong Kong and Macau, the Hong Kong – Zuhai – Macau Bridge.

As a youngster growing up in Hong Kong, a trip to Macau was considered a great treat. Together with my parents we generally took the passage two or three times every year during the 1950s and early 1960s. The aim of the visit was to attend the Macau Grand Prix or, so my folks could try their luck at the Casinos. If memory serves it was not necessary to wait until arrival in Macau to start gambling as the Ferries offered gambling facilities, open to passengers once clear of Hong Kong waters, Slot Machines, Cards, Fan Tan, Roulette, etc. My last voyage on the old, but much loved, **Fat Shan** was around 1960.

Our favorite was the overnight passage. The ships departed from Sheung Wan Ferry Pier soon after midnight and usually arrived in Macau around 5-6am. Passengers were allowed to remain on board until 7am when they were required to disembark.

Prior to boarding the Ferry in Hong Kong it was usual to spend some time at the “Poor Man’s Nightclub”. This was basically a flea market erected every night around 6pm and it ran until about midnight, when it all disappeared, just as rapidly as it had been set up. It was a fun place to visit for a few hours as it was located in the empty Sheung Wan Bus Terminus and car park adjacent to the Macau Ferry Wharf. One



could buy anything there from electronic goods, through to clothes, Canto pop, Chinese opera, CD’s fortune tellers, snacks, Chinese medicines and potions, letter writers and with noodle shops and Dai Pai Dongs galore - all the usual attributes featured in a traditional Chinese Night Market. Then, just before it closed one would amble the short distance towards the Hong Kong Immigration post and get ready for embarkation on the Ferry. The actual Market location is highlighted in the adjoining image.

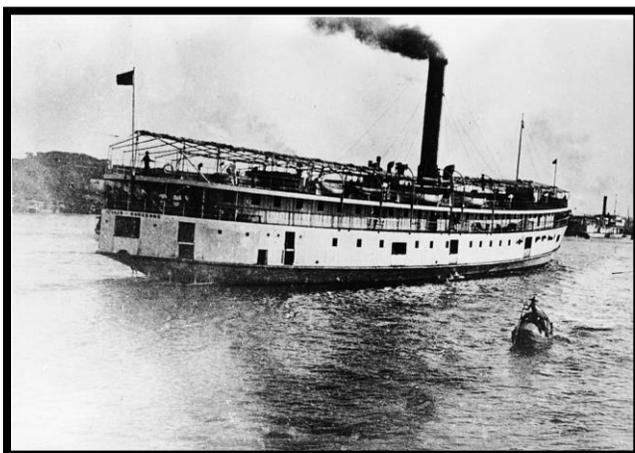
The night crossing seemed to be long but there was plenty to do which prevented much sleep. Apart from the slot machines, it is rumored that onboard entertainment extended to showgirls and striptease, but I never witnessed that. It was however a gathering of jolly passengers all hoping to make their fortunes at the Macau Casinos, each stoked by having drunk several large tumblers of Brandy. However, the return journey was generally a little more subdued since it is not usual for Casinos to lose money.

Macau was a completely more relaxed and “lay back” environment compared to that of Hong Kong, there was a continental air about the place. The Portuguese influence became immediately apparent as soon as one disembarked from the ship at the Macau Ferry Landing, its European style cobbled streets, tree lined avenues, outdoor tea houses and continental fashioned cafes, the wide range of pastries for sale, pedal tricycles, the aromas of drying seafood, and Portuguese culture was visible everywhere. Even the senior police officers were Portuguese nationals. Much of the architecture was heavily Portuguese influenced and the hotels all had their wide verandahs and lofty ceilings with lazy rotating electric fans, built by the colonialists for tropical living. Macau was the first Colony in Asia and the last to be relinquished to China in 1999.

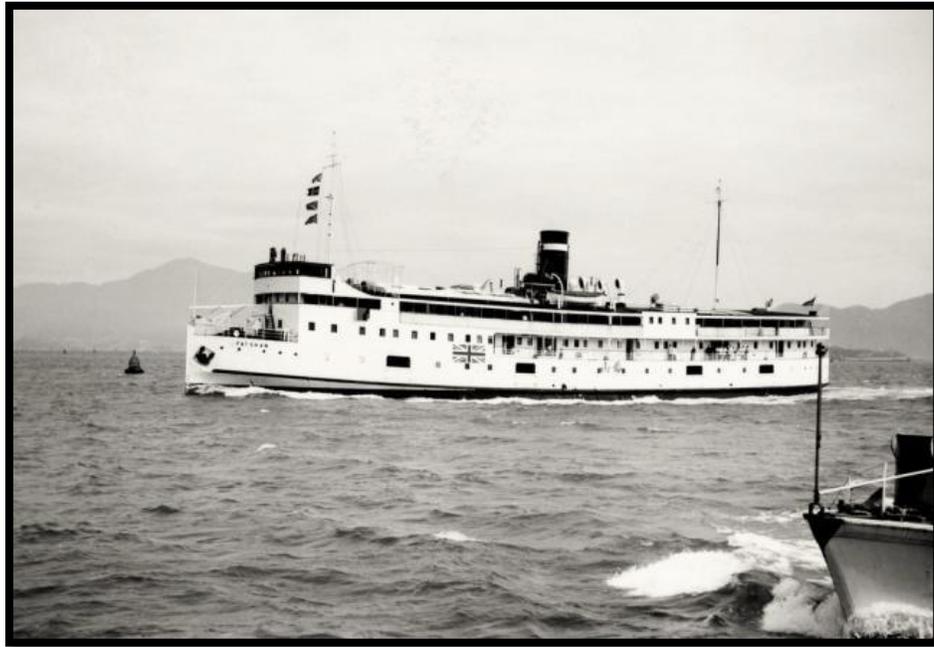
Macau’s main means of revenue was from its gambling Casinos and hotels. Fu Lo Yung jointly held the gambling franchise and monopoly in Macau with Ko Ho Ning from 1937 until his demise in 1960. The gambling license was then lost to a consortium headed by Sir Stanley Ho in 1961, who played a significant role in building the new Ferry terminal at Sheung Wan and introducing more modern ships to the Ferry service, up to and including Hydrofoils, followed by Jetfoils in the 1980s.

There were a number of Ferries engaged on the Hong Kong Macau service; amongst which **Fatshan**, and the post war built **Tai Loy** (later to be renamed **Nam Shan**), complete the duo featured in this article. In May 1951, **Fatshan** was acquired by the Man On Shipping and Navigation Company from the China Navigation Company to whom the vessel had been returned at the conclusion of WW2. During this time, **Fatshan** was one of the main ferry boats operating the Hong Kong to Macao route. This ferry was extremely popular with the traveling public and became an iconic vessel over ensuing years.

By 1961 there was much competition on the route with Stanley Ho’s Shun Tak Shipping enterprises. Competition for the route increased progressively over the following years until the mid to late 60’s when Hydrofoil Ferry services were introduced. In 1968, Sir Stanley Ho’s Tai Tak Hing Shipping Company, a subsidiary company of Shun Tak, acquired **Fatshan** together with **Tai Loy** and continued sailing the vessel on the Hong Kong Macao route.



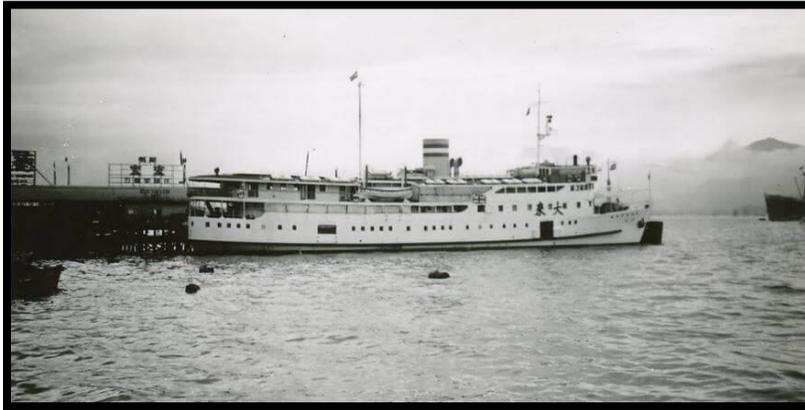
The original **Fatshan**, Hong Kong to Macau Ferry. Captured whilst navigating the Pearl River, built in 1887 she remained on the route until 1933 when scrapped, and replaced by the newer 1933 built Ferry bearing the same name. The waters of the Pearl River were a dirty muddy brown in comparison of the Blue green waters of Hong Kong. The startling contrast was very obvious to passengers.



Above, the later **Fatshan**, seen steaming through Hong Kong waters sometime during the 1960s after she had been taken over by the Tai Tak Hing Shipping Company. The **Fatshan** was built in Hong Kong during 1933 and had a GRT of 2639 tons, a length of 73m, Beam of 14m and was propelled by a 2 - 4 cylinder triple expansion steam engines, producing 2600 IHP, driving twin screws, giving a service speed of 13 knots. Regrettably she **Fatshan** met her demise in in 1971 during Typhoon Rose, when in order to seek shelter the ship had anchored off Stonecutters Island, but due to severe winds her anchors parted and caused her to collide with two other drifting vessels, she finally capsized and sank about 120m off the shoreline of Lantau Island at Kap Sui Mun. 88 passengers and crew were lost as a consequence of the tragedy and at the time it was recorded as Hong Kong's worst maritime disaster.



The wreck of the **Fatshan** can be seen just awash in the foreground of the above image.



The **Tai Loy** built in Hong Kong by Wing On Shung Shipyard. She was laid down in 1948, launched in 1949 and went into full service in 1951. She was a modern, purpose built triple screw motor ship of the times. In imperial measurements she had an overall length of 200 ft and Beam of 36 ft GRT 1330 tons. The vessel was later renamed "**Nam Shan**" and became famous for her

appearance in the 1975 French Movie "Emmanuelle 2", which was filmed in Hong Kong.



The renamed "**Nam Shan**", seen at the Macau Ferry Terminal at Sheung Wan, on Hong Kong Island, with a very smartly turned out official looking on.

These ships were not, as made out by some and depicted in the movies, rundown rust buckets or Hong Kong dust bins. In actuality these were triple deck Ferries, maintained to a good standard under the strict and watchful eye of the Hong Kong Marine Department, and were professionally managed and operated by competent crews.

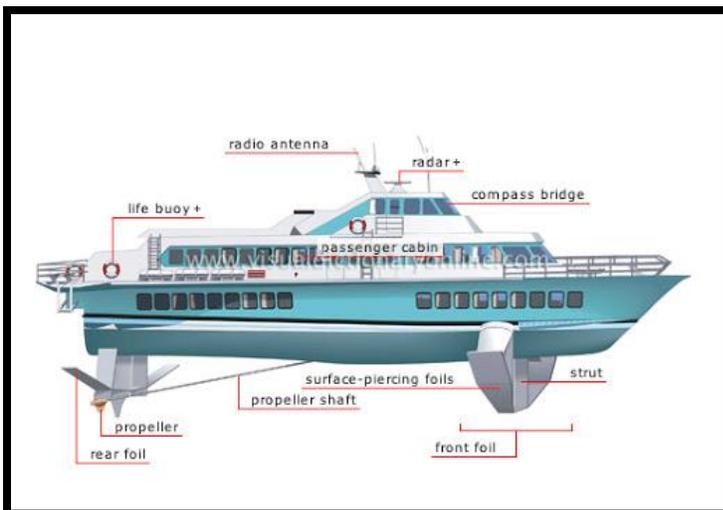
The conventional Ferry Services continued very successfully but it was not long before more up to date technology was introduced with the introduction of Hydrofoils, and later Jetfoils to improve passenger services. The Far East Hydrofoil company (FEH) was formed and became the principal user of this type of Ferry and one of the largest operators in the World to successfully operate this kind of fast Ferry which shortened the 4 hour trip to less than 2 hours. Services commenced in 1964 with two Italian-Swiss designed Hydrofoils, the **Flying Phoenix** and **Flying Kingfisher**. In 1972 Shun Tak Enterprises Corp. Ltd was formed and became the holding company of FEH and other associated shipping. The major stakeholders in FEH were the franchisee of STDM, Societe de Turismo de Macau, which operates a number of casinos in Macau. Gradually the fleet was increased to some 11 vessels offering a departure schedule every 30 minutes from Hong Kong and Macau, between 8am - 6.30pm daily. However, during the 1980s the Hydrofoils were progressively phased out of service due to the increasing competition from the Jetfoil.

Boeing Jetfoils were engaged in the service which further enhanced the route. They were were run by **Far East Hydrofoil / Far East Jetfoil** with the principal stakeholder - Shun Tak operating about a dozen craft. This all remained intact until 1999 when a merger took place which created **TurboJET** as the major player. Hong Kong has developed an excellent Ferry infrastructure, with multiple ferry companies offering high-speed crossings with modern, luxurious vessels. With numerous departure points in Hong Kong, you can now travel to destinations in China and Macau.

The Hong Kong to Macau terminal, at Sheung Wan, is one of the most prominent facilities in Hong Kong. It consists of the major marine facilities and customs and immigration for all services to and from Macau. Additionally, there are two major towers, an hotel and an office complex, with a shopping mall in between and subway connections underground. In Hong Kong, it is called: "The House that the Jetfoil built"



TurboJET's Boeing Jetfoil "**Santa Maria**" entering Victoria Harbor on its return trip from Macau. Sometime during 1980s.



A simplistic layout of a typical Hydrofoil, similar to those used by the HMHC from 1964 through to 1980s



Typical economy class seating arrangement used on jetfoils operated by TurboJET. Airline type seating was standard on all Ferries. It was quite a novel feature in the early days when first introduced.



Hong Kong Hydrofoil Company's "Flying Albatross" riding high on her foils



TurboJET Ticket Counter at Shun Tak Center, Sheun Wan, in Hong Kong.



Alas, times have changed now with a new alternative link between Hong Kong and Macau. Will this signal the end of Ferry services as we know them today? The Hong Kong –Zhuhai–Macau Bridge, (HZMB) is a 55-kilometre Bridge –Tunnel system consisting of a series of three cable-stayed Bridges, a section of undersea tunnel, and four artificial islands. It is both the longest sea crossing and the longest open-sea fixed link in the World.

Built by Chinese interests, the lead Designer was the Mott Macdonald Group – a London based multinational firm which provides engineering, architecture, design, planning, project management and consulting services. It stands as a spectacular mega achievement for all concerned in its construction. As a ditty, when visited by the Author last year (1990) the cost of a single way bus ticket was a very reasonable discounted rate of HK\$ 32 for retirees, (normally HK\$ 64 for non-retirees), the one way trip taking about 30 minutes in a comfortable bus. This magnificent spectacle will surely have a substantial impact on traditional Hong Kong – Macau Ferry services.



On a more localized note there is the **Star Ferry Company Limited**. This must rank as the first thing anyone associates with Hong Kong. Few visitors to Hong Kong miss taking the essential cross harbor ride on these, beautiful purpose built, ships.

The **Star Ferry's** history stems back to 1888 when a resident Indian merchant, Dorabjee Naorojee Mithaiwala, founded the **Kowloon Ferry Company** to span the 1 mile, distance between Hong Kong Island and Kowloon peninsula, at Tsim Tsa Tsui. Prior to the **Star Ferry** the only means of going back and forth between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island was by Sanpan. In 1898, upon his retirement and return to India, Mr Naorojeethe sold the company to The Hongkong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company Limited, at that time owned by Jardine, Matheson & Co. and Sir Catchik Paul Chater, by which time the fleet had increased to four Ferries plying the cross harbor route. The service then became known as the **Star Ferry Company**. The names of the original four Ferries engaged in the service were – **Morning Star, Evening Star, Rising Star and Guiding Star**. **At that time**, each boat had a passenger capacity of 100 and the fleet made a combined total of 147 harbor crossings per day.

In 1906 the company constructed its first passenger pier at the end of Salisbury Road in Tsim Tsa Tsui, but in September the same year it was destroyed in a Typhoon. It was an impressive structure featuring segregation of First and Second Class, passengers.

1912 saw the company involved in controversy; at that time Hong Kong currency and Canton currency were both accepted as legal tender in Hong Kong. In the autumn of 1912, the Star Ferry caused a controversy by insisting, that payment had to be made in Hong Kong currency only. Canton coinage would no longer be accepted. More progress, and expansion, was evidenced over ensuing years as the service grew in popularity, and profitability, with the introduction of the first Diesel Electric Ferry

introduced in 1933, aptly named **Electric Star**. Further developments were introduced when early in the 1950s, construction of the present twin piers commenced on both sides of Victoria Harbor, designed to handle 55 million passengers each year. These structures were eventually completed in 1957, along with the Edinburgh Place Ferry Pier built on the Hong Kong Island.

At the time of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong in 1941, the Star Ferry Company had acquired a total of 6 Ferries. The **Golden Star** and the **Meridian Star** were used to transport prisoners of war from Sham Shui Po to Kai Tak Airport, and during 1943 the **Golden Star** was bombed and sunk in the Canton River by American aircraft. The **Electric Star** was also sunk in the harbor. Following WW2, the Ferries were recovered and returned to normal service. As the infrastructure of Hong Kong quickly recovered after the war years, so did the **Star Ferry Company Limited**, with it expanding its fleet and adding a new service from Hung Hom to both Central and Wanchai, at the request of the Hong Kong Government (both these routes being terminated in 2011) Until the opening of the first Cross Harbor Tunnel in 1972, the Star Ferry remained the principal means of public transportation between Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon peninsula. The Star Ferry, to this day, operates on a franchise from the Government, which was last renewed in March 2018.

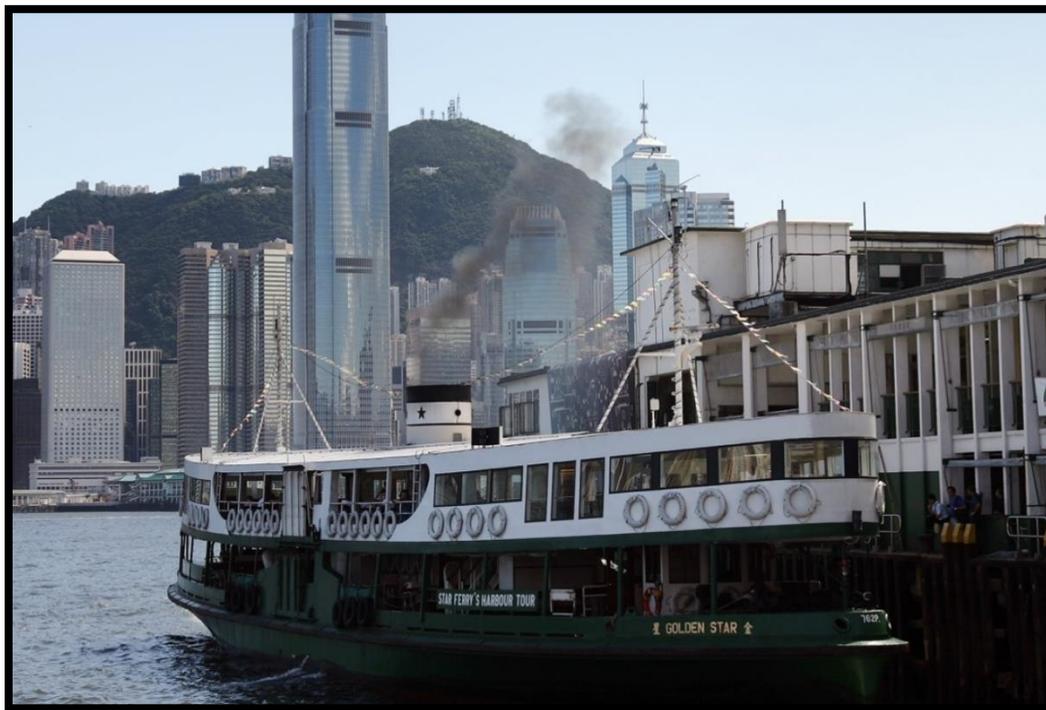
There was more controversy pending, in 1966, when a fare increase of 5 cents (or 25%) by the Ferry, allegedly instigated by the Government became a political boiling point, as it caused a 27-year-old student to go on hunger strike in protest at the Edinburgh Place terminal. His arrest triggered the 1966 Hong Kong Riots, which became particularly nasty as they were stoked by Communist agitators from mainland China.



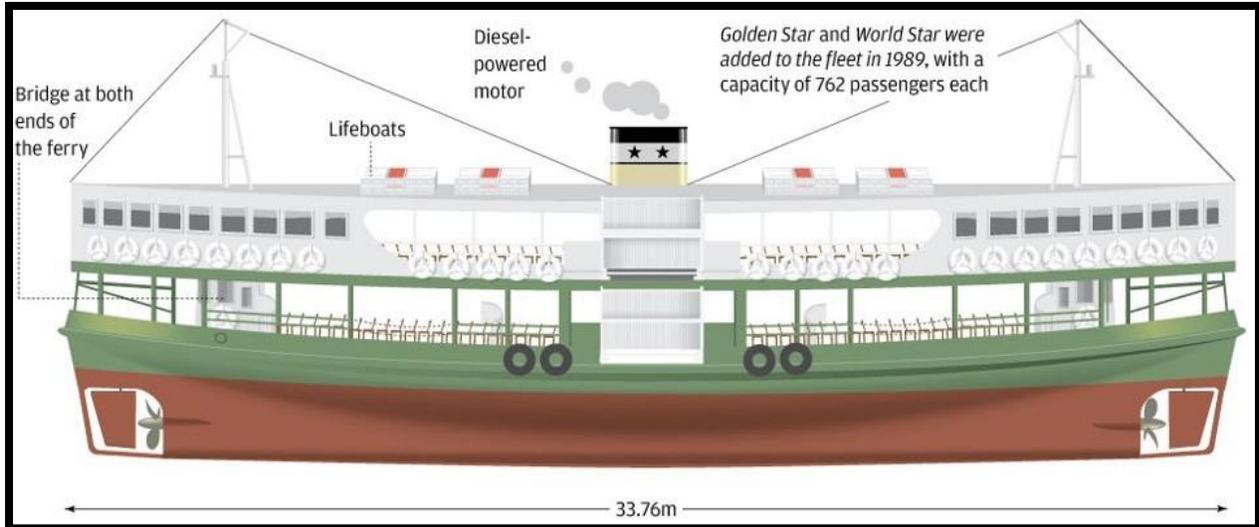
A pre-war Star Ferry with its iconic Funnel markings, which remain unchanged to this day.



Taken in the early 1950s from the Hong Kong Island Star Ferry Pier



A modern day Ferry, "Golden Star" at Tsim Tsa Tsui two tier Ferry Pier. Photo credit Felix Wong



Above is a rough drawing of a typical Star Ferry. Note the navigating bridge Fore and Aft on the lower deck. Upper deck was for First Class and Lower deck Second Class. True Icons of the World's most photographed Port. There are currently 9 diesel-electric Ferries in the Star Ferry fleet, with the same basic design features prevailing. The numbering followed by the letter "P" painted on the Hull, denotes the number of passengers the Ferry is certified to carry.

Nowadays, passengers use electronic payment methods such as Octopus or Jetcon tokens to pay for the ride. Tokens are available in the vending machines at the piers. Direct payment by coins at a turnstile is no longer accepted.



Credit: Carl Smith

Panoramic view of old and new, As seen from City Hall in mid 2000s. Old Star Ferry Pier (front left) and Queen's Pier (front right). The new Star Ferry piers (background left) now in full operation.



The **Hong Kong Yamauti Ferry Company Limited (HYF)** was a highly visible force when it came to Ferries in Hong Kong. In its heyday, this Ferry group, managed well over 20 Ferries engaged in cross harbor and inter Island services, to the outlying Island of Hong Kong. It was also involved in vehicular Ferry services, especially important prior to the first of the **Cross Harbor Tunnels** coming on stream in 1972, when it was the only option available.



One of the many **HYF Ferries**, serving Hong Kong and the outlying Islands. Notice the numbers and “P” painted on the stern which signifies her maximum passenger carrying capacity.

The original company was established in Hong Kong in 1897 by Mr.Lau Tak Po, a Chinese businessman. He bought 5 wooden boats and commenced providing Ferry services exclusively around Kowloon under the name of “**Yaumati Ferry**”. In 1924 “**Yaumati Ferry**” obtained the franchise license for the rights to the transportation route, preventing competition from the **Star Ferry Company**. Consequently, the **Yaumati Ferry Company** became the largest Chinese-owned company in the world at that time, profiting from the transportation demand of massive expansion on the Kowloon peninsula. The company eventually became known as “**Hong Kong and Yaumati Ferry**”. This included the vehicular ferry which served to transport motor vehicles across Victoria Harbor for many decades (1933 to 1998) previous to the opening of the **Cross Harbor Tunnel**, **Eastern Harbor Tunnel** and **Western Harbor Tunnel** in 1972, 1989 and 1997 respectively. HYF also engaged their **Triple Deck Ferries Man Shing**, **Man Ping** and **Man Kin** in “Round the Island” excursions during holidays and weekends.

The company decided to relinquish its Ferry licenses in 1999, and these licenses were transferred to the New World First Ferry on 15 January 2000.

Although HYF gave up its franchised ferry licenses in 2000, the company retained the **Dangerous Goods** and **Vehicular Ferry Service** routes between North Point, Kwun Tong, and Mui Wo, as DG carrying vehicles were not permitted to transit any of the three Cross Harbor tunnels, while Mui Wo is situated on Lantau Island.



The HYF Vehicular Ferry Pier at Central, around the early to mid - 1950s. The only means for vehicles to cross the harbor at the time; well before the introduction of the initial Cross Harbor Tunnel in 1972.



Another view of the HYF's Vehicular Ferry Piers at Central, on Hong Kong Island - Just as it was in the 1970s.

According to public records, Henderson Investment Ltd. is HYF's largest shareholder, as at Jan 2006. **Henderson Investment Limited** is primarily involved in property developments, investment and leasing of properties in Hong Kong and mainland China. Other activities include operations and management of department stores.



HYF Vehicular Ferry. Note the advertisement displayed on ship's side promoting a new residential development reflecting HYF's principal shareholders' property interests.



Converted HYF Vehicular Ferry "Man Lok", Built 1982, now a floating restaurant and entertainment vessel. Providing cruises around Victoria Harbor and Hong Kong waters



One of HYF's last triple deck Ferries built in 1988, the ex - **Man Kwok**, renamed **Xin Guo** when sold to NWFF in 1999, now part of NWS Holdings Limited

So, now this era has almost drifted into oblivion and we will need to engage our memory buds to bring back those snippets of nostalgia, but times past come rushing back, so easily triggered by sight, sound or smell. A visit to modern day Hong Kong makes it so easy to ponder and drift back into a nostalgic trance of days long gone and entwined amongst Hong Kong's sunsets of longevity.



A rising sun in the East signals the arrival of a new day in today's Hong Kong

End

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