

Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell

Volume 5



David Bellis

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**Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell
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Introduction

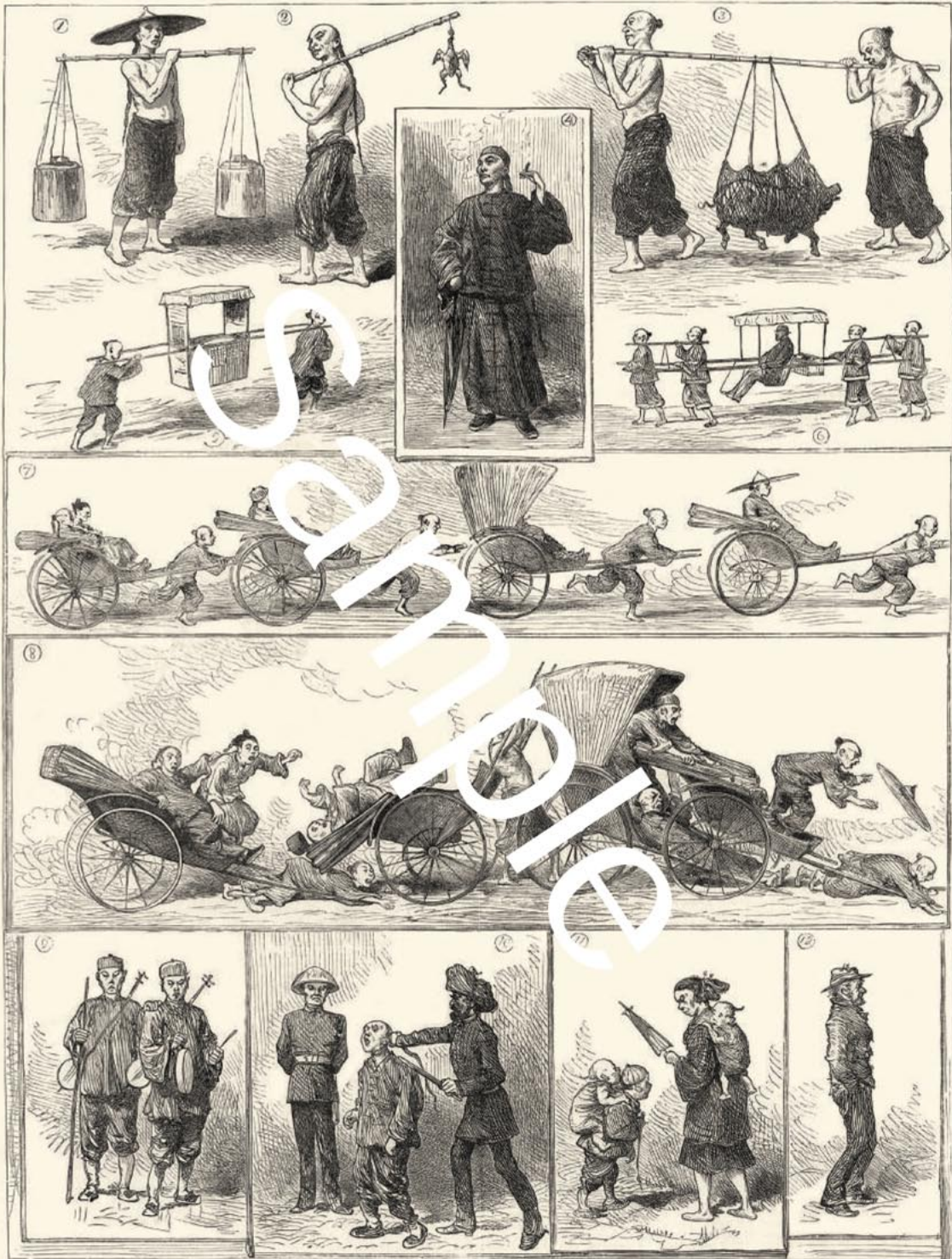
I knew I wanted this book to show Hong Kong's people, but I wasn't sure what I'd write about them. I turned to their photos for ideas ...



Looking at all those faces – young, old, local, foreign – I wondered who among them called Hong Kong ‘home’, and who felt they were just visiting, as it’s a question I’ve been asking myself recently.

When the party of marines and officers raised the British flag at Possession Point in 1841, there was no doubt about the answer. Hong Kong Island was home to its population of around 6,000, and the British were visitors. Visitors were clearly in the minority, but I doubt that either group could have imagined how quickly that would change.

The 1881 census shows Hong Kong’s population had exploded to over 160,000. After just 40 years, the original Hong Kongers made up less than 4% of the total, and Hong Kong had become a city of newcomers. Would they make it their home? Let’s meet some of them to find out.



1. A Seller of Oil.
8. A Compound Collision.

2. "Massa's Dinner."
9. Street Musicians (Mind).

3. "A Pig in a Pole."

4. A Compradore.
10. Hong-Kong Police.

5 and 6. Portable Chairs or Litters.
11. Taking Care of Baby.

7. Jierickshaw.
12. "Jack" ashore.

Photo ① : ‘Sketches at Hong Kong’

One year after the 1881 census, the *Illustrated London News* (ILN) published this full-page engraving, titled ‘Sketches at Hong Kong’.

The ILN was launched in 1842, making it almost the same age as British Hong Kong. It caused a stir, looking very different from the typical newspaper of the time. The newspaper norm was text and lots of it, but the first issue of the ILN managed to cram 32 illustrations into its 16 pages.

This new style was a great success, with the growth of the ILN outpacing even that of Hong Kong. By the end of 1842 circulation had passed 60,000. It reached 200,000 in 1855, and continued to grow.

The illustrations that drove these sales were produced by skilled engravers. They’d receive artists’ sketches, or later photographs, and set to work engraving the images for use on the printing presses. I imagined they’d be engraving metal plates, but in fact they used wooden blocks. Not just any wood, though: they used a very dense, hard type of wood known as boxwood that was more durable than the metal plates of the day. Even after printing hundreds of thousands of copies, the hard-wearing boxwood could still print a sharp image.

The large print runs mean that many copies of the ILN have survived, making them a good source of images of early Hong Kong. We mustn’t assume they’re all accurate, however. If the original image wasn’t very clear, the engravers would need to use their own judgement to decide what it showed. Having never been to Hong Kong, they could easily make mistakes.

Fortunately there aren’t any glaring mistakes here. The artist not only did a good job of sketching, but also of choosing scenes that would be popular with overseas viewers. I doubt the artist had any plans to start a trend, but as we look at the postcards sold to tourists 30, 40, and even 50 years later, we’ll see they repeat many of these same themes.





Photo ④ : Jinrickshaws and portable chairs



About a third of the ILN page is taken up with sketches of what they describe as ‘Jinrickshaws’ and ‘Portable Chairs or Litters’. This photo shows them too, though its title is ‘Jinrikisha and Carrying Chairs’. Today we call them ‘rickshaws’ and ‘sedan chairs’.

Sedan chairs were the older of the two. The ILN’s readers would have recognised them, but would have seen them as quaint and old fashioned. Sedan chairs had been popular in London in the 1600s and 1700s, but had disappeared from the streets by the mid-1800s.

Sedan chairs had a much longer history in China, and were still in widespread use in the 1840s. They quickly became the standard means of transport in Hong Kong. As seen in the photo above, there were several different styles of chair in use. Front and centre is the chair carrying the bearded man wearing a topee (sun helmet).



He's using the most basic form of chair, a simple seat and footrest suspended from two poles, minimising the weight for the carriers.

Beyond him, the woman is sitting in the more usual type of chair in which the passenger sits semi-enclosed. I'm used to seeing her style of chair with the roof and the man's lighter chair without, but here they're reversed, with the woman relying on her parasol for shade.



A team of four men carries her chair. Sometimes the larger team was needed to handle a long, uphill climb, but other times it was used as a way to show off the rider's status. Here's the Prince of Wales visiting Hong Kong in 1922, with his sedan chair carried by a team of eight!



Despite the sedan chairs' early success, they were quickly overtaken by the newly-arrived rickshaws. Originating from Japan, the rickshaw first appeared on Hong Kong's streets in 1874. That was a privately-owned vehicle, but it started a trend that led to rickshaws being made available for public hire in 1880.

If you turn back to the ILN sketches and look at the rickshaw on the left, can you spot what is unusual about it?

Those first rickshaws were much wider and, as the ILN sketch shows, could carry two passengers. The government soon issued new regulations that made the rickshaw narrower, so that it could only carry one adult. It would be nice to think this change was made with the rickshaw puller's welfare in mind, but instead it was done for the welfare of Hong Kong's roads. The first rickshaws were found to cut up the road surface. The single passenger made the rickshaws lighter which, together with a switch to wider wheels, helped tackle the problem.

As the new regulations were introduced in mid-1882, we're lucky the artist caught the older model before it disappeared. Then is the rickshaw below one of the new, narrower models? We can't be sure from this angle, but if it is, then it is one of the first: the photo must have been taken before the end of 1882, when the building on the left, Wardley House, was demolished.

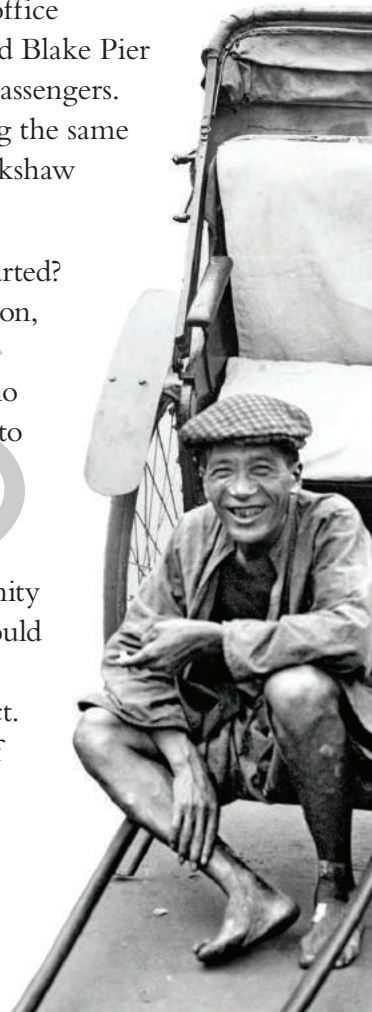




The 1880s photo was taken on the seafront when it ran along Des Voeux Road. The men shown above are also on the seafront, but their photo is from the 1920s, when the seafront had moved north to Connaught Road. Their rickshaw rank stood in front of the original St George's Building. With several large office buildings nearby, the Star Ferry pier to the left, and Blake Pier to the right, this was a prime location to pick up passengers. The men look to be a tight-knit group, all wearing the same style of hats and clothes. I doubt any unknown rickshaw pullers would have been welcomed here.

This was a problem for new arrivals – how to get started? The lucky ones would arrive with a family connection, e.g. 'Get in touch with third uncle's son-in-law'. Or maybe there was someone from the same village who could help. Failing that, our newcomer would have to look for one of the larger groupings, typically of people from the same part of China. Early English-language descriptions of Hong Kong mention 'Chinatown', as though the whole Chinese community was one unit. The new arrivals knew better, and would be listening out for a snatch of familiar dialect, identifying the speaker as someone from their district. Once they joined a group, wearing the same style of hat and clothes solidified the group's identity.

But there's always one who didn't get the memo ...



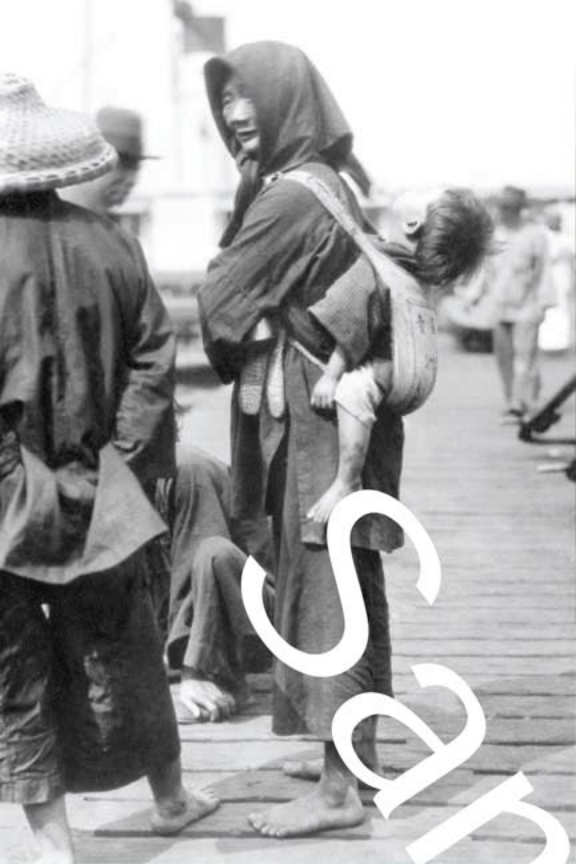


Photo ⑦ : Baby carriers

Sketch 11 on the ILN page, ‘Taking Care of Baby’, shows one aspect of local family life that visitors found fascinating: the cloth baby carriers.

They were a simple design, a cloth square with straps on the corners that tied across your chest. The straps aren't clear to see in the ILN sketch – the babies seem to be hanging on to the people's shoulders instead. I think it's an example of the engraver being given something they hadn't seen before, and not getting the engraving quite right. We get a much better view in the selection of early 20th-century photos and postcards to the left.



The first photo at top left shows a woman carrying a child, probably her first or youngest, in a cloth square that is decorated with an embroidered pattern. The child is sleeping soundly, despite having their head lolled back and their neck bent at an alarming angle. Let's hope they are enjoying the luxury of being carried around, as it wouldn't last long.

In those days of large families with lots of siblings, children were soon given the job of carrying a younger brother or sister, as shown in the other three scenes. The two colour views clearly started life as the same black and white photo, but two different postcard publishers chose two different backgrounds and colour schemes. The boy's shaved forehead dates the original photo to 1911 or earlier.

The last photo shows an urgent need of another cloth square: a hanky!

Sample





Photo ⑫ : British civilians



The rest of the British people living in Hong Kong came under the heading ‘British civilians’ in the 1931 census. They included business employees, government workers (police, education, public works, etc.), and their spouses and children. The author of the 1921 census didn’t hold his civilian compatriots in very high esteem:

Except for a few professional men, employees of the Dock Companies and Civil servants, the European population almost completely changes every 5 years. Most of the employees of the various firms only complete one tour of duty here, and then after the expiration of their home leave are transferred elsewhere. These facts fully explain the allegations of the lack of public spirit in the Colony.

Hong Kong’s English-language newspapers from that time also show that few expats thought of Hong Kong as their long-term home. The press typically spelled home with a capital H, which was always used to refer to Britain. Considering anywhere else to be home would have been very unpatriotic!

Even so, the people in this photo look well-settled, with a mix of friends and family, and membership at the local golf club. Would they stay beyond five years? Luckily there are notes on the back of the photo that may give us the answer. They say that the photo was taken at 'Golf House, Deep Water Bay' on New Year's Day in 1916, and, even better, list out the people's names. From left to right we have Cedric, Maud, Father, Lewis, Mr Hosie, Mrs Duncan, and Annie.



As Hosie and Duncan are both Scottish surnames, and many of the men working at the dockyards came from Scotland, I guessed the families shown above were some of the 'employees of the Dock Companies' that the census author set apart from the more migratory Europeans. A quick scan down the 1916 Jurors List confirms it – Mr Edward Lumsden Hosie was an accountant, Mr George Duncan was a foreman plumber, and both of them worked for the Dock Company at Hung Hom.

Mr Hosie was certainly here for the long term, as he appears in every Jurors List from 1915 to 1941. Unluckily for him, he then appears on the 1942 list of civilian internees, meaning he was here during the war and interned at Stanley Camp. He was 57 in 1942, so he was one of the older men in that camp. He lived to see the

Japanese surrender in 1945, by which time he was over 60, having spent half his life here in Hong Kong. He'd have returned 'Home' for recuperation with the other internees, and most likely remained there. He died in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1971.

I wish we knew as much about the man in the topee, but whenever he appears in photos he is simply labelled 'Father', which isn't very helpful! I guess he had a senior position at the docks, though, as the 1917 photo below shows he was wealthy enough to drive one of Hong Kong's first motor cars, with its registration a low number 19.



The note on the back of this photo says it was taken at Fanling, showing it was already possible to drive there from Kowloon by 1917. When the British leased the New Territories (NT) in 1898, travel between towns and villages still relied on the network of footpaths and narrow tracks that had developed over the centuries. The British set to work building roads.

The first of these new roads linked Kowloon to Tai Po. It was 'justified by administrative and military needs', and was finished in 1902. Tai Po was the administrative centre in the NT, and the Six-Day War had shown the need to move troops quickly in case of trouble. The NT stayed peaceful, though, so instead of soldiers rushing north, the traffic on the new road was mostly southbound, delivering cattle from China to Kowloon.

At the end of 1911 another, longer road was finished. It ran all the way from Castle Peak Bay (today's Tuen Mun) in the southwest corner of the NT to Sha Tau Kok and the border with China in the northeast. It also met the Tai Po Road at Fanling, extending the options for Kowloon's drivers. Two years later a third section of road joined Castle Peak Bay to Sham Shui Po, completing the Kowloon – Tai Po – Fanling – Yuen Long – Castle Peak Bay – Kowloon circuit. This long circular drive was a popular weekend outing for those lucky enough to have a car.

Maybe the family were out for a scenic drive when the photo opposite was taken? Or perhaps another game of golf was calling, as the 1911 road also gave them access to the Fanling Golf Course. They were certainly a family who enjoyed their sports, as other photos from their album show them playing tennis and swimming in the sea.

The photo below shows a different family enjoying a more leisurely competition. The note on the back always tickles me: 'At Pokfulam Nov 26/09 after a game of crochet'. Competitive crochet – now that would be a sport to behold! Alas, no crochet hooks to be seen here; instead, the hoops and mallets show they'd just finished a game of *croquet*.





Sample

Photo 13 : A civil-military marriage

The civil and military sides of British life came together for this marriage of Miss Dorothy Muriel Holyoak to Captain Charles Douglas Armstrong, MC, of the 1st Battalion, the East Surrey Regiment.

Their wedding was held at St John's Cathedral on 16 October 1926, the time of year for perfect wedding weather in Hong Kong. Dorothy was no stranger to the Cathedral as she was christened there back in 1905, together with her sister Joyce. They were likely twin sisters, as their parents were married almost exactly one year before the christening.

As the photo shows, after the wedding ceremony the new husband and wife stepped out below an arch of swords, held aloft by Captain Armstrong's fellow officers. The couple didn't have far to walk though, as a car was waiting for them that, according to military tradition, men from Armstrong's regiment would pull to their next destination.

We've witnessed this tradition before in Volume 3 (p. 60). That occasion was a naval wedding, held further up Garden Road at St Joseph's Church. Their car was heading downhill, which meant the sailors 'pulling' the car didn't really have any work to do. But Mr and Mrs Armstrong were heading uphill from here to their reception at Government House. These soldiers would be working hard.



Hopefully there was a cold drink waiting for the soldiers when they arrived. The rest of the several hundred guests headed indoors for the reception, greeted first by the Governor and his wife in the drawing room, and then by the new couple in the ballroom. A group photo was taken in the grounds of Government House to commemorate the day.



Standing, from left to right, are Hong Kong's Governor Sir Cecil Clementi, Mrs N G Holyoak (bride's mother), Captain C D Armstrong (groom), Miss M J Holyoak (bride's sister and chief bridesmaid), and Lieutenant C J Yeo (best man).

Seated are Lady Clementi and Mrs D M Armstrong (bride), with the two other bridesmaids, Dione and Cecily Clementi, at their feet.

Apart from the bridesmaids, there aren't many smiles among the group. In particular, I wondered if perhaps the mother, Mrs Holyoak, disapproved of the match? But looking more closely, she

is wearing a black lace gown and a black hat, both signs of mourning. Her husband, Dorothy's father, had died less than five months earlier, so there must have been mixed emotions on this day. This also explains the presence of the governor, Sir Cecil Clementi, KCMG, as he had kindly stepped in to give the bride away at the altar. The late Mr Holyoak (shown right, in 1924) had been the chairman of the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce and several other major organisations in Hong Kong. As he was also a member of both the Executive and Legislative Councils, the governor would have known him well.



From Government House the couple headed north to Fanling where they spent their honeymoon. (That's a bit far for the soldiers to pull a car, so hopefully the driver was allowed to start the engine!) The honeymoon was all too brief, as the local newspaper announced that 'Capt. Armstrong and his wife will leave for India with the East Surrey Regiment on Wednesday, 27 October'.

Captain Armstrong was a career soldier who joined the Army in 1915 and fought in both world wars. Between the wars he followed the 1st Battalion to Egypt, Sudan, Hong Kong, and India. This latest relocation was nothing special for him; it was just one of many.

But how did Dorothy feel about it? Although she was an old hand at sea travel, and may well have visited India before, moving there as a young army wife would have been very different. Sadly, with the benefit of hindsight we see that it didn't work out – records show that the couple divorced, and that both had remarried by the mid-1930s.





sample

阿司匹靈藥餅

Photo 18 : Americans



An American sailor has swapped places with the rickshaw puller in this photo from 1929. The sailor was serving on the USS *Tulsa*, an American gunboat that had previously been stationed off Central America. The *Tulsa* joined the Asiatic Fleet in early 1929, so this was probably one of the sailor's first visits to Hong Kong. He's wearing a white 'dixie cup' hat, not the darker 'flat hat' we saw earlier in the Happy Valley Grandstand photo.

The American community in Hong Kong is the last one large enough to get its own segment on the 1931 pie chart, with 494 members. Well, 494 give or take a few hundred. The exact number is up for debate, and part of the confusion is due to that Asiatic Fleet.

The census count included everyone on the ships in the Victoria harbour on census day. The odd passenger or two doesn't make a big difference, but on 7 March 1931 an American naval transport was visiting with 133 men and 37 women on board – subtract them, and the size of the American community drops significantly, to 324.

The bigger issue is that the table I used for the pie chart is based on race. If we switch to a different census table that recorded people by nationality, we get a total of 1,326 Americans. The largest addition is the 446 people who reported Chinese race but American nationality.

Those 446 people likely traced their American nationality back to the wave of Chinese immigration in the mid-19th century, as in 1882 the USA introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act to block further Chinese immigration. Australia followed in 1901 with its White Australia policy, then Canada in 1923 with its revised Chinese Immigration Act. Race and nationality were hot topics at the time, so it's not surprising they receive so much attention in the 1931 census.

Our sailor would have spent the 1930s on the *Tulsa* calling at ports along the coast of China, sailing inland along the Yangtze River, and occasionally visiting the Philippines, where the Asiatic Fleet was based. The *Tulsa* was in the Philippines in December 1941, but managed to evade the Japanese attacks to reach the Dutch East Indies, and then Australia. She survived the war.

The Americans caught up in the war here in Hong Kong were also able to make a lucky escape. Japan was willing to give them their freedom in exchange for the release of Japanese internees who were being held in camps in the USA. So although the Americans were interned in Stanley Camp in January 1942, at the end of June they were released to board the *Asama Maru*, which carried them to Mozambique. There a carefully-choreographed exchange took place as the Japanese and Americans swapped ships. The Americans boarded the *Gripsholm* and, almost two months after leaving Stanley, arrived safely in New York.

Later wars would see American servicemen escaping to Hong Kong. During the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s, many of those servicemen chose to visit Hong Kong for their R&R (rest and recuperation). Business boomed for Hong Kong's tailors and camera shops, and especially for Wanchai's bars.

Not your typical photo book!

Meet the people of old Hong Kong through these rare photos, dating from the 1950s right back to the 1880s. There are cobblers, conjurers, compradores, croquet players, soldiers, sailors, Scottish golfers, hawkers, a Hungarian motorcyclist, and more! Who among them called Hong Kong 'home'? Join David to find out, as he uncovers clues in the photos' details that reveal each person's story.

David runs Gwulo.com, the award-winning local history website with over 30,000 photos of old Hong Kong.

In this latest selection from Gwulo.com's inexhaustible trove of old photos, David continues to find life and meaning in the most unlikely places. This is a brilliantly sympathetic exploration of the people, professions and communities who made Hong Kong work.

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In his fifth volume of *Old Hong Kong Photos and The Tales They Tell*, acclaimed historian David Bellis looks at the most important part of any society: its people. From all walks of life, here they are – young and old, rich and poor, local and foreign – all breathing life and energy into this place that so many have called 'home'.

Prof. John Carroll,
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