

Learning the Ropes at Hong Kong's Sea School

The naval-style school delivers strict discipline to lower-achieving teenagers

by Yoyo Chan, James Fung & Cherry Wong



It is a misty early spring morning. Some 200 boys flock to the playground before daybreak; many have rushed here directly from their dormitory beds, even before they have had a chance to wash. A gust blowing in from the sea spears through a line of boys while their seniors are calling the roll. Braving the chill, they start the morning jog. Then they are assigned to different duties, such as doing the laundry and cleaning the dormitory. When they complete the housework, they put on their smart naval-style uniforms and get ready for the quick march drill.

This routine plays out every day in the Hong Kong Sea School. Some may have retained an impression of the campus, with its white utilitarian buildings facing onto Stanley

beach, but few may know what happens inside.

The school was founded in 1946, and provided basic education and training in seamanship to orphans from World War II and homeless children. Later, it became the first “practical” school in Hong Kong.

Following moves to bring practical schools into the mainstream and reduce the stigma attached to students attending them, the school began to admit students through centralised allocation in 2001 instead of just receiving students referred from mainstream schools.

Yet, it retains most of its characteristics, such as maritime training, compulsory board and lodging and, most of all, strict discipline.

Traditional English military training is

The school believes doing morning exercises teaches the students discipline

just during the morning drill. Every time the students cross the playground they have to march. They have to greet their superiors with a salute. They have to keep their hair very short. There are mirrors all over the campus so they can straighten out their uniforms from time to time.

Lights out is at 9:30 p.m. daily. Students are not allowed to leave the school during weekdays. On Sunday, they have to return by 9 p.m. The school has a system whereby staff

at the nearby convenience store will inform teachers if students sneak out.


“I think the youngsters nowadays do not have a clear idea of regulations. They even snatch away the microphone and talk back to the Chief Executive [of Hong Kong],” Chan says. “There should be order otherwise [society] would be chaotic. You should first obey, and raise your questions later.”

When the students are asked about their most memorable experience at the school,

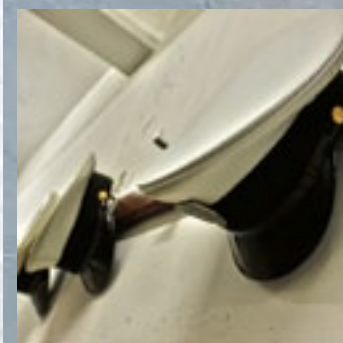
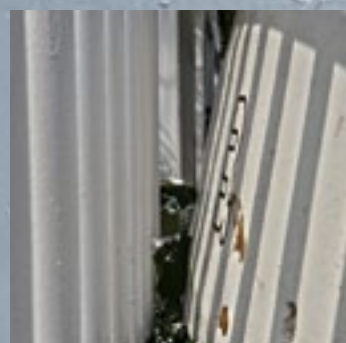
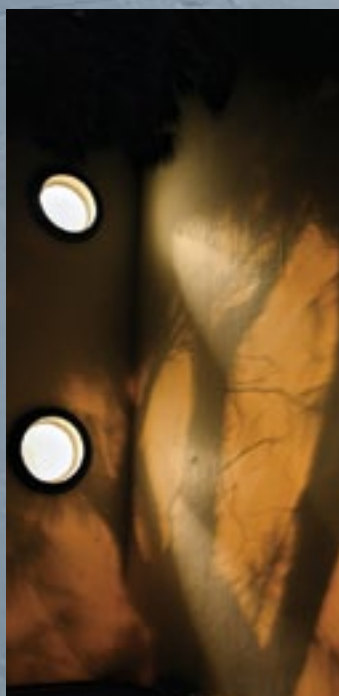
a form six student, identified as Fung, says: “[We] had to march even if it was raining heavily. We were kept standing in the playground for so long. [They] did not allow us to leave.”

“Basically we would do everything the instructors told us to. Even if their requirement is too harsh, we still have to first obey before we speak out. This is one of the things I have learnt throughout these years,” Fung adds.

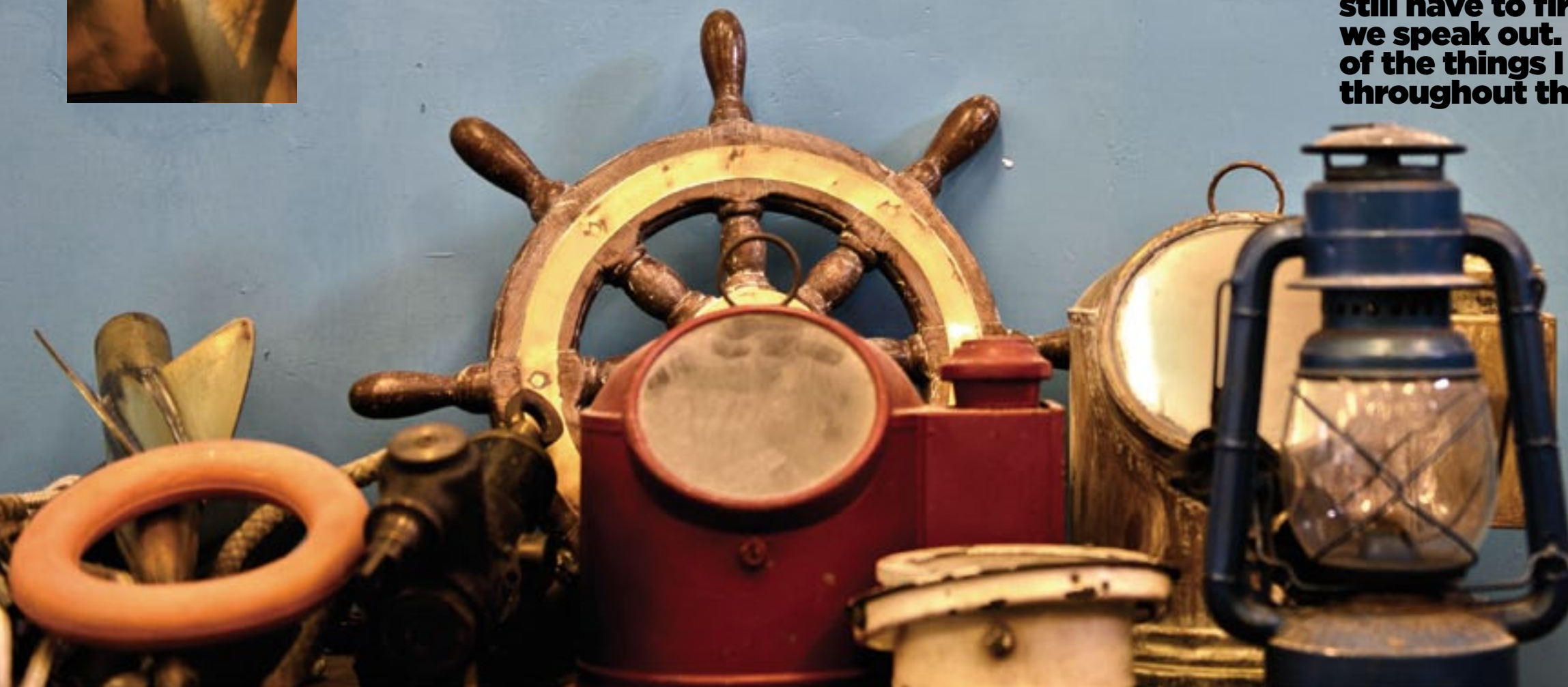
Fung regards his school life as a fruitful



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one. He has developed a close relationship with his schoolmates and the drill gives his life meaning. He says: "But for being here, I would have been hanging around doing nothing."

William Hutchinson, the principal of the school, believes the methods of the school help lower-achieving students find purpose and a way forward. Given they are unlikely to get many passes in the public examinations, Hutchinson believes they have to understand the importance of following certain social norms to secure a job. He points out that employers from the disciplined forces, shipping companies and in particular, catering services expect their employees to wear uniforms, stand straight and say "yes sir, no sir".

"There are other ways of doing it, yes. I am not going to argue about that. But for us, we believe that is very, very effective," Hutchinson says.


Besides vocational purpose, Hutchinson also points out that the drill teaches the students to love their country. They raise the national flag and gather together as the school band plays the national anthem at the end of the drill every day. All students take turns to raise the flag. The principal thinks this will enhance their pride and attachment to their motherland.

Along with the physical training and strict discipline, Hutchinson says the school provides counselling to help students maintain a psychological balance. It also



offers various sea activities to keep them occupied. All of these are designed to prevent students from going astray. Hutchison says their education is all-rounded and helps students to be more responsible, to pay attention to duty and have good manners.

But the rigid routines and strong naval accent might not be for everyone. Some find the going too tough. “Each year there are one or two students who leave. Over five years, there are quite a lot of dropouts,” Fung says.

On the day of our visit, *Varsity* saw a whiteboard in the school office with attendance figures written on it. According to the figures on the board, 41 out of 263 students were absent. The names of the absent students and the reasons for their absence were noted besides the figure. For some, the remarks were: “not willing to come back”. Others were “sick”, “having haircut”, “not yet contacted”, or “missing”. 

Edited by Rene Lam