


Photo Feature

FISHING FOR MEMORIES

THE SWEET AND BITTER LIVES OF HONG KONG'S FISHERFOLK

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It is a cloudy and misty morning in Tai O, the tide is high and the wind is strong. Despite the intense rocking of the 30-year-old fishing boat, Fisherman Ng and Fisherman Wong are happy to stay onboard and talk about their lives.

The men, both in their sixties, are among the very few fishermen in Tai O who still go out to sea to fish.

Ng was born on a fishing boat, into the fifth generation of a family that fished for a living. He recalls that his enjoyment of fishing grew in proportion to the size of his catches. "Catching a thousand kilograms of fish really made my day," Ng exclaims. He remembers he would cook a big meal for his family to celebrate a bumper catch.

Ng's fishing boat has been the stage for all the important moments in his life: it is where he grew up, where he held his wedding, where he raised his children and grandchildren. It has also witnessed the saddest moment, the death of his young daughter.

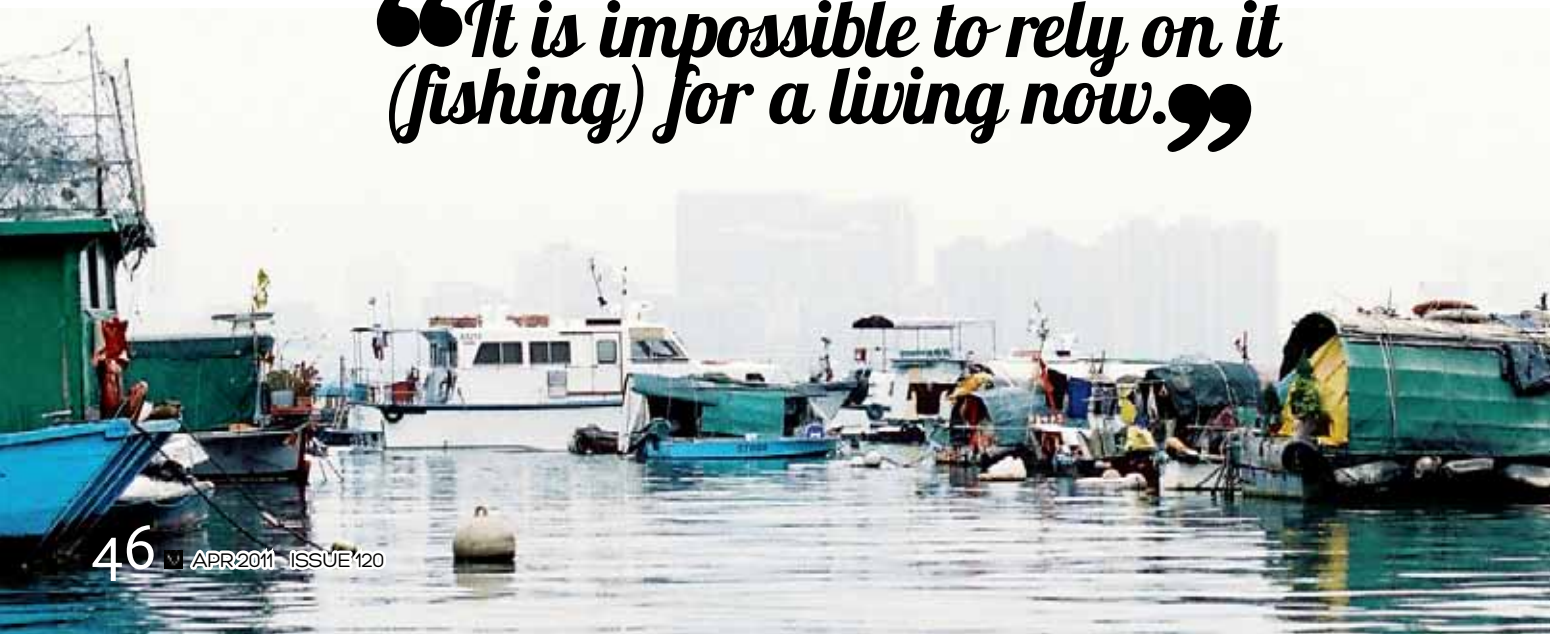
Ng's eyes turn red as he recounts the tragedy. He explains that fisherfolk used to tie cushions on their children, so that the children would float in the water if they fell off the boat. One morning, Ng and his wife were busy going around the boat tying cushions on their six children. But one of their daughters fell into the sea before they managed to get around to her and drowned.

Despite the painful memories, Ng still sees the boat as his home. Even though he moved to a stilt house in Tao O two years ago, he chooses to sleep on his boat as often as possible.





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(fishing) for a living now.”*









Sitting on an inverted washing powder container, Ng's friend fisherman Wong explains that he fishes as a hobby these days. "It is impossible to rely on it (fishing) for a living now," Wong says.

He points out that water pollution in Hong Kong is destroying the seaweed, which is a significant food source for the fish. "In the past, we could catch a thousand catties of fish each time, but now it is just around a hundred," Wong says.

Since the decline of Hong Kong's fishing industry, some fishermen have found a way out by operating fish breeding rafts. Fisherman So is one of them.

So, now in his fifties, has run a breeding raft in Sai Kung since 1981. Although he makes a stable living, he says being a fisherman was more fun. He remembers dropping out of school at 13 and following his father's footsteps into fishing.

Part of the fun comes from spending time with other fishermen. "Fishermen are generous," So says. "They never need others to share a tab and they never haggle over every dollar." So says fishermen would not hesitate to cook up enough food to fill two tables, even when only a few guests were coming for dinner.

Still, he admits that fishing can be risky at times. He once had a close-to-death experience in the Taiwan Strait in the mid-1970s while on a fishing expedition to Zhoushan, China.



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While So's boat was passing through the Kinmen-Xiamen waters, one crewman saw something big and heavy drop into the water. Then there was the sound of an explosion in the distance. The water became turbulent and the oil containers on the boat made piercing sounds like a siren. "The ship had never rocked so strongly, even the experienced crewmen cried and shouted in panic," So says. Fortunately, everyone was safe in the end from what might have been a bombing disaster.

So understands it is impossible to relive his old fishing days, but he finds helping his older brother to go fishing gives him an opportunity to get the taste of being a fisherman again.

Fisherwoman Ho, now in her sixties, moved to a flat in Shau Kei Wan to take care of her grandchildren. But she routinely goes to the Causeway Bay Typhoon Shelter to catch up with her old fisherfolk friends. Ho is now the vice-president of the Hong Kong Off-shore Fishermen's Association.

"I am used to living a life on a boat rather than in a house," Ho says. She misses the boat's open vistas that allowed her to see what everyone else was doing. She finds it hard to understand why the land folks keep their distance from each other.

Ho also dislikes the way some land folks look down on fishermen because they are uneducated, and dress and speak differently. One land person called Ho "Hedan Po" (a derogatory term to describe water folks) because she did not wear any shoes.

Ho is proud of being a fisherwoman despite the mocking. She does not think the land folks are superior to water folk. "What you have at home, we have them on the fishing boat," she says.

As much as Ho would love to encourage her children to pursue fishing, she knows that she is probably a member of the last generation of fisherfolk in Hong Kong. "It is just a natural progression. I don't feel particularly sad, and there is nothing I can do anyway," Ho says, as the sound of waves blend with her

