

龐龔子：53號

No. 53

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I RETURNED TO HONG KONG to work eleven years ago, and bus No. 53 has been a constant companion to my teaching life since.

No. 53 is a sluggish service travelling along Castle Peak Road between Tsuen Wan and Yuen Long. There is nothing illustrious about it, nor is it very well-known. In fact, the bus runs at sparse, elusive intervals, and sometimes even gets suspended due to mishaps like engine breakdown or a driver falling sick. If one has the misfortune to miss a bus, one often has to wait half an hour for another. Until a few years ago, No. 53 still used the kind of archaic red-and-yellow double-decker without air conditioning. During operation, it emitted large amounts of sooty exhaust from behind, while the engine generated intermittent gasping sounds, as though sighing helplessly over its inability to function as it wished. This also matched the demeanour of some of the passengers rather well. In the sweltering summer when one got on the bus, one even had a sense of practising asceticism by way of stepping into an oven or a food steamer. Once, there was a teenager sitting in front of me chatting freely on his mobile phone. The person at the other end probably asked him where he was, and he quipped without a moment's thought: 'where else but that goddamn snail of the century', which captured the style and spirit of the bus quite well. Whether in terms of equipment, operating mode or overall style, No. 53 is more likely to call up associations of the past than the present or future. Sometimes it even called to mind the kind of bus that had run in the bus-conductor age of forty years ago—the classic ancestral model with the manually operated metal bars that served as a flexible door.

Of course, No. 53 still has its supporters. In my experience of the local bus service, No. 53 is one of the very few KMB bus routes that allows multiple

sectional cash fares, preserving this primitive operating mode which is beyond the capability of the automated electronic Octopus card. In essence, sectional cash fares constitute an advanced honour system. This is because however sharp and alert the driver may be, if a passenger purposely under-pays his fare by a couple of stops, the bus company can do nothing about it. Moreover, if a passenger occasionally lacks change and is ten or twenty cents short, the bus driver is always lenient, showing the warmth and kindness of bygone days.

The pity is that such a 'sensible and considerate' bus route has long been operating at a loss, locked within a cycle of cause and effect. Once, while chatting with a passenger, a young driver explained that one reason why No. 53 loses money is that the bus travels on a route along which many of the company's staff live, and their 'dependants' thus ride for free. As for other types of passengers, they include the aged, dull of hearing and living a slow, leisurely life; former elders or retired chiefs in various trades who are proud of their weighty seniority and love to make great speeches (many of whom only need to pay half fare or even less); small-scale retailers carrying sundry goods; housewives and domestic workers going on grocery trips; working-class people trying to economize; primary or secondary school students going to schools along the way, and so on. The well-dressed, middle-class-looking passengers whom we commonly see on certain urban routes are clearly in the minority. In sum, No. 53 is a solidly grass-roots bus route which continues to operate for historical reasons despite being, in the business sense, a terminal cancer, as it is one of the bus company's 'community service' items dedicated to the welfare of the populace.

Precisely because of this, No. 53's operating schedule is totally devoid of enthusiasm. Take an obvious structural feature as an example. Over the past ten years, the daily schedule listed on the notice panel at the bus stop was once every twenty-five to thirty minutes within an operational period of sixteen hours, which was further diluted to once every thirty to thirty-five minutes last year in order to reduce operating losses. Long intervals, unstable service, insufficient passengers and operational losses constituted an unbreakable vicious circle.

But infrequent service is in fact just a secondary problem. Imagine the schedule listing the bus running 'once every thirty to thirty-five minutes, 07:45 to 23:45': how could even Einstein calculate its arrival time? The office Solomon who designs the schedule is probably an earl or countess born with a silver spoon in the mouth, who has never needed to catch a bus in his or her life, or one of those armchair scholars who has forgotten his roots, and who makes the schedule an untraceable mystery with his freewheeling artistic imagination.

In actual fact, it would not be difficult to solve the problem. So long as the schedule is set regularly according to the clock, whether at intervals of two, three, four, five, six, seven and a half, ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty or thirty minutes, it can facilitate passenger memory and planning, thus enhancing their sense of belonging to and their satisfaction with the bus service. This is because a good schedule must be designed from the user's point of view, and should be simple, systematic, and easy to remember. Where service is infrequent, its stability and comprehensibility become doubly important.

Take the passengers of No. 53 for example: more than once have I seen some of them burst into storms of abuse and roars of complaint, then change their means of transport, as they feel repeatedly duped by the indecipherable schedule. I can only tackle this problem with a primitive simplicity: inquire about official departure times from the terminus when I board the bus, check them against the vague schedule, and then estimate the other unknowns by the knowns. In this way I gradually build up a timetable which roughly meets my personal needs, shortening my wait to within ten minutes, except under unexpected circumstances.

I do not like to take red minibuses, for they are habitual road offenders that pay no heed to traffic regulations. They dash along at life-threatening speed when in a hurry, refuse to budge when passengers are few, and block one-lane roads at traffic lights as they please: displaying a total disregard for rules, they are absolutely selfish and inconsiderate to other road users. As for taxis, they are naturally not a means of daily commute for the common folk. In these eleven years of my simple life, No. 53 has carried me countless times along Castle Peak Road, accompanying me through light and dark, rain or shine. I have taken the first bus at 6:30 a.m. and the last bus at 12:05 at night, savouring plentiful stars and the full moon, the setting sun and floating clouds, threatening storms and flashing lightning through windows of various shades and tones. The road and course are tortuous, yet the bus itself has to go straight ahead. I have not driven for over nine years, and am probably no longer fit to drive at all. For I have become used to watching and thinking, or writing poems at leisure on the bus, subway or ferry; an occasional half-hour wait simply extends my thoughts at the roadside, without making me impatient.

A bus is an unintended confluence of all manner of things in life, particularly when it serves a route where the average age of the passengers is higher than the mean. There was a time when I would chance to meet a four-foot tall, fidgety old woman at the bus stop every few mornings, and help her carry a dirty worn red, white and blue nylon bag and a small luggage-cart onto the bus, placing them by

the first or second row of seats. I never actually talked to her, nor did I know what was inside the bag. And the old woman never remembered my face. Yet her sense of vicissitude, her obstinacy, forgetfulness and frailty, have all become a part of my life experience.

Over twenty years ago, I watched the film 'Gandhi'. It contained this scene: during a conversation on an old-fashioned train, a journalist asked Gandhi why he insisted on travelling third class, even though he was the spiritual leader of the country (India was still a British colony then) and an international personage. The film version of Gandhi just answered in a subdued tone: 'Because there is no fourth class.' I have never tried to verify whether or not this conversation was based on fact; nor do I harbour any intent to imitate him on the path of self-cultivation. But to feel the pulse of the people's lives, their joys and griefs, no doubt one has to place oneself among them. I saw this Academy Award-winning film three times.

Now No. 53 has switched to using an air-conditioned single-decker, and the fare has risen by 30 per cent. Thrifty, hard-working passengers have no choice but to buy the extra degree of comfort. Sometimes, when I chance to see a remnant red-and-yellow double-decker on the road in the New Territories or North Kowloon, it evokes a childish nostalgia and a mute sense of indistinctness, and I yearn to relive a few moments of the 'snail of the century'. The supersession of the old by the new is but a natural process; yet feelings endure, and faint shadows ever remain. Will the social service of No. 53 come to an end one day? Will life bring me to another working or living environment? Sitting on the bus here and now, I only feel that between this route and myself, we may still be fated for another ten or twenty years.