



INTO THE BLINDS' VISION

PHOTOS AND TEXT BY DANIEL IP

Hong Kong has one of the world's best airports and one of the busiest container terminals. But, for the visually impaired, the basic public transport that they have to rely on every day is far from reliable.

The Mass Transit Railway (MTR) has been criticised for its failure to assist the visually impaired.

"Although tactile guide paths have been installed in the MTR station, they are not very well designed and do not easily lead us to where we want to go unless we are very familiar with the place," said Lam Chun-tak, a retired policeman, who lost vision because of diabetes 18 years ago.

Though the guide paths are found almost at every MTR station, many confluences of those paths lack signs to direct the visually impaired to various destinations. Without guidance from a companion, they can get lost easily, especially if it is their first visit to the station.

"The MTR stations have some tactile station layout maps installed somewhere, but they are always located in places where no one goes. Rather ironically, even the guide paths do not lead us to them," said Mr Lam.

"Another important thing, on the platform, not every single train compartment connects to a guide path, especially on lines operated by the former Kowloon and Canton Railway," Mr Lam said.

"It is very dangerous for us to get off the train and search for a guide path that doesn't exist. You know, some stations do not even have platform screen doors. We would easily fall onto the rail tracks," added Mr Lam.

Susan Ho Suet-fun, the chairperson of Hong Kong Federation of the Blind said: "We, the visually impaired, have meetings with the MTR Corporation every six months to discuss the lack of facilities. They

always say that they will look into it but then they do nothing."

At MTR stations, poles are set before escalators to prevent passengers from carrying oversized luggage. To most people, the poles create no difficulty as they pass through the poles. However, to visually disabled people, the poles are obstacles.

"The poles are really a big problem. Some may get hurt as they do not notice them. At some stations, the poles are so tall that they can bruise our faces. We did nothing wrong, but we are the ones who suffer. It is so unfair!" said Ms Ho.

Ms Ho raised this problem with the MTR Corporation, but, according to her, the company responded by saying that they would soon look into the problem.

Nevertheless, she appreciates that the MTR had made some great improvements in recent years.

"In the early years when the MTR first operated, the stations had

nothing to assist the disabled. Now, the MTR has many installations to help us.”

More tactile guide paths, audible devices and Braille plates have been set up in stations. Early this year, the MTR Corporation said they would install platform screen doors at eight stations and extend the guide paths to cover all the train platforms before 2012.

According to the MTR Corporation, it has already invested

six billion dollars in building infrastructure for the disabled such as elevators, Braille maps and guide paths.

People who are visually impaired are encouraged to use the stairs and elevators to which the guide paths lead them. In the forthcoming five years, the Corporation will further inject two billion dollars into providing structures facilitating them.

Despite the improvements made by the MTR Corporation, another popular form of public transport, buses, are found inadequate in their facilities assisting the visually impaired people.

“I always take buses because I do not want to go up and down (the stairs or the escalators) at the MTR stations, which is not convenient for us,” said Liu Yung-fat, an 82-year-old retiree, who lost his eyes in an accident when he was seven.

He visits organisations which work for the visually impaired on his own about four times a week. He takes either a bus or a taxi. He said he needs to seek help when taking on and off the bus. However, sometimes, he cannot get a helping hand.

“One time I was at a bus stop, no one was there. I didn’t know which queue was the right one. A bus came but didn’t stop and no one from the bus company was there. I felt lost at that moment.” After

waiting for some time, to his delight, somebody came to his assistance.

Since there are no Braille plates at bus stops showing the routes of each bus, the visually impaired have to call the bus companies or look for information on the internet in advance.

“The only facility for us is the bus stop announcement system of KMB (Kowloon Motor Bus). City Bus and First Bus do not have that system installed,” said Lee Kin, a 53-year-old visually impaired man.

Yet, according to Citybus and New World First Bus (NWFB), some of their buses do have bus stop announcement systems activated to aid the blind’s commuting.

Mr Lee said that the bus companies provide inadequate facilities for them. Moreover, bus drivers do not even show their understandings on the needs of them.

“Most of the bus drivers start to drive off before we have had time to sit down. Once, I was holding a cardboard with the route number I wanted to take, I heard a bus arrived and open its door. The driver didn’t ask me to get on until I asked him,” said Mr Lee.

Transport fare is also a burden to many visually disabled people, especially those who are unemployed.

“Many visually impaired don’t want to go out due to the high cost of transportation. Discounts will encourage them to go out and become more involved in society,” said Judia Yue Sau-chun, the fieldwork coordinator of the Department of Social Work at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Chong Chan-yau, chairperson of Hong Kong Blind Union, said that the Hong Kong government needs to take the lead in helping the visually impaired.

“The visually disabled should have the chance of being independent. If the government does help, it would be easier for them to overcome the obstacles of leading an independent life,” said Mr Chong.

The *Report of the Needs of Public Transportation for the Disabled*, released



Visually impaired Lam Chun-tak said that not every single train compartment connects to a tactile guide path.



Lee Kin is taking off the minibus with the help of his wife.

care about us, a real barrier-free society can be established.”

Lee’s wife, Cho Yuen-ni, also visually disabled, recalled an unforgettable experience in Guangzhou: “After I got on a bus, the bus driver didn’t take off immediately. Instead, he made an announcement to ask other passengers to offer me a seat. Suddenly, almost all the passengers ahead stood up at once and gave me a hand.”

Her husband added that the people who are willing to offer their seats to them on public transport in Hong Kong are mostly the elderly. Mr Lee is disappointed that Hong Kong people are so cold towards them.

The couple said the government should promote helping the disabled. “We would rather have better people than better facilities which are emotionless.”

While many visually disabled feel that they are ignored by the society at large, Christina Wong Ming-yan, a writer and a multimedia creator, would rather embrace her visually disability more positively.

“I think the loss of sight is nothing to be pitied for. Sometimes I would think it is the best gift God has given me,” said Ms Wong, who has been named an Outstanding Young Person of Hong Kong.

She also said that it was how you see things determined how you react. She is prepared to serve as a positive influence to all those she meets. ▽

by the Food and Health Bureau last year, suggests that if a 50-per-cent fare discount on public transport is offered to the disabled, they will be more involved in the society. Public transport companies could also increase their revenue.

Andrew Cheng Kar-foo, the Deputy Chairman of Panel on Transport in the Legislative Council said: “I agree that fare discounts should be offered to them. We have been discussing this issue for many years and we have talked to the public transport companies. However, the decision is still up to them as the government cannot force them to do so.”

Meanwhile, in many countries, public transport companies are required to offer discounts particularly to the disabled, like in Japan, Thailand and Denmark.

For instance, though not being obliged to do so by law, the subway service provider in Canada, the Toronto Transit Commission, asks the visually disabled to apply for a free transit pass to use their service

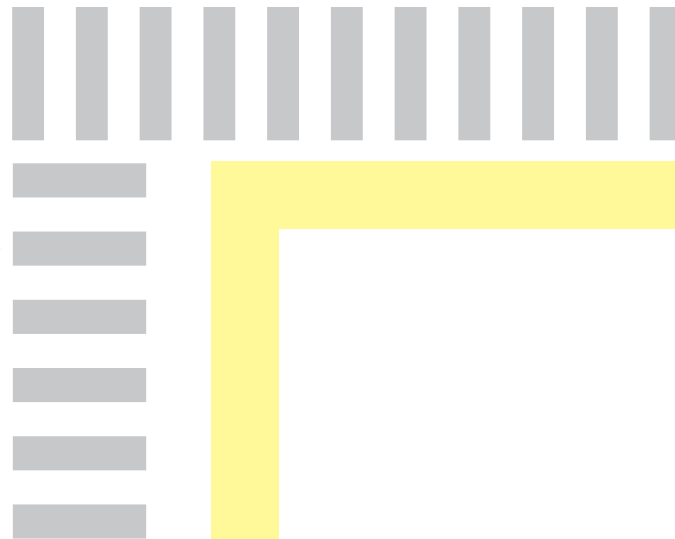
if the person is registered with the Toronto chapter of the Canadian National Institute of the Blind.

Belgium, Austria and China also allow the visually impaired to travel on public transport free of charge.

According to Article 44 of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons, the visually impaired can take all forms of transport including local buses, trolleybuses, subways and ferries free of charge.

The chairman of Hong Kong Buddhist Society for the Blind, Lee Kai-tak, said he was surprised that Hong Kong, as an international city, provides less welfare for the visually impaired than the Mainland does.

“I think it is a problem with the social sense of people in Hong Kong. They don’t have the sense to help and even notice minority groups around them,” said Mr Lee. “If the government and society





- 1: Lee Kin is using the Braille type machine.
- 2: Braille plate typed by the Braille type machine.
- 3: Poles set before escalators at MTR stations are obstacles to the visually impaired.
- 4: Liu Yung-fat is walking along the tactile guide paths at the MTR station.

