

第十四屆校際香港歷史文化專題研習比賽
The 14th Inter-school Competition of Project Learning
on Hong Kong's History and Culture

(甲項) 文字報告 - 高級組 - 冠軍
Written Report - First Prize, Senior Division

基督教香港信義會宏信書院
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「The Tsuen Wan Bridge System: A Historical Analysis of
Infrastructure Development and Its Reflection
of Hong Kong's Urbanization」

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The 14th Inter-School Competition of Project Learning on Hong Kong's History and Culture

Research Topic: The Tsuen Wan Bridge System: A Historical Analysis of Infrastructure Development and Its Reflection on Hong Kong's Urbanization

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Abstract

The following research essay will explore the historical development of the Tsuen Wan Bridge System in Hong Kong from the 1950s to the present, tracing the socioeconomic growth and urbanisation of the city. Employing a literature review of primary and secondary sources, including government records, legislative documents, and historical photographs, the research will primarily focus on four pivotal periods: the preparation and early development stage (1950s–1980s), the foundation of the footbridge network (1980–1990), its expansion (1990–2009), and its mature phase (2009–present).

As part of our findings, this essay aims to reveal how the evolution of the system has been driven by factors such as population growth, traffic congestion, industrialization, and economic change. As a whole, the bridge system has also effectively addressed urban challenges, stimulated economic vitality, and improved accessibility, particularly through initiatives like the Universal Accessibility Programme. On the other hand, it has also contributed to social segregation in less developed areas. Hence, this study will subsequently highlight the Tsuen Wan Bridge System as a vital model of adaptive urban infrastructure, offering valuable insights into the balance that must be struck between connectivity, inclusivity, and socioeconomic development in rapidly urbanizing cities, with Tsuen Wan as a prime example.

Introduction

Tsuen Wan is known for its extensive network of footbridges that connect around 4 government institutions, 20 malls, including CDW buildings, public infrastructures, and 15 residential estates, being honoured as the “City in the Sky.” (Liang, 2021)

In the 1960s, due to the rise in population, there was an increase in safety concerns in transportation. Therefore, the government aimed to eliminate the traffic congestion by separating vehicular traffic into different levels through footbridges. The new Towns, such as Tsuen Wan, followed this trend and started building footbridges (Wong). As the 1980s approached, Hong Kong's economic shift into a bustling cultural and business hub prompted the government to advance infrastructural development, including housing, industrial complexes, and the subway system, completed on October 1, 1979 (Wong, pp.1-2). Also, the relocation of manufacturing to Mainland China due to rising costs spurred the need for sustainable commercial buildings. Following the Tsuen Wan line's opening, a footbridge network was formed connecting shopping malls, which had gradually become a popular spot for locals and tourists alike (Liang, pp.46-47). Rapid population and economic growth also led to developer-initiated footbridges, with new property leases requiring bridges in private projects for easier access to shopping areas (Liang, pp.37-38).

However, this urbanization would soon highlight negative social impacts, such as a growing divide between middle-class and lower-class consumption areas, leaving lower-class citizens “under the bridge” and contributed to social segregation, with over rising criminal activities, including robberies and street prostitution, particularly in the less developed “under the bridge” areas (Liang, pp.47-48).

This research examines the Tsuen Wan bridge system's development from the 1960s to today through four periods: preparation (1950s–1980s), foundation (1980s–1990s), expansion (1990–2006), and maturity (2007–present).