Introduction

Cities are a crucial attribute of the rise of human civilisation. An ideal city of the twenty-first century should not only serve as a manifestation of its political, economic and modern technological achievements, but also strive actively for the harmonious coexistence of humanity and its natural environment. Systematic town planning and regular review are therefore the only way to improve the livelihood of modern city-dwellers. To build an ideal city, planning has to be comprehensive and cover multiple areas: from planning layout, urban design, development and infrastructure, to the enactment and implementation of town planning legislation, as well as daily operation and management. As the number of people paying close attention to or joining the field of town planning as professionals continues to rise, different stakeholders in society have taken up the responsibility of monitoring the city’s town planning. During its planning process, the government is frequently faced with political, economic and social challenges. To achieve established goals, the government has to deal with increasingly complex internal and external problems.

When the British landed at Possession Point in Sheung Wan in 1841, they found Hong Kong Island, a barren rock, located at the southern edge of China, lacking land resources for development. With typhoons striking in the summer, the island did not possess the conditions for agricultural development. Nor could it be considered an ideal place for living. The first population census of Hong Kong Island conducted by the British in 1841 revealed that only around 5,450 Chinese lived on the island at the time, most of whom were fishermen from Stanley and Shau Kei Wan. The Qing government never considered Hong Kong a city prior to that. By contrast, in 2015 the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) estimated that Hong Kong had a population of 7.32 million.1 Today’s Hong Kong is a modern city with excellent facilities, rivaling other international metropolises. It can be seen that the growth and development of Hong Kong is inextricably linked to the conscious allocation of resources to make good use of modern technology to overcome the city’s shortcomings. Hong Kong’s urban development experience is not only a development model for Chinese cities after the implementation of the open-door policy in China in 1978, but also an example for a better understanding of other Asian cities.

Town planning was developed as a profession even before the Second World War, only it was named differently then. According to historical data, professional terminology such as ‘town-building plans’ and ‘town-extension plans’ did not appear until the early twentieth century, but the term ‘street planning’ had

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been used since 1851.³ The historical remains (such as city walls, roads, squares, temples and water supply systems) of famous cities around the world offer ample proof of town planning’s fundamental influence on a city’s development as a whole.³ A number of geographers who studied Hong Kong’s urban development were of the view that, prior to the war, Hong Kong’s urban development was fragmented and lacked a comprehensive plan.⁴ However, this view may be due to their neglect of the city’s early development. How could one explain the City of Victoria on Hong Kong Island having the functions of European cities in the mid-nineteenth century but for the fact that the city’s town planning started as early as the 1840s?

The process by which a city is built from scratch depends on its geographical environment, the inhabitants, its economic resources, the development status of its neighbouring regions, and objective economic and political circumstances. At the initial stage, there is much freedom in terms of planning. As the city’s population grows continuously and its population structure changes, its economic and political terrain shifts, while new technologies are introduced and the external environment alters, requiring the city’s planning to be updated accordingly. This is because very complicated issues would arise should early planning lack comprehensiveness. Hong Kong’s early city development suffered from its poor geographical conditions and lack of natural resources. The development of the entrepôt mainly relied on technology. With a continuously growing population, issues such as whether old buildings should be retained or torn down and rebuilt, and the coexistence of new and old constructions and their cultural relationship may well make urban renewal even more daunting than planning from scratch. If Hong Kong’s urban development started from scratch, did the city’s early construction and planning reflect the cultural conflicts of Western and Chinese civilisations? What were the factors that led to town planning adapting and changing with the times? What opportunities did the colonial government grasp to introduce European city models into Hong Kong? How major a role did factors such as Chinese external political and economic circumstances, Hong Kong’s population growth, internal structural changes, allocation of available economic resources, introduction and modernisation of technologies, and enactment of town planning legislation each play? How did changing Sino-British relations and China’s external political and economic environment affect Hong Kong’s urban planning policies? What were the difficulties encountered

in repeated redevelopment? Were there conflicts between urban renewal and new planning? How did the authorities balance the interests of different parties through town planning and achieve established goals? These are all questions worth exploring in depth, for they were not only Hong Kong’s internal issues. They also involved Sino-British foreign relations, as well as China–Hong Kong political and economic problems.

Unfortunately, discussions on the history of Hong Kong’s town planning development have been few and far between until now, with limited analysis on Hong Kong’s impacts on China following the implementation of the open-door policy. Most of these discussions focused on the pros and cons of town planning in Hong Kong in recent years, with an emphasis on the contents and benefits of land use and town planning legislation. They seldom touched on town planning history, or Sino-British and China–Hong Kong relations. A number of years ago, I conducted comprehensive research on subjects including Hong Kong’s water supply systems, land and harbour development and transport systems. This was the first attempt at studying the development process of urbanisation based on planning policy. The research focused on town planning and sought to analyse the formation, focal points and changing trends of town planning through studying the evolution of town planning. It also attempted to compare the inter-relationship between town planning and changes in social structure at different stages of development, in order to understand how Chinese immigrants affected Hong Kong’s town planning and how town planning acted as a medium of mediation in the various disputes between Britain and China at different stages, which in turn drove social transformation. In addition, my research showcased the ways in which China’s social, economic and political environments in different eras have influenced the pace of Hong Kong town planning since 1841, and how such planning would in turn provide the forward-looking ideas that would lead the city in the foreseeable future. Hopefully, we would rethink the cultural shocks of Western culture to the city, as well as the changing political situation of China through which the city’s distinctive local style was developed, so as to bring new thinking to the urban research and direction of Hong Kong’s future development as a city.

Looking back on the past, town planning in Hong Kong can be roughly divided into six major stages of development.

The first stage began in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the duality of planning. On the one hand, technology was used to resolve the shortage of resources and the attack of typhoons, while water supply systems were built, land was reclaimed from the sea, typhoon shelters were constructed, and the roads and basic facilities of a commercial port were built to establish the city’s commercial foundations. Western culture was introduced, Western

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lifestyles were promoted through European architecture, and planning was mainly focused on Central on Hong Kong Island. On the other hand, the colonial government mostly ignored the Chinese population who took refuge in Hong Kong, employing a laissez-faire policy towards the Chinese communities and thus exacerbating the city’s public hygiene and law and order crises. In the atmosphere of anti-imperialism which pervaded the Chinese communities in Hong Kong, it was difficult for the colonial government to plan for public health districts in those communities. Out of this turbulent political landscape, Hong Kong emerged as an entrepôt.

The second stage lasted from 1898 to the Pacific War, and encompassed the expansion of the territory. The Convention for the Extension of Hong Kong Territory was signed in 1898, under which the land north of Boundary Street and south of the Shenzhen River was leased. As the shifting political landscape in China brought about a continuous influx of population, the city had to expand in size, and the Convention promptly addressed this by providing new land resources. Determining the district of New Kowloon, enacting legislation on land use planning, expanding transport networks and developing the countryside had all contributed to making the northern coast of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and New Kowloon regions of focused development, thus allowing for the territorial expansion of Hong Kong. In the 1930s, the colonial government contemplated purchasing the New Territories from China to solve Hong Kong’s land shortage problem, but it had to carefully consider British relations with the Chinese nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party, as well as British–Japanese relations. The idea was aborted following the outbreak of the Pacific War.

The third stage lasted from 1941 to 1945, when Hong Kong was a resource port for the Japanese military. Under the rule of a Japanese military government, Hong Kong became a resource port for the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. As it was a Japanese military port, planning in terms of population, district functions and the promotion of economic activities differed greatly from that of the British colonial government. The views put forth by the Japanese on the city’s layout and development of agriculture and other resources are rarely discussed, and they warrant fresh deliberation.

The fourth stage lasted from 1945 to 1978, with high-density development planning. Faced with severe population pressures after the war, the government introduced high-density residential planning in order to solve housing problems for new immigrants. On the other hand, this also provided a large, cheap workforce for processing industries, transforming Hong Kong into a city of processing industry. The first generation of new towns were built to alleviate population pressure, and planning was made for integrated communities that would provide employment and daily living facilities. The city’s development was guided by technology, management and a bureaucratic system. The ways and patterns of living at the time were also led by technology. The high-density development planning model laid the foundation for absorbing large numbers of Chinese immigrants. It was also a model for Chinese cities after the open-door policy was implemented in 1978.

The fifth stage lasted from 1979 to 1997, with the westward extension of the
city’s centre. A free-trade economic system propelled Hong Kong to become an international financial centre and one of the ‘Four Asian Tigers’, gaining other regions’ recognition of Hong Kong’s economic stature. At the same time, with China implementing its reform and open-door policy, the northward migration of industries, the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration Agreement, the transformation of the economy and concerns over political issues related to the return to China in 1997 meant that Hong Kong’s economic development was hardly plain sailing as disputes occurred between China and Britain. To downplay the political disputes between China and Britain, the government undertook the ‘Rose Garden Project’, a project with the Hong Kong International Airport on Lantau Island as its core. The project saw a further expansion of the city to East Lantau and the westward extension of the city’s core districts, boosting Hong Kong’s ranking among other international metropolises.

The sixth stage of development started with the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 and continues until now, with the challenges of sustainable development. With changes in the political system, the impacts on the global natural environment brought on by climate change and rising civil awareness among its citizens, the government has introduced sustainable planning policies and amended public consultation procedures to give the Town Planning Board a greater role. As part of the Greater Pearl River Delta, Hong Kong has to coordinate with the overall development of South China and face opposition from Hong Kong citizens regarding deeper integration between Hong Kong and Mainland China. This means town planning policies in Hong Kong have to undergo another transformation and guide the city to find a new path.

Hong Kong’s town planning faced intricate challenges in different periods. This not only resulted in adjustments corresponding to each period’s needs, but also created many styles with local characteristics. Let us now delve in depth into such intricacies.