The evolution of public transport policy in Hong Kong since 1981

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Abstract: Counting only the usable land, the population in Hong Kong is as dense as 34,000 people per square kilometer, and it has a highly efficient multi-modal public transport system. According to the experience of Hong Kong public transit system, highly reputable public transport services reveals that the viability and sustainability of mass transit railways depend very much on accompanying transport policies and land development strategies. The ways to reduce traffic congestion from supply measures to demand management and change the transit mode from vehicle to railway are both based on Hong Kong’s actual situation. Finally this article emphasis on sustainable transport is a great experience which needs research with more in-depth thinking, and the evolution of public transport policy in Hong Kong is a good inspiration for the public transit development in the other great cities in the world.

Keywords: evolution; public transport; policy; Hongkong

1 Background

Hong Kong is a small and hilly territory comprising of many islands, so that addressing the transport needs for people has always been a challenge for HK. Counting only the usable land, the population in Hong Kong is as dense as 34,000 people per square kilometer. Such a high population density requires an efficient transport system to facilitate mobility and economic development of the territory. Fortunately, Hong Kong has a highly efficient multi-modal public transport system. All modes of public transport are operated by the private sector without direct subsidy from the government, which is an operating model rarely found in the traffic and transport systems among the world’s major cities. At present, the daily patronage of all means of public transport exceeds 11 million passenger trips, which representing about 90% of the daily total number of commuters. By comparing with the other major cities, this figures are exceptionally high.

The experience of Hong Kong, with a system of highly reputable public transport services, reveals that the viability and sustainability of mass transit railways depend very much on accompanying transport policies and land development strategies. The priority given to public transport and control on the growth of private cars have established the foundation for success in Hong Kong since 1981.

2 Development of Hong Kong’s public transport policies since 1981

2.1 Events and transport policy before 1981: improvement of the road system.

With the implementation of ten-year housing project since 1972 and the new town development policy issued in 1973, the traffic congestion expanded from the island to new territories. Moreover, the rapid economic boom since 1978 stimulated the increase in freight and passenger movements both within the territory and across the border of China. Along with the socio-economic prosper of Hong Kong itself, the internal transport demand arise dramatically.
In this case, the government realized that it needs a more comprehensive approach to plan the local transport system that would take complete account of projected population growth, economic activities and social development. Therefore, the government commissioned the first Comprehensive Transport Study (CTS-1) in 1973, whose objective was to formulate strategies for the development of the territory’s transport system. The CTS defined alternative systems for public and private travel, evaluated and compared transport system alternatives, and defined the roles and priority to be given to each mode of transport in the system. The CTS was completed in 1976 (Wilbur Smith, and Associates, 1976).

Based on CTS-1, Environment Branch published the first White Paper on transport policy called “Keeping Hong Kong Moving – The White Paper on Internal Transport Policy” in 1979. It recognized the unique characteristics of Hong Kong, such as population, terrain, commercial and industrial activities and density of development place etc. There were three main principles founded in the policy which were still valid now (Environment Branch, 1979): improvement of the road system, expansion and improvement of public transport, and more economic use of the road system.

2.2 The public transport policy in the 1980s: demand-side restraint on the road system.

(1) The policy of transit service coordination and protection (1980s)

The CTS-1 which was developed in line with the government’s stated goal to “Keep Hong Kong Moving”, had formed the basis of transport planning for the territory up to the late 1980s. It suggested further development of the territory’s infrastructures to meet growing travel demand. However, mobility is more than simply building new infrastructures. The growth in private vehicles was equally alarming, with the figure rising from 92,884 at end of 1971 to 190,146 at end of 1980 (a 200 percent increase). Severe congestion became common in many parts of the territory. In the early 1980s, for instance, a morning work trip from Hong Kong East to Central required a minimum of two hours.

The government then realized that unlimited and demand-lead highway expansion should be restrained. In order to discourage the growth of private vehicle traffic, the government introduced fiscal restraints on private vehicle ownership in May 1982, which included doubling the initial registration tax, tripling annual license fees, and doubling the duty on petrol. Fiscal measures, although politically unpopular, are considerably more effective in curtailing the number of vehicles than conventional traffic management measures. Instead of building more roads, it is more practical to restrict the traffic on the road system to a level which the system could cope with.

Finally, the government made clear intentions to make efficient use of the available road capacity, to give priority to road users in congested areas, and to take steps to limit road usage to levels that could be accommodated by the existing system.

2.3 The public transport policy in the 1990s: improving public transport and managing the demand for road use.

To accommodate the increasing population and demand for transport, the government commissioned the Second Comprehensive Transport Study (CTS-2) in 1986. The CTS-2 was completed in 1989 (Transport Department, 1989). The objective was to identify measures to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of mobility for passengers and freight by road, rail, and ferry from 1991 to 2001.

The CTS-2 concentrated on developing a resource-based plan to develop a cost-effective highway and railway infrastructure investment programme (Karn, 1993). In the area of public transport development, the CTS-2 recommended continued expansion and improvement of public transport, which include better coordination between different transport modes and the deployment of air conditioned buses.

In 1990, based on the recommendations of the CTS-2, the second White Paper on the transport policy in Hong Kong — Moving into the 21st Century: the White Paper
on Transport Policy in Hong Kong was published. It formulated three basic principles that are improving the transport infrastructure, improving public transport and managing the demand for road use. The White Paper proposed a balanced package of measures for managing road use. It listed three major objectives: (1) to make effective use of road space by introducing modern traffic management techniques to improve traffic flow and to minimize traffic disruptions caused by defective vehicles, accidents and road work; (2) to make more rational use of road space by giving priority to more efficient and essential road users; (3) to manage the demand for road use by spreading out travel demand and managing its growth to the level the road system can handle — including the use of fiscal and regulatory measures wherever necessary and practicable to help slow growth in the number and use of motor vehicles.

The government considered the inter-modal coordination policy as an especially important underlying element to maintain a balanced and efficient system (Secretary for Transport, 1989). As the Secretary for Transport notes, this policy should maintain a good range of public transport services, encourage the use of off-street modes, keep traveling cost low, and give due weight to consumer to feel comfortable and convenient.

2.4 The public transport policy in the 2000s: rail-based public transport and environment sustainable.

The third Comprehensive Transport Studies (CTS-3) was started in August 1997 and completed in October 1999. The overall objective was “to provide a framework on which the government can develop a balanced transport strategy to facilitate the mobility of people and goods within Hong Kong in an environmentally sustainable manner up to 2016” (Transport Department, 1999). One of the Transport Bureau’s policy objectives is to make the transport system environment more friendly and sustainable. To accomplish this, the CTS-3 focuses on expanding the road network and especially the rail systems, which is identified as a high-capacity and environmental friendly mode of public transport. The CTS-3 examines a range of growth scenarios defined by the following key elements: land use planning scenarios, economic growth, port development, vehicle fleet sizes, value of time, public transport fares, transport infrastructure budgets, cross boundary road and rail traffic, airport trips, and international and cross boundary ferry trips.

In October 1999, the government of Hong Kong published the third white paper “Hong Kong Moving Ahead” to conclude CTS-3. The document outlines the transport strategies for the future: (1) better integration of transport and land use planning; (2) better use of railway as the backbone of the passenger transport system; (3) better public transport services and facilities; (4) better use of advanced technologies in transport management; and (5) better environment protection.

In particular, one of the objectives was set out to increase the proportion of rail-based public transport journeys from 33% in 1997 to 40% ~ 50% in 2016 (Transport Department, 1999). Accordingly, the second Railway Development Strategy was issued in May 2000, which provided the planning framework for expanding Hong Kong’s railway network up to 2016 (Transport Bureau, 2000). Furthermore, public transport interchange has become an essential provision at each new railway station to facilitate feeder services provided by other public transport modes.

As we can see, the characteristics of this White Paper were the idea of environmental protection and the emphasis of the use of railway as the only public transport mass carriers recommended. The Railway Development Study (RDS-2000) conducted later is actually a complementary document according to the prioritized position that the third white paper has positioned it.

3 Evolution of ideas from supply measures to demand management

The phenomenon of a rapid growth in car ownership and attendant road congestion is world-wide. Hong Kong is experiencing only what the most other cities have suffered
for years. However, Hong Kong, with its severe geographical constraints, has to face the threat of mobility presented by the private car more seriously than the other communities. In the 1980s and before, in order to keep up with congestion, expanding the roadway infrastructure was the major method. Although increased funding and establishment of the road could help ease the congestion to a certain extent, the continuing increases in demand for road transport have hampered the development of a green and sustainable transport system and intensified pollution problems.

The government then realized that the use of supply measures alone by transport planners would not be helpful in solving the congestion problem without the demand management. This is because space in urban areas is tight and construction costs are high, and continued road capacity expansion and transport improvements without demand-side restraint are not a viable or realistic solution on both financial and environmental grounds over the long haul. Hence, congestion pricing of roads is a potential win-win strategy in that it curtails congestion and raises public revenues for cash-strapped governments. In addition, it reduces environmental externalities and conserves energy. Besides that, a lot of measures were taken to control the ownership and use of private car, and encourage people to make trips by mass public transport. In this way, Hong Kong government successfully solved the congestion problem.

4 Evolution of ideas from reliance on road traffic to rail traffic

As the continuously increasing transport demand, it is in much need to build an highly efficient public transport system. To accomplish this, the CTS-3 focuses on expanding the rail systems, which claimed that railways were environmental friendly and efficient mass carriers as compared with the other road-based transport. Thus, the government expected that the proportion of rail in the public transport patronage would grow to about 40% ~ 50% in 2016 (Transport Bureau, 1999). With the same occupation of the road space, the railway transport mode can indeed take comparatively greater number of passengers, which is much more efficient than the road transport. The policy of Railway as the Backbone of Public Transport is an great improvement in the CTS-3 compared to the former two Comprehensive Transport Studies.

5 Evolution of ideas from cost-effective to environment friendly

As mentioned above, the CTS-2 concentrated on developing a resource-based plan to develop a cost-effective highway and railway infrastructure investment programme. However, in the CTS-3, it aims to develop a balanced transport strategy to facilitate the mobility of people and goods of Hong Kong in an environmentally sustainable manner and this recommendation were highlighted in the Chief Executive Policy Address of 1999 and the Chief Executive Policy Address of 2000. In contrast to its two predecessors, the CTS-3 recognizes the adverse impact that transport imposes on the environment. In this connection, a Strategic Environmental Assessment has formed a key and integrated part of the analysis and strategy development process.

In “Hong Kong Moving Ahead”, better environmental protection became one of the five main principles, which means the awareness of humanistic care, especially environmental protection have been taken into consideration when making a transport policy. Based on these considerations, the characteristics of “Hong Kong Moving Ahead” were the implemention of the idea of environmental protection.

The recent shift in transport policy, from emphasizing an cost-effective public transport system to environmental friendly transport, has resulted in an clean and sustainable city.

Conclusion

The evolution of public transport policy in Hong Kong is a good inspiration for the public transit development in the other cities in the world. The ways to reduce traffic congestion from supply measures to demand management and shifting from vehicular traffic to rail traffic are both based on Hong Kong’s actual situation. Finally, reached
The emphasis on sustainable transport is a great experience which needs research with more in-depth thinking.

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