

History offers a lesson for critics of new rail link

Hua Guo and Victor Zheng say the Kowloon-Canton Railway was once considered a 'white elephant' by the public, but the officials of the day knew it was a necessary investment

The Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link opened yesterday, yet public excitement over the prospect of a brand-new, high-speed rail link has been tempered by the numerous controversies that have surrounded it over the past eight years.

History may help to define the future if we study the past. The Kowloon-Canton Railway (KCR) was the first cross-border railway connecting Hong Kong with the mainland. The railway had a British section and a Chinese section. The former, which was officially opened on October 1, 1910, is the basis of today's East Rail Line connecting Kowloon with Lo Wu. A year later, the latter was completed from Lo Wu to Canton (Guangzhou).

At the grand opening of the railway, Mr E.S. Lindsey, the chief resident engineer of the KCR, was reported by the *Post* to have said that "it would be possible to go from Canton to Hong Kong in four hours, allowing the passenger time enough to transact business and return home on the same day".

No one today questions the benefits of the East Rail Line to Hong Kong, but few know that it would not have been constructed if Hong Kong had not faced a threat to its competitiveness. A major British trading house obtained a concession in 1898 from the Imperial Chinese government to build a railway connecting Hong Kong with Canton. The railway itself had not been constructed due to the higher cost of transporting goods by train than by river steamer until when the Americans financed construction of Canton-Hankow railway and proposed to build their own deep water port near Canton.

These plans posed a threat to Hong Kong's role as the maritime hub connecting China with the rest of the British Empire. Thus, the Hong Kong colonial

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government rushed to start construction on the KCR, using public funds to pay for the excavation of the British section from Kowloon to Lo Wu in 1905.

The initial budget for the 35km British section was roughly HK\$5 million to HK\$6 million, but the cost ballooned after a series of engineering difficulties, a shortage of reliable labour, and delays due to typhoons. When completed, the project cost the colonial government around HK\$12 million.

The constant delays and ever-increasing cost of the railway project aroused deep suspicion about Hong Kong's capacity to pay for it and led to attacks from the public. Besides being ridiculed as a "white elephant" by the public, the project faced criticism from high-ups. In the Legislative Council, a member of the Chamber of Commerce was reported to have launched the following diatribe against the colonial government: "I doubt if any other railway in the world, with the exception of one or two in South America, has ever cost such a terrible sum of money."

At the opening ceremony of the British section of the railway, E.S. Lindsey defended the project: "Railways like this one, which are intended for the development of a district, usually do cost a good deal, and until that development is accomplished, the traffic must necessarily be slight. The original intention is liable to be lost sight of when, after a railway is finished, traffic sufficient to pay for the interest on its cost is not immediately forthcoming."

Sir Francis Henry May, then Officer Administering the Government, said in his opening speech: "We do not expect that this line by itself will pay remunerative interest on the large capital spent on its construction. But the indirect beneficial results to the colony will, I think, be such as to recompense it in some measure for the large expenditure that has been incurred."

Today, Hong Kong's decision-makers are facing the same questions as those faced 100 years ago by the people of colonial Hong Kong: should any decisions on Hong Kong's future be judged overwhelmingly by short-term gains and losses? Without a doubt, history offers a lesson that answers those questions for the people of today.

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Passengers wait to board a train to Lo Wu. The original railway was completed in 1910. Photo: Edward Wong