

# City Talk



The Kwai Tsing Container Terminal is one of the world's busiest ports. SING TAO

## HK PUNCHED WAY ABOVE WEIGHT AS SEAPORT

Hong Kong began life as a seaport.

From its early days as a colony, our deep harbor, protected by the two narrow entrances, Lei Yue Mun and Kap Shui Mun, made us the perfect site for oceangoing vessels to berth.

Tsim Sha Tsui was probably our first port facility, supported by Holt's Wharf, where goods were stored for loading and unloading, adjacent to a railway terminus.

As Hong Kong developed a tourism industry, the Holt's Wharf site evolved to become Tsim Sha Tsui East, hosting many high-class hotels, and the Ocean Terminal was our passenger ship terminal for many decades, until it was recently supplemented by the new cruise terminal in Kai Tak.

In the 1970s, the widespread use of containers for shipping changed the port scene.

Instead of shipping bulk cargo in various shapes and form, putting most goods in 20- or 40-foot-long containers created a new packaging system for shipment.

Commodities, clothing and machinery were packed inside these standard size containers, making them much easier and quicker to load onto ships specially designed to carry them.

Loading and unloading times were drastically cut from weeks to days, and this new innovation was a sea change in ocean transport.

Kwai Chung, located in the southwest New Territories, with a deep waterfront and easy access through the Rambler's Channel, was selected as our location to house the new container terminals.

Helped by the fast-growing manufacturing bases in Guangdong, Kwai Chung container terminal quickly grew and blossomed from one terminal in 1970 to nine in the 1990s.

For many years, our total throughput, expressed in TEUs (total equivalent units of 40 ft containers) led all other ports in the world, including London, Amsterdam, Singapore and more.

Unfortunately, the ever-rising land costs and competition from the mainland in the



### Nuts and bolts

Edmund Leung

form of the new Yantian port gradually eroded our leading position.

Meanwhile, Hutchison Ports, in expansionary moves out from Kwai Chung, acquired many other overseas ports, from Felixstowe in Britain to Panama, and many other strategic locations, to become the owner of the largest number of container ports in the world, indirectly sustaining the pioneering position of Hong Kong as the leader in seaports.

The small footprint of our container terminals was a limitation for Hong Kong, but we overcame this weakness by developing sophisticated systems of loading and unloading, and for storage of containers.

We successfully applied the most advanced lifting and transport machinery for quick loading of containers on and off vessels, and to stack containers along the wharf, fully utilizing all of the valuable land spaces.

The terminal operators continuously innovated our sorting system for containers with computerized systems.

Many container cranes are now operated from a central control room, doing away with drivers sitting in an enclosed cab atop the giant cranes.

Forcing crane operators to stay up in the hot cab for a full eight-hour shift has caused a lot of labor problems and was not conducive to satisfactory working conditions.

Hong Kong may be recognized as a financial hub by many people, but we must not forget our roots as a seaport.

We are gifted with a deep harbor, a location near the world's largest manufacturing base and a cluster of maritime service industries.

We must keep these sharp tools in top condition to serve our region, and develop new skills and services to enable us to stay in our leading position.

**Veteran engineer Edmund Leung Kwong-ho casts an expert eye over Hong Kong's iconic infrastructure**