City University of Hong Kong
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CAH 3511 Discovering Hong Kong’s Culture and Heritage
Local History Project Report

Topic:
Stonebreakers

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1. Introduction

Probably most of the people have little understanding towards the industry of stone breaking. This photo inspired our interest in this industry. At first, we believed that they were farming or harvesting. We are under this illusion and it may probably explain by the official narratives of "Hong Kong story".

Hong Kong was under the British colonial rule for more than 150 years. After signing the treaty of Nanjing in 1842, the Chinese government agreed to cede the territory of Hong Kong. Since then, Hong Kong developed quickly and it gradually became an entrepot, which facilitates the trade between China coastal regions and Southeast Asia. Besides, Hong Kong was famous for its manufacturing industry since the middle 20th century. There were few largest industries, which include plastic flowers, textiles and shipbuilding. This is the narrative of Hong Kong story, which is constructed as a successful transformation from entrepot to industrial city and became the international financial center in the 21st century.

The official narratives of Hong Kong story overlooked the stone-breaking industry. It contributed a lot to Hong Kong urban development. Since volcanic and intrusive
igneous rocks compose the geology of Hong Kong, granite has been used as a raw material for buildings and construction since 1840s\textsuperscript{1}. The stone-breaking industry started to grow. Most of the workers were Hakka and they settled in the coastal area. The Hakka took this advantage and developed quarries at coastal regions include Ngau Tau Kok, Sai Tso Wan, Cha Kwo Ling and Lei Yue Mu, which named as ‘Four Hills’\textsuperscript{2}. Their output was mainly for local consumption such as the construction of residential houses and buildings for environments as well as exporting to the southeast China.

Before the introduction of stone crushers, stone breaking was operated manually. The workers used some simple tools such as mallet, chisels, drills and wedges. Firstly, they had to spend a few hours drilling into the stone hill after which the poles of dried wood were able to force into the drill holes\textsuperscript{3}. Water was used as a means to expand the wood. The stone face would then crack off and undergo the process of polishing. The broken pieces of stone were formed finally. It was a tough job, which required intensive manpower. Due to the advancement in technology, the use of mechanized quarrying equipment replaced hand quarrying and the industry phased out in the 1960s.

The stone-breaking industry was the cornerstone of Hong Kong development. This project aims to uncover its historical significance and contribution. We are going to make it known to others about the industry and how do the laborers work in the old days.

2. The Ups and Downs of Stonebreaker

2.1. The flourishing period of Stonebreakers

According to “Diplomatic documents”, it recorded that the residents living in Kowloon east were fishermen, farmers as well as stonebreakers, which showed the stone breaking was the main industry in early Hong Kong. There were 10 Quarries in Kowloon and HK Island (6 in Hong Kong Island and 4 in Kowloon), for instance, in Quarry Bay and Kowloon Bay. The mine has located all over the place, which not only provided numerous job opportunities, but also formed different communities.


\textsuperscript{3} See footnote 2
In 1848, there were dozens of ships that exporting stone (about 70-100 tons per ship) with over 1000 workers only for transporting the stones onto the ship. In 1972, one-eighth of a total number of working labors in HK was Stonebreaker\(^4\).

2.2. The Contribution of Stonebreakers

From the late 1990s to early 2000s, a large amount of granite (花崗岩) from local stone quarries used to construct. Stonebreakers made a significant contribution to the construction of Hong Kong. When we look at the great architecture in HK with smooth stone on its surface and stone column as railings, we can find that the material used was granite\(^5\). The stone came from the hard work of stonebreakers and the architectures still stand firm in Hong Kong.

![Images of King George V Memorial Park (1936), High Street Ghost House (1892), and Court of Final Appeal (1843)]

2.3. The Decline in Stonebreakers

\(^4\) Liang, B. (2008). Guantang feng wu zhi (觀塘風物志) (pp. 83-88) (Hong Kong (China), Kwun Tong District Council, Kwun Tong District Office).

The main reason was the advancement in the production method. The use of cement was introduced to substitute stones in 1911. It is easy to use, firmer and faster when constructing infrastructure. Later, in the 1930s, cement as materials for construction became mainstream. The number of workers decreased as the people tended to use gunpowder for mining. Therefore, the use of machine replaced workers in breaking the stone into small pieces, which led to the decrease in a number of stonebreakers.

The other cause of the decline in stonebreakers was the 1967 Riot. As the HK government had to prevent rioter-making bomb by using the gunpowder in the quarry, they implemented control of gunpowder. It created a serious impact on production as they used gunpowder in breaking the stone into small pieces. When the use of gunpowder was limited, it was difficult to maintain even the quarry-hired manpower in production. The labor power was costly and time-consuming. Later, Government refused to renew the license of the quarry and then shut down one by one.

3. Exhibition theme and content

The exhibition's theme is “The Best Job Ever” (絕世好工), which focuses on the contribution of stone quarrying or stonebreaker to Hong Kong as well as the hardship of being a stonebreaker. Nowadays, the criteria of a good job or even the best job are different from the past. People have higher expectations and standards when selecting a job depends on the salary, working hours, welfare, etc. Therefore, we aim to introduce stonebreaker to the audiences and let them think critically whether stonebreaker is the best job in the past in a modern perspective.

Stone quarrying was once a popular industry in the past and it had a significant contribution on the large-scale infrastructures. It was a momentous industry that fostered the development of Hong Kong. Thomas Allom mentioned in 1843 “…a large portion of the natives having long sustained themselves by the profits of hewing this primitive stone.⁶” Indicating most of the local people maintained their livelihoods by working as a stonebreaker during the 1800s.

Yet, why so many people chose to be a stonebreaker? The high salary was an essential factor that made stonebreaker became a favorable job. The status of stone quarrying industry in 1848-1860 mentioned in The Blue Book 31 of the Hong Kong Government: “The average daily income of workers in Hong Kong was 7 pence,

stone cutter's average income was 1 shilling and 41/2 pence which were the highest paid during this period.\textsuperscript{7} And their income was remained the highest up to 1854 when the salary was already 30 shillings\textsuperscript{8}. And until the 1900s, the average income of stonebreakers was still higher than other labors\textsuperscript{9}.

In addition, stonebreakers were enjoying different benefits while earning the highest salary. Since most quarries located in rural areas, there were temporary shelters offered to the workers to live on site. The shelters were made of masonry and wood, and about 15 feet high which were quite decent in the old days\textsuperscript{10}. Moreover, since strong physique was required, workers were given three meals a day, including breakfast, lunch and dinner that served by a resident cook on site\textsuperscript{11}. A naptime or rest from 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm during the extremely hot weather was also offered to the workers in order to ensure their ability for the continuous works\textsuperscript{12}. Hence, being a stonebreaker could guarantee a comparatively good life by having adequate clothing and food. Since at least, the workers did not have to worry about their accommodation or in hunger. Furthermore, two unions were registered in 1948 and 1949 to protect the rights of the workers including Hong Kong and Kowloon Building and Stone Masons Workers Union (Shing Yee) (港九勝義建築結石工會) and Hong Kong and Kowloon Masons General Union (港九石行總工會)\textsuperscript{13}.

However, being a stonebreaker was hard and exhausting. People were required to have strong physique as they normally worked 8 to 12 hours a day\textsuperscript{14}. Especially in the high demand seasons, workers usually worked 8 hours, rested for 2 hours and then worked for another 8 hours. Apart from the long working hours, stonebreakers also requested to move a large rock block and handle a 12-lb hammer efficiently. As well as to own a tool-kit which cost around $50. Furthermore, stone quarrying was a dangerous industry that involved manual lifting of heavy rock blocks, handling explosives and working at height\textsuperscript{15}. Thus, workers were at high risks of getting injured or even dead in the working environment.

\textsuperscript{7} See footnote 3  
\textsuperscript{8} See footnote 3  
\textsuperscript{11} See footnote 7  
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\textsuperscript{15} See footnote 3
Undoubtedly, stonebreaker was a well-paid job, and these people also fostered the development of Hong Kong (by providing the materials for a construction of a metropolis). Yet, the workers devoted a lot to this job as they had worked very hard and undergone various hazards in order to earn the salary (血汗錢). Being a stonebreaker is not as good as people think. It seemed to be the best job in that period (with the highest salary), but the workload and challenges were much greater than other jobs. Stonebreaker is a job that people risk their life for a better living condition.

4. Exhibition Design

The below is the board design about the stonebreaker; the dimension is 200 cm (length) x 100 cm (width) that matched with the size requirement set by the publisher. The board is designed into three different sections, and they are theme and title, basic information and photos, and finally is the interpretation by us.
Looking for the board, we want to provide a sense of vintage and old fashion for the audience to feel the old Hong Kong. Therefore, we would like to use light color as the main color to design the board, except the theme and title.

First, we used a photo of granite feature as a background, in order to match the theme, which is stonebreaker. Therefore, it can give a clear first impression to viewers to note that the story about the board is related to stone. Second, from the top, there is the first section and they are theme and title, that are ‘絕世好工’ and ‘招聘’. They are set from right to left in order to match with the style of traditional Chinese words, and to provide a sense of 19 and 20-century style of the job advertisement. Also, there are some frames in gray that wanted to show the layer between the background and the information, so that viewers can easily to look at those words and photos. Those frames are designed into semi-transparency and white background because we want to give a clear message to visitors. Therefore, they can get the information from the board comfortably.

Besides, we would like to post two photos on the board and to show the story of stonebreakers at that time. It helps to bring audiences into the situation and the reality so that they can be more familiar with the topic even they do not know or experienced before the exhibition. And each photo will include a frame so as to differentiate those photos. Besides, just using photos to tell the story may be not enough to attract people. Therefore, we would like to include a video clip about stone-breaking in order to catch peoples’ eyes. We know that it is hard to invite people to look at the board because it is passive and not many people will pay attention to the exhibition board, mostly are just stay three seconds. As a result, having the video may prolong their attentions towards our board and get more information.
Next to the photos and video, there is a part of short general information about the history of stonebreaker. It aims to provide basic information to visitors so that they can further explore this interesting work after getting the message. Furthermore, it helps to interpret visitors how this job it is. In order to provide information, we would like to use a map instead of use many words to say because it will be more attractive and make the message more attractive.

At the bottom part, it is the third section, which is talking about interpretation. We try to use point form style to bring out the main ideas of being a stonebreaker. We divide this section into three parts and use the subtitle to stick out the points, job requirement, bonus, and welfare. However, we try to use ironic style to talk about being a stonebreaker and both contents include positive and negative things, so as to balance the things and seem like not to be one-sided.

On the other hand, we think pictogram is a fascinating strategy to catch peoples’ eyes because it full of pictures so that it can target children or teenagers to see the exhibition. Moreover, in order to reduce the word number, we use pictogram instead of the word to increase the delightful. It can also provide the pellucid message to the audience so they can easy to understand. Both points of the pictogram are having annotation as an explanation and elaboration for the audience so as to make clear of the interpretation.
The major aim of the board design is to attract audience attention and willing to read the board, in the following it will talk about the methods that we use to attract visitors.

First, in the context of the board, we understand that visitors are not willing to spend a lot of time to read to many texts, the amount of words that put on the board are as less as we can. The amounts of words are limited to 200 words. Visitors can read it very quickly and immediately received the message that the board tried to spread out. For example, a short paragraph is put on the upper part of the board, it only contains around 180 words. Here is the short paragraph that put it on the board.

「香港開埠後四處大興土木，需要大量建築用的石材。而香港大部份地質均是花崗岩，因此盛產各種石材。本公司提供的工資比其他行業高，吸引不少人才投身打石業，當中又以來自廣東省客家人為主。工作地方多數在「四山」，分別是牛頭角、茜草灣、茶果嶺和鯉魚門。由本公司建造的著名花崗岩建築物有：香港終審法院大樓、高街等。不要猶疑，立即成為我們一份子吧！為香港，我們需要你！」

Readers do not feel board as they do not need to read too much text and they can immediately know the basic information about stonebreaker. It helps visitors know that stonebreaker has huge contribution to the Hong Kong society in the past. This short paragraph is used employee perspective to talk about, as this board is an imitation of recruitment advertisement. Moreover, in the middle part of the board, it
introduces stonebreaker's working requirement and the stonebreaker's working subsidy in short sentences which helps visitors read it easily and quickly. It also introduces it in an ironic way; such as the working "subsidy" is having black lungs, a pair of blind eyes and broken hands. Visitors can easier to remember the work injuries that stonebreakers may face and their bad working environment. It helps them understand that although stonebreaker had very high salaries, they needed to work very hard and even sacrificed their health. In the bottom part of the board, it is difficult for visitors to read a text. Therefore, we use images instead of wordings to talk about stonebreakers' welfare. It is an easier way to read the board and understand that stonebreakers enjoy better welfare than other workers in the 20th century.

Second, in order to grab visitors attentions, the board uses “The Best Job”(絕世好工) as the title. Nowadays, "The best job" is a hot topic for people to discuss, so this title can attract people to read it. Also, visitors can see the board even far away to it as the word size of the title is large. To imitate the recruitment advertisement in the 20th century, the reading direction of the title is from right to the left. The arrangement of the context and images on the board are considered. The text is put it in the middle and upper part of the board and the pictures and videos are put it under the paragraph. The text is on the eye level of visitors; visitors can easier to read the text in a comfortable way.

To conclude, stonebreakers had contributed a lot to the development of Hong Kong. It was the most well paid job in the past with various benefits like free shelters and meals, yet the hardships of stonebreakers were greater than what the workers had gained. Our design is reader-friendly, as we have used texts, images, pictograms and videos to provide a more dynamic presentation to the audiences. Through the exhibition board, we hope that the audiences can get familiar with this job and the stone quarrying industry and inspire them to think about the meanings behind of our theme – “The Best job ever” through stonebreaker.
References


