

Experimental and Numerical Studies on the Performances of Stone Column and Sand Compaction Pile Reinforced Hong Kong Marine Clay

by

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Abstract: Stone columns (SCs) and sand compaction piles (SCPs) are widely utilized as effective methods to increase the bearing capacity and reduce the settlement of soft ground. In this study, a physical model test was conducted to compare the performances of the SC and SCP improved Hong Kong Marine Clay (HKMC) grounds. The finite element (FE) modelling was performed to analyze the settlement and stress increment. A practical equation related to the area replacement ratio and the friction angle of columns is proposed for determining the creep improvement ratio of soft ground treated by columns, which agrees well with the creep improvement ratios from the FE simulations.

Keywords: sand compaction pile; stone column; marine clay; creep improvement ratio

Introduction

Ground columns have been widely used in the improvement of soft soils to increase the bearing capacity, reduce total and differential settlements, accelerate consolidation and mitigate liquefaction. Stone Columns (SCs) and Sand Compaction Piles (SCPs) are two of the most widely applied column-based ground improvement techniques (Han and Ye, 2001; Kitazumi, 2005). Recently, SCs and SCPs have been widely utilized in Hong Kong Marine Clay (HKMC) to support seawalls in the artificial island for Hong Kong Boundary Crossing Facilities (HKBCF). SC and SCP play the roles of densification, reinforcement, and drainage related to the incorporated material (Bouassida and Carter, 2014). The stiffness of the columns is normally higher than that of the surrounding soft soil, larger stress concentrates on the columns with the assumption of equal strain. Stress concentration ratio (n -value) is defined as the ratio of the vertical stress acting on the column to that on the surrounding soil (Poorooshasb and Meyerhof, 1997):

$$n = \frac{\Delta\sigma_c}{\Delta\sigma_s} \quad (1)$$

where $\Delta\sigma_c$ and $\Delta\sigma_s$ are the stress increments on the column and the surrounding soil when the vertical loading is applied on the improved ground. However, there is a lack of direct comparison between the SC and SCP treated soft grounds in a drained boundary condition.

The creep behavior widely exists in soft soils and directly related to long-term settlement (Yin *et al.*, 2011). For HKMC, stress-strain-strength behavior is well studied by many researchers. The viscous behavior including creep and the strain-rate dependent behavior should be considered for this type of soft soil (Feng *et al.*, 2017). Pugh (2016) reported that the ignorance on the creep of soft soil resulted in two serviceability failures of the SC treated very soft ground in real projects. Therefore, the time-dependent behavior of the composite foundation formed by SC/SCP columns and HKMC is also necessary to be considered.

The settlement improvement factor, β , is utilized to describe the influence of area replacement ratio on the total settlement of the composite foundation (Sexton *et al.*, 2017):

$$\beta = \frac{S_{untreated}}{S_{treated}} \Big|_{t=36500 \text{ day}} \quad (2)$$

where $S_{untreated}$ and $S_{treated}$ are the total settlements of untreated and column treated soft soil ground subjected to the same applied load for $t=36500$ day, respectively. A similar parameter $\beta_{consolidation}$ is defined as the consolidation settlement improvement factor for the soft soil with no creep. Similarly, the creep improvement ratio β_{creep} is defined as the creep coefficient of untreated ground and that of treated ground.

This study is to compare the performances of the SC and SCP in improving the strength and reducing the settlement of the HKMC soft ground and to investigate the effects of ground columns on the long-term performance of the column improved ground. A physical modelling experiment on the response of the SC and SCP treated soft ground subjected to external footing loads was conducted. An FE modelling was performed to examine the influences of the area replacement ratio, friction angle, and Young's modulus on the creep behavior of the ground improved by columns (specified on SCs and SCPs).

Physical Model Test and Procedures

Basic Properties of Clay and Column Materials and Preparation

The HKMC was taken from the site of the artificial island for HKBCF in Hong Kong. The plastic limit and liquid limit of the HKMC are 24.6% and 52.7%, respectively. The specific gravity, G_s , of HKMC is 2.56. HKMC belongs to the MH based on the Unconfined Soil Classification System (USCS). According to BSI (2016), the maximum and minimum dry densities are 1620 kg/m³ and 1425 kg/m³ for the standard sand material, 1480 kg/m³ and 1200 kg/m³ for the aggregate material. The aggregate is clarified as silty gravel with sand (group symbol is GM) with the coefficient of curvature of 0.98 and the coefficient of uniformity of 2.59; the standard sand belongs to clayey sand (group symbol is SC) with the coefficient of curvature of 0.568 and the coefficient of uniformity of 4.12.

A steel box with inner dimensions of 1000mm×600 mm×800 mm was used as the container for the physical model test, as shown in Figure 1. Lubricating grease was spread on the inner surfaces of the steel box and a plastic film was attached to the inner surface of the steel tank. First, the HKMC was mixed with water to prepare a fully saturated slurry with the moisture content about 1.9 times of liquid limit. A pre-consolidation pressure of 10 kPa was applied on the surface of the HKMC by dead weights. After the pre-consolidation stage, an SC and an SCP were installed into the HKMC for comparison under the same loading condition. The arrangements of the two columns and transducers are shown in Figure 1. Earth pressure cells and pore water pressure transducers were utilized and installed in the physical model. The capacity of pore-water pressure transducers is 1 MPa with an accuracy of 1 kPa in this study. Earth pressure cells (TML model KDA-PA/KD-A) were calibrated with a capacity of 1000 kPa (Zhou et al. 2011). After the installation of the SC and SCP, a sheet of geotextile covered by a 50 mm thick sand layer was placed on the surface of HKMC. A plywood plate with a thickness of 15 mm was placed above the sand layer to provide the equal-strain condition, as shown in Figure 1(b). The uniform vertical loading of 40 kPa was imposed by a water-pressurized rubber membrane underneath a bolt-fixed steel cap. The detail of this membrane has been described in Yin and Su (2006).

Procedure Description

First, the vertical pressure of 40 kPa was applied by the GDS pressure/volume controller for three days under the drained condition. The stress changes on the top of the SC and the SCP and at the top surface of the HKMC were monitored. The dissipation of the excess pore water pressure in the HKMC was also monitored during the testing progress. Then, an undrained load test was conducted using a hydraulic jack to investigate the load-settlement relationship of the SC and SCP. The settlement was directly measured by a linear variable differential transformer (LVDT) until the failures of the SC and SCP occurred. Afterwards, two multi-stage oedometer tests on the HKMC samples taken from the physical model were carried out after the load test to investigate its nonlinear compression behavior. The parameter values of clayey soils, SC and SCP are summarized and listed in Table 1. The oedometer tests and the load test on the SC and SCP can provide verified data for the HKMC, the SC, and the SCP.

Numerical Analyses and Parametric Study

Numerical Simulation of the Load Test

A numerical model was built to simulate the load test and to back-calculate the bearing capacities of the SC and the SCP (Ambily and Gandhi, 2007). The equivalent diameter was determined in the FE analysis, as presented in Figure 2(a). Axis-symmetric analysis was selected in the simulation. The horizontal displacements of the two sides were fixed. The top of the FE model is uniformly compressed. The drainage condition of the two sides is impermeable due to the symmetric of the model. The fine mesh was generated in the FE modelling, inducing total 1800 elements with a mesh size of 11.37 mm. The Mohr-Coulomb model was used for the SC and the SCP (Castro, 2017; Castro and Sagasetta 2009). The dilation angles were obtained from the relationship of $\psi = \phi_c - 30^\circ$, where ϕ_c is the friction angle (Mohanty and Samanta, 2015), and the Poisson's ratio was taken as 0.2. The applied loading was consistent with the procedures in the physical model. As plotted in Figure 2(c), a good agreement between the analyzed results from the finite element and the physical model test data proves that the simulation domain and the values in Table 1 for the SC and the SCP are reasonable.

Numerical Simulation of the Physical Model

The consolidation process of the HKMC improved by the SC and the SCP was simulated based on the validated parameters of the physical model test. As illustrated in Figure 2(b), the equivalent diameter is the same as that used in the simulation of the load test. The uniform vertical loading of 40 kPa was applied on the top surface. A rigid plate was set on the top and bottom of the sand layer to simulate the equal strain condition in the physical model. Roller boundaries were set to ideally simulate the boundaries of the physical model (the side friction is neglected). Since strengthening by SCP and SC is mainly associated with the lateral expansion of the soft soil, the pile-soil interface was modeled by total adhesion contact rather than the interface element between the soft soil and columns. All the parameter values were listed in Table 1. In order to deeply understand the treated soft ground, different values of diameter, Young's modulus, friction angle of the columns and surcharge loading were applied in the FE modelling, as listed in Table 2.

Results and Discussions

Test Results under Vertical Loading of 40 kPa

Figures 2(d) and 2(e) show the variations of stress change on the columns and surrounding soft soil in the physical model. The stress variations from FE modelling are also calculated and compared. In the physical model test, the measured stresses are in the range of 250 kPa~326 kPa for the SC, while those of the SCP increase from 208 kPa to 277 kPa. Thus, the bearing capacity of the SC treated ground is higher than the SCP treated ground in the drained condition. In FE modelling, the stress variation shows a consistent trend. In the first 3 days, stresses on the SC increase from 208 kPa to 328 kPa and stresses on the SCP increase from 186 kPa to 265 kPa. For the stress change of surrounding soft soil, the measured stresses decrease from 45.4 kPa to 40.1 kPa for the SC treated soft soil and reduce from 49.9 kPa to 44.8 kPa for the SCP treated soft soil. In the FE analysis, the total vertical stress diminishes from 54 kPa to 49.5 kPa for the SC treated ground and decreases from 57 kPa to 49.8 kPa for the SCP treated ground within the first 3 days.

Numerical Results of Creep Settlement of the Soft Ground Improved by Columns

The area replacement ratio is an important parameter in the treatment process of composite foundation, which is defined as:

$$A_r = \frac{A_c}{A} = \frac{r_c^2}{r_e^2} \quad (3)$$

where A_c is the area of the column, r_c denotes the radius of the column, A is the total area, and r_e is the equivalent radius of the area. The values of the area replacement ratio are calculated from Eq. (3) based on the different values of r_c .

The creep effect of soft soil is usually neglected by setting a very small value of creep parameter ($\approx 1\%$ of the standard value, denoted as “no creep”). For the very small creep parameter value of soft soils (termed as “no creep”), there is a stable force equilibrium after the consolidation:

$$\sigma_p A = \Delta\sigma_c A_c + \Delta\sigma_s (A - A_c) \quad (4)$$

Nevertheless, it is more realistic to consider the creep of the soft soils by setting the standard value of creep parameter in soft soils. The stress on the top of soft soils gradually decreases because the creep behavior of soft soils still occurs after consolidation. Then, the stress on the ground column increases correspondingly based on the force equilibrium, expressed as:

$$\sigma_p A = (\Delta\sigma_c + d\sigma_c) A_c + (\Delta\sigma_s - d\sigma_s) (A - A_c) \quad (5)$$

where $d\sigma_s$ denotes the stress decrement of surrounding soft soil, $d\sigma_c$ is the stress increment on the ground column. Substituting Eq. (3) into Eq. (4) and Eq. (5), we can get:

$$\frac{d\sigma_c}{d\sigma_s} = \frac{1 - A_r}{A_r} \quad (6)$$

It is found that the stress increment on the ground column due to the creep of surrounding soft soil would decrease with the area replacement ratio. Thus, the higher value of the area replacement ratio is helpful to reduce the creep influence on the stress concentration of the ground column.

Regarding the column-improved soft ground as one representative volume of mixture system (Shi and Yin, 2017), there is a relationship between the total creep of mixture system and the creep of soft soil (Shi and Herle, 2017):

$$\varepsilon_{creep} = \frac{\int_{V_s} \varepsilon(t) dV}{V_t} = (1 - A_r) \varepsilon_s(t) \quad (7)$$

where V_t and V_s are the volumes of the column-improved soft ground and surrounding soft soil, respectively; $\varepsilon_s(t)$ is the creep behavior of the surrounding soft soil, which is related to the creep parameter and stress-strain state (Yin and Graham, 1994):

$$\varepsilon_s(t) = \mu^* \ln \left(\frac{t + \Delta t_e}{t_0 + \Delta t_e} \right) \quad (8)$$

where Δt_e is the equivalent time related to the state of surrounding soft soil, μ^* is the creep coefficient of untreated soft soil. When the soft soil is at the normally consolidated state, $\Delta t_e = 0$. By substituting Eq. (8) into Eq. (7), a general creep settlement equation for the column-improved soft ground can be obtained:

$$\varepsilon_{creep} = (1 - A_r) \mu^* \ln \left(\frac{t + \Delta t_e}{t_0 + \Delta t_e} \right) \quad (9)$$

As illustrated in Figure 3(b), the value of the equivalent time (Δt_e) is not only related to the amplitude of the unloading stress but also dependent on the stress state before unloading. For A_r is 0.104, the stress of surrounding soft soil decreases from 50 kPa to 40 kPa. For A_r is 0.416, the stress reduces from 25 kPa to 18 kPa. Although the unloading amplitude of $A_r=0.104$ is larger than that of $A_r=0.416$, it is shown that the stress-strain state of $A_r=0.416$ is much closer than that of $A_r=0.104$ to the normal compression line. In order to make a simplification, Eq. (9) can be expressed as:

$$\varepsilon_{creep} = (1 - A_r)^{\xi} \mu^* \ln \left(\frac{t}{t_0} \right) \quad (10)$$

where ξ is the reduction factor, which is related to stress decrement of the surrounding soft soil and the stress state. In this study, $\xi = 2.2 \sin(\phi_c)$. The creep coefficient of the treated soft ground is regarded as:

$\mu_{treated}^* = (1 - A_r)^\xi \mu^*$. Therefore, the creep improvement ratio is expressed as:

$$\beta_{creep} = \frac{1}{(1 - A_r)^\xi} \quad (11)$$

(a) The Influence of Young's modulus of column

As compared in the physical model, one main difference between SCs and SCPs is the value of Young's modulus. The range of Young's modulus of a stone column is usually between 25 MPa and 100 MPa (Castro, 2017). Taking the values of SCs and the SCPs as the reference, two other different values (12 MPa, 70 MPa) of Young's modulus in the FE modelling are utilized and compared. In Figure 4 (a), there is a good agreement between the calculated results of Eq. (11) and FE simulations with four different values of area replacement ratio (A_r). The creep improvement ratio nonlinearly increases with the area replacement ratio. Especially for the large value of the area replacement ratio, the creep settlement is largely reduced. In addition, it is observed that the creep settlement of treated soft ground is relatively independent of Young's modulus of columns, which is consistent with Sexton *et al.* (2017).

(b) The Influence of friction angle of column

The friction angle (ϕ_c) values of sand and stone materials are normally larger than 30° , thus, three different values of ϕ_c were investigated. The influence of friction angle of columns is shown in Figure 4 (b). It is found that the increase of ϕ_c could help to reduce the creep settlement of the column-treated soft ground, thus, the reduction factor ξ in Eq. (10) is related to the value of ϕ_c . As shown in Figure 4 (b), there is a good agreement between results of FE simulation and the calculated results from Eq. (11). Correspondingly, the influence of ϕ_c is correctly captured by Eq. (11).

(c) The Influence of surcharge loading

The influence of surcharge loading in the system of column-treated soft ground on the creep improvement ratio is presented in Figure 4 (c). Three different surcharge loadings from 40 to 160 kPa were studied since the surcharge loading of the composite foundation is normally within 200 kPa. It is shown that the surcharge loading has a slight effect on the creep improvement ratio. As explained by Sexton *et al.* (2017), the stress of soft soil could transfer to the columns before the columns are fully yielded. The calculated curves of Eq. (11) agree well with the results of the FE simulation with three different surcharge loadings.

Conclusions

In this study, a physical model test was conducted to compare the performance of the SC and SCP treated soft HKMC. FE modelling was utilized to analyze the stress variation of the SC and SCP, and the parametric study was performed to investigate the influences of column and surcharge loading on the creep settlement. The main findings and conclusions are drawn as follows:

- a) According to the FE modelling under the loading of 40kPa, the n -values of the SC treated soft ground are in the range of 5.5~7.6, while the n -values range from 4.0 to 6.2 for the SCP improved soft soils.
- b) The columns play the functions of replacing the soft soil and resisting the stress, which helps to reduce the creep settlement of the column reinforced soft ground. The reduction of creep settlement is an indicator of the safe long-term behavior of the soft soil reinforced by SC and SCP.
- c) There are good agreements between the FE simulations and the calculated results from the proposed simplified equation for different Young's moduli, friction angles, and surcharge loadings.

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Data Availability

All data during the study are available in the submitted article and the detailed data values are available from the corresponding author by request. And there is no model or generated code in this study.

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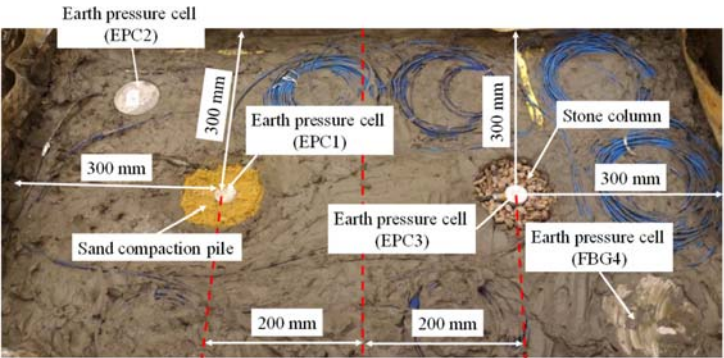
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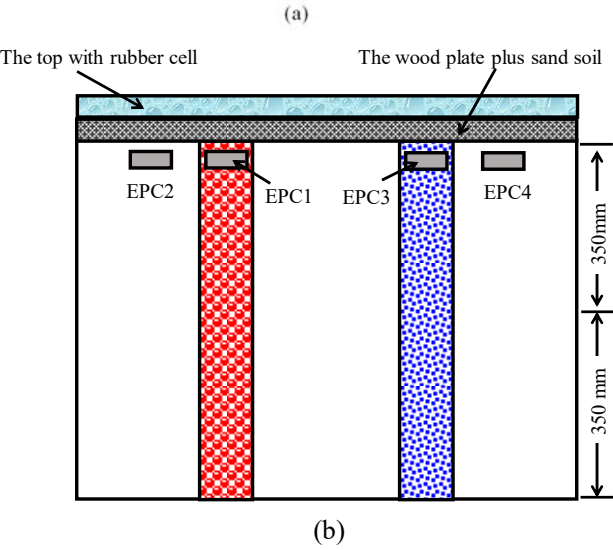
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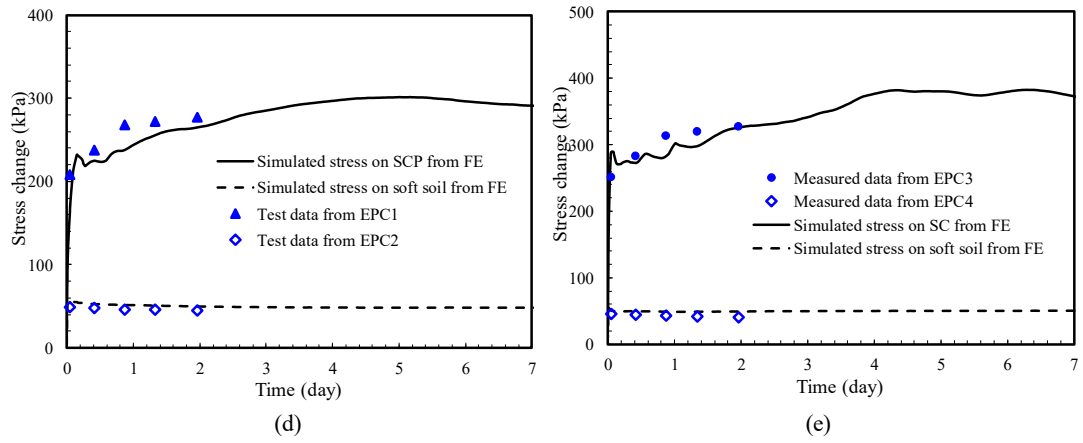
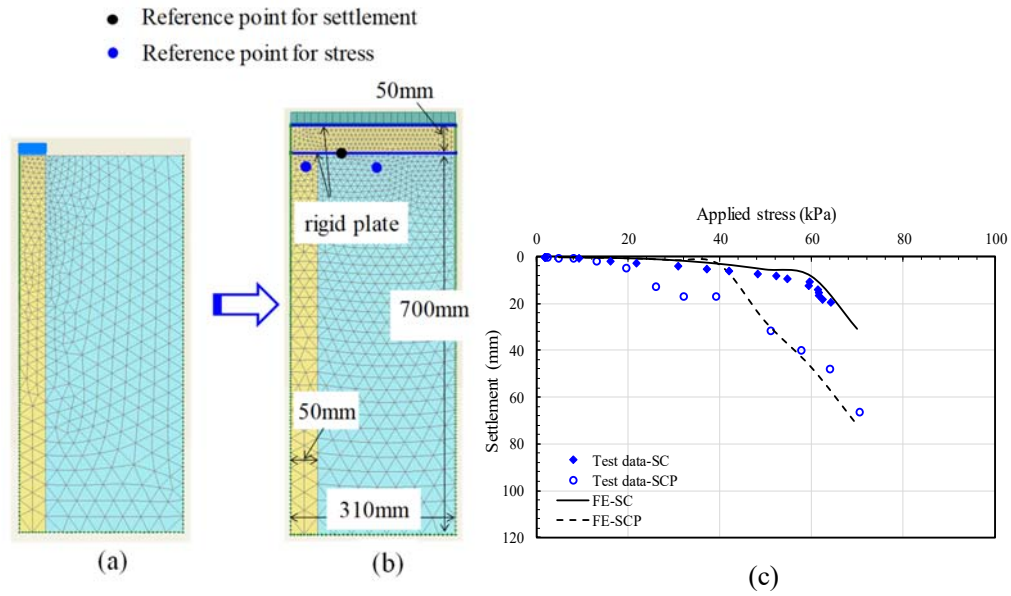
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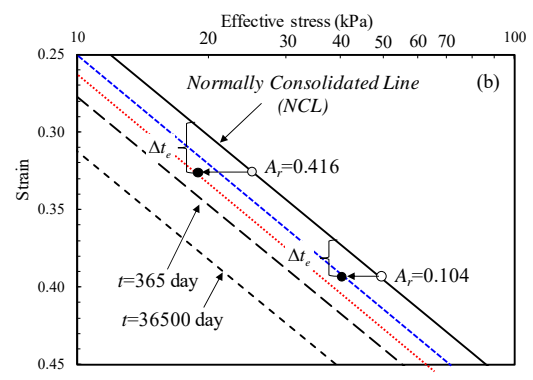
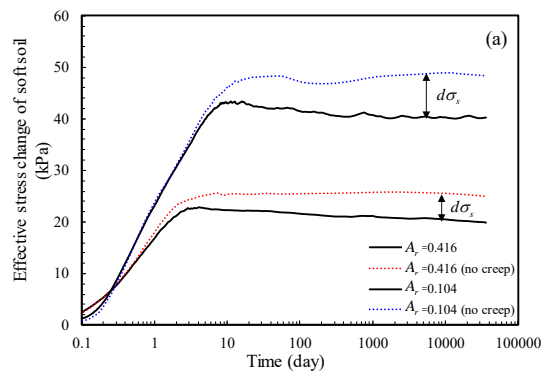


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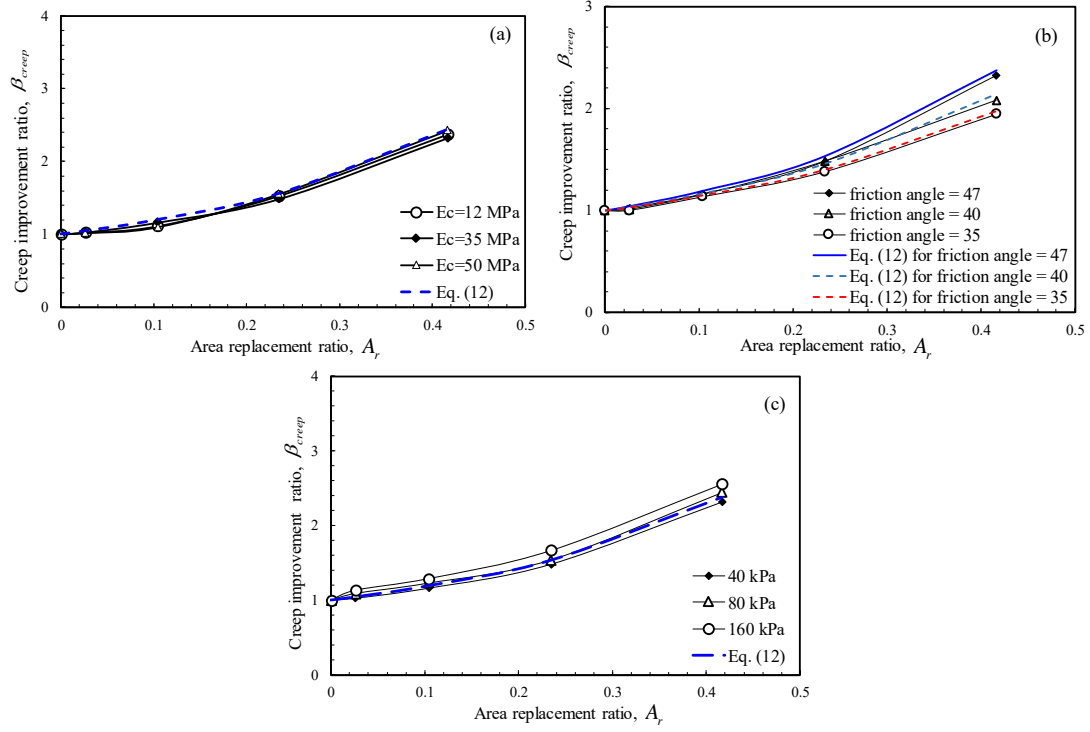
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Table 1. Parameter values in the finite element simulations for the physical model test

Parameter (unit)	HKMD	SC	SCP
$\gamma_{soil} (kN / m^3)$	16	19	19
$k_x (m / day)$	3.5×10^{-4}	1.0×10^{-1}	1.0×10^{-1}
$k_y (m / day)$	3.5×10^{-4}	1.0×10^{-1}	1.0×10^{-1}
$c' (kPa)$	0.1	0.1	0.1
$\phi' (^\circ)$	30	47	42
ψ	-	17	12
POP (kPa)	10		
κ^*	0.026	-	-
λ^*	0.101	-	-
μ^*	0.0076	-	-
ν	0.15	0.2	0.25
$E_c (kN / m^2)$	-	35250	12000

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302

Table 2. Parametric analysis of column in the finite element simulations

Column Radius	Variable				Constant			
r_c (mm)	E_c (kN/m^2)	ϕ_c (°)	ψ (°)	σ'_v (kPa)	γ_c (kN/m^3)	v	c' (kPa)	$k_x=k_y$ (m/day)
50, 100, 150, 200	12000	47	17	40	19	0.2	0.1	0.1
50, 100, 150, 200	35250							
50, 100, 150, 200	50000							
50, 100, 150, 200	35250	47	17	40				
50, 100, 150, 200		40	10					
50, 100, 150, 200		35	5					
50, 100, 150, 200	35250	47	17	40				
50, 100, 150, 200				80				
50, 100, 150, 200				160				

303

304