Application of Drones and Artificial Intelligence in Highway and Bridge Inspection

Shanshan Wu[1,*], Guobing Deng[2], Jiawei Zan[2], Tingrong Xie[3]
[1]Faculty of Railway and Architecture, Chongqing Vocational College of Public Transportation, Chongqing, China
[2]Chongqing Transportation Engineering Quality Inspection Co., Ltd., Chongqing, China
[3]Huazhi (Chongqing) Engineering Technology Co., Ltd., Chongqing, China
**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: With the rapid development of drone technology and artificial intelligence (AI), their integration is bringing revolutionary changes to the field of highway and bridge inspection. Drones can efficiently collect large amounts of structural data while ensuring safety, while AI analyzes this data through advanced algorithms, significantly improving the accuracy and efficiency of structural defect detection. This paper reviews the application of drones and AI in highway and bridge inspection, combining the latest academic research and industry practices. It analyzes the current development trends, successful case studies, and challenges faced, and discusses future research directions.

Keywords: Drone; Artificial Intelligence (AI); Bridge Inspection; Algorithm

1. Introduction

Highways and bridges are critical components of transportation infrastructure, and their health directly impacts traffic safety and economic development [1]. Traditional inspection methods often rely on manual checks and large mechanical equipment, such as scaffolds and aerial work platforms, which are time-consuming, costly, and pose safety risks [2]. In recent years, the integration of drone and AI technologies has provided new opportunities for highway and bridge inspection, especially in improving efficiency, reducing costs, and ensuring safety [3]. Drones can be equipped with various sensors, such as high-resolution cameras, LiDAR, and infrared thermography, to collect data. AI then analyzes this data through intelligent algorithms to detect structural defects and assess their severity [4].

2. Application of Drone Technology in Highway and Bridge Inspection

2.1 Standardized Operations for Drone Data Collection

Ensuring consistency and accuracy in data collection is crucial in highway and bridge inspection. To achieve this, standardized operations play a vital role in improving data quality and consistency [5]. The following are key aspects of standardized operations:

(1) Standardization of Flight Paths

Flight paths should be designed based on the structural characteristics of the highway and bridge, environmental factors, and inspection needs. By setting fixed flight routes, it is possible to ensure that all key areas are covered and that each inspection follows a consistent flight trajectory, improving data comparability [6]. For example, multiple flight paths at different angles and altitudes can be set to comprehensively cover various parts of the highway and bridge.

(2) Unified Sensor Configuration

Selecting the appropriate sensor combination is crucial for data collection. Common sensors include high-resolution cameras, LiDAR, and infrared thermography. LiDAR can be used to generate 3D point cloud data of the highway and bridge, while high-resolution cameras provide detailed image data, suitable for crack detection and surface defect identification [7].

(3) Data Collection Frequency and Accuracy Requirements

The drone's flight speed and image collection frequency should be adjusted according to the type of bridge and highway structure. For high-speed highway bridges, higher collection frequencies may be necessary, while for smaller bridges or roads, lower frequencies may be sufficient. Furthermore, standardized data collection accuracy is required to ensure the reliability of subsequent analyses [8].

2.2 Drone Application Cases

As drone technology has become more widespread, many countries have adopted it as a key tool for highway and bridge inspection, especially for improving inspection efficiency, ensuring safety, and reducing costs. Table 1 shows five representative cases of drone applications in highway and bridge inspection.

Table 1. Representative Cases of Drone Applications in Highway and Bridge Inspection

Region	Application Type	Technical Methods	Key Achievements	Case Features & Innovations
California, USA	Highway & Bridge Inspection	Drones equipped with LiDAR and high-resolution cameras for 3D modeling	Improved accuracy, shortened inspection time	Drones can efficiently gather structural data of highways and bridges, using LiDAR and cameras to accurately detect cracks and corrosion. This reduces manual errors and greatly saves time and cost.
Jiangsu, China	Highway & Bridge Inspection	High-resolution image collection combined with AI image processing algorithms	Automated crack and damage detection, classification of severity, reduced human intervention	Using drones for efficient inspection of bridges and roads, combined with artificial intelligence technology to automatically identify and classify damage conditions, has improved work efficiency, ensured the objectivity of analysis, and effectively reduced labor costs.
Tokyo Bay, Japan	Bridge Inspection	Drones equipped with infrared thermography	Enhanced inspection accuracy and safety, especially in harsh weather conditions	Infrared thermography helps effectively detect thermal expansion and potential damage to steel structures, especially during night-time or adverse weather operations. This technology greatly improves the accuracy of inspections while ensuring the safety of operators in complex environments.
Amsterdam, Netherlands	Road Surface Monitoring	LiDAR and high-resolution cameras combined	Accurate detection of road cracks and damage, reduced traffic disruption, improved data accuracy	The Dutch Transport Management Bureau uses drones equipped with LiDAR and high-resolution cameras for routine monitoring of roads. In urban areas, using drones minimizes the impact on traffic flow while ensuring high coverage and precision in monitoring.
Sydney, Australia	Bridge & Highway Inspection	Multi-sensor combination (infrared thermography, high-resolution cameras, LiDAR)	Detailed detection of steel structure cracks and corrosion, enhanced dynamic monitoring capability and safety	For the Sydney Harbour Bridge inspection, drones combine infrared thermography and LiDAR with other sensors to detect potential structural issues, especially under extreme weather conditions. This approach enhances inspection accuracy and safety.

Through the analysis of the above five cases, we can conclude that:

(1) Technical Applications: Different countries have varying technical approaches in drone-based highway and bridge inspection. The USA and the Netherlands focus on 3D modeling and the combination of LiDAR, emphasizing comprehensive scanning of structures. China emphasizes the combination of image processing and AI technologies to automate damage detection. Japan and Australia, in contrast, utilize infrared thermography and other sensors to improve detection accuracy and safety in harsh environments.

(2) Key Achievements: All case studies show significant results, including improved inspection accuracy, reduced inspection time, lower human intervention, and reduced costs. Especially for high-frequency highway and bridge inspections, using drones not only

improves efficiency but also enhances safety.

(3) Innovations: Each case presents unique innovations. For example, California's integration of 3D modeling and efficient data processing, Jiangsu's AI automation, Tokyo Bay's use of infrared thermography, and Sydney's combination of multiple sensors all provide valuable insights for other regions' highway and bridge inspection efforts.

(4) Environmental Adaptability: In harsh working environments, such as Japan's night-time or stormy weather conditions, infrared thermography ensures the accuracy and safety of bridge inspections. The Netherlands and the USA focus on minimizing traffic disruption and achieving comprehensive road surface monitoring in dense urban areas using drones.

Through comparative analysis, it is evident that the integration of drones and artificial intelligence has become a driving force in highway and bridge inspection. Whether in high-frequency inspections, complex working environments, or efficient data processing, drone and AI integration has the potential to significantly enhance the quality and efficiency of inspections. As technology continues to evolve, more regions will incorporate various sensors and AI algorithms to improve the intelligence level of highway and bridge inspection.

3. Applications of Artificial Intelligence in Highway and Bridge Inspection

Artificial intelligence (AI), particularly image recognition and data analysis algorithms based on deep learning, has demonstrated significant potential in highway and bridge inspection. Compared to traditional visual inspection methods, AI offers substantial advantages in terms of both speed and accuracy. It enables the automatic identification, classification, and trend prediction of structural defects, thereby supporting informed maintenance decisions and optimized resource allocation. This section explores AI applications in this field from three key perspectives: image recognition and defect detection, 3D modeling and structural analysis, and multi-source data fusion for predictive maintenance [9].

3.1 Image Recognition and Defect Detection

Image recognition is one of the most mature areas of AI application in infrastructure inspection. Deep learning models such as convolutional neural networks (CNNs) can automatically detect common structural defects in images, including cracks, spalling, and corrosion. For example, Cha proposed a deep residual network-based method for detecting concrete cracks, achieving an identification accuracy exceeding 98% across multiple bridge image datasets. In another study, Li applied an improved YOLO algorithm for real-time detection of road surface defects, enabling quantitative analysis of crack width and significantly enhancing the efficiency and precision of traditional inspection methods [10].

3.2 3D Modeling and Structural Analysis

The integration of AI with 3D modeling technologies has provided a more intuitive and comprehensive approach to assessing the structural health of bridges and roads. Multi-angle images captured by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) can be processed using Structure-from-Motion (SfM) techniques to generate detailed 3D models, which can then be analyzed using AI algorithms to assess structural integrity.

For instance, Ameli demonstrated that combining point cloud data with CNNs effectively identifies subtle deformations and fatigue cracks in bridge structures [11]. Additionally, AI can assist in analyzing damage evolution and simulating structural behavior, supporting the development of long-term monitoring and maintenance plans. Wu utilized graph neural networks (GNNs) to simulate the stress response of bridges under varying loads, providing a foundation for intelligent maintenance strategies [12].

3.3 Multi-Source Data Fusion and Predictive Maintenance

In practical inspection scenarios, relying solely on images or a single type of data often fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of structural health. AI technologies can integrate data from multiple sources—such as LiDAR, thermal imaging, and accelerometers—to develop multimodal detection models for holistic condition assessment [13].

For example, Azimi proposed an AI model that integrates visual, infrared thermal, and vibration signal data to automatically identify fatigue-induced crack propagation, enabling early warning of potential failures [14]. Furthermore, AI models based on time-series data, such as long short-term memory (LSTM) networks, have been employed for predicting structural conditions and trends, thereby guiding preventive maintenance of highways and bridges [15].

This predictive maintenance paradigm is gradually replacing traditional periodic inspection methods. By leveraging AI for early diagnosis and forecasting, the focus of infrastructure management is shifting from reactive responses to proactive interventions, significantly enhancing both the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of asset management.

3.4 Application Cases of Artificial Intelligence in Highway and Bridge Inspection

Artificial intelligence (AI) has increasingly become a crucial tool in enhancing the precision, reducing labor costs, and improving the automation level of highway and bridge inspections. AI technologies demonstrate particular strengths in image processing, data analysis, and multi-sensor data fusion. Table 2 shows five representative case studies highlighting the application of AI in highway and bridge inspection, accompanied by detailed analysis and comparison.

Through the analysis of the above five cases, we can conclude that:

(1) Technological Applications: AI technologies in highway and bridge inspections are primarily applied in image analysis, data fusion, and dynamic monitoring. Florida and Zhejiang have adopted deep learning and CNNs for automated crack detection, achieving notable outcomes in image processing. Osaka has advanced structural health assessment through AI-LiDAR data fusion. London's application of DNNs facilitates real-time analysis of structural vibrations, while Sydney combines AI with infrared thermography to enhance corrosion and structural health monitoring.

(2) Key Outcomes: Whether for pavement crack detection or bridge health monitoring, AI has significantly improved inspection accuracy and efficiency. Automated recognition and analysis by AI reduce manual intervention and associated errors, while also enhancing data processing speed and real-time responsiveness.

(3) Innovative Features: Each case demonstrates unique innovations. Florida's automated crack recognition system, Osaka's integration of AI and LiDAR, London's real-time vibration monitoring, and Sydney's use of infrared thermography with AI offer novel solutions to sector-specific challenges.

(4) Environmental Adaptability: AI technologies have shown strong adaptability to diverse and complex environments. For instance, the combination of AI and infrared imaging in Sydney enhances detection accuracy in low-light or nighttime operations. Similarly, London's DNN-based system processes large volumes of vibration data in real time to detect potential anomalies in bridge structures.

Through comparative analysis of these representative cases, it is evident that as AI continues to evolve, its role in highway and bridge inspection is expected to expand. With the integration of higher-precision sensors and more powerful computational capabilities, future AI-driven systems will become increasingly intelligent, particularly in multi-source data fusion and complex structural analysis. This progress will further enhance the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of infrastructure health monitoring.

Table 2. Representative Cases of AI Applications in Highway and Bridge Inspection

Region	Application Type	Technical Methods	Key Achievements	Case Features & Innovations
Florida, USA	Highway and bridge defect detection	Image analysis using Convolutional Neural Networks (CNN)	Automatic detection of cracks, corrosion, and structural damage; significantly improved inspection efficiency	By using convolutional neural networks (CNN) to analyze image data collected by drones, and through large-scale data training and deep learning, this artificial intelligence system can accurately classify different types of damage and provide real-time assessments, thereby significantly improving the automation level of detection work.
Zhejiang Province, China	Pavement damage monitoring	Automatic crack detection and	Automated crack identification on road surfaces,	Using artificial intelligence technology to analyze road surface cracks and damage. The system uses deep learning algorithms to

		classification based on deep learning	reduced manual intervention, and enhanced inspection speed	automatically identify cracks in images and classify them based on their width and length. This method greatly improves detection efficiency and minimizes human error.
Osaka, Japan	Bridge health monitoring	AI and LiDAR data fusion	Improved accuracy in structural health assessment and detection of potential defects	Combining artificial intelligence with lidar data, 3D point cloud technology is used to assess the structural condition of bridges. Artificial intelligence algorithms can accurately detect minor defects such as cracks and deformations, and generate detailed health reports based on the data. This method significantly improves the accuracy of bridge inspections.
London, UK	Dynamic monitoring of highways and bridges	Vibration data analysis using Deep Neural Networks (DNN)	Real-time monitoring of structural vibrations, identification of anomalies, and risk prevention	In highway and bridge monitoring programs, deep neural networks (DNNs) are used to analyze vibration data in real time, enabling the detection of structural anomalies caused by fatigue or external forces. This AI-based system supports timely maintenance decisions and improves safety monitoring levels.
Sydney, Australia	Structural health monitoring of highways and bridges	AI integrated with infrared thermographic imaging	Enhanced accuracy in thermographic analysis, improved corrosion detection and health assessment	Artificial intelligence combined with infrared thermal imaging technology is used to monitor thermal expansion and potential corrosion in steel structures. Through deep learning, the artificial intelligence system analyzes thermal imaging data to identify potential cracks or corrosion issues caused by temperature changes. This method significantly improves detection accuracy in low-light environments.

4.1 Data Processing Accuracy and Algorithm Robustness

In the context of AI-based highway and bridge inspections, data processing accuracy and the robustness of algorithms are crucial factors influencing system performance. Although deep learning technologies have demonstrated strong capabilities in image recognition, point cloud processing, vibration signal analysis, and more, their stability and adaptability in real-world engineering scenarios still face significant challenges.

First, due to the complexity of highway and bridge structures and the diversity of defects, the collected data is often non-structured and highly uncertain. For example, variations in crack textures, fluctuations in image quality under different lighting conditions, and environmental noise interfering with sensor data can all directly affect the recognition accuracy of AI models. Especially when dealing with coexisting defect types, blurred boundaries, or weathered material surfaces, basic models such as Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs) often show insufficient recognition capability.

Second, many current AI models rely on large, annotated datasets from static environments for training. Once deployed in dynamic, uncontrolled real-world inspection settings, models tend to experience performance degradation and reduced generalization ability. This issue, referred to as “data domain shift,” limits the model's applicability across different regions and infrastructure types.

To improve AI algorithm robustness, efforts should be made on multiple fronts. On one hand, it is important to enhance the model's tolerance for non-ideal conditions, such as through data augmentation, multi-task learning, or the introduction of attention mechanisms to improve sensitivity to subtle features. On the other hand, the development of new technologies, such as graph neural networks and transformation-invariant modeling, will be crucial for constructing recognition frameworks that offer stronger structural understanding and better adaptability to diverse scenarios.

4.2 Real-Time Processing and Automation Capabilities

Real-time sensing and rapid feedback are key advantages of drone and AI systems in highway and bridge inspections. However, under current technical conditions, these advantages are still constrained by multiple factors, especially in large-scale and continuous inspection tasks, where system bottlenecks in processing are becoming increasingly apparent.

First, real-time data processing remains a significant challenge. With the growing integration of multi-sensor technologies, inspection systems often need to process multiple sources of data simultaneously, including images, point clouds, thermal imaging, and vibration signals. These high-dimensional datasets are not only large in volume but also complex in structure, which significantly increases the inference computation and data synchronization costs for AI models. Most current systems still rely on centralized backend processing, which makes it difficult to meet the demands for frequent and high-coverage real-time analysis.

Additionally, there are still barriers to increasing automation levels. Although AI can recognize defect features at the image level, its involvement in decision-making remains limited. For instance, after AI recognition, manual verification, classification, and annotation are often still required, and there is a lack of intelligent suggestion mechanisms aimed at maintenance strategies. This "semi-automation" in the detection process limits the potential for reducing labor intervention.

To address these issues, future research should focus on the integration of “edge computing and cloud collaboration.” By deploying lightweight AI models on drone terminals or mobile inspection platforms, initial data preprocessing and real-time judgment can be performed. Combined with the high-performance computational capabilities of cloud platforms, deep fusion analysis and management optimization can significantly improve the system's overall response speed and processing ability.

Furthermore, pushing for full-chain automation in the inspection process is a key direction. By implementing closed-loop control logic, AI systems can not only identify issues but also automatically generate repair recommendations, task scheduling strategies, and maintenance priority rankings. This will enable the comprehensive “automatic sensing—intelligent judgment—assisted decision-making” function, significantly enhancing the integration of inspection and maintenance operations.

4.3 Summary of Technology Development Trends

As AI and drone technologies continue to advance in highway and bridge inspections, the industry is gradually transitioning from “assisted detection” to “intelligent decision-making.” Based on an analysis of current representative cases and technological challenges, the future development trends are expected to focus on the following aspects:

First, enhancing algorithm robustness will be a core component of technological evolution. AI models currently face limitations when processing complex structures, changing lighting conditions, and high-noise environments. In the future, algorithms with stronger generalization and anti-interference abilities will become research priorities. For example, the incorporation of attention mechanisms, graph neural networks (GNNs), and self-supervised learning techniques will significantly improve AI stability and accuracy in complex scenarios.

Second, the ability to fuse heterogeneous multi-source data will become a key breakthrough in the system's intelligence. In highway and bridge inspections, image, point cloud, infrared, vibration, and other sensor data often coexist, and traditional approaches that process data in isolated streams can no longer meet the demand. In the future, unified modeling capabilities that fuse different data dimensions, time series, and spatial features will enhance the system's deep understanding and decision-making capabilities.

Third, the evolution of edge computing and cloud collaboration architectures will significantly improve system real-time capability and response efficiency. Given that inspection scenarios often involve large volumes of data and time-sensitive tasks, transitioning from “centralized” to “distributed” computing will be an effective way to improve system operation efficiency. Initial preprocessing at the data acquisition end, followed by the uploading of critical data to the cloud for comprehensive analysis, will significantly enhance system responsiveness.

Moreover, the closed-loop automation of inspection processes will promote the transition from “intelligent sensing” to “intelligent decision-making.” While current AI applications mainly focus on defect recognition and assessment, future systems will extend to include defect prioritization, maintenance suggestion generation, and task scheduling optimization, achieving a full-cycle intelligent-assisted management model. This will enable closed-loop control with the flow of “detection—analysis—decision—feedback.”

Finally, the standardization of data and the establishment of industry-wide sharing platforms will provide foundational support for the rapid development and widespread application of AI models. Unified defect annotation standards, high-quality multi-source datasets, and reusable algorithm frameworks will accelerate the training and validation of algorithms, facilitating model transfer and reuse across regions and engineering projects.

Overall, the future highway and bridge inspection systems will feature higher levels of intelligence, stronger scene adaptability, and a more complete automated management process. AI technology will no longer merely serve as an “assistive tool,” but will become the core engine supporting highway and bridge operation and maintenance management.

5. Conclusion

With the continuous advancement of drone and AI technologies, their integration in highway and bridge inspections demonstrates immense potential and prospects. Drones, with their flexible and efficient data collection capabilities, overcome the time, spatial, and safety limitations of traditional inspection methods, while AI improves the analysis accuracy and efficiency of the collected data through advanced algorithms. This technological convergence not only offers more intelligent and convenient solutions for the maintenance of highways and bridges but also drives the industry toward greater automation and intelligence.

Although significant achievements have been made in various application scenarios, such as improving inspection efficiency, accuracy, and safety, challenges remain in areas such as data processing precision, algorithm robustness, real-time capabilities, and full-process automation. In the future, as multi-source data fusion technologies mature, algorithm robustness improves, and edge computing and cloud collaboration capabilities evolve, highway and bridge inspection systems will possess stronger intelligence, automation, and real-time response capabilities. Especially in complex environments, integrating multiple sensors and optimizing AI algorithms will be crucial in enhancing the accuracy and efficiency of inspections.

Simultaneously, the establishment of data standardization, industry-wide sharing platforms, and cross-domain collaborations will accelerate the promotion and application of these technologies, driving overall industry progress. Ultimately, the integration of AI and drone technologies will play an increasingly significant role in enhancing the accuracy, efficiency, and safety of highway and bridge inspections, providing solid technical support for global infrastructure development.

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