

Swatow: The old town's colonial centre

Howard M. Scott¹ and Xiaoli Chen²

New Zealand photographer in China

[howard@iconz.co.nz]

Abstract

The old city of *Swatow*, a delta part at the confluence of the rivers *Han*, *Ron* and *Lian* rivers in north-eastern *Guangdong* Province of southern China, was built using colonial architectural features. Most of these buildings are now in poor condition. Unless a decision to protect and restore them is taken soon, they will be lost. This photo reportage records a selection of street scenes in old *Swatow* in late 2007.

Introduction and background

The former city of *Swatow* (the common English name) is known as *Shantou* (the pinyin system of Chinese pronunciation) or *Shan-t'ou* (the Wade/Giles system of Chinese pronunciation) and owes its existence to the outcome of the Second Opium War of 1856 - 1860.³ *Swatow* is a delta port at the confluence of the *Han*, *Ron* and *Lian* rivers in north-eastern *Guangdong* Province of southern China. Three hundred kilometres to the south is Hong Kong; Fujian Province lies immediately to the north, and to the west are the plains of *Chaoshan*. Taiwan faces the city from across the Taiwan Straits. About 12 kilometres to the east of the city is the mouth of the Han River, which, along with its tributary, the Mei, drain much of *Guangdong* and southern *Fujian* before emptying into the South China Sea. Before the area was opened to foreign trade, there was no city of *Swatow* but rather only a small community of fishermen and farmers.⁴

What do we know of early *Swatow*? During the *Song* Dynasty⁵, *Swatow* was part of *Tuojiang* City in *Jieyang* District. During the *Yuan* Dynasty⁶, it came to be called *Xialing* and around 1563 became part of *Chenghai* District in the *Chao* Prefecture of *Chaozhou*. By 1574, the area was called *Shashan Ping*, but by the 17th century it was more commonly referred to as *Sha Shan Tou Pao Tai*, which was later shortened to *Shantou*. During these early times, the area around *Shantou* was of little economic significance and had few people (Zheng, 2003). *Swatow* city came into being at the request of the Americans who, in late 1859, asked the *Ch'ing* authorities to designate the area as an open port for international trade and to allow foreign residence.⁷

In 1860, *Swatow* became a free port. As a 'Treaty Port', *Swatow* quickly became an important centre for the importation and distribution of opium and a recruitment centre for contracted émigré labour.⁸ Commonly known as 'the Coolie trade', contracted labour had originally been centred in *Amoy* but the business became increasingly centered in *Swatow*. The trade was subject to systematic abuse, including inflated debt for outbound passage, monopoly prices for board, food and provisions, artificially low wages and rigged gambling. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of Chinese émigrés became 'free labourers', coming and going from China as they liked, working for whom they chose and repatriating significant amounts of money to their hometown.⁹ Very quickly the *Hokkiens* and *Teochews* of *Chaoshan* (The *Chaochow* and *Swatow* area) became influential throughout South East Asia and their

commercial acumen was increasingly influential in the mines, plantations and trading posts of Indo-China, Siam, Malaya, Singapore, Borneo, the Philippine Islands, The Dutch East Indies, Hawaii, French Polynesia, New Guinea, German New Guinea and Peru as well as in the Australasian and Californian goldfields and on the trans-continental railways of Canada and the United States (Willmott, 2004). Put simply, *Swatow's* prosperity was built on the profits of opium and contracted émigré labour and on the returns from the investment of repatriated savings.¹⁰

Swatow became a modern city in 1919 and was separated from *Chenghai* in 1921. By the 1930s, the Port of *Swatow* was the third largest in China and the city continued to flourish until the Japanese occupation and the dislocation of World War II. By the time the People's Republic was established in 1949, the city's fortunes were in decline and it was not until 1979, when *Swatow* became a 'Special Economic Zone', that prospects slowly turned for the better. Direct foreign investment returned and today thousands of small companies specializing in light industry are exporting their products worldwide. There is also some heavy industry, such as shipbuilding, but food processing and fishing are the mainstay of the regional economy. In recent years, a number of well-known foreign firms have located in *Swatow*.¹¹ And *Shantou* University, which is privately funded, is one of the best universities in Guangdong Province. With a city population of around 1.2 million and the greater metropolitan area having approximately 4.7 million residents, *Swatow* is now beginning to regain its former significance and importance. The city has jurisdiction over the six districts of *Longhu*, *Jinping*, *Haojiang*, *Chenghai*, *Chaoyang*, *Chaonan* and *Nan'ao*.

It is said that the character and culture of the *Chaoshan* people is unique in China. For centuries more Chinese émigrés originated from *Chaoshan* than any other area. Their adventurous and entrepreneurial attitude, along with their industriousness and commercial acumen, enabled them to prosper at home and abroad and they constitute a significant proportion of most overseas Chinese communities. Proud of their language, cuisine, music and family values and venerating good conversation and friendship, the *Chaoshan* people symbolically express their kinship through the drinking of *Gongfu Cha* (tea). And there is another important trait common to the *Chaoshan* people. They have a generous spirit. On returning to China, they would often build a new home, almost always in the European colonial style. And they would donate generously to community affairs, financially supporting schools, hospitals and universities. They truly were agents of change and development.

The old city of *Swatow* was built using many colonial architectural features, especially European arched windows, European balconies and variations of the Greek column.¹² But unlike *Gulangyu*, where carved Chinese unicorns, phoenixes and Taoist 'taiji' diagrams were common, the special features of *Swatow* architecture are more plain and less flamboyant. There were colonial institutions too: a German medical centre, an American Christian church, the trading houses of *Swire* and *Jardines*, Hong Kong Bank and the British Consulate. The Consulate remains on *Queshi* Island, several kilometers to the east of the old city, but is in poor condition. And although there was some talk in 2004 of refurbishing the Consulate to become an historical museum, there is no evidence of any change yet. Also on *Queshi* Island, but directly opposite the old city, prominent members of the foreign community had houses. Unfortunately, although most of the city's early buildings are still standing, they are

generally not in good condition. Unless a decision to protect and restore them is taken soon they will be lost to natural weathering, typhoon damage and neglect.

The 'International Settlements' of *Gulangyu* (Scott, 2006a) and *Shamian* (Scott, 2006b) are both in better condition than the 'Open City' of old *Swatow*. But old *Swatow* is not beyond repair. Although it occupies a much larger area than *Shamian*¹³ in *Canton* (and probably slightly larger area than *Gulangyu*¹⁴ in *Amoy*), the heritage value of China's third largest 19th century port should not be overlooked. There are also areas of *Swatow* beyond the city centre that could have important heritage value. We hope the city chooses to retain its colonial architecture as already many visitors can be seen wandering these historic streets with their cameras and clearly Chinese people have a real interest in these buildings. Old *Swatow* is an important part of China's history. This photo reportage records a selection of street scenes in old *Swatow* in late 2007. Unless positive action is taken to preserve these buildings, photo reportage may be all that remains to us in the future.

Plate 1: 39 Anping Rd



Plate 2: 46 Anping Rd



Plate 3: 23 Guoping Rd



Plate 4: 37 Guoping Rd



Plate 5: 40 Guoping Rd



Plate 6: 91 Guoping Rd



Plate 7: 112 Guoping Rd



Plate 8: 3 Minzu Rd



Plate 9: 49 Shangping Rd



Plate 10: 67 Shangping Rd



Plate 11: 67 Shangping Rd



Plate 12: 109 Shanpai Rd



Plate 13: 31 Shengping Rd

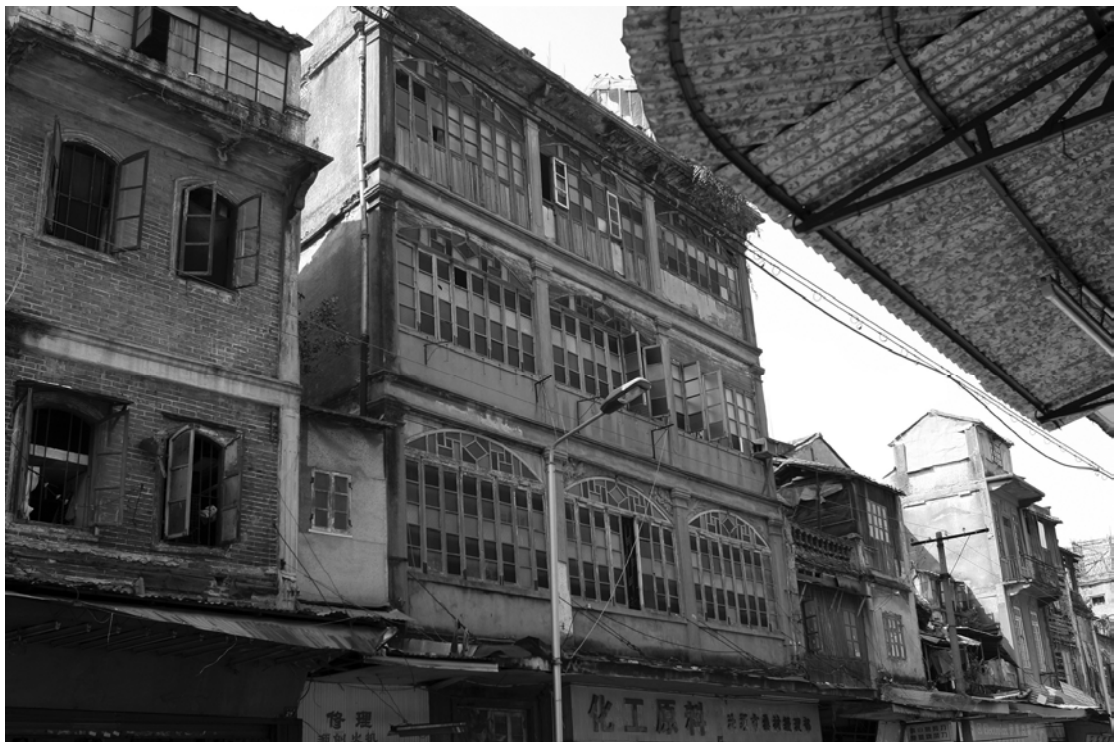


Plate 14: 29 Tongping Rd



Plate 15: 13 Wufu Rd



Plate 16: 68 Wufu Rd



Plate 17: 109 Yongtai Rd



Plate 18: 120 Yongxingjie Rd



Plate 19: 38 Zhenbang Rd



Plate 20: 62 Zhiping Rd



Endnotes

1. Photographs, research and text
2. Research and text
3. The Second Opium War broke out following the ‘Arrow Incident’ of 1856. *Guangzhou* and *Tientsin* were taken by French and British forces. Britain, France, the U.S.A. and Russia were party to the 1858 Treaty of *Tientsin* under which China agreed to open 11 more ports to foreign trade, agreed to accept foreign legations in Peking, legalized the importation of opium and accepted Christian missions in China. Due to China’s hesitation to enact the agreement, the war was renewed in 1859. Britain and France took *Peking*. The *Peking* Convention of 1860 reaffirmed the 1858 Treaty of *Tientsin* and concluded hostilities. In late 1859, the U.S.A. had petitioned the *Ch’ing* authorities for *Swatow* to become an open port and in 1860 it was given this status.
4. We could not find any major publications of early photographs of *Swatow*. There is, however, a good general pictorial reference of conditions in China during the late 19th century by Shen Jiawei with a translation by Dou Kun, *Old China through G.E. Morrison’s Eyes* (2005).
5. The *Song* Dynasty was a ruling dynasty in China between 960-1279 CE.
6. The *Yuan* Dynasty was a ruling dynasty in China between 1271-1368. The *Yuan* Dynasty was officially established on 1271 but it did not take control of all China until 1279.
7. The First Opium War ended with the signing of the Treaty of *Nanking* (1842) and the British Supplementary Treaty of the *Bogue* (1843) which provided that the ports of *Canton* (*Guangzhou*), *Amoy* (*Xiamen*), *Foochow* (*Fuzhou*), *Ningpo* (*Ningbo*), and *Shanghai* should be open to British trade and residence and that *Hong Kong* be ceded to Britain.
8. Some academics, including Harry Gelber, do not believe that the opium trade had anything to do with the 1856 – 1860 war. However, one of the key elements of the 1860 settlement was that China agreed to legalize the importation of opium (see Gelber, 2006).
9. The *Chaoshan* Diaspora developed extensive business networks throughout South East Asia (Frost, 2003).

10. The Chinese Diaspora invested heavily in the opium trade throughout South East Asia as well as in the opium trade of Hong Kong and China (Wong, 2007).

11. Numerous 'World Top 500 Enterprises', including Chevron Texaco, Kodak, Henkel, Mitsubishi and Wal-mart, are based in *Shantou*.

12. *Windows:*

Windows can be Colonial, European, American, Gothic, Art Deco, Art Nouveau or Chinese and are made of wood, stone, concrete or brick. They can be single or double; wide or narrow; shuttered or unshuttered; arched, semi-circular or oval. Some are plain but others are ornamented with Eastern or Western designs or a combination of both. They may have small balconies with rows of potted plants similar to houses in the German countryside.

Doric Columns:

Of the three types of column found in Greece, Doric columns are the simplest. They have a 'capital', which is the top or crown, made of a circle topped by a square. The shaft, which is the tall part of the column, is plain with 20 sides. There is no base. The look is plain but powerful. The area above the column is called the 'frieze' and usually has simple patterns. Above the columns are the 'metopes' (met-o-pee) and 'triglyphs'. The metope is a plain, smooth stone section between triglyphs. Sometimes the metopes have statues of heroes or gods on them. The triglyphs are patterns of three vertical lines between the metopes.

Ionic Columns:

The Ionic style is more decorative than the Doric. Ionic shafts are taller than Doric ones so that the columns look slender. They also have flutes, which are lines carved into them from top to bottom. The shafts also have entasis, which is a little bulge in the column to make the column look straight from a distance. The frieze is plain. The bases are large and look like stacked rings. Ionic capitals have scrolls and paired scrolling volutes above the shaft.

Corinthian Columns:

The Corinthian column is the most decorative and also uses entasis to make the shafts look straight. The Corinthian capitals have flowers and leaves below a small scroll. The shaft has flutes and the base is similar to the Ionian. However, unlike Doric and Ionian cornices, which are at a slant, Corinthian roofs are flat.

13. Shamian Island is only 1,000 metres by 400 metres or 450 metres if Queen Victoria's Garden is included.

14. Gulangyu is 3 kilometres by 0.6 kilometres.

References

- Frost, M. (2003). Transcultural diaspora: The straits Chinese in Singapore, 1819 – 1918. *National University of Singapore Asia Research Institute, Working Paper Series No. 10*, 1 – 44.
- Gelber, H. G. (2006). 'China as 'victim'? The opium war that wasn't. *Harvard University Centre for European Studies Working Paper Series No. 136*, 1-10.
- Jiawei, S. (2005). *Old China through G.E. Morrison's eyes* (D. Kun, Trans.). Xiamen: Fujian Education Press.
- Scott, H. (2006a). Gulangyu: A photographic exploration of its colonial heritage. *Journal of Maori and Pacific Development*, 7(2), 46-61.
- Scott, H. (2006b). *Sha Mian: A colonial heritage*. Auckland: Black Apple.
- Willmott, B. (2004). Chinese contract labour in the Pacific Islands during the 19th Century. *The Journal of Pacific Studies*, 27(2), 161-176.
- Wong, Y. (2007). The big five Hokkien families in Penang, 1830s – 1890s. *Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies*, 1, 106 – 115.
- Zheng, K. (Ed.). (2003). *Shantou Kai Bu Ji Kai Bu Qian Hou She Qing Zi Liao*. Shantou: Chaoshan History and Culture Research Centre.