

Gulangyu: A photographic exploration of its colonial heritage

Howard M. Scott

New Zealand photographer in China

[howard@iconz.co.nz]

Abstract

As Artist in Residence at the Art Centre of Xiamen University in 2005, I had an opportunity to visit Xiamen (formerly known as Amoy) on many occasions and to photograph examples of the colonial style architecture. Following a brief introduction to the history of Xiamen/ Amoy, I provide a selection of these photographs to provide some sense of the architectural novelty of this fascinating place whose buildings are symbolic of a significant aspect of China's rich and varied history.

Introduction and background

Gulangyu Island lies a few minutes by boat off the island city of Xiamen (previously known as Amoy) on the Fujian coast of China. Taiwan (previously known as Formosa) is 160 kilometres to the southeast. Both Gulangyu and Xiamen/Amoy have a long association with European traders. Early records indicate that the first Portuguese and Dutch traders entered Amoy around 1300, but regular trading took some time to establish. Thus, for example, substantial trade with Portugal began in the early 1500s, with Spanish traders following in the late 1500s. The Dutch, who began regular trading with China around 1600, occupied Formosa in 1624, turning the island into a trade station to service their commercial interests in Japan and China and to provision ships on the southern trade route to the Dutch East Indies, which fell to the Japanese during the Pacific War of 1941-45 and, following independence after the end of the Pacific War, became the Republic of Indonesia.

The Dutch occupation of Formosa in 1624 infuriated the Chinese. The pirate warrior Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong), already in rebellion against the Ch'ing (Qing), marshalled his troops on Gulangyu Island to recapture Formosa from the Dutch. After leaving Gulangyu in April 1661 with 25,000 troops, Koxinga defeated the Dutch in January 1662, liberated Formosa, and ended the 38-year occupation. However, foreign trade continued and in 1684 the Ch'ing established a Customs House in Amoy, welcoming first the Portuguese and then the British. By the early 1700s, even the Dutch had returned on favourable terms. As trade flourished, foreigners established themselves in Amoy and the Fujianese migrated in ever increasing numbers. Such was the extent of the exodus from Fujian that by 1750 the Ch'ing prohibited Chinese migration and banished the foreign traders from Amoy. The banishment of foreign traders and the prohibition on Chinese migration temporarily reduced the economy of Amoy to a level similar to that of its former status as a scattered community of rural fishermen and farmers.

None of this ended foreign settlement on the islands off Fujian. Historically, Gulangyu Island was a natural reserve of egrets and wild Bougainvilleas, with just a few scattered communities of pirate fishermen. It did not remain so. Japanese and Chinese pirates had raided the Fujian coast for centuries and European traders were equally keen to share in the profits of smuggling. Piracy and smuggling were

endemic, with salt and later opium the most lucrative contraband. The Ch'ing persistently struggled to eradicate piracy, contain smuggling, forbid foreign settlement and restrict foreign trade, but with little success. Following the first Opium War of 1839-1841 and the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, the Ch'ing were obliged to cede Hong Kong to Britain and to reopen Amoy to foreign trade, as one of five Treaty Ports, the others being Canton (Guangzhou), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), and Shanghai. Opium became the principal Chinese import.¹ Following the signing of the Treaty of Nanking, European traders established rights of residence along the China coast.

Great Britain had established a concession on Gulangyu in 1851. By 1902, an International Settlement had been formalised, with well established Consulates from Britain, Portugal, Holland, Spain, the USA, France, Germany, Japan, Denmark, Austria, Norway, Sweden, Belgium and the Philippines. Foreign Consulates, Trading Houses and wealthy merchants built colonial style residences on Gulangyu Island and the International Settlement became the official centre of foreign trade and diplomacy throughout the hinterland of Fujian Province and beyond. Gulangyu also became notorious for heavy drinking, excessive gambling, wild nightlife and exotic bordellos.

The impact of Gulangyu's international heritage on its architecture

Between the late 1840s and the late 1930s, many European colonial-style buildings were constructed on Gulangyu and the island became renowned amongst Europeans for its trading opportunities, benign climate, architectural splendour and convivial lifestyle. The conspicuous display of wealth on Gulangyu came primarily from the profits of the opium trade and was accentuated by the ornate European colonial architecture. The opium trade continued for European firms until the Japanese occupation of coastal China during the 1930s and the Pacific War of 1941-45 (Brown, 2003, pp. 397-411). But opium use in China continued even after European firms left the trade. During the early 20th century the illicit opium trade was largely controlled by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) in collaboration with the invading Imperial Japanese Army and was not finally eradicated until Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong) established The People's Republic of China in October 1949.

The Chinese Civil War, which began in the 1920s, remains unresolved, with both Peking (Beijing) and Taipei claiming 'One China' made up of 23 provinces that include Taiwan. Although armed hostilities across the Taiwan Straits have ceased an unremitting international diplomatic battle rages with cat and mouse manoeuvres from both sides continuing over the most trivial of things. One consequence of this impasse is that the Fujian coast was closed to foreigners after October 1949 and not opened again until 1980 when Amoy was made one of four Special Economic Zones. Only then did foreigners return to Xiamen/Amoy and Gulangyu. The modern era of 'Opening to the Outside World' had begun.

Gulangyu's rich history has left the island with a wide variety of architectural styles. Some of the colonial style buildings were demolished in the late 20th century and replaced by modern replicas (Jie, 2003). Some of them have been replaced by buildings of modern design. However, many of the fine old buildings constructed since the Treaty of Nanking and during the days of the International Settlement are still standing and some of them, particularly those of historical importance, are undergoing major restoration (Hong, 2000). These classic colonial style buildings are

no longer seen as a humiliating reminder of ‘extra-territoriality’ under ‘the unequal treaties’ but are now valued as an important feature of the varied history of Xiamen/Amoy and are being restored by the city authorities for re-sale to wealthy residents and as an attraction for the growing tourist industry. Many of these historic buildings and their history have been recorded in Brown (2005).

The photographic exploration

The Art Centre of Xiamen University invited me to Xiamen/Amoy as an Artist in Residence in late 2005. This gave me the opportunity to visit Gulangyu on many occasions and to photograph the colonial style architecture.² I found, what Wang (Brown, 2005) describes as “an appealing mixture of classical European and Chinese architecture”. There are Doric, Romanesque, Corinthian, Tuscan and Ionic columns. There are Corinthian, Ionic Romanesque, Byzantine and Egyptian capitals. There are ornamented Roman astragals and Ionic entablatures and Renaissance and Gothic style windows. Chinese designs have been integrated with many of these styles. There are classic Greek columns adorned with Chinese unicorns, phoenixes, and Taoist diagrams. And a single column may incorporate Doric, Ionic and Corinthian style with a Chinese ceramic trim. Windows can be European, American, Colonial or Chinese in design - Gothic, Art Deco, Art Nouveau. Some buildings display more than one of these styles on the same wall. The windows can be made from wood, stone, concrete or brick and are single, double, narrow, wide, shuttered, unshuttered, arched and semi-circular. They may be ornamented with eastern or western design, they may have small balconies attached. The roofs also provide interesting variety. The ubiquitous Chinese orange Jiageng roof tiles are very much in evidence as are mosque domes, sloping roofs typical of Northern Europe, and roofs embellished with carved phoenixes or other mythical Chinese creatures. Verandas, allowing for weather-protected outdoor living, may be single, double, triple or quadruple-sided. Finally, there are the gates. There are gates with Greek columns ornamented with 18th and 19th century European artwork and Chinese dragons and phoenixes. And the eaves and lintels may be Art Deco. There are traditional Chinese gates too. Most of these follow the Chinese design of a double central door with smaller doors to the right and left (Brown, 2005, pp. 182-197).

The photographs that I have included here are of buildings that I particularly like. They are not necessarily the best known or the most famous buildings of Gulangyu. They provide some indication of the varied architectural styles to be found on the island, including some of the more humble homes. The images show these buildings as they were in the final months of 2005 and will enable photographic comparisons to be made in the future. My hope is that more of these wonderful buildings, both grand and humble, will be restored and regularly maintained so that visitors from China and abroad can continue to visit Gulangyu to admire them.

Plate 1: Roman style building



Plate 2: Formerly the British Consulate



Plate 3: Parisian style building



Plate 4: English-style bungalow



Plate 5: Building with unfluted Tuscan non-tapered round column (and washing line)



Plate 6: Building reminiscent of Roman style



Plate 7: Traditional Chinese style building



Plate 8: Building with Corinthian columns (formerly the American consulate)



Plate 9: Building with Doric columns and Corinthian capital



Plate 10: Building with Gothic windows (top left)



Plate 11: Romanesque style building



Plate 12: Victorian style building with French colonial window and Indian style balcony



Plate 13: Building with Tuscan columns



Plate 14: Overlooking Amoy from Gulangyu



Plate 15: Building with Corinthian capital and Tuscan columns



Plate 16: Renaissance style building



Plate 17: Building with square columns



Plate 18: Building with French colonial style windows



Plate 19: Northern European style building



Plate 20: Building with Victorian style elements on front face



Plate 21: Basic Victorian style building



Plate 22: Building with Corinthian columns and French colonial windows



Plate 23: Mannerism style (a style that originated in Florence and Rome around 1520s and spread to Northern Italy)



Plate 24: British colonial style building



Plate 25: Building with Corinthian tapered window columns



Endnotes

1. Many original documents about the opium trade are archived in a DVD by Howard M. Scott called *A Photographic Essay on Water in Hong Kong* – see, in particular, Appendix 5: The Opium Ordinance 1891. This DVD is lodged in the University of Auckland library (New Zealand) and at the Universities of Hong Kong and Xiamen in China.
2. A recently published book by Bill Brown (2005) on Gulangyu has recorded many of the historic buildings and their history. I found this publication very useful to help me locate and identify specific buildings in Gulangyu and I would like to thank the author Bill Brown, the historical researcher Hong Bu Ren and the photographer Lily Wang for their thorough work.

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