



Bond, Bund, and Band: Transformation of Waterfront Space in Xiamen, China

Yu CHEN, Assistant Professor
National University of Singapore, Singapore
akicy@nus.edu.sg

Waterfront space has been central to economic, social and cultural life of coastal cities in China. Its transformation reflects changing social environments and thinking. In traditional Chinese society, waterfront was the place where local people lived and made their living. After the First Opium War (1839-1842), China was forced to confront with western civilization. A specific business-oriented waterfront space emerged in treaty ports where foreigners were allowed to reside and trade. Since China opened up her door again in 1978, rapid urbanization brought dramatic changes to historical waterfronts. Through investigating transformation of waterfront space in Xiamen, this paper aims to identify its social and spatial characteristics in different historical periods. Located along the southeast coast of China, the Island of Xiamen did not attract the central court's attention until the invasions of pirates threatened the safety of inland. Outside the walled garrison set up in 1387, private houses and shops were constructed along the Inner Harbor, and wharves were constructed through philanthropic and spontaneous actions. After the First Opium War, Xiamen was opened as one of the first of five treaty ports in China. In 1852, the British Concession was set up on the beachground between two existing wharves. The traditional waterfront was transformed into the bund - a linear space central to the business life of Xiamen. After the British Concession reverted to the Chinese government in 1930, the bund was reclaimed and transformed into a promenade called Lujiang Road. Since being established as a special economic zone in 1980, Xiamen has been developing at a rapid pace. To release heavy traffic in the old city, Lujiang Road was altered into an expressway. Most of the wharves were demolished or relocated except the Gulangyu Ferry Pier. The reclamation of the waterfront allowed a public park to be built along the water.

This paper will point out that development of waterfront space in traditional society was largely sustained by the community bond and imprinted with indigenous customs. While being modernized into bund with western influence, the waterfront space retained its local character due to the continuity of social traditions in a transitional period. In its contemporary development, the identity of the historical waterfront was endangered by cost-effective approaches to city problems and short-term vision. As a result, the once pedestrian-friendly waterfront became a vehicle-dominated band sandwiched by functional zones. This paper will conclude that social and spatial values of historical waterfronts should be explored and further materialized in their development to strengthen city identity and provide a powerful impetus to new economy.

KEY WORDS: Urban transformation, waterfront space, Xiamen, China, community bond, bund, band.