The desire of the British for treaty ports on the China Coast in the 19th century actually had its origins in the deep historical past. For most if not all of human recorded history Asia has contained half or more of the world’s population, and three of the four hearth areas for the development of complex civilizations, Western Asia with Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Indus Civilization in South Asia, and China (the fourth being Meso-America). Asia produced surpluses of food and craft goods, which were valued in the Western areas of Euro-Asia and Africa. Beginning no later than Roman times, the Mediterranean World desired trade and goods from Asia giving birth to what would later be known as the Silk Road. The routes both by land and sea developed over the centuries connecting the Mediterranean World to the production centers of Asia.

The European Explorations of the 15th century and after sought routes to the products of Asia that circumvented the Moslem World of Western Asia and North Africa, led by Portugal and, followed by the Dutch, English and French. By the early 19th century while Portugal had established footholds along coastal Africa, and in South Asia and Macau in China, and the Dutch had begun to consolidate their control over Indonesia, the British had gained dominance in South Asia, divided control of most of mainland Southeast Asia with the French, and sought ports in coastal China.

For the British expanded trade with China was a significant goal. Their long time trade imbalance with China had led them to pay for goods with Spanish silver coming from South America until they had begun to sell opium raised in India to China in large quantities. The opium trade reversed the balance of trade in Britain’s favor and drove the Chinese Emperor through his Commissioner in Guangzhou, Lin Zexu, to halt the opium trade. This led to a British declaration of War claiming that Britain was acting to protect the universal right of free trade, an not as a promotion of opium sales against the will of a sovereign country per se. Britain’s victory led to the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), which gave the British the right to establish five treaty ports in China (Guangzhou, Amoy, Fuchow, Ningpo, and Shanghai) and gave Hong Kong Island to Britain in perpetuity. The Second Opium War (1856-1860) was also won by the British and led to the creation of many more treaty ports.

The British found themselves in need of many buildings in their new settlements, and they turned to their previous experiences in Asia for architectural forms. This led back to such settlements as Singapore in Malaya, and in turn back to
South Asia where the British had extensive experience in colonial construction. In South Asia the community of English men and women represented an infinitesimally small percentage of the total population, and there was an underlying fear of being overwhelmed militarily and culturally by the native population. The establishment of “British” customs, behavior, and attitudes as the only acceptable norm for British nationals in an Asian colonial setting constituted a way of protecting the small British communities from feeling overwhelmed by their surroundings. The three governorships that the British East India Company established at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta were bits of European civilization in Asia. If one looks at surviving photographs of the Madras waterfront of the 19th century, the road facing the beach was lined by buildings decorated in a simplified Classical style, which can be referred to as Colonial Classicism. At Madras ocean-going ships anchored offshore and goods were ferried from the ships to the beach in small boats, and goods were taken in the boats out to reload the anchored ships. Business establishments jostled one another for a waterfront location along the beach road, the bund, an Anglo-Indian term referring to a river embankment.

The British in the colonies were, if anything, more rigidly conservative than their brethren back home on the British Isles, as exemplified in Colonial Classicism. The architecture that they had built for themselves in South Asia was at first an important bulwark clearly separating them from the “natives”. The buildings, such as those along the Bund of Madras, were constructed in Colonial Classicism to symbolize the separate identity of the British from the rest of the population. A simple Greek Revival look was common in these structures since it was a cheap and easy style that would clearly make the necessary differentiation apparent to all. The ground floor would commonly house the business establishment and the necessary warehouse space for goods. The floor or floors above contained the dwelling space for the single European male staff of the business. (Married managers with their wives in residence had houses in another part of the town.) The only Classical elements needed were columns in either the Doric or Ionic orders, and an occasional pediment on the street facade. This was enough to establish the primacy and presence of British identity, culture and cultural authority. Building proportions and details were modified to deal with the hot humid climate of Asia below the Tropic of Cancer. The proportions of the building openings tended to be tall and narrow to allow for high ceilings for the hot air to rise away from the sitting area near the floor; this natural ventilation was enhanced by a servant working a hand operated fan attached to the ceiling. Large expanses of window allowed for ventilation in an effort to capture whatever breeze was available. Porches and loggias helped to shade the walls of the buildings without severely blocking any available breezes. Screens and shades could be added between the columns or piers to further block out the sun during the hot season before the arrival of the monsoon. Finally, the exterior of the building tended to be painted white further reducing heat absorption. The Madras Bund was lined with such buildings. Another fine example of Colonial Classicism was the Officers Club at Dum Dum (the place where the British developed the dumdum expanding bullet for use against rebellious natives) near Calcutta.
Colonial Classicism traveled with the British to the Malaya Peninsula where examples can be found in Georgetown, Penang, and Singapore. From there this style of building and design traveled to Hong Kong and the five Treaty Ports for which the English had bargained in the Treaty of Nanking. Businesses tended to line the waterfront in the Treaty Ports and Hong Kong jostling for the best location along the Bund just as they had in South Asia.

British government buildings also took on this pattern of building. The Lt. Governor’s Residence, Victoria [Hong Kong] was depicted in a painting by M. Bruce in 1846. It was a white flat roofed structure of two stories with loggias on the ground and second floors on its south front, the upper loggia had sun shades between the columns. An enclosed porch supported on brackets was covered with louvers for ventilation and sun protection on its south side, and the walls were punctuated by symmetrically placed high narrow windows.

Such buildings came to be known as in the Compradoric style on the China Coast. This combined together the word “comprador,” which referred to an important Chinese business agent in the economic structure of the treaty ports, and the word “Doric” referring to the simple Classical style in which they were designed. The trading companies of the British, other European countries, and the United States had a staff of Europeans and Americans who were normally nationals of the country from which the company originated, and a Chinese staff who were needed to conduct business with the Chinese population. The head of the Chinese staff was the comprador, a Chinese merchant. “The comprador hired and guaranteed an entire Chinese staff of shroffs (specialists in the exchange and handling of money), servants, linguists, watchmen, and coolies. He also conducted the foreign firm’s business with the Chinese mercantile community, securing commercial intelligence and buying and selling. “ (Reischauer, Fairbank, & Craig, 155) “Doric” referred to the Greek Doric Order which was centered on the simple clear Doric column, sitting on the ground without a base and a starkly geometric capital; this marked a relatively easy way to announce one’s cultural roots, and supposed superiority.

Often residences for all or part of the European staff was a common feature of the early commercial buildings which were called factories originating in the role of merchant ship factors who bought and sold goods at the ports of call. Since the factor of a ship was responsible for selling all the cargo and making purchases of Eastern commodities to take back, they were under some pressure to get their business done before the merchant had to set sail for home. The solution was to leave the factor and his goods in a warehouse, the factory, at the foreign port so as to be able to catch the shift in the seasonal monsoon winds for the journey back to the homeport. The factories became a generic way of referring to foreign business establishments in the China Coast Treaty Ports. The factory buildings of the British and others were commonly in the Compradoric style during much of the 19th century. This could be seen in the early buildings put up in the foreign concessions of Shamian in Guangzhou, Ningpo, and Shanghai, as well as Hong Kong.
Foreign factories had existed on an island in the Pearl River at Guangzhou [Canton] separated from the city by a canal prior to the Treaty of Nanking. Here the various European trading companies had established offices before the First Opium War. After the Opium Wars the island resumed its position as the center of foreign settlement and influence in Guangzhou. Foreign consulates, residences, banks and the trading companies covered the island. Buildings done in the Compradoric might have simplified, symmetrical, and Classical facades two or three stories in height. The ground floor might have an arched central main entrance with arched windows to either side. The upper floor or floors might have loggias across the length of the building modulated by a row of Doric columns, or Doric columns with large expanses off window between them to allow for the maximum amount of ventilation to cope with the hot humid summer months. Modest Classical details and the composition of the building made it clear that this structure represented an outpost of Western culture and civilization.

The British selected the Treaty Ports with an eye to successful trade. This meant finding a coastal or river site located in a promising economic region to which long-distance ships could easily travel and dock, and related to an inland transportation network. Important businesses and institutions scurried to grab a good location along the waterfront, which constituted the bund of the treaty port. It was along the bund that the ships anchored opposite the row of Compradoric factory buildings to off-load their goods and reload. Customs and other government offices, consulates, and banks occupied locations along the bund.

Shanghai soon grew into the economically most important treaty port and became China’s metropolis during the first half of the 20th century. It had been a modest county town near the confluence of the Whangpu River and Wusung River [Soochow Creek], and about twelve miles from where the Whangpu River entered the Yangtze estuary. As such it meet important requirements for becoming an important port. Ocean going ships could reach it without having to sail a long distance through unknown waters to dock. Shanghai had water transport to the interior that tied it to the network of trade in the wealthy Yangtze Valley and much of Central China.

International Settlement developed as the commercial center with most of the important port facilities and business establishments because of its location and long frontage on the Whangpu River. The French Concession developed into the residential area of choice for foreigners and the wealthy, both foreign and Chinese. The British set up their area of control north of the old county town and were soon joined by holdings taken by the United States (which merged their land holdings with the British to form the International Settlement), and the French. The international Settlement, which began as 138 acres in 1843, had expanded to 7923 acres by 1930. The French also actively expanded their concession from 164 acres in 1864 to 2525 acres by 1914. The Chinese municipality with its exploding population constituted an administrative area of 204,800 acres. By 1934 the
population of Greater Shanghai had exploded to over 3.1 million of which there were almost 70,000 foreigners of 48 different nationalities.

By treaty foreigners had the protection of extra-territoriality, exemption from the jurisdiction of local [Chinese] law, and this protection extended to the concession lands. During the Taiping Rebellion in the early 1860s about 500,000 Chinese refugees flooded into Shanghai in search of a safe haven from the chaos of a ferocious civil war that cost about 20 million lives before it was over. The foreign concessions came to have majority Chinese populations. The Concessions could be a place of “freedom” for some from the control the Chinese law and political authority; for others servitude without the protections of traditional customs and rules. This split was based upon one’s wealth and connections.

Crime and the suspension of traditional moral restraints were easy in a world of small jurisdictions each with their own legal codes and systems. Political control and jurisdiction came to be divided between three jurisdictions, the French Concession, the Chinese city and surrounding territory, and the International Settlement. Because of this mixture of three legal jurisdictions next to one another, criminal activity migrated to Shanghai since it proved to be so easy to evade the law. Shanghai gained a reputation for vice including various forms of criminal activities besides the more obvious, prostitution, drugs, and gambling. In 1864 the British consul noted the existence of 668 brothels in the foreign settlements alone.

Buildings done in the Chinese tradition and western modes competed for space in the increasingly more crowded city. Chinese and foreigners ended up intermixed spatially and socially in the fabric of the city. Ever larger and grander Western styled buildings came to line the Bund. In the early years after the 1842 Treaty of Nanking Compradoric buildings were constructed along the Bund in Shanghai, buildings with Doric colonnades. None of these early structures survived, as they were all torn down to make way for larger structures. Chinese-style buildings jostled up behind them along the streets leading away from the Bund to the west. Li-Nong housing was a form of row house that placed townhouses along alleys that cut across city blocks making it possible to pact the block with multiple rows of dwellings. These dwellings had both Chinese features and some Europeanized decoration mixed together. They were built to make as much profit as possible from the Chinese streaming into the Settlement. At the far edge of the International Settlement away from the Whangpu River, the English located their horse-racing track, an signature feature of many British settlements in Asia. The track was later moved north outside of the Settlement as the population grew and space became too valuable for such a use. The land on which the racecourse stood sold in 1862 for 20 times its original price, and was used for tenement construction.

The early 20th century saw the rise of Shanghai as the financial and trade center for all of the Yangtze Valley and Central China. Ever more impressive buildings rose along the Bund including the Shanghai Branch of the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank of 1923 by Palmer and Turner, which was looking to established
English architectural fashion at the time. A number of surrounding properties were purchased to enlarge the site for a grand building of much greater scale, area, and volume than the structure it replaced. It was intended to outshine the Customs House, and the other banks and trading companies with frontage on the Bund. The building was in the Imperial Baroque manner of such recently completed works as the Central Criminal Law Courts [the “Old Bailey”] of 1900-1907 in London by Edward Mountford. Baroque Revival buildings of this period had to deal with the problem of the building being approached from the sides along a street rather than frontally down a grand boulevard. Since the dome was a popular element, it had to be brought forward as close as possible to the street so that it could be appreciated by the passerby. This was the formula that the Palmer and Turner adopted. Once inside the domed entry rotunda, one either turned to the main banking hall or to the Chinese Department, the former decorated with the Classical Orders, and the later with a mock Chinese Order.

The treaty ports were the tip of the spear of the Western Expansion into China during the Age of Imperialism. Shanghai alone controlled the majority of imports and exports between China other countries. As a dominant trading and financial center, Shanghai and the other treaty ports marked a shift in economic, political, and cultural dominance, from the traditional inland cities to port cities serving distant Western metropoles. Sovereignty had been abridged by extra-territoriality, economic and financial power rested with foreign companies backed by the threat of foreign military force. Power shifted from the native capital, first Beijing, and then Nanjing, to the distant Western metropoles where almost all of the major businesses in the treaty ports had their head offices.

The French Concession had very little frontage on the Whangpu River and developed into the residential area of choice for wealthier foreigners, wealthy Chinese and European immigrant groups such as the White Russians fleeing the Russian Revolution. Later there was an immigration of European Jews escaping fascism swelling the Jewish population beyond the wealthy Kadoori, Sassoon, Ezra, and Hardoon families who had constructed mansions in various European revival styles in the French Concession. Sir Victor Sassoon had an English Tudor villa with half-timbering and a huge fireplace big enough to roast an ox near the golf course on Hungjao Road. The Sassoon family had made a fortune in the opium trade between India and China. Although Sassoon lived in his penthouse at Sassoon House on the Bund, he often preferred to entertain at his villa. Wealthy Chinese and even Chinese government officials of the first half of the 20th century established residences in the concessions to escape Chinese law. The Kwok Mansion housed the family of ten, and was operated by 24 servants. Kwok had founded the Wing On department store. A Swiss architect from Lucerne designed the mansion in a Swiss chalet style. Many of the officials of the KMT Government that ruled China from 1927 to 1949 built mansions in the French Concession including the Minister of Transportation who built his Victorian gothic Revival mansion in 1930. Some parts of the French Concession contained rows of large middle class houses sitting in the middle of their lots surrounded by gardens and lawns.
The foreign population brought their religions with them. By the 1930s there were over 30 Christian churches and four synagogues, and a number of schools and hospitals run by Christian religious denominations. The Moore Memorial Methodist Church, done in Gothic Revival was by the Shanghai architect, Ladislaus Hudec, who had been born in Czechoslovakia, studied architecture at the University of Budapest, became a prisoner of the Russians, and in 1918 escaped from Siberia, and made his way to Shanghai. The Russian community built two churches. The Cathedral of the Holy Mother of God (1931), designed by a Russian émigré, was modeled upon the Cathedral of the Savior in Moscow, and was topped by five blue onion domes over its Greek cross plan. The St. Nicholas Military Church (1933) also designed by a Russian émigré, was dedicated to the memory of the martyred Tsar Nicholas II and his family. Christian missionaries had the protection of extra-territoriality and set up schools to train Chinese children in Christian teachings and Western knowledge. The American Episcopal Church set up a secondary school in Shanghai in 1878 that grew into St. John’s University, which became known for a while as the “Harvard” of Shanghai with its brick buildings decorated with Chinese motifs and laid out like a small mid-western American university.

Shanghai became the center of fashion and the avant-garde in 1930s China. Architects, including Russian and Eastern European architects and engineers sought to design in the most contemporary manner. Palmer and Turner designed Victor Sassoon’s Cathay Hotel [Sassoon House] in a chastened Art Deco capped by a green with red trim pinnacle facing the Bund. Art Deco apartment blocks popped up across the city including the Shanghai Mansions, which was just north of the Bund.

The interaction of Western influences and a predominantly Chinese population in treaty ports, such as Shanghai, created a hybrid and diverse physical environment, influenced by multiple cultures and a sense of modernity. Buildings with a mixture of Western styles and Chinese elements rose. Intellectuals and the avant-garde sought the treaty ports for a greater freedom to explore Western ideas and trends. Criminal gangs and mobsters enjoyed the lack of effective laws and corrupt policing in which Shanghai specialized. Shanghai and the other treaty ports housed the foreign enterprises that were gaining more and more power over the Chinese economy. Poor peasants continued to flooded into the treaty ports to find work and escape starvation in the countryside. They usually ended up as the pawns, and the cheap labor for the wealthy and the politically powerful.

The life and vitality of the Treaty Ports came to a screeching halt with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which marked the beginning of World War II in Asia.
Further Reading


Rhoads Murphy, Shanghai: Key to Modern China. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953.


