



Research article

Forming an in-between place: urbanisation of the Beach Ground, Xiamen (1842–1930)

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Abstract

This article examines the urban modernisation of Xiamen, a city located in the south-east of China, from the 1830s to the 1930s, highlighting the interplay between local initiatives and imperial powers. The Beach Ground was a core area of the Xiamen Bund, located south-west of Xiamen, and played a vital role in the maritime trade. Its planning and governance were closely linked to the establishment of the British concession (1852–1930). Taking the reclamation and embankment construction of the Beach Ground as a starting point, this article analyses how the Beach Ground transformed as an in-between place through unofficial land reclamation (before 1842), British concession planning (1842–1911), sovereignty disputes (1878–1922) and the construction of the Xiamen Bund embankment (1920s–1930s). These four vignettes provide a multi-perspective narrative of Xiamen's regional development through the political and economic conflicts and resolutions of different stakeholders, as well as its consequences for local society. This reveals the im-

pacts of global exchange on China's modernisation and affirms the contribution of Indigenous knowledge and local adaptation.

Keywords urban modernisation; Indigenous knowledge; global flows; British concession; regional development; port city

Introduction

Today, Xiamen draws on material artefacts from the Republic of China – the legacy of global mobility and cultural integration – to shape the image of a diverse and vibrant modern port city. The resulting spaces often appear controversial in historical narratives. The rule and legal jurisdiction established by the Qing dynasty, along with Xiamen's semi-colonial status, are seen as detrimental to national sovereignty and pride due to foreign dominance and privileges on Chinese soil. Yet these legacies provided important foundations for China's development.¹ In the foreign enclave, an area influenced by multiple forces, economic, cultural, political and ideological modernity emerged through external stimulation.

Modernity is not only a process of emulation and borrowing process over time, but also a period that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century.² The origin of modernity in the context of China was influenced by Western practice, following the Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking) in 1842.³ The designed treaty ports were the critical nodes for transferring innovations – modern infrastructure, economic systems and urban planning methodologies. The colonial power combined with foreign-dominated institutions like municipal authorities to control urban affairs and further influence the cities' built environment.⁴

This article examines the modernisation of Chinese cities by studying Xiamen, a port city that became an international trading hub after 1842 during China's period of forced commercial opening. Focusing on the Beach Ground in the Xiamen Bund from the 1830s to 1930s, the earliest trading and shipping centre located on the south-west coast of Xiamen served as a British concession (1852–1930). It was an in-between place in the early twentieth century, both geographically and politically. The British concession on the Beach Ground was a narrow strip of land without clear divisions, mired in sovereignty disputes. Additionally, it also represented a transition zone between the traditional Chinese city and the Gulangyu International Settlement, which was undergoing a more comprehensive modernisation led by foreigners.

This article explores the transition of the Beach Ground through four periods, namely the unofficial land reclamation before 1842, the planning and governance of the British concession from 1842 to 1911, the sovereignty conflicts over the Beach Ground from 1878 to 1922 and the local authorities launching the Xiamen Bund construction from the 1910s to the 1930s. The transformation of the Beach Ground involved coordination and compromise among various stakeholders – individuals, local governments, the British Empire and transnational companies – regarding land sovereignty and commercial interests. Based on literature and archival analysis, this article provides a multi-perspective narrative about Xiamen's urban modernisation through the political and economic conflicts between, and resolutions of, different stakeholders, as well as its impact on local society.

Xiamen before being a treaty port

The city of Xiamen, whose name means 'the mansion's gate' in Chinese, highlights its geostrategic importance to Fujian. The place name has been recorded since officers and soldiers of the Ming Empire built the city and its fortifications on the south-western part of the island in 1394.⁵ However, the island's geographical environment, which is hilly and surrounded by the sea, posed significant challenges to its land use and transportation. Between the ninth and sixteenth centuries, the city of Quanzhou near Xiamen flourished as a major trade centre along the Maritime Silk Road. Local merchants traded Fujian's porcelain, silk, tea and other commodities overseas, and many of these merchants eventually established permanent settlements abroad. With the rise of European maritime exploration, the Portuguese arrived in Xiamen around 1516, followed by the Dutch and the British in the seventeenth century.⁶ Foreign merchants who traded in southern Fujian transliterated the name 'Xiamen' as 'Amoy', based on the local Hokkien dialect.⁷

The Beach Ground attracted people from surrounding areas who came to trade and settle, seeking new economic opportunities. In the seventeenth century, Xiamen's population increased to more than 140,000 as a shipping centre and an immigration gateway.⁸ From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, its urban sprawl was driven by residents' need for survival. The city expanded to the south as the local government moved military installations to the city's outskirts and new residents settled in houses built along the island's hills. In urban areas, the narrow streets were paved with rugged flagstones and had sewers along the sides. The nearby shophouses were intertwined, often encroaching on the road, to accommodate the dense population. This crowded and messy environment fostered the spread of fires and epidemics, causing widespread destruction.⁹

Frequent disasters, along with limited arable land and food production on the island, could not feed the growing population, driving residents to seek livelihoods overseas. The Qing Empire lifted the maritime bans in 1684 and again in 1727¹⁰, and in Xiamen, it established a customs institution and official ferries under its jurisdiction. One of the custom houses, located on the Xiamen Bund, the coast outside the south gate of the city and facing Gulangyu across the sea, inspected and collected taxes on passing domestic and foreign merchant ships and goods.¹¹ Xiamen transformed from a coastal military stronghold into an official trading hub.

The demand for commerce and shipping stimulated residents' spontaneous construction to expand the city's available land and transportation facilities. One type of construction involved unplanned reclamation, where residents dumped waste materials along the ancient bay. Over time, the accumulated waste levelled the coastline, enabling people to build houses and constructed jetties (locally called *Lutou* 路頭) at the end of roads, extending them into the sea.¹² The other was planned reclamation, usually for businesspeople to make a profit. According to the *Lujiang zhi* (鹭江志), a local chronicle of Xiamen in the Qing dynasty, the Ye family reclaimed land from the sea between the small island they purchased and *Zhushujiao* Jetty (see Figure 1), forming a newly reclaimed land area, and built shops on it.¹³ Due to the successive construction of jetties, residents systematically planned boat routes and docks. Traders gathered in jetties and temples, where large crowds flowed through, and set up markets to sell their products.¹⁴

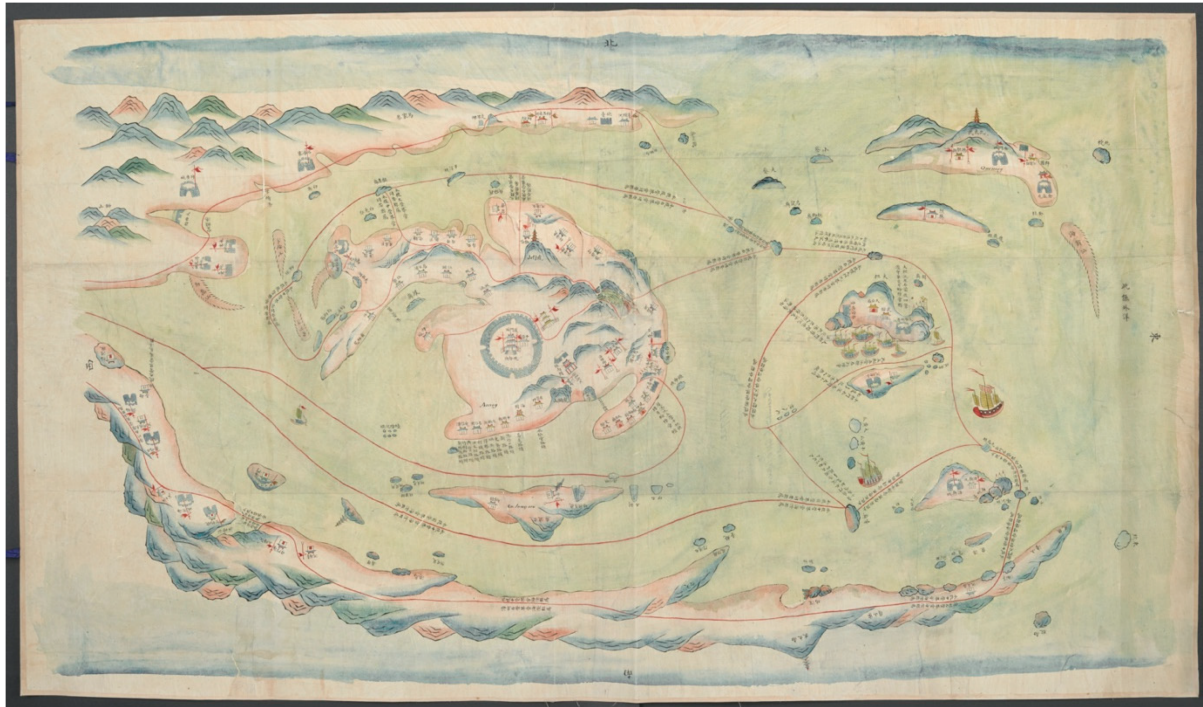
British concession planning

With the growth of commerce from the eighteenth century, ships frequented Xiamen's harbours for trade, while the Chinese market permitted only opium among foreign products. Foreign merchants became increasingly dissatisfied with the local customs system and regulations restricting foreign exchanges. The conflict culminated in the First Opium War (1839–42), forcing the Qing Empire to sign the Treaty of Nanjing (1842). This unequal treaty opened five treaty ports – Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai – to foreign trade, asked for a substantial war indemnity from China and ceded Hong Kong Island to Britain. To ensure compliance with the treaty, British forces retained control of strategic locations, including Gulangyu in Xiamen, which remained occupied until the Qing Empire completed the war indemnity payments.¹⁵ When Henry Gribble, the first British consul, arrived in Xiamen in 1843, he and his staff settled on Gulangyu, an island under temporary British occupation that also offered a healthier alternative to Xiamen City.¹⁶

Site selection

In 1844, Xiamen's officials and British consuls surveyed the site for the British to build shops and residences. The site had been a training ground (*Jiaochang* 較場 and *Shuicaotai* 水操台) in the seventeenth century and was located on the southern coast of the island.¹⁷ The authority selected this area because it was unobstructed by graves and houses, and construction would not cause opposition from the surrounding population.¹⁸ The British refused the proposal, however, because the area was remote and inaccessible, preventing the monitoring of commercial activities.¹⁹ Instead, they temporarily occupied the office of the local authority (*Daotai Yamen* 道台衙門) on the north-east side of the ancient city to build their office the following year.²⁰ When the British returned the site to the authority in 1863, construction workers knocked down the foreign-style building and rebuilt the *Yamen* with donations from the local gentry the following year.

Figure 1. A Chinese coloured map of the town of Amoy, 1885. The map shows Xiamen Island (the large island in the middle) and its developed waterways (red line) during the Qing dynasty, drawn in a north–south orientation. The circular wall on the island was the ancient Xiamen City and outside the east wall was the *Daotai Yamen*, which served as temporary offices for the British from 1845 to 1852. The coastal area south of the wall is the Xiamen Bund. The jetties in the Xiamen Bund (from left to right) were *Xintiandi*, *Zhushujiao*, *Dianbao*, *Hongbenbu*, *Datie*, *Desheng*, *Cijie*, *Shixiang*, *Xin*, *Gangzaikou*, *Daomei*, *Shuixiangong* and *Dashizi* (新填地路頭, 竹樹腳路頭, 典寶路頭, 洪本部路頭, 打鐵路頭, 得勝路頭, 磁街路頭, 史巷路頭, 新路頭, 港仔口路頭, 島美路頭, 水仙宮路頭, 打十字路頭). The south-east side of Xiamen Island was once a military training ground. The small island to the south of the island is Gulangyu, which was used as an international settlement from 1903 to 1943. (Source: © British Library Board [Add. 17722])



In 1852, the authority finally compromised and ceded a foreshore between *Daomei* Jetty and *Xin* Jetty. Foreigners who lived in Gulangyu took sampans to their office on the bund during the day. The agreed area on the foreshore, known as 'Beach Ground' (*Haihoutan* 海後灘), is located southwest of Xiamen City. It was the smallest British concession in China, measuring approximately 189 metres long and 69 metres wide.²¹ Without visible boundaries, residents hardly noticed that it was a British-administered district.²² The British planned the Beach Ground in the same year, taking into account public spaces such as jetties and roads.²³ Although the planning was done without professional guidance, the management of lots and the consideration of public space gradually transformed this area into a space different from the neighbourhood.

As the sole developer, the British government planned the concession in Xiamen as a commercial centre without comprehensive functions.²⁴ The British consul revised the plan in 1855 and focused on the economy and the practicality of public facilities. They divided the site into six regular zones based on its existing urban layout and then leased the land to various foreign investors for 99 years.²⁵ Instead of the government, these foreign firms paid for all construction costs. Each lessee of the six lots was required to build an 8-metre-wide wharf.²⁶ Furthermore, the British successively leased land parcels along the coast from *Xin* Jetty to *Cijie* Jetty, allowing lessees to subdivide their properties for rent.²⁷

Local governance bodies

Drawing on the municipal council established in 1854 in the Shanghai concession, the British concession in Xiamen formed its municipal council in 1877.²⁸ This foreign-led organisation was responsible for public affairs, such as managing infrastructure like docks and roads, maintaining public order and sanitation and collecting taxes, within the concession. It comprised five elected lot holders, along with a small police force consisting of a British police inspector and two native constables.²⁹ In addition, in 1854, British consuls initiated the establishment of a new customs authority (*Xinguan/Yangguan* 新關/洋關), building on existing local institutions. As a result of the Second Opium War (1856–60) and the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), the customs served as an imperial institution for the Qing Empire while under the management of foreign powers.³⁰

The Imperial Maritime Customs Service (IMCS) set up a customs house in Xiamen in 1862. They bought the land in Lot No. 6 of the Beach Ground from a British trading company, Jardine Matheson & Co., in 1867.³¹ The new IMCS office was completed in 1870. It was the only lessee to have full individual facilities in the concession, including wharves, godowns and checkpoints.³² The main office was a two-storey brick building with an arcade-style exterior corridor.³³ IMCS built a stone jetty and two symmetrically placed bungalows that served as checkpoints for inspecting goods in front of the office.³⁴ The former native customs, Fujian customs (*Min* customs 閩海關) in Xiamen, now known as *Changguan* (常關), was only responsible for the trading activities of civilian ships.³⁵ The office of Fujian customs had a hard-hilled roof with swallowtail ridges on both sides, and was the only traditional Chinese mansion on the Beach Ground. In 1909, Fujian customs moved out of the Beach Ground, and the former official office was destroyed in a typhoon in 1917.³⁶

In 1901, IMCS extended its authority into Chinese domestic trading by controlling native customs.³⁷ Its jurisdiction also expanded when it established subordinate departments for the postal service, coastal policing and navigation management.³⁸ Foreign staff serving Chinese institutions had privileges in the form of extraterritorial rights and held responsible positions compared to the native population.³⁹ In 1904, Xiamen's customs reforms, including reducing the number of local customs officers, strengthening control over cargo transportation and collecting taxes, aroused resentment among the local population.⁴⁰

As anti-foreign sentiment grew in Republican China, protesters vandalised the customs house and docked ships in 1905. The riot resulted in damage to customs property and casualties among staff and protesters. Negotiations between Xiamen authorities and the representatives of chambers of commerce and customs led to the revision of tax rules and customs regulations, as well as the transfer of accused employees.⁴¹ Between 1907 and 1909, IMCS reconstructed the office building at its original location, transforming it into a three-storey building with a Western-style brick structure (see Figure 2). Another project involved reclaiming and expanding the land in front of the office and building an inspection building.

Controversy over sea reclamation land

The planning of the Beach Ground retained the original pattern of the city for cost-saving reasons (see Figure 3). It was the transition zone between the old town and the foreshore that was only separated from the shophouses in the northeast by a road. The lessees subdivided the land and leased these lots to foreign companies, banks, post offices and so on. As subleases increased, foreign firms increasingly built European-style buildings. With foreign trade reaching its peak at the end of the nineteenth century, the Beach Ground became Xiamen's most prosperous commercial district. Except for the Beach Ground, Xiamen Island's urban environment did not improve in the nineteenth century. During the Qing dynasty, local authorities tried to legally require that all commercial shops submit architectural drawings to the government to prevent buildings from encroaching on to roads. The plan was unsuccessful because officials did not enforce the law strictly enough. The authorities also commissioned a street-cleaning department in 1905,⁴² however, these measures did not fundamentally solve the sanitation issues in urban areas. The foreign enclave's isolation from its surroundings was evident in the exotic façades along the coast and in its use of land.

Figure 2. The office of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service (Source: Collection of Swire, G. Warren, 1928–29; image courtesy of Special Collection [reference number: Sw07-101], University of Bristol Library [<https://www.hpcbristol.net>])



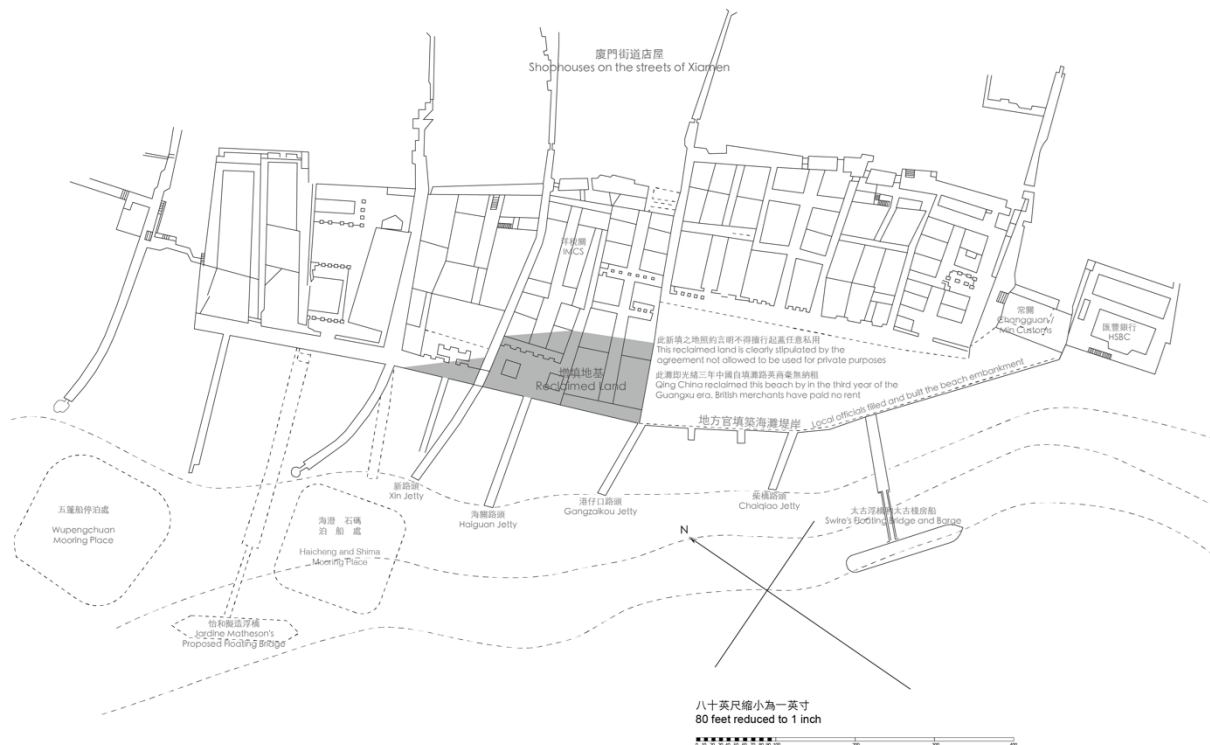
The Beach Ground Charter

The need for port accessibility drove foreign merchants to aggressively develop the foreshore. Butterfield & Swire, a British firm, built its own dock near *Daomei* Jetty in 1867.⁴³ Foreign firms subsequently reclaimed the foreshore. Boyd & Co. hired workers to reclaim the foreshore between *Daomei* Jetty and *Gangzaikou* Jetty in 1877. The local authorities soon discovered the project and took it over, filling the shore with sand and gravel, and paving a stone road that was six to seven metres wide.⁴⁴ The authorities then drafted six agreement charters on the bund before the British concession, emphasising the reclamation as a public facility to avoid subsequent disputes over land occupation.⁴⁵ The Charter of the Beach Ground agreed upon between China and Britain in 1878 triggered land disputes due to differences in the meaning of the language used in the two versions. The Chinese version of Article 6 stated that the area was annexed to the concession and managed by British merchants, but it did not imply the incorporation into the concession that the English version of the charter presented: 'When the filling in is completed the reclaimed land shall be incorporated with that already leased and entrusted by the native authorities to the care of the foreign merchants within the concession.'⁴⁶ Conflicts and negotiations over land sovereignty continued for the next four decades.

Compared with the Beach Ground of the 1850s, the vibrant trading activities led to the expansion of both the leased land and the harbour facilities. Foreign companies' shipping utilised more efficient vessels and improved port planning and wharves in the concession. These private wharves were extensions of trading houses rather than the end of the connection between public roads and the sea. The scope of the Beach Ground was closely related to the interests of foreign firms. In 1883, the British merchants Tait & Co. reported to the Xiamen authorities that the stone embankment in front of their building had cracked. After the authorities had negotiated with the British consul on the boundary issue for repairs, the two sides agreed that the foreign firms had to cover the maintenance costs within the leased boundary.⁴⁷ During this period, the British consul instructed a survey to draw the map of the Beach Ground and confirmed with the Xiamen authorities whether the foreign companies had constructed their building illegally. In the full map of the Beach Ground, drawn by surveyors in 1885 (see Figure 3), the authorities marked the rights regarding the use of embankments, wharves and properties to safeguard sovereignty and the interests of residents. The local official marked the official reclamation area of 1877,

located in the vacant land on the south side of the map, emphasising that individuals were not allowed to use or build on this site without authorisation.

Figure 3. Map of the Beach Ground, 1885. The original map dates from the eleventh year of the Guangxu period, which corresponds to the year 1885 in the Gregorian calendar. It was drawn by a surveyor from the foreign tax bureau and then submitted for approval to the British consul and the local administrative head, known as the *Daotai* (Source: redrawn by the author based on a historical map, *Full View of Xiamen Haihoutan* 廈門海後灘全圖, from Xiamen Museum)



Multi-stakeholder tensions

After the treaty, port systems expanded commercially in China's coastal cities. The Qing court recognised the need to operate independently to prevent monopolies. Qing dynasty officials proposed an operation model based on government–business cooperation to establish enterprises and enhance national strength. These enterprises faced constraints, however, due to competition from foreign companies and insufficient domestic industrial supply chains, forcing them to rely on foreign services.⁴⁸ Underdeveloped production significantly impacted lifestyles in Qing China, contrasting sharply with the advanced conditions in the foreign enclave. It was not until the early twentieth century that local gentry and Chinese nationals overseas invested in industry and municipal engineering, and their introduction of capital and technology accelerated China's modernisation.

With the support of the elite businessman Lin Erjia 林爾嘉, one of China's earliest private telephone companies, the Xiamen Telephone Company (*Delufeng gongsi* 德律風公司), was established⁴⁹, allowing the residents of Xiamen Island to begin to use telephones. In 1907, the Xiamen Telephone Company started to install telephone poles on the Beach Ground. The British suspended their construction, demanding the company to sign a contract and pay rent.⁵⁰ The British consul also asked local authorities to intervene and denounced the unauthorised erection of telegraph poles within the concession as an invasion of sovereignty and a breach of treaty. In response, local authorities inspected the site and clarified that the telephone poles were erected in front of the British-leased land on a public road constructed by the local government, arguing that the project served the public interest. However, the

British consul insisted on rent, citing a precedent in the British concession in Guangzhou. The dispute was referred to higher authorities in Beijing.

The Beach Ground was a place where merchant ships gathered and berthed and was a gateway for people and goods. Conflicts over land use intensified, with incidents such as the British Navy conducting a military exercise on the Beach Ground and Chinese students carrying fake equipment through the British concession.⁵¹ The stakeholders each held their own views and refused to compromise. Butterfield & Swire soon became the centre of attention for its port construction plans.

In 1880, China Navigation, a subsidiary of Butterfield & Swire, built a wharf that could accommodate ships up to 500 tons. The wooden bridge was perpendicular to the embankment to connect the barge (see Figure 4). Their shipping transported red bricks from Xiamen to construct its Hong Kong headquarters, and labour to the Straits settlements.⁵² During the long voyage, there was an unavoidably high mortality rate caused by abuse, overcrowded conditions, natural disasters, among other factors. A fire on the *Shanghai* resulted in the death of more than 200 passengers. The crew took advantage of the chaos to loot the ship and rob passengers, and more serious disasters resulted in the deaths of passengers and damage to the ship. Its wreckage remained in the Xiamen Bund and became a barge (bonded warehouse) to continue service for China Navigation.⁵³ In the summer of 1910, Butterfield & Swire demolished the damaged wooden bridge between the bund and the barges. The staff had to use sampans to transfer cargo and people until they got permission to rebuild the bridge.

Figure 4. Butterfield & Swire Office at the Xiamen Bund (Source: collection by Swire, G. Warren, 1906–7; image courtesy of Special Collection [reference number: Sw02-072], University of Bristol Library [<https://www.hpcbristol.net/>])



The bridge sparked controversy over land encroachment when it was established and, with China's rising tide of nationalism and efforts to restore full sovereignty after the founding of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912, the rebuilding project faced greater resistance.⁵⁴ Despite objections to the reconstruction plan from local authorities, Swire insisted on hiring contractors from Shanghai and construction began as scheduled in 1921. Local groups continued to protest until the construction of the bridge was halted. The protest became a political movement when British diplomats and a warship sent to Xiamen joined in. Local activists lobbied more than 40 Shanghai workers involved in the project to stop work. The Xiamen Bund began to ban China Navigation from loading and unloading, and replaced the shipping company with other routes.⁵⁵ Through telegrams and newspapers, the protest received support from patriots from various domestic ports such as Shantou, Shanghai and Beijing, and a boycott even occurred in Manila.

The British eventually gave in to the Chinese protesters. In 1922, the British demolished the brick walls and built prohibition signs outside the British concession.

Municipal improvement of the Beach Ground

Following a series of uprisings, the British government began questioning the necessity of treaty concessions and initiated negotiations with the ROC. In 1930, it relinquished the concession in Xiamen.⁵⁶ The steps towards ending semi-colonial privileges in Xiamen are traceable. On the one hand, the protests in Xiamen in 1921 achieved successful negotiations with the British over the sovereignty issues of the Beach Ground that had been a problem since 1877. On the other, since the late nineteenth century, knowledge transfer from foreign firms and Chinese nationals overseas has advanced China's industrial and urban development. Semi-colonialism in China allowed for the spontaneity of national enterprises. By raising funds, officials and the public established organisations such as railways and shipping companies to compete with imperial power for profits. Meanwhile, improving the built environment in the British concession and Gulangyu International Settlement provided a reference for Xiamen's municipal construction.

Construction of the embankment

In 1919, the ROC government and the local populace jointly established Xiamen's municipal institution, with significant contributions from Chinese committee members overseas. This institution included two departments: the municipal council (*Shizhenghui* 市政會), serving as the legislative body, and the municipal bureau (*Shizhengju* 市政局), functioning as the executive body.⁵⁷ The following year, the two departments began cooperating to complete the embankment construction in the Xiamen Bund. The reclamation project from the island of Fuyu (浮嶼), in the south-west of Xiamen, to the electric light factory in the south covered a total area of 152,479 square metres and cost over 700,000 yuan.⁵⁸ Landowners paid the project fee in instalments based on the size of their land and got property rights licences, which were approximately 700 yuan per square metre. The government acquired plots as official property if the acquisition procedures were incomplete or if the owners could not pay for the work.

Owing to inexperience in construction and difficulties in raising funds, the embankment of the Xiamen Bund took 13 years. The municipal institutions experienced constant internal disputes and neglected construction in the first six years of the project until they reorganised departments. The authority replaced the municipal council with the municipal supervisory office (*Shizheng duban gongshu* 市政督辦公署), which consisted of general affairs, design, route planning, construction supervision, embankment work and other departments.⁵⁹ The office further divided the remaining embankment into four sections. The first section was adjacent to the west side of the British concession. When the tide was low, workers dug a square pit to a depth of 1 metre and put in large stones as the foundation. They then laid gravel on top and poured a 0.6-metre-thick cement slab. Then, they built the walls with cement and stones. There was only a small section of the foreshore with deep water, so workers laid the foundation using square pine wood piles imported from the United States, each measuring 9 metres in length and 0.3 metres in width on each side. This section of the embankment and the supporting wharves were completed in 1928 (see Figure 5).

The second section of the project was located on the foreshore of the British concession. Owing to the complex hydrogeological conditions of this section of the beach, workers used 12–14-metre-long American pine wood as the pile foundation, drove 1.44 lengths of pine wood per square metre vertically, poured concrete on the ground to the depth of 0.6 metres and finally laid strips of stone. The construction methods for the second and third sections were the same, but their completion was interrupted by the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945). The fourth section was in a natural bay in the south of Xiamen, serving as a sheltered anchorage for fishing boats. Therefore, workers partially used domestic pine, each 4 to 5 metres long and 0.2 metres square in cross-section, to lay the foundation, followed by pouring a 0.6-metre-thick layer of concrete.⁶⁰

In 1928, when the embankment was nearly finished, Xiamen authorities abolished the municipal bureau and the municipal council, dividing them into two departments: Road Administration (subdivided into design, road maintenance and supervision) and Embankment Engineering (subdivided into port affairs, road administration, land management, accounting, statistics, supervision and documentation).⁶¹

However, the embankment from the postal office to Mazu Temple (see *Mazugong* in Figure 1) collapsed just one year after its completion. Under the guidance of engineer Peng Xuhan (彭需漢), workers rebuilt the section using American pine piles, but it collapsed again soon afterwards, resulting in a total loss of more than 700,000 yuan.

Figure 5. Reclamation on the Beach Ground (Source: collection by Swire, G. Warren, 1928–9; image courtesy of Special Collection [reference number: Sw07-103], University of Bristol Library [https://www.hpcbristol.net])



Global exchange

Owing to the repeated failures and high expenses, the Xiamen authorities lost confidence in repairing the section. In 1931, the authorities entrusted the project to the Netherlands Harbour Works Company Limited and raised contract fees by issuing lottery tickets. The Netherlands Harbour Works Company had taken on several reclamation projects in China in the 1910s.⁶² According to the contract, this company had to relocate the embankment 100 metres outwards within two years and guarantee a service life of more than 25 years. The company set up a temporary office and a precast yard on Gulangyu and brought machinery, vessels, materials and engineering personnel from Hong Kong. They used 20-metre-long concrete piles with a 0.6-metre concrete pouring platform, forming an integrated foundation (see Figure 6).

In a parallel effort to develop transportation infrastructure in Xiamen, in 1933 Butterfield & Swire once again improved its Swire Wharf, capable of berthing 3,000-ton freighters. This wharf had two steel barges (64 metres long and 9 metres wide), an approach trestle (21 metres long and 8 metres wide) and a bulkhead measuring 1,865 metres long. Additionally, the site included warehouses covering 7,464 square metres with a storage capacity of 15,300 cubic metres. It was the largest wharf in Xiamen during the Republic era. In addition to transportation and communication facilities, it also introduced modern economic practices and more efficient logistics systems. The Netherlands Harbour Works Company Limited completed 610 metres of embankment work in November 1932, marking the completion of the entire Beach Ground embankment project, totalling 3,068 metres (see Figure 7).⁶³

Figure 6. Construction of the Xiamen Bund (Source: collection by Swire, G. Warren, 1933–4; image courtesy of Special Collection [reference number: Sw08-088], University of Bristol Library [www.hpcbristol.net])



Figure 7. Xiamen New Bund (Source: collection by Swire, G. Warren, 1933–4; image courtesy of Special Collection [reference number: Sw08-085], University of Bristol Library [https://www.hpcbristol.net])



Conclusions

The construction of the Beach Ground from the 1830s to the 1930s illustrates the city's urban modernisation with the growth and fall of imperial power. The first vignette revealed the unofficial history of Xiamen's modernity, starting with local initiatives to build jetties. These grassroots projects functioned as public infrastructure, transforming the Xiamen Bund into a thriving hub for trading and migration, where foreign things were first encountered in traditional Chinese cities. The second vignette analysed the formation of the Beach Ground, showcasing the imposition of foreign systems and their impact on the built environment. Due to the special nature of the British concession – small in area and solely used for commercial purposes – it could not form an enclave and was closely integrated with its surroundings. The third explored the interplay of global forces and local dynamics, focusing on the sovereignty dispute on the Beach Ground. These external stimuli prompted local society to make changes. The final vignette documented the construction of the Xiamen Bund's embankment as an attempt to modernise infrastructure, reflecting how the flow of population, knowledge and goods accelerated regional development.

By using these four vignettes the article explained how the Beach Ground evolved into an in-between place, shaped by conflicts and coordination among various interests and influenced by transnational exchange. The construction of wharves and embankments enhanced Xiamen's maritime network and engineering technology in the twentieth century. The shift of foreign-led governance structures, such as IMCS, facilitated more systematic management. It was also sometimes counter to local needs, instead prioritising colonial interests. Therefore, the formation of in-between places was a result of not merely external imposition but also local adaptation and the integration of foreign influences. Focusing on Xiamen, this article offers a perspective for historical research on the modernisation of other cities under treaty port systems and emphasises the processes of resistance and adaptation.

Notes

- ¹ Brady and Brown, *Foreigners and Foreign Institutions*, 2.
- ² Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, 10–11.
- ³ Bickers and Jackson, *Treaty Ports in Modern China*.
- ⁴ Yeoh, *Contesting Space*.
- ⁵ Xue, *Lujiang Zhi*, 29.
- ⁶ Pitcher, *In and about Amoy*, 43–8.
- ⁷ Macgowan, *English and Chinese Dictionary*.
- ⁸ Xiamen gangshi zhi biancuan weiyuanhui, *Xiamen gang zhi*, 54.
- ⁹ Zhou, *Jindai Xiamen Chengshi Fazhan Yanjiu*, 124. See the records in Hughes, *Amoy and the Surrounding Districts*, 52–3; Pitcher, *In and about Amoy*, 15–16.
- ¹⁰ Ng, *Trade and Society*, 186.
- ¹¹ Xiamen Customs, *Xiamen haiguan zhi*, 1.
- ¹² Zhou, *Jindai Xiamen Chengshi Fazhan Yanjiu*, 115–16; Xiamen gangshi zhi biancuan weiyuanhui, *Xiamen gang zhi*, 82.
- ¹³ Xue, *Lujiang Zhi*, 36.
- ¹⁴ Zhou, *Jindai Xiamen Chengshi Fazhan Yanjiu*, 121–3.
- ¹⁵ Art. XII. See Mayers, *Treaties*, 3.
- ¹⁶ Coates, *The China Consuls*, 18–19; Chen, *Minnan jindai jianzhu*, 16.
- ¹⁷ Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 193–4.
- ¹⁸ Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 193–4. For a description of unobstructed places, see also 'Trouble-free place' in Yu, 'The making of a bund in China', 36.
- ¹⁹ Nield, *The China Coast*.
- ²⁰ According to the Inscription on the Reconstruction of the Xingquan Yongdao Shu (重建興泉永道署碑記). The Daotai was the subprovincial official representative of the Qing dynasty. See Chen, *Minnan jindai jianzhu*, 15–18.
- ²¹ Yu, 'The making of a bund in China', 33.
- ²² Nield, *China's Foreign Places*, 28.

- 23 Yu, 'The making of a bund in China', 36.
- 24 Yu, 'The making of a bund in China', 33–4.
- 25 For the lease of British concession, see Fei, *Zhongguo zujie shi*, 243–4.
- 26 Nield, *China's Foreign Places*, 29.
- 27 Xiamen waishizhi bianweihui, *Xiamen waishi zhi*, 22.
- 28 Chen, 'Zhimin de guixun yingzao'.
- 29 Yu, 'The making of a bund in China', 36; Wright and Cartwright, *Twentieth-Century Impressions*, 814.
- 30 Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China*, 10.
- 31 Xiamen Customs, *Xiamen haiguan zhi*, 355.
- 32 Yu, 'The making of a bund in China', 34.
- 33 Chen, *Minnan jindai jianzhu*, 16–18.
- 34 Xiamen Customs, *Xiamen haiguan zhi*, 355.
- 35 Xiamen Customs, *Xiamen haiguan zhi*, 2–3.
- 36 Xiamen Customs, *Xiamen haiguan zhi*, 16.
- 37 Tsai, 'The inspector general's last prize'.
- 38 Chang, *Government, Imperialism and Nationalism in China*.
- 39 Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China*, 15.
- 40 Tsai, 'The inspector general's last prize', 250–3.
- 41 Xiamen Customs, *Xiamen haiguan zhi*, 397.
- 42 Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 124–5.
- 43 Xiamen gangshi zhi biancuan weiyuanhui, *Xiamen gang zhi*, 14.
- 44 Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 208–14.
- 45 Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 215.
- 46 Article 6 of the Beach Ground Charter in 1878 is: '填築之後，該地接籠已經租地，由地方官託界各洋商代為經理'.
- See He, '1921–1922 nian xiamen haihoutan an yu zhongying jiaoshe yanjiu'.
- 47 Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 223–5.
- 48 Reinhardt, *Navigating Semi-Colonialism*, 109.
- 49 Ong, *Coming Home to a Foreign Country*, 150–1.
- 50 Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 226–31.
- 51 Xiamenshi danganju and Xiamenshi danganguan, *Jindai Xiamen shewai dangan shiliao*, 231–3.
- 52 Bickers, *China Bound*.
- 53 Bickers, *China Bound*, 154.
- 54 Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi Xiamen weiyuanhui and Wenshi ziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui. *Xiamen de zujie*, 211–16.
- 55 Bickers, *China Bound*.
- 56 Nield, *The China Coast*, 486.
- 57 Zhou, *Jindai Xiamen Chengshi Fazhan Yanjiu*, 126.
- 58 Xiamen gangshi zhi biancuan weiyuanhui, *Xiamen gang zhi*, 85–86. Yuan 圓 is a unit of account. It was a round coin made of silver from the Republic era.
- 59 Zhou, *Jindai Xiamen Chengshi Fazhan Yanjiu*, 130; Xiamen gangshi zhi biancuan weiyuanhui, *Xiamen gang zhi*, 85–9.
- 60 Xiamen gangshi zhi biancuan weiyuanhui, *Xiamen gang zhi*, 86.
- 61 Zhou, *Jindai Xiamen Chengshi Fazhan Yanjiu*, 130.
- 62 Nield, *China's Foreign Places*, 62.
- 63 Xiamen gangshi zhi biancuan weiyuanhui, *Xiamen gang zhi*, 88.

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Research ethics statement

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