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A FORGOTTEN CORNER IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE – A CONCISE HISTORY OF SHAMIAN IN MODERN CHINA, 1859–1943

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The article illustrates the history of Shamian, which is a small and obscure island located in the very corner of Guangzhou, China. This place had been leased as a concession to Britain until 1943. The history and development of Shamian concession was coincided with the first Sino-British encounter and the opening of China to the West, and it symbolized the imperial partition as well as the social transformation of China.

In this article, the author traces back the origin of Shamian, its beautiful environment and surroundings, its European life style, its unique cultural atmosphere, its British-based institutions, its segregation and discriminative policy against Chinese, which led to the upheavals of many Chinese residents culminating in the large Sino-British conflicts and massacre in 1925, when the place was under siege for more than one year.

After the incident, both Chinese and British claimed they were ignorant and on the right side of history, and it was the other side should take the responsibility for the occurrence of the tragedy. Such dispute continues to the present as an unsettled historical case.

Shamian finally returned to the Chinese rule at the end of World War II, which closed the last chapter of foreign colonialism in Chinese history.

After the Communist government took power in 1949, China was closed to the West for almost thirty years, and Shamian became the best teaching example of anti-imperialism for the Red China. Only until Deng Xiaoping, who initiated the new national policy of “openness and reform”, took power in 1978, did Shamian begin to change its outlook which resembled more like its pre-1949 face.

Since then, Shamian has been rebuilt with its previous European style architectures and cultural relics. It is a special district of foreign consulates in the city of Guangzhou and it becomes China’s symbol of opening to the whole world.

For many Westerners, Shamian arouses their nostalgic feeling of a little mirror of Europe in modern China. But for many Chinese, this place recalled an era of capitulationism and impotence; many labelled it as one of China’s monuments of national humiliation, especially after the outbreak of the incident in 1925, Shamian was increasingly stigmatized by the jingoists as a symbol of foreign imperialism in China.

At the end, however, no one can deny that the concession not only contributed to the modernization of Guangzhou, but also set China on the irreversible course of modernity. Under the rule of European and the influence of Western civilization, the former foreign enclave once became a very cosmopolitan place in a backward China. The island had aroused so many romantic memories for the Westerners, and at least it had created a niche in the history of modern China as well as in the history of British Empire.

Key words: Shamian, concession, British empire, foreign imperialism, modern China, European, Guangzhou, massacre, incident.

Author's Biography

Jie Li completed his PhD in History at the University of Edinburgh in 2017. While his primary interest is modern and contemporary Chinese history, Jie Li's research covers many fields, which include China's international relations since 1949, the histories of the former Soviet Union and communism, and the Cold War. His recent publications include: *Gorbachev's Glasnost and the Debate on Chinese Socialism among Chinese Sovietologists, 1985–1999* (Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies December 2016); *Xinjiang's Islamic Resurgence: A View from 1990s Chinese Sovietology* (Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies 2016); *The Use of Lenin in Chinese Sovietology in the 1990s* (Routledge India 2019). In addition, he has published a number of commentaries on contemporary Chinese affairs as well as book reviews on a variety of historical scholarship. Some of these works appeared in the *Twenty-first Century Bimonthly* administered by the Institute of Chinese Studies at Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is currently a Lecturer in the Department of History at Hong Kong Baptist University. He can be contacted at <jielican2009@hotmail.com>.

The Origin

Shamian is a small and obscure island (0.3 sq km) in Guangzhou (the capital city of Guangdong Province), China, and it is located in the very corner of the city [Canton Advertising and Commission Agency 1971, 7]. In the aftermath of the Second Opium War (1856) during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1910), Shamian was leased as a concession to Britain and France, and the Chinese were not entitled to reclaim it until 1943¹. The emergence of Shamian concession was coincided with the first Sino-British encounter and the opening of China to the West, and it symbolized the imperial partition as well as the social transformation of China².

When the British first came to China in the seventeenth century and their request for lucrative trade arrangement with the Qing Dynasty was turned down until 1685, when the Kangxi Emperor decided to open the ports of China to foreign trade. However, by 1757 Kangxi's grandson Qianlong Emperor restricted all foreign trade to the city of Guangzhou. From 1757 until the first Opium War in 1842, all foreign trade was through Guangzhou, and foreigners could deal only with the official government-approved agents – the monopolistic guild or the *Gonghang* (factories) [Spence 1999, 145–151].

Since then, the Sino-British trade became dominated by items such as tea (from China to Britain) and silver (from Britain to China). However, such mutual trade strongly favoured the Chinese side, as Britain had to purchase silver from continental Europe and Mexico to supply the Chinese appetite for silver, which was a costly process then. In tackling such trade deficit, the British came up with a solution on

¹ In this article I will consistently use present spelling of Chinese words in pinyin system, rather than the old form in Wade-Giles transcription, for example, *Shamian* and *Guangzhou* will be in place of *Shameen* and *Canton* respectively.

² Treaty ports in China for foreigners might be either concessions or settlements. In a settlement, the local administration simply designed a foreign district, leaving the newcomers to negotiate the terms of occupation with existing landowners. Concessions existed where the local authorities made available a block of land to a particular foreign power which took responsibility for subdividing it and leasing sections of it to new foreign residents. In either case, the foreign quarter soon tended to take on foreign characteristics. In the treaty ports Europeans and Americans live in their own quarters, with streets well paved and lighted, houses in European style, and shops full of American and English goods.

opium, which was supposed to be a medical ingredient, but had been constantly abused as drug addiction. British sales of opium to China in large amounts began in 1781 and between 1821 and 1837 sales increased fivefold. The Qing government had largely ignored the problem until abuse of the drug had spread widely in China [Spence 1999, 151–163].

Alarmed by the reverse in silver flow and the epidemic of an estimated 2 million addicted Chinese, the Qing government determined to pressure the Britons to end the opium trade. However, the intransigent British decided to fight the first Opium War to defend their trade interest. The result of the War was the signature of the Treaty of Nanking on August 29, 1842, which stipulated the abolishment of the *Gonghang* in Guangzhou and the opening of four additional ports to foreign trade. Nevertheless, the provisions of the Treaty continued to be ignored and foreigners were still not allowed inside the walls of Guangzhou. Such mutual distrust left the seed of further conflicts between China and Britain [Spence 1999, 163–167].

During the Second Opium War in 1856 between China and Britain/France, and in October of the same year a mob of retaliation pillaged and burned all the foreigner residences in Guangzhou. In 1857, an expedition which had been dispatched from Britain, attacked the city and it was taken on 29th of that month. When the foreign merchants returned to Guangzhou to establish trade after the capture of the city, they found the factories and the buildings in ruins [Virgil Ho 2005, 50].

Considerable discussion subsequently took place as to the selection of another site in Guangzhou for a permanent British settlement and trade, and it was eventually determined that an extensive mud flat known as Shamian meaning “sandy face”, should be filled and appropriated. Between 1859 and 1862 the mud flat was filled in and a granite wall erected to form an island, taking the shape of a half an egg [Garrett 2002, 125].

Finally, the sandbank was to become an artificial island, surrounded by water, and with gates on the bridges to keep the Chinese out. The cost of building the concession was estimated to be between pound 70.000 to 81.250. The British allowed their allies, the French, to have the remaining fifth as reward for their assistance in the recent hostilities, but their representatives did not join the British on Shamian until much later [Garrett 2002, 126].

Shamian measured 2.850 feet (almost 900 meters) long and 950 feet (300 meters) wide, and was separated from the western suburb of Guangzhou by a narrow canal, two bridges linked the island to the city. Although the island was not a fenced-off foreign concession, the foreign residents there consciously turned the island into an “autonomous” area set apart from the rest of Guangzhou [Garrett 2002, 127]. Since then, in the case of British, they demonstrated that it was possible for them to convert this small sandbar into a modern and Europeanized fine place.

The Beauty

When Shamian was woven, the British brought all sorts of Western materials. With these they built homes and offices of such pattern as had not been seen in China before. On the island, the gardens, tennis courts, and broad avenues were covered by palms, creepers, and tropical plants. Shamian housed a number of government offices and one consulate, and was a well-preserved remnant of the nineteenth century foreign presence [Hutcheon 1990, 23].

The concession was laid out amidst abundant shrubs and the roads were shaded with well-grown banyans, in contrast to the city of treeless Guangzhou which

surrounded it. It was so small that even at a leisurely walk one could not occupy more than twenty minutes in encircling it [Elder 1999, 18]. There was only one Central Avenue on the island, and it was a grass park lain between the dwelling houses [Elder 1999, 19]. As Robin Hutcheon comments:

“After a hard day at the office this delightful place offered the residents of Shamian the opportunities to relax and unwind. In the cool of the evening it was much favored by those who enjoyed stroll in the peace and serenity of this well manicured public garden, an oasis of calm in a city often plagued by violence” [Hutcheon 1990, 62].

Like other places under the rule of imperial empires in the world, when Shamian became a European concession, whereupon it was reflected in the opulent European colonial-style architectures, not only for British alone, but a mixture of the styles of different countries.

Beneath the spreading branches of leafy banyan trees could be seen the white walls of the Anglican Christ Church (Church of England) in Shamian, and it was erected on Central Avenue between 1864 and 1865. The Church drawn a full congregation for the Sunday morning services conducted both in Cantonese and in English [Garrett 2002, 127].

Shamian became a comfortable base for all its European inhabitants, with luxurious homes, ample servants and a variety of recreations. There was a communal lawn between the houses, the lawn was kept planted, pruned, and mown by the Shamian Council and was used by all residents. It had swings, seesaws, merry-go-rounds, sliding boards, and sand piles for the children [Hutcheon 1990, 40].

The buildings for the British Consulate were erected in Shamian in 1865 [Garrett 2002, 127–128]. Representatives of other nations were eventually admitted into Shamian and there were ten consulates by 1873 [Garrett 2002, 130].

The business sector in Shamian was also flourishing since the onset of the concession. Major banks gradually opened in imposing classical-style buildings on Central Avenue, first came the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), today a major world-wide institution, first set up a branch in Guangzhou in 1880 [Garrett 2002, 130]. Then the Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China, the Bank of Taiwan, and the National City Bank of New York, those handsome premises were all opened on Central Avenue on 29 October 1921 [Garrett 2002, 131].

The beauty and orderliness of Shamian, due to not only its proliferation of European architecture, but also the public facilities, the nature, and the life. The whole island was like a public garden, shaded by extensive planting of trees and lawns as well as laid out with a cricket pitch, a football field, a bowling green, and eight grass tennis courts [Virgil Ho 2005, 51]. Particularly for the Shamian Lawn Tennis Club opened in August 1877, and it was the pride of the British concession, producing many champions in the Far East, and the envy of foreign residents throughout southern China [Garrett 2002, 132].

The Shamian Hotel, the only one British-built hotel in Guangzhou, opened in May 1888 to accommodate the tourists from all over the world. It was renamed the Victoria Hotel in November 1895 in honour of the reigning British monarch [Garrett 2002, 134].

Valery Garrett once eulogized the idyllic scenes of Shamian in following words:

“The grand British wedding reception appeared to have been an occasion when the whole of Shamian turned out. A group of residents in the English section formed

the Guangzhou Garden Fund in 1864 and organized the planting of several hundred trees, including many varieties of fruit trees, which attracted thousands of singing birds. Broad walks were shaded by banyans, while handsome brick houses and a bicycle track gave Shamian the appearance of an English suburb, and the island won admiration from the general public in Guangzhou. The “Europeanized” ambience was so tranquil and peaceful that all contemporary guidebooks on Guangzhou, both in English and Chinese, strongly recommended to their readers a walk on the island” [Garrett 2002, 128].

The Surroundings

The establishment of Shamian benefited not only its own area, but also its surroundings within the city of Guangzhou. The island of Shamian seemed a wise choice, for it lay close to Shaji Road in Li Wan District of western Guangzhou, where is one of the most bustling areas in the downtown of the city up to present. Many Cantonese merchants lived in Shaji Road and whose business with foreigners was long established. Thanks to the founding of Shamian, since the early 1900s many Western merchants, missionaries, and ministries were always paying a visit as well as doing business in Shaji Road after they had settled down in the concession. In the middle of twentieth century, not only the Westerners, but also the Hong Kong and overseas Chinese all came to the area to make money [Elder 1999, 22].

As the business sector growing, many foreign banks, missionary schools, hotels, and restaurants all flourished overnight in Shaji Road during the first half of the twentieth century. Besides, Shaji Road had turned to be not only a mercantile site, but also an attraction of tourism with its admiring typical Cantonese architectures and local customs [Zhong Junming 1999, 49–56]. It continued to draw travellers around the globe, many foreigners’ diaries and letters extolled its charms and helped to form the Western perception of not only the city, but China as well [Zhong Junming 1999, 56].

The Segregation

Although Shamian was the Eden Garden for the Whites, however, it might be a forbidden zone for the Chinese, as throughout the history of the concession, Chinese were generally excluded except for the servants, some officials, and selected businessmen.

In this semi-banned place to the Chinese, since they were required to produce a permit issued by Shamian Municipal Council to gain entry to the island, and they were forbidden to travel on all parts of Shamian apart from some exceptional conditions. Chinese were consistently prohibited from renting any premises or dwelling there, and the gates to the island were normally not open to Chinese [Virgil Ho 2005, 53]. As Valery Garrett observes:

“Security was tight around the island. Guards stood at the two bridges, preventing Chinese from crossing unless they had a pass. No Chinese were allowed to own property on Shamian nor even to sleep there as guests. They were only allowed to reside on the island as servants, with a ratio of about three servants to every one foreigner” [Garrett 2002, 133].

Those permitted Chinese were mainly the wealthy merchants who were invited by the European officials, and the Chinese who entered the island were only allowed to take the sedan chair, carried by barefoot men and was the only vehicle permitted in Shamian [Virgil Ho 2005, 54]. Gungwu Wang once described:

“No Chinese can put his foot on Shamian except in dispatch of business or as a servant to a Westerner. A Chinese here in either of these capacities cannot sit down to adjust a shoe fastening on one of the comfortable benches under the tree shade on which Westerners enjoy the river breezes” [Gungwu Wang 2003, 17].

Such overcautious policy as put into effect against the native population, later provided a convenient target for accusations by Chinese fanatics against the foreign Shamian inhabitants.

The Incident

The long time British imperialist exploitation and its practice of segregation always lead to the upheavals of Chinese, and Shamian is one of the best examples to illustrate such phenomenon.

On May 30, 1925 (later enshrined in China’s revolutionary history as the “May Thirtieth Incident”), British police in Shanghai shot several Chinese protestors and resulted in killing eleven people and wounding many others. Afterwards Shanghai citizens promptly went on strike, and workers throughout much of south China responded with protests and anti-foreign boycotts, most of them directed at Britain [Hutcheon 1990, 80].

The “May Thirtieth Incident” in Shanghai outraged many Chinese, and it incensed the popular resentment of anti-British feeling throughout south China. There was a more serious massacre happened in Guangzhou a few days later, and its flash point was exactly in the little concession of Shamian [Hutcheon 1990, 81].

On June 20, 1925 many Guangzhou residents were called on, and a parade of Chinese military cadets, university students, and the labours marched along the waterfront facing Shamian on Shaji Road. Lined up on the island opposite were British and French marines. Suddenly troops from the concession forces fired on a crowd of protesters, killing more than fifty of the Chinese demonstrators and leaving many more injured. It was later known as the Shaji Massacre [Garrett 2002, 173].

Shamian was besieged for about sixteen months, after the June 22 the island was entirely deserted by all the residents, and the concession was practically cut off from communication with the city. Three hundred British troops from Hong Kong were quartered on Shamian. With barbed wire, sandbags, fortifications, and big guns, Shamian had all the appearance of being under siege. When it was over, for commemorating the massacre, the Guangzhou authorities erected a monument there and renamed the Shaji Road, where the shooting incident of June 23 in 1925 took place, as “June 23rd Road”, the name which still retains today [Garrett 2002, 135].

On the other hand, the British alleged that it was the Chinese force under the command of Russian officers attacked the concession at first. They insisted that it was the demonstrators who were distributing circulars and leaflets, which later on proved to be inflammatory pamphlets, and calling upon Guangzhou citizens to rise against the foreigners and drive them out of Shamian [Yvan 1997, 53]. As one British official defended in his letter to the Queen in London:

“The first shots were unquestionably fired by the Chinese from the Shaji Road. All the demonstrators were under the leadership of Soviet Russians, and the Bolsheviks had arranged the procession with both civilians and troops in order to create an ‘incident’. The actual facts were that the foreigners on Shamian were not the aggressors, and that the foreign authorities concerned limited their action to what was necessary for the defense of the lives of those on the island. It was clear that the responsibility falls entirely on the Chinese” [Yvan 1997, 109].

Afterwards, the Chinese also claimed that they were innocent and not responsible for the Shamian massacre, as the British acted first and the firing was deliberately started by the troops from the concession. Both sides still argue about the secret story behind Shamian in 1925, and such dispute continues to the present as an unsettled historical case.

Afterwards

Although the Shamian incident was ended in tragedy, however, it became a turning point for Chinese to reclaim the sovereignty of the concession. Immediately after the massacre, the Chinese Republican government summoned the British ambassador in Beijing on July 23, 1925, for discussing the future of Shamian. Once again in early 1927, Chinese representative met the British official in Wuhan to talk about the recovery of this concession [Zhong Junming 1999, 127]. But the Shamian affair could not be settled down at this moment as the Chinese government was afflicted by the Communist menace as well as the Japanese encroachment. In 1943 the Chinese government signed the agreements of resumption with Britain and France in January and February respectively, the fate of Shamian was finally set and it was officially returned to China. At the meantime, the Chinese could not fully control the concession until the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945 [Zhong Junming 1999, 128]. In September 1949, the Chinese government formally established a committee responsible for the reconstruction of Shamian, the intention was to make the concession as a part of the Guangzhou city as well as to let Chinese people reside in it [Zhong Junming 1999, 129].

The Communist victory in 1949 put a stop to that, and a large scale of de-colonization, including the mass destruction of colonial property, took place in this former concession. Since then Shamian was no longer the politically apathetic community as it was in colonial days. Under Mao Zedong era (1949–1976) China was closed to the West for almost thirty years, and Shamian became the best teaching example of anti-imperialism for the Red China.

Only until Deng Xiaoping, who initiated the new national policy of “openness and reform”, took power in 1978, did Shamian begin to change its outlook which resembled more like its pre-1949 face. As Deng favoured the idea of opening Guangdong Province, Guangzhou emerged as one of the most go-ahead cities in China after 1978, and it benefited Shamian to become a special district of foreign consulates in the city. Unlike in the pre-1949 era, Chinese now are welcome to visit the island and share the beauty of life there. In 1982 the five-stars White Swan Hotel, designed and invested by the British, opened in Shamian, and it had received its most honourable guest in 1986 – Queen Elizabeth II, when she was paying her first state visit to China. Since 1996 the island had become a historical and cultural site under national protection [Garrett 2002, 177].

Conclusion

Historically, the legacy of Shamian in modern China is mixed and ambiguous. For the Chinese, the little concession recalled an era of capitulationism and impotence; many labelled it as one of China’s monuments of national humiliation, especially after the outbreak of the Shaji Incident in June 1925, Shamian was increasingly stigmatized by the jingoists as a symbol of foreign imperialism in China [Virgil Ho 2005, 56].

Conversely, for the British the island appeared as “a tranquil scenery place with tidy planning and cleanliness” [Canton Advertising and Commission Agency 1971, 73].

As Virgil Ho points out, what Westerners brought in Shamian were not only all sorts of materials, but also the order, civilization, and Western institution, which contrasted with the chaos and disorder in the city of Guangzhou, therefore, Shamian was seen as a place that inspired not hatred, but rather public appreciation and envy to the Chinese [Virgil Ho 2005, 57]. The analysis of Chris Elder is parallel to that of Ho, as Elder observes that this “bright oasis in the desert of Eastern heathendom and unfriendliness” was an increasingly unacceptable reminder of China’s weakness and vulnerability to outside pressure [Elder 1999, introduction xvii].

Whether you like Shamian or not, the place with only 1.401 inhabitants resided in a city of over a million, had indeed been converted from a worthless small sandy flat into a European-like city, and even transformed into a lovely paradise amid the noisy city of Guangzhou [Garrett 2002, 136]³. Its impact on the regular life of Guangzhou left a mark in the urban history in China, as the concession not only contributed to the modernization of Guangzhou, but also set China on the irreversible course of modernity. Under the rule of both British and French, the former foreign enclave once became a very cosmopolitan place in the backward China. The island had aroused so many romantic memories for the Westerners, and at least it had created a niche in the history of modern China as well as in the history of British Empire.

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³ According to Garret’s statistics in this page of the book, the census of the population of Shamian taken in 1911: there were 323 foreigners, including 165 British, and 1.078 Chinese staff living on the island.