

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Colonial concepts in motion: the Shanghai Bund and its British imperial genealogies

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Abstract

This article traces the origins and evolution of the Shanghai Bund within a comparative framework of transimperial urban forms. Existing scholarship has offered divergent interpretations – imperial metropolitan precedents, cross-colonial transfers and local antecedents – which this article argues are complementary rather than contradictory. It further moves beyond broad regional claims through specifying concrete cases supported by new archival evidence. Drawing on records mainly from the Shanghai Municipal Archives, The National Archives in the UK and contemporary newspapers, the article shows how Singapore's Boat Quay, Calcutta's Strand Road and London's Thames Embankment were selectively appropriated to meet shifting sanitary, political and economic needs. Localized over successive decades, these borrowings crystallized into a Bund form – landscaped, monumental, with a financial core and technologically modern – that became a model for other treaty ports and was reproduced across the imperial world and beyond. The Bund's history is thus a microcosm of the circulation and remaking of ideas within the wider networks of the British Empire.

Introduction

When prompted to name the world's most famous thoroughfares in the early twentieth century, certain waterfront roads came to the forefront of people's minds. As the British travel writer Philip Kerby observed:

Fifth Avenue, the Strand, Unter den Linden, the Rue de la Paix and the Bund – five great thoroughfares of the world, each with an elusive individuality which unites with the others to form an imaginary barrier to that mystic hinterland – Romance...¹

Among these, the Shanghai Bund was distinctive. Unlike the other four, which were products of local urban development, it arose from a colonial context. From the late

¹P. Kerby, *Beyond the Bund* (New York, 1927), 11.

nineteenth century, the Bund was not only a broad riverside promenade lined with imposing buildings, but also a symbol of imperial order and modernity, combining functional, aesthetic and political value. More importantly, the Bund provided a transferable model of waterfront planning: with the influx of indemnities and colonial capital, it was soon emulated in other Chinese treaty ports, and in Korea and Japan, reshaping their waterfronts as focal points of urban modernity.

Despite this celebrated position in global narratives, the Bund's intellectual and spatial origins remain underexplored, with few studies offering dedicated or detailed examination. Existing scholarship on the Bund's origins offers divergent perspectives, falling into three main positions: imperial metropolitan origins, cross-colonial transfer and local precedents. Some Asian scholars, such as Chen and Qian, argue that, in a broad sense, the spatial form of the Bund came directly from the Western world, as bunds were very similar to the waterfronts of many European port cities.² Home, by contrast, has stressed that colonial spaces in East Asian port cities were not simply replicas of Europe. While many construction and management practices were influenced by Western approaches, the extreme profit-driven motives of British businessmen often led to a more chaotic and disorderly spatial form in these cities.³ Other scholars, such as Lentzner and Rao, have traced the Bund's origins to South Asia, arguing that both its spatial form and its very name were imported from that region.⁴ These interpretations contrast with Muramatsu's assertion that Singapore served as the model for colonial Hong Kong and East Asian treaty ports, pointing out the striking similarities in the waterfront landscapes of Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai.⁵ By contrast, Yu has proposed that the urban form of bunds, in terms of their composition and function, was not entirely novel for Chinese ports.⁶ This historiographical tension underscores the complexity of the Bund's genesis as well as the absence of a coherent genealogy that incorporates its successive stages of development.

This article argues that these interpretations are not contradictory but complementary, collectively providing a multilayered framework that captures the successive stages through which the Bund was shaped. Rather than being the outcome of a singular act of construction, the Bund emerged through successive processes of appropriation. Over several decades, as governors and designers changed, and under shifting sanitary, political and economic pressures, different imperial precedents were selectively drawn upon to address immediate needs. Within successive new urban contexts, the Bund was reshaped and reconstructed, eventually crystallizing in the 1870s into a new colonial prototype. This process reflected the broader circulation of ideas within imperial networks. In this context, Shanghai's Bund operated as a

²G. Chen, N. Aoki and S. Xu, 'The beginning of East Asian modern cities: comparative study on colonial planning and management of British concessions and settlements', *The Architect*, 3 (2019), 51–69; Z. Qian, *Bainian Huiwang: Shanghai Waitan Jianzhu Yu Jingguan De Lishi Bianqian* [A Century in Retrospect: The Historical Changes of the Architecture and Landscape of the Shanghai Bund] (Shanghai, 2005).

³R. Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities* (New York, 2013), 64–91.

⁴K. Lentzner, *Colonial English: A Glossary of Australian, Anglo-Indian, Pidgin English, West Indian, and South African Words* (London, 1891), 61; Y. Rao, 'Anticipating a unique Chinese cosmopolitan space: Shanghai urbanism re-presented', Sydney University Ph.D. thesis, 2000.

⁵S. Muramatsu and M. Bao, *Two Hundred Years of East Asian Architecture World* (Beijing, 2002), 245.

⁶C. Yu, 'The making of a Bund in China: the British concession in Xiamen (1852–1930)', *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*, 7 (2008), 31–8.

critical node: it absorbed, fused and reshaped existing colonial models, and in turn generated a new spatial template that was subsequently appropriated, adapted and reinterpreted by other colonial ports. Moreover, while three genealogies have been noted, the existing discussions usually remain at a broad level, often framed in terms of such general categories as 'East Asia', the 'Western world' or 'China'. This article addresses that gap by grounding these genealogies in primary archival materials, which make it possible to move from general claims to specific cases. For example, the South Asian strand can be concretely tied to Calcutta's Strand Road, while the metropolitan precedent is clarified through reference to the Thames Embankment. In this way, their connections are rendered more precise and substantiated.

The analysis relies mainly on archival materials from the Shanghai Municipal Archives and The National Archives in the UK, notably the Committee on Roads and Jetties (CRJ) (1849–53), the Shanghai Municipal Council's records (1854–80) and Foreign Office correspondence, as well as reports in the *North China Herald* and other contemporary publications. Using these sources, this article traces the Bund's historical trajectory as an urban form, investigating how, in different periods, it absorbed and adapted external models such as the Singapore Boat Quay, the sanitary logic of the Strand Road and the comprehensive approach of the Thames Embankment, and how these borrowings were translated into symbolic meanings shaped by the local colonial setting.

The origins of the term 'bund'

The term 'bund' is derived from the Persian word '*bunder*',⁷ which refers to a 'landing-place or quay, a seaport, a harbour' and was commonly applied to many ports along the west coast of India.⁸ In East Asia, it came to be regarded as an integral feature of British settlements, denoting not only an embanked riverfront but also a broader urban form encompassing its immediate surroundings.⁹

This article argues that the Shanghai Bund did not arrive directly from India but was transmitted via Guangzhou. The early periodical *The Totem* (later reprinted in *Streets of Shanghai*) reported that the term 'bund' was widely believed to have been introduced by the British East India Company in the 1840s.¹⁰ Although the Company's monopoly in China ended in 1834, the term's persistence reflects the continued legacy of its institutional and linguistic practices within the merchant communities of the treaty ports. Indeed, between the late eighteenth century and the 1830s, the Company's presence in Guangzhou reached its zenith. Parsi merchants, long-standing partners of British traders, were also active there.¹¹

⁷Y. Cai, *Editorial Board of Shanghai Title Deed (1847–1911)* (Shanghai, 2005).

⁸G.S. Rao, *Indian Words in English: A Study in Indo-British Cultural and Linguistic Relations* (Oxford, 1954), 108.

⁹J.E. Taylor, 'The Bund: littoral space of empire in the treaty ports of East Asia', *Social History*, 27 (2002), 125–42; C. Pallini and D. Bona, 'Chinese treaty ports and the Bund: a case of global colonial heritage?', in *Changing Cities II*, second international conference on Spatial, Design, Landscape & Socio-economic Dimensions, held in Porto Heli, June 2015.

¹⁰A.H. Gordon, *Streets of Shanghai: A History in Itself* (Shanghai, 1941), 8.

¹¹At a gathering held to celebrate the King's birthday in 1834, Lord William Napier, the first superintendent of trade, praised the Parsees as 'a most industrious, enterprising, and valuable class of British subjects', and 'their distinctive position made them particularly deserving of the benevolence of the British public'. See 'His Majesty birthday', *Canton Register* (CR), 2 Sep. 1834, 138.

It was through their practices that 'bund' most likely became part of a shared vocabulary among commercial elites across regions. After the Company's dissolution in 1834, many of its employees and collaborators who had joined smaller free-trade firms retained their linguistic habits. This trajectory also corroborates Taylor's observation that, outside the Indian ports, the term 'bund' was almost certainly first used in Guangzhou, then a key site of British trade and spatial experimentation in China.¹²

When Shanghai opened as a treaty port in 1843, these Guangzhou-based merchants naturally brought the term 'bund' with them. To facilitate commercial activity, the low and muddy banks of the Huangpu River required the immediate construction of embankments and the stabilization of quays. According to the Shanghai Land Regulations jointly signed by Shanghai Daotai Gong Mujiu and the first British consul, George Balfour, responsibility for roads, drains and jetties within the Concession rested not with official authorities but with the individual land renters themselves.¹³

Among these early waterfront leaseholders, the firms most likely to have introduced the term 'bund' to Shanghai were the three established opium houses: Jardine, Matheson & Co., Gibb, Livingston & Co. and Dent, Beale & Co. A map from 1847 shows that by that time five companies had completed the construction of the Bund (Figure 1), among which these three stood out for their close ties to the East India Company. Having accumulated capital in Guangzhou through the opium trade, their founders and partners were often drawn from the Company's networks.¹⁴ By contrast, the remaining two firms – Blenkin, Rawson & Co. and Holiday, Wise & Co. – were relatively small in scale and maintained only limited ties with India, either in trade or personnel, making them unlikely candidates for introducing the term into Shanghai.

Even more directly, title deeds from 1847 (Nos. 41, 114, 141, 201) show that Parsis, including members of the Rastamji and Buijorjee families, were already active in Shanghai as managers at Jardine, Gibb and Dent.¹⁵ Their presence provides concrete evidence that the term 'bund' was not only transmitted through the institutional and commercial legacies of the East India Company but was actively carried into the Shanghai Concession and embedded in its early practice.

In sum, the Shanghai Bund was not the product of a direct transfer from India but of transmission, localization and gradual institutionalization through the commercial networks linking India, Guangzhou and Shanghai. This conclusion supports the 'South Asian origins' thesis emphasized by Lentzner and Rao: both the term and its early practices carried the imprint of South Asian colonial port culture.¹⁶ Yet the importation of the name was only the beginning. The more critical issue was how the Bund would be spatially constructed in Shanghai – a question to which the following discussion now turns.

¹²Taylor, 'The Bund', 129.

¹³W.A. Medhurst and Shanghai Consulate, 'Shanghai Land Regulations', *The North China Herald* (NCH), 17 Jan. 1852, 99.

¹⁴J.M. Braga, *Hong Kong Business Symposium: A Compilation of Authoritative Views on the Administration, Commerce, and Resources of Britain's Far Eastern Outpost* (Hong Kong, 1957), 431; M. Holdsworth and C. Munn, *Dictionary of Hong Kong Biography* (Hong Kong, 2012), 208; Alain Le Pichon, *China Trade and Empire: Jardine, Matheson & Co. and the Origins of British Rule in Hong Kong, 1827–1843* (Oxford, 2006).

¹⁵Y. Cai, *Editorial Board of Shanghai Title Deed (1847–1911)* (Shanghai, 2005), 68, 161, 194, 249.

¹⁶Lentzner, *Colonial English*; Rao, 'Anticipating a unique Chinese cosmopolitan space'.

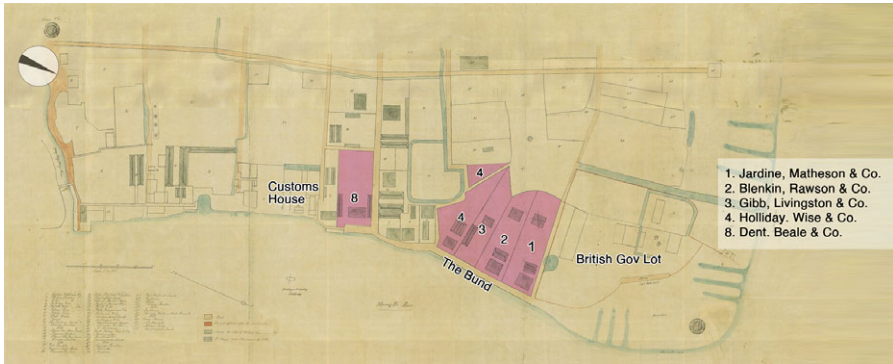


Figure 1. Map of Shanghai British Concession in 1847. It indicates the adjoining land renters involved in the construction of the Bund. Source: <https://www.virtualshanghai.net/Maps/Collection?ID=750> accessed 12 Nov. 2022.

The Singapore model and early local adaptations (1842–46)

At the same time as the term ‘bund’ began to circulate in the Shanghai settlement, its spatial form was being shaped during Balfour’s tenure. A key feature of this formative stage was that the Bund emerged out of the intersection between local embankment traditions and early colonial experience. At the outset, the waterfront itself received little attention. Balfour’s responsibilities centred on negotiating with the Daotai and demarcating the boundaries of the Concession, while his deputy, Daniel Robertson, undertook the practical tasks of surveying the land, drafting the plan, laying out the roads and fixing lot boundaries.¹⁷ Although the Bund road was included as part of the official plan, there was neither a unified construction authority nor any effective supervision of the works carried out by the merchants. Indeed, the very retention of the riverside path was in part a concession to local Chinese interests. The Regulations stipulated that the existing towpath (the site on which the Bund later developed) should be preserved at a width of 30 feet, following Guangzhou Customs standards, to ensure the passage of Chinese grain junks and to prevent erosion of the riverbank.¹⁸ This demonstrates that in its earliest form, the Bund continued the existing functions of a Chinese towpath and embankment. In this respect, it supports Yu’s ‘local precedent’ perspective: the Bund was not an entirely new creation but rather an adaptation and reworking of pre-existing spatial resources.¹⁹

In defining the settlement boundary through negotiation with the Daotai, Balfour accepted that the Bund and the foreshore lay outside the Concession.²⁰ This meant that the Bund remained under Chinese jurisdiction, while foreign renters held only usage rights. Consequently, although required to reserve the towpath and build embankments, the landholders had little incentive to invest. By the time of Balfour’s

¹⁷Shanghai Municipal Archive (SMA), U01-001-01250, A. M. Kotenev, *Riparian Rights, 1845–1930: General* (Shanghai, 1930), 31–3; quoting Medhurst to Secretary, Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC), 17 Mar. 1885.

¹⁸Medhurst and Shanghai Consulate, ‘Shanghai Land Regulations’, 99.

¹⁹Yu, ‘The making of a Bund in China’, 31–8.

²⁰SMA, Y007-001-00003, Affairs of the Shanghai Settlement, 1843–1860.

departure in 1846, the towpath had yet to be properly surfaced, and the Bund remained little more than a muddy track, navigable only in boots on rainy days.²¹

In this sense, the early Bund resembled a waterfront trade space reserved by the authorities but actually shaped through spontaneous clustering and construction by merchants. The parallel with Singapore's Boat Quay in the early nineteenth century is notable. In the famous 'Raffles Town Plan' of 1822, the south bank of the Singapore River was designated for commercial activity, yet private merchants mostly undertook the actual reclamation, embankment and paving. The result was a waterfront characterized by narrow pathways pressed against warehouses, directly servicing the loading and unloading of cargo. Under laissez-faire principles and the absence of centralized governance, commercial imperatives took precedence over public infrastructure. Balfour similarly envisaged Shanghai as a trade-oriented port, open to foreign commerce.²² After the East India Company's monopoly ended in 1834, Balfour's conception aligned with Britain's broader commitment to free trade in China, which aimed to expand treaty ports and open markets.²³ As Muramatsu has argued, Singapore provided a paradigmatic reference for subsequent East Asian treaty ports.²⁴ This influence is underscored by Balfour's career trajectory: his postings in Malacca, Penang and Singapore left him deeply familiar with such port typologies, experiences that in turn informed his practice in Shanghai.

Overall, between 1843 and 1846 the Bund was far from a grand boulevard. It was instead a hybrid product, situated between a Chinese towpath and a colonial waterfront. Its limitations were evident: lacking public works or municipal organization, it was little more than a 'retained' riverside strip. Yet this very ambiguity, as an incomplete form shaped by both local precedent and colonial laissez-faire, ensured that when subsequent consuls and shifting governance logics arrived, the Bund became a site open to redefinition.

The strand model and local institutionalization (1846–64)

Alcock's turn to public health (1846–53)

The arrival of Rutherford Alcock in 1846 marked a decisive shift in the logic of urban governance. For the first time, the Bund was invested with the meaning of a 'health boulevard', with hygiene and public order placed at the centre of municipal concern. This change reflected not only Alcock's personal background but also Shanghai's growing absorption of the strand model within a cross-colonial context.

Trained as an army surgeon, Alcock was acutely sensitive to issues of climate, ventilation and health, and had already published several influential studies on these subjects.²⁵ Years later, in his address to the Sanitary Science Congress, he would systematically argue for the incorporation of public health into governance

²¹G. Lanning and S. Couling, *The History of Shanghai* (Shanghai, 1921), 282.

²²G. Balfour, 'Shanghai opened to foreign trade in 1842', in M. Hall (ed.), *The Chinese and Japanese Repository of Facts and Events in Science, History, and Art, Relating to Eastern Asia*, vol. 3 (Nendeln, 1843), 32.

²³'His Majesty birthday', *CR*, 2 Sep. 1834, 138–9.

²⁴Muramatsu and Bao, *Two Hundred Years of East Asian Architecture World*, 245.

²⁵R. Alcock, *Notes on the Medical History and Statistics of the British Legion of Spain* (London, 1838); R. Alcock, *Observations on Injuries of Joints, and Their Treatment* (London, 1840); R. Alcock, 'Lectures on amputation and on the nature, progress, and terminations of the injuries for which it is required', *The Lancet*, 35 (1840), 705–13.

agendas.²⁶ In Shanghai, he had already put this conviction into practice. Soon after his arrival, he complained to Sir John Francis Davis that the Concession was 'low-lying, with stagnant water and damp air', posing serious risks to the health of merchants.²⁷ To address these problems, he established the CRJ, which initiated a programme of municipal improvements aimed at raising ground levels, straightening roads and constructing drains.²⁸ To this end, Joseph Gibbs, an engineer with prior experience in drainage works in London and on the Continent,²⁹ was invited to prepare a drainage plan for the settlement.³⁰

Within this programme, the improvement of the Bund was prioritized. Alcock's correspondence with the CRJ in 1850 shows that the proposed standards for the Bund far exceeded those applied elsewhere: levelling and raising the carriageway, surfacing it with shell sand, constructing stone embankments and fences, installing drains, laying turf and protective vegetation on the front beach and building a riverside pathway.³¹ Although most of these plans were abandoned due to cost and mercantile opposition, road resurfacing was carried out, and the Bund emerged as the cleanest and best-maintained street in the Concession (Figure 2).³²

Alcock sought to construct the Bund as a 'health belt' for foreign residents, portraying the breezes of the Huangpu as a safeguard against disease. This reasoning was consistent with broader colonial practice: it was commonly believed that higher ground was healthier, while low-lying and humid areas were saturated with miasma and thus their residents were prone to illness.³³ Yet in pursuit of commercial interests, the British continued to select estuaries and low-lying harbours as trading sites despite their sanitary risks.³⁴ Within such environments, waterfronts, by virtue of their openness and river breezes, were regarded as relatively healthy zones and were endowed with both symbolic and functional significance in governance. This sanitary logic directly underpinned Alcock's proposal to relocate the Consulate and Customs House to the Bund.³⁵ The original Consulate, where Balfour had resided in the Shanghai Old City, was regarded by these newcomers as a place of intolerable stench, heightening Alcock's concerns about potential health risks.³⁶ These anxieties were reinforced in the summer of 1848, when a severe wave of sickness swept through the community.³⁷ In a letter to Sir George Bonham, Alcock confessed that 'the detriment

²⁶R. Alcock, 'An address on health', *British Medical Journal*, 2 (1882), 605–7.

²⁷The National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 228/63, letter from Alcock to Davis, 7 Dec. 1846.

²⁸SMA, U00-001-01291, Minutes of the Committee on Roads and Jetties in Shanghai British Settlement, 21 Jun. 1852.

²⁹For Gibbs' earlier experience in London drainage works, see Parliamentary Papers (PP), vol. 26, Q. 1646, 1852–53, 165.

³⁰SMA, U00-001-01291, Minutes, 30 Jun. 1853.

³¹TNA, FO 671/2, letter from Alcock to CRJ, 1 May 1850.

³²SMA, U00-001-01291, Minutes, 22 Aug. 1850.

³³*The British and Foreign Medico-Chirurgical Review; or Quarterly Journal of Practical Medicine and Surgery*, vol. 33 (London, 1864), 127.

³⁴J.R. Martin, 'A brief topographical and historical notice of Calcutta: with a sketch of the rise and progress of sanitary improvement in the East Indies', *The Lancet*, 50 (1847), 330.

³⁵TNA, FO 228/104, on the subject of Sugar Duties, 15 Sep. 1849; TNA, FO 228/161, Alcock to Bonham, 9 Jun. 1853.

³⁶Committee on Roads and Jetties (CRJ), *Fourth Report of the Chinese Hospital at Shanghai for the Year Ending December 31st, 1850*, vol. 20 (Shanghai, 1851), 152–60.

³⁷TNA, FO 228/89, letter from Alcock to Bonham, 10 Mar. 1848, 81.

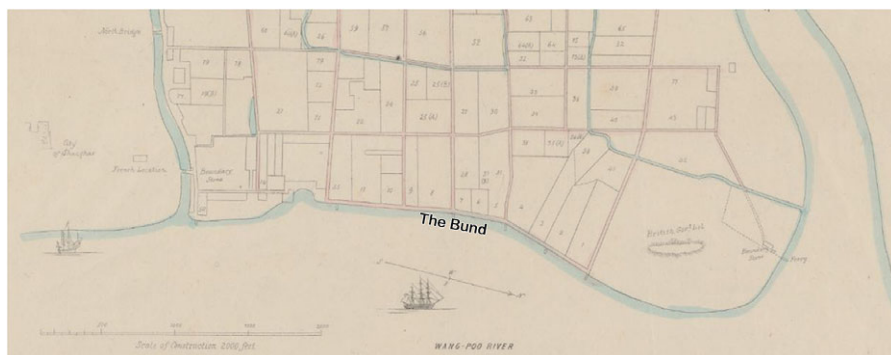


Figure 2. Map of the Shanghai British Concession in 1849 (detail). Source: <https://www.virtualshanghai.net/Maps/Source?ID=1851> accessed 5 Sep. 2025.

to health during the summer heat which I felt last year in a degree to cause me some anxiety for the result of another season under similar circumstances'.³⁸ Despite initial resistance from Davis and the Foreign Office, Alcock persuaded them to approve the move, and by late 1849 the Consulate was transferred to the Bund.³⁹ Soon afterwards, he opened the consular riverside land for public use, marking the Bund's first official recognition as a shared civic space.⁴⁰ In 1853, the CRJ even proposed to extend the walkway and plant trees at the low water mark, turning the Bund into a shaded promenade for leisure and respite.⁴¹ Even though the cost was modest, the proposal still met with opposition from the riverside landholders, as it entailed further encroachment upon their plots. Nevertheless, by the late 1850s the Bund had become a popular place where foreign residents enjoyed evening rides and walks.⁴²

Alcock's approach to remaking the Bund was intimately connected to the colonial port model of the Strand Road. In an 1849 letter to the CRJ he wrote: 'It appears, furnishes another instance of the view that an improvement in ventilation and drainage may perhaps be the true key to the question; and in this respect our predecessors have had abundant experience, the efficacy of which has been attested in India.'⁴³ This indicates that Alcock was consciously drawing on the sanitary practices of colonial ports in India. Since Bombay and Madras had not yet developed waterfront works of comparable scale at that time, Calcutta's reclamation and widening projects were probably the most immediate reference.⁴⁴ Expanded dramatically during the

³⁸TNA, FO 228/104, letter from Alcock to Bonham, 25 Apr. 1849, 39.

³⁹TNA, FO 228/63, letter from Davis to Alcock, 21 Sep. 1846.

⁴⁰TNA, FO 671/1, letter from CRJ to Alcock, 29 Nov. 1851.

⁴¹'The Bund embankment requires some considerable repairs along the road-side', *NCH*, 8 Jan. 1853, 90.

⁴²SMA, Y015-00017-0047, life in Shanghai's foreign community, 1859, 20–1.

⁴³TNA, FO 671/2, letter from Alcock to CRJ, 13 Mar. 1849.

⁴⁴Another piece of indirect evidence can be traced to an 1847 article in *The Lancet*, which offered a detailed account of Calcutta's sanitary campaign and its associated improvements; see Martin, 'A brief topographical and historical notice of Calcutta'. The timing was significant: the article appeared just as Alcock took up his post in China. Given his professional background as a contributor to *The Lancet*, and his established engagement with medical debates, it is highly probable that he would have followed this discussion on sanitary reform. After his arrival in Shanghai, he continued to consult the latest publications through the public subscription library, a recognized conduit for foreign residents to access new books and periodicals by mail.

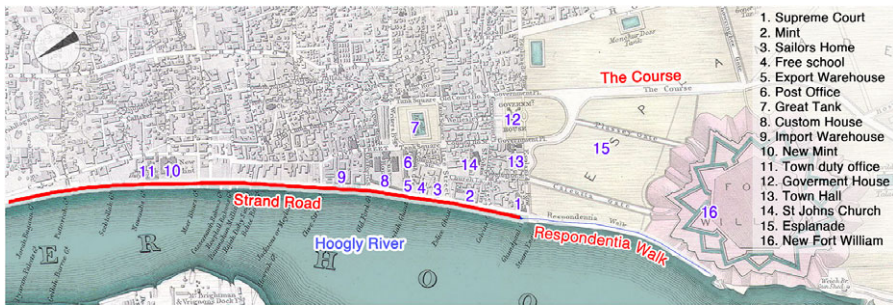


Figure 3. Strand Road and its main power entities in Calcutta during the 1820s (detail). The main functions have been marked by the author. Source: The background map is the 'Map of the City and Environs of Calcutta in 1842', https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1842_S.D.U.K._Map_of_the_City_of_Calcutta,_India_Geographicus_-_Calcutta-sduk-1842.jpg / accessed 12 Nov. 2022.

sanitary campaigns of the 1820s, Calcutta's Strand Road improved ventilation and traffic circulation while also raising land values, rapidly becoming the core of colonial administration and commerce (Figure 3).⁴⁵ Its southern extension, Respondentia Walk, was lined with trees, forming a riverside promenade that combined hygiene with recreation.⁴⁶ Beyond its sanitary role, Strand Road also carried symbolic significance. It borrowed its name and imagery from London's Strand, which by the mid-nineteenth century had become a bustling axis of offices, shops and theatres, celebrated as giving strangers 'an imposing idea of the wealth of London'.⁴⁷ In this colonial context, Strand Road became an emblem of order and prosperity. Soon, Calcutta's Strand Road superseded the Course, which had previously attracted 'the best companies', and emerged as the new focus of elite sociability in Calcutta.⁴⁸ Later scholarship has reinforced this view. As Bach has argued, Strand Road was effectively Calcutta's first official waterfront, embodying the nexus of commerce, the river and urban governance.⁴⁹ As a port paradigm combining sanitary reform with civic display, the strand model soon spread to other colonial contexts.⁵⁰

For Shanghai, the most relevant precedents were Guangzhou and Hong Kong. In the 1830s, Respondentia Walk had already become part of daily life in Guangzhou's factory district under the East India Company, embedding the idea of a waterfront promenade linked with health and sociability (Figure 4). In Hong Kong, a Strand Road was constructed through land reclamation as early as 1842, which combined shipping facilities with recreational functions. An 1850s painting shows a woman strolling along the Strand with her dog, enjoying the breeze and open views (Figure 5). During the reclamations of the late 1850s and 1860s it was expanded into the Praya, a colonial Chinese waterfront space that was widely perceived as bearing a strong resemblance to the Bund, and which, by the late nineteenth century, had

⁴⁵H.E.A. Cotton, *Calcutta, Old and New: A Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (Calcutta, 1907), 321.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 168.

⁴⁷K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London, 2004 [1867]), 460.

⁴⁸'Sketches of India – Calcutta', *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, Feb. 1832–Dec. 1853, 27 Aug. 1836, 242.

⁴⁹B.P. Bach, *Calcutta's Edifice: The Buildings of a Great City* (London, 2006).

⁵⁰Such as Burma's Moulmein, Yangon and Prome (now Pyay), South Africa's Cape Town and Australia's Townsville.

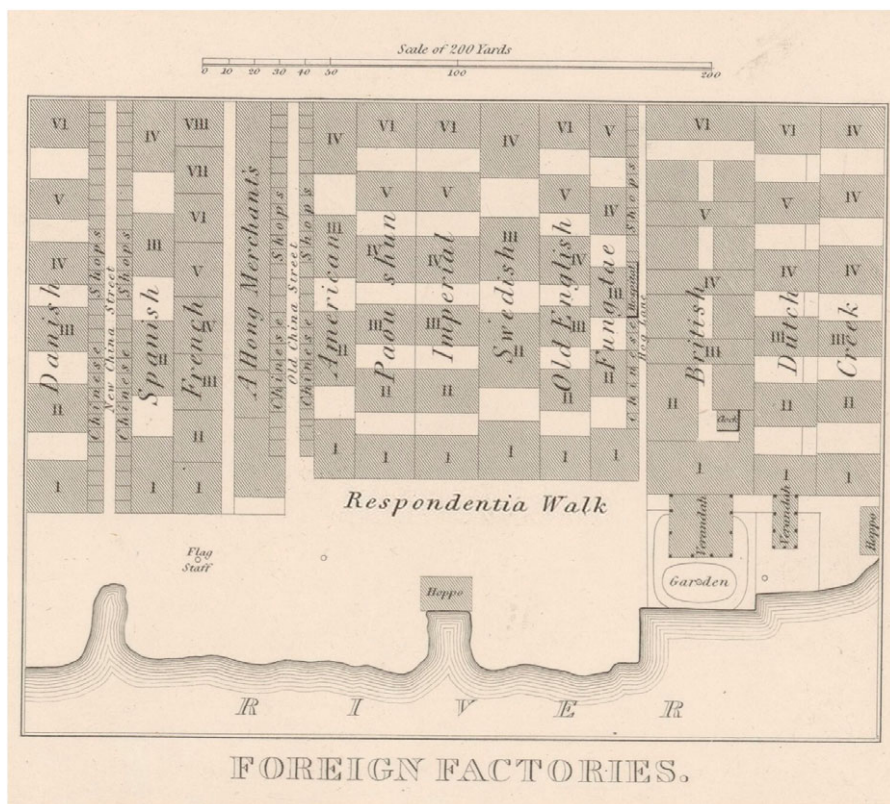


Figure 4. Map of the Thirteen Factories in 1840, Guangzhou. It shows the Respondentia Walk built along the river. Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

evolved into the principal hub of commerce, finance and sociability.⁵¹ Thus, when Shanghai municipal records in 1859 recorded the proposal to ‘widen that Strand not less than 20 nor more than 30 feet’,⁵² the use of this terminology shows that the Bund had already been inscribed within a discursive framework of the ‘strand’.

In this phase, the Bund’s development confirmed what Lentzner and Rao have identified as its ‘South Asian genealogy’.⁵³ Yet by the early 1850s in Shanghai, its adoption was only partial: the Regulations capped road widths at 30 feet, financial constraints curtailed public works and mercantile opposition left most of Alcock’s sanitary vision unrealized. Some land renters even dug their own drains, producing foul ditches that encroached on public roads.⁵⁴ As a result, Shanghai’s Bund still lagged far behind the scale and refinement of Calcutta, or even Hong Kong (Figure 6). This persistent gap between ambition and reality, however, laid the groundwork for a

⁵¹ A.L. Pichon, ‘In the Heart of Victoria: The Emergence of Hong Kong’s Statue Square as a Symbol of Victorian Achievement’, *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, 7 (2009), 605–25.

⁵² SMA, ‘The year 1859’, NCH, 7 Jan. 1860, 7.

⁵³ Lentzner, *Colonial English*; Rao, ‘Anticipating a unique Chinese cosmopolitan space’.

⁵⁴ SMA, U00-001-01291, Minutes, 28 Aug. 1851, 18 May 1852.



Figure 5. The view of Strand Road in the 1850s, Hong Kong. Source: N. Cameron, *An Illustrated History of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 1991), 231.



Figure 6. The view of the Bund in 1854. This painting shows that the Bund road itself had already been widened and straightened compared to 1849, though it was still supported by wooden piles rather than stone embankments. Comprador-style buildings along the Bund remained low and lacked aesthetic appeal. Source: Virtual Shanghai, <https://www.virtualshanghai.net/Photos/Images?ID=17614> accessed 12 Nov. 2022.

more thorough implementation of the strand model after 1854, when rising population pressures and institutional reforms propelled the Bund into a new phase of development.

The publicization and landscaping of the Bund (1854–64)

During the 1850s, internal conflicts like the Small Sword Society uprising and the Taiping Rebellion caused a large influx of Chinese refugees into the concessions. Rapid population growth, rising land values and environmental deterioration pushed the Bund's governance into a new phase. Western merchants soon realized 'there was more money in their own inconspicuous mud than in the whole sea-going trade of this commercial emporium'.⁵⁵

This new situation created the conditions for Alcock to advance projects that gave the Bund a more visible image. With real estate emerging as a major industry, the British Settlement gradually shifted from a trading outpost to a place of permanent residence.⁵⁶ The Public Meeting of 1854 made this shift explicit: renters expressed their intention to reside long-term in Shanghai and called on the British authorities to plan in advance for the housing shortage expected within a decade.⁵⁷ In this context, Alcock and his successors attempted to portray the Concession as a 'cosmopolite settlement and municipality' rather than just a trading port.⁵⁸ In 1854, Alcock promoted the establishment of the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC), which replaced the temporary CRJ and took charge of military defence, sanitation, finance and construction.⁵⁹ Its first plans were highly ambitious: the inaugural Council proposed a budget of 25,000 taels, provoking shock and opposition among land renters but demonstrating unprecedented municipal aspirations.⁶⁰ At the same time, the revision of the Regulations marked a critical institutional shift. The new Regulations permitted Chinese tenancy, clarified municipal authority over public works and established new standards for road width and embankment construction.⁶¹ These changes provided the legal framework for the Municipal Council's subsequent interventions in the Bund, particularly in the widening of roads and the creation of a promenade, even as conflicts with land renters continued to constrain their implementation.

The Bund's transformation and governance were also challenged by practical sanitary factors. The influx of refugees triggered a severe sanitary crisis: makeshift shelters crowded the Settlement, refuse accumulated, sewage was discharged directly into drains and traffic was obstructed. British physician John Ivor Murray had once judged the early Settlement to be reasonably healthy due to the low population density, but after 1853 the situation deteriorated rapidly.⁶² Alcock had initially hoped to mitigate miasma and contagion through spatial segregation between Chinese and foreign residents, but the clustering of Chinese within the Settlement undermined this plan.⁶³ The Bund quickly degenerated from 'the healthiest quarter' into a major

⁵⁵E.O. Hauser, *Shanghai: City for Sale* (New York, 1940), 53.

⁵⁶R. Feetham and Chinese Studies and Translation Office, *Report of Judge Richard Feetham on the Situation of Shanghai Public Concession* (Shanghai, 1931).

⁵⁷'Minutes of a public meeting of foreign renters of land, held at Her Britannic Majesty's Consulate', *NCH*, 22 Jul. 1854, 202.

⁵⁸W.R. Carles, *Some Pages in the History of Shanghai, 1842–1856* (London, 1916), 7.

⁵⁹'Public meeting at H. B. M.'s Consulate', *NCH*, 11 Jul. 1854, 198.

⁶⁰'The Bund of yesteryear', *Shanghai Sunday Times*, 9 Aug. 1925, 4.

⁶¹'Notification', *NCH*, 8 Jul. 1854, 154; 'Land Regulations', *NCH*, 8 Jul. 1854, 195.

⁶²'Minute of proceeding at a special public meeting of land-holders', *NCH*, 10 Jul. 1852, 198.

⁶³R. Alcock, *The Capital of the Tycoon: A Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Japan*, vol. 2 (New York, 1868), 58.

source of filth. Large numbers of Chinese, lacking shelter, crowded the riverfront, obstructing traffic and dumping refuse directly onto the foreshore, further worsening conditions.⁶⁴

Against this backdrop, the implementation of the strand model continued, particularly in the conscious widening of roads to relieve congestion, increase ventilation and reduce the spread of disease. At the Public Meeting of Foreign Renters held only a week after the SMC's creation, a proposal was tabled to widen the Bund to 50 feet.⁶⁵ The proposal was unanimously passed and subsequently implemented. This success prompted further ambitions, with a new proposal calling for reclamation to expand the total width to 80 feet, again justified in the classic sanitary logic of improved air circulation and the reduction of noxious odours and disease:

The admission of Chinese residents into our Settlement, although attended with pecuniary advantages to many, is in other respects an annoyance to almost every member of our community... During the present season the smells are most offensive both in the back streets and on the Bund, and before the approach of hot weather, unless some steps be taken to prevent rubbish, &c., from being thrown over the Bund, that hitherto most agreeable promenade will be positively unbearable, and we shall hear of sickness prevailing in that locality which has hitherto been considered the most healthy part of our Settlement.⁶⁶

The widening plan soon met opposition. Expansion would have consumed substantial riverside frontage, and some waterfront tenants, notably Ross & Company, vehemently objected. In the end, a compromise was reached: only a 60-foot granite roadway was built.⁶⁷ This solution, however, failed to resolve the Bund's sanitary crisis. At low tide, the muddy foreshore extended outward with layers of silt, further exacerbated by 'coolies' who continued to dump the Settlement's refuse directly on the riverbank.⁶⁸ In June, foreign residents were still complaining that 'the odour is unbearable'.⁶⁹ Worse still, the Bund foreshore became a place where the bodies of suicides and drunkards accumulated and decomposed.⁷⁰

Despite persistent problems, from the mid-1850s the Bund began to be recast as a civic and landscaped space, intended not only to tackle the sanitary crisis but also to symbolize municipal order and colonial authority. In 1859, Consul Robertson once again proposed widening the Bund by no less than 39 feet, stressing that it was 'a Mall useful and ornamental to our "Model Settlement"'.⁷¹ He even described it as 'perhaps the last act of that career, the successful endeavour to obtain one of the greatest improvements to a place in which he took so deep an interest'.⁷² This vision directly echoed Alcock's unrealized plan of 1853. Yet it faced renewed opposition from tenants, and the final outcome was a compromise: the Bund was extended to 80 feet,

⁶⁴TNA, FO 671/6, minutes of a public meeting of foreign renters of land, 11 Jul. 1854.

⁶⁵'Minutes of a public meeting of foreign renters of land', *NCH*, 22 Jul. 1854, 202.

⁶⁶'The admission of Chinese residents into our settlement', *NCH*, 24 May 1856, 170.

⁶⁷Evidence can be found in the minutes of municipal meetings held on 31 Mar., 12 Apr., 13–14 May, 19 May, 25 May, 28 Jun. and 10 Sep. 1856. See SMA, *The Minutes*, vol. 1, 58, 84, 86, 89–91.

⁶⁸*NCH*, 26 Jul. 1856, 206.

⁶⁹*NCH*, 14 Jun. 1856, 182.

⁷⁰*NCH*, 26 Jul. 1856, 206.

⁷¹'The extension of the Bund', *NCH*, 25 Jun. 1859, 187.

⁷²*Ibid.*

but instead of a Mall, the SMC announced only the division of the Bund into separate lanes for horses, carriages and Chinese 'coolies', with a few trees planted to provide shade along the riverside.⁷³

Yet the strand model of 'widening and greening' proved inadequate to tackle the underlying problems. Siltation caused by the tides still blocked waterways, damaged the Bund's character and threatened public health. Solid jetties further trapped refuse, emitting foul odours as the sun beat down on damp and rotting materials in summer.⁷⁴ The direct discharge of sewage into the riverbank posed another persistent problem. One satirical piece signed by 'Old Drains' even personified the ageing sewer system, accusing it of retaliating against the inhabitants with both visible and invisible noisome distillations.⁷⁵

Overall, the governance of the Settlement and the Bund had entered a more institutionalized phase. Guided by the strand model, the Bund was shaped by a dual orientation towards health and landscape: widening streets and improving ventilation, on the one hand, and, on the other, employing promenades as landscaped instruments to project civic order and colonial imagery. Yet environmental challenges, financial limits and land disputes meant that improvements were often compromised. As Home has observed, colonial urban space was frequently marked by confusion and disorder due to the profit-driven motives of British merchants.⁷⁶ The Bund's experience vividly confirms this: dependence on the sanitary logic of 'widening and beautifying' roads could neither resolve siltation and sewage discharge nor dispel the Bund's enduring reputation as a 'stinking foreshore' in the summer heat.⁷⁷

The Bund's transformation under the influence of the Thames Embankment project (1864–79)

It was against this backdrop that the SMC began to envisage a more systematic remodelling of the Bund. The Thames Embankment in London, a highly visible model of sanitary reform and riverfront remaking,⁷⁸ soon became a direct reference point for Shanghai. Its origins lay in the Great Stink of 1858, when the foul foreshore of the Thames River was full of refuse and silt, and the stench made the Palace of Westminster almost unusable as a seat of government, forcing sanitation onto the national political agenda.⁷⁹ In 1862, the Thames Embankment Act was passed, and under the impetus of miasma theory, Joseph Bazalgette launched the Thames Embankment project. This was more than a sewage scheme: it was a comprehensive riverfront improvement integrating drainage, flood control, traffic circulation and landscaping. Parks, squares and public buildings were added, and the Thames

⁷³*Ibid.* 'The year 1859', *NCH*, 7 Jan. 1860, 30.

⁷⁴'Mr Clark's Bund scheme and the solid jetties', *North China Daily News (NCDN)*, 17 Mar. 1866.

⁷⁵'To whom it may concern', *NCH*, 27 Apr. 1861, 68.

⁷⁶Home, *Of Planting and Planning*, 64–91.

⁷⁷K.L. MacPherson, *A Wilderness of Marshes: The Origins of Public Health in Shanghai, 1843–1893* (Lanham, 2002), 267.

⁷⁸D. Porter, *The Thames Embankment: Environment, Technology, and Society in Victorian London* (Akron, 1998).

⁷⁹S. Halliday, *The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Metropolis* (Stroud, 2001).



Figure 7. The Thames Embankment, c. 1890–1900. Source: Library of Congress, <http://ccn.loc.gov/2002696941> accessed 6 Sep. 2025.

riverside was thoroughly reshaped into a new urban spectacle, becoming an imperial emblem of civilization and modernity (Figure 7).⁸⁰ As one of the most celebrated urban projects of Victorian Britain, the Embankment set a precedent widely emulated across the empire.

On 14 December 1864, following Parkes' initiative, the SMC approved the municipal engineer John Clark's comprehensive embankment scheme for the Huangpu. The proposal called for reclamation to widen the Bund to 100 feet, and for the integration of drainage, landscaping and shipping facilities.⁸¹ Clark's design clearly echoed the Thames Embankment model: cofferdam construction,⁸² greening,⁸³ floating jetties,⁸⁴ interceptor sewers along the embankment⁸⁵ and treatment of property and public rights.⁸⁶ He even planned to send the drawings to Bazalgette for review,⁸⁷ a sign that the Bund was no longer envisaged as a decorative waterfront avenue but as an ambitious and institutionalized urban scheme integrating drainage, flood control and public space. Although financial constraints and land disputes prevented the full implementation of

⁸⁰Porter, *The Thames Embankment*.

⁸¹SMA, *The Minutes*, vol. 2, 495.

⁸²J. Clark, 'The Bund line', *NCDN*, 20 Jan. 1865.

⁸³*Ibid.*

⁸⁴J. Clark, 'The Bund line', *NCH*, 21 Jan. 1865.

⁸⁵J. Clark, 'Engineer's Department Report of Municipal Engineer', *NCH*, 8 Apr. 1865, 68.

⁸⁶'Meeting of treaty consuls', *NCH*, 11 May 1872, 374.

⁸⁷Clark, 'Engineer's Department Report', 68.

the scheme, parts of it were gradually executed between 1865 and 1870, including road widening, the creation of a public park (1868)⁸⁸ and the sloped embankment works.⁸⁹

By this time, the Bund had been explicitly defined as an ‘imperial image project’ by the SMC. It was no longer conceived of solely as a traffic corridor and a comfortable walkway with trees, but as the emblematic frontage of the Settlement, an urban stage for imperial order and modernity. Transport and industrial functions were increasingly relocated away from the core waterfront. In 1865, building on Clark’s plan, Fogg & Co. proposed a scheme for a 100-foot-wide riverfront boulevard, new steamship piers and a public landing place.⁹⁰ The SMC chairman William Keswick rejected the scheme, emphasizing not economy but the need to protect the Bund’s public and scenic character:

There might not be any damage when ships stop at the Bund, but the Bund residents could see many unpleasant scenes from their windows. In addition, the behaviour of seafarers is not always satisfactory. Generally speaking, they have some very disrespectful followers, and it is not advisable for many ships to stop at the Bund... Commercial offices and residential buildings will increase the value of the Bund, and one day the warehouse will be away from here and make room for offices and residential buildings.⁹¹

This valorization of the Bund was not merely a local stance but was part of a broader imperial logic. This overarching logic also continued to inform the decisions of Shanghai’s local authorities, reinforcing the Bund’s centrality in the city’s urban development. In December 1866, Alcock, by then promoted to British Minister to China, wrote from Beijing to consular officers at the treaty ports: ‘There has been, I perceive, great waste of money in the temporary embankment... There is but one thing left to be done, and that is to continue the Bund at the public cost and in the most durable manner.’⁹² This intervention reflected his wider effort to promote the Bund as a model of public infrastructure for China’s treaty ports, signalling its incorporation into a transimperial framework of urban improvement. His intervention shows that even after leaving Shanghai, Alcock continued to promote the Bund as a model of public infrastructure for treaty ports. Indeed, during his earlier posting as consul-general and Minister Plenipotentiary to Japan (1858–65), following 12 years as consul in Shanghai, Alcock had already overseen the development of treaty ports such as Nagasaki, Yokohama and Hakodate, each of which constructed its own Bund.

In 1869, the letter from the then SMC chairman Edward Cunningham, together with a sensational sanitary report by Dr Alex Jameson, further pushed the Bund’s transformation into a civic and sanitary space. In a letter written shortly after his resignation, Cunningham argued:

The Bund is the only scenic spot in Shanghai... The Bund is the only place where residents can take in fresh air from the Huangpu River while strolling at

⁸⁸SMA, *The Minutes*, vol. 5, 579.

⁸⁹SMC, *Report*, 1870, 16.

⁹⁰SMA, U01-001-01250, Kotenev, *Riparian Rights*, 64–6; quoting Cases: Adamson, Bell & Co., H. Fogg & Company, 1871.

⁹¹SMA, *The Minutes*, vol. 2, 542–3.

⁹²TNA, FO 17/1302, Consular Buildings, 10 Dec. 1866; TNA, WORK 10/431, 18 Jan. 1867.

dusk, and it is also the only place with open views of the concessions and settlements... The shipping industry is not the main factor of commerce, but only one of its low-level subsidiary industries. Exchanges, banks and accounting offices are the nerve centres of Business, and their locations are always places where a large number of commercial personnel gather... The noise and dust brought by the emergence of the shipping industry scared away the exchanges, banks and other institutions, and replaced them with the stacks of rough-and-tumble products in Liverpool and New York, full of dust and smog.⁹³

Cunningham described the Bund as Shanghai's 'eye and heart', underlining its importance for display, health and recreation. As a long-serving councillor, present since the 1849 CRJ and closely linked to Alcock, his views carried particular weight. Alex Jameson's report, moreover, bluntly stated: 'until the bund shall be extended, I am not aware of any palliative measure that could be suggested, likely to lessen materially the evil arising from the condition of the fore-shore'.⁹⁴ Here, health and landscape were bound together in the planning discourse of the Bund.

From 1870 onwards, a series of initiatives completed the transformation of the Bund from a temporary commercial riverfront into a municipally led public garden and emblematic urban project. A ten-year drainage and water-supply campaign, which started in 1870, improved sanitary conditions.⁹⁵ By cutting off much of the wastewater that had previously flowed into the Bund's vicinity, it addressed one of the main sources of pollution. In 1871, another proposal to widen sections of the Bund and improve the shoreline,⁹⁶ initially resisted by riverside tenants, was eventually referred to the Consular Court, which ruled that the foreshore was public, not private, property. In 1872, the SMC negotiated a memorandum with the riverside landowners stipulating that the foreshore would be converted into a public garden, with a granite embankment and riverside road maintained at municipal expense.⁹⁷ In July, the SMC issued a circular to the owners of the Bund regarding a plan to build a new embankment along the Huangpu River, with the reclaimed foreshore to be converted into a public park.⁹⁸ By 1879, the remaining unsightly structures along the foreshore had been removed, the ground level raised to match that of the old Bund and lawns laid down.⁹⁹ As Kerrie Macpherson observed in *A Wilderness of Marshes*, by the 1870s, the Bund had been transformed from a malodorous shoreline into a public garden.¹⁰⁰

At this point, as Consul Keswick had anticipated, banks, insurance companies and major navigation firms quickly established themselves along the riverfront, turning the Bund into the financial and commercial hub of the Settlement (Figure 8). Leading institutions such as the Hongkong and Shanghai Bank, the Oriental Bank Corporation

⁹³SMA, *The Minutes*, vol. 4, 29–32, 688–90.

⁹⁴A. Jamieson, 'Memo. On the sanitary condition of the Yang-King-Pang and Hongque settlements at Shanghai', NCH, 22 Mar. 1870, 211.

⁹⁵MacPherson, *A Wilderness of Marshes*, 82.

⁹⁶SMC, *Report*, 1872, 4–6.

⁹⁷TNA, FO 671/33, 'Memorandum of Agreement', 1872.

⁹⁸SMC, *Report*, 1873, 9–11.

⁹⁹SMC, *Report*, 1879, 68.

¹⁰⁰MacPherson, *A Wilderness of Marshes*, 267.

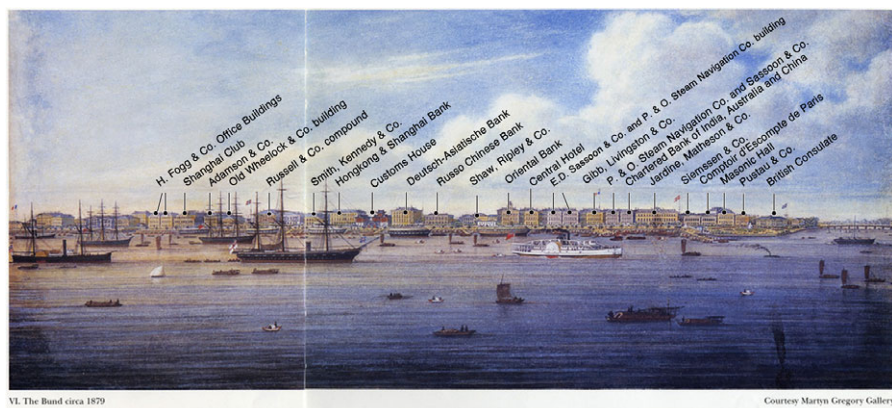


Figure 8. The view of the Bund in 1879. This painting depicts a wider and more orderly stretch of the Bund. By this time, the stone embankment slopes had been planted with turf. At the northern end of the Bund, the public park is visible, and between it and the Customs House lies a long stretch of lawn. A 'second generation' of buildings had also appeared, taller and more solidly constructed than their predecessors. Most of them were commercial and financial institutions. Buildings on the Bund have been labelled by the author. Source: Virtual Shanghai, <https://www.virtualshanghai.net/Photos/Images?ID=17136> accessed 12 Nov. 2022.

and the Deutsch-Asiatische Bank stood side by side with powerful shipping and service companies, creating a dense cluster of global capital. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the emphasis on prestige and aesthetics rivalled commercial function,¹⁰¹ and buildings became a 'monument game' in which firms competed in scale and grandeur.¹⁰² The Bund had also become the stage for technological modernity, with the city's first electric lights¹⁰³ and the debut of its tramway.¹⁰⁴ In this way, through the sustained efforts of British officials, the Bund gradually diverged from the conventional model of colonial ports centred on maritime trade. Its shipping function was progressively diminished through successive acts of local appropriation, while its role as a site of spectacle and high-end commerce became prominent. By the late nineteenth century, this transformation culminated in the emergence of a distinctly Shanghai style: a waterfront defined by the concentration of leading commercial and financial institutions, a landscaped riverside environment, an imposing architectural frontage and the early adoption of modern technologies, which together made the Bund a renowned urban window projecting the empire's strength and image.

This appropriation of metropolitan planning ideas allowed the Bund not only to achieve the symbolic objectives of Strand Road but even to surpass them. In 1873, the European traveller Baron Hubner compared the Shanghai Bund to 'Oxford Street, or even the Strand in London', remarking that it had already surpassed the commercial vibrancy of Yokohama, Calcutta and Bombay.¹⁰⁵ This echoed what Chen and Qian have described as the 'imperial genealogy'.¹⁰⁶ In a hybridized and localized form, the

¹⁰¹ F.L.H. Pott, *A Short History of Shanghai* (Shanghai, 1928), 21–5.

¹⁰² J.W. Huebner, 'Architecture on the Shanghai Bund', *Papers on Far Eastern History*, 39 (1989), 127–54.

¹⁰³ SMA, *The Minutes*, vol. 7, 782–5.

¹⁰⁴ 'The tramways', NCH, 6 Mar. 1908, 582.

¹⁰⁵ B. Hubner, 'Baron Hubner on Shanghai', NCH, 2 Aug. 1873, 88.

¹⁰⁶ Chen, Aoki and Xu, 'The beginning of East Asian modern cities', 51–69; Qian, *Bainian Huiwang*.



Figure 9. The view of the Bund in the 1920s. The image shows that the Bund had been widened once again, with its roadway clearly divided into separate lanes. Along the riverside, extended lawns are visible, while the buildings appear more imposing and ornate. The overall style closely resembled contemporary British commercial architecture, particularly that of London and Liverpool. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_HSBC_Building_and_the_Customs_House.jpg accessed 6 Sep. 2025.

Bund was repackaged as a showcase of imperial modernity, a model that by the late nineteenth century spread to other treaty ports. By the early twentieth century, the Bund had attained the stature of a global urban spectacle (Figure 9). Kerby's celebrated inclusion of the Bund among the world's five great thoroughfares, alongside London's Strand, provides a fitting reminder of how far the Shanghai waterfront had travelled from its muddy origins.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

This article has traced the origins and evolution of the Bund as a distinctive colonial-era waterfront space, situating it within a comparative framework of transimperial urban forms. Its formation was shaped both by the appropriation of circulating ideas and practices embedded in local conditions.

First, the term 'bund' was not an official imposition but entered Shanghai through the commercial networks linking India, Guangzhou and Shanghai. Its transmission was mediated by the institutional and linguistic legacies of the East India Company and sustained by its commercial successors. This trajectory underscores that the Bund's origins did not lie in a single act of transplantation but in the flows of

¹⁰⁷Kerby, *Beyond the Bund*, 11.

institutions, language and practices that circulated through the colonial port culture of the British Empire.

Second, the spatial construction of the Bund reflected a dual logic of diffusion and adaptation. This article has engaged with three principal historiographical interpretations of its origins – imperial metropolitan precedents, cross-colonial transfers and local antecedents – and argues that these are not contradictory but complementary. Each highlights a different dimension of the Bund's genealogy, activated at particular historical moments to address specific practical needs. Taken together, they provide a more integrated framework for understanding how the Bund took shape. In addition, this article moves beyond broad region-level interpretations by specifying them through concrete cases, thereby rendering the Bund's connections with particular imperial waterfront forms more precise and substantiated.

These diverse references were not simply transplanted but were selectively appropriated in response to local realities – hydraulic requirements, maritime trade, sanitary concerns about miasma and the pursuit of civic image. They were then concretized within the specific Chinese context of climatic conditions, legal frameworks, mercantile resistance and political contingencies. Over more than three decades of sustained intervention by the CRJ and the SMC, these layered influences produced a distinctly Shanghai Bund form, defined by its cluster of leading commercial and financial institutions, its landscaped riverfront and its imposing architectural frontage. This trajectory exemplifies Said's notion of 'travelling theory' and Ward's insights into international planning diffusion: ideas and models were not merely replicated but were reinterpreted, recontextualized and embedded in new settings.¹⁰⁸

The Shanghai Bund, as a renowned colonial waterfront form, quickly acquired a transregional presence, replicated across East Asian treaty ports and further afield. With the career movements of officers such as Alcock, Robertson and Parkes, the Bund model was disseminated to multiple ports in East Asia, producing a series of waterfronts celebrated as emblems of imperial success. By the late nineteenth century, the Bund had become a recognized spatial type, celebrated across East Asia, from Hankou, Tianjin and Guangzhou to Kobe and Hakodate, as a splendid promenade and emblem of imperial modernity. Meanwhile, the very concept of the Bund travelled more widely, with traces of its influence observed in Singapore, Penang, Rangoon, Madras, Chinde, Seattle and even Liverpool. Such appropriations even extended beyond the temporal and spatial bounds of the British Empire. In China, reformers of the late Qing and Republican eras adapted the Bund model to assert national agency, constructing localized bunds in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hankou itself as a means of contesting foreign control of port space.¹⁰⁹ Around the early twenty-first century, newly planned waterfronts in Fuzhou, Nanjing, Wuhan and Chongqing continued to mobilize the Bund as a symbolic resource for projecting contemporary urban images.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸S.V. Ward, 'Planning diffusion: agents, mechanisms, networks, and theories', in C. Hein (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Planning History* (New York, 2017), 76–90; E.W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, 1983), 226–7.

¹⁰⁹Y. Sun, *The International Development of China* (New York, 1922), 37–8, 58, 61, 65–6, 85–6; Z. Zhang, *Zhang Zhidong Quanji [The Complete Works of Zhang Zhidong]* (Wuhan, 2008), 1067–8.

¹¹⁰Wuhan Archives, LS005-002-2751, Wuhan Municipal Party Committee Policy Research Office, Municipal People's Government Research Office, *The Speech Record of Qian Yunlu*, 27 Mar. 1997.

In conclusion, the history of the Bund is not merely that of a colonial port but a microcosm of how imperial urbanism was continually reshaped and reproduced through cross-regional circulation and local negotiation. As a spatial imaginary repeatedly reinvented under shifting conditions, the Bund's story is far from over; it continues to unfold, offering new vantage points from which to understand the interplay between imperial legacies and local urban forms.

Acknowledgments. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Professor David Nichols at the University of Melbourne, for his guidance and support throughout the conception, writing and refinement of this work. I am also thankful to Professor Qinghua Guo at the University of Melbourne for her valuable comments on earlier drafts. Additionally, I am grateful to the editor and anonymous reviewers of this journal for their insightful and constructive suggestions.

Funding statement. This work was supported by the China Scholarship Council (CSC)–University of Melbourne PhD Scholarship. Grant No. 201908320487.

Competing interests. The author declares none.