



City profile

Quanzhou: Reclaiming a glorious past

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ABSTRACT

Quanzhou, a coastal city in Fujian province, boasts an illustrious history spanning two millennia. Marco Polo who visited the city in its heyday proclaimed it to be one of the greatest ports in the world. However, its importance waned as succeeding dynasties discouraged and then prohibited maritime trade. This decline spawned migration to Taiwan and neighboring Southeast Asia in search of a better life. The much diminished city's revival began only with China's opening up in 1978. This revival also carried costs, despite haphazard development eventually replaced by spatial planning to reap agglomeration benefits. Still the legacy of pollution from manufacturing poses a challenge as the city attempts to upgrade production through technology. Quanzhou's story shows how history looms large both in imparting costs and in terms of conferring benefits. An important example of the latter is its choice as a pivot city of China's proposed Maritime Silk Road over more economically important cities. This choice is likely based on its links to a vast diaspora during its history.

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1. Introduction

Quanzhou (24° 55' 0" N, 118° 35' 0" E) is a city with a glorious past, a muted present, and a bright future (Fig. 1). Historically, the port city was the hub of a thriving trade route between China and the rest of the world.³ It is located in China's southeast coast and at the west bank of the Taiwan Straits. Although eclipsed by nearby cities like Shenzhen and Xiamen, it plays a very important role in Fujian Province and increasingly in the national economy. It is one of the three "central" cities in Fujian, one of the five cities of the West Bank Economic Zone, and one of the three major pilot areas for comprehensive financial reform. Nationally, the city has been designated as the starting point of the recently announced Maritime Silk Route intended to reposition China as a global player in the years to come (Lin, 2015). Quanzhou's global reach will then far exceed whatever it had achieved in its heyday centuries ago.

However, today's Quanzhou is not important for its economic role. The many titles the city has been bestowed, like "Museum of World Religions" (Lu, 2004; Wu, 2011; Quanzhou Municipal People's Government, 2015a), "Capital of East Asian Culture," "International Garden City," "National Famous Overseas Chinese Hometown," and "Capital of Brands," speak to its historical, cultural and social significance.

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E-mail addresses: liran@um.edu.my (R. Li), qianyiyouyou@sina.com (Q. Wang), keecheok1@yahoo.com (K.C. Cheong).¹ Tel.: +60 123136571.² Tel.: +60 123203950.³ This was recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Fujian Provincial People's Government, 2014; Quanzhou Municipal People's Government, 2015b).

Historically, Quanzhou dates from the Xian Qin Dynastic period, boasting a history of more than 1750 years. Quanzhou was a trade center in the Song Dynasty. Marco Polo referred to it as "the largest port in the world, enjoying equal popularity with Egypt's Alexander Port" (Fujian Provincial People's Government, 2014). It was also believed that the origin of Hokkien culture could be traced to this city (Guan & Chen, 2003). Its history is on display even today. Xi Street (Fig. 2) was the earliest street and area that Quanzhou developed. As the most intact ancient block in Quanzhou today, it remains a symbol of Quanzhou's historical prosperity (Wei, Zhou, & Yang, 2015).

Economically, Quanzhou's economy has recently been a successful incubator of private sector growth. Its employment rate is the highest among cities in China and fifth in the world in 2008 (Dongnan Web, 2009). It is home to the largest number of national brands and contributes the highest portion of GDP output within Fujian in the last 15 years (CCTV, 2014). However, private sector companies have focused on low value-added manufacturing industry which lacked international recognition.

Culturally, Quanzhou was among the first batch of national historical and cultural cities designated by the State Council in 1982 (Quanzhou Web, 2015a). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also recognizes Quanzhou as the first UNESCO World Multi-Culture Centre (Quanzhou News Web, 2014a).⁴ Quanzhou is known as the Museum of World Religion because edifices of many religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, and various branches of Taoism)

⁴ It is also said that Marco Polo had noted that Quanzhou's people believed in Buddhism, noting "People here are idolaters. Idol worshippers are Buddhism believers" (Polo, 1918).



Fig. 1. Quanzhou Location Map in China's Fujian Province. Source: Historum.com.

are found throughout Quanzhou (Ding, 2007; Lin, 2014; Xinhua Net, 2015).

Ethnographically, Quanzhou is the ancestral home to many Chinese overseas of Fujian extraction, and up to half of the Han people in Taiwan have Quanzhou roots (Wikipedia, 2015). Quanzhou has “Five Southern Cultural Heritages”—Hokkien dialect, Southern Drama, Southern Music, Southern Shao Lin, and Southern Architecture. Strong Chinese overseas links exist because not only is the city located on the coast but it is also adjacent to Taiwan. The relationship with Taiwan goes back to ancient times. Today, as a conduit for “cross-straits” relations, Quanzhou is seen as having a major role to play in promoting the eventual peaceful reunification between the Chinese motherland and Taiwan (Su, 2006a, b).

Perhaps partly because of its diminished economic role compared to nearby cities like Xiamen, Quanzhou's diverse dimensions have not been integrated into a coherent story to demonstrate the significance of this city. Indeed, academic studies of the city have been sparse, and whatever is available has been recent. In trying to construct a coherent picture of this city, this paper has had to resort to non-academic sources to fill information gaps.

This portrait of Quanzhou can illuminate several themes that apply to cities of antiquity. One is that prominent as it is nowadays, economics may not define a city's importance. Another is that history affects not only the present but also the future of a city. It is both an opportunity and a threat. This paper therefore begins its profile by first looking at



Fig. 2. Quanzhou's Xi Street.

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