

Foshan today

Foshan Municipality (Foshan), Guangdong Province, is home to approximately 3,358,500 people. It is approximately 16km from Guangzhou and 231km from Hong Kong. Covering a total area of 3,813 square kilometers, Foshan is divided into 6 county-level administrative districts: Chancheng, Shunde, Nanhai, Sanshui, Gaoming, and Foshan City

In 2002, Foshan Municipality's GDP equaled 116 billion RMB. The total output value of its industrial and agricultural sectors totaled 217 billion RMB in 2000. Its major industries include the manufacture of electronics, textiles, plastics and leather, ceramics, electric household appliances, building materials, silk, chemical fibers, and garments.

Foshan City developed about two miles inland from the Dong Ping River and today has a population of approximately 500,000 residents. The rapidly growing city has plans to expand southward and develop new administrative, commercial, tourist, and residential areas. Most of the land on the south bank is covered by fishponds. As part of the expansion plan for the city of Foshan, this area will be incorporated into the city proper through a plan designed by the American firm Sasaki Associates, Inc. The city has already begun construction for a new stadium in this area in preparation for the 2006 China Games. Other development plans include the building of new parks, commercial areas, residential housing, educational facilities and shopping areas – practically an entire new city on the south bank.

History

Located in the Pearl River Delta (PRD), Foshan has a long and rich history. Prior to the 13th century, the present-day PRD was swampy, mosquito-infested land. Chinese settlement patterns in northern Guangdong province precipitated the change in the delta's physical form. Slash and burn agricultural methods used in the hills of northern Guangdong Province deposited silt downriver along the floodplains, creating more solid land which would later be settled.

From 1273-74, Kublai Khan's armies began moving south and drove a mass migration of people from northern Guangdong Province to the lower south sea frontier. As this area became settled, people drained swamps to get rid of mosquito-borne malaria and built levees for flood control. The channelized drainage of water during the monsoon seasons deposited the silt at the mouth of the Pearl River estuary.

Much of the land upon which Foshan currently stands was recovered from the south sea, through a process of placing rocks around the perimeter of sand flats. After these sand flats, or "shatan," were stabilized, legumes were planted to fix nitrogen into the soil. After 3-5 years, the shatans were ready for rice. The process was repeated on the downstream side of the new shatans, which in turn gave rise to more captured land.

Favorably situated at the confluence of the West and North Rivers, Foshan has historically been an important trading city with docks, piers and warehouses. It was known for its high-quality iron cooking pots. By end of 18th century, Foshan's population was an estimated 500,000, nearly all of whom were urban: merchants and their families, cotton textile workers, tea curers, and ironmongers. The total estimated population for the Foshan-Guangzhou area totaled 1-1.5 million.

Early Domestic Trading

By end of 17th century, Foshan was the cotton textile commercial center in South China, in a triangular trade arrangement.

Early Trade with Europe

Europeans purchased porcelain, lacquered ware, silk, cotton cloth (“nankeens”), refined and raw sugar, and tea. They paid in silver bullion. The British East India Company (EIC), in particular, began importing raw cotton from India to meet the increasing Chinese demand and to stem the flow of silver into China. By 1827, the favorable balance of trade for China had turned in favor of the British.

As Europe’s demand for silk increased, farmers in the PRD switched from subsistence rice farming to commercialized silk farming. This practice of sericulture, also known as the mulberry embankment and fishpond method, has been cited as a sustainable, pre-modern agricultural ecosystem. In this system, silk worms are fed on the leaves of mulberry trees. Then, silk worm excrement, mulberry tree leaves and other organic material are gathered and thrown into fish ponds, providing food for carp. The fish were harvested annually. Mulch that formed from fish waste and other decomposed organic matter was scooped from the ponds and used to fertilize the mulberry trees and rice fields.

Like Guangzhou, much of Foshan’s current economic strength stems from its traditional place as a major hub of PRD exports. Historically, merchants contracted with peasant-families growing sugarcane and exported raw and refined sugar to Jiangnan. In turn, raw cotton was imported from Jiangnan to Foshan for spinning and weaving in the textile industry. The resulting cotton cloth and yarn were then sold throughout the hinterland to peasant families in exchange for rice that was sold for export to Foshan and Guangzhou.

Throughout the PRD, rice from Foshan was sold and raw silk was imported for finishing. From Nanyang (which included countries to the south such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, Malaysia, and the Philippines), raw cotton, rice and dyes were imported in exchange for silk, cotton cloth and refined sugar produced in Foshan. Europeans eventually purchased these products in Guangzhou. In exchange for silk, cotton goods and tea, the Europeans brought raw cotton, silver and opium. This historical network of production and trade within the PRD positioned Foshan to become a center of industry and economic strength.

Sources:

[Foshan Municipal Government Online](#)

Robert B. Marks, *Tigers, rice, silk, and silt: environment and economy in late imperial south China*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.