The Urban Fabric of the Chinese Settlement in Incheon (1883 – 1910) and the Architectural Morphology of the Shop House

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Abstract:
This paper will examine the urban fabric of the Chinese settlement between 1883 and 1910 in Incheon, a gateway port to Seoul, and consider its relationship to the spatial configurations of commercial and residential architecture. Until late in the nineteenth century, Korea had kept her ports closed to western travelers to protect the last empire (earning it the name “hermit kingdom”). However, fierce battles at that time with rival foreign powers, particularly Japan and China, changed the geopolitical landscape forever. In 1883, Japan forced the Korean government to open the port of Incheon as part of a concession treaty, which allowed Japanese merchants to engage in commercial activities. A Chinese settlement in the port of Incheon emerged as a result. Chinese merchants and workers began to settle in areas near the concessions set up by the rival Japanese. The Chinese settlement was different from the Japanese development in the sense that the construction of buildings was partly under the control of the Korean government. This paper will discuss three features that make the spatial and formal configurations of the buildings in the settlement unique to the history of modern Korean architecture and urbanism:

1) It was one of the first modern districts in Korea planned by foreigners. While there was little or no distinction between ‘building’ and ‘planning’ in most Korean cities in this period, the streets, blocks and parcels of the Chinese settlement were planned before the construction of individual buildings took place.

2) The two layers of narrow-frontage and the deep lots were in sharp contrast to the single layer of wide-frontage and the shallow-lot pattern that was found in major commercial streets in Seoul.

3) Most buildings in Korean cities that had both commercial and residential use employed a horizontal juxtaposition of space, with the shops in the front and houses to the back in a linear and planar configuration. In the shop house of the Incheon settlement, however, the architectural morphology drew the distinction upon vertical lines, with the house situated above the shop. This was derived from a mixture of Western and Chinese architecture.

The Chinese settlement rapidly decayed after 1910 when Japan colonized the Korean peninsula, and this short-lived ethnic enclave has been regarded as a marginal space in Korean architecture and urbanism.

Keywords: urban fabric, settlement, morphology, shop house