

Retrieving landscape

Drawing(s) as key to the development of alternative biographical readings of Nanhai in the Pearl River Delta

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Abstract

This article focuses on two methods employed in the selection, interpretation, and representation of diverse source materials for developing alternative biographies for my ancestral landscape - Nanhai district in the Pearl River Delta in southern China. These biographies aim to approach Nanhai from a long view of continual transformation, as opposed to prevalent readings of the region that focus on the striking spatial contrasts and large-scale developments that have only come about in recent decades.

The chronological reading explores a critical shift in the cosmological understanding of the landscape situated in the 19th century through a selection of historical gazetteer maps, while in the excavational reading the diffuse continuity of the lineage in the present-day landscape of Nanhai is traced. In both methods, the drawing functions as a crucial (research) tool to engage the range of source materials.

Keywords

Pearl River Delta, Landscape Biography, Ancestral Landscape, Cosmological Landscape, Operative Research

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.47982/spool.2023.1.07>

1 Alternative slow readings for a fast changing region

As the largest urban area in East Asia, having overtaken Tokyo sometime in the 2000s (The World Bank, 2015, pp. 21–22, 25), the Pearl River Delta is often imagined solely through its urbanizing machinery, which inevitably replaces the old with the shiny new. Since the initiation of economic and political reforms in 1978, the delta has indeed rapidly urbanized into one large sprawling region. Exemplary studies through this lens include the short contribution to the *Mutations* publication and the subsequent *Great Leap Forward* in the *Project on the City* series by architect Rem Koolhaas and his student team at the Harvard Design School, which have set the tone in terms of framing the Pearl River Delta (Chang et al., 2000, 2001). Written as provocations on what was then the ‘emerging urban condition(s)’ of the delta, the so-called ‘city of exacerbated difference,’ the focus lay on the spectacular and the high-speed, covering the short period in which the delta emerged ‘with the suddenness of a comet’ (Koolhaas, 2001, p. 28).

However, beyond the spectacular, people also make their homes here, and long-lingering, diffuse continuities that are not immediately legible persist despite modernization, in contrast to the suggestion that the delta only recently came into being. Thus, maintaining narratives that privilege (urban) development and the short-term, disorderly transformations of the region as the dominant lens of inquiry risks obscuring and homogenizing what is, in fact, a multi-layered and multi-temporal ‘lifeworld.’¹ Instead, I propose ‘slow readings,’ firmly grounded in the perspective of landscape, to retrieve landscape. These are ‘views from somewhere’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 590), shaped by my personal connection to the delta and specifically Nanhai district – the ancestral home of my paternal family – but equally by my distance from it, as I was born and raised in Belgium, where I also received my architectural training. My specific personal and disciplinary position played a crucial role in shaping my research lens, in directing evidence gathering, and in developing and applying relevant methods. These readings thus form ‘partial,’ yet ‘faithful accounts of the world’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 579), from both up close and afar. They attempt to engage the *longue durée* instead of the sudden, and the everyday as opposed to the striking.

2 Two complementary methods as variations of landscape biography

The biographical approach to landscape, as extended by the Dutch archaeologist Jan Kolen and colleagues (Kolen, Renes, et al., 2015; Kolen, Ronnes, et al., 2015), offers a framework within which to develop my slow readings. The Dutch approach to landscape biography takes as its key concerns the acknowledgment of landscape as constantly changing at different tempos (in different rhythms, layers, and memories), set against the *longue durée*; the mutual influence of people and landscape as a lifeworld (their intertwined biographies); and the landscape as multi-layered with spatial inheritances that are continually reworked by people and other actors (the authors of the landscape), thus also avoiding the sharp distinction between

¹ Lifeworld refers to landscape “as a world to live in” as opposed to “a scene to view.” (Wylie, 2007, p. 149) Put simply, it is the world in which human and non-human life unfolds.

nature and culture. Findings, in turn, offer insights that can serve landscape planning and design, thus bridging the gap between research and practice.

Similarly, I aim to place Nanhai within a longer process of continual transformation by approaching the question of temporality through what I call the 'time depth' of the landscape: quite simply, the presence and weight of time. Two methods applied to the same case of Nanhai illustrate distinct yet related methods, each addressing the interplay between rupture, change, and continuity in the landscape in the long term in a different way.

In the first method, Nanhai as officially represented in historical maps is traced for the 19th century, during which China shifted towards modernity, a pivotal period in which the 'homogenization of space' (Yee, 1992, p. 31) at the expense of landscape starts to take hold: a 'chronological reading' of the cosmological landscape through Nanhai.

In the second method, Nanhai is approached as an ancestral landscape 'pregnant with the past' (Ingold, 1993, p. 153) resilient in the face of modernization. It starts from the careful mapping and visualizing of the present-day landscape as replete with traces of the past, left by the hands of many previous dwellers by simply spending their lives within it: what I term an 'excavational reading' of the ancestral landscape of Nanhai.

In both approaches, the drawing kit of the architect functions as crucial component to engage the source materials: both the everyday practice of reading spatiality, uses, and patterns from two-dimensional visual documents, and the skills to likewise read, interpret, and document the (built) environment. Drawings thus form the key to capturing – as a research tool – and presenting the landscape and its biographies. In fact, both methods are forms of mapping of the lifeworld of Nanhai. The source materials are subjected to a series of operations, to get closer to or create distance from them. One method starts from limited documents at hand which are unpacked and expanded, while the other starts from a complex, multi-layered environment ending with precise drawings in which choices on what to abstract or elaborate are made deliberately. Inherently, these processes that center the drawing as an instrument of inquiry are partial, based on implicit assumptions and automatisms that are further explored below in two series of reflections.

3 Creating proximity with the digitized gazetteer: the chronological reading of Nanhai's cosmological landscape

In this chronological reading of Nanhai, a shift in the official representation of the cosmological landscape is traced for the 19th century, a period Chinese literary historian and public intellectual Wang Hui insists on revisiting (2011). During this time, pressured by foreign expansionism, China started undergoing a profound cosmological shift². A sense of urgency developed among the reform-minded to save the Chinese empire from outside threats through the measured and tentative incorporation of Western knowledge under different guises, carefully balanced with the preservation of an own perceived Chinese essence³. Ultimately, the fall of the last dynasty in 1911 marked the start of the (complete) disintegration of a more or less coherent enmeshment of state and a cosmological, religious, and everyday lifeworld. During this extended period, the official Chinese landscape started to gradually move from an animated, enchanted landscape to a quantifiable, rational territory.

Two 19th-century editions of the Nanhai gazetteer⁴ offer a concretization of this shift, localized glimpses into this transitional, exploratory phase⁵. Both contain a large number of *tu* 圖 – although commonly translated as image, illustration, diagram, chart, or (technical) drawing, *tu* remains an untranslatable, ambiguous word (Bray, 2007, p. 3) – which in the case of these gazetteers, I will interpret as maps. Though made by a specific group of people, and thus not neutral, I choose not to approach them through the lens of power, but to read them as reflections of the landscape as perceived and idealized by their makers – local officials and scholars – to fit within the larger framework of the empire. The texts in the respective gazetteers – extended table of content, introduction, and epilogue – act as reading keys to the maps, while I also build upon the seminal work on Chinese cartography by Cordell D.K. Yee (1994b, 2008).

Below, two 'montages' that combine selected maps from both gazetteers illustrate the method – an iteration of what was first explored in the context of a symposium (Chan, 2022). Comparable maps from both editions are selected and literally put next to each other on the same page, allowing a sharper focus for reading and comparing the precise contents, style, and authors, while also uncovering the probing nature of 'new' or 'Western' cartographic practices for the official landscape as opposed to a sudden break. The gazetteers are drawn from digital collections, and thus dematerialized, which forms a defining condition for this method that will be addressed later on.

2 Cosmology is interpreted here as Bruno Latour did in his contribution in the newspaper *The Guardian*, where he observes the necessary shift away from 'infinite space' and unbridled expansion is 'of the same magnitude as when, from the 17th century onward, westerners had to shift from the closed cosmos of the past to the infinite space of the modern period.' (Latour, 2021)

3 For more information on the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1894), see Bastid-Bruguère (2009).

4 The local gazetteer was a genre of history compiled by officials and local scholars, typically offering an overview of the land (textually and visually), its inhabitants, and its government in multiple volumes (juan). It formed a key instrument for local governance. Their periodic recompiling and their adherence – especially in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) – to a more or less uniform template in style and contents, allow for a systematic comparison of the same subjects between different editions. (Zurndorfer, 1995, p. 189)

5 Note that 'modern' cartography was introduced by Jesuits much earlier at the imperial court. However, these practices were not widely accepted nor implemented by Chinese literati on the ground (Yee, 1994c).

3.1 Montages

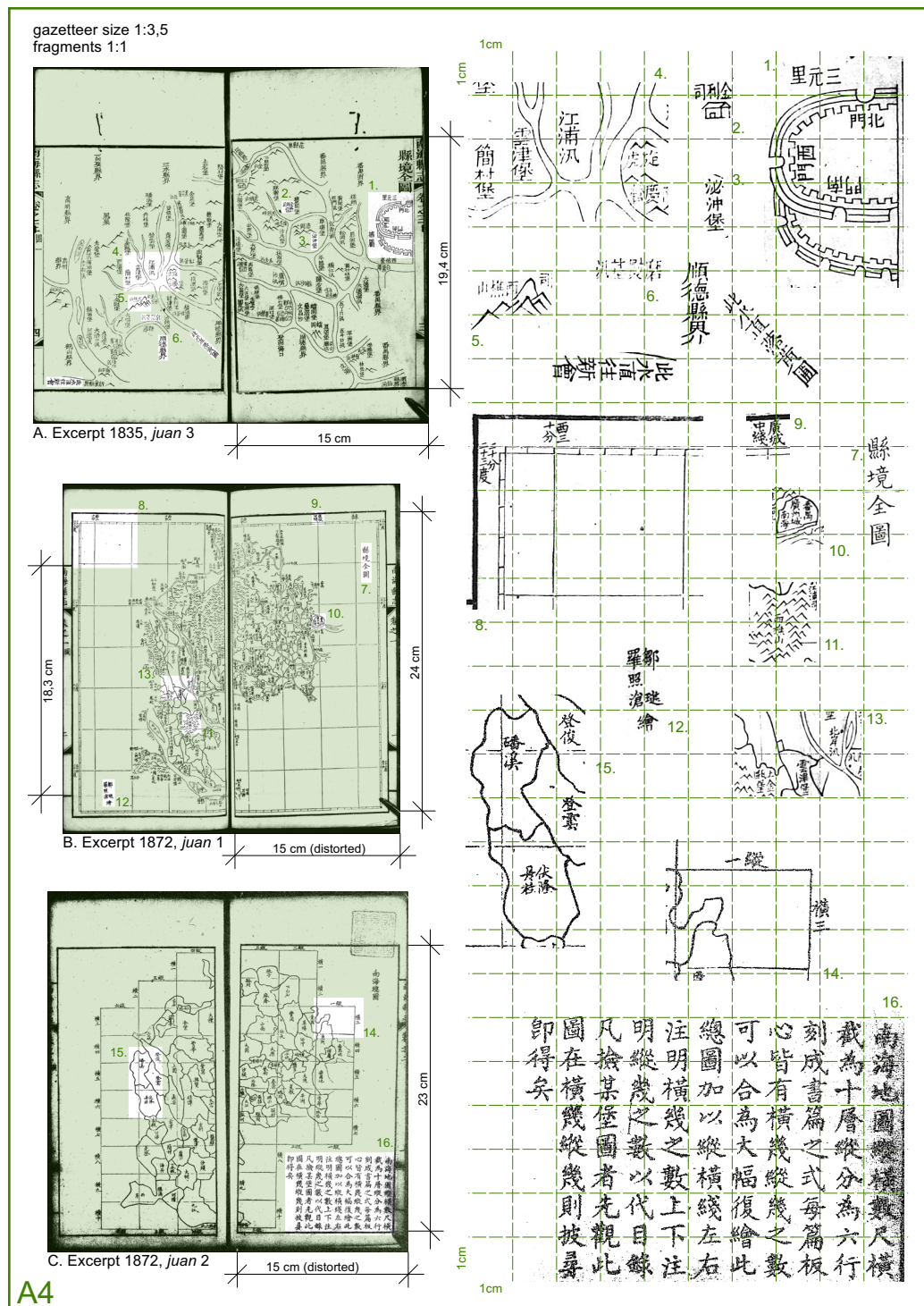


FIGURE 1 A comparison of county maps Reproductions from the Nanhai gazetteers 1835, 1872 (Harvard-Yenching Library)

In the first montage, three maps representing Nanhai county from both gazetteers are combined on an A4 sheet. On the left side, the maps are scaled down, reproduced in full, and overlain with a transparent color, while highlighted details are left white. These details, as cut-outs, are shown on the right side on a grid of 1 cm by 1 cm. They are reproduced onto the grid in their actual size as in the original gazetteer volumes. The purpose of the montage is to make tangible again the dematerialized gazetteer (as a reproduction), specifically for aspects that are important to the measuring eye of the architect: actual line weights, line types, text size, direction, ... At the same time, it functions as a communication device: by singling out details, it leads the reader into the world of the map while taking into account the constraints of publication: the impossibility of reproducing spreads in full. On the other hand, the necessary activity of selecting and interpreting specific details from the maps is deliberate and requires a degree of precision. From this process of composing the montage, several themes start to emerge that also move beyond the superficial reading of a mere inclusion of Western conventions such as the use of a graticule (9, 10).

On the one hand, the selected details highlight obvious graphical changes: from a largely pictorial approach (1, 2, 5) to precise planimetric representation (10). However, there is also retention: Nanhai is still presented without its neighboring localities, as well as pictorial mountain peaks (11). On the other hand, epistemic changes slowly creep in: firstly, where in the earlier edition the map contributors are unclear, and the table of contents indicates each subcounty map (*bu* 堡) map was supplied by the *bu* itself, the newer gazetteer maps – some signed (12) – are the work of a defined team of mapmakers (12), which we could even start to read as authors. Secondly, we can read the gradual shift from the precedence of text over image to the image gaining autonomy over the textual. Whereas the older map A relies on descriptions outside the map set for factual information such as approximate distances between the county seat (1) and the different *bu*, the text (16) in the bottom right corner of the 1872 map C explains the introduction of a grid system consisting of verticals and horizontals, which makes possible the swift retrieval of maps within the gazetteer, and explicitly states it thus replaces the table of contents as the primary navigational aid. Thirdly, in the newer edition, the careful probing and development of conventions can be seen. Where before, the use of variable scale, perspective, and pictorial representations were considered “proper to cartography” (Yee, 1994a, p. 152) and their use often hinged on textual accompaniment, in the late Qing dynasty, the map starts to move towards the form of a stand-alone document. Thus, undoubtedly, convention and standards would need development for maps to function by itself.

The second montage – using the same arrangement – focuses on the depictions of Guangzhou, the provincial capital as well as the county seat of both Nanhai and Panyu county. Unsurprisingly, due to its status, in both gazetteers, more detail was reserved for these maps in comparison with the *bu* maps that are of similar scale – especially evident in the case of the older edition. I propose that undoubtedly very conscious choices were made on what elements to include or exclude to render a legible and specific portrait of the city as afforded by the limited book size (approximately 28 cm by 15 cm, excluding the center margin stitched into the book binding).

The 1835 map again shows an idealized form of Guangzhou, which was common also in manuscript maps (Yee, 1994a, pp. 154, 164), symmetrically composed and ideally sited in relation to the Pearl River. The city walls and their gates are pictorially represented (5.), as are the multitude of temples, the mosque, government institutions, and academies inside and outside the city walls (2.). Curiously, no distinction is made between temples of different religious backgrounds or government buildings – all sharing the same symbol (2, 4.). The walled city is pictured much larger, indicating its symbolic importance, in relation to the extramural areas in the 1835 map (compare 1. with 8., both covering the same area). In contrast, in the 1872 edition, the proportions are now faithful to reality. As in the county maps, a graticule is used, with the prime meridian (7.) running through the imaginary division between Nanhai and Panyu (13.), and hierarchies are expressed through different line types and weights. However, the content remains much the same: although the number of landmarks is reduced, religious and government buildings (compare 11. with 4.) form the main

points for orientation within the city. Although they differ technically, their purpose remains the same: to show a portrait of a city where the religious, scholarly, and governmental are enmeshed.

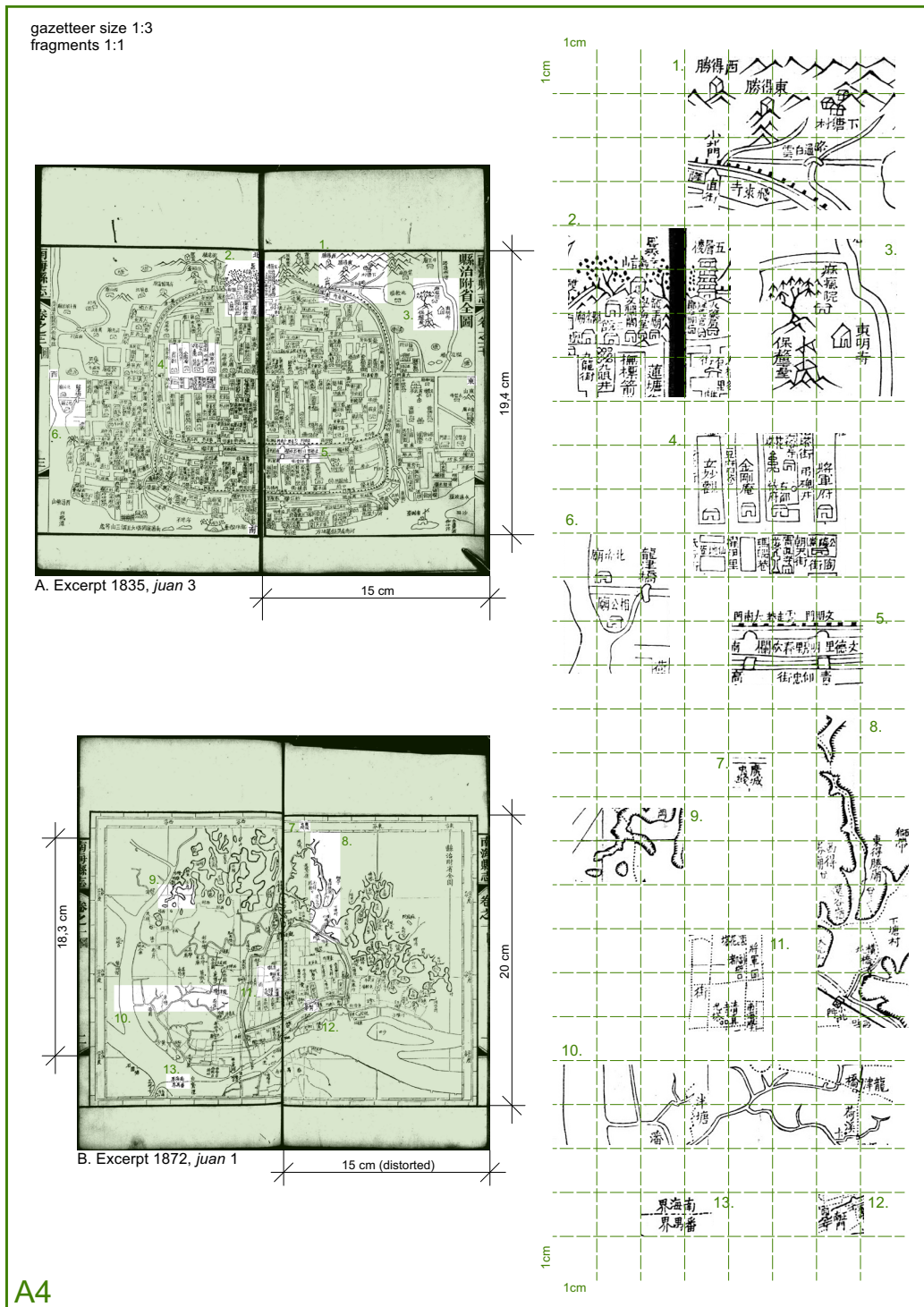


FIGURE 2 A comparison of maps of the county and provincial seat Reproductions from the Nanhai gazetteers 1835, 1872 (Harvard-Yenching Library)

3.2 Reflections – bringing closer the past landscape as architect

3.2.1 Engaging the local gazetteer, an oft-cited source

Local gazetteers form an important source for historians of China, as an estimated 8000 have survived, offering insight into localities for the past millennium (Wilkinson, 2000, p. 154). Their extensive contents allow for research from multiple angles – ranging from demographics to local customs and dialects. However, their visual content has been understudied in favor of the textual, which has only been taken up in recent years (Luo, 2016). On the other hand, gazetteers should also be heeded for their ‘local patriotism’ as the team of compilers included local scholars who would have wanted to paint their own locality in a positive light (Will, 1992, pp. 12–13; Zurndorfer, 1995, p. 190). Taking up both points, I center the visual and read the *tu* with sincerity, as both reflections of a desired landscape and as self-representations. Furthermore, making large sets of illustrations – in the case of the 1835, 84 *tu*, and the 1872, 164 *tu* – must have been a time-consuming endeavor and thus their inclusion points to their relevance.

Working forcibly at a distance from Belgium due to the pandemic, the gazetteers were accessed through online databases. Holdings of different copies worldwide have become accessible through many digitization projects, offering the possibility to work remotely. Even within China, due to the originals’ fragility, oftentimes reproductions are consulted instead⁶. Unfortunately, this also dematerializes the sources: its paper, its binding, but more pertinent to this method, its size – working online one can zoom in and out at one’s convenience without regard for scale. Compiled versions also combine multiple spreads on one page, foregoing the actual size of the original. An important step, then, in engaging the material consisted in attempting to materialize again this unrooted archive through comparing different digital copies of the same edition. Using the ubiquitous drawing applications available to designers, the *tu* were then scaled back to the original book sizes and printed, allowing me to start my own paper archive nonetheless. Only then does it become possible to appreciate the delicate work of the gazetteer, printed with woodblocks, and to imagine the constraints and affordances of this particular medium. Keeping in mind that the negative (the white space on each page) was carved away, suddenly the thickness, or rather thinness, of a line acquires a certain weight. For the second edition, it becomes clear that the medium was pushed to the limit, as evident from the very fine work.

3.2.2 Tracing conventions

In the 1835 edition the content of the *tu* is oftentimes limited (and diverse as each *bu* provided its own map), with no visual key. Likewise, the 1872 gazetteer maps offer no legend for interpretation. However there is the instinctive ease – formed through habits of architectural training, practice and research – to read the images immediately as spatial representations, which is not without danger when looking at images so remote in time. As such, there is a need to also render strange the habitual, and instead of glossing over what is not immediately understood to zoom in on visual discrepancies, differences, the clues that absences and presences present.

6

See for example the 260 volume *Guangdong Lidai Fangzhi Jicheng* 廣東歷代方志集成 [Guangdong Gazetteers of the Past Dynasties Collection], with reproductions of extant gazetteers of Guangdong Province.

The idea of the convention allows for a reconciliation of both remoteness and familiarity. At its most basic level, conventions are simply implicit in the everyday use – a door in a floor plan needs no explanation nor legend. In the case of the gazetteers, then, the absence of a legend implies it was simply unnecessary, the use of gazetteer maps either hinged on unspoken conventions or separate descriptions included in the gazetteer elsewhere. What is present then can be approached from this assumption, allowing for the often limited or abstract documents at hand to be unpacked and expanded.

3.2.3 Redrawing as access to a past landscape

Finally, an obscured step that engages time depth is the redrawing of maps as a method to become familiar with this landscape of the past, a form of closer engagement with the material. By following contours, pinpointing villages, reading place names, the retracing acts not unlike a survey on-site, in which themes, patterns, repetitions, start to emerge. These redrawn maps (if georeferenced) in turn can be compared with other layers of satellite imagery, aerial footage, and contemporary maps – bringing together a wide array of sources straddling almost two centuries in time. The retracing and overlaying thus allow the compilation of an archive of diverse yet comparable documents, stacked on top of each other from which traces that remain today can be detected and offer clues to themes to investigate in the second, excavational method. Likewise, this survey of paper landscapes, in turn, points to moments on the map that can be shown to the reader.

4 Doing fieldwork in memory and amidst traces: the excavational reading of an ancestral landscape in Nanhai

As opposed to the previous method, this approach starts from the contemporary situation, working its way downward: scratching at layers and tracing continuities in the landscape as ‘an enduring record of – and testimony to – the lives and works of the past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves’ (Ingold, 1993, p. 152). From this point of view, the landscape is not shaped by clear-cut authors but rather reworked again and again by a multitude of users over time, their traces coexisting as simultaneous elements. This reworking operates not only on the physical level but also through the repetition of rituals and stories. The latter form the keys to the ‘cultural biography’ of the landscape according to the Dutch historian Gerard Rooijakkers (1999, p. 302).

The case of my ancestral village in Nanhai, as explored in a forthcoming essay, is used to illustrate the developed method (Chan, in press). The diffuse continuity of the lineage⁷ (as found in the persistence of lineage institutions, practices, and stories) in this village is evoked through the pairing of photographs with detailed architectural drawings based on everyday observations, family and village lore, and informal talks. These pairs that I have termed ‘diptychs’ are complemented with ‘thick descriptions’⁸ that form the reading key and incorporate time dimensions that are not possible in the more static media of photographs and drawings. The method of the diptych is tailored specifically to the purpose of capturing and showing the lineage as intertwined with the landscape, its continual inscription but also inevitable change over time. The concept of the diptych is borrowed from the arts; in the essay, the visual pair hinges on each other, and both panels serve to reinforce and complete the other. Although both have the same subject, they work in a complementary way: the photograph makes the landscape – its materiality and color, its abundance – instantly tangible, while the drawing highlights aspects (through colors) of the same scene that would otherwise not be immediately legible. They require the reader to actively compare, jumping from one to the other.

4.1 Diptychs

The first diptych focuses on the exterior of three houses in the village, for which three types of transformations at different time rhythms are inscribed on and around the buildings. Each theme is highlighted through a different color, set against the black and white cavalier drawing. This projection was specifically chosen to keep the drawing as a measurable document. At the same time, I kept in mind the history of Chinese representation, which did not privilege a single fixed vantage point but instead valued the possibility of the wandering eye/mind.

7 For the purpose of the essay, the lineage is defined as an institution centred around three core characteristics: common patrilineal descent from one single ancestor beyond the single household, ancestor worship, and the continuation of the family line.

8 The concept of “thick descriptions” was borrowed and extended by anthropologist Clifford Geertz to define ethnographic descriptions that are opposed to “thin descriptions,” which are merely factual in nature. The former are the result of extensive fieldwork and describe complex environments in a comprehensive and detailed way, set against their wider cultural and social context. (DBNL, 2012; Luhrmann, 2001)



FIGURE 3 Three (ancestral) houses in transformation, drawing 2022 (Hong Wan Chan)

According to family history, the three houses were built simultaneously sometime in the 19th century by my great-great-grandfather. They stand as three quasi-identical siblings in the landscape of the village – with the same proportions, detailing, material use – and have been occupied by my ancestor’s kin over the generations, although the new material conditions of today’s market society have left them largely unoccupied. Though at first glance, they have retained their general architectural appearance over time, the diptych traces their subtle transformations and shifting uses by pointing to adaptations made over time and small signs of use and disuse, care, and neglect. Their necessary periodic religious re-inscription is highlighted in red, while blue maps practical adaptations over a longer period, and green represents the seemingly unruly plants and trees that are, in fact, cared for. Although built at the same time, they each have a distinct biography, as signaled by their use and care regime: house A is occupied during the daytime, its occupants – an elderly couple, my distant uncle and aunt – returning at night to their apartment in the town center nearby; while house C is left empty and serves only as a storage space; house B, in turn, falls somewhere in between the two conditions, where small signs on the exterior point to a limited use.



FIGURE 4 Three (ancestral) houses in transformation, Photo 2018 (Hong Wan Chan)

Moving to the interior of the three houses, a photograph of house B's central shrine is combined with more conventional plans and sections of the houses, allowing a simultaneous comparison and discussion of the three interiors.

This diptych shows the religious inscriptions (in red) needed in the interior to maintain the home. Again, each interior reveals another condition and afterlife. Although house A is no longer occupied full-time, a range of deities and the ancestors still hold their place in the house and are frequently attended to. They occupy smaller and larger shrines and recesses in the walls or dwell in posters and granite reliefs. House C is stripped of any such presence, niches and shrines left bare. House B, again, falls in between the two.



FIGURE 5 Places for the gods and ancestors in the domestic interior, Photo 2017 (Hong Wan Chan)

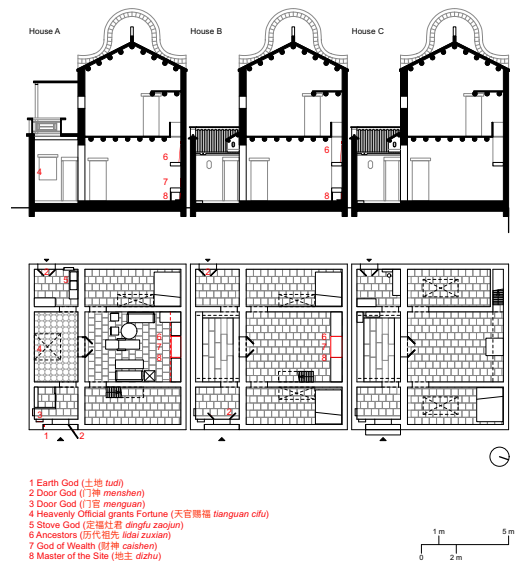


FIGURE 6 Places for the gods and ancestors in the domestic interior, Drawing 2022 (Hong Wan Chan)

4.2 Reflections – using the architectural drawing kit as distant insider

4.2.1 Evidence – inside and outside

I started visiting my ancestral village long before I began my architecture training, which has inevitably directed my gaze toward that of the ancestral through my position within my lineage. As such, access to materials and their gathering have occurred less systematically and over a long stretch of time. I have relied on stories that have been delivered across generations, retold again and again, set against the customs and wider historical change of the area. At the same time, photo sets that I made between 2013 and 2018 are but a snapshot in time. There is a certain ambiguity that has characterized this method, allowed by my position as an insider – albeit born in the world outside. This same tension is also there between the brevity of my visits and my relative young age and the time depth I aim for, and again repeated in the medium of the static photograph and the drawing in relation to the thick descriptions, which capture the continual repetition of ritual and story over time.

Furthermore, my access to the village is not entirely frictionless nor evident, a realization that became all the more obvious when the COVID-19 pandemic cut short an extended research stay and barred access to China as a foreign national. At once, I found myself – although a member of the lineage – nevertheless cut off from my ancestral place. On the other hand, the practical limitations posed by this everyday reality aside, as anthropologist Charlotte Aull Davies posits, ‘even in the most autobiographical forms of research, the ethnographer does not have unconditional and unhindered access to knowledge: the question of insider status is still problematic’ (2007, p. 228). Even in the closest of ethnographic studies – where the ethnographer acts as a key informant themselves – there is an uneasy tension; however, it is in the “process of interaction between ethnographer-as-self and ethnographer-as-other that social knowledge of general interest and significance is produced” (Davies, 2007, p. 228). Thus, the analysis of my ancestral village through the lens of the lineage is equally an exercise in balancing distance and proximity.

4.2.2 Observations – architectural drawings

The search for this appropriate distance is taken up through my persona as an architect, heavily influenced by the disciplinary culture to which I belong (Davies, 2007, p. 9). The “cultural biography” allows me to bring together both positions. My knowledge of rituals and stories tied to my ancestral landscape then directed the selection of ensembles from a complex, multi-layered environment, ending with precise drawings, which are necessarily selective in character. In this method, the drawing – an iterative process of synthesizing the material on hand: what to show and what to obscure – also becomes the ideal device to render a degree of anonymity to the landscape and its owners. For example, unnecessary views into the private sphere can be left out. These drawings also reflect my insistence on staying on and close to the ground, resisting the urge to zoom out and rejecting totality as exemplified by the top view. Each diptych is grounded, as the landscape plays out not from above but always within.

4.2.3 Limits to presenting the landscape

As I aim to make visible aspects of the landscape that are often obscured in today's seemingly disenchanted world of the Pearl River Delta, a third question concerns that of presentation. Paper serves as both the medium that enables transmission and a constraint due to the limited sizes of journals or books. This limitation impacts the scale that can be employed for each drawing to remain legible and what falls inside or outside the frame. Likewise, the limited number of images – in the case of the essay, a total of 10 – allowed in a journal requires efficiency in showing, pushing for precision and the elimination of excess. Such practical concerns did, in fact, influence the development of the method, with the ultimate aim of creating communicable sets of diptychs. Thus, it is possible that my ancestral landscape would have been approached differently if more or fewer visual materials were allowed. Finally, the drawings themselves are subject to architectural drawing conventions and aesthetics that reflect my time, influenced by my education in a West-European country and the Flemish architecture community to which I belong.

5 Conclusion: drawing towards multiple imaginaries

Above, two complementary methods were outlined that enable 'views from somewhere' that oppose narrow, short-term analyses of the Pearl River Delta. Each provides insight into the lifeworld of Nanhai in which the vantage point continually shifts, balancing proximity and distance. Both methods rely on drawing as a crucial research instrument, demanding an awareness of the implicit assumptions and biases inherent to this tool, coupled with a continuous questioning of my own personal and disciplinary position.

In the first method, the construction of montages bridges the gap between remoteness in time and materiality. Through the architect's lens, lines, dots, symbols, and more are activated to reveal a more nuanced portrait of the transition during a period that marked the onset of the 'homogenisation of space.' The montages uncover a clearly tentative exploration situated in the 19th century, during which elements constituting the official landscape, and thus registered on the maps, were not readily abandoned when exploring new cartographic practices. This reading highlights a wavering slowness in the perception of the landscape.

In the second method, diptychs bring the distant viewer closer to a contemporary lineage landscape that necessitates constant reworking and retelling. The intimate knowledge of this lifeworld is made visible and legible through the juxtaposition of photographs and drawings, both created by me as the author. Both media are inevitably influenced by the conventions of my time.

Indeed, these two methods can only offer 'partial' yet 'faithful accounts' that are inherently time-specific, reflecting our contemporary context and my perspective. They are developed as specific responses to the issue of totalizing narratives, which are relevant today in the Chinese context and beyond. They are an effort to provide a starting point for advancing alternative imaginaries, emphasizing the need for a multiplicity of knowledge about place, as opposed to a singular view. Despite their limitations and non-exhaustiveness, they serve as a call for diverse ways of understanding one landscape.

Acknowledgements

This article reflects the search for methods to approach my ancestral landscape within the context of my doctoral research, supervised by Prof. Bart Verschaffel and Prof. Johan Lagae at Ghent University. I am grateful for their guidance throughout the process. I would also like to thank my extended family in Nanhai, and express my appreciation and awe for the tender and mysterious ways in which stories are delivered through time.

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