

It was always something about the places themselves – something I could never quite pin down – that drew me to the villages dotting the landscape of Taishan and Kaiping counties, in the heart of the Siyi (四邑, “Sze Yap” or “Four Counties”) region of Guangdong. Once, the dense network of villages and fields had formed part of one of the most densely populated places on earth; now, many of them are largely depopulated. Life carries on there, but most of the young men and women have left to find work in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, or other factory cities of the Pearl River Delta; meanwhile, shuttered windows and barred doors mark the houses awaiting the return of owners now overseas or in other parts of China. Judging by the rusted bars and crumbling brickwork, some of these houses have waited a very long time.

For me, a sense of place has always been at the center of my work as a historian. I am fascinated by the ways in which the course of history is so often channeled by the quotidian choices facing ordinary people as they make their way in the world, with the decisions taken by individuals and families – what to plant, what to eat, how to earn a living – building in their aggregate into a powerful engine of historical change. When I walk the places where these micro-decisions once played out among small communities, I try to search for the voices of these people among the bricks and stones, but the stones are silent. Such places are imbued with memories, but those memories are lost to us, as those who remember firsthand fade into the past. If you have ever walked through any of these old villages, you may get a sense of what I mean. The past feels immanent, present, but somehow without shape, not quite comprehensible, not quite in reach.

Over the 2018-2019 academic year and summer, I conducted a year of dissertation research in archives and repositories in Beijing and in Guangdong Province, with the final phase of this research aided by an OYCF Chow Fellowship. My dissertation project explores the ways in which the dynamics of migration impacted the social and political fabric of the Siyi region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the opportunities and dilemmas they offered to local actors, and the challenges they posed for Qing rule and administration in the region. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the Siyi region – particularly the counties of Taishan and Kaiping – was the source of a majority of Chinese migrants to North America, and to many other destinations besides. Shaken by piracy and banditry, inter-lineage feuds, rebellions in the nineteenth century and warlordism in the twentieth, Siyi was simultaneously a crucial hub in a rapidly coalescing Pacific world, and a battleground between a tottering Qing state, powerful and well-armed local lineage groups, militias, bandits, and other criminal groups well into the twentieth century. During this period, Siyi was a dynamic and unstable space in which people, money, goods, and weapons circulated between the four counties and nodes on the region's overseas network. This fact in turn had a profound impact on the dynamics of power and violence in the region, as Siyi lineages could draw on transregional and transoceanic networks stretching from Southeast Asia to North America, and could muster significant resources of wealth, manpower, and armed force.

Most of my time in the Siyi region was spent in local archives, tracking down family genealogies, contracts, legal records, and anything else that could shed light on the experiences of ordinary people at the end of the Qing dynasty. I was able to amass a considerable source base, but the nature of this work meant that it was only rarely that I found myself out in the countryside, following up a lead on a genealogy held in the village but not in the archive, or

simply to follow the impulse to see for myself a place described in the archival documents. Some of these villages I had visited before, but when I returned to them after encountering these places and some of their people in old documents, I found the weathered brick houses, the watchtowers, woods and fields imbued with a new meaning. For me, they had once been oases of calm from my work in the towns and cities, scenic and beautiful, suggestive of the way people lived in the deep past of this place; now, details from the documents seemed to leap out from every field and building. In one village, an abandoned church and convent, now home to a gaggle of chickens and a parked truck, now was attached to names, specific missionaries and Chinese priests, a congregation, flesh and blood people who had once convened there to worship. In another, the nondescript-looking chips in the concrete of the village's old watchtower now revealed themselves as bullet holes, marking the aftermath of a bandit raid that I had seen written up in a local news bulletin. I have stared out from a village, across the fields to a tree-planted dike on the horizon, and wondered at the thoughts of someone a hundred and fifty years ago, staring at the same horizon, making up their mind on whether to leave all this behind and strike out for California. Having built a mental map in the archives of the region's nineteenth and early twentieth century tumult, on my return to the villages themselves I found my sense of place transformed, with particular sights and places imbued with a sense of the past that now felt tangible and real.

A deep sense of place seems to rely on an equally deep sense of memory, but this relationship is a complex thing, especially one is dealing with memories for which there are no first-hand witnesses left. The discipline of history offers tools with which to systematize, evaluate, and build narratives and explanations out of memory, and I am now using those tools to shape our understanding of this region and its people's role in shaping the Pacific world.

Nevertheless, I often find myself returning in my mind to those Siyi villages, seeking to keep my writing grounded in the experiences of this particular place and the distinct swirl of memories that surrounds it, and attentive to the lived experience of the people who once made their lives there, or sought to risk everything to journey overseas. The archival findings, connections, and melding of place with memory during the final phase of my research year owe much to the support of the OYCF, and I look forward to bringing this period of research to fruition as I move deeper into the writing process.