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The myth of the Others: Western representations of the Dan people and boat clusters in the island city of Guangzhou, China (1842–1900)

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Abstract
This article studies Western (primarily Anglophone) representations of the Dan people (boat people) and the boat clusters on which they lived, relative to the mainland, in the island city of Guangzhou, focusing on 1842–1900. A change occurred over time, as the Dan went from being in close interaction with Westerners prior to the Opium Wars to being peripheral to Western interests and activities. This shift is evident in Western writings, and negative representations of the Dan came to dominate in the late nineteenth century. This mirrored changing sociospatial power relations between Westerners and the terrestrial Chinese, as Westerners increasingly gained access to the onshore city of Guangzhou itself, in part from the colonial island enclave of Shamian. Changing crosscultural interactions affected how the Chinese Others were perceived and ultimately how the Chinese whole was intertextually constructed in Western colonial discourse.

Keywords: boat clusters; Guangzhou; intertextuality; sociospatial power relations; the Dan; Western representations

Introduction

"The myth of the Other," Longxi Zhang (1988, p. 130) argues, based on his studies of "China in the eyes of the West," lies in "distance." Studies concerning Western representations of China in and around the late nineteenth century tend to focus on how "distant China" was constructed as the Other and how this myth was challenged (see also Chang 2010; Dupée 2004, p. 27; Fiske 2011, pp. 217–219; Forman 2013; Kasaba 1993; Kuehn 2016; Pagani 1997; Prado-Fonts 2023). However, as China as the Other is investigated, little attention is paid to the Others of the Other in the eyes of the West, namely Western representations of the Dan (boat people) who lived primarily on and with the water.

This article perceives the historical crosscultural sociospatiality of the island city of Guangzhou, China in the period between 1842 and 1900 by tracing developments in Western representations of the Dan and the clusters of boats in which they lived. This period is chosen because the 1842 Treaty of Nanking opened Canton to foreign trade while the turn of the nineteenth century saw a dramatic change in the Dan's living environment due to embankment constructions along the Pearl River and road constructions that filled in linked canals in the city. This article demonstrates how representations of the Chinese Others were related to crosscultural relation and "distance" between the Dan, terrestrial Chinese, and Western observers. Special attention is paid to the marginalized Others' dependent position: their status and representations depended largely on the relation between the

Chinese and Westerners. By studying Westerners' multifaceted colonial observations of the Dan and their floating town relative to the island city and the vast Chinese mainland, we argue for ethnohistorically and intertextually sensitive understandings of urban change.

As Chinese authors writing about Western representations, we are engaging in a decolonial writing back to the West, which is a practice of "epistemic disobedience and delinking from the colonial matrix" of power (Mignolo 2011, p. 9). The prevailing belief in the superiority, dominance, and validity of Western knowledge has operated to "oppress, suppress – and delegitimize – other ways of knowing, thinking, being, living, and imagining" (Dei and Jaimungal 2018, p. 3). The approach of decolonial writing back from the margins/non-West entails a "definitive rejection of 'being told' from the epistemic privileges of the zero point what 'we' are, what our ranking is in relation to the ideal of humanitas and what we have to do to be recognized as such" (Mignolo 2009, p. 3). By counteracting Western colonial narratives of disfiguration, this article challenges Eurocentric knowledge and white supremacist colonial frameworks.

The article also contributes to discussions within island studies concerning the social construction of island space (Joseph 2020; Nadarajah et al. 2022; Waite 2022; Zhu and Grydehøj 2023). Guangzhou is an island city in the sense that it was formerly – and in many senses still is – substantially composed of a dense network of rivers, channels, and delta islands (see Fig. 1). This geography has had a substantial influence on urban development in various parts of the Pearl River Delta (Lin and Su 2022; Sheng et al. 2017; Su 2017). Changing representations of island, water, and urban space in the Pearl River Delta have conditioned how people (both Chinese and foreigners) have interacted with these spaces (Su and Grydehøj 2022). The present article shows how Westerners' understandings of Guangzhou's water spaces, Dan boat clusters, and the terrestrial city (including central and peripheral, Chinese and Western islands) impacted one another.

Westerners and the Dan in the contact zone of Guangzhou

Occupying a geographically favorable position at the top of the Pearl River Delta and consisting substantially of river islands, Guangzhou (then called Canton) was a major port for China's foreign trade in the centuries leading up to the 1800s. However, the spatial activities of Westerners (the observers) in the city were constrained by fierce confrontations with the local Chinese population. Although the Treaty of Nanking guaranteed Westerners' right to enter the city, violent antiforeign actions by locals prevented them from doing so. This changed after the Second Opium War, which led to a five-year occupation by Western military forces (December 1857–September 1862).

Over the following decades, Westerners gradually entered deeper into onshore Guangzhou for missionary, commercial, tourist, and other activities. During the Thirteen Factories era (1684–1856), Westerners in urban Guangzhou had resided primarily in the Thirteen Factories business district (see "十三行" in Fig. 1) to the southwest of the ancient walled city, but this was hardly a permanent settlement: Westerners were barred from owning land and factories and from staying in the district outside the trading seasons, and confrontations with local Chinese were frequent. After the Thirteen Factories district was destroyed during the Second Opium War, the Shamian (then called Shameen) Island concession (1861–1945) (see "Shameen" in Fig. 1) was built as a replacement to the southwest of the city, in which Westerners came to enjoy a sociospatial monopoly. While there were other nearby riverine foreign communities in around the same period, such as Henan (then called Honam) (see "Honam Island" in Fig. 1), Shamian was the most significant and stable community, and was the central site for foreign social activities (Ching and Liu 2019, pp. 171–174).

Such was the situation on the land. Guangzhou, however, is a "water city," in which canals, channels, streams, rivers, and lakes have also been of key spaces for human activity and residence. In the Thirteen Factories era, Westerners' ships were forbidden from entering the section of the Pearl River that passed through urban Guangzhou (see "Pearl River" in Fig. 1) and were only permitted to anchor at Pazhou Island (then called Whampoa), 19 km to the east. Typically only high-ranking merchants and seamen were allowed into the city. Westerners thus partly relied on Chinese people working

Figure 1. Map of Guangzhou.
Source: Carrall (1874), attached page. In Stadtbibliothek Braunschweig's collection, used with consent of Stadtbibliothek Braunschweig.

(and often living) on the water to supply and transport food, commodities, and people. During the Shamian era, steamers were permitted to directly enter urban Guangzhou, but in the waters close to Shamian Island itself, the dense boat clusters and their inhabitants, the Dan (also called Tanka, Tankia, or boat people), gradually became a nearby-yet-alien space and community. Besides missionaries, few Westerners visited and went among them with frequency (Conner 2009, pp. 2–4; Farris 2016, pp. 41–45).

The term Dan came into usage as a designation for a cultural group who traditionally lived and worked on junks (boats) in southeastern China's coastal areas starting from the Song Dynasty (960–1279) (He 2023, pp. 83–84). Their boats often anchored in lines along the rivers or coasts, with a large part of the clusters being stationary, forming a unique community and island-like space on the water, close to, yet separate from, the land (Grydehøj and Ou 2017; He and Faure 2016; Luk 2023; Ou and Ma 2017; Wu and Situ 2011) (see Fig. 2). The Dan had varied livelihoods: some worked within the boat clusters, and some lived from transport, fishing, or providing goods and services to people onshore (Conner 2009, pp. 270–271; Huang 2012, pp. 635–639; Luk 2022, pp. 205–206). According to Zhuang (2009, p. 132), the Dan of the Lingnan region (covering modern-day Guangdong, Guangxi, Hainan, Hong Kong, and Macao), possess no autonomous language and speak dialects similar to the terrestrial ones. During the period under discussion, the Dan's living and working places, ways of life, and (marginalized) social status remained relatively stable (Huang 1985, p. 41; Wu and Xia 2019, pp. 70–71), and their boat clusters were particularly dense in the section of the Pearl River between urban Guangzhou and Pazhou, with a population of possibly around 100,000 (estimates vary between sources) (Gordon-Cumming 1886, p. 76; Graves 1890, p. 187; Gray and Gregor 1878; Wu and Chen 2017, pp. 248–249). This community and the boat cluster/river/land environment constitute "the observed" of this article.

Although traditional terrestrial Chinese accounts present the Dan as being engaged in smuggling, prostitution, and thievery, this was only ever true for a small minority of the Dan and was no more common than among the terrestrial Chinese (He 2005; Lingnan Social Studies Institute 1934, pp. 8–9; Zhang 2008). The Dan were discriminated against in Chinese society, leading to prohibitions against their owning land, taking the imperial examination, and engaging in many other mainstream social

Figure 2. Boat clusters in the Shaji Canal on the north side of Shamian.
Source: Unknown photographer (1878). Canal Road (after the tornado, Canton), photo 337/3(37), *Photographs from the India Collection at the British Library*, Primary Source Media, Nineteenth Century Collections Online, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BUKRHJ606268058/GDCS?u=hku&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=93c3d725&pg=1. (Accessed 1 June 2023). Used under Gale Terms of Use.

and cultural activities (Chen 1946; Shapiro 1932; Siu and Liu 2004; Wu 2013). They were "late imperial [Chinese] outcasts on watery margins" (Luk 2023, p. 1).

The reasons for and mechanisms of this discrimination were complex. One reason was the Dan's unclear ethnic origins, which caused them to be perceived as "Others" by the Han majority (Blake 1981, pp. 45–46; He 2005), though there is no solid evidence that they were ethnically or linguistically distinct from the terrestrial Chinese (Anderson 1970, p. 248; Huang 1990; Luo 1978). Another reason was their distinct culture and lifestyle, together with their morality, which differed from and were perceived as "low" relative to those of the terrestrial Chinese (Hiroaki 1967, p. 13; Ward 1965, pp. 38–53). Finally, there were rumors of piracy, national betrayal, and various crimes and sins (Huang 2012, p. 639; Siu 1989, pp. 51–53; Zhang 2008, p. 23). In light of the limited terrestrial resources in southeastern China, these discourses constructed an ideological environment for justifying discrimination, othering, and social exclusion, in which the Dan were unable to produce texts or participate in mainstream public discourse (He 2005, p. 50; Lin and Su 2022; Zhang and Liu 2018, pp. 144–146; Zhang 2008, p. 25).

Gary Chi-Hung Luk (2023) has examined the notion of Dan in terrestrial Chinese texts written by late Qing-Republican intellectuals. In contrast, the present article traces Westerners' representations of the Dan and their boat clusters as a geographical entity, accounting for interactions between the observers and the observed as well as Guangzhou's wider crosscultural sociospatial context. Although there were other foreigners in Guangzhou, Westerners were the majority, and their accounts typically present a colonial logic. Within the Western accounts of this period, the British are most numerous, but we also consider other accounts, for instance from US and French authors. Although Westerners from

different countries visited and wrote about Guangzhou, Anglophone accounts were uniquely influential for both other foreigners and Chinese readers. There are many more sources in English than in other languages, and sources in other languages often referred to English sources, and among them, those which have been translated into English spread more widely. The prevalence of English sources became increasingly pronounced during the second half of the nineteenth century. Therefore, our sources are mainly in English.

Scant scholarly attention has been paid to Western depictions of the Dan. Research on the Dan in the West primarily consists of ethnographic studies. There have been a few Chinese studies focusing on portrayals of the Dan in Western texts, but these studies only summarize the features of the Dan's image in those texts without exploring the complex social, historical, and cross-cultural contexts specific to the local area of Guangzhou, and often neglect the dynamic evolution of those representations over time (Chen 2016; Zhang 2011). This article shows that while Western representations of the Dan were initially relative positive and based on intimate contact, a shift occurred in and around the 1880s, after which more negative themes and more distant observations emerged. We can witness this shift by comparing texts written by individual authors, most of whom visited or resided in Guangzhou only once and published just one text on the subject. We illustrate this gradual shift and what gives rise to it by considering as many relevant texts as possible and analyzing them as a corpus. Attention is paid to the texts' publication dates, times of the authors' Guangzhou experiences, authors' sociocultural backgrounds, and intertextuality among sources.

Dan boat clusters and the closed city

For many years, Guangzhou's Dan lived spatially close to and socially intimate with Westerners. The Chinese authorities' lack of interest in the Dan allowed them to have freer and more frequent interactions with foreigners (Farris 2016, p. 44). During the Thirteen Factories era, most Western visitors to Guangzhou simply remained aboard their ships. The earlier the period, the more likely that Western visitors never got closer to Guangzhou than the anchorage at Pazhou (Conner 2009, pp. 2–4; Farris 2016, p. 44). Access to the Thirteen Factories was restricted to only certain people and (officially) to the trading seasons (around May through November), though some residents did manage to remain inside the district year-round (Farris 2007, p. 68; Morse 1978 [1910], p. 74). Even those Westerners who were permitted entrance to the Thirteen Factories were confined to their assigned business area, plus a few narrow surrounding alleys and suburban areas (Garrett 2001, pp. 80–83; Morse 1978 [1910], pp. 367–368). Westerners were strictly excluded from the city itself, and those who secretly entered forbidden spaces risked violent attack from the Chinese, instigated by local officials (Morse 1978 [1910], pp. 369–392; Wakeman 1966, pp. 73–78).

During their stays on the Pearl River, Westerners' boats were thus "transformed into stationary, floating residential quarters," with necessities for living, eating, and transportation being assisted and provided by both the officials and the nearby Dan community (Armero 1861, pp. 485–486; see also Tiffany 1849, pp. 25–28, 164–166; Wood 1859, pp. 275–277). Westerners also relied on the Dan for local information (Downs 2014 [1997], pp. 62–64; Van Dyke 2005, pp. 60–61). Temporarily sharing similar river spaces and relying upon one another, Westerners and the Dan developed personal and emotional bonds. Westerners had opportunities for entering Dan spaces, and accounts early on in the study period take more of an insider's perspective on the boat clusters and Dan community. These interactions occurred at the start of each Western writer's Guangzhou experience, so that depictions and narratives of Dan were often conspicuous parts of the writings (whether travelogues or memoirs), frequently opening the narration and attracting readers (e.g., Armand 1864; Smith 1847; Tiffany 1849; Wood 1859; Yvan 1858).

Forbidden from exploring on shore, Westerners based much of their social and recreational lives on the water. They could float along on pleasure barges after dinner (Tiffany 1849, p. 230) or participate in rowing and regattas (Berncastle 1850, p. 131; Yvan 1858, p. 49). By the mid-nineteenth century, Westerners' small crafts were increasingly mingling with the Dan boat clusters, contravening the

Guangzhou government's regulations and in spite of Chinese merchants' concerns (Conner 2009, p. 276; Farris 2016, p. 45).

This aquatic coexistence encouraged more intimate interactions, for instance on the river-shore boundary. Osmond Tiffany (1849, p. 230), son of a US merchant, notes that "On the bank [of the Pearl River] are groups of clerks [...] if very hot, standing still looking at the vessels, and talking to the boat girls." Such reports indicate that many Dan interacting regularly with Westerners may have known a kind of Cantonese pidgin English. At this stage, foreign women were still not permitted in Guangzhou, and for the all-male Western community, who lacked access to terrestrial Chinese women, Dan women were the most convenient choice for local romantic relationships, female companionship, and sex. Many Western accounts over the years attest to prostitutes, including some Dan, being brought into the Thirteen Factories (Conner 2009, p. 274; Downs 2014 [1997], p. 39; Van Dyke 2011, p. 61). Chinese accounts also report that some Dan prostitutes "only offer service to Western customers," and scurrilous rumors abounded of Dan women who contracted mysterious diseases from foreign men, which they then sought to rid themselves of by having sex with Chinese men (Lin et al. 2018; Zhang and Liu 2018, pp. 151–152).

In these circumstances, Westerners and the Dan, two groups marginalized by terrestrial Chinese society, interacted both actively and passively. For example, William Hunter, an American businessman and long-term Thirteen Factories resident before the Second Opium War, was known for having a particular Dan mistress (Downs 2014 [1997], p. 49). It is little wonder that Hunter and his peers offered, as we shall see, detailed and insightful accounts of the Dan and their boat clusters.

In the initial stage of the research period, Western representations of the Dan framed the boat clusters as simultaneously isolated and self-contained but also intimately connected and existing in mutual dependence with social processes elsewhere on the water and onshore.

An isolated and self-contained world

The boat clusters bounded by water were represented as insular and self-contained. Westerners often noted the 'aquatic' quality of the Dan and their spaces, which was so exotic to Westerners as to ensure that the Dan appeared distinct and independent from their surroundings, in this case, onshore society.

The Dan were defined as "aquatic tribes of the human species [...] whose hereditary domains are the watery element that supports their little dwelling" (Smith 1847, p. 19), "living by themselves in the midst of its waters" (Yvan 1858, p. 181). Dan living spaces were connected with aquatic lifeways and sociospatial identity: "this massing of boats – belonging to the spot, and to the local river population" (Wood 1859, p. 276). Melchior Yvan (1858, p. 150), French Embassy physician from 1844 to 1846, remarks upon "the population which is born, which lives, and which dies upon the river." This cradle-to-grave rhetoric is pervasive in early Western accounts (e.g., "A visit to Canton" 1861; Tiffany 1849, p. 25), as is the sense of strangeness, exoticism, and novelty seeking connected with it: "the strange modes of life adopted by an amphibious population" (Hinchcliff 1876, p. 392), and "Here was a scene of life that no other stream of the world, probably, exhibits" (see also Armand 1864, pp. 198–199; Beauvoir 1873, p. 412; Ribeiro 1866, p. 74; Taylor 1850, p. 135; Wood 1859, p. 276).

The Dan's separation from the outside world (in this case, life on shore) was also repeatedly emphasized. Focus was initially placed on the spatial distinction from the terrestrial city and the Dan's lack of interaction with terrestrial people: Tiffany (1849, p. 25) writes that the river channel "is densely packed with human beings in every stage of life, in almost every occupation that exists upon the shore that they seldom trespass on." This spatial separation was related to social segregation (e.g., "A visit to Canton" 1861; Hinchcliff 1876, p. 393). Some Westerners recognized the complexity of the Dan's sociospatial existence: not all Dan lived solely on water, some men worked on shore during the day, and others lived with their families on land but worked on the water. This complexity interfered with wider representations of the Dan and required a kind of resolution. Thus, for example, those Dan who did not live solely on the water or who came from other terrestrial areas were often simply not considered "pure boat people" (e.g., "A visit to Canton" 1861; Hinchcliff 1876, p. 392; Wood 1859,

p. 276). This move preserved the discourse of the Dan as purely aquatic and independent from life on the land.

The individual Dan was represented as living their entire life solely on the water, excluded from the land. This implied completeness and self-sufficiency was projected onto the community as a social and spatial whole, with Western writers emphasizing the floating world's fulfillment of every human need, occupation, and sociocultural function. The terrestrial city was unnecessary and belonged to another world: "All the professions contributing to the pleasures and the wants of a great concourse of men, are here in boats, pushing, jostling, elbowing one another: it is, as it were, a regatta of petty commerce and trade!" (Yvan 1858, p. 150). Voice was given to those under observation: when asking a boat girl why she did not go on shore to make a better living, Yvan (1858, p. 154) recalls,

> "Why?" said the young creature. "Do we not possess here everything which can content us? Have not all the ages of life their pleasures on the bed of the Tchou-kiang [the Pearl River] as well as on shore? In our boats, the child receives all the care his weakness requires; the young man exercises his profession in peace, and the old man, also, finds the diversion and repose his age demands."

The Dan and their space were represented as bound to the boat cluster context, spatially and socially independent from the adjacent land.

This conceptualization was relationally constructed. The Dan were represented as different from both Western and terrestrial societies, distinguishing them as the "dual Others" (Lin *et al.* 2018, p. 239; Zhang and Liu 2018, pp. 144–146). They were complete because they had everything the terrestrial city had, yet the reference point was always the land, and it was always separation from the land and terrestrial Chinese that caused the Dan to be recognized as independent. Because characterizations of the Dan were relative to surrounding peoples and spaces, changes in the Dan's surroundings produced changes in conceptualizations of the Dan themselves.

A microcosm of the land and its better "Other"

Relative to the land, the boat clusters were framed simultaneously as (1) microcosms of Guangzhou society and terrestrial China and (2) as utterly unique and superior Others.

The boat clusters were represented as self-sufficient from but also as smaller versions of the land (e.g., Hunter 1882, p. 18; note that although Hunter's work was published in the 1880s, his experiences in Guangzhou date from the early- and mid-nineteenth century). This microcosmic similarity with terrestrial society (albeit largely based on the Western imagination and cognitive associations) was amplified alongside the Dan's separation and completeness. Comparisons between the boat clusters and the land were unavoidable. Tiffany (1849, p. 165) regards the boat clusters as "A perfect town [which] seemed to be built in the water" and "a city in miniature; there were houses, bridges, and winding canals among them, and all between the outer edge of boats and the shore" (see also "A visit to Canton" 1861; Wood 1859, p. 277; Yvan 1858, p. 129).

Yet despite this perception of microcosmic similarity, the boat clusters' difference (rather than just distinctness) from the land was implied to be essential, fundamental, elemental (e.g., "A visit to Canton" 1861; Gray and Gregor 1878, p. 282; Thomson 1873, p. 40; Wood 1859, p. 275). Western narratives tended to emphasize transitions between the solid land and the floating town of the boat clusters. After introducing the filthy, chaotic, and "dull" terrestrial city in five chapters, the first sentence of Yvan's (1858, p. 129) section titled 'The water city' goes: "We will now leave *terra firma*, and in the tanka of the beautiful A-moun go through the floating-town, and the agitated streets of which the Tchou-kiang nurses incessantly the innumerable inhabitants" (Armand 1864, pp. 199–200; see also Thomson 1873, p. 43; Williams 1864, p. 133). This shift is emphasized through chapter divisions, implying two worlds that prompt fundamentally different experiences and feelings.

All this was entangled with a Western tendency toward relative evaluations of the land and the boat clusters, with Westerners strongly preferring the latter. The boat clusters were said to be clean and

orderly in comparison with the land. Turning from the huge, messy, filthy, and chaotic terrestrial districts to the boat clusters, Wood (1859, p. 276) writes:

> Their boats, roofed over with matting, are exceedingly neat, everything being scrupulously clean, and the smallest thing having its proper place. Order and system are especially necessary to this neatness, as the boat is the permanent dwelling of its three or four inmates – their kitchen, dining-room, and bed-chamber.

In such texts, negative experiences and feelings toward the unclean land were followed by positive sentiments toward Dan spaces (Armand 1864, pp. 198–201; see also Thomson 1873, p. 43). These texts habitually refer to the Dan as poor, lending them respectability for keeping their spaces clean and orderly despite their poverty. This implicitly echoes modern Western ideals of diligence and self-determination while contrasting with the stereotypical Western notion of Oriental "supine malleability" (Said 2003 [1978], p. 206), as is evident in the foul and ramshackle state of terrestrial Chinese society.

The boats' inner and outer spaces were said to enjoy better social orderliness, openness, vitality, and beauty than those of the land. They were "anchored in long lines abreast of one another, forming streets as it were, but broader than many of the streets of the city or suburbs" (Hunter 1882, p. 19). Social and communal orderliness and openness were favored ideas in the West itself at the time (Girouard 1987). Westerners thus imagined Dan boat clusters as more amenable than the perceived chaos of terrestrial Guangzhou (Cox 1880, p. 422).

Westerners faced hostility from the terrestrial Chinese but were offered hospitality on the water. When Westerners needed to transport goods or people in Guangzhou, they encountered "the solicitations of the Tanka girls of China," young Dan women who were "quite good looking, with cheerful faces […] and in the smiling, merry animation with which they urge you to employ their boats, many of them display beautifully regular and white teeth" (see also Williams 1864, p. 133; Wood 1859, pp. 276–277). The women were also described as skillful and hard-working boat drivers, and Western writers expressed gratitude toward them (Williams 1864, p. 133).

Hunter (1882, p. 27) describes the Dan as "A very useful class whose boats were always at the service of any one to cross the river, for the Gardens, or to go to the Hongs [Thirteen Factories]." These boat drivers were neighbors to the Westerners, who went out rowing on the Pearl River as they were forbidden recreation or exercise on land (Yvan 1858, p. 49).From a Western perspective, neither Westerners nor the Dan had a place in the terrestrial city, and they shared a mutual respect for hard work, physicality, good humor, and politeness, in contrast to the stereotypical terrestrial Oriental, who was fat, lazy, and had an "immobilized or unproductive quality" (Said 2003 [1978], p. 208). Moving from the boat clusters to the land, Yvan (1858, p. 37) writes:

> These inhabitants of dry land have nothing in common with the polite and kind hosts of the floating-houses on the Tchou-kiang; they are a mob of rogues from Fo-kien and Kuang-ton, filled with hatred and envy. Nothing guarantees a stranger from the attacks of these wretches: the caprice of the moment, the wind which blows, a bad humour, are the only motives of their actions.

By shifting back and forth, Yvan emphasizes the terrestrial-aquatic difference.

Westerners also represented the boat clusters as "poetic." This too was built on contrast with the "dull" terrestrial city (Thomson 1873, p. 40; Wood 1859, pp. 270–275; Yvan 1858, p. 129), while the Dan were said to be contented, full of life, energetic, and artistic, despite their poverty: "the Cantonese who chose their domicile on the river were among the most prudent and artistically inclined of all the inhabitants of Canton," and their boats were "floating houses of the poets on water" (Yvan 1858, p. 137). Such representations project or transplant Western values upon the Dan. Yvan (1858, p. 139) reports that "Here men place themselves, with long poles in their hands,

to move the house when the proprietor wishes to change the scene," yet this depiction seems quite imaginary: it is unlikely that individual Dan would move house (and thereby leave their local community behind) simply because they wanted a change of scenery. Such poetic images of the Dan were cumulatively constructed through decades of Western writings (e.g., Smith 1847, p. 19; Thomson 1873, p. 45; Tiffany 1849, p. 28).

Floating, fluidity, and freedom on the water (contrasted with terrestrial unchangeability and immobility) and a sense of the spiritual over the material were seen as characteristic of the Dan and their boat clusters. The Dan came to embody the characteristics that Westerners anticipated seeing when visiting China:

> The floating-town of Canton is, to all the Europeans who visit the Celestial Empire, the object of an exclusive predilection; for them China, the real China, the fantastic China of our screens, fans, and lacquer work, is all on the river which balances on its overhanging surface. (Yvan 1858, p. 129)

In referring to popular Chinese paintings of idealized river scenes, Yvan highlights how this group of Western writers frequently approached Guangzhou: The Oriental sublime of their imaginations appeared to them on the floating town of boat clusters, not the land. Both written texts and decorative Chinese – or Chinese-related – commodities engaged in intertextual circulation of images and representations.

The Dan were often perceived as more cultured than the terrestrial Chinese. Yvan (1858, p. 150) notes that "All professions are represented on the Tchou-kiang, even that of the school-master! It is not a rare thing to meet tanka-girls who can read and write." Such defense of the Dan's spiritual and cultural lives is linked with Westerners' (especially missionaries') expansionary logic and the projection of Western values, impulses and ambitions, as discussed below.

Westerners also positively compared the Dan's "natural beauty" with mainlanders' appearances. This applied especially to Dan women: "The physique of the boatwomen is vastly superior to that of their countrywomen who live on terra firma" (Gray and Gregor 1878, p. 283), and "their feet are bare" (Wood 1859, p. 277). This was attributed partly to their life and work on the river and partly to their relaxing and outgoing culture (Thomson 1873, p. 45; Wood 1859, p. 277). Terrestrial Chinese society was seen as overly solemn and suppressing natural tendencies, with women being hidden away, out of sight. The Dan stood apart from terrestrial society, allowing them to serve as a favorable "particularized Other."

Dan boat clusters were also more agreeable to Western tastes related to spatial and social organization. The multitude of boats formed clusters, which were then grouped together into a floating town that was seen as complete in itself. Yvan (1858, p. 131) introduces the boat clusters as follows:

> The town of boats occupies a space of several leagues of the Tchou-kiang; it is divided into quarters like London and Paris, and like our great cities has its commercial streets, and its fashionable districts. The suburbs – that is to say, the part of the river which is inhabited by the lowest class – are composed of narrow, winding streets [and] consist of lines of tankas.

This description of an integrated, well-functioning, and organized site refers back to the Western metropolis. Thereafter, in each part of his text, Yvan (1858) emphasizes the boat town's relations with others and its internal divisions of labor and function. He describes the spatial relationships between different neighborhoods for different kinds and classes of residents (Yvan 1858, p. 132). He also highlights the importance of different kinds of labor for the entire Dan community: "The fishermen in this amphibious society represent the horticulturists and gardeners who supply large towns. Every morning they plough the inexhaustible plains of the ocean, and furnish the market with the principal object of consumption" (Yvan 1858, p. 133). He says much the same of merchants and other groups.

Many texts similarly introduce the boat clusters as an integrated whole (e.g., Hunter 1882, pp. 33–39; Wood 1859, pp. 276–287). This floating town forms an interactive system, positively reminiscent of the Western city and way of life.

The above discourses show the Western predilection for contrasting the Dan and their boat clusters with terrestrial culture and space, a binary in which the Dan either represented positive images of traditional Chinese politeness, harmoniousness, and poetry or self-glorifying Western images of cleanliness, orderliness, hospitality, diligence, religiosity, and naturalness. These conceptualizations were projected onto the Dan's floating town, causing both exotic and familiar cultural ideals to emerge and prompting Western admiration. The Dan served as a comparative means of negatively evaluating the terrestrial Chinese, as the absence or contradiction of goodness.

The larger terrestrial city was pervasively of greatest significance to Westerners. Even when portraying the boat clusters as a single unit, the land provided the latent conceptual framework. The floating town, though depicted quite positively up to this stage (the mid-nineteenth century), was a dependent variable. Westerners' representations of the floating town were determined more by their experiences of the land than by their experiences of the boat clusters themselves. This relationality meant that changing ideas concerning the land ultimately altered Western perceptions of the Dan.

A changing Western presence in a changing city

After the Thirteen Factories district burned down in 1856, Shamian Island was selected as the new center for the Western presence in Guangzhou, with a few other nearshore sites developed as well. Shamian gradually became a hub of Western social, economic, and political activities as well as the site of first disembarkation for most Western visitors and new residents (Lin and Su 2022). The socio-spatial relationship between Westerners and the Dan changed accordingly.

The first crucial shift concerns Westerners' itineraries in the city and is closely related to Shamian. After the Second Opium War and Westerners' five-year occupation of the city, restrictions were lifted on Western ships approaching Guangzhou and Westerners entering the walled city (Conner 2009, p. 255). More and more steamers came to the Pearl River, capable of moving faster and through shallower channels than the hitherto-dominant wind-powered ships. This allowed them to reach central Guangzhou using new and more direct sailing routes, typically by sailing up the smaller channel from Macao (see the "Pearl River" on the left in Fig. 1), bypassing the hitherto-unavoidable anchorage at Pazhou (Conner 2009, p. 24; Van Dyke 2005, pp. 46–49).

Wharfs and piers were gradually constructed on and around Shamian (see Fig. 1) so that Westerners could disembark directly on this colonial island enclave or at the mainland wharfs immediately to its east, just across a bridge (Rocher 1893). Moreover, Westerners gained access to the wider terrestrial city and suburbs, rather than being confined to Pazhou and nearby river islands (Conner 2009, pp. 215–240; Farris 2016, pp. 164–177).

As a result, most Westerners had no direct contact with Guangzhou's boat clusters, which were often little more than a site glimpsed from the deck of a steamer (Charles 1896, pp. 195–197; Plauchut 1899, p. 46; Ricalton 1901, p. 31; Schmid 1883, pp. 141–143). Accounts from the later portion of the study period often adopted an outsider's perspective, with an indirect view and rhetoric that placed the boat clusters at the periphery of the wider narrative.

Many later Western observations of the boat clusters were literally made *from* Shamian, noting that the idyllic Western enclave was "overlooking the closely-packed house-boats which lie moored close below us" (Gordon-Cumming 1886, p. 28). This "overlooking" angle contrasts with the earlier side-by-side and more equal perspective from the water, suggesting a sense of superiority and dominance linked to Western hegemony over Eastern Others.

This spatial relationship and perspective made it easy to observe the "large population […] at our very doors" (Graves 1890, p. 187), "even when we go no further than the limits of this green isle [of Shamian], but sit watching the infinitely varied boats or junks" (Gordon-Cumming 1886, p. 75). There was, however, no longer frequent contact between the observer and the observed, with few accounts of

interaction between Westerners and the Dan, overshadowed by reflections upon a proximity that did not matter in practice.

Westerners often "watched" from their *terra firma*, with Shamian being a solid and stable island compared with the floating boat clusters. In Said's (2003 [1978], p. 103) words, "the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached." The difference of the Dan and their space was negatively highlighted to fortify boundaries between the West and non-West and maintain unequal power relations.

A vulnerable and dependent part

The late-nineteenth century saw a change in conceptions, with Western accounts evidencing increasing ambivalence toward the Dan and their floating town. As Westerners themselves became more engaged with the terrestrial city, they came to see the Dan as less insular and self-contained, understanding that they mixed with and relied upon terrestrial society. With increasing access to different parts of Guangzhou, deepening Western knowledge about the area altered spatial understandings of the boat clusters: "It is not only along the sides of the broad Pearl River, but along the network of innumerable canals and creeks which communicate with it, that they [the boats] are found" (Bird 1883, p. 56; see also Browne 1901, p. 56; Turner 1894, p. 23). Such accounts do not see the boat clusters as bounded and discrete, and there is awareness that "many of the men work on land all day, only returning at night" (Gordon-Cumming 1886, p. 77) and that they "intermixed a great deal with the Chinese" (Graves 1890, p. 187). This clashed with earlier conceptualizations.

Furthermore, there emerged the idea that the Dan were affected by problems they could not solve on their own; they were no longer a complete and perfect whole but were deemed weak and vulnerable. For example, "when a typhoon happens to come that way […] there is much wailing and drowning […] the missing ones are not noticed much in that ever-increasing multitude" (Charles 1896, p. 198). This vulnerability is both natural (boats are seen as more vulnerable than houses) and social (the community is seen as incapable of and uninterested in securing people and property). Previously, the Dan's poverty had been seen as producing diligence; now, it was seen as a threat to their safety and wellbeing (Gordon-Cumming 1886, pp. 76–78).

Westerners' attitudes toward the Dan mixed empathy with disgust. Gordon-Cumming (1886, p. 76), observing the Dan from Shamian, writes: "I often linger on the embankment to watch these, till I am conscious of a cold mist rising, and am glad to retreat to a cheery fireside – not without a thought of pity for the children who can never know the meaning of that word." She proceeds to empathetically describe other terrible aspects of the Dan's lives (Gordon-Cumming 1886, pp. 77–78). The Baptist missionary Graves (1890, p. 187) advocates "systematic effort […] to reach these people […] Certainly something should be tried to relieve us of the charge of neglecting so numerous a body of our fellow men." Formerly a happy, self-sufficient water community, the Dan were now seen as a suffering floating population in need of help.

This shift coincided with changing perceptions of the Guangzhou local government's water police, a Chinese group that Westerners had previously tended to depict negatively. Whereas earlier writings had presented these as evil police officers who blackmailed the Dan and signified Chinese autocracy (Gray and Gregor 1878, pp. 280–281; Yvan 1858, p. 113), Westerners now emphasized their role in ensuring public safety (Gordon-Cumming 1886, p. 77). The Dan, in turn, were represented as a peripheral, backward, and problematic part of Guangzhou that require regulation and protection by surrounding terrestrial society.

In another account, MacGowan (1897, pp. 296–298) of the London Missionary Society discussed the threat that the "homeless" Dan posed to Shamian's living conditions: he proposed that Westerners adopt the policy "that not the [boat] people, but the mandarins [officials], shall be held responsible for any injury to the life or property of their subjects." The Dan and their boat clusters, in a close-yet-alien sociospatial relationship with the Westerners, had become, from the Westerners' perspective, a peripheral, subordinate, and silent part of Chinese society, neither independent nor worth communicating and negotiating with.

A lower part of the Chinese whole

In previous eras, Westerners had close contact with the Dan and observed their boat clusters from within. Western accounts represented the Dan and their spaces as clean, hospitable, polite, harmonious, and poetic, in contrast to the terrestrial Chinese and their spaces. This sense of Westerner-Dan affinity dwindled over time.

The Shaji Canal, described as a "dirty stream" (Brassey 1880, p. 355), separated the island from the mainland to the north. As construction of Shamian's community grew more complete, Western disgust for the Dan living on the Shaji increased:

> A narrow creek separates it [Shamian] from the mainland, but not sufficiently to preserve it from all the offensive odours which seem to form part of Chinese national life. Small boats crowd this creek […]. All these are manned by families which reside permanently in them. The result is that the air is continually rent with the loud voices of this floating population. It is also rendered unwholesome by the presence of many people who have never yet learned the first lesson in regard to sanitary laws. (MacGowan 1897, p. 296)

In this description, the Dan and mainlanders are indistinguishably dirty and uncivilized, and the preference for the water space and its population over that of the terrestrial city has vanished. Focus now rested on distinguishing the Westerners' own place (Shamian) from the encircling Chinese space. This was aided by the sharp inside-outside contrast permitted by Shamian's emerging status as a clearly bounded utopian island enclave (Lin and Su 2022).

The greater the Westerners' success at creating a microcosm of the West within Guangzhou, the more interested they became in elevating Shamian's status relative to Guangzhou and particularly the boat clusters surrounding the island. As Westerners depended less and less on services provided by the Dan, they gradually presented the Dan not as gentle or hospitable but instead as obsequious and rude: "These boats and many others are sculled by coquettish young damsels whose shrill voices can be heard from afar as they glide laughingly along, ever ready with a joke or a pert reply" (see also Browne 1901, p. 56; Charles 1896, pp. 195–196). This depiction of boatwomen was related to their aforementioned reputation for prostitution, echoing an idea of Oriental or Chinese women as "creatures of a male power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing" (Said 2003 [1978], p. 207).

The Dan were now often depicted as morally inferior, no longer possessing greater spirituality or religiosity than the terrestrial Chinese. Previously positive religious characteristics became negative superstition, with associated bad habits: "Their morals are loose. The men are mostly gamblers, and many of the women are not chaste. Opium-smoking is also quite prevalent among the men," characteristics that Western missionaries attributed to a lack of "real religious belief" (Graves 1890, p. 187).

Changing sociospatial relations between Westerners and the Dan lessened the former's respect for the latter. By representing the Dan as weak and vulnerable, Westerners' writings discursively created them as being in a dependent relationship with the surrounding terrestrial city.

Incoherent boat clusters

Descriptions of the boat clusters as a coherent floating town lost popularity. Later Western representations were more in a style and rhetoric of repetition, categorization, enumeration, and cataloguing. For instance, Gordon-Cumming (1886, p. 79) introduces the "whole fleets of market boats" by means of a simple list:

> There are oil boats and firewood boats, rice boats and sugar-cane boats, boats for vegetables and boats for the sale of flowering plants; there are fruit boats, bean-curd boats, confectioners' boats,

shrimp boats, and fish boats; boats for sundry meats, and for pork in particular; boats for the sale of crockery, of salt, or of clothing.

Her descriptions amount to nothing more than what she observed, with no interest in internal connections or the functioning of Dan society. Such writing was dominated by a novelty-seeking impulse and an arrogant assumption that the Dan could be understood through observation alone, without interaction.

This mode of introducing the boat clusters was pervasive among Western texts of this period (e.g., Bird 1883, pp. 56–58; Charles 1896, pp. 195–198; Droeze 1896, p. 618; Graves 1890, p. 187; MacGowan 1897, pp. 293–296; Turner 1894, p. 23), in which the floating town was transformed into a succession of "repeating islands" (Benítez-Rojo 1996): related, affiliated, and subordinated to the mainland. Yet the various shifts in Western perceptions of the Dan were not recognized or mentioned by their authors.

By the end of the century, the Dan and their boat clusters were no longer commonly seen as a coherent floating town. The isolated, self-contained, microcosmic, and preferable "Others" had become peripheral to and dependent upon terrestrial society, vulnerable, and as bad as (if not worse than) the land. Western writers were no longer interested in the community's internal functioning but were instead content to categorize the Dan and their boat clusters in terms of seriality and repetition.

Changing observers, sources, and sociospatial contexts

Changing composition of the observers

We have studied Westerners' changing representations of the Dan and their boat clusters by relating these to changing sociospatial relations and interactions between Westerners, the Dan, and their respective places. The observers themselves had also changed.

The composition of the Western community underwent constant change, so that the earlier and later authors were two quite different groups of people, with quite different ideologies. This is a demonstration of and should be contextualized in an increasing Western interventionist impulse in both Guangzhou and China more generally (Fiske 2011, p. 216; Johnson 2017, p. 22). The development of racial science in the global colonial context also contributed to these changes (Bridges 2002, p. 66; Zuelow 2016, p. 91). The earlier arrivals were usually businessmen (some doubling as diplomats), like William Hunter, with a small number of missionaries (Downs 2014 [1997], p. 505). Later visitors saw more and more professional diplomats, tourists, groups of clergymen, and wives of men working in the city with "gentility" (Hunter 1984, p. i). Between the 1860s and the start of the 1900s, increasing numbers of diplomats and missionaries arrived in Guangzhou (Hunter 1984, p. 6; Thompson 2009, p. 14), and Western women were for the first time permitted entrance to the city.

Missionaries exhibited exceptional "rigidity in their cultural values and a corresponding contempt" (Downs 2014 [1997], p. 336) for the Chinese, especially the Dan. Missionary accounts frequently remark that, relative to the terrestrial Chinese, few Dan converted to Christianity (Graves 1890, p. 187). Such statements were often followed by negative depictions of the Dan's poverty, low morals, and the terrible state of their homes (Graves 1890, pp. 187–188; MacGowan 1897, p. 298). There is a colonial logic here, with the Dan identified as poor, depraved heathens requiring Western salvation, regulation, and civilization. This echoes Downs' (2014 [1997], p. 337; see also Miller 1969, pp. 57–80; Woodcock 1969, p. 104) argument that "missionary attitudes" regarding Chinese (especially Cantonese) people implied "cultural superiority," targeting the most vulnerable as they "were also the most likely to accept the faith." The Dan were thus typical targets for missionaries, who were encouraged by notions of Dan inferiority. MacGowan (1897, pp. 296–298) appeals for stricter and more systematic governance of the Dan and the water space, while Graves (1890, p. 188) calls on fellow missionaries to enter the boat clusters, where "Perhaps a floating school might be tried, or the experiment of having a floating chapel among them."

The shift in ideas concerning the Dan thus reflected changes in the Western community. Earlier Western businessmen cared little about religious intervention, while later upper-class writers depicted the Dan and their space as weak, poor, and requiring spiritual and managerial assistance and regulation. This strengthened key representational features of the boat clusters and their residents in the later period: degraded, peripheral, vulnerable, and dependent.

Changing sources and changing sociospatial contexts

Changes in interactions between the observer and the observed (itineraries, loci of activity, modes of contact) and variations in the group of observers coincided with profound shifts in the sociospatial context and the intertextual system.

In the Thirteen Factories period, Westerners had direct contact with the Dan and their boat clusters. In the later period, Westerners' knowledge and understanding of the Dan (social status, role, relationship with terrestrial society) was increasingly derived from terrestrial Chinese accounts and interactions with the terrestrial Chinese. Explicit and implicit references to terrestrial Chinese sources increased accordingly.

Earlier works display an explicit Western-Chinese intertextuality: Westerners recognized and remarked upon their references to terrestrial discourses. For example, see Gray and Gregor's (1878, p. 280) record of the Dan's origins and the reasons for the discrimination against them:

> [In Chinese society,] various opinions have been expressed about the origin of the boat population of China. Sometimes they are said to be the descendants of persons who have been convicted of treason, and in consequence deemed unworthy of homes on terra firma. The boat people of Canton, at all events, are said by native annalists to be the descendants of a person named Loo Tsun […] His descendants were much persecuted by the imperialists as an accursed race, and were eventually made to take up their quarters in boats, not being considered worthy to reside ashore.

Introductions, judgments, and explanations in earlier accounts are mostly either given in the passive voice or as third-person narrator indirect speech, often explicitly noted and attributed to Chinese "native annalists," "imperialists," and other terrestrial Chinese. This narrative device allows Western writers to distance themselves from the terrestrial discourse while implicitly acknowledging their own uncertain knowledge of the Dan and sometimes expressing sympathy with them. The rhetoric shifted with time, as exemplified by this turn-of-the-century excerpt:

> The inhabitants of these floating dwellings are called Tankia, which means boat-dwellers; their ancestors were also amphibians. They are looked upon as a class below the land people, and they have many customs peculiar to themselves. (Ricalton 1901, p. 29)

Terrestrial sources and knowledge came to be used implicitly, with Western writers narrating in an active voice, marked by free indirect discourse. Westerners in later periods internalized and accepted what had previously been doubted and distanced. Terrestrial Chinese discourses were treated as generally correct, with no need for skepticism or verification. This was in addition to the many judgments the Westerners confidently reached with no evidence given at all. For instance, Graves (1890, p. 187) declares, without explanation or reference, that "[the Dan] are probably descendants of the aboriginal tribes who occupied Southern China before the advent of the Lai-man or Chinese race," and "there is every reason to believe that they were originally of a different race."

Some knowledge was derived from previous Western accounts, which had in turn drawn upon earlier Chinese sources, as evidenced by the intertextual repetition of details and ideas. Compare, for example, statements concerning internal divisions among the water population in Graves (1890, p. 187), Gray and Gregor (1878, p. 280), and Wood (1859, p. 276): all three sources classify the

water population into two groups, the "true boat people" or Dan and the others from different places. Similarly, Ricalton (1901, p. 29), Hinchliff (1876, p. 392), and Yvan (1858, p. 132) all claim that the Dan's ancestors were "amphibians" or "amphibious." As there was no Chinese equivalent to the scientific term "amphibian" at that time, this precise word must have been introduced by earlier Western writers and repeated by later writers. Even when the original sources were terrestrial Chinese, statements were deemed more credible if the intertextual chains went through a Western (predominantly English) textual circulation system and appeared in multiple Western accounts. Chinese discourses recorded in Western accounts were considered more reliable than the originals, making them eligible to receive a personal tone of confident knowledgeability and a kind of ethnographic credibility.

This phenomenon was situated within and determined by wider trends of Western-Chinese interaction and Westerners' sociospatial positioning in Guangzhou. The two Opium Wars, initiating the forceful penetration of China by the West, placed Westerners in a privileged position and provided them opportunities to enter formerly forbidden parts of terrestrial Guangzhou, including the walled city, and to interact more intensively with terrestrial Chinese society. Despite the frequent conflicts that rose in some periods, the formerly inhospitable terrestrial Chinese increasingly grew accustomed to Westerners and Western places as normal parts of their city and lives, with intensifying commercial, social, and cultural interactions (Conner 2009, pp. 215–240; Farris 2016, pp. 164–189; Nield 2015, pp. 45–47). As Westerners began perceiving the land less negatively, the comparative function of the Dan and their boat clusters dwindled in significance.

Given greater opportunities for interaction and communication, Westerners came to better understand the terrestrial Chinese, including their discourses of the Dan's peripheral status. These conceptualizations grew, developed, and circulated over time, so that terrestrial Chinese discourses concerning the Dan were slowly adopted by Westerners. Furthermore, as Westerners acquired places of their own within the city, such as Shamian, and the river route came under their full control, they had little reason to interact with the marginalized Dan. This itself contributed to Western dependence on terrestrial Chinese ideas and knowledge of the Dan and their places.

Conclusion

The diachronic shift of Western representations of the Dan and their boat clusters was thus due to a multiplicity of intertwined and changing interests, positions, and perspectives that resulted from shifting sociospatial power relations between not only Westerners and the Dan but also between Westerners and the terrestrial Chinese. The former was largely dependent on and served the latter. The contradictions and inconsistencies in these discursive constructions shattered their claims to objectivity and challenged the essentialist conception of Otherness. For Westerners, representing the Dan was a way to manage crosscultural encounters and intercultural relations, but more importantly, it helped Westerners define themselves and perpetuate their superiority as they portrayed those who had closer contact with them as relatively better but still inferior "Others." These representations, as cultural constructs produced in specific sociohistorical contexts, were embedded in colonial discourse and ideology.

The observers' (Westerners') cognition and comprehension of the boat cluster as a "floating town" depended on their relationship with the land. This was due to the presupposed floating town-terrestrial city binary as well as the terrestrial city's dominant significance within the binary. Once the terrestrial city changed, many other spaces changed accordingly. As conceptions of the terrestrial city became more positive, and familiarity with the terrestrial city increased, the floating town's contrasting function became less useful, and the need for interactions between Westerners and the Dan withered, leading to a loss of Western familiarity with the Dan. The boat clusters were now represented as a dependent, peripheral part of life on shore. Being incomplete, the floating town was less a microcosm of or superior alternative to the terrestrial city; it was more a vulnerable periphery of the land. It was less an integrated and dynamic whole and more a repeated static numeration. The changing demographics of the Western observers strengthened this shift.

In Western representations, the Dan as the "Other" were portrayed as sharing some qualities with the "self" and therefore viewed more positively than the terrestrial Chinese before the Opium Wars; however, this same group of people were depicted as utterly different and perceived even more negatively than the terrestrial Chinese following the wars. This diachronic shift was a product of changes in Westerners' sociospatial status in Guangzhou, which moved from the restricted and inhospitable spaces of the earlier Thirteen Factories era (the waterfront Thirteen Factories district, Pazhou and surrounding islands – all close to water spaces and the Dan) to the superior and utopian space of the later Shamian era (with better access to terrestrial society and space, with control over particular pieces of territory – and thus a close-yet-alien relationship with the Dan and their water spaces). This reflected changing power relations in the colonial process. The floating town was relationally marginalized from an external perspective, rendered insignificant, dependent, and vulnerable compared with the vast mainland.

Changing Western representations and perceptions of the Dan also contributed to the mainlanding of Guangzhou as a whole in the Western mindset. Over time, the boat clusters ceased to be viewed as a floating town, Dan society came to be seen as peripheral to the city, and Westerners themselves moved from the relatively distant Pazhou and surrounding islands into the near-shore enclave of Shamian. The river, water spaces and the Dan who frequented them came to have less significance for Western understandings of Guangzhou, becoming peripheral and marginalized elements of the urban space, rather than entities used to help define and mediate conceptualizations of Guangzhou.

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