TOWARD AN ARCHIPELAGIC CHINA:

Alternative territorial imaginaries in two late 18th century Chinese novels

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Lu Feng

University of Warwick, UK <Lu.Feng@warwick.ac.uk>

ABSTRACT: This article examines how two little-known mid-Qing (1644-1911) Chinese novels, *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji*, construct alternative territorial imaginaries of Qing China through a constellation of aquatic elements, including submarine archipelagos, the whirlpool phenomena and river systems. Drawing upon recent scholarship on aquapelagos, it shows that the two texts display a fluid spatial continuum that reconceives Qing geography and redefines Chineseness through the centrality of waters. It situates both novels within a genealogy of Chinese island writing as well as the historical context of late imperial China, in order to shows how they reshape imperial discourses of islands into a critique of the Qing empire. It also utilises multiple mid-Qing maps to provide visual representation of the novels' innovative assemblages of aquatic spaces as well as their imaginative underwater archipelagos marked by riverine geographies. In so doing, this study argues that both novels embody the processes of cultural assimilation and fragmentation that characterised Qing imperial expansionism. It challenges the homogenising paradigms of continentalism and nationalism that has informed contemporary concepts of China, contributing to the envisioning of decolonial futures.

KEYWORDS: Island literature, geographical imagination, archipelagos, aquapelagos, Qing imperialism, epistemic decolonisation

Introduction

Recent scholarship on the concept of the aquapelago offers a nuanced framework for understanding the dynamic interplay between terrestrial and aquatic elements in cultural imagination. The concept of aquapelagos – defined as "integrated terrestrial and marine assemblages… fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging" (Hayward, 2024, p. 4) – provides a particularly powerful lens for examining how geographical configurations influence social and cultural identities through the inter-relation of water and land. As Hayward (2024) points out, while the term *archi*pelago refers to fixed spatial entities on a surface level, focusing on island-to-island connections, the *aqua*pelago is a performed space constituted by human interactions with a multitude of wet entities, including rivers, tides, ocean currents, submarine depths, seafloor surfaces, and various forms of non-human actants that move between land and aerial and weather systems. Aquapelagic thinking thus brings to light the spatial continuum that connects terrestrial cultural landscapes produced by agriculture and habitation with those underwater "scapes" produced by fisheries, ocean floor resource exploitation etc. (Hayward, 2024, p. 4). In recent work on the topic (Hayward & Visentin, 2025), the focus of the aquapelago has been extended to inland waterscapes,

identified as "interior aquapelagos." As such, aquapelagic theory enables an understanding of how waters play a generative role in cultural identity and territorial imagination, holding potential for challenging static notions of cultural belonging associated with political concepts of territory and the homogenising paradigms of continentalism and nationalism. The novels discussed here intersect with these frameworks in an idiosyncratic way in that the realms they depict beneath the surface of the ocean are not aquatic ones but, rather, terrestrial territories with skies, clouds, ground and rivers that exist stably beyond the Laws of Physics and are accessible from the surface world.

Drawing on and extending the aquapelagic framework to encompass this complication, this article examines how two little-known late 18th century Chinese novels, *Xiyi Meng* 希夷梦 (*Chentuan's Dream*) and *Haiyou Ji* 海游记 (*Ocean Adventure*), construct their alternative territorial imaginaries of Qing China through water-centred spatial logics.[1] After conquering the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the Manchu rulers of the Qing (1644-1912) greatly expanded their territory by gaining control of non-Ming territories in present-day Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan, thereby establishing the Qing as a new empire almost double the size of the Ming by the mid-18th century (Peterson, 2016). Rather than conceiving China as a monolithic landmass demarcated by the rigid boundaries between land and sea, however, these two texts define it through a constellation of aquatic elements, including river systems, whirlpool phenomena and underwater archipelagos, that display an undefined, constantly shifting, and somewhat fragmented geography. Their aquatic assemblages reveal complex cultural dynamics between the Qing state and its subjects in terms of cultural identification.

On the one hand, the two texts reflect the emergence of the Qing as a maritime power over the 17th and 18th centuries. This era witnessed the Qing's increasing reliance on regional maritime trade in the East Asian Seas, its annexation of offshore islands, shoals, and sandbars, the establishment of a formidable navy and the institutionalisation of a customs structure, and its embrace of international trade that contributed significantly to early globalisation (Ng, 2017; Po, 2018; Zhao, 2013). The Qing's increasing maritime engagement generated a discourse of islands studied by Emma Teng in her seminal 2004 study on how Taiwan islands were transformed from foreign islands to a Chinese province over the 17th and 18th centuries. Teng advocates for viewing the Qing as a non-Western imperial power comparable to European colonial regimes, and introduces the concept of "Qing imperialism" (2004, p. 10) for a re-examination of the territorial expansionism of the Qing. Considering imperialism as a cultural process whose "discoveries and trespasses are imagined and energized through signs, metaphors, and narratives" (Thomas, 1994, p. 2), Teng demonstrates how the proliferation of cultural representations of islands in travel writings and visual materials of the time helped to transform distant islands once conceived as lying beyond the traditional boundaries of the Chinese domain into familiar parts of the imperial realm. The popular discourse of islands thus participated in the imperialist imagination of the possible territorial expansion of the Qing empire, as well as the opportunity to "civilise" the foreign people. Arguably, the two novels under discussion were products of this discourse.

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[1] The translation of the two novels' titles here follows Patrick Hanan's rendition (2004, p. 31, n4). The publication date of *Haiyou Ji* is largely ambiguous. Scholars such as Cao and Zhang (2012, p. 35) suggest that the novel was produced during the reign of Jiaqing Emperor (1796-1820). Although both novels have been reproduced in highly accessibly modern formats, they have so far received very limited scholarly attention.

On the other hand, *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji* complicate and expand current understandings of the Qing conception of islands. Through analysing their aquatic construction of a parallel world to the Qing territory, this article argues that not all Chinese cultural representations of islands produced during this period served an imperialist purpose. As Teng (2004, p. 10) recognises, encounters with the maritime frontiers provided the Qing travel writers "with an opportunity to look back at the self", encouraging cultural reflection and new understandings of Chinese culture, while also prompting them to explore the ways in which other cultures could challenge their societal norms. *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji* powerfully exemplify this process of cultural self-reflection and critique through their watery imaginaries of Qing geography.

Unlike the elite writers studied by Teng, the anonymous writers of the two Qing novels likely came from lower social strata, and the late 18th century Chinese society in which they lived no longer enjoyed the efficient administration, social stability, and steady expansion that had characterised the reign of the three great emperors: Kangxi (r. 1662–1722), Yongzheng (r. 1723–35), and Qianlong (r. 1736–95) (McMahon, 2015). Instead, beginning with the reign of Jiaqing Emperor (r. 1796-1820), when the two novels were produced, Chinese society was deeply troubled by various problems related to waters: surging population and intensified farming led to land degradation and frequent river flooding (Dodgen, 2001; Mostern, 2021); increased competition for resources and the lack of stable habitation triggered widespread migration – mostly via waterways – to both internal borderlands and maritime frontiers, places where conflicts emerged and even escalated into popular uprisings (McMahon, 2015); and there was also a perceived decline in government efficiency and fiscal management, making it more difficult for the state to stabilize society (McMahon, 2015). As this article will show, it was these water-related disruptions of imperial order that informed the alternative territorial imaginaries of *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji*. Thie fictive construction of these aquatic connections undermines the Qing empire's attempts at territorial integration. And their imagination of submarine archipelagos characterised by riverine geographies, in particular, reveals that these Qing writers conceived islands not as extensions of imperial authority but as aquatic refuges where diverse displaced populations can imagine different forms of community. Such riverine archipelagic imaginaries capture the complex dynamics of the Qing empire's expansionist project, directing us to spatial diversity and regional difference irreducible to the framework of the nation-state, and illuminating the simultaneous processes of cultural assimilation and fragmentation that characterised Qing imperialism (Rawski, 1985).

This article will situate the two texts within both the genealogy of Chinese island literature and the historical context of the late Ming and Qing dynasties, analysing how they both incorporated elements from the imperial discourse of islands, while reshaping this imperial conception into an aquapelagic critique aimed at the Qing empire itself. It will also draw upon and reinterpret multiple seventeenth- and 18th century Chinese maps, in order to provide the reader with a more tangible representation of the aquatic assemblages constructed in the two novels. In so doing, this article aims to offer an alternative vision of Qing Chinese identity as fundamentally constituted by fluid, dynamic, and uncontrollable aquatic systems. It intervenes in the perpetuation of a continental, nationalist conception of China as a unified, monolithic power standing in opposition to its archipelagic neighbours in Southeast Asia, contributing to an epistemological alternative that opens possibilities for decolonial futures by displaying how interconnected aquatic elements can reshape our understanding of territory, identity, and belonging beyond the constraints of nationalist frameworks.

Inhabiting the Sacred Islands in *Xiyi Meng*

Xiyi Meng is a forty-chapter novel written by the little-known writer Wang Ji 汪寄. Published at the end of the late 18th century, it tells a story set in a transitional period in the 10th century when the Song dynasty had just been established by Zhao Kuangyin (927C.E.-976), who had orchestrated a coup following the death of the former emperor and consolidated his rule over the empire. The protagonists of the novel, two generals loyal to the former dynasty desperately fleeing from one place to another by river, accidentally drift into the sea and sink into an underwater, island-based world. This is an aquatic world where multiple island-states are in constant clashes with each other as they vie for dominance and control over the scarce resources available in their aquatic domain. Having fulfilled their political ambition in the undersea archipelagic realm – over a long period of time that occupies the length of almost thirty chapters – the two generals manage to return to their homeland on the ground only to find out that the new dynasty has already collapsed and been replaced by yet another new one, namely the Yuan (1271-1368) founded by Kublai Khan (1215-1294). As their once familiar homeland continues to be plagued by societal chaos and its political landscape becomes further unrecognisable, and as the two generals feel an inevitable sense of displacement, they seek ways to go back to the undersea, archipelagic realm where they restored societal order and gained honour and respect. In the end, though, they fail to escape from this turbulent world and, with the help of Daoist deities, become two cranes soaring into the sky.

Throughout the novel, aquatic spaces mark the two main characters' movement from imperial territory to underwater islands as well as their sense of identity and belonging. The two generals traverse diverse localities across the empire via rivers and waterways, encountering mysterious animals such as apes and dragons; they access the submarine world through a hurricane that created a whirlpool where a number of whiting appear (chapter 6); and more importantly, the islands are not only immersed in but also characterised by waters. Upon General Zhongqing's arrival at the Island of Floating Rock after his fugitive river journey, a depiction of the undersea island and a detailed account of its history are given as follows:

> *It is said that this place was in the East China Sea, with a most peculiar shape. It was named the Island of Floating Mountain in ancient times, also known as the Island of Facing Roots, which was thirty-six thousand miles in diameter and divided into hundreds of parts... There had been few people living here. But ever since the Qin dynasty, people who were scared of Emperor Qin began relocating here with their families in the excuse of searching for elixir.... As more people drifted upon this island by hurricane and whirlpool, the nearby islands also became populated. Family Lu lived on the Island of Floating Rock. There was also the Island of Floating Gold, Two Dragon Island, the Island of Heavenly Seal, and many other islands, which are over one hundred in total. On these big islands everywhere there were ancient plants and rare pearls. The Island of Floating Rock distinguishes itself from them in that the smaller islands around it are all attached to it. Although it appears as being divided into numerous parts on the surface of the water, those parts are in effect connected at the bottom. The islanders are unaware of whether it is floating or sinking, but they can tell by the water level.* (Chapter 7, my translation)[2]

[2] The modern published edition of *Xiyi Meng* contains several variations from the Qing dynasty version, particularly in chapter 7. The quoted passage draws from the Qing publication retrieved from

Apparently, a significant parallel exists between the terrestrial land and the submerged archipelago. By giving the Island of Floating Mountain the additional name of the "Island of Facing Roots", the text suggests that the submerged island realm acts as a parallel world to the terrestrial empire, looking up to it. The affinity between the two worlds is strengthened by the origin of the residents of this once desolate island, as the islanders are migrants and refuges from the land above who sought to escape from the rule of a tyrannical emperor. Notably, this passage depicting the Island of Floating Rock at once draws from and transforms the imperial conception of sacred islands based on mountains and possessed by the emperors.

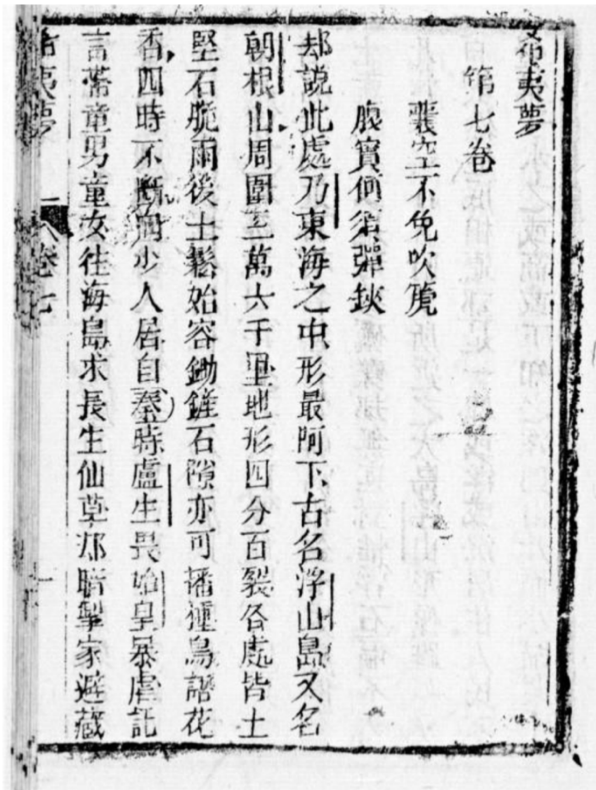
希夷夢
第七卷
囊空不免吹篪
腹實何須彈鋏
却說此處乃東海之中形最阿下古名浮山島又名
朝根山周圍三萬六千里地形四分百裂各處皆土
堅石厖雨後土鬆始容鋤鏟石隙亦可播種鳥語花
香四時不斷向少人居自秦時盧生畏始皇暴虐託
言帶童男童女往海島求長生仙草邪聯挈家避藏

Figure 1 - The opening paragraph of chapter 7 of *Xiyi Meng* of the 1809 edition.

Adam Grydrhøj and Bin Luo (2017) have traced the Chinese fascination with islands as far back as in the 3rd century BCE, when the Chinese writing system was standardised in the Qin and Han Dynasties (221BCE-220BCE). In their view, dao 岛, the Chinese character meaning "island", has two visual constituents, namely *niao* 鸟 (bird) and *shan* 山 (mountain). The naming of the island as "Floating Mountain" in *Xiyi Meng* clearly harkens back to the emphasis on the mountain in the conception of islands in early Chinese writing. However, the submarine mountain-islands in the novel are nothing like those that in ancient times that were considered "exemplary sacred places" (Grydrhøj and Luo, 2017, p. 29). In *Shiji*

Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Chinois 4198 Réserver; https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc26966d/ca19858724).

(*Records of the Grand Historian*, hereafter *Records*, written around 85 BCE), a foundational work in Chinese civilisation that set a model for historiographical writing that influenced subsequent dynasties, an account concerning the three mythical islands – Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou – reads as follows:

> *From the age of Kings Wei and Xuan of Qi and King Zhao of Yan, men were sent from time to time to set out to sea and search for the islands of Penglai, Fangzhang, and Yingzhou. These were three spirit mountains which were supposed to exist in the Gulf of Bohai. They were not very far from the land of men, it was said, but the difficulty was that, whenever a boat was about to touch their shores, a wind would always spring up and drive it away. In the past, people said, there had been men who succeeded in reaching them, and found them peopled by fairy spirits who possessed the elixir of immortality. All the plants and birds and animals of the islands were white, and the palaces and gates were made of gold and silver. Seen from afar, the three spirit mountains looked like clouds but, as one drew closer, they seemed instead to be down under the water. In any event, as soon as anyone got near to them, the wind would suddenly come, and drag the boat away, so that in the end no one could ever reach them.* (Sima, 1971, p. 14)

There are multiple parallels between the account of the sacred islands in the *Records* and the portrayal of the underwater archipelago in *Xiyi Meng*. The shared elements include: the close proximity to the shore that gives the illusion of accessibility; the crucial role of winds that make islands inapproachable; the floating appearance of these islands; the promise of immortality and material abundance associated with them; underwater locations that render them elusive; and the separation between the terrestrial and the undersea. However, while these elements persist from the *Records* to *Xiyi meng*, the meanings of islands are transformed. The aquatic mountain-islands where "ancient plants and rare pearls" provide the elixir for immortality are no longer for the emperors but for the subjects, including the common people, "who were scared of Emperor Qin" and who "began relocating" to the underwater islands, as well as for the two generals, who ran away from the chaotic terrestrial realm in desperation. And whereas the holy islands remain shrouded in mystery and largely inaccessible in the *Records*, the novel instead renders them reachable through hurricanes and whirlpools, offering a habitable sanctuary for refugees. Thus, the undersea archipelago in *Xiyi Meng* symbolises not so much an earthly heaven but a last refuge, suggesting an erosion of the emperors' sacred realm (Cao and Zhang, 2012).

Unlike the islands in the *Records*, which appear largely as a vague, mythical places with little details about their physical conditions, the Island of Floating Rock in *Xiyi Meng* is vividly depicted with the deployment of aquatic elements. As described in the passage quoted earlier, "the Island of Floating Rock distinguishes itself from them in that the smaller islands around it are all attached to it;" and it appears "divided into numerous parts on the surface of the water", yet "connected at the bottom." This conception of a unified colossal island consisting of smaller independent islands with relative autonomy may bring to mind the provincial administration of the Qing. This was a system established by the early Manchu rulers in the 17th through which to appoint a single governor as a middleman to each of large territorial divisions in order to translate central policy to local programs (Guy, 2015). The Qing territory was greatly expanded over the 17th and 18th centuries, as mentioned earlier. "Stretching from the deserts of Mongolia to the subtropics, encompassing regions heavily and lightly cultivated, densely and sparsely populated, areas that could be held only with significant military presence and areas that responded best to light and distant government"

(Guy, 2015, p. 352), it was hardly a homogeneous land. The provincial administration was thus designed "to incorporate regional difference into a single administrative structure, to manufacture homogeneity – or at least its image – out of diversity" (Guy, 2015, p. 352). The system came to be highly standardised over the 18th century, allowing flexibility and adaptability to serve diverse needs, and bringing remarkable stability to the imperial regime. Yet, by the end of the century, while all the provinces had been administratively mapped out, a series of disparate local issues posed severe political challenges to the empire, fuelling popular revolts such as the Miao rebellion (1795-1806) and the White Lotus Rebellion (1796-1804) (McMahon, 2015; Wang 2014). In this respect, the imaginary of a seemingly fragmented yet interconnected landscape of a colossal island is perhaps less a straightforward representation of the Qing provincial system than a reflection of the dynamic between integration and division in the maintenance of the imperial structure.

Its claim on the integration of all parts of the Island of Floating Rock notwithstanding, *Xiyi Meng* is, in fact, more invested in the depiction of its division by means of rivers. The presence of rivers is so pervasive that the reader gets the impression that the fictive island realm of *Xiyi Meng* is marked by "amorphous riverine geographies", a feature highlighted by Gang Hong (2022, p. 23) in his analysis of the aesthetic construction of island space in Chinese literary works from diverse historical periods. Just as the two generals' fugitive journey across their terrestrial homeland is marked by the presence of rivers and aquatic animals, their lives in the underseas, too, are intertwined with waterborne travels. In the novel, internal conflicts keep arising within the Island of Floating Rock as well as external ones between it and the surrounding islands, entailing unceasing endeavours from the two men to reinstate harmony amid the chaos prevalent among the island-states. As they journey through the undersea archipelago, the novel offers intricate portrayals of riparian sites characterised by fantastical non-human beings and natural phenomenon: generous depictions of the composition of waters (chapter 11, 28, 32); the appearance of water monsters and dragons in the rivers that sabotage military plans (chapter 11, 33); lengthy, enigmatic explanations of the workings of rivers and seas (chapter 26, 28); and two submarine islands facing each other connected by a bridge and surrounded by a mixture of hard and soft waters apparently representing the symbol of yin-yang (chapter 28), to name but a few.

Alongside with natural and supernatural phenomena, the flooding rivers are another considerable feature of the novel's undersea island realm. General Zhongqing's political career on the Island of Floating Rock, for example, begins with his encounter with a scholar-official surnamed Xi who is in charge of waterway management. In chapter 7, after Xi explains the island's tilted topography and how that creates issues related to the river system, Gu subsequently proposes a detailed plan for dam management, which, having been successfully implemented, immediately establishes Xi as an influential figure at the court. Flooding becomes even more central in the last ten chapters of the novel. In chapter 30, when the two generals finally resolve all the military and political disputes within the island and with its neighbours, a court official flatters the ruler of the Island by declaring that "the society has now reached to the prosperity of Yongzheng and Qianlong eras" (Wang, 1994, p. 440). He dismisses phenomena such as a locust plague and flooding as merely *tianzai* 天灾 (natural disasters) that have nothing to do with statecraft. Yet, this dismissal soon proves hollow, as river flooding becomes the most significant concern of the novel's final chapters, when a series of research investigations into the causes of the flooding are conducted. These reveal the complexities of river control, from issues concerning corrupt officials who want to cut off expenditure on waterway management to problems concerning local governments ignorant of the importance of removing silt.

In the history of the Qing dynasty, the waterway system, comprising the Yellow River, Yangzi River and the Grand Canal, played a crucial role in the functioning of the empire. While the canal system was considerably expanded during the 15th century Ming, following the capital's relocation from Nanjing in the south to Beijing in the north (on the basis of political and military considerations), it reached its maturity in the 18th century Qing, becoming "larger and more complex than any previous system" (Dodgen, 2001, p. 3). This extensive network encompassed not only the two great rivers and the Canal but also numerous streams, lakes, ponds, and wetlands. During this time, the waterway system functioned as the economic artery allowing both the central government to deliver important goods such as salt and grain tax to the capital and the ordinary traders to convey various transoceanic consumer goods, such as tea and porcelain, from inland to international trading ports such as Canton and Macau (Dodgen, 2001; Mostern, 2021; Van Dyke, 2018). It was also of cultural and military significance in that it enabled the Qing empire to maintain firm control over its vast land and diverse resources and extend the Han culture into the frontiers (Miles, 2020; Reinhardt, 2020). Meanwhile, the issue of river control became increasingly severe at the turn of the 19th century when the Yellow River, carrying a large quantity of silt, began to overflow the levees at an unprecedented frequency (Dodgen, 2001). Consequently, the maintenance of the extensive and sophisticated waterway system became fiscally demanding and administratively challenging. As noted in the introduction, this period saw escalating competition for resources among various social groups due to rapid population growth, while ineffective local governance and flawed policies further heightened social tensions, leading to widespread popular uprisings across multiple regions (McMahon, 2015). Considering the long-established link between river control and state power in the history of Chinese civilisation, river flooding became even more symbolic of societal instability for both the imperial regime and its people, reflecting the diminishing effectiveness of the imperial administration (Dodgen, 2001; Mostern, 2021).

In this light, the novel's construction of the Island of Floating Rock as a vast submarine island that appears to be partitioned into multiple smaller isles by water obviously mirrors the riverine environments of the Qing. Its representation of the amorphous riverine geographies of the island – as both spaces of fantastical supernatural beings requiring cartographic documentation and as troublesome sites plagued by floods necessitating statecraft – reflects an imperial perspective that views the natural world as something to be organised, categorised, and manipulated "from above and from the center" (Scott, 1998, p. 2). However, this imperial perspective is simultaneously undermined by the narrative itself, as both the riparian supernatural beings and the recurring issue of flooding remain beyond the government's control. Coupled with the perennial tensions within the island and with its neighbours; rivers function primarily as borderlands that separate one area from another, registering the strong sense of social fragmentation that characterised late 18th century Chinese society despite the Qing empire's desire for unification. In other words, as much as the novel attempts to envision the Island of Floating Rock – or rather, Qing China – as one unified entity of multiple constituents, with all its parts assimilated, its imagining of the riverine landscape of the undersea island in effect constructs a different cultural-political geography, that is, an archipelago. This riverine archipelago registers an acute awareness of regional difference and spatial diversity within a seemingly cohesive whole, revealing active relationality within an imperial unity.

The novel does not provide any illustration of its imagined riverine archipelago. Yet, early 19th century Chinese maps help us visualise its aquapelagic conception of the Qing empire. Figure 2 is a map crafted in 1811, entitled 'All-Under-Heaven Complete Map of the Everlasting Unified Qing Empire'. It is an intricately crafted woodblock print in blue and white, where

blue indicates land and white illustrates water. The map consists of four sheets and is 112cm high and 249 cm wide. On it, the presence of the two great rivers, namely the Yellow River and the Yangzi River, is prominent with the use of thicker white lines. From them numerous streams branch out and extend, weaving into an intricate root-like web that meanders deep into the seas on the east as well as the inland frontiers on the west. With the countless white river-lines permeating the whole map, as well as the overall use of blue rendering the map, it gives the impression that the entire world shown on the map is submerged in water.

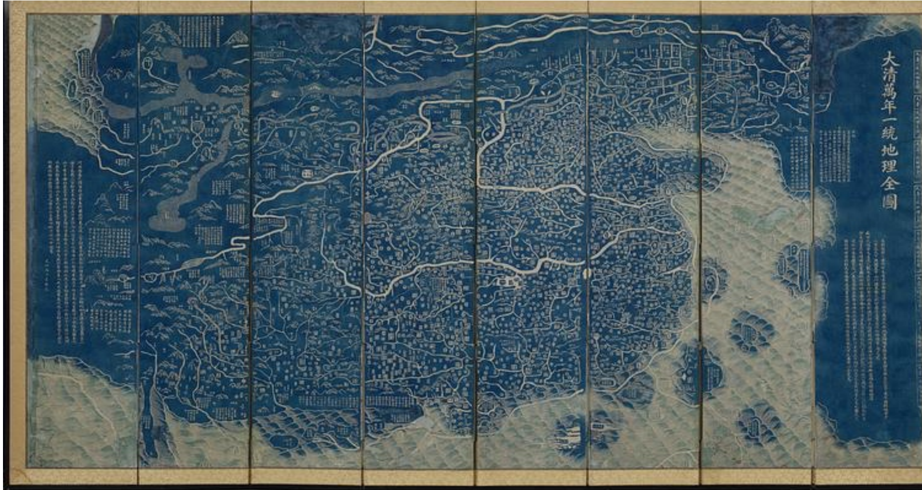

Figure 2 - *Da Qing Wannian Yitong Tianxia Quantu* ('All-Under-Heaven, Complete Map of the Everlasting Unified Qing Empire') (ca. 1820). Woodcuts, 112 x 249 cm. Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center.

Figure 3 - *Daqing fensheng yutu* (*Provincial Atlas of the Qing Dynasty*) (ca. late 18th century).

Figure 4 - Map of China coast and trading ports from the 16th to 19th century. (Ng, 2017, map 2).

Here, I would like to invite the reader to imagine the waterways on this map on a more magnificent scale. Consider these white lines as bold as those on some other Qing maps, such as Figure 3, where rivers are denoted by rather thick lines that would appear highly disproportionate in comparison to their existence on standard modern maps. With this thickness, the water-river network would function more like a network of border zones. While the mainland of China and its surrounding seas may coalesce into a cohesive whole via the expansive navigation routes, these watery boundaries simultaneously crack it into distinct sections, each resembling an island, with a fluid boundary that opens to the possibility of reforming. This map is different to a map such as Figure 4 in that it does not render the mainland as a blank, stable and neglectable mass and merely focus on the maritime world full of islands. It avoids the risk of representing the land of China in an abstract manner and essentialising or homogenising Chinese identity, defying the paradigm of continentalism and nationalism. Instead, it reflects a dynamic dual process of assimilation and disintegration in accordance with the concomitance of cultural integration and cultural diversity: while water routes extend into the ocean, encompassing surrounding islands within the existing imperial domain and contributing to an expanding and thus undefined territorial boundary, the landmass itself is also in a constant motion, dissolving internally into numerous formless island-like regions through the amorphous waterway network.

Haiyou Ji, a rewritten version of the strange tales of luoji Haiyou Ji differs significantly from *Xiyi Meng* in multiple aspects, including characterisation, plot development, language, length and narrative structure. Unlike the latter, it lacks both a historical backdrop and a multitude of literary allusions woven into its language, requiring little of the reader's prior knowledge of Chinese history and classical texts. However, published in the same era as *Xiyi Meng*, in late 18th century China, it too constructs an aquatic assemblage constituted by rivers, the whirlpool, and a submarine archipelago that suggests an underside, literally and figuratively, of the Qing empire. This aquapelagic configuration thus equally destabilises the imperialist ideal of integration and reveals social fragmentation within the empire, if with its own distinct characteristics.

The thirty-chapter novella tells of Guanchengzi's undersea adventures, beginning with his return and framed within his subsequent retelling of his experience, which consists of two accounts. The first account is in chapter 2, where Guanchengzi recounts to a man at the river's sea mouth how, during his youth as a merchant selling pens overseas, he encountered an unusual red fog on the sea. The helmsman identified a *luoji* 落漈 (whirlpool) (*Haiyou Ji*, 1998, p. 77) as the cause of this fog, a marine phenomenon, according to him, common around Nan'ao Island at the intersection of Guangdong and Fujian Sea zones.[3] As strong winds pulled the ship straight into the whirlpool and down to the seabed, the crew found a mountain with gated rock walls. They subsequently received two notes: the first one with unidentified characters, then another in Chinese, stating: "if you are all Chinese, we will take you in by a boat tomorrow morning" (*Haiyou Ji*, p. 77). After the crew entered the mountain, they learn that this place is the Kingdom of Wulei, located 330 *li* (a *li* is about 0.3 of a mile) lower than China and surrounded by sea waters, making it easy to come to but difficult to leave. The novel's first narration of the island realm ends here, with Guangchengzi revealing he has documented his ocean adventure in a manuscript entitled *Haiyou ji*.

Within its limited length, this account effectively establishes multiple parallels between China and the undersea island realm while highlighting the distinctions between the two worlds. The island's use of a different writing system that appears unrecognisable to the Chinese suggests a distinct cultural identity and a clear awareness of the difference between itself and China. This awareness is soon reinforced by what is written on the second note. By explicitly addressing the visitors' identity as well as the spatial division between inside and outside, the note reflects the islanders' distinct sense of self and other, a division between the undersea kingdom and the terrestrial empire. At the same time, the islanders' ability to then communicate in Chinese reveals their familiarity with Chinese culture and their conditional hospitality towards the Chinese visitors. And as they allow the visitors to enter their society, the novella suggests a porous boundary between the undersea island realm and the terrestrial mainland, the foreign and the Chinese, indicating a dynamic process of cultural exchange, transformation, and reformation, where identities can shift and blend while maintaining their distinctive characteristics.

Following this first account, the second narration of the Kingdom of Wulei further expresses this cultural porosity geographically, simultaneously highlighting both similarities to and departures from the mainland empire. After getting caught in a series of scandals with locals, the two men are forced to flee. Before parting, they transform the manuscript into a book, which they give to a fellow boatman, instructing him to share the story of the islands. As the boatman opens the book while docked at the riverside, the novel's second account of

[3] Nan'ao island was of military importance during the Ming and Qing. For a detailed discussion of the island, see Po (2018, pp. 129-131).

Guangchengzi's adventure concerning the phenomenon of *luoji* the whirlpool begins in chapter 8, fully unveiling the Kingdom of Wulei as follows:

> *As Haiyou Ji tells, after reaching the seabed, Guanchengzi disembarks and goes ashore. He trades his pens for jewellery through a broker, whom he also asks to help find him housing. When inquiring about local customs, he found out that the broker is also Chinese. "What you experienced is luoji," the broker explains, "As there were many people 'flowing' to here, they naturally formed a state and named it Wulei. This place is the Island of Purple Rock, which is very far away from the capital-island. The commander-in-chief of the island is the most important official. There are three deputy commanders, stationed in the Island of Fragrant Rock, the Island of White Rock and the Island of Flowery Rock, respectively. Each island has a general director, deputy director, prefect and county magistrate. From the imperial examinations to official ranks, everything is learned from China. (Haiyou Ji*, p. 91) (my translation)

On the one hand, the Kingdom is perceived as *yiguo* 一国 (a state) located beneath China in the deeps seas where not only its inhabitants and the goods they use all arrive by "flowing" (*tanglai* 淌来) from China, but also all aspects of the society, from manners and customs to social structures "is learned from China". The novella thus explicitly establishes the island as a reflection of the Chinese system. On the other hand, unlike the Chinese landmass, the submarine kingdom exists as an archipelagic network of semi-autonomous islands, connected by waters and governed through a system of limited local authority. While this archipelagic imagination of the island-kingdom may resonate with the fragmented appearance of the Island of Floating Rock in *Xiyi Meng*, it differs fundamentally in its physical and political structure. Unlike in *Xiyi Meng*, where the islands' foundations are connected as a single entity, Wulei's islands maintain independence from each other, both geographically and administratively – with each island containing its own complete political hierarchy of a general director, deputy director, prefect and county magistrate. Thus, the Kingdom of Wulei emerges as a complex network where each island functions as both mirror of and prism to the territorial empire, reflecting familiar socio-political structures while refracting them through a distinct underwater context, a disparate writing system, and most importantly, an archipelagic geography. This configuration undercuts the rigid dichotomy between the self and other that sustains the imperial hierarchy and political legitimacy. Moreover, while presenting the underwater kingdom as a *yiguo*, a unified state, it also suggests a division within the kingdom as well as the territorial empire.

To gain a deeper understanding of how *Haiyou Ji* defies the imperial definition of power relations by showcasing a more fluid understanding of geography and identity through aquatic spaces, it is necessary to discuss the novella's creative adaptation of the discourse of *luoji*, the fantastical whirlpool. If *Xiyi Meng* contests imperial authority through its rewriting of the ancient tales of sacred islands, *Haiyou Ji* achieves a similar result by engaging with a more contemporary island discourse. As shown in the last section, the phenomenon of the whirlpool is an element present in ancient Chinese tales of sacred islands, serving as that which keeps visitors from approaching the holy realm. While there is no specific term designated for the whirlpool in ancient accounts, this phenomenon gained a particular name, *luoji*, during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) when the Mongols conquered most of Eurasia and significantly facilitated Chinese maritime trade across the Indian Ocean (Park, 2012).

In the *History of the Yuan*, an official Chinese historical record compiled in 1370, the term *luoji* was used to describe the strange phenomenon around the Penghu Archipelago.[4] According to it, fishing boats that wanted to reach the Ryukyu Kingdom via the Penghu Islands might encounter a typhoon, drift into the *luoji* whirlpool, and sink into the seas, with fewer than one or two out of a hundred making it back (Li, 1993, *juan* 89). Ryukyu established a tributary relationship with China in 1372 at the beginning of the Ming dynasty and served as "a central figure in regional commerce in its role as merchant middleman between Japan, China, and Southeast Asia" (Akamine, 2016, p. 7). In the following dynasty, as the relationship between China and its Southeast Asian archipelagic neighbours intensified, the Ming emperors made significant diplomatic efforts by sending out envoys to Ryukyu, who then reported their journey back to the emperor. The Ming envoy Chen Kan's (1489-1538) *Shi liuqiu lu* ('A Record on the Emissary Trip to Ryukyu', ca. 1534) is one important historical document that offered new factual information for Chen's contemporaries and won widespread acclaim at the time (Ming, 2024). In it, Chen contradicted earlier writings' identification of *luoji*, noting that the location of the whirlpool was highly ambiguous and, in fact, remained far away from the Ryukyu (Chen, 1534, see Figure 5).

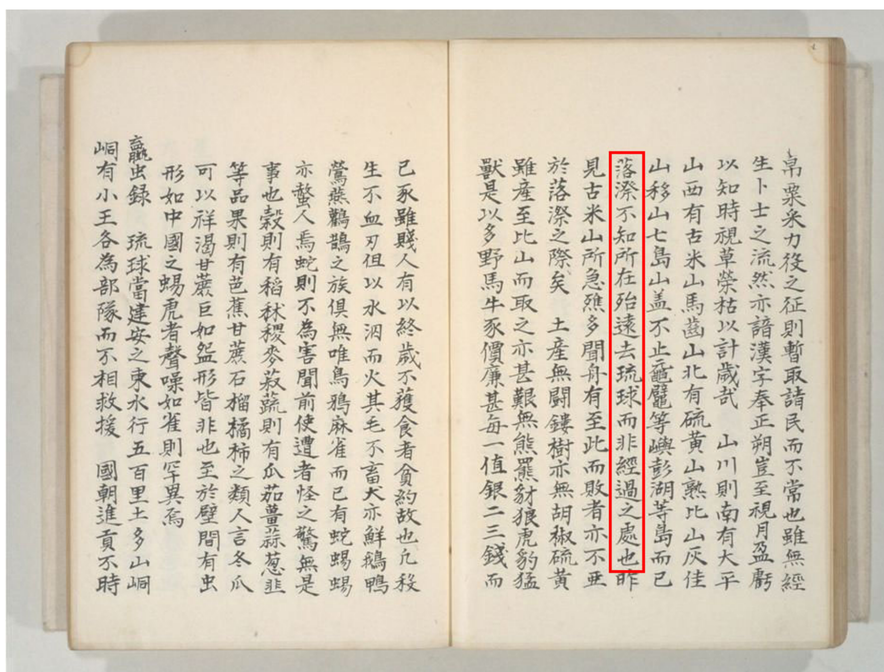
帛粟糸力役之征則暫取諸民而不常也雖無經
生卜士之流然亦諳漢字奉正朔豈至視月盈虧
以知時視草榮枯以計歲哉　山川則南有太平
山西有古米山馬齒山北有硫黃山熱比山灰佳
山移山七島山蓋不止黿鼊等嶼彭湖等島而已
落漈不知所在殆遠去琉球而非經過之處也昨
見古米山所急殊多閩舟有至此而敗者亦不亞
於落漈之際矣　土產無闘鏤樹亦無胡椒硫黃
雖產至比山而取之亦甚艱無熊羆豺狼虎豹猛
獸是以多野馬牛豕價廉甚每一值銀二三錢而
已豕雖賤人有以終歲不獲食者貧約故也凡殺
生不血刃但以水溺而火其毛不畜犬亦鮮鵝鴨
鶯燕鸛鵲之族俱無唯烏鴉麻雀而已有蛇蜴蜴
亦螫人焉蛇則不為害聞前使遭者怪之驚無是
事也穀則有稻秫稷麥菽蔬則有瓜茄薑蒜葱韭
等品果則有芭蕉甘蔗石榴橘柿之類人言冬瓜
可以祥渴甘蔗巨如盌形皆非也至於壁間有虫
形如中國之蜴虎者聲噪如雀則罕異焉
蠃虫録　琉球當建安之東水行五百里土多山峒
峒有小王各為部隊而不相救援　國朝進貢不時

Figure 5 - *Shi liuqiu lu* ('A Record on the Emissary Trip to Ryukyu') (ca. 1534). University of the Ryukyus, https://doi.org/10.24564/ih01601

The mysterious, almost unlocatable marine phenomenon continued to attract the state's attention in the ensuing centuries. In contrast to previous narratives, an official writer of *Huangming jingshi wenbian* ('Collected Writings on Statecraft from the Ming', 1638; hereafter *HMJSWB*) dismissed the existence of *luoji* entirely, claiming "it is impossible to verify the

[4] According to it, "Ryukyu is thus the smallest and most dangerous among foreign barbarian lands" (Song, 1976, 210.17).

existence of *luoji*", and declaring Chen's portrayal of Ryukyu as a dangerous, barbaric place to be "all but a bluff" (Chen et al., 1971, p. 14). Considering the intimate interactions between Ryukyu and Ming China that had grown over the 15th and 16th centuries and the likely influence of Chinese culture on Ryukyuan society (Akamine, 2016), the official's words might not be pure wish fulfilment and reflect more than factual correction. As Miles Campos (2012) points out, for the official writer, the distant island shrouded by a mysterious phenomenon of whirlpool in Chen Kan's account denoted a challenge to the hegemony of Confucian orthodoxy. By overriding the existence of deadly whirlpools around Ryukyu, the official writer strove to diminish the geographical as well as cultural boundaries between the Chinese and the foreign, thereby demonstrating a single, unchallenged order under imperial rule across the seas.

Thus, just as how Taiwan was viewed as a symbol of territorial expansion in early Qing, the concept of the island throughout the trajectory of *luoji* as a discursive construct held symbolic importance in suggesting a domain of wilderness distant from the imperial capital and a different culture that might threaten the hegemony of Confucian ideology (Teng, 2004). It is this symbolic power of subversion that both provoked imperial anxiety and inspired writers seeking societal change, simultaneously generating popular narratives supporting the imperial practice of settler colonialism as well as those texts that challenged imperial power structure, such as *Haiyou Ji*. A brief discussion of two strange tales, written respectively by He Bang'E (fl. 1736-ca. 1779) and Yuan Mei (1716-1798), proves helpful here, as they will not only demonstrate how the elite-literati reinforced imperial power relations through their perpetuation of the imperial conception of islands.[5] More importantly, their abstract, simplistic construction of islands will clearly show how the anonymous writer of *Haiyou Ji*, who was likely of lower social position, significantly appropriated the elitist discourse of *luoji* to subvert imperial authority through its idiosyncratic aquapelagic imagination.

Following the Qing annexation of Taiwan, a surge in the cultural production of *luoji*-related island narratives occurred during the 18th century. As Teng (2004) observes, during this time the ancient sacred islands, such as Penglai and Yingzhou, which were said to be around the Yellow Sea in the east, became associated with the South China Sea, around Ryukyu, Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines. Taken together, these narratives functioned as an assimilationist discourse supporting settler colonialism, helping to reconceptualise Taiwan from "a domain of uncultivated land and cultureless savagery" (Teng, 2004, p. 43) lying beyond the natural boundaries of China defined by ancient texts and the land-sea division to a Chinese province civilised by the Qing empire. Both entitled *Luoji*, the two namesake short stories written by He and Yuan were produced around the time as *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji*. Unlike the official writer of *HMJSWB* who maintained imperial order by dismissing the existence of the whirlpool and thus an otherworldly island of different cultures all at once, the two strange tales acknowledge *luoji* while emphasising the universality and superiority of Chinese

[5] Scholars have observed that one of the crucial characteristics of Ming-Qing culture is "the extraordinary degree to which values and beliefs favorable to ruling class interests permeated popular consciousness" and "the relatively high degree of cultural integration on the sub-elite level" ((Johnson, 1985, p. 35, 47). According to Johnson (19855, p. 48), through its "unusually complete" control of the media of indoctrination, mostly the publishing industry, the ruling class of this era imposed a consensus, a system of beliefs, values, and ideas that was gradually diffused through the whole society. To a large degree then, the elites' concern with the universality of the Confucian-based Chinese order reflected their anxiety and fear of the potential collapse of the well-established societal order they were familiar with in the face of increasing global contacts, as well as their worry about the possible subversion of power hierarchies that might jeopardise their privileges.

culture. Both stories describe travelers pulled underwater near the Penghu Islands but diverge thematically. He's version critiques greed through ghosts trapped by gold-seeking desires, while Yuan's focuses on ghost-islanders' identity, emphasising their Chinese origins through explicit declarations: "we were all Chinese people" (Santangelo, 2013, p. 1152). Furthermore, Yuan portrays the island as a desolate "purgatory" (Santangelo, p. 1153) with minimal attention to foreign elements, revealing a preoccupation with maintaining Confucian order and imperial authority (Campos, 2012, p. 57).

Figure 6 - A close-up of Figure 1 illustrating China's southeast coast where the maritime routes lead to multiple islands, including Penghu and Ryukyu archipelago.

The short stories of the weird and exotic like those written by Yuan and He fulfilled many social functions for the elites in late 18th century Chinese society, ranging from entertainment and moral reflection to knowledge acquisition (Chan, 1998). As one of the many odd matters enriching the learned men's social and intellectual lives, the notion of islands served them more as an abstract concept than a tangible geography. It functioned as a token for the elites to contain their identity and reinforce imperial boundary-making practices that "at once exoticises the other and attempts to convert otherness into familiarity and we-ness" (Teng, 2004, p. 17). If in the eyes of the Qing empire the Taiwan archipelago was at once a concrete space with complex environments that were to be explored, mapped out, conquered and exploited, and a cultural symbol of power and authority, elite writers like Yuan reduced it primarily to the latter.

Cultural symbols such as islands, however, convey a range of meanings that can differ significantly from one person to another in society (Rawski, 1985). Written by an author of likely lower social status, *Haiyou Ji* obviously presents a radical departure from these elite perspectives. Instead of abstraction, the novella creates a concrete geography of fractal infinite islands that both reflect and refract Qing society and culture. It transforms a singular, distant point into substantial entities of numerous interconnected constituents, dramatising

the fragmentation of an expanding empire signalled by the blue map discussed in the last section. Moreover, unlike Yuan's rather simplistic portrayal of the ghost-islanders, the residents of the Kingdom of Wulei distinguish themselves from the Chinese with their own writing system and identity. They are influenced by the Chinese culture but not subordinated to it. And while in Yuan's tale the ghost-islanders register a strong sense of attachment to the mainland, the islanders of the undersea kingdom in *Haiyou Ji* showcase a disillusionment with the imperial structure that shape both the terrestrial empire and the undersea archipelago.

Indeed, as the narration of Guanchengzi's ocean adventure continues, the novella shifts its narrative focus from this Chinese visitor to the islanders – from the self to other – and moves among the islanders themselves, revealing a fragmented, unstable society even within what might otherwise appear as a monolithic other. Following the perspectives of multiple island residents, including various underclass characters and a well-educated elite Gentleman Xu, *Haiyou Ji* depicts the aquapelagic kingdom in a highly realistic and dystopian manner as an inhospitable place where lying, cheating, scandals and shenanigans persist, where its inhabitants, both rich and poor, find no permanent settlement, and where there is no less competition and violence than the old world from which Guanchengzi comes. The story of the Miao Islands serves as a compelling example of how the novella subverts the ideal of imperial rule through its alternative island imaginary. The conception of the Miao Islands was obviously inspired by the Miao revolt on the mountainous Hunan-Guizhou-Sichuan borderland during the 1790s, where the Miao indigenes attacked Han Chinese settlers in pursuit of land, wealth, and autonomy from the Qing government (McMahon, 2015). This echoes the earlier analysis of *Xiyi Meng* with regards to how regional issues strengthen local awareness, leading to the imagining of regions as islands with their own relatively independent socio-political ecosystems. In chapter 14, having lost his property and stirred up conflicts with the local bandits, Gentleman Xu decides to relocate to another island where the general director tasks him with quelling the disturbances around the surrounding two Miao Islands. Although Xu successfully resolves the territorial conflicts on behalf of the local government, the governor suspects him of colluding with the Miao islanders. This suspicion ultimately prompts him to marry the Head of the Miao Islands and ascend to the new head of these peripheral islands (chapter 23), a position from which he demonstrates his ability as a ruler to recognise talents like Guanchengzi and restore justice.

Gentleman Xu might have initially appeared as a figure of elite education, wealth, power and privilege, but he is certainly not immune to the precarious living conditions in the undersea archipelago, where severe societal competition inevitably leads to a struggle for survival affecting various social groups. And in seeking a stable, safe life, Xu's identity undergoes continuous transformation through his watery movement among islands, from his flight from home to his marriage to the Miao. This integrated configuration of land and water generates what Roberts and Stephens (2017, p. 26) consider a "fractal repetition", which prompts the reader to look at the putatively stable world and attest to its final stability. Thus, through its portrayal of the volatile lives of constantly moving islanders such as Gentleman Xu, *Haiyou Ji*, again, powerfully blurs the line between the self and other once, dismantling the facade of a cohesive undersea kingdom whose societal stability was supposedly guaranteed by a sociopolitical structure learned from China. Moreover, while the terrestrial empire may have viewed the internal frontier inhabited by the Miao as threats requiring suppression, *Haiyou Ji* reimagines the Miao borderland in the underseas as a space where different cultural identities connect and where an alternative to the imperial administration can emerge. The power relation between the centre and the periphery is thus reversed in the novella's archipelagic realm, resulting in the construction of a dynamic space of cultural

fluidity that resists the imperial practice of categorisation and discrimination and, consequently, its maintenance of power.

Evidently, if the island denotes the possibility of a new societal order in all the Chinese texts discussed in this section – from the official writer's account of Ryukyu to the elite-literati's *luoji* stories and to *Haiyou Ji*, their disparate conceptions of island geographies then correspond to the different social positions of the writers who hold disparate attitudes towards the notion of an alternative social order and power structure. While elite writers resisted social transformation, *Haiyou Ji* expresses a migrant perspective, where displacement and asylum-seeking through aquatic spaces render the islanders stateless in both the underwater archipelago and the terrestrial empire. Their liminal identities are not bound to the empire, or rather, a proto-nation, as Chen Hon Fai (2017) perceives the Qing, and their displacement is not unlike the experience described by Harrod J. Suarez (2024, p. 759) of an undocumented, stateless character in his discussion of an archipelagic Philippines: "a displacement marked by proximity and distance, delivering an archipelagic ambivalence that is the underside of the nation, its other." But the aquapelagic realm in *Haiyou Ji* functions more as an underside: the fluid movement of the characters continues to lead us astray, "pushing out to determine the next but unknowable horizon of universal Relation" (Suarez, 2024, p. 759), of the transformative self-and-other-encounters. Thus, the aquapelagic "is a structure that undoes itself – it does not remain in perpetual or eternal tension with" (Suarez, 2024, p. 759) the territorial empire; it goes beyond being simply the dialectical other of the empire. It foregrounds a chain of movement constituted by aquatic elements that does not seek an ending point, suggesting an ongoing process of transformation, an elsewhere, and thus "an infinity of subjects, all split" (Suarez, 2024, p. 762), and impossible to be categorised within the imperial structure as well as the discourse of nationalism.

Aquapelagic reimagining: Toward a decolonial epistemology of China and beyond

This article has examined how two late-18th century Chinese novels, *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji*, present alternative geographical imaginaries of Qing China through innovative aquapelagic constructions. While employing different narrative approaches, both novels employ a constellation of aquatic elements – underwater settings, whirlpool phenomena, and riverine geographies – to display a continuum of disruptions that critiques imperial authority. Both present aquatic assemblages that blur the distinction between the mainland and islands, between land and sea, assemblages that play a crucial role in various social groups' formation of a sense of community and belonging. While drawing upon ancient sacred island tales and the *luoji* discourse respectively, *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji* simultaneously subvert these imperial discourses of islands. Their conception of underwater archipelagic worlds – the Island of Floating Rock and the Kingdom of Wulei – at once mirror and contrast with the vast Qing territory, demonstrating the function of submarine spaces as aquatic refuges for diverse disenfranchised populations rather than as imperial territorial extensions. More significantly, by depicting amorphous riverine geographies of their undersea islands, the anonymous authors of both novels imagined the vast landmass of the Qing dissolving and deforming into smaller fragments, revealing an acute awareness of the spatial diversity and regional difference that characterised the expanding empire at the end of the 18th century. These writers thus conceptualised islands not as external to China's proper domain but as internal components of the land-state itself, suggesting that the mainland itself might be understood as a large island comprising smaller ones connected

through fluctuating aquatic networks. This undersea riverine archipelagic reimagining effectively challenges the imperial image of the Qing as a unified whole, revealing instead the dual process of cultural integration and fragmentation that characterised the historical realities of Qing expansionism.

When considered together, the submarine contexts, the marine phenomena of the whirlpool, and riverine archipelagic geographies powerfully create an alternative vision of Qing Chinese identity as defined by fluid, dynamic, and uncontrollable aquatic systems. Their water-centred conception of Qing geography and culture anticipates contemporary aquapelagic theory's emphasis on the constitutive role of waters in the formation of place-identity. It resonates with Hayward's observation that human interactions with multiple aquatic elements create performed spaces – the imaginative realms, in this case – that challenge static notions of territory and fixed definition of belonging and community. The aquapelagic imaginaries of *Xiyi Meng* and *Haiyou Ji* therefore necessitate a reconsidering of the relationships between geography, sovereignty, and identity formation. They enable us to move beyond conventional territorial paradigms toward a more nuanced understanding of how regions, states, and cultures interact through aquatic assemblages that function as shifting sites enabling both connection and differentiation, not only in the context of China but also far beyond. They reveal the relational potentiality inherent in dynamic interactions between land and water, between self and other. As such, by discovering these two Qing texts' aquapelagic imagination of China, this article not only intervenes in the perpetuation of a continental, nationalist conception of China as a monolithic entity, but also contributes to the ongoing project of epistemic decolonisation by retrieving localised historical aquapelagic thinking while demonstrating how this water-centred approach can destabilise our current global configurations based on the notion of nation-state and the demarcation of rigid and political geographical boundaries.

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