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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Memory and Forgetfulness of the Flood: Meaning and Nostalgia in Thousand Island Lake (Qiandaohu), China

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Islands are often associated with sites of memory, forgetting, and nostalgia. People find islands in the world and imbue them with social and cultural meaning. Drawing upon studies of islands as sites of memory and forgetting, and taking the case of Thousand-Island Lake (Qiandaohu) in Zhejiang, China, this paper argues that it is important to denaturalise island geographies when considering the social and cultural roles they play. Thousand-Island Lake is a result of the construction of Xin'anjiang Dam and Reservoir in 1958-1962, which flooded Chun'an Valley, submerging Lion City and transforming the surrounding mountain peaks into lake islands. Having developed into a tourist destination in the 1980s, Thousand-Island Lake has become a site for nostalgic heritage. The submergence of Lion City at the bottom of the lake has saved it from the fate of so many modernised Chinese cities and paradoxically made it emotionally accessible for nostalgic memorialisation. Dragon Mountain Island and Honey Mountain Island have accrued new meanings as islanded heritage sites, while numerous other lake islands have been given narrow and changeable tourist-oriented themes. The need for connection with a reconstructed past and the requirements of the tourism industry have been important for the formation of islands as islands in Thousand-Island Lake.

In the west of China's Zhejiang Province, at the far limits of Hangzhou City's administrative boundaries, Xin'anjiang Reservoir 新安江水库 lies nestled in the mountains of Chun'an County 淳安县. Created as a result of the construction of the Xin'anjiang Dam in 1958-1962, the reservoir provides drinking and irrigation water as well as hydroelectric power to cities in the region, but it is best known today for providing tourism services. The flooding of the river valley created Thousand-Island Lake 千岛湖 (*Qiandaohu*), which joins a list of other reservoirs in China and abroad that have come to be prized for their natural beauty. Besides being appreciated for

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its natural environment, the area is promoted for its rich cultural heritage, with various towns, villages, landmarks, and parks being seen as sites of special cultural significance for Zhejiang and China as a whole.

Thousand-Island Lake's name is inspired by the numerous hilltops and mountain peaks that were transformed into islands by the construction of the reservoir. Thus, although the lake is a nature spot, it is very much a human-made nature spot, with its islands, coastlines, and largest town all being created as a result of the reservoir project.

In this paper, drawing upon studies of islands as sites of memory and forgetting, we denaturalise the geographies of Thousand-Island Lake to show humans imbue landscapes and waterscapes with cultural, social, and emotional meaning. We argue that although islands are often regarded as conducive to meaning-making, it is also the case that meaning is conducive to island-making. Because of our focus on how conceptions of islands change, we give place names first in their English translations, followed by their names in Chinese characters and in some cases pinyin.

This paper is based on an unsystematic literature review of popular media and tourism promotional texts concerning Thousand-Island Lake. Although a major tourist attraction in China, Thousand-Island Lake has been the subject of only very limited prior humanities and social sciences research in either Chinese or English. The present paper is thus intended partly as an introductory study to open up new ways of perceiving and thinking about the lake.

Islands as sites of selective memory

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the roles islands play in processes of remembering and forgetting. Introducing a special section on 'Islands, history, and decolonial memory', May Joseph (2020, p. 193) writes of islands:

> They are spectacles that evoke primal affects. Desire, fear, anxiety, silence, erasure, madness, carceral logics, pleasure. Their liminality, forged of sand, stone, rock, mist and ocean, draws one into the materiality of islandness. Surrounded by water, physically disconnected from larger continental influences, islands embody the neural spaces of memory. Their contours absorb the feelings a society imposes upon them.

Islands attract memories and emotions. Narratives of national resistance, suffering, victory, flourishing, and resilience are perhaps particularly likely to be situated on small islands. Hadjimichael et al. (2020) show how the Greek island of Ro has been imagined as a site of resistance against external oppression, in part through the development of legends of personal resilience and fortitude. Gang Hong (2020a) considers the ways in which Chinese islandness has been constructed through patriotic tourism that harks back to past glories, yet he also shows how certain senses of islanded trauma

and violence can be (partly) overwritten and de-memorialised through island recreations of traditional Chinese culture (G. Hong, 2020b). Crucially, for Hong (2020b), remembering and forgetting is not simply something that happens *to* or *on* the island:

> Far from being an inert container of mental processes, geographical memory is an active agent in the shaping of both imaginative and material geographies. Aspects of the built landscape, such as museums, monuments, and memorials, play a key role in the cultivation of collective consciousness and, by extension, geographical memory.

In a related manner, Dang (2021) uses the case of the Con Dao archipelago to demonstrate how traumatic memories can be converted into or inspire encounters with the sacred, so that island nationalism and religious experience coincide. Studying the island of Balliceaux, site of Black Carib genocide, Finneran and Welch (2020) ask how the islanding of trauma affects the process of memory itself and what responsibilities this islanding incurs upon both visitors and land managers.

Common to many of these studies is the concept of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a practice that is strongly associated with remote places such as islands and mountains (Bingenheimer, 2016) and that frequently brings together feelings of celebration and mourning, producing a memorialisation that both acknowledges past tragedy or violence and creates a mythic wellspring for national, cultural, ethnic, religious, or other flourishing. Religious, national, or cultural pilgrimage sites often simultaneously memorialise loss (for example, the martyrdom of a saint, sacrifice of a god, death of soldiers, decline from a golden age of civilisation) and celebrate actual or hoped-for revival.

The causality behind the sanctification and heritagisation of islands is complex. As Philip Hayward (2024, p. 1) notes, "There is a common association of remote, inaccessible and minimally inhabited places with spiritual 'energies' and related senses of holiness." On the one hand, people who seek sacred, spectacular, and lifechanging experiences seem to gravitate toward islands, in the form of monks, tourists, lifestyle immigrants, and others (Baldacchino, 2010; Johnson, 2024; Luo & Grydehøj, 2017; Oh, 2022; Prince, 2018; Sampaio & King, 2019). On the other hand, island space seems conducive to the formation of unique (and uniquely visible) cultures and cultural objects (Grydehøj et al., 2020, 2023). The effect is mutually reinforcing.

While focusing on the nature of islandness, the above discussions tend to take for granted the island as an object of physical geography: The island is there, and people do things on, to, and with it. Yet because islands are good to think with (Pugh, 2013; Ronström, 2011), it is not uncommon for people to find or create islands to fulfil their needs.

The islands of Thousand-Island Lake are interesting in this regard. Although they are an incidental byproduct of an energy infrastructure project, they have been imbued with social and cultural meaning, including with senses of heritage and nostalgia for a past way of life that largely occurred elsewhere—more specifically, that occurred in the drowned landscape at the bottom of the reservoir.

The historical, folk cultural, and tourism geography of Thousand-Island Lake

Thousand-Island Lake is today a nature area at the western periphery of the Yangtze River Delta megacity region. Prior to the construction of Xin'anjiang Reservoir, the valley was home to a substantial population, centred in Lion City 狮城 (*Shicheng*). The earliest records of Lion City go back to the start of the 200s CE (Liang, 2011), with the city eventually being made the seat of Chun'an County. Located in a fertile valley and serving as a regional transportation hub (Ji, 2012), Lion City was well placed to benefit from the relocation of China's capital to Hangzhou by the Southern Song dynasty in 1132 (Tong, 2009), and besides the city itself, various towns and villages developed in the valley systems. Lion City was comprehensively walled and fortified in the 16th Century, and at the time the reservoir was constructed, the city had 2.2 km of walls, 6.6 m in height, with five gates and numerous watchtowers (Qiu, 2019).

The 1957 decision to construct Xin'anjiang Dam, the first major hydropower project in the People's Republic of China, led to the displacement of approximately 290,000 residents and the transformation of the Chun'an valley system into a 573 km^2 lake. The former mountain tops and peaks within the basin turned into islands and reefs. In 1984, the Zhejiang Province Geographic Names Committee, noting the area's appeal to tourists, decided to name this body of water Thousand-Island Lake 千岛湖 (Qiu, 2019).

In media and tourism materials, Lion City is often discussed as a 'forgotten', 'lost', or 'mysterious' city, but it was never truly out of memory. Most of those displaced from Lion City and other submerged towns and villages were relocated elsewhere in Zhejiang, Jiangxi, or Anhui Provinces, but some were relocated elsewhere in Chun'an County, and cultural memory of former life in the valleys remained. In 2002, the county government initiated an investigation into the state of the lake, and a team of divers explored the remains of Lion City (Tong, 2009). The site was publicised and received provincial-level protection in 2011. In 2016, construction began on the Wenyuan Lion City Resort, a tourist-oriented reconstruction of the ancient city.

Notably, and conflicting with the idea of Lion City having been lost or forgotten, a topographical myth concerning the city's beginnings is current, suggesting either the maintenance of cultural memory or the invention of a new origin myth in recent decades. The myth explains both the name of the

city and the nearby Five Lion Mountain 五狮山 (*Wushishan*): An ancient turtle spirit steals a magical pearl from the Dragon King of the East China Sea. The pearl falls to the ground at Lion City, five lions begin fighting over it, and the Dragon King transforms these lions into mountains, while the pearl becomes an island. Temples were later built on each of these five peaks (Ji, 2012).

Nostalgia for a submerged city

Although the initial explorations of Lion City are frequently narrated as instances of the almost accidental discovery of a forgotten city, the impetus for the project was a combination of a desire to promote tourism and a sense of nostalgia for the way of life that had been submerged beneath the lake. It is unsurprising that memories of the sunken city persisted, for many of the Lion City families were relocated to Jiangjia Town. Although Jiangjia Town currently has a lakeside location, prior to the construction of the dam, the site was on one of the mountaintops immediately to the north of Lion City.

Feng Qiu (2019), former head of the Planning and Construction Section at the Thousand-Island Lake Scenic Tourism Bureau, reflects upon his role in the establishment of Thousand-Island Lake as a site for cultural heritage tourism:

> My father's hometown is near the small west gate of Lion City. Growing up there, he had a deep emotional connection to the ancient city. Since I was young, he often reminisced, saying, "Our hometown is beneath Thousand-Island Lake, among the grand archways and impressive city walls. I often climbed the walls to play." ... Whenever we passed over the ancient city by boat, he would gaze out at the lake, lost in thought, eventually exclaiming, "If only Lion City were still here; I long to see my old home again."
>
> Since the development of tourism in 1982, Thousand-Island Lake has always focused on island construction, with the use of water as a resource being less developed. ... I thought that if ... the water, land, and air were developed in parallel, Thousand-Island Lake would attract more tourists. In addition, Thousand-Island Lake lacked cultural connotations for tourism, which was inconsistent with the history of the ancient county. If the underwater ancient city were excavated, it could not only increase the cultural connotations of Thousand-Island Lake tourism but also reconnect the Chun'an cultural context that was cut off due to the construction of the hydropower station.

That is, significant for the dives into Lion City was the notion that Thousand-Island Lake suffered from being a purely nature site without a cultural heritage element. The memories of those who had lived in and around Lion City provided further motivation to reconnect the Chun'an people with their past.

This desire to reconnect with the past is also found in other accounts. In the early 1980s, Nianchun Yu, a former resident of Lion City, moved into a house in today's Thousand-Island Lake Town that overlooked the site of the ancient city, and "although it had sunk beneath the water, memories of every blade of grass and brick from his hometown often came flooding back to him" (A. Hong, 2019). Inspired by conversations and reminiscences with others who had been relocated, Yu began to document memories of Lion City and its surrounding villages in the 1990s. He ultimately combined interviews and archival sources to create maps of the sunken settlements, which were finalised in 2005, and "single-handedly created accurate depictions of the underwater cities, preserving their history and cultural heritage for future generations" (A. Hong, 2019).

In such accounts, the reservoir can be seen as having swallowed up Lion City and its culture, yet the reality is more complex. As Lion City Museum board member Wiezhou Zhu notes, Lion City "remains one of the country's best-preserved walled cities. It has survived the changes of the past 50 years" (qtd. in Jou et al., 2012). In one other words, the lake has become a vault protecting the physical remnants of a vanished way of life from the vagaries of breakneck modernisation and political upheaval, which led to the comprehensive redevelopment of most of China's other walled cities. The aforementioned Lion City Museum has created space for nostalgia, with a model of the ancient city and photo wall for sharing the memories of the city's former residents (Ji, 2012). Lion City Museum is located in Wenyuan Lion City, a reconstruction of the submerged city that has been built close to the site of the ancient city itself and just to the east Jiangjia Town.

Sacred island mountains and themed tourism sites

This idea of reconstructing the past is present elsewhere around Thousand-Island Lake. Hai Rui Temple 海瑞祠 (Hai Rui Ci), one of the key cultural heritage tourism sites in the area, is today located on Dragon Mountain Island 龙山岛 (Longshandao), a former mountain peak. Originally constructed in 1577 in honour of the former local magistrate Hai Rui, the temple was flooded with the reservoir construction and was created anew at its present site in 1985 (Fu, 2007; Li, 2023).

The popularity of Hai Rui, who served as local magistrate in 1558-1562, was rooted in his personal frugality and his reforming efforts to reduce corruption and alleviate poverty (Fang, 2016; Fu, 2007). These remain popular and officially cultivated qualities for Chinese political leaders. Although called a 'temple', this is more of a memorial site, with spots celebrating Hai Rui's virtuous activities and social contributions. Li (2023) writes:

> In the back hall stands a three-meter-tall statue of Hai Rui, while the Memorial Tablet of Remembrance remains in front of the main hall. Standing there, one cannot help but feel a sense of travelling back in time, as though Hai Qing Tian [*a nickname for Hai Rui*] were about to embark on a new journey, and the people of Chun'an were bidding him a heartfelt farewell. We too find ourselves part of this poignant moment.

Chen (2003) reflects upon the site in a similarly nostalgic manner, noting that the words on the Memorial Tablet of Remembrance ('When a person departs, memories linger') "captures the sentiment of the Chun'an people, who continually remember and honor Hai Rui after his departure."

Hai Rui Temple comes to stand for something more than Hai Rui himself; it becomes a symbol of Lion City. The flooding of the temple due to reservoir construction saved it from the fate of so many similar sites in China, which over subsequent decades were demolished as part of urbanisation and modernisation projects. Its submergence in the flood and reconstruction in a new location of exceptional scenic beauty allows it to symbolise a Chun'an past that is somehow more present than had the original temple been replaced by a new urban society. The water of Thousand-Island Lake becomes a stabilising medium that keeps the past intact and emotionally accessible: The past is still down there at the bottom of the lake.

Whereas Hai Rui Temple was recreated as an islanded heritage site, other sites were transformed into islanded heritage through the reservoir construction. Honey Mountain Island 蜜山岛 (Mishandao) is another island heritage tourism attraction, but this former mountain peak has come to be associated with the well-known Chinese idiom 'three monks have no water to drink' 三个和尚没水喝 (hereafter, 'three monks'). This idiom refers to a story in which a monk living alone on a mountain goes down to the spring every day and carries two buckets of water back up to the temple using a shoulder pole. A second monk joins him at the temple, and together, they cooperate to carry a single bucket of water by each holding one end of the shoulder pole. When a third monk arrives, none of the monks are willing to fetch water.

The 'three monks' proverb may have circulating in late-imperial China, but it seems first to have acquired its standardised form and obtained a full story behind it in the 1980s, possibly through the prize-winning short film *Three Monks* 三个和尚 (*San ge he shang*) (Y. Chen, 2015). Quickly following this film, the story was the subject of a number of other adaptations (e.g., Xiao H., 1984; Xiao M., 1982).

'Three monks', even its story form, is evidently proverbial, and there is nothing to suggest it was associated with a specific mountain in ancient times. However, during a visit by Vice Premier Guo Moruo to Honey Mountain Island in 1963, a local official is reported to have said that the spring mentioned in the proverb was memorialised by a stele on the island and that, moreover, three nearby Ming dynasty burial mounds were the resting

places of the three monks. The vice premier ordered that these pieces of built heritage be protected, and the mounds themselves received special county-level protection in 1985 (Yuan Yuan Talks Sports, 2023).

Since then, Honey Mountain Island has been frequently linked with the 'three monks' story in tourism promotion and other literature. For example, Chen (2003) writes:

> Honey Mountain Island, located in the southeast of Thousand-Island Lake, is small but lush with trees and wildflowers. It gets its name from Honey Spring, known for its sweet water that never runs dry, earning the title of 'the top spring in the southeast'. Interestingly, the popular tale of 'one monk fetches water, two monks share it, three monks have none' originates here, with the 'graves of the three monks' still visible on the southwestern hillside.

This description is illustrative of the manner in which the meaning of the 'three monks' proverb (concerning the difficulty of organising individuals into a society) has faded. The 'three monks' story instead becomes a simple marker of times past. As a consequence, Honey Mountain Island is sometimes promoted as a kind of otherworldly island utopia for rest and relaxation. The Hangzhou tourism authority writes:

> In ancient times, people went up the mountain to offer incense. Nowadays, we take boats to worship the god. Mishan Mountain used to be a famous scenic spot in West Zhejiang in the past. And now, it has become a fairy mountain in the lake. It is the very place of the famous folklore Three Monks Have No Water to Drink. Followers still gather at Mishan Zen Temple, and the inexhaustible water of Mishan Spring still tastes sweet. A pot of Yunwu Tea with the sweet water will make you willing to stay here forever (ywhangzhou.cn, n.d.).

The importance of islandness for Honey Mountain Island and Dragon Mountain Island comes through in Chen's (2003) description:

> The couplet in front of the main hall [of Honey Mountain Temple] beautifully depicts the scenery: "Peaks have turned into islands, the mountain gate waits for the blue waves to rise, warmth brings smiles in greeting." ... From the map, Dragon Mountain Island, located at the center of Thousand-Island Lake, is also small. Viewed from above, it resembles a soaring dragon, hence its name, also known as Jiaofeng. Surrounded by vast blue waters, the island is shaded by dense greenery, creating a beautiful environment with refreshing air, perfectly capturing the essence of today's Dragon Mountain.

The Honey Mountain temple couplet quoted above articulates the feeling that even as times and circumstances change, that which makes Chun'an special remains. The association of Dragon Mountain Island with a dragon is here attributed to the island's shape, also reminding us of the (presumably recently created) dragon-centric origin myth for Five Lion Mountain.

Besides Dragon Mountain Island and Honey Mountain Island, other islands in Thousand-Island Lake have been turned into tourist-ready theme sites. The tourism promotion authority often draws upon readymade fairyland imagery. For instance, an article concerning Deer Island 鹿岛 (*Ludao*), titled 'Another "fairyland" opens in Qiandao Lake' states:

> In fairy tales, deer are the spirits in the depth of forests. This magical 'Deer-shaped Island' in Qiandao Lake is bound to be a mysterious land. It's on this magic peninsula that Qiandaohu Botanical Garden is located. All explorations of flora here seem to be guided by the deer (Hangzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, 2025).

The promotional materials do nothing to conceal the newly constructed nature of this fairyland. Sites for nostalgia and memorialisation of past lifeways can be created for present-day consumption. The sacred can be crafted out of the mundane, and meanings can be transformed.

As real or perceived tourist desires change, so too do island identities. Names are important in this process, as indicated by the large number of place names associated with mythical beings. Besides Five Lion Mountain and Dragon Mountain Island, there is Five Dragons Island 五龙岛 (*Wulongdao*). Formerly a set of mountain peaks, Five Dragons Island is now an archipelago of five themed islands, joined by bridges. Although developed for tourism already in the 1980s, these islands have recently been renamed and reinterpreted as Moonlight Island 月光岛 (*Yueguangdao*) and include Lock Island 锁岛 (*Sudao*), which is themed around use of heart-shaped locks as love tokens. Like so many sites around Thousand-Island Lake, Moonlight Island has been constructed as a social media-ready photography scene. Similarly, Ostrich Island 鸵鸟岛 (*Tuoniaodao*), on which tourists could "feed ostrich, take photos with them or even ride on their backs" (China Daily, 2006) has been turned into Fishing Fun Island 渔乐岛 (*Yuledao*), a place for entertainment, watersports, and fish-centred meals. Elsewhere in the lake, Monkey Island 猴岛 (*Houdao*) features monkey interactions and exhibits; Snake Island 蛇岛 (*Shedao*) has snake pits;. Bird Island 鸟岛 (*Niaodao*) is themed around birdlife; and Plum Island 梅峰岛 (*Meifengdao*) has been turned into a plum tree plantation and recreation and leisure site.

These narrowly themed islands exist alongside and perhaps heighten the nostalgic cultural heritage of Dragon Mountain Island and Honey Mountain Island as well as of the heritage tourism zones around the lake, such as Wenyuan Lion City and Dragon Riding Alley 骑龙巷 (*Qilong Xiang*) in Thousand-Island Lake Town.

How does islandness matter at Thousand-Island Lake?

The islands of Thousand-Island Lake are in a sense of typical of the millennia-long Chinese use of mountains as symbolically potent landforms. Chinese culture has traditionally regarded islands as a kind of mountain, so that attributions of islandness and mountainness become mixed (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017). Yet in Thousand-Island Lake, we discern special approaches to islands, which cause them to differ from other categories of Chinese mountains.

The unusual status of Thousand-Island Lake's islands is evident already in their place names. One thing that Dragon Mountain Island, Deer Island, Lock Island, Snake Island, and Plum Island share is the claim that they received their names on account of their shapes, highlighting the process by which the valley's mountains have been renamed in line with their post-inundation morphologies and the usefulness of these in tourism marketing. At Thousand-Island Lake, one indication of whether an island has retained its pre-flooding name or has been renamed is whether its name includes 'mountain' 山 (*shan*): Older place names in the lake typically append 'island' 岛 (*dao*) to the 'mountain' name (i.e., 山岛), while those with newer names are merely 'islands' (i.e., 岛). In other Chinese contexts, it is typical for pieces of land surrounded by water to be named either 'mountain' 山 or 'island' 岛, rather than both. The unusual appending of 'island' 岛 to 'mountain' 山 names (e.g., 龙山岛, 蜜山岛) is indicative of how the reservoir construction initiated a complex and ongoing reorganisation of mental geographies of Chun'an Valley. The lake islands are used to remember Lion City and the old Chun'an. However, memories are always located in the present, and memorialisations of the past through heritage says more about present needs than they do about past life (Lowenthal, 1975).

Hai Rui Temple is a kind of multiply situated place (see also Hayward, 2022) that exists both on Dragon Mountain Island and at the bottom of the reservoir. The island serves as a reflection or inversion of the lake and allows visitors access to a perceived vanished past. Islands are often associated with nostalgia and heritage. The transformation of Dragon Mountain into an island prepared the ground for heritage construction. The island itself is a consequence of the flooding that destroyed the original temple, yet the cultural meaning of Hai Rui Temple could not be so well maintained and communicated were it not for its island location—and in fact, without the flooding's wholesale enclosure of the past, it is entirely possible that Hai Rui Temple would have simply vanished and gone the same way as so many other traditional sites in the rapidly modernising China of the second half of the 20th Century.

The same is not true for Honey Mountain Island's Buddhist temple, which has existed on the site since ancient times. However, whereas this temple formerly sat high above the valley, it now simply rests on an island in the lake. This islandness allows the site to become a 'fairy mountain', a sacred otherworld, in contrast to Honey Mountain's history as site of a rather

unremarkable Buddhist temple. Through application of the 'three monks' proverb and accentuation of the place's islandness, Honey Island Mountain is cast back in time as a carrier of nostalgic heritage.

Crucially, although islands are often seen as symbolising isolation and remoteness (Gillis, 2004; Ronström, 2021), the islanding of the temple has made it more accessible. This is both because the reservoir construction has turned the valley into a tourism area and because boat transport to scenic lake islands is a particularly established leisure activity in China. Examples include West Lake 西湖 in Hangzhou (Zhejiang), Erhai 洱海 in Dali (Yunnan), and Star Lake 星湖 in Zhaoqing (Guandong), often again with fairyland connotations—harking back to even older Chinese cultural associations of islands with immortality (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017). The identification of Thousand-Island Lake as a Chinese tourism zone more-or-less necessitates scenic boat trips with stops at islands around the lake. A comparison can be made with Fairy Island Lake 仙岛湖 (*Xiandaohu*) in Hubei Province, another island-dotted reservoir that was first branded as Thousand-Island Lake, then rebranded with its present name in order to reduce competition with the Thousand-Island Lake in Zhejiang. Fairy Island Lake likewise features numerous themed islands that are stops on island-hopping boat trips (Song of the Wanderer, 2023).

The theme islands of Thousand-Island Lake mix elements of Chun'an culture (for example, the fish dishes at Yule Dao) with wider Chinese leisure values (watersports, observation of animals, romantic spots, social media-ready photo ops), some of which themselves hark back to visions of simpler, old-fashioned entertainment. Thousand-Island Lake becomes a fairyland and acquires its links with the past because of its islands. The islands may be viewed from afar from atop Plum Island, and aerial perspectives of the lake and its islands are common—a pseudo-satellite view that renders islandness exceptionally 'legible' (Grydehøj, 2018). We are invited to abstract the individual, narrowly themed lake islands into a greater and more culturally significant whole.

Conclusion

Island studies has devoted considerable attention to how people create meaning from islands. In this paper, we have sought to denaturalise the islands involved in meaning-making processes. Thousand-Island Lake is unusual for its islands were neither discovered within the environment nor constructed through land reclamation. They are instead accidental byproducts of a large-scale infrastructure project, and their very creation coincided with immense loss and displacement for the people of Chun'an. Thousand-Island Lake is famously beautiful, but its beauty is linked to destruction, and its memorialisations are melancholic.

The (historically inaccurate) narrative of Lion City having been lost and forgotten and then having been rediscovered illustrates a nostalgic desire to reclaim a specific authentic past (heritage, a selected inheritance) without needing to look too closely at the manner in which all pasts are conquered by

the present. The submergence of Chun'an Valley permitted a sense of culture to be frozen in time for future reuse, absent the complexities of, for example, heritage-oriented neighbourhood redevelopment projects elsewhere in China that seek to superficially turn back the aesthetic clock to a preindustrialised era. Heritagised islands such as Dragon Mountain Island and Honey Mountain Island literally re-place stories from elsewhere (narratives of the acts of Hai Rui from Lion City and the proverbial 'three monks'), while the lake's various theme islands each encapsulate specific tourism values. The fact that these islands can be renamed and rethemed as changes in taste and tourism product development require points again to the ease with which history can be created, erased, and recreated as well as the elasticity of the concept of Chun'an culture and heritage.

When studying islands as sites of memory, meaning, and forgetting, it is important to bear in mind that cultural processes are not simply things that occur within geographical spaces. These cultural processes form the spaces themselves, and changing human needs will alter geographies in such as a way as to open or foreclose particular pathways for cultural development.

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