

Xiakou: A Case Study in Digital Ethnography

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This story begins in a small Sichuan village over fifteen years ago as a historian (John Flower) and an anthropologist (Pamela Leonard) began their study of the cultural landscape of a contemporary Chinese village. The story evolves as they strive to pioneer *digital ethnography* and later, in collaboration with The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH), build interactive presentation of focused, long-term fieldwork research results in the form of an online monograph, media archive, and information repository, entitled *Moral Landscape in a Sichuan Mountain Village: A Digital Ethnography of Place*.

The original and ongoing field study explores the histories, beliefs, livelihoods, and local identities in Xiakou Village, located in the mountains of Ya'an County, in western Sichuan Province of the People's Republic of China. The goal of the project is to understand Xiakou Village as an evolving *cultural landscape*, defined as the interwoven field of physical environment, historical memory, and moral agency, in which particular places gather a people's sense of themselves and serve as sources of belonging and identity. This understanding attempts to establish a basis to consider questions such as: What does it mean to belong in a place? How do people understand who they are in terms of where they live? What is the relationship between history and place? How do memory and landscape inform the ways in which people define their communities?

The ethnography uses the new possibilities of digital technology to create interleaving essays, primary source multimedia artifacts, and GIS maps. The purpose of this digital form is to render more transparent the relationship between source and interpretation, to open up non-linear narrative paths through the ethnography, and therefore to more vividly reveal the interconnections among different dimensions of village life that are the core content of the project. Indeed, we revisit the village study model to highlight the overlapping fields of interaction that link the village to broader regional, national, and even transnational identities.

Another fundamental aim of the project is to reframe modern Chinese history away from the big narrative of the nation and toward local stories of the grassroots. How do the villagers of Xiakou understand their history? What memories and meanings from the past still animate their place, and how are they remembered and explained?

Moral Landscape in a Sichuan Mountain Village is multidisciplinary, using the perspectives of history, anthropology, economics, folklore, and religion to try to understand the interconnected facets of life expressed in the village landscape. The common thread running through the ethnography is the idea that the landscape holds moral values. When people in Xiakou talked about place and history they were talking about what was good and bad, right and wrong.

We understand digital ethnography to be an online interactive monograph with integrated archive and database. This digital format of the ethnography evokes an understanding of place through interactive essays that localize the broad trends of China's modern history in the lived experiences of Xiakou's villagers. The interactive essays are the project's main narrative tissue, interconnected by a searchable archive of digital artifacts. These artifacts consist of multimedia information—photographs, scanned documents, audio and video recordings, GIS maps—contextualized in a thick setting of related metadata, and shared across essays. The project's digital format is essential for realizing the rich potential of the ethnographic and historical content of the research: a central database

and interconnected xml content enable the transparency, connectivity, and interactivity that comprise the key innovative characteristics of this form of narrative. Transparency means that the ethnography will reveal not simply "what we know" but also "how we know it," by providing the reader access to primary source materials in the database. The architecture of the interactive interface will also use the database to encourage connections across thematic categories, making it possible for the reader to explore alternatives to a set, linear narrative.

2. Ways of belonging: new village studies and mapping the cultural landscape

What is a village in China? A wide range of scholarship has addressed this central question, from the perspectives of regional systems analysis (Skinner 1964) to cultural landscape studies (Knapp 1992, Feuchtwang 1997). Our approach tries to give priority to villagers' conscious representations, analyses, and understandings of their relationship to "their place". The resulting geographical scope goes beyond the village itself to encompass the communities along the North Road and, under some conditions, extends to include the broader eight county Ya'an region.

In *Moral Landscape in a Sichuan Mountain Village* we advocate a return to the ethnographic tradition of village studies, but using new tools of the digital humanities that emphasize the ways in which place is not simply a fixed and unchanging location, but rather a nexus of evolving relationships and historical connections to other places. Thus, one of our goals is to highlight the multiple, overlapping fields of interaction that link the village to broader regional, national, and even transnational identities.

We see our project as complementary to the much larger and comprehensive initiatives that aim to create complete datasets, such as the China historical GIS project (Bol 2006). In contrast, our project does not attempt to be comprehensive, but rather celebrates the particularity of place. We hope that our qualitative interpretation of landscape will provide the kind of unique local portrait of place

from which comprehensive projects can create a more vivid broad tableau of China as whole.

3. Beyond Revolution: an inductive approach to local history

Another fundamental goal of our project's landscape approach is to reframe modern Chinese history away from the master narrative of the nation and toward local stories of the grassroots (Duara, Prazniak). How do the villagers of Xiakou understand their history? What memories and meanings from the past still animate their place, and how are they remembered and explained? How does that local understanding of history reiterate or differ from historical narratives based on the nation-state, China, as subject? While there are excellent village-based histories (e.g. Chan, Madsen, Unger 1992; Selden, Friedman, Pickowicz 1991) that focus on the local impact of national events, particularly the Chinese revolution, in *Moral Landscape in a Sichuan Mountain Village* we try to adopt a more localized, inductive approach. The historical scope of our project thus largely corresponds to the way villagers mark the turning points in their past, based on their personal experiences in local places and marking events that fall within their horizon of memory.

Methodologically, we understand that the essays and artifacts represent *our synthesis* of a dialogue with local villagers and with local historical source-materials on the topic of social and environmental change. In confronting the subjective reality of fieldwork and analysis, anthropologists have emphasized the need to be transparent in presenting the politics of the research encounter. We believe digital technology allows us to go further in meeting this aim.

4. History, environment, and agency in the moral landscape

In trying to understand the significance of the environmental changes that have taken place in this valley, we frame issues of environment and economic development within local cultural practices and historical knowledge. How do local people draw on their historical understanding of place in adapting to economic development

policies introduced from outside? How do those development policies in turn influence their livelihoods, and change their understanding of the landscape?

5. Structure, content, and logic of the digital ethnography

The structure of the ethnography's online monograph comprises eight chapters: History, Landscape, Belief, Folklife, Authority, Work, Gazetteer, and Biography. Chapters are not airtight divisions, but rather groupings that highlight the dominant themes of the essays within them. There are three main types of content within this chapter structure: *essays*, *interactive maps*, and *artifacts*. Essays are the basic interpretive building blocks of the ethnography and are accessed through the chapters. The interactive maps under the Gazetteer chapter will offer spatial representations of sites in the cultural landscape, dynamically presented through GIS layers, sorted by kind and historical period.

Both the maps and essays are illustrated and documented by "artifacts", i.e., foci of evidence that link to multimedia content—photographs, video and audio recordings, image maps, diagrams, supplemental texts, primary source documents, and field notes. The artifact frames this multimedia content within supplementary metadata and highlights thematic overlaps and interconnections within the ethnography.

The essay/artifact structure allows us to experiment with different approaches to conceptualizing and presenting the ethnographic research. These artifact-centered essays are intentional inversions of the more familiar text-driven narrative presentation, and they point the way to readers who want to engage the ethnography more interactively. To enable that level of engagement, our goal is to code each artifact and each essay subsection with selections from a finite set of keywords, making the whole site fully searchable through the site's integrated information structures.

6. Proposed Presentation

We will discuss the information structures in which the base materials are created and maintained. Then we discuss the interactive

interface through which those materials are accessed by scholars and the general public. Finally, we will justify our claim that these techniques embody the methodologies expressed above.