Literary and cultural (re)productions of a utopian island: Performative geographies of colonial Shamian, Guangzhou in the latter half of the 19th century

Tingcong Lin

School of English, University of Hong Kong

lintc@connect.hku.hk

Ping Su

Research Center for Indian Ocean Island Countries, South China University of Technology

School of Foreign Languages, South China University of Technology

suping1983@gmail.com (corresponding author)

Abstract: In the second half of the 19th century, Shamian was established and developed as a colonial island enclave in the Chinese city of Guangzhou. Simultaneously, literary and cultural imaginations, depictions, and narrations of the place produced a discourse of Shamian as a utopian island: geographically insular and bounded, environmentally beautiful and peaceful, socially exclusive and harmonious, and technologically progressive and advantageous. This paper examines contemporaneous (predominantly English) literary and cultural representations of Shamian as a colonial utopia and their interrelations with the island's spatial formation and evolution. These texts (primarily written and pictorial descriptive, non-fictional accounts) reflected the spatial reality but also promoted spatial practices that reinforced the physical utopian island. This process exemplifies the theories of performative geographies in island studies and intertextuality in geocriticism, showing how a place's spatial representations and reality are mutually constructed. Adopting a conceptual model of intertextual performative geographies, this paper investigates the dynamic interplay of these literary and cultural texts with the spatial reality, arguing that literary and cultural representations of Shamian (re)produced the colonial enclave as a utopian island, both conceptually and practically.

Keywords: Shamian, colonial island enclave, utopian islands, literary and cultural reproduction, performative geographies, intertextuality

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Introduction

Following the Second Opium War (1856-1860), the second half of the 19th century was a time of great change in China, as the country came under increased foreign influence. During this period, Shamian, a small river island (0.3 km²) in the southern Chinese city of

Guangzhou, developed into a utopian enclave for foreigners. Shamian is today a quaint colonial heritage site in what is now the heart of one of the world's most populous urban agglomerations (Figure 1). This paper takes an intertextual performative geography approach to studying the mutually constitutive nature of reality and representation: We ask how Shamian's geographical transformation into a colonial island enclave interacted with the literary and visual texts that were produced on and about the island.

Figure 1: The colonial heritage site of Shamian (left) is separated from the surrounding megacity of Guangzhou (right) by a narrow canal. © Adam Grydehøj, 2019.

We begin by introducing the theory and methodology of this study, which is followed by a discussion of the ways in which the colonial enclave of Shamian was imagined and planned prior to and during its establishment. Then, we examine the process of its construction and development through foreign spatial practices in the island context. Following that, we scrutinize how Shamian was presented and understood as advantageous and superior through contrasts and comparisons with its past, neighboring Chinese districts, and other places worldwide. Finally, we study how Shamian was discursively conceptualized as a utopia through performative cultural narrations, depictions, and inventions and analyze the intertextual relation between the place and its representations. This leads to our conclusion that the utopian island was interactively (re)produced in space (and spatial practices) as well as in texts.

Theory and methods

Fletcher's (2011, p. 19) theory of 'performative geographies' proposes a study of "the island as a space of cultural production which privileges neither geography nor literature but insists

on their interconnection.” False distinctions between real and imagined islands contribute to the “development of a series of interrelated hierarchical pairs (physical/cultural, reality/romance, actual/virtual, fact/fiction, materiality/metaphor, image/word) in the discussions of the physicality and culture of islands” (Fletcher, 2011, p. 18). For Fletcher (2011, p. 20), a core tension in island studies is its effort “to reconcile a commitment to studying the facts of islands and island life with an interest in their representation.” Focus on performativity—defined by Butler (1996, p. 112, qtd. in Fletcher 2011, p. 27) as “that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names”—highlights “the impact of geography on subjective and social knowledge and experiences” as well as “the linguistic and cultural processes by which descriptions of islands are generative of ‘reality’” (Fletcher, 2011, p. 28). Fletcher’s (2011, p. 27) thinking, foregrounding “an appreciation of the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between places and the ways in which they are depicted,” aligns with Sullivan’s (2011) ideas about the performative aspects of geography, upon which we also draw in the present article.

Westphal’s (2011, p. 113) ‘geocritical’ approach similarly considers the relationship between places and texts (referents and their representations) as one of mutual construction and generation. The concept of intertextuality—at its most basic, the relationships between texts—is key to Westphal’s (2011, p. 168) approach, which suggests an expanded view of intertextuality, reading space as a kind of text, equal to written literature: “Space, grasped through the representation that texts sustain, can be ‘read’ like a text; the city, that paradigmatically human space, can be ‘read’ like a novel. One reads space; one traverses a text; one reads a text as one traverses space.” To go a step further, intertextuality exists not just among texts and among spaces but also among texts and spaces: “Space informs the text that produces a fictional representation of a spatial referent. Conversely, the impact of the text on a given space is obvious when one looks at the intertextual chain that associates spatial ‘reality’ with fiction” (Westphal, 2011, p. 169).

Combining the ideas of Fletcher and Westphal, we propose a concept of intertextual performative geographies, which aims to collect and analyze a broad and interdisciplinary corpus of texts on a given spatial referent with a focus on the interactive, interdependent, and intertextual relationships between space and text. We use this conceptual model in this paper to undertake an intertextual analysis of texts produced on or related to Shamian. We do so in order to discern how interrelations between and among texts, spaces, and practices combined to performatively produce a utopian island enclave.

The paper’s spatiotemporal focus is within Shamian from the start of the Second Opium War in 1856 to 1900. This time-space sees Shamian in a relatively separated, stable, and tranquil situation, which is distinct from preceding and subsequent eras as well as from other foreign enclaves of the same era (Farris, 2016, p. 144; Nield, 2015, pp. 45–49; Garrett, 2002, pp. 131–137): In the early-20th century, with the rise of multinational corporations and their buildings, Shamian’s function and significance—and the intensity of Sino-foreign interactions—changed dramatically. While other foreign enclaves in Guangzhou also had commercial or diplomatic significance, Shamian was the central site for foreign activities during the study period, resulting in large numbers of texts and records, which in turn strengthened the island’s sociocultural significance.

Our focus on literary and cultural representations in a particular time period is largely pragmatic: The large number of texts concerning Shamian renders impossible any “attempt to undertake a full-scale geocritical analysis” and advocates for temporal restrictions (Westphal, 2011, pp. 126-127). Because we consider the interrelation between geographies and representations, the best method is to observe these evolving simultaneously, bearing in mind both writing dates and publication dates, as the cycle of production and circulation was important for the texts’ performative, generative, and intertextual aspects.

Keeping these caveats in mind, our primary texts include related contemporaneous travelogues, travel guides, memoirs, newspaper articles, paintings, photos, maps, and souvenir postcards, most of which are descriptive and non-fictional. Our corpus is predominantly foreign, especially English, given that the United Kingdom was the most significant colonial power in Guangzhou at the time and was the dominant and most active player—compared with France, the United States, and others—in the Shamian enterprise. Very few Chinese sources are included, both because our focus is on the exercise of colonial power and discourse in Shamian and because few Chinese texts were actually produced. As a foreign concession, Chinese bureaucratic intellectuals (traditionally the main producers of literary and cultural texts in Chinese society) were largely excluded from Shamian, resulting in an absence of Chinese texts. This is a stark reminder of how “the foreign partitioning of spaces had replaced the feeling of communal enterprise [...] in the Thirteen Factories Era” (Farris, 2016, p. 144).

Longing for a colonial island enclave

British victory in the Second Opium War led to the opening up of 11 new treaty ports in China. One result was a decline in the importance of Guangzhou (then also known as Canton), which had hitherto been the center of British trade in the country. Shanghai and Hong Kong quickly overtook Guangzhou as the site of the most innovative commercial ventures in China. Meanwhile, there was a redistribution of responsibilities and profits in Guangzhou’s foreign trade-related industries: Within a short period, Chinese merchants were in control of most of the trading business, with foreigners largely confined to roles in shipping (Nield, 2015, p. 44). Consequently, the 362 westerners (not including women and children) living in the city in 1850 had more than halved by the mid-1860s (Nield, 2015, p. 44; Garrett, 2002, p. 127). Despite Guangzhou’s declining importance for trade, the city maintained its cultural (e.g. printing presses, missionaries) and diplomatic importance as a hub of Sino-foreign contact.

The late-17th century to mid-19th century had seen a rise in foreign trade in Guangzhou but also increasing foreign dissatisfaction with the conditions of the Thirteen Factories neighborhood, which was the combined commercial and residential site for foreigners in the city. 19th-century urban Guangzhou—perceived by foreigners as filthy and chaotic—compelled foreigners to imagine, plan, and articulate a clean, organized, insular space to replace the Thirteen Factories. There was a desire to remove the Thirteen Factories from the context of the city, “effectually and permanently [...] rendering the neighborhood of the British consulate and buildings a *cul de sac*” (Davis, 1852, p. 158) where “no strange Chinese were permitted to pass through” (Hunter, 1911, p. 222). This longing for a safe, tranquil, wide-open, and Chinese-free place pervaded and circulated in foreign enclaves in Guangzhou at the time. Foreigners complained how the small, dense, and clamorous Thirteen Factories

prevented ordinary sociality (Conner, 2009, p. 190). No less than the United Kingdom's then-consul in Guangzhou, Sir Harry Parkes complained that lack of privacy in the neighborhood hindered romantic relationships and lovemaking (Lane-Poole, 1867, p. 179).

Complaints sometimes turned into demands for relocation. A good, large place was not enough; foreigners also wanted it to be separate and purely foreign. For instance, an editorial in the *Canton Press* emphasized the necessity of a space occupied exclusively by foreigners, unlike the Thirteen Factories, which was home to some Chinese merchants "who ought to go to live somewhere else" ("Canton Press Saturday, 27th October", 1838, p. 2).

As it happened, this desire came to be fulfilled by disaster. In 1856, a fire destroyed the Thirteen Factories neighborhood, opening the way for a new kind of enclave in Guangzhou. Among the various proposals for a new residential and business zone for foreigners (Lane-Poole, 1894, p. 317; Mayers et al., 1867, p. 131), that which was selected was the "more ambitious plan" advanced by the British officers and businessmen, led by Parkes (Conner, 2009, p. 241). The plan—grounded in the existing discourses mentioned above—was to establish a foreign enclave on Shamian (also called Shamien, Shamin, Shameem, and Chamin during this period).

At the time, Shamian was perceived by foreigners to be "hardly a place at all" (Nield, 2015, p. 42). Royal Navy (1858) survey charts show details such as "hovels on piles," "large rafts of bamboo," "mud," and "ruins." Among the latter were two small Chinese forts that had been destroyed in past battles, "occupying small patches of solid land in the midst of the swamp" (Mayers et al., 1867, pp. 129-131). This may, however, simply have been the foreigners' own perceptions. Prior to the fire of 1856 (the same fire that destroyed the Thirteen Factories), Shamian was mentioned in Chinese civic records as surrounded by thousands of "prostitute ships" and being "the best place for prostitution in Guangzhou" (Huang, 2012, pp. 635-636). That is, the new foreign enclave was not constructed upon an empty, unpopulated space, devoid of society. Yet this is how Shamian would come to be seen: as a *tabula rasa* upon which foreigners' dreams could be built.

The foreign consuls used indemnity from the previous fire and the war to pay the Guangzhou governors to expel Shamian's existing inhabitants and to dismantle the island's existing structures (Lane-Poole, 1894, p. 317; Wolseley, 1862, p. 55; India Office Records, 1859, p. 8). Land reclamation was then undertaken, and a 100-foot canal was dredged on the north side of the island to create a clear water boundary between Shamian's new granite masonry embankment and the Chinese city beyond (Mayers et al., 1867, p. 132). Shamian was thus transformed into a defensively fortified island (Farris, 2016, p. 83). The actual construction work was undertaken by Chinese refugees who had escaped the Taiping rebels and were employed by the city authorities (Conner, 2009, p. 242; Wolseley, 1862, p. 55). In accordance with the proportion of finances provided by each government, the British possessed four-fifths of the island and the French one-fifth, but the French end nevertheless remained relatively undeveloped in the period under discussion (Farris, 2016, p. 76; Mayers et al., 1867, p. 132; India Office Records, 1859).

Although foreigners chose Shamian as their compensation for the loss of the Thirteen Factories, the island was always envisioned as something other and more idyllic than the Thirteen Factories. Shamian gradually developed into a very different kind of enclave, with its residential, diplomatic, and cultural influence becoming more prominent than its

commercial influence. By July 1861, basic construction had been completed, with much of the credit being accorded to Harry Parkes:

Shameen, the new site for the factories, is a fine place. This is in great degree Harry's work. A portion of the river bank has been cleared, filled up with sand that is raised well from the water; a heavy stone river wall built about five or six feet above high water; and this makes a beautiful site for the foreign buildings. (Lane-Poole, 1894, p. 443)

On 3 September 1861, the Shameen Rental Treaty was signed, and the island attained the legal status of a concession (Zhong, 1999, p. 24; Wolseley, 1862, pp. 412-415). Auctioning of the island's lots began that same day, and Parkes and others "were glad to see that the bidding became fast and furious, and the end of the first day's sale showed a very good result" (Lane-Poole, 1894, p. 279, p. 446).

Foreigners had been immediately impressed by the site's potential. William Mayers et al.'s (1867, pp. 132-133) later account listed and analyzed Shamian's geographical advantages:

In addition to the advantage of lying in immediate proximity to the Western Suburb [of Guangzhou], where the Chinese wholesale trade is centred and all the principal merchants and brokers have their residences, it is situated immediately opposite the Macao Passage, as the broad, deep channel is termed which branches off to the southward at the extremity of Honam Island, and up which, in summer, the cooling breezes of the monsoon are wafted almost uninterruptedly. The broad basin formed by the fork of the river at this point is not only advantageous in this respect, as affording coolness and picturesque views, but it also yields a safe and commodious anchorage for steamers, from the man-of-war corvette to the 1,000-ton merchant vessel, which can safely reach this point by passing through Blenheim Reach, to the southward of Whampoa, and find deep water and good holding ground within 150 yards of the river-wall of Shamien.

However, due to Guangzhou's decline as a center of trade and wider geopolitical circumstances, Shamian's geographical advantages were not exploited to their full. Construction on the island proceeded slowly, limited in the beginning to a series of temporary, thatched-roof summer residences (Mayers et al., 1867, p. 133; Williams, 1864, p. 180).

Constructing the material foundations of the colonial island enclave

Shamian's locational benefits, combined with its modern (western) urban planning, proved irresistible in the long run. The island's grid plan, with three main avenues running East to West and five narrower streets running North to South, divided the island into 16 blocks and a total of 82 lots, connected to the mainland by two gated bridges on the North and East sides (Figure 2). At the riverfront, a 'bund' or walking path ran atop the thick stone embankment, behind which was the esplanade or recreational promenade (Seward, 1873, p. 235). The three avenues were grassed over and accompanied by various plantings—a landscape painstakingly

designed by westerners and constructed by Chinese gardeners (Farris, 2016, pp. 80-81; Staples-Smith, 1939, pp. 10-11).

Figure 2: Shamian block plan and demonstration of wall embankment in the 1920s.
Source: Garrett, 2002, p. 127. © Guangzhou Museum.

Naming of the newly built roads was a significant early spatial practice. The previous local names were neither studied nor considered by the colonial powers. In the British concession, the long streets were named prosaically: Front Avenue, Central Avenue, Canal Street, and Consular Road (Farris, 2016, pp. 75-76; Conner, 2009, p. 243). On the French side, streets were named after sailing vessels that had previously visited Guangzhou and thus had more imperial patriotic implications (Plauchut, 1899, p. 51). “In the wonder of proper name,” as Stephen Greenblatt (1991, p. 83) notes in his study of colonial toponymical practices, “the movement from ignorance to knowledge, the taking of possession, the conferral of identity are fused in a moment of pure linguistic formalism.” As Tuan (1991, p. 688) suggests, the purpose of naming “is not only that a correct label should be affixed to a new entity, but also that, somehow, the new name itself has the power to wipe out the past and call forth the new.” In the case of Shamian, naming practices played a role in creating, developing, and transitioning the island place to one suited for colonial occupation. Both naming and mapping (e.g. Figure 2), “in imperial contexts,” were often “used to legitimize the reality of conquest and empire,” exerting a new spatial discipline (Harley, 1988, p. 282, p. 285).

The 1870s saw a boom in population and construction on Shamian, and by the 1880s, the buildings on the British side of the island were almost complete (Farris, 2016, pp. 85-98), with little room left for further development (Seymour, 1886). There were concerns that Shamian was too small and would need to be expanded (Foreign Office, 1899, p. 12). The island had nevertheless at this point acquired something resembling the appearance that it retains today, notwithstanding the subsequent construction of larger commercial buildings (Nield, 2015, p. 45). Notably, even though the concession was controlled and dominated by foreigners, whose lives were increasingly separated from those of the Chinese population of Guangzhou proper, westerners still interacted with and depended upon substantial numbers of Chinese people, both at home and at work. Shamian’s resident Chinese population was

thus approximately three times that of westerners during this period (Farris, 2016, p. 105; Smith, 1939, p. 22). As we shall see, however, this Chinese population is largely excluded from accounts of life in Shamian written by foreigners.

The island's spatial limitations occasioned shifts in urban design practices over time. In the 1860s, buildings were based on a rectangular, hip-roofed prototype, in various shapes and sizes, but later decades saw greater uniformity in building size and type, with neat rows of buildings differentiated primarily by superficial features, such as verandah shape and ornamentation. In the final decades of the 19th century, demand for more residences led to the introduction of terraced housing (Farris, 2016, p. 98). This was about more than just architectural efficiency though, as all the building forms deployed in Shamian throughout the period reflected European identities, helping foreigners "articulate their cultural difference from the Cantonese of the surrounding city" (Farris, 2016, p. 85). These were not typical 19th-century colonial commercial buildings but were stylistically closer to English suburban or rural houses, an architecture of community and tranquility. Non-residential functions, particularly commercial functions, were erased, barely reflected, or at least 'hedged', as Isabella Bird (1883, p. 44) observed:

A stone bridge with an iron gate gives access into one of the best parts of Canton, commercially speaking; but all the business connected with tea, silk, and other productions, which is carried on by such renowned firms as Jardine, Matheson & Co., the Dents, the Deacons, and others, is transacted in these handsome dwellings of stone or brick, each standing in its tropical garden, with a wall or ornamental railing or bamboo hedge surrounding it, but without any outward sign of commerce at all.

Despite this European style, the buildings tended to be the work of Chinese contractors, whose construction practices underwent remarkable adaptations to meet their foreign clients' needs and desires.

Foreigners transplanted to the island western forms of community and social organization. A municipal council, funded by property tax, was formed in June 1871 to take responsibility for law and order, public works, and land use regulations (Smith, 1939, p. 16; Municipal Council of British Shameen, 1871). Despite the island's small size, areas at each end of the British quadrangle were reserved for outdoor recreation, largely due to the increasing number of women and children (Farris, 2016, p. 84). The Canton Club on the esplanade contained indoor recreational spaces, such as billiards rooms and reading rooms and was the center of British social life on the island (Johnston & Erh, 1997, p. 106; Mundy, 1875, p. 84), accommodating parties; activities; and larger events such as dances, lectures, and amateur theatrics (Bird, 1883, p. 46). Intriguingly, "although there is such limited space for horse exercise [...] many keep their ponies for riding" (Mundy, 1875, p. 84). We can read here the fulfillment of the Thirteen Factories-era longing for a truly European enclave amenable to family and social life.

The island enclave pioneered the adoption of new technologies relative to the wider Guangzhou: fire engines, lighting (gas balloons), telephones, and indoor cooling (Nield, 2015, p. 46; Smith, 1939, pp. 16-20; Long, 1907, p. 814;). European-style residences and hotels on

the island made Shamian the first choice of landing, accommodation, commercial and diplomatic interactions, and tourism for foreign travelers arriving in Guangzhou (Farris, 2016, pp. 172–178).

The full exercise of western life within the seclusion of this island enclave was largely due to the spatial and practical protections and exclusions that surrounded it. Royal Navy vessels, which the Chinese government had previously prohibited from sailing on the Pearl River, frequented Shamian (Conner, 2009, p. 255). The two small bridges across the canal were places of connection to the city, yet restrictions on Chinese visitors gradually strengthened over the last decades of the 19th century. During the day, the bridges were carefully regulated by Chinese policemen in guardhouses, “always stationed to enquire the business of every native who wants to enter” (Turner, 1894, p. 24; Mundy, 1875, pp. 80–81), making the island “an exclusive territory, to which entry was strictly controlled” (Conner, 2009, p. 246). A volunteer self-defense force was organized by the community (Smith, 1938, p. 19), and protection was provided by Chinese gunboats of the Imperial Maritime Customs, commanded by foreigners and stationed opposite the island (Mundy, 1875, p. 81). These defensive practices largely protected the island during the anti-foreigner riots of the 1880s (Farris, 2016, pp. 140–143; Nield, 2015, pp. 44–45).

Shamian’s late-19th century spatial evolution was guided by the desire for a colonial island enclave, distinct from the Chinese city. In the next section, we consider how contemporary literary and cultural texts were not just sensitive to local developments but also generative and performative. These texts built complex intertextual relations between spaces, words, and images.

Building the colonial island enclave out of contrasts and comparisons

Descriptions of precolonial Shamian “simply as a ‘reclaimed sandbank’” ignored that “the existing area was not an uninhabited wasteland” (Conner, 2009, p. 241). Yet erasure or denigration of Chinese lives was crucial not just to the material construction of Shamian as a colonial island enclave but also to its mental construction. Indeed, as we shall see, the material and mental processes (space and text, geography and literature) were closely interrelated and mutually constitutive.

The few foreign accounts that mention Shamian’s precolonial inhabitants tend to be vague and contemptuous. For example:

Old residents in China will doubtless well remember the time when this mud flat was typical of all that was filthy, unsavoury, and dissolute; when it was covered with long, lowering, decrepid sheds of wood and bark, tottering on grimy piles above the stagnant swamp, which constituted the most loathsome haunts of vice; whilst between and around these buildings crowded hovels inhabited by lepers, mendicants, and thieves of the most miserable class. (Mayers et al., 1867, p. 131)

Similarly, Scottish travel writer and painter Constance Gordon-Cumming (1886, p. 27) describes contemporary Shamian before turning to the past:

It is hard to realise that, previous to the capture of Canton in 1857, a hideous mud-flat occupied the place where this green isle now lies. Having been selected as a suitable spot for a foreign settlement, piles were driven into the river and filled up with sand, and on this foundation was built an embankment of solid granite, which is now the daily recreation-ground of all the foreign population. But nothing that now meets the eye on this artificial island suggests the enormous labour by which this transformation was accomplished.

Such representations emphasize Shamian as a place that had been undervalued by the Chinese and needed to be recreated by foreigners, setting the stage for their subsequent words and actions.

Parkes' selection of Shamian as a new enclave was frequently lauded (Lane-Poole, 1894, p. 318; Mayers et al., 1867, p. 132), at least by the British, with Shamian being presented as a replacement for the Thirteen Factories (Conner, 2009, p. 241). Although Shamian was envisioned as and developed into something quite different than the foreigners' old commercial district, the narrative of an island salvaged from abandonment and provided as compensation for the loss of the Thirteen Factories was present already from the establishment of the Shamian concession. The new enclave was seen as symbolizing a new era in the colonial enterprise (Nye, 1875, pp. 120-121).

Such narratives of colonial progress were also present in visual media. Even though construction of buildings on Shamian proceeded slowly, the idea of Shamian as a unique and wonderful foreign space was present in paintings, drawings, and engravings nearly from the start, which emphasized the island's early landmark buildings and lush vegetation, in contrast to the densely urbanized Chinese city. The engraving in Figure 3 is a vivid example. The ordered and open dwellings and offices of Shamian contrast strikingly with the dense and chaotic Chinese neighborhood in the foreground. From the view presented here, sharp spatial and cultural differences—and the consequent sense of privilege—could be felt.

Figure 3: Engraving titled ‘Shamien, the Foreign Settlement’ (after a photograph by John Thomson), showing Shamian in the 1870s. Source: Farris, 2016, p. 82. *The Graphic*, September 22, 1883, in author’s collection, also with consent of the *Illustrated London News Picture Library*.

Shamian was not flourishing commercially in the same way as had the Thirteen Factories at their height, but it had other advantages that were regarded as worth cherishing. This feeling was enhanced by comparisons with not just diachronically related settlements (e.g. the Thirteen Factories) but also with well-known places worldwide. John Thomson (1873, p. 100) wrote of the island that “its green sward, its rows of trees, its flower-garden and promenade fronting the river, its elegant stone residences, and well-built church, would not disgrace a fashionable suburb in London.” Shamian’s bund was praised for being “made as substantial as the embankment of the Thames” (Hinchliff, 1876, p. 391; see also Mayers et al., 1867, p. 134). The enclave was also lauded in relation to other urban foreign enclaves in China or Far East Asia. For Mayers et al. (1867, p. 134), “the Shamien site is universally declared the most picturesque settlement of all in China.” Hurley (1898, p. 9) held that “Shameen is perhaps one of the most delightful as well as one of the healthiest foreign settlements in the Far East.” It was said of former USA Secretary of State William Seward’s (1873, p. 235) late-1870 visit to Guangzhou:

If they found the fabrics of Canton more exquisite than they had imagined, he found the foreign settlement more spacious and elegant than the people of Shanghai and Hong-Kong allow it to be. There are thirty or forty spacious foreign Hongs [Factories], an Episcopal church, built of white marble, and a club-house with a good library and billiard-room; on the bank, a promenade, handsomely-ornamented with gardens, which rejoices in the name of Cha-min (Sand-face).

Such comparisons functioned as a form of advertisement but also suggest a sense of competition with the growing foreign enclaves in other Chinese cities, at a time when Guangzhou's own role as a commercial hub for foreigners was dwindling (Farris, 2016, p. 85).

Comparisons were also frequently made with the city across the canal from the "tranquil oasis" (Nield, 2015, p. 44). Indeed, this comparison became an established mode in depictions of Shamian in various types of cultural products. If, as noted above, visual representations (such as paintings and engravings created by Chinese artists for foreign consumption) of the island presented it as a unique space from the start, travel writings and memoirs quickly followed suit once the enclave had been filled up. Even before then, Shamian was being written about as a place of refuge. Such texts frequently narrate either arrival into the concession from the city or departure from the enclave and into the Chinese districts. Consider, for instance, the following account of arrival:

On reaching the wharf, which was thronged with Chinese, I changed to the house-boat which awaited me, and I was rowed up the river to Shameen, the settlement. It would have been almost impossible, and a most tedious undertaking, to have attempted to have gone through the streets, owing to their narrowness, and to the offensive smells prevalent in all Chinese cities. [...] The contrast this pleasant retreat bears to the great bustling native city is soothing and tranquilizing. [...] I was very glad to get back to the settlement, as this was my first expedition into the native quarters; and if my bearers had deserted me, as at any moment they might have, I should have found it utterly impossible to get out of a maze where right and left, before and behind, had exactly the same appearance, and as I could not speak the language it would have been impossible for me to discover my road by enquiry. (Mundy, 1875, p. 79, p. 84, p. 87)

This excerpt was written while construction on the island was still underway. Shamian was a place of safety and refuge from the frightful, confusing, and strange Chinese districts, and the author recognized his ignorance of the Chinese city. As the 1880s progressed and Shamian became increasingly well established, foreigners drew even sharper distinctions.

Though the island's bounded space and security barriers kept it separate from the city, Shamian did not exist out of context, and its residents were constantly "reminded of their surroundings [...] not only by the city across the canal, but also by the boat people" (Farris, 2016, p. 83) who regularly sheltered in the island's canals:

A narrow creek separates it from the mainland, but not sufficiently to preserve it from all the offensive odours which seem to form part of Chinese national life. Small boats crowd this creek, for they have greater protection here from wind and tide than they would have were they to anchor in the stream beyond. All these are manned by families which reside permanently in them. The result is that the air is continually rent with the loud voices of this floating population. It is also rendered unwholesome by the presence of many people who have never yet learned the first lesson in regard to sanitary laws. (MacGowan, 1897, pp. 295-926)

At the end of the century, as these factors accumulated, the emphasis on contrasts and the level of emotion that came with them reached a peak:

[In Canton city,] there is no such thing as a straight line, or a chance to take your bearing from the sun. It is a bedlam, a babel, a chaos, a lunatic asylum, in one, and yet everyone is going sedately about on his own business [...] My ears ached, and my brain was dizzy. I was glad to return to the European city of refuge, Shameen. (Wildman, 1900, p. 237)

Underlying these comparisons between the island enclave and wider city was the idea of otherness. Negative descriptions of the other “constitute the goodness of those describing them as such” (Sturm, 2010, p. 137). Farris (2016, p. 83, p. 67) sees descriptions of “detachment from the city” as means of mapping out “the spatial and social isolation of the foreign community.” Studying these literary and visual texts diachronically reveals the increasing disdain and Sinophobia in representations of this urban space, as time passed and as spatial, social, and political contexts changed.

Thinking the island utopia

The attitude of contempt and condescension toward Chinese vernacular space discussed above was in the process of becoming a sense of superiority regarding the foreigners’ own space. Pride was taken in foreignness as such. This foreignness was at first glance predominantly Englishness and was claimed to be so by many texts. However, Shamian was in fact home to foreigners from a range of places, hosting foreign banks, foreign companies and consulates from various western countries (Li et al., 1999, p. 30). Island spatiality sometimes encourages the collapse of internal cultural difference into a single, comprehensible representation of identity (Grydehøj, Nadarajah, & Markussen, 2020; Su, 2017). The Thirteen Factories neighborhood had never been appreciated as an ideal community, but Shamian could be designed with precisely this in mind. Space and discourse interacted, influencing and building upon one another, until the vision of the island enclave became not just one of a place of refuge but also of a place of perfection.

Representations of Shamian in relation to the Chinese city shifted over time from focusing on fear or discomfort in the Chinese city to pride in the superiority of the island enclave. Shamian transformed from a safe haven to a paradise. The prominent British explorer and travel writer Isabella Bird (1883, pp. 44–45) wrote in 1879:

The settlement, insular and exclusive, hears little and knows less of the crowded Chinese city at its gates. It reproduces English life as far as possible, and adds a boundless hospitality of its own, receiving all strangers who are in any way accredited, and many who are not. A high sea-wall with a broad concrete walk, shaded by banyan trees, runs round it, a distance of a mile and a quarter. It is quite flat and covered with carefully kept grass, intersected with concrete walks and banyan avenues, the tropical gardens of the rich merchants giving variety and color.

Likewise, John Turner (1894, p. 77) describes Shamian as an ideal place in contrast to the surrounding native city: “When we arrived on the English Concession at Canton once more, it seemed like a Paradise, with its shady avenues, princely houses, cooing doves, and the atmosphere of peace and quiet, as contrasted with the hooting of the native crowds.”

Such descriptions abound in the literature concerning Shamian, even in texts written by the Germans who were active in the British concession (see Stoecker, 1958, p. 21 for a German source of similar theme). Irish Protestant missionary in China John MacGowan (1897, p. 295) happily found that “here the worship of God is maintained in this heathen land” and concluded that “having it entirely under their own control, the residents have made roads and planted trees, and made it look as much like a piece of England as they possibly could.” Gordon-Cumming’s (1886, p. 27) description of the insular English life is striking:

So it was a most startling revelation to find myself in a very smart, purely foreign settlement, as entirely isolated from the native city as though they were miles apart, instead of being only divided by a canal, which constitutes this peaceful green spot an island. Here is transplanted an English social life so completely fulfilling all English requirements, that the majority of the inhabitants rarely enter the city!

In these texts, England is the imagined ideal while Shamian is depicted as a copy of England, as perfect a place as possible in a foreign land but always a paradise in an exotic elsewhere, foreign to Europeans. This is evident, for instance, in the various references to tropical plants, thereby subverting claims of Shamian’s Britishness or Europeanness and suggesting a metaphorical link between tropical scene and paradise/utopia. This sense of total exclusion and separation was grounded in wishful thinking. After all, the construction, maintenance, and functioning of every aspect and every mansion on the island relied on Chinese laborers and servants, yet most contemporary western literary and cultural representations of Shamian ignored or did not see the involvement and existence of Chinese people. Farris (2016, p. 105) interprets this as a tension “between denial of being surrounded by the Chinese metropolis and reliance on local employees to conduct both business and household affairs.”

These narrations not only echo the aforementioned separation, isolation, and contrast but also highlight the source of foreigners’ confidence and optimism: Shamian’s physical beauty and sense of community, hospitality, and friendliness. In these representations, it is possible to trace a shift over time from a picturesque to an outright utopian framing.

Residents and visitors seemed to be attracted at first sight to the enclave’s prettiness. Many described it impressionistically by combining both the natural environment and the artificial grandeur, although in the early years, the former was more prominent. For example, Mayers et al. (1867, p. 134) give a systematic observation of Shamian’s beauty:

Shamien has also been greatly beautified by judicious planting and laying-out. [...] The site is bisected by a central road, the Broadway, 100 feet wide, parallel to which another road of 80 feet width is carried, and is crossed at right angles to these by five transverse roads, all of which are planted with trees along their entire length, and are allowed to remain covered with grass with the exception of a gravelled pathway on one side. The entire circumference of the site is formed into a smooth esplanade

paved with chunam, already overhung with vigorous young banians, the rapid growth of which promises to make the Shamien 'Bund' the most umbrageous and pleasant promenade in China within a very few years.

Descriptions like this illustrate how Shamian's natural beauty (though created through land reclamation) was closely linked with the ordering process of western urban planning practice. As infrastructural and architectural construction on the island proceeded, and texts narrating these scenes became more widely circulated, the enclave made an increasingly utopian impression on people. The image of this human-made space's comfort, peacefulness, greenness, and richness featured among the accounts of residents and visitors alike:

I thought Shameen looked very pretty as we passed along it, and I was surprised, when we pulled up before the Chaplaincy, to see what a charming, comfortable house it seemed to be. [...] It is in the Italian style of architecture, built in two stories, with two deep verandahs at the back of the house, looking upon the river. [...] The houses in the settlement are very handsome and the whole of it is beautifully laid out. (Gray, 1880, pp. 4-5)

A handsome English church, and large luxurious two-storied houses of Italian architecture, with deep verandahs, the homes of wealthy merchants, are scattered over the isle, embowered in the shade of their own gardens; and altogether this little spot—washed on one side by the Pearl River, and on the other by the canal—is as pleasant a quarter as could be desired. (Gordon-Cumming, 1886, p. 27)

'Italian-style' architecture is mentioned by both Gray and Gordon-Cumming, yet the island's two-storey buildings with hipped or pyramidal roofs were in fact simply neoclassical, in a familiar British colonial style (Farris, 2016, p. 85). The reading of these buildings as Italian reflected their western superiority, colonial identity, and distinction from the Chinese vernacular space, people, and culture. More significantly, a vague 'Italianness' provided a sense of pastoral, nostalgic, and warmhearted prettiness that was a signifier of the utopian ideal that the architecture and their literary and cultural representations strove to express. Writers seem not to have been troubled by the disconnection between describing Shamian as simultaneously quintessentially English and stylistically Italian.

Representations in this later period see a shift in attention from the island's beauty to appreciation of the social space and ideal community that these (artificially constructed and ordered) natural conditions were seen to foster:

The settlement is so loved by all, that it is often called the Paradise, as everything is supposed to be nearly perfection, all the residents being regarded as fellow-members of one large family, from which the backbiting and scandal so rife in small communities is supposed to have been entirely banished [...] The roads are of grass, with beautiful avenues of trees; outside these are good paths of chunam. There is also a small flower garden, where the children play. [...] Shameen's Local Government Board is a council elected by the residents, and each member looks

after a department: e.g., one takes the police, another the roads, another something else, and so on. (Mundy, 1875, pp. 81–82, p. 84)

The great tennis courts beautifully green lie between us and the water and they do look finely in the afternoon when lots of people are flying about and playing there. The whole place is a garden. There are trees in long straight rows or scattered about here and there and there are flowers everywhere. (Spinney, 1887)

The above texts highlight the utopian features of the enclave: harmony, equality, and a sense of shared prosperity. The connection between the picturesque physical space and the advanced western social space is prominent here. In Farris's (2016, p. 84) words, it was "implied that the utopian surroundings directly caused blissful social harmony." For example, Gideon Nye (1875, pp. 120–121), a veteran of the China trade, attributed great importance to the Shamian's western architecture and design, which he saw as enabling "sociability and friendly intercourse [...] the source, at once, of modern culture and material progress, which constitute what I may call our muscular and progressive civilization, as contrasted with the emasculated civilization that we see around us." The enclave was thus not only narrated and recounted in relevant texts but also imagined as a harmonious, hospitable, orderly, utopian social space. Shamian—materially and mentally constructed as the opposite of China—had become a utopia for foreigners.

Analysis: Discourse and space in the colonial island utopia

Analysis of the cultural depictions, narrations, and sometimes inventions of late-19th century colonial Shamian as a utopian island has shown that the enclave was discursively constructed as somewhere without vernacular culture and history; a replacement for the Thirteen Factories; a place destined to be selected, reclaimed, colonized, westernized, urbanized, gentrified, and advanced; unique and better-than-other, both regionally and globally; small, bounded, insular, sharply distinct, separated, and disengaged from the local environment; a retreat, shelter, and refuge; a (transplanted) European and English pastoral home; architecturally (and nostalgically) Italian or classical/pre-industrial; and an Edenic, paradisaical, picturesque, orderly, and harmonious society. Behind and manifested in these representations were the increasing "assumptions about Western racial or cultural superiority," contrasting with the Thirteen Factories period's "feeling of communal enterprise" (Farris, 2016, pp. 143–144). These texts were not just representative and descriptive; they were, as much as their spatial referents, generative and performative, and they formed an intertextual relationship with the referential space.

As we have seen, Shamian was described in the second half of the 19th century as resulting from the 1856 destruction of the Thirteen Factories and the need for China to compensate foreigners for this loss. However, the Shamian project was clearly also the result of a long-circulating discourse among Guangzhou's foreign community, which had for decades been desirous of a different kind of enclave (Hunter, 1911, p. 222; Davis, 1852, p. 158). Instead of becoming a booming business zone like the Thirteen Factories, Shamian developed into a beautiful and exclusionary utopian enclave that at once matched the dreams of Guangzhou's foreign population and better suited the reality of Guangzhou's dwindling

commercial importance. Shamian was thus fundamentally produced through performative discourse: Places are created and destroyed through speech, not just through material processes (Tuan, 1980, p. 63), and text simultaneously reports and changes reality (Westphal, 2011, p. 116).

Over the course of the second half of the 19th century, the city's community of westerners underwent spatial consolidation and separation from the surrounding city. As Guangzhou's foreign community shrank, consolidated, and separated from the Chinese city in the late-19th century, Shamian's development was at the heart of the "spatial strategies" of foreigners who were grappling with the "more defined dialogues of identity and alienation" that were beginning to emerge (Farris, 2016, p. 67).

This restricted island place and its small community produced an abundance of literary and visual texts within a short period, which contributed to an intense intertextuality, as the texts—as well as their authors, readers, and referents—were interconnected, resonated, and echoed in dialog, intentionally or otherwise. Contemporaneous literary and cultural depictions, descriptions, and narrations of space developed a discourse of the utopian island, and these representations, while reflecting spatial reality, also promoted spatial practices that then reinforced the island's utopian imagination.

Utopian Shamian was constructed, developed, presented, and performed not just simply as an independent place but as an outstanding place among many other places, its utopian character built through comparisons and contrasts with other places in Guangzhou, China, and around the globe. Yet Shamian's space and the spaces around it provide, as an intertextual network or system, not just a source from which to derive or to which to compare but also a condition or restriction. Shamian's spatial presence and the practices within it reflected and were conditioned by its small island geography—that is, its 'islandness': "the small scale of the island territory (smallness); the existence of a spatial frontier (boundedness); the degree and nature of contact with the outside world (isolation); [and] the geographical discontinuity of the island setting (spatial fragmentation)" (Fernandes & Pinho, 2017, p. 5). It was a space that was fully and scientifically configured at a stroke, and its literary and visual representations reflected upon the small island's appeal or allure as site for rapid and comprehensive planning and development, often led or guided by outsiders (Baldacchino, 2020; Grydehøj & Kelman, 2020; Baldacchino, 2012).

Shamian's potential for rapid policy deployment was immediately understood by British officials, especially in Parkes' various accounts, and was achieved quickly in spatial practice, with social organizations, public services, community committees, *etc.* all set up and running smoothly a short time thereafter and subsequently reflected in the relevant representations with a triumphant celebratory rhetoric.

Islands are strongly connected with "the utopian impulse [...] to re-create a new, perfected, atomized form of life" (Sreenan, 2017, p. 275). Reflecting upon island enclaves in particular, Hong (2020a, p. 52) writes:

Mainland society's enclavising tendencies with regard to islands betray a desire to escape its own reality by constructing a utopia that is both away and accessible. In other words, mainland society's conscious enclavising planning of the island betrays an unconscious drive to complete its shattered self-identity through the mirror image

of the “ultimate big Other” (Žižek, 2008), an island enclave of natural innocence and historical continuity.

The utopian island enclave requires and is required by mainland society. Shamian provided a foreign refuge not only from the Chinese city but also from the profane realm of expansionist colonial commerce, as represented by the (unmissed) Thirteen Factories.

Shamian was geographically insular, bounded, and small; socially exclusive and harmonious; politically centralized and ordered. Its spatial presence and practice were developed internally, within the island, as physical, metaphorical, and actuating conditions. This spatiality produced a correspondent discourse, rendering ‘islandness’ and its related utopian ideal as preconditions for Shamian’s lives and representations. Shamian was performed into geographical being.

The texts (both written and visual) considered above presented numerous patterns in their depictions and narrations of Shamian as well as of its distinctiveness from mainland or Chinese space. They observed and discussed the same spatial referents, issues, and features of the island and life on the island; and they concurred with one another’s observations and assessments without openly mentioning one another. They also involved a great deal of “unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks” (Barthes, 1981, p. 39), a consequence of the intertextual formation of shared understandings of Shamian as an idea and a place.

Nevertheless, the texts’ recessive resonances and echoes both reflected and enacted shifts over time, for instance from representations of refuge to representations of beauty to representations of utopian social space and ideal community. It is only through the reading of the island’s written texts in interaction with the island’s space that the production, circulation, and ideology of Shamian as a utopian enclave can be understood.

We may take the example of British consul Sir Harry Parkes, who was the leading figure of the colonial enterprise not just in Guangzhou but arguably in China in general. Many of his writings from and concerning the establishment and early development of colonial Shamian took the form of published newspaper articles, correspondence letters with diplomats or politicians in China and Britain, and other kinds of written communication. Comprehending their significance requires knowledge of the issues to which they were responding, such as discussions regarding the choice of a site for the new concession. In other words, intertextual conversational networks underlie Parkes’ writings. Some of Parkes’ writings were later collected in his biography, *The Life of Sir Harry Parkes* by Stanley Lane-Poole (1894). Parkes’ words were transformed into parts of the book, which became a reference for later texts that sought to discuss Shamian’s history and that inspired later readers to continue Parkes’ enterprise, thereby exerting a lasting textual and ideological impact.

Another example involves two of the best-known literary authors who dealt with Shamian, Isabella Bird and chaplain John Henry Gray. Gray’s (1875) popular book *Walks in the City of Canton* was known for its detailed and informative accounts of places foreigners could visit in Guangzhou. Bird’s (1883, p. 46) book *The Golden Chersonese and the Way Thither* includes a letter that she wrote during her stay on Shamian in January 1879:

If I had time for it, my letters would soon swell to the size of Archdeacon Gray's quaint and fascinating book, 'Walks in Canton'; but I have no time, and must content myself with brief sketches of two or three things which have greatly interested me.

Bird's 'will not repeat herein' statement exemplifies the effective circulation of texts among foreigners—especially foreign writers—on or in relation to Shamian. It was also an explicit acknowledgment of the impact of previous authors and texts on Bird's experiences and feelings, on and off the island, both conceptually (e.g. a desire to describe new sites and to avoid repeating descriptions of certain scenic spots) and practically as a guide for her own writings (e.g. concerning placenames, for which Gray's book was a common reference). Without prior and contemporary accounts like that of Gray, certain new literature, like that of Bird, would be not merely incomplete but altogether impossible. Bird's writings in turn informed many accounts that came after. In such cases, "the text is no longer born of the city, but born of another text to which the city has been subjected" (Westphal, 2011, p. 156).

Foreigners' stays and movements at the time were at least partly guided by previous accounts. Foreigners (re)visited, (re)observed, and (re)recorded the same spots, often following similar routes and having similar experiences and observations. Such travelers' journeys in Guangzhou tended to begin and end on Shamian. Many of the foreigners visited and lived in the same places. There were various key intersections and hubs. These included steamer wharfs, where everyone landed and departed and which were mentioned and depicted countless times. Another was Christ Church, one of the earliest permanent buildings in the concession (Farris, 2016, p. 76), the material and social attributes of which were repeatedly and meticulously depicted. Two consecutive hotels on the island—the Shameen Hotel (1888–1895) and the Victoria Hotel (1895–1946), also known as the 'late Shamien Hotel'—were throughout their respective operating lives the only English hotels in the whole of Guangzhou (Smith, 1939, p. 20, p. 22; Hurley, 1898, p. xii). The intertextuality among the written and illustrated representations was formed not only by textually referring to and responding to each other or by depicting common spatial referents but also through common and patterned spatial practices (living, touring, observing), that is, through shared performative origins.

"Space informs the text that produces a [...] representation of a spatial referent" (Westphal, 2011, p. 169). Spatial practices have a recessive but performatively influential effect, orienting the pattern, focus, or gaze of representations. Yet these spatial practices were themselves influenced and oriented by texts, which is evident in the construction and transformation of the spatial referents in question. As Michel Butor (1970, p. 38) argues, "Information influences both routes and objects; [...] objects can be effectively shifted, and the order of trajectories—journeys, voyages, passages, and paths—can be transformed."

A crucial primary step is naming: By ignoring Shamian's vernacular culture and history and by giving new western names to roads and sites on the island, foreigners were both (re)naming and telling a story from a different perspective (their own). This was complemented by the erasure of Chinese people and their spatial existence (forts, boats, buildings) from the island space and the subsequent organization of the block configuration in accordance with the new placenames ('Front' district, 'Central' space, *etc.*, aligned with road names). The reorganization of terrestrial island space often simultaneously prompts and

is premised upon the delegitimization of previous aquatic lifeways (Grydehøj & Ou, 2017), in this case those of the boatpeople in the waters surrounding the island.

In Sullivan's (2011, p. 65) words, "the narration of place retrieves the narrated place from the past, setting it within the present, so it can rejuvenate itself and be reestablished in the future." Shamian was thus a heritage site from its inception as an island enclave: Shamian has never *not* been a site of selective historical creation, a curation of potential pasts for future purposes, a negotiation between practical needs and emotional certainties (Dang, 2021; Hong, 2020b; Ronström, 2008). The narrations and depictions of Shamian's precolonial past as a dirty and primitive space, as well as stories of progress told by contrasting the place in the two periods, deliberately implied that the island was always destined to be a successor to the Thirteen Factories, thereby justifying the clearing and complete recreation of the island.

Because "references to an 'ideal' future can also be aids in the creation of place" (Sullivan, 2011, p. 65), it is unsurprising that foreign writers already early on praised the decision to locate the new enclave on Shamian. This praise hedged the island's (temporary) underdevelopment and desolation, foreseeing a beautiful future once construction was complete. Such discursive and performative work contributed to the island's attractiveness and in practice promoted the land auction and subsequent construction. These representations were closely in dialog and were sufficiently influential to form a discourse of ambition and optimism regarding to the island's utopian outlook, promoting the reality of its development.

Establishment of the island enclave responded to and solved most of the problems that had been discussed regarding concessions of the previous era. However, the talking or writing of a place into existence is a process, not a one-off event (Sullivan, 2011, p. 60). Placemaking requires narrative maintenance (Tuan, 1991). By the 1870s, and as the island had become well-built, the maintenance function of text-to-space impact grew in importance. Panoramic representations of the enclave tended to include emphasis on Shamian's separation from and contrast with the Chinese city; its prettiness, peacefulness, and richness; its vague Italianness, signifying a pastoral nostalgic ideal; artificial beauty poetically blended into the natural environment; and its communal harmony and equality, with a corresponding shift in attention from picturesqueness to social space and ideal community. Shamian had become—and was in a constant process of becoming—an Edenic, paradisaal, utopian whole.

The intertextual network rendered the discursive environment concerning Shamian so strikingly and purely positive that, despite the abundance of texts, it is difficult to find negative descriptions or narrations of the island enclave. This was of critical importance for encouraging future investment in and attraction of new visitors and residents to the island. By continually presenting the island's positive attributes, not just as a commercially, politically, culturally, and socially crucial hub but also as a charming place of residence and attractive travel destination, foreigners wrote the colonial island utopia into being.

Conclusion

In the second half of the 19th century, Shamian's texts—as well as their authors, readers, and referents—were concentrated within the spatiotemporal field of a very small river island. They were interconnected, resonated, and echoed in both (personal) dialog and (public) circulation. They interacted with space and with one another to create a new, utopian kind of colonial enclave.

In the words of Roland Barthes (1988, p. 195), place is “a discourse, and this discourse is actually a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it.” Shamian’s evolution from a barbarian and inhospitable ‘sand face’ to a ‘civilized’ island enclave was a case of foreigners spatially representing and signifying an island space as their own. Discourses concerning Shamian were both conditioned by and constructed the place’s ‘islandness’: It is upon this island that utopia was discursively constructed. By gazing upon and representing shared spatiotemporal realities, texts engaged in dialogue with one another, and by excerpting, republishing, and repeating utterances, images, and meanings, texts maintained, restated, and reproduced the island utopia in a performative way. Authors and artists were not merely viewing the same places but also experiencing them along similar routes and in a homogeneous, relatively restricted environment that to some extent preconditioned the texts’ potential forms and outcomes.

Although Shamian was often discussed as a static, timeless space (so characteristic of the heritagization process; Ronström, 2008), the intertextual discourse changed over time, moving from the quasi-island imagination prior to the enclave’s construction, to the optimistic and radical narrations during its establishment, to the idealistic and embellished depictions of utopia fulfilled.

Westphal (2011, p. 154) notes that texts often “stay a few steps ahead of geography.” Text and space need one another.

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