

From Land Property Disputes to Cloud Computing: Revisiting the Human Geography of the Huizhou Area in Imperial China

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As pointed out in our previous article, area studies can be advanced by building a virtual library to aggregate and disseminate information on various societies. We use Huizhou (徽州) in imperial China, a heritage site listed by UNESCO, as an example to suggest a digital initiative to raise awareness of socio-cultural and ecological contexts to study the human geography of Huizhou. Within an interactive environment, readers can search the archives for background and context for their area studies. Huizhou had an unprecedentedly rich variety and large number of land titles, land tenure, and contracts for deeds in Min-Qing times. Zurndorfer (2011) further points out that these documents reveal many landed property disputes. Their litigations, intermediation and adjudications could extend over the time of several generations within the same surname lineages or over the space of widely dispersed lands. She indicates that this was an outcome of the drastic economic changes and social development since the sixteenth century. We argue that the reason this region was rife with lawsuits over landed property disputes was also largely associated with its culture, society and space. Litigation documents, official stamp papers and land duty tax alone cannot present the whole picture of this region.

Huizhou boasts of extensive and cohesive clan organizations with centuries old ancestral halls, Confucian merchants and scholarly officials. Officials were exempted from land taxation. Landowners were also able to re-channel their income from tenants to clan charitable activities. Merchants funded the education and imperial civil examination of their clanspersons. Zurndorfer also notices that they were engaged in disputes over the lands inherited from ancestors, the ancestral graveyards and the properties of adopted lineage members. All of these disputes imply multi-dimensional relationships between social values of kinship, cultural beliefs in Confucianism and commercial agriculture with a special ecology and tenant system. To transcend the temporal/spatial boundaries and unravel such subtleties of landed property disputes, we suggest a digital humanities and science collaboration to map the human geography of Huizhou with land documents as well as genealogies and local gazetteers abundant with primary historical records, personal profiles and geographical data. An e-archive with geospatial information system support will allow scholars of Huizhou studies worldwide to compare and analyze these data and furthermore share resources and social network over the cloud.