

DISCOVER HISTORY IN WORDS AND BEYOND

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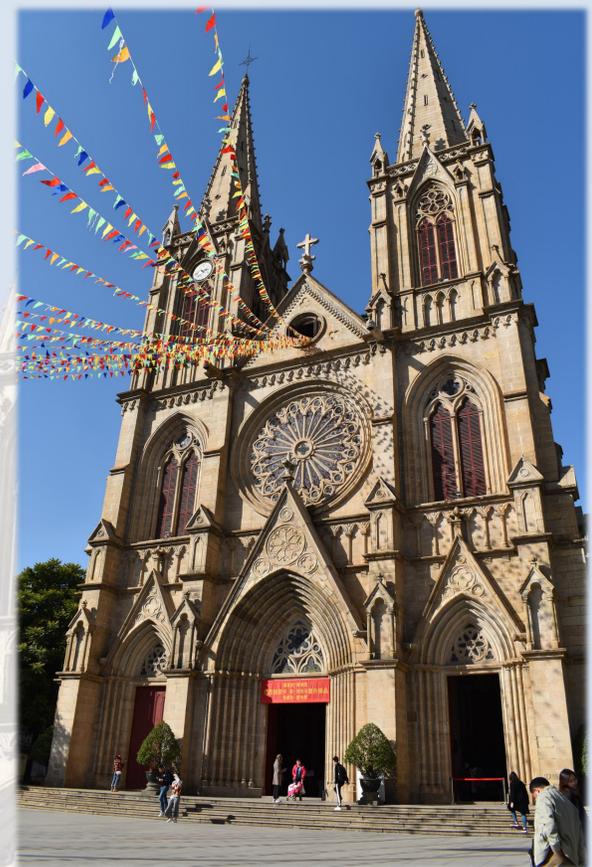
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How does fieldwork help us understand a place in a new light? And how does this firsthand experience confirm or revise our preexisting ideas?

In my course on cultural encounters, I ask students to use the knowledge from their own fieldwork to answer these questions. My point of departure is that what have been preserved on the local sites are always more complex, multilayered, and surprising than what is recorded in the texts. Take the religious heritage in the city of Guangzhou in Southern China for example.

Guangzhou, aka Canton, had long been connecting imperial China and the world before the city was made an official port in the Tang dynasty (618-907). Today, it has remained a center of culture exchange between China and the world.



SACRED HEART CATHEDRAL



GUANGXIAO MONASTERY

THE significance of Guangzhou in cultural exchange is manifested in its religious establishments. Often overshadowed by the Silk Road overland routes, the maritime route was an important but often neglected avenue by which Buddhism (as well as Zoroastrianism, Nestorianism, Islam, and later Catholicism and Protestantism) was transmitted into China.

As the entrepot of foreign religions throughout Chinese history, Guangzhou has still preserved some of these monasteries, mosques, and churches. They are scattered in older neighborhoods, quietly witnessing the change of ways of life in this city.