Introduction

During the fall of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Huang Xiangjian (1609–73) journeyed on foot from his native Suzhou to far-distant Yunnan Province to rescue his father, who had been posted there as an official of the collapsing dynasty. Leaving home in early 1652 and returning in mid–1653, Huang traveled for 558 days over 2,800 miles, braving hostile armies, violent bandits, fierce minority tribes, man-eating tigers, disease-laden regions, earthquakes, and the freezing rain and snow of the “Little Ice Age” to find his parents amidst the vast mountainous borderland province. Despite nearly impossible odds, he brought them back home. Huang then began to paint pictures of his odyssey through the sublime landscape of the dangerous, “barbarian” southwest in an extraordinarily dramatic style, and he wrote vivid accounts of his travels that were published as The Travel Records of Filial Son Huang (Huang Xiaozi jicheng).1

Huang Xiangjian created pictorial and literary works with distinct functions for the multilayered social networks that surrounded him. Personally, his most pressing concern was to establish a socially valuable reputation regarding filial piety and loyalty for himself and for his father in the wake of their return home to disorder. The initial step in this process was the writing of The Travel Records of Filial Son Huang, here translated for the first time in their entirety. The next step was to create paintings that captured the Huang family odyssey. This book is the first comprehensive examination of Huang Xiangjian’s landscape paintings of the southwest edge of the Chinese empire. Paintings of southwest China are extremely rare. Huang’s paintings, however, should not be understood as factual records of the southwest. Instead, they represent a seventeenth-century Suzhou citizen’s expectations and perceptions of the colonial southwest. The primary goal of these works was to illustrate vividly how one man put the practice of filial
piety into action. The way in which the Huang family utilized these paintings and writings demonstrates the societal mechanics of how a reputation for filiality may be engineered by a group of like-minded educated men as an alternate form of validation to a government-issued degree. Indeed, these paintings present an intriguing case study of the social function of art as an agent of moral persuasion, class identification, and biographical commemoration.

In this art-historical study, I use the paintings of Huang Xiangjian to encourage new readings of site-specific paintings and to identify a previously unrecognized category of Chinese site painting, the geo-narrative, as I have so labeled it. The artists, commentators, subject matter, and styles of geo-narrative paintings vary, but they all present a structured topographic experience for viewers through an identifiable landscape whose greater significance, ultimate meaning, and purpose are slowly revealed. Careful visual, textual, and cultural analysis of the works of Huang Xiangjian, set against the horizon of the site-specific painting tradition that surrounded him in his native Suzhou, reveals the strategies that he employed to create novel geo-narrative paintings using the unfamiliar landscape of the southwest. Huang not only created site-specific paintings as part of a campaign for the socially generated title Filial Son, he also prepared works that served more private functions, such as a handscroll that creates an experiential ascent of a mountain, or a visual spiritual biography for his father in the form of a landscape album.

Approaches to Site-Specific Painting

The written and painted records of Huang Xiangjian allow unparalleled access to the experiences and vision of one seventeenth-century gentleman as he moved through a decidedly foreign landscape. Indeed, with the exception of the work of the early Ming-dynasty physician Wang Lü (ca. 1332–91), the extensive inscriptions, extant paintings, and lengthy travel records that Huang Xiangjian created provide more information than for any earlier maker of place paintings. Using my translation of his travel diaries and art-historical examination of his paintings, most of which are inscribed with episodes from his odyssey, I compare his works to descriptions of the same southwest sites in contemporaneous gazetteer entries and to personal narratives by other seventeenth-century travelers. In this I follow scholars such as James Cahill, Kathryn Liscomb, and Alfreda Murck, who have studied paintings of sites and travel. Cahill has examined renderings
of specific mountains, such as Mount Huang; Liscomb has discussed the theoretical impetus for the creation of such paintings, particularly of Mount Hua; and Murck has explored the poetic, political, and stylistic symbolism of site paintings such as those depicting scenes in the Xiao Xiang region. Most recently, Flora Fu has examined paintings of mountains as “grand tours” of China for a variety of social groups. The implications of specific topography are a focal element of Fu’s study. This may be seen as part of a larger trend, in which scholars such as Jennifer Purtle, Julia Orell, and Catherine Stuer have begun to analyze the role of identity, place, and painting in relation to specific areas of China, including Fujian, Guangzhou, the Yangzi River, and Nanjing.

Since there was no catalogue raisonné for the work of Huang Xiangjian, or even any monograph on Huang in any language, my first task was to identify all paintings attributed to him and to determine which of them were authentic and important. I traveled to over a dozen museums in mainland China and visited private collectors in the United States to view them firsthand. I also located and documented the sites depicted in the Suzhou place paintings that surrounded Huang as a young man and those in the Guizhou and Yunnan landscapes he created after his journey to rescue his parents. I examined famous sites, such as Suzhou’s Tiger Hill (Huqiu) and Mount Taihua in Kunming, Yunnan, as well as those that had been not only forgotten, such as Haoran Pavilion at the edge of Er Lake (Erhai) in Dali, but also abandoned, such as Mount Zhixing in Suzhou. Much has changed in China since the seventeenth century. Some sites have been geologically and culturally altered by time. Little original architecture remains. Tourism, the government, and commerce have touched every site in some way. Even so, many have been carefully preserved or reconstructed, and the relationship of the updated architecture with the geography can sometimes present a physical experience roughly similar to that enjoyed by traditional visitors.

Earlier studies such as Richard Edwards’s *The World Around the Chinese Artist* and James Cahill’s *Shadows of Mount Huang* also include photographs of geographic areas or specific sites represented in place paintings. Usually photographs of this type introduce viewers to the general topography of the area under discussion or highlight the distinctive topographical features of one site to which artists might allude in painted form. Rather than using photographs primarily for visual comparative purposes, to illustrate that a painting looks like a site, this study employs photographs for *experiential* comparative purposes; that is, as evidence that a specific view is attainable or unavoidable or impossible from a certain place. The photographs appearing here represent
visual evidence of very specific and experiential views of the actual topography pictured in the paintings.

The “geography” captured in the paintings and photographs included in this book should be understood to represent the “multifaceted phenomena of human experience” discussed over the centuries by countless visitors and writers.\footnote{An unmediated experience of the natural Chinese landscape was not only impossible, but also culturally undesirable for traditional viewers. Visits to specific sites allowed sightseers to commune with the individuals and ideas associated with those sites throughout history. Such site visits also allowed them to transcend cultural and historical time to participate in the anthropocosmic schema at the heart of a number of belief systems.\footnote{On these visits the natural environment of specific sites allowed viewers to engage in spiritual dialogue. Given the extensive and multilayered symbolism of some sites, it might be argued that one cannot know for certain what traditional viewers read in painted versions of the same landscapes. The complex implications of site geography, however, clarify rather than muddle the reading of place paintings because they allowed painters and patrons greater nuance of meaning and purpose in their creation. This study interprets the implications of the specific physical paths, topography, and views within place paintings as landscape markers that position the viewer culturally, historically, and spiritually by placing him topographically. Painting paratexts and contemporaneous writings provide many clues to the experiences illustrated in these works. Art historians, however, should employ other purely visual evidence as well. Connoisseurship and stylistic analysis are one means to this end, and I utilize these methods. Visual analysis of the geography of the sites in relation to their painted counterparts is another.}}

The paintings and photographs in this book identify the site and sight experiences that painters represented to locate the cultural and historical vision sought by viewers and patrons in specific physical places. As observer and photographer, I intentionally created the photographs to signify predetermined and carefully structured experiences. As did traditional visitors, I had read Ming-dynasty travel writings, poetry, and gazetteer reports describing the sites and had viewed numerous sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings of the sites prior to my arrival at them. Relying on the written and visual descriptions found in these traditional sources, I sought out the specific, historically sanctioned views associated with each place. Certainly, mine was a twenty-first-century academic’s experience and recording of the proceedings, but I would suggest that the experiential tradition I followed—meaning the materials I studied, what those
materials prepared me to seek and view, and how I perceived them on site—may be seen to replicate in part the experiential visual tradition represented in the paintings.

The paintings discussed in chapter 1 of this study reveal an extensive site-painting lexicon utilized by Suzhou artists to represent the unique somatic and visual experience of the topography, architecture, and views at each of the Suzhou sites. The realization that these painters were manipulating the topographical elements in their site paintings for specific narrative reasons then informed my consideration of Huang Xiangjian’s paintings of the southwest. As in the Suzhou paintings, viewers’ experiential knowledge of the illustrated landscapes allowed Huang to create a diversity of readings and functions. For example, only by ascending Mount Taihua did I grasp the import of the view from the observation platform entitled “Endless Expanse of Blue” (Yibiwanqing) in one of Huang’s albums, and only when I trekked up Mount Jizu was its relationship to the Himalayas in one of his handscrolls made clear. These experiences so invigorated my reading of the topography depicted in Huang’s site paintings that the landscape emerged from its more typical role as background to become an active participant in and narrator of the journeys illustrated. Indeed, I found that the experience of actual sites exposes how artists such as Huang manipulated the topographical elements of their painted counterparts to narrate the distinctive vision of individual players and their role in a wide range of social interactions and functions.

**Geo-Narrative Painting**

Paintings of identifiable places have been the subject of scholarly study for some years, yet much debate has surrounded what to call them. “Topographical” painting has been utilized, but also much disputed as a label inappropriate for Chinese painters’ renderings of real places. In his study of travel themes from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, Kenneth Ganza calls the term “an unsatisfactory classifier because it presupposes that the subject landscape is portrayed in a topography-conscious manner,” and he believes that “the primary problem posed by these paintings is the pictorial interaction between the objective requirements of geographical specificity and the subjective expression of artistic inspiration.” He suggests the term “toponymic” as more appropriate to paintings of this type in that it “states only that the artist based the painting
on a specific place that he names in the title and thus leaves the door open for inquiry about the artistic aspects of the painting.”¹³ The term “topographical” has, however, continued to be employed. Eugene Wang has observed that there is “no exact equivalent in Chinese to the Greek word topos that conveniently collapses the dual senses of locus and topic,” but suggests that the word ji (site, trace, vestige) may hold similar meanings.¹⁴ James Cahill has used topographical painting to designate “representations of particular places” and “paintings presenting stages in a journey to some particular place” in a variety of discussions about specific-site paintings.¹⁵ Richard Vinograd has called paintings of personalized topographical sites “landscape of property.”¹⁶ Other writers, such as Kathlyn Liscomb and Joseph McDermott, have avoided the pitfalls of terminology altogether by focusing on paintings of specific sites and referring to them as such; “paintings of Beijing” or “paintings of Mount Hua.”¹⁷

Most of the place-painting studies discussed above rightly identify the painter or patron as the key player and focus of the work. The pictured landscape, meanwhile, serves as the backdrop or intermediary sphere through which this persona voyages. In these readings, the confluence of an individuated painting style with a few topographic features both associates the landscape with its creator or recipient and reflects his identity. This is true of many seventeenth-century landscape paintings. By physically journeying through the landscapes illustrated in some works, however, I discovered a distinct experiential place-painting tradition that inverts this priority. The focal persona remains an important element in the creation and picturing of these works, but it is the individuated landscape that serves as the active agent. In this role, the geographical features of a specific place rather than the persona of the artist or patron describe the journey and explicate its meaning.¹⁸

I have proposed the term “geo-narrative” earlier in the introduction for place paintings that lend themselves to this reading.¹⁹ “Geo,” as a shortened form of “geography,” emphasizes the active and dominant role of specific geography in these works, while “narrative” stresses the very particular story and meaning the painted geography conveys. The term “geo-narrative” also agrees with the traditionally active role of geography in Chinese thought. Topography did not consist of passive natural forms; rather, those forms were seen as dynamic players. It was they that guided viewers’ experience. Mountains, for example, were often described as inscrutable twisting dragons, as in this quotation from a seventeenth-century geomancer: “The magic dragon writhes and changes, unknowable in its subtle origins; and mountain ridges that have life breath will
start to run east then suddenly turn west, or begin to run south then suddenly
head north; you cannot pin them down—off they go in all directions. Surely
nothing but the writhing of the magic dragon is an adequate figure of the moun-
tain ridges’ permutations.”

Inscriptions and paratexts further elaborate the geo-narrative experience.
Many such works include an abundance of written material, often in the form
of colophons added to the end of the scroll or album. Those that do not may
have had such materials removed and remounted as separate artworks because
the reputations of those who wrote the accompanying commentaries were often
of a higher status than those who painted the pictures. This commentary may
provide the name of the artist as well as the recipient or patron of the work.
It almost always identifies the site or area illustrated and often explicates the
topographical experiences pictured. It may take the form of a travel account
describing the topographic experiences of the painter or recipient on the road.
The writer may discuss the history of the natural and architectural elements
pictured, similar to the style of a traditional gazetteer, or he may present impressionistic poetry or prose descriptions of the views and experiences along a route.
Appended writings may even offer one explanation for the meaning and func-
tion of the work. Such texts are an important element of these paintings because
they allow the recovery of some historical elements that surround the paintings
and the viewing process itself; but they are only one complementary aspect of
the geo-narrative. They contribute to, rather than explain, viewers’ understand-
ing of the pictured landscape experience.

The experiential knowledge that viewers brought to the topography in the
painting is a fundamental element of geo-narratives. Varying levels of experi-
tential knowledge could be attained through journeys to the sites or familiarity
with the verbal reports or recorded experiences of others who visited the sites.
Scholars such as Susan Bush and Minna Törmä have addressed the various roles
of site experience in relation to Chinese painting. Bush examines Zong Bing’s
(375–443) views on painting landscape in relation to Buddhism as practiced on
Mount Lu. Törmä suggests that the landscapes of some extant Song-dynasty
handscrolls were originally mounted as screens presenting a “wandering-expe-
rience through the process of viewing.” Studies such as these, paired with early
writings, some of which are discussed below, indicate that landscape experience
was a major focus in the development of painting theory and its reception
throughout Chinese imperial history.

Zong Bing is usually credited with the idea of visual journeying through
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... painted landscapes once he was no longer able to travel to the sites themselves. Later biographers, such as Shen Yue (441–513) in the Song History (Songshu), explain that Zong Bing created place paintings on the walls of his home through which he might “roam while reclining” (woyou). This concept grew in popularity over the centuries, and by the late Ming, as Flora Fu has observed, Zong Bing was a favored model and inspiration for painters and viewers of landscape. Amongst early writers, the Song-dynasty painter Guo Xi (ca. 1020–after 1090), as recorded by his son in The Lofty Truth of Forests and Streams (Linquan gaozhi), most directly addresses the experiential goals of landscape painting and how they might be achieved:

It is generally accepted opinion that in landscapes there are those through which you may travel, those in which you may sightsee, those through which you may wander, and those in which you may live. Any paintings attaining these effects are to be considered excellent. . . . You seem in fact to be in those mountains. This is the mood of a painting beyond its mere scenery. You see a white path disappearing into the blue and think of traveling on it. You see the glow of setting sun over level waters and dream of gazing on it. You see hermits and mountain dwellers, and think of lodging with them. You see cliffs by lucid water or streams over rocks, and long to wander there. To look at a particular painting puts you in the corresponding frame of mind, as though you were really on the point of going there.26

Viewers’ expectations of a travel experience through painted topography were well advanced by the Song dynasty, when the poet Qin Guan (1049–1100) in a 1087 inscription to a painting of the Wangchuan Villa described in detail his journey through the work: “Wild with excitement, as if I were with Mojie (Wang Wei) himself, I entered Wangchuan. We crossed Huazi Hill, passed through Meng Wall Cove, and paused to rest at Wangchuan Villa. We tied up at Grained Apricot Lodge, ascended the Clear Bamboo Range, and stood at Magnolia Enclosure. . . . We boated on Lake Yi, played among Willow Waves, and rinsed in the Luan Family Shallows. . . . People in scholar’s caps, carrying staffs, and wearing sandals were playing chess and drinking tea, or composing poems for their own amusement.”27 The writer relates the experience of traveling through the very specific historical topography of a villa associated with the famous Tang-dynasty poet Wang Wei (701–61). The idea of experiential travel through painted landscapes became ever more popular throughout the Yuan and Ming dynasties.
to the point that in the early Ming, the physician-painter Wang Lü (ca. 1332–91) created a complete sensorial experience of his trip to Mount Hua (Shaanxi Province) in a painted album that included prefaces, a travel record, and poetic inscriptions. Such experiential renderings continued to be practiced into the early Qing dynasty by artists such as Mei Qing (1623–97), who stated plainly the journey potential of his 1690 album *Sixteen Views of Mount Huang*: “Although the magnificence of the thirty-six peaks cannot be completely shown in this album, a brief look may inspire others to travel through them vicariously.”

Topographical experience was key in both the stylistic choices and training of traditional artists, as suggested by Zhang Hong in his conclusion to the 1639 inscription he attached to *Ten Scenes of Yue*. He states: “About half [of the things I saw there] did not agree with what I had heard. So when I returned home I got out some silk and used it to depict what I had seen, because relying on your ears is not as good as relying on your eyes.” The established method of achieving these experiential effects involved traveling through and experiencing specific regions and sites. Li Chengsou (ca. 1150–after 1221) explains: “Those who paint landscapes must travel everywhere and observe widely, only then will they know where to place and move the brush. How do I know this? From youth on, I, Chengsou, have observed the landscape of Xiangzhong and roamed at length in the Three Gorges and the Kui Gate. Whether land or water, I completely absorbed its aspects, and after a long while I involuntarily perceived my capacity for monochrome painting. It is necessary for students to understand this.”

Li learned to paint by traveling throughout specific sites. Wang Lü expresses this sentiment in his Mount Hua album by stating, “This is what is meant by the saying that one cannot transmit spirit in a painting by imitating other paintings. It is only possible to convey spirit by encountering such marvelous things for oneself.” Artists then returned to their studios to paint the spirit of these places. The topographical experience was believed to have become a part of the artist between the time spent traveling and the time spent painting. This melding of person and place was then transferred to the artwork. I would suggest that this practice promoted the development of experiential renderings of landscape. Spatial and temporal distancing of the painter from the landscape allowed the topography and the artist’s experience and perception of it to merge in his mind, then to be expressed in the painted landscape. The artist was not painting what he saw, but his remembrance of it.

The experiences portrayed in geo-narrative paintings may be seen as one form of artistic expression of the merging of place and person. Xu Xiake (1587–
articulated this ideal in his introduction to the first gazetteer of Mount Jizu (Yunnan Province): “The outward manifestations of a mountain’s scenes are its peaks and caves. A scene is created when a passer-by chances upon it: once transmitted through his emotions, it is made distinct.” This type of experiential rendering required more naturalistic styles than other painting genres because it simulated what viewers to the sites might see or had actually seen. Artists, as necessary, defended the representational styles of these works because their goal was experiential reportage rather than stylistic play. Some described a revelatory moment after having actually visited and experienced the site, which forced them to make a stylistic shift. Wang Lü explains, “I have studied painting for more than thirty years, but that was only receiving a legacy of paintings on paper and silk. By referring to this or that artist and stealing a thing or two, I really was just appropriating the fame of those artists. How could I have known that beyond the realm of paper and silk there were divine transformations such as these at Mt. Hua? . . . I am no longer the same person who merely received a legacy of paintings, for now I have roamed Mt. Hua.”

He describes the development of his style from experience in great detail in the second preface to his paintings. The final line of his discussion’s opening section expresses his argument succinctly: “I take my heart-mind to be my teacher. It takes as its master my eyes, which in turn revere Mt. Hua as their teacher.”

The early Qing painter Hongren (1610–64) and his biographers point to his time on Mount Huang as having irrevocably altered his style as well. Hongren stated: “I dare to say that nature itself has been my painting teacher; I have roamed alone with my walking stick the myriad valleys and cliffs.”

In geo-narrative paintings, meaning is captured and communicated through pictorial and textual narratives focusing on specific sites, locational views, meaningful seasons, and hours of the day. The writings included in these works might be composed for the paintings or consist of separate compositions added to the works later. The handscroll entitled *Eight Views of Jiahe* (*Jiahe bajing*), attributed to the Yuan-dynasty painter Wu Zhen (1280–1354), captures eight sites of his hometown, paired with detailed inscriptions in a tone similar to those found in gazetteer entries, such as this one for “Evening Clouds at Dragon Pool”: “Three li west of the city, outside the Tongyue Gate, in front of the Three Pagodas Temple, is the Dragon King Shrine. The stream running below this is fast-flowing and deep. When a drought occurs, the people pray at this shrine. At times, when there is a wind, the waves are terrifying.” Here, locational and seasonal details of the area mingle with the writer’s emotional
response to the site at particular times of the year. In 1656, Xiao Yuncong (1596–1673) painted a handscroll called Living Abroad or Returning Home Is One and the Same (Gui yu yiyuan tu), which presents a topographically distinctive journey around Jingting Mountain (modern Anhui Province) highlighted by numerous inscriptions focused on particular experiences of the artist and his friend, the monk Jingru (b. 1604), concerning specific sites. Here, Xiao moves viewers pictorially and textually through temporal topographic experiences as he merges them with historic personalities, events, and landscape markers of the past, as in the scene depicting “Thunder over Jing Mountain.” He writes, “The strange, soaring summit reaches to the clouds; today I climbed the highest peak. Who made the golden inscription in the grotto? Now I know, it is made by the thunder.”

Successful geo-narratives are most often lauded for their naturalistic immediacy, their ability to place viewers within the geography pictured, and the active re-experiencing of the topographic narrative that viewers might enjoy as they “roamed while reclining.” Zong Bing presents an early description of just this experience in his Introduction to Painting Landscape (Hua shanshui xu). According to Susan Bush, Zong Bing sought enlightenment as his transformative goal when viewing paintings. “As I unroll paintings and face them in solitude, while seated I plumb the ends of the earth. Not having to avoid a multitude of natural dangers, I simply respond to the uninhabited wilderness, where grottoed peaks tower on high and cloudy forests mass in depth. The sages and virtuous men shed reflected light from the distant past, and a myriad delights are fused into their spirits and thoughts. What then should I do? Freely expand my spirit, that is all. What could be placed above that which expands the spirit?”

Over a thousand years later in the late Ming, Huang Kongzhao (1589–1678), Huang Xiangjian’s father, recounts how deeply the experiences captured in such works still affected him as he re-experienced the sites he had once traveled with his son. “I ran my hands over the leaves [of this album by my son] and after a while, I could feel every dot and drop of the blood and the tears. The wind and the mist were still there in all their splendor on the paper.”

Huang Xiangjian’s geo-narrative paintings were developed from the complex and diverse place-painting tradition that surrounded him in his hometown of Suzhou. They exhibit well-known site-specific views and compositions of the locales pictured; they signal and compose views using a distinctive codified topographical vocabulary; and they emphasize experiential concerns such as time and seasonal influences to narrate the visual and physical experiences of specific
sites. Suzhou site paintings were created for a variety of purposes. For example, “honorific” paintings of places were produced as gifts for distinguished individuals; “famous sites” paintings were made as luxury items that lent the fame of their subject matter and inscribers to the recipients; and fund-raising appeal paintings were used to garner financial or material support for religious or civic projects. Huang used these traditional artistic devices and social strategies in new and personal ways to formulate complex geo-narrative routes animated by the multidimensional symbolism of both the famous and obscure sites and views of the southwest. His landscapes are layered constructions of physical topography and the experience of journeying through it; cultural topography as manifest in historically established symbols representative of generalized principles as well as in specifically condensed symbols of persona, social group, and class; and personal topography infused with the personality, beliefs, and experiences of a specific recipient. Journeying through these scenes, viewers were affected and transformed.

Geo-narrative represents a distinct category of painting within the visual culture of seventeenth-century China. It was a finely executed yet functional type of luxury good utilized by the growing educated class of the Ming-Qing transition to communicate personal meaning within a well-defined cultural space. The sophisticated implementation of its characteristics as described above and analyzed throughout the rest of this book suggests that it represents a mature painting tradition developed over many centuries. As such, it joins an alternative history of landscape painting first introduced and explored by scholars such as Anne Clapp and Kathlyn Liscomb, who explained types of paintings outside the elite art-history tradition that focused on the style of select premier personalities promoted by contemporaneous tastemakers. Although geo-narrative painters continued to construct personal styles and to employ regional painting modes, they built pictorial meaning around landscape experience rather than personal style. The illustrated landscape experiences might be particular to the artist or the recipient or both. The painters also implemented the contemporary signifiers for sites that surrounded them in paintings, historical gazetteers, and travel writings. These varying elements, however, were employed to render specific geographic experiences narrating particular journeys that communicated specific meanings.
Southwest Studies

This book is the first study to focus on visual depictions of the southwest. It examines some rare extant Han-Chinese pictorial renderings of Guizhou and Yunnan Provinces made prior to the modern era. It has benefitted from the historical and geographical research within the burgeoning field of southwest studies. In the 1930s, Chinese scholars who had relocated to Kunming drew attention to studies of the southwest done in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The great pioneer in the study of local history and culture of the southwest was Fang Guoyu (1903–83). A native of Lijiang (Yunnan Province), Fang exhaustively researched the history, geography, and ethnology of the southwest, with a special emphasis on Yunnan. His decades of contributions to ethnological and historical studies have served as a foundation for later Chinese and Western historians. English-language studies of the southwest developed later. Published in 1947, *The Ancient Na-Khi Kingdom of Southwest China* by Joseph Rock remained one of the few works of its kind for several years. Since the 1950s, a growing number of books and articles on literature, history, and colonialism have focused on the identity and culture of native peoples of the southwest and their interaction with the Han Chinese. Historians such as Herold J. Wiens, Charles Backus, C. P. Fitzgerald, Lynn Struve, John Herman, and Yang Bin have treated early Han-Chinese colonizing efforts in the area, its later political struggles, and the histories of its diverse native inhabitants. Laura Hostetler and C. Patterson Giersch have studied the indigenous history of the southwest in relation to its Han colonizers. Literary historians, such as Julian Ward and Ihor Pidhainy, have examined Chinese travel literature and geographical writings on the southwest.

The first chapter of this book, “Suzhou Place Painting Traditions,” introduces readers to the contemporary topographical images that surrounded Huang Xiangjian in his youth. Paintings representing tourism to the famous natural scenery, ancient sites, and monasteries of seventeenth-century Suzhou, a city long considered a center of high culture, were quite fashionable, and their visual vocabulary became his foundation. The southwest, however, was not a traditional painting subject and lacked a standard vocabulary. This chapter examines how the stylistic, literary, and topographical conventions of Suzhou place paintings functioned. It also cues readers to the basic techniques of this tradition later utilized by Huang Xiangjian and expanded on in his own work.
For a fuller understanding of chapter 2, readers may turn first to appendix 1 to read a full translation of the two travel records: Huang’s arduous southwest journey to rescue his parents and his diary describing the family’s harrowing voyage home to Suzhou. Influential friends and colleagues had these two narratives printed together as The Travel Records of Filial Son Huang within a year of the family’s return. This text is presented as it was written, with no subdivisions or commentary. Footnotes are provided to assist modern readers unfamiliar with the social, political, cultural, or environmental context.

In the second and third chapters, “Paintings of the Southwest for Suzhou Audiences” and “Filial Geo-Narratives,” I argue that the majority of Huang Xiangjian’s painted oeuvre was part of a successful campaign that visualized his filiality and his father’s and his own loyalty to the fallen Ming dynasty. In ink albums and hanging scrolls, Huang illustrated himself and his family at dramatic moments along their journeys. Chapter 2 relates the basic components of the Huang family odyssey and examines the mechanics of content, style, and production evident in the paintings Huang produced after his return to Suzhou. It also introduces seventeenth-century views of the southwest and the variety of self-styled “Ming loyalists” who would have been interested in Huang’s paintings. Chapter 3 interprets Huang’s geo-narrative paintings and The Travel Records of Filial Son Huang as the material evidence of a campaign to enhance the moral standing of the Huang family within the elite circles of their friends and acquaintances in their hometown of Suzhou. A primary goal of this campaign was to earn Huang Xiangjian the socially generated title Filial Son in order to aid his impoverished family on their return with immediate material benefits, such as monetary gifts, and the societal advance of status that such a title could elicit.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters discuss two of Huang Xiangjian’s most complex geo-narrative paintings. Although both works may have aided the Huangs’ filial campaign, they were created for two separate filial purposes and require a complex experiential and visual understanding of the topography pictured. In the fourth chapter, “Attaining a Grand View from Mount Jizu,” focus is on the ascent of the Buddhist Mount Jizu (Yunnan Province), which Huang painted in 1656, and the multilayered experiences it afforded to a variety of contemporary viewers. Huang composed the pictorial elements of the topography and the narrative in the inscription to create three interrelated, experiential readings of this handscroll, depending on the viewer’s level of knowledge of the geography of the Mount Jizu region. The first and most accessible reading is
as a traditional painted journey-experience of an exotic locale. The fullest reading of the second journey-experience, articulated in the inscription at the end of the painting, is dependent on the viewer’s knowledge of the history of that area and the painter’s extraordinary personal story. The third reading was available only to the reader who had fully understood the topography as he viewed the painting; grasped the personal significance of the journey while reading the inscription; and then employed the ability, through experience and imagination, to visualize the comprehensive view of the surrounding region from the mountain’s summit and to associate it with the metaphorical implications of the *daguan*, or “grand view.” Those able to combine a knowledgeable reading of the picture and inscription with a full visualization of the varied topography as seen from the summit could interpret the transformative experience activated by a *daguan*—the comprehensive understanding of an enlightened individual.

In the fifth and sixth chapters, “Topographies of Yunnan” and “Picturing the Quest toward Sagehood,” I argue that Huang’s 1658 masterpiece, *Scenic Frontier of Yunnan* (*Diannan shengjing*), presents his father’s lifetime quest for sagehood. This undertaking extends over the eight-leaf album as a written and visually narrated journey through a set of unique sites filled with topographical metaphors for personal growth and illumination. I refer to this geo-narrative type as a pictorial “spiritual biography.” The complexity of the route and multidimensional symbolism of the painting’s sites are examined in three analytical dimensions. First is the physical topography and the attendant experience of journeying through it. Next is the cultural topography as manifest in historically established symbols representative of generalized principles, as well as specific condensation symbols of persona, social group, and class. The last to be considered is the personal topography infused with the personality, beliefs, and experiences of a single person: the artist’s father, Huang Kongzhao.

This study analyzes how one man used artistic creativity and his society’s belief in the traditional values of filiality and loyalty to survive during a complicated and dangerous time. Huang Xiangjian was one of thousands of educated men who sought to preserve and distinguish themselves amidst the political disorder, social upheaval, and financial distress of this period. The strategies he used tell much about life and art in this period, but they tell still more about Huang Xiangjian himself. I began my research on Huang because his painting fascinated me. I continued it because of the variety of geo-narratives it revealed. I present it now as a tribute to a man I deeply admire, for in the end, Huang Xiangjian truly was a Filial Son.