



ISLANDS' METAMORPHOSES: TWO RIVER ISLANDS IN NANJING, CHINA, AS A CASE STUDY IN HISTORICAL TOPONYMY AND CARTOGRAPHY

Xu DUODUO

Nanyang Technological University (NTU), School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS), Division of Chinese, Singapore

Email: duoduo001@e.ntu.edu.sg

***Abstract:** The present study illustrates the historical toponymy and historical topography of two river islands (located in the Yangtze River), belonging to the territory of Nanjing, China. The toponymic analysis was carried out from a collection of ancient maps. The current Bailu Zhou Island has inherited its name from a poem written by Li Bai after the ancient Bailu Zhou 'disappeared' because of hydro-geo-morphological events over time. Bagua Zhou Island, with its enigmatic name, was shaped gradually in the Yangtze River by the processes of erosion and accumulation of debris. Besides clarifying the historical toponymy and cartography of the two islands, the paper inserts their history among other cases of 'exchanged' place names. This research reveals that both natural and human factors contribute to the toponymic replacement of islands. It shows, moreover, the relevance of changes in the hydro-geo-morphology of river islands, due to the instability of river phenomena, in affecting their naming process.*

***Key words:** Bailu Zhou Island, Bagua Zhou Island, River Islands, Toponymic Replacement, Nanjing*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu Province in South East China, has a history of almost 2,500 years. It is a metropolis nurtured by rivers. Qinhuai River meanders through the inhabited center and the Yangtze River flows from the west to the northern side of the city. Nanjing is situated at the lower mouth of Yangtze River, one of the two biggest rivers in China. After having crossed the city, the watercourse turns eastward and flows into the East China Sea. The lower mouth of Yangtze River is characterized by a number of islands and their stories have been recorded, over time, by people in the region of Nanjing.

2. BAILU ZHOU (“THE EGRET ISLAND”)

In the southern part of Nanjing, a garden surrounding a river island (located in the Qinhuai’s riverbed) is called *Bailu Zhou* (“Egret Island Park”). The famous Chinese poet Li Bai (701-762 AD) wrote a poem entitled *Deng Jin Ling Feng Huang Tai* (“The Phoenix Bird Tower”), in which *Bailu Zhou* is mentioned. The related verse tells: *Er Shui Zhong Fen Bai Lu Zhou*. Shigeyoshi Obata (1928: 114) translated these words as: “And the river divides in two streams, holding the White Heron Island between”¹. That historical site inspired Li Bai, who is reputed in China as “the God of Poetry”, to compose that well-known poem. However, an analysis of historical maps of the area shows that the current *Bailu Zhou* Island (with garden) is not the one mentioned in the poem. The (ancient) *Bailu Zhou* Island in the poem was located outside *Jiang Dong Men*, one of the gates of Nanjing, “The Gate at the East Side of the Yangtze River”. In other words, it was an island of the Yangtze River, not of the Qinhuai River, as the current one. The earliest record of the ancient *Bailu Zhou* Island can be found in *Sunwu Du Jianye Tu* (Chen Yi, 1516: 8)², the map of the capital city of Wu Kingdom (229-280 AD): *Jianye* (one of the ancient names of Nanjing, Figure 1).

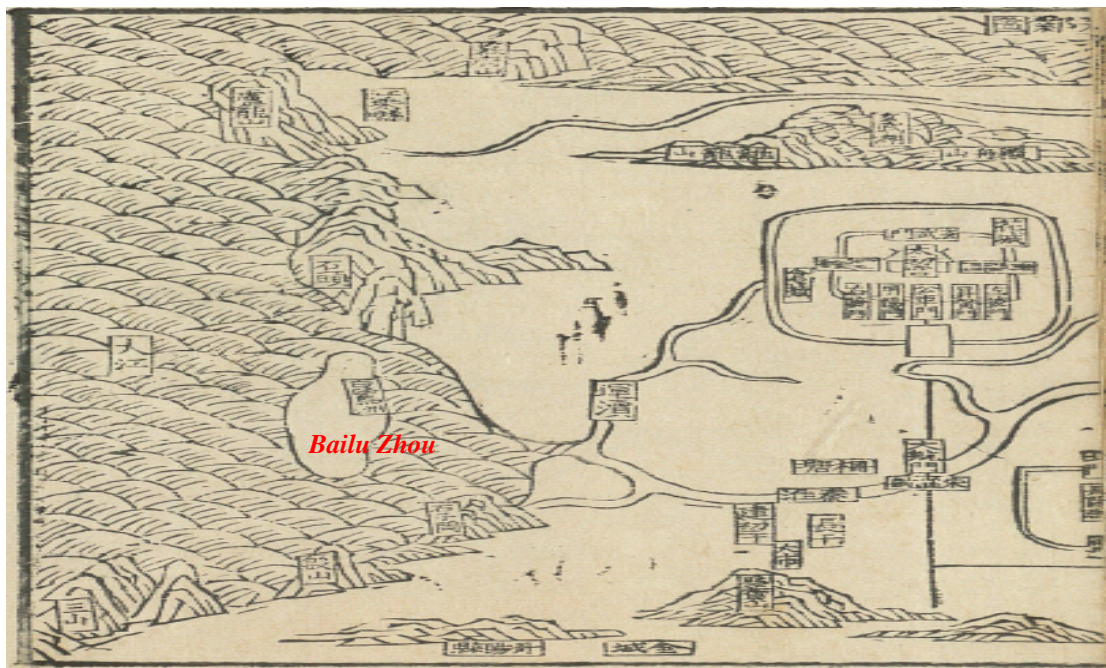


Figure 1. Sunwu Du Jianye Tu (Chen, Yi, [1516], p. 8), the map of Jianye (Nanjing), the capital city of Wu Kingdom (229-280 AD)

In *Dongjin Du Jiankang Tu*, the map of *Jiankang* (another ancient name of Nanjing), the capital city of East Jin Dynasty (317-420 AD), it is possible to see that the island has expanded (Chen Yi, 1516: 10). Due to the erosion of river sands on the side of the watercourse’s main stream and to the accumulation of debris on the side located

¹ Shigeyoshi Obata translated *bailu* as “white heron”. However, the Chinese word indicating the bird’s name should be translated as “egret”.

² Chen, Yi., (1516) is a book about the historical geography of Nanjing with a collection of ancient maps of the city.

in front of Nanjing, the island was gradually ‘pushed’ by the current towards the bank. In *Nanchao Du Jiankang Tu*, the map representing *Jiankang* as the capital city of Southern Dynasty (420-589 AD), the island appears much closer to the river bank (Chen Yi, 1516: 12). The ancient *Bailu Zhou* remained ‘unchanged’ until the Southern Tang Dynasty (937-976 AD), according to Chen Yi (1516: 16). In the map representing *Jiankang* during Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), the island is divided into three districts: *Bailu Zhou*, *Ruzhou Xiang* (“The Ruzhou County”³), and *Shanyu Kou* (“The Eel Port”) (Chen Yi, 1516: 20). In Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the island was renamed as *Shazhou Xiang* (Chen Yi, 1516: 22). Finally, in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), because of the debris’ accumulation process, the island joined the river bank becoming a peninsula, no longer recognizable in its original geo-morphology (Figure 2, Chen Yi, 1516: 24).

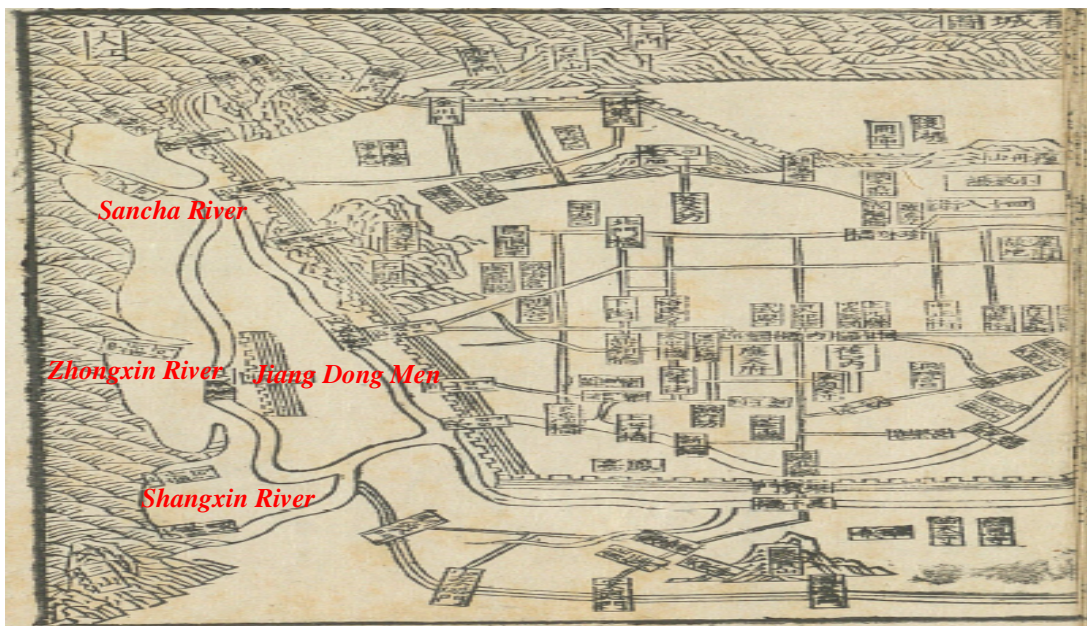


Figure 2. *Guochao Ducheng Tu* (Chen, Yi, [1516], p. 24), the map of *Yingtian* (Nanjing), the capital city of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD)

On the other hand, the Garden of *Bailu Zhou* was one of the private gardens of Xu Da (1332-1385 AD), one very famous general who lived at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD). His son, Xu Huizu (1368-1407 AD), expanded the garden and named it *Dong Yuan* (“The East Garden”). *Dong Yuan* became a favorite place for intellectuals and celebrities to meet during that time⁴. The current *Bailu Zhou* in Qinhuai River is an island of (surrounded by) the garden. Reeds grow in the shoal around the island. When autumn comes, egrets gather there. Since the scenery seems to be similar to the historical and literary descriptions of the ancient *Bailu Zhou* Island of Yangtze River, it is possible to hypothesize that this place was named by analogy with the same name of the Qinhuai River’s island in 1929, when the *Dong Yuan* site was

³ *Ruzhou* is a city in Henan Province. A district on *Bailu* Island is named after it.

⁴ Some historical records on *Dong Yuan* can be found in *You Jinling Zhuyuan Ji* (“Visiting the Gardens in Jinling”) by Wang, Shizhen. (1526-1590 AD, Ming Dynasty); *Qinding Siku Quanshu Jibu 6 Bieji: Yanzhou Xugao* (*Complete Books of the Four Repositories Collections 6 Chronological Collections: Continuation of Yanzhou Collections*), (1577/1773), vol. 64, pp. 2-3.

restored⁵. Nowadays, *Bailu Zhou Park* is a prestigious resort, renowned because of its history, as well as because of its wonderful natural scenery. Conversely, the ancient *Bailu Zhou* Island has ‘vanished’. It seems quite normal for people, therefore, to connect the above mentioned Li Bai’s famous poem to the popular garden. Actually, calligraphies found on wooden boards in the garden’s remains during the 1930s state: *Qi Ming Chu Tai Bai Yi Shi* (“The name comes from Li Bai’s poem”)⁶. They pointed out that the name was taken from Li Bai’s poem. According to an analysis of the ancient maps of the area, it turns out to be mistaken the hypothesis arguing that the garden has been built on the site of the ancient *Bailu Zhou* island. It is a normal fact that people name a place with reference to the local birds. There is, for example, a cliff on the shore of the Yangtze River called *Yanzi Ji* (“The Swallow’s Promontory”). Moreover, a village on *Jiangxin Zhou* (“The Islet in the Center of the River”) in the west of Nanjing is called *Bailu* (“egret”). These beautiful birds add poetic imagination to the places, carrying on the related history as well.

Additionally, *Chi Bi* could be another example comparable to the toponymic replacement happened to *Bailu Zhou*. In *Chi Bi Fu* (“The Red Cliff’s Ode”), written by Su Shi (1037-1101 AD), the place name *Chibi Ji* (“The Red Nose Promontory”, since it looks like a ‘nose’ on the cliff) was misunderstood and interpreted as *Chi Bi* (“The Red Cliff”). Su Shi has written the ode after having visited *Chibi Ji* in Hubei Province, thinking it was *Chi Bi*. Both places are characterized by red cliffs (since the soil is mainly clayey and ferrous) and coincidentally have similar names. One possible explanation of this toponymic misunderstanding could be: *Chi Bi* (“The Red Cliff”) was the battlefield where the *Battle of Red Cliffs* (208 AD)⁷ was fought. It is famous because in that battle the *Wu* and the *Shu* defeated the *Wei*, fighting with much weaker armies. Seeing the promontory with a red cliff and a similar name, Su Shi connected the place to that historical site.

3. BAGUA ZHOU (“THE BAGUA ISLAND”)

Another island of the Yangtze River on the northern side of Nanjing is called *Bagua Zhou* (“The *Bagua* Island”). *Bagua* is an octagonal trigram used in Daoist cosmology in order to represent the fundamental principles of reality (literally, it means “eight symbols”). There are no records about why that island was named *Bagua*. However, a legend spread among the Nanjing inhabitants tells that Queen Ma (1332-1382 AD), the wife of the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), dropped a jade *bagua* in that location on the river, and the island grew on that. With this island ‘cutting’ the river into two branches, it became easier for people to ferry across the surging river⁸. In order to find out the etymological origins of its name, it is possible to check through the ancient maps of Nanjing. The earliest mention of *Bagua Zhou* as an island on the Yangtze River can be found on a map from Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD). In *Yingtian Fu Jing Fangkuo Tu*, (Figure 3) the map of the Yingtian (Nanjing)’s

⁵ Data from the introduction to *Bailu Zhou Garden* in Zhou, Jinliu, (1991), p. 79.

⁶ Cf. Xie, Weihang & Xie, Shimeng, (2007), p. 221.

⁷ Cf. Zhang, Xiugui, (2006), pp. 214-235.

⁸ There are not yet scientific publications on the historical toponymy of this island. The legend can be found in *Baidu Baike*, a Chinese online encyclopedia (available at: <http://baike.baidu.com/>).

area (Chen Yi, 1516: 27)⁹, there are two islands called *Manli Zhou* (“The Eel and Mullet Island”) and *Sha Zhou* (“The Sandy Island”), located in the place in which the current *Bagua Zhou* lies. *Manli Zhou* could also be found earlier, in *Song Jiankang Fu Tu* (Chen Yi, 1516: 20), the map of *Jiankang* (Nanjing) during Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD), while *Sha Zhou* was not yet marked in historical maps before Ming Dynasty.

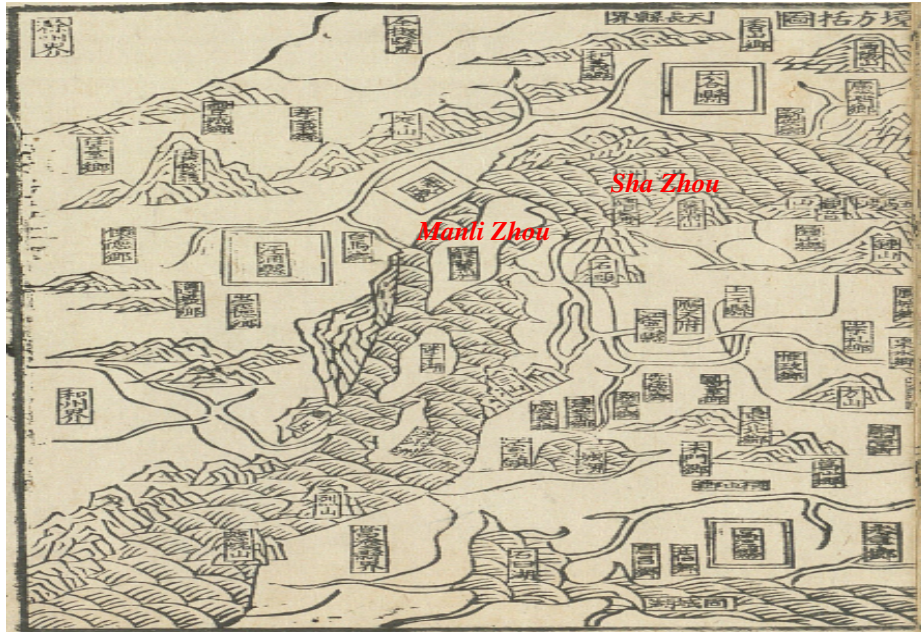


Figure 3. *Yingtian Fu Jing Fangkuo Tu*, the map of *Yingtian* (Nanjing) Area (Chen, Yi, [1516], p. 27)

In *Jiangning Fu Tong Qixian Tu* (Huang Zhijuan et al., 2010, vol. 1: 5), the map of the seven counties under the *Jiangning* (Nanjing) Prefecture during the reign of Yongzheng (1722-1735 AD), an Emperor of Qing Dynasty, the situation remains unchanged. However, in *Jiangning Shengcheng Tu* (Huang Zhijuan et al., 2010, vol. 1: 4) (Figure 4), the map of the capital city of *Jiangning* (Nanjing) Prefecture drawn during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1735-1799 AD), the two islands seem to be merged into one, called *Caoxie Jia* (“The Island of the Sandal”). During the reign of Emperor Tongzhi (1861-1875 AD), *Caoxie Jia* (indicated as a combination of “*Bagua Zhou*” and “*Qili Zhou*”), because of the hydro-geo-morphological processes of erosion and accumulation of debris, has ‘moved’ eastwards (it is possible to see this, for example, in *Tongzhi Shangjiang Liangxian Zongtu*, “The General Map of the Two Counties: Shangyuan and Jiangning”) (Figure 5)¹⁰. In *Changjiang Tu Ce* (Peng Yulin, 1868)¹¹, a detailed map of Yangtze River painted in Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), three islands separated by inner rivers are annotated: *Bagua Zhou*, *Qili Zhou* (“The Seven Miles Island”), and *Tiansheng Zhou* (“The Island Born from the Heaven”).

⁹ *Yingtian* is another name of Nanjing in Ming Dynasty.

¹⁰ Cf. *Tongzhi Shangjiang Liangxian Zhi*. [Local Chronicles of Shangyuan County and Jiangning County During the Reign of Emperor Tongzhi], (1874/1991), vol. 27, p. 12.

¹¹ Cf. Peng, Yulin, *Changjiang Tu Ce* [Yangtze Atlas], 1868; Cf. Zhu, Binggui, (2014), p. 121.



Figure 4. *Jiangning Shengcheng Tu*, the map of the capital city of Jiangning (Nanjing) Prefecture (Huang Zhijuan et al., [2010], vol. 1, p. 4)

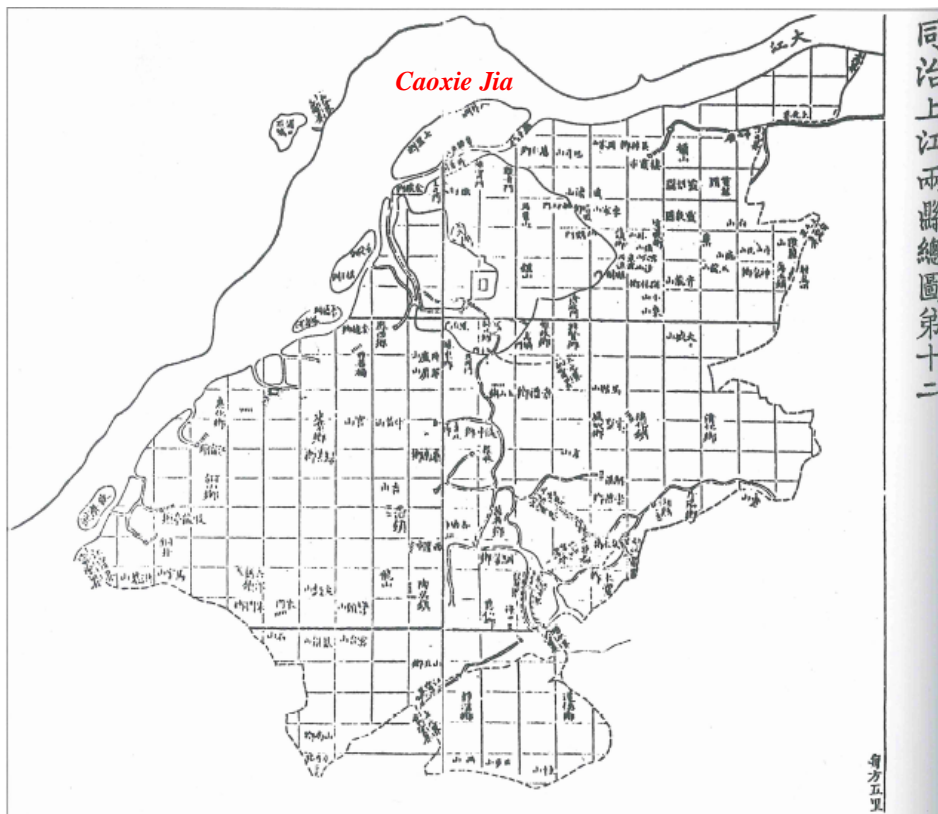


Figure 5. *Tongzhi Shangjiang Liangxian Zongtu*, the General Map of the Two Counties: Shangyuan and Jiangning (Wang Shiduo et al., [1874/1991], vol. 27, p. 12)

Comparing the maps from Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) to Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), it is possible to notice that the location of *Manli Zhou* has moved towards the lower Yangtze River. In mid-Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), it merged with another island and it changed name a number of times. Some of its different denominations are: *Caoxie Jia*, *Qili Zhou*, and *Bagua Zhou*. *Qili Zhou* and *Tiansheng Zhou* were islands near *Bagua Zhou*. Later on, the stream among them became smaller, due to the accumulation of debris, and the three islands were considered one. *Qili Zhou*, even if once it was a bigger island than *Bagua Zhou*, became the name of a district on the island of *Bagua Zhou*. In other words, the place name *Bagua Zhou* was coined no later than the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD). The legend of Queen Ma in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD), therefore, could be at the origin of its name, but not at the origin of the island itself (as a geo-morphological ‘expression’ derived by the river’s dynamics). The shape and the geological features of *Bagua Zhou*, independently from its origin and the naming process behind its name, continued to change over time. In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)’s maps, *Jiangning Shengcheng Tu* and *Tongzhi Shangjiang Liangxian Zongtu* (Figure 4 and Figure 5), it appears as a footprint-shaped island. Because of this, it got the name *Caoxie Jia* (“The Island of Sandal”). Nowadays, looking at the satellite map (Figure 6), the island seems to be more ‘squared’. It could be reasonable for people not knowing the toponymic transition of that place to hypothesize that it was named according to its current shape.



Figure 6. *Bagua Zhou* Island from Google Earth

In Qing Dynasty (1614-1912 AD), *Bagua Zhou* was closer to the southern bank of Yangtze River, as shown in *Tongzhi Shangjiang Liangxian Zongtu* (Figure 5). However, looking again at the current satellite map (Figure 6), now it appears closer to the northern bank of the river. That can lead us to conclude that the main stream of Yangtze River has changed, flowing, before, on the northern side of the island and, now, on its southern side. Huang Nanrong (1986: 21) pointed out that the last significant change in the island's shape and location was in the 1940s, basing his analysis on historical hydro-geo-morphological data.

4. THE ORIGINS OF TOPONYMIC TRANSITION

Landscape, on the Earth, changes over time. Water is one of the natural forces reshaping the places' morphology. Both islands mentioned above have witnessed, in the chronology of their hydro-geo-morphology, the action of water over centuries. They silently show their movements and changes through the maps the cartographers have drawn during their long history. *Bailu Zhou* 'disappeared' because of the accumulation of debris and became part of the river bank, while *Bagua Zhou* increased in size and changed shape due to the stream's debris accumulation. As mentioned above, the two main hydro-geo-morphological changes in the 'island(s) movements' giving shape to *Bagua Zhou* happened during the reigns of Qianlong (1735-1799 AD) and Tongzhi (1861-1875 AD). They could have been originated by two catastrophic floods that occurred in those times: one in 1788 AD and the other one in 1870 AD¹².

The 'metamorphic nature of landscape' is a quite wide-spread feature of river islands¹³. In the lower Yangtze River area, a number of different islands in the middle of the watercourse are called *Jiangxin Zhou*, which means "Islets in the Center of the River". Not only Nanjing has its *Jiangxin Zhou*. Several other cities along the lower mouth of Yangtze River also share islets with the same place name, including *Zhenjiang* and *Jinjiang* in Jiangsu Province, and *Huangshan* and *Dangtu* in Anhui Province. These islands could have other and additional specific names according to their historical or geographical features. For example, one in Nanjing had a parallel name (that is still used) from ancient times, *Meizi Zhou* ("The Plum Island"). It is a plum-shaped island, long and with two sharp vertices. Due to the flow of the river these 'river-center islets' tend to 'move' towards the mouth of the river changing their shape and position. Over time, *Meizi Zhou* island in Nanjing was continuously flooded and submerged (214 recorded times from 185 BC to 1911 AD, according to the historical sources¹⁴). In the mid-Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), immigrants from other provinces started to live on this island and projects of water containment (levees) were realized in order to prevent or to slow down the natural hydro-geo-morphological evolution of this 'river-center islet'¹⁵. The shaping of the so-called *Jiangxin Zhou* Islands and their union with the land, for example, are considered basic factors in the change of the morphology of the lower Yangtze River (Huang Nanrong, 1986: 20). Taking into account the river islands'

¹² Cf. *Changjiang Liuyu Guihua Bangongshi*, (1979), pp. 128-129.

¹³ Cf., for example, Raslan and Salama, (2015), pp. 77-92.

¹⁴ Cf. *Jiangsu Shengzhi Shuili Zhi*, (2001), Chapter 2.3. The online version is available at: <http://www.jssdfz.com/book/slz/DEFAULT.HTM>.

¹⁵ Cf. *Jiangsu Shengzhi Shuili Zhi*, (2001), Chapter 2.3.2. The online version is available at: <http://www.jssdfz.com/book/slz/DEFAULT.HTM>.

hydro-geo-morphological changes over time, it is easier to understand the toponymic transition of *Bailu Zhou* and *Bagua Zhou*. Moreover, nowadays *Bagua Zhou* is located on the northern bank of Yangtze River. A small branch of the river flows around the island, while the main stream goes straight on its southern side. It is likely that in the future *Bagua Zhou* will be 'pushed' towards the north and will be merged into the riverbank more or less in the way of the ancient *Bailu Zhou*. Indeed, according to Huang Nanrong (1995: 70), around 10 'river-center islands / islets' have already merged into both banks of the Yangtze River since the foundation of People's Republic of China (1949). Besides natural factors, population movements and settlements dynamics also play an important role in 'writing' the river islands' history. Additionally, among islands or places with the same name, generally the most well-known one tends to be connected to literary or traditional records.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper tries to clarify, investigating the historical cartography and (river) toponymy of Nanjing, the history of two of its river islands, *Bailu Zhou* and *Bagua Zhou*. Their naming process can be considered as a specific kind of toponymic replacement. *Bailu Zhou* was named after an old place name, since the original island no longer exists, while *Bagua Zhou* got its name from a legend. The 'metamorphic nature of landscape' of river islands is an important factor in understanding the islands' history and their toponymy. At first, it can possibly lead people to 'mix-up' places (islands) they know at their times with islands well-known (except for their location) through ancient records, poems, and legends, generating a 'geographic and toponymic misunderstanding'. Moreover, another element of possible 'confusion' for people are the different names attributed to river islands before their changes in shape (in their geomorphology) or their 'drift' towards the riverbank or the mouth of the river, leading to the elaboration of legends, for example, or to the 'mix-up' of an island (and its related name) with another one.

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