In projects of ‘reclamation’, people have been turning seascapes into landscapes since at least the 10th century in China’s Pearl River Delta and since the 19th century around the edges of Sydney Harbour. The histories of reclamation in these two areas are very different but are nevertheless imbued with commonalities of human and shoreline mobility, expansionary dreams, and openings to the more-than-human world. Rather than viewing them as elements of Anthropocene dystopia, I offer a nuanced historical-archaeological reading of them which registers positives and negatives, losses and gains. The Pearl River Delta reclamation is interpreted in terms of aspirations to lineage expansion in which reclamation is coupled with overseas migration to California, Australia and elsewhere. In Sydney Harbour, a sea wall built in the 1890s at Rushcutters Bay transformed a mangrove mudflat into an urban park, destroying one ecology but giving rise over time to another in which new forms of human and non-human mingling occur.

Amid concern over the prospects of inundation that global warming poses, few have noticed that in large parts of Asia accelerating rates of reclamation mean a continued net seaward expansion of the landmass. In this setting, an archaeology of reclamation takes on a particular relevance.

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