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Chinese Travel Writing

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'Travel writing', like the term 'autobiography', is a category defined by content rather than by formal features. In the Chinese tradition, it encompasses a variety of genres such as poetry, rhapsody, essay, diary, letters, and so on, with a history spanning two thousand years. Despite great historical changes over the centuries, we see a certain cultural coherence built upon a continuous tradition of writing and shared reading. People have always moved through space –trading, soldiering, relocating, and resettling – since antiquity, but their movement only began to be written about in earnest from early medieval times (roughly referring to the first through tenth centuries in the Chinese context). These writings are what made places visible on a cultural map, and have been consumed by eager readers and recycled in their own travel writings. Imagine a travel guide, which an educated travelling reader may consult before arriving at a new place. It tells the reader where to go and what to see, and this in turn determines what the reader will write about the place: the only difference is that this premodern Chinese travel guide consisted of poems and prose accounts describing travels undertaken by the writers to or within the place. Furthermore, the poems were frequently inscribed on the physical landscape such as the cliff of a mountain, or written either directly on the walls of a structure at a famous site or on wooden boards hanging on those walls. The poems on the boards, referred to as 'poetry boards' (*shiban*), were regularly changed and updated; but poems by famous writers, local luminaries and, on occasion, emperors were engraved on stelae and thus became a more permanent part of the site. As the title of Richard Strassberg's ground-breaking anthology of Chinese travel writing, *Inscribed Landscapes*, indicates, these texts literally become part of the place, intensifying its aura and thickening its history, embedding it deeply in a web of cultural memory.¹

¹ Richard E. Strassberg (ed. and trans.), *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

This is perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of Chinese travel writing: the heavily inscriptive quality of a place through an accumulation of writings that condition a latecomer's view. Meanwhile, there are locales that fall into obscurity, cast into the dark by the bright light of the well-known and well-inscribed places around them. In the Chinese literary tradition, travel is never entirely an experience of space alone, but also of time – in the sense that a traveller often ruminates on history at a celebrated site and adds his or her own writings to its textual record. From the tenth century on, travel writing increasingly became a conscious attempt to echo and to contend with voices from the past, even as one was always obliged, especially if one was a renowned writer, to participate in the textual life of the place.

When the great poet Su Shi (1037–1101) visited Mount Lu in South China, he at first decided not to write any poem, but he was being recognised everywhere in the mountain by people who saw him, and he could not help writing a poem about it, and then he wrote another, and another. Then someone sent him a copy of a friend's guide to the mountain, which quotes poems by earlier poet-visitors Li Bai (701–62) and Xu Ning (fl. c.813). Thereupon Su wrote another poem commenting on Li Bai's and Xu Ning's Mount Lu poems. The meta-travel-account finally ends with one more quatrain by Su Shi, which became so famous that its last couplet has attained the status of a common saying in the Chinese language: 'I cannot tell the true visage of Mount Lu, / Only because I myself am right here in the mountain.' Upon this Su Shi drolly concludes: 'My Mount Lu poems are summed up in this.'² Su Shi's wry account of his Mount Lu experience sums up some of the most salient features of Chinese travel writing.

In his 1994 anthology of premodern Chinese travel literature, Richard Strassberg, in a pioneering effort to dispel the Western reader's misconception of Chinese travel writing being 'much like our own' and to show the tradition in Chinese terms, introduced the 'mainstream of travel writing' as being 'concerned with travel in China itself'.³ By 'mainstream', however, Strassberg refers to the canonical travel accounts in the Chinese literary tradition, and such a focus, even as it gives a good basic introduction to Chinese travel literature, obscures its multifariousness. Not only did people constantly go beyond the borders of the Chinese empire and write down their experiences in the premodern period, but accounts of travel abroad increased exponentially in the nineteenth century. The current essay aims to

² For a translation of this account, see Stephen Owen (ed. and trans.), *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), p. 622.

³ Strassberg (ed. and trans.), *Inscribed Landscapes*, p. 4.

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strike a balance between writings about domestic travel and about travel abroad.

Travel Inside the Empire

The heading, chosen for expediency, is a little misleading, since an important part of Chinese travel writing, indeed its very origin, is as much about mythologised geography as about real geography, as much about the cosmos as about the Chinese empire. 'Encountering Sorrow' ('Li sao'), a poem of 187 couplets attributed to the shadowy courtier figure Qu Yuan (c.340–278 BCE), relates the aristocratic protagonist's suffering in an ignominious world and his decision to go on a celestial journey to seek, unsuccessfully, an ideal mate, traditionally read as a political allegory of the historical author's quest for a good king. The poem is preserved in an anthology known as the *Verses of Chu* (*Chu ci*), whose received version came from the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). The moralistic-historical interpretative framework into which Han and later commentators cast this extraordinary poem does little to obscure the fantastic nature of the exotic imagery or of the speaker's encounters with goddesses and shamans through a mystical landscape. Another poem in the same anthology, 'Far Roaming' ('Yuan you'), possibly dating to the second century BCE, likewise depicts a cosmic journey in the four directions, but has a happier ending as the protagonist finally reaches the centre of the universe and the 'great beginnings' of time, achieving spiritual transcendence and physical immortality. A poetic exposition, 'The Great Man' ('Daren fu'), attributed to the court writer Sima Xiangru (c.179–117 BCE), bears resemblance to 'Far Roaming' but has an imperial ruler as the cosmic traveller, who obtains and affirms his supreme power by roaming the universe.

These poems establish some of the most important topics of Chinese travel writing: the political exile's search for consolation and meaning in wild landscape, journey as spiritual quest and the attainment of transcendence during travel, extraordinary encounters on the road, and the traveller's desire to go home, which is sometimes paradoxically configured as 'forgetfulness about return', much like the story of the lotus-eaters. The more immediate influence of the poems is manifested in Han 'poetic expositions' or 'rhapsodies' (*fu*) about travel, a famous early specimen of which is Ban Biao's (3–54 CE) 'My Northward Journey' ('Beizheng fu'), dated to the year 25 CE. It relates the author's flight from the fallen imperial capital Chang'an (modern Xi'an) to Tianshui (in modern Gansu) during the chaotic years of dynastic transition. Marked by a sombre mood, the rhapsody describes the places the author

passes through on his journey. The poet uses familiar formulae from 'Encountering Sorrow', such as 'In the morning I set out from X; at evening I stay over at Y', and sometimes recycles a line almost verbatim, such as 'I lament the many travails of human life.' But the difference is also striking, as the fantastic celestial roaming is replaced by a secular journey through uninhabited wilderness, foggy valleys, and unmelted snow. The most remarkable difference is the shift of focus from mythology to history, as the places marked in Ban's textual map are historical sites where he contemplates past events and personages, and this mode of travel writing, like the fabulous travel in the *Verses of Chu*, exerted a powerful influence on the later tradition. In this type of writing, space and time define each other as history is mapped spatially, based on the author's travel itinerary.⁴ 'Meditation on the past' (*huaigu*) at a historical site became a prominent theme in subsequent poetry, and the sites are, ironically, remembered through these poetic texts more than through the events commemorated in the texts. As Stephen Owen says, 'The vagaries, capricious choices, and powerful images in [these] texts are the past for later ages.'⁵ In fact, such texts often recreate a site. In Yangzhou, Level Mountain Hall, first built by renowned writer Ouyang Xiu (1007–72) and immortalised in his 'Account of Level Mountain Hall', was destroyed many times through the centuries but rebuilt just as often, because travellers to Yangzhou, familiar with Ouyang Xiu's writing, expected to find the hall there. As a seventeenth-century account states, the rebuilt Level Mountain Hall gave visitors 'a joyous admiration for both the landscape and things of culture' as they came here, drinking, composing poetry, and by doing so paying tribute to the former writer.⁶

The fourth through sixth centuries – a time when the Chinese empire was divided between north and south, with North China under the rule of non-Han peoples – witnessed the next important moment in Chinese travel writing. Two remarkable phenomena dominate the age. One is the appearance, in the southern regime, of an abundance of 'records' (*ji*) of travel, written in plain prose. These records were generally associated with military campaigns undertaken against the north in this period. In contrast with

⁴ See David R. Knechtges, 'Poetic Travelogue in the Han *Fu*', in *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Sinology* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1989), pp. 127–52; Xiaofei Tian, *Visionary Journeys: Travel Writings from Early Medieval and Nineteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2011), pp. 77–82.

⁵ Stephen Owen, 'Place: Meditation on the Past at Chin-ling', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 50/2 (1990), 417–57 (at p. 420).

⁶ Owen (ed. and trans.), *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, p. 635.

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a travel *fu*, which narrates a journey with lyrical rhymed prose in an elevated language, a *ji* is characterised by its incorporation of everyday details and mundane happenings on the journey that bring the representation of travel to life. For instance, in *A Record of the Western Campaign* (*Xizheng ji*), the army officer and writer Dai Yanzhi (fl. early fifth century) relates an amusing anecdote: during the campaign of 417, when he was sailing upstream to investigate the river course at the command of his general, the locals in a northern town called Sanle, who had never seen a southern-style boat before, 'gathered like ants on the river banks and doubled over with laughter'. The laughter of the Sanle residents at the strange sight of a boat is an important moment in Chinese travel writing: if the *fu* author is always the active agent of looking and reflecting, the author of a *ji* can be both the subject and object of observation, wonder, or even ridicule – as Mirza I'tisam al'din, who travelled from India to England in the 1760s, remarked, 'I journeyed for a spectacle and became a spectacle myself.'⁷

The other cultural phenomenon that would produce an immense influence on the later tradition is the 'discovery' of the beauty of landscape. An oft-cited passage by Yuan Song (d.401) describes his self-conscious amazement at the beauty of the Three Gorges on the Yangtze River:

Written records and oral accounts all warn people about the perils of traveling on the River, but no one has ever said anything about the beauty of the landscape. When I came to this place, I was absolutely delighted . . . The layered crags and striking peaks, with their strange and extraordinary forms, are beyond description . . . I lingered there for several days and nights, and quite forgot to return . . . If the mountains and waters had consciousness, they too would certainly marvel at *me* as the first person in a thousand years who appreciates them.⁸

This period witnessed the birth of 'landscape poetry' and 'landscape painting', both of which are closely associated with travel. Zong Bing (374–443), renowned landscape painter and writer, says that in his old age

⁷ Cited in Vasant Kaiwar and Sucheta Mazumdar (eds.), *Antinomies of Modernity: Essays on Race, Orient, Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 100.

⁸ Cited in Li Daoyuan's (d.527) *Commentary on The Classic of Rivers* (*Shuijing zhu*), translated in Strassberg (ed. and trans.), *Inscribed Landscapes*, p. 90; also translated, and discussed, in Tian, *Visionary Journeys*, pp. 142–3. Li Daoyuan cites copiously from more than 300 earlier sources in writing his commentary on *The Classic of Rivers*, a geographical text from the first or second century CE. While Li had personally investigated many waterways in North China, he had never travelled to the south because China was politically divided at the time. Although Li is often hailed as a great writer of travel literature, any description of the southern landscape in his commentary is drawn from textual sources by southern writers such as Yuan Song himself.

he painted from memory the landscape he had seen in his youthful wanderings so that he could be a 'recumbent traveller' surrounded by the images. Xie Lingyun (385–433), the younger contemporary of Yuan Song, is the first great travel writer in Chinese history, noted for his active exploration of little-frequented spots in the wilderness, seeking marvellous sights even during his exiles. An avid traveller, he even invented special footgear, dubbed 'Duke Xie's Sandals', for mountain climbing. His experience also reminds us of the drastically different conditions for travel and sight-seeing in the fifth century: as an aristocrat commanding vast material and human resources, Xie was able to deploy several hundred retainers to cut down trees and open a path through the mountains on one of his excursions. This story from his biography presents a striking contrast with his nature poems, which portray a beautiful, yet solitary landscape with the poet speaker as the lone Rambler. Aesthetic appreciation of nature was made possible by the labour of retainers and servants, which is never mentioned in the writings of this period, not even in poems lamenting 'the hardship of travel', a favourite motif in Chinese literature.

The insatiable desire for the wonders of nature and the penchant for travel went hand in hand with an inward turn: the representation of landscape came to be linked with a belief, inflected by Buddhism, that what you are determines what you see, and that the mind has the power to transform the place.⁹ Some of the most memorable travel pieces are actually about imagined landscape. Sun Chuo's (320–77) poetic exposition 'Roaming the Heavenly Terrace Mountain' ('You Tiantai shan fu') is inspired by his viewing of paintings of this sacred mountain and a meditative experience. The great poet Li Bai wrote a famous poem on roaming on the Tianmu Mountain in a dream ('Meng you Tianmu yin liubie'), which is still a staple school text in mainland China. The motif of dream travel or visionary journey undertaken with a strong spiritual purpose had many ramifications in later times.

The Tang dynasty (618–907), the golden age of Chinese poetry, saw a flurry of travel writings in diverse genres. In 809, Li Ao (c.772–c. 841) was assigned to office in Guangdong, and embarked on the journey with his pregnant wife. The 'Record of Coming South' ('Lai nan lu'), in a little more than 1,000 words, gives a succinct account of the trip from Luoyang to Guangzhou. Starting on 6 February 809, he arrived on 24 July; halfway through his journey, at Quzhou (in Zhejiang), his wife gave birth to a daughter, and

⁹ See Xiaofei Tian, 'From the Eastern Jin through the Early Tang (317–649)', in Stephen Owen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, vol. I: *To 1375* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 199–285 (at pp. 213–16).

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they stayed awhile so that the mother and baby could rest. Though always hailed as the first extant Chinese travel diary, Li Ao's is more precisely a chronicle with important dates marked with dry, brief entries. Occasionally, however, the prose stylist peeks out from underneath the cloak of the impassive chronicler: 'On the *wuyin* day, we went into the Dongyin Mountain, and I spotted a huge bamboo shoot the size of a baby!' One is tempted to relate this remark to the author's recent experience of becoming a parent.

Liu Zongyuan's (773–819) 'Eight Records of Yong Prefecture' ('Yongzhou baiji'), a series of eight essays about the scenic sites of Yongzhou (in modern Hu'nan), are considered the gems of Chinese travel writing. Yet these exquisite essays are more about local landscape than about the dynamic experience of travel itself, which finds its fuller expression in contemporary poetry. Du Fu (712–70), commonly regarded as China's greatest poet, wrote many poems relating his journeys as he fled from war and chaos after the An Lushan Rebellion devastated the Tang empire. 'Northward Journey' ('Beizheng'), a narrative poem of 140 lines written in 757, consciously evokes Ban Biao's poetic exposition of the same title. It is a virtuoso performance that mixes anguished concerns for the state and tender compassion for his family and alternates between a grand historian's style and the sensitive, even whimsical, lyricist. Even more important for the tradition of Chinese travel writing is his series of twenty-four poems written on a journey from Qinzhou (in modern Gansu) to Chengdu (in Sichuan); the poems, each with a place name in the title, map out a clear itinerary. Xie Lingyun's poems written en route to exile might have been a model, but Du Fu goes beyond his predecessor by using poems as signposts that mark the topography throughout his journey. Each of Xie's poems is self-contained, but the poems in Du Fu's series together constitute a journey narrative with a well-conceived structure. After Du Fu, poetic series recounting a journey became a standard feature in Chinese travel literature and is continued today by poets writing in both classical and modern forms.

In the Song dynasty (960–1279) there was an increase in textual output, partially thanks to the spread of printing and the better circulation and preservation of texts. Writers produced voluminous travel writings in poetry and prose.¹⁰ Many canonical travel accounts are from this period; the genre of travel diary deserves special note. Unlike Li Ao's short chronicle, these diaries

¹⁰ James M. Hargett focuses on prose only and in particular discusses Song travel writings in detail in 'Travel Literature', in Victor H. Mair (ed.), *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 555–9.

are much more extensive, recording the sights and customs of places visited and passed through. Given the material conditions of travel, it is no surprise that many such diaries were kept during river voyages, since boat travel must have been more comfortable, and more amenable to writing, than riding a horse or sitting in a carriage or sedan chair. Lu You's (1125–1210) 'Account of My Journey into Shu' ('Ru Shu ji') and Fan Chengda's (1126–93) 'Boat Trip to Wu' ('Wu chuan lu') are well-known examples.¹¹ But we would miss a large part of the picture of travel writing if we constrained our survey to prose. As poetry increasingly takes on the role of a diary by recording a poet's everyday experience, the poetic travel diary serves a different function from its prose counterpart.¹² Again Fan Chengda's case furnishes a good example. Fan lived at a time when North China was under the rule of the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115–1234), and the Jin and Song regularly dispatched emissaries to each other. Fan Chengda served as a diplomat on behalf of the Song government in 1170, and he wrote two records of the trip: one in prose known as 'Account of Holding the Reins' ('Lanpei lu'), and one in a series of 72 poems with copious notes provided by the poet himself. Compared with the prose account, the latter is much more detailed, and perhaps not surprisingly, more personal and emotionally intense, as the poet passed through the former Song territory occupied now by the Jurchens.¹³

Journal-style travel poetry, especially in the form of quatrains built from the seven-syllable line, offers snapshots that capture 'moments of being' on a journey. Yang Wanli (1127–1206), who travelled extensively in South China on official assignments, is a notable poet in this regard. His travel poems, frequently grouped in sets, are compiled into collections organised chronologically and often with a geographical focus, such as *The Collection of the*

¹¹ The former has been translated into English twice: as *South China in the Twelfth Century: A Translation of Lu You's Travel Diaries, July 3 – December 6, 1170*, trans. Joan Smythe and Chun-shu Chang (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1981); and *Grand Canal, Great River: The Travel Diary of a Twelfth-Century Chinese Poet*, trans. Philip Watson (London: Frances Lincoln, 2007). The latter is available to English readers as *Riding the River Home: A Complete and Annotated Translation of Fan Chengda's (1126–1193) Diary of a Boat Trip to Wu (Wuchuan Lu)* trans. James M. Hargett (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007).

¹² For a discussion of the productive tension between poetic and prosaic accounts recording the same travel experience but giving different manifestations, and of the critical role played by genre in travel writing, see Tian, *Visionary Journeys*, pp. 215–24. For a discussion of this issue using Lu You's poetic and prosaic accounts of his river journey to Shu as a case study, see Ronald Egan, 'When there is a Parallel Text in Prose: Reading Lu You's 1170 Yangzi River Journey in Poetry and Prose', in Paul W. Kroll (ed.), *Reading Medieval Chinese Poetry: Text, Context, and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 221–50.

¹³ A translation of Fan's prose account can be found in *On the Road in Twelfth Century China: The Travel Diaries of Fan Chengda (1126–1193)*, trans. James M. Hargett (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1989), pp. 147–79.

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South Sea (Nanhai ji) that centres on Yang's sojourn in Guangdong from 1180 to 1182. Many of the poems are charming vignettes, and when read cumulatively, as they are intended to be, present a fascinating autobiography of a keen, witty mind. The following quatrain is a typical specimen:

Feeling sorry about the sedan chair cutting into the carriers' shoulders,
I dismount and walk till I get holes on the bottom of my feet.
The traveler's heart is filled with anxiety about dusk approaching,
And the emerald clouds, just to frustrate me, cover half the sky.¹⁴

Numerous authors from the late imperial period (fourteenth through nineteenth centuries) left an enormous quantity of travel writings, but the name to be inevitably mentioned is the remarkable Xu Hongzu (1586–1641), better known as Xu Xiake. Xu was something like a professional traveller who devoted his life to travel and braved many hardships and dangers, not compelled by political circumstances as most scholar-elite travellers in premodern China were, but out of a pure passion for exploration. Throughout his wanderings, spanning over thirty years and covering sixteen provinces, Xu kept a diary that amounts to 600,000 characters; it is a precious record for literary scholars, historians, and scientists alike, as he was one of those rare premodern Chinese travel writers who provided a meticulous witness account of the geographical and geological features of the landscapes he visited, such as the amazing cave formations in the southwest. Xu was not trying to produce a 'literary artifact' by contemporary aesthetic standards, yet occasionally his unadorned, detailed narrative, such as a vivid account of a robbery, appeals to a modern reader, with its earthy depiction of 'real travelling'.¹⁵

Two authors, obscure as they are in the traditional Chinese canon, nonetheless deserve mention because their travel accounts represent the ethos of their times. A gifted painter Huang Xiangjian (1609–73), the son of a Ming official, walked from his native place Suzhou to Yunnan during the chaotic years of the Ming–Qing transition to find his father there and bring him back home. He not only left a travel account but also a number of landscape paintings depicting his journey.¹⁶ Then, in the late nineteenth century, Zhang

¹⁴ This is No. 4 of the poetic series entitled, 'As I Journeyed through the Slope Trail, Big Trees Blocked the Sky for More Than Fifty Leagues, So I Wrote Seven Quatrains to Cheer Myself Up'. *Quan Song shi* ('Complete Song Poetry'), 72 vols. (Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1991), vol. XLII, p. 26299.

¹⁵ The phrase is used by Pan Lei (1646–1708) in his foreword to Xu's diaries, translated in an appendix to Julian Ward's book, *Xu Xiake (1587–1641): The Art of Travel Writing* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), p. 206.

¹⁶ The account, known as *Filial Son Huang's Journey Record* ('Huang xiaozi jicheng'), was printed in 1655. Some of the paintings are preserved in the Suzhou Museum, some in the

Daye (b. 1854), a son of a Zhejiang scholar-official, wrote *The World of a Tiny Insect* (*Weichong shijie*), an autobiography structured as a travelogue. While the book's opening and final sections recount the author's travels in adult years, its middle section relates the author's childhood wanderings over the same territory during the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64). At seven years old, Zhang Daye had fled with his mother from place to place in Zhejiang, their journey filled with macabre scenes of death and cruelty depicted through a child's eyes. Subsequently, much of his travel as an adult sought to dispel the ghosts haunting him from the past.¹⁷

Both Huang's and Zhang's accounts are products of a war-torn age; both deal with travel, personal trauma, and national disaster. Lyrical and nightmarish, elegiac and violent, Zhang's work harks back to a long tradition of Chinese travel writing; but with its fragmentation and flashbacks of a remembered landscape, it also stands at the birth of the modern literary tradition.

Travel Outside the Empire

Chinese travel was never 'primarily internal'.¹⁸ The Chinese empire was constantly engaged in colonial enterprises and trade networking from the Han dynasty on, and travel writing served the empire as a powerful apparatus. Yet a small, but significant, part of writing about travel abroad is religious, and the original motivations for these travels had little to do with the political or economic interests of the empire.

Again we must look to the fourth and fifth centuries, the time when mobility reached an unprecedented level and all sorts of travel writing flourished, and when Buddhism, a foreign religion, penetrated into Chinese society and made its permanent imprint on the native culture. People moved around in a politically divided 'China' and across the traditionally defined Chinese borders, not just to conduct trade, but also to go on religious pilgrimages. The first extant travelogue by a Chinese author about his foreign travels was written by a Buddhist monk, Faxian (c.340–c.421), who embarked on a journey to India in 399 CE in search of the complete Vinaya Piṭaka, a text

Nanjing Museum, among others. See Elizabeth Kindall, *Geo-Narratives of a Filial Son: The Paintings and Travel Diaries of Huang Xiangjian (1609–1673)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Zhang Daye, *The World of a Tiny Insect: A Memoir of the Taiping Rebellion and its Aftermath*, trans. Xiaofei Tian (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Strassberg (ed. and trans.), *Inscribed Landscapes*, p. 3 (my emphasis).

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outlining rules and regulations for Buddhist monks and nuns. The land journey took him through some thirty kingdoms of Central Asia and India; thirteen years later, he finally boarded a merchant ship from the 'Kingdom of Lions' – Sri Lanka – and returned to China via the sea route. In 413 he arrived at the capital of the southern empire, Jiankang (modern Nanjing), and became a sensational figure in Buddhist and secular circles alike. He wrote an account of his travels shortly after his return, but it seemed too brief to satisfy the curiosity of his readers. A few years later, he was prompted to relate his travels in greater detail, and that is presumably the travelogue we have today, commonly referred to as *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (*Foguo ji*). This work became an inspiring precedent for a number of similar pilgrimage travelogues thereafter, the best preserved and most famous of which is the Tang monk Xuanzang's (c.600–64) *Account of the Western Regions During the Great Tang* (*Da Tang Xiyu ji*). Xuanzang's work not only has been of great importance for historians of medieval Central Asia and India but also for the later literary tradition, as his story constitutes the core narrative of the sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyu ji*), commonly attributed to Wu Cheng'en (1501–82).¹⁹ This novel was produced during the late imperial period, the heyday of the classical Chinese novel. It notably combines the philosophically transcendent dimension with the empirically fantastic element of early and early medieval Chinese travel literature, so that the journey to the Western Paradise is also a figure of a person's spiritual quest.

Nevertheless, religious travelogues take up only a small portion of overseas travel writing, the majority of which are closely related to the missions and concerns of the empire. In the first comprehensive history of China, the *Historian's Record* (*Shi ji*), the famous traveller Zhang Qian's (d.113 BCE) exploration of Central Asia is framed as an oral report made to the Emperor Wu of the Han (r.140–87 BCE), who had adopted an expansionist policy during his long, vigorous rule. The traveller's account was designed to present basic information about a place such as its geographical location, population, administrative system, local customs, and products; these data were of potential use to the state and conveyed knowledge of economic and military value, and the relation to 'elsewhere' was one of trade or of colonisation. This distinctly utilitarian mode of travel writing persisted through imperial China, most notably in state-sponsored dynastic histories, but also in private compilations.²⁰ It is sometimes adopted in domestic travel

¹⁹ In the English-speaking world the novel is best known as *Monkey*, an abridged version translated by Arthur Waley (1889–1966).

²⁰ For a detailed discussion, see Tian, *Visionary Journeys*, pp. 159–65.

writing, but the latter is characterised by its diversity in style and content, whereas writings about travel abroad tend to be more practical than aesthetic.

Sometimes an empire's failed ventures would lead to unexpected benefits. The Tang empire had many armed conflicts with the Islamic caliphates in the eighth century, and its Korean general Gao Xianzhi (Go Seonji, d.756) suffered defeat in the Battle of Talas in 751, which marked the end of Tang's westward expansion. Nevertheless, it resulted in the spread of paper-making technology to Central Asia and also occasioned the writing of *My Travels* (*Jingxing ji*) by Du Huan, a prisoner of war who travelled through the Arab countries and finally managed to return to Tang via the sea route in 762. His travelogue, no longer complete, is notable in that it is not only the earliest Chinese eyewitness account of the Arab countries but also was the first documented Chinese presence in Africa and left a rare contemporary record of the ancient trade-based empire Aksum.²¹

Many travelogues from the Song were composed by emissaries to the Liao (Khitans) and Jin (Jurchens) dynasties, such as the one by Fan Chengda mentioned above. Two records were composed by Southern Song envoys to Mongolia, one completed in 1221 and the other in 1237.²² The Mongol Yuan empire generated a surge of travel writing, much of which is about westward journeys following the Mongol conquest routes. Yelü Chucai (1190–1244), a descendant of the Khitan Liao royal family, became a trusted advisor to Genghis Khan (r.1206–27), who affectionately called him Urtu Saqal ('Long Beard'). He joined the khan's campaigns in Western Asia and subsequently authored *A Record of Westward Journey* (*Xiyou lu*) in 1228. *The Perfected Master Changchun's Travel to the West* (*Changchun zhenren xiyouji*), details the Daoist master Qiu Chuji's (1148–1227) arduous journey to the Hindu Kush to meet with the khan; it was compiled by Qiu's disciple Li Zhichang (1193–1256), who had accompanied the master.

The Ming dynasty's (1368–1644) maritime ambitions saw the famous voyages of the eunuch admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) to Southeast Asia,

²¹ Wolbert Smidt, 'A Chinese in the Nubian and Abyssinian Kingdoms (8th Century): The Visit of Du Huan to Molin-guo and Laobosa', *Chroniques yéménites*, 9 (2001), 17–28.

²² These are Zhao Gong's *The Comprehensive Record of the Mongol Tartars* (*Mengda beilu*), and Peng Daya's *A Summary of the Dark Tartars* (*Heida shilue*) with supplementary notes by another diplomat, Xu Ting. They are translated into German by Erich Haenisch, Yao Ts'ung-wu, Peter Olbricht and Elisabeth Pinks under the title *Meng-Ta pei-lu und Hei-Ta shih-lüeh: Chinesische Gesandtenberichte über die frühen Mongolen 1221 und 1237* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1980). Parts of it are translated into English based on the German translation in Tabish Khair et al. (eds.), *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing* (Oxford: Signal, 2006), pp. 104–11.

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South Asia, Western Asia and East Africa. Several accounts were produced from the voyages by men who accompanied the admiral on his expeditions, and all exhibit the utilitarian mode of travel writing in their mixture of ethnographic observations and practical geographical directions for the purpose of expanding and enriching one's native state.²³ Gong Zhen's depiction of the Majapahit kingdom on the island of Java, for instance, proceeds from the depiction of its location, climate, flora, and fauna to the customs of its society. Like most accounts of the other kingdoms in his work, it ends with a confirmation of the kingdom's subordinate status vis-à-vis the Chinese empire. Another notable account from late imperial China is the *Small Sea Travelogue* (*Pihai jiyou*) produced by Yu Yonghe (fl. late seventeenth century) about his expedition to Taiwan, where he was sent by Fujian officials to obtain sulphur for the sake of manufacturing gunpowder.²⁴ Along with Chen Di's (1541–1617) *Record of the Eastern Frontiers* (*Dongfan ji*), this is one of the earliest accounts of the island of Taiwan and its indigenous inhabitants, and stands out among travel writings for its lively style and vivid details.

The late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) saw a new phase in overseas travel writing, as members of the scholar elite ventured far beyond the normal orbits of previous elite travellers to Europe and America, and authored a series of extensive travel accounts in which issues of identity and alterity come to the fore. Of particular note were the first such travellers, namely Bin Chun (b. 1804) and Zhang Deyi (1847–1918), who were among the first official emissaries dispatched to the Western world by the Manchu Qing government in the 1860s. With few previously published travelogues to consult regarding their destinations, they had to negotiate between the brave new world, itself in fast, dramatic change, unfolding before their eyes and the existing tradition of writing about the Other. This resulted in some of the most fascinating travel accounts, in both prose and poetry, a counterpart of the Western travel writings about China from the same period.²⁵

Absence in representation is often mistaken as a lack in social reality, but women likely travelled as much as men did in premodern times, even though they did not always leave behind travel writings. Bin Chun and Zhang Deyi heralded a fast-growing body of travel literature about the Western world, and among the prominent travel writers, Shan Shili (1858–1945) was the first

²³ See Tian, *Visionary Journeys*, pp. 159–65.

²⁴ See Emma Teng's discussion and translation of excerpts in her book, *Taiwan's Imagined Geography: Chinese Colonial Travel Writing and Pictures, 1683–1895* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Asia Center, 2004).

²⁵ Tian, *Visionary Journeys*, pp. 153–214.

elite female traveller outside of China to write about her travels extensively.²⁶ As a matter of fact, a woman stands at the beginning of Chinese travel literature, and this is Ban Zhao (c.49–c.120), writer, historian, and trusted advisor to the female regent of the Han empire, Empress Dowager Deng Sui (81–121). In 95, seventy years after her father Ban Biao composed ‘My Northward Journey’, Ban Zhao wrote a poetic exposition, ‘My Eastward Journey’ (‘Dongzheng fu’), when she accompanied her son to his first official post.

Another often ignored aspect of Chinese travel writing is the travel of an emperor himself. Such travel largely took place within the Chinese territories; nevertheless, whether it was an inspection tour through the empire or an outing to the suburbs of the capital, the royal progress was an ostentatious spectacle and ritual necessity that displayed and asserted power. The Han poetic exposition on ‘The Great Man’, mentioned above, is about imperial cosmic journey. Not coincidentally, the first prose account of travel in the Chinese tradition, dated to the third century BCE, is about the fantastic travels of an ancient king from the tenth century BCE; it is known as *The Story of King Mu* (*Mutianzi zhuan*). And another of the earliest prose travel accounts was written by a courtier following Emperor Guangwu of the Han (r.25–57 CE) on an expedition to the sacred Mount Tai to perform sacrifices to heaven and earth in 56 CE.²⁷ The tradition of imperial perambulation continued throughout imperial times. Emperors commissioned their courtiers to commemorate the occasions with writings, and beginning in the early medieval period emperors themselves increasingly took up literary composition. In terms of productivity, however, no Chinese emperor could rival the Manchu Qing monarch Qianlong (1711–99), who left behind a staggering number of over 40,000 mediocre poems. Many of these were composed on his outings near and far, especially during his six tours to South China between 1751 and 1784, and were inscribed on stelae at famous sites. Su Shi would truly have been reduced to silence.

Travel Writing in Modern Times

While overseas travel writing continued to be written in the first half of the twentieth century, travel writings about China by Japanese, European, and

²⁶ For a discussion of Shan’s travelogue about Japan and Russia, *Travels in the Guimao Year* [1903] (*Guimao lǚxíng jì*), see Ellen Widmer, ‘Foreign Travel through a Woman’s Eyes: Shan Shili’s *Guimao lǚxíng jì* in Local and Global Perspective’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 65/4 (2006), 763–91.

²⁷ Strassberg (ed. and trans.), *Inscribed Landscapes*, pp. 57–62.

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American travellers, among others, also proliferated.²⁸ For Chinese readers, such accounts provided a fresh perspective on one's society and culture, making it possible to look at things with new eyes. This external perspective was so appealing that the great writer Shen Congwen (1902–88) once authored a satiric novel, dubbed *Alice's Travels in China* (*Alisi Zhongguo youji*), in the form of a travelogue with just such an outsider – a fictional character nonetheless – as its protagonist.

One of the distinct characteristics of modern Chinese travel writing, which we have already seen in Zhang Daye's *World of a Tiny Insect*, is the combination of travel account with stories, whether of oneself or of others, and with remembrances. Shen Congwen's *Miscellaneous Sketches of Xiang Travels*, a powerful account of his journey back to his homeland in western Hu'nán (Xiang), is marked throughout by his reminiscences about his colourful adolescent experiences, his observations on local events and characters, and their past and present. The violent reality of the land torn apart by warlords' infighting, ethnic conflicts, and armed revolts is juxtaposed with the otherworldly beauty of the landscape. As Hu'nán is the old land of Chu and of the legend of Qu Yuan and 'Encountering Sorrow', cultural history and personal history interweave and form intricate layers, and the geographies in Shen's work are at once real and mythical, brutal and romantic. In the 2000 Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian's (b. 1940) *Soul Mountain* (*Ling shan*), an autobiographical novel, we see the same elements – travel account, personal narrative, fantastic geographies, and issues of ethnicity, class, and gender.

With the economic rise of China and the advent of the Web in the 1990s, there has been a monumental shift in the ways in which Chinese travel writing is produced, circulated, and consumed in the twenty-first century. Through the premodern period, giving a first person account of travel was by and large an elite activity, but now many of the Chinese tourists roaming worldwide are ordinary, albeit well-to-do, citizens. They share their travel experiences on the internet, posting blogs and pictures on social media such as Weibo. Writing a poem or one's name

²⁸ See Joshua Fogel, *The Literature of Travel in the Japanese Rediscovery of China, 1862–1945* (Stanford University Press, 1996); Nicholas Clifford, *A Truthful Impression of the Country: British and American Travel Writing in China, 1880–1949* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). Leilei Chen's study, *Re-orienting China: Travel Writing and Cross-Cultural Understanding*, focuses on six Canadian and American travel writers in post-1949 China (University of Regina, 2016).

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on the surface of a structure at a famous site may be an offence punishable by a fine today, but taking a selfie to demonstrate one's presence at the site is legitimate and can be broadcast to all who care to see it. Chinese travel writing is profoundly changed in the globalised, 'connected' world.