

---

---

***Visionary Journeys: Travel Writings from Early Medieval and Nineteenth-Century China.* By Xiaofei TIAN. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011. Pp.xii+381.**

CHAN Hon Man

Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Hong Kong Baptist University

---

---

In recent years a succession of monographs on Chinese travel writings has been published in English. Most of these works examine either a specific period of literature or one particular poet. Tian Xiaofei's *Visionary Journeys* is a major addition to this previous scholarship, examining the role of visual perception in Chinese travel writings. Tian's meticulous discussion focuses on two periods: early medieval China (Northern and Southern Dynasties, 317–589) and modern China (the 19<sup>th</sup> century). It is unusual to compare the two periods, which are separated by more than a thousand years, in a book-length study. Tian stresses that it is worthwhile to study literati from these two special periods which "engaged in so much translation, absorbed so much of foreign cultures, and witnessed such a complete cultural transformation" (p. 2). Tian identifies modes of seeing the world which "were established in early medieval times and resurfaced, in permutations and metamorphoses, in the nineteenth-century writings on encountering the Other" (p. 6). The work under review is divided into two parts. Part I consists of three chapters, dealing with the questions of "seeing, visualizing, and image-making" in early medieval Chinese writings. Part II comprises two chapters, focusing on "the fresh seeing of the world in the nineteenth century" (p. 7).

The first chapter focuses on the concept of *xiang* 想 (visualization) and its association with *si* 思 (thought) and *guan* 觀 (clear observation) in the minds of the Eastern Jin elite. Tian cites examples of Buddhist texts to demonstrate how Buddhism extended its influence over Chinese epistemology and enabled people to see the true nature of landscape with visualization and imagination.

In the next chapter, Tian explores different types of journeys in travel writings which can be carried out by the power of visualization. She points out that the hell/paradise structure and the motif of *sigui* 思歸 (longing for home) are important elements in both Faxian's 法顯 (ca. 340–421) travel accounts and also in short stories describing journeys to hell in the *zhiguai* 志怪 (anomaly accounts) of the fifth century. In Chapter 3, Tian focuses in particular on Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433), who is described as the poet of purgatory, occupying the intermediate state between this world and the otherworld in his travel writings. The otherworld, in Tian's terminology, is used as "a heavenly realm or a land of terror and peril" (p. 143), while the poet Xie always remains hopeful to escape from the land of purgatory.

Chapter 4 is the most original. Tian explores Chinese travel accounts of Europe and America, examining their new ways of seeing foreign lands. Tian begins by showing how Qing scholars wrote about their "alien" experience when encountering the foreign. Citing travel accounts written by Zhang Zuyi 張祖翼 (1849–1917), Wang Tao 王韜 (1828–1897), and Zhang Deyi 張德彝 (1847–1918), Tian discusses the new problems of "seeing": paintings of nude figures on public display in London, gender confusion, and American women's freedom to travel with male acquaintances. Tian suggests that these examples demonstrate, to a certain extent, cultural misunderstandings along with a negative attitude towards the foreign. In the last chapter, Tian argues for "the adequacy of classical poetic language to express one's emotional experience" in nineteenth century poems. Tian examines travel poems written by Wang Tao to see how the poet used classical Chinese allusions to represent his new experiences when visiting Scotland.

Tian's interpretation of travel writings in the periods of early medieval China and modern China is fascinating. I would add, however, that the discussion of "visualization and imagination" in Chapter 1 should take the concept of *shenyong* 神遊 (spiritual journey) into consideration. Two significant recent studies in this area have been published: Gong Pengcheng's 龔鵬程 *You de Jingshen wenhua shi* 遊的精神文化史 (A Cultural and Philosophical History of Travel) and Kowk Siu-tong's 郭少棠 *Lüyou: Kua wenhua xiangxiang* 旅遊：跨文化想像 (Travel: A Cross-Cultural Imagination).

Tian's interpretation of Xie Lingyun's landscape poetry is novel, claiming that Xie always put himself in the intermediate existence between reclusion and advancement in official's career. I would suggest that it is better to situate Xie's poetry within the larger backgrounds of three traditional types of Chinese travel narrative, namely: traveling for freedom (as in *Zhuangzi*); traveling for self-improvement (as in Qu Yuan's poetry); and traveling in order to realize one's ambition (as in Confucianism).

This book provides close readings of many different genres of texts (poems, prose writings, Buddhist scriptures, travelogue, and so on). Particularly striking is Appendix 1, which supplies an English translation for Xie Lingyun's *Zhuanzheng fu* 撰征賦 (Fu on My Journey). Tian skilfully interprets the text with detailed commentary which broaden our understanding of Xie's situation in the turbulent period of 416–417. Tian's book is certainly to be welcomed by readers interested in Chinese travel literature.

