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## Transformative Journeys: Travel and Culture in Song China (review)

Stephen McDowall

China Review International, Volume 17, Number 3, 2010, pp. 387-390  
(Article)

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makes this book as valuable a reference as it is a reflection of the diversity and fascination of contemporary Chinese film studies.

Paul Clark

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Cong Ellen Zhang. *Transformative Journeys: Travel and Culture in Song China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. xvi, 304 pp. Hardcover \$49.00, ISBN 978-0-8248-3399-2.

Scholars have long considered the Song (960–1279) to have been a critical moment in the development of Chinese travel literature. James Hargett notes that it was “during this period that the travel record became a widely practiced form of literary expression.”<sup>1</sup> Richard Strassberg observes that by the end of the Song, “a number of influential texts had emerged to form a canon [of travel literature], while the important sites of literary pilgrimage had been mapped and inscribed.”<sup>2</sup> While we usually attribute this shift to the development of infrastructure and the expansion of the civil service, we have thus far tended to be rather vague about the precise details of this elaborate system. In *Transformative Journeys*, Cong Ellen Zhang seeks to bring the travel of Song scholar-officials (*shidafu* 士大夫), a new elite that emerged during this period (p. 4), into a much clearer focus, examining the role of the imperial government in mobilizing officials, the impact of travel on the identity and status of the travelers themselves, and the role of travel in the development of local history. She argues that “the Song state was instrumental in creating and maintaining an elite group of scholar-officials,” and that through travel, these men “strengthened their position as the country’s political, social, and cultural leaders” (pp. 3–4).

Zhang’s use of official sources is impressive. She draws extensively from the *Song huiyao* 宋會要 (Collected essential documents of the Song) and the *Qingyuan tiaofa shilei* 慶元條法事類 (Categorically arranged compendium of administrative law of the Qingyuan [1195–1200] period), two collections that document the large number of official edicts and policies that were issued to regulate travel during the Northern and Southern Song periods (across which she sees a high degree of continuity; p. 15). At least some of the regulations and processes she

discusses would have been in place already during the Tang (618–907), but here Zhang is able to take advantage of the greater number of Song sources available, the result of an expanding publishing industry, but also of the more focused efforts at systematic regulation made by the central government, particularly during the Northern period. By examining the regulations (even those that have not survived) such as the *Jiayou yiling* 嘉祐驛令 (Regulations on the use of courier stations during the Jiayou [1056–1063] reign), promulgated in 1059 and the first set of its kind issued by the central government (p. 103), Zhang is able to trace in some detail the development of official travel infrastructure over time. On the other hand, given the “inexhaustible” extant materials on Song elite travel (p. 14), it is a shame that for firsthand literati evidence she chooses to turn repeatedly to Lu You’s 陸游 (1125–1210) *Ru Shu ji* 入蜀記 (Record of a journey into Shu) and Fan Chengda’s 范成大 (1126–1193) *Wuchuan lu* 吳船錄 (Diary of a boat trip to Wu), two wonderfully readable travel accounts to be sure, but also the two with which we are already the most familiar.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, students and specialists alike will find chapters 2–5, in which Zhang meticulously examines the regulations, transport, lodging, porters, guards, paperwork, rituals, and receptions associated with official travel, to be a significant and original contribution both to travel studies and to Song studies more generally. There is real depth to Zhang’s examination of the practicalities involved in the movement of officials and the specific government offices involved. As well as official regulations, she draws on anecdotal writings such as Hong Mai’s 洪邁 (1123–1202) *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志 (Record of the listener), detailing the intricacies not only of the documents required by officials before they were able to travel, but also of how these documents were produced: the silk used was manufactured exclusively for government use, partly to prevent forgery, and the quality of each document depended on the rank of the official (p. 71). In chapter 6, Zhang highlights the enormous financial burden placed on local officials who increasingly felt obliged to stage lavish welcome receptions for important new arrivals. Contemporary sources suggest that over time, these entertainment costs “spiraled out of control,” which many interpreted as a sign of moral decline (p. 148).

Regrettably, the potentially engaging final fifty pages of the book, dealing with “sightseeing and site making” and “elite travel, famous sites, and local history,” are not quite as useful as Zhang’s previous chapters. She correctly notes that “the sites that attracted literati travelers had a vibrant human past, with which Song travelers passionately sought connection,” a significant shift from pre-Song writers who “were keen on meticulous description of the landscape and the expression of personal emotions” (pp. 154–155). Focusing on the “imaginary geography” of Huangzhou (Hubei), she discusses the spiritual communion that first Lu You and then Fan Chengda sought to establish with their famous predecessor Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1100) by visiting and writing about Red Cliff 赤壁 and East Slope 東坡, two

sites to which Su would come to be inextricably linked in the literati imagination (pp. 180–191). But this is hardly new ground, and it is doubtful that the observation that these cultural pilgrimages and subsequent efforts to maintain the Su Shi sites “enriched the local history of Huangzhou” (pp. 202–203) will do much to reconceptualize the field of travel literature studies.

In this context, too, the emphasis Zhang places throughout her study on the role of the central government begins to feel a little forced. It is certainly true that “the scholar-officials’ itineraries were determined by their court assignments” and that, while on official business, these men enjoyed “unmatched privileges granted by the state” (p. 7). But is the fact that scholar-officials took their orders from the court the reason they “lingered the longest and expressed the deepest emotional connections” at “sites of historical and cultural significance” (p. 8)? Did “famous places off the beaten path” (a slightly problematic concept in any case) really hold “special attraction for *official* tourists” (p. 157; my emphasis), or simply for the educated literati, who may also have been officials? Fan Chengda may have been returning from an official post, but it was no imperial edict that compelled him to climb Emeishan 峨嵋山 in 1177. Zhang argues that the travel privileges received by officials “effectively distinguished the civil servants from the other travelers, further burnishing the prestige of bureaucratic service,” and that this logistical support was a crucial component of elite self-identification (p. 110). While there is no doubt some truth to this, the “prestige of bureaucratic service” must have been far less important at these culturally significant sites, from which, Zhang tells us, non-elite travelers were “completely missing” (p. 8).

The system largely established by the Song government that enabled officials to travel to the farthest ends of its realm, if not with ease, then at least with relative efficiency, stands out as one of its most significant achievements, and one that laid the foundations of Chinese bureaucratic life for centuries to come. Indeed, from the vantage point of the early Qing, the erudite commentator Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) looked back to the decline, followed by the scaling down of the official courier system beginning in 1629, as the most significant factor in the collapse of the Ming empire.<sup>4</sup> What *Transformative Journeys* does well is to explain, in intricate detail, exactly how the Song state was able to make that system work. The minor criticisms I have voiced here should by no means detract from the significant contribution this book makes to our understanding of the period. It represents a very welcome addition to the study of travel literature, and to Song studies in general.

Stephen McDowall

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## NOTES

1. James M. Hargett, *On the Road in Twelfth Century China: The Travel Diaries of Fan Chengda (1126–1193)* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989), p. 44.
2. Richard E. Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes: Travel Writing from Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 56.
3. James Hargett has written extensively on Fan Chengda and his travel diaries. For the *Wuchuan lu*, see *Riding the River Home: A Complete and Annotated Translation of Fan Chengda's (1126–1193) Diary of a Boat Trip to Wu* (Wuchuan lu) (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008). For Lu You's diary, see Chun-shu Chang and Joan Smythe, *South China in the Twelfth Century: A Translation of Lu Yu's Travel Diaries, July 3–December 6, 1170* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1981), and Philip Watson trans., *Grand Canal, Great River: The Travel Diary of a Twelfth-Century Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2007). See also Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes*, pp. 205–218, for extracts from both diaries.
4. Gu Yanwu 顧炎武, *Rizhilu jishi* 日知錄集釋, ed. Huang Rucheng 黃汝成 (Shijiazhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 473–475.