

Introduction

THE RISE OF CHINESE TRAVEL WRITING

“Every traveler has a tale to tell.” This ubiquitous European expression not only testifies to the pervasiveness of travel writing in many cultures but also indicates the centrality of the journey in Western narrative. The major genres from the epic to the novel have been constructed around odysseys, pilgrimages, crusades, exiles, explorations, picaresque adventures, Grand Tours, quests, and conquests. A primary guide has been the teleology of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which provided ample myths for the Western traveler to view his journey as ordained by a higher power and potentially redemptive. The exodus of the Israelites to the Promised Land or the progress of saints from the suffering of a profane world to the bliss of Heaven allegorically endowed journeys with the possibility of material reward or salvation of the soul. Tragic wanderings and a profound sense of rootlessness could be interpreted as the consequences of Adam and Eve’s egress from paradise or a divine curse. At the same time, Eurocentrism in its many national and historical guises often conditioned Western writers to emphasize the strange “otherness” of the places they visited. Much Western travel writing can be read as an unconscious projection of native values onto other cultures, an exporting of repressed anxieties, or as a fantasy of the exotic. In attempting to come to terms with the difference of foreign places, these texts often reveal themselves to be mirrors of the writer’s own desires and illusions.¹

During the medieval and early Renaissance periods, travel accounts often represented exotic, marginal worlds as fearful zones of demons, infidels, heretics, and natural dangers. Such texts as *Wonders of the East* presented the “savagery” of distant places with hyperbole and often considerable imagination to satisfy the reader’s desire for *curiositas*.²

Given the limited extent of medieval traveling, the representations in these works were mostly accepted as valid even though largely unverified. Despite a general intention to convey what was actually witnessed, such writers usually avoided contradicting the authority of the canonical *auctores* back home who dominated writing by interpreting individual experience through classical and theological allegories.

It was the travel writing of the Age of Exploration that finally challenged and helped to undermine the medieval worldview. Following the earlier efforts of such traders as Marco Polo in his *Description of the World* (1298–1299), a host of accounts recorded vastly different cultures and landscapes unexplainable within the established categories of knowledge. Such anthologies as Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1589) contained many plausible and enthusiastic reports of ocean voyages that resulted in commercial profit.³ Owing to the increase in trade and colonization, these accounts could now be verified as readers demanded more factual, as opposed to allegorical, truth. Such texts not only encouraged four centuries of adventurous imperialism; they also liberated writers to become individual authors reporting on the unique meaning of their own experience in a variety of narrative forms resistant to traditional classification. As one contemporary critic points out, "Authors exploited the discontinuity between the things in the New World and the words in the ancient books to claim for their works an unprecedented cultural power to represent the new."⁴ The "savageness" of these territories revealed to perceptive writers hitherto unrecognized qualities within themselves, while the fashionable consumption of foreign things introduced a new degree of cultural relativism. Romantic Nature, antiquity, and the primitivism of other peoples were often used to frame unflattering assessments of the home culture. Many of the comparisons drawn between these different societies fueled the critique of sociopolitical institutions in Europe, generating support for the revolutionary changes of the past three centuries.⁵

The overlapping of this kind of journalistic reporting with the evolving novel further moved travel writing into the progressive mainstream of Western narrative. The flexible forms of letters, diaries, histories, and romances served both factual and fictional writers as well as those in between. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, popular works based on actual journeys, such as *The Travels of Mendes Pinto* (1614)⁶ and Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), frequently crossed over into fiction so that the writer might put forth liberal opinions about the broader cultural issues of the time. Novels that parodied travel accounts, such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Bougeant's *The Marvellous Voyage of Prince Fan-Férédin* (1735), and Vol-

taire's *Candide* (1759), employed common themes, character types, and plots.⁷

The Enlightenment's optimistic advocacy of individual consciousness was also advanced in a kind of travel writing that used autobiography and biography to explore the self. The affluent increasingly ventured forth on Grand Tours to educate their tastes, enhance their status, and pursue forbidden pleasures. They constituted the core of an ever-widening audience that consumed works about people much like themselves encountering distant places. Goethe's *Italian Journey* (1786), for example, conveyed through letters to friends back home in Weimar not only the writer's perceptive observations along the classical itinerary but also the subjective responses of a sensitive mind discovering itself undergoing change. In Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* (1785), the writer filtered many of his experiences of places, history, and society through his observations of the character of his English traveling companion, Dr. Johnson, for whom Scotland was a somewhat exotic location.

Thus, the mainstream of travel writing in the West developed as a means of facilitating the desires of writers and readers for a more liberated, autonomous existence. By defining altered selves in nontraditional accounts of other worlds, it played a role in critical phases of social and political emancipation at home. The twentieth century has witnessed an even greater proliferation of travel writing. Mass tourism has whetted the appetite of readers for more profound observations of places too briefly encountered, while exotic adventures continue to entertain. The paradigm of the journey has been often invoked to signify modern experience. The questioning of classical forms of representation has led to the breakdown of traditional structures of time and space to signify inner peregrinations of the psyche. Figurative language has been conceived of as a migration of meaning, and the act of theorizing as a product of displacement.⁸ Texts ranging from the high literary to film and advertising frequently signify reality as a transit through unstable states of being.

By contrast, the travel writing of Imperial China may seem far removed from the historical and intellectual foundations of the West, as remote in its forms and concerns as the land itself. The writers, like their original audience, were mostly degree-holding literati, usually officials and poets as well, whose public lives revolved around climbing up, slipping down, seeking entrée to, or rejecting entirely the ladder of bureaucratic success. In a country without a strong maritime or colonial tradition, their itineraries were primarily internal. Theoretically, they scorned the pursuit of commercial profit and also showed little

interest in foreign countries and non-Chinese ethnic groups. Within a cosmology without a purposeful Creator or strong philosophical interest in the concepts of truth and progress, the dominant Confucian ideology advocated the recovery of a ritualized moral order based on archetypes that were primarily cyclical and spatial. The literary forms of Chinese travel writing evolved out of a matrix where narrative was dominated by the impersonal style of official, historical biography, and subjective, autobiographical impulses were largely subsumed within lyric poetry. Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, journalism was nonexistent and the novel generally regarded as an entertaining diversion.

Chinese travel writing, like its Western counterpart, is voluminous and formally diverse, resisting simple classification. Western readers were first introduced in the late nineteenth century to translations of records by Buddhist monks of their pilgrimages to India and to an ancient chronicle of an imperial tour to the margins of the empire.⁹ In the years since then, there has been a tendency to focus on these and similar accounts of political missions to the periphery and beyond.¹⁰ Such texts tend to confirm ideas of Chinese travel writing as being much like our own. They chart difficult quests through alien lands by individuals who objectively report on awesome geographical features and ethnographic oddities.

The mainstream of travel writing, however, was concerned with travel in China itself, and was written by literati for a number of reasons in addition to an impersonal, documentary one. Although scattered antecedents exist in early Chinese literature, it was not until the mid-eighth century, about two-thirds of the way through Chinese literary history, that a set of conventions of representation in prose was codified in the lyric travel account (*yu-chi*), enabling writers to articulate fully the autobiographical, aesthetic, intellectual, and moral dimensions of their journeys in first-person narratives; and it was not until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that the travel account and the related travel diary (*jih-chi*) actually began to flourish.

In the traditional Chinese classification of literature, travel writing could be found in two principal categories in the Four Libraries (*Szu-pu*) system. Those works that primarily documented geographical features were classified under the geography (*ti-li*) subsection of the history (*shih*) category.¹¹ Shorter, more personal pieces such as travel accounts and travel diaries were usually included within the collected works of literati in the belles lettres (*chi*) category. These collections were generally published posthumously, and the outstanding ones were continually reprinted through the centuries. From the Sung dynasty on,

as Chinese prose became anthologized and individual pieces canonized as monuments, a number of travel accounts gained widespread prominence. In addition, travel writing was also disseminated through encyclopedias, local gazetteers, and guidebooks.¹²

A further form of transmission, one perhaps unique to Chinese travel writing, was accomplished by engraving texts at the original sites of their inspiration (see fig. 1). By incorporating a text into the environment, the traveler sought to participate enduringly in the totality of the scene. He perpetuated his momentary experience and hoped to gain literary immortality based on a deeply held conviction that through such inscriptions, future readers would come to know and appreciate the writer's authentic self. At the same time, the text altered the scene by shaping the perceptions of later travelers and guiding those who sought to follow in the footsteps of earlier talents. Often, local figures would request or commission such inscriptions by notable visi-

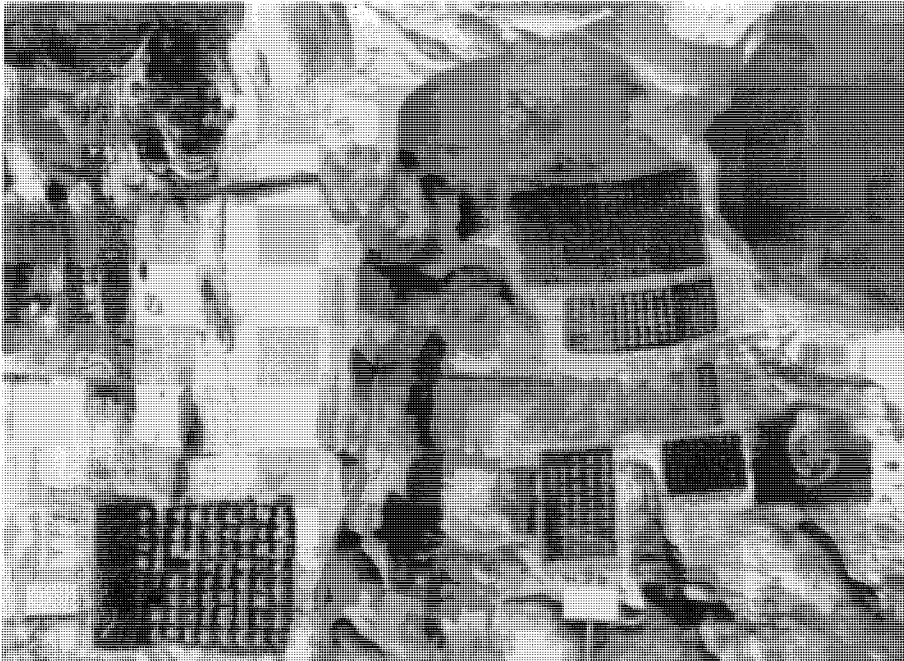


Fig. 1.
Inscriptions on a mountain in Kuei-lin,
Kuang-hsi. Photograph by the author.

tors to signify the importance of a place. Certain sites thus became virtual shrines in the literary culture, eliciting further inscriptions through the centuries. The Cave of the Three Travelers (San-yu-tung), first written about by Po Chü-i (772–846) in 819,* attracted another set of “Three Travelers” in the Sung, and was further inscribed by Lu Yu (1125–1210) in his *A Journey into Shu* (1170).¹³

For many travel writers, excursions to places that had accumulated a literary tradition were encounters in which Nature was inextricably linked with language and history. Sung Lien’s (1310–1381) piece *Bell Mountain* (1361),* for example, is a veritable peregrination through the past, as along his path he notes places associated with events and writers who had preceded him. In such cases, the experience of the inscribed landscape predominated over the encounter with pristine Nature so important to many Western travelers. So pervasive was this mode that several later connoisseurs of the landscape protested against the overinscription of a scene. Yüan Hung-tao (1568–1610) criticized the excessive number of engravings on the Mountain That Gathers the Clouds (Ch’i-yün-shan) as a contamination of the mountain’s spirit.¹⁴ Fang Pao’s (1668–1749) account of Geese Pond Mountain (1743)* praised the purity of this inaccessible spot by noting that no other travelers had yet been able to engrave inscriptions there. But to most writers, the presence of Chinese characters in a scene was not considered a violation of Nature by the artifice of civilization. According to some myths, writing was believed to have originated from the observation of natural processes or animal tracks by ancient sages and was thus regarded as contiguous with the environment. The ordering and enhancing of reality through the artful application of language stood at the heart of the Chinese concept of culture (*wen*); it was, indeed, a core function of the ruling class of literati-officials.

In addition to having a purely aesthetic function, this textualizing of the landscape often accompanied social, political, military, and economic development. It was one way a place became significant and was mapped onto an itinerary for other travelers. By applying the patterns of the classical language, writers symbolically claimed unknown or marginal places, transforming their “otherness” and bringing them within the Chinese world order.¹⁵

Such inscriptions could actually result in the physical alteration of the landscape as it was transformed into a shrine with commemorative

*Throughout the Introduction, an asterisk denotes a text that is included in this anthology.

pavilions, gardens, and other features often designed to recreate a writer's original description. Red Cliff in modern Huang-kang, Hu-pei, became such a site of pilgrimage in the centuries following Su Shih's (1037–1101) two influential pieces written in 1082.* Among the structures erected at the site were a sacrificial hall to honor the writer and a pavilion to house copies of his original calligraphy. Recently, a statue of Su Shih himself was erected, and in 1982 an academic conference was held at the site to discuss his travel writings. Similarly, although the original location of Wang Hsi-chih's (ca. 303–ca. 361) Orchid Pavilion, which he recorded in 353,* was in the intervening centuries forgotten, it was subsequently recreated outside modern Shao-hsing, Che-chiang, with a winding stream similar to the one Wang mentioned.¹⁶ Of course, it was not necessary literally to engrave one's text at the site: producing a widely read account was often sufficient to gain the writer inclusion in the *genius loci*.

Engraved inscriptions were not only read by later travelers to the site, but were also widely reproduced in rubbings sold as souvenirs. Later calligraphers, moreover, reinterpreted earlier versions or rewrote them in their own styles, further disseminating these texts.¹⁷ A number of texts gained enormous prestige through rubbings of engravings of the original calligraphed versions. Wang Hsi-chih's Preface to *Collected Poems from the Orchid Pavilion* (353)* was engraved many times and became the most influential model of the "running mode" of calligraphy, even though the original had long since disappeared (fig. 2). Likewise, one of Su Shih's handwritten versions of his first piece about Red Cliff* survived and has been revered through the centuries as a masterpiece;¹⁸ it, too, was widely reproduced in numerous engravings and reinterpretations (fig. 3). Both these texts also established enduring painting traditions as artists over the centuries created conventional formats based on the scenes described. Scholars in a boat beneath a cliff inevitably signified journeying to Red Cliff; poets seated along a winding stream with floating winecups was instantly recognized as the gathering at the Orchid Pavilion. These two sister arts were also combined, with the texts of travel accounts being appended to images depicting the scene. The Ming painter Shen Chou (1427–1509), for instance, added such a text to the end of his 1499 handscroll of Chang's Cave (Chang-kung-tung; fig. 45); and the Ch'ing artist Chin Nung (1687–1773) produced an album of twelve leaves in 1736 in which he illustrated scenes from famous travel accounts and inscribed the texts as colophons (figs. 20, 23). Lastly, both images and texts appeared in the decorative arts, applied to a wide range of objects; some of these motifs continue to be employed by Chinese artisans today.¹⁹

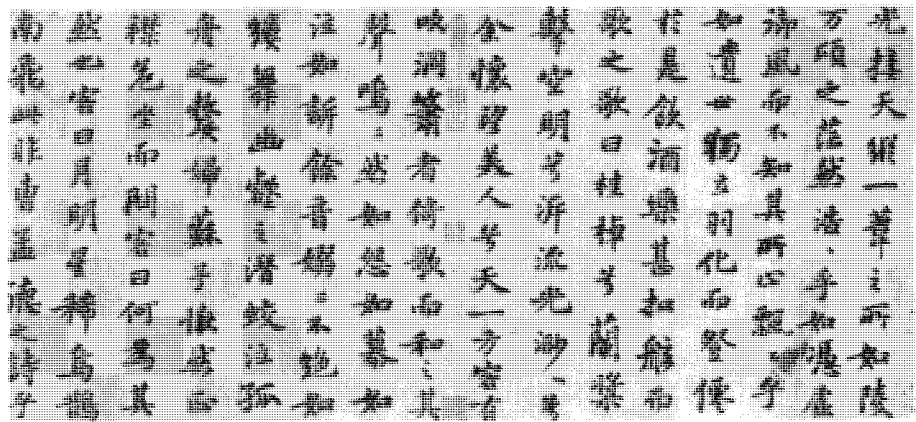
永嘉九年歲在癸丑暮春之初
于會稽山陰之蘭亭脩契事
也羣賢畢至少長咸集此地
有^{山陰}環嶺茂林脩竹又有清流激
湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水

Compared to Western travel narratives, however, travel writing was more marginal within the Chinese literary canon. The journey was less central mythically to Chinese cultural experience, which is noted for lacking a definitive epic account like the *Odyssey*, nor did it play a major role in the development of the Chinese novel. Monumental examples of the explorer's narrative, such as *The Travel Diaries of Hsü Hsia-k'o* (1613–1639),* stand out in the literary landscape like solitary peaks. Some of the most heroic journeys, including Cheng Ho's (1371–1435) seven voyages to South Asia and Africa in 1403–1431, yielded only secret official reports, which subsequently disappeared, and no literary accounts.²⁰ Despite the inclusion of a number of travel accounts in the early prose anthology *Finest Flowering of the Preserve of Letters* (*Wen-yüan ying-hua*, 987), in this and most other influential collections travel writing was generically subdivided and subordinated to other categories.²¹ When included in the collected works of individuals, travel writing formed but a minute portion; genres such as memorials to the throne, epitaphs, biographies, essays, letters, and prefaces were the ones usually looked to for serious stylistic and thematic statements. The earliest extant anthology exclusively devoted to travel accounts is a handwritten manuscript from the fourteenth century, which contains the table of contents from an earlier collection dated 1243; at least by then, apparently, travel writing had begun to be regarded, by some, as an independent genre.²² Although scattered critics during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties took note of the travel account, as late as the first half of this century the term *yu-chi* still had not appeared in the classical dictionaries *Tz'u-yüan* (1915) and *Tz'u-hai* (1938). It remained for modern Chinese anthologizers to argue for travel literature as a major prose genre in its own right and to reintroduce it to contemporary readers.²³

The traditional division of Chinese travel writing into history and belles lettres reflects a distinction between public, impersonal forms and more private modes that included the representation of the subjective self. This duality was further reinforced by the presence of two principle discourses in classical Chinese, which were combined in varying

Fig. 2.

Wang Hsi-chih (ca. 303–ca. 361), Preface to *Collected Poems from the Orchid Pavilion* (detail, original 353). From a rubbing of the *Ting-wu* series of engravings reproduced in *Shu-tao ch'üan-chi*, vol. 4: *Eastern Chin* (Taipei, 1976).



proportions within most texts. At one pole was the objective, moralizing perspective of historiography; at the other, a mode of expressive and aesthetic responses to the landscape derived from poetic genres that could be termed “lyrical.”

Historiography provided the earliest forms of narrative in China and continued to dominate most prose writing until the modern period.²⁴ Its primary function was to document human behavior in society within a framework of Confucian moral judgment, as a guide to readers involved in statecraft. The historian created an omniscient, third-person voice and a terse, unembellished style of prose. He typically defined the self from an exterior perspective, against a background of exemplary types enacting well-defined roles. Time in these accounts was conventionally represented by means of the recurrent cycles of Chinese chronology; space was charted along an axis emanating from the power center of the court to the margins of the provinces. As a writer, the historian was primarily a processor of information that he collected, evaluated, edited, and retold. He regarded himself as engaging in a self-effacing act of documentation, which allowed him effectively to transmit the meaning of events with the proper combination of factuality and literary embellishment. There was from the outset a

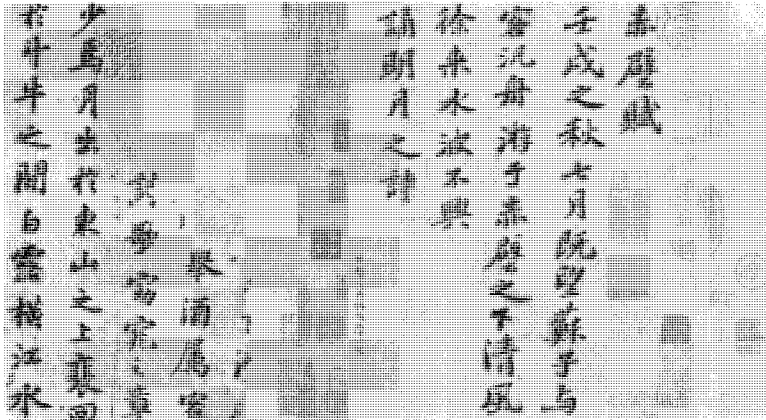


Fig. 3.
 Su Shih (1037–1101), *Red Cliff I* (detail from
 Su Shih's handwritten version). National Palace
 Museum, Taipei. The missing title and first
 four lines on the right were added later by the
 Ming artist Wen Cheng-ming (1470–1559).

close connection between historiographical discourse and state power, in that the office of the Grand Historian (*T'ai-shih*) was originally hereditary. The court's desire to dominate the writing of history was so intense that at times the private compilation of history was decreed to be illegal, with such acts, when discovered, even resulting in imprisonment. Thus, when a travel writer adopted the narrative persona of the historian, he was appropriating a potent form of literary authority. At the same time, because the conventions of historiography governed content, they tended to direct the writer's concerns toward the public values and issues of official, court-centered culture.

Historiographical conventions dominate almost exclusively in the few extant examples of early travel writing; they also constitute the primary discourse in works informational in nature, such as guidebooks, records of cities, and accounts of journeys to foreign lands. It was not until the period of disunity during the Six Dynasties that a complementary, lyrical discourse began to appear in prose, expressing what Yu-kung Kao has defined as the quintessential ideals of "self-containment" and "self-contentment" in Nature.²⁵ The rise of lyric *shih* poetry, the rejection of public life by many writers, and the search for alternate spheres of being such as transcendence in Nature supported

new, personal forms of literature apart from the political focus of the court. In contrast to historiography's paradigms of totality, Chinese lyricism sought to represent an alternate vision. The lyric poet, operating from a more interior ground of being than the historian, often captured his momentary experiences of self-realization in descriptions of landscapes. In an autobiographical act, he signified an identification of his inner feelings (*ch'ing*) with the sensual qualities of scenes (*ching*), using highly imagistic language that often obscured the distinction between observer and object. Similarly, he explored a more subjective sense of time by coordinating shifting perspectives to evoke a vision of the universal *Tao* as a process of endless transformation.

Lyric travel writing ultimately emerged as the most literary means of representing a journey. Its essential character was defined by the incorporation of individual poetic vision within a narrative framework derived from historiographical discourse. Thus lyric travel writers, whose works are the major focus of this anthology, wore the dual mask of historian and poet (in fact, they were often writers of biographies and poetry as well). They created sublime, self-centered worlds—marginal places universalized—as substitutes for the politicized dynastic scene with its unstable and unpredictable power center. Indeed, the lyric travel account grew out of the tension between the public and private aspects of the self experienced by exiled officials, such as Yüan Chieh (719–772) and Liu Tsung-yüan (773–819) of the T'ang. These men's achievement of one of the few genuinely autobiographical forms in Chinese prose was the watershed between a long period of development, when travel writing was dominated almost exclusively by historiographical concerns, and the later, mature phase of travel writing, which sought to inscribe the landscape with the perceptions of the self.

Early Chinese Travel Writing

Prior to the travel accounts and travel diaries of the T'ang and Sung, relatively few prose texts survive that are concerned with the representation of a journey. *The Book of Documents* (*Shu ching*, early-late Chou dynasty) contains mythicized descriptions of the ritualized tours of the ancient sage-king Shun:

In the second month of the year, he [Shun] made a tour of inspection to the east as far as Tai-tsung [i.e., T'ai-shan, the Supreme Mountain], where he made a burnt offering to Heaven and sacrificed to the mountains and

rivers according to their importance [fig. 8]. He received the eastern nobles in an audience and put their calendar in order, standardized the musical pitches and the measures of length and volume as well as the five kinds of rituals. He was presented with the five tokens of rank, three kinds of silk, two living animals and one dead one; he returned the five tokens of rank to the nobles. After finishing his tour, he returned to his capital. In the fifth month, he made a tour of inspection to the south as far as the Southern Sacred Mount, to which he sacrificed in the same manner as at Tai-tsung. Likewise, in the eighth month, he made a western tour of inspection as far as the Western Sacred Mount. In the eleventh month, he made a tour of inspection to the north as far as the Northern Sacred Mount, where he sacrificed as he had in the west. Upon his return to the capital, he went to the Temple of the Ancestor and offered up an ox.²⁶

This passage indicates the earliest reasons for writing about travel: to document heroic achievements in ordering the political, spiritual, and material dimensions of the world and to provide a guide for later rulers.

These public themes are paramount in the earliest extant travel narrative of any length, *The Chronicle of Mu, Son-of-Heaven* (*Mu T'ien-tzu chuan*), whose earliest strata have been dated around 400 B.C.²⁷ It tersely chronicles an imperial tour by Emperor Mu of the Chou (r. 1023–983 B.C.) through his realm—an example of what David Hawkes has called “itineraria,” that is, representations of ritual progresses, as well as of imaginary or supernatural quests.²⁸ The ritual progress in particular is a circuit by a powerful figure such as a king or wizard through the zones of a symmetrical cosmos. Each zone is presided over by a god or political figure who confirms the traveler’s authority or acknowledges submission in ritualized encounters (fig. 4). The traveler ultimately returns to the power center of the capital having thus demonstrated his control of totality.

The Chronicle of Mu reads like a record of the public activities of the emperor by a court historian:

On the day *chia-wu*, the Son-of-Heaven journeyed west. He crossed the hills of the Yü Pass.

On *chi-hai*, he arrived at the plains of Yen-chü and Yu-chih.

On *hsin-ch'ou*, the Son-of-Heaven journeyed north to the P'eng people. They are the descendants of Ho-tsung, Ancestor of the Yellow River. Duke Shu of P'eng met the Son-of-Heaven at Chih-chih. He presented ten leopard skins and twenty-six fine horses. The Son-of-Heaven commanded Ching-li to accept them.²⁹



Fig. 4.
Emperor Mu Meets the Queen Mother of the
West (rubbing from a Han dynasty engrav-
ing). From Ku Shih, *Mu T'ien-tzu chuan hsi-*

cheng chiang-shu (rpt. Taipei, 1976). This frag-
ment depicts the emperor riding in his chariot
with his attendants in the foreground.