Travel and Visiting One’s Homeland

Kuo-Ch’ing Tu

The concept of travel, generally speaking, denotes the act of leaving one’s daily residence to reside temporarily elsewhere, and implies distance and time. Travel as a way of life can be traced back to ancient times. Since antiquity there have been people who normally lived in a strange land, leading a wandering life from one place to another, such as nomadic tribes, mountain woodcutters, and boat people. However, as far as the history of human life in general is concerned, travel started only after an agricultural society was established and residential life became generalized. After cities were formed as centers of population, the flow of resources and construction projects made merchants and workers projects lead a mobile life from place to place. After political, religious, and social systems were established, official tours of inspection, post service from town to town, temple visits, religious mendicancy, military careers, the vagabond life of itinerant entertainers, all entailed one way or another a life given to movement. In China, visits by poets and literati to historic sites and scenic spots and the exile of punished officials to remote corners of the empire, while in the West, racial migration, colonization, overseas adventure, field investigation, pilgrimage to holy places, the crusades, etc., all caused people to leave home and inspired them to write, as is often seen in literary history East and West.

Although every traveler is different, the purpose of travel falls into two types: voluntary or compelled. The former is motivated by curiosity, adventure, and boredom, and includes visiting places of
scenic beauty, enlivening one’s life, preaching and traveling in pursuit of enlightenment, increasing knowledge, returning to one’s homeland, and overseas migration. The latter involves a duty or mission, including tours of inspection, understanding the feelings of the people, business trips or transfers to another post, apprehending criminals at large, war and expeditions, colonization and opening up of foreign trade, or has no alternative, such as war or famine forcing people to leave homes and taking refuge or exiling oneself in a foreign country because of political reasons. The life experience of these two situations of leaving one’s homeland and living in a foreign country differs greatly in respect to the traveler’s attitude. Travel out of one’s own choice carries hope, excitement, and satisfaction, while forced travel may make the winner complacent toward the consequences of conquest and plunder, and the loser and failures may have more disconsolate over the past than appreciative of the foreign land in its reality.

Travel includes going away and returning home. The observation and experience in a strange place after leaving one’s own homeland and the impact and reflection on one’s own life and culture after returning will set off an interactive stimulation and constitute the main content of travel literature. The travelogue in writing describes what a traveler has actually experienced and seen, and his observations and thoughts about the cities, mountains and rivers, places of historic interest and scenic beauty, commodities and antiquities, customs and character of the peoples encountered on the journey. Most travel writings are autobiographical and record the individual’s impressions and reflections. Travelers who record their impressions can be men and women of letters, historians, anthropologists, archeologists, sociologists, or linguists, and each accordingly sees things differently. A travelogue with literary qualities is generally called a travel book, which is a mode of travel literature. The content of a travel book, if it concerns a foreign country, can convey the author’s insight into the foreign culture besides the literary effect of intriguing descriptions of what the author actually experienced. Hence a travel book serves the double function of literature: for pleasure and knowledge, being both interesting and useful (dulce et utile). At the same time it can enhance comparative understanding between two cultures. For example, in the case of a Briton traveling to Greece or a Japanese to Mainland China, his travelogue with literary sensibility and insight based on his observations and impressions will make a valuable contribution to the study of “classical” influences on English literature and Hellenism, or to the understanding of Chinese culture and Sinology in Japan.

In Chinese literary tradition, xiaoshuo, which is generally used to translate the Western concept of “short story” or “novel,” is
supposed to write about “what one has heard on the way and the talk of 
the streets” or “the talk of the town and the gossip in the streets,” 
implying that *xiaoshuo* as a mode of literature is concerned with 
travelers’ tales. Among literary qualities, the most important ones 
should be the skill of verbal expression and creative imagination. 
Therefore travel literature does not concern only faithful recording of 
travel experience; it must be imbued with the author’s subjective 
opinions and imagination. Travel experience is “true” (shì) and 
concrete while the author’s opinions and imagination are “false” (xū) 
and abstract. Therefore travel literature certainly lies between true and 
false. How to treat a travel experience depends on the author’s attitude 
toward literature. Travel experience can be part of a plot in a story or 
an episode, or even only a motif or theme of a narrative structure. 
Sometimes the whole travel experience in a story can be all fiction 
because the author intends to be engaged with creative writing, not with 
a travel report. Fictional travel can incorporate various travel 
experiences, and the author’s attitude toward writing may shift from 
actual observation to social criticism, by describing a fictional journey 
or portraying an ideal paradise in such a way as to satirize some social 
reality. Among the fictional works of travel literature, Wu Cheng’en’s 
*Xiyouji* (The Journey to the West) of the seventeenth century in China 
and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) of the eighteenth 
century are the two masterpieces known to the world. In addition, there 
are all kinds of travel literature—allegory, prophecy, and science 
fiction—as well. If we take travel to be a kind of yearning in pursuit of 
the remote, the unknown, and the ideal “fair one,” then Qu Yuan (340?- 
278 B.C.) should be the originator of travel literature in Chinese 
history. “In the morning I left Cangwu and arrived at Xuanyuan in the 
evening . . . the road is long and endless, and I will search up and 
down.” The fundamental structure of his masterpiece, *Li sao* 
(Encountering Sorrow), can be seen as a mode of travel. In the 1990s, 
some scholars started to reconsider the meaning of travel. They 
mention it in the same breath with the boundary crossing diaspora and 
transnational circulation of capital as a sign of postmodern culture, and 
furthermore explore dialectically the form, scope, significance, and 
metaphor of travel from the perspectives of postcolonialism, 
postmodernism, and poststructuralism. However, what concerns us 
here is the concept of travel in a more general sense, in which travel 
literature refers to a work in literary form that expresses what a traveler 
has seen, felt, realized, reflected upon, and criticized as a result of 
being away from his or her homeland.

Although works describing or concerning travel have long 
existed together with literature itself, travel literature as a genre has
attracted scholarly attention only after the sixties. In 1961 and 1962 the English Institute at Columbia University held sessions on travel and discussed travelers and travel books that have extended knowledge, enlarged ideas, served as an index to culture, and contributed to imaginative literature. Professor Warner G. Rice, remarked in the “Introduction” that “many opportunities lie open for research in this field—a field which is very spacious indeed.” (“Introduction: Travellers and Travel Books.” Literature as a Mode of Travel. The New York Public Library, 1963). In 1992, Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel, edited by Professor Michael Kowalewski, was published, and it includes a section “Travel Writing Since 1900,” which contains 963 books in English published up to 1991 (including English translations from other languages, fiction excluded). Concerning criticism and studies in the history and culture of modern travel and tourism, it contains only sixty-three items, most of which were published after the eighties.

In Taiwan, publication of travel literature came to notice only at the end of the eighties. In 1987 martial law was lifted and so was the restriction on traveling to Hong Kong and Macao, and thus people in Taiwan were allowed to visit Mainland China for the first time. As the chance of going abroad increased, writings about travel have appeared in large amounts in literary supplements of newspapers, especially in recent years. In September of 1997, Chung-Wai Literary Monthly (No. 304) came out with a special issue on travel literature focusing on “Li yu fan de bianzhang: lüxing wenxue yu pinglun” (Dialectics of Leaving and Returning: Travel Literature and Criticism), which introduced theories and practices of travel literature abroad in response to the new trend in the literary circles of Taiwan. This year the first China Airlines Literary Award of Travel Literature was launched, attesting to the fact that travel literature is just unfolding. In 1998 Chinese Young Writers’ Association convened a small-size “Seminar on Travel Literature.” It had only seven papers presented, most of them concerning poetry, and included works of foreign writers, suggesting that the development of Taiwan literature in this respect is still lacking in critical studies. In May of 1999, Chung-Wai Literary Monthly (No. 324) published another issue on “Dialectics of Leaving and Returning” with the focus on feminism and travel. It introduced women’s travel writing in feminist criticism in the West, echoing the trend and criticism of travel literature that are now in the ascendant in Taiwan and worldwide.

Since the restriction of tourism was lifted and veteran mainlanders could return to visit their homeland, whether the scenic beauty of foreign countries or the mountains and rivers of one’s
motherland, whether of subjective impressions or objective observations, all of these writings are eye-opening and inspiring, able to arouse all sorts of feelings in a traveler’s mind. Furthermore, on the witness of his eyes and ears, the traveler will reflect by comparison upon his own life environment, social culture, and vicissitudes of life, which will inspire him or her to produce an interesting work. Travel experience can display the world vision of a writer and reflect a new visage of Taiwan literature in development. Therefore we made “Travel and Visiting One’s Homeland” as the theme of this issue. The works selected for this issue focus on travels to foreign countries and Mainland China and on thoughts of the mainlanders after returning to their homeland, but at the same time attention has been given to travels in Taiwan itself in the past and present. Nishikawa Mitsuru’s “Sairyūki” (The Sulfur Expedition) is based on a historical document describing the travel experience of an official, Yu Yonghe, of the Kangxi period (1662-1722), who was commissioned to go to Taiwan to collect sulfur. Pang Yujin’s treatise discusses Yu Yonghe’s travel experience to Taiwan and the affection for Taiwan revealed in Nishikawa’s fiction, which took the historical event of Yu Yonghe’s commission to collect sulfur as the background. He maintains that Nishikawa’s “Sulfur Expedition” occupies a very special page in the history of Taiwan literature. Among the travel writings that reflect Taiwan today, Chen Lie’s “Yushan qulai” (Morrison Mountain Journeys) describes the grandeur and beauty of the rugged nature of Taiwan with a rather masculine touch; the Chinese text exhibits a writing style of great vitality, which reverberates in the reader’s mind and is still kept in John Crespi’s translation, which deserves a special appreciation. As to short stories, Chen Ruoxi’s recent work, “Bizhu de jueze” (Bizhu’s Choice), reflects a social reality after a veteran mainlanders’s visit to his homeland. Huang Baolian’s “Chuzhong” (The Original Intent) describes the exoticism and romantic fantasy encountered by a Taiwanese traveling to Paris, and the reader cannot help smiling after reading it. Professor Howard Goldblatt’s superb translation is true to form. The poet Li K’uei-hsien has traveled to many countries in Asia and Europe, and, limited by space, we could only select three of his poems. Wujiang Nianwuhasheng is a pen name used by Huang Kequan, who has a special concern for the mainlanders in Taiwan. We selected an essay of his, “Lao yuzai, wo wei ni xiexia” (Old Mainlander, for You I Write) in the fifth issue, published in June 1999. Ms. Zhang Rang’s “Lüren de yanjing” (Eyes of the Traveler) expresses views and comments on travel similar to those by writers East and West, and we asked Professor William Lyell of Stanford University to translate it as his first piece of work after
retirement. His excellent rendition has proved the Chinese dictum, the older the ginger the more pungent its flavor. In addition, Professor Timothy Wong of Arizona State University, Professor Robert Smitheram of Middlebury College, Professor Cynthia L. Chennault of the University of Florida, Professor Sylvia Li-chun Lin of the University of Colorado at Boulder, Professor Christopher Lupke of Bowdoin College in Maine all lent us their hands for translation, forming a strong lineup of translation for this issue of the journal. The two stories by Chen Ruoxi and Huang Baolian, recommended by Professor Jack Jenn-Shann Lin of the University of Alberta, and the poems by Wujianf Nianwuhuasheng, recommended by Professor Xu Junya of National Taiwan Normal University, have greatly enriched the content of this issue. Consent to translation from all the authors has made publication of this issue possible and is greatly appreciated.

Finally, Nishikawa’s story, “The Sulfur Expedition,” is comprised of three chapters, and, owing to the limitation of space, we could publish only Chapter One, leaving it to be continued. For the same reason, we are forced to omit the “Updated Bibliography of English Translation of Contemporary Taiwan Literature” in this issue. We apologize for any inconvenience these alterations may have caused.