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Gaze and Dialogue: An Imagological Study of Transcultural Travel Narratives of Xinjiang—From Sven Hedin to Shen Wei's Dual Writings

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Abstract. Transcultural travel narrative is an important practice for constructing regional images and promoting dialogue among civilizations. From the perspective of transcultural imagology, this paper compares the narratives of Xinjiang in Swedish explorer Sven Hedin's Travels in the Heart of Asia and Zhejiang poet Shen Wei's Notes on the Western Regions. Hedin gazes at Xinjiang as an explorer and geographer, and solidifies Xinjiang as an object to be observed within the framework of subject-object dualism. Shen Wei, relying on his settlement experience and "deterritorialized regional writing", moves towards dialogic narrative, making Xinjiang a cultural subject that can communicate equally with the outside world. The comparison between the two modes reveals the shift of travel writing from "gaze" to "dialogue", and provides ideological resources for constructing transcultural narratives of Xinjiang and China's image.

Keywords: Transcultural narrative, Xinjiang image, travel writing, gaze, dialogism

1. Introduction

From Odysseus' homeward journey in *The Odyssey* to the elaboration of oriental wonders in *The Travels of Marco Polo*, travelers not only record exotic scenery in their spatial movement, but also complete the construction of the relationship between self and other in their writing. Travel narrative has always been at the boundary between fact and fiction, self and other, documentary and imagination. It is both a record of personal experience and a field for the generation of cultural imagination. Against the policy background of "strengthening the capacity for international communication" and "telling China's stories well", travel writing, as a narrative mode integrating documentary and literary nature, personal experience and public communication, provides a unique perspective for exploring how transcultural narratives promote mutual learning among civilizations.

In the theoretical vision of transcultural imagology, such narratives are never value-neutral. Following the theoretical approaches of Said and Foucault, Zhou Ning points out that Western representations of the East have created the so-called image of the East, and the East presents itself within this established discourse system. This means that the East presented in travel writing is often not the East itself, but an "Orient" created by Western culture, a "construct" that exists as the "other" of Western culture. However, in his later reflections, Zhou Ning further points out that transcultural

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imagology faces a "dilemma of problems and methods": merely deconstructing Western narratives about China is not equivalent to reconstructing the subject of Chinese thought, because "the subject of thought is set by the structure of thought. If there is no 'thought', how can we talk about the 'subject' of thought [1]?" This warning reminds us that while criticizing "gaze", we need to explore constructive paths of dialogue more. Lin Xi summarizes this tension as the "two faces" of transcultural imagology: critical deconstruction and constructive reconstruction, and advocates transcending the binary opposition of either-or with "sympathetic understanding" [2].

As a key node of the Silk Road, Xinjiang has always been the place where the eyes of Eastern and Western travelers meet. From Marco Polo to Sven Hedin, and then to contemporary scholars and writers, Xinjiang presents quite different images in the narratives of different cultural subjects. However, it is worth noting that a new narrative possibility has emerged in recent years. Writers represented by Shen Wei, with the subject identity of settlers, cross-genre writing strategies and profound local experience, have provided a transcultural narrative practice different from the "gaze" of Western travelers. Can this narrative transcend the stereotype of Orientalism? Does it mean the possibility of a genuine cultural dialogue? Centering on Sven Hedin's *Travels in the Heart of Asia* and Shen Wei's prose collection *Notes on the Western Regions*, this paper analyzes the different strategies and cultural and political implications of the two narrative modes in the construction of Xinjiang's image from the dual perspectives of gaze and dialogue. Hedin's travelogue represents the typical observational writing of the Western age of exploration, while Shen Wei's prose represents a dialogic writing based on local experience. Through the comparison of the two writings, this paper attempts to outline the possible transformation path of Xinjiang's image in transcultural narratives from "the object being observed" to "the self that can speak".

2. The limits of gaze: observational writing in *Travels in the Heart of Asia*

Sven Hedin (1865-1952) was one of the most famous Central Asian explorers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His *Travels in the Heart of Asia* records major geographical discoveries including the first scientific survey of Lop Nur and the discovery of the ancient city of Loulan. From 1899 to 1902, he completed his fourth Asian expedition, traveling more than 6,000 miles. Hedin's writing represents the typical knowledge production mode of the Western age of exploration. As a geographer, he accurately recorded the geographical features, climate characteristics and ecological environment of the Silk Road, providing the world with a large number of first-hand materials about the hinterland of Asia. However, Hedin's observational writing has inherent limitations in the cultural dimension. This writing is based on a subject-other binary framework, where the traveler is the subject of observation, and the land, people and culture of Xinjiang are the objects to be observed and described. In this framework, Xinjiang as a cultural entity is incorporated into the classification and naming of the Western knowledge system. It is measured, recorded and mapped, but rarely has the opportunity to speak in its own voice.

2.1. The structure of gaze: internal focalization and the mechanism of othering

Genette distinguishes three modes of focalization: zero focalization (the narrator is omniscient and knows all the thoughts and actions of the characters), internal focalization (the narrator's vision is limited to what a certain character knows and feels), and external focalization (the narrator only records visible external behaviors and does not enter anyone's inner world) [3]. Hedin adopts a strict first-person internal focalization narrative, with "I" as the center throughout the text. "I saw", "I felt" and "I decided" constitute the main narrative trunk. Readers form a strong identification with the

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narrator, stand behind Hedin, and discover the "unknown" region with him. However, for the behaviors of local people, Hedin often presents them in an external focalization way: "They knelt on the ground, facing west, muttering something". He only records external actions without explaining their meanings, making the behaviors of local people seem mysterious and incomprehensible. If Hedin were willing to ask and present the explanations of local people, these behaviors would gain meaning, but the narrative chooses to retain the mystery. This choice itself is an operation of othering, constructing local people as beings that cannot be rationally understood. Examined from the perspective of postcolonial theory, this "gaze" structure is not Hedin's personal prejudice, but a shared narrative convention of colonial travel writing.

2.2. Spatial construction: heterogeneous space and "traversable" Xinjiang

Narrative studies of space focus on how texts construct the meaning of space through description, perspective and movement paths. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau distinguishes between "place" (a stable and ordered space) and "space" (a place occupied by practice and traversed by movement). Travel is a typical practice that transforms "place" into "space" [4]. In Hedin's writing, Xinjiang is constructed as a space with strong heterogeneity, an object waiting to be traversed. The narrator's movement has clear direction and purpose, never repeating routes and constantly advancing to new regions. This movement mode constructs space as "an object for exploration" rather than "a place for habitation". Hedin's spatial coding centered on "danger" forms a sharp contrast with the spatial imagination of Xinjiang held by Chinese people at the same time: according to Cheng Xiangli's investigation, Chinese travelogues in the early 20th century focused on presenting Xinjiang as an "image of a treasure house of resources", and later shifted to the positioning of a "strategic important place". If Xinjiang in Hedin's eyes is a heterogeneous space that needs to be "traversed", then Xinjiang in Chinese people's writing is a homogeneous resource space that needs to be "utilized". Both together obscure the ontological meaning of Xinjiang as a "homeland" [5].

2.3. Character portrayal: functional characters and narrative ethics

In Hedin's travelogue, local people belong to "functional characters": guides are responsible for leading the way, translators for communication, and porters for transportation. Once their functions are completed, the characters disappear from the narrative. They have no independent inner world and no traceable personal history. From the perspective of narrative ethics, this involves a deep-seated problem: who has the right to become the subject of narrative? When the character function of local people is limited to "helping the expedition complete the task", they have no value to be told independently in the narrative. Choosing how to portray the other is itself an ethical act, which determines whose stories are told, how they are told, and for whom they are told.

This gaze is not Hedin's personal choice, but a structural product of the entire Western colonial and exploratory era. The problem of the "Oriental other" is essentially an issue of imperialism and colonialism. The West used this concept to carry out its colonial practices worldwide and dress them in a legitimate cloak. However, it should be prudent that Zhou Ning reminded us in his earlier research that there are "two kinds of Orientalism" in Western cultural tradition: one is the negative and ideological Orientalism, which constructs the image of an inferior, passive and degenerate East to serve imperialist hegemony; the other is the positive and utopian Orientalism, which idealizes the East as a paradise of happiness and wisdom and becomes an ideological resource for Western self-criticism and transcendence [6]. Hedin's writing is obviously closer to the former. Although it does

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not directly serve colonial rule, it participated in constructing an imagination of Xinjiang among Western readers, that is, a mysterious hinterland of Asia waiting to be discovered and written about. In this process, the image of Xinjiang is solidified as an object being gazed at, rather than a subject that can respond to travelers. Although his scientific spirit is worthy of respect, his narrative structure still solidifies Xinjiang as an object to be observed. It is this complexity that makes it necessary for us to carefully examine the limits of observational writing: even in the most well-intentioned travel narratives, the structure of "gaze" may obscure equal cultural dialogue.

3. The possibility of dialogue: Shen Wei's transcultural narrative practice in *Notes on the Western Regions*

If Hedin's writing represents the "othering gaze" of Western travelers towards Xinjiang, then Shen Wei's *Notes on the Western Regions* provides a completely different narrative mode. Shen Wei was born in Huzhou, Zhejiang in 1965. After graduating from university, he traveled west alone and settled and worked in Xinjiang for 30 years, then returned to Zhejiang. This two-way migration experience from the south of the Yangtze River to the Western Regions and then looking back at the south of the Yangtze River from the Western Regions has given him a unique cultural position. He is neither a "native" Xinjiang person nor a passing tourist, but a "quasi-local" who has taken root in a foreign land for 30 years, and Xinjiang culture has been infused into his blood.

3.1. Narrative position: the transformation from "traveler" to "settler"

Hedin is a typical "traveler", and Xinjiang is only a chapter in his life resume. Shen Wei is a "settler", with a fixed residence and a daily rhythm of life day after day. This identity as a resident gives his narrative dimensions that traveler narratives do not have: the continuity of time, the interweaving of relationships, and the depth of emotion. Shen Wei once said that he "listens to the teachings of foreign lands and pays tribute to the diverse civilizations of Xinjiang". This humble attitude forms a fundamental contrast with Hedin's "explorer authority". Hedin's narrative starts with "what I discovered", while Shen Wei's narrative starts with "what touched me"; Hedin regards Xinjiang as an object to be conquered, while Shen Wei regards Xinjiang as a subject to be learned from and listened to. Some critics define Shen Wei's writing as "hybrid writing"—he stands at the junction of two cultural worlds, both a narrator and a listener, which is precisely the prerequisite for "dialogue" to occur.

3.2. Narrative strategy: material culture as a medium of dialogue

Shen Wei's narrative strategy focuses on the most ordinary daily things. Existing studies have incisively pointed out that he "tries to write from the most ordinary daily material life and regional scenery, and looks at 'big' history through a 'small' caliber" [7]. In *Notes on the Western Regions*, the most representative embodiment of this strategy is the two imported spices that run through the whole book: fennel and the fragrance of Elaeagnus angustifolia flowers. Fennel in Kashgar has changed from a ritual necessity to a daily necessity, and for the first time has become the foundation and center of the city as a protagonist rather than a supporting role; while the fragrance of Elaeagnus angustifolia flowers has generated more vital creation in the interaction between literary imagination, historical memory and real society.

It is worth noting that spices, plants and smells are the writing objects chosen by Shen Wei. Smells cannot be collected, but can only be shared in experience; spices cannot stay on paper, but

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can only be tasted in life. By focusing on these flowing and shareable sensory experiences, Shen Wei transforms Xinjiang from an object space being gazed at into a perceptual field with temperature and breath.

3.3. Stylistic form: cross-genre writing and polyphonic presentation

Shen Wei's writing has significant cross-genre characteristics. From *Xinjiang Dictionary* to *Notes on the Western Regions* and then to *Hinterland of Asia: 111 Words*, he integrates essays, prose poems, field investigations, micro-novels and other genres into one. The dictionary style with entries as units constitutes an "open narrative", where readers can enter from any entry and "assemble" the picture of Xinjiang according to their own interests. Hedin's linear narrative is a "closed narrative", where the narrator has full control over the narrative rhythm; while Shen Wei's dictionary style dissolves narrative authority and invites readers to participate in the generation of meaning.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin proposed that a true polyphonic novel is not the author's monologue with a single voice, but allows different characters to have independent and incompatible conscious worlds, which unfold in dialogue with each other. Cross-genre writing creates "polyphony" within the text [8]. Shen Wei's dictionary-style writing is precisely the practice of this dialogic transcultural narrative: the lyrical voice of poetry, the empirical voice of field investigation, and the narrative voice of micro-novels coexist and interweave in the same text, and no voice occupies an absolute authoritative position. This mix of styles is not a formal game, but a metaphor for the content itself: Xinjiang itself is a community of multiple ethnic groups, multiple cultures and multiple voices. Shen Wei does not try to "represent" these voices, but provides a textual space where they can coexist and listen to each other.

3.4. Narrative ethics: "deterritorialized regional writing" as an advanced form of dialogue

Shen Wei explicitly opposes the label of "regional writing", believing that "regionality should only be the foothold of creation, not a closed cage". He proposes "deterritorialized regional writing": on the one hand, he admits that the roots of his works are deeply rooted in the soil of Xinjiang; on the other hand, he pursues to elevate these specific local experiences into universal humanistic care and cultural insights.

From the perspective of transcultural narrative, this strategy transcends the binary opposition common in the criticism of "Orientalism". The fundamental problem of Hedin-style writing is that the narrator always judges the value of Xinjiang with an "external frame of reference". Shen Wei's "deterritorialization" means abandoning this external frame of reference. Xinjiang is narrated in its own way, and its value does not depend on comparison with any external standard. Shen Wei writes from a "semi-internal" perspective obtained after long-term residence as an "outsider". Writing from this perspective is not to "speak for" Xinjiang, but to "speak with" Xinjiang. When he writes about the history of spices, he is in dialogue with the people who used these spices in history; when he writes about karez wells, he is in dialogue with the craftsmen who dug these underground channels. The ethics of dialogue is precisely based on the recognition of the source of knowledge and the respect for the learning process.

Shen Wei not only "writes" about Xinjiang, but also "lives" in Xinjiang. When the writer is no longer a passing traveler, but a person who is willing to commit himself to a foreign land and let the foreign land shape him in turn, writing can move from the one-way "I see" to the two-way "we meet". Shen Wei himself once humbly stated that his thirty years in Xinjiang were a continuous learning process. In Shen Wei's narrative, knowledge is a gift to "me" and a shared heritage

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belonging to "us". The ethics of dialogue is precisely based on the recognition of the source of knowledge and the respect for the learning process. The contrast between the two narrative modes of Sven Hedin and Shen Wei is a microcosm of transcultural travel writing moving from "one-way observation" to "two-way dialogue".

4. The construction of dialogic narrative: characteristics, motivations and challenges

Through the comparison between Hedin and Shen Wei, we can initially outline the basic characteristics of dialogic narrative in a transcultural context. Different from observational writing, dialogic narrative does not regard foreign cultures merely as objects to be investigated and described, but tries to reserve a space for the "other" to speak in the writing, making the narrative itself a two-way communication and response. This does not mean that dialogic narrative will eliminate differences. On the contrary, it recognizes the existence of differences, but regards differences as the starting point of dialogue rather than the end of distance.

4.1. Basic characteristics of dialogic narrative

Comprehensively comparing the writings of Hedin and Shen Wei, dialogic narrative can be summarized into four core characteristics:

First, polyphonic presentation. In observational narratives, local people are usually paraphrased by the narrator, and their discursive space is compressed. Dialogic narrative allows local people to have independent narrative voices, and the narrator cedes part of the focalization right. The text shifts from "telling about the other" to "co-narrating with the other".

Second, reflective consciousness. The narrator of observational narrative often appears in an "omniscient" posture, and his judgments are presented as objective facts. Dialogic narrative requires the narrator to show awareness of his own cognitive limitations, admit "I don't know" or "maybe I misunderstood", and separate the narrative subject from the experiential subject to gain a critical distance.

Third, process presentation. Observational narrative reserves "scenes" for dramatic moments. Dialogic narrative does the opposite: the object of scenarization shifts from "crisis" to "the process of encounter itself", and presents the complete trajectory from initial acquaintance, temptation and misunderstanding to reaching common knowledge in detail.

Fourth, daily life presentation. Observational narrative tends to use a large number of "pauses" to create an exotic atmosphere, constructing Xinjiang as a mysterious space opposed to the civilized world. Dialogic narrative embeds cultural differences into specific scenes of daily life: a cup of tea, a musical instrument, a trip to the market—culture is no longer a "wonder" that needs to be explained, but an experiential detail of life.

4.2. Why dialogic narrative is possible: three motivations

From Shen Wei's creative experience, three motivations for the generation of dialogic narrative can be summarized.

First, the transformation of the writer's subject identity. Hedin is a "traveler", while Shen Wei is a "settler". The former gains impressions through short-term traversal, while the latter accumulates experience through long-term immersion. Thirty years not only means familiarity with the scenery of Xinjiang, but also a profound transformation of cultural identity: Shen Wei has built a foreign

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land into his spiritual hometown. This identity transformation enables him to write about Xinjiang from the perspective of a "local" rather than an "intruder".

Second, the conscious choice of writing methods. Shen Wei's cross-genre writing, which integrates essays, prose poems, field investigations, micro-novels and other genres into one, is itself a practice of "hybrid writing". From *Xinjiang Dictionary* to *Notes on the Western Regions* and then to *Hinterland of Asia: 111 Words*, he has always been looking for a writing form that can accommodate the richness and diversity of Xinjiang. This formal hybridity dissolves the single narrative authority and creates a structural space for polyphonic dialogue.

Third, the interweaving of multiple narrative perspectives. Shen Wei skillfully integrates three perspectives: natural history, ethnography and private narrative, seeking a balance between knowledge, culture and individuality. This polyphony of perspectives makes the narrative no longer a monologue of a single subject, but a convergence of multiple voices.

4.3. Challenges and limits of dialogic narrative

Of course, we need to carefully ask: what challenges does dialogic narrative face in practice? Can dialogue in transcultural narratives be reduced to another form of "self-projection"? In recent years, travel literature studies have introduced the resonance theory of German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, proposing that travel writing is essentially a "resonance experience", and the construction of resonance space in narratives helps to promote cultural dialogue. But studies also show that it is difficult for travelers' subjective resonance experiences to be conveyed to readers unless the narrator adopts specific fictional techniques. This means that the construction of dialogic narrative requires not only a sincere cultural attitude, but also superb narrative skills. This dilemma forms an interesting contrast with the methodological dilemma of transcultural imagology itself. Zhou Ning once warned that if there is only postcolonial deconstructive criticism and no constructive ideological ability, transcultural research may fall into the dilemma of "a subject without thought" or "thought without a subject". The reason why Shen Wei's writing can avoid the risk of "projection" lies precisely in his solid sorting of historical materials about the Western Regions, his serious investment in field investigations and his patient observation of daily life. Knowledge, experience and empathy are indispensable. This "sympathetic understanding" is not simple empathy, but is based on the recognition of the source of knowledge, respect for the learning process and awareness of one's own limitations.

5. Conclusion

From Sven Hedin's *Travels in the Heart of Asia* to Shen Wei's *Notes on the Western Regions*, the transcultural narrative of Xinjiang has gone through a long road from "gaze" to "dialogue". Hedin's observational writing has attracted countless readers with its geographical accuracy and adventure thrills, and has made an indelible contribution to the world's understanding of the hinterland of Asia. However, this writing is destined to be centered on the traveler's gaze, and Xinjiang has always been an object to be observed, measured and written about in it. Shen Wei's writing represents another possibility. When the writer is no longer a passing traveler, but chooses to intertwine his life with Xinjiang, transcultural narrative may transcend the subject-other binary structure and move towards genuine encounter and dialogue. Against the background that Western discourse continues to construct negative images of Xinjiang, the cracking of "other narratives" and the reshaping of "self-narratives" have become urgent issues to be solved. Studies in transcultural imagology have shown that mere deconstruction is not enough to reconstruct the subjectivity of Chinese thought; while

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Shen Wei's "deterritorialized regional writing" provides a possible constructive path. He reminds us that a true, three-dimensional image of Xinjiang that can dialogue equally with the world may not come from the positive propaganda of grand narratives, but from the detailed depiction of "big" history through a "small" caliber, and from the sincere writing of daily scenery, sensory experiences and local lives. This kind of writing does not avoid differences, nor does it try to smooth them out, but seeks the possibility of coexistence on the premise of recognizing differences.

In the new era and new journey, transcultural travel narratives should be based on the overall strategic situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, adhere to the people-centered orientation of creation and communication, and respect the cultural subjectivity of all ethnic groups. With an equal, respectful, open and inclusive dialogue attitude, we should use multiple carriers such as words, images and new media to vividly show the true picture of Xinjiang with social stability, economic development, ethnic unity, cultural prosperity, good ecology and happy people. Let travel writing become an emotional bond and cultural bridge connecting inside and outside Xinjiang and communicating China and foreign countries, so that the world can understand Xinjiang, China and Chinese civilization through vivid narratives. While promoting Chinese culture to the world and enhancing the people-to-people bonds among peoples of all countries, we will further contribute Chinese wisdom and Chinese narratives to global cultural exchanges and mutual learning, seek coexistence in differences, and learn to coexist in encounters.

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