

The Transformation of Traditional Literati Spirit Reflected in Liang Qichao's Impressions of a European Journey

Yizhou Zhang

*College of Humanities and Education, Wuhu University, Wuhu, China
1578837255@qq.com*

Abstract. The interaction between Chinese and Western civilizations and the change of social systems in modern China have caused structural changes in the spirit of traditional literati. Modern overseas travel literature serves as an important medium to record the ideological transformation of scholar-officials. After World War I exposed the fundamental defects of Western civilization, under the background that discussions about Chinese and Western cultures were opposed in China, Liang Qichao wrote his travelogue "Impressions of a European Journey" based on personal visits to Europe, departing from the narrow scope of theoretical discussion. By using three research methods - literature review, close textual analysis and verification of historical records with texts - this paper takes "Impressions of a European Journey" as the main case and studies it from three aspects: national responsibility, cultural attitude and statecraft practices. The research indicates that the travel diary reflects three significant transformations in the spirit of scholar-officials: the focus of national concern changed from supporting the monarch to saving the country and its people; the cultural views shifted from a Chinese-centred perspective to mutual learning between China and Western countries; and the way of statecraft moved from empty scholarly discourse to practical investigations abroad. This spiritual innovation realizes the modernization of the traditional Confucian spirit and redefines the ideological core of modern travel literature. Not only does it show the process of traditional literati transforming into modern intellectuals, but it also forms a new writing pattern for subsequent overseas travelogues.

Keywords: Modern Travel Literature, Spirit of Traditional Literati, Liang Qichao, Impressions of a European Journey

1. Introduction

Ancient Chinese travel writings grew and changed along with the traditional literati spirit. By means of official journeys and reclusive wanderings, ancient scholar-officials portrayed scenery, with the Confucian core of self-cultivation and state governance permeating the depths of their writings. In the classical Chinese system, literati depended on royal authority, considered Chinese civilization as the peak of world culture and achieved statecraft through classical learning and official positions, resulting in a stable spiritual flow prevailing in Chinese literature for many centuries.

In the latter part of the Qing Dynasty, China became exposed to foreign contacts, the imperial examination system was terminated, the monarchy vanished, and Western learning gradually spread to the east. A great number of scholars went abroad for investigation and observation. The clash between overseas experiences and their own awareness caused not only the surface of their life to change but also the declining Confucian and Taoist doctrines underneath [1]. Therefore, innovative literary works appeared. Differing from the previous travel essays, which mainly described picturesque scenery and moral teachings, the modern overseas travel literature focused on records and reflections on different civilizations as its main themes.

Current academic investigations mainly focus on Liang Qichao's cultural views or prose styles individually, but few studies center on travelogue texts to analyze the transformation of literati spirit from the perspective of the developmental history in modern travel literature. As an important representative of the change from traditional scholars to modern thinkers, Liang Qichao's *Impressions of a European Journey* was written during a particular historical period: the disappointment with Western civilization after World War I and the intense discussions at home about Chinese and Western cultures. It represents a typical example for analyzing the ideological shifts of modern scholars. Considering the existing research gaps and the academic significance of this issue, this paper combines the classification of literature, close textual reading, and mutual verification of history and texts to investigate the spiritual transformations presented in the travelogues from three aspects: national responsibility, cultural stance, and statecraft practice. It also categorizes the concrete context of the ideological transformation of modern scholars and adds some new materials to the intellectual history of modern travel literature, hoping to offer modest contributions to the studies of modern and contemporary travel writings.

2. Definition of core concepts and the historical context of creation

2.1. Concept definition: modern travel literature and the spirit of traditional literati

Chinese travel literature originated from the travels of ancient scholars and officials, evolving from landscape poems to landscape essays and finally to travel notes with the increase of literary tours [2]. In modern China, travel literature developed during the late Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic, which can be classified into two types: domestic travel writings and foreign travel writings. Compared with ancient travel literature, there has been a comprehensive modernization in its creators, geographical fields and purposes of writing: the authors changed from examinees to new intellectuals versed in both Chinese and Western learning; its narrative spaces went beyond the boundaries of China; and their creative intentions shifted from personal emotional expression to national enlightenment and institutional reflection.

Based on Confucianism, the positive ideological implications of the traditional literati's spirit can be condensed into four principles: firstly, "serving the Dao while serving the monarch"; secondly, "to care about the country and the people, and to shoulder the responsibility for all under heaven"; thirdly, "to cultivate one's own virtue in difficult times, and to bring about universal peace in prosperous times"; fourthly, "to maintain integrity and upright government" [3]. However, from a modern viewpoint, this ancient spiritual system has some obvious shortcomings: its ethical framework of nationhood is restricted to autocratic monarchy, regarding patriotism as serving the emperor; its cultural concepts follow the division between Hua (Chinese) and Yi (barbarians), emphasizing the superiority of Chinese civilization; its statecraft practice are limited to theoretical study and domestic officialdom, lacking cross-regional empirical investigations. Amid drastic

modern social upheaval, this spiritual system, which has existed for more than two thousand years, ushered in an opportunity for transformation.

2.2. Liang Qichao's identity transition as a literatus

Liang Qichao received orthodox Confucian education from childhood and passed the Provincial Examination when he was sixteen, thus becoming a typical old Chinese scholar-official. After the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform, he was exiled to Japan, where he read extensively both Japanese books and the translated Western works using the "Sino-Japanese reading method". He absorbed various Japanese doctrines and a wide range of Western thoughts [4], and it is noted by scholars that "the appearance of cross-cultural comparative consciousness was an important turning point in the mental progress of the Chinese people" [5]. Consequently, this experience has formed Liang Qichao's unique temperament: he inherited the Confucian core of caring for the nation and delivering universal relief, yet cast off the ideological fetters of feudal loyalty to the monarch, integrating profound traditional culture with a modern worldwide vision. This blend of old and new traits rendered him an ideal research subject for the transformation of the modern literati spirit, and endowed *Impressions of a European Journey* with its composite, progressive set of ideas bridging Chinese and Western traditions.

2.3. The creative background of *Impressions of a European Journey*

Internationally, World War I devastated European industrial civilization and plunged European society into ideological contradictions. The widespread skepticism toward the omnipotence of science and materialism challenged the prevailing belief among Chinese scholars that Western civilization was universally superior.

Domestically, the New Culture Movement split intellectual circles. Some supporters of Westernization like Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu criticized the traditional Chinese learning and called for total Westernization, while the National Essence faction adhered to the theory of Chinese superiority. The two sides continued to debate. In the early period, Liang Qichao entered the cabinet twice and was enthusiastic about politics, so he did not pay much attention to the New Culture Movement [6]. However, his European trips from December 1918 to March 1920 enabled him to have well-considered opinions on the debate between Chinese and Western, as well as old and new thoughts. Though externally framed as a travel record, the work is essentially an intellectual chronicle that leverages overseas travel to explore pathways for China's national development.

3. Three major transformations of literati spirit reflected in the text

3.1. New conception of national responsibility: from serving monarchs to saving the nation and its people

Traditional literati were trapped within the ethical framework of the unity of ruler and subject, linking their devotion to the nation with monarchical power and elite systems, devoting their lives to the ideal of "making the emperor a sage like Yao and Shun" and maintaining the ruling dynasty. The lyrical content of traditional travelogues mainly concerned the rise and fall of contemporary governance.

After the establishment of the Republic of China, the modern concept of the nation-state became popular and Liang Qichao reconstructed his national viewpoint in a modern way. He completely

revised the old political ethics of dependence, redefining the mission of national salvation along two lines: giving up the theory of hero-led salvation to arouse the whole population, and overcoming the centripetal view of China to acquire a global perspective for the welfare and development of hundreds of millions of Chinese people.

In *Impressions of a European Journey*, he sharply criticized the error of the old-style patriots who tried to achieve national reform by means of individual warlords or officials, saying that their thoughts were "bound by the old social ideology and unable to understand that a democratic country depends entirely on the majority of its people, not on a few heroic figures." He argued that genuine national salvation demanded a fundamental shift in approach: "Only working for the entire citizenry, rather than a small group of exploitable elites, constitutes true patriotism and the one true path to national salvation." He put his hope in the enlightenment of the younger generation, and called for "a mass movement of all virtuous citizens nationwide" to promote real popular democracy.

Faced with the danger of national division by foreign countries, Liang Qichao refused to retreat into narrow nationalism. He suggested that modern patriotism must not be parochial: "Our patriotism must neither prioritize the nation above all individuals, nor prioritize the nation above the world." People should develop their own talents under the protection of the nation and thus contribute to global civilization. As he stated, "The prosperity of a nation itself is not an ultimate goal; it should make beneficial contributions to the whole human society---otherwise, the existence of a nation has no significance." This idea that the nation's development should benefit the advancement of all mankind gave the traditional scholars' "world outlook" a completely new meaning, revealing Liang's remarkably forward-thinking modern internationalism and global sense of responsibility.

3.2. New cultural stance: from sino-centrism to mutual learning between Chinese and Western civilizations

Sino-centrism constituted an ingrained cultural mindset of traditional literati. After the military defeats and the impact of Western culture in the latter period of the Qing dynasty, a new idea of complete Westernization appeared. These two opposing views have always limited Chinese intellectuals. Liang Qichao's *Impressions of a European Journey* established a novel, rational perspective that viewed Chinese and Western civilizations on equal footing.

First, he demystified Western modernity. Liang thought that the First World War showed some inner shortcomings in European civilization, rooted in blind faith in the omnipotence of science. "Materialist philosophers, sheltered under the banner of science, constructed a purely materialistic, mechanistic outlook on life, reducing all internal and external human experience to the immutable laws of material motion." This viewpoint reduced humanity to a state of cutthroat survival of the fittest, a condition which needs to be considered carefully and with caution.

Second, he reconsidered the importance of the native traditional culture. In the face of the general pessimism towards Western civilization, Liang re-appraised the traditional intellectual resources of China. In *The Great Responsibility of Chinese People to World Civilization*, he proposed that the pre-Qin schools of Confucianism, Daoism, and Mohism all unified idealism and practicality—a strength capable of remedying the divide between spirit and matter, ideal and reality plaguing Western civilization, and rebuilding domestic cultural self-confidence.

Furthermore, he promoted the academic field of "civilizational synthesis". Rejecting cultural isolationism, Liang advocated a strategy of complementary civilizational exchange: "We shall expand our own civilization through Western learning, and supplement Western civilization with our own, to forge a new composite civilization." He outlined a clear roadmap for young generations,

stressing the integration of indigenous cultural heritage with foreign intellectual nourishment to form a new civilizational system that could benefit humanity worldwide. This culturally subjective stance, rooted in native tradition yet oriented toward the globe, demonstrates robust cultural self-determination.

3.3. New approach to statecraft: from empty scholarly speculation to overseas empirical practice

Statecraft, which aims at effective government, was the Confucian principle guiding the country [7]. The statecraft of the ancient scholars mainly concentrated on moral ideals, confined to the investigation of classics and local administration, valuing theoretical moral reasoning more than actual implementation. Liang Qichao added this spirit with a strong empirical consciousness rooted in social science.

He went beyond the trivial descriptions of tourist guides, making on-site studies about the post-war European life and economic difficulties, and investigating class antagonism caused by the Industrial Revolution. In *Undercurrents of Social Revolution*, he predicted violent conflicts between capital and labor. Concerning the divided social structure of China, he pointed out the fundamental reason as the absence of legal spirit, suggesting that modern societies should unite their people by means of universally accepted and followed laws. Moreover, to prevent class disputes, he practically proposed that "occupational elections and universal suffrage should be the main supports in the Constitution of the Republic of China", believing that the improvement of institutions could stabilize the political foundation. This transition from empty moral discourse to specific institutional building under the legal rule shows the remarkable modern change in the scholar-official's spirit, thus qualifying Liang Qichao as a new kind of modern Chinese scholar-official.

4. Dual academic value of the new literati spirit

The ideological shifts shown by Liang Qichao in *Impressions of a European Journey* indicate not only a milestone in his personal intellectual development but also a widespread impact on China's modern intellectual and literary history.

4.1. Intellectual history value: establishing a paradigm for the spiritual transformation of modern intellectuals

The book provided a model for integration between Chinese and Western learning and self-reconstruction for intellectuals caught between old and new eras. On one side, drawing on classical phrases from *The Doctrine of the Mean*, Liang creatively proposed the "Doctrine of Fulfilling Human Nature", which preserved the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation while incorporating Western ideals of individual liberation. On the other hand, he vigorously championed independent thought and intellectual liberation, urging youth to trace ideas to their origins and get rid of preconceived biases. This critical attitude, which refused to obey traditional authority or follow Western theories blindly, directly inspired the May Fourth New Culture Movement.

4.2. Literary history value: expanding the ideological and aesthetic boundaries of modern travelogues

From the perspective of literary evolution, *Impressions of a European Journey* has greatly subverted the generic boundaries of traditional travel writing. As stated by Liang himself, "To grasp the

ideological tendencies of a period, nothing is better than to study its literature." The text accurately traces the shift from Romanticism to Naturalism in 19th century Europe, and combines modern discussions about international politics, economics and philosophy into the literary narration from the position of a firsthand witness. The appearance of this "scholarly travelogue" has rendered unprecedented intellectual depth and social enlightenment value to travel literature, making it an invaluable historical record recording the contact and integration of Chinese and Western cultures.

5. Conclusion

Taking Liang Qichao's *Impressions of a European Journey* as its research object, this paper sorts out the modern transformation pathways of traditional literati spirit across three dimensions: national responsibility, cultural stance, and statecraft practice. The result shows that Liang Qichao has accomplished a comprehensive renewal of the traditional literati spirit through his European tours and subsequent literary works, achieving a change of spirit from an old-fashioned Confucian scholar to a modern intellectual. Instead of being completely influenced by modern foreign cultures, the spirit of traditional literati has undergone creative changes during the process of combining Chinese and Western cultures: retaining the Confucian core of concern for the nation and people while discarding the feudal residues such as loyalty to one monarch and cultural xenophobia, thus forming a new model of literati who integrate the ancient, modern, Chinese and Western thoughts.

This study reshaped the ideological basis of modern travel writings, formed a new style of modern travelogues which is based on empirical research and possesses an enlightening value, and promoted the development of the modern Chinese intellectual community. However, this research has some shortcomings: it only analyzes Liang Qichao's travelogue without horizontal comparison with other texts. Future research may be improved in two aspects: firstly, to carry out a parallel comparative study between *Impressions of a European Journey* and the travelogues of contemporary scholars like Yan Fu and Jiang Baili in order to examine the various manifestations of the spiritual transformation of modern literati; secondly, to investigate the practical importance of Liang Qichao's ideas for the contemporary intercultural exchanges from the viewpoint of the mutual learning between civilizations.

References

- [1] Tang, Y. (2014). Modern evolution of Chinese prose in late Qing overseas travel notes. *Literary Review*(5), 89-98.
- [2] Zhang, J. (2009). Review of research on travel literature. *Tourism Science*, 23(2), 55-61.
- [3] Wen, K. (2012). A brief discussion on scholar morality and literati spirit. *Studies in Ethics*(1), 24-27.
- [4] Gan, C. (2023). The transformation of Liang Qichao's view of Confucianism: From On New Citizens to Reflections on European Travel. *Modern Philosophy*(6), 125-132.
- [5] Li, Y. (2009). *Japanese experience and the emergence of modern Chinese literature*. Peking University Press.
- [6] Zheng, S. (2005). Liang Qichao and the new culture movement. *Modern Chinese History Studies*(2), 1-37.
- [7] Tian, Y., & Liu, B. (1994). The transformation of the idea of statecraft from tradition to modern times. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*(3), 120-128.