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A Comparative Analysis of Ming Dynasty Travel Literature Guangzhi Yi and Western Travel Literature Suma Oriental

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Abstract. Ming travel literature reached its peak in the late Ming, an era often regarded as the golden age of the traditional Chinese travelogue. In this era, the prosperity of the commodity economy, the rise of the pragmatic learning trend, and the prevalence of the custom of scholars traveling around all contributed to the emergence of a large number of renowned travel literature writers who were skilled in conducting on-site investigations and documenting the landscapes and customs of various places. In the West, the Age of Discovery likewise inaugurated a golden age of travel writing, one oriented toward commercial intelligence and colonial expansion. Two works from that period are regarded as twin masterpieces of Eastern and Western human geography of the 16th century. Wang Shixing's *Guangzhi Yi* centres on the interplay between geographical setting, regional customs and group temperament. It differentiates Wang Shixing from Xu Xiake and addresses the fashion of long-distance travel among late Ming scholar-officials. Its Western counterpart is Tomé Pires' *Suma Oriental*, a sixteenth-century Portuguese treatise that systematically describes Asia and ranks among the primary sources of European knowledge of the Orient in the Age of Discovery. Although they differ markedly in terms of authors' identities, research focuses and writing motivations, they share striking similarities in their core spirit, observational perspectives and academic value.

Keywords: Wang Shixing, *Guangzhi Yi*, Tomé Pires, Suma Oriental, travel literature

1. Introduction

Written in the 16th century, *Guangzhi Yi* and *Suma Oriental* emerged from distinct historical processes of transformation and development.

The late Ming Dynasty represented the golden age of ancient Chinese travel literature. Three factors contributed to the rapid flourishing of travel literature: First, there was an improvement in the economic foundation. The commodity economy flourished, transport and material conditions improved, and currency circulation expanded. Canals and official highways connected the north and the south, making long-distance travels more accessible. The second factor was ideological and cultural transformations. Yangming Neo-Confucianism stimulated the awakening of self-awareness among scholar-officials in the late Ming Dynasty. Scholar-officials sought spiritual fulfilment through travel to scenic places, a practice that offered solace and an outlet for self-expression. A

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travel craze among scholar-officials took shape in the late Ming Dynasty, giving rise to abundant travelogue writings [1]. The third factor was the turbulence of politics and officialdom. In the early Ming Dynasty, official travel was largely passive. To maintain effective control over officials, the central government widely implemented the system of mobile officials to prevent officials from building up excessive power. In the later period, however, scholar-officials enjoyed more leisure time while awaiting official appointments or transfers in officialdom, which led official travel to become voluntary. Many scholar-officials took the initiative to appreciate landscapes and observe folk society during promotions, transfers or journeys back to their hometowns.

The European Age of Discovery, from the 15th to the 17th centuries, is also referred to as the era of great geographical discoveries. Travel literature also reached its heyday in this period, and three major factors accounted for its development. First was the ideological climate: the Age of Discovery fostered the exploration of the natural world and the observation of foreign lands, with an emphasis on personal experience and field observation. Travellers recorded authentic local conditions, geography and the customs of foreign peoples. Second, material and technological change provided the basis for this boom in travel writing. The production of books expanded rapidly from this point on, and the increasing number of travel accounts constituted a substantial portion of the expanding book market [2]. Third lay the application of ship logs and nautical charts. During the Age of Discovery, much Western travel literature contained a wealth of practical navigational and geographical information. Also, a typical travel account would include navigational data.

In recent years, scholarly research on travel literature is no longer confined to Chinese texts, and overseas travelogues have gradually attracted attention. Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of studies that compare Eastern and Western works within the same analytical framework. From the perspective of human geography, Wang Shixing's *Guangzhi Yi* is the pioneering classic in this field. By contrast, Pires' *Suma Oriental* is regarded as a pioneering work of early European Orientalism. Inspired by comparative studies of *The Travel Diaries of Xu Xiake* and *The Travels of Marco Polo*, this paper analyses the similarities and differences between the two works from various perspectives.

2. Differences between Guangzhi Yi and Suma Oriental

Writing is composed of three components: the author, motivational factors for composition, and the subject of writing. Travel literature is no exception. Behind each work lie distinct authors, motivations and subjects of writing. Therefore, this paper compares and analyses the differences between *Guangzhi Yi* and *Suma Oriental* from these three perspectives.

2.1. Writing time and authorial identity

Guangzhi Yi was written by Wang Shixing, courtesy name Hengshu, art name Taichu (also known as Yuanbai Daoren). He was a native of Linhai County, Taizhou Prefecture, Zhejiang Province. "From an early age, he cherished the aspiration of Xiang Ziping, wishing to travel across the Five Great Mountains." While still a government student, he had already explored all the landscapes of Hangzhou and the Yue region [3]. Wang Shixing exemplified the late-Ming literatus who travelled in the course of his official career. He passed the metropolitan examination in the fifth year of the Wanli reign (1577) and was initially appointed Magistrate of Que County in Henan Province. Afterwards, he successively held metropolitan posts including Supervising Secretary of the Rites Section and Supervising Secretary of the Personnel Section. Later, having incurred the emperor's displeasure, he was sent to serve in provincial posts. He successively held offices including

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Administration Vice Commissioner of Sichuan, Administration Vice Commissioner of Guangxi, Surveillance Vice Commissioner of Yunnan, Administration Commissioner of Shandong, and Vice Education Commissioner of Henan. In his later years, he attained the post of Right Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate and Governor of Henan, and was eventually transferred to Chief Minister of the Court of Imperial Entertainments in Nanjing. In the twenty-sixth year of the Wanli reign (1598), Wang Shixing died of illness while holding the office of Chief Minister of the Court of Imperial Entertainments, aged only fifty-two. Throughout his life, Wang Shixing "travelled whenever possible, wherever possible, and wherever he was posted as an official" [1]. Taking advantage of his official postings across different regions, he travelled throughout the Two Capitals and Twelve Provinces of the Ming Empire in his time, with Fujian being the only territory he never visited. Wherever he went, he carefully investigated every rock and cave, every plant and tree. He extensively collected information on local customs and products and recorded them in detail. His principal works include three geographical treatises: *Random Notes on Travels to the Five Sacred Mountains*, *Extended Records of Travels* and *Commentaries on the Extended Records* [4].

In his youth, Tomé Pires, author of *Suma Oriental*, served as apothecary to Prince Afonso, son of King João II of Portugal [5]. After the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511, he travelled to India. Between 1512 and 1515, he composed *Suma Oriental: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to China* in Malacca and Cochin. It was the first work dedicated to introducing the East and China, which recorded in detail the geography, trade and customs of regions ranging from Egypt and India to Southeast Asia and China. In 1516 King Manuel I sent Pires at the head of an embassy to China to establish formal trade relations. The embassy anchored at Tamão near Guangzhou in August 1517, and was admitted north for an audience with the Zhengde Emperor, reaching Beijing in 1520. However, upon the demise of the Zhengde Emperor in 1521, together with Portuguese misconduct in Guangdong and Malaccan envoys' accusations of the Portuguese conquest of Malacca, the diplomatic negotiations were suspended. Members of the entire diplomatic mission were subsequently detained by Guangdong authorities. The situation deteriorated to the extreme, marking one of the earliest conflicts between the Portuguese and the Cantonese. The ambassador Tomé Pires disappeared amid uncertain circumstances. It is conjectured that he died in a Chinese prison around 1527 [6].

2.2. Focus on subject selection and writing motivations

The subjects examined in *Guangzhi Yi* cover multiple dimensions. In his later years, Wang Shixing was no longer content with composing simple travel records in verse and prose as he had done in *Notes on Travels to the Five Mountains*. Instead, he sought to refine, organise and synthesise the rich observations accumulated over more than two decades of official travel, elevating them through theoretical reflection [7]. Drawing on late-Ming empirical learning and his own experience of official travel, he structured the book around the administrative divisions of the Ming. Volume One, *A Brief Outline of Territorial Geography*, offers a general geographical overview of the Ming dynasty, covering territorial evolution and the distribution of mountains and rivers. Volumes Two through Five treat respectively the geographical characteristics of the Two Capitals, northern Yangtze provinces, southern Yangtze provinces, and the southwestern provinces. Moreover, he meticulously recorded local circumstances, particularly the produce, trade and handicraft industries of the economically prosperous Jiangnan area. Focusing on the institutions that governed people's livelihoods, he examined the lives of various social groups—urban residents, merchants, imperial clansmen, and ethnic minorities—through the interplay of geographical setting and cultural custom. For instance, he classified the people of Zhejiang into three categories: "people of the watery

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lowlands", "people of the mountain valleys", and "people of the seashore" [8]. He observed that "eastern Zhejiang was generally frugal while western Zhejiang was extravagant". He also documented local customs such as the Shanxi people's preference for digging cellars and the diligence and thrift of the Jiangxi people. These writings embody his concern for statecraft and popular welfare. While *General Accounts of the Broad Realm* is a personal notebook, its descriptions of topography, geomancy, local produce, customs, grain transport, corvée, horse administration and salt laws are underpinned by the philosophy of "applying knowledge to statecraft".

Wang Shixing's motivation was twofold. First, and most directly, he says in the preface: "Now, being ill and weary of travelling, I have reflected upon my journeys; and as there are matters not fully recorded in the *Chronicles*, I have expanded upon them in this work, bringing the total to six volumes." By this time, he was advanced in years, physically weakened and plagued by illness. No longer able to travel far in person, he could only recollect the travel observations of his lifetime from his sickbed. Prior to this, he had already authored *Random Notes on Travels to the Five Sacred Mountains* and *Chronicles of Extensive Travels*; however, there remained a great deal of material that had not been fully documented. He therefore used his pen in place of his feet to "elaborate" upon what had been left unsaid, thus producing this book. The second reason lies in his academic pursuit of writing. His core objective in composing *Guangzhi Yi* was to investigate the "human-land relationship". He held that mountains, rivers, produce, customs, society, and ethnic groups formed an interconnected whole that could not be examined in isolation [9]. As he declared in his preface: "All that I record, whether true or false, comes from what I have personally seen and heard. If not, I would rather leave the matter blank." He thus explicitly rejected the superficial practice of "repeating hearsay and copying from existing books".

In contrast, *Suma Oriental* covers the coastal regions from the Red Sea to China, a vast zone organised around the maritime routes from the East African coast to East Asia, and it treats this territory systematically. He compiled a great deal of China-related intelligence in the book, recording the places of origin of goods including raw silk, dyed silk, brocade, porcelain, sugar and camphor. However, he had not yet set foot in China when writing *Suma Oriental*. Therefore, such intelligence was gathered through interviews and inquiries with merchants and seafarers in Malacca and from various regions [10]. From 1512 to 1515, he stayed in Malacca, newly conquered by Portugal and then the commercial nexus linking East and West. There he gained extensive access to merchants, mariners and local officials from Arabia, India, China and elsewhere, amassing an exceptionally rich body of first-hand information.

Behind Tomé Pires's writing motives lie two primary factors. The first was to acquaint the Portuguese crown with Asia's coastal regions in the service of overseas trade and colonial diplomacy —that is, to open new markets and generate profits. For this reason, Pires focused heavily on ports, circulating commodities, prices, currencies, weights and other units of measurement, customs laws, exchange rates, maritime routes, voyage timetables and other commercially relevant information stretching from the Red Sea to coastal Asia. Additionally, it covers political institutions, social customs and military capacities. The text is shaped by an exoticising, othering viewpoint typical of the colonial age. The second major factor relates to Pires's professional background and powers of observation. An apothecary by profession, he was capable of meticulous observation, documentation and precise description. Combined with his inquisitive temperament, this allowed him to amass unprecedented information on Asia in merely a few years.

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3. Similarities between *Guangzhi Yi* and *Suma Oriental*

Each work encapsulates the spirit and values it aims to convey. Interestingly, the values and ethos of *Guangzhi Yi* and Suma Oriental are remarkably similar in certain respects. This study therefore explores their commonalities along these two lines.

3.1. Empiricism and comprehensive documentation

Both texts emphasize the primacy of personal experience and on-the-ground observation, rejecting dependence on hearsay and secondary accounts. During the late Ming, the vogue for travel writing gave rise to various superficial tendencies: writers who indulged in metaphysical speculation, those who merely collated facts at second hand, and others who pursued elegant posturing—all styles detached from reality. Wang Shixing firmly rejected these practices. In the preface to *Guangzhi Yi*, he declares that whatever had not passed through his own eyes and ears, he would rather leave unrecorded than record from hearsay. Accordingly, he attached great importance to on-site investigation throughout his journeys and rigorously examined every phenomenon. For example, to investigate Qixia Cave, he advanced with a torch for over five li and recorded his close observation: "From Lingchuan to Pingle, stone mountains tower abruptly from the earth. Inside, the rock is porous and open, with twisting paths for walking... Shapes of humans, animals and flying things look just like the real beings. Stalactites hang down and drip water, building up over millennia, some reaching several zhang in length -- truly a marvel of the world. Though snakes and vipers are common in Guangxi's mountains, none inhabit this cave, which remains remarkably clean". In the preface to *Suma Oriental*, by contrast, Pires claimed: "Here one learns everything, has experienced it and seen it with one's own eyes." Although part of his knowledge was obtained through interviews with merchants and local lords, he upheld the principle of the primacy of direct experience overall.

While *Guangzhi Yi* adopts an internal perspective, focusing on Ming territory, analysing regional customs and informed by the traditional Sinocentric worldview, *Suma Oriental* takes an external viewpoint, centred on global enquiry and treating Asia as an exotic object of observation. Nevertheless, both texts transcend the framework of mere geographical or natural description. Rather than simply recording landscapes, they integrate multiple types of information including geography, economy, products, customs, politics and history [5]. Exhibiting encyclopaedic characteristics, they constitute comprehensive regional geographical accounts in the broad sense and attach great weight to human social activities. In terms of writing style, both works resemble essays and collected accounts of what the authors witnessed. They contain personal subjective assessments and are not formal official gazetteers compiled under strict institutional standards.

3.2. Academic value

3.2.1. Historical value

Neither *Guangzhi Yi* nor *Suma Oriental* centres its narrative on dynastic politics and institutional codes. Instead, they record grassroots economies, urban life, trade routes and commodities. Notably, they fill the gap left by official narratives such as the *Ming Veritable Records* and state-compiled gazetteers, which prioritise statecraft and governance while neglecting economic and popular life. In Volume One, *A Brief Account of Geography*, Wang Shixing sketches the late Ming's nationwide commodity circulation network in one brief passage. Volume Five narrates the entire course of the proposal to develop navigation on Yunnan's Jinsha River. Such folk markets and details of everyday

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life are not recorded in official histories, nor are they described in such detail in local gazetteers; consequently, modern works on social and economic history directly cite them as primary sources. Although Pires did not travel to mainland China whilst writing the section on China in *Suma Oriental*, his knowledge of the country was derived from interviews with Chinese maritime merchants in Malacca; it constitutes 'one of the earliest, most comprehensive and detailed accounts'. Precisely because the information was gathered at the front line of trade, the book preserves data on private trade not found in official records. These accounts have been repeatedly cited in subsequent research on the history of Sino-Portuguese trade. At the same time, the *Suma Oriental* is described as "the first comprehensive geographical account of Asia by a modern European" and "the last great holistic portrayal of Maritime Asia prior to the large-scale arrival of Europeans in the East". Together, these two books serve as dual evidence from both the East and the West that "the study of personal observations and experiences can be recognised as serious scholarship".

3.2.2. Human geographical value

Both works go beyond describing mountains, rivers and place-names, emphasising instead the causal links between the geographical environment and people's livelihoods, customs and trade. Wang Shixing is regarded by the academic community as a pioneer of human geography in China. In his essay *Wang Shixing's Geographical Thought and Its Influence*, Zhou Zhenhe further argues: "Wang Shixing had a profound understanding of the regional characteristics of geography and paid close attention to analysing the differences in the natural environment and cultural factors across various regions." The most classic example of this is found in Volume IV, *The Provinces South of the Yangtze*, which divides Zhejiang into three regions based on topography, livelihoods and customs: "The people of the water towns on the Hangzhou, Jiaxing and Huzhou plains are known as the 'people of the wetlands'; those of the rugged hills of Jin, Qu, Yan and Chu are known as the 'people of the valleys'; and those of Ningbo, Shaoxing, Taizhou and Wenzhou, situated between the mountains and the sea, are known as the 'people of the coast'. Each of these three groups has its own distinct customs". Such a classification—based on the relationship between people and their environment—is extremely rare in premodern China. *Suma Oriental* extends from the Red Sea and East Africa across India and the Malay Archipelago to China and Japan. Organised around ports, monsoon routes and the flow of goods, its spatial narrative constitutes, in itself, a cross-regional study of maritime human geography. Pires' assessment of Malacca's strategic location has become legendary: he described its importance and prosperity as "unrivalled in the world, in my view", and coined the famous saying: "Whoever controls Malacca holds Venice by the throat." Pires likewise classified maritime regions into straits and estuaries, navigational clusters, and the rise and fall of ports. Both exemplify the efforts made by intellectuals in the East and West during the 16th century to identify the underlying patterns governing the "relationship between humankind and the earth".

4. Conclusion

Comparative travel literature is a vast and rich field. Well-known examples of "parallel comparisons" include the comparison between *The Travels of Xu Xiake* and *The Travels of Marco Polo*, and that between *A Journey into Shu* and *The Travels of Childe Harold*. *Guangzhi Yi* is a seminal work of humanistic geography from the Ming Dynasty; together with *The Travels of Xu Xiake*, it is regarded as one of the "twin stars" of Ming-era geography. The *Suma Oriental*, meanwhile, is the first monograph by a European to describe the East (including China), and it is a wealth of cultural information in itself; together with *The Travels of Marco Polo*, it represents

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European accounts of the East from different historical periods, separated by approximately two centuries. However, to date, no research -- whether Chinese or foreign -- has been found that directly juxtaposes and discusses the two works, *Guangzhi Yi* and *Suma Oriental*. Consequently, following comparative research, this paper finds that both *Guangzhi Yi* and *Suma Oriental* are travelogues and comprehensive geographical accounts that adopt distinct perspectives in the East and West respectively; both have broken with traditional writing conventions by incorporating comprehensive accounts of observations and experiences, and both adhere to the collection of evidence through on-site observations and interviews, demonstrating an empirical orientation. Although *Guangzhi Yi* offers a Chinese domestic perspective, whilst *Suma Oriental* presents an external European perspective, the two works can together form a dual perspective that allows for mutual verification and cross-referencing.

Travel literature continues to evolve today. It is no longer merely "a distant land that changes one's life", nor is it the preserve of the upper classes; it is gradually moving toward a style that is more authentic, social-scientifically deeper, and more humanistically engaged, or toward writing grounded in fieldwork. Many writers travel the world, bringing back profound reflections on the history, society and culture of foreign lands. Travel literature has now also become intertwined with the consumer market; through "literary tours", it encourages people to "follow literature to distant lands", thereby boosting local economies.

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