

Julian WARD, *Xu Xiake (1587-1641): The Art of Travel Writing*, Richmond, Surrey, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2001. 231, xviii pp. ISBN 0-7007-1319-0.

On October 17, 1636, Xu Xiake, then almost fifty years old, left his family in Jiangyin (in present-day Jiangsu province) and embarked on what would be his last and, by far, most challenging expedition. Accompanied by a Buddhist monk and two servants (one of whom would abandon the party just a fortnight into the journey), Xu would eventually spend nearly four years on the road, traveling through the provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Huguang, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan as well as seeking out and exploring sites both famous and out of the ordinary. Life on the road was as invigorating as it was hazardous. During the journey, as Ward notes, “Xu was robbed three times, ran out of money and was finally deserted by his remaining servant” (p. 43).

Xu Xiake was of course not the first Ming-dynasty literatus to have traveled extensively in southwest China; quite a few had gone before him, though, unlike Xu, almost all had done so in the capacity either as officials or as political exiles. What sets Xu apart from his contemporaries is not just his desire for travel; during his long and arduous journey, Xu managed to keep a detailed record of most of the notable places he had visited (judging from the editions still extant, Xu must have written, on average, 500 characters per day for nearly 1,100 consecutive days). It is this voluminous record, which includes many noteworthy observations on the geography of southwest China, which has encouraged commentators particularly since the early part of the twentieth century to hail Xu as one of China’s greatest geographers.

In this first book-length study in a western language of Xu Xiake’s travel diaries, Julian Ward sets out to demonstrate, however, that this reputation of Xu as a traveler and an explorer has unfortunately overshadowed Xu’s standing as a literary man. Ward argues that, “[d]espite the abundance of objectively reported information in his travel diaries,” Xu must first and foremost be seen as a “highly subjective lover of Nature” (p. 205). “At the core of Xu Xiake’s writing is a balance between accurate recording of observations and his application of traditional and contemporary Chinese poetic language to express an emotional response to the landscape through which he passed” (p. xiii). It is Xu’s “ability to transcend different categories, drawing on both subjective and objective strands of travel writing” (p. 125), that in Ward’s view ultimately accounts for Xu’s brilliance as a writer.

To demonstrate the “exuberance and literary merit” (p. xii) of Xu Xiake’s diaries, Ward chooses to focus on three aspects of Xu’s work. First, by examining the language used in the diaries—active verbs, adjectives, use of parallel groups of characters, etc.—Ward argues that Xu was able to combine “descriptive precision” with “aesthetic resonance” and, as a result, to capture both the texture and spirit of what he had encountered. Second, by probing into Xu Xiake’s attitudes toward the “exotic” southwest, Ward suggests that while Xu continued to distinguish between the “civilized” and the “uncivilized,” it was amidst the “fantastic scenery of the southwest” that “Xu felt he had at last discovered true freedom” (p. 151). Third, by exploring Xu Xiake’s obsession with mountains and caves, Ward concludes that in his travels as well as his writings, Xu “placed aesthetic beauty before scientific value” (p. 159) and that Xu “was driven by a desire to discover and describe sacredness, a sacredness that for him was an underlying spirituality transcending individual belief systems” (p. 188).

Ward’s study has several strengths. First, it offers an useful summary of the latest Chinese scholarship on Xu Xiake and his diaries (the book makes no use of Japanese scholarship, however); as such, it is a valuable source book for the biographical information on Xu and for the publication history of his work. Second, by consulting a wide range of primary and secondary sources, the book weaves together a lucid discussion of the social and cultural context of late-Ming China (pp. 14-28); by the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, Xu Xiake was clearly not alone among the literati in having developed an “obsession” (*pi*). Third, Ward’s extensive translations not only allow English readers to have an easier access

to Xu's writings but also provide specialists with a trove of examples of translations of difficult terms; for the hard work, the reader should be grateful.

Ward's study has a number of weaknesses, however. First, the book is sprawling. Not until almost half way through (from p. 97) does one enter the main body of the work (the first half is devoted to the history of Chinese travel writing, Xu Xiake the traveler, and the different editions of his diaries). But even within the main chapters (chaps. 4-6), Ward has a tendency to digress. Chapter 5 ("The Exotic Southwest"), for instance, begins with a discussion of the ideas of center and periphery and Stevan Harrell's notion of "civilizing project." It then offers a description of the geography and history of Yunnan as well as of Xu's encounters in the province. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Xu Xiake's attitudes toward the peripheral peoples of the southwest and his ambivalent feelings for the place. While Ward's attempts to engage theoretical issues are to be commended, it remains unclear how the notion of "civilizing project"—and how this chapter as a whole—serves to enhance our appreciation of Xu as a travel writer and of the "exuberance and literary merit" of his diaries.

The second weakness of Ward's study has to do with the precision of terminology. Throughout the book, Ward has employed a variety of terms to describe Xu Xiake's activities. Ward is no doubt correct in stating that for Xu "travel was not simply a matter of scientific verification" (p. 162), meaning, as I understand it, that in his travels Xu "was not primarily concerned with the collection of physical and written data" (p. 200). But the use of the term "scientific" becomes problematic when Ward refers to geomancy (*feng shui*) as a "pseudo-scientific art" (p. 158) and asserts that Xu applied "scientific facts" (p. 159), possessed "a proto-scientific scepticism and rationalism" (p. 188), and had an interest in "proto-scientific exploration" (p. 201). While Xu Xiake's activities may or may not be considered "scientific," it would be useful if Ward had explained more explicitly how the terms "scientific," "proto-scientific," and "pseudo-scientific" should be understood in the context of the Ming dynasty.

Another weakness of Ward's study has to do with its premise. It is true that modern scholars have generally paid more attention to Xu Xiake as a traveler than as a writer, but even Fang Chao-ying, in one of Xu's earliest western-language biographies, acknowledges that Xu's diaries "are composed in a beautiful prose style which makes reading them even today a pleasure" (Arthur W. Hummel, ed., *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period (1644-1912)*, vol. 1 [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943-44], p. 315). While Ward has provided—at least within the universe of western-language scholarship—by far the most thorough literary analysis of Xu's diaries, is it really a surprise that Xu Xiake, whose great-grandfather and grandfather had served in the Ming government and who himself had been given a classical education, turned out *not* to be a "literary dullard" (p. 189)? Ward's book would have been much stronger if the author had compared more systematically the writings of late-Ming travelers or had traced out more explicitly the stylistic evolution of travel writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

This is a book written clearly out of a genuine respect and appreciation for Xu Xiake the traveler and the writer. As someone who spent a lifetime pursuing his love for nature, Xu deserves no less. Despite its weaknesses, Ward's study should be the first book to consult for readers interested in this remarkable wanderlust.

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