
On the second page of the Introduction to his new book, Stephen McDowall cites a brief description of Song dynasty (960-1279) youji (游紀 (“travel records” or “travel record literature”)) I wrote more than twenty years ago:

To begin with, they contain a first-hand account of a brief excursion or an extended journey. The language used therein to describe the details of the trip is predominantly narrative. Second, they provide facts about the physical environment such as climate, relief, vegetation, and land-use in a given region… The descriptions in these types of reports are “objective” or “impersonal” in that the author himself plays no direct role, but simply observes and reports on what he sees [McDowall’s emphasis]. Third, youji works invariably reveal the author’s attitudes or opinions… This “subjective” or “personal” quality is the one characteristic that most clearly distinguishes the travel record from the geographical tracts found in most local histories (fangzhi).¹

The author also remarks that my understanding of youji as a literary genre, which admittedly reads some portions of the landscape descriptions therein as objective depictions of historical sites or physical landscapes, ignores the “specific cultural contexts in which these descriptions were formed” (p. 2). McDowall further contends that previous approaches to studying traditional Chinese travel literature “impl[y] of the observer a disinterest that can no longer be accepted so uncritically” (p. 2). We must put aside the descriptive tools used by previous authors (like me), he says, and instead consider “systems of cultural, political, social and aesthetic schemata that, at various levels of the observer’s consciousness, impose themselves on the world.” Doing so, we are told, will lead to a more “nuanced and subtle treatment of youji in secondary literature.” The author even proposes to “go some way towards removing (my emphasis) the genre from its elemental you 游 and ji 記, which in Chinese as well as its usual English equivalent of ‘record’ is freighted with connotations of verisimilitude not carried by other literary forms” (p. 2). McDowall’s central argument and one of the underlying critical premises of his book, then, is that previous secondary scholarship on youji in English has put too much emphasis on form and not enough on meaning as it is expressed in what the author identifies as “culturally creative acts” (p. 2). In other words, we need to pay more attention to the role of the viewer in landscape descriptions and not just to the shan 山 and shui 水 elements.

While I agree that any author, ancient or modern, who sets out to delineate the physical details of a landscape, either in writing or in visual media, inevitably draws upon (or “sees the world through”) various “systems of cultural, political,

¹ This passage is quoted from my On the Road in Twelfth Century China: The Travel Diaries of Fan Chengda (1126-1193) (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1989), 2.
social, and aesthetic schemata,” I wonder how one isolates the details of this process. Of course, in some cases “schemata” of a more general nature are easily identified. For instance, when Fan Chengda 范成大 (1126-1193) wrote about his physical ascent of Mount Emei (Emeishan 峨嵋山) in the summer of 1177, the subtext of his travel narrative contains a personal Buddhist religious quest and epiphany. But how would one explicate the detailed “schemata” in Su Shi’s 蘇軾 (1037-1101) famous verse about Mount Lu 鹽山, which ranks as one of the best-known descriptions of landscape in all Chinese literary history? Su’s quatrain reads:

横看成嶺側成峰, Looking from the side it forms a range, from the end it forms a peak;
遠近高低各不同。From far or near, high or low, it is never the same.
不識盧山真面目, I do not know Mount Lu’s true face and eyes,
只緣身在此山中。And this is simply because I am in the very midst of the mountain itself.

Now, one could call Su Shi’s description here (or just about any piece of writing, for that matter) the result of a “culturally creative act,” but what in the way of definitive commentary can further be said about it? Is it possible to isolate the cultural, political, social, and aesthetic details that were at work at various levels of Su Shi’s consciousness when he visited Mount Lu in 1084 and led him to produce such a poem? I confess that I have reservations about the feasibility of trying to dig into any writer’s consciousness. Nevertheless, McDowall raises some bold, new ideas about Chinese youji and how we should approach and study the genre, and he certainly deserves a chance to present his case and prove his argument.

The subject of McDowall’s study is a prose text in ten parts (or sections) titled “You Huangshan ji” 游黄山記, which he translates as “Account of My Travels to Yellow Mountain.” Written in early 1642 by the noted poet, scholar, and official Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582-1664), this work was composed in order to serve as a supplement (buzuo 補作) to a set of shi 詩 poems Qian had written during a visit to Huangshan in the third lunar month of 1641. Although Qian Qianyi was

---

2) The religious implications of Fan Chengda’s ascent to the summit of Mount Emei are discussed in detail in my Stairway to Heaven: A Journey to the Summit of Mount Emei (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2006), esp. 119-35.
3) Su Shi shiji 蘇軾詩集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 23.1219 (“Ti Xilin bi” 题西林壁).
4) On just some of the possible readings and critical interpretations of Su Shi’s famous quatrain—and there are many, see my essay “Su Shi and Mount Lu,” in Journeys 5.1 (2004): 1-18 (esp. 14-15).