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Travel & Literature: From the Discovery of Significance to Wandering Without Significance

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Panel: Questions of Travel

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Bin Jiang

TRAVEL & LITERATURE: FROM THE DISCOVERY OF SIGNIFICANCE TO WANDERING WITHOUT SIGNIFICANCE

Travel is one of literature's most basic themes. Literature records the movement of human beings or the imagery created by human beings both in space and time. The essence of this movement is travel. Ancient myths both in the east and west often address this theme because travel is the best way for a person to know and explore the world. Although most myths are fictional, real life is the foundation of fiction. Human beings have wandered the earth since they were created. They got to know the world, enriched their feelings and extended the limits of their thinking by continuing to wander. The wandering life of our ancestors constructed the foundations for the creation of myth.

An ancient Chinese myth called *A Chinese Bestiary (Shan hai jing)* records a chaotic world where human beings and gods live together. They all like to wander. Meanwhile, in ancient Greek and Scandinavian myths, there are also lots of stories about the wanderings of the gods, including their visits to earth.

Human beings mirror the world they live in and reflect it back at itself. People who have wide and tight contacts with the world can therefore reflect back a richer view of it. That's the reason I think that travel is one of the most important ways for us—for human beings—to understand the world.

Travel requires us to be self-conscious. We understand that we form the principal part of the world by traveling. More than 2,000 years ago, in the early Qin dynasty, texts such as *The Books of Songs (Shi jing)*, *The Book of History (Shu jing)*, and *The Books of Changes (Yi jing)* addressed the theme of travel.

In Chinese, the character for travel is actually composed of two characters: *lv* and *you*. *Lv* means someone who lost his home and lives somewhere else while *you* means play, experience and walk. These two characters were combined in the Tang dynasty. From then on, poems numerous about travel appeared, and it became one of the most important topics in traditional Chinese literature.

I'd like to talk about a myth called *Journey to the West (Xi you ji)*. It's one of the four most famous works of fiction in the history of Chinese literature. The story is about a monk called Tang Seng, who goes to the West with his four apprentices: *sun wukong*, *zhu bajie*, *sha heshang* and *bai long ma*: a monkey, a pig, a devil who once lived in heaven and a horse. During the journey, they travel through East, Middle and South Asia, followed by heaven, hell and the Dragon Palace under the sea. They meet with and overcome 81 obstacles and finally arrive in the "West", at the end point of their pilgrimage. Tang Seng obtains a Buddhist scripture and returns to mainland China. The journey has a clear goal for Tang Seng and his apprentices: it's a search for significance. At the end of the myth, they accomplish their task and achieve their goal. They even discover the significance of existence as a Buddhist. The story has been taught in China for a thousand years. *Journey to the West* is trying to tell us that in searching for, pursuing and realizing an ideal dream, and in accomplishing a great undertaking, we will definitely meet with obstacles big and small, many and few. If we try our best to

conquer all the difficulties and suffering we face, we will finally succeed. In *Journey to the West*, travel is both the way to accomplish the task and a metaphor for all the difficulties and obstacles of life.

Among western travel novels, one of my favorites is *Don Quixote*, written in the 17th century by the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes. The story, for those of you who are unfamiliar with it, is about a man named Don Quixote who was fascinated by novels about the heroic deeds of knights. He decided to live like a knight. He wore armor and rode a skinny horse and began a quest. During his journey, he made lots of stupid mistakes and suffered a lot. Finally, he woke up from his daydreaming and returned to his hometown. In some ways, the structure of *Don Quixote* is quite similar to *Journey to the West*: both of them tell a story by narrating a journey. But the ends of the two novels are quite different. *Journey to the West* has a happy ending while *Don Quixote* has a quite sad one. *Don Quixote* also has a very clear set of values. The novel criticizes Spanish politics, law, morality, religion, literature, art and the system of private property during that period, rendering the story “an epic of the dying knight class”. As Byron said, “Don Quixote is a sad story. The more it makes you laugh, the more it makes you sorrow. This hero stands for justice. Subduing the villains is his only purpose. He was driven crazy exactly because of these virtues.”

After modernism and post-modernism were established in the West, trends of non-significance began to appear in travel literature. When I say non-significance, I mean narratives that are not directed at a particular target, the way *Don Quixote* or *Journey to the West* are. Modern society makes the values of traditional society invalid. The ultimate value, the end goal of the narrative, thus becomes invalid too. Finally, nihilism and relativism form the highway for people to move through this world. The American writer Jack Kerouac’s representative work, *On the Road*, was once very popular all over the world. The non-significant wandering in his novel became one of the most important achievements of modern spirit.

After Jack Kerouac, lots of literary works imitated the same theme: travel is no longer a way to communicate. It has become a window to show estrangement and nihilism instead of indicating the way to grow up. As Milan Kundera said, “live in somewhere else”. Now, however, the “somewhere else” is boring, too. The lonely individual created by modern society ruined the taste of significance a long time ago. They don’t love anyone except themselves. Therefore, they only care about themselves instead of caring about the world and other human beings. Any “somewhere else” is just a copy of the present place, and it is as boring as the present place. Finally, the journey of traditional travel literature is over.