

THE BODY AS LENS AND TESTIMONY: THE BODILY EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE SONG STORIES OF TRAVELING TO FOREIGN LANDS (960–1279 CE)

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This paper focuses on “Gao Yan,” a classical short story describing an eventful foreign journey in the Song period, to explore how the body displays information about foreign lands and the potential socio-cultural factors that form such bodily perceptions. First, the body is a lens for perceiving the “abnormal” environment through various sensory impressions, including climate, foreigners’ body odor, and observation of customs. Second, the body functions as a testimony of suffering by displaying physiological changes such as scars, injuries, and complexion. Third, the growing consciousness of the Central Lands in the Song period is key to shaping these corporal experiences; this implies a set of cultural concepts and resonates with the prevalent anxiety regarding the Sino-barbarian dichotomy, stressing the Central Lands’ moral-cultural superiority. Apart from seeking novelty, bodily experiences play an essential role in fictional narratives which transform the strange world into an understandable order based on Confucian orthodoxy.

Keywords: classical Chinese short stories, bodily representation, the Central Lands, travel to foreign lands, multisensory experience

1. Introduction: the overlooked representation of foreign travel in classical short stories

This chapter mainly focuses on “Gao Yan” (高言), a classical short story documented in *Lofty Debates Under the Green Window* (青瑣高議 *Qingsuo gaoyi*, hereafter as *Lofty Debates*), in order to explore the exotic experience and reaffirmed cultural identity demonstrated through multisensory perception during the Song period (960–1279 CE). By examining a narrative corpus that has so far received sporadic

attention, this chapter aims to elucidate the body's role in delineating foreign lands and discover the potential social-cultural concerns presented through the fictional journey; thus, it contributes a case study from the context of premodern Chinese fiction to current research on the representation of the body and travel.

Many scholars have noticed that due to the growth in international exchanges and geographical knowledge, as well as the improvement of infrastructures and individual mobility, narratives about travel in the Song period experienced an unprecedented development in genres and content (see, e.g., Hargett 1985; Zhang 2011). Existing research centers on official domestic travels (宦遊 *huan you*), which are mostly documented as travel essays or diaries of boat trips; while another growing body of research addresses records of foreign lands, especially embassy accounts and entries on commercial products. In contrast to the traditional preference for "stability," "movement" is a noticeable dimension of the Song society. The extensiveness of the travel category featuring interpersonal relationships in encyclopedias (類書 *leishu*), as well as strange encounters in stories as part of everyday knowledge, indicate the prevalence of travel in the Song everyday life and culture (Wu 2007, 23–73, 121–131).

Among the vast literature produced in the Song period, however, a certain number of classical short stories also present travel experiences in foreign lands, but these have been long ignored by both literature and history scholars. This oversight may be partly due to the ambiguity—both in content and genres—of fictional journeys, which either deviate from the precondition of authors' genuine experience for travel writing, or swing between simple records and crafted literary works. This does not mean that these represented travels are not worthy of investigation. Instead, they present particular concerns about imagining others and world-making by illustrating the wandering experiences and the corresponding mentality of travelers. The Song short stories provide a new perspective to understand how people conceived foreign travel and the surrounding world in a descriptive and popular context, as well as how a Chinese elite integrated the uncertain heterogeneity, caused by mobility, into the conventional world order. The representation of travel experiences and the accompanying knowledge is never limited to one genre or one perspective, but is a complex phenomenon with various forms and purposes in the same culture.

Lofty Debates and *Record of the Listener* (夷堅志 *Yi jian zhi*, hereafter as *Record*) are the two important story compilations that document the largest number of extraterritorial travel experiences in the Song period. The former is a novel collection from the Northern Song era, edited and written by a lower-class scholar, Liu Fu (劉斧, 1040–after 1113 CE); the latter is a very large compilation of strange tales and anecdotes by the prominent officer Hong Mai (洪邁, 1123–1202 CE) from the Southern Song dynasty. Notably, both collections reflect the tendency

of popularization in Song novels; this indicates the early confluence of the classical tales (傳奇 *chuanqi*) and vernacular stories (話本 *huaben*) (Li 1992, 39–45). Hidetaka Otsuka particularly highlights *Lofty Debates* as reflecting the emergence of a new type of popular encyclopedia (通俗類書 *tongsu leishu*) that compiles various fiction and trivial affairs of everyday knowledge (Otsuka 2011, 93–107). Compared with the extensive but repetitive seafaring events documented in *Record*, there are only two stories about overseas travels in *Lofty Debates*: “Wang Xie” (王榭) and “Gao Yan”; by comparison, they present more elaborate travel experiences with detailed sensory and psychological portraits. “Wang Xie” is a derivative of the traditional motif of the fairyland (仙鄉 *xianxiang*), which intentionally fabricates an accidental journey to the Kingdom of Swallows by incorporating the utopian scenery as the spring of peach blossoms and the biological nature of animals (Huang 2007, 167–188). In contrast, “Gao Yan” presents a distinctly realistic concern through extraterritorial knowledge and a continuous comparison of the homeland with foreign lands. It enacts a morality play that reconstructs the comprehensive superiority of the Central Lands (中國 *zhongguo*) through a journey in the farthest known places. This chapter takes “Gao Yan” as the main primary source, given its contemporary worldview and details on travels, while using stories in *Record* as a necessary reference to examine the narrative features and the potential issues arising from these fictional journeys.

2. “Gao Yan”: a fictional journey around the world in the Song era

“Gao Yan” is found in the third volume of *Lofty Debates*, with a subtitle that summarizes the storyline. The story consists of three parts; the first is a brief portrait of Gao Yan, a lower-class intellectual who constantly complains that he deserves greater respect but unfortunately lives at the wrong time. Because he has impetuously murdered a friend, he has no choice but to flee to foreign lands; but when the new emperor issues an amnesty, Gao Yan returns to the capital and confesses the journey to his intimate friend. The second part is Gao Yan’s statement about this grand journey, which takes twenty years and spans “ten thousand *li*” (萬里 *wanli*) from the northernmost to the southernmost limits of the known world. He first escaped to the northern nomadic realm on horseback and married a barbarian woman. Suffering from this harsh life, he escaped again to Guangzhou, where he traveled to Arabia (大食 *Dashi*) on gigantic vessels with sea merchants. By hitchhiking with merchant ships sailing among ports, he visited several kingdoms scattered among the southern seascapes, including *Dashi*, *Linming* (林明國), and *Riqing* (日慶國). Here, Gao Yan not only heard rumors about strange islands, including the Al-Wakwak Island and the Land of Maidens, but he also remarried with another foreign woman. When he abandoned his family and returned to

the Central Lands alone, his wife tore their child into pieces. After returning, Gao Yan expresses his deep regret and henceforth re-embraces every convention in the motherland with heartfelt admiration. The final part is the sympathetic comment that summarizes this journey as having been “degraded” due to an unforgivable moral mistake, i.e., a cultivated person should always behave as a cautious and refined scholar, not a gallant knight errant who acts recklessly and driven by emotion.

Two noteworthy features of this text are the following. First, “Gao Yan” is an elegantly styled tale in the form of official biographical historiography. It exemplifies the Song classical tales’ feature of fusing various genres, including historiography, poetry, and commentary (Cheng 1999, 5). However, it seems to lack an obvious historical prototype, which is different from many Song tales that focus on historical figures—especially female celebrities, such as “The Anecdotal Biography of Yang Taizhen” (楊太真外傳 *Yang Taizhen wai zhuan*), “The Biography of Lüzhu” (綠珠傳 *Lüzhu zhuan*), and “The Anecdotal Biography of Li Shishi” (李師師外傳 *Li Shishi wai zhuan*). It is difficult to verify how “Gao Yan” was created, due to the minimal external information about whether the stated author Liu Fu acted mainly as an author or an editor, as well as whether the travels were mostly based on personal experience or second-hand sources. A possibility is that Liu Fu did not personally engage in overseas journeys, but gathered various information to fabricate this story—similarly to Hong Mai, author of *Record*.

Second, the journey of “Gao Yan” presents an apparent realistic concern, which is different from the previous transcendental and religious interests. There are no personal encounters with any supernatural beings, including gods, spirits, or immortals. All suspicious events are skillfully presented as hearsay from local people. Although the displayed worldview is not an accurate geographical description, it carefully confines the travel scope to a realistic background, especially the nautical transportation to Arabia and the climatic features of the nearby area. This reveals the worldview of a Song literati, where the northern land is occupied by powerful nomadic tribes, whilst the vast southern sea region is dotted with various wealthy kingdoms. The narrative specifies that the historical sailing route from Guangzhou to the Arabian Peninsula provides possible trans-shipment ports for further transfers to the other parts of the world; this is mostly consistent with descriptions of other convincing geographical records, such as *Representative Answers from the Region Beyond the Mountains* (嶺外代答 *Lingwai daida*) and *A Description of Barbarian Nations* (諸蕃志 *Zhu fan zhi*). Merchant ships sailing in the Arab world provide the possibility to access the mysterious lands recorded in ancient classics. The descriptions of the foreign land is not fully original, but mostly assembled and reorganized from several older pieces of literature, such as *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經 *Shan hai jing*) and *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang* (酉陽

雜俎 *Youyang zazu*). The author seems to keep a cautious distance from these narratives of mysterious lands, and has found a reasonable way to embed them into the world map as extensively as possible. Another similar expression in “Gao Yan” is the realistic marriages with local women. This story stresses how a scholar states his foreign experience; thus, the portrayal of women mainly exemplifies the experience of living in foreign lands, not the traditional romance between a talented scholar and an ideal noble or immortal lady.

“Gao Yan” is, of course, not the first fictional journey in premodern Chinese literature, as a similar theme appears in other genres, such as “Far Roaming” (遠遊 *Yuan you*) and “Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease” (逍遙遊 *Xiao yao you*) in the Warring States period (476–221 BCE). Etymologically, the keyword *you* (遊, “travel”) refers to a transcendent quest among spaces while holding a fluttering flag, and long-distance travel is regarded as a process of self-transformation. In the context of Chinese fiction, a journey is usually associated with a pilgrimage which either focuses on the progress of transition, or presents the vivid scenery of other realms through the testimonies of travelers (Gong 2003, 183–214). The distinctiveness of “Gao Yan” lies not only in the large-scale extraterritorial journey, but also in reflecting the knowledge and aesthetic interests of the Song context. The early Tang tale, “A Travel to the Cave of Immortals” (遊仙窟 *You xian ku*) (ca. 658–730 CE), may reveal the changing narrative tendency from a transcendent utopia to genuine social life, by portraying a scholar’s visit with sing-song girls in a brothel as a playful excursion with immortals (Chen 2002, 194). It is rare to see a story like “Gao Yan,” which fits the foreign adventure into the realistic and educational concerns; this contrasts with the previous focus on a scholar’s occasional encounters with immortal beings during their inland travel, as a spiritual quest or a religious trial.

The genre in Western literature that most closely aligns with “Gao Yan” may be the “imaginary voyage,” which is a narrative of a fictional journey to demonstrate a utopian or political satire. According to Paul Arthur (2010, 1), this is a marginal and complicated literary classification, overlooked by scholars; it is a strange marriage of romance and history that “reflect[s] and exploit[s] a particular moment in the history of maritime exploration.” It usually depicts a populated southern world for cross-cultural encounters, by intentionally delineating the edges of the known world, in the form of a genuine travel account (Arthur 2010, 1–18). The imaginary voyages in the Western tradition are not entirely compatible with Chinese novels in the developmental period and the intention of conveying philosophical discourse. However, Arthur’s (2010) study reminds us that while examining those fictional journeys, which are easily misrepresented as belonging to a single category, a comprehensive and historical perspective helps us to interpret their imaginative effect on readers, especially the cultural climate of the era in which they were produced. A fictional journey such as “Gao Yan,” which deliberately

addresses specific opinions through travelers' various overseas experiences, appeared in the twelfth century, which is earlier than the Ming-Qing novels such as *Journey to the West* (西遊記 *Xi you ji*), *Eunuch Sanbao's Voyage to the Western Ocean* (三寶太監西洋記 *Sanbao taijian xiyang ji*), and *Flowers in the Mirror* (鏡花緣 *Jing hua yuan*). Although the large volume and writing techniques of vernacular novels had not yet developed in this period, the Song stories depict an imaginable foreign world by applying detailed sensory descriptions and referring to various known resources.

How should one interpret stories such as "Gao Yan," which present a realistic tendency and potential cultural concerns in the form of foreign travel? The traveler's body, as represented in texts, could provide a basis for examining the interplay between outside environments and internal perception. In travel writing, it is also the presence of a physical body behind the narrative voice that insists on consistency and guarantees the authenticity of travel accounts (Helmers and Tilar 2005, 267–276). The exotic customs are undoubtedly the eye-catching spectacle of those stories; nevertheless, it is the traveler's body that shapes the flesh and blood of unknown faraway lands, and thus constitutes the distinctive travel impression. The physical experience of "Gao Yan" does not belong to a prominent individual, such as authors of travel essays and embassy accounts, but a normal male body, through which the protagonist presents a more universal and intuitive perception. Such bodily experience manifests not only a private sentiment, but also a convincing commonality for readers who have never been or cannot be there.

Given the body's fundamental role in both fictional journeys and travel writing, this chapter draws on research on Chinese fiction and travel history for its methodological framework to contextualize "Gao Yan"; it also applies body-related history to discuss notable keywords and descriptions. According to body-thinking in the East Asian context, the "body" is a relational embodiment which is deeply immersed in the social-cultural context, and presents four types of functions, namely, politics, social norms, spiritual cultivation, and metaphor. Such a body is usually incomplete and needs the guidance of a superior organ (heart) or external regulation to accomplish perfection—namely, a process of "cultivating oneself" (修身 *xiushen*)—to transform a body into an organism with both physiological and moral agency to practice value judgments (Huang 2007, 187–218). Regarding the confluence of bodily history and cultural studies in the Chinese context, "the embodied experience" (身體感 *shentigan*) and "visualization" (遊觀 *youguan*) are the two notable concepts that help to realize a dynamic equilibrium between the body and environment. Namely, "the embodied experience" highlights the body's functions not only in generating multiple sensorial combinations to create order in the outside world, but also in presenting a specific cultural cultivation through everyday practices, such as "vital energy" (氣 *qi*) and "deficiency" (虛 *xu*) (Yu 2008,

15, 23). "Visualization" is a multilayered term that proposes visibility as an essential body technique to constitute the aesthetic and religious ways of seeing, from external excursions to opening the inner self (Liu 2009, 19–32). Prior research on Chinese fiction also exemplified how the body functions as a thematic metaphor that resonates with the space construction. For example, a unity of body and mind through the practice of inner alchemy-refinement is represented in *Journey to the West* (Liao 2014, 99–133), while the ill and exhausted body undergoing medical treatment is employed as a metaphor for the declining nation in the late Qing period (Guan 2013, 83–118). Although there has been scarce analysis of travel experiences in classical Chinese novels, the above-mentioned research on literary motifs and the bodily concept provides an extensive basis for interpreting these Song classical short stories.

To better illustrate how bodily perception underlies Gao Yan's journey, this chapter will discuss the different dimensions of the body as follows: (1) the body as a lens to constitute foreign lands through travelers' sensory impressions; (2) the body as a testimony to demonstrate unusual experiences through travelers' physical transformations; and (3) the potential social-cultural context that breeds the above-mentioned bodily representations.

3. The body as a lens to perceive strange foreign lands

This section will illustrate the three prominent features of foreign lands observed in "Gao Yan." The summary stated by Gao Yan is an outline that concisely shows how sensory experiences constitute his travel impression:

I escaped for over twenty years and experienced the farthest countries in person. I traveled among rivers and mountains, living quietly among the water and grass. Every misery such as bitterly cold, scorching, starvation, and suffering, were put all upon me.

奔走二十年，身行至者四國。溪行山宿，水伏蒿潛，寒熱饑苦，集於一身。
("Gao Yan," 438)

By outlining cold and warmth, and a large-scale sense of climate, which is followed by the inner painful feelings such as hunger and suffering, the protagonist sets the tone of the journey, which is exhausting as well as uncomfortable.

The first impression is the uncomfortable climate in different regions. This is not an accurate measurement of temperature, humidity, or wind speed, but a comprehensive and general impression originating mainly from sensations on the skin. It is usually presented as the preliminary observation of a new space, with the term terrestrial *qi* (地氣 *dìqì*) used to introduce a region through the sequence of "climate-crop-harvest times" or "growing season-lifestyle." The northern land

is described as freezing cold and barren: "There were yellow sands spread all over ten thousand miles and no plants could grow: The terrestrial *qi* was severely frozen and grass could only burgeon after May" (黃沙千里，不生五穀。地氣大寒，五月草始生) ("Gao Yan," 436). In contrast, the terrestrial *qi* in Dashi Arabia was "extremely scorching and crops were reaped twice per year" (地氣大熱，稻歲再熟) ("Gao Yan," 437). Such a substantial description, which associates climate with agriculture, may stem from the intuitive interest in the region's natural environment from a person who comes from an agricultural civilization that values the land's productivity.

Interestingly, terrestrial *qi* could be simply explained as an environmental feature, but it is also an old term that had been applied in philosophical or political theories such as *The Book of Rites* (禮記 *Li ji*) and *Masters from Huainan* (淮南子 *Huainanzi*) since the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE) to determine the innate inferiority of foreigners. By claiming the environmental determinism through which the imbalanced *dqi* leads to the moral and physical inferiority of barbarians, which is inborn and uneducable, scholars proposed different foreign policies, such as delegitimizing Chinese rule over foreign lands in the Han-Tang period, and disempowering foreign rule during the Southern Song (Yang 2016, 390–412). Nevertheless, the link between the influence of the terrestrial *qi* and the innate essence of foreigners seems to be quite loose in "Gao Yan," as the text presents the above-mentioned sequence only to contour the natural environment of a region. "Gao Yan" frequently uses generic words such as "people" (人 *ren*) and "king" (王 *wang*) to refer to foreigners with different statuses, and traditional words for "barbarians," such as *man yi rong di* (蠻夷戎狄), are not used. The text tends to take the concept of the terrestrial *qi* to frame the foreign world, then supplements it with overall bodily impressions and known geographical information. Both "extremely cold" and "extremely scorching" are intense physiological feelings, which express not only the easily understandable information of temperature, but also the excess beyond normal range by the adverbs of degree. This emphasis on excess indicates the deviation from the conditions to which the traveler is accustomed, and greatly influences the habitability and the lifestyle in foreign lands, which is revealed in the subsequent change of focus from climate to land use. The perception of the climate reflects a surrounding world that is vastly different from the familiar Central Lands, i.e., the cold north is extremely uninhabitable, while the warm south presents exotic products and lifestyles that help people cope with the heat.

The second feature is the body odor of foreigners, an olfactory prejudice that associates this physical feature with cultural discrimination. Gao Yan particularly underscores the intolerable smell of his wife, who is a native of the northern land: "Although my wife is young, she reeks of a smell mixed with raw meats and goats. She is so smelly, greasy, and filthy that I could not bear to stay close to her" (妻年雖

少，腥羶垢膩，逆鼻不可近) ("Gao Yan," 436). Four bodily impressions are combined to emphasize the offensive smell of his wife, namely, "stink" (腥 *xing*), "gamy" (羶 *shan*), "filthy" (垢 *gou*), and "greasy" (膩 *ni*). Literally, *xing* means the stench of fish or blood, while *shan* indicates the odor of goats. Both of them refer to the stench of beasts and are attached here to the other two critical comments on terrible hygiene. Gao Yan's unpleasant experience not only originates from the bodily traits of his spouse, but also his impression of the nomadic lifestyle. As Classen has observed, olfactory symbolism often functions as an expression of otherness to classify or identify groups. At least in the West, foreigners, women, and nature are usually labeled as "others" by their odors, which represent not only "savagery" to "civilized" humans, but also contrast with the refreshing fragrance presented through what is regarded as "cultivated" or "controllable" (Classen 1992, 133–166). Since ancient China, body odor has also been stereotyped against foreigners by the Han Chinese, as expressed extensively in strange tales and traditional medicinal records. The study by Chen Yinke (1982, 140–142) also indicates that the modern term *huchou* (狐臭, "a fox-like body odor") implies a philological transformation from a specific reference to the strong armpit odor of foreigners to a general body odor of people, from the time of the increase in intermarriage between the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups.¹ Gao Yan's emphasis on the stench and filthiness of his wife also inherits this conventional disgusted expression of separating others by exaggerating the intolerable body odor of foreigners; this draws a line between the spouses.

Finally, the third feature is the visualized portrayal of foreigners. Although numerous stories have raised the foreigner issue in the Tang period, they mostly focus on male foreigners who visited the Central Lands such as monks, magicians, and merchants, rather than foreign natives. In terms of characterization, "Gao Yan" provides not only a group portrayal of foreigners with a certain exoticism, but also images of common folk in real life. This reflects the author's pragmatic interests, including how to make a living abroad, and different laws and lifestyles practiced in other lands, such as a legal system which is similar to the "an eye for an eye" code of justice. It describes how to mitigate the scorching heat by thickly coating houses with lime and channeling water over roofs to make waterfalls and a cool breeze ("Gao Yan," 437). It particularly highlights the brutality and belligerence of foreigners. For example, Gao Yan criticizes the folkways of Riqing through a series of unequivocal and aggressive judgmental words:

¹ This could be broadly regarded as a phenomenon in medieval China since the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties (220–589 CE), especially the Upheaval of Five Barbarians (304–316 CE) and the establishment of the Tang empire. The sources that Chen applies to observe the linguistic transformation are the medical records from the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) to the Song dynasty.

The people of Riqing are without any etiquette and are the meanest and filthiest people I have seen so far. People act violently and follow the rule of superior brutal force. Even women slaughter other people on every occasion. There is no legalized punishment. If someone is sentenced as guilty, the king destroys his or her home and occupies all property with other people.

無禮儀亂雜，最為惡穢。爭鬪好狠，婦女動即殺戮。無刑罰，犯罪，王與人共破其家而奪之。（“Gao Yan,” 437）

“Gao Yan” also displays a textual spectacle of the grotesque bodily traits of other races, from rumors heard during voyages, including the dwarf pygmies, a tree growing little children, and “The Land of Maidens.” These had captured the conventional imagination of foreigners since *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. The above-mentioned folkways and abnormal physical appearances of other races are presented in visualized descriptions to display a heterogeneous world outside the Central Lands.

Foreign women are the group that notably reflects the above-visualized portrayal of foreigners, showing different concerns from previous love affairs between male literati and women. The female characters in Chinese classical novels usually present certain desirable characteristics such as beauty, wealth, or divine power. Women in other realms, such as immortal lands, particularly hold a prestigious or transcendent social status as princesses, dragon ladies, immortals, or goddesses, who either fulfill the protagonist’s wishes or meet the criteria to be an ideal spouse. “Gao Yan” presents foreign women in two ways: one is the protagonist’s marriages with two foreign wives, who lack attractiveness but have a close interaction with Gao Yan; and the other is the exotic hearsay about “The Land of Maidens” which embodies a curious imagination about the other gender. Gao Yan’s first wife is a northern barbarian woman with an unbearable body stench; while the second is a local woman in Riqing who brutally tears her son apart. This description of his second wife is adapted from the motif of “island women” (海島婦人 *haidao furen*) which originated from Buddhist scriptures; this was expanded through further real-life experiences and outsider protagonists such as merchants or travelers during the Song period, to demonstrate the fearsome and unknown overseas world (Zhang 2016, 93–98). Gao Yan’s marriages are more like a random and dispensable means of life support, and a closer look at the folkways reveal certain undesirable features of foreigners.

“The Land of Maidens” is a matrilineal society situated on an isolated island, where women live independently from men by practicing an unusual method of reproduction. This self-sufficiency seems to abandon the regular constraints of class, and women conceive their pregnancy through a series of spontaneous actions without the collaboration of other people:

There are stones of infants and milk, the pond of birth, and the wall of expecting pregnancy. Women go there to swallow the stones, drink the water, and gaze at the wall. Soon they become pregnant and every newborn is without exception a baby girl.

有胎乳石，生池、望孕井，群女皆往焉。咽其石，飲其水，望其井，即有孕，生必女子。（“Gao Yan,” 437）

“The Land of Maidens” is a universal motif that embodies their location on the southern periphery of the known world, and imagines childbearing as a sympathetic ritual to resonate with Mother Nature instead of sexual intercourse (Wang 2008, 120–125). Despite the differing details, and the potential geographical locations such as Sulawesi, Yunnan, or Australia, most records of “The Land of Maidens” in Chinese literature feature primitive and highly repetitive images of a remote area, and portray the alien bodies of foreigners as similar to the feather people and large-eared people described in *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Lu 2005, 1–15). By criticizing the violent and savage behaviors of people that the traveler has intimately encountered, as well as displaying the abnormal physiological features of other races in mythic rumors, “Gao Yan” presents the overall strange impression of foreign women through different layers.

From the climatic differences felt through the skin to the unbearable body odors, and from the close observation of foreigners to the hearsay about strange races, the traveler’s body plays a fundamental role in gathering external information through various senses, thereby shaping their specific impression of foreign lands. Such an impression does not just stem from a biological reaction, but from the interaction of physical, social, and cultural factors that leads the traveler to focus on differences in etiquette and lifestyle, and thus express negative or maladaptive evaluations.

4. The body as a testimony of suffering to display worrying physiological signs and traumatic experiences

The bodily symptoms of travelers function eloquently to manifest not merely a growing sense of physiological disharmony, but also a critical, harsh moment in life. These symptoms also imply certain criteria that were regarded as “normal, healthy, and natural” by contemporary people, such as being able-bodied, having a glowing complexion, and a body with vital energy and blood. What happened to travelers could be thereby easily distinguished as an abnormality, and the cause was usually determined as maladjustment to an uncomfortable and unsafe foreign environment. The following section will focus on major physical symptoms in stories, to discuss the effects of foreign journeys on the body.

The first apparent physiological feeling is exhaustion due to the hardship of journeying across land and sea. Gao Yan's travel is far from a relaxing tour, but an arduous trudge as an escaping criminal; this can be observed through several repetitive words about moving hurriedly, such as "travel" (行 *xing*), "rush" (奔走 *benzou*), and "scurry" (奔竄 *bencuan*). Such weariness or uneasiness usually emphasizes the first-hand hardship of trudging found in the travel literature, with involuntary purposes such as exile, war, and diplomatic missions (Gong 2023, 232–234). Despite presenting various foreign spectacles, the journey of Gao Yan is caused by compulsion and intrinsically lacks a concrete destination. His aimless fatigue is not in the service of either a spiritual challenge or a religious quest as in previous stories, but he is simply stranded abroad due to being deprived of a legitimate social identity.

Second, the withered countenance (枯 *ku*) is a sign of an unhealthy physique in stories. This is a common Chinese medicinal concept, using the analogical system between plants and the human body to indicate an emaciated, dried-up, and gloomy appearance. While Gao Yan lived in the northern land, he had to work ceaselessly to secure the minimum requirements for survival in the barren land. One day, he was frightened by his "withered and dull" facial hue reflected through the water:

Day after day, I mowed grass in the sand with my foreign wife and dug out wild mice for the whole day. What was the meaning or pleasure of this kind of life exactly? When I saw myself through the water, I could not help but run away in fright. It looked as if a ghost appeared out of the water, whose expression is so withered and dull.

徒日逐胡婦刈沙草，掘野鼠，生奚為也！或臨野水自見其形，不覺驚走，為鬼出於水中，枯黑不類可知也。（“Gao Yan,” 436）

Both “withered” and “dull”—words used in this panic-stricken realization—are common warnings of malnutrition and poor blood circulation, based on the empirical summary of visual observation. Moreover, the text links these two facial signs with “ghost” to stress the scary and non-human-like appearance gained from struggling in an unlivable land. Kuriyama has illustrated the expressiveness of facial hue in the Chinese medicinal concept, which not only reflects bodily changes but also mirrors feelings and inclinations. Gazing at facial hue (望色 *wangse*) is a fundamental diagnostic method that first takes into account the color and luster of a face, and then utilizes botanical analogies to figuratively describe the metabolism of the body (Kuriyama 1995, 205–234). “Withered” exhibits a shrinking of one's vitality due to lack of nourishment and “dull” signposts one's unhealthy countenance. The dramatic shock from the transformation in his own appearance and the consequent self-evaluation as “ghost-like” implies the traveler's maladaptation to the foreign land.

A similar description of a “withered” body is documented in *Record*, which depicts a sea merchant family from Fuzhou drifting to the ghost island. The environment seems to be similar to the familiar Chinese society, but the residents not only “look bizarrely withered and haggard, but also poorly and indecently dressed” (形軀枯悴, 生理窮窶) (*Record*, 1239). The sea merchant family later finds out that all these islanders are starving ghosts yearning for the random feasts of the dharma assembly. More worryingly, the health condition of this family is radically deteriorating due to living among ghosts and inhaling their breath (鬼氣 *guiqi*):

[The merchants] have lived in the ghost kingdom for several years. The reeking and vapping breath of ghosts was so unbearable that the father and the older brother died. The youngest son is the only survivor.

居數年, 不堪鬼氣薰蒸, 父兄皆死, 唯幼子存。(*Record*, 1239)

This story also applies the withered appearance and the associated image of “ghosts” to present an unusual and tormented body, which tangibly manifests the negative influence caused by foreign environments. Moreover, it goes beyond a metaphorical expression as “ghost-like” and becomes a precondition of the otherworldly landscape. The breath of ghosts constitutes the vital characteristic of the foreign space and is specified with two terms, namely, “reek” (薰 *xun*), and “steam” (蒸 *zheng*), i.e., a moisturized warm air with an aggressive smell.

The *qi* presented in this story is neither an ambivalent airy element, nor an invisible internal feeling that stimulates emotional turbulence. Instead, the text attributes to the *qi* a material and perceptible form as an indigenous essence, so that people can distinguish its humidity, temperature, and smell. This pervasive harmful air permeates the land and creatures, while also functioning as an observable feature to indicate the inwardness of both the residents and space. Elizabeth Hsu has illustrated the bodily ecology functioned by *qi* (氣) and *xing* (形) by examining several early Chinese medicinal texts. The condition and the equilibrium of *qi* are manifested through the various visible outward forms, which shelter the inner flowing *qi* and resonate with the natural environment, including wind and the four seasons (Hsu 2009, 103–124). Such a warm and dangerous atmosphere also reminds readers of the notorious miasma (瘴 *zhang*), a prevalent endemic disease in tropical and subtropical areas as understood by northern literati; it symbolizes fear, anxiety, and foreignness, but is possibly curable with appropriate healing (Yang 2010, 163–192). When travelers visit this land by mistake, they are forced to experience a slow soaking and all-pervasive deterioration. Although the reeking and vapping air from all around them corrupts the travelers’ bodies, after leaving the ghost land to receive appropriate nursing it is still possible to make a full recovery. The complexion of the surviving son changes then tangibly from withered to rosy glowing, a sign of sufficient

vitality and blood circulation, described as “the gradual recovery of a normal, human-like complexion” (漸復人色) (*Record*, 1239).

In contrast to the reversible complexion, scars or severed limbs indicate the most traumatic and indelible experience inscribed on travelers’ bodies. In “Gao Yan,” the traveler does not experience violence in person during the journey, but witnesses fighting and slaughter among foreigners as a bystander. However, the reason of his traveling stems from extreme violence, as he had stabbed a friend to death out of rage. Gao Yan is not essentially a victim, but a fugitive perpetrator who has committed a homicide.

There is an extensive description of torture and ferocious conflicts in *Record*. A story notes that a sea merchant living in Mingzhou is captured and enslaved by local islanders after the shipwreck. Whenever islanders hold a banquet, they use red-hot iron chopsticks to scald his thighs and watch him crying as public entertainment. The text depicts the visual shock of legs full of scars and scabs in the end by using oracle bones as the main image; an ancient Chinese tool that manifests prophecies by observing crisscrossing cracks caused by burning tortoise shells or animal bones:

The merchant was trapped on the island for three years and finally got a chance to escape by hitchhiking a ship. [It is witnessed that] His burned thighs looked as if they were tortoise oracles.

凡留三年，得便舟脫歸，兩股皆如龜卜。(Record, 86)

In a series of stories about giants, the injured body also functions as eye-catching evidence of adventures. The stories usually involve a group of sea merchants who have lost their way after storms, and struggle to escape by fighting with giants living on unknown islands. One story mentions, for example, that a giant pierces a merchant’s shoulder with a colossal finger and binds him to a tree to cook him alive. The merchant “desperately endures the pain” (忍痛極力) and successfully escapes by chopping off the giant’s finger, which is as huge as a wooden or steel rafter to support roofs (*Record*, 249–250). Another tale describes a group of seamen hastily breaking free of a raging giant by chopping his arm off with sharp axes, and preserving it with salt as a trophy:

The amputated limb of the giant was over five feet long. The seamen salted it, bringing it back for display to other people.

臂長過五尺，舟中人涖之以鹽，攜歸示人。(Record, 416)

Although the description of the feelings of the sufferers is limited to sketching the intensity of pain and the variety of injuries, pain and violence are widely represented in these fictional journeys to dramatize the unknown and danger of faraway lands. The scars inscribed on travelers’ bodies, the bloody limbs left

in battles, and the prevalent but inexpressible pain, form the climactic moment of such represented travels through various sensational and horrendous bodily images. The end of these conflicts often highlights a body which cannot be restored to health. As the wounded body stops bleeding and is thickly covered by new tissue over time, the closed but permanent physical mark also symbolizes the completion of the journey and the irreversible bodily transformation.

The above-mentioned bodily signs are not a simple change of appearance, but are linked to internal organs, mentality, and external influences. From one's complexion to the scarred body, the corporal representation is predominantly a visualized portrayal that reveals observable criteria. Both travelers with exhausted and injured bodies, and the foreign landscape presented through various sensory impressions, indicate the body's key role in shaping and conveying a rare experience—such as traveling to foreign lands—that usually lacks a familiar context and relies instead on concrete descriptions of personal perceptions. The bodily experience of travelers thus establishes a connection between individuals and other people, thus facilitating the imagination of foreign realms and empathy toward travel events.

5. The consciousness of the Central Lands: the core of shaping travel experiences?

The body is the natural and intuitive organism for presenting travelers' experiences, as it blends with environmental stimuli and physiological reactions. As shown by the previous discussion, these foreign travels are apparently neither pleasant nor safe. This begs the question: what underlying factors shape such consistent opinions on traveling among foreign lands? The final exclamation by Gao Yan provides some clues:

I was lucky to survive and to re-experience the cultural atmosphere of the Central Lands. During this journey, my heart was illuminated out of self-awareness. I could revisit not only the cities and chariots but also the relics of previous sages. I could enjoy wearing fine silk clothes, and tasting cuisines again. If someone spits on my face, clutches my throat, or beats my back, I would bend my head to tolerate such disgrace and not dare to hurt people anymore.

以逃死，幸得餘息，復見華風。間心自明，再遊都輦，復觀先子丘壠。身再衣幣帛，口重味甘鮮。有人唾吾面，扼吾喉，拊吾背，吾且俛首受辱，焉敢復賊害人命乎！（“Gao Yan,” 438）

By contrasting two types of actions, Gao Yan enthusiastically expresses his joy at returning to the motherland. The first is the comfortable and highly developed

lifestyle of the Central Lands, including sightseeing, tasting cuisine, wearing fine silk clothes, and revisiting the conventional legacies built by Confucius's masters. The second is various physical humiliations such as spitting, clutching, beating, and bending his head to beg for a chance to stay in the homeland. Similar declarations also appear in his complaints about life in the North: "At that time, I yearned to be a dog living in the Central Lands, but this dream never came true" (吾是時思欲為中國之犬，莫可得也); "I pondered that I would live in the Central Lands just for a single day, rather than living in such a place for a thousand years" (吾自思：此活千百年，不若中國之生一日也) ("Gao Yan," 436). To stay in the homeland, Gao Yan would rather disgrace himself by tolerating rude transgressions of physical boundaries. His return involves performing a series of cultural activities with a body that is now re-immersed in familiar social norms, to express his recognition of the social norms and etiquette of the Central Lands.

It is worth noting that *Zhongguo* (中國) or *Hua* (華), the term that refers to the Central Lands, appears several times in "Gao Yan" and may reveal multifaceted meanings. First, the Central Lands inherit the cognition of the cosmological and political center; at the same time, the term refers to a political entity, a state that is differentiated from its neighbors. This conventional term is often mentioned or listed together with other kingdoms in "Gao Yan." The traveler's interest in pragmatic matters, from natural resources to law systems, also echoes the pragmatic awareness of political boundaries that have gradually arisen through frequent interactions with foreign kingdoms. The Song imperial court had long-term military disputes with Khitan in the north, but it also created economic prosperity through overseas trade in the south with Sanfoqi (三佛齊, i.e., the Srivijaya empire), Champa, and the Arabsphere. Such multistate complexity, as well as the flourishing foreign Muslim community in Guangzhou and Quanzhou, show the multi-dimensional significance of international affairs from the ninth to fourteen centuries. This was an enduring phenomenon, spanning from the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period to the Song dynasty and the Mongol Yuan period.

Secondly, the self-image of the traveler based on living in the Central Lands leads to a sense of orthodoxy that is based on the traditional cultivation of the scholar. There is no specific explanation for the philosophical root of "Gao Yan." Nevertheless, through the theme and the applied language, it is clear that the bodily engagement of "Gao Yan" is neither Taoist transcendence nor Buddhist abstinence, but is more akin to the Confucianism practiced by ordinary literati. For example, it utilizes the form of historiography, stressing the cultural activities, and mentions repetitively the expectation of "the Central Lands," the "gentle scholar" (士君子 *shi junzi*), and "the manifestation of righteousness" (明道 *ming dao*). Moreover, the Confucian context of "Gao Yan" is also presented in its realistic tendency and the contrast between the "normal" Central Lands and the "abnormal" kingdoms that surround them. "Gao

Yan" embeds suspicious or surreal information through opening phrases such as, "I heard from someone" (聞 *wen*) to distinguish between hearsay and first-hand experience. What happened in foreign lands is usually regarded as excessive and abnormal by Gao Yan, in contrast to his life in the Central Lands. The word *zhong* (中) not only means "center," but also implies a set of cultural principles, including moderation (中庸 *zhongyong*), achieving balance (中和 *zhonghe*), or the right way (中正 *zhongzheng*). In the story these concepts foreshadow a warning sign that the traveler's life in foreign lands is, both geographically and culturally, a destined deviation from elite cultivation.

Considering the basic self-discipline and opinions on travel of an ordinary Chinese scholar may help us understand a story such as "Gao Yan," which presents obvious value judgments and perceptions. These include cherishing the body that is received by one's parents and represents the outset of self-cultivation, and the discouragement of long-distance travel without a concrete destination. For example, "While your parents are alive, you should not go too far afield in tour travels. If you do, your whereabouts should always be known" (父母在, 不遠遊。遊必有方), as stated in *The Analects of Confucius* (論語 *Lunyu*, 1979, translated by Lau, 54–55); and "Our bodies—to every hair and bit of skin—are received by us from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them" (身體髮膚, 受之父母, 不敢毀傷), as specified in *The Classic of Filial Piety* (孝經 *Xiao jing*, 1879, translated by Legge, 466). By contrast, the travel motivation and wandering experience of Gao Yan are a violation of classic Confucian principles. Interestingly, Gao Yan's physiological state is closely linked to his mentality. He is so withered and weary during his guilty exile that he barely recognizes himself. When he is pardoned and can return to live openly in the Central Lands, he finally regains comfort and harmony.

Moreover, the emphasis on moral-cultural superiority and drawing boundaries between the self and others is not an isolated case, but may resonate with the prevalent Sino-barbarian dichotomy (華夷之辨 *hua yi zhi bian*), which highlights how the moral and cultural discrepancy results in an irreconcilable separation. International politics, with the Central Lands surrounded by powerful neighboring states, challenged the imagined world order in the Song dynasty (see, e.g., Rossabi 1983; Ge 2011). Although it is still under discussion whether the Song period can be contextualized as witnessing a burgeoning of "nationalism," and how "ethnicized orthodoxy" transformed into "ethnicized moralism" (Yang 2019),² it is undeniable

² Yang proposed the reinterpretation of Sino-barbarian dichotomy by examining the works of Guwen (古文) scholars and *Daoxue* (道學) philosophers, including Han Yu (韓愈), Shi Je (石介), Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修), and Liu Chang (劉敞). Yang also illustrated the gradual formation of "Chineseness" based on morality and culture, which mainly appeal to the self-practice of Chinese elites, while not excluding or re-educating other ethnic groups (Yang 2019, 74–97).

that many Song scholars attempted to discover the origin of their anxiety and self-doubt about being marginalized and challenged by other powerful states. Many signs of political debates and philosophical trends in the Song dynasty have shown that “the resistance to foreign civilizations is most commonly manifested in the elaboration and overrated exaggeration of the inherent culture” (Ge 2011, 47, 59). This chapter does not intend to further discuss the conceptual transformation and knowledge formation of “the Central Lands” or *Tianxia* (天下, “all under heaven”), but proposes that these shifting concepts may shape the fundamental order of “Gao Yan” and other stories depicting overseas events. Paying attention to their applied language and allusions—in other words, how they elaborate known sources to frame a story—may be helpful in contextualizing those texts which seem to be overly obsessed with knowledge. Depicting the overseas experience is neither a cliché nor a superficial entertainment born from curiosity; rather, it consciously fabricates a series of comparisons between “the Central Lands” and “the other lands” to reveal a common concern among intellectuals in a specific period.

It is not uncommon to find depictions of exoticism and even xenophobia in premodern Chinese fiction, and some of the stories express a distinctive eeriness by depicting unusual body experiences. By analyzing “Hu Daoqia” (胡道洽) and “Shirenjia” (士人甲), the two strange tales in *Stories of Darkness and Brightness* (幽明錄 *Youminglu*) (ca. 420–479 CE), Xie Mingxun (2003) elucidates the anxious social atmosphere regarding foreigners’ invasion, as revealed in the novel’s motif of “changing into a barbarian” (化胡 *hua hu*). Whether by vilifying a foreign physician as a wild fox, or by presenting a dramatic embarrassment by forcefully replacing a reborn scholar’s feet with the ugly hairy feet of a foreigner, both stories exhibit critical hostility mixed with teasing, and vigilance toward foreigners through parodying, or by combining animal-like physical forms with such characteristics as stench and hairiness (Xie 2003, 45–69). Instead of imagining the transformed body parts of a foreigner, “Gao Yan” presents a comprehensive depiction of, and comparison with surrounding lands. It also applies authentic bodily perceptions and convincing knowledge as building blocks to elaborate the world-making, which consists in neither a single landscape nor a stable center decorated with faraway peripheries, but rather a dynamic travel route presented through large-scale mobility. The travelers’ movements and transportation, and their feelings and reactions to foreign spaces, inject fresh and perceptible information to form a sharp contrast between the overseas and domestic worlds. Similar phenomena related to alertly defending and distinguishing the Chinese identity are also revealed in the emerging system of colloquial novel during the Song Dynasty, especially the historical topic of “Three Kingdoms” (三國 *sanguo*), which emphasized Han-Chinese orthodoxy (Ge 2011, 61). Together, these cases indicate that the cultural psychology regarding foreign culture has always been a minor

but enduring issue in Chinese fictional writing, developing different concerns and schemes with the times.

It should not be forgotten that the travel motivation of Gao Yan is to evade justice by escaping abroad. He is a murderer who has neither a choice nor a place in the Central Lands—until the new emperor's amnesty. This overseas journey can be paraphrased as the bitter result of leaving the homeland. Every land he visits reveals various deficiencies or excesses, and every foreigner he meets presents more or less certain moral deficiency, including brutality, voracity, and lack of proper education. Gao Yan himself belongs to the ranks of immorality, but is fortunate enough to restore his identity through the rare mercy shown by the celestial son. All the detailed travel and sensory experiences are summarized as a restated reprimand of the Confucius scholar's teaching, which is clearly illustrated by the commentator:

Gao Yan is self-conceited and proud of his talents, killing someone while acting on impulse out of drunkenness. He fled to the ghost land, where was bitterly cold and nobody lived there. He struggled, barely searching grass and water to survive, even hunting mice for food. How could he still regard himself as human in such a living condition? It is a great blessing that he has survived the wandering and avoids the death penalty, such a chance to reclaim his humanity is only one in ten thousand. If scholars and gentlemen read this story, they should keep it in mind as a precept.

恃其才，卒以凶酗而殺人害命，其竄服鬼方，苦寒無人境，求草水之一飲，捕鼠而食，安敢比於人哉？得生還以為大幸，偶脫伏屍東市，復齒人倫，亦萬之一二也。士君子觀之，以為戒焉。（“Gao Yan,” 439）

This comment discloses the main theme of moral teaching in the story. That is, the wandering across foreign lands should be regarded as a vivid punishment for the impertinent and guilty traveler. In the commentator's view, Gao Yan is almost degraded as “non-human” since he commits a murder, and either the death penalty or straying outside the Central Lands is the unavoidable punishment, until the rare pardon. “Gao Yan” mainly emphasizes the necessity of self-discipline to avoid painful wandering, rather than the unknown danger represented by faraway lands and peoples, which is manifested through the traveler's heartfelt expression based on concrete perceptions and experiences. According to the traveler's statement, traveling in faraway lands is an accumulation of agony, whilst returning is always a godsent blessing.

6. Conclusion

This chapter focused on the text of “Gao Yan” to discover how bodily experiences constitute the representation of overseas journeys and the potential concerns they express. Such overlooked fictional journeys should not be regarded as isolated cases, but as one of the interwoven links between the expansion of long-distance travel and the established culture, expressed in the languages of the body and the Other. Different from the supernatural motifs usually associated with immortal lands, stories such as “Gao Yan” depict the extraterritorial world and travel routes in a more realistic way, to present a worldview blended with textual sources and geographic knowledge. There is also a shift in perspective from the transcendental encounter of the scholar’s romance to a suffering Chinese male traveler’s perception of living in foreign lands, by presenting a group portrait of foreigners with various customs and physical features—especially the image of foreign women. Apart from seeking novelty, bodily experiences play an essential role in these short stories of overseas travels, which transform the foreign lands into an understandable order based on Confucius’s orthodoxy. As a result, a body constantly influenced by travel makes what happens in foreign lands more concretely perceptible. Meanwhile, a body cultivated by a specific social and cultural norm also constitutes an organic device to perceive and interact with a strange environment. Such descriptions can be placed in the broader context of how Chinese intellectuals constitute their identity and their relationship with neighboring states and foreigners, as well as how fictional writers express this concern through deliberate fabrication. “Gao Yan” elaborates on concerns about morals and the world order based on Sino-centrism by depicting the different sensory perceptions of the physical and mental imbalance due to wandering in foreign lands, and the harmony experienced after returning to the Central Lands. Through examining a representative imaginary journey in the Song period, this chapter attempted to expand the analysis by combining the body concept and travel culture to interpret how fictional works embody sensory details and overseas experiences.

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