

Two perspectives on early encounters with the West: a comparative study of Bin Chun's Cheng Cha Notes and Zhang Deyi's maritime travel accounts

Hongyi Zhang

School of Humanities and Arts, Hunan International Economics University, Changsha, China

15081978899@163.com

Abstract. This paper focuses on Bin Chun, one of the first official envoys to the West in the late Qing Dynasty, and his work *Notes on Riding the Raft*, as well as translator Zhang Deyi and his *Accounts of Maritime Voyages*. Through a comparative literary analysis approach, the method systematically examines the differences between the two works in terms of narrative perspective, focal point of observation, stylistic features, and cultural mentality. The study shows that Bin Chun, as a representative of the traditional literati, upheld the classical note-writing tradition, depicting the West with an aestheticized and assimilatory gaze, reflecting a sense of cultural superiority; whereas Zhang Deyi, as a modern intellectual trained at the Tongwen Guan, adopted a technical and analytical gaze, focusing on objective recording and the exploration of mechanisms, exhibiting characteristics of early modern enlightenment. This paper argues that these two works respectively represent two distinct ways in which Chinese modern intellectuals responded to Western civilization, marking a key turning point in the evolution of traditional Chinese travel writing toward modern documentary prose.

Keywords: Binchun, Zhang Deyi, Chenga Notes, Maritime Wonders, Travel Gaze

1. Introduction

During the late Qing period, Chinese intellectuals responded to the shocks of Sino-Western encounters in a unique way through writings produced during their travels to the West, which has gradually attracted in-depth attention from academia in recent years. In 1866, a delegation led by Bin Chun traveled to Europe, marking the first time that the Qing government officially organized personnel to set foot in the West. Two important documents emerged from this journey: Binchun's "Notes on Boarding the Raft" and Zhang Deyi's "Records of Maritime Travels." These works not only provide firsthand materials for "opening one's eyes to see the world" but also reflect the significant differentiation among Chinese literati in cognitive approaches and writing traditions in the face of tremendous changes. Existing studies show that scholars often explore these works from perspectives such as diplomatic history, literature, or communication studies. For example, Liu Yang argues that the Qing court's dispatch of Bin Chun was driven by the intention to avoid conflicts over formal diplomatic "ritual disputes," with the ultimate goal of safeguarding the empire's dignity [1]. Yang Hua points out that Zhang Deyi's records of Western customs demonstrate an effort to understand foreign cultures. Although still influenced by the traditional literati perspective, it already exhibits a nascent openness of "inquiring into local customs when entering a country." Ye Lu further proposes, from the perspective of reception studies, that the circulation processes and functional positioning of the two books among late Qing readers differed: one was geared more toward aesthetic consumption within the literati circle, while the other had greater practical value for knowledge enlightenment [2-3].

However, existing research has largely focused on discussions of individual figures and has yet to undertake a systematic and in-depth comparison of the differences between Bin Chun and Zhang Deyi in terms of their ways of viewing, narrative strategies, and cultural stances. Based on this context, this paper intends to adopt methods of close textual reading and comparative analysis, starting from their personal backgrounds, to explore how the two observed the West from different perspectives and formed divergent writing styles and cultural expressions. This study not only helps to more precisely grasp the spiritual condition and responses of late Qing intellectuals when encountering Western modernity, but also provides new textual clues and avenues of thought for understanding the complex path of China's modern cultural transformation.

2. Literature review

In recent years, the writings on travels to the West during the late Qing period have gradually attracted scholars' attention. In particular, Binchun and Zhang Deyi—two of the earliest Chinese literati to travel to Europe with official delegations—left behind travel notes and maritime narratives that not only recorded their personal experiences in foreign lands but also serve as crucial windows for examining the cultural mindset and stylistic changes in the early interactions between China and the West. Current scholarly research on these two works often approaches them from perspectives such as the authors' identities, narrative techniques, cultural positions, and modes of dissemination.

Regarding Binchun and his travel notes on the raft journey, Liu Yang, drawing from diplomatic practice, believes that the Qing court's dispatch of Binchun was essentially a strategic arrangement, intending to use an informal visit to avoid ceremonial disputes and maintain the court's dignity [1]. Chai Xulin, on the other hand, points out that Binchun's cross-cultural writing was deeply constrained by his traditional scholar cognition, constituting a 'disciplined observation [4].' Zhang Huijia and Zhang Yu further, with the help of narrative theory, analyze the tendency toward "unreliable narration" within the text, noting that the author often uses a traditional Chinese aesthetic framework to process Western realities, creating a narrative tension where reality and imagination intertwine [5]. Duan Wen calls for greater attention to this often-overlooked journey, arguing that its symbolic significance far exceeds its actual diplomatic outcomes [6].

Zhang Deyi and his accounts of maritime adventures have received different interpretations. Huang Shili systematically examined Zhang's eight accounts of adventures, pointing out that his writing shows a modernizing progression from early curiosity-seeking to more rational approaches in later periods, reflecting adjustments to his knowledge system shaped by his educational experience at the Tongwen Guan [7]. Yang Hua focused on Zhang Deyi's descriptions of Western folklore and found that, although he still maintained the traditional scholar's perspective, he demonstrated an attempt to 'inquire about a country and its customs,' beginning to consciously understand the social mechanisms behind these practices [2].

Ye Lu approaches from the dimension of dissemination, pointing out that 'Chengcha Notes' primarily satisfies the imaginative consumption of foreign lands by the scholar-official class [3]. whereas 'Maritime Records of Wonders', due to its detailed daily accounts and practical information, was more regarded by the groups involved in Westernization and reform as an important source for understanding the West, thus realizing a shift in the text's function from "recording the exotic" to "pursuing knowledge".

Overall, existing research has clearly revealed the writing differences between the two individuals due to differences in identity and education, with solid accumulation in areas such as narrative strategies, changes in mindset, and reception and dissemination. However, these findings mostly focus on individual analyses or parallel discussions, and a systematic comparative study has yet to be conducted on their respective gaze modes, text construction strategies, and their differing positions in the evolution of modern thought. Against this academic backdrop, this paper attempts, through a comparative perspective, to re-examine the cognitive differences and writing transformations represented by these two works, aiming to more deeply reveal the multiple spiritual stances and responses exhibited by late Qing intellectuals when confronted with Western modernity.

3. Author identity and travel role: imperial envoys and apprentice translators

The stark differences in the identities of Binchun and Zhang Deyi determine that one represents a 'top-down official gaze,' while the other embodies a 'bottom-up personal observation,' which is the primary reason for the disparity between the two works.

3.1. Analysis of identity differences

3.1.1. Binchun: the traditional imperial envoy and poet

The Qing government ultimately selected a figure like Binchun, who appeared to be "non-mainstream," to undertake the pioneering mission of the first official diplomatic delegation to the West for the following reasons.

First, Binchun came from the Manchu Plain White Banner. Compared to Han officials, his background could earn greater trust from the core layers of the imperial court. Second, his official rank at the time was not high, which instead became a special advantage, allowing the Qing court to effectively avoid ceremonial difficulties in formal diplomatic occasions. Traveling under the pretext of a "journey" rather than being formally "dispatched as an envoy" afforded the Qing government considerable diplomatic flexibility.

In addition, Binchun had frequent interactions with intellectuals at the time who advocated understanding the West. Before his journey, Xu Jishe gifted him the *Yinghuan Zhilue*, and Dong Xun also gave him the *Suiyao Zaibi*, while Li Shanlan and others wrote prefaces for his *Chuza* travel notes. These exchanges helped him accumulate considerable knowledge and information. On the other hand, Binchun had always enjoyed traveling and had a highly adaptable personality, which helped him

cope with long journeys and unfamiliar environments. His experience working at the General Administration of Customs, handling documentation, and liaising with foreigners also provided him with practical experience relevant to foreign affairs.

Binchun's mindset on his overseas visits displays a distinct 'top-down' characteristic, embodying a dual role as both a 'tourist' and a cultural emissary. As an official sent on a state-sanctioned 'journey,' his primary task was to conduct ceremonial inspections on behalf of the Qing government, requiring him to provide the imperial system with intelligence on exotic affairs while also meticulously recording details of official interactions. This naturally endowed his accounts with the official document qualities of a 'performance report.'

3.1.2. Zhang Deyi: the modern apprentice parliamentarian

Zhang Deyi was among the first batch of foreign language students trained at the Tongwen Guan in the capital, and his role in the diplomatic mission was that of an 'apprentice translator.' In addition, the accompanying personnel were: 'Feng Yi, Deyi, Guang Ying, Yan Hui, along with six servants.' Among the accompanying personnel, there were also two foreigners: Frenchman Deshan and Briton Selar, both of whom had previously served as assisting tax officials and were proficient in Chinese. Furthermore, the three students from the Tongwen Guan were all proficient in English, which significantly enhanced the convenience of this diplomatic visit.

Zhang Deyi's mindset is that of a bottom-up 'learner' and 'information collector.' In his observation and documentation of the outside world, he pays particular attention to capturing various novel experiences. His recording activities, centered on 'narrating the unusual,' not only satisfy his personal cognitive interests and provide self-entertainment but also have a communicative aspect for sharing with others, carrying a strong sense of personal character.

3.2. Modes of gaze and focus of observation: poetic watching and technical gaze

This constitutes the core distinction between the two figures, reflecting their differing interpretations of John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze." It refers to the way tourists observe and perceive destinations during their travels, a perception heavily shaped by the tourists' own socio-cultural backgrounds and media influence. The tourist gaze is not merely an act of seeing; it also participates in the construction and interpretation of the tourism experience, while reflecting tourists' preconceived expectations of the destination—expectations that often derive from depictions in tourism promotions, films, and online sharing platforms. Binchun adopted an aesthetic and naturalizing gaze, whereas Zhang Deyi inclined toward an analytical and documentary gaze.

3.2.1. Different 'gazes' on Western technology

Faced with the most striking achievements of Western industrial civilization, the two reacted in completely different ways. Binchun's observations were impressionistic and aestheticized. He was accustomed to applying and assimilating Western landscapes through the imagery of traditional Chinese culture, conducting a kind of cultural 'naturalization'.

At Cheng Cha Notes

"On the 11th, overcast. Arrived in Hong Kong at the Chen hour. The peaks overlapped like a painting. Entering the harbor, dozens of miles of uneven buildings, nestled against the hills and slopes, presented a scenery distinct from Shanghai." He employed the distinctly Chinese aesthetic concept of "scenery resembling a painting" to synthesize the topographical features of Hong Kong. This is not an observation from the perspective of geography, but an aesthetic classification, instantly transforming the unfamiliar colonial landscape into a familiar and harmless aesthetic object.

"The streets are clean, the houses are four to five stories high, with carved railings and painted panels, adorned with exquisite decorations. The shops are densely packed, and the scenery is remarkable." "Exquisite ornamentation" is a term traditionally used to describe the carved beams and painted rafters of classical Chinese architecture, while "remarkable scene" also constitutes a vague, impressionistic aesthetic judgment. The text mostly overlooks specific details such as the materials of the streets, the architectural styles, and the window designs, and only gives a general impression similar to evaluating a Chinese garden or city.

In contrast, Zhang Deyi's way of understanding involves a 'technical gaze.' He not only records the novelty of Western objects but also strives to deeply comprehend the principles of their operation and their social functions.

"He emphasized the significance of freshwater for maritime navigation, noting that steamships heat water through fire to harness the power of steam for propelling the vessel, with even the vaporized water being repurposed for practical use. Around the top and bottom of the ship, copper and iron pipes run throughout, supplying the needs of hundreds of people for drinking, eating, and washing, without any shortages." He not only accurately described the basic principles of the steam engine, but also discovered the transformation and circulation of energy and matter contained within it. He also paid attention to the 'copper and iron pipes' spread all over the ship as a means of implementation. This surpasses Binchun's general descriptions such as 'firewheel cart' and 'very ingenious.'

His focus of observation was on the organization and professionalism of the hospital. The text precisely summarized the modern hospital's bureaucratic management model based on professional division of labor, with each of the eight characters

having its own responsibility, orderly and well-regulated.' Its deeper value lies in the fact that it has touched upon how society responds to the social issue of 'disease' in an institutionalized manner.

3.3. Different 'gazes' on Western society

Regarding sociocultural phenomena, the perceptions of Binchun and Zhang Deyi stood in striking contrast. The former often adopts a culturally-centered evaluation, while Zhang Deyi tends to provide a more objective description of the phenomena themselves.

3.3.1. Bin Chun: a moral judgment gaze measured by confucian etiquette

Binchun often judged Western customs according to the standards of Chinese ritual and morality. For instance, he expressed "extreme shock" at the public social interactions between men and women, describing women as "bare-chested and back-exposed" and men as "embracing their waists and circling around them," ultimately concluding that it was a "vulgar custom of foreigners." He did not attempt to understand what this social practice meant in Western society; instead, he immediately activated his own culture's moral review mechanism, directly condemning it as a behavior that was unritualistic and shocking. Binchun recorded this incident with the purpose of showing his fellow scholars back home the absurdity of Western "foreign customs," thereby highlighting the civility of Chinese ritual teaching.

3.3.2. Zhang Deyi: aesthetic descriptive gaze focused on detailed restoration

Zhang Deyi also recorded the balls, but his focus was on the procedural specifics: 'Music played above, while men and women danced below... All the women favored high bosoms and slender waists, so during dancing their skirts were heavily supported, with edges adorned with jewels and gold thread, sparkling like starlight.' 'Men and women looked at each other, sometimes affectionately, sometimes with dislike, sometimes nodding, sometimes bowing, sometimes holding hands, sometimes raising their arms, sometimes the man stepped back while the woman advanced, sometimes the woman stepped back while the man advanced, sometimes both advanced, sometimes moved apart, sometimes drew close to each other, sometimes raised hands in a circle, sometimes bent toward each other—various forms continued until the music ended.' Although he also considered it 'rather improper to watch,' his main purpose was to faithfully record this cultural phenomenon itself. He meticulously and precisely documented the full sequence of movements in social dances, and he also observed and recorded women's clothing features and their visual effects, which was an aesthetic observation rather than a moral judgment.

3.4. Text construction and narrative strategies: the poetic tradition of 'notes' and the documentary innovation of 'tales of wonders'

The genre and style of a text are external manifestations of its function. The titles of the two works convey implicit hints about their different literary traditions and narrative strategies.

3.4.1. Chengcha notes: the afterglow of classical note-writing style

The term "notes" inherits the long-standing tradition of classical Chinese literary notes. This literary form is usually short in length, with an elegant and concise language style, often interspersed with poetic exchanges and other literary content, reflecting writing characteristics guided primarily by literary aesthetics, and its literary value often surpasses its practical function. In terms of its writing motivation and target audience, Chengcha Notes aims to provide domestic elite scholar-officials with a window into glimpsing the Western world, satisfying their curiosity and imagination about foreign civilizations. In this sense, in the context of the late Qing Dynasty, the work primarily functioned as a "cultural consumer product" within the scholar-official class.

3.4.2. Maritime travel accounts: the modernity documentary behind 'Shuqi'

'Shuqi' also emphasizes the 'extraordinary,' but the focus is on 'narration,' that is, telling or stating. Its literary form is diary-style, with detailed storytelling and a more plain and accessible language style. Although it is close to a simple day-to-day account, it possesses extremely high information density. Its function goes beyond mere literary appreciation and holds potential value for knowledge dissemination and social enlightenment. In terms of historical source value, 'Shuqi' is more akin to an original archive, providing first-hand social information for later reformists and advocates of modernization, and can be regarded as an "enlightenment reading" oriented toward the future.

4. Cultural mindset and historical positioning: traditional elegies and modern harbingers

From a broader historical perspective, these two works are precisely at the crossroads of the transformation of Chinese cultural mentality and the writing paradigms of travel literature.

4.1. Chengcha notes:the last glimpse of the traditional 'worldview'

Binchun's writing seems to be bound by the invisible shackles of Chinese culture, completing a "graceful journey" that appears free yet is in fact constrained. The West depicted in his work is not truly foreign, but a hazy reflection that has been thoroughly Sinicized and veiled under a cultural filter. He strives to incorporate unfamiliar new phenomena into the traditional cognitive framework for interpretation. This writing strategy is, in essence, an unconscious elegy for the soon-to-collapse 'Celestial Empire' mindset and a splendid farewell to the paradigm of traditional Chinese travel literature.

4.2. Maritime travel accounts:the difficult emergence of the modern 'worldview'

Zhang Deyi's writing is more like a 'struggling apprentice' breaking free from cultural shackles. Although his style still carries a touch of naivety, he demonstrates a writing attitude characterized by a commitment to objectivity, the pursuit of new knowledge, and meticulous observation. This is no longer about fitting foreign cultures into existing frameworks, but rather an attempt to truly understand the internal logic of another civilizational system with an equal and rational perspective. His writing directly influenced later works, such as Liang Qichao's New Continent Travel Notes, and marks an important starting point in the modern transformation of Chinese travel literature.

5. Conclusion

This article takes Binchun's Chengcha Notes and Zhang Deyi's Maritime Wonders—two works from the late Qing period—as research subjects. Through detailed comparison, it attempts to reveal significant differences in their modes of observation, narrative logic, and cultural stances, arising from the vast disparity in their social positions. Restricted by his social background, Binchun tends to process foreign sights through the aesthetic lens of a traditional literatus, incorporating Western scenery into familiar expressive frameworks. In contrast, Zhang Deyi, an 'apprentice translator,' exhibits a bottom-up, almost technical observational stance. He endeavors to depict the operational mechanisms of objects and record the details of social operations, demonstrating cognitive interests that differ markedly from those of Binchun.

These two works, in fact, reflect two different response paths of late Qing intellectuals when encountering the West: one still lingering in the twilight of the 'cosmological worldview,' and the other tentatively exploring the difficult transition toward a 'global perspective.' They are not only valuable case studies of how Chinese scholars adjusted their cognitive frameworks, but also vividly mark the crucial shift in modern travel writing from poetic note-taking to a more fact-based literary style.

However, this study's analysis focuses primarily on the text itself and does not sufficiently connect with the political and social context of the late Qing, reader responses, or the dynamic process of cross-cultural transmission. In the future, more archival materials and newspaper sources could be introduced, or corpus analysis could be conducted using digital humanities methods. Combining interdisciplinary perspectives can further explore how this topic moves beyond literary studies into broader fields of historical culture and the exchange of ideas.

References

- [1] Liu, Y. (2019). The first attempt to send envoys to the west: An analysis of the Binchun Mission in the late Qing Dynasty. *Historical Archives*, (03), 100–109.
- [2] Yang, H. (2020). "Entering the country and asking about customs": Zhang Deyi's attitudes, experiences, and understanding of western folklore. *Folklore Studies*, (06), 97–106, 158–159.
- [3] Ye, L. (2021). Research on the dissemination of travel notes to foreign lands in the late Qing Dynasty. Liaoning University.
- [4] Chai, X. L. (2019). Pioneers of modern overseas travel: The cultural journey of the Binchun Mission. *Journal of Shaoxing University of Arts and Sciences (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 39(03), 74–81.
- [5] Zhang, H. J., & Zhang, Y. (2025). Mirrors through misunderstandings: On unreliable narration in Binchun's "Notes of River Rafting". *Journal of Huainan Normal University*, 27(01), 95–99, 104.
- [6] Duan, W. (2023). The "forgotten" journey: Binchun's delegation trip to Europe and its evaluation. *Xin Chu Culture*, (30), 13–15.
- [7] Huang, S. L. (2019). Research on Zhang Deyi's "Accounts of Maritime Wonders". Hunan University.