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WOMEN'S TRAVEL IN THE TANG DYNASTY:

Gendered Identity in a Hierarchical Society

Abstract: Women's travel writing has received increasing attention, with English literature being the focus of most studies. In contrast, Chinese women have been absent from historical travel narratives. The Tang Dynasty (618-907), a golden period in Chinese history, had a rare collection of women's travel poetry, a genre offering richness and insights on female travelers' experiences and perceptions of "other" places they had visited. Drawing on women's travel writings from *All Tang Poetry*, this study illustrates how travel narratives help formulate and reinforce, or downplay, gendered identities in the contexts of social hierarchy and patriarchal ideology. The research contributes to the gender, travel and identity literature from a Chinese language and culture perspective.

Keywords: The Tang Dynasty, women's travel poetry, gendered identity, social hierarchy, feminist leisure, Chinese culture

INTRODUCTION

In history, although women also travel, the act of traveling *per se* has more often been associated as a male activity. Accordingly, places ascribed to women are often private or domestic spaces like home and family (Roberson, 2009). Gendered space or place as such has served as a mechanism through which one group with more power maintains and reinforces its advantage over another with less power (Spain, 1992). Thus, by traveling or going away from home, women develop insights, power, and identities through crossing or breaking boundaries of gendered space. More recently, as Walchester (2012) observes, the focus on gender and travel has been shifting from essentialist arguments about women travelers to perspectives on female travel writings as reflections of their historical, geographical, and political positions. Women's travel writing has gained increasing attention, and their presence in the public has also been acknowledged (Wernecke, 2013).

For over a quarter of a century, there has been a tenacious intellectual tradition with ongoing articulations on feminist and gender perspectives in leisure and tourism studies (Aitchison, 1996, 2000, 2005; Carvalho, Costa, Lykke & Torres, 2019; Figueroa-Domecq, Pritchard, Segovia-Pérez, Morgan, & Villacé-Molinero, 2015; Gibson, 2001; Henderson, 1994; Kinnaird & Hall, 1994, 2000; Swain, 1995). These feminist reviews and critiques serve as a valuable theoretical context within which women's leisure and travel along with patriarchal power and control could be critically understood. Notably, as Gibson (2001) observes, while gender and feminist studies on tourism and leisure have come a long way, a

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lot of work remains to be done, "especially in relation to the gendered nature of tourism in the developing world" (Gibson, 2001, p.38).

This study aims to analyze women's travel poetry in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and to explore the roles of gender, identity and social hierarchy in understanding women's travel in a unique social and historical context. Additionally, gender tourism research is heavily Anglo-centric (Figueroa-Domecq, et al., 2015), while in other cultural/language societies, more studies on gendered travel experiences and identities are needed (Aitchison, 2005; Kinnaird & Hall, 2000). In response to the imbalance, this study draws on historical-literary texts and provides a critical reading of the travel experiences of Chinese women, as "histories—stories and reconstructions of the past—are in fact illuminations of a present that would not be possible without this past" (Grosz, 2003, p.15; Yang, Khoo-Lattimore & Arcodia, 2017a). The study contributes to the gender, travel and identity literature from a distinct Asian culture/language perspective, and offers insights on how female travelers' identities were shaped in their own terms of gender-/self-awareness along with their struggles to overcome social restrictions or constraints.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Paradigmatically, women and travel have been subjects of critical tourism/leisure studies from gender and feminist perspectives (Aitchison, 1996, 2005; Figueroa-Domecq, et al., 2015; Gibson, 2001; Henderson, 1994; Pritchard, Morgan, Ateljevic & Harris, 2007; Ren, Pritchard & Morgan, 2010; Shaw, 1994; Swain, 1995; Wearing, 1998; Yang, Khoo-Lattimore & Arcodia, 2017b). Following this great tradition, various aspects of, or issues pertinent to, women's travel have been fruitfully explored, e.g., female tourists' souvenir-purchase behavior (Anderson & Littrell, 1995), solo women travelers' experiences (Jordan & Gibson, 2005), young women tourists' sexual risk-taking and behavior (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015; Berdychevsky, Poria & Uriely, 2013), and female travelers' perceptions of risks on travel (Brown & Osman, 2017; Wilson & Little, 2008), along with gender roles (Wilkinson & Pratiwi, 1995) and impacts of tourism on women in destination communities (Harvey, Hunt & Harris, 1995; Tran & Walter, 2014). The dual role of women as producers and consumers of tourism has also been scrutinized (Apostolopoulos, Sönmez & Timothy, 2001).

In addition, travel writings and narratives have been critically used as source materials to understand female travelers' identities and experiences embedded in such gendered representations (Falconer, 2011; Mills, 1991; Pritchard, 2001; Smith, 2001). Butler (1995, p.488), in her account of studying Western female travelers, referred to critical examinations of their travel writings as a useful approach to analyzing the role of tourism in women's lives.

Women's Travel Writing

Except novels or fictions, there were few research records documenting women travelers before the 17th century (Steadman, 2007, p.4). Mobilities of women in the old days were largely associated with domestic reasons such as wedding journeys to join new families,

moving houses or changing places of residence, seasonal recurrent trips between urban residence and country cottages, as well as extended visits to friends and relatives.

In the British Isles, travelers to the European continent had increased rapidly in the first half of the 19th century. This increase was a result of Europe's reopening to British travelers in 1815, Napoleon's road-building program, and commercial steamships crossing the English Channel in 1821 (Buzard, 2002). By the second half of the 19th century, it had become increasingly common for the British middle-class families to take trips abroad. Accordingly, published travel accounts such as books, poems and articles have appeared (Hagglund, 2012). In these accounts, female travelers recorded what they had seen – an activity which John Urry refers to as the tourist gaze (Hagglund, 2012). While some women constructed their travel narratives as foreign through "othering" the travelers themselves, others considered travel writing to be culturally imperialistic (Walchester, 2012).

Sara Mills (1991), after analyzing British women's travel writing since the mid-19th century, observed that there was a tension between imperialism and femininity. She noted that female travel writers were unable to readily adopt the imperial voice with ease, and reported that women's text constitutes counter-hegemonic voices within the colonial discourse. On the contrary, Khan (2003) studied the published memoirs of two late Victorian era travelers (Ida Starr and Annie Brassey), and held a view that their writings have made totalizing statements about empire, race and class. The notable gendered voice reaffirms the late Victorian racial and class ideology that in part underpinned the British imperial projects at the colonial time. Caballero (2016), through analysis of Graham's Journal of a voyage to Brazil, revealed gendered racial prejudice and superiority of the imperial taste and aesthetics. Mulligan (2016) discussed travel writings by four British female adventurers, and considered the way women's travel writing has adapted to, and adopted, the discourse of Romanticism.

Nonetheless, travel was an emancipatory activity and self-negotiation for women travelers. Billie Melman (1992) focused on the impact of women writers' gender and social status on their travel perceptions and representations of "others" in the Middle East between early 18th and 20th centuries respectively. She emphasized the lack of homogeneity of those travel writings about the Middle East, and argued that those travelogues had had emancipatory effects on women since the narratives involved forms of travel which had disrupted bourgeois notions of separate spheres.

American women's travel writings were featured in a variety of genres, in addition to the traditional modes and personal narratives (Richter, 2016; Siegel, 2004; Steadman, 2007). Female travel writers could be distinguished along class lines, with more educated women like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Edith Wharton, and Margaret Fuller writing for publication, while others wrote primarily for themselves or family, and publication was only an incidental concern (Richter, 2016; Siegel, 2004). Some women, like escaped slave Louisa Picquet, were not even literate and must relate their tale to an amanuensis and face the "literary appropriation" of her story by male designs (Roberson, 2009, p.216).

Moreover, Genoni (2007) reported that recent Australian memoirs are overwhelmingly written by women (26 of the 32), who based themselves more often in urban rather than in rural France. In addition, Juliana de Nooy (2012) reviewed four books where

Australian female writers give detailed insights into their construction of the French identity to which they aspire, and suggested that mapping is a particularly appropriate metaphor for the processes of cultural identification they have undergone.

There are some Japanese women's travel writings in the 17th - 19th centuries, when women from aristocratic families gained education under the influence of neo-Confucianism (Ko, Haboush & Piggott, 2003). Female travel was regarded as undesirable at the early Tokugawa period (1603-1868). There was a perception that a man should divorce a wife who travelled excessively (Shiba, 2012) because a woman who transcended the traditional gender boundary was seen as a threat to social stability (Nenzi, 2008). Accordingly, authorities imposed strict regulations on women inspection at official checkpoints to maintain public order and women's safety. Even on pilgrimage, Japanese women were prohibited from entering certain sacred places, as they were perceived as "unclean due to their menstruation and childbirth" (Shiba, 2012, p.95).

Nevertheless, women from aristocratic families did travel, but there were many barriers and difficulties. An ambivalent gender identity was reflected in Japanese women's travel accounts. On the one hand, women utilized travel to enjoy and exploit the detachment from the ordinary, temporarily behaving as those they aspired to be with the goal of asserting and corroborating their identity as a *bunjin* (man of letters) (Nenzi, 2006, p.57). On the other hand, they "chose to conceal their opinions behind the veils of literary tradition" to appeal to the authority through the extensive use of poetry and of an overly polite language offering a distilled depiction of space (Mills, 1991; Nenzi, 2006, p.50). However, short distance trips were usual and frequent in Japan in the 17th to 18th centuries when women had even more chance than men to travel. The time and destination of such short trips were mainly determined by family needs and obligations. "Praying for health, for family safety and, as the wife of a ranked *daimyo* (territorial lord in pre-modern Japan), praying for the 'safety of the realm', attending memorial services, tending to ailing family members, helping out after the birth of a grandchild" (Shiba, 2000, pp.107-112 and 127-129, cited from Yonemoto, 2010, p.396) could all be the reasons why women left their homes.

Historically, Korean women's travel writings are of similar features. The earliest record was the accounts of Kim Guem-Won, who travelled as a teenage boy in disguise and later travelled as an accompanying wife in the early 19th century (Yang, et al., 2017a). Gender hierarchy was obvious in Korea. At the beginning of the 20th century, Korean schoolgirls and housewives were encouraged to undertake picnics and one-day excursions in order to enhance their physique and health, to bear children and nurture the next generation (Yang, et al., 2017a). Choi (2009) traced the American Protestant missionaries in the early 20th century to Korea, and suggested that a modern Korean woman was deeply bound up in such diverse themes as nationalism, Confucian gender practices, images of the West and Christianity, and growing desires for selfhood.

Gendered Identity, Travel, and Social Class

Studies on identity in tourism have evolved into two focal areas: Identity of a place, and identity of an individual (be it the host or the guest). The former concentrates on the

holistic identity of a destination or attraction (Rogers, 2002; Santos & Yan, 2009; Xue, Kerstetter & Hunt, 2017), and argues that tourism plays a role in the identity formation and evolution for destinations (Gu & Ryan, 2008; Medina, 2003; Paasi, 2011; Reis, 2012; Wang & Chen, 2015). Smith (1978) critiqued tourism for its role in undermining local identities, while Abram, Waldren and Macleod (1997) saw tourism as an ongoing process of identification. According to Desforges (2000), tourism provides an additional impetus to reworking identity, as tourists are incorporated into local identities through their role and presence on important community occasions.

For the latter, identity (or self-identity) is seen as an ongoing multifaceted and changeable process (Elsrud, 2001; Giddens, 1990, 1991). Tourism offers a means to tourists' (re-)defining themselves (Cohen, 1979). Travel experiences can be transformational, like a moment of epiphany leading to self-actualization (McClinchey, 2015), demonstrating how self-identity is worked upon, developed and evolved (Bosangit, Hibbert & Mccabe, 2015). These perspectives have been most readily observed in solo women travelers (Brown & Osman, 2017; Elsrud, 2001; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Richards & Wilson, 2004; Wilson & Little, 2008; Zhang, Morrison, Tucker & Wu, 2017), and young travelers undertaking a gap year before or after university (Graburn, 2001). They seek worthwhile experiences as a means of creating and performing a new or enhanced identity (Snee, 2014).

In the Tang Dynasty, patriarchal ideology and social hierarchy have taken deep roots and influenced people's value and behavior. Hence, how does women's travel relate to, or interact with, their identity formation or transformation? How do gender perceptions and social hierarchy influence women's travel? (Figure 1). This paper focuses on Chinese women travelers in the Tang Dynasty for three reasons. First, Tang is one of the most prosperous dynasties in Chinese history, where women have enjoyed freedom both physically and spiritually. Second, people in the Tang Dynasty lived in a hierarchical social system defined by law. Third, women with different social status could take part in leisure and travel in distinct ways.

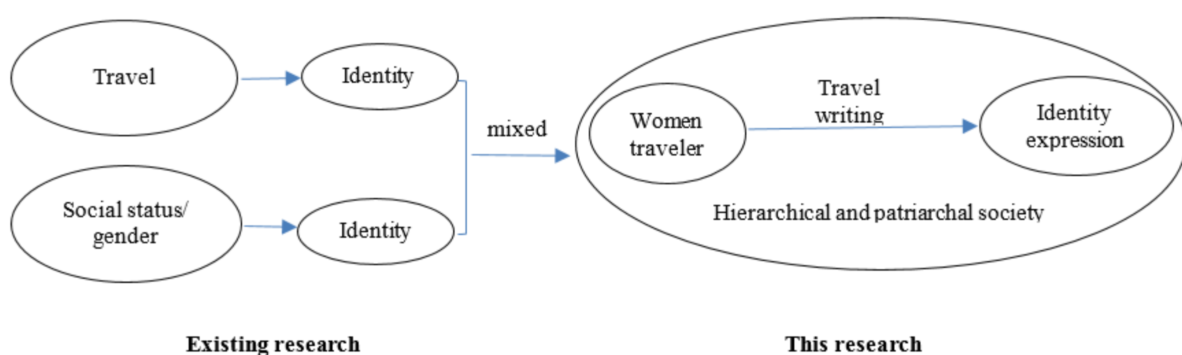

Figure 1. Contexts and Perspectives

CONTEXTS AND METHODS

This study unfolds itself along the lines of gender and social hierarchy in the Tang Dynasty, and how women's travel as a gendered activity has evolved and happened (or made happen) over time.

Social Contexts

Early Tang rulers built a united and prosperous empire with remarkable administrative and military achievements (Wong, 1979). At its height, the Empire developed extensive ties with over 300 countries and regions in the world (Yao, 2011). Numerous religions, including Islam, the Nestorian Christian sect of Syria, and Zoroastrianism from Persia, established mosques and temples in China. More than any other times, China was exposed to a wide range of foreign cultures in this period.

This Dynasty was also the peak of national power and economic prosperity in Chinese history (Benn, 2004). The capital city Chang'An (today's Xi'an) was the largest urban center, seven times the size of Constantinople (capital of the Eastern Roman Empire), six times the size of the Arabian capital of Baghdad, and over nine times the size of the Ming Dynasty Capital (Yao, 2011). With a highly developed economy, culture, and civilization, women lived in a relatively free and relaxed social atmosphere than in other dynasties. According to Wang (2009), even nuns and geishas could become friends with dignitaries, the literati, and officials. They went sightseeing, dined and drank, and composed poems and songs together.

Evolution of Women's Travel in China

Women's involvement was restricted by the traditional *nei-wai* binary norm of "men outside, and women inside" (男主外女主内) (Rosenlee, 2004). The earliest records of women traveling dated back to the Qin (221–206 BC) and Han (202 BC–220 AD) dynasties. Regarding spring outings and hikes (游春踏青), a poem called "Out of the East Gate (出其东门)" in *The Book of Songs* (诗经) says, "stepping out of the east city gate, lots of women crowded onto the roads", illustrating the busy scenes of women at leisure in springtime (Zhang, 2005). Spring outings usually happened during the *Shangsi Festival* (上巳节), along with folk rites and functions, such as *courtship* (求偶), *praying for birth* (求嗣), and *fuxi* (祓禊) – the washing of hands and faces in vanilla water to rid oneself of misfortune and diseases (Xia, 2012). Travel poetry reveals that spring outing has reached its zenith in the Tang Dynasty, when travel became a common leisure activity for women.

However, such outdoor activities came to a stop in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), when traditional norms concerning women's virtues became dominant in society. During this period, at least 12 books were written on women's virtues, including the *Discipline of Women* (内训), *Regulations about Women* (闺范), and *Collection of Model Women* (女鉴录), in

which girls were taught to obey from a young age, and women were controlled by high standards. Foot-binding became a common practice to limit women's movement and to segregate them from outdoor recreation/leisure activities. Under such social norms, most women stayed at home and learned needlework, reading and writing (Zhao, 2009).

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) brought back stability, prosperity, and improvements in transportation and infrastructure. Female literati's travel gradually gained acceptance and popularity along with missionaries spreading western ideas such as freedom and equality (Zhang, 1985). Leisure travel poetry such as "Climbing the Liuhe Tower" (登六和塔) by Sun Sunyi (孙荪意) and "The Waterfall" (瀑布) by Hu Shenrong (胡慎容) reflected rich travel experiences of the poetesses (Duan, 2005, pp.65-66). The first Chinese female travelogue titled *Guimao Lüxing Ji* (癸卯旅行记) by Shan Shili (单士厘, 1863-1945) appeared in 1904, featuring the author's travel experiences in Japan, Russia, England, France, Germany, and Italy with her diplomat husband (Guo, 2014; Widmer, 2006). Lv Bicheng (吕碧城, 1883-1943), a pioneer of Chinese backpacker and modern traveler and secretary of the President Office of the Republic of China, had also traveled extensively, with details about food, lodging, cultures and geographies from her *European and American Itineraries* (Li, 2018).

The evolution of women traveling in China was a tortuous process, and Tang was unique among Chinese dynasties in terms of its open-mindedness and lax moral restrictions. Due to its inclusive social environments and its interactions with foreign cultures, women at that time enjoyed a high degree of freedom (Zhang & Liu, 2008).

Methods

Women travelers' poetry in the Tang Dynasty offers a cross-culturally valuable text (and context) in alignment with a feminist lens on gendered identity and women's leisure experience in a patriarchal society (Jordan & Gibson, 2004). Their poems are translated and analyzed to tell their stories on travel. The renowned *All Tang Poetry* is the primary source. This collection, compiled by Yan Cao, Dingqiu Peng, and eight other scholars in 1705 under Emperor Kangxi's command, is divided into 900 volumes and includes 49,403 poems and 1,555 sentence fragments from 2,837 poets (Peng, 1998). The collection starts with poems by emperors, queens, and concubines. It also presents poems with music in chronological order. A brief biography offers a glimpse into the lives and experiences of the anthologized poets. Other useful sources include *Annals of Tang Poems* (Ji, 2008), *the Old Tang Book*, *the New Tang Book*, *Historical Stories about Sui and Tang Dynasties*, *A Collection of Ancient Chinese Women Writers* (Wang, 1999), *Annotations of Xue Tao's Poems* (Zhang, 1981), and *Comments on Laws of the Tang Empire* (the oldest and most comprehensive code of conducts and legal accounts of people's identities, status, rights, and obligations).

Three steps were followed in selecting poets and poems for this study. First, *All Tang Poetry,* the most comprehensive Tang poetry collection, was used as the primary source. Second, based on the catalogue of poets included in *All Tang Poetry,* only female poets were selected. There are altogether 643 poems in 12 volumes written by 124 female poets. Per social hierarchy (Figure 2), and based on renown and background, one poet was selected for each category (except the "Royal Families" group, of which two poets were chosen). Hence, Empress Wu Zetian (武则天), Imperial Court Official Shangguan Wan'er (上官婉儿), Princess Yifen (宜芬公主), Taoist Yu Xuanji (鱼玄机), Civilian Mrs. Lin (庶民林氏) and *Geisha* Xuetao (乐妓薛涛) were selected. Third, about poem selection, content relevance or relatedness to women and travel (e.g., sightseeing, pilgrimage, mobility, outdoor leisure, meditation, and sojourning) are observed. Only one poem from each poet was selected and translated into English for analysis.

The integration of narratives and interpretation helps identify the links between the "why" and the "how" of historical events. Without narratives about how an event happened, it would be difficult to understand why it happened (Yan & Mckercher, 2013). Likewise, without interpretations, such research would be no more than historical descriptions. Thus description and interpretation are combined to reveal the mechanism about women's travel, their travel narratives and identities in accordance to their associated social class.

Methodically, interpretation and translation of the six selected poems were facilitated through a focus group discussion amongst five specialists in the areas of Tang poetry, Tang history, Chinese-English translation, gender research, and sociology of tourism, respectively. The interpretation was not only a language issue, but also one of objective (or subjective) understanding of these poems in their unique social, cultural and political contexts of production. Each poem was read and discussed with some "prepared" questions: 1) what modifier could be used to describe your impression of the poem? 2) what mood does the poem evoke? 3) what is the travel component in the poem (or why and how the depicted travel happened)? 4) women's role in the poem; and 5) what does travel mean to the women involved? To go beyond these probes, the discussants were also encouraged to express their appreciations or commentaries (if any) on a poem. This has resulted in deeper layers of meanings or interpretations of the text, particularly in reference to women's travel.

Technically, the focus group discussion was recorded with consent and permission from the participants and summarized for analysis. The modern Chinese interpretation has facilitated the English translation of these ancient poems, which was completed and dually checked by the authors who are competent and fluent in both languages.

The following interpretations are presented to reflect travel by women from distinct social groups, ranging from the empress and women from the royal families, to female taoists, ordinary women and geishas. According to the *Comments on Laws of the Tang Empire*, women were classified into five hierarchical groups. The top layer was the group with supreme power; they were the empress, dowagers, empress' grandmas, and princesses. The second layer was the privileged noble class such as royal families. The third-to-the-fifth layers were taoists, civilians, and geishas (Figure 2).

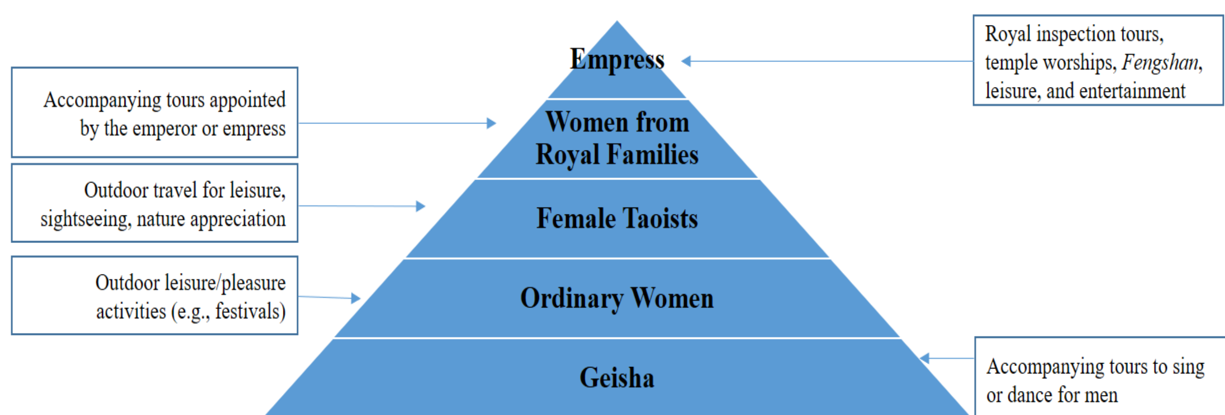

Figure 2. Women's Travel by Social Hierarchy in the Tang Dynasty

Empress Wu's Royal Progress

Wu Zetian was the only empress in ancient China. Forty-eight of her poems are collected in *All Tang Poetry*; most were written after she became empress. Many depicted her inspection tours, temple worships, and grand ceremonies such as *Fengshan* (封禅, emperors' worship of the heaven and the earth to pray for peace and prosperity of the nation). During her reign (690-705), Empress Wu has taken long and difficult journeys to Mount Songshan (Zhao, 2015), where she wrote "Shicong River Tour" (游石淙诗) when she reached the top.

> Mountains and caves in different shapes are more attractive than the fairyland in taoist classics,
> Jade-like mountains guard the imperial city like loyal soldiers.
> People live and work in peace and content because of the system of land equalization,
> Wind and rain come on time to make the prosperity of Tang.
> The sky touching mountain shades the sunshine,
> The creeks in the caves with cloud reflections are like colorful clothes flowing in water.
> Stop climbing, to sing and dance for the moment to appreciate mountains and rivers,

Go back by dusk to the imperial palace on carriages escorted by horses and ministers.

三山十洞光玄箓，玉峤金峦镇紫微。

均露均霜标胜壤，交风交雨列皇机。

万仞高岩藏日色，千寻幽涧浴云衣。

且驻欢筵赏仁智，雕鞍薄晚杂尘飞 (Peng, 1998, Volume 5, p.32)。

Empress Wu traveled with her officials and royal members to enjoy the scenery by Shicong river. She took advantage of the glorious sights to praise the providential prosperity of the nation, manifesting her majesty and rationalizing herself as the ultimate and competent ruler. The empress' poetry indicates that travel was not for pure relaxation. Through leisure and pleasure travel, the empress enhanced communication and harmonized relations with her ministers, showcasing her achievement and wisdom, and praising her competence and authority in a patriarchal society. Through travel poetry, the empress also temporarily yet intentionally faded herself into an ordinary woman, and delivered her authority in subtlety to her ministers and the public. In a patriarchal society, her identity as the empress per se gave her a strong sense of obligation to the state even during her pleasure travel and temple visits.

Royal Family Females' Accompanying and Submissive Travel

At that time, an emperor/empress often brought royal family members, high-rank officials, and sometimes families of the accompanying officials on his/her travel. As recorded in the 9th volume of *Annals of Tang Poems*, "Every year, the emperor would go somewhere for sightseeing, hunting or hot springs with the queen, concubines, ministers, and imperial academy officers". Among the concubines, Yang Guifei (also called Yang Yuhuan) was the best known. A rare painting titled "*Portrait of Madame Guo Guo's Spring Hunting*" by Zhang Xuan in the Tang Dynasty best illustrated Concubine Yang Guifei's sister Madame Guo Guo's travelling in Spring (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Portrait of Madame Guo Guo's Spring Hunting* (Photo by author. The original version was lost. A reproduced version was passed down from the Song Dynasty and is now curated at Liaoning Museum in Shenyang <www.lnmuseum.com.cn>)

Tang is the first dynasty to appoint female imperial officials. Shangguan Wan'er (上官婉儿, 664-710) was one of them. She wrote many poems, and had 36 pieces collected in *All Tang Poetry* (Wu, 2016). The following is about her majesty's visit to Xinfeng Hot Springs Palace (驾幸新丰温泉宫).

> In the year of the Jinglong Reign, on a sunny winter day with favorable weather,
> Tens of thousands of horses and carriages with the emperor are leaving Ba River for sightseeing.
> I see in the distance numerous horses running as fast as dragon flying upon the wind,
> Rows of carriages rapidly move on the endless jade-like field.

> 三冬季月景龙年，万乘观风出灞川。
>
> 遥看电跃龙为马，回瞩霜原玉作田 (Peng, 1998, Volume 5, p.33)。

The poet described what she saw while traveling with Emperor Tang Zhongzong on a winter day. Delicate feelings are conveyed about a generous, grand, peaceful, and prosperous scene. Shangguan Wan'er had been the official of both imperial courts by Empress Wu and Emperor Tang Zhongzong. She often participated in imperial pilgrimages, hunting and hot spring tours with the emperor or empress, and has left poems in praise of the great achievement of the imperial courts. She downplayed her own leisure travel but highlighted her identity as an imperial court official. Travel was a time to show her literary talent and loyalty to the court, which in turn has enhanced her political position and gained trust from other officials.

Although royal female members enjoyed privileges, their destiny was under the control of the emperor. For example, princesses could be married to a far-away "foreign"

land because of their royal identity and their obligations to the imperial court. In this regard, *heqin* (和亲), a political and diplomatic strategy for the Tang dynasty to maintain harmonious relationships with neighboring states, has defined the fate of twenty princesses from the imperial family through marriage to neighboring state rulers. Usually, such small bordering states were farther away from Central China, and the court would prepare a large dowry to show affluence of the imperial family and to compensate for the long-haul marriage of a princess (Guo, 2010). The wedding travel could take days or months and would often involve a large group of people, horses, and carriages to move the dowry and protect the princess. Inevitably, the princess would need to stay in taverns, and appreciate unusual folk customs and extraordinary landscapes on her journey. Among the many *heqin* poems collected in the *All Tang Poetry*, there was only one written by the princess herself. Princess Yifen (宜芬公主), on her *heqin* journey to the minority state of Xi, had stayed in a Xuchi Inn, and had left a poem written on the screen/curtain of her guest room (虚池驿题屏风):

> Saying goodbye to my hometown before my marriage, where I am not likely to come back,
> The emperor worried about the long travel and said goodbye to me with tears.
> The sand and dust in the air will make the make-up on my face disappear,
> I am so heart-broken that I will not forget the capital of Chang'an.

> 出嫁辞乡国，由来此别难。
>
> 圣恩愁远道，行路泣相看。
>
> 沙塞容颜尽，边隅粉黛残。
>
> 妾心何所断，他日望长安 (Peng, 1998, Volume 5, p.37)。

A complicated feeling was left between the lines. On the one hand, the princess had to accept the order by the emperor of her marriage to a remote minority group, which was usually associated with harsh weather, difficult life and strange customs; on the other hand, she thought the selection of her by the emperor for *heqin* was an honor and a chance to show her value and loyalty to her nation. Notably, *heqin* was not a journey for relaxation, sightseeing or pleasure. It was often portrayed as a political, obligatory rite filled with hopes for the princess' home state, as well as complicated feelings of unwillingness amidst a collective mission. Once a princess' marriage was determined by the emperor, the only thing she could do was to obey. *Heqin* princesses sacrificed their own right and life for their nation's peace and development. Their imperial yet subordinate identity was deeply rooted in their minds. The *heqin* journey did not reveal the veil of their inner self; instead, it reiterated

and strengthened their subordinate and submissive role in the dynasty, and consequently aroused their identity crisis or anxiety.

Meditation Travel of Female Taoist Priests

Taoism, claiming of gender equality and complementarity of *yin-yang* in nature (Zhou, 2008), has been popular in the Tang Dynasty. Female taoists enjoyed higher social status than average women. The *Equal Farmland Regulation* allocated female taoists with 20 acres of farmland whereas average women were given nothing (Li, 1992, p.74). Moreover, taoists were free from child-rearing and parent-caring norms, and most of them were intellectuals. They had more time and freedom to travel and to socialize freely with the literati and other people.

Female taoist priest Yu Xuanji (鱼玄机, 844-871) was one of the four great female poets. She became a taoist priest in 866 to hide her former concubine identity. Fifty of her poems have been collected in *All Tang Poetry*, and "Summer Days in Mountains" (夏日山居) is her magnum opus.

> Since I move here to live in the way immortals do, clusters of flowers abound all around, and I never do any planting.
> The bushes in the yard are my clothes hangers; the fresh spring by my sitting place reflects my wine.
> The balustrade fades into a path through groves of bamboo; my silk dress is always surrounded by books.
> Composing poems in leisure on a pleasure painting boat and singing under the moonlight, the gentle breeze blows me back home.
>
> 移得仙居此地来，花丛自遍不曾栽。
>
> 庭前亚树张衣桁，坐上新泉泛酒杯。
>
> 轩槛暗传深竹径，绮罗长拥乱书堆。
>
> 闲乘画舫吟明月，信任轻风吹却回 (Peng, 1998, Volume 804, p.4901)。

This poem is filled with bright and happy feelings. The growing flowers, towering trees, clothes on the branches, clear spring water, scattered books, and singing and composing on a floating boat have created a leisure setting of freedom. Notably, female taoists valued pure, lofty, and cloistral aesthetics. Leisure and reclusive life gave them more time and space

to think about the relationship between nature and self, thus awakening their reflection over identity. Women became taoists not only for believing the doctrine, but also for the relief of worldly pressure. In reality, secularism has a profound influence on their thinking and doing than their taoist identity and the deeply-rooted Confucianism. The secular value orientation determined that they were used to seeking spiritual ballast and meaning of life in the real world so as to get rid of the puzzles and bitterness in life. At a deeper level, this could be seen as the socialization or individualization of religion in the Tang Dynasty. The paradox of the sacredness of religion versus the worldliness of life was depicted as a mutual inter-infiltration in the poems by female Taoists, who not only had the courage to pursue their desired life, but also upheld an independent personality respected by taoism. Therefore, the combination of religion, worldliness and art in female taoists' poetry marks an integration of realism and romanticism, and the principle of balance in ancient Chinese aesthetics.

Ordinary Women's Outdoor Trips on Festivals

Women from the middle and lower classes rarely ventured out for traveling or entertainment. Only during special festivals, temple worships, or traditional customs could they leave their house for a short distance travel. Such customs include Lantern, Shangsi, Dragon-boat, and Mid-autumn Festivals (Yu, 2013). In *All Tang Poetry*, there are barely ten poems about outdoor trips by average women with no formal names or even no names. Here is one written by a poet named Mrs. Lin about her visit to Datong Temple (大通寺).

> Today I am going to have a trip, sitting in the boat with warm wind, and it is the right time for travelling because of the extraordinarily beautiful scenery.
> The green cascading hills cover the sun, and the blue water appears still with no ripples.
> The Buddha left significant words numerous years ago, and mendicant Buddhist monks still continue their spiritual pursuit today.
> Buddha was originally introduced to China from the West, but the quest for Zen has never stopped.

> 海暖风和放小舟，满天烟景好追游。
>
> 青山叠叠浑无影，绿水漫漫静不流。
>
> 佛祖昔年留妙偈，头陀今日继灵修。
>
> 菩提自是西来种，今古禅参尚未休 (Wang, 1999, p.664)。

Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, was widespread in the Tang Dynasty. It was believed that its supernatural power could bless its followers with freedom and peace. For a believer, practicing Buddhism was more in her mind than in formalities. Hence, many followers chose to practice Buddhism at home instead of living/staying in a temple like monks. This has made Buddhism a popular belief for women. On one hand, occasional temple worships gave women the time to step out of their chambers and to experience nature. On the other hand, the after-life and other-world in Buddhism brought hope and expectation to the desperate housewives. From the above poem, it can be inferred that the woman got relaxation spiritually through beautiful sceneries on her way to the temple. The bright and relaxed mood and firm belief in Buddhism can be felt between the lines. This confirms the observation that, even though women travel for domestic reasons, they can still enjoy relaxation (Yonemoto, 2010).

Geisha as a Performer or Entertainer on Travel

Tang was a golden age not only for poetry but also for music and dance, when geishas appeared as a unique social group. Geishas not only worked for the imperial palace, but also for governmental departments, armies and households. Skilled at painting, drawing, dancing, singing, composing, and instrument-playing, geishas usually made a living by pleasing others with these skills. Nonetheless, they were not prostitutes; they have made significant contributions to the popularity of poetry and music at that time. Intellectuals have frequented *qinglou* (brothels) with geishas (乐妓). Of the 49,000+ poems collected in *All Tang Poetry*, some 2,000 poems are about geishas.

Xue Tao (薛涛) was the only geisha poet collected in *All Tang Poetry*. An official geisha during the years of 785-789, she was one of the four very famous female poets. While accompanying an official named Mr. Wangbo and his party on a tour, Xue Tao wrote a poem on “Chrysanthemum” (浣花亭陪川主王播相公暨寮同赋早菊):

> Autumn is coming to an end, but chrysanthemum in the courtyard is still blooming.
> Its green flower buds with dewdrops, and its half-blossom golden pistil shines with frost.
> Chrysanthemum, different from other grass and flowers, are useful for people in many ways.
> Drinking with the guests in the outdoor, do not have to fear for the bad people.

西陆行终令，东篱始再阳。

绿英初濯露，金蕊半含霜。

自有兼材用，那同众草芳。

献酬樽俎外，宁有惧豺狼 (Zhang, 1981, p.7)。

As a geisha, Xue Tao traveled and drank with the officials, but she always showed her humility through poetry (Chennault & Larsen, 1987). She compared herself to the chrysanthemum blooming with frost in the cold weather, symbolic of her strong character in a secular society. Through praising the beautiful, unique and strong quality of the chrysanthemum, she conveyed the message of her own value and spiritual pursuit through self-respect and self-improvement, and showed a struggle or anxiety over her geisha identity and her inner pursuit. Sightseeing with court officials served as a window for her to realize and express her inner self through poetry, because geisha was always associated with the lowest social class and bad reputation. In her spiritual mind, sightseeing also created a temporary freedom through enjoying beautiful scenery, which she could associate with her own life experience and perceptions. This explains why Xue Tao became a taoist in her later life. Travel, through enlightening her inner self, has deepened her submissive identity.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes women's travel poetry in the Tang Dynasty, with an aim to explore the role of gender, identity and social hierarchy in forming female travelers' perceptions and experiences, which are revealed through our reading of their travel narratives (Figure 4).

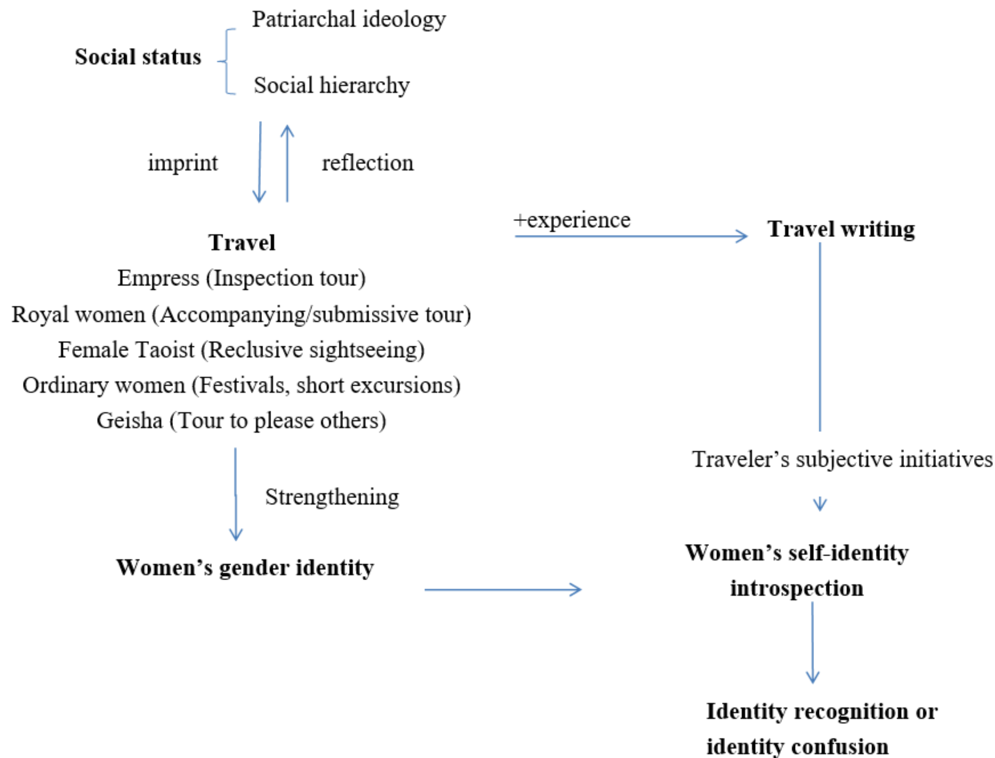

Figure 4. Gender, Travel and Identity Seen through Women's Travel Poetry

Discussion

As can be seen from the above analysis, *All Tang Poetry* has served as a useful source, and patriarchal-social hierarchy as a critical perspective on deciphering Chinese women's travel poetry and their gender awareness and identity through travel. While previous studies have focused on feminism and the impact of gender on women's leisure and travel (Aitchison, 2005; Choi, 2009; Figueroa-Domecq, et al., 2015; Gibson, 2001; Henderson, 1994; Mills, 1991; Nenzi, 2006, 2008; Pritchard, et al., 2007; Siegel, 2004; Smith, 2001), this study revealed an integrated role of gender and social hierarchy in the shaping of female travelers' identities and their travel goals or patterns. Notably, Empress Wu's royal progress was for imperial power assertion; females from royal families traveled for leisure and often as mandatory activities as a result of being selected as travel companions in response to the so-called royal graciousness; princesses traveled afar to a "foreign" destination for marriage so as to ensure state peace; *geishas* traveled for their livelihood; taoists traveled for reclusion; and ordinary women had excursions on traditional festivals or pilgrimage trips to temporarily disengage themselves from the routines.

Moreover, women's travel writings (poetry in this instance) help build up and express the travelers' gendered identity through "negotiations" both with themselves and with their surroundings. Through travel poetry, women travelers see the external world in their own eyes, and perceive their surroundings in the eyes of "others". Existing literature forays into the "sexualization of space" which is found evident in women's travel experiences in light of surveillance, resistance and empowerment (Jordan & Gibson, 2005, p.195), and concerns about the "passage" role of travel in place-making and identity-building (Giddens, 1991; White & White, 2004). Leisure travel in this study offers an "other" space and "free" time for women to think beyond their daily routines or family chores. Very often, the retrospective and reflexive nature of travel writing could have profound implications for, and high impacts on, travelers to find and enhance an (the) awareness of their identities (Butler, 1995).

Furthermore, it is found that, through travel writing, women's subjective initiatives (e.g., how much they can control, or are controlled of, their travel time, places to visit, companions, and the like) can help understand the effects of travel on their individual(istic) identity. Previous studies focused on the meanings of travel for a distinct social-cultural group, e.g., British and American solo women travelers (Jordan & Gibson, 2005). This study showed that subjective identity is essential to female travelers' experience, which to some extent determines what and how much this distinct group of Chinese women could acquire from travel. In this analysis of women travelers in the Tang Dynasty, Empress Wu on the very top of the hierarchy could have everything at her own discretion to make her travel purpose-driven, pleasant and in comfort, and fulfilling the goal of strengthening her supreme identity. However, for *geishas*, with no capacity of making their own choices, they could only submissively "please" officials or literati through singing, dancing, composing, instrument playing or drinking on their travel. For them, travel could not bring them a new self, or build an imperial identity like Victorian women on their travel to the colonies (Khan, 2003), but only strengthen their low social status. The paradox of *geishas* (as a subordinate/submissive stereotype versus their own self-identity as literati) has made some travelers such as Xue Tao experience confusions over their identity. This appears to contradict previous studies that travel brings women new identities (De Nooy, 2012; Graburn, 2001; Zhang et al., 2017).

Additionally, the meanings of mobilities for women in ancient China remain to be uncovered through historical/textual studies. Although women in Tang had much fewer constraints than in other dynasties, their chance to experience the outside world was still limited. Like Japanese women in 17th and 18th century (Nenzi, 2006, 2008; Shiba, 2012; Yonemoto, 2010), they traveled mainly for obligations such as praying for family health and safety, attending memorial services, or attending to ailing family members. Furthermore, mobilities gave women time and space to think about themselves and their value (Yonemoto, 2010), such as Empress Wu declaring her supremacy at the top of the mountain she climbed up to, or *Geisha* Xue Tao comparing herself to the chrysanthemum she depicted as blooming

in late autumn to express her loftiness during her travel with an official.

Conclusion

Women's travel is a well-researched area in critical tourism/leisure studies (Aitchison, 1996, 2005; Figueroa-Domecq, et al., 2015; Gibson, 2001; Henderson, 1994; Pritchard, et al., 2007; Ren, et al., 2010; Shaw, 1994; Swain, 1995; Wearing, 1998; Yang, et al., 2017a), where narratives offer a fresh and unique perspective on gendered identity and travelers' experiences (Butler, 1995; Desforges, 2000; Jordan & Gibson, 2005). Prior research on women's travel narratives has focused on cultural-imperialism (Walchester, 2012) and romance (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015; Berdychevsky, et al., 2013; Mulligan, 2016), negotiations of writing for a conservative audience and radicalism of their travel (Roberson, 2009), as well as constraints of its receptions (Mill, 1999; Nenzi, 2006). This analysis of women's travel poetry, along with its historical perspective and sociocultural context, contributes to gender, identity and critical tourism studies in a number of ways.

First, travelogue contains rich expressions of tourists' *en route* experiences, feelings and perceptions. While male and Eurocentric narratives have received adequate attention, more needs to be said of women's travel writings, at different times and/or from culturally diverse language contexts (Figueroa-Domecq, et al., 2015; Pritchard, et al., 2007; Yang, et al., 2017a). In *All Tang Poetry*, for instance, of the 900 volumes, only 12 volumes were written by women, and travel-related poems (those by and about women on travel) are even fewer or rarer. Some such writings have stayed in personal collections, and have not been made open for public access or research. From a cultural-historical perspective, the rarity of text or textual restrictions could be an impediment by itself to our understanding of female travelers of different times and place, and of their perceptions of gender and identity on travel (Alacovska, 2015; Brown & Osman, 2017).

Second, in the context of dominant masculine texts, women's travel writings are often criticized or even accused of falsehood because representations in their travel narratives do not fit in with the stereotypical conceptions of what women should or could do (Mills, 1991). Interestingly, solo travelers are increasingly adopting masculine traits of adventure narratives, through incorporating "risky" experiences into their travel stories as part of their journey of independence, resistance, empowerment or self-development (Falconer, 2011; Jordan & Gibson, 2005). In a way, women's travel poetry in the Tang Dynasty serves as a unique (con)text, with delicate feminine traits, to reveal the feelings and experiences of female travelers from different walks of life.

Third, the historical and literary criticism approach to interpreting women's travel poetry is also noteworthy. From an evolutionary or comparative perspective, it would be interesting to probe whether women's travel in ancient China (or indeed in the histories of other cultures) could be viewed in any way as a rudimentary form of contemporary girlfriend

getaways (Gibson, Berdychevsky & Bell, 2012; Berdychevsky, Gibson & Bell, 2013, 2016) or *guimi* tourism (Hao, Zhang & Xiao, 2021). Likewise, are female travelers distinct in motivation and behavior when compared across historical periods or across cultures? Current research suggests that their travel behaviors are characteristic of experience-seeking through adventures, risks, sex and romance (Berdychevsky & Gibson, 2015; Berdychevsky, et al., 2013; Brown & Osman, 2017; Falconer, 2011); shopping and dining (Anderson & Littrell, 1995); and engagement in decision-making (Barlés-Arizón, et al., 2013; Kerstetter & Pennington-Gray, 1999; Myers & Moncri, 1978). In view of the dominant (post-)positivist focus on tourism management studies or market research, such humanistic perspectives could expand the lens and scope of understanding (female) travelers' identity and experience.

Last but not least, in view of contemporary Chinese women travelers as an emerging global consumer market, this study of their past could well serve, in one way or another, as a footnote of their future in terms of acknowledging gender-identity perspectives and enhancing cross-cultural understanding (Guo, 2014). Cultural and historical knowledge of women travelers could help manage consumer behavior and mitigate cultural differences or misunderstandings.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not free from limitations. Notably, the discussion along with its interpretations could not be seen in light of generalizations. Likewise, though gender-balanced and collaborative, a caution on researchers as instrument should also be noted of this interpretive undertaking. Gendered travel experiences and identity construction can vary in different eras, cultures, and societies. Tourism scholars working in different countries could dig into historical and literary travel writings in their own languages/cultures, and bring to light multiple insights or perspectives on travel and gendered identity.

Moreover, the poems selected for this analysis are from *All Tang Poetry*. They were originally written in ancient Chinese, and were subsequently translated into modern Chinese and further into English for analysis and interpretation. While the uniqueness of the source text could add to the originality of the study, the English translations of these poems might not have faithfully, fluently or elegantly reflected the poets' intended meanings or even their liveliness in rhetoric. □

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