

Preface

For all the complaints today about the declining possibilities for real travel in a world crisscrossed by jets, overrun with tourists, and overbuilt with the kinds of hotels and resorts they demand, travel writing and the dissection of such writing both continue to flourish. Much of the dissection has been done by critics, literary and cultural, who examine the ways in which travelers have represented peoples, cultures, and geographies beyond their own, viewing them through lenses colored by race, gender, and culture, sometimes demonizing them, more often exoticizing them, and sometimes simply domesticating them into a familiarity comforting to Europe and North America. All too often, however, such studies simply add a new layer over this process of exoticization or familiarization, for, by focusing primarily on the textual representations as such, the objects of those representations seem almost denied their real existence, in danger of being turned into peoples, nations, and cultures without voices.

This study, like others of its sort, obviously owes an enormous debt to Edward Said for the clarity with which he put certain questions that some might prefer to leave unraised. Yet here I seek to go beyond a focus on textual representation pure and simple or an indication of the ways in which my subjects got China right or wrong. I argue here in the first place that the study of travel writing must pay attention not only to the representations and discursive strategies of travel texts themselves but also that it is time to return to considerations of the objective situations of the peoples and cultures they purport to describe as well as the changes taking place therein. The observed, after all, have their own history no less than the observers. Second, my study argues that, whether convincingly for their readers or not, travel writers claim a particular kind of veracity and ask for a peculiar kind of trust on the

part of those readers, one that is different from that given to, say, journalists or scholars. Finally, it argues that for various reasons a particularly important focus of travel writing at least in the twentieth century has been a search for authenticity, the desire to discover what it is that constitutes the true heart of the culture and people under observation.

So, the book is to be read primarily as an essay on travel writing in a particular place at a particular time. I have chosen China as an object here, for it is a country that for some centuries has occupied an important place in the Western imagination, reflected in a large body of travel writing that goes back at least to the Franciscan missionaries who made their way to the country in the mid-thirteenth century, even before Marco Polo. Here I concentrate on what is roughly a sixty-year period, from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth, a time of considerable change both within China and within the countries from which its foreign observers came. My approach here is that of a historian, not a literary or cultural critic, and at times I will take issue with the findings and methods of such critics. Still, my hope is that the general method of looking at travel writing that I have taken toward the Chinese example may be helpful for other periods and other lands as well.

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Part of chapter 6 first appeared in somewhat different form as an article in the *New England Review* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1997), and I am grateful to the editors of that journal for permission to use it.

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