

A Study on Cultural Heritage and Pedagogical Applications in Yu Dafu's Travel Essays



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Abstract: This paper focuses on the historical background and cultural context of Yu Dafu's travel essays. It analyzes the characteristics of cultural heritage in his essays and their pedagogical applications from the perspectives of cultural memory transmission, reconstruction of teaching cognition, and the three - dimensional ability - cultivation path of heuristic teaching. By integrating Yu Dafu's creative process and classic works as a modern Chinese writer, this study explores the regional cultural heritage in his travel essays and their contributions to teaching applications, providing insights for the cultivation of applied liberal arts talents in the new era.

Keywords: Yu Dafu, travel, travelogue, cultural heritage, teaching cognition

1. Introduction

Yu Dafu (1896 - 1945) was one of the significant writers in modern Chinese literature. His works were known for novels, essays, classical poetry, literary theory, and translations. Among them, travel essays constituted an important part of Yu Dafu's literary creation. They not only recorded the author's travel experiences and observations but also profoundly reflected the social and cultural context of the time as well as the author's personal emotional world.

Yu Dafu's travel essays were usually characterized by sincere emotions, elegant writing style, strong cultural atmosphere, and a sense of history. His works often revealed a deep attachment to traditional culture and a keen insight into the changes of modern society. As the famous British travel writer Norman Douglas pointed out, "By reading a good travel book, readers can not only embark on an external journey and see various scenic descriptions but also enter an internal journey with emotional ups and downs. This internal journey accompanies the external journey" (Douglas, 1925).

Yu Dafu's travelogues precisely possessed these cultural characteristics and have always been acclaimed as "a unique flower in modern Chinese travel literature" and "representing the highest achievement in modern travel literature" (Mei & Yu, 2004).

At the end of March 1934, after the opening ceremony of the Huihang Highway, Yu Dafu, Lin Yutang, and Pan Guangdan were invited by the Zhejiang Provincial Construction Department to participate in the Southeast Five-Province Tour. On March 31, they visited Dong Tianmu Mountain. On April 1, they passed through Yuling Pass and spent the night on a boat in Tunxi, Xiuning County, Anhui Province. On April 2, they wandered around the Tunxi market. On April 3, they visited Baiyue Qiyun Mountain in Xiuning. The essays "Record of Passing through Yuling Pass" and "Night Mooring in Tunxi" by Yu Dafu were written based on this trip. At the end of the travel essay "Night Mooring in Tunxi", the author wrote a seven-character quatrain:

"The Xin'an River flows gently and green, with houses scattered along the banks like boats. For several nights, I dreamed under the bridge in Tunxi,

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and the heartbreaking spring scenery is like that in Yangzhou (*The Chinese original: 新安江水碧悠悠, 两岸人家散若舟, 几夜屯溪桥下梦, 断肠春色似扬州*) (Yu, 2017, pp. 145). In “Notes on Visiting Baiyue Qiyun,” he wrote: “As soon as you go out of the West Gate, there is a big bridge, which is built over the stream flowing down from Langmu Ridge, Songluo Mountain, and Qiyun Mountain. The rolling, clear stream flows eastward and becomes one of the sources of the Zhejiang River. Looking down from the bridge, I really wanted to ask it to deliver a message to my friends and relatives in Zhejiang, saying that on a certain year, month, day, and hour, I met someone outside the city of Xiuning, who was going to Qiyun Mountain (Yu, 2017, pp. 191-192).

2. The Historical Background and Cultural Context of Yu Dafu’s Travel Writing

This section mainly explores the historical background and regional cultural context of Yu Dafu’s travel writing, such as the historical and cultural origins of the titles and contents of Yu Dafu’s travelogues and the impact of the cultural context of the times on his travel essay creation.

Firstly, the historical and cultural origins of Yu Dafu’s travel essay writing. The “Yuling Pass” mentioned in “Record of Passing through Yuling Pass” is located at the border between She County, Huangshan City, Anhui Province, and Lin’an District, Hangzhou City, Zhejiang Province. It is an ancient pass on the border of Anhui and Zhejiang provinces and was originally built in the period of Sun Ce of the Three Kingdoms. It has always been a strategic place for military contention. In his essay “Record of Passing through Yuling Pass”, Yu Dafu described its strategic position with the poem “The winding path has so many bends, having gone through thousands of mountains and tens of thousands of mountains, there is no more attachment beyond this, and I have passed another pass coming from the west (*The Chinese original: 盘旋曲径几多弯, 历尽千山与万山, 外此更无三宿恋, 西来又过一重关*)” (Yu, 2017, pp. 79). The “Tunxi” mentioned in “Night Mooring in Tunxi” got its name from Sun Quan’s garrison in

the thirteenth year of Jian’an (AD 208). It is the confluence of the Xin’an River, Hengjiang River, and Shuai River, and is also an important water transport hub. The Xin’an River originates from the east slope of Liugu Peak in Xiuning County, Anhui Province. It flows through Tunxi and enters Zhejiang Province at Pukou, She County. It is the core carrier of Huizhou culture. The poems about the Huizhou merchants’ water transport channel and the “The Xin’an River flows gently and green (*The Chinese original: 新安江水碧悠悠*)”. in Yu Dafu’s travel essays all reflect the inheritance and innovation of the cultural context of the times.

Secondly, the historical background of Yu Dafu’s travel essay writing. In the early to mid-1930s, a tourism boom swept through cities such as Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou in China (Wang et al., 2005). Yu Dafu, living in this historical context, naturally responded to the call of the tourism culture craze. Writing and publishing travelogues also met the needs of the times and cultural context. Analyzing the cultural characteristics inherent in travel itself, “Travel is a recognition and measurement of the geographical space of the nation - state. The magnificent rivers and mountains and the long - standing cultural relics can inspire people’s patriotic sentiments and effectively reshape their cultural memory and self - consciousness as Chinese people” (Ni, 2023, pp. 170). Travel is also regarded as “an important ritual and a process of self - realization in the journey of life” (Thompson, 2011). For Yu Dafu, each trip was a “cultural pilgrimage”. Before each outing, he paid great attention to collecting and reading historical documents related to the scenic spots (Ni, 2023, pp. 174). For example, in 1934, during the Hangzhou - Hui trip, Yu Dafu and his companions originally planned to climb Mount Huang, so he specially copied relevant data from classical local chronicles and travelogues in advance, added his own comments and insights, and compiled them into an article titled “Notes on Huangshan”.

Thirdly, in terms of the cultural context of travel essay writing, it is mainly reflected in the intrinsic quality of the integration and reference of Chinese

and Western cultures in Yu Dafu's essays. When discussing the relationship between landscape description and culture, Wu Xiaodong pointed out that Yu Dafu often compared the landscapes in his travelogues with Western - like landscapes and cultures, which were actually "simulacra of landscapes" that appeared in Western books and pictures, that is, landscapes reproduced through print media. How to view the landscape is closely related to people's emotions, aesthetics, minds, and even the subject structure (Wu, 2012). For example, in "Record of Passing through Yuling Pass", he mentioned Swiss villages when talking about the rural villages in Anhui, described the rugged and majestic cliffs of Fangyan with the texture of traditional Chinese landscape painting (in "Quietness of Fangyan"), and used the picture of Zhong Kui sending his sister and the picture of traveling on the Yangtze River to describe the continuous stream of people and donkeys and horses on the ancient mountain path (in "Record of Passing through Yuling Pass"), all of which are examples of using simulacra techniques (Ni, 2023, pp. 180).

At the same time, Yu Dafu's travel essays continued the tradition of classical Chinese travel literature, interspersing various anecdotes, interesting stories, and poems from ancient books, which are highly knowledgeable and elegant. In this way, the landscape is no longer just a silent, static natural scenery, but a dynamic humanistic landscape that projects the author's emotions. For example, in Yu Dafu's "Notes on Visiting Baiyue Qiyun", there are multiple references to relevant records in ancient books such as "Xiuning County Chronicles," "Anhui General Chronicles," and "Xu Xiake's Travel Notes". Most of the landscapes he wrote about are Taoist sacred sites, cliff inscriptions, stone tablets, and steles. The landscape, built up by various texts and discourses and accumulated in history, is a perception and reflection on the historical and cultural tradition when viewing the scenery (Ni, 2023, pp. 186). Therefore, although in traditional reading experience and evaluation habits, people generally position Yu Dafu's travel essays as "literati - style" travelogues

and consider that he has taken the old path of Chinese - style literati (Ni, 2023), "from 1932 to 1937, Yu Dafu shifted from a somewhat morbid explorer of the soul to the hermit posture of Taoism, and his travelogues for self - entertainment are very similar to the old literary travelogues" (Xia, 2005, p. 80). However, the use of simulacra techniques in his essay writing and the breaking of the traditional writing style of classical travel literature indicate that his travel essays cannot be simply regarded as "old literary travelogues" (Xia, 2005, p. 80). The author Yu Dafu himself is a highly sensitive and melancholic individual in terms of cultural spirit. In the journey, "the 'I' as the subject of action is always in a state of stress response" (Luo, 2021). The emotional experience that should be coherent in classical travel literature is always interrupted by the modern - fragmented scenery. "It is always pricked by the nerve connecting 'nature' and society, and he is in a state of seeking healing but tearing himself apart during the journey" (Gai, 2023, p. 214).

3. Cultural Memory Transmission and Teaching Cognition Reconstruction in Yu Dafu's Essays

This section primarily explores the insights that the cultural heritage in Yu Dafu's travel essays offers for the cultivation and reconstruction of teaching cognition, including teaching cognition, teaching design, and cultural practice.

Taking Yu Dafu's travel essay "Night Mooring in Tunxi" as an example, the artistic depiction of Anhui's landscape in the essay reflects the aesthetic characteristics of the corresponding era and culture. First, at the level of imagery, "The Xin'an River flows gently and green (*The Chinese original: 新安江水碧悠悠*)" portrays the clarity and vitality of the Xin'an River; "Damp and cold Tunxi" reflects the tranquility and vicissitudes of old Huizhou; and "Houses scattered along the banks like boats (*The Chinese original: 两岸人家散若舟*)" highlights the naturalness of ancient villages. Second, in terms of contrast, the phrase "Heart-breaking spring scenery like that in Yangzhou (*The Chinese original: 断肠春色似扬州*)" compares Tunxi with Yangzhou,

emphasizing the “quietness” and “substance” of Huizhou’s landscape. Third, regarding personal experience, the author transforms the regret of not being able to visit Mount Huang into a deep observation of Tunxi. For instance, the small market town “located at the confluence of many waters (*The Chinese original: 地处众水汇聚之乡*)” (Yu, 2017, 141), is described as “the major port of southern Anhui” and “Little Shanghai”(Yu, 2017, 141), where one can “listen to the rain on the boat and watch the rain by the water” (*The Chinese original: 在船上听雨, 在水边看雨*) (Yu, 2017, 142). From the above three aspects, it can be seen that the focus of Yu Dafu’s essays lies in “dampness and coldness”. On the one hand, “dampness and coldness” reflects an aesthetic style of naturalness, elegance, and sadness, which is a projection of Yu Dafu’s melancholic temperament. On the other hand, “dampness and coldness” is a true and unique reflection of the local climate and social conditions of Tunxi in old Huizhou in the 1930s.

The “aesthetics of dampness and coldness” constructed by Yu Dafu in his Huizhou essays, such as “Night Mooring in Tunxi” and “Notes on Visiting Baiyue Qiyun”, is actually a metaphorical code of cultural memory. In teaching, it is necessary to break through the flat - processing of traditional text analysis and establish a three - dimensional cognitive framework for the essay text.

3.1 Imagery Symbol Layer

“Dampness and coldness” is not only a description of the climate but also a spiritual shiver and self - healing of literati facing the desolate countryside. For example, in “Night Mooring in Tunxi”, the portrayal of a group of images such as “rainwater”, “wharf”, “ship”, “bridge”, “riverside”, “rain boots” and “umbrella” metaphorically represents the collective cultural anxiety of intellectuals in the Republic of China era. In teaching undergraduates majoring in Chinese language and literature, students should be guided to deconstruct the cultural symbols of traumatic memory behind the images.

3.2 Historical Context Layer

In combination with the social reality of the decline of Huizhou merchants in 1934, the objects in the essay such as “dim lamp without flame (*The Chinese original: 残灯无焰*)” and “drizzle at dusk (*The Chinese original: 微雨黄昏*)” become witnesses to the era’s transformation. In the teaching process, cross - text materials such as Anhui local chronicles and economic history can be introduced to help students reveal the interactive relationship between literary writing and historical and cultural processes through multi - text reading and thinking.

3.3 Memory Reconstruction Layer

Yu Dafu sublimates his personal travel experience into the practice of cultural trauma healing. In “Notes on Visiting Baiyue Qiyun,” he wrote: “On both sides of the mountain road, there are many peach blossoms and miscellaneous trees, and a cluster of ancient pines in the middle is particularly strange and lovely. Under the quiet noon sunlight, step by step, passing through the ancient pines and Wangxian Pavilion, people are intoxicated by the fragrance of flowers, and are in a daze as if in a dream. Only the pine waves caused by the breeze and the chirping of bees and butterflies collecting flowers sometimes wake up the noon dream. In addition, the mountains are as quiet as in ancient times. I don’t know what era it is now, nor do I know where my body has arrived” (Yu, 2017, 191-192). “The peaks within the main hall of Qiyun Mountain can be summarized as strange and great” (Yu, 2017, 196). These travel writings are precisely the cultural pilgrimage - style writings of Taoist holy land, reflecting the efforts of intellectuals to rebuild cultural identity. This requires teaching to go beyond the introduction of regional landscapes and delve into the inheritance mechanism of cultural genes.

4. Three - Dimensional Ability - Cultivation Path of Heuristic Teaching in Yu Dafu’s Travel Essays

4.1 Fission - Style Improvement of Text - Interpretation Ability

Traditional teaching often falls into the binary rut of “scenic description - emotional expression”,

while the deeper value of Yu Dafu's essays lies in the decryption training of cultural memory symbols and the collision of diverse interpretations.

First, the decryption training of memory symbols. Guide students to distinguish the "memory fields" in the essay text (such as Xin'an River, Baiyue Ancient Road). These spaces are not only geographical coordinates but also cultural containers bearing clan ethics and business spirit. By drawing a mind map corresponding to the "imagery - memory - culture" in Yu Dafu's travel essays, students can develop the ability to decode symbols.

Second, the collision of diverse interpretations. For the scenes described in "Night Mooring in Tunxi," such as "listening to the rain on the boat and watching the rain by the water (*The Chinese original: 在船上听雨, 在水边看雨*)" (Yu, 2017, 142), controversial issues can be designed. For example, do these cultural scenes in the essay tend to express the aesthetic transference of ancient literati or a cultural elegy under the impact of modernity? From this perspective, students can be guided to debate from the perspectives of phenomenology and memory studies.

4.2 Immersive Development of Cultural Practice Ability

The teaching value of Yu Dafu's essays ultimately needs to be implemented in cultural heritage practice. This can be achieved by constructing a "three - stage ability - cultivation chain" to enhance the practicality and implementation of the essay's teaching value.

First, the perception stage. Use large - model software such as Qianwen to restore the Huifeng Wanyun cultural scenes in the essays, such as simulating the visual presentation of the "She County Archway Group" in the drizzle at dusk. Through multi - sensory experience, students can understand how the physical environment triggers cultural memory.

Second, the memory reconstruction stage. Design a simulation topic "Return to 1934": Require students to integrate historical materials such as Huizhou merchants' account books, genealogies,

documents, and folk songs based on the details of the essay, and write a "White Paper on Cultural Memory in Yu Dafu's Essays", which can cultivate students' historical imagination and material integration ability.

Third, the contemporary transformation stage. Launch a research project on the "Activation of Yangtze River Cultural Genes". For example, referring to Yu Dafu's cultural aesthetic understanding of Huimo and Xuan paper, the "Yangtze River Cultural Genes" and "aesthetics of dampness and coldness" can be transformed into architectural space design concepts to guide students in designing and innovating modern application plans for traditional cultural elements.

5. Conclusion: Towards the Creative Transmission of Cultural Memory

Yu Dafu's essays such as "Night Mooring in Tunxi" and "Notes on Visiting Baiyue Qiyun" are landmarks of his travel writing in Anhui. Centered around images like "The Xin'an River flows gently and green (*The Chinese original: 新安江水碧悠悠*)" and "Damp and cold Tunxi" these essays blend personal experience with regional culture, presenting a style characterized by "quietness, substance, and depth". Yu Dafu's travels are highly intertwined with his texts—the opening of the Huihang Highway provided the historical backdrop for his writing, while the unfulfilled journey to Mount Huang intensified his emotional expression in places like Tunxi. For undergraduate teaching in Chinese language and literature, the implication lies in the need to focus on three dimensions: "aesthetic characteristics, historical context, and cultural heritage". This approach helps students understand the diverse values of the texts from the perspectives of personal experience, regional culture, and historical memory.

The cultural heritage characteristics of Yu Dafu's travel essays remind us that the essence of teaching travel literature is to serve as an important means of transmitting the excellent cultural genes of our country. By deconstructing the metaphorical

system of cultural images in his travel essays, restoring the memory tension of historical contexts, and creating channels for the transformation of cultural practices, we ultimately cultivate students to become “living carriers” of cultural memory. This innovative teaching paradigm is not only applicable to modern Chinese literature courses but also provides a transferable cognitive framework for traditional cultural education and enlightenment. When students can understand Yu Dafu’s cultural concerns and historical sentiments, they gain the key to unlocking the gene bank of the Yangtze River civilization.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest in this work.

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