

# “Treasures from Afar”: The Cultural Characteristics and Dissemination Value of Hong Kong Travel Literature

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## Abstract:

\*Xia Er Guan Zhen\* ( 遐迩贯珍 ), founded in August 1853 and ceased publication in May 1856, spanned the terms of Governors Ban Han and Pauline. This paper takes \*Xia Er Guan Zhen\*, founded in the mid-19th century, as its research object, systematically examines its distinctive status and cultural significance in the history of Hong Kong travel literature. Through literature analysis and the theoretical framework of travel literature, it unveils the innovative attributes of the journal in terms of factual writing, elegant language, and cross-cultural communication. Xia Er Guan Zhen\* pioneered a travel tradition integrating practical utility with literary aesthetics through the dissemination of scientific knowledge, the enlightenment of economic concepts, and comparative narratives of Chinese and Western cultures. Furthermore, its pioneering exploration of cross-cultural communication models and practices serves as a crucial precursor and methodological reference for the effective dissemination and in-depth exchange of contemporary travel literature.

**Keywords:** \*Xia Er Guan Zhen\*; Hong Kong travel literature; historical context

## 1. Introduction

The Complete Collection of Travelogues\*, an important publication in Hong Kong during the early 19th century, was initiated by the Morrison Educational Society and printed by Anglo-Chinese College. It was successively edited by missionaries such as Medhurst, Hillary, and Legge. Its founding heralded the preliminary establishment of Hong Kong's status as a hub for Sino-Western cultural exchange. It not only recorded Hong Kong's early social changes and Sino-Western cultural conflicts but also pioneered a tradition of travel literature that combined practical

function with literary aesthetics. This paper takes \*The Complete Collection of Travelogues\* as its research object, aiming to systematically explore its unique position and cultural value in the history of Hong Kong travel literature, revealing its innovative characteristics in documentary authenticity, literary aesthetics, and cross-cultural communication competence.

Existing research on “Xia Er Guan Zhen” has predominantly concentrated on the fields of journalism history and communication studies, with insufficient scholarly attention paid to its literary value, especial-

ly its tourism literature value. “Xia Er Guan Zhen” has an innovative strategy for disseminating scientific knowledge, characterized by the organic integration of visual and textual information and focuses on the dissemination of practical technology [1]. As well as the analysis of colonial perspectives, such as “Xia Er Guan Zhen” and the construction of British colonial discourse — taking Hong Kong news as the center, it mentions that “Xia Er Guan Zhen” uses the local Chinese language to trace and report the Sino-British War, and advocates the “benevolence” of British rule over Hong Kong, thereby explaining the “rationality” of the war and constructing a colonial discourse system [2]. Current academic research on “Xia Er Guan Zhen” exhibits two core gaps: one is the evaluation criteria for its literary value. Traditional research often adopts a journalism history-centric perspective and neglects its literary aesthetic value; the other is the understanding of the degree of integration between Chinese and Western cultures. Some studies overemphasize Western influence and ignore the continuity of traditional Chinese literary elements. Addressing these research gaps provides a novel academic perspective for understanding the early cultural identity construction of Hong Kong. Other studies focus on the journal’s contributions to science communication and newspaper innovation, such as its pioneering role in disseminating Western medical knowledge and the principles of the steam engine. This involves reinterpreting the cultural value of \*Xia Er Guan Zhen\* within the theoretical framework of travel literature.

All operas, novels, biographies, etc., that are related to tourist attractions and have local characteristics and historical significance can be classified as tourism literature. [3] Achieving these research objectives will facilitate the redefinition of the status of “Xia Er Guan Zhen” in the history of modern Chinese literature, especially in the history of tourism literature. The value of “Xia Er Guan Zhen” lies not only in its historical documentary significance, but also in the methodological inspiration it provides for contemporary tourism literature.

In his “On the Main Characteristics of Tourism Literature,” Peng Shaochun points out that this literary genre centers on depicting landscapes and expressing the emotions and aesthetics of those involved in tourism, while also possessing a documentary quality. This study employs this theoretical framework, finding that its summarized characteristics of documentary, literary, and cultural elements exactly align with the textual features of \*Xia’er Guanzhen\*, providing a solid theoretical reference for the analysis of the journal’s tourism literature features.

## 2. Theoretical basis

Tourism literature constitutes a literary genre rooted in travel experiences. Through the depiction of natural and cultural landscapes, it reflects the ideological perceptions, emotional responses, and aesthetic experiences of tourists and professionals, possessing lyrical, aesthetic, and informative characteristics. Its core connotations encompass

three dimensions—tourism, literature, and geography, emphasizing a foundation in real-life travel experiences, presenting regional characteristics and folk customs through artistic techniques, and integrating diverse cultural elements such as history and society. In tourism literature studies, the authenticity dimension focuses on the text’s fidelity to objective reality; the uniqueness dimension emphasizes the differences and irreplaceable nature of regional cultures; the knowledge dimension embodies the text’s informational function; the individuality dimension reflects the author’s subjective consciousness and personalized expression; and the aesthetic dimension focuses on the aesthetic value of literary language and the creation of artistic conception. This theoretical framework serves as a robust analytical tool for the present study.

## 3. The third aspect of the travel scholarship features of “A Collection of Treasures from Afar and Near”

Regarding the characteristics of travel literature, scholars have different opinions. Feng Naikang argues that travel literature is characterized by fragmentariness, lyricism, aesthetics, and informativeness [4]. Specifically, travel literature inherently integrates professional knowledge such as geography, history, and culture into travel narratives, which not only enriches the text’s connotation but also gives readers a cognitive enhancement function. This constitutes the core distinction between travel literature and ordinary travelogues. This article combines this theoretical framework and analyzes “Xia Er Guan Zhen” from the following two dimensions with the characteristics of travel literature:

### 3.1 A True Record of Science Communication

One of the most salient factual characteristics of \*Xia Er Guan Zhen\* ( 遐迩贯珍 ) lies in its credible dissemination of scientific knowledge. The article “A Brief Account of the Steamship Mechanism,” published in the journal, offers a meticulous elaboration on the operational principles of the steam engine, embodying the characteristics of science communication. This content not only has scientific and technological value but also reflects the knowledge dissemination function of travel literature. Introducing advanced Western science and technology to Chinese readers through the perspective of travelers, this factual writing ensures the authenticity of the information and enhances the credibility of the text. The journal adopts a new strategy of combining visual and textual information in its dissemination of scientific knowledge, emphasizing the dissemination of practical technologies. This innovative approach further strengthens its factual characteristics.

### 3.2 The Enlightenment Role of Economic Ideas

Beyond science communication, \*Xia Er Guan Zhen\* also exemplified its function in enlightening modern economic notions through fact-based narratives. Its pioneer-

ing bulletin board and advertising columns not only held commercial value but also embodied the dissemination of modern economic ideologies. Through these advertisements, readers could learn about contemporary business dynamics and market information; this function of economic enlightenment is a significant manifestation of the social value of travel literature. With a monthly circulation of several thousand copies covering multiple treaty ports, its widespread influence enabled the rapid dissemination of these economic ideas, exerting a subtle impact on the transformation of modern Chinese economic thought. This integration of economic enlightenment into travel literature demonstrates the journal's forward-thinking approach to content innovation.

This fact-based narrative not only established the publication's authority but also provided a rich source of material for subsequent literary expression. Upon the transformation of these scientific principles into pragmatic popular science writings, it essentially completed the transformation and dissemination of technical knowledge into cultural symbols, allowing writers to develop more aesthetically valuable cultural expressions within this framework. This shift from factual to lyrical, coupled with the integration of Western contextual elements and classical Chinese aesthetic traditions, constitutes the distinctive cross-cultural narrative logic of *\*Xia'er Guanzhen\**.

### 3.3 The Cultural Connotation of Naming Art

The title itself, *\*Xia Er Guan Zhen\** (遐迩贯珍), embodies remarkable literary aesthetics and profound cultural connotations. "Xia Er" (遐迩) denotes both near and far, while "Guan Zhen" (贯珍) implies connecting rare and precious things. The title *\*Xia Er Guan Zhen\** implicitly conveys that the journal's articles, akin to a string of pearls, their fame spreading far and wide. "Xia" (遐) means far, and "Er" (迩) means near. The *\*Shangshu\** (Book of Documents), in the chapter "Tai Jia Xia" (太甲下), articulates, "If one ascends to the distant, one must begin from the near." Furthermore, the *\*Shiji\** (Records of the Grand Historian), in the biography of Sima Xiangru, states, "With the unity of near and far, and the well-being of both within and outside the country, is it not peaceful?" This resonates impeccably with the title's connotation. "Guan Zhen" (贯珍), as ancient wisdom holds, "linking pearls and stringing jade together to form a chapter," can be simply interpreted as connecting rare and precious news from near and far, publishing it monthly. Such a title significantly outperforms earlier periodicals established by Western missionaries, such as *\*Cha Shi Se Yue Yue Tong Ji Zhuan\** (察俗月统记传) and *\*Dong Xi Yang Kao Yue Yue Tong Ji Zhuan\** (东西洋考月统记传), circumventing their flaws of verbosity and ambiguity. This naming strategy not only conforms to the aesthetics of traditional Chinese culture, but also reflects the modern consciousness of cross-cultural communication. The aesthetic value of travel literature is primarily manifested in two dimensions: the depiction of beauty within the work itself and the guidance of readers toward an aesthetic realm[5].

The first part of the book has two five-character poems as inscriptions. One of them reads: "The original theory is far and wide, and the magnificent words connect the past and present. The secluded path opens up the bird path, and the reputation is as high as that of the chicken forest. The wonderful explanation awakens the eyes of the world, and the skillful craftsman has worked hard. I have traveled to foreign lands and rely on you as my compass." [6] The aesthetic core of this poem lies in "the unity of form and spirit"—with rigorous metrical rules as its framework, vivid imagery as its embodiment, and sincere commendation as its essence. It showcases lexical ingenuity and contains the warmth of emotions. At the same time, it has the beauty of form, the beauty of imagery and the beauty of introspection.

From the perspective of travel literature, this name aptly expresses the traveler's spirit of spatial traversal and exploring the unknown. The poetic expression in the name not only showcases its literary quality but also contains profound cultural implications—connecting different civilizations through travel and facilitating the sharing and exchange of cultural treasures. This exquisite naming strategy reflects the editors' deep understanding of the integration of Chinese and Western cultures and sets the tone for subsequent literary creations.

### 3.4 Literary Aesthetic Pursuit

The journal *\*Xia Er Guan Zhen\** exhibits distinctive aesthetic value in its literary diction. Its style preserves the elegance of classical Chinese prose while integrating colloquial elements of modern vernacular Chinese, creating a distinctive literary beauty. This linguistic innovation is evident not only in vocabulary selection but also in sentence structure and rhetorical devices. The journal skillfully combines the elegance of classical literature with the conciseness of modern newspapers, creating a language style that is both literary and accessible to dissemination. For example, in describing Hong Kong's landscape, it employs both the imagery of classical poetry and the direct descriptions of vernacular Chinese; this fusion creates a new aesthetic experience. Through an examination of this innovative linguistic style, we can ascertain the significant status of *\*Xia Er Guan Zhen\** in the evolution of literary language.

## 4. Continuation and Development of Historical Context

From the perspective of historical development, the Hong Kong literary tradition pioneered by The Distinguished Scholar forged a distinctive cultural lineage. Zhao Xifang pointed out that Hong Kong literature has the dual characteristics of being "the most Chinese cultural guardian" and "the modern integration of the international world," and this characteristic has already begun to emerge in The Distinguished Scholar. In terms of writing, it emphasizes the absorption of traditional historical narrative techniques

and literary styles[7]. The “historicization” of the journal is very obvious. Historicization mainly refers to the historical materialization of the research object, the documentaryization of the research method, and the historiography of the research subject[8]. It introduces a large amount of the modern civilization that the West was spreading at that time, covering fields such as political science, history, literature, geology and geography, astronomy, physics, chemistry, medicine, and biology. For example, when introducing the geographical features of Hong Kong, it not only provides accurate geographical data, but also enables readers to understand the natural environment of Hong Kong through literary descriptions. This way of knowledge dissemination held pioneering historical significance in its era.

From this, we can also understand the reading habits of people in Hong Kong and the mainland during the Qing Dynasty. For example, the journal employed the linguistic style of Confucian classics to disseminate its ideas and adopted a chapter-based structure for its articles. In terms of format, “Xia Er Guan Zhen” adopted the traditional Chinese thread-bound book format and used a vertical layout, aligning with the reading conventions of Chinese audiences[9].

While grounding itself in traditional Chinese cultural traditions, \*Xia Er Guan Zhen\* actively absorbed Western modern civilization. Its historical value provided important lessons for the later development of Hong Kong literature, and its exploration of the integration of Chinese and Western aesthetic traditions was pioneering. For example, its literary descriptions of Hong Kong’s urban landscape foreshadowed the emergence of modern urban literature; its aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment continued the tradition of Chinese landscape literature. This historical inheritance of aesthetic value made \*Xia Er Guan Zhen\* an important literary bridge connecting tradition and modernity, East and West. This cultural positioning shaped the subsequent developmental trajectory of Hong Kong literature. By analyzing the cultural context of this journal, we can better understand the formation process of Hong Kong literature’s unique cultural identity and its special position within the Chinese cultural sphere.

## 5. Conclusion

The most outstanding contribution of “Xia Er Guan Zhen” in terms of its communication value is the pioneering cross-cultural communication paradigm it established. The magazine’s publishing philosophy embodies the modern communication awareness of bidirectional cultural exchange. The emergence of literary works in modern Chinese newspapers began with “Cha Shi Su Yue Tong Ji Zhuan”, but such works were often interspersed with other articles without fixed pages or dedicated columns. “Xia Er Guan Zhen” opened a column, and the position was fixed between the two major contents of discussion and news, which was unprecedented [10]. Its content not

only introduced Western civilization to Chinese readers, but also showed Chinese culture to the Western world. For example, the innovations in page design, content arrangement, and advertising management, such as the first introduction of news illustrations and the establishment of advertising columns, reflected the modern newspaper operation concept. This two-way communication model was pioneering at that time and provided important reference for later cross-cultural exchanges. The publication boasted a monthly circulation of several thousand copies, reaching across numerous treaty ports. This wide range of dissemination made its influence far exceed that of general publications. From the perspective of travel literature, this communication model actually realizes cultural travel through the media, enabling readers in different regions to share the traveler’s experiences and thoughts.

These innovations not only bolstered the dissemination of travel literature but also showcased early practices in media convergence. In the digital age, reviewing the journal’s media innovation experiences can provide historical lessons for contemporary media development. In particular, its successful experience in achieving widespread dissemination under limited technological conditions hold substantial reference value for exploring approaches to enhance the dissemination of travel literature and promote cultural exchange in the new era.

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