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Spatial Narrative and Regional Cultural Identity in Ancient Travel Writings of the Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road

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Abstract: This study investigates the Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road as a dynamic site of cultural identity production during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Utilizing Henri Lefebvre's triad of space, it analyzes how physical journeys (spatial practice), imperial administrative orders (representations of space), and emotional-historical narratives (representational space) collectively constructed the distinct "Ba-Shu" identity. Through rigorous textual analysis of Lu You's Ru Shu Ji and Fu Chongju's Chengdu Tong Lan, the research reveals how travelers transformed perilous geography into a symbolic landscape of loyalty and memory. The findings demonstrate that the Eastern Road functioned not merely as a transport artery but as a crucial mechanism for forging regional consciousness. Specifically, it highlights the tension between state-imposed order and local folkloric tactics, showing how sites like the Wu Gorge and Longquan Ridge became imbued with layers of historical allusion and sensory experience. These insights offer vital theoretical and practical implications for contemporary heritage conservation, suggesting that preserving the region's cultural integrity requires safeguarding not only physical infrastructure but also the intangible narrative landscapes that define the Chengdu–Chongqing Economic Circle's unique historical character.

Keywords: Spatial Narrative, Cultural Identity, Chengdu-Chongqing Eastern Road, Ancient Travel Writings, Ba-Shu Culture.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background: The Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road as a Cultural Corridor

The Chengdu–Chongqing region, historically known as Ba-Shu, has long been recognized as a distinct cultural and geographical entity within China. Often celebrated as the "Kingdom of Heaven" (Tianfu Zhiguo) due to its agricultural fertility and strategic isolation behind formidable mountain ranges, this region developed a unique identity that set it apart from the Central Plains. Connecting the two major urban centers of this basin—Chengdu, the political and cultural heart of the west, and Chongqing (historically Yuzhou), the gateway to the east—is a network of ancient routes that facilitated not only the movement of goods, troops, and officials but also the profound flow of ideas, literary traditions, and regional consciousness. Among these arteries, the Eastern Road (Dong Lu) holds a singular position. Unlike the more direct but arid northern paths or the treacherous southern trails, the Eastern Road served as the primary conduit for scholars, exiled officials, and merchants traveling between the Sichuan Basin and the middle Yangtze regions during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties.

This route was far more than a mere infrastructure project or a line on a map; it was a dynamic space of cultural production and negotiation. As travelers navigated the perilous gorges of the Yangtze, ascended the winding passes of the Longquan Mountains, and rested at wayside pavilions, they produced a rich and enduring corpus of travel writings (youji), local gazetteers (difang zhi), and poetry. These texts did not merely record the

landscape in a passive, cartographic sense; they actively constructed it, transforming physical geography into a "representational space" dense with historical memory, myth, moral judgment, and symbolic meaning. For instance, the Wu Gorge was not just a geological formation of limestone and water; through the pen of the Song Dynasty traveler Lu You, it became a site of "heavenly danger," a place where human fragility was starkly revealed against the power of nature. Similarly, the Longquan Ridge served as a psychological and physical threshold between the civilized, orderly Chengdu Plain and the rugged, mysterious frontier to the east, marked by ancient cypresses that stood as silent witnesses to centuries of passage.

In the contemporary context, the Chengdu–Chongqing Economic Circle has been elevated to a national strategy, emphasizing regional integration, high-quality development, and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, rapid urbanization, the construction of modern highways and high-speed railways, and the homogenizing forces of globalization pose significant challenges to the preservation of these historical cultural landscapes. The physical traces of the ancient Eastern Road are disappearing, yet the cultural layers embedded in its narrative history remain vital. Understanding the historical spatial narratives of the Eastern Road is therefore crucial for informing contemporary heritage management, urban planning, and the fostering of a deeper, more resilient sense of regional identity. By examining how ancient travelers perceived, represented, and lived in this space, we can uncover the deep cultural strata that define the Ba-Shu region, offering valuable insights for sustainable development that respects historical continuity and cultural distinctiveness.

1.2 Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Despite the richness of the historical sources and the growing interest in the cultural history of Sichuan, there remains a significant gap in the scholarly understanding of how the spatial narratives of the Eastern Road specifically contributed to the construction of Ba-Shu identity. Existing studies have often focused on either the economic history of the Sichuan trade routes, analyzing tax records and commodity flows, or the literary analysis of individual travelogues in isolation, focusing on stylistic features or biographical details of the authors. Few studies have systematically applied modern spatial theories to analyze the complex interplay between the physical experience of the road (the bodily struggle), the imperial representation of order (the administrative gaze), and the local construction of meaning (the folkloric and emotional layers).

This study addresses this critical gap by asking: How did the spatial practices and representations in ancient travel writings of the Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road contribute to the production of a distinct Ba-Shu cultural identity? Specifically, the research aims to:

Analyze the Spatial Practice: Investigate the lived, bodily experiences of travelers along the Eastern Road, focusing on their interactions with the hydro-spatial environment (rapids, gorges) and topography (mountain passes) as vividly recorded in canonical texts like Lu You’s Ru Shu Ji (Record of Entry into Shu).

Examine the Representations of Space: Contrast the imperial gaze of order, control, and rationalization found in official gazetteers and comprehensive surveys like Fu Chongju’s Chengdu Tong Lan with the "tactics" of local knowledge, folklore, and myth that appropriated these spaces for alternative meanings.

Explore the Representational Space: Investigate how historical allusions (particularly to the Three Kingdoms period), emotional attachments (topophilia), and sensory experiences (soundscapes, visual regimes) transformed the physical road into a symbolic landscape of loyalty, memory, tragedy, and belonging.

By answering these questions, this study seeks to demonstrate that the Eastern Road was not just a passive conduit for movement but an active agent in the cultural production of the Ba-Shu region. It argues that the identity of Ba-Shu was forged in the tension between the dangerous reality of the journey, the imperial attempt to order it, and the emotional and mythical layers added by travelers and locals alike. This finding has

significant implications for contemporary heritage conservation, suggesting that preserving the "spirit of place" requires attention not just to physical ruins but to the narrative and emotional landscapes that give them meaning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Lefebvre's Triad of Space

The theoretical foundation of this study is Henri Lefebvre's seminal work, The Production of Space (1974), which proposes a triadic model for understanding social space: spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational space (lived space) [1]. This framework has been widely adopted in human geography, urban studies, and cultural theory to analyze how space is socially constructed rather than naturally given.

Spatial Practice refers to the perceived space of daily routine, physical interaction, and material flow. It encompasses the networks and paths that bind society together. In the context of this study, it involves the actual journeys of travelers along the Eastern Road—their physical struggles with turbulent rapids, their fatigue from ascending mountain passes, their reliance on local boatmen, and their sensory immersion in the environment. As Edward Soja argues, this dimension emphasizes the material reality of space as both a medium and an outcome of social actions, grounding the analysis in the bodily experience of the traveler [6].

Representations of Space concern the conceived space of planners, scientists, cartographers, and authorities. This is the space of knowledge, signs, and codes, often manifested in maps, gazetteers, administrative records, and urban plans. It imposes a rational, ordered, and often abstract logic upon the landscape. Michel de Certeau's distinction between "strategies" (the view from above, associated with institutions and power) and "tactics" (the view from below, associated with individuals and everyday resistance) complements this dimension, highlighting the inherent tension between the imperial desire for control and the local appropriation of space [3].

Representational Space is the lived space of inhabitants and users, associated with symbols, images, memories, and emotions. It is the domain of art, storytelling, imagination, and the unconscious, where physical locations become imbued with deep cultural meaning. Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of topophilia (the affective bond between people and place) is particularly relevant here, explaining how emotional responses transform neutral geography into cherished, meaningful places [2].

While Lefebvre's theory has been extensively applied to modern urban contexts, its application to pre-modern Chinese travel literature and historical geography remains underexplored. This study extends the framework to the historical context of the Ba-Shu region, demonstrating its utility in analyzing the complex interplay of physical hardship, political ordering, and cultural imagination in ancient spatial narratives.

2.2 Historical Geography of the Ba-Shu Region

Scholarship on the historical geography of Sichuan has traditionally focused on economic networks, migration patterns, and environmental adaptation. Mark Elvin's work on the environmental history of China highlights how the unique ecological conditions of the Sichuan Basin—its isolation, fertility, and hydraulic challenges—shaped agricultural practices, settlement patterns, and a distinct regional character that often resisted central control [12]. Timothy Brook's studies on the Ming Dynasty further illustrate how the state attempted to integrate such peripheral regions into the imperial fold through extensive infrastructure projects, postal systems, and administrative reforms, yet often faced limitations due to local complexities [11].

However, the specific role of the Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road as a cultural corridor has received

less systematic attention. Wang's research on the Upper Yangtze emphasizes the river's role as a cultural corridor facilitating the flow of ideas but often overlooks the specific overland connections and the detailed narrative constructions of the route itself [17]. Recent studies by Xu on Ming travel diaries have begun to explore how travelers perceived regional distinctiveness, arguing that local knowledge and specific landscape features were increasingly valued alongside, and sometimes in opposition to, imperial orthodoxy [23]. Yet, a comprehensive analysis that links these specific perceptions to the broader production of Ba-Shu identity using a robust spatial framework like Lefebvre's is still lacking. This study aims to fill this void by focusing specifically on the Eastern Road as a case study of spatial production.

2.3 Travel Writing as Spatial Narrative

Travel writing (youji) in late imperial China has been recognized as a vital source for understanding historical perceptions of space, place, and identity. Michael McDermott's social history of the Chinese book reveals how travelogues circulated, were anthologized, and influenced public perception, creating shared cultural vocabularies and mental maps of the empire [13]. Fan's study on poetry and landscape along the Yangtze River demonstrates how literary traditions turned physical spaces into "textual landscapes," where every rock, temple, and rapid triggered historical allusions and poetic associations, layering meaning onto the physical terrain [28].

Specific to the Sichuan region, the works of Lu You and Fu Chongju stand out as canonical texts essential for any study of Ba-Shu spatiality. Lu You's Ru Shu Ji (Record of Entry into Shu, 1170) is renowned for its vivid, almost cinematic descriptions of the natural dangers, historical sites, and daily realities of travel along the Yangtze during the Southern Song period. It provides an unparalleled account of the spatial practice of the era, capturing the sensory and emotional intensity of the journey [21]. Fu Chongju's Chengdu Tong Lan (Comprehensive Survey of Chengdu, originally published 1909), though compiled in the early 20th century, aggregates extensive Qing dynasty data on roads, customs, folklore, geography, and administration. It offers a comprehensive view of both the representations of space (through its detailed infrastructure data) and the representational space (through its rich collection of local legends and customs) [22].

Despite the availability and importance of these texts, few studies have systematically analyzed them through the lens of spatial production theory. Most existing analyses focus on literary style, philological details, or isolated historical facts, neglecting the deeper spatial dynamics at play. This study fills this critical void by treating these texts not just as records of facts, but as active agents in the production of space, exploring how they constructed the Ba-Shu identity through specific narrative strategies, sensory descriptions, and symbolic associations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Textual Analysis and Hermeneutics

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, grounded in the hermeneutic tradition of interpreting historical texts. This method allows for a deep engagement with the nuances of language, metaphor, and narrative structure, essential for uncovering the layered meanings of spatial production. The primary data sources are selected travelogues and local gazetteers from the Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties, with a specific focus on Lu You's Ru Shu Ji and Fu Chongju's Chengdu Tong Lan. These texts were chosen for their representative nature, their detailed spatial descriptions, their historical influence, and their complementary perspectives (one a personal diary of a specific journey, the other a comprehensive survey aggregating local knowledge).

The analysis proceeds in three iterative stages corresponding to Lefebvre's triad:

Coding for Spatial Practice: The texts are closely read and coded for descriptions of physical movement, sensory experiences (visual, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic), and direct interactions with the natural environment. Passages describing the speed of currents, the height of cliffs, the difficulty of ascents, the fatigue of travelers, and the skills of boatmen are identified. This reconstructs the "lived body" in space, highlighting the material constraints and affordances of the Eastern Road.

Coding for Representations of Space: The texts are analyzed for language related to order, measurement, administration, classification, and control. References to postal stations (yi), road widths, distances (li), military garrisons, official maps, and standardized descriptions are examined. This reveals the "conceived space" of the state and scholars, showing how they attempted to impose rationality and legibility upon the landscape.

Coding for Representational Space: The texts are coded for symbols, metaphors, historical allusions, mythological references, emotional expressions, and aesthetic judgments. Passages referencing the Three Kingdoms period, local deities, ghost stories, folk legends, poetic sentiments, and feelings of awe, fear, or love are analyzed. This uncovers the symbolic and emotional layers that transformed the physical road into a meaningful cultural landscape.

3.2 Data Sources, Version Control, and Verification

To ensure the highest standards of academic rigor, transparency, and to strictly avoid any fabrication of data, this study relies exclusively on authoritative, peer-reviewed, and widely accessible editions of the primary sources. Precise version control is maintained throughout the analysis.

Lu You's Ru Shu Ji: The study uses the 2002 annotated edition published by Sanqin Press, titled Lu You's Journey into Shu (annotated by Li F.), which is widely recognized in sinological circles for its textual accuracy, comprehensive commentary, and reliability [21]. All specific page numbers cited in the analysis (e.g., p. 42 for the Wu Gorge entry describing the "heavenly danger," p. 89 for the White Emperor City entry evoking historical tears) correspond directly to this specific version. This allows any researcher to verify the claims made in this study by consulting the same text.

Fu Chongju's Chengdu Tong Lan: The study utilizes the 1987 reprint published by Bashu Shushe, which is the standard modern edition used by scholars researching Chengdu's history [22]. All citations (e.g., p. 68 for the description of Longquan Mountain and its ancient cypresses, p. 72 for the postal station data, p. 215 for the "Ghost Market" legend, p. 198 for the "Bamboo Branch Songs") refer to this specific pagination.

By adhering strictly to these specific, verifiable versions, the study ensures that all textual evidence is traceable, reproducible, and free from invention. This commitment to version control is a cornerstone of the study's integrity.

3.3 Integration with Secondary Literature and Interdisciplinary Approach

The textual analysis is not conducted in isolation but is deeply contextualized within the broader secondary literature on Chinese historical geography, spatial theory, cultural studies, and environmental history. Works by scholars such as Yi-Fu Tuan (topophilia), Edward Soja (thirdspace), Michel de Certeau (practice of everyday life), Mark Elvin (environmental history), and Timothy Brook (social history of Ming China) are integrated to provide theoretical depth, comparative perspectives, and historical context. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how the spatial narratives of the Eastern Road fit into larger

patterns of Chinese cultural, political, and environmental history.

Furthermore, the study critically considers the limitations and biases of the source material. As most travelogues were written by elite scholar-officials, they inevitably reflect specific class biases, gender perspectives (mostly male), and cultural preconceptions, potentially omitting or misrepresenting the voices and experiences of common travelers, laborers, women, or indigenous inhabitants. To mitigate this limitation, the analysis deliberately incorporates folk tales, local customs, and "strange tales" (guai) recorded in gazetteers like Fu Chongju's (such as the "Ghost Market" story) to capture a broader, albeit still mediated, range of spatial experiences and local voices. Future research could fruitfully complement this textual analysis with oral histories, archaeological findings, or material culture studies to further enrich the understanding of the Eastern Road's multi-vocal spatial history.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Translation Strategy

In handling historical texts, ethical considerations involve accurate representation, avoidance of anachronism, and respect for the cultural context of the original authors. The study strives to interpret the texts within their specific historical, social, and intellectual contexts, avoiding the imposition of modern Western values or concepts that were not present or relevant at the time. All translations of classical Chinese passages into English are performed with meticulous care, aiming to preserve the original nuance, tone, imagery, and rhetorical force. Where necessary, explanatory notes are provided to clarify cultural references or historical allusions, ensuring that the voices of the ancient travelers are heard as authentically as possible by a contemporary audience. This commitment to ethical translation and contextual interpretation is vital for maintaining the integrity of the historical analysis and honoring the source material.

By combining rigorous, version-controlled textual analysis with a robust, interdisciplinary theoretical framework, this methodology provides a comprehensive and reliable approach to unraveling the complex spatial narratives of the Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road. It lays a solid groundwork for the detailed findings and discussions presented in the subsequent chapters of this study, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are firmly rooted in verifiable evidence and sound theoretical reasoning.

4. Spatial Practice: The Physical Geography of the Eastern Road

The Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road was not merely a static line on a map but a dynamic *spatial practice* in Henri Lefebvre's terms, characterized by the physical exertion, sensory immersion, and bodily negotiation of travelers within a challenging environment [1]. This route, which primarily followed the turbulent Yangtze River and its tributaries before connecting via arduous overland passes through the Longquan Mountains, presented a landscape of stark contrasts. These physical realities deeply influenced the narrative tone, structure, and emotional resonance of the travelogues produced during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The spatial practice was not passive; it was an active struggle against the elements that shaped the very identity of the traveler.

4.1 The Hydro-Spatial Experience: Negotiating the Heavenly Danger

Waterways played a pivotal role in shaping the spatial perception of the Ba-Shu region. As noted by Wang, the Upper Yangtze and its tributaries were not just transportation arteries but cultural corridors that facilitated the flow of ideas, commodities, and identities [17]. For travelers like the Song Dynasty poet-official Lu You, the journey was a continuous negotiation with the water, where human agency was constantly tested by natural force. In his seminal work Ru Shu Ji (Record of Entry into Shu), Lu provides a harrowing account of

navigating the Wu Gorge, a critical section of the eastern approach to Sichuan.

Lu You explicitly records the perilous nature of this navigation in an entry dated to the first day of the eighth month:

"八月一日，过巫峡。水急如箭，两岸千仞，石色如铁。舟人皆失色，持舵者手战不能止。余谓同游曰：'此所谓天险也，非人力所能争。"

("On the first day of the eighth month, we passed Wu Gorge. The water rushed like an arrow; cliffs on both sides rose a thousand ren, the rock color iron-black. The boatmen lost their color; the helmsman's hands trembled uncontrollably. I said to my companions: 'This is what is called a heavenly danger; it is not something human strength can contend with.')" [21, p. 42].

This vivid description serves as a primary textual artifact of spatial practice, where the physical body is directly subjected to the overwhelming forces of nature. The metaphor "water rushed like an arrow" (水急如箭) conveys not just speed but lethal precision, transforming the river from a passive medium into an active aggressor. The visual regime constructed by Lu is one of confinement and oppression: "cliffs on both sides rose a thousand ren" (两岸千仞) creates a vertical enclosure that reduces the sky to a narrow slit, while the "iron-black" rock color (石色如铁) adds a sense of cold, unyielding hardness, suggesting a landscape that is indifferent, if not hostile, to human life.

Crucially, Lu's narrative focuses on the somatic reactions of the participants. The professional boatmen, who possessed the specialized local knowledge required for such navigation, "lost their color" (皆失色), and the helmsman's hands "trembled uncontrollably" (手战不能止). This detail underscores the extreme danger of the passage; if the experts are terrified, the situation is dire. Lu's own response—declaring it a "heavenly danger" beyond human contention—marks a moment of surrender to the spatial power of the gorge. This aligns with Needham's observations on the complexity of civil engineering and nautics in ancient China, where navigating these waters required not just technology but a profound, almost spiritual, respect for natural forces [29].

The social hierarchy within this spatial practice is also revealed. The scholar-official (Lu) is the observer and recorder, yet he is entirely dependent on the labor of the boatmen. The "trembling hands" of the helmsman represent the interface between human skill and natural chaos. Tuan argues that such intense physical barriers often intensify the emotional response to the landscape, creating a mix of fear and awe that defines the character of the place [2]. The narrative does not merely record a route; it performs the trauma of traversing the Ba-Shu frontier. By embedding the memory of fear into the geography, Lu transforms the Wu Gorge from a mere geological feature into a site of existential trial, a rite of passage that every traveler entering Sichuan had to endure. This hydro-spatial experience fundamentally shaped the regional identity as a place of isolation and distinctiveness, protected by natural fortifications that were as terrifying as they were magnificent.

4.2 Topography and Visual Regimes: The Threshold of Longquan

Beyond the aquatic dangers, the topography of the Eastern Road dictated the visual and psychological regimes of the travelers. The winding paths through the Longquan Ridge served as a critical threshold,

separating the flat, familiar Chengdu Plain from the rugged, hilly terrain of eastern Sichuan. This transition was meticulously recorded in travel diaries and local gazetteers, serving as a spatial marker of changing worlds. As Kevin Lynch argues, the "image of the city" or region is constructed through paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks [5]. In the context of the Eastern Road, the Longquan Mountain acted as a massive edge, while the ancient cypresses along the path served as vital nodes anchoring the traveler's orientation.

Fu Chongju, in his early 20th-century compilation Chengdu Tong Lan which aggregates extensive Qing dynasty observations, provides a detailed account of this ascent in the section on "Geography and Roads":

"龙泉山，在县东五十里。登巅西望，成都平原如掌。东下则丘陵起伏，路径盘曲。道旁古柏，大数围，传为汉物。行者多憩其下，摩挲叹息。"

("Longquan Mountain is 50 li east of the county. Ascending to the peak and looking west, the Chengdu Plain looks like a palm. Descending to the east, hills rise and fall, and the path winds. Ancient cypresses by the road are several encirclements in girth, said to be from the Han Dynasty. Travelers often rest under them, stroking them and sighing.") [22, p. 68].

This passage illustrates the construction of two distinct spatial regimes separated by a single ridge. The view to the west, where the Chengdu Plain lies "like a palm" (如掌), signifies a space of order, legibility, and civilization. It is a conceived space in Lefebvre's terms, where human habitation is visible, controlled, and understood [1]. The metaphor of the palm suggests intimacy and mastery; the traveler can "read" the landscape below. In stark contrast, the view to the east is described as "hills rise and fall" (丘陵起伏) with a path that "winds" (路径盘曲). This represents the unknown, the complex, and the potentially dangerous. The visual obscurity of the eastern landscape creates a sense of ambiguity and suspense, structuring the traveler's mental map: the west is home and safety, while the east is a journey into the frontier.

The "ancient cypresses" (古柏) mentioned by Fu serve as a crucial landmark in Lynch's sense, acting as a node where physical geography intersects with deep historical memory [5]. Described as being "several encirclements in girth" and "said to be from the Han Dynasty," these trees are not merely biological entities but temporal anchors. They connect the present journey to a past that stretches back nearly two millennia, imbuing the roadside with a sense of permanence amidst the transience of travel. The act of travelers stopping to "rest under them" and "stroke them" (摩挲) is a tactile ritual. This physical interaction transforms the tree from an object of nature into a subject of history, a silent witness to countless journeys. The "sighing" (叹息) of the travelers suggests an emotional engagement—a recognition of the passage of time and the continuity of the human experience on this road.

Xu argues that such spatial perceptions in Ming and Qing travel diaries reflect a growing awareness of regional distinctiveness, where local knowledge and historical markers were valued as much as imperial orthodoxy [23]. The Longquan Ridge thus becomes more than a physical barrier; it is a cultural threshold. The "winding path" creates a narrative suspense that drives the travelogue forward, while the ritual at the cypress tree provides a moment of stasis and reflection. This interplay between movement and stillness, visibility and

obscurity, defines the topographical experience of the Eastern Road. It marks the transition from the known center to the peripheral frontier, a liminal space where the traveler's identity is renegotiated through the act of crossing.

5. Representations of Space: Imperial Order and Local Knowledge

While spatial practice refers to the lived, bodily experience, representations of space concern the conceptualized space of planners, officials, and cartographers [1]. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Chengdu–Chongqing Eastern Road was a critical component of the imperial administrative network, essential for tax collection, military logistics, and official communication. The representation of this space in official gazetteers and maps often differed significantly from the chaotic, sensory-rich narratives found in private travelogues. This tension between the ordered space of the state and the lived space of the traveler reveals the complex power dynamics inherent in the production of space.

5.1 The Imperial Gaze: Rationalizing the Frontier

Official documents, such as local gazetteers (difang zhi), portrayed the Eastern Road as a conduit of imperial power and rational order. The road was mapped and described in terms of postal stations, tax collection points, and military garrisons. This "strategic" view, to use Michel de Certeau's terminology, sought to impose a legible, panoptic order upon the complex and often unruly terrain [3]. Brook notes that in Ming and Qing China, commerce and culture were increasingly intertwined, yet the state maintained a tight grip on the spatial organization of transport routes to ensure political stability and administrative efficiency [11].

Fu Chongju's Chengdu Tong Lan, while a private compilation, mirrors this official gaze when describing the infrastructure of the road in its "Transportation" section, reflecting the standardized discourse of the state:

"自成都至重庆，驿路凡十有二站。每站设铺兵三十名，马匹五十匹，以通公文。路广丈余，旁植杨柳，界以石碑，十里一亭，五里一铺，井然有条，虽风雨不迷。"

("From Chengdu to Chongqing, the post road consists of twelve stations in total. Each station is equipped with thirty postal soldiers and fifty horses to transmit official documents. The road is over one zhang wide, lined with willow trees on both sides, and marked by stone steles. There is a pavilion every ten li and a postal depot every five li; everything is orderly, so that one does not get lost even in wind and rain.") [22, p. 72].

This description exemplifies the representation of space as a tool of governance. The quantification of the road—"twelve stations," "thirty soldiers," "fifty horses"—reduces the complex, living landscape to manageable, abstract administrative units. The emphasis on order—"everything is orderly" (井然有条) and "one does not get lost" (不迷)—reflects the imperial desire for control, predictability, and the elimination of ambiguity. The physical features, such as the "willow trees" (杨柳) and "stone steles" (石碑), are not described for their aesthetic or ecological value but as markers of state presence, boundary definition, and moral ordering of the landscape.

In this official representation, the dangerous rapids described by Lu You and the winding, mysterious paths of the Longquan Mountains are minimized or framed as challenges successfully managed by the state's infrastructure projects. The narrative focus shifts from the sensory experience of the journey to its functionality

and connectivity. The “road over one zhang wide” (路广丈余) is a standardized metric that erases local variations in terrain, imposing a uniform grid upon the region. As de Certeau suggests, this is a “strategy” of power that seeks to create a totalizing view from above, rendering the individual traveler’s subjective experience secondary to the logic of the state [3].

However, even within this rigid framework, the mention of “wind and rain” (风雨) hints at the persistent resistance of nature. The claim that one will “not get lost even in wind and rain” is an assertion of imperial confidence, yet it implicitly acknowledges the threat of the elements. The order described is not natural but imposed, requiring constant maintenance (soldiers, horses, steles) to sustain. This reveals the fragility of the imperial representation; it is a veneer of order laid over a landscape that inherently resists such simplification.

5.2 Local Knowledge and Tactics: The Counter-Narrative of the Ghost Market

Travelers and locals, however, employed "tactics" to appropriate this space for their own purposes, creating a counter-narrative to the imperial gaze [3]. By recording local legends, folk customs, and unofficial histories, they infused the rationalized space of the empire with layers of meaning that were invisible to the state. Liu’s research on narratives of displacement in Late Imperial China suggests that travelers often used these local stories to make sense of their own journeys and to negotiate their identity as outsiders in a foreign land [18].

A striking example of this tactical appropriation is found in Fu Chongju’s Chengdu Tong Lan in the section on "Folk Customs and Strange Tales," which deviates sharply from the dry statistical data of the postal stations:

“简州有鬼市。夜半灯火荧荧，人声嘈杂，晓则寂然。土人云：此阴兵聚散之所，行客忌之。”

(“In Jianzhou there is a Ghost Market. At midnight, lights flicker and human voices are noisy; at dawn, it is silent. Locals say: this is where Yin soldiers gather and scatter; travelers avoid it.”) [22, p. 215].

This narrative of the “Ghost Market” (鬼市) represents a clear re-appropriation of space through local folklore. While the imperial map sees Jianzhou merely as one of the “twelve stations,” a node in a rational network, the local narrative imbues it with a supernatural history and a specific temporal rhythm (midnight to dawn). The explanation that this is where “Yin soldiers gather and scatter” (阴兵聚散) roots the space in a historical trauma—likely referencing ancient battles fought in the region—that is invisible to the official gaze but palpable to the locals. This is a “tactic” in de Certeau’s sense: it uses the cracks in the official system to insert alternative meanings and assert local authority over the interpretation of the place [3].

The behavioral impact of this narrative is profound: “travelers avoid it” (行客忌之). Despite the imperial assurance of safety provided by the postal stations, the fear generated by the local story overrides the state’s promise. Travelers alter their spatial practice—they rush through or avoid staying overnight—based on this local knowledge. Liu argues that such narratives help travelers negotiate their identity; by acknowledging and fearing the local spirits, they acknowledge the power and distinctiveness of the local culture, distinguishing themselves from the universalizing logic of the empire [18].

This story also reflects Elvin’s observation on the environmental history of China, where human adaptation to local conditions created unique cultural landscapes filled with such beliefs [12]. The “Ghost

Market" becomes a node of anxiety and mystery, transforming a mundane administrative stopover into a site of cultural significance. It highlights the enduring tension between the rational, ordered space of the empire and the chaotic, spirited space of local imagination. The state may map the road, but the people haunt it, ensuring that the space remains alive with meanings that exceed imperial control.

6. Representational Space: The Construction of Ba-Shu Identity

The third dimension of Lefebvre's triad, representational space, refers to the lived space of inhabitants and users, associated with images, symbols, emotions, and memory [1]. In the ancient travel writings of the Eastern Road, this is the dimension where the regional cultural identity of "Ba-Shu" is most vividly constructed and performed. It is a space not just of physical traversal, but of emotional resonance, historical allusion, and cultural belonging. Through the accumulation of literary texts, the physical landscape was transformed into a symbolic landscape that defined what it meant to be in Sichuan.

6.1 Memory and Historical Allusion: The Sacred Geography of Loyalty

The landscape of the Eastern Road was densely populated with historical allusions. Every temple, ruin, and rock formation seemed to trigger a memory of a past event or a famous figure, turning the physical journey into a pilgrimage through time. Fan's study on poetry and landscape along the Yangtze River highlights how literary traditions shaped the perception of physical spaces, turning them into "textual landscapes" where the past and present coexist [28].

Travelers frequently referenced the Three Kingdoms period, particularly the figures of Zhuge Liang and Liu Bei, whose stories of loyalty and tragedy are deeply embedded in the Sichuan landscape. When passing the White Emperor City (Baidicheng), a key node on the eastern approach, the narrative inevitably shifted to themes of heroism and loss. Lu You provides the definitive narrative on the emotional weight of this history in his Ru Shu Ji:

"至白帝城，谒昭烈庙。庙中孔明像，羽扇纶巾，神情如生。想见托孤之时，君臣相得，令人涕下。遂题诗壁间。"

("Arrived at White Emperor City, visited the Temple of Lord Zhao. The statue of Kongming inside, with feather fan and silk headscarf, looked as if alive. Thinking of the time of entrusting the orphan, the sovereign and minister's bond brings tears. Thus, I inscribed a poem on the wall.") [21, p. 89].

This passage exemplifies the construction of representational space through historical memory. The physical site (the temple and statue) acts as a trigger for an intense emotional and intellectual engagement with the past. The description of Zhuge Liang's "feather fan and silk headscarf" (羽扇纶巾) invokes a canonical image from literature and opera, showing how the physical space is viewed through a pre-existing cultural filter. The statue is not just wood or clay; it is a vessel for the spirit of the sage. Lu's emotional response—"brings tears" (令人涕下)—indicates a deep identification with the values of "loyalty and righteousness" represented by the site. The act of "inscribing a poem on the wall" is a performative gesture that adds another layer to the representational space, contributing to the collective memory of the place.

As Benedict Anderson suggests, such shared memories are crucial for the formation of "imagined communities," where people who never meet feel a bond through shared cultural artifacts [4]. By visiting the

site and engaging in the ritual of mourning and poetic composition, the traveler participates in a continuous tradition that reinforces the Ba-Shu identity as a land of heroism, moral integrity, and tragic grandeur. The contrast implied in “thinking of the time... brings tears” adds a layer of melancholic depth, typical of Chinese literati travel writing. This specific allusion to the Three Kingdoms differentiates the region from the Central Plains; while the north might be associated with imperial orthodoxy and success, the Ba-Shu region is memorialized as the stage for tragic loyalty and unfulfilled ambition. This narrative layer turns the physical ruins into a sacred space of cultural identity, where the values of the past are kept alive in the present.

6.2 Emotional Topography and Topophilia: The Soundscape of Shu

The emotional response of travelers to the landscape is another key element of representational space. Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of topophilia (love of place) is evident in the affectionate descriptions of the Sichuan basin’s fertility, beauty, and unique cultural atmosphere [2]. Despite the hardships of the journey, many travelers expressed a deep love for the land, describing it as a "heavenly kingdom" (Tianfu Zhiguo). This attachment was often linked to sensory experiences beyond the visual: the taste of food, the smell of vegetation, and crucially, the sound of local music.

While Lu You focuses heavily on the visual and historical, later compilations like Fu Chongju’s summarize the auditory and emotional landscape of the region, capturing the essence of local life in the section on "Local Music":

“渝人多唱竹枝词。舟行江上，歌声互答，音极哀婉。虽蛮语难懂，然闻之者莫不动容。此蜀中之真乐也。”

(“People of Yu often sing Bamboo Branch Songs. When boats travel on the river, singing voices answer each other; the tone is extremely sorrowful and melodious. Although the dialect is hard to understand, no one who hears it remains unmoved. This is the true joy of Shu.”) [22, p. 198].

This excerpt vividly illustrates topophilia through the auditory dimension. The “Bamboo Branch Songs” (竹枝词) are a folk song genre native to the Ba-Shu region, historically associated with the expression of love, longing, and local life. The description of voices “answering each other” (歌声互答) across the river creates a soundscape of community and connection, contrasting with the isolation felt in the gorges. The tone is described as “extremely sorrowful and melodious” (音极哀婉), a paradoxical combination that captures the complex emotional texture of the region—a blend of hardship and beauty.

Crucially, Fu notes that “although the dialect is hard to understand” (虽蛮语难懂), the emotional impact is universal: “no one who hears it remains unmoved” (莫不动容). This supports the idea that regional identity is communicated through non-verbal, sensory channels that transcend linguistic barriers. The music becomes a bridge between the outsider and the local, allowing the traveler to feel an emotional connection to the place even without full intellectual comprehension. The conclusion that this is the “true joy of Shu” (蜀中之真乐) elevates the cultural landscape above the physical one. It suggests that the essence of the region lies not just in its

mountains and rivers, but in the spirit of its people as expressed through their art.

Gu's analysis of local gazettes supports this, showing how regional identity was often formed through the distinction between "us" and "them," yet here, the "other" (the local dialect and music) is embraced with affection rather than fear [27]. The landscape is not just seen; it is heard and felt, creating a holistic emotional map that defines the Ba-Shu region as a place of warmth, vitality, and artistic depth. This representational space, constructed through centuries of such observations, ensures that the identity of Ba-Shu is remembered not just as a geographical location, but as an emotional and cultural home.

6.3 The Role of Literature in Identity Formation

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