This book examines writings on moving through and seeing the world at two important moments of dislocation in Chinese history. By dislocation I mean not only physical displacement but also intellectual and emotional dislocation that one experiences when encountering and actively engaging with the foreign, the unfamiliar, the strange and unknown. The two moments refer to early medieval China (commonly known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties [317–589 CE]) and modern China—more precisely, the nineteenth century. While it is not uncommon to trace a theme through its history of development, it might seem unconventional to write a book on two periods separated from each other by more than a thousand years. This general introduction thus aims to broadly outline what this book is about, as well as explain my decision to focus on these two periods. But first I would like to ask the reader to engage in a mental exercise.

Suppose that people of the future were to look back to a past age when China came into paradigm-changing contact with the foreign world. It was an age when foreign vocabulary was introduced into every aspect of Chinese life, when foreigners came to China and lived among the Chinese people, trading, studying, lecturing, and training students; it was an age when the Chinese likewise journeyed to distant lands, with some staying on for good, never to return to their native soil. It was an age when a vast amount of foreign material was translated into Chinese and absorbed at all levels of society. Many concepts were lost in translation, but this did not stop people from reaching out, reading, and being profoundly
changed by what they read. It was an age of tremendous anxiety that China was going to be enslaved by outside influences and lose its native cultural heritage. It was also an age when many people eagerly embraced those same influences and argued passionately for tolerance and incorporation of foreign ideas into the native culture. It was an age when boundaries became permeable and were crossed, when people traveled to and from many places, even many worlds. It was an age of bold visions and exciting possibilities, when China was, for better or for worse, forever changed.

With very little modification, the above description of early medieval China may very well be applied to the modern era. Although the substance of the period remains vastly different, the transformative experiences of early medieval China have powerful resonance in modern times, when China came into its first full contact with the Western powers in the nineteenth century. Compared to these two periods, no other period in Chinese history engaged in so much translation, absorbed so much of foreign cultures, and witnessed such a complete cultural transformation. More importantly, the new textual knowledge was complemented by travel and exploration undertaken not just by sailors and traders but by members of the elite, who wrote accounts of their journeys for the eager consumption of a home audience.

Traveling to distant lands and returning home to tell the tale was not all that uncommon in premodern China, and numerous writings about travel, both within China and beyond, were produced during the long millennium between early medieval times and the nineteenth century. Several things, however, distinguish the early medieval era. As examples in

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1. For convenience I use the term “early medieval China” for this period, even though some scholars use the term in reference to the first century CE through the seventh century.

2. By “China” I mean an imagined Han Chinese polity. The actual borders and political boundaries were in constant flux throughout history. For an anthology of source materials about foreign travels from early to late imperial China, with a brief scholarly introduction and bibliography attached to each source text, see Chen Jiarong, Qian Jiang, and Zhang Guangda, *Lidai zhongwai xingji*. For a survey of Chinese travel writings from early medieval times through the twentieth century, see Mei Xinlin and Yu Zhanghua, *Zhongguoyouji wenxue shi*. For an English anthology of premodern Chinese travel writings with an informative introduction, see Strassberg, *Inscribed Landscapes*. 
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the Prologue to Part I of this book show, more people moved around during this period than ever before. The rise of Buddhism created a major incentive for people to travel far and wide, and as a result, religious seekers journeyed to Central and Southeast Asia alongside members of imperial expedition teams and traders. These new voyagers came back with different kinds of stories. In connection with the phenomenon of increased spatial mobility, the fourth- and fifth-century elite displayed a pervasive curiosity for all things faraway and exotic. In their various forms, travel accounts from this period grew out of, and in turn fed into and stimulated, such curiosity. Rather than impersonally cataloguing local sites, products, and customs, many of these new travel accounts record personal experiences during these journeys. Crystallized in first-person anecdotes as well as in descriptions of movement through specific places at specific times, the individualized element of these travel writings does not aspire to give an “objective” account of what there is to note, but rather presents the world as seen through the eyes of a historical subject, an individual person.

It is this period that produced the first extant travelogue written by a Chinese author about his travels in and throughout Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The author Faxian 法顯 (ca. 340–421) was a Buddhist monk who set out in the year of 399 on an arduous pilgrimage to India; some fourteen years and thirty kingdoms later, he boarded a merchant ship from Ceylon and returned to China. He told the tale of his journey through hell to paradise and back to an enraptured audience. Nevertheless, during this period one did not need to venture so far to encounter the Other, for even traveling through the “interior” Chinese landscape could mean coming into contact with the foreign. Crossing the borders of a politically divided “China” was, simultaneously, a return to textually familiar territory and a venture into the unknown.

From the year 317, which marked the collapse of the Western Jin dynasty to invasion by northern non-Han peoples, to the year 589, in which China became reunified under one dynasty, the Chinese empire was split into northern and southern rival states. The north was dominated by a succession of non-Han polities, and the south by northern refugees and settlers who established a continuation of the Western Jin dynasty and claimed Han Chinese cultural orthodoxy. This dynasty in the south, known as the Eastern Jin (317–420), was succeeded by four short-lived dynasties, Song (420–79), Qi (479–502), Liang (502–57), and
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Chen (557–89). The descendants of the northern refugees, born and raised in the south, as well as native southerners, had only read about the famed former capitals of the Chinese empire, Chang’an and Luoyang, but lacked their forebears’ firsthand knowledge of these legendary cities. Goethe, who had come to know Rome well through books, visited Rome for the first time in 1786, and thus described his experience: “Wherever I walk I come upon familiar objects in an unfamiliar world; everything is just as I imagined, yet everything is new.” Southern courtiers who had a chance to see Luoyang and Chang’an with their own eyes for the first time during this period must have been struck by a similar sentiment.

In many ways, even the landscape in the south represented a new world. Traditionally the south had been considered peripheral to the center that was the Chinese heartland in the Yellow River region. Seen as a land of heat, humidity, pestilential vapors, and “barbarians” (a reference to the various Southern ethnic peoples), it was, in short, a land for exiles. The Southern Dynasties elite, the highest stratum of which consisted of northern immigrant families arriving in the south during the early fourth century, came to inhabit the land as exiles and refugees, but also as settlers and colonial masters. They made the south theirs by giving it a total textual makeover, writing, painting, and elegantly discoursing on the beautiful and yet strange landscape. In the spring of 353, the great calligrapher Wang Xizhi and a group of forty-odd friends gathered at a place called Lanting and composed poems; those who failed to produce a poem were asked to drink three goblets of wine as a penalty. Wang Xizhi then penned the famous “Preface to the Poetic Collection of Lanting,” the single most famous example of Chinese calligraphy. This event alone put Lanting on the cultural map of China; to this day, it is a celebrated site in the suburbs of Shaoxing (in modern Zhejiang province), heavily inscribed with Wang Xizhi’s calligraphy, complete with a winding stream by the side of which Wang Xizhi and his friends had supposedly sat, just as he described in the preface. The point is that no one who subsequently visited Lanting or Shaoxing could be innocent of this memory, and Lanting came to serve as an allegory for the entire southern landscape: it was new and exotic to the Southern Dynasties elite, who gazed at it with wonder and celebrated it in their writings. During this time Chinese landscape

poetry and painting began to flourish, igniting a textual and visual tradition that would continuously grow and change, but always bore the impression made during early medieval times. It was also during this time that Buddhism, known as “the doctrine of images,” gained influence among members of the elite, and a discourse of visualization and image-making was being formed as they looked at the world with fresh eyes.

The very first representations of seeing a new world are one of the central elements connecting early medieval sightseers and nineteenth-century travelers—more precisely, the first travelers to Europe and America. The reason for restricting our attention to travel outside China in the nineteenth century is obvious: by this point the Chinese empire had been thoroughly explored, and these travels were well documented. In fact, even the adjacent outside lands—Central Asia, South and Southeastern Asia, as well as China’s East Asian neighbors Korea and Japan—had long lost much of their exotic flavor for Chinese travelers. Accounts of these regions abound, and in reading them, one often detects a barely concealed contempt or, at best, a patronizing attitude toward the peoples and cultures encountered. All this changed, however, in the first extensive travel accounts of Europe and America from this period. The Western world was new and strange to the mid-nineteenth-century elite Chinese travelers who were the first to venture out that far; the newness and strangeness were in no small measure due to the fact that the Western world was itself undergoing vast transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution and struggling with the side effects of this first phase of modernity. The Chinese travelers faced a double culture shock—not just stable difference, but difference itself in a radical process of change. In more than one sense, they experienced a profound sense of dislocation, just like their counterparts from the early medieval era.

“Dislocation,” a central issue in this study, is literal as well as figurative, physical as well as mental. Early medieval China was a time of expanding intellectual horizons, and Buddhism, a foreign import, played a crucial role in the overall cultural transformation. One of the many changes brought about by Buddhism was a sense of the shift of the traditional Chinese world order in which “China” occupied a central position, as indicated by the phrase “central plains” (zhongyuan 中原) or “middle kingdom” (zhongguo 中國). In the travelogue authored by the monk Faxian, however, central India was regarded as the “middle kingdom,” while
China itself was referred to as “the land on the margin or borderland” (biandi 邊地). As his travelogue testifies in unambiguous terms, he had to go through hell to reach the Buddhist heaven that was central India. In many ways the Buddhist conception of the world was inherited by nineteenth-century travelers to Europe and America, in the sense that they saw the Western world either as heaven or as hell, and rarely, if ever, anything in between. And yet, when they did see the Western world as paradise, they were not anchored by the same equilibrium and matter-of-factness experienced by Faxian, who as a devout Buddhist took for granted the superior status of the birthplace of the Buddha. The nineteenth-century travelers meeting the Western world face to face were in a much more complicated situation culturally, politically, and psychologically. Just as in the early medieval times, modern China was profoundly shaken by foreign influences, although this time the responses were more multifarious and less certain, and people struggled to find a sense of grounding and stability amid the turmoil.

One of the ways writers evoked such a safe haven was to use Buddhist words and images liberally. By this time many of the terms originating from Buddhist scriptures had already become part of Chinese everyday vocabulary and had long lost their exotic flavor, but they still retained an aura of “familiar strangeness.” In other words, Buddhism, once a quintessentially foreign religion, had by then been completely accepted and appropriated into the native culture—indeed, it is part of the criteria used to describe what is Chinese today. In the nineteenth century, it provided the best domesticating and familiarizing strategy for travelers to make sense of the new world they encountered. In this the nineteenth century once again harkens back to the early medieval period.

Journeys into new territory; a growing circulation of texts, goods, and people; conscious integration and appropriation of foreign influences—these are characteristics shared by the early medieval period and the nineteenth century. This book brings these two periods together not only in their encounters with Others, but also in their active, unprecedentedly large-scale and deep-reaching interactions with Others and their intense fascination with Otherness. More specifically, this book aims to explore modes of seeing the world; such modes, I argue, were established in early medieval times and resurfaced, in permutations and metamorphoses, in the nineteenth-century writings on encountering the Other.
Seeing the world is a complicated matter. Seeing, as we know, is never passive. It begins with an object—a “what”—and a point of view. It is an active process of sorting out, classifying, and comprehending. There is theoretically a “raw” seeing: the encounter of the naked, undifferentiating, innocent eye meeting the world without trying to make sense of it, but it is something not demonstrated or demonstrable, something we can never know or prove. What we do know is seeing as articulated in language. As such, seeing is governed by a body of explicit and implicit laws and codes, beliefs and values, by which members of a society understand and approach the world; it is also mediated by language, by rhetorical strategies, images, and tropes. One major argument of this book is that a set of schemata of seeing the world was first developed in early medieval China. Just as many basic forms of the Chinese cultural episteme took their shape in this period, the paradigm of seeing had far-reaching influence in Chinese culture. It continued well into the nineteenth century, when the first Chinese elite members embarked on voyages to visit distant foreign lands, venturing further than any of their predecessors had ever gone. By this point the familiar framework, with its implicit and explicit codes of understanding and articulating the world “out there,” had sustained much pressure to the point of snapping. It is in the tension between existing categories and new realities that we discern both the continuity of the cultural tradition and its radical changes.

This study is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the early medieval Chinese writings on seeing, visualizing, and image-making; Part II focuses on the fresh seeing of the world in the nineteenth century. I leave more detailed accounts of the chapters in the prologues to Part I and Part II, and keep the general introduction of this book intentionally broad.

In several ways this study itself is about breaking boundaries that fragment and compartmentalize knowledge in academe. Not only are there various institutionalized forms of the division of premodern and modern periods in schools and in the field, but even within premodern studies, barriers exist that segregate the study of one “major period” from another. While specialization contributes to depth and precision, it also tends to encourage intellectual isolation and prevent scholars from envisioning the continuity and transformation of a long, unbroken cultural tradition. When the premodern field is unable to speak to the modern, the significance and relevance of our research and teaching are limited; when the
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modern field fails to connect with the premodern, it cannot adequately understand and explain modern and contemporary China.

This book also brings together different sorts of materials written within one period that might conventionally be shoehorned into separate disciplinary categories of literature, history, and religion. Mine is a deliberate attempt to counteract the artificial nature of the modern disciplinary divide, based on the conviction that textual production does not take place in a neatly partitioned space. I do not deny that there are indeed boundaries between different branches of knowledge even before the formation of modern disciplines, and that different types of works follow different conventions; but it is equally undeniable that modern concepts often prove inadequate to capturing certain historical phenomena (for example, a modern student’s understanding of “literature” certainly would not do justice to the conception of “literature,” wen, in the mind of a member of the early medieval Chinese elite, nor would modern notions of identity—such as “poet”—have been comprehensible to such a person). Furthermore, the production and circulation of writings that fall into different spheres of literature, religion, and history must be considered in the context of the episteme of the particular epoch. Just as a premodern elite male could be simultaneously poet, diplomat, courtier, bureaucrat, historian, geographer, and paradoxographer, certain larger cultural issues and concerns shared by people living in one era often spill into what modern scholars think of as different spheres and different types of texts.

In this book I treat these spheres and texts together in the hope that some of their hitherto neglected aspects can be illuminated. For instance, Chapter 1 juxtaposes poetry, fu 賦 (rhymed prose variously translated as “poetic expositions” or “rhapsodies”), Daoist writings, and Buddhist scriptures and commentaries to demonstrate the shared discourse of visualization and imagination in the Eastern Jin. Chapter 2 discusses military campaign records, fu on travel, and Faxian’s Buddhist travelogue to illustrate two related modes of seeing sights/sites. Then, in Chapter 3, I examine Xie Lingyun’s 謝靈運 (385–433) landscape poetry, not only against the background outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 but also in the context of contemporary accounts of journeys to hell and back, so as to shed light on certain characteristics of his poetry that might otherwise escape notice. In Chapter 4 I use historical writing, ethnographic and geographic accounts, poetry, diary, and travelogue to explore several complex issues involved in
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encountering the foreign: namely, how people attempted to deal with race and gender, order the world, and map the modern city.

In short, I pay special attention to what I call cultural forms of representation and attempt to sort out rhetorical strategies, or modes of seeing the world, that inform these writings. Ultimately this study explores how people negotiate with dislocation when their inherited cultural assumptions undergo profound shake-ups and transformations, and how self and self-knowledge construct one’s view of the Other and are in turn changed by encounters with it. My method is close, historicized reading and analysis of diverse texts, but I will not always situate these texts in their familiar disciplinary “surroundings.” Instead, I juxtapose. The effect of juxtaposition should be, not unfittingly, a sense of dislocation and defamiliarization. A specialist might find that my approach does not fall into the usual framework of her or his discipline or field of research (for example, a Buddhist scholar may be disconcerted by my broadly cultural reading of Faxian’s travelogue in an attempt to sort out the “cultural grammar” underlying the travelogue); but what I hope to accomplish through this approach is to illuminate the texts in unexpected ways, and appeal to readers interested not just in the period of early medieval China or the nineteenth century but also in issues of representation, travel, visualization, and modernity. Without relinquishing disciplinary claims or specialized forms of knowledge, I feel that it is nevertheless useful to allow different kinds of study to coexist with research under the protocols of the sharper and narrower focus of a specialist.

This study also aims to foreground the problem of genre. Much of the materials treated in this book can be classified as “travel literature,” but travel literature is a broad, content-defined category that incorporates many genres. One particular genre that concerns us is poetry. The last chapter of Part I of this book focuses on Xie Lingyun, the great fifth-century poet whose poetry breaks through the paradigm of seeing a far-away, exotic landscape in terms of either heaven or hell; likewise, the last chapter of Part II is devoted to the poetry of Huang Zunxian 黃遵憲 (1848–1905), the last great poet of imperial China, and it argues that poetry not only provided a medium that intervened radically in the self’s encounter with the Other, but articulated a quintessentially modern experience, stretching the traditional schemata of seeing the world to its utmost limit.
Both in the early medieval period and in modern times, things moved around a great deal, and so did people. Boundaries were constantly crossed; cultures became mixed. One motif recurring in these chapters is that of journeys: journeys of the mind, or physical journeys to foreign lands, to unfamiliar territories within Chinese borders, to the Buddhist paradise known as the Pure Land, and even to hell and back. The recording of the experience of the journey became an occasion to put the chaos of the world into words and to find meaning and pattern in the process. In this sense the title of this book, *Visionary Journeys*, refers to journeys undertaken *in*, and *with*, vision and imagination.