The Intellectual-Historical Value of the Bitter-Journey Writing: The Development of a Bittersweet Journey through Culture to the Contemporary Cultural-Tourism Integration Narratives

Jing He [1,*] and Lu Wang [2]

[1] School of Liberal Arts, Zhuhai College of Science and Technology, Zhuhai, China
[2] Zhuhai College of Science and Technology, Zhuhai, China
Email: 2448450553@qq.com (J.H.); 2486015864@qq.com (L.W.)
*Corresponding author
Manuscript received July 4, 2026; accepted October 18, 2026; published November 23, 2026

***Abstract*—Against the backdrop of China's national strategy for cultural-tourism integration, contemporary cultural-tourism narratives have proliferated. However, their spiritual connotations differ markedly from the classic bitter-journey writing exemplified by Yu Qiuyu's *A Bittersweet Journey through Culture* from the 1990s. Adopting intellectual history as the analytical framework, this paper employs close reading, diachronic comparison and socio-historical criticism to trace the evolution of bitter-journey writing and its intellectual-historical value. This study finds that the core of bitter-journey writing has shifted from the cultural anxieties of elite intellectuals toward the construction of mass cultural identity. This shift is accompanied by systematic transformations in writing subjects, cultural cores, and narrative modes, which reflect shifts in sociocultural mentalities. This paper further proposes pathways to construct spiritual depth in contemporary cultural-tourism narratives, providing theoretical support for high-quality cultural tourism development.**

***Keywords*—bitter-journey writing, A Bittersweet Journey through Culture, cultural-tourism integration narrative, intellectual history, travel literature**

I. Introduction

Travel literature has long served as a sensitive mirror of the zeitgeist in Chinese literary history, functioning as a key medium for writers to engage with culture, reflect on history, and forge spiritual meaning. In the 1990s, Yu Qiuyu's *A Bittersweet Journey through Culture* established the paradigm of bitter-journey writing, marking a milestone in modern cultural prose and triggering extensive scholarly discussions on its stylistic features and intellectual significance [1]. In recent years, driven by China's national strategy for cultural-tourism integration, new forms of travel narratives, including short-video productions and immersive experiences, have emerged rapidly.

However, existing studies mostly focus on the industrial operation and communication strategies of cultural tourism, with few tracing the spiritual lineage from classic bitter-journey prose to contemporary digital narratives, or exploring the underlying evolutionary logic from an intellectual-historical perspective. In practice, the booming market for cultural-tourism content faces a notable contradiction. On the one hand, output of short-video works, micro-dramas and immersive products keeps rising, driving rapid growth in tourism consumption. On the other hand, content homogenization and the dilution of cultural connotations have grown increasingly salient, with many works following a logic that prioritizes online traffic over cultural depth. It is against this background that re-examining the spiritual tradition of classic bitter-journey writing and exploring its contemporary inheritance value has become an urgent practical issue.

To address this gap, this paper examines the evolution of bitter-journey writing and its contemporary transformation. It specifically explores what intellectual-historical paradigm classic bitter-journey writing has formed, as well as how and why contemporary cultural-tourism narratives have undergone shifts. The research adopts close reading, diachronic comparison and socio-historical criticism methods, helping sort out the spiritual lineage of Chinese travel literature and offering practical guidance for the high-quality development of cultural-tourism narratives.

II. The Intellectual-Historical Origin of Bitter-Journey Writing

The emergence of bitter-journey writing in the 1990s was deeply rooted in China's sociocultural transformation. Against the backdrop of market-oriented reforms, the Enlightenment ideals of the 1980s gradually faded, elite culture shifted to the social periphery, and Chinese intellectual circles confronted a crisis of values and identity, giving rise to widespread anxiety over the humanistic spirit. The major debate on the humanistic spirit that swept intellectual circles in the 1990s constituted a concentrated manifestation of this emotional climate. Faced with the impact of the market economy and the marginalization of elite culture, a group of scholars and writers tried to rebuild the value coordinates of intellectuals through cultural reflection, and sought the possibility of spiritual settlement from historical and cultural traditions. This ideological trend provided a deep spiritual background for the birth of bitter-journey writing. During this period, many intellectuals turned to historical sites and cultural relics to seek spiritual resources, hoping to respond to the spiritual vacuum brought by market expansion through literary creation.

Published in 1992, A Bittersweet Journey through Culture is precisely the literary articulation of this spiritual anxiety [1]. Yu Qiuyu constructed a three-tier writing paradigm of on-site travel, historical excavation and cultural reflection,

with "bitterness" as the spiritual core—reflecting elite intellectuals' concern for cultural destiny and sense of literati responsibility. This kind of "bitterness" does not merely refer to the hardships of physical travel; more importantly, it points to the intellectual sorrow for the rise and fall of traditional culture, and the inner perplexity of intellectuals facing the impact of commercial society. As a typical specimen of the era, this work embodied the spiritual state of 1990s intellectuals and became an important literary coordinate of humanistic spirit in the transitional period. It also established a reference template for subsequent cultural-travel writing, inspiring later prose writers to integrate real-world sightseeing with historico-cultural meditation [2].

In representative essays such as The Taoist Pagoda, Yu framed the loss of Dunhuang cultural relics as a collective moral tragedy, infusing personal historical reflection into on-site travel writing [1]. In Dujiangyan Irrigation System, another representative work, Yu took Li Bing, the builder of the ancient water conservancy project, as the carrier of cultural personality, praising the pragmatic wisdom and humanistic feelings of ancient craftsmen, and injecting the value judgment of intellectuals into the narration of historical sites. This writing mode of "integrating scenery, history and reflection" established the paradigm of the 1990s "grand cultural prose" movement and pushed travel prose from a marginal literary genre to the forefront of public cultural life. As an important achievement of the transformation of prose style in the 1990s, bitter-journey writing broke the narrow pattern of traditional prose that focused on personal lyricism, and endowed travel literature with the spiritual mission of reflecting cultural destiny and inheriting humanistic spirit.

III. Narrative Evolution of Bitter-Journey Writing in the Era of Cultural-tourism Integration

The tradition of bitter-journey writing has undergone systematic narrative evolution in the era of cultural-tourism integration, presenting a three-dimensional shift from elite cultural dominance to mass cultural dominance. Such transformation does not mean the complete disappearance of the elite-oriented bitter-journey mode; rather, elite reflection has retreated to the marginal position of public discourse, while mass-produced travel narratives occupy the mainstream public cultural space.

First, the writing subject has shifted from elite enlightenment discourse to pluralistic horizontal gazing. Classic bitter-journey writing was dominated by elite intellectuals with top-down discursive authority. Intellectual authors took the role of cultural interpreters, hoping to guide ordinary readers to understand historical heritage from a rational and critical perspective. In contrast, digital technology has lowered the barriers to narrative production. Digital nomads, travel bloggers and ordinary tourists have become important creators, presenting travel experiences from an equal horizontal perspective and focusing on individual sensory perception rather than grand cultural reflection [3]. Most amateur creators do not seek to deliver profound historical criticism; instead, they prefer to document personal sentiments, scenic impressions, and real-life experiences. Under the User-generated Content (UGC) model, every tourist can become a narrator of travel experience. They present local cuisine, street landscapes, folk customs, and other mundane details from a first-person perspective, forming a decentralized narrative ecology. Different from the monologue-style enlightenment of elite writers, this kind of mass narrative presents a dialogue-like interactive feature: audiences can participate in the construction of meaning through comments, likes and secondary creation, which further promotes the diversification of narrative perspectives [3]. This pluralization of writing subjects reflects the long-term popularizing trend of Chinese travel literature.

Second, the cultural core has shifted from the dissolution of bitterness to the construction of identity. The core of classic bitter-journey writing lies in elite cultural anxiety: authors feared that traditional cultural memory would be diluted amid commercial impacts. However, within the context of cultural-tourism integration, such cultural bitterness gradually dissipates. Through media mechanisms such as emotional value circulation and co-presence construction, travel narratives have turned to the construction of cultural identity and emotional belonging, catering to the public's demand for emotional compensation in a fast-paced society [4]. Mass audiences no longer expect travel texts to expose cultural crises. Instead, they hope to obtain a sense of spiritual belonging from local landscapes and cultural stories.

Such identity construction is generally realized through the awakening of collective memory: travel narratives activate the public's deep-seated cultural memory by crafting poetic landscape metaphors and narrating local historical tales to generate emotional resonance. For example, popular cultural-tourism micro-dramas often integrate local intangible cultural heritage and folk legends into the plot, so that audiences can obtain emotional compensation and identity confirmation while watching the plot [5]. This kind of emotional value circulation mechanism makes cultural identity replace cultural anxiety and become the core spiritual demand of mass travel narratives. This shift manifests the transformation of social mentality from cultural reflective anxiety to cultural confidence building.

Third, the narrative mode has shifted from reflective interpretation to experiential presentation. Classic writing followed the logic of observation-interpretation-reflection: writers observed relics on-site, sorted out historical context, and finally put forward cultural meditation. By contrast, contemporary narratives prioritize experiential presentation. Sensory mobilization, visual-oriented presentation, and performative replicability have become prominent features, and immersive technologies further promote participatory meaning-making. Numerous short-video travel works prioritize visual spectacle and situational atmosphere, while historical thinking is often compressed or simplified to cater to viewing pleasure.

The rise of immersive cultural tourism projects further strengthens this experiential turn. Taking heritage-themed immersive role-play experiences and real-scene interaction projects as representatives, such works allow audiences to participate in historical stories through role-playing, and obtain perceptual experience through interactive scenes. However, this kind of experience is often designed for entertainment and consumption purposes. The depth of

historical thinking is often weakened in the process of sensory stimulation, and the humanistic connotation contained in cultural heritage is easily reduced to a backdrop for experience performance. This shift from meaning interpretation to experiential presentation is an inevitable outcome of mass cultural logic, yet it entails the latent risk of declining spiritual depth.

Unlike classic bitter-journey writing, which prioritized the depth of thinking over sensory pleasure, contemporary narratives often reverse this hierarchy, placing visual impact and immersive experience at the core. From the perspective of tourism sociology, this performative turn echoes the logic of "staged authenticity": tourist destinations are packaged into consumable visual spectacles, and tourists complete the symbolic consumption of places through check-in performances [6].

IV. Intellectual-historical Logic and Practical Dilemmas Behind the Evolution

The aforementioned three-dimensional narrative evolution is not an isolated literary phenomenon but a projection of epoch-making structural transformation shaped by multiple intertwined factors. Behind the shift from elite writing to mass narratives lies the combined effect of policy guidance, social transformation and technological empowerment.

A. Deep Motivations of the Narrative Shift

Three major forces jointly drive the transformation, and they are interlocked and mutually reinforcing. First, policy guidance: China's national strategy for cultural-tourism integration delivers top-level policy support, incorporating travel writing within the framework of local cultural construction and industrial development. Second, social transformation: the rise of the consumer society and the experience economy has given rise to the "check-in economy". The logic of symbolic consumption reshapes the value hierarchy of travel narratives and advances the consumption-oriented transformation of travel practices [7]. Third, technological empowerment: digital media lowers the production threshold, reconstructs the communication logic, and promotes the downward shift of narrative power, which is a concrete manifestation of the transformation of socio-cultural power structure [3].

Specifically, policy guidance defines the development direction of cultural-tourism integration from the top level, creating a policy environment for the innovation of travel narratives; the rise of consumer society and experience economy releases the public's demand for experiential cultural consumption, providing market momentum for the transformation of narrative forms; digital media technology breaks the threshold of cultural production, reconstructs the production and communication logic of travel narratives, and provides technical support for the downward shift of narrative power. The combined effect of these three forces has brought about the systematic transformation of bitter-journey writing from an elite-centered mode to a mass-oriented mode.

B. Cross-epochal Spiritual Commonality

Despite such narrative evolution, contemporary cultural-tourism narratives and classic bitter-journey writing share a common spiritual root within Chinese travel literature: the pursuit of spirituality through travel. From ancient landscape literature to modern bitter-journey writing, the core logic of taking travel as the path to pursue spiritual value has always been consistent, forming the cross-epochal spiritual continuity of travel writing.

Specifically, this spiritual commonality is embodied in two levels: first, the practical tradition of "seeking truth through travel". From ancient scholars' study tours to modern intellectuals' cultural inspections, and then to contemporary public cultural tourism, the behavioral logic of obtaining spiritual growth and cultural cognition through on-site walking has been continued. Second, the value pursuit of "taking culture as the core". Whether it is elite reflections on cultural destiny or the public's search for cultural identity, both take cultural value as travel's core pursuit, which constitutes the inner spiritual essence running through the history of Chinese travel literature [8].

C. Risks of Spiritual Depth Dissolution

Nevertheless, contemporary cultural-tourism narratives operating under consumer-driven logic face the risk of the dissipation of spiritual depth. This risk penetrates into the whole production and communication logic of cultural-tourism narratives, and is specifically manifested in three progressive levels:

First, the symbolization and spectacularization of landscapes dilute spiritual connotations. Nevertheless, contemporary cultural-tourism narratives operating under consumer-driven logic face the risk of the dissipation of spiritual depth. For example, some ancient town scenic spots blindly imitate the so-called "internet-famous aesthetic", building uniform commercial streets and decorative landscapes, resulting in the serious homogenization of regional cultural characteristics [9]. When landscapes are reduced to mere visual symbols, the cultural memory and historical depth they embody are gradually erased.Second, the superficiality and homogenization of experiences dissolve experiential depth. Under the logic of the check-in economy, tourism is gradually reduced to a fast-consumption practice of "taking photos and posting them online". Tourists rush from one scenic site to another merely to complete check-in rituals, lacking in-depth perception and reflection on local culture. This fast-food travel experience makes the once profound spiritual journey gradually degenerate into superficial symbolic consumption [10]. The highly replicable check-in experience also leads to the convergence of tourism content across different destinations, further weakening the uniqueness of travel experience.

Third, the utilitarianization and instrumentalization of narratives marginalize humanistic spirit. Cultural-tourism content is increasingly reduced to a tool for realizing traffic monetization and commercial value. The humanistic care and cultural reflection originally contained in travel writing are continuously marginalized, and the spiritual value of travel is replaced by practical utility values such as drainage capacity and consumption driving force. This is essentially the squeeze of humanistic spirit by instrumental rationality in the consumer age.

V. Construction of Spiritual Depth in Contemporary Cultural-tourism Narratives

Against the above risks, reconstructing the spiritual depth of cultural-tourism narratives is both the contemporary inheritance of the intellectual-historical value of bitter-journey writing and the inherent requirement for high-quality cultural tourism development. The construction can be promoted from three dimensions.

First, for creative subjects: inherit the core of spiritual trek, and transform from elite enlightenment to mass spiritual exploration. Creators should stick to the stance of cultural concern, integrate humanistic spirit into tourism content, and transform top-down reflection into individual inward exploration, so that spiritual trek becomes a universal life experience for the public. Specifically, creators can draw on the writing tradition of bitter-journey, dig into the historical stories and humanistic connotations behind local cultural heritage, and integrate poetic narration and emotional resonance into visual creation. Instead of blindly catering to the flow logic of "visual first", they should take cultural connotation as the core, and realize the creative transformation from elite enlightenment to public spiritual exploration through individualized expression.

Second, for platform mechanisms: expand local and daily dimensions, and optimize the content ecosystem. Platforms should guide narratives to root themselves in local culture and everyday life, support localized and differentiated content creation, and uncover spiritual connotations embedded within ordinary life, so as to avoid homogenized check-in content and deepen the spiritual depth of narratives. In terms of concrete measures, platforms can establish special content sections for in-depth cultural-tourism, allocate traffic resources toward high-quality original works, and encourage creators to explore the spiritual values embedded within everyday life and local culture. Meanwhile, through content classification and precise recommendation mechanisms, audiences with diverse needs can access suitable cultural content, thereby avoiding content homogenization stemming from a singular algorithmic orientation.

Third, for the governance end: promote the upgrading of experience hierarchy and achieve spiritual resonance. Governance authorities should advance the upgrading of tourism products from sensory gratification toward spiritual resonance via policy guidance and project support, and foster a balanced cultural-tourism ecosystem that balances experiential quality and ideological pursuit. For example, cultural and tourism authorities can set up special funding programs to support high-quality cultural-tourism content creation and immersive experience projects with cultural heritage as the core. They can also cultivate a number of demonstration areas integrating sightseeing, cultural interpretation and spiritual experience, and guide the industry to form a graded experience system from sensory pleasure to emotional resonance and then to spiritual sublimation [7].

VI. Conclusion

From the perspective of intellectual history, this paper systematically organizes the development of bitter-journey writing from A Bittersweet Journey through Culture to contemporary cultural-tourism integration narratives. This study argues that classic bitter-journey writing established the spiritual tradition of the bitter-journey mode through historical inquiry and cultural reflection, embodying the cultural anxiety of 1990s intellectuals. In the era of cultural-tourism integration, this tradition has transformed in terms of subject, core and mode, and its spiritual connotation has shifted from elite anxiety to mass identity construction, which is an inevitable result of the change in epochal cultural mentality. This paper makes three primary contributions, as outlined below. First, it breaks through the research boundary between classical literature and contemporary cultural tourism by applying the intellectual-historical paradigm, revealing the profound spiritual inheritance between the two. Second, relevant Western theories such as staged authenticity and consumer society are introduced for theoretical dialogue to extend the theoretical foundation. Finally, practical pathways for constructing spiritual depth are put forward, providing references for the high-quality development of cultural tourism. Admittedly, this study has certain limitations: the corpus examined mainly consists of prose and short-video works, while other emerging narrative forms such as immersive dramas remain under-covered. In addition, the theoretical grounding of its intellectual-historical analysis requires further consolidation. Future research will incorporate more diverse textual materials and adopt multi-perspective theoretical frameworks for deeper exploration.

In the final analysis, travel writing in different eras is a spiritual mirror of the times. The bitter-journey tradition, with walking as the carrier and spiritual exploration as the core, has always been the internal spiritual vein of Chinese travel literature. How to guard humanistic spirit against consumer-driven logic and reconstruct deep-level experience in the mass-culture context remains a long-term proposition for both academic research and industrial practice.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Jing He and Lu Wang jointly proposed the research topic and compiled relevant literature concerning the bitter-journey writing. Jing He conducted close textual reading and interpreted the intellectual-historical connotations, while Lu Wang reviewed prior scholarship and established the structure of the paper. They co-wrote, revised and proofread the manuscript including citations and annotations. All authors approved the final version.

References

[1] Q. Y. Yu, *A Bittersweet Journey Through Culture*, Shanghai: Oriental Publishing Center, 1992.
[2] B. Song, "A brief analysis of the cultural implications of *A Bittersweet Journey Through Culture*," *Chinese Language Construction*, vol. 21, pp. 29–30, 2016.
[3] W. Liu, "Research on innovative paths for short-video-empowered integrated development of culture and tourism," *News Dissemination*, vol. 6, pp. 57–59, 2025.
[4] W. Xiong, X. Y. Huang, and X. M. Cai, "Travellers in images: Poetic

metaphor and the construction of tourism imagination," *Human Geography*, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 155–164, 2025.
[5] C. L. Xie, "'Cultural-tourism + micro-drama': Audio-visual culture empowering new integration of culture and tourism," *News World*, vol. 5, pp. 76–78, 2025.
[6] J. Dong, X. Y. Wen, and H. Xu, "Examining the check-in trend from cultural scenes: A study on online community users' check-in behavior at cultural-tourism locations," *Documentation, Information & Knowledge*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 88–98, 2025.
[7] H. R. Zhang, "Expanding tourism aesthetics research from sorting out historical facts," *Oriental Forum*, vol. 5, pp. 7–12, 2002.
[8] J. W. Ding, M. A. Syed, and I. Rosya, "Unveiling cultural heritage: Exploring the perceived online destination image of China's cultural heritage destination and narrative strategy in travel vlogs," *Journal of China Tourism Research*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2024.
[9] Z. G. Zhu, L. H. N. Fong, H. C. Gao, and D. Buhalis, "How does celebrity involvement influence travel intention? The case of promoting Chengdu on TikTok," *Information Technology & Tourism*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 389–407, 2022.
[10] J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage Publications, 1998.

Copyright © 2026 by the authors. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (CC BY 4.0).