

When the Yellow River Floods

Water, Technology, and Nation-Building in Early
Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature

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Introduction

We of this age have our feelings stirred about our life experience, about family and nation, about society, about the Chinese race and Confucian teaching. The deeper the emotions, the more bitter the weeping. This is why the Scholar of a Hundred Temperings from Hongdu has made this book.

—Liu E, *The Travels of Lao Can*, preface (1905)

The Travels of Lao Can (*Lao Can youji* 老殘遊記, hereafter *The Travels*) is a novel about building a nation. Written by arguably the most talented but also most notorious late Qing (1644–1911) polymath, Liu E 劉鶚 (style name Tieyun 鐵雲, 1857–1909), this combination of travelogue, murder mystery, and political commentary follows a peripatetic physician protagonist as he travels through China’s Shandong Province while treating patients, offering advice on local governance and flood control, and investigating an apparent murder. First serialized in 1903 (with a sequel begun a few years later), the novel is set in the contemporary present, referencing the recently concluded Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) and the rise of the revolution that led to the collapse of the Qing empire in 1911 and the founding of the Republic of China the following year—less than a decade after it was serialized. To scholars, the novel offers a complex and nuanced perspective on the status of the Chinese nation at this critical historical juncture on the eve of its transition from a weakened dynastic imperium to a nascent republic. Yet to “the Scholar of Hundred Temperings from Hongdu” (Hongdu bailian sheng 鴻都百鍊生), Liu E’s pen name, the work was more than a perspective. As his much-cited 1905 preface to the novel in the *Tianjin Daily News*, quoted above, makes clear, it was the emotional embodiment of his generation’s greatest concern: the formation of a modern nation-state.

At the time of the novel’s writing, Qing China had been undergoing a forced journey of transformation for over half a century—a journey triggered by Western aggression. And intellectuals from different camps held different views on its ideal direction. An ongoing debate raged on the relationship between individual and

nation, which was the central issue for nation-building—how to create a sense of shared citizenship, common beliefs, and commitment to an imagined national entity.¹ Liu E's novel was a literary manifestation of these efforts. It was an expression that, although an imperial subject, a Chinese person is also an individual in a community, a citizen of the Chinese nation, and a member of the Chinese ethnicity.

For a work ostensibly concerned with national salvation, ethnic awareness, and nation-building, and whose title claims relation to a travelogue, the protagonist, Lao Can, barely ventures beyond the single province of Shandong. So how can this short journey within a single province represent an entire nation? Why did the author choose Shandong, rather than any other Chinese locality, as the central stage for putting on this show about the national crisis and nation-building? Are there any elements within *The Travels* set in Shandong that might offer insights into the novel's conceptualization of nation-building?

This book argues that *The Travels* by Liu E is a key work of modern Chinese literary history that intertwines environmental change, hydraulic engineering, nation-building, and literary creation. Set in Shandong, a region historically affected by the Yellow River floods, the novel sheds light on the role of water management in the process of nation-building. By examining these themes and their intersections, this study reveals the pivotal role of environmental degradation in shaping the formation of national literature in early twentieth-century China, going beyond conventional narratives that focus solely on political and cultural factors.

Issues of national identity and nation-building have been raised in a host of studies on early twentieth-century Chinese literature. Past scholarship has approached the question from various perspectives: the sense of national humiliation (Tsu 2005), the discourse of love (Lee 2007), popular sympathy (Lean 2007), historical violence (Braester 2003; Wang 2004; Berry 2008), and practices of translation (Liu 1995), among others. Those studies consider human beings the most important, if not the only, agent in the nation-building process. In contrast, recent developments in environmental history offer new insights into the part the environment played in literary nation-building. For instance, historians have identified the role of famine and relief in shaping national consciousness (Rankin 1986; Edgerton-Tarpley 2008). Moreover, as David Pietz and Mark Giordano (2009, 118–19) indicate, twentieth-century Chinese state-building efforts were concerned primarily with “how to effectively manage water to serve the goals of nation-building

1. As Duara (1988) points out, China's nation-building of the present day builds upon the ideas developed during the late Qing, a time that witnessed the elites' drive to build a Chinese nation with efforts in any form. The Qing court, in fact, participated in preparing the way for this effort of nation-building. The Qing court's interpretation of the concept of China (Zhongguo 中國) as a composite of multiethnic people in the late nineteenth century “provided twentieth-century Chinese nationalists with one of the major components of modern Chinese national identity: the multiethnic state” (Zhao 2006, 3–4).

and modernization” and “the quest to establish a vigorous modern national identity among the peoples of the empire.” The present book explores this connection to water in the literary nation-building of *The Travels*.

China had already struggled for thousands of years with Yellow River floodings when a course shift in 1855 brought this curse to the northern province of Shandong—a threat that would potentially lead to the collapse of the Qing empire. From the age of thirty-three to thirty-seven, Liu spent the best five years of his fifty-three-year-long life as a successful hydraulic engineer in Shandong, working to survey and regulate the unruly river. Undeniably, as this book will show, Liu’s 1903 novel is deeply rooted in Yellow River floods and flood control in Shandong, the sociocultural-historical context in which Liu E’s literary nation-building literally takes place, and the floods of the mid-nineteenth century present us with the nonhuman agent that animates Liu E’s turn-of-the-century novel.

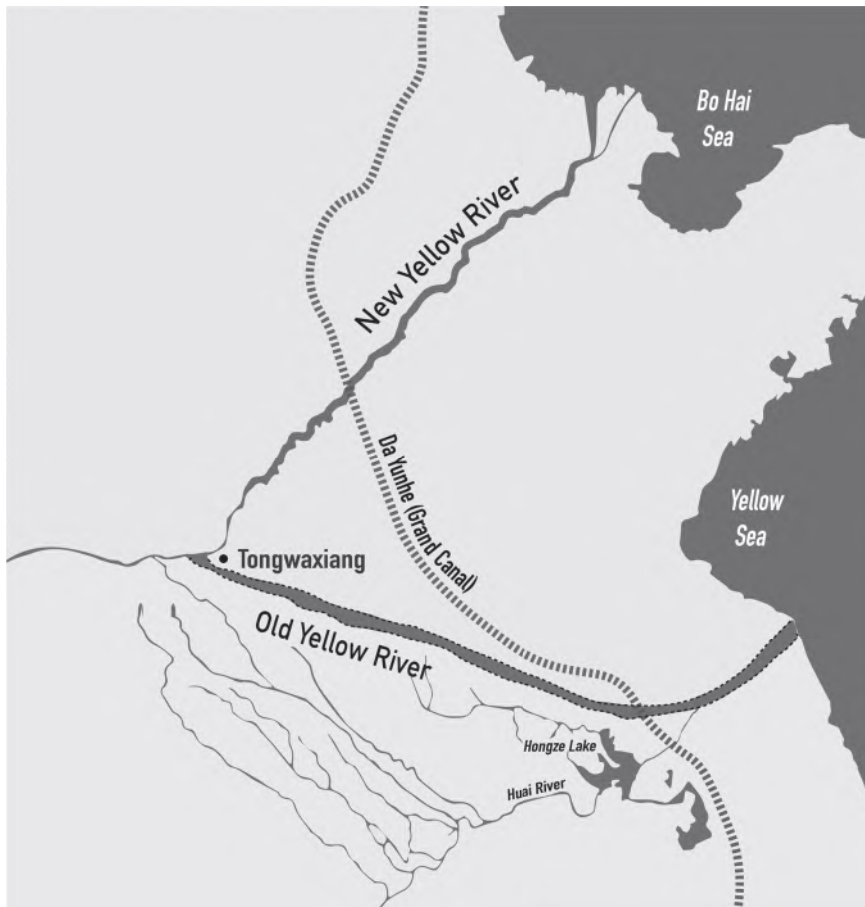


Figure 0.1: The 1855 course change of the Yellow River

The connection between flood control and nation-state formation in the late Qing, compared with that in the Republican period, has received little attention. The relatively small investment the Chinese state made in flood control before the twentieth century partially explains this lack of scholarly attention. Compared with China's national hydraulic projects in the twentieth century, the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing dynasties saw far less direct state intervention in flood control.² When the Yellow River changed course in 1855 after major flooding, the Qing government, for instance, chose to adopt a passive attitude toward its management. It delegated flood control responsibilities in the north to provincial authorities (Pomeranz 1993). This lack of direct state intervention partly explains why few scholars have noted the impact of Yellow River management on late Qing nation-building.

However, as Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley (2008) demonstrates, national identity need not only be formed through direct state intervention in natural disasters; it can also be formed by the relief efforts sponsored by the local gentry. As they did in other disasters, the local gentry played an active role in flood control and disaster relief in the Yellow River floods of 1855 (Jia 2019). The local gentry could serve as a critical point of departure for understanding the relationship between Yellow River flood management and nation-building initiated by private citizens rather than the state. Liu E, who came from a gentry family, is a typical representative of this non-state effort to respond to disaster and form a national identity. By obtaining a series of low-ranking offices through donations, Liu entered the flood control bureaucracy and oversaw fundraising for disaster relief. As such, *The Travels*, set in flood-ravaged late nineteenth-century Shandong and embodying Liu's nation-building insights, provides a perfect literary perspective to probe the connection between Yellow River management and nation-building during the late Qing dynasty.

Past scholarship has tended to classify *The Travels* as the offspring of late Qing intellectual thought—Chinese or Western. Scholars have noticed the novel's autobiographical nature and deep political concern (Hsia 2004; Wong 1989). They have also explored how these features relate to the Taigu school (Taigu xuepai 太谷學派), a folk syncretic religious society that combined Confucianism, Buddhism, and religious Daoism and encouraged the pursuit of political ideals, of which Liu E was a lifelong adherent (Tarumoto 1983, 187–90; Wang X. 1990; Wang X. 1993a, 2000; Kwong 2001). These scholars see the Taigu school of thought as the driving

2. The Ming and Qing state governments, as pointed out by Pierre-Etienne Will (1985), acted mostly as an arbitrator in hydraulic management. The central authorities were inclined to limit the scope of direct intervention and the function of the bureaucratic apparatus. Instead, they endeavored to strike a basic balance among different conflicting regions and parties and encourage local communities to take care of their own welfare and safety. As a result, state presence in daily maintenance kept subsiding except for major catastrophes, and a sort of automatic local hydraulic management community started to play an increasingly dominant role. Thus, Will believes that the private sponsorship is more powerful than state intervention.

force of the novel's nation-building narrative. Similar views also frequently appear in recent studies on Liu's novel and late Qing nation-building.³ Scholars have noted the relationship between the national sentiment promoted by Liu and the Confucian structure of feeling (Lee 2010) and the influence of Western sociological theories on the novel's imagination of the citizen-nation relationship (Guan 2014). These scholars generally consider nation-building in *The Travels* as based on abstract and immaterial philosophical concepts. Furthermore, although these varied analytical lenses have considerably expanded our understanding of the nation-building in Liu E's novel, they lack a unifying conceptual framework for comprehending the many themes that run throughout *The Travels*.

This book takes a different approach, one rooted firmly in environmental and fundamentally material concerns, to propose such a framework. Focusing on the case of *The Travels*, it examines the role of water in literary nation-building in early twentieth-century China. It looks at how floods and Liu E's embankment design provided him with the conceptual resources to imagine a new relationship between the individual and the state, propose a unique governance model, and mobilize national sentiment through concrete political and literary practice. As such, this study explores how Liu's real-world, hands-on experience as a hydraulic engineer contributed to the novel's breakthrough in literary form and how the novel, celebrated as exemplary in its new form of landscape writing, contributed to a new national consciousness in the early Republican period based in the water and earth of China's environment itself. Finally, in terms of the novel's narrative structure, the book elucidates the relationships between Liu's plans for hydraulic engineering and his discourse on the history and the future of China at the novel's plot center.

Such a broad-roaming scope naturally entails a thematic division of chapters. This book's five chapters examine the relationship between medical and political discourses, between discourses of water regulation and governance, between emotion and national sentiment, between river engineering and landscape description, and between the syncretic religious teachings of the Taigu school and the tenets of flood control. And while such a collection initially appears idiosyncratic, it reflects the complex and multifaceted approach of Liu E himself and is unified by the one concept at the heart of his identity: hydraulics. Accordingly, this book argues that *The Travels* presents us with a literary response to the political *and* environmental crises of late Qing China. Its narrative drive stems not only from Liu E's human-centered psychological anxiety for national salvation and his abstract philosophical beliefs but also from the urgent need to find a resolution to China's environmental crisis, the Yellow River floods. Flood disasters and river engineering are the overarching pivots that connect the novel's narrative and thematic elements and the discussions in this assessment of it. This novel allows us to discern a new way

3. For reading *The Travels* as a national allegory, refer to Holoch 1980; Hutters 2005; Rojas 2015.

of conceptualizing nation-building: one that was, in every sense, shaped by the hydraulic technology Liu E had spent more than a decade developing to counter the deadly environmental collapse of the mid-nineteenth century.

Liu E: Successful Engineer, Failed Entrepreneur

The half century between Liu E's birth and his writing of *The Travels* in 1903 witnessed frequent flooding of the Yellow River, one of the most disastrous environmental degradations in Chinese history. This period also experienced the political turmoil of the late Qing dynasty and the ambitious beginning and frustrating end of the Self-Strengthening Movement (Ziqiang yundong 自強運動, 1861–1895), also known as the Western Affairs Movement (Yangwu yundong 洋務運動). This was a series of institutional reforms undertaken by the Westernizing faction (Yangwu pai 洋務派) to promote industrialization in response to China's military defeat in the Opium Wars (first 1839–1842, second 1856–1860). As such, flood control and Western affairs together formed the pivotal sociopolitical context for Liu E's literary nation-building.

Yellow River flooding has occurred regularly throughout Chinese history.⁴ Floods were deeply associated with the ruler's ability to command resources, the mandate to rule, and thus the state's destiny. This is evident in the myth of Da Yu 大禹 (Yu the Great; traditional dates of reign 2205–2197 BCE), China's first river "engineer." According to legend, Da Yu guided the constantly flooding Yellow River into the sea by dredging and redirecting its course. This great accomplishment won him the right to the throne. He went on to found Xia (2205–1766 BCE), the first traditional Chinese dynasty in recorded history, laying the foundation for China as an agricultural civilization. Da Yu's rise to power also passed on an important message to subsequent Chinese rulers—their legitimacy to rule largely lay in their ability to tame the daunting Yellow River.

The intertwining of government and environment was especially pertinent for the Qing, the last imperial dynasty. Environmental degradation, such as the lack of soil conservation and deforestation caused by explosive population growth since the mid-Qing period, contributed to an increase in the magnitude and frequency of Yellow River floodings. The year 1855 finally ushered in a disaster with long-term implications. After a dike breach at Tongwaxiang 銅瓦廂 in Henan Province in the summer, the Yellow River changed course: it no longer followed the original southeastern river channel through Jiangsu to the Yellow Sea but moved north and flowed to the Bo Hai Sea through Shandong Province. This was the most serious breach and largest avulsion of the Yellow River since 1128. The course change of

4. On the problem of controlling the Yellow River in Chinese history, see Needham, Wang, and Lu 1971, 229–41; Elvin 1993, 2004; Elvin and Liu 1998; Dodgen 2001; Pietz 2015; Mostern 2021.

cultural deposits on which he could draw for his nation-building campaigns. The most remarkable contributions in his life—flood control, coal mining and railroad construction, and oracle bone study—all involved investigation, excavation, and utilization of the natural environment.¹⁶ These activities looked for solutions to the imminent environmental and political crises facing China, but also carried his hope to reconfirm the nation's potential of rejuvenation in the bedrock of its glorious past. It is unsurprising, then, to find each of them to surface in some way as themes in *The Travels*.

Yellow River and Liu E's Literary Nation-Building

Scholars exploring literary nation-building in early twentieth-century China find *The Travels* a particularly valuable subject of study, not merely because the author has explicitly identified nation-building as his main purpose of writing or because he devoted much of his life to nation-building activities. Most importantly, the novel presents Liu E's effort to conceptualize the plight of the Chinese nation from multiple perspectives, offering discourses associated with medical treatment, political criticism, sentimental expression, landscape writing, and philosophical thought, to name a few. Over the past century, studies of Liu's novel have probed these dimensions to varying extents. Like jigsaw pieces, they each offer remarkable insights individually but fail to piece together a whole picture. This absence of an overall understanding is largely because we lack an interpretative perspective rooted in the historical and social reality of Liu's time and in Liu E's life experience that is also broad enough to encompass the novel's core dimensions. I argue that appreciating the Yellow River flooding and its management in late Qing Shandong solves this jigsaw, forming a unifying framework by which we can understand, organize, and represent the core themes of *The Travels* identified in previous scholarship as a coherent agenda of literary nation-building. Furthermore, only by doing so, I argue, is it possible to fully comprehend the novel's literary-historical significance.

The process of nation-building begins, naturally, with a way to conceptualize the nation-state. Only with that in mind is it possible to address its problems and construct its future. Consequently, the first chapter of the book explores how Liu E understood China and the issues it faced in the early twentieth century. For this conceptualization, we turn to medicine. Discourses on medicine, traditional or

16. Flood control involves both hydraulic engineering and civil engineering. The conversion and utilization of earth is not only a purpose of Liu E's oblique dike design, but also a general focus of flood control. Civil engineering plays an essential role throughout the implementation of a hydraulic project. In the beginning, land measurement constitutes an important part of the preparatory work. As the project progresses, dredging, embankment, and breach repair all rely on the transport and utilization of earth and stone. In fact, flood control can be viewed as a process of land and earth and stone investigation, utilization, and rescheduling.

modern, are unavoidable for scholars exploring nation-building in China in this period, including that of Liu E. The novel's discourse on medicine and nation-building should be understood in the context of a developing idea of public hygiene in the early twentieth century, which played a crucial role in China's modern state-building and nation-building.¹⁷ The emergence of public hygiene at the beginning of the twentieth century was inextricably linked to the rivalry between Chinese and Western medicines (Rogaski 2004). Traditional Chinese doctors diagnose illnesses, treat diseases, and administer medication based on the theories of the yin and yang and the five elements. When missionaries introduced Western medicine into China in the early nineteenth century, a debate on the superiority and legitimacy of Chinese medicine and Western medicine arose, continuing to this day. On the surface, the debate is about medicine. It entails a conflict of two sets of views on the human body, often interpreted as a clash between two cultures. In the past, scholars were inclined to describe the encounter between Chinese and Western medicines in the early twentieth century as a confrontation. More recent research on the history of medicine has started challenging this binary paradigm by exploring the interplay of these two medicines and their mutual incorporation of ideas during their coexistent development in China (Andrews 2014; Pi 2019).

That medicine is the appropriate lens through which to explore the conception of the state in *The Travels* is evident in the purposeful correspondence between the professions of the protagonist, Lao Can, an itinerant medical practitioner, and the author, Liu E, a former practicing doctor.¹⁸ As a traditional Chinese medical practitioner and entrepreneur engaged in Western affairs, Liu E adopted a view on medicine that blended Chinese and Western approaches. Liu believed Chinese and Western medicines have respective strengths and weaknesses. Chinese medicine excelled in diagnosis, medical theory, and therapies, while Western medicine was more advanced in systematic medical training, medical apparatuses, and medical drugs. According to Liu, a patient should first be diagnosed according to Chinese medical theory and then treated with Western devices and drugs for the best outcome. In the long run, he believed, China must establish a complete training and qualification system for cultivating medical doctors.¹⁹ Liu's view obviously echoes

17. For the difference between nation-building and state-building, see Linz 1993.

18. From his mother, Lady Zhu 朱, Liu E learned traditional Chinese medicine, which allowed Liu to practice medicine for a time after repeatedly failing the imperial exams, though the business did not work out well.

19. In a letter dated 1895 to Sheng Xuanhui, Liu E made the following observation: "Western medicine lacks a solid theory but boasts high barriers of entry for practitioners (who have to pass exams and earn a license before practicing), well-made drugs (which are not allowed onto the market without experts' verification), and a strict discipline mechanism (which would suspend the licenses of doctors for malpractice until their qualifications being reaffirmed). When such a system has been enforced for hundreds of years, how could there be no remarkable outcome? In treating external injuries, Western medicine indeed performs better (such as open surgeries, and wound and fracture

the principle that Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909), a leading figure of the Western Affairs Movement, proposed for guiding the movement—“Chinese learning as fundamental structure, Western learning for practical use” (*zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong* 中學為體，西學為用). Liu E’s similar view of medicine serves as the basis for how we understand medicine in relation to his literary nation-building in *The Travels*.

Previous scholars have been inclined to regard the narrative of medical treatment in *The Travels* as part of the nation-as-body analogy, introduced from the West by late Qing constitutional reformists such as Liang Qichao (Guan 2014). Indeed, Liang’s argumentation immensely influenced discussions about nation-building in the late Qing and early Republican eras. He was also an acquaintance of Liu E. However, since Liu believed in “Chinese medicine as the fundamental structure,” we must understand the relationship between medicine and nation-building in the novel not only as influenced by Liang’s new concepts of medicine but also in the context of longer-standing notions derived from Chinese medicine. The first chapter of this book addresses this question by examining the dominant political rhetoric in the early twentieth century as represented in the narrative of illness and healing in *The Travels*. The chapter maintains that unlike readings that only emphasize the modern notion of the nation as a body, Liu E actually frames his storytelling about national crisis and salvation in terms borrowed from traditional Chinese pathology and river control terminology. The chapter traces trends in late Qing political rhetoric, particularly the nation-as-body analogy. It shows how Liu E’s training in traditional medicine allowed him to conceptualize the analogy and the nation’s healing differently from Liang Qichao, who built his national healing agenda on Western concepts. This chapter further shows how the interplay between hydraulics and medicine, which dates to ancient China, shaped the nation-as-body analogy underpinning the novel’s narrative of national healing. Chapter 1 also examines the political stance that Liu E reveals in the novel, illustrating how he analogizes Chinese revolutionaries of the time to the floods on the Yellow River and diseases

treatment) than Chinese medicine (because they have better trained doctors, more advanced apparatus, highly effective drugs, and advise more appropriate diet and daily care). In medical theory and therapies, Chinese medicine is not inferior to Western medicine. Only the practitioners have no interest in self-improvement and standardization. . . . They should study ancient masters’ theories like transformation of *qi* (*qihua* 氣化) and tip and root (*biaoben* 標本) until achieving full mastery. Meanwhile, they should also read translated Western books (like *Anatomy to Human Body* 形體闡微, *Complete Guide to Abscess Surgery* 割瘡全書, *Elementary Medicine* 醫學入門, and *Foreign Medicine* 萬國本草), study them thoroughly, and incorporate the understanding into their expertise. Then they would gain full confidence in practicing medicine. . . . There is no need to discriminate against Western medicine (because their drugs for treating are indeed better, although the usage is too strong) or abandon Chinese medicine (as for internal disharmony and deficiency caused by the disorder in transformation of *qi*, Chinese medicine and therapies are much more effective, but truly skilled doctors are rare). Both offer something valuable to draw from” (Liu and Liu 2019, 317–18).

caused by liquid imbalances in the human body. It goes on to analyze the novel's criticism of the Boxer Uprising and the abuse of power by local governmental officials. Liu depicts these as the cause of national illness, something to be cured by medical means analogous to flood control. The chapter's argument that the novel's narrative of national crisis and salvation is based on flood control addresses the main concern of this book—the important role that water played in Liu E's literary nation-building.

With his novel conceptual framework for the state established, Liu E leveraged the analogical and intertwined relationship between the river, body, and polity to address political concerns. This is the subject of Chapter 2. *The Travels* recounts how the so-called incorruptible officials impose extremely rigid, harsh governance at the cost of the lives of local people and how Lao Can intervenes out of righteous indignation to rescue innocent people from torture. Liu E saw this exposure of such reputation-obsessed “incorruptible officials” as his proudest accomplishment in the novel. Likewise, it is this aspect of the novel that first attracted scholars' attention.²⁰ Even though the novel undoubtedly includes Liu E's scathing criticism of late Qing local bureaucrats, it is, as David Der-wei Wang correctly suggests, a variation of the court case and chivalric genre. The novel's reexamination of incorruptible officials marks an ironic departure from traditional court case and chivalric novels such as *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants* (*Sanxia wuyi* 三俠五義, 1879). A fresh understanding of political power and the concept of justice began to take shape in *The Travels*: the deep-rooted sins do not lie in the rebels who subvert state order but in the officials authorized by the state to maintain the order (Wang 2007, 93). By challenging the justice and authority of the officials representing state power, the novel calls into question the legitimacy of the regime's rule. As such, the challenge represents Liu's attempt to fundamentally reexamine state power.

To make this reexamination and critique of state power, the second chapter argues that Liu E ties his political discourse to the earlier nineteenth-century floods. He was not the first to do so. David Der-wei Wang shows that this link between political discourse and the floods is observable in the figurative language in the 1879 novel *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants*.²¹ However, in *The Travels*, the floods do

20. Lu Xun (2011), for example, propounded his famous idea of the “novel of exposure” (*qianze xiaoshuo* 譴責小說) by taking as its example the criticism of harsh local governance in Liu E's novel.

21. In studying *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants* and *The Travels*, David Der-wei Wang borrows the idea of chronotope from Mikhail Bakhtin to read the flood disasters in the two novels as a literary configuration of the historical drive. In the former, the flooding of Lake Hongze 洪澤湖 that threatened the Song regime is closely linked to the traitorous Prince Xiangyang, while in the latter, the devastating Yellow River flood disaster that leads to numerous injuries and deaths results from a wrong decision made by the actually honest, upright Governor Zhuang. In either disaster, a hero stands up to fight for justice amid the engulfing waves of political and social transformation but in vain (Wang 2007, 96–97). Lake Hongze, whose dike breach induces a flood in *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants*, played a crucial role in Ming and Qing Yellow River management. Pan Jixun and Jin

not merely serve as a literary configuration of the historical drive toward political and social reform; these floods are the very historical drive itself, directly shaping social and political transformations. As Chapter 2 will show, the novel directly links its criticism of incorruptible officials to state governance and to the environmental collapse of the late nineteenth century. The Yellow River floods and his innovations in hydraulic engineering molded Liu E's sociopolitical critique and his agenda of governance and statecraft.

To make this point, this chapter begins by understanding the novel's criticism of the incorruptible officials. This criticism, it argues, implicates the Qing government's methods for addressing the public security challenges caused by the frequent Yellow River floods. The chapter further analyzes the solutions for public security suggested in the novel as an alternative to the mode of governance adopted by incorruptible officials. Chapter 2 then shows how Liu E's designs for hydraulic infrastructure served as conceptual resources for his challenge to the Qing government's defensive and rigid bureaucracy and in his blueprint for nation-building. From Liu E's perspective of river engineering, the novel redefines the very idea of incorruptibility and considers the concepts on which the idea of incorruptibility has historically been based. This chapter ends by looking into the underworld scene in chapter 28 of the novel, exploring how river engineering plays a significant role at the novel's close. Here, Liu E addresses his accusation of a national traitor, which was brought upon him due to his conceptualization of ideal governance. Like Chapter 1, this chapter examines the role of water in nation-building in *The Travels*, but now in the light of Liu E's agenda of governance and statecraft.

As should already be evident, Liu E's nation-building agenda and methodology stem from his very identity as a river engineer and political reformer. Unsurprisingly, then, *The Travels* is wrought with emotion and must be understood within the broader discourse of emotion and national sentiment within late Qing literature. This is the subject of Chapter 3. Emotion has been a key force driving China's nation-building activities since the late Qing, and *The Travels* is a quintessential case of this. In his 1905 preface to the novel, Liu E drew on the power and literary history of weeping and cited the various sentiments shared by contemporaneous Chinese people about nation, society, ethnicity, and civilization as the reason for writing the novel. Liu's opening statement has since become a core text that scholars must engage with when exploring the modern forms of Chinese people's emotions. Most notably, Liu's preface features centrally in Haiyan Lee's study of the relationship between the discourse of love and literary nation-building in nineteenth- and twentieth-century China. In it, Lee detects a sentiment that levels social hierarchies

Fu 靳輔 (1633–1692), the celebrated hydraulic engineers of the Ming–Qing period, implemented an embankment system at the lake to wash away silt with the lake's water and prevent deposits, to ensure the operation of the Grand Canal.

and distinctions and posits a new principle of ordering human society. It is a sentiment that springs up from human nature, associates one with the world, and transcends all boundaries, and the celebration of it bears characteristics of the late Ming cult of passion or feeling (*qingjiao* 情教) (Lee 2007). Lee posits that this sentiment of belonging was the key element of nation-building in Liu's preface.

While Lee's observations have merit, extending this understanding to the core content of the novel's discourse of emotion would risk oversimplifying. Instead of a transcendental, abstract sentiment of belonging, Chapter 3 argues that what Liu depicted most in the novel is the postdisaster trauma caused by the Yellow River embankment failures. While mapping the Yellow River in 1889, Liu witnessed a dike breach that rendered tens of thousands of people homeless or separated them from their loved ones. The firsthand experience of trauma was the basis for the novel's writing of emotion, and Chapter 3 identifies the trauma associated with the Yellow River flooding as the resource on which Liu E drew to develop the idea of nationally shared sentiment. It argues that Liu E's novel establishes the discourse of emotion by transforming flood trauma through symbolic healing on the narrative level and conceptually combining disaster relief, trauma healing, and nation-building with newspaper editing.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the novel's allusion to earlier literature, illustrating that the novel develops the idea of saving the nation through flood taming by rooting the idea in canonical works in poetic and narrative traditions. It then analyzes how the ancient analogy between water flow and emotion informed Liu E's way of crafting a narrative of national salvation through a story about flood trauma and its healing. It goes on to investigate the expression of flood trauma as shaped by hydraulic criticism and a technology-based morality before examining the novel's narrative of trauma healing as resonant with river engineering technology and the history of hydraulics of the Yellow River. The chapter concludes by exploring how the novel's narrative of trauma and healing participates in the literary national identity construction executed through newspaper layout editing in reporting a 1907 flood in northern China and its aftermath. Whereas Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the political aspects of the novel, Chapter 3 takes the thesis of nation-building in a new direction by addressing the discourse of emotion. Its primary argument is that it is only possible to appreciate this integration of emotion into the political discourse by recognizing the unifying hydraulic framework employed by Liu E. That is, this chapter discusses the novel's construction of national identity by establishing a connection between the flood experience and national sentiment.

Having established the link between emotion and hydraulics in Liu E's nation-building, we then use this framework in Chapter 4 to reconsider the novel's most lauded aspect: its landscape writing. *The Travels* holds a special place in the literature reforms of the 1910s. After the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, Chinese intellectuals saw it as their mission to promote a new national language and new

national literature. In formulating new literary standards and envisioning modern national literature, Hu Shih 胡適 (1891–1962), the leading literary reformer, cited *The Travels* as an important case study. Vernacular Chinese, Hu advocated, should be the standard form of writing. In his 1925 preface to the Yadong Library Press (Yadong tushuguan 亞東圖書館) edition of *The Travels*, the first serious literary study of the novel, Hu praised the novel's exceptional literary techniques, focusing on its accomplishments in vernacular landscape description. It was the vernacular depiction of landscape, Hu Shih argued, that distinguished the novel from traditional Chinese novels, providing an example of vernacular fiction writing that could be followed by all subsequent vernacular literature (Hu 2013, 1045–48).

As C. T. Hsia (2004) pointed out, Hu's focus on the novel's landscape writing led him to miss out on the novel's more significant breakthroughs in literary form and narrative techniques. However, Hu's observation still alerts us to a highly important but easily neglected fact: *The Travels* marks the emergence of a new type of landscape writing in Chinese novels. This contribution made *The Travels* not only a cornerstone of Hu's national literature construction but also a forerunner of modern Chinese literature. Since the publication of Hu Shih's preface in 1925, *The Travels* has been regarded as a classic exemplar of landscape writing. For generations, high schools in the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have utilized excerpts from the novel as teaching materials to instruct literary techniques of landscape description. Chapter 4 asks, what brought about this history-shaping emergence of landscape writing? Although numerous studies have been devoted to the novel's innovative landscape writing ever since Hu first called attention to it, surprisingly few have probed the root causes of its emergence. Chapter 4 explains the emergence of a new type of landscape description from the hydraulics perspective. It argues that Liu E's landscape description was premised on a new perceptual mode informed by his profession as a hydraulic engineer.

The chapter starts by showing that due to his engagement with hydraulic engineering, Liu E considered natural landscapes as enigmatic and unable to be depicted through conventional literary and artistic forms. The chapter then discusses how the technical problems Liu E encountered in flood control and the optical knowledge required to solve them shaped his writing on water landscapes. It further explores how Liu E's landscape writing relates to his concern for visual illusions and the mechanisms that shape visual experience—an inquiry arising from his anxiety about the limits of human visual capacity to deal with the instability and unpredictability of the untamed Yellow River. The chapter concludes by demonstrating how Liu E's landscape writing embodies his interest in the perception of light, his critical understanding of philosophy, and his contemplation of Chinese political prospects. Ultimately, Chapter 4 shows that the novel's innovation in landscape description is more than an innovation in the craft of writing. It is a more complicated one that incorporates flood control, visual perception, and philosophy into literary

nation-building—one that we can appreciate only by understanding his identity as a river engineer.

The first four chapters of this book analyze *The Travels* from the perspectives of body imagination, political governance, discourses of emotion, and literary techniques—the four focuses of past scholarship on late Qing literary nation-building—by positing Liu E's attempts at controlling the Yellow River floods as the central idea uniting them. Yet as Chapter 5 argues, such an assessment would be incomplete without examining Liu E's engagement with the philosophy of the Taigu school, a secret religious cult banned by the Qing government. As scholars have noted, the Taigu school, to which Liu was a lifelong adherent, served as an essential spiritual drive for his exploits in industrial and commercial activities, and even literature. The final chapter discusses how the theme of the Taigu school and that of river regulation together form the very core structure of the novel. Specifically, Chapter 5 explores the connection between Taigu philosophy, flood control, and the nation-building themes of the novel by addressing one of the most puzzling aspects of *The Travels*: the episode in chapters 9–11 involving a gathering of a hermit prophet, a female philosopher, and a Confucian scholar. This gathering, at the structural center of the novel's twenty-chapter first volume, has usually been regarded as an interlude irrelevant to the main plot and even a rupture in the narrative. This chapter disagrees. It contends instead that this episode is the very center of the novel's narrative logic and Liu E's imagination of nation-building because it embodies his belief in the Taigu school and concern for Yellow River governance.

The final chapter identifies the Taigu school and flood control as distinct but highly interrelated themes in *The Travels*. Chapter 5 first illustrates that the music playing during the gathering, the most representative scene in the interlude, encapsulates the Taigu school at its crucial historical moment of revival and articulates Liu E's vehement call to perpetuate the school's legacy. The chapter further explores the connotation of political resistance in the music-playing scene by discussing the link between the fictional music piece and a music score Liu E printed for circulation. Aside from the Taigu school, Yellow River regulation is another legacy that Liu E deemed in danger of being lost and which he, therefore, needed to pass on. The chapter delves into the intellectual resources shared by the Taigu school and the long history of Yellow River regulation, indicating that Yellow River governance, like the Taigu school, serves as a hidden context for the novel's imagination of China's rejuvenation, as suggested in the political prophecy of the hermit Yellow Dragon (Huanglongzi 黃龍子), a character with strong reference to the Taigu school leaders. The chapter ends by analyzing Yellow Dragon's explanation of his prophecy, pointing out that Liu E bases his political imagination on the model of hydraulic engineering at the very core of the narrative structure. This chapter argues that Yellow Dragon, in the most enigmatic episode at the novel's center, embodies the Taigu school's legacy and the history of Yellow River regulation. Chapter 5's most important contribution

is to consolidate the overall thesis of the Yellow River as the driving force of Liu E's literary nation-building on a structural level by incorporating the Taigu school's significance.

In sum, this book presents a new approach to a critical work of modern Chinese literary history. It identifies the single, unifying driving force behind *The Travels's* innovations in political imagination, the discourse of emotion, and literary form and explains the driving force that brought them about. By examining the confluence of devastating floods, hydraulic engineering, nation-building, and literary creation, this study explores the relationship between environmental change and the birth of modern Chinese literature. Conventional narratives depict literary nation-building in the late Qing as induced primarily by political and cultural collision. This book goes beyond human factors to show the pivotal role of environmental degradation in forming national literature and literature about the nation in early twentieth-century China.

3

From Sediment to Sentiment

Transforming Flood Trauma into National Identity

The game of chess is almost ended. We are getting old. How can we not weep?

—Liu E, *The Travels of Lao Can*, preface (1905)

By incorporating hydraulics into the analogy of biological nationalism, Liu E created a framework to criticize the philosophy of incorruptible government and express his agenda for national salvation. However, this incorporation played a dual role: it enabled him to draw on earlier literature and an ancient analogy between water flow and emotion to develop the idea of national sentiment in the novel. That this was his intention is evident from the preface he wrote on the theme of weeping when the *Tianjin Daily News* (*Tianjin riri xinwen* 天津日日新聞) reserialized *The Travels* in 1905. He presents the novel as the expression of his tears for his troubled country's misfortune and his fears about the nation's indefinite future. Meanwhile, the overall sentiment in the novel is this deep concern and the sorrowful and overwhelming “feelings stirred about our life experience, about family and nation, about society, about the Chinese race and Confucian teaching” 有身世之感情，有家國之感情，有社會之感情，有種教之感情。¹ That sentiment is what the present chapter explores.

Referencing the metaphor of a chess game, Liu E pushes his readers to consider the current political climate. The “game of chess is almost ended” 棋局已殘 suggests the Chinese political system is about to collapse, and “we are getting older” 吾人將老 suggests it is too late to do the right thing. Using the words “end” (*can* 殘) and “old” (*lao* 老) to express a sentiment of doom, Liu also weaves the protagonist's name, Lao Can, into the text.² This associates the character with the then-prevalent

1. My translation.

2. For discussion on the name Lao Can, see also Wong 1989. For discussion on “can” in “Lao Can” as ruins, see Cheng 2007.

societal despair and anxiety concerning the nation's future, establishing the theme as integral to the protagonist's identity and, therefore, the novel.

Given the clear association between the protagonist's name and the sentiment of national misfortune, it is perhaps surprising that Lao Can is not the character who sheds the most tears in the novel. Instead, Liu E develops this sentiment of national misfortune through an analogical story about flood trauma and healing and the sympathetic portrayal of a courtesan named Cuihuan. Chapters 13 and 14 describe the great suffering that the 1889 Yellow River flood in Shandong caused Cuihuan, who was sold into prostitution because of her family's loss of fortune. Terribly victimized by the flood, Cuihuan is the novel's most lachrymose and sentimental character. Cuihuan cannot stop crying about her family's loss of fortune, her father's death, and her miserable fall to prostitution because of the flood. The huge volume of her tears is unrivaled. Of the fifty-one mentions of the word "weeping" (*ku* 哭) in the novel, thirty are found in chapters 13 and 14; of the twenty-one mentions of the word "tears" (*lei* 淚), eleven are found in these two chapters. The two chapters are saturated with the tears Cuihuan sheds for her misfortune. By letting these tears flow freely, Liu portrays her as the epitome of the flood victims, the carrier of traumatic memories, and the mournful victim who cries for the calamity.

Liu E's regret at failing to save people from perishing in the 1889 Shandong flood finds expression in Cuihuan. The depiction of the disaster in chapters 13 and 14 is based on Liu's witnessing the destruction while mapping and surveying the Yellow River as a river work official. As Liu clarifies in his commentary on chapter 14, nothing was more devastating to him than failing to rescue the victims of the flood. He "could not help but burst into bitter tears" 不禁痛哭 at the heartbreaking scene and his inability to help. It is the only occasion in the novel or accompanying commentary when Liu expresses his emotions so forcefully, showing the moral weight of his failure. Accordingly, as this chapter will explore, Cuihuan's trauma reflects the novelist's own state of mind.

However, as well as expressing his inner turmoil, Liu E's portrayal of Cuihuan's trauma enables him to address national sentiment by analogizing flood victims and the nation. Just as his tears for his country in the preface are expressed in the novel as the tears for the Yellow River flood victims and for his own failure to prevent the flood and save lives, when Liu writes about the flood and its suffering victims, he writes in fact about the suffering of his country. Fitting his broader hydraulic framework for understanding the nation-state, this analogy of flood trauma and national sentiment depended on water flow as a symbol of emotion. As this chapter explores, such symbolism was rooted in Chinese literary tradition and a long-standing Confucian-Buddhist conceptual model that enabled him to connect the trauma caused by the Yellow River floods to the idea of national identity. Furthermore, it enabled him to explore not just national mourning but also national salvation through the narrative of trauma healing. In the novel, the healing depends on river taming, enabling Liu

E to engage in national identity-making in a manner that he, a hydraulic engineer, could contribute to—the regulation of the Yellow River. That water was at the heart of this analogy charged his work with an emotional depth that few scholars fully recognize.

Evoking Floods in Earlier Literature

Although *The Travels* is not the first Chinese novel to describe devastating floods, it is the first to explore the relationship between floods and the shaping of national sentiment. Liu E explores this relationship by drawing on the greatest works in Chinese literary tradition. By alluding to the eighteenth-century novel *The Story of the Stone* (*Shitou ji* 石頭記, also known as *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢, or *Dream of the Red Chamber*), and the earliest Confucian canon, *The Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), Liu E justifies the relationship between the emergence of national sentiment and floods.

In his 1905 preface, Liu E justifies his claim that his tears for his country drove the writing of the novel by turning to Chinese literary tradition. He references its most important writers and identifies their works as their own crying (*kuqi* 哭泣). The long list of these writers starts with the slandered patriotic poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (340–278 BCE), who is regarded as the first poet in Chinese literature, and ends with Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715–1763), author of *The Story of the Stone*. Liu pays tribute to Cao by using highly sentimental references from Cao's novel, which appear at the end of the preface of *The Travels*, inviting humankind to weep and grieve with him for the country's fall and his inability to save it. These quoted phrases, taken from two beverages consumed by Cao's protagonist (a tea named "qianhong yiku" 千紅一窟 and a wine called "wanyan tongbei," 萬艷同杯), each reference "weeping" and "mourning" through a homophonic pun.³ No other text in Liu's list of great works enjoys such privileged allusion.

With this connection to Cao's novel established, it becomes apparent that the emotional depth of Liu E's work is deeply influenced by *The Story of the Stone*. Marked by romantic and tragic sentiment, *The Story of the Stone* is arguably the most important resource on which later novels—including *The Travels*—have drawn to address affection. The sadness and regret Liu expresses for his uselessness in the face of tragedy is grounded in the beginning of Cao's novel. *The Story of the Stone* begins

3. In chapter 5 of *The Story of the Stone*, the protagonist Jia Baoyu 賈寶玉, the projection of Cao Xueqin himself, drinks a tea named *qianhong yiku*, which literally translates as "a thousand lovely ones are in one cave (*ku*)," and a wine called *wanyan tongbei*, which means "ten thousand beauties are in one cup (*bei*)." The word *ku* is a homophonic pun on "cave" 窟 and "weeping" 哭, while *bei* puns on "cup" 杯 and "mourning" 悲. The puns made by Cao Xueqin, as Liu E correctly points out in the novel's preface, mean "thousand lovely ones weeping together" 千芳一哭 and "ten thousand beauties mourning together" 萬艷同悲 (Liu 1990, 2).

by retelling a Chinese foundation myth about the goddess Nüwa 女媧.⁴ Nüwa uses smelted stones to repair a hole in the heavens that had caused an apocalyptic catastrophe. The protagonist of Cao's novel is Jia Baoyu, the incarnation of the one stone Nüwa left unused in her heaven-patching task; and because of his uselessness, the stone "became filled with shame and resentment and passed [his] days in sorrow and lamentation" 自怨自愧，日夜悲哀 (Cao 1973, 47). Cao creates a figure unprecedented in the history of Chinese fiction, shedding tears for his inability to be of use to the world, or "all under heaven" (*tianxia* 天下). At the end of his novel's preface, Liu borrows the image of this crying stone to express resentment at his own incapability to save the country. His publicized sadness and sorrow, as well as the tears flowing for his country, find their source in the very beginning of *The Story of the Stone*.

By referencing the stone in the Nüwa myth, however, Liu E also empowers himself to save the country through his profession, river engineering. In the original myth, Nüwa's grand undertaking hinges on controlling floods and fixing breaches. These acts are the very contributions that Liu E, a renowned river engineer, could—and did—make when the Yellow River flooded in the latter half of the 1880s and in the early 1890s. By mending flood-damaged dikes, Liu successfully regulated the floodwaters. The reference to the Nüwa myth allows Liu E to identify with the heaven-patching stone used to save "all under heaven."

The name of the novel's protagonist, Lao Can, perfectly captures the self-empowerment suggested by the reference to the Nüwa myth. The narrator introduces Lao Can as follows:

There was once a traveler called Lao Can. His family name was Tie, his given name was of one character, Ying, and his pseudonym, Bucan. He chose Bucan as his pseudonym because he enjoyed the story of the monk Lan Can roasting taros. Since he was a pleasant sort of person, people regarded highly of him and began to call him Lao Can, which eventually became a regular nickname. (Liu 1990, 3–4)⁵

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4. The earliest textual version of the Nüwa myth appears in *Huainanzi* 淮南子 in the early Former Han dynasty (202 BCE–8 CE): "Going back to more ancient times, the four pillars were broken; the nine provinces were in tatters. Heaven did not completely cover [the earth]; Earth did not hold up [Heaven] all the way around [its circumference]. Fires blazed out of control and the people could not extinguish them; water flooded in great expanses and would not recede. Ferocious animals ate blameless people; predatory birds snatched the elderly and the weak. Thereupon, Nüwa smelted together stones of five colors to patch up the azure sky, cut off the legs of the great turtle to set them up as the four pillars, killed the black dragon to provide relief for the Ji area, and piled reeds and cinders to stop the surging waters" 往古之時，四極廢，九州裂，天不兼覆，地不周載，火熾炎而不滅，水浩洋而不息，猛獸食顛民，鸚鳥攫老弱。於是女媧鍊五色石以補蒼天，斷鼈足以立四極，殺黑龍以濟冀州，積蘆灰以止淫水 (Liu 2010, 223–24). Translation slightly adapted.
5. In Chinese, *lao* is often added to a (usually male) name to show familiarity and express fondness.

卻說那年有個遊客，名叫老殘。此人原姓鐵，單名一個英字，號補殘。因慕懶殘和尚煨芋的故事，遂取這「殘」字做號。大家因他為人頗不討厭，契重他的意思，都叫他老殘；不知不覺，這「老殘」二字便成了個別號了。

The name Tie Ying literally means “pure iron”—that is, smelted iron ore; it refers both to Liu E’s style name, Tiejun, and the smelted stones Nüwa used to seal the heavens. The pseudonym Bucan, literally meaning “to mend (*bu*) the broken (*can*)”—that is, to patch up holes—clearly references Nüwa’s great task. The narrator’s explanation of why Lao Can chose the character *can* for his pseudonym further confirms the connection to Nüwa’s unused stone. According to the narrator, this *can* is derived from the dharma name of the monk Lan Can 懶殘, a character from *Tales of Sweet Enrichment* (*Ganze yao* 甘澤謠, 868), who received his name because he ate others’ leftover food (*can* 殘).⁶ Thus, *can* in Lao Can’s pseudonym also means “leftovers” or “the remains.” Bearing a name meaning “smelted iron ore” and a pseudonym meaning “mending the broken / (with) the leftovers,” Lao Can is the reinvented vision of that unused smelted stone in the heaven-patching scene from *The Story of the Stone*.⁷ The idea of patching up the hole in the heavens with the remains, suggested by the pseudonym Bucan, precisely captures the unused stone’s wish to be useful and identifies the stone’s untapped potential. By identifying Lao Can, the projection of the novelist himself, with the unused stone in the creation myth in *The Story of the Stone*, Liu E expresses his desperate desire to be used for the salvation of his country.

The pseudonym Bucan, read in reference to the flood taming in the Nüwa myth, expresses Liu E’s pride and ambition as a river engineer who tasked himself with controlling the devastating Yellow River and thereby saving his country. Such passion for and courage in shouldering the responsibility for saving China manifests in chapter 1 of *The Travels*. At the beginning of that chapter, Lao Can successfully and proudly heals the sick Shandong gentleman Huang Ruihe 黃瑞和, whose name clearly refers to the Yellow (Huang 黃) River, the lower reaches of which are in Shandong Province. Liu E thus takes up where Cao Xueqin leaves off in the Nüwa myth to create a new sentimental subject, Lao Can, who is eager, and symbolically empowered, to join the grand project of reinventing Chinese civilization through river regulation.

6. According to *Tales of Sweet Enrichment*, “Lan Can’s original name was Ming Zan. He was a monk from the Hengyue Temple in the early Tianbao era, and he ate others’ leftovers. Due to his lazy disposition and his habit of eating leftovers, he received the dharma name ‘Lan Can’ 懶殘者，名明瓚，天寶初衡岳寺執役僧也。退食，即收所餘而食，性懶而食殘，故號「懶殘」也 (Yuan 1985, 5).

7. Another example of Liu E’s identification with Cao Xueqin, and Lao Can’s identification with Jia Baoyu, is the correspondence in how other characters refer to the protagonist. In *The Story of the Stone*, Jia Baoyu is called “second elder brother” (*er gege* 二哥哥) by his cousin Shi Xiangyun 史湘雲; Lao Can is similarly called *er gege* by his cousin Mrs. Shi 石姑娘.

Conclusion

Just as the Yellow River management's origin in the myth of Da Yu over four thousand years ago symbolized the earliest Chinese conceptualization of state-building and civilization renewal, it also remained at the heart of Liu E's nation-building efforts in *The Travels*. Throughout Chinese history, no period other than the late Qing—the eve of the dynastic era's collapse—has seen its intellectuals so eager to seek inspiration from the symbolic myth to address the imminent civilization crisis, and Liu E's novel is one of the most important literary expressions of this trend. As this book has argued, the Yellow River floods in nineteenth-century Shandong fundamentally shaped Liu E's life and are the key to understanding his greatest written work.

From a river engineer's perspective, Liu E conceptualized the relationship between the individual Chinese citizen's body and the nation very differently from the mainstream late Qing discourse of nation-building inspired by nineteenth-century Western sociological theories. Based on his hydraulic expertise, the author imagined a complexly analogical and intertwined relationship between the river, the body, and the state that he employed to express his agenda for revitalizing the country. Specifically, through an exploration of local governance, the author proposes a broader governance model that encourages more civilian participation and less state intervention. Meanwhile, by fictionalizing his observations on flood events, Liu E transforms the post-disaster traumas caused by the Yellow River floodings into a key resource for developing the novel's discourse of national emotion. The visually straining experiences Liu E had during his Yellow River survey and mapping tasks contributed to the innovative landscape writing that inspired leading critics to recommend it as an exemplary novel for national literature construction in the early Republican era. By encoding Yellow River floodings and river engineering into the structural core of the novel, Liu successfully connects his political commitment, which springs from traditional Chinese philosophies, to Yellow River engineering and establishes the Yellow River as the core drive for the novel's nation-building

narrative. In this way, *The Travels* becomes the landmark work of early twentieth-century literary nation-building—imagining nationhood in literature and making national literature.

Environmental collapse, this book has argued, was the true catalyst for the literary invention of *The Travels*. Its breakthroughs in the narrative, landscape writing, and approach to political issues all impacted post-1910s modern novels, as other scholars have noted. This book is the first to identify the true source of Liu E's literary innovation: the nineteenth-century Yellow River floodings. The perspective of *The Travels* is not local but national. Environmental and scientific explorations have been important subjects for modern writers in the West (Raine 2014)—the decisive influence of mineral resource rushes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the narrative form of English literature is an illuminating example (Miller 2021). By the early twentieth century, the fascination with the environment and science and technology was no longer a Western phenomenon. Liu E, like many of his Western counterparts, showed a keen interest in the technology of natural resources exploitation, especially hydraulics and mineral extraction technology. It was his intense desire to exploit natural resources to empower the country that motivated him to pen the epoch-making *The Travels*. Acknowledging this fact enables us to interpret the novel from an ecocritical perspective.

In approaching *The Travels* from such a perspective, we cannot avoid reexamining the development of the concept of “youth” in early twentieth-century writings. Beginning with Liang Qichao's “On Young China” (Shaonian Zhongguo shuo 少年中國說, 1900), “youth” became one of the most important explorations of the nation. Unlike Liang Qichao's imagination of China's rejuvenation, which appealed to a “marriage” with the West, Wu Woyao's 吳沃堯 (1866–1910) science fiction novel *The New Story of the Stone* (*Xin shitou ji* 新石頭記, 1905–1908) opened up another way of imagining China's rejuvenation through the character of Old Youth (Lao shaonian 老少年), which represents China's ability to draw the power of rejuvenation from its ancient traditions without relying on the West (Song 2016). In late Qing literature, however, Wu Woyao's Old Youth is not the only figure created to symbolize the ability of Chinese civilization to renew itself. The Yellow River, the core symbol of *The Travels*, embodies the ancient power of rejuvenation sought after in early twentieth-century political discourse. Written two years before *The New Story of the Stone*, *The Travels* offers another perspective on China's self-rejuvenation. Its protagonist, Lao Can, is associated with the ancient power of rejuvenation, which is both a source of destruction and rebirth. Lao Can, a river engineer and doctor, not only regulates the Yellow River but also possesses the skill of “miaoshou huichun” 妙手回春 (literally, “wonder hands bring the dying back to life”). This ability symbolizes his capacity to revitalize and restore what has been lost, using China's ancient traditions to empower the nation. From an ecological standpoint, *The Travels*

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