

Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China. By D. Jonathan Felt. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 123. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021. Pp. x + 391. \$68.00/£54.95.

This fascinating new contribution to the study of Early Medieval China does much more than merely examine geographical texts from the period of division after the disintegration of the great Han dynasty empire (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). It also places those geographical texts within an overarching framework of interpretive metageographies. The term metageography refers to the types of broad “spatial structures through which people order their knowledge of the world,”¹ such as the Cold War–era conceptual division between East and West and its associated ideas of so-called First, Second, and Third Worlds (p. 3). The conventional metageographical lens through which most of premodern Chinese history has been viewed was an imperial perspective (overlaid more recently by modern nationalist historical visions). This imperial metageography was court-centred and assumed a—if not exactly permanently continuous, then at least continually restored—unified political identity that was, furthermore, imagined ideally to be coterminous with the entire civilized world (pp. 4–5).

The imperial metageographical imagination may have also been, oddly enough, in some ways even more tenacious than the actual political administration of the empire. As Felt observes:

the limitations of premodern transportation technology made it difficult for courts to extend real and consistent control across their domains, but the limitations of premodern information technology made it far easier for a court to exert inordinate influence over the textual-based cultural paradigms of the elites living within its domain. (p. 256)

The near monopoly of writing enjoyed by the Sinitic language, combined with the strong orientation towards state service of the traditional Chinese literati, empowered this imperial metageography to achieve a plausible hegemony in the minds of many people.

But, this dominant imperial metageography was challenged after the third century by three new factors: prolonged political fragmentation, the rise of the southern Yangtze River basin to rival the old northern Central Plains as a

¹ Felt is here quoting Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p. ix.

civilizational core area, and the spread of Buddhism, which brought along with it an awareness of a very different South Asian civilization that was nonetheless undeniably comparable in sophistication to classical Sinitic civilization. These developments compelled writers of geographical texts in this period to consider “alternatives to the defunct Han imperial order” (p. 18). Felt identifies four new major metageographical frameworks that Early Medieval geographers developed as alternatives to the old court-centred imperial model: what he calls ecumenical regionalism, a concept of parallel Northern and Southern dynasties, river-based environmental (rather than political) natural geography, and the idea of an Indo-Sinitic bipolar world.

Following the practice of several other recent scholars, Felt even goes so far as to “jettison the term ‘China’ altogether,” in favour of the alternative label “Sinitic” (p. 9).² Of course, “Sinitic” is really not so very different from “Chinese” in being merely another non-native word meaning having to do with China. But, if only because it is so much more arcane, “Sinitic” is probably less easily conflated with the familiar modern Chinese nation-state. Nevertheless, it remains difficult in practice to dispense entirely with what are, after all, the most basic English-language words for the subject of discussion. And, while there certainly was no primordial, essential, continuous, unchanging, and unitary “China,” there do seem to have been distinctive historical, cultural, and linguistic traditions that we may perhaps still appropriately call Chinese.

The only surviving complete comprehensive geographical text from this period is Li Daoyuan’s 酈道元 (c. 460s–527) *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 (Commentary on the River Classic), although hundreds of geographical texts are known to have been compiled, and a number of other surviving works, such as Chang Qu’s 常璩 (c. 291–c. 361 C.E.) *Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志 (Record of the Kingdoms South of Mount Hua), were “classified in the seventh century as geographical writing but are often not thought of as such today” (p. 13). Felt himself categorizes the *Huayang guozhi* as “local history” rather than as local geography.³ Nevertheless, Felt still does make some use of the *Huayang guozhi*, as well as other texts, but, because the *Shuijing zhu* is such an important example of geographical writing from this era, Felt takes it as “the anchor” for his monograph—even though the river-based structure of the *Shuijing zhu* was admittedly somewhat “idiosyncratic” (p. 12). The

² For similar usage choices, see Andrew Chittick, *The Jiankang Empire in Chinese and World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 19–20; and Hugh R. Clark, *The Sinitic Encounter in Southeast China through the First Millennium CE* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016), passim.

³ David Jonathan Felt, “Local Geographies and Ecumenical Regionalism,” *Chūgoku shigaku* 中國史學 29 (2019): 1.

Shuijing zhu is also somewhat unusual in taking the form of extensive annotations to an earlier, possibly third-century, original text.

The original *Shuijing* had organized its geography around rivers and mountains and identified Mount Kunlun 崑崙 (located somewhere in the Tibetan plateau) as the centre of the earth. Jörg H. Hüseemann is less certain than Felt that “Li Daoyuan shared this opinion” about Mount Kunlun’s absolute centrality,⁴ but, in his annotations to the *Shuijing*, Li Daoyuan did at least intriguingly make a possible identification of the Sinitic Mount Kunlun with the Indo-Buddhist idea of a mountainous Anavatapta Pool, out of which the major rivers of the world supposedly flowed. This enabled Li Daoyuan to incorporate relatively recently acquired information about India into the older, more geographically limited, focus of the original *Shuijing*. According to Felt, Li Daoyuan, thus, created an “Indo-Sinitic bipolar model” of the world (pp. 211–12, 222). From the perspective of this Kunlun-centred bipolar model, “the old civilizational core regions of the Yellow River and Ganges basins were each ‘central realms’ (*zhongguo*) for their own halves of the world” (p. 232).

But, while Buddhists did sometimes refer to India as *zhongguo* 中國, and Li Daoyuan did also use that term, if Li Daoyuan truly envisioned an Indo-Sinitic bipolar world, it then becomes somewhat curious that his description of the entire Indic “half” of the world is compressed in his commentary to only two *juan* 卷 of a forty-*juan* book organized around the structural framework of the river systems of geographic China. The Indic half of Li Daoyuan’s bipolar world is reduced to little more than an extended digression in a book that remains overwhelmingly focused on China, and which has even been described as wistfully recalling, from an age of political division, an enduring unified *zhongguo* (Chinese) identity as a kind of “empire of memory.”⁵

The *Shuijing zhu* is our prime surviving example both of a geography that is based on natural rather than political features, and of a possible Indo-Sinitic bipolar world-view. But, as already noted, the *Shuijing zhu* is also somewhat idiosyncratic. Although they survive today only in the form of fragments and references preserved in other sources, the largest subgenre of geographical writing in Early Medieval China actually consisted of local geographies (p. 28). These typically developed the

⁴ Jörg H. Hüseemann, “Located Imagination—India in the *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 of Li Daoyuan 酈道元 (?–527),” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 171.1 (2021): 154.

⁵ Michael Nylan, “Wandering in the Ruins: The *Shuijing zhu* Reconsidered,” in Alan K. L. Chan and Yuet-keung Lo, eds., *Interpretation and Literature in Early Medieval China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 63, 66, 76–77.

characteristic metageographical perspective that Felt calls ecumenical regionalism. Early Medieval local geographies focused on different—sometimes even politically independent—geographic regions that were nevertheless all united by a common written Sinitic language and a shared Sinitic cultural horizon. Typically, Felt argues, Early Medieval local geographies were primarily concerned “not to assert local autonomy . . . but . . . instead to show local participation in the larger civilized world” (p. 33).⁶ This is China not as a unified empire but as a sprawling universal civilization.

A favoured topic of these local geographies was to record memories of local figures who had been prominent exemplars of the broader Sinitic civilization. These included not only local connections with the vanished Qin (221–207 B.C.E.) and Han Empires, but also with the legendary ancient sage kings who are so central to the Sinitic origin story. For example, although Great Yu 大禹, the purported founder of the Xia dynasty at the end of the third millennium B.C.E., was mentioned in older texts, Early Medieval geographies more specifically located Great Yu’s (alleged) birthplace in what is today Sichuan and his tomb in modern Shaoxing, Zhejiang—areas that were all beyond the sphere of the actual Sinitic civilization during Great Yu’s ostensible lifetime (pp. 82–84). By centring the scene of Great Yu’s activities in the southern Yangtze River basin, these Early Medieval geographies made the south appear to be an almost equally venerable participant in the Sinitic civilization as the northern Central Plains.

The rise of the south is, of course, one of the major developments of this period of Chinese history, but Felt argues that the metageographical framework of opposing Northern and Southern dynasties, viewed as “two equal and complementary halves of one greater whole,” destined to someday eventually inevitably be reunified, was an *ex post facto* formulation of the imperial unification project of the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties rather than a genuine contemporary world-view (p. 117). Instead, both northern and southern regimes throughout this period at least tried to project an image of themselves as the sole legitimate successor to the old Han dynasty empire. For example, the official history of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), which was completed in 554, dismissed all the southern states as not even being in “communication with the Hua land” 不聞華土 and merely mimicking the “central realm” 中國 (p. 133). Since “Hua” and the “central realm” (*zhongguo*) are both terms that are conventionally translated into English as “China,” these statements amount to a flat assertion that the Southern dynasties were not even true parts of the Chinese

⁶ Much the same point is made by Andrew Chittick, “The Development of Local Writing in Early Medieval China,” *Early Medieval China* 9 (2003): 69.

world. However, by the sixth century, increased north-south mobility by literati officials may have accelerated a growing sense of cultural commonality, and in the writings of Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591) Felt believes that we find “one of the earliest articulations of a north-south metageography of equal and complementary halves” (p. 152), prefiguring the Sui and Tang dynasty unification.

After the Sui unification in 589, early Sui and Tang dynasty officials synthesized a new narrative of the history of Sinitic geographical writing that emphasized its ancient origins and imperial orientation—including the direct continuity of the Sui and Tang dynasties within that grand imperial tradition—and denounced the local geographical writing of the Age of Division as biased and parochial (pp. 2, 55–63). Privately compiled geographies were replaced at this time by officially sponsored *tujing* 圖經 (map-treatises), compiled from an imperial perspective and standardized across the empire. By the times of the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279), the local gazetteer (*difangzhi* 地方志) format had become the new norm, and it was once again privately authored and locally oriented. But, following the next great imperial unification under the Mongol rule, from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth, local gazetteers were again standardized empire-wide, giving final “literary expression to a powerful alignment of local, national, imperial, and civilizational identities” (pp. 260–62). Imperial metageography was, thus, reconciled with local geographies as integral parts of a unitary civilization and empire.

Structures of the Earth is a pleasure to read. It is meticulously researched, consistently engaging, and always thought-provoking without being stridently iconoclastic or tendentious. I highly recommend it.