Introduction

The Production of Geographical Knowledge in Medieval China

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Scholars of early modern European history have long analyzed the historical production of locality. While they have illuminated how locality was produced by both individual and collective actions, their microanalytical approaches have often situated locality in a political and religious context, emphasizing, for instance, the importance of saints in the creation of locality.1 In this historiographical context, geographical practices have tended to be overlooked despite their obvious epistemic relevance. This is possibly due to the long-standing confusion between historical geography – a field akin to forms of antiquarianism and nationalism – and the history of geographical knowledge, which often stands at a crossroads of cultural history and the history of science.

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1 Torre 2019.
In contrast, historians of imperial China have been at the forefront of analysis in studying the geographical production of places, partly thanks to the cultural and historiographical importance of the genre of the local gazetteer (difang zhi 地方志). Following a virtual workshop in June and July 2020 organized by Department III of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, we thematically arranged the contributions to the workshop along two non-exclusive processes: processes that shaped the production of geographical knowledge about locality and those that involved the circulation of geographical knowledge in social and intellectual circles. The latter group of contributions appeared in a special issue of *Monumenta Serica* published in 2021. The former group of contributions appear in this special issue of *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*. Moreover, the four articles presented here all analyze the early medieval period (specifically the Six Dynasties (220–589) and Tang periods (618–907)), while three out of four examine the southern part of the Sinitic realm. Therefore, the following contributions are also distinct from those published in *Monumenta Serica*, most of which focus on the second millennium of China’s imperial period.

Since a majority of writings produced before the Song (960–1279) are now lost, the fact that the following articles are based on sources written before the age of print has implications in terms of transmission and representativity. In other words, scholars working on premodern sources are often faced with questions of extensiveness and choice. Nevertheless, the four articles compellingly demonstrate that a sense of place emerged in early medieval China, even prior to the development of the local gazetteer, generating lore about localities through cumulative layers of inscribed knowledge.

Studies on Chinese localities often focus on a single locale. While the four authors address some of the tensions between localities and empire, it is worth noting that localities in their respective analyses refer to mountains (Janine Nicol), borderlands (Jon Felt), the sea (Linda Feng), and the realm (Andrew Chittick). The different scales of inquiry reflect the variety of genres and actors involved in the production of medieval geographical knowledge, which was far more varied than mere administrative geography included in the geographical treatises (dili zhi 地理志) of the standard histories. By focusing on these various types of sites, the authors suggest a shift away from the binary framework between the imperial and the local and towards a more diverse framework for the study of knowledge production.

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2 Lycas, Hasegawa, and Chen 2021.
3 See, for instance, Altenburgher, Wan, and Børdahl 2015.
Taking locality as a subject of action and inquiry also forces us to rethink our actors’ own notions of geographical knowledge as well as the values and processes that shape such knowledge. For instance, the production of geographical texts about localities can also be seen as a way to legitimize the sociopolitical role of local elites and officials. Likewise, the tensions between personal experience and learned knowledge can reveal how actors handled problems: officials devised personal or institutional strategies when dealing with unknown localities and areas (Feng), and in return their knowledge was shaped by the non-official knowledge and expertise of the locals (Felt). When faced with the challenge of data gathering, historical actors had to find practical elements to navigate through both their texts and topography (Nicol). They shaped the places they administered or described in their writings as much as they were shaped by the specificities of locality.

In an attempt to transcend classic dynastic boundaries (both temporal and spatial), historian Andrew Chittick stresses in his article the political importance of the region and the universal value of the local. He presents a case study of the Wu region, which he calls the “Jiankang empire.” Beyond the Wu region, this thought-provoking case study also sheds light on other regional (political) cultures of the Six Dynasties, as well as the Wu-Yue regime in the subsequent tenth century. Chittick explores the pattern of imperial succession to study competition, especially concerning issues of virtue and charisma, which were key to producing a legitimacy of place. In seeking new forms of autonomy and legitimacy, local elites used their official positions as well as cultural elements, both local and alien (Buddhism). As Chittick shows, ritual artifacts as well as texts played an important role in breaking the artificial dynastic divisions.

As a historian of Chinese Buddhism, Janine Nicol asks how places of significance were promoted in medieval China through three texts, two places, and one author. Specifically, she examines the sacred geography of the Zhongnan Mountains and Mount Wutai as expressed in three texts written by the monk Shi Daoxuan in the seventh century. By exploring the religious production of geographical knowledge, the author confirms the intimate link between mountains and religion. Daoxuan recorded many ruins, which helped him inscribe those places in religious history. The layered accumulated knowledge of places (through the use of Xuanzang’s records) and the personal experience of Daoxuan reinforced claims of religious ownership over mountains and effectively sedimented locality.

4 Chittick 2020.
5 See, for instance, Soymié 1956 and Robson 2009.
Historian of medieval China D. Jonathan Felt assesses a borderland locality and region in historical time and space by focusing on Northern Wei official Li Daoyuan’s 鄭道元 Shuijing zhu 水經注 (Guide to Waterways with Commentary), a sixth-century geographical account of China based on its hydrocultural landscape. Felt employs the concept of a “gradated frontier” and analyzes how both local expertise and the structure of the text shaped the territorial structure displayed by Li Daoyuan in his description of what is now central Vietnam. He also shows how Li Daoyuan had to reply on a “newer literary genre of local geographies,” not least because he had never visited the places he sought to describe. In describing such an alien territory, according to Felt, the Shuijing zhu restructured the conventional knowledge of geography and topography.

Linda Feng is a cultural historian of the Tang dynasty; in her contribution, she explores the epistemology of liminal spaces in ninth-century China by closely focusing on Liu Xun’s 劉恂 (fl. 888–904) Lingbiao luyi 嶺表錄異 (Records of the Unusual from Lingnan), a collection of geographical information on Lingnan, the southernmost region of the empire. Feng examines not only the strategies which officials adopted in describing unfamiliar places, but also the role of empirical knowledge, the importance of oddities, and the functions of local expertise in shaping official and institutional knowledge about locality. Characterizing Liu Xun’s inquiry as a search for “a pattern of normality within the abnormal,” Feng shows how his approach differed from the ritualized convention of describing the unknown and unfamiliar.

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**References**


