CHAPTER 11

The Influence of Buddhist Cosmology on the Idea of the Geographical Center in Pre-Modern China

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The idea of the geographical center, including the idea of the natural geographical center and that of the cultural geographical center, shows the ways in which human beings recognize themselves, their geographical environment and their surrounding world. It is often colored by mythological and religious pigments. It is also affected by people’s geographical range of activities, their understanding of the geography of their external world, and their additional geographic knowledge, specific or otherwise. Introduced into China during the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), Buddhism had been widely spread by the time of the Six Dynasties (220–589 CE), and had shown a significant influence on philosophy and culture in China. As a result of this geographical spread and philosophical and cultural influence, Buddhist cosmology and geography had largely altered the traditional idea that the world’s geographical center was in China, and thereupon deeply influenced the practical geographic knowledge in China. This paper will explore and discuss the profound influence of Buddhism in China, the changes of the concept of the geographical center in China, and some other related issues on Chinese historical geography.

People familiarize themselves with their surrounding environment by becoming familiar with themselves and their identities first, taking oneself as the center to recognize the surroundings and their relation to it. This is particularly true when they get to know their geographical environment: they begin from the place they are located in, and then extend to surrounding areas, so as to establish basic concepts of geographical directions, such as the Four Directions (siji 四極) and the Five Places (wufang 五方). People’s understanding of their geographical environment depends on their practice of geographical activities, and this understanding is extended as the range of activities is enlarged. The idea of the geographical center is the primary representation of the practice of geographical activities around the center of which people
are based—any geographic concept and geographic knowledge system would include the idea of the geographical center. From this idea comes the concept of “the central state” (zhongguo 中国). The concepts of “the center of the earth” (zhongtu 中土) and “the central state” exist both in China and India. “The central state” is not only considered as the center of a state or a place, but also as the center of thousands of states in all four directions; even the center of the universe. In the past, people chose the geographical center to establish a state and its capital city. As it is said in Wujing yaoyi [Essentials in Five Classics]: “[When] the monarch receives the mandate to create the beginning, to found a country and to establish its capital, [he] must be located in the center of the earth. By doing so, [he can] collect the harmony of heaven and earth, hold the balance of yin and yang, lead the Four Directions equally, and control thousands of states.”1 This concept is echoed in Faxun [Instruction of Regulation] by Qiao Zhou 譙周 (c. 201–270 CE): “the monarch lives in the central state. Why? [It is to] follow the harmony of heaven and earth, so as to unify the Four Directions.”2 It shows that when establishing a country and its capital, choosing the geographical center would not only help unify the world and rule other countries, but also fulfill the requirements of the harmony of heaven and earth and the balance of yin and yang; it thus gives additional cultural and philosophical significance to the idea of the geographical center. Therefore, the idea of the geographical center is different from practical geographic knowledge—it might not fully represent people’s knowledge in the geography of nature, but it shows people’s cultural and philosophical thoughts. Its formation is not only decided by people’s geographical activities, but is also connected to their ideological activities, including mythological and religious imagination, which occasionally comprises a much larger part than practical knowledge. The geographic knowledge, either learnt from geographical activities within people’s accessible range, or by hearing from others, becomes the foundation of people’s geographic ideas. But the geography in areas where people are not able to reach, or hear about (and therefore would be unaware of), would depend on people’s imagination under a certain pattern, which becomes the major factor controlling people’s geographic thoughts.

The idea of the geographical center in China had already achieved its complete form in myths and culture in the pre-Qin period (before 221 BCE)—Pangu split heaven and earth; Fuxi and Nüwa created human beings; Huangdi (or the Yellow Emperor) battled against Chiyou; the Great Yu subdued floods. All of

2 Ibid., p. 317.