In contrast to the capital cities and the Mingtang 明堂 (Hall of Light), the basic system of symbolic terrestrial division, the Nine Provinces (jiuzhou 九州), is rarely regarded from a ritual perspective. The Nine Provinces are either discussed for the sake of their topographical and historical background⁠¹ or evaluated with respect to “geometrical” or “schematic cosmography.”⁠² The latter studies, focused on structural attributes of these systems, present them as static survey schemes mapping the civilized, inhabited world, or even the whole world in a regular and hierarchical way.

Yet the system of the Nine Provinces originates from a step-by-step ordering of terrestrial space by the mythical emperor Yu 禹. In other words, it possesses the attributes of a process-oriented scheme for assembling a properly organized terrestrial division that symbolizes world order, the supreme goal of Chinese statecraft. Quite surprisingly, this key aspect of the Nine Provinces is given little consideration in sinological literature. A good example of the state of the art is provided by the recent survey study of conceptions of space in ancient China by Mark Lewis who, having briefly mentioned this point, does not develop it but moves directly on to discussing geometrical or schematic versions of the Nine Provinces.⁠³

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¹ See, e.g., the seminal studies of the Nine Provinces by Gu Jiegang, “Zhou yu yue de yanbian,” Shixue nianbao (chubian) 1.5 (1933), 11–33; Gu Jiegang and Tong Shuye, “Handai yiqian Zhongguoren de shijie guannian yu yuwai jiaotong de gushi,” Yugong ban yue kan 5.3–4 (April 1936), 97–120.


In this chapter I will reconsider the transmitted descriptions of the Nine Provinces with respect to their process-oriented character and explore the recently discovered description of the Nine Provinces in the Rong Cheng shi 容成氏 manuscript, where the sequence of establishing the provinces is accentuated. This approach throws new light on the transmitted versions of the Nine Provinces. In particular, it shows that they are, in effect, concurring versions of Yu's deeds rather than territorial systems characteristic of successive historical periods, as they are presented in Chinese commentarial and historiographic tradition. The process-oriented perspective also allows one to revise the view of the transmitted descriptions of the Nine Provinces as an evolution from a “naturalistic” view toward their schematic representation, that has long been accepted in sinological literature.

The process-oriented character of Yu’s regulation of terrestrial space is also strongly manifest in the Shanhai jing 山海經 (Classic of mountains and seas, ca. 1st century BC), a description of terrestrial space that builds on a system of itineraries marked by mountains. In contrast to the extant versions of the Nine Provinces, the system of itineraries lays special emphasis on local spirits. In particular, an itinerary encompasses mountains that share the same guardian spirits. The itineraries are, therefore, delineated according to the spatial dispersion of divine powers and represent a sacred space that I refer to as a “spiritual landscape.” Delineating the itineraries is attributed to Yu. Support given Yu by local spirits, as the major source of his power over the landscape, is also mentioned in other extant texts and is strongly present in many of the recently-found manuscripts dating from the late Warring States period through the early Han dynasty. But there are also sources referring to Yu’s regulations from which the spirits are totally absent.

I aim here to explore the demarcation line between two versions of Yu’s regulating actions: establishing an “administrative” territorial division devoid of any allusions to spirits as opposed to creating a “spiritual landscape” by means of divine support. The former version became officially recognized because it was adopted by imperial historiography, while the latter version is characteristic of texts that may be loosely referred to as an “unofficial” tradition.

Finally, I shall call attention to the typological similarity of Yu’s regulating actions to the so-called “tours of inspection,” whose initiation was attributed to Yu’s predecessor, Emperor Shun 舜, and which was revived as one of the major statecraft practices by Qin (221–207 BC) and Han emperors. Yu’s and Shun’s functions are combined in the