

Restoring “History” to Historical Study

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Reviewing a recent book about early medieval Chinese geographical writings, this essay asks what sort of historical contextualization is needed for historical study, and suggests looking at multiple factors, including the material conditions of textual production, that may be responsible for the proliferation of texts. It cautions against embracing a single story to account for a long historical period, especially if that story fits our modern concerns too neatly; even more importantly, we have to allow the primary sources to take the lead, rather than looking for and presenting only evidence that serves a particular agenda.

Geographical writings and local history have continued to be engaging research topics, and the relationship between humans and our environment is more important than ever. In the past several years there have been a number of noteworthy studies of pre-Tang geography writings in Chinese, German, and other languages.¹ In this context, D. Jonathan Felt’s book, *Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China*, is a commendable attempt to fill a considerable gap in English-language scholarship by studying the geographical writings of early medieval China, a period situated between the Han and Tang dynasties and roughly lasting from the late second through early seventh century.

The book is written in a lucid style. The argument made by the book is straightforward: there is, the author contends, an imperial metageography, first developed by “Qin-Han officials and literati” (p. 4), that centers on the Sinitic civilization and on the imperial court; however, born out of the fragmentation of imperial order following the collapse of the Han empire, early medieval Chinese geographical writings focused on local regions and challenged that imperial metageography by developing four new metageographies. “Tang literati described these [pre-Tang geographical] texts negatively because they perceived them as detrimental to the imperial order” (p. 15), and so the present volume is a corrective both to that distorted picture painted by those Tang literati and to the imperial metageographical framework that, in the eyes of the author, still largely remains “the unconscious spatial framework employed by historians and Sinologists alike” (p. 258).

This is a review article of *Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China*. By D. JONATHAN FELT. Cambridge, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY ASIA CENTER, 2021. Pp. xii + 391. \$68.

1. For instance, Li Cuiye’s 李翠葉 *Han Wei liuchao diji wenti yanjiu* 漢魏六朝地記文體研究 (Beijing: Beijing ligong daxue chubanshe, 2018); Xing Peishun’s 邢培順 *Tang qian dizhi yanjiu* 唐前地志研究 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 2018); Bao Yuanhang’s 鮑遠航 *Shuijing zhu yu Wei Jin nanbeichao dili wenxue wenxian yanjiu* 水經注與魏晉南北朝地理文學文獻研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2019). The “Geographical Records” from the two seventh-century dynastic histories, *Jin shu* and *Sui shu*, each have their own study, i.e., *Jin shu dilizhi huishi* 晉書地理志匯釋 and *Sui shu dilizhi huishi* 隋書地理志匯釋 (published by Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe respectively in 2018 and 2019). There are also studies of pre-Tang representations of specific regions and locales or newly annotated and reconstituted pre-Tang geographical works. These Chinese-language studies are not referenced or listed in the bibliography of Felt’s book. Also see Jörg Henning Hüseemann’s erudite tome on Li Daoyuan’s *Shuijing zhu*, *Das Altertum vergegenwärtigen: Eine Studie zum Shuijing zhu des Li Daoyuan* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2017), and Alexis Lycas, “Le décentrement du regard géographique dans le *Shuijing zhu* de Li Daoyuan (†527),” in *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 104 (2018): 241–66.

The first chapter defines geographical writings as a “new literary genre” and examines the kind of cultural work it does. It classifies these writings into six kinds—local regions, natural spaces, foreign lands, the world, capital cities, and other “minor subgenres”—and relates the story of how “Tang officials evaluated and reinterpreted early medieval geographical writing to serve their own imperial ideologies” (p. 85). I will have more to say about this chapter; here I will simply make a passing observation on the terminology. In this book, the word “literary” is used liberally throughout, but in many places it simply means “textual” in the sense of writing. Indeed, many of the geographical writings fit neither the early medieval nor the modern concept of “literature.” It is worthwhile keeping in mind that the term *dili* 地理, very imperfectly corresponding to “geography,” was a bibliographical category subsumed under “history” (*shi* 史) in dynastic histories. The statement that “the single defining feature of early medieval geographical writing” was “its spatially organized textual structure,” or that “all geographies organized their text as though moving through space” (p. 22), is rather dubious, because nearly all of the textual remains are fragmentary and reconstituted by Qing and modern scholars, and we simply do not know how those texts were originally structured.

Each of the four remaining chapters in this book explores one of the four new metageographies. Chapter two discusses what the author calls the metageography of ecumenical regionalism, by which the author means that many local geographies of the third to fifth century emphasize the unique contribution of local cultures to the Sinitic ecumene (p. 115). The third chapter, “North and South,” describes how the metageography of northern and southern dynasties, or in the author’s words, the Tabgatch empire and the Jiankang empire,² constituted a conflict with “the singular and absolute claim to imperial centrality” (p. 6) by posing two competing imperial centers, in contrast with the “two equal and complementary regional halves of a unified empire” as portrayed, the author claims, by Tang literati (p. 164).

The last two chapters focus on Li Daoyuan’s 酈道元 (d. 527) commentary on the *River Classic* (Shuijing zhu 水經注). Chapter four contends that Li Daoyuan resorts to the metageography of hydrocultural landscape that “prioritizes river systems as the foundational organizing framework for all other natural and human geographical patterns,” which Felt sees as a reaction against the Han imperial metageography advocating the anthropocentric ideal of state control over nature (p. 165). Chapter five posits that Li Daoyuan embedded another organizing metageography, “an Indo-Sinitic bipolar world model,” by explicitly equating Mount Kunlun and Mount Anavatapta (pp. 210–11). Felt argues that this world model was a disruption of Sinocentrism and allowed Sinitic literati to think about civilizations within a comparative framework “for the first time” (p. 7).

The book contains many keen insights and accurate observations, such as about the competition between the northern and southern dynasties or about the Buddhist disruption of Sinocentrism (even though whether we can indeed credit Li Daoyuan with a bipolar world model is another question). Yet, it has a tendency to overstate its case, and to construct arguments and marshal evidence on the basis of a preconceived *idée fixe*. Eager to demonstrate the early medieval geographical writings as a product of the fragmentation of imperial order and a way of resisting imperial order, the author simplifies the complicated ways in which imperial order works, and in the process both overestimates its power and underestimates it.

2. The use of the term “Tabgatch empire” in this chapter is confusing. At one point the author states, “my conception of the Tabgatch empire includes the Tang regime as well as the states mentioned above [Northern Wei, Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, and Sui]” (p. 120); then he says, “For historical analysis, it is more useful to include the Tang dynasty and then reorganize these five dynasties into two distinct imperial formations. The first of these, the Tabgatch (Tuoba 拓跋) empire, will be the focus of this study on the north-south metageography.” So it seems that the Tabgatch empire is solely equated with the Northern Wei, after all.

Nowhere did anyone—certainly not Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) in his *Han shu* “Dili zhi” 漢書地理志, which is regarded by Felt as the central manifestation of Han imperial metageography—state that “the Han empire had successfully subdued regionalism” (p. 66), nor was that a reality, either. This is indeed a myth, not, however, propagated by the Han literate elite, but one ironically upheld by the author himself. To argue that a unified empire necessarily and successfully suppresses any expression of regionalism is an exaggeration, and to support it, the author often willfully overlooks any evidence that would point to another direction.

For instance, the Han author Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) produced “*Fu* on Shu Capital” (Shu du fu 蜀都賦) and *The Annals of Shu Kings* (Shu wang benji 蜀王本紀), which are no different from many of the early medieval works of “ecumenical regionalism” discussed in chapter three, but neither work is mentioned in the author’s discussion of the so-called Han imperial metageography. The author writes off the Eastern Han work *Yue jue shu* 越絕書 (translated as “Lost histories of Yue”), which is dismissed for exemplifying Han universalism and suppressing regionalism (p. 26), even though *Yue jue shu* very much evokes the fourth-century *Huayang guozhi* 華陽國志, a regional history of Sichuan, which is praised as a prime example of regionalism (pp. 108–14).

One question we might ask is, besides doing cultural work called for by their own time, what other possible reasons could account for the proliferation of geographical texts in early medieval China. Geographies were by no means the only kind of works that appeared in large numbers: from this period we have more writings than ever before about many subjects, such as the collections of anomaly accounts or of humorous anecdotes, biographies of clans, families, notable personages, and recluses, as well as personal letters. The transformative change in technology—the invention and widespread use of paper—was crucial in the dissemination and preservation of knowledge; not only were more writings produced because of the more expedient and increasingly affordable writing media, but more writings were preserved due to wider circulation. If one connects the increase in the writing of local geographies merely to the fragmentation of imperial order at the end of the Eastern Han, one ignores the changing material conditions that were responsible both for an increase in all sorts of writings and for an increase in writings that survived, and one also distorts the picture of lively regionalism in a unified empire like the Han by overlooking the clues to the previous existence of such writings that are now lost or fragmented.

The authorial postface to the *Huayang guozhi* enables us to catch glimpses of a fuller picture of Han writings on regional culture. According to the fourth-century author Chang Qu 常璩, a number of authors from the Han and the Western Jin all compiled a record of Shu.³ This shows that there is no necessary correlation between the strengthening or weakening of a unified empire and the absence or presence of regional writings. Chang Qu also states that, when he compiled his own work, he consulted those earlier records as well as accounts of the southern frontiers, and “checked them against *Han shu*, and incorporated those [details and facts] that matched it” 驗以漢書, 取其近是.⁴ None of this, however, is mentioned in Felt’s lengthy discussion, which places an exaggerated emphasis on Chang Qu’s critique of the so-called Han imperial metageography. Yet, even a casual reading of the postface reveals

3. At one point Felt mistakenly attributes Chang Qu’s citation of Yang Xiong’s *Shu ji* 蜀紀 (Account of Shu, also referred to as “Accounts,” “Benji” 本紀) to Chang Qu’s own “Shu zhi” 蜀志 (Record of Shu) (p. 112, p. 302 n. 149).

4. *Huayang guozhi jiaobu tuzhu* 華陽國志校補圖注, comp. Ren Naiqiang 任乃強 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1987), 12.723.

that Chang Qu's criticism is directed at "common/popular" (*shisu* 世俗間) misconceptions of Shu instead.⁵

In a study of medieval Chinese writings, geographical or otherwise, it behooves us to consider the material conditions and the motivations of textual production, and ask the following question: in an age of manuscript culture, when textual dissemination was limited and textual preservation could not be taken for granted, how and where did those regional geographies circulate? Who were the authors, and who were their intended readers? Many regional geographical writings were compiled not necessarily by local residents who felt pride in their hometown, but by officials assigned to a provincial post or emissaries sent to distant southern locales; and it was to be expected, or at least conceivable, that they presented a copy of their work to the ruler upon return to court or to the prince they worked for. Sometimes the note in the early seventh-century *Sui shu* 隋書 bibliography identifies an author as the "assistant magistrate of said prefecture" 本州主簿.⁶ Zhu Ying's 朱應 (fl. early third century) *Funan yiwu zhi* 扶南異物志 (translated as "Record of the peculiar things of Funan," p. 285 n. 53) was written during his diplomatic mission; Sheng Hongzhi's 盛弘之 (fl. early fifth century) well-known *Record of Jingzhou* 荊州記 was clearly written when he was on the staff of the governor of Jingzhou.⁷ Indeed, Chang Qu himself gives a clear statement of the working of the state in terms of gathering and preserving regional geographical information: "At the height of the Han and [Western] Jin dynasties, various offices were arrayed numerously like stars, maps and records of the regions of the empire flowed annually to the Ministry of Works, so that rulers and scholars, sitting in the grand hall and enclosed behind the curtains, gathered enough information about things and lands, and did not have to rely on the [aforementioned] accounts" 於時漢晉方隆，官司星列，提封圖簿，歲集司空，故人君學士，蔭高堂，翳帷幕，足綜物土，不必待本紀矣。⁸

This leads to the point that, while overestimating the power of imperial order and that of unified empire, the author of *Structures of the Earth* paradoxically underestimates such power by simplifying the complex ways in which it works. Chapter four, for instance, while doing an admirable job of underscoring mountains as a space where people such as recluses sought to elude state control, regrettably downplays the strategic importance of mountains in state military planning. Furthermore, the analysis would have been much sharpened had this chapter recognized that "the recluse" as a category was a *necessary* antithesis of court and helped demonstrate the comprehensiveness and fullness of the empire. The best illustration of this counterintuitive point is that, when the Eastern Jin general Huan Xuan 桓玄 (369–404) temporarily established his own dynasty, he sought out the descendant of a famous third-century recluse to play the role of the recluse for his regime, sarcastically referred to as the "fill-in recluse" (*chongyin* 充隱) by contemporaries.⁹ Chapter four also argues that the hydrocultural model of the *Shuijing zhu* tempered imperial ideology by "emphasizing the uncontrollability of nature and highlighting the pivotal role of local imperial officials in managing this relationship at the local level" (p. 198), as if these local officials were not the representatives of the emperor sent by the imperial court.

In reading this wide-ranging book, one easily becomes absorbed in the many fascinating details and insights of individual chapters and sections; but when one stands back to consider the overarching argument, one cannot help noticing a conflict of its internal logic

5. *Huayang guozhi* 12.727.

6. *Sui shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 33.984.

7. Sheng Hongzhi was mistakenly transcribed as Cheng Hongzhi in this book and indexed accordingly (p. 58).

8. *Huayang guozhi* 12.723.

9. *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1974), 99.2594.

in the larger structure. Early on in the book, the author states, "Growth periods in the writing of local geographies correlated to periods of imperial weakness and the presence of an independent state in the Yangzi basin" (p. 33); then, in the third chapter, he argues, quite rightly, that each side of the northern and southern dynasties conceived of themselves as a self-sufficient universal empire. In that case, to claim that the proliferation of geographical writings in the southern dynasties indicates the weakening of imperial order can only mean one thing: that the author himself believes in the unified empire so much that he regards any empire less unified than the Han or Tang as weak and fragmented. Indeed, the use of the very word "fragmented" is premised on the unstated primacy of a unified whole, which should not remain unquestioned and yet seems to be unconsciously accepted by the author.

In reality, the Tabgatch Wei in the north and the Song, Qi, and Liang dynasties in the south were mostly doing quite well with their imperial order. In particular, the Liu Song dynasty—when geographies experienced the second exponential increase, according to the author's chart (fig. 1.7)—was a period when the south saw the physical and discursive construction of the capital city Jiankang and of the new southern empire.¹⁰ Why, then, would geographical writings do an exactly opposite kind of cultural work, given that many geographical texts from this period were written by the same elite men intimately connected to the imperial or princely court? Felt observes, "There also seems to be a general disinterest in local geographies in the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439) and Northern Dynasties" (p. 33). If we follow the author's reasoning, then this period should have seen a likewise substantial growth of local geographies in the north; but that did not happen, and the author makes no attempt to explain the discrepancy. Are we to understand that somehow there was no "imperial weakness" in the Sixteen Kingdoms/Northern Dynasties period, or that the northern regimes were somehow unaffected by the so-called post-Han fragmentation of imperial order? Perhaps, instead of thinking that the fragmentation or preservation of imperial order was the only thing that mattered to elite men or to cultural production, we should consider alternative explanations.

Felt's book calls attention to an interesting, and important, question about providing historical contextualization and painting a larger picture. How much contextualization is too much? And how much is not enough? The collapse of the Han was no doubt a momentous event, but it may be too simplistic to tie everything coming afterward, especially dynasties and regimes two or three centuries later, to that single event, and treat that event as the larger background picture against which we must interpret all subsequent social phenomena and individual lives until the next big, unified empire came along. In other words, we need a much more nuanced contextualization of a phenomenon, a period, and a work than the "three early medieval shifts" sketched in this book, namely the "fragmentation of imperial order," the transformation of the Yangzi basin into a "secondary core of Sinitic civilization,"¹¹ and "the transplantation of Buddhism" (p. 19).

Inadequate contextualization is a major problem for the *Shuijing zhu* chapters. Somehow, in a work of historical study, *Shuijing zhu* is treated as a "pure text" without much historical context. There is little information about Li Daoyuan's life and times, although Li Daoyuan lived at a turning point in the history of the Tuoba/Tabgatch Wei, and his life was intricately intertwined with the complicated and dynamic politics of the northern regime that he served loyally to his tragic end and that had a direct impact on his writing of *Shuijing zhu*.

10. See Tian, "Representing Kingship and Imagining Empire in Southern Dynasties Court Poetry," *T'oung Pao* 102 (2016): 1–56.

11. A "second core" would be more accurate than a "secondary core"—at least the Southern Dynasties did not consider themselves as "secondary" to any other regime, and the author himself states as much when he argues for each side of the northern and southern regimes' self-conception as a universal empire.

Yet, treated as a pure text, *Shuijing zhu* is not placed in its textual ecology, either. That is to say, although it is first and foremost a commentary, it is considered neither within the commentarial tradition that had been firmly established by Li's time nor in relation to the other important commentaries produced in this period.¹²

This is not an insignificant point, for a major weakness of the argument, namely that Li Daoyuan's commentary uses natural geography "as *his* primary spatial structure" against the imperial metageography (p. 166, my italics), is that the structure of *Shuijing zhu* is not Li Daoyuan's own, but that of the original text, *Shuijing*. If *Shuijing* begins with the statement that Mount Kunlun stands at the center of the earth and that the Yellow River originates from Kunlun, then Li Daoyuan is obliged to provide a commentary citing sources agreeing and/or disagreeing with the statement, but it does not mean that Li Daoyuan necessarily endorses *Shuijing*, here and throughout the commentary. As a matter of fact, the way in which he phrases his commentary at this particular point is quite worth noting, as he clearly shows a very cautious attitude about the "several differing theories" 數說不同.¹³ Throughout his commentary Li Daoyuan sometimes cites sources that support or supplement a *Shuijing* statement, and sometimes cites those that contradict it. He also cites sources that contradict one another, in which case he evaluates and adjudicates whenever he can. When he does not know or is uncertain, he states so. Li Daoyuan is a very good commentator in this respect, and a good commentator is what he aspires to be. All this is exactly what Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451) does in his commentary on the historical work *Sanguo zhi* 三國志.

Li Daoyuan never asserts that he aims to be absolutely comprehensive in his work; he merely aims to be as comprehensive as he can *within constraints*, and his two constraints are the original text he commented on and the sources he had access to. Felt tries to support the claim that Li deliberately paired off the Sinitic and Indic realms by looking at the lands Li "purposefully excluded," saying that Li, for instance, "wrote nothing of the Mongolian Steppe" (p. 242). This piece of supporting evidence unfortunately does not hold water, because firstly, any river Li adds to the original *Shuijing* rivers in his commentary must either be a tributary of an original *Shuijing* river or somehow connect to the *Shuijing* rivers as clearly stated in an earlier source that Li Daoyuan could cite; secondly, there is scant information about the rivers on the Mongolian Steppe. Felt can only give the *Shi ji* and *Han shu*'s Xiongnu biographies as "sources available to him [Li Daoyuan] on these lands" (p. 328 n. 95), and any cursory look at those Xiongnu biographies will show that there is very little information about the few rivers mentioned therein. Felt also surmises that, if Li Daoyuan wanted to, he could "write a bit of imaginative geography—just as he connected the Yellow River to [Mount] Kunlun through an imagined underground channel" (p. 243). But Li Daoyuan never *imagines* that underground channel—it is a channel that was *believed* to exist and, more importantly, recorded in earlier sources available to Li Daoyuan. Li even takes pains to note here that he had "consulted various books, which all state," etc. 余考羣書，咸言 . . .¹⁴ To suggest that Li Daoyuan could write imaginative geography would, I imagine, be the biggest affront to an early medieval commentator like Li Daoyuan, who was so proud, as he had every reason to be, of his "scientific" attitude.

12. See Michael Puett and Yu-yu Cheng's chapters on commentary in *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature: 1000 BCE–900 CE*, ed. Wiebke Denecke, Waiyee Li, and Xiaofei Tian (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 112–31.

13. *Shuijing zhu jiaoshi* 水經注校釋, comp. Chen Qiaoyi 陳橋驛 (Hangzhou: Hangzhou daxue chubanshe, 1999), 1.

14. *Shuijing zhu jiaoshi*, 11.

Besides confusing a commentary with a treatise that does have a central argument, Felt’s *Shuijing zhu* chapters, especially chapter five, demonstrate a troubling misunderstanding of the primary source. Since one major piece of evidence offered for the bipolar world model is the equation of Kunlun and Anavatapta (pp. 226–32), one needs a comprehensive presentation of Li Daoyuan’s commentary on this point, but unfortunately Felt’s reading of Li’s commentary, cited in short excerpts, is highly selective and at times inaccurate.¹⁵

This brings us to another major issue that this book calls attention to, namely, the use of primary sources. Felt quite rightly laments the fact that many scholars treat Li Daoyuan’s *Shuijing zhu* as a collection of geographical factoids and merely mine it for data (p. 166), and he is determined to see the forest rather than the trees. I find this an excellent impulse and a commendable direction. We very much want and need something more than mindless *kaozheng* (“evidentiary scholarship”) done for its own sake. However, an argument, no matter how attractive it sounds, cannot be sustained without a strong command of primary sources and a judicious use of them. Many translations in this book are taken out of context. Since Li Daoyuan’s *Shuijing zhu* is a major work treated in this volume, one expects to see at least a full translation of Li Daoyuan’s preface, which is not long and could be given in an appendix so as not to disrupt the book’s narrative flow, but we are only shown bits and pieces of it. Many translations contain inaccuracies.¹⁶ Even for those “small” errors, one cannot simply brush it aside by saying, “Well, that doesn’t affect the argument,” for while that might be true for the local point in a particular section of the book, an accumulation of such errors undermines the scholarly value of the book and damages the large argument it attempts to make.

In chapter one, the author gives many statistics and tables based on his own taxonomy of these texts. It is fine to use one’s own classification system to sort these texts, but it is not always clear to the reader what titles are grouped in any given category, and the occasional

15. This review is no place for going into the details; suffice to say that Li Daoyuan ultimately expresses, plainly and unequivocally, a healthy dose of skepticism about the Kunlun/Anavatapta conflation, interrogates the conflicting accounts of Mount Kunlun itself, and brings the long meandering commentary to a full circle toward the end by echoing the position he set out at the beginning of the chapter commentary: namely, he can only present conflicting accounts without being able to adjudicate. Interested readers may refer to this reviewer’s article, “Empire’s Blue Highways: Li Daoyuan’s *Commentary on the River Classic*,” *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 35.1 (2022): 75–120..

16. One example of a “small” mistake is the translation of Cui Hao’s memorial advising against a southern campaign (p. 137). The author takes Ruru 蠕蠕 to be “these wriggling worms” referring to the southerners; rather, this was a Northern Dynasties designation of the northwestern ethnic people Rouran 柔然. A more serious mistake is the translation of a passage from the *Sui shu* bibliographical essay: “All texts that the two authors Ren Fang and Lu Cheng included as well as other travelogues are cataloged first” 任、陸二家所記之內而又別行者，各錄在其書之上 (p. 53, my italics). The phrase *biexing zhe* 別行者 means “those [titles] that were circulating independently/separately” and has nothing to do with travelogues. In other words, the bibliographical essay is saying, “Regarding those titles that were included in Ren Fang’s compilation and Lu Cheng’s compilation, but also circulated separately, they would all be recorded before Ren’s compilation and Lu’s compilation [in this bibliographical list].” Felt’s misreading leads to this incorrect statement: “Accounts of expeditions and travels were not included in Lu Cheng’s and Ren Fang’s compendia, but they were included in the *Sui shu* bibliography” (p. 48). Further argument is based on this misreading (see p. 24 and p. 282 n. 13). Sometimes the author is misled by earlier scholars—for example, repeating Chen Qiaoyi’s mistake in understanding Li Daoyuan’s phrase *shier jing tong* 十二經通 as referring to “the *Twelve Classics*” (p. 214). At other times, the author disregards a perfectly fine earlier translation and replaces it with his own mistaken translation. For instance, in the narration of “the encounter at Pengcheng,” he translates *Jiangnan zhi mei* 江南之美 as “a beauty [that is, beautiful woman] of the lands south of the Yangzi” (p. 141), but the phrase simply means “a treasure of Jiangnan” (Albert Dien’s translation) and in the context refers to musical instruments (metonymically referred to as “one hundred strings” 弦百條) that were requested by the northerners; no “beauty” was sent over to the northerners. This section on the Pengcheng encounter also leaves out some important details, possibly because they do not serve the author’s argument.

title cited as an example in an endnote—much less accessible than a footnote—is often more confusing than clarifying. For instance, *Jiaozhou yiwu zhi* 交州異物志 (Record of the peculiar things of Jiao Prefecture) is listed under the category of “Foreign Lands” (p. 285 n. 47) rather than that of “Local Regions,” and *Huashan jingshe ji* 華山精舍記 (Record of the monasteries of Mount Hua) is listed under the category of “Natural Spaces” (p. 284 n. 42), even though there is nothing “natural” about monasteries. The so-called minor subgenres are the most messy because they apparently include travelogues, which the author admits “resembled foreign geographies in their content” (p. 48), and these “minor” subgenres in fact constitute the second-largest category according to the author’s statistics (p. 28). The point is not so much about disputing the author’s criteria as about understanding the statistics and tables he offers (pp. 28, 30–31, 34, 37): it is hard to get a good grasp of those statistics and tables if the author’s criteria of classification are unclear or debatable to begin with.

The same may be said about the author’s use of his three major sources, both for the statistics in chapter one and for his discussion in chapters two and three: a list of titles of pre-Tang *dili* works in the *Sui shu* bibliography; a collection of reconstituted *dili* works in *Han-Tang dili shuchao* 漢唐地理書鈔, compiled by Wang Mo 王謨 (d. 1817); and a collection of 439 works from Han through Tang in *Han-Tang fangzhi jiyi* 漢唐方志輯佚 compiled by modern scholar Liu Weiyi 劉緯毅 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1997). There is little attempt to give a systematic explanation of these sources: their different natures and times of production, their different criteria in defining a work of “geography,” and the discrepancies among them. At one point the author says, “For local geographies, Liu Weiyi’s collection of textual fragments, the *Han-Tang fangzhi jiyi*, provides our most comprehensive bibliographic list” (p. 33). Yet, Liu Weiyi’s work, useful as it is, contains many omissions and errors. There were various attempts to correct and supplement Liu’s collection, and those attempts should at least be acknowledged in a scholarly work on early medieval geography.¹⁷

The responsible thing to do for us as scholars working with medieval sources is always to consult, not only the modern reconstituted edition, but also the sources from which the fragments are collected, such as the encyclopedias, the commentaries, and the histories. For one thing, one can check for accuracy, and the result is often surprising; for another, one gains a much better understanding of the ecology of these textual fragments. It would be a lot of work, but it is where digital texts prove a handy tool for contemporary scholars. The bottom line is that any serious scholar of medieval history or literature should no longer treat a text as a patient already prepared and ready to be operated on, so to speak, but as a fluid formation coming down to us through layers of mediation; rather than largely relying on secondary sources, as this book often does (and is sometimes led astray by them), we trace the formation of the texts through those layers of mediation, and that is where our true scholarly work is.

One last point that can be made regarding the author’s construction of a larger argument at the expense of a nuanced, contextualized understanding of primary sources is about reductive labeling. “Tang literati” (or “Tang officials” and “Tang scholars,” and sometimes “Sui-Tang officials” and “Sui-Tang literati”), whom the author accuses of attacking pre-Tang local geographies out of imperialistic concerns, becomes the proverbial straw man. It turns out that “Tang literati” mainly refers to two scholars, namely, Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661–721) and Du

17. For instance, see Chen Shangjun’s 陳尚君 review, “Ping Han Tang fangzhi jiyi” 評漢唐方志輯佚, *Tang yanjiu* 1999.5: 540–44. Others are noted in Qu Zhimin’s 屈直敏 “Han Tang Fangzhi jiyi buzheng sanze” 漢唐方志輯佚補正三則, *Zhongguo dianji yu wenhua* 2009.4: 108–10.

You 杜佑 (735–812), and at most two others.¹⁸ The interpretation of their comments on pre-Tang local geographies is also highly debatable.¹⁹ Even if they did criticize certain specific titles, it is not at all clear that they were motivated by "Tang imperialism." Indeed, Tang writings on local geography, customs, personages, etc. are numerous, and include a large corpus of treatises on regions, not to mention representations of local places, scenes, and sights through a much larger textual legacy than has been preserved from the early medieval period.

Elsewhere the author criticizes the use of periodization by dynasties, and strenuously argues for using "Tabgatch empire" and "Jiankang empire" to replace the "Northern and Southern Dynasties." The author insists that he is "more than just rebranding" (p. 119), but it is hard to tell any substantive difference between "Tabgatch empire" and "the Northern Wei," or "Jiankang empire" and "the Southern Dynasties" in this book. It should be pointed out that north and south are relational, directional concepts, and do not necessarily imply two halves of a "whole" as the author insinuates. If anything, "Jiankang empire" reduces the multiplicity of the southern regimes to a monolithic entity of a single empire.

The most uncomfortable labeling is that of "Sinologists and historians." Clearly the author identifies himself with the latter, but what is a Sinologist in today's academia? To me, who has always identified as a literary scholar, the meaning of the antiquated term is never entirely clear. The author seems to equate Sinologists with scholars who read texts, although he never says so in so many words; and his use of the word "literary" and "literature" in this book (e.g., calling Liu Zhiji's treatise on historiography, *Shi tong*, a work of "literary criticism," p. 54) does not indicate that he thinks of literature as a discipline separate from history.

Of course, one could argue that terminology does not have to matter—one uses certain terms for expediency, just as the author declares that he will jettison the term "China" altogether (p. 9) and yet uses it in his book title. What does matter, however, is that historians, literary scholars, and scholars of religious studies must all read primary sources widely and deeply. There is no getting around that if one wants to do high-quality work. One should always beware of a single story to account for a long historical period, especially if that story fits our modern concerns too neatly, such as offering a challenge to imperial authority or Sinocentrism, or resisting the oppressive power of the state; even more importantly, we have to allow the primary sources to take the lead, rather than looking for and presenting only evidence that serves any particular agenda.

It is interesting how some books, even when they are problematic, inspire many thoughts and clarify many issues, and *Structures of the Earth* is such a book. Its value lies in the space it opens up for further inquiries. Many of its claims lead to questions that will be important for scholars and students of early medieval China to ponder. This book is a useful addition to the field of early medieval Chinese studies as long as we understand its problems and limitations. The direction to which the author aspires—seeing the forest instead of merely the trees—is a worthy goal for all of us.

18. That is, the *Sui shu* bibliography compiler, and Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645), because of one note he wrote on *Han shu* "Dili zhi" (p. 89 n. 112).

19. Liu Zhiji's comment can be hardly construed as criticism (p. 58). The reading of the passage by Du You is particularly dubious (p. 59).