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SPECIAL SECTION

LOCAL USES OF GEOGRAPHICAL KNOWLEDGE IN IMPERIAL CHINA

Introduction to Contributions to the International Workshop held by the
Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG), Berlin,
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ALEXIS LYCAS, HASEGAWA MASATO 長谷川正人 and
CHEN SHIH-PEI 陳詩沛

Geographical knowledge has traditionally been viewed as a monolithic system constructed for ordering the political space of the state. Yet what did historical actors in imperial China do with geographical knowledge produced at the local level? While acknowledging this political function of geographical knowledge, the six contributions of this special issue approach localities as places of knowledge production. They highlight the shifting values that those actors assigned to localities and problematize what locality meant in the history of imperial China: Was the imperial capital a locality? Were there localities within localities? Did mountains and religious sites function as localities? And can localities be treated as historical records? Focusing on localities allows us to move beyond the somewhat abstract and uniform notion of geographical knowledge and to consider the variety and ductility of the geographical cultures that were produced and circulated in the Sinitic sphere, across time and space, but in locally specific contexts.¹

The six authors in this special issue examine a broad spectrum of literary genres transcending traditional boundaries and underscore the importance of paratextual and material elements. To understand what informs the divergent uses of geographical knowledge, local and central factors must be juxtaposed. Whether local or imperially centered, these factors are multifaceted, encompassing disparate literary genres and reading practices. They also reveal practical processes of making, managing, and understanding the meaning of locality. They show a complex set of references from various genres, places, and times that historical actors used to create and recreate idiosyncratic ways of describing and representing the environs. The authors focus on different genres and periods, and together they compellingly complicate our understanding of the various genres they analyze –

¹ We adapt here Karine Chemla's coining of "mathematical cultures." See Karine Chemla, "Changing Mathematical Cultures, Conceptual History, and the Circulation of Knowledge: A Case Study Based on Mathematical Sources from Ancient China," in: *Cultures without Culturalism in the Making of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. Karine Chemla and Evelyn Fox Keller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 352–398.

including city plans, diagrams, gazetteers, book lists, atlases, and administrative guides – and point us to the presence of multiple influences and legacies embedded in each genre.

The articles also address the tension between learned knowledge and personal experience in imperial China and show how historical actors negotiated this tension. Civil and military officials employed tools and strategies when dealing with localities and areas which were unfamiliar to them. At the same time, their personal experience could be shaped by local and non-textual knowledge and expertise of the locals. But it remains to be determined what was deemed local and imperial, for historical actors looked both up and down. For finding solutions to problems of representing the local within the imperial and navigating through both texts and topography, practical tools were of paramount importance. Some – if not all – of such tools came to symbolize political and military power. But they also reveal incongruities between geographical knowledge and the geographical features of localities.

Griet Vankeerberghen (McGill University) offers a fresh analysis of the *Sanfu huangtu* 三輔黃圖 (Imperial Plan of the Three Capital Regions), a topographical account of Western Han Chang'an, in her examination of the debate over which imperial capital was legitimate in the early imperial period. A historian of early Chinese texts, Vankeerberghen situates the *Sanfu huangtu* not only as a work of memory, but also as a representation of an urban landscape. More importantly, she indicates that, despite later rearrangements, Ban Gu's 班固 (32–92) *fu* 賦 served as a structural model for the *Sanfu huangtu*, much like it did for his geographical treatise. This may not be surprising since *fu* poems often displayed strong geographical values, but Vankeerberghen demonstrates this by using the LoGaRT research tools, which allow detailed analysis of the structures of each text.² Her analysis shows that the *Sanfu huangtu* is not so much about topographic accuracy, but rather about conveying a memory of place. Vankeerberghen further demonstrates that this site of memory creates identity, and that geographical knowledge fuels the sense of belonging.

A historian of cartography and art, Lin Fan (Leiden University) provides a political history of the military usage of diagrams of troop formations (*zhentu* 陣圖), which were devices used for negotiating power among strongmen. Her analysis centers on the tension between experience and learned knowledge during the Song dynasty, as well as the controversies over the growing practicality of *zhentu* and their political and epistemological implications, such as in the making of Song Taizong's authority and legitimacy. Lin traces the historical processes through which the knowledge of *zhentu* became institutionalized. She shows that geographical knowledge in general and about localities in particular was both adaptable and practical, which made it less rigid than other forms of imperial knowledge. As for their material aspects, *zhentu* helped produce separate yet inter-related groups of knowledge and literacy for the purposes of military training and campaigns.

² Chen Shih-Pei, Kenneth J. Hammond, Anne Gerritsen, Shellen Wu, and Zhang Jiajing, "Local Gazetteers Research Tools: Overview and Research Application," *Journal of Chinese History* 4 (2020) 2, pp. 544–558.

Art historian Elizabeth Kindall (University of St. Thomas) examines the Yuan-dynasty *Yandang* 雁蕩 scroll attributed to Li Zixiao 李子曉 (*fl.* 14th c.) as a document with multiple layers of information – graphic and textual – each with its own sublayers. By separating the various moments of the descriptions of the landscape (lived, perceived, and represented), she highlights how geographical knowledge could also communicate individual experience. The textual material serves as an introduction to the experience of the depicted image, and the painting as a solution to the practical problem of not being able to visit the represented space. By focusing on the circulation of the scroll, Kindall further explores perceptions by fourteenth-century audiences, which were conditioned by their social and spatial contexts. This article therefore investigates a multi-sensory double perception, on the one hand of the landscape by the artist, and on the other hand of the scroll by its viewers. Whether taken as a travel guide, an official account, or a religious document, the *Yandang* scroll firmly links the artist's experience as a traveler to his expertise as a painter.

Historian Eloise Wright (Ashoka University) probes a phenomenological experience of space in the late Ming period in her intertextual study of the *Dali fuzhi* 大理府志 (Dali Prefecture Gazetteer), the earliest extant local gazetteer of Dali, Yunnan. She argues that a combination of translocal factors and exceptional forms of mobility must be taken into account when we analyze the geography and history of early modern Dali. She shows how the structural complexity of the gazetteer mirrors the heterogeneous nature of the city of Dali itself and thus produces a multilayered representation of the locality, where textual authority turns localities into actors, and sites into historical records. The authoritative status of the *Dali fuzhi* manifested itself in later iterations of the gazetteer and contributed to the emergence of local and translocal identity in Dali.

Historian Joseph Dennis (University of Wisconsin-Madison) examines the temporal structure of book collections at Confucian schools during the Ming–Qing period. His scrupulous reading of school library book lists reported in gazetteers reveals the wide range of sources that their compilers consulted and underscores the tension between compilation principles and practices, both at the local and central levels. He shows that while some collection practices were thorough, others were less methodical, depending on the historical actors involved, or on their social contexts. Multiple considerations likely shaped compilers' decisions as to whether or not to expand their existing lists. Book lists could also perform a normative function and display the political and sociocultural status of a locality and that of literati associated with the locale. Book lists not only helped disseminate knowledge, but also played an instrumental role in knowledge production. Examining book lists in Ming and Qing gazetteers unveils the conditions under which geographical knowledge was produced at the local level.

How were comprehensive geographies (*zongzhi* 總志) read, used and reused from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth century? Historian of cartographic knowledge Mario Cams (University of Macau) details the contestation and reframing of centrally-defined imperial space by local actors who were driven by their own needs and the vibrant book market during the late Ming. He argues that the seemingly confused arrangements of spatial information in late Ming prints functioned as a site of innovation and challenged the existing notion of space represented in earlier state-led geographical compilations. Scholarly compiled atlases of the late

Ming reflected market demand for practicably organized geographical information and gradually began to displace imperially constructed spatial arrangements. This general trend towards openness and practicality became further pronounced, according to Cams, by the wide popularity and commercial success of route books and administrative guides, which were circulated among and marketed for itinerant merchants and officials in the late Ming period.

The articles of this special issue were originally selected and presented at the workshop titled “Locality and Geographical Knowledge in Imperial China,” which was hosted by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (MPIWG) in Berlin in the summer of 2020. Originally planned as an in-person event, the workshop had to be reconfigured as a set of two online meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We would like to thank all the presenters for their contributions and the staff at the MPIWG for their logistical support. Chu Ping-Tzu, Michael Höckelmann, Jörg Hüsemann, Xu Chun, and Robin Yates served as discussants, and we are grateful for their participation and valuable comments. Our thanks are also due to the *Monumenta Serica* editorial team, and to Zbigniew Wesolowski S.V.D. in particular, for their help and expertise in bringing this project to fruition.