



**HAL**  
open science

## D. Jonathan Felt, Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China

Alexis Lycas

► **To cite this version:**

Alexis Lycas. D. Jonathan Felt, Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China. Early Medieval China, 2022, 28, pp.106-109. 10.1080/15299104.2022.2101773 . halshs-03783185

**HAL Id: halshs-03783185**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03783185>**

Submitted on 22 Sep 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Fichier auteur envoyé à l'éditrice en avril 2022, publié dans *Early Medieval China* 28 (2022), p. 106-109.

D. Jonathan Felt, *Structures of the Earth: Metageographies of Early Medieval China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2021. xii, 391 pp.

Although the geographical knowledge of the second millennium of the empire is well studied, D. Jonathan Felt's monograph marks, following the remarkable work of Jörg Hüseemann, the revival of studies on the history of early medieval geographical knowledge.<sup>1</sup> As far as the formal aspects of the book are concerned, the quality of the editorial work done on the manuscript is laudable—I did not find any glaring mistakes or typos. Felt's text is clear, informative, and without jargon, even if he sometimes tends to repeat sentences from one page to the next to emphasize certain points. The author must be commended for choosing to include short lines of translations of primary sources in the body of his demonstration instead of adding numerous independent translation blocks. The reader can thus clearly follow his reasoning, and the text gains in fluidity. The excellent schematic maps produced with GIS are particularly relevant and allow one to visualize Felt's hypotheses or conclusions. The bibliography is thorough, and the index useful. The only problem concerns the notes, which are inexplicably placed at the end of the volume. This may have been an editorial decision not attributable to the author, but the otherwise pleasant and informative reading of the book suffers from such unnecessarily hindrance.

The book is organized around four thematic chapters, whose titles function through conceptual or spatial oppositions that Felt takes on in his analysis, often with great nuance. The main body of the text is flanked at one end by an introduction and an indispensable first chapter presenting the genres of geographical writing, and at the other end by a conclusion that takes up the themes addressed in the main chapters to assess their late medieval and post-medieval fortune. The four themes of the study touch on the notions of regionalism, borders, natural geography, and competing world orders. They also follow a relatively chronological order which culminates in the last two chapters, more specifically focused on Li Daoyuan's 酈道元 (d. 527) *Shuijing zhu* 水經注. Felt's objective is to present four ways of seeing the

---

<sup>1</sup> Jörg Henning Hüseemann, *Das Altertum vergegenwärtigen: Eine Studie zum Shuijing zhu des Li Daoyuan*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2017. See also another recent monograph by Garret P.S. Olberding, *Designing Boundaries in Early China: The Composition of Sovereign Space*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.

world. He does so according to historical or historiographical oppositions, which enrich his arguments.

The introduction and the first chapter are particularly useful to gain an overview and a precise history of the evolution of ancient and especially medieval geographical knowledge. In line with the works of Andrew Chittick and Liu Weiyi 劉緯毅, the author shows the importance of local writings and regionalism in the construction of early medieval knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Felt shows the third-century burgeoning, fourth-century explosion, and fifth-century consolidation of geographical writing, and more specifically of local writing. I generally agree with his analysis, but one should not forget that a significant amount of the geographical documentation of the period is fragmentary, and that the attribution of many of these texts to a specific author or period remains problematic.<sup>3</sup>

Based on local writings produced between the third and fifth centuries, Chapter 2 addresses the question of regionalism, between empire (understood politically) and *ecumene* (culturally). Felt shows the tension between the local and the imperial around issues of customs, memory, and the dramatic change that the opening of the empire to the south represented. In particular, he offers a very pertinent analysis of the poet Zuo Si's 左思 (ca. 250–305) “geographical realism” (p. 101) as expressed in his “San du fu” 三都賦. He continues his analysis by evoking the explosion of the geographical production in the Yangtze River basin. Felt further explains the shift from an administrative geography to a physical appropriation of southern spaces, which change from strange to beautiful.

In Chapter 3, the author presents the political history of a North-South binary opposition as constructed by Sui-Tang authors to characterize the fifth and sixth century. He takes up Andrew Chittick's expression of a “Jiankang empire,” to which he opposes that of a Tabgatch empire. The divisions that he proposes are relevant to the explanation the political history of the period and make it possible to highlight the oppositions between “competing imperial centers,” which find their legitimacy in a fight over cultural heritage and varying local customs. Although Felt's analyses are solid, this chapter moves away from geographical knowledge to deal mainly with political issues. The pages on an “ecumenical” Yan Zhitui 顏之推, though interesting, distract from the book's thesis. Similarly, while the otherwise

---

<sup>2</sup> Liu Weiyi 劉緯毅, *Han-Tang fangzhi jiyi* 漢唐方志輯佚. Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 1997. Andrew Chittick, *The Jiankang Empire in Chinese and world history*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the great usefulness of Liu Weiyi's work, many limitations and errors have been pointed out by reviewers. For instance, see Hua Linfu 華林甫, “Sui-Tang tujing jikao shang” 隋唐圖經輯考 (上), in *Guoli zhengzhi daxue lishi xuebao* 國立政治大學歷史學報 27 (2007): 141–213.

brilliant analysis of the *Nan shi* 南史 and *Bei shi* 北史 produces a compelling history of medieval historical writing, it also strays from the main argument of the book.

The last two chapters continue this series of oppositions, between mountains and rivers (Chapter 4), and between east and west (Chapter 5), but the author now focuses on the *Shuijing zhu*. Chapter 4 deals with the “hydrocultural landscape.” Felt devotes several pages to the primacy of the water element, which allows Li Daoyuan to justify the economy of his text. Felt gives an illuminating discussion of the cultural role of the mountain (p. 177–97), notably as a liminal space, but it seems to me that his analysis is not irreducible to the specificities of the *Shuijing zhu* alone. In the subchapter on waterways, the specific contribution of Li Daoyuan is demonstrated more clearly, and his interest in the local application of imperial transformations becomes more evident. A final metageography concerns the Chinese-Buddhist synthesis, apparent through an east-west dichotomy in the *Shuijing zhu*. It occurs particularly through the symmetry between the Kunlun and Anavatapta mountains, which allows Li Daoyuan to develop the idea of a bipolar world, reflecting a dichotomous hydrographic structure. To justify this concept, the author of the *Shuijing zhu* draws heavily on Buddhist Sinitic literature.

It is here that I must note a disagreement with Felt. Though I agree with the construction of a Sino-Indian bipolarity, I believe that it should be nuanced, as we should not forget that Li Daoyuan was primarily confined to using the material he had at hand, such as “anomaly accounts, imperial records, and Buddhist geographies” (p. 215). Likewise, the paradox with the *Shuijing zhu* is that it may be given too much retrospective importance because of its original “hydrocultural” structure and because it is one of the few premodern geographical texts to have been preserved almost in its entirety. That being said, Li Daoyuan’s most important contribution, which Felt presents well even if he formulates it differently, is related to the synthesis of “certain native Sinitic conceptualizations of a non-Sinocentric world with new accounts of the world from Buddhist literature,” and of “a model of the world centered on a cosmic mountain (...) that was situated halfway between Sinitic and Indic civilizations” (p. 220). The very existence of this synthesis means that Li Daoyuan created, as a “geographer,” an original modeling.

In sum, I find many of Felt’s arguments convincing, and his goal of providing an alternative framework for thinking about the historical and spatial setting of the Sinicized world (p. 8) works well. The dynamics he analyzes allow him to deconstruct some teleological interpretations regarding the evolution of what has become “China.” His work is

a welcome addition to the revival of the history of geographical knowledge, as opposed to the ancient but epistemologically-limited antiquarian passion about historical geography.

Nevertheless, I must register two final points of disagreement. First, I believe that the author places too much emphasis, for the purpose of strengthening his hypothesis, on the supposed disregard of Sui-Tang authors for early medieval local writings, and even for geography in general (pp. 2, 21). While this Sui-Tang posture is true to some degree, it is mostly rhetorical and does not conceal the profusion of local writings that continued to be produced under the Tang rule.

Second, I have some reservations about the efficacy of “metageography” to describe the historical processes at work. Felt defends the use of the term and understands it as a set of spatial structures employed by humans to put their knowledge of the world in order. But is this not the most basic definition of what geography is? I understand the heuristic value of the concept of metageography, but it seems to me that Felt’s arguments would have been just as convincing if he had used “geography” or “representation of space”—he actually uses the latter to explain what he means by metageography (p. 4), and specifies elsewhere that the word metageography is an etic label (p. 67). If the question was to differentiate the understanding of historical actors like Li Daoyuan from our own vision of the past, then this concept could be useful. But if we, as observers, do produce a form of metageography, then the concept becomes historiographical, and overshadows the historical process that it seeks to elucidate. Since Felt proposes a cultural history of the actors’ in their own terms, not one according to modern observers, I cannot help but question the usefulness of the term. Nonetheless, it poses an important epistemological question, albeit one that is beyond the scope of the book and this review.

Alexis Lycas

École pratique des hautes études, Paris Sciences et Lettres  
Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l’Asie orientale