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The Evolution of Geographical Perspectives as Reflected in the Transmission of the Classic of Mountains and Seas

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Abstract. As a composite text of ancient Chinese geography and mythology, the Classic of Mountains and Seas combines mythical elements with early geographical knowledge, reflecting the ancient people's exploration and imagination of the world. This study adopts a literary and mythological research perspective, combining textual analysis, interdisciplinary research, and case study methods to explore the transmission and evolution of geographical names in the Classic of Mountains and Seas. It analyzes how mythological geography transitions into actual geography and reveals the shifts in geographical perspectives reflected in this process. The study found that the geographical descriptions in the Classic of Mountains and Seas were constructed by ancient people on the basis of limited knowledge, using mythical imagination to create a "pseudo-real" geographical system. Its evolutionary process reflects a cognitive transformation from mystification to rationalization. The evolution of typical place names such as Kunlun Mountain and Kongtong Mountain reveals the transformation of ancient geographical perspectives from the myth of the "center of the world" to the reality of "diverse yet unified" geography, reflecting the historical process of cultural exchange and expansion.

Keywords: Classic of Mountains and Seas, evolution of geographical views, mythical geography, interdisciplinary research, Kunlun Mountain

1. Introduction

As a "geographical oddity" among ancient Chinese classics, the geographical descriptions in the Classic of Mountains and Seas have always been a focus of academic attention. The text contains both "pseudo-realistic" records of mountainous landscapes and natural resources, as well as imaginative descriptions of mythical realms and bizarre creatures. This dual perspective makes it a crucial text for studying ancient geographical perspectives.

This study, themed "Tracking the Evolution of Geographical Perspectives Through the Transmission of the Classic of Mountains and Seas," aims to explore the transmission and evolution of geographical names within the text, analyzing the mechanisms and motivations behind the transition from mythical geography to actual geography. The significance of this study lies in revealing the transformation path of ancient people from mythical imagination to empirical cognition through analyzing the evolution of the geographical view in the Classic of Mountains and

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Seas, thereby providing a new perspective for understanding the interaction between geography and culture in ancient Chinese civilization.

2. Overview of geographical names in the classic of mountains and seas

2.1. Geographical classification and characteristics in the text

The geographical world of the Classic of Mountains and Seas is like an ancient map that has been crumpled up and then reassembled, containing both the practical measurements of the ancient people and their imagination as they gazed at the stars. Upon opening this extraordinary text, the first thing that catches the eye is the stark division between the "Mountain Classic" and the "Sea Classic"—this division is not a strict boundary in the modern geographical sense, but rather resembles two large blocks of color casually sketched by ancient people with brushes on silk, one dipped in the ink of realism and the other in the colors of romanticism.

The "Shan Jing" section accounts for six-tenths of the book's content, meticulously recording the details of over 500 mountains like an old ledger. The "Nan Shan Jing" begins at Zhaoyao Mountain in the Zhoushan Archipelago of Zhejiang Province, then heads westward, linking 39 mountains along the way, and finally concludes at Nanyu Mountain on the coast of Guangdong Province, spanning over 16,000 li. It is a veritable "interprovincial travel guide" measured by the ancients' footsteps. The Western Mountains section is even more grand, spanning twenty mountains from Qianlai Mountain in the Hua Mountain range to Gaotu Mountain, covering over 3,000 li. The natural resources of each mountain are meticulously recorded: for instance, one mountain produces gold on its southern slope and silver on its northern slope. This is not to say there are literal mountains of gold and silver, but rather the ancient people used the concept of yin and yang to imbue natural phenomena with poetic imagery. This description of "mountains full of gold and silver" is akin to modern people saying "sunrise in the east, rain in the west." It is the observer using the most vivid language to transform the intense sunlight on the southern slopes and the cool shade on the northern slopes into tangible mineral deposits.

The Zhongshan region is the most bustling, with 198 mountains crammed into the heartland of Central China, resembling a bustling marketplace. From the Gan Zao Mountain to the Gu Dang Mountain in the Bo Shan mountain range, the 15 mountains span less than a thousand miles, yet they record a journey of 937 li—though the ancients' calculations were not precise, their meticulousness evokes the careful scrutiny of an old accountant reviewing ledgers [1]. These mountains are not cold coordinates but living spaces with warmth: some mountains are home to deities, some rivers originate here, and even the appearance of the mountain gods is recorded—some with human faces and horse bodies, others with nine tails, as if each mountain peak had its own "ambassador."

2.2. The intertwining of mythical geography and real geography

Standing between the legends and reality of Mount Kunlun, one can best appreciate the ethereal beauty of the "Classic of Mountains and Seas." The book describes the mountain as "ten thousand zhang high," with the Kaiming Beast guarding its peak, making it the "abode of a hundred gods," a vivid projection of heavenly palaces. Yet, when one consults modern satellite maps, the continuous snow-capped mountains of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, both in their orientation and grandeur, closely resemble the "ancestor of all mountains" described by ancient writers. This correspondence is not a simple "search for prototypes," but rather resembles ancient people using the colorful brush of

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mythology to add exaggerated lines to the canvas of reality—like a child painting the sun red and rivers blue, though not precise, it captures the most essential features.

The example of Kongtong Mountain is even more intriguing. The text describes it as "the mountain of Kongtong, vast beyond compare," yet modern archaeology has uncovered sites in the northwest that closely match the descriptions. Those pottery shards with strange patterns might just be evidence of the "strange birds nesting in the trees" mentioned in ancient texts; the location of a sacrificial pit aligns perfectly with the text's mention of "a mountain with a temple." This interplay is like a puzzle, where real-world fragments and mythical imaginings fit together seamlessly, leaving one unsure whether the ancients crafted stories based on the ruins or whether the stories guided later generations to discover the ruins.

3. Examples of the evolution of place names in the classic of mountains and seas into actual place names

3.1. Kunlun Mountain: from mythical center to geographical entity

Flipping through the Kunlun Mountain chapter of the Classic of Mountains and Seas, one cannot help but think of the "treasure mountain" that children deliberately mark on their maps. The text describes it as "south of the Western Sea, along the shores of the Flowing Sands, beyond the Red Water, and before the Black Water," a location description that resembles a deliberately set riddle from an ancient "treasure hunt" game. Even more exaggerated is the "10,000 ren" height—calculated at approximately 1.8 meters per ren during the Han Dynasty, this mountain would be 18,000 meters tall, more than twice the height of Mount Everest. However, setting aside the exaggerated numbers, the book's description of Mount Kunlun also has a touch of realism: the mountain is home to the "Kaiming Beast," which is as large as a tiger with nine human-faced heads [2]; there is an "immortal tree" on the mountain, whose fruit grants eternal life; and the mountain is surrounded by the Red River, Black River, and Blue River, making it a vivid "three-dimensional map" sketched by ancient people with mythical brushstrokes.

This intertwining of myth and reality finds a remarkable correspondence in archaeological discoveries. In the 20th century, the Nomohong Cultural Site discovered in the Qaidam Basin of Qinghai Province yielded jade and bronze artifacts engraved with patterns resembling the nine-headed human-faced Kaiming Beast. In the Nagqu region of Tibet, ancient sacrificial pits were found containing pine and cypress branches and jade stones symbolizing "immortality." Most astonishingly, satellite remote sensing images reveal that the continuous snow-capped mountains of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau align remarkably well with the description in the Classic of Mountains and Seas: "The Kunlun Mountains rise to twice their height." Though the ancients lacked precise measuring tools, they captured the grandeur of the mountains through their most intuitive perceptions: when they stood on the Loess Plateau and gazed into the distance, those snow-capped peaks shrouded in mist naturally became the "ancestor of all mountains" in their eyes.

3.2. Kongtong Mountain: the connection between mythical legends and archaeological evidence

The name Kongtong Mountain evokes an ethereal aura, like the blue smoke rising from a Taoist alchemist's cauldron. The Classic of Mountains and Seas describes it as "the mountain of Kongtong, without equal in size," and the sacred site where the Yellow Emperor met Guangchengzi. This legend grew increasingly mystical over the centuries, with Sima Zhen's Commentary on the Records

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of the Grand Historian in the Tang Dynasty even describing Kongtong Mountain as having "five-colored auroras," a veritable abode of immortals. However, upon visiting Kongtong Mountain in Pingliang, Gansu Province, one discovers that this ethereal aura is intertwined with the "smoke and fire of the mortal world"—the clusters of temples on the mountain slopes, the wear marks on the stone steps, and the inscriptions from various dynasties in the stele forest all testify to its real-world identity as the "First Mountain of Daoism in Northwest China."

Archaeological discoveries have added a touch of "empirical evidence" to this sacred mountain. In the 1980s, the Siguokou Site discovered around Kongtong Mountain yielded a large number of jade and pottery artifacts from the Qijia Culture, including a jade cong engraved with patterns related to the "Yellow Emperor Riding the Dragon" legend from the Classic of Mountains and Seas; At the foot of the mountain, the Nan Zuo site uncovered a large sacrificial pit dating back 5,000 years, containing the complete skeletons of cattle and sheep, echoing the records in the text of "spring sacrifices at Kongtong [3]." Most interestingly, local villagers still preserve the custom of "climbing Kongtong Mountain on the third day of the third month," though they cannot explain its origins. Their devotion, however, mirrors the ancient tradition of "pilgrimage."

3.3. Analysis of other typical place name evolutions

The river names in the "Classic of Mountains and Seas" are like a string of codes; once deciphered, they correspond to the "real coordinates" of modern geography. The term "river water" mentioned in the book, though seemingly arbitrary, was actually the ancient people's most straightforward name for the Yellow River—in the Han Dynasty's "Commentary on the Waterways," "river water" specifically referred to the Yellow River, and this usage continued into the Ming and Qing dynasties. Even more intriguing is the "Black Water," which the text describes as flowing westward into the Great Wilderness. Modern geographers have identified a river of the same name at the border of Gansu and Sichuan provinces, whose dark-colored soil perfectly aligns with the name "Black Water." [4] This naming is not a coincidence but rather the ancient people's use of the most intuitive perceptions to label rivers—yellow water is "He," black water is "Heishui," as simple yet enduring as giving a child a nickname.

The "real-world projection" of mythical tribes is even more astonishing. The "three-faced people" mentioned in the text sound like aliens, but when combined with archaeological discoveries, the bronze masks unearthed at Sanxingdui feature three-faced designs; and the human figures in the rock paintings of Cangyuan, Yunnan, also depict patterns of three faces side by side. Such "odd" descriptions may be exaggerated records of the appearance of foreign tribes by the ancients—just as modern people say, "That foreigner has blue eyes," the ancients used "three-faced" to emphasize differences. As for the "immortal people," the text states that they were "dark-skinned and lived to be 300 years old." [5]

4. From myth to geography

The transformation of geographical cognition in the Han Dynasty can be regarded as a silent cognitive revolution. When Sima Qian openly stated in "Biographies of Dawan" in "Records of the Grand Historian" that "I dare not speak out", it actually declared the retreat of mythological geography - the "Kunlun Divine Beasts" that could still fit in during the Warring States period were outdated under the guidance of the empirical spirit of the Han Dynasty. This transformation is rooted in deep-seated historical factors: the precise surveying and mapping needs arising from the power struggles of the feudal lords in the late Warring States period, which were integrated through the

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system of Qin Shi Huang's "gathering troops from all over the world and gathering them in Xianyang", ultimately evolved into an administrative geographic system of "convenient mountains and rivers" in the Han Dynasty. The detailed records of the population, farmland and properties of the prefecture in the Hanshu Geography are just like the ancient version of the national statistical yearbook, which is in sharp contrast to the romantic writing of "a mountain has many supernatural animals" in the Book of Mountains and Seas [6].

The intervention of the Five Elements theory provides a theoretical framework for geographical cognition. During the Han Dynasty, scholars assigned the five directions of wood east spring, fire south summer, and constructed a coordinate system for spatial cognition. This theoretical construction is not a mystical fantasy, but an inevitable choice for systematizing knowledge: just as modern economics models with big data, Han Dynasty geography weaves scattered geographical knowledge into an organic whole using the Five Elements theory as network nodes. The statement in "Huainanzi" that "the Kunlun Mountains are twice as high" seems to continue the mythological narrative, but in fact, it positions Kunlun in the western space through the Five Elements orientation; The "Geographical Records" in the Book of Han further elevated the "personification of geography" to a new level, such as the discourse "The land in Hedong is plain, with salt and iron," which already has the embryonic form of modern regional economic analysis [6].

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the paradigm shift of geographical cognition in China from mythological imagination to empirical models from pre Qin to Han Dynasty by analyzing the evolution trajectory of geographical views in the Shan Hai Jing. This transformation is not only a product of the demands of the times, but also reflects the theoretical consciousness of knowledge systematization. Its core findings can be summarized into the following three points:

Firstly, the "double helix structure" of geographical cognition. The juxtaposition of "Shan Jing" and "Hai Jing" in the "Shan Hai Jing" is similar to the double stranded structure of DNA: the former records the location and resources of more than 500 mountain ranges with the empirical spirit of "step by step mileage", while the latter constructs a mythical geographical space with the romantic writing style of "divine beasts and exotic realms". This duality is not simply a contradiction or opposition, but a dual construction of the unknown world by ancient cognitive subjects under limited observation conditions - it includes both simple records of real geography (such as the exploration of the coastal mountains from Zhejiang to Guangdong in the Nanshan Jing) and philosophical imagination of the transcendent world (such as the mythological construction of the Kunlun Hanging Garden).

Secondly, the role of the Five Elements theory as a cognitive scaffold. During the Han Dynasty, scholars introduced the Five Elements Allocation System of Wood East Spring, Fire South Xia into geographical analysis, essentially constructing the "spatial coordinate system" of ancient China. This theoretical construction is not a mystical fantasy, but an inevitable choice for systematizing knowledge: just as modern economics models with big data, Han Dynasty geography weaves scattered geographical knowledge into an organic whole using the Five Elements theory as network nodes. The positioning of Kunlun in "Huainanzi" and the analysis of local products in "Geographical Records of the Book of Han" both reflect the integration function of theoretical frameworks on empirical materials.

Thirdly, the "underground river" feature of cultural exchange. Archaeological discoveries, such as the Central Plains style bronze ware of Xiajiadian's lower culture, and the Yuzhang shapes of

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Sanxingdui and Erlitou, prove that the cultural interaction between the Central Plains and the border areas predates Zhang Qian's visit to the Western Regions.

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