

Finding ancient geography in 'The Classic of Mountains and Seas'

By LIU XIAOFENG, LIU ZONGDI, and ZHANG XUSHAN

The *Shan Hai Jing*, or *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, is a singular book written in ancient China that has remained popular reading for thousands of years. Recently, Liu Xiaofeng, a professor from the Department of History at Tsinghua University, invited Liu Zongdi, a professor from the School of Chinese Language and Literature at Beijing Language and Culture University, and Zhang Xushan, a professor from the Department of History at Tsinghua University, to share their opinions on issues interpreting geographical knowledge as depicted in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

Liu Xiaofeng: *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* not only records some of the oldest Chinese geography, but also preserves some of the oldest myths and histories in the early stages of Chinese civilization. Can this book, with powerful mythological overtones, really be regarded as a geographical work?

Liu Zongdi: *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is not a bestiary [as some early Chinese scholars have suggested]. It is rather a work of geography, and a source of important historical material for studying ancient history and geography. Typical readers generally read the book to satisfy their curiosity, interested primarily in the strange creatures depicted within it. Scholars mainly focus on the mythological components and tend to underestimate the value of this book as an archive of ancient history.

The book is considered the oldest Chinese geographical record in existence. A section of the book known as *The Classic of Mountains* records many mountain and river formations, as well as the animals, plants, and minerals therein; it is clearly a document of natural landscapes and creatures based on facts. The section of *The Classic of Seas* records dozens of *fang-guo* [vassal states or tribes which existed during the Xia and Shang dynasties] across the country, with details of their state names, family names, lineages, and fragmentary records of their resources and products, customs, and mythological figures. The value of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* as a work of geography is beyond doubt.

Liu Xiaofeng: If we admit that *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is an ancient geographical book derived from reality, a question then arises: what geography does it record?

Liu Zongdi: There are various speculations regarding the territorial scope and geographical loca-



An illustration from a Ming-Dynasty edition of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* Photo: CFP

tions mentioned in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and no final conclusion has yet been reached. The problem comes down to the confusing records in the book. Many places documented in the text can be found in other ancient geographical books, so mainstream scholars generally believe that the territorial scope described in this book most closely reflects that of China during the Warring States Period (770–476 BCE). However, although the names of some mountains and rivers in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* correspond to the actual landscape of the Warring States Period, most of them are completely different in direction and distance. Therefore, some scholars consider the book full of imagination and fabrication, with limited geographical value. Specifically, it depicts a world surrounded by sea, whereas China isn't flanked to the west and north by sea. Consequently, readers tend to believe that much of the book is fabricated and therefore of little scientific value.

Although China is not surrounded by sea on all sides, in ancient times [roughly before the 21st century BCE], there was a place within China's territory that was in fact surrounded by sea on all sides—the area where Shandong Province is located today. The Shandong Peninsula is flanked to the north by the Bohai Sea, and to the east and south by the Yellow Sea. In ancient times, there was also a "sea" to the west of Shandong, which referred to the many lakes formed by the flooding of the Yellow River.

The names of several places in "The Classic of the Great Wilderness," a section in *The Classic of Seas*, are sufficient to connect the book with the landscape of Shandong. For example, "The Classic of the Great Wilderness" records that in the north, there is a state called Northern Qi bordering on the North Sea. Obviously, this state refers to the Qi state (1046–221 BCE) in present-day Shandong. Also, according to this

section there is a place in the northeast called Tang-gu, adjacent to the East Sea, which is believed to be the "Chengshantou," the easternmost point of the Shandong Peninsula [and also the easternmost point of China's coastline], where the sun rises at the earliest hour.

Liu Xiaofeng: Professor Zhang Xushan has written a thesis on the place wherein the Queen Mother of the West [a mother goddess in Chinese mythology] lives. The thesis also discusses the constantly changing perception of space in ancient times. Prof Zhang, we'd be glad to hear your views on the changes in the location of the Queen Mother of the West.

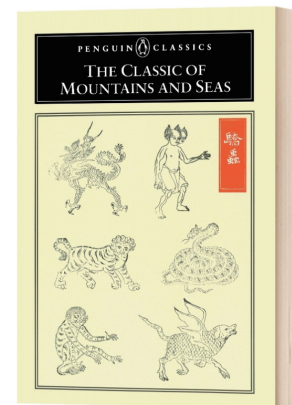
Zhang Xushan: The early myths and legends that were originally popular in the Central Plain, such as *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, did seem to contain a vague awareness held by the people of the Central Plain regarding the world around them. The ancient myths of the Queen Mother of the West encompass two meanings of faith and geography. According to *Erya* [the first surviving Chinese dictionary] and Guo Pu's annotations to *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the Queen Mother of the West resided in the "westernmost point under Heaven." As the early Chinese people expanded west, their knowledge of the actual western geography was greatly increased. The mythological position of the Queen Mother of the West changed accordingly, and some geographical elements related to the legend, such as the Ruoshui River and the mythological Kunlun Mountains, also changed.

In *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the chapter known as "The Classic of Areas Within the Seas: the East" records that "The countries outside the quicksands are the kingdoms of Daxia, Shusha, Juyao and Yuezhi" (trans. Wang Hong & Zhao Zheng). The ancient kingdom of Daxia was in present-day Shanxi Province. In the early Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE),

Yuezhi [also known as Roushi, an ancient people first described in Chinese histories as nomads living in the western part of the modern Chinese province of Gansu, during the 1st millennium BCE] lived between the city of Dunhuang and the Qilian Mountains. These four kingdoms covered an area stretching from the western end of the Hexi Corridor to present-day Shanxi Province. The territory of the Queen Mother of the West, which was said to be located to the east of these four countries, must therefore be to the east of present-day Shanxi. Consequently, the original legend would have been spread in what is now present-day Shandong. Hence, Professor Liu Zongdi's argument that *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* is the legend of Dongyi [in most cases referring to inhabitants of eastern China] is consistent with reality.

During the Warring States Period, a legend associated the Queen Mother of the West with King Mu of Zhou [a ruler of the Zhou Dynasty, who ruled from 977 to 922 BCE], which relocated the fairyland of the Queen Mother of the West further westward to the Hexi Corridor. During the Han Dynasty, the Hexi Corridor was under the control of the Han government, so the Chinese people imagined that there was a state of the Queen Mother of the West in the remote Western Regions [a historical name often specified in Chinese chronicles that usually referred to Central Asia]. Zhang Qian's [a Chinese official who served as an imperial envoy to the world outside of China in the late 2nd century BCE] missions to the Western Regions made him soon realize that the so-called "state of the Queen Mother of the West" didn't exist there, so he turned to the Parthian Empire deeper in Central Asia to determine whether or not such a state existed further "west." The answer can be found in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, a monumental history of ancient China. The elders of the Parthian Empire explained that the Ruoshui River and the Queen Mother of the West were in Tiaozi, but they had never seen them before. In this way, a strange and remote city, "Tiaozi," or Antioch [then capital of the Seleucid Empire] beside the Mediterranean, came to be linked to the legend of the Queen Mother of the West. By the late Han era, the Chinese people had heard that the Daqin Empire (the Roman Empire) was located to the west of Antioch, and so came to associate the Queen Mother of the West with the Roman Empire and beyond.

The myth of the Queen Mother of the West represents the yearning of the Chinese people throughout the ages for the fairyland. Though it originated in the Central Plain, some past scholars believed that the myth actually originated from the world beyond China. However, deficiencies in methodology have thus far failed to support their arguments.



FILE PHOTO: *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (English version) published by Penguin Random House

'The Classic of Mountains and Seas'

Edited by REN GUANHONG

The Classic of Mountains and Seas is an encyclopedia of ancient China. Its rich content involves history, geography, ethnology, mythology, religion, zoology, phytology, mineralogy, and medicine, etc. The subject variety and the peculiarity of its content are remarkable among ancient Chinese books. The book is divided into 18 volumes, among which volumes One to Five are entitled *The Five Treasures: The Classic of Mountains*. Volumes Six to Eighteen are called *The Classic of Seas*. *The Classic of Mountains* mainly records mountains and rivers in ancient China. It depicts diverse subjects such as ancient history, plants, trees, animals, myths, and religion. *The Classic of Seas* records not only geographical locations, but also the physical features of foreign people in remote countries.

Opinions have been wildly divided on who the author was and when the book was written, as well as how the book should be categorized. Originally proposed to have been authored by such mythical figures as Yu the Great or Boyi, the consensus among modern scholars is that the book was not written at a single time by a single author, but rather by numerous people from the period of the Warring States (770–476 BCE) to the beginning of the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).

During the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, the book was regarded as a book of geography. In the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, in light of a growing understanding of the world and other factors, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* came under the scrutiny of literary criticism. Since the late Qing Dynasty, due to the introduction of Western anthropology and other disciplines, researchers have employed different approaches in the study of the text to identify the author, when the book was written, different editions, the creatures, figures mentioned in the book, geographical information, etc.