From a Boundless Realm to a Bounded Domain: The Transformation of Geographical Cognition and the Reconstruction of the *Tianxia* Worldview in the Song Dynasty

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Abstract: The Tang and Song dynasties marked a pivotal period of transformation in China's historical geography cognition and its concept of the "Tianxia" (the world). This paper focuses on the Song dynasty, examining how its geographical perspective evolved from the Han–Tang notion of an "unbounded world" to one of a "bounded realm," and explores how scholar-officials achieved a cultural reconstruction of the Tianxia concept through various means—such as reshaping the cultural and political significance of mountains and rivers, rebuilding the sacrificial system for the Five Great Mountains and Four Major Rivers, redefining the "Central Land" theory, and elevating the cultural status of the Yangtze River. This transformation was not only driven by the unique political and military context of the Song dynasty but also reflected the scholarly class's efforts to employ cultural strategies to address real-world challenges and sustain the legitimacy of the regime. The establishment of the Song dynasty's Tianxia concept represented a significant turning point in the evolution of China's statehood—from the governance based on geographical entities to one grounded in cultural identity integration—and exerted a profound influence on the governance and cultural identity of later multi-ethnic states.
Key words: Song Dynasty; geographical cognition; worldview of the world

Naitō Konan's "Theory of the Transition from the Tang to the Early Modern Period" posits that the Tang Dynasty marked the end of the medieval era, while the Song Dynasty represented the beginning of the early modern period—a transition that encompassed political, economic, and cultural dimensions. After World War II, Naitō's students further developed this theory into the "Tang–Song Transformation Theory." Since its introduction, this theory has exerted a profound influence on the study of Song Dynasty history. In his paper "The Tang–Song Transformation Theory and the Study of the Political Institutions of the Song Dynasty," Li Huarui examined the application and controversies surrounding the Transformation Theory within the history of political institutions, arguing that it explains the transition from "aristocratic politics" to "joint governance by imperial authority and the scholar-official class," while emphasizing that the Song Dynasty still retained numerous traditional elements. In his paper "The Evolution of the Tang–Song Official System and the Transformation Theory," Gong Yanming approached the topic from the perspective of the specific evolution of the official appointment system, providing a detailed analysis of phenomena such as the system of temporary official assignments and the separation of official ranks, thereby offering solid institutional-historical evidence for the Tang–Song political transformation. Huang Kuanzhong's work "The Imperial Examination System and Regional Order: A Case Study of the Song Dynasty" investigates how the imperial examination system reshaped the

structure and behavioral patterns of local elites, enabling scholar-official families to become the core of local society, thereby illustrating the far-reaching impact of political transformation at the grassroots level of society.

In terms of economics, Bao Bide's work *Swen: The Transformation of Thought in the Tang and Song Dynasties* focuses on cultural aspects but also analyzes how changes in land systems—such as the widespread adoption of the tenant farming system—and the expansion of handicraft industries facilitated social mobility. Ge Jinfang, in her essay *Viewing the Tang–Song Transition through the Lens of the "Agricultural-Commercial Society," introduces the concept of the "Agricultural-Commercial Society" to characterize the economic nature of the Song Dynasty; she argues that this society was no longer merely an agricultural society, yet it had not yet fully transitioned into a modern commercial society. This perspective both corroborates and refines the "transformation theory." Although Wang Zengyu adopts a cautious stance toward the "transformation theory" in his book The Class Structure of the Song Dynasty, his detailed study of the rising status of Song-era tenant farmers and the development of wage-based employment relationships provides robust empirical evidence for the changes in socio-economic relations, thereby indirectly supporting the theory of social transformation. In his paper The Transformation of Socio-Economic Relations During the Tang–Song Transition and Its Impact on the Field of Cultural Thought, Lin Wenxun systematically examines how shifts in economic relations—such as the replacement of dependency relationships by tenant farming contracts—provided a material foundation for the secularization and popularization of cultural thought; this study represents an important contribution to understanding the interplay between economic and cultural transformations.

In the cultural sphere, Liu Zijian's work *China's Turn Toward the Internal: The Cultural Shift at the Transition Between the Two Song Dynasties* examines Song Dynasty literary collections and notes to argue that, although the Song Dynasty exhibited characteristics of the "modern era," post-Southern Song culture gradually became more inward-looking and conservative, thereby supplementing and reflecting upon the theory of transformation. Yip Pei-hsia's *The Inner Circle: Marriage and Women's Life in the Song Dynasty* challenges this theory from the perspective of gender history, contending that while the Song Dynasty witnessed "modern-era" transformations in the economic and political spheres, the rise of Neo-Confucianism and the emphasis on the concept of female chastity may have actually constrained the space and status of women.

However, within this broad research framework, the exploration of the transformation in geographical cognition during the Song Dynasty remains relatively underdeveloped, particularly due to the lack of systematic analyses conducted from the perspectives of "spatial concepts" and "cultural construction." In this field, Tang Xiaofeng's *From Chaos to Order* argues that ancient China established a concept of the "world " —which integrated cosmological and political views—through the systematic ordering of mountains and rivers; Ge Zhaoguang further posits in *Zhaizi China* that the Song Dynasty marked a pivotal stage in the formation of the Chinese consciousness, during which scholar-officials constructed the boundary between "China" and "barbarians" through cultural identity. Although these studies provide important perspectives for understanding Song Dynasty geographical concepts, there is still a lack of sufficiently detailed empirical discussion on how natural landscapes were specifically imbued with cultural meaning and how they participated in the underlying mechanism of political order construction. As Tang Xiaofeng emphasized in his dialogue with Zhou Shangyi on the cultural construction underlying China's geographical landscapes: "Understanding how natural landscapes were artificially endowed with cultural meaning is key to comprehending traditional Chinese spatial concepts."

Therefore, building upon existing theoretical frameworks, this paper focuses on the transformational process of geographical cognition during the Song Dynasty. Through a close reading of surviving historical texts, it examines in detail how the scholar-official class reconfigured the spatial imagination and political order of the world through the cultural interpretation and redefinition of specific natural landscapes—such as mountain ranges and rivers—thereby seeking to provide a new approach for gaining a deeper understanding of the distinctive characteristics of traditional Chinese geographical cognition.

1. The significance of mountain ranges as political boundaries has increased.

In the traditional Chinese world order, the term "Tianxia" was not merely a geographical concept but rather a composite entity encompassing both a civilizational hierarchy and a political system. As early as the *Book of Documents: Tribute of Yu*, it is recorded: "Yu divided the land into nine provinces, following mountain ranges and dredging rivers, and determining tributes based on the terrain." This passage suggests that Yu mapped out the geographical patterns of the realm, delineated the land into nine provinces, and assigned tribute collections to each province according to its distinct natural and geographical conditions. This provided rulers with an ideal political model for governing the realm. Under the influence of this ideal political model, during the Han and Tang dynasties, a worldview centered on "Great Unity" —rooted in the belief that "all under heaven belongs to the king, and all within his domain are his subjects" —emerged. This was, in essence, an imaginative framework of a "boundless realm." This concept was built upon the formidable military strength and vast territorial expanse of the Han and Tang dynasty.

However, following the An Lushan–Shi Siming Rebellion—and particularly during the Five Dynasties and Northern Song periods—the political landscape underwent a sudden reversal. The loss of the Sixteen Prefectures of Yan and Yun deprived the Northern Song regime of the natural barrier provided by the Great Wall from its very inception, leaving it confronted for an extended period with powerful neighbors such as the Liao and Western Xia. This sense of external pressure was directly internalized as an unprecedented sensitivity among the Song people toward territorial boundaries. The vague, flexible notion of frontier governance characteristic of the Tang Dynasty was replaced by a more precise, linear conception of boundary demarcation. Song-era scholars were keen to compile comprehensive national geographical records, such as the “Yuanfeng Jiuyu Zhi”, the “Yudi Guangji”, and the *Yudi Jisheng*; their purpose was not merely to document geographical information but also to clearly delineate the dynasty's actual area of control and its territorial scope. The “Yuanfeng Jiuyu Zhi”, compiled by Wang Cun and others, opens with an emphasis on "the establishment or abolition of prefectures and counties, the names of garrisons and fortresses, and the benefits derived from mountain and marsh resources monitored by the Yuheng," providing detailed accounts of the location, distance, population, and tributes of administrative divisions at all levels—each entry serving to reinforce meticulous management of internal spatial arrangements and to assert territorial sovereignty.

In response to the shift in territorial scope—from an "unbounded world" to a "bounded realm" —the natural attributes of mountains and rivers were imbued with an unprecedented political significance regarding territorial boundaries, aimed at upholding the dynasty's legitimacy and consolidating its rule.

During the Han and Tang dynasties, significant mountain ranges were often associated with renowned Taoist sacred mountains and grottoes dedicated to immortal cultivation, giving rise to a series of geographical texts concerning the geography of Taoist deities; by the Song dynasty, this perspective began to shift. The Tang dynasty geographer Seng Yixing proposed the "Two-Rong Theory," according to which particular attention should be paid to the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, as well as to two east–west trending mountain ranges that he referred to as the Northern and Southern Jié Mountains. However, this theory did not gain widespread acceptance during the Tang dynasty; historical records and anecdotal accounts from that period merely noted his expertise in astronomy and cartography; it was not until the Song dynasty that this theory was attributed to Seng Yixing and became widely disseminated. The earliest document to record the "Two-Rong Theory" was the *New Book of Tang*, compiled during the Song dynasty; thereafter, it appeared frequently in imperial maps, encyclopedias, classical commentaries, and other scholarly works. Zheng Qiao provided a new interpretation of this theory in his *Tongzhi: Brief Treatise on Astronomy*.

The Northern Frontier is defined by the mountain ranges and rivers spanning the realm, encompassing two distinct boundaries. The Northern Boundary begins at Sanwei and Jishi, embracing the yinaspect of the Zhongnan mountain system; it extends eastward to Mount Hua, crosses the rivers, and encompasses Leishou, Dizhu, Wangwu, and Taihang Mountains; it reaches the right flank of Mount Changshan and then follows the eastern frontier defenses all the way to the Yimo and Chosun regions—this constitutes the Northern Frontier, designed to confine the nomadic tribes. The Southern Boundary begins at Mount Min and Mount Buzhong, embracing the yangaspect of the land system; it extends eastward to Mount Hua, connecting with Mount Yishan, Xiong'er, Waifang, and Tongbai Mountains; it starts from

Shangluo, crosses the Yangtze and Han rivers to the south, includes Mount Wudang and Mount Jing, and extends to Hengyang; then it follows the eastern mountain passes all the way to Dongou and central Min—this constitutes the Southern Frontier, designed to confine the barbarian tribes.

The geographical configuration of China's mountains and rivers is perceived as being embodied by two distinct boundary lines. The northern boundary begins at the Sanwei and Jishi mountains, extends eastward along the northern flank of the Zhongnan Mountain range to the Taihua Mountain, crosses the Yellow River, encompasses the Leishou, Dizhu, Wangwu, and Taihang mountains, reaches the western side of the Changshan Mountain in the north, and then continues eastward along the frontier walls until it extends into the territories of the Yimu and Joseon peoples. The significance of this entire mountain system lies in its role of "limiting the nomadic tribes." The southern boundary starts at the Minshan and Bizhong mountains, extends eastward along the southern flank of these ranges to the Taihua Mountain, connects with the Yishan, Xiong' er, Waifang, and Tongbai mountains, then turns south from Shangluo, crosses the Yangtze and Han rivers, passes through the Wudang and Jing mountains, reaches the southern side of the Hengshan Mountain, and finally extends eastward along the Wuling mountain range to the Dongou and central Min regions. The function of this southern boundary is to "limit the barbarian tribes." Su Shi expressed this view in his "Prayer for Rain at the Tianqi Temple in the Southern Township of Xiashi County, Luzhou": "The Great River, located in the northern frontier, has historically been known as a stronghold of powerful military forces... The Taihang Mountains stretch vast and formidable, cutting across the heart of China; they shield the Ji Province and serve as a natural barrier separating the civilized world from the barbarians." Here, the role of the Taihang Mountains is likewise described as "separating the civilized world from the barbarians." Thus, by the Song Dynasty, the political significance of major mountain ranges had grown; these large mountain systems and renowned peaks, which previously carried spiritual and divine connotations, had transformed into crucial barriers and natural demarcations that distinguished the "Chinese civilization" from the "barbarian peoples" and separated the Song dynasty from the Liao and Xia regimes.

2. The restoration of sacrificial rituals associated with the Five Great Mountains and Four Major Rivers during the Northern Song Dynasty and the construction of their symbolic significance

The "Five Great Mountains and Four Major Rivers" is an ancient Chinese term referring collectively to five renowned mountains and four major rivers. The Five Great Mountains comprise Mount Tai (East Peak), Mount Hua (West Peak), Mount Heng (South Peak), Mount Hengshan (North Peak), and Mount Song (Central Peak); the Four Major Rivers refer to the Yangtze River, the Yellow River, the Huai River, and the Ji River. The worship of mountains and rivers has existed since ancient times, giving rise to the saying that "a nation must rely on its mountains and rivers." The imagery of mountains and rivers was often linked to the fate of the state and the emperors of the populace; as early as the Pre-Qin period, famous mountains and major rivers were associated with the rulers of the feudal states for sacrificial rites; by the Han Dynasty, the worship of the Five Great Mountains had become one of the important ritual systems; the worship of the Four Major Rivers originated from the reverence for natural forces; according to the "Erya: Interpretation of Water," the Four Major Rivers, as they alone flow into the sea, were regarded as symbols of "discharging the impurities of China" and were incorporated into state sacrificial rituals since the Zhou Dynasty.

At the dawn of the Northern Song Dynasty, the dynasty faced a unique geopolitical landscape. The loss of the Sixteen Prefectures of Yanyun disrupted the traditional borders of the Central Plains dynasties, leaving the northern frontier exposed to military pressure from the Liao Dynasty. Mount Heng, the Northern Sacred Mountain, was no longer part of the Northern Song's territory; meanwhile, Mount Tai—the Eastern Sacred Mountain, formerly regarded as the foremost of the Five Sacred Mountains—was situated along the Song–Liao border. Against this backdrop, the Five Sacred Mountains and the Four Great Rivers became synonymous with the country. Even though the Northern Song Dynasty had not yet achieved full territorial unification in reality, the practice of conducting complete sacrificial rites for these sacred sites could symbolize a state of "great unity." By reorganizing the sacrificial system associated with the Five Sacred Mountains and the Four Great Rivers, the Northern Song court could reinforce the dynasty's legitimacy and

orthodoxy, thereby strengthening the stability of its rule.

In the first year of the Dazhong Xiangfu era (1008 CE), Emperor Zhenzong of the Song Dynasty personally presided over the Fengshan ritual at Mount Tai—a political and cultural practice of profound significance. In his imperial edict for the Fengshan ceremony, the emperor declared: "By virtue of my humble character, I have succeeded to the throne despite the instability of the dynasty; fortunately, Heaven and Earth have bestowed their favor, the ancestral temples and the state have been blessed, the cosmos shares this joy, and both the civilized and the barbarian peoples have shown goodwill." This ritual was not merely a restoration of traditional ceremonial practices but also served to affirm the legitimacy of the Northern Song regime through these sacrificial rites—a powerful boost to the morale of the Song dynasty following the signing of the Treaty of Chanyuan. It is worth noting that at the time, Mount Tai was actually situated near the border between the Song and Liao dynasties; this geographical marginalization, however, led the Northern Song court to place even greater emphasis on its symbolic significance.

In addition to the sacrificial rites dedicated to Mount Tai, the Song dynasty inherited the Tang dynasty's tradition by elevating the Five Sacred Mountains to the rank of imperial deities in the fifth year of the Dazhong Xiangfu era (1012 CE); subsequently, the Four Major Rivers, the Four Seas, and the Five Mountain Protectors were successively elevated to the rank of royal nobility. During the Northern Song dynasty, the sacrificial rites for the Five Sacred Mountains exhibited highly systematic and ritualized characteristics. The imperial court explicitly stipulated: "The Five Sacred Mountains and the Four Major Rivers, as well as all renowned mountains and great rivers, have always been honored and worshipped by the sage emperors and wise kings throughout history." The ceremonial protocols were meticulously defined as follows: "Sacrifices for the Mountain Protectors and Sea Deities shall be performed at their respective temples; where no temple exists, an altar shall be erected at the base of the mountain or by the sea; the temples for the Mountain Protectors and Sea Deities shall comprise three halls, with two main gates, and shall be surrounded by walls and encircled with thorny hedge." This institutionalized sacrificial system integrated natural mountains and rivers into the national ritual framework, transforming them into symbols of imperial legitimacy.

Of particular interest is the adaptive approach adopted in the worship of the Northern Peak. Since the traditional Mount Heng was located within the Liao dynasty's territory, the Northern Song dynasty designated Mount Damao in Quyang County, Hebei Province, as the Northern Peak for sacrificial rites. The *History of Song: Treatise on Rituals* records: "Mount Heng is situated in Quyang County; the shrine at Changshan is located in Zhending Prefecture; envoys were dispatched to offer sacrifices at both sites." This practice reflects the pragmatic mindset of the Northern Song scholar-officials: although the geographical location was beyond their direct control, by sustaining the sacrificial rituals, they preserved the integrity of the Five Sacred Mountains system, thereby safeguarding the symbolic unity of the entire realm.

This approach of constructing a symbolic system through ritual institutions reflects the cultural innovation undertaken by the scholar-officials of the Northern Song Dynasty when confronted with geographical realities and challenges. Rather than striving to control specific geographical entities, they sought to maintain the coherence of the "Tianxia" concept through the creation of cultural symbols. This shift marked the transition of the Song Dynasty's conception of "Tianxia" from a focus on geographical entities to one centered on cultural symbols, representing a stark contrast to the approaches adopted during the Han and Tang dynasties.

3. The Crisis and Reconstruction of Geographical Understanding in the Southern Song Dynasty

The evolution of the "Central Land" theory represents the core aspect of the transformation in geographical cognition during the Southern Song Dynasty. The core geographical concepts—such as "Nine Provinces," "Huaxia," and "China"—formulated since the Han and Tang dynasties not only carried geographical implications related to regions and landscapes but also possessed strong political and religious attributes, thereby constructing a geographical notion of "Huaxia China." In this context, the construction of the "Central" orientation was particularly significant. The inscription on the He Zun bronze vessel from the Western Zhou Dynasty, which reads "Reside here in the Central Land," and the

record in the *Book of Documents: Zhao Gao* describing how the Duke of Zhou surveyed the land and established the capital at Luoyi both exemplify this idea. Within the Han–Tang worldview of the "Tianxia" (the country), the "Central" orientation was naturally the possession of "China"; the other four directions were naturally subordinate to the "Central," their products were to be supplied to "China," and their peoples were to submit to China. The "Law of the King" recorded in the *Xunzi: Wangzhi* reflects this very notion:

The North Sea yields horses and dogs, which China has acquired and domesticated; the South Sea yields feathers, horn leather, azurite, and cinnabar, which China has obtained and utilized as wealth; the East Sea yields purple fish and salt, which China has secured for its clothing and sustenance; the West Sea yields leather and patterned antelope hair, which China has acquired for its various uses.

The term "Zhongdi" (Central China), commonly referred to as the Central Plains, denotes a vast region encompassing present-day Henan Province, the southeastern part of Shanxi Province, the southern part of Hebei Province, the western part of Shandong Province, the northwestern part of Anhui Province, and the northern part of Jiangsu Province. The worldview of "the world under heaven," established since the Han and Tang dynasties, held that "China" must naturally and unconditionally and completely occupy this territory. However, following the Jingkang Incident, the Song dynasty rulers retreated southward, and the Southern Song dynasty settled in the Jiangnan region; the loss of the northern Central Plains subjected the scholar-officials to a severe crisis of geographical perception. This not only represented a reduction in territorial extent but also dealt a significant blow to the traditional concept of the "Nine Provinces of Huaxia," and the legitimacy of the Southern Song regime was thereby questioned.

To address this crisis, Cheng Yi first questioned the traditional concept of the "Central Axis of Heaven and Earth": "In the Central Axis of Heaven and Earth, the principles must be perfectly aligned. But how then can one determine its location? The answer is: by observing the cultural artifacts, rituals, and music, one can ascertain the location of the Central Axis of Heaven and Earth." This shift in the definition of the "Central Axis of the Earth" —from a geographical center to a cultural center—provided a theoretical foundation for the legitimacy of the Southern Song dynasty's rule.

Zhu Xi further developed this idea: "The 'center of heaven and earth' does not refer to the physical center of the Earth, but to the center of principle and reason. For example, just as the North Star remains in its place while all other stars revolve around it, this does not imply the physical center of the Earth." This interpretation completely broke free from the constraints of the geocentric worldview and established cultural orthodoxy as the criterion for determining the center of the world.

Within this theoretical framework, although Lin'an was geographically situated in the southeastern part of China, it could be positioned as a new "center of the world" through its cultural heritage. In his work *Records of a Journey to Shu*, Lu You wrote: "From Jingkou to Qiantang, there are dozens of prefectures—all located in strategically advantageous southeastern regions; the prosperity of their cultural and intellectual traditions ranks among the highest in the country." This account, in essence, establishes the status of the Jiangnan region as a new cultural center.

The transformation of this "Central Asian" theory holds profound significance. It means that the concept of "China" is no longer contingent upon a specific geographical region but can be reconstructed anywhere through cultural transmission. This notion endowed subsequent Chinese regimes with strong cultural resilience and also served as an important ideological foundation for the pluralistic yet unified pattern of the Chinese nation.

4. The sublimation of the Yangtze River cultural imagery

During the Southern Song Dynasty, the Yangtze River acquired unprecedented cultural significance. Its role evolved from being merely a geographical river into a cultural barrier and a spiritual symbol—a transformation that profoundly reflects the distinctive characteristics of the Southern Song Dynasty's worldview.

Prior to the Song Dynasty, the Yangtze River was primarily regarded as a geographical boundary, whereas its cultural significance was far less prominent than that of the Yellow River. As the mother river of the Chinese nation, the Yellow River has always been seen as the central symbol of Chinese civilization. However, by the Song Dynasty—particularly following the Jingkang Incident—the shifting political center southward led to a fundamental transformation in the

status of the Yangtze River.

First and foremost, the Yangtze River's role as a military defensive barrier was prominently emphasized. In his memorial, Li Gang stated: "The rugged terrain of the Yangtze River is indeed a natural barrier. Since the Wu dynasty, every state established in the Jiangnan region has invariably relied on this natural defense." During this period, the strategic importance of the Yangtze River defense line was repeatedly underscored, serving as the geographical foundation for the survival of the Southern Song dynasty.

However, what is even more significant is the cultural elevation of the Yangtze River imagery. In his poem, Yang Wanli wrote: "The Yangtze River has become a natural barrier spanning thousands of miles; here, the millennia-old imperial aura has coalesced." By linking the Yangtze River to the fortunes of dynasties, he endowed it with a cultural significance that transcends mere geographical boundaries. In his work *Wu Chuan Lu*, Fan Chengda meticulously documented the humanistic landscapes along the Yangtze River; through the literary prose of these scholars, the Yangtze River emerged as a vital bond connecting the cultures of various regions in southern China.

It is particularly noteworthy that the literati of the Song Dynasty developed a rich local cultural framework during their travels along the Yangtze River. In his work Knowledge Genealogy and Cultural Experience: The Yangtze River Travels of Song Dynasty Literati and the Construction of Local Culture, Tian Feng points out that the Yangtze River's strategic importance as a transportation hub was further enhanced during the Song Dynasty; consequently, literati's journeys along the Yangtze became more commonplace, and cultural activities grew more frequent. Through these travel experiences, the literati not only discovered new landscapes but also continually elevated the cultural significance of the existing ones.

This process of constructing local culture through the travels and literary writings of literati is, in essence, a process of building cultural identity. Through their experiences of local belonging along the Yangtze River, these literati integrated their personal knowledge and memories with the local landscape, thereby forging a new sense of local identity. This identity is no longer contingent upon a geographical central position but is instead rooted in cultural heritage and symbolic significance.

5. The historical significance of the new cosmological worldview during the Song Dynasty

Building upon the preceding arguments, it becomes clear that the scholar-officials of the Song Dynasty, through a series of cultural constructions and reinterpretations of spatial significance, forged a new conception of the world that bore distinct characteristics of their era. The core tenet of this "Song-style conception of the world" lies in the establishment of a global order—centered on cultural orthodoxy and transcending geographical boundaries—while acknowledging the actual political and geographical limits of the realm, by reinforcing cultural identity and ritual symbolism. This conception exhibited three distinctive features and exerted a profound historical influence on subsequent generations.

First, the Song Dynasty's conception of the world evolved to embody a clear awareness of territorial boundaries—shifting from an "infinite world" to a "bounded realm." Unlike the expansive worldview of the Han and Tang dynasties, which posited that "all under heaven belonged to the king," Song scholars, shaped by the political reality of prolonged confrontation with regimes such as the Liao, Xia, and Jin, developed a distinct notion of territorial demarcation. Through the compilation of comprehensive geographical works such as the Yuanfeng Jiuyu Zhi and the Yudi Jisheng, they meticulously documented prefectures, counties, administrative circuits, towns, and fortresses, thereby clearly defining the dynasty's actual area of control. Meanwhile, the popularity and reinterpretation of the "Two Precepts Theory" by the monk Yixing during the Song Dynasty viewed extensive mountain ranges as natural boundaries separating the "barbarian tribes" and the "nomadic peoples" —a reflection of the Song people's shift toward politicizing and demarcating natural geographical features. This transition—from a vague notion of "frontier" to a clear concept of "boundary" —is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Song Dynasty's worldview of the world.

Secondly, this concept of the "Tianxia" (the world) exhibits an inherent fluidity—shifting from a geographical center to a cultural center. In response to the practical dilemma of the fall of the Central Plains and the impossibility of

securing a literal "Central Land" in geographical terms, the scholars of the Southern Song Dynasty achieved a creative transformation of the "Central Land" theory. From Cheng Yi's assertion—that "by observing cultural artifacts, rituals, and music, one can discern the location of the Center of Heaven and Earth" —to Zhu Xi's interpretation—that "the Center of Heaven and Earth does not refer to the physical center of the land, but to the center of principle" —the notion of the "Center of the World" no longer depended on a specific geographical space; instead, it could be reestablished anywhere through cultural transmission. As a result, despite its remote location in the southeastern part of China, Lin'an could still become a new "Center of the World" by affirming its cultural orthodoxy. This fluidity of thought provided theoretical support for the political authority to maintain cultural continuity amid shifting geographical boundaries, demonstrating remarkable cultural resilience.

Thirdly, the Song Dynasty's concept of the "Tianxia" emphasized symbolic unity and orthodoxy. Unlike the Tang Dynasty's "inclusive and accommodating" imperial ideology, the Song scholar-officials placed greater emphasis on cultural purity and exclusivity. Through the ritualization of the sacrificial system for the Five Great Mountains and Four Major Rivers, the adaptive practice of sacrifices at the Northern Sacred Mountain, and the elevation of the Yangtze River as a cultural symbol, the Song people constructed a comprehensive symbolic system of cultural orthodoxy, thereby maintaining the unity inherent in the Tianxia concept. At the same time, they adopted cultural identity—rather than ethnicity or geographical origin—as the core criterion for distinguishing between "China" and "barbarians"; as Zhu Xi put it: "If one is from China, they are considered part of the Chinese people; if one is from the barbarians, they are considered part of the barbarians." This cultural-centric approach enabled the Song Dynasty's conception of the "Tianxia" to preserve a strong sense of orthodoxy even amid spatial compression, and it also provided a new framework for interpreting the idea of great unification in later generations.

The formation of this new conception of the world exerted a profound influence on Chinese history. On one hand, it provided a cultural paradigm for subsequent Chinese regimes in managing ethnic relations and territorial issues—particularly offering theoretical resources for the cultural integration of non-Han dynasties, such as the Yuan and Qing, after they established control over the Central Plains; on the other hand, it reinforced the central role of cultural identity within political communities, laying an ideological foundation for the formation of the Chinese nation's pattern of "multiple entities within one unit." From a broader historical perspective, the shift in the Song Dynasty's conception of the world—from geographical scope to cultural identity—marked a significant transformation in traditional Chinese notions of the state and offers important insights into understanding the continuity and adaptability of Chinese culture.

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