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## Mapping the Sacred: Geospatial Studies on Chinese Religions

This special issue of *RRCS* showcases research focused on the study of spatial networks of religious individuals, sites, and institutions of China present and past. All of the papers are concerned with geocoding (i.e., attaching spatial attributes to) religious data in order to form geographic information systems (GIS). By testing the strengths and limitations of geospatial analysis, these papers transform our ways of knowing Chinese religions and society.

*Mapping the religions of China is a scholarly exercise that spatially organizes how we conceive religion and society in China.*

We have sought research that responds to the spatial turn in the humanities and represents a variety of methods. Collectively, these papers help us consider how geospatial knowledge can augment our understanding of diverse Chinese religions. The authors do not adhere to a uniform method or framework, but are united in a search for new ways of understanding Chinese religions through techniques for spatialization. The topics span the diversity of China's religions, addressing facets of Islam, Buddhism, and popular temples, and encompass Chinese local and regional traditions in modern and premodern societies.

The authors each participate in a broader discussion centered on the tension between quantitative and qualitative approaches to the spatial study of Chinese religions. These essays provide interpretive strategies to empower scholars of religion to adapt social scientific methods. They also delve into the messiness of data. What does it mean to map religiosity? If religious data points are fundamentally not the same as other sociological data points, then how best can we account for religion in comparative analyses? We believe that engaging with these kinds of questions in the context of emerging digital methodologies will continue to produce new and significant knowledge.

It is our hope that these essays may serve as models that will inspire further investigations. Each essay presents particular results in specific fields of research, but also illustrates new methods and computational tools that may be adapted for use with other topics. Not every scholar of Chinese religions will learn how to construct a database, but we believe the following articles

demonstrate that spatial analysis allows us to formulate new questions to ask of China's religions and societies. Basic literacy in spatial modes of understanding will become integral to how we study Chinese religions and society.

The first paper, written by Shih-pei Chen, is based on her original dataset culled from digital editions of local gazetteers. The author uses her exemplary study of historical locust temples to offer methodological reflections that will be of interest to all researchers of historical GIS. Chen uses GIS to reconfirm findings made last century linking locust temples and meteorological patterns, and discovers regional patterns that challenge those earlier conclusions. Her prose focuses on the dynamic qualities of GIS maps, as opposed to static paper maps, which allow us to see patterns in the distribution of locust plagues over time and space.

In the second paper, a study of Chan Buddhism in the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), Jason Protass assembles a GIS dataset to reveal how religious lineages changed over time in China. Protass studies the distribution of Chan abbots as found in Song-era records by blending GIS geospatial analysis and traditional close reading of sectarian Buddhist sources and gazetteers. This essay turns on the historiographic questions surrounding the use of religious documents in GIS analysis. Whereas previous scholarship has emphasized these various lineages as doctrinal opponents, Protass uses his GIS toolkit to demonstrate that Chan lineages in the Northern Song likely corresponded to regional networks that rose and fell in response to outside forces of patronage, politics, and war.

The third paper in this volume, by Marcus Bingenheimer, focuses on an early nineteenth-century monk who traveled throughout China and his published route book, a guide to China's most famous pilgrimage sites. The Qing-era text was published without maps, and Bingenheimer geo-references the main points on each route in order to create visualizations of the extensive network of monastic pilgrimage routes in the nineteenth century. Using his visualizations, Bingenheimer carefully analyzes the pilgrimage routes as they move across landscapes, between famous mountains and urban centers. His paper includes a complete translation of the route book's prefatory essay. This unusual religious geographic treatise contains new information about why and how Buddhists went on pilgrimage in late imperial China.

The last paper, by Zhaohui Hong and Jianfeng Jin, breaks new ground by analyzing the average distance from residential areas to local mosques in eight cities and prefectures in Xinjiang and Ningxia. Using government data, the authors first establish the relative densities of Muslim populations per mosque to approximate the ratios of supply and demand. The authors then apply spatial methods to determine the average distance between residential

areas and mosques in each place, and the average commute time needed to attend regular religious services. This innovative research on the relative accessibility of mosques in Chinese cities offers suggestive insights into the impact of religiosity on everyday life. One can readily imagine employing similar temporal-spatial research methods in other inquiries into religion and society.

We believe that juxtaposing these diverse research topics in a special issue of *RRCS* brings attention to the methodological possibilities of using GIS analysis in studies of religion in Chinese society. The editors of this issue extend a special thanks to Dr. Fenggang Yang for his invaluable advice and direction in forming this issue.

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