2,300 years ago, China was one eighty-first of the world

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Two thousand three hundred years ago, the two characters "China" did not name a country.

By the account of one man from the state of Qi,

it was one eighty-first of the world.

This is not somebody's guess — it is written in the Records of the Grand Historian.

The passage comes from the Records of the Grand Historian,

in the "Biographies of Mencius and Xun Qing."

Sima Qian is recording here a set of claims made by Zou Yan,

a man of Qi in the Warring States period.

The original reads like this — "The Confucians speak of a China that is one part in

eighty-one of the world. China's name is the Red County of Shenzhou.

Within the Red County of Shenzhou there are nine provinces,

which is what Yu set in order; these do not count as provinces.

Outside China there are nine places like the Red County of Shenzhou,

and these are what are called the nine provinces."

In today's words: the "China" the Confucians described is only one eighty-first of the world.

This "China" has a name: the Red County of Shenzhou.

Inside the Red County of Shenzhou there are nine provinces

the nine Yu divided in the Book of Documents, the Yu Gong.

But those nine do not yet count as true provinces.

And beyond the Red County of Shenzhou there are eight more places the same size.

Nine times nine, eighty-one parts in all — that is the whole of "the world."

This is where the word we use today, Shenzhou, comes from.

One thing to make clear. The nine provinces Zou Yan described are not the same set as the Yu Gong nine. This film uses the Yu Gong set throughout

Ji, Yan, Qing, Xu, Yang, Jing, Yu, Liang, Yong.

The reason is simple: the passage above says "what Yu set in order,"

and only the Yu Gong names are the ones that match Yu.

That is a textual decision, not a doctrinal one, and it is the only set used

anywhere in this film.Notice the framing.

Sima Qian is not asserting this himself; he is recording what Zou Yan asserted.

That is the only reason the number survives at all

a historian in a later age wrote one man's claim about scale into the record,

and the claim outlived the man who made it.

The "one eighty-first" is not a measurement anyone could check in his lifetime;

it is a sentence someone else chose to preserve, and preservation is what turned a private

speculation into a shared fact.

Zou Yan was a man of Qi.

His birth and death are not recorded in the histories;

the more common account places him roughly between 324 and 250 BC.

He held the doctrine of the Five Powers in succession,

using the rotation of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth to explain why dynasties replace one

another. The mechanism is plain to state: each element carries a virtue,

and when one virtue is spent the next element in the cycle supplies the one after

it, so a dynasty that has lost its virtue is,

by that logic, already finished and the next ruler's authority comes from the element that follows.

He also proposed the Great Nine Provinces.

The people of Qi gave him a nickname — Tan Tian Yan,

"Zou Yan who talks about heaven."

The nickname is recorded in the Records of the Grand Historian.

The people of Qi sang it like this: Tan Tian Yan,

Diao Long Shi, Zhi Gu Guo Kun.

Three men, three traits. Zou Yan could talk about heaven;

Zou Shi could carve dragons; Chunyu Kun spoke as smoothly as oil on an axle.

The verdict is half admiration — for a man willing to redraw the whole world

and half mockery, for talking about things too far away to check.

Both halves are in the same six characters.

The people of Qi were not sure whether to be proud of him or to laugh

at him. There is one detail that is easy to pass over.

Zou Yan was a man of Qi.

Qi is on today's Shandong peninsula, with sea on three sides.

In Warring States Qi, seafaring was nothing new — people of that time had crossed from the

peninsula to the Korean peninsula. Someone who sees the sea every day will naturally ask one

question: what is on the other side?

The idea that there are nine more places the size of China did not necessarily come

from anything he saw at sea.

But the place it was born is right on the coast.

That is our reading, not something the histories record.

It does, though, explain one thing: why this doctrine came out of the eastern seaboard and

not the Central Plains. The sea is the only edge of the world you can stand

at and see. Every land border has a neighbour beyond the hill;

the ocean has only a horizon, and a horizon is a question with no answer in

view — which is exactly the question this doctrine was built to answer.

A word that survived from the Warring States to today has changed purpose several times in

two thousand three hundred years. The earliest use kept four characters joined:

the Red County of Shenzhou. Later, people began to take it apart

saying either "Red County" or "Shenzhou."

That is not our inference; that is how the later literature actually uses it.

The best-known use of "Red County" is a poem Mao Zedong wrote in 1950,

"Huanxisha: Reply to Mr. Liu Yazi": "Long is the night,

no dawn on Red County's sky; a hundred years of monsters dancing."

The use of "Shenzhou" comes from a poem the same author wrote in 1958,

"Seven-Character Regulated Verse, Two Poems: Sending Off the God of Plague."

Note that the full title is "Two Poems," not simply "Regulated Verse"

it is a set of two.

The second contains this line: "Willow branches by the thousand in the spring wind;

six hundred million of Shenzhou, all like Shun and Yao."

That year, Yujiang County in Jiangxi eliminated schistosomiasis; the People's Daily reported it on 30 June 1958,

and Mao Zedong wrote the two poems the next day.

Put the two examples side by side and something interesting shows.

The same person, writing on the same word, chose "Red County" once and "Shenzhou" once.

By the mid-twentieth century, then, "Red County" and "Shenzhou" were two interchangeable terms

both ancient names for this land.

Eight years separate the two poems.

Nothing else does. What changed between them is not the word but its register.

A name fixed inside a geography treatise stays a proposition you can argue with;

the same name echoing through poems, and then pinned to a spacecraft,

becomes something a person feels before they parse it.

Repetition in verse does this — it wears a word smooth until it reads as if it

had always belonged to the speaker.

A spacecraft borrows that settled warmth: it takes an ancient name not because the name describes

the machine, but because the name already carries the feeling of reaching upward.

But Shenzhou moved one layer further after that.

It went from a name in a geography text to a word carrying feeling:

used in poems, used in names.

The spacecraft that goes up today is called Shenzhou — 「神舟

the same sound. It is no longer a geographical proposition.

It has gradually become a kind of self-designation.

That is a very long journey for two characters.

A claim about scale, written down by one man in the state of Qi,

ends up as a name people use for themselves.

Back to Zou Yan. Once this doctrine of the Great Nine Provinces was out,

what happened? The Records of the Grand Historian gives two lines

one a verdict, one an outcome.

The verdict is four characters: "his words are vast and irregular"

he said things of enormous scale, contrary to ordinary sense.

The outcome is this: "when princes and great men first met his doctrine,

they were shaken and turned toward it; afterwards it could not be put into practice."

The feudal lords and nobles, hearing his teaching for the first time,

were stunned by it and even wanted to follow it.

In the end, no one actually carried it out.

Why would a doctrine that magnifies the world eighty-one times fail to spread?

Because it was useless. To a ruler of that time,

where the boundary of the world lay made no difference to how he collected tax that

day, raised troops, or fought his neighbours.

The map Zou Yan drew was too large — so large that it had nothing to do

with the age he lived in.

He could not even prove it.

There was no way, then, to test a claim like "one eighty-first."

A doctrine that cannot change what a ruler does on any given day is a doctrine

a ruler has no reason to fund.

So the nickname "talking about heaven" slowly shifted from admiration into a way of saying "unbounded."

In later ages the Great Nine Provinces doctrine was filed under the "strange and far-fetched,"

alongside yin-yang portents. A ruler's attention is a budget.

Every teaching he funds is one he is not funding something else

a canal, a wall, a campaign closer to hand.

A doctrine about the shape of the whole world asks for the same attention as a

teaching about this year's harvest, yet gives nothing a harvest gives.

That is the quiet meaning of "could not be put into practice":

the doctrine was not forbidden, only never given a reason to be paid for.

But the story turns here. In the nineteenth century, world maps reached China.

People suddenly found that beyond China there really were other civilizations,

other landmasses, other oceans. "What lies beyond China?"

the question Zou Yan asked was right.

He only got the answer wrong.

He answered nine places the size of China; the real answer is seven continents and four

oceans. But in his own time, the number of people who could even ask the question was already very small.

Today Shenzhou is still one of the names for China.

Several others stand alongside it: Red County, the Nine Provinces,

Huaxia, Zhonghua. Each has its own origin.

The one this film is about is the most unusual of them

because when Shenzhou was born, it was not a self-designation.

It was a unit of measurement.

It answers "how large are we," not "who are we."

And those Nine Provinces of the Yu Gong — Ji, Yan,

Qing, Xu, Yang, Jing, Yu, Liang, Yong — are not abstract ideas.

They correspond to specific ground. Ji is roughly today's Hebei;

Yan is western Shandong; Qing is eastern Shandong; Xu is northern Jiangsu;

Yang is the lower Yangtze; Jing is the two lakes region;

Yu is the Central Plains; Liang is Sichuan; Yong is the Shaanxi and Gansu area.

Two thousand years on, some of these names became the name of a province,

some the name of a city, and some the place where the food we eat every

day is grown. This is what the series sets out to do.

Shenzhou: China's Living Heritage is not a travel film, and not a history film.

What it sets out to do is put the two characters Shenzhou back onto specific ground

walking it stop by stop, looking at where each place's name came from,

what it produces, what business it does, who it has produced,

and what it has left behind.

These names did not survive because anyone preserved them on purpose.

They survived because administration keeps its own memory: a province takes the name of the region

it governs, a city keeps the name of the capital it replaced.

The ground holds the word long after the word's first meaning is gone.

We start from Beijing, then follow the canal to Yangzhou,

to Quanzhou, to Guangzhou. The people who sailed out from Guangzhou built watchtowers in Kaiping,

earthen buildings in Fujian, and in Shanxi drew up China's first draft note;

in Huizhou they raised memorial arches.

Further on are the gardens of Suzhou, the West Lake in Hangzhou,

the porcelain of Jingdezhen; the cave temples at Yungang, Longmen,

and Dunhuang; Mount Tai and Qufu.

Each of those places is one entry in the nine provinces.

Each of them can be walked.

That is the whole method: no summary, no overview — just one piece of ground at a time, until the word is standing on solid earth again.

Follow this line to its end and it comes back to Beijing

because the place we set out from and the place we return to are the same

city.

Last, back to Zou Yan. He travelled widely in his life,

but he stayed longest in one state — Yan.

King Zhao of Yan built him a palace called the Jieshi Palace,

and took him as his teacher.

The Records of the Grand Historian puts it this way:

"King Zhao swept the road before him, and asked to take a seat among the disciples and receive instruction" — the king holding a broom to clear the way for him,

asking to sit in a pupil's place and hear him teach.

A ruler, treating a scholar in that posture.

Where was Yan? Its capital was called Ji — and that is where Beijing stands today.

Next time, we begin from here.

Everything mentioned in this film is still where it was.

A word, a river, a city — what kept them alive this long is nothing else:

in every generation, someone remembered. The word is still in the dictionary.

The river still runs. The city still has people in it,

going to work and coming home.

None of that is a monument.

All of it is what the word was pointing at.

The full transcript, the bibliography, and further reading for this film are at sylogs.com.

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