

## Epilogue

# What Is a Geographical Perspective on China's History?

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That there is a geographical perspective must be true: there was a conference, this was the topic, these scholars wrote diverse and interesting papers true to the theme. But assuming that there is a geographic perspective, what is it that makes a perspective geographic? And what difference does a geographic perspective make in the study of China's history?

It is striking that these essays have been written by historians rather than by geographers. There are geographers who study China, and a few even study China's history. In fact one of the great humanist geographers, the late Yi-fu Tuan, wrote a historical geography of his native China.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps reflecting trends since Harvard unfortunately abolished its Geography department in 1950, studies of China's geography have not flourished in the US. Cressey's geographical survey was published in 1934, and Herrmann's historical atlas in 1935, although we do have Blunden and Elvin's wonderful cultural atlas,<sup>2</sup> and Cordell Yee's superb study of cartographic history.<sup>3</sup> There has been some work by geographers on contemporary China,<sup>4</sup> but it is fair to say that the US has seen fewer historical geographers working on China than historians with geographical interests.<sup>5</sup>

In China the story is very different. The modern historical geography of China in China is a shift from ancient traditions of administrative geography<sup>6</sup> and was motivated by nationalism and national salvation.<sup>7</sup> It continues to thrive. The Center for China's Historical Geography 中國歷史地理研究中心 at Fudan University, founded by Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, was responsible for the most authoritative historical atlas of China prior to the China Historical GIS,<sup>8</sup> publishes the journal *Historical Geography Research* 歷史地理研究, and has physical and human geographers on its faculty, although rather fewer than the historians.

Outside of Fudan there was the late Cao Wanru 曹婉如, the authority on the history of cartography, whose three volumes on historical maps is unparalleled.<sup>9</sup>

To bring into clearer focus the geographic perspective embedded in the contributions in this volume I want first to consider how geography as a field/discipline/perspective, which exists independently of historical studies, currently defines itself and its relation to history.

In his thoroughgoing survey of historical geography, Alan Baker proposes an intersection between history and geography through geographic discourses on location, environment, landscape, and region.<sup>10</sup> But his subtitle, “bridging the divide,” reminds that there is a divide between the disciplines. The problem is that even if we know that life takes place through time in space, the basic technologies for analyzing the temporal and the spatial are different and nearly incommensurate. The historian’s chronology, a fundamental tool for sorting out what happens over time, facilitates narratives along one or a few threads. Trying to keep track of what is taking place everywhere over time is unmanageable. The geographer’s map, just as fundamental a tool, reveals variation through space at the expense of change over time. Representing space and time together, or spatiotemporal modeling, is a major computational challenge.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, both necessarily make choices of scale in representing time and space (one can speak in terms of centuries and countries or days and villages), and those choices can deceive as well as reveal.<sup>12</sup> The choice of a spatial or temporal perspective has consequences. As an historian compiling a chronology of the previous 1400 years of history and as a politician leading a government anxious to keep from changing social and economic life, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1018-1086) sought to define enduring patterns of institutional failure and success, but he had no interest in understanding how policy outcomes were affected by regional differences. In fact, writing at a time when both government and private scholars were interested in historical geography and new methods of cartography, Sima did not include a single map in his great *Mirror for Aid in Government* 資治通鑑.

What do geographers think a geographic perspective is today? Since 2001, the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, the leading international journal in the field, has published articles in four areas: Environmental Sciences; Methods, Models, and GIS; Nature and Society; and People, Place, and Region. All four are of interest to the geographically-minded historian. Environmental science has turned away from environmental determinism to focus on process-based approaches, in which an environmental system is understood in terms of the dynamic combination of multiple systems of human-environmental interaction.<sup>13</sup> Geographic information system (GIS) technology has become probably the most important tool for cartography, modeling, and spatial analysis and is having an impact in many fields beyond geography, including history.<sup>14</sup> A special issue of *Historical Geography* was devoted to surveying emerging trends in historical GIS in 2005.<sup>15</sup> There is a book length introduction to historical

GIS,<sup>16</sup> and two conference volumes of articles applying GIS in historical research have appeared.<sup>17</sup> The study of interaction between humans and the environment (“nature and society”) continues to be important.<sup>18</sup>

The study of people, place, and region is, I think, the area in which historians generally work when they see themselves as being geographic.<sup>19</sup> In her retrospective, Audrey Kobayashi identifies three discourses in the 1930s and 40s: Carl Sauer’s focus on how culture formed the characteristics of regions, Wright’s notion that humans could be understood through their conceptions of geography (“geosophy”), and regional geography as understood through the products of economic activity. G. William Skinner has roots in the last of these. Beginning in the 1970s, two related trends have emerged and continued into the present: the humanistic geography associated with Yi-fu Tuan and Denis Cosgrove, among others,<sup>20</sup> and the post-structuralist Marxist geography of Edward Soja and others.<sup>21</sup>

Humanistic geography has been the subject of two recent volumes, one is very much in this tradition,<sup>22</sup> the other addresses the application of GIS techniques to humanistic scholarship.<sup>23</sup> But what marks something geographic as “humanistic”? It is, I think, a focus on *place* as something socially and culturally constructed and a recognition that the ways in which humans at a given time and place relate to the environment is mediated by the ways in which they understand themselves and their relation to the world.<sup>24</sup> Another way of understanding this, perhaps a more social science than humanistic view, is Pred’s structuration theory, in which place is “constantly becoming a human product.”<sup>25</sup>

Historical studies, like many fields, is making a spatial turn.<sup>26</sup> These papers tell us something about what a spatial turn is coming to mean in the practice of historical studies.

A thread running through many essays is the role of conceptions of space and place in history. In Stephen Whiteman’s essay, for example, we see the Manchu emperor using an interpretation of physical geography to reach a very human political conclusion. In this case, the argument is that Manchu origins and the sacred origins of the people they have conquered are connected; this was one of the many forms of the Qing dynasty claim to legitimacy. In fact, China has a long history of using the physical landscape in making claims about the extent of empire—one of the earliest is the “Tribute of Yu” piece in the *Book of Documents*, in which Yu describes the Nine Regions. Qing ideological claims appealed to shared geographic knowledge; more generally ideas about “country” appealed to such knowledge, a point made by one of the editors, Yongtao Du, in his conference paper on comprehensive gazetteers.

Later imperial literati could acquire a geographic view of the territorial extent of the country through the maps in encyclopedias and historical atlases. These maps did not, as many do today, depict China as an isolate, removed from geographic context. Rather, they showed dynastic territory as part of a larger continental and maritime world.<sup>27</sup> Laura Hostetler’s study of three Qing cartographic surveys of the realm points out that maps were part of emerging global

information flows, that they were visualizations of an empire, and they were propositions about that empire in a larger world. Sometimes the frontiers were porous zones of contact and mixing, not easily demarcated whether by cartographic assertion or by ethnicity. Kathlene Baldanza's account of the Vietnam frontier reminds us that frontier making was something quite different from border marking. Frontiers existed between communities, both of which possessed agency. Yajun Mo's account of the new frontier of Xikang province in the Republican era brings out another aspect of frontier: the alterity of the population across "our" frontier provides "us" with an identity, our commonality ultimately lies in a claim to being different from others.

"Identity" is a problematic concept, as one might expect of a word that denotes both sameness and difference. Of the multiple ways of establishing an identity (by status, by organizational membership, by lineage), place-based identity has been a particularly strong feature of Chinese life, particularly during the later imperial period.<sup>28</sup> Local identities are not given, they have to be constructed. As Andrew Chittick shows with a study of dragon boat racing, this happens at the neighborhood level. It can be no less important for the most literate elites, as in Xiaoquan Raphael Zhang's account of a seventeenth century literatus.

A "place" is more than a name, it is all the attributes that people associate with it, attributes which become available in some sense to those who claim a place-based identity. The cultural construction of place creates social capital, to be sure, but it also creates self-conscious bonds of loyalty that can result in communal action.<sup>29</sup> I find it particularly interesting that a place-based identity easily transcends the dynasty, which is temporally limited. Regimes come and go, but a place can be maintained. At first glance this might seem a threat to central authority, and at times the center has acted as if it were a threat. As Huei-Ying Kuo shows in her study of overseas Chinese investment in Fujian, however, from the participants' perspective the mobilization of resources through a place-based identity to help that place can appear to be a nationalistic act. It depends upon whether one sees the nation as constituted by places or places as a function of the state.

A challenge for historians, who focus on change over time, is seeing change unfolding through "space," especially when that space is constituted by many places at many levels of aggregation, from the neighborhood to the nation. It is important to see that the analysis of spatial features, whether it involves using geographic information system technology or not, is a data-driven, empirically minded enterprise. Spatial analysis is concerned with how things are arranged in space (location and distance) and the significance of those arrangements; it seeks spatial patterns in large amounts of data, thus to identify the relationships between different kinds of data with spatial attributes; it makes use of data that can be quantified, but it also draws on aerial imagery and remote sensing data; it seeks the relationships between different kinds of data with spatial attributes; it provides a context in which the aggregate and the particular instance can both be taken into account; finally it can be used to create spatiotemporal models of phenomena such as population change.

It is not the meaningfulness of the spatial feature to those who experienced it that is telling, but the ways the topography of the land or the urban grid constrains and enables human action. Luke Hambleton's study of the coastal clearances in early Qing takes physical geography seriously. Similarly Gregory Rohlf's study of the urban morphology of highland towns in Qinghai is an example of analyzing spatial organization.

Regional systems analysis, the discovery of spatial systems in the physiographic landscape or in the marketing systems of a region's villages and towns, is best known in the China field through the work of the late G. William Skinner.<sup>30</sup> During the latter part of his career Skinner adopted GIS technology.<sup>31</sup> Jiang Wu, Daoqin Tong, and Karl Ryavec's study of regional religious systems in contemporary China builds on Skinner's work in his application of GIS, spatial analysis and statistics.

Today Skinner's spatial data are being prepared for release by Merrick Lex Berman at Harvard, and some major data series are already available through the China Historical GIS website (<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis/>). The China Historical GIS is meant to provide the basis for large-scale historical spatial analysis by providing a time series of changes in the field administration from 221 BCE to 1911, the idea being that spatial historians can attach their data to places, thus to see change through space and time.<sup>32</sup> To the extent that spatial analysis requires learning to use GIS software, acquire data, and create GIS datasets, it remains quite challenging. Today, however, there are web-based mapping services which do not require technical knowledge (although it helps to read the instructions). One example, which already includes hundreds of layers of China data is Harvard's WorldMap system (<http://worldmap.harvard.edu/>).

The spatial turn in historical studies of China is finding many paths, from the intellectual and cultural history to quantitative social science history. The great promise of this work, as exemplified by this book, is that it changes the way we think about history.

## Notes

1. Yi-fu Tuan, "Humanistic Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 66, no. 2 (1976): 266-76. Yi-fu Tuan, *A Historical Geography of China* (Piscataway, NJ: AldineTransaction, 2008).

2. George Babcock Cressey, *China's Geographic Foundations, a Survey of the Land and Its People*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1934). Albert Herrmann and Harvard-Yenching Institute, *Historical and Commercial Atlas of China*, Monograph Series/Harvard-Yenching Institute, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935). Caroline Blunden and Mark Elvin, *Cultural Atlas of China*, Rev. ed. (New York: Checkmark Books, 1998).

3. Cordell D.K. Yee, "Cartography in China," in J.B. Harley and David Woodward, eds., *The History of Cartography*, Vol. 2, Bk. 2, *Cartography in Traditional East and Southeast Asian Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

4. For example, Gregory Veeck, *The Uneven Landscape: Geographical Studies in Post-Reform China*, *Geoscience and Man*, Vol. 30 (Baton Rouge, LA: Geoscience Publications Dept. of Geography and Anthropology Louisiana State University, 1991), Gregory Veeck, Clifton Pannell, Christopher J. Smith and Youqin Huang, *China's Geography: Globalization and the Dynamics of Political, Economic, and Social Change*, *Changing Regions in a Global Context* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

5. An important exception is the late Paul Wheatley, whose work was not exclusive to China. Paul Wheatley, *The Pivot of the Four Quarters; a Preliminary Enquiry into the Origins and Character of the Ancient Chinese City* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1971). Historians with geographic/environmental interests include Mark Elvin (Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), Mark Elvin and Cuirong Liu, *Sediments of Time: Environment and Society in Chinese History*, *Studies in Environment and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)), Robert Marks (Robert Marks, *Tigers, Rice, Silk, and Silt: Environment and Economy in Late Imperial South China*, *Studies in Environment and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)), and of course G. William Skinner who is discussed below.

6. Tang Xiaofeng, *From Dynastic Geography to Historical Geography: A Change in Perspective Towards the Geographical Past of China* (Beijing: The Commercial Press International, Ltd., 2000).

7. For its history, see Minghui Peng and 彭明輝, *Lishi dilixue de xingqi (1919-1949): Yi "Shidi xuebao" "Yugong banyuekan" wei zhongxin de tantao 歷史地理學的興起 (1919-1949): 以“史地學報”“禹貢半月刊”為中心的探討* (N.P.: N.P., 1994).

8. Tan Qixiang 譚其驤, *Zhongguo Lishi ditu ji 中國歷史地圖集* (Shanghai: Ditu chubanshe, 1982).

9. Cao Wanru 曹婉如 et al., eds., *Zhongguo Gudai Ditu Ji 中國古代地圖集*, 3 vols. (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990-94).

10. Alan R.H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide*, *Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography*, 36 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

11. See, for example, Donna J. Peuquet, *Representations of Space and Time* (New York: Guilford Press, 2002). For an earlier approach see, for example, Tommy Carlstein, Don Parkes and N. J. Thrift, *Human Activity and Time Geography* (London: E. Arnold, 1978).

12. Mark S. Monmonier, *Mapping It Out: Expository Cartography for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, *Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), Mark S. Monmonier, *How to Lie with Maps*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

13. Richard Aspinall, "A Century of Physical Geography Research in the *Annals*," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100, no. 5 (2010): 1049-60.

14. Mei-Po Kwan, "A Century of Method-Oriented Scholarship in the *Annals*," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100, no. 5 (2010): 1060-75.

15. Note too the special issue of *Social Science History*, Anne Kelly Knowles, ed., *Special Issue: Historical GIS: The Spatial Turn in Social Science History* (*Social Science History* 24, no. 3, 2000).

16. Ian Gregory and Paul S. Ell, *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies and Scholarship*, Cambridge Studies in Historical Geography, 39 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

17. Anne Kelly Knowles, ed., *Past Time, Past Place: GIS for History* (Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2002); Anne Kelly Knowles and Amy Hillier, *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2008).

18. Karl S. Zimmerer, "Retrospective on Nature-Society Geography: Tracing Trajectories (1911-2010) and Reflecting on Translations," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100, no. 5 (2010): 1076-94.

19. This paragraph follows Audrey Kobayashi, "People, Place, and Region: 100 Years of Human Geography in the *Annals*," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 100, no. 5 (2010): 1095-106.

20. Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); Denis E. Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision: Seeing, Imagining and Representing the World*, International Library of Human Geography, Vol. 12 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008); David Lowenthal, "Geography, Experience, and Imagination: Towards a Geographical Epistemology," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51, no. 3 (1961): 241-60, Tuan, *A Historical Geography of China*.

21. Edward W. Soja, "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 2 (1980): 207-25, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

22. Michael Dear, Jim Ketchum, Sarah Luria, and Doug Richardson, eds., *Geohumanities: Art, History, Text at the Edge of Place* (London: Routledge, 2011).

23. David J. Bodenhamer, John Corrigan and Trevor M. Harris, *The Spatial Humanities: GIS and the Future of Humanities Scholarship*, Spatial Humanities (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011).

24. Leonard Guelke, "The Relations between Geography and History Reconsidered," *History and Theory* 36, no. 2 (1997): 216-34.

25. Allan Pred, "Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 74, no. 2 (1984): 279-97.

26. Barney Warf and Santa Arias, *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Routledge Studies in Human Geography (London: Routledge, 2009), Jo Guldi, *The Spatial Turn in History*, 01 APR 2011, Institute for Enabling Geospatial Scholarship at the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia Library. Available: <http://spatial.scholarslab.org/spatial-turn/disciplinary-perspectives/the-spatial-turn-in-history> (accessed January 16, 2012).

27. Cao Wanru, et al., eds., *Zhongguo gudai ditu ji*.

28. The period might be bookended with a study of the appearance of local history in Song, in Peter K. Bol, "The Rise of Local History: History, Geography, and Culture in Southern Song and Yuan Wuzhou," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 61, no. 1 (2001): 37-76, and of the problematic nature of place-based identity in the modern era in Bryna

Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), and David S. G. Goodman, "Structuring Local Identity: Nation, Province, and County in Shanxi During the 1990s," *China Quarterly* 172 (2002): 837-62.

29. See, for example, Si-yen Fei, *Negotiating Urban Space: Urbanization and Late Ming Nanjing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009); Antonia Finnane, *Speaking of Yangzhou: A Chinese City, 1550-1850* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Tobie S. Meyer-Fong, *Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

30. For example, G. William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 24, nos. 1-3 (1964-1965), G. William Skinner, "Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems," in G. William Skinner, ed., *The City in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), G. William Skinner, "The Structure of Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (1985): 271-92.

31. See, for example, G. William Skinner, Mark Henderson and Jianhua Yuan, "China's Fertility Transition through Regional Space: Using GIS and Census Data for a Spatial Analysis of Historical Demography," *Social Science History* 24, no. 3 (2000): 613-48. For an introduction to Skinner's "Hierarchical Regional Space" analysis, see the work of his collaborator Mark Gregory Henderson, "Spatial Contexts of Urbanization and Land Conservation in North China," Ph.D., University of California, 2004.

32. For an account of the CHGIS project see Peter K. Bol, "Creating a GIS for the History of China," in Knowles and Hillier, eds., *Placing History*; Peter K. Bol and Jianxiong Ge, "China Historical GIS," *Historical Geography* 33 (2005): 150-52. The CHGIS datasets are freely available for download. "China Historical Geographic Information System 1.0-5.0, [www.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~chgis)" 2002-2012, Harvard University and Fudan University.