

The Spatial Organization of Territory in Imperial China

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Beginning with its earliest history, Chinese rulers organized the land under their dominion into territories that could be mapped and taxed. Yu the Great 大禹, the mythic founder of China's primordial first dynasty, channeled the rivers into their proper courses, created Nine Provinces 九州 with censuses and tax quotas, and Five Feudatories 五服 that organized the social hierarchy. From that time onwards, all historical and geographical texts tracked the Persistence and Transformation (yan'ge 沿革) of the territory of the realm.

This paper introduces a new methodology for spatial history, whereby we can analyze the instances of spatial change in order to understand changes in the way that the state deployed its limited resources around the realm in different ways at different times. By thus interpreting the political landscape, we can identify when and where the imperial court chose to extract more resources from the population, wage war, and colonize its peripheries; and when and where it chose to disinvest from regions that were declining in wealth and population, marginal to a regime's agenda, or capable of remaining stable even with a light state footprint.

In addition to proposing a methodology and justification for spatial political history, this paper introduces the format, content, and results of my "Digital Gazetteer of Song China," an SQL database organized to allow this kind of historical inquiry.