

Fifteen Topics in Historical Geography of China

Maoli Han

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北京大学出版社
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS



Springer

Maoli Han
Research Institute for Historical
Geography, College of Urban
and Environmental Sciences
Peking University
Beijing, China

Translated by
Jing Yu 
School of Foreign Languages
Shanghai Jiao Tong University
Shanghai, China

ISBN 978-981-96-7721-4 ISBN 978-981-96-7722-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-7722-1>

Jointly published with Peking University Press
The printed edition is not for sale in China Mainland. Customers from China Mainland please order the
print book from Peking University Press.
ISBN of the Co-Publisher's edition: 978-7-301-33820-9

Translation from the Chinese language edition: “中国历史地理十五讲” by Maoli Han, © Peking
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Supported by the Chinese Fund for the Humanities and Social Sciences
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Foreword

Fifteen Topics in Historical Geography of China is a groundbreaking book that fills a critical gap in English-language scholarship. It offers a systematic exploration of the intricate relationship between geography and history in China, demonstrating how natural landscapes, climate, and topography have shaped human civilization over millennia. Unlike general history books, this work provides a spatial perspective, revealing how geography influenced territorial expansion, trade routes, administrative divisions, military strategies, and urban development. Through its well-structured and research-driven approach, the book presents an invaluable resource for students, scholars, and educators alike.

As a former student of Professor Han at Peking University, I was fortunate to learn from one of the foremost scholars in the field of historical geography. I often found myself wishing for a structured, comprehensive textbook that could help me organize and deepen my understanding of the discipline. Now, with *Fifteen Topics in Historical Geography of China*, that wish has been fulfilled—not only for me but for countless others who have long awaited an English-language resource of this caliber.

For decades, students and scholars in Western countries have dreamed of having access to a textbook that provides an authoritative and systematic exploration of China's historical geography. Unlike general history books, which often overlook geographical factors, this work demonstrates how China's natural environment has shaped its political, economic, and cultural history. It presents a nuanced understanding of the spatial dynamics that have influenced territorial expansion, trade routes, administrative divisions, military strategies, and urban development over thousands of years.

As a professor of Chinese history in Canada, I have long struggled to find a comprehensive reference on Chinese historical geography for my students. The lack of reliable, updated, and well-structured materials in English has been a persistent challenge. The search for a suitable textbook has often been frustrating, as existing literature either lacks depth or fails to provide a coherent framework for understanding the subject. With the publication of this book, that challenge has finally been resolved. This work fills a crucial gap, providing an invaluable resource for both educators and students who wish to understand China's past through the lens of geography.

Beyond its utility in the classroom, this book also serves as an important bridge between Chinese and Western academia. One of the longstanding issues in Sinology is the limited accessibility of Chinese scholarship to Western readers. Chinese historians and geographers have produced a wealth of research over the past few decades, yet much of it remains untranslated and largely unknown outside of China. *Fifteen Topics in Historical Geography of China* offers Western scholars a rare opportunity to engage with cutting-edge research conducted by leading Chinese academics. By making this scholarship available in English, the book helps to foster a deeper and more nuanced understanding of China's historical geography on a global scale.

What sets this book apart from other resources is that it is not merely a summary of existing knowledge—it is an original contribution to the field. Professor Han has spent decades conducting research and refining her insights through years of teaching. Her extensive academic experience is evident in every chapter, where she integrates her own findings with established scholarship, providing fresh perspectives and in-depth analysis. The book does not simply present historical facts; it also introduces readers to the methodologies and analytical frameworks that define historical geography as a discipline. This combination of scholarship and pedagogy makes it an invaluable resource for both students and seasoned researchers alike.

The book is organized into fifteen lectures, each addressing a key aspect of China's historical geography. It begins by tracing the origins of geography as a discipline, examining its evolution from a survival tool to a means of environmental transformation. Subsequent lectures explore crucial themes such as the shifting boundaries of China's territory, the impact of climate change on agriculture, the migration-driven shifts in economic centers, and the significance of roads, canals, and military strategies in shaping historical events. Other topics include the role of geographical conditions in the rise and fall of dynasties, the cultural exchanges facilitated by the Silk Road, and the spatial dynamics of capital cities. Each lecture presents a carefully structured argument, supported by historical evidence and geographic analysis.

Since its original publication in 2015, *Fifteen Topics in Historical Geography of China* has gained immense popularity in China. The book has been reprinted over twelve times and republished twice, a testament to its academic value and widespread impact. It has become a standard reference in historical geography courses at major Chinese universities and has shaped the way students and scholars approach the subject. Now, with its English translation, this book has the potential to reach an even wider audience, benefiting those engaged in Chinese studies, historical geography, and related fields.

I have no doubt that this book will be warmly welcomed by scholars, students, and educators in English-speaking countries. For those teaching Chinese history or historical geography, it will serve as an essential reference. For researchers, it will provide a wellspring of insights into China's spatial history. And for general readers with an interest in Chinese civilization, it will offer a fascinating exploration of the geographical forces that have shaped one of the world's oldest continuous cultures.

In a world where China's historical and contemporary significance continues to grow, understanding the country's past is more important than ever. This book

provides a crucial perspective, helping us appreciate how geography has shaped—and continues to shape—the destiny of China. By bridging the gap between Chinese and Western academia, it also represents a step forward in fostering greater global dialogue and collaboration in the study of history and geography.

I am honored to introduce this work to an English-speaking audience and deeply grateful to Professor Han for making her invaluable insights accessible to the world. I hope that readers will find this book as enlightening and inspiring as I have. It is not just a book—it is a milestone in the study of China's historical geography, and I believe it will remain an essential resource for years to come.

Long Cheng
Department of Humanities, Alexander
College
Vancouver, Canada

Competing Interests The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this manuscript.

Timeline of Chinese History

Prehistoric Times

Yuanmou Man (ca. 1.7 million years ago): One of the earliest hominids in China.

Peking Man (ca. 500,000–200,000 years ago): *Homo erectus* fossils found in Zhoukoudian.

Beginnings of agriculture and animal domestication (ca. 10,000 BCE).

Ancient History

Xia Dynasty (legendary, dates uncertain): The legendary first dynasty in traditional Chinese history.

Shang Dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE): The earliest historically verified dynasty, known for bronze casting and early writing.

Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1046–256 BCE): Divided into the Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) and Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE) periods, marked by the development of classical Chinese philosophy. The Eastern Zhou is further divided into the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE).

Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE): The first imperial dynasty, known for unifying China and beginning the construction of the Great Wall.

Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE): Divided into the Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE) and Eastern Han (25–220 CE). Known for significant cultural and technological advancements and the establishment of the Silk Road.

Imperial China

Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE): Divided into the Cao Wei, Shu, and Wu states.

Chin Dynasty (266–420 CE): Divided into the Western Chin (266–316 CE) and Eastern Chin (317–420 CE).

Southern and Northern Dynasties (420–589 CE): A period of disunity and conflict between various regional kingdoms.

Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE): Short-lived but pivotal, known for reuniting China and initiating the construction of the Grand Canal.

Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE): Often regarded as a golden age of Chinese civilization, with significant cultural, artistic, and technological innovations.

Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960 CE): A period of fragmentation and political upheaval.

Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE): Divided into the Northern Song (960–1127 CE) and Southern Song (1127–1279 CE). Known for economic prosperity, cultural achievements, and advances in technology.

Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE): Established by the Mongol leader Kublai Khan, marked by increased foreign trade and cultural exchange.

Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE): A time of cultural restoration, maritime exploration, and the construction of the Forbidden City

Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE): The last imperial dynasty, characterized by territorial expansion, followed by internal strife and external pressures leading to its collapse.

Modern China

Republic of China (1912–1949): Established after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, leading to a period of modernization and political instability.

People's Republic of China (1949–present): Founded by the Communist Party of China under Mao Zedong, marking the beginning of modern China's era.

Understanding Dates in This Book

It is important to note that all months referenced in this book follow the Chinese lunar calendar for historical periods before China officially adopted the Gregorian calendar. The Chinese government introduced the Gregorian calendar on January 1, 1912, during the early years of the Republic of China. However, the traditional Chinese lunar calendar remained widely used in daily life and cultural practices. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Gregorian calendar became the official standard for administrative and legal purposes, though the lunar calendar continues to play a significant role in traditional festivals and agricultural activities.

As a lunisolar system, the Chinese calendar determines the beginning of each month based on the new moon, resulting in months lasting either 29 or 30 days. Consequently, lunar months do not always align with Gregorian calendar months. The correspondence between lunar months and Gregorian months varies from year to year due to the presence of intercalary (leap) months. For instance, the fourth lunar month may fall anywhere between late April and early June in the Gregorian calendar, depending on the specific year. As a result, historical records prior to the adoption of the Gregorian calendar are based on the lunar system, whereas later dates follow the modern solar calendar. Because of these differences, historical records in ancient China were maintained according to the lunisolar calendar. However, to maintain the flow of the main text, no additional conversions or adjustments have been made within this work.

For more detailed information, please refer to the following sources:

The Cambridge Illustrated History of China by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Wikipedia's "Timeline of Chinese History" (available online for detailed and specific events).

Chinese Administrative Divisions in Ancient Times

To help readers better understand the administrative divisions mentioned in this book, the following text provides an overview of the major administrative units across different dynasties in ancient China. It is important to note that these divisions and their interrelationships evolved over time, and the information provided below reflects the prevailing systems of each era. Given the intricacies of China's historical geography, some simplifications and generalizations are necessary to ensure clarity and concision.

Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou Periods (c. 2070 BCE–771 BCE)

Guo (国, State): Core areas directly governed by the monarch.

Hou, Bang (侯、邦, Vassal State): Territories governed by royal family members or important officials.

Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods (c. 770 BCE–221 BCE)

Guo (国, State): Feudal states with relatively independent rule.

Xian (县, County): Local administrative units established by states to strengthen central control.

Qin Dynasty (221 BCE–207 BCE)

Jun (郡, Commandery): The country was divided into commanderies, each with counties under its jurisdiction.

Xian (县, County): Basic administrative units under commanderies.

Han and Jin Dynasties (202 BCE–420 CE)

Zhou (州, Region/zhōu, Province): Initially established as inspectorates during the reign of Emperor Wu to oversee local governance, the Zhou gradually evolved into larger administrative divisions with supervisory authority over multiple commanderies and kingdoms.

Jun (郡, Commandery): Administrative regions subordinate to a Zhou, functionally similar to the earlier commanderies.

Xian (县, County): The foundational administrative units under the jurisdiction of commanderies.

Sui Dynasty (581–618)

Zhou (州, Region/zhōu): Zhou was reformed as the main administrative units that directly governed counties, simplifying the administrative structure by reducing the role of commanderies.

Xian (县, County): Basic administrative units managed directly by Zhou.

Tang Dynasty (618–907)

Dao (道, Circuit): Dao was larger administrative regions that encompassed multiple prefectures (Fu and Zhou). It initially served as supervisory areas for monitoring local governance. Over time, they gained more administrative significance.

Zhou (州, Region/zhōu): Zhou was the main administrative units under the circuits.

They were governed by appointed officials and were responsible for local administration, including the counties under their jurisdiction.

Fu (府, Prefecture): “Fu” typically indicated an area of significant importance. Fu were often established in major cities or regions that required a higher level of administrative oversight, such as Chang’an (present-day Xi’an), or other cities of strategic, economic, or cultural importance. Fu operated alongside the commandery (Zhou) system but often held a more prominent status due to their role in governance and defense.

Xian (县, County): Basic administrative units overseen by Zhou or Fu.

Song Dynasty (960–1279)

Lu (路, Route): The country was divided into several Lu, which were supervisory regions with significant administrative functions, not merely serving a supervisory role.

Fu (府, Prefecture): Major administrative regions under Lu.

Zhou (州, Region/zhōu): Zhou served as an administrative unit, similar to Fu.

Xian (县, County): Basic administrative units under Fu or Zhou.

Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)

Xing Sheng (行省, Province): The country was divided into several Provincial Administrations, which served as the highest level of regional governance, overseeing the operation of local administrative units including Lu, Fu, Zhou.

Lu (路, Route): Lu was subordinate to Xing Sheng and served as intermediate-level administrative divisions. They were larger than prefectures and were responsible for the administration of a significant geographical area, which often included multiple prefectures and sub-prefectures.

Fu (府, Prefecture): Major administrative units, responsible for local governance within their territories.

Zhou (州, Region/zhōu): Zhou was generally subordinate to Fu and had a more localized role in administration, often being responsible for specific areas within a larger prefecture.

Xian (县, County): Basic administrative units under Fu or Zhou.

Ming (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasties (1644–1912)

Sheng (省, Province): Provinces were the primary administrative divisions, with the number of provinces increasing during the Ming and stabilizing at 18 in the Qing.

Fu (府, Prefecture): Main administrative units one level below provinces, responsible for local governance.

Zhou (州, Region/zhōu): Zhou was generally considered to be of a lower administrative level than Prefectures, often found in frontier or ethnic minority areas and sometimes governed by native chieftains (Tusi).

Xian (县, County): Basic administrative units under Fu and Zhou.

Ancient Chinese Measurements

To assist readers in comprehending the ancient Chinese units of measurement mentioned in this book, we have provided metric conversions wherever possible. Due to variations across different dynasties and regions, the conversions below reflect the prevailing standards of some major dynasties and are intended for reference only.

Length Units:

Cun (寸, Chinese inch): Approximately 3.3 centimeters (1.3 inches)

Chi (尺, Chinese foot): Approximately 0.33 meters (1.08 feet)

Zhang (丈): Usually 10 chi, approximately 3.3 meters (10.83 feet)

Li (里, Chinese mile): Varied across periods, generally ranging from 308 to 576 meters (1,011.5 to 1,891.5 feet)

Volume Units:

Sheng (升): Equal to 1 liter, approximately 0.264 gallons

Dou (斗): Equal to 10 sheng, approximately 10 liters (2.64 gallons)

Dan (石): Depending on the period, 1 dan generally equals 100-120 liters (26.4–31.7 gallons)

Weight Units:

Liang (两): 1/16 of a jin, approximately 12.5–18.75 grams (0.028–0.041 pounds)

Jin (斤): 1 jin varied slightly in different periods, generally around 16 liang, equivalent to 200–300 grams (0.44–0.66 pounds). By the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was roughly equal to 500 grams (1.1 pounds)

Dan (担): 1 dan is typically 100 jin, equivalent to 50–60 kilograms (110–132 pounds)

When directly quoting Chinese historical documents or literary works, the term “li” refers to the Chinese li, not the English mile. If the concept of “li” is used in the main text, it will be specifically indicated as “Chinese li” or converted to the metric unit of meters for clarity.

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About the Author

Maoli Han is a Distinguished Professor at Peking University and Deputy Director of the Historical Geography Committee of the Geographical Society of China, specializing in Chinese historical geography. She has made significant contributions to historical agricultural geography, environmental changes, and rural social geography. Professor Han has led 13 major research projects and published six influential monographs and over 60 academic papers. She has also received multiple academic and teaching awards on national and municipal levels.

About the Translator

Jing Yu is a Professor at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, specializing in translation studies with two decades of experience in translation practice and research. She has published extensively in Chinese and international journals like *Target* and *Chinese Translators Journal*, and authored monographs and translations in both Chinese and English.

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