

*Dividing the Realm in Order to Govern:
The Spatial Organization of the Song State*

by Ruth Mostern

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The movement of digital humanities has been gaining momentum in recent decades. Every year scholars organize numerous conferences, workshops, panels, lectures, and seminars worldwide to discuss and demonstrate how to utilize digital tools to facilitate research in history, literature, and philosophy. Not only is historical evidence gathered, converted, examined, and presented in revolutionary ways, hypermedia also helps researchers to produce online visual projects to retell stories of the past. Digital humanities further provide opportunities for scholars from different fields to conduct interdisciplinary research in order to identify new patterns in human society. Some of their findings are often impossible to discover by using traditional methods. Ruth Mostern's *Dividing the Realm in Order to Govern: The Spatial Organization of the Song State* is a fine example of this kind of digital scholarship. By incorporating computational tools such as historical geographic information systems (GIS) and statistical analysis into history study, Mostern offers insightful arguments on the complicated relations among spatial organization, political policies, and socio-economic transformations in Song China (960-1276). It is a pioneering work which

can inspire new areas of studies in the future.

This book is built upon *The Digital Gazetteer of the Song Dynasty*, a relational MySQL database freely available online, established and maintained by Ruth Mostern and her student Elijah Meeks at the University of California, Merced.¹ According to the prologue of the book, it is “a database that records information about all of the provincial circuits, prefectures, counties, and towns that existed at any given time during the Song dynasty, and all of the occasions when they were promoted, demoted, split, merged, renamed, or re-assigned jurisdictions” (9). While reading this book, the reader can access the online data on its website to check the author’s conclusions. This is one of the benefits of digital history: since the data are open to the public, anyone can browse, test, and verify the methodologies and results. According to Mostern, this database is based on *An Alphabetical List of Geographical Names in Sung China*, published by Hope Wright in 1958 (263). This alphabetical list itself is based on three sources, namely, the *Songshi* (宋史), *Taiping huanyu ji* (太平寰宇記), and *Yuanfeng jiuyu zhi* (元豐九域志). Mostern expands its contents by collecting information from other sources, such as *Song huiyao jigao* (宋會要輯稿) and several contemporary Chinese reference works (266). The end product is a highly useful digital tool that can facilitate historical research in countless ways.

Through analyzing the database and a variety of textual sources including local gazetteers, chronological histories, government documents, and scholarly works, Mostern proposes her thesis on Song geography and its spatial organization: “long-term shifts in population distribution, medium-term changes in ideas about sovereignty and their geopolitical context, and short-term politics and crisis intervention all intersect to create a political landscape” in the Song period (259).

¹ Ruth Mostern and Elijah Meeks, *The Digital Gazetteer of the Song Dynasty*, accessed on September 30, 2014, <http://songgis.ucmerced.edu/>.

Mostern uses two approaches to support this thesis. First, she discusses the definition of “territory” in the minds of Song rulers, politicians, and intellectuals and examines how the government and private writers described territory from political, geographical, economic, and cultural perspectives. Second, she also pays attention to trace the changes of practices in terms of spatial organization in China between the early tenth century and the late thirteenth century and identifies three major time periods in which the Song state either was an active planner or had to respond to external and internal challenges when it initiated new jurisdiction changes. It is in these changes that Mostern demonstrates the unique contributions that her digital database brings to this study as she persuasively questions, revises, and expands existing narratives on Song geography and society.

This book is divided into two parts, each of which corresponds to one of the approaches introduced above. Part I, entitled “The Meaning of the Territory,” is comprised of three chapters. It can be viewed as a “long introduction” to Mostern’s study and lays out the foundation of the detailed temporal and spatial analysis in later chapters. Chapter 1 briefly introduces the historiography of territorial studies in Chinese history. Mostern mentions that she has been heavily influenced by G. William Skinner, who first suggested a macro-region theory for imperial China in the 1970s; Charles Tilly, a Europeanist who followed Skinner and reminded us of the different agenda that military and civil activities of a regime had in terms of spatial distribution; and Robert Hartwell, the key figure in shaping the Tang-Song transition theory in the West and who influenced a whole generation of scholars from the 1980s to the present. However, instead of accepting all of the above without reservation, Mostern points out possible problems that these theories may have. The historiographical section is highly important and will be addressed later in this review. The author argues that Song statesmen actively used spatial policy to solve problems from within and without. Unlike other dynasties which always introduced intensive spatial changes in their

early decades, the Song witnessed continuous activism throughout its three hundred years (32).

The prominent historian Deng Guangming (鄧廣銘) once proposed “four keys” for Chinese history study: institutional history, historical geography, chronology, and bibliography.² Unlike American scholarship, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese scholarship are famous for their institutional focus and detailed examination of related sources. The second chapter in Mostern’s book rather follows this legacy and presents a clear analysis of every level of Song local government, starting from circuits, to prefectures, counties, and even towns (鎮 *zhen*), cantons (鄉 *xiang*), and neighborhoods (廂 *xiang*). The author points out that the prefectures were the most important administrative units in the Song. They were political and economic centers, making decisions for taxation and fiscal management. Prefectures in the frontier were also important military commanding units. Counties, on the other hand, were less important as they were only used for extracting revenue from the society. Mostern thus reveals a prefecture/county or military/civil dichotomy in the Song period. She also traces the origin of “town” in history, showing that towns were established as garrisons at the beginning and only gradually became an administrative unit under counties in recent centuries.

Chapter 3 discusses the compilation and writing of map guides, geographies, and local gazetteers in the Song. Mostern argues that most of these activities followed a Persistence and Transformation (沿革 *yan’ge*) tradition, which adopted a historical perspective to introduce all political landscape changes in a certain region from the earliest time to the present. Mostern further states that the chapter on the Tribute of Yu (禹貢 *Yugong*) in the Book of Documents (尚書 *Shangshu*) serves as the

² Zhang Qifan, “Sanshinian lai Zhongguo dalu de Songshi yanjiu (1978-2008)” [Three Decades of Research on China’s Song (1978-2008)] in *Songxue Yanjiu Jikan* [Song Studies Quarterly], vol. 2 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 2010), 529-564.

earliest model of geographical writing and “profoundly influenced Song writers” (66). These two arguments may only reflect part of the picture. The Persistence and Transformation account can be found in nearly every local gazetteer in imperial China, but whether that can be viewed as a tradition in local history writing is questionable. A typical gazetteer includes many other contents, such as maps, overviews of government institutions, customs, scenery, heritage sites, schools and academies, religious sites, lists of degree holders, biographies, and poems, essays, and accounts of travels. There is no need to single out Persistence and Transformation as *the* model. Of course, the central thesis of Mostern’s book is how various factors changed the political landscape during the Song period, thus the Persistence and Transformation argument works well for this purpose. In addition, it is beyond doubt that the Tribute of Yu is one of the earliest geographical surveys in Chinese history, but the compilation of map guides and gazetteers was also influenced by the Ritual of Zhou (周禮 *Zhouli*), the Classic of Mountains and Seas (山海經 *Shanhai jing*), *Yuejue shu* (越絕書), *Wu Yue chunqiu* (吳越春秋), and *Huayang guozhi* (華陽國志).³ The last three titles in the list were early examples of local histories compiled before the sixth century. It is highly possible that other similar works were also available in the Han and Jin periods, however, there are no extant copies today. The Tribute of Yu is but one of the models that later writers followed.

Mostern’s major contribution in this chapter is her revision of the Fiefdom narrative in traditional English-language writing. This theory suggests that imperial Chinese thinkers always viewed the world in a model that focused on “centers of power radiating outward from the capital” (73), thus other regions in the empire were often ignored in historical accounts. Mostern demonstrates that Song local gazetteers

³ Huang Wei, *Fangzhi Lunji* [Collected Essays on Gazetteers] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang daxue chubanshe, 1983), 1.

actually contain accurate descriptions of the extent of jurisdictions; local scholars depicted their regions with abundant details and recorded the history from their own perspectives. Therefore, the perception of the empire as a hierarchical territorial network, in which only the center was the focus, was not a proper view. Mostern's argument also works well with the Localist model advocated by Robert Hymes.⁴

The second part of the book, titled "The History of Territory," is comprised of three case studies of active territorial changes in China from the early tenth century to the late thirteenth century. They mainly concern with the intensive jurisdiction adjustments in the Five Dynasties and early Northern Song periods (907-1005), the period of reforms (1040-1127), and the early Southern Song (1127-1142).⁵ Here we can see the usefulness of the Digital Gazetteer developed by Mostern and Meeks. By using statistical analysis methods, the author identifies the three periods of state activism, and then further investigates them through close reading of traditional textual sources. Chapter 4 surveys the monumental developments in the Tang-Song transition and displays how the rulers of the Five Dynasties and early Song intentionally relied on spatial changes to gradually convert military commissions to civilian governed prefectures in the tenth century. Warned by the shrinking power of Tang emperors and the unstable political and social order after the An Lushan (安祿山) Rebellion in the 750s, these governments carefully adopted a number of tactics to weaken the power of regional military lords and re-established a court-governed civil system. Mostern also provides a detailed discussion on the transformation of each region's political landscape in the empire throughout this time period. Mostern convincingly demonstrates how prefectures and counties were used

⁴ Robert Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-chou, Chiang-Hsi, in Northern and Southern Sung* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁵ Mostern uses different years in her section titles, but what the reviewer lists here points to the real focus of her discussion.

differently to meet different agendas. The principle was “to increase the number of prefectures in regions where troops were likely to be needed” and, at the same time, to abolish counties “where tax and labor extraction was at a maximum and administration consumed too many resources” (164). This argument resonates well with the prefecture/civil dichotomy Mostern proposes in Chapter 2.

Similarly, when Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹, 989-1052) and Wang Anshi (王安石, 1021-1086) came to power in the Qingli (慶曆, 1041-1048 and for Fan’s reforms, 1043-1044) and Xining (熙寧, 1068-1077) periods, these statesmen attempted to correct through spatial organization the financial troubles the empire was facing. In chapter 5, Fan Zhongyan’s efforts were short-lived, but Wang Anshi’s new policies profoundly influenced Song politics, society, culture, and political landscape. Wang Anshi’s commitment to an expansion policy and his alliance with Wang Shao (王韶, 1030-1081) regarding the military actions in northwest China brought the highest number of spatial changes for the concerned period. The author summarizes Wang Anshi’s spatial changes as “reducing units in the core and expanding them on the periphery, empowering circuits, and diminishing the role counties” (209). In other words, Wang Anshi abolished counties and prefectures in the central regions and founded more prefectures along the Song-Xia border. Maintaining jurisdictions was costly at that time, so reducing the number of counties and prefectures could save financial expenses. Many of them were merged into the heartland of China. At the same time, military-centered jurisdictions such as garrisons, forts, and prefectures were established in the northwest. During the reign of Huizong (徽宗, r. 1100-1126), the Cai Jing (蔡京, 1047-1126) government again shifted its attention to the frontiers. Their colonization policy not only helped to extract resources from the local population, but also aimed to incorporate non-Han tribal territory into the Chinese realm.

The last chapter of the book briefly examines spatial innovations after the fall of the Northern Song. In the late 1120s and 1130s, the

Southern Song government moved to Hangzhou (杭州) after losing one third of its territory to the Jurchens. This retreat facilitated a new wave of reorganizing the political landscape in southern China. The most important new element in its policy, according to Mostern, was “conditional abolition,” a temporary effort which downgraded prefectures to counties in order to relieve the local fiscal burden created by wars and military presence along the Song-Jin border. These counties could be reinstated as prefectures once the situation was improved. “Conditional abolition” provided certain levels of flexibility for the court as it solved immediate issues of warfare, finance, and relocation. After the Shaoxing (紹興) Treaty in 1142, both the Song and Jin entered a static period of spatial policies. That silence was maintained until the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century.

Overall, Mostern demonstrates her masterful skill in integrating digital methods with historical research and shows how the Song government and governments of the Five Dynasties actively initiated spatial changes to their political landscape in order to strengthen central authority, consolidate state-building, defend themselves from outside threats, and provide more fiscal resources in times of emergency. She successfully shows a new form of scholarship, which can be modeled in the future by historians in other fields.

It is worth noting that Mostern questions Hartwell’s famous theory on local administration in this book. Hartwell once claimed that “the expansion of the densely populated areas of the empire created administrative difficulties leading to a localization of central authority that manifested itself in the evolution of the province and an enhanced independence of the district [county] at the same time that the bureaucratization of the central government was brought to a halt” (24). However, what Mostern demonstrates is more complicated. As a local unit mainly useful for resource extraction, counties did not gain independence in the “Tang-Song transition.” On the contrary, counties were regularly abandoned in various parts of the empire whenever the

court sought new ways of cutting expenditure. These stories can be witnessed in every chapter of the second part of this book. Mostern further admits that she follows Luo Yinan (羅禕楠)'s suggestion to study the complex relations between the central and local leadership of the Song (24). Ever since Hartwell introduced Luo's Tang-Song transitional framework, which itself is based on the scholarship of Naitō Konan (内藤湖南, 1866-1934), Chinese scholars have repeatedly questioned Luo's theoretical assumptions and concrete evidence.⁶ However, the majority of American Song historians still accept Hartwell's localist model and rarely reevaluate the evidence of that claim. Mostern is one of the few American scholars who has paid attention to Chinese critiques. She realizes that prefectures were associated with military affairs and counties were important in a civil administration context. The number of prefectures continued to rise throughout the Northern Song period, a phenomenon that cannot be explained by Hartwell's theory. Mostern's final conclusion is more persuasive and complicated.

A pioneering work in the field, this book may still have some limitations in its methodologies, contents, and format. The first question involves the quality of the data. In this respect, the author expresses confidence in the appendix: "The conclusions and generalizations that this book has drawn from the data are valid, even if the precise numbers may diverge slightly from historical reality" (268). This argument is likely to be more or less true because state gazetteers and the *History of Song* should provide enough information on the political landscape of different periods of the Song dynasty. Yet, these sources may not be able to show short term changes if a work compiling certain decades does not exist. Some spatial changes could be missing. Furthermore, Mostern may

⁶ For example, Huang Kuanchong, *Songdai de jiazhu yu shehui* (Taipei: Dongda tushu gongsi, 2006), 258-270; Tao Jinsheng, *Bei Song shizu: Jiazhu, hunyin, shenghuo* (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 2001), 313-319; Shen Dengmiao, "Yetan Mingdai qianqi keju shehui de liudonglu," *Shehui kexue luntan* 9 (2006): 81-93.

want to discuss beforehand the quality of the data that have been used to compare activities of the Song to those of other dynasties. Otherwise, this would not be a valid claim since other data may be biased.

This book is published by Harvard University Asia Center as a Harvard-Yenching Institute monograph. Therefore, for the convenience of its readers, most of whom are specialists in Chinese history, it might have been better to have used footnotes instead of endnotes and provide Chinese texts for all quotations. The maps, figures, and illustrations in this book are highly helpful as they substantially increase the readability of the texts. On the other hand, each map used in the text should be accompanied by a section of legends, so that the reader may easily interpret it and follow the author's narrative. The author does explain the meaning of those big, small, shaded, and hollow dots on each map, but it is still necessary to indicate them whenever a new map is introduced. Of course, these minor issues usually come from decisions made by the publisher rather than the author.

Dividing the Realm in Order to Govern utilizes a comprehensive geographical database to examine the political landscape of the Song period. With a sound thesis, clear structure, and jargon-free writing style, the book is a pleasurable read. It reveals a new way of conducting historical research by using digital tools and computational methods. Not only is the work important to Song historians, but anyone interested in digital humanities may gain precious insights. Historians are encouraged to follow Mostern's model to study other dynasties in late imperial China. The tremendous amount of information in Ming-Qing gazetteers will surely change our understanding of spatial management and policy making in late imperial China.