This book is a study of a genre of Chinese writing called *difangzhi* 地方志, which is typically translated as “local gazetteer” or “local history.” Neither translation fully reflects the contents of *difangzhi*, but I will use “local gazetteer,” the most common term, throughout this book. A gazetteer is a cumulative record of a territorial unit published in book format, generally by a local government, and arranged by topics such as topography, institutions, population, taxes, biographies, and literature. Imperial China had nested hierarchies of territorial units and gazetteers. By the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the base level was the county gazetteer. Above that were subprefectural and prefectural gazetteers, provincial gazetteers, and at the top of the pyramid, empire-wide gazetteers. Some smaller or specialized administrative units, such as villages, guard units, and border passes, and institutions, such as schools and temples, also published gazetteers.¹

Compilers traced the genre’s origin to requirements in the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1045–256 BCE) that each locale submit maps and geographical information to the central government. By the thirteenth century, gazetteers had attained the scope and form in which they were typically found down to the present, a mix of geography, history, literature, and government records. Gazetteers differ from “histories” 在 in that their records transcend dynasties, whereas histories cover single dynasties. In

1. Brook, *Geographical Sources*. 
other words, gazetteers were tied to the land while histories were tied to the rulers.

The questions explored in this book required broad reading of numerous gazetteers. Although gazetteers emerged as a distinct genre in the Song dynasty (960–1279), only twenty-seven Song and thirty Yuan (1279–1368) gazetteers are extant.2 The Ming is the first period from which a large number, approximately 1,014 titles, survive, and thus, it is the focus.3 There are another seven thousand extant titles from the end of the Ming to the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, and gazetteers continue to be produced throughout China today. The significance of gazetteers, as well as their format and compilers’ underlying agendas, have changed over time, and some findings about gazetteers from earlier periods may not apply to those published in later periods.

Although much research has been done on gazetteers, the range of questions addressed has been narrow. A large literature on local gazetteers was produced in the 1980s and 1990s in mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan, but that scholarship differs from this study. Intellectual historians explored categories of materials found in local gazetteers but did not analyze them from the perspective of social, legal, or economic history. In North America and Europe, Peter Bol, Timothy Brook, and Pierre-Etienne Will have written important articles on gazetteers.4 This book is, however, the first monograph in English on local gazetteers, and the first in any language to examine the social contexts of their production, circulation, reading, and use.

This gap in scholarship is in part due to disciplinary boundaries: most scholars of Chinese literature have not considered gazetteers to be important literary works, and scholars of Chinese history have spent relatively little time on book genre questions. Scholars typically use

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gazetteers by examining individual entries or sections rather than the works in their entirety. By not taking gazetteers as objects of study, scholars have missed the potential such an approach has for studying Chinese local society, family life, local government, taxation, printing, literacy, and book culture, among other topics.

This study starts with a simple question: “What were Chinese local gazetteers?” It is an important question for scholars of late imperial China because gazetteers are one of the richest and most abundant types of historical source, and often the best source for local information, especially for locales outside of core regions. At first glance the question’s answer seems straightforward: Gazetteers were simple collections of materials about particular places accompanied by short introductions to each topic. However, on closer examination it becomes clear that gazetteers were complex texts: They were sites where the central state interacted with local elites, fields for battles over social status and property interests, forums to shape public opinion and advocate policy, and much more. Studying their production, distribution, reading, and use can lead to insights into important historical questions. The key questions in this study relate to three topics: the production and dissemination of knowledge in late imperial China, the relationships between local societies and the central state in both core and peripheral regions, and the operations of the publishing industry.

I argue that local gazetteers were important points of intersection between the central government and local societies and one of the main vehicles for transmitting local information to central government officials, both those who were sent by the center to govern in the provinces and those who remained in the capitals. Gazetteers circulated local information to local and nonlocal readers and authors, helped bind locales to the centralizing state and dominant culture, and were important venues of local cultural production. They were used to collect a variety of textual information that was available only locally, such as stone inscriptions, unpublished local writings, and genealogies. Compilers could gather additional information through oral interviews and sketches, and make it available to local, national, and even international audiences. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Chinese local gazetteers informed Jesuit histories, geographies, and maps of China published in Europe, and Japanese monks and merchants collected them.
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Gazetteers became foundational blocks in building the imagined empire. As Peter Bol argued, the rise of local history reflected a fundamental change in the way that China’s cultural elite thought about themselves and the country, and “ought to be seen as a sign that Song literati had begun to reconceptualize the nation as something less imperial, less derivative of court culture, and less centralized.” Gazetteers put forth a particular view of locality and what makes a civilized place. Officials, scholars, literati, and travelers who moved about China read and collected gazetteers as they traveled, and some of them used these collections as the basis for other kinds of works, such as books on famous mountains, literary anthologies, biographical collections, and more. Places that were part of the late imperial states were expected to have gazetteers demonstrating their participation in the civilized world. The importance of a gazetteer in creating a local identity as an integral part of a greater civilization was most salient in border regions and was reflected in the contents and manner of writing borderland gazetteers. Gazetteers of remote counties populated largely by non-Chinese-speakers provided examples of locals who accepted Chinese culture, strove to be virtuous, studied for the civil service examinations, paid taxes, and participated in the dominant society.

Examining gazetteers as points of contact between the center and the local can shed light on questions such as these: How did local elites connect to and influence central government officials and policy? How, in a vast empire, was local information produced, collected, and disseminated, both locally and translocally? How did the centralizing imperial state incorporate peripheral areas into the empire? Who had access to books, and what types of people were literate?

Because this is an interdisciplinary study and the range of questions is broad, I necessarily draw upon concepts derived from multiple scholarly fields, especially book history and social history. Robert Darnton’s idea of the “communication circuit,” which has been used to examine publishers, printers, shippers, booksellers, and readers and connect them to broader issues in society and culture, is useful in its outlines, even if it is not a perfect fit for noncommercial books of late imperial China. The

5. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
following chapters will apply social history analysis to the life cycles of gazetteers, from a project’s conception to its compilation, physical production, distribution, and reception. But I will also draw upon scholars such as Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, who “reverse the historian’s point of view and consider, not the impact of the book on society, but that of society on the book.” By taking gazetteers as objects of study, we can look in both directions.

This study is also part of a growing literature that seeks to place book history in a comparative perspective. Historians of Europe have produced a large literature on the role of printing and publishing in European social, political, and cultural transformations. Their work has been based on rich sources such as account books and other business records. Historians of China, however, have been hampered by a scarcity of sources on production costs, book prices, financing methods, and other economic data. Many types of sources available for studying early European publishers simply do not exist for Chinese publishers. Nonetheless, the following analysis of gazetteers presents substantial new information on the economics of book publishing in imperial China.

Historians of Chinese print culture were long perplexed by Elizabeth Eisenstein’s 1979 book, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change, in which she advocated the idea of a “printing revolution” in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe and portrayed Gutenberg’s printing press as a technological innovation of tremendous world historical significance. In her view, the press was a catalyst for the transformation from the medieval to the modern world, and a condition precedent to the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution. Movable type, the argument went, radically increased the flow of information, leading to a critical mass that enabled both intellectual and religious revolutions.

However, large-scale printing began in China more than five hundred years before Gutenberg, yet there was no evidence that it caused such radical transformations. By the 1990s a small number of historians

10. A few of the important works include: Chia, Printing for Profit; Chow, Publishing, Culture, and Power; and multiple works by Cynthia Brokaw.
11. Chia, Printing for Profit, 10.
were working on the history of Chinese print culture, not only because of the importance of the topic itself, but also because the rich literature on European and American print culture raised interesting comparative issues. For example, China and Korea had movable type centuries before Europe, yet the technology did not become popular in East Asia. Instead woodblock printing remained the dominant print technology until the coming of lithography in the nineteenth century because it was cheap, ubiquitous, and effective and did not require the capital outlay needed to buy mechanical presses and cast thousands of pieces of type for a Chinese-character font. Once woodblocks were cut, a publisher could make additional copies on demand from stored blocks, whereas movable type had to be reset for subsequent printings. By portraying Gutenberg’s press as a “technological breakthrough,” Eisenstein represented movable type and block printing as fundamentally distinct technologies. The difference, however, is overstated. Thousands of copies could be made from a set of woodblocks, and printed materials permeated Chinese society from an early date. Thinking comparatively about print culture can enhance understanding of the intersections of technology, politics, and culture. Some scholars of European print culture, such as Roger Chartier and Ann Blair, have been in dialogue with scholars of Chinese print culture, to the benefit of both fields.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to addressing substantive issues in Chinese history, this book also models new ways of reading gazetteers and is a reference for scholars who use gazetteers in their research. Throughout these pages I have included translations and explanations of key terms and materials.

The most important sources for this study were paratextual elements of gazetteers.\textsuperscript{13} These include prefaces, postfaces, administrative petitions and orders related to compilation, lists of contributors to production and editing, and compilers’ notes. Over the past decade I have examined more than five hundred gazetteers that were first published in the Song, Yuan, and Ming. Although my analysis included gazetteers from every Ming province and the regions directly administered by the two capitals, most were from eastern China, especially Henan, Hu-guang, Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, the Southern Metropolitan Region,


\textsuperscript{13} Genette, \textit{Paratexts}.
the Northern Metropolitan Region, Fujian, and Guangdong because relatively few from the western provinces survive. Because there are few extant pre-1400 gazetteers, most gazetteers used herein were published in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. Later gazetteers, however, often reproduced prefaces and additional materials from earlier gazetteers, and these were used in studying the earlier centuries. Other important sources include genealogies (used in chapter 2), and travel diaries (used in chapter 7). Also used in chapter 7 are records of individual readings of gazetteers found in a wide range of sources. Many were found by searching databases for gazetteer titles, and others were found by skimming potential sources. The analysis is based on both intensive examination of particular gazetteers and extensive use of many gazetteers.

The seven chapters of this book are organized by the stages in the life of a gazetteer. With regard to gazetteer production, I examine why people compiled local gazetteers; who compiled them; the social networks involved; the editorial process, including the politics of gazetteer compilation; and the physical production, including costs, financing, labor, and the movements of materials, manuscripts, and craftsmen. On the consumption side, I examine how gazetteers were distributed, circulated, read, and used. I reconstruct communities of gazetteer readers both inside and outside of the local communities in which the gazetteers were produced, and analyze the ways in which those readers used gazetteers. Of course, the ways in which gazetteers were read affected how they were produced, and how they were produced affected how they were read. Explaining these mutual interactions is an important part of this study.

Chapter 1 examines why different levels of government compiled gazetteers. The chapter begins with stories about particular Ming emperors’ compilation orders, then steps back for a broad overview of the genre’s origins and development and how their compilation was universalized down to the county level in the Ming. Imperial gazetteer projects were critical to the spread of gazetteers in the Yuan and Ming, and I translate and discuss the two oldest extant sets of editorial rules, which were issued by the court in 1412 and 1418 to serve as the organizing principles for local gazetteers submitted to the court for use in the national gazetteer. The chapter then analyzes government initiatives from outside
the court, mostly by local magistrates and prefects who had various motivations. The chapter concludes with an examination of compilation in borderlands, arguing that gazetteers were viewed by Chinese officials as tools for assimilating native peoples into the dominant Chinese culture and political order. Gazetteers were often the first Chinese-language literary project in a given locale and helped plant the seeds of written Chinese culture in non-Chinese, oral societies. At the same time, native chieftains used local gazetteers to enhance their positions in the Chinese state and promote their legitimacy to provincial and central government officials. They did this by publicly documenting their hereditary right to rule and demonstrating their conformance to Chinese elite norms.

Chapter 2 is a case study of the purposes and politics behind the compilation of the 1477 and 1579 editions of the *Xinchang xian zhi* 新昌縣志 (Xinchang County gazetteer) and subsequent readings of the two editions. I approach gazetteers from a social history perspective and use a microhistory methodology. I start with the proposition that although gazetteers at first glance seem like compilations of miscellaneous information, they often were produced with specific agendas in mind. These underlying agendas varied from gazetteer to gazetteer, so by examining a gazetteer in its entirety one can learn about the society that produced it and gain insight into the meanings of the information found therein. These meanings would not necessarily be obvious to someone who was simply extracting data from individual sections for use in a topical study. By paying attention to the compilation process and reading a gazetteer as a whole, one can open new windows on a variety of questions.

To analyze the Xinchang gazetteers, I read them in conjunction with thirty genealogies of Xinchang lineages that I collected from the Utah Genealogical Society, the Xinchang County Archives, Shanghai Library, and Columbia University. Aggregating and analyzing the biographical information contained in the gazetteers and comparing it to information in the genealogies reveals that the individual compilers of the 1579 edition were close paternal, maternal, and marital relatives, and that they selected gazetteer entries to highlight their kinship ties, publicly establish their ancestral lines, and illustrate their leadership in local society. By writing the gazetteer as a public genealogy of their extended family, the gazetteer compilers mapped out a level of extended-family
organization that lay between the lineages and the county government and legitimated their rights in local society. Through this microhistory of the gazetteer compilation and examination of the gazetteer as a strategic text, I extend to county gazetteers the logic of David Faure’s argument that genealogies legitimated rights in local societies.14

Chapter 2 continues the analysis of Xinchang gazetteers through the lens of readers’ responses, which show that contemporary readers viewed gazetteers as texts about lineage status in local society. I focus on a case in which members of the Huang lineage in Xinchang County argued that the local Confucian school instructor omitted their famous members from the 1477 gazetteer in retaliation for the Huans’ having sued him after he destroyed their first ancestor’s grave to expand the school gardens. Public genealogy was but one agenda for writing a gazetteer. It is important to understand the range of potential agendas for writing gazetteers, because knowing why a gazetteer was compiled can affect how we interpret its contents and use it in our studies. For example, knowing that public genealogy was a potential agenda might lead to the discovery that the biographies of virtuous women contained in a given gazetteer were in fact biographies of the compilers’ female relatives. In such a case one would have to be careful using those biographies in a study of virtuous women that aggregates and analyzes biographies from multiple gazetteers. One would have to consider the extent to which the set of biographies represented the ideal types of female virtue in a given time and place, and to what extent it was simply a collection of the best stories the compilers could come up with about their grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives.

Chapter 3 steps back from detailed case studies to look more broadly at editorial issues and how they affect our periodization of gazetteers. In the previous literature scholars disputed when the gazetteer genre flourished. Ba Zhaoxiang, based on his extensive count of Ming gazetteers, argued that it was only in the sixteenth century, whereas Zhang Sheng argued that it was earlier and that Ba excluded many early-Ming gazetteers from his count. I argue that their disagreement stems from their failure to define what they meant by “gazetteer,” and that we can reconcile

their positions by carefully examining the editorial process. Thus, the chapter begins with an exploration of the meaning of "gazetteer." I argue that gazetteers should be thought of as living documents that were regularly updated, supplemented, revised, and recompiled, not as ad hoc isolated publications that quickly became out-of-date and remained so until recompilation decades later. Once we understand this fact, we can solve the periodization problem. Ba counted mainly the mature gazetteers while excluding their early incarnations. By including the early editions, and not confining our periodization to the Ming (as did both Ba and Zhang), we can see a long-term rise in local gazetteer production from Song to Qing, punctuated by periods of increased compilation during the founding and consolidation of dynasties, and from particular imperial projects; and periods of decline due to war.

Chapter 3 also explores details of the editorial process: the spaces in which editorial work was done, the types of people who worked on gazetteers, and payments to editorial personnel. I show that the "commodification of writing," which Kai-wing Chow postulated as a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century phenomenon, has antecedents in gazetteer writing by the early fourteenth century. The chapter concludes with a case study of the editing and printing of the 1537 *Hengzhou fu zhi* (Hengzhou Prefecture gazetteer). It contains the notes of Liu Fu, a retired official hired by the Hengzhou prefect to edit and publish the prefectural gazetteer. Liu provided a detailed account of his research methods, his difficulties in obtaining needed information from the prefecture's various county and departmental officials, his reasons for printing the gazetteer in his home rather than in the prefectural yamen, and problems he encountered in the printing process. Because his notes predate Matteo Ricci's observations on Chinese printing by a half century, cover different ground, and are written from an insider's perspective, they are a valuable source for the history of printing. In them Liu Fu explains the complex interactions between central government officials and members of local societies involved in compiling and publishing a gazetteer.

Liu Fu's notes serve as a bridge to chapter 4, which explores the publication of local gazetteers in both manuscript and print form. Thousands of gazetteers were compiled only as manuscripts, but printing was normative even in the Song and Yuan. Although gazetteer printing had much in common with that of other book genres, significant differences
make a separate study worthwhile. Most importantly, bureaucratic involvement created a paper trail that reveals aspects of printing and publishing not readily apparent from the study of other book genres. Gazetteers were compiled throughout the empire, their place of production is generally known, and movements of craftsmen and manuscripts can be tracked by connecting craftsmen hometowns, subject locales, and production sites. Thus, studying them can enrich our understanding of geographic variations in book publishing and create a more dynamic picture of the printing labor market. Aggregating production information makes it possible to identify regional printing centers and map the zones in which craftsmen operated.

Chapter 5 is a study of how much gazetteers cost to produce and how their publication was financed. Understanding the economics of book production and consumption in different times and regions is important to a host of questions regarding the social, cultural, and political significance of books. In his 1974 book, *Chinese Vernacular Fiction*, Wilt Idema notes that the amount known about publishing economics in the Ming is limited, and as Lucille Chia wrote in her 2002 book, *Printing for Profit*, a study of publishing in Jianyang, Fujian, from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries, “There is a frustrating lack of data on book prices.” Gazetteers, however, are an untapped resource on economic aspects of book production. Chapter 5 presents an analysis of pieces of information retrieved from hundreds of gazetteers and brings to light new evidence of the per-page cost of producing a book in Ming China, labor and materials costs, and financing methods. My study of financing contributes to our understanding of gazetteers as a genre by showing that funds for publication came from both nongovernmental and governmental sources. It also adds to our knowledge of Ming local administration and taxation by examining allocation of government funds and community fundraising for local projects.

Chapter 6 analyzes intended and actual gazetteer audiences, along with distribution methods. Although the primary readers of local gazetteers were officials and literati, gazetteer compilers expected that at least some people other than elite males would read their gazetteers. After analyzing intended audience, I reconstruct actual audiences based on

records of gazetteer ownership by institutions and individuals. I also show that after small initial print runs, gazetteers were printed on demand, often for decades after the blocks were first cut. Blocks were usually stored in the local yamen or school, but sometimes they were kept in private homes to make it more convenient for commoners to print copies. Gazetteers produced in response to imperial edicts were generally sent to the court in the form of a manuscript copy; the original was kept in the yamen, and a copy was made for the Confucian school. These manuscripts often served as the foundation for gazetteers printed later.

Chapter 7 turns to how people read and used gazetteers. I apply Roger Chartier and Stanley Fish’s idea of “interpretive communities,” examining local audiences through “individual confessions” of readings found in records of lawsuits, travel diaries, collected works of people who were interested in local history, and comments recorded in book prefaces and colophons. I first look at how officials sent to govern in the provinces used gazetteers to familiarize themselves with the areas in which they were posted, to transmit policy ideas to their successors in office, as casual reading, and as texts through which to bond with members of the local elite. Because of the law of avoidance, officials were not natives of the territory they governed and needed a broad overview of the locales they would be governing. The chapter then tracks travelers’ use of gazetteers on the road and shows that gazetteers were used as travel guides and that traveling officials and local officials used them in socializing at scenic sites. Local gazetteers were more detailed than merchant route books, which guided travelers on interprovincial travel but contained less information on particular locales. Next, I examine gazetteer connections to lawsuits. Gazetteers were written documents with official status and were used as evidence in cases that had historical aspects, such as those over water rights. Because of this, people whose interests could be affected by the portrayal of local history in the gazetteer tried to influence content, and some even forged materials and bribed compilers. The chapter concludes with a study of gazetteer collectors and how gazetteers were used by authors on various topics.

I conclude the book by bringing together the various chapters’ findings to argue that by the late fifteenth century gazetteers had become

key nodes for collecting and disseminating local information. Local gazetteers were one of the basic sources for various types of writing that were empire-wide in scope. In addition to travel writing, gazetteers were a key source for biographical works, histories, encyclopedias, and works of many other genres. Thus, when you think of local gazetteers and their relation to cultural production in Ming China, you might imagine them as cells in a honeycomb that covered the empire. Gazetteers were the vessel in which materials gathered by dozens of contributors were distilled and deposited, like honey from bees. Gazetteer contents then became available for consumption and transformation into new cultural products by locals, travelers, and those residing in other places. In the Ming, gazetteers were an important genre, and they deserve our careful attention. As Xie Zhaozhe 謝肇淛 (1567–1624) wrote in his postface to the 1612 gazetteer of Yongfu 永福, Fujian, “From now on locals will know recent and past affairs. The [contents of the gazetteer] are like bright pearls suspended in a deep room; arrayed therein, you can point to them. They are like the hanging vines turning green in the marketplaces of the five districts; passersby will happily look at them.”