Geography and history are different ways of looking at the world, but they are so closely related that neither one can afford to ignore or even neglect the other.


Since antiquity all the sage kings who received the mandate to govern have marked out the capital and measured the lands so as to set the axis for humanity. Above they were in correspondence with the orbits of the planets; below they divided the mountains and rivers. They created borders and they drew boundaries; they established a capital and they bestowed fiefs.

—Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580–643 CE), *Sui History Geography Monograph*

In the spring of 2006, I made a presentation to a group of high-ranking university administrators attending a multidisciplinary research showcase at my home campus in Merced, California. I feared that next to solar panel engineering and stem cell fabrication, my work on the geography of middle-period China would seem unfathomably abstruse. Nevertheless, determined to make a good showing, I discussed how the Song 宋 (960–1276 CE) court repeatedly restructured the spatial organization of the empire. Song officials, I explained, founded, abolished, promoted, demoted, and reordered jurisdictions in an attempt to maximize the effectiveness of limited resources in a climate of shifting priorities, to placate competing constituencies, and to address crises. To my amazement, the administrators were rapt and attentive, smiling and nodding. As I concluded my talk, my chancellor exclaimed, “Why, you’ve just explained what I do every day!”

While the analogy is a bit facile, the my warm reception I received from that audience helped me to recognize that conducting an effective administration in the face of competing interests, crises, and limited re-
sources—and confronting the resulting consequences—is in many ways a universal problem. In the field of state theory, anthropologist James Scott has cogently explored the study of activist regimes and the often unintended ramifications of their activities.¹ However, my anecdote does not reveal, and neither does Scott address, a particular and important angle—namely, that states, as opposed to universities, are inherently and fundamentally geographical. Their existence is marked by whether or not they hold sway over some territory on the earth’s surface, and their persistence depends upon how the machinery of dominion is spatially distributed throughout this territory. Sovereignty is based on the control of territory.

This book uses the example of Song dynasty China to explain how a pre-industrial regime organized itself spatially in order to exercise authority throughout its realm. During a cycle of spatial transformation that spanned the tenth through the twelfth centuries and coincided primarily with the Song dynasty, the Prefecture and County (junxian 郡縣) system structured revenue accumulation, military organization, census numeration, and map making. It even determined the terms of debates about imperial power. On more than a thousand occasions during the three-century Song reign, counties and prefectures were established or abolished as the regime sought to create an optimal spatial landscape in a political climate of short-term crisis, long-term transformation, and clamorous advocacy from many constituencies.

A Proposal to Change the Jurisdiction of Two Frontier Counties

Each adjustment to the Song spatial landscape changed the geography of commerce, taxation, warfare, and social organization. In the late twelfth century, Cai Kan 蔡戡 (1141–?), former prefect of the Southern Song capital at Lin’an 臨安, was serving on the southern frontier of the Song empire as military commissioner of the Guangnan West 廣南西 provincial circuit.² While in office, he received a proposal from the court seeking to modify the territorial organization of the realm on this remote periphery. His blistering critique of the proposal is the most trenchant surviving Song commentary concerning the political stakes of spatial organization.³
The proposal concerned two counties, Linwu 临武 and Yizhang 宜章, situated “amidst mountain peaks and precipitous terrain” in the rugged mountains separating the two circuits of Guangnan from Hunan 湖南, known in the Song as Jinghu 荆湖 South. Yizhang was situated high upstream on the Zhang River, and Linwu was on the Wu River; both watercourses converged on northern Guangnan’s major regional center of Yingde 英德 less than 50 miles downstream. The court was proposing to transfer responsibility over the affairs of the two counties out of two different Hunan prefectures, and to place both of them under the jurisdiction of Lian 连zhou prefecture in Guangnan circuit. Cai Kan responded with a lengthy rebuttal listing eleven reasons why the change would be a disaster.

By way of background, Cai Kan explained that the two counties in question were hotbeds of poorly suppressed banditry. “Whenever there is a bad harvest,” he explained, “[people] join together in bands of dozens or hundreds and come out to pillage. When [their scope] expands, they
gather in groups of thousands with gold drums and pennants and break into the territory of Guangdong circuit.” He said that the two counties had hosted fourteen bandit leaders since the founding of the Southern Song in 1127. On occasion, the bands had even captured county seats, but when government troops pursued them, the insurgents slipped back to their mountain redoubts.

Cai believed that the only way to hold the rebels in check was to coordinate security measures between the two provincial circuits of Guangdong and Hunan. Otherwise, as troops rushed to battle with one band, another would rise up in a place left unprotected. In order to do this, it was essential to develop and maintain a territorial infrastructure optimized for frontier defense, and he believed that the proposed transfer of jurisdiction to Lianzhou would undermine this objective. His eleven-point critique details five areas of concern. Collectively, his concerns introduce many of the contentions that this book will pursue:

1. **Spatial organization structured social networks.** Lianzhou prefecture and its neighboring jurisdictions already harbored bandit headquarters well connected by roadways. If the number of rebels in territory under the jurisdiction of Lianzhou increased, it would further enhance the likelihood of partnerships forming among all the insurgents in the region. Indeed, rebels from Guiyang county in Lianzhou prefecture were already beginning to ally with their counterparts in Yizhang and Linwu. If the three counties were located in the same prefecture, communication among them would be much easier. Rebels would even be able to forge marriage alliances more easily, and collaborate more closely, if spatial organization changed.

2. **Spatial organization shaped military affairs.** Provincial circuits had independent defense budgets. Hunan’s was larger than Guangdong’s, and the funds available to fight the Yizhang and Linwu bandits would decline if the two counties were moved to the less well-financed provincial circuit of Guangdong. Military command was organized by circuit and prefecture as well. The garrisons located in Yizhang and Linwu were under the command of a Hunan-based army from Ezhou prefecture. If the counties were moved to Guangdong, the garrisons would instead be affiliated with a Guangdong-based army. In sparsely populated northern Guangdong, this would violate regulations about the proper ratio of
troops to subjects. In any case, the Guangdong army, already fully occupied defending the rest of the provincial circuit, was in no position to supervise additional troops or manage more campaigns. If existing Guangdong troops were pulled away from other campaigns to defend Linwu and Yizhang, rebels in other regions would multiply. If the army were expanded, it would be with “newly tattooed conscripts” who were unreliable, likely to run or mutiny. Guangdong had as many new conscripts as the army could accommodate, and the challenges they brought made it imperative not to add additional recruits at that moment.

3. Spatial organization affected trade and transportation. Because the Hunan-Guangdong border was mountainous and unsecured, merchants and other travelers planning to traverse the region had to be assembled into groups to be led by military escorts and mountain guides. If Linwu and Yizhang counties were moved to Lianzhou prefecture, the limited personnel available there would make this procedure more laborious and time consuming, and the circulation of money, commodities, and documents would suffer.

4. Song subjects expected stable spatial organization. In the aftermath of recent changes in the territorial landscape of the region, the people had become restive and confused. Since the area suffered from endemic unrest, more changes would make people feel uneasy and insecure.

5. Spatial organization was a field of bureaucratic competition. According to Guangdong official Cai Kan, the Hunan circuit administration advocated this change of jurisdiction because they wished to devote resources to other rebellious prefectures and rid themselves of two troublesome counties, not because they believed it was in the best interests of the region. While no additional documents about this event are extant, we may assume that Cai’s counterparts in Hunan were lodging similar accusations about him.

In the end, Yizhang and Linwu were not moved to Lianzhou prefecture. Cai Kan’s belief that adjusting the spatial organization of civil administration could have an adverse impact on military, economic, social, and administrative affairs was typical of Song official thought. Nevertheless, the significance that territorial policy played in statecraft and society has thus far been overlooked by historians.
Territory and State Power

Geographer Joseph Whitney has suggested that the creation and maintenance of counties, prefectures, and provinces was the way that imperial China’s “ideology . . . [was] translated into spatial organization.” During the 300-year Song regime, close to 20 percent of all of the jurisdictions in the realm were revised at some time. Counties, prefectures, and provincial circuits were created, abolished, promoted, and demoted. Their ranks and names were changed, and authority over them was transferred among parent units.

The Song era is a perfect exemplar for a historical study of spatial politics. In the late nineteenth century, political reformer Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927) advanced the proposition that the Song bureaucracy had been the most effective in China’s long history. One of the five reasons he presented in support of this claim was that “prefectures were small” (州郡地小 zhoujun di xiao). Although the total land area of the Song was much smaller than any previous dynasty that had unified the empire under a single regime, it maintained a larger number of jurisdictions. The Song had a higher density of counties, and a smaller median county size, than any other era in imperial history. Additionally, more contemporaneous data about Song historical geography exists than for any other era, evincing both the close attention that Song archivists paid to spatial information and the high frequency of spatial change during the era.

Like other regimes that developed great ambitions of power over people, places, and commodities, Song rulers systematically surveyed, mapped, and bounded their territory while making administrative decisions with explicit reference to spatial organization. Place making was constantly reiterated within specific but variable institutional limits as the regime reorganized revenue collection, census taking, administration, services, and war according to the organization of territories deemed appropriate and politically viable. Of course, as Cai Kan could attest, even when territorial control was simple and efficient on paper, it could be complex and inefficient in practice, since local claims, bureaucratic infighting, limits on coercive power, outright resistance, and other social factors remained salient as well. Nevertheless, the Song, like other states, organized the realm into discrete, contiguous, and observable jurisdictions that formed the basis for governance. Maps and geographical treatises produced during the Song
Illustrations 0.1a (above, overview) and 0.1b (top of page 8, detail of Guangxi). The ca. 1180s Duoli tu 墜理圖. The map is a 179 x 101 centimeter stele, one of eight presented by Huang Shang 黃裳 to Zhao Kuo 趙𥓩, who would rule as Emperor Ningzong 寧宗 beginning in 1195. This typical representation of Song territory includes a notional Great Wall marking the northern perimeter of the realm. Prefectures are denoted by names enclosed in rectangular cartouches and located at roughly correct places on the map. The cartouches are not intended to represent boundaries.\(^9\)

dynasty defined the perimeter of the regime and enumerated precisely what jurisdictions constituted its extent. Song maps universally depict a realm organized into jurisdictions and clearly distinguished from its neighbors.
The Spatial Organization of State Power

as a Field of History

This book is a work of spatial history, a growing field that concerns the organization of human geography as it has changed over time. New techniques for managing spatial databases and digitally mapping historical spatial information have encouraged historians to conduct empirical scholarship about the geography of state power and other spatial historical questions. Previously, historians interested in the spatial organization of state power focused largely upon questions related to international borders and frontiers, map making, and the making of states; while local and regional historians, long attuned to spatial questions, were ill-equipped to integrate details about multiple sites. In the field of middle-period China, regional histories have tended to focus either upon highly commercialized regions that were centers of artistic and intellectual exchange, or, less often, upon places at the peripheries of the empire.

By contrast, historians have not explored the processes by which domains encircled by borders become integrated territories that can be apprehended and ruled, nor have they analyzed what the resulting landscapes can reveal about politics and policy. A complaint that geographer David Knight raised in 1991 still has not been addressed: “The cultural
landscape—the physical landscape as modified by intentional and unintentional human actions—has long been the focus of study by geographers. . . . [But] one old theme that still demands exploration is the impact on landscape of political decision making and actions which may reflect ideological commitments.”

This field of inquiry has fallen through disciplinary and methodological cracks. As historical geographer Anne Knowles has recently observed, “historians seek causal explanations by establishing the temporal sequence of events. Geographers find causation in the spatial proximity or distance of conditions.” Since historical narrative is poorly equipped to handle spatial proximity and scale as causal factors, it has been difficult to study the spatial character of state power. As historian Richard White points out, “when historians move to the regional, national and transnational scales, not only does the detail usually fall away, but the region and the nation often become mere containers. Spatial analysis matters less and less as the scale increases.”

To study the spatial history of state power, it is necessary to identify and organize information about vast numbers of local place-making events that occurred over hundreds of years. In order to accomplish that, this book relies on a database—a digital gazetteer. In parallel to this book, I have published The Digital Gazetteer of the Song Dynasty, 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. Organized around named places and their histories, it is optimized for discovering and visualizing spatial and temporal patterns.

The genre of the digital historical gazetteer, and techniques for using the information in it, have been developed by participants in the interdisciplinary field of historical geographic information science (GIS). Scholars interested in this approach utilize spatial analysis and spatial visualization to drive historical analysis, and employ geographical information as historical evidence. The fundamental innovation of this field is not technology per se, but the way that its empirical and visual stance encourages fresh, sophisticated, and sustained ways to ask spatial questions about past landscapes.
Historians of China are particularly well positioned to study the spatial history of state power in this way. The Chinese tradition of writing about geography (dili 地理, or “terrestrial organization”) begins with its earliest texts, and documents “a conception of an orderly administrative territorial division established by the ruler and aimed at symbolizing world order.”\(^{17}\) The imperial Bureau of Operations (zhifang 職方), an office of the Ministry of War (bingbu 兵部), archived spatial information at court from the Zhou 周 dynasty (1045–256 BCE) onward.\(^{18}\) Beginning in the eleventh century, geographical scholarship moved out of the court and into the hands of the literati. Consequently, historians of China have access to a vast corpus of texts and maps. The influential early twentieth-century journal Yugong 禹貢 took its title from the name of China’s oldest work of geography, the sixth-century BCE Tribute of Yu (Yugong 禹貢), and in contemporary Sinophone academia, historical geography remains a lively field.\(^{19}\) The OCLC Worldcat digital library catalogue lists 105 Chinese works that include the phrase “Chinese historical geography” (zhongguo lishi dili 中國歷史地理) in their title.\(^{20}\) For decades, institutions like the Fudan University 復旦大學 Center for Historical Geography (lishi dili yanjiu zhongxin 歷史地理研究中心) have supported important scholarship and published essential reference works.

Anglophone Chinese historical geography is indebted to the pathbreaking work of G. William Skinner, who is best known for his adaptation of central place theory to the Chinese marketing system and its organization into macroregions with a core-periphery structure.\(^{21}\) In the field of middle-period history, Skinner’s insights about spatial organization formed the basis for Robert Hartwell’s paradigm-changing regional and demographic study of the Tang-Song transition.\(^{22}\) As the director of the China Historical GIS (CHGIS) and Chinese Biographical Database (CBDB) projects, which germinated from Hartwell’s data and approach, and in his own scholarship besides, Peter K. Bol has extended Hartwell’s historical insights and has disseminated extensive digital information for quantitative analysis of China’s historical geography and society.\(^{23}\) I locate this book humbly in the shadow that these scholars have cast.

The challenge of this project has been to interpret the patterns revealed by spatial analysis where their historical cause is implicit, by using the extant documentary record in order to posit compelling and consis-
tent historical explanations for spatial change. Where documents about spatial policy are insufficient, statecraft essays and documents about historical events help to locate place-making activities in political context. My intention has been to leverage spatial data, historical documentation, and contextual information about the Song political economy together in order to advance a persuasive explanation linking spatial and temporal phenomena. This approach offers the possibility of realizing Richard White’s hope for spatial history at the scale of the state, and employs a method that other historians and historical geographers may emulate. The book has few models to imitate or oppose, and it will take many more studies like this one, and much more data development, before it is possible to entertain general theories about the spatial behavior of historical regimes and the circumstances under which they are likely to reorganize their spatial landscapes.

“Dividing the Realm in Order to Govern”

This book explains China’s changing spatial landscape during a great transformation of the imperial order between the eighth and the twelfth centuries. During this important era in both Chinese and world history, the authority of the emperor and the court expanded, while the aristocratic class dissolved and was replaced by a meritocratic civil bureaucracy. The population of the empire tripled, and the most commercial and monetized economy that would exist anywhere on earth prior to the eighteenth century came into existence. The Song was also China’s philosophical and scientific Golden Age. However, the military apparatus that had permitted earlier dynasties’ colonization of Central and Southeast Asia declined along with its aristocracy or was intentionally abrogated. The pastoralists to China’s north founded formidable regimes that married vast cavalries and tribal structures to Chinese-style bureaucracy. By the early twelfth century, Jurchens occupied half the empire; by the late thirteenth century, the Mongols had toppled the dynasty.

The revolution in imperial state power during this era was a highly spatial phenomenon. The new Song vision for the direct imperial rule of territory by bureaucrats called for a reorganization of the number, distribution, and political role of the counties and prefectures to which civil officials were deputized. Government support for settler colonization of
the burgeoning south required new jurisdictions to be founded that were appropriate in size and location to contain tax-paying subjects and the garrisons that protected them. Armies were strictly associated with civil jurisdictions. In general, Song spatial change transformed the realm from a predominantly aristocratic and hegemonic geography to a civil and territorial one. The Song court primarily accomplished this by restructuring the relative density of the state presence in different parts of the empire, which entailed creating and abolishing counties and prefectures. During the Song, almost twenty percent of the jurisdictions that constituted the realm were founded, abolished, or moved from one parent unit to another. However, while the population of the empire tripled, the total number of jurisdictions remained almost constant. At the same time, the production of maps, surveys, and gazetteers flourished. Elite families began to identify with native place as defined by county, and the administrative authority of prefectures and provincial circuits was strengthened.

In the Song, like other regimes, the resource extraction ceiling limited growing ambitions of state power. As a result, state building became a frequently reiterated geographical process. There was a contradiction between viewing territories as containers of revenue, which dictated lowering expenditures; and envisioning territories as outposts of civil and military authority, which required a dense imperial field presence. It was difficult for territories to serve both functions simultaneously. Over the course of decades, if not years, some jurisdictions, along with their salaried personnel and governmental mandate, had to be abolished if others were to be established. Although spatial renovation to meet new priorities was a characteristic of all regimes in China’s imperial history, the Song was an outlier, both in terms of the overall density of the state presence in its hinterland, and in terms of the sustained vigor with which it managed a dynamic spatial landscape throughout much of its 300-year history. In the Song era, changing the number and distribution of counties and prefectures allowed the court to regulate the circulation of revenue and personnel in distinct regions of the empire. The court promoted colonial strategies to extract profit from territory at the same time that it encouraged the local population to identify with the imperium and its institutions.
Dividing the Realm is organized into two parts. The first part, entitled “The Meaning of Territory,” examines the conventions and ideologies that shaped the Song spatial landscape and explains the causes and justifications for its frequent renovation. Chapter 1, “The Political Economy of Spatial Change in Imperial China,” introduces a theoretical model for explaining the challenges of spatial organization in imperial China and locates the Song in historical perspective. Chapter 2, “The Spatial Organization of State Power in Song China,” explains the Prefecture and County system that structured the Song spatial landscape and the divergent geographies it encompassed. Chapter 3, “Following the Tracks of Yu: Depictions of Imperial Territory,” identifies the discourses and assumptions about territory that constrained spatial politics. The first part of the book reveals three important contradictions: between a geography of politics and a geography of the longue durée, between a geography of military spending and a geography of revenue extraction, and between a geography of bureaucracy and a geography of feudalism.

The second part of the book, entitled “The History of Territory,” chronicles successive phases of spatial renovation in middle-period China from the late Tang (618–906 CE) through the Yuan (1276–1368 CE). The narrative encompasses roughly the eighth to the fourteenth centuries, but focuses primarily on the three centuries of Song dominion and the
dynamics of spatial change in times of war and peace. Chapter 4, “Strengthen the Trunk and Weaken the Branches: The Fall and Rise of the Territorial State,” explains how Song territorial policy capitalized on the experiences of tenth-century regimes that developed procedures for wresting control from tax-farming warlords. The Song regime also created a spatial organization appropriate to a unified imperial entity with a northern defense perimeter, separate political and commercial cores, and a remote southern frontier. Chapter 5, “Enrich the State and Let the People Prosper: Spatial Organization in China’s Long Eleventh Century,” examines the territorial effects of both real hostilities and imagined threats the Song faced from its pastoralist and tribal neighbors. The need to invest in a wartime landscape in the north required consolidating other jurisdictions as long as they were secure and tendered little tax revenue, while establishing new ones that could assist with capturing new sources of wealth. Chapter 6, “The End of the Middle-Period Spatial Cycle,” focuses on Song territory after the fall of the north to Jurchen Jin invaders. An arc of new prefectures protected a new border, while an innovative policy allowed for jurisdictions to be temporarily demoted in the parts of the empire where the depredations of armies led to demographic collapse. As refugees moved into the far south, many jurisdictions that had been abolished two centuries before were restored. After the Song regime gave way to the Yuan in the late thirteenth century, the new regime replaced the Song spatial order with an entirely new political landscape that accorded with the logic of the new regime.

An Appendix describing the creation of the Digital Gazetteer of Song Dynasty China, the source of the geographical information that I have analyzed herein, follows the six chapters of the book.

The chronology of tenth-century imperial consolidation, eleventh-century political reform, and twelfth-century localism that this book traces will be familiar to Song historians. However, this work of spatial history departs from received historiography about the era. By detailing the complex relationship between the court and its field administration, it complicates the paradigm of centralization and decentralization that has been a persistent focus of Song historiography for a hundred years. It also demonstrates that Song policies toward northern military frontiers and southern settlement frontiers were two aspects of a relatively coherent
imperial approach to the general problem of administering peripheral regions with inaccessible resources and limited infrastructure. Finally, it re-frames the well-known eventful phenomena of the Song—wars and reforms—as responses to long-term spatial and demographic change as well as crises in their own right.