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Mapping Empire: Cartography, Territory, and Border Making in Chinese History

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Introduction

This book explores how maps, surveys, and frontier policies helped make China's territory—and, in the process, shaped the identities of those who lived within, along, and across its edges. Rather than treating cartography as a neutral science or a mere reflection of power, I argue that mapping has been a constitutive practice: it created administrative space, legitimated authority, and provided the scripts by which center and frontier negotiated their relationship. From the Han expansion to contemporary border regimes, cartographic techniques and political projects advanced together, generating a dynamic geography that was at once material—in roads, posts, and cadastral fields—and conceptual—in cosmologies, categories, and claims.

The story begins with a basic observation: states govern by measuring. Early imperial regimes transformed itineraries, milestone posts, and tribute routes into ways of knowing and ruling space. As technologies changed—from bamboo slips and route sketches to gridded maps and printed gazetteers—so did territorial imagination. The rise of systematic cadastral surveys and household registers bound land to law, taxation, and labor, while military colonies and frontier garrisons tethered sovereignty to soil. In this evolving toolkit, a “map” was not just a sheet of symbols; it was a bundle of practices linking surveyors, scribes, soldiers, and subjects.

Yet mapping was never purely domestic. Empires meet rivals at their margins, and borders harden—or blur—according to the instruments at hand. Jesuit astronomers and Qing officials collaborated to produce coordinate surveys that redrew “all under Heaven” into latitudes and longitudes. Treaty negotiations with Russia and other powers translated rivers, ridges, and pastures into lines on paper, often freezing fluid ecologies and itinerant livelihoods into fixed jurisdictions. The same processes that promised clarity also produced contention: a standardized line can stabilize a frontier, but it can also crystallize a dispute.

This book thus treats frontiers as laboratories where techniques become politics. In the southwest, tusi chieftaincies and later gaitu guiliu reforms braided ethnography with administration, reframing kinship and ritual landscapes as governable districts. In the northwest, imperial campaigns against steppe and oases demanded new scales of mapping, from caravan routes to triangulated deserts. Maritime charts, lighthouse networks, and customs regimes reconfigured coastal worlds of trade and piracy into securitized corridors and checkpoints. Each case shows how specific instruments—registers, triangulations, boundary stones, lighthouse lists—recast social worlds as state spaces.

Modernity did not end this entanglement; it intensified it. The late imperial encounter

with international law and theodolite surveys ushered in a century of boundary-making that culminated in republican, wartime, and revolutionary cartographies of the nation. Post-1949 institutions centralized mapping as a strategic industry, treating coordinates as state secrets while deploying them to build roads, plan farms, and police frontiers. Today, satellite imagery, GPS, and online map platforms have multiplied both the reach and the stakes of cartography. Digital interfaces appear frictionless, but behind them lie shifting datums, content filters, and edge cases where technical choices carry geopolitical weight.

Throughout, I place technical detail alongside human experience. Maps are archives of ambition, but also of anxiety: they record the hopes of reformers, the fears of border sentries, and the improvisations of villagers whose fields became parcels on a plan. By reading surveys with statutes, and atlases with travelogues, I foreground the social labor that turns measurements into authority. The chapters that follow move chronologically and thematically, tracing how devices, doctrines, and disputes co-produced China's territorial order from the Han to the present.

Finally, this is a book for readers of geopolitics, historical geography, and the making of modern borders. It offers a *longue durée* account of how ideas of "center" and "periphery" were assembled, challenged, and remade through cartographic practice. If the map is not the territory, neither is the territory simply "there" awaiting depiction. It is an outcome—partial, contested, and continually revised—of the very practices by which states and societies attempt to know it.

CHAPTER ONE: Han Frontiers and the Invention of Imperial Space

The unification of China under the Qin and later the Han dynasties was not merely a political triumph; it was a profound act of geographical imagination. Before these empires, the concept of a singular "China" encompassing a vast, centrally administered territory was largely aspirational, a cultural ideal often confined to the philosophical treatises of the Warring States period. The Han, building on Qin foundations, transformed this ideal into a tangible reality, meticulously crafting an imperial space through military expansion, administrative innovation, and, crucially, early forms of cartographic practice. This wasn't just about drawing lines on a map; it was about embedding those lines in the landscape itself, shaping the very perception of what constituted the Han realm.

The Han conquest stretched the sinocentric world outward, pushing its boundaries far beyond the traditional heartlands of the Yellow River plain. This outward thrust necessitated new ways of understanding and managing distance, terrain, and diverse populations. Commanders and officials found themselves grappling with landscapes previously known only through fragmented accounts or poetic metaphor. To govern these new acquisitions—to tax them, defend them, and integrate them into the imperial fabric—required a systematic approach to spatial knowledge. This was the genesis of what we might call imperial cartography: not necessarily maps as we understand them today, but a constellation of techniques that collectively defined, measured, and represented the burgeoning empire.

One of the most immediate challenges of Han expansion was the sheer logistical feat of moving armies and supplies across vast distances. Campaigns against the Xiongnu in the north and northwest, for instance, involved immense military deployments into harsh, unfamiliar territories. To facilitate these movements, a rudimentary but effective system of route mapping emerged. These weren't detailed topographic surveys, but rather practical guides that noted key landmarks, water sources, and strategic choke points. Such "maps" existed primarily in the minds of generals, in the verbal reports of scouts, and perhaps in rough sketches on perishable materials like silk or bamboo. Their purpose was pragmatic: to navigate, to conquer, and to control.

The establishment of commanderies (*jun* 郡) and counties (*xian* 县) across the newly acquired territories further solidified the imperial grip on space. Each administrative unit was assigned specific boundaries, even if these were initially defined by natural features like rivers and mountains, or by the proximity of settlements. These boundaries, however fluid in practice, represented the state's assertion of jurisdiction,

a conceptual framework that gradually imposed order on what might otherwise have appeared as an undifferentiated expanse. The act of naming these new administrative divisions, often drawing on local topography or historical associations, was itself a form of spatial inscription, anchoring imperial authority to specific places.

Beyond military and administrative considerations, the Han court also developed a sophisticated understanding of geography for ideological purposes. The empire saw itself as the center of "All Under Heaven" (*tianxia* 天下), a concept that imbued its territorial claims with a cosmic significance. While this cosmological view often depicted a concentric model of decreasing civilization radiating outwards from the imperial core, it also spurred genuine interest in understanding the physical world at the empire's fringes. Embassies and trade missions venturing to distant lands brought back valuable geographical intelligence, contributing to a growing, albeit often mythologized, picture of the world beyond the Han borders.

The construction of infrastructure, particularly roads and postal relay stations, played a critical role in physically manifesting Han imperial space. These networks, radiating from the capital, served as the arteries of the empire, facilitating rapid communication, troop movements, and the flow of goods and information. Each post station, carefully positioned along a designated route, acted as a fixed point in the imperial spatial schema. The cumulative effect of these routes was to weave a physical tapestry that connected disparate regions, making the abstract concept of a unified empire a lived reality for officials and travelers. The very act of traveling along these defined routes, with their regulated distances and established waypoints, reinforced the imperial ordering of space.

Frontier policies under the Han were a complex blend of military might and diplomatic maneuver. The establishment of military colonies (*tuntian* 屯田) in strategic border zones served a dual purpose: to defend against external threats and to bring new lands under cultivation, thereby extending the agricultural and demographic reach of the empire. These colonies were often accompanied by rudimentary surveys to allocate land for farming, laying the groundwork for more systematic cadastral practices in later periods. The farmers, many of them ex-soldiers, became literal tillers of imperial territory, their labor transforming wildlands into productive extensions of the Han state.

The famed Han bamboo slips offer tantalizing glimpses into the administrative and logistical intricacies of frontier management. These inscribed slips, often unearthed from archaeological sites along the Great Wall, contain a wealth of information: military rosters, supply requisitions, and, significantly, reports detailing distances, garrisons, and watchtowers. While not "maps" in the modern sense, these documents functioned as essential spatial records, providing real-time intelligence for commanders and offering the central government a detailed, albeit textual, overview of its sprawling frontiers. They demonstrate a meticulous attention to detail, born out

of the necessity of maintaining control over remote and often hostile environments.

The development of astronomical knowledge also had a subtle but significant impact on the Han understanding of space. While primarily concerned with celestial phenomena, astronomical observations contributed to more accurate calendrical systems and, by extension, a more precise sense of time and direction. This growing scientific rigor, even if not directly applied to large-scale land surveying, fostered a mindset that valued measurement and systematic observation, paving the way for more sophisticated cartographic techniques in subsequent dynasties. The imperial observatory became a nexus of knowledge production, its findings implicitly shaping how the empire perceived its own geographical extent.

The Great Wall, in its various iterations during the Han dynasty, stands as the ultimate physical manifestation of imperial border-making. More than a simple defensive barrier, the Wall was a monumental act of spatial definition. It represented a deliberate demarcation between "inside" and "outside," between the settled agricultural lands of the Han and the nomadic steppes beyond. While its precise alignment shifted over time and its defensive efficacy varied, its symbolic power was immense. It was a tangible line on the ground, a material expression of imperial will to define and protect its territorial integrity. The construction itself required immense logistical coordination and a practical understanding of topography, even if formal maps of its entire length are scarce from this period.

The Han worldview, while expansive, also recognized the inherent challenges of controlling distant territories. The concept of "loose rein" (*jimi* 羁縻) governance, particularly in dealing with peripheral tribal groups, allowed for a degree of local autonomy as long as nominal allegiance to the Han court was maintained. This pragmatic approach acknowledged the limitations of direct rule over vast, culturally diverse regions and highlights a nuanced understanding of imperial control that was not always about rigid, precisely defined borders. Instead, it involved a flexible spatial strategy, adapting to local conditions while projecting an overarching claim of sovereignty.

The narratives of exploration and conquest, enshrined in historical texts like Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, also served a cartographic function. These accounts, detailing the exploits of generals and envoys, provided a literary mapping of the empire's reach. They transformed remote regions from unknown voids into spaces imbued with imperial narratives, recounting battles fought, alliances forged, and resources discovered. By placing these events within a geographical framework, these histories contributed to a shared imperial consciousness of space, shaping how both elites and, to a lesser extent, the general populace understood the extent and nature of the Han realm.

Even artistic representations, such as tomb murals and bronze maps, offer clues about

Han spatial thinking. While highly stylized and often symbolic, these artifacts sometimes depict landscape features, settlements, and lines of movement that suggest a nascent interest in visual spatial representation. These weren't tools for navigation or administration, but they reveal a cultural understanding of territory that was becoming increasingly integrated with the identity of the Han empire. They speak to a growing visual literacy regarding geographical space, however abstract.

The invention of paper during the Han dynasty, while not immediately revolutionizing cartography, laid the groundwork for future advancements. Bamboo slips and silk were cumbersome or expensive, limiting the scope and detail of early spatial records. Paper, with its relative affordability and ease of production, would eventually enable the creation of more elaborate and widely disseminated maps, fundamentally altering the way geographical information could be compiled, stored, and shared. Its long-term impact on cartographic practice cannot be overstated, even if its full potential would only be realized in later centuries.

The Han dynasty's legacy in defining imperial space was profound. It moved beyond a purely conceptual or cultural notion of "China" to establish a tangible, administratively defined, and militarily defended territory. This was achieved not through a single, revolutionary "map," but through a constellation of practices: military campaigns, administrative divisions, infrastructure development, textual records, and ideological assertions. These efforts collectively initiated the long and intricate process of mapping empire, laying the foundational concepts and techniques upon which subsequent dynasties would build and elaborate. The Han forged the initial contours of a distinctly Chinese imperial geography, a blueprint that would continue to evolve for millennia.

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