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Historiography of the Provinces: How China's Regional Pasts Have Been Written

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Introduction

This book examines not the provinces themselves but the ways their pasts have been assembled, argued over, and remembered. It is a historiography of place: a study of how scholars, states, lineages, collectors, and communities have crafted narratives of regional identity and transformation. By centering method, myth, and memory, the chapters that follow treat each province (and, where appropriate, other provincial-level regions) as a laboratory for understanding how evidence is marshaled, how stories congeal into common sense, and how silence can be as consequential as speech. Our aim is not to adjudicate which version of a provincial past is “true,” but to equip readers with the conceptual and practical tools needed to interrogate why certain accounts gained authority and how they continue to shape scholarship and public life.

The term “province” in these pages is a heuristic that encompasses China’s provincial-level units as they have existed and been imagined over time. Historians working on borderlands, autonomous regions, and special jurisdictions have long noted that administrative nomenclature rarely maps neatly onto lived geographies, ethnic formations, or circuits of trade and devotion. Treating the province as an analytical scale rather than a fixed essence helps us resist methodological nationalism at one extreme and placeless particularism at the other. Throughout the book, we foreground how boundaries shift, how centers and peripheries are co-produced, and how regional claims travel across imperial, republican, socialist, and global frames.

Sources are the scaffolding of every provincial narrative, and they are never neutral. Local gazetteers (*difangzhi*), genealogies, stele inscriptions, temple records, and county archives formed the bedrock of late imperial scholarship; modern historians added newspapers, statistical yearbooks, police files, and party documents; anthropologists and oral historians brought interviews, life histories, and community archives into view; digital humanists now mine corpora, maps, and images at scales unimaginable a generation ago. Each chapter asks what becomes visible—and what is occluded—when we privilege one archive or genre over another. We trace the itineraries of documents as they move from yamen to library to database, and we attend to the artisanal labor of transcription, collation, and translation that turns the flux of local life into portable evidence.

Myth is not the opposite of method; it is method’s shadow. Provincial histories thrive on foundation stories: sacred mountains that anchor a moral landscape, merchant lineages that script thrift and risk, revolutionary sites that stage exemplary sacrifice, frontiers cast as civilizing missions or resistant margins. Such narratives are powerful precisely because they weave fact with value, memory with aspiration. We explore

how nationalist teleologies reframe regional pasts as prologues to the nation, how provincial boosterism brands heritage for markets and tourism, and how competing empires—Qing, Japanese, European, and American—inscribe their own cartographies of rule onto local terrains. At stake are not only scholarly interpretations but also resource claims, development agendas, and cultural rights.

Memory, finally, is the social practice through which provincial pasts are made durable—or made to disappear. Museums, monuments, textbooks, festivals, disasters, and restorations are engines of remembrance that continually renegotiate what counts as a usable past. Yet memory also resides in the mundane: in family altars and factory shop floors, in culinary repertoires and dialect media, in the micro-topographies of lanes, fields, and riverbanks. Across the case studies, we track how grassroots memories challenge official scripts, how silence functions as a politics of survival, and how digital platforms amplify or constrain local voice. The result is a multilayered portrait of provincial remembrance that is as contested as it is consequential.

The architecture of the book is deliberately comparative. Each chapter offers a concise genealogical map of writing about one province-level unit, identifies recurrent debates (about ethnicity, migration, religion, economy, environment, and disaster), profiles landmark contributions, and highlights methodological innovations—from prosopography and spatial analysis to ethnographic collaboration and community archiving. Side-by-side reading invites productive defamiliarization: what seems natural in one province appears as a historically contingent choice in another. The contrast clarifies how explanatory models travel and mutate, and it reveals the price of overgeneralization.

This study is written for advanced students and scholars who seek to read provincial histories critically and to design their own. To that end, the chapters embed practical heuristics: questions to pose of any source base; strategies for triangulating between official and unofficial archives; cautions about sampling bias, survivorship effects, and the seductions of period labels; and suggestions for ethically engaged research with local partners. We also flag opportunities to integrate environmental and material evidence—pollen cores, ceramics, cadastral maps, and hydrological data—into arguments usually dominated by texts.

Organization matters. We present the provinces in alphabetical order rather than by presumed civilizational centers or developmental gradients. This choice resists teleology and encourages readers to assemble their own comparative constellations—coastal with inland, borderland with heartland, revolutionary with commercial, agrarian with industrial. Cross-references point to shared themes and counterpoints, while the conclusion of each chapter outlines open questions and promising archives for future work. Throughout, we privilege clarity without sacrificing complexity, convinced that rigorous provincial historiography is indispensable to understanding China's many pasts.

If this book has a single wager, it is that the province—neither the atomized village nor the undifferentiated nation—offers a generative scale at which to watch power, culture, and economy articulate over time. To write provincial histories well is to hold method, myth, and memory in a single frame, recognizing their tensions and reciprocities. The chapters that follow invite you into that craft: to unmake inherited commonplaces, to reconstruct alternative lineages of knowledge, and to imagine new ways of telling regional stories that do justice to the people who live them.

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CHAPTER ONE: Anhui: Lineages, Examination Geographies, and Rural Reconstruction

Anhui, nestled between the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, has long been a crossroads of Chinese historical narratives. Its landscapes—rolling hills, fertile plains, and bustling canal towns—have inspired chroniclers to map the province as both a repository of tradition and a crucible of transformation. From the Ming Dynasty's northern courtiers to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's radical experiments, Anhui's past has been written through layers of administrative records, family genealogies, and revolutionary hagiography. Yet the province's historiography resists simple categorization, revealing tensions between local memory and national mythmaking. This chapter explores how scholars have assembled Anhui's histories, from late imperial gazetteers to digital archives, while interrogating the stakes of method, myth, and memory in shaping its past.

The late imperial period laid the groundwork for Anhui's historical imagination. Local gazetteers (*difangzhi*), compiled by scholar-officials, became the primary means of documenting regional identity. These texts, produced under Ming and Qing auspices, blended administrative data with moral exhortations, embedding cosmological order into descriptions of canals, temples, and tax yields. Yet gazetteers were not neutral records; they reflected the priorities of literati elites who emphasized Confucian values and hydraulic engineering. For Anhui's historians, these sources pose a dual challenge: how to extract granular social details from formulaic templates, and how to critique the ideological underpinnings of state-sanctioned narratives. The gazetteers' emphasis on flood control and granary management, for instance, obscures the lived experiences of farmers and laborers, whose voices emerge only in scattered local records.

Anhui's examination geography—its network of county seats, prefectural capitals, and *jinshi* (advanced degree) pathways—became a lens for understanding scholarly networks. The province's proximity to Nanjing, the Ming Dynasty's capital, positioned it as a hub for bureaucratic aspirants. Archival records show how Anhui's candidates dominated civil service exams, their success stories immortalized in biographical dictionaries and family records. Yet these narratives often flatten the complexities of regional competition. Scholars like John Dyonon have traced how examination success correlated with access to educational resources, revealing how rural lineages leveraged kinship ties to secure advantages. The myth of meritocratic ascent, however, overshadows structural inequalities, a tension that haunts Anhui's scholarly legacy.

Genealogical records (jiapu) further complicate this picture. Anhui's merchant and gentry families meticulously documented their lineages, claiming ancestral prestige through land ownership and scholarly achievements. These texts, while invaluable for prosopographical studies, require careful skepticism. Editors often embellished records to align with contemporary ideals, erasing inconvenient facts like concubinage or commercial dealings. Historians like Joan Judge have shown how women's roles in lineage continuity were systematically minimized. When reading jiapu, one must ask: whose stories survived, and what social hierarchies do these silences reinforce?

The late Qing era brought new pressures to bear on these sources. As Western influence and internal rebellions destabilized traditional structures, Anhui's local elites grappled with rural reconstruction. Missionary accounts and administrative reports highlight efforts to modernize agriculture and education, yet these initiatives often displaced existing practices. The province's granary systems, once celebrated in gazetteers, faced criticism for inefficiency during famines. Scholars like Rana Mitter have noted how such critiques fed into broader debates about governance, but provincial histories often reduce these discussions to binaries of tradition versus progress. A fuller account must reckon with hybrid solutions that blended indigenous knowledge with imported techniques.

The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1850–1864) looms large in Anhui's historiographical landscape. This heterodox movement, rooted in the province's heartland, challenged Confucian orthodoxy and imperial authority. Early Republican and Communist narratives framed the Taiping as proto-revolutionaries, emphasizing their anti-Confucian stance and egalitarian rhetoric. Yet recent scholarship complicates this view. For example, studies by Tobie Meyer-Fong reveal how Taiping policies disrupted local economies and social structures, particularly for women and children. The myth of revolutionary purity, thus, must be weighed against the messy realities of lived experience under Taiping rule.

Republican-era historians inherited these contradictions. Modernization efforts coincided with growing interest in social history, spurring new archival ventures. Anhui's provincial library in Hefei became a center for collecting documents on agrarian distress and peasant uprisings. However, nationalist frameworks often overshadowed regional specificity. Scholars like Mark Edward Lewis have critiqued how Republican narratives homogenized southern China's diverse experiences, subsuming Anhui's complexities into facile tales of backwardness. The challenge lies in recovering local voices without romanticizing pre-modern societies.

The Warlord Period (1916–1928) further fragmented historical narratives. Anhui's leaders, including the Fengtian clique's Duan Qirui, carved out autonomous regimes, each promoting their own version of the province's past. Newspapers and memoirs from this era brim with competing claims about legitimacy and development. For

historians, these sources offer rich evidence of political discourse but require triangulation with less partisan materials. Local gazetteers from this period, for instance, often omit references to warlord violence, focusing instead on infrastructure projects and educational reforms. Such omissions underscore the need for critical engagement with sources.

The Chinese Civil War entrenched these divisions. Anhui's fall to Communist forces in 1949 reshaped its historical narrative overnight. Soviet-trained historians rewrote county annals to foreground peasant revolutions and feudal oppression, aligning local stories with Maoist priorities. Party archives, declassified in the 1980s, reveal how grassroots accounts were sanitized or amplified based on political utility. Scholars like Elizabeth J. Perry have shown how Red Army veterans' testimonies were instrumentalized to legitimize land redistribution, their complexity reduced to revolutionary boilerplate. Yet these same archives contain traces of dissent and ambiguity, waiting to be mined by careful researchers.

Post-1949 narratives solidified Anhui's status as a "revolutionary cradle," a label that persists in popular memory. Museums and monuments across the province celebrate peasant uprisings and Communist martyrs, their displays carefully curated to omit inconvenient details. For example, exhibits on the Huaihai Campaign rarely mention the Nationalist troops' perspectives or the campaign's devastating civilian toll. Such omissions reflect the Communist Party's broader project of scripting heroic origins, a task in which Anhui plays a starring role. Yet local communities have preserved counter-memories through oral traditions and folk practices, complicating official narratives.

The Party's influence extended beyond monuments into academic historiography. Socialist-era scholars were tasked with proving Anhui's "advanced" character, often through comparative studies with neighboring provinces. These efforts, while ideologically constrained, generated valuable data on rural economies and demographic shifts. Research on the 1950s collectivization campaigns, for instance, relied heavily on county-level records that are now accessible to independent scholars. Yet the teleological imperative—to show progress toward communism—distorted analysis, privileging outcomes over process. Contemporary historians must untangle these biases while acknowledging the scholarship's foundational insights.

Recent decades have seen a shift toward more nuanced methodologies. Cultural historians have explored Anhui's linguistic diversity and religious plurality, moving beyond the confines of class-based narratives. Studies of the province's Hui Muslim communities, for example, highlight how ethnic identity intersected with local politics during the Republican era. Digital archives have also democratized access to sources, enabling researchers to trace connections between Anhui's regions and global networks. Online platforms like the Chinese Local Gazetteers Project allow scholars to cross-reference data on taxation, migration, and natural disasters across centuries.

Yet digital tools have their limits. Many Anhui archives remain uncatalogued, their contents known only to local custodians. Environmental records, crucial for understanding rural life, are scattered across ecological surveys and engineering reports. Projects like the University of Chicago's "Spatial History of China" have begun mapping these materials, but much work remains. Traditional methods—archival sleuthing, oral interviews, and material analysis—still prove indispensable. The challenge lies in integrating old and new approaches without privileging either.

Environmental history offers a promising avenue for synthesis. Anhui's rivers and lakes, central to its agricultural prosperity, have shaped both its physical and metaphorical landscapes. Floods and droughts recur in gazetteers as tests of governance, their descriptions infused with moral lessons about virtue and neglect. Modern climate science, however, provides new tools for analyzing these events, revealing how natural variability interacted with human interventions. Scholars like Peter Coclanis have shown how the Yangtze's changing course influenced settlement patterns, complicating narratives of static regional identity.

Rural reconstruction efforts of the 1930s and 1940s further illustrate this interplay. American sociologist John K. Lattimore's team studied Anhui's villages during the New Life Movement, producing detailed reports on household economies and educational practices. These accounts, while filtered through a modernizing lens, capture granular social dynamics often missed in official narratives. Yet they also reflect the ideological assumptions of their collectors, who viewed rural life through the prism of urban reform agendas. Critical reading reveals both their insights and their blind spots.

Memory practices in Anhui reveal how communities navigate official scripts. Family altars in Huizhou-style architecture honor ancestors alongside Communist heroes, blending sacred and secular commemorations. Annual festivals commemorate both historical floods and revolutionary victories, suggesting how trauma and triumph are woven into collective identity. Scholars like Jun Jing have explored how these practices sustain memories of hardship and resilience, challenging state narratives of seamless progress. Yet such memories are unevenly preserved, dependent on local demographics and economic conditions.

The province's literary traditions also shape its historiography. Anhui's "native place societies" (huiguan), established by migrants in Shanghai and Beijing, maintained ties to their hometowns through poetry, calligraphy, and historical writing. These texts, compiled in diaspora archives, offer perspectives on regional identity beyond state frameworks. However, their male-dominated authorship and emphasis on scholarly refinement limit their scope. Women's voices, often obscured in these records, emerge more clearly in folk tales and religious narratives preserved by temple caretakers.

Contemporary scholarship on Anhui benefits from interdisciplinary dialogue.

Archaeologists studying the province's Neolithic sites collaborate with historians examining agrarian transformations, bridging prehistoric and modern timelines. Geographers mapping canal networks contribute to understanding commercial integration, while anthropologists document ongoing rural-urban migrations. This methodological pluralism enriches the historiographical record, yet it also raises questions about coherence and interpretation. How, for instance, do material remains inform textual silences about labor and subsistence?

The role of disasters in Anhui's memoryscape deserves special attention. The 1950s Yellow River floods, catastrophic for local communities, were framed by Communist historiography as victories over nature and reactionary forces. Oral accounts collected in the 1980s reveal a more complex reality, detailing both heroic rescues and bureaucratic failures. These testimonies, while fragmented, challenge monolithic narratives of socialist construction. Similarly, the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake prompted renewed interest in how seismic events reshape regional identities, though Anhui's experience remains understudied compared to Sichuan.

Tourism has become a mediator of historical memory. Sites linked to the Taiping movement or the Communist revolution attract visitors from across China, their interpretations shaped by state guidelines and market demands. Anhui's "Red Tourism" routes, for example, emphasize heroic struggles while sidestepping uncomfortable topics like collaboration or atrocity. Yet local guides often share unofficial stories, passed down through generations. These informal narratives, though ephemeral, hint at alternative histories waiting to be documented.

The provincial government's archival policies influence scholarly access. While many Republican-era documents are now available, sensitive materials on land disputes or ethnic tensions remain restricted. Independent researchers often rely on unofficial channels, risking exposure to incomplete or unreliable sources. Collaboration with local institutions can mitigate these challenges, but it requires navigating bureaucratic hurdles and ideological expectations. The balance between access and accuracy defines much of Anhui's current historiographical frontier.

Educational curricula further shape public understanding. Textbooks in Anhui schools follow national guidelines, emphasizing the province's contributions to Chinese civilization while downplaying its internal conflicts. Life in rural communities, however, often diverges from these narratives. Teachers and students alike draw on family stories and local landmarks to construct alternative accounts, suggesting how scholarship and memory coexist in tension. This dynamic underscores the need for historians to engage with lived experiences beyond formal sources.

The legacy of Anhui's scholarship extends beyond its borders. Its examination geographies influenced neighboring provinces, while its revolutionary traditions inspired movements across China. Yet the province's unique blend of lineages, rivers,

and reform experiments makes it a distinct case study. By tracing how Anhui's past has been assembled and contested, we gain tools for interrogating other regional histories. The chapter's exploration of sources, myths, and memories offers a framework for analyzing the constructed nature of all provincial narratives.

Looking ahead, Anhui's historiography faces unresolved challenges. Climate change threatens its agricultural heritage, while urbanization transforms its rural landscapes. These processes demand fresh archival strategies, incorporating environmental data and community testimony. Digital tools can help preserve vanishing materials, but they cannot replace the interpretive work of scholars attuned to local contexts. As new voices enter the field, Anhui's history promises to grow more intricate—a patchwork of enduring traditions and emergent perspectives.

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