

The contributions of historical geography research in the twentieth century to the concept of “Chinese nation”



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Abstract

The Chinese nation has evolved through history and is inextricably linked with geographical factors. Since the inception of the concept of “Chinese nation” in the twentieth century, Chinese scholars have made significant contributions to understanding this concept from a historical geography perspective. This paper undertakes an examination and discussion of these contributions, highlighting three main aspects in which Chinese scholars in the twentieth century have significantly enhanced the concept of “Chinese nation” from a historical geography perspective: firstly, escaping the trap of “China Proper” and comprehensively understanding the Chinese nation from a geographical perspective; secondly, breaking the spatial barrier set up by the Great Wall, endowing the Chinese nation with a complete geographical space; thirdly, *The Historical Atlas of China* clarifying the connection between historical China and modern China, providing a comprehensive geographical basis for understanding the formation and development of the Chinese nation. The paper, contextualized within the historical backdrop, provides an analysis and discourse on these three aspects, indicating that the contributions of scholars in the twentieth century were instrumental in refining the concept of the Chinese nation from a historical geography perspective, illustrating the inseparable connection between nation and geography. Only through the organic integration of history, nation, and geography can we fully grasp the historical trajectory and geographical foundation of the Chinese nation.

Keywords Chinese nation concept · Historical geography · Gu Jiegang · Tan Qixiang

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1 Introduction

Human activities are inexorably tied to two fundamental elements: time and space, commonly referred to as history and geography, respectively. In 1936, Gu Jiegang¹ and Tan Qixiang aptly stated in the “Inaugural Editorial” of *The Evolution of Chinese Geography*, a semi-monthly magazine, that “history records the past activities of human society, and all the activities of human society take place on the earth, so what is especially closely related to history is geography. History is like a drama, and geography is the stage; without a stage, where can the drama be performed?” (Gu and Tan 1934) This vividly illustrates the intimate relationship between history and geography. Hegel (2001) also noted, “the natural connection that assists in the formation of the spirit of a people is the geographical basis.” Therefore, the understanding of history is inseparable from the geographical environment, and likewise, understanding “nation” is equally intertwined with the geographical environment. This is because the geographical environment determines livelihoods, which in turn shape economic and cultural patterns, ultimately influencing societal forms, values, and ideologies. This situation is particularly pronounced in pre-industrial societies. The concept of the Chinese nation is formed in the course of historical development. It is closely intertwined with geographical factors. Historical geography is an indispensable perspective for understanding and interpreting the concept of the Chinese nation. Since the emergence of the concept of the Chinese nation in the twentieth century, Chinese scholars have made significant contributions to refining this concept from a historical geography perspective. Therefore, this paper aims to conduct a preliminary discussion of the significant contributions made by Chinese scholars in the twentieth century to refine this concept from a historical geography perspective.

2 Discussion

2.1 Escaping the trap of “China Proper”: a comprehensive geographical understanding of the Chinese nation

The concept of the Chinese nation emerged in the twentieth century, primarily based on modern China. What, then, defines “China?” Over a century ago, this question was somewhat ambiguous. From the early twentieth century to the 1930s and 1940s, an important epistemological obstacle in the geographical understanding of the Chinese nation was the concept of China Proper. (Huang 2020) In 1905, Liang Qichao published the article “*Observations on the Ethnic Groups of China in History*,” formally proposing and elucidating the concept of the Chinese nation. This work delineates the formation of the Chinese nation based on the historical origins of “the various ethnic groups inhabiting the main regions of China.”² The conclusion drawn is

¹ The names of Chinese scholars in the text of this paper follow the rules of Chinese, with surnames coming first.

² The original text within quotation marks is: “分宅中国本部诸族.”

that “the contemporary Chinese nation corresponds to what is commonly referred to as the Han people”³ (Liang 1989a). However, Liang Qichao soon realized that such an interpretation of the Chinese nation deviated from his original intention of using “nation” to integrate Chinese society, as he initially envisioned “a great nation composed of the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, Miao, and Tibetan ethnic groups” (Liang 1989c). Therefore, in his work *Studies on the Ethnic Groups in Chinese History*, published in 1922, after careful consideration and further research, Liang Qichao revised his definition of the “Chinese nation”: “The sole criterion for the formation of a nation lies in the discovery and establishment of ‘national consciousness’... Whenever encountering another nation and immediately feeling the sense of ‘I am Chinese,’ such individuals are members of the Chinese nation (Liang 1989b).” It represents a significant advancement in using “Chinese” as the foundation for the national consciousness and identity of “Chinese nation,” breaking away from the previously narrow understanding of the Chinese nation influenced by the concept of China Proper.

It is evident that the concept of the Chinese nation was significantly influenced and affected by the term “China Proper” at its inception. So, where did the concept of China Proper in Chinese language⁴ come from? According to Chen’s (2017) research, this term was translated directly from English, which was originally created by Western scholars to understand the historical, geographical, and political traditions of China. According to scholars who have compiled the translation history of the term “China Proper” from both Chinese and Western literature, it is known that this term was introduced into China through a process that involved the transmission from Europe to Russia, then to Japan, and finally into China via translated articles published in publications such as *The Chinese Progress* (时务报) and *The China Discussion* (清议报) founded by Liang Qichao, as well as in *The Reformer China* (知新报) associated with the Reformists (Huang 2020; Chen 2016). According to Huang’s research, the term first entered the Chinese language in an article titled “Discussion on the Border Affairs of China,” published in *The Chinese Progress* in 1896: “The region of Xinjiang is situated quite a distance away from China Proper.⁵ This geographical distance poses evident challenges to the central administration, particularly in terms of military expeditions... The area around Mongolia is desolate, lying between Siberia and China Proper, with barren land and sparse population. From a military and political perspective, this place is quite strategic (Kozyo 1896).” This article was a translation from Japanese, originally titled “On Russia’s Offensive and Defensive towards Qing Dynasty Border Defense,” published in issues 27 and 28 of *The Journal of Toho Kyokai*, translated by Kozyo Satakichi. The term China Proper in Japanese was originally *Shina Honbu*,⁶ which was translated

³ In this paper, Liang Qichao categorized the historical “various peoples inhabiting the main regions of China” into eight: *Miaoman*, *Shu*, *Badi*, *Xuhuai*, *Wuyue*, *Min*, *Baiyue*, and *Baipu*. After tracing the changes and historical origins of these eight ethnic groups, he pointed out, “the eight ethnic groups mentioned above all constitute the most important components of the Chinese nation.”

⁴ The translation of “China Proper” into Chinese is “中国本部.”

⁵ The original Chinese version of this citation: 盖新疆地方, 距中国本部离隔颇远.

⁶ *Shina Honbu*: in Chinese, 支那本部.

as “中国本部 (*Zhongguo Benbu*)”⁷ in Chinese. Therefore, Huang (2020) believes that “the appearance of the Chinese term ‘*Zhongguo Benbu*’ was due to the translator Kozyo Satakichi’s change of the Japanese term ‘*Shina*’⁸ to Chinese ‘*Zhongguo* (中国).’” In fact, from various indications, one cannot rule out the possibility that changing “*Shina Honbu*” to “*Zhongguo Benbu* (中国本部)” was done by the editors of *The Chinese Progress*. There are two pieces of evidence to support this: (1) The original Japanese title of the translated article was “On Russia’s Offensive and Defensive towards Qing Dynasty Border Defense,”⁹ but when *The Chinese Progress* published the article, its Chinese title was changed to “Discussion on the Border Affairs of China,”¹⁰ not using the original Japanese title. This indicates that *The Chinese Progress* edited the article before publishing it. (2) The Reformist newspapers *The Reformer China* and *The China Discussion* both directly used the Chinese word *Shina Honbu* (Liang 1999). Therefore, whether “*Shina Honbu*” was changed to “*Zhongguo Benbu*” by the translator, or by the editors of *The Chinese Progress*, or even by Liang Qichao himself,¹¹ cannot be confirmed at present. If it was the latter, this is likely a clue that Liang Qichao encountered the term “China Proper” and used it to discuss the Chinese nation.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the term “China Proper” began to be used in Chinese intellectual circles. Before and after the Revolution of 1911, amid the anti-Qing (Manchu) government atmosphere, this term became associated with the “Eighteen Provinces of Han”¹² in China, serving as a geographic designation for the region of Han (Zou and Chen 2012). In the 1920s and 1930s, some Chinese who used “China Proper” as a geographical term perhaps did not realize the major pitfalls

⁷ *Zhongguo Benbu*: in Chinese, 中国本部; Pinyin *Zhōngguó Běnbù*.

⁸ *Shina*: in Chinese, 支那. The word “Shina” was originally a transliteration of the word “China, Chine” in English, French and other languages. From the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 to the Japanese war of aggression against China, Japan abandoned the name of “Chugoku” which was used for thousands of years and used “shina” to refer to China in order to cultivate the sense of superiority of the Daiwa nation. After World War II, at the request of the Chinese delegation, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a notice to the whole country on “Matters Concerning Avoiding the Use of ‘Shina’” (Japanese: “支那ノ呼称ヲ避ケルコトニ関スル件,” A06050410200、枢密院文書・雑件・昭和二十一年~昭和二十二年・枢密院秘書課 (国立公文書館)), instructing officials and civilians, the media, textbooks, official documents, and civil servants throughout the country to prohibit the use of “Shina,” which stipulates: “In the future, regardless of the underlying reasons, the use of the name that is hated by the country (Republic of China) will be strictly prohibited.” Since then, the word “Shina” has completely disappeared from the official documents, textbooks, newspapers and magazines of the Japanese government. Today, except for Japanese right-wing elements, Japanese people no longer use the word “Shina.”

⁹ Russia’s Offensive and Defensive Theory towards Qing Dynasty Border Defense: 清國邊備に對する露國の攻守論.

¹⁰ Discussion on the Border Affairs of China: 中国边事论.

¹¹ *The Chinese Progress* was a well-known reformist newspaper during the Reform Movement period of the turn of the twentieth century. It was founded on August 9, 1896, in Shanghai by Liang Qichao, Huang Zunxian, Wang Kangnian, and others. It was issued once every ten days, with Liang Qichao as the chief editor. It was the first newspaper run by Chinese people and the most important and influential newspaper of the Reform Movement at that time.

¹² Eighteen Provinces of Han (汉地十八省): The Qing dynasty established 18 provinces in areas previously ruled by the Han people of the Ming Dynasty.

and loopholes inherent in the term (Qin 1978).¹³ However, Japanese imperialism, which keenly understood the situation of China and the subtleties of the Chinese language and harbored ambitions to seize Chinese territory, found that the concept of “China Proper” provided a perfect pretext for dismembering China. Thus, they deliberately exploited the concept of “China Proper” to separate the Manchuria-Mongolia regions from China so as to seize them. In 1927, Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi (2016) explicitly stated in a report to Emperor Showa: “The areas known as Manchuria and Mongolia are not historically part of or special regions of Shina. Dr. Yano has made extensive efforts to research the history of Shina, leaving no doubt that Manchuria and Mongolia do not belong to the territories of Shina. This research has been disseminated by Tokyo Imperial University to the world.” Since the twentieth century, Japan has conducted numerous so-called “surveys” in northeastern China, Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Xizang, with the aim of using the concept of “China Proper” to erode and dismember China (Cao 2011; Fang 2002). As Gu Jiegang (1939a) pointed out: “Since Emperor Meiji set his strategy to conquer China, he aimed to first seize Manchuria-Mongolia regions. Therefore, the term ‘China Proper (*Zhongguo Benbu*)’ was fabricated, excluding the border regions from the ‘proper’ territory of China, deceiving the Chinese people and the world. This stratagem misled everyone into believing that the Japanese coveted only areas beyond ‘China Proper’ and did not harm the fundamental interests of China.”

In 1931, Japan launched the September 18th Incident and occupied northeastern China. In 1932, they established the puppet Manchukuo, further exposing their conspiracy. In 1934, with a deep understanding of historical geography, Gu Jiegang and Tan Qixiang (1934) pointed out sharply in the “Inaugural Editorial” of *The Evolution of Chinese Geography*, a semi-monthly journal: “Nation and geography are inseparable. Without the development of our geography, how can we establish a basis for the study of national history? Not to mention other things, just look at our eastern neighbor’s deliberate aggression against us and the creation of the name ‘Benbu’ (本部)¹⁴ to refer to our Eighteen Provinces, implying that our borderlands are not inherent. We, a group of fools, have actually been successfully deceived by them, and now every geography textbook calls it this way. This is our shame.” This loud call was intended to awaken the Chinese people to the dangers posed by Japan’s use of the concept of “China Proper” to dismember China. This was also the original intention behind the establishment of *The Evolution of Chinese Geography* and the promotion of historical geography research. With the outbreak of the Japanese War of Aggression against China in 1937, Gu Jiegang keenly felt the immense danger posed by the term “China Proper.” To further alert the Chinese people, Gu Jiegang (2010), after completing a survey of the northwest China in 1938, revealed Japan’s conspiracy of using “China Proper” in a public speech: “The Japanese have blatantly

¹³ “On March 14, 1924, Chiang Kai-shek wrote to Liao Zhongkai, saying: ‘The Communist Party of Russia has no sincerity, and its only policy towards China is to make the Communist Party of China orthodoxy. The Communist Party of Russia never considers cooperating with our party. As for its policy towards China, it aims to make the Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan parts of its Soviet, Regarding China Proper, the Communist Party of Russia also has intentions.’”

¹⁴ Benbu: the translation of “*Honbu*, Proper,” in Chinese, 本部.

created the term ‘China Proper’ for us in our geographical area. We have never seen the term in ancient history. During the Qin (秦) and Han (汉) dynasties, the Chinese territory was the largest, extending south to Annan and east to Chaoxian. During the Yuan Dynasty, the territory spanned Europe and Asia, with eleven provinces under the central government, but there was no term ‘*Proper*.’ This is a malicious strategy by Japan; they are entirely using these terms to divide Chinese territory.”

It is worth noting that in early 1939, Gu Jiegang published two consecutive articles in his edited newspaper *Social Welfare Tientsin* (益世报), one titled “The Urgent Need to Abolish the Term ‘China Proper,’” published on January 1st, and the other titled “The Chinese Nation Is an Indivisible Whole” published on February 13th. The two articles were published within a span of just over 40 days. According to *GuJiegang’s Diary*, “The Urgent Need to Abolish the Term ‘China Proper’” was written from December 20th to 23rd, 1938 (Gu 2007), and was published on January 1st of the following year. The writing of “The Chinese Nation Is An Indivisible Whole” was prompted by a letter from Fu Sinian (2014), in which he informed Gu Jiegang that “at present, the Japanese are propagating that Guangxi and Yunnan are the former residences of the Thai people in Siam, and inciting them to reclaim lost territories.” Gu Jiegang (1947) felt the situation was urgent and, driven by a deep sense of responsibility and mission towards the Chinese nation, immediately wrote “The Chinese Nation Is An Indivisible Whole” upon receiving Fu’s letter. In other words, the viewpoint that “the Chinese nation is an indivisible whole” has a clear intrinsic connection with the geographical resistance against Japan’s “China Proper” conspiracy and the situation of neighboring countries encroaching on Chinese territory. Huang (2020) argues that “the dispute of China Proper in the 1930s and 1940s was part of the discussion on the Chinese nation.” Although the term “the dispute of China Proper” is not accurate, the intrinsic connection between the viewpoint of “the Chinese nation is an indivisible whole” and the need to avoid Japan’s “China Proper” trap is indisputable.

In “The Chinese Nation Is An Indivisible Whole,” Gu Jiegang (1939b) remarked: “The Japanese used the pretext of national self-determination to seize the three provinces of Northeast China and establish a puppet Manchukuo... Prince Demchugdongrob initially advocated for high autonomy in Inner Mongolia but later threw himself into the arms of the Japanese, betraying the nation and its territory. However, his slogan was also claimed to be national self-determination.” The above situation indicates that exposing Japan’s conspiracy of separating Manchuria-Mongolia regions from China is an important component of the view that “the Chinese nation is an indivisible whole.” In other words, the significance and value of “the Chinese nation is an indivisible whole” lie not only in rallying the people of the nation together in times of national crisis but also in using the integrity of the Chinese nation to resist the “China Proper” trap, and to mitigate the situation of neighboring countries encroaching on Chinese territory. By emphasizing the unity of the Chinese nation, this viewpoint aims to defend and maintain the territorial integrity of China. Therefore, the view that “the Chinese nation is an indivisible whole” embodies a dual significance, both in uniting all the ethnic groups of China and in geographically defending the territorial integrity of China. This contribution is something we should not forget when looking back on history, particularly the important

contributions made by scholars of previous generations in refining the concept of the Chinese nation and defending the territorial integrity of China during times of national crisis.

2.2 Inside and outside the Great Wall: providing the Chinese nation with a comprehensive geographic space

In the first half of the twentieth century, another factor influencing the perception of the Chinese nation was the traditional concept of “Hua-Yi distinction”¹⁵ and the geographical mindset of dividing China into “inside part” and “outside part” using the Great Wall. In Sun Yat-sen’s sixteen-character political manifesto proposed in 1905, the first two sentences, “Expel the Tatar and revive *Zhonghua* (驱逐鞑虏, 恢复中华),” juxtaposed “Tatar” and “Zhonghua” (means China) in an antagonistic and exclusionary manner. After the Revolution of 1911, Sun Yat-sen and his followers realized the significant flaw in this slogan—if the “Tatar barbarians” were expelled, half of China’s territory would be lost. Thus, they quickly adjusted their approach, re-establishing the strategy of “Five Peoples are to run the Republic together,” including the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan, as the foundation for building the nation, namely, “the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui and Tibetan peoples are of one nation, and are to run the Republic together.” (Sun 1912) The slogan “Expel the Tatar and revive *Zhonghua*” was directly derived from the *Declaration of War to the Central Plains*¹⁶ issued by Zhu Yuanzhang¹⁷ during his northern expedition, originally stating “Expel the *Hu*¹⁸ and revive *Zhonghua* (驱逐胡虏, 恢复中华),” with only one word changed (Yao and Xia 1962). This slogan actually originated from the historical concept of “Hua-Yi distinction,” indicating that the concept of “Hua-Yi distinction” was still an underlying factor influencing the perception of the Chinese nation at that time.

In the early twentieth century, during China’s transition from a traditional dynastic rule to a modern state, the deeply rooted ethnic and geographic perspectives derived from the traditional “Hua-Yi distinction” concept continued to influence people’s perceptions, particularly concerning the concept of “China.” The prevailing concept of “China” that existed in people’s minds at the beginning of the twentieth century still bore significant traces of the “Hua-Yi distinction” ideology. The term “*Zhongguo* (中国, China)” originally referred to as “capital” during the

¹⁵ The distinction between *Huá* and *Yí* (Chinese: 华夷之辨; Pinyin: *Huá Yí zhī biàn*), also known as Sino-barbarian dichotomy, is a historical Chinese concept that differentiated a culturally defined “China” (called *Huá* 华) from cultural or ethnic outsiders (*Yí* 夷 conventionally “barbarians”). Hua-Yi distinction—Justapedia, justapedia.org/wiki/Hua%E2%80%93Yi_distinction.

¹⁶ Declaration of War to the Central Plains (Chinese 諭中原檄; Pinyin *Yù Zhōngyuán Xí*): The declaration of war was made by Zhu Yuanzhang when he launched a northern expedition against the Yuan Dynasty in 1367.

¹⁷ Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), Emperor Hongwu, founded the Ming dynasty and reigned from 1368 to 1398.

¹⁸ The *Hu*: The ancient Chinese names for various ethnic groups in the Northern and Western China border areas.

Western Zhou dynasty. *The Shiji Jijie* (史记集解, *Collected Annotations of Records of the Grand Historian*) quotes Liu Xi of the Eastern Han dynasty's *Shi Ming* (释名, Explain Names) to explain the term “*Zhongguo* (中国)” as follows: “The emperor’s capital is called ‘*zhong* (中),’¹⁹ so his country is called ‘*Zhongguo*.’²⁰” (Takigawa 1998) Later, the term “*Zhongguo*” was expanded to broadly refer to the fiefdoms granted by the Emperor of the Zhou dynasty. After the unification by the Qin dynasty, the territories of the original seven kingdoms in the Warring State Period and their territories began to be referred to as “*Zhongguo*.” “The Annals of Qin” of *The Records of the Grand Historian* states that the ancestors of Qin said “some of the descendants lived in *Zhongguo* and some lived among the Yi and Di tribes.”²¹ (Sima 1959) From numerous historical records, it is evident that the ancient concept of “China” was primarily used in contrast and distinction to “Yi and Di tribes.” Therefore, the historical records of the term “China” mainly juxtapose and contrast it with “barbarian tribes.” For instance, phrases such as “the northern Di tribes have always been a threat to China (Sima 1956),” “China lives inside restraining the Yi-Di tribes, while the Yi and Di tribes reside outside paying tribute to China (Yao and Xia 1962),” and “The relationship between China and the Yi-Di tribes is like the relationship between day and night, yang and yin (Fan 2003).” In summary, in ancient times, the term “China” had two fundamental meanings: firstly, it denoted an agricultural area distinct from the regions inhabited by “Yi and Di tribes,” thus representing a geographical concept; secondly, it referred to the people of these agricultural areas who are distinct from the “Yi and Di tribes.” Therefore, in ancient times, “China” represented not only a cultural concept but also had ethnic connotations.

The traditional view of “China” based on the “Hua-Yi distinction,” reflected geographically, is the mindset of dividing the Chinese nation into “inside part” and “outside part” by using the Great Wall as a boundary.

In the 30th year of his reign (1691), Emperor Kangxi (康熙) explicitly stated: “An emperor rules the empire based on its own principles, not solely relying on fortifications. Since the construction of the Great Wall by the Qin dynasty, it has been regularly maintained by the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties. Were there no border troubles from the surrounding ethnic groups at those dynasties? At the end of the Ming dynasty, Emperor Taizu of Qing led a large army and directly broke through the Great Wall Pass. All the armies of the Ming dynasty collapsed, and no one dared to resist, showing that the way to defend a country lies in cultivating virtue and pacifying the people. When the people are happy, the country is strengthened, and the borders are naturally secure” (Ma et al. 1985). The measures taken by the Qing dynasty, such as the construction of the Eight Outer Temples in Chengde Mountain Resort, which is outside the Great Wall, also reflect the intention to downplay the use of the Great Wall as a fortification between China and the Yi tribes. However,

¹⁹ “Zhong” means “center” in Chinese; that is to say, the emperor’s capital was always located in the center of the country.

²⁰ “Guo” in Chinese means “capital,” “country,” or “state.”

²¹ Yi and Di tribes: non-Han tribes in the east and north of ancient China.

the traditional concept of using the Great Wall as a boundary between “inside part” and “outside part” or “inner” or “outer” still widely existed among the people.

By the twentieth century, as the Great Wall gradually became a “figure of the past dynasties’ back,” this colossal and magnificent structure left over from ancient times stirred up people’s sentiments of nostalgia and imagination about the past. Coupled with the decentralization of pastoral areas in the industrialized society and the decline in social vitality, people gradually forgot the fact that northern nomadic peoples migrated southward and dominated the Central Plains accompanied the long history of China. They also forgot that the Great Wall was abandoned for most of its history and had not played a significant role. Anyhow, the architecture of the Great Wall began to be glorified and praised, and even regarded as a “symbol of the Chinese nation.” Little did they know that the historical distinction between “inside” and “outside” of the Great Wall may have influenced people in modern times, leading to a fragmented understanding of China’s overall history and territory.

The construction of the Great Wall dates back to the Warring States period. Throughout Chinese history, only two dynasties attached importance to the Great Wall: the Qin dynasty and the Ming dynasty. After the subjugation of the six kingdoms, the Qin dynasty connected the defensive fortifications, which were built by the kingdom of Qin, Yan, and Zhao to prevent the northern nomads from going south, as a whole to form the “*Wangli Changcheng*.”²² The First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (*Qin Shi Huang*) aimed to permanently block the northern nomadic tribes outside of the Great Wall and ensure the eternal continuation of the first unified empire, just like the name “*Shi Huang* (First Emperor).” Another dynasty that relied on and built the Great Wall was the Ming dynasty. The Great Wall we see today is mostly built during the Ming dynasty. The Ming dynasty relied on the Great Wall for a practical purpose—to defend against the Mongols from the north. After its middle period, the Ming dynasty had to gradually cede its rule and share power with the Mongols in the north. The two formed a confrontation, mainly with the Great Wall as the boundary.²³ Therefore, the Great Wall was not only the northern border of the Ming dynasty but also an important fortification against the Mongols’ southward invasion. If the construction of the Great Wall by the Qin dynasty aimed for eternal reign with subjective motives, the Ming dynasty’s vigorous construction of the Great Wall tended to be practical—to defend against the Mongols’ southward invasion for peace. Therefore, the starting points for the Qin and Ming dynasties’ emphasis on the Great Wall were completely different: the Qin aimed for eternity, while the Ming aimed for peace.

²² *Wangli Changcheng* is a Chinese customary name for the Great Wall. “*Wan*” is ten thousand; “*Li*” is a Chinese unit of length and one *li* is equal to half a kilometer.

²³ Traditionally, the Ming Dynasty is often perceived as a unified empire, which is not entirely accurate. In fact, after the middle period of the Ming dynasty, with the rise of the Mongols and their encroachment into Ming-controlled territories, the Ming Dynasty’s control in the northern regions significantly receded. Following the Crisis of the Tumu Fortress, the Ming dynasty gradually found itself in a situation where it shared power with the Mongols in the north. The reliance on and vigorous construction of the Great Wall by the Ming dynasty stemmed from the standoff with the northern Mongols, which defined their respective territories.

In 1925, Lu Xun (2005) made the following comment on the Great Wall: “It was in vain that many workers died as laborers. The outer tribes were never stopped. Now, it is only a relic, but it will not be extinguished for a while, and maybe it will be preserved. ... This great and cursed Great Wall.” “The outer tribes were never stopped” accurately describes the true state of the Great Wall in Chinese history for most of its time. Although the Great Wall delineated a line between the agricultural and nomadic regions, it failed to stop or separate the ethnic interactions between the two major regions along the line. In history, the main forces that broke through this geographical barrier were the highly expansive and aggressive northern nomadic tribes. They didn’t value the Great Wall and the Great Wall didn’t pose too many obstacles. In this sense, the Great Wall, spanning between the agricultural and nomadic regions, is by no means the “periphery” of China but is precisely the geographical “axis” of historical China and the “axis” of the Chinese nation. The formation and development of the Chinese nation are attributed to the integration of the two major ethnic systems of agriculture and nomadism (Shi 2022).

Given the common perception among Chinese people of using the Great Wall as a boundary to divide China’s history and ethnicities/Minzu into “inside” and “outside,” this erroneous imagination and cognition have led to tendencies such as “emphasizing the inside part while neglecting the outside part” or “substituting the inside for the outside.” Gu Jiegang (1939c) specifically pointed out that “the primary issue in the entire history of China is the integration of various ethnicities/Minzu from inside and outside.” Here, the terms “inside” and “outside” refer precisely to the divisions delineated by the Great Wall. At the same time as Gu Jiegang’s above viewpoint, Li Ji (2005), one of the pivotal founders of modern Chinese archaeology, sharply pointed out: “For two thousand years, Chinese historians have been misled by *Emperor Qin Shi Huang*. The belief that Chinese culture and ethnicities are solely confined to areas south of the Great Wall is a profound misconception. We should awaken to this realization! Our ancestral homeland, both ethnic and cultural homeland, extends not only inside the Great Wall but also into Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Outer Mongolia, and the Siberian region—these are the places where the ancestors of the Chinese nation lived and thrived. It was only with the construction of the Great Wall by *Emperor Qin Shi Huang* that these regions were permanently relinquished to ‘outside tribes.’ Therefore, modern readers find it surprisingly fresh and unexpected when encountering ancient histories containing phrases like ‘The prominent military conquests of *Xiang Tu* compelled even those overseas to submit.’” Li Ji, who received anthropological training at Harvard University, explored the origins of the Chinese nation in his doctoral dissertation titled *The Formation of the Chinese People*, exploring the origin of the Chinese nation through “anthropometric data of Chinese people, historical records on city construction, surname origins, population data, and other historical literature.” Chang (2005) referred to Li’s research as “anthropological ancient history.” It is due to Li Ji’s comprehensive interdisciplinary perspective and transcendent insights that he could profoundly assert how the Great Wall has obscured our vision, leading to the misconception of fragmenting Chinese history, the Chinese nation, and Chinese territory.

It is noteworthy that these views and understandings of scholars have also had a widespread impact on the general population through various means. In the

well-known film appealing for resistance against Japanese aggression, *Guanshan, Ten Thousand Miles Away*, the interlude *The Ballad of the Great Wall* contains the lyrics, “the Great Wall stretches for ten thousand *lis*, outside the Great Wall is homeland, with fertile sorghum and fragrant soybeans, abundant gold and no disasters.” With the widespread circulation of *The Ballad of the Great Wall*, the concept that “outside the Great Wall is homeland” gradually penetrated the hearts of the Chinese people, becoming the outset of the later concept of “inside and outside the Great Wall is homeland.” Lattimore (1962) highlights that one key to understanding the history of China is to understand the changes in power between China and ‘Yi-Di’ regions around it. The first mention of “China” in this passage, denoting “Chinese history,” represents the concept of “modern China,” while the latter mention of “China,” juxtaposed with “Yi-Di,” refers to the “historical concept of ‘China.’” This statement coincides with Tan Qixiang’s (2011) assertion that “historically, the ethnicities who had assimilation relationship with the Han people were predominantly from the north,” and also resonates with Gu Jiegang’s view that “the primary issue in the entire history of China is the integration of various ethnic groups from within and outside (the Great Wall).” Undoubtedly, the traditional ethnic view based on the “Hua-Yi distinction,” as well as the mindset of using the Great Wall to divide the Chinese nation into “inside” and “outside,” directly raises two questions: (1) How do “historical China” and “modern China” connect? (2) How can we understand the historical scope of the formation and development of the Chinese nation from a geographical perspective? Undoubtedly, these two points are closely intertwined with geography, especially historical geography. However, the comprehensive geographic groundwork for the forming and developing of the Chinese nation was not completed in the first half of the twentieth century but was ultimately achieved after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China through the compilation of *The Historical Atlas of China* (Tan 1982).

2.3 *The Historical Atlas of China* clarifies the connection between “historical China” and “modern China,” providing a comprehensive geographic basis for understanding the formation of the Chinese nation

The Historical Atlas of China is a major foundational academic project completed after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. To a large extent, the compilation of *The Historical Atlas of China* not only thoroughly clarifies the connection between “historical China” and “modern China” but also provides a comprehensive geographic basis for the formation and development of the Chinese nation.

In 1955, Tan Qixiang was tasked with chairing the compilation of *The Historical Atlas of China* (Tan 1991). Initially, the project aimed to “recompile and redraw” based on *The Historical Maps of Consecutive Dynasties* by Yang Shoujing of the Qing dynasty (Yang 1981). Therefore, the compiling team was called the “Committee for the Recompilation and Redrawing of Yang Shoujing’s *The Historical Maps of Consecutive Dynasties*,” abbreviated as the “Yang Maps Committee” (Tan 1982). However, what was unforeseen was that once the project commenced, it turned

into a daunting journey lasting nearly 30 years²⁴(Ge 2014). The final outcome was not merely a recompilation and redrawing of *The Historical Maps of Consecutive Dynasties* but a monumental work divided into eight volumes, covering all dynasties and territories in Chinese history: *The Historical Atlas of China* (Tan 1982).

The recompilation and redrawing of the “Yang Maps” encountered significant challenges and took an extensive amount of time. However, the crucial issue was not merely the cartographic work but, primarily, the need to determine what constituted “historical China.” Tan and his team soon realized that there was a considerable disparity between Yang Shoujing’s *The Historical Maps of Consecutive Dynasties* and the territorial boundaries of modern China. Reflecting on this, Tan stated: “Initially, we only sought to ‘recompile and redraw’ Yang Shoujing’s *The Historical Maps of Consecutive Dynasties*, intending to retain the scope of the Yang Maps. At that time, we had not yet encountered the issue of the scope of historical China. ... Yang Shoujing’s so-called *The Historical Maps of Consecutive Dynasties* covers the period from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Ming dynasty, yet essentially depicts only the administrative divisions in the domain of 18 inland provinces of the Qing dynasty, excluding border regions such as Xinjiang, Qinghai, Xizang, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, and others. Shortly after commencing the compilation work, we realized that it was not feasible to adopt the Yang Maps’ scope for our maps. Historians of the People’s Republic of China must no longer follow the precedent set by Yang Shoujing, which confined the scope of historical China solely to the territories of the Central Plains dynasties. Our great motherland was built collectively by people of various ethnic groups, including those from border regions. We cannot equate historical China exclusively with the Central Plains dynasties. We need to map out the entirety of historical China, representing the whole span of Chinese history, rather than focusing solely on the Central Plains dynasties such as Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming. Consequently, we made the decision to rename the project as *The Historical Atlas of China*, expanding the scope to encompass the entirety of China throughout various historical periods. Determining the comprehensive scope of China for each historical period thus became a paramount issue that required careful and repeated consideration” (Tan 1991).

Driven by a profound sense of academic mission and historical responsibility, Tan and his research team were keenly aware that “historians of the People’s Republic of China must no longer follow the old precedent set by Yang Shoujing, which confined the scope of historical China solely to the territory of the Central Plains dynasties.” However, determining the comprehensive scope of China for each historical period raised questions about what constituted “historical China,” how to understand the territory and ethnicity/Minzu of “historical China,” how “historical China” connected with “modern China,” how to comprehend “modern China” from the perspectives of ethnicity/Minzu and territory and so on. These questions posed challenges far beyond the scope of cartographic work. Through a long period of arduous, meticulous research, Tan Qixiang and his team ultimately clarified many

²⁴ The difficulties and twists of compiling *The Historical Atlas of China* are fully reflected in the work of *The Long River: A Biography of Tan Qixiang*.

complexities and misconceptions in the perception of “China” since early modern times, completing the landmark academic achievement of *The Historical Atlas of China*. However, understanding *The Historical Atlas of China* requires consideration of a companion piece that is equally significant: Tan’s “Historical China and the Chinese territories.” This paper serves as a systematic explanation of the compilation of *The Historical Atlas of China* and condenses extensive reflections and remarkable insights of Tan and his research team on the theme of “Historical China and the Chinese territories.” The paper is highly intellectual, with a straightforward style and profound reasoning, making it equally groundbreaking in the field of Chinese historiography.²⁵ *The Historical Atlas of China* not only established the territorial framework of “historical China” spanning thousands of years, but its epoch-making significance lies in conducting systematic and in-depth research on “Historical China and the Chinese territories,” thereby clarifying three key points for the first time:

2.3.1 Historical China does not equate to the dynasties of the Central Plains

The original intention to complete the cartographic compilation of Chinese historical maps based on a “recompilation and redrawing” of the Yang Maps ultimately led to a negation of the Yang Maps. This decision was motivated by the recognition that the Yang Maps “essentially depicted only the administrative divisions in the domain of 18 inland provinces of the Qing dynasty and did not include border regions such as Xinjiang, Qinghai, Xizang, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Inner Mongolia, and others (Tan 1991)”. The Yang Maps reflected a narrow view of “China” and represented the main crux of the convoluted cognition of “China” since early modern times. Tan Qixiang and his research team deeply understood that they must no longer follow the precedent set by Yang Shoujing’s *The Historical Maps of Consecutive Dynasties*, which confined the scope of historical China solely to the territory of the Central Plains dynasties and essentially depicted only the territories of the Central Plains dynasties such as Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming. They emphasized that “historical China should not be equated with the dynasties of the Central Plains” and asserted that “We, as modern Chinese, cannot take the concept of ‘China’ in the minds of the ancient people as the scope of modern China.” We must break free from the long-standing and deeply ingrained mindset and “draw a map depicting the entirety of China, representing the complete scope of historical China (Tan 1991)”. Therefore, the most significant contribution of *The Historical Atlas of China* is its departure from the confines of using the Central Plains dynasties to define China

²⁵ In 1981, Tan Qixiang attended the “Symposium on the History of Ethnic Relations in China” in Beijing, where he was invited by Weng Dujian to give a lecture on “How to Define the Scope of China in Each Historical Period.” At that time, Tan had just completed the compilation work of *The Historical Atlas of China*. The content of the lecture covered the entire process from the “Yang Maps” to the compilation of *The Historical Atlas of China* and used personal experiences and vivid historical cases to eloquently clarify a series of important issues related to “historical China and the Chinese territories.” The content of the lecture was later organized and published under the title *The historical China and the Chinese territories* in the inaugural issue of *China’s Borderland History and Geography* in 1991.

and the complete abandonment of the notion and thinking pattern of using “the territorial boundaries of Central Plains dynasties as the scope of historical China.”

2.3.2 “China” is not a nation of only Han people but a nation created jointly by people of all ethnic groups of China, including those in the border regions

During the compilation of *The Historical Atlas of China*, Tan and his team boldly asserted that “our great motherland was collectively created by people of various ethnic groups, including those in the border regions.” They proposed using the territorial boundaries of the Qing dynasty from 1750 to 1840 as the “naturally formed China through historical development.” They believed that the main reason for this “China naturally formed by historical development” view is that “the Central Plains need border areas, and the border areas need the Central Plains even more. They need to be unified under one political power, which is beneficial to the people of the Central Plains and even more beneficial to the people of the border areas (Tan 1991)”. In other words, whether in historical times or today, China is a nation created by “people of various ethnic groups, including those in the border regions,” clearly delineating that “China is not only a nation of Han people.” This organic integration of the territorial changes in historical China with the formation and development of the Chinese nation dispels misconceptions such as “China is a nation of Han people” implicit in phrases like “expel the Tatar and revive *Zhonghua*.”

2.3.3 The territorial boundaries of the Qing dynasty from 1750 to 1840 constitute the “naturally formed China through historical development”

Another significant contribution of *The Historical Atlas of China* is that, from the intricate and complex evolution of territorial changes throughout successive dynasties, it first proposed and established the historical fact that the Qing dynasty’s territorial extent from 1750 to 1840 represents a “naturally formed China through historical development,” that is, a naturally formed territorial scope of China. Furthermore, it points out that all ethnic groups historically active within this territorial scope are considered ethnic groups in Chinese history and belong to the Chinese nation.

The above three points thoroughly clarify the connection between “historical China” and “modern China,” providing a comprehensive academic and theoretical basis for understanding the differences and connections between “historical China” and “modern China” from the perspectives of “ethnicity” and “territory,” especially in comprehending what constitutes “modern China” as a whole. These three points, from a geographical perspective, correct many cognitive illusions and misconceptions, effectively addressing the connection between “historical China” and “modern China,” and providing a comprehensive geographical basis for understanding the formation and development of the Chinese nation as a whole.

3 Conclusion

In the first half of the twentieth century, the interdisciplinary field of historical geography had yet to take shape in China²⁶ (Tan 2011). Historical geography, as a specialized academic discipline, was pioneered and established by scholars such as Tan Qixiang, Shi Nianhai, and Hou Renzhi under the impetus of the significant national foundational project of compiling *The Historical Atlas of China*²⁷ (Ge 2018). Since the twentieth century, pioneering scholars like Gu Jiegang, Tan Qixiang, and Li Ji have made significant contributions to expanding and deepening the understanding of the concept of the “Chinese nation” from the unique perspective of historical geography. Their studies not only avoided the “China Proper” trap but also fundamentally changed the mindset that segmented the Chinese nation with the Great Wall, establishing the concept that “inside and outside the Great Wall is homeland.” Furthermore, after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the thorough clarification of the connection between “historical China” and “modern China” through the compilation of *The Historical Atlas of China* provided a solid academic and theoretical foundation and comprehensive geographic basis for understanding the “Chinese nation” in its entirety. This process fully demonstrates the inseparable relationship among history, ethnicity, and geography. Particularly in understanding the history of the Chinese nation, the perspective and angle of historical geography are indispensable. Only by organically combining history, ethnicity, and geography can we truly comprehend the historical trajectory and geographic foundation of the Chinese nation.

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²⁶ Regarding the formation of historical geography studies in China, Tan Qixiang once pointed out: “In the mid-1930s, the Yugong Society proposed to transform the evolution geography of the old era into modern and scientific historical geography. This transformation required action on two fronts: first, expand the research breadth from regions, administrative divisions, cities, rivers, and canals to include various fields of physical and human geography; second, advance research depth from merely documenting changes in geographical phenomena to exploring the reasons and laws behind these changes, with the latter generally being more challenging than the former. Before the 1950s, we hardly made any achievements in this regard. Most articles only discussed the specific differences in various periods without addressing the reasons for these changes; few articles only briefly mentioned them. It was not until the 1960s that we made breakthroughs.”

²⁷ In July 1959, Fudan University established the Research Office of Chinese Historical Geography, with Tan Qixiang as its director. Starting in 1960, a total of 55 undergraduate students majoring in historical geography were enrolled over the course of two years.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Not applicable.

Consent for publication Not applicable.

Competing interests I have no competing interests.

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Comments

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