


INTRODUCTION

North China Over the Last Thousand Years of Chinese History

Jinping Wang 

National University of Singapore, Singapore
Email: hiswj@nus.edu.sg

(Received 7 May 2024; revised 11 May 2024; accepted 14 May 2024)

This special issue centers on the geographical region of North China, or *huabei* 華北 as it is known today. The individual articles engage with a range of historical terms for North China like the Central Plain (*Zhongyuan* 中原), along with its subregions like Hebei and Shanxi, which are often named after their geographical positions relative to the Yellow River or significant mountain ranges. These terms, depending on contexts, refer to different geographical spaces and imply different cultural meanings. While some readers may expect fierce debates about what constitutes North China and what doesn't, in the pages that follow, we have taken a different approach. We view regions, subregions, and localities as social, political, and cultural constructs. As we use “North China” to delineate the regional focus of our research, we also explore how terms associated with North China are employed in historical contexts and how they operate within the framework of our study. Chronologically, our primary focus has been on the second millennium of Chinese history, spanning the Northern Song (960–1127) to the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911), though some articles extend their coverage into the twentieth century.

Our exploration can be roughly categorized into two areas. The first category—including articles by Ya-hwei Hsu, Jinping Wang, and Luman Wang—encompasses activities undertaken by distinctive social groups, each transcending regional limits. These activities cover a range of social and economic initiatives: literati and non-literati elites constructing specific types of tombs, Daoist clergy establishing religious lineage institutions, and merchants conducting trade and monetary transactions. The second category features articles by Tomoyasu Iiyama, Yuanyuan Qiu, and Xin Wen, who delve into the perceptions of both elites and commoners across diverse sociopolitical landscapes, exploring discourses concerning personal and territorial identities. Collectively, we investigate how these activities and perceptions contributed to regional transformations in history and shaped regional identities within historical narratives. Through our analysis of historical changes and continuities in North China over a thousand-year period, we seek to underscore the significance of *longue-durée* history in comprehending the complex interaction between regional dynamics and historical trends.

In this introduction, I aim to situate the contributions of the special issue within the broader historiographical context of North China studies and to highlight how the included articles signal new directions in the field. The historiographical discussion

will center on English-language scholarship and will not provide an exhaustive review of the equally vast literature in Chinese and Japanese, as each presents distinct questions and methodologies. That being said, in organizing this special issue, I aimed to foster dialogues between English-language scholarship and its Chinese and Japanese counterparts mainly in two ways. Firstly, I sought contributions from scholars across these three academic circles, and their work has significantly updated our understanding of middle and late imperial North China vis-à-vis their respective subfields. Secondly, with the editors' permission, I have included a significantly revised translation of an original Chinese publication by Yuanyuan Qiu, a distinguished Qing historian from mainland China.¹ Incorporating her pioneering study on the Eight Banners system within North China's regional context promotes a meaningful dialogue between Chinese and Anglophone scholars, enriching the discourse for both. Like Qiu's work, all the articles showcase new scholarly approaches to middle and late imperial North China developed over the past two decades.

The Historiographical Context of North China Studies

To highlight how the articles included in this special issue differ from those of previous generations, it is crucial to outline the dominant paradigms that have shaped the definition of North China and historians' study of the region. Two approaches rooted in modern geographical studies have greatly influenced scholarly understanding of pre-twentieth century North China as a regional unit: (1) natural constraints and (2) territorially based systems of human interaction. Although their geographical definitions of North China largely coincide, it was the second approach that exerted the most profound impact on English-language scholarship on North China from the 1970s to the 2000s as an analytical tool.

The first approach emphasizes the significance of natural geography and climate. Mountains, rivers, and rainfall, as natural constraints, played a particularly crucial role in shaping historical actions in the premodern world. In this respect, the Qin Mountains (*Qinling* 秦嶺) and the Huai River (*Huaihe* 淮河) together form the watershed between the north and the south of China, especially in political and military terms.² Additionally, the 15-inch isohyet line, proposed by historian Ray Huang, separates areas of agrarian and pastoral economies. This line, in Huang's words, "skirts around the heartland of Manchuria from the northeast, runs parallel with the present Great Wall in the middle, and curves southwest to separate Kokonor and Tibet from China proper."³ Combining these two geographical and climatic concepts, this approach defines North China as the vast region south of the Great Wall and north of the Qinling-Huai River line, including present-day Shandong, Henan, Hebei, Shanxi, and Shaanxi provinces, as well as Beijing and Tianjin municipalities.

The second approach underscores socio-economic geography, represented by anthropologist G. William Skinner's model of physiographic macroregions, defined in terms of drainage basins and shaped by the economics of transport. This model divides

¹Qiu Yuanyuan 邱源媛, "Qingdai qimin fenzi xia de minzhong yingdui" 清代旗民分治下的民眾應對, *Lishi yanjiu* 2020.6, 68–92.

²Han Maoli 韓茂莉 and Yu Jiaming 于家明, "Junshi dili shijiao xia de Zhongguo gudai lishi kongjian jin Cheng" 軍事地理視角下的中國古代歷史空間進程, *Junshi lishi yanjiu* 2016.5, 119–22.

³Ray Huang, *China: A Macro History* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 26.

agrarian China up to the nineteenth century into nine finite macroregions.⁴ In this system, North China includes “the lower basin of the Yellow River plus the drainage areas of the Huai, the Wei, and the host of smaller rivers that cross the North China Plain.”⁵ It overlaps with most parts of North China delineated in the first system with one major difference: Shaanxi is included in the macroregion of Northwest China instead. This approach leads to different understandings of the region as it downplays Shaanxi’s historically significant connections to areas to the east; it was the political center of major imperial dynasties up until the Northern Song.

Combined with the mid-twentieth century’s “New Social History” turn, Skinner’s macroregion model deeply influenced scholarship on middle and late imperial China by providing a spatial framework for historical research. The model transcends the traditional political boundaries and administrative units of Chinese dynasties, adopting a core–periphery analysis approach to explore city-centered cycles of economic development. It highlights long-term regional cycles of growth and decline, rather than shifts in dynastic regimes, as a real structure of historical change in pre-modern China.⁶ Robert Hartwell, in his famous 1982 article about long-term transformations of China from 750 to 1550, built on and modified Skinner’s macroregion paradigm.⁷ Together with the periodization paradigms of the Tang–Song transition, the late imperial era, and early modern China, Skinner’s and Hartwell’s macroregion model fueled significant scholarly interest in long-term social and economic changes from the Song to the Qing dynasties. Many studies embraced a regional history approach to explore the evolution of local elites and organizations as well as agrarian and market economies.⁸

Regional-history studies of middle and late imperial China from the 1970s to the 2000s, however, exhibited considerable spatial and temporal imbalances. On the one hand, there is a pronounced geographical emphasis on the south. This bias stems from several factors: (1) relatively few historical sources from the north; (2) the south’s emergence as the economic and cultural center since the Song dynasty; (3) historians’ preference for examining areas perceived as dynamic and advancing rather than those in decline; and (4) the impact of the South China School or historical anthropology, particularly among historians of late imperial China.⁹ On the other hand, significant research on North China primarily focuses on the period from the late imperial era to the early republic. While many of these works recognize the limitations of the macroregion model,¹⁰ they still considered the concept useful. Scholars who continued to

⁴G. William Skinner, “Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China,” in *The City in Late Imperial China*, edited by Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 210–20.

⁵Skinner, “Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China,” 213.

⁶G. William Skinner, “Presidential Address: The Structure of Chinese History,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 44.2 (1985), 271–92.

⁷Robert Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750–1550,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42.2 (1982), 365–442.

⁸For a detailed discussion, see Richard von Glahn, “Imagining Pre-modern China,” in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, edited by Paul Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 45–56.

⁹For the introduction of this school and their approach, see Michael Szonyi and Zhao Shiyu, “State Institutions, Local Society, and Historical Continuity: Ming Military institutions from the Perspective of Historical Anthropology,” in *The Chinese Empire in Local Society: Ming Military Institutions and Their Legacy*, edited by Szonyi and Zhao, translated by Joel Wing-Lun (London: Routledge, 2021), 1–25.

¹⁰During these decades, debates over Skinner’s macroregion theory continued. Scholars from multiple disciplines criticized its untested applicability, neglect of cultural and political conditions in regional

draw on this approach broadly applied the inherent core–periphery analysis of the macroregion concept to explore village politics, peasant economy, and rural religious life.¹¹

Scholarly interest in the macroregion model has waned in the past two decades even among historians like Susan Naquin, who had championed the model in the 1980s.¹² Her recent book on the material culture of North China questions the traditional regional-history approach while introducing new frameworks for defining “regions.” She levels a two-pronged critique at regional-history studies. First, the term “region” has been diluted in scholarly works due to its “frequent, contradictory, and unreflective overuse.” Second, the term problematically implies opposition to concepts like “elite, metropolitan, imperial, palace, court, or modern.” This conception derives from the modern Western idea of “regionalism,” a notion vaguely defined as the basis for resistance to centralizing power.¹³ In her choice of a new framework to define “regions,” she prioritizes culture over geography or economy.¹⁴ This shift reflects the broader cultural turn prevailing in the field of history after the 1990s. Several recent scholarly works on North China, spanning the late imperial to republic era, for example, center on the cultural production of history and memory at the local level and by various groups of historical actors.¹⁵

Similarly, scholarship of Middle Period North China has demonstrated growing attention to cultural-historical topics such as ethnicity and identity in border areas, rendering Skinner’s macroregion model less useful. The macroregion model defines North China in the premodern era as regions dominated by agrarian economies, typically

formations, and limiting theoretical assumptions. See William Lavelly, “The Spatial Approach to Chinese History: Illustrations from North China and the Upper Yangzi,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 48.1 (1989), 100–13; David Faure and Helen F. Siu, *Down to Earth: The Territorial Bond in South China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 217–18; Kären Wigen, “AHR Forum: Bringing Regionalism Back to History: Culture, Power, and Place: The New Landscapes of East Asian Regionalism,” *American Historical Review* 104.4 (1999), 1185–88; Carolyn Cartier, “Origins and Evolution of a Geographical Idea: The Macroregion in China,” *Modern China* 28.1 (2002), 79–143. For the most recent criticism, see Daniel Koss, “Political Geography of Empire: Chinese Varieties of Local Government,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 76.1 (2017), 159–84.

¹¹Elizabeth Perry, *Rebels and Revolutionaries in North China, 1845–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Philip C. C. Huang, *The Peasant Economy and Social Change in North China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985); Joseph W. Esherick, *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Prasenjit Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State: Rural North China, 1900–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Making of a Hinterland: State, Society, and Economy in Inland North China, 1853–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Huaiyin Li, *Village Governance in North China, 1875–1936* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Thomas David DuBois, *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005).

¹²Skinner’s nine macroregions are adopted in chapter 5 “Regional Societies” of Susan Naquin and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 138–208.

¹³Susan Naquin, *Gods of Mount Tai: Familiarity and the Material Culture of North China, 1000–2000* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 3.

¹⁴By identifying a region “according to the materiality of its everyday culture,” Naquin explores how “cultural familiarity and geographic contiguity affected the communication and replication of religious ideas and practices” in North China. Naquin, *Gods of Mount Tai*, 4.

¹⁵Henrietta Harrison, *The Man Awakened from Dreams: One Man’s Life in a North China Village, 1857–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Harrison, *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron: Cultural Response to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

excluding pastoral areas such as today's Inner Mongolia, which, in contemporary understanding, might also fall within the "North China" categorization. However, despite the symbolic divide marked by the Great Wall, the agrarian and pastoral worlds were not entirely separate. Extensive border areas in Shaanxi, Shanxi, and Hebei provinces straddled these two worlds, servicing as political buffers, military frontlines, and commercial exchange points between agrarian and nomadic societies. Another special issue on North China that I recently edited for the *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* focused specifically on the frontiers between the Song and "Inner Asian" states of the Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), Xi Xia (1038–1127), and the Yuan (1271–1368) from the tenth to thirteenth centuries.¹⁶ While underscoring a regional and local approach, this *JSYS* special issue foregrounds frontiers as a regional context for the interactions of dynastic governance and borderland societies, as well as the exchange of discourse and material cultures with respect to ethnicity and identity.

Besides the cultural turn, other paradigm shifts in historical studies—such as environmental, transnational, and global turns—have also shaped scholarship on North China over the past two decades. Environmental history, now a vibrant subfield in middle and late imperial Chinese history, has provided a fresh environmental perspective on the interactions between agrarian and pastoral worlds. In the 2018 special issue on "The Environmental History of China" for this journal, several articles concentrate on North China, highlighting the prolonged process of deforestation resulting from the integration of pastoralism and farming, two originally geographically separated activities and lifestyles.¹⁷ As a result, environmental, ecological, and social disasters continuously plagued North China throughout the second millennium.

Exploring state management of environmental crises and related disasters has prompted some historians to reframe North China's history not simply as a regional story, but as a cohesive national story, viewed from the imperial state's perspective. For instance, Ling Zhang's groundbreaking research on the Hebei region and the Yellow River flooding illustrates the Northern Song state's proactive environmental management, which, as she emphasizes, "ran through the making of China's history during the second millennium."¹⁸ This mode of environmental management exemplified state-centered activism, a theme also reflected in Lillian M. Li's studies on late imperial states' management of famine. Famine relief in late imperial North China, as Li argues, sheds light on a stark contrast between a northern state-centered model and a southern community model of leadership, the latter of which also originated during the Song dynasty.¹⁹

In short, North China studies over the past two decades have shifted away from the Skinnerian regional-history approach, embracing multiple new perspectives, including but not limited to cultural and environmental viewpoints. Through this shift, historians have crafted new narratives and interpretations of middle and late imperial North China. These developments challenge conventional discourses about Chinese history

¹⁶Jinping Wang, "Regional and Local Approaches to the Frontiers in North China from the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 51 (2022), 1–14.

¹⁷Sabine Dabringhaus, "Perspectives on the Environmental History of China," *Journal of Chinese History* 2 (2018), 285.

¹⁸Ling Zhang, *The River, the Plain, and the State: An Environmental Drama in Northern Song China (1048–1128)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 288.

¹⁹Lillian M. Li, *Fighting Famine in North China: State, Market, and Environmental Decline, 1690s–1990s* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 379.

in that period, including those premised on a binary of an advanced south and a declining north in economic and cultural terms.

Special Issue Articles

This special issue continues and expands these new directions in recent North China studies and is characterized by three features. First, all six articles use the term “North China” flexibly and eschew strict geographic definitions or any specific analytical frameworks for “regions.” Second, the majority primarily explore the historical activities and perceptions within the agrarian societies of North China, although some articles address frontier issues. Therefore, in general, this special issue does not cover regions further north like Manchuria or the Mongolian steppe, though they may be mentioned briefly in some articles. While Xin Wen’s article discusses the northwest, its main emphasis is on how the Northern Song rulers and elites perceived this region and its relation to their empire rather than on the region itself. Finally, the six articles identify specific trends in respective subfields in the history of middle and late imperial China over the last two decades. These trends include a rise of cultural and social historical studies of Middle Period North China, active debates on issues of ethnicity and identity in the Qing Empire (1644–1911), and a revisionist approach to studying North China from the late imperial to the early republican period amid modernization.

Xin Wen’s article exemplifies how adopting an intellectual and cultural history approach has significantly enriched our understanding of Middle Period North China as a geopolitically contested space where Han and non-Han-ruled dynastic states coexisted or succeeded one another. The founding and evolution of imperial states from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, alongside interstate communications and conflicts, played a crucial role in shaping political boundaries in North China, both territorially and culturally. The discrepancy between these two dimensions, stemming from the coexistence of several regional states, spurred intense intellectual discussions on the identity of China and fueled modern scholarly debates over these historical discourses. Culturally, “North China” refers to the traditional heartland of Chinese civilization, known as the Central Plain or the Central Land of the Xia (*zhongxia* 中夏) in classical Chinese texts. From the late tenth to early twelfth centuries, this region was divided among the Northern Song, the Liao, and the Xi Xia dynasties. The empire-building efforts of these dynasties were all rooted in establishing dynastic legitimacy, territorially and culturally. Much scholarly work has focused on the Northern Song, exploring how the Song political elite developed discourses on their territorial claims—especially over the critical region of the Sixteen Prefectures—to position the Song as the legitimate successor of the great Chinese empires of the Han (202 BCE–220 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) dynasties.²⁰

Extending this line of inquiry, Wen’s article examines Northern Song elites’ discourses over what he defines as the northwest, a geographic swath that has not yet received substantial scholarly attention. The northwest region, including modern Ningxia and Gansu provinces and northern Shaanxi province, were once official prefectures of the Tang dynasty but mostly did not enter the Northern Song domain. As Wen shows, Northern Song’s ruling and cultural elites generally did not consider these areas

²⁰For a summary of these studies, see Jinping Wang, “Regional and Local Approaches to the Frontiers in North China,” 6–11.

as belonging to their world, which was defined as the “civilized” realm of Han Chinese. The ways in which Song elites mapped, labeled, and “gazed” upon the northwest was more reflective of their process of navigating between reality and imagination when establishing political boundaries, both in practice and perception. This perspective highlights how the Song elites’ conceptualization of the northwest was more about their own interpretive process and less about the region’s actual historical context. Their approach to mapping and defining boundaries was, in some moments but not always, accompanied by concrete political or military efforts to enforce this envisioned order. Additionally, the genre and nature of different texts—political discussions, geographical treatises, and maps—played an important role in either restricting or enabling Song elites to represent the northwest as within or beyond the Song borders. Wen’s study importantly demonstrates that the transformation of political boundaries is not only physical but also conceptual. It highlights how the ideas of the northwest, North China, or any region, have historically been ideological and cultural constructs.

Ya-hwei Hsu’s and Jinping Wang’s articles examine how funeral and burial practices among literati and non-literati groups shed light on social changes and regional interactions triggered by the Song–Jin and Jin–Yuan dynastic transitions. They showcase the significant growth of the sociohistorical study of Middle Period North China in the past two decades, which focuses on the transformations of local elites, their organizations, and their interactions with imperial states. This emphasis on elite-centered local dynamics has been a prevailing theme since the formulation of the Hartwell-Hymes hypothesis of the Tang–Song Transition paradigm, which has dominated the scholarly discourse in the Middle Period China field since the 1980s. This hypothesis foregrounds the localization of Confucian-educated literati elites during the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) and a fundamental change in elite–state relations, a process which led to the formation of a community governance model dominated by local gentry in the late imperial era.²¹

Recent studies by Tomoyasu Iiyama, Chang Woei Ong, Jinping Wang and others have delineated a distinctive northern pattern of long-term social transformations that underlined the significant impact of Jurchen and Mongol rules on northern Chinese society.²² In this alternative narrative, literati elites had very different relations with the imperial state compared to their southern counterparts, and the dominant local elites under Mongol rule were non-literati social groups, such as the military strongmen and the religious clergy. These recent studies also employ a methodical utilization of archeological and epigraphic sources. The accessibility of stone steles, inscriptions, and tomb materials has significantly expanded over the last two decades,

²¹For a comprehensive review of scholarly studies in this line, see Robert Hymes, “Sung Society and Social Change,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 5, Part 2, *Sung China, 960–1279*, edited by John W. Chaffee and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 526–664.

²²See Chang Woei Ong, *Men of Letters within the Passes: Guanzhong Literati in Chinese History, 907–1911* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008); Iiyama Tomoyasu 飯山知保, *Kingenshidai no kahoku shakai to kakyō seido: mō hitotsu no shijinsō* 金元時代の華北社會と科擧制度: もう一つの士人層 (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 2011); Jeehee Hong, *Theater of the Dead: A Social Turn in Chinese Funerary Art, 1000–1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2016); Jinping Wang, *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200–1600* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2018); Iiyama Tomoyasu, *Genealogy and Status: Hereditary Office Holding and Kinship in North China under Mongol Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2023).

thanks to a combination of scholarly fieldwork, new archeological discoveries, and a surge in commercial efforts to publish and digitalize stele inscriptions.²³

In this respect, Ya-hwei Hsu's article introduces a methodological innovation to the study of Confucian-educated literati in the Jin dynasty. Moving beyond the conventional reliance on transmitted texts, Hsu examines excavated tombs, incorporating textual, material, and visual sources found therein. By developing a comprehensive database of thousands of tombs from the Liao, Northern Song, Jin, and Southern Song dynasties, Hsu effectively contextualizes the Jin tombs within a broader comparative framework. Specifically, her article illustrates several key findings. Firstly, in the Jin era, only literati with official positions or honorary titles had epitaphs in their tombs, unlike in Northern and Southern Song periods where positions and titles were not required for such honors. This contrast suggests that exam degrees and official positions, rather than Confucian learning, were crucial status markers for Jin literati.²⁴ Secondly, the practice of using land deeds as "netherworld contracts" was distinctive to Han Chinese tombs in the Liao and Jin dynasties, underscoring ethnic distinctions. Lastly, tombs of wealthy non-literati elites in the Jin featured murals with portraits of the deceased and domestic scenes, some accompanied by burial notes written on the wall. Some of the tombs with burial notes also contained writings of popular literature or long paragraphs of ink writings written by literati, suggesting the involvement of literati in burial practices and their social integration in local communities. These findings enhance our understanding of the lower social strata in the north under Jurchen rule as well as north-south distinction regarding the literati and burial practices.

My own article extends this discussion of burial practices by examining burials and reburials of eminent Quanzhen Daoist masters, highlighting the distinct role of Quanzhen Daoism as a unifying religious force in the north under Mongol rule. As a foundational component in their lineage building, Quanzhen ancestor worship featured practices like assembly-funerals, repeated reburials, and continuous memorial services. These practices placed significant emphasis on the physical remains of a lineage's founding master, linking them to his spiritual and material legacy. The performance of these practices by specific individuals and groups served as public affirmation of their inheritance of the master's legacy and their leadership position within the lineage. As the lineage became a crucial organizational mechanism within the nationwide Quanzhen order, over time these distinct Quanzhen funeral and burial customs evolved into a fundamental aspect of a cohesive Quanzhen culture. This culture, spreading through Quanzhen monastic and lineage networks, not only upheld regional integration but also fostered social and cultural unity in North China during the Jin-Yuan transition period. In essence, it evolved into a prominent cultural system that distinguished northern society under Mongol rule, creating a stark contrast with the social fabric of the south.

From the tenth century onward, the significant presence of non-Han ethnic groups and their dynasties not only shaped political boundaries but also the social landscape of North China. The notable influx of nomadic peoples into agrarian North China during the second millennium led to closer interactions among individuals and social groups

²³Jinping Wang, "Textual, Material, Visual: Exploring an Epigraphic Approach to the History of Imperial China," *Journal of Chinese History* 7 (2023), 73–99.

²⁴This argument based on archeological evidence aligns with Jinping Wang's earlier study of the Jin degree-holder society based on transmitted texts and stele inscriptions. See Wang, *In the Wake of the Mongols*, 28–62.

from diverse ethnic backgrounds. From the Khitan-Liao, Jurchen-Jin, Mongol-Yuan to the Manchu-Qing, non-Han dynasties also established ethnicity-based ideological and legal distinctions between themselves and the Han populations. The historical and social processes of ethnicity-making and identity-building have garnered considerable interests among historians of both middle and late imperial China. English-language scholarship of the Qing Empire over the past two decades has been characterized by animated debates on issues of ethnicity and identity, alongside the predominance of the New Qing History approach in the field.

Tomoyasu Iiyama's and Yuanyuan Qiu's articles present a fresh perspective on ethnicity-making and identity-building in the Qing dynasty. Diverging from New Qing History studies that prioritize state institutions, elite discourses, and non-Han frontier regions, both articles adopt a bottom-up approach that highlights the social experiences of identity claims by ordinary people in North China, the empire's heartland.²⁵ Together, these two articles underscore the importance of examining identity formation and ethnic processes within the actual social contexts in which historical actors lived. Challenging the notion that ethnicity was the primary form of identity in the Qing Empire, they highlight the ambiguity and fluidity within traditionally clear-cut binary groups, such as bannermen and civilians, and Han and non-Han.

Yuanyuan Qiu's social-historical approach to the Qing Eight Banners system represents a pioneering trend in recent scholarship that moves beyond ethnicity, a lens that has significantly influenced New Qing History scholarship on the Banners and the imperial governance of the Qing Empire. The article explores the practical dynamics of status switching between bannermen and civilians in the Zhili region, with a focus on a marginal yet distinct subgroup of bannermen known as the *touchong* people. These men had "voluntarily joined" the Banners system or were coerced into bondage in the early Qing, when the state seized vast swathes of land from the civilian population and redistributed them to Manchu royal family, nobles, officials, and troops in the form of manors. Many *touchong* people undertook the task of managing Banner lands of Manchu manors. While bannermen and civilians were legally and institutionally separated and were not expected to cross these established boundaries, individuals from both groups, as Qiu's article compellingly demonstrates, often exploited the loopholes in the dual administrative systems to advance their personal interests in real-life situations. Specifically, *touchong* families commonly registered some members within the Banners system, while having other members registered in the prefecture-county system to maintain civilian status. As a result, *touchong* family members sometimes switched from bannerman to civilian status to take civil service examinations, or vice versa, to exploit and acquire property by capitalizing on the privileged Banner status in comparison to their civilian neighbors or counterparts.

The article not only highlights the ambiguity in the *touchong* people's identity but also sheds light on the importance of understanding identity through the lens of status,

²⁵The representative studies on ethnicity in light of the New Qing History Approach include James P. Millward, *Beyond the Pass: Economy, Ethnicity, and Empire in Qing Central Asia, 1759–1864* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Pamela K. Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). While some recent studies have also begun to emphasize the perspective of ordinary people, they continue to focus on non-Han frontier regions. See Eric Schluessel, *Land of Strangers: The Civilizing Project in Qing Central Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).

which is defined across multiple categories. Firstly, it was Banner status—not Han or Manchu ethnicity—that underpinned the *touchong* people's identity. Secondly, the class status of being a slave distinguished *touchong* people from both civilians and other regular bannermen. Legally and institutionally, the *touchong* people, who were predominantly ethnic Han, were considered the private property of Manchu princes and nobles owning the manors. This focus on status over ethnicity in the *touchong* people's identity formation aligns with David Porter's recent monograph on ethnic Han banner soldiers known as Hanjun 漢軍, which argues that status was a far more important identity category in the Qing social organization.²⁶

Unlike Qing historians who primarily explore the horizontal dynamics of Manchu, Mongol, and Han ethnicities within the Qing Empire, Tomoyasu Iiyama introduces a vertical or cross-dynastic perspective to the ongoing debate over ethnicity and identity. He connects the Mongol identity in the Qing dynasty to the social legacy of the Yuan dynasty. Earlier studies on the ethnicity of the Mongols in the Qing have primarily focused on the Mongol elites and tribes living on the empire's margins, emphasizing their geographical and social separation from the former Ming territories and Han-Chinese. Iiyama's article shifts the focus to the self-claimed Mongol descendants living within China proper since the Yuan dynasty. Featuring the story of a local Bai lineage in Dali County of Shaanxi province, the article shows how, like other local marginal groups in the Qing Empire, the self-claimed Mongol descendants "appropriated cultural symbols of authority from the political center" to secure and promote their positions within both the imperial order and the local community.²⁷ But the efforts of such lineages extended beyond capitalizing on the imperial initiative to compile nationwide gazetteers; they also re-utilized existing Yuan-era stone steles as distinctive cultural symbols of authority. The Bai lineage, specifically, aimed to honor their distant Mongol ancestor who served the Yuan dynasty, portraying him as a righteous official deserving of the Qing state's recognition through official sacrifices. Moreover, members of the Bai lineage have adeptly navigated their ethnic identity between Han and Mongol into the era of People's Republic of China. Although they accepted the state's designation of Han ethnicity under modern classification criteria, the lineage continues to leverage their premodern Yuan-ancestry as a basis to at times claim Mongol ethnicity.

Similar to how ethnicity-making in the twentieth century was shaped by modernist discourses, scholarly perspectives on North China during the late Qing and early republic era were dominated by a modernist narrative until very recently. This narrative emphasizes the region's struggles—particularly in its vast inland, rural areas—to transition towards a modern society, economy, and culture. This journey is in stark contrast to that of the south, particularly the coastal regions, which are characterized by promising efforts and results in modernization.

Luman Wang's study exemplifies the recent revisionist scholarly efforts to challenging this narrative.²⁸ Her article in this special issue builds on the emerging field of global countryside studies to reassess China's supposedly backward northern interior. It offers an alternative historical viewpoint of Shanxi merchants and their financial

²⁶David C. Porter, *Slaves of the Emperor: Service, Privilege, and Status in the Qing Eight Banners* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024).

²⁷Pamela Kyle Crossley, Helen F. Siu, and Donald Sutton eds, *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3.

²⁸Luman Wang, *Chinese Hinterland Capitalism and Shanxi Piaohao Banking, State, and Family, 1720–1910* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

institutions known as *piaohao*, the main indigenous banking networks in the late Qing. In the conventional modernist narrative, the failure of Shanxi *piaohao*'s evolution into western-style banks, due to the merchant owners' reluctance and conservative views, illustrates the challenges of modernization efforts in inland North China. Wang, however, emphasizes *piaohao* merchants' capacity for adaptation and resilience in the face of both internal challenges and external pressures from Western imperialist and capitalist forces during the nineteenth century. In Wang's revisionist narrative, Shanxi *piaohao* played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between the agricultural production of interior regions and the burgeoning trade in the coastal treaty ports after the 1860s, which subsequently redefined the economic boundaries between North and South China. Additionally, by enabling the interregional monetary flows within China, *piaohao* not only supported domestic commerce but also formed mutually beneficial relationships with colonial banks located in treaty ports. Consequently, *piaohao* became an integral part of the expansive financial networks that underpinned global trade.²⁹

In addition to their individual contributions, the articles reveal a great deal when read against one another. For instance, powerful networks led by specific social groups—such as Quanzhen Daoists in the Mongol-Yuan era and Shanxi *piaohao* merchants in the Qing dynasty—played significant roles in shaping the North China region by creating alternative centers of power differing from the imperial political center of power in Beijing. My own article, along with my prior research, reveals that the monastic and lineage networks of Quanzhen Daoism facilitated the exchange of ideas, personnel, and resources both within the order and beyond its confines. Their dynamic organizational abilities bestowed an unprecedented level of social and cultural authority of this religion in thirteenth-century North China. This burgeoning authority eventually became significant enough to cause concern for the Mongol rulers—who had once been patrons of Quanzhen Daoism—prompting them to take political measures against the order.

Similarly, the *piaohao* merchants established nationwide and even transnational financial networks, creating alternative centers of economic power in the rural hometowns of these merchants in Shanxi province. Echoing the Quanzhen story centuries ago, the *piaohao* took on quasi-public fiscal responsibilities for the Qing state, handling tax collection and transfers for decades. However, like the Quanzhen, they too were eventually stripped of these privileges when the late Qing state reclaimed these governmental functions after 1895. In other words, despite functioning in different ways within different historical periods, Quanzhen religious networks and *piaohao* financial networks exhibited noteworthy similarities in their relations to the imperial political center of power: their dependence on the state for legitimacy and survival. Indeed, as many scholars have concurred and Yuanyuan Qiu's article explicitly concludes, the regional history of North China in the second millennium was marked by the supremacy of the state in state-society relations in contrast to the south, where community dominance prevailed.

²⁹However, a fundamental reassessment requires further research to uncover the impact—or lack thereof—of *piaohao* merchants and their financial institutions on Shanxi province's social dynamics. For instance, as Edgerton-Tarpley points out, *piaohao* merchants' contributions to the famine relief appear in local famine folktales but are intriguingly absent “in the hundreds of letters and reports that foreign and Chinese relief workers wrote about Shanxi during the famine years.” See Edgerton-Tarpley, *Tears from Iron*, 23.

The strong presence of state power consistently shaped the social landscape and cultural identity of North China, establishing it as the heartland of dynastic empires from the Song to the Qing. With most imperial capitals located in the north, dynastic histories intertwined with regional dynamics, particularly in the metropolitan areas surrounding the capitals. Yuanyuan Qiu's study of the Zhili region as the Qing's Metropolitan Area (*jingji* 京畿) best illuminates how the local social structure and economic life were fundamentally transformed by the early Qing's military and land policies. Meanwhile, reading several articles alongside each other reveal a hidden narrative of Shaanxi, which, after ceasing to be the metropolitan area of the Tang Empire, experienced a prolonged decline throughout the second millennium.

During the Northern Song, as Shaanxi became a contested border area between the Song and the Xi Xia, the state's territorial management profoundly transformed the region into a militarized frontier society.³⁰ Culturally, from the perspective of the Northern Song literati elites, as illustrated in Xin Wen's article, a significant part of Shaanxi was marginalized and even excluded from the "civilized" realm of Han Chinese. In the successive Jin and Yuan dynasties, Shaanxi was reintegrated into a reunified North China. Archeological and epigraphical sources from these periods depict a Shaanxi society influenced by the cultures of Han Chinese literati and religious communities, as discussed in Ya-hwei Hsu's and Jinping Wang's articles, respectively. As the birthplace of the influential Quanzhen Daoism, Shaanxi's cultural identity was deeply imbued with this religious tradition in the late Jin and throughout the Mongol-Yuan period. Tomoyasu Iiyama's article presents yet another distinct picture of local society in eastern Shaanxi in the Qing era. Culturally, the local society was steeped in the strong Confucian teaching fervently promoted by the Manchu state and local literati. Socially, however, it grappled with recurring environmental disasters and ethnic conflicts, which at times wrought devastation across the social spectrum, affecting elites and ordinary folk, the poor and the wealthy alike.

Although we can only piece together fragmented snapshots of sociocultural changes in Shaanxi society, they are sufficient to illuminate one consistent regional characteristic of North China in the second millennium. The region was a dynamic, contested ground for exchanges, conflicts, and integration among diverse ethnic groups and political entities from both agrarian and nomadic backgrounds. Scholarly interpretations of regional dynamics of North China over the past millennium must be thoroughly contextualized within these political, environmental, and ethnocultural contexts. Indeed, all the articles in this special issue represent this broad shift among China historians moving away from the conventional modernist lens of growth or decline and instead are considering the complex, authentic evolution within specific historical contexts.

Regrettably, the articles included in the special issue cover all major dynastic periods over the past thousand years except for the Ming (1368–1644). Undoubtedly, English-language scholarship on North China during the Ming dynasty is significantly sparser than that on the earlier Song-Jin-Yuan periods and the later Qing dynasty. Although not specifically focusing on the Ming, some articles shed light on recent directions in Ming studies. For example, Tomoyasu Iiyama's article aligns with David Robinson's studies that highlight the Mongol Empire's impact on the Ming notion of

³⁰Chang Wei Ong, "The Limits of 'Civilization': The New Policies and Shaanxi's Territorial Administration in the Late Northern Song," *T'oung Pao* 106 (2020), 171–210; "Cocreating a Frontier Region in the Northern Song: The State and Local Strongmen in Hewai," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 51 (2022), 15–38.

Han-ness and the integration of non-Han peoples in the Ming bureaucracy and military.³¹ Meanwhile, it provides a vivid case study indicating that ordinary descendants of Yuan-era non-Han immigrants, particularly Mongols, continued to reside in northern Chinese villages after the Yuan dynasty ended, adapting to multifaceted changes throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties. The emphasis on the enduring Mongol legacy in northern Chinese society also resonates with my study of a two-century transformation of social organization in Ming Shanxi. This study highlights the significant impact of Ming princely and military institutions on social structure in North China; both institutions evolved from their Yuan counterparts.³² These recent works emphasizing the Ming's connection to the preceding Yuan dynasty underscore overlooked continuities between middle and late imperial eras.

In summary, adopting a northern perspective and a *longue-durée* approach, this special issue reflects scholarly endeavors over the past two decades to rewrite historical narratives of imperial China in the second millennium. These recent narratives, moving away from earlier generations' spatial approach to Chinese history inspired by the Skinnerian macroregion model, resurrect the role of the state, and contextualize it from diverse social, cultural, environmental, and transnational perspectives. With Kaifeng and Beijing serving as imperial capitals for much of the time, state power profoundly shaped both intra- and inter-regional dynamics in North China as well as the region's relations with the rest of China. As the agrarian and pastoral worlds—along with their peoples, regimes, and cultures—became increasingly intertwined, state activism in the north was robust, reinforced by ethnic, environmental, and geopolitical challenges that were often far more severe than those encountered in the south.

Meanwhile, the stories of people from various social strata and ethnocultural backgrounds—such as non-literati tomb owners in the Jin, Quanzhen Daoists in the Yuan, *touchong* people, self-claimed Mongol descendants and Shanxi merchants in the Qing—highlight the agency and resourcefulness of ordinary people in pursuing their own interests. They achieved this by borrowing or creating symbols of cultural authority and by employing strategies akin to “regulatory arbitrage,” a term Michael Szonyi aptly uses to describe how Ming military households interacted with state institutions.³³ Whether analyzed within the frameworks of north–south distinctions, dynastic transitions, network formation, or knowledge and identity production, our narratives in this special issue aim to enrich scholarly understanding of North China and its subregions. This enrichment arises not from debating on regional structures, but from exploring the activities and perceptions of its residents from diverse perspectives within specific historical contexts.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

³¹David Robinson, *Martial Spectacles of the Ming Court* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013), Robinson, *In the Shadows of the Mongol Empire: Ming China and Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2019), Robinson, *Ming China and Its Allies: Imperial Rule in Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³²Jinping Wang, *In the Wake of the Mongols*, chap. 5, 215–67.

³³Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).