

Reconstructing the course of the Yellow River during
the Western Han period using remote sensing data:
Reexamination of the discourse on the
“fundamental conditions of ancient Chinese despotism”
by HASEGAWA Junji

The changes that have occurred in the course of the Yellow River over the ages has been considered to be an important theme in the historical geography of China, and many researchers have conducted studies of the subject using various methods. The various explanations in the extant bibliographic sources about river course change in dynastic China were first summarized during the early Qing period by Hu Wei in his *Yugong Zhuizhi* 禹貢錐指 (*Brief Study of “Tribute of Yu”*), which proposed that major changes had occurred in the River’s course. Hu’s argument then formed the basis of various opinions that six or seven significant changes had occurred leading up to the existing course as of 1855, in such works as *Zhongguo Lishi Ditu Ji* 中国歴史地図集 (*Collected Historical Maps of China*) and *Huanghe Zhi* 黄河志 (*Gazetteer of the Yellow River*). In particular, as to the pre-Eastern Han era, all argued that the river’s course had changed twice: one being observed during the Warring States period in the fifth year of the reign of Eastern Zhou King Ding (602BC), the other occurring between the third year Wang Mang’s Xin Dynasty (11 CE) and the 13 year of the reign of Later Han Emperor Ming (70 CE), in The flood control works of Wangjing 王景. However, as observed in *Yugong Shanchuan Dilitu* 禹貢山川地理図 (*Geographical Maps of “Tribute of Yu”*) by Cheng Dachang 程大昌 of the Southern Song Dynasty, there was in pre-Ming Dynasty times a great deal of emphasis placed on the river course change project named after Provincial Governor Donqui 頓丘 in the third year of the reign of Former Han Emperor Wu (132 BC), while no mention is given to the Wangjing Project.

The author has elsewhere reconstructed via remote sensing data the old course of the Yellow River between the Warring States and Former Han Periods

and has shown, based on that reconstruction and micro upland topography, the changes that occurred in the river near Liaocheng, Shandong Province in 132 BC. In the present article, the author reexamines the traditional discourse concerning the changes that occurred up through the Latter Han Period, based on his previous findings. In addition, there is also information in the *Hanshu's* 漢書 “Gouzu Zhi” (Treatise on Canals and Rivers) section about the first Yellow River levee of the Warring States period, which Kimura Masao argues signifies the existence of state-operated irrigation projects in the lower reaches of the Yellow River, indicating one basic condition of ancient Chinese despotism. However, the author’s reconstruction of the ancient river course and the present topographical data concerning the region shows these levies to have been formed by the Yellow River naturally, making it very difficult to concur with the conventional discourse that large scale irrigation projects were already underway in the lower Yellow River basin as early as the Warring States period.