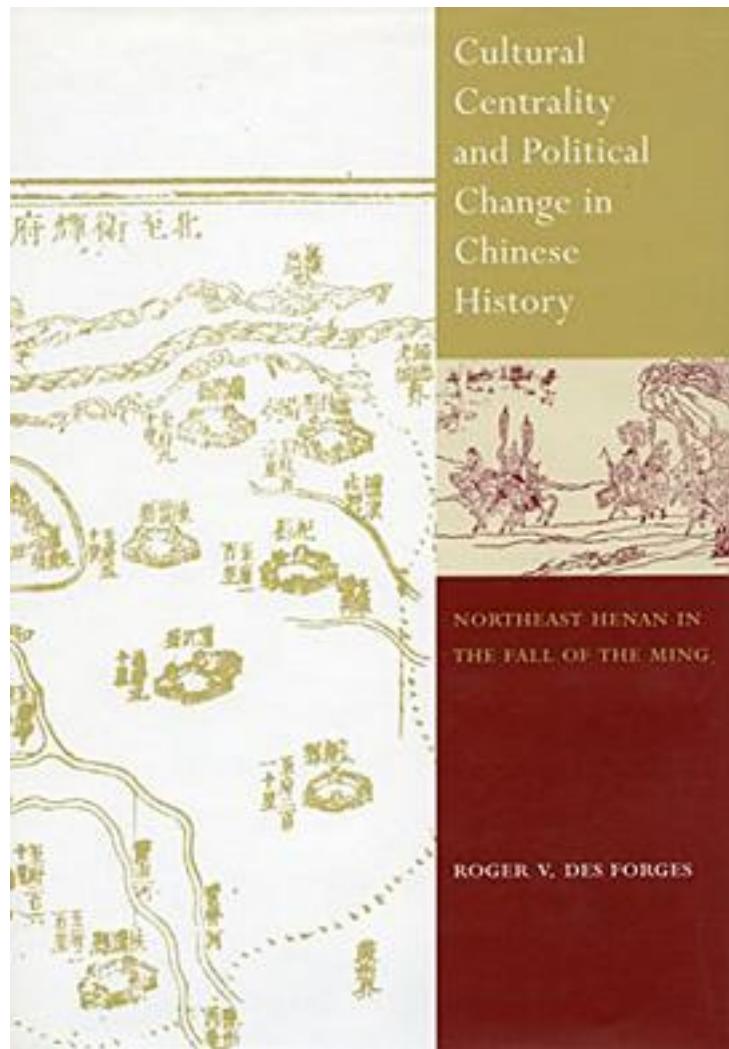


Cultural Centrality and Political Change in Chinese History



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The Ming period of Chinese history is often depicted as one of cultural aridity, political despotism, and social stasis. Recent studies have shown that the arts continued to flourish, government remained effective, people enjoyed considerable mobility, and China served as a center of the global economy. This study goes further to argue that China’s perennial quest for cultural centrality resulted in periodic political changes that permitted the Chinese people to retain control over social and economic developments.

The study focuses on two and a half million people in three prefectures of northeast Henan, the central province in the heart of the “central plain”—a common synecdoche for China. The author argues that this population may have been more representative of the Chinese people at large than were the residents of more prosperous regions.

Many diverse individuals in northeast Henan invoked historical models to deal with the present and shape the future. Though they differed in the lessons they drew, they shared the view that the Han dynasty was particularly relevant to their own time. Han and Ming politics were integral parts of a pattern of Chinese historical development that has lasted to the present.

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