

From Traditional Geoculture to Modern Geopolitics : Time, Place, and Space of China

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China is a huge country with a long history and rich civilization. In the case of Chinese geography, various topical studies can be examined, ranging from agricultural geography to industrial geography, from economic geography to political geography, from urban geography to rural geography, and from environmental conservation to transportation. A number of issues, such as political system, environmental problems, economic reform, and cultural analysis, can be concentrated on.

With the intertwined relationships between a broad geography and a rich civilization of China, Chinese geography is a quite complicated, interesting, and exciting subject in the social sciences. It is also the case, from time to time, teachers find it difficult to organize lectures on Chinese geography because of the intricate relationships between China and geography. However, when information on Chinese geography is broken down as this essay illustrates, teaching Chinese geography is not quite difficult as people think. In this paper, three categories of geographical perspectives regarding Chinese geography : TIME, PLACE, and SPACE, will be discussed.⁽²⁾ Moreover, the teaching materials mentioned in this paper demonstrate that a number of Chinese scholars, whether Chinese geographers or non-geographers, have contributed their geographical perspectives to analyze Chinese issues. Based on these teaching materials, the essay offers some specific strategies to teach a seminar of Chinese geography in the university classroom.

A. To Select Teaching Materials : Time, Place, and Space of China

Unfortunately, scholars often fail to realize that Chinese scholars in the social sciences have contributed a great deal to the study of China's geography. The discussion below details teaching materials written by geographers and non-geographers, categorized by time, place, and space, facilitating the study of Chinese geography in the university classroom.

TIME : China has a long history and a vast territory. During this long historical process, the size of the area actually governed by the central government changed from time to time. As early as the fifth century B.C., the Chinese began to administrate their territories by using geographical concepts. *Yugong* [The Tribute of Yu], a chapter of the sanctioned Confucian text *Shangshu* [The Book of Documents], has been considered the oldest scientific treatise on geography in China. During the Han Dynasty, another influential geographical book, *Hanshu Dili Zhi* [The Treatise of Geographical Studies in *Hanshu*], a treatise chapter of *Hanshu* [The History of the Earlier Han Dynasty] by Ban Gu (32-92?), appeared in Chinese history. This treatise represents the first official sponsored monograph on geography (Tang 1994). In this important document the Chinese first utilize the term geography (*dili* in Chinese). Furthermore, *Hanshu Dili Zhi* illustrates the fundamental approach of Chinese geographical research for more than a thousand years. The Chinese often referred to this approach as the *yange dili* [dynastic geography] model, whose major focus embraces the change of size of national territory and its regional administrative divisions in China. Since both Chinese geography and Chinese civilization have been strongly influenced by the *yange dili* approach, many Chinese scholars in the West inevitably employed a geographical perspective—through “time” series analysis to present the Chinese history. Both historian, such as John King Fairbank (1992), Jonathan Spence (1989), and Benjamin Elman (1983), and geographers, such as K. M. Buchanan (1966), Richard Edmonds (1990), Renzhi Hou (1985), Weimin Que (1995), and Frank Leeming (1993), have taken a geographical approach of through looking a “time” lens to introduce Chinese history and civilization.

PLACE: The focus on “place” provides an essential geographical perspective to understand a number of essential issues in China. *Zhongguo*, the Middle Kingdom, China, signifies that the ancient Chinese people used to consider themselves as people occupying the best and richest “place” of the world. Teaching resources available using this approach include Fitzgerald (1964), Ronald Knapp (1992), D. R. Howland (1996), and Gail Hershatter et al (1996). When studying China using “place,” it is important to remember that the Chinese for thousands of years relied on the tributary-investiture system to organize the world. Under this system, the Chinese had used China as a special “place” to attract “barbarians” from the outside by offering to access Chinese market. This concept of Middle Kingdom, however, was ruthlessly broken by the Opium War in the 1840s, when the Chinese realized that alternative forms of imperilization or colonization in the West were more powerful than the Sinitic world order. The focus of the Middle Kingdom as the special “place” to analyze the relationships between the Chinese as “civilized people” and non-Chinese as “barbarians” has been a popular topic studied in Chinese geography. For instance, the Chinese historians John King Fairbank (1968) and Mark Mancall (1984), political scientists Allen S. Whiting (1994) and Samuel S. Kim (1998), and geographers Norton Ginsburg (1968) and Alan Jenkins (1990), have contributed to the Chinese foreign relations and geopolitical issues related to China. Some of these scholars are increasingly focused on a particular country relationship with China, such as Sino-US relations, by political scientists Kenneth Lieberthal (1997) and Harry Harding (1992), and Sino-Japanese relations by Allen Whiting (1989) and geographer Unryu Suganuma (1997b).

SPACE: In addition, many scholars have examined “boundary” and/or “wall” theories which focus on the Chinese culture. In the 1940s, Owen Lattimore published his influential book—*Inner Asian Frontiers of China*. Following Lattimore’s footsteps, geographers such as Stephen Jones (1959), Theodore Herman (1959), K. M. Buchanan (1966), and Marwyn Samuels (1982), examined Chinese concepts of boundary in respect to “space.” Moreover, anthropologist G. William Skinner took one major step to focus on Chinese urban cities by expanding the “wall” theory. Through a “space” lens, he created

a theory of the way that economic, social, cultural, and political activities are patterned using quantitative methods. His book, *The City in Late Imperial China*, has become one of the most influential Chinese geography books in the twentieth century.⁽³⁾ Skinner’s work have provided enormous influence upon Chinese studies in social sciences; a number of scholars, such as Rhoads Murphey (1984), William Rowe (1984), Keith Schoppa (1982), and Susan Naquin and Everly Rawski (1987), have followed his footprints. However, as a scholar who studies China points out, “few systematic data have been available to substantiate” Skinner’s claims (Lavelly 1989). Therefore, few researchers can really utilize Skinner’s approach to analyze Chinese society in the pre-eighteenth-century even though Skinner’s writings have created many admirers in the intellectual community. Despite this shortcoming, the “wall” theory has never diminished in its popularity as a useful way to examine various issues by Chinese scholars. Even today, the “wall” theory has been broadly interpreted by many Sinologists in the social sciences, such as Arthur Waldron (1990), Godwin Chu and Yanan Ju (1993), Piper Rae Gaubatz (1996), and Andrew Nathan and Robert Ross (1997).

All of the above referenced geographers and non-geographers, in one way and another, shared common geographical methods to analyze China-based on viewing Chinese civilization through TIME, PLACE, and SPACE lens when studying Chinese political, cultural, urban, historical geography. These three categories certainly help teachers to select important reading materials from the numerous textbooks and articles available on China. To be sure, coupled with the writings of Chinese geographers, books and articles from other fields in the social sciences have been important teaching materials for courses addressing Chinese geography.

Recommended Teaching Materials in Chinese Geography Seminars (Examples of Topical Proficiencies)

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY: The writings by C. P. FitzGerald, Owen Lattimore, Theodore Herman, Godwin Chu and Yanan Ju, Richard Smith, Michael Freeberne, Norman Kutcher, Frank Leeming, Lisa Husmann, and

Gilbert Rozman.

ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY : The writings by G. J. R. Linge and D. K. Forbes, Jingzhi Sun, Jack Williams, T. R. Tregear, Chuanjun Wu, David Phillips and Anthony Gar-On Yeh, Nicholas Lardy, James Dorn and Wang Xi, and Barry Naughton.

HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY : The writings by Richard Edmonds, Benjamin Elman, Kuei-Sheng Chang, John King Fairbank, Chiao-Min Hsieh, Renzhi Hou, K.M. Buchana, Mark Mancall, Weimin Que, Xiaofeng Tang, and Jonathan Spence.

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY : The writings by J. K. Fairbank, Norton Ginsburg, Terry Cannon and Alan Jenkins, Kenneth Lieberthal, Harry Harding, Marwyn Samuels, Samuel Kim, Robert Finlay, Allen Whiting, and Unryu Suganuma.

URBAN GEOGRAPHY : The writings by Ronald Knapp, Rhoads Murphey, Laurence Ma, William Rowe, C. Pannell, Keith Schoppa, K. W. Chan, Victor Sit, G. W. Skinner, W. L. Parish, and M. K. Whyte.

MARINE SPACE AND NATIONAL BOUNDARIES : The writings by Peter Kien-hong Yu, Marwyn Samuels, William T. Dobson and M. Taylor Fravel, Unryu Suganuma, and Stephen Jones.

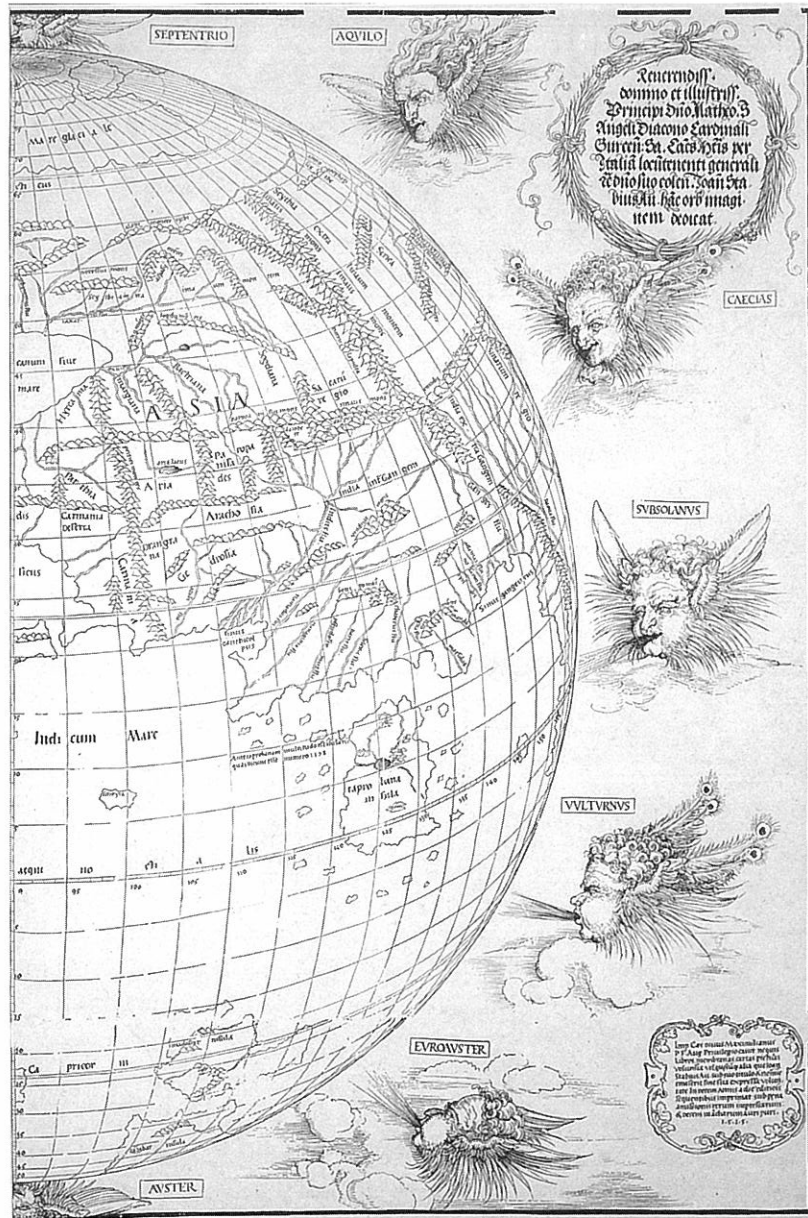
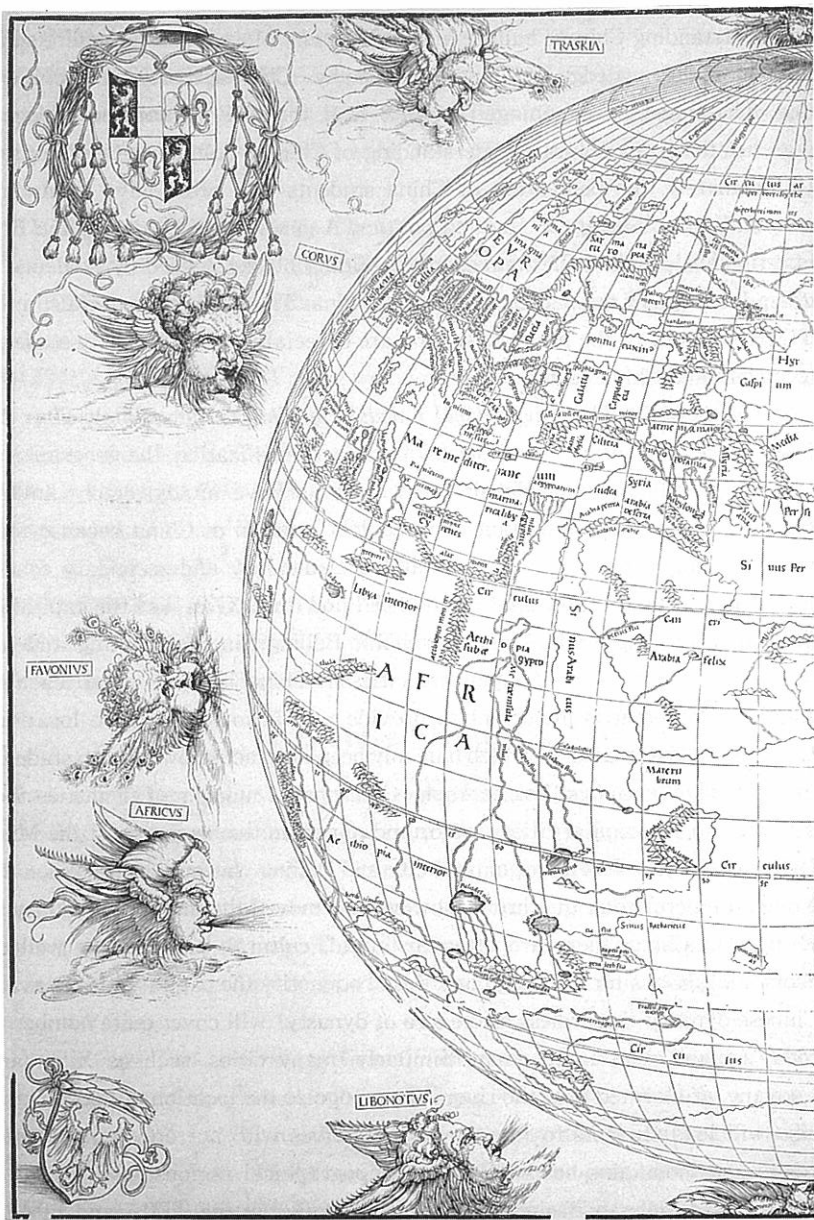
B. Lecture Strategies

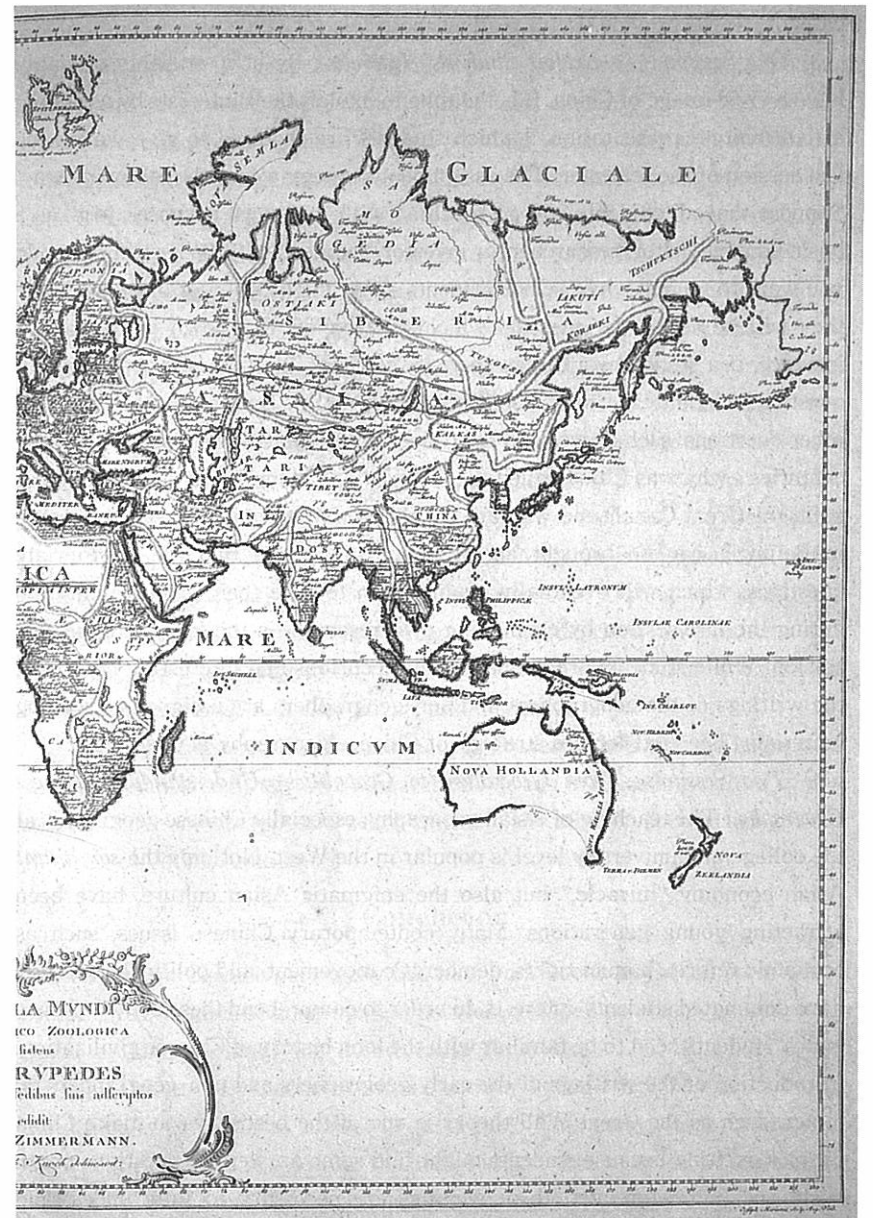
To teach Chinese geography by providing lectures based on TIME, PLACE, and SPACE perspectives is the important strategy in a university classroom. These strategies provide not only useful teaching materials for teachers, but also an effective way to learn or to grasp Chinese geography for students in a relative short period of time. The following strategies to organize classes in Chinese geography are major approaches and constitute part of the 13-week sessions.⁽⁴⁾

1) *The First Two Sessions : A General Survey in Chinese Civilization* : After Mao founded the People's Republic of China, China was virtually a closed country. Only after 1979, did China finally open up and began to reform its economy. Despite more than a decade of the Chinese open-door policy, most students in the West simply do not have much sense of the real image of China

by understanding Chinese culture and civilization. Most students require some fundamental knowledge of Chinese geography—Chinese history and civilization. The contemporary image of China (e.g., the 1989 Tiananmen Incident) does not foster an accurate understanding of Chinese culture and civilization. Unfortunately, the perception of China students that often have is already colored by the Western media and politics. A general survey during the first two sessions provides the fundamental building blocks needed by students to grasp the sense of the particular “place,” China. The teaching materials in the TIME category of the previous section are especially useful and help students to understand China in general.

2) *One Session : The Geographical Location of China* : Immediately after the first two sessions of a general survey in Chinese civilization, the geographical location of China is scheduled. Most students have an extremely limited knowledge about the important geographical location of China because they were not taught enough geography at the elementary and secondary school levels. For instance, most students do not know that Xi'an was the capital of many dynasties before the Chinese moved to Beijing. Simply to asking students to memorize a number of important cities in China is not a good teaching solution. Rather, it is important to provide a solid image of these locations bring to life historical sites which had only been abstract knowledge to students in their prior learnings. For example, China has a number of dynasties that often set up two capital cities : major and minor. In the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, Nanjing was major capital city and Beijing was minor one. When the Yongle Emperor took the throne, however, he moved the major capital city to Beijing. In China, there are often historical, cultural, political, as well as economic reasons for creating big cities. To identify the capital cities in every Chinese dynasty (regardless of the size of dynasty) will cover quite number of today's main cities in the map. Similarly, many cities, such as Xi'an and Luoyang, are located near the rivers. To recognize the location of major rivers also will lead students to familiarize themselves with not only a number of rivers and mountains but also various topographical regions, such as Loess Plateau and Sichuan Basin. The readings detailed in the TIME and SPACE





categories will provide useful reading materials for students.

3) *One Session: To Exploit Students' Interests*: By now, students probably have a vivid image of China. It is the time to exploit their interests by assigning a five-minutes presentation,⁽⁵⁾ which students are required to give during the last session of the semester. The assignment strategy works the following way. Suppose that all students will go to China with their own purposes (e.g., as a businessman, visitor, researcher, or investor), a question is "Where in China do you want to go and why?" Once students select the location or place in China; they will be asked the question which will exploit their own interests. For instance, if a student want to go to visit the Great Wall, he/she certainly will question "why did the Chinese build the Great Wall?" By the same token, many other questions, such as why did the Chinese lived nearby the Yellow River for centuries? why was China called the "Middle Kingdom?" why did the Chinese build the Great Canal? and why are the thirteen Ming emperors' tomb located in Beijing?, can be brought up. Helping students to find the appropriate questions, which will eventually enable them to give their own presentation during the last session by conducting own research, is the key factor in this session. While students are pondering these curious and interesting questions, the writings of the geographers and non-geographers are assigned as reading materials. The next lecture strategy of Chinese geography is underway.

4) *Two Sessions: From Geoculture to Geopolitics—Understanding Chinese Geography*: The teaching of Asian geography, especially Chinese geography, at the college and university level is popular in the West. Not only the *soi-disant* Asian economy "miracle," but also the enigmatic Asian culture, have been attracting young generations. Many contemporary Chinese issues, such as economic reform, human rights, democratic movement, and political structure, have dominated students' interests. In order to comprehend these contemporary issues, students need to be familiar with the long history of Chinese civilization. Introduction of the writings of the early geographers and non-geographers on topics, such as the Great Wall theory is one of the best ways to make China courses exciting because students might find some answers to questions previously puzzling. Moreover, these writings are necessary to fully understand

Chinese geography. Since China is a country based on the development of the *yange dili* [dynastic geography] model, it is indispensable for students to understand *yange dili*, which directly influences current Chinese geopolitics, geoculture, and geoeconomics. Without learning *yange dili*, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to understand today's Chinese geopolitics or any geoeconomic issues (note: both PLACE and TIME categories of teaching materials will help). For example, the Chinese did not demand the return of Hong Kong based upon simple geoeconomic considerations. Nor it is a simple geopolitics maneuver when the Chinese navy contested the empty space of many islets in the South China Sea. All of these problems are directly influenced or related to thousands of years of complex Chinese geoculture and geopolitics.

5) *One Session: To Finalize Chinese Geography*: After reading articles and books during a number of intensive weeks, students solidly develop a "new" image of China, which may or may not be different from the one they held at the beginning of the course. They come to realize that issues, such as human rights or democratization, have more than one side. During this class, it is essential to reinforce these new image and perceptions for students. One enjoyable and useful way to do this is to show document films, such as *The Pacific Century* or *The Yellow River*, and discuss it.

6) *The Last Session: The Presentation by Students*: It is time to listen what students found from their own research. Everyone in class is required to give a five to three minutes speech, which can be in any manner, such as using slides, pictures, or simply talking.

Conclusion

Even though Chinese geography has many textbooks to choose from with a complicated number of geographical perspectives, one can teach geography in China by simply classifying it into main three levels: TIME, PLACE, and SPACE. This enables teachers to find easy way to construct the classes despite the difficulty of China as subject in geography. This essay, furthermore, indicates that numerous scholars in the social sciences have come to realize that interdisciplinary studies across fields provide people an unique perspective to

understand China's problems. Geography is certainly the field to serve this interdisciplinary studies.

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Endnote

- (1) Research Fellow in the Research Department of the Institute of Morology. The author would like to thank Dr. Ronald G. Knapp and Dr. Norton Ginsburg for their useful suggestions and enlightenment. The author also thanks Kristen Smith for reviewing the early drafts.
- (2) There are many geographical approaches. For instance, spatial historical geographers can use spatial approach to examine the Chinese Geogra-

phy.

- (3) William Skinner published his regional systems approach to Chinese society, which first appeared in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 24, nos. 1-3 (1964-65).
- (4) Based on the assumption that Chinese geography seminar contains three hours every week which counts a session with approximately total 13 weeks in one semester.
- (5) If Chinese geography has more than fifty people, a group assignment will be appropriate.