

Evolution of the Political and Spatial Boundaries in Ancient Tarim Basin

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Abstract: There is a specific relationship between the politics and spatial boundaries. From the historical perspective, this article takes Kashigar as an instance, to study the political process in Tarim Basin, as well as the related spatial projection, and finally teases out the evolution process and law of political space in the basin. The analysis shows that the political spatial boundaries in the basin has evolved dynamically over time due to the interplay of endogenous and exogenous forces. Firstly, the overall process of development from scattered small oasis regimes to a regional political force based on a large oasis; Secondly, the distribution of political space within the basin and its evolution is mainly controlled by the formation and changes in the larger political pattern outside; Lastly, the boundaries of power of different political entities change from time to time, but their core areas remain fixed. The article's exploration of the political patterns of the Tarim Basin provides a reference point for subsequent research.

1. Introduction

The logical between politics and spatial boundaries is particularly concerned in the discussion of space theory. On the one hand, space is considered to be "the mapping of political relations in human society, and the generation of space is the result of the interaction of various conflicts" [1]. On the other hand, each political system itself "obviously shows specific spatial attributes, even if it is not very prominent" [2]. Politics and space are like two sides of a coin. There is a special corresponding relationship between them.

It can be considered that each political process has an adaptive geographical region, and each geographical region should have some connection with a specific political process [3]. Moreover, this geographical area should be "closed", that is, there is a clear "boundary". This has laid a foundation for the study of the spatial organization pattern of the political system. Based on this theory, this paper studies the political process and its corresponding spatial projection in the Tarim Basin from the perspective of historical development, so as to reveal the law of the evolution of political space in the basin.

2. Political Spatial Patterns in the Tarim Basin During the Past Dynasties

The Tarim Basin is located in the west of Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The towering mountains around it block the humid air flow, making the basin extremely arid, thus forming a vast Taklimakan Desert. However, due to the melting of snow and ice in the mountains, many valley rivers have been formed. These rivers are mixed with fine soil, forming oases and fertile fields at the foothills of the basin edge. Due to sufficient water, fertile land and intensive human activities in the oasis, small or large oasis settlements have been formed.

Although the Tarim Basin has a closed environment, in ancient times it was the artery connecting the East and the West - the main transportation pivot of the Silk Road in China. Under the government of the Western Han Dynasty, the trade between China and the West had become

frequent, and the Silk Road transit tariff was very thick. Whoever controlled the trade routes could obtain huge wealth^[4]. Stimulated by transit tariff, the oasis city-states scattered on the edge of the Tarim Basin, which were originally closed off, became active. Due to the limitation of natural resources, these city-states were generally small in scale and weak in strength. They had always wandered around in the process of the Central Plains regime and the Central Asian tribes competing for control of the Western Regions. The political process mixed with survival rationality and development demands began, and a thick spatial projection was cast on the vast land of the Tarim Basin.

In the following, through the analysis of historical data, the political forces existing in the Tarim Basin in each historical period are sorted out, and then the main towns controlled by these forces are analyzed to determine their actual geographic coverage. Since it is difficult to restore the spatial boundaries of cities and towns in the historical period accurately, the corresponding textual research is carried out between them and modern towns, and based on this, the exact spatial boundaries of major political forces are delineated on the map.

2.1. Political Spatial Patterns in the Tarim Basin During the Pre-Qin, Han, Wei, Jin and the Southern and Northern Dynasties

Archaeological data show that there were human activities in the Neolithic Age in the Tarim basin about 10000 years ago. About 3000 years ago, the original collection economy began to change to the farming economy, resulting in the emergence of semi collection and semi farming settlements. By the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, the large and small oases in the Tarim Basin had been controlled by local tribal forces. They built castles in the oases and ruled the surrounding rural and pastoral areas, forming the so-called "city state". There were also some small countries that were still in the period of nomadic economy and had no fixed city states, which were called "traveling countries".

During the Han Dynasty, the Tarim Basin was the focus of contention between the Huns and the royal family of Han Dynasty. From establishing "Du-hu" (an ancient jurisdictional agency) of the Western Regions in the Western Han Dynasty, to the "retreat from the Western Regions and unify the Western Regions both for three times" in the Eastern Han Dynasty, the city states in the basin were always under the alternate rule of the Huns and the Han Dynasty. According to records in The Biography of the Western Regions in The Book of Han: "The Western Regions cannot be passed through until the time of emperor Xiaowu. There were 36 states and later divided into more than 50 ones, all located in the west of Huns and the south of the Wusun tribe."^[5] Therefore, around the time of Zhang Jian's diplomatic mission in the Western Han Dynasty, there were about 36 city states in the Western Regions.

According to Yu Taishan and other scholars' textual research on the geographical location of city states in The Book of Han^[6], there were 22 city states in the Tarim Basin, with a total population of about 330000 (including the number of victorious soldiers). Among them, the largest city-state was Qiuci, with a total population of more than 100000, followed by Yanqi and Kumak, with 32100 and 24500 people respectively. The city states with more than 10000 people, according to their population size, also include Jimi, Khotan, Shule, Yarkant and Shanshan. The rest of the city states were "small countries" in the basin with less than 10000 people. See Table 1 and figure 1A for the spatial range covered by political forces of various countries in the basin.

During this period, although the strength of each city state was different, each state kept acting in its own way and did not belong to each other. However, with the enhancement of their own strength, they all had the desire to control the Silk Road trade and monopolize the transit tariff, so they began to fight and merge with each other. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Tarim basin formed a kind of regional centralization politics under the leadership of powerful countries, that is, several weaker city states close in space were politically united and subordinate to the rule of powerful countries. Although the states were still nominally independent of each other, the transformation from city-state politics to regional politics has been very obvious.

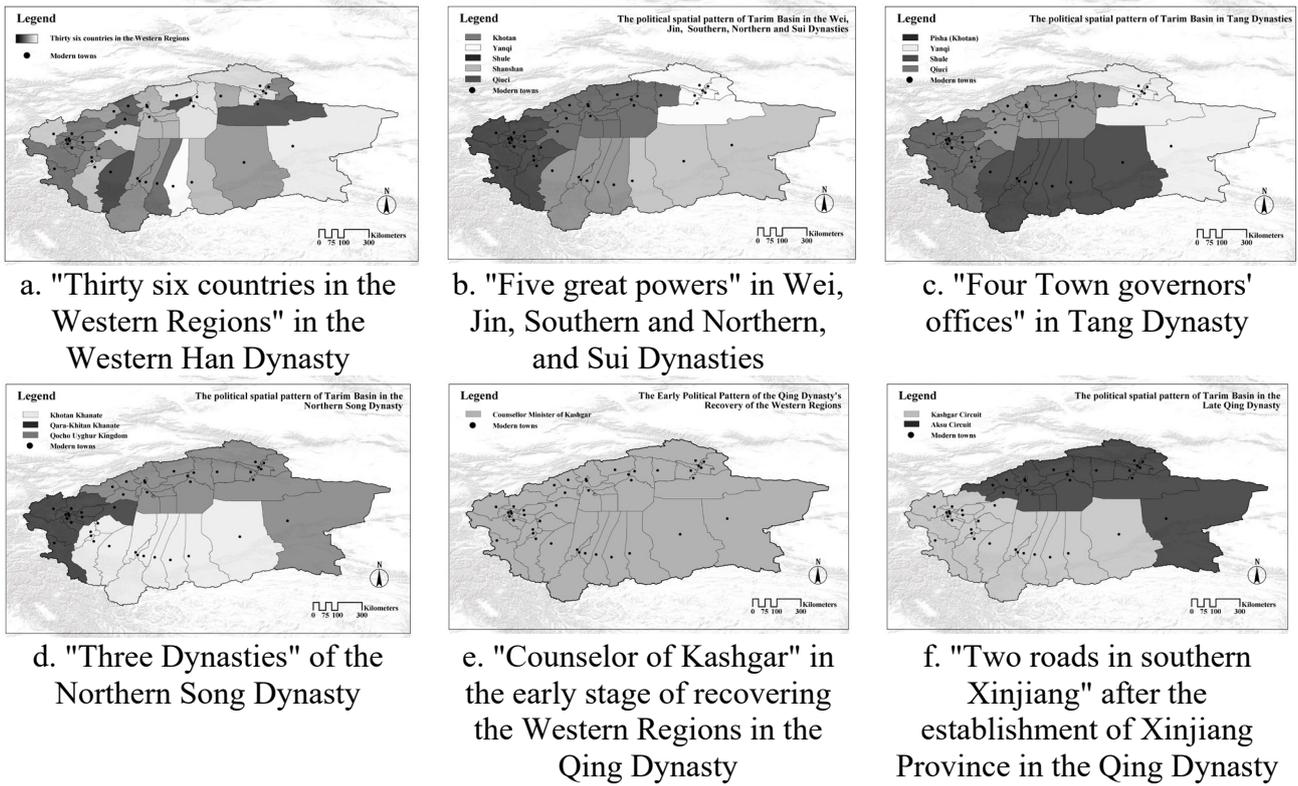


Figure 1 The political space in Tarim Basin in historical periods.

Table 1 City states in Tarim Basin in the Western Han Dynasty.

State Name	Economic Base	Modern town	State name	Economic Base	Modern town
Ruoqiang	Pastoral	Ruoqiang	Zihe	Pastoral	-
Loulan	Pastoral	Ruoqiang	Yarkant	Grain	Yarkant
Qiemo	Grain	Qiemo	Shule	Grain	Kashgar
Xiaowan	Grain	Qiemo	Weitou	Pastoral	Akqi
Jingjue	Grain	Niya	Kumak	Grain	Aksu
Ronglu	Grain	Niya	Onsu	Grain	Onsu
Jimi	Grain	Yutian	Qiuci	Grain	Kuqa
Qule	Grain	Yutian	Weixu	Pastoral	Hoxud
Khotan	Grain	Hotan	Yanqi	Pastoral	Korla
Pishan	Grain	Pishan	Quli	Grain	Yuli
Xiye	Pastoral	-	Wulei	Grain	Luntai

(The data in Table 1 is based on Volume 96 of *The Book of Han(I)*, Volume 66 of *The Biography of the Western Regions(I)*; and Volume 96 of *The Book of Han(II)*, Volume 66 of *The Biography of the Western Regions(II)*.)

After the collapse of the Han Dynasty caused by the DongZhuo rebellion, the warlords in the central plains were divided, the royal families and nobles killed each other, and the nomads went south to fight with the farming people for 400 years, resulting in frequent regime changes across the country. The countries of the Western Regions "come humbly if they ask for something, and arrogant if they don't. They know that they are far away, and the Han soldiers can't reach it."^[7] In a word, the rule of the Central Plains Dynasty over the Western Regions was greatly weakened.

Under this situation, nomads in the grasslands and Northern China, such as Xianbei, Rouran, Gaoche, Hephthalite, and Turks, had been fighting here for a long time. The countries in the basin should not only face powerful foreign enemies, but also guard against the disturbance of other countries in the basin. Therefore, they adopted the strategy of surrendering to the outside world and

annexing to the inside. As a result, the previously loose regional political forces finally condensed into entity politics in the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, and finally formed five relatively balanced political forces in the basin with the big oasis as the spatial unit, namely, Yanqi and Kucha in the north of the basin, Khotan and Shanshan in the South, and Shule in the West. The spatial coverage of their political forces is shown in Table 2 and Figure 1b.

Table 2 The main political forces in the Tarim Basin during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties.

Political force	Ruled city-states	Major modern towns within the jurisdiction
Yanqi	Weixu, Yuli	Yuli, Hoxud, Hejing, Bohu, Korla
Qiuci	Kumak, Onsu, Weitou	Kuqa, Xinhe, Xayar, Baicheng, Luntai, Akqi, Maralbexi, Onsu, Awat, Uqturpan, Kalpin
Shule	Zhenzhong, Yarkant, Kesh, Qusha, Xiye, Yinai, Xiuxun, Puli, Yuling, Yidu, Qin	Kashgar, Artux, Ulugqat, Payzawat, Shufu, Shule, Yopurga, Yarkant, Makit, Akto, Yengisar, Poskam, Kargilik, Taxkorgan
Shanshan	Qiemo, Jingjue, Xiaowan, Loulan	Niya, Qiemo, Ruoqiang
Khotan	Ronglu, Jumi, Pishan, Qule	Hotan, Karakax, Lop, Qira, Yutian

(The table is sorted out according to *History of Northern Dynasties*, biography 85, *Western Regions*.)

2.2. Political Spatial Patterns in the Tarim Basin During the Sui and Tang Dynasties

In the early Sui and Tang Dynasties, the Tarim Basin was controlled by Western Turkic tribes. After the formation of the great unification of the Tang Dynasty, Anxi capital was set up in the western regions to govern the vast areas of the Tarim Basin from south of the Tianshan Mountains to the west of the Congling mountains and the Amu Darya River Basin. Compared with the countries west of the Congling mountains, the oasis regime in the basin was closer in space and more direct in political connection, so it had become the focus of the central regime in the Tang Dynasty.

Therefore, the political relations among the countries in the Tarim Basin during this period were directly controlled by the deployment of the central government of the Tang Dynasty to a great extent. In terms of military affairs, the Tang Dynasty established "four towns in Anxi" in the Tarim Basin and sent troops to garrison for deterrence. In terms of the daily management of the town, the Jimi policy was adopted, that is, the local Aboriginal nobles were recognized, granted princes, and included in the management of the central government, hoping to reduce the management cost.

The four city states of Qiuci, Yanqi, Shule and Khotan were the most important Jimi regimes determined by the Tang Dynasty in the Tarim Basin. Because they were the main political forces in the basin at that time, the control over these big powers meant the control over the weak and dispersed political forces attached to these big powers, thus controlling the whole Tarim Basin. Therefore, during this period, a political pattern led by the "Four Town governors' offices" of Qiuci, Yanqi, Shule and Khotan was formed in the basin.

According to the *Geography Annals of the New Book of Tang*, the "Four Town governors' offices" led a total of 34 military governors, including nine in Qiuci, ten in Pisha (Khotan), fifteen in Shule, and none in Yanqi, but the name of the vassal state was absent^[8]. Professor Wang Xiaofu (1992) made a textual research on the name and geographical outlook of the prefectures of the four towns^[9]. See Table 3 and figure 1C for the space covered by their political forces.

Table 3 Cities governed by the "Four Town governors' offices" in Tarim Basin, in Tang Dynasty.

Governors' offices	Territorial states	Major modern towns within the jurisdiction
Qiuci	Wulei, Qiuci, Jupi, Luocheng, Baizhou, Kumak, Xiaoshi, Onsu, Dagan, Weitou	Kuqa, Xinhe, Xayar, Baicheng, Luntai, Akqi, Onsu, Maralbexi, Uqturpan, Awat, Kalpin
Pisha (Khotan)	Jiliang, Pishan, Gucheng, Hunu, Khotan, Hanmi, Jingjue, Lancheng, Ronglu	Hotan, Karakax, Lop, Qira, Khotan, Niya, Qiemo
Shule	Qishan, Daman, Shule, Han, Biancheng, Yaojian, Zhuba, Panshun, Ban, Shuagnqu, Huangqu, Kujing, Qinan, Qizha	Kashgar, Artux, Ulugqat, Payzawat, Shufu, Shule, Yopurga, Makit, Akto, Yengisar, Yarkant, Poskam, Kargilik, T Taxkorgan
Yanqi	—	Yuli, Hoxud, Hejing, Bohu, Korla, Ruoqiang

(The data in this table is sorted according to Wang Xiaopu, History of political relations among Tang, Tubo and Dash[M], Beijing:Peking University Press, 1992.)

2.3. Political Spatial Patterns in the Tarim Basin During the Song, Yuan and Ming Dynasties

In 960 ad, the Northern Song Dynasty was established, and its westward regime only reached the eastern Gansu and Hehuang regions of Qinghai; the subsequent Southern Song dynasty was content to exercise sovereignty over a part of the country. For more than 300 years, the Song dynasty was characterised by frequent warfare and confrontation between the north and the south, and there was never a strong central authority to unify the whole country. As a result, the Tarim Basin in the west was controlled by a succession of frontier regimes.

The most striking event in the Tarim Basin during this period of history was the introduction of Islam. The combination of politics and religion was like a strong whirlwind, which violently changed the political pattern in the basin. In 960 AD, Musa Arslan Khan declared Islam to be the state religion of the Qara-Khanid Khanate, thus establishing a new Islamic religious center in the western Tarim Basin, at which point three major religious powers were formed in the basin, centred on Kashgar, Khotan and Qiuci, with both Khotan and Qiuci practising Buddhism. The spatial extent of their political power coverage is shown in Table 4, Fig. 1d

Table 4 The separatist regime in Tarim Basin, in Northern Song Dynasty.

Divided regime	Political identity	The main modern towns in the jurisdiction
Qara-Khitan Khanate	Central Asia and the Dynasties of the Western End of the Tarim Basin	Kashgar, Artux, Ulugqat, Payzawat, Maralbexi, Shufu, Shule, Yopurga, Akto, Yengisar, Taxkorgan
Khotan Khanate	Close ties with the Central Plains Dynasty	Hotan, Karakax, Lop, Qira, Khotan, Niya, Qiemo, Yarkant, Poskam, Kargilik, Makit
Qocho Uyghur Kingdom	Surrendered to the Liao Dynasty and contributed regularly	Yuli, Hoxud, Hejing, Kuqa, Xinhe, Xayar, Baicheng, Luntai, Akqi, Bohu, Korla, Onsu, Ruoqiang, Awat, Uqturpan, Kalpin

Note: Table based on Ma Dazheng. The History of Xinjiang. Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2006.

As the religion spread, Islam continued to clash with Buddhism, the Qara-Khanid Khanate became bitter enemies with Khotan and Qiuci, and religious wars broke out from time to time. In fact, the political backgrounds of these three major regimes varied, with the Qocho Uyghur

kingdom, to which Qiuci belonged, being subordinate to the Liao dynasty; the Li dynasty, to which Khotan belonged, having close ties with the Central Plains Dynasty; and the Qara-Khanid Khanate, which was the main political power active in Central Asia. Thus, the advance and retreat of different religious forces was in part a reaction to the waxing and waning power of these regimes in the Tarim Basin.

Beginning with the Southern Song Dynasty and continuing through the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the Tarim Basin was ruled by six frontier regimes: the Qara-Khitai Khanate, the Ogedei Khanate, the Chagatai Khanate, the Eastern Chagatai Khanate, the Yarkand Khanate and the Dzungar Khanate^[10]. During this period of history, although the ruling regime was unified, there was never an end to the rivalry between the different political forces within the basin, and the geographical area under their control was in constant flux, with no stable boundaries.

2.4. Political Spatial Patterns in the Tarim Basin During the Qing Dynasty

In the 24th year of the Qianlong reign (1759), the Qing army defeated the Elder and younger Khoja, captured Kashgar and Yarkand, pacified the area south of the Tianshan Mountains and unified the western region once again. In order to better manage the western region, the Qing government set up the "General of Ili" in 1762, based in Huiyuan City. In charge of the garrison in the north and south of the Tianshan Mountains, and in the eastern and southern of Lake Balkhash up to the Pamirs, and oversees local administration^[11].

After the "General of Ili", there were counsellors and ministers of affairs, etc., stationed to handle various matters according to the importance of the city. By the end of the Qianlong era, the establishment of the Minister of Military Affairs was basically set in stone, and at this time Xinjiang was divided into three major geographic units: North, South and East, and the area around the Tarim Basin was under the jurisdiction of the Minister of Counsellor of South. This counsellor was based in Kashgar and was in charge of the "Eight Cities of Southern Xinjiang", the strongest in the basin. So the Tarim Basin in the early Qing dynasty was in fact a clearly structured and unified political situation, with Kashgar at its head. (Fig 1e)

However, under the military system, the governor did not directly deal with the people, and the daily administrative affairs were managed by the "Baig", which led to the expansion of the power of the local "Baig" and brought about a series of instability factors. Moreover, after the Opium Wars, the British and Russians coveted Xinjiang and attempted to use local forces to infiltrate it, and the Yakoob rebellion, which caused great unrest, had much to do with the covert support of the Tsarist Russians. In this case, the Qing government hoped to thoroughly solve this contradiction through the establishment of a province in Xinjiang, so as to unify the administrative system in the north and south of Tianshan Mountains, replacing the "Baig" system with the Prefecture system, thus removing local strong forces for local governance.

Table 5 The Administrative framework in Tarim Basin after the establishment of Xin Jiang province.

Administrative divisions	Cities, departments and states administered	The main modern towns in the jurisdiction
Kashgar Circuit	Shule, Yarkant, Yengisar, Hetian	Kashgar, Artux, Ulugqat, Payzawat, Maralbexi, Shufu, Shule, Yopurga, Akto, Yengisar, Taxkorgan, Yarkant, Poskam, Kargilik, Makit, Hotan, Karakax, Lop, Qira, Khotan, Niya, Qiemo
Aksu Circuit	Onsu, Yanqi, Kuqa, Uqturpan	Yuli, Hoxud, Hejing, Kuqa, Xinhe, Xayar, Baicheng, Luntai, Akqi, Bohu, Korla, Onsu, Ruoqiang, Awat, Uqturpan, Kalpin

Note: Collated from *Liu Xiangqin's Manuscript*, vol. 8.

According to literature, Xinjiang was established as a province in 1884, and by the twenty-eighth year of the Guangxu era, the province had "four circuits, six cities, eleven departments, two directly

subordinate states, one state, twenty-one counties and two sub-counties" ^[12], of which the Aksu and Kashgar were located in the Tarim Basin. The prefectures under their jurisdiction are shown in Table 5.

It can be seen that the administrative framework set up in the Tarim Basin after the establishment of Xinjiang as a province divided the entire basin into two units to be administered in the east and west. The towns in the eastern part of the basin were one unit, unified by the Aksu Circuit, while the western part of the basin was another unit, unified by the Kashgar Circuit. (Fig 1f)

During this period, however, the Tarim Basin in southern Xinjiang was fully Islamised and the towns were populated by predominantly Uighur Muslims who shared a strong cultural, religious and living customs. Thus, although administratively divided in two, the entire Tarim Basin is essentially a unified geographical subdivision with the same cultural traits. Along with the sedimentation of history and the development of the nation, cultural coherence broke through the boundaries of artificially defined administrative units and became the most crucial element dominating the political patterns in the Tarim Basin, and continues to do so today.

3. Conclusions

From the perspective of historical evolution, the above has combed the political structure and the corresponding spatial boundaries in the Tarim Basin in different historical periods. The results show that the political space in the basin is a long-term dynamic evolutionary process shaped by the interplay of endogenous and exogenous forces, whose main characteristics are as follows:

(1) From decentralisation to centralization: The political spatial pattern in the Tarim Basin has experienced a process of development from scattered small oasis regimes to a regional political force based on a large oasis. This transformation was in large part caused by competition for Silk Road transit tariffs between states within the basin. They tried to improve their strength through the alliance between neighboring states, so as to win the competition. And what began as this loose association eventually evolved into an integrated political entity after a long process of mergers.

(2) Control of peripheral regimes: The distribution of political space within the basin and its evolution is largely controlled by the formation and changes in the larger political pattern outside. The Tarim Basin is at the crossroads of the Central Plains Dynasty, the Central Asian kingdom and the Grassland Tribal Forces. This particular location forced the weaker city-states in the basin to find their own optimal support, driven by the rationality of survival, so that the political space in the basin was, to a large extent, the result of competition between several external powers in the area.

(3) Political power divisions: The power boundary of these political entities in the Tarim Basin changed from time to time, but their core areas were relatively constant. According to the analysis above, four separate zones are broadly formed in the basin, each with one or two core towns. The specific divisions are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 The region division of the Tarim Basin based on history clues.

Area	Core Towns	Towns
Western Tarim Basin	Kashgar, Yarkant	Kashgar, Yarkant, hufu, Shule, Yengisar, Akto, Payzawat, Maralbexi, Makit, Artux, Yopurgam, Poskam, Kargilik, Ulugqat, Taxkorgan
Middle northern Tarim Basin	Aksu, Kuqa	Akqi, Uqturpan, Kalpin, Onsu, Aksu, Awat, Baicheng, Kuqa, Xinhe, Xayar,
Eastern Tarim Basin	Yanqi	Hejing, Hoxud, Yanqi, Bohu, Korla, Yuli, Qiemo, Ruoqiang
Southwest of the Tarim Basin	Khotan	Pishan, Karakax , Hotan, Lop, Qira, Yutian, Niya

It has been suggested that the “Political arena” usually correspond to its space, but in some cases these “Political arena” can transcend this space and their effects are not only generated by “political processes” but also by cultural, economic and technological phenomena. The Tarim Basin was the

hub of the Silk Road, where civilisations collided, exchanged and fused, resulting in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, Sino-Western culture. These factors also had a significant impact on the formation of the political spatial patterns in the Tarim Basin, and further research on this topic is needed.

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