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# The Eurasian Transformation of the 10th to 13th centuries: The View from Song China, 906-1279

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EURASIAN TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE TENTH  
TO THIRTEENTH CENTURIES: THE VIEW  
FROM SONG CHINA, 960-1279

PAUL JAKOV SMITH

ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the nature of the medieval transformation of Eurasia from the perspective of China during the Song dynasty (960-1279). Out of the many facets of the wholesale metamorphosis of Chinese society that characterized this era, I focus on the development of an increasingly bureaucratic and autocratic state, the emergence of a semi-autonomous local elite, and the impact on both trends of the rise of the great steppe empires that encircled and, under the Mongols ultimately extinguished the Song. The rapid evolution of Inner Asian state formation in the tenth through the thirteenth centuries not only swayed the development of the Chinese state, by putting questions of war and peace at the forefront of the court's attention; it also influenced the evolution of China's socio-political elite, by shaping the context within which elite families forged their sense of corporate identity and calibrated their commitment to the court. I conclude that intersecting cycles of state-building in China and the steppe during the Eurasian transformation stimulated the rise of a Neo-Confucian ideology that helped the literatus elite transfer its energies away from the unresponsive and autocratic court to more local concerns, allowing it to gain autonomy from the Song state that had conceived it, adapt to life under Mongol rule, and project its influence over Chinese culture well into the late imperial era.

In this essay I address the nature of the medieval transformation of Eurasia from the perspective of China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Ever since the work of the Japanese historian Naitô Torajiro (1866-1934), historians have viewed the period encompassed by the Song and its late-Tang and Five Dynasties precursors—that is, roughly the eighth through the thirteenth centuries—as an era of fundamental change in all aspects of Chinese society.<sup>1</sup> The primary engine of this medieval

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<sup>1</sup> For a precis of Naitô's argument see Hisayuki Miyakawa, "An Outline of the Naitô Hypothesis and its Effects on Japanese Studies of China," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 14.4 (1955), 533-552. Richard von Glahn puts the Naitô hypothesis in larger perspective in "Imagining Pre-modern China," in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition in Chinese History*, eds. Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 35-70.

transformation was undoubtedly the shift in the demographic center of gravity from the old political heartland of North China to the lush frontier regions drained by the Yangzi River. The percentage of the entire population residing in South China had increased from roughly 25 percent in the year 605 to 46 percent by the inception of the great transformation in the mid-eighth century, and climbed steadily thereafter to 65 percent in 1080 and 71 percent by 1200. Expansion into South China stimulated advances in rice agriculture, whose robust productivity broke the cycle of agrarian self-sufficiency and freed producers to specialize in market-oriented crops and handicrafts. As landowners and peasants throughout China were drawn into a network of trade in daily necessities as well as luxury goods for the rich, trade itself spilled beyond the confines of regulated urban markets into an articulated hierarchy of periodic rural markets, intermediate towns, and great urban centers of distribution and consumption.<sup>2</sup>

No less important than this economic metamorphosis, however, were the political aspects of the medieval transformation: the collapse of the medieval aristocracy of great clans that had dominated China politically and socially from roughly the fourth through the ninth centuries and the increasing bureaucratization of the Chinese state from the eighth century on.<sup>3</sup> Both trends were shaped by a third factor that had consequences not only for China but for all of Eurasia: the rise of the great steppes polities that began (from a Chinese perspective) with the Tibetan, Turkish, and Uighur states during the Tang; continued with the Khitan Liao (907-1125), Tangut Xi Xia (ca. 990-1227), and Jurchen Jin (1115-1234) empires during the Song; and culminated in the Mongol Empire of the Yuan (1260-1368). The rise of the steppe had a direct influence on the development of the Chinese state, by putting geopolitical imperatives and questions of peace and war at the forefront of any policy agenda. At the same time it indirectly influenced the evolution of the

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Elvin provides a richly textured description of China's medieval economic revolution in *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973). For a more evolutionary interpretation of the agrarian changes from the eighth through the sixteenth centuries see Li Bozhong, "Was There a 'Fourteenth-Century Turning Point'? Population, Land, Technology, and Farm Management," in Smith and von Glahn, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition*, 135-175.

<sup>3</sup> On the demise of the medieval aristocracy see David Johnson, *The Medieval Chinese Oligarchy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977). On the emergence of specialized bureaucratic agencies during the late Tang see, for example, Denis Twitchett, "The Salt Commissioners after the Rebellion of An Lu-shan," *Asia Major* (new series) 4.1 (1954), 60-89.

socio-political elite, by shaping the context within which elite families forged their sense of corporate identity and calibrated their commitment to the court.

It is precisely these intersecting themes of elite transformation and state-building in China and on the steppe that I focus on in this essay. That perspective requires a somewhat broader chronological scope than the tenth to thirteenth centuries that frame most of the essays in this volume. For especially with respect to the evolution of the Chinese state and its socio-political elite, some historians now envision not one great transformation starting in the Tang and ending in the Song, but rather two identifiable historical eras spanning the eighth to the sixteenth centuries. The first phase constitutes the Tang-Song transformation itself, encompassing at one end the collapse of the medieval aristocracy and the fall of the Tang, and at the other end the reunification of China under an increasingly activist Northern Song state staffed by an exam-mobilized elite dedicated to multigenerational service in government as their principal source of political power and social prestige. The second phase begins with the conquest of North China by the Jurchen in 1127, which drove the remnants of the Song court south to preside over a polity (termed the Southern Song) just two-thirds the size of its northern predecessor, while forcing the descendants of the Northern Song bureaucratic elite to recast their relationship to the central state and reorient their focus from the court and the capital to their home regions and locales.<sup>4</sup> For Song historians of widely different approaches, the move south comprised more than a territorial shift; it also signalled important changes in the structure of the Chinese state and the nature, orientation, and political vision of the Chinese elite. Although largely seen as the final episode in the Tang-Song transformation, some historians have tentatively identified the Southern Song as the beginning of a new historical phase, termed the Song-Yuan-Ming transition. At its

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<sup>4</sup> The argument for a transformation of both the state and the socio-political elite in the transition from the Northern to Southern Song is developed most fully by Robert M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750-1550," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42.2 (1982), 365-442; and Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and gentlemen: the elite of Fu-chou, Chiang-hsi, in Northern and Southern Sung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). The Hartwell—Hymes paradigm is refined by Beverly Bossler in *Powerful Relations: Kinship, Status, and the State in Sung China (960-1279)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Council on East Asian Studies, 1998). James T.C. Liu confirms a sharp change in political orientation from Northern to Southern Song in *China Turning Inward: Intellectual-Political Changes in the Early Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Council on East Asian Studies, 1988).

broadest, the concept of the Song-Yuan-Ming transition seeks to highlight a cluster of geopolitical, economic, social, and cultural trends that mark the period spanning the Southern Song through the late Ming as an evolutionary conduit linking the Tang-Song transformation of the eighth to eleventh centuries with the equally transformative late imperial era of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. Although most of my discussion in this essay focuses on the Song, it is the larger era of the Song-Yuan-Ming transition that defines the end-point of my perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The picture that I attempt to draw here is very broad, and is based far more on the work of fellow scholars than on original research of my own. In the first two sections I trace state-building efforts in China following the fall of the Tang and the parallel cycle of state formation on the steppe; in the third section I discuss the impact of Sino-steppe competition on the activist policies crafted by Wang Anshi for the irredentist Emperor Shenzong and his sons; and in the fourth and final section, I outline the failure of the activist state and its consequences for the evolution of the socio-political elite during the Song-Yuan-Ming transition.

*Coming out of the Tang: Re-building the state in the five dynasties and early Song*

The collapse of Tang power in the final decades of the ninth century unleashed massive forces of rebellion, warlordism, and territorial fragmentation, inducing a half-century of social turmoil under the Five Dynasties (907-960) in the north and Southern Kingdoms of the south before the reestablishment of unity and order by Zhao Kuangyin and his new dynasty, the Song (960-1279). Although the social disruptions of this era of disunity were powerful enough to sweep away the underpinnings of the old Tang order, military hegemony in the north and outlaw chieftains in the south initiated immediate efforts at state-building that laid the foundation for reunification under the Song and ushered in the emergence of new social and political elites.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I expand on the nature of the Song-Yuan-Ming transition in "Introduction: Problematising the Song-Yuan-Ming Transition," Smith and von Glahn, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition*, 1-34.

<sup>6</sup> This section draws heavily on my draft introduction to *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 5: The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors, Part 1*, eds. Denis Twitchett and Paul Jakov Smith (forthcoming), and is heavily indebted to the contributors to that volume.

In the north, territorial expansion constituted the first step in the process of rebuilding a stable state. From 907 to 960, the successive regimes of north China consolidated their control along a north-south axis encompassing all of north China and the Central Plains from the Yellow River south to the Huai and Han Rivers, and west along the Wei River valley. Sovereignty over north China was by no means complete during this period, for the Shatuo stronghold centered on Taiyuan (in modern Shansi) slipped the noose of central control in 951 and—most momentously for later events—the Sixteen Prefectures comprising the 300-mile barrier between the Central Plains and the steppe were ceded by the Shatuo state of Later Jin to the Khitan in 937. But the overall trend was towards the deepening of territorial control, culminating under the fifth, Later Zhou dynasty with the recapture of two of the Sixteen Prefectures in the north, and annexation of the plains between the Huai and Yangzi Rivers from the Southern Tang.<sup>7</sup>

The process of territorial consolidation in the north was propelled by the increasingly effective assertion of centralized political authority. During the latter half of the Tang, the court had been obliged to cede political power to the military governors (*jiedushi*) and increasingly autonomous generals (many of Shatuo descent) of north China.<sup>8</sup> It was these generals, military governors, and regional warlords who competed with one another for mastery over the north, and who sought to recreate their own image of the defunct Tang order that they themselves had helped to destroy. Thus the chief challenge facing the successive would-be dynasts was how to recentralize power from other members of their own kind—in particular the military governors—while rebuilding the apparatus of the centralized, bureaucratic state.

That process of recentralization began with the very first Five Dynasties ruler, when Zhu Wen, founder of the Liang Dynasty (907-923), began to systematically replace Tang-era military governors with personally-appointed prefects loyal to Zhu alone. Although Zhu Wen was never able to neutralize the animosity of major military governors deeply opposed to his imperial aspirations and ruthless approach to governance, the four succeeding regimes (three Shatuo and one Chinese) were able

<sup>7</sup> These issues are addressed by Naomi Standen in Chapter One of *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 5, Part 1*, “The Five Dynasties, 907-979”.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Robert M. Somers, “The End of the T’ang,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol 3: Sui and Tang China, 589-906, Part 1*, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 682-789.

to build on his momentum to impose ever-greater centralizing pressure on the military governors. By mid-century the Later Zhou (951-960) rulers Guo Wei and his adopted son Chai Rong, assisted by an emerging civil bureaucracy, had begun to win the war of attrition against the once-autonomous military governors. Crucial to their victory was the recentralization of military authority through a series of reforms that transformed the two most potent armies—the Metropolitan and Palace Commands—from unpredictable power brokers to reliable agents of centralized imperial power, finally relieving the Later Zhou rulers from dependence on the allegiance of the military governors and moving power unequivocally from the provinces to the center.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile throughout this half-century of ostensible fragmentation a parallel process of state-building was taking place in the south. Whereas northern state-builders came out of the class of military governors with roots in the Tang political order, southern rulers emerged out of militarized outlaw elements unleashed by the massive social dislocation and demographic upheavals produced by the rebellions that helped topple the Tang.<sup>10</sup> As Tang political authority was seized by Zhu Wen and his Later Liang regime in the north, the most powerful of these military entrepreneurs carved out a total of nine initial and two successor states that coincided with the physiographic cores of south China. Moreover, despite their outcast origins, the rulers of south China underwent a process of political maturation that paralleled the evolution of their northern neighbors. Over time military prowess yielded to political effectiveness as the chief measure of prestige and governance, as once-itinerant bandit chieftains formed stable demilitarized regimes based on political acumen, alliances with local elites, and the support of refugee literati in search of security and employment. In fact, state-building in the regionalized south was even more robust than in the war-torn north. For the greater stability of the south enabled the new regimes to initiate agrarian projects—especially hydrology—that enhanced agricultural productivity, and to sponsor internal, inter-regional, and international trade over land and by sea. Thus while the successive northern regimes had to focus on the crucial political problem of wresting power from

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<sup>9</sup> The most important overview of this process is Edmund Henry Worthy, Jr., “The founding of Song China, 950-1000: Integrative changes in military and political institutions” (Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1975).

<sup>10</sup> This process is described by Hugh Clark in Chapter Two of *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 5, Part 1*, “The Southern Kingdoms, 907-979.”

other military governors, fending off each other, and developing workable approaches to the increasingly powerful Khitan, the southern kingdoms were free to develop sophisticated ways of taxing and even facilitating the growth of the increasingly buoyant commercial economy. And just like their northern counterparts, the rulers of the southern kingdoms reintroduced bureaucratic governance into their regions, deploying a mix of local and refugee literatus lineages as local circumstances allowed.

The half-century process of state-building in north and south paved the way for dynastic reunification under the Song founder Zhao Kuangyin, by centralizing military power, reestablishing the structures of bureaucratic governance, and (by 950 or so) establishing momentum towards imperial reunification. Both Zhao Kuangyin (or Taizu, r. 960-76) and the dynastic consolidator, his brother and successor Kuangyi (or Taizong, r. 976-97), emerged from what Edmund Worthy calls the “militocracy” of the tenth century; for their father, who had served successively in the imperial armies of each northern dynasty but the first, helped the family make the transition from undistinguished civil officials in the late Tang to established members of the Five Dynasties military elite.<sup>11</sup> Zhao Kuangyin was not only a talented soldier who rapidly ascended to the position of Commander of the Palace Army under Chai Rong, he was also a keen observer of Zhou bureaucratic reforms and a direct participant in Zhou policies of military centralization and territorial expansion. By 959, when Chai Rong’s death put a child on the throne, Zhao had earned the intense personal loyalty of a reinvigorated imperial army and its confident military commanders, who took advantage of a reported invasion by Khitan and Northern Han forces in 960 to proclaim their 34-year old commander as emperor. It is possible to imagine the new Song Dynasty becoming just another place-holder in the succession of short-lived northern dynasties. But the social turmoil and political fragmentation generated by the collapse of the Tang had gradually but inexorably given way to civic order and political stability in both north and south, and by mid-century the two most powerful states in north and south China had begun to look beyond immediate problems to contemplate the possibilities of reunification. By the time Zhao Kuangyin assumed the throne of the sixth northern dynasty since the fall of the

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of militocracy and the transition from militocratic to bureaucratic absolutism under T’ai-tung, see Worthy, pp. 295-316; John W. Chaffee traces the history of the Zhao lineage in *Branches of Heaven: a History of the Imperial Clan of Sung China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), Chapter Two.

Tang, reunification had become a realistic ambition, and as a central player in the Later Zhou campaigns of centralization Zhao Kuangyin was in an ideal position to capture the great prize.

The Song founder's approach to state-building continued the measures practiced by his Five Dynasties predecessors, especially his own mentor Chai Rong. Although Taizu was very much a military man, he is best known for peacefully demobilizing his general staff, thereby severing the personalized links between commanders and their troops that had made "praetorian" coups—such as the one that brought Taizu to power—so common in the post-Tang era, and subordinating the military to bureaucratic control under the absolute authority of an unchallenged emperor.<sup>12</sup> Taizu built on his prestige as absolute military commander to extend bureaucratic control well beyond what his Zhou mentors could achieve. Not only was Taizu able to neutralize the power-brokering role of the great generals, but he and his successor Taizong finally eradicated the military governors as a ruling elite, dismantling their territorial jurisdictions and replacing them with civilian officials under direct control of the capital. Thus the era of the Tang military governors was finally terminated by its last incumbents, the Song founders it had brought to power, and the position of *jièdushi* turned into a purely titular office conferred primarily on aboriginal chieftains.<sup>13</sup>

In other areas of civil administration Taizu adapted Tang and Five Dynasties precedents to recreate a network of county, prefectural, and circuit officials that implanted imperial authority throughout the empire through a growing bureaucratic apparatus increasingly staffed by graduates of an expanded examination system. Very quickly, the examination system burgeoned to become a defining feature of Song (and indeed all of mid- and late-imperial) political, intellectual, and cultural life.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, it gave rise to a new, literocentric political elite that, however much it may have benefited by local prestige and the owner-

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<sup>12</sup> The term "praetorian" coup is used by John Rich Labadie, "Rulers and soldiers: perception and management of the military in Northern Song China (960-ca. 1060)," Ph.D. thesis, University of Washington, 1981, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Worthy, "The founding of Song China," pp. 272-79.

<sup>14</sup> For complete studies of the Song examination system in English see John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Thomas H. C. Lee, *Government Education and Examinations in Sung China, 960-1278* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1985). Benjamin Elman surveys the history of the examination system during the last millenium of the imperial era in *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

ship of land, was nonetheless defined—by itself and others—through its mastery of learning and its prowess in the examination halls. Individually, the members of this new social class (known as the *shi*—literati—or *shidafu*—literatus-official) possessed little of the independent wealth or hereditary official status of their Tang aristocratic predecessors. In this sense, they posed less of a challenge to the absolutist inclinations of some Song emperors and (later in the dynasty) their chief councilors.<sup>15</sup> Yet while they never challenged the political prerogatives of the throne, the new exam-based literocracy came to dominate Chinese cultural institutions for the next nine-hundred years, as they “[captured] hauteur from aristocrats, . . . sustained it against merchants, and . . . grew as much as the monarchs in self-esteem and substance.”<sup>16</sup>

Political consolidation paved the way for the founders to continue the process of territorial unification that had been initiated by the Later Zhou. By 978 all the kingdoms of South China had capitulated to the Song. But in the north, efforts to topple the last holdout against the Song—the Shatuo regime of Northern Han—were foiled by the regime’s patron the Khitan Liao. In 979 Taizong launched a second invasion of Northern Han that Liao forces were unable to repel, bringing the break-away Shansi region back under centralized control for the first time since 951. But this was as far as the Song would get towards restoring Chinese control over north China. Flush with victory over the Northern Han Taizong pressed his troops on towards the Sixteen Prefectures, where they were decimated by Liao forces near Youzhou (modern Beijing). Taizong launched a second massive invasion of the Sixteen Prefectures in 986, but once again Liao cavalry and their commanders overwhelmed Song forces. The Song were never to regain the Yan-Yun region, for Song state building came up against a second feature of the

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<sup>15</sup> The issues of imperial and/or ministerial absolutism are recurring if still-unsettled motifs in the study of Song history. No later emperors (with the possible exception of Xiaozong, r. 1162-89) ruled with the personalized authority of the founders Taizu and Taizong. On the powers of the early Song emperors see Liu Jingzhen, *Bei-Song qianqi huangdi he tamen de quanli* (The early Song emperors and their authority, Taipei: Taoxiang chubanshe, 1996); on the increasing authority of the chief councilors over the course of the dynasty see Lin Tianwei, “Songdai xiangquan xingcheng zhi fenxi” (Analysis of the emerging authority of the chief councilors in the Song (1973), reprinted in *Songshi yanjiu ji* Vol. 8 (Taipei, 1976), 141-170. Anthony Sariti captures the tension between monarchy and bureaucracy in “Monarch, Bureaucracy, and Absolutism in the Political Thought of Ssu-ma Kuang,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 32.1 (1972), 53-76.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate* (3 vols., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), Vol. 2, p. 64.

medieval transformation of Eurasia: a parallel process of state formation on the steppe that was to shape events in China as well as the entire Eurasian system for the next three centuries.

*A cycle of state building on the steppe, tenth to thirteenth centuries*

Overviews of Inner Asian state formation by Nicola Di Cosmo and Frederick W. Mote suggest the magnitude of the challenge that confronted the Song from the steppe.<sup>17</sup> Over the long term, Inner Asian state formation was often precipitated by economic, social, or political crises that stimulated the militarization of pastoral societies. According to Di Cosmo, crisis could create social dislocation within tribes that provided the opportunity for a charismatic leader to rise to a position of supratribal ruler or khan. This disruption of traditional, semi-egalitarian political relations was characterized by “a replacement of the clan nobility with a much more powerful, hieratic, and autocratic form of authority where collegial decisions were restricted to a small group of people.” Political authority was in turn supported by the increased militarization of society into permanent fighting units placed under the direct control of the khan or royal clan.<sup>18</sup> But this conjoining of permanent militarization and political centralization within an aristocratic class required far greater economic resources than pastoral society could provide, stimulating the demand for invasions of wealthier sedentary regions to secure predictable supplies of external resources. For Di Cosmo, the development of forms of “state appropriation” of economic resources evolved over time: “Cast in a historical perspective, inner Asian state formations . . . display a gradual but sure tendency to form more and more sophisticated means of access to external resources.” Moreover, this incremental growth in the ability of Inner Asian states to secure revenues external to their productive bases “was coeval with the emergence of the state apparatus and provided the basis for its survival, for foreign relations, for the projection of force beyond its polit-

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<sup>17</sup> Nicola Di Cosmo models Inner Asian state building over the imperial era in “State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History,” *Journal of World History* 10.1 (1991), 1-40; Frederick W. Mote surveys the formation of individual frontier states and empires in the mid-imperial era in *Imperial China 900-1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), chapters 2-4, 8-12, and 16-20. See also the “Introduction” to *The Cambridge History of China Vol. 6: Alien Regimes and Border States*, eds. Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Di Cosmo, “State formation,” pp. 21-3.

ical and territorial boundaries, and for the domination of different ethnic, linguistic, and economic communities.”<sup>19</sup>

In Di Cosmo’s formulation, then, the secular development of technologies of resource appropriation serves as a marker of Inner Asian state formation.<sup>20</sup> And the most intensive period of development and elaboration in the forms of Inner Asian resource appropriation occurred between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, when powerful steppe empires bordered and then eradicated the Song. During the first millennium of the imperial era, Inner Asian states slowly progressed from a dependence on tribute during Han times to a combination of tribute and the systematic control of intercontinental and border trade during the Sui and Tang. But the pace of change accelerated in the early tenth century, when the Khitan Liao (variously dated as 916 or 947 to 1125) pioneered a new form of governance that Mote describes as dual administration, and that Di Cosmo deems the beginning of the era of the “dual-administration empires” of the Liao, Jin, and early Mongol period (907-1259).<sup>21</sup>

The institution of dual administration grafted an alien system of civil governance over the conquered farming families along the Chinese and Korean borders to a native Khitan state that administered all military and tribal matters and collected tribute from subordinate peoples like the Jurchen.<sup>22</sup> Dual administration did not displace the collection of tribute from China, for the Khitan Liao used war or the threat of war to institutionalize tribute into a system of “indemnified peace” with the Song that later proved equally profitable for the Tangut Xi Xia (1038-1227) and the Jurchen Jin (1115-1234).<sup>23</sup> But by developing increasingly

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<sup>19</sup> Di Cosmo, “State formation,” p. 27. Because the process of Inner Asian state formation was fully reversible, with steppe states running the risk of dissolving and returning to a non-state condition, Di Cosmo eschews an explicitly evolutionary formulation. But this caveat notwithstanding, the developmental trajectory that he depicts, characterized by increasing sophistication based on explicit borrowing (what Mote, p. 226, likens to technology transfers) over the long duration from the Xiongnü to the Qing, approximates an evolutionary path.

<sup>20</sup> Di Cosmo, pp. 30-37, periodizes the stages of Inner Asian state formation as follows: tribute empires (209 B.C.-A.D. 551; trade-tribute empires (551-907); dual-administration empires (907-1259); and direct-taxation empires (1260-1796).

<sup>21</sup> Mote, *Imperial China*, 39-40, 72-5; Di Cosmo, “State formation,” pp. 32-4. Although neither Mote nor Di Cosmo (both published in 1999) refer to one another, they depict the phenomenon of dual administration and the process of political evolution through adaptation and emulation in similar terms.

<sup>22</sup> Mote, *Imperial China*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>23</sup> Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 71. As Mote puts it, “The Inner Asian states learned to

effective techniques of dual administration, the Liao were able to supplement trade and tribute with an increasing proportion of revenues from the direct taxation of sedentary peoples, which helped finance the successful occupation and defense of the Manchu-Korean state of Bohai and the “Sixteen Prefectures” of north China. These techniques of dual administration were in turn adopted by the Jurchen at the very beginning of their ascent to statehood under Aguda (r. 1115-1123), and employed in their governance of the sedentary domains conquered from the Liao in 1125 and the Song in 1127.<sup>24</sup> The combination of Chinese and steppe methods of governance pioneered by the Khitan evolved into what Mote describes as a technology of statecraft that was augmented by the Jurchen and the Tanguts throughout the twelfth century, adding to the store of universal governing techniques that the Mongols would draw on in their sweep through China and Eurasia in the thirteenth century.<sup>25</sup> As Di Cosmo argues, the Mongol Yuan (1271-1368) took the process of Inner Asian state formation one step further, by circumventing tribute (though not trade) as a source of revenue and extracting their resources from the conquered territories through a system of direct taxation. But Di Cosmo, like Mote, stresses the evolutionary trajectory by which the Yuan emerged as the first of the direct-taxation empires: “The completion of the conquest of China under Khubilai is the best example of the confidence achieved by the Mongols to summon a wide array of political resources derived from the storehouses of inner Asian, central Asian, northern Chinese (Liao and Jin), and Chinese political traditions.”<sup>26</sup>

The rapid evolution of Inner Asian statecraft in the tenth to thirteenth centuries allowed states on the northern frontier to support formidable armies that offset agrarian China’s advantages in wealth and numbers, thereby blocking Song from assuming a position of supremacy at the center of a China-dominated world order and relegating it to a

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threaten war, demand territory, or require other concessions, and the [Song] learned to resist most of those demands by paying ever higher indemnities.”

<sup>24</sup> Di Cosmo, “State formation,” p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 226.

<sup>26</sup> Di Cosmo, “State formation,” p. 34. For Di Cosmo, the peak of the direct-taxation model was achieved by the Qing, which “achieved a level of social and political integration between conquerors and conquered far higher than that of earlier inner Asian polities” (p. 36). In her essay in this volume Michal Biran emphasizes that the Mongols saw themselves as forging a completely new political path, and rejects the notion that the Mongols represented the culmination of a long evolutionary phase of state-building on the steppe.

position of equal participant in a multi-state East Asian system.<sup>27</sup> Even the Tangut Xi Xia, a tribute-trade empire (to follow Di Cosmo's formulation) occupying the largely unproductive lands of the Ordos bend and the Gansu Corridor, was able to match the Song in military power and confront it as a de facto diplomatic equal. Evolving Inner Asian states expanded ever further south of the Great Wall frontier that—even before the Ming creation of the Wall as we now know it—traditionally divided sedentary China from the steppe, seizing north China in 1127, encircling south China by the 1260s, and finally absorbing all of China into the vast Eurasian empire of the Mongol Yuan in 1279. This political evolution of Inner Asia, a crucial feature of the transformation of medieval Eurasia, imparted irresistible torque to the development of Song political culture and helped shape the course of Chinese history for centuries to come.

*Irredentism and state activism in the late Northern Song*

Song policy-makers formally acknowledged the irreversibility of a new multistate system regulated by treaties and the establishment of regular diplomatic intercourse when they approved the Treaty of Shanyuan in 1005. As a result of Taizong's failure to dislodge the Sixteen Yan-Yun Prefectures from Khitan control, advisors to his son and successor Zhenzong (r. 997-1022) instituted an extensive project of defensive construction centered on the fortification of frontier cities and the creation of a network of cavalry-blocking waterways that diminished Liao military superiority and dashed Khitan hopes of reestablishing a buffer zone between themselves and the Song. In response, the Liao launched a massive invasion of China's Central Plains in 1004 in the hopes of using war to achieve an advantageous peace that would bring Song irredentist attacks to an end. Although Khitan forces approached to within one-hundred miles of Kaifeng their own losses were considerable, and both sides soon came to appreciate the advantages of a negotiated and dependable settlement. The ensuing Shanyuan Treaty of 1005, in which the Song agreed to make annual payments to the Liao and repudiate claims to the Yan-Yun region, constituted a recognition by the Song court that the territorial, ritual, and financial costs of diplomatic parity

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<sup>27</sup> This theme is recurs throughout the essays in *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10th-14th centuries*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

and a purchased peace were far less onerous than the social and political costs of mobilizing the country for protracted irredentist war.<sup>28</sup>

The diplomatic equilibrium that accompanied Song suspension of its irredentist aspirations ushered in a concomitant period of political stability that lasted another half a century. The Shanyuan settlement coincided with the transition from battle-hardened dynastic founders to court-nurtured successors, precipitating a shift in political power from an absolutist throne to an increasingly complex and self-confident bureaucracy.<sup>29</sup> Of course the bureaucracy itself was by no means homogeneous: it was staffed by men from different parts of the empire, with potentially conflicting political views, interests, and affiliations; and it drew on a pool of examination graduates that grew faster than the number of available government posts, even as entry into government became the most prized avenue of social mobility. Irreconcilable policy differences and intense competition for office would eventually fracture the solidarity of the bureaucratic elite under the weight of factionalism and the concentration of power in increasingly hegemonic ministerial regimes. But in the decades following the Shanyuan settlement the *shidafu* bureaucratic elite was still relatively small and cohesive and the still-evolving bureaucratic apparatus relatively robust.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the arbitrary exercise of state power was restrained by the constitutional division of authority over civil affairs (under the Secretariat-Chancellery), military matters (under the Bureau of Military Affairs), and economic administration (under the Finance Commission), while an institutionally embedded system of checks and balances prevented a single chief councilor from dominating the Council of State and subjected all the state councilors to independent oversight by a fully-developed system of policy critics

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<sup>28</sup> See Nap-yin Lau, "Waging War for Peace? The Peace Accord Between the Song and the Liao in AD 1005," in *Warfare in Chinese History*, Hans van de Ven, ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 180-221. These same events are analysed by Lau Nap-yin and Huang K'uan-chung in Chapter Three of *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 5, Part 1, "Founding and Consolidation of the Sung Dynasty under T'ai-tsu, T'ai-tsung, and Chen-tsung, 960-1022"*.

<sup>29</sup> The most important study in English of this post-Shanyuan evolution of the Northern Song state is still Edward A. Kracke, Jr., *Civil Service in Early Sung China, 960-1067* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, University Press, 1953). Winston Lo offers a longer perspective, tracing the evolution of the Song civil (and military) service over the course of the entire dynasty, in *An Introduction to the Civil Service of Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987).

<sup>30</sup> For Robert M. Hartwell's influential analysis of this cohesive, state-centered "professional elite" see his "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China," 406-16.

and censors.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, governance was characterized by a relatively conciliar approach to decision-making, exemplified most graphically by the reliance on broadly staffed interagency ad hoc committees to advise the emperor on important policy issues.<sup>32</sup>

But the equilibrium sustained by the Shanyuan settlement was by no means unassailable, and could be shaken by any combination of internal or external shocks. Internally there was always the threat of a domestic challenge to frontier stability, for the consensus on accommodation was pragmatic rather than principled, offered grudgingly rather than with enthusiasm. Moreover the very “civilism” of the Song state marginalized some individuals and groups who might benefit more from war than peace, inclining them to acquiesce in if not agitate for frontier expansion. Externally, equilibrium could be jolted by the demise of a stabilizing ruler or state, or particularly by the entry of a vigorous new player on the steppe. Such was the case in 1038, when the Tangut ruler Li Yuanhao (1004-1048) proclaimed himself Emperor of the Great Xia empire, encompassing the Ordos and the Gansu Corridor and controlling the most important trade routes linking Inner Asia and the Song.<sup>33</sup> Song reluctance to extend appropriate diplomatic recognition to the new Xia emperor instigated a four-year war (1038-1042) that highlighted Song deficiencies in strategic planning, tactical execution, and troop battle-fitness, forcing the court to sign a treaty in 1044 that bought from Yuanhao the same kind of indemnified peace with which it placated the Liao.

Song incompetence in this first Sino-Tangut war exacerbated growing concerns about Song governance and bureaucratic morale, even as the problems of military impotence, bureaucratic demoralization, and growing Tangut power continued to fester. These potential threats to the post-Shanyuan equilibrium converged again in the mid-1060s, when the reigning emperor’s premature death brought his young son Shenzong (r. 1067-1085) to the throne. Internationally, the Tangut court was

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<sup>31</sup> Kracke, *Civil Service*, Chapter Three. On the structure and political role of Song remonstrance and censorial offices see Chia Yuying *Songdai jiancha zhidu* (The Song Censorial System, Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 1996), especially pp. 155-212.

<sup>32</sup> On this important element of eleventh-century policy-making see Robert M. Hartwell, “Financial Expertise, Examinations, and the Formulation of Economic Policy in Northern Sung China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 30 (1971), 281-304 (293).

<sup>33</sup> The growth of the Xi Xia state is mapped in Ruth Dunnell, “The Hsi Hsia [Xi Xia],” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 6, 171. The first Sino-Tangut war is discussed in Michael McGrath’s chapter for the *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 5, Part 1.

inspired by the deterioration of Tibetan rule in the Gansu-Qinghai highlands to launch expeditionary forces against Tibetan political centers, sinified frontier tribes, and even Song commanderies throughout the northwestern borderlands.<sup>34</sup> Domestically, the very primacy of the examination-based civil service put indirect pressure on frontier stability by producing a surfeit of potential officials. The numbers of men with ranked civil service status almost doubled during the first sixty years of the eleventh century, from some ten-thousand to around 24,000 men. By the 1060s this glut of officials had begun to demoralize the entire civil service, with far more candidates than the system could absorb clamoring for posts, sponsors, and promotion from junior to senior status. In a socio-cultural environment dominated by the state, the career aspirations of these supernumerary officials were best served by expansion in the scope of government activity in either the domestic or foreign arenas.

Even more direct pressure came from a group increasingly marginalized by the mid-Song civil services, the hereditary military families who comprised the core of the Song general command. In the half-century following the Shanyuan Treaty the Song court had systematically excluded the military's contribution to strategic decision making, replaced regular troops and effective generals with local militia, and transferred military authority and even outright field command from the generals to top-ranking civilian officials. Although the general staff was not dismantled, it was transformed into a bureaucratized and subordinate appendage of the civilian-dominated state.<sup>35</sup>

In mid-1067 Tangut incursions supplied the pretext for one military man to take frontier matters into his own hands, when the frontier commander Chong E took it upon himself to kidnap a prominent Tangut general and wall the Xia town of Suizhou (renamed Suide), just across the hotly contested Sino-Tangut border. Civilian courtiers like the influential Sima Guang (1019-1086), imbued with the worldview of the Shanyuan settlement, demanded that Suide be returned to the Tanguts and urged the newly-enthroned Shenzong to honor the policy of his predecessors by treating their Tangut treaty-partner with respect and

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<sup>34</sup> The following paragraphs draw on Paul Jakov Smith, "Irredentism as Political Capital: The New Policies and the Annexation of Qingtang (Northeastern Tibet) under Shenzong and his Sons," in Patricia Ebrey and Maggie Bickford, *Huizong and the Culture of Northern Song China*, forthcoming.

<sup>35</sup> Labadie, "Rulers and Soldiers," p. 199 and Chapters Two and Four.

assuming a posture of compliance in order to reestablish diplomatic entente.

In the past, such sober-minded exhortations had sufficed to bring frontier adventurism to an end. But the flame of irredentist longing burned far more brightly in Shenzong's heart than it had for his predecessors, and he ascended the throne determined to "destroy the Xia Nation and then personally lead the campaign to subjugate the Great Liao."<sup>36</sup> Fanned as they were by imperial passion, irredentism and frontier adventure emerged during Shenzong's reign as a potent form of political capital that swept a new constellation of men—including generals, eunuchs, and hawkish bureaucrats—into power.

The blueprint for enacting Shenzong's vision was provided by Wang Anshi (1021-1086), a brilliant but temperamental proponent of activist statecraft who enacted a comprehensive program of reforms meant to revive the nation's moral fiber and mobilize its resources for the emperor's irredentist dream. These so-called New Policies (*xinfa*), which represent the epitome of state activism in the imperial era, dominated the political agenda for the last half-century of the Northern Song.<sup>37</sup>

From an institutional perspective, the New Policies reflected Wang Anshi's vision that bureaucracy could be expanded and fine-tuned to intervene in and reshape every aspect of the social, cultural, and (most especially for Wang) economic landscape. Under the banner of enriching the state without emisserating the people, Wang recruited ambitious "bureaucratic entrepreneurs"—young men with demonstrated expertise in finance and bureaucratic enterprises but low standing in the civil service—to staff a bevy of new, reform-specific agencies. This expanded apparatus was charged (in the reform parlance of the day) with commandeering surplus profits from private "engrossers" for the sake of the common good, by using state agents to displace rich landlords from their monopoly over rural credit markets (through the green sprouts or *qingmiao* policy) and great merchants in the capital and the provinces from their control of the wholesale and even retail commodities trades (through the state trade or *shiyi* policy). At the same time additional

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<sup>36</sup> Shao Bowen (1057-1134), *Shaoshi wenjian lu* (Record of Things Heard and Seen by Mr. Shao, 1151; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), 3.26.

<sup>37</sup> For analyses of the New Policies see Paul J. Smith, *Taxing Heaven's Storehouse: Horses, Bureaucrats, and the Destruction of the Sichuan Tea Industry, 1074-1224* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies, 1991), and Chapter Five of *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 5, Part 1*, "Shen-tsong's Reign and the New Policies of Wang An-shih, 1068-1085".

measures were enacted to professionalize local labor service obligations through the extension of a “service exemption fee” (*mianyi qian*) to all sectors of the population, and to enfold roughly half of all households in the realm into a vast mutual security (or *baojia*) apparatus that, in the capital and the northern frontier regions, required mandatory military drill.

Politically, the New Policies were abetted by the emperor’s willingness to abandon the system of bureaucratic checks and balances brought to maturity in the post-Shanyuan decades, just as he was eager to repudiate the Shanyuan settlement itself. Persuaded by Wang that the only way to augment imperial authority was to unyieldingly support the reforms, Shenzong allowed Wang to dominate the Council of State, control remonstrance offices, circumvent existing administrative structures with his new reform agencies, and pack the government with his cadre of bureaucratic entrepreneurs, whom more established literati denounced as “mean and petty men.” This newly mobilized cohort of reformers and their sons and brothers would, with the exception of an eight-year anti-reform Regency following Shenzong’s death in 1085, come to control the government through the fall of the Northern Song.

Such drastic changes to the political landscape were certain to generate a significant backlash, and from the very start of Wang’s tenure in 1069 a growing circle of officials inveighed against Wang Anshi’s abuse of ministerial authority and the predatory intrusiveness of his New Policies. But driven by the potency of his irredentist dream, Shenzong acceded to Wang Anshi’s insistence that dissent against the reforms be suppressed, by purging opponents of the activist agenda, punishing anti-reform censors, closing the “roads of remonstrance,” and granting key reform cadre in the field immunity from censorial impeachment.

Except for brief interruptions, dissent against the New Policies remained silenced for the duration of Shenzong’s reign. With the enthronement of Shenzong’s eight-year-old son Zhezong, power passed to a coalition of men headed by Sima Guang and the Empress Dowager who were determined to abolish the hated New Policies and reverse the irredentist adventurism that spawned them. But despite the transfer of power to prudent, conservative men, political culture had been too thoroughly transformed by the heated partisanship of Shenzong’s reign to permit a return to the relative collegiality of the post-Shanyuan decades. Thus while Wang Anshi’s erstwhile foes moved to reverse his policies, they enthusiastically emulated Wang’s political techniques of capturing the Council of State and monopolizing the censorate and remonstrance offices.

In particular, the Yuanyou partisans (so named for the Restoration reign period from 1086 to 1094) suppressed opponents with a counter-purge of New Policies adherents more sweeping than anything in the dynasty thus far, only to find themselves ousted from office in 1094, when the now mature Zhezong reinstated his father's reform measures and proponents. From this point on, Northern Song political culture was engulfed in a virulent factionalism that reached its peak around 1102, when Zhezong's brother and successor Huizong authorized his chief councilor Cai Jing (1047-1126) to proscribe all members of the "Yuanyou party"—whether dead or alive—and extirpate their political and literary legacies.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, as Huizong asserted in 1108, it was Cai Jing's suppression of policy opponents that enabled the emperor to fulfill his father's goal of annexing the Tibetan domains centered on Qingtang (modern Xining, Qinghai province), intended to be the first step in Shenzong's irredentist war with the Tanguts:

Previously my Divine Ancestor began plans for military success by delineating the western frontier. Although at that time not even [Qingtang] had been recovered he established a unified circuit in order to bring all [the constituent regions] under a common name and to show that this great and sacred design must be brought to success. . . . In bringing this plan to fulfilment [We have] relied on my Chief Councilor [Cai Jing]. If he had not banished the doubting multitudes then how could [We] have fully realized [Our] forebear's ambition to spread Our majesty among the caitiffs beyond the borders?<sup>39</sup>

Through the reigns of Shenzong and his sons, then, irredentist ambition and imperial support for the chief councilors and statist policies that could help bring that ambition to pass had irreversibly undermined the constitutional division of authority that checked the arbitrary exercise of state power. The Song political system from the New Policies through the very end of the Southern Song saw a growing consolidation of executive authority in the inner court comprised above all of the sovereign and his long-reigning chief councilors.<sup>40</sup> At the same time purges, suppressions, and irreconcilable policy differences had fractured the tenuous and inherently unstable solidarity of the bureaucratic elite,

<sup>38</sup> Ari Levine analyses the politics and political language of factionalism in the late Northern Song in Chapters 6 and 7 of *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 5, Part 1*.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, "Irredentism as Political Capital," citing Yang Zhongliang, *Zizhi tongjian changbian jishi benmo* (1253), chap. 140, p. 13b.

<sup>40</sup> The historian Lin Tianwei measures the growing power of the chief councilors over the course of the Song dynasty by the number of man/years the originally dual posi-

pitting insiders and outsiders against one another and eventually driving a wedge between the inner court and the ministerial political machines that dominated it and the bureaucracy as a whole.

In the sphere of economic policy, despite the distinctly anti-New Policies bias of the historical record it seems fair to conclude that Wang Anshi's promise to "multiply the state's revenues without adding to the people's taxes" went unfulfilled. For while the activist economic policies of Wang and his successors generated huge cash reserves for the state, the redistributive rationale that animated the reform economic measures was quickly subverted by the court's inexhaustible hunger for revenues to be stockpiled in preparation for its irredentist wars. In short order the New Policies fiscal reforms were transformed from a collective effort to liberate the productive resources of peasants, small merchants, middling landowners, and consumers into an interlinked set of new taxes and fees, all collected by agents of the state energized by an action-oriented incentive system that rewarded the most draconian fulfilment of their tasks.<sup>41</sup> Wang Anshi's experiment in economic activism degenerated into confiscatory taxation, creating a legacy of levies and extractive mechanisms that turned the late-Northern and Southern Song states into economic predators.

But what of the revanchist dream that underpinned the New Policies? In order to mobilize the nation for war, Shenzong and Wang Anshi promoted an intensive project of military strengthening that included revitalization of the officer corps through reforms in the command structure, establishment of a national military institute, revival of the national arsenal, creation of a reliable system of cavalry-horse procurement, and the institution of mandatory military drill and review for virtually all members of the new mutual security (*baojia*) system in north China. In addition, both Shenzong and Wang Anshi chose to delegate autonomous

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tions of "right" and "left" chief councilors were occupied by a single (and hence preëminent) incumbent. By that measure, 22 percent of the Northern Song's chief councilors served alone, for a total of 63 of the era's 167 years or 33 percent of the time. During the Southern Song, by contrast, 36 percent of the chief councilors served alone for 63 percent of the era's 149 years. See Lin Tianwei, "Songdai xiangquan xingcheng zhi fenxi," 141-170. For discussions in English see James T. C. Liu, *China Turning Inward*, 81-104; and Gong Wei Ai, "Prevalence of Powerful Chief Ministers in Southern Sung China, 1127-1279 A.D.," *Chinese Culture* 40.2 (June 1999), 103-114.

<sup>41</sup> On the galvanizing effect of the New Policies incentive systems see Smith, *Taxing Heaven's Storehouse*, 177-90. On the degeneration of the reform economic measures into confiscatory taxation see Smith, *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 5, Part 1*, Chapter Five.

authority to their generals in the field. With this they reversed a century-old policy of military centralization, setting off a counter-trend that reached its peak around 1115 when Huizong promoted the eunuch general Tong Guan (1054-1126) to the position of Generalissimo of Shaanxi, Hedong, and Hebei Circuits and concurrent head of the Bureau of Military Affairs, thereby granting one man supreme control over the entire Northern Song military apparatus.<sup>42</sup>

Song military reforms yielded their most impressive results in extended campaigns against the weak frontiers of north-eastern Tibet (the Qingtang region) and southwestern Sichuan, where Song forces showed that with adequate time and massive resources they could dislodge indigenous populations from their native settlements, fend off their guerilla defenders, and buy off their chieftains with emoluments and titles. But victory against scattered tribal forces meant little when it came to doing battle with the far more sophisticated armies of the Tangut Xi Xia, against whom Song forces under Shenzong and his sons never gained more than a stalemate when they weren't thoroughly humiliated. Yet by Huizong's reign so many men had ridden to power on the banner of Shenzong's irredentist mission that every victory, real or imagined, was an occasion for promotions and solemn celebrations. And so when in 1118 defectors from the north reported that Jurchen invaders had created havoc on the Khitan frontier, Huizong and his court defied anxious critics to make a pact with the Jurchen to help topple the Liao in return for recovery of the Sixteen Yan-Yun Prefectures. But in 1122, after four years of negotiating over Yan-Yun as Jurchen armies devoured the Liao domain, Tong Guan's expeditionary army was routed and humiliated by the putatively impotent remaining Khitan troops. After the Jurchen forces overthrew the last Liao remnants in 1125 they turned their sights on the Song, whose panic-stricken emperor abdicated to his son Qinzong. But with neither the trained corps needed to conduct effective diplomacy nor the military discipline and reserves of political capital required to mount an effective defense, the Song left itself open to a Jurchen blitz through north China "as if it were undefended," belying the half-century of war mobilization and military reform. In the first month of 1127 Kaifeng fell to the Jurchen, who marched both emperors and their royal entourage to exile in the alien north. Shenzong's revanchist dream had backfired, adding all of north China to the category of lost territory and placing the survival of the dynasty in doubt.

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<sup>42</sup> For sources see Smith, "Irredentism as Political Capital".

*From the activist state to the semi-autonomous elite in the Song-Yuan-Ming transition*

The loss of the north signalled for many the failure of state activism, while simultaneously exacerbating the autocratic tendencies brought to the fore under Shenzong and his sons. For Gaozong (r. 1127-1162), first emperor of the truncated Southern Song, the overwhelming political objective was to recapture the equilibrium of the post-Shanyuan decades. This not only entailed creating a safe haven for the regime in the rebellious and war-torn south, but also meant suppressing widespread demands for a reconquest of the north in favor of gaining peace through rapprochement with the Jin conquerors. Both objectives Gaozong entrusted to his chief councilor Qin Gui (in power 1128-1155), whom he authorized to use on behalf of accommodation the same political tactics forged by Wang Anshi and Cai Jing on behalf of war: centralization of power, political intimidation, and suppression of debate.<sup>43</sup> Under Gaozong's successor (Xiaozong, r. 1162-1189), political centralization assumed many of the classic attributes of autocratic rule by a monarch unencumbered by other persons or institutions. For Xiaozong not only by-passed the line bureaucracy but even circumvented his chief ministers, personally assuming decision-making authority over so wide an array of administrative affairs that outspoken representatives of bureaucratic professionalism like Zhu Xi (1130-1200) publicly decried the emperor's arrogation of civil service powers and his enfeeblement of the council of state.<sup>44</sup> Monarchical autocracy gave way once more to ministerial domination when Xiaozong's abdication in 1189 deprived the Southern Song of its last effective sovereign. Yet the onset of a protracted era of weak emperors did nothing to reconstitute the relatively conciliar, professionalized governance that had evolved under the passive rule of the post-Shanyuan rulers. Instead, the vacuum created by imperial withdrawal was quickly filled by palace favorites and powerful chief councilors, who either muzzled their civil service critics through

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<sup>43</sup> Teraji Jun, *Nan-Sō shoki seijishi kenkyū* (1988), translated into Chinese as *Nan Song chuqi zhengzhishi yanjiu* (Research on the Political History of the Early Southern Song) by Liu Jingzhen and Li Jinyun (Taibei: Taohe chubanshe, 1995). See also Charles Hartman, "The Making of a Villain: Ch'in Kuei and Tao-hsüeh," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 58.1 (1998), 59-146.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Conrad Schirokauer, "Chu Hsi's Political Career: A Study in Ambivalence," in *Confucian Personalities*, eds. Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 162-88.

heavy-handed purges or neutralized them through more cunning tactics of manipulation and cooptation.<sup>45</sup>

The centralization of executive authority in increasingly narrow circles at court in no way enhanced the administrative reach of the state, for the gap between the ruler and his proxies on the one hand and the bureaucratic establishment on the other hobbled the fiscal and defensive capacities of the state. In the realm of financial administration, for example, the centralization of executive authority in the hands of the emperor, chief councilors, and their minions was offset by the irreversible hemorrhaging of fiscal authority to regional agencies. According to Robert M. Hartwell, despite continued complaints by functionaries of the central government, regional fiscal agencies “supervised the accounts for nearly sixty percent of total government income and possibly more than seventy-three percent of expenditures” in the late twelfth century, giving them the power to retain the bulk of state fiscal receipts in the provinces. As a result, although total government revenues were approximately the same in the late eleventh and late twelfth centuries when North China is discounted, the Southern Sung court had weaker control over the empire’s economic resources than its late Northern Sung predecessor, at a time of even greater national peril.<sup>46</sup>

With respect to national defence, the urgent frontier situation stimulated impressive advances in military technology during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including the development of a permanently stationed navy and the use of incendiary devices and projectiles employing gunpowder.<sup>47</sup> But the effective deployment of these sophisticated technologies was impeded by the baleful effects of arbitrary governance, which undermined the court’s ability to reach broad-based, well-considered decisions about issues of war and peace and paralysed the Song policy-making apparatus at the very moment that the dynasty confronted its greatest threat. As Charles Peterson has shown, Song frontier policy from roughly 1200 on was timid and indecisive, with the court too

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<sup>45</sup> The political atmosphere during the last century of the Southern Song is described by Richard Davis in Chapters 10-12 of *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 5, Part 1*.

<sup>46</sup> Robert M. Hartwell, “The Imperial Treasuries: Finance and Power in Song China,” *Bulletin of Sung-Yuan studies* 20 (1988):18-89, especially pp. 72-91.

<sup>47</sup> For the Song navy see, for example, Lo Jung-pang, “The Emergence of China as a Sea Power during the Late Sung and Early Yuan Periods,” *Far Eastern Quarterly* 14 (1955), 484-503; for an overview of Chinese military technology see Joseph Needham and Robin D.S. Yates, *Science and Civilization in China, Vol. 5, Part 6: Military Technology: Missiles and Sieges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

fearful of provoking even a deteriorating Jin regime into war to give support to anti-Jurchen rebels in Shandong or even to undertake military preparations of its own, despite the urgent pleas of Zhen Dexiu (1178-1235) and like-minded *daoxue* (Neo-Confucian) revanchists.<sup>48</sup> From 1217 to 1224 Song forces fared well against a series of attacks launched by Jurchen armies made desperate by Mongol assaults further north; but the court's ambivalence towards the Shandong rebels eventually pushed the most powerful of them into the hands of the Mongols in 1226, quite possibly depriving the Song of "a golden opportunity to strengthen its position in the northeast and even to lay the basis for the occupation of parts of [Henan, Jiangsu, and Shandong]".<sup>49</sup> The Song had no direct contact with the Mongols until 1221, but even then fears about the disastrous Yan-Yün collaboration with the Jurchen a century earlier kept them shy of further entanglements.<sup>50</sup> These fears turned out to be prophetic, for when in 1234 the court did finally launch a preemptive campaign in Henan to wrest its old capitals of Luoyang and Kaifeng from the Mongols, the Song military lacked the information, leadership, training, and supplies to mount an offensive campaign. Two years later the Mongols responded to what they saw as unilateral provocation by unleashing a massive campaign against Sichuan that razed all but four of the region's fifty-eight prefectural capitals, initiating a long but inexorable process of conquest that for the first time in history made a steppe power sovereign over all of China.

At first glance there are few discernible continuities between the native but ineffective Southern Song state and the robust polyethnic regime of the Mongol Yuan (1271-1368). This is the position taken by John Dardess in his contribution to the volume on the Song-Yuan-Ming transition. There Dardess argues that both the Yuan and the early Ming states stand in sharp contrast to the Southern Song, by reversing the passivity and lack of political consensus that ensued following the Jurchen conquest. In Dardess's view, the dynamic Yuan agenda went beyond conquest to include the creation of a polyethnic regime with an international corps of civil and military servants, utilizing multiple languages and scripts and drawing on new institutions devised specially to regu-

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<sup>48</sup> Charles A. Peterson, "First Sung Reactions to the Mongol Invasion of the North, 1211-17," in *Crisis and prosperity in Sung China*, John Winthrop Haeger, ed. (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1975), 215-52.

<sup>49</sup> Charles A. Peterson, "Old Illusions and New Realities: Sung Foreign Policy, 1217-1234," in Morris Rossabi, ed., *China Among Equals*, 204-239 (231).

<sup>50</sup> Peterson, "Old illusions," pp. 218-31.

late intra-ethnic competition. Moreover according to Dardess the early Ming state continued this activist form of governance, as the Ming founder Zhu Yuanzhang (r. 1368-1398) used propaganda, coercion, and centrally-directed local organization to accomplish the ethical and behavioral transformation of the entire population of China, in accordance with ancient norms laid out in the Confucian canon.<sup>51</sup> But it is equally possible to see the activism of the Yuan and early Ming as transient phenomena, dependent more on command mobilization and ideological terror than on the creation of enduring structures of everyday governance. The Mongols were more effective conquerors than governors, and once they had subdued South China they undermined their own ability to establish long-term political control over their new domain by forfeiting public authority to local South Chinese magnates and other private agents in return for their accommodation to foreign rule. It was this passivity and devolution of power that Zhu Yuanzhang sought to reverse, through political terror, behavioral rectification, and autocratic control over matters of state. By the early fifteenth century however Zhu Yuanzhang's behavioral rectification was regarded by contemporaries as a dead letter. At the same time, the political vacuum created by his autocratic enfeeblement of bureaucratic institutions was filled by competing civilian and eunuch agencies, whose perpetual battles for control over policy, political spoils, and increasingly weak emperors reduced the Ming state to the same institutionalized passivity that resulted from autocracy and ministerial dominance during the Southern Song and the forfeiture of public authority to private agents in the Yuan.<sup>52</sup>

Of course the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries were a time of enormous cultural vitality and significant social and economic change, in spite of the wars, political turmoil, and autocratic but ineffective states that characterized the Song-Yuan-Ming transition. But in sharp contrast with the Northern Song, when the most important cultural and institutional innovations were generated by the activist state, during the Song-Yuan-Ming era the locus of cultural and institutional change shifted to the local, educated, landowning elite (variously referred to as the

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<sup>51</sup> John Dardess, "Did the Mongols Matter? Territory, Power, and the Intelligentsia in China from the Northern Song to the Early Ming," in Smith and von Glahn, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition*, 111-134.

<sup>52</sup> I offer this argument in "Impressions of the Song-Yuan-Ming Transition: The Evidence from *Biji* Memoirs," in Smith and von Glahn, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition*, 71-110; and in "Fear of Gynarchy in an Age of Chaos: Kong Qi's Reflections on Life in South China under Mongol Rule," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41.1 (1998), 1-95.

gentry, or *shidafu*). Although this emergent elite continued to depend on the examination system as a marker of social status, it no longer relied on the state as its principal source of income and power.

Elite separation from the state was in part a result of the growing surplus of qualified candidates for the civil service, which impelled the eleventh-century oligarchy of exam-based bureaucratic lineages to supplement office-holding with an alternative mobility strategy based on the accumulation of wealth and property and the strengthening of family, community, and employment ties at the local level. This emergent localism, which for Robert Hartwell and Robert Hymes constitutes the most salient transformation of Southern Sung society, “served to widen and to emphasize a gap between elite interests and state interests at the local level, and to confirm and strengthen the independence of elite status and social position from the efforts of the state to certify, to validate, and so to control it”.<sup>53</sup>

This demographically-driven process of social differentiation was transformed into more pointed estrangement by the factional warfare of the late Northern Song, which raised the risks to individuals and their families of political service; and by the loss of North China to the Jurchen, which for many members of the political elite signalled the failure of state activism. The corrosive effects of factionalism and foreign conquest were exacerbated by the arbitrary governance of the Southern Song, which frustrated and alienated those officials who, in addition to their stress on local initiatives, continued to take the ideals of professional bureaucratic service to heart. The most impassioned heralds of that estrangement were the leaders of the movement known as the Learning of the Way (*daoxue*, conventionally termed Neo-Confucians), who—inflamed by their resentment over “barbarian” control of the North Chinese heartland—collectively articulated a critique of absolutist rule whether monarchical or ministerial and outlined the limits of literati

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<sup>53</sup> Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen*, 212. See also Robert M. Hartwell, “Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750-1550.” For a useful review of the literature on the Song elite see Patricia Ebrey, “The Dynamics of Elite Domination in Sung China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48.2 (1988), 493-519. It may be helpful to see the Song-Yuan elite as the evolutionary antecedent of the gentry class whose origins Shigeta Atsushi links to the mid-Ming: that is, an elite stratum that combined landownership with the prestige and access to office that flowed from learning and participation in the examination system. See Shigeta Atsushi, “The Origins and Structure of Gentry Rule,” in *State and Society in China: Japanese Perspectives on Ming-Qing Social and Economic History*, eds. Linda Grove and Christian Daniels (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1984).

loyalty to an ethically compromised government.<sup>54</sup> As the breach between the state and the literati hardened, Neo-Confucian learning came to provide a sense of group identity that replaced national government service with moral transformation as the marker of elite status, and the centralized state with one's own locale as the proper focus of institutional reform. Thus just as the innovative capacity of the central state declined, elites from the Southern Song on transferred their energies onto local, often lineage-oriented reforms such as community granaries, charitable estates, and private academies.<sup>55</sup> Disenchantment with the state did not mean that local elites, even Neo-Confucians, cut themselves off from its potential largess. Because even a weak court could shape the outcomes of contests for power outside the domain of the central state, competitors at the local and national levels vied to influence its policies. And in these contests no single group enjoyed more notable success than the Neo-Confucian followers of the Learning of the Way, whose ascent constitutes one of the cardinal features of the Song-Yuan-Ming transition.

Although Neo-Confucianism gained traction as a critique of the absolutist state by high-minded but powerless political idealists, under the pressure of ever-greater national peril powerlessness gradually gave way to considerable (if at first only token) influence. After proscribing the Learning of the Way from 1194 to 1197, a panicked court reached out to its staunchly revanchist adherents for moral and political support in 1234, after the Mongols had conquered the Jin.<sup>56</sup> In 1241 Emperor Lizong (r. 1225-64) proclaimed the Neo-Confucian canon—especially the “Four Books” and Zhu Xi’s commentaries to them—the orthodox standard for government schools and the civil service examinations. Although political disintegration in the face of relentless Mongol campaigns

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<sup>54</sup> For an example of Wei Liaoweng’s critique of ministerial absolutism and call for a return to constitutionally divided government see James T.C. Liu, “Wei Liao-weng’s thwarted statecraft,” in *Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China*, eds. Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), esp. pp. 344-45; for *Zhu Xi’s* refusal to serve in a government so politically degraded that it would constitute “an insult to my person” see Conrad Schirokauer, “Chu Hsi’s Political Career,” p. 170.

<sup>55</sup> The literature on local institutional initiatives is referred to by many of the essayists in Hymes and Schirokauer, *Ordering the World*. For one of the most influential contributions to the field see Denis Twitchett, “The Fan Clan’s Charitable Estate, 1050-1760,” in *Confucianism in Action*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

<sup>56</sup> James T. C. Liu, “How Did a Neo-Confucian School Become the State Orthodoxy?” *Philosophy East and West* 23 (1973), 483-505; Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 232-34.

devalued the rewards of state support, the combination of augmented *jìnshì* quotas and official recognition produced a substantial crop of *daoxue* followers in the waning years of the Southern Song.<sup>57</sup> When the Song and its examination system collapsed these *daoxue* adherents—now more committed to preserving the culture than to mourning the loss of their dynasty—fanned out into their local communities, where they founded private academies and staffed lineage schools that disseminated Neo-Confucian learning throughout the local elites of South China. Indeed, it was *daoxue*-inspired Confucian literati who sought to reform Yuan governance from the local level up in the crisis-ridden decades of the 1340s and 1350s, a reformist zeal they later transferred to Zhu Yuanzhang's fledgling dynasty. Reacting against the chaos of the Yuan era, the Confucian intelligentsia preached to Zhu the need for total moral renovation of the Chinese people, joining with him to direct all efforts of the new Ming regime "toward the truly revolutionary goal of national psychobehavioral rectification" across all classes of Chinese society.<sup>58</sup> Although Zhu Yuanzhang's rectification movement soon degenerated into a campaign of political terror that numbered Neo-Confucian partisans among its tens of thousands of victims, Ming monarchs and Neo-Confucian adherents came together again over a revived examination curriculum that obliged candidates to master *daoxue* interpretations of the Four Books and Five Classics. In the end, then, a cultural reaction against monarchical autocracy and ministerial absolutism that had begun in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when a vocal minority of literati lost faith in imperial politics and increasingly turned to local social and cultural institutions to reverse dynastic decline, culminated in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries in the creation of a state-sponsored orthodoxy that fit the needs of both the literati and their rulers.

But even after their success in the national political arena, Neo-Confucian partisans still focused their attention on local institutions, above all the family and extended patrilineal lineage. To give just one example, in her recent book and her essay for the Song-Yuan-Ming volume, Bettine Birge shows how one response of the *daoxue* movement to social and political crisis was to formulate new ideals of family structure and identity that undermined the legal status of women and their

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<sup>57</sup> See Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations*, Chapter One.

<sup>58</sup> In addition to John Dardess' article in *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition*, see his *Confucianism and Autocracy: Professional Elites in the Founding of the Ming Dynasty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

control over property. The *daoxue* leadership envisioned a reconstitution of social order by redefining the position of individuals, both male and female, within the nuclear family, the lineage, and the wider community. Despite the success of the *daoxue* leaders in gaining a large elite following in the late Song, their views on women and property ran counter to established practices and attitudes, and Birge finds it questionable whether their agenda would have triumphed had Song trends continued without interruption. But in the same way that the Mongol conquest gave *daoxue* leaders an opportunity to refashion the examination curriculum to their own liking, Mongol rule and social practices provided the catalyst that *daoxue* legislators needed to bring marriage and property law into conformity with their own notions of patrilineal descent. The Mongols introduced new forms of property distribution and family formation drawn from their own heritage, such as levirate marriage, that were quickly picked up by individual Chinese of all classes, especially when economic advantage could be gained. The confusion that resulted from conflicting ideas of proper sexual, social, and economic relations precipitated endless lawsuits and a spate of contradictory rulings. Amid this ideological and legislative uncertainty, Neo-Confucian adherents seized the opportunity to promote laws conforming to the ideals of Zhu Xi and his followers that enabled an unprecedented institutionalization of patrilineal descent and inheritance.<sup>59</sup> The *daoxue* social agenda received a further boost during the Ming, which preserved Neo-Confucian legislation on women and family at the same time that it coopted for the Neo-Confucian banner such practices as widow fidelity that from the perspective of their female practitioners had earlier been framed in Buddhist and Daoist terms.<sup>60</sup> Thus even though the process took several centuries to evolve, the institutionalization of Neo-Confucian views on women and property can be seen as one element in the larger constellation of Song-Yuan-Ming trends that projected local gentry concerns onto the national political state, as succeeding regimes ceded ideology and local control to the gentry in return for their dynastic support.

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<sup>59</sup> Bettine Birge, *Women, Property, and Confucian Reaction in Sung and Yuan China (960-1368)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and "Women and Confucianism from Song to Ming: The Institutionalization of Patrilineality," in Smith and von Glahn, *The Song-Yuan-Ming Transition*, 212-40.

<sup>60</sup> Katherine Carlitz, "Shrines, Governing Class Identity, and the Cult of Widow Fidelity in Mid-Ming Jiangnan," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56.3 (1997), 612-40.

*Conclusion*

The rising influence of Neo-Confucianism brings us back to the initial focus of this essay: the intersecting cycles of state-building in China and the steppe during the Eurasian transformation of the tenth through the thirteenth centuries. For it was precisely the intertwined anxieties caused by the rising steppe on the one hand and the increasingly unresponsive and autocratic state on the other that gave rise to the Neo-Confucian movement. Although Neo-Confucianism is associated above all with the Southern Song, we now know that however fervent its Southern Song adherents, Neo-Confucianism was a minority and much-maligned phenomenon during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It is really only after the fall of the Southern Song to the Mongols that Neo-Confucianism begins to emerge as the distinctive ideology of the educated local elite, growing numbers of whom explicitly subscribe to its cultural, behavioral, and institutional norms and to the status it confers on them as *ru* (Confucian) members of “our group” (*wubei*).

From a long-term perspective the rise of this semi-autonomous elite—attentive to the status rewards of the examination system but more focused on the local arena than on government service—emerged as the most important consequence for China of the Eurasian transformation of the tenth through the thirteenth centuries. From a Chinese perspective class-formation trumped state-building in the course of these four centuries. For following the fall of the Northern Song, the most important locus of innovation in statecraft passed from China to the steppe, providing the Mongols with a repertoire of organizational means to draw on as they finally conquered all of China and integrated it into a vast Eurasian empire. But conquering and governing are two different matters, and in less than a century the Yuan state had succumbed to chaos, violence, and civil wars brought on at least in part by Mongol misgovernance. But throughout the fall of first the Song and then the Yuan elite culture and institutions endured. For by the twelfth century the literocentric socio-political elite had gained autonomy from the Song state that had conceived it, facilitating its swift adaptation to life under steppe rule and ensuring its continued ability to flourish and to shape Chinese culture throughout the era of the Song-Yuan-Ming transition.