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The Song Dynasty (960-1279)

The Song and the Nomadic Empires

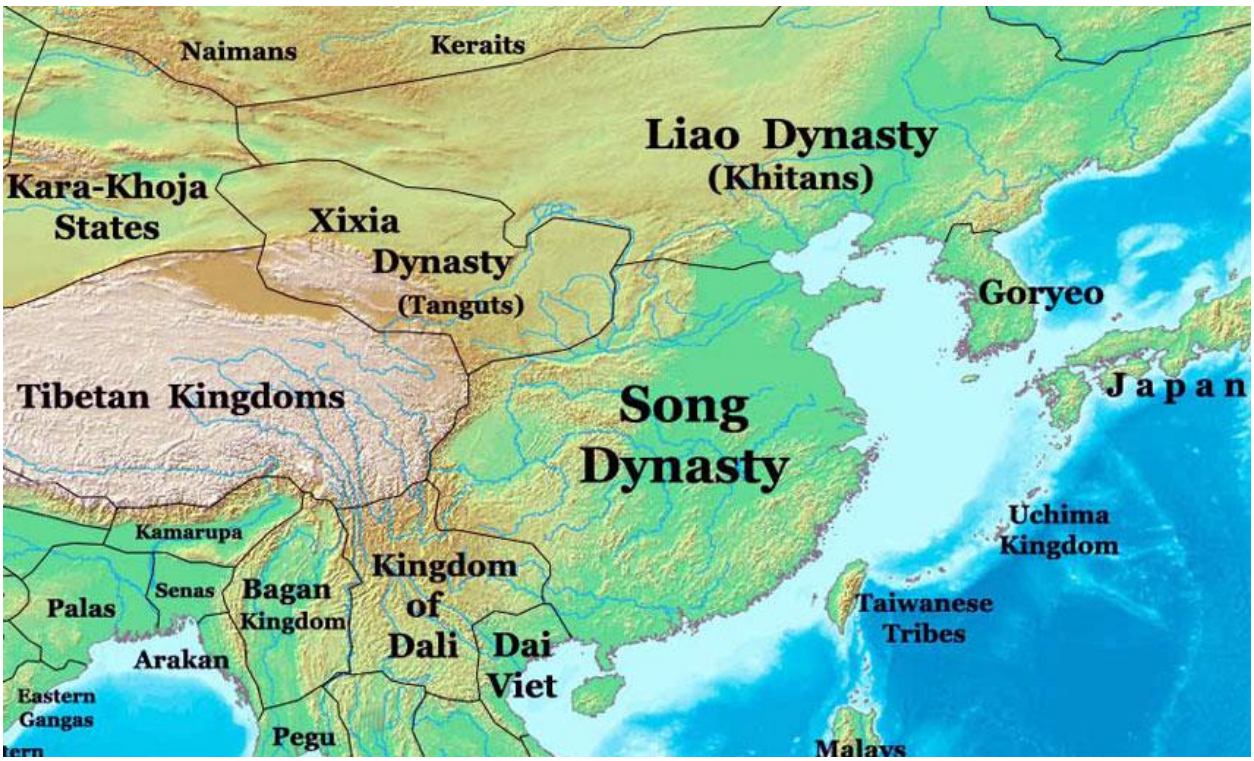
The Song, the Liao, and the Western Xia (Xixia)

In 907[1] the Liang dynasty ushered in the break-up of the Tang, leading to the following periods known as the Five Dynasties and the Ten Kingdoms in the Chinese historical chronicles. This period of disunion was similar to the one at the end of the Han: the once unified empire broke down into a number of separate political entities, each of which claimed sovereignty within its own domain. But unlike the time of the Great Disunion after the Han, which lasted some three hundred years, this period of absence of central authority lasted less than eighty years. The Five Dynasties regimes ruled northern and central China sequentially during a period of fifty-three years, the last dynasty being the Later Zhou. Between 907 and 960, the Ten Kingdoms emerged, mainly in southern China, and sometimes overlapped with one another in time. Many of these corresponded with a natural regional boundary. They were all relatively unstable regimes, each lasting only a few decades, due to the incessant wars of conquest and annexation they waged against one another, and their vulnerability to the internal usurpation of supreme power by ambitious generals. A number of these kingdoms rose out of the Tang military regions, where some military governors, who were already the *de facto* rulers, simply proclaimed regional sovereignty on the Tang's demise.

During this period of short-lived dynasties competing militarily for ascendancy, and especially for the prize of reuniting China, Zhao Kuangyin, an exceptionally capable military commander and an astute politician of the Later Zhou (951-960) dynasty, usurped the Zhou throne and in 960 set himself up at Kaifeng as the emperor (r. 960-976) under a new dynasty called the Song. The Later Zhou, already the dominant power in northern China, had been poised to annex other kingdoms, after putting in place a series of measures to promote economic reconstruction. Zhao Kuangyin and his successor completed what the Later Zhou had

[1] All dates will be assumed to be CE unless explicitly indicated otherwise.

begun, after another two decades of fighting that culminated in the conquest of the Northern Han in 979. Unlike the Sui-Tang reunification of China, the Song empire did not incorporate territory in modern-day Korea, Mongolia, Manchuria, and central Asia. In 981, the Song expedition to regain Dai Co Viet (today's Vietnam) in the south was repelled. The kingdom of Da Li, a successor state of Nan Zhao, prevented any Song expansion to the southwest.



Map showing the territory of the Song and neighbouring dynasties, c. 1000
(*nationsonline.org*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from
https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/Chinese_dynasties/Song_Dynasty_Map)

While the Song dynasty had a territory about seven times that of modern France at the time when it unified China, its authority did not even extend to all of northern China. Unfortunately for the Song, during the tenth to the fourteenth centuries powerful empires of nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples emerged to the north, northwest, and northeast of the Chinese domain. Among these was the empire of the Qidan, called Liao (916-1125). The Qidan were a semi-nomadic Mongolian people, whose territory ranged between Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. The Liao emperor presided over a state the southern part of which included the Sixteen Prefectures of Yanyun, which comprised parts of present-day Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, and Shanxi. A Chinese-style civil bureaucracy governed this area. While the south had an agricultural economy, the much larger northern part had a pastoral economy of the steppe, and men on horseback ruled it. This

area provided some 600,000 cavalry troops, organized into mobile units called ordos (which gave rise to ‘horde’ in English). Trials by strength on the battlefield between the warlike Qidan mounted archers and the Song forces convinced the latter that it was preferable to buy peace, rather than have a continual state of war with the Liao. In 1004 the Liao, also exhausted by war, accepted peaceful co-existence, but at a price. A treaty was concluded between the two states. The Song agreed to pay annually 200,000 rolls of silk and 100,000 ounces of silver to the Liao, so that a friendly treaty was concluded between the two ‘brotherly’ states, with the Song emperor Zhenzong being the older brother (meaning a more respected senior status, in Confucian terms). Both sides kept to the terms of the treaty for over four decades. In 1042, the Song’s military weakness was once more exposed by their being defeated by another neighbouring state, the Western Xia (Xixia). The Liao took the opportunity to extract from the Song an additional annual ‘tribute’ of 100,000 rolls of silk and 100,000 ounces of silver, as the price of keeping the peace between them.

Towards the last decades of the tenth century when the newly founded Song dynasty was endeavouring to unite the Chinese lands, Li Jiqian (963-1004), the scion of a leading clan of a formerly nomadic people called the Tangut, nursed an ambition to carve out a kingdom independent of the Song in northwestern China. This region had been settled by the Tangut, and it also had other tribal populations, such as Tibetans, Mongols, and Turks, with Chinese scattered among them. Through decades of inter-tribal politics, wars, and alliances, and years of persistent military campaigns against the Song, Li Jiqian and his son Li Deming (981-1032) succeeded in establishing the kingdom of Western Xia in a territory that was situated at the southwest of the Liao and northwest of the Song empires. Sandwiched between the two larger neighbours, the rulers of the Western Xia learned to play one against the other. Since they were often at war with the Song, they accepted the position of being subordinate in terms of diplomatic formalities while not actually under the control of the emperor of the Liao, to gain recognition and to keep peace with this northern regime. To build an even closer relationship, they formed marriage alliances with the Liao royal family, marrying Liao princesses. Although there were occasional disputes between the Liao and the Western Xia that led to military combat, on the whole peace was maintained.

Both these states to the north of the Song desired the latter’s wealth in agricultural and other resources and tried to overwhelm their southern neighbour by force of arms. The Song doggedly resisted these aggressors to keep its territory intact, winning a military victory now and again amid many setbacks. In 1006, the Song changed its hard stance against the Western Xia and offered to conclude a peace treaty with this upstart power on generous terms, though not from a position of weakness. The Song bestowed official and kingly titles on Li Deming, with gifts of silver, silk, and teas, as well as other symbolic and material gifts valued

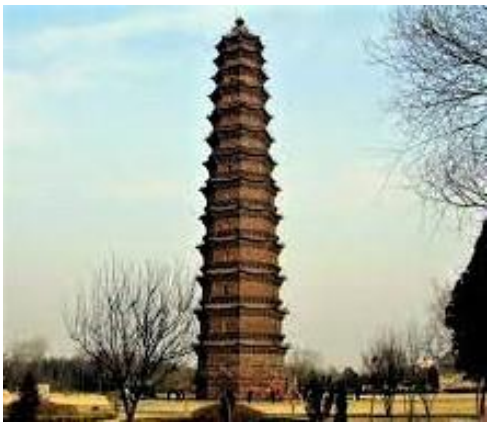
by people of this region. At the Western Xia's request, the Song also agreed to maintain markets at certain border posts for commercial exchanges between their subjects. In the treaty, the word *feng* was used as the bestowal of official titles and the word *ci* as the giving of gifts. These were expressions normally used by an emperor to his subjects. Acceptance of Song official titles and gifts in such terms rendered the Western Xia subordinate to the Song as a state. Like the relationship between Western Xia and the Liao, the subordination was in form but not in substance. The Western Xia functioned as an entirely independent sovereign state. The treaty did secure peace for over three decades between these two neighbours.

In 1032, Li Deming's son, Li Yuanhao, an ambitious empire builder, ascended the throne of the Western Xia. He enlarged the territory of the Western Xia by annexing independent tribal areas in his vicinity through military force. After he had brought under his control the entire region called the corridor west of the Yellow River (*Hexi Zoulang*), which covered the modern Gansu province, he set up a capital and various military and civilian institutions for governance. Then in 1038 he made himself the emperor of the Great Xia - an empire as distinct from a mere kingdom – with much pomp and pageantry. He also exhibited a remarkable ethnic consciousness in seeking to lessen the cultural influences of the Tang and Song dynasties, by adopting and promoting a Western Xia writing script for official and general use in his empire. Documents transmitted between the Western Xia and the neighbouring Song and Liao empires would be written in both Chinese and Western Xia languages. He abolished the Chinese surnames of Li and Zhao given by Chinese emperors of the Tang and Song dynasties to the Tangut royals and adopted traditional tribal names instead. He also purged music, customs, and ceremonial usage of excessive Chinese influence. His decrees even included how his subjects should attire themselves: the emperor and his officials of different grades were dressed each in their regulated clothing styles, while the commoners were only allowed to wear dark green clothes. With the emperor in the lead, Tangut men were ordered to shave their heads. Despite his effort to diminish Chinese cultural influences, he still saw the need to adopt Song administrative institutions in governing his empire. His descendants in the twelfth century had no such ethnic scruples, and some were enthusiastic about embracing the Confucian culture and institutions of the Song.

Having made these changes, Li Yuanhao requested the Song to grant him formal recognition. The Song court not only refused to grant his request; it stripped him of his official titles and, as an insult, posted warrants for his arrest along the border between the two countries, with high rewards to those who captured him. Subsequently, the warlike emperor of Western Xia, who did not seem to have a high opinion of the Song's military prowess, was preparing to fight the Song. From 1040 to 1042, the Western Xia attacked the Song many times and won three major victories. With the outbreak of hostilities, the Song closed the border

markets, ceased to purchase salt produced in Western Xia, and stopped the annual gifts of money, silk, and tea to that country. Even if the Song economic sanctions did not ruin the Western Xia economy, high price inflation and severe shortages of goods, including daily necessities, appeared as the wars proceeded. The economic hardship and the mounting toll of people suffering death or injury produced a war weariness in the people of Western Xia, making it difficult for its ruler to continue his policy of aggression, despite military triumphs.

In 1043, the emperor of the Western Xia made an overture to the Song court for peace. The other important party of the triangular relationship, namely the state of Liao, had not remained entirely quiescent during the military conflict between the Western Xia and the Song. As we have seen, the emperor of Liao demanded, with the threat of force, cessation of land (without success), and an increase of the annual tribute (successfully) from the Song. The Liao attempt to sabotage peace between their two neighbouring states failed. After over a year of negotiations, in 1044 a peace treaty was concluded, whereby the Song agreed to pay the Western Xia annually 72,000 ounces of silver, and more rolls of silk and catties of tea, but refused to cede any territory. Trade was restored between them at the border markets as well as at the Song capital. Li Yuanao would remain subordinate to the Song emperor as the ruler of the Western Xia, but to avoid kneeling and other gestures of obeisance, he would not receive the Song emissaries at his capital. These representatives of the Song emperor were instead directed to another appointed city.



The iron pagoda at Kaifeng (built in 1049)
(*visitourchina.com*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from
https://www.visitourchina.com/kaifeng/attraction/iron-pagoda.html)

Until the first decades of the twelfth century, an uneasy balance of power existed amongst these three states, with shifting alliances of one with another against the third. On the whole, peace prevailed between the

Song and the Liao. Occasionally fighting broke out between the Western Xia and the Liao, without creating major political or territorial changes. Some Western Xia rulers after Li Yuanhao, particularly Xia empress dowager Liang, for internal political reasons waged war on the Song more than fifty times during the years from 1085 to 1099. In addition to military resistance, the Song would respond by stopping the annual gifts and by closing the trading posts. Without being able to make much headway on occupying Song territory, and facing the loss of the Song annual gifts, on the death of the empress dowager in 1099, the sixteen-year-old Western Xia emperor Chongzong put himself under the tutelage of the Liao emperor, ceased the invasions and border raids, and communicated to the Song his desire for peace, with the restoration of the annual gifts. The Song emperor at first rebuffed the Western Xia approach, but later accepted peace with the gifts to Western Xia, after the intervention of the Liao and further conciliatory gestures from the Western Xia.

Chongzong was a great admirer of the Confucian culture of the Chinese. He settled the century-old dispute within the Western Xia polity on whether to adhere to the indigenous culture of the northwest or that of the Chinese to the south, in favour of the latter. The ruling elites of the Western Xia were aware of the examples of other and earlier semi-nomadic empires, such as the Northern Wei (386-535), which had flourished in northern China with the wholesale adoption of the Han Chinese culture. Under Chongzong's reign peace prevailed for over a decade between the Western Xia and the Song until, starting in 1104, a new Song emperor Huizong, with a new prime minister Cai Jing, pursued a policy of territorial expansion against the Western Xia with limited success. For two decades thereafter, the two sides were intermittently at war or conducted negotiations for peace, until the attention of the leaders of both countries was drawn to a startling new development, which was the sudden and stunning rise of yet another semi-nomadic pastoral people, the Nuzhen (or Jurchen), in northeast China.

During the early years of the eleventh century, a dominant clan among the Nuzhen tribes called Wanyan took the lead in organizing their fellows, who were scattered in the territory of the Liao in northern Manchuria, into a tribal alliance. A well organized and regulated tribal alliance, with a governing council under a strong leadership, and with executive and coercive powers backed by military force, had often been the first step towards building a state or an empire by nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples of the Asian steppes. The head of a powerful tribal alliance would normally expect to be recognized by the neighbouring states or empires, which might confer official titles on him and conduct diplomatic relations with him with exchange of gifts, either on the basis of equality, or between superiors and inferiors depending on his relative status vis-à-vis the heads of the neighbouring countries. Such recognition would enhance the prestige and strengthen the position of the (normally hereditary) heads of the clan that led the tribal alliance.

After one, two, or more generations of consolidation of power and expansion within the tribal areas, or further afield, the tribal alliance might be transformed into an empire, on the emergence of an exceptionally ambitious and capable leader, particularly in military matters. Wanyan Aguda (1068-1123), the founder of the Jin dynasty, a man noted for his prodigious physical strength and extraordinary accuracy in archery, was such a leader of the Nuzhen. When, at the age of forty-three, he succeeded his brother in 1113 as the leader of the Nuzhen tribal alliance, he had already proved himself as a seasoned warrior and a victorious military commander. In addition to being a gifted general, he was also a sound strategic planner, skilled in politics and diplomatic gamesmanship.

Enter the Jin

At this point, after nearly two centuries of ruling the vast expanse of the north-eastern corner of Asia, the Liao dynasty had declined in vigour. The Nuzhen tribes grew restive with the increasing exactions from their politically corrupt Liao overlords. When Wanyan Aguda decided to lead the Nuzhen tribes to revolt against the Liao, he took care to legitimize this move with ritual and ceremony, claiming it a righteous act against the exploitation and oppression under the rule of the Liao emperor, who had lost the Way (*Dao*). His emissaries also succeeded in persuading many other surrounding tribal groups to make common cause with the Nuzhen, so that he would not need to fight on many sides with many different enemies. Late in 1114, he led a modest army of a few thousand men against far larger numbers opposing him from the Liao side, and he won such resounding victories that at the beginning of 1115 the Nuzhen hailed him as their emperor. Thus began the Jin dynasty, with Wanyan Aguda reigning as Jin Taizu. As the war against the Liao continued to progress in the Jin's favour, with an expansion of territory and an increase in the number of troops, there was a need for Jin Taizu to consolidate his rule. This he did through restructuring the Nuzhen tribal organization under a military aristocracy, dominated by members of his own clan with slaves at its base. Under Jin Taiju and his successor, Jin Taizong, the Nuzhen tradition of slavery became institutionalized, but it was regulated in such a way as to offer opportunities for freedom, and to prevent people from being made slaves by force during chaotic times of military conflict or other crises. Excessive enslavement benefited the owners of slaves rather than the ruling dynasty, whose interest lay in having more farmers with smallholdings to cultivate the fields and to provide taxes. The reformed Nuzhen institutions were at first imposed on the conquered Liao territory, but with the conquest progressing apace, the Jin ruler soon decided to continue to use the Liao system of governance.

By 1120, the nature of the war against the Liao had changed from one of fighting against oppression to that of overthrowing the dynasty to form a united empire under the Jin. At this point it seemed to make strategic sense to Jin Taizu to conclude a treaty with the Song, promising to give the latter certain Liao territory if

the Song would become allied with the Jin, and fight against the Liao. The Song agreed, but it would be a short-lived alliance. While the Liao remained at peace with the Song provided the latter paid the annual 'tribute' to it, the Jin turned out to be a much more aggressive adversary and one far more difficult to appease. In 1121, the Jin emperor focused his efforts on destroying the Liao and keeping the Song on his side. Despatching a major force against the Liao, the politician and propagandist in Jin Taizu announced to the commanding general that he was sent to wage a war of unification, and to strike down a dynasty that had been abandoned both by the gods and men because of its misrule. With their morale thus strengthened, within just one year in 1122, the Jin forces captured the three remaining capitals of the Liao, sending their once arrogant overlord on the run. As regards the people in the territory once controlled by the Liao, Jin Taizu ordered them to come forward to surrender themselves to the Jin rule: slaves surrendering before their masters would be freed, and those who led groups to surrender would be given official posts. Displaced persons were encouraged to return to their home villages, and agriculture was to be promoted. Many surrendered without a fight. The Jin turned over to the Song certain cities seized from the Liao in accordance with the above-mentioned treaty between them, but that was only after the Jin had carried away all the treasures, the wealthy clans, the artisans, and even the ordinary people from these places. In August 1123, Jin Taizu died before he had completed the conquest of the Liao.

Jin Taizong, who succeeded the Jin founder in 1123, sent troops in hot pursuit of the fleeing Liao emperor, in case he became a rallying point for Liao loyalists, or sought shelter in the Western Xia, whose ruler had taken a Liao princess as his concubine and had been friendly and supportive of the Liao emperor during this conflict. To induce the Western Xia to change sides, the Jin offered to cede to the Western Xia certain former Liao territory if the latter would maintain the same friendly subordinate state relationship with the Jin as it did with the Liao. An additional stipulation was that the Western Xia would hand over the Liao emperor to the Jin, should he flee to that country. This territorial inducement was difficult for the leader of the Western Xia to refuse; and in 1124 the Western Xia accepted the Jin terms and was able to extend its territory at the Liao's expense. In 1125, the Jin forces captured the Liao emperor and put an end to the Qidan dynasty that had ruled a large tract of territory in northern and northeastern China for over two hundred years since 916. Some Qidan aristocrats moved westward to parts of present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where they set up the Western Liao empire.

In just ten years the leaders of a relatively obscure Nuzhen tribal alliance had led their people to overthrow the Liao dynasty and replace it with their own Jin dynasty. Since the Nuzhen tribal organization was not adequate to the task of administering all the territory now under Jin control, particularly the predominantly agricultural areas, the Jin rulers continued to use the Liao system of governance, with the participation of

former Liao and Han Chinese officials. The Nuzhen were the forerunners of the Manchus who, several centuries later in 1644, began their conquest of the whole of China when the Ming dynasty went into terminal decline.

After taking over considerable lands of the Liao empire – except for a few limited former Liao areas which the Jin allowed Western Xia to take – the Jin rulers did not rest content with their gains. Before 1125 ended, the Jin leaders were already focusing their attention on the militarily weak but materially rich Song empire as the next target to subjugate by force. Early in 1126, Jin forces threatened Kaifeng, the Song capital, and emperor Song Huizong abdicated and fled the city. His successor, Song Qinzong, tried to appease the Jin by ceding territory, increasing the annual payment, and honouring the Jin emperor as 'uncle' in official exchanges. This brought the Song only a few months of respite before the Jin resumed the attack later in the year. Near the end of 1126, Song Qinzong surrendered after Kaifeng came under siege. A few months later, the Jin also captured Song Huizong and took the two Song emperors with their wives and retinues north.

At this point, unlike the Liao, the Song dynasty that had begun in 960 did not come to a complete end, even with the seizure of its capital and emperors. 1126 only marked the end of the Northern Song dynasty. In 1127 Zhao Gou, a son of the emperor Huizong, became emperor and reigned as Song Gaozong of the Southern Song. After a decade of escaping from the pursuing Jin forces, moving from city to city in southeast China, in 1138 Song Gaozong was finally able to set up his capital at the city of Lin An (present-day Hangzhou) in southeastern China. Although Song Gaozong provided a rallying point for the people of China to rise and fight for their country, the credit for the survival of the Song dynasty at this point was largely due to the stout resistance of the regular military forces led by able generals and supported by armed bands.

In these desperate times, people in both northern and southern China had been swept up, by a certain patriotic fervour, into organizing themselves spontaneously as *yi jun*, righteous or loyalist armies, to fight the Jin invaders; bandits and displaced persons also joined the ranks. Under continuous Jin aggression, the more pugnacious among the Southern Song commanders had become toughened by frequent engagements against Jin forces, which earlier on had inspired such fear amongst Song army officers that they had tended to retreat or escape rather than fight. In less than a decade, a crop of Southern Song generals had won fame fighting the Jin. Many of these joined the Song military through enlistment as militiamen or common soldiers and rose from the ranks on merit. They were able not only to stand up to Jin military assaults: some of them were eager to turn the tables on the Jin by advancing into the territory controlled by their adversary. Yue Fei was an outstanding example. In 1140, during a two-months drive north, Yue Fei's troops time and

again defeated the most powerful Jin forces amassed against them, and recovered many important cities in northern China, among which were Zhengzhou and Loyang, the western capital of Northern Song. Just as Yue Fei was poised to recover Kaifeng, the Northern Song capital, he had to pull back reluctantly on the strict orders of the Song prime minister, Qin Hui, who adamantly pursued a policy of appeasement towards the Jin. Equally strong for the opposite policy stood Yue Fei, who was among the most ardent of the Southern Song generals and officials wishing to recover the Northern Song lands, and to reject any humiliating Jin terms for peace.

After destroying the Northern Song and installing a Jin puppet regime in its place, the Jin were bent on the conquest of the entire Chinese lands. At the beginning of the reign of Song Gaozong, a Southern Song prime minister and other officials conceived a plan for *zhong xing*, meaning the recovery of the old Song capital and northern China by fighting the Jin. But being the successor of the two Northern Song emperors who had been taken captive by the Jin, Gaozong did not really desire their return in case his own position was jeopardized. Although he had to appear to welcome the idea of *zhong xing*, he rejected proposals for taking a strong and active military stance against the Jin. The officials who took such a line were demoted, removed from power, or even put to death, while those who supported a negotiated peace with the Jin were given important posts. He chose flight instead of fight, and for many years he used Qin Hui, a ruthless politician with special links to the Jin, as prime minister to facilitate and promote a policy of appeasement, on which Qin Hui had built his official career. The Jin rulers tempted the Song with the prospect of peace, but they were not serious about it until the Song generals demonstrated their ability to defend their country. Several Southern Song commanders of large forces placed themselves strategically, and together they formed a strongly defended line south of the Huai River, halting further Jin advances. In any event, the Jin military found itself at a disadvantage operating in the unfamiliar terrain of the watery southern region of China. Between 1133 and 1136, a series of military offensives against the Southern Song by the Jin and its puppet Chinese regime met with nothing but setbacks. Concluding that waging war against the Song was past the point of diminishing returns, the Jin were ready, in 1137, to negotiate in earnest a treaty of peace with the Song court.

In its terms for peace the Jin, like the Liao before it, demanded a large annual subsidy of 250,000 taels of silver and 250,000 rolls of silk from the Song. Such payment was burdensome, but war could arguably have been worse. There was an additional condition that required the Song emperor to become a subject or vassal of the Jin. This condition was deeply humiliating to the Song, and it amounted to a surrender of sovereignty at a time when the Song military was fighting the Jin forces to a standstill. To sweeten the pill, the Jin emperor offered an inducement, which was to turn over to the Southern Song some of the territory of its

puppet state in the north, considering that the Song emperor was himself about to accept the position of a puppet of the Jin. When the news broke, there was a huge outcry from Song officials, military leaders, and the public against signing such a demeaning treaty. Despite fierce opposition, the Song emperor and his prime minister, Qin Hui, did sign the peace treaty with the Jin in 1138. Just over a year later, in 1140, the Jin abrogated the treaty, and sent a large army to invade the Southern Song. The Song emperor quickly deployed his most able commanders to defend his realm, and defence was all that they were strictly meant to do. Because he and Qin Hui were still set on the course of making the peace treaty with the Jin work, he soon sent orders to the front, requesting the Song commanders, who were successfully beating back the Jin forces, not to pursue the enemies to the north but to retreat to a defensive line. All the Song generals retreated from the front, except for Yue Fei, whose troops had already marched northward, and in a brief span of about three months they won many victories and recovered many important former Northern Song cities. In the end, Yue Fei too was forced to pull back on urgent orders from Qin Hui.

Not being able to achieve its goal of destroying the Southern Song through military means, the Jin court responded positively to overtures from Qin Hui, who had once again been begging for peace. Yue Fei's military advance in North China constituted a threat to Qin Hui's appeasement policy. To show that he was serious about peace with the Jin, Qin Hui not only ordered the victorious Song generals, including Yue Fei, to draw back from the front but also relieved them of their military commands. The peace treaty concluded in 1141 between the two countries included the same burdensome and dishonourable terms as the earlier one, but with one difference. It obliged the Song to return to the Jin some of the territory which the Jin had granted to the Song in the earlier treaty. As mentioned, the territory in question had once belonged to Jin's former puppet state in northern China. The triumphs and fighting spirit demonstrated by the Song military counted for little in the treaty negotiations. The weak-kneed Song emperor and Qin Hui, his prime minister, each had personal reasons to make peace with the Jin, however high the price, and however strong the internal opposition. In Qin Hui's mind, there was no room for Yue Fei in this scheme of things, and he had to be eliminated to satisfy the Jin commander, Wanyan Zonghi, and as a warning to others. Yue Fei, his son, and an aide were all executed on Qin Hui's orders, on a false charge of treason.

From that time onwards, there were leaders on the Jin side with renewed appetite for conquering the Southern Song, or on the Song side for seeking to recover the lost lands of the Northern Song, but neither side made significant headway militarily against the other. In 1208, their treaty-based state relationship took a worse turn for the Song, shortly after a Song commander surrendered to the Jin during a renewed 'Northern Expedition' against the Jin. Another Song prime minister with dictatorial powers killed the Song official leading the war against the Jin, as Qin Hui had done before him, and accepted peace with the Jin

on exceedingly onerous terms. The treaty that was reached in 1208 increased the annual Song subsidy to the Jin from 200,000 taels of silver to 300,000 taels. In addition, the Jin exacted a huge and unprecedented bounty of three million taels of silver for their victorious army. There was also a clause that lowered the position of the Song *vis-à-vis* the Jin.

Not surprisingly the Mongols, a rapidly rising military power from the steppes of East Asia early in the thirteenth century, were able to exploit the bitter animosity between the Song and the Jin to persuade the former to join them as allies in their war against the Jin. From a strategic point of view, this turned out to be a mistake similar to the one the Northern Song had made a century earlier, when it allied itself with the upstart Jin to eliminate the Liao. The Mongol war machine had already put an end to the Western Xia in 1227, and in 1234 it destroyed the Jin. After the fall of the Jin, there was nothing that stood between the mighty Mongol hordes, driven by a lust for conquest, and the riches of the Southern Song. How the Mongols took over China under the Song will be treated in chapter 3.

The military weakness and the cultural strength of Song China

Military weakness

China during the Song exhibited extraordinary economic vitality, political dynamism, and cultural achievements, as we will shortly discuss, but its fatal military weakness cast a long shadow over the land. There appeared to be several reasons for the incapacity of the Song military. The founder of the Song dynasty, Zhao Kuangyin (emperor Taizu), was a military commander, who usurped the throne of the Later Zhou, whose ruler had himself usurped the throne of the Later Han. Usurpation, as well as military competition for ascendancy, provided the mechanisms behind the multiplicity and the rapid turnover of many kingdoms and dynasties that followed, after the Later Liang replaced the Tang Dynasty in 907. Given this historical background, the Song emperors tended to be wary and mistrustful of their military commanders, particularly the more capable and successful ones. They devised measures to prevent the regional military leaders from becoming too powerful or independent of the court. For example, Zhao Kuangyin relieved even his sworn brothers of their military commands and gave them civilian posts instead, after he consolidated power as the emperor of the new dynasty. This practice of taking away the generals' troops was still followed even during the time of Song Gaozong's reign, when the Song dynasty was in danger of being annihilated by the Jin. During the entire Song dynasty, the military officials were firmly under civilian control, both by the emperor and by the prime minister. The court's policy and practice of holding tight reins on the military commanders hindered the development of a strong Song military force.

There were other factors that contributed to the Song's military weakness. The Chinese dynasties that demonstrated periods of great military strength and extended their frontiers, such as the Han, the Sui, and the Tang before An Lushan's rebellion, based their fighting force on peasant militia or farmer-soldiers. The Song inherited the practice of using mercenaries, who could be ex-bandits, pardoned criminals, homeless migrants, or those with no means of subsistence, from the lower ranks of society. Not surprisingly, professional soldiers had very low social esteem, as attested by the familiar Chinese saying that good men do not become soldiers, any more than good iron would be made into nails. These soldiers tended to have poor discipline and fighting spirit, so despite being costly to maintain, they constituted an ineffective fighting force.

The semi-nomadic peoples who invaded the Song from the north were skilled at hunting, livestock breeding, and cavalry warfare. Fighting the mounted warriors from the steppes, the Han had found it necessary to buy horses from the Central Asia. The Tang, in addition to purchasing horses, also developed stud farms for breeding horses. In case of need, the Tang would resort to hiring foreign cavalry troops to augment their own. The rise of the Western Xia as an antagonist, controlling areas from where the Tang had once bred and sourced horses and hired foreign auxiliary troops, prevented the Song from doing likewise. The shortage of horses put the Song at a serious disadvantage in cavalry warfare, in which the people of the steppes excelled. These shortcomings made the Song vulnerable to military aggression from the semi-nomadic empires along its northern frontiers, stretching from Tibet to the sea.

Political reforms

The military weakness of the Song contrasted markedly with the strength of its developments in other areas. The Song dynasty (both Northern and Southern) presided over an age remarkable for innovative and creative activities in China. These encompassed the political, economic, social, and cultural fields. There was significant population expansion and growth in the economy, in commerce, and in wealth. It was a period of high cultural and intellectual achievements, helped by the promotion and the spread of education. During the three centuries when the Song held sway politically, the society underneath the polity underwent profound changes. Buddhism, which dominated the Chinese scene from the fifth century, had waned during the ninth century. The faith-based menagerie of gods and demons and the cycle of reincarnation had receded into the background, bringing to the fore a more secular landscape, apprehensible by reason. During the Song, China transformed itself from the outmoded world dominated by aristocratic lineages which had

characterised the Tang into a new world, 'whose basic characteristics are already those of the China of the modern times'[2].

Rulers in imperial China and their scholar-officials were traditionalists, who kept historical records assiduously and made it their business to learn from past experiences to guide the present. They would try to avoid past mistakes, and reform any defects in the institutions that they were going to adopt. Having taken steps to rein in the power of the military, the Song court set to work perfecting the civilian government. In traditional China, all political power in theory emanated from the emperor. In practice, the power had always been shared between the emperor and the officials who served him, the central as well as the regional, through delegation. The emperor's personal circle, the empress, her relatives, and the eunuchs, who constituted an inner court, had opportunities to exercise power because of their closeness to the emperor. The Song was unusual in setting up a system in which the sharing of power between the emperor and the highest officials at the court, such as the prime ministers, was tilted in favour of the latter. This regime made it difficult for an emperor to exercise power arbitrarily. It also kept the empresses and the eunuchs from interfering in state affairs, as they had done so notoriously during the Tang dynasty.

The State Council, the highest organ of the government, was a collective decision-making body of five to nine high officials who, along with the emperor, ruled the country. The formulation of government policy by the State Council was made by first gathering necessary information; then undertaking a thorough discussion and debate, where opinions of different sides were heard; and finally, the resulting policy statement was voted on by the members. The emperor was normally expected to ratify a decision so arrived at, or he might have the casting vote. In no other dynasty were the scholar-officials as powerful as those in the Song. Furthermore, in no other dynasty were people from different walks of life allowed to submit plans and proposals to offices of the government. Although the Song system of government was initially modelled on the Tang, it was transformed by the Song in the course of time, according to the exigencies and ethos of its era. Not having to share power with the military aristocracy, as had been the case under the Tang, the Song government was able to achieve much greater centralization of power. Despite this concentration of power, the government made itself more in touch with its own civil servants and the public, by having three independent services hearing their opinions, suggestions, and complaints.

Politics under the Song was lively and full of passion with the leading figures, and their followers, divided into opposing groups which behaved in some ways like members of modern political parties, having

[2] *A History of Chinese Civilization*, by Jacques Gernet (Cambridge University Press, New York, NY, second edition 1996) p 300.

different socio-economic agendas, philosophical outlooks, and concrete policies. They lobbied the emperors and even empresses, networked with like-minded colleagues, energetically promoted their own views and proposals, and denounced vehemently those of their opponents. The struggle between the reformers, as represented by Wang Anshi, and the conservatives led by Sima Guang, fully exemplified this situation during the eleventh century.

The ideology of the two sides reflected the social situation and the cultural climate of the time. Some of the radical measures of the reforms were tailored to remedy the Song's perpetual military weakness, as well as to meet the increasing financial burden of the military establishment, and of wars and tribute payments. The crisis provoked by the emergence of a militarily aggressive Western Xia around the middle of the eleventh century added impetus to the reform movement.

Wang Anshi was well aware that the burden of taxes on land and labour services imposed by the government fell mainly on the shoulders of the small farmers or peasants, while the landowners and merchants with large estates often found ways to pay little or no taxes. The peasants, who lived on the edge of solvency, often needed to borrow money during planting and growing, and loans from private moneylenders were obtainable mostly on exorbitant rates of interest. They were thus vulnerable to losing their land. It was a classic situation of the rich becoming richer and the poor poorer. Wang Anshi's reforms included the offering of state loans to the farmers at a reasonable rate of interest, payable after harvest. He rationalized the process of tax collection by converting labour services – a kind of capitation tax levied again mostly on smallholders – to a tax in the form of money, while at the same time significantly reducing their total tax obligation. By keeping the small farmers in business, and by supporting agricultural production through better irrigation and other forms of improvement on land use, he hoped to increase the total amount of taxes collected on land, despite halving the land tax. In fact, taxes from commerce and industry, and new sources of revenue from the government monopoly on certain commodities, such as salt and liquor, in addition to the land tax, did enable the state to increase its income.

Wang Anshi's intervention to lighten the load on the small farmers was in tune with the sense of equity and social justice current in eleventh and twelve century China. An even more practical consideration related to the security of the state. By giving these people a stake in the society, he hoped that they might not foment rebellion – the Song, like many other dynasties, had not been spared many instances of peasant rebellions – and that they might cooperate more willingly with their rulers in resisting the military aggression of the nomadic empires. He organized and trained peasant militia, instead of relying solely on an army of mercenary soldiers, whose effectiveness as a fighting force continued to decline, while their

number kept on increasing. Using peasant militia and replacing the soldiers' role in keeping internal order by re-vitalizing the traditional mutual responsibility (*bao jia*) system in the countryside, he managed to reduce the swollen regular army and thus cut down the escalating military cost.

Another fiscal reform concerned government intervention in price stabilization, by preventing large monopoly merchants from manipulating prices by stockpiling, and then selling the commodities, such as cereals, at high prices. Instead, the government would purchase the goods when the market price was low, and sell them to small traders on credit, for resale. This benefited the retailers by keeping them from being squeezed by rich merchants, and also the public by keeping goods in circulation at stable prices. He evidently believed that by securing the livelihood and liberating the economic power of the multitude of small players, the production and circulation of wealth of the entire country would improve, which would benefit both the state and the people.

Wang Anshi's reform programme was wide ranging. In addition to the fiscal, economic, and military matters, it established many public charities such as hospitals, hospices, dispensaries, and orphanages. It set up regional public schools to widen educational opportunities. It changed the content of the civil service examination to include more practical subjects like law, economics, and geography. In the interest of justice, the teaching of law in the schools, and examinations on law, were particularly emphasized so that judgment and sentencing of offenders would be based on and bound by the written code, rather than allowing the prevailing practice of relying on the personal discretion of the relevant officials to continue. Many of Wang Anshi's reform measures were strongly opposed by the conservative ruling elite, and his attempt to limit the amount of landholding and private property was the most damaging to their interest.

Wang Anshi was a radical thinker, who believed that he was reviving the true teachings of Confucius and Mencius, and he used these as a guide for setting up a perfect social order using the power of a benevolent state. He thought that large private landholdings effectively reduced the power of the state and its revenue, and that restricting private wealth and power would promote a more equitable society. Wang Anshi believed that using the criteria of rationality and objectivity to run a government efficiently, and apply the written law strictly, would lead to a situation where the polity was just and the society harmonious, and the two would merge into one. His ideal could be represented by a ubiquitously displayed eight-character couplet still seen on scrolls and public building today: *tian xia wei gong, shi jie da tong*, meaning the world is in harmony when it is for the benefit of the public. This expression embodies a perpetual Chinese longing for a world of equity and peace. On the other side, the reality of the Chinese society had always been one where

powerful lineages carved out disproportionate shares of the society's wealth for themselves and their descendants.

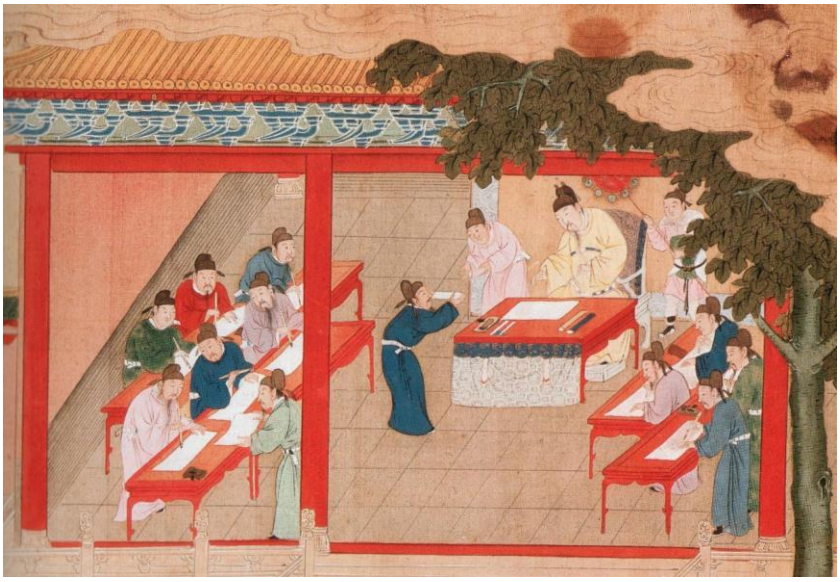
People in our modern society might find Wang Anshi's position on private property and state power repellent and suggestive of totalitarianism. Despite his efforts at centralization, imperial China did not have the means to control its people as effectively as, for example, Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, or Maoist China. However, rulers in China had never been shy of state power: allowing society space to grow and to develop independent institutions outside the government's control had not been a part of either the theory or the practice of their tradition of governance. The idea that a government should be separated into legislative and executive branches, which balanced each other's power and exercised checks on each other, did not emerge in a significant way from China's experience of governance, and there was never an independent judiciary. After all, in the Chinese patrimonial state, the emperor represented an idealized father figure, who had authority by right and, in the Chinese Confucian universe, would exercise his authority in a virtuous and benevolent way. Should an emperor be lacking in virtue, heaven would supposedly call him to account.

Wang Anshi was able to push through his reforms in the teeth of fierce opposition because he had the support of the emperor. Facing an empty treasury and social unrest, Song Shengzong (r.1067-1085) subscribed strongly to Wang Anshi's reform programme, believing that it would make the troubled empire wealthy and powerful and, in particular, militarily strong. From 1069 to 1075, he gave Wang full authority to implement various planks of the programme. But as the reform progressed, the attack from the rich and powerful, among whom were many conservative officials, was so overwhelming that the emperor softened his stance, and let Wang Anshi resign from the post of prime minister and the overseeing of the reform. In 1085, when Shenzong died, the conservatives dominated the court, and dismantled most of the measures put in place by Wang Anshi and his fellow reformers. Wang Anshi's reform had highlighted some deep-rooted long-term problems in the Chinese society, and its failure showed the difficulty of making radical changes or administering correctives to the existing social structure.

The reform that the Song dynasty did succeed in making, and that had lasting impact on China, was in connection with education and the civil service examination. As mentioned earlier, Wu Ti of the Western Han had used the examination on the Confucian classics as one channel for the recruitment of officials. After the chaotic times of the Great Disunion, when this institution fell into a state of neglect, the Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-90) dynasties revived it for the same purpose. The Song dynasty reunited China after a century under regional military rule. It elevated the recruitment examination for the civil service into a

major structure because it laid great store by a well-managed civilian government that functioned efficiently and was effectively controlled from the centre. It is important to note that, unlike civil servants in modern democratic countries, who are the servants of their elected political masters, their Song counterparts were themselves also holders of political offices, because there was no distinction between the functions and roles of civil servants and civil politicians in Song times. That is still the case in contemporary China.

Rationality and objectivity were principles well understood and applied by those who built and managed the well-ordered Song civil service. For example, the powers and the areas of competence of the various government offices were separate and clearly defined. To reduce the temptation of corrupt practices, such as milking the public by charging irregular fees, the Song officials were well paid. The Song dynasty increased the number of officials recruited through the civil service examination to about 30%, as against 15% during the Tang. It included in the examination practical subject matters in connection with government administration, in addition to the Confucian classics. The examiners endeavoured to prevent cheating by assigning numbers to the candidates and having their scripts copied to obscure their identities and calligraphy. They systematized the selection by a three-tiered competition and broadened the base of participation by starting the initial round at the prefectural level. Those who qualified would progress to the next level of examination at the capital, supervised by the Imperial Secretariat. The winners from there would take part in the final round of selection, competing in the palace in the presence of the emperor, who would award to those whose performance was outstanding the most coveted scholarly title, *jinshi*. Although not all successful candidates would be awarded official positions, they effectively joined a pool of well-educated talents, from which officials could be drawn when needed. By presiding over the imperial examinations and rewarding the best educated with titles or honours, the emperor might benefit from the strengthening of his authority, through the bond of personal loyalty which this process was likely to instil in the successful candidates.



The Song emperor receives a candidate during the palace examination (*Wikipedia*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_examination)

Did the Song state examination system create a meritocracy? It must have inspired hope among countless families with young boys, causing them to steer the cleverest of their sons starting from six or seven years old to devote a decade or, for some, a lifetime to poring over Confucian classics and other worthy books, in pursuit of an elusive distinction, for the glory and enrichment of the family. This situation was encapsulated by the well-known myth of a poor lonely scholar, struggling in a chilly room in front of a window without any visitors, who would one day win worldwide fame through examination success. However, it was extremely difficult for those without a family background of wealth and learning to become degree-holders through sheer effort and determination. Upward social mobility through this channel was probably only a trickle rather than a flood. In an empire governed by around 20,000 officials, the greater part (about 70 percent) of this ruling elite began their official life through the *yin* (i.e. hereditary) privilege granted to the offspring of high officials, or through recommendation by serving officials. Even the 30 percent who were chosen on merit through scholarly competitions were not doing so on a level field. Some well-connected people were allowed to take special or restricted examinations that were easier to pass than the regular ones. For these reasons, even though the Song made great efforts towards perfecting the system of examination, and relied more on it for official recruitment, it did not lead to the empire becoming a true meritocracy.

The gentry

The Song official examination did contribute towards the emergence of a Chinese ‘gentry’ society. The Chinese gentry were a special breed, distinguished more by superior education rather than by land

ownership. The resurgence of the institution of the imperial examination under the Song produced a great impetus for education. The growth of state and private schools produced from ten to several hundred thousand students, many of whom would become candidates for the examinations. Over time, the pass rate decreased: for example, 5 out of 10 passed in 1023, 1 out of 10 in 1093, and 1 out of 200 in 1275. Not all successful candidates for the imperial examinations would get official posts. Those who passed the examinations would gain honours from the degrees, even without the additional benefit of having official posts. Those who did not pass would probably still have social esteem as being part of the educated elite, with opportunities for employment, such as teaching, which would not be available to an uneducated person.

In the narrowest sense a member of the Chinese gentry in the Song is thought to be a degree-holder, but this would be an over-simplification of the situation. Although a few exceedingly bright boys from poor families, through application, determination, and luck, might manage to educate themselves to a high enough level to pass the examinations, most of the successful candidates came from prosperous families with a tradition of learning, access to books, and ample funding for education, and with degree-holders or government officials among their own members or networks of relatives and other associates. In the broader sense, the Chinese gentry were the local elite, the socioeconomic upper stratum of Chinese families or lineages - rather than just individuals - that provided the seedbed from which the scholar-officials sprung. Mere wealth, without educated members in the family, would render a rich household vulnerable to official exaction, or other forms of victimization. The reformed Song civil service examination aroused high hopes and stimulated popular education and enthusiastic participation in this enormously stressful mental competition, but it did not lead to a huge increase in the number of officials recruited through this channel. Its more significant consequence was the increase in the ranks of the educated, with or without the degrees, among the well-to-do or wealthy people in the empire. These people, embedded largely in the gentry families, served to strengthen the influence and consolidate the wealth and social position of the local elite.

The Chinese gentry or local elite served many necessary public functions. They formed the buffer between the government officials above and the peasant society below, from the Song dynasty onwards to the end of the Qing in 1911, with the exception of the Yuan dynasty under Mongol rule. They took part in the allocation and collection of taxes in the countryside, supervised the periodic markets, organized public works (such as the building of dikes against floods), mediated disputes, acted as advisors in lawsuits, and set up local militia or other security forces, in addition to playing major roles in the local educational, charitable, and cultural activities. The gentry assumed the role of the unofficial arm of the government, because the government in late imperial China was content to limit itself to providing a superstructure

staffed by a relatively small number of officials, who were to govern an increasingly large number of people as the population grew.

The number of Song official posts in twelfth century China was listed as 20,000, and the same number was listed in the Qing during the nineteenth century, while during the intervening centuries the population in China grew from 110 million in 1190 to over 400 million in 1850. During the same period, the number of counties (*xian*), the most basic territorial administrative units, grew by only a little over 10 percent. The official arm of the government extended to the county level, which was normally governed by the county magistrate, a central government appointee. The average number of people governed by a single county magistrate grew from about 90,000 to 300,000 between the Song and the Qing late dynasties. The county magistrate was normally not a native of the district he governed, because of the 'rule of avoidance'. This rule, which prohibited local officials from serving in their native districts, was used to minimize the temptation for corruption and favouritism. Since the Sui, most of the subsequent dynasties had adopted this practice. Although a county magistrate normally had his own paid assistants, such as secretaries, and several low status employees, like messengers and jailers, they were few in number. For the country magistrates to fulfil their open-ended responsibility for governing their districts, the help and support of the local gentry was indispensable. Although the gentry were normally not a part of the paid staff of the county magistrate, income from commissions or fees was derivable from many of their multifarious functions. The gentry functioned as the intermediary between the local population and central government appointees, who would be unfamiliar with the local situation. They administered local populations numbering in the tens to hundreds of thousands, and territories that could be as large as Rhode Island. Without the help of the local gentry, the government of imperial China during the last thousand years would not have been able to manage the empire smoothly, if at all. (But we should note that the century of Mongol rule from 1279 to 1368 formed an exception, to be covered chapter 3.)

Neo-Confucianism

The gentry were closely connected with the revival of Confucianism stimulated by the Song policy of strengthening the civil service recruitment examination. For several centuries, roughly from the fifth to the ninth, Confucianism had been overshadowed by Buddhism in both the popular and elite culture. During the Song intellectual ferment, Confucianism underwent a 'renaissance'. From a large body of classical texts accumulated during the Sui-Tang era, Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the chief proponent of the Song Confucianism, selected four classical texts as the embodiment of the truth of the teaching of the ancient masters: the Analects (*Lunyu*) of Confucius; the Mencius, a work of Confucius' chief disciple; the Doctrine of the Mean

(Zhongyong); and the Great Learning (*Daxue*). Zhu Xi's interpretation of Confucian texts, as provided by his commentary, represented a synthesis of the Song intellectual currents and a new philosophy. Neo-Confucianism, the name given to it by the Jesuits, united rational, moral, and metaphysical elements into a philosophical worldview, which integrated the human sphere with the cosmic order.

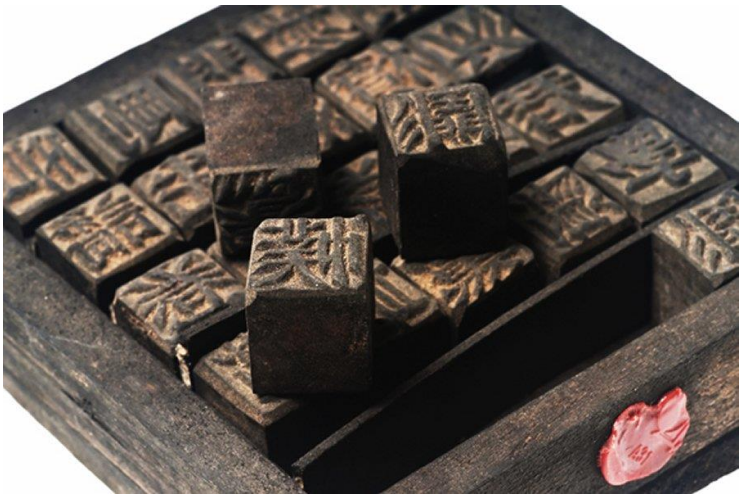
Neo-Confucianists assumed that the universe was governed by a moral force, apprehensible by an individual's mind and reason. This moral universe, not buttressed by divine sanction, was eminently rational and humane. Confucius and Mencius, in the chosen texts as reinterpreted by Zhu Xi, provided the key to open the door of this universe. They had shown the Way (*Dao*) for the moral improvement of an individual, whose character could be formed or transformed by the *Dao* through disciplined self-cultivation. Having subdued the self through a rigorous process of education, a scholar's ultimate goal was not just to improve himself, but to improve the whole society. His mission in life would begin with self-cultivation (*xiu shen*), then it would progress to giving order to his family (*qi jia*); after that he would be ready to govern the country (*zhi guo*), and finally he would provide peace or harmony to the world (*ping tian xia*). What he sought, therefore, was not a Buddhist Nirvana, nor salvation of his own soul in an afterlife. He did not seek to escape from the world or hold himself aloof from or above the world's fray, like a Daoist. His final objective was social, orientated towards this world, for involvement in the public service as a morally autonomous being, an individual with a conscience of his own.

Neo-Confucianism, propagated in the schools, and legitimized by the official examinations, became the orthodox philosophy of governance during the Song. Through the activities of the scholar-gentry, such as teaching in schools, and 'preaching' in Community Compacts (*xiangyue*), which were a kind of local residents' meetings, it filtered downward and permeated into the whole society. As a result, it did not remain the culture of the elite; it also coloured deeply the culture of the masses. The Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) of the Mongols, who ruled China after the Song with the help of non-Chinese, was ambivalent towards the Chinese culture and did not use the civil service recruitment examination until 1315. Nevertheless, Neo-Confucianism survived the Yuan. Under the Ming (1368-1644), the Chinese dynasty which overthrew the Yuan, it became again the state orthodoxy. Wang Yangming, the outstanding Ming exponent of Neo-Confucianism, advocated, in addition to the rational approach, the use of meditation as a means to gain intuitive knowledge. When the semi-nomadic Manchus conquered Ming China and set up the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), these foreign rulers endeavoured to rule as legitimate emperors of China sanctioned by Confucianism. They endorsed Neo-Confucianism as the official ideology of the state, supported the Confucian social order, and performed the rites and rituals established by that tradition. They capitalized on the civil service recruitment examination system, sponsored literary publications and cultural projects, and issued many sacred edicts based on Confucian precepts for the edification of their subjects. With

political support from above and deep roots in the society below, the Confucianism propagated by the Song and Ming thinkers prevailed as the dominant worldview in China, until the second decade of the twentieth century.

Printing, firearms, and ships

Many factors converged to contribute to the dynamism of the Song intellectual and cultural scene. An exceptionally important one related to the development of printing on paper. Paper produced with plant fibre was invented during the Han. Woodblock printing of Buddhist pictures and texts on paper began during the Tang dynasty near the end of the eighth century. During the Song, the technique became popularized and was widely used. From the tenth century onward, printing proliferated with accurate reproduction of illustrations and texts on a wide variety of subjects and for different purposes, including promissory notes and government decrees, not to mention books on the classics. During the mid-eleventh century, movable type was invented, but woodblock engraving remained in use because it was easy and cheap to produce and well suited to a language like Chinese, which has an enormous number of different characters. Song China, being the first country in the world to produce printed books, generated tens of thousands of volumes of books to satisfy the demands of private collectors and government libraries, as well as the literate public. The availability of cheaply and speedily produced printed works made education more accessible and provided opportunities for more people to participate in the cultural and intellectual life of the country. Printing contributed to the growth in education and of the gentry class, as well as the cultural 'renaissance' of that era.

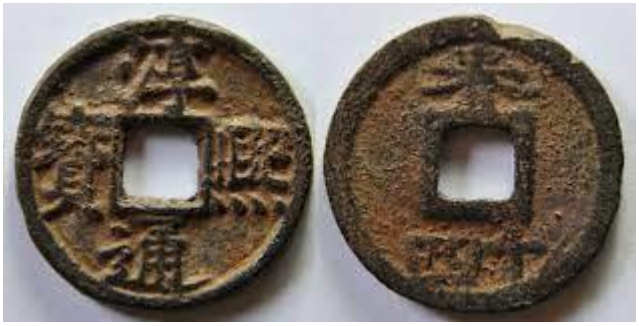


Movable type from the Song dynasty period (*coursedesignmatters*: retrieved on 26 November from https://coursedesignmatters.wordpress.com/2016/09/28/china-what-do-they-have-to-do-with-type/)

Song China took over another Tang invention - firearms - that was later transmitted to Europe with enormous repercussions to the world. Gunpowder had been used by the Tang military in incendiary projectiles, after being discovered by experimenting Daoist alchemists. The Song, struggling desperately against aggressive nomadic neighbours, developed several weapons that made use of the incendiary, smoke-producing, and explosive properties of gunpowder, between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries. The Song forces used gunpowder packed in incendiary or explosive grenades, thrown by catapults into their enemy's ranks. They also deployed rockets propelled by gunpowder in bamboo or wooden tubes to deliver incendiary arrows. In the thirteenth century, the Mongols, who were quick to adopt new armaments in warfare, hit their enemies with the 'thunderbolts that shake the sky', which were exploding projectiles cased in metal. The global consequences of the development of muskets, cannons, and a host of powerfully destructive weapons in the modernizing Europe after the Tang-Song invention of firearms are still being played out. As regards China, only the state had the authority to undertake or authorize its subjects to undertake projects on firearms, and the succeeding dynasties did not pursue the development of firearms in the manner of some of the warring and colonizing states of Europe, until late Qing times. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century when the British attacked Chinese coastal cities using modern cannons from gunboats, the defending forces of the Qing with their outmoded weapons could offer little resistance. It was after many such lessons that the Qing government tried grudgingly to modernize its armaments and fleets through importing products, technology, and know-how from the West.

In nautical technology, as in the knowledge and use of firearms, Song China led the world by several centuries. Partly because the overland trade along the Silk Road between the Song and Central Asia was blocked by the rise of the semi-nomadic empires, the Chinese turned more to overseas trade, using the well-traversed sea routes that linked the Chinese coast with the regions of south-east Asia to the Persian Gulf. Although the Arabs had dominated this trade since the Tang, the Chinese were able to participate in this maritime commercial activity by tapping into their centuries-old experiences in shipbuilding, navigating along their great inland rivers and canals and out into the high seas. During that time, seaworthy Chinese sailing ships were the most advanced in the world. A large ship would have up to four decks and large watertight compartments. It could be equipped with four to six masts, a dozen canvas or rigid-matting sails, pivoted oars, stern-post rudders, and mariners' charts, maps, and compass, and be capable of carrying 500 men. During the two centuries from the beginning of the Song dynasty, the collection of maritime customs duties increased from half a million strings of copper cash[3] to 65 million strings. This increase in the tax receipts surely reflected the growth in maritime trade during this period.

[3] One string represented a unit of 1000 round copper coins, each with a square hole in the middle, held together by the string threaded through the holes.



Song dynasty ‘cash’ coinage (*Wikipedia*: retrieved on 26 November 2023 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Song_dynasty_coinage)

Economic growth

The expansion in foreign trade was only a part of the story. It was a subplot of the great economic expansion and growth in domestic commerce in Song China. The Song dynasty benefited from the southward shift of the population and the economic centre of gravity that was already apparent during Tang times. The development of rice cultivation in the water-rich lands south of the Yangtze River played a crucial role in the Song economic upsurge. Technical improvements like the double cropping of early ripening varieties of rice led to increased yields of a cereal crop which already had the highest yield per acre. The resulting surplus enabled the population to grow and provided the basis of accumulation for investments in other economic activities, such as manufacturing, trade, and services.

The economic growth was accompanied by societal changes that altered the relationship between the social classes, a development that was already well underway from the late Tang. In place of the Tang military aristocracy, with their self-sufficient domains, maintaining an essentially patriarchal patron-client relationship between themselves and those who served them, there appeared a new class of landlords, who tended to settle in the growing townships and cities, enjoying the richness and amenities of life in an urban setting, on income derived from land ownership, while leaving the management of their estates to their

stewards. The relationship between the landlords and tenants was simply a matter of economics, involving the payment and collection of land rents and debts, rather than one of personal subjection or dependency.

Rich landlords were often closely connected with, if not actual members of, the gentry-official class, and as such had ways to avoid tax payment or to pay very little of it. As a result, an estimated 70% of the cultivated acreage was not liable to tax. The land tax burden fell almost entirely on the 30% of the cultivated areas left to the independent tillers of small plots. The poorer ones among them eked out such a precarious living that they were left with very few resources to tide them over a poor harvest, price fluctuations, or other contingencies. They often needed to borrow because of the time gap between sowing and harvesting. They lived under a constant threat of losing their land if they could not pay back the loans, often obtained on usurious rates of interest. Default on debt payments would lead to the loss of their land to the rich landlords or merchants who provided the loans. Consequently, the rich would become richer, and the poor would join the ranks of the landless peasants, while the government would collect less taxes. Wang Anshi's reforms of 1068-1085 ameliorated this situation for a period until the forces favouring the interests of the rich and powerful landlords struck back during the reign of Song Huizong (1082-1135), who did not share his predecessor's enthusiasm for the reforms.

Where could the landless peasants go, if they could not make a living, as tenants or labourers in the countryside? They could join the floating population in the burgeoning cities or towns and find employment opportunities or some niches for survival. The Song economic growth was accompanied by an enormous urban expansion. The burgeoning cities and towns during the Song had a different character from those of the Tang. Large cities under the Tang, being centres of government administration with residences of the families of the officials and separate quarters for commerce and crafts, were aristocratic in character. Within the outer ramparts, inner walls divided the different districts of these cities. Commerce and markets were strictly regulated and controlled by government officials, and there was a curfew at night. In Song times, the bursting urban population spilled over to outside the city boundary, and the ring of a city wall could no longer contain the spread of their economic activities. The inner walls had also lost their ability to confine the different occupational groups into separate districts. Shops, workshops, factories, taverns, inns, teahouses, market stalls, and places for entertainments of various kinds sprang up on streets that had acquired names of their own. These were grass-roots developments, arising from popular needs and demands, rather than government planning. Curfews as well as many other official regulations and controls had been abandoned because of the difficulty of enforcement. The inhabitants were free to move about, frequenting establishments for business or amusement that remained open throughout the night. The Song

cities as well as the growing towns were therefore commercial in character, bustling with economic activities, providing different kinds of employment for the expanding population.

Settled in these urban sprawls were merchants, large and small, as well as the rich landlords. These 'urban bourgeoisie' were a vital component of the Song economic expansion. While cottage industries and small-scale craft enterprises or workshops could be set up by those with modest means for large scale manufacturing and trade, particularly inter-regional or foreign trade whether overland or by sea, the rich landlords and merchants were the main sources of the seed capital. One area of the Song economic growth involved commercialization of crops with high market demand. These included tea, hemp, cotton, sugar cane, lacquer-producing trees, and mulberry trees for silkworms. The rich landlords and merchants were well positioned to invest in the cultivation of these plants, the processing of the raw materials derived from them and the making of the end products, as well as in product distribution. The availability of capital, coupled with improved technology and rising demand, propelled Song China to become a major producer of metals, particularly iron (for agricultural implements, cookware, and weapons) and copper (for coins). The newly discovered explosives were used to open up the mines. In 1078, the production of cast iron reached over 114,000 tonnes, while over seven hundred years later in 1788, England, the leading European industrial power, was producing only 68,000 tonnes[4]. Intense empire-wide commercial activities involved not just those mentioned, but a host of other craft products, such as ceramics, silks, ornaments, furniture, papers, and printed books. Inter-regional trade was facilitated by the more than 50,000 kilometres of navigable waterways formed by the Yangtze River and its tributaries and the canals connecting them. Some of the products such as ceramics, silks, and tea were produced not just for the domestic market, but also for large overseas demands, distributed via both overland and sea routes.

The contribution of the rich landlords and merchants during the Song to the growth in economic production and trade was due not only to their capacity for investment, but also to the market demand created by them. Because of the large number of wealthy landowners and merchants during the Song, they had a great impact on the economy as consumers. The demand from their lifestyle and tastes stimulated not only domestic production, but also the importation of foreign luxury goods, such as furs, incense, rare stones, ivory, coral, and spices. The Song paid for their foreign trade not only by selling Chinese products, but also in copper cash. This trade was considerable and widespread. The copper cash minted by the Song could be found in the empires of the nomads to the north, the lands of South-East Asia and Indian Ocean, and in Japan, where it was used as a local currency because of its abundance.

[4] *A Dictionary, Practical, Theoretical, and Historical, of Commerce and Commercial Navigation*, by J. R. McCulloch (Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, London, 1839).

In addition to the private enterprises, the Song government became directly involved in the business of raising funds to cover the heavy military expenditure that was not met by ordinary taxation. There were large state-owned shops, factories, and mines managed by civil servants. Products like tea, alcohol, salt, and perfume were state monopolies. Because of the enormous Song commercial expansion, income from the state-owned enterprises as well as the taxes on manufactured and traded goods, in addition to the customs duties on trade, both internal and foreign, formed an increasingly more important part of the state revenue, as compared with the taxes levied on the agricultural community. During the eleventh to the early twelfth centuries, revenue from the agricultural sector, which comprised taxes on land and labour services, was about equal to that raised from commerce and industry. Later in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, income from the latter far exceeded that from the former. Song China revealed an economic trend, which showed up also in late Ming and Qing times, that the empire's wealth was largely derived from the economic activities of trade and craft production. This fact remained largely unrecognized, because China's Confucian rulers could only imagine wealth in terms of land ownership and agricultural production.

Money

The unprecedented economic expansion and high military expenditure obliged the government mint to cast more and more copper coins. Around the turn of the eleventh century, the annual issue of copper coins (strung together in units of 1000 coins per string) grew from a few hundred thousand strings to over a million. Seven to eight decades later, annual production reached around six million strings. The Northern Song (960-1126) was estimated to have issued 200 million strings of copper coins, but even such a volume of the metal coinage was insufficient to meet the currency needs of the time. To supplement the shortfall, silver (not minted) also went into circulation also. A more drastic remedy came in the form of paper money printed by the state during the first decade of the eleventh century. This monetary innovation evolved from the use of the certificates of deposit, issued by government agents in favour of merchants or among the merchants themselves during the ninth century. Between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, the use of paper currency became widely adopted in Song China and spread to the neighbouring Liao and Jin empires. In addition to the paper currency, the Song mercantile world also introduced other modern monetary devices, such as promissory notes, bills of exchange, and the cheque. Paper money, made possible by the invention of printing, greatly assisted the Song economic expansion by reducing the pressure on the government mint to provide increasingly large numbers of copper coins, thus removing this monetary impediment to growth. The issue of paper money reached an equivalent of 400 million strings of copper coins during the Southern Song (1126-1279). The Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) which succeeded the Song embraced the use of paper currency. While the Song limited the validity of the issues to certain areas and

periods of time, the Mongols in 1260, already in control of North China and Sichuan, issued a paper currency to be circulated as the only valid form of money, which would not expire, in their Chinese territory. The value of this form of money declined when its conversion into gold or silver was prohibited. The power to print money and to fix the exchange rate between the paper issues and the precious metals, or the power to prohibit such exchanges, could easily be misused or abused by the authorities concerned. The Chinese society suffered the ill consequences of monetary mismanagement at the end of both the Song and the Yuan dynasties.

Intellectual life

The monetary economy was one of the signs of an emergent modern society during Song dynasty China from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, before its appearance in Europe. Indications of a similar trend included: the rapid economic and population expansion; the changes that took place in the socioeconomic relationships in the country side; the burgeoning urban centres that broke down official restrictions so as to enable many newfound freedoms; the increasing population mobility, particularly the movement of people from the countryside into the growing towns and cities; the spread of private schools and of education; and the rise of a new printing industry producing a large volume of printed works, including encyclopaedias and the growth of library collections. Among the important characteristics of the modern world that arose out of the European experience were rationalism and secularism. The Song society was manifestly secular, and its 'renaissance' gentlemen typically cultivated a rational, or even scientific, approach to the acquisition of knowledge. Their intellectual curiosity covered a wide variety of subjects on which they left written records in the form of treatises, monographs, or books. These included the worlds of nature, mathematics, astronomy, geography, cartography, history, archaeology, epigraphy, technology, and medicine. A book published in 1092 (the *Kaogu Tu*) demonstrated one of the first scientific attempt to classify and date the ancient Chinese bronzes. Song scholars' approach to the study of history was notable for their concern to exhaustively seek the sources, which they examined with a critical rationality worthy of their modern counterparts. Their interest in mathematics contributed to the development of algebra. Their scientific aptitude led them to use experiments to test and examine their knowledge critically. Some of their ideas on art would appeal to our contemporary sensibility. Shen Kua, a Song physicist and astronomer who also commented on art, looked upon paintings as pictorial representations that did not need to bear a close visual resemblance to the subjects being painted. In his view, the value of a work of art lay in the revelation of the mind, culture, and human quality of its creator.

During the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, Song China led the world in the volume of trade, level of technology, political organization, scientific knowledge, and in arts and letters. Its population of around

one hundred million was larger than that of the whole of Europe during that time. The technology or inventions of the Song (and those of older dynasties) that were transferred to Europe contributed significantly to the rise of modern Europe. Among these were the compass and sternpost rudder (for navigation), the wheelbarrow, the spinning wheel, the application of watermills to looms, printing and paper, gunpowder, the counterweight trap that revolutionized warfare, and iron casting. Despite the cultural brilliance and economic expansion of the Song, it lacked sufficient military strength to check the irresistible advance of the conquering Mongols, who overcame the last stand of the Song loyalists in 1279.

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