

LINDA WALTON

MIDDLE IMPERIAL CHINA, 900–1350

A New History



MIDDLE IMPERIAL CHINA, 900–1350

In this highly readable and engaging work, Linda Walton presents a dynamic survey of China's history from the tenth through the mid-fourteenth centuries from the founding of the Song dynasty through the Mongol conquest when Song China became part of the Mongol Empire and Marco Polo made his famous journey to the court of the Great Khan. Adopting a thematic approach, she highlights the political, social, economic, intellectual, and cultural changes and continuities of the period often conceptualized as "Middle Imperial China." Themes are addressed that also inform scholarship on world history: religion, the state, the dynamics of empire, the transmission of knowledge, the formation of political elites, gender, and the family. Consistent coverage of peoples beyond the borders – Khitan, Tangut, Jurchen, and Mongol, among others – provides a broader East Asian context and a more regionally and globally integrated representation of China's past.

LINDA WALTON is Professor Emerita of History and International Studies at Portland State University.

NEW APPROACHES TO ASIAN HISTORY

This dynamic new series publishes books on the milestones in Asian history, those that have come to define particular periods or to mark turning points in the political, cultural and social evolution of the region. The books in this series are intended as introductions for students to be used in the classroom. They are written by scholars whose credentials are well established in their particular fields and who have, in many cases, taught the subject across a number of years.

A list of books in the series can be found at the [end of the volume](#).

MIDDLE IMPERIAL CHINA, 900–1350

A New History

LINDA WALTON

Portland State University





CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108420686

DOI: [10.1017/9781108355025](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108355025)

© Linda Walton 2023

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2023

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-108-42068-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-43075-3 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain,
accurate or appropriate.

For Griffin (b. 2017) and Nellie (b. 2021)

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	page x
<i>List of Maps</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiv

Introduction: Middle Imperial China in East Asian and World History 1

Dynastic Cycles and Historical Change	2
What Are the Defining Features of Middle Imperial China, 900–1350?	5
Frameworks for the Book	12

1 The Turbulent Tenth Century: Transforming the East Asian World 14

“Five Dynasties” in the North	15
The Rise of the Khitan Liao	18
“Ten Kingdoms” in the South	22
Agriculture and Economic Development in the South	24
Networks and Nodes of Commercial and Cultural Exchange	25
Reunification	29
Consolidating Rule	31
Making War and Peace: Khitan, Song, Tangut	35

2 Song in a Multipolar World 38

War and Reform in Northern Song	40
Huizong, Reform, and the Fall of the Northern Song	47
The Jurchen Jin Empire	51
Retrenchment and Revival in the Southern Song	54
The Rise of the Mongol Empire and Fall of the Southern Song	56
Empresses Rule!	62
Empire, Territory, and Nation?	65

3 Schooling, State, and Society in Song and Jin 69

From Aristocrats to Bureaucrats	70
Education and the Examination System	74
Court and Countryside: State, Scholars, and Society from Northern to Southern Song	81

	Scholars, State, and Society in the North: Jurchen and Han	85
	Society and State, North and South	89
4	An Economic Revolution?	91
	The Agricultural Economy	93
	Handicraft and Industrial Production	98
	State Monopolies: Mining, Salt, Tea, and Wine	106
	Money and Markets	108
	Foreign Trade: Maritime and Overland	111
	Economic Integration of the East Asian World before the Mongol Conquest	117
5	Cities and Urban Life	120
	Commerce and Cities	122
	Song Imperial Capitals	127
	Courtiers, Commoners, and Urban Cultures	133
	Liao, Jin, and Xi Xia Urban Landscapes: Mobility and Settlement	137
6	Religious Transformations	143
	Buddhism and Empire in Song, Liao, and Xi Xia	144
	Sectarian Developments in Song Buddhism	147
	Buddhism and Popular Religion in the Song	150
	A Daoist Renaissance	153
	The Social Landscapes of Spirituality in the Song	158
	Buddhism and Daoism in the North under the Jin	162
	Religions from the West	164
7	Ways of Knowing: Learning and Knowledge	167
	Northern Song: Classicism and Cosmology	169
	Knowledge and the Natural World in the Northern Song	175
	Southern Song Schools of Thought: The Learning of the Way and Its Rivals	176
	Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism in the North	182
	History as a Way of Knowing	184
8	The Arts of Culture	191
	Painting, Poetry, and Politics	191
	The Tang Legacy and Northern Song Poetry and Prose	193
	Southern Song Poetry, Patriotism, and Society	196
	Jurchen and Chinese Literature in the North	199
	Music, Dramatic Literature, and Theater	201
	Visual Arts and Artists	206
9	Gendered and Generational Lives: Women, Men, Children, and Families	217
	Transformations of Family and Kinship	219
	Women, Marriage, and Gendered Identities	228

Children and Childhood	236
Wives, Widows, and Warriors: Women, Marriage, Status, and Identity under the Liao and Jin	240
The Family and Its Alternatives	242
10 Mapping the Built and Natural Environment	245
A Landscape Shaped by Rivers	246
Forests and the Problem of Deforestation	253
Mapping Territory	256
The Built Environment: The Architecture of the Living and the Dead	259
11 Sustaining Life and Healing Bodies: Food and Medicine	269
Agricultural Commodities: Rice, Tea, Sugar, and Wine	270
Fruits of the Land and Sea	277
Cultural Contexts and Meanings of Food and Drink	281
Regional and Ethnic Cuisine: Differences/Preferences	283
Food and Medicine: From Nourishing to Healing the Body	285
12 The Mongol Yuan Dynasty in China	294
The Impact of the Mongol Conquest on Government and Society	296
Gender and Power: Women, Marriage, Property, and Politics	305
Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism	311
Poetry, Painting, and Performance	313
Foodways and Medical Traditions	321
13 Yuan China in the Mongol Eurasian Empire	324
Qubilai and the Consolidation of Empire: Conquest, Diplomacy, and Commerce	325
“A Soup for the Qan”: Cuisine, Diet, and Medicine	332
The Material Culture of Commerce	336
Religious Cultures, Communities, and Connections	342
A Eurasian World Order?	353
<i>Bibliography</i>	357
<i>Index</i>	400

FIGURES

- 1.1 Stag hunt (detail). Handscroll, ink and color on paper. Attributed to Huang Zongdao, active c. 1120. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York page 19
- 1.2 Portrait of Song Emperor Taizu. Unidentified artist, second half of the tenth century. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 32
- 1.3 Khitan crown. Northern Song. Gilt silver with repoussé decoration. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 36
- 2.1 “Cloud ladder” used for scaling city walls and fortresses 39
- 2.2 Portrait of Song emperor Huizong. Unidentified artist. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 48
- 2.3 Portrait of Chinggis Khan. Unidentified artist. Album leaf, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 59
- 2.4 Portrait of Empress Yang. Unidentified artist, Southern Song. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 63
- 3.1 Portrait of Bi Shichang. Unidentified artist. Album leaf, ink and color on silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 73
- 3.2 Diagram of Jiankang Prefectural School 78
- 3.3 Stone rubbing of the title plaque for a Confucian temple. National Palace Museum, Taipei 81
- 4.1 “Rice Culture, or Sowing and Reaping” (detail). Unidentified artist, before 1353. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 97
- 4.2 Winnowing fan. From Wang Zhen (fl. c. 1333), *Nong shu* (1875–1908 Guangya shuju ed.), 14.10. HathiTrust (digitized from Harvard University Library copy) 97
- 4.3 Liang Kai, attrib., “Silk Technology” (detail). Early thirteenth century. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Cleveland Museum of Art 101
- 4.4 Bronze coin with inscription *Chongning tongbao* (currency of the Chongning (1102–1106) reign). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 109
- 4.5 Southern Song *huizi* printing plate 110
- 5.1 Zhang Zeduan, *Spring Festival along the River* (detail). Early twelfth century. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing 129

- 5.2 Zhang Zeduan, *Spring Festival along the River* (detail). Early twelfth century. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Palace Museum, Beijing 130
- 5.3 Lin'an (Hangzhou) imperial city diagram 134
- 6.1 Zhao Guangfu, attrib., *Barbarian Royalty Worshipping the Buddha* (detail). Handscroll, ink and color on silk. Cleveland Museum of Art 146
- 6.2 Seated bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in Water Moon form, eleventh century. Liao (?). Wood (willow) with traces of pigment. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 147
- 6.3 Jin Chushi, from series "Ten Kings of Hell," portraying the fifth king, Yama (before 1195). Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 152
- 6.4 Page from *Yunji qiqian* (Seven Lots from the Bookbag of the Clouds), compiled by Zhang Junfang (fl. 1008–1029). 1609 printed edition. National Palace Museum, Taipei 155
- 6.5 Page from *Tianzhu lingqian* (Tianzhu Oracle Slips), 1208–1224 157
- 7.1 Diagram of the Great Ultimate 173
- 7.2 Su Song's clocktower 177
- 7.3 Portrait of Sima Guang. Unidentified artist. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 185
- 8.1 Guo Xi, *Early Spring* (1072). Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 193
- 8.2 Actor, thirteenth century. Stoneware with glaze. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 204
- 8.3 Ceramic pillow with actors, late thirteenth century. Cizhou stoneware. Cincinnati Museum of Art 205
- 8.4 Li Cheng, *Solitary Temple Amid Clearing Peaks*. Hanging scroll, ink on silk. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City 209
- 8.5 Huizong, "Ode to Peonies." Album leaf, butterfly binding (paper). National Palace Museum, Taipei 212
- 8.6 Ma Yuan, "Viewing Plum Blossoms by Moonlight." Fan mounted as album leaf, ink and colors on silk. Metropolitan Museum of Art 214
- 8.7 Li Song, attrib., *The Knickknack Peddler* (1210?). Fan mounted as an album leaf, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum 216
- 9.1 Li Gonglin, *Illustrations of the Classic of Filial Piety*, "Serving Parents." Handscroll, ink on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 225
- 9.2 Ma Hezhi, attrib., *Ladies' Classic of Filial Piety*, "Wife Paying Respect to Husband." Twelfth century. Handscroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 229
- 9.3 "Women and Children by a Lotus Pond." Southern Song, first half of thirteenth century. Album leaf, ink and color on silk. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 237
- 10.1 Topographical map of Lin'an prefecture 259
- 10.2 *Diantang* (palatial-style hall). After Li Jie, *Building Standards* (*Yingzao fashi*) 261

- 10.3 Liao timber pagoda 262
- 10.4 City wall. From Zeng Gongliang, *Essentials of the Military Classics* (*Wujing zongyao qianji*) (1044) 263
- 11.1 Liu Songnian, attrib., *Preparing Ground Tea*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 273
- 11.2 Page from *Zengzhu taiping huimin heji jufang* (Annotated Formulae of the Pharmacy Service for Benefiting the People in an Era of Great Peace), orig. 1110, 1304 printed edition. National Palace Museum, Taipei 288
- 11.3 Li Tang, attrib., *A Physician Applying Moxibustion*. Hanging scroll, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 292
- 12.1 *Six Horses* (detail). Thirteenth–fourteenth centuries. Unidentified artists. Handscroll, ink and color on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 296
- 12.2 Mongol infantry archer 297
- 12.3 Portrait of Qubilai Khan. Unidentified artist. Album leaf, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 298
- 12.4 Safe conduct pass (*paiza*). Late thirteenth century. Iron with silver inlay. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 302
- 12.5 Portrait of Chabi. Unidentified artist. Album leaf, ink and color on silk. National Palace Museum, Taipei 310
- 12.6 Zhao Mengfu, *Grooms and Horses* (detail, 1296). Handscroll, ink and color on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 315
- 12.7 Ni Zan, *Enjoying the Wilderness in an Autumn Grove* (1339). Hanging scroll, ink on paper. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 318
- 12.8 Portrait of Ni Zan (detail). Unidentified artist. Mid-fourteenth century. Handscroll, ink and color on paper. National Palace Museum, Taipei 322
- 13.1 Shallot (“Muslim onion”) and fungus (“heavenly flower”) 335
- 13.2 Embroidered silk canopy with phoenixes and flowers. Yuan (1271–1368). Silk and metallic thread embroidery on silk gauze. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 339
- 13.3 Ceramics from the Sinan shipwreck. Photograph by permission of the National Research Institute of Marine Cultural Property, Republic of Korea 340
- 13.4 Blue-and-white porcelain plate with carp design and Islamic motifs. Jingdezhen. Mid-fourteenth century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 342
- 13.5 Tibetan Buddhist Vajrabhairava Mandala, c. 1330–1332. Silk tapestry (*kesi*). 13.5a Detail (lower left corner). 13.5b Detail (lower right corner). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 346
- 13.6 Syro-Uighur-Chinese tombstone inscription rubbing 348

MAPS

1.1	Mid-tenth-century China	<i>page</i>	30	
2.1	Northern Song, Khitan Liao, Tangut Xi Xia, c 1100			47
2.2	Southern Song and its neighbors, c. 1200		57	
4.1	Maritime Asia during the Song		116	
5.1	Tang Chang'an		123	
5.2	Quanzhou		126	
5.3	Southern Song Hangzhou		132	
5.4	Liao and Xi Xia (Tangut) capitals		141	
10.1	Physical map of continental East Asia			247
10.2	Diagram of Song Kaifeng		250	
12.1	Yuan China in 1291		295	
12.2	Plan of Dadu		300	
13.1	Maritime and continental Asia during the Yuan			333

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The immense debt I owe to colleagues in the field whose labors fill these pages will be obvious to any reader, and I sincerely hope that these colleagues will be gratified, not disappointed, by the use I have made of their work. I would like to thank especially Patricia Ebrey, Valerie Hansen, Charles Hartman, Robert Hymes, and Alfreda Murck for various forms of support and assistance at different stages of this project. Commissioning editor Lucy Rhymer and her assistant, Emily Plater, both deserve thanks for their encouragement and support throughout the long process of creating this book, from start to finish. Closer to home, I am indebted to the extraordinarily hardworking staff of the sorely underfunded Portland State University Library, particularly Herminia (Min) Cedillo of Interlibrary Loan, Joan Petit, and Jian Wang for ongoing help in obtaining materials, especially during the challenging circumstances imposed by the COVID pandemic. I am also deeply grateful for the astonishing changes in the museum world over the past few years that have opened access to thousands of high-resolution images online for use in the public domain. For the images in this book, I have thus been able to take advantage of the rich collections of Asian art held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the National Palace Museum, Taipei, along with the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.

Another kind of scholarly debt is owed to the late Frederick Mote and to Dieter Kuhn, both of whom authored books that successfully took on the challenge of synthesis, though on vastly different scales. Mote's *Imperial China, 900–1800* (1999), with its multi-dynastic coverage over nearly a millennium is unsurpassed in its range and depth, particularly with regard to its inclusion of non-Han peoples in the history of imperial China. Kuhn's *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (2009), part of the *History of Imperial China* series published by Harvard University Press, focuses on the Song dynasty alone, masterfully narrating the history of this dynasty from the perspective of “Confucian rule,” but not to the exclusion of other important topics (such as the economy, urban life, and so on). I have been inspired by both of these books, and hope that this book offers yet another valuable model of synthesis and scope. Readers will note that the

scholarship cited here is almost entirely in English. The justification for this from my point of view is that relevant scholarship in the English-speaking world is vast enough to present a daunting challenge to any attempt at synthesis, and that it is virtually impossible for a single scholar to be familiar with the wide range of scholarship in European languages, as well as Chinese, Japanese, and/or Korean, well enough to make use of beyond one's own area of expertise. I hope this explanation will convince most readers as a validation of the approach taken here.



Introduction

Middle Imperial China in East Asian and World History

Since the earliest written records in China, dynastic chronology has framed its history. As elsewhere in world history, dynasties were defined by a succession of rulers descended from one family line. Transcending dynastic chronology, the term “Middle Imperial China” typically refers to the dynasties of Tang (618–907), Song (960–1279), Liao (907–1125), Jin (1115–1234), and Yuan (1260–1368), between the Early Imperial (Qin, 221 BCE–210 BCE, and Han, 207 BCE–220 CE) and Late Imperial (Ming, 1368–1644 and Qing, 1644–1910) periods. Institutions of centralized government under the rule of an emperor were created in the Qin and Han, and these served as the foundation for the imperial state in both the Middle Imperial and Late Imperial periods. But beyond this general framework, what does “Middle Imperial” mean and why is it important?

Sandwiched between “Early” and “Late,” Middle Imperial China is used in its widest meaning to refer to the reunified empire in the Tang dynasty, following three centuries of divided rule, through the beginning of the Ming dynasty, which restored “native” Han Chinese rule after the Mongol Yuan dynasty.¹ In this book we adopt a more limited chronology, from the collapse of the Tang (907) through the decline of the Yuan (1368), in order to focus attention on the Song, Liao, Jin, and Yuan. One way to define what is “middle” about this period is to see it as beginning with the collapse of the Tang imperial order, both internally as a centralized empire and externally as the dominant power in East Asia, and ending on the eve of the restoration of Han Chinese rule by the Ming. Tang cultural and political influence on the Korean peninsula, in the Japanese archipelago, and in states to the south that Tang people knew as Nanzhao (modern Yunnan province) and Annam (modern Vietnam), waned with the breakdown of Tang imperial authority after the rebellion of the Turko-Sogdian general An Lushan (755–763), bringing to an end the Early Imperial period and ushering in the Middle Imperial. Middle Imperial China is equally defined by both economic and social transformations, generated by

¹ Here and throughout, “Han” will be used to refer to peoples or regimes that identify as culturally/ethnically “Chinese” (or not, as in “non-Han”). This is a practical usage chosen for efficiency, acknowledging that such terminology obscures many issues and thus remains problematic.

changes begun already in the eighth century, as well as by the restoration of a unified empire under the Song. Incursions into Song territory by the Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin, and ultimately conquest by the Mongols, definitively altered political circumstances, and consequently both social and economic conditions, in the area we now think of as China.

Given the significant non-Han presence in the history of this era, what exactly does “China” in the Middle Imperial period mean? Often seen as the culmination of a long series of encounters between China and its nomadic neighbors, the Mongol conquest and the legacy of its predecessor states (Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin) greatly complicate the meaning of the China part of Middle Imperial China. In fact, the old name “Cathay,” which Europeans in the Mongol era knew as the region north of the Huai River and which was often used broadly to refer to China as a whole, derived from “Kitay” (Khitan), the people who founded the Liao Empire in Northeast Asia.² Apart from the important question of what, if any, meaning the modern concept of ethnicity had to people of this era in what we now call “China,” native subjects of the previous Tang dynasty were not only culturally influenced by non-Han peoples and cultures from beyond the Great Wall but many – including the ruling house – were also themselves descendants of intermarriage between Han and non-Han. Consequently, although the term “Han” derives from the name of the first major dynasty, “Han” (or its opposite, “non-Han”) is of limited utility in describing people’s identities. China can also be understood in a spatial sense, as a geographic territory, the homeland of people who call themselves Han (or Chinese). But even that territorial designation is problematic, bearing as it does the anachronistic connotation of firmly drawn boundaries of the modern nation-state.³ However, in practice it is convenient to use the terms Han and non-Han and to refer to, for example, Song China, as long as it is done with the awareness that these are imprecise, and sometimes misleading, terms.

Dynastic Cycles and Historical Change

In the moral universe of Chinese historical chronicles, the character of rulers determined the rise and fall of dynasties. Dynasties experienced stages – birth, maturation, death – producing a pattern known as the dynastic cycle. Influenced

² Christian de Pee, “Cycles of Cathay: Sinology, Philology, and Histories of the Song Dynasty (960–1279) in the United States,” *Fragments* 2 (2012): 35.

³ For a study of the spatial organization and administration of the state during the Song, see Ruth Mostern, “*Dividing the Realm in Order to Govern*”: *The Spatial Organization of the Song State (960–1276 C.E.)*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011). For a provocative study of the origins of the Chinese nation in the Song, see Nicolas Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

by the narrative of these chronicles, generations of historians in both Asia and the West viewed the Song dynasty founders as vigorous leaders, while later emperors, such as Huizong (r. 1101–1126), who reigned over the loss of the north to Jurchen invaders, were often seen as effete and dissipated. After the rebirth of the Song dynasty as the Southern Song (1127–1279), this regime once again fell prey to invaders from the north, the Mongols, who were building their own world empire. Because the Song was also known for its cultural achievements – notably in poetry and landscape painting – the dynasty as a whole was thus traditionally regarded as culturally and artistically vibrant but militarily and politically weak. It compared unfavorably with the exuberant Tang dynasty, whose empire dominated East Asia, producing brilliant generals as well as scholars and poets. The Mongol Yuan dynasty in turn was typically seen as a nonnative conquest dynasty that was able to take advantage of Song military weakness and for the first time conquer all of China. The Yuan was replaced after barely a century by the restoration of native rule under the Ming. Foreign rule returned with the Manchu conquest in the mid-seventeenth century, and, unlike the short-lived Mongol Yuan, the Manchu Qing ruled for nearly three centuries (1644–1911). An important responsibility of each successive dynasty was the compilation of the history of the preceding dynasty by court historians, whose objectivity was circumscribed by the need to reinforce the legitimacy of the reigning dynasty. In the case of foreign rule, the power of dynastic periodization was such that under the Mongol Yuan, the histories of Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin were incorporated into the official dynastic histories, and they were therefore regarded as legitimate inheritors of the “Mandate of Heaven,” the right to rule endowed by the moral order of the cosmos.

Dynastic periodization, and the historical patterns of rise and fall it supported, fell out of fashion when early twentieth-century Chinese historians sought to place the history of China within a universal timeline of historical progress: ancient, medieval, modern. Nationalist Chinese historians were prepared to abandon dynastic chronology associated with the collapsed empire in favor of one that measured historical change in China alongside that of the West. China’s history was thus related to world history by means of a linear evolutionary chronology culminating in the creation of the modern world. With the post-World War II and postcolonial development of a global history that questioned European Enlightenment notions of historical progress toward modernity, the record of China’s past has contributed to revisions of the ancient–medieval–modern paradigm. Nowhere is this more apparent than with studies of the Song. The Song economy in particular exhibits features that fit models of development – urbanization, industrialization, technology – in early modern Europe, thus raising fundamental questions about periodization in world history. What exactly is “early modern”? To what degree has the use of

periodization rooted in European historical experience obscured patterns in China's past?

Adapting the ancient–medieval–modern timeline to China's history, the Japanese Sinologist Naitō Konan (1866–1934) was among the first to propose the Song period as the beginning of “modern” (*kinsei*) China, introducing the notion of the “Tang–Song transformation” as the crucial watershed in China's history.⁴ Prewar Japanese Sinology produced important research on the Song that inspired and underpinned the work of Euro-American scholars beginning in the 1950s. During this same period, in the Chinese-speaking world, both European Enlightenment and Marxist historical models contended as interpretive frameworks for the Chinese past. In the aftermath of the 1949 Revolution, and until at least the 1980s, Marxist ideas of class struggle and economic systems as the basis of historical change prevailed in the People's Republic of China (PRC), while Western approaches and methodologies influenced the work of Chinese historians elsewhere (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore).

Indebted to Japanese as well as Chinese scholarship ongoing throughout the twentieth century, Euro-American scholars moved initially from text-based interdisciplinary Sinology to more social-scientific studies of Song society, economy, and politics.⁵ Already during the 1950s John King Fairbank and his colleagues at Harvard began to incorporate the idea of the Tang–Song transformation and of the Song as an era of major economic, social, and cultural/intellectual developments into their teaching, a perspective that shaped the narrative of their groundbreaking 1960 textbook *East Asia: The Great Tradition*. Mark Elvin's *The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation* (1973) drew extensively on both Chinese and Japanese scholarship to promote the idea of the Tang–Song transformation to Western scholars. Despite the fact that many of the arguments presented by Elvin have been challenged and revised, the overall perspective he proposed remains influential. In part as a result of Elvin's work, by the 1970s historians of China had begun to adopt a periodization paradigm different from (though not unrelated to) that of ancient–medieval–modern: Early Imperial, Middle Imperial, Late(r) Imperial. Grounded in a “China-centered” approach,⁶ this new framework focused attention on changes in state–society relations and on the economic, social, cultural, and intellectual developments that defined each

⁴ For a thorough and insightful review of this topic, see Richard von Glahn, “Imagining Premodern China,” in *The Song–Yuan–Ming Transition in Chinese History*, ed. Paul Jakov Smith and Richard von Glahn (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2003), 35–70.

⁵ De Pee, “Cycles of Cathay,” 35–67.

⁶ Paul A. Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past*, Studies of the East Asian Institute (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

period. Although the characteristic features of each of these eras were in theory drawn directly from Chinese historical experience, they still led to a modernity defined essentially by the West.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw an explosion in studies of the Song by scholars in the PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Japan, Europe, and North America.⁷ The digital revolution has also had a profound impact, generating biographical databases and GIS mapping for the Song (and later eras).⁸ Until the past two decades, studies of the Khitan Liao, Jurchen Jin, and Mongol Yuan peoples and dynasties were relatively sparse, but in recent years these have increased dramatically. Emphasis on cultural diversity as well as political issues surrounding the role of minority peoples – both in the PRC and elsewhere – have drawn attention to rulers of China whose origins lay beyond the Great Wall, and studies of the Mongol Yuan in the context of steppe empires as a global historical phenomenon have shed new light on this dynastic phase in the history of China.

What Are the Defining Features of Middle Imperial China, 900–1350?

From a dynastic perspective, the tenth century began with the collapse of the Tang dynasty and ended with reunification under the Song dynasty. The founding of the Song dynasty brought to an end to the last era of political fragmentation (Five Dynasties, 907–960) in the history of imperial China. To place the theme of unification in a broader historical context, the Roman (31 BCE–476 CE) and Han (207 BCE–220 CE) Empires created political unity at the western and eastern ends of Eurasia before eventually disintegrating. Although attempts were made to reconstitute the Roman Empire (Holy Roman Empire, Eastern Roman Empire), they never fully succeeded. By contrast, imperial unity was restored in China by the Sui (581–617) and Tang (618–907) dynasties. After the Song unification, apart from the century and a half of division between Northern (960–1126) and Southern Song (1127–1279) due to the Jurchen Jin conquest of the north, China was essentially a unified empire well into the twentieth century.

Political Unification and Power

Political unification, then, is a key theme in the history of Middle Imperial China, along with the evolving relationship between emperor and bureaucracy. Although the growth of autocracy is no longer seen as a defining feature

⁷ Bibliographies and reviews of scholarship in China and Japan have appeared periodically in the *Journal of Song–Yuan Studies*.

⁸ See the Harvard-based China Historical GIS (CH-GIS) and Chinese Biographical Database (CBDB).

of Song (as proposed by Naitō and his followers), the nature of imperial authority remains central to understanding the political history of the Song and later. Achieving balance both between civilian and military authority and between emperor and bureaucracy was a fundamental concern of Song governance. The official bureaucracy, largely recruited and selected through the civil service examinations, performed its necessary functions of administration; but at the highest levels of government, the most important officials were appointed and served at the behest of the emperor.

The Song inherited its basic institutional structure of government from the Tang: emperor at the top, overseeing a three-pronged structure incorporating military, central administrative, and censorial (a watchdog agency that monitored other government offices) functions. By the ninth century, Tang imperial power rested on the support of regional military leaders, who gradually became independent of the center and eventually withdrew even nominal support for the Tang emperor. The Song founder came to power as a military leader in one of the Five Dynasties that contended for power during the tenth century in the aftermath of the Tang collapse. Once political unification was achieved, in order to maintain its control of people and defend its territory the Song state had to collect sufficient revenues from its population to support both administrative operations and the military. The Song founder and his successors were well aware of the importance of maintaining military and fiscal control over regional administrative units. Control of the military was highly centralized, and fiscal operations were similarly controlled through central government agencies, although differing regional conditions necessitated a degree of decentralization reflected in the evolution of province-like “circuits” that formed an intermediate layer of governance.

Although both the Khitan Liao and Jurchen Jin ruled over Han Chinese populations, adopting and adapting Song political institutions of centralized government, the Mongol Yuan as a dynasty of conquest was faced with the most daunting task of ruling the whole of both north and south China. Yuan rulers for the first time created the institutional structure of a nomadic-agrarian bureaucratic empire, going beyond their predecessors. Building on Song, Liao, and Jin political institutions, the Mongol Yuan crafted institutional approaches to governing that served their own distinctive political, social, economic, and cultural needs as nomadic rulers of a centralized agrarian empire.

Changes in Economy and Society

Beyond the framework of dynastic rise and fall reflected in political history, historians studying social and economic change have characterized the centuries between around 750 (mid-Tang) and 1250 (the demise of Southern Song) as experiencing an economic revolution, or at the least a transformation in both society and economy. The velocity and nature of these changes differed dramatically across regions. Beginning with anthropologist G. William Skinner’s work in

the 1970s, historians have been careful to recognize the limitations of generalizing observations for all of China.⁹ Despite his focus on regional developmental cycles, Skinner recognized the relevance of the dynastic cycle model to charting economic growth, which was dependent on the stability of the political order and its capacity to ensure the flow of goods, the functioning of markets, and so on.¹⁰ Following Skinner, Robert Hartwell argued that there were cycles of economic change during the Song that differed in timing and scale depending on the region.¹¹ From an empire-wide perspective, Shiba Yoshinobu and Joseph McDermott have proposed a tripartite economic periodization over the course of the Song: expansion and regional development, continuity, decline.¹² Other historians have focused studies of economic and social change where appropriate on discrete regional or local units over varying periods of time.¹³ Despite disagreements about specific features, the general nature of economic change is widely agreed upon: commercialization, the development of a market economy (including transportation and distribution networks), monetization, and urbanization.

By contrast, however, both the precise timing and the nature of accompanying social changes have been hotly debated even when the general contours of change are accepted: the decline, demise, disappearance of the great clans of the Tang and their replacement by new families who gained power not through inherited status – ascription – but through achievement, increasingly demonstrated by selection through the civil service examinations, which tested candidates' knowledge of classical learning and awarded degrees leading to official appointments in the imperial government. John Chaffee's 1985 seminal work on the Song examination system showed how this complex bureaucratic operation not only produced officeholders for government administration but also began to penetrate Song society and culture.¹⁴ Thomas Lee's related work published in the same year focused on the education system that underpinned the examinations.¹⁵

⁹ G. William Skinner, "Presidential Address: The Structure of Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 2 (1985): 271–292.

¹⁰ Skinner, "Presidential Address: The Structure of Chinese History," 281.

¹¹ Robert M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750–1550," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 2 (1982): 365–432.

¹² Joseph P. McDermott and Yoshinobu Shiba, "Economic Change in China, 960–1279," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 5, Part Two: The Five Dynasties and Sung China, 960–1279 AD*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John W. Chaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 321–436.

¹³ See, for example, Joseph Peter McDermott, *The Making of a New Rural Order in South China* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ John W. Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of Examinations*, Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature, and Institutions (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

¹⁵ Thomas H. C. Lee, *Government Education and Examinations in Sung China* (New York and Hong Kong: St. Martin's and Chinese University Press, 1985).

Robert Hartwell asserted that Tang aristocratic clans were replaced after the founding of the Northern Song by a professional elite whose skills in essential government tasks – in his case study, financial administration – made them vital to the operation of the state.¹⁶ Robert Hymes expanded and refined this argument by demonstrating, through a dense study of marriage patterns, kinship ties, and local activism in one prefecture, that the nature of local elite power and status shifted from Northern to Southern Song: from a “national” elite whose marriage ties extended across the empire to a local one, whose interests and patterns of marriage were essentially limited to their native locality.¹⁷ Beverly Bossler challenged this by showing that the perception of a shift in the nature of the elite from Northern to Southern Song was at least in part a historiographical illusion created by the nature of the sources, and that powerful families retained national ties in the Southern Song as well as being rooted in local communities.¹⁸

Tracing social change begins with the primary unit of the family: marriages unite families and build kinship ties over generations, and gender relations defined in family life serve as models for society at large. During the Song period, rituals of family life were revised to accord with social ideals envisioned by scholars such as Zhu Xi (1130–1200).¹⁹ Song legal cases preserved in *The Enlightened Judgments*, a thirteenth-century collection, reflect the often contentious application of law to family disputes, and the unsurprising lack of fit between Confucian ideals and social practice.²⁰ The role of women both within the family and household and beyond it was idealized by Confucian scholars, but again, as the practice of daily life often conflicted with those ideals, we should expect that many women did not fit the ideal mold that was provided for them by male scholars and expected by their male relatives.²¹

¹⁶ Robert M. Hartwell, “Financial Expertise, Examinations, and the Formulation of Economic Policy in Northern Sung China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 30, no. 2 (1971): 281–314.

¹⁷ Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-Chou, Chiang-Hsi, in Northern and Southern Sung*, Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature, and Institutions (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹⁸ Beverly Jo Bossler, *Powerful Relations: Kinship, Status, and the State in Sung China (960–1279)*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Patricia B. Ebrey, *Chu Hsi’s Family Rituals: A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites*, Princeton Library of Asian Translations (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

²⁰ *The Enlightened Judgments: Ch’ing-ming Chi: The Sung Dynasty Collection*, trans. Brian E. McKnight and James T.C. Liu, Suny Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

²¹ Patricia B. Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Beverly Jo Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines, and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in*

Changes in economy and society under the Khitan Liao, Jurchen Jin, and Mongol Yuan are much harder to trace, in part because of limitations of written sources and in part because less scholarship has been produced. Both of these conditions, however, are changing rapidly. Although Elvin argued in *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* that the Mongol conquest brought an end to the vibrant economic revolution of the Song, subsequent research has yielded a far more complex understanding of economic – and social – change during the Yuan. The history of the Mongol Yuan, and to some extent that of the Jurchen Jin, is better documented in written sources than that of the Khitan Liao, but archaeological work has provided a rich source of new materials on the Khitan in particular that documents Khitan society and economy in far greater depth than before.²²

Intellectual and Cultural Life

Ideas that shaped family life and gender relations in the Song were rooted in intellectual changes traceable to the late Tang. Thinkers such as Han Yu (768–824) sought to revive a classical Confucian heritage believed to have been lost in the waves of Buddhist influence that inundated China after the fall of the Han in the third century. During the Northern Song, a number of thinkers developed the fundamental principles that became associated with “Neo-Confucianism”: a cosmology based on the concepts of *li* (Principle/Pattern) and *qi* (Matter/Energy) as the primary elements of the universe.²³ These concepts were also applied to the human world, providing an explanatory basis for ideals of human behavior and for the order of human society.²⁴ The creation of a Confucian cosmology as the basis for moral cultivation has often been described as a response to Buddhist (and/or Daoist) metaphysics, thereby securing a metaphysical or cosmological grounding for classical Confucianism, based on moral codes of conduct and correct ritual practice transmitted in texts. Neo-Confucianism came to dominate the intellectual world of Song China, and Mongol rulers also adopted it as official orthodoxy for the civil service examinations, ensuring Neo-Confucianism’s dominance in the scholarly world of Yuan China.

Literature was an integral part of intellectual life in these centuries, as it had been earlier. Poetry flourished in the Song, which saw the continuation of

China, 1000–1400, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

²² Valerie Hansen and François Louis, “Introduction, Part 1: Evolving Approaches to the Study of the Liao,” *Journal of Song–Yuan Studies* 43 (2003): 1–9.

²³ Peter Kees Bol, *“This Culture of Ours”: Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

²⁴ Peter Kees Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, Harvard East Asian Monographs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008).

earlier forms along with the development particularly of the song lyric (*ci*).²⁵ Statesmen were poets as well as scholars, and the range of topics addressed in various kinds of poetry was vast.²⁶ Intimate family life was as much the focus of poetry as was nature. Poetry and visual art – painting – were also linked, as poetry was inscribed on paintings in elegant calligraphy to add meaning to the visual depictions. By the early Yuan period, a new literary and cultural form had evolved: drama. Plays and musical performances were a lively part of life under the Jurchen in north China, and dramatic arts blossomed under the Mongols.²⁷

Religion and Society

Transmitted overland and by maritime routes from the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism took root in China after the fall of the Han in the third century. Religious life at this time was dominated by Daoism, an extremely complex and diverse collection of ideas and practices that are poorly represented by a single term. Daoism, however, did provide a vocabulary that helped translate Buddhist concepts from Sanskrit and Pali scriptures into Chinese. The Sanskrit Buddhist concept of *tathātā* (thusness, ultimate reality), for example, was translated by the Daoist term *benwu* (original nonbeing). The spread and flourishing of Buddhism in the Tang eventually brought political, economic, and cultural backlash that resulted in prohibitions on the economic privileges of Buddhist monastic institutions, and ideological attacks by Confucian scholars on Buddhism as a foreign religion. Despite these setbacks in the ninth century, Buddhism flourished once again in the tenth through fourteenth centuries.²⁸ Buddhism in this era is often characterized using the term “popularization,” and this is accurate as a depiction of the laicization of Buddhism and its spread throughout local communities, temples, and so on. Rulers of the Khitan Liao and Tangut Xi Xia (1032–1227) also patronized Buddhism, which flourished among their populations. Daoism also

²⁵ For a general introduction to the topic, see Kōjirō Yoshikawa and Burton Watson, *An Introduction to Sung Poetry*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

²⁶ On the pre-eminent poet and scholar Su Shi, see Ronald Egan, *Word, Image, and Deed in the Life of Su Shi*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies Harvard-Yenching Institute, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1994).

²⁷ Stephen H. West, *Vaudeville and Narrative: Aspects of Chin Theater*, 1st ed., Münchener Ostasiatische Studien (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977); Stephen H. West and W. L. Idema, *The Orphan of Zhao and Other Yuan Plays: The Earliest Known Versions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Chung-wen Shih, *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama, Yüan Tsa-Chü* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

²⁸ Peter N. Gregory and Daniel Aaron Getz, *Buddhism in the Sung*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

experienced what many refer to as a “renaissance,” characterized by the development of many new regional traditions during the tenth through fourteenth centuries, some of which spread throughout the empire.²⁹ Daoist liturgies and ritual practices evolved and were reconstituted as part of both clerical and lay life among followers of Daoism, who might also practice Buddhist rituals and carry out sacrifices at shrines to local deities.³⁰

The “vernacularization” of beliefs and practices describes an overall transformation of religion, transcending the boundaries between official religions, whether Buddhism, Daoism, or the imperial rituals of state religion. Individuals drew on a variety of different beliefs and ritual practices according to their efficacy in meeting human needs for solace and hope in the face of life-cycle dramas and in providing the immediate benefits of healing medicine. Beyond the realm of Sinified Buddhism, indigenous Daoism, and ubiquitous local gods and spirits, other religions imported into China also drew followers. Persian Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, Eastern Syriac Christianity and Roman Catholicism, as well as Islam, all were part of the religious landscape during this era. The Mongol conquest expanded the influence of Eastern Syriac Christianity and Islam, while at the same time promoting Tibetan Buddhism.

Technology, Trade, and Maritime Networks

Looking outward from domestic political, economic, social, religious, and cultural life, China during the tenth through fourteenth centuries was embedded in a wider world of both land frontiers with powerful neighbors and maritime networks that stretched from the Sea of Japan to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.³¹ Technological advances in shipbuilding – both riverine and oceangoing vessels – made possible longer-distance trading, as did more sophisticated navigational knowledge and aids. At the state level, government offices located at ports such as Mingzhou (modern Ningbo) and Quanzhou along the southeast coast supervised maritime trade, assessing taxes on incoming goods and even aiding foreign merchants who often resided for extended periods in port cities. Major exports consisted of

²⁹ Robert P. Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

³⁰ Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

³¹ See, for example, Tansen Sen, “The Formation of Chinese Maritime Networks to Southern Asia, 1200–1450,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49, no. 4 (2006): 421–453; Angela Schottenhammer, *The Emporium of the World: Maritime Quanzhou, 1000–1400*, Sinica Leidensia (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2001). Angela Schottenhammer, “China’s Emergence as a Maritime Power,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 5, Part Two: The Five Dynasties and Sung China, 960–1279 AD*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John W. Chaffee, *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 437–525.

ceramics (including newly invented porcelain), metals, and silk and other textiles; major imports included aromatics, perfumes, and drugs. Revenues from maritime trade made a significant contribution to Song state finances, as did commercial taxes in general assessed on the booming commercial economy. The expansion of maritime trade was not unrelated to the disruption in overland trade routes precipitated by political instability in eastern Eurasia in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³² In other ways, too, the presence of formidable foes on its inland borders to the north and west, in particular, influenced the economy of the Song through the development of the tea and horse trade in Sichuan and the northwest, and by necessitating huge expenditures on the military for defense.³³ The Mongol conquest decisively disrupted many earlier patterns of exchange, while enhancing others, such as the Silk Road, where Mongol political control eased the flow of caravans across Eurasia by providing relatively secure passage through territories previously controlled by different – and often hostile – states. The Mongols likewise took advantage of Song maritime trade routes to pursue their own diplomatic and commercial connections across the South Seas and the Indian Ocean.

Frameworks for the Book

These brief topical sketches are designed to whet the appetite of the reader, and to introduce some of the main threads of a storyline. This storyline might be bookended by two related statements made by the editor of the Song volume in a definitive series on Chinese history: the first describes the Song as not only surviving but thriving in “the most multipolar East Asian world in Chinese imperial history”;³⁴ the second says that the Mongol conquest “marked the end of a multipolar world that had existed since the late eighth century.”³⁵ The consequences of the Mongol conquest for Chinese and Eurasian history were profound, but its precise impact on political, economic, cultural, and social life was complex and remains inadequately understood. This book aims to place

³² John Chaffee, “Song China and the Multi-state and Commercial World of East Asia,” *Crossroads: Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World* 1 (2010): 38–39.

³³ Paul J. Smith, *Taxing Heaven’s Storehouse: Horses, Bureaucrats, and the Destruction of the Sichuan Tea Industry, 1074–1224*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, distributed by Harvard University Press, 1991). For military expenditures as a major portion of the state budget, see Peter Lorge, “Military Institutions as a Defining Feature of the Song Dynasty,” *Journal of Chinese History* 1, no. 2 (2017): 276.

³⁴ John W. Chaffee, “Introduction: Reflections on the Sung,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 5, Part Two: The Five Dynasties and Sung China, 960–1279 AD*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John W. Chaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

³⁵ Chaffee, “Introduction: Reflections on the Sung,” 18.

Chinese history within its Eurasian world setting, and to reflect as fully as possible the current state of knowledge about the many and diverse actors and players on that stage: Khitan, Jurchen, Tanguts, Uighurs, Tibetans, and Mongols. Each chapter addresses a discrete theme to be interwoven with the others over time. Chronology and theme intersect throughout the book, drawing the reader's attention both to temporal setting and to a thematic context, such as urbanization. At the same time, periodic markers of world-historical context will provide readers with a guide to understanding the place of this part of eastern Eurasia in a global narrative of human historical experience.

The Turbulent Tenth Century

Transforming the East Asian World

Sandwiched between the decline of the Tang dynasty and the rise of the Song, the “interregnum” of the tenth century was long regarded as little more than a brief interruption between the settled and orderly patterns of unified empire. Recent scholarship, however, has shown the tenth century to be a critical turning point in many ways.¹ In 900 the Tang empire was collapsing, heralding the demise of an East Asian world order centered on the Tang imperium. As the great aristocratic families of the Tang grappled with the end of their social and political worlds, new powers rose to establish regional military regimes, north, south, east, and west. What did the collapse of the Tang mean to rulers and peoples in the rest of Central, East, and Southeast Asia? The era known as the “Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms” briefly captured the political stage following the fall of the Tang, inheriting Tang institutions but also absorbing institutional and cultural influences across shifting frontiers and borderlands. The ruler of one of the Five Dynasties went on to become the founder of the Song in 960. While the political map and social order were dramatically transformed during the tenth century, what happened to the market economy in cities and countryside, and to the overland and maritime trading networks established earlier?

Viewing the histories of regional regimes in tenth-century China as merely an interregnum punctuating the main dynastic storyline of the Tang collapse and Song founding fixes our attention on what came before and after. Such a perspective distracts us from considering the historical contingencies and thus unrealized possibilities presented by this era.² Was it inevitable that China would be reunified under a new dynasty as it was by the founder of the Sui dynasty (589–617) after the fall of the Han and the intervening Period of Division (c.250–550)? The reunification of China in the Sui–Tang period has been contrasted with the breakup of the Roman imperium after the fall of Rome, a historical process that set the stage for the rise of distinct European “feudal” polities and ultimately nation-states. After the Tang in turn collapsed

¹ See, for example, Hugh R. Clark, “Why Does the Tang–Song Interregnum Matter? A Focus on the Economies of the South,” *Journal of Song–Yuan Studies* 46 (2016): 1–28.

² For a related discussion, see “What’s the Matter with ‘China’? A Critique of Teleological History,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 2 (2018): 295–314.

and fragmented into regional regimes, what were the forces that drove China’s reunification? How did the process of reunification unfold against the backdrop of powerful foreign states and empires in the northeast and northwest that challenged leaders (some of whom themselves were of non-Han descent) seeking to establish their authority as rulers of China? Relations between regional regimes that emerged from the collapse of the Tang and non-Han states and empires along the northeastern and northwestern frontiers are key to understanding the turbulent tenth century, as are demographic and economic differences between north and south, and the evolution of maritime trade networks in the South Seas and beyond.³

“Five Dynasties” in the North

The half-century between the official end of the Tang in 907 and the founding of the Song in 960 is by convention known as the “Five Dynasties.” Song historians such as Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) adopted this label because of their obsession with the transmission of dynastic legitimacy. Ouyang Xiu’s history of this era, *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, is laid out according to a moral scheme through which the historian dispenses “praise and blame” on the upright and the evil.⁴ Beginning with Zhu Wen’s (852–911) deposing of the last Tang emperor in 907 and declaration of himself as the founding emperor Taizu of the Later Liang (907–923), a succession of five dynastic states ruled in the Yellow River valley: Later Tang (923–936), Later Jin (936–947), Later Han (947–950), and Northern Zhou (951–959).⁵ These states did not rule continuously the same geographic territories, nor did their chronologies line up as neatly as they may appear.

However they acquired power – principally through military means – the rulers of each of these dynasties represented themselves as legitimate heirs of the Tang.⁶ Questions of legitimacy aside, the opportunity for these men to capture the stage was provided by the decentralization of Tang government authority, and the devolution of power from the center to the provinces in the wake of the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763). The leader of the rebellion, Turko-Sogdian general An Lushan, was unsuccessful in his bid to topple the

³ Clark, “Why Does the Tang–Song Interregnum Matter?”, 25.

⁴ Ouyang Xiu, *Historical Records of the Five Dynasties*, trans. Richard L. Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). See the translator’s introduction for a discussion of Ouyang Xiu’s historiographical approach and the basis of his commentaries.

⁵ In fact, another state that lay geographically in the north, Northern Han (951–979), was typically included among the “Ten Kingdoms” of the south (see below).

⁶ Details of the following narrative rely heavily on Naomi Standen, “The Five Dynasties,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 5, Part One: The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors, 907–1279*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Paul Jakov Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Tang dynasty, which was able to regroup and reorganize fiscally and militarily to continue on for more than a century. Ultimately, rebel forces led by the failed examination candidate Huang Chao were able to capture the Tang principal capital, Chang'an, in 880, forcing the emperor to flee to the refuge of Shu (Sichuan) in the distant southwest. A Shatuo Turk military leader named Li Keyong (856–908) came to the rescue of the imperial court, defeating Huang Chao, recapturing the eastern and western capitals, and briefly restoring the emperor to the throne.⁷ But virtually all power had now drained away from the court, which controlled neither vital economic resources nor the military. Control of both lay in the hands of regional military governors whose authority to appoint officials, collect taxes, and command armies had steadily increased following the An Lushan Rebellion, reaching a peak after Huang Chao's defeat in 884. The most powerful of these warlords in the north controlled the capital area and propped up the Tang emperor, who held his throne only at their behest.

Zhu Wen, a regional military governor under the Tang, initially supported the rebel leader Huang Chao. But Zhu defected to the Tang, becoming a rival of Li Keyong, leader of the Shatuo Turks, for dominance over the fragile Tang court and control of its legacy. In order for either Zhu or Li to expand their power, they had to gain the allegiance of other regional governors and thus their military support. Zhu Wen did this successfully, in a short time controlling not only his own home base of Bianzhou (renamed Kaifeng), which then became the eastern capital, and Luoyang, the western capital. The Tang emperor abdicated, paving the way for Zhu Wen to announce his new dynasty, the Later Liang (907–923). Naturally, other warlords resisted Zhu Wen's ascent, regarding themselves as equally qualified to replace the Tang and found their own dynasty, or at the very least capable of gathering their forces to restore the Tang. One important asset that Zhu Wen gained by announcing his new dynasty and controlling the capitals was the central bureaucracy, providing access to resources and to the machinery of government, although he eschewed the formal symbolic trappings of imperial legitimacy and continued to rely on his personal relationships and the allegiance of his followers.

His rival, Li Keyong, had died in 908, shortly after Zhu Wen's declaration of the Later Liang, but in 923 Li's son Li Cunxu (885–926, r. 923–926) defeated

⁷ The Shatuo were a Turkic-speaking people who lived in the northern borderlands during the late Tang and commingled with Sogdian pastoralists in the Ordos around the great bend of the Yellow River. The Shatuo became allied with the Tang, and because of his support of the Tang, the imperial surname, Li, was granted to the leader we know as Li Keyong. For the Shatuo in the ninth and tenth centuries, see Maddalena Barengi, "The Making of the Shatuo: Military Leadership and Border Unrest in North China's Daibei (808–880)," *Central Asiatic Journal* 63, nos. 1–2 (2020): 39–70; "North of Dai: Armed Communities and Military Resources in Late Medieval China (880–936)," *Annali di Ca'Foscari, Serie Orientale* 57 (2021): 373–396.

the Later Liang and replaced it with his own Later Tang, intended to symbolize a restoration of the Tang.⁸ The means by which Li Cunxu declared his accession to the throne and his style of rulership showed that he aspired to imitate the model of Tang imperial government and to demonstrate his legitimacy as an inheritor of the mandate. He restored Chang'an and Luoyang to their status as imperial capitals, and demoted Kaifeng. His successor, Li Siyuan (867–933, Mingzong, r. 926–933), built on these foundations when he came to power, ruling with strategic attention to different military and political interests that threatened his authority.⁹ Under Li Siyuan, this Shatuo Turkic dynasty greatly expanded territory under its control in comparison with the Later Liang, incorporating all of northern China (except for two minor border provinces) and by 925 including the state of Shu in the southwest.¹⁰

Amid the litany of seemingly endless changes in regimes and rulers, what was it like to live in conditions of near-constant warfare and political instability? We can catch glimpses of human experiences during these times through the writings of two men who left remarkable, and quite different, memoirs. Wang Dingbao (870–940), who took an examination degree in 900, claimed ties to a distinguished line of Wangs who resided in the Tang capital, Chang'an, but his life and career were spent in the Lingnan region of the south (modern Guangdong and Guangxi). The purpose of the work he compiled, *Collected Statements* (917), was to provide a record of the Tang civil service examinations, recalling the glory days of Tang imperial rule in contrast to the tumult of his own times.¹¹ Based on oral recollections as well as documentary sources, Wang's work is at once a rare and valuable account of recruitment in the Tang and a richly personal perspective on the turmoil of the late ninth and the tenth centuries. Like Wang Dingbao, his contemporary Wang Renyu (880–956) was born into the chaos of the late Tang, and his official career was spent moving from post to post among changing regimes. The extant portions of his voluminous memoirs narrate historical events, such as the fall of the state of Shu, but also document social life based on oral accounts as well as written texts, including “urban legends” and stories about bandits, scholars, monks, and musicians.¹² One of the topics he covered was

⁸ Richard L. Davis, *Fire and Ice: Li Cunxu and the Founding of the Later Tang* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016).

⁹ Richard L. Davis, *From Warhorses to Ploughshares: The Later Tang Reign of Emperor Mingzong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ For the Shu state and its demise, see Hongjie Wang, *Power and Politics in Tenth-Century China: The Former Shu Regime* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).

¹¹ Oliver Moore and Dingbao Wang, *Rituals of Recruitment in Tang China: Reading an Annual Programme in the Collected Statements by Wang Dingbao (870–940)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004).

¹² Glen Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China: From the Memoirs of Wang Renyu (880–956)*, Oxford Oriental Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the Khitan invasions, using his personal observations and reflections to record what he viewed as the tragic incursion of barbarians into the heartland, explicable only through the appearance of bad omens:

Fierce armies and valiant warriors were helplessly surrendered; the common people were slaughtered one by one . . . Thorns and brambles grew in the imperial palace . . . Clouds cast gloom, sun was dimmed . . . It surely meant that a time of ill fortune had befallen us . . . [F]or otherwise how could . . . tribal chieftains in left-wrapped felt garments indulge so insistently in untamed violence?¹³

The Rise of the Khitan Liao

Military conflicts that led to the founding of the Later Tang were entangled with rising forces of the Khitan along the northern borders. The Khitan tribal confederation had emerged from vassalage to the Uighurs when their empire collapsed after 840, and from their tributary relationship with the Tang, to create their own independent state.¹⁴ The acknowledged founder of the Khitan Empire, Abaoji (872–926) of the Yelü tribe, was elected khan in the same year as the last Tang emperor was deposed (907). Well before his election, as tribal chief of the Yelü, Abaoji had demonstrated both his military prowess and his abilities as a political leader in relations with Chinese warlords along the northern frontier of China. Abaoji's father as tribal chief had encouraged agriculture, the production of iron and salt, and weaving among the Yelü, expanding the economy of his people beyond pastoralism. The Yelü tribe had also assimilated Han refugees and captives into their society, thus incorporating their settled way of life with the Khitan nomadic one. Han people were profitably settled into walled cities, suitable for their way of life, with places for markets; industries; Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist temples; ancestral shrines; and even postal relay stations.

In 916, when Abaoji was up for re-election to the position of khan, he instead carried out a symbolic accession ceremony in the style of a Han Chinese ruler and claimed status on a basis of equality with the rulers of the Later Liang.¹⁵ He took the title of emperor, adopted a reign title, and made his son heir apparent.

¹³ Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China*, 156. "Left-wrapped" refers to the fact that this people's gown buttons up on the left-hand side rather than the right.

¹⁴ Details of the following account rely on Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, "The Liao," in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 6: Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*, ed. Denis C. Twitchett and Herbert Franke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 43–153. The early background of the Khitan confederation is treated in Pierre Marsone, *La steppe Et L'empire: La formation de la dynastie Khitan (Liao) Ve-Xe siècle* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2011).

¹⁵ Here and elsewhere when there is a need to stress the political/cultural intent or meaning, distinct from an ethnic one, "Han Chinese" will be used. Similar caveats apply to this as well as to the use of the term "Han."



Figure 1.1 Stag hunt (detail). Handscroll, ink and color on paper. Attributed to Huang Zongdao, active c.1120; formerly attributed to Li Zanhua (899–936), eldest son of the Khitan founder, who fled to the Later Tang court and became known for his paintings of nomadic life, such as the Khitan youth on horseback with bow and arrow portrayed here. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Along with these symbolic acts, Abaoji ordered the establishment of the first Confucian temple, and the building of a great capital city in the Liaoxi steppe (later known as Shangqing, the “supreme capital”), which soon saw the construction of Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist temples. In addition to the consolidation of his power through personal alliances that cut across tribal boundaries, Abaoji made use of centralized administration and institutions, establishing the basis for dual administration that continued throughout the Liao: Northern Administration for tribal domains, and Southern Administration for the sedentary – especially Han – population, organized on the Tang model of government.

Abaoji intervened in the turmoil surrounding the collapse of Tang, leading his troops south in 916 and 917, and again in 921 and 922, on the eve of the founding of the Later Tang. Post-Tang regimes were not the only target of conquest for Abaoji’s armies. In 924–925 they moved across northern Mongolia and the Orkhon river, and into eastern Dzungkharia; other Khitan forces gained control over Uighurs settled in the western Gansu corridor, and tribal peoples south of the Gobi Desert and in the northeastern corner of the Ordos. Far more ambitious were Abaoji’s designs on Parhae (Chin. Bohai), a powerful state in eastern Manchuria and the coastal region whose peoples had roots on the Korean peninsula and in other parts of Northeast Asia. Parhae was different from the tribal and pastoral peoples Abaoji’s forces had

encountered previously. It was a prosperous and stable state with skilled artisans and literate leaders who maintained good relations with states on the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago, as well as with China.¹⁶ Militarily, however, it could not withstand the Khitan assault. Abaoji changed its name to Dongdan and made it a vassal kingdom ruled by his eldest son, while the Parhae king and nobility were removed to the Khitan court and the rest of its population dispersed elsewhere in the Liao Empire.¹⁷

Abaoji transformed the Khitan tribal confederation into a state that controlled nomadic peoples of Mongolia and Manchuria, along with the former territories of Parhae. Military organization was central to the process of state formation under Abaoji, who created a multiethnic guard of 10,000–20,000 soldiers and families that, after 922, became his *ordo* (military camp).¹⁸ Beyond the imperial *ordo* (and that of the empress, who had her own), the main purpose of which was to protect the emperor (or his consort), tribes under Khitan control provided soldiers for Khitan military campaigns and defense.¹⁹ In cultural terms, one of the most significant innovations Abaoji promoted was the introduction of a written script for Khitan, which was adopted and in wide use by the end of his reign.²⁰ This enabled the record-keeping tasks of the Khitan Northern Administration in parallel with the use of written Chinese in the Southern Administration, thus both supporting the dual nature of Khitan government and reflecting the diverse population of the empire. The dual system of government was formally adopted in 947 with the official division of the empire into the Northern and Southern Regions, while a series of capitals governed territories through a modified provincial organization of regional administration. Beyond the “supreme capital” in Manchuria, there was the eastern capital at Liaoyang (controlling former territories of Parhae), the southern capital at Youzhou (modern Beijing), the central capital (from 1007, former capital of the Xi people whom the Khitan assimilated into their empire), and the western capital at Datong (only from 1044).

¹⁶ John B. Duncan, trans., *A New History of Parhae* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012).

¹⁷ For more on Parhae/Bohai identity under the Liao and later, see Jesse D. Sloane, “Mapping a Stateless Nation: ‘Bohai’ Identity in the Twelfth to Fourteenth Centuries,” *Journal of Song–Yuan Studies* 44 (2014): 367–368. Pamela Kyle Crossley, “Bohai/Parhae Identity and the Coherence of Dan Gur under the Kitan/Liao Empire,” *International Journal of Korean History* 21, no. 1 (2016): 11–45.

¹⁸ Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2004), 426.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive survey of the Khitan military, according to the standard history, see Karl A. Wittfogel and Chia-sheng Feng, *History of Chinese Society: Liao (907–1125)* (Philadelphia, PA: The American Philosophical Society, 1949), 508–570.

²⁰ For a painstaking effort to decipher the script and language in modern times, see Daniel Kane, *Kitan Language and Script* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). See also Daniel Kane, “Introduction, Part 2: An Update on Deciphering the Kitan Language and Scripts,” *Journal of Song–Yuan Studies* 43 (2013): 11–25.

After Abaoji's death, his empress became a powerful force in governing, helping to secure the throne for Abaoji's younger son Deguang rather than his named heir apparent and eldest son, Bei, who was ruler of Dongdan, the former Parhae state.²¹ To pre-empt any potential challenge from Bei, the new emperor moved the capital of Dongdan and its residents to Dongping (Liaoyang). Parhae was thus integrated more closely into the empire, in contrast to its previous semi-autonomous status. Deguang, posthumously known as Taizong, continued his father's military actions, subduing tribal peoples along the borders and also engaging in the political and military struggles in north China.²² Forming a strategic alliance with Shi Jingtang (892–942) to help Shi overthrow the Later Tang and establish his own dynasty, the Later Jin, Taizong positioned himself to make significant demands on Shi, a Shatuo Turk and now puppet of the Khitan ruler. The most important of these demands was ceding to the Khitan in 938 sixteen formerly Tang prefectures, in a wide swath from Datong in Shanxi to Youzhou (Beijing), giving the Khitan access to all the strategic passes across northern China as well as a foothold in Hebei. The "Sixteen Prefectures" would remain a thorn in the side of the succeeding Song dynasty until the Khitan lost their own empire. In addition to their manipulation of the Later Jin, the Khitan entered into close relations with southern post-Tang states, especially with the Southern Tang (937–975), a neighbor and rival of both the Later Tang and the Later Jin, and also with the southeastern coastal state of Wu-Yue (907–978), which became a vassal state and paid tribute. The latter relationship provided access for the Khitan to seaborne trade with Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean and for the rulers and people of Wu-Yue to trade with Parhae and states on the Korean peninsula.

In 947 the Khitan invaded the Later Jin and occupied their capital at Kaifeng, and Taizong adopted the dynastic name of Liao.²³ The invasion was short-lived, however. Faced with resistance from the Chinese population because of extensive looting and plundering, the Khitan troops were forced to withdraw to the north. Shortly thereafter, Liu Zhiyuan (895–948), who had maintained the independent Shatuo Turk stronghold at Taiyuan, himself entered Kaifeng

²¹ For a detailed investigation of the important roles played by the consort family of the Khitan rulers and the hybrid system employed to determine succession to the throne, see Jennifer Holmgren, "Marriage, Kinship, and Succession under the Ch'i-tan Rulers of the Liao Dynasty (907–1125)," *T'oung Pao* 72, nos. 1–3 (1986): 44–91.

²² Wang Renyu recounted the retreat and death of this Khitan ruler. See Dudbridge, *A Portrait of Five Dynasties China*, 154–156.

²³ For the complexities behind the use of this name and its possible meanings, see Daniel Kane, "The Great Central Liao Kitan State," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 43 (2013): 27–50. For the use of the term "Great Qidan," see Valerie Hansen and François Louis, "Introduction, Part I: Evolving Approaches to the Study of the Liao," *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 43 (2013): 3.

and declared the Later Han dynasty, which lasted for only three years (947–950) until a military coup resulted in the declaration of a new dynasty, the Northern Zhou (951–960), which laid the foundations for the Song reunification. At the collapse of the short-lived Later Han dynasty, Liu Zhiyuan's cousin, who had held Taiyuan for him, declared himself ruler of the independent state of Northern Han (951–979), whose fortunes were dependent on the support of the Khitan.

“Ten Kingdoms” in the South

The so-called “Ten Kingdoms,” which were in reality fewer than ten, included the Northern Han as one, despite its location far to the north. Because it could not (or at least did not) lay claim to inheriting the mandate, as the northern “Five Dynasties” did, the Northern Han was categorized by Song and later historians among the southern kingdoms, illegitimate regimes lacking the mandate to rule. Two of these states, Wu-Yue and Southern Tang, have already been mentioned in connection with their diplomatic and trade relations with the Khitan Liao. Their locations made them valuable partners for this purpose: Wu-Yue in the lower Yangzi delta and the Southern Tang in the middle Yangzi valley both provided access to maritime trade with Southeast and East Asia (Korea and Japan) for essential as well as luxury goods otherwise unavailable to steppe peoples.

Among the remaining states located in the south, along with Wu-Yue, only two others governed throughout most of the half-century between the fall of the Tang and the founding of the Song: Jingnan (907–963) at the confluence of the Han and Yangzi Rivers, and Min (909–945) in southern Fujian.²⁴ The former was a smaller state that survived among its larger neighbors through diplomacy, and the latter eventually succumbed to internal disorder and was absorbed by neighboring states. Two other kingdoms were successor states: Southern Tang was a successor to Wu (902–937) and Later Shu (934–965) was the successor state to Former Shu (907–925) in the southwest (Sichuan). Representing a distinctive cultural legacy dating back to the Warring States era, the state of Chu (927–951) dominated the warm and fertile river valleys south of the upper Yangzi (modern Hunan), ruling from its capital at Changsha. Farther south lay the Southern Han (917–971), with its capital at Guangzhou, extending across the region known as Lingnan (modern-day Guangdong and Guangxi) (see [Map 1.1](#)).

²⁴ This section relies greatly on Hugh Clark, “The Southern Kingdoms between the T’ang and the Sung, 907–979,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 5, Part One: The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors, 907–1279*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Paul Jakov Smith, *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 133–205.

The south had not been unaffected by the last of the great rebellions that ultimately destroyed the Tang. Huang Chao's forces had crossed the Yangzi before retreating back to the north, and in their time in the south they managed to wreak havoc on what remained of Tang provincial government, opening up space for the emergence of local and regional power brokers and political structures. Hugh Clark has shown that many of the new leaders began as bandits and ruffians who took advantage of the tumultuous times to enrich and empower themselves.²⁵ As they settled into positions of power, these men and their descendants became a new elite whose forebears had neither high social nor high official status. They were self-made men who rose to power in conditions of chaos and upheaval, and they determined their own fate as well as that of those around them according to their military strength and political skill.

Unlike their northern counterparts, who had prior experience as military governors and inherited from the Tang a series of imperial capitals along with the infrastructure of court governance, southern rulers had to create their own central governmental structures from the local and regional administrations that they took over as they acquired power. As military struggles ebbed and society stabilized, political acumen and cultural achievement became more valuable than skill on the battlefield. The state of Wu (later Southern Tang) even revived the civil service examinations in 909 as a way to recruit Confucian scholars to the service of the state. Although Wu was the first state to revive the examinations, other states, such as Shu, enlisted men to their service who themselves had already passed the examinations or who came from a scholarly ancestral line. Wu-Yue, on the other hand, recognized the imperial claims of northern dynasties and so its scholars were able to sit for the northern examinations rather than organizing their own independently.

While northern states may have claimed inheritance of the mandate to rule as legitimate successors to the Tang, southern rulers did not always fall in line to accept these claims, and in fact at times issued claims of their own. The founder of the Later Shu, for example, declared himself emperor – not just king – in 934. Continuity of the Tang dynastic name was proclaimed in the south when Xu Zhigao (888–943) adopted the Tang dynastic surname of Li and made himself emperor of the Southern Tang, a revival of the fallen dynasty. With its capital at Jinling (Nanjing), Southern Tang at its height ruled over an extensive territory that included southern Anhui and Jiangsu, Hunan, and eastern Hubei, eventually absorbing even the states of Chu (Hunan) and Min (Fujian). Just before the founding of the Song in 960, the

²⁵ Hugh R. Clark, “Scoundrels, Rogues, and Refugees: The Founders of the Ten Kingdoms in the Late Ninth Century,” in *Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms*, ed. Peter Lorge (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011), 47–77.

Southern Tang ruler gave up his imperial title and reverted to “king” under pressure from the Northern Zhou.

Agriculture and Economic Development in the South

Political struggles among dynastic pretenders and regional rulers played out against the backdrop of transformations of the social and economic order. These changes were brought about by migration to the south and by both agricultural development and trade. Immigrants fleeing military and political upheavals in the north sought security, opportunities, and prosperity in the south, and they brought with them both skills and diverse cultural backgrounds.²⁶ An increase in agricultural productivity in the south was fueled both by the establishment of peace and stability in the wake of near-constant warfare and by the temporary easing of taxes. The removal of these obstacles to economic growth was followed by active steps to promote agriculture: the expansion of water conservancy networks and the reclamation of arable land. Wet rice agriculture was the basis of the economies of the southern kingdoms, so reliable and efficient irrigation networks were essential to the maintenance and expansion of production. To sustain and increase agricultural production, rulers and officials of southern kingdoms carried out irrigation projects such as the restoration of Tongji Dike in Shu at the beginning of the tenth century. The most extensive water conservancy projects, however, were undertaken by Wu-Yue in the area around Hangzhou Bay, where coastal dikes and catchment basins were critical to the protection of lowland irrigated paddy fields prone to flooding. Wu-Yue rulers also established an official post in charge of waterways and agriculture, signaling its importance to the economic viability of their regime.²⁷

Both surging numbers of immigrants and the protected landed wealth of Buddhist monasteries put pressure on southern governments to expand their revenue base beyond the inherited agricultural taxes of the Tang. The most important innovation was the imposition of a head tax, which could be levied on urban dwellers as well as rural populations, by all the southern kingdoms.²⁸ In addition to monopolies on salt and liquor, for example, southern kingdoms also relied to an unprecedented degree on commercial taxes as a source of revenue.

Commercial agriculture was promoted, along with handicraft and industrial production in ceramics and textiles, and trade networks expanded to distribute

²⁶ These topics are dealt with in depth for southern Fujian (Min) in Hugh R. Clark, *Community, Trade, and Networks: Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁷ Clark, “The Southern Kingdoms between the T’ang and the Sung, 907–979,” 172–174.

²⁸ Clark, “The Southern Kingdoms between the T’ang and the Sung, 907–979,” 193.

commodities such as tea, which was grown in Chu, the Southern Tang, Min (Fujian), and Shu (Sichuan). In Shu, there is evidence that both private trade in tea and a tea monopoly existed.²⁹ Along with tea, sericulture, including the cultivation of mulberry leaves and the rearing of silkworms, was an important economic activity in many parts of the south, especially in the kingdom of Shu. Textile production of all kinds was important in many of the southern kingdoms, and fine textiles were part of the tribute sent to the northern dynasties, along with ceramics. Like textiles, ceramics were produced in different parts of the south, with certain places known for the production of specific types of ceramics, such as the green-glazed Yue wares of Wu-Yue or the mass-produced ceramics of Changsha. Both silk and ceramic production were patronized by rulers, and at times subject to monopoly control by the state, as was mining for the production of metal goods and coins.

Networks and Nodes of Commercial and Cultural Exchange

The production of commodities such as silk, ceramics, tea, and metals was closely tied to the continuation and expansion of earlier trade networks, both domestic and foreign. Domestic trade exchanged goods within southern kingdoms and also between those kingdoms and northern dynasties. Citing Hinō Kaisaburo, Hugh Clark has identified three major inland routes of both communication and transportation that connected north and south: the Gan River valley (Jiangxi), the Xiang River valley (Hunan), and the Grand Canal.³⁰ But one of the most important routes – if more dangerous – was the coastal one from southern ports to those as far north as the Shandong peninsula, connecting from there to the northern territories of the Khitan, the Korean peninsula, and the Japanese archipelago. Regular tribute trade from the southern kingdoms to the northern dynasties was documented in court archives. For example, the state of Chu sent tea, while Wu-Yue sent silks and metal goods, and so on. This tribute trade was commercially, as well as diplomatically, important.

Southern coastal regimes such as the Southern Han, with its capital at Guangzhou, relied on Tang-era foundations of maritime trading networks.³¹ After Huang Chao's rebels captured Guangzhou in 878–879 and slaughtered many Muslim and other foreign merchants, their presence naturally dwindled, and Arab and Persian traders instead settled in ports in Champa (along the central and southern coast of modern Vietnam) and the Indonesian archipelago state of Srivijaya. Guangzhou nonetheless continued to be the main continental

²⁹ Clark, "The Southern Kingdoms between the T'ang and the Sung, 907–979," 175.

³⁰ Clark, "The Southern Kingdoms between the T'ang and the Sung, 907–979," 178.

³¹ Angela Schottenhammer, "China's Gate to the South: Iranian and Arab Merchant Networks in Guangzhou during the Tang–Song Transition (c. 750–1050), Part II: 900–c. 1050," *AAS Working Papers in Social Anthropology/OAW Arbeitspapiere zur Sozialanthropologie* 29 (2015): 23.

port for trade with the South Seas, and ports such as Hangzhou and Quanzhou also provided access to seaborne trade with Southeast Asia.³² Merchants from southern kingdoms engaged in thriving maritime commerce with distant places in the Southeast Asian archipelagoes (Indonesia and the Philippines) and the coasts of the Indian Ocean, trading with their Arab and Persian counterparts in ports such as Kalah (Kedah) on the west coast of the Malaysian peninsula. Tombs and other sites in Chinese port cities such as Fuzhou, Yangzhou, and Guangzhou contain shards of turquoise-blue glazed pottery testifying to continued trade in goods from West Asia and the Middle East.³³ Chinese ceramics, in turn, were also an important export. The wreck of an Arab or Indian ship recovered from the waters between Sumatra and Borneo (known as the Belitung wreck for its discovery site), dated to the ninth century, contained around 60,000 pieces of Chinese ceramics produced in the late Tang.³⁴ The overwhelming proportion of the ceramics were from the Changsha kilns in the inland region of Chu (modern Hunan), showing that maritime trade relying on Arab or Indian ships was already thriving in the late Tang and that products from the interior were transported to coastal ports for export.³⁵ The Changsha kilns gradually declined during the tenth century in favor of kilns in coastal locations such as Min (Fujian) and elsewhere. Nautical archaeology has uncovered a rich trove of Chinese ceramics produced by kilns from many different places, north and south, carried by a Southeast Asian ship that sank in the Java Sea in the tenth century.³⁶ Known as the Intan wreck (for its discovery site), the ship was possibly making a return voyage from Guangzhou to a Javanese port.³⁷ The vessel's cargo included a large quantity of silver ingots of immense value, along with lead coins, bronze and other metal objects. The silver ingots were revenue from the salt tax collected by the Southern Han government and used to purchase goods from afar.³⁸ Some of the commodities acquired by Chinese merchants were further

³² Angela Schottenhammer, "Seafaring, Trade, and Knowledge Transfer: Maritime Politics and Commerce in Early Middle Period to Early Modern China," *Crossroads: Studies on the History of Exchange Relations in the East Asian World* 11 (2015): 7–10.

³³ Angela Schottenhammer, "China's Gate to the Indian Ocean: Iranian and Arab Long-Distance Traders," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 76 (2016): 147.

³⁴ Michael Flecker, "A Ninth-Century AD Arab or Indian Shipwreck in Indonesia: First Evidence for Direct Trade with China," *World Archaeology* 32, no. 3 (2001): 335–354.

³⁵ Yang Liu, "Tang Dynasty Changsha Ceramics," in *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*, ed. Regina Krahl, John Guy, J. Keith Wilson, and Julian Raby (Singapore and Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; National Heritage Board, Singapore, 2010), 144–159.

³⁶ Denis Twitchett and Janice Stargardt, "Chinese Silver Bullion in a Tenth-Century Indonesian Wreck," *Asia Major* 15, no. 1 (2002): 31.

³⁷ Twitchett and Stargardt, "Chinese Silver Bullion in a Tenth-Century Indonesian Wreck," 62–67.

³⁸ Twitchett and Stargardt, "Chinese Silver Bullion in a Tenth-Century Indonesian Wreck," 35–41.