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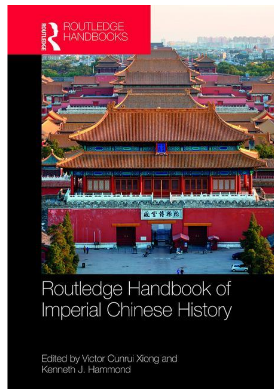


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# The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms

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# 10

# THE FIVE DYNASTIES AND TEN KINGDOMS

*Peter Lorge*

The period known as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (Ten States) is conventionally described as running from 907, when the last emperor of the Tang dynasty abdicated his throne, to 960, when the first emperor of the Song dynasty established the Song. It is therefore a period of interregnum between the Tang and Song dynasties. These simple chronological facts, however, mask a far more complicated history that goes to the heart of traditional Chinese historiography, political philosophy, Chinese identity, and territorial imagination. Chinese historians writing during the Song dynasty were acutely aware of all of these problems, and their responses, while deeply integrated into their accounts of the period, were also informed by their own cultural and political biases. Song dynasty histories of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period were often as much about the Song dynasty as the preceding period.

The decline of the Tang dynasty laid the groundwork for the Five Dynasties period, shaping the nature of the political and military struggle, often shaded with ethnic concerns, for the first half of the tenth century. Arguably, the Sino-Türkic struggle that was finally played out in the tenth century had been built into the founding of the Tang dynasty from its inception. Many of the aristocratic lineages that rose to prominence in the centuries before the Tang dynasty were culturally mixed, including the family of Li Yuan 李淵 (566–635), the Tang founder. Aristocratic lineages dominated the Tang court, as well as their local bases. Their power even persisted after the upheavals of the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763) temporarily destroyed the power of the central court. It was only after the Huang Chao Rebellion (874–884) that these aristocratic lineages lost power.[1] As the previous stabilizing forces, both political and cultural, collapsed, the struggle for power became acute and the Tang fell.

The southern and western parts of the Tang Empire became peripheral to the struggle for power in North China by the end of the ninth and beginning of the tenth centuries. The Tang Empire broke apart along the North-South fault line, emphasizing the separateness of the North from the group of southern polities. Where the North passed mostly as a unit from the control of one ruling house to another, the South fragmented into many smaller units. The North-South split also marked the very different geopolitical situations the disparate regimes faced. Northern regimes contended with Steppe involvement in their political and military power struggles. Southern regimes fought amongst themselves without much concern for the North.

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Perhaps because there was no northern threat, the South encompassed a number of warring regimes. While the kingdom of Shu in Sichuan had a history, due to its encircling ring of mountains, of separation, the reason for the splits within the rest of the South is less clear. The different polities were more culturally developed than the northern regimes, having inherited much of elite Tang culture. They also continued the trend that began in the Tang of faster population growth and greater economic development. At the same time, southern armies would prove much less effective than northern ones. The territory of the South fostered political fragmentation, at least under the political and cultural conditions of the early tenth century.

The North was tightly bound to the Steppe and its politics. Steppe groups had been active in North China for centuries before even the Tang Dynasty was founded. The cradle of Chinese civilization along the Yellow River was not isolated from the Steppe. Steppe groups interpenetrated the Central Plains of North China, with the Yellow River, rather than a mythical "Great Wall boundary" marking the southernmost point of Steppe influence by the tenth century.[2] North China was also conducive to cavalry forces, unlike in the South, leading to far more developed and effective armies. Ultimately the struggle to control the legitimate government of North China in the tenth century wore down the elites, Sinitic, Steppe, and Sino-Steppe, who emerged from the Tang dynasty.

The establishment of the Song dynasty in 960 marked not only a changing of the guard with respect to elites, but also a dramatic shift in military and political fortunes for the central government of North China. While from a historiographical perspective the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period ended in 960, the culture of the period took longer to subside. It is still an open question as to when Song culture truly started, or at least became distinct from what preceded it. Indeed, defining what came before as "Chinese" in some pure sense is only practical from a retrospective, selective, and elite perspective. In any case, there was no sharp break as there was in the political sphere, where a new dynasty was declared. At a minimum, it was not until several decades after the Song founding that a new culture was apparent.

Indeed, it is the issue of the emergence of Song culture that marks the historiography of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. From the perspective of eleventh-century Song historians, the preceding period was very different from their own, a benighted time in contrast to the Song. The three main histories that cover this period——, *The Old History of the Five Dynasties* (Jiu Wudai shi 舊五代史, by Xue Juzheng 薛居正 and others), *The New History of the Five Dynasties* (Xin Wudai shi 新五代史, by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修), and the last 29 chapters (266–294) of *The Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Governing* (Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑, by Sima Guang 司馬光 and his collaborators), present somewhat different views. The *Old History* was written in the late tenth century, before the Song conquest was complete. The *New History* and the *Comprehensive Mirror* were written after the conquest ended, in a period of cultural efflorescence but deep anxiety about what was perceived to be a flawed dynastic founding. Our received understanding of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms comes from the eleventh-century perspective and the pivotal historiographic enterprise based in that time.

Fundamentally, Ouyang Xiu and Sima Guang portrayed the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period as a time of chaos caused not only by contending military factions, but also by the breakdown of Confucian political mores. While Ouyang and Sima disagreed on many aspects of history, both saw the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms as a disorderly time in between two great dynasties, the Tang and the Song. Both men also agreed that the political legitimacy of the Tang dynasty was transmitted to the Song through the northern regimes. This generalization requires a bit of nuance, however, because although Ouyang Xiu created the designation "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" that suggests that the sequence of five northern imperial houses were legitimate dynasties in contradistinction to the illegitimate

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southern kingdoms, Ouyang explicitly stated that he, and he alone, regarded only the Later Liang as legitimate, and not the following four regimes.[3] The historiographical implications of this are fairly complex, particularly because Ouyang's argument in favor of Later Liang legitimacy is both technical and not very convincing.

Perhaps as a consequence of these historiographical conventions, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period has not been well studied. Seen merely as an interregnum between the regular operations of Chinese dynasties, it had little to offer historians except for limited sources, complex and incoherent narratives, and a lack of important developments. Conversely, looked at as a period without a unifying political cloak, it reveals the naked structure of the underlying social, economic, cultural, and political milieu of the tenth century. More significantly, the structures revealed for the tenth century are examples of what existed throughout most, if not all, of Chinese history. The very idea that localized Chinese cultures always existed, while always tacitly acknowledged by modern scholars, has hitherto had relatively little impact on the study of China before the Ming dynasty. It is only in later imperial Chinese history that regional studies have flourished.[4]

A significant bias of the eleventh-century reading of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period is the assumption of a natural division of loyalties between Chinese and non-Chinese people. Song scholars expected that ethnic identity would determine political loyalty. But as Naomi Standen has shown, this was not a tenth-century expectation.[5] Not only were regions and localities not inherently drawn to an imperial center, people were not naturally fixated on following other members of their own ethnic group. Political loyalties were based on politics until the end of the tenth century.

There were no natural boundary lines or borders separating peoples and polities. This fact runs contrary to the usual portrayal of imperial Chinese history. The overemphasized idea that some sort of "natural" division between Sinitic and Steppe people existed approximately where the Ming dynasty Great Wall was constructed has long confused a broad band of militarily contested territory with a cultural separation. The rough, but usually unmarked, borders of the major dynasties were lines of military equilibrium between contending polities. During the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, these also existed within the Chinese ecumene, emphasizing their general lack of coincidence with culture or ethnic identification. The reality on the ground before, during, or after a major dynasty like the Tang or the Song did not fully match imperial historiographical conventions. The history of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period is thus not an aberration but a reality check.

## Late Tang and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms

At root, the study of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period highlights the tension between the idea of a strong, unifying central government ruling over China and strong, distinct regions only nominally under central authority. The course of Tang history and the dynasty's collapse exemplified these issues since the causes of its decline were primarily internal. This is a key difference between the Tang and Song dynasties; internal forces destroyed the Tang, but external forces destroyed the Song. Arguably, as the narrative of many Song historians in the eleventh century and after suggested, in solving the Tang's internal weakness, the Song made itself externally vulnerable. The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period was therefore the ultimate expression of the failed Tang system that the Song had to overcome to create a new unifying dynasty.

The Tang ruling family emerged from the mixed Chinese-Steppe military aristocracy of northern China in the seventh century. This mixed heritage, which was pervasive in North

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China among many of the elites, contributed to a cosmopolitan capital culture. Steppe military commanders leading Steppe cavalry forces were prominent in the Tang army, but many Chinese officers were hardly distinguishable in their martial culture. Most of the infantry remained Chinese, based upon a regular system of required military service for adult male farmers (the *fubing* system). This worked extremely well in establishing and expanding the dynasty when campaigns were intermittent and limited in duration and distance. Once the borders were more stable, and the security threat more consistent and low level, circumstances called for standing border commands with generals given broad civil and military authority in their areas of responsibility. This worked well as long as the border generals were on good terms with the central court.

When relations between the court and the border commanders (military governors) broke down, however, the consequences proved disastrous. In 755, as a result of just such a break, the military governor (commissioner) of Lulong in northern Hebei, An Lushan 安祿山, rebelled. In short order, An Lushan, swept down from the border and captured the capital at Luoyang in 756. Although An Lushan would be killed in 757, the rebellion would continue until 763. The rebellion not only forced power holders at every level of society, and within every institution of the Tang government, to choose sides, it also forced them to consider how loyal they were to anyone. Someone who wanted to be loyal to the Tang might be forced to choose between life and death if he were in the path of a rebel army. A more distant would-be loyalist would have to balance his current and future needs against sending aid to the court. More ruthless men might simply take advantage of the weakness of the center to strengthen their grip on local power.

After the rebellion was fully suppressed, the court focused on regaining central control over the empire. Central control was most clearly demonstrated in ritual and economic terms, but there were also less obvious yet equally important areas like loyalty and cultural orientation. In general, the Tang court was able to reestablish its control on every level, as the recent work of Nicholas Tackett has demonstrated.[6] Elites were still interested in being part of the Tang dynasty. Certainly, there was no good alternative available in the eighth century, and the prospects of life without a central court were unpleasant, as the rebellion had demonstrated.

The Tang court's painstakingly reconstructed power was dealt a mortal blow by another rebellion, this time led by a man named Huang Chao 黃巢. The Huang Chao Rebellion (874–884) (initially started by Wang Xianzhi 王仙芝 and others) was different from the An Lushan Rebellion insofar as the leadership began as salt smugglers, rather than as generals. In that sense, An Lushan was really a mutiny and Huang Chao a rebellion. The Tang court struggled to bring sufficient military force to bear to suppress the An Lushan rebellion. In the wake of the An Lushan Rebellion, the court had been forced to balance out its military power regionally in order to prevent any one general from gaining enough power to threaten the court. Any military force around the court and based at the capital was primarily for defensive purposes, to prevent a repeat of the capital being captured and the court being forced to flee. Not only did this make the capital garrisons unavailable for campaigning, it also tended to leave them less effective than real field armies.

The Tang court actually offered Huang official positions to bring him into the government and end the rebellion, but required him to disarm first. Although Huang rejected these terms, he was unable to defeat Tang forces defending the Central Plains and marched south. The court continued simultaneously to fight and bargain with Huang, as both sides sought an agreeable settlement based on changing circumstances. Meanwhile, Tang generals and officials tried to advance their own positions by fighting Huang Chao and seeking rewards from the court. A significant number of Tang officials and generals required extraordinary rewards to do more than defend their own districts. Competition for rewards among the

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successful commanders created increasing friction within the Tang army. It became impossible for the court to placate or maintain cooperation among ambitious men who all expected to be placed in charge for defeating the rebellion.

Two men emerged as the most effective military leaders in the suppression of the rebellion, Zhu Wen 朱温 (852–912) and Li Keyong 李克用 (856–908). Despite their effective cooperation against the rebels, Zhu attempted to murder Li in 884. While the failed assassination was the proximate cause of the decisive break between the two men, it was unlikely that they would have willingly and amicably divided power. At least initially, both men were loyal to the Tang government. Zhu was Chinese and Li was a man of the Steppe. Yet since their followers did not break down neatly along ethnic lines, there was no sense of a specifically ethnic struggle for dominance. The struggle for power was simply that, a struggle for power.

There were, however, some shades of ethnic identification, whether through built-up networks of relationships or through the inclinations of the leaders of the respective groups. Li Keyong drew more support from Steppe groups and maintained a strong base in the North bordering on the Steppe, around the provincial city of Taiyuan. He tended to have more Steppe cavalry at his disposal than Zhu, who was based more around Bianzhou on the Yellow River. Chinese forces were generally stronger in infantry and siege warfare, though there were many instances where this was not the case. A number of rulers in the North struggled to balance their Steppe and Chinese cultures within themselves, for political and personal reasons.

The struggle between Zhu and Li was instrumental in separating North and South China. Since both of them built up their power serving the central government it was natural for them to struggle for control of the emperor and the capital. Given that ultimately the Song dynasty would build its empire from the north Chinese remnants of the Tang dynasty and then move south, Zhu and Li were politically and militarily correct in seeing North China as the key to controlling the Tang Empire. South China could and would be conquered from the North once control of the North was decided. While they struggled in the North, however, the southern and western regions detached themselves from central control.

The tension between Steppe and Chinese culture, or at least the power holders who developed in that mixed environment, was resolved on the battlefield in the closing years of the Tang and into the Five Dynasties period. Both of the major players in the Late Tang struggle for power would disintegrate under decades of war and internecine strife. The Sino-Steppe aristocracy consumed itself in the struggle for control over the Tang Empire, opening up a space for new, mostly Chinese, men to take over.

## The North and the South

The North-South split was far more than a military or political rupture. Economically, the South began to outperform the North during the Tang, a trend that would continue until the present day. Yet it is the cultural split, perhaps linked to the economic split, that would prove even more dramatic. North China retained the military, and thus political advantage during the period. South China absorbed and then developed Tang high culture, which seems to have withered in the North. Partly this was the result of the destruction of many elite lineages in the North and partly the flight of many elites to the South.

The southern shift of culture was most obvious in the physical movement and retention of culture in the South. When the Song dynasty centralized its control over culture, it brought libraries, paintings, calligraphy, historical records, and scholars from the South to the North. Some of the objects had been moved to the South to avoid war, while others had been there before the Tang dynasty broke up. The cosmopolitan culture of the Tang capitals was no

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longer a northern Chinese enterprise. At least in elite cultural terms, the remnants of the Tang were in the South during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, particularly in the Southern Tang and Shu states.

A second aspect of the move of Tang culture to the South was its transformation from a cosmopolitan culture to a purely Chinese culture. Tang culture was always predominantly Chinese, but, particularly before the An Lushan Rebellion, it had been open to outside influences. Whatever Tang elite culture was left or moved to the South became, by definition, Chinese culture. Cosmopolitan aspects of Tang imperial culture were thus functionally Sinified by their sojourn in the South. Despite the foundational ties to cosmopolitan culture, Tang culture came to be seen as purely Chinese. In this sense, the Five Dynasties period "laundered" Tang culture, making it into legitimately Chinese culture. Less clear is how much northern Tang culture was influenced by Southern Tang culture in the South. Certainly, the Tang culture that the Song would draw from the South was not the same as the Tang culture that existed in North China during the Tang dynasty.

The largest of the southern regimes, the Southern Tang, was highly developed culturally and economically, as were the succession of Shu regimes in Sichuan. Despite their respective economic strengths, however, neither the Southern Tang nor Shu demonstrated the ability to project military power outside of the South. None of the southern regimes, in fact, managed to do more than maintain their respective borders, hinting at a surprising measure of military equilibrium. It is not clear why this was the case. The South lacked a good supply of horses suitable for warfare, but maintained extensive riverine navies. These separate military environments did not equal out. With the notable exception of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), dynastic conquests in China moved from North, where there was strong cavalry, to South, where there were strong navies. Northern regimes had the advantage even when their cavalry was Chinese rather than Steppe.

This North-South split had always existed in the Chinese ecumene, as, indeed, it existed to the end of imperial Chinese history. But the contrast between the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period and the Six Dynasties period (220–589), another period of mostly divided China, is instructive. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, it was northern China that was often fragmented and southern China that was usually unified. This was due to Steppe groups contending with each other in North China and a stable regime at Jiankang in the South. In the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period the South was fragmented, though somewhat stable in that fragmentation, and the North remained unified. While there are some nuances to this characterization, which will be discussed later, it points to an important general shift in Chinese history.

Chinese regionalism became a more pronounced feature of southern China during the tenth century. North China, by contrast, would stay far more cohesive as a politico-cultural unit. Since these features persisted after the tenth century, arguably until the present, the shift is significant. There are three interrelated reasons for the change from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. First, the Chinese population in the South began to grow as immigration and acclimation to local diseases improved. Second, the southern economy began to exceed that of the North probably at some point during the Tang dynasty. Third and finally, the Grand Canal tying North to South was extended all the way to the South during the Sui dynasty.

Functionally, the Grand Canal allowed for greater segmentation of the Chinese economy and laid the groundwork for what would later become a fully reticulated market system during the Song dynasty. Northern China became dependent upon southern China for food, luxury goods, and taxes. The Grand Canal thus undermined northern economic development, particularly because the North bore the brunt of the military struggle with the Steppe. It was no accident

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that the main exception to northern economic decline was the Song capital of Kaifeng in the eleventh and early twelfth century (though Luoyang recovered by the eleventh century and Yanjing was prosperous until the fall of the Liao). Kaifeng was the northern hub of the Grand Canal. When Kaifeng fell to the Jurchen Jin in 1127, the northern economy declined sharply.

The Grand Canal itself broke down in the Late Tang due to lack of maintenance. Without the Grand Canal as a conduit of goods north and troops south, North and South began to function in separate geopolitical realms. That flow of goods and services in both directions tied the Tang Empire together. Governments centered in the North needed the Grand Canal to project military force into the South. Zhou Shizong 周世宗, the second emperor of the Later Zhou, the last of the Five Dynasties, reopened the connection between the Huai and Yangzi Rivers as he campaigned south. Without the Grand Canal it was difficult, though not impossible, to conquer the South.

Northern China remained mostly under the control of a single regime throughout the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. This territorial and even central government consistency supports the later idea of continuity between the Five Dynasties connecting the Tang and Song dynasties. Significant pieces of land around the edges did fall out of the control of the central government, most obviously the Sixteen Prefectures (the area around modern Beijing) and northern Hedong centered on the city of Taiyuan (the northern part of modern Shanxi Tuoba Tao 拓拔燾 province). Yet why the territory of the series of northern regimes remained intact is unclear. Earlier Chinese history suggests that the east-west struggle for unity at the beginning of the Han dynasty, focused on the Yellow River valley and the Central Plains, was resolved and the Han military problem shifted to its northern and southern borders. The North did not remain undivided during the Six Dynasties Period, however, so northern integration may well have been an effect of Tang dynasty governance.

Conversely, southern China was politically fragmented. Again, any explanations for this circumstance must be tentative. Most basically, the terrain of southern China is more divided by mountains and waterways. Of course, waterways were transit links as much as barriers, but this points to a reality of warfare. While most of the North was open to cavalry and more cavalry was available in the North, in the South armies were mostly infantry and riverine navies were crucial. Armies had to work in conjunction with navies to project power through waterways and then out from the ships. The pace and operations of conquest were very different from northern practice, though given that northern powers like the Later Zhou and Song were able to conquer the South, it does not appear the difficulties were insurmountable.

Southern political fragmentation was an effect of military capabilities more than terrain. Military capabilities are not simply a measure of men, materiel, and terrain, however, but also of the political will of governments. Politics is manifest in military capability both as cause and effect. The southern regimes, despite the great wealth of several of the states, were unable or unwilling to develop and use military force to unify the South, let alone attempt to capture the North. Several campaigns within the South were effectively prosecuted, but without more generally changing the overall fragmentation. It would appear that the southern regimes were not culturally driven to conquer China and recreate the territorial extent of the Tang Empire. Interestingly, a similar lack of southern interest in the North was also manifest during the Southern Song in the twelfth century, when southern elites were reluctant to go to war to retake North China from the Jurchen Jin. States like the Southern Tang had strong cultural reasons for claiming legitimacy and continuity with the Tang dynasty without requiring the corresponding physical borders.

Fundamentally, southern fragmentation was a manifestation of cultural attitudes. Elites focused on their local and regional interests rather than on an imagined unified China. All

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of the southern states resisted the Song conquest because Chinese "unification" was not a compelling ideology. Southern fragmentation was thus not just a military problem in the historiography of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms but an ideological challenge to imperial orthodoxy. There was something wrong with those states not trying to conquer each other as well as the North.

## The South

The southern Sinitic states were not equal in their size, power, or significance. Several of them were short-lived, and others experienced changes of name, ruling family, and borders. Critically, they created and maintained distinctive cultures that persisted long after they had been conquered or subsumed by the Song dynasty. The obvious expression of fragmentation in the form of separate states not only revealed the underlying regionalism of Tang China but also pointed toward the future development of localities. Economic development amplified local differences, with southern economic development beginning to outstrip northern development during the Tang dynasty. Key in all of this was the diversity of people and places that were unequivocally "Chinese."

Almost all of the southern states developed out of Tang administrative or military districts. Local strongmen gradually distanced themselves from the Tang court, achieving *de facto* independence even before the dynasty officially ended. By the time the Tang center was gone, the South had already been functionally separate for years. In the wake of their "official" independence in 907, the southern states groped for a stable order, predicated on a military and political equilibrium. The large states of Wu/Southern Tang and Former and Later Shu both maintained territorial stability during internal political change. Several of the smaller states were also geographically stable.

Curiously, the internal politics of these states were less stable than their geographies, implying that the respective courts had less bearing on their borders than the structure of the states themselves. The kingdom of Wu grew out of the military governorship of Yang Xingmi 楊行密, and was overthrown in 937 by Li Bian 李昪, becoming the Southern Tang. The Southern Tang then proceeded to conquer smaller states like Chu (951) and Min (945). Yet Chu was revived in 952, gaining independence until the Song captured it. Similarly, the state of Shu in Sichuan is broken up into the Former Shu (907–925) and Later Shu (934–965), with the earlier state captured in 925 by the Later Tang dynasty from the North, and then reemerging in 934.

There was a considerable measure of geographic sense to the coherent separateness of Shu in Sichuan and Chongqing since it was clearly demarcated by a ring of mountains. Despite those impressive natural defenses, Shu was regularly conquered by powerful northern regimes. Shu was able to maintain an independent existence when the northern power was preoccupied, but was mostly insulated from the southern states (though the Later Shu was captured by the Song armies in 965, advancing from the North and up the Yangzi). An ambitious general sent to Shu could set himself up as a warlord if his home regime got distracted. Sichuan and Chongqing were not, however, a good base from which to conquer China. At the same time, Shu retained a considerable cultural store of books and scholars throughout the tumultuous political and military events of the tenth century.

Two other powers, the Wu/Southern Tang and Wuyue, are good examples of the peculiarities and distinctiveness of southern regimes. The state of Wu began coming into its own as a large, wealthy kingdom in 907. It was by far the wealthiest polity in China in the first half of the tenth century. After its change of ruling house, the new Tang (Southern Tang) state launched some successful campaigns of conquest in the South, while avoiding direct

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conflict with the North. The Southern Tang was also a haven for preserving and nurturing elite Chinese culture. Song culture owed an enormous debt to Southern Tang libraries, scholars, calligraphers, and painters, as well as the beginnings of foot binding at the Southern Tang court. Some Song moralists would, nevertheless, cast aspersions on the purportedly decadent Southern Tang elite lifestyle that supported its impressive cultural products.

The Wu/Southern Tang encompassed much of the most productive areas of tenth-century China. Its rulers referred to themselves as emperors despite not controlling any of the historical capital cities of northern China. At least from their own perspective, they were the inheritors of Tang culture and political legitimacy. Their culture was a continuation of Tang culture, so they had a good claim to political legitimacy. The Southern Tang foundation of Song culture was an uncomfortable issue for eleventh-century Song literati who sought to distinguish themselves and their (non-decadent) refined culture from that of the Southern Tang.

The Wuyue was a small state on the southern coast oriented to international trade. This, combined with its rulers' great interest in Buddhism, transformed it into a sort of Buddhist powerhouse. Wuyue's rulers undertook the revival of Tiantai Buddhism, which had suffered badly under the Tang's Huichang Suppression (842–846). Using their access to Korea and Japan, Wuyue's rulers gathered missing Buddhist texts. In the 950s, the Wuyue ruler ordered the production of 84,000 miniature pagodas, at least 500 of which were taken to Japan. Edmund Worthy has argued that Wuyue's broader strategy, aided by its strong Buddhist orientation, was to maintain diplomatic relations with as many powers as possible in order to balance out the threat of the Wu/Southern Tang.[7]

The relative stability of the South requires some explanation. Edmund Worthy suggested that the southern powers reached a *de facto* agreement maintaining the power balance. In his view, the southern states left the issue of a unified empire to the northern powers and chose on several occasions not to annihilate an opponent. Unfortunately, we do not know why major states chose not to destroy a neighboring polity. At least in early modern Europe, balancing power between states took considerable effort and there was the explicit acknowledgment of that as a goal. There is no evidence that the southern states chose not to destroy their opponent as a preferred option to destroying them. The Southern Tang did, in fact, conquer and absorb some very small territories, suggesting that any perceived restraint with respect to the other states was probably driven by other considerations.

Military "restraint" by southern states was most likely the involuntary product of military, political, and economic constraints. The Southern Tang or any other state did not restrain their actions, but rather recognized their severe limitations. When the Later Zhou and then Song armies invaded the South, they consistently defeated the southern states' armies and navies.

## The North

Li Keyong 李克用, a Shatuo 沙陀 general, and Zhu Wen 朱溫, a former rebel under Huang Chao who had turned coat and joined the Tang side, cooperated in defeating Huang Chao in 884. Their relationship was ruined, however, when Zhu tried to assassinate Li as he was passing through Zhu's stronghold at Kaifeng (Bianzhou). Li escaped the attempt and fell back to his own base at Taiyuan. Caught in the middle of a dispute between two of its most powerful generals, the Tang court refused to take sides. Although Huang Chao was dead, parts of his rebellion lived on and even captured Luoyang, one of the Tang capitals. Zhu was now on his own, though under the Tang banner. The Tang court had no help to send him, and Li Keyong was no longer fighting the rebels. After much desperate fighting, and repeated promotions by the Tang emperor, Zhu Wen managed to defeat

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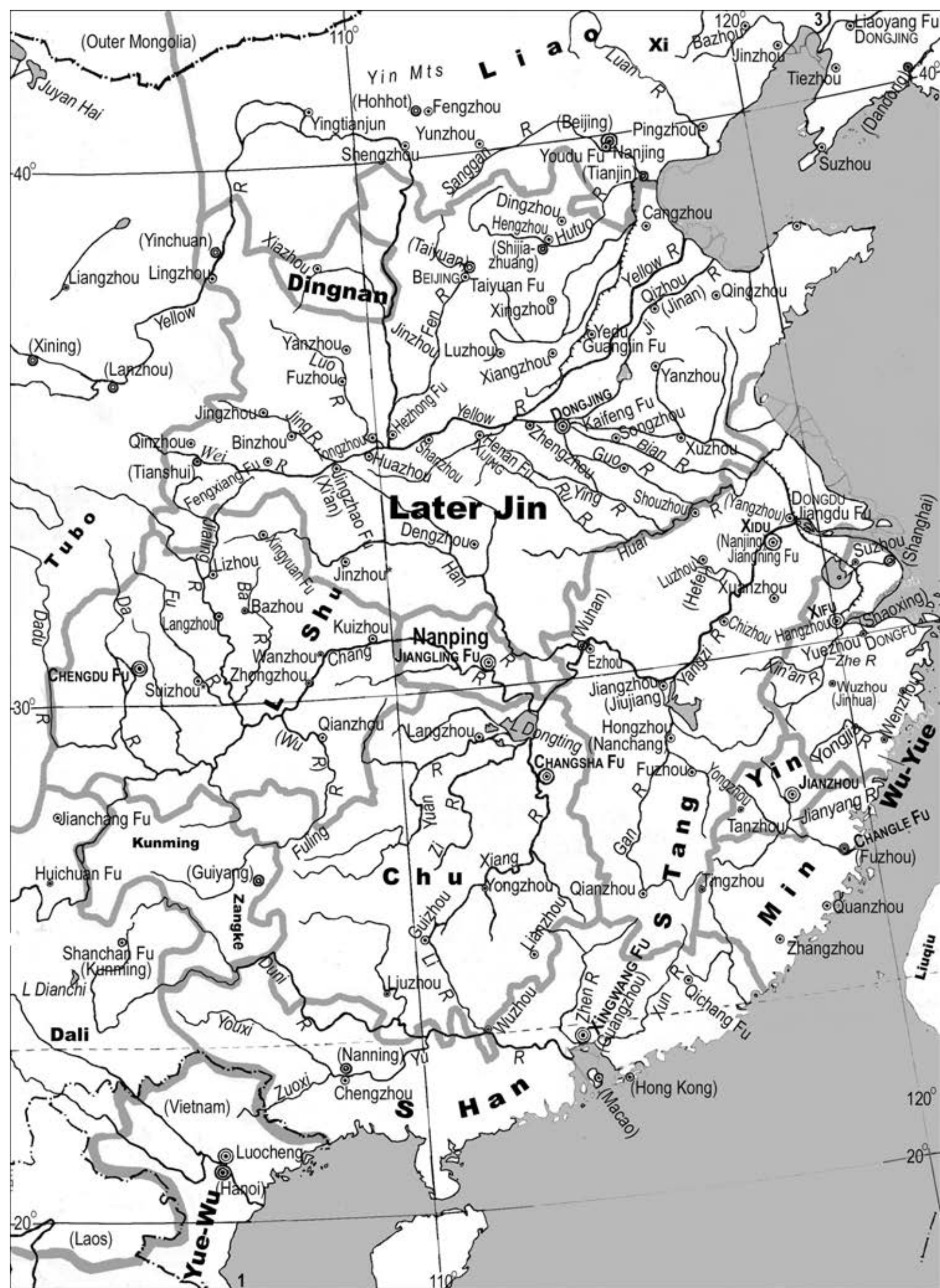
the remaining rebels. This was only the beginning of widespread conflict among all of the warlords. The Tang emperor was only peripherally important to the conflict, mostly acting to sanction the actions that powerful warlords who gave him nominal allegiance desired (Map 10.1).




*Map 10.1* The Five Dynasties Period. (*See* Tan Qixiang, vol. 5, 82–83.)

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Zhu managed to conquer a large section of central China, leaving areas to the North and southern China in the hands of other warlords. Li Keyong, his great rival, was based in Shanxi further to the North. Although Zhu controlled the Tang emperor and the Tang court, their value was quite limited at the beginning of the tenth century. In 904, he killed one emperor and installed another, and by 907, he concluded that the Tang emperor was more an impediment to his power than an asset. Accordingly, he forced the last Tang emperor to abdicate in his favor. Zhu then founded the Liang dynasty, known in Chinese history as the Later Liang dynasty (907–923). The abdicated emperor was killed in 908, and Zhu was himself assassinated by his own son in 912.

Li Keyong died in 908, and was succeeded in command of the Shatuo Türks by his extremely able son Li Cunxu 李存勗. When his father died, Li Cunxu's military and political positions were not very good, having suffered repeated setbacks and defeats. He reversed this decline, and by 923, defeated and overthrew the Later Liang dynasty to reestablish the Tang dynasty (what would be known in Chinese history as the Later Tang dynasty). Meanwhile, independent regimes in southern and western China had sprung up or more openly threw off real allegiance to a northern imperial court. Central and northern China became battlegrounds for the many warlords connected with Türkic or other Steppe polities, or the Han Chinese warlords fighting against them.

Although the split between Zhu Wen and Li Keyong played out through the first three of the Five Dynasties, we should not overstate the significance of ethnicity on loyalty. As Naomi Standen has recently pointed out, loyalties were personal, not ethnic or cultural in this period. It was not until after the Song dynasty was established, and the Song-Liao conflict settled with a firm border, that loyalties to an individual's identified group were assumed. During the Five Dynasties period, individuals might move back and forth between various overlords seeking for a good position. Moreover, ethnic and cultural identity was not racial or genetic.[8] Apart from transfrontiersmen who lived in areas of mixed cultural practice, identity was defined by practice, whether language, custom, or lifestyle. Southern China was uniformly Chinese in every aspect of practice, but even there some men journeyed north to take employment with non-Han overlords. This is not to say that there was no racial/cultural chauvinism, but rather that ambitious or desperate men were willing to move wherever they thought might be advantageous for their fortunes.

Li Cunxu confronted many of the same problems faced by Zhu Wen. Simply declaring the restoration of the Tang dynasty could not ritually restore the Tang Empire any more than the founding of the Liang dynasty could. Real political power relied upon real military power, and military power was now widely distributed across the former Tang Empire. Local and even regional leaders had no reason to support an imperial court in Luoyang or Kaifeng that could neither punish nor protect them. At the same time, the Later Tang dynasty's military was stronger than almost any other military within the former Tang Empire. Li Cunxu sent a force to conquer the Shu kingdom in Sichuan in 925. The Later Tang army successfully captured Sichuan, and Li left the commanding general Meng Zhixiang 孟知祥 in charge of the territory. True to tenth-century form, however, when Li Siyuan 李嗣源, Li Cunxu's successor, died in 934, Meng Zhixiang declared himself emperor of the Shu. The Shu would remain an independent kingdom until the Song conquered it in 965.

The Later Tang dynasty was itself overthrown in 936 by Li Siyuan's son-in-law, Shi Jingtang 石敬瑭 (892–942). Shi Jingtang obtained military support for his *coup* from the Kitan (Khitan) emperor. The Kitan Empire itself was founded in the wake of the Tang fall as a northern Steppe empire with some Chinese ideas of imperial government. Kitan and Chinese cultures were not entirely compatible, of course, leading to a split administration with

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the Northern Court dealing with Steppe people and their affairs, and the Southern Court dealing with the Han Chinese population. Most of the Han population, and, eventually, the largest part of the new empire's economy, was based around the area near modern Beijing. Shi Jingtang ceded these so-called Sixteen Prefectures of Yan 燕 and Yun 雲 to the Kitan as payment for their assistance in putting him on the throne.

The Sixteen Prefectures later became a critical issue between the Song and (Kitan) Liao empires, and a cause for much lamentation among Chinese historians and statesmen. Shi Jingtang, it is argued, could not legitimately cede Chinese territory to the Kitan because it was sovereign Chinese territory. Of course, the very fact that he did belies the anachronism of such an argument. Shi Jingtang ceded the territory because it was the price of achieving his goal of becoming emperor. It is also an important marker of the goals of Kitan security policy. Kitan support for Shi not only gained them a client state in the Central Plains, it also helped bolster their claims to the Sixteen Prefectures. Moreover, the territory contained the strategic passes controlling the north-south routes from Kitan territory into the plains of Hebei.

Kitan influence at the Later Jin court was strong, and an irritant to many there. Shi Jingtang understood and accepted the bargain he had made; after his death, it all fell apart. His successor was convinced to expel the Kitan. In response, the Kitan emperor invaded in 946, and overthrew the Later Jin dynasty the following year (947). Once set up in Kaifeng, the Kitan emperor entertained the idea of simply extending Kitan rule over the former territory of the Later Jin. It is uncertain if he contemplated conquering the rest of China. At a minimum, he performed ceremonies to inaugurate a Kitan dynasty now called "Liao."

Notwithstanding whatever the Liao emperor's larger plans, his immediate military position was unsustainable. The subject population was not amenable to Liao rule, and his army was effectively isolated in Kaifeng. This would prove to be greatest territorial extent of Kitan rule. The Liao emperor looted the city and withdrew back to Liao territory, dying soon after. Of course, the retreat of the Liao army left a power vacuum. The Later Jin dynasty had been destroyed, the Liao army had left, and the Liao court was occupied with an imperial succession. Kaifeng was looted and open.

Liu Zhiyuan 劉知遠 (895–948), a Shatuo Türk military governor of the region around Taiyuan, Shanxi, seized the moment and established a new dynasty, the Han. His dynasty, which would later be called the Later Han, was the fourth dynasty to control North China since the fall of the Tang, and the third in a row to be ruled by Shatuo Türks (although, Shi Jingtang, the founder of the Later Jin, according to his epitaph, descended from Shi Le 石勒 of Jie 羯). It is worth noting that no one questioned the legitimacy of these dynasties because their ruling families were not Han Chinese. To have raised such questions during the Song dynasty, of course, would have not only vastly complicated the already challenging aspects of legitimating the Song through the Five Dynasties, but also have forced a reconsideration of the legitimacy of the Tang dynasty as well. Thus, despite an often deep-seated ethnic or racial chauvinism on the part of Chinese historians, a polity that chose to rule China as a Chinese dynasty could still be portrayed as inherently legitimate. At the same time, this also created historiographical problems with respect to the Kitan Liao dynasty and the Jurchen Jin dynasty.

Liu Zhiyuan died after only a year on the throne, leaving the new dynasty to his teenage son. Infighting within the court undermined the loyalty of the generals. One of them, Guo Wei 郭威, returned to the capital with his army purportedly because of reports that a hostile faction had taken control at court and his family was in danger. Most resistance collapsed as his border force approached, and Guo quickly took control of the emperor and the court.

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The emperor was almost immediately murdered, but Guo did not take the throne. Guo was loyally awaiting another member of the Liu family to come south from Taiyuan and take the throne when he received a report of a Liao invasion. It was only when Guo set out with the army to defend the kingdom from the Liao that his troops demanded he take the throne. Bowing to his troops' will and making sure a Liu successor was blocked from reaching the capital, Guo set up a new dynasty, the Zhou. The remnants of the Liu regime fell back to Taiyuan where the rump Later Han government became the Northern Han court.

## The end of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and beginning of the Song

The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period began and ended in North China. Between the beginning and ending points, however construed, the turning point in military and political terms that moved the northern regimes from breakdown and toward unity, and eventually to recreating the Tang Empire, was the Battle of Gaoping 高平 (in Shanxi) in 954. Until the Battle of Gaoping, the Later Zhou dynasty appeared to be no different than the four dynasties that preceded it. Zhou Shizong's 周世宗 (Chai Rong 柴榮, Guo Wei's successor) victory secured his own throne and changed the course of his dynasty. It also laid the groundwork for the Song dynasty.

The battle took place not long after the Later Zhou founder died in 954, and the Northern Han ruler saw an opportunity to take control over the regime at Kaifeng that had been denied to him. Accordingly, he obtained direct military support from the Liao dynasty and marched south from Taiyuan toward Kaifeng. The newly installed second Zhou emperor marched north and the two armies clashed at Gaoping. The Northern Han army was on the verge of victory when Shizong personally led a force into battle, not only winning decisively, but also legitimizing his position on the throne. Shizong's generals formed the core of his power and, after his death, became the founders of the Song dynasty. Both Shizong and his generals were examples of the new men who had moved into the northern government's central armies.

These new men were at least a partial break with the previous patterns of elite military intermarriage. Politically they left behind the contest between Zhu Wen's and Li Keyong's remnants. After crushing the Northern Han army, Shizong immediately followed up with an attack on Taiyuan, the Northern Han capital, in an effort to completely extinguish that threat. Although the siege failed, the Northern Han and its Liao patron were temporarily dissuaded from further serious incursions. Shizong had secured his political place and his northern border giving him the opportunity to expand the territory under the control of the northern regime.

Shizong successfully struck west and south, capturing land from the Later Shu and a much larger area from the Southern Tang. The Southern Tang campaign took over a year and at several points seemed on the verge of failure. Success in the South significantly expanded Shizong's territory, and thus his revenue and prestige. In the process of campaigning against the Southern Tang, the Later Zhou military developed a navy and opened up waterways north and south from Kaifeng. Shizong then turned his attention to the Liao, but fell ill soon after the campaign began. He died shortly afterward, leaving a young son on the throne.

The coup d'état that overthrew the Later Zhou and established the Song in 960 ended the Five Dynasties period, yet left the issue of the Ten Kingdoms untouched. Of course, the Song only succeeded in ending the Five Dynasties retrospectively because it succeeded over the next 20 years in conquering the South. And it was not until 979 that the Song finally conquered the Northern Han. The Song founding itself was not completed until the

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resolution of another 25 years of war with the Liao initiated by an invasion of Liao territory immediately following the fall of Taiyuan and the Northern Han. Politically and militarily, even the Ten Kingdoms were not completely gone until 979.

There were several reasons that the Song was able to conquer southern China and establish a stable regime. First, it built upon the military and political success of the Later Zhou following the Battle of Gaoping. If Shizong had lived longer, the Later Zhou might have become a stable dynasty and conquered southern China. Certainly, Shizong had the military capability to achieve that political end. Yet creating a stable dynasty was not simply a military task nor was the political stability that followed the initial Zhou and later Song military successes a given. The Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period was not fragmented only for military and political reasons. Early Song rulers also had to establish unity and uniformity as the normal condition.

The second reason the Song was able to end the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period was cultural. While Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms culture persisted into the Song dynasty for a time, the simple fact of a single, central court that ruled over the empire created a unified cultural focal point. The Song court determined what cultural products were imperially endorsed and what sort of scholarship would lead to a government job. All elites seeking government support quickly oriented their intellectual and cultural pursuits toward that focal point. Culture became a dynastic tool for fostering loyalty among local, regional, and imperial elites. During the Song conquest, the promotion of imperial cultural norms acted as a force-multiplier for the military and political campaigns to win over rulers and elites. The Song army was the instrument of an orthodox dynastic project that would reify the political power of conventionally educated and socialized elites.

Finally, the third reason the Song did not become the sixth northern dynasty of the tenth century was imperial intermarriage with the families of the founding generals. This social tie among the military elites reduced or eliminated the centripetal tendencies of a dynasty in its early stages. Military men founded every dynasty in Chinese history, making managing the ambitions of generals a key survival issue. In the case of the Song, the way it successfully managed its founding generals was by marrying them into the imperial family. Crucially, this policy tied these generals to the central government rather than apportioning them independent regional power. The Song government was highly centralized as a direct response to the diversity of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period. This extended all the way into the marriage practices of the imperial clan and the descendants of the founding generals.

## Conclusion

Historiographical issues necessarily and reasonably dominate any discussion of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, at least as a preamble to considering specific historical events. The political and military importance of different regions of China was neither entirely unique nor an aberration. While traditional historiography assumed, at a minimum, that a unified empire was obviously a better way to run China, more peaceful, orderly, and better able to defend itself, and more usually that such a unified polity was the "natural" state of China, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period was more structured than such a tradition predicted.

The North held the military, and therefore the political, initiative to overturn the stable multistate environment of the early tenth century. As a consequence, efforts to recreate the Tang Empire had to await the resolution of the struggle for power in the North. That struggle played out as a continuation of the Chinese-Türkic factional conflict that grew out

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of the suppression of the Huang Chao Rebellion, though it was factional rather than ethnic. The Kitan Liao dynasty also played an important role in the resolution of that battle, but was much less significant than the mutual exhaustion of the two sides. Indeed, the Kitan invasion of North China in 946–947 had little influence on that narrative, as the Later Han dynasty that took control of Kaifeng after the Kitan left was related to the same cast of characters.

It was the break-up of the Later Han dynasty and the creation of the Later Zhou dynasty that brought new players into the game. All of them had served in earlier dynasties, so they were not outsiders, but they were much less tightly connected to the previous regimes. When the Later Zhou displaced the Later Han, leaving a rump regime at Taiyuan, the Late Tang dynasty rivalry was marginalized. The remnant Northern Han court in north Shanxi was only finally crushed in 979, almost 20 years after the establishment of the Song dynasty. In that sense, at least, the full narrative underlying the fall of the Tang dynasty and the trajectory of the five northern Chinese dynasties was nearly a century from inception in 884 to denouement in 979.

The military and political events in the century from 884 to 979 were one of the main lines of development in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, but they were not the only events affecting the shift from Tang to Song cultures. Economic trends, like the growing productive capacity of the South, that began in the Tang continued through the Five Dynasties period into the Song. The arts also advanced, and may well have benefited at least in diversity with multiple courts. Southern Tang painting, for example, was truly exquisite. Yet the destruction of warfare, which was most acutely felt in the North, was deeply intertwined with most of the changes of the Five Dynasties period. War was not just central to the period in the eyes of later historians, it was central to elites and commoners who lived through the time. A farmer may not have cared much what dynasty he lived under, but the demands on manpower, food, and other resources to support the wars, let alone if an army moved through his locality, were of immediate concern.

Culture still flourished in this tumultuous time, at least in the South. This was a historiographical paradox, though it shouldn't have been. It was often the periods of political and military struggle that produced great culture in China as happened in the Warring States period, the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms. Centralized political authority as well as its accompanying centralized historical writing stifled much creativity even while promoting a select part of artistic production. The tenth century was rich in military history and cultural accomplishments.

Although the writing of tenth-century history was well under way before the end of the century, what would become the dominant historiographical traditions of the period were formed during the very different eleventh century, a time that Song historians felt had little in the way of military accomplishment but far more in the way of cultural achievements. Ouyang Xiu portrayed the first half of the tenth century as a time of moral decadence, cultural decline, and military predominance. In that light, the creation of the Song and the cultural efflorescence of the eleventh century were a break with the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. Ouyang's perspective was eventually accepted, though recently historians less invested in the Song dynasty's separateness have begun to emphasize the cultural and economic continuities of the tenth century. Song elite culture grew out of Ten Kingdoms culture, and Ten Kingdoms culture, the culture of the South, was not just a static reservoir of preserved Tang culture. Southern cultural diversity was the foundation of eleventh-century Song cultural diversity. It was only in the second half of the eleventh century that diversity began to trouble some thinkers, and intellectual unity grew in attraction. That diversity was in many ways a holdover from Ten Kingdoms culture.

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## Notes

1 Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy.*
2 On the history and myth of the Great Wall, see Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); for a shorter overview, see Peter Lorge, "The Great Wall," in Naomi Standen (ed.), *Demystifying China* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012), 25–32.
3 Johannes Kurz, "A Survey of the Historical Sources for the Five Dynasties and Ten States in Song Times," in *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 33 (2003), 187–224, 190. For Ouyang Xiu's validation of the Later Liang, see Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Wudai shi* 新五代史 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974) 2.21.
4 The obvious exception to this is the work of Hugh Clarke on the Song dynasty. His work on Fujian province, for example, amply demonstrates the rich possibilities of local or regional studies. See most notably, Hugh Clark, *Community, Trade, and Networks: Southern Fujian Province from the Third to the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and *Portrait of a Community: Society, Culture and the Structures of Kinship in the Mulan River (Fujian) from the Late Tang through the Song* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2007).
5 Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty.*
6 Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy.*
7 Edmund Worthy, "Diplomacy for Survival," 17–44.
8 Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty.*

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