

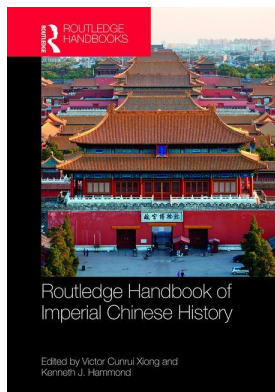
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11

THE NORTHERN SONG

Yongguang Hu



Map 11.1 The Northern Song and Liao. (See Tan Qixiang, vol. 6, 3–4.)

The Northern Song (960–1127) was a pivotal period that witnessed a number of key transitions in Chinese history. The state adopted the principle of meritocracy and promoted scholar-officials to manage the bureaucracy. Its society benefited from agricultural growth, the expansion of handicraft industries, and the development of trade. At the same time, the court suffered from severe factional conflicts in its last five decades, and the dynasty

constantly faced military threats from non-Chinese regimes in the north and northwest. The Northern Song eventually fell to the invasion of the Jurchen in 1127.

The Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) ruled China for more than three centuries and was the longest reigning dynasty in the last millennium. Historians usually divide the Song into two time periods: the Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) and the Southern Song 南宋 (1127–1279). During the former period, its territory covered China proper, but not including a narrow region to the south of the Great Wall. The Northern Song coexisted with two nomadic regimes on the steppe in Central and North Asia: the Kitan Liao 遼 Empire (907–1125) and the Tangut Xixia 西夏 Empire (1038–1227). The people of Jurchen established the Jin 金 Empire in Manchuria in 1115 and then conquered the Liao one decade later. The Song court could not defend itself against the Jurchen invasion in the winter of 1126–1127, and two of its emperors were captured by this enemy. In mid-1127, one of the Song imperial princes successfully escaped to the south, and his Southern Song regime continued reigning as the imperial house for another one and half centuries. By this time the court only controlled two-thirds of its former territory. In the thirteenth century, the nomadic Mongols established their own state and subsequently occupied the Xixia and Jin. The Southern Song managed to withstand Mongol invasions for more than four decades before its complete collapse in the late 1270s.

The Northern Song was a critical period in Chinese history. First proposed by the acclaimed Japanese historian Naitō Konan 内藤湖南 (1866–1934) in the early twentieth century, the Tang-Song Transformation theory has been largely accepted by Japanese and Western historians in the last century. This theory argues that China experienced a number of significant transitions between the Tang 唐 (618–907) and Song dynasties, especially in the Northern Song period. Politically and socially, the Song rulers entrusted Confucian scholar officials to administer the state, not members of aristocratic families who used to enjoy privileged positions in the previous centuries. Powerful family members or regional military governors could no longer monopolize government posts because the state utilized the Civil Service Examination System (*keju* 科舉) to recruit talented men for official positions. This surely helped to promote the social status of the literati. The Northern Song court also actively used fiscal and taxation policies to promote a cash economy, in which the government functioned as a collection of state-owned enterprises. Moreover, political stability, peaceful international relations, and new technologies all contributed to a prosperous economy. The population grew to more than 100 million, the highest number to that point in Chinese history. The state underwent a large wave of urban growth, and city residents created an energetic urban culture. Vibrant long-distance continental and oversea trade connected the Northern Song to other regions in Asia, representing an early version of globalization. Facing the intellectual challenges of Buddhism and Daoism, prominent Northern Song thinkers introduced innovative ideas to reform Confucianism in the eleventh century and laid a solid foundation for the establishment of the Neo-Confucian school. Today, some Chinese historians still have reservations about the Tang-Song Transformation theory, as they tend to focus more on the continuities between these two dynasties. Yet it is still accurate to say that the Northern Song, and the Song at large, brought numerous key changes to Chinese society and strongly influenced the future of the imperial era.

The emperors and top leaders

Taizu 太祖 (*né* Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤) (927–976), the founder of the Song dynasty, was from a military family in Hebei 河北, North China. He became an army officer when he was 21 years old and was gradually promoted to be the highest commander of the Palace Army in

Kaifeng 開封 when the last emperor of the Later Zhou 周 dynasty (951–960), a six-year-old boy, inherited the throne in 959. Half a year later, Taizu and his followers fabricated news of Kitan invasions and used the ensuing turmoil to organize a coup d'état, proclaiming himself to be the new emperor. The child emperor was forced to abdicate, and on February 4, 960, Taizu formally established the Song dynasty, with Kaifeng as its capital.

As a military commander, Taizu had witnessed the ebb and flow of dynastic powers in the previous decades in North China. No dynasty lasted more than two generations, and regional warlords would assert their dominance by easily wielding military power. Taizu sought to end this chaotic cycle by upholding the principle of rule by civil officials. He gradually ended the regional control of warlords and took away the commanding power of his own generals, preventing any of them from replicating what he had done in 960. He promoted Confucian scholar officials in the government and ensured a relatively open environment for policy discussion. Eunuchs, emperors' in-laws, and imperial clan members were no longer allowed to hold high-level government positions. He also forbade his successors to execute literati simply for their opinions, teachings, or policies.

Taizu then started a series of wars to conquer small kingdoms in the south. His goal was not accomplished when he died mysteriously in 976. Rumors often associate his death with his younger brother, who ascended to the throne to become emperor Taizong 太宗 (*né* Zhao Guangyi 趙光義) (r. 976–997). The succession choice is suspicious since it does not follow the traditional practice of agnatic primogeniture in Chinese history, especially considering the fact that Taizu himself had two grown sons. Nonetheless, over the next two decades, Taizong continued the initiatives of civil governance and successfully unified China in 979 when his army defeated the Northern Han 漢. In an aftermath battle, Taizong was wounded by an arrow near Yanjing 燕京 (Beijing 北京) as he led his army to invade the land of the Kitans. He died in 997 from that injury, and his throne was inherited by his son, not one of his two nephews.

The two decades of Zhenzong's 真宗 (*né* Zhao Heng 趙恆) (r. 997–1022) reign were a transitional period in Northern Song history. Unlike his uncle and father, Zhenzong was not a confident, powerful ruler who had total control over state affairs. Yet since domestic conquest was no longer an urgent priority, his indecisiveness helped to empower the chief councilors and establish a stable government guided by the principles proposed by Taizu and Taizong. Structured bureaucratic procedures replaced *ad hoc* decisions, and the expansion of civil service examinations insulated government from military dominance. The court also solved the issue of border conflicts with the Kitans by signing the Treaty of Chanyuan 澶淵 in 1005, eliminating wars between these two empires for more than a century. The last ten years of Zhenzong's rule were infamous in history as Zhenzong became infatuated with Daoist teachings and extravagant ritual ceremonies. Accompanied by more than 22,000 officials, monks, and servants, Zhenzong visited Mount Tai 泰山 in 1008 to perform the *fengshan* 封禪 sacrifice, a ritual ceremony demonstrating Heaven's endorsement of the emperor as the chosen ruler of the land and people. During this period, encouraged by Zhenzong's religious zeal for Daoism, officials frequently reported the discovery of "heavenly books" (*tianshu* 天書) and auspicious signs, both of which showed how he was a reincarnation of a Daoist immortal and destined to bring stability and prosperity to the state. Zhenzong died in 1022, leaving the throne to his 13-year-old son and Empress Liu 劉 (r. 1022–1033), who acted as the regent of the regime for the next 11 years.

Renzong 仁宗 (*né* Zhao Zhen 趙禎) (r. 1022–1063) began his personal rule in 1033 after Empress Dowager Liu's death, and his reign was the longest in the Northern Song dynasty. Traditional Neo-Confucian historians often praised Renzong's three decades of rule as the heyday of the Song and attributed numerous Confucian virtues to him. By doing so, they

aimed to contrast Renzong's conservative policies with Shenzong's radical reforms in the 1070s and 1080s. Ironically, the reforming spirit that prevailed during the late Northern Song was actually first cultivated in the 1040s.

Two acclaimed Confucian politicians led this change: Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052) and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽脩 (1007–1072). Both of them clearly understood the political, military, and fiscal issues beneath the surface of a shallow prosperity. First, in order to protect itself from northern enemies and ensure domestic order, the government had to maintain large standing armies, a policy that brought a heavy financial burden to the state because it had to pay salaries to more than one million soldiers, in addition to the other costs associated with construction, provision, recruitment, training, and mobilizing for wars. More than 80 percent of the government's annual budget was directed to military related spending, and the Imperial Army still suffered humiliating losses along the northwest frontier when the Tanguts launched several invasions in the 1040s. Second, thanks to the expansion of examinations, the court had recruited degree holders at an unprecedented scale. There were not enough posts for everyone, and candidates had to spend years waiting for a vacancy. Yet many of them still had official titles and received stipends. Some records indicate that the bureaucracy quadrupled in size between Zhenzong's and Renzong's reigns. Third, the inefficiency and widespread corruption within the government further eroded the quality of leadership. Apparently, a superficial knowledge of Confucian classics would not elevate one's moral standing. Commoners' interests were often ignored, exploited, or manipulated by the privileged. In 1043, Fan Zhongyan submitted a lengthy memorial for ten initiatives, aiming to increase administrative efficiency, reduce corruption, promote education, stimulate the economy, and strengthen the military. Although this Qingli 慶曆 Reform only lasted for one and half years due to the fierce conservative backlash, it helped to construct a new vision for later reformers and became a precursor to the full-fledged reforms that would occur 30 years later.

As Renzong died heirless in 1063, one of his nephews ascended the throne and became known as Yingzong 英宗 (*né* Zhao Shu 趙曙) (r. 1063–1067). Although he appeared promising, he was soon afflicted by an unknown health issue and died less than four years into his reign.

Shenzong 神宗 (*né* Zhao Xu 趙頊) (r. 1067–1085) succeeded his father to be the sixth emperor of the Northern Song. His reign was probably the most studied and most controversial in the entire dynasty. Facing the same issues as during Renzong's reign, Shenzong was determined to restructure the state and revive its military, bringing back the glorious days of Chinese domination over "all under Heaven." He enlisted the prominent reformer Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) to design and promulgate a dozen New Policies (*xinfa* 新法) during the next one and half decades, and these reforms fundamentally changed all aspects of the Song dynasty.

The first and foremost component of Wang's New Policies was economic reform. Aiming to ease the burden of high interest debt that peasants had to assume when borrowing from usurious moneylenders in the countryside, the court enacted the Green Sprouts Act (*qingmiao fa* 青苗法) in 1069. Under this law, every year the government would provide loans with interest rates of only 10 to 20 percent to peasants in the spring and receive cash payments after the harvest in the fall. The state thus established a rural credit system, providing peasants more affordable ways to buy seeds, tools, and fertilizers before the cultivation season. To further monetize the economy and relieve peasants' burdens, Wang Anshi introduced the Service Exemption Act (*mianyi fa* 免役法), under which peasants no longer needed to perform labor service in order to fulfill their taxation duty. The government would instead collect a service exemption fee assessed on the basis of family property and use that income to hire

laborers to accomplish the same tasks. This policy was popular nearly everywhere because even the rural rich had been suffering from unrealistic service commitment for centuries. In a number of major cities the court implemented the State Trade Act (*shiyi fa* 市易法) to regulate commodity prices through the operation of the Ever-normal State Trade Agency (*changping shiyi si* 常平市易司). This office purchased goods from traveling merchants at generous prices and then sold them to consumers at relatively affordable prices in urban markets. It prevented urban rich merchants from hoarding commodities and monopolizing the trade with traveling merchants. The government agency acted as a giant trading company, which brought advantage to both small merchants and city consumers, while still being able to generate good returns for the state.

Another important component of Wang's reforms was its military policies. Throughout the empire, the government established a mutual security system (*baojia* 保甲), in which every five to ten households formed a small guard, every five small guards formed a large guard, and every five large guards formed a superior guard. At every level, these guards were headed by local capable landowners. Qualified families needed to supply at least one adult male to receive basic military training and maintain social order of the locality. The ultimate goal of this reform was to replace existing incapable standing armies with newly recruited and trained militia and to bring the former conscription system back to the state. Although such a goal was never achieved in the Northern Song period, the social organizational method of the mutual security system largely survived in late imperial China. Wang's regime further issued the Horse Raising Act (*baoma fa* 保馬法), encouraging families in the mutual system to raise horses for military use. Before this reform, only government stud farms could raise horses in limited numbers, and this became a critical issue constraining military mobility. The new regulation enhanced the productivity of the society and increased the horse supply to the Song military in the following decades.

The New Policies faded away with the death of Shenzong in 1085. His successor Zhezong 哲宗 (*né Zhao Xu* 趙煦) (r. 1085–1100) was too young to rule this vast empire, so Empress Dowager Xuanren 宣仁 (1032–1093), the mother of Shenzong and grandmother of Zhezong, acted as the regent for the next eight years. She was never a supporter of the New Policies even during Shenzong's reign. Wasting no time, Xuanren brought Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086), a renowned historian and a long-term conservative leader, back to the court and made him the chief councilor. In the following year, Sima Guang adamantly abolished nearly all the reforming policies; even some of his anti-reformist allies believed that he went too far. Nevertheless, all the efforts to save the New Policies failed, and previous reformist leaders were banished from the capital. The victory of the conservatives did not bring harmony back. With no common enemy around, they themselves engaged in never-ending factional conflicts at court until the empress dowager died in 1093. Zhezong, who had felt manipulated as a puppet, was now eager to use his personal rule to change the course of history. Young and ambitious, he admired the reforming legacy of his father and he packed his government with reformers again. This time, it was the conservatives who were purged from Kaifeng and lined up on the road leading to noxious places in the tropical south. In the last two decades of the eleventh century, the political winds shifted, and the political culture could be labeled as anything but stable. The deep gulf between the two camps could never be bridged as both reformists and anti-reformists constantly abused their power and persecuted rivals whenever possible. Zhezong died unexpectedly in 1100 when he was only 24 years old, and one of his younger brothers became the next ruler.

Huizong 徽宗 (*né Zhao Ji* 趙佶) (r. 1100–1126), the penultimate emperor of the Northern Song, was a controversial figure in history. Similar to his brother, Huizong also had

strong interest in his father's reform agenda and appointed Cai Jing 蔡京 (1047–1126), a third-generation reformist leader, to be his chief councilor in 1102. Determined to continue Wang Anshi's legacy, Cai Jing quickly started to persecute hundreds of conservative figures and promulgate a new wave of reforms, focusing on educational and social welfare policies, many of which were bold experiments without precedent in world history. For example, the court established numerous free poorhouses (*juyangyuan* 居養院), charity clinics (*anjifang* 安濟坊), public pharmacies (*hejiju* 和濟局), and cemeteries (*louzeyuan* 漏澤園) across the empire. All of them were supported by public finance. Huizong was an ambitious monarch, a highly accomplished calligrapher and painter, and an avid art patron and collector. He was fascinated with Daoist teachings and repeatedly invited Daoist masters to his palace for holding ceremonies and compiling a Daoist canon. Often encouraged by Cai Jing, Huizong was obsessed with luxury entertainment activities. In Kaifeng, he ordered the building of a magnificent pleasure park, filled with artificial rocks, exotic animals, and rare plants found in the South. In order to transport rocks and plants to the capital, the government operated a notorious transportation network, often referred to as the “flower and rock network” (*huashigang* 花石綱). It added enormous expense to the local government and created widespread misery among peasants. In 1120, Fang La 方臘 (d. 1121), a charismatic Manichaean leader in Zhejiang 浙江, gathered hundreds of thousands of followers to rebel against the court. They attacked six prefectures and were responsible for approximately one million deaths in the most prosperous region of the empire before the insurrection was suppressed a year later.

Probably the biggest failings of Huizong and his ministers were in the areas of the military and diplomacy. In Manchuria, the newly risen Jurchen established the Jin state in 1115, and quickly expanded into Liao territory. Huizong and some of his advisors considered this new change a perfect opportunity to weaken the Liao and retake the Sixteen Prefectures (*yanyun shiliu zhou* 燕雲十六州) that had been occupied by the Kitan since 938. They negotiated with the Jurchen, and both parties agreed to attack the Liao from different fronts and divide its territory after victory. However, to their great surprise, the fragile Liao army managed to defeat the Song invasion near Yanjing again, whereas the Liao were dealt a fatal defeat from the Jurchen in the north. The incompetence and vulnerability of the Song military were plainly exposed to everyone. After conquering the Liao state in 1125, the Jurchen leaders wasted no time directing their armies southward. Kaifeng was besieged twice in the next two years. Never facing such severe challenges in his life, Huizong voluntarily abdicated his throne and made his eldest son the new emperor, whose temple name would be Qinzong 欽宗 (*né Zhao Huan* 趙桓) (r. 1126–1127). Yet it was too late to organize any meaningful resistance. One year later, in the winter of 1126–1127, the capital fell into the hands of the Jurchen. Both Huizong and Qinzong were taken into captivity, then transferred to the remote north in Manchuria, and never had a chance to return to their homeland. Accompanying them were hundreds of thousands of civilians, officials, servants, court ladies, maids, and soldiers, along with their family members. With countless tragic stories, the “Humiliation of Jingkang” (*Jingkang zhichi* 靖康之恥) marked the end of the Northern Song.

Political institutions

The Song political system was probably the most complicated one in imperial Chinese history. Not only did it inherit many contradictory practices from the Tang and Five Dynasties, its own focus on civilian rule and the increasing numbers of officials and clerks also created new issues and problems.

The central government resided at the capital of Kaifeng. The ruling entity was the Council of State, comprising chief councilors and military directors. Usually there were two to four chief councilors. Their official title changed over time. Between 960 and 1080, it was Joint Manager of Affairs with the Secretariat-Chancellery (*tong zhongshu menxia pingzhang shi* 同中書門下平章事). Shenzong himself promulgated an institutional reform for the government in 1080, after which the primary chief councilor became the Left Director of the Department of State Affairs and Concurrent Vice Director of the Chancellery (*shangshu zuo pushe jian menxia shilang* 尚書左僕射兼門下侍郎), and the secondary chief councilor became the Right Director of the Department of State Affairs and Concurrent Vice Director of the Secretariat (*shangshu you pushe jian zhongshu shilang* 尚書右僕射兼中書侍郎). In the early twelfth century, Huizong further invented two new titles, which were only used for two decades. All of these names implied a transition from the Three Department System (*sansheng zhi* 三省制) in the Tang period to the eventual One Department System (*yisheng zhi* 一省制), in which a small number of chief councilors could make all the decisions for the entire bureaucracy. The previous famous Six Ministries (*liubu* 六部) in the Tang period, namely, the Ministries of Personnel (*libu* 吏部), of Revenue (*hubu* 戶部), of Rites (*libu* 禮部), of Defense (*bingbu* 兵部), of Justice (*xingbu* 刑部), and of Public Works (*gongbu* 工部), had only nominal roles at court before Shenzong's institutional reform in 1080. After this reform, their functions were largely restored, so were the Nine Courts (*jiusi* 九寺) and Six Directorates (*liujian* 六監), all of which were responsible for a variety of tasks, including, but not limited to, imperial affairs, government education, ritual ceremonies, and public maintenance.

The power of the chief councilors was constrained by the Bureau of Military Affairs (*shumi yuan* 樞密院), the highest military command center of the empire. This bureau was not directed by military generals, but civil officials. The purpose of setting up this agency was to weaken the power of the chief councilors, so they would have no access to military affairs. In practice, an official would be promoted to be the Commissioner (*shi* 使) of the Bureau first before he became a chief councilor.

The State Finance Commission (*sansi* 三司) was another independent office in the central government. Its main responsibilities were managing taxation, census, salt and iron monopolies, and transportation. The head of the Commission (*sansi shi* 三司使) was often called the Fiscal Councilor (*jixiang* 計相), enjoying a slightly lower status than the members of the Council of State. During the Wang Anshi Reforms, he created a separate body, the Finance Planning Commission (*zhizhi sansi tiaoli si* 制置三司條例司). This office differed from the State Finance Commission in that the former was used by Wang to skip regular political procedures in order to implement his reforms.

Two other important offices of the central government were the Censorate (*yushi tai* 御史臺) and Remonstrance Bureau (*jianyuan* 諫院), both of which were responsible for overseeing the entire bureaucracy and impeaching corrupted officials. The former was headed by the Vice Censor-in-Chief (*yushi zhongcheng* 御史中丞), and the latter was staffed with Remonstrators (*sijian* 司諫) and Exhorters (*zhengyan* 正言). These officials were intended to maintain their organizational independence in order to constrain the power of the chief councilors. Yet they were often manipulated by the court and became vassals of powerful ministers. For example, in late Northern Song, both the reformists and anti-reformists wanted to monopolize the positions of censors and remonstrators, and mobilize these positions of power to attack the other faction.

Local administration was divided into three levels. At the bottom was the county (*xian* 縣), headed by a county magistrate (*xianling* 縣令), often a *jinshi* degree holder who had to

rely on the cooperation of local subofficial clerks (*li* 吏) to govern his region. Above the county was the prefecture or its equivalents (*zhou* 州, *fu* 府, *jun* 軍, or *jian* 監). Usually it was headed by a prefect (*zhizhou* 知州, *zhifu* 知府, *zhijun* 知軍, or *zhijian* 知監) and comprised two to ten counties. And over the prefecture was the circuit (*lu* 路), a geographic jurisdiction similar in size to a province (*sheng* 省) in the Ming 明 and Qing 清 dynasties but lacking many key functions that its later counterparts had. There was no circuit governor who could manage affairs in local prefectures or counties. Each circuit rather had four commissioners, responsible for fiscal, judicial, military, and supply affairs. The central bureaucratic government directly appointed circuit commissioners, prefects, and county magistrates in the empire.

Foreign relations

Traditional narratives often criticize the Northern Song as a “poor and weak” (*jipin jiruo* 積貧積弱) dynasty. It is true that this regime, compared to its predecessors and successors, probably controlled the smallest territory of any dynasty which claimed the unification of China. During its entire time span from 960 to 1127, it was threatened by three non-Chinese states from the north, namely, the Kitan Liao (907–1125), the Tangut Xixia (1038–1227), and the Jurchen Jin (1115–1234). Eventually, the Jurchen Invasion of 1126–1127 directly led to the fall of the dynasty. On the other hand, the Northern Song had an inherent geographical weakness and faced unprecedented challenges from within and without. It did make numerous strategic mistakes, sometimes grave, but it also managed to achieve certain success during a number of border conflicts. The “poor and weak” label cannot accurately reflect its true military and diplomatic capacity in history.

From the very beginning, the Song encountered the Liao in the north. The founder of the Liao was Abaoji 阿保機 (872–926), who unified Kitan tribes in 907 and established a new state in Manchuria. Over the next five decades, the Liao promoted a divided China to expand its influence southward. In 936, Taizong 太宗 of Liao (r. 927–947) installed Shi Jingtang 石敬瑭 (892–942), a regional military governor in north China, as a new emperor and helped him to found the Later Jin 後晉 dynasty (936–947). In exchange, Shi agreed to cede the famous Sixteen Prefectures to the Liao. Upon receiving this strategically important region along the Great Wall, the Liao had the capacity to control the entire Chinese defense line, and the North China Plain would be directly exposed to any northern invaders during the next two centuries. When Zhao Kuangyin established the Song in 960, he decided not to immediately provoke his northern neighbor, but to wait for a better time in which all the southern kingdoms would be conquered by his army. The direct clash between the Song and Liao started in 963 when several Song troops attacked the Northern Han kingdom (951–979), a client state of the Liao Empire in Taiyuan 太原. In the next one and a half decades, Song and Liao armies clashed repeatedly over the fate of the Northern Han, yet no one enjoyed an overwhelming victory. After Taizu died, Taizong continued his brother’s mission and finally captured Taiyuan in 979, a bitter defeat for the Liao.

The fall of the Northern Han did not result in a peaceful coexistence of the two empires. Immediately following the conquest of Taiyuan, Taizong mobilized his troops to enter Liao territory, hoping to capture Yanjing and restore Song rule of the Sixteen Prefectures. In the seventh month of 979, the Song army was smashed at the Battle of Gaolianghe 高粱河, and Taizong barely escaped from the battlefield. The Kitans organized more invasions of the Song in the 980s and 990s, but they could not hold on to the newly occupied land in North China either.

The turning point of Song-Liao relations was the Treaty of Chanyuan signed by both states in 1005. This treaty was the result of a six-day negotiation following a Liao invasion in late 1004. Probably considering the tremendous costs of war, officials from the two sides reached a peace agreement. They acknowledged the current Song-Liao border, and the Song would permanently give up its sovereignty claim on the Sixteen Prefectures. Along the border they would open frontier markets to facilitate trade relations. The Song also agreed to pay an annual tribute of 200,000 bolts of silk and 100,000 taels of silver to the Liao to show its peaceful intention. (The amounts were later increased to 300,000 bolts and 200,000 taels, respectively, in the mid-eleventh century.) Interestingly, in the text of the treaty, they used the term “brother states” (*xiongdì zhi guó* 兄弟之國) to describe their mutual relations. Clearly, under such arrangement, the Chinese ruler was no longer the only Son of Heaven (*tianzi* 天子) in the world.

Ever since the treaty was enacted, it has been a point of contention among Chinese historians. Confucian scholar-officials constantly viewed it as proof of humiliation. They could not accept the fact of Chinese paying tribute to “barbarians;” the policy of pacification simply violates the universal Sinocentric order. In the next millennium, generations of Chinese literati considered the Treaty of Chanyuan as evidence of a “poor and weak” Song and criticized the Song court for its choice of surrender. Yet from a retrospective view, this treaty might not signify a lamentable failure of Song policies. The yearly tribute paid by the Song only amounted to two or three percent of its fiscal income and helped the court to avoid expensive war costs in the long run. After the Kitans received the payments, they still needed to turn to Chinese merchants at those frontier markets to purchase commodities for their daily life. The Northern Song state actually generated more income through their trading relations with the Liao than they forfeited by their tribute payments. Moreover, the Treaty of Chanyuan is a unique international arrangement created in world history as it acknowledges the existence of multiple states in East Asia. Both the Song and Liao followed the terms of their treaty and avoided wars for more than 100 years. This proved to be more beneficial to both states than a scenario of constant conflicts.

Another challenge that the Song faced was from the northwest—the Xixia, a regime that was gradually built by a semi-nomadic people called the Tanguts in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. Situated in the Ordos (Hetao 河套), a steppe region to the south of the Yellow River loop, this regime had already acquired a somewhat autonomous status for one and half centuries before the leader Weiming Yuanhao 嵬名元昊 (*né* Li Yuanhao 李元昊) (1003–1048) declared its formal separation from the Song and established the Xixia Empire in 1038. Over the next few years, the Song failed to halt the southern expansion of the Xixia and suffered three disastrous losses on the battlefield. Realizing its geopolitical weakness as being a small state situated between two larger powers, the Xixia agreed to sign a truce in 1044. This time the Song court would send an annual tribute of 130,000 bolts of silk, 50,000 taels of silver, and 20,000 catties of tea to the Tanguts in exchange for peace.

Yet unlike the peaceful Song-Liao relations in the eleventh century, the violent clash between the Song and Xixia did not end after the truce. The Song never gave up its plan to reoccupy the Ordos, which used to be part of the formal Tang Empire. Under Shenzong’s reign, Wang Anshi cited the Xixia as the reason to initiate his military reform. In 1068, a middle-level officer Wang Shao 王韶 (1030–1081) submitted a memorial to the court, proposing a western expedition to annex the regions of Xihe 熙河 and Qingtang 青唐 (both in Qinghai 青海 and Gansu 甘肅 provinces) before a full scale war with the Xixia. This grand strategy asked the court to conquer the Qiang 羌 people first in the northwest and then use them as allies to engage the Tanguts from another direction. In 1072, Wang Anshi’s

administration accepted Wang Shao's plan and appointed him as the commander to implement this strategy. Within only three years, the Song successfully entered the Xihe and Qingtang regions and recovered five prefectures through this conquest. When the conservatives took power under Empress Dowager Xuanren in 1085, they decided to give up four frontier garrisons near the Song-Xia border, hoping to make peace with the Tanguts. Zhezong's personal rule reversed the course again, and Song troops actively entered the Xihe and Qingtang regions to confront the Tanguts in the 1090s. This expansionist policy was adopted by Huizong and his ministers in the early twelfth century until the fall of the dynasty. Although the Song sometimes suffered great human and financial losses in its numerous battles, its military mission against the Xixia finally achieved relative success.

Economy

China experienced impressive economic expansion in agriculture, handicraft industry, and commerce during the Northern Song period.

Agriculture was the backbone of the Song economy. Similar to other imperial dynasties throughout history, the Song state depended on taxing agrarian production and assets to support its operations. Since its inception, the court had been eager to promote land reclamation, encouraging exiled peasants to either return to their home villages or open new land near their current residence. By the 1080s, the total acreage under cultivation reached roughly 410,000 square kilometers, a number that would not be surpassed until the late sixteenth century. Thanks to an efficient household registration system, the government had the capacity to extract revenues from more than 70 percent of the land and thus enjoyed a steady source of income. Major staple crops in this period included wheat, rice, millet, barley, and soybeans. Peasant families were also eager to invest in economic plants to increase their income. Typical products were vegetables, cotton, hemp, silk, tea, sugar cane, flowers, fruits, and herbs.

New seeds, fertilizers, and technologies also facilitated agricultural growth. One example was the introduction of Champa rice (*zhancheng dao* 占城稻) in the early eleventh century. It was a drought-resistant species from present-day southern Vietnam, which could be grown in mountainous regions. Realizing that Champa rice could be double-cropped under warm climate conditions, the state actively promoted its cultivation in the south. By the end of the eleventh century, almost every peasant family in the Lower Yangzi was harvesting this rice. Scholarly accounts in the Northern Song also mention different types of fertilizers and their application methods. Farmers understood how to use them to regenerate soil and increase yields per unit of land. Labor-intensive rice cultivation stimulated the invention of new tools and technologies. Curved moldboard plows made of cast iron were widely used, and sometimes steel blades were attached to the plows to further increase their efficiency. Some accounts mention the popularity of *yangma* 秧馬, probably a movable cart for either transplanting or lifting seedlings in rice paddy fields. Both water wheels and water mills were common in the Northern Song. The former could transport water to agrarian fields in a higher place, and the latter utilized hydropower to grind grains or other materials, providing services to both agriculture and the handicraft industry.

Mining and metallurgy grew rapidly in the Northern Song period. Copper, iron, silver, lead, and mineral coal were dug from underground mines, which were often controlled by the government. The production of iron reached 150,000 tons per year under Shenzong's reign, which is triple the highest output in the Tang period. Copper production also reached an unprecedented level of 700 tons per year, a record that would not be broken until 1952.

The distribution and sale of all these mineral resources were monopolized by the government, which regulated price and levied taxes on mine owners. This remarkable expansion of mining activities thus efficiently increased tax revenue for the government.

Driven by the rising demand in a prosperous economy, numerous handicraft workshops began to emerge across the empire. Owned and managed by either government agencies or private owners, these places manufactured goods and commodities in all sectors of the economy. One notable example is textile production, a highly organized industry in the Northern Song. It is estimated that there were at least 100,000 private workshops producing large quantities of cotton and hemp cloth in the mid-eleventh century; some of them hired dozens or even hundreds of workers on a daily basis. North China and Sichuan 四川 were the centers of sericulture and silk production. In scholarly accounts, fine silk made in these regions could be as light as thin mist. In addition to the textile industry, oil pressing, sugar making, food packing, porcelain making, lacquer work, woodwork, lumbering, architecture, ship building, paper making, and printing all experienced impressive growth in this period.

The demographics of the empire were also changing dramatically. In an 1110 census, there were more than 20 million households in the empire, and the total Song population might have reached 110 million. This figure easily makes the Northern Song the most populous state in pre-modern world history. Half of the population lived in the Lower Yangzi Valley, indicating a major shift in terms of population distribution. North China was no longer the only economic and social center of the empire, and the south would become more and more influential in the coming centuries. Migrants settled in new places and created new towns and cities. Forests were cleared for new settlements and communities, and mountains were converted into paddy fields.

Urbanization also characterized Song socioeconomic change. Kaifeng, the capital of the empire, had a population of more than one million and was the largest city in the eleventh-century world. Unlike the Tang capital Chang'an 長安, a planned city with rigid grid pattern, walled wards, and enforced curfew, Kaifeng was an irregular shaped commercial center and key transportation hub from its first days. Four rivers flowed through the city, transporting every kind of good and commodity to the capital. The functions of Kaifeng were not designed according to political needs, but rather gradually defined by commercial interests. Business was highly specialized and consumer-oriented as the city was filled with thousands of restaurants, inns, bookstores, wine taverns, theaters, clinics, drugstores, pawnshops, hardware workshops, and grocery stores. In addition to the capital, there were also regional economic centers with populations ranging between one hundred thousand to half a million. Notable examples include Luoyang 洛陽, Jinling 金陵 (Nanjing), Hangzhou 杭州, Suzhou 蘇州, Yangzhou 揚州, and Chengdu 成都.

Another important consequence of commercialization was the development of trading networks within and beyond the empire. Because of the Wang Anshi Reforms, economic activities became more and more monetized. Peasants needed to sell their harvest in order to generate cash income for their families. Local and intra-regional markets thus spread quickly throughout the empire. Urbanization and state monopolies on certain commodities drove the growth of inter-regional or even international markets. The new technologies and inventions in ship building further facilitated the use of waterways and maritime routes in the Northern Song. Every year, thousands of ships from West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia arrived at major seaports such as Quanzhou 泉州 and Guangzhou 廣州 to trade with Chinese merchants. At the same time, economic development and international trade aggravated the problem of “Coin Famine” (*qianhuang* 錢荒) that had been bothering the government for decades. The explosion of Song copper production still could not meet the

demand of a cash-based society. For the first time in world history, authorities started to issue paper notes as a new monetary form. Invented in the early eleventh century, paper money began to be widely used in the Southern Song and became the only legal form of currency in the Yuan dynasty.

Examination, education, and social changes

The Civil Service Examination System was the dominant recruitment method in the Song. This institution was first created in the Sui 隋 (581–618) and expanded in the Tang. In the late tenth and early eleventh centuries, the Song court expanded its scope and enacted several policies to ensure fairness. Examinations were held every three years at different levels: prefectural (*jieshi* 解試), departmental (*shengshi* 省試 or *libushi* 禮部試), and palace (*dianshi* 殿試). Those who eventually passed palace examinations received the prestigious *jinshi* 進士 (“advanced scholars”) degree and became government officials. This was a highly competitive process. In the late Northern Song, sometimes up to 200,000 students would attend prefectural examinations in a given year, with only 400–500 of them receiving the *jinshi* degree next year. The examinations focused on Confucian classics, literature, history, and contemporary affairs. In the beginning, students needed to compose poems (*shi* 詩), poetic expositions (*fu* 賦), expositions (*lun* 論), and policy response essays (*ce* 策) to demonstrate their learning. Among these, poems were often considered the primary indicator for academic performance. In 1071, the Wang Anshi regime abolished this poetry track (*shifu ke* 詩賦科) and established a Classics track (*jingji ke* 經義科) to recruit talented men. Under this new arrangement, poems and poetic expositions were replaced by questions on Confucian classics, and policy response essays became the most important criteria for passing examinations.

Students usually spent ten years or more in schools for literacy training and examination preparation. Although there were a number of private academies led by highly regarded scholars in the Northern Song period, government schools were the dominant form of education. In the mid-eleventh century, the Imperial University (*taixue* 太學) at Kaifeng gradually replaced the Directorate School (*guozixue* 國子學) as the leading center of higher education in the empire. Wang Anshi further introduced the Three Hall System (*sanshefa* 三舍法) in 1072, aiming to expand education to the entire empire. This goal was accomplished by Cai Jing in 1102, when his court ordered every county and prefecture to establish a government school. Cai Jing’s version of the Three Hall System was probably the most radical experiment in educational history in the pre-industrial world. It attempted to realize the goal of universal male education. Schools were divided into halls (*she* 舍), a concept similar to “grades” in modern society. Students studying there needed to take monthly, seasonal, and annual examinations; those who performed well would be promoted from county schools (*xianxue* 縣學) to prefectural schools (*zhoufuxue* 州府學), and then to the Imperial University. This was the world’s first hierarchical government educational network. Students enrolled in these schools received a monthly stipend of 700–1,000 copper coins. This was made possible by the rent income of school land (*xuetian* 學田) that was allocated by the government or donated by local well-to-do families to local schools. Although the Three Hall System was abolished in 1121 and never restored in the Southern Song, its design and spirit could still be found in later centuries in China.

The expansion of examinations and education inevitably brought a major structural shift to Northern Song society. Between the second and eighth century, a small number of prominent families monopolized government posts in China, and commoners had little hope of becoming members of the political and social elites. These powerful families comprised

high-level officials, important landowners, imperial clan members, and notable aristocrats, and often relied on the Recommendation (*chaju* 察舉) or Nine-Rank (*jiupin zhongzheng* 九品中正) recruitment methods to reproduce themselves in the civil service. Their social status gradually declined after the An Lushan Rebellion (An-Shi zhiluan 安史之亂) (755–763) as political unrest and socioeconomic dynamics destabilized the foundation of their power. When the examination system became the dominant model of government recruitment in the early Song, formally powerful families lost their stakes completely. The Chinese bureaucratic system was finally transformed into a practice of scholarly meritocracy, based on individual mastery of classical learning.

Yet at the same time, it would be exaggeration to argue that Song examinations were fair and impartial, always being able to find most talented men from the population, regardless of their social background. Well-to-do families could easily afford to educate their children and were eager to invest wealth on their sons. School education and examinations could further provide precious cultural and social capital for those students. Once they passed the examinations, their official positions would surely bring ample returns to the family or even clan. On the contrary, peasant families urgently needed all their males to earn incomes, mainly through agricultural work. Leaving home and spending years in school was an unimaginable privilege to most of the families in the empire, not to mention the additional costs associated with multiple examinations in one's later life. Even though there were numerous examples of poor hardworking students gaining success through examinations, official families and local elites were more likely to produce degree holders than commoners. Nevertheless, Song society was no longer dominated by dozens of powerful aristocratic families, but by thousands of less prominent elites. The impact of meritocracy on social mobility was significant, even if limited.

Philosophy

The Song was an age of Confucian revival. Unlike those intellectuals drawn to Buddhism and Daoism in the previous centuries, Song literati were eager to reestablish principles of Confucianism and introduce new ways of thinking based on creative interpretations on the classics. They often focused on metaphysical questions, upheld the importance of rational logic, and demonstrated their individual responses to the challenges posed by competing ideologies. An early intellectual breakthrough occurred in the mid-eleventh century when Ouyang Xiu and Fan Zhongyan, the two famous leaders of the Qingli Reform, rejected the Buddhist and Daoist philosophies pervasive in that society and stressed the value of Confucian rites and education in shaping daily customs. They also directed their cultural attention back to the ancient sage-kings ruling the Three Dynasties (*sandai* 三代), and away from the political and military achievements of the Han 漢 and Tang dynasties, both of which pursued their hegemonic goals through coercion and lacked the true spirit of rites and righteousness. Neither Ouyang Xiu nor Fan Zhongyan developed a coherent framework of Confucian ideas, but their teachings were the precursors to later vibrant intellectual movements in the Northern and Southern Song and new philosophical foundations constructed over the next two centuries.

One example was the Learning of the Way (Daoxue 道學), a Neo-Confucian movement initiated by a number of Northern Song thinkers and then transformed into a full-fledged philosophy by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) in the Southern Song period. Traditional accounts of its intellectual genealogy hold great esteem for the “Five Masters of the Northern Song” (Beisong wuzi 北宋五子), namely, Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073), Shao Yong 邵雍

(1011–1077), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), as each of them was believed to have made unique contributions to the formulation of the Learning of the Way doctrine. Yet the construction of this lineage is a teleological assumption, in which all of the aforementioned “masters” were predestined to recover the long-lost “transmission of the Way” (Daotong 道統), preparing for the coming of Master Zhu Xi, who would synthesize their ideas and establish a new foundation for the revival of Confucianism in the late twelfth century. In reality, the teachings of these five figures were not always compatible, and only Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi viewed themselves as belonging to this glorious tradition. Zhou Dunyi borrowed the Daoist concepts of “Ultimateless” (*wuji* 無極) and the “Supreme Ultimate” (*taiji* 太極) to explain the origin of the Cosmos, creating an ontological layer for the Confucian doctrines. Shao Yong was interested in using numerology to understand the physical world, stressing the uniformity of the underlying principles in the universe and in the human heart. Zhang Zai was a pragmatic scholar, and the range of his interests was vast: mathematics, astronomy, agriculture, politics, and military. The most important legacy he left to Neo-Confucian intellectuals was probably the idea of *qi* 氣 (vital energies), the force that flows freely in the universe and from which concrete entities, including human beings, are formed. Later, *qi* became one of the theoretical foundations for the process of self-cultivation in Neo-Confucianism: one can pursue goodness since his or her nature (*qi*) is always good.

Natives of Luoyang 洛陽, Cheng Hao and his younger brother Cheng Yi were the most influential thinkers among the five. Both of them were prominent conservatives and strongly opposed the New Policies of Wang Anshi in Shenzong’s reign. During the 1070s and early 1080s, they taught at private academies in Luoyang and devoted themselves to philosophy and education. The foundational concept advocated by the Cheng Brothers is *li* 理 (principle, pattern, or reason), the ultimate, transcending reason for all existence. It is the unchanging principle that determines the course of the universe and the rational basis that exists prior to human life. They further borrowed *qi* from Zhang Zai’s teaching and presented it as the physical counterpart of the metaphysical *li*. In this way, *qi* is the manifestation of *li*, and all the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物), including human beings themselves, are the manifestations of *qi*. This is the famous idea of “one principle with many manifestations” (*li yi fen shu* 理一分殊), the foundation of Zhu Xi’s thoughts in the twelfth century. The Cheng Brothers also believed in the goodness of human nature and constructed corresponding relations between *xing* 性 (human nature) and *li*, and *qing* 情 (feelings or emotion) and *qi*. Therefore, *xing* is always good, just as the eternal, perfect *li*, and *qing* can be complicated since *qi* could display itself in multiple forms. Following this logic, the goal of learning is to achieve self-cultivation, in which one’s heart and mind can be unified with *xing* and eventually *li* after one apprehends his or her own good human nature. There are several methods of self-cultivation, including living with composure (*jujing* 居敬), investigating things (*gewu* 格物), and extending one’s knowledge (*zhizhi* 致知). Both of the Cheng Brothers viewed themselves as the key transmitters of the Way that had been lost since the death of Mencius. They believed that they rediscovered the teachings of ancient sage-kings, Confucius, and Mencius. Their works, especially those of Cheng Yi (since he outlived his brother by 22 years), greatly influenced the thoughts of Southern Song literati. For example, most of Zhu Xi’s ideas can be traced back to Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao, and the Learning of Way movement is also called the “Cheng-Zhu School of the Principle” (Cheng-Zhu lixue 程朱理學) in Chinese intellectual history.

Another influential school of Confucianism in the late Northern Song is the Learning of Wang Anshi (*wangxue* 王學 or *xinxue* 新學). Wang was not only an ambitious and talented politician, but also a famous poet, writer, and philosopher. For more than four decades in the

late eleventh and early twelfth centuries when the reformists were in power, his teachings prevailed as the state ideology, and his *New Commentaries of Three Classics* (Sanjing xinyi 三經新義) and his *Character Dictionary* (Zishuo 字說) were assigned to be the official curriculum for the civil service examinations and government schools. One major difference between his learning and that of the Cheng Brothers is the choice of classics included in the Confucian Canon. Both Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi valued the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu 春秋), one of the Five Classics and a concise chronicle covering the history of the Lu 魯 state in the Eastern Zhou 周 from 722 to 481 BCE. The Cheng Brothers hoped to use its moral teachings to strengthen imperial authority and regulate a proper social order. On the other hand, the Learning of Wang Anshi tends to focus on pragmatic topics such as government administration and Confucian statecraft, so he and his followers highly appreciated the idealized picture of governance portrayed in the *Rites of Zhou* (Zhouli 周禮), a pre-Qin text that contains detailed descriptions of positions and functions in an imagined government. *The Rites of Zhou* was useful to them because it provided a grand design for political institutions and was ambiguous enough to accommodate flexible interpretations, so the reformers could easily find evidence from this classic to legitimize the New Policies. Wang Anshi and his followers were also eager to advocate an ideological conformity (*yidaode* 一道德), under which the learning of Confucianism would be standardized throughout the empire. This is the rationale behind the establishment of the Three Hall reform in Shenzong's and Huizong's reigns. The reformists made Wang's commentaries the official curriculum, hoping that the literati would embrace the themes presented therein and conservative resistance would be eliminated.

In addition to the aforementioned figures, there were other scholars actively exploring the Confucian world in the Northern Song. Examples include Sun Fu 孫復 (992–1057), Hu Yuan 胡瑗 (993–1059), Shi Jie 石介 (1005–1045), Li Gou 李覲 (1009–1059), Sima Guang, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), and Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039–1112). Unlike their Han and Tang predecessors who usually spent a great deal of effort on annotating the meanings and origins of individual terms in the classics (*zhushu* 注疏), most of the Northern Song intellectuals focused on the philosophical meanings (*yili* 義理) of the classics. Their readings and interpretations of Confucian classics reflect their sociopolitical questions. They often applied exegesis to these texts to produce new meanings, arguments, and ideas. To them, the classics were no longer sacred texts that should be revered, but intellectual treasures that can be revised, reinterpreted, and transformed at will.