Chapter 6

Reduced empires and economic expansion: From the late Tang to Song periods (ca. 800 – 1279)

Key ideas:
This chapter explores the transformation of the middle empire, from the formation of a new society in the late Tang to the flourishing of the Song and Jin empires in the 12th and 13th centuries. In the first section, the political history of the states in China and the formation of an East Asian multi-state system will be explored. The second part discusses general issues of geopolitical structures and shifts in the economic, population and political centres.

Qingming shanghe tu, a long painting by of Kaifeng by Zhang Zeduan, probably late 11th century; roads in the suburbs:
http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/Along_the_River_During_the_Qingming_Festival_(detail_of_original).jpg
See also: http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/song/pop/c_scroll.htm

In the four centuries under investigation in this chapter, the 320 years of the Song dynasty are the core. The Song empire stands out in human history for many reasons: it coupled high population density with great urban prosperity, it was home to a society of great inventiveness, social mobility and humanist sensitivity.

While our main focus in this chapter will be on the Song, it appears necessary to explore them within the context of the society that took shape in late Tang and Five Dynasties periods as well as in the competitive system of states that coexisted in what we now consider
China and the regions beyond. Social and cultural transformation, the beginnings of which we have outlined in the last chapter, and international competition, leading to a veritable race of arms, both were formative to the age. In the following, we will turn first to the political history and a sketch of the various political players on the East Asian stage, before we explore the great transformation of the social, economic and cultural Chinese world.

6.1  China among equals: The history of events

The Late Tang, 755-906

The rebellion by the military governor An Lushan 安禄山 that broke out in 755 marks the end of the golden age of the Tang. The rebellion is usually referred to as the rebellion of An and Shi in Chinese (An-Shi zhi luan 安史之乱), for An Lushan was killed in 757, after which his former subordinate Shi Siming 史思明 (703-761) and after him his son Shi Zhaoyi 史朝义 (?-763) took over the leadership. It took over seven years to put down, leaving much of the modern provinces of Hebei and Henan devastated in its wake.

The rebellion greatly weakened the central government. Or rather, it exposed its military and structural weakness. At the rebellion’s outbreak, An Lushan promptly occupied the capitals Luoyang and Chang’an, forcing the court to take the difficult mountain route over the Qinling and Ba mountains and flee to Sichuan.

For a strange and unknown reason, the emperor’s flight to Sichuan was recorded in a painting; see http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%E6%98%8E%E7%9A%87%E5%B9%B8%E8%9C%80%E5%9B%BE.jpg#file (detail of a mountain road)


167 An Lushan is described as part Sogdian-part Turkish (Sogdia is located in what is now western Usbekistan and parts of Kasachstan, its capital is identified with Samarkand). He was a military man, and probably illterate, one of the mercenary leaders the Tang government expected to be more malleable than Chinese generals.
The rebellion was suppressed with the help of Uigur (a Turkic people, Huìhé 回纥 in Tang sources) mercenaries and at the cost of great destructions and a terrible loss of lives throughout the formerly thriving North. As a result, the influence of quite independent military commissioners in their respective regions was not curbed, but reinforced. The most powerful of these military rulers, in control of much of the North China plain, moved toward de facto independence. Their position became hereditary, and they raised their own taxes, passing on no more than a fraction of their revenues on to the central government. Consequently, the later Tang ruled over a much reduced territory.

Beyond the military regions from the North China Plains to Sichuan, over which the Tang exerted no more than nominal control, the Uigurs established their control along the Silk Road from Gansu to the Tarim Basin, while the new Muslim Arab forces expanded their influence over Persia. To the West, Tibetan power, though still in the form of loose confederations, grew, making incursions into Sichuan, raiding oases in Central Asia, and settling in Ningxia along the Huanghe. In the Southwest, Nanzhao 南昭 rose as a powerful kingdom from 750 onwards, controlling the so-called Southern Silk Road into Burma and northeastern India. Succeeded by Dali 大理 on Erhai Lake 洱海 in 902, this southwestern kingdom continued to be the neighbour of the Song, until it was conquered by the Mongols in the 13th century. In the Northeast, the Korean kingdom of Silla became fully independent. In the 10th century, the Khitan in Southern Manchuria began a process of state formation, while Annam, now the Hanoi region in northern Vietnam, which had been under Chinese administration for almost a millennium, broke off into independence.

Internally, the Tang government was able to consolidate its rule. This was due primarily to the considerable agricultural development of the old South and the fact that these resources could be tapped by the means of the Sui transport canal system. The growing weight in population, agricultural output and importance for the supplies of the central government in fact had already manifested itself in the 730s, when grain shipments of rice from the lower Yangzi area had reached ca. 50 000 t. After the restoration of the canal, which had become unusable after 8 years of neglect during the rebellion, the central government and its military was able to rely on grain supplies from the old South, especially from the Nanjing region and from northern Jiangxi. Despite the loss of control over the old leading economic areas in the east of the great plains, the later Tang thus could maintain imperial rule, albeit of a quite different nature: The political centre was dependent on the transport line of the canal system, as well as on the economic efficiency and stable administration of the South. In the long run, these new conditions
Changes not only regional and administrative patterns but Chinese civilization itself.

**Changes in taxation and land ownership systems**

Furthermore, the tax base of the Tang, which had rested on taxation per person and the equal field system, had collapsed during the rebellion. Death and dislocation caused by warfare, and the discontinuation of regular census even in regions spared from direct effects had made the population registration obsolete. The government responded by two major changes in the taxation system. First, the system of taxation per person was gradually replaced by a land tax, thus setting a district's tax quota on the basis of available cultivated land rather than on its number of inhabitants. The new taxation system involved a detachment of the state from direct control in local economy and society. The far-reaching implications of the late 8th century tax reform, that was to set the precedent for agricultural taxation throughout the later imperial period, will be discussed below.

In addition to a shift from poll-tax to land-tax, the government also relied increasingly on revenues from commercial taxation. The most important of these was the salt monopoly, in effect an institution controlling and licensing rich merchants to collect salt taxes. Re-introduced after Han Wudi’s famous precedent as an emergency measure in 759, the salt monopoly proved such a good source of revenue that it was maintained throughout subsequent dynasties. Monopolies on alcohol and tea followed, as well as customs offices in the major harbours and toll stations along the main transport routes. The later Tang experienced almost a century of peace and vigorous economic development. While the majority of later Tang emperors made little impact on the political landscape and eunuchs, increasing in number and influence, again became powerful representatives of the inner court in the second half of the 9th century, the administration obviously remained functional and, despite mounting complaints of abuses and corruption, largely conducive to economic and social development.

**The Huang Chao rebellion**

It is often assumed that the trend towards manorial landholdings that reduced smallholding farmers to tenants was accompanied by widespread impoverishment of the agricultural population. As the transformation of rural China was accompanied by major technological changes and sustained population increase, this interpretation is hard to prove. There can be no doubt, however, that the great changes of an urbanizing and specializing society made many families rich and many others poor, causing much instability and anxiety throughout society.

A great famine struck northern China in the 870s after several years of drought and a locust plague. In 874, a rebellion broke out in Anhui, on the southern fringes of the affected region, that was to
swell to become one of the greatest and most destructive popular rebellions in Chinese history. Named after its leader Huang Chao 黃巢 (? - 884), it lasted for 12 years and left a ravaged state and a dynasty that would continue to exist for another two decades in name only.

Although commonly characterized as a peasant rebellion, it would probably be more aptly described as an almost millenarian movement of the disadvantaged of the newly forming society striking out against the *nouveaux riches*. The course which this highly mobile rebellion took bears this out. It was a mostly southern phenomenon, involving great bands of up to 600,000 insurgents that followed the major trade routes and systematically captured and looted the cities. They reached as far south as Guangzhou, where they are recorded to have massacred 120,000 foreign merchants. Only a year later, they had returned to the north and captured Chang'an. The great capital was utterly destroyed in repeated captures and re-captures. It was a Shatuo 沙陀 Turk general by the name of Li Keyong 李克用 (856–908) who eventually suppressed the rebellion. Chang'an and the Guanzhong 关中 area never again became the centre of the Chinese empire but declined to a regional, though strategically important backwater.

*The Five Dynasties and Ten States, 907-960*

Map: The territories of the eleven states during the Five Dynasties period: http://www.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/history/five-dynasty-map.cfm

The period of division after the final disintegration of the Tang dynasty was relatively short, lasting five decades from the final demise of the Tang to the foundation of the Song, and seven decades spanning the actual time of imperial break-up. The empire
broke apart into eleven major regions, largely congruent with the regions controlled by the Tang military governors. For the sake of maintaining a coherent line in Chinese history, later historians elevated the largest of these states that controlled much of the Great Plains of Northern China to the rank of dynasties, while the others are merely termed “states,” thus coining the name of the period “Five Dynasties and Ten States” (五代十国).

The first of the Five Dynasties was founded by a warlord who had been in control of the Tang court during the last years of the Tang. The subsequent three Dynasties were founded by warlords from Shatuo Turks who had become sedentary in the Northwest. At the same time, the Khitan (Chinese Qidan 契丹) a fully nomadic people from the Northeast, rose to dominate the Northern steppe and began to push into the Chinese north. Through the following centuries until Mongol conquest, two major empires would face each other in Northern China, with the Song in the South and the Khitan Liao in the North from 960 to 1125, followed by the Jurchen Jin from 1125 to 1234.
The Later Zhou (后周 951-960), based in the fertile region of the Southern Plains, succeeded in extending its control throughout most of Northern China. In 960, when the capable ruler suddenly died, leaving an infant on the throne, a general by the name of Zhao Kuangyin 赵匡胤 (927-976, ruled as Song Taizu 宋太祖 960-975) usurped the throne and founded a new dynasty, the Song (宋 960-1279).

Upon ascending the Zhou throne, Zhao Kuangyin immediately made clear that his dynasty was to return the Chinese world to imperial rule. His usurpation is remarkable as a well ordered and skilfully staged passage of power, the usurper acting with the support of the Zhou dowager empress and most members of court and government. Taizu immediately proceeded to continue Zhou efforts at centralizing government and at ensuring political leadership of the military. Two of his measures stand out: He sent all senior military leaders (most of whom were his former colleagues) into comfortable retirement, and soon he presented himself in his new imperial status as so far above ordinary humanity that even his former colleagues and superiors preferred to adopt markedly deferential forms in communicating with him.
Through the early Song, these characteristics of government became established. The autonomy of military leaders was curbed; the army became a numerically large but little integrated force. It was concentrated in the capital area, while the provisioning of border garrisons was run and thus controlled by the transport commissioners, powerful civil officials who were responsible for the transportation of tax revenue in kind and in money. For most of the dynasty, there was an institutional division between military, civil administration and fiscal matters (although some powerful ministers, especially during the Southern Song, managed to combine the three offices). The division of power and his exalted status gave the emperor autocratic powers, that were however curbed by strong Confucian ethics of civilian rule, welfare of the population, and moral conduct. At the same time, the administration, run by the new class of scholar-officials or literati, was characterized by a new dedication, professional and critical attitudes. On the whole, relations between the emperor and his highest ministers were shaped by mutual respect. Despite factional debates and frequent antagonism between the inner court of the imperial family and the eunuchs and the outer court of the officials, violent power struggles were rare in the Song period.

Fig: A Song scholar-official in a representative study
http://www.njmuseum.com/zh/ww/content/content_714.html

Over the first two decades of Song rule, the whole South was reconquered – with the exception of the kingdom of Dali (950-
1253), which had replaced Nanzhao 南诏 (732-950) in modern Yunnan province and Northern Vietnam, where the first independent Vietnamese dynasties had been set up. In the North, Song control was extended beyond the North China Plain into southern Shanxi. This would be the extent of the Northern Song empire (960-1126). The North remained under the rule of the Liao and the Tangut Western Xia (西廈 1038-1227) in the Northwest, which ruled most of Shanxi and Shaanxi.

The Liao empire

In the early 10th century, the Khitan had captured the regions of modern Beijing and Datong, made one of the Shatuo Turk dynasties their clients, and even marched on Kaifeng and temporarily held the North China Plain. In the first half of the 9th century, the Khitan state quickly became an extended nomad empire that ruled over a southern zone of Chinese and other sedentary populations from Datong in northern Shanxi to Southern Manchuria and many other pastoral and sedentary peoples throughout Manchuria. Subsequent rulers extended Liao control in Northern Asia from the mouth of the Amur River in the East to the Altai mountains in the West.

Fig: Mural in a Liao grave showing Go players
http://www.hebei.com.cn/node2/node892/node893/node895/userobject1ai36232.html
(See also: http://steppes.proboards.com/thread/1192)

168 As Nanzhao but larger and more tightly organized, Dali controlled a region that had hardly been touched by Chinese colonization in the period. Dali had its capital in the modern town of the same name on Erhai Lake 洱海, where most trade routes into inland Southeast Asia and Eastern India converged. In the later Tang and especially during the Song period, Dali came to play an important role in the trade in horses and silver.

169 Vietnam (i.e. the modern North of the country) broke free from its status as a Chinese border region administered from Guangzhou and present-day Hanoi during the Five Dynasties period. In 939 forces under Ngo Quyen 吴权 gained independence from the Southern Han, the state based on Guangzhou. He founded the first of the first three short-lived independent Vietnamese dynasties, the Ngo (939 - 965). Ngo Quyen's death a few years later ushered in a period of civil strife, but in the early 11th century the first stable dynasty was founded. The Ly dynasty 李 ruled Vietnam for more than 200 years, from 1010 to 1225. As in earlier secondary states in Korea and Japan, Vietnamese states were modeled on China while maintaining a strong sense of independent identity. The written language was Chinese and officials were recruited through state examinations. From the 11th century onwards, a gradual southward expansion, encroaching on Cham territory began.

170 The Manchurian possessions of the Liao included the kingdom of Bohai/Barhae 渤海 (698 - 926, when it was conquered by Liao), a foundation by the dislodged elite of Goguryeo.
As the Liao dynasty (946-1125), the Khitan state took on some features of dynastic rule modelled on Chinese dynasties. Below this attire, however, the Liao remained a military steppe state. Its main concerns remained extracting surplus from its sedentary subjects and keeping on top its numerous constituent tribes. The power of the Liao rested upon its formidable cavalry, but its internal stability remained precarious. The population of the whole extended empire is thought not to have surpassed 9 mio. Of these, less than 1 mio were Khitan, the majority were Chinese farmers and artisans, and up to 360 000 were Buddhist monks and nuns.

Much of the imperial elite's energies were spent on keeping the numerous nomad elements within their extended steppe and Siberian territories in check, while their control over the sedentary population in the south was economically crucial yet institutionally difficult. A two-tier administrative system was developed, with Khitan officials having decisive power and subordinate Chinese officials providing administrative experience, a system that certainly was not conflict-free but by and large workable. At the Liao court, frequent succession crises and lasting tribal identities of the leading clans compounded instability, causing great and incalculable swings from powerful expansion to complete passivity in the history of the Liao empire.

East Asian diplomacy in a multi-state system

As so-called tribal peoples formed new states, they swiftly adopted a Chinese “outward appearance” in designations of dynasties and offices as well as in dresses and court ritual and diplomatic form. Chinese imperial diplomacy coined interstate relations in ritualised and personified terms, with relationships expressed as personal ties between the emperor and rulers of the various lesser countries.

The system assumed the absolute centrality of the emperor as the link between heaven and the human world, from whom all ordering emanated throughout the civilized world. It might seem that this system could not work in a world of numerous states of equal weight, such as in the Five Dynasties’ period, or accommodate two competing powerful empires. Contrary to expectations, however, it worked quite well.

The several emperors, all using the paraphernalia of the Son of Heaven, each kept their centrality within their system of diplomatic relations. This was possible, because all relations were conceived of as radiating outwards from the emperor(s), while lateral relations between the states the/each central court was in contact with were not part of the picture, at least formally. Thus, each court could maintain its set of relations with surrounding and distant courts, taking no notice of other networks of diplomatic relations - or at least choosing to formally disregard them. This peculiar structure made

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The system quite flexible, allowing for its adaptation to complicated and often conflicting relations of alliance, recognition and subordination.¹⁷²

*The Western Xia*

For the royal tombs of the Western Xia, see [http://www.sdmuseum.com/show.aspx?id=4795&cid=80](http://www.sdmuseum.com/show.aspx?id=4795&cid=80)

The rise of the Xia empire was to a considerable degree the result of skilful diplomatic manoeuvres of a small state wedged between two powerful neighbours. At the time of the Song founding, the Tangut polity in central Shanxi was the only remaining one of the Tang military governorships and their rulers had been invested as the dukes of Xia 夏. Initially, the Song were content to recognize the potentially dangerous small neighbour, investing them as kings of Xia. By the 980s, however, the Tangut ruling elite appeared to be about to abandon independence for comfortable life at the Song capital.

When hostilities broke out between Song and Liao in 986, however, independent-minded Tangut leaders seized the opportunity and submitted to the Liao. Exploiting Song fears of a joint Liao and Xia attack and Liao shifts between expansive phases and those of inertia (mostly caused by succession conflicts), the Xia established themselves as a dynastic state and a redoubtable military power. In 1038, Li Yuanhao 李元昊 (1003-1049, called Zhao Yuanhao 赵元昊 in Song sources, for different surnames had been bestowed on the Tangut rulers by the Tang and the Song) proclaimed himself emperor at the head of his Xia 夏 dynasty. Neither Song nor Liao

¹⁷² Thus, the newly founded Goryeo 高丽 dynasty (also transcribed Koryŏ, 918-1392) in Korea, while forced to recognize vassal status vis-à-vis the Liao, also independently maintained relations with the Song, thus balancing influences and resisting Liao threats.
recognized the Xia as imperial, yet both had to accommodate their state as a kingdom within their diplomatic relations.

*Song-Liao relations: The “treaty system”*

In the meantime, dealing with the unprecedented power constellation of two empires facing each other, Song-Liao relations were transformed by a treaty concluded in early 1005. After a century of war and looting raids, the Liao emperor Shengzong (reigned 982-1031) launched a major campaign against the Song in 1004. He led his massive cavalry forces straight towards Kaifeng, when the two armies met just north of the Huanghe, about 100 km from the capital. Secret negotiations were started immediately and succeeded in avoiding battle over the Song capital. In early 1005, the two emperors signed a treaty that set a new precedent in Chinese foreign relations.

In the treaty, relations between the two emperors were defined as those between brothers. In other words, equality was formally recognized. Envoys were to be exchanged for new year and imperial birthdays. Furthermore, the Song bought their way out of requests for territory and hostages. They agreed to massive annual payments of silk and silver received as “tribute” by the Liao while presented as “gifts” from the Song, thus allowing both sides to maintain a position of slight superiority.

The treaty allowed the Song to maintain its territorial integrity. Departing from established practice, no hostages were exchanged and no Song princesses were sent to marry “barbarian” lords. The bought peace established a new strategy that gave rise to fierce debate. Many generals were highly upset at missing the chance of striking at an enemy who had advanced far into hostile territory without securing its supply lines. By contrast, the officials who had negotiated the treaty congratulated themselves for having secured “a century of peaceful relations.” Until the end of the Song, the debate between advocates of war and of peace would continue. As it were, Song-Liao relations indeed remained stable and largely peaceful until the end of the Liao dynasty over a century later.

*Song relations with Western Xia*

In Song-Western Xia relations the new precedent was followed in 1044, ending decades of almost yearly campaigns of Song forces into Tangut borderlands. In the Song-Xia arrangements, annual

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173 In the treaty of 1005, the Song agreed to pay 200,000 bolts of silk and 100,000 ounces of silver annually. In 1042, the payments were increased to 300,000 bolts of silk and 200,000 ounces of silver. Similar arrangements were made with the Western Xia in 1044, arranging for payments of 130,000 bolts of silk, 50,000 ounces of silver and 20,000 catties of tea. See Mote (1999), Imperial China, pp. 70f, 185.

174 Quoted in Mote (1999), Imperial China, p. 71.

175 The protracted border wars between Song and Western Xia were a heavy burden on the Song state. Numerous Song poems and some surviving paintings thematize the hardships involved for soldiers and transporters in the mountains of Northern Sichuan and Shanxi. The pressure on the Western Xia pushed them into closer alliance with the Liao. This resulted in the threat of a combined
payments of tea were added to those of silk and silver, indicating that tea drinking had already spread to the Western regions.

While the annual payments were no significant burden for the Song economy, they certainly were an important asset to the Liao, who employed their access to valuable Chinese goods in their far-flung Eurasian trade, fulfilling both diplomatic and economic purposes. The same would apply to the Western Xia and their Silk Road links. Song payments contributed to the stability of its northern neighbours as they helped them to maintain their sway in a mobile and commercial region.

The Southern Song and the Jin, 1126-1279

Map: The Northern Song and adjacent empires:

In the 12th century, the Jurchen Jin dynasty (金 1115-1234) replaced the Liao and set up a tightly administered, militarily powerful empire. The Jurchen (Chinese: Nüzhen 女真 or Ruzhen 汝真) were a people from the forests of Eastern Manchuria that had only acquired iron technology less than a century before its sudden appearance on the stage of history. Unlike the Liao, they were sedentary agriculturalists, but like their former lords they were horse-breeders and fearsome mounted warriors. Their very society came to be organized along

Liao-Xia attack, at which point the advocates of war at the Song court were overruled by the “peace faction” and the unique case of an equal treaty and annual payments in exchange for peace became the Song “treaty system.”
military lines, made up of basic units that were to provide 100 warriors when called up and larger ones of 1000 mounted warriors. From their first victory over the main Liao army in 1114/5 (according to the sources with a force of 10 000 facing at least 100 000), Jurchen cavalry launched an unstoppable conquest. They proclaimed a dynasty named Jin. Within the next fifteen years, they conquered the Liao empire and took all the old Chinese heartland north of the Huaihe from the Song. In 1129-30 they invaded Jiangnan and occupied Hangzhou, forcing the Song emperor to take to the high seas to evade capture.

Even before the extent of their newly conquered territories was demarcated – the Huaihe-line border was defined only in 1141, while the northern and northwestern boundaries remained vaguely defined along the borders of settled Manchurian lifestyles – the new state set out to consolidate its rule. How, however, would it be possible for an invading people of at most 2 mio individuals to rule over some 30 mio inhabitants of the North China Plain?176

Three factors seem important in the consolidation of Jin rule: First, the conquest was thorough and devastating. Little resistance was left after several years of Jin campaigns throughout northern China. By the end, most active resistance fighters had fled to the South, and the population left behind welcomed any return to ordered life. Second, the Jin left Liao and Song structures and officials in place, allowing for continuity of administrative structures. Third, in an organized migration of their own people, the Jurchen left their homeland and resettled throughout northern China. In this

176 For an estimate of the population of Northern China at the time of the Jin conquest, see Ge Jianxiong, ed., Zhongguo renkoushi, vol. 3, p. 374.
exceptional step, the Jin most radically departed from Liao precedent: While the Khitan elite had maintained its nomadic lifestyle apart from their Chinese subjects, the sedentary Jurchens transplanted themselves into their newly conquered land. Here, their transplanted communities maintained their unit systems and fighting skills. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, the “wild men” from the Manchurian forests had been transformed into landowners and tenants, stratified and bound up with economic and cultural life of the surrounding Chinese population and intermarrying with them. The Jurchen had come to stay.

The Jin examination system and literary culture

Soon, administration and economy of the new state were back on track. The Jin rebuilt Beijing as their main capital, installed a transport and granary system, and a two tier examination system to supply Jin and Chinese officials. By the late 12th century, population losses had been recovered. A general upswing is reflected in steep population growth over the turn of the century, with the late Jin population peaking at about 56 mio.177 There was a well-developed network of private schools and a great cultural emphasis on education. While unable to compete with the richer Southern Song in the field of culture, the Jin certainly was not a boorish backwater. Northern forms of art, such as operatic performance, saw marked development, while belles lettres were raised in their artistic standing; both trends foreshadowing Yuan developments in Chinese literature.

In most respects, the Jin was a Chinese state. Certainly, the ruling house, key officials and elite troops in this state were Jurchens. Deep-seated ideals of unified empire and sentiments against alien

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rule left aside, this arrangement perhaps was quite suitable for most inhabitants of the Jin empire.

The Southern Song empire

When the Northern capital of the Song was occupied by the Jin army in 1127, emperor Huizong, better known as a collector and practitioner of poetry and art than as a political figure, was captured with his heir, empress, concubines and some 60 children. The imperial family was taken to Manchuria where they lived out their lives. Only one son and his infant child escaped by coincidence. This young man, then 20 years old, was put on the throne and would become Gaozong 高宗 (reigned 1127-1162), the founder of the Southern Song.

Several more narrow escapes followed. Gaozong soon had to flee to Yangzhou 扬州, and a year later barely saved his life crossing the Yangzi, moved to Hangzhou and finally had to spend several months at sea. The tumultuous events that accompanied the dynasty's survival illustrate how indispensable emperor and imperial line were in moments of crisis. While, as the era of quite ineffectual emperors of the late Northern Song had demonstrated, administration of the empire functioned quite smoothly without imperial participation, the dynastic state without its symbolic centre could not exist.

Yue Fei and Qin Gui


The trauma of the demise of the Northern Song for all remaining members of court and government may explain the fact that the advocates of peace prevailed over those of war throughout the remaining century of Southern Song rule. The story of Yue Fei 岳飞 (1103-1142), China's most popular military hero, exemplifies the point. Yue Fei, an able resistance fighter during the Jin wars became a general under the Southern Song and carried out major attacks on Jin territory. While openly honoured and supported by the court, Yue Fei was gradually confined in his assignments and eventually imprisoned. Shortly after the treaty of 1141 brought stability on the
borders, he was poisoned by or on orders of the Chief Councillor Qin Gui 秦檜 (1090-1155) - who has been styled one of the great villains of Chinese history for this reason - and probably with the connivance of emperor Gaozong himself.

Southern Song territorial loss and economic resilience

The loss of the Central Plains was a blemish that the Southern Song had to live with. This is not a later historical interpretation, but was already the view of contemporaries. It was symbolically acknowledged by the court by concentrating official blame on Huizong, the last-but-one Northern Song emperor (who abdicated in favour of his son when the situation had become hopeless) and by the name of the Southern Song capital Lin'an 临安 (meaning “temporary peace,” modern Hangzhou). Shame at the inability to regain the North suffused Southern Song political and cultural life.

In economic terms, however, the southward shift of the political centre and the loss of territory does not appear to have been too great. Fugitives from war and uncertainty in the north contributed to the continued population increase in the South. Whereas the Northern Song population peaked at about 130 mio, the Southern Song still ruled over roughly 100 mio people, and over the century of peace from the Song-Jin wars of the 1120s to the beginning of the Mongol raids in the 1220s, Southern Song population probably again approached the figures of the Northern Song. Despite its diminished territory, the Song state thus remained the most populous state in its age worldwide. Population density, commercialization and urbanization increased, as did overseas trade. Outwardly, the Southern Song certainly appeared flourishing. Compared to the Northern Song, it did, however, suffer from an important weakness: it had lost its major iron ore and coal deposits in western Henan, southern Shanxi and Shandong. Considerable efforts were made in the opening of new mines in central and eastern China. Nevertheless, iron output did not reach the extraordinarily high levels of the Northern Song, with considerable implications for the economy and the military. Furthermore, it appears that high population density reached levels that caused social and environmental pressures, as increasing numbers of rural families had to live on plots below subsistence level and deforestation became widespread in the core areas.

Song-Jin relations

As mentioned above, a treaty was concluded in 1141 which basically organized Song-Jin relations along the lines of the Song-Liao precedent. As with Song-Liao relations, the treaty established lasting

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stability. It was broken at times, but generally served its purpose in maintaining a stalemate of military equality that was advantageous to both sides in economic terms.

While official relations remained cold to hostile, trade continued, both on official markets on the border and illicitly. As the Song salt monopoly created artificially high salt prices, the smuggling of salt became lucrative activity, carried on at a massive scale from the extensive coastal salines from southern Shandong to the mouth of the Huaihe, as well as from the salt lakes in Shanxi that now had become Western Xia territory.

The Song annual payments were an important economic asset to the Jin government. The payments were similar to those made to the Liao, yet their relative weight in state revenues and commercial benefits was less, as the Jin state was much larger and more populous than its predecessor, and less involved in trade across Central Asia, to boot. It is interesting to note, however, that the Song trade surplus from legal interstate trade is estimated to have more than covered these annual payments. While the Song felt wronged and shamed in terms of ritual politics, they nevertheless profited economically.

*Song relations with Dali and Vietnam*

While the Western Xia receive considerable attention due to their almost recognized imperial status, the kingdoms of Dali (in modern Yunnan) and Annam (northern Vietnam) were denied official recognition by the Song and mostly receive short shift in accounts of political history. It is worth noting, however, that these two states, while lesser in political and military stature, were of at least similar importance in economic terms and larger than the Xia in terms of population. As the Xia, Dali and Annam were based upon trade networks. Annam was the southern centre of the seafaring Viet people, while Dali was the hub of overland trade routes linking China proper, Annam, Burma, Tibet and Northeastern India.

While early dynastic Vietnam became a trade competitor that Song merchants had to live with, contacts with Dali could not be abandoned. Since ancient times, Yunnan had been an important horse-breeding and mining region. When the Southern Song lost the North and with it the leading mining regions as well as access to the Western steppe, trade with Dali in order to procure horses as well as copper and silver became a necessity. Without diplomatic ado, border markets were set up for state trade of horses in exchange for tea – accompanied by clandestine trade. Both the – albeit quite small

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180 The treaty was broken in 1161, when an over-zealous and internally threatened usurper of the Jin throne attempted an invasion that was beaten back by the Song navy on the Yangzi, and in the early years of the 13th century, when the Song unsuccessfully attempted to exploit the situation of the Jin coming under Mongol attack.

181 Mote, *Imperial China*, p. 287.
- cavalry of the Southern Song and riding horses of private people usually were animals bred in the Yunnan highlands.

Fig: Song painting “One hundred horses.” Note that the horses are considerably smaller than those of Tang period depictions: http://tupian.baike.com/a1 83 62 01300000251577123790621107151.jpg.html

6.2

Geopolitical shifts and instabilities

The Song was a period of unprecedented economic and cultural flourishing. In many respects it would remain unrivalled throughout premodern history. Yet the dynasty is stigmatised as weak. The Northern Song failed to regain the northern frontier regions. Instead, it was forced to accept equal relations with both Liao and Xia. A century later, the Song were unable to stop the “wild Jurchen,” and another one-and-a-half century on the Southern Song succumbed to the Mongols.

The negative historical evaluation of the Song

Traditional and modern history writing invested much work in placing the blame for this weakness and examining its reasons. Historiography of the period centres on blaming individual emperors and ministers, while later historians identified political structures, ideology and even Song culture as a whole as defeatist. Less negative interpretations point out that Song military was not totally worthless, but under capable leaders carried out effective campaigns against the Jin and that Song resistance to Mongol conquerors lasted longer and held out longer against the Mongol armies than any other.

From a perspective that is less focussed on political and moral guilt, we may look at the three centuries of the Song as a period of unique, inherently unstable constellations in geopolitics and in economic structures.

Underlying factors that shaped the general setting of East Asia in the Song period in a very general way were the onset of a colder, for some 200 years rather unstable climatic period from the late 10th
century onwards. In the same period, Eurasian and East Asian trade gradually increased, with growing markets developing outside China in the Muslim world and in the maturing states of Indonesia, Korea and Japan. Climatic cooling, interrupted by short periods of renewed warming, can be expected to have dramatically impacted steppe conditions, thus contributing to the general unsettling and reorganizing of steppe peoples. Trade, meanwhile, was an important factor in social change, both in the Song empire and along the Central Asian trade routes.

The Southward shift of the economic and population centre

Within China, the southward shift of the centre of population and economy was the most significant long-term event of the period. At first glance, division of China between the Southern Song in the South and Jin in the North appears reminiscent of the Southern and Northern dynasties; with the North relying on millet-based agriculture for sustenance, carts for transportation, and horses for making war, while the South rested on rice agriculture, boats for transport, and a navy for making war. With a noticeable shift in relative weight: Whereas in the 5th to 6th centuries at least 3/2 of the Chinese population lived in the North, in the 12th century at least ¾ lived in the South. Chinese civilization had moved southwards.

In a very gradual process, the old South had been transformed. In the period of the Southern and Northern dynasties, it had still been a land of natural richness, a patchwork landscape of swamps, open water and densely forested hills, with fields, towns and villages clinging to the feet of hills, wealthy on account of its good waterways, its links with the Southern trade in luxury goods, and its agroforestry resources rather than its rice and silk cultivation. Through the Tang dynasty, changes in Jiangnan and Jiangxi became noticeable, and during the Song period, these areas were transformed into the open, largely deforested landscape of highly intensive agricultural cultivation, shaped and defined by human labour: with sea-walls separating sea from cultivated land, canals, ditches and reservoirs providing irrigation and drainage, swamps drained and turned into diked fields, lower hillides carefully terraced, and bridges and dike-roads fixing the courses of roads and waterways.

The centre of the Song empire was the Jiangnan region, with extensions into the lowland regions along the Yangzi and its major tributaries, especially the Ganjiang (in Jiangxi) and the Xiangshui (in Hunan). Major commercial emporia with their own surrounding areas of high population density and intensive cultivation were situated along the Yangzi, especially modern Wuhan and along the coast, especially Quanzhou and Guangzhou.

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182 For the population shift, see Shi Nianhai (1992), ???, pp. 52-65.
183 For a gripping account of the transformation of Jiaxing county in the very east of Jiangnan through historic times, see Elvin (2004), The Retreat of the Elephants, chapter 7.
The transformation was brought about by multiple technological improvements in agricultural technology as well as in the processing of agricultural products. At the same time, agricultural efficiency coupled with high and increasing population density and major breakthroughs in transport technology led to urbanization, the specialization of professions, again to technological advancement and to great, though certainly not evenly distributed wealth.

**The Eastward shift of the political centre**

While this great shift in the centre of population and economy is well-known and -researched, the eastward shift of the political centre in the Song period is less noted.

**The Song capitals**

Bianjing (Kaifeng 开封), the capital of the Northern Song, was located just to the south of the Huanghe in the East of the North China Plain, Lin’an (Hangzhou 杭州) in southeastern Jiangnan, on the Qiantang estuary and at the southern end of the great transport canal, became the capital of the Southern Song.\(^{184}\) While they were capitals, the two cities were the largest and wealthiest cities of the world. The population of Bianjing surpassed Tang Chang’an; Lin’an was the largest city in pre-industrial history. In contrast to the Tang capital with its controlled life within walled wards, Song cities had shed their inner subdivisions. Shopfronts now lined the roads, markets had sprung up everywhere, and sprawling suburbs extended far beyond the city walls.

Yet the renown of Kaifeng and Hangzhou as historical capitals never approached that of Chang’an and Luoyang, nor even that of the more recent capitals Beijing and Nanjing. It seems that the Song capitals share the blemish of their dynasty in historical memory: they became the symbols of succumbing to foreign conquest.

Besides, Kaifeng and Hangzhou were bustling commercial centres before they became capitals. The imperial palaces and government buildings, rather than dominating the city, had to be squeezed in, adopting to existing structures as the former prefectural buildings were expanded. For this reason, to the critical retrospective inspection, the Song capitals in their very urban structure may have appeared to reflect Song weakness, exposing a tendency to accommodate itself with conditions as they were. Without entering into the complex background of the symbolism of capitals and the coincidental choice of Kaifeng and Hangzhou, it may suffice to say that a positive evaluation is equally possible, emphasising the Song government’s economic far-sightedness and its humane restraint from tearing down buildings owned by commoners in order to expand the imperial city into full and regular proportions.

\(^{184}\) For a detailed description of the Song capitals, see Heng (1999), *Cities of Aristocrats and Bureaucrats*, chapter 4.
The closeness of political and economic centre

Whatever the motivation for the choice of the Song capitals, the near-congruence of political and economic centre during the period appears highly significant in economic and cultural respects. It may not be sheer coincidence that unprecedented economic development took place in a period when the separation of political and economic centre was abandoned.

Transport systems

In terms of economic structure, we should not jump to the conclusion that the shift meant a relaxation in taxation and the state transport system, the most obvious burdens imposed on the national economy by the central government. On the contrary, state grain shipments to Kaifeng averaged at 400,000 t per year, roughly twice the volume of the peak of Tang shipments from the 730s to the 750s. Agricultural surplus from all over the empire, but especially from Jiangnan, was concentrated at the capital, insuring the material foundation of rule.

One reason for this development was that the number of officials increased significantly with the perfection of bureaucratic administration and population increase. More importantly, in an age of military confrontation, the military budget made up perhaps ¾ of the state expenditures and large numbers of troops were concentrated in and around the capital. As the Northern Song strove to overcome the centrifugal tendencies caused by the overly powerful military governors introduced by the high Tang, they concentrated the bulk of the Song army - up to 800,000 troops - in the capital area.

However, while the volume of grain shipments to the capital granaries increased greatly, we need to take two factors into consideration: First, with population increasing and improvements in cultivating techniques, the tax burden shouldered by individuals may not have become heavier. Second, while the volumes registered at the granaries were greater, the distance from most producing regions was considerably less compared to Luoyang and greatly reduced compared to Chang’an. This meant a considerable reduction in transport costs. As transport costs had to be paid from tax revenues, usually in the form of additional levies in grain used for consumption or the payment of transporters en route, this in turn means that volumes reaching the capital granaries cannot be simply equalized with the volumes extracted from the producing regions. While quantifications of real tax burdens, transport distances, costs and efficiency are impossible, these rough considerations give us an inkling how advantageous the location of Kaifeng and (even more so) of Hangzhou were, not only for the cities themselves, but for the empire that supported them.

Urban court culture

Implications for court and government culture are more evasive, but perhaps hardly less important. The Song central government stands out in Chinese history for its practical outlook and relative absence of violence at court in the context of court intrigues, power struggles and punishments meted out after failures against high officials. These characteristics have been explained as a result of the formation of the scholar-officialdom, the ruling class shaped by the state examination system. The urban setting at the centre of the economically leading region may also be regarded as an important influence.

Song court culture was urban, with court paintings, for example, displaying a lively interest in everyday human activities, including itinerant peddlers and the bathing of babies. While Song emperors were certainly exalted almost beyond human status, they do not appear so far out of touch as to become unconcerned for their subjects’ livelihood. Song capital officials usually lived in rented premises in the midst of urban life. The state examinations having become the standard career path, they formed a socially mobile and a cohesive group. For the most part, these scholar-officials appear committed to their administrative work, practical minded and singularly open to economic involvement.

We will return to these major shifts in more concrete aspects of late Tang and especially of Song economy, society and culture explored below.
Further reading:

   For a picture of society, economy, religion and individual stories, with considerable emphasis on women.

   For a picture of society, religion and individual stories.


For the seriously interested, the following works provide well-written studies on specific issues:

For in-depth studies of the period’s political history:


For Song society and economy:


   for a detailed description of Song Kaifeng and Hangzhou, primarily concentrating on Kaifeng, using the painting Qingming shanghe tu and the reminiscences of Meng Yuanlao and the central sources.