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- Bob Eno (September 2019)
Song Dynasty Culture:
Political Crisis and the Great Turn

The Song Dynasty, like the Zhou and the Han, is a dynasty whose history is split in two. The dates of the dynasty are 960-1279, but in 1127, an invasion of North China by a nomad people called the Jurchens forced the Song court to flee to the South, and from that year to the dynasty’s end, China was divided in two, with the Jurchens presiding over North China from their capital near modern Beijing, and the Chinese Song court based in the city of Hangzhou, near the Yangzi River delta. The two eras of the Song are distinguished in the historical records by being assigned the names “Northern Song” and “Southern Song.”

The Five Dynasties and the rise of nomad empire. During the decades following the fall of the Tang, control of China was deeply fragmented. In North China, five successive ruling houses, which were little more than warlord military powers, controlled most of the Yellow River valley region, while in the South, a different array of ten states existed during the period (which is therefore sometimes called the period of “five dynasties and ten kingdoms”). Of the five dynasties in the North, three were controlled by non-Chinese rulers, leaders of different Turkic tribal groups that had harried the northwest regions of China during the Tang, and that benefited from the fall of that dynasty. The strength of the Tang had been such that it had reestablished the great territorial reach of the Han government, an empire stretching north and west in the face of the vibrant tribal cultures of the northern steppe. The disintegration of the Tang made way for these nomadic peoples to coalesce in political alliances that rivaled Chinese states in effective strength.

During the Five Dynasties era, with no central political force in China to hinder the growth of these configurations at the edge of “Han Chinese” territories, the stage was set for nomadic groups to flourish politically to a degree that had not been seen since the time of the Xiongnu threats to the early Han Dynasty state. Under these circumstances, the first of a series of great nomad empires emerged. This was the empire of the Liao, a dynastic house ruled by leading clans of a tribe knows as the Khitans (Qidan in Chinese). For the next several centuries, the Liao and sophisticated successor states – the Jin state of the Jurchens of Manchuria and the great Mongol empire – pressed China from the
north and west with such ferocity that no Chinese government could approach the strength and extent of the Tang.

Towards the close of the Five Dynasties, the Khitan tribes became so powerful that they wrested from Chinese control significant areas south of the old Great Wall line – including the territory of present-day Beijing. When China was at last reunited in 960 under the Song Dynasty, the pressure of the Liao presence confined the new government to an area substantially smaller than that of the Tang. In the twelfth century, the Khitans were overthrown by a fresh expansion from the north: the Jurchen empire, led by a people from eastern Manchuria. The Jurchens established their own dynasty, the Jin, which was so powerful that it overran the northern half of China proper, including the Yellow River Valley, forcing the Song to cede its entire northern region. A century and a half later, the Jurchens were in turn routed by the explosive expansion of the Mongol empire, which extinguished the Song and founded, in China, the Yuan Dynasty.

Although the Mongol empire withdrew from China after only about one hundred years, and a Han Chinese period of rule – the Ming Dynasty – ensued, China was once more conquered by a nomadic: the Manchus (ethnically identical with the Jurchens), who ruled China from 1644 until the twentieth century.

Thus the latter phases of traditional China’s political history are dominated by the presence of strong non-Chinese governments, either bordering China and hemming it in to the north and west, or ruling China directly as occupiers. In terms of the history of the Song, during the earlier phase, known as the Northern Song, the pressure of the Khitan Liao state on the northern steppe restricted the geographical scale of the dynasty’s reach. During the latter phase, the even stronger pressure of the Jurchen Jin Dynasty in the north split China Proper in two, with the Song government, known as the Southern Song, in a position closer to a government in exile from its cultural homeland than that of an imperial state.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dynasty</th>
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<tr>
<td>Shang</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zhou</td>
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<td>Qin</td>
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<td>Sui</td>
<td>589 – 617</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tang</td>
<td>618 – 907</td>
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<td>“Five Dynasties”</td>
<td>907 – 960</td>
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<tr>
<td>Song</td>
<td>960 – 1279</td>
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<td>960-1127</td>
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<td>SOUTHERN SONG</td>
<td>1127-1279</td>
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<td>Yuan</td>
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<td>Ming</td>
<td>1368 – 1644</td>
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<td>Qing</td>
<td>1644 – 1911</td>
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The early Song state

The founding of the Song. In 960, a general of the Later Zhou, the last of the five northern dynasties, mutinied against his government and led his army in a series of conquests that ultimately resulted in the reunification of China. This general, Zhao Kuangyin, became the founder of the Song Dynasty.

As noted above, while the Song is considered one of China’s great eras, the Song state never matched the Han or Tang in terms of military strength and the expanse of empire the imperial house controlled. In establishing a reunified China, the Song founders recognized that the Khitan Liao empire represented too great a military threat to overcome. They settled for a compromise solution, focusing on establishing a flourishing state within the confines of the heartland of China, giving up those regions of the Han and Tang empires that lay deep in Central Asia or on the northern steppe. While many of these territories came under the control of the Khitans, who established their own, non-Chinese Liao Dynasty in the north, much of the Central Asian corridor came under the control of a different people, Tanguts, who established a state known as Xixia, or Western Xia, in that region. The Liao Dynasty endured almost to the end of the Northern Song era as a strong force on China’s borders; ultimately, the Khitan Liao was toppled by the Jurchens, who conquered the Liao in 1125, on their way to occupying all of North China.

From the start, then, the Song state differed from its great predecessors in its lack of expansionist ambitions, and its focus on the development of a civil state whose success could be sustained.

The expansion of commerce under the Northern Song. The Song founders established their court at a city that had not previously served as a dynastic capital. The city of Kaifeng lay in China’s midlands, just south of the Yellow River. The decision to take Kaifeng as a base rather than the Tang capital of Chang’an reflected a change in the circumstances and goals of the dynasty. Chang’an had been considered ideal by the Tang because of its status as the terminus of the “Silk Route,” the channel of foreign trade through Central Asia, and because of its strong military defensibility. The new Song
government was far less interested in these advantages. Kaifeng was better suited to Song goals because it had become a terminus of the Grand Canal – its connection by canal with the southern urban center of Hangzhou made it a focus of internal commerce. The Song aspired to focus on building the wealth and social cohesion of the heartland regions of China, and a capital located at Kaifeng was ideal for these purposes.

For almost 1000 years, since the disastrous Yellow River floods of the early first century, the population of China had been gradually shifting from the fertile but dry lands of the North towards the South, a region characterized by a warm, moist climate and by a multitude of naturally navigable waterways. This shift accelerated during the peaceful years of the early Song, as farmers sought to open new lands in the South on which to grow rice, which was becoming increasingly popular throughout China, and also to produce other crops that Northerners would find exotic and attractive, such as tea. In the South, crops could be grown year round, and Major North-South canals fostered a lively inter-regional trade that heated China’s economy to levels unseen before in the world. The South became particularly wealthy. Farming populations began to grow at spectacular rates, and enormously wealthy merchant families began to purchase large tracts of land, rent them out to peasant tenants, collect high rents, and use their wealth to gather together in increasingly large urban centers, where the upper classes lived in remarkable luxury. The growth of some of the largest Chinese cities, such as Guangzhou (Canton) and Nanjing, dates from this period.

**The Examination System**

By the time of the Song, the civil service examination system had become so central to the Chinese state that it was, in many was, the cultural focus of all who aspired to success. Even the growing merchant class, which was, by policy, banned from participating in the exams because their profession, based on self-serving “greed” for profit, was considered intrinsically immoral, looked for ways to have some of their sons shed the merchant class designation in order that the family could become members of the most prestigious class in society: the official class. Because it was during the Song that the exam system fully matured into the form it was to carry into the early twentieth century, it is appropriate to step back here and make an overview of the history and nature of the system.

Although the intricacies of the examination system were endless, its basic structure was simple. Throughout the period from about 589 to 1905, the central imperial government held massive exams at the various capitals of China every three years. Those who performed best on these exams earned the right to receive government positions; the
specific position was determined through a combination of exam scores, personal influence, and available openings. To select the thousands of young men (and men only) who could compete for these exams, lower level tests were administered annually at provincial and county levels. The aspiring young man could expect to spend several years moving upward through this pyramid of exams--that is, assuming that he was successful at the lower levels: most were not.

The exam system in China was born as early as 100 B.C., soon after the time that the Han Dynasty Emperor Wu accepted the proposals of his courtier Dong Zhongshu and established Confucianism as state orthodoxy. It is recorded that the emperor himself conducted the earliest exams, posing questions to the graduates of the state academy and determining their role in government on the basis of their replies. Although some sort of examination procedures were used at intervals during the Han and then later in some of the many kingdoms of the Six Dynasties period, the exam system as we usually think of it did not become fully institutionalized until the short-lived Sui Dynasty (589-617) brought an end to China’s medieval period of disunity and reinstated a Confucian pattern as the basis of revived centralized government. From that time until this century, the exam system was central to government in China. Although the nature of the exams changed over time, the system was intrinsically a Confucian one--exam papers were no place to demonstrate one’s Daoist or Buddhist insights.

**Preparation for the Examinations.** Preparation for the tests began at an early age and could continue for many years; in some cases, men spent their entire lives attempting to pass the exams (which could be taken any number of times). Successful candidates were rewarded with great prestige. Their families could boast that they belonged to the sole recognized nation-wide elite, and were permitted to fly a special flag at the gates of their family compounds. They could expect that their successful son would bring to the family all the benefits that Confucian education, public service, and deeply entrenched customs of bribery could provide. Although the examinations were open to any adult male, regardless of birth, in practice families whose members had already achieved high rank through the examinations were at a tremendous advantage in preparing the next generation for success. It was such families who usually possessed the resources that allowed them to excuse their children from all economic contributions to the household in order that they might spend a dozen years or more devoting themselves solely to the study of examination texts.

There were a number of different types of examination tracks open to young men. The most important was the Confucian civil service examination, which gave men access
to the highest level of government posts. These exams were based on a thorough mastery of the extensive corpus of Confucian classical texts, with their voluminous commentaries, of political essays composed by exemplary Confucians of the post-Classical era, and of the arts of poetry, calligraphy, and essay composition that marked one as a cultivated member of the Chinese intellectual elite.

The intensity of this educational process can be suggested by a quantitative measure concerning only the matter of Confucian classical texts. In addition to a very wide knowledge of the texts and their commentaries, exam candidates were expected to know a certain core group of these texts by heart. The texts that needed to be memorized included the following group, listed below with the total number of words, or Chinese characters, that they include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Words</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Analects</td>
<td>11,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mencius</td>
<td>34,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Yijing</td>
<td>24,107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Book of Documents</td>
<td>25,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Book of Poetry</td>
<td>39,234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Book of Rites</td>
<td>99,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Zuozhuan</td>
<td>196,845</td>
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</tbody>
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The total comes to well over 400,000 words, roughly the equivalent of memorizing a book of 1,000 pages word-perfect. And this was just for starters! A never ending stream of commentaries, histories, poetry and so forth would demand unceasing attention for all the years of a student’s youth, and preparation for the highly artificial literary styles demanded by ossified examination formats ensured that when a student wasn’t memorizing texts, he was trying to master poetic rhyme schemes or baroque essay formats that would please the critical eye of future examiners.

**Social Consequences of the Exam Curriculum.** The imperative of rote learning that permeated the education of Chinese youths was symptomatic of the authoritarian character of the entire system of Confucian education. Although students read the *Analects* of Confucius and heard him state plainly there that he was not “one who studied much and memorized what he had studied,” and saw that Confucius challenged the legitimacy of virtually every power holder of his day, the overall thrust of Confucianism, as presented to young boys, stressed the primacy of the Three Bonds: obedience to father, elders, and rulers. This was a primary lesson instilled in every child aspiring to become a member of the ruling class of China, and although a significant number of men were able
to overcome this call to political docility in their maturity, the overall cast it leant to the bureaucratic government of China was a high tolerance for imperial autocracy and fear of innovation.

This tendency undermined one of the most progressive features of the examination system—the fact that the institution of government appointment through examination made access to wealth and power dependent upon intellectual merit rather than on the whim of the ruler or personal connections at court. The government system of China is often referred to as a “meritocracy,” and this is one of China’s most celebrated glories. However, the intellectual “merit” that earned young men promotion was not necessarily the type of creative or independent achievement that we would tend to deem appropriate for the highest levels of public responsibility.

The intensity of textual study that was required to rise from the lowest educational levels to candidacy for the examinations was so great that it formed an effective barrier to most children. In some cases, this was simply a matter of intellectual talent or an ability to settle down and study hour after hour, year after year (not a quality we associate with children). More often, it was simply a matter of economics. Only a small percentage of the households of China could afford to spare a son to full-time study for the entire period of his life at home. This fact worked against another of the most progressive features of the examination system—its openness. In theory, with only a few exceptions (such as the exclusion of merchant families from candidacy during certain periods), social mobility through competitive examination was available to the sons of all families, down to the lowliest peasants. While it is true that talented sons of impoverished families somehow scrimped their way through to expertise and high rank frequently enough to maintain the meaningfulness of the exam system’s egalitarian promise, the great majority of successful candidates always came from privileged families in the wealthiest regions of China.

Exams and the Confucian Esprit de Corps. One of the unique features of Chinese society that resulted from the exam system was the fact that members of the ruling bureaucracy from the sixth century on shared a common experience of great intensity that formed an important bond among them. While in many traditional societies, members of a single generation might share certain sorts of military training or experiences, or in smaller social groups might undergo some other type of rite of initiation, China was unique among traditional cultures in subjecting its large governing elite to an intellectual initiation such as the exam system.
Every three years, young men of promise would flock to the capital city, find lodging in that sophisticated and strange place, and encounter hundreds of other young men from all parts of the empire similarly displaced in the hope of lifelong advancement. During the period leading up to the exams, candidates, who were often on their own for the first time in their lives, would form intense friendships, friendships which might later form a network of government contacts. Many features of Chinese political history are best explained only after one has examined lists of triennial examination candidates and discovered which political actors were linked by comradeship dating to their exam days. Moreover, exam graduates also formed important relationships with their examiners, and men who performed outstandingly on the exams could expect that their examiners would become lifelong patrons who would serve as surrogate fathers within the Confucian bureaucracy.

The function of the exams as a socializing experience was enhanced by the exhausting nature of the metropolitan tests. The entire process stretched over eight days, and was permeated by elaborate ritual ceremonies. The examinees spent days at a time locked in tiny examination cells which stretched over several acres in prison-like rows, and were expected to write all day and all night, squinting under the light of their cubicle candles.

Given the stress of these terrible conditions, a rich body of folklore grew around the exams, reinforcing their impact upon society and the men who had to endure them. Candidates who entered their cells had heard how the ghosts of failed candidates haunted the testing grounds in the night, and it was not unknown for men’s courage to break; sometimes a hapless candidate would be found hanging in his cell at dawn, his undistinguished exam paper left incomplete.

**Education and Governmental Responsibility.** Perhaps the greatest irony of the civil service examination system in China is that in many respects, despite the praiseworthy principle of appointment by competitive examination, the system was defective because the exams tested students for the wrong skills. It was a fundamental tenet of the time that mastery of Confucian moral texts, of poetic forms, and of the rhetoric of canonical commentary uniquely equipped a man to govern others. To us, it seems self-evident that this is not true.

Successful graduates of the exam system faced certain immediate problems to which they were ill suited to respond. Graduates were often posted to low level positions in the provinces where they assumed duties at the level of the county magistrate. There,
they were responsible for such duties as tax collection, water conservation, agricultural enhancement, legal administration, and management of their own county offices, called *yamen*. Typically, they faced certain handicaps. First of all, their jurisdictions generally extended over populations of perhaps forty to fifty thousand people, and they were supplied with no assistance from the central government. Magistrates were responsible for hiring *yamen* staff from local people. Because there was a “rule of avoidance” that ensured that no official would ever be appointed to a post in his home district (to avoid problems of favoritism), a new officer from the capital would be entirely unfamiliar with the population from which he had to select his assistants. Frequently, when young men were posted far from their home counties, they were not even able to understand the local dialects of the people they governed! Moreover, the budget of a magistrate was a very limited one--his salary was small and he was provided with virtually no discretionary funds.

Basically, young men fresh from their Confucian studies were completely untrained in the skills that would allow them to succeed under such conditions unless they had received informal instruction from family members or acquaintances who had been immersed in government. It was quite common for such men to govern incompetently. Some resorted to brutal authoritarian measures, others exhausted themselves issuing moral proclamations urging their people to behave properly (not a very effective strategy). Most often, magistrates fell under the influence of powerful local families, who provided them with “officers” who were skilled in using coercion to extract taxes from peasants and confessions from “criminals.” By relying on such local bullies, a magistrate could ensure that he could forward to the central government the revenues the emperor demanded and that he could submit records of court proceedings demonstrating his sagely ability to bring the guilty to justice and keep order in his district. Inevitably, such patterns of conduct also involved habits of bribery and other forms of corruption that were endemic in the Chinese political system (and remain so today).

Periodically, there were reform initiatives that proposed to make the contents of the exams more relevant to the practical skills necessary for government. But these movements were rarely successful. The men who occupied high office and served as the examiners of the next generation had invested their entire identities in the education of their youth--they were not likely to approve of any radical change in standards or content to the exams. In most cases, the most revolutionary changes merely involved the authorization of a more “modern” or pragmatically oriented set of commentaries to the Confucian classics than those that had been employed previously. While in some cases
this might have allowed examiners to give added weight to answers that suggested some grasp of the intricacies of practical governance, this was not always the result. The fourteenth century certification of the commentaries of the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi’s as orthodox resulted in the opposite result. Zhu Xi was a brilliant metaphysician—his theories of the cosmos and its relation to man’s ethical tendencies represent a wonderful example of philosophical imagination—but when successful candidates sought to apply Zhu’s cosmic theories of Heavenly Principle, material force, and the moral intuitions of the sage heart to the problems of tax collection, flood control, and militia organization, they sometimes found that he was a little sketchy on the details.

**The Political Struggles of the Eleventh Century**

“Cultural Confucianism.” The early Song leaders placed great emphasis on civil government, as opposed to military, and part of this involved active sponsorship of education and scholarship. The term for the civil aspects of society, *wen*, denoted far more than the non-military features of the state. *Wen* denoted the patterns of art and social refinement of the past, and the goal of perfecting “*wen* society” was not pictured in economic terms, it expressed the ambition to create a cultural flourishing that would reflect the essence of sage wisdom, as that was portrayed in the Confucian canonical texts.

In pursuit of this goal, the imperial court commissioned massive compilations of literary compendia, encyclopedias, and histories, that could bring together the now thousand year-old traditions of the “Confucian” state. Scholarship – pure scholarship – enjoyed a prestige beyond anything seen in past eras. The government’s interest in recruiting scholar-officials through the exam system became increasingly focused on the credentials of scholarship, an ideal that naturally now incorporated the artistic elements of poetry and, increasingly, calligraphy and painting, that had become central to the profile of the *literatus*.

In response to this direction of government ambition, each generation of examination candidates seemed to produce leading graduates whose scholarly virtuosity reached new heights. The intellectual history of the early Song is peopled by men whose encyclopedic knowledge and literary skill remain unsurpassed in later Chinese history. Since one’s standing in the examination results determined the level at which one’s official career would begin, many of these outstanding scholars became leaders of government, and naturally, they perpetuated this trend to demand increasingly deep scholarly credentials for the next generation of exam candidates.
One of the outstanding examples of this type of Confucian virtuoso was Sima Guang (1019-86), who became one of the main figures in the most devastating factional battle in the history of Chinese politics – a battle that so weakened the dynasty that it set the stage for its inability to resist the invasions of 1127 and the loss of North China.

Sima Guang was an outstanding scholar as a young man, and attained the highest examination degree at the age of only nineteen. His official career was a success from the start, and he ultimately rose to the position of Prime Minister, the highest civil service office in Song China. As a high minister, he steered the government towards highly conservative policies, designed to reinforce the Confucian stress on personal virtue, reflected in mastery of canonical and historical texts, as the central criterion for public leadership.

But this is not what Sima Guang is best known for in Chinese history. When not attending to the heavy duties of his high offices, Sima Guang devoted himself to the compilation of a history of imperial China that could become the standard for educating all future emperors, and all young men aspiring to official careers. Sima Guang’s text, The Comprehensive Mirror for Governance, was not only authoritative, it was and remains among the largest historical texts ever compiled, stretching over twenty volumes in modern editions.*

Sima Guang’s culturally conservative approach to government represented the mainstream view among the elite of the Northern Song. Their focus was entirely on raising the scholarly and moral level of the highest tier of government leaders, and qualifications for leadership were conceived entirely in cultural terms. They were far less focused on the technical knowledge that might be needed to encourage and sustain the development of Song society in terms of economic growth, infrastructure building, and the maintenance of a capable military defense. Conservative Northern Song leaders of this type articulated a vision of literati excellence that may be called “Cultural Confucianism,” for its emphasis on the link between governance and mastery of China’s cultural tradition.

* In this respect, Sima Guang resembles a Western conservative politician, known both for his accomplishments as Prime Minister and as author of voluminous, highly regard histories: Winston Churchill.

The issues of competence and corruption. As we have noted before, while the Han Dynasty decision to credential officers of state through a system of Confucian education ensured that government was directed by literate and generally thoughtful men, chosen on the basis of merit, the nature of the Confucian curriculum meant that these officials were not often trained to address directly the practical concerns of governance. These
matters included both the demands directly made by the imperial Legalist state, including tax collection and law enforcement, and also a range of issues that varied according local needs: agriculture and water conservancy, maintenance of commercial roads or waterways, supervision of market practices, and so forth. These were not matters that were covered in any detail in the Confucian curriculum.

Although all Chinese governments exercised the absolute power that Legalism prescribed, against which subjects had little or no defense, the degree to which the government controlled society was, in fact, significantly limited by the size of the centrally appointed government, which was actually quite small by modern standards. Although there was a lavish court establishment, much of it staffed by imperial favorites, eunuchs, and others who were not products of the exam system, the actual number of men who were appointed to official position with jurisdiction over the subjects of the realm was generally in the neighborhood of forty thousand. This group of men, exam graduates, aspired to high office in the central government at the capital, but their initial postings, and for many, the only type of appointment they received, were to serve as local “magistrates,” that is, as the sole representatives of the central government in the thousands of small counties of China. From these positions, they might rise to higher status on the local level, for example, a “prefect,” who administered a major urban center or cluster of rural counties, or to a major appointment outside the capital as a provincial governor – and of course, most hoped to rise to positions at the capital. However, the key representatives of the government were truly the lower-level local magistrates – they did not set policy, but they had to implement it, and do so in a way that was responsive to local needs.

Apart from the fact that their Confucian training provided the men who served as magistrates with few tools to respond to the practical needs of office, there were other major obstacles to success. In order to guard against corruption, there was an inflexible “rule of avoidance” that forbade the appointment of any magistrate to the district from which he himself came. Consequently, many young exam graduates found themselves sent to a remote area of the empire, where they were unfamiliar with the people, the customs, and often even with the spoken language. There, without any other officers of state in their district, they attempted to manage the yamen (magistrate’s office), coordinate the police, manage tax collection, act as investigator and judge in criminal and civil court cases, and administer a range of other tasks that varied with their district.

Obviously, this was not a task a single person could accomplish without help, and, indeed, the government included in the salary of the magistrate funds to hire a yamen staff and police force that could implement his orders. Unfortunately, there was no exam
system for these appointments, and little way for a magistrate to determine which men of his district were appropriate for these appointments. Magistrates served in their district for only a few years at a time, and as they rotated, they tended to retain the staff hired by their predecessors. But where did these “yamen runners” come from.

Basically, the staff of the yamen was drawn from or recommended by the most powerful families in the district. These were generally landholding families, often called “gentry,” who had amassed wealth and local prestige through merchant activities, association with government officials – sometimes their own sons were exam graduates – or successful careers in various criminal activities. All too often, especially in rural districts, local society was dominated by families who used their wealth and reputations to bully the peasants and coerce from them high rents for land, various tribute payments, and unpaid forms of service. When a magistrate arrived to represent the central government, he was, in a sense, in competition with a local power structure that was designed not to serve the government, but to serve the local elite. And the staff he was provided with to help him compete with the local elite was often put forward by and beholden to that same local elite. Frequently, local families underwrote the costs of hiring personnel, since the magistrate’s funds were very limited, and it was in the interest of the families to have their agents infiltrate the yamen.

Consequently, there were two basic types of gaps that existed at the level of local government, where imperial policy was most directly implemented. First, the training of the officers of state did not closely match the practical challenges of governance that they faced. Second, the personnel who comprised what we call the “subbureaucracy” was not aligned with the goals of the state, and were often, in fact, agents of a corrupt local power structure.

As the Cultural Confucians continued to raise the standards of classical scholarship demanded by the exams that qualified men for government service, the consequence was that the men who succeeded in earning government appointment were increasingly well screened for intelligence and ambition, but increasingly less familiar with the practical and technical aspects of society that they would be called upon to address once their quest for appointment was successful.

Wang Anshi’s radical reform program. The eleventh century is remembered historically for the greatest policy battle in Chinese history. One side of the battle was represented by the great historian-Prime Minister Sima Guang, the leader of the Cultural Conservatives. His adversary was a man named Wang Anshi (1021-86), who is generally remembered
either as the greatest of political visionaries, or as a radical and unbalanced man, who led China into a grand misadventure.

Wang Anshi’s background was more modest than many of the leaders of the Cultural Conservatives. He came from a family that was well off, but not prominent, and he spent the early part of his career, after passing through the exam system, working his way up the ladder of appointment. Like Sima Guang, Wang was an independent minded scholar, but his scholarship was rather unorthodox; he tended to concentrate on Confucian texts that were not the focus of the official curriculum, and to interpret them in new and novel ways.

In the 1050s, Wang began to formulate ideas for how government policies could be radically restructured to address underlying problems he saw with the Song model. His proposals fell on deaf ears; however, he was undeterred, and continued to submit memorials (official reports) to the throne with unusual recommendations.

In 1067, a new emperor came to the throne. Known as Shenzong, he was young and ambitious; when Wang sent a memorial detailing policy proposals that he had now been polishing for a decade, the emperor was persuaded. Wang suddenly found himself Prime Minister, and he began to implement his reforms.

Wang Anshi’s reforms covered a broad range of issues. Some were strictly economic: for example, he instituted an ambitious program to provide government loans to farming families who needed seed and tools, and who were being crushed by usurious interest rates being charged by local landholders. Tax remissions were converted to cash payments, rather than payments in kind, to avoid the high transportation costs entailed with shipping grain and other goods used to remit tax obligations to the capital. Wang created a bureau for the management of state finance policy, and allowed increased local autonomy for state agencies in charge of government monopolies on goods such as salt and tea. In addition, Wang developed programs for the reorganization of the military supply system, and implemented a registration system for the population to make tax collection and law enforcement more manageable.

Other reforms addressed the issues of competence and control of the sub-bureaucracy. The curriculum for the exam system was altered to introduce new, practical training aspects. A special tax was created to fund the independent government appointment of yamen staffs, in an attempt to give the magistrates greater ability to free themselves from dependence on local elites, and to allow them to reward effective subordinates. An appointment track was created to allow for promotion of local yamen staff who demonstrated ability and integrity, and Wang proposed developing exams tailored for this semi-educated group.
These reform measures met with very strong resistance from traditionally minded Confucian officials. Where Wang’s policies were effective, they raised arguments on the basis of moral principle of historical precedent, where they were ineffective – and a number of them were – the opposition had ready ammunition to attack the entire enterprise. Perhaps no features of the reforms so angered traditionalists as the dilution of the Confucian exam system with elements of a practical curriculum, involving topics such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and water conservation. These mere technical arts were seen as details that could easily be managed by men fully trained in the enormous corpus of Confucian moral and historical texts. Moreover, the idea of promoting and creating an exam track for the semi-educated members of the subbureaucracy threatened in the long run to turn government over to men whose training was entirely in the art of service to the Legalist state, without any basis in the moral authority of Confucian teachings to act as a restraint on the autocratic impulses of the imperial court.

The government effectively split into two camps on Wang’s reform policies, and the controversy proved so damaging that the emperor was forced to dismiss Wang in 1076. In his place, he appointed Sima Guang, a clear signal that Cultural Confucianism had prevailed.

However, the reform movement did not die with Wang’s dismissal. Four years later, Sima Guang was dismissed and Wang was recalled. In many respects, the competition between the two developing factions was reinforced by differences in the personal styles of their leaders. While Sima Guang was an exemplary orthodox Confucian literatus, broad in his tastes and talents, and scrupulous in his manner, Wang was a very different type of person. Not only was his scholarship unorthodox, but he was a man careless of appearance, indifferent to aesthetics (though a poet of some accomplishment), and boorish in his personal manner. These features became mixed together with policy issues in the minds of his opponents; Wang’s lack of literati graces made him an easy target, and he and his reforms were opposed as a revival of the spirit of Qin Legalism.

Nor did the battle subside when, in 1086, Shenzong, Sima Guang, and Wang Anshi all died. Shenzong was succeeded by a child emperor, whose mother, acting as regent, enacted a radical repeal of all Wang’s programs, prompting renewed activism by reformists. When the empress-regent died in 1093, another reversal of policy occurred.

As this dramatic oscillation of policy continued, the politics behind it became increasingly bitter and factionalized. The Cultural Confucians and Pragmatic Reformers were not just two groups with different policy orientations, their struggle became deeply personalized. At the point of one policy shift, the incoming faction ordered that the
bodies of recently deceased political enemies be taken from their graves and flailed for their political crimes, a gesture more deeply offensive than outright murder in a culture that prized ancestors over the living.

Ultimately, this bitter factionalism contributed to a fatal weakening of the central government. While it was certainly not the only cause for the Song state’s inability to resist the invasion of the Jurchen armies a quarter century later, the unhealed scars of these political battles were a major contributor to dynastic weakness, and the disaster of 1127 constituted a major blow to the authority of both the Cultural Confucian and Reformist factions of government.

**Commerce, Science, and Ideology in the Southern Song**

The Jurchen invasion of Northern China in 1127 was recognized by Chinese as a disaster of the first magnitude. North China was the homeland of Chinese culture, and although the South had long since become an economic and cultural region on an equal level with the North, it was still conceived of by many people as the frontier, certainly not the appropriate base for a dynasty claiming to be the successor of the Han and Tang. However, in some respects, the division of China at this point created unique positive opportunities for development, and looking back, we can see that the potential existed for China to emerge from this split far stronger than it had ever been before. This did not happen, and, in fact, China from this point on seems to enter a long period of general economic and cultural stagnation, that centuries later made it vulnerable to the depredations of Western powers.

*China split in two.* The Jurchens had been a growing power in the region northeast of China for many years, a region that later came to be known as Manchuria. They were a Tungusic people, originally nomads of the northern steppe, and had for some time been competitors of the Khitan Liao Dynasty. Shortly before their invasion of China, the Jurchens extinguished the Liao and founded their own dynastic state, which they called the Jin, moving their capital close to present-day Beijing. Throughout the period of the Southern Song, the Jin Dynasty ruled North China effectively.

When the Jurchen armies swept into China, the Song encountered the consequences of their general neglect of military preparedness in favor of concentration on civil governance. The government was forced to flee far south, eventually settling its capital in the city of Hangzhou, below the Yangzi delta, and a large mass of people followed their path, migrating from North to South China. This final major migration of
people south capped the thousand-year trend to balance the populations of China’s two main agricultural regions.

**Commerce and science during the Southern Song.** The influx of people into South China was actually an economic boon. While lands in the fertile North China Plain had been the heartland of Chinese agricultural production for millennia, there was a great deal of land in the South that had never been cleared for cultivation, and the settlers who fled from the invasion began to open these lands and bring them into production. Southern agriculture was based on rice, and rice had become a dietary item in great demand in the North. In the eleventh century, new strains of rice that allowed farmers to raise two crops in a season had been introduced, and now these contributed to an outburst of productivity in the expanding agricultural lands of the South.

The Song, when based at Kaifeng, had made sure that the Grand Canal was in good repair, and now, although North and South were under different jurisdictions, the canal became the central conduit for an active inter-regional trade, including not only staples from the South such as rice and tea, but a wide variety of goods that climate or traditional cultural made scarce in one region or the other.

As trade grew in volume, new devices were developed to support it. Coinage had been dramatically increased during the early Song, so that cash payments could facilitate trade. Now, with commerce reaching new levels, paper currency was developed, and new banking institutions were invented to allow for investment, credit, and cash savings.

But it is questionable the truly dramatic leap in agricultural output and commercial activity of the Song era would have occurred without the migrations that followed the Jurchen invasions, forcing exploitation of southern resources that had lain untouched before. The economic growth in the South resulted in rapid urbanization. During the Southern Song period, a number of southern cities are estimated to have housed populations close to one million – the largest cities in the world at the time. These concentrations further spurred the development of diverse markets for craft goods, such as ceramics, of which the Song craftsmen became unsurpassed masters (which is why fine porcelain is called “china” today). Another item that increased in demand was
books. In response, Song artisans invented movable type and launched a printing industry unmatched in the world.

Economic activity and the rising demand for goods was a major spur to scientific and technological creativity, and the foremost historian of the history of science in China has maintained that virtually every core invention of Chinese science traces its origins or a significant innovation to the Song period. For example, the rising output of goods in the South created incentives for the development of maritime trade, so that Chinese goods could reach new markets abroad. The old Silk Route was no longer available to the Song, and, in any event, climate changes had made it much less hospitable to caravan travel than had been the case during the Tang. So for the first time in Chinese history, the merchant class turned towards the sea as a potential commercial highway. Responding to this need, craftsmen applied known technology to create the maritime compass, which allowed ships to navigate as far as the Red Sea, to trade with Middle Eastern markets. Shipbuilding became a major industry, and a host of inventions led to the construction of technologically advanced ships, adaptable to both commercial and military uses.

The need to harness the water energy of South China led to a series of inventions connected to irrigation and flood control. The military was refitted with weaponry that used a new technique for carbonizing iron: the invention of steel. Alongside the development of new financial institutions, Chinese mathematics made enormous strides, as did astronomical science – intellectual fields whose growth was facilitated by the possibility of mass produced books.

Commercial activity and the appearance of new methods of production and other technologies created the conditions favorable for speculative investment, and social historians find many of the institutions that are typically precursors of capitalist development: urban professional guilds, concentrations of wealth in socially mobile families, and liquid forms of currency.

These developments in commerce, science, and economic institutions during the Song have led scholars to question why China did not go on to make the intellectual and social breakthroughs that are associated with transformations to modernity in the Western world. If one were to take a snapshot of the world in the twelfth century, there seems no question that China would appear the only state capable of making those sorts of changes. Europe did not reach the levels of commerce and intellectual sophistication seen during the Southern Song period until centuries later. What held China back?

It is often pointed out that this may be the wrong way to ask the question: the critical changes in culture and economics that led to the Enlightenment and scientific revolution in the West may not have followed any laws of social development, and the
real question should perhaps be what forces pushed Europe to develop as it did. Nevertheless, what is often called the Song “commercial revolution” is so pronounced, and the intellectual ferment surrounding it so dramatic, that, with or without reference to Europe, it is indeed disappointing to look a century or two ahead and find China having apparently regressed in both economic and scientific terms.

A number of candidates as causes for this deceleration of China’s social development have been proposed over the decades, and it is now generally acknowledged that it is very likely that no single cause decisively altered the direction China took. It has been pointed out that in Europe, modernization was enabled in part by weak and fragmented governments being unable to constrain experiment and initiative by individuals, while in China, the universal top-down pattern of governance was dedicated to a type of social control that left far less room for economic and intellectual entrepreneurship. A related contrast is that in Europe, modernization was focused in rapidly growing urban centers that were often administered solely on local initiative, outside the purview of established state structures, whereas in China, the strongest nodes of central government control were precisely urban centers – the rapid growth of an urban community in South China during the Song brought people under stricter government control than would have otherwise been the case.

But one component of China’s retreat from the brink of modernity is generally agreed to be related to abrupt changes that took place in the intellectual sphere. These changes are associated with the rise of an entirely new form of Confucian ideology, an approach that substantially rejects both the Cultural Confucianism of the conservative Northern Song establishment and the activist reform program of Wang Anshi’s followers. This new ideology is called Neo-Confucianism in the West, and its impact on China’s intellectual history was so dramatic that for centuries the term “Confucianism” itself was understood only in terms of this new approach, which was born amidst the factional struggles of the Northern Song, and first attracted a wide following after the invasions of 1127. We will discuss Neo-Confucianism further in a separate reading.

The Mongol invasions and the end of the Song.

During the last century of the Song Dynasty, forces were gathering on the northern Asian steppe that were to have dramatic world consequences, affecting the shape of Chinese history. This was the period when the Mongol people were brought together under the leadership of Genghis Khan (or Chinggis Khan, 1165-1227) and his successors and
launched lightning cavalry attacks on both East Asia and Eastern Europe, amassing for a brief time the most far flung empire that the world has ever seen.

In 1226, the Mongol armies brought down the empire the Xixia state that had controlled the Central Asian corridor throughout the Song, and following this, they turned their attention to the Jurchen Jin Dynasty, exerting pressure from the north. To create a more secure military buffer, the Jin moved their capital from Beijing to the old Northern Song capital of Kaifeng, south of the Yellow River, but it was to no avail. In 1234, the Mongols brought an end to Jurchen rule in North China.

Genghis Khan’s grandson, Khubilai Khan (1215-94) became the leader of the Mongol forces in the east in 1260. He established a capital in Beijing, and determined to conquer all China and rule their as emperor. In 1271, he proclaimed the establishment of a new dynasty, the Yuan, and began a campaign of conquest, aiming south.

The Mongols may have been the most dominant military phenomenon until the atomic bomb. Their army was composed entirely of cavalry, and training on the wild steppe had toughened both horsemen and horses to travel enormous distances at great speed. Warriors learned to sleep in the saddle and to tap their horses’ veins for blood when food was scarce. The tradition of Mongol warfare was raiding; the pattern was to appear seemingly from out of nowhere, attacking settlements, towns, and cities with terrific ruthlessness, as much intent upon terror as conquest and loot. In Europe, they were widely believed to be a scourge sent from God, and during the thirteenth century, their conquests there extended as far west as Hungary and Poland. In the Middle East they occupied the lands of modern Iran and Iraq, extending west through most of Turkey.

[Diagram of Mongol Empire in the 13th Century]
The Southern Song military had been strengthened since the time of the Jurchen invasions, but it was not equipped to defend against the type of warfare launched by Mongol armies under Khubilai. In 1279, the Song Dynasty fell to the invading armies in what was probably the bloodiest war ever witnessed on Chinese territory. Census figures that can provide the basis for population estimates for the period suggest that China’s population, which had burgeoned during the Song, was cut by as much as one-third, from about 120 million to 80 million, as a result of the Mongol incursions and the social chaos that followed them. Any analysis of why China did not follow the Song commercial revolution with the further development of modern institutions must take into account the devastating setback that was represented by the wars that brought an end to the Song.