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The Northern Song Historical Context

In the chaotic period of the Five Dynasties, an emperor was not an emperor, a father not a father, a son not a son. Even the human bonds governing older brother and younger brother, and husband and wife were completely destroyed. [During this time,] the principle of Heaven was almost annihilated.

—Ouyang Xiu, *Xin Wudai shi*

In the study of Song China (960–1279), experts in the field tend to see the period as part of a long process of change dating back to the Tang Dynasty (617–907). This six hundred years of change, or the Tang-Song transition, is believed to have drastically altered the political, social, and cultural structure of medieval China, thereby laying the foundation for the following centuries until the end of the monarchical system in 1911.¹ Politically, many scholars see the period as a continuation of the weakening of the Chinese state while Chinese society became increasingly powerful and variegated. For these scholars, this weakening of the Chinese state may have begun in the Tang, but the process definitely quickened when the Song court was forced to move in 1127 from Kaifeng (in the Eastern Yellow River basin) to Hangzhou (in the lower Yangzi River area). For them, the relocation of the Song court signifies not only the transition from the Northern Song to the Southern Song, but more importantly, the further disintegration of the national polity and the concomitant rise of the local gentry as the real power holders.²

The Tang-Song transition was equally dramatic with respect to technology and the economy. Many historians of the Song describe the period as full of rapid technological and commercial progress. There occurred rapid urbanization, the rise of a monetary economy,

the creation of movable-type printing, the development of new staple and commercial crops, a rapid increase in population, and a robust maritime trade.³ Most significantly, these technological and commercial developments have led many historians to believe that during the Tang-Song transition, the economic center of China shifted from the Yellow River valley to the Yangzi River valley, and hence altered the basic structure of the Chinese economy in the following centuries.⁴

Corresponding to these social and economic changes, important intellectual changes took place during the Tang-Song transition. These included the rise of ancient prose style, the revival of classical studies, the emergence of civil culture, and the genesis of *Daoxue*. For many Song experts, these intellectual changes were not isolated events. Instead, they were attempts by the educated elite to redefine themselves in response to momentous sociopolitical changes. From “the aristocratic clans” to “the civil bureaucrats” and to “the local elite families,” each time the educated elite changed their self-definition, they altered the criteria by which the upper echelon of Chinese leadership was measured, and consequently redefined the boundaries within which they would operate in state and society.⁵

As a part of this broad scheme of development, the Northern Song (960–1127) is often assigned an ambiguous role. Temporally located at the midpoint between the Tang and the Southern Song (1127–1279), the Northern Song is frequently seen as either a recipient of something that happened in the past or a forerunner of something important in the making. On the one hand, it is seen as an extension of the Tang, namely, the revival of *guwen* (old style) prose and of Confucian ethics started by Han Yu (768–824), and the continuation of the decline of the aristocratic clans in Chinese politics since the mid-eighth century. On the other hand, it is understood as a preparation for the Southern Song, such as the decentralization of state power from the civil bureaucrats to the local gentry, and the gradual crystallization of *Daoxue* eventually completed by Zhu Xi. There are certainly many valuable insights to be gained from seeing the Northern Song as a midpoint of some broad trends. At the same time, we also lose sight of the particularity of the Northern Song as a unique historical period. For the Northern Song people, especially the educated elite, their main concern was neither to imitate the Tang nor to pave the way for the Southern Song. Rather, their main concern was to find solutions to problems and conflicts that plagued their lives. To fully appreciate the historical significance

of the Northern Song, it is imperative to keep in mind its particular historical context.

Two Centuries of Military Governance

One of the issues that the Northern Song educated elite had to grapple with was how to construct a lasting civil governance. The goal of constructing civil governance—a sociopolitical order founded upon a civil code of behavior and administered by a group of learned men steeped in classical studies—was to replace its opposite sociopolitical order, military governance. Built on a military code of behavior and ruled by military generals, military governance stressed efficiency, a clear chain of command, and the absolute obedience of juniors in rank. While both forms of sociopolitical order accepted the paramount power of the emperor and the legitimacy of the imperial system, they differed fundamentally in ways by which to allocate political power, resolve conflicts, and structure political and social life.

Immediately preceding the Northern Song, for over two centuries, much of northern China practiced military governance. This military governance, which first appeared after the Rebellion of An Lushan (755–763), was a combination of Central Asian nomadism and the Tang system of military governorship (*jie du shi*). This rise of military governance took several steps. It began with the division of the mid-Tang empire into a military zone in the northeast and a civil zone in the central and southern parts of the country. This bifurcation of China into military and civil zones led to what contemporary historian Chen Yinke (1890–1969) calls the condition of “one dynasty, two states” (*yichao liangguo*).⁶ The process continued with the expansion of the military zone at the expense of the civil zone. It finally reached a point in the late Tang, around the time of the Huang Chao rebellion (875–884), when the military governors displaced the Tang court as the *de facto* rulers of China. This militarism reached its climate when the military governor of Henan, Zhu Wen (r. 907–912), brought the Tang dynasty to an end in 907.

The fall of the Tang signaled the beginning of a period of fifty-three years of total military control of China, known in history as the Period of the Five Dynasties (907–960). The Period of the Five Dynasties includes five northern dynasties and ten southern kingdoms. The five northern dynasties, located in the Yellow River valley and the Wei River region, were Later Liang, Later Tang, Later Jin, Later Han, and

Later Zhou. The ten southern kingdoms, clustered around or south of the Yangzi River valley, were Wu, Nan Tang, Wu Yue, Min, Nan Han, Chu, Early Shu, Later Shu, Nan Ping, and Bei Han. During those fifty-three years, changes of power took place frequently, sometimes as frequently as once every ten to fifteen years. Among the five northern dynasties, three of them (Later Liang, Later Tang, and Later Jin) were founded by Shatuo Turks, who had been present in China for centuries as Tang military officers. To indicate their link with the Tang imperial court, some of the Shatuo Turks carried the Tang royal family name Li, such as the first emperor of Later Tang, Li Cunxu (r. 923–926).⁷ Exemplifying the extent to which China had been militarized, the military generals were in complete control of the government, and the civil officials were at best secondary players in politics.

This militarization of China also brought change to the family system. Family ties, rather than being based on blood genealogy as prescribed by Confucianism, entailed the widespread practice of adoption based on practical convenience and mutual interest, modeled after the military custom of “joining hearts by sharing the same family name” (*xixing yi jie qixin*) between generals and soldiers.⁸ Originally, the practice was a means for military generals to build up an elite army known as the “Army of the Adopted Sons” (*yier jun*). Personally loyal and directly responsible to the military generals, the “Army of the Adopted Sons” was the core army of the military generals in battle and the administrators in occupied territories. Related as lords and vassals, the military generals and the “Army of the Adopted Sons” pledged to share whatever they gained in conquest.⁹ This practice of “joining hearts by sharing the same family name,” which later spread to nonmilitary sectors, meant that once pledged, the two strangers would treat each other as father and son. The adopted father would regard his adopted son as if he were his son by blood, giving him full-fledged family privileges and property inheritance. Likewise, the adopted son would regard his adopted father as if he were his real father, cutting all connections with his biological father. This practice, a product of military governance, transformed the family structure in much of northern China during the ninth and tenth centuries.

A case in point is how the second emperor of the Later Tang, Li Siyuan (r. 926–933), rationalized in 925 his decision to succeed his deceased stepbrother Li Cunxu. As an adopted member of the ruling Li family, Li Siyuan’s decision involved two parts: (1) how he claimed

to inherit his stepbrother's throne based on kinship; (2) after his rise to power, whether he should establish a new dynasty or continue the imperial line of the Later Tang. In his first public announcement after ascending the throne, Li Siyuan gave answers to these two questions:

I had served *Xianzu* [the father of Li Keyong, the founder of Later Tang] since I was thirteen years of age. Since then, I have been doing my best to serve the [Li] family as if it were my own family. I had also served *Wuhuang* [Li Keyong] for thirty years by helping him resolve problems, bearing the gusty wind and pouring rain, and risking my life in combat. [In the process,] I had experienced all the danger and borne all the hardship. The enterprise of *Wuhuang* is my enterprise; the world ruled by earlier [Li] emperors is my world. Hence, I am following the rightful procedures as a younger brother to succeed my deceased older brother [Li Cunxu]. Since it will deviate from the rites and conventions if members of the same family adopt a different dynastic title, I will take full responsibility for the fortunes of the [Li] family, regardless whether the future will be kind or harsh on us. [Therefore,] I have decided not to accept the suggestion [for establishing a new dynasty].¹⁰

There is no doubt that Li Siyuan's announcement, elegant and majestic, was part of his ploy to legitimize his rise to power. But even in this political act, we see how the practice of "joining hearts by sharing the same family name" had changed the notion of family in tenth-century China. Li Siyuan's main argument was that one's kinship was not given by birth; rather, it was earned through sharing hardship together to achieve a common goal. For more than thirty years, he claimed, he had worked hard to improve the interests of the ruling Li family, proving his full-fledged membership of the family. It was on the ground of kinship earned through sharing hardship that he thought he had the right to inherit his stepbrother's throne. To make certain that there was no further doubt about his full-fledged membership in the Li family, he rounded off his announcement by stating that he had resisted the temptation to create a new dynasty. Whether Li Siyuan truly believed in what he said or whether he thought that founding a new dynasty would be harder to justify than inheriting a throne, we do not know. Nevertheless, it is clear that he put "joining hearts by sharing the same family name" to good use to advance his political interests.

Reconstruction of Civil Governance

With this historical context in mind, the resemblance between the early Tang and the Northern Song—particularly with respect to the pen controlling the sword and the center dominating the periphery—was not repetition by chance. In fact, the Northern Song rulers reconstructed civil governance after it had lost its appeal for quite some time. In this process of reconstructing civil governance, the Northern Song rulers certainly took into consideration the early Tang model. As much as possible, they wanted to emulate what the early Tang rulers had accomplished three centuries before in putting in place a civil code of behavior. At the same time, they also intended to go beyond the early Tang model to make sure that the new civil governance would not eventually produce the military domination that brought an end to the Tang.

This Northern Song project of reconstructing civil governance was easier said than done. Much rebuilding had to take place to break down the military establishment, particularly the military governance at the center and the military practices in society. In terms of putting an end to the military governance at the center, the first two Northern Song emperors—Taizu (r. 960–976) and Taizong (r. 976–997)—had made decisive moves to centralize the military forces in their own hands. Themselves career military officers before coming to the throne, the two emperors made three major changes during their reigns. First, immediately after the Song was established, all the major generals were asked to give up their military power. Known in history as “dissolving military power over a cup of wine” (*beijiu shi bingquan*), this transition of power took place during an imperial dinner in which Emperor Taizu succeeded in persuading his military generals to accept retirement.¹¹ Second, the military establishment was completely overhauled in such a way that the best army of the country was stationed around the capital, Kaifeng, leaving the feeble and the less trained to the provinces. In effect, this centralization of military force ended the late Tang system of military governorship.¹² Third, all the top military positions were filled by civil ministers certified by the expanded civil service examination system, setting the stage for civil officials to dominate military affairs. Throughout the Northern Song, all the military policies, including war plans and combat strategies, had to be approved by the top civil officials in the government.¹³

Concomitant to the destruction of military governance was the rise of civil bureaucrats through an expansion of the civil service examinations. Although scholars are still disputing the impact of the examination system on the social structure of the Northern Song,¹⁴ there is no doubt that a new ruling class emerged in the Northern Song that earned its right to rule by passing the civil service examinations. A major characteristic of these civil bureaucrats was their undivided loyalty to the emperors. To underscore the civil bureaucrats' link to them, the Northern Song emperors, beginning with Taizong, officiated over the palace examination.¹⁵ As the ceremonial chief examiners who failed no one, the Northern Song emperors performed the act of ordination. They granted titles, and thereby the license to rule, to the successful examination candidates. In return, the civil bureaucrats were expected to serve the emperor with their hearts and souls. Hence, a partnership was formed: the civil bureaucrats would have the power to rule the country, but they pledged not to challenge the imperial authority, as the aristocratic families and military generals had done during the late Tang and the Five Dynasties period.

In the *Song shi*, we find evidence of this partnership between the Northern Song emperors and the civil bureaucrats. In the opening paragraph of the "Biographies of the Loyal and the Righteous" (*Zhongyi zhuan*), the editors of *Song shi* made the following remarks: "During [the period] of the Five Dynasties, the literati's spirit of loyalty and righteousness had completely dissipated. At the beginning of the Song, even [chief councilors like] Fan Zhi and Wang Pu had reasons to regret, not to mention others. . . . During the reigns of emperors Zhen[zong] and Ren[zong], distinguished men in the government such as Tian Xi, Wang Yucheng, Fan Zhongyan, Ouyang Xiu, and Tang Jie promoted straight-talking and speaking in one voice. As a result, officials and gentry throughout the empire aspired to moral integrity and a sense of propriety. Gone were the vulgar practices of the Five Dynasties period."¹⁶ To the editors of *Song shi*, a drastic change in the Northern Song bureaucracy took place during the reigns of Zhenzong and Renzong (997–1063), when civil bureaucrats replaced the aristocratic families as the administrators of the empire. On the one hand, the civil bureaucrats were more loyal to the emperor than their predecessors, placing the interest of the empire above and beyond their own interests. On the other hand, they demanded a closer relationship with the emperor, actively and aggressively participating in making decisions with the emperor on matters related to the empire.

Characteristics of the Mid-Northern Song

Although, due to the concerted efforts from above, military governance had been structurally demolished in the first three to four decades into the Song, many military practices and military values remained dominant in society. It took another half century, through the reigns of Renzong (r. 1023–1063) and Shenzong (r. 1068–1085), for the new civil governance and the new civil culture to be fully developed. Those sixty years from 1023 to 1085, commonly known as the mid-Northern Song, have long been regarded as the high point of the Northern Song period. In thought, the first generation of the *Daoxue* scholars such as Shao Yong, Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao, and Cheng Yi began to make their marks in the intellectual landscape.¹⁷ In government, the three major Northern Song political thinkers and reformers—Fan Zhongyan, Wang Anshi, and Sima Guang—implemented drastic reforms to shape the country in accordance with their own social and political visions.¹⁸ In the arts, the essayist Ouyang Xiu, the painter Guo Xi (ca. 1020–after 1090), the calligrapher Mi Fu (1051–1107), and the poet Su Shi, completed their masterpieces, which are still admired today.¹⁹

It would certainly be an exaggeration to characterize the mid-Northern Song as a complete break with the early Northern Song, but substantial differences are evident in the values and social practices of these two periods. One key difference was the self-identity of the educated elite who gained fame and power by participating in or passing the civil service examinations. While during the early Northern Song, members of the educated elite were still fighting against the old habit of mind that required civil officials to be subservient to the rulers, during the mid-Northern Song they were confident that they were the “corulers” of the empire. As the corulers, they believed that they were ruling the country *with* the emperor rather than *for* him.²⁰ They thought that they were legitimate leaders of the empire, sharing with the emperor all his responsibilities of ordering the world. It was in this context of the educated elite believing in ruling the empire with the emperor that Fan Zhongyan, Wang Anshi, and Sima Guang carried out drastic reforms to address the administrative, financial, and military problems of the mid-Northern Song.

A prime example of the difference between these two generations of literati was their views on the Five Dynasties official Feng Dao (882–954). A respected scholar and a skillful civil official, Feng Dao

served in four out of the five dynasties of the chaotic period.²¹ He had a good relationship with major military leaders, so much so that despite rapid dynastic changes he always found a way to remain in power. Other than being good at winning the trust of the military leaders, Feng Dao was also capable of serving as a bridge between the military rulers and the civil officials. He was particularly good at remonstrating with the military leaders in humble and yet clear language mixed with military metaphors. As the subservient civil official par excellence, Feng Dao saw himself as a follower of Confucian teachings. In the preface to his “A Self-Portrait of the Ever-Happy Old Man” (*Changlulao zixu*), he presented himself as a contented old gentleman who was proud of watching his family flourish under him. He claimed that in public he might have shifted his loyalty from one imperial court to another, but in private he had done his utmost to perpetuate his family interests.²²

In the *Old History of the Five Dynasties* (*Jiu Wudai shi*) compiled by Xue Juzheng (912–981), we find a positive assessment of Feng Dao’s career. Finished in 974, two decades after the founding of the Song, the *Old History* represented the view of the early Northern Song literati who looked up to Feng Dao as their model. In the *Old History* account, Feng Dao’s subservience as a civil official was considered to be a virtue rather than a defect. After a summary of Feng Dao’s life, Xue Juzheng offered the following remarks on Feng as a historical figure: “What [Feng] Dao had done exemplified the standards of ancient gentlemen. What [Feng] Dao had achieved in subservience to [leaders] fulfilled the demanding task of a major official.”²³ By emphasizing that Feng Dao’s subservience was fulfilling his responsibility as an official, Xue judged Feng Dao on the basis of a submissive official (*chen*) in serving a dominating emperor (*jun*), the first relationship in the Confucian Five Cardinal Relationships (*wulun*). For Xue, after Heaven had made its view known regarding who was the Son of Heaven, an official had to follow the Mandate of Heaven by serving him wholeheartedly. Thus, there was nothing wrong with Feng Dao’s subservience, and he should be honored as a faithful Confucian official.

Nor was Feng Dao morally wrong in serving four dynasties, according to Xue Juzheng. Himself having served in four dynasties, Xue commented favorably on a group of Later Liang civil officials who joined the Later Tang government. He complimented them for rendering a high quality of service to both governments as a “steadfast palm tree [which] does not change in the four seasons, and a broken jade [which] can stand a hot fire.”²⁴ In Xue’s mind, given the political

situation in the Period of the Five Dynasties, the civil officials were at best secondary players in politics. What the civil officials could hope to achieve was to serve responsibly any government that happened to have the Mandate of Heaven. Judging Feng Dao by the standards of his time, Xue had no doubt that he was a successful Confucian official.

In the *New History of the Five Dynasties* (*Xin Wudai shi*) by Ouyang Xiu, however, we have a completely different picture of Feng Dao.²⁵ Completed in 1053, when the fourth emperor of the Song Dynasty, Renzong, was directing his attention to reform the country's bureaucracy and economy, the *New History* presented the view of the mid-Northern Song civil bureaucrats who entered the Song government by passing the civil service examinations, not through blood privileges or family network. In the *New History* account, Feng Dao became the symbol of what had gone wrong in the Five Dynasties. In a didactic tone, Ouyang Xiu condemned Feng Dao for being shameless:

Having read Feng Dao's self-glorifying account in his *Preface to an Ever-happy Old Man*, I find him shameless. One can tell how shameless the society was at that time. In the Period of the Five Dynasties, I can only find three persons with full integrity, and fifteen civil officials died for their government. But there were many strange people wearing Confucian gowns and claiming to learn from the past. They received high salary and served in the government, but they never made sacrifice for the sake of righteousness and loyalty. Instead, only the military officers and soldiers made sacrifice. It seems that there was no true Confucian scholar [in the Period of the Five Dynasties].²⁶

For Ouyang, the case of Feng Dao was revealing. It revealed how serious militarism had become during the Five Dynasties. Not only had militarism corrupted the Chinese state and the Chinese family, it had also corrupted the scholars, the self-proclaimed custodians of Confucian ethics and Confucian culture. Even if both the Chinese state and society were corrupted, there was still hope that a moral reawakening might occur through the mere examples of a few true scholars. But since most of the scholars, like Feng Dao, were so eager to accept the status quo, Ouyang found the Five Dynasties utterly hopeless.

Particularly important to Ouyang was what Feng Dao's example might have meant to his mid-Northern Song readers. To fully appreciate Ouyang's concern, we need to keep in mind that, up until 1032, early Northern Song emperors continued to pay tribute to Feng Dao

by regularly granting official titles to his descendents.²⁷ This policy of honoring Feng Dao appeared to terminate in 1051 after Emperor Renzong refused to grant the great-grandson of Feng Dao a government title after his submission of Feng Dao's policy papers to the government.²⁸ For Ouyang, if Feng Dao could be called a Confucian official and was regularly honored by the emperors, the Northern Song project of rebuilding civil governance would only be empty rhetoric. For him, his critique of Feng Dao was not only a critique of him as a person, but also a critique of the feckless Confucian scholars who had yielded to the rulers and the military state.

Factionalism in the Late Northern Song

As leaders of Northern Song civil governance, there were two sides of the educated elite's belief in ruling the empire with the emperor. On the one hand, they were extremely active, sometimes even zealous, in participating in governing. Driven by their self-imposed mission of ordering the world with the emperor, the educated elite assumed a wide range of duties: counseling the emperor on national affairs, carrying out government policies, supervising military campaigns, looking after provincial and village schools, serving as local governors, and so on. They were so eager to partake in governing that they would do anything as long as it benefited the empire. The great reformer Fan Zhongyan gave poetic expression to this political activism by calling on his fellow civil bureaucrats to be "first in worrying about the world's troubles and last in enjoying its pleasures."²⁹ On the other hand, with high expectations attributed to their participation in governing, they were unwilling to yield in policy debates, regardless of whether the opposition came from their own kind or from the emperor himself. As the country confronted internal and external problems, their reluctance to compromise and their propensity to be morally dogmatic produced rounds of bureaucratic factionalism that split them into groups competing for power.³⁰

Worse yet, as the scope of reform expanded from the times of Fan Zhongyan to the times of Wang Anshi and Sima Guang, bureaucratic factionalism became increasingly intense. As a result, during the reigns of Zhezong (r. 1086–1100), Huizong (r. 1101–1125), and Qinzong (r. 1126–1127), commonly known as the late Northern Song, officials in the central government were practically divided into two opposing camps: one in support of Wang Anshi's reform called the *xin tang* (new

party), and the other in support of Sima Guang's reform called the *jiu tang* (old party). At the height of partisan factionalism, when one group was in power they expunged the other group from the government; when the other group held the upper hand they returned the favor. As a result, almost all major cultural/political figures of the late Northern Song, including Cheng Yi, Su Shi, Su Zhe (1039–1112), and Liu Zhi (1030–1098), were involved in partisan factionalism. Many of them, most notably Cheng Yi and Su Shi, suffered from humiliating banishments.³¹

During the last forty years of the Northern Song, when the body politic of China was threatened internally by partisan factionalism and externally by foreign invasion, some members of the educated elite began to question the validity of civil governance. They wondered whether civil governance was responsible for incapacitating the central government and weakening the military defense. Shortly before the Song court was to move south to Hangzhou to escape the invading Jurchen army, the discourse on civil governance had reached full circle. The high hopes in the early Northern Song for ordering the world gave way to end-of-the-dynasty pessimism about the human inability to control one's life. Although many members of the educated elite were not yet willing to let the military generals and aristocratic families take over the government, they had lost confidence in themselves to build a perfect human order based on classical learning and a civil code of behavior.

Scholar-Official and Scholar-Gentleman

In the following chapters, we will examine this momentous transformation from military governance to civil governance during the Northern Song. Particularly, we will focus on the change in the self-identity of the educated elite who played a leading role in building civil governance. Like other social groups, the educated elite were not monolithic. There were, at least, two major types of educated elite—or, using an eleventh-century term, *shi* (men of letters). The first type was the scholar-official. It refers to men of letters who, with or without aristocratic family backgrounds, joined the bureaucracy after successfully passing the civil service examinations. These men of letters were given the power to rule having proven their accomplishment in classical and literary training. The three great Northern Song reformers—Fan Zhongyan, Wang Anshi, and Sima Guang—are the prime examples of

scholar-official who mastered the Confucian classics, passed the civil service examinations, and applied their knowledge of the classics to governing. The second type was the scholar-gentleman. It refers to men of letters who were yet to pass the civil service examinations, but they used their family and educational backgrounds to cultivate a social network with those in power. Some of these men of letters achieved fame by socializing with powerful officials, and others entered the bureaucracy based on the recommendations of their friends in high position. Cheng Yi is a good example of the second type. He did not pass the civil service examinations, and yet based on Sima Guang's recommendation, he earned a job in 1086 as the teacher of the teenage Emperor Zhezong.

This distinction between the scholar-official and the scholar-gentleman is significant because it shows the variety of roles assumed by these men of letters in state and society, and the webs of relationship that bound them together as a group. More importantly, it points to, using Pierre Bourdieu's words, the "cultural capital" of these men of letters in advancing their social and political interests.³² Through patronage, sponsorship, inter-marriages, and informal social networks, these men of letters enjoyed a range of social and political resources that were not available to other walks of life.³³ There was, however, one precondition. All of these social and political resources became available to these men *only after* they had demonstrated their classical and literary skills in the civil service examinations.