The Tang-Song Transition and the Context for Ideological Change

In the twentieth century it became increasingly common to make a distinction between “modern” China and a China that had existed before the “modern.” This before-the-modern China came to be called “traditional” China or, in Chinese Marxist historiography, “feudal society.” Those who made this distinction often asserted traditional, pre-modern China was a society that ceased to experience fundamental change and that this was because it had certain characteristics that were inimical to progress. Indeed, the goal of bifurcating Chinese history into “modern” and “traditional” periods was in service of a revolutionary end: to get rid of the legacy of the past and create a “new” China.

Needless to say historians who worked on earlier periods were never fond of a periodization scheme that in effect treated most of Chinese history as a mistake (and their work as irrelevant!). Today even modern historians recognize that Chinese history was marked by cumulative change, with the modern transformation the closest to us and most apparent. Yet outside of the circle of professional historians the idea of an unchanging China is still to be found in the popular press and the imagination.

The first part of this essay asks how such an idea emerged in the first place and examines some of the essential characteristics that have been associated with “traditional” China in order to suggest some questions we ought to ask. The second part turns to the ways in which China changed during the long transition from the Tang (617-907) to the Song (960-1279) dynasty, a transition that divides the early imperial states of Han and Tang, from the later imperial states that followed.

As will be apparent at various points this essay was written to provide the context for understanding the rise of new ideological movements in the Song period, in particular “Neo-Confucianism,” which emerged in opposition to the statist New Policies of the late eleventh century.

Part I - The Narrative of Stagnation and Failure

The idea is that China in the past was unchanging and stagnating is a commonplace of the news media and much education, although it can be presented as positive or negative as the case demands. Early in the summer of 1989, after the government had violently suppressed the great popular demonstrations for political reform at Beijing’s Tiananmen Square, I attended a meeting at which a widely read political commentator asked why we should be shocked, after all, what had China ever known except tyranny, autocracy, and despotism? But, as another one pointed out, if the government had at that moment decided to reform itself and accepted criticism (as many in the government wanted to) we could just as well have said, with as much justification, this was just the latest example the tradition in Chinese political culture of accepting criticism from intellectuals. We can usually find examples to fit the case we want to make. But how did it come about that the dismal narrative of Chinese history gained such currency in the first place?

Chinese History viewed from a “modern” present

Stated most simply the dismal view goes something like this: China was isolated from the rest of the world, its culture was dictated from the top down by the emperor and court, imperial government was autocratic and despotic, its educational system was built on the rote memorization of required texts, it subordinated the individual to the group, and ultimately Chinese civilization was incapable
of transforming itself. China was on a dead-end road, some would say, but it did not understand this until it confronted the modern West. Although it did not know it, some said, China had lost the race to modernity long before European ships arrived at Chinese ports in the sixteenth century.

It is possible to give a positive spin to the “unchanging China” story. A positive case might go like this: China developed a unique system for holding together a large population without modern technology, it stressed family values and the ways in which individuals were connected to others through social relations, it developed a system for selecting the most talented to serve in government, and it made government responsible for teaching a shared morality. It was very successful at what it did, more successful than any other state in human history, by valuing social harmony above the pursuit of self-interest. However, the traditional system was not appropriate for a modern nation.

How did the idea of an unchanging China come to be so well established? For Europe a rough answer would be that it happened when historical theory met a particular historical situation. Long before Western Europe learned about China from the reports of the Jesuits, its historians had subscribed to the old Christian belief that history had its preordained course, that it was heading somewhere. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was clear that Western Europe was developing in an extraordinary manner. Intellectuals were asking what made their times different from the past and where they were heading. One way of answering the question was to argue that a rational, systematic study of the past revealed a record of progress. This turned out to mean only the history of western Europe.. As the German theorist Georg Hegel (1770-1831) explained: it was not necessary to take Chinese history into account in formulating a theory of historical progress because “The history of China itself does not develop anything and on that account one cannot engage in the details of that history.” The great historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) echoed him: “At times the conditions inherited from ancient times of one or another oriental people have been regarded as the foundation of everything. But one cannot possibly use as a starting point the peoples of eternal standstill to comprehend the inner movement of history.”

The belief in a stagnating China incapable of transforming itself implied that China was irrelevant to scholarly inquiry, a reversal from seventeenth century (and even some eighteenth century) views which held that Chinese institutions (for example the civil service examination system), Chinese ideas (for example Neo-Confucianism), and Chinese manufactures (for example porcelain) were worth learning from and even imitating.

What is strange, is that this desire to read China out of history eventually came to be accepted in China as well. Today in practically all fields of endeavor China looks outside for what it regards as more advanced models and techniques. Whether we speak of globalization or modernization this has meant looking to things from the modern West, for the conclusion seems inescapable that for at least two (and some argue for three or four) centuries a handful of countries at the western tip of the Eurasian landmass and their New World extensions have largely determined the course of the world affairs. Never before in history have so few been able to gain in

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2 Although I use “modern West” this phrase should be understood to include the Japanese adaptation of political, social, cultural, and economic institutions of the most developed regions of Western Europe and the United States.
wealth so quickly and so disproportionately, sustain that growth over long periods, and extend their power over so many other peoples. Europeans had reason to believe that they represented the only true road to the future, although less reason for the conviction that they had been on that road since the twelfth century or even since antiquity. Chinese intellectuals and politicians may not have wanted to grant that the West had the only way or was in sole possession of the truth, but pragmatically speaking those who would compete for wealth and power have little choice but learn from those who have more of it.

The suspicion that in order to compete China would have to adopt the ways of the West was supported by new generations of European and then American social theorists. They proposed ways of understanding historical change based on European history which explained what was necessary to become like the modern West. Marx, for example, argued that a civilization should develop from primitive society, to slave society, to feudalism, to capitalism, and finally to communism, with the nature of production creating the class struggle that drove history from one stage to the next. He too supposed that China had stagnated, that it had fallen off the course. A progressive scheme such as this made history into a kind of a race, in which a country falls behind or scoots ahead for reasons that can be explained. Historians in the People’s Republic of China were given this scheme to contend with, and since China had never been a capitalist country, the Party decreed that the period from the unification of China in the third century BC to the nineteenth century was to be treated as the “feudal” stage of history. Some historians did resist a scheme that did not fit Chinese history. Some argued that there had been “sprouts of capitalism” in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Others argue that there had been a major transition between the eighth and eleventh century. But the best they could do was gain acceptance for the notion that the eleventh and twelfth century marked the beginning of a “later period of feudal society.”

Marx’s historical stages are not the only way history has been periodized into progressive stages. But using the historical experience of one place to create a prescription for all places supposes what is obviously not true: that all people through all history were on the same track and racing toward the same end. The problem is that it leads us to look at the past in terms of the present (or in terms of what we in the present believe to be true) and to judge it as good or bad depending on whether it advanced the country toward what the present believes to be the finish line. Again, two can play this game. The argument that Confucianism was an obstacle to transforming East Asian states into Western style nation states has been met by those who insist that Confucian values – its stress on education or respect for authority are in fact an aid to modernization. (Depending on what we mean by “Confucianism, I would argue instead that it benefited from economic growth, but was not a proponent of it). The problem is that if we make winning the modernization race the issue we fail to ask important historical questions: what were those people at that time in the past trying to accomplish and how did the way they thought and acted change?

This is not an argument against comparison. It is an objection to comparing different histories in terms of only one history or one present-day society. For example, Max Weber (1864-1920), a founding father of

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6 For a survey of some alternative progressive periodizations see Cameron, Meribeth E. “The Periodization of Chinese History” Pacific Historical Review 15.2 (1946): 171-77.
social science theory, made a systematic study of China, and India, precisely because he wanted to discover why capitalism appeared in the West and not in the East. He concluded that Confucianism never established the degree of tension between the ideal and the actual that Christianity did because the Confucian worldview treated the empire as the ideal, and it could never find the best means to serve the common good because it kept the individual subordinate to the family, whereas Protestantism broke the bonds of kinship and made rational law the basis for all social relations. Since then others have located the seeds of Western superiority much farther back in time, for example in the European interest in quantification and precise measurement. Some have simply faulted the Chinese for being inward looking and unwilling to learn from others. There have been institutional explanations: Europeans developed a concept of property rights and others did not. There have been economic explanations: the Chinese failed to control population growth, thus decreasing the land available to farming families, or the Chinese state absorbed too much of the surplus. The endpoint in these cases is defined by what the West achieved in recent times. However, if we can imagine ourselves into the sixteenth-century, we might be using a contrast with Europe to explain why China was so much richer and better organized.

There are multiple dangers in this kind of comparison, where one side is supposed to represent the true path of historical development and the other side represents the failure to stay on track. One danger is that we make the impossible assumption that history does in fact have a single course, but this cannot be true for the simple reason that different areas of the world have different histories. Another danger is that we generate a series of false dichotomies in which China is said to be part of the passive, spiritual, family-oriented, despotic, isolated East in contrast to the active, materialist, individualistic, democratic, and open West.

But again, this is not an objection to comparison. We might suppose, for example, a comparative framework that began by asking what both sides had in common. Take, for example, a marathon where the winning runner is from Kenya and loser from Boston. Even after we grant that the competitors come from different cultures and climates it would still be true that as far as racing is concerned both runners have much more in common with each other than with those who cannot run. With this in mind, we might instead focus on the incremental advantages the Kenyan had over the Bostonian in exactly those things they have in common. The winner has pretty much everything the loser has, but perhaps he trains a bit harder, his


heart pumps a bit faster, his lungs have just a bit more capacity, his legs are just a touch longer, his weight a few ounces less. When we are speaking of countries it may be far more useful to account for different outcomes by looking for incremental differences and opportunities rather than supposing that there were any fundamental differences in national character.

In fact what makes China and Europe such an interesting comparison is that there were so many similarities, as we would expect with regions with large populations, extensive governmental structures, standing armies, commerce and cities, taxation, law, religion, and intellectual traditions. Recent studies of China's socioeconomic economic history remind us that China was very successful in maintaining the largest unified political system in the world and feeding a growing population. They have also shown that into the eighteenth century the most productive part of China were remarkably similar to the most productive parts of the rest of the world. They have shown too that comparative history does not have to begin from the premise that the choice was between a singular European path of historical development and stagnation. What may have made all the difference was Europe's opportunity to exploit the New World.

Such comparative studies of have made it more difficult than ever before to assume an unchanging China, and they suggest that the explanation for why the West shot ahead may have little to do with long term patterns of development, the political system, or ideology. Still, it is important to keep in mind that for much of history China was not part of the competition taking place between European states. Europe and China were not in a race with each other. Instead what mattered to China in an international context was staying a step ahead of the powerful militarized tribal confederations and states along its northern border. Its merchants' participation in foreign trade was not seen as a matter of state competition, and it was probably not until the sixteenth century, when the modern world economy began to take shape, that large numbers of Chinese traders settled abroad, but they were settling in already well-populated states and were not colonists. It is important to trace China's participation in the larger world, whether we think there was a world economic system operating on the Eurasian landmass or not. The study of world history must take into account the economic and cultural center of East Asia because it affected much of the rest of the world directly or indirectly. But it was

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16 Pomeranz, Kenneth. The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy.
not until the nineteenth century that the Chinese political elite reached a consensus that China had to compete with the West (and Japan).

The various states in China’s past were always concerned with their international standing. From early on it granted that there were winners and losers in history. Just as there is a recent tradition of historiography in the West that seeks to explain why the West gained world supremacy, there was a tradition in the Chinese past of explaining why China was (or how it could be) superior to the tribal peoples on its borders, what in the West were called the “barbarians.” In the eighth century the historian Du You looked out from eastern end of the Eurasian landmass, that part of the world that he knew the most about, and asked why it was that of all the peoples in the world China alone had sages, why its civilization was superior to those of the surrounding peoples. (His answer was geographical: the north China plain was graced by a temperate climate, it was neither too cold nor too hot, neither too dry not too wet, and thus it was natural that sages should have appeared in there to create a superior civilization.)

What is new is that during the last two centuries the context in which the self-assessment of success changed, and once it became global China could no longer measure itself against its immediate neighbors. Nor could it continue to measure itself against its own idealized antiquity, which for centuries had served as model of state perfection. The point of reference for China became the modern West and Japan. It was in this context that the sense of having “lost” a race gained appeal in China and made Chinese history the record of a moribund “feudal society.” This changed the status of everything that was associated with the past. One result was that an ideology such as Neo-Confucianism, was no longer seen as a philosophy aimed at transforming individuals and society and instead was labeled as the “the state philosophy of the later period of feudal society.”

Reexamining Some Ideas about the Essential Character of Chinese History

One consequence of judging Chinese history from the perspective of the modern West has been the invention of terms to refer to that other China that existed before westernization. A variety of terms have come into currency: Imperial, Confucian, Feudal, Pre-modern, and Traditional China. Each of them implies that before it began to compete with the West China was a single entity that lasted many centuries or that it was an enduring social-political-cultural system. Voices from both the West and China have insisted that progress required breaking free of tradition, although there has never been certainty about what progress meant: property rights, capitalism, heavy industry, bureaucratic rationality, science and technology, socialism, individualism, Christianity, the rule of law, democracy, capitalism, or human rights?

It seems to me that the idea of a “traditional” China as a coherent and stable civilization, has been created in very recent times to serve two related purposes: to define the Chinese past as something fundamentally different from and generally irrelevant to the

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19 Du You 杜佑, Tong dian 通典 (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1988) 185.4978-9.
modernizing Chinese present and to create an identity for Chinese history in the context of world history. Very few historians of Mediterranean civilization assert that “the West” is now or was ever a coherent, unified system, but some historians and commentators in China and the West have continued to assume that there was such a thing as “traditional” China. This has led to an extensive literature that has tried to identify the structure and values that supported the traditional system. Too often the effort to define the essential, enduring characteristics of China’s past begin with the assumption that there was a traditional Chinese system and proceed to choose illustrations that confirm the assumption. As a result our attention is shifted from the historical problem of what is changing and why is it changing to the sociological problem of trying to make all the parts fit together in a coherent whole.

Below I want to take up five ways in which the essential nature of traditional China has been described. My strategy is to treat each of these commonplaces as a one-sided answer to a particular question and to show that the opposite answer could be offered as well. But my point is not to offer a more attractive essential China, but to recognize that behind the answers lie questions of fundamental importance to thinking about Chinese history.

1. Did Chinese culture have a single unique origin? It is still common to argue that Chinese culture began in the Neolithic period, in the loess plateau at the bend of the Yellow River. That it began independently of outside influence, and, developing in a linear fashion through successive cultural stages, ultimately took the form of an empire that included all within it in a shared culture. The tree grew as the Neolithic twig was bent. The resulting imperial system claimed the right of universal kingship, relied on bureaucratic organization and hierarchy, controlled land and labor, and provided cultural models. The system lasted even as dynasties came and went. Support for this view was found in ancient texts, and at first archaeological finds were interpreted accordingly. But some archeologists have been arguing for a different account of origins, one in which there were multiple cultures that over time interacted with each other. In this view civilization in China from the start accommodated significant regional diversity in social and economic practice,

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In fact the size of the empire varied, and for long periods there were competing states some of whose rulers did not trace their origins to the Chinese past. Periods of political unity did not make regional differences disappear; there were regional economic cycles and regional systems. Thus rather than assuming that China in the past was in essence either a single cultural entity or a diverse area of regional cultures, we need to ask when the political system succeeded in accommodating regional differences and creating a shared political culture and what happened when it did not.

2. Was China isolated from the outside world and resistant to outside influence? In English it is common to say that the term “China” meant “Middle Kingdom” in the eyes of the Chinese. That China equated “all under heaven” with its empire and thus that it could only accept relations peoples and states beyond the borders of its administration if they joined in the fiction of a universal empire and presented themselves as tributaries who acknowledged the universal kingship of the emperor. Under these circumstances, it is said, China saw no reason to accept influence from outside, for to do so was to acknowledge that there was in fact a larger world. But consider an opposite argument. It is true that there was very little direct contact between the eastern and western ends of the Eurasian landmass before the sixteenth century, except during the empire of the Mongols of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But China received much from Indian civilization, it had extensive contacts with the Arab world, it traded extensively with East and Southeast Asia, and from the late sixteenth century on benefited greatly from the flow of silver and new crops from the Americas. More to the point: for long periods China was partially or fully occupied by peoples who at first saw themselves as different from China. Chinese foreign relations were pragmatic and realistic, but rarely isolationist. Rather than asserting that traditional China was isolated or open, we need to ask how relation between China and the states and peoples beyond its borders changed over time in both theory and practice.

3. Was the Chinese political system autocratic? It has often been asserted that the system in principle vested all power in the ruler. That he claimed the right of ownership of all land and labor; that he was the source of law and thus above the law; that his court was the source of cultural and ethical models; that the ruler was free to behave as an autocrat for there were no institutional checks short of usurpation or rebellion on his behavior, and Chinese rulers became increasingly autocratic and despotic over time. Against this we could cite the history of

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limits officials were able to place on imperial authority and the tendency of rulers to become managers and figureheads as government became less aristocratic and more bureaucratic. If there was a long-term trend beginning in the late tenth century for rulers to become increasingly autocratic there was a seemingly opposite trend: the size of the state apparatus declined relative to the population, the state gave up attempts to control land and labor, it reduced its services to the population, and the private commercial economy grew. The historical challenge is to determine how and why the relationship between the ruler and the bureaucracy and between the government apparatus and society changed over time and how conceptualizations of these relationships changed.

4. Was there an orthodoxy? It is often assumed that China was “Confucian” and that the educational system was based on the mastery of the Confucian Classics with state-approved commentaries, texts that represented the founding of civilization as an ideal age. The civil service examination system (which lasted until 1905) established a stultifying orthodoxy, it is said, which thwarted creativity and blocked the development of science. Once again there are counter-arguments: for several centuries the most prestigious examinations primarily tested poetic composition, the interpretation of the Classics changed fundamentally several times during the course of history, examination questions and answers did not conform in practice to the official commentaries, and what it meant to be educated went beyond the Classics to include history, belles-lettres, and schools of philosophy. The state supported the importation, translation, and eventually printing of Buddhist texts from India and Central Asia and patronized Daoist texts (sometimes as part of the examination system). The question we need to ask is when, how, and why elite education was unified – what did they learn and what values did learning impart? – and how this changed over time.

5. Was there such a thing as an individual? It is often said that in China there was no idea of the self as an autonomous and integrated entity. Rather, the self was located in a shifting web of social relationships so that the individual was merely the aggregation of social roles the person had learned. Relationships were conceived of as inherently hierarchical, making the person dependent on superiors for any sense of accomplishment and self worth. Thus aside from withdrawal from participation in public life, ritualized acts of protest, and outright rebellion individuals could not challenge the system in any fundamental sense. Neither a public sphere nor a civil society could develop in China. Intellectual and literary culture was oriented toward the court and dependent on it for patronage. The Chinese system prevented the development of a subjective will, and thus

31 Timothy Brook and Michael B. Frolic, eds., Civil Society in China (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharp, 1997).
China did not develop modern science and industry. It could not conceive of human rights. Some would turn this on its head and argue that the Chinese view of self locates the person in ongoing process, that order is conceived of as harmonious equilibrium, and that there is no need for a concept of truth or of a transcendent authority. However, it is possible to argue against both positions and point out that there was a wide range of alternatives to authoritarianism in China, that intellectual traditions had a place for individual worth and rights, and that many thinkers stressed that individual worth should not be dependent on social authority. We need to ask how relationship of the self to the social world was conceived, how the inner life was articulated, how desires and emotions were understood, and how this changed over time. The spread of Buddhism in China suggests there was not one unified view.

The conclusion I think we should draw is that on these five rather large issues no single characterization of Chinese civilization can be historically correct. Instead of trying to define a pre-modern, traditional, Confucian or feudal Chinese system we will learn much more by asking how this China changed over time. But perhaps the reason why we have gotten caught up in trying to define the essential nature of Chinese civilization has to do with our need to define “China” in the first place.

The problem of China as a national history

The preceding discussion has questioned the value of measuring China’s past in terms of the modern West and of trying to define the essential nature of that past. But in both cases we assumed that it is useful to speak of “China” as something had an historical existence. But is “China” adequate as an historical subject? There were many different states and empires that held territory within and beyond the boundaries of today’s People’s Republic of China; there was not a continuous state based on a single foundation. Perhaps then when we speak of “China” as having an historical existence we are actually referring to a single continuous civilization which developed over time. Yet it is difficult to find propositions about the essential character of that civilization that are meaningful, distinctive, and valid over the course of the last two or three thousand years, and the kinds of questions we can ask instead of putting forward propositions about Chinese civilization are not at all unique to Chinese history.

An alternative would be to say that what did exist was the idea that there was continuous civilization, whether the civilization itself was in fact continuous or not. With considerable justice we might argue that from early times governments, writers, and scholars have been engaged in retrospectively creating, transmitting, and transforming the idea of a continuous civilization for which they claimed to speak.

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33 Such is the view of the influential thinker Li Zehou. Li also holds that Confucian voluntarism supported the idea of a strong ruler. See Woei Lien Chong, "Mankind and Human Nature in Chinese Thought," China Information 11.2-3 (1996): 138-75. However, the preoccupation with external things and total surrender to state sanctioned authority” has also been used to explain the rise of extreme subjectivism in the Ming period; see, for example, Paul Jiang, The Search for Mind: Ch’en Pai-sha, Philosopher-Poet (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1980), pp. xii-iii, preface by Richard Lynn.


Or, as one scholar has elegantly put it, China is an “artwork whose medium is history.”

That is to say that the idea of a China was just that, an idea, and that the historical narrative of China was an effort to create and sustain the proposition that there was such a thing. Since those definitions varied considerably this might lead to a very interesting inquiry into the purposes such definitions were meant to advance.

The challenge is to keep clear the difference between, on one hand, attempts to define a shared national culture or a national character (whether to condemn it or to praise it) and persuade other people to accept that definition, and, on the other hand, the historical world in which these attempts were made. To define something as constant and unchanging over a long period of time requires collapsing change and variation; from among all the ways people act and all their traditions supposedly representative examples are plucked out of context and said to represent the whole. The fact that some people in some places at some times want to depict a society, or culture, or national character as an enduring system with an unchanging nature is itself a very interesting historical phenomenon.

We can see people who argue for such ideas (and those who argue against them) as part of the social world of their time and see them as offering interpretations that are also judgments about how people should or should not think and act. Claims about national culture and identity are by their nature ideological, they are vehicles for arguments about what people should value.

One alternative to trying to define a “China” is to take the perspective of a critic who explores how others have defined “China” rather than offering an alternative. I think we can do more than that, however, by adopting a more complicated picture of continental East Asia during a certain period and asking what changes were taking place at a certain time and place.

How did people during the middle period (8th-15th c.) in that area that is retrospectively identified as “China” understand where they were? There was no country called “China.” The term China comes from the Sanskrit cīna (usually thought to be a rendering of Qin, the unified empire of 221-206 B.C.). Instead there were a series of different states, sometimes more than one, with different ruling dynasties and rituals, with different boundaries and cultural histories. “Middle kingdom” is a modern Western mistranslation of the words zhong guo, which originally meant the several states (guo) located in the north in the middle (zhong) of the surrounding tribal peoples. It was not until around the beginning of the twentieth century that leading intellectuals such as Liang Qichao, having seen that Western nation states referred to their nations by names such as France and England, argued that their own country needed a name as well and successfully argued that zhongguo ought to be adopted by themselves as the equivalent of the Western term “China.” In other words the use of China and Chinese began as a Western usage and was then adopted by the people the West called “Chinese” to refer to their own country (Zhongguo) and its population (Zhongguo ren). Prior to this, however, the term zhongguo was used to refer to all those states through history that took the area of the “central states” of antiquity as their historical core. However, in the twelfth century and thirteenth centuries, all or part of that old core area was fought over by the Song state, which

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moved its capital to the south in 1127, the Liao state (907-1125) of the Khitans, the Jin (1115-1234) state of the Jurchens, the Xia (1032-1227) of the Tanguts, and the empire of the Mongols (the eastern part was named Yuan from 1260 to 1368). Song government documents almost never referred to the Song population as *zhongguo ren* (the term we translate today as “Chinese”) but when they did they meant the people who lived in the central states area versus those outside of it. Its neighbors took a similar position, as when a Liao politician argued: “Now that we have gained [territory in] the central states, we ought to use men of the central states to govern it, we should not only use people of our state.”

The common way people referred to others was to use the name of the state to which they belonged: thus Liao and Jin documents refer to “people of Song” (*Song ren*), and Song documents speak of people of Liao and Jin. The point at which we see what appear to be ethnic terms is when different cultural groups lived together under a single political authority. Thus a few Song documents distinguish between peoples who mixed at the border by referring to their people as *Han ren*, “Han people” (Han being the empire of 202 B.C.-A.D.220), and the tribal peoples as *fan*. In Liao, Jin, and Yuan sources there are frequent references to culture groups in the domestic population, as when a Jin edict orders that “When officials draft announcements, the Jurchens, Khitans, and Han people are each to use their own writing systems.” This fits the Jin, Liao, and Yuan practice of using different institutions and special quotas for the various culture groups in governing their states, something that was not really an issue for the Song except in some border areas.

But even these ethnic terms and their locations turn out to be problematic. The provinces south of the Huai River were held by the Song state after the court retreated from the north in 1127 until it was conquered by the Mongols in 1279, after they had conquered the Jin and Xia in the 1227 and 1234. But the Yuan did not refer to the people in former Song territory as “Han people,” they called them “southerners” (*nauren*) and used the term *Han ren* for people in the north (apparently including the Jurchens and Khitans). The founder of Ming (1368-1644) was from the south; after defeating his southern rivals he pushed the Mongols out of the north China plain and the northwest. Ming, which went on to fight wars against the Mongols, Vietnamese, the Japanese in Korea and traded with East and Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, Africa, Europe, and the New World became part of Qing in 1644, the name the Manchus gave their empire. Its territory continued to expand for another century, pushing into the Muslim areas of Central Asia and gaining control over Tibet. We can certainly identify regions (the northern plain, the northwest and the corridor to central Asia, the upper, middle, and lower Yangzi River drainage basins, the southeastern coast, the far south) and ask who controlled them. Politically we might better speak of successive dynasties and competing states, rather than anachronistically trying to say where China was or who the Chinese were. At times scholars in these states tried to make sense out of the confusion by proposing that there was a single line of succession of “legitimate” dynasties, irrespective of the territory held and the identity of the population, but they did not agree on what that line should be. Some thought the entire

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30 *Liao shi* p. 1252. For one of the three or so uses of *zhongguo ren* in the Song dynastic history see *Song shi* pp. 11528, 11734, 11330. It is equally rare in the Jin and Yuan dynastic histories.

39 *Jin shi* p. 73.

40 Note that the Russian term for China is *kitai*, which apparently comes from the Mongolian term for the Khitans.


42 Davis, Richard L. “Historiography as Politics in Yang
effort was pointless. The great historian Sima Guang (1019-1086) argued that there was no such thing as a single line of legitimate succession in practice.42

These successive and competing states occupied parts of or all of the same physical space; the geography has a history that includes different peoples and sociopolitical organizations. They had much in common because to gain advantage they learned from each other. Thus we can speak of a complex of political, social, cultural, and economic practices that were employed to varying degrees in this geographic space, despite changes in government and despite changes in the languages of the rulers. Many have seen this as evidence that “barbarians” were becoming sinified and assume that there was a clearly defined “Chinese culture” that belonged to Song, for example, which those who invaded Song territory adopted. Yet this is also problematic, for Liao and Song both saw themselves as successors to Tang. The evolving writing system and the accumulation of texts since ca. 1200 B.C. would seem offer some continuity, but it is in fact an example of why something like “Chinese culture” is difficult to pin down. Writing changed over time, and different styles of writing appeared. It only made sense to speak of “Chinese” literature when there were other competing “national” literatures; before that it was simply “literature” even if it was written in recognizably and intentionally different scripts. Song writers assumed that the cultural tradition they inherited extended back to antiquity but typically periodized past writings in terms of the dynasty during which they were written. Moreover, the literature and writing system came to be shared by people in the states in what we somewhat anachronistically call Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. What is interesting is that although Liao, Xia, Jin, and Yuan also learned to use the writing system of Tang and Song they also developed writing systems of their own, some of which were alphabets or syllabaries inspired by Central Asian writing systems and others modeled on East Asian characters, into which they translated many classical, historical, and literary texts from Song, Tang and before. It is this process of sharing and differentiating that should hold our interest, rather than trying to find a presumptive owner of cultural productions on the basis of modern nationalisms. This helps explain why Neo-Confucianism, although developed by scholars who saw themselves as recovering the ideas of the ancient sages of the central states, did not treat their ideas as being the exclusive cultural legacy of a nation or people. They were valid on their own merits and, in their view, were true for all peoples in all places at all times. Indeed, their texts and ideas spread to the rest of East Asia and today are taught in the West as well.

If we do not treat the dynasties, empires, and states that rose and fell from the eighth century to the seventeenth as a single civilizational entity that endured over many centuries without undergoing fundamental change, how should we see them? It seems to me that the simplest approach is to them all as attempts in the past to tie together divergent interests, fluctuating social practices and economic processes, and received political institutions and cultural traditions so as to form an enduring order under the particular circumstances of the time. The creation of states and the effort to stabilize relations between states were the highest levels at which the effort to create a viable order proceeded, people in daily life had to do the same thing for themselves. If we take this view then the context for politics is not only the history of politics, it must include the historical circumstances that political actors had to deal with. And the historical significance of politics lies not in the size and power of the states that resulted from these efforts but in the new configuration of

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institutions, interests, practices, and traditions that resulted from the attempts of political actors to forge a new order. States and empires respond to circumstances and create new circumstances.

I think we can take the same view of ideology. That is, that intellectual actors formulate ideologies in an effort to create coherent sets of ideas and practices that are intended to guide social and political actors. Ideologies are historically significant to the extent that people are persuaded to follow them. Just as successful political actors must find a way to deal with the larger historical changes taking place around them, so too must ideologues. We easily accept that this is true of political actors, but students of Neo-Confucianism generally focused on the philosophical issues Neo-Confucian thinkers addressed. If we do want to reopen the question of how Neo-Confucianism as new ideological structure was part of history, it seems to me that the first order of business is to ask what the larger changes were that any ideology would have needed to address. In short, we need a working definition of the historical context. To define that context requires that we identify what had changed, for it is the fact that the history had changed that opened the way for the formation of new ideological structures, and defined the circumstances to which a successful ideology had to respond.

Part 2 – Some Evidence for Fundamental Change: 750 and 1050 Compared

The eleventh century was a great period of ideological debate. The actors are well known: Fan Zhongyan, Ouyang Xiu, Sima Guang, Wang Anshi, Su Xun and Su Shi, Zhang Zai, the Cheng brothers and many others. Why should so many divergent points of view – and so many competing attempts to formulate an ideology for state and society – have appeared at this moment within two generations of each other? I would suggest it was because by this time it had become clear that the world was so different from what had gone before that even if intellectuals were not certain what they should do they at least knew that earlier ideas from the Han and Tang about how things ought work were no longer applicable.

To see how different the world had become I want to speculate as to how around the year 1050 a member of the political elite, a shi, might have identified the differences between his world and that of Tang at its height, in about 750.

To begin with he would have thought that the Song dynasty, or more correctly “The Great State of Song,” founded a century earlier was a success. It had been founded in 960 at Kaifeng in the north China plain by a general and his brother who had usurped the throne from the infant ruler of Zhou. At first Song was the sixth in a string of short-lived states that had held the northern plain from 907 to 960. The Song founders protected themselves from internal usurpation and by 978 they had succeeded in subduing the independent states that had been established in the south as the Tang empire (618-907) had crumbled. With the end of domestic challenges to a unified empire the two founders, Emperors Taizu and Taizong, had turned their attention to state building: defining the border, controlling the independent military governors, recruiting civil administrators, regularizing tax collection and military provisioning, and reestablishing the legal system.

By 1050 the institutional success of Song was clear. Literati of this generation no longer compared themselves against what they now called the “Five dynasties,” instead they looked to the two great empires of the past, Tang (618-907) and Han (202 BC-AD 220), the only two times in history that a centralized bureaucratic state had governed so much territory in north and south for such an extended period. Han was distant, Tang was not. A literatus could read its legal code and study its institutional history. He could read the works of its great classicists, literary
intellectuals, historians, and learned clerics. And in 1057 Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi finished rewriting the official history of the Tang dynasty in a new literary style. This work, now known as the New Tang History, was a grand work, in 225 chapters, including a chronology of political events and treatises on all the major areas of state activity: court rituals, the tax system, the military, the calendar, the bibliography of the imperial library, and so on. It had charts showing the chief councilors at court and the governors of the provinces. And it had over 150 chapters of biographies for all sorts of people: the men and women of the imperial clan and their in-laws; the military and civil officials who had shared in power; the less powerful, who had won fame for their political integrity, their loyalty, their personal morality, the excellence of their administration, their mendacity and cruelty; the Confucian scholars -- men who had prepared the official commentaries on the Classics, compiled great collections of documents, edited histories, or defined rituals and ceremonies; poets and essayists; exemplary women; eunuchs; and finally the leaders of the many foreign peoples with which Tang had relations, peaceful and hostile.

But when he looked at the Tang past more closely, it was less grand than its three hundred year existence suggested. The 870s and 880s had seen devastating rebellions, the sacking of the capital, and the pillaging of whole regions. Military governors had taken away Tang’s control over the provinces, holding taxes back from the center and appointing their own successors. He would have known of An Lushan’s rebellion of 755, when An Lushan swept down from his garrison on the northeastern border and took the capital at Chang’an in the northwest, putting the emperor to flight. This had occurred when Tang was apparently at the very height of its power and Tang never fully recovered from it. He might have concluded that from the mid 750s the Tang was in decline, or he might have emphasized the Tang court’s relative success in restoring central authority. We, with hindsight, see the rebellion as marking the moment when the unified hierarchy of power, wealth, culture, and status that Tang had tried to maintain began to give way, allowing a series of fundamental changes in the order of things to unfold. A literatus with intellectual ambitions would have known that some of the greatest writers and thinkers, Du Fu and Han Yu for example, whose works were part of his intellectual universe, had lived through the rebellion or were born soon after it and that they had begun to ask not how to restore the pre-rebellion past but what the world ought to become. Thus An Lushan’s rebellion also marked an intellectual divide, between the glories of empire and the search for something else.

Let us suppose that our literatus had compared his times, the 1050s, against Tang at the height of its power in about 750, on the eve of the great rebellion. What had changed?

Foreign Relations

He would have known that that Song no longer was sending great armies west to maintain its hegemony along the Silk Road and that it had little prospect of suborning or coercing the many tribes, confederations, and states to the north and west. This was not because Song was weak but because the tribal peoples had learned how to become strong. Song had large armed forces (but was weak in cavalry), it had superior technology (including the use of gunpowder in bombs and rockets), and it could afford to keep strings of forts provisioned. But in the north the Khitans had learned from Tang how to fashion a state, something that looked to Song like an empire with an emperor and to Inner Asian peoples appeared to be a traditional khanate. Their Liao dynasty, proclaimed in 907, had occupied the northeast between Song and the state of Koryô (918-1392) on the Korean peninsula. And Liao had defeated Song armies that had tried to take the sixteen former Tang prefectures around modern Beijing. A treaty
in 1004 had ended hostilities, after the Liao armies had advanced to the Song capital, but initially at a cost to Song of an annual indemnity to Liao of 200,000 bolts of silk and 100,000 ounces of silver. In the northwest, along the upper loop of the Yellow River and continuing westwards, the Tanguts were learning as well. Once a tribal people who accepted Song and Liao hegemony, their king and khan proclaimed them a dynastic state with the name Great Xia (known usually as Xi Xia) in 1038, a year after they had promulgated their own unique writing system. Xia expanded further northwest along the Silk Road and successfully defended itself against Song attacks; in 1044 Song agreed on an annual payment of about half of what it was giving Liao. In the far south there had also been a major change, the area of Vietnam had become independent in 939 and was now known as Dai Viet. The southwest (modern Yunnan) remained an independent kingdom, although what had been Nanzhao in Tang times was now Dali.

What did our literatus think about all this? He might have agreed with those statesmen who pointed out that older ideas about barbarian peoples coming to pay tribute to the civilized empire did not describe the reality of present. He might have sided with those who saw a treaty and subsidy as a national humiliation and called for a more aggressive foreign policy, or with those who believed that long-term peace was possible, or with those argued for constant vigilance against incursions but against Song aggression abroad. He would have known that in the late 1030s, when the Tanguts had created their state of Xia, some younger literati officials had volunteered to go to the front to help defend Song. How onerous the subsidies to the foreign states were probably depends upon the frame of reference. As an outlay of the Song government they were substantial, but overall they must have boosted the regional economy and increased the sale of Song goods at the border markets and tax revenues.

We know that the cycle of state building among the northern peoples would continue for centuries to come. The “central states” territory was richer than ever before, but its neighbors to the north were better organized than ever – so well organized in fact that tribes further out began to learn from them. In 1115 the Jurchen tribes, hither subordinate to Liao, proclaimed their Jin dynasty (1115-1234) and attacked the Liao. Song, seeing an opportunity to take the sixteen prefectures around Beijing that it had not been able to recover in the early years of the dynasty, turned on the Liao as well. But in the end the victorious Jin went after Song. The emperor and his father the retired emperor were both captured and taken north. The Song court was reconstituted in the south at Hangzhou and the dynastic line reestablished, but the northern plain was taken by Jin. Jin held it until the Mongols finished conquering Jin in 1234, before moving on to conquer Song in the 1270s. The Mongols held all of China, and much of the rest of Eurasia, for the next century and remained a hostile presence on the border after that. The Jurchens rose again in the early seventeenth century, renamed themselves Manchus, and in the 1680s gained full and direct control over all of territory that had supported the previous Ming dynasty. Although Ming territory was the richest prize, the Manchus continued to expand for another century, doubling their territorial holdings. Much of their empire is claimed by the Peoples’ Republic of China today. In other words, for 500 of the last 1000 years dynastic families from outside the central states territory and the south have governed either all of China or most of the north China plain.
Even if this might have been unimaginable to eleventh century literati they would have known that Song’s international relations in the 1050s were substantially different from Tang’s in the 750s.

The challenge for ideology was how to come to terms with this international reality. In the Northern Song the court under the New Policies ultimately decided not to accept this state of affairs and tried to reinstate an aggressive foreign policy on the borders, with the disastrous consequence of the loss of the north. For those who opposed this policy the question was what ideological stance to take. Would it be a nativist, defensive attitude based on the supposition, for example, that only Song people could be moral? Or would they argue that morality crossed cultural borders and was universal? After the loss of the north Neo-Confucians ultimately chose the latter course, after an initial period of resisting the idea of peace. Although the Neo-Confucians defined particular texts (such as the Four Books) and particular ideas (such as doctrine that all humans were endowed with the same good nature), and although they defended the interests of the states which they served, they proclaimed that morality could be shared by all and that Jurchens and Mongols also could and should cultivate themselves.

**North and south**

When literati turned their attention to the south they could see another kind of difference, not in control over territory but in the population of territory. The most important demographic change in the previous thousand years had been the rise of the south. In 752 slightly under half of all registered households lived in the south and the Sichuan basin (4.07 million) with the remainder in the north China plain (the broad plain extending north of the Huai River to the northern and western mountains), the northwest (the river valleys to the west and northeast of the bend of the Yellow River where the Tang capital was located), and outlying regions (4.86 million). By 1085 the registered households in the north had increased by 16% (to 5.66 million). But the registered population of the south and Sichuan had more than doubled (to 10.94 million registered households), for a total population approaching 100 million individuals.

This shift in the demographic center had economic, political, and cultural consequences. The idea of a “south” and north-south divide already had a long history. But by 1050 the “south” was no longer a single area centered on the lower Yangzi River as it had been when China was divided between “northern” and “southern” dynasties prior to Tang. The change became entirely evident between the Tang and Song periods when there were five successive dynasties in the north but “ten kingdoms” in the south, which effectively divided the south into five simultaneously viable polities. In other words, the “south” had grown from one area in the southeast to five self-sustaining regions: Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong along the coast and Jiangxi and Hunan inland. This institutional, economic, and demographic articulation of the south as a multi-centered terrain was a fundamental contrast to the north where, outside of the northwestern river valleys, the bulk of the population lived on a single continuous plain. In Song three of these southern regions were particularly important, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, and Fujian.

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the fifteenth century the Guangdong region gained in significance and in the seventeenth century middle Yangzi became a new center of growth. The geography of the river and mountain systems of the south versus the broad plain of the north ensured that the south would continue to have multiple centers once its population grew, and even today the language map of China reflects this.

What were the consequences of the development of the south? In the first place it meant that a greater share of the wealth was in the south and thus that an increasing proportion of families with wealth would be found in the south. By the 1070s officials from the south came to dominate policy making offices and continued to do so thereafter. Literati knew this and there were concerns about how to ensure that different regions would be represented in the bureaucracy, something that they tried to achieve by setting regional quotas for the civil service examinations. Tension between northern and southern officials (and among southern officials from different regions) would become one axis for the forming of factions. Already by the 1050s southerners were coming to dominate the ranks of literary men, and within a century southerners would dominate intellectual culture; they would continue to do so. Ming maintained two capitals, one at Nanjing and the other at Beijing; thus recognizing both northern defense and southern literati.

Northerners and southerners had different regional priorities. For the north it had to be national defense. The northern border was a military zone, a drain on the manpower and economic surplus of the northern plain and the northwest. That border was far away for southerners. Their most important foreign border was the coast, and their great coastal cities made money from trading networks that extended overseas. They had exploitable internal frontiers as well, as villagers extended settlements up the river valleys. For the south, in other words, economic development was more important than the defense of the northern frontier. From this perspective it is not surprising that the most important southern chief councilor (Wang Anshi 1021-1086) adopted policies that promoted economic development whereas his foremost opponent, a northern chief councilor (Sima Guang 1019-1086), insisted that the size of economy was determined by the size of the population. The southern conviction that the size of the economy could grow drew support from improvements in technology (which also benefited the north), improvements in crops such as the introduction of new strains of rice that allowed for double cropping in the south, and greater investment in water conservancy. During Tang water conservancy projects were evenly split between north and south; during Northern Song 75% of all projects were in the south and the total number of projects doubled; during the Southern Song it doubled once again.

Just as important a difference was the cost of transportation. The Tang court was tied to the empire by a network of roads radiating out from Chang'an, the capital in the northwest, and the Grand Canal which linked

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the Yellow River to the southeast. The all-important provisioning of the borders was necessarily by road. But in the mountainous south, where land transport would have been even more expensive, the river systems provided an alternative. The north did have rivers and canals and the south did have roads, what matters are the proportions. And it matters because downstream transportation by water cost about one fifth of what land transport cost. If we think of river systems as economic networks in which larger downstream settlements served as markets for smaller upstream settlements we can see that prices would be lower in the south and profits greater (allowing the government in the late fourteenth century to tax some southern areas at twice the normal rate). The south carried less of the burden of national defense and made more money through commerce; the south was richer. This has a further implication. In the north the government needed to control as much of the land in order to secure provisions and labor for the military; in the south the general well-being was best served by facilitating commerce. One might say that this meant that the north tended toward a tributary mode of production, where the production and circulation of goods was guided by state requisitioning, and the south toward a petty-capitalist mode of production, where legions of small traders kept the commercial economy thriving.52

One part of the south in particular, the lower Yangzi River drainage basin, was on its way to becoming the economic heartland of China. Its cities were growing; better water conservancy techniques allowed the population to settle in the wet lowlands; and the tax quotas were relatively lower. The relative importance of the south would receive a further boost seventy years later when the north China plain was held in succession by Jurchens, local warlords, and Mongols and the Song capital was moved to Hangzhou.53 The north suffered greatly during these conquests and subsequent occupations, so much so that the registered population of Ming had declined by about 25% by 1391, with great losses in the north, northwest, and Sichuan.

The ideological significance of the rise of the south emerged on three fronts. Two of these – changes in the economy and the national elite – will be discussed later. But one should be discussed here. The size of the administrative apparatus had not kept pace with the growth in population. For example, Song had about as many counties as Tang (about 1200) to tax and govern but about twice the population. In practical terms this meant that government could not maintain the degree of control over local society that it had in Tang in 750. In seeking an ideology that would further the well-being of society one possibility was to call for increasing the size of government so that it could play a constructive role in society, as happened under the New Policies regimes of the late Northern Song. Another possibility was to accept a diminished role for government, which led some to ask what could be done outside of the bureaucratic apparatus to promote the common good. Neo-Confucianism from the start rejected the expansion of government activity and centralization called for by the New Policies. Instead they spoke of local control, moral leadership, and local voluntary institutions that would organize local literati elites, such as the private academy (shuyuan) and the

52 I take these terms from Gates, Hill. China’s Motor: A Thousand Years of Petty Capitalism. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), however she does not differentiate between them in regional terms.
community compact, and allow them to do good for the community, such as the charitable granary. It should be noted that Neo-Confucianism was more successful in gaining followers in the south than in the north, even after north and south were reunified in the late thirteenth century.

**Commerce and Urbanization**

In 750 urban and commercial centers were also administrative centers and the government supervised and limited commercial activity. In 1050 urbanization and commercialization were developing independently of the state administrative system. The change was illustrated by the difference between the first Song capital of Kaifeng and the Tang capital of Chang’an. Chang’an was a great square imperial city, built to the architect’s plan, strategically located in a river valley within mountain passes on the corridor that connected Central Asia to the northern plain. Its defense depended on garrisons of conscripts and its provisioning depended largely on tax revenues from outside. Chang’an was the city and the court was the epitome of civilization. It had the best everything. Exotic domestic products were delivered from the prefectures and its provisioning depended largely on tax revenues from outside. Chang’an was the city and the court was the epitome of civilization. It had the best everything. Exotic domestic products were delivered from the prefectures and its provisioning depended largely on tax revenues from outside. Chang’an was the city and the court was the epitome of civilization. It had the best everything. Exotic domestic products were delivered from the prefectures and its provisioning depended largely on tax revenues from outside.

In contrast the Song capital of Kaifeng was a commercial city, not a planned city (although Song built a massive square wall around it to make it look properly imperial), located near the junction of the Yellow River and a canal from the south. Its streets were filled with shops. By 1050 the government taxed commerce rather than trying to control it. Certainly it was the largest and richest city in its day, with an urban and suburban population of about a million, but it was not the only major city and it was not the only cultured city. Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, all in the south, attracted merchants and officials as well. In Tang it is hard to find a city or town of importance that was not a prefectural or county administrative seat, but by 1050 there is clear evidence that market towns in north and south outside of administrative seats were becoming economically important and new commercial networks connected villages, to market towns, to small cities, to larger cities. From the Song on the economic hierarchy of cities and town would continue to develop, and the administrative system would try to adjust to it. (The appended map illustrates this for the southeast)

The tax system had changed as well. In 1050 the government’s revenues came from taxes that were assessed on the land rather than the person and service obligations were assessed according to the household’s total wealth. In other words the Song taxed property, in contrast to the Tang system which prior to the mid-eighth century taxed the person (in theory the government guaranteed each farmer a certain amount of land during his productive years). This change, instituted not long after An Lushan’s rebellion, recognized economic inequality and, we might argue, legitimized it. The redistribution of land was now left to the market. Literati differed in their view of this. Some thought the disparity between rich and poor was inevitable; others thought the government ought to try to narrow the gap.

The new land tax system was a way of getting more taxes from those areas where the government no longer had the power to redistribute land or where newly opened land was left unregistered. This made particular sense in the south where investments in rice paddy and irrigation networks were only possible if the government refrained from interfering in land tenure. The second part of government revenue came from monopoly sales of salt, liquor, and tea, also instituted in the late eighth century, which allowed the government to garner revenue from areas it did not fully control. The third part came from taxes on the transit and sale of commercial goods. In 1050 literati might have known that briefly in the 1040s, before changes in the monopoly system and new quotas for commercial taxes, almost half of central government revenues had come from the non-land tax sources (rather than 15-25%).

By the 1050s the state had learned not only how to tax the market but also how to support it by maintaining the money supply. This was crucial. In 740 the annual mint was about 275,000 “strings” of bronze cash (one string was nominally 1000 cash) but soon declined to less than a third of that, and deflation was the result. In 1050 the annual mint was about 1.5 million strings of cash. By the 1080s the annual mint was about 4.5 million strings. Some scholars bring into the calculation silver as a means of storing wealth and think that the equivalent of about 360,000 strings was entering the economy annually in about 750 and 21.6 million in 1080. In terms of value this would be the equivalent of 4.6 million bushels of rice in 750 and 21.6 million in 1080.

convertible bills of exchange began to be widely used in private commerce and already in 1020s the government was circulating paper currency in one area. Yet despite the growth in the mint, some areas suffered debilitating cash famines. A century later, in the 1160s the government began to issue well-backed paper money with great success. In the long term, silver would become more important than paper as a means of storing value, but in Song there was more coin and paper than silver. A money economy had appeared.

We can probably never be sure how much revenue all levels of government together were taking in, but in 1050 the central government recorded cash receipts of about 40 million strings, from commercial tax stations and monopoly sales of salt, liquor, and a few other commodities. How extensive was the commercial network? There is a list of commercial tax quotas from 1077 (suggesting that tax stations were only expected to meet their quota, rather than taxing all goods that passed through) which shows that 127 out of 284 prefectural capitals had quotas of over 10,000 strings annually. This provides us with a kind of ranking of urban centers and shows that a multi-level network of urban commercial centers was emerging. The breakdown is as follows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commercial Tax Quotas for Prefectural Seats in 1077</th>
<th>(in thousands)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annual Quota (in strings)</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South of the Huai River</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

59 Guo Zhengzhong, Liang Song chengxiang shangpin huobi jingji kaolue, p. 224-228.
What this table does not show, however, is that 33 county seats and market towns had quotas in excess of their prefectural seats and 22 county seats and market towns had quotas of more than 10,000 strings, an indication that economic networks and the administrative system were becoming distinct.60

It is much more difficult to say how many people actually lived in cities in 1050 since the records we have do not discriminate between urban and rural population (although the Song tax system treated rural and urban households differently). Fairly reliable figures for Southern Song registered population (1126-1279) show that some prefectures must have had fairly large urban centers. The capital of Hangzhou was not even the largest city in the south, although its population grew from about 100,000 to 190,000 households between about 1170 and 1270, or from 500,000 individuals to about 1 million (based on a calculation of 5 persons per household). But Wuchang (Ezhou in Song) in Hunan and Chengdu in Sichuan each had 100,000 households, Nanjing had 170,000, and Quanzhou, the Fujianese port, had 50,000. Prefectural totals give some sense of the kind of growth that was possible: for example, Suzhou had a population of almost 80,000 households in 740 and was smaller than that at the beginning of the eleventh century, but by 1080 in had reached 200,000 households, 330,000 by 1275 and 475,000 by 1369.61

Two final notes. First, on foreign trade and the money economy. Tang armies had kept the routes open to Central Asia into the mid eighth century; in Song this trade was soon controlled by Xia.62 The Central Asian trade grew further under the protection of the Mongols. Overseas trade increased dramatically between 750 and 1050. The invention of the mariner’s compass freed ships from the need to rely on coastal landmarks, although I do not know if it is possible to measure its effects for this period. But we do know that the eleventh century saw a stream of official trading missions and private trade. Ships from over 40 states and principalities arrived in Canton alone.63 Quanzhou in Fujian became the great entrepot port for trade with Southeast Asia. Some have argued that eventually the need for revenue destroyed this trade, but others argue that the institutional structure significantly reduced transaction costs and created an incentive structure that was conducive to maritime trade.64

Second, on the extent of the commercial revolution and the money economy from Tang to Song. Did it create a national market for non-luxury goods or were regions still largely separate economies? Was the growth of the economy driven by the market, as most think, or was what we are seeing in Northern Song in particular the result of fiscal policies aimed at maintaining the economic power of the state? Do we have to wait until the sixteenth century for the

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private market to drive the economy? It seems to me that much of the evidence for arguing that the economy was driven by the government’s fiscal policies dates from a fifty year period (1070-1120s) when central policy was simultaneously encouraging economic growth and increasing its revenues; in other words the data reflect the government’s larger role in the economy, it does not tell us about the growth of the private market. The expansion in the south increased agricultural output, but it was the availability of cheaper transport, sea trade profits, distance from the northern border, and limits on the collection of commercial taxes that ensured that the increased output resulted in greater per capita wealth.

The fact that the hierarchy of wealth was separating from the political hierarchy posed a challenge for ideology. One possibility, adopted by the New Policies, was to attack the amassing of private economic power and increase the state’s role in local society. At first glance this recalls the Tang attempt to make the hierarchy of wealth reflect the political hierarchy, but in contrast to Tang in 750 the New Policies encouraged economic growth. For the Neo-Confucians the question was not whether to accept the reality of growing private wealth but what morality would mean in a world where economic power could operate independently of political power. They defended the independence of private wealth but they also insisted that morality could not be equated with profit, just as they asserted that morality could not be equated with political power. At the same time they found numerous ways in which private wealth could be used to support their own agenda: by supporting publications, by building shrines and academies, by endowing charitable granaries, by investing in lineage building, and so on. The result was that the Neo-Confucian movement did not have to depend on state support to survive (although Neo-Confucians certainly wanted the court to recognize formally the correctness of their views and to support their projects). This meant that, like Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism was distinct from the political hierarchy, yet to a far greater degree than Buddhism it claimed ideological authority over political life. Neo-Confucianism thus had to compete, for public support, for financial resources, and for state recognition.

Social change

By 1050 the use of the term shi to refer that stratum of society that aspired to play leading role in political and cultural life was already 1500 years old. But what it meant to be a shi had changed over time. In the eleventh century it meant government service in the first place, usually beginning with an appointment to a county or prefectural office and with the sponsorship of higher officials or a number of years of service promoting into the senior administrative ranks. For men with relatives in higher government office the possibility existed of gaining official rank by “protection,” although the protection privilege could only be used for a few relatives. Those with relatives in lower offices and those trying to break into officialdom for the first time had to rely on the increasingly competitive civil service examinations. Some

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mid-eleventh century scholars knew that what it meant to be a *shi* in Tang was quite different. At its upper reaches the Tang government was dominated by what I would call a state aristocracy. These were families who had served at court for centuries, who married with other families of equal stature, and who were ranked on the court’s official clan list. They had once been the great lords of the countryside as well, but in Tang they traded in their local power for the court’s ranks and emoluments. If they were lucky they would make a career at court, and avoid provincial service among civil officials of less illustrious pedigree. In 1050 some literati had understood that Song had embarked on a course that would not necessarily turn out in the government’s favor: it had encouraged dramatic increases in the numbers of examination candidates without increasing the opportunities for government service. In short, it was creating a growing body of disaffected literati.

The much debated social transition in the nature of the elite from Tang to Song is a matter of utmost importance, for it bears on who we think the Neo-Confucians were. One very influential view holds that the Neo-Confucians were speaking to. One very influential view holds


in Tang an oligarchy of great clans dominated the government, but this “aristocracy” disappeared when Tang fell. It was succeeded by a new “ruling class” drawn from among the land-holding commoners. They were brought into government through a competitive examination system and proceeded to perpetuate themselves as a scholar-official elite known as the *shidafu*. However, the *shidafu* lacked the aristocratic pedigrees that in Tang had made high officials the emperor’s social equals and as a result Song officials were subordinated to the ruler, for they owed their position to him directly (the Song instituted a palace examination overseen by the emperor himself, something Tang did not have, and successful candidates were immediately given official rank and offered a post, again unlike Tang). The *shidafu* thus supported the centralization of bureaucratic power and the policies which tied the population more directly to the ruler and state. But when those policies proved detrimental to their own economic interests in land they were torn between their institutional loyalty to the state and their economic loyalty to their families. Ultimately, they tended to follow their economic interests. They became corrupt and self interested, and thus subverted the evolution of a government that would have truly served the common good; leaving China with a self-interested elite and an autocratic ruler. In this view the rise of Neo-Confucianism made no difference.  


This account, in which the “feudal” aristocracy of Tang was giving way to the “modern” bureaucracy of Song, has been challenged by Marxist historians, some of whom held that state control over land and labor in Tang in effect made the farmers slaves; officials, whatever their family background, controlled that population on behalf of the state which they constituted. When this system broke down, and it became possible to acquire large estates without holding office, the landlords became a feudal ruling class. It was in the interest of those who controlled the means of production (the landlords) to increase the central authority of the state because they needed it to defend their interests against their tenants, and they needed an ideology that justified this arrangement. In this view Neo-Confucianism supplied that ideology.

More recently a third view of the social transformation has emerged, one that better fits how Song literati thought about culture, family, and political service. To see who we are talking about we need only ask what social distinctions people in Tang and Song made and on what grounds they made them. Asked like this the first answer is straightforward. The primary social distinction was between those who called themselves the shi and everyone else. But the grounds for making this distinction were not constant over time. In Tang times the great clans with illustrious pedigrees were called shi zu or “shi clans.” The Tang elite assumed that the moral quality of a person and their cultural refinement had a great deal to do with their ancestry. Shi did not mean government officials, it referred to the “best” people from whom officials could be chosen (in fact Tang employed men from non-shi backgrounds as officials as well). Pedigree mattered, and so the court ranked the great clans and checked the genealogical

史學會，浙江省社會科學研究所.


claims made by office seekers. Given what they represented, the presence of great clans in government helped make a dynasty legitimate, but what made a clan great was its pedigree of ancestors with high government office extending into the distant past.

We cannot, in other words, separate the Tang great clans as social elite – which they were – from their focus on holding official rank, for ideally the hierarchy of political power and the hierarchy of social status were the same. Tang developed a system that allowed large numbers of people to have some kind of official status. If officials could not secure government posts for their sons and grandsons then they could place them in various “Guards” or register them as “Students;” others could go join the professional staff in a government office. Men in such status groups were “outside the stream” for regular promotion (*liu wai guan*) but they could qualify for promotion into the “Nine Ranks” at the apex of the bureaucratic stream, and thus become “officials within the stream” (*liu nei guan*). In the 730s there were about 18,000 regular officials (the “Nine Ranks”) but beyond this there were about 140,000 men in these other official categories “outside the stream.” In addition there were 300,000 minor office functionaries who lacked such status. In 749 the government listed 398 clans, each of which had several branches. Of the 140,000 men of status some 60,000 were listed as “students,” yet the Tang examination system aimed to garner talented twenty or thirty talented (usually aristocratic) men a year for those court offices that required knowledge of the Classics or literary talent. Passing the examination merely made one eligible to be considered for an appointment, it did not guarantee one.

The genius of the Tang system was that it sharply limited the number of men who could become officials (an intake of about 600 a year was enough to staff the Nine Ranks) while absorbing a very large number of their relatives into honorable official status groups, thus allowing the great clans to give up their local bases for life as bureaucrats. But the genius of Tang in making the clans dependent on the government was a tragedy for the great clans in the end. When Tang lost control over the provinces to military men and when rebels sacked its cities, it lost its ability to provide clansmen with stations and incomes, and out in the provinces pedigree mattered ever less. Great clan status mattered as long as someone was there to reward those maintained it, when the dynasty fell the great clans simply faded away.

What was different in 1050? There were 12,700 men holding civil (rather than military) rank in 1050. (We do not know how many actual posts there were in the civil administration but we do know that some posts, tax station manager for instance, were regarded as beneath civil officials and held by men with military rank). About half of the 12,700 would have entered the ranks by passing the regular civil service examination, another thirty percent might have gained rank by passing special “facilitated” examinations for those who had repeatedly failed the regular exams, and an uncertain number (perhaps over thirty percent) could have held rank by virtue of a father’s or grandfather’s office. In other words by 1050 the examinations had become the primary means of entering the bureaucracy and it was becoming essential for those who wished to rise to high office.

This led to a debate over who was in fact a *shi*. Some argued that the examinations were meant to choose officials from among the *shi*, and that the *shi* were in fact those cultured families with traditions of government service, in other words they saw the *shi* as a hereditary group. This was not a claim to great clan ancestry in most cases, but a sense that the state ought to be managed by those men from families which had the right values, the right education, and traditions of service. Families

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whose fortunes came from commerce or who had no traditions of service did not belong. But others argued that since the examinations tested education and talent anyone who had the education of a shi ought to be regarded as a shi. In other words, education made a person a shi and fit for government service. This was particularly important in the south, where families had little history of office holding.

This debate had not yet been resolved by 1050. Some still contended that to be shi meant to belong to that group of families who had been making government service their occupation. The great northern conservative Sima Guang, whose family had served the dynasty since its founding, even proposed that admission to the examinations be limited to those who had secured the greatest number of recommendations from officials at court.\(^{72}\) As we would expect serving officials developed a variety of special examinations so that their sons would at least not have to complete at the entry level. Such developments pointed toward the creation of a new state aristocracy. Why did this not happen?

The simple answer is that the conviction that those who governed should be the most talented men and that talent could be cultivated through schooling and selected through competitive examinations made it increasingly difficult for families to guarantee positions for sons. Moreover, by 1050 both the entry level prefectural examinations and the capital examinations were blind, making it difficult for examiners to be sure who they were grading. The opportunities for preparing for the exams were increasing as well: from the 1040s on there had been repeated calls for building state funded schools in the prefectures and counties to prepare students to take the examinations, although in fact the number of examination candidates was steadily increasing even without such schools.

Added to this the old Tang system of supporting many official status groups outside of the Nine Ranks of regular officials had disappeared. To be a clerk, for example, no longer made one eligible for promotion into the Nine Ranks, and although occasionally the court proposed employing surplus literati as clerks, very few accepted that being a clerk was an honorable alternative for a shi.\(^{73}\) To be a student brought no special status unless one held a place at the National University at the capital, and by 1050 this was no longer restricted to the sons of officials. In short, the government no longer could provide shi family members honorable official careers. And when it allowed the household of students who passed only the entry level examination relief from the labor service obligation it encouraged even more families to prepare their sons for the examinations.\(^{75}\)

Literati families were thus facing a problem. If it they could expect the government neither to exclude others in their favor nor to provide honorable careers for their sons, then how were they to help their descendants keep their status as shi? What do families wish for their descendents? asked the great twelfth century writer poet, Lu You. “That their food and clothing will be sufficient and marriages will be made at the right age; to have them be shi, and not slide off into being artisans and merchants, to descend to being clerks, or to depart to be followers of Daoists and Buddhists. How could they remain a shi family if every generation did not serve in government? At least by the middle of the twelfth century a solution to this problem had taken shape in

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\(^{72}\) Sima Guang, *Sima wenzheng chuanjia ji* (Wangyou wenku ed.) 40.517.


\(^{76}\) Lu You 陸游, *Lu Fangweng quanji* 陸方翁全集 (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1986) 21.124
the south, although it may well have been going on in 1050.

The solution, which involved both new social practices and a reconceptualization of what it meant to be a shi, lay in the formation of self-perpetuating communities of literati families in local society. The Tang had seen the transformation of great clans from local magnates into an aristocracy of bureaucratic families; the ultimate Song transformation was recreation of a local elite, but one of a very different character. This happened through social movements in two directions.

The first direction was the rise of well-to-do local families to shi status. This was made possible by a redefinition of the grounds for being a shi away from service as an official and toward the acquisition of the kind of education the examinations tested. The number of county and prefectural local schools increased and in the twelfth century the government began to grant certain tax breaks to the families of those who registered at schools. Families that had long been rich and powerful in their home towns began to invest in education; they began to convert to shi. It was to their advantage to do so. I’ll simply repeat one story, about the Guo family of Dongyang County in Zhejiang, as told by a family friend in mid-twelfth century. Grandfather Guo amassed a great fortune, thousands worked his lands, and Guos were known throughout the regions as a powerful family. But to be powerful, rich, and smart did not protect the family from the jealousy of their neighbors, and when they transgressed the law even the shi families would extort everything they could from them. The examination system mattered, the writer explains, for two reasons. From the perspective of locally powerful families it was a means to join the shi and better defend their interests, and from the perspective of the public good it led powerful families to accept constraints on their behavior in order to gain the acceptance of the local shi. The Guos eventually figured this out. The son saw to the education of the grandsons and one of them in turn associated himself with leading shi of the day. From other sources we know that this family went on to become the most important sponsors of private academies in Dongyang county.

The second direction of change was the return of official families to their local base. Families who in the eleventh century had been successful in placing sons in office began to turn their attention to the question of how they could maintain their social position if they could not count on serving in government. Their answer was to turn their attention to shoring up their position in their home locale by building marriage alliances with other leading local families and playing a greater role in the social and cultural life of their home base, rather than seeking marriage ties with officials from elsewhere in order to create bureaucratic alliances. An example will illustrate this family strategy. Hu Ze (963-1069) from Yongkang county (near Dongyang) passed the examinations and rose to high office at the capital. When he retired he did not return to Yongkang, but moved his household to Hangzhou, the administrative center of Zhejiang, where it was easy to stay in touch with other high officials and make connections for his sons. Other Hus had to stay in Yongkang. But in the twelfth century, when some Yongkang Hus were successful again they stayed in Yongkang and made repeated efforts to maintain solidarity among their local kin. Their descendents have remained a force in local society into the present. In some instances establishing a

78 Bol, Peter K. “Zhang Ruyu, the Qunshu kaosuo, and Diversity in Intellectual Culture -- Evidence from Dongyang County in Wuzhou,” 慶祝鄧廣銘教授九十華誕論文集 Essays in Honor of the Ninetieth Birthday of Professor Deng Guangming (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), 644-73.
local base was not so easy. The northern official families who could escape to the south after 1126 needed to find a place to settle, they needed to marry with powerful families like the Guos, families who themselves aspired to *shi* status and befitted from the social status of such a marriage. Lü Zuqian (1137-1181), a scholar and official who helped spread Neo-Confucianism, was descended from one of the most illustrious bureaucratic families of Northern Song. After the Jurchens took Kaifeng, his branch of this northern family moved south to Jinhua (next to Yongkang), where the local government lent them a house. Lü Zuqian’s father married him to the daughter of one of his bureaucratic colleagues, but Lü Zuqian (who passed the examinations and held office for a time) married his daughter to the son of one of the wealthiest local families, which in the previous generation had established itself as *shi*. However, the Lüs did not establish an economic base and within just a few generations they had largely disappeared. These anecdotes illustrate what others have demonstrated to be widespread transformation of the national elite.

I am not sure that literati in 1050 would have foreseen these developments, although the course had already been set. Some twelfth century observers were aware that in the past an illustrious pedigrees and high status marriages had mattered more. But in 1050 it was clear that the number of *shi* was increasing, that southern families were more competitive than ever, and that the most important factors in this were increases in wealth and the spread of education. By the start of the twelfth century the government was investing in schools and supporting their students. Some have argued that in Song the term *shi* really only applied to those serving or eligible to serve as officials, and that their numbers were sharply restricted by the fact that only the *jinshi* degree counted (in contrast to the many different kinds of degrees in Ming and Qing) – in this view the great expansion of the *shi* had to wait until after 1447, the year the Ming government removed the quota on the number of students who might be granted the special rights of local degree candidates. I think this expansion actually happened by the end of Northern Song, when there as many as 167,662 registered students in schools supported by rents from over 1.5 million acres of land with annual expenses amounting to 2,978,787 strings of cash. The growth of local literati communities in the south continued, even

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82 Zheng Qiao 鄭樵, introduction to the treatise on clans and lineages in the *Tong zhi* 通志.
through the Mongol invasion. The role of schools in this is evident: in Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, and Hunan between 80 and 100% of counties had schools (in the north incomplete sources show between 10 and 25% had schools) and there is mention of another 350 private schools, most of which appeared after 1126. In Southern Song the numbers of triennial prefectural examination candidates are quite amazing: up to 20,000 in Fuzhou in Fujian, over 10,000 in Jianning 建寧 in Fujian, over 10,000 in Jizhou 吉州 in Jiangxi, 7,000 in Yanzhou 嚴州 in Zhejiang, 7,000 and 8,000 in other prefectures in Zhejiang. With numbers like these, one can understand why it is possible that by 1250 there were as many as 450,000 taking part in the examinations. These were men who all agreed could be called shi. The chance that any one of them would gain office was miniscule, but increasingly as families compiled genealogies and strengthened kinship connections the likelihood that all of them would be related to someone who had passed and gained office was great.

Finally, this spread of education was speeded by the spread of printing. By 1050 our literatus would also have read some of his books in printed form, either at a library in a government school or by purchasing them at a commercial book store, whereas his counterpart in 750 could only have read handwritten copies. This too was a long term trend. In the north the National University had completed the printing of a set of the Confucian classics in 130 volumes between 932 and 953; in the south local government offices and, increasingly, commercial firms were printing books. By the end of the eleventh century one could buy various editions of the Classics and commentaries, printings of Buddhist and Daoist texts, historical and political writings, philosophical tracts, numerous literary anthologies, and the collected writings of individuals. Although moveable type was invented in around 1050 and occasionally used, most printing was done with woodblocks: a whole page was written out and pasted on a plank, the spaces around the characters cut away, the block inked and a page struck off. The great advantage of this system was that once the blocks were cut copies could be printed as demand. Some people sent their manuscripts to well known printers in the cities, but often teams of journeymen traveled to the family, school, temple, or government office that had work for them. The result was that many places were producing printed books – above all books for the examination market and religious texts – and often competing with each other to issue new works and copying each other’s editions.

The result was a far more literate and well published society than in Tang. We know the names of about 2200 writers of poetry in Tang, but over 9000 for Song; some prose writings from about 10,000 Song figures are still extant, but only a quarter as much for Tang. These differences may reflect the greater chance of survival for Song works, but they also fit the larger trend. The literate national elite was not only larger, it was also better informed. Examination candidates needed to stay abreast of current events, and shifting standards, in order to compete. County and prefectural schools gave students access to local officials. There were other means of staying informed. By the late eleventh century a system had been established for distributing the official court

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85 John Chaffee. The Thorny Gates of Learning, pp. 136-137.
gazette to the prefectures, and local government was required to inform the public of new rules and procedures through public placards. There were also privately published papers aimed at informing literati who lacked official connections. The volume of private and public publishing continued to expand. For one prefecture alone, Wuzhou in Zhejiang (which included the Dongyang and Yongkang, cited in examples above) there are references to books by about 150 Song authors, compared to less than ten for all periods prior to the Song.91

What this meant for ideology was that there was a growing audience. For the government to try to control the education and culture of that audience – as the New Policies did by briefly requiring that they all attend government schools – turned out to be prohibitively expensive and difficult to enforce. What the Neo-Confucians discovered was that they could appeal to that audience, the vast majority of whom had no hope of ever passing the examinations and serving in government. What they offered them was a new philosophy, one that explained how the individual could have real value as a person and authority as a scholar whether or not he passed the examinations and served in government. Neo-Confucianism offered practical advantages as well: membership in growing networks that included men with national reputations, high government officials, and men from leading local families; teachers, texts, and schools that did more than drill students in examination writing; and rituals for organizing family life. Above all it offered all those local literati who lacked official status but wished to see themselves as part of the national elite the chance to participate in public life at the local level.

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Seen from within Song the world of 1050 was vastly different from the world of 750, when Tang was at the height of its powers. The changes that already had taken place or were beginning to take shape were fundamental and would continue for centuries to come. This survey has treated only a few areas of particular relevance to intellectual change. A more complete account of the changes that took place between the eighth century and the fourteenth would need to survey changes in many more areas: bureaucratic organization, the workings of the court, military organization and recruitment, technology, national and local religions, literature, art, and more. Yet even the few changes that have been discussed here ought to be enough to show that there were fundamental changes in the middle period to which Neo-Confucian ideology responded.

Peter K. Bol

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91 Based on the records collected in Hu Zongmao 胡宗楙, Jinhua jingji zhi 金華經籍志 Mengxuan lou, 1926.
Fig. 16. Commercial tax quotas for 1077 as measured in strings of cash (guan). Black symbols are used for market towns, yellow for county seats, and red for prefectural seats. Symbols of the same size represent equal amounts. Not only are there towns with tax quotas greater than their county seats and county seats with quotas greater than their prefectural seats, there are administrative centers with no quotas at all, indicating an absence of significant commercial activity. The area covered is Liangzhe circuit (modern Zhejiang, southern Jiangsu, and eastern Anhui provinces). Sources: Song huiyao jigao for tax data; CHGIS for the administrative hierarchy as of 1077.