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Introduction

Order created from disorder is always, in a sense, disorderly.

— CHARLES PÉGUY (1873–1914)

THE SONG DYNASTY was among the most brilliant and important periods in the history of imperial China. Some historians in fact have compared the major changes that marked the tenth through thirteenth centuries in China to those of the Renaissance in Europe. Others have suggested that, during the Song period, well before the arrival centuries later of Westerners in China, Asia had already entered “modern times.”

Yet the dynasty’s weaknesses are also clear. Although the Song emperors ruled nearly 320 years—only the Han dynasty lasted longer—their power was exercised over a territory that was much smaller than at other times in Chinese history. Powerful empires and kingdoms from the steppes of Siberia and Central Asia—first the Khitan and then the Jurchen in the North, the Tangut and the Tibetans in the Northwest—prevented the Song from restoring Chinese sovereignty over lands that the great dynasties of the past had once controlled. The Song’s own military deficiencies—relative though they were—forced the dynasty to pay tribute to these powers for over two centuries and to accept the fact that they were just one among several imperial powers in East Asia. Having been forced to abandon the vast Yellow River plain and its capital Kaifeng to seek refuge in the South in 1127, the dynasty finally came to an end 140 years later. In 1276 the Mongols entered its second capital, Hangzhou, and the small child who had been proclaimed emperor by a few loyal fugitives perished at sea during a final battle off Canton in 1279.

The history of the Song was thus subject to a continuous, double-sided tension. On one hand, dynastic strength had to keep powerful neighbors at

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bay through diplomacy, trade, and tributary exchanges. The dynasty regularly attempted to conquer the steppes and plateaus it regarded as its own territory. On the other hand, it needed to politically, fiscally, socially, and economically integrate central China, now unified after nearly a century of fragmentation between 880 and 975. To meet this twofold challenge, the Song dynastic state innovated, sometimes in the face of pressing emergencies, drawing the maximum possible benefit from the dynamism of the local societies it aimed to dominate. After being ousted from the northern plain in 1127 and always under threat from its northern neighbors, the dynasty managed to recreate its power base by aligning itself with the transformations taking place in southern China. Although the history of the Song encompasses, as we will see, far more than these innovations and changes, they provide a useful starting point.

A Society in Transformation

The expansion of cultivated land and the increase in agricultural yields—due largely to the spread of new farming techniques that encouraged more intensive rice cultivation—made it possible to feed a larger population. Begun under the Song, this population growth made China the world's most populous political entity. In the same development, the surpluses now generated by the rural world made it possible to sell part of the harvest. Premium rice varieties began to appear on the market, the tea trade began to boom, and small distilleries spread across the countryside.

Population growth, together with recurring conflicts, led to half a dozen waves of migration that disrupted the empire's internal balance. After the loss of the northern plain in 1127, millions of refugees moved south. This shift in population established the dominance of the lower Yangzi River area and the great lakes regions over the North. Urban civilization was transformed as a result of these population transfers and demographic growth. Better supplied, cities—including small towns with rural households—became hubs that organized commercial exchange. These market towns facilitated the movement of grain from farmland to city dwellers and, in return, engaged rural people in local exchanges that provided villages with basic goods. Somewhat seasonal in nature, this market economy increasingly depended on monetary and credit methods that secured merchants sizable profits and provided fresh income for the government. Against this backdrop, the authorities implemented borrowing systems and issued the first-ever paper money in 1024.

Proto-industrial sectors also made crucial strides: Due to a marked rise in temperatures, blast furnaces made possible a qualitative jump in iron metallurgy, akin to the advances that the so-called dragon kilns—able to fire several thousand pieces at once—brought to the ceramics industry. Mass production allowed this industry to meet domestic and foreign demand. The export business, often taking advantage of smuggling routes, required ever more oceangoing junks and river barges. The resulting advances in shipbuilding made the Song a major maritime power in Asia. Their empire became a true crossroads that linked the South Seas with Central Asia.

The flourishing commerce between imperial powers shaped the Asian landscape around the Song, their wealth, and their money. Peace treaties required official exchanges—such as silks, precious metals, and tea—and, despite the frequent conflicts with Central Asian powers, overland trade continued to link the Song empire with the vast territories to the west. Under the protection of the Song's Tibetan allies, these riches financed the caravan trade, and the movement of precious metals and luxury goods brought solid profits to Central Asian merchants who supplied the horses that were crucial to China's cavalry. Meanwhile, a significant maritime network developed with northern powers between the Sea of Japan, the Bohai Gulf, and the Yellow Sea. Sailors and merchants from Zhejiang, Fujian, and Canton frequented these routes, expanding their centuries-old ties with the southern seas. They integrated into a cosmopolitan population along the Chinese coast and in Vietnam, Malaysia, Sumatra, and Java. Exports of silk, porcelain, lacquer, rice, fruit, medicinal plants, and paper provided these merchants with profits that helped fund the domestic trade whose dynamism radically transformed Song society after 1127.

Long regarded as hard to define historically due to its failure to support capitalist accumulation comparable to that of the West, the commercial dynamism that was clearly launched under the Song dynasty and partly reawakened between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries is now regarded as part of the global process that contributed substantially to the development of the Western economy.

New Elites Serving a New Regime

The growth of private publishing, whose woodblock prints were often of poor quality compared to official editions funded by the court and administrations, demonstrates the vitality of the book sector. Even though movable type appeared as early as the mid-eleventh century, printing techniques still depended

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on the quality of the wood-carved printing blocks. This dynamism in the book trade surely arose from new educational priorities aimed at preparing tens of thousands of candidates for the civil service examinations. The first Song emperors, wary of the armies that had brought them to power and keen on winning over literate elites, made extensive use of this mode of recruitment, promising laureates eminent positions within the civil administration. The old exam system, now intended to ensure that literati from different parts of the empire could achieve social mobility beyond the military's realm of influence, was totally revamped and made uniform. The standards and processes implemented at that time stayed virtually the same until 1905.

Admittedly, the literati were compelled to rethink the content of knowledge based on this new institutional setting. Nonetheless, their reevaluation of the scriptural tradition passed down from antiquity was closely connected to their determination to rebuild a worldview that the very existence of rival empires undermined. This intellectual creativity, radical in a manner similar to what had preceded the empire's founding, sparked intense rivalry among many streams of thought, including the religious schools. Confucianism became the required norm for exams, court ceremonies, and lineage organization, yet the vitality of Buddhism and the proliferation of Taoist movements remained evident throughout society, influencing both the elites and common people.

Finally, political institutions were restructured to meet the centralizing ambition present from the dynasty's beginning. The first Song emperors inherited the institutions of the Tang empire (612–907), already reshaped by the military regimes of the Five Dynasties (907–960). They retained those features that allowed them direct authority over administration, the armies, and public finance. Some modern historians see in these changes the coming of imperial absolutism. Yet it is more accurate to envision a dual bureaucratic system, civil and military, where emperors, depending on the loyalty and abilities of the agents they chose to favor, could balance between their palace and the central administration. A few decades later, the hierarchy around the ruler was no longer simply a matter of personal loyalties, as it had been under the warlords of the tenth century. It was now grounded in the proclaimed impartiality of recruitment by examination, in the sophistication of the systems for assignment, evaluation, and promotion of officials, in the increased specialization of subordinate agents and recognition of their merit, and in the limitation of the privileges that the sons of great families still enjoyed. This bureaucratic regime, which enabled the dynastic state to maintain political unity and territorial

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integrity, served as a model until the beginning of the twentieth century. The three centuries of Song rule had proven decisive.

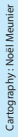
A New Synthesis

The history offered in this book proceeds along two tracks. In addition to presenting in detail the many facets of Song history, the book also aims to explain how historians—largely lacking archives for this period—have gradually reconstructed that history. Therefore, a historiographical essay appears at the end of the book. Nonetheless, throughout the chapters, it has been essential to refer to the debates that have allowed new approaches to be adopted and new fields to be explored. This book, therefore, also sketches the history of Song historiography.¹

In accordance with the format adopted by the French publisher of the *Histoire générale de la Chine*, in which this volume originally appeared, the reader will find in this translation, first, an event-driven, chronological history—mainly political and military (chapters 1–5)—followed by thematic chapters that address territorial organization (chapter 6), the economy (chapter 7), and political structure (chapter 8). Intellectual and social history, each a topic so rich it could furnish enough material for its own Song dynasty history, are covered in chapters 9 and 10. By thus providing a coherent set of facts and analyses on which specialists now widely agree, this book seeks to provide the basis for situating the Song dynasty within a comprehensive history of medieval Asia.



MAP 1. The Song empire and neighboring empires and kingdoms (960–1127)



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