

1 Introduction

The interaction between war and politics was the most important driving force in the formation of the early Song dynasty. War and politics shaped not just the territorial extent of the empire and the structure of the government, but the character and culture of the dynasty as well. Virtually inseparable sources of power for the first emperor, posthumously known as Song Taizu (r. 960–976), these two forces were gradually separated during the reign of the second emperor, posthumously known as Song Taizong (r. 976–997), before becoming almost fully detached from each other, at least with respect to the emperor's power, in the reign of the third emperor, posthumously known as Song Zhenzong (r. 997–1022). Up until now, this process has been simplified into a process of the rise of civil power over military power. There were, however, specific, historical reasons for the shift of political power to government bureaucrats; it did not happen because of a prescriptive imperial plan that intended to emphasize civil values over military values. Ironically, the civil-dominated government that emerged at the beginning of the eleventh century was produced by a half century of war and personal politics.

Civil officials in the late tenth century were given power in the government bureaucracy because they had no power outside of the central government. Initially, the imperial government at Kaifeng itself had very little authority. Military and political power was vested in the person of the emperor, whose authority came from his military success and his personal connections to the generals controlling the central armies. These personal ties allowed Song Taizu to focus the dynasty's military power on conquest, rather than infighting, and then, with each military success, on political consolidation. The dynasty gradually became separated from the person of the emperor alone and, because the wars of conquest were successful, the imperial government gained power. Bureaucrats gained power when the central government they served gained power. Simultaneously, military matters, while still maintaining an enormous bureaucratic apparatus in the central government, became

2 The Reunification of China

border or external concerns. Military men served the court, were paid by the court, and led imperial armies rather than maintaining their own forces from regional strongholds. All of these developments were driven by military success and shaped by political struggles. There was nothing natural or inevitable about the particular direction of early Song dynasty history.

The late tenth-century Song government was not yet the eleventh-century government dominated by civil officials holding the highest civil service exam degrees. Military men and civil officials without advanced degrees held positions of great authority. The culture of the Song dynasty in the tenth century laid the foundation for the flourishing civil culture of the eleventh century, but it was by no means the same as that civil-dominated, politically driven culture. Eleventh-century assumptions about the “proper” or “correct” order of things, and the sense that literati domination of the government was the natural direction for the early Song government to go, strongly influenced the writing of the history of the early Song. In the tenth century, however, the course of dynastic progress was guided by actions and reactions to military and political events, with no clear destination.

Ever since the eleventh century, the founding of the Song dynasty has been portrayed as a process of demilitarization, of the subordination of the military to civil control, and the end of a long period during which violence dominated Chinese politics. But the founding emperors did not dispense with war; they successfully used it to resolve a variety of political and territorial issues in their own favor. The effects of individual battles within and upon the political forum were as important in the creation of the Song regime as their immediate consequences in acquiring territory. War, and even more fundamentally, battle’s role in the formation of the Song empire must therefore be discussed in terms of both politics and territorial acquisition. Indeed, the political and military fortunes of Song Taizu, were one and the same. His military victories were political accomplishments, and his imperial dignity was strongly rooted in the successful campaigns of conquest that built the empire.

This relationship between war and politics did not immediately change with the succession of Taizu’s brother, Taizong, to the throne. While Taizong quickly inserted men more personally loyal to himself into the government, he continued to assume that his position as emperor would be bolstered by military success. To some extent, he was correct. His brother’s legacy of conquest was incomplete, and Taizong still needed to prove himself to the military elite that had formed as a result of Taizu’s policy of imperial intermarriage with high-ranking generals. The problem for Taizong was that he proved to be an inept military commander. His

moment of military glory in conquering the Northern Han was immediately followed by abject defeat and personal humiliation when he attempted to capture the Sixteen Prefectures. His subsequent military record was equally poor, and it became necessary for him to try to break, or at least attenuate, the link between politics and war. His own family's military ties, as well as the importance of the army due to the war Taizong had started with the Liao empire, prevented him from completely disenfranchising the military. He may well have suspected that any overt move on his part to do so would have resulted in his being deposed. What he could do was to gradually shift the focus of government toward powerless civil functionaries.

Taizong's son and successor, Zhenzong, came to the throne with the imperial bureaucratic system still incomplete and with a major war to resolve. His own succession was less fraught with controversy, and he seems to have felt less threatened by the military elites than his father did. But while he could afford to devote less attention to placating the military, his father's training, coupled with the dominance of the newly risen civil functionaries at court, forced him into a sustained written campaign to persuade his officials to do his will. That he did not simply compel them to do so by the force at his disposal was a tribute to his personality and training. He was also in no way threatened by them, which may have contributed to his, and subsequent Song emperors, indulgent treatment of officialdom. Zhenzong's civilized behavior, coupled with the resolution of hostilities with the Liao, ended the political effect of military actions on the power of the emperor until the twelfth century.

Underlying all of these military and political successes were the intimate social connections among the elites, mostly military at the beginning of the dynasty, and the imperial family. Taizu's personal ties and leadership were particularly important in launching the dynasty on its path. It was personal ties and the loyalty that maintained them that initially held the Song polity together. The Song founding was not successful because Taizu manipulated the bureaucratic system to diminish the military and political power of the various generals he had inherited from the preceding dynasty. He convinced the generals to relinquish power and let him be emperor through his personal relationship with them. Taizu accomplished this by promises (which he kept) of enhancing their relationships through marriage ties with the imperial family rather than by force. Thus, the creation of the Song dynasty is an intensely personal story, involving a relatively small number of men near the pinnacle of power who negotiated and backed the rule of one of them.

The demilitarized, depoliticized, and depersonalized interpretation of the Song founding has informed all previous explanations of the physical

4 The Reunification of China

and political formation of the empire. I will briefly discuss that interpretation in the rest of this introduction. In Chapter 2, I will turn to the methodology of this work, before providing a detailed account of the creation of the Song empire that more fully integrates the role of war and politics. That account will begin with an overview of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, followed by a chronological narrative of military and political events from the reign of Zhou Shizong, through Song Taizu and Song Taizong, and ending in Zhenzong's reign shortly after the conclusion of the Chanyuan Covenant.

The demilitarization of the Song founding

Yang Xiong said: "If Yin does not reach the utmost then Yang will not be produced. If chaos does not reach the utmost then virtue will not take shape." The chaos of the Tang house [618–907] reached the utmost in the Five Dynasties [907–960] and then Heaven's blessing was the Song. The emperor Taizu accorded with the hearts of men, *troops did not bloody swords, markets were not changed into execution grounds*, but the empire was settled. [my italics]¹

Written in the eleventh century, Fan Zuyu's explicit demilitarization of the Song founding seems extreme, but it was consistent with the view of many other Song officials and historians at that time.² Scarcely a hundred years after the Song founding, the campaigns that created the empire were simply ignored in favor of a bloodless and inevitable founding (a historiographical issue discussed in Chapter 2). But even this supernatural founding was marred by the inability of the Song to reconstitute completely the territory of the Tang, an inability that was eventually explained by the "south-first" strategy ostensibly adopted by Taizu.

Song Taizu's successful *coup d'état* on 3 February 960 elevated him the short distance from supreme military commander of the Later Zhou dynasty to emperor of the Song.³ But, while it was easy enough to

¹ Fan Zuyu, *Tangjian*, in *Biji Xiaoshuo Daguan*, Taipei: Xinxing Shuju, 1981, vol. 40, p. 350. Michael Dennis Freeman has also translated an abridged version in his "Lo-Yang and the Opposition to Wang An-Shih: The Rise of Confucian Conservatism, 1068–1086," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1973, p. 145.

² Ibid. Freeman, pp. 145–50. Of course, opposition to Wang Anshi's reforms colored the opinions of many of those historians.

³ Li Tao, *Xu Zizhi Tongjian Changbian* [hereafter XCB], Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2004, 1.4. The entire account of the events leading up to the official overthrow is contained in XCB, 1.1–5. See also Sima Guang, *Sushui Jiwen*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2006, 1.1–3. A report from Zhen and Ding Prefectures arrived on January 31 that a Liao–Northern Han army had invaded the empire. Zhao Kuangyin left Kaifeng two days later leading an army to oppose it. That night, at Chenqiaoyi (Chen Bridge Station), supposedly unbeknownst to Zhao, several

officially found the Song dynasty the following day, it took him sixteen years of military campaigns to create the Song empire and make himself emperor in fact as well as in name. Since Taizu and his successors were politically and militarily successful, Song statesmen and historians saw the creation of the dynasty as inevitable. This teleological viewpoint was not accidental; it was part of the process of placing the Song dynasty in the legitimate succession (*zhengtong*) of Chinese dynasties.⁴ States that had never been part of the Song empire but had been within the territory of the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Tang empires were described as “returning” to its rule, rhetorically establishing the Song as the legitimate successor to those empires.

Chinese historians applied three general assumptions about the founding of legitimate dynasties to the creation of the Song. First and foremost, there was only one legitimate emperor in the world, who possessed the Mandate of Heaven as a result of his virtue, and all other rulers in the world had to accept his overlordship.⁵ Second, the ability to conquer the empire and establish a dynasty derived from the Mandate of Heaven. Third and finally, the Chinese ecumene was the natural and proper center of the empire ruled by the legitimate emperor. These assumptions not only framed the historical portrayal of the creation of the empire but also prejudiced the way Song emperors and officials evaluated the course of events.

Those aspects of the Song founding that did not accord with the theoretical ideal were manipulated into conformity. As the quote from Fan Zuyu earlier makes clear, the extent to which kingdoms were forced to surrender to the Song was glossed over in favor of individual rulers bowing to the inevitability of Song success. Reversing the order of cause and effect, possession of territory at the end of the campaign demonstrated the military power that stemmed from the Mandate of Heaven.

The most unambiguous proof of possession of the Mandate would have been control of the territory of the Han and Tang empires. But the Song founding, and thus its legitimacy, was imperfect. For all its success

officers decided to place him on the throne. The army returned on February 3 and the Song dynasty was founded on February 4.

⁴ For a discussion of the symbolic aspects of legitimation in Chinese history, see Hok-lam Chan, *Legitimation in Imperial China*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1984, pp. 3–48.

⁵ See Yao Yingting, “Lun Tang-Song zhi Ji de Tianming yu Tianming Sixiang,” in *Songshi Yanjiu Lunwenji*, Zhengzhou: Henan Chubanshe, 1982. For the Han dynasty development and formalization of the Mandate of Heaven, see Michael Lowe, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1982, chapter 13, especially pp. 151–8. Also see Herlee Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970.

6 The Reunification of China

in southern China and against the Northern Han kingdom, the Song army failed against the steppe empire of the Liao dynasty.⁶ The third Song emperor, Zhenzong, was forced to accept not only Liao possession of a small piece of territory that had been part of the Tang empire, the Sixteen Prefectures of Yan and Yun, but also the existence of the Liao emperor. In so doing, he continued the recognition that had been quite natural for all Five Dynasties rulers (and, probably, Song Taizu as well). Parity with the Liao emperor was harder to sublimate than the territorial concessions of the Chanyuan Covenant (often called the Treaty of Shanyuan)⁷ that concluded Song–Liao hostilities. Yet the Song had clearly conquered and reintegrated most of the Chinese parts of the Han and Tang empires. Despite its imperfection, the Song had a fair claim to possession of the Mandate. It remained to construct an account of the Song founding reconciling the conventions of Chinese history with historical facts. The compromise satisfied neither ideal nor reality.

Each emperor's role in the military and political creation of the empire varied with his military fortunes, the legacy of his predecessor, and his own temperament, but all three emperors' actions, and those of their officials, had to be integrated into a unified explanation of how and why the Song empire took the form that it did. This became a process of explaining why a legitimate dynasty was unable to defeat the Liao and

⁶ The name "Liao" was originally adopted as the name of the Kitan empire in 947 during their occupation of Kaifeng. Although it was occasionally changed back to "Kitan," for example, following the death of the Liao emperor Yingzong in 982, XCB 23.533–4, for the sake of simplicity, I use "Liao" throughout this book.

⁷ *Chanyuan zhi meng* (澶淵之盟) has usually been translated as "The Treaty of Shanyuan" in English. The standard western work on the Covenant is David Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity in Eleventh Century China*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, which now supersedes Christian Schwarz-Schilling, *Der Friede von Shan-yuan (1005n. Chrs.): Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Chinesischen Diplomatie*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959. I would like to thank Dr. Schwarz-Schilling for giving me a copy of his otherwise difficult to acquire thesis several years ago. A.F.P. Hulsewe made some important criticisms of this work in his review of it, A.F.P. Hulsewe, *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 31/3 (1968), 638–40. David Wright has persuasively argued that "*meng* (盟)" was really a "covenant" rather than a "treaty." See Wright, pp. 73–8. I read the character 澶 as "chan" because it is the most common modern standard Mandarin pronunciation. See Luo Zhufeng, *Hanyu Dadidian*, Shanghai: Hanyu Dadidian Chubanshe, 2008, vol. 6, p. 178, and Morohashi Tetsuji, *Daikanwa Jiten*, Tōkyō: Taishūkan Shoten, 1955–1960, vol. 7, p. 7207. The only other pronunciation provided in *Hanyu Dadidian* is "dan." R. H. Matthews, *Mathew's Chinese–English Dictionary*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1943, p. 777, provides the reading "shan," as do several older dictionaries including the Kangxi Dictionary. Christian Schwarz-Schilling points out that the "shan" reading is a historical pronunciation ("The Treaty of Shanyuan – Then and Now: Reflections 1000 Years Later," footnote 1). While it has become convention in English language scholarship to use the "shan" reading, I find it hard to justify reading this one word in a nonstandard modern Mandarin pronunciation.

capture the Sixteen Prefectures, completing the territorial legacy of the Han and Tang. It was assumed that the entire responsibility for the outcome of the Song creation rested with the decisions of the Song emperors because neither Liao intentions nor complex and unpredictable military factors could be unselectively incorporated into the account. This assumption dramatically elevated the symbolic value of the Sixteen Prefectures as a sign of military weakness while entirely traducing and transcending their original, strictly military, significance. The Chanyuan Covenant and the failure to capture the Sixteen Prefectures became the logical results of a prescriptive Song policy decision. But which policy decision? Various proposals for military campaigns were mooted in the early years of the Song, but only the “south-first” strategy suggested by Zhao Pu in 968 adequately protected Taizu’s military virtue and provided for the imperfect conclusion of the conquest. In this construction of events, Zhao Pu’s suggestion became the blueprint of the entire Song conquest. The fact that this policy had been proposed even before the founding of the Song seemed to provide further support for this myth.

The south-first strategy was first introduced and ostensibly adopted as policy during the Later Zhou dynasty (951–960), the regime Zhao Kuangyin overthrew to establish the Song. In 955, the second Later Zhou emperor, posthumously known as Shizong, called on his officials to submit plans for “pacifying the empire.”⁸ The plan of an official of the Ministry of Justice, Wang Pu, was reportedly judged best and excerpted in later histories to outline the proposed strategy of reunification.⁹ Wang’s most salient strategic point, after calling for an enlightened and benevolent government, was that the southern Chinese kingdoms should be conquered before turning north to destroy the Northern Han kingdom and take the Sixteen Prefectures from the Liao. Zhao Pu’s 968 proposal was similar but simpler.¹⁰ Yet neither emperor actually

⁸ Sima Guang, *Zizhi Tongjian*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1992 [hereafter ZZTJ], 292.9525–6. Shizong’s “製治之方” and Wang Pu’s “侯天下既平”.

⁹ ZZTJ, 292.9525–6 and Xie Juzheng, *Jiu Wudai Shi*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1995 [hereafter JWDS], 128.1679–81. In the JWDS account, Wang Pu’s plan is called a “平邊策”. See also Edmund Worthy’s translation of the ZZTJ version in Edmund Worthy, “The Founding of Sung China, 950–1000: Integrative Changes in Military and Political Institutions,” Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1973, pp. 15–17.

¹⁰ XCB 9.204–5. The anecdote was originally recorded in Shao Bowen, *Wenjian Qianlu*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2008, 1.4. See also Worthy, “The Founding of Sung China, 950–1000: Integrative Changes in Military and Political Institutions,” pp. 18–20, and his long note on the discussion between Zhao Pu and Taizu, pp. 89–90, n. 7.

8 The Reunification of China

followed the south-first order of campaigns. Zhou Shizong launched a northern expedition after conquering only a part of the Southern Tang and Taizu's successful southern campaigns were interspersed with unsuccessful northern ones.

Despite glaring discrepancies between the actual sequence of Taizu's campaigns (and Zhou Shizong's) and the plan set out by Wang Pu and Zhao Pu, explaining the course of the empire's creation with the south-first strategy recommended itself to Song historians and civil officials for three reasons. First, it allowed them to overlook Taizu's few failures and transform his campaign record into a flawless manifestation of moral and military power.¹¹ Second, because Taizu's success was considered inevitable, choosing the correct policy from those proposed by officials became more important than how that policy was carried out by generals (of course, the failure of "correct" policies could always be blamed on poor execution). Civil officials were therefore more important than generals in creating the empire. Third, it tied the failure to capture the Sixteen Prefectures and humble the Liao to a flawed plan rather than to flawed virtue or legitimacy. Cause and effect were thus neatly established, and the importance of individual military events was set aside while the more significant, to civil officials, process of imposing civil, central government control over the empire was emphasized. This led to another teleological construct, that the Song founding was successful *because* it emphasized civil rule and de-emphasized military rule, not because military success was the precondition for establishing a government by civil officials.¹²

Taizu's military record may have proven that he possessed the Mandate, but Taizong's historical position was more ambiguous. Taizong's successful campaign against the Northern Han in 979 was partially aided by the measures Taizu had taken to weaken them. Flushed with victory, Taizong moved directly to attack the Liao and seize the Sixteen Prefectures. But a Liao counter-attack crushed the Song army, forcing him to flee the battlefield. Although Taizong's two Sixteen Prefectures campaigns (he launched a second one in 986) were total failures, they were still offensives. From the perspective of Song historiography, Taizong's

¹¹ Many later historians were unaware of Taizu's failures because they relied upon sources like Chen Bangchan's *Songshi fishi Benmo*, and other works which compiled selections from the chronological records into topical entries. The failed campaigns were either ignored or significantly downplayed in these secondary compilations. See also Freeman, p. 146.

¹² This idea was present even in the first elucidations of the plan to conquer China by Wang Pu; first institute good government and then military success would naturally follow. See footnote 8.

intentions were good if his execution was not. He blamed his generals (many of whom had been quite successful under Taizu), but his failure was clear nonetheless.

It was left to Zhenzong to accept the existence of the Liao. As a palace-reared emperor, he could be excused for being less martial than his father or uncle. Later Chinese statesmen and historians felt that Zhenzong's concessions to the Liao were excessive, while conceding that dealing with the avaricious and warlike northern barbarians had always been difficult, even for the Han and Tang. Now that the dynasty was on the defensive, Zhenzong was portrayed as preserving it from the invading barbarians. Thus, since it was assumed that the Liao emperor wanted to destroy the new dynasty and conquer China, Zhenzong displayed great courage when he risked himself to drive off the invading Liao army at Chanyuan. In the negotiations that ended hostilities, he made formal concessions which included an annual indemnity, but the Liao were forced to give up their assumed designs on China, ostensibly making an even greater concession. In that respect, Zhenzong was both heroic and successful. Furthermore, based on the erroneous assumption that the Liao wanted to destroy the Song not only before but also after the Chanyuan Covenant, the court continued to believe that only the constant vigilance of the army kept the empire safe throughout the eleventh and early twelfth centuries. It was not until 1126 that this imagined successful northern defense finally collapsed before the invading Jin armies, the same armies that had just destroyed the Liao empire.¹³

The Southern Song court and later historians conflated the Liao and Jin dynasties into a generic, constant, barbarian threat, and the *terra irredenta* of the Sixteen Prefectures, conceded to the Liao at Chanyuan, became the most obvious example of weakness in the face of that threat. But the Sixteen Prefectures were already a concrete symbol of the imperfect formation of the dynasty in the eleventh century. Their original strategic significance had given way to their place in the ideological construction of Song history, where they obtruded into any attempt to gloss over their concession to the Liao. The Liao emperor could be called “the Kitan ruler” in internal Song documents, thus denying the existence of the Liao empire or the imperial dignity of its ruler, but the non-conquest of the Sixteen Prefectures could not be camouflaged and, from the perspective of the Song court, provided the legitimate gravamen for continued Song hostility. This Song position ignored the legitimacy of Liao grievances against Taizong's unprovoked attack on their territory,

¹³ It is worth noting that the Song had allied with the Jin to destroy the Liao.

10 The Reunification of China

which Liao threats to invade during the eleventh century gave credence to the Song's fears.¹⁴ Moreover, from the teleological perspective of historians writing later in the twelfth century, when the Jin had overrun all of north China, and in the thirteenth century, when the Mongols were destroying the Song, the strength and intentions of the steppe empires were foregone conclusions. But in the tenth century, the simplifying, heuristic devices of Song weakness, Liao (and Jin) intentions, and the south-first strategy were not yet fully formed or reified. The nascent Song empire was still strong; its internal politics remained vital, personal, and uncertain; and the outcome of the military campaigns could not be foreseen.

Underneath all of the rhetoric of empire, however, was an internal political battle for power within the new Song government. At first, only the intrinsic value of real military power provided a reliable hedge against the uncertainties of the political marketplace. But, as the dynasty gained stability and the value of political power within it increased, the most powerful generals traded in their armies for good administrative positions and closer personal ties to Taizu. In this, they were only following Taizu, who leveraged his military position in the Later Zhou dynasty into supreme civil and military power in the Song.

War and personal politics

For Taizu, war was not only a means to acquire territory, but also the basis of his political power. His military and political fortunes were dynamically linked, facilitating and dependent upon each other. Taizu used the personal ties he had developed as a general both to take power and to disarm most of the potential military threats to his new dynasty. He first settled his internal military problems and then used military conquests to manage his political problems. The dynasty as a political unit was tied to Taizu's person so closely that in the early years, they were effectively one and the same. By the time he died in 976, Taizu had, by a series of military and political successes, made himself and his empire

¹⁴ For renegotiations of the Liao annual payments see Wright, *From War to Diplomatic Parity in Eleventh Century China*, pp. 205–19, and Tao Jingshen, “Yü Ching and Sung Policies Toward Liao and Hsia, 1042–1044,” *Journal of Asian History* 6/2 (1972): 114–22. For Liao threats during the 1074–5 border crisis see Klaus Tietze, “The Liao-Sung Border Conflict of 1074–1076,” in *Studia Sino-Mongolica Festschrift für Herbert Franke*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979, pp. 127–51, and Christian Lamouroux, “Geography and Politics: The Song-Liao Border Dispute of 1074/75,” in Sabine Dabringhaus and Roderick Ptak (eds.), *China and Her Neighbors*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997, pp. 1–28.