

A Social History of Middle-Period China

Drawing on a wide range of sources, this book discusses the social history of China in the period 960–1279, comparing the different ethnic cultures of Song ‘China’ and its neighbouring empires. This valuable reference work for our understanding of the Song, Liao, Western Xia and Jin dynasties presents recent Chinese research in English translation for the first time, exploring topics including material culture, food, technology, ritual, religion, medicine, gender, family and language.

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Ruixi Zhu , Bangwei Zhang , Chongbang Cai , Zengyu Wang

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A Social History of Middle-Period China

*The Song, Liao, Western Xia and
Jin Dynasties*

Zhu Ruixin, Zhang Bangwei, Liu Fusheng,
Cai Chongbang and Wang Zengyu

With an introduction by Peter Ditmanson

Translated by Bang Qian Zhu



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Introduction to the English Edition

Peter Ditmanson

From the tenth to the thirteenth century, East Asia saw the emergence of new social and political orders, after an extended period of flux that began in the late eighth century with the fracturing of the vast Tang Empire (618–907). Tang cosmopolitan cultural and political influence had stretched from the Japanese islands and the Korean peninsula to Afghanistan, but after the tenth century, a much different configuration prevailed. The Song Empire (960–1279) was much smaller than the Tang and it was hemmed in by powerful neighbours: the Tangut Xixia state (982–1227) to the northwest and the Khitan Liao empire (907–1125) to the north and northeast, eventually overtaken by the Jurchen Jin (1115–1234) that wrested the north China plain away from the Song in 1127. Tibetan peoples lay to the west, and in the southwest were the Dali (937–1253) and Dai Viet kingdoms (1054–1225). Largely cut off from the peoples of Central Asia and the traffic of the Silk Route, the culture of the Song marked a shift away from the cosmopolitan tastes and sensibilities of the Tang. The cultural centre of the empire gradually shifted southward to the rich Jiangnan region to the south of the Yangzi River. As the Song court established an examination-based bureaucracy, a scholastically-oriented civil culture rose to prominence, far removed from the expansive aristocratic and martial world of the Tang. This transformation had a durable impact, reshaping the vectors of Chinese culture for the next millennium. Across the north, the Tangut, Khitan and Jurchen states blended elements of their own cultural and political orders with institutions derived from the Tang and the Song. The Liao and the Jin (and the Mongols after them) found innovative ways to govern the multicultural regions and diverse economies under their control. In this new world order of shifting geo-political tensions, the memory of the sprawling transcultural Tang empire retained an iconic presence, with each of the contending states in the region asserting its place as the legitimate successor. When the dynastic histories of Song, Liao and Jin empires were compiled in the mid-fourteenth century, the editors left this question of succession unresolved.

This new and different world left a wealth of source materials from which the authors of this volume have gathered and ordered an impressive array of topical studies on the social history of this era. While some of this material is

archaeological, most is textual. With great erudition and resourcefulness, the authors have mined a remarkably wide range of sources to provide exhaustively intricate portraits of daily life in this period. The level of detailed information in these chapters would not be possible for earlier times in Chinese history. Improvements in printing led to a greater proliferation of texts across much of East Asia. In the Song, amidst the fevered scholastic competition of the *literati* elite, writers asserted their place by taking up topics far beyond the knowledge of the classics and the histories that dominated the curriculum of the civil service examinations. For a readership that prized broad worldly knowledge and first-hand observation, writers offered up pieces that give us detailed descriptions of places, events, people and customs. The gazetteers, reports, essays, poems, diaries, letters, travel records, manuals and guides that proliferated portray day-to-day life on an unprecedented scale. One of the most celebrated of Song genres was the *biji* or ‘brush notes’, notebooks filled with casual and miscellaneous observations, a resource used extensively in the chapters in this collection. And as the volume and diversity of Song writings dramatically increased, a burgeoning readership created markets for reproducing these works through printing and hand-copying on a larger scale than in previous centuries. By the end of the Song, books had been published in over ninety prefectures.¹

While Tang writings were largely absorbed with aristocratic life at the capitals, Chang’an and Luoyang, Song writers take us much further afield, introducing us to urban and rural life in greater detail. And while these writers were overwhelmingly focussed on elite *literati* lives and concerns, we do occasionally encounter figures further down the social ladder. While we have lush descriptions of the banquet delicacies at feasts of the highest echelons, we also have accounts of peasants surviving on millet gruel and chaff. Scholars wrote on topics affecting all levels of society, producing extensive manuals on the technological innovations of the day in agriculture, mining and sericulture. The modest fluidity of Song society created a market for descriptive accounts and how-to manuals on etiquette for different levels of society, with information on the proper way to be a refined person: how to dress, communicate and maintain proper ritual decorum. The iconic twelfth-century handscroll, *Along the River at the Qingming Festival*, painted by Zhang Zeduan, offers us a panorama of life in the city, with details of river traffic and street markets, inns and pubs, theatre stages and street performers, scholar-officials, merchants and farmers all going about their business. The scenes depicted here and in contemporary writings tell us much about life at that time in the largest urban centres on the globe.

These materials give witness to a world of transformation, as writers noted the social, economic and political changes that were taking place across the realm. One frequent refrain was the vast gulf between their society and that of previous ages. Earlier periods in Chinese history had seen change, but never

had these changes been so well-documented, analysed and debated. Song writers were deeply conscious that they lived in a world of flux. Change was rapid and observable within a lifetime. A scholar like Lu You (1125–1210) could note that chairs had once been an object of derision in a *literati* home, but were now a common item. The increased monetisation of the economy brought greater fluidity to the social order, and accumulated wealth presented challenges to sumptuary regulations, marriage negotiations, the etiquette of celebrations, and, of course, fair scholarly competition in the examinations. Emperors were compelled to ban the giving of birthday gifts as the practice seemed to descend into open bribery among officials. Song narratives on social customs and practices often reflected the anxiety and emphasised a strong sense of the precariousness of their social world.

The *literati* elite of the Song formed a broad community that had become increasingly integrated across the empire by the common curriculum of the civil service examinations and the widespread circulation of texts. Personal letters now travelled by government post at unprecedented speed. For those who served in the bureaucracy, travel was an integral part of their duties as they took up office in distant prefectures. These scholars were deeply aware, however, of the contrast between their own shared culture and the significant diversity of social practices across the empire and they wrote in detail about the unique ways in which people ate, dressed, spoke and practiced their beliefs in different places. Anecdotes of southern soldiers who died of starvation because they could not cope with northern millet were perhaps exaggerated, but they remind us that despite the sophisticated networks of trade, transportation and communication, the culture of the Song was not as unified as it is often portrayed.

Song scholars also wrote about the cultures and polities beyond their borders. In this sense, this world of the Song and its neighbours – the Tangut, Khitan and Jurchen, as well as other groups to the south and west – is one of lopsided sourcing and perspective. Textual materials in the languages of these peoples were more limited, or in some cases non-existent. This imbalance in our sources makes this kind of comparative study in social history challenging and calls for innovative approaches. The Tangut dictionary, *The Sea of Characters*, for example, has been skilfully mined in these chapters as a source to interpolate social practices and beliefs. Song scholars provide much important information on these peoples, but their writings were often skewed with chauvinism, fear and misunderstanding. Accounts of baby-eating customs in Lingnan, or reports of burning the feet of Yao children to make them better walkers reflect no small degree of exoticism of non-Han peoples. To what extent can we accept these accounts at face value? The Song faced innumerable humiliating defeats against the forces to the north, and defined their own cultural and social identity against that of these enemies. In Song eyes, descriptions and comparisons of the social order, gender and family relations and

material culture of their neighbours were part of a broader discourse on the boundaries of civilisation and barbarism.

The writings of this period also tell us much about the shifting and expanding role of the state in people's lives from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries. Each of these societies saw considerable innovation and change in their political institutions and structures. Song bureaucratic expansion and reform of the education system, the agricultural sector and its military institutions brought much-debated upheaval to the lives of scholars, farmers and soldiers alike. The civil service examination system, for example, was one of the most important social institutions of the last millennium of Chinese history. The examinations reshaped male gender identity in Song society, and as the chapter on marriage practices points out, the system had a dramatic impact on marriage strategies and practices among the elite clans of the realm. At the Tangut, Khitan and Jurchen courts, attempts by rulers to add Han-style institutions presented new opportunities and challenges in these societies, transforming the daily lives of families and individuals. With the establishment of the new Jin dynasty, for example, sartorial regulations were drawn up to reflect new social hierarchies, dramatically transforming Jurchen patterns of dress. And in the all of these states, large-scale court-sponsored publishing projects and initiatives made available extensive knowledge of Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist doctrines, as well as a range of technical knowledge in medicine, agriculture and other fields.

The authors of these chapters have also skilfully explored the limits of the reach of the state and the official doctrines of the realm, showing us the tensions and discrepancies between prescribed social norms and actual practices. In marriage arrangements and funerary practices, for example, fashion, practicality, convenience and economy often won out over regulations and guidebooks. As the section on cremation shows, strong state efforts to ban the practice met with little success. Our traditional portrait of the Song is that of a society in which Neo-Confucian doctrines and practices emerged victorious. As the authors explain in the Introduction, however, the actual influence of these teachings on daily life is a matter of some debate. Moreover, they argue, the writings of even the most doctrinaire scholars, including the great Zhu Xi (1130–1200) himself, reflect some flexibility and understanding of the fast-changing world in which they lived.

The chapters in this volume cover a remarkable array of facets of social life in encyclopedic detail. Several of the chapters offer innovative categories for thinking about social history. Gender dynamics and the lives of women and families, areas of study traditionally poorly represented, are given extensive attention here. There are areas not covered in this book, as the authors admit. They have wisely chosen to omit topics that have been covered in great depth in other scholarship, such as the civil service examination system, or

the religious and intellectual traditions and practices of Neo-Confucianism or Chan Buddhism. These chapters do, however, give us a clearer view of the context of upheaval and discontinuity that these discourses sought to address. The authors acknowledge that their scholarship draws upon a significant body of earlier academic work, a testament to the revolution in historical scholarship that has taken place in China in the last few decades. As the authors admit, a work of this nature and scope is experimental and unwieldy, but the book will nevertheless remain an invaluable resource for scholars in Chinese studies or in comparative fields of social history.