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Edited by Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The four regimes that form the subject matter of this volume have generally received negative treatment from traditional Chinese historians and have been viewed as an interruption in the grand sweep of Chinese history. Each was established by a non-Chinese ruling group, who maintained their own cultural identity while ruling over a multiethnic state including large Han Chinese populations, and each controlled large territories that had long been ruled by Chinese. Each regime presented a challenge to the integrity of Chinese culture and to China's deeply rooted assumptions about its cultural supremacy and international order.

Yet these regimes were remarkably successful. The Khitan Liao dynasty lasted longer than had any previous Chinese dynasty except for the Han and the T'ang. For more than a century after the fall of the T'ang dynasty in 907, the Tangut in northern Shensi and Kansu clung tenaciously to the regional authority that they had acquired under the late T'ang and then formed their own empire of Hsia, which as an independent state survived for two centuries more. More than two centuries after the collapse of Khitan power, the official historians of the Mongolian Yüan court grudgingly conceded to the Liao the title of a legitimate dynasty but denied that status to Hsia, who would seem to us to have had almost as good a claim. Both were long-lasting, stable regimes, firmly rooted in territories that had been in part settled by Han Chinese for a millennium, and both regimes survived in the face of a hostile Chinese regime, the Sung, whose population outnumbered them twenty to one and whose economic resources were even more overpoweringly superior. Both fought the Sung to a standstill, forced the Sung to recognize their existence and parity as sovereign regimes, and extracted large subsidies from them in exchange for peace.

The Jurchen Chin were still more successful, emerging from what had always been a remote borderland of the Chinese world first to conquer the Liao empire and then to wrest control over all of north China from the Sung. Whereas the Khitan and Tangut had been multiracial border regimes in which the Han Chinese, though probably the majority of the population and certainly the producers of much of the country's wealth, had not been over-

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whelming in numbers, the Chin empire had a burgeoning Chinese population of between thirty million and forty million. The Jurchen regime in China was necessarily far more of an accommodation to traditional methods of government than had been those of the Khitan or Tangut. It was also a state that could claim far more realistically to have been an equal rival to the Sung, “another China.”

The Mongolian Yüan dynasty was quite distinct from its predecessors. For the Liao, its Chinese domains had been, at least in the beginning, an almost accidental extension of a regime whose political heart always remained in its home grasslands. The Jurchen had kept their tribal home territories in the northeast but soon became essentially a Chinese dynasty with their capital in China. The Mongols overwhelmed the Hsia and Chin and took possession of northern China as merely one part of an unparalleled explosion of military power aimed at world conquest, which made them masters of northern Eurasia from the borders of Hungary and Poland to the Sea of Japan. The Mongols’ conception of “All under Heaven” was far grander than anything dreamed of by the Han, T’ang, or Sung, or indeed by any other Chinese regime. China became for a while only part of a much larger political order. By the time Khubilai conquered the Southern Sung and brought the entire country under Mongolian rule, the Mongolian empire had been fractured into rival khanates, but China – now the whole of China, with well over 100 million people – remained just one part of a larger empire. Unlike its predecessors, when the Yüan regime in China collapsed the Mongols simply retreated to their homeland in the steppe and, there, continued to be a major power for several centuries.

Each of these regimes was in its own way successful, and each of their dominant peoples proved adaptable and yet maintained their own identity. They controlled large areas of north China for centuries. The region around Peking, for example, remained in alien hands for well over four centuries, and the western part of Kansu Province was restored to Chinese control under the first Ming emperor after six centuries of foreign domination. Moreover, the whole of north China was under non-Chinese rule for well over two hundred years.

Although an ever-increasing part of China thus fell into foreign hands, these regimes may also be looked at in a different light, as a part of a much lengthier reverse process by which Chinese-style bureaucratic governance became the political norm in East Asia and was adopted and adapted by regimes outside Chinese control and beyond what had been traditionally Chinese territory. This development can be traced back to Koguryō, to the other Korean kingdoms of Silla and Paekche, to the unified Silla from the seventh century onward, and to seventh- and eighth-century Japan. The

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immediate predecessor of the Liao as a stable northeastern state was Po-hai (Parhae) in southeastern Manchuria (719–926), the conquest of which was perhaps a more important stage in the establishment of Khitan power than was the acquisition of the sixteen Chinese prefectures in 937. Po-hai was an independent state, with five capitals, a sophisticated Chinese-style bureaucratic government, an elite with a mastery of literary Chinese, and a developed culture that had emerged and flourished for two centuries on the borders of the T'ang empire.¹ A somewhat similar regime had been in existence since the early eighth century in Nan-chao, occupying modern Yunnan.² These two fiercely independent “satellite regimes” of T'ang represented the same general political development – the adaptation of Chinese institutions by non-Chinese populations – one aspect of the larger process by which surrounding peoples were incorporated into the Chinese institutional and cultural system.

This could happen in a variety of ways: In the case of the Hsia, Koguryō, and also Vietnam – which finally threw off Chinese rule in the early tenth century and became an independent state on the Chinese model³ – some of their peoples had lived under Chinese provincial administration for centuries and, when they finally broke free to form their own states, continued to employ familiar methods of government. At the other extreme, Japan, Po-hai, and Nan-chao occupied areas that had never been effectively ruled by a Chinese dynasty, but their peoples were familiar with China and its institutions and imitated familiar Chinese models when they themselves formed independent states. And these various adaptations took place in a world that was fundamentally changing.

THE LATE T'ANG BALANCE OF POWER

One of the problems of traditional Chinese historiography in its dealings with foreign peoples has been its failure to match unchanging theory with constantly evolving actuality. The ancient ideal of the “five zones of submission” envisioned a world in which China, or rather its ruling dynasty, the bearers of the Mandate of Heaven to control mankind, were the sole legitimate possessors of unquestioned authority – authority that was at once political, cultural, and moral. The surrounding peoples, the “barbarians” who did not fully participate in Chinese culture, should in this ideal model voluntar-

1 On the emergence of Po-hai, see Denis C. Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, eds., *Sui and T'ang China*, 589–906, pt. 1, vol. 3 of *The Cambridge history of China* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 440–3.

2 On Nan-chao, see Charles Backus, *The Nan-chao kingdom and T'ang China's southwestern frontier* (Cambridge, 1981).

3 See Keith W. Taylor, *The birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983).

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ily submit to the emperor and become his vassals, and their countries would become a sort of outer perimeter under the emperor's moral authority but beyond his real control and outside the realm of civilian direct administration. Despite centuries of contacts with the real outside world, this model persisted as a symbol of the world as the Chinese elite imagined it should be. Remnants of these attitudes, based on an imaginary world sharply divided between Chinese and barbarians, continued to undermine China's relations with other peoples for centuries after the period covered by this volume.

This was a theory that may have had some validity in the distant past, when China was surrounded on all sides by peoples with a somewhat lower level of cultural development and with loose and ill-articulated forms of political organization. But it had changed forever during the T'ang. In the Sui period, only one of China's neighbors, Koguryō in northern Korea and southeastern Manchuria, had any claim to be a "state" with a mainly sedentary population and stable institutions. All the other border peoples, from Yunnan to the border of Hopei, were tribal peoples, many of them living a seminomadic life without any permanent large-scale structures of government, although they might join together to become a potent threat in times of crisis. Perhaps more important, none of them had a written language except Koguryō, which employed Chinese. By 750 that situation had completely changed: Late T'ang China was ringed with stable states – Nan-chao in Yunnan; the great aggressive Tibetan kingdom along its long border with Szechwan, Kansu, and what is now Sinkiang; the 'Abbassid caliphate in the far west; the Turkish (T'u-chüeh) and later the Uighur "empires" in the Mongolian steppe; Po-hai in Manchuria; Silla in Korea; and, far away, Japan. All these states had literate elites, some employing Chinese as a written language and others using writing systems of their own.

Events in the 750s and 760s had further stabilized this situation. After the disasters of An Lu-shan's rebellion, T'ang forces abandoned their far western protectorates in Sinkiang and also the extensive areas under regular Chinese civil administration in Turfan, Hami, and the Kansu corridor. All Kansu was occupied by the Tibetans. From the 730s to the 750s T'ang armies had intervened in the Pamir region, fought the armies of the 'Abbassid caliph on the Talas near Ferghana, invaded Nan-chao, and attempted to conquer the Khitan in the northeast. After 763 the T'ang took up a totally defensive posture. No T'ang expeditionary force was ever again sent against a neighboring state with an eye to conquest. Even when the chance arose in the 850s, the T'ang court deliberately decided not to reoccupy the lost prefectures of the northwest.

During the late eighth and early ninth centuries there had gradually emerged a novel and stable international situation in which the T'ang used

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diplomacy as much as armed force and in which the other players on the international scene also gradually evolved stable relationships among themselves that were underpinned by treaties. In 822 the T'ang entered this interstate system when they finally concluded a treaty with Tibet on the basis of equality. And China was no longer the center around which international relations revolved, although ambassadors and embassies continued regularly to visit Ch'ang-an. In the west the Uighurs, Tibetans, Nan-chao, and the Arabs were involved in conflicts among themselves and developed their own network of alliances and treaties, and in the northeast Silla, Po-hai, and Japan formed another diplomatic network employing Chinese as their common language and formalities derived from the T'ang system. In neither of these networks were the T'ang direct participants.

In 840, the only immediate neighbors of China who were not an organized state were the tribal nations of the Khitan and Hsi, living to the north of modern Hopei and in western Liao-ning. They were, for the moment, vassals of the Uighur khaghans, though they still also retained close and regular relations with the Chinese court.

Then around 840 the stability of northern Asia began to unravel. First, the Tibetan kingdom suddenly collapsed, owing to internal causes that remain to be satisfactorily explained. Almost immediately thereafter the Uighur empire disintegrated, and the Uighurs abandoned their capital city, Karabalgasun, and their homeland in Mongolia to settle in eastern Sinkiang, Turfan, Hami, and the Kansu corridor. Their Khitan and Hsi vassals transferred their loyalty to the T'ang court.

Toward the end of the century came a collapse of central authority that spread through East Asia like an epidemic: The T'ang empire was destroyed by Huang Ch'ao's rebellion and was an empire only in name from 880 onward. Long before its formal end in 907 in reality it had disintegrated into numerous independent local regimes, competing for hegemony and constantly at war with one another. For more than half a century after 907, China was divided among as many as ten regional states. In the last years of the century, central authority began to break down in Japan; in Korea, the Silla kingdom broke up into three regional warlord states; in Manchuria, Po-hai went into a terminal decline; and in the far southwest Nan-chao too fell apart. The fragmentation of China itself during the Five Dynasties was paralleled everywhere in East Asia.

It was against this background that the Khitan state of Liao emerged. There was no sudden breakdown of an international order imposed by the T'ang, as is sometimes suggested. That order had disappeared forever in the late eighth century, modified into something quite new and replaced by a novel framework of international relations. But this, too, had collapsed in its

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turn, and in A.D. 900 the international situation had been fluid for some sixty years, and governments were collapsing everywhere. In this situation of near anarchy, the Khitan gradually, almost accidentally, became players in the game of warlord politics in north China, as well as in the world of the steppe, the control of which was their first objective. Moreover, the situation was to remain fragmented for years to come. In China itself, the political fragmentation lasted for almost a century, from the fall of Ch'ang-an to Huang Ch'ao in 880 to the final conquest of the Northern Han by the Sung armies in 979. For much of that period China was divided into as many as nine or ten regional states, and until 960 the north was ruled by a succession of unstable and short-lived military regimes. During that period, military force determined the shape of politics and continued to be a major factor in the first decades of the Sung.

Not only was the early tenth century dominated by the generals in north China; it also was a period during which many of the regional warlords were non-Han generals, particularly Sha-t'o Turks. Li K'o-yung, the greatest of these, had been instrumental in putting down Huang Ch'ao and was the de facto ruler of northern Shansi long before the formal end of the T'ang in 907, and one of the contenders for power in the constant civil wars that blighted the twilight of the T'ang in the 880s and 890s. After the fall of T'ang his state (known as Chin) became an independent entity. In 921 Li K'o-yung's successor reunified north China by destroying the Liang and then set himself up as emperor of the restored Later T'ang dynasty (923–37).

For a quarter of a century, all of north China was under Sha-t'o rule, first under the Later T'ang and then under their successors the Chin (937–46). Li K'o-yung had already involved the Khitan in a short-lived alliance as early as 905. By the 920s they were drawn in as full-fledged participants in north Chinese politics: The Chin were their puppets and ceded to them sixteen border prefectures with Chinese populations. They were also wooed as allies by the independent courts of southern China. Between 944 and 947 the Khitans attempted to invade China, took the Chin capital, destroyed the dynasty and briefly set up one of their own, but wisely decided that the risks were too great and withdrew, leaving north China in the hands of yet another Sha-t'o military dynasty, the Han (947–50). Although this regime soon collapsed as a dynasty, its successors retained their independence in the Sha-t'o homeland in Shansi until 979.

Large parts of northern China were thus under the rule of the Sha-t'o for many years: in the case of northern Shansi, for a century. But the Sha-t'o were not the only foreign leaders of local regimes on Chinese soil at this time. The northwest, which was Tibetan-occupied territory until the 840s, was split among a variety of local warlords: Chinese in Tunhuang; Uighur in Turfan,

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Kan-chou, and Su-chou; Tibetan in Liang-chou; and Tangut on the southern borders of the Ordos. The Tanguts, like the Sha-t'o, had been settled in the region by the T'ang as a frontier garrison force and had clung to their local power through the disturbed times of the early tenth century. They later emerged as founders of a powerful multiethnic empire, the Hsia or Hsi Hsia, which in the early eleventh century assimilated all the fragmented local regimes of the northwest under its own control. Like the Sha-t'o, the Tanguts were not alien invaders of Chinese territory but were non-Han people who had been settled inside the T'ang frontiers by deliberate government policy and had long been a part of the T'ang provincial and military organization.

The roots of two of our major regimes, the Liao and the Hsi Hsia, can thus be traced into the political and military turmoil of the late ninth and early tenth centuries. It is also important to see how they were rooted in the frontier order established by the T'ang.

THE FRONTIER

Traditional histories of China depict the Khitan, Jurchen, and Mongols as "outsiders," intruding into "Chinese" territory. But this is a misleading oversimplification that needs to be laid to rest forever.⁴ In spite of what is shown in modern historical atlases, the T'ang, like its predecessors, never had any clearly defined and demarcated northern frontier. People still sometimes spoke of the "Great Wall," and some remnants of earlier fortifications still existed, but this term was used only to express a vague idea of China's limits.⁵ There was never a continuous defensive line or a defined frontier. There was a line of fortified border prefectures and counties, a few fortresses in strategic places, and a scattering of military colonies, military stud farms, beacon signal towers, and military picket-outposts. It was a defense in depth, with its backbone formed by powerful provincial armies at Ling-chou, T'ai-yüan, Ta-t'ung, and Peking. Only on the Tibetan frontier did the T'ang maintain a massive static defense, and only the Tibetan frontier was from time to time demarcated in disputed areas by mutual negotiation. But in the north, T'ang control was defined by the extent of the border prefects' authority, and this constantly changed.

This "frontier" was further obscured by another aspect of early T'ang military policy. The tribal peoples of the border districts were brought

4 For an interesting new analysis of the relations between nomadic peoples and their sedentary neighbors, see Anatoli M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the outside world*, trans. Julia Crookenden (Cambridge, 1984). For a new interpretation of China's relations with its steppe neighbors since the Han period, see Thomas J. Barfield, *The perilous frontier: Nomadic empires and China*, ed. Charles Tilly (Oxford, 1989).

5 On this problem, see Arthur N. Waldron, *The Great Wall: From history to myth* (Cambridge, 1990).

partially within China's political orbit by a complex system of agreements and understandings through which they were incorporated into a system of indirect rule, under which their leadership was co-opted into the T'ang government system "on a loose rein" and given titles, offices, ranks, and emoluments. The tribal groups were organized in a loose hierarchy of prefectures (*chou*) and governments-general (*tu-tu-fu*) overseen by T'ang border commanders. They did not in fact participate in the T'ang system of government; rather, their chieftains ruled their peoples according to native custom. Their hierarchy of Chinese titles was largely a formalization in Chinese terms of the existing tribal structures, in the stable continuance of which both their own chieftains and the T'ang government alike had a vested interest. The tribal leaders were periodically invested with new titles and were given gifts and subsidies to ensure their continuing loyalty.

The larger and more powerful border peoples and their paramount leaders were inducted even further into the T'ang order by the bestowal of the T'ang imperial surname, with the implication of their incorporation into the imperial family's system of kinship; by marriage of their rulers with T'ang princesses, to establish a dynastic marriage relationship; and by the education of their future rulers in China as "hostage princes," usually serving long terms as officers in the imperial guards. The embassies that attended the Chinese court often included large numbers of prominent tribesmen in addition to the ambassador, and these people, too, became familiar to some extent with things Chinese. None of these measures, of course, went very far in making Han Chinese out of the tribal leaders. But they were successful in that they gave tribal leaders a firsthand knowledge of the capital and court and of Chinese institutions and methods of government, and they produced an influential minority among those familiar with the Chinese language and customs. None of the immediate neighbors of T'ang China was really ignorant of China, whether or not they chose to imitate Chinese models.

Thus the idea of a "frontier" in T'ang China was a multilayered one. There was the outer zone of people who were part of the "Chinese world" by virtue of their participation in the tributary system; there was an inner zone of tribal people under very loose indirect rule; and there was the outer limit of the T'ang military defense system and the outer limit of effective civil government.

There was also, of course, the abiding "ecological frontier" between those regions suitable for permanent agriculture and those that would support only a pastoral economy, which limited the possible expansion of a Han Chinese farming population. And last, there was a frontier sometimes too casually assumed to be the same as this ecological boundary, between those regions with a dense more or less homogenous Han Chinese population and those

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inhabited by other peoples. In the T'ang neither the military defense system nor the limits of civil administration represented either an ethnic or a cultural frontier. Many non-Han people had lived for centuries inside these frontiers, intermingled and intermarried with Han Chinese and other ethnic groups, some of them partly or wholly assimilated. This had long been so, at least since the massive settlements of hundreds of thousands of Ch'iang, Hsiung-nu, Hsien-pei, and other border peoples in Later Han times. There was a further huge infusion of non-Han invaders during the fourth and fifth centuries. It is customary to think of these peoples as having been assimilated fairly rapidly into the Chinese way of life, but in the sixth century many of them still retained a powerful ethnic and cultural identity of their own, and some Han Chinese in the border zones adopted some aspects of their non-Han life-style.

The early T'ang government settled further some large groups of non-Han people – Ch'iang, Tangut, T'u-yü-hun, Tibetans, Turks, Uighurs, Khitan, and even Sogdians from Central Asia – in their northern frontier prefectures. These peoples numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Some willingly assimilated and adopted a settled life as farmers, though Chinese attempts to force this on other groups were bitterly resisted. Others remained primarily herdsmen. But they were important to the T'ang government, as they oversaw the huge government pastures that produced horses for the cavalry and other livestock. Many of these minority groups retained their tribal structure and their tribal leaders. Many of their menfolk were enlisted in the T'ang armies and provided a great part of its cavalry, their own chieftains serving as their commanders.

The modern province of Kansu, the border areas of eastern Tsinghai, and the northern parts of Shensi, Shansi, and Hopei formed a broad zone where a minority of Han settlers and much larger non-Han populations co-existed, for the most part peacefully, and where garrison troops, Han and non-Han, with their military settlements and colonies, lived side by side with both local farmers and semi-nomadic herdsmen. There was some degree of intermarriage, and the identity of these peoples was far from uniform, with some thinking of themselves primarily as T'ang subjects and others clinging fiercely to their tribal legacy.

It is thus totally misleading to imagine the T'ang's northern frontier, even at the height of its dynastic power, as a sharply delineated national boundary in the modern sense, clearly defining areas of sovereignty and separating different peoples. Instead, it was a broad transitional zone in which identities, loyalties, and authority were constantly changing and striking new balances.

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The collapse of the T'ang empire between 880 and 907 and the emergence of various new independent states both inside and outside what had been T'ang territory brought about sweeping political changes but left the confused multiethnic borderland of northern China much as before. There was no longer a Chinese central power, but its local military leadership remained intact and even more aggressive, as the central restraints had been removed. The main difference was that the borderland now became the region from which new military and political forces arose to influence the rest of northern China. The Sha-t'o Turkish power based in Shansi and the Tangut regime in the borders of the Ordos had been developed from parts of the T'ang border military establishment. The Sha-t'o attempt to renew the T'ang was largely based on a border general's conception of what T'ang power had been.

It was also a continuation of an ancient trend: Ever since the rise of Toba Wei, one centralizing regime after another had been founded by border generals based in the no-man's-land of the northern frontier – the Toba themselves, who rose to power from the Ta-t'ung region; their successors the Western Wei and Northern Chou, whose rulers were originally commanders of northwestern garrisons; the Sui who came from the same group; and the T'ang, who were closely related to both the Northern Chou and the Sui and had their original power base in T'ai-yüan. All were originally military regimes, and all were able to mobilize support from both the Han Chinese and the non-Han worlds.

The same trend continued, but with important differences: The Liao arose on the northern borders but, after acquiring an important foothold in China, decided against serious conquest. The Chin arose from being a dependent people on the northern border of the Liao's Chinese-style empire. The Mongols, who are often treated as *sui generis*, had been as we shall see later frontier dependents of the Chin for many years before Temüjin's rise to power. The difference in the case of the Jurchen and Mongols was that after the tenth century the frontier itself had moved: The outer frontier of empire to which the Chin and the Mongols related was not the traditional frontier of the Chinese world, or the frontier between the Liao and Chin and the Sung, but that of the "extended Chinese world" brought into being by the Khitan conquests in Mongolia, Liaoning, Kirin, and Heilungkiang and their establishment there of a state and a system of border relationships based on the T'ang Chinese model. All these peoples came to power not as strangers and complete outsiders in the Chinese system, but after long having been a part of it. Living on the fringes they were perhaps better acquainted with the provincial border than with the real centers of dynastic power and culture, but to some degree they were participants nevertheless.