

Song Dynasty Culture: Political Crisis and the Great Turn

The Song Dynasty, like the Zhou and the Han, is a dynasty whose history is split in two. The dates of the dynasty are 960-1279, but in 1127, an invasion of North China by a nomad people called the Jurchens forced the Song court to flee to the South, and from that year to the dynasty's end, China was divided in two, with the Jurchens presiding over North China from their capital near modern Beijing, and the Chinese Song court based in the city of Hangzhou, near the Yangzi River delta. The two eras of the Song are distinguished in the historical records by being assigned the names "Northern Song" and "Southern Song."

The early Song state

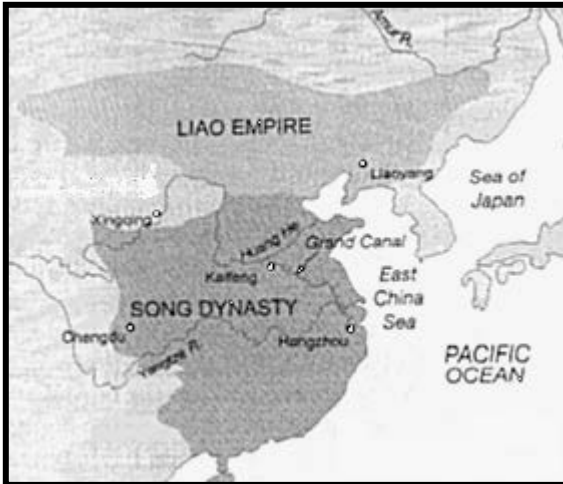
The Five Dynasties and the founding of the Song. During the decades following the fall of the Tang, control of China was deeply fragmented. In North China, five successive ruling houses, which were little more than warlord military powers, controlled most of the Yellow River valley region, while in the South, a different array of ten states existed during the period (which is therefore sometimes called the period of "five dynasties and ten kingdoms"). North China faced the particular pressure of military incursions by non-Chinese peoples of the northern steppe; among these, a Mongol tribe known as the Khitans were the greatest threat.

In 960, a general of one of the Northern states, Zhao Kuangyin, mutinied against his government, and led his army in a series of conquests that ultimately resulted

in the reunification of China. He became the founder of the Song Dynasty.

While the Song is considered one of China's great eras, the Song state never matched the Han or Tang in terms of military strength and the expanse of empire the imperial house controlled. In establishing a reunified China, the Song founders recognized that the Khitans represented too great a military threat to overcome, and they

<i>Shang</i>	c. 1700 – 1045 BCE
<i>Zhou</i>	1045 – 256 BCE
<i>Qin</i>	221 – 208 BCE
<i>Han</i>	206 BCE – 220 CE
"Six Dynasties"	220 – 589
<i>Sui</i>	589 – 617
<i>Tang</i>	618 – 907
"Five Dynasties"	907 – 960
Song	960 – 1279 ◀
NORTHERN SONG 960-1127	
SOUTHERN SONG 1127-1279	
<i>Yuan</i>	1279 – 1368
<i>Ming</i>	1368 – 1644
<i>Qing</i>	1644 – 1911



settled for a compromise solution, focusing on establishing a flourishing state within the confines of the heartland of China, giving up those regions of the Han and Tang empires that lay deep in Central Asia or on the northern steppe. Many of these territories came under the control of the Khitans, who established their own, non-Chinese dynasty, called the Liao. (Much of the Central Asian corridor came under the control of a different people, Tanguts, who established a state known as Xixia in that region.) The Liao Dynasty endured almost to the end of the Northern Song era as a strong force on China's borders; ultimately, the Khitan Liao was toppled by the Jurchens, who conquered the Liao in 1125, on their way to occupying all of North China.

From the start, then, the Song state differed from its great predecessors in its lack of expansionist ambitions, and its focus on the development of a civil state whose success could be sustained.

The expansion of commerce under the Northern Song. The Song founders established their court at a city that had not previously served as a dynastic capital. The city of Kaifeng lay in China's midlands, just south of the Yellow River. The decision to take Kaifeng as a base rather than the Tang capital of Chang'an reflected a change in the circumstances and goals of the dynasty. Chang'an had been considered ideal by the Tang because of its status as the terminus of the "Silk Route," the channel of foreign trade through Central Asia, and because of its strong military defensibility. The new Song government was far less interested in these advantages. Kaifeng was better suited to Song goals because it had become a terminus of the Grand Canal – its connection by canal with the southern urban center of Hangzhou made it a focus of *internal* commerce. The Song aspired to focus on building the wealth and social cohesion of the heartland regions of China, and a capital located at Kaifeng was ideal for these purposes.

For almost 1000 years, since the disastrous Yellow River floods of the early first century, the population of China had been gradually shifting from the fertile but dry lands of the North towards the South, a region characterized by a warm, moist climate and by a multitude of naturally navigable waterways. This shift accelerated during the peaceful years of the early Song, as farmers sought to open new lands in the South on which to

grow rice, which was becoming increasingly popular throughout China, and also to produce other crops that Northerners would find exotic and attractive, such as tea. In the South, crops could be grown year round, and Major North-South canals fostered a lively inter-regional trade that heated China's economy to levels unseen before in the world. The South became particularly wealthy. Farming populations began to grow at spectacular rates, and enormously wealthy merchant families began to purchase large tracts of land, rent them out to peasant tenants, collect high rents, and use their wealth to gather together in increasingly large urban centers, where the upper classes lived in remarkable luxury. The growth of some of the largest Chinese cities, such as Guangzhou (Canton) and Nanjing, dates from this period.

The Examination System

By the time of the Song, the civil service examination system had become so central to the Chinese state that it was, in many ways, the cultural focus of all who aspired to success. Even the growing merchant class, which was, by policy, banned from participating in the exams because their profession, based on self-serving "greed" for profit, was considered intrinsically immoral, looked for ways to have some of their sons shed the merchant class designation in order that the family could become members of the most prestigious class in society: the official class. Because it was during the Song that the exam system fully matured into the form it was to carry into the early twentieth century, it is appropriate to step back here and make an overview of the history and nature of the system.

Although the intricacies of the examination system were endless, its basic structure was simple. Throughout the period from about 589 to 1905, the central imperial government held massive exams at the various capitals of China every three years. Those who performed best on these exams earned the right to receive government positions; the specific position was determined through a combination of exam scores, personal influence, and available openings. To select the thousands of young men (and men *only*) who could compete for these exams, lower level tests were administered annually at provincial and county levels. The aspiring young man could expect to spend several years moving upward through this pyramid of exams--that is, assuming that he was successful at the lower levels: most were not.

The exam system in China was born as early as 100 BCE, soon after the time that the Han Dynasty Emperor Wu accepted the proposals of his courtier Dong Zhongshu and established Confucianism as state orthodoxy. It is recorded that the emperor himself conducted the earliest exams, posing questions to the graduates of the state academy and

determining their role in government on the basis of their replies. Although some sort of examination procedures were used at intervals during the Han and then later in some of the many kingdoms of the Six Dynasties period, the exam system as we usually think of it did not become fully institutionalized until the short-lived Sui Dynasty (589-617) brought an end to China's medieval period of disunity and reinstated a Confucian pattern as the basis of revived centralized government. From that time until this century, the exam system was central to government in China. Although the nature of the exams changed over time, the system was intrinsically a Confucian one--exam papers were no place to demonstrate one's Daoist or Buddhist insights.

Preparation for the Examinations. Preparation for the tests began at an early age and could continue for many years; in some cases, men spent their entire lives attempting to pass the exams (which could be taken any number of times). Successful candidates were rewarded with great prestige. Their families could boast that they belonged to the sole recognized nation-wide elite, and were permitted to fly a special flag at the gates of their family compounds. They could expect that their successful son would bring to the family all the benefits that Confucian education, public service, and deeply entrenched customs of bribery could provide. Although the examinations were open to any adult male, regardless of birth, in practice families whose members had already achieved high rank through the examinations were at a tremendous advantage in preparing the next generation for success. It was such families who usually possessed the resources that allowed them to excuse their children from all economic contributions to the household in order that they might spend a dozen years or more devoting themselves solely to the study of examination texts.

There were a number of different types of examination tracks open to young men. The most important was the Confucian civil service examination, which gave men access to the highest level of government posts. These exams were based on a thorough mastery of the extensive corpus of Confucian classical texts, with their voluminous commentaries, of political essays composed by exemplary Confucians of the post-Classical era, and of the arts of poetry, calligraphy, and essay composition that marked one as a cultivated member of the Chinese intellectual elite.

The intensity of this educational process can be suggested by a quantitative measure concerning only the matter of Confucian classical texts. In addition to a very wide knowledge of the texts and their commentaries, exam candidates were expected to know a certain core group of these texts *by heart*. The texts that needed to be memorized

included the following group, listed below with the total number of words, or Chinese characters, that they include:

<i>The Analects</i>	11,705
<i>The Mencius</i>	34,685
<i>The Yijing</i>	24,107
<i>The Book of Documents</i>	25,700
<i>The Book of Poetry</i>	39,234
<i>The Book of Rites</i>	99,010
<i>The Zuo zhuan</i>	196,845

The total comes to well over 400,000 words, roughly the equivalent of memorizing a book of 1,000 pages word-perfect. And this was just for starters! A never ending stream of commentaries, histories, poetry and so forth would demand unceasing attention for all the years of a student's youth, and preparation for the highly artificial literary styles demanded by ossified examination formats ensured that when a student wasn't memorizing texts, he was trying to master poetic rhyme schemes or baroque essay formats that would please the critical eye of future examiners.

Social Consequences of the Exam Curriculum. The imperative of rote learning that permeated the education of Chinese youths was symptomatic of the authoritarian character of the entire system of Confucian education. Although students read the *Analects* of Confucius and heard him state plainly there that he was not "one who studied much and memorized what he had studied," and saw that Confucius challenged the legitimacy of virtually every power holder of his day, the overall thrust of Confucianism, as presented to young boys, stressed the primacy of the Three Bonds: obedience to father, elders, and rulers. This was a primary lesson instilled in every child aspiring to become a member of the ruling class of China, and although a significant number of men were able to overcome this call to political docility in their maturity, the overall cast it lent to the bureaucratic government of China was a high tolerance for imperial autocracy and fear of innovation.

This tendency undermined one of the most progressive features of the examination system--the fact that the institution of government appointment through examination made access to wealth and power dependent upon intellectual merit rather than on the whim of the ruler or personal connections at court. The government system of China is often referred to as a "meritocracy," and this is one of China's most celebrated glories. However, the intellectual "merit" that earned young men promotion was not

necessarily the type of creative or independent achievement that we would tend to deem appropriate for the highest levels of public responsibility.

The intensity of textual study that was required to rise from the lowest educational levels to candidacy for the examinations was so great that it formed an effective barrier to most children. In some cases, this was simply a matter of intellectual talent or an ability to settle down and study hour after hour, year after year (not a quality we associate with children). More often, it was simply a matter of economics. Only a small percentage of the households of China could afford to spare a son to full-time study for the entire period of his life at home. This fact worked against another of the most progressive features of the examination system--its openness. In theory, with only a few exceptions (such as the exclusion of merchant families from candidacy during certain periods), social mobility through competitive examination was available to the sons of all families, down to the lowliest peasants. While it is true that talented sons of impoverished families somehow scrimped their way through to expertise and high rank frequently enough to maintain the meaningfulness of the exam system's egalitarian promise, the great majority of successful candidates always came from privileged families in the wealthiest regions of China.

Exams and the Confucian Esprit de Corps. One of the unique features of Chinese society that resulted from the exam system was the fact that members of the ruling bureaucracy from the sixth century on shared a common experience of great intensity that formed an important bond among them. While in many traditional societies, members of a single generation might share certain sorts of military training or experiences, or in smaller social groups might undergo some other type of rite of initiation, China was unique among traditional cultures in subjecting its large governing elite to an intellectual initiation such as the exam system.

Every three years, young men of promise would flock to the capital city, find lodging in that sophisticated and strange place, and encounter hundreds of other young men from all parts of the empire similarly displaced in the hope of lifelong advancement. During the period leading up to the exams, candidates, who were often on their own for the first time in their lives, would form intense friendships, friendships which might later form a network of government contacts. Many features of Chinese political history are best explained only after one has examined lists of triennial examination candidates and discovered which political actors were linked by comradeship dating to their exam days. Moreover, exam graduates also formed important relationships with their examiners, and men who performed outstandingly on the exams could expect that their examiners would

become lifelong patrons who would serve as surrogate fathers within the Confucian bureaucracy.

The function of the exams as a socializing experience was enhanced by the exhausting nature of the metropolitan tests. The entire process stretched over eight days, and was permeated by elaborate ritual ceremonies. The examinees spent days at a time locked in tiny examination cells which stretched over several acres in prison-like rows, and were expected to write all day and all night, squinting under the light of their cubicle candles.

Given the stress of these terrible conditions, a rich body of folklore grew around the exams, reinforcing their impact upon society and the men who had to endure them. Candidates who entered their cells had heard how the ghosts of failed candidates haunted the testing grounds in the night, and it was not unknown for men's courage to break; sometimes a hapless candidate would be found hanging in his cell at dawn, his undistinguished exam paper left incomplete.

Education and Governmental Responsibility. Perhaps the greatest irony of the civil service examination system in China is that in many respects, despite the praiseworthy principle of appointment by competitive examination, the system was defective because the exams tested students for the wrong skills. It was a fundamental tenet of the time that mastery of Confucian moral texts, of poetic forms, and of the rhetoric of canonical commentary uniquely equipped a man to govern others. To us, it seems self-evident that this is not true.

Successful graduates of the exam system faced certain immediate problems to which they were ill suited to respond. Graduates were often posted to low level positions in the provinces where they assumed duties at the level of the county magistrate. There, they were responsible for such duties as tax collection, water conservation, agricultural enhancement, legal administration, and management of their own county offices, called *yamen*. Typically, they faced certain handicaps. First of all, their jurisdictions generally extended over populations of perhaps forty to fifty thousand people, and they were supplied with no assistance from the central government. Magistrates were responsible for hiring *yamen* staff from local people. Because there was a "rule of avoidance" that ensured that no official would ever be appointed to a post in his home district (to avoid problems of favoritism), a new officer from the capital would be entirely unfamiliar with the population from which he had to select his assistants. Frequently, when young men were posted far from their home counties, they were not even able to understand the local

dialects of the people they governed! Moreover, the budget of a magistrate was a very limited one--his salary was small and he was provided with virtually no discretionary funds.

Basically, young men fresh from their Confucian studies were completely untrained in the skills that would allow them to succeed under such conditions unless they had received informal instruction from family members or acquaintances who had been immersed in government. It was quite common for such men to govern incompetently. Some resorted to brutal authoritarian measures, others exhausted themselves issuing moral proclamations urging their people to behave properly (not a very effective strategy). Most often, magistrates fell under the influence of powerful local families, who provided them with “officers” who were skilled in using coercion to extract taxes from peasants and confessions from “criminals.” By relying on such local bullies, a magistrate could ensure that he could forward to the central government the revenues the emperor demanded and that he could submit records of court proceedings demonstrating his sagely ability to bring the guilty to justice and keep order in his district. Inevitably, such patterns of conduct also involved habits of bribery and other forms of corruption that were endemic in the Chinese political system (and remain so today).

Periodically, there were reform initiatives that proposed to make the contents of the exams more relevant to the practical skills necessary for government. But these movements were rarely successful. The men who occupied high office and served as the examiners of the next generation had invested their entire identities in the education of their youth--they were not likely to approve of any radical change in standards or content to the exams. In most cases, the most revolutionary changes merely involved the authorization of a more “modern” or pragmatically oriented set of commentaries to the Confucian classics than those that had been employed previously. While in some cases this might have allowed examiners to give added weight to answers that suggested some grasp of the intricacies of practical governance, this was not always the result. The fourteenth century certification of the commentaries of the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi’s as orthodox resulted in the opposite result. Zhu Xi was a brilliant metaphysician--his theories of the cosmos and its relation to man’s ethical tendencies represent a wonderful example of philosophical imagination – but when successful candidates sought to apply Zhu’s cosmic theories of Heavenly Principle, material force, and the moral intuitions of the sage heart to the problems of tax collection, flood control, and militia organization, they sometimes found that he was a little sketchy on the details.

The Political Struggles of the Eleventh Century

“Cultural Confucianism.” The early Song leaders placed great emphasis on civil government, as opposed to military, and part of this involved active sponsorship of education and scholarship. The term for the civil aspects of society, *wen*, denoted far more than the non-military features of the state. *Wen* denoted the patterns of art and social refinement of the past, and the goal of perfecting “*wen* society” was not pictured in economic terms, it expressed the ambition to create a cultural flourishing that would reflect the essence of sage wisdom, as that was portrayed in the Confucian canonical texts.

In pursuit of this goal, the imperial court commissioned massive compilations of literary compendia, encyclopedias, and histories, that could bring together the now thousand year-old traditions of the “Confucian” state. Scholarship – pure scholarship – enjoyed a prestige beyond anything seen in past eras. The government’s interest in recruiting scholar-officials through the exam system became increasingly focused on the credentials of scholarship, an ideal that naturally now incorporated the artistic elements of poetry and, increasingly, calligraphy and painting, that had become central to the profile of the *literatus*.

In response to this direction of government ambition, each generation of examination candidates seemed to produce leading graduates whose scholarly virtuosity reached new heights. The intellectual history of the early Song is peopled by men whose encyclopedic knowledge and literary skill remain unsurpassed in later Chinese history. Since one’s standing in the examination results determined the level at which one’s official career would begin, many of these outstanding scholars became leaders of government, and naturally, they perpetuated this trend to demand increasingly deep scholarly credentials for the next generation of exam candidates.

One of the outstanding examples of this type of Confucian virtuoso was Sima Guang (1019-86), who became one of the main figures in the most devastating factional battle in the history of Chinese politics – a battle that so weakened the dynasty that it set the stage for its inability to resist the invasions of 1127 and the loss of North China.

Sima Guang was an outstanding scholar as a young man, and attained the highest examination degree at the age of only nineteen. His official career was a success from the start, and he ultimately rose to the position of Prime Minister, the highest civil service office in Song China. As a high minister, he steered the government towards highly conservative policies, designed to reinforce the Confucian stress on personal virtue,

reflected in mastery of canonical and historical texts, as the central criterion for public leadership.

But this is not what Sima Guang is best known for in Chinese history. When not attending to the heavy duties of his high offices, Sima Guang devoted himself to the compilation of a history of imperial China that could become the standard for educating all future emperors, and all young men aspiring to official careers. Sima Guang's text, *The Comprehensive Mirror for Governance*, was not only authoritative, it was and remains the among the largest historical texts ever compiled, stretching over twenty volumes in modern editions.*

Sima Guang's culturally conservative approach to government represented the mainstream view among the elite of the Northern Song. Their focus was entirely on raising the scholarly and moral level of the highest tier of government leaders, and qualifications for leadership were conceived entirely in cultural terms. They were far less focused on the technical knowledge that might be needed to encourage and sustain the development of Song society in terms of economic growth, infrastructure building, and the maintenance of a capable military defense. Conservative Northern Song leaders of this type articulated a vision of *literati* excellence that may be called "Cultural Confucianism," for its emphasis on the link between governance and mastery of China's cultural tradition.

The issues of competence and corruption. As we have noted before, while the Han Dynasty decision to credential officers of state through a system of Confucian education ensured that government was directed by literate and generally thoughtful men, chosen on the basis of merit, the nature of the Confucian curriculum meant that these officials were not often trained to address directly the practical concerns of governance. These matters included both the demands directly made by the imperial Legalist state, including tax collection and law enforcement, and also a range of issues that varied according local needs: agriculture and water conservancy, maintenance of commercial roads or waterways, supervision of market practices, and so forth. These were not matters that were covered in any detail in the Confucian curriculum.

Although all Chinese governments exercised the absolute power that Legalism prescribed, against which subjects had little or no defense, the degree to which the government controlled society was, in fact, significantly limited by the size of the centrally appointed government, which was actually quite small by modern standards.

* In this respect, Sima Guang resembles a Western conservative politician, known both for his accomplishments as Prime Minister and as author of voluminous, highly regarded histories: Winston Churchill.

Although there was a lavish court establishment, much of it staffed by imperial favorites, eunuchs, and others who were not products of the exam system, the actual number of men who were appointed to official position with jurisdiction over the subjects of the realm was generally in the neighborhood of forty thousand. This group of men, exam graduates, aspired to high office in the central government at the capital, but their initial postings, and for many, the only type of appointment they received, were to serve as local “magistrates,” that is, as the sole representatives of the central government in the thousands of small counties of China. From these positions, they might rise to higher status on the local level, for example, a “prefect,” who administered a major urban center or cluster of rural counties, or to a major appointment outside the capital as a provincial governor – and of course, most hoped to rise to positions at the capital. However, the key representatives of the government were truly the lower-level local magistrates – they did not set policy, but they had to implement it, and do so in a way that was responsive to local needs.

Apart from the fact that their Confucian training provided the men who served as magistrates with few tools to respond to the practical needs of office, there were other major obstacles to success. In order to guard against corruption, there was an inflexible “rule of avoidance” that forbade the appointment of any magistrate to the district from which he himself came. Consequently, many young exam graduates found themselves sent to a remote area of the empire, where they were unfamiliar with the people, the customs, and often even with the spoken language. There, without any other officers of state in their district, they attempted to manage the *yamen* (magistrate’s office), coordinate the police, manage tax collection, act as investigator and judge in criminal and civil court cases, and administer a range of other tasks that varied with their district.

Obviously, this was not a task a single person could accomplish without help, and, indeed, the government included in the salary of the magistrate funds to hire a *yamen* staff and police force that could implement his orders. Unfortunately, there was no exam system for these appointments, and little way for a magistrate to determine which men of his district were appropriate for these appointments. Magistrates served in their district for only a few years at a time, and as they rotated, they tended to retain the staff hired by their predecessors. But where did these “*yamen* runners” come from.

Basically, the staff of the *yamen* was drawn from or recommended by the most powerful families in the district. These were generally landholding families, often called “gentry,” who had amassed wealth and local prestige through merchant activities, association with government officials – sometimes their own sons were exam graduates – or successful careers in various criminal activities. All too often, especially in rural

districts, local society was dominated by families who used their wealth and reputations to bully the peasants and coerce from them high rents for land, various tribute payments, and unpaid forms of service. When a magistrate arrived to represent the central government, he was, in a sense, in competition with a local power structure that was designed not to serve the government, but to serve the local elite. And the staff he was provided with to help him compete with the local elite was often put forward by and beholden to that same local elite. Frequently, local families underwrote the costs of hiring personnel, since the magistrate's funds were very limited, and it was in the interest of the families to have their agents infiltrate the *yamen*.

Consequently, there were two basic types of gaps that existed at the level of local government, where imperial policy was most directly implemented. First, the training of the officers of state did not closely match the practical challenges of governance that they faced. Second, the personnel who comprised what we call the "subbureaucracy" was not aligned with the goals of the state, and were often, in fact, agents of a corrupt local power structure.

As the Cultural Confucians continued to raise the standards of classical scholarship demanded by the exams that qualified men for government service, the consequence was that the men who succeeded in earning government appointment were increasingly well screened for intelligence and ambition, but increasingly less familiar with the practical and technical aspects of society that they would be called upon to address once their quest for appointment was successful.

Wang Anshi's radical reform program. The eleventh century is remembered historically for the greatest policy battle in Chinese history. One side of the battle was represented by the great historian-Prime Minister Sima Guang, the leader of the Cultural Conservatives. His adversary was a man named Wang Anshi (1021-86), who is generally remembered either as the greatest of political visionaries, or as a radical and unbalanced man, who led China into a grand misadventure.

Wang Anshi's background was more modest than many of the leaders of the Cultural Conservatives. He came from a family that was well off, but not prominent, and he spent the early part of his career, after passing through the exam system, working his way up the ladder of appointment. Like Sima Guang, Wang was an independent minded scholar, but his scholarship was rather unorthodox; he tended to concentrate on Confucian texts that were not the focus of the official curriculum, and to interpret them in new and novel ways.

In the 1050s, Wang began to formulate ideas for how government policies could be radically restructured to address underlying problems he saw with the Song model. His proposals fell on deaf ears; however, he was undeterred, and continued to submit memorials (official reports) to the throne with unusual recommendations.

In 1067, a new emperor came to the throne. Known as Shenzong, he was young and ambitious; when Wang sent a memorial detailing policy proposals that he had now been polishing for a decade, the emperor was persuaded. Wang suddenly found himself Prime Minister, and he began to implement his reforms.

Wang Anshi's reforms covered a broad range of issues. Some were strictly economic: for example, he instituted an ambitious program to provide government loans to farming families who needed seed and tools, and who were being crushed by usurious interest rates being charged by local landholders. Tax remissions were converted to cash payments, rather than payments in kind, to avoid the high transportation costs entailed with shipping grain and other goods used to remit tax obligations to the capital. Wang created a bureau for the management of state finance policy, and allowed increased local autonomy for state agencies in charge of government monopolies on goods such as salt and tea. In addition, Wang developed programs for the reorganization of the military supply system, and implemented a registration system for the population to make tax collection and law enforcement more manageable.

Other reforms addressed the issues of competence and control of the sub-bureaucracy. The curriculum for the exam system was altered to introduce new, practical training aspects. A special tax was created to fund the independent government appointment of *yamen* staffs, in an attempt to give the magistrates greater ability to free themselves from dependence on local elites, and to allow them to reward effective subordinates. An appointment track was created to allow for promotion of local *yamen* staff who demonstrated ability and integrity, and Wang proposed developing exams tailored for this semi-educated group.

These reform measures met with very strong resistance from traditionally minded Confucian officials. Where Wang's policies were effective, they raised arguments on the basis of moral principle of historical precedent, where they were ineffective – and a number of them were – the opposition had ready ammunition to attack the entire enterprise. Perhaps no features of the reforms so angered traditionalists as the dilution of the Confucian exam system with elements of a practical curriculum, involving topics such as agriculture, animal husbandry, and water conservation. These mere technical arts were seen as details that could easily be managed by men fully trained in the enormous corpus of Confucian moral and historical texts. Moreover, the idea of promoting and

creating an exam track for the semi-educated members of the subbureaucracy threatened in the long run to turn government over to men whose training was entirely in the art of service to the Legalist state, without any basis in the moral authority of Confucian teachings to act as a restraint on the autocratic impulses of the imperial court.

The government effectively split into two camps on Wang's reform policies, and the controversy proved so damaging that the emperor was forced to dismiss Wang in 1076. In his place, he appointed Sima Guang, a clear signal that Cultural Confucianism had prevailed.

However, the reform movement did not die with Wang's dismissal. Four years later, Sima Guang was dismissed and Wang was recalled. In many respects, the competition between the two developing factions was reinforced by differences in the personal styles of their leaders. While Sima Guang was an exemplary orthodox Confucian *literatus*, broad in his tastes and talents, and scrupulous in his manner, Wang was a very different type of person. Not only was his scholarship unorthodox, but he was a man careless of appearance, indifferent to aesthetics (though a poet of some accomplishment), and boorish in his personal manner. These features became mixed together with policy issues in the minds of his opponents; Wang's lack of *literati* graces made him an easy target, and he and his reforms were opposed as a revival of the spirit of Qin Legalism.

Nor did the battle subside when, in 1086, Shenzong, Sima Guang, and Wang Anshi all died. Shenzong was succeeded by a child emperor, whose mother, acting as regent, enacted a radical repeal of all Wang's programs, prompting renewed activism by reformists. When the empress-regent died in 1093, another reversal of policy occurred.

As this dramatic oscillation of policy continued, the politics behind it became increasingly bitter and factionalized. The Cultural Confucians and Pragmatic Reformers were not just two groups with different policy orientations, their struggle became deeply personalized. At the point of one policy shift, the incoming faction ordered that the bodies of recently deceased political enemies be taken from their graves and flailed for their political crimes, a gesture more deeply offensive than outright murder in a culture that prized ancestors over the living.

Ultimately, this bitter factionalism contributed to a fatal weakening of the central government. While it was certainly not the only cause for the Song state's inability to resist the invasion of the Jurchen armies a quarter century later, the unhealed scars of these political battles were a major contributor to dynastic weakness, and the disaster of 1127 constituted a major blow to the authority of both the Cultural Confucian and Reformist factions of government.

Commerce, Science, and Ideology in the Southern Song

The Jurchen invasion of Northern China in 1127 was recognized by Chinese as a disaster of the first magnitude. North China was the homeland of Chinese culture, and although the South had long since become an economic and cultural region on an equal level with the North, it was still conceived of by many people as the frontier, certainly not the appropriate base for a dynasty claiming to be the successor of the Han and Tang. However, in some respects, the division of China at this point created unique positive opportunities for development, and looking back, we can see that the potential existed for China to emerge from this split far stronger than it had ever been before. This did not happen, and, in fact, China from this point on seems to enter a long period of general economic and cultural stagnation, that centuries later made it vulnerable to the depredations of Western powers.

China split in two. The Jurchens had been a growing power in the region northeast of China for many years, a region that later came to be known as Manchuria. They were a Tungusic people, originally nomads of the northern steppe, and had for some time been competitors of the Khitan Liao Dynasty. Shortly before their invasion of China, the Jurchens extinguished the Liao and founded their own dynastic state, which they called the Jin, moving their capital close to present-day Beijing. Throughout the period of the Southern Song, the Jin Dynasty ruled North China effectively.

When the Jurchen armies swept into China, the Song encountered the consequences of their general neglect of military preparedness in favor of concentration on civil governance. The government was forced to flee far south, eventually settling its capital in the city of Hangzhou, below the Yangzi delta, and a large mass of people followed their path, migrating from North to South China. This final major migration of people south capped the thousand-year trend to balance the populations of China's two main agricultural regions.



Commerce and science during the Southern Song. The influx of people into South China was actually an economic boon. While lands in the fertile North China Plain had been the heartland of Chinese agricultural production for millennia, there was a great deal of land in the South that had never been cleared for cultivation, and the settlers who fled from the invasion began to open these lands and bring them into production. Southern agriculture was based on rice, and rice had become a dietary item in great demand in the North. In the eleventh century, new strains of rice that allowed farmers to raise two crops in a season had been introduced, and now these contributed to an outburst of productivity in the expanding agricultural lands of the South.

The Song, when based at Kaifeng, had made sure that the Grand Canal was in good repair, and now, although North and South were under different jurisdictions, the canal became the central conduit for an active inter-regional trade, including not only staples from the South such as rice and tea, but a wide variety of goods that climate or traditional cultural made scarce in one region or the other.

As trade grew in volume, new devices were developed to support it. Coinage had been dramatically increased during the early Song, so that cash payments could facilitate trade. Now, with commerce reaching new levels, paper currency was developed, and new banking institutions were invented to allow for investment, credit, and cash savings.

The economic growth in the South resulted in rapid urbanization. During the Southern Song period, a number of southern cities are estimated to have housed populations close to one million – the largest cities in the world at the time. These concentrations further spurred the development of diverse markets for craft goods, such as ceramics, of which the Song craftsmen became unsurpassed masters (which is why fine porcelain is called “china” today). Another item that increased in demand was books. In response, Song artisans invented movable type and launched a printing industry unmatched in the world.

It is questionable whether the dramatic leap in agricultural output and commercial activity would have occurred without the migrations that followed the Jurchen invasions, forcing the exploitation of southern resources that had lain untouched before.

Economic activity and the rising demand for varieties of goods was a major spur to scientific and technological creativity, and the foremost historian of the history of science in China has maintained that virtually every core invention of Chinese science traces its origins or a significant innovation to the Song period.

For example, the rising output of goods in the South created incentives for the development of maritime trade, so that Chinese goods could reach new markets abroad. The old Silk Route was no longer available to the Song, and, in any event, climate

changes had made it much less hospitable to caravan travel than had been the case during the Tang. So for the first time in Chinese history, the merchant class turned towards the sea as a potential commercial highway. Responding to this need, craftsmen applied known technology to create the maritime compass, which allowed ships to navigate as far as the Red Sea, to trade with Middle Eastern markets. Shipbuilding became a major industry, and a host of inventions led to the construction of ships that were technologically advanced, adaptable to both commercial and military uses.

The need to harness the water energy of South China led to a series of inventions connected to irrigation and flood control. The military was refitted with weaponry that used a new technique for carbonizing iron: the invention of steel. Alongside the development of new financial institutions, Chinese mathematics made enormous strides, as did astronomical science – intellectual fields whose growth was facilitated by the possibility of mass produced books.

Commercial activity and the appearance of new methods of production and other technologies created the conditions favorable for speculative investment, and social historians find many of the institutions that are typically precursors of capitalist development: urban professional guilds, concentrations of wealth in socially mobile families, and liquid forms of currency.

These developments in commerce, science, and economic institutions during the Song have led scholars to question why China did not go on to make the intellectual and social breakthroughs that are associated with transformations to modernity in the Western world. If one were to take a snapshot of the world in the twelfth century, there seems no question that China would appear the only state capable of making those sorts of changes. Europe did not reach the levels of commerce and intellectual sophistication seen during the Southern Song period until centuries later. What held China back?

It is often pointed out that this may be the wrong way to ask the question: the critical changes in culture and economics that led to the Enlightenment and scientific revolution in the West may not have followed any laws of social development, and the real question should perhaps be what forces pushed Europe to develop as it did. Nevertheless, what is often called the Song “commercial revolution” is so pronounced, and the intellectual ferment surrounding it so dramatic, that, with or without reference to Europe, it is indeed disappointing to look a century or two ahead and find China having apparently regressed in both economic and scientific terms.

A number of candidates as causes for this deceleration of China’s social development have been proposed over the decades, and it is now generally acknowledged that it is very likely that no single cause decisively altered the direction China took. It has

been pointed out that in Europe, modernization was enabled in part by weak and fragmented governments being unable to constrain experiment and initiative by individuals, while in China, the universal top-down pattern of governance was dedicated to a type of social control that left far less room for economic and intellectual entrepreneurship. A related contrast is that in Europe, modernization was focused in rapidly growing urban centers that were often administered solely on local initiative, outside the purview of established state structures, whereas in China, the strongest nodes of central government control were precisely urban centers – the rapid growth of an urban community in South China during the Song brought people under stricter government control than would have otherwise been the case.

But one component of China's retreat from the brink of modernity is generally agreed to be related to abrupt changes that took place in the intellectual sphere. These changes are associated with the rise of an entirely new form of Confucian ideology, an approach that substantially rejects both the Cultural Confucianism of the conservative Northern Song establishment and the activist reform program of Wang Anshi's followers. This new ideology is called Neo-Confucianism in the West, and its impact on China's intellectual history was so dramatic that for centuries the term "Confucianism" itself was understood only in terms of this new approach, which was born amidst the factional struggles of the Northern Song, and first attracted a wide following after the invasions of 1127.

The origins of Neo-Confucianism. The source of the Neo-Confucian movement lies in the tense political atmosphere of the eleventh century. During that tumultuous century, a small group of disaffected men – two brothers, their uncle, and two family friends – withdrew from the public life that their scholarship qualified them to join and turned instead to a search for truth and values outside the press of social cares. Trained as Confucians, these five men, sometimes called the Five Masters of the Northern Song, were following a non-Confucian impulse in their act of withdrawal, and close reading of the texts they ultimately authored suggest very substantial influence from the more other-worldly philosophies of Daoism and Buddhism.

Two of the senior members of this group, Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) and Zhang Zai (1020-1077), turned away from Confucian book learning to look for some more universal basis for the Confucian value of *ren*: humaneness. Rather than seek for the ultimate source of *ren* in the minds of people or in the social institutions of sages, they looked to Heaven and the cosmos, and pictured *ren* as a life force infusing all things at their core, not just people. Very much like the early Daoist view of the *dao*, *ren* was

pictured as a cosmic direction that humans had departed from; to rejoin the way of *ren*, people had to re-immense themselves in nature, where the force of *ren* could be observed in its spontaneous operation.

Two of the junior members of this group, Zhang Zai's nephews Cheng Hao (1032-1085) and, in particular, Cheng Yi (1033-1107), built around similar ideas a more thoroughgoing cosmological system. They argued that the universe was composed of two basic components: substance or a material force, which they denoted by the term *qi*, which means energy or breath, and directional norms that guide the things of the universe to fulfill their natures, "principles," which were called *li*, a word that originally meant the natural grain of wood or stone. (This is a different word *li* from the word that denotes the Confucian idea of "ritual.") Tian, or Heaven, the guiding *dao* of the universe, is nothing other than the sum total of these *li* – the natural principles that guide the spontaneous action of the things of the world. These principles do not exist in themselves – they are the animating force of the realm of *qi*, the realm of all substances, from the densest stone to the most rarified of things, the energy we feel and the thoughts we think.

In the view of these men, the search for truth took place not in books or in the conflicted engagements of political life, the search began in solitude with the observation of the natural world of objects and the natural flow of one's mind, both of which were imbued with the Heaven-instilled dispositions of *li*.

Inspired by these ideas, the Five Masters moved away to dwell at a distance from the centers of politics. But they attracted a group of followers who made their ideas known, and who spurred them to articulate their teachings in detail, especially the two Cheng brothers, whose writings show that the simple dualism of *li* and *qi* – principle and material force – can be the basis of a complex and interesting philosophy, which links ethical doctrine seamlessly with speculation about the metaphysical structure of the universe. The "academy" of the Five Masters became a well known phenomenon during the Northern Song.

However, the teachings of these men remained no more than a peripheral curiosity during their lifetimes. After all, the status of Confucianism in Chinese society lay very much with the political role it had played since the Han, the prestige of the scholar-official, and the reverence which its vast corpus of canonical texts commanded. The Five Masters largely bypassed the texts – almost bypassed Confucius! – and their other-worldly approach did not seem to be a promising point of entry for scholars ambitious for successful careers.

The ideas of the Five Masters probably would have become an interesting footnote in the history of Chinese philosophy had not the invasion of 1127 created a

massive intellectual crisis in China, and had their work not shortly thereafter been discovered by one of the greatest intellects of Chinese history.

Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian synthesis. When North China fell to the Jurchens, the legitimacy of the two major approaches to Confucianism was called into question by the association between their factional battles and the dynasty's failure. While policy debates at court focused on the issue of whether or not to attempt to recover the North militarily, the intellectual climate, so vibrant during the eleventh century, was adrift.

In this vacuum, a young scholar, Zhu Xi (1130-1200), born shortly after the invasion to a family with a southern background, turned to search for new alternatives and discovered the works of the Five Masters. The original works of these men had been unsystematic, and the ideas of the various thinkers included many inconsistencies, Zhu was able to discern systematic themes, among them the basic ideas outlined in the last section. He set about compiling the writings of the Five Masters, editing and collating them in such a way that all their major ideas could be presented together with coherence. Then Zhu used this as the basis of his own philosophical vision, which, through his long life, he expressed in numerous writings, and in recorded conversations with the many disciples he came to have.

The philosophical distance between Zhu's Confucianism and the ethical writings recorded in the *Analecets* and other Classical texts is hard to overstate. But the Zhu was a formidable scholar, much more deeply schooled in ancient texts than the Five Masters, and by writing new and extensive commentaries on a wide range of canonical texts, Zhu provided a pathway whereby students could read his perspective directly into the foundational works of Confucianism. Despite the fact that Zhu was continuing the work of a group of thinkers who withdrew from practical affairs and developed their thinking largely independent of the textual tradition, Zhu differed from them in recommending the traditional route to knowledge: study and social engagement. He wrote:

There is no better way to penetrate principle to the utmost than to pay attention to everything in our reading of books and handling of affairs. Although there may not seem to be substantial progress, nevertheless after a long period of accumulation, without realizing it, one will have become saturated with principle, and achieve harmony and understanding.

Not only did Zhu apply this to the traditional textual canon of Confucianism, in a powerful bow to the heirs of Cultural Confucianism, Zhu re-edited Sima Guang's massive *Comprehensive Mirror*, producing an abridgement that both made Sima's work

appropriate for inclusion in the standard curriculum, and that linked Sima's imprimatur with Zhu Xi's new approach to Confucian understanding. Unlike the Five Masters, Zhu specifically tailored the presentation of his ideas so that they could compete with the standard "textbook" approaches through which exam candidates were trained.

But like the Five Masters, the thrust of Zhu's system pointed people away from the world of affairs and towards the study of cosmic forces and their operation in the natural world, and the spontaneous ethical responses of people. He elaborated a complex cosmology to articulate the way in which the twin forces of "principle" and "material force" operated.

The Great Ultimate, through movement, generates the force of Yang. When its activity reaches its limit, it becomes tranquil and thus generates the force of Yin. By the transformation of Yang and its union with Yin, the Five Forces arise: Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth. It is man alone who receives them in their highest excellence. The five moral principles of his nature are aroused by, and react to, the external world, and engage in activity. Good and bad are distinguished and human affairs take their place.

Within this cosmic vision, Zhu portrayed the human quest for knowledge as, first and foremost, a transcendental one, clearly influenced by the approaches of more other-worldly, quietist schools of Daoism and Buddhism.

The essential path is to concentrate on one thing. This means having no desires. Having no desires, one is vacuous while tranquil and straightforward in action. Being vacuous while tranquil, one becomes intelligent and penetrating; being straightforward in action, one becomes impartial, and hence all-embracing.

The man of *ren* forms one body with all things without any differentiation. Righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and faithfulness are all expressions of *ren*. As *ren* is nourished, self and other are identified.

There were several reasons why Zhu's ideas were received with enthusiasm by a significant number of scholars. First, they offered a new interpretation of Confucianism that seemed able to unite the corpus of traditional texts with an approach untainted by any connection with the fruitless battles that had brought the Northern Song to ruin. Second, they empowered individual scholars and young men seriously hoping to achieve the *junzi* ideal a vision of self-improvement that did not depend on government or on the luck of a political career. Finally, Zhu's approach, and the example of its application which he provided through his vast commentarial writings, brought coherence to the encyclopedic mass of Confucian texts that confronted students, and reduced their endless array of particular statements to a very limited number of easily grasped themes. Perhaps not

surprisingly, the abridger of Sima Guang's overwhelming history of China was also a great simplifier of the meanings and lessons of the Classical canon.

During Zhu Xi's lifetime, his ideas attracted a following, but did not the approval of the imperial throne or the most powerful Confucians in the government. This was due, in large part, to the fact that Zhu was a strident proponent of a military counter-invasion of the occupied territories of the North, an option that the government had elected not to take. Zhu's contrarian political views led him to keep a distance from practical involvement in the government, and despite his prominence as a scholar and exam graduate, he used the excuse of ill health and other reasons repeatedly to decline any call for service in official positions. This made Zhu anathema to the government, and for a time, his works were actually banned. However, after his death, their popularity continued to grow, and shortly after the fall of the Southern Song, the successor Yuan Dynasty proclaimed Zhu's ideas acceptable in examination responses, and authorized his commentaries of Classical works as the standard editions for exam studies.

Zhu Xi's interpretations remained the basis for exam preparation thereafter, and so thorough was their influence that not until the advent of the Qing Dynasty in 1644 did some scholars begin an active program of trying to recover the pre-Zhu Xi understanding of early Confucian traditions. Zhu's influence on Confucian understanding was as profound as the influence of the Protestant reformation on the understanding of Christianity among its followers – more profound, really, because no equivalent of a pre-Zhu Xi “Catholic church” remained in existence to offer competing interpretations. For several centuries, it was understood that the Five Masters and Zhu Xi had not formulated a new approach to Confucianism, they had merely rediscovered the lost “original” message that Confucius had articulated.

The effects of Neo-Confucianism. While no single cause can account for the manner in which Chinese society seemed to back away from the modernism that seemed ready to emerge during the Song, the advent of Neo-Confucianism was clearly a factor. Although it might seem at first that the charge to seek our Heavenly *li*, principles, in the natural world might lead towards a search for what Western science came to construe as natural laws that govern the action of matter, Neo-Confucianism was insistent that the principles to be found were ethical ones, regularities that would be shared by both the natural world and the spontaneous impulses of the human heart. The short classical text *The Great Learning*, which we encountered earlier, was to be a basic guide to this quest (the version we use of that text today is the product of brilliant scholarly editing by Zhu Xi).

Consequently, the immersion in nature that Neo-Confucianism actually inspired had less to do with scientifically objective observation, and more to do with a withdrawal away from the social world into the quiet of nature, where one could more effectively explore one's own heart for the principles of Heaven. During the later Ming Dynasty, a Neo-Confucian who became celebrated equally with Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming (1472-1529), described his experience of seeking principles from things this way:

When I was young, my friend Qian and I discussed the idea that to become a sage or a worthy man, one must investigate all the things of the world. . . . [To begin,] I attempted to investigate the principles in the bamboo in front of the pavilion. From morning till night, I was unable to find the principles in the bamboo. On the seventh day I became sick. . . . After I had lived among the barbarians for three years I understood what all this meant. There is really nothing in the world of things to investigate. The effort is only to be carried out with reference to one's body and mind.

In truth, while Song China had made great strides in the study of mathematics, neither theoretical math nor the concepts of scientific theory based on math had ever been part of Confucian education. Lacking any notion that natural structure and action could be represented through reduction to mathematical formulas, Neo-Confucians lacked key tools to discover through observation the foundations on which natural science and technological discovery were based in the West.

Earlier, Neo-Confucianism was compared in its influence to the Protestant movement in Europe. The comparison also presents an important contrast. Since the analyses of the 19th century sociologist Max Weber, it has been argued by social historians that there was an intimate connection between the rise of Protestantism and the birth of capitalism in Europe. Early Protestant teachings developed strong doctrines of personal responsibility, and linked hard work and the pursuit of wealth in this world to grace and the rewards of Heaven in the next. Neo-Confucianism, in contrast, strengthened the traditional Confucian bias against the pursuit of personal wealth, condemning merchant activity as selfish greed and the sign of a mind so "muddied" that the clarity of Heavenly principle was obscured. Its strengthened the idealistic component of ethical self-cultivation, and weakened the stress on material accomplishments. Once Neo-Confucianism had been endorsed as the orthodox viewpoint for the state civil service examinations, its social effects were very much opposite those of Protestantism in Europe.

To the degree that the rise of Neo-Confucianism may have contributed to the deceleration of the Song development towards a capitalist economy and scientific revolution, it may be viewed as a critical secondary effect of the political trauma of the

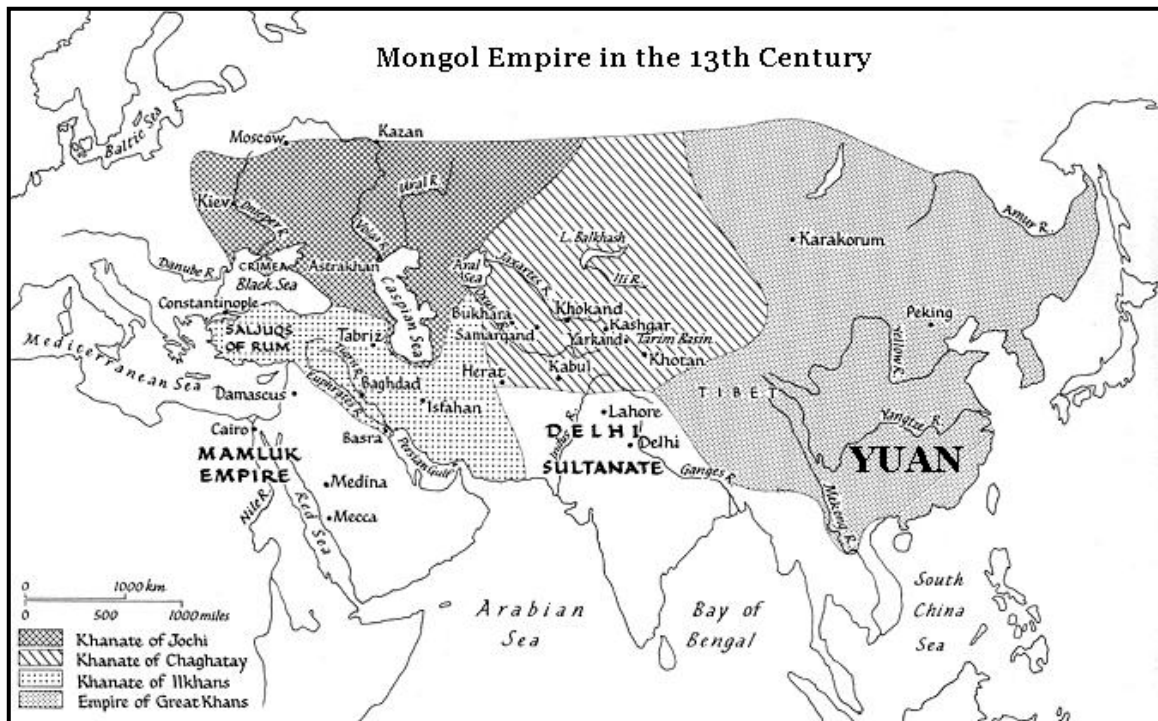
eleventh century factional struggle between the Cultural and Reformist wings of the Confucian establishment.

The Mongol invasions and the end of the Song. During the last century of the Song Dynasty, forces were gathering on the northern Asian steppe that were to have dramatic world consequences, affecting the shape of Chinese history. This was the period when the Mongol people were brought together under the leadership of Genghis Khan (or Chinggis Khan, 1165-1227) and his successors and launched lightning cavalry attacks on both East Asia and Eastern Europe, amassing for a brief time the most far flung empire that the world has ever seen.

In 1226, the Mongol armies brought down the empire the Xixia state that had controlled the Central Asian corridor throughout the Song, and following this, they turned their attention to the Jurchen Jin Dynasty, exerting pressure from the north. To create a more secure military buffer, the Jin moved their capital from Beijing to the old Northern Song capital of Kaifeng, south of the Yellow River, but it was to no avail. In 1234, the Mongols brought an end to Jurchen rule in North China.

Genghis Khan's grandson, Khubilai Khan (1215-94) became the leader of the Mongol forces in the east in 1260. He established a capital in Beijing, and determined to conquer all China and rule there as emperor. In 1271, he proclaimed the establishment of a new dynasty, the Yuan, and began a campaign of conquest, aiming south.

The Mongols may have been the most dominant military phenomenon until the atomic bomb. Their army was composed entirely of cavalry, and training on the wild steppe had toughened both horsemen and horses to travel enormous distances at great speed. Warriors learned to sleep in the saddle and to tap their horses' veins for blood when food was scarce. The tradition of Mongol warfare was raiding, and their pattern was to appear seemingly from out of nowhere, attacking settlements, towns, and cities with terrific ruthlessness, as much intent upon terror as conquest and loot. In Europe, they were widely believed to be a scourge sent from God, and during the thirteenth century, their conquests there extended as far west as Hungary and Poland. In the Middle East they occupied the lands of modern Iran and Iraq, extending west through most of Turkey.



The Southern Song military had been strengthened since the time of the Jurchen invasions, but it was not equipped to defend against the type of warfare launched by Mongol armies under Khubilai. In 1279, the Song Dynasty fell to the invading armies in what was probably the bloodiest war ever witnessed on Chinese territory. Census figures that can provide the basis for population estimates for the period suggest that China's population, which had burgeoned during the Song, was cut by as much as one-third, from about 120 million to 80 million, as a result of the Mongol incursions and the social chaos that followed them. Any analysis of why China did not follow the Song commercial revolution with the further development of modern institutions must take into account the devastating setback that was represented by the wars that brought an end to the Song.