The Reunification of China

Peace through War under the Song Dynasty

PETER LORGE

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The Song dynasty (960–1279) has been characterized by its pre-eminent civil culture and military weakness. This ground-breaking work demonstrates that the civil dominance of the eleventh century was the product of a half century of continuous warfare and ruthless political infighting. The spectacular culture of the eleventh century, one of the high points in Chinese history, was built on the bloody foundation of the conquests of the tenth century. Peter Lorge examines how, rather than a planned and inevitable reunification of the Chinese empire, the foundation of the Song was an uncertain undertaking, dependent upon highly contingent battles, both military and political, whose outcome was always in doubt. Song civil culture grew out of the successful military campaigns that created the dynasty and, as the need for war and armies diminished, the need for civil officials grew. The Song dynasty's successful waging of war led ultimately to peace.

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1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The demilitarization of the Song founding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

War and personal politics

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

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

strong. But it was not clear whether the power that Taizu had personally acquired would transfer to his successor.

Taizong succeeded to the throne without any of the accumulated political or military capital of his elder brother, Taizu. His succession also had something of the flavor of a *coup d'etat* about it, albeit within the Zhao family, both because his claim that Taizu intended him to succeed in place of Taizu's own sons was suspect, and because many believed that he was responsible for Taizu's early death.[15] But Taizong's goal as emperor was much simpler than his brother's. He wanted to take control of the empire his brother had already built, not construct a new one. Taizong's problem, then, was to find a way to claim Taizu's legacy.

War was the obvious answer. Taizong used a campaign against the Northern Han kingdom to place himself directly in command of his brother's most powerful generals, a position of supreme command he had never before held, and to prove, by success in war, his fitness to be emperor. Although the campaign was only a partial victory, Taizong was now sufficiently blooded, and his generals sufficiently embarrassed by their part in the failure, to concentrate his energies on internal political consolidation. Seven years later, he sent a second expedition to take the Sixteen Prefectures that was similarly defeated.[16] While the failure of the second campaign did not unduly discomfit Taizong, it strongly suggested to most court officials that the Song army was incapable of taking the Sixteen Prefectures and generated some well-deserved hostility on the part of the Liao.

Zhenzong came to the throne without any of the political uncertainty of either his uncle or his father. War, which for Taizu and Taizong had been a useful political tool, was only a dangerous problem for Zhenzong. War with the Liao seemed to threaten the existence of the empire. His father's failures marked the end of the Song military expansion and the shift of the Song army to, with a few minor exceptions, a wholly defensive posture. And while previously the Liao had mostly limited themselves to counter-attacks against Taizong's invasions, during Zhenzong's reign, they began attacking Song territory in force. Zhenzong's military objectives were always defensive – to prevent the Liao from destroying the empire, rather than to expand the power of the empire or himself. As

[15] Edmund Worthy provides an extensive list of articles discussing the Taizu–Taizong succession. See Worthy, p. 10, n.9. The general consensus is that Taizu did not intend Taizong to succeed him.

[16] For the Sixteen Prefectures, see Nap-yin Lau, "Song-Liao Chanyuan zhi meng Xintan," in *Lishi Yuyan Yanjiusuo Jikan*, vol. 61, part 3 (September 1990), Taibei, pp. 693–747. The first footnote in Nap-yin Lau's article lists twenty-two articles on the Chanyuan Covenant and the Sixteen Prefectures in Chinese, Japanese, and English.

such, it is not surprising that when he concluded the Chanyuan Covenant in 1005, he and his officials regarded it as a successful negotiation. Within a few years, the covenant would be execrated and used as a political tool in ministerial battles for power, but it endured for over a century.[17]

The founding of the Song thus ended without a climactic, decisive battle, or even a dramatic final event of any kind, but rather with what appeared in retrospect to be an unseemly capitulation resulting in a dishonorable peace. Still, during Taizu and Taizong's reign, neither the emperors nor their officials had any reason to regard their empire as weak. And even for Zhenzong, it was only afterward that the larger implications of the treaty dawned on him, and then only when stridently brought to his attention.[18] Taizu did not win every battle or even every campaign he undertook, but he knew in war victory was never certain and that individual defeats could be redeemed as long as he was politically stable. In the tenth century then, failure in war was a military and, possibly, political problem, not a dynastic character flaw.

While the internal political use of war was important in the creation of the Song, it should not overshadow its more direct, external application in extending the borders of the empire. A war of words still preceded and continued alongside recourse to arms. This was an attempt to treat external military problems as if they were internal political ones and throw a decent rhetorical cloak over the naked use of force. Ultimately, however, the Song army decided the issue. And although Taizu and Taizong demanded unconditional surrender from the kingdoms they were attacking, both were willing, with the exception of Taizong's dealings with the Liao, to negotiate that surrender.

Conquest by war and negotiation

If the rhetoric of empire could not conceal the fact that almost every state resisted incorporation until the Song army forced them to do so, it could still serve as a framework for diplomatic negotiations during the military campaigns. Politically, Taizu first acted like the emperor and then convinced his comrades and subordinates to treat him like the emperor. Militarily, he treated the rulers of the states he was trying to conquer as

[17] For a discussion of the post-Chanyuan politics at the court of Zhenzong, see Karl Olsson, "The Structure of Power under the Third Emperor of Sung China: The Shifting Balance After the Peace of Shan-Yuan," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1974.

[18] XCB 62.1389. Cited and translated in Olsson, "The Structure of Power under the Third Emperor of Sung China: The Shifting Balance After the Peace of Shan-Yuan," pp. 156–7.

already conquered and then forced them to submit. Taizu wanted to conquer the southern kingdoms with a minimum of effort and damage either to his army or the kingdom he was attacking. This was only practical – he wanted to conserve his military resources for further campaigns and he expected to rule the territory after it was conquered. The easiest way to accomplish both goals was to remove the existing rulers and take over their administrative machinery. From Taizu's perspective, the best outcome would be if a ruler simply submitted to him and took up a comfortable, but supervised, life in the Song capital. But without the motive force of war, no southern ruler was likely to submit. The fortunes of war controlled both the speed and direction of negotiations.

Fighting and negotiating were not separate activities, but two aspects of the bargaining that attempted to resolve certain political relationships without the total destruction of either side. War for Taizu, and Zhou Shizong before him, was explicitly a process that encompassed fighting and negotiating. The primary targets of Song Taizu's southern campaigns were the rulers and, to a lesser extent, the officials of the southern kingdoms. All military action was ultimately aimed at convincing them to surrender control of their territory. To that end, all of the southern campaigns directed their efforts toward seizing the capitals of the various kingdoms and thus the kingdoms' rulers, their officials, and the seats of their governments. Because the campaigns achieved their military objectives, they also achieved their political objectives.

Taizong at first continued this practice, allowing the last Northern Han ruler to surrender once it was clear that the Song army was on the verge of breaching the defenses of his capital, but he entirely abandoned it when he attacked the Liao. The Liao formed a special case because, at least as originally articulated, the intention of attacking the Sixteen Prefectures was to take only that piece of territory, not to entirely destroy the Liao government. Unlike Taizu's treatment of the southern kingdoms, Taizong did not even offer to negotiate before beginning his campaign. This was particularly strange given that the Liao had been trying to re-establish diplomatic relations with the Song for some time. Taizong had thus burned the diplomatic bridge behind him as he advanced, leaving only the possibility of a complete military victory or a complete defeat. Had he been willing to negotiate as he advanced, and perhaps even as he retreated, he might have been able to obtain some sort of compromise agreement. This is not to suggest that the Liao would have been willing to give up the Sixteen Prefectures – only a complete Song victory could have secured them – but to emphasize that the negotiations that eventually did take place under conditions extremely unfavorable to the Song could have taken place earlier, under less

disadvantageous conditions. By the time Zhenzong was forced to negotiate, the Liao emperor, bolstered by years of mostly victorious campaigns and backed by the hardened attitudes of his court, demanded much more than merely being left in peaceful possession of the Sixteen Prefectures.

The Liao had been in possession of the Sixteen Prefectures since 938, when Shi Jingtang, the emperor of the Later Jin dynasty, officially ceded the territory to them in return for their help in establishing his dynasty. Most of the population was Chinese, and the cities, which were economic engines for the Liao empire, were dominated by the Chinese. Indeed, the entire territory, while not particularly productive compared to the rest of China, was the center of agriculture, craft, and merchant activity in the Liao empire as a whole. The southern edge of the Sixteen Prefectures, the Guannan (lit: "south of the passes") region, was critically important for its strategic north–south passes. Zhou Shizong seized the Guannan region from the Liao in 959, leaving it in Song control when the Later Zhou fell. Thus, at the beginning of the Song dynasty, the Song held the most critical passes of the Sixteen Prefectures, the Guannan region, and the Liao held the, for them, economically critical remainder of the Sixteen Prefectures.

Since the Sixteen Prefectures campaigns were not immediately directed against the Liao government, neither the Liao emperor nor his court officials were directly or immediately threatened by the Song invasion. This gave them the time, not to mention the distance, to formulate and construct their response undisturbed. The strategic value of the passes surrounding the Sixteen Prefectures was in the forefront of both Song and Liao considerations during the Song invasions. Control of those passes was the necessary first step to any military action against the Liao court; and therefore, any attempt to seize them would be seen by the Liao court as ultimately aimed at it. Any claims by Song officials that they were "only" trying to regain territory which rightly belonged to the Chinese court were either disingenuous or a teleological attribution by later historians. Taizong's statement after his second failed campaign that he was "only trying to make the barbarians flee into the desert,"[19] even had it been true, would hardly have been comforting to the Liao court. Even so, because imperial rhetoric also formed the basis of Song–Liao negotiations, and because the Song couched their claims to the Sixteen Prefectures in terms of their rights as the legitimate successor of the Tang dynasty rather than military need, the Liao court had to translate their military position into a rhetorical form that made their intentions clear to

[19] XCB 27.617.

the Song. This explains why the Liao insisted that the Song accept the title of emperor (*huangdi*) for the Liao ruler; not necessarily because they wanted to be a Chinese dynasty themselves but because only by forcing such an unpalatable piece of rhetoric on the Song could they ensure that their superior military position would always be recognized. Otherwise, the Song court could have contented itself with the same rhetorical superiority that had comforted the Han and Tang when their military exploits against the steppe had failed.

The Chanyuan Covenant lasted for over a century not only because the Liao held a superior military position which they were not interested in exploiting for territorial gains, but also because any Song discussion of changing that situation was confronted early on by rhetorical markers which immediately reminded the court of its inferior military position. While it was not difficult to ignore those rhetorical markers or to discount any of the military problems, the effort to do so made the weakness of the Song position obvious. If near-rhetorical parity had been the result of attacking the Liao early on when the dynasty was militarily strong, what might happen beginning from a position of weakness? Few at the Song court during the eleventh and early twelfth centuries seem to have felt that peace with the Liao was worth the rhetorical cost, but the lasting legacy of the Chanyuan Covenant, the last act of the Song creation, was that the Song–Liao border remained peaceful for over a century. This stability was the result of both military and rhetorical victories by the Liao.

The Liao court did not merely react to the founding of the Song when it impinged upon their territory or that of the Northern Han, it also chose not to respond to overtures from the southern Chinese kingdoms for joint action against the Zhou and then the Song. Clearly then, Liao interests were not a simple reflection of Chinese interests. At the same time, Liao actions had a tremendous impact on the process and progress of the Song creation and a realistic appraisal of the Song creation must take account of the Liao perspective.

The Liao perspective on war with the Song

The Liao emperors were not merely failed contenders for the Chinese throne and it is inappropriate to assign them exclusively sinocentric values. It is true that they clearly had designs on the central plains of China before 947, but after that, as Wang Mingsun has pointed out, they concluded that it was beyond their capabilities to directly rule the area.[20]

[20] Wang Mingsun, *Song, Liao, Jinshi Lunwen Gao*, Taibei: Mingwen Shuju, 1988.

It is also worth noting that the Liao dynasty actually took the name "Liao" during its brief control of Bianliang (Kaifeng), the Chinese capital, in 947.[21] Even so, after 947, Liao policy was clearly oriented toward influencing and indirectly controlling the central plain rather than directly ruling it. To that end, the Liao government gave military support to the Northern Han kingdom both for defense and in its failed attempt to displace the Later Zhou dynasty in 954.

Both the Later Zhou and Song governments regarded Liao military support of the Northern Han as a direct act of aggression against them. By most definitions, it was, but it was still not an attempt to take over the central plains, just to weaken the dynasty ruling it or insert their own client government. In fact, after their support of the Northern Han invasion of 954, the Liao showed remarkable restraint in limiting their military actions to the defense of Northern Han territory and the Sixteen Prefectures. The Song government, which felt that the Sixteen Prefectures were rightfully theirs, may have regarded the Liao defense of the Sixteen Prefectures as an aggressive act, but the Liao surely cannot be blamed for defending land that had been theirs for several decades and which the Song had never possessed. More to the point, the Liao did not take advantage of the Song army's southern campaigns to invade the empire, despite repeated attempts of the southern kingdoms to induce them to do so. After Taizong's second Sixteen Prefectures campaign, however, Liao tactics changed. Raiding was replaced by full-scale invasions as the Liao seized the tactical, battlefield, initiative. They retained this initiative until the 1120s, and it underlay all Song–Liao negotiations.

Song emperors and officials completely misunderstood the reason for their loss of initiative; although the profound effects it had on Song–Liao relations were clear. It was argued during the Song that the earlier system of border defenses, a line of fairly independent generals who aggressively and proactively engaged the Liao, had been extremely effective and it was only the gradual removal of those generals for political reasons that allowed the Liao to invade so successfully during Zhenzong's reign. Although institutional changes were important, this argument assumed that the Liao had always been trying to invade and that it were only changes in Song policy that changed the outcome of events. It does not seem to have occurred to Song emperors or officials that Liao actions had changed. By failing to distinguish between border raids and invasions, the latter sometimes led by the Liao emperor himself, the Song

[21] It is interesting that they did not even try to carry out this declaration in Chang'an or Luoyang, the capitals of the Tang dynasty. This seems to indicate that they were not trying to obtain historical legitimacy, only contemporary legitimacy.

government conflated local, tactical, maneuvers taken for tactical reasons, with tactical maneuvers taken for strategic reasons.

The Song government was unable to parse Liao tactical and strategic policy not because they did not understand the difference in their own policies, but because they could not credit the same sophistication to the Liao. Their understanding of the Liao was tightly constrained by certain historiographical conventions. Liao strategic policy concerning the central plains of China and China itself was fairly consistent from 947 until the 1120s: they wanted a stable relationship with themselves in the dominant military position. Liao tactical policy, however, changed as the situation warranted in pursuit of their strategic policy. Thus, in the early years of the Song, the Liao restrained their military and attempted to negotiate a stable relationship with the Song where they retained control of the militarily significant Sixteen Prefectures. Even the destruction of the Northern Han could be overlooked. The Song could not accept Liao control of the Sixteen Prefectures for the same reason the Liao wanted them – the state which held the passes would be in a strategically advantageous position. Taizu avoided the issue and died before he had to face it, but Taizong ran headlong into it. Even after Taizong had invaded their territory, the Liao restrained themselves.[22] Unfortunately, as much as the Liao wanted to negotiate and hoped that continued restraint on their part might preserve that possibility, Taizong would not negotiate in the wake of his failures.[23] Taizong's strategic policy was unlimited and, because he assumed that the Liao policy was also unlimited, he could see no room for a negotiated, compromise settlement. Furthermore, had Taizong negotiated, he would have allowed the Liao to translate their superior military position into a superior diplomatic position. By refusing to negotiate, he retained the diplomatic initiative, a situation that the Liao temporarily accepted.

They did not wait long after Taizong's death to force the issue. It was clear that Taizong would only have negotiated under the most extreme military pressure. Since the Liao were not capable of actually threatening the existence of the Song, large-scale invasions during Taizong's reign would have been useless and wasteful.[24] But, with the change in emperors, the tempo and strength of Liao attacks increased.

[22] Toqto'a, *Liaoshi*, Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1996, 9.102.
[23] Taizong might have been willing to negotiate if he had won several battles and then withdrawn of his own accord, but, if he had won, he would not have withdrawn.
[24] For the enormous effort involved in launching raids on the Song, see Nap-yin Lau, "Song-Liao Chanyuan zhi meng Xintan," pp. 695–9.

Zhenzong intended to continue his father's policy of not negotiating, but the Liao court resolved to bring the Song to the bargaining table and reap the benefits of their superior military position. Border raids escalated into invasions led by Liao emperor Shengzong and his bellicose mother, the dowager empress Chengtian.[25]

Disastrously, the Song court saw the increasingly serious Liao attacks as merely an increase in military activity caused by a decrease in the effectiveness of its northern border defenses. Thus, rather than attempting to negotiate an end to the invasions, the Song court concentrated on strengthening its border. But if the Song court did not, or could not, understand that the Liao were raiding in order to bring about negotiations, the Liao court for its part could not be sure if Song efforts to improve its military situation while refusing to negotiate were due to continued unwillingness to negotiate or a desire to improve its bargaining position before negotiating. The policy debates at the Song court make it clear that the former, rather than the latter, was the case – negotiation was never discussed as a possible solution to the problem, but the Liao court had no way of knowing that. So, while both sides would have agreed that the general problem was an unresolved dispute over territory, neither court was able to clarify the finer points of the situation and make them known to the other court as the basis for negotiation until the prospect of a decisive battle which both sides wanted to avoid forced them to do so. Thus the years of fighting that led up to the Chanyuan Covenant was a prolonged period of miscommunication during which the two sides tried to make their respective positions clear through the hazy medium of war. Unfortunately, the general misunderstanding of each others' intentions led to dramatically different interpretations of the military events. For example, although the Liao were not at first trying to capture any of the major cities that formed the Song northern defense line, the Song thought that each time one of those cities held out during a Liao attack, the city had been successfully defended. This eventually forced the Liao to directly assault those cities in order to get their point across.

[25] It might be more accurate to say that Dowager Empress Chengtian led the invasions accompanied by her son, Liao emperor Shengzong. The dowager empress dominated Shengzong's court until her death in 1009. "-there was no question who was ultimately in control; . . .the new emperor [Shengzong] was thoroughly dominated by his mother, who continued to browbeat and sometimes even strike him in public even when he was a grown man." She also had her own *ordo* of ten thousand cavalry. Denis Twitchett and Klaus-Peter Tietze, "The Liao," in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 6, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 90–1.

The Liao army, a virtually all-cavalry force, was ill equipped for siege work. All of its advantages lay in mobility, so by refusing to accept battle in the open field, the Song forced the Liao army to take the tactically unattractive option of attacking fixed positions. While this strategic and tactical policy would not allow the Song to retake the initiative, it made the Liao pay a high price for their gains.[26] The Liao could only advance their position by increasingly costly and risky campaigns that enervated both sides. Whether this was an explicit policy of the Song or a policy failure is moot, warfare during Zhenzong's reign became a war of attrition. The Song successfully improved their bargaining position with the Liao by making the cost of bringing military pressure to bear mutual. By the time negotiations began, both sides were eager for a settlement and agreement was quickly reached.

It was very important for Song statesmen to establish that it was the Liao, not the Song, who initiated negotiations in 1004. But this is simply further proof that they did not understand that the point of the war for the Liao was to reach a negotiated settlement. While the Song were attempting to designate who won and who lost, the Liao were negotiating a hardheaded and canny treaty. It is thus not surprising that the Chanyuan Covenant was so much to the Liao's advantage. It was not a question of what the military situation was – there could be no objective evaluation of that – but of the subjective understanding of how the results of the battles related to the means and goals of the two sides. The Song did not understand either the Liao means or goals, but the Liao were fully conversant with Chinese values. As much as the military situation was open to interpretation, the Liao were certain about what the Song wanted. This gave them an immense advantage during the negotiations, the reverse of the situation during the Song conquest of the south. Zhenzong's court forgot what his uncle's court had known so well: the endgame of any military action was the negotiation that obtained the political objective. Unlike Taizu, who had very clear objectives politically and militarily, Zhenzong had no goal beyond weathering the crisis. As little as he understood war, he understood negotiation even less. But Zhenzong and his court could not know that they had just played out the final act of the Song founding.

[26] Unless, of course, the purpose of the tactical defense was to wear down the Liao in preparation for a return to an offensive tactical policy. Since Song strategic policy was clearly defensive during Zhenzong's reign, despite the rhetoric of offense in the emperor's defensive actions, there was no understanding of the use of tactical defense as a prelude to a later offense.

War and the creation of the Northern Song

War was central to the creation of the Northern Song in a variety of ways beyond merely acquiring territory. The detailed investigation of war at its most basic level, the actual course of the campaigns themselves, allows us to illuminate the internal political formation of the Song court, the rhetorical formation of the dynasty, and the Chinese understanding of the use of military action for political goals during the tenth century. Moreover, the campaigns allow us to deconstruct several Song myths about their founding. Those myths have been crucial to our present understanding of the course of Song history standing, as they do, as explanations for certain fundamental "characteristics" of the Song dynasty as a whole. Virtually all of those myths serve to explain Song weakness.

Song weakness is not, as John Labadie would have it, a "red herring" with the Song as militarily strong as any earlier dynasty but simply faced with stronger opponents.[27] Military power is always relative, both to one's opponents and to one's goals. The outcome of battle can be rhetorically manipulated, but facts on the ground are the starting point for all negotiations and later characterizations. Those facts, or at least their military significance, are often forgotten as the events recede into memory. Thus, Song Taizu was successful in conquering the south because his military and political power was equal to the task. He failed to conquer the Northern Han because in that case, it was not. The same held true for Taizong and Zhenzong. But the same was also true for the Liao. They failed to install the Northern Han regime in the central plain in 954, or to preserve it against Taizong in 979, but they succeeded in establishing a peaceful border with the Song and retaining control of the Sixteen Prefectures. And since the Liao did not intend to destroy the Song in 1004, then, given that the Chanyuan Covenant was so much to their advantage, it seems unlikely that they wanted to destroy the Song later in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries either.[28] There was thus, for more than a century, no successful defense of the Song northern border that collapsed during the Jin invasions, because there was never a threat. Indeed, the very fact that it was the Jin rather than the Liao who took the central plain is telling. Generalizations about Song weakness have

[27] John Richard Labadie, "Rulers and Soldiers: Perception and Management of the Military in Northern Sung China (960–ca. 1060)," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1981, pp. 11–12.

[28] Christian Lamouroux, "Geography and Politics: The Song-Liao Border Dispute of 1074/75," p. 15.