

## *The Constitution of Ancient China*

By Su Li. Edited by ZHANG YONGLE AND DANIEL A. BELL, translated by EDMUND RYDEN. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 304 pp. \$39.95, £30.00 (cloth).

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Su Li (the penname of Zhu Suli), a US-trained professor of law at Peking [Beijing] University, and a former dean of its Faculty of Law, is not a great fan of the Western legal system. In a series of publications since the mid-1990s, he has challenged the common view among his colleagues that transplanting Western legal institutions is an appropriate remedy for China's social and political ills. Instead, he called for utilizing indigenous concepts of justice in settling legal issues in China's vast countryside. More recently, he has shifted his attention from the legal system per se to the broader constitutional arrangements (or constitutional system, *xian zhi* 憲制) of modern and then traditional China. By "constitutional arrangements" (somewhat problematically translated in this book as "constitution"), Su Li refers to "a basic political-legal setup by which any state is formed and continues to run normally" (20). By studying the specific ways through which traditional and modern China has constituted itself, Su Li argues that policy-makers should be able to develop adequate means of running this huge country without the need to borrow Western ideas and institutions indiscriminately.

The *Constitution of Ancient China* comprises ten chapters. At its core stand four essays by Su Li: an introduction, specifically prepared for this book, and three essays that he had previously published in Chinese periodicals. These essays focus on three major components of ancient China's "constitution": administrative arrangements aimed at facilitating political unity; the "cultural constitution," which refers here to the unified script and pronunciation adopted in Mandarin Chinese (i.e., the "official language," *guan hua* 官話); and the elite selection process which generated the stratum of scholar-officials. These essays are preceded by the editors' introduction, in which Zhang Yongle and Daniel Bell provide a useful overview of Su Li's career and earlier publications. Su Li's essays are followed by four chapters of critical comments by Wang Hui (Chinese Language and Literature, Tsinghua [Qinghua] University), Liu Han (School of Law, Tsinghua University), Wu Fei (Philosophy, Peking University), and Zhao Xiaoli (School of Law, Tsinghua University). The volume ends with Su Li's reply to his critics, in which he admits certain weaknesses in his arguments but explains why these weaknesses do not invalidate his larger conclusions about China's need to liberate itself from the "normative standpoint" of the US constitution (229).

The book's structure as a dialogue rather than a pure collection of essays is laudable. Without the editors' introduction and the incisive comments by the four other scholars, the reader would not be able to grasp either the subtleties of Su Li's approach or his ideological agenda, which remains largely hidden behind an ostensibly neutral historical discussion in the core essays. Su Li's reply is also very helpful in clarifying his methodology and his goals. Daniel Bell, the editor of *The Princeton-China Series*, should be

lauded for the attractive format of these publications, which introduce the complexity of political and ideological debates in current China to the anglophone public. For *The Constitution of Ancient China*, the dialogue format is particularly appropriate; indeed, in the eyes of the present reviewer, it saves the book. If the book had been restricted to Su Li's core essays alone, I could not recommend it. A combination of intrinsic weaknesses in Su Li's approaches and serious problems of translation (of which see below) undermine much of these essays' potential appeal.

Before I turn to my critical comments, it is important to clarify that I am quite sympathetic with Su Li's intellectual endeavor and that of like-minded thinkers whose works were published in *The Princeton-China Series*. Their desire to reaffirm the positive aspects of China's political and intellectual tradition should be understood against the backdrop of the radically negative views of the country's past that proliferated in China's intellectual community through most of the twentieth century. From Zou Rong's 鄒容 (1885–1905) denigration of the imperial system as a “superstitious doctrine,”<sup>1</sup> through the “totalistic iconoclasm” of the New Culture Movement (1915–1920s)<sup>2</sup> and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), with its bizarre anti-Confucian campaign (1973–1975), to the “River Elegy” (“He shang” 河殤) documentary of 1988—countless Chinese intellectuals of different ideological affiliations were united in their negative view of the country's political and intellectual tradition. The Chinese empire and its Confucian intellectual superstructure were blamed for the country's lack of capitalism, human dignity, equality, Promethean spirit, progress, and the like. The remedies were to be sought purely in the West, be it the party-state Soviet model or the adoption of free market and liberal values. Through most of the twentieth century, the country's imperial enterprise and imperial ideology were studied primarily as a foil to modern China rather than a source of intellectual inspiration.

In recent decades there has been a new tide. The resurrection of China as a (relatively) rich and powerful state and its increasing self-confidence have resulted in a new and more affirmative view of its political and cultural tradition. The political agendas behind this re-evaluation differ, and some of the claims of the admirers of the tradition are no less questionable than those of its opponents. But overall, I believe the result will be a more nuanced view of both past and present, a view that will allow selective borrowing from foreign models without abandoning the advantages of China's indigenous experience. Insofar as this is Su Li's avowed goal, I cannot but wish him success. But the devil is in the details. Although Su Li's discussion of traditional China's constitutional arrangements contains many insights, it is marred by too many historical inaccuracies to permit constructive engagement. Worse, the author's periodic adoption of a self-congratulatory mode amid blatant historical misstatements alienates the reader and discourages him or her from treating Su Li's intellectual experiment with respect.

Su Li's commentators (most notably Wang Hui and Liu Han) have already pointed at some of his essays' major problems, such as his overemphasis on structural functionalism, which prevents him from addressing the nuances of China's history, and his lack-luster interest in the ideological foundations of traditional Chinese political culture. In his response, Su Li reminds the reader that he is not a historian: “My search is not for history but for theory” (215). Su Li classifies his research as “experimental sociology” in

<sup>1</sup>For the translation of Zou Rong's *Revolutionary Army* (*Geming jun* 革命軍), see John Lust, *The Revolutionary Army: A Chinese Nationalist Tract of 1903* (Paris: Mouton, 1968).

<sup>2</sup>For “totalistic iconoclasm,” see Lin, Yü-sheng, *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).

which the “history of China, historical persons and their activities, and historical events” serve as “experimental phenomena” (216). Fair enough. But to arrive at valid conclusions from an experiment, one must read the experimental data correctly. Alas, this is not what happens. Some of Su Li’s basic premises about China’s history are so flawed that one cannot but question the validity of his conclusions.

Take the “Introduction,” for instance. Su Li asks what prompted China’s agricultural communities to evolve into a state. This is a fascinating question that has been extensively debated by Chinese (and Western) historians, archeologists, and anthropologists.<sup>3</sup> However, rather than utilizing insights from these debates, Su Li opts to adopt two theoretical explanations that can be called quasi-historical. The first is the hydraulic model of Karl A. Wittfogel, according to which the earliest state was formed to manage the Yellow River.<sup>4</sup> The second is an external factor, namely the conflict with the pastoral nomads in the north that “comprehensively and forcefully” shaped “the civilization of the central plain” (22). The problem is that both explanations are entirely fallacious from a historical point of view. As archeological research can easily demonstrate, large-scale hydraulic works (especially controlling the Yellow River flow) did not start before the very end of the Bronze Age (ca. 1500–400 BCE)—thus postdating the formation of early Chinese states by centuries.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, large-scale conflict with the nomads evolved only in the aftermath of the imperial unification, eight full centuries after the time suggested by Su Li.<sup>6</sup>

Su Li’s adoption of Wittfogel’s model is not accidental. He shares the latter’s premise that the environment determined China’s political path. For Wittfogel, this environmental explanation serves to make China into a despicable example of “oriental despotism,” whereas for Su Li it serves as a justification of the country’s rejection of Western legal models, but both agree that Chinese political structure was fundamentally immutable. This structure could be adjusted from time to time to meet specific challenges, but its basic parameters—Su Li’s “constitution”—remained unchangeable. Much like Wittfogel, Su Li conceptualizes China as a land of insulated rural communities in which “there must be a strong authoritarian government” (25). Although in certain details Su Li clearly departs from Wittfogel, especially in emphasizing the crucial role of scholar-officials in keeping the imperial system intact—his insistence on environmental determinism strikes me as a woeful flattening of China’s complex history.

This flattening is evident throughout much of Su Li’s discussion. Take, for instance, the repeated trope of insular communities in which “people know only their village and

<sup>3</sup>For a summary of pre-1990 studies, see Zhu Fenghan 朱鳳瀚 and Xu Yong 徐勇, eds, *Xian Qin shi yanjiu gaiyao* 先秦史研究概要 (Tianjin: Tianjin jiaoyu, 1996), 142–45. For later studies, see relevant parts of Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所, *Zhongguo kaoxue*: *Xia Shang juan* 中國考古學：夏商卷 (Beijing, Zhongguo Shehui kexue chubanshe, 2003) and Gideon Shelach and Yitzhak Jaffe, “The Earliest States in China: A Long-Term Trajectory Approach,” *Journal of Archeological Research* 22.4 (2014), 327–64; q.v. for further references.

<sup>4</sup>Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957).

<sup>5</sup>Recall that the Yellow River problems started only on the eve of imperial unification, because of excessive development along its middle course in the Loess Plateau. See Mark Elvin, *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 24, and the more detailed study in Yunzhen Chen et al., “Socio-economic Impacts on Flooding: A 4000-Year History of the Yellow River, China” *AMBIO* 41.7 (2012), 682–98.

<sup>6</sup>See Nicola Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

locality.” Su Li frequently (21, 33, 67) refers to paragraph 80 of the *Laozi* 老子, which speaks about the people of the neighboring villages who “never meet each other,” as a proof for the existence of these insular communities not just in primeval times but as a perennial feature of Chinese civilization. It is true that such communities did exist throughout China. It is also true that some of the empire’s leaders, most notably Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328–1398, Ming Taizu 明太祖, r. 1368–1398), considered the insularity of these communities as the normative and desirable state of affairs. But was it really the dominant feature of Chinese civilization? Su Li answers affirmatively. In his eyes “Early China” (a period which in his parlance includes all of the pre-imperial and imperial periods) “had no metropolis”: it had only “walled towns, market towns, and garrisons” (238n24); the rest were tiny rural communities. This is a very odd statement. Su Li may be unaware of early metropolises such as Linzi 臨淄 of Qi 齊 or Xiadu 下都 of Yan 燕, the walls of which reached 40 km in perimeter, but it is inconceivable that he has never noticed the existence of Tang Chang’an, or Song Kaifeng and Hangzhou. Were these anything *but* metropolises? And how is the image of insulated rural communities commensurate with the burgeoning market economy and high geographic mobility of the Northern Song or later Ming? Why, in search for political continuities, should the author ignore the complexities of China’s development, its historical dynamism, its tensions, and internal contradictions?

To be sure, marked continuities in China’s imperial (and even pre-imperial) socio-political and cultural system are undeniable. Yet if these continuities were determined by environmental and other immutable factors, if these were essential features of the country’s “constitution” as Su Li argues, then we would expect them to function indefinitely under any political circumstances. In fact, however, China underwent manifold dramatic ruptures through its history. Su Li pays lip service to these “constitutional revolutions”—during the Spring-and-Autumn period (Chunqiu 春秋, 770–453 BCE) for example—but cites the limits of space in this book (28–29) as an excuse for not engaging them. It is a pity. An adequate treatment of historical ruptures, of the periods when China acted as a polycentric entity, when even a semblance of centralized control was no longer maintained (e.g., in the Spring-and-Autumn period, or later, in the fourth century CE, in the early tenth century CE, and so forth) could cause Su Li to rethink his analytical framework. It is precisely these periods of intense turmoil—rather than the Yellow River floods or nomadic menace—that caused China’s statesmen and thinkers to opt for unified rule as the default choice. China’s political miracle is not the empire’s indestructibility: actually, its periodic collapses were as disastrous as anywhere else on the globe. The miracle was the empire’s repeated resurrection.<sup>7</sup> This resurrection was not a product of environmental or other perennial factors, but rather of the choices and preferences of China’s statesmen and thinkers, its elites and even (at least in certain periods) its commoners. By denying ancient (and by inference—modern) Chinese statesmen this freedom of choice, Su Li deprives China’s history of its vitality.

In addition to the simplification of China’s historical trajectory, another annoying feature of Su Li’s essays is his recurring self-congratulatory mode. Take, for instance, his summary of Western Zhou 西周 (ca. 1046–771 BCE) administration. First, Su argues that the *Rituals of Zhou* (*Zhou li* 周禮, erroneously translated in the book as abstract “rites of Zhou” rather than as the title of a text) embodied the “orthodox state ideology” and was prepared by a “great, farsighted politician, the Duke of

<sup>7</sup>For my argument, see more in Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: Traditional Chinese Political Culture and Its Enduring Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Zhou.” These “rites of Zhou virtually amount to the constitutional norms and theory universally shared and accepted by the then ruling class.” Then comes Su Li’s conclusion: “This all happened in a territory of around 1.5 million square kilometers. It can be said, with reason, that this was the earliest time in human history that an attempt was made to establish the horizontal distribution of political power necessary to a large state” (41).

This attempt to turn China into the earliest “constitutional” polity in the world and the earliest example of a reasonably organized large state is ridiculous. It is based on a mixture of wrong propositions coupled with insufficient knowledge of world history. The most erroneous is the idea that the *Rituals of Zhou* was produced by the Duke of Zhou 周公 (d. ca. 1035 BCE) and that it represents a kind of early Zhou constitution. In fact, this fascinating text, which indeed served as the blueprint for ideal political systems advocated by countless statesmen, from Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE–23 CE) to Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), the Taiping 太平 rebels, and the late Qing 清 (1636/44–1912) reformers, was in all likelihood penned at some point between the late Warring States (453–221 BCE) and the early Han period.<sup>8</sup> Instead of using this text as a chimerical Western Zhou constitution, Su Li could learn about the realities of Western Zhou rule from, for example, the excellent study by Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, which has been translated into Chinese.<sup>9</sup> Besides, even a cursory awareness of Mesopotamian or Egyptian history is sufficient to refute the bizarre claim that the Western Zhou was “the earliest” expansive state in human history. Actually, there are many interesting parallels between the Western Zhou and Mesopotamian proto-empires, for which territorial expansion became a regular feature of governance, especially in the case of Assyria (ca. 1300–609 BCE).<sup>10</sup> Ignoring these parallels for the sake of claiming China as “the earliest” impoverishes Su Li’s discussion.

Su Li’s excessive adoration of Western Zhou (which was a very impressive polity, but surely not an “empire” when compared to the Qin-Han model) reflects a constant pattern in his discussion. The achievements of the Chinese empire are exaggerated; those of other civilizations and empires are either denigrated or ignored. For instance, China’s imperial longevity, achieved “without being the chosen people of God” (36), is contrasted with other civilizations. Of these we are told that their empires either “passed when the wind blew them away” (the Mongols), or simply never came into existence (“ancient India and Arabia”),<sup>11</sup> or failed to ensure “peaceful and unified rule”

<sup>8</sup>For the dating of the *Rituals of Zhou*, see, e.g., Peng Lin 彭林, “Zhou li” zhuti sixiang yu chengshu nian-dai yanjiu 《周禮》主題思想與成書年代研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 1991). For the usages of the text throughout history, see the essays in Benjamin A. Elman and Martin Kern, eds, *Statecraft and Classical Learning: The “Rituals of Zhou” in East Asian History* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>9</sup>Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045–771 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); for the Chinese translation, see Li Feng 李峰, *Xi Zhou de miwang: Zhongguo zaoqi guojia de dili he zhengzhi weiwei* 西周的滅亡：中國早期國家的地理和政治危機 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007). Reading Li Feng—and coming to terms with Su Li’s own correct recognition that the Western Zhou “had not yet become a complete territorial state” (46)—would also have helped him avoid the misleading assertion that the Zhou territory comprised “1.5 million square kilometers.”

<sup>10</sup>For an introductory discussion, see Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000–323 BC*, third edition (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

<sup>11</sup>Su Li ignores the existence of the Arab Caliphate and of early Indian empires. For India, he claims that the first empire was established by the “Turkic Mongol people,” i.e., the Mughals (21). It seems that the author is unaware of the Maurya empire (fourth–third century BCE), despite the fact that its most

(Rome). China, in distinction, sustained “a long-lasting, peaceful, united, and large state” (36–37).

These and similar statements<sup>12</sup> dramatically undermine the book’s potential appeal. Whether they derive from nationalistic feelings or sheer ignorance is not for me to judge, but they do a huge disservice to Su Li’s very reasonable discussion of the real achievements of China’s imperial enterprise. Take, for instance, the comparison with Rome. To be sure, the Roman empire was less successful in ensuring “peaceful and unified rule of a large state” than its architects and custodians hoped. But was this not the case with any Chinese dynasty as well? Let us review a relatively peaceful one: the Ming dynasty 明 (1368–1644) during its two least turbulent centuries (from the beginning of Yongle 永樂 reign in 1402 to the start of the conflict with the Jurchens/Manchus in 1618). These centuries witnessed, first, recurrent wars with Mongols, which devastated much of the northern frontier; second, the menace of the so-called “dwarf pirates” (*wokou* 倭寇), who wreaked havoc along the sea coast; third, countless small and medium-scale peasant uprisings; and fourth, widespread banditry, including even in the vicinity of Beijing.<sup>13</sup> For sure, speaking of these centuries as truly “peaceful” is an exaggeration. And yet, much like the Roman empire, the Ming (like other major dynasties, which suffered from their own sets of problems even during their heyday) brought *relative* peace and stability to many (if not most) of its subjects, which was an incomparably better choice than sinking into internecine conflicts. Taken from this perspective, Chinese dynasties did not differ dramatically from other major imperial polities worldwide.

An inadequate comparative perspective is yet another major weakness of Su Li’s essays. Despite the author’s insistence that his discussion is based on “making a comparison with the various states that have emerged from the past to the present” (212), this comparison, in practice, is largely limited to the Greek city-states, modern European nation-states, and the United States of America, all of which are contrasted with pre-modern China. The author could have benefited tremendously by paying more attention to comparable cases of expansive continental empires. Take, for instance, the Arab Caliphate (of whose existence Su Li seems to be entirely unaware). Its amazing success in imposing Arabic as the language of administration, religion, and ultimately daily life over a huge territory from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf could have been profitably compared with the imposition of unified script and the unified “Mandarin” pronunciation throughout the Chinese empire. This comparison would be particularly useful because it could highlight the different outcomes of both experiments: in China, the uniform “official language” served as an important vehicle of preserving the cultural and *political* integration of the realm, whereas in the Arab world the ongoing cultural unity was not matched by a comparable longevity of unified political rule. The question of why in certain cases the normativity of the

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illustrious ruler, Aśoka (d. ca. 232 BCE) is a celebrated figure in Chinese Buddhism (under the name of King Ayu 阿育王).

<sup>12</sup>For example, his odd claim that China is “the only continuously existing ancient civilization in human history” (215). Has he not heard of Indian (or Jewish) civilization?

<sup>13</sup>See James W. Tong, *Disorder under Heaven: Collective Violence in the Ming Dynasty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991) (for peasant uprisings); David Robinson, *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven: Rebellion and the Economy of Violence in Mid-Ming China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001) (for banditry); Ray Huang, *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming Dynasty in Decline* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 163–66 (for the Japanese pirates’ menace); Morris Rossabi, “The Ming and Inner Asia,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 8: The Ming Dynasty, Part 2: 1368–1644* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 221–71 (for the relations with the Mongols).

empire survives, whereas in other its substitution with a cultural “commonwealth” is accepted<sup>14</sup> could be an excellent topic for exploration, allowing a much deeper understanding of China’s imperial “constitutional arrangements.”

One final point that spoils my impression of Su Li’s book has nothing to do with Su Li himself: it is the problem of inadequate translation. In the past I have appreciated Ryden’s work as a translator, but this time I am very disappointed. In quite a few cases, the translation becomes misleading. Take, for instance, the word “constitution” in the book’s title. Only a reader who navigates down to Liu Han’s essay (179) will understand that Su Li did not claim that early China had a written constitution akin to that of the United States (which in Chinese is rendered *xianfa* 憲法); rather, he speaks much less controversially of “constitutional arrangements” or a “constitutional system” (*xian zhi* 憲制). This confusion was created by Ryden alone. A similar case involves the translation “geopolitical” for Su Li’s *diyuan zhengzhi* 地緣政治. Su Li’s term refers to the original meaning of “geopolitical,” namely, politics that are related to geographic features (in his case, the formation of provincial boundaries in traditional China). Yet in modern usage, “geopolitical” is normally associated with interstate relations; hence speaking of “domestic geopolitical considerations” (49) sounds very odd. And sometimes, the translator leaves the reader completely perplexed:

From this we may postulate that the people of this land had their own inherent and sustained reasons for creating the administration of a large state, since from an empirical point of view the administration of this large state was created by the dynasties and politicians throughout history. It was something that they imposed on the people of this area. (35)

For me the sentence does not make sense (did the people have a reason to create a large state, or was it imposed on them?). There are many such examples.

The translation runs awry whenever the text requires an understanding of Chinese history, particularly administrative history, or when the classical texts are cited. The latter are almost invariably mistranslated (the only laudable exceptions are when the translator uses pre-existing translations into English, which could have been easily done throughout). But let us focus on simpler examples of needless inaccuracies. For instance, the area “within the passes” (Guanzhong 關中, referring to the Wei River 渭河 valley and adjacent areas of Shaanxi) is at times translated correctly, but sometimes is rendered “the plain of the central pass” (22), and elsewhere is misleadingly identified as a town (232). Or take the odd terms “barbarian prefect,” “barbarian department magistrate” and the like: actually they refer to officials under the system of indigenous leaders (*tusi* 土司), which was adopted primarily in the minority areas of southwest China. The term *junxian* 郡縣 is usually translated correctly as “commanderies and counties” but then oddly as “commanderies and townships” (167). Add to this a variety of other inaccuracies.<sup>15</sup> Frankly, I do not see how a reader without a good Sinological education could navigate through the book.

<sup>14</sup>For the transformation of the Christian and the Islamic worlds from unified empires (the Roman Empire and the Caliphate) into commonwealths, see Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup>For example, a Han exegete, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) is referred to by his personal name on p. 162, but by his appellative (*zi* 字), Kangcheng 康成 on pp. 193 and 196. The letter *ü* is normally written correctly, but from time to time it becomes “u” (257n24) or, oddly, “ui” (241n36), and so forth.

I regret that this review sounds harsh. I would very much like Su Li and like-minded scholars to continue their engagement with China's past. I hope that their search will allow China's leaders to utilize the country's immense historical experience and its rich intellectual resources more effectively when navigating its course into the future. I also hope, however, that the search for China's indigenous political resources will be based on solid historical foundations, on sober estimates of pluses and minuses of pre-modern China's institutional arrangements, and on clearer evaluations of which aspects of the past can be refurbished and re-utilized, and which are moribund. The result will be more engaging for both historians of China and colleagues in other fields.

## *The Origins of the Chinese Nation—Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order*

By Nicolas Tackett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xx + 328 pp., 2 appendixes and index, £25.99 (ppb).

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Nicolas Tackett's book is only the most important of the results drawn from the author's research on the Song Northern frontier and the Song political culture. Just as he did for his book on the demise of the Tang aristocracy,<sup>1</sup> Tackett provides us with databases accessible on his Berkeley website. One database contains the inventory of 1700 Tang, Song, and Liao tombs located in the Northeast frontier area, and the other presents the basic information available on more than 800 people involved in the history of the Song borders. Any interested reader can also download fifty pages of the original Chinese texts quoted in the book, a more detailed bibliography, and the whole set of lengthy footnotes. Obviously, Tackett's methodical approach and tools should stimulate researchers and students, who can now easily combine erudition with digital resources.

As the subtitle underscores, the complex and long-lasting new Asian order, based on the relations between the two major powers of East Asia that emerged after the Tang empire's disappearance, resulted in a new perception by the Song of their imperial identity facing the Liao. Indeed, if we include the Xi-Xia kingdom, which was another important actor from the 1030s onwards, and the Jin empire in the twelfth century, the new geopolitical order resulting from the coexistence of Song China with three powerful steppe polities shook the basic political concepts of *nei* (inside) and *wai* (outside). Hence, one of the challenges after the Song–Liao peace treaty of Shanyuan of 1005 was the legitimization of a Song empire which could no longer claim to be universal. The multi-state system, as it is usually depicted, required a cultural revolution that gradually prompted the Song government to view as political markers all the differences—languages and daily ways of production and consumption, as well as more generally

<sup>1</sup>Nicolas Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014).