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Standen/Unbounded Loyalty

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NB: Illustrations were deleted to decrease file size.
he reality of China as it exists today is impossible to ignore. But that should not lead us to imagine that China—or its borders—were a historical inevitability. When An Lushan rebelled against the Tang dynasty in 755, the Chinese empire fell apart.\textsuperscript{1} We know that eventually—over two centuries later—another Chinese empire came into being. Hindsight feeds neatly into the modern narrative of nationalism, and together they impel us to seek the origins of what is generally called the reunification of some implicitly indestructible entity called “China.”\textsuperscript{2} But in fact, during those two hundred years following An Lushan’s rebellion—and perhaps for another half-century after that—nobody knew that a Chinese empire would ever again be the dominant power in East Asia. This book is an exploration of the latter part of that period, a moment when “China” as we know it was not inevitable, when East Asia might conceivably have remained, like Europe, a congeries of competing states.\textsuperscript{3}

Instead, what happened in East Asia was the emergence of a borderline out of a borderland. In the century between the death throes of the Tang (618–907) and the treaty of Shanyuan in 1005, a sharply defined border developed between the two states of Liao (907–1125) and (Northern) Song (960–1126).\textsuperscript{4} The end of this process saw imperial order beginning to be established in a form that was to remain familiar in its fundamentals for much of the late imperial period, but the process began in the radically different world of the late Tang and Five Dynasties (907–960), when multiple power centers within the same territory interacted on an entirely different basis. An account of this change provides a case study of some of the ways in which borders and boundaries functioned before the invention of the nation-state and the development of the narrative of nationalism. I attempt here to describe a world in which the categories available to order experience and think about choices were fundamentally unlike those familiar to modern readers. In doing this, it is important to treat the borderland not merely as part of some larger whole, but as an object of study in its own right.\textsuperscript{5}
One way into these issues is provided by over two hundred cases (listed in the Appendix) of people who began their lives under regimes based south of the notional line of the Great Wall, but who subsequently became subjects of the Liao regime based to the north. Many of these people were officials or soldiers who transferred their service from southern to northern masters. As the tenth century began, central authority had broken down, to be replaced with a plethora of leaders, lords, and rulers of various kinds, a situation that had been sporadic since An Lushan’s rebellion (755–763), and endemic since Huang Chao’s (875–884). Even those claiming royal or imperial status were in no position to demarcate borderlines or negotiate arrangements for frontier institutions (like markets), nor to dictate their will to frontier leaders who frequently controlled their own armies and sources of income. In these circumstances the ability of leaders and rulers to exercise authority depended chiefly on their capacity to attract followers (whether by coercion or persuasion) and win their fidelity, giving such servitors an influence over wider events unknown in times of internal stability.

Servitors thus had genuine options. From their point of view, there was no guarantee that one’s lord of the morning would last the night, and officials and soldiers frequently had to choose whether to remain loyal to their current master or switch their allegiance to a new one. During the first half of the tenth century it was these on-the-spot decisions of individuals that were the chief or only factors governing the location and functioning of borders and boundaries. But by the first years of the eleventh century a pair of emperors—Liao and Song, Kitan and Chinese, longstanding military antagonists—wielded enough authority within their own realms to be able to demarcate a borderline between them in full confidence that their officials would adhere to what had been determined at court. Such changes in the nature of this frontier are revealed in the lives of those below the status of emperor who started by making borders and ended by observing them. The varied relationships between people and frontiers, as seen in the choices people made regarding their allegiances, are the chief matter of this book.

These choices have been valued differently at different times. Thanks to the famous tirade against those who changed allegiance in the Five Dynasties, written by Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072) and developed further by Sima Guang (1019–1086), this period has been generally regarded as one of renegades, turncoats, and even traitors. This view rests upon the application to tenth-century people and circumstances of moral standards formulated in the eleventh century as ethical strictures began to harden, revised in the late imperial period, and again in modern times. These later standards assume that political borderlines are clear-cut, that these correlate unprob-
lematically with boundaries of identity and allegiance, and accordingly that frontier crossing is deviant. When these anachronistic criteria are thrust back on the past, the frontier crossers of the tenth century are denied choice, and must be either condemned or excused. Even the most positive interpretations of their behavior are presented in terms of mitigating circumstances, which, by offering apologies for frontier crossing, implicitly confirm its dubious morality. This framework leaves no scope for treating the choices and actions of frontier crossers as normal behavior, that may invite explanation but requires no justification.

**Problems with approaches to the Tang-Song transition**

Some issues raised by the use of post-tenth-century understandings of political units, identities, and allegiance are discussed in Chapter 1, but the assumptions underlying the standard portrayal of tenth-century frontier crossers begin with an oddly inconsistent view of the wider context of the Tang-Song transition and neglect the role and significance of the Liao in tenth-century history.

**The tenth century**

The tenth century forms a crucial portion of the Tang-Song transition, sometimes regarded as the most significant turning point in the history of imperial China. The Tang-Song transition is generally held to begin with An Lushan’s rebellion in the mid-eighth century. Over the next two or three hundred years, the culturally inclusive, territorially expansive, northwest-orientated, aristocratic Tang empire, that dominated East Asia even in decline, was transformed. By the middle of the eleventh century there was instead a culturally normative, territorially concentrated, southerly orientated, socially mobile Song state that was forced to accept an interstate system in which no single power held primacy. However, the way the wider period has been conceptualized does not permit satisfactory explanations of either the tenth century or of frontier crossing. The greatest concern has been to explain how we get to the Song rather than how we get from the Tang. That is, scholars have chiefly sought the Tang (or earlier) origins of phenomena that characterize the Song, and have paid much less attention to considering what happened, under later regimes, to phenomena characteristic of the Tang. Hence the Liao have been considered as the enemy and equal of the Song in the later tenth century, but their political dominance during the century as a whole, and their concomitant role in shaping the post-Tang world, has been marginalized.
In the crucial period of the tenth century, the Tang empire fragmented into a sequence of five short-lived dynasties north of the River Huai (see Table 1) and ten chronologically overlapping kingdoms to the south and west. These kingdoms concern us little but for Northern Han (951–979) in Shanxi (then called Hedong). It should be no surprise, then, that the dominant power in Northeast Asia for most of this period was none of these, but rather the Liao dynasty, founded in 907 by Kitan pastoralists and based in the region known to modern times as Manchuria. During the 950s the last rulers of the Five Dynasties began the conquest of the Ten Kingdoms that was completed by the first two Song emperors, Zhao Kuangyin (Taizu, 960–976) and Zhao Kuangyi (Taizong, 976–997). These conquests included limited warfare with the Liao, but from the 980s Liao and Song clashed in earnest, fighting each other to a standstill over two decades before concluding the treaty at Shanyuan in 1005 that prevented further war between them for over a century.

Despite the centrality of the tenth century in the Tang-Song transition, it is rarely treated in any detail. Scholars of the Transition have given most attention to social and economic issues, even though the sources are grudgingly systematic on these topics, and tend to enforce a focus on the Tang up to the mid-ninth century and the Song starting from the early eleventh century, with little detailed analysis of the tenth century itself. Although there are more materials for intellectual history, this topic often labors under similar chronological constraints, however unwillingly. Having said that, the recent revivals of interest in the imperial clan and in military history do sometimes address the early Song and even the Later Zhou.

Those who do focus on the tenth century itself rarely treat it as a whole. It is generally split at some point mid-century—947, 950, and 960 are common choices—and, at least until the Song unification, between the regions north and south of the River Huai. Although war and politics dominate the written record for this century, modern historians have spent little time on such matters. Meanwhile, the southward shift of the Song court and lettered elites from the early twelfth century (Southern Song, 1127–1276) has meant better survival for material from south of the Huai, with the result that the north has been generally less studied in comparison to the steady flow of research on the south, and Fujian in particular. The materials that do survive for the tenth century in the north have been used largely for studies of governmental institutions.

This fragmented study of the tenth century has provided valuable analyses of developments north and south up to mid-century, but starting from
mid-century chiefly for the south. The thread of continuity for the entire tenth century and beyond is the Liao, which is generally treated quite separately, if at all.

**The Liao**

The brief survey above indicates the extent to which the mid-imperial transition has been considered almost entirely from the Song, or more broadly, Chinese, point of view. Despite the Liao’s dominance of the region politically and later religiously, they have rarely been studied in their own right, or taken seriously until they confront the Song near the end of the tenth century. Before then they are generally referred to as the Kitan, an ethnic designation that carries unspoken, but subtly powerful, connotations. The secondary literature’s use of “Kitan” for most of the tenth century positions them as a people rather than a political regime, implying that they are stateless and so denying them the political status they actually had. Among the Song themselves, after the conclusion of the treaty of Shanyuan in 1005, there were those who sought to retain “Kitan” as the formal designation of their counterpart in place of the new term “Northern Court” precisely because the latter conveyed an uncomfortable sense of equality. Speaking of the “Kitan” brackets them with tribal groups like the Xi, Tuyuhun, Shiwei, Dilie, and a host of others, none of which formed recognizable states, or at best with the Turkish and Uighur empires, whose lack of an acknowledged dynastic name places them outside, and in implied and necessary opposition to, the Chinese cultural sphere.

The Liao, of course, is generally regarded as the first of the “conquest dynasties,” being followed (and conquered) by the Jurchen Jin (1115–1234), who were in turn conquered by the Mongols who established the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368). All three confronted the Song dynasties and have tended to be studied largely in association with the Song as a whole, as enemies, rivals, and partners in cultural exchange. Grouping the three together assumes that they shared certain similarities. Thus where the Liao are discussed at all, it is frequently in tandem with the Jin or (less often) the Yuan, so that, for instance, even the best of the several recent histories dealing with Inner Asia have routinely linked the Liao with the Jin as conquerors of China. Bracketed with Jin and Yuan, the role of the Liao as non-Chinese, “barbarian” conquerors has been to play the foil to the Song.

Although it is recognized that the three conquest dynasties exhibited marked differences from each other, there is a great need for some actual research into such issues. Even at the crudest level we may note that whereas the Jin overlapped entirely with one or another incarnation of the Song, the
Liao started fifty years before the Song. But in the compilation of dynastic chronologies the Liao are rarely placed anywhere but after the Song, which they predate, so that they can be located with the “other conquerors.” This goes unremarked upon because Europhone research on the Liao has tended away from the early period in favor of a focus on Liao relations with its Song antagonist, chiefly from the treaty of Shanyuan onwards. Chinese historical research on the Liao is becoming more varied, but remains tiny in volume.

As a consequence, the first century of Liao rule—and accordingly its relations with the Five Dynasties—rather disappears from consideration. Even when there was a flurry of Chinese work in the 1980s on early Liao relations with the Five Dynasties, the conceptual framework of the conquest dynasties made it easy to interpret these interactions as simply prefiguring Song-Liao (or Song-Jin or Song-Mongol/Yuan) relations between the Chinese regime and its alien enemy intent on conquest. There has been, then, a circularity to the way the Liao have been studied that has reinforced their status and presumed inclinations as a conquest dynasty.

Classifying the Liao as a conquest dynasty carries the unexamined presumption that the regime aimed to conquer China, but acquiring lands within the line of the Great Wall does not appear to have been a deliberate strategy and did not impel military action. The Sixteen Prefectures (or Yan-Yun region) promised in 936 (with registers handed over in 938) are the ostensible conquest, but were in fact a payment from a challenger of court authority in return for indispensable Liao help in overthrowing the sitting Five Dynasties emperor. The sources disagree as to whether the Liao occupied Yan and Yun opportunistically during the campaign and so created a fait accompli, or whether they were the prize offered in advance to win Liao intervention. Either way, the region had not been seriously sought by the Liao before and it was not fought over, save for one encirclement lasting a maximum of four days. The Liao did conquer the Later Jin in 947 after three seasons of determined fighting, but this episode was famously brief, lasting less than five months.

This lack of conquest in a conquest dynasty is usually explained by the argument that the Liao really wanted to conquer but were unsuccessful. However, this relies on two assumptions; first, that all of the many recorded Kitan raids on the Five Dynasties and Song were automatically part of a wider strategy of territorial encroachment, and second, that Chinese rallied against the 947 conquest and drove out the alien occupiers. In fact, there were many reasons for raids, they could head north from the Five Dynasties and Song as well as south from Liao, and they were not all directed by a court. Raids were often part of normal border interaction and were not necessarily a manifestation of
Introduction
court-on-court warfare. Meanwhile, the evidence for the Liao-Jin war and 947 occupation suggests that the Liao ruler Deguang (Taizong, 926–947) never intended to stay in the south. He began to withdraw his troops before the locals began acting against the garrison leaders, apparently in response to requests from his own generals.\textsuperscript{31} Recent reinterpretations of the second half of the century (to 1005) similarly argue that the Liao were disinclined to conquer the Later Zhou or Song, fighting only in defense of prosperous lands that by then had been theirs for decades.\textsuperscript{32}

The Liao, then, are quite unlike the Jin or the Yuan on this central issue of expansion south of the line of the Wall, though parallels do remain, of course. To take just two important examples, the Liao did rule a sizeable population drawn from Tang and Five Dynasties administrative districts, whether inhabitants of the Sixteen Prefectures, people seized in Abaoji’s massive raids before 907, or refugees from the chaos of the late Tang and early Five Dynasties. And they did establish models of dual administration for the management of their economically mixed empire that were borrowed by subsequent dynasties that did take up permanent occupation south of the line of the Wall. Yet the context was completely different for the Liao than it was for the Jin and the Mongols, and that was of the greatest significance.

The Liao emerged, crucially, from the wreckage of the Tang dynasty, and their first ruler, Abaoji (Taizu, 907–926), “ascended the imperial throne” in 907 at the same time that others were making similar claims within the line of the Great Wall.\textsuperscript{33} Scholars have been properly suspicious of this coincidental timing, but it can be seen as a natural consequence of the collapse of a great dynasty that claimed authority over lands and peoples extending far to the north and west of its heartlands, in which outposts a residual influence continued to be felt, for instance, in matters of protocol and conciliar styles of rule. If we see the Liao as one—indeed, the most politically successful—of the many successor states to the Tang, it makes perfect sense for it to begin as the Tang ends.\textsuperscript{34} The Liao were as much a product of the late Tang as were the Five Dynasties, and it is this that makes them different in kind from the later conquest dynasties.

For the first half-century of its existence, the Liao regime was not in competition with any other major state. It held supremacy among at least the eastern Inner Asian peoples, while the regimes to its south sought accommodation or peaceful relations, or even acknowledged Liao overlordship, until the beginnings of expansion under Guo Rong (Shizong, 954–959) of the Later Zhou. The Liao was established out of near political vacuum and faced little opposition to achieving a position of unequivocal power. The early rulers could expand their authority and develop new and modified systems of
internal control without distraction from serious external challenge. They could coexist with their neighbors because their neighbors were not a threat. Their preeminent position in the borderlands—which also included the Five Dynasties regimes—meant that the Liao necessarily played a significant role in shaping the tenth-century transformation and determining the character of the post-Tang world.

By contrast, the Jin and the Mongols both began as pretenders muscling in on reasonably stable relationships between pairs of states abiding in a balance of power, whether Liao and Song after 1005, or Jin and Song after 1142 (or, including the Tangut state of Xia, between them and Song after 1044). Both Jin and Mongols arose in opposition to well-established, strong states operating within a well-tried interstate system. While coexistence was not impossible, it could only be achieved by determining, militarily, a suitable demarcation of authority measured out territorially. To gain their place in the sun, the Jin and the Mongols had to fight for recognition as the political equals of their neighbors. But, unlike the tenth-century Liao, they could no longer shape the system in which they operated at a fundamental level; modifications were possible, but the basic pattern had already been set for them, and the Liao had been major contributors to creating that pattern.

So neither the Liao nor the tenth century fit readily within the historical narratives in which they are normally placed. In particular, a wedge is driven between the Five Dynasties and Liao by assuming their opposition in anticipation of the outcomes of the eleventh century and beyond. The Five Dynasties are cast as “Chinese” (even though three of the five were led by Shatuo Turkish families) resisting the inevitable predations of the “barbarian” Khitan. But if we set aside our expectations, we may see patterns that do not easily fall into the conquest-dynasties rubric, but which suggest, rather, that it might be fruitful to consider both the Liao and Five Dynasties together, seeing north China, in Pamela Crossley’s phrase, “as part of an Inner Asian continuum.” To do this we also have to study the period of the tenth century as an entity in its own right—not simply as a sad and degenerate coda to the Tang or a chaotic preliminary to the Song—but analytically distinct. We have to be able to trace changes without confusion from categories developed for later times that may be ill-fitting impositions. We cannot hope to understand transitional eras adequately if we presuppose the answers.

In order to understand the choices of tenth-century frontier people, we first need to reconsider the concepts of borders, ethnicity, and loyalty that frame modern interpretations of frontier crossing. Accordingly, Chapter 1 sets out a revised vocabulary for discussing the choices and actions of frontier crossers, separating territory from allegiances, and rejecting ethnicity as
the mainspring for choice in favor of loyalty. The final piece of the tool kit is a methodology of historiographical comparison that turns problematical sources to advantage.

Loyalty is central to the analysis offered here, but we know remarkably little about what it may have meant in the tenth century. Chapter 2 therefore examines the development of ideas of loyalty, or zhong, from their origins to their radical redefinition by the historians of the eleventh century. By the early tenth century many different interpretations of zhong were available to condition choices made in turbulent times, but a century later the development of a new political formation—two equal and opposing states rather than one hegemonic empire—had begun to narrow the options dramatically. Chapter 3 will then consider the practice of loyalty by tracing the relationship between allegiance and borderlines from around 900 until the conclusion of the treaty of Shanyuan in 1005. From this it will become apparent that we are dealing with a number of different borders and boundaries, which do not necessarily coincide.

The task then is to try to show how different borders and boundaries interweave and interact over time, and how these relationships affect, and are shaped by, the choices of individual human beings. And at all times we have to keep in mind the influence of the recorders upon our picture of the tenth-century world. In the five case studies comprising Chapters 4 to 6 the issues can be seen in human terms, at the level of individual choices.

Four of our five subjects served together at the Liao court. Han Yanhui (882–959) was the earliest arrival in Liao, and was joined in 936 by Zhang Li (d. 947) and Zhao Yanshou (d. 948/9). All three would have met Li Huan (d. 962) on the journey back to the North after the Liao conquest of 947. Li Huan and Han Yanhui then served in the same court until Han Yanhui’s retirement. These four were not all the same age. Zhang Li seems to be about a decade younger than Han Yanhui, and Zhao Yanshou was probably a decade younger again. Li Huan may have been about the same age as Zhao Yanshou, but it is difficult to be sure. Finally, Wang Jizhong (d. 1022) comes from an entirely different generation, for he must have been no younger than his late twenties by the time of his capture in 1003.

Joining the Liao regime in its founding period in the first years of the tenth century, Han Yanhui made important contributions to establishing the institutions of a Chinese-style state and seemed entirely unconcerned about issues of cultural identity. In Chapter 4 his choices are compared with Zhang Li’s, who also moved between nascent states, but in the South. Han Yanhui’s concern to find secure employment follows one interpretation of zhong, while Zhang Li’s filial piety appears to follow quite another.
Both changed their master more than once, and their behavior was considered normal at the time.

Zhang Li’s tale subsequently intertwines with that of Zhao Yanshou in Chapter 5, after both crossed to Liao in the 930s. Zhang once tried to escape from Liao back to the South, while Zhao led Liao armies against the Later Jin (936–947). Their stories give a particularly detailed picture of the pressures and attractions of Liao service for those with more or less political power. The changing political situation, to which they contributed, put their loyalties in question and so made their choices more problematical than those of Han Yanhui and the young Zhang Li.

In Chapter 6 we see how loyalty was redefined as two major states developed in opposition to each other. Li Huan was taken north following the Liao conquest of the Later Jin in 947. Unlike his earlier counterparts, Li acted against the Liao, seemingly because he retained an attachment to his home in the South, but perhaps out of opportunism. His actions may suggest a change that we see completed in the case of the Song general Wang Jizhong. Captured by the Liao, he negotiated the treaty of Shanyuan on their behalf, but was unable to fulfill his deepest wish to return to Song. Whereas a century earlier rulers competed for the loyalties of every individual official, now an emperor could sacrifice the loyalty of an individual to the more important goal of maintaining a working peace treaty. We see that Li Huan exercised choices that Wang Jizhong was apparently unwilling to contemplate.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes the stages by which the meanings of zhong changed through the tenth century and in the historiography of the period and discusses some of the implications for our understanding of territoriality, identity, and morality, and the relationships between them, before the eleventh century. These, in turn, may allow us to reflect further on our frameworks for analysis, and in particular on the impact of the narrative of nationalism, not just on how we explain periods of (arguably) nascent modernity (such as the Qing dynasty), but also on our interpretations of undisputedly premodern times. For these times much work remains to be done to elucidate the categories that were meaningful to contemporaries, in comparison with those that are important to ourselves. It is in that comparison that we may grow in understanding.

This book offers an alternative reading of the tenth century by consciously starting out from a different, and explicit, set of assumptions. We are well aware that our imagining of our world and how it works in the first years of the twenty-first century may not have been shared by our predecessors on the planet. In establishing the assumptions used here before applying them to empirical evidence, I have tried to identify the set of possibilities existing
for the people under examination. Accordingly, I offer a new route through the data at our disposal. My interpretation of these events, choices, and processes may help to suggest possibilities for seeing Chinese imperial history before the Song in different ways. Those who disagree with either assumptions or conclusions may at least be moved to consider what starting points might be preferable.