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BOOK REVIEW

La Dynastie des Song: Histoire générale de la Chine (960-1279)

Christian Lamouroux

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Since 1989, Christian Lamouroux has published a long series of probing, erudite articles about hydraulics, bureaucracy, spatial organisation, fiscal reforms, monetary policy, imperial sovereignty, court culture, historical writing, and commerce during the Song dynasty (960-1279). Although thoroughly versed in Chinese, Japanese, European, and North American scholarship on Chinese history, his work has always been individual, guided by an enduring interest in space, technology, and power, and informed by a critical understanding of the ways in which conventions of writing and practices of transmission have shaped the surviving sources. This solid body of historical scholarship forms the basis for *La Dynastie des Song: Histoire générale de la Chine (960-1279)*. The book appears in the series *Histoire générale de la Chine*, published by Les Belles Lettres and edited by Damien Chaussende. As Lamouroux writes, “institutional and political history and the history of the economy and finance occupy an important place in this book, though other aspects—especially everything that pertains to military history—have not been neglected” (p. 28). The eminent treatment of these preferred subjects has produced a coherent, elegant, original account of the history of the Song Empire.

Conforming to the format of the series, *La Dynastie des Song* opens with a political and institutional history (“A Dynastic History [960-1279]”, chapters 1-5), followed by a series of thematic chapters (“A World Opened Up”, chapters 5-10). A general introduction explains the methodological challenges of writing a dynastic history of the Song empire, by necessity reliant on printed sources (all archives having perished and manuscripts being few) and on multiple historiographies informed by conflicting conceptions and ideologies. “In a certain way, the ‘history of the Song’ that we propose is also intended to be—indeed must be—a ‘history of the history of the Song’” (p. 17). The introduction offers a characterisation of these historiographies and gives a concise, informative account of the main textual sources and archaeological materials.

Although the first chapter, “Foundations and Founding (960-1005)” nominally begins in 960, its opening pages describe the disintegration of the Tang Empire (618-907) into a series of smaller polities that fought and succeeded one another during the first half of the tenth century. Changes in administrative structures during that period not only created the means by which the founder of the Song Empire, the general Zhao Kuangyin (927-976, posthumous title Taizu, r. 960-976), rose to power, but also laid the basis for the characteristic structure of the Song court and government, notably the division between the Bureau of Military Affairs and the headquarters of the imperial armies. Taizu’s division of military powers, and the new balance he created between central and regional powers in the civil bureaucracy, placed the emperor in a position of absolute power. His successors, Taizong (r. 976-997) and Zhenzong (r. 997-1022), elaborated this structure, allotting increasing power and prestige to civil officials and to the examinations through which these emperors recruited their most eminent officials.

Chapter 2, “A New System of Authority (1005-1063)”, explains that the armed peace with the Liao Empire (907-1125), inaugurated in 1005 by the Treaty of Shanyuan, forced Zhenzong to set imperial authority on a new foundation. He enhanced the absoluteness of imperial power by giving new prominence to the ritual and religious authority of the emperor, by securing the autonomy of the Imperial Treasury, and by restricting access to the inner court. Under Renzong (r. 1022-1063), the literati, first constrained by a “wall” of old, established families (p. 122), subsequently became divided among themselves as they debated how

to eliminate the budget deficit that had been increased by the costs of the war against the Xia Empire (1038-1227) as well as by the maintenance of the army, the government, and the imperial family. Chapter 3, “Imperial Incompleteness (1063-1127)”, discusses the long history of the New Laws, a complex of radical reforms designed by Wang Anshi (1021-1086) to eliminate the budget deficit. Enacted by Shenzong, abolished during the regency of Empress Dowager Gao (1085-1093), then reinstated by Zhezong (r. 1085-1100) and Huizong (r. 1100-1126), these controversial reforms of bureaucratic, fiscal, and military structures increased the violence of factional divisions among the literati, while emperors used the reforms to arrogate power to the inner court and to pursue irredentist wars.

This combination of ministerial autocracy, violent factionalism, and irredentist warfare pursued by the inner court continued after the Song Empire lost the northern half of its territory to the Jin Empire (1115-1234) in 1127. Chapters 4 and 5, “The Birth of a New World (1127-1224)” and “The End of a Dynasty”, describe the alternations between periods in which autocratic emperors pursued war and reforms—on their own or with the assistance of autocratic ministers such as Qin Gui (1090-1155), Han Tuozhou (1152-1207), Shi Miyuan (1164-1233), and Jia Sidao (1213-1275)—and periods in which emperors heeded the recommendations and remonstrations of literati who opposed the autocratic tendencies of the court. These literati increasingly identified with the Learning of the Way (*daoxue*, often called “Neo-Confucianism” in English-language scholarship). The budget deficit, the instability of the paper currency, and frequent uprisings against oppressive government extraction left the Song vulnerable to attacks by the Yuan Empire (1271-1368), which took the capital Hangzhou in 1276 and ended the Song dynasty in 1279.

The thematic chapters take up conspicuous topics and developments from this vertical chronology—e.g., imperial sovereignty, institutional reform, fiscal policy, military organisation—and unfold them horizontally, to reveal a multiplicity of contemporary perspectives and a subtlety of historical interpretation. Lamouroux’s original contributions to the historiography of the Song, implicit in the political and institutional narrative, become more evident in these chapters. Chapter 6, “Borders, Imperial Territory, and the World”, analyses “the multiplicity of realities on the border and the diversity of representations of the ‘Other’ that these realities called forth among the literati-officials” (p. 281). Lamouroux acknowledges the prominence and power of the imagination of the Song Empire as the Middle Kingdom, set above neighbouring peoples by its settled agriculture and literate culture. He explains that this imagination, grown fervid after the humiliating Treaty of Shanyuan, incited the Song government to conquer and colonise peoples on the northwestern, western, and southwestern frontiers, where it “introduced new forms of social and economic life and imposed a particular mode of ecological transformation” (p. 295). But Lamouroux identifies other imaginations of space and power as well, such as the conduct of trade with enemy states as a form of diplomacy and the recognition by some literati that borders created artificial divisions between people united by a common humanity. Inhabitants of border regions and merchants trading in overseas ports likely had their own imaginations of space and power, but these imaginations can now only be inferred from accounts of their behaviour by literati.

In chapter 7, “An Exchange Economy”, Lamouroux offers a subtle but thorough criticism of the common characterisation of commercial activity during the Song as a market economy. He argues that economic development was regional and uneven, and that it was the government, rather than merchants, who

connected these regions to one another. The government created the infrastructure for production and circulation, exercised control over markets through its fiscal and monetary policies, designated sites for specialised agricultural and industrial production, extracted resources for its own maintenance and for the provision of the army, and thereby shaped new social stratifications in the countryside and in the cities: “It is evidently in the individual configuration of each macroregion, in the new connection that its countryside and cities managed to establish between themselves and in relation to the demands of the evolving bureaucratic state, that one must seek the origin of the increasing division of labour in the different sections of the craft industry and the source of the commercial dynamism that characterises the Song” (p. 358). The elaboration of this basic analysis of the Song economy produces many important new insights, such as the observation that the government during the Southern Song in effect backed its paper currency with precious metals, because it used silver and gold to buy up inflated bills.

Chapter 8, “A New Sovereignty”, adds nuance to the argument, first proposed by Naitō Konan (1866-1934), that during the Song the power of the emperor became absolute because the emperor was set apart from the civil bureaucracy as he had not been set apart from the powerful established families during the Tang. By framing Song imperial sovereignty within a comparative universal history of the state, Lamouroux argues, proponents of this argument have neglected the particular character of sovereignty during the Song. The chapter therefore considers imperial sovereignty within its full dynastic context: the layout of the palace, the management of the imperial family, the power of empresses and imperial concubines, the organisation of the army, the structure of civil government, the position of the emperor himself (with an emphasis on the strategic importance of the Imperial Treasury), and the coordinating role of the Censorate and the Remonstrance Bureau. The chapter concludes that the rituals which the emperor performed as the Son of Heaven remained the source of his legitimacy—and of the legitimacy of the officials who governed and conducted rituals on his behalf—and that Song officials, although isolated from the emperor by his absolute power, nonetheless shaped imperial sovereignty by representing imperial power to itself, as they invoked ancient and recent precedents to place emperors within a long line of legitimate succession and within the encompassing space of a moral cosmos.

Chapter 9, “Re-establishing the Empire, Reconstructing the World”, reminds the reader that Song emperors used the examinations to recruit officials in numbers unrivalled by other dynasties: when calculated (for comparison) as an annual average, the number of examination graduates during the Song is twenty times as high that of the Tang, four times as high as that of the Ming (1368-1644), and more than three times as high as that of the Qing (1636-1912). The examinations created divisions among the literati, but they also contributed to a shared intellectual culture that was characterised by lively debate. Song literati criticised the received texts of the ancient canon, debated the general meaning of canonical texts, discussed the moral importance of literary style, and increasingly sought universal principles within themselves. This chapter presents an original, integrated account of the development of classical thought (“Confucianism”) during the Song, centred on three defining moments: “the inauguration of a ‘universal peace’ sanctioned by the grand sacrifices at Mount Tai in 1008; the era of reforms, from 1044 to the end of the Northern Song; and the synthesis of the twelfth century” (p. 499). The narrative recognises the continuities in the debates about learning and politics but also discerns important shifts, such as successive

engagements with different Buddhist and Daoist traditions, the conviction, starting around 1030, that the world possessed a coherence and a meaning that could be known and could be acted upon, and the gradual concentration upon the self and on a single universal principle (*li*) thought to inform all reality.

Chapter 10, “The Organisation of Society: Cults, Order, and Disorder”, impresses upon the reader that, in spite of important developments in classical learning, the Song was not a “Confucian age” (p. 549). Rather, at all levels of society, “the evolution of the religious universe accompanied and modified the relations that individuals maintained with the invisible world of deities and spirits, while also contributing to the conception they had of the ties that bound them to the different circles of sociability which gave them their identity, beginning with their family and their ancestors” (p. 550). The chapter elaborates these changes in the “religious ecology” (p. 551) during the Song in a series of concise sections on Buddhism, on Daoism and popular religion, on divination, diviners, and geomancy, on families and family resources, on the village order, on the order of the law, and on crimes and punishments. From these sections emerges, as the introduction to the chapter promises, an image of a society in which every individual belonged to multiple, overlapping communities—communities that espoused partly complementary, partly contradictory understandings of the visible and invisible worlds, of space and time, of life and death. Lamouroux finds explicit evidence of such simultaneous belonging in temple inscriptions in Putian, Fujian province—in which powerful families assert their place in the history, the social hierarchy, the landscape, and the religious order of their community—and in epitaphs, which designate the place of the deceased within the descent line of their family as well as within marriage networks, scholarly genealogies, patronage systems, and charitable associations.

The conclusion to *La Dynastie des Song* reflects on the coherence of the Song dynasty as an historical period. It proposes that the loss of the northern half of the empire in 1127 forced the court and the literati to assess the legacy of their dynasty, and that a consideration of their decisions—the abandonment of reforms, the continuation of the examinations, the reorganisation of the fiscal and monetary structure—reveals more about the nature and significance of the Song than do attempts to decide its place within universal periodisations of the “early modern” and the “modern”.

Christian Lamouroux’s concentration on his areas of strength has yielded a coherent, compelling account of Song history, an account that is at the same time comprehensive and original, generous in its scholarly acknowledgments and individual in its interpretations. That his emphasis on institutions, politics, economics, and finance has enabled him to present such a full account of the period appears to be due less to the intrinsic importance of those subjects than to the place they occupy in the sources. In other words, the success of the volume derives in the final analysis from Lamouroux’s constant attentiveness to the nature of the surviving sources. In his chapter on the exchange economy, for example, he reminds the reader that “the economic dynamism of the Song is accessible to us only through the prism of the administrative apparatus, especially when our purpose is to quantify it or to situate it geographically. What is revealed to us first and foremost is the bureaucratic assessment of those activities” (p. 374). This thorough understanding of the textual traditions of the Song as they have been transmitted to the present is evident not only in Lamouroux’s treatment of institutional history and fiscal policy, but also in his discussion of topics that he has not treated at length in previous publications, such as the history of the

Learning of the Way and the religious organisation of local society.¹ Even in passages that rely substantially on the scholarship of others, one discerns in the background Lamouroux's own understanding of the conventions of the sources. This bringing together of primary sources and secondary literature will be evident to readers who consult the footnotes, as they will repeatedly discover a reference to a primary text where they had expected to find a citation of a secondary source.

To my knowledge, Christian Lamouroux is only the third scholar to have published, in a European language, a history of the Song dynasty for a general audience. Among the predecessors of *La Dynastie des Song*, Jacques Gernet's *La Vie quotidienne en Chine à la veille de l'invasion mongole, 1250-1276* (1959; published in English in 1962 as *Daily life in China: on the eve of the Mongol invasion, 1250-1276*) and Dieter Kuhn's *Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China* (2009) are still in print; Dieter Kuhn's *Die Song Dynastie (960 bis 1279): Eine neue Gesellschaft im Spiegel ihrer Kultur* (1987) is not. Lamouroux demands more of his readers than do Gernet and Kuhn, but he repays their close attention with elegant prose, nuanced argument, and comprehensive treatment. The comprehensiveness and seriousness of *La Dynastie des Song* in fact make it more akin to the two volumes on the Song dynasty in the Cambridge History of China series (a series originally also intended for a general readership) than to the books by Gernet and Kuhn. Published as a trade book in a ten-volume series, *La Dynastie des Song* is at the same time an accessible historical account and a valuable reference work. An elegant summation of Christian Lamouroux's thorough, original scholarship, the book makes many valuable contributions to the scholarly literature on the Song dynasty.

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¹ The analysis of the sources in *La Dynastie des Song* is not entirely without error. Some episodes in Song history that Lamouroux accepts as factual Charles Hartman has recently exposed as fictions manufactured by Song literati, such as Taizu's retirement of his generals "over a few cups of wine" in 961 (p. 52; Hartman 2020, pp. 296, 303-311) and Taizu's promotion of civil government (pp. 52, 54; Hartman 2020, pp. 89-90 *et passim*). Christian Lamouroux (2022) has published a laudatory review of Hartman's book in the journal *T'oung Pao*.