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Among all of China’s traditional dynasties, the Song, which spanned the Common Era years from 960 to 1279, has had the dubious distinction of reputedly having been the most civil. On the one hand, this appraisal has resulted in past and present scholars of post-unification imperial China regarding the Song as the apogee of civil humanistic attainment, not just in the arts but particularly, as facilitated by the fully mature civil service examination system, in the conjoined realms of governance and statecraft. However, on the other hand, these same scholars have correspondingly anointed the Song as the weakest in military terms of all the dynasties ever to establish, even if only tenuously, universal sovereignty over the empire. Indeed, the association of Song China’s preeminent civility with military weakness has long been almost axiomatic for Chinese historians of China and their Western counterparts alike, and they further concur that whatever peace the Song enjoyed owed more to a humiliating strategy of appeasement than to any martial capacity for self-defense. Hence, over time, an attitude bordering on incuriosity has arisen about trying to look beyond the tropes to detect whether there were any military foundations at all on which the esteemed civilianized functionality of the Song must have rested.

The immediate value of Peter Lorge’s The Reunification of China: Peace through War under the Song Dynasty lies precisely in the fact that it forces us to reevaluate the indispensable contributions of warfare not only to the Song founding itself but also to the often fractured and discontinuous peace that China was able to eek out with its mortally hostile neighbors for a near-half century after its establishment. Moreover, in the process, Lorge additionally apprises us of something as valuable but more subtle—namely, the largely unexamined and therefore surprising facility of warfare at also maintaining the Song’s internal peace, not just at the time of its inception but also for decades subsequently. Lorge persuasively argues that our customary bifurcated purview on the Song as civilized but weak stems from our almost reflexive inclination to impute the ethos of its eleventh-century cultural climate back onto its late tenth-century situation. Writing by way of introduction Lorge underscores the serious mistakenness of this conflation, stating that: “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 civilization-dominated, politically driven culture” (2).

Thus, through The Reunification of China, Lorge has undertaken and largely succeeded at a project in differentiation—one that expressly aims to explicate...
just how radically and consequentially the formative culture of Song China in the late tenth century contrasted with that which came immediately after it. This undertaking has led him to proffer and attempt to prove the provocatively revisionist hypothesis that the true founding of the Song as a political entity was not in the conventionally designated year of 960 at all but instead in the year 1005. In order to accomplish these interrelated objectives, he has constructed a concise study that, after its formal introduction (Chapter 1), consists of nine sharply focused chapters plus a too brief and perhaps merely recapitulative conclusion. Chapter 2 is also introductory because it provides us with a discussion of methodology as well as a welcome historiographical survey of the recent literature, through which Lorge modestly contextualizes his study as one contribution among several reflecting a growth in scholarly interest in the military as well as political history of the Song.

Thereafter, we may divide the eight remaining chapters of The Reunification of China prior to the conclusion into two parts. Chapters 3 and 4 are the first part, with both devoted to the death-throes of Later Zhou (951-960), the last of the northern-based Five Dynasties, under its ruler Chai Rong (921-959), later canonized as Shizong (r. 954-960). Chapters 5 through 10 constitute the second part, collectively encompassing the earliest stage of the Song efflorescence under the long-lived Zhao clan. This latter set of chapters may itself be further divided serially into three chapters that detail the seminal military exploits of the Song dynastic founder Taizu (r. 960-976); two that describe the less successful efforts of his brother-successor Taizong (r. 976-997); and one that outlines the exertions of the Song military in warring for the sake of peace during the opening years of the reign of the emperor Zhenzong (r. 998-1022), son of Taizong, culminating in the landmark Covenant of Chanyuan peace accord that was struck between the Chinese and the Kitan people of the adversarial Liao regime in 1005.

Given that they are all mutually reinforcing, these chapters, taken in aggregate, ostensibly supply a narrative tapestry of the campaigns in pacification and consolidation mobilized by the Song’s founding monarchs. Yet, commendably and most often precisely through the device of narrative, Lorge has facilitated a deeper understanding on our part than has any previous author on the subject of how the cultural attributes of the Song’s eleventh century (and, for that matter, succeeding twelfth and thirteenth centuries) came to be projected back onto its tenth. Lorge finds that the touchstones for this sort of imputation were indeed the imperial actors themselves, but he simultaneously confronts us with how such imputing resulted more from the bias of traditional Chinese historians than from the historical actors themselves.

We encounter an excellent instance of this manner of explication in a critical portion of Lorge’s discussion of the Song founder Taizu, who was especially