THE POLITICS OF COLLECTING KNOWLEDGE

Song Taizong’s Compilations Project

BY

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The first rulers of the Song dynasty were the architects of a reunited empire that ended a long period of disunion. The reunion process in the early Song began in the north, which, apart from the states of the Liao 朝 (founded in 916) and Northern Han 北漢 (founded in 951), had geographically existed almost unchanged since the end of the Tang. The Later Zhou 後周 (951-960), the last of the Five Dynasties in the north, had already initiated various campaigns to unite the empire under one single rule. The Five Dynasties that reigned in succession in the north all had their capital at Kaifeng, with the exception of the Later Tang which ruled from Luoyang. Since their territory remained almost unchanged, it was easier for their rulers to maintain a coherent ideology regarding a united empire, even though they were often faced with internal strife and external warfare.

The south had seen rather different developments during the ca. sixty years of the same period. Whereas the north experienced continuous warfare and a series of dynasties quickly succeeding each other, the south, soon after the abolition of the Tang in the early tenth century, went through a fragmentation of its territory into several states. Some of these chose to pledge loyalty to the northern dynas-

1 I would like to express my thanks to Pierre-Étienne Will for his many suggestions and comments in preparing this essay for publication, as well as to reviewers Peter K. Bol and Christian Lamouroux for their useful criticisms. All errors that remain are my responsibility alone.

2 Wang Gungwu, The Structure of Power in North China During the Five Dynasties (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1963), focuses on the political history of the first four of the Five Dynasties. An equally comprehensive history of the south during the same period in a Western language still remains to be written. For a Chinese account, see Zheng Xuemeng 郑学檬 Wudai shiguo shi yanjiu 五代十 国史研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1991).

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ties, whereas others tried to establish themselves as independent states. The state of Wu-Yue 吳越 (907-978) always sought recognition of its rulers as kings by the northern dynasties, and used its status as their vassal to counter the threat posed by the Southern Tang (Nan Tang 南唐, 937-976). The second ruler of the Southern Tang regarded himself as successor of the Tang and dreamed of a restoration of Tang rule under his leadership. On Wu-Yue, see Edmund H. Worthy, Jr., “Diplomacy for Survival: Domestic and Foreign Relations of Wu-Yueh, 907-978”, in Morris Rossabi (ed.), China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors 10th to 14th Centuries (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 17-44.

How far and to what extent block-printing actually influenced the distribution of texts in the early days of the dynasty still remains to be researched in detail.


For a detailed study of the production of the Wenyuan yinghua, see Hanabusa Hideki 花房英樹, “Ban’en eiga no hensan” 文苑英華の編纂. Tōhō gakubu 19 (1959): 116-135. A possible model for the Wenyuan yinghua, apart from the early Tang works, may have been the Qianshu lizao 番書類載 by Zhu Zundu 車尊度, who had been active under the Southern Tang. Zhu is said to have compiled 13,800 pieces of old and new literature into 1,000 juan, ordered according to six categories. He also wrote a catalogue for the work in 50 juan. See Wang Yinglin 王應麟, Yuhai 王海 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992) 52.35a-b (407). Zheng Wenbao 鄭文寶 (953-1013) states that Zhu originally was from Shandong, but moved to...