Regional and Local Approaches to the Frontiers in North China from the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries

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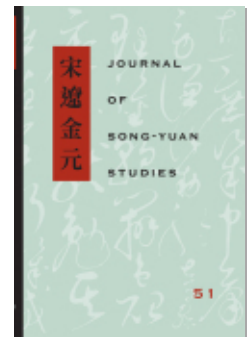# Regional and Local Approaches to the Frontiers in North China from the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries

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Nearly two decades ago, Nicola Di Cosmo and Don Wyatt noted that the rise of regional perspectives after the 1980s had greatly advanced the Western scholarly understanding of China. Previously many scholars in North America and Europe had long held an ingrained stereotype of imperial China as "an isolated and xenophobic monolith, a static empire mostly turned inward upon itself against the outside world and especially against its own vast and predatory northern 'Inner Asian' frontier."[1] This image resulted from a conventional approach to area studies that separated the history of China from that of Inner Asia. As a result, this approach "has unquestionably led us to a myopic preoccupation with Chinese civilization in a cultural vacuum and, consequently, to an overly narrow focus on the influential but hardly totalistic history and culture of the ethnically dominant Han people."[2] Since the 1980s, a range of regional or regionalist paradigms, such as G. William Skinner's model of macroregions as socioeconomic systems, have reshaped the ways in which scholars view Chinese history.[3] One subdiscipline that has begun

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1. Nicola Di Cosmo and Don J. Wyatt, eds., *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 2.

2. Nicola Di Cosmo and Don J. Wyatt, *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, 3.

3. For Skinner's macroregion theory, see William Skinner, "Regional Urbanization in Nineteenth-Century China" and "Cities and the Hierarchy of Local Systems," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977), 211–49, 275–351. For Middle-Period China historians' appropriation of Skinner's analytical framework of macroregions, see Robert M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformation of China, 750–1550," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 42.2 (1982): 367–94.

to gain currency within this paradigm shift in Western scholarship on China is the study of frontiers and border regions, which, as Di Cosmo and Wyatt put it, "are being studied no longer or not exclusively as marginalized zones of Sinitic influence, but rather as separate areas in their own right."[4] Much has changed in the field of frontier studies in the past two decades, and this special issue reflects recent developments in the subfield of northern frontiers in Middle Period China.[5]

The frontiers straddling the entities that we have retrospectively called "China" and "Inner Asia" figure significantly in historical research on Middle Period China. The case of north China has been particularly inspiring to scholars interested in frontier spaces. The region experienced intense political, social, and cultural exchanges between the "Chinese" and "Inner Asian" worlds for almost four centuries after fall of the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907).[6] A large portion of the region became the frontlines in sometimes violent, sometimes peaceful relationships between successive Chinese dynasties—especially the Song 宋 (960–1276)—and their northern and northwestern neighbors: the Khitan Liao 遼 (907–1125), the Jurchen Jin 金 (1115–1234), the Tangut Xi Xia 西夏 (1038–1227), and ultimately the mighty Mongol Empire. Among these "Chinese" and "Inner Asian" states, political, geographical, and cultural boundaries between "Chinese" and "nomadic" peoples were constantly shifting. In the past two decades, scholarly studies on the northern frontier have overlapped with those on the interactions between "Chinese" and "Inner Asian" states and cultures. Scholars have explored how communities perceived or defined boundaries and borders, how the blurring of boundaries affected practices conventionally characterized as "Chinese" or "nomadic," and what interstate interactions took place at and across political borders.[7]

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4. Nicola Di Cosmo and Don J. Wyatt, *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, 4.

5. This special issue draws together five of the fifteen articles presented at the international conference "North China as Part of the Inner Asian System, 10th-15th Centuries" held at the National University of Singapore on December 9–11, 2019. The conference was supported by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, under its Academic Research Fund *Tier 2* (Award No. MOE2017-T2-2-017).

6. Geographically, the region of north China commonly includes today's Beijing 北京, Tianjin 天津, Hebei 河北, Henan 河南, Shandong 山東, Shanxi 山西, and Shaanxi 陝西 provinces.

7. For representative scholarly works in this line of inquiry, see Naomi Standen, "Raiding and Frontier Society in the Five Dynasties," and Irene S. Leung, "Felt Yurts Neatly Arrayed,

While previous scholarship on the frontier during this period has largely adopted dynastic and top-down perspectives, this special issue proposes an alternative that focuses instead on regional and local perspectives. It is not a completely bottom-up approach, as the articles in this issue do recognize the importance of understanding the court's indispensable role in shaping border affairs. Instead, as Ong Chang Woei's article in this issue suggests, we call for "moving beyond the fixation on seeing everything from the perspective of the center." In their shared commitment to giving voices to borderland peoples, societies, and cultures, the five articles in the pages that follow have much in common in their premises, interests, and findings. Stressing several themes, this introduction puts the articles of this special issue into conversation and comparison. It teases out the major contributions of this special issue to the field of Middle Period China, focusing on how it advances ongoing debates, revises entrenched biases, and makes methodological interventions in multiple subfields. All five articles engage extensively with existing scholarship in related subfields such as the Song state's frontier management, the Song elite's political discourse, and cultural exchanges between north-China regimes and their northern neighbors as well as those between Han and non-Han peoples. To avoid repetition, this introduction will refrain from citing the scholarly works that have been mentioned or discussed in the individual articles found here.

Frontier Management

Historians have described the tenth to thirteenth centuries as a time of "China among equals."[8] It was a period punctuated by wars, and even times of relative peace were threatened by the possibility of violence. This political-military environment structured not just interstate relations but also the state's frontier management, which directly affected the lives of borderland peoples and the

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Large Tents Huddle Close: Visualizing the Frontier in the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127)," both in Di Cosmo and Wyatt, *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries, and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, 160–91, 192–219; and Naomi Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, scholarly studies on the northern frontier in the Middle Period also began to thrive in Chinese scholarship. See Zhang Xiqing 張希清, ed., *10–13 shiji Zhongguo wenhua de pengzhuang yu ronghe* 10–13世紀中國文化的碰撞與融合 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2006).

8. Morris Rossabi, ed., *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1983).

nature of borderland societies. North China was caught between war and peace on two important fronts: 1) between north-China regimes and their northern neighbors; and 2) between north China and south China (particularly between the Southern Song and the Jin as well as the ensuing Mongol-Yuan). Primarily addressing the first set of relations, the articles in this special issue shed new light on the Northern Song dynasty's frontier management at its northern borders.

In particular, the studies in this special issue revisit scholarship that has applied a court-oriented perspective to interpret the Song state's frontier-management strategies as part of the dynasty's general principles for national governance. These general principles centered around two key concepts, *qianggan ruozhi* 強幹弱枝 and *chongwen yiwu* 崇文抑武,[9] which aimed to put military forces and officers under the centralized control of the court, dominated by the emperor and his scholar-officials. Three articles—by Ong, Zhang and myself—engage the scholarly debates on these principles in two important ways. Separately, each article highlights the agency of borderland players in shaping the state's flexible frontier-management measures without compromising the dynasty's general principles. The three articles interrogate diverse border regions and together demonstrate the unique qualities of the North China frontier.

The articles by Zhang and Ong together illustrate the diversity of approaches the Northern Song employed with respect to the northern frontiers around the mid-eleventh century. Zhang's article highlights a case that aligns with the Song state's general principles of centralized civil rule, which aimed to restrain the clout of militarized elite families. In contrast, Ong's study reveals an "abnormal" case of families monopolizing military and administrative affairs in border prefectures. Together, they show that an always-looming threat of violence, along with the region's social-political structures, gave rise to two different types of frontiers in the Northern Song's northern borderland. One type, like Dingzhou 定州 and the broader Hebei region studied in Zhang's article, was relatively stable and friendly. The nature of this frontier was a direct result of the peace-making and border-demarcating treaties signed by

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9. *Qianggan ruozhi* refers to the policy of strengthening the central government or court-commanded imperial army while weakening the local government or regional and local military forces. *Chongwen yiwu* means promoting the civil and restraining the martial. For major scholarly works on these two general principles of the Northern Song, see the extensive citations in the articles by Ong and Zhang.

the Northern Song and the Liao in 1005 and 1042. The other type, exemplified by the region of Hewai 河外 examined by Ong, was much more volatile and hostile. As Ong shows, the nature of Hewai's frontier was heavily influenced by the constant, large-scale Song-Xi Xia wars that occurred there after 1040. It was also shaped by distinctive regional power dynamics, in which local strongmen had consistently controlled the movement and allegiance of local communities since the tenth century.

The regional approach adopted in both articles allows us to see beyond the state's top-down frontier policies and understand instead the agency of individuals and local forces in shaping the nature of the border region. Zhang's paper shows how Han Qi 韓琦 (1008–1075), a commander-in-chief who was committed to the Confucian way of benevolent governance, pushed for a civilianization project to transform Dingzhou from a "militarized, marginal, and uncultured space" to a "place of cultural significance." In his efforts to change Dingzhou, and its reputation for "frontier dust" and "barbarian wind and sand," Han took a typical scholar-official approach by establishing, or renovating, buildings and institutions imbued with civil qualities—such as ritual performances, schools, and local temples—and by writing poems and essays to commemorate them. In contrast, Ong's paper highlights the role of local strongmen in creating and maintaining the status quo in the state's frontier management in Hewai. Ong shows that this status quo, in which militarized elite families of local strongmen held hereditary rights to govern and guard three border prefectures in Hewai, benefited all stakeholders involved, including the Northern Song court.

Far from indicating a contradiction, the comparison of the Dingzhou and Hewai cases in fact tells us something new. When we redirect our attention from prescriptive frontier policies to the different situations in specific border regions, we recognize that the Northern Song's frontier management on the ground was rather pragmatic, and even innovative. It flexibly adapted to diverse regional dynamics in different types of frontier areas, making it possible to reach a degree of equilibrium acceptable for both the state and borderland residents.

A comparison between Ong's paper and mine allows for a new understanding of the Northern Song's failure in its frontier management in the Sixteen Prefectures during the 1120s. In an effort to guard the new borderlands, between 1123 and 1125, the Northern Song court chose to rely on local strongmen, especially those from the local Han populations known as Han'er 漢

兒. Looking at Hewai and the Sixteen Prefectures—both regarded as volatile and hostile frontiers—side-by-side, we notice the similarity of the Northern Song court's strategy of entrusting local strongmen to defend border regions. Just as in Hewai, in the Sixteen Prefectures the Song court indeed had the same incentive of minimizing its military burden and financial costs, which would have risen considerably if it had instead deployed imperial troops to guard the frontiers. Despite their similarities, however, the Sixteen Prefectures and Hewai differed in terms of their local strongmen's relationships with the Northern Song state. In Hewai's case, even though local strongmen also carried the label of "men with unbounded loyalty," they had more than a century's experience in negotiating and collaborating with the Song state, which led to the creation of an equilibrium that benefited both parties. Yet, in the case of the Sixteen Prefectures, the Song court and the Han'er forces had no relationship with similar historical depth, which would have been essential for nurturing the common ground required for the two sides to defend the Sixteen Prefectures.

This type of new understanding comes into focus when we juxtapose the three articles on Hebei, Hewai, and the Sixteen Prefectures and put them in conversation. Our findings chart new ground in the growing field of frontier studies by proposing a comparative regional approach to both center-frontier relationships and local sociopolitical structures, which mutually affected each other.

Empire, Ethnicity, and Identity

Identity was central to the project of empire building in the age of "China among equals."[10] Here I will be discussing two models of identity—civilizational and ethnic. Military threats were not the only challenge to the Song dynasty's goal of establishing a supreme "Chinese empire" in cultural and territorial terms. Coexistence with northern neighbors also precipitated crises. The Song political elite identified their own people as civilized "Chinese,"

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10. For the working definition of empire, I follow Jack Fairey and Brian P. Farrell's approach, which defines an "empire" as "any state that formally adopted some combination of an associated set of ideas and practices that manifested themselves in three ways: ideological, structural, and institutional." For their elaboration on this concept, see Jack Fairey and Brian P. Farrell, eds., *Empire in Asia: A New Global History, Volume 1: From Chinggisid to Qing* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 4–6.

whereas the peoples from their northern neighbors were branded as uncivilized "Others." At the same time, identity increasingly became an ethnic matter. Northern states like the Liao drew from their own sociopolitical traditions to configure an ethnicity-based identity that allowed them to define themselves and others. In the eleventh century, ideas about the civilizational and ethnic models of empire and identity flowed across borders, particularly as the political elite of the Song, Liao, and Xi Xia engaged in frequent diplomatic exchanges with each other. At these states' peripheries, frontier residents regularly crossed borders for various reasons. As the cultural, ethnic, and political dimensions of identity intertwined, borderland people's identity and political allegiance became the focus of intense interest among the imperial elite of the time as well as modern historians today.

The current special issue builds upon a growing body of Middle Period China studies dedicated to analyzing empire, ethnicity, and identity. The tenth to thirteenth centuries witnessed parallel state-building efforts in both China and Inner Asia. In China, after the fall of the Tang dynasty, the interregnum of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms witnessed ambitious state-building initiatives and the concomitant emergence of a multistate system among regimes in the divided north and south. The rise of the Song dynasty, with its successful military campaigns uniting the south and its civilian recruitment of the southern elite into its bureaucracy, brought an end to the period of political division and rekindled the vision of, and commitment to, the holistic Chinese empire.[11] Meanwhile, the rapidly maturing statecraft employed by Inner Asian states in these centuries helped the Liao, Xi Xia, and Jin to become powerful imperial dynasties that matched and even surpassed the strength of their Chinese rivals, particularly the Northern Song. As a result, there emerged a new and larger multistate system within East Asia among these contending states, which were, in varying degrees, willing to accept boundaries and recognize one another as equals.[12] This geopolitical equilibrium de

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11. Hugh Clark, "Why Does the Tang-Song Interrugnum Matter: Part Three: The Legacy of Division and the Holistic Empire," *JSYS* 49 (2020): 1–44.

12. For state building in Inner Asia from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, see Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 6, *Alien Regimes and Border States*, 907–1368, ed. Frank and Twitchett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–42; and Nicola Di Cosmo, "State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History," *Journal of World History* 10.1 (1999): 1–40. For an overview of state building in both China and Inner Asia, see Paul Jakov Smith, "Introduction: The Sung Dynasty and Its Precursors,

facto reduced the Northern Song to what Wang Gungwu has described as "a lesser empire."[13] In addition, this new reality gave incentives to the political elite of all the coexistent states to advance their own imperial discourse and claim the title of "supreme empire" for their own dynasty.

Two articles in this special issue advance the scholarly discourse on the rhetoric of empire among the Northern Song, Liao, and Xi Xia. Tackett's article examines how the Chinese civilizational discourse on empire was adapted at multiple north Asian courts, including the Liao and Xi Xia. While this approach is in line with recent scholarship that argues for multiple directions in Sino-steppe cultural exchange, Tackett's study is unique in that it explores the dynamics of such cultural diffusion, and contextualizes it within broader social and political movements in the Chinese and Inner Asian worlds in the tenth and eleventh centuries. This integrative approach allows him to identify mass migration and diplomatic activity, which to date have not received much scholarly attention, as two driving forces of Sino-steppe cultural exchange. This new interpretation also challenges the conventional "Sinicization" narrative, which underlines Inner Asian state rulers' conscious identification with Chinese culture to explain why they claimed that their dynasties —and not the Song—represented the one true, legitimate Chinese empire.[14]

Rhetoric that positioned the Song, Liao, and Xi Xia as empires between the tenth and twelfth centuries was deployed largely in the context of interstate relations. Each dynasty had other sets of ideologies to legitimize imperial rule on its home front. Nonetheless, borderlands between these states stood at the intersection of political discourses that were oriented toward internal and external audiences. Perceptions of borderlands and their residents—including those across borders—became an inherent part of the political elite's definition of their state. For the Northern Song elite, no region was more crucial than the Sixteen Prefectures to the imperial project of reconquering the "lost territories" and thereby establishing the Song as the legitimate successor of the great Chinese empires of the Han and Tang.

907–1279," in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 5, Part One: Sung China, 960–1279*, ed. John W. Chaffee and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–37.

13. Wang Gungwu, "The Rhetoric of a Lesser Empire: Early Song Relations with Its Neighbors," in Rossabi, *China Among Equals*, 47–65.

14. See Liu Pujiang 劉浦江, "Deyun zhizheng yu Liao Jin wangchao de zhengtongxing wenti" 德運之爭與遼金王朝的正統性問題, in Liu Pujiang, *Songmo zhijian: Liao Jin Qidan Nüzhen shi yanjiu* 松漠之間: 遼金契丹女眞史研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 1–26.

My article explores how the Northern Song's empire-building discourse interacted with its empire-making actions, especially its move to "recover" the Sixteen Prefectures in the early twelfth century. In doing so, my article sheds light on a fundamental rift in the Song political discourse on "retrieving" the Sixteen Prefecture to restore "the old territories of the Han and Tang." The fracture centered on a key discrepancy between the court's rhetoric and practice: the Song court and its political elite conceptualized "people-land unity" in their rhetoric, but performed "land-people disunity" in practice, which exacerbated a series of mistakes the Song made in its military and political maneuverings in the newly gained borderlands. This discrepancy hinged on the Song elite's inconsistent and at times contradictory rhetoric about borderland people's ethnic identity.

Ethnicity and identity are two key words that appear in most of the five articles that comprise this special issue. Historians are divided on whether ethnicity is an appropriate category of analysis for Middle Period China—or any pre-nineteenth-century context, for that matter. Those historians who have found ethnicity a generative category tend to focus on political discourses deployed by the political elites of different states, especially the Song. They often contextualize the Song elite's discourse on ethnicity and identity within broader Song intellectual movements that defined "China" and "Chinese" against cultural and ethnic Others.[15] Tackett's article, which elaborates on his earlier work on the topic, is emblematic of this cultural-historical approach. Defining ethnicity as a "cultural interpretation of descent," he takes the stance that ethnicity is not just relevant; it is also an analytical category critical to understanding Sino-steppe cultural exchange. Such exchanges almost always involved a cultural interpretation of identity that pitted "us" versus "Others." The remaining four articles share in this position in their use of terms like "ethnic groups" and "ethnic identity."

Two articles, by Hong and myself, however, propose alternative approaches to the topic of ethnicity and identity. Both articles reject ethnic divisions as a dominant analytical framework. Instead, they regard ethnicity-based identity more as the ideological inclination of the political elite than as a constitutive element shaping people's sociocultural experiences in day-to-day life.

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15. Nicolas Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Shao-yun Yang, *The Way of Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019).

Focusing on the Han populations, or Han'er, in the Sixteen Prefectures, my article challenges the cultural-historical approach by bringing social history into the conversation. While Tackett underscores the panoramic perspective of the Song political elite, who imagined solidarity among the "Han people" across the Song-Liao border, my article highlights the necessity of contrasting the local and national perspectives used to conceptualize the land and people of border regions. Locally produced epigraphic sources reveal not only a general absence of ethnic markers like Han or Fan, but also a strong inclination to structure Han'er's war-time experiences using social identities configured by wealth, status, locality, and religious belief. By incorporating national and local sources and perspectives into the conversation, I emphasize that while the ethnic understanding of identity reflected a top-down and idealized vision of society, a historical understanding of borderland societies and residents requires us to pay equal attention to social and cultural conceptions of identity, especially those framed using local terms and concerns.

Hong's article showcases how a cultural understanding of identity that considers local perspectives can transcend the analytical framework of ethnic distinctions. Her art-historical approach lends the special issue a distinctive take on the tangled relationship between ethnicity, culture, and identity in regions where we often have limited knowledge about the ethnic composition of local populations. Hong attends to value-driven objects and sites that people made, rather than the words they put down on paper. Zooming in on Liao-dynasty tombs in Datong, Hong's article examines multiple forms of burial goods and tomb structures, which scholars have commonly regarded as indicators of either "Chinese/sedentary" or "Khitan/nomadic" cultural components. Instead of fixating on ethnicizing culture, Hong proposes spatializing culture as an alternative.

By spatializing culture, Hong underscores the inherent connection between the built environment in this life —such as immobile houses for sedentary Chinese or mobile tents for nomadic Khitan—and what people created to accommodate the remaining body and soul of the deceased in the afterlife. As the built environment of the living was a crucial part of shaping people's cultural and ethnic identity, how burial goods and tomb structures referenced specific forms of living spaces was then suggestive of people's conceptions of the underworld and the afterlife. The Datong tombs from the Liao period, as Hong argues, reveal not one system of belief about the afterlife, be it Chinese or Khitan, overtaking the other, but rather the dynamic appropriation of

cultural sources from both systems that was the result of constant negotiation between tomb makers and sponsors on the ground. From a perspective of local material and visual culture, Hong's article, by showing how "ethnic" cultural components coexisted in the same locality or even the same tomb, reminds us of the blurriness of ethnic identity in borderland people's day-to-day lives.

A material and visual cultural lens, however, has also led some scholars to conclude the opposite: the existence of a crystalized ethnic identity in the Song-Liao period. For instance, Tackett's article uses visual representations of Khitan daily life in Song and Liao paintings to support his argument about the shared ethnic category "Khitan" across Song-Liao borders. We can make sense of these two seemingly contradictory views by acknowledging that they speak to the central methodological point this special issue aims to address on the topic of ethnicity and culture. Tackett takes the "Khitan" elements in the Song-Liao paintings out of the paintings' own context and puts them in the broader context of a widespread ethnic discourse. This approach reveals a top-down and elite-centered perspective, which allows us to see how Sino-steppe cultural exchange took place across political borders. In contrast, Hong puts Liao tombs and their murals within both their own context—the actual process of tomb-making and the logic informing every step of cultural appropriation—and their broader local context; that is, the historically accumulated cultural sources that were available for local communities to appropriate. This approach thus speaks to a bottom-up perspective that orients toward ordinary people rather than the political or intellectual elite. It allows us to see how Sino-steppe cultural integration took place in the borderlands. As this special issue demonstrates, the two approaches do not negate, but instead complement each other.

Terminology and Methodology

The five articles in this special issue touch upon several historical terms and analytical categories that are central to debates among intellectual and cultural historians of Middle Period China. As mentioned earlier, scholars are still debating whether the modern analytical category of ethnicity should be used to discuss premodern China. They also have yet to reach a consensus on whether it is acceptable to translate the terms "*Zhongguo*" 中國 and "*Hanren*" 漢人 in Middle Period Chinese texts as "China" and "Chinese" or "Han Chinese." Contributors to this special issue have sought, to varying

degrees, to be self-aware in their use of such terminology. It bears noting that the terms "Hanren" and "Han people" used in these articles are not necessarily the same as the Han Chinese identity of today. Similarly, terms like "China" and "Chinese" should not be confused with their contemporary meanings.

One of the strengths of the special issue is the flexibility it affords these terms, as the authors situate them in their specific contexts rather than insisting on a singular or overarching definition. Both Tackett's and my own article engage with such debates among intellectual and cultural historians. In addition to directly tackling the question of ethnicity, our uses of "China," "Chinese," "non-Chinese," and "Chinese empire" are closely tied to the primary sources that convey these ideas in a range of historical contexts. While the other three articles use the same terms in less strict ways than intellectual historians might expect, their discussions enrich our understanding of how various authors employed abstract concepts in concrete historical and regional contexts.

For instance, Ong's study looks closely at the powerful borderland clans known as *tuhao* 土豪, who often had multiethnic backgrounds and controlled communities of both Han and non-Han border dwellers. While promoting the strategy of relying on the *tuhao* to defend the Hewai border, the Northern Song statesman Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 invoked the term *hanbing* 漢兵 (Han soldiers) in his memorial to the court in 1044. While intellectual historians may debate whether the term had an ethnic connotation, in the context of Fan's memorial, as Ong argues, the term merely denoted professional imperial armies in contrast to local forces led by *tuhao*. In other words, although terms like "Han" did seem to function increasingly as ethnic markers in Song political or intellectual rhetoric, they did not always have an ethnic connotation in Song-period texts.

In the spirit of calling for diversity and variety in research strategies, the five articles have demonstrated the value of the regional and local approaches to the themes of places, people, and norms. With respect to places, the five papers either zoom in on specific localities like Dingzhou and Datong or on regions such as Hebei, Hedong, Hewai, and the Sixteen Prefectures. This focus underscores the role played by distinctive regional social-political structures in shaping important historical developments. The contrast between Hebei and Hewai revealed by Zhang's and Ong's articles illuminates the necessity of understanding state-level policies and institutions within the context of regional dynamics.

On the topic of people, all five articles highlight the agency of regional and local players in managing borderland societies, negotiating with domestic and foreign regimes, and framing their identity on their own terms and in their own ways. The case of the Sixteen-Prefectures' Han'er is revealing in what it says about the value of localizing ethnicity-charged rhetoric. It also shows how the regional social-historical approach to identity could offer a meaningful balance to the holistic and top-down approach intellectual or cultural historians tend to take by looking solely at the perspective of imperial centers and elites. In addition, some regional players even disproportionately influenced national discourses and cultures. On this point, Tackett's article offers a productive take on the demic diffusion of specific regional elite. His study illuminates how the diaspora of people from Hebei and Hedong in the tenth and eleventh centuries led to the formation of a distinctive Hebei culture across political borders. While we have a rich body of scholarship on the political-military elite in the Hebei region from the mid-Tang to Five Dynasties periods, Tackett's regional approach highlights the influence of the Hebei culture on both the Song and Liao courts in the eleventh century, a phenomenon that has not received scholarly attention until now.[16]

Finally, regarding norms, all fives articles attest to the potential of cross-regional comparison on specific cultural themes, be it the material culture of tombs or the political cultures of governance, identity, and imperial sovereignty. Despite their divergent approaches to cultural or ethnic expressions of Chinese and Inner Asian identities, Tackett's and Hong's articles share an interest in the material culture of tombs across the Song-Liao border. Relying on the large database of northeast Asian tombs he has compiled, Tackett has discovered the striking spread of a unique type of elite tomb from Hebei northward to the Liao capitals and southward to the Song metropolitan region around Luoyang and Kaifeng. Tackett thus argues for a common transborder elite mortuary culture at the political cores of the Song and Liao empires, which was the immediate consequence of the bidirectional migration of people from Hebei. While recognizing the cross-regional spread of mortuary culture, Hong also stresses the weight of cultural accumulation within local communities over

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16. Zhang Tianhong has also taken a regional-historical approach to study Hebei or Heshuo 河朔 (north of the Yellow River) buffer towns (*fanzhen* 藩鎮) under the rule of regional governors, the political system which nurtured the distinctive Hebei culture. See Zhang Tianhong 張天虹, *Zhong wan Tang Wudai de heshuo fanzhen yu shehui liudong* 中晚唐五代的河朔藩鎮與社會流動 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2021).

time. Combining cross-regional and local approaches empowers us to explore long-term social and cultural changes in their horizontal and vertical dimensions. The horizontal dimension refers to the macroregional spread of influential movements of ideas, organizations, and cultural patterns. In contrast, the vertical dimension speaks to a local reconfiguration of these movements by appropriating them into the local repertoire of ideas and practices.

This special issue strikes a balance between national, regional, and local perspectives with the goal of advancing the field through new methodological approaches. Some of the authors here consider the interaction of dynastic policies and borderland societies on frontier management, while others focus on ideological rhetoric, social experiences, and material cultures with respect to ethnicity and identity. Taken together, they show how, on all these topics, thinking in national terms alone can be misleading, or at least insufficient. The articles thus present regional and local approaches that historicize and spatialize political discourses, frontier arrangements, and cultural legacies.

Rather than advocating for the complete displacement of a national perspective, we put these perspectives, as well as the historical sources that underpin them, into conversation. A comparison of day-to-day administration in different borderland regions allows us to see patterns in the same state's frontier management in different localities. A comparative study on political documents or elite writings shows how concepts and ideas circulated among "Chinese" or "Inner Asian" dynasties, resulting in multiple directions of Sino-steppe cultural exchange at the state level. A comparison between the same set of elite writings and locally produced sources requires us to move beyond elite rhetoric to understand the rhetoric's historical subjects on their own terms. And when we put written records and material objects into dialogue, we transcend some dominant categories of analysis that are derived from textual discourses.

This special issue thus delights in exploring the gray spaces between binaries of conventional categories of analysis like center and periphery, civil and military, and Chinese and non-Chinese. In doing so, we give weight to the constant negotiations among historical players, the inexorable adaptation of policies, institutions, and ideologies on the ground, and the lively appropriation of diverse cultural systems. Frontiers in north China from the tenth to thirteenth centuries provide a regional context for us to explore these in-between spaces, which most certainly contain many more stories about the Middle Period Chinese and Inner Asian worlds that have yet to be discovered.