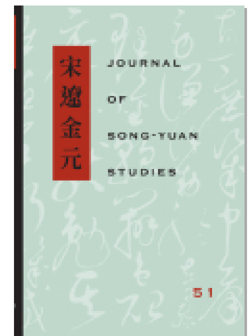
Demic Diffusion, Diplomatic Sociability, and an Emergent Trans-National Political Culture in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century Northeast Asia



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Demic Diffusion, Diplomatic Sociability, and an Emergent Trans-National Political Culture in Tenth- and Eleventh-Century Northeast Asia

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An increasing volume of scholarship has examined the question of sino-steppe cultural exchange. Indeed, it is not difficult to identify elements of a common culture shared by political elites on both sides of the border. But whereas there is an extensive tradition of writing about sino-steppe culture as concerns the Tang, with its mixed Särbi-Chinese "northwestern" aristocracy, and also as concerns the Mongol Yuan, somewhat less has been written on the intervening tenth and eleventh centuries, an era dominated by the competition between the Khitan Liao, Chinese Song, and Tangut Xia states. This article will focus on three less well-known examples of trans-border diffusion dating to this intervening period: 1) the bidirectional diaspora of people from Hebei and Hedong and its impact on Song and Liao elite culture; 2) the incorporation of steppe ethnic categories into Song political discourse; and 3) the adaptation of a particular Chinese model of imperial sovereignty at multiple Eastern Eurasian courts. These examples offer an opportunity to rethink the forms, dynamics, and mechanisms of cultural diffusion across the steppe frontier. Traditional Chinese political theory imagines the civilizing sway of the imperial center as spreading out like wind over grass, to cite a well-known passage from the *Analects*.[1] But assuming we do not ourselves believe that wind can serve as a vehicle to disseminate culture, it is necessary to come up

1. *Analects* 12.19. For a translation with commentary in English, see Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius: Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 134.

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with a clearer understanding of the dynamics of cultural transmission, one that takes into account the historical particularities of tenth- and eleventh-century Northeast Asia.

The Hebei-Hedong Diaspora and the Demic Diffusion of Mortuary Culture

The decades following the Huang Chao Rebellion and the collapse of the Tang Dynasty were marked by very large-scale migrations of people. The best-known migrants, alluded to in countless accounts of the "Tang-Song Transition," are those who relocated to south China, thereby contributing to the great southward demographic shift of the Chinese population. But perhaps equally significant, especially in terms of their immediate impact on the politics and elite culture of the tenth and eleventh centuries, was the exodus of migrants out of Hebei and Hedong to other parts of the north. As we will see, individuals from this swathe of territory north of the Yellow River would come to play a disproportionately large role at the courts of both the Song and the Liao dynasties. One consequence of these migrations was a new metropolitan elite culture shared by both the "Chinese" Song and the "Khitan" Liao.

The first large wave of migrants from Hebei and Hedong accompanied the Shatuo invasion of north China. In the final years of the Tang, the Shatuo Turk Li Keyong 李克用 (856–908) had built up a power base around Taiyuan in central Hedong. Over the course of the Later Liang Dynasty (907–923), his successor, Li Cunxu 李存勗 (884–926), expanded Shatuo control into neighboring Hebei. Whereas most of the military commanders of the emergent regime had steppe origins, the civilian administrative staff included large numbers of local Chinese. Thus, when the Shatuo invaded all of north China in 923, overthrowing the Later Liang and establishing their own new dynasty, the Later Tang, large numbers of people from Hebei and Hedong came in tow.

The impact of the 923 invasion on the composition of the political elite was striking, as Wang Gungwu first noted several decades ago.[2] Table 1 presents data from standard history biographies. It identifies the regions of origin of officeholders of the most important Henan-based regimes of the tenth century,

2. Wang Gungwu, *The Structure of Power in North China during the Five Dynasties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 208–15.

Table 1. Region of origin of officeholders with standard history biographies (by regime)

	HENAN / GUANZHONG	HEBEI / HEDONG	SOUTH CHINA	N
End of Tang (880–907)	74%	11%	15%	144
Later Liang (907–923)	80%	16%	4%	180
Later Tang (923–936)	40%	57%	3%	430
Later Jin (936–947)	33%	64%	3%	341
Later Han (947–951)	31%	68%	1%	270
Later Zhou (951–960)	36%	61%	3%	322
Beg. of Song (960–1000)	32%	44%	24%	527

NOTE: Data includes all individuals with biographies in *Jiu Wudai shi*, *Xin Wudai shi*, or *Song shi* who served the respective regime at some point in their careers. Region of origin defined as place where an individual's family was based on the eve of Huang Chao's sack of the Tang capitals in 880. Individuals of Shatuo background are assumed to have been from Hedong. Data source: Nicolas Tackett, *Tang Wudai renwu zhuanji yu shehui wangluo ziliaoku* 唐五代人物傳記與社會網絡資料庫, version 2.0.

including the Five Dynasties, as well as the subsequent Song Dynasty. The data reveals a sharp increase in the representation of men from Hebei and Hedong immediately following the 923 Shatuo invasion. The fraction of officeholders from these regions continued to increase through mid-century, reaching a peak of 68% under the Later Han Dynasty. It only declined late in the century, primarily as a consequence of the rising significance of southerners following the Song annexation in the 970s of the last independent kingdoms of the south.

Table 2 looks not at officeholders *per se*, but rather at the socioeconomic elite of the capital region, as represented in the corpus of excavated tomb epitaphs from Luoyang.[3] Luoyang constituted either the primary or the secondary capital of all of the Henan-based northern dynasties, including the Song. Moreover, unlike in the vicinity of neighboring Kaifeng, the other great metropolis, epitaphs have been found in large numbers in the Luoyang area.[4] Table 2 thus provides a useful snapshot of the capital-based elite as it evolved

3. On the methodological strategy of equating recipients of tomb epitaphs with the socioeconomic elite, see Nicolas Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014), 16–25.

4. Unlike Luoyang, Kaifeng is situated in the Yellow River flood plain. As a consequence, tenth-century tombs in the Kaifeng area are today buried under several meters of silt, making their discovery much less common.

Table 2. Region of origin of elites buried in Luoyang (900–1000)

	HENAN / GUANZHONG		HEBEI / HEDONG		SOUTH CHINA	N
900–923	29	(94%)	1	(3%)	1 (3%)	31
923–936	27	(87%)	4	(13%)	0	31
936–951	21	(51%)	20	(49%)	0	41
951–960	7	(26%)	20	(74%)	0	27
960–979	12	(32%)	26	(67%)	1 (3%)	38
980–1000	3	(12%)	17	(68%)	5 (20%)	25

NOTE: Region of origin defined as place where family was based on the eve of Huang Chao's sack of the Tang capitals in 880. Data source: Tackett, *Tang Wudai renwu zhuanji yu shehui wangluo ziliaoku*, version 2.0.

over the course of a sequence of tenth-century regimes. Looking at the data, one can discern a sharp increase in the representation of Hebei and Hedong elites by the late 930s, confirming that their rise to political prominence was accompanied by their physical relocation to the political core.[5] Once again, we find that the dominance of Hebei and Hedong elites at the capital only began to decline significantly late in the century, with the appearance of the new emigres from the south.

More or less simultaneous to the mass migration from Hebei and Hedong to metropolitan Henan was a large-scale movement of people in the opposite direction, to the political core of the Liao empire—that is, the region surrounding Shangjing and Zhongjing (the Liao Supreme and Central capitals), roughly situated in the area where the Eurasian Steppe meets the Manchurian Plain. Chinese people had undoubtedly migrated northward into Manchuria throughout history for a wide variety of reasons.[6] However, historical records suggest they did so in far greater numbers in the decades following the breakdown of the Tang imperial order after the year 880.[7] In some cases, individuals

5. That the increase is evident only beginning in the late 930s, and not in the years immediately following the 923 invasion, is likely a consequence of the fact that the earliest migrants were young enough that they would not have begun to die in statistically-significant numbers until a decade or so later.

6. To understand why Chinese might migrate north towards the steppe, one can consider the situation in the better-documented Ming Dynasty. See Iwai Shigeki, "China's Frontier Society in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Acta Asiatica* 88 (2005): 1–20.

7. For a very useful list of 225 "frontier crossings," including individuals and groups moving into and out of Liao territory (and also instances of shifting cross-border political alliances), see Naomi Standen, *Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao China* (Honolulu: University

or populations were captured by Khitan armies in raids or during warfare, then settled in colonies at various sites around Liao territory. Many other Chinese from Hebei and Hedong went north voluntarily to escape the violent power struggles of the era, as during the rise to power of Liu Shouguang 劉守光 (d. 914) in Youzhou (in 907) and the subsequent conquest of northern Hebei (in the 910s) by the Shatuo Turks. Yet more were transferred to Liao control as a consequence of the Later Jin's cession of the "Sixteen Prefectures" of Yan (in northern Hebei) and Yun (in northern Hedong) in 936. A final mass relocation occurred following the Khitan invasion of north China in 947. In their retreat north only a few months after initiating their invasion, the Khitans dragged back with them much of the Later Jin court, including the last emperor himself.[8] Many of these Later Jin courtiers, as we have seen, would themselves have had Hebei or Hedong origins.

As with the Shatuo invasion, these northward migrations also had a noticeable impact on the composition of the political elite, in this case of the Liao. Figure 1 identifies the places of origin of Chinese serving the Liao, as recorded in standard history biographies. Most high-ranking Chinese were from Yan, in the vicinity of the Southern Capital, with some others from southern Hebei (in Song territory) and northern Hedong (in the vicinity of the Liao Western Capital). It is possible that some of the men originating in Yan continued to live near the Southern Capital with their families. But most Chinese absorbed into the Liao bureaucracy were brought north to resettle in Manchuria. Figure 2 presents data culled from tomb epitaphs written for ethnic Chinese living at the Liao political core. Triangles indicate the sites of burial, while circles indicate the places of family origin of these individuals. If one assumes that the places of burial indicate where the families relocated to, then this data reveals a remarkable northeastern movement of people from Hebei and Hedong (both north and south of the Song-Liao border) to the Manchurian core of the Liao empire, as suggested by the arrow.[9]

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of Hawai`i Press, 2007), 187–210. For more on the resettlement of Chinese populations under the Liao, see Patricia Buckley Ebrey, "State-Forced Relocations in China, 900–1300," in *State Power in China, 900–1325*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Paul Jakov Smith (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 309–18.

8. Toghtō 脫脫 et al., *Liao shi* 遼史 (henceforth *LS*; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 4.59–60. On the funerary epitaphs of the last Later Jin emperor and his son, discovered in Liaoning Province, see Du Xingzhi 都興智 and Tian Likun 田立坤, "Hou Jin Shi Chonggui Shi Yanxu muzhiming kao" 後晉石重貴石延煦墓誌銘考, *Wenwu* 文物 2004.11: 87–95.

9. There are of course also epitaphs for ethnic Chinese excavated in the "Sixteen Prefectures"

Figure 1. Geographic origins of Liao officeholders of Chinese descent. Included are all individuals (n=45) with biographies in *Liao shi* or *Qidan guo zhi*, excluding those of tribal origin (i.e., excluding most individuals surnamed Yelü 耶律 or Xiao 蕭). Place of geographic origin is defined as the place the family was likely based on the eve of Huang Chao's sack of the Tang capitals in 880.

To recapitulate, the tenth-century Tang-Song interregnum was marked by a bidirectional diaspora of people from Hebei and Hedong, who came to play prominent roles at multiple tenth-century courts. They constituted anywhere from half to two-thirds of officeholders of the Later Tang, Later Jin, Later Han, and Later Zhou, and retained their prominence into the first decades of Song rule. Indeed, the Song imperial clan itself had ancestral roots in the region of Yan.[10] Meanwhile, a substantial majority of ethnically

of northern Hedong and Hebei. These individuals tended not to hold office, or else they held offices of less significance, in contrast to the ethnic Chinese buried at the Liao political core.

10. On the burial at Youzhou (in Yan) of the ancestors of the Song founders, see Xu Song 徐松, *Song huiyao jigao* 宋會要輯稿 (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1957), Dixi 帝系 1.1a–2a.

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Figure 2. Places of origin and burial of Liao ethnic Chinese of the Liao political core. Triangles identify places of burial; circles identify places of geographic origin. Arrow indicates direction of migration as implied by the data. Includes all known excavated tomb epitaphs (n=41) composed for ethnic Chinese buried at the political core of the Liao.

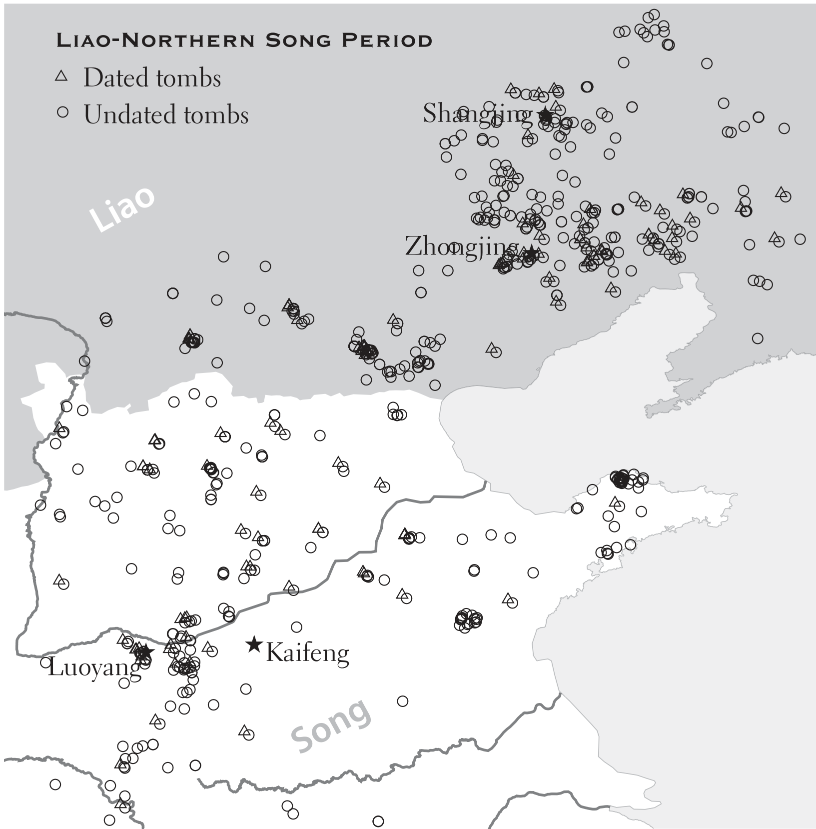
Chinese officeholders of the Liao came from this very same region, especially from Yan. To be sure, ethnic Khitans retained a preeminence at court, but ethnic Chinese are known to have played influential roles in policymaking and administration, with men from Hebei and Hedong being particularly prominent. What were the implications of the dominance of a specific regional elite at rival courts? In the second half of the Tang, the most populous parts of Hebei were in fact under the control of autonomous governments, where, free from the cultural hegemony of Tang capital elites, there developed a distinct culture.[11] To what extent did elements of this distinct Hebei culture

11. Tan Kai 譚凱, "Wan Tang Hebei ren dui Song chu wenhua de yingxiang" 晚唐河北人對宋初文化的影響, *Tang yanjiu* 唐研究 19 (2013): 252–56.

Figure 3. Round, hexagonal, and octagonal tombs dating to the Tang (above) and Liao-Northern Song (opposite). "Dated tombs" have inscriptions establishing that they date to the relevant period of time; "undated tombs" are believed to date to the relevant period of time based on the archaeologist's assessment. Liao place names appear on Tang map for reader's reference. Data source: Tackett, *Tang Song Liao muzang shujuku* 唐宋遼墓葬數據庫, version 1.0.

come to influence the formation of a new hegemonic elite culture at the Liao and Song capitals?

To assess the transformation of elite culture at the political cores of the Song and Liao, one can turn to the material culture of tombs. Methodologically-speaking, tombs offer the advantage of allowing one to map the expression of a particular cultural trait to a precise geographic location. In recent years, I have compiled a large database of Northeast Asian tombs, most of which



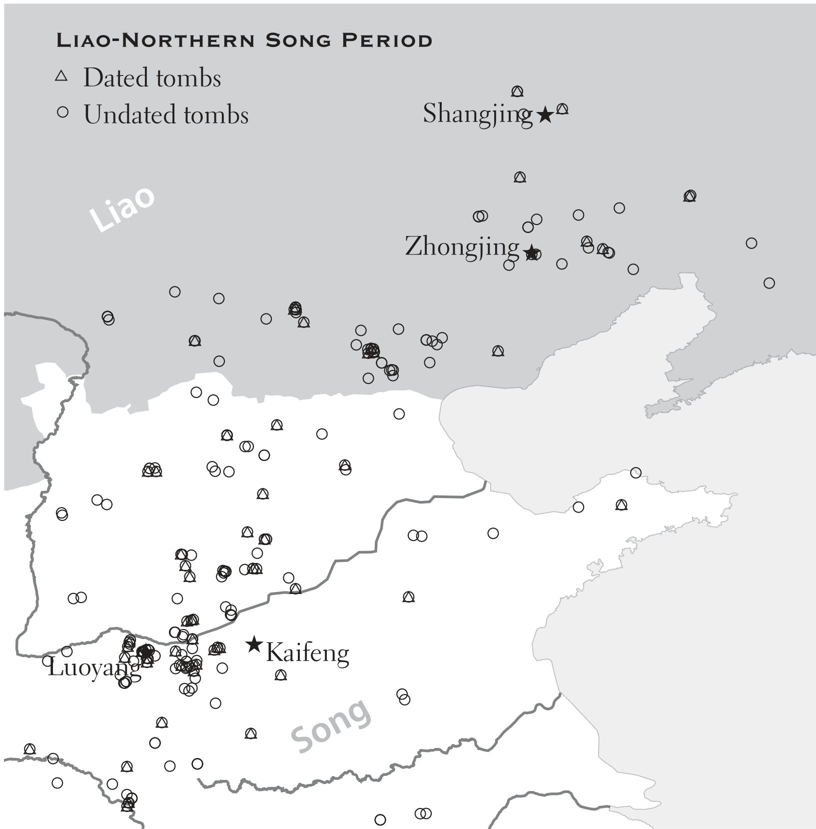
belonged to the elite, a consequence of the fact that larger, more elaborate tombs are much more likely to be reported in the archaeological literature.[12] On the basis of this data set, one can discern relatively clearly the popularization between the Tang and the Song-Liao periods of a unique type of elite tomb once found almost exclusively in Hebei and its immediate surroundings. The tombs of this type were distinctive in two very specific ways: 1) they had circular (or hexagonal or octagonal) layouts, in contrast to the more typical square or rectangular tombs; and 2) they featured a very unusual masonry technique that used bricks to emulate wooden architectural elements as well as wooden furniture. By mapping tombs with these characteristics for the Tang

12. Nicolas Tackett, *Tang Song Liao muzang shujuku*, version 1.0. Available for free download at www.ntackett.com.

Figure 4. Tombs exhibiting wood mimicry dating to the Tang (above) and Liao-Northern Song (opposite). "Dated tombs" have inscriptions establishing that they date to the relevant period of time; "undated tombs" are believed to date to the relevant period of time based on the archaeologist's assessment. Liao place names appear on Tang map for reader's reference. Data source: Tackett, *Tang Song Liao muzang shujuku*, version 1.0.

period and then for the Liao-Northern Song period (Figures 3 and 4), one sees in striking terms the spread of a mortuary tradition of elite burials from Hebei northward to the Liao political core around Shangjing and Zhongjing, and southward to the Song metropolitan region around Luoyang and Kaifeng. This tomb style remained the predominant type of large tomb until at least the fall of the Northern Song in the early twelfth century.

One important implication of this data is that there emerged between the ninth and eleventh centuries a common trans-border elite culture that drew



together the political cores of the Song and Liao empires. Though the data considers tomb architecture alone, it is fair to assume that shared funerary traditions are indicative of a broader assortment of commonly held cultural traits. In the case of the Liao, ethnic Chinese in fact lived alongside a large population of Khitan elites, who participated in a very different mortuary culture featuring very different grave goods.[13] But the politically prominent ethnic Chinese Liao officials seem to have been culturally very close to the Song capital elite. Indeed, if one takes into account the very different tomb styles of south China—consisting of narrow rectangular chambers housing single coffins instead of the larger domed chambers for deceased couples

13. For a comparison of "Khitan" and "north Chinese" mortuary cultures, see Nicolas Tackett, *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 214–24.

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found in the north—one might even infer that the Northern Song capital elite had more in common culturally-speaking with their counterparts at the Liao court than with their fellow Song compatriots in the south.[14]

A second important implication concerns the mechanism of cultural diffusion in this particular instance. The spread of an elite mortuary tradition from Hebei and Hedong to Henan and Manchuria paralleled almost perfectly the two major migratory pathways described earlier. As such, it seems probable that the diffusion of mortuary culture was the immediate consequence of these migrations. If one posits that funerary traditions are especially conservative, given natural human concerns that the burial of a loved one is done properly, then it makes sense that the geographic dispersal of funerary traditions is more likely to accompany migrants to their new homes—a form of cultural diffusion termed "demic diffusion"—than to spread from one population to the next via emulation.[15] Once a new elite culture had become hegemonic following the wholesale replacement of an old elite with a new one (e.g., after the Shatuo invasion) or following the rapid settlement of a new political center in a once sparsely inhabited zone (e.g., after the founding of the Liao), later arrivals to the political core coming in smaller numbers may have been more susceptible to hegemonic sway, adapting to rather than resisting the newly established metropolitan culture. This sort of adaptation may explain why, at least from the perspective of tomb architecture, southern emigres had little detectable impact on Northern Song capital culture.[16]

14. On the north-south divide in tomb architecture during the Song Dynasty, see Dieter Kuhn, "Decoding Tombs of the Song Elite," in *Burial in Song China*, ed. Dieter Kuhn (Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 1994), 48.

15. On "demic diffusion" (as pertains to the Indo-European migrations into Europe), see A. J. Ammerman and L. L. Cavalli-Sforza, "A Population Model for the Transmission of Early Farming in Europe," in *The Explanation of Culture Change: Models in Prehistory*, ed. Colin Renfrew (London: Duckworth, 1973), 343–57.

16. Kuhn, "Decoding Tombs of the Song Elite," 48. The tomb of Su Shi's nephew Su Kuo 蘇适 (1068–1122) is exceptional in being a southern-style tomb excavated in Henan in the north. For the excavation report, see Li Shaolian 李紹連, "Song Su Kuo muzhi ji qita" 宋蘇适墓誌及其他, *Wenwu* 1973.7: 63–69.

The Export of Steppe Ethnic Categories into Song Political Discourse

The second example of cultural diffusion involves the appearance in Northern Song political discourse of steppe categories of ethnicity. There has been considerable debate on whether "ethnicity" is a relevant category of analysis when talking about Eurasian Steppe-based regimes, or even for that matter any pre-nineteenth-century regime.[17] I take the position that ethnicity was very much relevant. There is in fact nothing about classical anthropological explanations of ethnicity (by Geertz, Barth, Keyes, etc.) that would limit the phenomenon to modern times.[18] Ethnicity is a type of ascribed identity that derives from a "cultural interpretation of descent" (to cite Keyes), meaning that a people is defined by its distinct culture, which is believed to be the product of shared descent. (A type of identity that is not "ethnic" in nature, by contrast, might entail markers of cultural difference that are not imagined to be tied to descent.) Ethnic boundaries emerge in a situational context as a consequence of social or political interactions, but they also rely upon plausible markers of difference (including conspicuous behavioral, culinary, or linguistic distinctions, but also self-conscious displays of identity conveyed perhaps by sartorial or hirsutal means). The composition of ethnic groups, the ethnic markers used to define them, and even the ethnonyms themselves changed drastically over time. Thus, by speaking of "ethnicity" in the tenth and eleventh centuries, I am not necessarily making any claims about continuities in specific ethnic categories over the *longue durée*. I am rather speaking of the appearance—possibly quite transiently—of a particular *type* of identity at a particular time and place and in a particular social or political context.

A distinct but related question concerns the politicization of ethnicity—that is, the deployment of ethnic categories in political discourse. Classic anthropological accounts of ethnicity have often focused on neighboring communities that establish ethnic boundaries as a byproduct of their daily

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17. For an overview of this debate, see Mark C. Elliott, "La Chine moderne: Les Mandchous et la définition de la nation," *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 61.6 (2006): 1459–63.

18. Clifford Geertz, "The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States," in *Old Societies and New States: The Quest for Modernity in Asia and Africa*, ed. Clifford Geertz (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), 105–57; Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 9–37; Charles F. Keyes, "The Dialectics of Ethnic Change," in *Ethnic Change*, ed. Charles F. Keyes (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 4–30.

interactions. When one shifts one's purview from mundane local concerns to the panoramic perspective of a state's political elite, these same ethnic categories do not always remain relevant. Historical records reveal that steppe regimes—but not Chinese regimes—tended with a remarkable degree of consistency to be organized along ethnic lines. The ethnic politics of the Qing are best documented. Countless multilingual steles stand testament to the multiple peoples—Tibetans, Uighurs, Mongols, Chinese, and Manchus—who composed the empire's subjects. Before the Manchus, the Mongol Yuan, too, divided its populace into ethnic-like groups, namely Mongols, *hanren* 漢人, *semuren* 色目人, and *nanren* 南人.[19] And prior to the Mongols, Khitan ethnic politics are evident, for example, in the use of ethnonyms in the names of certain bureaus, such as "Chief Administration Office of the Han and Parhae Peoples of the Chongde Ordo."[20] Even earlier, one finds surnames and clothing used as ethnic markers at the Northern Wei court, and an Eastern Wei emperor believing it to be his responsibility as political leader to resolve ethnic tensions between the Chinese and Särbi populations.[21] Ethnicized politics likely also explain the distinctive male hairstyles found among an assortment of steppe peoples throughout history. Thus, Xiongnu men had braids, while Turks let their hair hang loose; Khitans wore a tonsure with pigtails, Mongols had plaits of twisted hair behind their ears, and Jurchen and Manchu men grew queues.[22]

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19. In the Mongol ethnopolitical classification system, *hanren* referred to north Chinese (probably including Jurchens and Khitans), *semuren* to individuals from West and Central Asia, and *nanren* to Chinese southerners. See F. W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 489–90.

20. Xiang Nan 向南, ed., *Liaodai shike wenbian* 遼代石刻文編 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995), 185, 250.

21. Albert E. Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 8–9.

22. For photographs of excavated Xiongnu braids, see Gelegdorj Eregzen, ed., *Treasures of the Xiongnu* (Ulaanbaatar: Mongolian Academy of Sciences, 2011), 110–11. For depictions of Turkish and Khitan hairstyles, respectively, see Étienne de la Vaissière, *Histoire des marchands sogdiens*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Collège de France, 2004), pl. 2; and *Xuanhua Liao mu* 宣化遼墓 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2001), col. pls. 5, 7, 10, 30, 31. On Mongol hair, see Igor de Rachewiltz, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 310–11. For Jurchen and Manchu hair, see Herbert Franke, "The Forest Peoples of Manchuria: Khitans and Jurchens," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 417; and Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *The Great Enterprise: The Manchu Reconstruction of Imperial Order in Seventeenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 60, 646–50. Finally, on Tangut hair, see Ruth Dunnell, "The Hsi Hsia," in *The Cambridge History of China*,

Chinese empires, by contrast, were not fundamentally ethnic in nature.[23] Indeed, prior to the Song, Chinese political discourse (as articulated by educated elites) rarely invoked *ethnic* forms of identity. One finds deployed instead a very different language to speak of the "other." This othering discourse revolved first and foremost around a contrast between civilization and barbarism. When identifying people by name, the primary distinction was one between the civilized Hua 華 people and the uncivilized Yi 夷 people, where "Hua" referred not to a descent group but to a place (the Central Plains) that constituted the civilized center. Similarly, "Yi" referred to a place as well, namely the uncivilized periphery. Civilization was thus a property of place—the consequence perhaps of the *qi* of the land—and not of genetics.[24] The culture of the civilized was not innate; an individual could acquire it for his descendants, in some cases simply by physically relocating to the civilized center.

This situation changed in the Song. Ethnic forms of identity came to be articulated by Song elites in certain political contexts—most obviously, in the context of interactions with the neighboring Tangut and Khitan states. The ethnic form of identity is best represented by the more frequent use of the term "Han people" (*hanren* 漢人) to refer to Chinese (where "Han people" refers to descendants of people of the Han Dynasty and thus represents a "cultural interpretation of descent").[25] It is also evident in efforts to set inter-state boundaries on the basis of the geographic range of the Han people (efforts invariably frustrated by the complex reality of the ethnic mosaic on the frontier).[26] And it is evident in the use of the term "Han lands" (*handi* 漢地) to refer to the territory properly under Chinese control.[27] Finally, and on a darker note, it is

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Volume 6: *Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368*, ed. Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 181–82.

23. The discussion that follows summarizes and clarifies in response to recent scholarship—including Shao-yun Yang, *The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019)—the discussion of ethnicity in Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, esp. 156–95.

24. On *qi*-based theories of environmental determinism, see Shao-yun Yang, "Reinventing the Barbarian: Rhetorical and Philosophical Uses of the Yi-Di in Mid-Imperial China, 600–1300" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2014), 20–23, 103, 330–32.

25. Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 159–64.

26. Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 130–37.

27. Xu Mengxin 徐夢莘, *Sanchao beimeng huibian* 三朝北盟會編 (Shanghai: Haitian shudian, 1939), Zhengxuan 政宣 shang, 4.32, 4.35, 4.36; Ye Yongli 葉隆禮, *Qidan guo zhi* 契丹國

evident in the attempted ethnic cleansing of Yan in 1122 by Song troops (born of a misguided faith in the ethnic loyalty of Han subjects of the Liao).[28]

This is in no way to say that the civilizational discourse disappeared in the Song. The contrast between civilization and barbarism remained critically important to moral philosophers like the Neo-Confucians, and, as discussed below, it lay at the heart of how imperial sovereignty was conceptualized.[29] But the alternative ethnic type of identity that emerged in the Song alongside it had a far-reaching impact. For example, it offered a new language by means of which Chinese political elites could under some circumstances conceptualize a "China" that was defined on ethnic rather than civilizational grounds—as the land of the Han people rather than as the land of the civilized.

Where did the language of "Han people" in Song political discourse come from? Shao-yun Yang has provided convincing evidence that this was language with steppe origins.[30] It was initially outsiders from the steppe who referred to Chinese as "Han" and not the Chinese themselves. Whereas Yang focused only on the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, Mark Elliott subsequently traced the long-term development of the ethnonym Han up until the fifteenth century, also stressing the steppe origins of the label, though he paid relatively little attention to the intervening Song-Liao period, precisely when ethnic discourse became more widespread.[31] Needless to say, given the significance of ethnic politics on the steppe, it should not be surprising that ethnic categories in China turn out to have had steppe origins.

To get a sense of the degree to which steppe and Chinese ethnic categories coincided in the eleventh century—in this case with regards specifically to

志 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 3.35, 5.62, 13.160, 19.206. See also the mid-eleventh-century stele inscription Qian Yue 錢�India, "Fuyang xian wenmiao ji" 富陽縣文廟記 in *Quan Song wen* 全宋文, eds. Zeng Zaozhuang 曾棗莊 and Liu Lin 劉琳 (henceforth *QSW*; Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2006), 20:413.98, which explains that "the various barbarians all belong to all-under-Heaven; it is only our Han territory that we refer to as the Middle Kingdom" 蠻夷戎狄,皆天下之有,獨我漢壤,謂之中國.

28. Xu Mengxin, *Sanchao beimeng huibian*, Zhengxuan shang, 11.98.

29. On "Chineseness" and "barbarism" in Neo-Confucian thought, see Shao-yun Yang, *Way of the Barbarians*, esp. 119–40.

30. Shao-yun Yang, "Becoming *Zhongguo*, Becoming Han: Tracing and Re-Conceptualizing Ethnicity in Ancient North China, 770 BC–AD 581" (M.A. thesis, National University of Singapore, 2007).

31. Mark Elliott, "Hushuo: The Northern Other and the Naming of the Han Chinese," in *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority*, eds. Thomas S. Mullaney et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 173–90.

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the ethnic category "Khitan" and not to the ethnic category "Han"—one can compare visual representations of Khitan daily life in Song paintings to those in Liao paintings (Figure 5). Such images are of course not actual snapshots of daily life, but rather representations that bring to light the distinct practices believed to be characteristic of Khitan culture. Those elements of Khitan daily life that artists (or those commissioning the paintings) chose to highlight are thus critical for understanding the Khitan ethnic category from an emic perspective. As it so happens, painters both at the Song capital and in Liao territory shared a sense of how one ought to represent Khitans: one needed to include large tents, camel-driven covered carts, and men with distinctive Khitan-style hair and costumes. Another common motif was the Khitan cooking scene, featuring cauldrons from which protruded large chunks of stewed meat.

How does one account for such remarkable similarities in how Khitan culture was conceptualized by both Liao and Song elites? An intriguing possible mechanism to explain the transfer of ethnic categories from Liao to Song is diplomacy. Around half of officials serving on the Song council of state (a group that included some of the most influential political and cultural elites) can be shown to have had *prior* experience serving on an embassy mission to Liao or, alternatively, as an escort accompanying a Liao envoy.[32] In other words, the diplomatic experience—including both social interactions between diplomats and the opportunity to see foreign lands first-hand while traveling—constituted one of the key ways in which Song political elites encountered Song-Liao political, cultural, and ethnic boundaries.

As it turns out, in their diplomatic exchanges, Song diplomats faced a number of stark reminders of the Khitan-Han ethnic divide. The Liao ambassador was invariably an ethnic Khitan, while the deputy ambassador was always ethnically Chinese.[33] Among courtiers at the Liao court, there was a clear sartorial divide between Chinese and Khitan costumes (albeit it was not necessarily the case that all Khitans wore Khitan costumes and vice versa).[34]

32. Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 35–37. Given that the data is by no means comprehensive (we rarely know the identities of ambassadorial escorts, nor of the ambassador and deputy ambassador's subordinates within the ambassadorial retinue), it is likely that the percentage of policymakers with diplomatic experience was in fact quite a bit higher than 50%.

33. For a complete list of Liao ambassadors and deputy ambassadors, see the tables appended to Nie Chongqi 聶崇岐, "Song Liao jiaopin kao" 宋遼交聘考, *Yanjing xuebao* 燕京學報 27 (1940): 1–51. From these tables, it is clear that all ambassadors had Khitan surnames and all deputy ambassadors had Chinese surnames.

34. *LS* 55.900, 56.905–10.

Figure 5. Depictions of Khitan daily life in Song court paintings (top) vs. Liao tomb murals (bottom). Images represent composites of scenes from original paintings. The line drawings are taken from Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 47–48. Reprinted with permission of Cambridge University Press.

And there were also frank conversations between Song and Liao diplomats that broached the delicate question of ethnicity. In the 1040s, the Liao deputy ambassador Liu Liufu 劉六符 apparently once explained to his escort, the Song official Fu Bi 富弼 (1004–1083), "I am a man of Yan; along with the officials of the Southern [i.e., Song] Court, we are all of one family. Nowadays, those whom I serve are not of my kind" 六符燕人, 與南朝之臣本是一家, 今所事者乃是非類.[35] Using language of descent—for example, the word "family"—to talk of the commonalities between ethnic Chinese of the Liao and those of the Song perfectly encapsulates the "cultural interpretation of descent" at the heart of ethnic thinking. Finally, there is evidence of the deliberate performance of ethnicity at diplomatic banquets, as suggested by an early eleventh-century account of the food served at a dinner held near the Liao Southern Capital:

> Decorated wooden bowls brimmed with caitiff food. First came camel gruel, consumed with a ladle. There was stewed bear fat, mutton, pork, pheasant, and rabbit, and there was dried beef, venison, pigeon, duck, bear, and tanuki, all of which was cut into square chunks and strewn onto a large platter. Two *hu* youths in pristine clothing, each holding a napkin and a knife and spoon, cut all of the various meats for the Han envoys to consume.[36]

> 文木器盛虜食，先薦駱糜，用杓而啖焉。熊肪羊豚雉兔之肉爲濡肉，牛鹿鴈鶩熊貉之肉爲腊肉，割之令方正，雜置大盤中。二胡雛衣鮮潔衣，持帨巾，執刀匕，徧割諸肉，以啖漢使。

It is no coincidence that this banquet featured so conspicuously the large chunks of stewed meat—a culinary marker of ethnicity that, as we have already seen, figured prominently in both Song and Liao visual representations of Khitan daily life. As if to accentuate the ethnic boundary dividing banquet participants, servants were assigned to cut the meat into smaller pieces for the Song diplomats so that they could eat with chopsticks (per Chinese custom) rather than with their hands (per Khitan custom).

But whereas ethnic categories traveled from the Liao political elite to the Song political elite in the eleventh century, likely as a consequence of diplomatic sociability, this does not mean the categories ceased to evolve

35. This passage comes from Fu Bi's *xingzhuang* 行狀. See QSW 71:1556.315.

36. Jiang Shaoyu 江少虞, *Songchao shishi leiyuan* 宋朝事實類苑 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1981), 77.1011.

subsequently. Song political elites adapted the ethnic categories into the Chinese political context, allowing these categories to take on a life of their own. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, they came to speak of their polity as a monoethnic state.[37] The Liao court by contrast conceived of its polity as a multiethnic empire. (Unlike both the Song and Liao, the political elite of the Tang saw their polity as a universal empire, in which ethnicity was of no particular political significance.) One might say then that, whereas the Liao political elite conceived of ethnicity according to long-held principles of steppe political organization, Chinese political elites mapped ethnic categories on top of an earlier civilizational discourse. As we shall see, at the very same time, the Chinese "civilizational" worldview was absorbed into Liao political culture, where it too took on a life of its own.

The Chinese Civilizational Worldview and Northeast Asian Imperial Sovereignties

The Chinese "civilizational" worldview entailed a model of imperial sovereignty in which the court of the one legitimate Son of Heaven lay at the center of the civilized world. There was but one civilization, and this civilization could be recognized by the correct implementation of law and the correct practice of ritual, meaning both proper court ritual—including wearing appropriate costumes and playing the right music—and the proper performance of marriage and funerary rites by elites. Classical geographic models portrayed the world in the form of a series of five or nine concentric squares, with the imperial court at the center.[38] As one moved away from the imperial center and entered more distant "zones of submission," one found ever declining degrees of civilization, in societies composed of people who benefited less and less from the transformative sway of the emperor and imperial court. The outermost zone was the "zone of wilderness" (huangfu 荒服), a space entirely devoid of the beneficial influence of civilization.

What did Song China's neighbors think of this worldview? The Liao notably did not reject it, as is clear from the anecdote of an ethnic Chinese reading

37. Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, esp. 158–59, 174–95.

38. Nicolas Tackett, "Imperial Elites, Bureaucracy, and the Transformation of the Geography of Power in Tang-Song China," in *Die Interaktion von Herrschern und Eliten in Imperialen Ordnungen des Mittelalters*, ed. Wolfram Drews (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 179–180.

from the *Analects* at the court of Emperor Daozong 道宗 (r. 1055–1101). Upon reaching the passage where Confucius explains that "barbarian tribes with rulers do not match up to Chinese states without them" (夷狄之有君, 不如諸夏之亡也), the courtier became visibly uncomfortable and sought quickly to change the subject.[39] The Khitan monarch interjected:

> In past times, the Xunyu and Xianyun were unrestrained and without ritual and law, so they were called "barbarians." I have overhauled our ritual system, such that it is as refined as that of Zhonghua [i.e., China]. So what is there for me to resent?[40]
>
> 上世獯鬻、獫狁蕩無禮法，故謂之夷，吾修文物，彬彬不異中華，何嫌之有?

Although some—apparently including the courtier in question—may have perceived the Khitan Daozong to be a "barbarian" ruling a people on the periphery of the civilized world, Daozong himself was confident this was not the case.

But what precisely did Daozong envision when he asserted that the Liao was equal to the Song in refinement? Partly this referred simply to the fact that the Liao, too, had put in place a legal and ritual system. Indeed, the dynasty had early on established a legal and administrative infrastructure, and the Liao court seems to have been involved in the transformation of ritual practice among the populace.[41] Moreover, like Chinese regimes, after establishing political control over surrounding peoples, the Liao sometimes also deployed a discourse identifying this periphery as being in need of their civilizing influence.[42] But, at the same time, the Khitans were also unabashed about the distinctiveness of their culture. They created a new writing system for their

39. The passage in question is from *Analects* 3.5.

40. Hong Hao 洪皓, *Songmo jiwen* 松漠紀聞, *Quan Song biji disan bian* 全宋筆記第三編 ed. (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2008), 7:121; Ye Longli, *Qidan guo zhi*, 9.106.

41. On the implementation of a legal system, see *LS* 2.16. On efforts to transform ritual practice, consider, for example, the restrictions on the sacrifice of horses and cattle at funerals. See *LS* 13.142, 19.228, 19.229.

42. Detecting this discourse is difficult because so little Liao writing has survived in its original form, unfiltered by Song or later Chinese editors. For a reference to the "four wildernesses" (sihuang 四荒) on Liao's periphery in a funerary epitaph for a Liao empress, see Xiang Nan, *Liaodai shike wenbian*, 375; Chen Shu 陳述, ed., *Quan Liao wen* 全遼文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 9.214. On Liao court poetry treating Liao as the civilized center in contrast to Korea and other peripheral polities, see Shao-yun Yang, *Way of the Barbarians*, 144–45.

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language to serve as an alternative to the Chinese script.[43] Court costumes were devised to highlight the ethnic divide between Chinese and Khitans, as we have seen. And the court ritual program that they instituted incorporated rites rooted in the "national customs" (*guosu* 國俗) of the Khitans, rites that were most definitively not Chinese.[44] Even funerary practice for Khitan nobles may have reflected a self-consciously distinct imperial culture.[45] In brief, like the Chinese, the Khitans had established a refined civilization, but it was a civilization that differed from that of the Chinese.

An extended account of events leading up to the Oath of Chanyuan (1005) written from the Liao perspective (the Song perspective is far better known) appears in the funerary epitaph of Emperor Shengzong 聖宗 (982–1031), unearthed in the early twentieth century:

> He expanded our territory, ushering in calm across the world. The might of our armies shook the east, so that Korea submitted its allegiance; our prestige and civilizing influence extended to the west, whereupon Guiyi [based in Dunhuang] offered tribute. The Tanguts of the Xia Kingdom report to us, and the remote Wushe have come to our court. Only that "Central Land" [i.e., Song China] has in past years violated their treaty with us. From Kaifeng, they charged forward like pernicious boars, seizing Taiyuan and Fenzhou [i.e., the Northern Han], then invading our [southern] capital. They broke our trust and cast aside righteousness in their wanton warmongering. With our indignation having grown since the

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43. Daniel Kane, *The Kitan Language and Script* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3. Archaeologists have discovered many inscriptions in either Khitan small script or Khitan large script. Unfortunately, the terse references to these two scripts in the historical record do not explain explicitly the motivation for their creation. See *LS* 2.16, 64.964.

44. The monographs on ritual in *LS* make repeated reference to "national customs." One such court ritual evidently of steppe and not of Chinese origin was the "rebirth ritual" (再生禮), performed every twelve years by emperors, empresses, crown princes, and tribal chiefs. See *LS* 116.1537. A Jin scholar is known to have compiled a text entitled *Liao liyi zhi* 遼禮儀志, which focused exclusively on rituals belonging to the "national customs." See *LS* 49.834.

45. On "Khitan mortuary culture," see Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 214–17. Gold and silver death masks and headdresses appear to have been exclusive to the Khitan aristocracy. For another example of the Liao imperial style, one can consider the positioning of Liao imperial tombs. Whereas Chinese emperors were buried under a mountain-like tumulus situated typically on a plain, Abaoji, founder of the Liao empire, was buried in the mirror opposite fashion: in a valley surrounded on nearly all sides by mountain ridges (a valley visible on satellite maps at coordinates 43.888N, 119.109E). See Dong Xinlin 董新林 et al., "Neimenggu Balin zuoqi Liaodai Zuling kaogu fajue de xin shouhuo" 內蒙古巴林左旗遼代祖陵考古發掘的新收獲, *Kaogu* 考古 2008.2: 3–6.

previous reign [when the Song also invaded], it became necessary once more to dispatch our troops on a punitive expedition. By adhering to the seven strategies, we gained the upper hand and swept across a thousand *li*. Our weapons, sharp and piercing, were everywhere profuse; our war drums thundered over lines of battalions. We encountered large armies, and overcame them all; we attacked frontier ramparts, flattening them. Desperate civilians abandoned their homes to flee; wounded soldiers hid away in their fortresses. Thereupon, grasping our halberds, we made it to the Yellow River. Our crack troops assembled like trees in a forest, brandishing dagger-axes high in the air. We were ready to cross the river and burn our boats [to indicate we would not retreat], while our opponents' position was as precarious as a stack of eggs. And so they dispatched an emissary to express profusely their sincerity. They implored for a reconciliation, begging for a [peace] sacrifice. They offered tribute in gold and silver as war reparation. Out of reverence for our emperor's virtue, [the Song emperor] called himself his nephew [i.e., a subordinate]; in the spirit of friendship, [our emperor] was willing to act like a brother. To ensure the longevity [of the peace], sworn oaths were recorded in ink.[46]

開拓疆埸，廓靜寰瀛。東振兵威，辰卞以之納款；西被聲教，瓜沙繇是貢珍。夏國之羌渾述職，遐荒之烏舍來賓。惟彼中土，曩歲渝盟。自汴宋而親驅虵豕，取并汾而來犯京城。絕信棄義，黷武窮兵。蓋先朝之積忿，須再駕以徂征。七德制勝，千里横行。戈戟霜攢而蔽野，鼓鼙雷動於連營。逢大陣而皆剋，攻邊壘以旋平。凋瘵戶民，盡離居而失業；傷殘將卒，竟閉壁以偷生。遂仗黃鉞，直抵洪河。會若林之銳旅，揮卻日之琱戈。我欲濟以焚舟，彼方危於累卵。乃命使軺，疊伸誠款。懇求繼好，乞效刑牲。貢奉金帛，助贍甲兵。尊聖善而庶稱兒姪，敦友愛而願作弟兄。保始終之悠久，著信誓於丹青。

This account is first and foremost about military conquest, military conquest intended not to subjugate the world's people for its own sake, but rather to usher in the sort of peace that only imperial rule could provide. Indeed, the inscription goes on to emphasize that, following Chanyuan, "a spirit of peace covered the land . . . [and] the beacon fires were forever extinguished" 和氣盈川 . . . 永息烽煙. The Liao did not shy away from referring to the Chinese with terms the Chinese used to refer to themselves. China was referenced above as the "central land;" elsewhere in the inscription, China was called Zhuxia (諸夏). But though they employed language intimately tied to the Chinese civilizational worldview, the inscription makes clear that the Liao,

46. Xiang Nan, *Liaodai shike wenbian*, 194; Chen Shu, *Quan Liao wen*, 6.141–42.

too, had tributary vassals under the sway of their own civilizing influence. Only Song China stood as an equal, its emperor a "brother" to the Liao monarch.

Other polities besides the Liao sought also to portray themselves as an alternative civilizational center.[47] A particularly interesting example involves the Tanguts' efforts in the 1030s to establish their own imperial state. To make sense of the Tangut claim to empire, it is useful first to get a sense of the legitimizing discourse that they deployed while still nominally a Chinese vassal. This discourse can be reconstructed from a series of excavated epitaphs written for members of the Tangut ruling clan, epitaphs that tend to repeat certain core principles.[48] A good account of the family's initial rise to power appears in the epitaph of Li Renbao 李仁寶 (874–945), cousin of the Tangut chief Li Renfu 李仁福 (r. 909–933):

> [The deceased] . . . was the distant descendant of Emperor Daowu [Tuoba Gui] of the [Northern] Wei. Since the beginning of the Yifeng era [(676–679)], [his ancestors] have lived here, with successive generations traveling alongside the imperial chariot, or standing amid the ranks of courtiers, some carrying a tiger tally, others a Han tally [both given to military commanders]. In the Zhonghe era of the Tang [during the Huang Chao Rebellion], when the dynasty faced numerous difficulties, the sage-ruler [i.e., the emperor] went on a tour of inspection [i.e., fled for his life to Sichuan]. Once again, one learned that those among [the deceased's] flesh and blood had inherited the *qi* of heroes. They rushed forward with vigor, reestablishing the [Tang] imperial banners. Having demonstrated extraordinary merit, they enjoyed exceptional favors. They immediately received a fiefdom, and were granted the imperial surname.[49]

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47. Besides the Tangut case described below, there is also the example of Koryō. See Remco E. Breuker, "Koryō as an Independent Realm: The Emperor's Clothes," *Korean Studies* 27 (2003): 48–84. For a brief summary of the Vietnamese model of an alternative civilizational center, see Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 282.

48. Du Jianlu 杜建錄, ed., *Dangxiang Xi Xia beishi zhengli yanjiu* 党項西夏碑石整理研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), 104–7, 122–49; Deng Hui 鄧輝 and Bai Qingyuan 白慶元, "Neimenggu wushen qi faxian de Wudai zhi Bei Song Xiazhou Tuoba bu Lishi jiazu muzhiming kaoshi" 內蒙古烏審旗發現的五代至北宋夏州拓拔部李氏家族墓誌銘考釋, *Tang yanjiu* 唐研究 8 (2002): 379–94. These epitaphs were all composed by locals; moreover, references to Li Yiyin in these inscriptions do not respect a Song imperial taboo. The texts thus represent the local perspective and not that of the Song imperial court. On the Song taboo as applied to Li Yiyin, see Imre Galambos, *Translating Chinese Tradition and Teaching Tangut Culture: Manuscripts and Printed Books from Khara-khoto* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 102; as well as Toghtō 脫脫 et al., *Song shi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju), 485.13982.

49. Du Jianlu, *Dangxiang Xi Xia beishi*, 106; Zhou Agen 周阿根, ed., *Wudai muzhi huikao*

> 公……乃大魏道武皇帝之遐胤也。自儀鳳之初，遷居於此，旅趨輦轂，便列鵷鴻，或執虎符，或持漢節者，繼有人也。以唐中和之歲，國家多難，聖主省方。又聞骨肉之間，迥稟英雄之氣，長驅驍銳，卻復翠華。厥立奇功，果邀異寵，遽分茅土，遂贈姓焉。

The family's prestige derived in part from a fictive claim of descent from the Northern Wei imperial Tuoba clan.[50] But more importantly, it was a consequence of recent service to the Tang Dynasty, notably during the Huang Chao Rebellion. It was then that Tuoba Sigong 拓拔思恭 (d.886) was made Governor of Dingnan 定難, thereby establishing the family's hereditary rule over the Ordos, and was simultaneously also granted the Tang imperial surname of Li. From their position as warlords of the Ordos, Tuoba Sigong's successors came to regard themselves as loyal defenders of the northwestern frontier, a view reflected in a Song-era account of Tuoba's grandson, the Tangut chief Li Yiyin 李彝殷 (r. 935–967):

> His valiance and might shook across distant lands; his benevolent rule was clearly manifest. Outwardly, he held back the Tibetans and Togons; inwardly, he appeased his populace. He served as a plinth for our [Song] dynasty; he was an auspicious star on the frontier.[51]
>
> 英威遠振，惠化昭彰。外遏番渾，內安黎庶，爲國朝之柱礎，作邊垣之景星。

By late in the tenth century, a full hundred years after Huang Chao, the family could boast of a sequence of such men, several of whom are celebrated in the epitaph of Li Yiyin's own grandson, Li Jiyun 李繼筠 (957–979):

> [The deceased] . . . was a descendant of the Northern Wei [imperial clan]. . . [The deceased's] great grandfather, the Prince of Han, was named Renfu, and styled [illegible]. The recipient of a fiefdom, he was renowned for his frontier defense. He dominated the lands beyond the Yellow River, quelling uprisings in this one quadrant [of the empire]. For his assistance to imperial rule, the court relied on him as a trusted subordinate. His lone magnificence shines through the historical annals; his grand legacy survives in his family's heritage. [The deceased's]

五代墓誌彙考 (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2012), 405.

50. On this claim as fictive, see Galambos, *Translating Chinese Tradition and Teaching Tangut Culture*, 100.

51. This passage comes from Li Yiyin's mother's funerary epitaph. See Du Jianlu, *Dangxiang Xi Xia beishi*, 123; Deng and Bai, "Neimenggu wushen qi," 381; Zhou Agen, *Wudai muzhi huikao*, 331.

> grandfather, the Prince of Xia, was named Yiyin, and styled [illegible]. Performing meritorious service on behalf of the state, and earning the acclaim of the masses, he was enfeoffed with a princedom, and made hegemon [i.e., protector] of the dynasty. The gold writing on the iron contract [i.e., the enfeoffment edict] shines forever without tarnishing; the Qilin Pavilion at the Phoenix Pond [which held paintings of the empire's most meritorious officers] cannot [sufficiently] honor him. As for [the deceased's] late father the governor, his *qi* was uncommon, his abilities extraordinary. Like Guan Yu, he was a match for ten thousand enemies, and so he subjugated the periphery. Possessing the strategic brilliance of Zhuge Liang, he moved his armies to defend Xia. Throughout life, he held on to titles commensurate to the piercing-eyed lord that he was.[52]

> 公……乃後魏之苗裔也，……曾韓王，名諱仁福，字□□，以位分土茅，望重藩屛。控扼河外，彈壓一方，朝廷以輔弼邦家，倚注心腹。獨盛光乎史策，大紹嗣於門風。祖夏王，名諱彝殷，字□□，有溢國之勳，負衆人之望。冊封王位，興霸祖宗。鐵契金書，永光不朽。鳳池麟閣，崇踐無由。故大父侍中，間氣不群，英秀奇異。有關羽萬人之敵，可以制服外疆；負葛亮七縱之謀，可以横行守夏，蟬聯爵秩，鶚視公侯。

In brief, generation after generation of Tangut chiefs had served loyally and with majesty on the frontier, and it was this service that first and foremost confirmed the Li family's legitimacy as local dynasts. The irony of course is that their service was performed in the name of the Tang, and then for a sequence of six tenth-century imperial dynasties ruling from Luoyang and Kaifeng. The family in a sense possessed a mandate to rule that had outlived multiple empires.

Not long after the death of Li Jiyun, his branch of the family would lose their hold on power, and be replaced by the descendants of Tuoba Sigong's brother. Unfortunately, no legible epitaphs have been found for this branch of the family. We do know that the Tanguts were successful at expanding their territory over the next half century. By the 1030s, the new Tangut ruler Yuanhao 元昊 (r. 1038–1048), a grandson of the fourth cousin of Li Jiyun, had gained the confidence to reject formally his subordination to Song by proclaiming himself "emperor" of the Tanguts. How he legitimated this action can be reconstructed from a memorial he sent to the Song throne in 1039:

> Your servant's forebears were emperors of the Northern Wei. The former state of

52. Du Jianlu, *Dangxiang Xi Xia beishi*, 145; Deng and Bai, "Neimenggu wushen qi," 386–87.

[172.71.254.233] Project MUSE (2025-04-05 00:05 GMT)

> Helian [Bobo] [i.e., Xia territory] is [thus] a legacy of the Tuoba [i.e., the Northern Wei imperial clan]. [Your servant's] remote ancestor Sigong was enfeoffed and received the [imperial] surname [of Li] in the late Tang, after leading troops to save [the dynasty] from disaster. Your servant's grandfather Jiqian amassed a righteous army and subdued all the tribes, taking possession of the five garrisons of Linhe, and forcing the seven prefectures of the frontier into submission. [Your servant's] father Deming inherited the legacy of his forebears, and strove to follow the [Song] court's commands. And now you servant has humbly created the small Tangut script, revised the court garments of the Great Han [dynasty], transformed the five tones of the [Classic of] Music into one tone, and reduced the nine obeisances of the [Classic of] Rites to three obeisances. Having set up the court garments, having implemented the script, having established the rites and the music, having prepared the [ritual] implements, none among the Tibetans, the Tartars, the [people of] Zhangye, and the [people of] Jiaohe have not come to submit. [My] troops and [my] people have repeatedly asked me to establish [our own] state, and for this reason for me to receive an appointment edict to become emperor. I humbly wish your majesty to authorize my investment as south-facing monarch [i.e. emperor] of the western lands.[53]

> 臣祖宗本後魏帝赫連之舊國，拓跋之遺業也。遠祖思恭，當唐季率兵拯難，受封賜姓。臣祖繼遷，大舉義旗，悉降諸部，收臨河五鎮，下緣境七州，父德明，嗣奉世基，勉從朝命。而臣偶以狂斐，制小蕃文字，改大漢衣冠，革樂之五音爲一音，裁禮之九拜爲三拜。衣冠既就，文字既行，禮樂既張，器用既備，吐蕃、達靼、張掖、交河，莫不服從。軍民屢請願建邦家，是以受冊即皇帝位。伏望陛下許以西郊之地，冊爲南面之君。

This text is multi-layered. As it survives only in Song sources, it has likely been edited so as better to ridicule the Tanguts' pretensions. For example, the apparent debasement of the music and rites (from five tones to one, and from nine obeisances to three, respectively) may reflect an editorial effort to make the Tanguts appear unrefined and unable to grasp the complexity and sophistication of classical precedent.[54] Yuanhao's request was, after all, a

53. Li Tao 李燾, *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian* 續資治通鑑長編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 123.2893–2894. For an alternative translation with commentary, see Ruth Dunnell, *The Great State of White and High: Buddhism and State Formation in Eleventh-Century Xia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 1996), 40–43. My contribution (besides offering a new translation) is to identify the links to Tangut pre-imperial political discourse, as well as to a language tied to a shared Northeast Asian "civilizational" discourse.

54. Similarly, it is unlikely that the original document would have juxtaposed the parallel

radical affront to the Chinese civilizational worldview. The Song was happy to recognize the legitimacy of neighboring "kings," like the Koryō king, who accepted nominal vassal status. But, in principle, there could be only one "emperor." Song recognition of Liao's equality was based on necessity; it was an exceptional case that the Song hoped not to repeat.

However, if one looks beyond Song editorial efforts to demean the Tanguts, one can still make out in the surviving version of the memorial a multifaceted justification for establishing Yuanhao as an emperor reigning alongside the Song (and Liao) monarchs. Yuanhao's argument begins by rearticulating some of the core principles already evident in the earlier tenth-century epitaphs. The prestige of the family had roots in part in the eminence of their (supposed) distant ancestors, the Northern Wei imperial clan. More recently, the family had saved the Tang from the Huang Chao rebels, and subsequent generations had defended the frontier while remaining obedient to the imperial court's commands. What Yuanhao had accomplished that was fundamentally different from the feats of his immediate predecessors, and that justified his ambition to be emperor, was to establish the basic elements of a new civilization—in the form of a written script, court clothing, and a ritual system. The novel Tangut script (preserved on countless surviving documents of the period) is interesting because its physical appearance seems designed to convey a sophistication elevating it to the prestige of written Chinese and Khitan.[55] The distinctive ritual system—and its complexity—is reflected in the unique Tangut style of imperial tombs. Unlike Chinese (or Khitan) imperial tombs, these Tangut tombs were surmounted by ornate stupa-like structures built of rammed earth.[56] Ultimately, it was by establishing a civilization that was distinct from that of the Chinese—but equivalent in its refinement—that Yuanhao won the right to assume an imperial throne, a right that neither his father, nor his grandfather, nor any of his tenth-century forebears had ever earned.

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expressions "small Tangut [script]" and "great Han [court garments]," as this juxtaposition so obviously demeans the Tanguts vis-à-vis ethnic Han Chinese.

55. For the argument that the Tanguts consciously strove to create a script like that of the Chinese rather than to recycle the more practical Tibetan script, which would have been amply sufficient to record the closely-related Tangut language, see Galambos, *Translating Chinese Tradition and Teaching Tangut Culture*, 122–23. Note also that the expression "small Tangut script" may imply that the creation of the Tangut script was treated as analogous to the creation of the Khitan small script.

56. Nancy Shatzman Steinhardt, "The Tangut Royal Tombs near Yinchuan," *Muqarnas* 10 (1993): 369–81.

What does one make of the new models of imperial sovereignty devised under the Khitans and Tanguts? The Chinese civilizational worldview was fundamentally unipolar. A single legitimate Son of Heaven ruled over all-under-Heaven; the civilized world was defined by the proper performance of a single legitimate system of rituals. The Khitans and Tanguts accepted certain core elements of this model of imperial sovereignty, but adapted it to their own purposes. The Khitans were the first to establish a new civilization on the Chinese model (i.e., defined by ritual practice, etc.), thereby allowing others to imagine the Liao court as an alternative but equally refined center of civilization. The Tanguts followed suit, emulating the Khitans in creating for themselves a new script and new ritual apparatus, then insisting on their own right to establish an empire on the basis of these innovations. The logical conclusion of this replication of civilizational centers was a new worldview that, like the older "civilizational" worldview, featured an imperial court as a beacon of civilization shining upon peripheral lands.[57] Unlike the older "civilizational" worldview, however, it recognized the possibility of a multitude of imperial courts, each representing an alternative center of an alternative civilization.[58]

What mechanism accounts for the transfer of a worldview from Song to Liao to Xia? To be sure, the circulation of Chinese classical texts to the various courts of East Asia undoubtedly played a role. Classical scholarship is full of descriptive accounts of the civilizing power of the imperial court. But one must also recognize that the new model of sovereignty in question was more meaningful to a regime when jockeying for position on the world stage than when striving to garner political support at home. One would imagine then that, as in the case of the diffusion of steppe categories of ethnicity, diplomatic exchange also played a significant role in the transmission of worldviews. One passage from Shengzong's epitaph not cited above—a passage asserting that "since our two courts have established relations, it has already been over thirty

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57. There was of course also an ethnic component to how this new civilization was conceptualized, as made clear in a letter sent by Yuanhao to the Song court, in which Yuanhao made explicit that Tanguts and Han Chinese ought to have their own states. See Dunnell, "The Hsi Hsia," 187. Regarding the counterfactual possibility of the civilizational model serving as the basis for an alternative world of nation-states—conceived very differently from how nation-states are conceived today—see Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 281–82.

58. It may be relevant that the Tangut ruler apparently assumed the imperial title of "Son of Blue Heaven" (青天子)—perhaps implying that the emperor of each civilization was thought to receive the mandate to rule from a distinct heaven. See Galambos, *Translating Chinese Tradition and Teaching Tangut Culture*, 105–6.

years" 自兩朝修聘, 已三十餘年—bears an uncanny resemblance to specific language used repeatedly by doves at the Northern Song court.[59] The text of Shengzong's epitaph thus appears to incorporate, at least in part, a discourse born in the context of the well-documented diplomatic sociability between Song and Liao envoys. In the case of the Tanguts, there is the interesting example in 1043—just five years after Yuanhao claimed the imperial title—of missives they sent to the Song court that both emulated closely language used in Khitan diplomatic correspondence, and also made demands (e.g., that Song increase its annual gifts to Xia) modeled on Khitan demands.[60] Such emulation was possible because, simply put, the Tangut Xia regime was a full participant in the diplomatic culture of eleventh-century Eastern Eurasia.[61] Similarly, through their engagement with Liao diplomats, the Tanguts would have come to understand the basis for the Khitan claim to legitimacy, and so based their own claim to empire on the same multi-civilizational worldview that the Khitans had initially innovated.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to shine light on three specific examples of cultural diffusion with implications for our understanding of the political culture of tenth- and eleventh-century Northeast Asia. I examined in turn the diffusion of a particular mortuary culture across a broad zone straddling the Song-Liao border; the importation into Song China of steppe ethnic categories; and the export of a traditional Chinese model of imperial sovereignty to Liao and Xia. Given trends in scholarship over the past two to three decades, one is no longer surprised to learn of cultural diffusion across the sino-steppe frontier, nor is one surprised to discover that this diffusion happened in multiple directions, from Song to Liao, but also from Liao to Song and Liao to Xia. It is now possible to push the discussion in new directions. How do the three highlighted examples clarify the dynamics of diffusion and its driving mechanisms?

59. Tackett, *Origins of the Chinese Nation*, 56–58.

60. Dunnell, "The Hsi Hsia," 188.

61. The number of diplomatic missions between Xi Xia and Liao is much more difficult to quantify than the number of diplomatic exchanges between Liao and Song due to a paucity of extant sources. From *LS*, we know of at least nine missions from the Tanguts to the Khitans. See Karl A. Wittfogel and Feng Chia-sheng, *History of Chinese Society: Liao (907–1125)*, published as *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, new ser., 36 (1946): 320–24.

First, I have highlighted the significance of regional cultures, and the potentially disproportionate role even a peripheral region might play in the processes in question. In analyzing cultural diffusion, it is typical to focus on large political units. Thus, one commonly conceives of the Khitan Liao, Tangut Xia, and Chinese Song as the basic units of analysis, on the premise that political and cultural borders roughly coincided. But by focusing on national units in this way, one fails to recognize certain phenomena that could ultimately be more significant. In the early tenth century, a massive diaspora of people from Hebei and Hedong drastically transformed the sociopolitical elite both at the Chinese metropolitan core in Henan and at the Liao political core in Manchuria. One could choose to dwell on only one aspect of the diaspora—the influx of ethnic Chinese into Manchuria—and turn the story of this diaspora into a tale of the sinification of the steppe. But it is more accurate to think of it as culminating in what one might call the Hebei-fication of both the Manchurian and the north Chinese elite. One consequence of this Hebei-fication in turn suggests yet another way in which thinking in national terms can be misleading. At least from the perspective of mortuary culture, metropolitan elites at the Song court had, it turns out, more in common with the "Chinese" subjects of Liao than with the "Chinese" of south China.

Second, I have proposed alternative mechanisms to account for cultural diffusion in the mid-imperial period. Probably the most common model for understanding how culture diffused in East Asia involves the dispersal of texts. We know that Chinese classical scholarship circulated widely, impacting political culture in a large swathe of East and Inner Asia. Buddhist scripture from India seems to have had a similarly important impact throughout this very same world region. In the case of Buddhism, the activities of monks and religious missionaries are also widely recognized as having played a role in the diffusion process. I propose two additional mechanisms that were especially significant in the context of the particularities of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The staggering scope of migration in the decades after the decline of the Tang drove a process of demic diffusion, by means of which a cultural complex might spread geographically as the people associated with it physically displaced a preexisting population. In addition, the period in question was an era of particularly intense diplomatic activity. The several hundred missions exchanged between Song and Liao in the post-Chanyuan century are especially well documented, a consequence of the relative abundance of extant Song sources. But it is likely that, perhaps driven by Liao's exceptional

engagement with the wider world, other East Asian polities also participated in diplomatic exchanges to a heightened degree.[62] Under these circumstances, diplomatic sociability inevitably became an important vehicle for the exchange of ideas, and likely accounts for the diffusion both of steppe ethnic categories and of the Chinese "civilizational" worldview.

Finally, in considering the diffusion of ethnic categories and of the civilizational model of imperial sovereignty specifically, one recognizes how ideas of this sort were adapted as they crossed borders. Cultural negotiation inherent to the practice of diplomacy was itself a productive force, spurring the emergence of new ideas. Thus, categories of ethnicity that played a role in administrative organization under the Liao became the basis for the notion of a monoethnic state under the Song. A civilizational discourse that served to establish China's centrality and exceptionality developed into the vision of a modular world divided into civilizations each ruled by its own imperial court. Of course, the monoethnic state and the multi-civilizational world were both themselves concepts deployed almost exclusively in the context of interstate relations. It is very possible, for example, that models of Buddhist kingship played a greater role in legitimizing Tangut rule on the home front.[63] The civilizational model of imperial sovereignty became critical precisely when the Tanguts sought recognition from their two imperial neighbors. It was part of an assortment of discourses and cultural symbols that was necessary for mutual intelligibility in diplomatic exchange, and so it arose inevitably as intense diplomatic engagement that was once *ad hoc* came to coalesce into the regularized and functioning inter-state order of pre-Mongol times.

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62. On Liao's engagement with the wider world, see Valerie Hansen, "International Gifting and the Kitan World, 907–1125," *JSYS* 43 (2013): 273–302; Michal Biran, "Unearthing the Liao Dynasty's Relations with the Muslim World: Migrations, Diplomacy, Commerce, and Mutual Perceptions," *JSYS* 43 (2013): 221–51.

63. For example, it seems that Buddhism played a more important role than civilizational discourse in Yuanhao's imperial accession ceremonies, undoubtedly performed before an audience of Tangut elites. See Dunnell, *Great State of White and High*, 36–47.