



Nicolas Tackett. *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 354 pp. \$34.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-64748-6.

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Published on H-Nationalism (August, 2018)

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The Song dynasty (960-1279) has been seen as a period of fundamental socioeconomic, political, and cultural change in Chinese history ever since the rise of professional history in East Asia in the twentieth century. Among the features attributed to the Song polity by historians who have seen it as an early modern or modern state is the emergence of nationalism or national consciousness. In this elegant book Nicolas Tackett proposes to “synthesize these varied and—at times—impressionistic observations into a coherent picture” (p. 5). This is therefore primarily a work of synthesis, one that aims to write a “total history of the origins of national consciousness among Chinese elites” (p. 26). But this is also more than a work of synthesis. By constructing a coherent thesis and probing new evidence for it, the author pushes earlier work to its very limits. The result is a provocative and engaging read, but one that comes with important caveats.

Inspired by Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) and European historians who have similarly sought the origins of the European nation-state in medieval and early modern times, Tackett proceeds from two basic findings.[1] First, in the eleventh century educated elites empire-wide shared a new feeling of community, a community that included also the peasantry. Second, the Song state was positioned in an interstate sys-

tem that included other strong states, particularly Liao to the north and Xia to the northwest. This interstate system shaped elite views on cultural and geographic boundaries, and, in Tackett’s reading, it did so mainly through an intense sociability among large numbers of diplomats.

In the first chapter (“Diplomacy and Cosmopolitan Sociability”) the author sets out this key argument. A survey of Song officials who served as ambassadors or deputy ambassadors to Liao in the period between 1005 and 1120 reveals that 618 men, mainly mid-career bureaucrats, served in these positions. The fact that about half of those involved in missions to Liao moved on to policy positions is seen as a sign that diplomatic experience was valued in bureaucratic promotion. Whereas most historians who have worked on the extant envoy reports have interpreted the missions as either highly ritualistic events or trips aimed at gathering intelligence for the Song court, Tackett portrays them as opportunities for interaction that generated a level of “cosmopolitan sociability unusual in premodern times” (p. 45). Tackett musters some evidence of exchange and proves to be a more observant reader in this regard than others who have merely seen them as ritualistic events. On the other hand, the evidence is very scant. The number of diplomats was relatively small at five per year and it remains un-

clear that their diplomatic experience was key in their promotion as opposed to other factors. Most importantly, there is no evidence of “intense sociability,” as the vast body of Song texts includes only two poems commemorating such events (p. 44) and, in contrast to the European case, there is no evidence of ongoing correspondence between diplomats on the two sides. (It is worth noting in this regard that there are more poems documenting diplomatic exchanges from the Period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties [fourth-sixth centuries], a period of diplomatic exchange that is given short shrift in *The Origins of the Chinese Nation*.) Tackett also does not distinguish between different types of embassies, the numerous routine visits for ritual purposes (deaths in the imperial families, seasonal greetings, etc.), for example, and those that were meant to address diplomatic issues.

This chapter also outlines the core contention of the book, namely, that the diplomatic activities of these men shaped Song political culture more broadly. Their experience led to pacificism and to a reconceptualization of the place of “China” in the world, one based on ethnic rather than civilizational distinction. As for the first point, Tackett adduces much evidence to suggest that peace with Liao (and the acceptance that territory in the north of the North China Plain would for the time being remain in the hands of Liao) was supported across factional divides. The broader inferences about how this impacted Song elites more generally are, however, more speculative; and here questions about the audience and reception of diplomatic reports, the chronology of the dissemination of such materials among audiences outside of court circles and high officialdom, and the rhetorical context and interpretation of the use of ethnic categories require more careful attention. There are several examples where the original texts do not readily lend themselves to the nationalist paradigm that is imposed upon them. For example, Tackett cites the official Li Qiu: “Today we have inherited an era of Great Peace; the popu-

lace has had the good fortune of never witnessing warfare. Even if we were never to obtain this land of Yan and Yun, *what would China really be lacking?*” (p. 62, my italics). Here and elsewhere Tackett rather unusually translates “Han” as “China”—the text more likely says, “how are we [the Song dynasty] lacking when compared to the Han [dynasty]?” This is not just a minor quibble; it illustrates that the concept for the modern nation-state (“China”) is presupposed and imposed on a context in which it would not have made sense—time in the form of the dynasty was a crucial dimension in the original text whereas it is not in the use of “China.”

This longer chapter is followed by two shorter chapters that further discuss interstate dynamics, with the goal to provide a political historical perspective on the question of how a new sense of Chinese national consciousness emerged during the eleventh century. Chapter 2 surveys the geography of the Song-Liao border region, pre-Song approaches to the defense of the northern frontier, and Song strategies to defend a border that, due to the loss of the Sixteen Prefectures to the Liao, cut across the North China Plain. Tackett maps out the barriers that were constructed to create the Xia-Song and Liao-Song borders and draws attention to the fact that, also in Song, the armies in these regions were staffed with tribal soldiers. The conclusion drawn from this survey is that during the Song frontier policy was shaped by a new national consciousness: elites no longer saw their state as “a universal empire [as the Tang did], but rather as a culturally and ethnically Han state” (p. 100). This reasoning follows from essentializing claims Song policymakers made that it was in “China’s nature” to field infantry while it was in the nature of steppe peoples to field cavalry (even though the Song army also included cavalry forces). In this context it is important to note that in his summary of the history of frontier policy the Tang encyclopedist Du You quoted from the eighth-century *Military Guide* to draw exactly this contrast between steppe and agricultural armies:

“Chinese men are foot soldiers. They are at an advantage in territories with natural barriers. Barbarians are infantry. They are at an advantage in the plains. They are good at sudden strikes; we are good at strong defense. We should not pursue them and we should not compete with them. When they come we should seal strategic passes so as not to let them in. When they leave, we should block strategic passages so as not to let them return.” This work was later quoted by Ouyang Xiu, suggesting that the pursuit of ethnic separation was not a Song invention.[2] The contrast between Tang and Song therefore needs to be worked out more carefully, not only on the basis of primary sources but also with regard to the underlying theoretical framework.

Throughout these chapters and the rest of the book the Song state is simultaneously referred to as a nation or an ethnic nation-state on one hand, and as an empire, a bounded empire, or an ethnic empire, on the other. When the Song state is contrasted to the Tang or Liao states, the two terms are clearly opposed to each other: Liao is a multinational empire and Song China a mono-ethnic nation-state; Tang a universal empire and Song, a Han state. Nation and empire need not be mutually exclusive, as the work of Krishan Kumar has shown, but Tackett nowhere explains how he understands the relationship between the two and whether and why the Song nation was also an empire. The question is not merely one of nomenclature. Nation-states and empires operate on the basis of different principles (the theoretical equality of citizens and the acceptance of inequality among subjects, for example) and in some states these can live in tension with each other (think of the British and Spanish Empires, for example). Using one over the other or the two simultaneously has repercussions for how one understands the organization of society and the operation of the state internally and externally.

Tackett makes a case for seeing the Song state as an historical instance of a general phenomenon

called nationalism with the goal to de-naturalize the European nation-state. He highlights a series of criteria that the Song state shares with modern nation-states (linear boundaries, ethnic solidarity, and the feeling for a “homogenous nationwide community,” for example [p. 280]) and notes, as others have in the past, that in critical ways it also differed from its modern equivalents: most notably, nationalism was not a mass phenomenon and the Chinese nation-state was in Song times not conceived to fit into a world of nation-states. If this is the case, however, one might wonder to what extent the Song state operated as a nation-state. Do we see in Song the origins of the Chinese nation-state? Or do we see a gradual transformation of political imaginaries among an expanding group of cultural elites with an imperial rather than a national mission?

In chapter 3 (on bilateral boundaries) and the final three chapters (on cultural space) Tackett discusses the key elements that make Song China comparable to the modern nation-state. The border demarcation projects initiated by the Song court and its northern neighbors are indeed remarkable. The high level of activity in the 1070s suggests these were part of the comprehensive centralization and reform policies under Wang Anshi. Of particular note here is Tackett’s analysis of the projects’ political significance: the “mounds and ditches” were constructed through bilateral effort and therefore led to the mutual recognition of territorial, and therefore bounded, sovereignty—this in contrast to earlier interstate systems, which were based on jurisdictional rather than territorial sovereignty. The Song court and its northern neighbors clearly invested more in the demarcation and mapping of contested border zones than earlier regimes. The question of how this affected political culture in Song China and also the “Pan-East Asian culture of international relations” is, however, one that ought to be pursued not only through analogy with the modern case. As Tackett admits, there is little evidence that demarcation took place all along the Song

borders. Did Song literati who wrote on all aspects of administration and frontier policy reflect on and theorize the cultural and political effects of border demarcation? Were (among the many maps produced in the Song) any maps produced for general readership showing border demarcations and the interstate system? And how much contemporary evidence is there that the mounds and ditches resulted in the formation of *ethnic* identities among those living in the border regions and across the Song territories?

The latter question is to some extent addressed in the subsequent chapters, which pursue the cultural impact of the interstate system through a frequency analysis of select ethnic terms, archeological finds (especially tombs), and the interpretation of space in envoy reports. At first glance the comparative word frequency analysis of terms relating to “China’s geographic space, population and culture” in the large corpora of Tang and Song literary collections (*Quan Tang wen* and *Quan Song wen*) seemed to me like solid proof that usage of the Chinese term for “Han people” (an ethnic term) indeed witnessed a massive increase, from 6 percent in the Tang to 53 percent in the Song (p. 160). When checking the data, however, and applying an approach I had used earlier in a similar corpus linguistics exercise, the evidence is far less convincing and the conclusions drawn are at best premature.[3] Let me explain. There are mainly three kinds of methodological problems, relating to the selection of keywords, the calculation of frequency, and differences in the corpora selected for comparison. First, the tables only include frequencies for terms clustering around four concepts: Hua, Zhongguo, Han, and dynastic terms (including Tang and Song). Dynastic terms are problematic because it is common knowledge that at the time of writing authors tended not to use the dynastic terms of the reigning dynasty; instead they used “our dynasty” or “the reigning dynasty,” et cetera. That there was some usage of “Tang ren,” et cetera, in the Tang may have to do with the fact

that the collection was compiled much later and few original editions from the time remain, but this awaits further research. While Hua and Zhongguo are relevant, there certainly are other terms that were used to refer to the polity and/or Chinese territory. The list I compiled based on actual usage in a twelfth-century text, for example, included *tianxia*, *zhongyuan*, *chao-ting*, *guochao*, Da Song, et cetera.[4] Second, apart from differences in the results I obtained when performing these searches across the entire *Quan Song wen* (these may have to do with differences in the electronic edition used or problems with character encoding; the data could not be checked), the calculation of percentages in the table is deceptive. It shows a massive percentage increase for “Hanren,” but this percentage is calculated based on the share of this term in the narrow selection of terms. One would obtain very different results if more contemporary terms of self-reference such as *Wo* Song, *guochao*, *benchao*, or *tianxia* were included in the calculation, and even more different results if one were to look at the frequency across the entire corpus. Even if we accept that there were 94 references to “Hanren” that were exclusively ethnic (and thus not referring to people living in the Han dynasty), this is a very small number of occurrences across a corpus that, for the entirety of the Song, consists of over 170,000 pieces of text and over 100 million characters (figures are those reported by the vendor). Third, differences in the Tang and Song corpora, and particularly the prevalence of certain genres in the makeup of these corpora ought to be taken into account. Genre has been shown to have an impact on the occurrence of ethnic terms and their collocates—unsurprisingly, a call to war calls for a different usage than a diplomatic treaty; and so, higher frequencies of particular types of policy documents in the corpus, for example, would lead to different results. One way to get around this problem would be to compile comparable sets of documents.

These methodological problems are relevant because, depending on how one reads the calculations and how one interprets them in their context, one would reach very different conclusions. The relatively low overall number of occurrences for all terms relating to “Chinese populations,” for example, might lead to the hypothesis that, overall, terms of self-reference were seldom used in the Song, and, when used, they mainly appeared in the context of interstate conflict. This is rather different from the celebration of national identity in modern nation-states, and is more in keeping with the attitude of an imperial elite who by and large remained focused on court politics and the territorial integrity of the Song state rather than ethnic solidarity. (A telling counterexample of this would be that the term “traitor to the Han,” a term of abuse for all those who failed to uphold national solidarity in modern times, does not appear to have found much usage even at times of war.)

Even though the data and analysis provided here are a good starting point, more work will need to be done to ascertain what meanings were attached to “Han” as an ethnic term at the time and who upheld a new “ethnoculture.” The question of reception is a critical one. Whereas most of the statements included here come from high court officials, conclusions tend to be drawn about “educated elites” more generally and tend to ignore that the makeup of the *shidafu* community also underwent historic change between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. In fairness to the author and readers, and as may already be clear from earlier references, my own recent work has focused on these questions. By looking at the question of the circulation and reception of texts about the polity, including envoy reports, and making sense of records that speak about competing states in a wide variety of registers, I arrived at a somewhat different conclusion about the impact of the multistate world on (Southern) Song elite identities: “Although the reality of a multistate world resulted in a worldview in which

the formation of bureaucratic states in the north with subjects of their own was acknowledged, the imperial ideal of the ruler of the central state as the sovereign of Chinese and non-Chinese peoples (*tianxia zhi ren* 天下之人 [the people of the realm], Yi-Xia 夷夏) alike remained unchallenged.... Wang Zhi reaffirmed that the emperor possessed parental feelings for all: “The emperor watches over all and treats all life as his own children. Always concerned, his heart goes out to both *Chinese and non-Chinese*. Constantly worried, he continues the legacy of the founding fathers of our dynasty.”[5] Wang Zhi’s statement, produced at a moment of high tension at the end of the Northern Song, is very similar to the rhetoric of empire attributed to the Tang emperors. To be sure, this concerns events that mostly postdate the story told in *The Origins of the Chinese Nation-State* and the author therefore does not engage with it. If one does accept that national consciousness first emerged during the eleventh century, however, the question of the legacy of such a momentous change ought to be addressed in some detail. A key challenge in this regard is why it is that many Song elites decided to collaborate with the Mongols in the thirteenth century—one can explain this if one accepts that territorial sovereignty had become a key concern in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but less so if one argues that ethnic solidarity had become a defining characteristic of the elite. (Chinese literati explicitly credited the Yuan with having unified the realm.)

In this context it is also important to note that even though the author time and again seeks to distance himself from an evolutionary model, stating that the goal is to look at the Song as one case of nationalism in a broader history of it, the persistent emphasis on “the origins” of the Chinese nation-state is contradictory to that goal and tends to ignore other, earlier cases in which ethnic discourse also came to the fore due to multi-state and interstate dynamics—the case of the Northern and Southern Dynasties in particular would have been relevant. The author does en-

gage with Song interpretations of this period, but the conclusion that the Northern Wei was then commonly seen as illegitimate on the basis of its ethnicity is factually inaccurate. Several Song historians, including influential eleventh-century historians such as Zhang Fangping and Chen Shidao, saw the Northern Wei as a legitimate dynasty. In this they followed the influential text *Zhongshuo* attributed to Wang Tong, who had established that occupation of the central plain was a criterion for legitimacy.[6]

In the fifth chapter on mortuary cultures across the Chinese/steppe divide, Tackett demonstrates a refreshing facility with a wide range of materials and analytical approaches. In some ways this chapter does not entirely fit, as it says more about Liao ethnic policy than about Song national consciousness, but it illustrates on the basis of a mapping of different architectural styles of and holdings in tombs how a cultural divide took shape along the Song-Liao border. This divide is further worked out in the final chapter that shows how, also on the Song side, territories below the mountains were seen in travel reports as Sinic spaces that were radically different from the steppe lands to the north. Can one on this basis conclude that it is therefore “little wonder that there emerged among educated elites of the eleventh century a new worldview that redefined age-old categories such as *Zhongguo*, *Han* and *Hua*, such that these elites for the first time conceived of both China and Chinese identity” (p. 272)? In the above I have indicated that there are significant theoretical, conceptual, and methodological problems as well as questions about the empirical evidence. Belief in the integrity of the territories that were considered to have been ruled by Chinese dynasties throughout time (including ethnically non-Han regimes) was clearly pronounced in Northern Song policy, and ethnic discourse was also prevalent, especially in genres related to interstate conflict. Tackett is certainly right that there have been moments in Chinese and human history when such concerns produced

cultural and political change (such as elite support for regimes that could realize the unification of all Chinese territories). The fact that some of the technologies that were adopted for the creation of imagined communities in modern times were available, albeit in different form, does not mean that national consciousness came along with them or produced them. In sum, it seems to me that the emergence of the Chinese nation-state and Han ethnic solidarity across social class divisions was not of Song origin but resulted from the establishment of a rather different kind of interstate system in the nineteenth century.

Here, as in his first work on the demise of the medieval aristocracy, Tackett’s analysis is based on a scientific approach. The author proceeds from a set of hypotheses that he sets out to validate on the basis of a wide array of evidence to which both quantitative and qualitative methods are applied. Herein lie both the strengths and the weaknesses of *The Origins of the Chinese Nation*. It is a model of clear argumentation and causal reasoning. By and large the evidence produced also allows for falsification. More problematic is that in presenting this model, contradictory (primary or secondary) evidence tends to be only discussed when it can be used to strengthen the argument; the argument tends to be overstated and the evidence pushed beyond what it can show. Nevertheless, this is a most engaging work of scholarship that will be much debated in the field of Chinese history and beyond. It is because of these merits that I have been inspired to engage with it in some critical detail.

Notes

[1]. The parallels drawn with the conditions identified in Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* on p. 14 are generalizations that are factually problematic: there was no national market for printed books and no national curriculum in schools; families producing high officials were not evenly distributed across the most densely populated regions.

[2]. For a more extensive discussion of this work and ethnic discourse in the Tang, see Hilde De Weerd, *Information, Territory and Networks: The Crisis and Maintenance of Empire in Song China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 237-42.

[3]. De Weerd, *Information, Territory and Networks*, 399-408.

[4]. De Weerd, *Information, Territory and Networks*, 400.

[5]. De Weerd, *Information, Territory and Networks*, 408.

[6]. On this and other examples, see Liu Pun-ing, “Political Legitimacy in Chinese History: The Case of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386-535)” (PhD diss.: Leiden University, 2018), esp. chapter 5. Ethnicity is in Liu’s view also a criterion but by no means the only or decisive one in determining a dynasty’s legitimacy.

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Citation: Hilde De Weerd. Review of Tackett, Nicolas. *The Origins of the Chinese Nation: Song China and the Forging of an East Asian World Order*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. August, 2018.

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