

China's Repeated Reunifications

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Why has China, for so much of its history, been the most populous country in the world? How were the states that were formed in China able to rule larger territories and populations and maintain centralized structures longer than governments elsewhere? Six times in China's history states were able to defeat their rivals until they controlled both the Yellow River and the Yangzi River regions (my minimum definition of "unified") and last eighty years or more (my minimum definition of "long-lasting"). These states were the Qin-Han (221 BCE–220 CE), Sui-Tang (581–907), Northern Song (960–1127), Yuan (Mongol, 1276–1368), Ming (1368–1644), and Qing (Manchu, 1644–1911) dynasties.

The centuries that China was under the control of these large states and the centralized ways in which they ruled resulted in a large body of words, ideas, and practices shared across the Chinese subcontinent, leading some people to assume that it was China's cultural uniformity that enabled large states to be formed. I think causation, in the early stages at least, was heavily in the opposite direction: Large, centralized states facilitated the spread of language and cultural ideas and practices. In time, of course, the process became more two-way, as shared culture made reunification and strongly centralized governments easier to create and maintain. Thus, I am not persuaded by any of the single-factor explanations of China's unity in terms of its geography, writing system, or Confucian ideas. At a minimum, political practice and international context need to be considered.

To develop a more-nuanced, multifactor explanation, I have been focusing on three consecutive unifications: that of the Sui-Tang, Northern Song, and Yuan. In the first half of my book-in-progress I highlight some of the similarities and differences between the processes involved in these three unifications. All three were achieved overwhelmingly through force of arms. There are differences in how long it took to attain military dominance and the level of resistance aspiring dynastic founders encountered, but no dynasty was established by treaties negotiated by statesmen or by marriage alliances between rivals. Still, the groups that founded these dynasties are quite different. The Sui and Tang ruling groups belonged to the aristocracy of the Northern Dynasties, which included the Xianbei ruling families and the Han Chinese families with whom they intermarried. The Song founder, by contrast, was a professional soldier, who on taking the throne took steps to curb the power of other military men who had aided him. By the time the Mongols subjugated the Southern Song, they already held a huge empire extending into Mongolia, and they had an elaborate government staffed not only by Mongols but also by Chinese from the north and by people from other places in Eurasia.

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These unifications built on each other. Or to put this another way, they did not all start at the same place. Arguably, the first of these reunifications, the Sui-Tang, was not inevitable. In 500, one could conceive of two or three strong countries in East Asia. After all, Korea had been part of the Han, and the Sui and Tang rulers tried repeatedly to reincorporate it. If they failed in Korea, they could have also failed in Fujian or Zhejiang. Quite plausibly, the north and south could have continued indefinitely as rival powers. However, once the Sui-Tang reunification proved to be successful, the superiority of unity over division seemed self-evident to the political elite. The century and more of division during the Southern Song when large areas settled by Chinese were ruled by non-Chinese states did not lead to a shrinkage of the Chinese population. To the contrary, it strengthened Chinese cultural identity.

Some changes brought about by unifications were unique, others recurrent, and still others cumulative. Changes in state-elite relations are a good example of a recurrent development. The Confucian literati were not major power-holders at the beginning of any of these dynasties, but they were brought in more quickly in the Song than either the Tang or the Yuan.

A good example of cumulative change is the movement of people. Large migrations laid the groundwork for unifications of the north and south. These large movements of people from north to south occurred during periods of warfare in the north, such as in the fourth century, the second half of the Tang, the Jurchen invasion in the twelfth century, the Mongol campaigns in north China in the 1210s–1230s, their invasion of Sichuan in the 1230s, and their final campaigns in the Yangzi regions in the 1260s–1270s. These migrations made the next unification somewhat easier because the mixing of people from different regions helped strengthen shared culture. Some ruling houses forced the movement of people as a way to impose their power and reduce any chances of resistance. This was especially common among the non-Han ruling houses: the Xianbei Northern Wei moved tens of thousands of farmers from Hebei to the capital at modern Datong; the Western Wei reportedly moved similar numbers from the captured city of Jiangling to territory they controlled in the north; and the Kitans forced farmers in Hebei and Shanxi into modern Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, and places

further north. To some extent, forced movement to the north balanced the voluntary movement to the south.

Part II of my book-in-progress addresses the question of China's large and long-lasting empires from another angle: How were central governments able to rule effectively at such distances? Did the actual techniques change? Forced migration has been mentioned as a state-building practice, but there are many others. To explore them I narrow my time frame to the Song in order to drill down to the primary source evidence. The richest material by far is for the Song, and the Song is probably also the period with the most creative innovations in statecraft. One good example is regulating succession to the throne. Since longer-ruling dynasties did more to solidify China as a large unified empire than short ones, it is worth considering what made it possible for dynasties to keep putting descendants on the throne for centuries. Song makes advances on Tang in this regard, and there are no cases of usurpations or armed struggles over succession in the Song. From the start, the Song took steps to avoid eunuch interference with succession, which was a major problem in the late Tang. The Song dynasty was also successful in keeping princes away from power struggles. Equally important, the Song avoided succession crises by making the senior widow the king-maker when an emperor died before designating an heir.

The Song was equally inventive, even if less successful, in finding ways to cope with aggressive neighbors. Here it is particularly interesting that Song officials were willing to compare the costs of monetary tribute versus the cost of war. Rather than look at the matter in terms of glory or humiliation, they pragmatically calculated the costs and benefits. To assure adequate revenue for defense purposes, Song statesmen found ways to draw much of their needed funds from commercial taxes, monopolies, and state lands.

The area of Song statecraft that had the largest influence on subsequent dynasties was probably the civil service system. Song officials tried to improve all aspects of the recruitment system, leaving behind a voluminous body of material on schools and teaching, testing, promoting, evaluating, and disciplining officials. The civil service examination system was the centerpiece of state-elite relations in the Song. Officials believed that they had earned their position through merit, so this was their government. Their identification with the dynasty helps explain the amazing civility of the government in Song times. Song rulers dismissed officials they no longer trusted or posted them far from the capital; they did not have them beaten or executed. Factionalism in the court repeatedly turned nasty and there was much name-calling, but officials did not come to blows. No one in Song times ever assassinated a grand counselor or staged a coup.

Finally let me mention the Song government's innovations in reaching down to the common people. They made much use of the new technology of printing to have notices widely posted in towns and villages to alert commoners of changes in policy, upcoming due dates, new opportunities, and fraudulent practices. The Song government also earned the good will of ordinary people by conferring titles and promotions on their gods, something that meant so much to these communities that they often had a stone carved to commemorate the honor.

I have been concentrating on the positive side of Song statecraft because I am trying to explain a positive outcome: the government maintaining order and facilitating prosperity despite serious external threats. This is not the usual story. When historians examine political topics they typically focus on the failures or shortcomings because this is what men of the time wrote about. In comparative perspective, however, the successes require more explanation than the failures, and the successes, I believe, can be attributed in large part to Chinese skill in the art of government. ■

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