CHAPTER NINE

Was Medieval China Medieval? (Post-Han to Mid-Tang)

CHARLES HOLCOMBE

The fall of the Han dynasty (formally, with the abdication of the last Han emperor in 220, and effectively a generation earlier, following the outbreak of rebellions in 184) is conventionally said to mark the beginning of imperial China's great Age of Division. As the preceding chapter by Michael Puett suggests, however, there was still considerable continuity stretching from the Han into the subsequent Three Kingdoms (220–80) and Western Jin dynasty (265–317) periods, the latter of which even briefly reunified China in 280. The truly epoch-changing rupture arguably came only after that, with the establishment of the first ephemeral "non-Chinese" state in North China in 304 (initially called Han, and then [Former] Zhao, 304–29), which ushered in an episode of bewildering chaos in North China known as the Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439). Even the return of relative stability in North China after 439 was still followed by a prolonged period of division between opposing Northern and Southern dynasties that lasted until 589. Between the third and sixth centuries there were some 35 historically recognized "dynasties" in China. Not only was China divided during these centuries, moreover, but from 304 until 581 most of the ancient Chinese heartland in the north, most of the time, was under identifiably "non-Chinese" rule, making this a particularly complicated and pivotal period in imperial Chinese history.

The description of these northern regimes as "non-Chinese" requires some qualification, however, and a more nuanced understanding of the details. To begin with, "China" and "Chinese" are not Chinese language words or concepts. The most generic Chinese language term for the country we call China, *Zhongguo* (Central Country), while truly ancient in origin, began more as a geographic description than a national identity, and as late as the fourth century still did not necessarily include regions south of the Yangzi River (Knechtges 2003, 45–46). The label "Han," which is an authentically Chinese term that is used today to mean "ethnic Chinese," did not begin to be so used until the sixth century (and then only in the north), and did not really stabilize on that meaning until much later (Yang 2014c). In the fourth century, meanwhile, there were two states that literally

A Companion to Chinese History, First Edition. Edited by Michael Szonyi.
© 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2017 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

called themselves "Han" (Han/Former Zhao, and Cheng-Han, 304–47), neither of which had ethnic "Han Chinese" rulers. At that time, the people we might in English describe as "Chinese" were more apt to be labeled "Jin people" (*Jin ren*), meaning people from the supposedly legitimate Western and Eastern Jin dynasties. Nor does there even appear to have been any clearly perceived distinction between Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese speaking peoples. There were multiple spoken languages in use at that time in China, but contemporary sources simply do not appear to have made what we would today consider to be the fundamental distinction between "dialects" of Chinese (or Sinitic languages) and those that were unrelated to Chinese (not Sinitic) (Chittick 2014, 3).

The "non-Chinese" people of fourth-century North China were, furthermore, at least to some extent, ancestral to the Chinese people of today. They lived in China (few came from anywhere very far away anytime recently), contributed to the mainstream of Chinese history, and were already somewhat affected by mainstream Chinese culture and civilization. For example, a fourth-century ruler of much of North China (Shi Le, 274–333) who came from one of the most exotic of those "non-Chinese" peoples (the Jie)—some of whose distant ancestors may even be traced to Central Asia—nonetheless regarded what is now southern Shanxi province as his home, and in 317 authorized a restoration of the (then banned) "Chinese" "Cold Food" (*han shi*) festival because it was an old Shanxi custom that he had grown up with (*Jinshu*, 105.2749–50; Holzman 1986, 57–59). Although there were numerous spoken languages, a single fairly uniform version of written Chinese enjoyed a near monopoly on writing throughout the entire region. And, however ethnically and linguistically varied the population of China in the fourth century had been, all of these peoples eventually contributed to an emerging new "Chinese" synthesis. Indeed, it has even been claimed that the "non-Chinese" rulers of the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–524) "and their descendants pretty much set the course of Chinese history, not just politically but also culturally, for nearly a millennium" (Chen 2012, 2). Certainly, Northern Wei led fairly directly into the gloriously reunified Tang dynasty (618–907). The Northern dynasties of this period, therefore, arguably fall into a somewhat different category than the "non-Han dynasties" covered in the chapter in this volume by Michal Biran. Yet, at the same time, at least until the end of the sixth century, they also clearly retained distinct ethno-cultural identities and non-Sinitic spoken languages. Hence the pivotal nature of this era.

Historical synopsis

In 184, the religious rebellion of the Yellow Turbans shattered the unity of the Han dynasty, and China descended into conflict between rival warlords. The most outstanding of these warlords was Cao Cao (155–220), who eventually consolidated control over most of the northern heartland of Chinese civilization under the name of a puppet Han dynasty emperor. It was not until after Cao Cao died, however, that his son finally dared to openly usurp the throne and establish a new imperial dynasty, called Wei (220–65). The following year, another warlord with a claim to descent from the Han imperial family founded a dynasty in the area of modern Sichuan, in the southwest, which is known to history as Shu-Han (221–63). A year later, yet a third state, called Wu (222–80), was established in the southeast, with its capital at what is now Nanjing. These three regimes are popularly known as the Three Kingdoms.

In an innovation with lasting consequences, in 220 the Three Kingdoms Wei dynasty established a new system for selecting government officials known as the Nine Ranks.

Under this system, specially designated officials were appointed for each regional administrative unit and charged with ranking potential candidates for office on a scale of 1–9, based supposedly upon their local reputation, for consideration by the Ministry of Personnel (Miyazaki 1956). Although the original idea was to promote talent, because the evaluators favored men from already established "good" families, the system contributed to the consolidation of what would become the characteristic Great Family elite of the age. This elite has been the focus of much attention from modern scholars. We will return to the question of whether or not it constituted an "aristocracy" later.

In 263, Shu-Han was conquered by the Wei, which itself in turn succumbed to a usurpation in 265 and was replaced by the Western Jin dynasty. In 280, Western Jin conquered Wu in the southeast, temporarily reunifying all of China proper. After little more than a decade, however, internal power struggles began to ravage Western Jin, and civil wars known as the "disturbances of the eight princes" (300–307) shredded imperial unity. By 317, the Western Jin had disintegrated, and centralized government in North China collapsed almost entirely.

In the south, a junior member of the Western Jin imperial family managed to reestablish a continuation of that dynasty, known to history as the Eastern Jin (317–420). The Eastern Jin capital was located at the site of modern Nanjing, and it became the first in a succession of five Southern dynasties that endured until 589. Together with Three Kingdoms Wu, these five Southern dynasties are commonly called the Six Dynasties. The core of these Southern dynasties was in the lower Yangzi River drainage area, and these dynasties stimulated significant economic development and commercialization in that region (Liu 2001). They also began the epochal shift of China's economic and demographic center of gravity from the north to the south that culminated later in the Tang and Song (960–1279) dynasties.

While Southern dynasty China enjoyed a degree of cultural and economic exuberance beginning in the fourth century, North China initially collapsed into chaos. The Western Jin dynasty had fallen as a result of civil war rather than "barbarian invasions," but during those civil wars cavalry drawn from ethnically distinct frontier populations had become militarily significant. After the collapse of imperial government in the early 300s, bands of such warriors formed multiple ephemeral states, most of which had identifiably "ethnic" rulers. Chinese sources conventionally speak of five major ethnic groups in fourth-century North China, collectively known as the "five *hu*" (*hu* being a generic Chinese term for northern foreign peoples).

Their regimes were typically hybrids. For example, the first of the "non-Chinese" Sixteen Kingdoms was founded in Shanxi in 304 by a man who claimed descent from nomadic Xiongnu royalty (the Xiongnu empire had been based in what is today called Mongolia). He also, however, claimed descent from Han dynasty Chinese emperors, bore the old Han dynasty imperial surname (Liu), had studied under a Confucian scholar and lived for years in the Chinese capital, and pointedly named his new state "Han." (The name was later changed to Zhao, which is called "Former Zhao" by historians to distinguish it from other states with that same name.) He claimed the Chinese title "emperor" (*huangdi*), but he also invoked the old non-Chinese Xiongnu supreme title *shanyu* (or *chanyu*), and established separate administrations for his "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" subjects.

In the long run, the historically most significant of the five *hu* peoples proved to be not the Xiongnu but the Xianbei (Holcombe 2013). The Xianbei were themselves divided into several differently named subgroups, and may have originated in the area of what is now Manchuria and northeastern Inner Mongolia. They spoke languages unrelated to Chinese (possibly affiliated to Mongolic), and their rise at this time was associated with the introduction of a new type of heavily armored cavalry.

This was an age of unprecedented cultural openness and cosmopolitanism—a time when the line between "China" and "not China" was far from clear. The triumph of Indian Buddhism in China beginning in the fourth century was only the most spectacular example of outside influence during these centuries, as music, dance, art, clothing and hair styles, food and drink, and even the status of women were profoundly affected by (primarily northwestern) foreign styles. The chair, for example, may have been introduced to China from the west together with Buddhism during this period (Kieschnick 2003, 229–47). A second- or third-century eastern Roman plate decorated with an image of Dionysus and the gods of Mount Olympus (Watt et al. 2004, 184–85), and a pitcher from a tomb dated to 569 that is decorated with scenes from the Trojan Wars (Dien 2007, 276–77), have been discovered in northwest China. Even in South China, a cache of fourth and fifth century Sassanid Persian coins and artifacts has been found in what is now Guangdong, and several Southern dynasty imperial tombs feature fluted stone columns suggesting Greek derivation (Dien 2007, 191, 280–81).

After more than a century of chaos in North China under the Sixteen Kingdoms, a subgroup of the Xianbei known as the Tuoba established a more enduring imperial dynasty called the Northern Wei in 386. By 439, this Northern Wei dynasty had reunified all of the north. Beginning in the late 400s, the Northern Wei implemented a series of Sinicizing (i.e., Chinese-izing) measures that transformed the regime into a more thoroughly Chinese-style state. These measures included requiring the taking of Chinese names and speaking the Chinese language, and the relocation of the Northern Wei capital to the venerable ancient Chinese site of Luoyang in 494.

Modern Chinese scholars have understandably been obsessed by this program of alleged Tuoba Xianbei assimilation into Chinese civilization, but non-Chinese scholars have been more skeptical, generally insisting that any Sinicization was only selective and limited. After 523, moreover, when the Northern Wei dynasty was rocked by rebellions in the garrisons along its northern frontier and split (in 534) into separate northwestern and northeastern dynasties, there was even a revival of Xianbei language and culture. Xianbei people remained politically and militarily dominant in North China until 581, and Xianbei culture made lasting contributions to "Chinese" civilization (e.g., in clothing styles—see Lingley 2010). While emphasizing that the cultural exchange was mutual, however, it remains undeniable that the Xianbei identity in China was eventually absorbed into a new fusion under the Tang dynasty, and ceased to exist.

After the splitting of the Northern Wei dynasty, both of the resulting new Eastern Wei (534–50) and Western Wei (535–57) regimes were dominated by warlord families, who each in turn eventually usurped the throne to found their own new dynasties. In 577, the last northwestern dynasty (Northern Zhou, 557–81) conquered the final regime in the northeast (Northern Qi, 550–77), reunifying North China. In 581, a palace coup replaced the Northern Zhou with a new dynasty called Sui (581–618), whose rulers are conventionally considered to have been "Chinese" (although, in reality, they had intermarried extensively with the Xianbei and were culturally mixed). In 589, the Sui then conquered the last Southern dynasty and reunified the whole of China proper. Despite considerable commercial prosperity, the Southern dynasties had been weakened by extreme economic polarization, a string of military usurpations and vicious internal power struggles, and by a devastating rebellion in 548–52.

The victorious Sui dynasty, which also completed the Grand Canal linking the river systems of north China with those of the south, soon overreached itself with a series of massive failed invasions of a kingdom in northern Korea called Koguryŏ. The Sui dynasty then collapsed amidst multiple rebellions, and a new dynasty, called Tang, was established on its ruins in 618. Although it took Tang a decade to consolidate control over the whole of China, the dynasty proved enduring, and it inaugurated one of the most glorious periods in all of Chinese history.

In 626, in a steppe-style succession struggle reminiscent of the dynasty's Tuoba Xianbei roots, the Tang founder's second son ambushed and killed his own older brother, the crown prince, together with a younger brother. Two months later, their father abdicated the throne to him (Eisenberg 2008, 167–94). Just ten days after the new emperor (posthumously known as Emperor Taizong, r. 626–49) ascended the throne, however, the Qaghan (or Khan) of the Eastern Türks in Mongolia (Illig Qaghan, r. 620–30) advanced his army to a bridge less than seven miles west of the Tang capital at Chang'an (modern Xi'an). The Türk Qaghan withdrew only after Emperor Taizong personally met with him, sacrificed a white horse, and offered generous gifts. Afterwards, Emperor Taizong was determined to avenge this humiliation, and, as internal rifts opened within the Eastern Türk empire, the Tang dynasty was able to exploit those divisions and defeat and capture Illig Qaghan in 630. Following this defeat of the Eastern Türks, Emperor Taizong was hailed as "Heavenly Qaghan" by the peoples of the eastern steppes—a non-Chinese title that Tang emperors would continue to claim until the late eighth century (Pan 1997, 179–83).

In 690, a former concubine who had become a favorite of Emperor Gaozong (r. 650–83) managed to ascend the throne in her own right, becoming the only reigning female emperor in all of Chinese history, Wu Zetian (625–705). There had, of course, been innumerable empresses (that is, wives of emperors) in Chinese history, and several very powerful women—typically from a position behind the throne as empress dowager. In pre-Tang Northern dynasty Xianbei culture, women had also enjoyed a significantly more prominent position than was normally the case in China. Empress Dowager Wenming (441–90), for example, had been an absolutely towering figure in the Northern Wei dynasty. However, Wu Zetian was the only woman to ever actually hold the title "Emperor." She briefly replaced the Tang with her own dynasty, called Zhou, but in 705 the aging female emperor Wu was deposed and the Tang dynasty restored.

The early eighth century is generally considered to have been the most culturally glorious period of the Tang. This halcyon age was cut short, however, by the rebellion of An Lushan (d. 757) in 755. Although the rebellion was eventually suppressed and the Tang dynasty survived until 907, Tang imperial authority never fully recovered.

The early Tang dynasty, meanwhile, had been the golden age of the legendary Silk Roads. Tang power reached deep into Central Asia, and a catalog of the exotic foreign items brought to Tang could literally fill a book, as Edward Schafer did with his *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand* (1963). But, if early Tang witnessed a continuation of the cosmopolitanism of the previous Age of Division, the turmoil of those centuries had also created the conditions for a new synthesis once stable conditions returned. Over the three centuries of the Tang dynasty, what had begun as a consciously multiethnic and multicultural empire was consolidated into a substantially more homogenous "China" (Abramson 2008).

To increase administrative efficiency in a somewhat sclerotic Great Family–dominated society, meanwhile, in the early sixth-century south, even before the Sui and Tang reunification, men of demonstrable literary ability had begun to be selected for government positions. Under the reunified Sui and Tang dynasties, then, an early version of what became China's renowned civil service examination system was implemented, and became an increasingly important institution. Testing had much earlier origins in China, and examinations had continued to be administered throughout the Age of Division, as Albert Dien (2001) has demonstrated with a study of a set of test answers from 408 discovered near Turfan. Nevertheless, the maturation of the examination system that began during the Tang dynasty proved to be a major turning point in Chinese history, associated with a fundamental change in the nature of the Chinese elite, and arguably marking the beginning of a whole new era.

A cycle of Cathay?

At first glance, including everything from the end of the Han dynasty in 220 to the middle of the Tang dynasty (roughly around 750) in a single historical period, as I have done in this chapter, seems strange. Such a periodization combines the unified Tang dynasty with the centuries of political fragmentation that preceded it, while splitting the Tang dynasty itself between two entirely different eras. The Age of Division and (Sui-) Tang are handled by two separate volumes in the recent Harvard History of Imperial China series (Lewis 2009a; and 2009b), and they are also separately treated by the *Cambridge History of China*. Other than "medieval," there is no established label for the whole period.

However, in 1922, the pioneering Japanese sinologist Naitō Torajirō (also known as Naitō Konan, 1866–1934) published a highly influential article in which he provocatively suggested that the mid-Tang dynasty marked a major watershed in Chinese history (Naitō 1922). The distinguished Chinese scholar Chen Yinke (1890–1969) soon reached a similar conclusion, noting in a 1954 essay that early Tang and late Tang were significantly different periods, both in terms of government, society, economics, and culture. Chen took the seminal Tang dynasty precursor of late imperial Neo-Confucianism Han Yu (768–824), as a particularly pivotal figure (Chen 2001), although he also recognized that important changes had begun even earlier in the mid-eighth century (Chen 1994, 55). Following Naitō and Chen, it has since come to be widely—though not universally—accepted that a major historical transition began in mid-Tang, reaching maturity in the subsequent Song dynasty. Facets of this Tang–Song transition are examined in greater detail in the chapter written by Nicolas Tackett later in this volume.

At the same time, if important changes began in the mid-to-late Tang dynasty, marking the start of a whole new era in Chinese history, the roots of earlier Tang institutions must be traced back to the preceding Age of Division. Chen Yinke (1982) convincingly demonstrated this point in a masterpiece study that he first published in 1944. Elements of continuity reaching from the Age of Division into early Tang included, among other things, a remarkable system of government farmland allocation known as the "Equitable Fields" (*juntian*) that was first implemented by the Northern Wei in 485, and a system of "Garrison Militias" (*fubing*) that was developed in the sixth century northwest. In order to properly understand the early Tang dynasty, therefore, it is necessary to study the previous Age of Division. In fact, in a book called *The Great Tang Empire*, Miyazaki Ichisada (1901–95) devoted a mere 61 out of 333 pages to the Tang dynasty itself, focusing the majority of his attention instead on the events leading up to the founding of the Tang (Miyazaki 1993). Because of these continuities reaching from the Age of

Division through early Tang, and the important transformations that began in mid-Tang, it can therefore indeed plausibly be argued that this period does constitute a coherent historical bloc. Whether or not it should be called "medieval," however, is another question.

Was medieval China "medieval"?

Premodern Chinese history was traditionally often periodized simply by using the standard sequence of dynasties. Many early western observers, meanwhile, dismissed premodern China as "stagnant," and lacking the kind of meaningful developmental sequence exhibited by European history. In an understandable reaction against such condescending foreign attitudes, modern East Asian scholars have therefore been much concerned to discover a comparable pattern of historical development in China. Frequently, this has been achieved simply by borrowing the conventional European tripartite division into ancient, medieval, and modern. An early example of this is the periodization scheme proposed by Liang Qichao (1873–1928) in 1901, in which the medieval age was conceived of as including almost the entire imperial period from the Qin unification in 221 BCE to the end of the eighteenth century (Gao 2006a, 3).

This basic three stage periodization scheme remains common, with much disagreement over exactly where to place the divisions. As a label for the middle period, however, Naitō Torajirō sometimes (although not in his most famous article: see Naitō 1922, 1) favored the term "Middle Antiquity" (*chūko*) over a more literal Japanese translation of the European expression "Middle Ages" (such as *chūsei*) (Miyakawa 1955, 537). Recent Chinese scholars have also often used this same relatively neutral term "Middle Antiquity" (pronounced *zhonggu* in Mandarin). English-speaking scholars, meanwhile, sometimes use a three part division between pre-imperial antiquity and early and late imperial periods (often divided by the start of the Song in 960).

During the twentieth century, the Marxist variant of the standard European periodization scheme, which identified a purportedly universal sequence of economically defined modes of production proceeding from an (ancient) slave society to (medieval) feudalism and then to (modern) capitalism, became common in East Asia. (The sequence has sometimes also been complicated by introducing Karl Marx's vaguely conceived "Asiatic mode of production.") Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, a Marxist framework has been more or less obligatory in mainland China—at least to the extent of automatically labeling much of premodern Chinese history "feudal." Marxist approaches also tended to dominate post–World War II Japanese academic fashion. Because it was assumed that modern capitalism could not be arrived at without passing through medieval feudalism first, a truly astonishing amount of ink was spilt in East Asia trying to identify when the transition from slave society to feudalism might have occurred in China (and whether or not there was any incipient capitalism later). Suggested transition points from slave society to feudalism proposed by PRC scholars have ranged from Western Zhou (ca. 1045–771 BCE) to the Han dynasty. In Japan, the Kyōto school, following Naitō Torajirō, viewed China's medieval period as lasting from the end of Han through mid-Tang, while the postwar Japanese Marxist scholars known as the "Tōkyō school" saw Chinese feudal society as only just beginning in mid-Tang (Zurndorfer 1995, 40–42).

In reaction to overly mechanistic applications of Marxist theory in postwar Japan, Tanigawa Michio (1925–2013) developed his controversial *kyōdōtai* (cooperative system) theory, which postulated local community relations in medieval China that somewhat ameliorated the expected harshness of naked Marxist class antagonisms (Tanigawa 1985). In the PRC, meanwhile, there was a great deal of excellent scholarship that managed to sidestep excessively rigid confinement within the European-derived theoretical model and follow the evidence instead. The prolific historian Tang Changru (1911–94), for example, although working diligently within the Marxist framework, still noted frankly that if the Han dynasty was a slave society then it was an “Asian-style slave society” in which slaves were few and greatly outnumbered by independent self-cultivators and tenant farmers (Tang 1993, 17–19). Since the introduction of market-based economic reforms in the late 1970s, serious concern for Marxist theory has, furthermore, waned in the PRC.

While postulating a vague “middle period” of some kind for Chinese history is fairly unproblematic, identifying it closely with medieval European feudalism proves more difficult. In trying to make the argument that China did indeed have a “Middle Ages,” Keith Knapp (2007) turned to the cases of the Islamic Umayyad (661–750) and Abbasid (750–1250) dynasties for medieval examples that were geographically intermediate between Western Europe and China, and might therefore be expected to better illustrate supposedly universal medieval characteristics. Knapp observes that these Islamic states were decentralized and had military elites endowed with something resembling fiefs (*iqta*) like medieval Europe, stressed patron–client relationships as did both Europe and China, and retained functioning bureaucratic governments and were richly cosmopolitan societies that celebrated book-learning like contemporary China. Knapp explains these similarities not as mere coincidence but as the result of “the migration of Inner Eurasian peoples” (Knapp 2007, 12). Although the extent to which this was a great Eurasian age of “migrations of peoples” (*Völkerwanderung*) is controversial, significant Eurasian interconnections are undeniable, and Knapp’s point is an excellent one. At the same time, however, it also only underscores the danger of universalizing a particular Western European feudal model.

If there were broad Eurasian linkages throughout this period, and if China was in the midst of an especially open and cosmopolitan age, Western Europe, by contrast, really was relatively isolated and peripheral during its Early Middle Ages, and might have been relatively atypical of Eurasian developments as a whole. Nor was Western Europe in this period obviously in any way “more advanced” than the rest of Eurasia. If anything, Tang through Song dynasty China may be said to have held a leading position in any putatively uniform sequence of Eurasian development. Precisely because our model of medieval feudalism is based so narrowly on the specific Western European case, therefore, it may not be the most appropriate general model.

There are, to be sure, certain obvious parallels between China and Europe in this period, including the collapse of ancient unified empires (Rome and Han), political fragmentation, the prominence of new ethnic groups (such as the Franks and the Xianbei), the spread of new religions (Christianity and Buddhism), the appearance of armored horse-riding warrior elites, a hereditary aristocracy, and a manorial economy tilled by dependent farmers. Some PRC scholars have been particularly inclined to identify the emergence of private dependency relations—including tenant farmers who are sometimes alleged to have “resembled serfs”—as an indication of feudalism in China (Tang 1990, 135). Yet, in China, many of these features either did not last very long, or must otherwise be qualified. Moreover, such essential characteristics of European feudalism as vassalage and the fief seem to have been almost entirely absent in China.

Horse-riding armored warriors dominated north China (but not the south) from the fourth century through the sixth, and then disappeared as a class. Chinese imperial unity was restored in 589, permanently ending the period of political fragmentation. The Age of Division through mid-Tang might have been, as Naitō Torajirō claimed, an unusually "aristocratic" period in imperial Chinese history. Yet, Dennis Grafflin (1981, 66) argues vigorously "that the aristocracy described by Naitō did not exist," and even Naitō himself noted the absence of feudalism (meaning fiefs and enfeoffment) (Mou 2011, 42). Although Japanese scholars since Naitō have generated an entire subfield of research into the supposed "aristocratic society" of the era, the Chinese Great Families of this period continued to derive their status primarily from office-holding in the central imperial government (which was, furthermore, not itself normally directly hereditary), and locally important families remained merely large private landowners rather than medieval European-style lords of semi-autonomous domains (Kawachi 1970, 482–83). Beginning during the Tang dynasty the incipient examination system profoundly changed the nature of the late imperial Chinese elite and produced a society very different from medieval Europe.

In South China, commerce and a market economy began to flourish after the fourth century, coming to permeate almost all levels of society. Even in the north, where governmental collapse had been most devastating during the fourth century, the commercial slowdown lasted only a couple of centuries. The economic development of Southern dynasty China should not be exaggerated, but South China did now witness the first stirrings of that economic revolution that would come to full fruition later in the Song. In addition, the rise of wealthy "commoner" (*shuzu*) landowners and merchants in South China by the fifth and sixth centuries was already beginning to undermine any "aristocratic" order that might have existed (Gao 1986, 210–19; Zhang, Tian, and He 1991, 171–78). And the Equitable Fields system that was implemented in North China after 485 does not seem to have any counterpart in medieval European feudalism.

As paper replaced the unwieldy strips of wood or bamboo that had been used for writing in the Han dynasty, and as commercial markets made books more widely available, there was a great expansion of book collecting in China during this period (even before woodblock printing began to have an impact in late Tang). By the Tang dynasty, books and literacy were probably "significantly more widespread" than in contemporary Europe (Nugent 2010, 3). Even allowing for Christopher Beckwith's (1987 180–83, 195) revisionist argument that literary culture was also expanding in Europe at this time, literacy in early medieval Europe was overwhelmingly confined to the clergy and religious purposes. This, too, is in contrast to a Tang dynasty China where education remained predominantly secular.

Despite the pervasiveness of Buddhism in Tang dynasty China, Buddhism did not replace other religious beliefs in China, but coexisted with them. China never became exclusively Buddhist—a "Buddhadom" comparable to medieval European "Christendom." In China, furthermore, religion had effectively been brought under secular authority by mid-Tang times. Parallels between the rise of Buddhism in China and Christianity in the Late Classical West should not, therefore, be exaggerated. Without denying the existence of broad Eurasian commonalities, medieval Europe and contemporary China were significantly different. If there was any universal Eurasian Middles Ages, our "medieval" model should not be too narrowly defined by Western European-style feudalism.

Conclusion: The state of the field

As a result of Meiji (1868–1912) Japan's early enthusiasm for western learning, and Japanese interest in this period of Chinese history because of its formative influence on the development of Japan's own unique civilization, Japanese sinologists took a leading role in the development of modern historical studies of "medieval" China. Before long, Chinese scholarship also found itself stimulated by modern western approaches. Chen Yinke, who studied in Japan, Europe, and the United States, is an outstanding example of this sophisticated blending of traditional Chinese and modern western learning.

After the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, scholarship in mainland China acquired an obligatory Marxist framework, and during the Cultural Revolution years (broadly understood as including much of the 1960s–1970s) academic historical studies were severely curtailed altogether. Meanwhile, non-Marxist Chinese-language scholarship continued to flourish in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and among the overseas Chinese. Because of the inherently conservative approach taken in Taiwan during the Cold War years, however, while scholarship there was often very solid, it was seldom inclined to develop radically new interpretations.

During the Cultural Revolution years, therefore, as peculiar as it may sound, Japan may have been the world's leading center for the study of this period of Chinese history. However, with the new age of openness in the PRC beginning after roughly 1978, accelerating Chinese economic takeoff, and an increasingly dynamic cultural and economic synergy between the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, there has been a surge of new Chinese activity, and Chinese-language scholarship has regained what may be considered its natural position of dominance.

Also quite naturally, the volume of English and other European-language scholarship pales in comparison with that in Chinese and Japanese. Beginning in the 1930s, the Hungarian-born scholar Étienne Balazs (1905–63) published a series of path-breaking studies in French and German. Since the 1950s, the American-born but French-based Donald Holzman (1926–) also produced some exceptional studies in both French and English, which remain standard even today. The booming prosperity of American universities in the post–World War II years (combined with Cold War geopolitical concerns), meanwhile, made possible a burst of China area studies in the US, although relatively little of that was focused on the Han-Tang period. The distribution of attention across the range of possible topics, moreover, remains uneven.

In terms of chronological focus, the Tang dynasty, as the acknowledged golden age of Chinese poetry, a culminating era in Chinese Buddhism, and a peak period in China's regional influence on its neighbors, has long attracted special interest among scholars in every language. By one estimate, the twentieth century alone generated nearly a thousand books and over twenty thousand articles on the Tang dynasty (Hu 2000, 78). By contrast, the preceding Age of Division, perhaps because it is both so atypical and so complicated, has been described as a kind of "black hole" in western understanding about China. Chinese scholars, who correctly perceive the Age of Division as posing a critical challenge to the continuity of a unitary "China," and Japanese sinologists, who locate the roots of some of their own culture in this period, have paid substantially more attention to the Age of Division. In English, however, the field has been slow to develop. A volume in the authoritative *Cambridge History of China* series dedicated to the Six Dynasties was envisioned in the mid-1980s, but remains unpublished today (although publication is now expected soon). An English-language newsletter on the period first appeared in 1977, and was reborn as a proper journal, *Early Medieval China*, in 1994.

In terms of discipline, scholarship in all languages has tended to focus on literature, thought, and religion. One bibliographical compendium of publications on literature during the Six Dynasties that was published on Taiwan in 1992 already listed approximately seven thousand titles (Hong 1992). Much work continues to be literary in orientation. In English, for example, Jack Chen (2010) recently contributed an analysis of the Tang Emperor Taizong's (r. 626–49) fabrication of his own literary-historical image, Antje Richter (2013) produced a pioneering study of letter-writing during the Age of Division, and Xiaofei Tian (2005) examined literary perceptions of illumination by candlelight in Southern dynasty poetry.

Affiliated to the discipline of literature, the translation of Chinese texts continues to be a project of great importance to English-speaking scholars. Major achievements in translation include Richard Mather's (1976) English rendition of the *Shishuo xinyu*, a delightful fifth-century collection of historical anecdotes that was once considered so linguistically challenging as to be almost untranslatable (Balazs 1964, 231); David Knechtges' translations (1982–) from the influential sixth-century anthology of belles-lettres, the *Wen xuan*; and Stephen Owen's multiple volumes of translation of Tang dynasty poetry.

As the formative age of Chinese Buddhism as well as religious Daoism, this period is critical to religious history (Zürcher 1959). The interaction of Indian Buddhism with Chinese civilization is a particularly fascinating episode, which Robert Sharf has recently (2002) explored with an analysis of an eighth-century Buddho-Daoist text. Stephen Bokenkamp (2007) and Robert Campany (2009) have both made significant contributions to the flourishing field of religious Daoist studies. Studies of art from this period often also focus on religious artifacts, such as the magnificent Buddhist sculptures at Longmen (McNair 2007).

Social historians have been much preoccupied with study of the "medieval Great Families," and there have also been specialized studies of institutions such as the Equitable Fields system (e.g., Hori 1975), or the rise of an eccentric ideal of gentlemanly life in reclusion (Berkowitz 2000). Because this period coincides with the dawn of history for neighboring civilizations in Korea, Japan, and Tibet, and was a time of peak activity across the "Silk Roads," international relations have also been a topic of wide interest (Beckwith 1987; Pan 1997; Holcombe 2001; Wang 2005; Hansen 2012; Skaff 2012; Wang 2013b). And, while few recent archeological discoveries can rival the fabulous sealed library cave that was found at Dunhuang over a century ago, the steady accumulation of new artifacts has enormously enriched our knowledge of the material culture of this era (Watt et al. 2004; Dien 2007; Steinhardt 2014).

Some of the most dramatic recent changes in our understanding of premodern China have involved the swing from imagining China as having always been especially closed, isolated, and exceptional, towards seeing it instead as part of the larger Eurasian world. Such changing intellectual (and political) fashions have less relevance for the Age of Division and early Tang than they do for other periods of premodern Chinese history, because it has always been clearly understood that this was an unusually open period. The current climate of globalization may have contributed, nonetheless, to a greater willingness to recognize the foreign connections, and to a new appreciation for this gloriously cosmopolitan era.

Suggestions for further reading

Bokenkamp, Stephen R. 2007. *Ancestors and Anxiety: Daoism and the Birth of Rebirth in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

de Crespigny, Rafe. 2010. *Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao, 155–220 AD*. Leiden: Brill.

Dien, Albert E. 2007. *Six Dynasties Civilization*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Graff, David A. 2002. *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300–900*. London: Routledge.

Hansen, Valerie. 2012. *The Silk Road: A New History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kieschnick, John. 2003. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Pearce, Scott, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey, eds. 2001. *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200–600*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Skaff, Jonathan Karam. 2012. *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tian, Xiaofei. 2007. *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center.