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## **Reinventing Chinese political history**

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# Reinventing Chinese political history



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# Reinventing Chinese political history

Inaugural lecture by

prof.dr. H.G.D.G. De Weerd

on the acceptance of her position as professor of

Chinese History

at the Universiteit Leiden

on Friday November 7, 2014.



Universiteit  
Leiden



*Mr Rector Magnificus, honoured guests, zeer gewaardeerde  
toehoorders,*

An inaugural lecture is a rite of passage, a moment of transition from one career stage into another, and thus also a moment of coming out. Looking back on the twenty-odd years I have so far spent in the field of Chinese studies, it turns out that most of this time has been spent on political history. This is not an entirely comforting realization. Jane Austen (1775-1817), writing at a time when historical writing was primarily concerned with the facts of high politics, said through the voice of one of her heroines: “I wish I were [fond of history] too. I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all - it is very tiresome”.<sup>1</sup> Let me start out with some observations about the development of political history more generally; I will then turn to some key questions in imperial Chinese political history that occupy me.

In the post-WWII era the kind of weariness that Catherine Morland articulated in a short early nineteenth-century novel spread more widely. The number of historians placing their work in the field of political history declined precipitously. Some have tried to stem the haemorrhage by declaring the death of traditional political history and by announcing the arrival of “the new political history”.

What is this new political history? Judging from past attempts by American, Canadian, and European historians at redefining political history, the new political history marked a departure from traditional narrative political history focused on major events, the lives of leaders, and the development of institutions. First political historians adopted quantitative methods designed to test hypotheses concerning political behaviors such as voting and legislative action. Dissatisfaction with cliometrics in turn led political historians to engage with the new social history. In the 1960s its proponents had turned their

attention to individuals and social groups forgotten in history including the working class and women as well as to aspects of social life such as the family, labor, or urban living. This kind of social history was new because it was no longer “the history of people with the politics left out” as one of its early practitioners, George Macaulay Trevelyan, Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, had famously described and practiced it.<sup>2</sup> For the new social historians power was a central concept and they were interested in the historical impact of social power on political institutions and decisions rather than the other way around. The rise of cultural history in the 1980s resulted in another redefinition of political history.<sup>3</sup> Cultural historians challenged historians’ and social scientists’ basic concepts (e.g., class) and assumptions about historical development. They underscored the need for greater self-awareness amongst researchers by having them probe the history of the experiences, representations, and meanings of core values, ideas, and practices. Politics remained a central concern as key advocates of the cultural historical turn including Lynn Hunt, currently Distinguished Research Professor and Eugen Weber Endowed Chair in Modern European History at the University of California, Los Angeles, wrote in illuminating ways on the languages and rituals of politics - in Hunt’s case of the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

The “new political history” appears then mostly as a contested term. I haven’t exhausted all the varieties - throughout the last three decades there have also been voices from historians calling for stronger methodological connections with political science or at least some subfields within political science, for example.<sup>5</sup> It is clear, however, from the succession of new histories that these attempts at redefinition may not have been entirely successful. Few amongst the new social and cultural historians delving into politics would include political history amongst their research fields.

A sense of crisis has also been felt among those working on Chinese political history in Europe and North America.

Already in 1971 Benjamin Schwartz, Leroy B. Williams Professor of History and Political Science at Harvard University, wrote “A Brief Defense of Political and Intellectual History... with Particular Reference to Non-Western Cultures”<sup>6</sup>. Schwartz mostly wrote on early Chinese thought and twentieth-century Chinese political and intellectual history and it is within this context that we have to understand what at first appears to be an endorsement of the kind of criticisms that political historians were facing: “certainly, any effort to make sense of the political history of mainland China in the last twenty years could hardly depend entirely on the history of institutions, constitutions, and formal organizations”. Instead Schwartz underscored the importance of and pointed to a different direction for modern Chinese political history by adding: “and yet we are dealing with a history in which there is considerable truth in the assertion that ‘politics are in command’. If this phrase has any meaning within the context of contemporary China, it must refer not simply or even primarily to institutions but to categories such as policy, decision-making, power relations, and the interplay between ideas and political action”<sup>7</sup>. Lest this quote makes it seem that Schwartz was an early advocate of cultural history but had missed out on the new social history, I should add that in this brief defense he countered the standard critique of elitism by placing political participation on vastly enlarged geographic and social scales. Political history was for him not only or not even primarily about the policies and decisions of a tiny elite in government centers and at the national level; it encompassed power relations in villages and counties as well as peasant organization and uprisings, the activities of religious clergy, merchants, secret societies, and other stakeholders.

That was 1971. Some may argue that in the last thirty years politics has been far less in command but I suspect that most would agree that politics remains critical in Chinese society. However that may be, not much has been written on the state of Chinese political history since then, so where is the field now and where shall it go? I shall try in the remainder of my

talk to outline some ways in which key aspects of Chinese political life in the late imperial era have been and will continue to be reinvented. At the risk of conflating my own personal experience with that of an entire field, I will do so mainly on the basis of my own work over the last twenty years. I used to agree with Catherine Morland that it would be nice to be fond of history but that it is very tiresome. Fortunately, more than 200 years ago she also pointed to a solution: “and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes’ mouths, their thoughts and designs - the chief of all this must be invention”<sup>8</sup>. Like a cultural historian *avant la lettre* Jane Austen’s fictional character had a hunch that history dealt not with facts but rather with speech acts. Invention is exciting, but political history’s potential does not stop there. Professional history is in my experience not so much about invention but mostly about reinvention, a reconfiguring of events and speech acts recorded in primary sources as well as the explanations proposed in the work of other historians with a view to shed new light on the past, and, very often, by extension, the present.

#### **Institutions revisited: the civil service examinations**

My first example may at first glance appear to be a somewhat unpromising topic for a new Chinese political history. It is a political institution with a long history and a very bad reputation: the imperial Chinese civil service examinations. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the examinations became a focal point in the critiques of Chinese reformers and revolutionaries. In their eyes the examinations had neglected to cultivate the skills and failed to produce the talent required for the Chinese nation to face its European and even its East Asian rivals - the defeat against Japan in the mid-1890s was not the first but it was a particularly painful reminder of China’s relative position towards other nations. Chinese reformers then availed themselves of a technique that would also be used by generations of Eurocentric historians. The history of an institution that spanned at least 1300 years

was telescoped into one coherent and unchanging system, an empire-wide system of examinations that allegedly had indoctrinated Chinese men for hundreds of years with the same old classical texts which bore no relevance to practical matters and which students only needed to reproduce from memory. Such a system would predictably fall far short of the standards of modernizers then and historians of modernization later. And so, even though the examinations had once been much admired by European visitors to China and philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even though they may perhaps have served as a point of reference for the first written civil examinations in England and France, in twentieth-century minds they became a symbol for the traditions that had caused China to lag behind other nations.

My first inkling that there was something wrong with this widely circulating picture of the examinations came when I was reading through commercially printed encyclopedias dating to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. According to their editors, these encyclopedias, covering all sorts of literary, historical, philosophical, and administrative topics were based on essays by popular contemporary authors, recent government documents, and of course the winning essays of the latest examination rounds. These sorts of marketing statements were explicitly targeted at men preparing for the examinations. Soon I further discovered that the encyclopedias were part of a wide range of textbooks, anthologies, atlases, and other reference materials expressly compiled for the use of students. From existing and referenced materials I could thus reconstruct a market in private and commercially printed examination manuals. A key question that remained was who steered this market: the central government, local governments, publishers, or literati in other positions. I concluded that a significant shift in power relations between the court and the literate elite took place in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. A century earlier, the first Song Dynasty (960-1276) emperors and their advisers had revamped the examinations

of the past as part of series of policies to centralize control, but as the examinations became the preferred way to enter officialdom and as numbers grew, the power to decide on its contents and to shape its cultural influence had to be shared with students, teachers, and publishers.

A social transformation spurred this shift in power relations. Much has been written about the social transformation of Chinese society between the late eighth and the thirteenth centuries. Even though there are disagreements about the timing, nature, and scope of social change,<sup>9</sup> looking back from the thirteenth century, it is generally accepted that the *political* elite changed from the hierarchically defined and capital-based aristocracy of the Tang Dynasty (618-906), to an elite of official servants recruited through examinations and focused on the capital in the eleventh century, and to an elite claiming power in local society in substantial part on the basis of its educational and cultural credentials. The numbers matter: between the early eleventh century and the early twelfth century the number of students sitting for the lower-level qualifying examinations grew from about 20,000 to 79,000; that number had increased fivefold, to an estimated 400,000, by the mid-thirteenth century - and that last number only covered the southern half of the Chinese territories.<sup>10</sup> Millions were preparing and sitting the examinations in the centuries that followed.

We won't have time to go into much more detail but today I want highlight two key observations about the examinations and raise a few questions focusing on their role in political history. These observations are intended to defamiliarize us from the modern context of examinations. The first is that the examinations, at least in the early centuries of their existence, were a decentralized set of examinations; in other words, there were no national standardized tests as exist today. At the local levels, examiners, selected from among currently serving officials, were appointed ad hoc and made up their own questions. There was also, contrary to textbook accounts, no

agreed upon curriculum for the various genres and topics that were tested. Secondly, the examinations were not supported by a nationwide school system that provided education for all - official schools could only accommodate a minority of students preparing for the examinations; most obtained an education through years of family or private tutoring, clan schools, academies, or self-study. The implication of this is that the examinations and the activities that surrounded them (textbook production, teaching, the printing of one's unsuccessful examination papers, networking activities among students and officials, and even the occasional uprisings when results were announced) ought to be approached as a site in which to observe the history and the fluctuations of politics and intellectual culture.

6 My favorite illustration of this last statement is a series of mercifully short examination questions written by one of the most famous philosophers in Chinese history, Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), in the 1150s. For example, he posed students at the school of Tong'an 同安 District (Quanzhou 泉州, Fujian) the following essay question: "When people are young they learn things, after they have grown up, they want to put these things into practice. Can we hear from you, gentlemen, what you are learning today and what you will put into practice in the future?"<sup>11</sup> This was not an innocent twisting of conventions. Essay questions at the time typically numbered a few hundred to a few thousand characters in length and asked students to respond to a list of quotations from classical, historical, and archival texts. The assumptions that underlay this conventional strategy was that working with cases drawn from primary sources was the best way to design solutions for administrative and cultural problems both in real-life situations and in written examinations. Zhu Xi's question signalled the intellectual and political challenge that the Neo-Confucian movement which he spearheaded would pose to the Song government and his peers. His question was based on the belief that someone's ability to serve in government depended on moral insight, for those who possessed that capacity could

lead a moral transformation of the polity. His attempts to reform the examinations in this way eventually bore some result by the mid-thirteenth century when the court and many examiners began to support his reading of the textual record and his political theory. Perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised. When examination time comes around in our large lecture classes, we too may be tempted to replace lengthy examinations with IDs, passages, and short essay questions with the one question of what students have learned from reading the textbook and listening to lectures.

In sum, I conclude from years of reading centuries-old examination papers, that institutions, however much they may seem reminiscent of the old political history, remain relevant. They remain relevant in particular when we analyze them not as "timeless institutional structures of the Chinese state"<sup>12</sup> but as a living history of individuals and collectives working within them and reshaping them. Institutions think, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas reminded us decades ago, they produce categories, metaphors and logical operations that shape the thinking of individuals.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese civil service examinations did that, just as national examinations and universities do today. They tested the skills that were deemed relevant for a statesperson centuries ago. A classical education was deemed relevant, as it was for European political elites until the twentieth century. What sorts of a politics they encouraged, what critiques were launched against them and in their defense, why they lasted in spite of the critiques and the hundreds of thousands if not millions of failures, these are the sorts of questions that a broader political history should engage. These are also questions that I hope to revisit in the long-term future in a global and comparative history of examinations.

#### **Networks and political imaginaries: the Song empire**

When we break formal institutions down in the way I have sketched above, we become aware of a far more complicated web of relationships, informal structures, networks that form,

expand, or contract. Informal structures are typically not captured in the histories of formal institutions but they often tell us a lot about the formation and impact of institutions and regulations, changes therein, and social and political power. This is a lesson I also learned from tracing the history of one of the foremost of institutions, at least I think it is that in the minds of many among us: the state or the polity. I am here not so much interested in the economic, financial, or military processes of modern state formation as these have been well researched particularly in European history, but more in the following questions: How was the polity imagined? What might the average person in the provinces have known about it and how did such persons describe their relationship to it? Further, did it matter in the longer term what sorts of images of the polity were available and by whom these were shared? (I will stick with the polity because that term carries the connotation of political society and thus comes closer to my intent to connect formal and informal social and state organizations.)

What “China” has been in history is not as simple a question as it might seem. Whereas nowadays Chinese textbooks propose that China is a sovereign country with a continuous history of 5000 years, historical textbooks from a thousand years ago were far less confident about the coherence of the Chinese territories over the course of time. The most prominent example of this more sober view of the ability of Chinese states to maintain control over their territories came from the second most famous Chinese historian, Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086). In 1061 he presented a memorial in which he underscored that times of divided rule had historically been dominant in Chinese history: “In these 1700 or so years [from the move of the Eastern Zhou capital in the eighth century BCE until the foundation of the Song] there have only been 500 or so in which the realm was united”.<sup>14</sup> Sima Guang’s main audience for this statement was Song Emperor Renzong 仁宗 (r. 1023–63). He impressed the prevalence of imperial collapse on the emperor while urging him to devote himself

energetically to the affairs of the imperial state. A century later Sima Guang’s observation about the *longue durée* of Chinese history began to make far more of an impact. It was repeated many times in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was quoted in chronologies of Chinese history that were incised on stone stelae and displayed in public spaces and that were reprinted in textbooks; it was also excerpted in encyclopedias and anthologies. By then the audience for Sima Guang’s words on Chinese political history had expanded to include the reading public at large - which as we have seen by the twelfth and thirteenth century included hundreds of thousands of examination candidates and even more students in the southern half of what we now call China. Discontinuity and multi-state rule struck them too and these were for many among them problems that ought to be addressed.

In my most recent book, forthcoming from Harvard University Asia Center, I propose that a sense of belonging to a territorially defined unitary state emerged as a widely shared feeling among Chinese elites from the twelfth century onwards. This state was supposed to cover roughly all territories from where the great walls were imagined to have been in the north, down to where the most southward of the sacred mountains was located, east to the coastline, and west to where the course of the major east-west rivers ended. I further propose that this kind of political imaginary has played a critical role in fostering elite support for large unified empires in the last 700 years of Chinese history, i.e. from the Yuan Dynasty (1276-1368) to the twentieth century. This sense of belonging itself was not new (it was based on models outlined in the classics of early imperial times) but it was first widely articulated in twelfth-century documents of all sorts. How did such a shift in the history of Chinese political culture come about?

There are two factors that I would like to focus on today, one that relates to longer-term structural changes and another that underscores the importance of political events in cultural historical changes. The reproduction of Sima Guang’s finding

about the discontinuity of Chinese history was part of a larger structural change in political communication between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Sima Guang's memorial belonged to a repertoire of texts relating to the history and current affairs of the Song Dynasty that had once been the exclusive domain of the court and high officialdom but that moved decisively in the hands of the literati. The literati or the scholars were like their European equivalents, the literati, not just literate, they were the cultural elite, they were conversant in the cultural skills requisite of the scholar-official. Materials that began to circulate among literati included single-sheet official documents, court gazettes, and archival compilations relating to the business of the reigning dynasty that were by law restricted to either specific court bureaux or at best to the offices of local officials. There were also maps, atlases, military treatises, historical and military geographies, local and empire-wide gazetteers, diplomatic treatises and reports, and intelligence communications. Some of this material survives; we also know about the trade in official news and state archival materials because scholars discussed them in letters and in notebooks or because they listed them in their library catalogs. Much of this material circulated through hand copying but it is no coincidence that the breakthrough of the print medium can similarly be dated to the twelfth century in Song China. Even though it had been invented centuries earlier, in the seventh or eighth century (there still is some debate), it was only in the eleventh and twelfth centuries that woodblock printing began to be used for all manner of written texts and increasingly also for the notebooks and the correspondence of Song literati themselves.

In other words, a new information regime was being established, one in which political literacy was a prerogative of the cultured elite. The examinations played a critical role in this - arguments were formulated based on cases drawn not only from classical and historical texts but also from the archives of the reigning dynasty. Political literacy was, moreover, critical beyond study and examination halls.

Current information was necessary for political networking and had also become part of elite social discourse.

Such information needs and the networks that developed to satisfy them exerted pressure on the institutions that had been set up to streamline communication between the center and the local level during the early days of the dynasty. The central bureau where the court gazettes were compiled, for example, became the object of infiltration and bribery. Literati demand for restricted materials also led to waves of publishing regulations legislating in ever greater detail the penalties for leaking, hand copying, and printing different types of materials. Times of increasing government restrictions and times of relaxation followed in turn, as they tend to do in authoritarian regimes past and present; the court remained ambivalent about publicity and always retained censorship as an option. Looked at from the longue durée of Chinese history, it becomes evident, however, that over the course of the twelfth century the court retreated from an interventionist position in the production and dissemination of current affairs texts and moved towards an implicit recognition of the information needs of officials and scholars. Rather than to the limits of the pre-modern state, I would attribute the court's retreat to a tacit acknowledgement of the benefits of selective publication. Gone was the singular focus on secrecy, which had been the cornerstone of imperial information policy since the days of the legalist advisers of the first emperor in the third century BCE.

Let me sound a note of caution to what was indeed a very precocious information culture in the history of humanity. The partial disclosure and the discussion of the state's archive and current affairs need not be interpreted as the arrival of a public sphere and a growing gap between state and civil society as European theoreticians might like to predict. The leaking of current affairs to office-holders and non-office holders alike can in the case of late imperial Chinese history be seen as crucial elements in the consolidation of imperial

rule. The archive placed both court and dynasty firmly at the center of literati networks and interests. Secrecy/censorship on the one hand and publicity on the other can in retrospect be seen as parallel processes that helped cement the continued collaboration of growing numbers of cultural elites.

Structural change tends to come about as a result of longer-term developments and critical events that offer a sudden opportunity for a change in power relationships to take hold. One event played a crucial role in the larger structural transformation in political communication that I have sketched above. The Song Capital of Kaifeng, a city of well over one million people, had fallen to Jurchen troops in 1126-27. With the division of the Chinese territories into mainly two halves, the north ruled by the Jin Dynasty and the south by the Song, Sima Guang's historical observation, offered 65 years earlier, that imperial unity is easily lost had materialized once again. War and displacement did not lead to an overall economic crisis but multi-state rule was experienced as a political crisis, "a shame to be washed away". The events of 1126-27, referred to in Chinese as the Jingkang Crisis, played a pivotal role not only, as has been suggested before, in bringing about longer-term social change but also in consolidating the developments in political communication. These had been gaining momentum since the latter half of the eleventh century but only broke through after the 1120s. The geopolitical crisis increased demand for texts about current affairs. I would conclude that it also brought with it a strengthening of elite commitment to the imperial state and not, as social and intellectual historians have previously proposed, a turn away from the center and imperial government and towards local concerns.<sup>15</sup>

### **Digital perspectives on collective action**

Political history has been reinvented not only through the discovery of new sources or the impact of new questions but also through the adoption and adaptation of new methods and new theoretical perspectives. In the final part of today's lecture

I want to dwell a bit on the opportunities and the challenges provided by digital methods.

I proposed earlier that an imperial mission (i.e., the responsibility to defend a and to restore a unitary state) spread through the circulation of archival texts and private commentary about the Song state in literati networks; in other words this particular kind of patriotism was not in the first instance instilled by a beleaguered state and its institutional machinery. I reached this conclusion in part through a series of experiments in which I read notes on conversations and reading materials with the help of digital text analysis, network analysis, and geographic analysis. The combination of these methods and more traditional close reading allowed me to systematically track and map who contributed what kinds of information from where and to whom. I could also explore how the communication networks of individuals compared to each other, both within generations and across time, and measured against a range of variables. On this basis I could hypothesize that whereas social relationships such as marriages may well have been contracting in geographic scope (put simply, more families were marrying more locally in the twelfth century than they were in the eleventh), the geographic range of information networks remained at a minimum cross-regional and may have even expanded - literati across the empire kept in touch with each other, reinforced their bonds, and thus constituted themselves as a political community. (If this were a lecture other than an inaugural one I would at this point if not earlier have shown some slides of maps and networks, but in keeping with good form I will continue with the lectio and trust that you can imagine what these might have looked like.)

How the geography of communication related to the formation, maintenance, or fragmentation of polities remains to be further explored, also in cross-cultural comparison - this is a question that I and my research team here in Leiden are tackling. I want to finish with a few brief remarks on what

innovation in digital methodology could further mean for the future of Chinese political history. I will focus my comments on another subfield in political history, the history of collective action which is where a good deal of my time will go in the immediate future.

Moments of collective action have sparked the imagination of Chinese intellectuals throughout Chinese history through to the present. Early twentieth-century radicals recalled the actions of Chen Dong 陳東 (1086-1127), an Imperial College student who voiced the concerns of students and other inhabitants of Kaifeng in the 1120s and who became a martyr. Chen Dong was one of many tens of thousands who appeared on the streets of Kaifeng to protest the Song court's acceptance of the conditions imposed by the invading Jurchen troops and to call for the dismissal of those who advocated submission - in the twentieth century the link with the embarrassing terms accepted in Beijing at the end of WWI which led to the student movement of 1919 was easily made. These and similar moments have become iconic but the crucial questions have remained unanswered: What made this kind of student mobilization possible? What role did student networks play in the restoration of the Song state in the south? Did the court successfully dismantle student networks in the decades after the 1120s or did they continue to shape political culture? Such questions were difficult if not impossible to answer before - it is not within the reach of most historians to analyze the lives, behaviors, relationships, and opinions of hundreds of people at once - especially not if we have to read through the collected oeuvre of hundreds of persons, all in classical Chinese. This is why studies about student activism during this period have predominantly been institutional histories of the Imperial College, narratives of the demonstrations and their aftermath, or short biographies of some of the martyrs. We are now, however, developing new and adapting existing methods in data mining and visualization that allow us to look at the thousands of letters and other writings that remain from a few dozen of these students<sup>16</sup> to see whether and when coalitions

formed, whether they were sustained over time, and what other kinds of relationships (family, hometown, common teacher, etc.) fostered mobilization efforts.

Similarly we can take a fresh look at the history of parties or factionalism. The standard story is that there was no room for political groupings in Chinese political culture. Officials faced the emperor as individuals; forming a party based on shared interests appeared to be self-interested and thus immoral. It could also be perceived as a direct challenge to the authority of the emperor. Hence the more pejorative term factionalism is used to describe party formation. Many historians, past and present, have tended to single out moments of factional strife at court and held those up as cautionary tales of the negative impact of divisive politics - the Chinese historians in the audience will most likely be familiar with the Great Proscription of the second century in which about 200 people were accused of and persecuted for forming a political alliance or the Yuanyou blacklist which included the names of 309 alleged members of a political faction.<sup>17</sup>

I tend to agree with those historians who propose that in fact factional politics was always there in late imperial China.<sup>18</sup> A seventeenth-century historian, Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-92), pointed out that factionalism was not an exceptional thing in Chinese history, he noted that from the Song Dynasty onwards it became part of being a literatus.<sup>19</sup> Networking was intertwined with the career of literati at various stages. It was essential when preparing and sitting examinations, seeking appointment and re-appointment, or when obtaining patronage for other types of employment. Networking involved literati in political coalitions. If it is the case that networking of this kind was necessary for careers and therefore pervasive, it follows that historians need to understand how factional politics worked not only at the top but also in the provinces.

Again a methodological problem arises: how do we get a grip on the question of how factional politics operated in the vast

collections of private writings? One could opt for a case study approach focusing on known individuals, but again we believe that the larger question of how far factional politics filtered through to the provinces can be better answered by devising methods to explore the entirety of the existing record. With a group of postdoctoral and doctoral students I have begun to analyze how the names of the 309 men who appeared on the list I last mentioned can be used to explore such questions: When and how did their names begin to cluster in the record? Did the lists reflect real political coalitions, were these random listings by paranoid leaders, or, were they the invention of later historians?<sup>20</sup> Around what issues did coalitions form? What was the response to factional lists in the provinces? We suspect and hope that such an approach will open up new perspectives in the Chinese history of political practice and participation. We will then also be better positioned to undertake cross-cultural comparisons.

More than fifty years ago Schaul N Eisenstadt undertook a comprehensive comparison of “*The Political Systems of Empires*”. He set out to compare the extent to which social groups in different societies could participate in the formulation of the goals of politics and the criteria they used to evaluate such goals.<sup>21</sup> The comparison was well informed but it was also heavily skewed by European standards of what constituted proper political participation (i.e., the autonomy of cities, the separation of church and state, the power of the church, etc.). Following the cultural turn, we may now be in a position to write a comparative history of political practice from a postcolonial perspective, in which we no longer assume progression towards European-style liberal democracy as the standard but fully engage with different modes of political communication.<sup>22</sup>

The above examples of student mobilization and factional politics illustrate that this type of new political history requires that historians are actively involved in the design of digital methods and tools (the distinction is I think an artificial one

- tools also consist of methods). Scientists have traditionally been involved in the design of instruments; sinologists have not been an exception. The first professor of Chinese at Leiden University, Gustave Schlegel (1840-1903), compiled a Dutch-Chinese dictionary 5217 pages thick, whose title I can only partially pronounce because the first part contains a transcription in a southern Min dialect. The *Nederlandsch-Chineesch woordenboek met de transcriptie der Chineesche karakters in het Tsiang-tsiu dialect (Dutch-Chinese dictionary with transcription of Chinese characters in the Zhangzhou dialect, 1886-1890)* was admittedly not only intended for scholarly purposes it also served to help translators working in the Dutch colonies where southern Chinese dialects were standard.<sup>23</sup> Middle-period historians of previous generations created concordances, indexes, bibliographies, dictionaries, and, in the case of the exceptionally foresighted Robert Hartwell, databases. Our fear of the digital and the still lingering misgivings about the quantitative history of the 1950s and 60s should not prevent us from fashioning the tools that will allow us to tackle new questions - this of course on the foundation of all good historical and humanities scholarship: the critical reading and evaluation of the textual and material record.<sup>24</sup>

I hope I have convinced some of you that Chinese political history is worth reinventing. This reinvention need not result in yet another new political history but I hope it will turn political history once more into an integrative history, a history that integrates insights from institutional, social, cultural, and intellectual history as well as political science in the study of political ideas, practices, decisions, and institutions.

Let me add, in conclusion, that I could have told a similar story of neglect for many other fields of Chinese history. One example will suffice. Most economic historians nowadays are aware of and make brief mention of “the industrial revolution” of the Song period referring to large-scale iron production, shipbuilding, the development of joint-stock companies

and paper money, and accelerating commercialization and urbanization that took place between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. However, even though most European universities devote entire courses to the European Industrial Revolution there is not one in which students can learn about the so-called first industrial revolution. When I proposed the topic to a well-known BBC radio show, which had earlier broadcast a very successful series on the British Industrial Revolution, the host, very uncharacteristically, ordered his closest assistant to note the idea down. The latter also started worrying immediately that he would not be able to locate three people to talk about the subject. Chinese economic history is still barely taught in European universities. I hope that when the next chair in Chinese history looks back on the twenty years or so that lie ahead of us she will have a different story to tell. We owe it to the citizens of tomorrow to fully incorporate the histories of non-European places in universities and schools at all levels.

It is a good habit to conclude this ceremony with a few words of thanks. It is a great honor and also a great responsibility to have been nominated for this unique professorship in Chinese history. For this honor and also for the trust that has been invested in me I thank the Executive Board (College van Bestuur), the Board of the Faculty of Humanities, and all who have contributed to the nomination.

The prospect of working with an unusual group of staff members in Chinese Studies, Area Studies, History, and Computer sciences eased the difficult decision to accept this new challenge considerably. I thank all of them and also the students of the Leiden Institute for Area Studies for the warm welcome they have given me during the past year. I owe special thanks to Maghiel van Crevel, the current director of LIAS, for his incredibly dynamic and inspiring leadership - I really wanted him to deliver this presentation on institutional history; never before have I met anyone who can speak lyrically and for hours about the institutional context of the university,

I can only assume that this is part of the profession in Chinese poetry.

The journey that has led to today's events has been a long one, even though everything may in retrospect appear to have gone very quickly. During the last twenty years I have been able to rely on the steadfast support of Peter Bol. I learned from him that the art of this profession consists in learning to ask fundamental questions, based on a close and critical familiarity with the source materials. He has also let me personally experience how quality teaching and quality research can go together. I thank him and Satomi Matsumura, whose Japanese classes I still miss, also for their presence today.

My intellectual, professional, and personal debts have accumulated over the years. I have learned in all sorts of ways foremost from my fellow students at Harvard University, my colleagues at the Harvard-Yenching Library, and my colleagues in history in Knoxville, Oxford, and London. I have, moreover, been able to count on the input and good humor from the ever-increasing number and very collegial group of Song historians, around 200 in the west alone and a few more in East Asia. I hope that I will be able to continue to count on their support in the future. In particular, I would like to thank a few sinologists and historians for their enduring interest in my trajectory and for their presence today: Nicolas Standaert and Carine Defoort from Leuven and Rana Mitter from Oxford. For my mother, Mimi Borremans, it will be a great relief that I landed well. I am grateful today for her advice many years ago that I should go for a more established institution when I proposed upon graduating from high school to set up my own university in the village of Everbeek. Mom, I am glad that you can also be here today despite great inconvenience. To my sisters and brothers, Nest, Lu, Annemie, Zif, Leo, Lode, and Dirk, my nephews and nieces, aunts and uncles, especially the biekish who are also here today, to my cousins, and to the loved ones of all of them, your solidarity has always been a source of inspiration. For their presence, continued support, and their

healthy sense of perspective I also thank Mary Lucal, Neula Kerr-Boyle, and Dagmar Boer. To all who came to celebrate today, a heartfelt thanks.  
Ik heb gezegd.

## Notes

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- 6 Benjamin Schwartz, "A Brief Defense of Political and Intellectual History... with Particular Reference to Non-Western Cultures", *Daedalus* 100.1 (1971): 98-112.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 98-99.
- 8 Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Section 14; accessed September 3, 2014, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/austen/jane/a93n/chap14.html>
- 9 For an early articulation of the nature of changes between the Northern and Southern Song, see Robert M. Hartwell, "Demographic, Political, and Social Transformations of China, 750-1550", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 2 (1982), 365-442; Robert Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-chou, Chiang-hsi, in Northern and Southern Sung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For an overview of East Asian and European language scholarship, see Luo Yinan, "A Study of the Changes in the 'Tang-Song Transition Model'", *Journal of Song Yuan Studies* 35 (2005): 99-127. Representative examples of different kinds of critiques of the localist turn include Beverly Bossler, *Powerful Relations. Kinship, Status, and the State in Sung China (960-1279)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998); Lee Sukhee, *Negotiated Power: The State, Elites, and Local Governance in Twelfth- to Fourteenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014). While most of the debate has focused on the nature of changes during the Song period, the ninth and tenth centuries have recently also come under closer scrutiny, see esp. Nicolas Tackett, "Great Clansmen, Bureaucrats, and Local Magnates: The Structure and Circulation of the Elite in Late-Tang China", *Asia Major* 21, no. 2 (2008): 101-152; id., *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2014).
- 10 John Chaffee, *The Thorny Gates of Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 36.
- 11 Zhu Xi, *Zhu Xi ji* (Chengdu: Sichuan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996 (ca 1245)), 74.3880.
- 12 Schwartz, "A Brief Defense", 111.
- 13 Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986).
- 14 Sima Guang, *Zhuanjia ji* (Siku quanshu edition), 21.4b.
- 15 An early and authoritative example is James T. C. Liu, *China Turning Inward: Intellectual-Political Changes in the Early Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
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- 24 See also Hilde De Weerd, “Two Frameworks for Understanding Spatial Control and Political Integration in Chinese History”, blogpost, Communication and Empire: Chinese Empires in Comparative Perspective, March 18, 2014, <http://chinese-empires.eu/blog/historical-network-analysis-and-the-dynamics-of-literati-communication/> and, id., “Isn’t the Siku quanshu enough? Reflections on the impact of new digital tools for classical Chinese”, blogpost, Communication and Empire: Chinese Empires in Comparative Perspective, Feb. 20, 2014, <http://chinese-empires.eu/blog/isnt-the-siku-quanshu-enoughreflections-on-the-impact-of-new-digital-tools-for-classical-chinese/>



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