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Divided by a Common Language: Factional Conflict in Late Northern Song China. By Ari Daniel Levine. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2008. Pp. xvi + 273. $55.00.

Political history as a whole fell out of fashion in the American academy decades ago, leaving a significant lacuna in that area of Chinese history in English. A number of historians have been cautiously edging back into the consideration of politics, usually cloaked in the mantle of cultural or social history. Ari Levine's *Divided by a Common Language: Factional Conflict in Late Northern Song China* is a welcome addition to this trend. It is also part of a slight shift in Song dynasty history from the overwhelming focus on the Southern Song to a somewhat greater consideration of the Northern Song. Well-researched and solidly written, Levine's work is a valuable contribution to the political and cultural history of the Song dynasty.

Strictly speaking, Levine has not written a political history, but rather an intellectual and cultural history of factionalism in the Northern Song. Political history is, of course, the necessary backdrop to this investigation, and Levine has or will publish much of that material in other places. *Divided by a Common Language* is very much a work for specialists who are already familiar with Song history and with the issues at hand. Factionalism itself, as Levine makes clear, did not just flourish in the Song, it was also treated theoretically and rhetorically in ways that would shape all future discussions of the issue. Generally speaking, despite several attempts to change this, factions were not theoretically acceptable at court. A faction was, by definition, an evil cabal of unscrupulous officials bent on undermining the just power of the emperor. Good men would naturally be ideologically and morally unified and serve the emperor as part of a selfless bureaucracy. Since officials were selected for their moral attainment as much as for their intellectual capabilities, service in government required moral perfection. And since it was not ideologically possible for morally perfect men to disagree profoundly, when court officials did come into irreconcilable conflict, one side had to be not just wrong, but morally compromised.

Levine is most interested in the language of factions: "My goal is to reconstruct the linguistic rules and intellectual assumptions that shaped faction theory and factional rhetoric in the late Northern Song and that prevented ministers from publicly acknowledging the existence of their own factional affiliations, while they simultaneously accused their adversaries of factionalism." (p. 17) Most of the book is taken up with delineating the way factions were discussed and the peculiarly strict understanding of factions that permeated those discussions. Levine's detailed coverage is necessarily repetitive since, despite earlier attempts to change the ideological foundations of factional theory, a fixed idea of the inherent evil of factions was never dislodged or even much modified. The issue became not whether factions were acceptable, but which side in a given political struggle would be declared a faction by the emperor or regent. Whenever a new ruler or regent took power the previous judgements could be overturned,

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resulting in revenge, revision of historical records and a further sharpening of political conflict.

The overarching sameness of the larger debate allows Levine to pursue a carefully nuanced investigation of the historiographical and linguistic byways that exercised the literati of the eleventh century. As a first step, he establishes a rather artificial time frame of "the late Northern Song" spanning the years from 1068 to 1104, or from the rise of Wang Anshi 王安石 to "the final factional blacklists (*dangji* [黨籍]) that effectively end the conflict" (p. 8). Quite apart from the usual problems of periodization, and even the issue of where such a designation leaves the two decades after this time but before the fall of Kaifeng 開封 (the post-late Northern Song?), it creates an artificial break with the first half of the Northern Song. Levine is clearly aware of this problem, and attempts to acknowledge it with a survey of the relevant scholarship on the politics of the earlier period. He is also extremely conscious of the historiographical issues at stake in the constructions of the eleventh century in particular. Unfortunately neither his survey of the scholarship nor his sensitivity to the historiographical issues can paper over his own questionable periodization.

Levine argues that "the factional divisions between reformists and antireformists emerged from the intellectual and political conflict between Wang Anshi and Sima Guang [司馬光]. . . . Common threads in the political theory and factional rhetoric of the late Northern Song can be traced back to the grand coalition of the 1060s," but continues on to admit, "and even further back to the reforming cohort of the 1040s" (p. 11). Indeed, Levine's own discussion of the political and intellectual events that predated his late Northern Song period demonstrates quite convincingly that they were intimately and inextricably connected to the factional conflicts from 1068 to 1104. The most substantial argument in favour of his periodization is that it was only after 1068 that the previous institutional and cultural restraints on the power of the state councilor's executive authority broke down. But this is mostly a question of degree. One could just as easily argue that power had been shifting towards the executive authority of the chief councilor since at least the early eleventh century. The Tangut war of 1038–1044 gave the greatest impetus to the idea that serious reform was needed, and that such reform could only be accomplished through an empowered chief councilor and like-minded officials. That change was soon aborted, but the need for reform of some kind and the institutional means to accomplish it were now firmly established at the Song court.

Not surprisingly, the first factional theorists that Levine turns to are Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹, who explained to the emperor in the 1040s that factions were natural and not necessarily bad, and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, whose essay "Pengdang lun" 朋黨論 also failed to shift the prevailing understanding of what a faction was. Fan and Ouyang were part of the first reform effort, known as the Qingli 慶曆 (for the reign period, 1041–1048, in which they occurred) or Minor Reforms (reflecting the historiographical connection they had to Wang Anshi's "Major" reforms), and sought to create a space wherein an openly

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allied group of officials could function. Neither man, however, was successful in changing the emperor's mind about the nature of factions. As Levine takes up the trail of factional theory he wisely cautions the reader against uncritically accepting the construction of eleventh century history that valorized men like Ouyang Xiu and Fan Zhongyan (and later Sima Guang and his faction) over their opponents. A great deal of received wisdom about the eleventh century and Song history as a whole has been built around the erratic and possibly biased retention of certain Song collected works. But his need to connect the intellectual lineage of factional theorists clashes with his desire to limit his consideration of factions to his "late Northern Song" period.

Indeed, Levine goes back even further in discussing the factional theorists writing during the Song, to Wang Yucheng 王禹稱, who lived in the second half of the tenth century. His consideration of Wang is interesting for two reasons: Wang's interest in aggressive border policies and his connection to what would become the Ancient Prose movement. For Levine, Wang is the bridge between Tang and Song factional theory. In Wang's reading of history, the rise of factions led to dynastic decline as superior men were driven out by petty men. Yet Wang's essay on factions, which influenced Ouyang Xiu, was likely strongly influenced by the developing factionalism at the second Song emperor's (Song Taizong) court. If this is true, then the problem facing Wang and other newly risen *jinshi* 進士 degree holders at court was not so much generational as structural and policy driven. Song Taizong came to the throne and continued throughout much if not all of his reign to rule through a group of retainers he had built up in previous years. These men wielded tremendous influence and power because they were retainers of Taizong, and thus, essentially formed an imperial faction. The exam holding officials outside of this group were at a tremendous disadvantage in any political struggle with these men, for to fight them was to fight the emperor himself.

At the same time, and just as there was immediately preceding the Qingli Reforms, military crisis loomed large over the court. In Taizong's case, he was faced with personal military failures which had undermined his already tenuous legitimacy. Aggressive military action had already proven disastrous, but he could not openly abandon this possibility and admit his defeat. Moreover, by the latter years of Taizong's reign, his attempts to use the exam system to extend his imperial retainers (leading to practices like Taizong personally meeting with every graduate) had clearly failed. The degree holders began to develop a group identity that was stronger on some levels than their gratitude to the emperor. They saw themselves as earning the degrees the emperor bestowed upon them, rather than being selected by his arbitrary grace. For emperors, a loyal group of retainers was the key to rule, men who were united in their concern for the emperor's political well-being. All subsequent emperors, it seems, sought to develop a group of retainers out of the government bureaucrats that surrounded them. Factional conflict heightened this process, as the emperor chose one side which was now beholden to him.

Shifting tack from social history, which had previously been the major meth-

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odological orientation of American Song scholarship, or at least that of the late Robert Hartwell's students (what Richard Davis calls "The University of Pennsylvania School"), Levine tries to frame his discussion solely in terms of politics and political theory. While I can readily understand the desire to avoid the same methodology that has marked so much Song scholarship in the United States, Hartwell himself offered a very powerful social history explanation for the growth and intensity of factional conflict in the Song. In one of his last papers presented, but never published, Hartwell explained the increasing factionalism of the Northern Song through the entry of new men into the government, men who, unlike earlier officials, were not related to their political opponents. He argued that the earlier restraint in political struggles was due not to the moderating authority of the emperor, but to the reluctance of men to treat their cousins or other relatives harshly. It is unfair to expect Levine to address the argument of an unpublished paper, but it should nonetheless alert us to the many aspects of factionalism beyond what is explicitly displayed in rhetoric and theoretical discourse.

Despite my strong reservations about Levine's attempts to separate the "late Northern Song" from the earlier eleventh century, this does not diminish his work within its own context. I am not sure if he was intending to do so, but it does seem as if he has created his own echo chamber to mimic that of the factional disputants in the Song. The language of factions created a single paradigm and a single rubric under which to judge political behaviour. The respective sides were not like modern political parties in a democracy who are supposed to be judged on the efficacy of their policies or leadership. It seems from Levine's description that the Song court really had no means to evaluate the effects of a given policy beyond the assertions of the officials. In the absence of an exterior, objective metric, only politics mattered. Yet at the same time, the political class was actually a unified class, and so communicated internally and with the emperor through the same ideological and linguistic prism.

The unity of not only the language of factionalism, but the ideology of factionalism as well, points to the fundamental intellectual and cultural unity of the literati class itself. This is quite a strange development in the eleventh century when a broad range of ideas in many other areas flourished. Indeed, Levine's next two theorists, Sima Guang and Su Shi 蘇軾, were both highly individualistic thinkers and writers. Sima was a great conservative, and became the leader of what Levine calls "the antireformists." Sima's views were not that different from Ouyang Xiu's, and benefited from seeing the failure of the radical approach of the Qingli Reforms. He was by nature a cautious and careful man, but also very close personally to the imperial family.

Like Ouyang Xiu, Sima Guang, in Levine's reading of Sima's 1058 essay on factions, "shared a conception of the polity as a fragile enterprise, whose integrity and survival depends upon superior men directing their loyalty upwards to the throne" (p. 57). The reciprocal side of that loyalty was that the emperor would chose superior men to serve him. This was simply a restatement of the earlier views on factions, since it merely reinforced the idea that factions were bad. Of course Sima himself was also concerned

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with the upkeep and maintenance of dynastic institutions. Good government came through both the employment of superior men and the proper operation of the bureaucratic machinery. Changing institutions was not, by itself, a solution to the problem of petty men in government or neglected bureaucracy. Thus the frailty of the dynastic polity was due to the inherent vulnerability of any government or institution to both the rise of bad personnel and the improper functioning of its processes.

Unity for Sima Guang was created by the absolute power of the ruler to choose who served him. That power was usurped, and had been historically usurped, by high officials banding together for their own purposes. Some sort of faction was always detectable near the end of any dynasty, and could therefore be blamed for that house's fall, while the discovery and dispersal of a faction, and the revival of a dynasty, was also a regular occurrence. There was ample evidence, then, to argue for a ruler to be on guard against factions. A ruler was ultimately only as good as the men he surrounded himself with. Arguing for imperial vigilance and care in selecting officials did not, unfortunately, provide a ruler with an objective set of criteria for accomplishing this. An emperor or regent had to choose their officials based solely upon their subjective judgement.

Su Shi was an even more individualistic thinker and writer, perhaps the most interesting and talented in Chinese history. Yet his direct response to Ouyang Xiu's essay was depressingly realistic: "For Su Shi, eliminating entire malign factions from court was but a temporary solution that could forestall but never entirely prevent the vengeful comeback of petty men." (p. 62) Unfortunately, the reverse was not also true; a group of superior men could be easily gotten rid of. Su found some space for a "faction" of superior men, but could only do so obliquely. Given the rejection of Ouyang Xiu and Fan Zhongyan's positions earlier in the eleventh century, it was impossible for even as talented a writer and thinker as Su Shi to argue for a true, positive existence of a faction. Su may also have been influenced by the politics that he saw around him. Rather than struggling with an intransigent intellectual and ideological framework set up in the first half of the eleventh century, Su may simply have been reflecting upon the pragmatic issues of rulership. The evil are much more driven and persistent in their pursuit of power; the good serve only when doing so does not compromise their morals.

The final theorist that Levine discusses was a colleague and literary disciple of Su Shi by the name of Qin Guan 秦觀. Qin assumed the existence of both good and bad groups of officials, and once again placed the onus of distinguishing between the two on the ruler. Qin wrote in the aftermath of Wang Anshi's fall from power, when the cycle of vengeance was still increasing in destructive power. More so than earlier thinkers on the subject, Qin relied upon the *Book of Changes* to justify his thinking on factions. This was astute and prescient inasmuch as he recognized the regular flow of change, rather than a static, ideal environment of enlightened governance, as the reality of dynastic politics. Where Su Shi saw a depressing reality, and Sima Guang sought a perfected ruler, Qin accepted a more dynamic and shifting milieu. And yet, at the end of all of this theorizing,

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it was Wang Anshi and his group of reformists that won out and controlled the government for the majority of the period between 1068 and 1104.

Levine's work is a substantial contribution to an understudied field and time period. As a first book, *Divided by a Common Language* has naturally been careful to avoid criticizing or taking positions on the larger issues of scholarship on the Song. There are two notable exceptions to this, and both are worthwhile points. First, Levine makes the critical point that the extant historical materials are strongly biased in favour of the antireformists (elsewhere often called the "conservative" or "Old Party"). Indeed, most of the collected works from the eleventh century are from this group of officials. I am not sure that this is wholly due to the political sympathies of subsequent historians, though it does help that Sima Guang, one of the greatest historians who ever lived, and Ouyang Xiu were towering figures in history writing. More research needs to be done on this issue. Sima Guang and Ouyang Xiu, not to mention Su Shi, were famous in the eleventh century for their work quite apart from their political positions. Surely the retention of their writings has something to do with their importance during their lifetimes.

The second critical point that Levine makes is that the "parties," whether reformist or antireformist were not coherent or stable groups. There were no formal membership lists until the government itself created lists of proscribed officials. Even those lists changed over time as the circles of vengeance expanded. Sima Guang held together a loose grouping of officials who attacked each other after he died. Wang Anshi's followers were even less cohesive. Some of them worked successfully to undermine Wang himself. To see these groups as parties or factions, or even really groups, is teleological and inaccurate. We are at a terminological loss as to how to discuss these constellations of men, with their competing and overlapping interests. They were united, as Levine has argued, by language and ideology across all of their groupings.

I have a few quibbles over some infelicitous translations; more serious is Levine's casual shifting from "factious" to "fractious" without any discernible purpose. Like many sinologists, he also feels it necessary to begin his chapters with quotes from Western works ranging from Thucydides to Shakespeare with only the most tendentious relationship to a given section's discussion. Still, these minor annoyances do not detract substantially from a solid piece of scholarship.

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