

# An Analysis of Zhao Kuangyin's Institutional Reforms That Facilitated the “Co-governance with Literati Officials” Framework

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### Abstract:

Against the backdrop of political transformation from the Five Dynasties to the early Song period, this article focuses on the series of institutional reforms implemented by Emperor Taizu of Song, Zhao Kuangyin, to end the dominance of military commanders and establish a governance framework where he would “rule the realm together with the literati.” This study systematically analyzes the implementation pathways and interactive mechanisms of measures such as the “cup of wine to relinquish military power,” central administrative restructuring, the promotion of civil governance principles, and the refinement of the imperial examination system across four dimensions: military, political, cultural, and the imperial examination system. Research indicates that during the early Song Dynasty, through institutional elevation of the status of civil officials and systematic curtailment of military commanders' power, a governance structure gradually emerged that suppressed military influence through civil authority. This successfully propelled the civil official group into the core of power, achieving a historic transition from “military-dominated politics” to “civilian-dominated politics.” This paper argues that the model of “co-governance by monarch and literati officials” established by Zhao Kuangyin not only laid the institutional foundation for the stability of the Song dynasty regime and its social development, but also profoundly shaped the political and cultural traditions of the later imperial era in China, exerting far-reaching historical influence.

**Keywords:** Song dynasty; Zhao kuangyin; Literati;  
Co-governing the realm.

## 1. Introduction

During the Five Dynasties period, China fell into a vicious cycle where “those with the strongest armies and most powerful horses became emperors.” Over the course of fifty-three years, the Central Plains witnessed frequent changes in political power, with eight rulers ascending to the throne, each reigning for an average of less than five years. The root cause lies in the complete domination of politics by military commanders, rendering the civil official system virtually non-existent. After Emperor Taizu of Song, Zhao Kuangyin, established the Song Dynasty, the core challenge facing his administration was how to fundamentally end the chaos caused by military officers interfering in politics and ensure the dynasty’s long-term stability and prosperity. To this end, he implemented a series of policies aimed at elevating the status of the literati, gradually establishing a political framework where “the monarch and the literati jointly governed the realm.”

This paper employs a literature review methodology. Existing research either focuses on the strengthening of central authority following the “Cup of Wine Incident” and its impact on the Song dynasty’s political landscape, examines the cultural effects stemming from Emperor Taizu’s pledge to “spare the literati,” or analyzes how early Song anti-corruption and integrity initiatives contributed to refining the imperial examination system [1]. These studies reveal that Zhao Kuangyin, through his visionary governance strategies, embedded the principle of valuing civil officials within the institutional framework of the Song Dynasty, thereby laying the historical foundation for “governing the realm together with the literati.”

Against this research backdrop, this paper aims to systematically elucidate how Emperor Taizu of Song gradually reversed the marginalization of civil officials that had persisted since the Five Dynasties period through institutional adjustments and policy implementation across four dimensions: military, political, cultural, and the imperial examination system. Ultimately, he propelled the civil official corps into the core of power, realizing the political vision of “the monarch and the literati governing the realm together.” This paper will examine the specific measures and interrelationships across these four dimensions in turn, revealing the phased characteristics and overall transformative logic of governance in the early Song dynasty. This study not only clearly elucidates the reasons behind the Song Dynasty’s resolution of the chaotic Five Dynasties period, but also provides an exceptionally classic and richly detailed case study of Chinese political wisdom from a millennium ago—demonstrating how institutional innovation can guide a nation toward long-term

stability and prosperity.

## 2. The Turmoil of the Five Dynasties Period and Zhao Kuangyin’s Breakthrough

### 2.1 Eliminate the Risk of Military Personnel Interfering in Political Affairs

The Five Dynasties period was an era that revered military might. Zhao Kuangyin was a beneficiary of this chaotic situation, yet he was acutely aware of the dangers inherent in such times. In the seventh month of the second year of the Jianlong era (961 AD), Zhao Kuangyin employed a series of persuasive tactics to induce military commanders to voluntarily surrender their military authority, an event historically known as the “Cup of Wine Incident” [2]. Throughout history, emperors have often feared that their loyal ministers, wielding power, might threaten imperial authority, while these ministers, wary of being discarded after their usefulness, dared not relinquish their military control. This mutual suspicion between ruler and subject frequently led emperors to execute their most loyal subjects. Therefore, Zhao Kuangyin’s approach was to strip his meritorious generals of their military authority, grant them generous rewards and high positions, and strengthen their bonds through intermarriage.

The founding emperor granted all their requests to govern as regional military governors. Except for Shi Shouxin, the Tianping Military Governor, who retained the nominal title of Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Guard Cavalry and Infantry, all other veteran generals were stripped of their imperial guard posts. By the third year of Jianlong, Shi Shouxin’s nominal title was also stripped. From then on, the position of Commander of the Imperial Guard Cavalry and Infantry was no longer filled. Emperor Taizu fulfilled his promise of intermarriage, betrothing his two daughters to the sons of Shi Shouxin and Wang Shenqi respectively, and also arranged for his younger brother Guangyi to marry Zhang Lingduo’s daughter. Through political marriages, the founding emperor neutralized the disloyal tendencies of these high-ranking generals, uniting them in safeguarding their shared prosperity and privilege. This was the “cup of wine to relinquish military power” that removed veteran generals commanding the imperial guard [3]. However, some historians have pointed out that the “cup of wine to relinquish military power” is a dramatic fabrication, and that in the end, Emperor Taizu of Song acquired the military authority of these key generals through financial compensation [3]. Regardless, it can be said that this was one of Zhao Kuangyin’s rational and

civilized methods for eliminating the interference of military officers in political affairs.

## 2.2 Central and Local Military Reforms

By the late Tang Dynasty, the power of the regional military governors had grown increasingly formidable, and Emperor Taizu of Song was keenly aware of the dangers this posed. In the third year of the Qian De era (965 AD), Zhao Kuangyin ordered all prefectures and counties to select the most valiant soldiers from their regions and send them to the capital Kaifeng to bolster the ranks of the imperial guard [2]. Zhao Kuangyin's measure, while seemingly strengthening the central imperial guard's manpower, actually bolstered the military strength of the regional fiefdoms. This has created a situation where the central government is strong and well-equipped, while local governments are weak and struggling. Thus, the local military governors lacked the military strength to challenge the central government and could only obey its commands. This was one of Zhao Kuangyin's methods to eliminate military interference in politics, ensuring the stability of the Song dynasty. It also marked the withdrawal of military commanders from the political core, making room for literati officials to participate in decision-making.

## 3. Layout Design and Its Impact on the Song Dynasty

### 3.1 Personnel Principles

The Song Dynasty had just been established, with a multitude of tasks awaiting attention. It sought to subdue regional warlords, stabilize social order, and complete the significant unification of the Central Plains. To ensure the long-term stability and prosperity of the Song Dynasty, it was imperative to fundamentally address the issue of "prioritizing military over civil affairs" that had persisted since the Five Dynasties period, thereby shifting reliance toward capable literati. The term "literati" here does not refer to literary figures who must be skilled in composing poetry and prose, but rather to clerks with practical political experience. Zhao Kuangyin's slogan "The chancellor must be a man of letters" was not immediately implemented, but it became an adage deeply ingrained in the subsequent Song Dynasty. In the governance principles of the Song Dynasty as perceived by later generations, a prominent hallmark has emerged. Some historians believe it signifies the elevation of the scholar-official class during the Song Dynasty, marking a shift in governance from administrative rule to cultural governance [2]. This approach indeed yielded immediate results within the civil service

system at the time [2].

### 3.2 Establishing the Dominant Position of the Literati Class

Emperor Taizu of Song established ancestral family rules for his descendants, one of which can be summarized as "do not kill scholars and officials." The later successors of the Song Dynasty were indeed very tolerant toward civil officials. Although the minister was unaware that Emperor Taizu of Song, the founding emperor, had vowed never to execute scholars and officials, subsequent emperors adhered to this ancestral precept, embedding it deeply in the hearts of the people [2]. The reasons for Zhao Kuangyin's actions are as follows.

Firstly, Emperor Taizu of Song was a military man by background and established the Song Dynasty through military means. After the Song Dynasty was established, its foremost concern was preventing a recurrence of the chaos that had plagued the Five Dynasties period. To ensure the long-term stability and prosperity of the regime, it was imperative to end the interference of military officers in political affairs. To weaken the power of the military elite, another corresponding class must be established to counterbalance it—namely, the scholar-official class. This policy of Emperor Taizu of Song has been summarized by historians as "prioritizing civil over military affairs [4]." By elevating the status of the literati class and enhancing the role of scholars in national politics, the influence of military factions was effectively curtailed and confined within manageable limits, thereby ending their interference in political affairs [4].

Secondly, during the Five Dynasties period, military commanders held power, leaving no platform for the literati to exert their influence. Although Emperor Taizu of Song was a military man, he deeply understood the principle that "one may conquer the empire on horseback, but how can one govern it from horseback?" Thus, an urgent challenge facing the Song dynasty was to swiftly achieve a shift in mindset from "on horseback" to "on foot" and to transform society accordingly. However, in its early years, the Northern Song Dynasty inherited the prevailing practices of the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods, where political power originated from the military and capable administrators were scarce. Consequently, it had to rely on treating the scholar-official class favorably and placing emphasis on the imperial examination system to recruit and cultivate literati talent as swiftly as possible. This also reflects that the rise of the scholar-official class was the result of both the demands of the times and the decisions of the monarch.

### 3.3 Local Governance Embarking on Civil Service Reform

Firstly, the abolition of subordinate prefectures. Since the mid-Tang dynasty, military governors typically administered several prefectures, with those outside their garrison headquarters termed subordinate prefectures. After Song Ping pacified Jinghu, he ordered that prefectures and counties outside the military governors' headquarters in these regions be placed under direct central control. The central government dispatched civil officials to serve as prefectural governors and county magistrates in these subordinate prefectures and counties, each holding a three-year term and reporting directly to the imperial court. They no longer took orders from the regional military governors, thereby significantly weakening the jurisdiction and authority of the regional military governors. This practice was subsequently extended to the newly unified southern states. As for the over thirty military governors nationwide who successively ceased to administer subordinate counties, this occurred after the second year of Emperor Taizong's Taiping Xingguo era.

Second, the addition of deputy magistrates. In the fourth year of the Jianlong era, following the pacification of Jinghu, the imperial court began dispatching deputy magistrates to the various prefectures in the region. This practice was later extended to the newly pacified territories of the former Later Shu, Southern Han, and Southern Tang, as well as throughout the entire country. These newly appointed officials, tasked with special surveillance duties by the imperial court, often displayed an air of arrogance and abuse of power.

Third, centralizing judicial authority. During the Five Dynasties period, regional warlords grew arrogant and tyrannical, leading to unjust killings. In the third year of the Jianlong era, Emperor Taizu decreed that all death sentences in the provinces must be reviewed and confirmed by the Ministry of Justice. In the same year, the position of county magistrate was reinstated, replacing the military commanders who had previously been appointed from the personal retinues of regional warlords. This magistrate assumed authority over judicial affairs and public security within the county. In the sixth year of the Kai Bao era, the imperial court abolished the longstanding practice of allowing regional military governors to use their own military officers to adjudicate criminal cases in prefectures and counties. Instead, it replaced this system with civil officials appointed through the imperial examinations. This move stripped the regional governors of their authority to handle ordinary cases at the prefectural and county levels [3]. These measures strengthened the central government's control over local authorities, while also enhancing

the civil service's influence over political affairs.

## 4. Imperial Examination Reform and Social Mobility

### 4.1 Zhao Kuangyin's Contributions to the Imperial Examination System

During the reign of the founding emperor, several measures implemented for the imperial examinations later became established practice [2].

First, the prohibition of public recommendation. According to the imperial examination system established in the early Song Dynasty, before the chief examiners arrived at the examination hall to preside over the tests, high-ranking officials in the court could recommend candidates to them. This practice was known as public recommendation. If the recommender acts impartially, there is nothing wrong with that. However, it also provides a shortcut for those seeking personal gain, and it is impossible for the recommender to be entirely free of self-interest, nor for the examiner to remain unaffected by the influence of the recommended candidate. To address this flaw, the founding emperor issued a decree in the first year of the Qian De era prohibiting official recommendations, with severe punishment for violators, thereby eliminating interference by high-ranking officials in the imperial examinations.

Second, the children of hereditary officials undergo a second examination [2]. To prevent the sons and sons-in-law of officials from obtaining imperial examination titles through improper means, the founding emperor decreed that these individuals must undergo a second examination after passing the preliminary round of the imperial examinations. This system originated from the imperial examinations held in the first year of the Kai Bao era. That year, ten candidates passed the jinshi level of the examinations, among whom the sixth-ranked candidate was the son of Tao Gu. Upon learning that Tao Gu's son was unqualified, the founding emperor ordered him to retake the examination. Though he ultimately passed, the emperor used this as an opportunity to issue an edict stipulating that henceforth, all sons of hereditary officials who passed the provincial examinations must undergo a retest [2].

Third is the palace examination. In the sixth year of the Kai Bao era (973 AD), Emperor Taizu conducted a re-examination of the successful candidates from the previous year's imperial examinations at the Jiangwu Hall. He again tested them with poetry and prose compositions to identify any impostors among them. As a result, two individuals who had defected from the Southern Tang dynasty failed the examination. However, considering their defec-

tion from the Southern Tang, they were ultimately granted the status of “Three Classics” scholars, with the imperial decree stating: “For having defected through secret channels, they are both granted the status of Three Classics scholars [2].” The founding emperor then issued an edict, pointing out that the imperial examinations had long been monopolized by influential families, making it difficult for those from humble backgrounds to advance. He announced that henceforth he would personally conduct re-examinations to rectify this malpractice [2]. From then on, the palace examination became a permanent institution within the imperial examination system. Although not all officials selected through the various rules of the imperial examinations in the early Song Dynasty were necessarily upright and incorruptible, they undoubtedly possessed relatively high qualifications. This method of selection also contributed to the purification of the bureaucracy in the early Song period. During the reign of Emperor Taizu, the court proactively prevented official corruption and malfeasance through a four-pronged approach: rewards, nurturing, prevention, and selection. This fostered a culture of integrity among officials. Coupled with relatively stringent punitive measures, the dual strategy of incentives and deterrence ensured both sides were addressed simultaneously. Consequently, the administration in the early Song Dynasty was notably clean and upright, setting a solid foundation for the long-term stability and prosperity of the Song Dynasty. This move by the founding emperor also signaled to the world that the “springtime for scholars” had arrived.

## 4.2 The Explosion of Talent Under the Imperial Examination System

In the imperial examinations of the second year of the Taiping Xingguo era, 109 candidates passed the Jinshi examination, while 207 passed the various other examinations. This represented a normal intake, though the total number of successful candidates saw a significant increase. In addition, Emperor Taizong of Song ordered the Ministry of Rites to review candidate records and identify those who had taken the examinations fifteen times. This meant that since the founding of the Song dynasty, these individuals had been pursuing the imperial examinations, striving relentlessly throughout the entire reign of Emperor Taizu without ever passing. A total of one hundred and eighty-four such candidates were collectively appointed. Thus, a total of five hundred candidates passed the imperial examinations this time [5]. Appointees during Emperor Taizong’s reign not only started in high-ranking positions but also advanced rapidly. Some rose to the level of chancellor during his reign—a phenomenon unseen during

Emperor Taizu’s reign. Therefore, as the historical records state, “The favor shown to Zhang was extraordinary, unprecedented in any previous dynasty,” meaning that the favor bestowed upon this cohort of admitted candidates was unparalleled in all preceding dynasties [6]. With one stroke, he ascended the Dragon and Tiger List. After ten years, he reached the Phoenix Pool. This was the true portrait of Song Dynasty scholars. The history of these two reigns reveals that the Song dynasty’s imperial examination system experienced an unprecedented surge in talent, originating during Emperor Taizu’s reign and flourishing under Emperor Taizong’s rule. Ultimately, however, its inception can be traced back to Emperor Taizu’s reign.

## 5. Cultural Promotion

### 5.1 Encourage Officials to Read

Although Zhao Kuangyin came from a military background, he had been an avid reader since childhood and held a particular admiration for talented scholars and officials. Historical records describe Emperor Taizu of Song: “He was of average stature, never putting down his books [6].” During the Xiande era of the Later Zhou dynasty, Zhao Kuangyin served as an advisor to Emperor Shizong of Zhou in the campaign against Huainan, emerging as the pivotal figure in its pacification. After capturing Shouzhou City, someone remarked: “My private carts carried several loads, all of them heavy goods [6].” Emperor Shizong of Zhou was greatly astonished and immediately dispatched his men to investigate. They discovered no treasures, only several scrolls of books. All that remained in the crates and chests were several thousand volumes of books, nothing else [6]. Emperor Shizong once questioned Zhao Kuangyin about his collection of books. Zhao replied that gathering books served to “broaden one’s knowledge and enhance wisdom,” earning the emperor’s approval [6]. After ascending the throne, Zhao Kuangyin explicitly stated his desire to have military officers study books, so that they might “gain knowledge of the principles of governance [6].” After the Song Dynasty conquered the Later Shu, it immediately dispatched envoys to transport Shu’s maps and books to the capital. Later, after subjugating the Southern Tang, it also transported all the books from the poetry-loving Li Yu’s collection to the capital. He spares no expense when purchasing rare books [2]. Military commanders in the early Song Dynasty mostly came from common backgrounds. “The generals of the early Song era generally rose from the grassroots, emerging from military ranks. Even bandits and rogues were among them—how did they differ from butchers and peddlers [7]?” Em-

peror Taizu of Song promoted reading, which indeed elevated the cultural literacy of his ministers. He not only required military commanders to study but also urged the literate civil official corps—already well-versed in classical texts—to intensify their reading and learning. From the imperial court to the local administrations, a culture of reading took root among officials at all levels, further solidifying the foundation of the Northern Song Dynasty’s literary governance [8].

## 5.2 Ancestral Family Rules Restrict Imperial Power

The first example concerns Fan Zhongyan, a renowned scholar of the Song Dynasty [2]. The incident occurred in the third year of Emperor Renzong’s Qingli reign (1043 AD). During this period, certain shortcomings in the Northern Song Dynasty’s governance became increasingly apparent. Rebel forces emerged in the Huainan region, engaging in widespread plundering. When a rebel army passed through Gaoyou, the imperial official in charge of Gaoyou, anticipating he could not resist them, rallied the local wealthy to contribute money and wine to entertain the rebels. He also presented them with generous gifts. The rebel army was greatly pleased and thus refrained from plundering the area, departing directly. When word reached the imperial court, some suggested that the military governor of Gaoyou be executed immediately. As a State Councillor (Chancellor), Fan Zhongyan vehemently opposed the decision. Emperor Renzong of Song consequently pardoned the military governor of Gaoyou, but Fan Zhongyan faced resentment from his colleagues. At this point, Fan Zhongyan spoke up: “Since the founding of our dynasty, our ancestors have never lightly executed their subjects. This is an act of great virtue. How can we so lightly destroy it?” Fan Zhongyan’s key argument against his colleagues was that Song dynasty family laws prohibited the arbitrary execution of ministers. His words resonated with the content of Emperor Taizu’s oath monument.

The second example concerns Cai Que, a chancellor of the Song Dynasty, and is taken from a Song Dynasty miscellaneous notes collection [2]. During the reign of Emperor Shenzong of Song, due to military setbacks in Shaanxi, he sought to execute a grain transport official to establish his authority. Chancellor Cai Que interceded, citing that “since the founding of our dynasty, no scholar-officials have ever been executed.” Emperor Shenzong then commuted the sentence to exile [9]. Chancellor Zhang Dun further declared, “A scholar may be killed, but not disgraced.” Emperor Shenzong was displeased, to which Zhang Dun replied, “Such a gratifying matter—it would be a shame

not to do it [9].” This incident demonstrates that the Northern Song dynasty’s principle of “not executing literati officials” had become a political tradition constraining imperial authority. When civil officials argued their case with reason and force, even the emperor found it difficult to impose his will unimpeded. Cai Que and Zhang Dun could openly defy Emperor Shenzong’s internal edicts based on this, and the emperor could do nothing about it. In the context of the Northern Song Dynasty, although Emperor Taizu’s vow remained unknown to outsiders, the practice of sparing literati and officials, once established as convention, functioned as a pervasive political principle. The reason why Song Dynasty monarchs could not act arbitrarily was largely due to the authority of the ancestral laws [10].

## 6. Conclusion

This study reveals that through a series of institutional designs, the cultivation of social strata, and the reshaping of cultural values, Zhao Kuangyin established the fundamental framework of “co-governance by monarch and literati officials” in the Song Dynasty. He pioneered a new model of civil governance, profoundly influencing the political structure and governance traditions of China’s late feudal society. This institutional arrangement not only mitigated the historical drawbacks of military dominance but also provided the Song dynasty and subsequent periods with a stable and enduring civil administrative system. Its political legacy exerted profound historical influence across institutional continuity, social structure, and cultural identity. The Song Dynasty provided a historical reference for understanding long-term effective governance by systematically incorporating elite literati into the state’s decision-making structure and maintaining a dynamic equilibrium of political tension through institutional mechanisms. It also offers valuable civilizational insights for contemporary institutional reform. Looking ahead, we can further explore the adaptability of the Song Dynasty’s cultural governance model across different historical phases and its relationship with governance effectiveness from the perspective of this historical period. This will provide a richer analytical lens for understanding the evolution of China’s historical political structures. Limitations of this study include: insufficient systematic comparison with governance models of preceding and succeeding dynasties as well as other contemporary civilizations; inadequate discussion of the system’s inherent contradictions, risks of rigidity, and its connection to subsequent periods of decline; and a focus on the elite level that overlooks the role and feedback of non-elite groups within the gover-

nance structure. Future research in this field may address these perspectives to supplement the existing work.

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