After the fall of the Tang in 907, China experienced another period of disunity. However, whereas after the Han it had taken over three centuries to reconstitute a centralized empire, on this occasion the period of division lasted only half a century. This has been taken as proof of the strength of the political institutions created by the Tang. Despite the frequent changes of regime the ruling elite remained the same and the personnel of the civil service which maintained the functions of government continued in office. Since that time the expectation that China should be a unitary state has been accepted as the norm and periods of disunity have been viewed as aberrations from that standard.

From 907 to the establishment of the Song in 960, the extreme north-east of China was ruled by the Qidan Liao dynasty. The rest of the country was divided into two, the northern section being ruled by a succession of five dynasties, and the southern section being fragmented into ten kingdoms. In 960 Zhao Kuangyin, a general from the last of the five dynasties, usurped the throne and established the Song dynasty (also known as the Northern Song). At its height, in the middle of the eleventh century, the Song dynasty ruled over much of China Proper. Part of north-eastern China and Manchuria was the territory of the Qidan Liao dynasty, and from about 1038 the north-west, the area of modern Gansu, was controlled by the Tangut Xi Xia kingdom. Early in the twelfth century the Qidan Liao dynasty became involved in a disastrous war with the Jurchen from east-
ern Manchuria. In 1125 its last ruler was captured by the Jurchen, who had established the Jin dynasty. Qidan survivors fled west and established the Western Liao kingdom in Central Asia, which lasted from 1131 to 1213. In the meantime the Jin dynasty had continued to expand into northern China and by 1127 had confined the Song to the southern half of the country. Now known as the Southern Song, they remained in power there until 1279.

THE FIVE DYNASTIES AND THE TEN KINGDOMS

This complex period in Chinese history was marked by three main developments. The first was the emergence of a new structure of power based on military strength. This development had begun in the late Tang, with the appearance of military governors of provinces, and it was to be carried further after the collapse of the dynasty. As an example of the process one could refer to the career of Zhu Wen, who had first come to prominence as a supporter of the rebel Huang Chao. After capturing Chang’an, Huang Chao appointed Zhu Wen to control a key prefecture to the east of the capital. When the rebellion faltered Zhu Wen defected to the Tang side and was made military governor of Xuanwu, in the area of modern Henan. During the closing years of the dynasty he concentrated on building up his power base, mainly by creating a professional army which was personally loyal to him. It comprised both infantry and an elite cavalry force, the latter provided by the wealthy families who supported him. By 903 Zhu Wen was in a position to dominate the court and in 907 he deposed the last Tang emperor and founded the Liang dynasty, the first of the five northern dynasties.

The second important development of the period concerned the situation along China’s northern borders. It will be recalled that from the 720s the Tang had relied on the Uighur to stabilize the frontier region. However, the Uighur empire collapsed in 840, and this proved the beginning of a general disintegration of political authority throughout northern Asia. It was this situation which allowed the rise of the Shatuo Turks. They had formerly been subject to the Uighur, but early in the ninth century some Shatuo tribes switched their allegiance to China and were per-