

# The Relationship Between Imperial Power and Phantom Power in The Song Dynasty from A Psychological Point of View

Li Wang

College of Arts and Letters, Hubei University of Education, Wuhan, China

19820200156640@stu.xmu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** From 221 B.C., when Emperor Qin Shi Huang claimed the title of Emperor, to 1911, when the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty, the period of feudal empire in China lasted more than two thousand years. To consolidate their rule, emperors of all dynasties continued to strengthen the centralization of power and put as much power as possible into their own hands. Therefore, during the two thousand years from the Qin to the Qing Dynasty, the centralization of China's imperial autocracy was constantly strengthening. As an essential period in China's history, the Song Dynasty profoundly impacted the later generations of society in all aspects of politics, economy, and culture. The relationship between imperial and relative power in the Song Dynasty has been a point of endless debate among scholars of later generations. In recent years, with the continuous development of psychohistory, more historians have begun to pay attention to more internal development. This paper combines historiography and psychology, exploring the inner of the emperor himself to conclude the relationship between imperial power and relative power in the Song Dynasty.

**Keywords:** Song Dynasty; imperial authority; bureaucratic power; psychohistory.

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, there have been some debates in the historiography about the relationship between imperial power and relative power in the Song Dynasty. For example, Qian Mu's "On the Relative Power in Song Dynasty belongs to the theory of weakening relative power" [1]; Wang Ruilai's "On the Relative Power in Song Dynasty supports the idea of strengthening relative power", and so on [2]. Most of the research on this in the historiography is based on the objective level, such as the system of the Song Dynasty. With the continuous development of psychohistory, there may be other views on the argumentation of the relationship between imperial power and phase power in the Song Dynasty. Related discussions on psychohistory can be referred to as "Review of Psychohistory Research" and other related literature and will not be repeated here [3].

Psychology points out that the subjective and objective aspects of a person's character, living environment, and so on, can have far-reaching effects on that person. This paper analyzes the subjective and objective factors of the emperors of the Song Dynasty from the psychohistory perspective, argues the relationship between imperial power and relative power during the reign, and finally comes up with a general theory.

This paper mainly uses a case study method to select some representative emperors among the 18 emperors of the Song Dynasty to explore their character and psychology. Psychology analyzes the nature behind them and finally arrives at the relationship between imperial power and phase power during their reign. This study shows how academics view the relationship between imperial power and phase power in the Song Dynasty.

## 2. The Relationship between Imperial Power and Ministerial Power in the Northern Song Dynasty

Zhao Kuangyin was born during the chaotic period of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, and his father, Zhao Hongyin, was a minister in the Five Dynasties period. Throughout the history of the founding emperors, Zhao Kuangyin's family is considered excellent. Zhao Kuangyin's ancestors

were all officials, “The founding emperor Kuangyin, known for his valor, intelligence, elegance, exemplary character, significant accomplishments, progressive thinking, and profound filial piety, initiated the luck of the nation. Emperor Kuangyin, bore the surname Zhao and hailed from Zhuo Commandery. His great-grandfather’s father, Zhao Tiao, was respectfully given an ancestral title Xi. During the Tang Dynasty, he served as the magistrate for Yongqing, Wen’an, and Youdu. Zhao Tiao’s son, Zhao Ting, was respectfully given an ancestral title Shun, held multiple official assistant roles in Fanzhen peripheral garrisons and eventually took on the position of Deputy Censor-in-Chief after several promotions. Zhao Ting’s son, Zhao Jing, was respectfully given an ancestral title Yi, successively governed over Yingzhou, Jizhou, and Zhuozhou. Zhao Jing fathered Zhao Hongyin, and the latter was respectfully given an ancestral title Xuan. During the Zhou Dynasty’s Xiande period, Zhao Hongyin held a distinguished status and posthumously conferred upon Zhao Jing the title of Left Daring Cavalry Senior General” [4]. His father, Zhao Hongyin, was “good at Confucianism” and liked to “visit books,” while his mother, Du, also had a certain degree of cultural cultivation. At a young age, Zhao Kuangyin was sent to school and had teachers to instruct him. Therefore, Zhao Kuangyin's early cultural education was undoubtedly excellent.

Zhao Kuangyin grew up with a more forceful character, a love for fighting, and cynicism that caused many troubles. Due to his family background and Zhao Kuangyin’s stronger and bolder character, his psychology was more mature than that of other people of the same age, allowing him to approach affairs with a more comprehensive perspective. After wandering for a while and engaging in military service, Zhao Kuangyin also worked with his father. “He was consecutively promoted to the positions of senior official in charge of domestic affairs and Baron of Tianshui County. Together with the founding emperor, he jointly oversaw the management of the imperial guards, and for a time, he was highly prominent” [4]. For Zhao Kuangyin, an ambitious young man who wanted to achieve a career, his father’s achievements were his role model and inspired him to move forward as the catalyst for continuous progress. Zhao Kuangyin’s early extraordinary experience, leading up to the Chenqiao mutiny and earning him the yellow robe, had a significant impact on his character. People who undergo military training in their early years tend to have strong willpower and executive abilities. For Zhao Kuangyin, this experience from the army had a profound impact on him, particularly in shaping his later decisions regarding decentralization, strengthening the centralization of power, and implementing other far-reaching measures.

After Zhao Kuangyin established the Song Dynasty and became the emperor, to achieve the purpose of strengthening the centralization of power, he implemented policies related to punishing corruption, focusing on the selection of officials, and reforming industry and commerce to restrict local finance [5]. It laid a good foundation for the development of the Song Dynasty. At the same time, it also strengthened the imperial power and weakened the power of the phases so that the emperor could hold more power, and the throne was more stable.

Song Taizong, Zhao Kuangyin’s younger brother, from a young age, had shown more than ordinary people’s ability. “The emperor was distinct from other children in his childhood; those who played with him held him in reverence and submission. As he grew up, he had a pronounced nose and a countenance reminiscent of a dragon. One glance at him and it was evident he was a significant figure, carrying himself with gravity and dignity. He had an inclination for learning. When Zhao Hongyin was commanding troops in Huainan, he conquered various regions but did not seize any valuables. Instead, he sought ancient books to present to the emperor and frequently instructed him rigorously. As a result, the emperor attained great accomplishments in literature and also possessed diverse talents” [6]. During his youth, he ventured outside alongside his brother, Zhao Kuangyin. After Zhao Kuangyin became the Emperor, Zhao Jiong served as the magistrate of Kaifeng, during which he made friends with a lot of literati, and his personal abilities received significant refinement and training.

After the death of Emperor Taizu of the Song Dynasty, Zhao Jiong succeeded to the throne and became Emperor Taizong of Song. Due to his early experiences, Song Taizong was able to accomplish the unification of the southern part of the country. However, when it came to the war in

the north, he lacked the necessary judgment. His upbringing as a “child king” fostered a headstrong, arrogant, and somewhat self-centered personality. In dealing with the war in the north, Emperor Taizong placed excessive trust in his personal judgment, which led to the negative situation of the generals having difficulty cooperating and the administrative efficiency being low. As a result, the Song Dynasty switched from offense to defense against the Liao Dynasty, and they remained at a disadvantage.

During the reign of Emperor Taizong of Song, he inherited and developed some of the policies of Emperor Taizu of Song, such as emphasizing civil matters over military affairs. In addition, the character of Emperor Taizong of Song was similar to that of Emperor Taizu of Song, and they lived in similar environments in their early years. Therefore, during the reign of Emperor Taizong, imperial authority effectively curbed the growth of regional power.

Song Renzong had the longest reign of any Emperor during the Northern and Southern Song periods. His political achievements were both positive and negative. During his reign, the development of science and culture in the Song Dynasty reached its peak with the emergence of a number of talents such as Fan Zhongyan, Yan Shu, Shen Kuo, and other outstanding achievements in the fields of literature and science and technology. However, during the reign of Emperor Renzong, measures such as “the Imperial Examination is not deposed” caused a serious burden on the economy of the Song Dynasty, and social conflicts became more acute, contributing to a state of widespread poverty and weakness.

Emperor Renzong’s actions can be attributed to his early childhood experiences. Although he had other children, they all died at an early age. As the only surviving son of Emperor Zhenzong, Renzong was regarded as the jewel in the palm of his hand and lived in a “greenhouse garden” where he received Confucianism and a good education. All of this laid the foundation for the talents he later displayed. At the age of nine, Renzong was made the crown prince and succeeded to the throne at the age of twelve. For the first twelve years of his life, Empress Dowager Liu served as the regent. As a puppet, Renzong had no real power in his hands, and all the power was in the hands of Empress Dowager Liu. At this time, Renzong lived under the shadow of Empress Liu’s power.

On March 29, 1033, the second year of the Mingdao era, Empress Dowager Liu died, and at the age of 24, Emperor Renzong began to take over the reign. As the “mother” of Renzong, Liu played a parental role in his upbringing. When Emperor Renzong was a young boy, Empress Dowager Liu listened to the government from behind the curtain, and in some places, she exhibited an overly authoritarian approach. Such a parenting style, characterized by excessive control, can result in children developing personality traits of passivity, dependence, obedience, avoidance, cowardice, and even dishonesty [7].

Later, Emperor Renzong attempted to implement new policies but displayed a timider side. These policies were opposed by the nobles, and because of its subjective inability to adhere to their implementation, leading to their short-lived existence. He ruled the world with benevolence, but he lacked a certain degree of toughness. During the reign of Emperor Renzong, although imperial power was better exercised because of his character and other reasons, he always ruled the world with benevolence, and the power of the ministers was not strengthened at this time.

Emperor Huizong, a famous “loser” in history, was mostly evaluated negatively by historians. He grew up disliking Confucianism, preferring exotic animals, and showing amazing talent in calligraphy and painting. From a young age, he was a “playboy” and learned a lot of bad habits from Monk Wang. After the death of Emperor Zhezong, he had no son, and the ministers wanted to choose one of his brothers to be the emperor. When the minister Zhang Chun wanted to support the Zhao Si as the emperor, he said that “Duan is frivolous and cannot be the emperor of the world” [8]. However, Huizong was able to ascend to the throne under the protection of the Empress Dowager. After becoming the emperor, he favored the sycophants and lived an extravagant life, which led the Song Dynasty to the end step by step.

Emperor Huizong, like Emperor Renzong, lived in the palace from a young age and received a good education. However, historical evaluations of these two emperors are very different. These

assessments are inextricably linked to his early experiences. In his early years, the emperor was intelligent and well-bred and gradually developed a frivolous character. In the era when the first-born son inheritance system was the core, it was almost impossible for Emperor Huizong to become the emperor. But Emperor Zhezong died early, leaving no son at all, and King Jian had an eye disease. So, Emperor Huizong was put on the throne. But could a playful and unrestrained man take on such a great task? The answer is no. The character of frivolous, frivolous people loved to play, for the responsibility of undertaking is insufficient. Emperor Huizong loved to play, did not like constraints, and found it difficult to take on this big task. When someone could meet his “appetite,” it was easier to listen to others slander. Cai Jing and other people around Emperor Huizong were slippery and flattering generation, seriously shaking the foundation of the Song Dynasty.

Emperor Huizong reigned for 25 years, and Cai Jing was a minister for 24 years. A country’s phase is to share the emperor’s problems, which should be the ability, character, and behavior of excellent people. Cai Jing, as the former Emperor, dismissed officials, and later because of a good hand of writing, patting a handful of good asses, by Huizong’s appreciation, became prime minister. During Cai Jing’s reign, he was appointed and dismissed many times, but he still served as a prime minister for 24 years out of Huizong’s 25 years as Emperor. Cai Jing’s existence was more of a fulfillment of the emperor’s extravagant demands and did not make any contribution to the long-term rule of the Song Dynasty. Although the Emperor had the highest power of appointment and dismissal, Cai Jing’s 24-year career was also three times removed from office but also very quickly reinstated. It still did not prevent Huizong from being usurped. The emperor’s behavior and decision-making were seriously swayed, and the actual power of the imperial power was weakened. The actual power of the chancellor got a certain degree of strengthening, which was different from previous emperors.

### **3. The Relationship between Imperial Power and Ministerial Power in the Southern Song Dynasty**

As the founding Emperor of the Southern Song Dynasty, Song Gaozong Zhao Gou’s life was full of drama. At the time of his birth, there was a vision of “red shining in a golden room.” When he was young, he was “This person possessed remarkable talent and understanding. He extensively studied and could swiftly comprehend things and grasp concepts. He recited thousands of characters daily and could draw a bow requiring the strength equivalent to one ‘dan’ and five ‘dou’ (both ‘dan’ and ‘dou’ were traditional Chinese measurements of weight, one ‘dan’ plus five ‘dou’ were equivalent to about 75~100 kilos today)” [9]. It can be seen from here that when Gaozong was young, he was the best among his peers in terms of both literature and martial arts. He should have been an excellent talent, but he did not show his ability and talent after he became the emperor. This was inextricably linked to the fact that he went to the Jin Dynasty as a hostage. In 1125, the Jin Dynasty defeated the Liao Dynasty in a joint effort by the Song and Jin Dynasties. Jin then moved southward to Tokyo, at which time Emperor Huizong hastily passed the throne to Zhao Heng, Zhao’s elder brother, while fleeing southward.

After failing to attack Tokyo for a long time, Jin demanded the withdrawal of the army by ceding land, paying compensation, and selecting princes and prime ministers as hostages to Jin. The emperor summoned his princes and asked, ‘Who is willing to undertake this mission for me?’ Prince Kang stepped forward, surpassing the other princes, and volunteered to take on the task. Prince Kang was intelligent and valiant, brave with decisive judgment, embodying the demeanor of Emperor Taizu of Song. Before setting out, Prince Kang secretly reported to the emperor, saying, ‘If it benefits the imperial administration, do not consider the interests of a single member of the royal family.’ As Prince Kang was about to depart. Bang Chang shed tears. Prince Kang said with hearty emotion, “This is a man’s duty; you shouldn’t behave like this.’ Feeling ashamed, Bang Chang remained silent [10]. From this historical material, it can be seen at this time, Zhao Jiu was still full of courage and righteousness for the family and the country to give up their lives. So, Zhao set foot in the Jin Dynasty and became a hostage.

Since ancient times, most of the hostages were abandoned and not respected in other countries. How can abandoned people talk about dignity and personality? Personality is the actual condition of a person as a natural and social subject in a certain society, as well as the sum of dignity, responsibility, value, and character resulting from the understanding of this condition [7]. The personality and dignity of Zhao Gou, who was a hostage in another country, were trampled upon. When he shot arrows with the Jin people as a hostage in another country, he was suspected of being the son of a general rather than the son of an emperor, as he was “hit by three arrows in a row. When Yao Pingzhong attacked the Jin camp, Zhao Gou behaved quite calmly. The Jin people became more and more skeptical about his identity as a prince, so they offered to replace the hostage. This is just Zhao Gou in the Golden State as the hostage when some small things happen, but small enough to see Zhao Gou in the Golden State during this time, personality and dignity had been seriously trampled on, so before many years of good character in the short career of the hostage almost ashes.

After the Jingkang disaster, Zhao Gou fled and begged for peace with the Jin. Although he preserved the lineage of Song emperors, behaviors such as compromising and surrendering to the Jin were disgraceful. What he showed after ascending the throne was weakness. He tried his best to protect his position from threats. He reappointed Wang Boyan and Huang Qianshan’s proposal. When Chen Dong and others from the warring factions submitted a petition to Zhao Jiu for a northern expedition to welcome back the “Two Saints,” they were killed. Gaozong would never do anything unfavorable to his throne. If he won, he would welcome back Emperor Huizong and Emperor Qinzong, and his throne would be shaken; if he lost, he would face the destruction of his country.

Zhao Gou’s career as a hostage was short, but it had a great impact on his life. He craved power, and from his elder brother, he saw what supreme power all about whoever was really was asked to be a hostage must obey orders. The different degrees of trampling he received in the Golden Kingdom made him change psychologically: only when he had power and held supreme power could he hold the life, death, and dignity of others. It was also his character that made him seek peace and appoint peacemakers. During the reign of Emperor Gaozong, many decisions were made out of the psychology of self-preservation, and many decisions were influenced by Wang Boyan and others, thus reflecting the enhancement of the power of the ministers.

As one of the few emperors of the Southern Song Dynasty, Emperor Xiaozong was one of the “exceptions” to the rule of Southern Song emperors. He was not born to Emperor Gaozong but was the heir of the “Bo” generation of Emperor Taizu. Zhao Jie was smart by nature because Emperor Gaozong had no children, so he sent someone to select ten children under the age of seven in the clan. “In the crowd, two individuals were selected again: one was chubby, and the other was skinny. The chubby man was retained, while the skinny one was sent away, gifted with three hundred taels of silver as a token of appreciation. Before the skinny man left, Si Ling suddenly said, ‘Take a closer observation.’ He then had both men stand together with their arms crossed. Suddenly, a cat strolled by, and the chubby man kicked it with one foot. The emperor commented, ‘The cat was merely passing by. Why impulsively kick it? Acting like this, how can he be entrusted with significant duties?’ Consequently, the skinny man was kept, and the chubby one was dismissed. The skinny man’s name was Fu Ling. The chubby man, named Bo Hao, later became a supervisor of Wenzhou” [11]. This suggests that Emperor Xiaozong had a good character when he was young. From a young age, he received a good education and had a good character, and what he showed in his early years was the quality of being able to take on a great responsibility. As a teenager, he gradually showed his talent in politics. At times, he expressed his own views on current affairs, which inevitably conflicted with Qin Hui, a powerful prime minister [12].

The character and ability of Emperor Xiaozong were destined to become a wise ruler, which was closely related to his personality in his childhood and his courage to express his personal views on current affairs and politics in his youth. After Emperor Xiaozong ascended the throne, he vindicated Yue Fei in the following month. Although the Northern Expedition had no significant achievements, it solved certain financial and social problems internally. In contrast to the Southern Song Dynasty, most of the emperors were fishers and fatteners of the people, who were only interested in their own

enjoyment. There was a peaceful development of the society, which was rarely seen in the history of the Southern Song Dynasty, and it was called “The Rule of Qianchun.” Zhao was also called by historians as “the first of all the emperors of the Southern Song Dynasty” [13]. During the reign of Emperor Xiaozong, the power of the phases was checked and balanced, but in the context of the Southern Song Dynasty, the emergence of Emperor Xiaozong only slowed down the loss of the actual power of the emperor.

Although there were no tyrants in the Southern Song Dynasty, most of them, with the exception of Emperor Xiaozong, were mediocre, with Emperor Lizong being the best representative [14]. He was not a direct descendant of the royal family but a distant cousin of Emperor Ningzong of the Song Dynasty. Although Rizong’s family was the tenth grandson of the son of the Great Ancestor, his father’s generation was no longer in the family, and his father was only a minor official. In contrast to the other emperors of the Song dynasty, most of whom lived in the palace and received a good education from an early age, Lizong grew up as a commoner and was only brought into the palace at the age of 16 to inherit the throne of King Yi.

Indeed, the early life of Emperor Lizong had a profound influence on him. The early life of Emperor Lizong was quite similar to that of a commoner, but later, when he entered the palace and was finally crowned as emperor, there was a significant contrast in his status. The psychological gap brought about by the difference in the status of people before and after is prone to breed the negative character of people’s arrogance and extravagance. In the first period, Emperor Lizong existed as a puppet emperor, and the real power was in the hands of Shi Miyuan, the minister of power, for several decades. However, after the death of Shi Miyuan, Lizong really took control of the real power. When he first took power, he wanted to make achievements like a wise ruler, leaving a mark in history. However, his biggest drawback was the stark contrast between his life before and after gaining power. In addition, the social background of the time was characterized by internal and external challenges, which made it difficult for him to implement the policies he had adopted.

Emperor Lizong gradually lost himself in the trappings of power, leading a life of extravagance and indulgence. The Chronicles of Chinese Emperor evaluates Emperor Lizong as follows: “However, Zhao Yun was a mediocre person, and was greatly driven by greed. He was neglectful of state affairs, had a strong preference for Taoist concepts, and indulged in abstract discussions about the ‘path of life and spirit’ on lectures. He sought only his own comfort, lacking any ambition to make significant contributions to the nation. As a result, power was seized by corrupt and wicked officials, leading to a daily decline in the state of governance” [15].

Emperor Lizong epitomized many emperors of the Southern Song Dynasty. These emperors had different experiences in their early years, but they were all mediocre. The internal and external problems of the Southern Song Dynasty deepened and accelerated the fall of the Song Dynasty. During this period, the powerful ministers were often able to influence the choice of imperial heirs and the decisions of emperors, leading to a substantial increase in their authority, reaching its peak during the Southern Song Dynasty.

#### 4. Conclusion

Summarizing the above, the relationship between imperial power and ministerial power in the Song Dynasty should be analyzed separately for the Northern Song and the Southern Song periods, as they had distinct characteristics. In the Northern Song Dynasty, the imperial power of Emperor Zhao Kuangyin’s pavement and other reasons, the country was better developed. Imperial power was more centralized, and the emperor played a prominent role in governance. This period saw significant achievements in various fields, including culture, science, and technology.

In contrast, the Southern Song Dynasty faced greater social upheaval and was further removed in time from the era of Emperor Taizu. Most of the emperors in the Southern Song Dynasty were more considerate of their own and did not have that kind of awareness of the high position. In the Southern Song Dynasty, compared to the Northern Song Dynasty, the society was relatively turbulent; the

Southern Song Dynasty had nine emperors, three of them young, and the remaining six were mostly mediocre and despicable people. This was partly due to the challenging circumstances they inherited, which made them prioritize their own interests and survival over the welfare of the state. Surrounded by most of the sycophants, the emperor listened to their slander. The actual power easily fell into the hands of treacherous ministers. As a result, ministerial power often grew stronger, and the emperors had less influence over state affairs.

To summarize, this paper argues that the ministerial power of the Northern Song Dynasty was in a weakened state, and the ministerial power of the Southern Song Dynasty was in a strengthened state. Analyzing these two periods separately helps us understand the unique dynamics and challenges each dynasty faced in terms of the balance between imperial power and ministerial power.

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