Different Views on the Political Geography of the Empire in the 11th Century: Debates over Military Affairs between Wang Anshi and Sima Guang

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The Question

How did Wang Anshi and Sima Guang conceive of regional differences within the context of the empire?
Basic Assumptions

- Not just north vs south.

- Their views on regional differences can best be studied by examining their writings on military affairs.
Baojia and Wang Anshi’s Conception of Regional Disparity

- *Baojia* was first implemented in 1070 around the capital region, then in the northern circuits and gradually throughout the empire.

- As late as 1073, it was only in the five northern circuits that directly faced the Liao and the Xi Xia that *baojia* was institutionalized to provide serious military training. In other parts of the empire, there was no persistent attempt to train *baojia* servicemen for carrying out military missions. There, the purpose was more for keeping population census to facilitate tax collection and labor service and maintaining local order.
In 1075, the command of *baojia* was transferred from the Court of National Granaries to the Ministry of War. In the same year efforts were put into converting formerly established local militia into *baojia* in a few frontier localities (in Sichuan, the Middle Yangzi, Huai River and Lingnan regions) with a substantial indigenous population and vibrant military activities.

Wang believed that *baojia* as a form of local militia is universally valid and can eventually be implemented throughout the empire in a uniform manner.
In short, Wang recognized regional differences within the empire, but saw this as less than ideal. In his view, despite the existence of regional disparities, superimposing onto the society a policy such as *baojia* that was derived from the ideal of antiquity could eventually resolve regional differences and bring all under Heaven into a holistic system.

This is entirely consistent with his general vision that the state should shoulder the responsibility of “uniting morality and making [varied] customs uniform.”
Sima Guang on Local Militia before the New Policies Era

- In 1040, Sima memorialized the court on behalf of his father, serving then as the prefect of Hangzhou, against instituting the “archers” (a form of local militia built through conscription), claiming that the custom of the Liangzhe region was unsuitable for military activities.

- In the early 1060s, Sima objected to Han Qi’s recommendation of establishing the “Righteous and Brave” Corps (another form of local militia that was established earlier in Hebei and Hedong) in Shaanxi.
Sima Guang on Local Militia before the New Policies Era

- In Han’s view, since all three northern circuits were critical strategic regions, it was only appropriate that the Shaanxi people shared the same load of defending the country as those of Hedong and Hebei.

- In response, Sima argued that given current circumstances, the court should pursue uniformity across the three northern regions by instituting the same kind of military establishment in these regions. Instead, the court should take note of the peculiar conditions of Shaanxi and made an exception.
Sima’s Critique of *baojia* and other New Policies’ Military Schemes

- All New Policies’ military measures, including 1) appointing supervising officers for overseeing all *baojia*-related matters; 2) the creation of new military zones under the so-called “Commander-Troop” system, should be removed. This was because they ignored existing regional administrative arrangement and interfered with the authority of local officials (circuit-level commissioners, prefects, magistrates etc.), depriving them of the ability to govern their assigned territories effectively.

- Sima’s proposal in general was to entrust regular regional offices with the task of overseeing military affairs and removed all additional court-imposed administrative layers and personnel created during the New Policies years.
Sima’s View on the Political Geography of the Empire: Contrasting with Wang Anshi

- Nevertheless, Sima did not think that state apparatus was irrelevant. On the contrary, Sima still spoke of regions mainly in terms of existing administrative units, and insisted that each unit should be responsible for both civil and military administration.

- But the empire in its ideal form was not, as Wang Anshi would have it, a uniform entity without regional variations. Instead, it was supposed to be a coalition of administrative regions of diverse geographical, social and cultural characters, each of which would have to be governed according to its peculiar local conditions.