

The Song Dynasty in China (960-1279)

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Economic Growth

Rice Cultivation

Manufacturing :: Textiles, Ceramics, Construction

Commercialization

Transport

Paper Money

The City of Quanzhou

Urbanization

Intellectual Life

Neo-Confucianism

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The Elite

The Family

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The Civil Service

Introduction (Main Page)

Does Modernity Begin with the Song Dynasty?

Those who say that it does can point to **economic growth**, **commercialization**, **urbanization**, the spread of **printing**, and the growth of literacy and education as their evidence, as well as **social changes**, including the emergence of a new elite with new tastes in art and tea.

Government by officials largely selected through examinations also gave the political system a modern look, but, after the failure of an ambitious attempt at centralization, government remained limited in its reach. Local elite families, once firmly established, dominated local affairs and supplied most of the examination candidates.

Click on the highlighted topics above to look more closely at the scenes in this handscroll depicting city life as rendered by a Song artist for a Song audience.

You can also begin by previewing a few scenes from the scroll at right — click on "explore scene" to get a closer look at any of the three featured scenes.

Or, start with an introduction to urban life in twelfth-century China as illustrated by the scroll ...

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Economic Growth: Rice Cultivation

Leads to a Population Boom

New developments in rice cultivation, especially the introduction of new strains from what is now Central Vietnam, spectacularly increased rice yields.

As a result the population, which had never before exceeded 60 million, grew to 100 million by 1127.

The population continued to increase until it reached perhaps 120 million in the 13th century. The highest concentrations of people were in the rice-lands of the south, which was to remain China's economic heartland, linked to the North by the Grand Canal.

Rice supports population increase because it yields more nutrition per land unit than any other grain. Rice was used primarily as food but was also used to brew the wine consumed in homes and taverns.

Related Web Link

Ancient Chinese Rice Archeological Project

This is an invaluable site for information on early rice culture in China. Scroll to the bottom to get to the Photo Galleries; Research Resources; and Paper Database sections, each of which includes excellent resource materials for teachers and students.

Economic Growth: Rice Cultivation

A Labor-intensive Crop

As grown throughout East Asia before modern times, rice required much labor — to prepare the paddy fields, plant and especially transplant the seedlings, as well as to weed, harvest, thresh, and husk.

Agricultural manuals helped to disseminate the best techniques for rice cultivation. The flooding of the paddies brought in many nutrients and reduced the need for fertilizer. A high seed-to-yield ratio and ease of transportation are other advantages of this crop.

There were also many varieties of rice, including drought resistant and early ripening varieties, as well as rice suited for special purposes such as brewing.

Since rice cultivation was so labor intensive, many people remained in the countryside to do the work. Still, there was an ample surplus to feed those who worked in manufacturing and commerce and to sustain a high level of material as well as aesthetic culture.

Farms produced the food to feed city people, and most Chinese remained farmers. The rectangular fields in this scene from the scroll (above right) are divided by irrigation channels, but the scene doesn't give us enough information to determine which crops in particular are grown there. We do know, however, that millet, wheat, and sorghum were the basic subsistence crops in the north, and that rice predominated in the south.

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Economic Growth: Manufacturing

Textiles and Silk

The common people mostly wore clothes made of plant fibers such as hemp, ramie, kudzu vine, etc. (bast fibers) and, at the end of the period, cotton — but the most highly prized fabric at home and abroad was silk, which was used to appease neighboring states and to ensure the comfort and elegance of the elite.

The feeding of silkworms — which devoured vast quantities of mulberry leaves — the cleaning of the habits of live silkworms, and the eventual transformation of their cocoons into silk was women's work, as was the weaving of simple cloth.

The production of the damasks, brocades, and many kind of gauzes favored by the elite required complex weaves and looms and was performed by private and state workshops.

Economic Growth: Manufacturing

Ceramics

In English, "china" has become synonymous with dinnerware, and during the Song the industry reached a new level of elegance and sophistication.

To begin with, there was a proliferation of shapes, colors, and decoration during the Song, with techniques ranging from painting and carving to stamping and moulding. Kiln sites produced a variety of objects, including many kinds of bowls and plates, as well as boxes, ink slabs, and pillows (headrests). Some sites could produce as many as 20,000 objects a day for sale at home and abroad.

Song shards have been found on the coast of Africa.

Economic Growth: Manufacturing

Construction and Building

The Song saw an impressive development of iron and steel production for agricultural tools, as well as for such new developments as chains for suspension bridges and drill bits for the sinking of wells with bamboo serving as natural pipe.

Meanwhile steel tips increased the effectiveness of Song arrows also equipped with flame-throwers and "crouching tiger catapults" for throwing bombs. Gun-powder was also used to good effect in mining.

The Chinese were also world leaders in ship-building including water-tight compartments and stern-post rudders. They navigated with the aid of (south-pointing) compasses, another Chinese invention.

Related Web Link

NOVA Builds a Rainbow Bridge [NOVA online/PBS.org] This site gives a step-by-step description, with images, of how the "Rainbow Bridge" in the scroll (shown above right) might have been built.

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Commercialization: Markets & Transport

Rural markets, as well as cities and towns, facilitated the exchange of goods and services. Some of the products on sale in this city depicted in the scroll would have come from nearby farms, but others came from far away.

Then, as still often now, donkeys did much of the work in the North. For heavy transport there were wagons and large wheelbarrows, while camels linked China to the world beyond the deserts.

Water transport, however, has always been far cheaper than going over land. The South, with its many rivers and waterways, had an advantage in this respect, but northern cities too were served by water transport. Here we see men unloading bales of grain.

International maritime trade also flourished during this time. Quanzhou in the Fujian region became a major center of trade with Southeast and South Asia, as well as with Korea and Japan.

Commercialization: Paper Money

Helping to grease the wheels of trade was the world's first paper money.

The basic unit of payment was copper coins strung on a string, but these were heavy and cumbersome for use in large-scale transactions. The Song solution was to print paper money — Marco Polo's report of this was met with incredulity in the West.

Commercialization: The City of Quanzhou

Although most trade was internal, there was also a vigorous ocean trade from Quanzhou and other ports linking China, not only with Japan but also with the trading centers in Southeast and South Asia.

Although agriculture was still the dominant source of revenue for the state, the custom duties collected at Quanzhou were an important addition.

Note: The city depicted in the scroll can be considered a typical Song city; it is not the city of Quanzhou.

Related Web Links

- **Learning about Quanzhou: The Archaeology of a Medieval Port in Fujian, China [Univ. of British Columbia]** Quanzhou was a vigorous trading center during the Song dynasty. This site includes highly informative text along with several illustrations and is based on research by members of the departments of archaeology and sociology at the University of British Columbia.
- **Quanzhou, An Eastern City: Song Dynasty Shipwreck and the History of Shipbuilding in Zaitun [Quanzhou People's Government]** Part of a larger site on the rich history of the city of Quanzhou, this page describes a 1974 unearthing of a Song-dynasty ship.

Urbanization: A New Kind of City

As in previous dynasties, the Song's largest cities were its capitals — Kaifeng during the Northern Song and Hangzhou after the dynasty was confined to the South, (1127-1279).

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But unlike previous capitals such as the Tang dynasty's Changan, the Song capitals did not have walled off wards. Instead, they boasted a lively street life, with markets, shops, and restaurants about which we know in surprising detail. Kaifeng did have an external wall, but its population spilled beyond it. The wall we see in the scroll has lost its military purpose, but its gate — seen here — still forms an impressive entrance into the city.

Intellectual Life: Neo-Confucianism

There was a vigorous revival of Confucianism in the Song that dominated the schools and the civil-service-examination system, as well as political discourse.

Contributing to the diverse intellectual life of the time was one of China's greatest poets, Su Shi (1037-1101); the historian and conservative political leader Sima Guang; and the leaders of the movement known in the West as Neo-Confucianism, which was to spread throughout East Asia.

Confucianism provided a faith for people to live by, a convincing account of the natural and human world, and a theoretical framework for state and society. It emphasized self-cultivation as a path not only to self-fulfillment but to the formation of a virtuous and harmonious society and state. Some might emphasize one aspect more than the other, but ideally, learning to be a better and wiser person went hand in hand with service to the larger social body.

Online Reading

- **First Prose Poem on the Red Cliffs, by Su Shi**

Related Web Links

- **Su Shi, poet and calligrapher [Chinapage.org]** This site includes several of the poet's works in Chinese, with their English translations, as well as a recitation in Chinese of *The Red Cliff* poem and a few portraits of Su Shi.
- **Confucianism and the Chinese Scholastic System [California State Polytechnic University, Pomona]** This site includes a discussion of the Chinese Imperial Examination System, by which qualified scholars were appointed to civil-service positions. Also has links to sections on "Confucianism and the Chinese Scholastic System" and "Ancient Chinese Science and Technology."

Intellectual Life: Buddhism

Buddhism was widespread among both commoners and the elite. Among the elite, the most influential Buddhist sect was the Chan (better known in the present-day West by the Japanese pronunciation of the word — Zen).

The city we see in the scroll is unusual in having only one relatively obscure temple. As in earlier cities, the highest structure in Kaifeng, the Northern Song's capital, was a pagoda. Although pagodas don't appear in this scroll, they dominated the skyline of many cities during the Song dynasty, as they had in the Tang dynasty. Like the spires of Europe's cathedrals and churches, the city pagoda was often the first thing the traveler would see as he approached a city or town.

Related Web Links

- **The "Iron Pagoda" in Kaifeng [ChinaTravel.com]** With an image and short description of the 11th-century "iron pagoda," which remains today a key attraction for visitors to Kaifeng.

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• **Seated Buddhist figure, Northern Song [The Saint Louis Art Museum]** Image and short description of a gilt-and-polychrome wood sculpture of a Buddhist "Guanyin" figure from the Northern Song.

Intellectual Life: Printing & Education

Woodblock printing was invented earlier in Chinese history, but did not come into wide use until the Song dynasty.

When it did come into common use, printing provided much wider access to books than had been the case when manuscripts were laboriously copied by hand.

The availability of inexpensive texts led to an increase in literacy. One result was that more families could afford to finance a son's education, which led to a swelling of the ranks of examination candidates.

Another was that it gave a boost to the development of drama and other forms of popular culture. The story tellers in our scroll may have benefited from perusing prompt books.

Social Changes: The Emergence of a New Elite

Socially, there were changes in the status system at large. There were also more subtle shifts in the micro world of the family, which remained the basic institution in Chinese practice as well as Confucian theory.

In place of the hereditary aristocracy, which was unable to survive the turbulence accompanying and following the fall of the Tang dynasty, there developed a broader elite that, ideally, based its wealth on land ownership, its prestige on learning, and its political clout on access to office and office holders.

The emergence of this class had much to do with the Song dynasty's commitment to rule by civilian bureaucrats (at the expense of the military) chosen by examination. In a society in which most people were illiterate, or at best semi-literate, the elite stood out by virtue of their reading and writing skills. Male learning was particularly stressed since it gave access to the examinations. The majority of examination candidates failed, but studying for the examinations produced men throughout the land who were educated in the same classic texts.

Social Changes: Family and the Status of Women

In the history of the family, the shifts are more difficult to trace, given the major regional and community variations.

The emergence of a new ideal of the "willow-waisted woman," a stronger advocacy against widow remarriage, the presence of some bound feet in Southern Song all suggest a decline in status of women.

However, the control women gained over property, their ability to inherit, their control of family budgets, and of their children's education show that older women were not without authority.

Children

The Song appears to have been the age of the discovery of childhood as a distinct phase of human life. At least the literature and art seem to suggest. The toy peddler in the scroll is only one of a number of figures to have survived, and there are other paintings showing children.

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Social Changes: The Military and New Technology

Determined to keep power out of the hands of the military, the Song rulers reduced the status of its military men. No longer could officials move between the civil and military services, and sometimes soldiers were even tattooed to keep them from deserting.

The Song were effective militarily due more to new technology than military skills. Perhaps not without significance is that Yo Fei, the dynasty's most famous general who is still revered today, died in prison.

Social Changes: The Civil Service Examinations

Since the Sui Dynasty (581-617), passing a series of examinations led to office in the civil service. It was only in the Song, however, that the examination system came to be considered the normal ladder to success, though even then many took alternate routes.

Despite strenuous debates about issues of examination content, the exam questions were always based on a command of Confucian texts.

Honesty was ensured by such measures as identifying papers by number rather than the candidate's name. Examination taking could become a lifetime endeavor. Competition was keen from the start, but became intolerable by the end of the Song Dynasty.

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