

SONG DYNASTY (960 - 1279)

The Song Dynasty was the ruling dynasty in China between 960 and 1279; it succeeded the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, and was followed by the Yuan Dynasty. It was the first government in world history to issue banknotes or paper money, and the first Chinese government to establish a permanent standing navy. This dynasty also saw the first known use of gunpowder, as well as the first discernment of true north using a compass.

The Song Dynasty is divided into two distinct periods: the Northern Song and Southern Song. During the Northern Song (960–1127), the Song capital was in the northern city of Bianjing (now Kaifeng) and the dynasty controlled most of inner China. The Southern Song refers to the period after the Song lost control of northern China to the Jin Dynasty. During this time, the Song court retreated south of the Yangtze River and established their capital at Lin'an (now Hangzhou). Although the Song Dynasty had lost control of the traditional birthplace of Chinese civilization along the Yellow River, the Song economy was not in ruins, as the Southern Song Empire contained some 60 percent of China's population and a majority of the most productive agricultural land. The Southern Song Dynasty considerably bolstered its naval strength to defend its waters and land borders and to conduct maritime missions abroad.

To repel the Jin, and later the Mongols, the Song developed revolutionary new military technology augmented by the use of gunpowder. In 1234, the Jin Dynasty was conquered by the Mongols, who took control of northern China, maintaining uneasy relations with the Southern Song. Möngke Khan, the fourth Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, died in 1259 while besieging a city in Chongqing. His younger brother Kublai Khan was proclaimed the new Great Khan, though his claim was only partially recognized by the Mongols in the west. In 1271, Kublai Khan was proclaimed the Emperor of China. After two decades of sporadic warfare, Kublai Khan's armies ended the Song Dynasty in 1279. China was once again unified, under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368).

The population of China doubled in size during the 10th and 11th centuries. This growth came as a result of expanded rice cultivation in central and southern China, the use of early-ripening rice from southeast and southern Asia, and the production of abundant food surpluses. The Northern Song census recorded a population of roughly 50 million, much like the Han and Tang dynasties. This data is found in the Standard Histories. However, it is estimated that the Northern Song may have had a population of up to 100 million people. This dramatic increase of population fomented an economic revolution in pre-modern China. The expansion of the population was partially the cause for the gradual withdrawal of the central government from heavily regulating the market economy. A much larger populace also increased the importance of the lower gentry's role in grassroots administration and local affairs. Appointed officials in county and provincial centers relied upon the scholarly gentry for their services, sponsorship, and local supervision.

The Song Dynasty was an era of administrative sophistication and complex social organization. Some of the largest cities in the world were found in China during this period (Kaifeng and Hangzhou had populations of over a million). People enjoyed various social clubs and entertainment in the cities, and there were many schools and temples to provide the people with education and religious services. The Song government supported multiple forms of social welfare programs, including the establishment of retirement homes, public clinics, and pauper's graveyards. The Song Dynasty supported a widespread postal service that was modeled on the earlier Han Dynasty (202 BC – AD 220) postal system to provide swift communication throughout the empire. The central government employed thousands of postal

workers of various ranks and responsibilities to provide service for post offices and larger postal stations. In rural areas, farming peasants either owned their own plots of land, paid rents as tenant farmers, or were serfs on large estates.

Although women were on a lower social tier than men (according to Confucian ethics), they enjoyed many social and legal privileges and wielded considerable power at home and in their own small businesses. As Song society became more and more prosperous and parents on the bride's side of the family provided larger dowries for her marriage, women naturally gained many new legal rights in ownership of property. They were also equal in status to men in inheriting family property. There were many notable and well-educated women and it was a common practice for women to educate their sons during their earliest youth. The mother of the scientist, general, diplomat, and statesman Shen Kuo taught him essentials of military strategy. There were also exceptional women writers and poets such as Li Qingzhao (1084–1151), who became famous even in her lifetime.

Religion in China during this period had a great effect on people's lives, beliefs and daily activities, and Chinese literature on spirituality was popular. The major deities of Daoism and Buddhism, ancestral spirits and the many deities of Chinese folk religion were worshiped with sacrificial offerings. Tansen Sen asserts that more Buddhist monks from India traveled to China during the Song than in the previous Tang Dynasty (618–907). With many ethnic foreigners traveling to China to conduct trade or live permanently, there came many foreign religions; religious minorities in China included Middle Eastern Muslims, the Kaifeng Jews, and Persian Manichaeans.

Social life during the Song was vibrant; social elites gathered to view and trade precious artworks, the populace intermingled at public festivals and private clubs, and cities had lively entertainment quarters. The spread of literature and knowledge was enhanced by the earlier invention of woodblock printing and the 11th-century invention of movable type printing. Pre-modern technology, science, philosophy, mathematics, engineering, and other intellectual pursuits flourished over the course of the Song. Philosophers such as Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi reinvigorated Confucianism with new commentary, infused with Buddhist ideals, and emphasized a new organization of classic texts that brought out the core doctrine of Neo-Confucianism. Although the institution of the civil service examinations had existed since the Sui Dynasty, it became much more prominent in the Song period. This became a leading factor in the shift of aristocratic elite to bureaucratic elite.

Editor:

Walter Koh

(McGill University)