

Song Dynasty

Sòng Cháo 宋朝

960–1279 Northern Song (960–1126); Southern Song (1127–1279)

The Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279) defined a new and enduring phase of China's premodern civilization, including southward economic shift, flourishing of urban culture, revival of the classical heritage over medieval Buddhism, and a new class of civil administrators who served the enhanced imperial autocracy.

The Song 宋 dynasty's duration of 320 years ranks second only to the Han 汉 dynasty's four centuries (206 BCE–220 CE) during the two millennia of China's imperial age (221 BCE–1912 CE). Like the Han, the Song dynastic court was reestablished in a distant locale after its earlier capital had been occupied by enemies. But unlike the Han, which regained control over all of China proper, the Song lost the ancient northern heartland to nomadic invaders for the second half of its dynastic era. So historians refer to the Northern (960–1126) and Southern (1127–1279) phases of the whole Song dynastic period.

Even the Northern Song never succeeded in fully reconstituting the entire territory of China proper, much less in projecting power beyond the Great Wall, as the Han and Tang 唐 (618–907 CE) dynasties had done. Two powerful non-Chinese nations, formerly allied with China's great medieval Tang dynasty, had survived its fall and established their own independent states, occupying territories that straddled the borders of China proper. To the northwest was the Xia 夏 state (1032–1227, also known as Xi Xia 西夏), established by a nation with Tibetan

ethnic affiliations. To the northeast lay the Liao 辽 state (916–1125), founded by a seminomadic tribal federation, the Qidan 契丹 (or Khitan), from which come the Russian name for China (Khitai) and the medieval European name (Cathay). Song was forced to secure peace with Liao and Xia by paying annual tribute while submitting to unprecedented terms of diplomatic equality. In the far south, Vietnam's national independence from China commenced in the early tenth century, and the Song dynasty's attempted suppression failed to reassert the dominance that the Han and Tang dynasties previously held over northern Vietnam.

How then, being so weak, did the Song dynasty manage to survive for so long, and why is it worthy of our regard today? Patriotic and nationalist Chinese since Song times have often expressed regret, or even humiliation, at the Northern Song's unprecedented acknowledgment of equal diplomatic status with its predatory neighbors and at the Southern Song's extended failure to recover north China. Even so, uncomfortable reservations about the Song's diminished geostrategic posture, compared to the expansive glory of the preceding Tang dynasty, are strongly offset by characteristic Chinese pride in the Song's outstanding economic and cultural achievements, for which it is often regarded as the acme of Chinese civilization.

Considered in global context, the Song period shows marked features of modern societies: a fundamentally rational, non-mystical worldview; transformation of society by growth of technology, commerce, and population; and development of strong state institutions with increasing influence in society.

The creative reformulation of Chinese culture, which came to fruition in Song times, made the preceding age of the Tang dynasty seem almost unrecognizably alien to historically aware people of the Song. The Song times generated mature intellectual, social, and political models that remained definitive in China until the twentieth century. If the Song was weak in its own East Asian region, its world-leading scientific and commercial strengths were nevertheless greatly admired in faraway lands to the south and west. Three world-changing inventions—printing, gunpowder, and the maritime compass—first exerted powerfully transforming effects in Song China before these technologies were transmitted as far west as Europe.

Transformation of China

The Song period marks a distinctive phase in two major trends that had gradually transformed China during the preceding millennium since the Han dynasty. The first trend was a strenuous effort to gain direct access to the cultural and material riches of the ancient Persian and Indian civilizations by state-sponsored expansion from the Huang (Yellow) River valley westward into Central Asia. The second was the conquest, colonization, and integration of the Yangzi (Chang) River valley and points south by successive regimes based in the Huang valley, leading also to fruitful contacts with Indian civilization through Southeast Asia.

A turning point in the unfolding of these two trends occurred in the mid-Tang period, in the decade of the 750s, and may be suggestively summarized by three events. First, in 751 an Arab army, aided by Turkish forces formerly allied with the Tang dynasty, defeated a multinational Tang army at Talas River in modern Kyrgyzstan, in the context of keen strategic competition for control of the profitable trans-Eurasian trade route. Second, in 752, in the wake of that defeat, a Tang general of Iranian cultural origin instigated a massive civil war in north China that destroyed the Tang state's central power. The dynasty survived in name for another 150 years while the weakening of its control over land tenure and markets greatly stimulated economic growth in the semiautonomous southern provinces. Third, in 758 Baghdad was founded in Mesopotamia as the capital of the new Abbasid dynasty.

At that time non-Chinese infidel powers in Central Asia restricted direct overland access to north China. Thus trade between Islamic centers and the Far East increasingly flowed by the southern maritime route from Baghdad through Basra and the Persian Gulf on to distant ports in India, Southeast Asia, and the southern coast of China.

In the late ninth century, when the Chinese rebel Huang Chao 黃巢 sacked Guangzhou 廣州 (Canton), many thousands of resident Islamic traders were massacred. The violence of that event is but one dimension of a multifaceted yet pervasive nativist reaction against the early Tang period's cosmopolitan openness through which China had gained and given much in cultural exchange and commercial intercourse with other ancient civilizations. Buddhism, which had thoroughly pervaded Chinese culture during the previous five hundred years, came under attack for being of foreign origin and thus allegedly at odds with characteristic Chinese commitments to family and the sociopolitical hierarchy. The revival of Confucian ideas in Song times was associated with heightened sensitivity to distinctions between Chinese and foreign.

In the early tenth century, five brief regimes successively ruled ancient China's political heartland in the Huang River valley, most of them based at Kaifeng 開封. Contesting for the imperial legacy after the Tang's fall, the increasingly intense wars of this transitional era exhausted the hereditary clans, whose military power had dominated medieval society for nearly a millennium, opening the way to a new governing elite of civil administrators and to unprecedented elevation of the emperor above his chief counselors.

Kaifeng's emergence as an imperial capital signifies fundamental economic change. At the start of the imperial era, prosperity in the capital cities of the Qin 秦 (221–206 BCE) and former Han dynasties had depended on irrigation and transport by canals built in the secure zone at the juncture of the Huang and Wei 渭 rivers. But by Tang times reliable local food supply was inadequate for that northwestern capital area's enlarged population, which became dependent on rice shipped by the Grand Canal from the remote southeastern Yangzi River delta, a naturally well-watered "land of fish and rice," as the colloquial saying puts it. The Grand Canal greatly promoted links between these two major river valleys during the



Emperor Song Taizu, founder of the Song dynasty, was a childhood devotee of the martial arts.

long Tang dynasty, as China's economic and demographic center shifted southward. Kaifeng's advantageous location, near the juncture of the Huang River and the Grand Canal, guaranteed the security of regular food supply to the court there.

Kaifeng was a new kind of capital city, with a thriving urban life based on commerce. Before the mid-Tang period, China's few large cities had principally served administrative functions, largely related to taxation and conscription of the large peasant population and to regional military control. Private commerce was relatively undeveloped, and state monopolies controlled production of strategic commodities essential to maintaining a balanced peasant economy, such as salt and iron tools, as well as luxuries like silks, some of which were exported overland to western Asia at great profit. Accordingly, in

early imperial capitals, such as Chang'an 长安, for example, residents typically lived in closed courtyards, and night curfews were enforced.

But from the late Tang through the Northern Song, over three and a half centuries, the number of urban prefectures with populations of more than 100,000 doubled, from twenty-six to fifty-two. Dramatic growth of domestic trade, stimulated by use of the world's first paper money, significantly reduced interregional differences within China proper. Economic and cultural integration was further supported by the rapid spread of book publishing. When Kaifeng became the Song capital, it was already a well-developed commercial city, and its flourishing economic and social life continued unabated. The brilliance, elegance, and raw human energy of scenes in and near the Northern Song capital are vividly portrayed with realistic

and colorful detail in a famous horizontal handscroll more than 5 meters long, known as *Peace Reigns over the River* (*Qingming shanghe tu* 清明上河图).

NORTHERN SONG

In 960, facing a threat from the Khitan, an educated professional military officer named Zhao Kuangyin 赵匡胤 usurped the reigning child emperor in a bloodless coup and founded the Song dynasty, a name that commemorates a classical feudal state of that region. Facing imminent invasion by the Khitan, Zhao judged that the urgent need for competent leadership outweighed the normative demands of loyalty to an immature sovereign. This instance of a classic ethical conundrum in dynastic politics has been generally, if not universally, approved by historians, a verdict that accords with the generally elevated character of the Zhao family's ruling style through eighteen reigns.

Concerned with forestalling any further coup against himself, the Song founder immediately persuaded his own commanders to accept lavish retirement under his close surveillance, thus centralizing military power, which remained a characteristic feature of Song rule. This opened the way to a century and a half of internal peace in China proper and to one of its most glorious phases of cultural and economic growth.

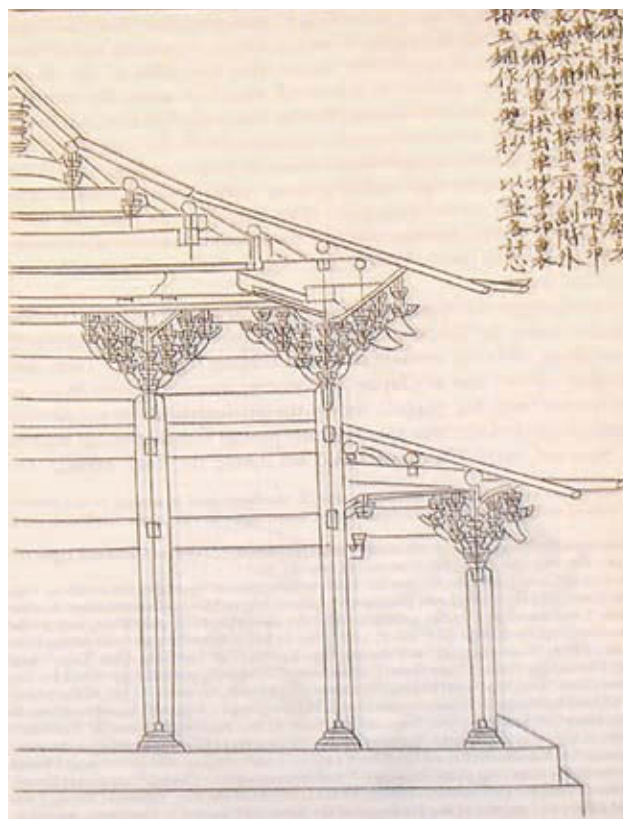
Powerful non-Chinese states, formerly allied with the Tang dynasty, faced the newly established Song state on its northern frontier. Northern Song never controlled the far northwestern Gansu 甘肃 corridor, which had been crucial for access to Central Asia during the Han and early Tang. Rather, the early Song's chief external concern was with the northeastern threat emanating from the environs of modern Beijing 北京, where the Liao dynasty had established its southern capital (then called Yan 燕), the first instance of that city's later continuing role as the capital of successive regimes with Chinese-style imperial pretensions. In response to this major geostrategic shift, the Song founder followed recent precedents that placed the administrative center at Kaifeng, in the eastern part of modern Henan 河南 Province. This move marked a decisive break with dynastic traditions of the previous millennium.

During the whole Song period, China's population is estimated to have doubled, from some 50 million to more

than 100 million, amounting to around one quarter of the presumed global total. Agriculture became increasingly commercialized as its growing productivity was driven by the spread of innovative technologies. Many landlords left their country estates to take up residence in towns and cities. The consequent changes in elite lifestyle contributed to a new, commercially oriented urban culture with a decidedly more open, mobile, and competitive society. A new and lasting style of painting emerged among cultivated literati, which featured exquisitely articulated views of man in balanced harmony with impressive natural settings. Household amenities such as venetian blinds and playing cards, among many others, were well known in Song China before being transmitted to the West.

Membership in the new type of social elite, which formed in the Northern Song and persisted until the twentieth century, could be gained only through success

Architectural manual from the Song Dynasty, demonstrating a classic innovation of this time period: a system of cantilevered joints that distributes weight evenly on a support.



in the highly competitive civil examinations. This institution's dominant social role over a millennium exerted a Darwinian effect favoring demographic propagation of aptitudes for book learning, which have remained a major asset for China's modernization.

Underlying this remarkable quantitative growth and qualitative change were the long internal peace, gained by centralizing control over military forces, and the qualitative enhancement of bureaucratic administration, particularly through expanded use of civil examinations for recruiting officials. Song emperors were distinctively humane in applying their autocratic powers, habitually respecting their civil officials. New tensions, between the anticommercial bias of revived classical Confucian ethics and the unprecedented contemporary realities of a thriving national economy, were played out in court politics of the Song period, establishing negative precedents that have exerted effects into recent times. But the overall system of regional and local administration was rationalized to an unprecedented degree, enhancing efficiency of population registration, tax collection and transport, and disaster relief, thus facilitating widespread improvements in the popular livelihood. The rise of schools throughout the some fifteen hundred counties greatly promoted education and stimulated social mobility, which brought extraordinary creative vitality to eleventh-century Song China.

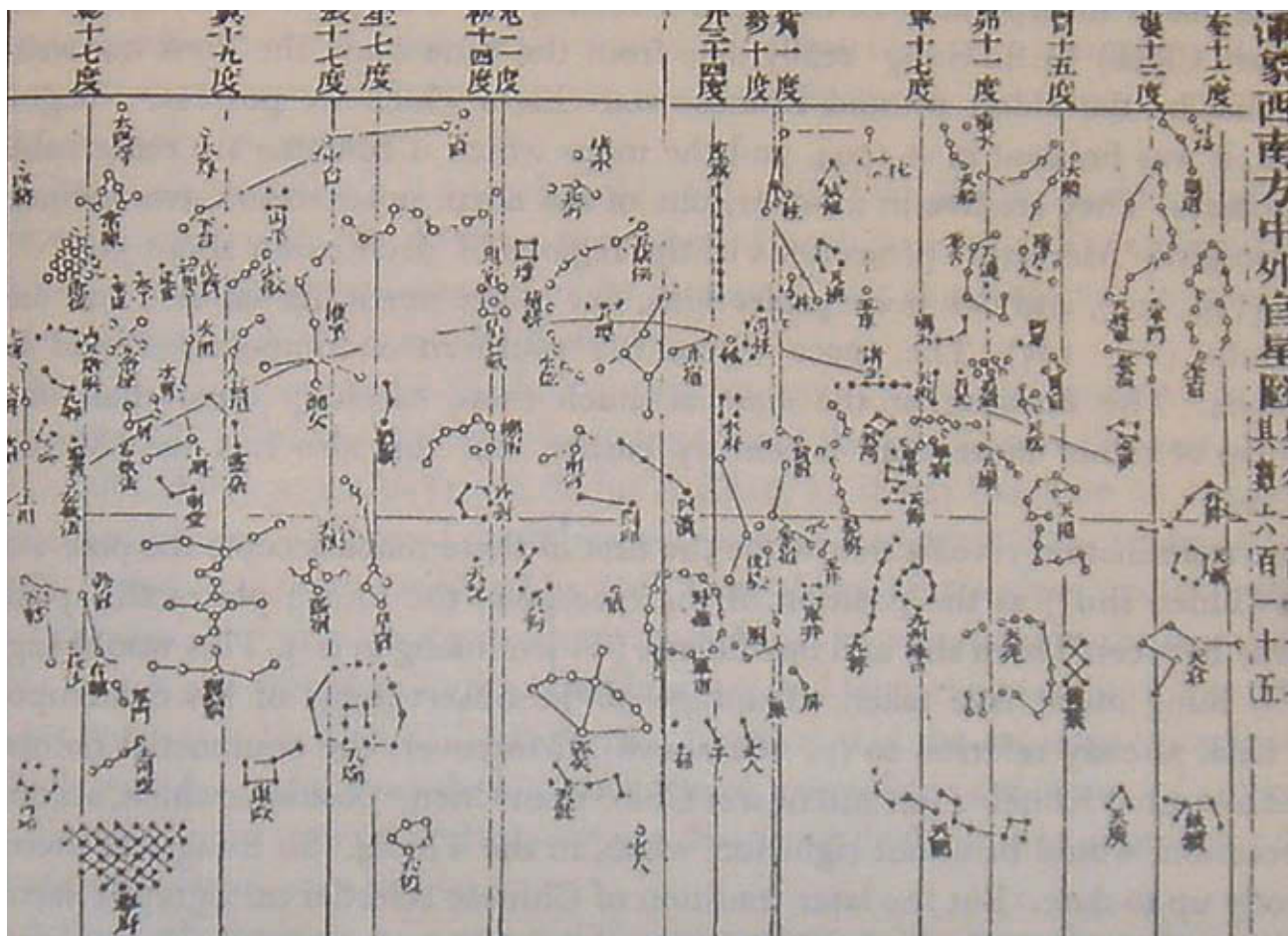
The Song dynasty's chief defects were two. The first was a relatively weak military position toward powerful and predatory nomads in the north because of excessive military centralization intended as a guard against civil war; thus the unheroic policy of utilizing China's wealth to buy peace was arguably a rational and humane choice intended to avoid the devastation of war and maintain political stability. The second defect was a tendency to administrative paralysis caused by intense factional disputes among bureaucrats, arising from the Confucian stress on principled search for truth by individuals and a heightened emphasis on personal loyalty to the ruler, which allowed no place for a loyal opposition.

Song China's burgeoning emporia attracted resident merchants from distant points in the Islamic trade networks which then spanned Eurasia. A Jewish community, which Chinese did not distinguish clearly from Muslims, is known to have existed by the eleventh century

in Kaifeng, where it remained well established for eight centuries until being dispersed during civil disturbances in the nineteenth century. Thus, although in recent years some Chinese citizens have affirmed personal Jewish ancestry, Jews have not been officially recognized as one of the fifty-six ethnic communities or five religions of contemporary China. On the other hand, Quanzhou 泉州, a port city on the southeast coast, during the Southern Song hosted a large population of Islamic traders whose descendants remain today a conspicuous and distinctive presence in that area.

Iron production in Song China reached levels unmatched anywhere until the nineteenth century. Chinese utilized coal, a fuel unknown to Europeans like Marco Polo, who wondered at the black rock that burned when he visited China in the generation following the Song dynasty's fall. Song period advances in the application of agricultural technology, such as a pedal-driven waterwheel for irrigation, in combination with the sophisticated use of multiple cropping, dramatically increased agricultural output, especially in the long Yangzi River valley from Nanjing 南京 west to Sichuan 四川 and further south. Intense use of water transport in the many canals, rivers, and lakes of south China underlay development of marine technology employed in building the contemporary world's largest and best designed ocean-going vessels. Such ships, constructed with sternpost rudders and watertight compartments, and carrying several hundred men, often sailed to ports of the western Indian Ocean.

Heavy expenses for northern military defense burdened the treasury by the middle of the eleventh century, provoking efforts at institutional reform and rationalization implicitly aimed to "enrich the state in order to strengthen the military," as the classical maxim puts it. Reformers, such as Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1085), were also sincerely motivated by Confucian principles of benefiting the people. They were opposed by conservatives, such as Sima Guang 司马光 (1019–1086), who were equally devoted to different understandings of the shared Confucian teachings and of the common good. The creative optimism of early Northern Song scholar-officials, such as Fan Zhongyan 范仲淹 (989–1052) and Ouyang Xiu 欧阳修 (1007–1072), who sought innovative and practical solutions to contemporary problems in accord



Astronomy flourished during the Song Dynasty. Diagrams such as this one that have survived the ages remain potent sources of information regarding past heavenly events.

with Confucian values, yielded to a political stalemate in which preemptive accusations of moral deviation stymied policymaking at the court. The failure of eleventh-century reforms left lasting effects on imperial government in later dynasties. Wealth gained from commerce was typically invested in farmland, which brought social prestige according to Confucian standards, while stunting the possibilities of independent capitalist development.

In the early twelfth century, a new power rose in northern Manchuria, the Jin 金 dynasty of the Jurchen 女真 nation (Jurchen Jin dynasty, 1125–1234), with whom the Song court made an alliance against their common enemy the Liao state. But in 1126 the Jin armies, after occupying Liao, continued southward and seized the Song capital at Kaifeng, carrying off the two last two Song emperors to

Manchuria, along with thousands of their clan members. None of them ever returned to China.

SOUTHERN SONG

Following this shocking disaster, a younger brother of the last Northern Song emperor reestablished the Song court in a temporary capital south of the Yangzi River at Hangzhou 杭州 in modern Zhejiang 浙江 Province, where it persisted for another century and a half until it was destroyed by the Mongol 蒙古 invasion in 1279. Even after losing all territories north of the Huai 淮 River basin, the Southern Song continued to grow economically and to thrive culturally, whereas the north lagged under alien rule. Southern export trade was expanded from one port,

Guangzhou (Canton), during the Northern Song to several other ports along the coast: Hangzhou, Quanzhou, and Ningbo 宁波, for example. State revenues from maritime trade outgrew income from agriculture, indicating a pragmatic attitude toward the anticommercial ethos of neo-Confucian moral teachings that were concurrently being energetically promoted.

Chinese demographic presence in Southeast Asia can be traced to early communities of resident sojourners in this period. Rapidly ripening rice, allowing two crops to be harvested per year, was introduced to China from Southeast Asia, as was cotton. Chinese craftwares, such as the widely desired porcelains that we call china, and preserved foods were traded for luxury goods such as rare minerals or exotic fauna and flora. As wealthier Chinese consumed more meat, pepper from Java and Sumatra became a necessary import to China, as to Europe. Remains of Song period export products have been found as far away as Arabia and East Africa. A Chinese maritime record of the early thirteenth century indicates knowledge of western locales such as Baghdad, Cairo, and even Sicily.

In the Southern Song period, the Jiangnan 江南 region (southeast of the Yangzi River) for the first time became economically and culturally dominant in China, foreshadowing the rise of Nanjing as the founding capital of the Ming dynasty 明 (1368–1644) and later of the unified Republic of China from 1927 to 1949.

The Southern Song philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) has been called the single most influential person in the last millennium of Chinese history. Zhu creatively integrated pre-imperial Confucian teachings with Buddhist and Daoist perspectives, which had enlarged Chinese thought and enjoyed popular favor in the medieval period. Through Zhu's reformulation neo-Confucian thought transcended elite circles and became effectively competitive with Buddhism and Daoism for influence in society.

Zhu Xi's system, which was orthodox in China until the twentieth century, offered its followers a comforting sense of living in organic harmony with moral principles that were both universal and historically Chinese. Zhu's thought was rational, as opposed to mystic, but its emphasis on ethical learning diminished later Chinese thinkers' interest in natural science, which had advanced impressively during the Northern Song, as in the thought of

Shen Gua 沈括 (1031–1095). Thus personal commitment to core humanistic disciplines of the Confucian way, such as normative family relations and the prestige of classical and historical models, pervaded Chinese society at all levels during the last millennium.

Southern Song government was often dominated by powerful chief ministers who monopolized power by concurrently holding two or more offices originally meant to be separately staffed. Arbitrary governance paralyzed policymaking and administration, and demoralized officials, intensifying factional disputes.

End of an Age

World history was changed forever in the middle of the thirteenth century with the rise of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan's militantly aggressive Mongol empire, which destroyed the Jurchen Jin dynasty in north China in 1234 before invading Russia, Poland, and Hungary in 1240 and 1241. Western Europe was saved only because the advancing Mongol horde returned to Mongolia on the death of their "Great Khan." In the Middle East, they destroyed the secret Isma'ili Order of the Assassins and conquered Persia, sacking Baghdad in 1258 and taking Damascus and the Levant in 1260 before a planned attack on Egypt was blunted.

Still, Southern Song valiantly resisted until finally overcome in 1279 by the Mongols' Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) under Khubilai Khan, during whose reign (1260–1294) Marco Polo was in China. The Mongols' typically violent and suspicious ruling style, and their imposition of overbearing and exploitative top-down controls on local administration, introduced a shocking new despotism to Chinese government, with lasting reverberations through the centuries to modern times. Many Chinese scholars who had matured in the late Southern Song withheld their support of the new Yuan dynasty and so gained the honored name of principled loyalists to the glorious memory of the fallen Song, China's most civilized and enlightened age.

By Song times China had fully integrated the influences of the Indian Buddhist worldview and emerged with a renewed and strengthened Chinese identity. That historical experience prefigures China's struggle in the twentieth century to balance the universal claims of

Marxism and Western science with pride in its own native traditions, and suggests possibilities for China's role in the world of the present century.

Thomas BARTLETT

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