**7. THE SONG DYNASTY (960-1279)**

Over 300 years of Song history is divided into the two periods of Northern and Southern Song. Because of the barbarian occupation of northern China the second half of the Song rule was confined to the area south of the Huai River.

**Northern Song (960-1126)**. General Chao K'uang-yin, later known as Song T'ai Tsu, was said to have been coerced to become emperor in order to unify China. Wary of power-hungry commanders, Song T'ai Tsu made the military into a national army under his direct control. Under his less capable successors, however, the military increasingly lost prestige. Unfortunately for China, the weakening of the military coincided with the rise of successive strong nomad nations on the borders.

In contrast to the military's loss of prestige, the civil service rose in dignity. The examination system that had been restored in the Sui and T'ang was further elaborated and regularized. Selection examinations were held every three years at the district, provincial, and metropolitan levels.

Only 200 out of thousands of applicants were granted the jinshi degree, the highest degree, and appointed to government posts. From this time on, civil servants became China's most envied elite, replacing the hereditary nobles and landlords.

Song dominion extended over only part of the territories of earlier Chinese empires. The Khitans controlled the northeastern territories, and the Hsi Hsia (Western Hsia) controlled the northwestern territories. Unable to recover these lands, the Song emperors were compelled to make peace with the Khitans in 1004 and with the Hsi Hsia in 1044. Massive payments to the barbarians under the peace terms depleted the state treasury, caused hardship to taxpaying peasants, and gave rise to a conflict in the court among advocates of war, those who favored peace, and reformers.

In 1069 Emperor Shen TSong appointed Wang An-shih as chief minister. Wang proposed a number of sweeping reforms based on the classical text of the `Rites of Chou'. Many of his "new laws" were actually revivals of earlier policies, but officials and landlords opposed his reforms. When the emperor and Wang died within a year of each other, the new laws were withdrawn. For the next several decades, until the fall of the Northern Song in 1126, the reformers and antireformers alternated in power, creating havoc and turmoil in government.

In an effort to regain territory lost to the Khitans, the Song sought an alliance with the newly powerful Juchens from Manchuria. Once the alliance had expelled the Khitans, however, the Juchens turned on the Song and occupied the capital of Kaifeng. The Juchens established the dynasty of Chin, a name meaning "gold," which lasted from 1115 to 1234, in the north. They took the emperor and his son prisoner, along with 3,000 others, and ordered them to be held in Manchuria.

**Southern Song (1126-1279)**. Another imperial son fled south and settled in 1127 at Hangzhou, where he resumed the Song rule as the emperor Kao TSong. The Song retained control south of the Huai River, where they ruled for another one and a half centuries.

Although militarily weak and limited in area, the Southern Song represented one of China's most brilliant periods of cultural, commercial, maritime, and technological development. Despite the loss of the north, trade continued to expand, enabling a commercial revolution to take place in the 13th century. Cut off from the traditional overland trade routes, Song merchants turned to the ocean with the aid of such improvements as compasses and huge oceangoing ships called junks. The development of a paper money economy stimulated commercial growth and kept it going.

**End of the Southern Song**. While the Song ruling class and the imperial court indulged themselves in art and luxurious living in the urban centers, the latest nomad empire arose in the north. The formidable Mongol armies, conquerors of Eurasia as far west as eastern Europe and of Korea in the east, descended on the Southern Song.

**Culture in the Song period.**

The Song period was noted for landscape painting, which in time came to be considered the highest form of classical art. The city-dwelling people of the Song period romanticized nature. This romanticism, combined with a mystical, Taoist approach to nature and a Buddhist-inspired contemplative mood, was reflected in landscape paintings showing people dwarfed by nature.

In philosophy, the trend away from Buddhism and back to Confucianism, which had begun in the late T'ang, continued. Pure and simple restoration of the ancient teaching was impossible, however, because Confucianism had been challenged by Buddhism and Taoism. Confucianism needed to explain humanity and the universe as well as to regulate human relations within society. In the late T'ang and early Song, several strands of Confucianism emerged. The great scholar Chu Hsi synthesized elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. This reconstituted philosophy became known as Neo-Confucianism, and it was the orthodox state doctrine until the end of the imperial system. Chu Hsi's philosophy was one that stressed dualism, the goodness of human nature, and self-cultivation by education through the continuing "investigation of things."

The Song scholars and historians also attempted to synthesize history. Ssu-ma Kuang made the first effort at producing a comprehensive history since Ssu-ma Ch'ien of the Han. In 294 chapters, he wrote a chronological account of the period from 403 BC to AD 959, which was abridged by Chu Hsi in the 12th century. Another first in Song scholarship was the creation of encyclopedias. `Assembled Essentials on the T'ang', a collection completed in 961, became the example for the various types of encyclopedic literature that followed.

The Song period is famous for porcelain with a celadon glaze, which was one of the most desired items in foreign trade (See Pottery and Porcelain). The development of gunpowder led to the invention of a type of hand grenade. In shipbuilding, the great seagoing junks were admired and imitated by Arab and Western sailors. By far the largest ships in the world at the time, they had watertight compartments and could carry up to 1,000 passengers.

**The Song cities**. Oceanic and coastal trade was concentrated in large ports such as Canton, Hangzhou, and Chuanzhou (Marco Polo's Zayton), where large foreign trading communities developed. Koreans dominated the trade with the eastern islands, while Persians and Arabs controlled commerce across the western seas. Along with commercial expansion came the urbanization, or increasing importance of cities, in Song society. Hangzhou, the Southern Song capital, had a population of more than 2 million. Commercialization and urbanization had a number of effects on Chinese society. People in the countryside faced the problems of absentee landlordism. Although many city residents enjoyed luxury, with a great variety of goods and services, poverty was widespread.

A change associated with urbanization was the decline in the status of women of the upper classes. With the concentration of the upper classes in the cities, where the work of women became less essential, women were treated as servants and playthings. This was reflected in the practices of concubinage and of binding girls' feet to make them smaller. Neither practice was banned until the 20th century.

|  |
| --- |
| **Song Dynasty (960- 1279 AD)**The Song marked a period of transition in more “modern” forms of society as many of the powerful gentry families of the Tang period crumbled and a new era of social mobility for males of all classes began. The new leaders brought the military under control and strengthened the civil side of the government with modifications in the civil service examinations. As J.A.G. Roberts has noted, the society was becoming more a meritocracy, with less emphasis on family background. Chinese garden architecture**Chinese garden architecture in the Yangzi delta** As described in Module 1, development of new styles of urban life was associated with a growing middle-class due in large part to an increasingly sophisticated economic system that allowed the growth of merchant guilds and revived the use of money (which had declined in the previous eras). In part, this development was due to a shift in focus to the Yangzi delta, which had been growing in population for centuries and had been made more accessible due to the canal links to the north. The delta cities of Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Yangzhou all became important economic and cultural centers, and today offer some of the finest examples of Chinese garden architecture in existence . Scholars in these cities advanced the arts of landscape painting and poetry during this period. Many technological advances also occurred in the Song, including the widespread introduction of printing, advanced military devices employing gunpowder, irrigation techniques, watermills, and so forth.One less “modern” change was the increased restrictions on the activities of women within and without the home. Widows, for instance, were discouraged from re-marrying. Although many women were engaged in household textile production, they were seldom allowed to leave the home except for occasional visits to temples or to attend certain festivals. The relative freedoms of the Period of Disunion and the Tang were replaced by a stricter system of clan and household management that gave more power to male heads. Neo-Confucianism, which developed in the Song, served in part to define women’s roles in society.Although in many ways developments in the Song set new directions for the development of urban, mercantile lifeways that carried into the early twentieth century, as a whole the era was militarily weak and subject to invasion. Indeed, the Song is divided into two parts –the Northern Song (960-1127 AD) and Southern Song (1127-1279)—because of such invasions. By 960 the Jurched, a people from the northeast had conquered the lands north of the Yangzi River, setting up a large state called Jin. A Tibetan-related group known as the Tanguts established another state, called Xixia in the northwest in present-day Ningxia. In the southwest, a successor to the Nanzhao kingdom still held sway. As a result of the Jin invasion, the capital (located in the northern city of Kaifeng) moved to the southern city of Hangzhou, which for a time numbered over one million inhabitants. Although the Song continued in the south for over a hundred years, it too eventually fell to the Mongols in 1279, who moved against the Southern Song years after the forces of Genghis Khan had defeated the Jin. |