

Song Dynasty



The **Song Dynasty (960 to 1279)** brought many changes to China. The previous rulers, the Tang, had under Empress Wu, supported many rights for women. The Tang combined Buddhism and Daoism freely within their society. Empress Wu even took on the role of “mother” with her people. However, that was all going to change and under Song rule, a more restricted patriarchy was to emerge.

The Song Dynasty will be known for its “**Golden Age**” of art, architecture, poetry, landscape painting and pottery. The Song rulers advocate for scholarship in government that created **Neo-Confucianism**, a revival of old Confucian beliefs combined with Buddhism and Daoism.

The creation of a strong, central government was a major key to the dynasties success. The government consisted of six ministries – personnel, finance, rites, army, justice, and public works. To overview this political system, the **Censorate** was created to ensure that the government officials remained competent and in good character. To become a member of this bureaucracy, there was a rigorous series of examinations that had to be taken and if successful, that person became a member of the upper-class. However, many official positions were given to sons of the privileged under a system of **patronage**.

A rapid population growth (from 50 to 120 million people) combined with the adoption of fast-ripening and drought-resistant rice from Vietnam allowed the government to feed the people. **Urbanization** created economic success for the Song Dynasty. In the 1200’s, China was the most urbanized country in the world. There were dozens of Chinese cities with populations over 100,000 people and the capital the Song, Hangzhou, was home to more than a million people.

An excellent short reading on [The Cities of the Song](#) can be found on this link from Columbia.edu.

To supply these cities with food, the Song created an immense network of internal waterways using canals [**The Grand Canal**] that connected to rivers and lakes. This 30,000 mile system provided a cheap transportation system and created the “world’s most populous trading area.”

The Song were known for their large-scale industrial production, especially **iron**. Hundreds of workers supplied finished iron from small backyard furnaces that provided vast supplies suits of armor and arrowheads for the military. Other furnaces were used to produce metal for coins, tools, construction and even bells for Buddhist temples. The Song even used **coal** to heat these furnaces as well as it being fuel for heating homes and cooking.

Alchemy, the production of **gunpowder**, was adopted by the Chinese military during the Song Dynasty. One of its first known uses was to effectively defeat a Mongol invasion of northern China in 1231. By the 1350's, the Song military had developed the cannon. However their advantage was soon to decrease once other empires copied their inventions. [See the lesson on Gunpowder Empires].

Other notable inventions during the Song dynasty were **printing**, both block and moveable type that led to the world's first printed books, especially in the subjects of agriculture, mathematics, and medicine. The Song had the best **navigational and shipbuilding technologies** in the world.

To maintain a wealthy society, the Song dynasty developed an **extensive economic system** for their government. **Taxes** had to be paid in cash, meaning that the peasants who grew crops could no longer barter but had to sell their products. The use of **paper money** became a common form of transactions. In addition the creation of **letters of credit** and **promissory notes** improved commercial negotiations.



Paper money and metal coins from the Song Dynasty era

The “Golden Age” of the Song dynasty was not a good age for women. The freedoms once granted to women during the Han and Tang dynasties were taken away and a more **patriarchal** (male-dominated) society emerged. Confucian beliefs returned where women were weak and a major distraction to men. The remarriage of women, although legal, was increasingly condemned. The cultural tradition of **foot-binding** returned and young girls were groomed at an early age by their mothers for marriage, resulting in a life of servitude to the husband. Men began to replace women workers in the textile and silk industries.

One notable difference about the role of women was seen in the cities. Some worked and operated restaurants, others sold fish and vegetables in the market places and female maids, cooks and dressmakers were common. In addition, the Song government gave property rights to women, especially from their own **dowries** and **property inheritances**. Low-ranking government officials did advocate for a woman's education as they believed that an educated woman would raise smarter sons that in the long-term would add to the family's fortune. In conclusion, the Song Dynasty offered a combination of harsher restrictions in rural areas and new opportunities in the cities for women.

However, the “Golden Age” of the Song dynasty would come to an end in 1279 with the invasion of China by the Mongols.