

The Song Dynasty

After the Tang dynasty, the Song dynasty was a time that helped to unite Chinese culture. The revival of Confucian thought again made an impact on China during the Song Dynasty. This time is known as the “Chinese Renaissance” because it was full of progress in technology and inventions.

The Song Empire never matched the Tang dynasty in terms of extent of land controlled or military power but they did impact the future of the Chinese civilization. In the Song government, the scholar-gentry carefully restrained military growth to prevent internal insurrection.

Under the scholar-gentry, Confucianism was revived. Confucianism became a powerful force of thought in what is generally called the Song Confucian Revival or neo-Confucianism. In the centuries preceding, Buddhism was the dominant force in China; the intellectual centers of China were the Buddhist temples. But in the Song, the center of intellectual activity again devolved on the scholar. Like Confucius and his followers, Neo-Confucians were primarily concerned with ethics rather than abstract religious or metaphysical speculation; his overwhelming concern lies in the concerns of government and the ethics of day to day living. As a result of this Confucian revival, the government itself undertook massive reforms according to Confucian principles; part of this reform was the extension of the examination system for choosing government officials. Song rulers promoted the interests of the Confucian bureaucracy. The examination system was further regularized. Passage of the exams was made easier, leading to a large and inefficient bureaucracy. It was hostile to foreign thought, making the bureaucracy less receptive of outside ideas and technologies. It had a major emphasis on tradition, social hierarchy, gender distinction, and served to harden the Chinese social system.

1. Why was the Song dynasty known as the Chinese Renaissance?
2. What is Neo-Confucianism? How did it impact China?

Decline of the Song Dynasty

The Song Dynasty was not as strong as the Tang. Its military weakness on the frontiers led to external pressure on the Song Empire. Tangut tribesmen created the rival kingdom of Xi Xia on the northern borders of China. They were able to force the Song to pay tribute. Tribute payments to the Liao and Xi Xia in addition to military costs placed increasing burdens on the bureaucracy and the Chinese economy. In the long run, military performance suffered. In the 1070s and 1080s, Wang Anshi, chief minister of the Song emperor, attempted to enact reforms. Taxes were extended to the scholar-gentry as a means of improving the military.

When the emperor who had supported Wang's reforms died, his successor preferred the traditional approaches to government. When Wang's reforms were reversed, conditions worsened. In 1115, the Jurchens, northern nomads who had overthrown the Liao, successfully invaded the northern frontiers of the Song Empire. The Song government was forced to flee southward to the Yangtze basin, where they established a new capital at Hang Zhou. Following the flight, the dynasty was referred to as the southern Song. It existed as a rump state until its final demise in 1279.

1. What were some weaknesses of the Song Empire?
2. What did they do to try and fix their weaknesses? Did they work?

3. What eventually happened to the Song?

Tang and Song Prosperity: The Basis of a Golden Age

A massive population increase of ethnic Chinese in the southern portions of China compelled the emperors from the Sui on to improve communications, most commonly through the construction of a series of canals linking the north China plain with the Yangtze River basin. The Grand Canal both facilitated bureaucratic control of the south and increased economic exchange between the Yangtze and northern China. The construction of the Grand Canal accelerated the shift of population to the south.

Tang conquests on the western frontier opened up trade routes and helped to establish connections between the civilized cores of Eurasia. China tended to export manufactured goods and import luxuries. Commercial shipping improved as the pace of trade quickened. Chinese junks were perhaps the finest commercial vessels in the world at this time. Market quarters in Chinese cities grew larger. These markets were organized by local guilds. Exchanges involving money and credit became common. The government began the introduction of paper money in the eleventh century during the Tang era.

Confucian thinkers advocated the restriction of women to the household. Confucians drafted laws favoring males in inheritance and permitting divorce. Women were excluded from the education system, and thus from public life. The practice of foot-binding during the late Tang and Song dynasties secluded women by literally removing their physical mobility. It was considered beautiful to have small feet and women would have their feet bound or tied back at a young age in order to have small feet. Foot-binding became typical of all social classes.

Major technological innovations and scientific discoveries were common in the Tang-Song era. Engineering feats included the construction of the vital canal system, dikes, dams, and bridges. All were critical to the commercial expansion and population movement typical of the period. The Chinese also developed gunpowder at first for amusement, then for military use. On a more domestic plane, chairs, tea-drinking, coal for fuel, and kites became common in Chinese households. Under the Song emperors, compasses were applied to sea navigation. The abacus was used for calculations, much as a modern computer. Bi Sheng invented movable type, making the production of books less onerous.

Scholarly Refinement and Artistic Accomplishment

Much of the literary and artistic accomplishment of the Tang- Song era was due to the revival of the Confucian scholar- gentry. The Confucian ideal required the educated man to appreciate the arts and to participate in their creation. The art and literature of the scholar-gentry concentrated on everyday life, rather than religious motifs.

1. How did the Grand Canal help China?
2. How did trade improve during the Tang and Song Dynasties?
3. What is foot-binding?
4. List some technological advances of these two dynasties.

An Address to Two-Hundred Million Fellow Countrywomen

By: Qiu Jin

Alas! The greatest injustice in this world must be the injustice suffered by our female population of two hundred million. If a girl is lucky enough to have a good father, then her childhood is at least tolerable. But if by chance her father is an ill-tempered and unreasonable man, he may curse her birth: "What rotten luck: another useless thing." Some men go as far as killing baby girls while most hold the opinion that "girls are eventually someone else's property" and treat them with coldness and disdain. In a few years, without thinking about whether it is right or wrong, he forcibly binds his daughter's soft, white feet with white cloth so that even in her sleep she cannot find comfort and relief until the flesh becomes rotten and the bones broken. What is all this misery for? Is it just so that on the girl's wedding day friends and neighbors will compliment him, saying, "Your daughter's feet are really small"? Is that what the pain is for?

But that is not the worst of it. When the time for marriage comes, a girl's future life is placed in the hands of a couple of shameless matchmakers and a family seeking rich and powerful in-laws. A match can be made without anyone ever inquiring whether the prospective bridegroom is honest, kind, or educated. On the day of the marriage the girl is forced into a red and green bridal sedan chair, and all this time she is not allowed to breathe one word about her future. After her marriage, if the man doesn't do her any harm, she is told that she should thank Heaven for her good fortune. But if the man is bad or if he ill-treats her, she is told that her marriage is retribution for some sin committed in her previous existence. If she complains at all or tries to reason with her husband, he may get angry and beat her. When other people find out they will criticize, saying, "That woman is bad; she doesn't know how to behave like a wife." What can she do? When a man dies, his wife must mourn him for three years and never remarry. But if the woman dies, her husband only needs to tie his queue with a blue thread. Some men consider this to be ugly and don't even do it. In some cases, three days after his wife's death, a man will go out for some "entertainment." Sometimes, before seven weeks have passed, a new bride has already arrived at the door. When Heaven created people it never intended such injustice because if the world is without women, how can men be born? Why is there no justice for women? We constantly hear men say, "The human mind is just and we must treat people with fairness and equality." Then why do they greet women like black slaves from Africa? How did inequality and injustice reach this state?

Dear sisters, you must know that you'll get nothing if you rely upon others. You must go out and get things for yourselves. In ancient times when decadent scholars came out with such nonsense as "men are exalted, women are lowly," "a virtuous woman is one without talent," and "the husband guides the wife," ambitious and spirited women should have organized and opposed them. When the second Chen emperor popularized footbinding, women should have challenged him if they had any sense of humiliation at all...Men feared that if women were educated they would become superior to men, so they did not allow us to be educated. Couldn't the women have challenged the men and refused to submit? It is clear now that it was we women who abandoned our responsibilities to ourselves and felt content to let men do everything for us. When men said we were useless; when they said we were incapable, we stopped questioning them even when our entire female sex had reached slave status. At the same time we were insecure in our good fortune and our physical comfort, so we did everything to please men. When we heard that men like small feet, we immediately bound them just to please them, just to keep our free meal tickets. As for their forbidding us to read and write, well, that was only too good to be true. We readily agreed. Think about it, sisters, can anyone enjoy such comfort and leisure without forfeiting dearly for it? It was only natural that men, with their knowledge, wisdom, and hard work, received the right to freedom while we became their slaves. And as slaves, how can we escape

repression? Whom can we blame but ourselves since we have brought this on ourselves? I feel very sad talking about this, yet I feel that there is no need for me to elaborate since all of us share in the same situation.

I hope that we all shall put aside the past and work hard for the future. Let us all put aside our former selves and be resurrected as complete human beings. Those of you, who are old, do not call yourselves old and useless. If your husbands want to open schools, don't stop them; if your good sons want to study abroad, don't hold them back. Those among us, who are middle-aged, don't hold back your husbands lest they lose their ambition and spirit and fail in their work. After your sons are born, send them to schools. You must do the same for your daughters and, whatever you do, don't bind their feet. As for you young girls among us, go to school if you can. If not, read and study at home. Those of you that are rich, persuade your husbands to open schools, build factories, and contribute to charitable organizations. Those of you, who are poor, work hard and help your husbands. Don't be lazy, don't eat idle rice. These are what I hope for you. You must know that when a country is near destruction, women cannot rely on the men any more because they aren't even able to protect themselves. If we don't take heart now and shape up, it will be too late when China is destroyed.

Sisters, we must follow through on these ideas!

1. What does the writer of this document want to stop?
2. What is going on in China that is upsetting the writer?
3. What does the writer suggest women do for the future?
4. What point of view is the writer demonstrating in this article?