

## SONG CITIES AND MONGOL CONQUEST THE OPEN CITY

In this lecture we are going to take a close look at a twelfth-century Chinese city. This is the kind of city that Marco Polo is going to see. This is the city that a twelfth-century painter named Zhang Zeduan immortalized with painstaking detail in a long scroll called *Qinming Shanghe tu*, means Going up the river on the Spring festival.

The city was thought to be Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song, but the absence of any prominent landmark of the real Kaifeng, points rather to an ideal city, devoid of misery, beggars or illness. The scroll was painted in monochrome ink on silk, although later copies from the Ming period **that we'll see in future lectures** added colors to it. The Song scroll in the Palace Museum in Beijing is considered to be the earliest extant version. And it is this version that we are going to look at now.

As we unroll the scroll, the first scenes introduce us to the rural life that lies outside the city. A line of donkeys carrying charcoal is just about to cross a small wooden bridge, thereby from the very beginning linking the countryside to the lively markets of the nearby city. A small boat stranded at the river bank reinforces the idea of being in the countryside: both boat and bridge look like they have been made by peasants, in stark contrast to the massive ships and the imposing bridges that we'll encounter once inside the city.

We are now on the banks of the river that crosses the city and constitutes the arterial route throughout the whole scroll. It was usual for Chinese cities to have a watercourse flowing through them. The riverside is lined with willows, planted there on purpose to strengthen the river banks and prevent floods.

At this point the city and the countryside start to mingle. A grass-roofed house stands close to a scrap of dry farmland protected by a crumbling wall made of tamped earth. This was the most usual way to construct walls in China. The same kind of wall also protects the house in front of it. Through the central lane comes a sedan chair with willow brooms fixed to its sides, in allusion to the *Qinming* festival,

a holiday in early spring when people sweep their family graves. One servant opens the way for the sedan chair, and behind it comes a retinue of half a dozen men. In contrast to the sedan chair in the main lane, a couple of women with their heads covered and riding donkeys take a small pathway to leave the city.

All of a sudden, the city appears. Two elements stand out immediately: the omnipresence of restaurants and the large boats on the river. This is a commercial city, served by a major river that can hold large boats: in the forefront two of them are anchored. A string of dockers are unloading the bundles from the boats and carrying them up to a seated merchant who supervises their work. In contrast with the light trousers of the dockers, the merchant wears a long gown, certainly not fit for manual labor. A complex commercial network already extended throughout the entire Song Empire, and some goods, like the grain that was probably in the bundles of the dockers, were traded across regions.

On both sides of the street, four restaurants are already open. It is in Song times that Chinese cuisine took on its distinctive character, with its astonishing variety of dishes and mixed tastes that could please people coming from very different regions and with very different culinary backgrounds. Song cuisine is probably the first cuisine that we would immediately recognize today as being Chinese. The variety of dishes eaten during Song times defies description. In this highly commercial city, trade attracts people from far and wide and brings about a proliferation of restaurants to cater to the range of different tastes. Furthermore, it was also with the Song that sitting on chairs to eat at a table became the norm, and replaced the old practice of sitting or kneeling on mats that is the general way of eating in most of Asia still today.

It is early morning and a peddler is putting on his shirt: the scroll unrolls both in space and time. The owner of the restaurant, which can also be accessed directly from the waterfront, is raising a pole with banners to signal that he is opening. In the background, there is a paper shop, the Wang family paper goods, offering spirit money and paper goods for the funerary offerings to the tombs during the Qingming festival. On display in the street is a multi-layered paper house. In Song times the three teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, were certainly important, and had even melded in with what was known as neo-Confucianism. But even so, popular religion with its host of supernatural beings such as ancestors, gods and ghosts, never lost its hold on the general population. And during the Qingming Festival, characterized by the sweeping of tombs, it was essential to burn all kinds of funerary offerings to provide for the ancestors afterlife and to appease any menacing ghosts.

Boats and restaurants line the riverbanks. The boats have stern-post rudders that could be lowered or raised according to the height of the water. These stern-post rudders, together with the mariner's compass and watertight compartments, are a sign of the technical advances in navigation that characterized the Song times, and that allowed the Song vessels to navigate as far as south-east Asia and the waters of the Indian Ocean. In the 12th century, the Song ships were, by large, the biggest and best in the world.