

SONG CITIES AND MONGOL CONQUEST  
THE BRIDGE AND THE CITY LIFE

The river is crowded with all kinds of boats. In the foreground is a passenger boat, its windows covered with blinds. Behind, there is a wine shop, identified, as was usual in Song times, by a scaffold and a hanging banner at the entrance. Alcoholic liquors were a monopoly of the state, together with salt and tea. As was the case in the restaurant that we saw before, the wine shop has two entrances, one onto the street and the other directly onto the river bank, from which two customers are coming in.

Along the street comes a wheelbarrow with a large, centrally mounted wheel, a very common means of transport since Han times, a thousand years before. It is a very ingenious vehicle that distributes the burden equally and can take up to six passengers at once. There are a lot of wheelbarrows in the Qingming scroll, pulled either by men or by donkeys. A variety of vessels are going up and down the river. In the middle of the current, eight men are paddling a boat towards the city, while five others are hauling a ship by pulling a rope from the riverside. In the foreground, a woman, who has just hung out her laundry is throwing the washing water into the river. Another woman, with her head covered, goes around on a donkey. In Song times women were rarely seen roaming the streets. The prevailing ideology of neo-Confucianism kept them secluded in their own quarters while foot-binding probably still confined to the upper classes - limited women's mobility.

A large boat is approaching the bridge and all its sailors are painstakingly pulling down the mast, while bystanders watch their maneuver and shout. The bridge is placed at the center of the scroll. The underside of the bridge, with its wooden structures held together by iron bands, reveals the advanced level of bridge engineering in China. The famous stone bridges of Quanzhou, in Fujian province, are yet further evidence of the outstanding civil engineering in Song times. There is a heavy traffic across the bridge: wheelbarrows, sedan chairs, donkeys and horses are all trying to cross, while some passersby pause to buy a snack from its stalls, and others lean on the railings looking down at passing boats.

Officials on their horses move alongside the shouting crowds, much more interested in the river traffic than in them. Peddlers walk around looking for customers on the bridge. Song cities not only had restaurants and wine shops but there were also peddlers carrying their wares around and setting up food stands, just as you will still find today in any Chinese city. Both sides of the bridge are crowded with little stalls that offer all kinds of goods, including shoes, and knives.

The metallurgical level of Song China was the highest in the world. Beyond the bridge, a huge scaffolding and a banner with three stripes indicates a large wine shop, selling rice wine and rice liquors. On the upper floor, a group of men is drinking and talking. In front of the wine shop a man buys a piece of cloth from a peddler. Cotton had been produced in China since Song times, and cotton fabric had already become very widespread, because it was cheaper than silk and more comfortable than previous coarse cloths. In the foreground a vendor offers candy sweets to a child and his mother: sugar had become a widespread commodity under the Song.

On the other side of the river pleasure boats wait for customers. In the back streets life is bustling. On the other side of the river pleasure boats wait for customers. In the back streets life is bustling. While people sit and refresh themselves in the many restaurants available, a master carpenter and his apprentice are busy making a wheelbarrow. On the other side of the street a storyteller gathers around him a small crowd of listeners: among them are many scholars, with their long robes and characteristic headwear. The thriving urban centre not only attracted trade but also street entertainment, with puppet theaters, storytellers and acrobats providing amusement to the crowded streets. A woman with her head covered mounts a horse behind an ox-cart, a fortune teller takes care of a couple of customers, and a small group of people relax in front of a military barracks with crossed spikes at the top of the wall and a horse lying in its courtyard.

Every walled city in China had a military garrison stationed in it. A small creek meanders through the streets, covered every few paces by small wooden bridges. The creek's sides are tightened with wooden boards reinforced by the roots of the willows; flood prevention is always in evidence in Chinese rivers. In the background, a Buddhist monk strides in front of a Buddhist temple with a studded door flanked by columns with elaborate capitals. Buddhism had by now become a highly entrepreneurial association and its temples owned a lot of land and impressive buildings in the main Chinese cities.

A group of scholars stand leaning on the railings of a medium-sized wooden bridge. With their characteristic gowns and head kerchiefs, these literati, probably students preparing for exams are to be seen all around the city. The official career was already an important ladder for social climbers in Song times. Beyond the bridge stands the open city gate, with an imposing brick tower, while the remains of the city wall, made of tamped earth, are crumbling, and many trees grow over them. The crumbling walls might be symbolic of the urban expansion going beyond the city walls. The camels crossing the gate point to trade with far-off lands.