

SONG CITIES AND MONGOL CONQUEST
THE SONG URBAN REVOLUTION

Timber from the hillsides for the boat-building industry and for the city houses; tea from the mountain slopes of Fujian, both for the Chinese market and for the Islamic, Japanese and nomadic worlds; huge ceramic centers in Jiangxi; while cotton growing, spinning and weaving was introduced now in the Yangzi region, bringing great comfort to the vast majority of people that couldn't afford silk.

All these were now specialized regions that depended for their daily needs on the agricultural surplus of other regions and on the transport network. At the same time Chinese cities imported now great quantities of spices that were used in medicine, religious ceremonies and cooking. To pay for all this, a tremendous amount of copper cash came into circulation, but all this commercial traffic needed more flexible modes of payment: having paper and printing, the Song invented the first paper-money in the world and developed credit institutions on a large scale.

The great Chinese cities attracted merchants from everywhere. Twenty four official Muslim embassies visited Song China, and many foreign communities established themselves permanently in China as they had already done in Tang times. A Jewish community established itself in Kaifeng where it thrived and had a synagogue built. Many centuries later, the Jesuits would find Jews still living there. At every level, innovation was the norm. Pottery was produced on large-scale compounds like Jingdezhen employing hundreds of workers where assembly lines guaranteed the best quality porcelain, with monochrome glazed surfaces that was incredibly modern in its design. And there were large-scale shipments of Chinese porcelain to South-east Asia, India and the Middle East.

By the year 1,000, woodblock printing was in general use. This allowed the diffusion of basic scientific texts and the creation of a nationwide scientific discussion stimulated by the government's systematic policy of printing all standard academic and scientific texts. There was progress in mathematics and astronomy, gunpowder

was applied to warfare, and medicine started the dissection of corpses and made a great step towards the diagnosis and cure of diseases.

Pharmacopias expanded decisively and were put into use in the pharmacies that were to be found in every city. Innovations were also applied to the big manufacturing industries: textile, metallurgy, ceramics, and hydraulic engineering reached their peak. All these economic advances culminated in an urban revolution.

About 7% of Song Chinese, that is seven million, now lived in cities. Kaifeng and Hangzhou, the capitals of Northern and Southern Song, each had a million inhabitants, while cities of a hundred thousand were common, especially in the south. Quanzhou, in Fujian, had half a million inhabitants. As we saw in the Qingming shanghe tu scroll, trade in the cities was no longer confined to restricted markets, as had been the case with the Tang. In Song cities, shops were found everywhere, inside and outside the city walls.

One Chinese source counted 4,400 shops in Kaifeng. These are the cities that Marco Polo will describe with the utmost wonder. But these cities were outposts of the strongly unified Song Empire and they did not develop distinctive legal institutions. In this sense they were completely different from the weak and tiny cities that were now emerging in far-off fragmented Europe.

Chinese cities, despite their wealth, will never play a political role like their European counterparts. With the Song, China became a highly centralized state, a tendency that would maintain and reinforce every new Chinese dynasty from then on. There was no power to counterbalance the power of the state. Aristocracy, that had been important from Han to Tang times, no longer held any power. Buddhism, that with the Tang had been a counterweight to the power of the state, had lost its political power after being dismantled in 845 and again in 955.

The emperor governed through an administrative body of scholars who were recruited for office by way of a long and selective chain of examinations. For our sixteenth century European travelers to China, these exams and the civil service to which they gave access will be one of the most distinctive features of Chinese civilization. The office holders will be called mandarins by the Portuguese, a name that signals the great power of command that they held. But it is important to remember that they couldn't perpetuate their power and that even their immediate descendants, the sons of the great officials, had to pass the exams to get a position in government. Also, they couldn't hold the same post for more than three years. With the Song, the system of recruitment competitions reached its peak.

To pass the exams conferred an enormous prestige and provided unmatched opportunities for political and economic success.

The examinations fostered both the establishment of a nationwide school system and the flourishing of the printing industry. The situation of women underwent a series of changes. With education being so widespread and many families having important libraries inside their houses, many urban women were now literate, and in fact the most important poetess of Chinese literature, Li Qingzhao, lived in Song times. But the practice of foot-binding was beginning to spread, a fashion that was to cause agonizing pain to Chinese girls for centuries. Bones in the feet were broken at an early age until the feet were so tiny they could fit into shoes as minuscule as these, a process that took years and transformed the girl's infancy into a hell of suffering. Foot-binding began with the Song, even if it was not general at that moment. This cruel practice, together with the prohibition of remarriage for widows, kept women in the inner quarters, in accordance with a general neo-Confucian trend towards a more restricted sphere for women.

The Song will be crushed by the Mongols, but they will leave as their legacy most of the features that will be considered for ever as characteristic of China. It was through them that modern China came to life. Even more significantly, the great inventions of the dynasty, the mariner's compass, printing and gunpowder have been decisive in shaping the world as we know it today.