

# Medieval China: Song Dynasty

The Song dynasty ruled Ancient China from 960 to 1279. During the rule of the Song, China was the most advanced civilization in the world. It is famous for its many inventions and advances. The Song dynasty came to an end when they allied with the Mongols against their longtime enemies, the Jin. The Mongols helped them to conquer the Jin, but then they turned on the Song. The leader of the Mongols, Kublai Khan, conquered all of China and then began his own dynasty, the Yuan dynasty.

## **Northern Song (960 to 1127)**

The history of the Song dynasty is usually divided up between the Northern Song and the Southern Song. The collapse of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) led to the break-up of China into five dynasties and ten kingdoms, but one warlord, Zhao Kuangyin, would regain some territories into a unified China. Legend has it that his troops no longer wanted to serve the current emperor and begged Zhao to wear the yellow robe. After refusing three times eventually he took the robe and became Emperor Taizu, establishing the Song dynasty. The Song ruled China from their capital at Kaifeng, but when the northern part of the state was invaded by the Jin state in the first quarter of the 12th century CE, they retreated to the South but remained in control of the majority of China.

## **Southern Song (1127 to 1279)**

When the Jin conquered the Northern Song, the son of the last emperor escaped to the south. He established the Southern Song in southern China. Despite the efforts to modernize and its great economic wealth during the period, the Song court was so plagued with political factions that the state could not avoid collapse in 1279 CE. The Southern Song paid a fee each year to the Jin in order to maintain the peace for over 100 years. The Southern Song then allied with the Mongols to conquer the Jin and eliminate the threat of attack. This plan backfired, however; once the Mongols conquered the Jin, they turned on the Southern Song and captured all of China.

## **Inventions and Technology**

The period of rule under the Song dynasty was a time of great advancements and invention. The Song improved upon inventions from previous time periods, especially the mass-production of iron armor and swords of high-quality steel that were made by water-powered bellows creating super-heated furnaces. Important inventions in the history of China made during this time included the magnetic compass and moveable type printing.

The way a magnetic needle points north-south had been known for some time, but during Song China, the needle was reduced in size and attached to a fixed stem (rather than floating in water). In some cases it was put in a small protective case with a glass top, making it suitable for sea travel.

Woodblock printing was invented during the preceding Tang Dynasty, and helped make books available through mass production. However, the Chinese written language used tens of thousands of characters, and it was tedious to make so many different blocks. The innovation of movable type printing became a fast and economical method for printing.

## **Culture**

The arts flourished under the Song dynasty. Poetry and literature were especially popular due the invention of moveable type and the availability of books to many people. Painting and the performing arts also flourished, fueled by rising demand from a growing, wealthy middle class. Landscape paintings, flower and wildlife painting, especially of birds, also became very popular with Song dynasty artists. A high value was put on education and many of the nobles were very well educated. It was during the Song dynasty that the foot-binding among noble women became a widespread custom. Foot-binding was a process used to restrict normal growth and make women's feet as small as possible. Considered an attractive quality, the effects of the process were painful and permanent. Originally, foot-binding was used as a method to distinguish girls of the upper class from everyone else, but later became a way for the lower classes to improve their social prospects. Foot-binding would continue right up to the early 20th century.

## **Rice and Tea**

It was during the Song dynasty that rice became such an important crop for the Chinese. The introduction of new drought-resistant and fast-growing rice, along with improved methods of water control and irrigation increased rice yields, allowing the farmers to have two harvests per year. Rice was used primarily as food, but was also used to brew the wine consumed in homes and taverns.

The Song carried on the refined, elegant rituals of tea drinking that began during the Tang Dynasty, continuing to enjoy it as a leisurely and social beverage. Under the Song Dynasty the emperor now controlled all aspects of tea cultivation and production, establishing new systems of grading leaf tea and determining quality. Only select members of a chosen class were allowed to drink certain teas, with "tribute grade" teas from revered mountains were reserved exclusively for the emperor.

The complex and formal tea etiquette begun under the Tang was also carried on, while new rules of hospitality, preparation, and serving of tea were created as well, extended participation in the ceremony to guests and strangers. These new rules of hospitality created a link between tea and being courteous and cordial to all, which still remains part of China's culture today.