During this era, most Japanese adopted Buddhism, some expressing their faith in art. This gigantic statue, erected in the city of Kamakura in 1252, shows the Buddha in meditation.
China is a sea that salts all rivers that flow into it.
—Italian traveler Marco Polo (1275 C.E.)

Early in the twelfth century the Chinese artist Zhang Zeduan, noted for his realistic drawings, painted a massive scroll of people at work and leisure throughout the city of Kaifeng (KIE-FENG), then China’s capital and home to perhaps 1 million people. Set during the annual spring festival, the scroll, the surviving portions of which are 17 feet long, portrays a bustling city, from its riverside suburbs to the high protective walls and the towering city gates to the downtown business district, during one of premodern China’s most creative and prosperous eras. Kaifeng’s streets are crowded with people (mostly men) going about their daily activities, including foreign merchants, streetside hawkers touting their goods, fortune tellers, scholars, and monks. The scroll also shows people working in warehouses, iron smelters, arsenals, and shipyards. Zhang’s record of Kaifeng’s commercial life is particularly vivid, showing building material suppliers, textile firms, and drug and chemical shops, as well as hotels, food stalls, teahouses, and restaurants. Cargo and pleasure barges cruise the river, while camels heavily laden with goods enter the city.

Much of the prosperous city life Zhang portrayed was familiar to Chinese of earlier and later generations, for Chinese society showed considerable continuity over time. The Han’s eventual succession by the Sui and then by the Tang (tahng) and Song (soong) dynasties ensured that Chinese society continued along traditional lines, in contrast to the dramatic changes that took place in Japan, the Middle East, India, Southeast Asia, and Europe during the Intermediate Era. Once the Tang adopted a modified version of the Han system, the ensuing millennium proved to be a golden age, broken only occasionally by invasion or disorder. Some scholars call the Intermediate Era in world history the “Chinese Centuries.” China became perhaps the world’s richest and most populous society, enjoying a well-organized government and economy, a flourishing artistic and literary culture, and creativity in technology and science. Many commercial and cultural networks connected China to the rest of Eurasia. Furthermore, China’s neighbors in Korea and Japan adopted many aspects of Chinese culture, though they also forged their own highly distinctive societies during this period. China did indeed, as Marco Polo recognized, influence or awe all those with whom it came into contact.

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Tang China: The Hub of the East

What role did Tang China play in the Eurasian world?

The harsh Sui dynasty that united China after the disintegration of the Han ruled for only a short time (581–618 C.E.) before rebellions brought it to an end. The victor in the struggles between rival rebel forces established the Tang dynasty (618–907). The three centuries of Tang rule set a high watermark in many facets of Chinese life and provided a cultural and political model for neighboring Asian societies. The only comparable power in Eurasia at that time was the expanding Muslim Abbasid empire; India and Europe were divided into many small states and often threatened by invaders. Tang models shaped China until the early twentieth century.

The Tang Empire and Eurasian Exchange

In the seventh and eighth centuries Tang China—an empire of some 50 or 60 million people—was the largest and most populous society on earth, with immense influence in the eastern third of Eurasia (see Map 11.1). Like the Han before them, the Tang launched ambitious campaigns that brought Central Asia (as far west as the Caspian Sea), Tibet, Mongolia, Manchuria, and parts of Siberia under Chinese rule. Vietnam had long been a colony. The Koreans became a vassal state, and the Japanese established close ties. Chinese garrisons protected the Silk Road, fostering the flow of goods and people across Eurasia.

The Tang were the most outward-looking of all Chinese dynasties, and during these years China became an open forum, a world market of ideas, people, and things arriving over the networks of exchange. The overland Silk Road across Central Asia remained a transcontinental high-

Map 11.1 The Tang Empire, ca. 750 C.E.
The Tang dynasty forged a large empire across Central Asia into Turkestan before their expansion was halted by Muslim armies at the Battle of Talas River in 751. Control of Central Asia allowed the Tang to protect the Silk Road trade route. The Tang also controlled Vietnam and dominated Korea.
way for traders, adventurers, diplomats, missionaries, and pilgrims traveling east or west, carrying goods and ideas. Nestorian Christian, Manichean, Buddhist, and Muslim missionaries arrived, and merchants from around Asia formed communities in several Chinese cities, many arriving by sea. Indeed, a lively sea trade, a kind of maritime Silk Road, linked China with Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle East. Perhaps two-thirds of the 200,000 inhabitants of the southern port of Guangzhou (gwahng-jo), also known as Canton, were immigrants, including Arabs, Persians, Indians, Cambodians, and Malays, and the city boasted both Sunni and Shi’ite mosques. Indian astronomers and mathematicians joined the Tang government as scientific officials. Meanwhile, several hundred Chinese scholars visited or sojourned in India, most of them seeking Buddhist literature.

Tang wealth and power stimulated commerce throughout Eurasia. By land or sea, many Chinese inventions reached into western Eurasia. In 753 C.E. a Chinese craftsman reported that, in Baghdad: “As for the weavers who make light silks, the goldsmiths who work gold and silver there, and the painters; the arts which they practice were started by Chinese technicians.” Chinese products such as silk and porcelain were much prized in Europe and the Middle East, and Chinese culture also spread to Korea and Japan. This multicultural exchange benefited China as well. Diverse societies in places such as Burma, Java, and Nepal regularly sent embassies to the Tang court bearing gifts, and renewed contacts with India and the Middle East fostered China’s creativity. New products also appeared, most notably tea from Southeast Asia. After the Chinese began drinking tea, originally a medicinal substance, as a beverage, teahouses opened in every marketplace. Another new arrival was the chair from the Middle East, replacing seating pads; the Chinese became the only chair users in East Asia. However, some Chinese scholars criticized the cosmopolitan attitude and complained about too much foreign culture.

The Eurasian exchange fostered dynamic and culturally rich cities. Tang China boasted many cities larger than any cities in Europe or India, and the capital, Chang’an (CHAHNG-ahn), present-day Xi’an (SHEE-AHN), had 2 million inhabitants. The world’s largest city, Chang’an was a model of urban planning, with its streets carefully laid out in a grid pattern and the city divided into quadrants. The broad thoroughfares were crowded with visitors and sojourners from many lands, among them Arabs, Persians, Syrians, Jews, Turks, Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indians, and Tibetans. Many foreign artists, artisans, and merchants worked in the capital, as well as entertainers such as Indian jugglers and Afghan actors. The city contained four Zoroastrian temples, two Nestorian Christian churches, and several mosques. The only contemporary cities that could come close to matching Chang’an’s size and amenities were Baghdad, the center of the powerful Abbasid Caliphate, and Byzantine-ruled Constantinople.

### Imperial Government and Economic Growth

The centralized imperial government reached a high level of efficiency and maintained one of the world’s most productive economies. Despite bloody rebellions, invasions, assassinations, palace coups, and dynastic upheavals, the hallmark of China’s political system for many centuries was stability. Later dynasties followed the basic Tang model. According to Confucian theory, the family was the model for the state, so the emperor at the top of the system was the symbolic father of the people, governing by moral example, not physical force. The Chinese considered the emperor the Son of Heaven—not a divine figure but the intermediary between the terrestrial and supernatural realms—and the first scholar of the land. He held daily audiences during which...
diplomats from distant lands sometimes presented gifts as a symbol of their submission to his authority. In return the emperor bestowed on them a title, state robes, and gifts, a ceremony followed later by a banquet.

While women sometimes had power behind the throne, only one woman, the Empress Wu Zhao (woo chow) (625–705), ever officially led the government. She had become an imperial concubine at age thirteen and used her political skills and ruthless ambition to eventually displace the sickly emperor, maintaining her power for over fifty years. While Empress Wu generally ruled ably, Chinese scholars viewed her as an evil usurper and warned future generations that women should not rule the country.

In theory the emperor held absolute power, but his actual power was circumscribed in various ways. He had to consider the Censorate, an agency unique to China that monitored the workings of the government, rooted out corruption, proposed changes in state policies, and criticized the government for failings. Only the strongest emperors could punish the Censorate for criticism. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven, that people have a right to overthrow an evil, corrupt, or ineffective government, meant that emperors had to consider the consequences of their policies and behavior.

Because administering such a large and diverse empire required a competent bureaucracy, the Tang revived the competitive civil service exams from Han times. The Chinese believed that government officials, known as mandarins, should be the wisest and ablest men in the land. The merit-based exams were intended to seek out talented individuals, regardless of birth, for government service. To help train potential officials, the government also operated a national university and hundreds of local-level academies. During the Tang and the succeeding Song dynasties, perhaps 15 percent of the mandarins did not come from upper-class backgrounds, indicating that the examinations led to some social mobility.

The system consisted of a series of examinations at local, provincial, and national levels. Usually less than 5 percent of candidates passed and moved on to the next level. By passing the highest level a man received the equivalent of a PhD degree, a prerequisite to hold office. The exams largely tested knowledge of literary composition and the contents of the Confucian classics. This competitive merit exam system was the most important institution contributing to the long duration of the political system, giving the ruling elite a shared Confucian ideology emphasizing ethics and loyalty. The Tang bureaucracy numbered around fifteen thousand officials, an extraordinarily small number for a country as huge as China. Clearly they ruled with the cooperation of the local people. From now on whoever ruled China had to rule through the bureaucracy of scholars.

Tang officials pursued policies that maintained economic growth, especially agricultural production. The 80 percent of Chinese who tilled the soil were generally able—though often just barely—to produce a food surplus for the other 20 percent in towns and cities. The Chinese worked to achieve better yields and became one of the world’s most efficient farming peoples. The Tang also attempted to circumvent the power of powerful landowning families by experimenting with land reform. In the “equal field system,” officials assigned each peasant family a plot of around 19 acres, in the hope that this would provide enough for the family’s needs. For a time the reforms brought the peasantry some prosperity. When the Tang declined after some 120 years, the equal field system also disintegrated. Still, throughout history some emperors and officials sought a more equitable land system.

**Religion, Science, and Technology**

The early Intermediate Era was the golden age for Buddhism in Central, Southeast, and East Asia. Under the Tang, Buddhism grew to be a dominant faith, while Confucianism and Daoism remained influential. As Buddhist monks, pilgrims, and artists traveled between India and China, they drew the two societies into closer contact. However, competing Buddhist sects presented the government with some problems. Furthermore, the Buddhist monasteries came to control vast amounts of tax-exempt land and wealth, becoming an alternative power center. In the mid-ninth century the government cracked down on Buddhist institutions. Emperor Wuzong (woo-chong) (840–846), in desperate need of more revenues, seized 4,600 monasteries and defrocked all monks under the age of fifty. Although Wuzong’s successors restored the monasteries, his actions reduced the political and economic power of the Buddhist orders enough to ensure that they never again exercised significant secular power.
Some new religions also moved east along the Silk Road. Nestorian Christianity, a sect considered heretical in Byzantium, gained a small following, and Islam became strong in northwest China and in pockets of southwest and southern China. Jewish merchants also settled in several northern China cities, founding Jewish communities that endured for centuries. Except for Wuzong, the Tang court generally took a tolerant, ecumenical view of religion. As one Tang emperor proclaimed: “The Way [truth] has more than one name. There is more than one sage. Doctrines vary in distant lands, their benefits reach all mankind.”

Tang scholars and craftsmen made significant scientific and technological achievements. Tang astronomers established the solar year at 365 days and studied sunspots, and some argued that the earth was round and revolved around the sun. They were also the first to analyze, record, and then predict solar eclipses. Chinese engineers built the first load-bearing segmental arch bridge. Another important development was the perfection of gunpowder, an elaboration of the firecracker. By using a mix of sulphur, saltpeter, and charcoal, Chinese military forces could now use primitive cannon and flaming rockets to protect their borders or resist rebels. Tang scholars made great strides by inventing woodblock printing. For centuries Chinese had carved texts into stone and then taken ink rubbings for mass distribution as demand for copies of religious and Confucian texts outpaced supply. Finally, some creative men began carving texts into wooden blocks, which could be used to reproduce text on paper with ink, satisfying the need to produce texts for the civil service exams and spread Buddhist writings. The first known book printed on paper with this method was a Buddhist text from 868 (see Chronology: China During the Intermediate Era). The Chinese had an insatiable desire to classify the wisdom of the past for use by future generations, and they could now compile encyclopedias to record their accumulated knowledge. Woodblock printing also gave rise to a written popular culture.

The Arts and Literature

Some of China’s greatest painters and sculptors lived in Tang times. Painting, an activity avidly pursued by scholars and government officials, was closely associated with calligraphy, the beautiful rendering of Chinese characters used to render a meaningful poem, quote, or passage in a refined, balanced form. Both calligraphers and painters used brush and ink on silk or paper. Chinese paintings were generally restrained, understated, and philosophical in presentation. Influenced by Daoism, many painters specialized in landscapes. An eleventh-century writer explained why: “Why does a virtuous man take delight in landscapes? That in a rustic retreat he may nourish his nature; amid the carefree play of streams and rocks, he may take delight. Haze, mist, and the haunting spirits of the mountains are what human nature seeks, and yet can rarely find.” But Confucian ideas were also expressed in the people who were usually a small part of the picture. Like Confucian philosophy, Chinese arts stressed order, morality, and tradition. But there were exceptions. Some artists were free spirits and experimented wildly; one eccentric flipped ink-soaked hair at silk, and another splashed while dancing. Artists also reflected their times. Wind-tossed bamboo and choppy water, for example, might indicate turbulent politics. The traveler to Tang China also experienced art when sipping tea from nearly transparent porcelain cups, the most sanitary utensils in the world at that time. China became famous for splendid lacquer ware, furniture made with mother of pearl, gold and silver inlay, and luxurious brocades.

Many of China’s greatest poets lived in this era, and annual literary festivals were held in Chang’an to select prizewinners. Many poems depicted the hardships of life—poverty, war, the ups and downs of romantic love, the passing of time, the imminence of death—but many lyrical poems explored life and its wonders, as well as the parting of friends. Chinese poems usually blended emotion with restraint, reflecting their Daoist and Buddhist influences. For example, Wang Wei (wahng way) expressed a Daoist appreciation of nature: “Walking at leisure we watch laurel flowers fall. In the silence of this night the spring mountain is empty. The moon rises, the birds are startled, As they sing occasionally near the spring fountains.” The poem describes a changing landscape of falling laurel leaves, a quiet spring mountain, a rising moon, and birds singing, all of which create Daoist feelings of peace, detachment, and purity.

The two giant figures of Tang poetry were Li Po (lee po) and Du Fu (too foo), close friends but very different in their personalities and styles. The eccentric Li (701–762) was romantic, disrespectful
of authority, and humorous but often melancholy: a true free spirit. Influenced by Daoism, Li said that a good person must be carefree, maintaining the heart and mind of a child. Li is believed to have drowned on a boat trip when he reached out in a drunken ecstasy for the reflection of the moon in the water. In “The Joys of Wine” he wrote: “Since Heaven and Earth love wine, I can love wine without shaming Heaven. With three cups I penetrate the Great Dao. Take a whole jugful and I and the world are one. Such things as I have dreamed in wine, Shall never be told to the sober.” Li also occasionally wrote about public issues. In a piece about the Tang military campaigns in Central Asia, he outlined the hardships of conscripted soldiers and wondered who would cultivate their fields.

The opposite of Li Po, Du Fu (712–770) was a Confucian humanist, the preeminent poet of social consciousness and deeply concerned with the human condition. Du’s poems held up a mirror to his times. His antiwar poems remain powerful even a millennium later: “When will men be satisfied with building a wall against the barbarians? When will the soldiers return to their native land?” His sympathies were with the soldiers and their families rather than with imperial aims:

> The war-chariots rattle, The war-horses whinny. Each man of you has a bow and quiver in his belt. Father, mother, son, wife, stare at you going. At the border where the blood of men spills like the sea. And still the heart of Emperor Wu is beating for war. Do you know that, east of China’s mountains, in two hundred districts, And in thousands of villages, nothing grows but weeds? And though strong women have bent to the ploughing, East and west the furrows are all broken down.

Du was also capable of great tenderness and celebrated the pleasures of everyday life: “Clear waters wind, Around our village. With long summer days, Full of loveliness. My wife draws out, A chessboard on paper, While our little boys, Bend needles into fish hooks. What more could I wish for?”

Changes in the Late Tang Dynasty

Significant changes took place in China between the eighth and tenth centuries. The overwhelming majority of Chinese now lived in central and south China, where the fertile Yangzi Basin was the most productive economic region. New crop strains were introduced from Southeast Asia that eventually made it possible to harvest two crops of rice a year. This increased productivity, combined with better transportation, led to more trade and substantial increases in the urban population. Crafts and merchant guilds and the world’s first paper money appeared, and Chinese traders visited Southeast Asia to obtain luxury goods.

Like the Han, the Tang ultimately found its empire too expensive to maintain and too difficult to defend. After a bitter defeat by Arab forces at the Battle of Talas River (near Samarkand) in 751, the Tang declined as a military power in Central Asia. Muslim forces filled the vacuum, and Islam became the dominant religion in Turkestan and in the Xinjiang (shin-jee-yahng) region just west of China proper. Finally the Tang lost control of China itself. The country broke apart, and in 907 Chinese rebel bands, spurred by famine and drought, sacked Chang’an. The Tang demise allowed Vietnam to finally free itself from the long yoke of Chinese rule.

During the next five decades after the Tang collapse, China was divided into several competing states known as the Five Dynasties. But Chinese society was now too massive and deeply rooted to experience the centuries of anarchy that occurred between the Han and Sui, and from the Tang onward the interludes of disorder between great dynasties proved brief. Perhaps the Chinese might have remained more innovative if imperial unity had been replaced by smaller competing states, as
happened in western Europe. But the Chinese came to deplore disunity. A proverb stated: “Just as there cannot be two suns in the sky, there cannot be two rulers in China.” The centralized imperial system remained in place for nearly a millennium after the Tang.

**SECTION SUMMARY**

- The Tang Empire was marked by ambitious expansion, inclusion of visitors from around the world, and the spread of Chinese goods across Eurasia.
- Under the Tang, stability was maintained by keeping the emperor’s authority somewhat in check and by rewarding high achievers through the civil service exam system.
- Buddhism reached its peak influence during the Tang, but it was greatly weakened when Emperor Wuzong seized Buddhist monasteries.
- During the Tang, the first book was printed using woodblocks.
- Poetry and other arts were very popular during the Tang; while usually stressing Daoist harmony, they sometimes expressed criticism of the government.

**Song China and Commercial Growth**

Why might historians consider the Song dynasty the high point of China’s golden age?

The next great dynasty, the Song (Sung) (960–1279), presided over a sophisticated period of achievement. Although lacking the Tang’s empire building and world leadership, the Song was in many respects more refined in the arts of living and in technological development and material richness. Described by some historians as premodern China’s most exciting period, the Song was characterized by unprecedented innovation, economic dynamism, urban sophistication, and cultural flowering. Late Song China contained perhaps 120 million people, between a quarter and a third of the world’s total population, living in an area that stretched a thousand miles east to west and north to south.

**Cities, Economies, and Technologies**

Song China boasted the world’s largest cities, at least five cities having populations over a million, and nearly fifty other cities each containing over 100,000 people. Meanwhile, once-great cities in western Eurasia had fallen in population: Rome to 35,000 and Baghdad to 125,000. Chinese urban residents enjoyed a high quality of life. A modern scholar described the vibrant activity in one of the cities:

*The day started with the booming of temple bells. Peddlers began to make their way up and down the streets, calling out the foods they had for sale. Carts laden with meats and vegetables moved in toward the markets. Businesses of all kinds opened. Many of these, such as the tailors, hairdressers, dealers in paper and brushes, and caterers, served the city’s taste for*
luxury. As night fell, lanterns lit up taverns and restaurants, the largest of which had staffs of hundreds. In the theater district dozens of houses offered varied bills, including the latest songs, puppet shows, acrobats, wrestlers, storytellers, and comedians.7

In the later Song era, when the government had been pushed south of the Yangzi River by nomadic invaders, the capital was Hangzhou (hahng-jo), a city of several million on the southern end of the Grand Canal (see Witness to the Past: Life in the Chinese Capital City). A later and well-traveled Italian visitor, Marco Polo, called it unquestionably the greatest city in the world. Hangzhou would be followed by Nanjing in the fifteenth century, and then Beijing from the sixteenth into the nineteenth centuries, as the world’s largest cities.

The Song also marked the high point for Chinese commerce and foreign trade. The merchant class grew substantially, and tax revenues were three times higher than for the Tang. The Grand Canal, which linked the Yellow and Yangzi River Basins, provided an economic cornerstone, allowing the mass movement of goods between north and south. China also developed the world’s first fully monetized economy, putting paper money and silver coins into wide use. In addition, Song China had the world’s most advanced farming, with expanding productivity meeting the needs for agricultural products. Farmers doubled the rice crop and vastly increased the growing and marketing of sugar, once a minor crop. While foreign trade continued to flourish, now it was based more on maritime networks that connected China to the rest of Afro-Eurasia. Chinese merchants regularly visited Southeast Asia and traded around the Indian Ocean, and Chinese industrial and food products found markets as far away as Persia, East Africa, and Egypt. The cosmopolitan southern seaports of Guangzhou (Canton) and Quanzhou (Zayton) were home to thousands of foreigners, including many Arab, Indian, Persian, and even East African merchants. To accommodate these varied peoples, the cities contained numerous mosques and Hindu temples.

Song China’s industry was the world’s most advanced. China’s world leadership was reflected in its export of manufactured goods (silks, porcelain, books) and import of raw materials (spices, minerals, horses). Chinese porcelain was traded all over Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa, and the name china became synonymous with the very finest porcelain products. China’s iron industry was the world’s largest before the eighteenth century, producing the finest steel for tools, weapons, stoves, ploughshares, cooking equipment, nails, building materials, and bridges. Mass production and metal-casting techniques supplied standardized iron products to the world’s largest internal market, and the Song mined coal for fuel and produced salt on an industrial scale. Spurred by domestic and foreign trade, Song China also developed a significant shipbuilding industry. Its huge compartmentalized ships had four decks and four to six masts and were capable of carrying five hundred sailors and extensive cargo. Thousands of cargo ships plied the rivers and canals. This maritime technology was the world’s best at that time.

The Song also maintained the Chinese technological and scientific tradition. Between the first and fifteenth centuries C.E., the Chinese produced a majority of the world’s major inventions. For example, they built the world’s longest bridge (2.5 kilometers) and expanded the use of water-powered clocks and mills. Major Chinese inventions of the era that later spread throughout Eurasia included the magnetic compass (for naval navigation), the sternpost rudder, and the spinning wheel. Song craftsmen also made movable type, first from fired clay and then from tin or copper, an invention that greatly facilitated the printing of books. In weaponry, Song technicians developed the fire lance, a bamboo tube filled with gunpowder that was the precursor of the metal-barrel gun. Song ships were fitted with missile launchers, flamethrowers, cannons, and bombs, all used to keep the coast free of pirates. Song engineers also invented a mechanized spinning process for the reeling of silk and later hemp thread. Developed over half a millennium before the Industrial Revolution began in western Europe, this was the world’s first industrial machine. The Song also had notable achievements in astronomy and medicine. Today astronomers still use data the Song collected from observation of the skies, such as on the supernova that created the Crab Nebula. A Song calendar precisely measured the solar year (365.2425 days). In medicine, Chinese doctors inoculated against smallpox, a disease that ravaged much of Afro-Eurasia. Some Chinese medical ideas reached the Middle East and Europe by the thirteenth century.

Society and Religion

The Song also saw the development of an urbane elite culture. Printed books fostered the spread of education, exposing a wider audience to the values of the social and political elite, and the Song government established schools in every district. Although only a small percentage of these students ever became mandarins, a degree or some educated background became a certificate of status, even if it never led to a government post. The cultivated gentleman, whether or not in government service, was expected to be proficient in music (especially lute playing), chess,
Life in the Chinese Capital City

The following excerpts are from a description of Hangzhou, the capital city of China during the southern Song dynasty, written by a Chinese observer in 1235. It reveals the life of urban people in China during one of its most creative eras. The writer describes the city's many amenities, including shops, restaurants, and taverns, and also its cultural and social activities. The many specialized enterprises and diverse clubs indicate a highly complex society.

During the morning hours, markets extend from . . . the palace all the way to . . . the New Boulevard. Here we find pearl, jade, talismans, exotic plants and fruits, seasonal catches from the sea, wild game—all the rarities of the world. . . . In the evening . . . the markets are as busy as during the day. . . . In the wine shops and inns business also thrives. . . . In general the capital attracts the greatest variety of goods and has the best craftsmen. For instance, the flower company at Superior Lane does a truly excellent job of flower arrangement, and its caps, hairpins, and collars are unsurpassed in craftsmanship. Some . . . famous fabric stores sell exquisite brocade and fine silk which are unsurpassed anywhere in the country.

Among the various kinds of wine shops, the tea-and-food shops sell not only wine, but also various foods to go with it. However, to get seasonal delicacies . . . one should go to the inns, for they also have a menu from which one can make selections. The pastry-and-wine shops sell pastries with duckling and goose fillings. . . . In the large teahouses there are usually paintings and calligraphies by famous artists on display. . . . Most restaurants here are operated by people from the old capital [Kaifeng], like the lamb rice shops which also serve wine. . . . There are special food shops such as meat-pie shops and vegetable-noodle shops. . . . The vegetarian restaurants cater to [Buddhist] religious banquets and vegetarian dinners. . . . There are also shops specializing in snacks. Depending on the season, they sell a variety of delicacies. . . .

In the evening, food vendors of all sorts parade the streets and alleys . . . chanting their trade songs. . . . The entertainment centers . . . are places where people gather. . . . In these centers there are schools for musicians offering thirteen different courses, among which the most significant is opera. . . . In each scene of an operatic performance there are four or five performers who first act out a short, well known piece. . . . Then they give a performance of the opera itself. . . . The opera is usually based on history and teaches a moral lesson, which may also be a political criticism in disguise. . . . There are always various acting troupes performing, and this usually attracts a large crowd.

For men of letters, there is a unique West Lake Poetry Society. Its members include both scholars residing in the capital and visiting poets from other parts of the country; over the years, many famous poets have been associated with this society. . . . Other groups include the Physical Fitness Club, Angler's Club, Occult Club, Young Girl's Chorus, Exotic Foods Club, Plants and Fruits Club, Antique Collector's Club, Horse-Lover's Club, and Refined Music Society. . . .

There are civil and military schools inside . . . the capital. Besides lineage schools, capital schools, and country schools, there are at least one or two village schools, family schools, private studios, or learning centers in every neighborhood.

THINKING ABOUT THE READING

1. What do the main goods sold in the markets say about economic prosperity?
2. What does the reading tell us about popular pleasures and entertainments in Hangzhou?
3. What do the main recreational and educational activities available suggest about leisure time and societal values?

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calligraphy, poetry, and painting. Although Song commercial growth allowed women to operate restaurants and sell fish and vegetables in markets, women experienced more restrictions than they had known earlier. Tang paintings and statues had shown aristocratic women in swept-up hair riding horses or standing dignified, wearing loose-fitting gowns. Now, however, women's status began to decline. Fearing that the new economic opportunities for women might undermine patriarchy, conservatives sought to limit women's roles. Men more often took concubines (official mistresses) in addition to their official wives, and families increasingly frowned upon remarriage for widows. Peasant wives had the most equitable position because they worked in the fields alongside men and were therefore crucial to family economic livelihood. Still, children belonged to the father's family, and the wife was ruled by her husband's mother. Divorce was possible but uncommon because it was a disgrace for the woman. In addition, old age was especially difficult for poor women, as a male Song writer sympathetically described:

For women who live a long life, old age is especially hard to bear, because most women must rely on others for their existence. Some wives with stupid husbands are able to manage the family's finances. But the most remarkable are the women who manage a household after their husbands have died leaving them with young children.
Still another source of suffering for women was footbinding, which was introduced during the Song period among the elite and some of the common folk. Mothers tightly bound the feet of five- or six-year-old daughters to prevent normal growth, crippling a girl’s feet and giving her a dainty walk, which enhanced what Chinese men viewed as her beauty and eroticism. But many peasants rejected the practice as too physically debilitating, since women’s labor was necessary for family survival. Footbinding was not widespread until later dynasties.

The Song also saw the rise of **neo-Confucianism**, a form of Confucianism that incorporated many Buddhist and Daoist metaphysical ideas. Neo-Confucianism was associated particularly with Zhu Xi (JOO shee) (1130–1200), a child prodigy and one of the most influential thinkers in Chinese history, who resigned from government service in disgust at corruption. Zhu Xi believed that the original ideas of Confucius had become rigid and altered over the centuries, and he advocated rediscovering the essence of the sage’s ideas. The influence of Daoism can be seen in Zhu Xi’s rational and humane approach, which recognized a dualism between the material world and the energy thought by Chinese to pervade the universe, or qi (ch’i). Harnessing this qi for personal centering became the goal of t’ai qi (tai ch’i), exercises to build mind and body. In the spirit of Confucius, Zhu identified reason or principle as the unchanging law, and morality as the measure of all human affairs: “For every person the most important thing is the cultivation of himself as an ethical being.”9 However, because Zhu was indifferent to natural science, his ideas did not help sustain scientific inquiry. Over time neo-Confucianism became the dominant mindset of China’s educated elite and a force for stability but not innovation.

**The Song in World History**

Although in many ways the Song could have been a turning point in Chinese and world history, they did not foster a major transition. The profound economic, technological, and urban developments remind some historians of eighteenth-century Europe at the dawn of rapid industrialization. But unlike that revolution’s transforming impact in the West, the commercial and agricultural dynamism never revolutionized Chinese society. Instead, these developments were contained and absorbed. For example, the Chinese had the technology to sail the seas and colonize other lands, but they lacked the incentive because China was largely self-sufficient. Since the highly bureaucratic empire easily adjusted to economic change, it could keep the merchants from disrupting China’s social order. With an agriculture productive enough to feed a huge population, convenient transportation by water through canals, and many natural resources, the Chinese had no great need to develop additional mechanized technologies. The Mongol conquest of the Song, as well as a cooler climate by the thirteenth century and the Black Death pandemic in the fourteenth, also undermined economic dynamism. Finally, population pressure became a growing burden as land available for farming filled up.

Confucian disdain of merchants also led to stagnation. In its domination of the merchants, the imperial government played a central role in containing economic growth. Song commercial growth resulted partly from the influence of unusually large number of mandarins from wealthy merchant families in this period. Yet, many essential commodities remained government monopolies, such as iron, grain, cloth, and salt, while public granaries to check famine were financed by taxes on the wealthy. This socialist policy reflected the low esteem accorded merchants in Confucian ideology. Monopolies over essential products enriched the state and protected the population from price and supply problems, but they restricted merchants to handling nonessential products.

The Song government, more interested in economic than political growth and empire, was generally disinterested in military expansion. Prosperity, trade, and urban living made peace more attractive than conquest. Although maintaining the world’s largest army, the Song, unlike the Han and Tang, reduced the power of military leaders so they could not threaten civilian authority, a chronic problem in the Tang. As a result, the Song adopted a passive attitude toward controlling the pastoral nomads across the border, attempting not to conquer but to appease them with generous payments. Ultimately the policy failed. In the twelfth century a nomadic people, the Jin (Chin), conquered northern China, forcing the Song court to move south across the Yangzi, where it continued to rule central and southern China from Hangzhou until the invasion by the Mongols.