Song Dynasty (960-1279): Commercial Revolution

**Overview.** While the Song dynasty (960-1279) was characterized by financial problems, military weakness, and footbinding, it also experienced an economic expansion so great that it was referred to as the “commercial revolution” by scholars. The economic upturn was chiefly propelled by improved agricultural technologies; the use of the abacus, gunpowder, and new printing techniques; the growth of domestic and foreign trade; and the development of a money economy.

**Agricultural Technological Development.** A great increase in agricultural productivity occurred during the Song era. In southern China the double cropping of rice was made possible by the introduction of a new strain of rice, which matured more quickly than local plants, from Champa in southern Vietnam. Several major water-control projects were undertaken that significantly improved the irrigation of rice paddy fields.

**Other Advances.** Meanwhile, other technological developments took place during the Song dynasty. Traditional techniques in silk weaving, porcelain making, and lacquer production were further developed. By the later Song dynasty the Chinese began to use the abacus, which became the primary calculating device for East Asian people until the twentieth century. Chinese scholars also learned how to use gunpowder in explosives, which was especially important in mining practices. Among all the technological developments, printing was the most significant advance. By the eleventh century the Chinese had learned to arrange movable carved characters on a woodblock, thus inventing the technique whose principles are still applicable to modern printing technology.

**Domestic Trade.** Historically, Chinese governments of the various dynasties despised merchants and instituted government restrictions on commercial activities. This contempt and restraint on commercialism, however, was broken during the late Tang and Song periods. Private marketplaces sprawled far beyond the traditional government markets. Various specialized urban shops lined the main streets and tempted undecided buyers and pedestrians who crowded the busy avenues.

**Growth of Foreign Trade.** In addition to domestic barter, foreign trade during the Song period experienced tremendous growth. Trade with the outside world was first conducted overland, starting as early as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), when the Chinese started trading with merchants from Central Asia, West Asia, and the Mediterranean region. Merchants traveled across the Silk Road, a series of routes that ran from Kazakhstan to Chang’an, across the Sinkiang and Gobi deserts. Commercial trade and profit made it possible for the Song government to pay huge appeasements to their enemies and to buy horses from the steppe for the defense of China against the “barbarians.”
**Overseas Trade.** During the Song period overland trade was supplemented by overseas efforts. Although trade by sea with India and the Middle East had existed since the late Han period, maritime trade grew rapidly during the Song era. Improvements in the technology of shipbuilding and navigation assisted overseas commercial activities. Chinese vessels now utilized sails, oars, and transverse water-tight bulkheads (to prevent ships from sinking). The Chinese also used the compass to help navigate their ships.

**Money Economy.** During the late Tang and Song periods, China experienced a great expansion of its money economy. Chinese copper coins came into use as early as the eastern Zhou period (771 B.C.E.-256 B.C.E.), but only now did this currency play an indispensable role in government finances and in the daily lives of Chinese citizens. By the end of the first century of the Song dynasty, cash began to comprise a significant portion of imperial tax revenues, and the income from government monopolies and commercial taxes exceeded agricultural taxes. The most important advance, however, was the development of paper money. Since copper coins were too cumbersome and bulky for long-distance commercial transactions, various paper credits and monies were invented for such activities. One type of paper money, called “flying cash,” was used to pay for goods bought from distant regions and could be reimbursed at the Chinese capital. The development of a money economy during the Song period reached a level far ahead of the rest of the world.

**Urban Centers.** Commercial development of the Song period made the urbanization of China inevitable. By the twelfth century China had fifty-two large urban zones with more than one hundred thousand households each. In these urban centers culture was sophisticated and diversified, and life was exciting and luxurious. Amusement quarters dominated city life; one could indulge in the many liquor and tea stores, in restaurants featuring specialized cuisines, and in houses furnished with female entertainers and prostitutes. City dwellers could also be amused by puppet shows, acrobats, storytellers, jugglers, and other entertainments. As the highly diversified urban life glittered, its dark side also began to show at this time. Urban poverty and pauperism emerged. Private charitable organizations, sponsored by local notables, rose to take care of the misfortunate ones and thus became a tradition largely responsible for social welfare in China.

**Sources:**


