

◀ Scholars took exams to become scholar-officials and help the emperor rule.

The Political Development of Imperial China

16.1 Introduction

Welcome to **imperial China**. Historians divide Chinese history into periods ruled by **dynasties**, or ruling families. In this chapter, you will learn about China's political development under several dynasties from 220 to 1644 C.E.

China was first unified under an emperor in the third century B.C.E. From the beginning, emperors needed help to rule their large country. Emperor Han Wu Di, for example, once, sent out this announcement:

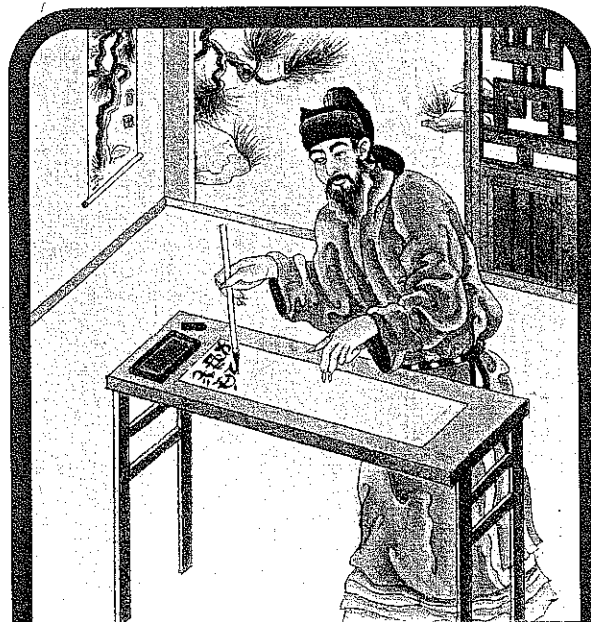
Heroes Wanted! A Proclamation

Exceptional work demands exceptional men.... We therefore command the various district officials to search for men of brilliant and exceptional talents, to be our generals, our ministers, and our envoys to distant states.

Over time, Chinese emperors tried several ways of finding qualified people to administer their government. One method was to rely on an **aristocracy** of wealthy landowners. Emperors like Han Wu Di, however, preferred to choose officials for their merit, or worth. During the Han dynasty, candidates for government jobs had to prove their knowledge and ability by passing strict tests. As a result, a class of scholar-officials evolved. Under later emperors, this system developed into a **meritocracy**, or rule by officials of proven merit.

In the 13th century C.E., a nomadic people called the Mongols build a great empire in Asia. Toward the end of the century, the Mongols took over China. Under Mongol emperors, government officials were foreigners. Under this **government by foreigners**, some officials were Mongol friends and relatives of the emperor. Others were trusted people from other lands.

How did these three approaches to government affect China? Which won out in the end? In this chapter, you'll explore these questions.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to understand how Chinese emperors chose people to help govern the country.

16.2 The Government of Imperial China

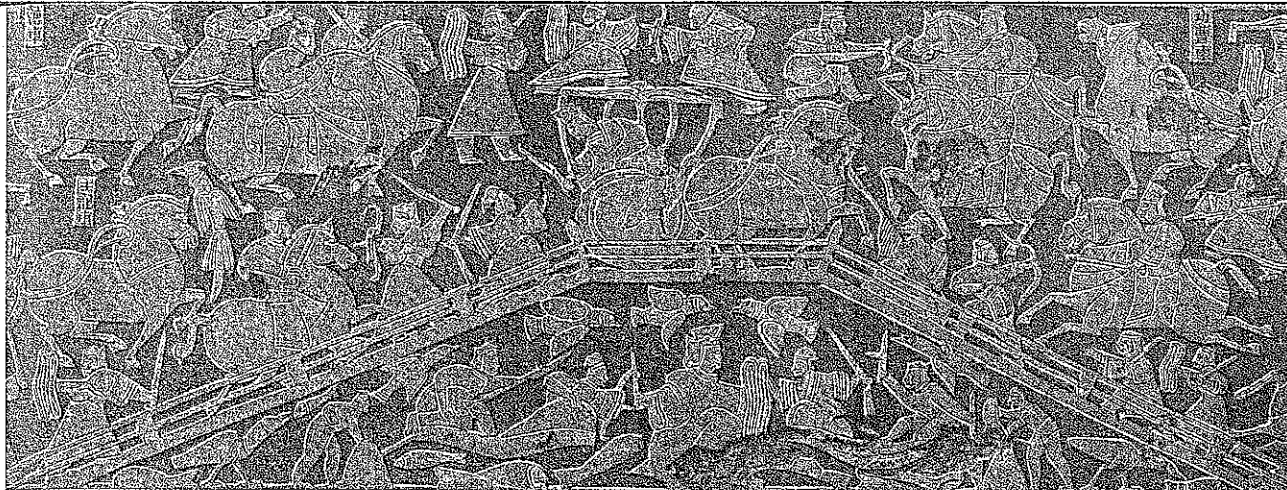
In 221 B.C.E., Prince Zheng, the head of the state of Qin, became the first Chinese ruler to claim the title of emperor. He took the name Qin Shihuangdi, which means “First Emperor of Qin.” From that time on, China generally had an imperial government headed by an emperor or, sometimes, an empress.

China’s Imperial Dynasties Chinese emperors named a relative—often a son—to become emperor after their deaths. In this way they established a dynasty, or line of rulers from the same family.

From ancient times, Chinese rulers based their right to govern on the Mandate of Heaven. According to this idea, Heaven had chosen a particular dynasty to rule. The Chinese believed that Heaven supported the dynasty for as long as an emperor ruled well. Natural disasters such as floods, famines, plagues, and earthquakes were taken as signs that Heaven was displeased. If an emperor ruled badly and lost the Mandate of Heaven, the people could overthrow him.

The table lists the imperial dynasties that ruled China between 221 B.C.E. and 1644 C.E. In this unit, you’ll focus on the dynasties that followed the Han dynasty.

China’s Imperial Dynasties		
Dynasty	Time Period	Known For
Qin dynasty	221–206 B.C.E.	unification of China under an emperor
Han dynasty	206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.	a golden age for a united China
Six dynasties	220–581 C.E.	a period of chaos and division
Sui dynasty	589–618 C.E.	reunification of China
Tang dynasty	618–907 C.E.	economic development and growth; many inventions and discoveries
Five dynasties in the north Ten kingdoms in the south	907–960 C.E. 907–970 C.E.	a period of chaos and division
Song dynasty	960–1279 C.E.	economic development and growth; many inventions and discoveries
Yuan dynasty (the Mongols)	1279–1368 C.E.	control of China by foreigners
Ming dynasty	1368–1644 C.E.	opening up of China to foreign influences at the start of the dynasty, closing down of China by the end of the dynasty



China's Breakup and Reunification The Han dynasty of ancient China held power for more than 400 years. This was a golden age of expansion and prosperity for China. In 220 C.E., however, the Han lost their grip on power. A long period of disunity followed. This period ended when the Sui and Tang dynasties reunified China.

What happened to bring about the end of Han rule? Like earlier emperors, the Han governed China with the help of a large **bureaucracy** of government officials. As long as the bureaucracy was skilled, honest, and hard working, China prospered. By 220, however, corrupt (dishonest) relatives and servants of the emperor had seized control of the government.

The result was disastrous. High taxes ruined families. Workers were forced to labor for long periods of time on public projects. Bandits attacked the countryside. This led **warlords** to oppose the emperor and fight with one another. The government grew weak and could not protect farmers.

Small farmers also suffered because they had to pay taxes and give half of everything they produced to their landlords. As they fell into debt, they had to give up their land to large landowners and work for them.

At last the farmers rebelled. The Han dynasty had lost the Mandate of Heaven.

No new dynasty took over from the Han. Instead, China broke apart into separate kingdoms, just as Europe did after the fall of Rome. Nomadic invaders ruled the north. Several short-lived dynasties ruled the south.

In 589, the northern state of Sui conquered the south and reunified China. The Sui dynasty created a new central government and ruled for 29 years. By 617, however, heavy taxes led to unrest and a struggle for power.

In 618, a general named Li Yuan declared himself emperor and established the Tang dynasty. Tang rulers built on the accomplishments of the Sui dynasty. They strengthened the central government and increased Tang influence over outlying areas.

Under the Tang, a unified China enjoyed a period of wealth and power that lasted nearly 300 years. Let's look now at how Tang rulers approached problems of government.

China was divided into warring kingdoms from 220 to 589 C.E.

bureaucracy a highly organized body of workers with many levels of authority

warlord a military leader operating outside the control of the government

16.3 Aristocracy: The Tang Dynasty

civil service examination
a test given to qualify candidates
for positions in the government

Civil service exams to choose government officials were based on the teachings of this man, Confucius.



Like emperors before them, Tang rulers relied on a large bureaucracy. Officials collected taxes and oversaw building and irrigation projects. They provided for the army and made sure the laws were obeyed. But how could emperors make sure they chose the best people for these positions?

Earlier emperors answered this question in different ways. Before the Han dynasty, emperors chose aristocrats to help them govern. Aristocrats, or nobles, were wealthy and powerful landowners. But simply being wealthy did not make a person talented and knowledgeable.

To improve the bureaucracy, Han emperors created **civil service examinations**. Candidates took long tests to prove they were qualified to hold office. The tests had questions on Chinese classics, poetry, and legal and administrative issues. Mainly they were based on the works of Confucius, China's great philosopher and teacher. This was the beginning of a system in which a class of scholar-officials ran the government.

Tang emperors also used civil service exams to fill some government positions. Early in the dynasty, however, emperors chose aristocrats for most high-level jobs. Some officials were hired because their fathers or grandfathers had held high government rank. Some were hired because of personal recommendations. Often, aristocrats gained positions by marrying into the imperial family.

Even the civil service exams favored aristocrats. The tests were supposedly open to all except for certain groups, such as merchants, actors, and beggars. In theory, any man could attend the university where students prepared for the exams. In reality, however, only the wealthy could afford tutors, books, and time to study. As a result, aristocrats held almost all offices in the early part of the dynasty.

Peasant rebellions and battles between generals ended the Tang dynasty in 907. Once again, China split apart. Five military dynasties followed one another to power in the north. The south broke up into independent kingdoms.

Beginning in 960, the Song dynasty rose to power. Gradually, Song emperors reunified the country. As you will see, they built on the civil service system to reform the way government officials were chosen.

16.4 Meritocracy: The Song Dynasty

Under Song emperors, the idea of scholar-officials reached its height. The Song relied on civil service exams and opened them up to far more candidates. In this way, they created a meritocracy: rule by officials chosen for their merit.

The exams were influenced by a new school of thought known as neo-Confucianism. This new teaching blended the teachings of Confucius with elements of Buddhism and Daoism (two traditional Chinese religions). A neo-Confucian scholar, Zhu Xi, selected and commented on classic Chinese writings. In 1190, his work was published as the *Four Books*. This work became the basis of study for all civil service exams.



During the Song dynasty, scholar-officials performed many tasks. Here scholars are arranging ancient manuscripts.

Confucius taught that people must act properly in five important relationships: ruler and subject, father and son, older sibling and younger sibling, husband and wife, and friend and friend. Except for friends, one person in each relationship is above the other. Those above should be kind to those below. Those below should respect and obey those above. In particular, subjects must be loyal to rulers. Song emperors and scholars believed that officials who had studied Confucius would be rational, moral, and able to maintain order.

Under the Song, people from lower classes gained the ability to become scholar-officials. They could attend the new state-supported local schools and go on to the university to become scholars. If they passed a local test, they could take the imperial exam in the capital. Here they wrote essays and poems in a certain style. They answered questions about political and social problems based on Confucian ideas.

The exams were set up to prevent cheating. Candidates were locked in a small room for several days. A second person copied each paper so that the examiners wouldn't know whose work they were reading.

Only a small proportion of candidates passed the difficult exams. Those who failed could take the tests again in the future. Those who passed had to wait a few years before their first appointment. When it came, it was for a job far from their hometown so that they couldn't play favorites among family and friends. At the end of three years, officials could move up in rank.

Despite the hardships, people were happy to get such respected jobs. As government officials, they also enjoyed certain privileges, such as being excused from taxes and military service.

16.5 Government by Foreigners: The Period of Mongol Rule

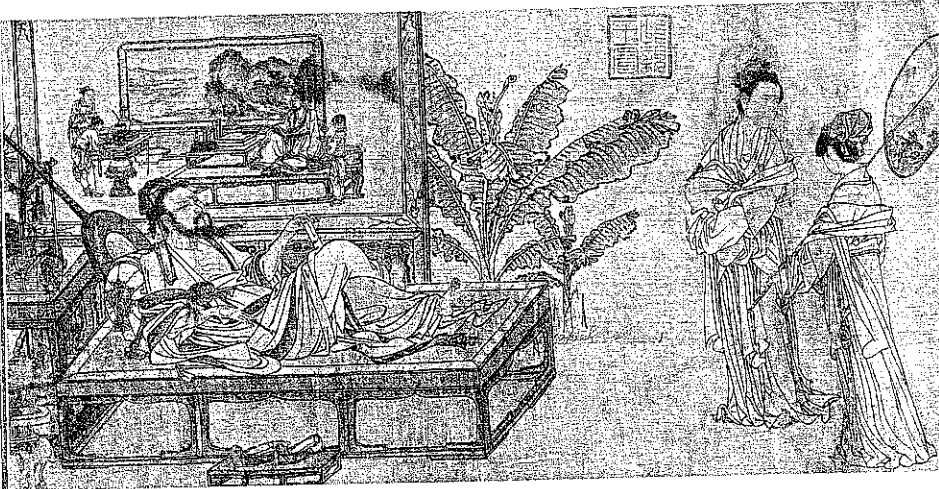
In the 13th century, the Mongols conquered almost all of Asia. In 1276, the Mongols captured China's imperial capital. Three years later, the last Song emperor died in flight.

The Mongol leader, Kublai Khan, took the title of emperor of China. He called his dynasty the Yuan dynasty. For nearly 100 years, from 1279 to 1368, China was under Mongol rule.

Under the Mongols, Chinese society was divided into four classes. The Mongols were at the top. Next came foreigners from outside China who were their friends. These people included Tibetans, Persians, Turks,

and Central Asians. Many of them were Muslims. The third class was made up of the northern Chinese, who were more accustomed to the Mongols than the southerners were. The southern Chinese came last.

Kublai Khan ended the system of civil service exams. He did not believe that Confucian learning was needed for government jobs, and he did not want to rely on Chinese to run his government. To fill important positions, he



Even though scholars did not hold government jobs during the rule of the Mongols, they still enjoyed a comfortable life.

chose other Mongols that he felt he could trust. Some of these people were his relatives.

But there weren't enough Mongols to fill every job. Besides, many were illiterate (unable to read and write). Kublai and later Mongol emperors needed people who could handle the paperwork of a complex government. They were forced to appoint trusted foreigners to government positions, even some Europeans. Chinese scholars were used only as teachers and minor officials. Other Chinese worked as clerks, and some of them rose to important positions.

Without the examination system, however, there was a shortage of capable administrators. In 1315, the Mongols restored the exam system. Even then, they set limits on who could take the exam, which favored Mongol and other non-Chinese candidates.

As time went on, fighting among Mongol leaders weakened the government. So did their greed. Officials were often corrupt, perhaps in part because they had not been taught Confucian ideals.

The Mongols had also made enemies of many native Chinese. In the 1350s and 1360s, rebels rose up to fight them. In 1368, the Mongol dynasty collapsed, and the Chinese reestablished their own government under the Ming dynasty. The Ming ruled China for nearly 300 years.

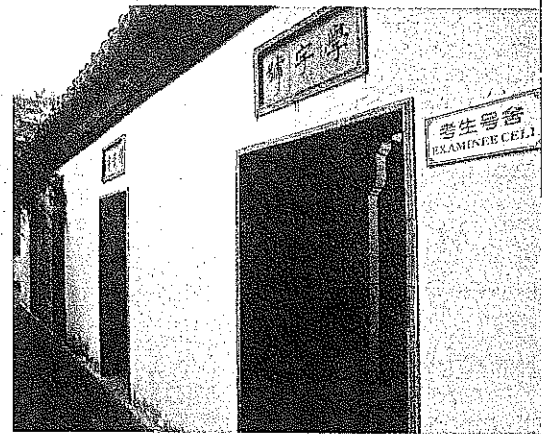
16.6 The Revival of the Civil Service System

Under Ming emperors, civil service exams were again used to fill government positions. This system lasted into the 20th century.

In many ways, the exam system served China well. It provided a well-organized government. The education of its scholar-officials emphasized moral behavior, justice, kindness, loyalty to the emperor, proper conduct, and the importance of family. These values helped to unify Chinese culture.

The civil service system gave poor men who were ambitious and hard working the chance to be government officials. At the same time, it ensured that officials were trained and talented, not merely rich or related to the emperor.

Yet China's civil service system may also have stood in the way of progress. The exams did not test understanding of science, mathematics, or engineering. People with such knowledge were therefore kept out of the government. Confucian scholars also had little respect for merchants, business, and trade. Confucians had often considered merchants to be the lowest class in society because they bought and sold things rather than producing useful items themselves. Under the Ming, this outlook dominated, and trade and business were not encouraged. In addition, the bureaucracy became set in its ways. Its inability to adapt contributed to the fall of the Ming in 1644.



Civil service exams lasted for several days. Candidates were locked in small cells like these during the tests.

16.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned how China was governed between 220 and 1644 C.E. Chinese emperors relied on a bureaucracy to help them govern. At different times, they used various ways of choosing government officials.

Early emperors chose officials from the aristocracy. The Han tried to improve government by creating a civil service examination system. Candidates for government jobs had to pass tests based mostly on Confucian learning.

After the long period of division, the Sui and Tang dynasties reunified China. Civil service exams continued, but aristocrats filled most government jobs under the Tang.

The Song dynasty used civil service exams to create a meritocracy of scholar-officials. Mongol emperors, however, relied on family members, friends, and trusted foreigners. Under the Ming, the Chinese restored their civil service system.

Now that you have an overview of Chinese government, it's time to look at other aspects of Chinese history. In the next chapter, you'll learn about the growth of China's economy during the Song dynasty.

◀ The Grand Canal provides a waterway between northern and southern China.

China Develops a New Economy

17.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you learned about changes in China's government. In this chapter, you will learn about the growth of China's **economy** during the Song dynasty, from about 960 to 1279 C.E.

The Song period was a time of great prosperity. Changes in **agriculture**, especially a boom in the production of rice, fed the growth of the economy. **Trade** and **commerce** flourished. These developments had started during the Tang dynasty. Under the Song, they would help make China one of the most advanced societies in the world.

Along with prosperity came **urbanization**, or the growth of cities. During this period, China's huge cities dwarfed the cities of medieval Europe.

An Italian traveler named Marco Polo first saw China toward the end of the Song dynasty. He marveled at China's crowded cities and bustling markets. Polo was especially impressed by the boat traffic on the Grand Canal. This great waterway linked northern China with the Chang Jiang (Yangtze) river valley in the south. Farmers and merchants used the canal to ship their crops and goods. Polo wrote, "It is indeed surprising to observe the multitude and the size of the vessels that are continually passing and repassing, laden [loaded] with merchandise of the greatest value."

In this chapter, you will learn how changes in agriculture, trade and commerce, and urbanization made China so prosperous. Let's begin by finding out how changes in agriculture helped to spur the growth of China's economy.

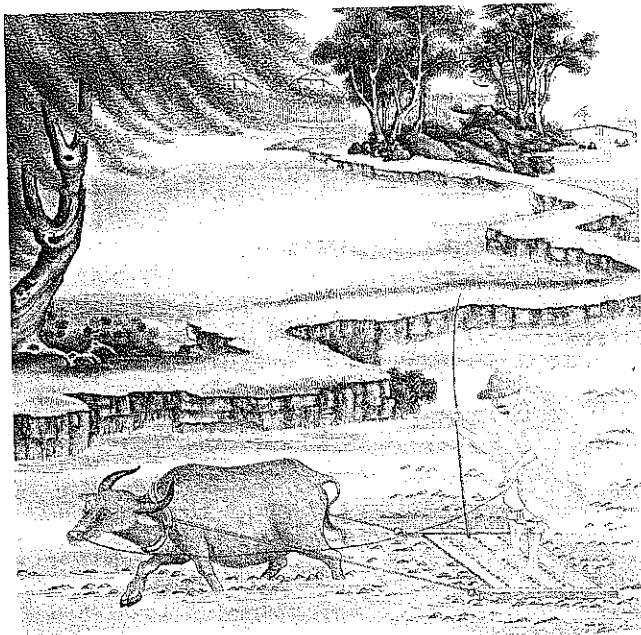
China's Economy

URBANIZATION

AGRICULTURE

COMMERCE

Use this spoke diagram as a graphic organizer to help you understand more about the changes in Chinese agriculture, commerce, and urbanization that occurred from the 10th to the 13th centuries.



Rice, grown in southern China, became the country's most important crop during the 13th century. Peasants worked hard during the growing season. Above, a peasant is preparing the rice paddy with a water buffalo (left) before rice seedlings are planted (right). Opposite, a chain pump provides water for the rice paddy (top), and peasants harvest the rice by hand (bottom).

17.2 Changes in Agriculture

Changes in agriculture were a major reason for the growth of China's economy during the Song dynasty. This period saw a huge increase in the production of rice as well as new and better farming methods. Let's look at how and why these changes happened.

Reasons for Agricultural Changes There were several reasons for the changes in Chinese agriculture. The first was the movement of farmers to the fertile basins of the Chang Jiang river in southern China.

During the Tang dynasty, northern China was the wealthiest and most populous part of the country. But wars and attacks by people from Mongolia drove many landowners to move south. Under the Song, southern China continued to grow. By 1207, about 65 million people lived in the south, compared to 50 million in the north.

The move to the south changed what farmers grew. Northern farmers had cultivated wheat and millet. These crops grew well in the north's cold, dry climate. In contrast, the south's climate was warm and wet. Wetlands covered most of the Chang Jiang valley. These conditions were ideal for cultivating rice plants, which need a lot of water.

Rice farmers, though, had their own problems. Rice crops were frequently destroyed by drought (periods of dry weather) and violent storms called *typhoons*. Even if a crop survived, it took five months to mature from planting to harvest.

During the 11th century, a new kind of rice was brought to China from Southeast Asia. The new type of rice was resistant to drought, and it matured in two months instead of five. Now farmers could plant at least two crops of rice each year, and rice production boomed.

Production increased even more with new and better farming techniques and tools. An improved plow and **harrow** made it easier

harrow a farm tool used to break up and even out plowed ground

to prepare fields for planting. Farmers began using fertilizer to produce larger crops. A device called a **chain pump** helped farmers irrigate land at the edges of lakes, marshes, and rivers. To grow rice on hillsides, farmers created flat areas called terraces. More and more land was devoted to farming, and landowners became wealthier.

Characteristics of the New Agriculture Imagine visiting a farming area in southern China during the 13th century. Small farms cover every bit of suitable land. Terraced hillsides spread as far as the eye can see. Rice grows on the terraces in flooded fields called *paddies*. Elaborate irrigation systems crisscross the paddies, bringing water where it's needed.

Early in the growing season, you can see water buffaloes pulling a plow and harrow to level the fields and prepare them for planting. The seeds have been growing in seedbeds for a month. Now workers will transplant the young plants to the paddy.

Growing rice takes a lot of hard work done by many hands. In the fields, large numbers of workers walk backward as they transplant the rice plants in straight rows. Two months from now, the workers will harvest the rice by hand.

Before and during the growing season, the rice paddy has to be constantly watered and drained. Dams, dikes, gated channels, and chain pumps help to move water into and out of the paddies.

Although rice is the main crop, peasants also grow tea, cotton, and sugar. To feed silkworms, they grow mulberry trees. In the southern hill area, you see tea plants. The Chinese had once used tea only as medicine. But by the ninth century, tea was the national drink. Tea drinking became a social custom, and teahouses became popular. To meet the demand, farmers grew more tea.

Results of Agricultural Changes The shift to rice growing was an important development for China. First, it increased food production. The abundance of food helped support a larger population. For the first time, China's population grew to more than 100 million people.

With ample food, peasants could take time away from farming to make silk, cotton cloth, and other products to sell or trade. Rice farmers could also market their surplus rice. Landowners became rich enough from growing rice to buy luxury items. All these changes encouraged the growth of trade and commerce, which we will look at next.

chain pump a pump with containers attached to a loop of chain to lift water and carry it where it is wanted



17.3 The Growth of Trade and Commerce

Trade and commerce had already begun growing during the Tang dynasty. Tang emperors eased restrictions on merchants, and they actively promoted trade. Products like rice, silk, tea, jade, and porcelain traveled along trade routes to India, Arabia, and Europe. Under the Song, business activity blossomed even more.

Reasons for Growth in Trade and Commerce One reason for the growth of trade and commerce was that wealthy landowners were eager to buy luxuries. The demand for luxuries encouraged traders as well as Chinese artisans, who made silk and other goods.

Commerce was also helped by water transportation. A vast network of rivers and canals connected different parts of China. Farmers in central China could ship their rice north along the Grand Canal. Busy boat owners had plenty of business, because it was cheaper and faster to move goods by water than by road. A **barge** could travel 45 miles a day, compared to 25 miles a day for an oxcart.

Improvements in navigation helped increase overseas trade. Navigational charts and diagrams, along with the magnetic compass (a Chinese invention), made it easier for sailors to find their way on long voyages.

With so much buying and selling going on, people needed more **currency**. During the 11th century, the government minted huge numbers of copper coins—so many that there was a copper shortage. Moneylenders began issuing paper money to merchants. The idea caught on, and the government printed paper money in large quantities. The increase in currency further spurred the growth of commerce.

Characteristics of China's Commercial Growth

Let's take a trip on the waterways of China in the 13th century. Our first stop is at a market town along a canal. The canal is crowded with barges loaded with rice and other goods. The barges are sailed, rowed, or pushed along with the help of long poles. Ox carts and pack animals trudge along the roads and over the bridges that cross the canal. Peasants are coming to town to sell their surplus crops and animals, as well as things they have made at home, such as silk, charcoal, and wine.

On the streets and bridges, merchants have set up small shops to attract customers who are visiting the city. Street peddlers sell goods from the packs they carry.

You also see "deposit shops" where merchants trade long strings of copper coins for paper money. Paper money is much easier to carry around, but unlike copper, it has no value in itself. If there is too much paper money in

barge a long boat with a flat bottom

currency the form of money used in a country

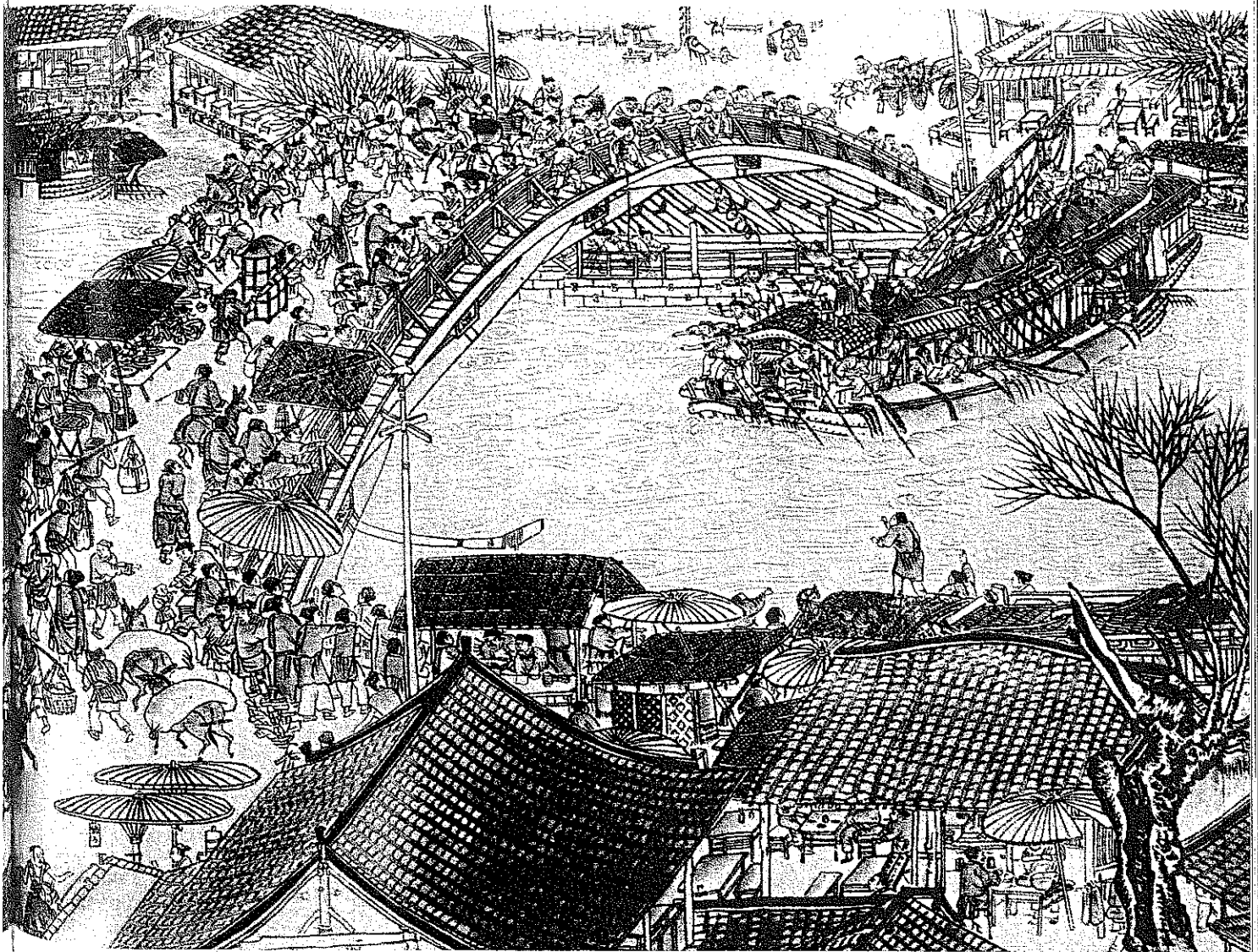


circulation, it loses its value. For this reason, the government controls the amount of paper money that is available. It also threatens to cut off the heads of counterfeiters (people who print fake money).

Let's continue our journey to a port city on the eastern coast. In the harbor, men are loading silk, ceramics, sugar, and rice wine into sailing vessels called *junks*. These ships are big enough to hold several hundred men. Notice their sails, which are made of bamboo matting. The junks will soon depart for Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, the East Indies, and even Africa. They will return loaded with indigo, spices, silver, ivory, and coral.

Results of Growth in Trade and Commerce The increase in trade and commerce had several effects. First, it resulted in the growth of the merchant class. Second, business activity brought increased prosperity, giving China the highest standard of living in the world. Third, many commercial centers grew into big cities. You'll learn about China's increasing urbanization in the next section.

Commerce greatly expanded in China under the Song dynasty. This scene shows commercial life in the northern Song city of Kai-Feng during the 13th century.



As population increased and commerce grew, huge cities like Kai-Feng developed. These two scenes are part of a 15-foot scroll called *Ch'ing Ming Festival on the River*.



17.4 Urbanization

Urbanization increased during the Song dynasty as cities sprouted up all over China. Chinese cities became the largest in the world. The city of Hangzhou had perhaps 2 million people within its walls. It's no wonder that Marco Polo was impressed with the cities he visited. European cities of this period had no more than 50,000 residents.

Reasons for Urbanization Why did the growth of cities increase under the Song? One answer is that the growth of commerce encouraged people to move to cities and towns. There, people could make a living as merchants, traders, peddlers, and shopkeepers. In addition, landowners left their farms because they preferred the shops and social life of the cities. More people brought still more opportunities for business, and cities grew even larger.

Characteristics of Cities China's cities at this time were crowded, exciting places. The crowds in Hangzhou astonished Marco Polo. He wrote, "Anyone seeing such a multitude would believe it impossible that food could be found to feed them all, and yet on every market day all the market squares are filled with people and with merchants who bring food on carts and boats."

Let's stroll through a typical 13th-century city. The streets are filled with rich landowners, merchants, traders, moneylenders, and visiting peasants eager to sell their surplus crops. Signs in the market area identify the goods sold in each shop—silk, silver, pearls, food items, fans, lacquerware, porcelain, and many more.

In the entertainment area musicians, jugglers, acrobats, and puppeteers perform outdoors. There are theaters, restaurants, wine shops, and teahouses. Food vendors carrying trays of food on their heads provide plenty to eat.

You might be surprised to see young girls whose feet are so tightly bound with cloth that their toes are bent under. The girls will grow up to have tiny feet, which the Chinese consider beautiful. But they will also have difficulty walking.



This custom of foot binding first became common during the Song dynasty. It marked a decline in the status of women. Some followers of neo-Confucianism taught that women were inferior to men. In addition, women in cities did not take part in farmwork. In the countryside, women enjoyed greater status because they did do farmwork.

Results of Urbanization The growth of cities changed the way many ordinary Chinese lived. Cities were vibrant centers of activity, from buying and selling to hobbies and board games. Public works projects provided employment for many city dwellers. Urbanization also stimulated culture, giving artists an audience of wealthy, leisured people. Paintings produced during the Song period are considered some of the finest in the world.

17.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about changes in agriculture, trade and commerce, and urbanization during the Song dynasty. During this time, the center of Chinese civilization shifted from the north to the south. The south's warm, wet climate was ideal for growing rice. Rice became China's most important crop.

A new kind of rice seed and improvements in farming methods greatly increased rice production. This helped support a larger population. It also gave landowners money for buying luxuries, which stimulated the growth of commerce.

Commerce was also helped by a network of rivers and canals. Improvements in navigation made overseas trade easier. Traders and merchants supplied the goods people wanted to buy. As China moved to a money economy, the increase in currency helped business grow.

Commercial activity contributed to the growth of cities. Merchants, peasants, peddlers, and traders sold all kinds of goods. China enjoyed the highest standard of living in the world.

Chinese scientists and inventors also contributed to China's prosperity. Next you'll learn about some of their inventions and discoveries.