

The Song Dynasty

In 960, China was overtaken by the Song dynasty. From its beginnings, the Song dynasty was unable to completely control the Khitan, a nomadic people to the north of the empire that had already assimilated much of Chinese culture. Throughout its 300-year rule of China, the Song had to pay **tribute** to the Khitan to keep them from conquering additional Song territory.

Under the Song dynasty many Chinese traditions were strengthened. For example:

- Civil service exams were emphasized as a prerequisite for government posts.
- Greater prestige was granted to the scholar-gentry.
- **Neo-Confucianism** arose as a blend of Confucian and Buddhist values. The new philosophy promoted the application of Confucian respect for authority and family to the everyday life of all levels of Chinese society, a feature that made it attractive to Chinese rulers. At the same time, the traditional aspect of Neo-Confucianism heightened the tendency of the Chinese elite classes to withdraw from contact with other peoples. Neo-Confucianism also reinforced gender and class distinctions.

The Song emphasis on the importance of the scholar-gentry over the military weakened its ability to withstand the threat of Khitan conquests of its northern borders. The cost of tribute paid to the Khitan burdened the Song economy as a whole, and especially the peasant class. Efforts at reform ended in the late eleventh century when Neo-Confucians reestablished Chinese tradition.

The faltering Song Empire now faced another threat: invasion by the Jurchens, another nomadic group. The Jurchens had overthrown the Khitan and settled in the region north of the Song Empire. They continued their conquest by dominating most of the basin of the Huang He (Yellow) River and causing the Song to retreat southward. The Song continued to thrive in the basin of the Yangtze River until 1279, during this time achieving noteworthy cultural and technological advances.

The Achievements of the Song

During the rule of the Song dynasty:

- Overseas trade begun under the Tang continued.
- Artists expressed themselves through landscape paintings.
- Warfare saw the use of catapults to hurl bombs and grenades. Armies and ships used flame-throwers and rocket launchers.
- Printing with movable type was developed.
- Compasses were used in ocean navigation.
- The **abacus** was developed to aid counting and the recording of taxes.
- The practice of **footbinding** spread among the elite classes. Later, lower classes would often adopt the custom as well.
- The concept of the patriarchal family intensified.

The Extension of China's Influence

The reestablishment of tradition among the Chinese during the Tang and Song dynasties did not prevent Chinese culture from expanding to other regions in the East. Throughout the period, Japan built on its previous contacts with Chinese culture, while Vietnam and Korea forged new ones.