

History 379

Paper



The Rise of Hangzhou During the Song
Dynasty

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Introduction

Hangzhou (杭州) is one of the largest and most prosperous cities in China today. It is the capital and centerpiece of Zhejiang province, and has a population of over ten million, while being a central hub of culture, technology, and commerce. Situated near the mouth of the Yangzi, it has direct access to the East China Sea and is close to other urban centers such as Shanghai, Suzhou, and Wuxi.

For much of Chinese history, Hangzhou (though assuming different names) has been significant. It was the logical southern terminus of the Grand Canal, one of ancient China's greatest feats of engineering. It was always a hub of trade and commerce, being a terminus of the maritime Silk Road and handling goods from Japan to Indonesia to Persia; this maritime trade was often the lifeblood of Chinese dynasties and their wealth. It was during the Song (宋) Dynasty from the late 10th to late 13th centuries when Hangzhou (then named Lin'an), benefitting from the Song emphasis on maritime trade and commerce, really developed into a major Chinese city. Though it existed as a city prior to the Song, during this time it saw large increases in population, increases in commercial traffic, development as an imperial seat, and the admiration of foreign communities and merchants from far and wide.

We will explore the rise of Hangzhou during the Song Dynasty, and in particular analyze its importance to the Song empire via geographic, political, and economic lenses; in particular, we will explore how the city broadly fit into the bigger picture of the Song empire and the major developments of the period.

Historical Background – the Song Dynasty, 960-1279

The Song inherited an empire from the previous Tang (唐) Dynasty through a pivotal historical moment that historians refer to as the Tang-Song transition, a term first coined by a Japanese historian of China, Naito Konan (Hu, Foster, and Hansen 2019, 183). During this time, major changes in many areas worked simultaneously to fundamentally alter the nature of Chinese society and the empire. These changes would spur prominent Song attitudes and policies that would shape the trajectory of the three centuries. We must seek to broadly understand trends in the Song empire as setting the stage for the rise of their cities.

The Northern Song (960-1127) ruled over more or less all of China proper and had its seat of power in Kaifeng. It coexisted, though not always peacefully, with the Liao (Khitans) and Xixia (Tanguts) empires to the north. Under the Northern Song, there was heavy emphasis placed on the military, the civil examination system (and hence the central bureaucracy), and the economy.

During the Tang and preceding dynasties, there was a prominent landed aristocracy class that was influential in the palace due to their ties to the court and held power in society due to their great wealth. During the Song Dynasty, a growing population, military, and economy required the growth of bureaucracy. The civil service examination, though not a Song invention, was taken to new heights by the Song as they began to appoint more powerful bureaucrats and administrators than ever before from successful examination takers. Suddenly, political power began to flow to a class of literati that enjoyed elevated societal perceptions and were well-versed as authorities on Confucian culture. The erosion of the landed aristocracy's power, and the rise of the educated literati, was one great development ushered in by the Song.

Economically, the Song saw a boom in maritime trade that was facilitated by a rise in production of commodity goods and developments in seafaring technologies. This trade was facilitated by Song infrastructure and waterways and the safer seas created by its navy. Ultimately, this led to a huge exchange of goods all over Asia as imports and exports flowed freely through coastal cities, where Song state tax offices were set up, enriching the empire off duties on all the goods. This economic change is arguably one of the most direct driving factors for Song urban development, and especially important for the coastal city of Hangzhou.

Regarding the military, perhaps I should clarify that we are not interested in the military itself in an essay about one Chinese city – but rather we should see the military in Song times as a litmus test for how fighting and armed conflict took center stage in the common Song political mind. According to Kuhn (2009, 50) the Song army employed 1.2 million men in 1045 and consequently represented 80% of the entire state budget, a dizzying figure that we in modern times must find difficult to comprehend. Repeated conflicts with northern neighbors prompted this huge military expansion and the development of military and naval technologies for use in combat. Nothing better illustrates how much war played a central role in the Song times, and with war comes consequences for the bureaucracy, economy, and population movement, all intrinsically connected with urban realities in the cities. Indeed, war is what prompted the Song to relocate to Hangzhou in the first place.

The Southern Song (1127-1279) was established when the northern third of the Northern Song territory, including the capital Kaifeng, fell to an invasion from the Jin (Jurchens) empire, and the court subsequently relocated to Hangzhou.

In many senses the Southern Song continued on with the changes that the Northern Song precipitated. The navy was now more important than ever to defend against northern threats, as China's many lateral riverways proved to be insurmountable obstacles for invaders. Cut off from the Hexi corridor in modern-day Xinjiang in the west because of the loss of territory to the Jin, the maritime Silk Road became much more important, and the booming of oceangoing commerce accelerated.

These fundamental, deep-rooted, and vastly prevalent changes ushered in by the Song were to have profound effects on its urban centers.

Geography

The silt on the banks of the Yellow River, passing through the Central China Plain, made for fertile farming and is traditionally seen as the cradle of Chinese civilization – this enabled a density of population and political relevance that made northern China dominant for most of pre-Song times. However, the other major fertile area of development was precisely the Yangzi



Figure 1: a political map of modern-day China (yellow) and surrounding areas, with Hangzhou (red) and Zhejiang (orange).

basin, at Hangzhou. According to Perdue (in Szonyi 2017, 256), like how millet was grown in the north, rice was grown around the Hangzhou area, taking advantage of its wet climate and many wetlands, lakes, and rivers. This enabled population to be sustained, and though it never gained political relevance until the Song, we know that human settlement at Hangzhou had always existed in some form after the advent of agriculture in China.

Moreover, especially considering the broader geographic dispositions of the Song empire, Hangzhou was blessed with an ideal location that suited the needs of the Song empire well. Figure 1¹ shows the location of Hangzhou relative to the rest of China, as well as the Korean peninsula, Taiwan, Hainan, and part of the South China Sea. Even without knowing much about the disposition of people during the Song time, we can already see that Hangzhou occupies a central position in both eastern China and in the oceangoing network in east Asia. Its status as a

¹ N.d., *China, Zhejiang, Hangzhou*, February 19, 2010, Wikimedia Commons accessed August 18, 2020, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Zhejiang_Hangzhou.svg.

coastal city no doubt gave it unfettered access to international markets, something that the other major Song metropolis of Kaifeng lacked. As mentioned before, the Yangzi basin was saturated with convenient natural networks of lakes, rivers, and other waterways, making settlement there, even without human infrastructure, especially conducive to trade.

The construction of the Grand Canal during the Sui Dynasty around 605 (Hu, Foster, and Hansen 2019, 111) both was the result of, and significantly strengthened, Hangzhou's geographical blessing. Since Hangzhou was a key city in the south, it was a logical starting point to connect the south to the north. It augmented natural waterways and integrated Hangzhou to the previously difficult-to-access northern cities.

While we can safely identify Hangzhou as (at least one of) the heartland(s) of southern China, it was unlike other southern settlements in that it also enjoyed deep ties to the north. It was close enough in proximity to major northern centers like Kaifeng and Luoyang to take advantage of transportation links like the Grand Canal. It was also accessible to northern populations outside the context of trade and commerce. For example, after the fall of the Northern Song, Hangzhou saw a massive surge of population where outsiders (from the north) "outnumbered or even totally replaced the local inhabitants" (Coblin 2002, 533) amid a surge of refugees and people seeking escape from the incoming Jin armies. Moreover, these refugees mostly came from the Kaifeng area (Ibid.), exemplifying how well-integrated Hangzhou was to the north: mass population movement was possible even from Kaifeng!

Ultimately, Hangzhou was truly unique in location. It was simultaneously a natural ocean port, and well-integrated by natural and man-made water infrastructure. It was an agricultural heartland of southern China, and deeply connected via infrastructure and culture to the north. It should not come as a surprise that it was instrumental to Song political and economic interests, as we shall soon see.

Politics

The Song Dynasty was chronologically split in two by its most jarring event, the conquest of the northern third of empire by the Jin Dynasty in the north in 1127. Despite heavy spending on defense, the Song still suffered military defeat after defeat until Kaifeng itself fell to the Jin. The emperor and his son were captured and humiliated, and the court had to relocate south to Hangzhou, then named Lin'an (临安), or “temporary peace” – a fitting name. After a peace treaty was established with the Jin which saw the Song concede its northern Chinese heartlands, the Southern Song embarked on a long road of recovery. Figure 2² shows the extent of the Jin conquests and the Southern Song predicament.

A change that immediately impacted Hangzhou was that along with the arrival of the court came the arrival of the literati. As discussed previously, a hallmark of Song policy was the elevation of the civil service examinations and the creation of an educated, culturally-enriched literati class in society that held political and popular clout. More than any other previous time in Chinese history, the court necessarily carried with it a powerful central bureaucracy and an army of literati. These literati were not just politically powerful, but also cultural



Figure 2: a political map of detailing the Southern Song territories, with the loss of virtually all of the north to the Jin.

² Map 6, in Kuhn, Dieter. *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009.

authorities. Hence Hangzhou quickly saw itself being a political center, and by extension a cultural hub as well.

Specifically, the political events in Hangzhou during this tumultuous period also mirrored a larger divide that plagued the Song Dynasty: the rise of tensions between the north and south. The rise of the literati had come at the expense of landed aristocracy, primarily from the north, and these new literati were dominated by newfound southern talent (Lorge 2005, 41); civil political capital began to flow south, which naturally caused tensions in the court. This was exacerbated by the loss of the northern territories to the Jin, and Hangzhou soon became the site of furious tensions between the military-aristocratic northern elite bent on irredentism and a new civil-literati bureaucracy seeking more peaceful means. In this way, Hangzhou, by virtue of being the seat of power, experienced ever more levels of political tension and diversity of political culture, in addition to the already-growing Confucian orthodoxy; the city had become a literal and figurative border between the north-south tensions characteristic of the Song era.

As a final thought, we should not neglect the political significance that Hangzhou had during the Northern Song, when it was not yet the capital of the empire. Given its size, it was still a relevant center of many political conversations and disputes: for example, during the large-scale reform initiative launched by Wang Anshi, one of his key opponents (and thus an opponent of the emperor's will) Su Shi was appointed to be Vice Prefect of Hangzhou in 1071 (Yang 2002, 100) to keep him away from the court at Kaifeng. During his tenure, Su sustained his audible criticism of Wang's reforms and went as far as using poetry to strategically direct his complaints (Ibid.) – this, of course, generated plenty of backlash, and Hangzhou was certainly in the thick of the Song political quagmire. Its establishment as a political hub certainly began very early on in the Song era.

Economy

The economy was in some ways the primary driver of Hangzhou's growth and importance during Song times, especially given the Song emphasis on commerce. We broadly identify two effects that worked in concert to cement Hangzhou's economic rise in this period: its rapid urbanization, and its establishment as an international trade hub.

Urbanization was aided greatly by the Song development of water infrastructure and vessel technologies, which significantly lowered shipping costs across the empire (Liu 2016, 88). This allowed commercial shipments of food like rice to enter densely populated areas, enabling their growth. A century into the Song Dynasty, in 1077, Hangzhou was the second most populous city in China with a population of around 600,000, second only to Kaifeng (Ibid., 91). By 11th century standards, this was a metropolis. This safely rendered Hangzhou a major source of commercial taxes for the empire, second again only to Kaifeng (Ibid., 83). Urbanization only perpetuated more growth, as the Song economy was also heavily invested in handicraft industries: oil pressing, sugar refining, porcelain making, ship production, and fabric production (Hu, Foster, and Hansen 2019, 192) all required many workers in an almost factory-like setting to produce suitable quantities for profitable export and nationwide consumption. This would prompt more workers to be concentrated and move into urban areas, further spurring the growth of cities. All this was made possible by the vast infrastructure network that was maintained by the state, which enabled efficient food transport to feed hungry workers, and the efficient export of manufactured goods that made cities thrive. Ultimately, places like Hangzhou became powerful economic engines based on their large labor pool.

The other facet of Hangzhou's economic boom ties in with the broad Song policy of encouraging economic trade internationally. Local accounts indicate that "a visitor strolling the streets ... of one of the ... Song maritime trading ports ... would have encountered people from every part of the known world" (Chaffee 2019, 90), a powerful testament to the cosmopolitan nature of cities like Hangzhou. The great concert of state emphasis on transportation infrastructure, shipbuilding

excellence, and urbanized mass-production meant that sought-after Chinese goods like silk and porcelain (figure 3³) could be freely traded via Hangzhou to people as far as the Islamic Caliphate. Though the famed Muslim merchant and explorer Ibn Battuta visited Hangzhou during the Yuan Dynasty in the 14th century, his remarks regarding the size of the city and the prevalence of the ships (Ibn Battuta 1994, 904) are no doubt owing partly to the emphasis that the Song placed on this central trade hub. The flow of imports and exports added to the ability of the city to generate taxes and raised Song dependence on the city even more. This trade also accelerated growth, as the volume of goods would have drawn in more merchants, and the demand for goods would have driven more production and workers.



Figure 3: a Song-era porcelain vessel, one of Hangzhou's many export products.

The loss of Kaifeng in 1127 effectively made Hangzhou the biggest, most prosperous city in the Song China. The importance of the city would have been magnified, as it was now the biggest tax base and transportation center.

Ultimately, Hangzhou's economy arguably was the most important driver of its growth in a direct way. We should understand Hangzhou's economic rise as the natural product of Song policies. Hangzhou's unique geography made it an indispensable port, as well as a natural hub to base transportation infrastructure. The Song reliance on maritime trade, and its highly exportable goods-based economy, essentially guaranteed Hangzhou's growth, helped along by urbanization.

³ N.d., *Funerary vase and cover, green-glazed stoneware*, May 2006, Wikimedia Commons accessed August 22, 2020, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Museum_f%C3%BCr_Ostasiatische_Kunst_Dahlem_Berlin_Mai_2006_043.jpg.

Conclusion

The story of Hangzhou is very much a story of the Song Dynasty, its dazzling successes and vibrant growth as an economic, political, and cultural center echoing the mandates and realities that defined the Song: reforms to education, the embrace of the maritime market, the emphasis on infrastructure, and constant threat of war in the north.

The blessing of Hangzhou was no doubt its geography. It had many effects: the lush Yangzi valley made for fertile rice farmland and made the city a heartland of south China; the location of the city then was a natural choice for a waterways infrastructure hub; the coast made it an international trading hub; and its proximity to the north and the north's people gave it relevance in the Northern Song court and eventually morphed into a meeting point between the social tensions of north and south.

With these invaluable advantages, Hangzhou was set up to simply be a massive beneficiary of Song political and economic maneuvering, growing the city in terms of population, wealth, and regional relevance.

Initially brought into the limelight by the Song dynasty, today's Hangzhou is still going strong, over one thousand years later.

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