

CIV203: Civilization III: The Ancient World Fall Term 2025 Group Research Project: Essay

Topic: The Urban Revolution: Kaifeng, Hangzhou, and the Commercial Transformation of the Song Dynasty

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When we look at the history of the world before 1300 C.E., it is easy to focus on great conquerors or massive wars. However, in China, the Song Dynasty (960–1279 C.E.) achieved something different: a revolution in how people lived and did business. While the dynasty before them, the Tang, was famous for its poetry and military expansion, the Song Dynasty is best known for its "Commercial Revolution." This was a time when China's population exploded, trade networks expanded, and cities became massive centers of life and culture. At the heart of this change were the two capitals: Kaifeng in the north and Hangzhou in the south. By looking at the economic structures and daily life of these two cities, and using sources like Jacques Gernet's *Daily Life in China on the Eve of the Mongol Invasion* and Dieter Kuhn's *The Age of Confucian Rule*, we can see that the Song Dynasty created a society that was surprisingly modern, with bustling night markets, paper money, and a powerful merchant class.



Kaifeng: Breaking Down the Walls To understand why the Song Dynasty was so special, we first have to look at the Northern capital, Kaifeng. Before the Song, Chinese cities like Chang'an were very strict. They were divided into walled districts called "wards." People lived inside these walls, the gates were locked at night, and you could only buy and sell things in specific market areas. Kaifeng changed all of that.

In Kaifeng, the government tore down the walls. For the first time, shops could open anywhere—on bridges, in residential streets, and along the river. Even more importantly, they got rid of the curfew. This created a lively nightlife that shocked visitors. The famous scroll painting, *Scenes Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, gives us a visual proof of this. It shows a city packed with people, camels from the Silk Road, and boats carrying grain, all moving freely through the streets.



Historian Dieter Kuhn notes in his book *The Age of Confucian Rule* that this freedom changed how people lived. Instead of making everything they needed themselves, people in the city started buying things. Kuhn writes, "The inhabitants of the capital did not live on what they produced themselves; they lived on what they bought" (Kuhn, 2009). This sounds normal to us today, but back then, moving from a farming lifestyle to a consumer lifestyle was a huge shift. Kaifeng became a place where you could buy tea, books, and iron tools freely, creating a booming economy.

The Move South to Hangzhou The success of Kaifeng didn't last forever. In 1127, the Jurchen people from the north (the Jin Dynasty) invaded and captured the city. The Song court had to flee to the south, where they established a new capital at Hangzhou (then called Lin'an). This started the Southern Song period.

If Kaifeng was a river city, Hangzhou was a water city. It was located near the ocean and was filled with canals and bridges. By the 13th century, it had a population of over one million people, making it probably the biggest city in the world. When Marco Polo visited Hangzhou later, he called it the "City of Heaven." He was amazed by the sheer size of it and the thousands of bridges that connected the neighborhoods. While Kaifeng was about connecting to the Silk Road, Hangzhou connected China to the ocean trade routes leading to India and the Middle East.

Daily Life and City Management Managing a city of one million people in the ancient world was incredibly difficult, but the Song administration was very organized. In our syllabus book, *Daily Life in China*, Jacques Gernet explains how the city handled problems like fire and garbage. Because most houses were made of wood and bamboo, fire was a constant danger. Gernet describes how the city set up watchtowers with soldiers ready to fight fires day and night. He notes, "If a fire broke out... the soldiers were instantly on the spot with buckets, ropes, axes, and scythes" (Gernet, 1962). This kind of organized public service was rare in other parts of the world at that time.



Gernet also describes the leisure life of the people. Hangzhou wasn't just about work; it was about having fun. There were entertainment districts called "wazi" where people could watch puppet shows, listen to history stories, or gamble. The restaurant culture was also huge. Gernet lists all kinds of specific foods people could buy, like "sweet bean soup" or dishes from different regions of China. This shows that the people of Hangzhou had extra money to spend and enjoyed a high quality of life.

Paper Money and the Merchants Powering all this trade was a major invention: paper money. The Song were the first government to issue paper currency on a national scale. Carrying around thousands of heavy copper coins for big business deals was impossible, so they developed bills called *huizi*. This allowed merchants to move wealth easily across the empire.

However, money caused social changes too. In traditional Chinese culture (Confucianism), merchants were considered the lowest class because they didn't "make" anything—they just traded what others made. But in the Song Dynasty, merchants became so rich that they couldn't be ignored. They started to rival the government officials in power. They bought land, supported the arts, and their commercial success became the backbone of the empire.

The Song Dynasty is often remembered as being militarily weak because they eventually lost to the Mongols. But if we look at their cities, we see a different story. The transition from Kaifeng to Hangzhou represents a time when China became the economic center of the world.

As Jacques Gernet's research shows, Hangzhou was a vibrant, living city with advanced services like fire brigades and trash collection. Dieter Kuhn's analysis backs this up by showing how strong the economy was, driven by iron production and consumer spending. The Song Dynasty didn't just build cities; they built a new way of living that focused on trade, convenience, and culture. When Marco Polo went back to Europe with his stories of the "City of Heaven," he was describing the legacy of the Song—a civilization that, in many ways, was the first "modern" society.

References

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Kuhn, Dieter. *The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China*. History of Imperial China. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.