

China Develops a New Economy

How did the Chinese improve their economy during the Tang and Song dynasties?

1. 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 explore how and why these changes happened.

Reasons for Agricultural Changes

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

During the Tang dynasty, northern China was the wealthiest and most populous part of the country, but wars and attacks from Mongolian tribes 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 since these crops thrived in the north's cold, dry climate. In contrast, the south's climate was warm and wet, so wetlands covered most of the Chang Jiang valley. These conditions were ideal for cultivating rice plants, which require a lot of water.

Rice farmers, though, did face challenges. Rice crops were frequently destroyed by periods of drought and violent storms, called typhoons. Even if a crop survived, it took five months for the rice to mature from planting to harvest.

During the 11th century, a new variety called champa rice was brought to China from Vietnam. It 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. As a result, rice production in China boomed.

Production increased even more with new and better farming techniques and tools. An improved plow and harrow, a tool used to level plowed ground, made it easier to prepare fields for planting. Additionally, farmers began using fertilizer to produce larger crops. A device called a chain pump, which used containers attached to a loop of chain to move water, 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

Anyone visiting a farming area in southern China during the 13th century would see small farms covering every bit of suitable land. Terraced hillsides spread as far as you can see, each covered

in flooded fields called paddies where rice is grown. **Elaborate** irrigation systems crisscross the paddies, bringing water where it's needed.

Early in the growing season, you 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 grow tea, cotton, and sugar. They also grow mulberry trees, which produce the leaves that feed silkworms.

Results of Agricultural Changes

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

Peasants could take time away from farming to weave silk, cotton cloth, and other products. Rice farmers could market their surplus rice. Landowners became rich enough from growing rice to buy luxury items. All these changes encouraged the growth of trade.

2. The Growth of Trade and Commerce

Trade and **commerce** were already underway during the Tang dynasty. Tang emperors eased **restrictions** on merchants, and they actively promoted trade. Products like rice, silk, tea, porcelain, and jade 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 an increase in trade, as well as an increase in the number of Chinese artisans, who made silk and other goods.

Water transportation also helped commerce. 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. Boat owners had plenty of business, because moving goods by water was cheaper and faster than by road. A long boat with a flat bottom, called a barge, could travel 45 miles a day, compared to 25 miles a day for an oxcart.

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

With so much buying and selling, people needed **currency**. In the 11th century, the government minted huge numbers of copper coins—so many that there was a copper shortage. Therefore, 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 a market town along a canal, which 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 items they have made at home, such as silk and charcoal.

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 **circulation**, it loses its value. For this reason, the government controls the amount of paper money that is available. It also threatens to decapitate counterfeiters who print fake money.

Let's continue our journey to a port city on the eastern coast where men in the harbor are loading silk, ceramics, sugar, and rice into large sailing vessels called junks. These ships are big enough to hold several hundred men. Their sails are made of bamboo matting. The junks depart for Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, the East Indies, and even Africa. They are expected to return loaded with indigo for making blue dye, spices, silver, ivory, and coral.

Results of Growth in Trade and Commerce

The increase in China's trade and commerce had several effects. First, it resulted in the growth of the merchant class. Second, business brought increased prosperity, giving China the highest living standard in the world at that time. Third, many commercial centers grew into big cities.

3. The Growth of 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. Since European cities of this period had no more than 50,000 residents, it's no wonder that Marco Polo was impressed with the cities he visited.

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 jobs, 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 who 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.

In the entertainment area musicians, jugglers, acrobats, and puppeteers perform outdoors. People are enjoying the theater. They are visiting with friends in restaurants and teahouses. Food vendors carrying trays of food on their heads provide plenty to eat.

Also in the cities, wealthy young girls tightly bound their feet with cloth so that their toes were bent under. These girls grew up to have tiny feet, which the Chinese considered beautiful. But they had great 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 Confucianism taught that women were **inferior** to men. In addition, women of the middle and upper classes in cities did not work. In the countryside, women enjoyed greater status because they did participate in work on farms.

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.