



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Peak Human: China's Song Dynasty

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Lesson Overview

The period of the Song Dynasty in China was a time of unprecedented prosperity, vibrancy, and innovation. In his book *Peak Human*, Johan Norberg says: "No classic civilization came as close to unleashing an industrial revolution as Song China. Its achievements in technology, production, and urbanization would not be equaled in Europe for half a millennium."

In this lesson, students will learn about the astonishing achievements of the Song Dynasty, paying particular attention to how historical continuities from that era continue to affect our lives today.



ALONG THE RIVER DURING THE QINGMING FESTIVAL, OFTEN CALLED THE "MONA LISA OF CHINA," IS A SONG DYNASTY MASTERPIECE. THE SCROLL (ALSO KNOWN AS THE "QINGMING SCROLL"), WHICH IS MORE THAN 5 METERS LONG, SHOWS THE DAILY LIFE OF A COSMOPOLITAN CHINESE CITY ALMOST A MILLENNIUM AGO.

SOURCE: BAIDU TIEBA, [HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:ALONGTHERIVER_QINGMING.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alongtheriver_qingming.jpg)

Warm-Up

What was life like during the Song Dynasty?

Kaifeng was the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty and one of the largest cities in the world at the time. Watch this [BBC clip](#), from 11:35 to 23:15, to learn about Kaifeng's dynamic urban culture and one of its most extraordinary contributions to civilization: movable-type printing. Then, answer these questions:

- Describe 1 feature of the masterpiece known as the "Qingming Scroll" that makes it such a rich source of knowledge about Song Dynasty life.
- Explain 1 way that Chinese restaurants in Kaifeng were unique for the period.
- Identify the 2 different types of printing that Song Dynasty publishers used.
- What was the specific reason movable-type printing was *not* adopted by Chinese society?
- Name 3 historical continuities of Chinese culture that are evident in the video. In other words, what elements of Song Dynasty life can still be seen in China today?

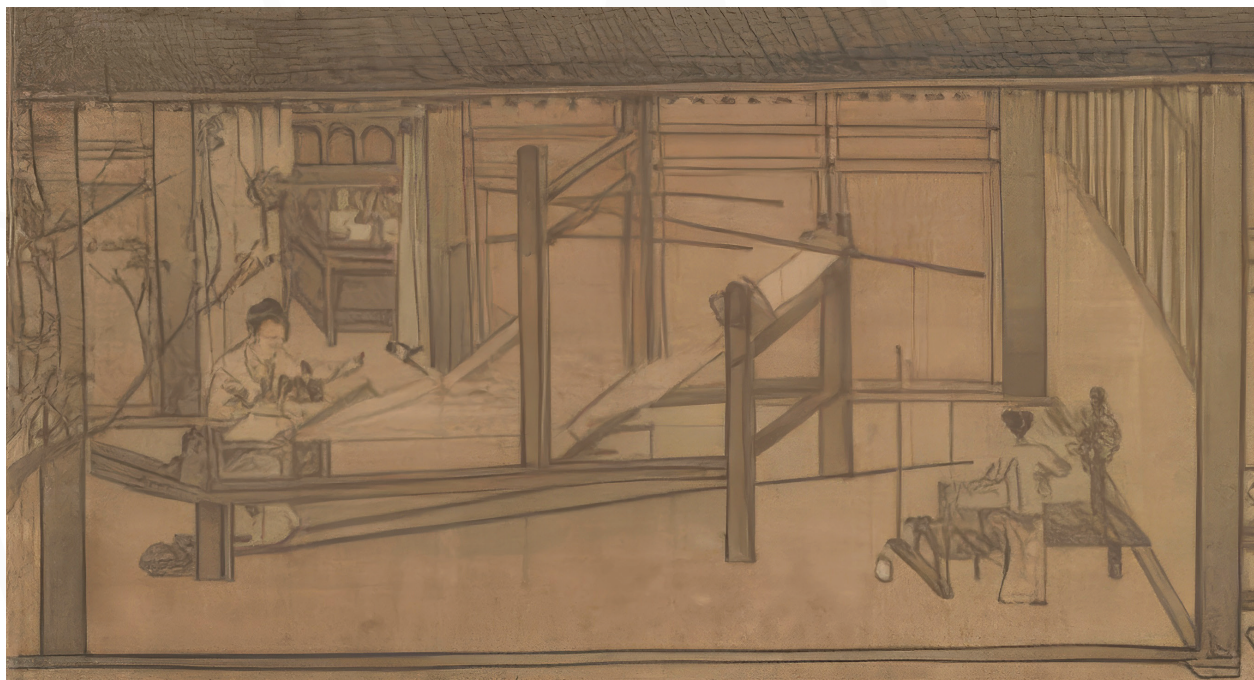
Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

Read pages 199–206, from "A Second Chance" to "The Mongol Horde," in the book *Peak Human*, then answer the following questions:

- Continue to think about historical continuities. How is China's portion of the world population in the 21st century similar to its share during the 13th century?
- What new military technology did the Southern Song Dynasty develop to defend against the Jin armies?
- How were the tolerant attitudes of the Southern Song evident in people's clothing choices?
- Compare and contrast: How was the civil society of the Song Dynasty similar to and different from interest groups today? Cite at least 1 voluntary group from page 203 and compare it with an institution you know, such as a church, nonprofit organization, or advocacy group.
- Research the Song-era maritime innovations. Then, in the following chart, describe how each benefited navigation and trade.

Maritime innovation	Description	Benefits to navigation and trade
Sternpost rudder		
Magnetic compass		
Iron anchor		
Watertight compartment		

- Read the part of the text about advances in textile manufacturing on pages 204–205. Then, look closely at this detail from the Song scroll painting *Sericulture*, attributed to Liang Kai.



SERICULTURE (THE PROCESS OF MAKING SILK), EARLY 1200S. ATTRIBUTED TO LIANG KAI (CHINESE, MID-1100S–EARLY 1200S). HANDSCROLL; INK AND COLOR ON SILK; FIRST SECTION: 26.7 X 98.6 CM (10 1/2 X 38 13/16 IN.); SECOND SECTION: 27.6 X 92.3 CM (10 7/8 X 36 5/16 IN.); THIRD SECTION: 27.6 X 92.3 CM (10 7/8 X 36 5/16 IN.). THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART, JOHN L. SEVERANCE COLLECTION, 1977.5

- What do you think the man and the boy are doing in these paintings?
- How do the loom and spinning wheel represent advancements in textile manufacturing during the Song Dynasty?
- How does cloth production, as shown in the image, represent a continuity in Chinese history?
- What is the “mind-boggling” what-if scenario that, if it had occurred, would have drastically altered world history?

Extension Activities/Homework

DEBATE THE LEGACY OF THE SONG DYNASTY’S “THREE GREAT INVENTIONS”

Song Dynasty inventors devised many new technologies, but three have proven most significant: movable-type printing, gunpowder, and the compass.

You and your classmates will debate the question: “Of the three great inventions of the Song Dynasty—movable-type printing, gunpowder, and the compass—which had the most significant impact on world history and why?”

In the open-minded spirit of the Song Dynasty, this debate aims to promote understanding, apply your historical knowledge, and flex your intellectual muscles.

Instructions:

- Establish rules for respectful and inclusive dialogue before beginning the debate. Brainstorm debate rules together, and your teacher will write them on the board. Examples include: “one person speaks at a time,” “listen and pay attention,” and “be mindful of how long you are talking and give others a chance to speak.” During the debate, all opinions will be heard and respected. All participants must recognize that people have diverse perspectives and backgrounds. You should foster an atmosphere of empathy and active listening. Try to understand each other’s viewpoints. Remember, engaging in civil discourse is one of the debate’s objectives. It is not enough to make a statement. Your claims must be historically defensible and supported by specific evidence.
- Your teacher will assign you to one of 6 groups. Each group will have 4–5 people. Choose a leader, secretary, and researcher. Even if you do not have an assigned role, each participant must speak at least once during the debate.
- Your group will advocate for one of the following positions. You must use **specific historical evidence** to support your claims.

Pro-printing group	Anti-printing group
Your group will advocate that movable-type printing is the technology with the most significant impact on world history.	Your group will advocate that movable-type printing is <i>not</i> the technology with the most significant impact on world history.
Pro-gunpowder group	Anti-gunpowder group
Your group will advocate that gunpowder is the technology with the most significant impact on world history.	Your group will advocate that gunpowder is <i>not</i> the technology with the most significant impact on world history.
Pro-compass group	Anti-compass group
Your group will advocate that the compass is the technology with the most significant impact on world history.	Your group will advocate that the compass is <i>not</i> the technology with the most significant impact on world history.

First, with your groupmates, come up with at least 3 historically defensible claims to support your position. Write them in the left column of the chart below.

Second, research reputable sources to find specific evidence to support your claims. Write evidence that reinforces each claim in the right column.

Your teacher will give you 10 to 15 minutes to prepare your claims and evidence.

Claims	Specific evidence
"We believe that _____ is/is not the technology with the most significant impact on world history because _____."	
"We believe that _____ is/is not the technology with the most significant impact on world history because _____."	
"We believe that _____ is/is not the technology with the most significant impact on world history because _____."	

- To begin the debate, your teacher will state the question, “Of the three great inventions of the Song Dynasty—movable-type printing, gunpowder, and the compass—which had the most significant impact on world history and why?”

A “pro” group will state one of their claims and its corresponding evidence. Then, the relevant “anti” group will attempt to refute their claim.

Take turns debating each claim. You may refute, disagree, and be critical of each other. However, you must also follow your established norms and back up your claims with evidence.

- After 10 to 15 minutes, your teacher will stop the debate and debrief with you:
 - Which ideas, from either side, were new to you?
 - Which ideas most resonated with you? Why?
 - What surprised you about this debate?
 - Part of civil discourse is the ability to disagree respectfully. How did you and your classmates behave civilly with each other? What could you have done to make the debate format more congenial and productive?

COMPLETE AN OPTIC ANALYSIS OF A SONG DYNASTY PAINTING

Many art historians believe the Song Dynasty was the Golden Age of Chinese painting. It set a high standard for realism, elegance, and magnificent detail. The Song Dynasty is renowned for its renditions of landscapes, children, and everyday life. China Global Television Network has created an interactive gallery showcasing more than 100 Song Dynasty paintings, along with commentary and explanations from Chinese and international scholars.

Explore the [gallery](#), choose a Song Dynasty masterpiece to analyze, and conduct an **OPTIC analysis** of the artwork.

Note: Song Dynasty artists often painted on scrolls many meters long. Therefore, you may choose 1 scene from a bigger painting, crop it, and analyze just that part of the artwork.

Which Song Dynasty painting are you analyzing? Write the title, then cut and paste a screenshot of the painting or cropped portion of it here.

Claims	Specific evidence
O – Overview Summarize the “action” of the painting without analyzing its meaning yet. This is equivalent to paraphrasing a document.	
P – Parts of the Painting Describe the placement of people and objects in the painting. Describe color, lighting, and movement.	
T – Title What does the title tell you about the painting? How much does it add to what you understand or do not understand about the painting? Explain your answers.	
I – Interrelationships What historical themes—social, political, environmental, cultural, economic, technological—does the painting reflect?	
C – Conclusion Provide an analysis of the entire composition. What is the artist trying to portray in this painting?	

Example analysis: Detail from *The Night Revels of Han Xizai*.



GU HONGZHONG 14

SOURCE: [HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/FILE:GU_HONGZHONG_14.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GU_HONGZHONG_14.JPG)

Claims	Specific evidence
O – Overview Summarize the “action” of the painting without analyzing its meaning yet. This is equivalent to paraphrasing a document.	A Song Dynasty scholar-official is escorting a female guest to a dinner party. The man is inviting the young woman into a room, and she seems shy, yet interested. The man is likely courting the young lady, given that he is standing close to her and his right hand is lightly touching her back.
P – Parts of the Painting Describe the placement of people and objects in the painting. Describe color, lighting, and movement.	The woman is wearing an elegant pink silk skirt and a light blue scarf. Her hair is decorated with ornaments. The man is wearing a formal dark silk robe, boots, and a black cap, which indicates high status. There is no background or landscape, and the figures seem to float in space.

Claims	Specific evidence
T – Title What does the title tell you about the painting? How much does it add to what you understand or do not understand about the painting? Explain your answers.	The phrase “Night Revels” in the title suggests that this painting is about a dinner party or going out with friends. It shows that the people in the painting have the time and resources to enjoy themselves together, eating, drinking, and playing music. The custom of socializing at night seems very modern.
I – Interrelationships What historical themes—social, political, environmental, cultural, economic, technological—does the painting reflect?	This detail shows the social relationship between men and women and the universal theme of courtship. The man and the woman seem to want to entice and impress each other, the man through his access to a high-status group and the woman through her beauty and high fashion.
C – Conclusion Provide an analysis of the entire composition. What is the artist trying to portray in this painting?	This part of the painting demonstrates the meticulous attention to detail and naturalism of Song Dynasty paintings. The composition of the man and woman is realistic and familiar; you can imagine the warm words they exchange as they enter a fancy dinner party. We wonder if they are already a couple or will soon fall in love.