

Analysis of the Development of Traditional Chinese Culture: A Case Study of the Highly Prosperous Song Dynasty Culture

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Abstract: Chinese traditional culture has a long and broad history, characterized by its richness and intricacy. As a pivotal component of the Song Dynasty, the culture holds significant importance in Chinese cultural history. Furthermore, it has made notable contributions in various domains, including science, literature, education, and technology. This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the reasons behind the remarkable prosperity of the Song Dynasty and its cultural influence, focusing on the historical background, governmental policies, social classes, and the growth of the commodity economy during the early period of the Song Dynasty.

Keywords: Song Dynasty culture; science; literature; education

1. Introduction

The Chinese culture has a profound history, spanning nearly five thousand uninterrupted years, making it significant research value. In recent years, there has been a societal wave of cultural enthusiasm, with increasing attention paid to the development of traditional Chinese culture. People seek inspiration and use it to promote innovative development and creative transformation in contemporary culture. Among the various dynasties, the Song Dynasty often sparks controversy. Chen Yinke, a renowned historian specializing in Tang and Song Dynasty history, commented on the Song Dynasty: "The culture of the Chinese nation has evolved over thousands of years, with the era of the Zhao and Song dynasties playing a crucial role." This statement provides an objective and balanced perspective.

Similarly, the American scholar Stavrianos refers to the Song Dynasty as the "Golden Age." However, some individuals held a negative attitude towards the Song Dynasty, perceiving it as a period of corruption, weak national strength, continuous foreign invasions, and hindered societal development due to feudal ethics. While the Song Dynasty faced challenges in military and other areas, we cannot overlook its remarkable accomplishments in economy and culture. The significance of the Song Dynasty's cultural contributions cannot be ignored in understanding Chinese culture truly. Therefore, studying the culture of the Song Dynasty carries significant contemporary value.

2. Specific manifestations of cultural prosperity in the Song Dynasty

2.1. The construction of science

China's renowned historian, Chen Yinke, once stated, "The culture of the Chinese nation, after thousands of years of evolution, reached its pinnacle during the era of Zhao and Song." Notably, the Song Dynasty witnessed a vibrant intellectual scene, giving rise to many distinguished thinkers such as Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Zhu Xi. These individuals made significant contributions to the intellectual and philosophical landscape of the time.^[1]

The construction of Rigaku was a significant symbol of the thriving culture during the Song Dynasty. Rigaku represented a new perspective within Confucianism that emerged through the transformation and innovative development of traditional Confucian views by the scholars of the era. As a prominent scholar of his time, Zhu Xi highly valued ethical character as the ultimate criterion for evaluating an individual's behavior. According to him, once a person fully grasped reason, their actions would naturally adhere to ethical standards and morality, making them a saint-like figure. Additionally, Zhu Xi proposed "maintaining the reason of heaven while extinguishing human desires." This notion advocated for

individuals to understand reason and observe nature, as one's true nature often became obscured by their selfish desires. To uncover the true essence and reason behind everything, Zhu Xi believed it was necessary to eliminate selfish desires. Despite the limitations of his perspectives, Zhu Xi played a positive role in fostering moral cultivation within society during that era.

Science represented the most sophisticated and comprehensive theoretical system within feudal China, encompassing not only rules and ethics as the "heavenly principles" governing everything but also emphasizing individuals' conscious awareness of these principles. This approach aimed to shape people's ideal personalities. The moral integrity and virtue of the Chinese nation can be experienced through works like Gu Yanwu's poem "The rise and fall of the world is the responsibility of all men" and Wen Tianxiang's poem "There is no one who cannot die in the ancient times of life, and the heart of a man can shine through the sweat of the blue." These writings reveal the moral ideals and values rooted in Rationale philosophy and embody the influence of Rigaku.

2.2. Unprecedented literary prosperity

The Song Dynasty achieved remarkable accomplishments in all aspects of literature. During this period, more than 9,000 poets emerged, with countless prolific writers among them. For instance, Lu You, a renowned poet of the time, is known to have composed an astonishing 10,000 poems over 60 years. Approximately 1,400 individuals made significant contributions to lyricism, creating over 20,000 works in a wide range of rich and diverse content. The literary achievements of the Song Dynasty far surpassed those of previous generations, exceeding all expectations.^[2]

During the early Song period, the literary world witnessed the emergence of three distinct styles. The first one was the leisurely and effortless style influenced by Bai Juyi. The second style, known as the Late Tang style, drew inspiration from the works of Jia Island and Yao He. Lastly, the Xikun style, pioneered by Li Shangyin, contributed to the diversity of Song poetry, establishing a foundation for pursuing literary style and basic aesthetic orientation.

The literary world experienced a reform movement during the Northern Song Dynasty following this initial phase. This movement broke away from the formalistic writing style that prevailed during the late Tang Dynasty and the Five Dynasties. Song prose, in particular, embraced a more accessible and reality-oriented approach, reviving China's literary tradition of realism. This significant shift laid the groundwork for forming a vibrant and unique style of Song Dynasty poetry, leaving a lasting impact on future generations.

By the middle of the Northern Song Dynasty, poets like Wang Anshi and Ouyang Xiu ushered in a new era in the literary world, contributing to developing a loose and progressive culture within Song Poetry. In the late Northern Song Dynasty, poets such as Huang Tingjian and Chen Shidao further emphasized the cultural role of poetry. They focused on seeking the Way through poetry, aiming to preserve the true essence of the mind. Moreover, they advocated for creating infinite possibilities within the confines of limited space, allowing for greater creative expression.

The Southern Song Dynasty was marked by notable poets such as Chen Heyi, representing the Jianzhai style, and Yang Wanli, known for the Chengzhai style. Chen Heyi broke away from the constraints of the Jiangxi Poetry School, forging his unique poetic tone. On the other hand, Yang Wanli focused on expressing natural scenery and scenes from daily life. Among the Southern Song Dynasty poets, Lu You remains one of the most renowned figures. His poems reflect simplicity and naturalness while adhering to strict literary conventions. Lu You often incorporates dream imagery, combining literary canons with personal emotions to convey his intentions. His style blends the conciseness of the Jiangxi Poetry School with the flowing and natural qualities of Su Shi's poetry, resulting in a distinctive poetic style all his own.

Among the various literary styles of the Song Dynasty, the most significant achievement was in Song lyrics. In the early Northern Song Dynasty, Liu Yong was a famous lyricist who sought to transform "vulgar" language into something more elegant. He expressed the everyday sentiments of citizen life through accessible language, enabling individuals to express their emotions. During the middle period of the Northern Song Dynasty, Su Shi emerged as a representative lyricist. He had a distinct inclination to "break the mold" when it came to using poetry as lyrics, drawing upon the common function of poetry to express personal feelings. Moving to the early Southern Song Dynasty, we encounter the melodious lyricist Li Qingzhao. She possessed a unique female aesthetic perspective and artistic spirit, employing fresh and gentle language in her works. In the mid-to-late Southern Song Dynasty, Xin Qiji represented the bold and liberal school of lyricists. His approach involved using the written text as spoken words,

effortlessly blending rigidity and flexibility to enhance the artistic expression of his poems.

2.3. Further development of education, science, and technology

During the Song Dynasty, education was highly valued, leading to the establishment of numerous academies. The official school system had two prominent features. Firstly, it aimed to narrow the gap in education among different social classes. For instance, the official school system, from Zongxue to the Imperial College, disregarded social background, providing opportunities for children from disadvantaged families to pursue their ambitions. Secondly, the development of local schools received considerable attention. By the end of the Northern Song Dynasty, state and county schools had reached their peak, and it was common to use the phrase "schools all over the world" to describe the widespread availability of education. The Song Dynasty's emphasis on education contributed to the intellectual and cultural prosperity of the era.

The imperial examination system underwent further improvements and reforms in the Song Dynasty. Establishing the Imperial College Examination and increasing successful candidates gave children from humble backgrounds opportunities to enter the Imperial examination system. Many prominent figures and cultural leaders of the Song Dynasty came from modest beginnings, and the imperial examination system offered them a chance to excel in society.

Notable examples include Fan Zhongyan and Ouyang Xiu, who hailed from single-parent families and experienced poverty in their childhood. Fan's father passed away when he was just one year old, and his mother remarried into the Zhu family while still breastfeeding him. As a result, Fan faced the hardships of the world from an early age, surviving on porridge and dedicating himself to diligent study. Similarly, Ouyang Xiu could not afford a pen and paper, so his mother taught him to read and write by drawing on the ground with reed stalks. Despite these challenges, both men eventually became esteemed literary figures, admired for their personal determination and hard work. ^[2]

The Song Dynasty reached the pinnacle of ancient times in handicrafts and manufacturing. Regarding science and technology, the compass, printing, and gunpowder weapons stood out as remarkable achievements among the four great inventions of the Song Dynasty. Additionally, the Song Dynasty's people applied magnetic phenomena to navigation technology, greatly facilitating the development of sea trade during that time.

2.4. Enrichment of the social life of citizens

During the Song Dynasty, the rise of the urban middle class gave birth to the "Tile House," a dedicated entertainment venue for the public. Each Tile House comprised multiple circles for performances, with one of them being the Hook Lan. The Hook Lan offered diverse entertainment programs, including miscellaneous plays, shadow puppets, and dancing with swords. These diverse forms of entertainment created a lively and extraordinary atmosphere for the attendees.

During the Song Dynasty, teahouses and restaurants held significant importance in the daily lives of its citizens. The people highly valued the cultivation and consumption of tea. Zhang Zeduan's "Qingming Shanghe Tu" also depicts the civic life in the Northern Song Dynasty, specifically in Tokyo, showcasing numerous teahouses and drinking establishments. The importance of tea during the Song Dynasty is reflected in two aspects: "order tea" and "fighting tea." Order tea refers to a particular way of drinking tea while fighting tea involves competitions to showcase tea skills. It can be considered a game or formal competition where participants demonstrate their expertise in tea quality, brewing techniques, and the art of tea. Tao Gu's "Qing Yi Lu" from the Northern Song Dynasty mentions the following: "Recently, there have been innovations in tea preparation, with the infusion of images depicting things like animals, insects, fish, flowers, and grasses. This results in delicate pictures that appear momentarily but quickly dissipate, creating a transformative experience. People referred to this as 'tea opera.'"^[3] The emergence of the Tea Opera also indirectly reflected the richness of civic life in the Song Dynasty.

3. Reasons for the Cultural Prosperity of the Song Dynasty

3.1. Political reasons

3.1.1. The historical background of national unification

The Song Dynasty, which was established in 960 A.D., was divided into the Southern Song Dynasty

and the Northern Song Dynasty. At the beginning of the Song Dynasty, the forces of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms still existed. Zhao Kuangyin, the founder of the Song Dynasty, devised a policy to unify the country and eliminate these forces. In 964 A.D., he conquered Jingxiang, followed by defeating Hou Shu in 965 A.D., Nan Han in 970 A.D., and the powerful Nan Tang in 974 A.D. Consequently, all the local forces submitted to the Song Dynasty, ending the era of chaos^[4]. Unlike the prolonged divisions and fragmentation seen during the Wei, Jin, North, and South Dynasties, and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, the country achieved unification. This stable political background of the Song Dynasty laid a solid foundation for the prosperity of its culture.

3.1.2. The ruler's basic state policy of "emphasizing the civilization over the military"

In order to prevent the military generals from undermining the stability of the regime, the rulers of the Song Dynasty learned from the lessons of the previous dynasty's downfall. They implemented a policy of promoting the literati, emphasizing literature, and adopting a lighter military approach. This led to a society that valued intellectual pursuits and created an environment where "all kinds of things are inferior but only reading high." As a result, more and more people were motivated to engage in scholarly activities. This cultural shift profoundly impacted overall cultural literacy during the Song Dynasty and greatly contributed to social sciences and technology advancements. Various achievements were made in papermaking, printing, and compass development.

3.1.3. The rise of the civic class

The imperial examination system in the Tang Dynasty held more symbolic significance than practical significance. However, the imperial examination reforms implemented during the Song Dynasty achieved a significant breakthrough. These reforms eliminated the limitations of the imperial examinations, effectively breaking the grip of "aristocratic rule by birthright." As a result, individuals from humble backgrounds could now be employed to fill positions within the central government. This shift in policy allowed for the rise of common people's political power and fostered the gradual growth of the civic class.

3.2. Economic reasons

The economy of the Song Dynasty can be regarded as reaching its peak in ancient Chinese history. During this period, the introduction of the world's earliest paper currency, known as jiaozi, marked China's transition into the era of credit money. It accelerated the development of the commodity economy throughout the two Song dynasties, leading to advancements in agriculture, handicrafts, and industry and commerce.

In agriculture, there was a shift from traditional oxen plowing to manpower-driven plows. The Song Dynasty witnessed significant progress in the development of production tools, which further enhanced agricultural society's productivity based on the Tang Dynasty's achievements. The most notable advancement in handicrafts was the flourishing cotton textile industry. Additionally, the Song Dynasty significantly contributed to the ancient porcelain era, establishing the famous seven kilns during this period.

In terms of industry and commerce, the Song Dynasty represented a crucial period of economic activity. The capital cities of Kaifeng in the Northern Song Dynasty and Lin'an in the Southern Song Dynasty had blurry boundaries between residential and commercial trading areas. Merchants could open stores in residential zones, and business hours were more flexible. Night markets like those in Kaifeng and Lin'an operated until late. The phrase "until the third night" describes such late-night business activities^[5]. All of these advancements in agriculture, handicrafts, industry, and commerce provided a solid material foundation for the rich cultural life of the citizens, contributing to the unique urban prosperity of the Song Dynasty.

4. The Impact of the Cultural Prosperity of the Song Dynasty on the Development of Traditional Chinese Culture

The culture of the Song Dynasty holds a distinct significance in the overall course of Chinese history and civilization. It gave rise to Song lyrics, which, alongside Tang poetry, ushered in a new era in Chinese literature. The dynasty also achieved remarkable accomplishments in science and technology, education, and civic life. However, following the principles of Marxist materialistic dialectics, we must examine the issue from a dialectical development perspective. This approach necessitates acknowledging the positive

aspects of the Song Dynasty's cultural prosperity and recognizing its shortcomings. By adopting a balanced view, we can better understand the complexities and nuances of this pivotal period in Chinese history.

4.1. Positive impacts

The Song Dynasty witnessed a climax of loyalty despite facing foreign invasions threatening the regime's rule. Unlike previous feudal dynasties, the Song Dynasty managed to maintain its unity and stability, averting internal disintegration due to contradictions. The society as a whole remained peaceful and experienced explosive population growth. The power struggle shifted from domestic disputes between foreign relatives and powerful ministers to a united front against foreign invasions, preserving internal unity. The fruitful scientific and technological achievements contributed significantly to productivity development.

Additionally, the rise of the civic class improved the social status of literati and scholars. The emphasis on civilization over the military in policy-making resulted in an overall enhancement of cultural literacy. These factors collectively propelled the development of Chinese culture and resulted in the creation of numerous magnificent civilizations during the Song Dynasty.

4.2. Negative impact

The negative impact of Song culture is primarily seen in the ideological and political spheres. During the two Song periods, the concept of "three principles and five norms" in science exerted a significant influence. Women experienced a deficient social status, with excessive emphasis on "chastity." These societal norms confined women's ideologies, leading them into oppressive circumstances. Furthermore, the literati became increasingly pedantic, placing importance on formalities, which indirectly hindered the efficiency of government officials in the administration.

Simultaneously, the emphasis on prioritizing civilization over the military weakened the country's national defense forces. In this social climate, expensive books became highly regarded while military generals were undervalued. This directly contributed to the Song Dynasty's vulnerability to foreign aggression, proving to be a significant factor in its eventual downfall. The rigid adherence to Confucianism's idea of "power" resulted in declining problem-solving capacity within administrative organs. Women were restricted in numerous ways, and concepts like chastity reinforced the notion that a woman's happiness was tied to burying her desires, leading to Chinese women being trapped in a cycle of oppression.

5. Conclusions

Indeed, the Song Dynasty is a dynasty that elicits mixed feelings. It experienced economic prosperity and cultural splendor but often faced military setbacks due to foreign interference. From a cultural perspective, the Song Dynasty was undoubtedly successful. It witnessed unparalleled prosperity in areas such as the rise of the civic class, literature, art, and more. Notable developments, such as the emergence of Jiazi (paper currency) and the expansion of market boundaries, demonstrated significant economic advancements, which hold long-lasting significance in Chinese history. British historian John Toynbee once remarked, "If I had to choose, I would like to live in the Song Dynasty of China." This statement reflects the allure and brilliance of Song Dynasty culture, making it a radiant pearl in Chinese cultural history.

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