



2.4a Reading 4: "Intro to the Song Dynasty (excerpts)"

From the *Asian Art Museum*

<http://education.asianart.org/explore-resources>

Intro to the Song Dynasty (excerpts)

Scholars often refer to the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties as the "medieval" period of China. The civilizations of the Tang and Song dynasties of China were among the most advanced civilizations in the world at the time. Discoveries in the realms of science, art, philosophy, and technology—combined with a curiosity about the world around them—provided the people of this period with a worldview and level of sophistication that in many ways were unrivaled until much later times, even in China itself.

The Song dynasty was the second great "medieval" period of China. It coexisted uneasily with powerful rivals to the north. These rivals were the Khitan Tartars of Manchuria and Mongolia, kept at bay only through costly bribes, and the Jurchen people of Central Asia, who were intent on conquering China but could not be influenced by payoffs. Still the Northern Song (while it lasted) and the Southern Song (from 1127 until 1279) achieved incredible feats of learning, science, art, and philosophy. International trade and exchange of ideas continued to flourish. Song intellectuals reacted to the threatened existence of their dynasty by developing a defensive, inward-looking strategy: a belief that the Chinese and only the Chinese were capable of true greatness.

During the Song, great advances were also made in science and technology. Perhaps the most significant advance, however, was the invention of movable type printing, achieved around the year 1040, four hundred years before



2.4a Reading 4: “Intro to the Song Dynasty (excerpts)”

Gutenberg's printing innovations in Europe. Song printed editions of texts—previously transmitted as handwritten manuscripts—helped to spread literacy and knowledge throughout the realm. Many books survive to this day; they are technological marvels that are highly prized as some of the most beautiful books ever produced.

Song dynasty artists explored new themes and techniques in painting and ceramics. The Song interest in science and minute observation of the world resulted in large-scale grand landscape paintings that explore the world in fine detail. New glazes and porcelain techniques flourished. Song artists were interested in both the monumental and the delicate; in the functional and the mysterious. Ordinary and educated people alike were exposed to art and literature through the new invention of printing, which encouraged the development of drama and fiction.

The rule of the Song ended in 1279 when Mongol leader Kublai Khan, having conquered the Jurchen regime in northern China, swept through southern China and brought the Song territories entirely within the fold of the newly proclaimed Yuan dynasty. But that begins another story. The Tang and Song dynasties, fraternal twin dynasties of China’s medieval period, stand out as among the most accomplished of all civilizations in global history: they gave the world many contributions and helped to shape Chinese civilization into what it is today.