



Silk and the Song Dynasty

Silk was the ultimate medieval cloth, and Song Dynasty China was its main producer. More than just clothing, it served as money, art, and symbol of imperial power.



0:01

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Image of the scroll titled
“Along the River during
the Qingming Festival”*

There’s an amazing scroll in the collection of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. It’s called “Along the River during the Qingming Festival”.

Dating to the 11th century during the Song dynasty in China, the scroll illustrates a thriving society. We see farmers growing crops and herding animals, artisans producing goods, merchants transporting their products by ship and caravan, and people buying and selling those goods.

A common thread running through this masterpiece is silk, quite literally. Not only does the image depict silk production and probably silk traders, but the scroll itself is made of silk, as is the canvas on which the image was painted.

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera, with an
image of silkworms on the
right*

Silk is nothing but a fabric using thread made from a worm about as long as my pinky finger.

So how did it shape culture diplomacy and politics in the Song dynasty? How important was it to this thriving society?

To find out, we have to dig deeper into the history of China and its connections to the wider world in the era of the Song.

1:18

*Map of China during the
Song Dynasty which
expands out to show the
movement of goods across
Afro-Eurasia*

The Song dynasty reigned over much of China between about 960 and 1275. To the north, other parts of China were under the control of mainly nomadic people in this period known as the Xia and Jin, and they produced lots of silk as well.

As you already know, this period saw an expansion of trade across Afro-Eurasia. West African gold, Indian cotton, and many other products were flowing around the world’s biggest landmass, both over the water by ship and over land by caravan.

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

Within this system, Chinese silk was one of the biggest industries, producing a more expensive product that traveled much farther away than just about anything else.

*Map showing the
movement of goods across
Afro-Eurasia*

Some of the most important export markets for silk traders were the Philippines, Vietnam, India, Korea, and Central Asian states. Some markets may have been as far west as Europe.

2:14

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

Hello, I’m Francesca Hodges, and I’m talking about silk because I find it really interesting, but I’m not an expert. Luckily, I know someone who is, so I’m going to interview Professor Xiaolin Duan to find out more about the role of silk in the Song dynasty and in both Chinese and world history.

So my first question today is: what are the major themes of the Song dynasty period of Chinese history?

2:43

*Xiaolin Duan speaks,
facing camera, next to
a timeline of Chinese
dynasties*

So the Song dynasty was, politically speaking, it is not an expansional or military strong dynasty. It’s different from the previous dynasty, the Tang, and also different from the next one, the Yuan dynasty.

Images of Song innovation

*Francesca Hodges and
Xiaolin Duan converse,
facing camera*

3:20

*Xiaolin Duan speaks,
facing camera, with
graphics explaining key
players in Chinese silk
production on the right*

But the Song dynasty was known for its cultural achievements, and also the Song dynasty was a time of commercialization and economic development.

How did the economy work during the Song dynasty?

So speaking of the Song dynasty economic system, there was a strong state involvement.

However, there was also a strong private commercialization going on. So in the other word is on one hand, there is a well-established, national transportation network, and on the other hand, the small towns and the urban network started to prosper. And we also see the development of local industries, especially handicrafts and that involved with textile weaving and silk and other types of clothes productions.

Who made the silk and where?

It took place in different locations, different level, but in different scales. So on the state level, there was an official office called the Linjing Office, literally translated as Twill and Brocade Office. It had an average of 200 silk workers annually, and they mainly produce silk and textiles for the imperial family. And then there are the urban workshops that either run commercially or under the major elite families, and those are for market use.

*Images of individual
household silk production*

4:53

*Map of East Asia during
the Song Dynasty*

But a majority percentage of silk production during the Song Dynasty still remained in individual households. And I would say, a large amount of the textiles produced by individual households were used by themselves and paid as tax.

Song dynasty China was not the only producer of silk in this period. Their neighbors the Xia and Jin in northern China also made and exported large amounts of the fabric. These states were often at war with each other, and war was expensive.

*Images showing silk used
as currency*

But just as often, they practice diplomacy, partly paying each other tribute or giving gifts. In this situation, silk wasn't just for clothing or tapestries. It was also used as a form of currency.

That's right. Large purchases or wages for troops could be paid for in silk. Silk was also used in diplomacy as gifts or as tribute to and from neighboring kingdoms.

5:33

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

But of course a lot of the silk was exported for sale in other parts of the world.

I wanted to know more about that trade, so I asked Dr. Duan about it.

How did the silk export trade work?

*Xiaolin Duan speaks,
facing camera*

Both official organizations and private merchants.

*Images of Chinese port
cities*

So the government had the shibao, which is roughly translated as exporting port cities, and the government used those organizations to deal with the foreign merchants. So the government definitely exports silk, and on the other hand, there are a number of private merchants who are engaged in international trade both legally and illegally.

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

6:26

*Map showing the
movement of goods across
Afro-Eurasia*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

Would you say that the Song dynasty silk trade is part of a wider Afro-Eurasian world system?

So first of all, the Song dynasty started in this so-called maritime Silk Road. So the Indian Ocean trade started to play an increasingly important role during that time. So the Euro-Asia connections, which is emphasized in this Afro-Eurasian world system, was definitely sustained and also energized because of the exportation of silk during the Song dynasty.

I understand that a lot of what we know about Chinese silk production and trade during this time period comes from visual art pieces.

Can you tell me a little bit more about what we see in these pictures of tilling and weaving from the Freer Art Gallery?

7:09

*Images of art described by
Xiaolin Duan*

The original picture of tilling and weaving was made by a scholar called Lou Shu, and he actually made this in response to Emperor Gaozong's call of persuading the farmers to really engage in tilling and weaving at the time. And this one had I think 24 images that detailed every step of weaving, from cultivating silkworm seeds into how to feed silkworms, how to pick up mulberry leaves and how to weave, and including how to worship the goddess of silkworm.

So there are a number of interesting features of the picture of tilling and weaving. The first one is showing weaving as a female-centered practice. So most of the people as we can see are female and including younger ladies and older ladies and also the infants who were carried by the ladies, so they were showing that this is a family-based production.

8:17

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

When I saw there were so many more women than men in these images, I realized I wanted to better understand the role of gender in silk production. My expert did not disappoint.

You mentioned that silk industry or the silk trade in China created almost a gendered economy. Do you think you could expand a bit on that?

*Xiaolin Duan speaks,
facing camera, with
images of art depicting silk
production*

It's probably important, an important assertion because it empowered women especially when the Song dynasty started this commercialization of silk production and women started to find that they can make money by making silk. They not only make clothes for their family members, but also made for the market.

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

I wondered about the impact of all this silk production. The Song dynasty was a period of great innovation.

9:14

*Images of Chinese
inventions and philosophy*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera, with a
timeline on the left*

Gunpowder, the compass, and movable type printing were all invented. It was also a period of great philosophy and art with an expanded system of schools and a big government bureaucracy.

These innovations were largely funded by this huge expansion in silk production.

Could we compare this 11th and 12th century economic miracle to the Industrial Revolution in 18th and 19th century Britain? I had to ask.

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Image of a street in Song
China with text listing the
similarities between China
and 18th century Britain*

10:22

*Xiaolin Duan speaks,
facing camera*

*Image of Song China with
text listing the differences
between China and 18th
century Britain*

11:14

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Map showing the
movement of goods across
Afro-Eurasia*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera, with a
timeline on the left*

11:55

*Francesca Hodges speaks,
facing camera*

Now some historians argue that there was an industrial revolution of sorts occurring during the Song dynasty. Would you agree?

So yes, I do think there was an industrial revolution of some sort during the Song dynasty, especially if we look at say three things, the using of coal as the main energy sources, and the second one is the production of iron, and the third one is the accumulation of technological development and the documentation of those practical knowledge reached a new level.

But however, we have to admit that there was quite some difference between the Song dynasty industrial revolution and the Industrial Revolution we all know about in British history, especially in speaking of the monopolizing of wealth among several major merchants.

We didn't see that concentration of wealth in the Song dynasty. And the second one is the British history witnessed a strong desire for the use of machine, but that didn't happen to the same extent in the Song history because China was blessed by the large amount of labor, so that was an advantage, but on the other hand also restricted the strong motivation of developing machines.

The comparison to Britain's Industrial Revolution six centuries later helps me to understand the incredible scale of silk production in the Song dynasty.

Some of this silk flowed into the vast Eurasian trading system, some even reaching Europe.

But most of it was absorbed by the massive economy of China. It was used to pay taxes, used as currency, and of course was used in the way we use it now as clothing decoration or as a canvas for artwork.

The Song dynasty would end with the Mongol invasion of China in the 13th century, and China's economy would grow and decline in cycles for centuries after.

Today, China has the world's largest economy once again. Silk is no longer one of its most valuable products, but China's silk output still dominates the global market. In many ways, silk is permanently linked with China across world history and for no time period is this more true than in the Song dynasty.