Song Dynasty Essay, Research Paper

The Song Dynasty

The Song dynasty lasted over 300 years, from 960 to 1279. Their history

is divided into two periods of Northern and Southern Song. The Song period was

one of China’s most peaceful and prosperous era. However the Song government was

corrupt and weak.

The Song Dynasty, or Sung Dynasty was a period in which the Chinese

government was very weak. In the beginning General Chao K’uang-yin, also known

as Sung T’ai Tsu, was forced to become emperor in order to unify China. Sung

T’ai Tsu created a national army under his direct control. He, and only he had

control of the military. Once he had passed away his less competent successors

were unable to keep the military under control, the military increasingly lost

prestige. The weakening of China’s military, coincided with the rise of strong

nomadic nations on the boarders.

During the same time of the military’s loss of prestige, the civil

service rose in dignity. This was an examination system that had been restored

in Sui and T’ang and was further elaborated and regularized. Selection

examinations were help every three years at the district, provincial, and

metropolitan levels.

Only 200 out of thousands of applicants were granted the jinshi degree.

This was the highest degree and appointed on government posts. From this time on,

civil servants became China’s most envied elite, replacing the hereditary nobles

and landlords.

The Song dynasty only extended over to the parts of earlier Chinese

empires. The Khitans controlled the northeastern territories and the His Hsia

controlled the northwestern territories. The Song emperors were unable to

recover these lands so they were forced to make peace with the Khitans and the

Hsi Hsia. They gave massive amounts of payments to the barbarians, under these

peace terms, it depleted the state treasury and cause heavy payments on

taxpaying peasants.

About 100 years after the Songs first started ruling over China, their

government started to go through a major decline. Officials that held important

government positions were corrupt. Wealthy merchants that became rich from

foreign trade found ways to avoid paying taxes. The peasants began to rebel when

the heavy taxes were placed on them.

The Song Dynasty had a lot of problems, in 1069 Emperor Shen Tsung

appointed Wang An-shi as chief minister. Wang was a scholar who studied earlier

Chinese governments. Wang noticed the corrupt government and made huge reform in

the government. His reforms were based on the text of ‘Rites of Chou’. Wang

tried to get honest, intelligent officials by improving the university system.

He made civil examinations more practical and reformed the merit system to

reduce corruption among government officials.

Wang help the governments financial problems by establishing a graduated

income tax. This meant the wealthy people were required to pay a greater

percentage of their income that poorer people pay. This new tax method reduced

the burden on the peasants and increased the governments revenues. The extra

money created from the taxing was used to pay government workers, which

abolished forced labor.

Many of his new laws were revivals of earlier policies, many officials

and landlords opposed his reforms. So when the emperor and Wang died, which

happen to been within a year of each other the laws were withdrawn. For the next

several decades, until the fall of Northern Song in 1126, the reformers and

anti-reformers took turns in power, this in turn created havoc and turmoil in

the government.

The Song tried to regain the territory that they had lost to the Khitans

by becoming allies with a new powerful Juchens from Manchuria. Once the Juchens

defeated the Khitans, they turned on the Song and occupied the capital of

Kaifeng. The Juchens established the Chin dynasty. They took the emperor and his

son prisoner, along with 3,000 others, and ordered them to be held in Manchuria.

With the emperor and his son prisoners, another son fled south and

settles in 1127 at Hangzhou. He resumed the Song rule as the emperor Kao Tsung.

The Song retained control south of the Huai River, where they ruled for another

one and half centuries.

While the Song upper class, which included the nobles and imperial

courts indulged themselves in art and luxurious living in the urban center, the

latest nomad empire arose in the north. The formidable Mongol armies, conquerors

of Eurasia as far west as easter Europe and of Korea in the east, descended on

Southern Song. This was the end of the Song dynasty, which ended by the start of

the Mongol dynasty.

The weakness of the Song dynasty brought its downfall. Its neighboring

barbarians were becoming stronger while the Song was becoming weaker. The Song

dynasty had a few holes in it that lead to its weakness and corruption. Even

though the Song era was one of China’s most peaceful and prosperous periods, it

could have lasted even longer if it had a stronger government.

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