

China's Later Dynasties

By Suzanne Strauss Art

SELECTED PASSAGES

It was a cold February day when Zhao Kuangyin cautiously led his troops into Kaifeng, capital city of the crumbling Northern Zhou dynasty. He was still wearing the yellow robe that had been thrown over his shoulders when the coup began. To his surprise, he encountered little resistance, and his army was able to gain control of the city without the shedding of blood.

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The formula for gunpowder was discovered during the 9th century when Daoist priests, seeking to produce a magical elixir, mixed together charcoal, saltpeter (potassium nitrate), and sulphur. Imagine their surprise when the concoction exploded! They later wrote down the ingredients they had used, adding the warning that the mixture might produce singed beards!

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By the time he was seven, the little student could read and write over a hundred characters and was ready to begin school. Once he did, his first task was to master the Thousand Character Classic. This was a Confucian moralistic essay, made up of exactly one thousand characters. The characters - all different - were written four to a line in rhyming couplets. The student had to memorize the entire work by rote (mindless repetition), without the benefit of any explanation of its meaning. Once he thought he had it committed to memory, he recited it, standing with his back to the teaching master. The master held a whip, and any slip in recitation earned the student a whack on his backside.

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Su Shi was the very model of a Song scholar-official - he was a "superior gentleman," admired for his intellectual and creative abilities, his administrative skill, and his moral

standards. He was one of China's greatest poets, a skillful essayist, a talented painter, a perceptive art theorist, and a gifted calligrapher. He was also a social butterfly, who loved to be surrounded by friends and often hosted dinner parties. (His recipe for pork is still prepared by modern chefs.) Sometimes, his dinner guests participated in cooperative painting games. One man would begin a picture, the next would add to it, and so on until the painting was complete. Su Shi considered wine a source of creative inspiration, and he would often consume several cups of it, fall asleep, and later get up to write or paint.

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In China's male-dominated society, women had few rights. Although a son had great respect for his mother (owing her the rites of filial piety), a woman was generally expected to perform her household duties without complaining and to do as she was told. Wealthy men took pride in the fact that they could afford to have wives who did no manual work at all. This idea was taken to extremes during the Southern Song period, when foot-binding became a common practice. It began in the 11th century among dancing women at court, who believed that smaller feet made them look dainty. It soon became the fashion among the families of the courtiers and officials themselves, and it would spread to the population at large in later dynasties.

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Strolling along the narrow, winding paths of such a garden was like letting your mind wander through a landscape painting. Graceful bridges over man-made streams offered unique views, as did small pavilions with curved roofs and brightly painted pillars. Garden scenes could also be viewed from balconies and through round openings in the surrounding wall known as "moon gates." Visitors to a garden often wrote short verses about particular scenes and placed them along the walkway or in a pavilion, just as an inscription might be written in the open space of a painting.

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Opium was nothing new in China. For centuries, the Chinese had grown poppies to produce a drug they used as a medicine for cholera. The habit of smoking opium to achieve a sense of euphoria was introduced in China in the 17th century. This practice is

highly addictive, and it became a popular means of escape from the harsh realities of the times. (Among other things, smoking opium dulled hunger pangs.) Yongzheng prohibited the sale and use of opium in 1729, but this apparently had little effect. The Portuguese had discovered that there was great profit to be made by selling the drug, and they established a thriving opium trade between India and China.