

The compilation
consisting of tang and
song poems history
essay



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Firstly, this collection showed the low material standards of the peasants during Tang and Song China. As the empire depended largely on agriculture to prosper, the assumption would be that the status of peasants was high during ancient China. However, the evidences indicated otherwise, as they were described to be living a hard life which revolved around farming of grains for food and also the raising of silkworms for silk. These were the basic materials that peasants had and needed to survive, yet even after having worked hard for them, high taxes exhausted most of their material belongings. The legal documents implied how difficult it was for the peasants to get their hands on even the very basic needs like food and cloth that they resorted to borrowing things from others regardless of the high interest charged, even to the extent of pawning their family members. A poem, Lament of the Farm Wife of Wu provided evidence on how little material possessions the farm families owned, where they had to sell their ox to pay taxes and even broke up their roof just to kindle.

Tang and Song China were known to be two very wealthy empires; nevertheless, the lives of peasants were depicted to be poor, while governmental officials and perhaps landowners were shown to be rich and therefore led easier lives. Still, the peasants were the ones subjected to high taxes they could not afford. These evidences suggested an unequal distribution of wealth. Moreover, peasant males were required to provide military services resembling another form of tax payment. Serving the military whenever required; was one of the many things peasants needed to worry about in their lives, not knowing when a recruiting officer would arrive at their doorsteps. One poem which described these was Recruiting Officer at

Shihao. The family mentioned in the poem, had three sons taken away for garrison duty at Ye, though it was not enough as the recruiting officer came to them one night, wanting to seize the last family man in spite of his old age. In return for her husband's escape, the old woman left with the officer. This suggested that even females were sometimes recruited for the military in place of their male family members, though merely for cooking duties as they were seen as incapable of fighting battles alongside men. Another example from The Old Man of Xinfeng with the Broken Arm indicated something similar, where the mentioned man broke his arm so that he would be deemed unfit for military service. All these evidences from the document revealed the nature of peasant lives during Tang and Song period.

Hierarchies ensured a successful dynasty, though political hierarchy is also a sign of unequal distribution of possessions. The different stages allowed distinction in the types of benefits given. In this sense possibly, this separated the upper class such as the emperor, governmental officials and aristocrats from the lower class - peasants and slaves. In addition, people of higher status were portrayed to be at an advantage - wealthy and powerful without working as hard. The poem The Old Man of Xinfeng with the Broken Arm briefly mentioned the position of a Prime Minister, probably an indication of a higher status compared to the governmental officials that moved from posting to posting. Likewise, officials of higher status often treated the peasants harshly while they could only do their best to please the officials. Such situations were often seen when officials took on jobs from one place to another for tax collection or army recruit. A recorded observation in the poem Farmers, talked about how the peasants served the

officers all they had even after being treated unsympathetically. Social hierarchy compared the status of male and female as well as the role they play according to wealth. Monks during Tang dynasty were generally of higher status; hence, they owned more than the peasants. Consequently, peasants borrowed materials they were short of, from monks like what the legal document *Fan Huaidong Borrows a Piece of Silk* recorded. During ancient China, men were of superior status compared to women. As men worked as farmers outside of their home, women took responsibilities of caring for the children and looking after the house, not to mention cooking for the men as demonstrated in *Watching the Wheat-Reapers*. Therefore, hierarchies, be it political or social, were very influential of the lives during ancient times.

The economy was an important aspect in determining the state in which the empire stood. Though both Tang and Song dynasties were wealthy, there were significant changes in terms of economic transactions. The first major shift which was also the most influential would be the change from paying taxes in the form of grains and silk; during Tang period, to payment in the form of cash throughout Song period as indicated in a Tang poem, *Lament of a Woman Acorn-Gatherer* and a Song poem, *Lament of the Farm Wife of Wu* respectively. This transformation was important in shaping the new economy of Song Empire as it led to the widespread use of money and this use of cash to replace trading of goods allowed for easier economic transactions, perhaps simplifying the trade process. One example from Tang legal document, *Fan Huaidong Borrows a Piece of Silk*, depicted an unfair transaction between a peasant family and a monk where they paid an

interest of high value while still having to return the silk cloth within a fixed period of time. If they were unable to return the piece of silk cloth, they would be charged a high monthly interest, while an untitled Song poem mentioned a plan to sell raw silk at the Western Gate. These sustained the idea that unlike Tang period, peasants were no longer required to make silk cloth from raw silk because instead of trading the silk cloth for something that they needed, they were able to sell raw silk for cash. These examples suggested how the innovation of cash might help reduce the incidence of unfair trade because the monetary system would most probably lead to a standardization, which was an improvement seen during Song period.

Family ties take away much trouble off families by providing support and helping hands. This was what peasants needed most as family can be a form of social support especially during the hard times when produce was difficult to come by. As peasants depended largely on agriculture to support themselves, they had to put in a lot of effort in producing grains and silk. Therefore, they need the help of family members to lighten their burden. The poem *Watching the Wheat-Reapers* claimed that as chores doubled up, works were divided among the family members and this ensured efficiency. Often times when waiting for the fields to ripen, the peasant families would camp by the field and look after the field. During this time, peasant families could really use some help from each other. *Lament of the Farm Wife of Wu* is one poem that showed the cooperation between the husband and wife in lightening their farming tasks. Family members were also bounded to a transaction deal, as shown in a legal document. All these come to show the

importance of family ties among the peasants in helping each other during desperate times.

The set of Tang poems written via observations can serve as examples to demonstrate the accuracy of referring to Tang dynasty as the 'Golden Age' for China. The foremost evidence extracted from the poem, The Old Man of Xinfeng with the Broken Arm maintained the absence of war or strife for a period of time as an indication of peace. It was also during this time, music and poetry flourished. It illustrated the increasing appreciation for music and poetry where people were able to enjoy singing and dancing. This would most likely also point toward the idea that education was more achievable, enabling composition of music and poetry. Another reason could perhaps be the fact that Tang dynasty was a large empire, conquering a lot of places. The same poem supported this assumption, where a lot of names of the areas Tang dynasty was able to exert their influence were brought up. Tang Empire was also shown to be wealthy due to the suggestion in Watching the Wheat-Reapers that governmental officials had surpluses of grains to eat. Furthermore, the legal documents cited, was from the caravan city of Dunhuang, which at that time was a prominent rest stop for traveling via the Silk Road. These suggested the frequent use of Silk Road during Tang period which would equate to a more outstanding trade system. Also, the existence of a Buddhist monk Li sustained the proposal that Buddhism was practiced a lot more compared to other dynasties before Tang, though Confucianism was probably still playing a major role. The significance of Buddhism can probably be seen with the higher status of the monk from the legal document, Fan Huaidong Borrows a Piece of Silk. The monk was exemplified

to own more possessions compared to peasants. The monk was also able to lend goods to others, charging them an unfairly high value of interest, which also implied the higher status of monks during Tang dynasty. For these reasons, Tang dynasty can therefore be concluded as the 'Golden Age' of China.

To sum up, the lives of peasants in rural China were difficult, yet they managed to find ways to survive through all hardships, and contributing to the success of the empires.