

Social structure during the renaissance: italy vs china



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In contemporary western societies, social classes are based upon a middle, lower, and upper class. Today social mobility[1] between these classes is likely if not common; however this has not always been the case. In the time period of the Italian Renaissance[2], the roots of social mobility can be found. Social structure[3] in Italy was based upon Humanism. [4] The power structure[5] of the Medici[6] further supported Humanism and in turn supported social mobility. Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, social mobility was much more stagnate.

The social structure in China was based upon Confucianism. [7] Accordingly, the power structure of the Ming Dynasty[8] upheld these traditional ideals. Thus, in comparison, one can see that the social structure in Italy, based upon Humanism, was much more of a progressive step towards the social structure we have today, while China[9], some would say, still maintains a ridged and conservative social structure today. 14th century Italy saw the development of an unprecedented type of social structure, one based on ones' wealth and economic status[10] instead of ones' relationship to the church.

Previously the church had control over much of the common mans' daily life, including their class, which meant that a persons' class was unlikely to change unless they were able to give large ' donations' to the church; however, the invention of the printing press[11] and the distribution of the translated bible[12] caused a dip in the church's power. And thus the new system of social status was created. Social mobility was increased ten-fold seeing as ones' income and wealth is never constant and as ones' economic

status ebbed and flowed their social status increased and decreased along with it.

The Italian Renaissance was a time of exceptional new thinkers paving the way for future generations. One such thinker was Thomas Aquinas, who set the movement of Humanism into motion which marked the beginning of the Renaissance. Humanism brought back old ideas and philosophies from ancient Rome and Greece, mainly their focus on the glorification of the human body. The idea that life was meant to be enjoyed instead of a trial and time of sufferance in order to reach heaven was new and exciting and was quickly adopted by the people of Italy.

The integration of Humanism into the Italian culture also caused a decrease in the church's power over the daily life of the people, which in turn supported the newly developed social structure. The now possible flow between the social classes in Italy allowed for one family to rise to power and stay in power for most of the renaissance. The Medici started as a modest banking family but because of their their successful business and rapidly growing wealth they soon became the most influential family in Florence, Italy.

They bought their power and through connections with other powerful figures, particularly with the Popes, many of them being from their own family[13]. The Medici used artwork to flaunt their wealth, they commissioned many great works of art including: the statue of david, Brunelleschi's dome, the Mona Lisa, and many other famous works of art. Many of the artists[14] that the Medici were the patrons of created

humanistic artwork, artwork that depicted realistic human figures and that wasn't focused on depicting a religious scene.

The Medici's power further supported the growth of humanism and in turn the social status system, which was the very thing that had allowed for them to come into power. The renaissance stretched for miles and miles, practically covering all of Europe, but many parts of Asia were practically untouched by this ' rebirth'. The social structure of China during this time is a prime example of this because of the radical contrast between their society and Italy's. In China ones' social status and class was, more or less, set in stone at their birth depending upon their heritage[15].

A person's class was dependent upon who their parents and ancestors[16] were and, if you were born into a certain class, you stayed in that class until death no matter what your economic status may be. Social mobility was virtually impossible at this time and ones' wealth had no effect on ones' social status, a peasant could be wealthy but they would still be considered a peasant. A major factor in the continuation and longevity of the Chinese social structure was the teachings and ideals of the philosopher Confucius.

Confucius emphasized the importance of ones' family and ones' duty to their family, living and deceased, and to a duty to ones' society. This sense of responsibility and loyalty to ones' family and society only succeeded in aiding the current social structure to remain unchanged. The importance of ones' family and ancestry[17] supported the heritage based social structure and because of this and ones' obligation to accomplish their duty and

perform their role in society based on the class that they had been assigned by their ancestors.

The Ming Dynasty was in power in China around the same time as the renaissance was occurring in Italy. The Ming Dynasty was a monarchy[18] and was controlled by the rule of the Emperors. An emperor was not elected, like the president is today, but was born into power as the son of the previous emperor, which followed the social structure based on ones' ancestry and heritage. The emperors had complete control and power over their empire and did not have to answer to any other power, unlike in Italy where the one had to go through the Pope in order to make radical changes to rules or laws.

The people of China did as the emperor asked because of their duty to him and because of his power over them, like the Pope the emperor can either bestow or take away ones' family honor. This was one of the only ways ones' social status could move up or down and it was a rarity. The emperors rule followed and upheld the ideals of Confucianism, thus supporting the present social structure and solidifying the immobility between classes.

While Italy's social structure during the renaissance was the building block for the social structure of today's western society, China's rigid and traditional social structure from the renaissance is practically the same today. Social mobility in Italy was fairly common and based on ones' income. This was because of the new development of Humanism. This new view on the purpose of human existence was supported by the rising power of the

Medici family. In contrast, social mobility in China during this time was immobile and permanent.

This was partially due to the popular philosophy of Confucianism which upheld traditional ideals of duty and heritage. Confucianism was supported and spread by the Ming Dynasty and its emperors. Modern western society's social mobility, and social and power structure is much like that of the Italian's during the renaissance because of their focus on economic status and power and their relaxed social structure, as opposed to China's strict and fixed social and power structure along with its rigid social mobility.