

## Topic 1.1

# Developments in East Asia from c. 1200 to c. 1450

## You Will Learn To:

- Describe how China's Song Dynasty demonstrated continuity, innovation, and diversity in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.
- Describe Buddhism's core beliefs and how it influenced Asian societies.
- Describe how China's cultural traditions affected neighboring regions.
- Explain how the Song economy became increasingly innovative and productive and how its commercialization impacted the Dynasty's trade networks.

Between 960 and 1279, the Song Dynasty ruled China, during which time the empire expanded its influence through Chinese traditions, such as its bureaucracy and monetary innovations. The Song's religious and philosophical influence stemmed from Confucianism, neo-Confucianism, and Buddhism, all of which spread to surrounding regions.

The Song's influence also spread through its commercialized economy and its merchants, who used maritime and overland trade routes throughout Asia. Production of Song luxury goods was accelerated as the Dynasty's leaders encouraged increased output of goods like silk and porcelain.

## Empires demonstrate continuity and innovation

---

### Song bureaucracy as an example of continuity

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., the Han Dynasty created China's first civil-service exam, which produced an educated class of government officials known as scholar-bureaucrats. This system continued throughout the Song Dynasty, which depended on educated citizens to fill governmental roles.

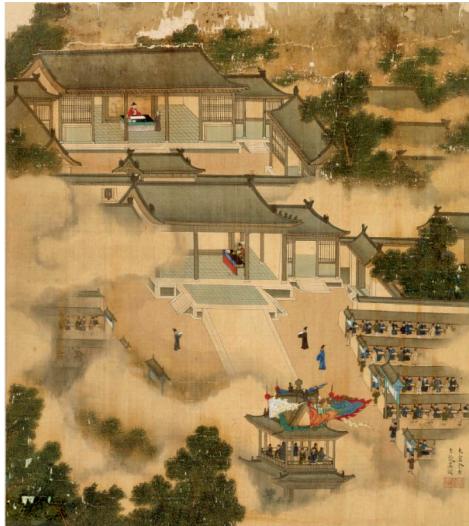
Under Song rule, the number of scholar-bureaucrats increased as emperors admitted bright young men from poor families into the testing program. These students spent years obtaining a traditional Confucian education, with the goal of becoming honest advisors to the Chinese emperors and to govern efficiently within a central bureaucracy.

The standard examinations were based on Confucianism's *Five Classics* and *Four Books*. Due to the tests' rigor, few passed, but those who did attained high social status.



Palace examination at Kaifeng, Song Dynasty

The bureaucratic and examination systems unified the Song's culture and empire while legitimizing emperors' rule. The use of governmental examinations based on the works of Confucius demonstrates the lasting impact of Confucianism on China.



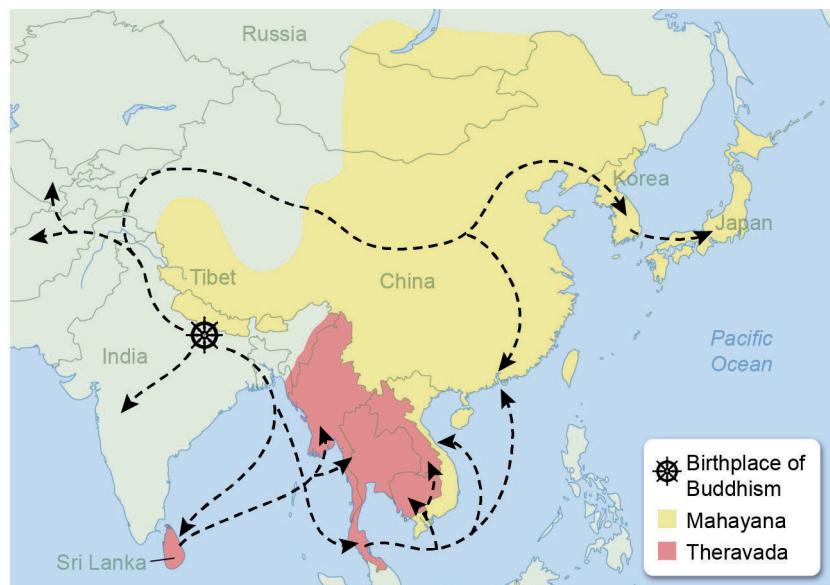
Civil service examination center in Peking (Beijing)

The Song bureaucracy became increasingly organized and efficient after instituting regulations for its subjects across China, even establishing specialized departments to manage various regional affairs.

## Buddhism influenced the Song and surrounding regions

### Buddhism shaped Song society

Buddhism also influenced the country's morality, literature, art, and architecture. Originating in present-day India, Buddhism's Mahayana branch became popular in China, rivaling native belief systems such as Taoism and Confucianism.



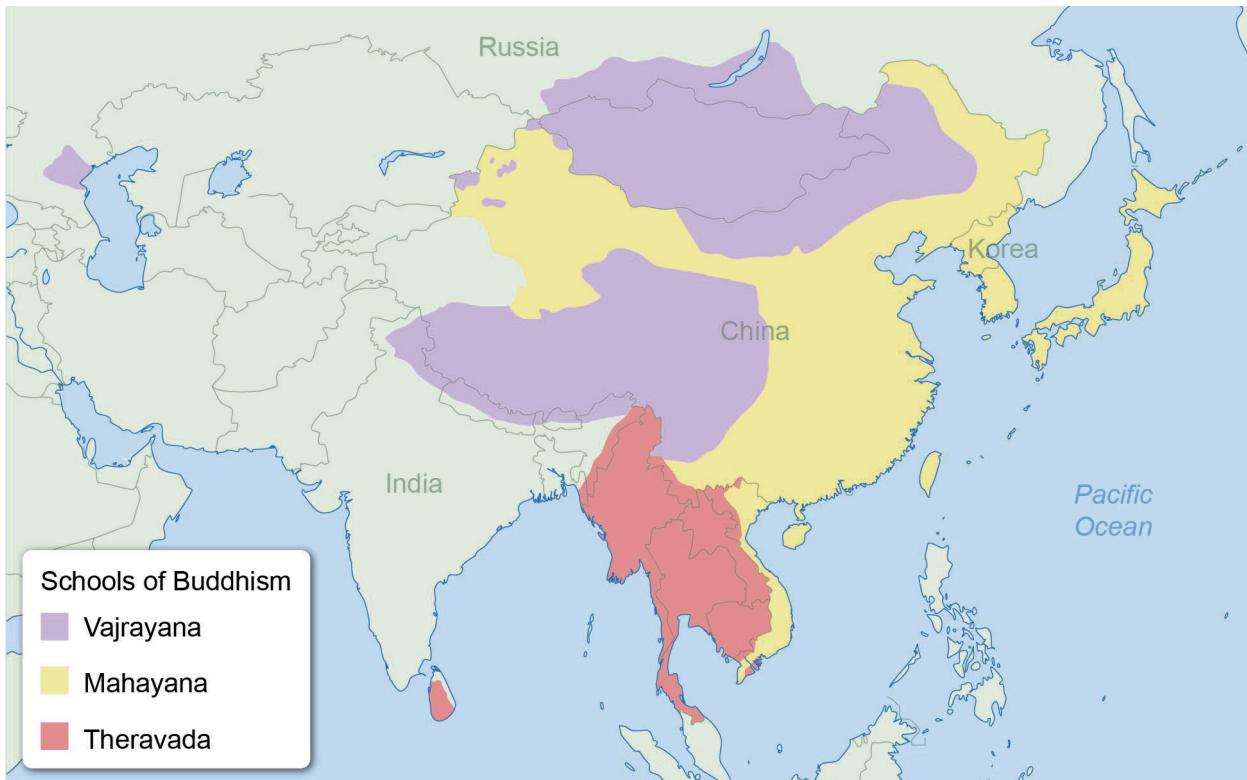
Spread of Buddhism and locations of its two major schools

Beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> century under the Song Dynasty, Buddhism assumed another role in developing Chinese culture and philosophy. At that time, Chinese scholars began to syncretize Buddhist ethics with Daoist philosophies and Confucian intellectual principles.

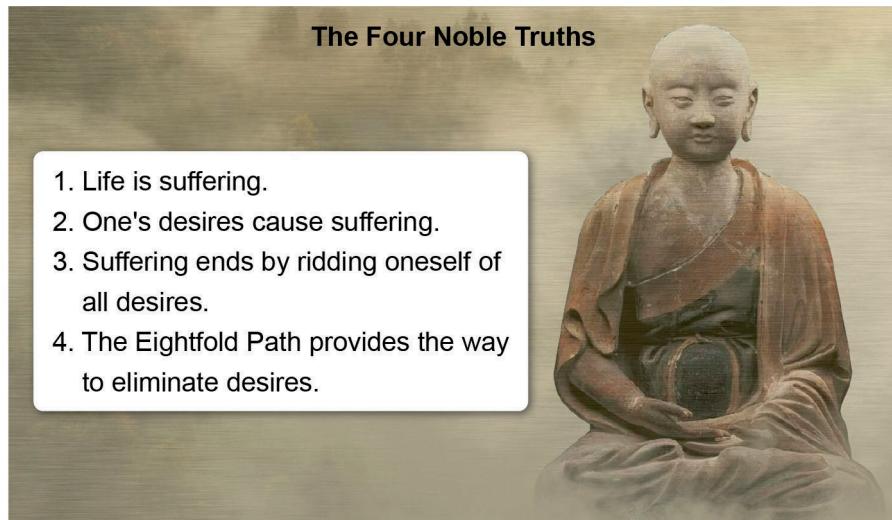
The blending of these beliefs became what is now known as neo-Confucianism, which became instrumental in the Song's bureaucratic system and governmental examinations.

Buddhism is practiced differently across China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. These differences reflect the various branches of the three primary schools of Buddhist thought:

- The Theravada school focuses on the teachings of the historical Buddha, with an emphasis on universal compassion and mindfulness.
- In Mahayana Buddhism, practitioners aim to emulate Buddha's compassion by extending it to their communities and ending all attachments, including to oneself.
- Vajrayana Buddhism centers on the belief that practitioners achieve enlightenment upon deeply understanding how everything is one.



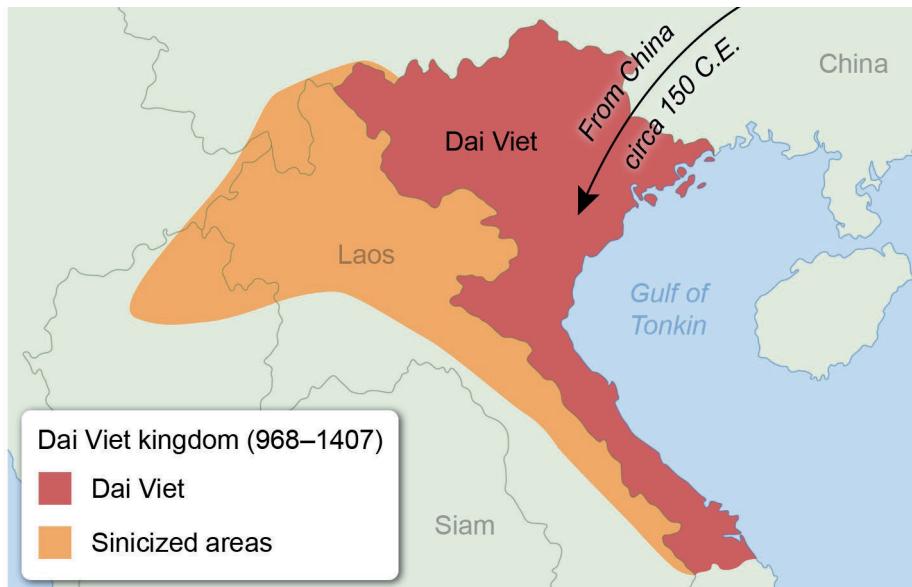
Some core beliefs shared by all schools include the existence of an afterlife, Buddha's attainment of Nirvana, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path.



Despite differences between the various schools of thought, Buddhism unified its practitioners with these core beliefs as it spread across Asia.

### Buddhism's spread to other East Asian kingdoms

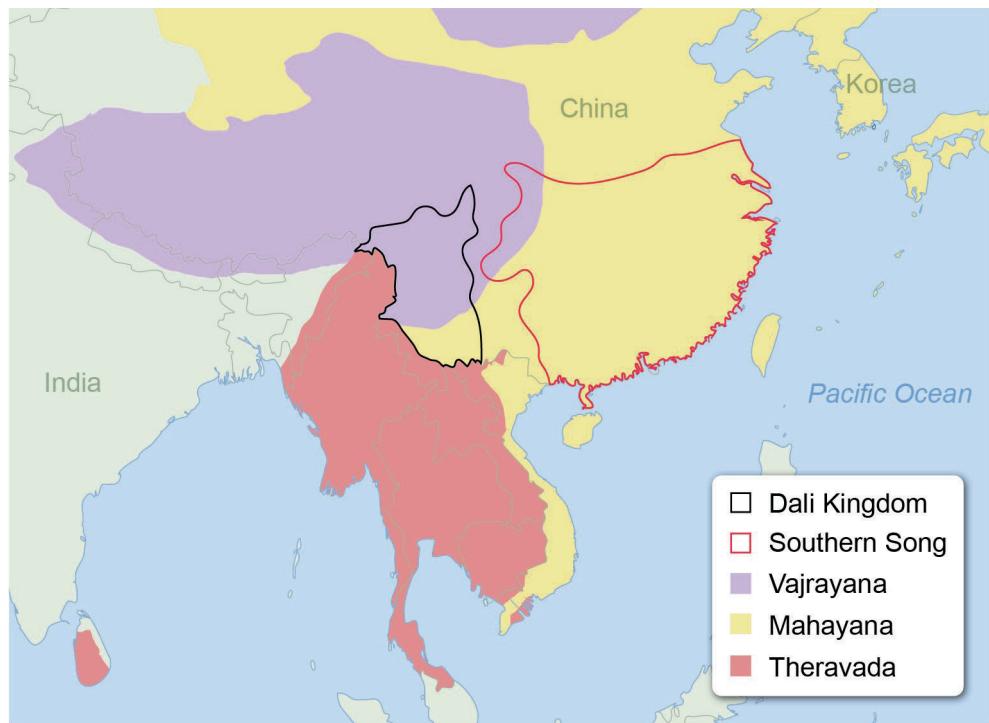
Buddhism's diffusion into Southeast Asia impacted Vietnam's lower classes and was sometimes blended with folk religions. In addition, Buddhism's principles of self-development, selflessness, and detachment from the material world shaped Vietnamese culture. For example, Vietnamese commoners often dedicated Buddhist temples to the monsoon season or the guardian spirit of agricultural fertility.



Such practices remained common with the Dai Viet kingdom's lower class. For this reason, local Vietnamese rulers understood that their preference for Confucianism—acquired through centuries of Chinese domination—could alienate them from commoners.

Historically, rulers sought to gain their subjects' trust by imitating their appearance or behavior and adopting a locally preferred religion. Therefore, although Confucianism heavily influenced Vietnamese aristocrats, many local rulers adopted or financially supported Buddhism to increase their legitimacy among the commoners.

Dali's state religion was a sect of Vajrayana Buddhism, while the neighboring Song territory was mostly home to Mahayana Buddhists.



Buddhism in Southern Song and the Kingdom of Dali

Regardless of the differences among the Buddhist schools, their respective branches of Buddhism had similar impacts on both societies.



Six of the Sixteen *arhats* depicted by Zhang Shengwen of the Kingdom of Dali

Zhang Shengwen's Vajrayana depiction of 16 *arhats* (enlightened Buddhist masters) above differs from Mahayana depictions of 18 such masters. Despite this difference, the reasons for their representations were similar across Buddhist societies: *arhats* were regarded as saints whose lives and actions were worthy of reverence and imitation. Consequently, Buddhist art like Zhang's reflected how the faith's core beliefs shaped Asian cultures, as the *arhats* were models for how Song and Dali societies should behave.

## Chinese traditions influenced surrounding regions

---

### Korea and Japan

The Song also spread Buddhist, Confucian, and neo-Confucian principles to Korean and Japanese societies. Over time, Chinese dynasties influenced these East Asian societies' architectural styles, technological advances, and governmental structures.

For example, China's bureaucratic structure and civil service examinations were adopted by Korea and Japan. Korea's dynastic kingdoms first used civil service examinations to fill bureaucratic positions about 600 years before their widespread adoption in Japan.



Military examination during Korea's Joseon Dynasty

China's system of governmental examinations became the norm in Korea between 1200 and 1450, during the Goryeo Dynasty (918–1392) and the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897). These dynasties also created educational institutions to prepare students for civil service examinations.

The increase in trade under the Song Dynasty helped diffuse other elements of Chinese culture, such as dress, religion, customs, and art, to Korea and Japan. Korean merchants adopted many Chinese cultural traditions, such as the kowtow (kneeling to show respect and submission).



Korean leader kowtows before a Chinese emperor

In addition, Chinese merchants brought Buddhism and Confucianism to Korea, where these philosophies became popular with Korean elites and commoners alike.

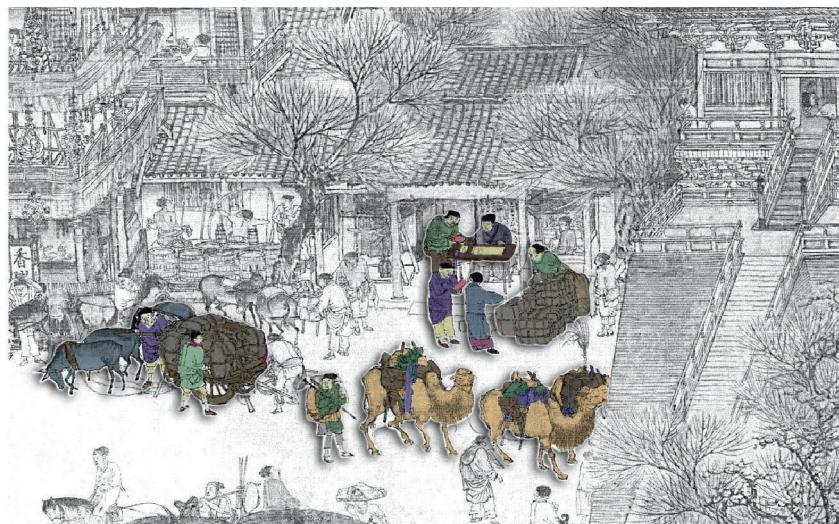
Trade likewise diffused Song culture into Japan, impacting its cultural development. During the Japanese Heian period, literature modeled the writing of Chinese scholars and was even written in Chinese characters. Also, Japanese officials kept government records exclusively in Chinese and reproduced them using the innovative Song practice of printing with movable characters.

## The Song economy

---

### Impact of commercialization and interregional trade

During Song rule, China underwent massive population growth due to technological advances in food production. This rapid growth made Song China the most urbanized country in the world, with millions living in cities. Urbanization helped the Song dynasty expand its commercial economy.

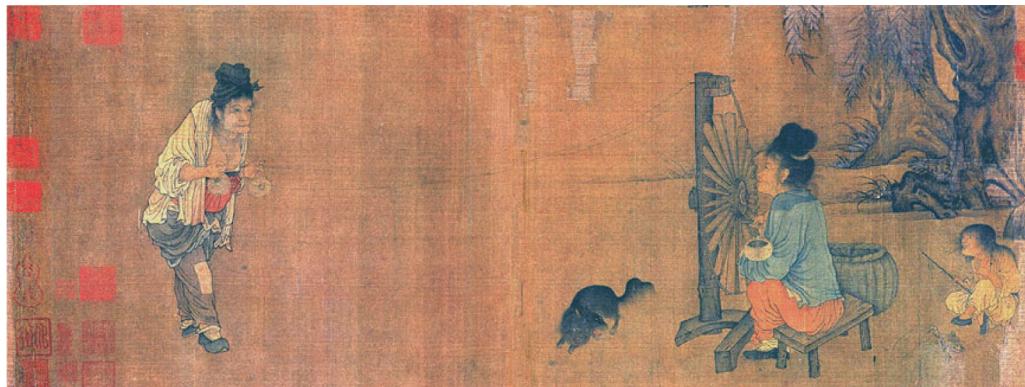


11<sup>th</sup>-century Song traders

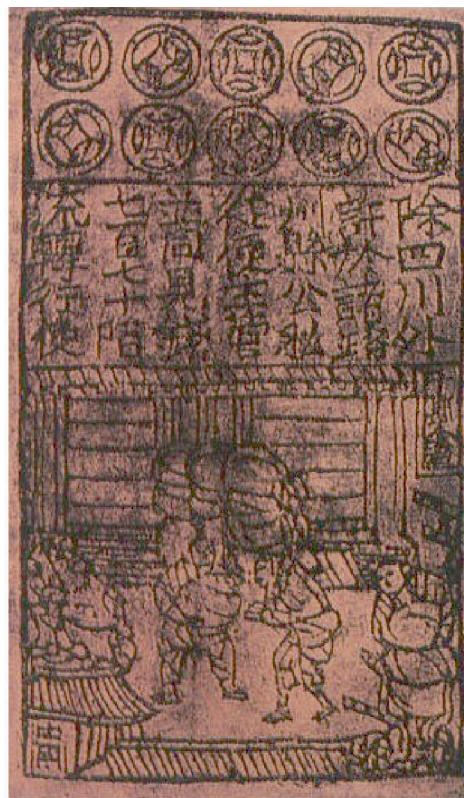
In the Song painting above, the artist illustrated this expansion by depicting a thriving marketplace inside a city gate. Goods are shown being bought from merchants' storefronts and loaded onto camels and donkeys for sale outside the city.

The Song Dynasty established financial institutions that issued paper money, an early Chinese innovation that furthered the Song economy's commercialization. Paper money enabled consumers to exchange currency for goods anywhere in China, ensuring that the country's market economy continued to thrive.

Around 1100, Northern Song artist Wang Juzheng painted three Song women spinning silk. Over time, such labor increased with the demand caused by Southern Song rulers' commitment to interregional trade.



Early Song-era traders thrived by exchanging goods arriving from the Silk Roads, whose eastern routes were developed by the previous Tang Dynasty, but expanded by the Song. Song China's commercial sector also grew due to policies that facilitated trade, including the innovation of printing the world's first paper currency.



Paper money of the Song Dynasty

In addition, Southern Song rulers increased their involvement in maritime trade. The silk depicted in Wang's painting exemplifies the luxury products that filled the Song's junks sailing the Indian Ocean trade network. By producing luxury items, artisans directly contributed to increased trade and commerce in Song China.



Section of the Qingming scroll showing traders, their ships, and merchant stalls

To generate more wealth from traded goods, Song rulers increased the empire's manufacturing volume and established trade policies that raised demand and drove up the price of silk. The result was more income for peasant farmers who grew mulberry trees, upon which silkworms thrived. These developments stimulated an increase in silk production, upon which manufacturers relied.

Song traders relied on manufacturers—especially of luxury items like silk and porcelain—to produce ever-larger volumes of merchandise. Aided by the Maritime Silk Road, Chinese traders enjoyed the benefits of the increased production, which Song rulers encouraged.



Chinese junk setting out for the Maritime Silk Route

By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the commercialized economy of the Song Dynasty had become one of the largest in Eurasia. As Song China's population rapidly increased, large urban centers developed where manufacturing and commerce thrived, encouraging the trade of Chinese goods to India and Africa.

## Things to remember

---

Song China demonstrated continuity and innovation:

- The Song Dynasty continued earlier dynasties' practice of creating a bureaucracy that centralized government while filling administrative positions with qualified scholar-bureaucrats trained in Confucianism.
- The Song bureaucracy consisted of highly-qualified officials who passed a civil service examination continued from previous Chinese dynasties.
- Song innovations included printing with movable characters and adopting the use of coined and printed money.

The Song dynasty influenced neighboring regions:

- Through trade and creating regional tributary states, Chinese culture diffused to neighboring states, such as the Dai Viet kingdom and Korea.
- By the 1200s, Chinese classical literature and Confucianism was heavily influencing the Vietnamese elite.
- Between 1200 and 1450, Korean dynasties emulated Song China, creating a bureaucracy staffed with officials who successfully passed a civil service examination.

Buddhism's core beliefs helped shape societies and were expressed in different ways, depending on the Buddhist school:

- Buddhism's Eightfold Path and other core beliefs are shared by the Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan schools of Buddhist thought.
- During the Song era, artists depicted enlightened Buddhist masters, which served as a reminder for how a state's subjects should behave.

Buddhism influenced both Song China and neighboring regions:

- The influence of Buddhism in China included Song scholars syncretizing Buddhist ethics with Daoist philosophy and Confucian intellectualism.
- Local Vietnamese rulers often financially supported and even adopted Buddhism to increase their legitimacy among the Dai Viet's predominantly Buddhist commoners.

By the 1200s, the Song economy had become increasingly commercialized, featuring:

- rapid growth in population and urbanization, with peasants and artisanal laborers producing increasing volumes of silk, porcelain, and other luxury goods.
- a market economy based on the increased manufacturing capabilities of those producing luxury goods and the expansion of trade via the land-based and Maritime Silk Roads.

## 1.1 Check for Understanding

**1. Which of the following is true of the Song Dynasty?**

- A. It demonstrated diversity by making Theravada Buddhism its state religion.
- B. It demonstrated innovation by creating the Silk Roads' earliest eastern routes.
- C. It demonstrated continuity by making bureaucratic officials pass civil service exams.

**2. What philosophy were the Song's civil service examinations based on?**

- A. Taoism
- B. Buddhism
- C. Confucianism

**3. What impact did Buddhism have on its followers across Asian societies?**

- A. Buddhism overtook Confucianism's dominance in China.
- B. Buddhism unified its practitioners through its core beliefs.
- C. Buddhism encouraged violence among its three major branches.

**4. Which of the following is an example of how Buddhism influenced Asian societies?**

- A. Buddhism encouraged urbanization in the Dali Kingdom.
- B. Song emperors legitimized their rule by practicing Buddhism.
- C. The Dai Viet kingdom's folk religions blended with Buddhism.

**5. How did China's cultural traditions affect neighboring regions?**

- A. Korean dynasties adopted the Song's use of civil service examinations.
- B. Korean officials forbade the practice of kowtowing to important foreign leaders.
- C. Vietnamese officials kept government records exclusively in Korean characters.

**6. Which of the following two elements helped the Song Dynasty become an important commercial and trading power within the surrounding Asian trade networks?**

- A. Paper money and junks
- B. Taoist and Buddhist merchants
- C. Confucianism and scholar-bureaucrats