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ABSTRACT

When scholars talk about an ancient Chinese “urban culture,” they distinguish between the “citizens” of the time with the citizen class of medieval Europe, but their emphasis is often still on identifying the “freedom” and “modernity” made possible by “urban culture.” This article treats Song-era urban residents as an aggregate group, to explore the characteristics of “urban culture” or “urban market culture” (*shijing wenhua*). On the surface, Song urban culture seems to feature the coexistence of elite and common culture. Deeper analysis shows that political, economic, and cultural capital became concentrated in urban areas as cities grew, making urban areas much more culturally influential relative to rural areas. Furthermore, because the scholar-gentry class wielded core political power, they continued to exert cultural hegemony. The key influencers of urban culture were public officials rather than private merchants. This was largely due to the popular imitation of upper-class culture by commoners. The urban cultural growth during the Tang and Song dynasties is politically significant because it continued and strengthened the phenomenon since the Tang dynasty of the dynastic state’s increasingly unprecedented cultural control, as more scholar-gentry began living and concentrating cultural resources in cities. Thus, from the Song period on, the center of society and culture shifted firmly from rural to urban areas.

KEYWORDS

City; citizens; urban culture; elite; commoner; cultural hegemony

Between the Tang and Song dynasties, urban environments underwent noticeable changes, to such an extent that some scholars have called the changes an “urban revolution.”¹ Thus, there has been much scholarly focus on urban economic development and many monographs and articles published on the characteristics of urban culture. In terms of theoretical framework and analytical angles, these have left some room for further discussion. This article examines the concept of “citizen” from a historical perspective and the cultural distinctions between scholar-gentry and commoners, urban and rural, and how these factors affected the cultural relationships between different classes in the context of Song urban culture.

In the spectrum between refined and coarse, extravagance and rural simplicity, how did these cultural elements relate to each other? In Song-era cities, what cultural forces were the most influential?

I. “Citizens” in academic historical perspective

Existing academic studies of urban culture in the Song period—and perhaps all of ancient Chinese history—have focused on the issues of “citizen” culture or “citizen” literature and art.

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This requires a clarification of the concept of “citizen.”² Interesting to note is that almost all studies clearly delineate the distinction between “city dwellers” and “citizens”; additionally they recognize the differences between the social status and characteristics of traditional Chinese “citizens” and the citizen class of medieval Europe. Thus the “urban cultures” of East and West of the same period cannot be compared on the same plane. This phenomenon in academic studies of history shows the careful distinctions scholars make between the two concepts, as well as the nuances between the cases of Chinese and Western urban history. Analysis of these phenomena, however, reveals some interesting questions that this article will address.

Most scholars also make a distinction between “city dwellers” and “citizens” in ancient China. Yang Wanli (楊萬里) is an example: “Handicraft makers, merchants, small landholders, servants, foot soldiers, loungers, diners, wastrels, and down-and-out intellectuals made up the core of the citizen class.”³ Fang Zhiyuan (方志遠) discusses how Ming era urban literature lists over ten kinds of urban residents, including officials, soldiers, scholar-gentry, and merchants: “These were the kind of people who lived in the cities of ancient China and comprised the social foundation of the urban population, but not all of the above can be considered ‘citizens.’” Fang says, “If one has to define the citizens of ancient China, the definition may be ‘residents of a city or town who live average lives, freely interact with other people in the city, and can freely leave and reenter the city.’”⁴ Gao Xiaokang (高小康) believes that “within the framework of traditional society, the citizen class was below that of the scholar class,” showing the perceived difference between these two social groups.⁵ Chen Guocan (陳國燦) famously said, “Citizens are all urban residents but not all urban residents are citizens.”⁶ Many scholars equate “citizen” with urban craftsmen and merchants. For example, Xu Yong (徐勇) states that “Urban citizens were a unique class that worked in trades or merchant activity.”⁷ Cheng Minsheng (程民生) claimed that Song citizens were “craftsmen and merchant citizens,” excluding other urban residents from the category of “citizen.”⁸ Ning Xin (寧欣) also equates citizens with “those who work and trade.”⁹ Cheng is perhaps the most direct: citizen culture is “consumer culture or commercial culture.”¹⁰

In a careful analysis of the differences between different groups of urban residents, minor differences emerge between them but also obvious shared characteristics. The greatest divide seems to be between officials and commoners, or those who govern and those who are governed. As Fang Zhiyuan says: City residents “should refer to the ‘people’ and not the ‘officials.’”¹¹ Xu Yong explains, “In ancient China, because of the monopoly on political power, commoners and officials developed into two distinct social groups. Urban dwellers and rural farmers were similar in that they were both official subjects without political power.”¹²

Some scholars recognize that the “citizens” of traditional China are not directly comparable with the citizen class of Western Europe’s urban renaissance period. As Cheng Minsheng notes, “In the West, citizens emerged from the margins of feudalism, and later stratified into a working class and capitalist class. Ancient Chinese cities experienced a different trajectory, based not on production but consumption, so the characteristics of its citizens differed in ways that are not easily compared.”¹³ Xu believed that “compared to the political culture of Western European citizens, ancient Chinese urban political culture was distorted and suppressed from its inception by a feudal autocratic political system which assimilated it,” causing it to develop very differently.¹⁴ Although there are differences in nuance in the existing literature, the overall direction is clear.

However, scholars do not study traditional Chinese urban culture merely to compare it to the West, but to more deeply understand the unique significance of this historical phenomenon. In fact, analyzing the differences from European urban culture may not even be so much about understanding traditional Chinese urban culture, but rather to learn useful lessons from this case. As Xu Yong says: “Self-government and freedom are the essence of modern urban political culture.”¹⁵ The newness and freedom of urban culture—and how it differs from older systems—is what scholars try to understand. Without this, discussion of ancient Chinese urban culture would be meaningless. Fang Zhiyuan’s three conditions for the definition of ancient Chinese citizen

emphasize that they must “live average lives, freely interact with other people in the city, and can freely leave and reenter the city.”¹⁶ So the terms “freedom” and “modernity” often appear in the literature on this topic. Xu Yong critically notes, political indifference was a unique feature of the ancient Chinese urban citizen class, and he goes further to say: “Indifference toward politics made citizens unlike other social groups which unambiguously accepted the orthodoxy of the dominant political culture of Confucian principle and virtue. Unrestrained by the heavy shackles of political responsibility, they desired individual liberation and freedom, even if this pursuit was mediated by the abnormal dynamics of the time.”¹⁷ Li Chuntang (李春棠) points out: “The rise of a new urban culture in the Song period made the middle and lower class masses need to participate in the exchange of goods as well as a ‘leisure’ life wherein people could find their social value through different channels. This was a foggy ‘historical beginning.’”¹⁸ Xie Taofang (謝桃坊) wrote that “the appearance of merchants and craftsmen as an interest group marked the emergence of a new element in the feudal social structure, the rise of a new social class.”¹⁹ Yang Wanli wrote that Song-era citizens’ intellectual world “had a degree of independence but also easily gave in to blind obedience, rejecting tradition but also remaining loyal to a feudal moral code.” From Song-era industries, one can see that “citizens truly sought to play an active role in society.”²⁰ Cheng Mingsheng further noted that citizen culture “had a heterodoxy that wore away at feudal customs.”²¹

It is interesting that scholars expect urban culture to have the characteristics of “liberty” or “modernity.” This stems from a teleological view of history more than an overview of historical facts. On this point the role of European urban culture is clear. Because of this, the differences between Chinese and Western “citizens” mentioned earlier, and the careful discussion of the characteristics of Western urban culture that do not map onto Chinese history has crept back into the discourse. This logical back and forth creates an awkward situation for scholars and shows clear discursive biases in historical studies where assumptions about societal progression play a role both consciously and subconsciously.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss whether these theoretical frameworks are appropriate. An under-examined issue that should be explored is that using European urban citizen society as a comparative example means including all urban residents. It does not consider the differences in status and political opinions between the ruling elite and lower class urban residents. Ancient Chinese “citizens,” as defined by some scholars, include only “some urban dwellers,” specifically, commoners; it observes the traditional division between those who govern and those who were governed.

This is significant.

Without a doubt, officials and others of the urban ruling class must be excluded from the category of “citizen”; otherwise there would be no room for discussion of “modernity,” “freedom,” or “heterodoxy.” A strict distinction between the different kinds of urban residents is important to the purpose of scholarship, but it also raises questions.

First, it may lead to confusion about concepts. In ancient China, “citizens” or *shimin* were more often called “market people” or *shiren*, usually referring to the workers and merchants who ran businesses in the specified “market” section of cities since the Qin and Han dynasties. These people had to be recorded with a special market status and carried a clear stigma in social status. It is understandable that modern historians would use this concept to translate the term for Western European city dwellers after the middle ages. If one associates ancient Chinese “citizen” culture with “freedom,” “modernity,” or “heterodoxy,” this translation makes sense. The concept of “citizen” changed after the Song period. Due to the collapse of the traditional market system and the abolition of “market status,” the dynastic state treated entire cities as markets and made city gates sites of commercial tax collection. The concept of “citizen” (market people) expanded from the original registered group to all city residents and all households and businesses.²²

Thus, if we exclude some urban residents from the definition of “citizen” in the discussion of “urban culture,”²³ then we would have a presentist conceptual bias.

Second, it is critical not to neglect another important facet of ancient Chinese urban history. Regardless of whether urban residents excluded from the category of “citizen” exhibit certain traits scholars care about, their residence in cities may result in cultural differences from those living in rural areas. Another question is whether, regardless of differences in status and culture, the shared trait of “city residence” alone makes all urban dwellers one social group distinct from their counterpart residing in the countryside. Could the rapidly developing cities from the Tang to Song periods have developed a unique form of “urban culture”?

Many years ago, Frederick Mote proposed the thesis that, unlike Western cities, Chinese history exhibited an “urban-rural continuum.” Mote argued that China did not have as distinct a rural-urban divide, that ancient Chinese city dwellers did not have political autonomy or special legal status, and many important cultural activities occurred outside the urban environment. Thus in Chinese traditional society, urban and rural areas formed a continuum, with no distinctive urban culture.²⁴ This was an influential theory in Western academic circles when it was first published.

Mote’s theory was derived from sociological studies. In the 1940s, American sociologist, G. Rodfield explained human history through a Darwinist framework and came up with the theory of “rural-urban continuum” to evaluate the opposition between social concepts like tradition vs. modernity or rural vs. urban, a theory accepted by many sociologists of the time.²⁵ The belief that traditional society was different from modern society, with less distinction between urban and rural areas and more of a continuum, stemmed primarily from sociological analysis of industrialized societies. Using the West as a comparative case for Chinese society to study differences is useful, but not always appropriate without more nuanced analysis. Furthermore, in recent years, some studies have argued that scholars should not ignore the distinctness of traditional Chinese urban culture by over-emphasizing Chinese agrarianism.²⁶ As cities grew in ancient China, they developed their own cultural characteristics. This naturally made Song-era urban culture distinct from rural society, although not in the same way as in late imperial China or in modern society.

II. Elite and common

The most direct expression of Song-era urban culture is the interesting opposition between elite and common culture. Archives are replete with examples of this.

In the ninth month of 990 CE, during Northern Song, Wang Yucheng (王禹偁) (954–1001) wrote from the Li family garden in Kaifeng, in what is now Henan province, that land in the capital is expensive: “Among many cities, between the two city watchtowers, every foot of land and every inch of earth is worth the same as gold, and has been for a long time.” Palaces, official temples, monasteries, and military barracks often occupied half the land in cities and it was hard for commoners to have large homes. For people not from aristocratic or meritorious families, there was no place to live. “Even if there is space, they can make more money as shops, clinics, or places for entertainment, which is more novel.” Although Mr. Li was a warrior, he “had read *The Spring and Autumn Annals* in his youth” and was clearly influenced by the scholarly culture and fashions of the time, “After moving to a residence, in the southeast he would have his meeting room and a garden, with bamboo and trees and flowers few in number but well-kept, very suitable for strolling and banqueting, as it was convenient and not tiresome.” This showed off the elite tastes of the writer’s host. Later, Wang found out that Li’s heirs had sold the estate after Li’s passing and heard the story of Emperor Taizong of Song ordering his court to purchase the estate and restore it. Later, he toured the garden with friends, lamenting that the things were still there while the man was gone, writing the piece, “Remembering ethereal elegance.”²⁷

Examples like this, of literati enjoying gardens, are numerous in Song-era sources. Another classic example is the Northern Song period list of nineteen famous gardens in Luoyang (in modern Henan) compiled by Li Gefei (李格非) in *Record of Famous Gardens of Luoyang* (*Luoyang ming yuan ji*). Zhang Dehe (張德和) of the Southern Song wrote a preface for the book, saying, “Some were known as meritorious people and left a legacy of nobleness, so one can imagine their virtue. Some accumulated worldly wealth, so one can see how they worked hard to manage businesses. There were also monasteries who produced clean products and cultivated and irrigated much. They all sought the merit of creation, so they could be compared to kings and dukes.”²⁸ These examples show that wealthy merchants and monks all sought to build gardens and plant flowers, following royal and aristocratic fashions and tastes. The Southern Song dynasty set up its capital in Lin’an (present-day Hangzhou, Zhejiang province) and neighboring Huzhou (also part of present-day Zhejiang) was a neighboring county with beautiful mountains and clean water. Noble families gathered there and gradually built a large collection of gardens. “In the city there are two streams that traverse it, which is unparalleled in the world, so there are many great gardens and ponds.” After the fall of the Southern Song dynasty, Zhou Mi (周密) (1232–1298) wrote that he “thought of yesterday’s dream” and how he once “traveled in and out of the city frequently,” listing ten gardens in his most famous work, *Miscellaneous Matters in Guixin year* (*Guixin zashi*).²⁹

Many gentry were not as wealthy as the Mr. Li described by Wang, who could build a garden in the middle of bustling Kaifeng. Other gentry often lived in the city but sought land in the less expensive wilderness outside the city to build sites for travel and leisure. Examples include Shen Kuo (沈括) (1032–1096), who built his Mengxi Garden outside the Zhufang Gate in Runzhou (now in present-day Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province) and the Southern Song Zhou Zhongxiang (周仲祥) who built his Huanchuan Garden as far as Linchuan village fifty *li* south of Xinyu county (in present-day Jiangxi province).³⁰ In addition to these examples, there are also many cases of gentry using funds to build official gardens, to be able to take breaks when not working and showcase their elite interests. These examples are also numerous in the archive. For instance, during Southern Song, Mingzhou (later renamed Qingyuan prefecture in present-day Ningbo, Zhejiang province) had over thirty gardens in addition to government offices, including Jinsi Hall, Qingshu Hall, Zhenhai Pavilion, Ren Studio, Chunfeng Hall. In 1243, during the leisure time of senior provincial official Chen Kai (陳垵), he led his subordinates to a small island on the city’s Moon Lake, and ordered magistrate Zhao Ti (趙體) to “build a pavilion upon it, so that he could share it with friends who traveled from afar.” The pavilion was named the “best pavilion of ten islands.” The pavilion was completed in the tenth month of that year and Chen brought guests to tour it. Under-official Lin Yuanjin (林元晉) wrote a poem: “Leading the industrious people in building, bringing guests to the island on a fine day. If this were not a prosperous year, how could one stroll so leisurely the whole day?”³¹ This was a clear exhibition of literati tastes.

At the same time, one of the main ways the gentry marked their status and cultural tastes was to disparage merchant customs as vulgar in order to emphasize their own distinctness. The warning of Southern Song writer Yuan Cai (袁采) (unknown date–1195) was a telling example: “The market, streets, teahouses, workshops, and wine shops are all places for petty people. Those of our generation may pass by these places, but must pay attention to our speech and manners to avoid dishonor. If there are drunkards, it is best to avoid them and not associate with them.”³² Yuan was serious about treating markets and streets as places gentry should not go, and merchants as “others” they should not get close to. Similar views were common among the Song elite. Sayings like “find peace in the field, far from the markets, practice farming as a primary industry and quit the profit-seeking of trade” were part of a long tradition of honoring agriculture over commerce.³³ For example, since the Xining Reforms, attendants from rural households were abolished and changed to laborers hired with money. One of the reasons opponents criticized the new policies was that most hired laborers were urban residents, who were viewed as less honest

than rural people. One saying that arose was that “when we gave up rural people to use city people, this made good people rare among the minor officials of the prefectures and counties.”³⁴ Lu You (陸游) (1125–1210) wrote that in Chengdu (in modern-day Sichuan) gentry families had strict rules, and talked about those who had to enter trade due to earlier poverty, but as soon as they gained an official position, “they are all unwilling to engage in trade again.” Urban literati also had a distinct wardrobe to show off their status, taking care to avoid faux pas, “the children of scholarly families, regardless of wealth, wear plain clothing with red silk belts, the width of which is one finger length. To depart from this leads to being mocked and being thought of as not of scholarly bearing.”³⁵ In literati eyes, those who had lived in cities for a long time were tainted by greed and sensual stimulation, and thus must be less virtuous. In Southern Song, an official name Hu Ying (胡穎) sentenced a corrupt official, saying that since he entered office through grace, he should have been “basically principled” but the reason his actions became corrupt was because his wife, Ms. Xu, was urging him to do so. It turned out that “Ms. Xu had long lived in the city and been affected by its ways, so how could she behave honestly?”³⁶ In Hu’s opinion, urban entertainment venues in which Ms. Xu had lived were dirty places that would corrupt people. This is why Zhen Dexiu (真德秀 1178–1235) interpreted Confucius’s words of “your speech must be credible, your actions must be thorough; to be obstinate is to be a petty person which is less desirable” as petty people “may not help others but they protect themselves without harming others,” which is not so different from scholars. However, “below this are city people, who are not suited to be scholars.”³⁷ Thus “city people” used to be seen as lower in status than “petty people.”

Of course, the disparity between scholar and commoner had existed a long time, as had the stigma on debased merchants. As early as the Eastern Han period, Xun Yue (荀悅 148–209) had said, “mountain people are simple while city people play.”³⁸ The contrast between scholarly elite and commoner vulgarity was also not a new phenomenon in the Song period. As social conditions changed, some gentry began tolerating urban trading activities so that by the late Southern Song period, there was even a discourse of “craftsmen and merchants are all essential.”³⁹ However, as the earlier example shows, during the Song era, there was still a clear contrast between scholarly elite and common vulgarity, which seemed to be a mainstream feature of urban life.

Furthermore, it is important to note that from the Tang to Song dynasty, cities of various sizes grew economically and urban culture flourished. At the same time, most cities continued to function as political centers of the dynastic state. As cities grew, a confluence of political, economic, and cultural factors attracted literati to reside in cities and their status as cultural centers led by the elite grew even stronger.

There have been many studies of literati migration to cities prior to the Song dynasty. Tanigawa Michio (谷川道雄) discusses the urban-rural relationship in the Six Dynasties period, arguing that cities and countryside at that time were divided and contrasting, and that although literati lived in cities while serving in official positions, their home bases were still located in the countryside.⁴⁰ Nakamura Keiji (中村圭尔) also points out that people of the Six Dynasties had negative evaluations of cities like Chang’an, Luoyang, Ye, and Jiankang.⁴¹ Han Sheng (韓昇) further notes that during the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties period, the political strength of the literati stemmed from the enormous social and cultural advantages they wielded in the countryside. After the political situation in Northern Wei stabilized, many northern Chinese literati began working with the government and began migrating to cities for political appointments, but in limited numbers. Major changes took place in the Tang dynasty. As central government power consolidated, more scholars took up government posts, urban economies grew and living conditions improved. The implementation of the civil service examination system, especially, drove more literati to move to the cities. Not only did the prestigious lineages of the realm move to the two capitals, but local elite families also began moving to regional urban centers. After the

An Lushan Rebellion, more scholar-gentry families moved south. The result was that as literati families moved from rural to urban areas, political migration gave way to cultural, economic, and lifestyle migration and literati rural bases disintegrated.⁴²

At the same time, although Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties era scholar-gentry families did not establish primary residences in cities, as Nakamura pointed out, the capital cities still functioned as cultural centers. Capital cities attracted the culturally ambitious, and the educational resources and facilities to support those who pursued these ambitions. Examples of the dynamism of capitals can be seen in how the “Ode to Three Capitals” by Zuo Si (左思) raised the price of paper in Luoyang, the cachet of Jiankang from the romanticized reputation of Xie An (謝安), or the flourishing literary scene of Yongming.⁴³ Six Dynasties era cities were propped up by central governments as a counterweight to the rural bases of the literati, and were a precursor to cities becoming cultural centers.

By the Song period, it was even more common for the scholar-gentry class to live in urban areas. As Hong Mai (洪邁 1123–1202) recorded: “For scholars who started with land, public service is now most respected, and those who say the houses of their forefathers become unlivable and must be renovated are many. To access medicine and food more easily, they move from villages to towns and towns to county cities. These cases are numerous.”⁴⁴ Liang Gengyao (梁庚堯) had an interesting analysis of this phenomenon.⁴⁵ He noted that cities of the time were not merely commercial centers, but rather administrative centers with commercial, cultural, and entertainment functions as well. Most officials and scholars resided in cities for public service or educational reasons, sometimes for family reasons or first moves. In addition to temporary residence in cities for official appointments or education, Song era archives contain many records of generations of literati living in cities. Some of these families had even been in the city for centuries and established clans. These urban dwellers may have been the descendants of literati who had migrated during the Sui and Tang dynasties. Liang raised examples of Song era literati who migrated to cities not in search of better living conditions but for cultural reasons. This undoubtedly informed Han Sheng’s analysis. Officials and scholars may have been searching for convenient living or friendships with like-minded people, or to find education for their children, like the father of Li Xiongfei (李雄飛) from Fenghua, who “cared deeply about educating his sons and moved to the city so he could more easily find a teacher for his two sons.”⁴⁶ Another example is Bao Xuan (鮑璇) “who loved his two sons very much and entered the city to find teachers and mentors.”⁴⁷ These two stories exemplify the status of cities of the time as irreplaceable centers of culture. Even those who resided in rural areas often needed to go into cities to look for teachers. One example is the renowned poet Lu You, who did not heed the advice of friends in his younger years and settled in the prefectural city of Shaoxing (in present-day Zhejiang). Although Lu loved to learn and studied widely, his son still needed to occasionally go into the city to study: “My young son wears his worn cap out to find a teacher, and this old father sits by the furnace in the cold at night, painting poetry.”⁴⁸

The strengthening of cities as cultural centers was a long-term historical trend, but the rapid development of cities during the Song period made this phenomenon even more pronounced. As Liang Gengyao pointed out in one case, Pingjiang prefecture (present-day Suzhou, Jiangsu province) produced eight *jinshi* in 1190 who were city-dwellers. These eight who lived in the city made up 75% of the *jinshi* of the prefecture that year. This may have been a special case, but it shows that city-dwelling scholars made up a large portion of those competing in the civil service examinations. There are many ways one can see how cultural resources were concentrated in the cities. Many period sources reflect this phenomenon. For example, print culture and book publication and circulation concentrated in the cities. Thus, even if scholars lived primarily in the countryside, they had to go into the city in order to buy books.

In 1083, Su Song (蘇頌 1020–1101), the Assistant Minister of Appointments returned to Runzhou during his mourning period after his mother’s passing, accompanied by his grandson,

Su Xiangxian (蘇像先). Daoist priest Wang Congzhi (王从之) asked Su Xiangxian on behalf of friends if he could board Su Song's official boat: "Yang Xiaoben Xingxian (楊孝本行先) from Qianzhou spent hundreds of thousands to buy books in the capital city. He needs to return soon but has too many books and a boat that is not enormous would not be sufficient to carry them all." Su Xiangxian generously agreed, saying, "I will see to it and am happy to renew an old friendship."⁴⁹ The person boarding the boat traveled from Qianzhou (in present-day Ganzhou, Jiangxi province) to Kaifeng to buy books, evidence of how flourishing the book market was in the capital, as the books that could be found there greatly outnumbered those that could be found in most prefectural cities. Lin Guangchao (林光朝 1114–1178) of Southern Song said of himself, "I was born to collect books. Every time I pass by Wuzhong, I buy books until my pockets are empty."⁵⁰ Lin hailed from Putian, Fujian province and bought books in Suzhou, which could be considered a long-distance journey. This shows that Suzhou, even as an auxiliary city, had a much stronger cultural scene than the cities in Fujian. As Hong Mai recorded: "There was the case of Zhao Suoshou (趙縮手), whose given name is unknown, who was a scholar from Puzhou. In his youth, his parents had money and sent him to Chengdu to buy books."⁵¹ Puzhou (present-day Anyue, Sichuan province) scholars had to travel to Chengdu to buy books, showing that local cities could not meet literati demands for books, and highlighting Chengdu's cultural significance as a regional center. There are many similar accounts. For example, Yuanzhou (present-day Yichun, Jiangxi province) scholar Liu Chu (劉滁) "bought five hundred books in Jian'an,"⁵² showing that Jianzhou (present-day Jian'ou, Fujian province) was a center of the book industry, probably because its books were abundant and reasonably priced.

In summary, many studies have explored how, as cities grew during the Song period, urban culture flourished along with handicrafts and trade. At the same time, because political, economic, and cultural resources were concentrated in cities, this only solidified the trend that had developed since the Southern and Northern Dynasties period of literati moving to cities. The number of scholar-gentry living in cities increased dramatically during the Song dynasty, and cities' role as centers of culture became even more pronounced. Thus, the distinction between elite and common as contrasting positions became a basic feature of urban culture. In this regard, urban characteristics followed the trends of earlier periods and did not change directions.

III. Urban people and rural people

Since political, economic, and cultural resources were concentrated in urban areas as cities grew, cities began enjoying advantages relative to rural areas in many aspects. Urban residents' sense of superiority and disdain for rural residents also increased. This phenomenon had existed since the Tang dynasty. Han Sheng raised the example of Princess Danyang (丹陽公主) to show how Tang era urban people had used "village" as an insult, and viewed rural people as targets for mockery. "Xue Wanhe (薛萬徹) was married to Princess Danyang, but Emperor Taizong heard people say that 'the prince consort smelled of the village.' The princess was ashamed of this and did not live with him for many months. The emperor heard this and laughed and held a banquet for them, betting his prized dagger as a reward if he lost a game of lances. He feigned defeat and took off the dagger. After the banquet, the princess was so happy that she rode in a carriage home with Xue and they reconciled."⁵³ After the Song dynasty, these instances became more numerous and are worth discussing.

On one hand, urban dwellers were accustomed to the conveniences of the city and often praised the advantages of urban living, mocking rural living as crude and plain. These cases are found frequently in period sources. Because of the characteristics of archival sources, these views naturally stemmed mostly from the scholar-gentry class. However, many wealthy rural families at the time also expressed a desire to move to cities, and a group called "remote tenant farmers"

emerged, showing how those who pursued the comfortable living conditions of urban areas were not limited to scholar-gentry.

As Hong Mai's earlier-referenced example illuminated, there were several important reasons people migrated to cities, country living was too coarse and "medicine was inaccessible and food and drinks hard to find." As Chen Gongfu (陳公輔 1077–1142) recorded in early Southern Song, "living near the seas and fields in the southeast used to be the best. When there was scarcity, rice could be a hundred cash for one *dou* while fish and meat would only be thirty cash per *jin*, and fuel, firewood, and sundries could be obtained easily. Nobody moved except for public service appointments. Lanterns were hung every day and the common people were prosperous and happy. There was never talk of poverty, worries, or resentments. In recent years there have been many national troubles, bureaucrats are confused, soldiers come and go, the prefecture has great needs, and supplies are limited. From officials that live away from home to even ministers, there are innumerable items whose price has skyrocketed, becoming ten times as expensive as before. Although there are huts, you can stay there but cannot live, so people escape the village. Thus the countryside is lonely, and there is nothing, including clothing and food. Close the door and wait for everything to run out."⁵⁴ The description of Taizhou (in present-day Zhejiang) as once prosperous and inexpensive with no "talk of poverty, worries, or resentments" was probably somewhat exaggerated and stemmed from Chen's feeling that the present was not as good as the past. However, because he was unable to stay in the city due to rising costs but was dissatisfied with rural loneliness, shortage of goods, and inconvenience in shopping for clothing and food, he candidly expressed his disappointment.

Zhang Jiucheng (張九成 1092–1195) left an even more sincere account of his rural life. In 1129, Zhang moved to Yanguan county (in present-day Jiaxing, Zhejiang) to earn a living through teaching. "The village is remote and lacks a market. There are no good cooks and every day vegetables and bamboo shoots are the only food. Most of the food hurts the stomach and makes one sick." On December 26 of that year, Zhang "came back from the village and was struck by an evil wind" which caused him to become violently ill and extremely lethargic. The "doctors folded their arms and retreated," and it was only thanks to friends who recommended a compassionate monk who came up with a miraculous cure that crisis was averted. Because of this experience, Zhang wrote an essay to commemorate this mercy, entitled "For my descendants to one day repay this kindness."⁵⁵

Lu You wrote to similar effect when he was in Sichuan and stayed overnight at a rural inn: "The moon is dark and I knock at the door. The lantern is weak and the bed is a reed mat. The rice is coarse and contains sand and dirt. The vegetables are so thin they taste like grass." These conditions were obviously very different from the daily life of scholar-gentry like Lu You. However, to emphasize that he was not of the common class, Lu You purposely wrote, "Regardless, I am satisfied as it is not so different from delicacies. I am not a boy or girl, who complains because of my stomach. The ancients despised those that only sought prosperity but could not work hard. Today I put a hand to the plow, but in old age you shall thank me for my ink and brush."⁵⁶ The tone of this poem actually seems slightly affected.

Some medical books even included prescriptions for rural conditions under which medicines and supplies were difficult to obtain. "If there is a case of gangrene, the cure is in the book. If people are too poor to buy medicine or live in remote towns where it is difficult to procure medicine, they can take honeysuckle wine, and follow up with maifan stone paste, then apply miracle paste. This process must be repeated to be effective. If there is no maifan stone paste, as is often the case for field workers or wild people, then just miracle paste is sufficient."⁵⁷ Thus it seems that remote towns in which medicines were hard to come by were fairly common, which prompted scholar-gentry to migrate from rural areas into cities.

Similarly, many smaller towns were also looked down on because standards of living there were not as high as that found in large cities. Literati and scholars living in small towns often

complained about it. During Northern Song, there was a town called Sanya 三亞 recorded in the *Lonely and Remote Places in Hebei* (*Hebei gu jiong chu*), where living conditions were bad because their official contributions were low, where “the land was full of ponds so there was nothing to buy at the market besides fish and lotus root.” The “situation for officials was bleak” and even the town officials abandoned their posts to escape the place. Once a passing envoy went to inspect the place and found short poems on the paper screens in the hall written by town officials who had left their posts: “For two years I’ve withered away in Sanya. Without rice and without money, how can I support my family? Our only two daily meals are lotus root; if you look in our mouths you might see lotus blossoms.” This poem was relayed to the ever curious Hong Mai of Southern Song who recorded it so that it has been preserved to the present.⁵⁸ There is also the case of Hedong District, Zezhou, Lingchuan county (in present-day Jincheng, Shanxi) where “the county was wild and remote, and at the market there was only a family that sells flatbread.” According to Dongping resident Dong Ying (董瑛) his father had once been assigned as magistrate to this county and “every meal and drink was thin and bitter.”⁵⁹

Considering these disparities in urban and rural political, economic, and even cultural status, it is not surprising that urban dwellers treated “rural manners” as a joke and looked down on rural people’s customs. As Sima Guang (司馬光 1019–1086) pointed out: “among the four classes of people, farmers have the most bitter life ... thus when their children visit cities, they think the food is good and the clothing beautiful. As they take in the beautiful sights, sometimes they do not want to return to the fields of the south. Many look down on farmers, but this is truly lamentable.”⁶⁰ From this it is clear that mocking rural people was a shared pastime for urban dwellers. In the late Northern Song period, Zhu Mian (朱勗 1075–1126), who had been born in a city, received imperial favor for managing the transportation of the Emperor’s garden stones, but was mocked by people of Suzhou and Hangzhou. There it was fashionable to mock Zhu’s speech by saying that his “head was full of country manners, and his pretentious ways invite loathing, though he should know better.”⁶¹ Similarly, when scholars criticized each other’s essays, they often accused their targets of writing in a “rural manner.”⁶² In urban entertainment and variety shows, there were also many performances that mocked rural people. According to Southern Song person Wu Zimu (吳自牧): “When I was in Bianjing (Kaifeng), it was rare for villagers and wild men to enter the city. When they come, though, they dress as Shandong and Hebei village geezers to earn money from comedy.”⁶³ Naideweng (耐得翁) also made a similar record: “When I was teaching in the capital, villagers did not come into the city often, but when they did they often dressed as Shandong and Hebei villagers, which earned laughter.” This custom persisted in Southern Song. “Today there are drummers, baton twirlers, and comedians.”⁶⁴

Because urban residents had such feelings of superiority compared to rural residents, under the pen of urban scholars city-dwellers developed an image of “laziness” and “decadence” which was flaunted. For example, Zhou Mi said, “city people are proud, not only by custom but because of their upbringing in the capital, and greater forces make it so.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, “city people, in terms of buying and selling, often sell ready-made goods and seek to turn a profit ... even though they do not contribute, they can still get by, as this is the beauty of custom.”⁶⁶ The “beauty of custom” mentioned here probably refers to how it was easier for city people to make a living relative to village people. Furthermore, rural people often envied and sought after city living.” Fan Chengda (范成大 1126–1193) wrote a particularly representative poem: “Homely wives take advantage of county fairs to go into the city and stroll the southern streets in groups. Passersby, do not laugh at the women’s vulgarity, for their husbands will buy them silver hairpins.”⁶⁷ It is because of envy that the village woman comes into the city and takes the opportunity to take in the sights. The poem goes on: “The son is tired of planting wheat and lotuses. He steals moments of rest to look toward the city ... It is fortunate there are not many barren fields at home, but he begins to wonder if city lights are better.”⁶⁸ Not only village wives, but young people also wanted

to live in cities, “stealing moments of rest to look toward the city.” Many similar poems can be found in period sources.

At the same time, occasionally rural entertainers could also be found in the cities, trying to perform for a living. For example, Lin'an city in Southern Song “had hundreds of actors from villages who bring their sons and daughters, and perform in the streets, workshops, bridges, and alleys, seeking money for wine and lodgings.”⁶⁹ This did not mean that rural culture was influential in cities, but rather that rural variety shows gave extra flavor to urban culture.

Because of this, the cities often became fashion bellwethers, influencing rural life in many ways. A popular saying went, “If tall top knots are popular in the city, the surrounding area will have them a *chi* taller; if big eyebrows are popular in the city, the surrounding area will have brows that wrap around half the head; if wide sleeves are popular in the city, the surrounding area will use a whole *pi* of brocade.”⁷⁰ This saying was often repeated by Song people.

IV. Cultural influence and cultural hegemony

What do different cultural factors mean within the context of elite and vulgar, extravagant and simple? In Song cities, which kind of culture was more influential?

Clothing and fashion represented the customs and cultures of different classes. The following section will analyze this as a case study.

Successive generations of the ruling class maintained a distinction between officials and the public, gentry and commoners. Strict regulations regarding transportation and clothing were frequently found in period sources. The Song period was no exception. In 982, during the reign of Emperor Taizong of Song, there was an edict proclaiming “rules regarding scholarly and commoner dress, as well as funerals and burials. There should be distinction in all matters, but in recent years, transgressions of boundaries have become too frequent.”⁷¹ Whereas earlier edicts were aimed at preventing commoners from dressing too ostentatiously, by the Tang and Song period the fashions of many classes had begun exhibiting new trends due to urban development and cultural changes. In August 1139, during the reign of Southern Song Emperor Gaozong, some ministers presented a memorial saying that there was no order in the clothing of the realm and no distinction between noble and debased: “the sedans and their carriers are all as one, the majesty of officialdom is abandoned.”⁷² Later, Zhu Xi (朱熹) noted: “Nowadays fashion is lawless and superiors and inferiors are all mixed.”⁷³ Whether “all as one” or “all mixed,” these comments show that elite and commoner culture influenced each other during the time period, which is significant.

Wang Xueli (王雪莉) once argued the following about Song fashion: fashion in ancient China followed two primary channels of influence. First was the cultural interactions of different ethnic groups, and the second was the interaction of different classes; that is, the formalization of casual attire and the casualization of formal attire.⁷⁴ She goes on to say, “In the history of Chinese fashion, it is the dynamic balancing between these two influences that has propelled fashion forward.” Wang Xueli bases her argument about the formalization of casual attire and casualization of formal attire on her study of official robes. Extending this to urban culture and the relationship between scholars and commoners, the history becomes more rich and complex.

It is clear that during the Northern and Southern Song period, there was mutual influence between scholarly elite culture and commoner vulgar culture.

On one hand, the appearance of urban culture impacted the scholarly class on multiple fronts, and even deeply influenced the royal court. Wang Xueli notes how caps, robes with round necks, leather belts, and boots were daily attire for commoner men during the Tang dynasty, but had become official uniforms by the Song dynasty, showing the influence of commoner culture on elite culture.⁷⁵ These influences were not limited only to this case. According to Jiang Xiufu (江休復 1005–1060) who recorded Sima Guang's words, during the middle years of Northern

Song, when women went out, they no longer wore loose trousers or shirts that overlapped in front, and they made “swirling skirts” with long slits in the back, for ease of mounting donkeys. This practice was said to have “originated from the prostitutes of the urban underground,” and yet elite families emulated this fashion, “knowing no shame at all!”⁷⁶ The modesty of scholarly tradition had ceded place to the bold fashions of urban culture.

Records reflecting the influence of commoner culture on elites are also abundant in the field of fine arts. During the reign of Emperor Renzong in Northern Song, Zhang Fangping (張方平 1007–1091) presented a memorial on court music: “Your servant saw the Minister of Ceremonies among the musicians, and those he led were all mixed with market peddlers, dirty people who live in the alleys. The nation has heavy matters on hand, so they must be immediately gathered for education and then dispersed when the ceremonies are complete. But how can artists be well-rounded and workers be skilled?”⁷⁷ The musicians under the Minister of Ceremonies were supposed to perform exclusively for state rituals, and yet they were mixed in the streets “with market peddlers”; the problem this revealed was not only that artists were not well-rounded and skilled, but that common urban music could influence court music. Aside from rituals, there were even more instances of urban culture influencing the royal court. According to the record, during the Zhenghe era (1111–1118) of Emperor Huizong of Song, “an elder among the capital courtesans married an official actor and often entered the palace to teach dance.”⁷⁸ To have a brothel madam enter the palace to teach song and dance was considered transgressive. At the same time, there was Ruan Xian (阮咸) who was good with instruments, “who came forward with art and talent to a temple and was treated graciously” and met Daoist priest Wang Qingzhi and An Minxiu of Liquan monastery.⁷⁹ By Southern Song, the tradition of using two characters for names of buildings and pavilions had also spread to the court. According to the record, this custom “originated with barbarians and spread to monasteries, from the lower officials to the royal court, and was copied so that everyone follows this custom now.”⁸⁰

Even more interestingly, some urban romantic poetry became accepted and absorbed by the imperial court. The Koryŏ kingdom sent multiple diplomatic missions to the Song court. They asked for music, musicians, and song lyrics, requests accepted by the Song court. The song lyrics taken to Koryŏ were preserved in later documents. Chŏng Inji (鄭麟趾 1396–1478) of the Chosŏn dynasty recorded over seventy songs in his *History of Koryŏ: Music Gazetteer* (*Koryŏ sa: Akchi*). Most of these songs were considered elite ritual music. Thus, the dozen or so commoner songs in the collection stand out. The last song, entitled “Untying the Girdle Ornament,” has the following lyrics: “Face beautiful, heart delicate. Eyebrows long and eyes stretching to her temples. Nose long, mouth small, tongue fragrant and soft. Ears rosy in the middle. Neck like exquisite jade, hair like the clouds. Eyebrows cutting and hands like spring bamboo. Breasts sweet, waist slender, feet tight, more than those, do not ask.”⁸¹ This poem can be characterized as “erotic.” Yang Wanli theorizes that the artists sent to Goryŏ to represent the Song court must have been students of the royal academy of fine arts (*jiaofang*). If these kinds of lyrics spread to Koryŏ through them, then these poems had clearly traveled from urban streets to the imperial court much earlier, where they circulated among the Song dynasty elite.⁸² This inference is plausible. This is supported by stories like that of sycophantic official Cai You (蔡攸 1077–1126) in late Northern Song, who presented performers to Emperor Huizong to gain favor.

In other respects, however, the majority of archival sources indicate that it was more common for urban commoners to adopt court fashions as their fashions than the other way around.

During the Song era, commoners frequently violated rules of transportation and dress and the issue received much attention. To the Song court, issuing multiple prohibitions was a way to prevent its status and authority from wearing away. In January 999, Emperor Zhenzong declared: “The laws regarding clothing are written in the law. If violations are not punished, then the problem will become worse.”⁸³ Because of this law, commoner families could not wear gold fabric. In August 1138, during Southern Song, the prime minister petitioned for a prohibition against gold

and jade being used for clothing and women's accessories, and Emperor Gaozong said, "The Ministry of Justice should investigate seriously and act accordingly."⁸⁴ Similar prohibitions were common. To urban commoners, however, the original intent of dressing up was not to transgress boundaries, but to show off wealth or be fashionable like the upper classes. Thus, many commoners treated the "palace look" or inner court modes of dress and grooming as a model for imitation. This was a widespread mass pursuit that developed into a fashion trend.

In October 1049, during the reign of Emperor Renzong, the Song court issued an edict that women's hats should not exceed a certain height, with very detailed regulations: the height could not exceed four *cun*, width could not exceed one *chi*, length could not exceed four *cun*, and could not use Rhinoceros horns, etc. There were also corresponding punishments for violating these rules. According to the record, "First the court preferred headdresses with white Rhinoceros horns, and the people fought to copy that, calling it the in look, and the headdress was called 'drooping to the shoulders.' It was as long as three *chi*, and could be even longer. The imperial censor Liu Yuanyu (劉元瑜) thought the fashion was devilish, and petitioned to have it prohibited, and many women were found guilty."⁸⁵ It turned out that what was perceived as "devilish fashion" originated in the inner court.

Ouyang Xiu (歐陽修 1007–1072) wrote a poem entitled "Partridge Sky," which describes an innocent girl applying makeup in front of a mirror: "She learned to paint her brows in the palace style, thin and long, the new fashion of dewdrops on lotuses. She knows only that a smile can overturn the nation, but does not believe what she sees will break hearts."⁸⁶ This poem shows that one of the popular palace cosmetic practices was to draw one's eyebrows "thin and long." Ouyang wrote another poem entitled "Song for Good Girls," which referenced a similar fashion: "Thin eyes and long brows, palace style adornments, walking toward flowers in slippers and standing, covered in embroidery, two heart characters, light golden yellow..."⁸⁷ Another example is Su Shi (蘇軾 1037–1101), who wrote a poem called "Reply to Six Poems of Wang Gong (王鞏)," which described a woman's toilette as "diligently applying yellow lead to follow the palace style,"⁸⁸ but did not write in detail what this "palace style" looked like. However, later Northern Song writer Wu Zeli (吳則禮 unknown–1121) composed the poem "Listening to pipa at the home of Liang Shengmin," with the lines "the knotted gauze dance of the palace features long sleeves; delicate brows and skillful study are the fashion of this age."⁸⁹ These poems show that from the mid-Northern Song period to the end, women often imitated palace styles in their dress and grooming, and the delicate brows and thin eyes continued to be a popular look. The "long brows and eyes reaching to the temples" line in the poem recorded in the *History of Koryō: Music Gazetteer* cited earlier probably referred to this fashion. By Southern Song, there were some changes. Shi Hao (史浩 1106–1194) wrote "Short poem like a dream," describing "Choosing shirts in the palace style, gives the face the appearance of good fortune, and spirited demeanor, like the goddess Guanyin. Come, come! Those who look will clasp their hands together in worship."⁹⁰ This poem does not emphasize slenderness but rather "the appearance of good fortune," which can be explored further. There are many similar records. One example is the poetry of Zhao Dingchen (趙鼎臣): "Look at hairstyles which copy the inner palace, the left-over hair ornaments can be used to buy new designs."⁹¹ "Farewell to New Jingzhou Official" by Zhang Xiaoxiang (張孝祥 1132–1169) contains the lines, "Short lapel shirts are new to the table, as are straight-sided hats in the palace style."⁹² Hu Zhonggong (胡仲弓) wrote in his poem "Inquiring Plum Blossom": "Recent palace style is clever, only needing bright pearls, not a gentleman."⁹³ So-called "new fashions," "style from the inner palace," and "recent palace style" all convey how palace fashions became the standard for style. In 1175, Emperor Xiaozong of Song and his cabinet minister discussed the drawbacks of extravagance "as it pertained to customs." Minister Gong Maoliang (龔茂良 1121–1178) replied: "The noble families imitate the palace style and then spread it to the commoners, so those who sell hair pins must say they are in the palace

style.”⁹⁴ This points to the origin of urban culture as spreading from the palace to noble families and then to commoners.

Copying fashion trends from the palace was not limited to clothing. Southern Song court painter Zhu Yu (朱玉) painted a scene of the Lantern Festival at the court of Lin'an entitled “Lantern Show” which includes a line of text above a depiction of a stage with the advertising words: “In the courtyard manner of the imperial capital.” The “courtyard style” referred to the style of the royal court, showing how commoner entertainment mimicked palace styles as a selling point to attract audiences.

There was a two-way influence between commoner and palace culture. Within this complex cultural relationship, was either influence stronger than the other?

One scholar has opined that as the Song-era “popularity of urban literature and art showed, urban commoners already became dominant in urban culture. This gave them a unique status in the social cultural system.” At the time, “there was a transition in the cultural center of gravity from scholarly elite to the commoners.”⁹⁵ This argument is bold but is not rigorously supported.

Karl Marx once said of the relationships between different classes in society in the text of *The German Ideology*: “The thinking of the ruling class in every period occupies the dominant position about schools of thought. That is, when one class occupies the dominant position in society in terms of material resources, it will also occupy the dominant position in terms of intellectual resources.”⁹⁶ This argument had far-reaching impacts reflected in Western scholarly trends from the nineteenth century. It emphasizes that when a class owns the material resources that allow it to rule society, it will be the primary influencer of society’s intellectual world both from an objective and subjective perspective. Since the mid-twentieth century, however, as cultural studies have become more nuanced, there have been many theories put forward that have addressed gaps and errors in Marx’s analysis of upper class structure. Li Xiaoti once published an exciting analysis of this phenomenon. Li notes how Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony became an important concept in cultural theory through the translation of British cultural critics and historians like Raymond Williams. Broadly speaking, Gramscian hegemony seems similar to the Marxian argument that the ruling class always occupies the ruling position in every age, but is actually a major revision. At the heart of Marxian theory is an assumption that the ruling class forces its values onto lower classes while Gramsci emphasizes the people’s voluntary submission. Because intellectuals understand what the people want, they invent a set of corresponding world-views and value systems which are gradually internalized by the people through the power of social groups.⁹⁷ Thus, domination and subordination are the linchpins of hegemony. Li also noted that the relationship between the upper classes and the lower classes is complex and prone to change. Cases from different time periods and different regions would exhibit different characteristics. Different theories and frameworks (e.g., conflict theories, hegemony, polarity, communication loops, dialogue) all have different degrees of explanatory power, “dependent on how we use them.”⁹⁸ That is to say, explanatory power under a set of conditions is relative, cannot possibly cover everything, and should be judged by whether they are aligned with historical fact. This is why scholars say there are no eternal laws in history. In terms of this article, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony with its emphasis on people’s voluntary submission helps us understand Song era urban culture.

There is a negative example of hegemony from the Song period. In late Northern Song, Emperor Huizong tried to implement ancient law to emulate the legendary sage kings in political philosophy by strengthening ritual cultures.⁹⁹ He established a Bureau of Rites Education for cabinet ministers to present petitions, and in 1111 issued the edict *New Procedures on Five Categories of Rites (Wu li xin yi)* for all the officials and people of his realm to obey. This was meant to correct people’s morals, define what was respectable and detestable, and delineate the distinction between noble and debased, to “develop moral education and change social mores.”¹⁰⁰ Later, to make it more convenient for people to follow these laws, he issued a Key Summary of

New Procedures on Five Categories Rites (*Wu li xin yi jieyao*), with detailed regulations for commoner headwear, weddings, funerals, worship, and other rituals. However, these regulations were not accepted by the people and were impossible to enforce. "For village households and poor commoners, those without places to sleep or steps to go up and down, teach them customs and task them with following through. For infrequent violations, they can go under the law. As for shamanism and matchmaking, do not venture to practice. Funeral rites are impossible to stop for long." By June 1119, the Song court could not help but admit the failure of its new rules: "Commoners and scholars have been bonded since ancient times, which was convenient for posting written notices, but whether they reach the commoners is unclear... The purpose of establishing rituals was to organize the people, but now has become harmful to the people. Kaifeng prefecture requests the Key Summary of New Procedures on Five Categories Rites come with more guidance and ministers of rites and students of rites be sent to teach passersby the official instructions on the public notices, or whether they can be changed to not being implemented."¹⁰¹ Without the people's acknowledgement, the policies were in vain and retracted.

In reality, although the Song government prohibited overstepping the boundaries of dress and transportation (what was actually just commoners' copying elite culture), there was never a way to police these rules. Clearly, the people's approval was key here.

Then, can urban culture gain some sort of "subjecthood" through elite influence? This requires looking into the process of influence and the elements of lower class culture the elite were absorbing. Traditional Chinese elite culture was never a closed system but rather more utilitarian. It absorbed fresh elements from other cultures, including grassroots society, even since ancient times, not only starting in the Song era. However, under normal circumstances, the elements it adopted were limited to the functional level, and it is difficult to assess its core values. This is the "essence" versus "function" dynamic very familiar to Chinese people. In terms of Song-era urban cultural influence, in particular, it is unquestionable that the lifestyles of the royal and official class contained more leisure and pleasure. The evolution of national history in the recent past can provide more direct evidence of this aspect of ethnic culture.

Furthermore, late imperial cultural history shows that imagining cities as stemming from any single cultural system is overly simplistic. Urban market culture did not lose its own unique characteristics by adopting from elite culture. Previous scholars have elaborated on these unique characteristics. Elites with political capital continued to occupy an advantageous cultural position. Because of this, though commoner culture attracted attention and found new life because of its novelty in late imperial urban society, the major force constructing urban cultural structures and guiding cultural development was ultimately government rather than commerce.

Thus, major merchants in cities more often catered to elite tastes rather than commoners' tastes. The story of Kaifeng merchant Sun Cihao (孫賜號) from Northern Song illustrates this point well. According to records, "Sun Cihao was originally a liquor merchant who was honest and beloved. He borrowed a hundred thousand to establish his first shops... His inventory grew great and he even added paintings to his walls. He also laid out books on tables, which were used to entertain the elite. They were all rare, and people competed for them. After a while, he opened more shops, built pavilions, and successfully expanded his business in Kaifeng."¹⁰² One major reason Sun made a fortune selling alcohol was that he opened an elegant establishment that catered to elite tastes where "people competed to rush to them." His taverns grew bigger and became one of the most recognized businesses in the capital.

Similarly, in Southern Song, the official wine shops of the military under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Revenue branch in Lin'an also managed wine shops that bought and sold alcohol: "Each wine shop employed ten official courtesans, and each had the gold, silver, and wine cups necessary to provide for drinkers' needs." Extremely extravagant, "the officials among them levied taxes, and at first did not care, pretending all was well. These were often near places where

student scholars lived, and outsiders could not easily get in.¹⁰³ Scholars not only had high cultural status but were also the primary consumers of commercial goods.

Cultural prestige was ultimately backed by political capital. This gave rise to cities of different administrative levels creating corresponding class differences in the cultural sphere.

As early as the Tang dynasty, there were sayings about Dongchuan and Xichuan people looking down on each other, “Xichuan people call Zizhou a market for Dongchuan people like us. But how can they even be compared to us?”¹⁰⁴ Here, Dongchuan and Xichuan refer to the cities of Chengdu and Zizhou (present-day Santai county in Mianyang, Sichuan). Comparatively speaking, Chengdu, as the leading city in the Sichuan region at the time, naturally had reason to take Zizhou lightly and even treat it as its “market.” This became even more pronounced by the Song period.

Of course, the city most qualified to be the cultural center was the capital. Wang Anshi (王安石 1021–1086) noted, “As sages change, from near to far, from inside to outside, the capital’s customs are the guides and the four surrounding regions emulate them For any event or affair, clothing, hats, cars, horses, tools, toys, or accessories, if there is a design change in the morning, by evening the trend will be set.”¹⁰⁵ Southern Song Naideweng said something similar: “When the ancestors of the dynasty established the nation, they set the capital at Bian, and the customs and rituals are emulated by all the regions.”¹⁰⁶ The example of fashion and cosmetics trends from the capital that spread to the rest of the country was evidence of this.

Thus, long-term residents of the capital, even commoners, sometimes felt they could laugh at officials from other places. According to the records, the customs of the wine shops of Lin’an was such that “first guests would sit, then look at the dishes, ask how strong was the wine, then change to good dishes. One nonlocal gentleman had not heard of this custom before and simply ate vigorously and was laughed at by the tavern keepers.”¹⁰⁷ In this case, the relationship between the capital and surrounding counties was an extension of the gap between urban and rural areas. Capital residents felt justified in seeing all nonlocals, gentry and commoners alike, as “country bumpkins.”

In the framework of Gramscian hegemony, elite culture in the Song period continued to occupy a dominant position, and urban commoner culture occupied a subordinate position.

V. Conclusion

Compared to the preceding era, did Song-era urban culture show more continuity or change?

The rise of urban commoner culture was a new facet of Song cities, making them different from the cities of earlier periods. At the same time, as elites began living in cities more often and more regularly, political, economic, and cultural resources accumulated in the cities at an unprecedented rate. These all show innovation in Song-era urban culture which is on par with the era’s economic growth. Furthermore, in terms of basic cultural structures, there were not as many dramatic changes as in the economic realm, so there was more continuity than change. This was the case for both urban-rural disparity as well as the dominant position of elite gentry culture. There were no particular “turning points” in the Tang and Song dynasties.

Another way to look at this is that urban cultural developments in the Song period were primarily significant politically, because they consolidated the unprecedented power of the dynastic state by concentrating elite residences and cultural resources in cities. Important developments in state systems, especially how the civil service examination system gave the state a monopolistic position in culture, was an important factor leading to this change. Thus, it is possible to think of earlier Chinese culture as rural culture.¹⁰⁸ But from the Song period on, the center of culture shifted from rural to urban areas.

Notes

1. Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, Part II (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 164–78.
2. For a survey of common questions about ancient Chinese urban residents, see Wu Zhengqiang (吳鍾強), “Zhongguo gudai shimin shi yanjiu shuping” (Discussion of research on ancient Chinese urban history), *Yunnan shehui kexue* (Yunnan Social Science) 1 (2003): 96–101, 116.
3. Yang Wanli, *Song ci yu Songdai de chengshi shenghuo* (Song poetry and Song-era urban life) (Shanghai: Huadong shida chubanshe, 2006), 138.
4. Fang Zhiyuan, *Mingdai chengshi yu shimin wenxue* (Ming-era Cities and Urban Literature) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 12, 13.
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