

Tang and Song Dynasty in China

After the Han Dynasty collapsed in A.D. 220, no emperor was strong enough to hold China together. Over the next 350 years, more than 30 local dynasties rose and fell. Under the next two dynasties, the Tang and the Song, China experienced a prolonged golden age. It became the richest, most powerful, and most advanced country in the world.

Tang Rulers Create a Powerful Empire

The Tang Dynasty ruled for nearly 300 years (618–907). Under the Tang rulers, the empire expanded. Tang armies reconquered the northern and western lands that China had lost since the decline of the Han Dynasty. By 668, China had extended its influence over Korea as well. The ruler during the campaign in Korea was the **empress Wu Zhao** (woo jow). From about 660 on, she held the real power while weak emperors sat on the throne. Finally, in 690, Empress Wu assumed the title of emperor for herself—the only woman ever to do so in China.



Tang rulers further strengthened the central government of China. They expanded the network of roads and canals begun by the Sui. This helped to pull the empire together. They also promoted foreign trade and improvements in agriculture.

Scholar-Gentry

To manage their large empire, the Tang rulers needed to restore China's vast bureaucracy. They did this by reviving and expanding the **civil service examination** system begun by the Han Dynasty. The relatively few candidates who passed the tough exams became part of an elite group of **scholar-gentry**.

In theory, the exams were open to all men, even commoners. However, only the wealthy could afford the necessary years of education. Also, men with political connections could obtain high positions without taking the exams. Despite these flaws, the system created a remarkably intelligent and capable governing class in China. Before the Tang Dynasty, a few noble families dominated the country. As the examination system grew in importance, talent and education became more important than noble birth in winning power. As a result, many moderately wealthy families shared in China's government.

The Tang Lose Power

To meet the rising costs of government, Tang rulers imposed crushing taxes in the mid-700s. These brought hardship to the people but failed to cover the costs of military expansion and new building programs. Finally, in 907, Chinese rebels sacked and burned the Tang capital at Ch'ang-an and murdered the last Tang emperor who was just a child.

Song Dynasty Restores China

After the fall of the Tang Dynasty, rival warlords divided China into separate kingdoms. Then, in 960, an able general named Taizu reunited China and proclaimed himself the first Song (sung) emperor. The Song Dynasty, like the Tang, lasted about three centuries (960–1279). Although the Song ruled a smaller empire than either the Han or the Tang, China remained stable, powerful, and prosperous.

Song armies never regained the western lands lost after 751. Nor did they regain northern lands that had been lost to nomadic tribes during the Tang decline. For a time, Song emperors tried to buy peace with their northern enemies. They paid hefty annual tributes of silver, silk, and tea. This policy, however, ultimately failed to stop the threat from the north. In the early 1100s, a Manchurian people called the **Jurchen** conquered northern China and established the Jin Empire. The Jurchen forced the Song to retreat south across the Huang He. After 1127, the Song emperors ruled only southern China.

The Song rulers established a grand new capital at Hangzhou, a coastal city south of the Chang Jiang. Despite its military troubles, the dynasty of the Southern Song (1127–1279) saw rapid economic growth. The south had become the economic heartland of China. Merchants in southern cities grew rich from trade with Chinese in the north, nomads of Central Asia, and people of western Asia and Europe.

Agriculture

The rapid growth of China resulted in part from advances in farming. Farmers especially improved the cultivation of rice. In about the year 1000, China imported a new variety of fast-ripening rice from Vietnam. This allowed the farmers to harvest two rice crops each year rather than one. To make sure that farmers knew about this improved variety, Chinese officials distributed seedlings throughout the country. The agricultural improvements enabled China's farmers to produce more food. This was necessary to feed the rapidly expanding population in the cities.

An Era of Prosperity and Innovation

During the Tang and Song dynasties, China's population nearly doubled, soaring to 100 million. By the Song era, China had at least ten cities with a population of 1 million each. China had become the most populous country in the world. It also had become the most advanced.

Science and Technology

Artisans and scholars made important technological advances during the Tang and Song eras. Among the most important inventions were movable type and gunpowder. With movable type, a printer could arrange blocks of individual characters in a frame to make up a page for printing. Previously, printers had carved the words of a whole page into one large block. The development of gunpowder, in time, led to the creation of explosive weapons such as bombs, grenades, small rockets, and cannons. Other important inventions of this period include porcelain, the mechanical clock, paper money, and the use of the magnetic compass for sailing.

The 1000s to the 1200s was a rich period for Chinese mathematics. The Chinese made advances in arithmetic and algebra. Many mathematical ideas, such as using negative numbers, spread from China southward and westward.

Tang and Song Dynasty Inventions		
	Description	Impact
Porcelain Late 700s	Bone-hard, white ceramic made of a special clay and a mineral found only in China	Became a valuable export—so associated with Chinese culture that it is now called china; technology remained a Chinese secret for centuries
Mechanical clock 700s	Clock in which machinery (driven by running water) regulated the movements)	Early Chinese clocks short-lived; idea for mechanical clock carried by traders to medieval Europa
Printing: Block printing: 700s Movable type: 1040	Block printing: one block on which a whole page is cut Movable type: individual characters arranged in frames, used over and over	Printing technology spread to Korea and Japan; movable type also developed later in Europe
Explosive powder 800s	Made from mixture of saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal	First used for fireworks, then weapons; technology spread west within 300 years
Paper money 1020	Paper currency issued by Song government to replace cumbersome strings of metal cash used by merchants	Contributed to development of large-scale commercial economy in China
Magnetic compass (for navigation) 1100s	Floating magnetized needle that always points north-south; device had existed in China for centuries before it was adapted by sailors for use at sea	Helped China become a sea power; technology quickly spread west

Trade and Foreign Contacts

Under the Tang and Song emperors, foreign trade flourished. Tang imperial armies guarded the great Silk Roads, which linked China to the West. Eventually, however, China lost control over these routes during the long Tang decline. After this time, Chinese merchants relied increasingly on ocean trade. Chinese advances in sailing technology, including use of the magnetic compass, made it possible for sea trade to expand. Up and down China's long coastline, the largest port cities in the world bustled with international trade. Merchant ships carried trade goods to Korea and Japan. They sailed across the Indian Ocean to India, the Persian Gulf, and even the coast of Africa. Chinese merchants established trading colonies around Southeast Asia. Many foreign traders, mostly Arabs, resided in Chinese cities. Through trade and travel, Chinese culture spread throughout East Asia. One major cultural export was Buddhism. This religion spread from China to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. The exchange of goods and ideas was two-way. For example, foreign religions, including Islam and some Eastern sects of Christianity, spread to China and won followers.

Changes in Chinese Society

China's prosperity produced many social changes during the Tang and Song periods. Chinese society became increasingly mobile. People moved to the cities in growing numbers. The Chinese also experienced greater social mobility than ever before. The most important avenue for social advancement was the civil service system.

The Status of Women

Women had always been subservient to men in Chinese society. Their status further declined during the Tang and Song periods. This was especially true among the upper classes in cities. There a woman's work was deemed less important to the family's prosperity and status. Changing attitudes affected peasant families less, however. Peasant women worked in the fields and helped produce their family's food and income.

One sign of the changing status of women was the new custom of binding the feet of upper-class girls. When a girl was very young, her feet were bound tightly with cloth, which eventually broke the arch and curled all but the big toe under. This produced what was admiringly called a "lily-foot." Women with bound feet were crippled for life. To others in society, such a woman reflected the wealth and prestige of her husband, who could afford such a beautiful but impractical wife.