Chapter 17

Reunification and Renaissance in Chinese Civilization: The Era of the Tang and Song Dynasties

OUTLINE

I. Introduction

Chinese civilization in the postclassic period continued to build on tradition with relatively little innovation. In the aftermath of the fall of the Han dynasty, political division was commonplace during the Era of Division (220 C.E. to 589 C.E.). During the period of political disunity, the Confucian bureaucracy lost its primacy, aristocratic elites regained temporary dominance, and Buddhism entered China. Chinese centralization was restored, and Chinese traditional cultural elements revitalized under the Sui and Tang dynasties. The Tang Dynasty enabled the revival of Confucian institutions. This Tang revival was continued under the Song Dynasty.

II. Rebuilding the Imperial Edifice in the Sui-Tang Era

A. Introduction

The emergence of the Sui dynasty at the end of the sixth century C.E. signaled the return to dynastic imperialism. Wendi, a northern aristocrat, successfully overthrew the Zhou ruler of northern China and unified much of the region. With the support of neighboring nomadic tribes, Wendi defeated the Chen kingdom of southern China and completed the reunification of the Chinese core. Wendi established granaries as a reserve food supply and lowered taxes. The ever-ready granaries were used to feed the population in times of shortage and to suppress grain prices.

B. Sui Excesses and Collapse

Wendi’s son, Yangdi, murdered his father and seized the throne. Yangdi continued the process of political reunification and centralization, including the support for the reestablishment of the scholar-gentry. Yangdi’s grandiose plans for construction throughout the empire led to the internal dissatisfaction with his reign. Military failures in Korea and on the western frontier touched off rebellions in China. His own ministers assassinated Yangdi in 618 C.E., bringing the dynasty to an end.

C. The Emergence of the Tang and the Restoration of the Empire

One of Yangdi’s officials, Li Yuan, established the Tang dynasty. Li Yuan secured the Chinese frontiers, particularly against the Turks. The empire was extended into Tibet, Manchuria, and Vietnam. In 668 C.E., Korea was integrated into the empire under the tributary kingdom of Silla. Southern China was incorporated more fully into the Chinese imperium.
D. Rebuilding the Bureaucracy

Early Tang monarchs fully restored the imperial bureaucracy, which the Confucian scholar-gentry continued to dominate. The role of aristocratic families within the government declined. The imperial bureaucracy extended from the imperial palace to the most local administrative units. The imperial executive was divided into six departments. The Bureau of Censors constantly evaluated the work of civil servants at all levels of the administration.

E. The Growing Importance of the Examination System

With the patronage of the Tang and Song emperors, the numbers of scholar-gentry exceeded those of the Han era. The Ministry of Rites administered increasingly regularized examinations to students from government schools or respected teachers. Those who passed the most difficult exams were declared jinshi and granted an opportunity to achieve high office. Success in the examination procedure granted higher social status to the candidates. Although the examination procedure offered a chance for any man to enter the imperial bureaucracy, many obtained positions as a result of birth or family connections.

F. State and Religion in the Tang-Song Era

The revival of Confucianism under the Tang threatened the position of Buddhism in China. Both Mahayana and Chan versions of Buddhism had flourished during the Era of Division (also known as the period of the Six Dynasties). Early Tang rulers continued to patronize both Buddhist monasteries and Confucian schools. By the middle of the ninth century C.E., in part as a result of early Tang support, there were nearly 50,000 Buddhist monasteries in China.

G. The Anti-Buddhist Backlash

Both Daoists and Confucians attacked Buddhism as an alien importation into China. Confucian bureaucrats pointed out that the untaxed Buddhist monasteries represented a threat to the Chinese economy. By the eighth century C.E., emperors began to take steps to halt the growth of Buddhism and the alienation of land. Under the emperor Wuzong, actual suppression of Buddhist monasteries and the recovery of their lands began. Tang repression marked the end of Buddhist expansion in China, although the religion continued to survive as a major aspect of Chinese culture. Confucianism was restored to its central position within Chinese intellectual and religious life.

III. Tang Decline and the Rise of the Song

A. Introduction

Tang decline actually began in the eighth century C.E. as a result of disruptions within the imperial family. Several empresses attempted to interrupt the succession in favor of their relatives. Emperor Xuanzong put an end to Empress Wei’s attempted usurpation. Initially successful, Xuanzong’s reign marked the beginning of Tang decline. The emperor lost interest in governing and became increasingly infatuated with a concubine, Yang Guifei. When external disorders threatened to result in loss of empire, one of the emperor’s generals, An Lushan, led a rebellion that eventually failed. Although the revolution failed to unseat the Tang, later emperors were unable to restore the dynasty’s power. As central authority weakened, nomads on the frontiers gained control over large portions of China and generals were able to establish regional kingdoms.
B. The Founding of the Song Dynasty

In 907 C.E., the last Tang emperor was forced to resign. It was only in 960 C.E. that a military commander, Zhao Kuangyin, was able to restore control over all of China except for the region controlled by the northern Liao dynasty. Zhao established a new dynasty, the Song. Repeated failures to deal successfully with the Liao led to a series of humiliating treaties for the Song emperors.

C. Song Politics: Settling for Partial Restoration

The Song empire never matched the Tang dynasty in terms of extent of land controlled or military power. In the Song government, the scholar-gentry carefully restrained military growth to prevent internal insurrection. Song rulers promoted the interests of the Confucian bureaucracy. The examination system was further regularized. Passage of the exams was made easier, leading to a large and inefficient bureaucracy.

D. The Revival of Confucian Thought

Under the scholar-gentry, Confucianism was revived. The most prominent of the neo-Confucians was Zhu Xi. Neo-Confucianism became a powerful cultural force in China. It was hostile to foreign thought, making the bureaucracy less receptive to outside ideas and technologies. Emphasis on tradition, social hierarchy, and gender distinction served to ossify the Chinese social system.

E. Roots of Decline: Attempts at Reform

Military weakness on the frontiers led to external pressure on the Song empire. Tangut tribesmen created the rival kingdom of Xi Xia on the northern borders of China. They too were able to force the Song to pay tribute. Tribute payments to the Liao and Xi Xia, in addition to military costs, placed increasing burdens on the bureaucracy. In the long run, military performance suffered. In the 1070s and 1080s, Wang Anshi, chief minister of the Song emperor, attempted to enact reforms. Taxes were extended to the scholar-gentry as a means of improving the military.

F. Reaction and Disaster: The Flight to the South

When the emperor who had supported Wang’s reforms died, his successor preferred the traditional approaches to government. When Wang’s reforms were reversed, conditions worsened. In 1115, the Jurchens, northern nomads who had overthrown the Liao, successfully invaded the northern frontiers of the Song empire. The Song government was forced to flee southward to the Yangtze basin, where they established a new capital at Hangzhou. Following the flight, the dynasty was referred to as the southern Song. It existed as a rump state until its final demise in 1279.

IV. Tang and Song Prosperity: The Basis of a Golden Age

A. Introduction
A massive population increase of ethnic Chinese in the southern portions of China compelled the emperors from the Sui on to improve communications, most commonly through the construction of a series of canals linking the north China plain with the Yangtze River basin. The Grand Canal, constructed during the reign of Yangdi, both facilitated bureaucratic control of the south and increased economic exchange between the Yangtze and northern China. The construction of the Grand Canal accelerated the shift of population to the south.

B. A New Phase of Commercial Expansion

Tang conquests on the western frontier opened up trade routes and helped to establish connections between the civilized cores of Eurasia. China tended to export manufactured goods and import luxuries. Commercial shipping improved as the pace of trade quickened. Chinese junks were perhaps the finest commercial vessels in the world at this time. Market quarters in Chinese cities grew larger. These markets were organized by local guilds but subject to imperial control. Exchanges involving money and credit became common. The government began the introduction of paper money in the 11th century during the Tang era.

C. The World’s Most Splendid Cities

The expansion of commerce was accompanied by substantial urban growth under the Tang and Song dynasties. The Tang capital of Changan may have had a population of two million. Population growth and the increased pace of trade served to stimulate urban growth in southern China. As much as 10 percent of the Chinese population may have lived in urban centers.

D. Expanding Agrarian Production and Life in the Country

Emperors of the Tang and Song dynasties encouraged peasant migration to previously uncultivated regions of the empire. State-funded irrigation systems and canals made production and marketing possible in the newly settled areas. Improvements in agricultural technique, in addition to increased acreage, promoted higher yields. As the emperors broke up aristocratic land holdings in China, land was more equitably distributed among the free peasants. The scholar-gentry often replaced the regional aristocracy as the local elite. Extended family households for the gentry, typical of the later Han period, were also common during the Tang-Song era.

E. Family and Society in the Tang-Song Era

Confucian patterns of the ideal household became more prominent in the Tang-Song era. Extended households were only common among the elite. Male-dominated domestic hierarchies prevailed. The position of women improved in the early Tang period but steadily declined thereafter. Marriages were often the result of careful negotiations between families. Most marriage partners were approximately the same age, and it was not unusual for the age of marriage to be delayed. While women remained clearly subordinate, during the early Tang period, they may have enjoyed greater opportunities in a wide range of activities. Chinese wives retained some legal protection against arbitrary divorce or abandonment.

F. The Neo-Confucian Assertion of Male Dominance

Confucian thinkers advocated the restriction of women to the household and sexual restrictions for women of all ages. Men, however, enjoyed greater sexual latitude. Confucians drafted laws favoring males in inheritance and permitting arbitrary divorce. Women were excluded from the education system, and thus from public life. The practice of footbinding effectively secluded
women by literally removing their physical mobility. Footbinding became typical of all social classes.

G. A Glorious Age: Invention and Artistic Creativity

Major technological innovations and scientific discoveries were common in the Tang-Song era. Engineering feats included the construction of the vital canal system, dikes, dams, and bridges. All were critical to the commercial expansion and population movement typical of the period. The Chinese also developed gunpowder—first for amusement, then for military use. On a more domestic plane, chairs, tea-drinking, coal for fuel, and kites became common in Chinese households. Under the Song emperors, compasses were applied to sea navigation. The abacus was used for calculations, much as a modern computer. Bi Sheng invented movable type, making the production of books less onerous.

H. Scholarly Refinement and Artistic Accomplishment

Much of the literary and artistic accomplishment of the Tang-Song era was due to the revival of the Confucian scholar-gentry. The Confucian ideal required the educated man to appreciate the arts and to participate in their creation. The art and literature of the scholar-gentry concentrated on everyday life, rather than religious motifs. Li Bo, the most famous poet of the Tang era, wrote his most effective works concerning the natural world. Under the Song emperors, landscape painting reached its height in China. It was not unusual for paintings to be accompanied by poetry that complemented the subject matter.

V. Global Connections: China’s World Role

Although the Song retreated to the south, they were unable to avoid the 13th-century invasions of the Mongols. By 1279, China was in the hands of the pastoral nomads. Mongol rulers invoked the Yuan dynasty in China. The Tang-Song era restored Chinese centralization and the bureaucracy. Critical to both was the primacy of the Confucian scholar-gentry. It was under the Tang that southern China was fully incorporated into the empire. The emperors of the Tang and Song facilitated the commercial and agricultural expansion that typified China into the 18th century. Even though Chinese civilization, more than the other core regions, retained its traditional structure, much innovation and change took place within China in the Tang-Song era, and Chinese inventions spread throughout the world.
TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

- beginning of persecution of Buddhists
- founding of southern Song dynasty
- founding of Song dynasty
- founding of Sui dynasty
- founding of Tang dynasty
- Mongol conquest of southern Song

589 C.E.
623 C.E.
840s C.E.
960 C.E.
1127 C.E.
1279 C.E.

TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

gunpowder
Li Yuan, duke of Tang
Chan Buddhism
Yang Guifei
Zhu Xi
Xi Xia
junks
Hangzhou

Wendi
Ministry of Rites
Pure Land Buddhism
Xuanzong
Wang Anshi
Liao
flying money
footbinding

Yangdi
jinshi
Wuzong
Zhao Kuangyin
Jurchens
southern Song
Changan
Li Bo
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in the chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Huanghe River
Hangzhou
boundaries of Tang empire
Yangtze River
Hangzhou
Changan
Grand Canal
Loyang
boundaries of Song empire
boundaries of southern Song empire

How did the geographical alignment of major river systems in China affect the development of the empire? Why was so much effort placed in the creation of canal systems, roads, and bridges? How does the political development of China from Tang to Song to southern Song reflect the geographical significance of the river systems?
MAKING CONNECTIONS

*The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.*

1. How did the Sui dynasty rise to power? What caused its collapse?
2. In what way was the rise of the Tang dynasty associated with the Confucian renaissance?
3. What accounts for the decline of the Tang dynasty?
4. In what way was the Song empire weaker than the Tang?
5. What were the components of economic prosperity during the Tang-Song era?
6. Discuss the status of women during the Tang-Song era.
7. What was the overall impact of the Tang-Song era on Chinese history?
8. What innovations were made during the Tang-Song era?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

*The following questions test your ability to summarize the major conclusions of the chapter.*

1. In what sense was the renaissance of Confucianism a positive factor during the Tang-Song era? What negative effects did it have on Chinese civilization?
2. In what ways was the Tang-Song era innovative? In what ways did it remain within the traditional Chinese framework?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following statements concerning the situation at the end of the Qin-Han period is most accurate?
   a. Aristocratic families rapidly lost ground to the growing influence of the scholar-gentry.
   b. Non-Chinese nomads ruled much of China and a foreign religion, Buddhism, eclipsed Confucian teachings.
   c. The authority of the imperial government was rapidly reestablished under the Zhou dynasty.
   d. Despite the disappearance of imperial unity, the centralized bureaucracy continued to function as before in the capital of Beijing.

2. During the political crisis following the fall of the Han, the Great Wall
   a. became ineffective as a barrier to invasion, because it was held by many small kingdoms.
   b. was destroyed and replaced by the Great Canal as a defensive barrier to nomadic peoples.
   c. continued to serve as a barrier to the penetration of nomadic peoples.
   d. provided the materials from which many Buddhist temples were built.

3. What made possible the rapid revival of the empire under the Tang?
   a. the abandonment of Confucianism in favor of the more widely practiced Buddhism
   b. the brevity of the period of political dislocation
   c. the willingness of the Tang to abandon traditional approaches to government
   d. the preservation of the Confucian traditions that had been central to Chinese civilization

4. The support of which of the following groups was most critical to the reunification of China under the Sui?
   a. the nomadic warrior elite
   b. the ethnic Chinese aristocracy
   c. the Buddhist monasteries
   d. the Confucian scholar-gentry

5. What was the attitude of the Tang emperors toward the Confucian scholar-gentry?
   a. The Tang continued to support the growth of Buddhism at the expense of the scholar-gentry.
   b. The Tang supported the revival of the scholar-gentry, often at the expense of the aristocracy.
   c. The Tang feared the return of the scholar-gentry and continued to support the nomadic aristocracy of China.
   d. Confucianism waned during the Tang era and was only resuscitated under the Song.

6. The Ministry of Rites was responsible for the
   a. administration of the Confucian examination system.
   b. regulation of Buddhist monasteries.
   c. examination of local administration and trial of poor ministers.
   d. coronation of the emperors.
7. Which of the following statements concerning entry into the Chinese bureaucracy is most accurate?

a. Although a higher percentage of candidates received office through the examination system than during the Han dynasty, birth continued to be important.
b. Under the Tang, family connections ceased to be of significance.
c. All officials received positions under the Tang as a result of family position.
d. The examination system was eliminated during the Tang era, and only members of the imperial family served in the bureaucracy.

8. Which of the following statements concerning the Tang dynasty’s attitude toward Buddhism is most accurate?

a. Under the Tang, Buddhism became the official religion of the state.
b. Later Tang emperors actually resuscitated Buddhist monasteries, particularly in southern China.
c. Although Empress Wu attempted to have Buddhism recognized as the official religion of the state, later emperors persecuted Buddhists as economic threats to the state.
d. From the outset, Tang rulers persecuted Buddhists.

9. What accounts for the relative weakness of the Song empire?

a. It never succeeded in achieving the degree of centralization that had typified the Tang.
b. The scholar-gentry lost influence under the Song, and the bureaucracy ceased to function.
c. The lack of agricultural productivity produced a general failure of the Chinese economy.
d. The military was subordinated to the scholar-gentry.

10. Which of the following statements concerning the economy in China during the Tang-Song era is NOT accurate?

a. The level of urbanization in China increased.
b. The Chinese transportation and communication network deteriorated.
c. The sophistication of Chinese commercial contracts and credit systems increased.
d. The amount of land under cultivation and the yield of Chinese agriculture increased.