4.11: The Tang Dynasty and the Emergence of East Asia

4.11.1 The Early Tang Dynasty

The Sui dynasty did not last long (581 – 618 CE) and only had two emperors: Emperor Wen and Emperor Yang. Both envisioned recapturing the glory of the Han Dynasty; hence, they engaged in many construction projects and military campaigns. Immense capital cities were built at Chang’an and Luoyang and, in order to supply them with sufficient grain, a canal system was created to connect the Yellow River to the Yangzi River. These emperors also believed that Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula were properly Chinese territory; therefore, they repeatedly launched enormous military expeditions to attack the most powerful Korean kingdom located there. Emperor Yang’s ground and naval campaign in 611 CE, for instance, required enlisting over one million combat troops and hundreds of thousands of additional men just to transport supplies. All of these campaigns met defeat.
What is more, that very same year, the Yellow River flooded, and rebellions broke out along it. Natural disasters combined with these emperors’ heavy demands led to widespread unrest, and the Sui Dynasty unraveled. Bandit leaders, local officials, and local elites took matters into their own hands by organizing their communities for self-defense. After the emperor took flight to the south, General Li Yuan [lee you-an], who was stationed along the northern border to defend against the steppe nomads, marched into Chang’an, where he declared the founding of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE). Emperor Yang’s life came to an end when he was assassinated by his own men.

Like the Han Dynasty, the Tang was one of the most dynamic and long-lived dynasties in China’s history. That dynamism was made possible by how effectively early Tang rulers consolidated the empire internally and then engaged
in military expansion (see Map 4.16). Consolidating the empire required first reestablishing solid political, economic, and military institutions. Fortunately, Tang rulers could draw upon nearly a millennium of historical experience going back to the Qin Dynasty, when a centralized monarchical political system governing all of China was first established. At the capital, Tang emperors had at their disposal sophisticated ministries that in turn oversaw a vast provincial and county administrative system. To serve in high office, a man usually had to come from one of a small number of highly prestigious families with illustrious family pedigrees. These families took pride in their superior education and manners and maintained their exclusiveness by intermarrying. Thus, the Tang Dynasty was dominated by an aristocracy. Nevertheless, some men from a larger pool of locally prominent families entered the civil service based on merit, by graduating from colleges located at the capitals or succeeding at civil service examinations (see Figure 4.1).

Map 4.1: The Tang Dynasty at its height in 700 CE
Author: Ian Mladjov
Source: Original Work License: © Ian Mladjov. Used with permission

In earlier times, empires rarely flourished without a solid agricultural foundation and revenue base. To ensure sufficient grain and labor service, Tang rulers believed that land must be equitably distributed to farmers. So they implemented the equal fields system. In this system, each family was to receive an equal plot of land (adjusted for terrain and productivity) for life, as well as a smaller plot as a permanent possession. The former was for growing grain, and the latter, for hemp and mulberry trees. In exchange, each farming family had to pay a tax in grain and cloth and provide twenty days of labor service. To make this work, officials carried out censuses and land surveys and periodically redistributed land. Of course, this system was quite onerous and difficult to carry out in practice, but it did function well for about a century.

The Tang also flourished because special attention was paid to molding an orderly society through the promulgation of sophisticated law codes. From ancient times, in China, law was viewed as an expression of the will of the emperor, whose pronouncements defined illegal conduct and proper punishments for it. Also, law was critically important to maintaining order, not only in the social but also the natural world. Crimes committed both by subjects and the state could disturb the cosmos and lead to natural disasters. Thus, law maintained social and cosmic harmony. That is why codes were so important.

The Tang Code contains twelve sections, one addressing general principles, and the rest, administrative and penal law.
Most of the statutes define criminal offenses and the punishment for each of them. The magistrate’s role, then, was primarily to investigate and determine precisely the nature of the crime so that the proper punishment could be assigned. In Tang times, people believed that the severity of punishment should be based on the relative status of the perpetrator and victim. For instance, a crime committed against a family member was more serious than one committed against a stranger, and a crime committed against an official was more serious than one committed against a commoner. Within families, too, the status of members mattered. Whereas a father could flog his son without consequence, a son faced capital punishment should he beat his father. In brief, Tang laws encoded the status hierarchy and values of imperial Confucianism. The most serious crimes were those committed against the emperor, country, senior family members, and social superiors. Nevertheless, those of higher status were held accountable for their actions; a magistrate who failed to justly administer the law faced punishment. In fact, Tang monarchs were so concerned that justice might fail to be upheld that they often proclaimed amnesties, nullifying the sentences of all but the worst criminals.

![Relief of soldier and horse from the tomb of Emperor Taizong](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Map%3A_World_History_-_Cultures%2C_States%2C_and_S...)  
*Source: Wikimedia Commons License: Public Domain*

Lastly, Tang rulers established a formidable military. At first, the army consisted of six hundred militias stationed at headquarters located near the capitals and throughout the countryside, a large standing army located at the capital, and frontier garrisons strung out along the northern border. These forces were largely maintained by drawing men from a military population. That is, Tang rulers relied on a large number of families that maintained military traditions and provided sons for periods of service in lieu of paying taxes and providing labor service. As necessary, these men could be assembled into expeditionary armies consisting of heavy cavalry and marching infantry (see Figure 2).

Having laid these solid institutional foundations, the Tang Dynasty followed with military expansion. Offensives waged to the north divided up and subdued powerful Turkic khans and their confederations of steppe nomads. Tang imperial power was then projected deep into Central Asia, Manchuria, and northern Vietnam, making China the most dominant country in East Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries.
4.11.2: The Emergence of East Asia: The Case of Korea and Japan

In the introduction, we defined East Asia in both geographic and cultural terms, highlighting Korea and Japan. East Asia first emerges as an identifiable cultural sphere during the Tang Dynasty. By Tang times, kingdoms had already emerged on the Korean Peninsula and the main islands of Japan, but it was during the Tang that ruling elites in both of these states made extensive efforts to adapt components of the Chinese political, legal, and writing system, as well as of Chinese culture, to their own societies.

4.11.2.1: Korea’s History from the Fourth Century BCE to 900 CE

We have already learned about China’s history from the Han Dynasty (203 BCE – 220 CE) through the Period of Division (220 – 589 CE) and into the Tang Dynasty. During those same centuries, the first states formed on the Korean Peninsula, and historians generally organize that time into three periods: the early historical period (c. 400 BCE – 313 CE), **Three Kingdoms Period** (313 – 668 CE), and the **Silla Dynasty** (668 – 892 CE).

By the fourth century BCE, the peninsula had already long been populated by peoples who had migrated there from northeast Asia and settled into agricultural villages. These peoples were not originally speakers of Chinese; rather, they spoke languages belonging to the Altaic language family, which possibly includes Korean. This point is important because people unfamiliar with East Asia sometimes think that the languages spoken by Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese are closely related, when in fact they are quite different. However, it is also important to note that in ancient times throughout East Asia, the Chinese writing system was adopted by literate elites for the purpose of writing their spoken languages. Only over time were native scripts developed out of it.

The political picture for the early historical period is complex because the peninsula and neighboring Manchuria looked like a mosaic of chiefdom confederations and petty kingdoms, each governed by elite families living in walled towns. These polities first took shape during these centuries. By the early centuries CE, three kingdoms extending from Manchuria to where Seoul lies today (the capital of South Korea) covered the northern half, while the southern half was divided up by confederations of chiefdoms. The most powerful kingdom was **Goguryeo** [Ko-gooryo] c. 37 BCE – 668 CE).

The Korean peninsula lies very close to China, with only Manchuria and the Yellow Sea dividing the two states. Long before Korea’s early historical period, rulers of Chinese states had taken an interest in controlling both trade routes leading into this region and the peoples living there. In 108 BCE, during the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu even sent expeditions into Manchuria and Korea. He opened up a corridor leading from China through Manchuria into the peninsula and established four commanderies to control the area (see Map `\(\PageIndex{2}\)`).
Map \(\PageIndex{2}\): A map of Korea during the early historical period | After 108 BCE, Han China established commanderies in Korea. Lelang was one of them and was located where the capital of North Korea—Pyongyang—is today. The most powerful neighboring kingdom was Goguryeo. Mahan and Jinhan were southern tribal confederations.

Author: User “Historiographer” Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

But Han China by no means colonized the entirety of this northeastern region. Kingdoms and tribal confederations remained to the east and south, most notably Goguryeo. After the Han Dynasty collapsed, northern China was in turmoil and unable to control these frontiers. In 313 CE, King Mich’on of Goguryeo, in an effort to expand the size of his kingdom, seized Chinese territory. That date marked the beginning of a new stage in Korean history referred to as the Three Kingdoms period (313 CE – 668 CE).

The Three Kingdoms were Goguryeo, Baekje [peck-jay], and Silla [she-la] (see Map \(\PageIndex{3}\)). Like Goguryeo, the early histories of Baekje and Silla date back to the early historical period, during which time they were consolidated from southern chiefdom confederations (see Map \(\PageIndex{2}\)). Each kingdom was dominated by a warrior elite composed of the ruling and aristocratic clans. For most of the Three Kingdoms period, Goguryeo was the dominant military and political power, spreading its control over much of Manchuria and northern Korea. During the fifth century CE, its capital was moved to Pyongyang, site of a former Han Commandery. This move made this city—the capital of North Korea today—important to Korean history. Murals on Goguryeo tombs located in the vicinity show what this kingdom’s elites valued (see Figure \(\PageIndex{3}\)). They are depicted as heavily-clad warriors fighting on horseback with bows and arrows, and swords and halberds. A cosmos depicts guardian spirits and nature gods belonging to a native Korean tradition of shamanism.

Given the geopolitical position of Korea, it is not surprising that all three kingdoms highly valued martial traditions. First
of all, they fought with each other for control over territory and resources on the peninsula. Secondly, positioned as Korea is between China and Japan, those states often intruded upon peninsular conflicts. For all these reasons, Silla, Baekje, and Goguryeo monarchs readily borrowed ideas from China that might benefit their realms and give them more power. That borrowing included introducing elements of Chinese political institutions and legal traditions, as well as Buddhism and Confucianism. All of these kingdoms sent students to study in China and patronized Chinese Buddhist monks and learned Confucians who visited their courts. These visitors were knowledgeable in many fields of learning, including science and technology. As we have seen, Buddhism not only promised salvation but also magical powers of healing, and rulers could style themselves as living Buddhas. That is why they sponsored the building of temples and formation of a Buddhist religious order. Confucianism, on the other hand, provided models of civility, courtly etiquette, and bureaucratic governance for ruling elites, and rulers could style themselves in Chinese fashion as sovereign monarchs. Hence, Confucian academies were established to train students of aristocratic families for service.

*Map* \((\PageIndex{3})\): *Map of the Three Kingdoms Period in Korea, c. sixth century CE* Author: User “Chris 73”

Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0
Towards the end of the Three Kingdoms period, however, it was not the great northeastern power of Goguryeo that unified the Korean Peninsula. This achievement went to the Silla Dynasty and did so for two reasons. First, Silla rulers were particularly effective in using Chinese political practices to centralize their power. They adopted Chinese-style titles, central government agencies, and law codes; made Buddhism a state-sponsored religion; and established an academy for studying Chinese classical texts, law, medicine, and astronomy. Second, Silla monarchs built alliances with Tang emperors that worked to their advantage. As we have seen, the Chinese Sui Dynasty fell because Sui rulers suffered terrible defeats at the hands of the armies of the great kingdom of Goguryeo. Tang Dynasty rulers continued the invasions but also failed. For that reason, they were open to building alliances with Silla and combining their military forces. Together, they defeated Baekje in 660 and Goguryeo in 668. Much to the Tang emperor’s surprise, Silla then drove out Tang forces, preventing any efforts on China’s part to control the Korean peninsula. The Silla Dynasty (668 – 892 CE) thus became the first one to unify the peninsula (see Map \(\PageIndex{1}\)).

In sum, Goguryeo and the Silla Dynasty were, in succession, two of the most powerful kingdoms in ancient Korea. Their histories were deeply shaped by the intrusion of Chinese states into the region. For that reason, they can be categorized as instances of secondary state formation. Throughout history, some states developed and centralized their control over a territory largely in response to the impact of a powerful neighboring state that had developed before them. As they did so, they also borrowed ideas for how states should be organized from that neighboring power, even as native traditions and language are retained.

4.11.2.2 Japan from the Yayoi Period to the Seventh Century

Those who follow the history of World War II might know that, during those years, the highest authority in Japan was Emperor Hirohito. Even today, Japan has an emperor and empress, although they no longer have any formal political power in this now democratic nation and rather serve in a cultural and symbolic role. Interestingly, the Japanese monarchy is the oldest continuous one in the history of the world and traces its beginnings to at least the fourth century CE.

Japan’s early historical development presents unique characteristics because of its geography. The island archipelago was close enough to Chinese and Korean states to borrow from them and benefit from migration and yet far enough away so that invasions were never a sudden impetus to change (see Map 4.5.1). Therefore, although we can also speak of secondary state formation for Japan, that is largely because of the conscious choice on the part of ruling elites to...
But even during the prehistoric period, geography impacted Japan’s development in other ways. The first evidence for Paleolithic hunter-gatherers dates back to c. 30,000 BCE. In the resource-rich environments of mountainous and forested Japan, small bands of mobile, multi-generational families were able to thrive on game, shellfish, fruits, tubers, and nuts. In fact, foraging strategies were so successful that even when sedentary village communities first formed, they thrived without agriculture. This period of time is known as the Jōmon [joe-moan] Period (c. 11,000 – 500 BCE). The archaeological record reveals that, up and down the archipelago, foragers had settled into permanent base camps. These were hamlet communities made up of pit dwellings for homes and raised floor structures for holding community functions. Jōmon, meaning “cord-marked,” refers to the type of pottery they used (see Figure \(\PageIndex{4}\)). This case is one of the few in prehistory where a culture invented and used pottery long before farming.

**Figure \(\PageIndex{4}\):** An earthenware “flame pot” from the Jōmon Period, dating to c. 3000 BCE

Author: User “Morio” Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

**Figure \(\PageIndex{5}\):** A reconstruction of Yoshinogari, a Yayoi Period chiefdom

It was located in northwest Kyushu and flourished c. first century BCE. Author: User “Sanjo” Source: Wikimedia Commons License: Public Domain
Farming began during the next stage in Japanese history—the **Yayoi** Period (500 BCE – 250 CE). The label refers to a site near Tokyo where artifacts were discovered evidencing new developments in Japan. Most importantly, rice-paddy agriculture and dry-field farming were introduced, techniques that supported population growth and the formation of more and larger village communities. The impetus to agriculture was likely earlier experimentation with simple horticulture, a warming climate, and migration from mainland East Asia. Those migrants also brought knowledge of iron- and bronze-working; hence, tools and weapons fashioned from metals became widespread.

Japan, but, during the latter half, they evolved into something more substantial. Archaeologists have excavated the foundations of large settlements surrounded by moats and embankments (see Figure \(\PageIndex{5}\)). These fortified bastions were home to up to two thousand residents and contained ceremonial centers, differentiated residences and burials, watchtowers, and palisades. Some burials contained skeletons evidencing wounds or dismemberment. Combining this evidence with clues from contemporary Chinese historical sources, specialists have concluded that, by the end of the Yayoi period, powerful chiefdoms had emerged in Japan, and they were allying with and battling each other to control trade routes and territory.

![Map depicting extent of the Yamato Kingdom c. seventh century CE](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Map%3A_World_History_-_Cultures%2C_States%2C_and_S…)

In retrospect, the late Yayoi Period clearly was a transitional phase leading to the formation of the first kingdom in Japanese history. That happened in the next stage, the **Mounded Tomb Period** (250 – 600 CE). Among the warring chiefdoms, one emerged as dominant. Hailing from the Kinai region of Japan (see Map 4.5.1), Yamato chieftains expanded their power through force and diplomacy, and eventually forged a kingdom (see Map \(\PageIndex{4}\)). The principal evidence for their growing power are the massive, keyhole-shaped tombs giving this period its name (see Figure \(\PageIndex{6}\)). In fact, nearly ten thousand tombs have been identified, but the largest ones belong to the Yamato rulers, the ancestors to the long-lived Japanese imperial line. Although the large royal ones have not yet been excavated, smaller tombs containing an abundance of horse trappings, iron weapons, and armor provide evidence that mounted warfare was introduced from the Korean peninsula, perhaps accelerating the pace of state formation.
As they conquered more territory, Yamato rulers devised strategies for strengthening their monarchy and incorporating leaders of the many powerful chieftain clans dominating local areas up and down the archipelago. For service at their royal court or as provincial officials, they granted them office and noble titles, thereby building a coalition of great clans. In addition, in the sixth century CE, Yamato rulers began to study the great Sui (581 – 618 CE) and Tang (618 – 907 CE) Dynasties in China and to introduce reforms based upon what they learned. The next two centuries in Japanese history, the **Asuka-Nara Period (c. 600 – 800 CE)**, was defined by these Chinese-style reforms, although the name itself refers to the successive locations of the royal court.
the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, progenitor of the Japanese imperial line. According to legends, it contains the Amaterasu’s sacred mirror, which was handed down to the first emperors. The shrine has been rebuilt many times.

Author: User “N yotarou”  Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 4.0

Prince Shōtoku [showtoe-coo] (573 – 621 CE) and Empress Suiko [sue-ee-ko] (r. 593 – 628) led the way by sending several embassies to the capital of China and then remodeling their capital and court. In his “Seventeen Article Constitution,” Shōtoku called for the introduction of Buddhism and Confucian ethics. His articles, for instance, stated that the sovereign’s relation to subjects was like Heaven’s to the earth, and his or her commands should thus be obeyed. Empress Suiko adopted the title “Heavenly Monarch,” thus shifting the character of the monarch from a martial king to a Chinese-style sovereign. In brief, they introduced a Confucian-oriented, emperor-centered state ideology that clearly established a hierarchical system of ranks and norms for court etiquette. For the remainder of this period, other reformers and monarchs would only deepen the reforms by introducing Chinese-style law codes. These laws reshaped the government and land according to a bureaucratic and administrative structure very similar to that of Tang China.

Nevertheless, distinctly Japanese patterns remained throughout this time. First, the royally-recognized great clans of earlier times evolved into an aristocratic class that dominated the court and the upper ranks of officialdom. Secondly, in addition to establishing a council to manage the growing numbers of Buddhist temples and clerics, the court established a Council of Kami Affairs to oversee native Japanese religious traditions. That tradition is known as Shinto [sheen-toe], or the “Way of the Kami.”

Shinto began in prehistoric times as reverence for kami—spirits and deities associated with natural phenomena, such as the sun or moon. Really, anything mysterious might become a kami, including a mountain, charismatic ruler, or serpent. During the Yayoi and Mounded Tomb Periods, these kami became the subjects of myths that explained their origins and powers, and shrines were erected to house sacred objects symbolizing them. By properly purifying oneself, conducting rituals, and praying to a kami, an individual could avert a disaster and ensure his own or the community’s well-being. Also, clans would claim important kami as their guardian spirits and fashion stories about how their ancestors descended from them. In fact, Yamato monarchs claimed they were descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, and constructed a shrine at Ise [ee-say] to house her kami body (see Figure `PageIndex(7)`). Finally, during the Asuka-Nara Period, the Yamato court developed a centralized system to keep track of and regulate Shinto shrines throughout its realm, thereby harnessing higher powers to support its claim to rule the land.

In sum, like Korea, Japan’s history was highly impacted by developments in China, even as native languages, traditions, and creative adaptation remained foundational to the unique identities of each. However, Korea was far more subject to the intrusion of Chinese states in the Korean Peninsula, something that did not happen in Japan. Rather, as the first state formed on the archipelago, ruling elites looked to China for ideas as to how the kingdom might be governed. In the course of doing so, they also introduced the great tradition of Mahayana Buddhism.

4.11.3: The Decline and Collapse of the Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty reached its zenith during the eighth century under the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712 – 756 CE), but then went into decline. At first, the problem was overexpansion. Tang rulers had expanded the empire’s boundaries in nearly every direction, including far into Central Asia. To defend the northwestern border, a system of regional frontier commands was established, each with its own commander and professional army. The earlier system of militias and
garrisons manned by hereditary military families declined.

This decline turned out to be dangerous. After one general, An Lushan, butted heads with the emperor’s chief minister, he marched his frontier army of 100,000 soldiers south to the capital, forcing the court to flee. An was eventually executed by his own men, and a Tang emperor returned to the throne, but the turmoil unleashed by this rebellion rendered the Tang Dynasty ineffective. During the ensuing turmoil, the empire shrank and Central Asia was lost (see Map $\PageIndex{5}$). Also, both Tang supporters and pardoned rebels were granted military governorships, giving them control over provinces. Many then chose not to remit tax revenue to the central government, appointed their own subordinates, and designated their successors. They had, in effect, become warlords with their own loyal, regional bases.

Furthermore, as the political system decentralized in this way, the system of equitable land distribution collapsed. Thus, much like during the end of the Han Dynasty, landlords used their power and influence to build great estates. Large numbers of farmers ended up without land and survived only by joining bandit gangs or the ranks of warlord armies. When droughts and famine hit in the late ninth century, a massive rebellion broke out. The last Tang emperor was turned into a puppet by military commanders and eventually, in 907 CE, abdicated. China then entered yet another period of division until the Song Dynasty restored order in 960 CE.

Map $\PageIndex{5}$: The Tang Dynasty in 800 CE | Note how Tang territory had shrunk after the An Lushan rebellion. Central Asia was now controlled by Tibetan and Turkic Uighur Empires Author: Ian Mladjov Source: Original Work License: © Ian Mladjov. Used with permission.