Section 1: The Tang Dynasty

Rise of the Tang Dynasty

The Tang dynasty, generally regarded as a golden age of Chinese culture, was founded by the Li family, who seized power during the decline and collapse of the Sui dynasty.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the events that led to the Tang dynasty coming to power

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The short-lived Sui dynasty had profound effects on the development of China as an imperial power, consolidating the ethnic and cultural character of the people and uniting the Northern and Southern dynasties.

- After a series of costly and disastrous military campaigns against one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, the Sui dynasty disintegrated under a sequence of popular revolts culminating in the assassination of Emperor Yang by his ministers in 618.

- The Tang dynasty was founded by the Li Yuan, a duke who seized power during the decline and collapse of the Sui dynasty.

- For the next hundred years, several Tang leaders ruled, including a woman, Empress Wu, whose rise to power was achieved through cruel and calculating tactics but made room for the prominent role of women in the imperial court.

- During the forty-four-year reign of Emperor Xuanzong, who came to power in 712, the Tang dynasty reached its height, a golden age with low economic inflation and a toned down lifestyle for the imperial court.
Key Terms

- **sinicization**: A process whereby non-Han Chinese societies come under the influence of Han Chinese state and society.
- **Han Chinese**: An ethnic group native to East Asia; the Chinese peoples especially as distinguished from non-Chinese (such as Mongolian) people in the population.
- **Confucianism**: A tradition, philosophy, religion, humanistic, or rationalistic religion, a way of governing, and a way of life based on the teachings of Confucius.

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**Overview of the Tang Dynasty**

The Tang dynasty (Chinese: 唐朝) was an imperial dynasty of China preceded by the Sui dynasty and followed by the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. It is generally regarded as a high point in Chinese civilization and a golden age of cosmopolitan culture. Its territory, acquired through the military campaigns of its early rulers, rivaled that of the Han dynasty, and the Tang capital at Chang'an (present-day Xi'an) was the most populous city in the world.

With its large population base, the dynasty was able to raise professional and conscripted armies of hundreds of thousands of troops to contend with nomadic powers in dominating Inner Asia and the lucrative trade routes along the Silk Road. Various kingdoms and states paid tribute to the Tang court, and the Tang also conquered or subdued several regions that it indirectly controlled through a protectorate system. Besides political hegemony, the Tang also exerted a powerful cultural influence over neighboring states such as those in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

The Tang dynasty was largely a period of progress and stability in the first half of its rule, followed by the An Lushan Rebellion and the decline of central authority in the later half of the dynasty. Like the previous Sui dynasty, the Tang dynasty maintained a civil service system by recruiting scholar-officials through standardized examinations and recommendations to office. Chinese culture flourished and further matured during the Tang era; it is considered the greatest age for Chinese poetry. Two of China’s most famous poets, Li Bai and Du Fu, belonged to this age, as did many famous painters such as Han Gan, Zhang Xuan, and Zhou Fang. There were many notable innovations during the Tang, including the development of woodblock printing.
Decline of the Sui Dynasty and the Founding of the Tang

Emperor Yang of Sui: Portrait painting of Emperor Yang of Sui, the last emperor of the Sui dynasty, commissioned in 643 by Taizong, painted by Yan Liben (600–673).

The Sui dynasty was a short-lived imperial dynasty of pivotal significance. The Sui unified the Northern and Southern dynasties and reinstalled the rule of ethnic Han Chinese in the entirety of China proper, as well as sinicized former nomadic ethnic minorities within its territory. By the middle of the Sui dynasty, the newly unified empire entered an age of prosperity with vast agricultural surplus that supported acute population growth. Wide-ranging reforms and construction projects were undertaken to consolidate the newly unified state, with long-lasting influences beyond the short dynastic reign. The Sui dynasty was succeeded by the Tang dynasty, which largely inherited its foundation.

After a series of costly and disastrous military campaigns against Goguryeo, one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea, ended in defeat by 614, the Sui dynasty disintegrated under a sequence of popular revolts culminating in the assassination of Emperor Yang by his ministers in 618. The dynasty, which lasted only thirty-seven years, was undermined by ambitious wars and construction projects, which overstretched its resources. Particularly under Emperor
Yang, heavy taxation and compulsory labor duties eventually induced widespread revolts and a brief civil war following the fall of the dynasty.

After Yang’s death, the Sui dynasty’s territories were carved into a handful of short-lived states by its officials, generals, and agrarian rebel leaders, and the process of elimination and annexation that followed ultimately culminated in the consolidation of the Tang dynasty by the former Sui general Li Yuan.

Li Yuan was duke of Tang and governor of Taiyuan during the Sui dynasty’s collapse. He had prestige and military experience, and was a first cousin of Emperor Yang of Sui. Li Yuan rose in rebellion in 617, along with his son and his equally militant daughter Princess Pingyang, who raised and commanded her own troops. In the winter of 617, Li Yuan occupied Chang’an, relegated Emperor Yang to the position of Taishang Huang or retired emperor, and acted as regent to the puppet child-emperor, Emperor Gong of Sui. On the news of Emperor Yang’s murder by General Yuwen Huaji on June 18, 618, Li Yuan declared himself the emperor of a new dynasty, the Tang.

**Early Tang Dynasty and the Rise to Prosperity**

Li Yuan, known as Emperor Gaozu of Tang, ruled until 626, when he was forcefully deposed by his son Li Shimin, the Prince of Qin, conventionally known by his temple name Taizong. Although killing two brothers and deposing his father contradicted the Confucian value of filial piety, Taizong showed himself to be a capable leader who listened to the advice of the wisest members of his council.

**Emperor Taizong:** Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649) receives Gar Tongtsen Yülsung, ambassador of Tibet, at his court; painted in 641 by Yan Liben (600–673).

For the next hundred years, several Tang leaders ruled, including a woman, Empress Wu, whose rise to power was achieved through cruel and calculating tactics but made room for the prominent role of women in the imperial court. Wu’s rule was actually a short break in the Tang dynasty, as she established the short-lived Zhou dynasty; the Tang dynasty was restored after her rule. In 706 the wife of Emperor Zhongzong of Tang, Empress Wei, persuaded her husband to staff government offices with his sister and her daughters, and in 709 requested that he grant women the right to bequeath hereditary privileges to their sons (which before was a male right only). Just as Emperor Zhongzong was dominated by Empress Wei, so too was Ruizong dominated by Princess Taiping. This was finally ended when Princess Taiping’s coup failed in 712 (she later hanged herself in 713) and Emperor Ruizong abdicated to Emperor Xuanzong.

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During the forty-four-year reign of Emperor Xuanzong, the Tang dynasty reached its height, a golden age with low economic inflation and a toned down lifestyle for the imperial court. Seen as a progressive and benevolent ruler, Xuanzong even abolished the death penalty in the year 747; all executions had to be approved beforehand by the emperor himself. Xuanzong bowed to the consensus of his ministers on policy decisions and made efforts to staff government ministries fairly with different political factions. His staunch Confucian chancellor Zhang Jiuling (673–740) worked to reduce deflation and increase the money supply by upholding the use of private coinage, while his aristocratic and technocratic successor, Li Linfu (d. 753) favored government monopoly over the issuance of coinage. After 737 most of Xuanzong’s confidence rested in his long-standing chancellor Li Linfu, who championed a more aggressive foreign policy employing non-Chinese generals. This policy ultimately created the conditions for a massive rebellion against Xuanzong.

Trade Under the Tang Dynasty

By reopening the Silk Road and increasing maritime trade by sail at sea, the Tang were able to gain many new technologies, cultural practices, rare luxuries, and foreign items.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe how the Tang dynasty prospered from trade

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• Although the Silk Road from China to the West was initially formulated during the reign of Emperor Wu of Han (141–87 BCE), it was reopened by the Tang Empire in 639 CE when Hou Junji conquered the West, and remained open for almost four decades.

• The Silk Road was the most important pre-modern Eurasian trade route, opening long-distance political and economic relations between the civilizations.

• Though silk was certainly the major trade item exported from China, many other goods were traded, and religions, syncretic philosophies, and various technologies, as well as diseases, also spread along the Silk Road.

• In addition to economic trade, the Silk Road served as a means of carrying out cultural trade among the civilizations along its network.

• Chinese maritime presence increased dramatically during the Tang period, giving rise to large seaports and trade relations with Africa, India, and beyond.

Key Terms

• Pax Sinica: A period of peace in East Asia, maintained by Chinese hegemony, during which long-distance trade flourished, cities ballooned, standards of living rose, and the population surged.

• Silk Road: An ancient network of trade routes that for centuries were central to cultural interaction through regions of the Asian continent connecting the West and East from China to the Mediterranean Sea.
Overview

Through use of land trade along the Silk Road and maritime trade by sail at sea, the Tang were able to gain many new technologies, cultural practices, rare luxuries, and contemporary items. From the Middle East, India, Persia, and Central Asia the Tang were able to acquire new ideas in fashion, new types of ceramics, and improved silver-smithing. The Chinese also gradually adopted the foreign concept of stools and chairs as seating, whereas before they had always sat on mats placed on the floor. In the Middle East, the Islamic world coveted and purchased in bulk Chinese goods such as silks, lacquerwares, and porcelain wares. Songs, dances, and musical instruments from foreign regions became popular in China during the Tang dynasty. These musical instruments included oboes, flutes, and small lacquered drums from Kucha in the Tarim Basin, and percussion instruments from India such as cymbals. At the court there were nine musical ensembles (expanded from seven in the Sui dynasty) representing music from throughout Asia.

There was great contact with and interest in India as a hub for Buddhist knowledge, with famous travelers such as Xuanzang (d. 664) visiting the South Asian subcontinent. After a seventeen-year-long trip, Xuanzang managed to bring back valuable Sanskrit texts to be translated into Chinese. There was also a Turkic–Chinese dictionary available for serious scholars and students, and Turkic folksongs gave inspiration to some Chinese poetry. In the interior of China, trade was facilitated by the Grand Canal and the Tang government’s rationalization of the greater canal system that reduced costs of transporting grain and other commodities. The state also managed roughly 32,100 km (19,900 mi) of postal service routes by horse and boat.

The Silk Road

Although the Silk Road from China to the West was initially formulated during the reign of Emperor Wu (141–87 BCE) during the Han dynasty, it was reopened by the Tang in 639 CE when Hou Junji (d. 643) conquered the West, and remained open for almost four decades. It was closed after the Tibetans captured it in 678, but in 699, during Empress Wu’s period, it reopened when the Tang reconquered the Four Garrisons of Anxi originally installed in 640, once again connecting China directly to the West for land-based trade.

The Silk Road was the most important pre-modern Eurasian trade route. The Tang dynasty established a second Pax Sinica and the Silk Road reached its golden age, whereby Persian and Sogdian merchants benefited from the commerce between East and West. At the same time, the Chinese empire welcomed foreign cultures, making it very cosmopolitan in its urban centers.

The Tang captured the vital route through the Gilgit Valley from Tibet in 722, lost it to the Tibetans in 737, and regained it under the command of the Goguryeo-Korean General Gao Xianzhi. When the An Lushan Rebellion ended in 763, the Tang Empire had once again lost control over its western lands, as the Tibetan Empire largely cut off China’s direct access to the Silk Road. An internal rebellion in 848 ousted the Tibetan rulers, and Tang China regained its northwestern prefectures from Tibet in 851. These lands contained crucial grazing areas and pastures for raising horses that the Tang dynasty desperately needed.

Despite the many western travelers coming into China to live and trade, many travelers, mainly religious monks, recorded the strict border laws that the Chinese enforced. As the monk Xuanzang and many other monk travelers attested to, there were many Chinese government checkpoints along the Silk Road where travel permits into the Tang
Empire were examined. Furthermore, banditry was a problem along the checkpoints and oasis towns, as Xuanzang also recorded that his group of travelers was assaulted by bandits on multiple occasions.

The Silk Road also affected Tang dynasty art. Horses became a significant symbol of prosperity and power as well as an instrument of military and diplomatic policy. Horses were also revered as a relative of the dragon.

**Tang period jar:** A Tang period gilt-silver jar, shaped in the style of northern nomad’s leather bag, decorated with a horse dancing with a cup of wine in its mouth, as the horses of Emperor Xuanzong were trained to do.

**Seaports and Maritime Trade**

Chinese envoys had been sailing through the Indian Ocean to India since perhaps the 2nd century BC, but it was during the Tang dynasty that a strong Chinese maritime presence was found in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, into Persia, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Egypt, Aksum (Ethiopia), and Somalia in the Horn of Africa.

During the Tang dynasty, thousands of foreigners came and lived in numerous Chinese cities for trade and commercial ties with China, including Persians, Arabs, Hindu Indians, Malays, Bengalis, Sinhalese, Khmers, Chams, Jews and Nestorian Christians of the Near East, and many others. In 748, the Buddhist monk Jian Zhen described Guangzhou as a bustling mercantile center where many large and impressive foreign ships came to dock.
During the An Lushan Rebellion Arab and Persian pirates burned and looted Guangzhou in 758, and foreigners were massacred at Yangzhou in 760. The Tang government reacted by shutting the port of Canton down for roughly five decades, and foreign vessels docked at Hanoi instead. However, when the port reopened it thrived. In 851 the Arab merchant Sulaiman al-Tajir observed the manufacturing of Chinese porcelain in Guangzhou and admired its transparent quality. He also provided a description of Guangzhou’s mosque, its granaries, its local government administration, some of its written records, and the treatment of travelers, along with the use of ceramics, rice-wine, and tea. However, in another bloody episode at Guangzhou in 879, the Chinese rebel Huang Chao sacked the city and purportedly slaughtered thousands of native Chinese, along with foreign Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims in the process. Huang's rebellion was eventually suppressed in 884.

The Chinese engaged in large-scale production for overseas export by at least the time of the Tang. This was proven by the discovery of the Belitung shipwreck, a silt-preserved shipwrecked Arabian dhow in the Gaspar Strait near Belitung, which contained 63,000 pieces of Tang ceramics, silver, and gold. Beginning in 785, the Chinese began to call regularly at Sufala on the East African coast in order to cut out Arab middlemen, with various contemporary Chinese sources giving detailed descriptions of trade in Africa. In 863 the Chinese author Duan Chengshi (d. 863) provided a detailed description of the slave trade, ivory trade, and ambergris trade in a country called Bobali, which historians suggest was Berbera in Somalia. In Fustat (old Cairo), Egypt, the fame of Chinese ceramics there led to an enormous demand for Chinese goods; hence Chinese often traveled there. During this time period, the Arab merchant Shulama wrote of his admiration for Chinese seafaring junks, but noted that their draft was too deep for them to enter the Euphrates River, which forced them to ferry passengers and cargo in small boats. Shulama also noted that Chinese ships were often very large, with capacities of up to 600–700 passengers.
Religion Under the Tang Dynasty

Religion in the Tang dynasty was diverse, and emperors sought support and legitimation from some local religious leaders, but persecuted others.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Analyze why the emperors of the Tang dynasty were interested in the promotion of certain religions.
Key Takeaways

Key Points

- Taoism was the official religion of the Tang; it is a native Chinese religious and philosophical tradition, based on the writings of Laozi.
- Taoism was combined with ancient Chinese folk religions, medical practices, Buddhism, and martial arts to create a complex and syncretic spirituality.
- Li Yuan, the founder of the Tang dynasty, had attracted a following by claiming descent from the Taoist sage Laozi.
- Buddhism, originating in India around the time of Confucius, continued its influence during the Tang period and was accepted by some members of the imperial family, becoming thoroughly sinicized and a permanent part of Chinese traditional culture.
- The prominent status of Buddhism in Chinese culture began to decline as the dynasty and central government declined during the late-8th century and 9th century, and many Buddhists experienced persecution.
- The Tang dynasty also officially recognized various foreign religions, such as the Nestorian Christian Church.

Key Terms

- **Taoism**: A religious or philosophical tradition of Chinese origin with an emphasis on living in harmony and accordance with the natural flow or cosmic structural order of the universe.
- **Confucianism**: A Chinese humanistic religion that teaches that human beings are fundamentally good, and teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavors, especially self-cultivation and self-creation; focuses on the cultivation of virtue, maintenance of ethics, and familial and social harmony.
- **Chan Buddhism**: A school of Mahayana Buddhism that originated in China during the Tang dynasty, was strongly influenced by Taoism, and later became Zen when it travelled to Japan.

Taoism

Taoism was the official religion of the Tang. It is a native Chinese religious and philosophical tradition with an emphasis on living in harmony and accordance with the natural flow or cosmic structural order of the universe commonly referred to as the Tao. It has its roots in the book of the *Tao Te Ching* (attributed to Laozi in the 6th century BCE) and the *Zhuangzi*. The ruling Li family of the Tang dynasty actually claimed descent from the ancient Laozi.

Taoism has had a profound influence on Chinese culture, and clerics of institutionalized Taoism usually take care to note distinctions between their ritual tradition and the customs and practices found in Chinese folk religion, as these distinctions sometimes appear blurred. Chinese alchemy, Chinese astrology, Chan Buddhism, several martial arts, traditional Chinese medicine, feng shui, and many styles of qigong have been intertwined with Taoism throughout history.

During the Tang dynasty, the Chinese continued to combine their ancient folk religion with Taoism and incorporated many deities into religious practice. The Chinese believed the Tao and the afterlife were a reality parallel to the living world, complete with a bureaucracy and an afterlife currency needed by dead ancestors. Funerary practices included providing the deceased with everything they might need in the afterlife, including animals, servants, entertainers, hunters, homes, and officials. This is reflected in Tang dynasty art and in many short stories written in the Tang about people accidentally winding up in the realm of the dead, only to come back and report their experiences.
Buddhism

Buddhism, originating in India around the time of Confucius, continued its influence during the Tang period and was accepted by some members of the imperial family, becoming thoroughly sinicized and a permanent part of Chinese traditional culture. In an age before Neo-Confucianism and figures such as Zhu Xi (1130–1200), Buddhism began to flourish in China during the Northern and Southern dynasties, and became the dominant ideology during the prosperous Tang. Buddhist monasteries played an integral role in Chinese society, offering lodging for travelers in remote areas, schools for children throughout the country, and a place for urban literati to stage social events and gatherings such as going-away parties. Buddhist monasteries were also engaged in the economy, since their land and serfs gave them enough revenue to set up mills, oil presses, and other enterprises. Although the monasteries retained “serfs,” these monastery dependents could actually own property and employ others to help them in their work, and could even own slaves.

Tang period Bodhisattva: A Tang dynasty sculpture of a Bodhisattva, a being who, motivated by great compassion, has generated bodhicitta, a spontaneous wish to attain buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The prominent status of Buddhism in Chinese culture began to decline as the dynasty and central government declined during the late 8th century and 9th century. Buddhist convents and temples that had been exempt from state taxes were targeted for taxation. In 845 Emperor Wuzong of Tang finally shut down 4,600 Buddhist monasteries and 40,000
temples and shrines, forcing 260,000 Buddhist monks and nuns to return to secular life. This episode would later be
dubbed one of the Four Buddhist Persecutions in China. Although the ban would be lifted just a few years later,
Buddhism never regained its once dominant status in Chinese culture.

This situation also came about through a revival of interest in native Chinese philosophies, such as Confucianism and
Taoism. Han Yu (786–824)—who Arthur F. Wright stated was a “brilliant polemicist and ardent xenophobe”—was one
of the first men of the Tang to denounce Buddhism. Although his contemporaries found him crude and obnoxious, he
foreshadowed the later persecution of Buddhism in the Tang, as well as the revival of Confucian theory with the rise of
Neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty. Nonetheless, Chan Buddhism gained popularity amongst the educated elite.
There were also many famous Chan monks from the Tang era, such as Mazu Daoyi, Baizhang, and Huangbo Xiyun.
The sect of Pure Land Buddhism initiated by the Chinese monk Huiyuan (334–416) was also just as popular as Chan
Buddhism during the Tang.

![Nestorian Stele: The Nestorian Stele, erected in Chang’an 781.](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I/Chapter_15%3A_Chinese_Dynasties/Section_1%3A_The_Tang_Dynasty)

**Christianity**

The Tang dynasty also officially recognized various foreign religions. The Assyrian Church of the East, otherwise known
as the Nestorian Christian Church, was given recognition by the Tang court. In 781, the Nestorian Stele was created in
order to honor the achievements of their community in China. The stele contains a long inscription in Chinese with
Syriac glosses, composed by the cleric Adam, probably the metropolitan of Beth Sinaye. The inscription describes the
eventful progress of the Nestorian mission in China since Alopen’s arrival. A Christian monastery was established in
Shaanxi province where the Daqin Pagoda still stands, and inside the pagoda there is Christian-themed artwork.
Although the religion largely died out after the Tang, it was revived in China following the Mongol invasions of the 13th century.

**Religion and Politics**

From the outset, religion played a role in Tang politics. In his bid for power, Li Yuan had attracted a following by claiming descent from the Taoist sage Laozi (6th century BCE). People bidding for office would have monks from Buddhist temples pray for them in public in return for cash donations or gifts if the person was selected. Before the persecution of Buddhism in the 9th century, Buddhism and Taoism were accepted side by side, and Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–56) invited monks and clerics of both religions to his court. At the same time Xuanzong exalted the ancient Laozi by granting him grand titles and writing commentary on him, set up a school to prepare candidates for examinations on Taoist scriptures, and called upon the Indian monk Vajrabodhi (671–741) to perform Tantric rites to avert a drought in the year 726. In 742 Emperor Xuanzong personally held the incense burner during a ceremony led by Amoghavajra (705–74, patriarch of the Shingon school) reciting “mystical incantations to secure the victory of Tang forces.”

While religion played a role in politics, politics also played a role in religion. In the year 714, Emperor Xuanzong forbade shops and vendors in the city of Chang’an to sell copied Buddhist sutras, instead giving the Buddhist clergy of the monasteries the sole right to distribute sutras to the laity. In the previous year of 713, Emperor Xuanzong had liquidated the highly lucrative Inexhaustible Treasury, which was run by a prominent Buddhist monastery in Chang’an. This monastery collected vast amounts of money, silk, and treasures through multitudes of anonymous people’s repentances, leaving the donations on the monastery’s premise. Although the monastery was generous in donations, Emperor Xuanzong issued a decree abolishing their treasury on grounds that their banking practices were fraudulent. He collected their riches and distributed the wealth to various other Buddhist monasteries and Taoist abbeys, and used it to repair statues, halls, and bridges in the city.

**The Literati**

Scholar-officials, also known as the Chinese *literati*, were civil servants appointed by the emperor of China to perform day-to-day governance, and came into special prominence during the Tang dynasty.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Describe the role of the literati in the Tang dynasty’s administration

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

**Key Points**

- The Tang dynasty was largely a period of progress and stability in the first half of the dynasty’s rule, which was established as a civil service system by recruiting scholar-officials through standardized examinations and recommendations to office.
- These scholar-officials, also known as the literati, performed the day-to-day governance of the state from the Han dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty, China’s last imperial dynasty, in 1912, but came to special prominence during the Tang period.
Since only a limited number could become court or local officials, the majority of scholar-officials stayed in villages or cities as social leaders and teachers.

The imperial examinations were a civil service examination system to select scholar-officials in imperial China.

Wu Zetian, later Empress Wu, reformed the imperial examinations to include a new class of elite bureaucrats derived from humbler origins.

Key Terms

- **literati**: Also known as scholar-officials, they were civil servants appointed by the emperor of China to perform day-to-day governance.

- **Wu Zetian**: A Chinese sovereign who ruled unofficially as empress consort and empress dowager, and then officially as empress regnant during the brief Zhou dynasty, which interrupted the Tang dynasty.

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**Scholar-Officials**

The first half of the Tang dynasty was largely a period of progress and stability. Like the previous Sui dynasty, the Tang dynasty maintained a civil service system by recruiting scholar-officials through standardized examinations and recommendations to office. These scholar-officials, also known as the literati, performed the day-to-day governance of the state from the Han dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty, China’s last imperial dynasty, in 1912, but came to special prominence during the Tang period. The scholar-officials were schooled in calligraphy and Confucian texts.

Since only a limited number could become court or local officials, the majority of scholar-officials stayed in villages or cities as social leaders. The scholar-officials carried out social welfare measures, taught in private schools, helped negotiate minor legal disputes, supervised community projects, maintained local law and order, conducted Confucian ceremonies, assisted in the government’s collection of taxes, and preached Confucian moral teachings. As a class, these scholars claimed to represent morality and virtue. The district magistrate, who by regulation was not allowed to serve in his home district, depended on local scholars for advice and for carrying out projects, giving them power to benefit themselves and their clients.

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**Imperial Examinations**

The imperial examinations were a civil service examination system to select scholar-officials for the state bureaucracy in imperial China. Although there were imperial exams as early as the Han dynasty, the system became the major path to office only in the mid-Tang dynasty, and remained so until its abolition in 1905. Since the exams were based on knowledge of the classics and literary style, not technical expertise, successful candidates, and even those who failed, were generalists who shared a common language and culture. This common culture helped to unify the empire and the ideal of achievement by merit gave legitimacy to imperial rule.
Imperial exam results: Candidates gathering around the wall where the results are posted. This announcement was known as “releasing the roll.”

The examination system helped to shape China’s intellectual, cultural, and political life. The increased reliance on the exam system was in part responsible for the Tang dynasty shifting from a military aristocracy to a gentry class of scholar-bureaucrats.

The entire premise of the scholarly meritocracy was based on mastery of the Confucian classics. This had important effects on Chinese society. Theoretically, this system would result in a highly meritocratic ruling class, with the best students running the country. The examinations gave many people the opportunity to pursue political power and honor, and thus encouraged serious pursuit of formal education. Since the system did not formally discriminate based on social status, it provided an avenue for upward social mobility regardless of age or social class.

However, even though the examination-based bureaucracy’s heavy emphasis on Confucian literature ensured that the most eloquent writers and erudite scholars achieved high positions, the system lacked formal safeguards against political corruption, besides the Confucian moral teachings tested by the examinations. Once their political futures were secured by success in the examinations, high-ranking officials were often tempted to corruption and abuse of power. Moreover, the relatively low status of military professionals in Confucian society discouraged similar efficiency and meritocracy within the military.
**Examination cells:** Chinese examination cells at the South River School (Nanjiangxue) Nanjing (China). Shown without curtains or other furnishings.

**Wu Zetian’s Reforms**

A pivotal point in the development of imperial examinations emerged with the rise of Wu Zetian, later Empress Wu. Up until that point, the rulers of the Tang dynasty were all male members of the Li family. Wu Zetian was exceptional; a woman not of the Li family, she came to occupy the seat of the emperor in an official manner in 690, and even before that she had begun to stretch her power within the imperial courts behind the scenes. Reform of the imperial examinations to include a new class of elite bureaucrats derived from humbler origins became a keystone of Wu’s gamble to retain power.

In 655, Wu Zetian graduated forty-four candidates with the *jinshi* degree, and during one seven-year period the annual average of exam takers graduated with a *jinshi* degree was greater than fifty-eight persons per year. Wu lavished favors on the newly graduated *jinshi* degree-holders, increasing the prestige associated with this path of attaining a government career. This clearly began a process of opening up opportunities to success for a wider population pool, including inhabitants of China’s less prestigious southeast area. Most of the Li family’s supporters were located to the northwest, particularly around the capital city of Chang’an. Wu’s progressive accumulation of political power through
enhancement of the examination system involved attaining the allegiance of previously under-represented regions, alleviating frustrations of the literati, and encouraging education in various locales so even people in the remote corners of the empire would work on their studies in order to pass the imperial exams. Wu thus developed a nucleus of elite bureaucrats useful from the perspective of control by the central government.

Decline of the Tang Dynasty

After the difficult suppression of the An Lushan Rebellion, the jiedushi increased their powers and accelerated the disintegration of the Tang dynasty.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the reasons for the eventual fall of the Tang dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The An Lushan Rebellion was a devastating rebellion against the Tang dynasty of China; it significantly weakened the dynasty.
- The power of the jiedushi, or provincial military governors, increased greatly after imperial troops crushed the rebels, taking administrative power away from the scholar-officials.
- In addition to natural calamities and jiedushi amassing autonomous control, the Huang Chao Rebellion resulted in the sacking of both Chang’an and Luoyang, and took an entire decade to suppress; although the rebellion was defeated by the Tang, the dynasty never recovered from that crucial blow, weakening it for future military powers to take over.
- Eventually the jiedushi ushered in the political division of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, a period marked by continuous infighting among the rival kingdoms, dynasties, and regional regimes established by rival jiedushi.

Key Terms

- jiedushi: Regional military governors in China during the Tang dynasty and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period.
- An Lushan Rebellion: A devastating rebellion against the Tang dynasty of China that began on December 16, 755, when general An Lushan declared himself emperor in Northern China, thus establishing a rival Yan dynasty, and ended when the Yan fell on February 17, 763.

An Lushan Rebellion

The Tang dynasty, established in 618 CE, after experiencing its golden age entered its long decline, beginning with the An Lushan Rebellion by Sogdian general An Lushan. The rebellion spanned the reigns of three Tang emperors before it was finally quashed, and involved a wide range of regional powers; besides the Tang dynasty loyalists, others involved were anti-Tang families, especially in An Lushan’s base area in Hebei, and Arab, Uyghur, and Sogdian forces or influences, among others. The rebellion and subsequent disorder resulted in a huge loss of life and large-scale destruction. It significantly weakened the Tang dynasty and led to the loss of the Western Regions.
The power of the *jiedushi*, or provincial military governors, increased greatly after imperial troops crushed the rebels, taking administrative power away from the scholar-officials. The discipline of these generals also decayed as their power increased and the resentment of common people against the incapacity of the government grew, and their grievances exploded into several rebellions during the mid-9th century. Eventually the *jiedushi* ushered in the political division of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, a period marked by continuous infighting among the rival kingdoms, dynasties, and regional regimes established by rival *jiedushi*. Many impoverished farmers, tax-burdened landowners, and merchants, as well as many large salt smuggling operations, formed the base of the anti-government rebellions of this period.

The An Lushan Rebellion and its aftermath greatly weakened the centralized bureaucracy of the Tang dynasty, especially in regards to its perimeters. Virtually autonomous provinces and ad hoc financial organizations arose, reducing the influence of the regular bureaucracy in Chang'an. The Tang dynasty’s desire for political stability in this turbulent period also resulted in the pardoning of many rebels. Indeed, some were even given their own garrisons to command. Political and economic control of the northeast region became intermittent or was lost, and the emperor became a sort of puppet, set to do the bidding of the strongest garrison. Furthermore, the Tang government also lost most of its control over the Western Regions due to troop withdrawal to central China to attempt to crush the rebellion and deal with subsequent disturbances. Continued military and economic weakness resulted in further erosions of Tang territorial control during the ensuing years, particularly in regard to the Uighur and Tibetan empires. By 790 Chinese control over the Tarim Basin area was completely lost.

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**Tang warrior:** A Tang pottery warrior from Duan’s Tomb, Shaanxi.

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ponder the causes of the unrest. Some lost faith in themselves, concluding that a lack of moral seriousness in intellectual culture had been the cause of the rebellion.

**Collapse of the Tang Dynasty**

In addition to natural calamities and *jiedushi* amassing autonomous control, the Huang Chao Rebellion (874–884) resulted in the sacking of both Chang’an and Luoyang, and took an entire decade to suppress. Although the rebellion was defeated by the Tang, the dynasty never recovered from that crucial blow, weakening it for future military powers to take over. There were also groups of bandits, the size of small armies, that ravaged the countryside in the last years of the Tang. These bandits smuggled illicit salt, ambushed merchants and convoys, and even besieged several walled cities.

Zhu Wen, originally a salt smuggler who had served under the rebel Huang, surrendered to Tang forces. For helping to defeat Huang, he was granted a series of rapid military promotions. In 907 the Tang dynasty was ended when Zhu Wen, now a military governor, deposed the last emperor of Tang, Emperor Ai of Tang, and took the throne for himself. A year later the deposed Emperor Ai was poisoned by Zhu Wen, and died. Zhu Wen was known posthumously as Emperor Taizu of Later Liang. He established the Later Liang, which inaugurated the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period.