11.1: Rise of the Tang Dynasty

Learning Objective

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

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.

Terms

Confucianism

A tradition, philosophy, religion, humanistic, or rationalistic religion, a way of governing, and a way of life based on the
teachings of Confucius.

**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.

**sinicization**

A process whereby non-Han Chinese societies come under the influence of Han Chinese state and society.

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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

The Sui dynasty was a short-lived imperial dynasty of pivotal significance. The Sui unified the Northern and Southern dynasties and reinstated 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.

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.

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