CHAPTER 5

A Cosmopolitan Empire:

The Sui and Tang Dynasties 589–907

North and south China were reunited at the end of the sixth century under the short-lived Sui dynasty (581–617) and fashioned into an expansive, dynamic, cosmopolitan empire by its successor, the Tang dynasty (618–907). The reunification of north and south, the opening of the Grand Canal linking them, the creation of two huge capitals, and the expansion of interregional and international trade all stimulated economic growth. The Tang capital, Chang'an, grew to be the largest city in the world, housing perhaps a million people and attracting traders, students, and pilgrims from all over Asia. Especially before the massive Rebellion of An Lushan (755–63) brought to an end this era of expansion, the Chinese of the Tang showed themselves remarkably open to what other cultures had to offer. Music and art in particular absorbed considerable foreign influence, and Buddhism continued to be enriched by doctrines and rituals introduced from beyond Tang's borders.

KEY DATES

581–618	Sui dynasty
589	Sui conquest of the south
609	Grand Canal completed
618–907	Tang dynasty
626–649	Reign of Taizong
629–645	Xuanzang's trip to India
630	Victory over Eastern Turks
653	Earliest surviving law code
690–705	Reign of Empress Wu
701–762	Li Bai
712–755	Reign of Emperor Xuanzong
712–770	Du Fu
755–763	An Lushan Rebellion
768–824	Han Yu
772–846	Bai Juyi
780	Twice-a-year tax is introduced
835	Eunuchs order slaughter of officials
843–845	Suppression of Buddhism
868	Oldest extant printed book
880	Rebel Huang Chao captures Chang'an

Empire-building

The recreation of a huge Chinese empire in the late sixth century was not inevitable. By then the Chinese subcontinent had been divided into separate northern and southern states for over two centuries, each of which considered itself the true heir to the Zhou and Han dynasties. Given the geographical differences between north and south China, this situation might well have become a permanent one, like the division into eastern and western Roman empires in the West; the north and south could each have developed its own version of Chinese civilization.

However, the union of the north and south did occur, and the long-term consequences for Chinese civilization were profound. The centralized bureaucratic monarchy was refashioned on an even stronger basis than in the Han. This reunification and the resultant peace ushered in three centuries of cultural flowering. From

Tang China's neighbours included states that had adopted many aspects of Chinese statecraft. These included the kingdoms of Silla and Bohai to the northeast, Nara Japan to the east, and Nanzhao and Tibet to the west.

then on those who thought about history had two examples from 'modern' times (the Han and Tang) that could be added to the three ancient dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou) to prove the rightness of the unity of the Chinese world. Permanent division into independent states seemed less and less a natural, reasonable, or desirable state of affairs.

Unification came about through force of arms. The successors of the Xianbei Northern Wei, whose names changed as a result of palace coups from Western Wei

to Northern Zhou to Sui, took Sichuan in 553, the northeast in 577, and the south in 589. The conquest of the south involved naval as well as land attacks, with thousands of ships on both sides contending for control of the Yangzi River. The Sui conquerors razed the southern capital at Jiankang and forced the nobles and officials living there to move to the new Sui capital at Chang'an, thus eliminating them as a possible separatist threat and adding their cultural traditions to the mix in the north.

This silver incense burner, less than 2 inches (5 cm) in height, was cleverly constructed so that it could be carried without the powdered incense falling out. Inside the hinged body is a small cup, slung on three rings to stabilize it. Incense was widely used both to perfume clothing and to ward off insects.

The Northern Zhou rulers who built the army that reunified China were unambiguously Xianbei, but in 581 Yang Jian, a general with a Chinese family name, ousted the heir to the throne (his daughter's son), secured his position by killing fifty-nine princes of the Zhou royal house, and founded the Sui dynasty. Known as Emperor Wendi (r. 581–604), he sought to legitimize his actions by presenting himself as a Buddhist Cakravartin King – that is, a monarch who uses military force to defend the Buddhist faith. His successor Yangdi (r. 604–618) arranged to have relics of the Buddha distributed around the country. Both had grandiose plans for rebuilding the empire. Wanting to match the geographical extent of the Han, they sent armies to both Vietnam and Korea.

Historians traditionally blamed Yangdi for trying to do too much and putting excessive burdens on the people. Levies for labour service and military campaigns were onerous – 1,132,800 men were reportedly called up in 612 for the campaign against Goguryeo, the northernmost of three Korean kingdoms. In less than four decades, rebellion resulted in the overthrow of the Sui dynasty. Of the many contenders who emerged, the most formidable came from the same northwestern elite that had produced the Northern Zhou and Sui rulers. The victor, Li Yuan (Gaozu, r. 618–26), was in fact a first cousin of the second Sui emperor (their mothers were sisters). He and his son Taizong (r. 626–49) largely continued Sui initiatives. Taizong ruled three times as long as his father and is generally treated as a co-founder of the Tang. A talented military leader, skilled with bow, sword, and lance, he placed himself at the head of crucial cavalry charges and was an astute strategist. He used as much force as Wendi to come to the throne, killing two brothers and seeing to the execution of all ten of their sons. Soon his father abdicated in his favour. Despite this ruthless beginning, Taizong proved a wise and conscientious ruler, able to select good advisors and willing to listen to them, even when they criticized his personal behaviour.

Modern historians often describe the Sui and early Tang as Sino-foreign hybrid regimes to draw attention to the large contributions of the Northern Dynasties to their institutional base and also the large component of families with Xianbei or other northern ancestry among the political and military elite of the period. Sui and Tang rulers were comfortable with the patrimonial – rather than bureaucratic – mode of governing common on the steppe, with its emphasis on ties of fealty, marriage alliances, and lavish gift-giving. Still, none of these Sui or Tang rulers chose to present himself as synthesizing the best of Chinese and Xianbei traditions. Because both

Yang and Li were Chinese names, they could present themselves as scions of old Chinese stock and emperors in the tradition of the Han. The Tang house, in fact, claimed to be descended from Laozi and as a consequence gave special honour to Daoism. But their sense of 'Chineseness' was not narrow. Certainly they did not think martial prowess or love of horses and hunting were un-Chinese. One Tang prince, a son of Taizong, was a great admirer of the Turks and the life of steppe nomads. Xianbei identity, however, rapidly faded. Many men of Xianbei descent used the Chinese surnames they had been given at the end of the fifth century and served in civil rather than military offices. One of Taizong's chief experts in civil administration was Zhangsun Wuji, a well-educated descendant of the Tuoba imperial clan whose family retained its Xianbei surname.

Even if the Sui and Tang founders framed their state-building in Chinese terms, they were heavily indebted to the groundwork laid during the Northern Dynasties. Both dynasties retained modified forms of the equal-field system started during the Northern Wei. By setting the uniform taxes in grain, cloth, and labour services relatively low, they were able to increase the numbers of households on the tax registers, and within a few years the number of registered households had been doubled to about 9 million (for a total population in the vicinity of 50 million). The Sui and early Tang also retained the Northern Zhou divisional militia, the army of volunteer farmer-soldiers who in return for their allocations of farmland served in rotation in armies at the capital or on the frontiers. They also were comfortable drawing non-Han groups into their military forces, often through alliances.

The economic and political integration of the empire was also aided by an engineering feat: the construction of the Grand Canal, dug between 605 and 609 by

The Sui dynasty's contribution to the development of Chinese transportation was not limited to the construction of the Grand Canal. Roads were built in the north China plain to improve access to the northern frontier. This bridge in Zhouxian, Hebei province, was constructed between 605 and 616 using more than 1,000 stones weighing more than a ton each. It has a span of about 130 feet (40 m) and a width of more than 30 feet (9 m).

means of enormous levies of conscripted labour. Transport canals had been built since Qin times, but these had never been on anything like this scale. The first stage linked the eastern capital of Luoyang to the Yangzi valley at modern Yangzhou. On its completion, the second Sui emperor led a 65 mile/104 km-long flotilla of boats down to his southern capital at Yangzhou. Soon the canal was extended south to Hangzhou and north to the Beijing area. An imperial road was built alongside the canal and relay post stations were provided. In total, the canal extended almost 1,200 miles (2,000 km) and made it easier for the government to draw on the growing wealth of the Yangzi valley to support both the government in the capital area and the military garrisons along the northeastern frontier. This new long-distance supply system gradually obviated the need for the army to be self-supporting, as supplies could be brought from the south to the north.

The canal dug in Sui times facilitated the transport of grain from the southeast to both the capital and the northern frontier armies.

The Sui and early Tang dynasties did not neglect the more bureaucratic side of political control. The Sui promulgated a code of law which combined elements of both northern and southern legal traditions, and the Tang built on it. The code of 653, the earliest to survive, has more than 500 articles specifying penalties to be imposed on those found guilty of a long list of crimes. The penalties ranged from a beating of ten blows with the light stick, to a hundred blows with the heavy stick, to penal servitude lasting one to three years, to life exile to distant locations with penal servitude, to execution. Like earlier laws, these ones served to support social and political hierarchies by grading penalties according to the relationship of the parties; for example, it was more serious for a servant or a nephew to strike or kill a master or an uncle than vice versa. The legal principles articulated in this Tang code remained central to the Chinese legal system in all succeeding dynasties.

Imperial control over provincial administration was a critical issue in this period. During the Northern and Southern dynasties, the number of prefectures had proliferated, and staffing them had largely become the privilege of local elite families. To reassert central control over local government, the Sui reduced the numbers of prefectures and counties, gave the ministry of personnel the power to fill even the lower posts in them, and ruled that officials could no longer serve in their home prefecture or serve more than one tour in any prefecture. These new policies worked to limit the power of locally entrenched families and to keep centrally appointed officials from allying with them. Also valuable in this regard was the postal courier system for official correspondence, maintained by the government at considerable expense.

Empire-building continued apace during the late seventh century when the court was dominated by Empress Wu, a powerful personality, as ruthless and politically

adroit as Sui Wendi or Tang Taizong. Her rise to power is that much more remarkable because she began not as an empress, but as the concubine of Taizong's successor Gaozong (r. 650–83). Her influence on Gaozong was such that within a few years of her entering the palace he was willing to oust his previous empress to install her instead, over the strenuous objections of his high officials. Once installed as empress, she moved quickly to eliminate her rivals and opponents.

After Gaozong suffered a stroke in 660, Empress Wu took full charge, following the traditionally propriety of ruling from behind a screen. But she also did new things. In 665 she, Gaozong, and a large entourage travelled to Mount Tai in Shandong to perform the Feng and Shan sacrifices, not performed since the Han dynasty. To balance yin and yang, she had the emperor perform the sacrifices to Heaven at the top of the mountain while she and her palace ladies performed the sacrifices to Earth at the bottom.

Even though Gaozong died in 683, Empress Wu maintained her control during the reigns of her two sons, whom she summarily deposed, one after the other. A group of Tang princes rose up against her in 684, but the army proved loyal to her and quickly suppressed the princes. In 690 Wu, then about sixty-five years old, proclaimed herself emperor of a new dynasty, the Zhou, making her the only woman who took the title emperor in Chinese history. She circulated the *Great Cloud Sutra*, which predicted the imminent reincarnation of the Buddha Maitreya as a female monarch, under whom all the world would be free of illness, worry, and disaster, thus providing Buddhist legitimation for her ascent to the throne. During her reign the court frequently moved east to Luoyang, and she recruited many officials from the east, probably seeing in them a counterweight to the northwest aristocracy so closely connected to the Tang imperial family.

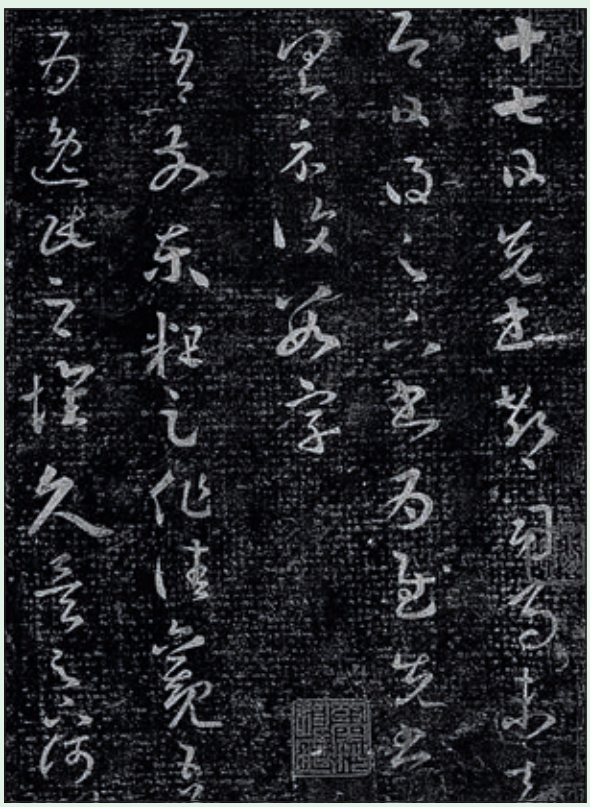
Execrated by later historians as an evil usurper, Empress Wu was, without question, forceful and she maintained an aggressive foreign policy. Her hold on the government was so strong that she was not deposed until 705 when she was more than eighty years old and ailing. Succession went to her son Zhongzong (r. 705–10), dominated by his wife and sister, till they were out-manipulated by her grandson, Xuanzong (r. 712–56).

Political and economic integration of the south made steady progress throughout the Tang period, aided by convenient water transportation along rivers and streams. River traffic had grown so heavy that storms at Yangzhou in 721 and 751 were said to have led to the destruction of more than 1,000 boats each time. Tea, native to the south, was no longer looked on as a medicinal herb, useful primarily to those trying to stay awake, but had come to be drunk all over the country, making it a major item in trade. By 742, when a census was taken, the proportion of the registered population living south of the Yangzi had increased from only a quarter in the early seventh century to nearly a half.

Government presence increased in the far south, Lingnan (today's Guangdong and Guangxi). Many Tang men of letters served there at some point in their careers,

Calligraphy as a Fine Art

In China, perhaps more than anywhere else, calligraphy came to be recognized as a fine art, practised by men of education and social eminence. Different scripts, such as 'seal', 'clerical', and 'draft', could be chosen to suit the calligrapher's mood or needs, and within each script a great number of styles evolved. Each piece of calligraphy was thought to reflect its writer's character and feelings. The strength, balance, and flow of the strokes made with a highly pliable brush were believed to convey the calligrapher's moral and psychological make-up as well as his momentary emotions. So indicative of character was calligraphy thought to be that in Tang times it was used as a criterion for assigning posts in the civil service. To attain a good hand took discipline and respect for tradition. Those aspiring to master the art of calligraphy would assiduously copy works by established masters before attempting to develop styles of their own. Thus the pieces of calligraphy by former masters were treasured, and the esteem accorded them had a profound influence on the development of the art.



To make copies of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, Taizong had them carefully traced, then carved on a stone from which copies could be rubbed. This impression dates from the Tang or Song dynasty.

The most famous piece of calligraphy in Chinese history is undoubtedly the *Record of the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*, written by Wang Xizhi in 353. Part of its fame is based on the story of how nearly three centuries later it got into the hands of the Tang emperor Taizong. Three times Taizong sent emissaries to request it from Biancai, an elderly monk living in a monastery in the south reputed to have possession of it, but each time Biancai claimed it had not survived the wars. Then Taizong sent Xiao Yi, a grandson of one of the last southern monarchs. Xiao Yi called on Biancai dressed as a Confucian scholar, and the two got along well, drinking, playing chess, and composing poetry. After several days of such visits, Xiao Yi brought out a painting to show Biancai and mentioned in passing that he possessed calligraphy by Wang Xizhi. Biancai asked him to bring the pieces the next day, and when he did, Biancai commented, 'These are authentic but not of the first rank. I happen to have a truly exceptional work, the original of the Orchid Pavilion manuscript.'

Xiao Yi feigned disbelief, so the next day Biancai took his treasure out of hiding to show him. Xiao Yi pointed to flaws and declared it a copy, leading to a heated argument. When Biancai, flustered, failed to put it away before going off to participate in a monastic ritual, Xiao Yi grabbed the treasure and rode off. Overjoyed to get it, Taizong promoted Xiao Yi to a rank-five government post and rewarded him with precious objects of gold and silver, a town mansion, a country estate, and two fine horses from the imperial stable. At first Taizong wanted to punish Biancai for his miserliness but in the end sent him silk and grain, which the monk used to have a pagoda built. Taizong had many copies of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy made, but the original, we are told, he treasured so much that he had it interred with him in his grave.

Whatever the truth of the details of this anecdote, it was recorded in Tang times, revealing that by that period the love of relics of the past had already reached the point where collecting and protecting them could become an obsession.

usually after losing political favour. These assignments were considered undesirable because of the prevalence of diseases like malaria which could prove fatal to northerners with no resistance to them. Men from the north marvelled at the physical landscape and the plants and animals, but also the indigenous people speaking languages they could not understand and going by a bewildering number of clan and tribal names. Those who had retreated up the mountains as Han migrants took the river valleys were generally viewed as backward, because they supported themselves by hunting and gathering and shifting agriculture, clearing forests to plant by burning them and moving on after the fertility of the soil declined. Clashes were not uncommon. Where bringing them under direct control was unrealistic, Tang officials tried to get their chiefs to agree to a sort of vassal status, referred to as 'loose rein', meaning that they would govern themselves and not raid Chinese settlements in exchange for titles and recognition. Arrangements of this sort were widespread across Eurasia, and can be considered a form of tributary empire. They demanded relatively little from the weaker party other than submission of some payment or local product and acknowledgment of subordinate status.

The calm, respectful, but determined demeanour of this stone statue was meant to capture the qualities desired in high officials. It was among a series of civil and military officials that lined the path to the grave of the first Tang emperor.

Elites and examinations

Empress Wu is often given credit for elevating the civil service examination system for the recruitment of men to office. As in the Han period, appointing men imbued with Confucian values of loyalty to the ruler and duty to the people was a means of strengthening imperial power, since it was much less costly to appoint officials the government could trust than to supervise and monitor their every action. To identify true Confucians, the Sui introduced written civil service examinations of candidates' literary abilities and knowledge of the classics. In the mature Tang system, there were two principal tests. The *mingjing* (illuminating the Classics) exam required extensive memorization. The *jinshi* (presented scholar) examination required the ability to compose formal styles of poetry and write essays on political issues, and in time it became the more prestigious. The Tang also took other measures to promote Confucian education, such as setting up state schools and issuing authorized versions of the Five Classics, complete with approved commentaries.

Although in the Tang period on average only twenty to thirty men passed the civil service examinations per year, the exams gradually came to play an important role in identifying an elite within the bureaucracy, a group of men who would spend much of their careers in the central government, rapidly promoted from one post to the next. The new system moreover expanded opportunities for highly talented from unconnected families; by mid Tang, a man from Guangdong province, far from any of the centres of power, had risen through the examination system to hold some of the highest offices in the court. On the other hand, in elite circles, genealogies continued to be much discussed and eminent forebears were looked on as a source of pride and admiration; the most prestigious families still largely married among themselves, giving coherence and visibility to the highest stratum of the elite. Early

in the Tang dynasty the emperors sporadically made efforts to undermine the prestige of aristocratic pedigree and to assert that high office carries more honour than eminent ancestors. Once the families closest to the throne had become socially accepted as aristocratic families, however, the emperors largely gave up trying to challenge the aristocrats' pretensions.

The continuing dominance of the upper reaches of the government by members of old families is well documented in the many thousands of privately written funerary biographies that archaeologists have discovered in Tang tombs. These biographies record family origin, recent ancestors, political careers, and marital connections, demonstrating that the civil service examination system did not put an end to the prominence of men from eminent families. Still, it did shape how they prepared themselves for government service and helped overcome differences between the northwestern, northeastern, and southern elites, whose members frequently moved to the capitals or nearby areas. From Tang times on, the education of the elite tended to become more bookish, and martial skills such as horsemanship, archery, and swordsmanship gradually came to play a lesser role in elite life.

The outer world

Tang empire building was strongly shaped by its Eurasian environment. There were new nomadic peoples to its north, primarily Turks; there were shifts in the dominant groups in Central Asia, such as Sogdians and, later, Arabs; there was the new religion of Islam; there were new sedentary neighbouring states in Korea, Tibet, and today's Yunnan; and there were maritime connections to Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

On the Inner Asian frontier, the Turks had become the major power, expanding from Mongolia. They were the first of China's nomadic neighbours to develop their own writing system and leave documents from their own perspective. Already a major power in the late sixth century, they were drawn into the fighting between the Northern Zhou and Northern Qi. In fact, the last Northern Qi ruler fled to the Turks with 1,500 followers. The Turks early broke up into separate eastern and western confederations, and their dynasties tended to be short, as succession did not follow fixed rules.

The Sui and Tang did their best to adapt to Turkic power. They pragmatically pursued marriage diplomacy, military alliances, trade and diplomatic missions, and played the old game of getting one tribe or contender to fight another. For instance, in 605, when the Khitan from the northeast made raids into China, a Chinese general was sent to lead 20,000 Turkic cavalrymen against them. When the Khitan were defeated, their women and livestock were given to the Turks as their reward. In 630, however, the Chinese turned against the Turks, wresting control of the Ordos and today's Inner Mongolia away from them, and winning for Taizong the title of 'great khan'. This opened the way for joint Tang–Turkic expeditions into the Silk Route cities of Central Asia in the 640s and 650s, which resulted in the Tang regaining overlordship in the area for more than a century. Shifting overlordship over the Silk Route cities can be illustrated by taking the case of Turfan, on the north side of

the Tarim Basin. The Han dynasty had stationed a garrison of soldiers in the region, and in subsequent centuries, when it was an independent kingdom, the population included Chinese, Sogdian, and other local people. The kingdom ruled by the Qu family from 502 had used Chinese as the language of administration, but had to accept the Western Turks as overlords later in the century. The monk Xuanzang (602–64) passed through Turfan in 629 and was generously supplied by the local king for his onward journey to India. In 640 an alliance of Tang and Eastern Turks wrested control from the Western Turks and set up standard Tang administration of household registration, land distribution, prices, travel passes, and the like. The rising Tibetan empire gained control of the region from 670 to 692, but the Tang later made efforts to recover the region. In the 740s it had 5,000 soldiers in the region and injected a lot of money into the local economy for their upkeep. The Tang pulled back with the emergency of the An Lushan rebellion, and the region fell under Tibetan control until 803 when the Uyghurs – the new Turkish power in Mongolia – replaced them. In surviving documents from this period, the Uyghur language is used more often than Chinese. After both the Tibetan and Uyghur empires broke up in the 840s, the Tang made no attempt to recover the area.

The rapid emergence of Tibet as a major power is only one case of the new reality of 'secondary states' along Tang borders which adopted some Chinese techniques of rule. These included several Korean states, Bohai to their north, Tibet, Nanzhao in modern Yunnan, and across the sea Japan. These states all adhered to universal religions, made use of writing, built cities, and selectively drew on Chinese precedents.

Even during its first century, the Tang did not always have the upper hand in its dealings with these neighbours. Taizong hoped to complete what Sui had failed to

In 1998, a ninth-century ship packed with Chinese ceramics was found shipwrecked in Indonesian waters en route to the Middle East. Measuring 17 feet (5 m) long and 16 feet (4.5 m) wide, it was made of mostly African hardwood and sewn together with coconut fibres. Known as the Belitung shipwreck, the bulk of the cargo was mass-produced Chinese ceramics, including 40,000 bowls, 763 inkpots, and 915 spice jars.

achieve against the Korean state of Goguryeo. In 644 he had a fleet of 500 ships built to carry 40,000 soldiers to the Korean coast, to meet up with an army of 60,000 coming overland. In the end the campaign failed, and the retreat proved an ordeal. In the 660s, by allying with the southern Korean state of Silla, the Tang did manage to defeat Goguryeo, but Silla was the one to end up with the territory, not the Tang. Silla, in time, would become a strong ally of the Tang.

A more troublesome ally was the Uyghurs. The An Lushan rebellion, discussed below, was put down in part through their help, but to keep them from plundering Luoyang after they helped retake it, they had to be paid off with huge quantities of silk. Thereafter, to keep them from raiding, they had to be allowed to trade horses for silk at extortionate rates.

International contact was not only by land; maritime trade was in fact of higher volume. The southern port cities of Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Fuzhou grew in size as maritime trade along the coast and throughout Southeast Asia and into the Indian Ocean expanded greatly, much of it in the hands of Arab merchants. Concrete evidence of this has been provided by the discovery of a shipwreck in Indonesian waters of a vessel of Arab design, with sewn planks, filled with Chinese cargo. This ship left Yangzhou in the 830s or 840s carrying more than 60,000 ceramic pieces, mostly lead-glazed wares from Changsha, including thousands of bowls with hand-painted designs of flowers, birds, and other motifs. An Arab book dated 851 by the merchant Sulayman describes Guangzhou as the best place for trade with China and reports that the local authorities put a Muslim in charge of settling disputes among their community. A few decades later, in 879, thousands of foreign merchants were apparently massacred in Guangzhou by rebels under Huang Chao.

Cultural confidence

Such extensive contact with the outside world in no way undermined Tang cultural confidence. Chinese in the early and mid Tang were open to the new and different. Perhaps because a universal religion of foreign origin gave China links to all the other countries of Asia east of Persia, perhaps because the elite included many families of non-Chinese descent, perhaps because the Tang had the military might to garrison the Silk Road and keep it open for trade, Chinese in this period were more than happy to gather about them the best of what the rest of their world had to offer and to welcome foreigners into their cities.

The culture of Chang'an and Luoyang was enthusiastically cosmopolitan, with an especial appreciation for things from Central Asia. Taizong was fascinated by Xuanzang when he returned to China in 645 to tell about his fifteen years travelling across Central Asia and India. Knowledge of the outside world was also stimulated by the presence of envoys, merchants, and pilgrims who came from the states in Central Asia as well as from neighbouring countries like Japan, Korea, and Tibet. Some foreigners even rose to high civil or military office. Goods from these distant regions – horses, jewels, musical instruments, and textiles – were sources of endless

Love Stories

Undoubtedly the two most famous women of Tang times were Empress Wu and Yang Guifei, and popular understanding of the power that women could gain over men was very much shaped by the stories told about these two rather different palace women. Before the end of the dynasty, however, fictional women were coming to play nearly as important a role in shaping understandings of male–female relations. Well-crafted short stories written in the classical language by leading men of letters came to shape cultural expectations concerning what makes men and women attractive to each other, how they differ in the ways they express love, and their varying proclivities for devotion or callousness.

Notions of what makes women attractive have changed over the course of Chinese history. The figurines found in Tang tombs reveal that active women, even ones playing polo on horseback, were viewed as appealing. So too were plump and full-faced women.

Tang love stories frequently concerned young literati who became enamoured of courtesans or prostitutes. Bai Xingjian wrote about a young examination candidate who fell for the beautiful courtesan Li Wa on first glance. She and her proprietrix gradually squeezed him of all his money and then disappeared. Totally impoverished, the young man was reduced to supporting himself as a singer of funeral dirges. When his father discovered him in that demeaned capacity, he beat him nearly to death. For a while the young man lived by begging, until by accident he again encountered Li Wa, who out of a sense of guilt and compassion first purchased her freedom from her proprietrix, then took him in. After nursing him back to health, she convinced him to resume his studies. In the end, he passed the examinations with distinction, became an official, and was able to win over his father, who even accepted Li Wa as a daughter-in-law.

An even more famous love story concerns an examination candidate who fell in love with a girl of good family, a distant cousin. It was written by the eminent man of letters, Yuan Zhen. In this story, Zhang, the son of an official, falls in love with Yingying after her widowed mother introduced her to him to thank him for doing them a favour. On the advice of Yingying's maid, Zhang tries to win her over by writing poems to her. Both Zhang and Yingying are literate and sensitive, Yingying especially:

> She excelled in the arts but acted as if she knew nothing about them. She was quick and clever in speaking, but was not inclined toward repartee. She loved Zhang very much but never said so in words. She was subject to melancholy moods, but did not let her feelings show on her face. Once she was playing sad music on the zither alone at night. When Zhang, who had overheard her, appeared, he tried to get her to resume playing, but she refused. This made him all the more infatuated with her.

Yingying ends up taking the initiative, and without a formal engagement or the permission of either's parents, an affair begins. Zhang leaves to go to the capital to take the examinations. When he does not return, Yingying writes him a long letter accusing him of faithlessness, but he ultimately breaks with her, telling a friend that beautiful women spell disaster for men. Each marries a partner chosen by their parents.

This small gilded silver cup was one of more than 1,000 treasures buried in a hoard near Xi'an. Eight musicians as well as plants and animals are depicted on its surface. Its form and technique show considerable Sogdian influence.

Pottery models of foreign merchants, musicians, or grooms were popular items to place in Tang tombs. This figure, 13 inches (33 cm) tall, depicts a thickly bearded man holding a flask made of leopard skin and may represent a wine merchant from Central Asia or the Persian region.

fascination to both the court and the capital elite. Foreigners were valued for their special skills as handlers of horses and camels, for instance, and as entertainers. Sogdians, from the region around Samarkand, were particularly prominent in these roles. Western fashions in hair and clothing were often copied, and foreign amusements like the game of polo became favourite pastimes of the well-to-do. The caravans that came from Central Asia were so appreciated that pottery representations of camels and their non-Han grooms were among the objects people commonly placed in tombs. The difference in the physical appearance of people from these regions – 'deep eyes and high noses', along with heavy, often curly beards – was clearly a subject of fascination. In 649 Gaozong had fourteen stone statues of foreign chiefs made to line the road to Taizong's tomb. Foreign religions, including Islam, Judaism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity were practised among the thousands of foreign merchants resident in Chang'an, though none of these religions spread into the Chinese population the way Buddhism had centuries earlier.

Central Asian influence had long-term impact in the arts. Silversmithing was perfected, with cups, plates, ewers, and other small objects showing the influence of Persian designs and techniques. The introduction of new instruments and new tunes from India, Iran, and Central Asia brought about a major transformation of Chinese music. Interior furnishings were also transformed, as the practice of sitting on mats on the floor gradually gave way to the foreign practice of sitting on stools and chairs. The supply of spices, incense, dyes, even foods were all enriched by imports from abroad.

Part of what attracted the outer word to Tang China was its cultural and economic vitality. Chang'an was a magnificent capital. Like earlier capital cities in the north, Chang'an was a planned city laid out on a square grid, but it was constructed on a much larger scale than any previous capital. Its outer walls, made of pounded earth about 10 to 15 feet (4.5 m) thick and 35 feet (10.5 m) tall, extended more than 5 miles (8 km) north to south and nearly 6 (9.5 km) miles east to west. The palace

was in the north, so the emperor could, in a sense, face south toward his subjects, whose homes were in the 108 wards, each enclosed by a wall. Certain blocks were set aside for markets, open at specified hours each day. The great southern gate of the city opened out on to an extremely broad avenue about 500 feet (150 m) wide. Foreign envoys seeking to see the emperor all travelled along this thoroughfare directly to the palace. This and other main avenues were bordered by ditches and planted with trees. When the city was first built in the Sui, officials and nobles were offered incentives to build residences and temples in the city, and many southern officials were forced to move there after their capital was conquered in 589. But incentives and coercion were not needed for long; by the early Tang leading members of society sought to live in Chang'an or the secondary capital at Luoyang, also rebuilt in the Sui period.

Educated men in Tang times engaged in a wide range of arts and learning. Confucian scholarship of many sorts flourished, especially the writing of histories and

Chang'an was laid out in the early years of the Sui and developed in Tang times into a great city. It was divided into walled wards, the gates to which were closed at night. To facilitate state supervision, buying and selling was restricted to special market quarters, but religious establishments were to be found throughout the city.

commentaries to the classics. In this period education in Confucian texts and commitment to Confucian principles of government service was not looked on as incompatible with faith in Buddhism or Daoism, and many men were learned in the texts of more than one tradition. The arts also attracted scholars, many of whom were esteemed for their calligraphy. Almost all educated men wrote an occasional poem, and poetic composition was tested on the most prestigious of the civil service examinations, the *jinshi*, or 'presented scholar' exam. Perhaps that contributed to the art of poetry, for the Tang produced many of China's greatest poets, including Wang Wei, Li Bai, Du Fu, Bai Juyi, and Li Shangyin. More than 48,900 poems by 2,200 Tang poets have survived. The parting of friends was a common theme of these poems, perhaps because officials were frequently transferred to the provinces. The immense distances of the empire, the dangers of travel, and the difficulty of keeping in touch once separated evidently made every parting seem momentous. Poets also frequented entertainment quarters of the cities where they could call on female musicians to sing the lyrics they had written. By the late Tang period, courtesans were also composing lyrics themselves.

Metalwork in gold and silver reached a high point in Tang times. The shape of this gilded silver bottle, unearthed near Xi'an in Shaanxi province, recalls the leather bottles of nomadic horsemen, while the workmanship reflects Persian influence. The playful etching evokes the horses of Emperor Xuanzong, which were trained to dance with cups of wine in their mouths.

The high point of Tang culture came in the first half of the eighth century, during the long reign of Xuanzong, a grandson of Empress Wu whose court became the focal point of high culture. Xuanzong conducted state ceremonies on a grand scale and authorized a major codification of state ritual. He welcomed Buddhist and Daoist clerics to his court, including teachers of the newly introduced Tantric school of Buddhism. In 726 he called on the Javanese monk Vajrabodhi to perform Tantric rites to avert drought and in 742 he held the incense burner while the Sri Lankan Amoghavajra recited mystical incantations to aid the victory of Tang forces. To liven up the poetry written at his court and amuse him on his outings with his palace ladies, Xuanzong established a new academy for poets. The poet Li Bai served in this academy for a few years, writing light sensual poems celebrating the beauty of the imperial parks and the ladies amusing themselves there. Xuanzong also enjoyed music and horses and even kept a troupe of dancing horses. Han Gan, a great horse painter, served at his court.

In his early years, Xuanzong's love of court life did not keep him from tending to affairs of state. He took prompt action to curb the power of imperial relatives and Buddhist monasteries, both of which had gained strength under Empress Wu. To deal with the declines in tax revenue caused by absconding peasants, he ordered a new census and reformed the equal-field system. Because of threats from the Turks, Uyghurs, and Tibetans, he restructured the defence establishment, setting up a ring of military provinces along the frontier from Sichuan to Manchuria and giving their commanders great authority.

Xuanzong had many consorts and fathered thirty sons and twenty-nine daughters. But one woman had a special place in his life. In popular culture Xuanzong is remembered above all for falling in love, when nearly sixty years old, with the young imperial consort Yang Guifei, a beauty who shared his interest in music and dance

In Tang times people began to sit on raised platforms, as depicted in this mural of a feast. The men seated are dressed in garb typical of scholars at their leisure, in gowns of blue or brown, black boots, and black hats. The mural, 70 by 92 inches (178 by 233 cm), was painted on the wall of an eighth-century tomb near Chang'an.

but lacked sound political sense. She was amused by the company of An Lushan, one of the recently appointed military governors of non-Chinese origin (half Sogdian and half Turk). The doting Xuanzong showered An Lushan with favours and allowed him to amass 160,000 troops along the northern and northeastern frontiers. In 755 An Lushan rebelled and marched on Luoyang and Chang'an, compelling Xuanzong to flee west. The troops that accompanied him staged a mutiny and forced Xuanzong to have Yang Guifei strangled; Xuanzong, already over seventy years old and depressed by the turn of events, abdicated in favour of his son. This ended perhaps China's most brilliant age of court culture.

The penetration of Buddhism into Chinese life

The outwardly oriented, cosmopolitan mood of the Sui and Tang periods allowed Buddhist institutions to become an integral part of Chinese life. Taizong had Buddhist temples built at the site of major battles so that monks could pray for the fallen of both sides. Buddhist monasteries ran schools for children; in remote areas they provided lodging for travellers; in towns they offered literati places to gather for social occasions like going-away parties. Monasteries also played a major role in the economy. Their huge tracts of land and large numbers of serfs gave them the financial resources to establish enterprises like mills and oil presses and to open up new land. With the income they earned from these ventures, they often expanded

into money-lending and pawnbroking businesses, making monasteries an economic force in local communities and contributing to further monetization and commercialization of the economy.

Stories of Buddhist origin became in Tang times among the most widely known and popular tales. To spread the faith, monks would show pictures and tell stories to audiences of illiterate laymen. The story of Mulian, who journeyed to the netherworld to save his mother, who was suffering the most harrowing punishments there, gave rise to the popular ghost festival held on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. On this day Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, from the most educated members of the clergy to ordinary illiterate villagers, would put out food in order to feed hungry ghosts suffering in the netherworld. The Japanese monk Ennin, who spent the years 838 to 847 in China, reported that on this day the forty-odd monasteries in Yangzhou would compete with each other to make unusual candles, cakes, and artificial flowers to offer in front of the Buddha halls. 'Everyone in the city goes around to the monasteries and performs adoration during this most flourishing festival.'

By the mid-Tang period the most popular schools of Buddhism were thoroughly sinified ones. Adherents of the Pure Land teaching paid homage to the Buddha Amida and his chief helper, the compassionate bodhisattva Guanyin, in order to be reborn in Amida's paradise, the Pure Land. Among the educated elite, the Chan school (known in Japan as Zen) was becoming just as popular. Chan teachings rejected the authority of the sutras and claimed the superiority of mind-to-mind transmission of Buddhist truth through a series of patriarchs, the most important of whom were the First Patriarch Bodhidharma, an Indian monk who came to China in the early sixth century, and the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, a Chinese monk who died in the early eighth century. The illiteracy of Huineng at the time of his enlightenment was taken as proof of the Chan claim that enlightenment could be achieved suddenly through insight into one's own true nature and did not depend on mastery of the scriptures. The 'northern' tradition of Chan emphasized meditation and monastic discipline. The more iconoclastic 'southern' tradition held that enlightenment could be achieved through a sudden flash of insight even without prolonged meditation.

The history of Buddhism in Tang times was not solely one of expansion and penetration. In the late Tang period, opposition to Buddhism as foreign re-emerged. In 841 the court initiated a massive suppression of Buddhism and other foreign religions to deal with its fiscal difficulties. By 845, when the orders were rescinded, around a quarter of a million monks and nuns had been returned to lay life, 150,000 slaves had been confiscated, and some 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 chapels had been demolished or converted to other purposes. This blow came at an unfortunate time for Chinese Buddhism, for in this period it also lost the intellectual stimulation of contact with Buddhist centres in India and Central Asia due to the spread of Islam in Central Asia and the decline of Buddhism in India. Lay Buddhism remained strong, but the monastic establishment suffered a serious blow.

Silk remained a major item of trade through Central Asia in Tang times. The most luxurious silks were generally used for women's clothes, as seen in this painted wooden figurine excavated from the tomb of a Chinese official posted to the far western frontier near Turfan in Xinjiang province.

Life far from the centre

A sense of what life was like for subjects of the Tang who lived far from the capital and well below the upper reaches of society can be glimpsed from a great cache of documents found sealed in a cave temple at Dunhuang, at the far northwestern edge of China proper where the Silk Road across the desert began. Surviving documents include contracts for the sale of land, houses, and slaves; household registration records used in the equal-field system; elementary education primers; forms for arranging divorce, adoption, or family division; sample or form letters for many occasions; circulars for lay religious societies; local histories and lists of local eminent families; and an enormous variety of government documents.

The farmers of Dunhuang may have lived far from the capital, but their daily lives were still profoundly affected by the policies established there, particularly the equal-field system. Documents found at Dunhuang prove that people did, in fact, receive allotments of land through this system, and this land did revert to the state after people died. But tenancy is also much in evidence. Not only were there government lands worked by various types of tenants, but also some people found it inconvenient to work the land allocated to them under the equal-field system and rented it to tenants while they worked as tenants themselves on other people's land.

Of all the large monastic complexes built in mountains far from cities, probably none attracted more pilgrims than the great establishment at Mount Wutai in Shanxi province. Its fame was so great that hundreds of miles away at Dunhuang in Gansu province it was depicted on a mural in Cave 61.

Monasteries were also large landlords, and their tenants were held on serf-like bondage, unfree to move elsewhere or marry outside their status group. Dunhuang documents show, nevertheless, that monastery dependants were free to own property of their own and to employ others to help them work it; some even had slaves of their own.

The state also had a large hand in the way goods were bought and sold. There are about ninety fragments of official price lists showing that every month the authorities established prices for three qualities of a wide range of commodities sold in government-supervised markets, including foodstuffs and textiles. In other matters, the role of the state was more indirect. Repair of irrigation ditches, for instance, appears to have largely been performed by small mutual-aid societies of those farmers most directly affected, supervised by men performing their labour-service duties.

This is not to say that there were no private or non-governmental collective activities in Dunhuang. The presence of Buddhist lay associations shows that even ordinary farmers could organize themselves, passing around circulars to call meetings. The expansion of education, largely outside government hands, can be seen from the great quantity and variety of educational texts that survived in Dunhuang. Confucian social ethics were taught in the primers used in schools run by monasteries. The *Family Instructions of the Grandfather*, which survived in forty-two copies in Dunhuang, employed simple verse to instruct young men in correct manners:

> When his father goes out to walk
> The son must follow behind.
> If on the road he meets a senior
> He puts his feet together and joins his hands.
> In front of a senior
> He does not spit on the ground.

The moral basis of women's manners was also expounded:

> A bride serves her husband
> Just as she served her father.
> Her voice should not be heard
> Nor her body or shadow seen.
> With her husband's father and elder brothers
> She has no conversation.

The Dunhuang documents also include many books for somewhat more advanced students, such as multiplication tables, arithmetic exercises, and vocabulary lists. They also include etiquette books with elaborate rules for how to vary polite language in correspondence when addressing someone very superior, slightly superior, a peer, or an inferior; how to write a condolence letter or make a condolence visit; and how to conduct weddings and funerals. The centrality of family, kinship, and

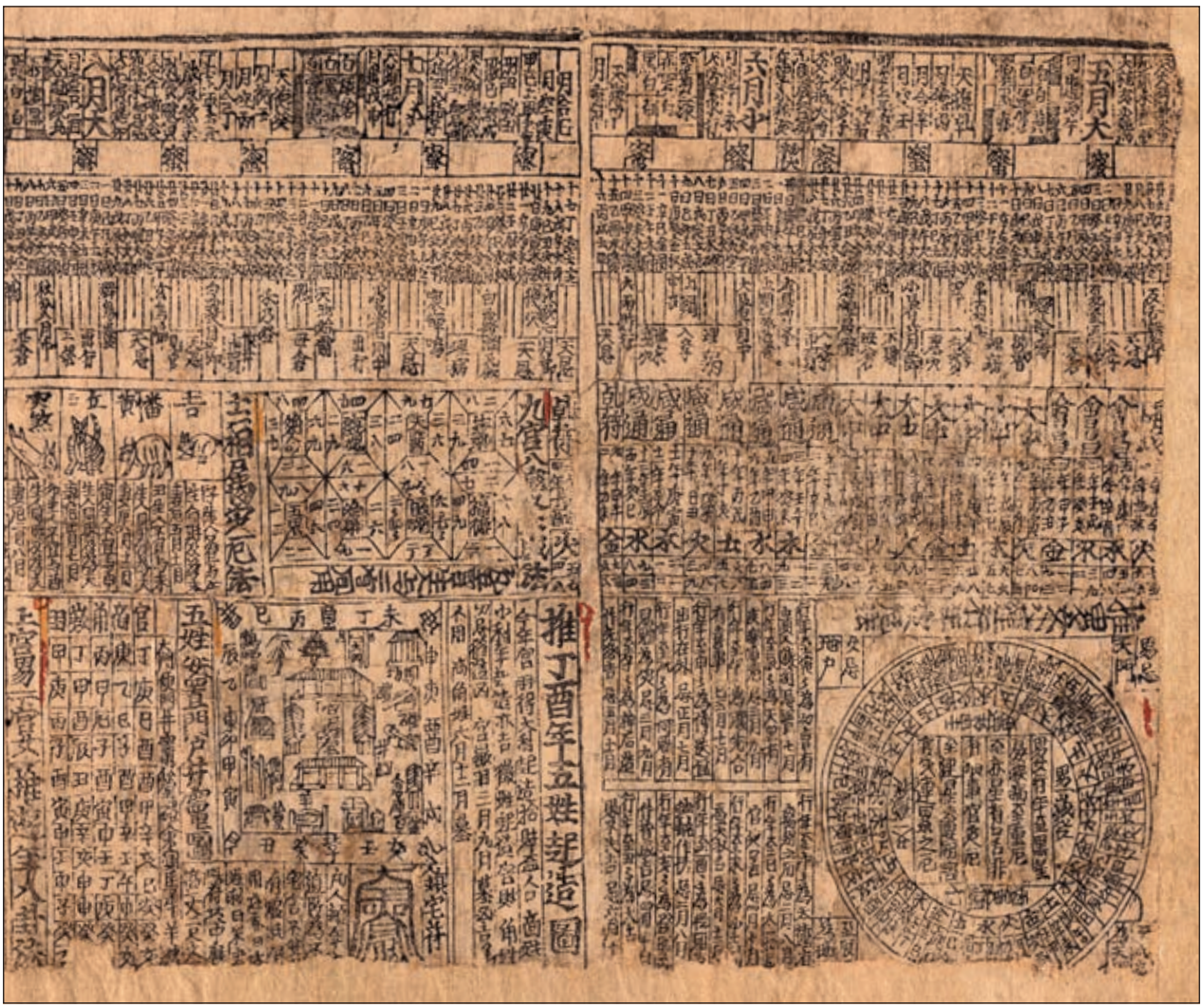
In the *Lotus Sutra*, the bodhisattva Guanyin was said to have the power to grant children to any woman who prayed to her, an attribute that undoubtedly added to Guanyin's appeal and the Chinese tendency to conceive of this bodhisattva as female. These pages from a ninth- or tenth-century illustrated version show a couple praying to Guanyin for the birth of a child (*right*), followed by a midwife attending the woman giving birth (*left*).

marriage in ordinary people's lives are evident in many of these documents. Among the many samples for proposing marriages are ones specifically for marriages between young people who died before reaching the age of marriage: families could arrange marriages for them so that they would not be alone in the afterlife.

Other glimpses of everyday life include Buddhist prayers asking for a successful and safe childbirth:

> Because of the accumulation of past misfortunes, this sufferer received the body of a woman in this life, and thus cannot escape from the suffering of pregnancy. Now her pregnancy is near its completion and her term seems to be full. Her family worries nervously that some physical harms might occur, and they truly fear that chaotic disasters might strike. Therefore, with all my reverence and sincerity, I come to plead to the Buddha for protection … I pray that when the day is due and the term is full a remarkable spirit will appear; the mother and the child will be fine, and the misfortune of distress and sorrow will not come to them. Bodhisattva Guanyin will pour water on her head and she will thus receive the divine medicine of averting death.

The beginnings of printing can also be better understood in the context of the Dunhuang documents. There was clearly a large local demand for primers for children, calendars of lucky and unlucky days, manuals of charms for warding off



Printed calendar for the year 877 found at Dunhuang in the far northwest. It is perhaps not surprising that among the earliest surviving printed works are calendars giving the information needed to calculate what to do or avoid doing on particular days.

evil, and guides for examination candidates. Another reason to make multiple copies was to earn religious merit by copying and distributing sacred Buddhist texts. It was perhaps not a large step to begin carving blocks to save time in reproducing texts, since the Chinese had long used seals made out of metal, stone, and clay to impress words on paper. They also knew how to make copies of texts by taking rubbings of inscribed stones. There is scattered evidence of the use of block printing as early as the eighth century, and by the ninth century the technique had been perfected. The oldest extant printed book is a copy of the *Diamond Sutra* preserved in Dunhuang, dated 868. Other Tang printed works preserved in Dunhuang include dictionaries and almanacs. At about this time the scroll format for long texts began to be superseded by flat books with folded pages, a format more convenient for storage. Within a couple of centuries the invention of printed books would revolutionize the communications of ideas.

Political, economic, and intellectual realignments

To restore order after eight years of war that began with the rebellion of An Lushan (755–63), Xuanzong's successor made many compromises. He pardoned rebel leaders, often appointing them as military governors in the areas where they had surrendered. Provinces became more central to the organization of government, some headed by military men, others by civil governors. In several vital areas, especially in Hebei, military governors had great autonomy, submitting no tax revenue, appointing their own subordinates, and passing their power to their own heirs.

In these circumstances, the central government finally abolished the long outgrown equal-field system it had inherited from the Northern Dynasties and in 780 substituted a twice-yearly tax on actual landholding. From this time on, regions were given quotas of taxes to fill and allowed considerable leeway in how they raised the required funds. Government withdrawal from control of land ownership amounted to a return to an open market in land, facilitating the growth of large estates as those who fell into debt had to sell their land and those with money could amass more and more property.

The new land tax worked well, but the central government discovered it could raise revenue even more successfully through control of the production and distribution of salt. By adding a surcharge to the salt it sold to licensed merchant distributors, the government was able to collect taxes indirectly, through merchants, even from districts where its authority was minimal, so long as it controlled the supply of salt. By 779, more than half the total government revenue was being raised through the salt monopoly. Success with salt led the government to attempt similar policies with other commodities, including wine and tea. The Salt Commission, run by officials who specialized in finance, became a very powerful organization.

Besides withdrawing from control of the market in land, the post-rebellion Tang government largely gave up supervision of the operation of urban markets. This retreat from management of the economy had the unintended effect of stimulating trade. The circulation of goods increased and markets were opened in more and more towns, facilitating regional trade centred on the provincial capitals. Merchants, no longer supervised so closely, found ways to solve the perennial problems of a shortage of coins by circulating silver bullion and notes of exchange. By the ninth century a new economic hierarchy of markets and towns had begun to emerge alongside the state hierarchy of administrative centres. The entire south was also benefiting from yet another influx of migrants. Cities of the lower Yangzi area, such as Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, flourished, inducing many elite families from the north to relocate permanently in the region.

Chang'an continued to thrive as an urban centre in the post-rebellion era. Capable and determined emperors and court officials took many measures to strengthen central control, and members of long-established aristocratic families served as the governors of many of the provinces. At court, however, the emperor's personal servants, the palace eunuchs, gained the upper hand. They had been put in charge of the

new Palace Army and soon gained control of palace affairs. High officials found themselves reduced to forming alliances with one group of eunuchs or another. Accounts of court politics after 820 revolve around plots and counterplots, with the eunuchs and their allies enthroning, coercing, and murdering one emperor after another. In 835, the emperor plotted with a group of officials against the eunuchs but their plot was discovered. In retaliation, the eunuchs ordered the immediate slaughter of more than 1,000 officials and had the three chief ministers and their families publicly executed in Chang'an's western marketplace.

Many of the increasingly independent military governors kept nearly all of the tax revenue they collected for their own expenses. The southeastern provinces were the main exception.

These altered circumstances stimulated some of the best minds to rethink basic issues about China's place in the world. Through the early Tang, China's political, institutional, and cultural excellence received affirmation from all quarters. Chinese goods were in demand far and wide. Rulers in Korea and Japan, in fact, copied much of Tang culture and institutions wholesale in their own efforts to create powerful political centres. In the late Tang dynasty, however, political crises led some writers to reexamine some of the major premises of Confucian thinking. The ideas of two leading writers, Du You (732–812) and Han Yu (768–824), can be taken to represent these intellectual trends.

Du You, from an eminent aristocratic family, served with distinction in a series of provincial and capital posts. In 801, he submitted to the throne his *Tongdian*, an enormous history of Chinese institutions, in 200 chapters (more than 5,000 pages in a modern edition). This work can be read as a plea for an activist approach to the problems of his day, for reforming the government in order to strengthen the centralized, interventionist aspect of imperial rule, then under threat from the autonomous provinces. Most officials, of course, believed in the primacy and centrality of the emperor, but in Du You's view too many of them had an antiquated view of the imperial institution, elevating the emperor's ritual and cosmological roles and ignoring the ways government actually sustained itself. In organizing his compendium, Du You did not begin with court ritual, in the traditional way, but with food and money, the basis of the people's livelihood and the government's source of revenue. In discussing taxation, he had great praise for the Sui official who had taken charge of enrolling additional households in the equal-field system. When the Sui put an end to constant warfare and people saw the government would take a much smaller share of their harvests than local strongmen did, they were willing to be registered. With hindsight we can see that the late Tang

withdrawal of the state from management of the economy had positive effects, but to Du You well-designed government control was much to be preferred to leaving people to their own devices.

Du You took issue with Confucian scholars of a literalist bent who thought the government should pattern itself on ancient institutions described in the classics. He contended that the prefecture and county system of government perfected in the Han and Tang was superior to the feudal system of the Zhou on the grounds that it made possible long periods of peace and population growth. Scholars should devote themselves to perfecting government institutions, possible only if they are willing to consider new solutions.

Du's younger contemporary Han Yu saw China's problems much more in cultural and moral terms. A committed Confucian, he reaffirmed the Confucian classics as the basis of education and good writing and promoted simpler styles of prose based on the ancient ideals of clarity, conciseness, and utility. He was as concerned as Du You with the weakness of the central government but believed a rejuvenation of Confucian learning would bolster the state. He submitted a memorial to the throne protesting against the emperor's veneration of a relic of the Buddha. In it he labelled Buddhism a barbarian cult and the relic a foul object, much too inauspicious to touch. He argued that the emperor, by showing respect for it, was encouraging the common people to give up their proper work and social obligations to pursue Buddhist goals, to the detriment of the state whose tax base was thereby reduced. In an equally famous essay on the origin of the Way, Han Yu argued that there was a single line of orthodox transmission of Confucian learning from the Duke of Zhou to Confucius and Mencius which had since been disrupted. He provided a summary of Chinese civilization as broad in conception as Du You's but much more succinct: Chinese civilization began with the sages who saved people from peril, showed them how to secure food and clothing and defend against wild animals, taught them music and rituals, and created political institutions for defence and the suppression of crime; but it began to be perverted with the rise of Daoism and Buddhism. Han Yu ended his essay by advocating that Buddhist and Daoist clergy be laicized, their books burned, and their temples converted into houses.

At the same time that printing was introduced as a means to reproduce texts, it also began to be used to decorate textiles. This fragment of an eighth-to-ninth-century silk banner, from Cave 17 at Dunhuang, contains motifs of Persian origin (the roundels come from Persian metalwork) mixed with other designs of Chinese origin.

Du You's and Han Yu's views are, of course, at odds with each other at many levels. Du You insisted on the need to grasp change and to know the details of concrete practices. Han Yu, by contrast, stressed what he saw as permanent and universal, and at the policy level stressed issues of moral character, arguing the need for leaders who had grasped the 'Way of the Sages'. Du You traced the successive

stages of historical development, whereas Han Yu seemed to think it would be possible to leap back to a distant past as though the intervening centuries could be cancelled. Still, they shared a basic optimism about the possibility for men of good intention to take action in the world which would bring about change for the better. Han Yu's blanket condemnation of Buddhism and Daoism was an extreme position – even friends like Liu Zongyuan defended Buddhism from his attacks. But by raising fundamental questions about history, culture, and government, men like Du You and Han Yu brought new energy to intellectual debate.

The warfare that followed An Lushan's rebellion occurred mostly in north China, but in the late Tang Huang Chao's armies started in the far south and brought violence to huge regions.

The Tang government and the elite associated with it went into steep decline in the last two decades of the ninth century. Bandit gangs, some as large as small armies, ravaged the countryside and even attacked walled cities. These gangs preyed on traders and tax convoys, smuggled illicit salt, and sometimes went on rampages that took them far from their original base. Huang Chao, the leader of the most successful band, was a salt merchant who had failed the civil service examinations. His army moved rapidly across the country, from north to south and then north again, taking Guangzhou in 879 and slaughtering thousands of foreign merchants. In 881, they took Chang'an, where they set up a government while the troops looted and killed indiscriminately. At one point in 882, after a poem ridiculing this new regime was posted on a government building, orders were issued to kill all those capable of writing poetry, and some 3,000 people are said to have perished as a result. Three years later, Luoyang was sacked and burned to the ground. Across large swathes of the country people who saved their lives by fleeing lost all their worldly possessions. It was not for another twenty years, however, that all pretence of Tang rule was abandoned, and the (short-lived) Liang dynasty proclaimed, beginning the period conventionally called the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–960) when China was fragmented into as many as ten regional states.

In the Chinese political tradition, as in many others, expanding the territorial reach of the state has been assumed to be positive, and certainly better than being forced to pull back. From this vantage point, the first half of the Tang dynasty has been viewed as one of the most splendid eras in Chinese history, the second half as its unfortunate aftermath. This

fits the theory that dynasties progress according to a predictable moral dynamic. Successful dynasties, like the Tang, are founded by men of vigour and purpose whose commitment to the larger good earns them the Mandate of Heaven. They build efficient governments on the basis of low but equitable taxes, having cleared away many of the local powers and corrupt practices that had accumulated before their rise. Their successors, however, are not all superior men able to prevent power struggles at court, keep the cost of defence and local administration low, and preserve or enhance sources of revenue, all the while inspiring loyalty through their bearing and virtue. In this view of the dynastic cycle, men of ability and integrity – both emperors and their counsellors – can arrest decline or even temporarily reverse it, but the dynasty will inevitably weaken and eventually fall.

To traditional Chinese historians, there was no comparable moral logic linking one dynasty to the next, and dynasties, presumably, could follow one after the other indefinitely. Thus, when Chinese historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries first came across European theories of linear progression from ancient, to classical, to medieval, and to modern civilization, they began to propose schemes for the larger periodization of Chinese history as well. As has already been mentioned in earlier chapters, they noted correspondences between Han and Rome and between the post-Han period and the European Middle Ages. But the Sui-Tang reunification was an anomaly. In the West neither Justinian in Constantinople in the sixth century nor Charlemagne at Rome in 800 had been able to recreate an empire as large, centralized, or mighty as the Roman empire. In China, the Tang dynasty more than matched the Han; it was able to contain more formidable external threats and manage a more diverse society with a more developed economy.

Few historians today accept either a cyclical view of Chinese history that downplays long-term change or a three- or four-stage periodization that assumes the normal pattern of historical development is the one that occurred in the West. In their search for China's own historical progression, historians now commonly focus on the late Tang as a key turning point, elevating it from a period of lamentable decline to one of exciting growth. The distress that intellectuals felt as they witnessed the deterioration of central control sparked a major revitalization of Confucianism which continued into Song times. The inability of the central government to keep tight control over the economy may have hurt state coffers but it invigorated trade. This transformation, referred to as the Tang-Song transition, is considered one of the major turning points in Chinese history, and is considered in more depth in the next chapter.

Instruments such as this 3 foot/1 m-long, four-string pipa, a type of lute of Iranian origin, were given as gifts to envoys of Japan who visited China in the late seventh or early eighth centuries. The wooden marquetry on the reverse depicts flowers, birds, butterflies, and mountains. It is among the many Tang era treasures that have been preserved in the Shōsōin in Nara, Japan.