CHAPTER FIVE

5

The Cosmopolitan Empires of Sui and Tang China (581–960)

North and south China were politically reunited in 589 when the Sui (sway) Dynasty (581–618) defeated the last of the Southern Dynasties. After only two generations, the Sui was itself replaced by the Tang (tahng) Dynasty (618–907), but progress toward cultural, economic, and political reunification continued, especially under three forceful rulers: Taizong, Empress Wu, and Xuanzong (shwan-dzung). The capital cities of Chang'an and Luoyang attracted people not only from all parts of China but also from all parts of Asia. The arts and, above all, poetry thrived in this environment. After the massive rebellion of General An Lushan wracked China in the mid-eighth century, many of the centralizing features of the government were abandoned, and power fell more and more to regional military governors. Yet late Tang should not be viewed simply in terms of dynastic decline because art and culture continued to flourish.

Historians of the Sui-Tang period have devoted much of their energy to understanding the processes of unification and the military, political, and cultural strength of the early Tang. How did the Tang solve the problems that had kept dynasties short for the preceding four centuries? Did the strength of the early Tang government owe anything to the mixed ethnic background of its founders? What happened to the aristocracies of the north and south? To understand the late Tang period, scholars have addressed other questions: Why did trade thrive as the government withdrew from active involvement in managing the economy? What were the connections between China's changing military posture and cultural trends? Were late Tang trends in literature, Buddhism, Confucian learning, and other fields of culture linked to each other?

THE NORTHWEST MILITARY ARISTOCRACY AND THE SUI REUNIFICATION OF CHINA

That reunification came about from the north is not surprising because, by the fifth century, the south had largely abandoned hope of reconquering the north. Reunification was delayed, however, by the civil war in the north after 523. Then in 577, when the Northern Zhou (joe) Dynasty defeated the Northern Qi (chee), its battle-hardened armies were freed up to take on the south.

The rulers of the Northern Zhou were non-Chinese, like the rulers of the Northern Wei before them, though during this period ethnicity was fluid and intermarriage among ethnic groups common. Generally ethnicity was considered to be passed down with family names on the father's side, but family names could be changed. Yang Jian (yahng jyen), the founder of the Sui Dynasty, offers a good example. He claimed descent from Han Chinese, but because *Yang* was one of the names given to Xianbei (shyen-bay) in the late fifth century, his ancestors may well have been Xianbei. His wife had the non-Chinese surname Dugu, but her mother was Chinese. Yang Jian's daughter married into the non-Chinese Yuwen family, the Northern Zhou royal house.

Yang Jian usurped the throne from his daughter's young son and proclaimed himself emperor of the Sui Dynasty. He quickly eliminated the possibility of Zhou Dynasty loyalists ousting him in return by killing fifty-nine princes of the Zhou royal house. Nevertheless, he is known as Wendi, the "Cultured Emperor" (r. 581–604).

Wendi presided over the reunification of China. He built thousands of boats to compete for control of the Yangzi River. The largest of these had five decks, could hold eight hundred men, and was outfitted with six 50-foot-long booms that could be swung to damage an enemy vessel or pin it down. Some of these ships were manned by aborigines from southeastern Sichuan, which had recently been conquered by the Sui. By late 588, Sui had 518,000 troops deployed along the north bank of the Yangzi River from Sichuan to the ocean. Within three months, Sui had captured Nanjing, and the rest of the south soon submitted.

After capturing Nanjing, the Sui commanders had it razed and forced the nobles and officials resident there to move to the new Sui capital at Chang'an. This influx of southerners into the northern capital stimulated fascination with things southern on the part of the old Northwest aristocracy.

Wendi and his empress were both pious Buddhists and drew on Buddhism to legitimate the Sui Dynasty. Wendi presented himself as a Cakravartin king, a Buddhist monarch who uses military force to defend the Buddhist faith. In 601, in imitation of the Indian king Ashoka, he had relics of the Buddha distributed to temples throughout the country and issued an edict expressing his goal that "all the people within the four seas may, without exception, develop enlightenment and together cultivate fortunate karma, bringing it to pass that present existences will lead to happy future lives, that the sustained creation of good causation will carry us one and all up to wondrous enlightenment."*

Both Wendi and his successor, Yangdi (r. 604–617), had grand ambitions to rebuild an empire comparable to the Han. The Sui tried to strengthen central control of the government by denying local officials the power to appoint their own subordinates. They abolished the system of recruitment used during the Age of Division, the Nine Rank System, and returned to the Han practice of each prefecture's nominating a few men for office based on their character and talents. Once in the capital, these nominees were given written examinations, an important step in the development of the civil service examination system.

The Sui helped tie north and south China together by a major feat of construction: the Grand Canal. Built by conscripted laborers, the canal linked the Yellow and Yangzi rivers. (In later dynasties, the canal was extended to the northeast as far as modern Beijing and to the south as far as Hangzhou.) The Sui canal was 130 feet wide and had a road running alongside it, with occasional relay posts and granaries. Water transport made it much easier to ship tax grain from the south to the centers of political and military power in north China.

Both Sui emperors viewed their empire-building as incomplete because they had not recovered the parts of modern Korea and Vietnam that the Han Dynasty had held. The Hanoi area was easily recovered from the local ruler in 602, and a few years later the Sui army pushed farther south. When the army was attacked by troops on war elephants from Champa (in southern Vietnam), Sui feigned retreat and dug pits to trap the elephants. The Sui army lured the

*Arthur F. Wright, "The Sui Dynasty (581–617)," in *The Cambridge History of China* vol. 3, ed. Denis Twitchett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 77.

Champan troops to attack, then used crossbows against the elephants, causing them to turn around and trample their own army. Although Sui troops were victorious, many succumbed to disease because northern soldiers did not have immunity to tropical diseases such as malaria.

Recovering northern Korea proved an elusive goal. The Korean state of Goguryeo had its capital near modern Pyeongyang and also held southern Manchuria as far as the Liao River. When in 598 Goguryeo troops joined a raid into Sui territory, Wendi ordered three hundred thousand troops to retaliate. (See Chapter 6 and Map 6.3.) However, the Sui army had to turn back when food supplies ran short. Sui then sent a fleet from Shandong, but it lost many of its vessels in storms and accomplished nothing. Another attempt was made in 611. Three hundred seagoing ships were built in Shandong, manned by ten thousand sailors and carrying thirty thousand crossbowmen and thirty thousand javelin men. Yangdi himself traveled to the region of modern Beijing to oversee preparations. Fifty thousand carts were built to carry clothing, armor, and tents. Reportedly, six hundred thousand men were conscripted to transport supplies in wheelbarrows. The *History of the Sui Dynasty* gives the undoubtedly inflated figure of 1,133,800 combat troops summoned for the expedition. Some went overland, weighed down with shields, armor, clothing, tents, and one hundred days' supply of grain. Because the ships failed to resupply them, they had to turn back, hungry and exhausted. The vast majority of the soldiers sent across the Yalu River did not make it back to China.

The cost to the Sui Dynasty of this military debacle was enormous. When floods, droughts, and epidemics reached areas that had been hard pressed by mobilization for war, bandits were joined by deserters. Nevertheless, Yangdi was determined to try a third time to take Korea. The 613 expedition crossed the Liao River and set siege to Goguryeo strongholds, but the campaign was cut short when word reached the emperor of a major rebellion in central China. Still, in 614, Yangdi ordered the Korea campaign continued. This time the naval force made enough progress that the Goguryeo king sued for peace and Yangdi could claim victory. When the Goguryeo king failed to appear at the Sui court as he had been commanded, Yangdi began mobilizing for a fourth campaign in 615. Unrest was growing so serious, however, that nothing came of it. Yangdi, by leading the Korean campaigns himself, was personally humiliated by their failures. The imperial dreams of the Sui emperors had resulted in exhaustion and unrest.

THE FOUNDING OF THE TANG DYNASTY (618–907)

With the Sui government unraveling, power was seized at the local level by several kinds of actors: bandit leaders, local officials trying to defend against them, and local elites trying to organize defense on their own. The contenders who eventually founded the Tang Dynasty were Li Yuan, the Sui governor of Taiyuan, and his general son, Li Shimin, known respectively as Gaozu (r. 618–626) and Taizong (r. 626–649). Their family belonged to the same northwest military aristocracy as the Sui emperors (Yangdi's and Taizong's mothers were in fact sisters, making them first cousins). *Li* (lee) was a Chinese name, and the Tang imperial family presented themselves as Chinese by descent, much as the Sui imperial family had.

Taizong was commanding troops from the age of eighteen and proved a highly talented general. Skilled with bow, sword, and lance, he enjoyed the rough-and-tumble of combat and placed himself at the head of crucial cavalry charges. He later claimed to have killed more than a thousand men by his own hand. Taizong was also an astute strategist, able to outmaneuver his opponents. As he defeated one opponent after another from 618 to 621, he began to look like the probable winner, which led local leaders to join him in order to end up on the winning side.

In 626, Taizong ambushed two of his brothers, one of whom was the heir apparent. (He later had the histories record that he was forced to take this step because they were plotting against him.) Taizong then saw to the execution of all ten of their sons and demanded that his father abdicate in his favor. Despite these violent beginnings, Taizong proved a capable monarch who selected wise advisers and listened to their advice. He had the government-issue new standard editions of the Confucian classics and compile the histories of all the dynasties of the past three centuries. He had a new legal code issued and ordered it to be regularly revised. This code, the earliest to survive, had great influence on the codes adopted not only by later Chinese dynasties but also by neighboring countries, including Vietnam, Korea, and Japan.

In the early Tang period, the Xianbei presence rapidly faded as Xianbei assimilated and their language fell out of use. Many men of Xianbei descent used the Chinese surnames that had been given to them at the end of the fifth century and served as civil rather than military officials.

Although the Sui and Tang founders evoked the memory of the Han Dynasty, they relied on the groundwork laid by the Northern Dynasties. The Sui and Tang governments retained the Northern Zhou divisional militia (*fubing*). Its volunteer farmer–soldiers served in rotation in armies at the capital or on the frontier in return for their allocations of farmland. Both Sui and Tang also retained modified forms of the equal-field system introduced by the Northern Wei and regularly redistributed land. They set the taxes in grain and cloth on each household relatively low, making it easier to enroll households on the tax registers. In the census of 609, the registered population reached about 9 million households (for a total population of about 46 million people). Even if considerable numbers of people escaped tax registration, it seems that the population of China had not grown since Han times (when the high point in 2 C.E. was about 59 million).

Both Sui and Tang turned away from the military culture of the Northern Dynasties and sought officials steeped in Confucian learning. Government schools were founded to prepare the sons of officials and other young men for service in the government. Recruitment through examinations grew in importance. In the mature Tang system, there were two principal examinations. One tested knowledge of the Confucian classics (the *mingjing*, or illuminating the classics examination). The other (the *jinshi*, or presented scholar examination) required less memorization of the classics but more literary skill. It tested the ability to compose formal styles of poetry as well as essays on political questions. Preparation for the *jinshi* examination was more demanding, but passing it brought more prestige. Even sons of officials who could have entered the government by grace of their father's rank often would attempt the *jinshi* examinations.

During the sixth century, a new ethnic group, the Turks, emerged as the dominant group on the Inner Asian frontier. To keep them in check, Sui and Tang governments used all the old diplomatic and military strategies. They repaired fortifications, received trade and tribute missions, sent princesses as brides, instigated conflict between different ethnic groups, and recruited non-Chinese into their armies. In 630, the Tang wrested northern Shaanxi and southern Mongolia from the Turks, winning for Taizong the title of Great Khan of the Turks. For the next half-century, Tang China dominated the steppe. Turks were settled in the Ordos region (as the Xiongnu had been in Han times), and several thousand families of Turks came to live in Chang'an. Joint Chinese–Turkish campaigns into the cities of Central Asia in the 640s and 650s resulted in China's regaining overlordship in the region much as it had during the Han Dynasty. (See Map 5.1.)

Courtesy of the Penn Museum, image #S8171, C385

Soldier and Horse. Taizong, a successful military commander, had his tomb decorated with bas-reliefs of soldiers and horses. Notice the elaborate saddle and the stirrups, which made it easier for soldiers to rise in the saddle to shoot arrows or attack with lances.

The early Tang rulers also embraced Sui ambitions with respect to Goguryeo. In 644, Taizong began preparations for an invasion. A fleet of five hundred ships was built to transport forty thousand soldiers to the Korean coast, while an army of sixty thousand prepared to march. Despite impressive early victories, this army also had to retreat, and the retreat again proved an ordeal. It would not be until 668, when China allied itself with the southern Korean state of Silla, that Goguryeo was finally subjugated (see Chapter 6). Eight years later, however, it was Silla, not Tang China, that controlled the area, and China had little to show for the effort put in over the course of eight decades to regain the borders staked out by the Han Dynasty so many centuries earlier.

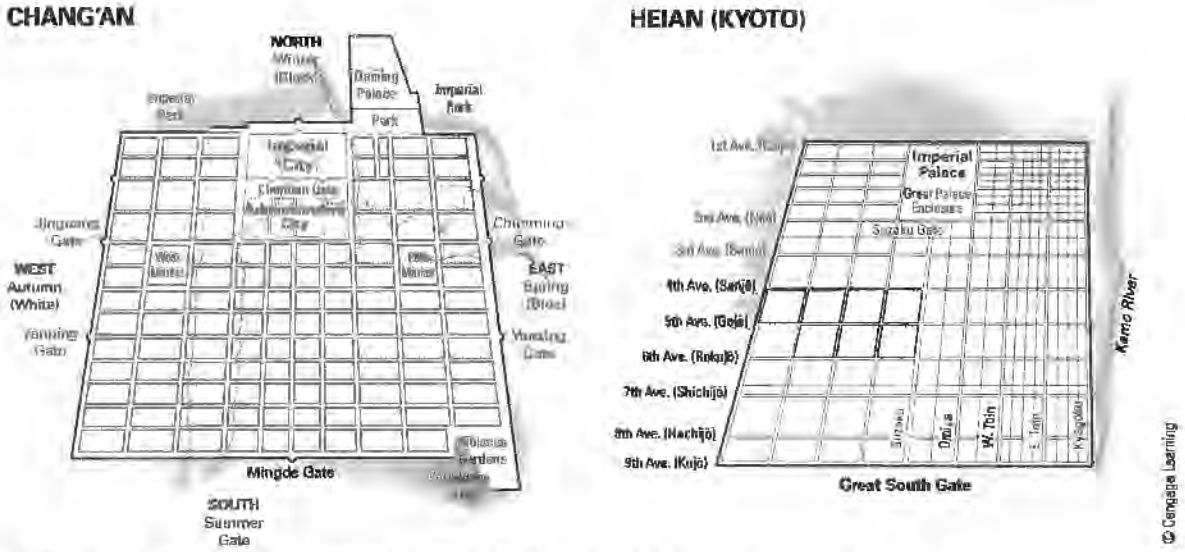

Figure 5.1 Layout of Chang'an and One of the Cities Modeled on It Outside China

THE TANG AT ITS HEIGHT

The Tang empire was the first since the Han to extend into Central Asia, and it also regained territory the Han Dynasty had held in Vietnam (though not Korea). To facilitate sending messages across its vast territory, the government set up 1,639 post stations on the main roads where one courier could hand over a mail pouch to the next.

The Tang capital, Chang'an, was built by the Sui Dynasty near the site of the Han capital of the same name. It was the largest capital yet seen, nearly six miles east–west and more than five miles north–south. In the center against the north wall was the walled palace city, with the residence halls to the north and administrative offices to the south. From the south gate of the palace city stretched a wide avenue leading to the main south gate of the city wall. The rest of the city was divided by eleven north–south streets and fourteen east–west ones, making 108 rectangular walled wards, each with four gates. Two of the wards were government-supervised markets. Prime space was also reserved for temples.

Tang retained this city as its capital and made Luoyang a secondary capital. Both cities became great metropolises, with Chang'an and its suburbs growing to more than 2 million inhabitants. At these cosmopolitan cities, knowledge of the outside world was stimulated by the presence of envoys, merchants, and pilgrims from Central Asia, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Tibet, among other places. (See Connections: Cultural Contact Across Eurasia (600–900) and Material Culture: Tea.) Because of the presence of foreign merchants, many religions were practiced, including Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Islam, although none of them spread into the Chinese population the way Buddhism had a few centuries earlier. Foreign fashions in hair and clothing were often copied, however, and foreign amusements such as polo found followings among the well-to-do. The introduction of new instruments and tunes from India, Iran, and Central Asia brought about a major transformation in Chinese music. (See Color Plate 6.)

In Tang times, Buddhism fully penetrated Chinese daily life. In 628, Taizong held a Buddhist memorial service for all of those who had died in the wars, and the next year he had monasteries built at the site of major battles so that monks could pray for the fallen of both sides. Buddhist monasteries ran schools for children, provided lodging for travelers, and offered scholars and officials places to gather for social occasions such as going-away parties. The wealthy often donated money or land to monasteries, and many monasteries became large landlords. Merchants entrusted their money and wares to monasteries for safekeeping, in effect transforming the monasteries into banks and warehouses. The government had each prefecture establish a Buddhist temple to recite sutras and pray for the protection of the state.

MATERIAL CULTURE

Tea

Tea is made from the young leaves and leaf buds of *Camellia sinensis*, a plant native to the hills of southwest China. By Han times, tea was already being grown and drunk in the southwest, and for the next several centuries it was looked on as a local product with useful pharmacological properties, such as countering the effects of wine and preventing drowsiness.

Tea was common enough in Tang life that poets often mentioned it in their poems. Perhaps the most famous tea poem was by the eighth-century author of a treatise on the art of drinking tea, Lu Yu (loo yew). Written to express his thanks for a gift of freshly picked tea, it reads in part:

> To honour the tea, I shut my brushwood gate,
> Lest common folk intrude,
> And donned my gauze cap
> To brew and taste it on my own.
> The first bowl sleekly moistened throat and lips;
> The second banished all my loneliness;
> The third expelled the dullness from my mind,
> Sharpening inspiration gained from all the books I've read.
> The fourth brought forth light perspiration,
> Dispersing a lifetime's troubles through my pores.
> The fifth bowl cleansed ev'ry atom of my being.
> The sixth has made me kin to the Immortals;
> This seventh is the utmost I can drink—
> A light breeze issues from my armpits.*

By Tang times, tea had become a major commercial crop, especially in the southeast. The most intensive time for tea production was the harvest season because young leaves were of much more value than mature ones.

Women, mobilized for about a month each year, would come out to help pick tea. Not only were tea merchants among the wealthiest merchants, but also from the late eighth century on, taxes on tea became a major item of government revenue.

The Tokugawa Art Museum / DNPartcom

Tea Jar. The spread of tea drinking served as a stimulus to the ceramic industry, as tea aficionados carefully selected the containers for storing tea leaves and mixing, steeping, or drinking tea. This tea jar, made in south China in the fourteenth century, was exported to Japan, where it came to be treasured as an art object, eventually coming into the possession of the Tokugawa shoguns.

Tea reached Korea and Japan as a part of Buddhist culture, as a drink appreciated by Buddhist monks, because it helped them stay awake during long hours of recitation or meditation. The Japanese priest Saichō, patriarch of Tendai Buddhism, visited China in 802–803 and reportedly brought back tea seeds.

*John Blofeld, *The Chinese Art of Tea* (Boston: Shambhala, 1985), p. 12.

In the Tang period, stories of Buddhist origin were spread by monks who would show pictures and tell stories to illiterate audiences. One of the best loved of these stories concerned a man named Mulian (moolyen) who journeyed to the netherworld to save his mother from her suffering there. The popularity of this story gave rise to the ghost festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. On that day, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike would put out food to feed hungry ghosts suffering in purgatory. Popular elaborations of the Mulian story emphasized the centrality of filial devotion and reinforced the Buddhists' message that the

Map 5.1 Tang China

truly filial draw on Buddhism to aid their deceased parents. During the Tang period, a new sacred geography for East Asia developed, with a network of pilgrimage sites in China. The manifestation of the bodhisattva Manjusri on Mount Wutai became so renowned that it attracted pilgrims from India. The Japanese Buddhist monk Ennin, who spent the years 838 to 847 in China, set his sights on a visit to Mount Wutai.

At the intellectual level, Buddhism was developing in distinctly Chinese directions. Among the educated elite the Chan school (known in Japan as Zen) gained popularity. Chan teachings reject the authority of the sutras and extol mind-to-mind transmission of Buddhist truths. Chan claimed as its First Patriarch the Indian monk Bodhidharma, said to have come to China in the early sixth century C.E. The Sixth Patriarch, Huineng (hway-nuhng), was just as important to Chan traditions. The illiteracy of Huineng at the time of his enlightenment was taken as proof that enlightenment could be achieved suddenly through insight into one's own Buddha nature and did not require study of sutras. The "northern" tradition of Chan emphasized meditation and monastic discipline. The "southern" tradition was even more iconoclastic, holding that enlightenment could be achieved suddenly through a flash of insight, even without prolonged meditation.

In the late Tang period, opposition to Buddhism resurfaced, in large part because its tax-exempt status aggravated the state's fiscal problems. In 845, a Tang emperor ordered more than 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 temples and shrines closed and more than 260,000 Buddhist monks and nuns returned to secular life. Although this ban was lifted after a few years, the monastic establishment never fully recovered. Buddhism retained a strong hold among laypeople, and basic Buddhist ideas like karma and reincarnation had become ingrained, but Buddhism was never again as central to Chinese life as it was in Tang times.

The Tang Elite

The aristocracies of the Northern and Southern Dynasties suffered several blows with the reunification of China. The Sui abolished the Nine Rank

System for recruiting men for office, ending nearly automatic access to office and its benefits for men from aristocratic families. Moreover, many of the highest-ranking families in the south were devastated by the wars of the sixth century, especially the rebellion of Hou Jing, which resulted in the death of thousands of members of elite families living in Nanjing. Nevertheless, throughout the Tang period, men from the thirty or so most famous families held an amazingly large share of the most prominent positions in the government. Moreover, the Tang elite remained avidly interested in questions of birth and relative family ranking.

Why did old families remain so prominent? One reason seems to be that their pretensions annoyed the early Tang rulers. In the early Tang, the new ruling house and its closest allies (largely from the northwest military aristocracy) resented continued admiration for old families from the east and south whose scions often held only midlevel positions in the Tang government and who, even in earlier eras, had never been associated with a dynasty as glorious as the Tang. The aristocratic families further annoyed the court by preferring to marry within their own circle, scorning proposals from the imperial house and its close allies. Taizong retaliated in 632 by ordering a thorough investigation of the genealogies of leading families and the compilation of a new genealogical compendium. When the work was completed, Taizong found that his own researchers supported the claims to eminence of the aristocratic families, and he demanded a revision to give more weight to official position under the Tang. Twenty years later Gaozong ordered yet another genealogical compendium, again wanting more emphasis on current offices. When it was completed, Gaozong went so far as to prohibit intermarriage by members of the seven old families whose pretensions rankled him most. The effect of this ban was to greatly add to the prestige of the seven named family lines, who from then on knew exactly whom they should marry.

At the same time, an unplanned accommodation was being worked out between the old families and the Tang court. Members of aristocratic families used their many resources to prepare carefully for office, and the government allowed them to occupy a disproportionate share of ministerial posts. With the greatness of the Tang established, the court stopped worrying about whether people also admired the old aristocratic families, who, after all, posed no military threat.

During the Tang, many of the old aristocratic families moved permanently to the region of Luoyang or Chang'an, the better to concentrate on political careers. By the eighth century, they were justifying their marital exclusiveness not by reference to the glory of their ancestors, but to their superiority in education, manners, and family morality. By bringing attention to characteristics that were largely a product of upbringing, it was easy for the old families to exclude outsiders and retain a common identity. Even if the examinations were becoming an avenue for people from modest backgrounds to rise, a surprising proportion of those who passed in Tang times came from eminent families. Moreover, when it was time for assignments to be made, candidates were judged on their deportment, appearance, speech, and calligraphy, all of which were subjective criteria, making it easy for the responsible officials to favor young men from families like their own. Certainly the elite became broader during the Tang, but at no time did the presence of new families pose much of a threat to the continued eminence of the old ones.

If the Tang elite is compared to the elite of the Han period, several differences stand out. Members of the Tang elite spent more time in the capitals than their Han counterparts did. Much more than in Han times, they took pride in their ancestry and discussed the ancestry of their peers and marriage prospects. At the same time, the Tang elite was, if anything, better educated than the Han elite, and its members did not disdain competing in the examinations.

Empress Wu

The mid-Tang Dynasty saw several women rise to positions of great political power through their hold on rulers, the first of whom, Empress Wu (woo) (ca. 625–705), went so far as to take the throne herself. How could a woman become ruler? Historians of the time, who viewed her as an evil seductress and usurper, attributed her success to her lack of scruples and her skill at manipulation. A brief review of her career shows that luck and political acumen also played a role.

Although Wu entered Gaozong's (gow-dzung) palace in 651 as a lesser consort, within a few years she convinced him to demote his empress and promote her. The histories record a chilling story of how Wu accomplished this. One day after the empress had been playing with Wu's baby girl, Wu came in and smothered the baby. When Gaozong later found the baby dead, Wu became hysterical, saying the empress must have killed her. Gaozong's top officials could not calm his rage or keep him from deposing the empress. Wu was made empress and her son heir apparent.

Four years later, Gaozong suffered a stroke, and Empress Wu began to make decisions in his place. She followed the customary propriety of "ruling from behind a screen," and the councilors could not see her when they talked to her. Wu nevertheless proved a hard-working ruler. In 665, she and Gaozong traveled with a large entourage of princes and high officials to Mount Tai (ty) in Shandong province to perform the sacred *feng* and *shan* sacrifices to heaven and earth, not performed since Western Han times. She created a role for herself in the ritual by citing the complementarity of yin and yang. Just as it was appropriate for the emperor to perform the sacrifice to heaven at the top of the mountain, since it was a yang sacrifice, she and her palace ladies should perform the sacrifice to earth at the bottom of the mountain, since it was a yin sacrifice.

By the 670s, Empress Wu's oldest son, the heir apparent, was beginning to take stands on issues, sometimes even opposing his mother's ideas. When he died in 675, many suspected that she had poisoned him. The next heir, not surprisingly, kept a lower profile. However, in 680, Wu accused him of plotting a rebellion; he was banished and later forced to commit suicide.

One of the ways Empress Wu was able to keep the government operating smoothly despite her questionable standing was by bringing new people to court through the civil service examinations. Many of those who had felt left out during the early Tang, when the court was dominated by the northwest aristocracy, were happy to take advantage of new opportunities to become officials.

After more than twenty years as an invalid, Gaozong finally died in 683. The seventeen-year-old heir apparent, posthumously known as Zhongzong (jung-dzung), took the throne. After six weeks, Empress Wu had him deposed because he tried to appoint his wife's father as chancellor. Another one of her sons, known as Ruizong, was then placed on the throne, but he was kept in a separate palace and rarely consulted. Now nearly sixty years old, Empress Wu no longer concealed herself behind a screen, and she began using the Chinese term for the royal "we." She even ordered the construction of imperial-style ancestral temples for her own Wu ancestors.

In 684, a group of Tang princes and their allies staged a rebellion against Empress Wu. They captured the major city of Yangzhou (yahng-joe) and issued a proclamation detailing her crimes, ranging from killing her own children to favoring sycophants. The army remained loyal to Empress Wu, however, and within two months had suppressed the rebellion. Wu now was even more confident of her position and moved rapidly to rid herself of opponents. On the advice of new favorites, she undertook another Confucian ritual project based on the classics, the construction of a Bright Hall for the performance of key rituals. Her Bright Hall was huge—about 300 feet square and 300 feet tall. It had three stories, the bottom two square and the top one round. When the Tang princes outside the capital refused to attend ceremonies marking the hall's completion, Wu used it as a pretext to eliminate much of the Tang imperial clan.

Until 690, Empress Wu had been content to be the power behind the throne. That year, however, when she was about sixty-five years old, she accepted her son's abdication and declared herself emperor of a new dynasty, the Zhou Dynasty. She became China's first and only female emperor.

Although Empress Wu employed Confucian language and diligently performed Confucian state rituals, she was personally deeply drawn to Buddhism. She was the major patron for the great cave temples carved at Longmen outside Luoyang. She found support for her political position in the *Great Cloud Sutra*, which prophesied that the Maitreya Buddha would be reincarnated as a female monarch and bring about an age free of illness, worry, and disaster. One of Wu's followers wrote a commentary to the sutra in 689 pointing out that the female monarch must be Empress Wu. When Empress Wu

Famen Temple/Museum, Shaanxi Province/Cultural Relics

Fine Metalwork Box. This gold and silver box was discovered in 1987 under a pagoda. It was part of a cache of more than a hundred precious objects donated by Tang rulers to the temple and sealed up in 874.

declared her own dynasty the next year, she had this sutra circulated throughout the country and ordered every prefecture to establish a Great Cloud temple.

When Wu made herself emperor, she did not designate an heir, apparently unsure whether she should let one of her own sons succeed her or have succession go to a member of her natal Wu family. In 697, when she was over seventy, she had her eldest surviving son, Zhongzong, brought back from exile and made heir apparent. Still, all through her seventies she retained power. It was not until 705, when she was about eighty and too ill to get out of bed, that the high officials successfully pressured her to abdicate.

Emperor Xuanzong

The removal of Empress Wu did not end the influence of women at court. Zhongzong was dominated by his wife, Empress Wei (way), who wanted their daughter to be made heir apparent. Her main rival was Zhongzong's sister, the Taiping (ty-ping) Princess. After Empress Wei poisoned her husband, Zhongzong, in 710, she put his last remaining son, a boy of fifteen, on the throne. Two weeks later, probably with the encouragement of the Taiping Princess, another grandson of Empress Wu, the future emperor Xuanzong (r. 713–756), entered the palace with a few followers and slew Empress Wei and her daughter as well as other members of their faction. He installed his father, Ruizong (rway-dzung), as emperor, but the Taiping Princess acted as the power behind the throne.

It was over the protests of the Taiping Princess that in 712, Ruizong abdicated in favor of Xuanzong. The princess's attempted coup failed, and she was permitted to commit suicide, ending more than a half-century of women dominating court politics.

Xuanzong, still in his twenties, began his reign as an activist. He curbed the power of monasteries, which had gained strength under Empress Wu. He ordered a new census to shore up the equal-field system. As a result of population growth, individual allotment holders in many areas received only a fraction of the land they were due but still had to pay the standard per household tax. Their only recourse was to flee, which reduced government revenue further. To deal with the threats of the Turks, Uighurs (hwee-gurs), and Tibetans, Xuanzong set up a ring of military provinces along the frontier from Manchuria to Sichuan. The military governors, often non-Chinese, were given great authority to deal with crises without waiting for central authorization. Their armies were professional ones, manned by costly long-service veterans rather than inexpensive part-time farmer–soldiers like the divisional militia.

Xuanzong appreciated poetry, painting, and music and presided over a brilliant court. The great horse painter Han Gan (hahn gahn) served at his court, as did the poet Li Bai (lee by). Although many of his leading officials had been selected for office through the examination system, family pedigree was still a great asset. He commissioned a two-hundred-chapter genealogical work that provided him with up-to-date assessments of the relative ranking of the elite families of his realm. After 736, Xuanzong allowed Li Linfu (lee lin-foo) (d. 752), an aristocrat proud of his family background, to run the government as his chancellor.

Xuanzong took an interest in both Daoism and Buddhism and invited clerics of both religions to his court. Laozi, as the putative ancestor of the Tang imperial family (both had the family name Li), was granted grand titles. Xuanzong wrote a commentary on the *Laozi* and set up a special school to prepare candidates for a new examination on Daoist scriptures. Among Buddhist teachings, he was especially attracted to the newly introduced Tantric school, which made much use of magical spells and incantations. In 726, Xuanzong called on the Javanese monk Vajrabodhi to perform Tantric rites to avert drought. In 742, he held the incense burner while the Ceylonese Amoghavajra recited mystical incantations to secure the victory of Tang forces.

Some have blamed Xuanzong's growing interest in Daoism and Tantric Buddhism for his declining interest in administrative matters. He was also growing older and wearier. By 742, he was fifty-seven and had spent thirty years on the throne. He spent more and more of his time with his beloved consort Yang Guifei (yahng gway-fay), a full-figured beauty in an age that admired rounded proportions. To keep her happy, Xuanzong allowed her to place friends and relatives in important positions in the government. One of her favorites was the able general An Lushan (ahn loo-shahn), who spent more and more time at court. Eventually An got into a quarrel with Yang's cousin over control of the government, which led to open warfare.

THE REBELLION OF AN LUSHAN (755–763) AND ITS AFTERMATH

An Lushan had commanded the frontier army in northern Hebei since 744. Half Sogdian (Central Asian) and half Turk, he was a professional soldier

from a family of soldiers, with experience fighting the Khitans, the dominant group in northern Manchuria at the time. When An rebelled, he had an army of more than a hundred thousand veteran troops. They struck southward, headed toward Luoyang. The court, on getting news of the advance, began raising an army, but the newly recruited troops were no match for the veterans. With the fall of the capital imminent, the heir apparent left to raise troops in western Shaanxi (Shahn-shee), and Xuanzong fled west toward Sichuan. The troops accompanying Xuanzong mutinied and would not continue until Yang Guifei and her relatives had been killed. The heir apparent, in the meantime, was convinced by his followers to enthrone himself, which Xuanzong did not contest.

How did the Tang Dynasty manage to recover from this disaster? The rulers had to make many compromises. To recover the capital, the Tang called on the Uighurs, a Turkish people allied with the Tang. After the Uighurs took Chang'an from the rebels, they looted it and would not leave until they were paid off with huge quantities of silk. Thereafter, to keep the Uighurs from raiding, the Tang had to trade them silk for horses at extortionate rates.

To get rebel leaders to submit, the Tang offered pardons and even appointed many as military governors of the regions they held. In key areas, military governors acted like warlords, paying no taxes to the central government and appointing their own subordinates. They even passed down their positions to their heirs. Posts that once had been held by civil officials were increasingly filled with military men, often non-Chinese or semi-sinified.

The Uighurs were only one of China's troublesome neighbors during this period. Antagonistic states were consolidating themselves all along Tang's borders, from Balhae on the northeast (see Chapter 6), to Tibet on the west, and Nanzhao on the southwest (Yunnan area). When Tang had to withdraw troops from the western frontier to fight An Lushan's forces, the Tibetans took advantage of the opportunity to claim overlordship of the Silk Road cities themselves. Although the Tibetan empire collapsed in 842 and the Uighur empire broke up soon after, the Tang court no longer had the ambition to dominate Central Asia. Tang did respond when Nanzhao attacked the Tang prefectures in northern Vietnam, and though Tang sent an army to reassert control, the Vietnamese declared their independence in the tenth century.

Because the central government no longer had the local infrastructure needed to enforce the equal-field system, the system was finally abandoned, and people were once more allowed to buy and sell land. In place of a one-tax-fits-all system, taxes were based on actual landholding and paid in semiannual installments. Each region was assigned a quota of taxes to submit to the central government and given leeway on how to fill it. With the return of free buying and selling of land, the poor who fell into debt sold their land to the rich, leading to the proliferation of great estates.

In addition to reforming land taxes, the late Tang central government learned how to raise revenue through control of the production and distribution of salt, returning to a policy of the Han government. By adding a surcharge to the salt it sold to licensed salt merchants, the government was able to collect taxes indirectly, even from regions where it had minimal authority. By 779, over half the central government revenue came from the salt monopoly. The Salt Commission became a powerful agency run by officials who specialized in finance.

Although control of salt production and distribution could be seen as a major intervention into the economy, on balance the post-rebellion government was withdrawing from attempts to control the economy. Not only did it give up control of land, it gave up supervision of urban markets and the prices charged for goods. This retreat from government management of the economy had the unintended effect of stimulating trade. Markets were opened in more and more towns, and the provincial capitals became new centers of trade. By the ninth century, a new economic hierarchy of markets, towns, and cities had begun to emerge parallel to the government's administrative hierarchy of counties and prefectures. Merchants, no longer as burdened by government regulation, found ways to solve the perennial problem of shortages of copper coins by circulating silver bullion and notes of exchange, allowing trade to proceed without the use of coins.

The economic advances of the late eighth and ninth centuries were particularly evident in the south. During the rebellion, refugees from hard-hit areas sought safety and new opportunities in the south, much as they had in the fourth century. The late Tang was a time of prosperity for the cities of the Jiangnan region, such as Yangzhou, Suzhou (soo-joe), and Hangzhou (hahng-joe), and many of those who came to these cities on official assignments or business decided to stay permanently.

Post-rebellion officials and emperors did not give up the goal of strong central control. They created a palace army to counter the power of the regional commanders.

Unfortunately, the palace eunuchs placed in charge of this army soon became as troublesome as the regional commanders. In the early ninth century, eunuchs dominated court affairs, much as they had in late Han times. High officials had to ally with one faction of eunuchs or another to have any hope of influencing policy. After 820, factions of officials and eunuchs plotted and counterplotted to enthrone, manipulate, or murder one emperor after another. In 835, the emperor plotted with a group of officials to purge the eunuchs, but when their plan was discovered, the eunuchs ordered the slaughter of more than a thousand officials. Three chancellors and their families were publicly executed in Chang'an's western marketplace.

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF TANG MEN OF LETTERS

The Tang Dynasty was the great age of Chinese poetry—the *Complete Tang Poems* includes more than forty-eight thousand poems by some twenty-two hundred poets. Men who wanted to be recognized as members of the educated elite had to be able to recognize lines quoted from earlier poets' works and write technically proficient poems at social occasions. Skill in composing poetry was so highly respected that it was tested in the civil service examinations. The greatness of Tang poetry, however, lies not in its ubiquity but in the achievements of a handful of great poets who brought the art of poetry to new heights.

Prolific Tang Poets

	Number of Poems
Bai Juyi	2,972
Du Fu	1,500
Li Bo	1,120
Liu Yuxi	884
Yuan Zhen	856
Li Shangyin	628
Meng Jiao	559
Wang Wei	426

In Tang poems, the pain of parting, the joys of nature, and the pleasures of wine and friendship were all common topics. Subtlety, ambiguity, and allusion were used to good effect. Wang Wei (wahng way) (701–761), a successful official strongly drawn to Chinese Buddhism, is known especially for his poetic evocations of nature. His "Villa on Zhongnan Mountain" uses simple, natural language:

In my middle years I came to love the Way.
And late made my home by South Mountain's edge.
When the mood comes upon me, I go off alone.
And have glorious moments to myself.
I walk to the point where a stream ends,
Then sit and watch when the clouds rise.
By chance I meet old men in the woods.
We laugh and chat, no fixed time to turn home.*

Wang Wei's contemporary Li Bai (lee by) (701–762) had a brief but brilliant career at the court of Emperor Xuanzong. One of his most famous poems describes an evening of drinking with only the moon and his shadow for company:

Beneath the blossoms with a pot of wine,
No friends at hand, so I poured alone;
I raised my cup to invite the moon,
Turned to my shadow, and we become three.
Now the moon has never learned about my drinking,
And my shadow had merely followed my form,
But I quickly made friends with the moon and my shadow;
To find pleasure in life, make the most of the spring.
Whenever I sang, the moon swayed with me;
Whenever I danced, my shadow went wild.
Drinking, we shared our enjoyment together;
Drunk, then each went off on his own.
But forever agreed on dispassionate revels,
We promised to meet in the far Milky Way.†

The forms of poetry favored in the Tang were eight-line stanzas of five or seven characters per line. This form, called *regulated verse*, had fixed patterns of tones and required that the second and third couplets be antithetical. The strict antithesis is often lost in translation but can be seen when lines are

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BIOGRAPHY

Du Fu (712–777), Confucian Poet

Although the civil service examinations in Tang times tested candidates on their ability to write poetry, the man widely considered the greatest of all Chinese poets repeatedly failed the examinations. Du Fu wanted to follow in the path of his grandfather, who had passed the *jinshi* examination in 670 and held prestigious posts in the capital. Instead, he spent much of his adult life wandering through China, returning from time to time to the capital to try once more for a political career. In 751 he even tried presenting some of his literary works to the emperor directly. Emperor Xuanzong had a special examination set for him, and he was passed. Still, he spent the next two years waiting for an appointment. Just when it seemed Du Fu would get his chance, one catastrophe after another befell him. In 754 Du Fu had to move his family because of a famine brought on by floods, and not long afterward he had to move them again during the disorder caused by the An Lushan rebellion.

Nearly fifteen hundred of Du Fu's poems, some quite long, have come down to us. Du Fu's greatness as a poet lies in his poetic inventiveness and creation of the voice of the moral man protesting injustice. In a long poem written in 755, Du Fu began by making fun of his grand ambitions, none of them fulfilled, then described the sights he saw on his journey from the capital. As he approached the place where his family was staying, he heard wailing, which he soon learned was in response to the death of his youngest child. Rather than dwell on his own family's sorrows, however, he turned his thoughts to others:

All my life I've been exempt from taxes,
And my name is not registered for conscription.
Brooding on what I have lived through, if even I know such suffering,
The common man must surely be rattled by the winds;
Then thoughts silently turn to those who have lost all livelihood
And to the troops in far garrisons.
Sorrow's source is as huge as South Mountain,
A formless, whirling chaos that the hand cannot grasp.*

After the rebellion, Du Fu gave up hopes of an official career and devoted himself entirely to his poetry. In 760 he arrived in Chengdu (Sichuan) and for the next few years lived happily in a thatched hut outside the city. As Du Fu grew older, his poetry became richer and more complex. His eight "Autumn Meditation" poems, considered among the masterpieces of Chinese poetry, ponder the forces of order and disorder in both the natural and human worlds. One reads:

I have been told that Chang'an looks like a chessboard.
A hundred years, a lifetime's troubles, grief beyond enduring.
Mansions of counts and princes all have new masters,
The civil and army uniforms differ from olden times.
Straight north past the fortified mountains kettledrums are thundering
From wagon and horse on the western campaign winged dispatches rush.
Fish and dragons grow silent now, autumn rivers grow cold.
The life I used to have at home is the longing in my heart.†

Questions for Analysis

1. What made Du Fu an appealing figure?
2. What can account for Du Fu's failure in the civil service examinations?

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translated word for word. For instance, in the first stanza of Li Bai's poem in the previous paragraph, the antithetical couplets read word for word: "Lift cup, invite bright moon/Face shadow, become three men," and "Moon since not understand drinking/Shadow only follow my body."

Du Fu (doo foo), a younger contemporary of Li Bai, is often paired with him, the two representing the two sides of Tang poetry: its more light-hearted side and its more solemn side (see **Biography: Du Fu [712–770], Confucian Poet**). In the next generation, Bai Juyi (by jew-ee) (772–846) encompassed

DOCUMENTS

Poking Fun

Among the texts surviving from the Tang is a set of four hundred sayings grouped under forty-two headings, a small part of which is given below. By making fun of situations and types of people, these witty sayings provide an amusing glimpse of Tang social life. They have traditionally been attributed to the late Tang poet Li Shangyin (ca. 813–858), but they are not included in his collected works and may well have been written by someone else.

Incongruities

1. A poor Persian
2. A sick physician.
3. A (Buddhist) disciple not addicted to drink.
4. Keepers of granaries coming to blows.
5. A great fat bride.
6. An illiterate teacher.
7. A pork-butcher reciting sutras.
8. A village elder riding in an open chair.
9. A grandfather visiting courtesans.

Reluctant

1. A new wife to see strangers.
2. A poor devil to contribute to a feast.
3. A poor family to make marriages.
4. To visit retired officials.
5. A pregnant woman to go afoot.

Vexations

1. Happening upon a tasty dish when one's liver is out of order.
2. Making a night of it and the drinks giving out.
3. For one's back to itch when calling upon a superior.
4. For the lights to fail just when the luck begins to favor one at cards.
5. Inability to get rid of a worthless poor relation.
6. A man cleaning out a well who has to go to the toilet in a hurry.

Ambiguity

1. Only of a poor gift does one say, "Can it be repaid?"
2. Only of an ugly bride does one say, "She is my fate."

both sides. When sent out to regional posts, he took his responsibilities seriously and sympathized with the people whom he governed. At times he worried about whether he was doing his job justly and well:

> From my high castle I look at the town below
> Where the natives of Ba cluster like a swarm of flies.
> How can I govern these people and lead them aright?
> I cannot even understand what they say.
> But at least I am glad, now that the taxes are in,
> To learn that in my province there is no discontent.*

*Arthur Waley, trans., *More Translations from the Chinese* (New York: Knopf, 1919), p. 71.

In addition to producing a huge volume of poetry, Tang writers wrote in many other genres, some humorous (see **Documents: Poking Fun**). They greatly advanced the art of fiction. Tang tales were short and written in the classical language (in contrast to the longer vernacular-language fiction and drama that became important in later periods). Bai Juyi's brother Bai Xingjian (by shing-jyen) (775–826) wrote a story about an examination candidate who on arrival in Chang'an fell instantly in love with the beautiful prostitute Li Wa (lee wah). Over the course of the next year, Li Wa and her owner gradually squeezed him of all his money and then disappeared. Bewildered and desperate, the young man was reduced to supporting himself as a funeral singer. When his father discovered this, he beat him nearly

3. Only of a nobody does one say, "Tai Gong met King Wen at eighty."*
4. Only of a poor appointment does one say, "It's a place to make a living."
5. Only to be rude to a guest does one say, "Make yourself at home."
6. Only of a poor dwelling does one say, "It's quite all right to live in."
7. Only those incapable of making a living for themselves rail at their ancestors.

Bad Form

1. To wrangle with one's fellow guests.
2. To fall from one's polo pony.
3. To smoke in the presence of superiors.
4. Priests and nuns lately returned to ordinary life.
5. To shout orders at a banquet.
6. To cut into the conversation.
7. To fall asleep in somebody's bed with one's boots on.
8. To preface remarks with a giggle.
9. To kick over the table when a guest is present.
10. To sing love songs in the presence of one's father- or mother-in-law.
11. To reject distasteful food and put it back on the dish.
12. To lay chopsticks across a soup-bowl.

Lapses

1. Talking to people with one's hat off.
2. Scolding another's servants.
3. Boring a hole in the wall to spy upon neighbors.
4. Entering a house without knocking.
5. Being careless about dripping snot or spitting on the mat.
6. Going into the room and sitting down uninvited.
7. Opening other people's boxes and letters.
8. Lifting chopsticks before the host's signal.
9. Laying down chopsticks before all have finished eating.
10. Stretching across the table to reach things.

Questions for Analysis

1. Which sayings do you find particularly clever?
2. What can you infer about the etiquette of the time from these sayings?

*It was not until he was eighty years old that King Wen invited Tai Gong to be his chief adviser.

to death. Reduced further to begging, he was in the end saved by Li Wa, who took pity on him, nursed him back to health, and convinced him to resume his studies. When he passed the examinations and obtained an official post, his father accepted Li Wa as his daughter-in-law.

Popular stories like these circulated widely and sometimes became the basis for later dramas. The most successful story in terms of its later incarnations was *The Story of Yingying* by the eminent man of letters Yuan Zhen (ywan juhn) (779–831). In this case, the examination candidate, surnamed Zhang, fell in love with a woman of his own class, a distant cousin named Cui Yingying (tsway ying-ying). She is first introduced to him by her mother, who wishes to thank him for coming to their aid during a bandit attack. Yingying is reluctant to greet him and refuses to be drawn into conversation. Zhang, however, is overwhelmed by her beauty and attracted by her shyness. He turns to Yingying's maid for advice, and she suggests that he propose marriage. He counters that the pain of separation from her is so great that he could not wait for a proper engagement. The maid then tells him to try to win her over by sending her poems. Although Yingying at first rebukes Zhang for making advances, eventually she decides to go to his room one night. Although taking the initiative, she still appears weak, leaning on her maid's arm. The ensuing affair is interrupted when Zhang has to go to the capital to take the examinations. When Zhang does not return, Yingying writes him a long letter protesting his faithlessness. Unlike most

other love stories, this one does not end happily in a marriage. Zhang decides that beautiful women spell disaster for men and lets his parents arrange a marriage for him to someone else. Yingying, too, in the end marries someone chosen by her mother.

Tang men of letters kept Confucian learning alive in an age when the pull of Buddhism and Daoism was strong. Confucian scholars worked out the ritual programs of the early Tang emperors, served as teachers in the state schools, and wrote commentaries to the classics. State support for Confucian activities coexisted with state patronage of Buddhism and Daoism and with private commitment to either religion on the part of many Confucian officials. Neither the state nor the scholarly community felt compelled to sustain exclusive positions.

With the restructuring of the Tang state after the rebellion of An Lushan, the state agencies that had provided the focus for Confucian scholarly activities deteriorated, forcing the scholarly community to reappraise its political and cultural responsibilities. A small group of scholars turned away from an emphasis on preserving inherited traditions in favor of looking directly to the classics to find the "Way of the Sages."

Han Yu (hahn yew) (768–824) was perhaps the most important of these politically engaged writers and thinkers. Even though he passed the *jinshi* examinations (on his fourth try), Han Yu found political advancement frustratingly difficult. He was a strong supporter of efforts to strengthen the central government's control over the provinces, and he deplored the political and cultural fragmentation that had been tolerated in order to hold together the Tang state. He offended the emperor when he wrote "On the Buddha Bone," a memorial intimating that the emperor was risking his own life by letting something so inauspicious as the bone of a dead person into the palace. As a writer, Han Yu advocated the use of a plainer prose style, labeled "ancient style" because it aimed for the ancient virtues of clarity and concision. This style, he contended, offered the best way to convey the truths of the Confucian tradition. In an essay on the origin of the Confucian Way, Han Yu argued that the Confucian tradition had been passed down in a single line of transmission from the duke of Zhou to Confucius and Mencius, but that the transmission had afterward been disrupted. He proposed that to revive the Way of the Sages, scholars had to go back to the *Analects* and *Mencius*.

THE DUNHUANG DOCUMENTS

The historical sources historians can use to reconstruct what life was like in the Tang period are richer than for earlier periods. There are fuller sources on the workings of the government, including the first surviving legal code, the first surviving court ritual code, and several compendiums of government documents. Much more survives from writers' collected works by way of personal letters, epitaphs for friends and relatives, prefaces to poems, and the like, from which historians can reconstruct social circles, trace marriage patterns, and infer attitudes toward marriage, children, friendship, and other nonpolitical subjects. There is also a substantial body of short fiction, which provides scenes of life in the cities among merchants, beggars, and shop owners in addition to the elite.

An even greater boon to recovering everyday social and economic relations was the discovery of thousands of original documents sealed in a Buddhist cave temple at Dunhuang, at the far northwestern corner of China proper, about 700 miles from Chang'an. The cave was sealed up soon after 1000 C.E., when the region was threatened by invasion, and was not discovered again until 1900, when a Daoist monk living there investigated a gap in the plaster. In 1907 and 1908, he sold the bulk of the 13,500 paper scrolls to the British explorer Aurel Stein (1862–1943) and the French sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878–1945). The majority of the scrolls were Buddhist sutras, including numerous copies of the same texts, but there were also everyday documents such as bills of sale and contracts for services; calendars; primers for beginning students; sample forms for arranging divorce, adoption, and family division; circulars for lay religious societies; lists of eminent families; and government documents of all sorts.

From these documents, we can see that through the early eighth century, local officials kept the detailed registers of each household needed for the equal-field system. Although there was not enough land available to give everyone his or her full quota, the government did make reassignments every three years, as required by the law. Tenancy was also very common. Some people who found it inconvenient to work the land allotted to them by the government rented it to tenants while working as tenants themselves on other people's land. Monasteries were

among the largest landowners, and monastery tenants had serf-like status, not free to move elsewhere or marry outside their group. They could, however, hire others to help them work their land, as well as purchase their own land.

Among the more interesting documents found at Dunhuang were fifty or so charters for lay associations. Usually a literate Buddhist monk helped the group organize Buddhist devotional activities, such as meals for monks or offerings for ceremonies. Wealthier groups might sponsor the construction or decoration of a new cave. Other groups were more concerned with sudden large expenses, such as funerals, with each member making small monthly contributions to what was, in effect, an insurance pool. One association was limited to women, who promised to contribute oil, wine, and flour for a monthly meal.

Many of those who belonged to these associations were illiterate and drew marks beside their names instead of signing their names. Temples did their best to reduce illiteracy by offering elementary education. Numerous primers have survived, as well as multiplication tables, vocabulary lists, and etiquette books with rules on the language to use when addressing superiors, peers, and inferiors and the steps to follow for weddings and funerals.

Some of China's earliest printed works were found among the Dunhuang documents, including a calendar for the year 877 and a copy of the *Diamond Sutra* dated 868, widely considered the world's oldest printed book. It is not surprising that the Chinese discovered how to print so early because China had a long history of mass production by use of molds. Moreover, people were familiar with ways to reproduce words on paper through the use of seals or rubbings taken from inscribed bronze or stone. The method of printing developed in Tang times involved craftsmen carving words and pictures into wooden blocks, inking them, and then pressing paper onto the blocks. Each block had an entire page of text carved on it.

THE TANG DYNASTY'S FINAL DECADES AND THE FIVE DYNASTIES

After the rebellion of An Lushan, the Tang central government shared political and military power with the military governors. After 860, this system no longer worked to maintain order. Bandit gangs, some as large as small armies, roamed the countryside and set siege to walled cities. These gangs smuggled illicit salt, ambushed merchants and tax convoys, and went on wild rampages through the countryside. Huang Chao (hwang chow), the leader of the most successful of these bands, was a failed examination candidate who had become a salt merchant. His army crossed the country several times. In 879, it took Guangzhou and slaughtered thousands of foreign merchants. Just two years later, his army captured Chang'an and set up a government. When someone posted a poem that ridiculed the new regime on a government building, the order was given to kill all those able to compose poems. Three thousand people are said to have died as a result.

During the century from 860 to 960 (when the Song Dynasty was founded), political and military power devolved to the local level. Any local strongman able to organize defense against rebels and bandits could declare himself king or even emperor. Many of these local rulers rose from very humble origins; one had started as a merchant's slave. In the south, no self-proclaimed king ever consolidated much more than the equivalent of one or two modern provinces (a situation labeled the Ten Kingdoms). Political fragmentation did not impair the economy of the south. In fact, in their eagerness to expand their tax bases, rulers of the southern kingdoms did their best to promote trade and tax it.

In the north, the effects of political fragmentation were less benign. Many of the regional warlords were not Chinese, but Turks from the old garrison armies. Both Chang'an and Luoyang had been devastated by the fighting of the late Tang period, and Kaifeng, located in Henan province at the mouth of the Grand Canal, became the leading city in north China. None of the Five Dynasties that in succession held Kaifeng was able to build a stable government before being ousted by rivals.

SUMMARY

After centuries of division, China was reunified in 589 C.E. by the Sui Dynasty, which defeated the last of the Southern Dynasties in naval battles. The founder of this dynasty, Yang Jian, claimed to be Chinese, but he was from the northwestern military

elite where intermarriage between Chinese and non-Chinese was very common. The Sui strengthened the central control of the government by limiting the power of local officials to appoint their own subordinates. Sui also promoted the economic integration of the newly unified country by constructing the Grand Canal, which connected the rice-producing regions of the south with the region of the capitals. Another accomplishment was construction of a large new capital built where the Han Dynasty had had their first capital; like it, the new capital was also named Chang'an.

Sui was overthrown in 618 after its incessant military campaigns provoked uprisings. The man to found a new dynasty, the Tang, was from the same northwestern military aristocracy as the Sui founder, and the Tang built upon Sui accomplishments. The second Tang emperor Taizong not only won victories over the Turks, then the dominant ethnic group north of China, but also promoted the civil arts, sponsoring the compilation of the histories of the previous dynasties and a new legal code and establishing government schools to prepare men for service as officials. Although Taizong's campaigns against Goguryeo were unsuccessful, under his successor an alliance with Silla led to victory and a unified Korea.

The capital, Chang'an, built on a grid, was a cosmopolitan city that welcomed merchants, pilgrims, and students from elsewhere in Asia. The Tang elite were attracted to the amenities of city life and often moved from their original family homes to the capital, the better to pursue their political careers. Buddhism received state support and continued to penetrate deeply into Chinese culture. Surviving documents from Dunhuang in the northwest are among the best sources for ordinary people's involvement with Buddhism. Nevertheless, in the ninth century a Tang emperor issued a ban on foreign religions that closed thousands of monasteries and forced clergy to return to lay life.

One of the most intriguing phases of Tang history was the period when Empress Wu was in control. She rose from secondary consort to empress. After her sons succeeded to the throne, she deposed them one after the other, eventually taking the title "emperor" for herself, thereby starting her own dynasty. It was not until she was over 80 that she was deposed and one of her sons returned to the throne. Another important ruler in Tang times was her grandson, Xuanzong, a patron of poetry, painting, and music as well as both Buddhism and Daoism. His reign came to an end with the massive rebellion of a frontier general, An Lushan.

After years of civil war, the Tang rulers had to call on Uighur troops to help retake the capital and also had to tolerate military governors who treated their provinces as hereditary kingdoms. The central government also had to devise new ways to raise revenues, the most successful of which was the salt monopoly. By the ninth century the political situation was deteriorating at court, where eunuchs gained power. Still, the late Tang was a culturally and economically vibrant period, when trade flourished and intellectuals and poets explored new territory. After 860, however, banditry and uprisings led to power devolving to the local level, and it was a century before another strong dynasty was established.

How did China change over the course of the three centuries of Sui and Tang rule? The late Tang did not dominate East Asia the way the early Tang had because all along its borders powerful states had established themselves. Nor was the late Tang as eager to adopt music, craft, and art styles from distant lands. Although military men held much of the power in both periods, China had not returned to the hybrid Xianbei-Chinese military culture of the Northern Dynasties. The late Tang official elite was oriented toward the civil arts, and more and more welcomed into its midst men of literary talent from undistinguished families. During Tang times, the Chinese economy grew much larger, first stimulated by the reunification of north and south and later by the abandonment of the equal-field system. The government found new ways to raise revenue, notably through control of salt production and distribution. In both the sixth and the ninth centuries, Buddhism was a major force within China, but much had changed about China's engagement with Buddhism. By late Tang, foreign monks were much less of a presence and Chan and Tantric monks much more of one. Confucianism was stronger at the end of the Tang, thanks to the intellectual flowering of the ninth century.