The Tang Dynasty (618–906)

When the rulers of the Tang dynasty (618–906) unified China in the early seventh century, the energies and wealth of the nation proved strong enough not only to ensure internal peace for the first time in centuries, but also to expand the Chinese realm to include large portions of neighboring lands such as Korea, Vietnam, northeast, central, and southeast Asia. The Tang became a great empire, the most powerful and influential of its time any place in the world. Flourishing trade and communication transformed China into the cultural center of an international age. Tang cities such as the capital of Chang'an (modern Xi'an), the eastern terminus of the great Silk Road, were global hubs of banking and trade as well as of religious, scholarly, and artistic life. Their inhabitants, from all parts of China and as far away as India and Persia, were urbane and sophisticated. Tang society was liberal and largely tolerant of foreign views and ideas; in fact the royal family of Tang, surnamed Li, was of non-Han Chinese origin (perhaps originally from a Turkish-speaking area of Central Asia), and leaders of government were drawn from many parts of the region. Government was powerful, but not oppressive; education was encouraged, with the accomplished and learned well rewarded. Great wealth was accumulated by a few, but the Tang rulers saw that lands were redistributed, and all had some measure of opportunity for material advancement. This was also a time when many women attained higher status at court, and a greater degree of freedom in society.

This dynamic, affluent, liberal, and culturally diverse environment produced a great efflorescence of culture unparalleled in Chinese history. Buddhism, originally imported from India, thrived to such an extent that China itself became a major center of Buddhist learning, attracting students and pilgrims from other countries. In East Asia, Chinese, rather than Sanskrit, became the language of Chinese Buddhist texts that served to transmit Chinese culture, ideas, and philosophy abroad. Significantly, Buddhist influence also resulted in the compilation of huge encyclopedias of knowledge during the Tang, preserving much earlier Chinese cultural material for posterity, and inspiring advances in mathematics and the applied sciences such as engineering and medicine. The Tang was also an age of great figure painters, whose religious frescoes filled caves along the Silk Road through central Asia, and covered the walls of royal tombs. New styles of ceramics, bold and colorful with variegated glazes, embraced Indian, Persian, and Greek forms.

Above all poetry flourished during the Tang, and indeed the Chinese think of Tang poetry as the greatest of all literary achievements. Tang poets like Du Fu, Li Bo, Wang Wei, and Bo Juyi created works of art that powerfully explored the relationships between sounds, images, and philosophy. Tang poets aimed to capture the fleeting and profound, influencing Chinese writers until the present day. Together with the surviving examples of painting and sculpture, Tang poetry manifests a Chinese inner vision and view of the world and cosmos in a way that more abstract scholarly works did not; these creative works express what might otherwise remain theoretical or ethereal into palpable, understandable, and immediate terms.

The most magnificent urban center in the world at the time, the capital of Tang China, Chang'an (literally "Everlasting Peace"), was a walled city built in alignment with the stars to symbolize its role as the world in miniature. The city witnessed the most splendid cultural achievements during the eighth century. As home to the most accomplished artists and thinkers of the day, it played much the same role as Florence did in fifteenth-century Europe. Just as it was witness to the height of Tang culture in the eighth century, it also was destined to be the focal point of the dynasty's decline: when a rogue general decided to rebel in 756, not only was the emperor sent temporarily into exile, but the artists, poets, and priests of the city also fled. Although the political structure of the Tang remained in place for another 150 years (until 907), the city and state, with resources scattered, were weakened. Pretenders to the throne began to emerge, warlords began to consolidate authority, and nomadic peoples on the northern and western borders of the country also competed for political power. But it was a gentle decline: overall the three hundred years of the Tang were marked by impressive advances in all aspects of art, science, and philosophy.

By the early tenth century, the Tang ruling house fell, and a period of chaos ensued. China was divided into at least fifteen different independent political regimes, and peoples on the border areas set up their own states. The cultural glory of Tang was eclipsed, surviving only among tiny warring states. However in the year 960, another unified empire arose, the Song.

The Song Dynasty (920-1279)

The Song dynasty was the second great "medieval" period of China. But unlike the Tang, it coexisted uneasily with powerful rivals to the north. These rivals were the Khitan Tartars of Manchuria and Mongolia, kept at bay only through costly bribes, and the Jurchen people of Central Asia, who were intent on conquering China but could not be influenced by payoffs. While the Song dynasty managed to recapture—and develop—much of the glory of the Tang, it did suffer a blow in 1127 when the Jurchen took the capital of Kaifeng, and sent the Song Chinese administration southward, to establish the Southern Song capital at Hangzhou, near modern Shanghai. Still the Northern Song (while it lasted) and the Southern Song (from 1127 until 1279) achieved incredible feats of learning, science, art, and philosophy. To the Chinese, the Song was a period certainly as great as the Tang. International trade and exchange of ideas continued to flourish, although (during the later Song) primarily through expanding networks of southern sea ports and ocean-going argosies.

Song intellectuals reacted to the threatened existence of their dynasty by developing a defensive, inward-looking strategy: a belief that the Chinese and only the Chinese were capable of true greatness. Some closed their minds to the world outside China and set about the task of defining Chinese canons of proper behavior, government, and arts. Most Buddhist doctrines (judged to be non-Chinese) were largely purged during the Song, and the native Chinese philosophies of Confucianism (in particular) and Taoism saw a resurgence. In fact the great philosopher Zhu Xi taught hopeful students a new and “purer” version of Confucianism that came to be called “Neo-Confucianism.” This philosophy tried to recapture the Confucianism of the past, while integrating other philosophical ideas that had since come into existence. Neo-Confucianism taught people proper Chinese views of the cosmos and of behavior, and provided answers for other “big questions” of life. Most of its ideas and practices survive to the present day, and have also had a notable impact on later societies in Korea and Japan.

During the Song, great advances were also made in science and technology. Hydraulic engineering, from canal and bridge building to the construction of enormous seafaring vessels, was per- fected. Chemical science, pursued in the secret laboratories of Taoist scholars, helped to produce important compounds and chemicals, including gunpowder—and by the year 1000, bombs and grenades became available to Song armies. Biology too made enormous strides: famous physicians conducted well-documented experiments, and many of their efforts helped to codify and improve what was already known in the healing arts of acupuncture and traditional medicine. Perhaps the most significant advance, however, was the invention of movable type printing, achieved around the year 1040, four hundred years before Gutenburg’s printing innovations in Europe. Song printed editions of texts—previously transmitted as handwritten manuscripts—helped to spread literacy and knowledge throughout the realm. Many books survive to this day; they are technological marvels that are highly prized as some of the most beautiful books ever produced.

Song dynasty artists explored new themes and techniques in painting and ceramics. The Song interest in science and minute observation of the world resulted, somewhat paradoxically, in large- scale grand landscape paintings that explore the world in fine detail. New glazes and porcelain techniques flourished. Song artists were interested in both the monumental and the delicate; in the functional and the mysterious, all of which they recognized as intrinsic natural phenomenon of the world. Ordinary and educated people alike were exposed to art and literature through the new invention of printing, which encouraged the development of drama and fiction. Creative pursuits were unified by a cultural inclination to connoisseurship: the wealthy and even not-so-wealthy shared an interest in art, literature, and science, and cultivated good taste in their patronage of the arts. The Song love of the refined extended to relics and antiques, which helped to foster the nascent science of archaeology, as well as the older art of forgery. Connoisseurs embraced even cuisine and gardening, which were transformed into gentlemanly concerns for the first time.

As with the Tang, Song poetry is held in high esteem by the Chinese, but it is different from the Tang varieties. Whereas Tang poets tried to capture fleeting moments and transcendent thoughts, Song masters enjoyed using poetry to explore all aspects of the world around them, including the mundane. Song poetry is thus filled with interesting, sometime humorous, accounts of picnics, travel, wine drinking, and even such quotidian events as going to the dentist or suffering in the summer heat. Nothing was off limits to the writers of Song, and with printing freely available, everything seemed to get published. While the surviving poems of the Tang might number in the tens of thousands, no one has inventoried how many poems survive from the Song; they could number as many as half a million.

The rule of the Song ended in 1279 when Mongol leader Khubilai Khan, having conquered the Jurchen regime in northern China, swept through southern China and brought the Song territories entirely within the fold of the newly proclaimed Yuan dynasty. But that begins another story. The Tang and Song dynasties, fraternal twin dynasties of China’s medieval period, stand out as among the most accomplished of all civilizations in global history: they gave the world many contributions and helped to shape Chinese civilization into what it is today.

Religion and Philosophy in the Tang and Song Dynasties

The Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties were periods of dynamic religious transformation and revival in China, as well as profound philosophical inquiry. The religious landscape was varied and colorful. Along with the ancient indigenous religion, Taoism, Tang dynasty China enthusiastically embraced major religions imported from abroad: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. During the Song period, Christianity disappeared from China, but Taoism and Buddhism continued to flourish and Islam began to take root. The popularity of these religions challenged the longstanding supremacy of Confucianism as the most influential philosophy in social and political life. In response, Song Confucian scholars developed a revised theory of Confucianism that assimilated certain Buddhist and Taoist elements. This philosophy became known as Neo-Confucianism and eventually reclaimed for Confucianism its role as the most influential social ideology in China. Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were the three major influences on Chinese life and art during the Tang and Song dynasties—sometimes competing with each other but often synthesizing and evolving together in ways that were uniquely Chinese.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the most conspicuous features of the religious landscape were the open rivalries as well as the relatively peaceful coexistence among different religions. Thus, the boundaries between different religions were fluid in two senses. First, through competition, different religions interacted with and influenced each other. Thus, while Buddhism and Taoism competed constantly for converts, they never excluded each other. For instance, early Buddhists frequently adopted Taoist terminology when they translated Indian sutras from Sanskrit. Taoists, for their part, also incorporated many Buddhist practices into their philosophical system. A notable example is the celibacy of the Taoist priests. Originally, Taoism did not require its priests to be celibate. However, as part of its interaction with Buddhism, a Taoist movement emerged during the Song which stressed priestly celibacy. As a result, today some branches of Taoism mandate clerical celibacy, while others do not. This tendency toward competitive religious interaction is likewise seen in the Nestorian adoption of Taoist and Buddhist concepts to facilitate the spread of Christian doctrine. Even Neo-Confucianism, which was in some ways a Confucian reaction against theistic religion, drew a great deal from Taoism and Buddhism in order to rejuvenate itself.

The boundaries among religions were also fluid because common believers had the freedom to choose and change their religions at will. In the Tang and Song, if the boundary between different religions existed, it mostly existed as a practical matter for priests. These priests had to compete for the support of the emperors, for numbers of converts, and for financial patronage. However, for a common believer, the boundary was not particularly important. An individual could participate in many different religious activities simultaneously. He could go to a Buddhist temple in the morning and offer sacrifice to a Taoist deity in the evening. She might worship Buddha and the Taoist deities side by side in her house. One chose a particular religion according to personal needs or taste.

Neo-Confucianism

Generally speaking, Confucianism had been the dominate ideology and philosophy in China since the Han dynasty. It was founded by an ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551–479 BCE). His philosophy and teachings were constantly developed, reinterpreted, and refined by his followers throughout the course of Chinese history. The predominant theme of Confucianism is its emphasis on social ties and duties as designated in the proper behavior for "five relationships": sovereign-subject; husband-wife; parent-child; elder brother-younger brother; and friend-friend.

In the middle of the second century BCE, Confucianism was established as the official state ideology. However, during the Tang and Song dynasties influences from Taoism and Buddhism significantly challenged the dominant status of Confucian ideology. Confucian scholars met this challenge by integrating elements of both Taoist and other native philosophies into a single integrative ideology known as Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism can be described as the culmination of an effort to integrate and harmonize several different religious and philosophical traditions that had developed in China over the preceding thousand years, and as a way of making sense of several diverse and sometimes competing philosophies. The Confucian emphasis on principles such as “humaneness,” “filial piety,” and “ritual” was integrated with more abstract Taoist notions of a “the Way” (Tao) that governed all existence, as well numerous Buddhist principles.

Neo-Confucianism is perhaps an expression of the tendency to seek “harmony” in all things—in this case, to try to synthesize complex religious and philosophical views. What resulted was a highly syncretic philosophy that was often very technical in nature; some ancient texts even present what might be described as flowcharts for their readers! Yet seemingly opposed ideas were unified by the notion of *li*, literally meaning “pattern,” or more specifically the “patterned markings of a stone,” but usually translated as “principle.” Neo-Confucians sought to uncover the “pattern” of all things, and firmly believed that all phenomena, including life, nature, destiny, indeed the entirety of existence, were essentially a “pattern” that could be discerned if closely examined. This fundamental premise, many people believe, underlay the Song interest in all things “scientific,” minute, and even trivial—since even the smallest entity had the potential to reveal the underlying pattern or *li* of all things.