Tang and Song China

**MAIN IDEA**

**EMPIRE BUILDING** During the Tang and Song dynasties, China experienced an era of prosperity and technological innovation.

**WHY IT MATTERS NOW**

Chinese inventions from this period, such as printing, gunpowder, and the compass, changed history.

**TERMS & NAMES**

- Tang Taizong
- Wu Zhao

**SETTING THE STAGE** After the Han Dynasty collapsed in A.D. 220, no emperor was strong enough to hold China together. Over the next 350 years, more than 30 local dynasties rose and fell. Finally, by 589, an emperor named Wendi had united northern and southern China once again. He restored a strong central government. Under the next two dynasties, the Tang and the Song, China experienced a prolonged golden age. It became the richest, most powerful, and most advanced country in the world.

The Tang Dynasty Expands China

Wendi declared himself the first emperor of the Sui (sway) Dynasty. The dynasty lasted through only two emperors, from 581 to 618. The Sui emperors' greatest accomplishment was the completion of the Grand Canal. This waterway connected the Huang He and the Chang Jiang. The canal provided a vital route for trade between the northern cities and the southern rice-producing region of the Chang delta.

About a million peasant men and women toiled five years to dig the more than 1,000-mile waterway. Perhaps as many as half of the workers died on this project. Thousands more toiled and died rebuilding the Great Wall. The endless labor on state projects turned the people against the Sui Dynasty. Overworked and overtaxed, they finally revolted. In 618, a member of the imperial court assassinated the second Sui emperor.

**Tang Rulers Create a Powerful Empire** While short-lived, the Sui Dynasty built a strong foundation for the great achievements of the next dynasty, the Tang (taihng). The Tang Dynasty ruled for nearly 300 years (618–907). The Tang emperor who began these achievements was **Tang Taizong**. His brilliant reign lasted from 626 to 649.

Under the Tang rulers, the empire expanded. Taizong's armies reconquered the northern and western lands that China had lost since the decline of the Han Dynasty. By 668, China had extended its influence over Korea as well. The ruler during the campaign in Korea was the empress **Wu Zhao** (woo-jow). From about 660 on, she held the real power while weak emperors sat on the throne. Finally, in 690, Empress Wu assumed the title of emperor for herself—the only woman ever to do so in China.

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Tang rulers further strengthened the central government of China. They expanded the network of roads and canals begun by the Sui. This helped to pull the empire together. They also promoted foreign trade and improvements in agriculture.

**Scholar-Officials** To manage their large empire, the Tang rulers needed to restore China's vast bureaucracy. They did this by reviving and expanding the civil service examination system begun by the Han Dynasty. The relatively few candidates who passed the tough exams became part of an elite group of scholar-officials.

In theory, the exams were open to all men, even commoners. However, only the wealthy could afford the necessary years of education. Also, men with political connections could obtain high positions without taking the exams. Despite these flaws, the system created a remarkably intelligent and capable governing class in China. Before the Tang Dynasty, a few noble families dominated the country. As the examination system grew in importance, talent and education became more important than noble birth in winning power. As a result, many moderately wealthy families shared in China's government.

**The Tang Lose Power** To meet the rising costs of government, Tang rulers imposed crushing taxes in the mid-700s. These brought hardship to the people but failed to cover the costs of military expansion and new building programs.

Moreover, the Tang struggled to control the vast empire they had built. In 751, Muslim armies soundly defeated the Chinese at the Battle of Talas. As a result, Central Asia passed out of Chinese control and into foreign hands. After this time, border attacks and internal rebellions steadily chipped away at the power of the imperial government. Finally, in 907, Chinese rebels sacked and burned the Tang capital at Ch’ang-an and murdered the last Tang emperor, a child.

**The Song Dynasty Restores China**

After the fall of the Tang Dynasty, rival warlords divided China into separate kingdoms. Then, in 960, an able general named Taizu reuniﬁed China and proclaimed himself the ﬁrst Song (sung) emperor. The Song Dynasty, like the Tang, lasted about three centuries (960–1279). Although the Song ruled a smaller empire than either the Han or the Tang, China remained stable, powerful, and prosperous.

Song armies never regained the western lands lost after 751. Nor did they regain northern lands that had been lost to nomadic tribes during the Tang decline. For a time, Song emperors tried to buy peace with their northern enemies. They paid hefty annual tributes of silver, silk, and tea. This policy, however, ultimately failed
to stop the threat from the north. In the early 1100s, a Manchurian people called the Jurchen conquered northern China and established the Jin Empire. The Jurchen forced the Song to retreat south across the Huang He. After 1127, the Song emperors ruled only southern China.

The Song rulers established a grand new capital at Hangzhou, a coastal city south of the Chang Jiang. Despite its military troubles, the dynasty of the Southern Song (1127–1279) saw rapid economic growth. The south had become the economic heartland of China. Merchants in southern cities grew rich from trade with Chinese in the north, nomads of Central Asia, and people of western Asia and Europe.

**An Era of Prosperity and Innovation**

During the Tang and Song dynasties, China’s population nearly doubled, soaring to 100 million. By the Song era, China had at least ten cities with a population of 1 million each. China had become the most populous country in the world. It also had become the most advanced.

**Science and Technology** Artisans and scholars made important technological advances during the Tang and Song eras. Among the most important inventions were movable type and gunpowder. With movable type, a printer could arrange blocks of individual characters in a frame to make up a page for printing. Previously, printers had carved the words of a whole page into one large block. The development of gunpowder, in time, led to the creation of explosive weapons such as bombs, grenades, small rockets, and cannons. Other important inventions of this period include porcelain, the mechanical clock, paper money, and the use of the magnetic compass for navigation. (See the Social History feature on pages 328–329.)

The 1000s to the 1200s was a rich period for Chinese mathematics. The Chinese made advances in arithmetic and algebra. Many mathematical ideas, such as using negative numbers, spread from China southward and westward.

**Agriculture** The rapid growth of China resulted in part from advances in farming. Farmers especially improved the cultivation of rice. In about the year 1000, China imported a new variety of fast-ripening rice from Vietnam. This allowed the farmers to harvest two rice crops each year rather than one. To make sure that farmers knew about this improved variety, Chinese officials distributed seedlings throughout the country. The agricultural improvements enabled China’s farmers to produce more food. This was necessary to feed the rapidly expanding population in the cities.

**Trade and Foreign Contacts** Under the Tang and Song emperors, foreign trade flourished. Tang imperial armies guarded the great Silk Roads, which linked China to the West. Eventually, however, China lost control over these routes during the long Tang decline. After this time, Chinese merchants relied increasingly on ocean trade. Chinese advances in sailing technology, including use of the magnetic compass, made it possible for sea trade to expand. Up and down China’s long coastline, the largest port cities in the...
world bustled with international trade. Merchant ships carried trade goods to Korea and Japan. They sailed across the Indian Ocean to India, the Persian Gulf, and even the coast of Africa. Chinese merchants established trading colonies around Southeast Asia. Many foreign traders, mostly Arabs, resided in Chinese cities. Through trade and travel, Chinese culture spread throughout East Asia. One major cultural export was Buddhism. This religion spread from China to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. The exchange of goods and ideas was two-way. For example, foreign religions, including Islam and some Eastern sects of Christianity, spread to China and won followers.

**A Golden Age of Poetry and Art** The prosperity of the Tang and Song dynasties nourished an age of artistic brilliance. The Tang period produced great poetry. Two of its most celebrated poets were Li Bo, who wrote about life’s pleasures, and Tu Fu, who praised orderliness and Confucian virtues. Tu Fu also wrote critically about war and the hardships of soldiers. Once he himself was captured by rebels and taken to Ch’ang-an, the capital city. He had sent his family to the village of Fuzhou for safety. Here he describes their separation:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**
The same moon is above Fuzhou tonight;  
From the open window she will be watching it alone,  
The poor children are too little to be able to remember Ch’ang-an.  
Her perfumed hair will be dampened by the dew, the air may be too chilly on her delicate arms.  
When can we both lean by the wind-blown curtains and see the tears dry on each other’s face?  

**TU FU, “Moonlight Night”**

Chinese painting reached new heights of beauty during the Song Dynasty. Painting of this era shows Daoist influence. Artists emphasized the beauty of natural landscapes and objects such as a single branch or flower. The artists did not use bright colors. Black ink was their favorite paint. Said one Song artist, “Black is ten colors.”

**MAIN IDEA**

*Analyzing Primary Sources*

What themes does Tu Fu explore in this poem?
Changes in Chinese Society

China's prosperity produced many social changes during the Tang and Song periods. Chinese society became increasingly mobile. People moved to the cities in growing numbers. The Chinese also experienced greater social mobility than ever before. The most important avenue for social advancement was the civil service system.

**Levels of Society** During Tang and Song times, the power of the old aristocratic families began to fade. A new, much larger upper class emerged, made up of scholar-officials and their families. Such a class of powerful, well-to-do people is called the *gentry*. The gentry attained their status through education and civil service positions rather than through land ownership. Below the gentry was an urban middle class. It included merchants, shopkeepers, skilled artisans, minor officials, and others. At the bottom of urban society were laborers, soldiers, and servants. In the countryside lived the largest class by far, the peasants. They toiled for wealthy landowners as they had for centuries.

**The Status of Women** Women had always been subservient to men in Chinese society. Their status further declined during the Tang and Song periods. This was especially true among the upper classes in cities. There a woman's work was deemed less important to the family's prosperity and status. Changing attitudes affected peasant families less, however. Peasant women worked in the fields and helped produce their family's food and income.

One sign of the changing status of women was the new custom of binding the feet of upper-class girls. When a girl was very young, her feet were bound tightly with cloth, which eventually broke the arch and curled all but the big toe under. This produced what was amusingly called a "lily-foot." Women with bound feet were crippled for life. To others in society, such a woman reflected the wealth and prestige of her husband, who could afford such a beautiful but impractical wife.

The social, economic, and technological transformations of the Tang and Song periods permanently shaped Chinese civilization. They endured even as China fell to a group of nomadic outsiders, the Mongols, whom you will learn about in Section 2.
The Mongol Conquests

MAIN IDEA

EMPIRE BUILDING The Mongols, a nomadic people from the steppe, conquered settled societies across much of Asia.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The Mongols built the largest unified land empire in world history.

TERMS & NAMES

- pastoralist
- clan
- Pax
- Mongolica
- Genghis Khan

SETTING THE STAGE While the Chinese prospered during the Song Dynasty, a great people far to the north were also gaining strength. The Mongols of the Asian steppe lived their lives on the move. They prided themselves on their skill on horseback, their discipline, their ruthlessness, and their courage in battle. They also wanted the wealth and glory that came with conquering mighty empires. This desire soon exploded into violent conflict that transformed Asia and Europe forever.

Nomads of the Asian Steppe

A vast belt of dry grassland, called the steppe, stretches across the landmass of Eurasia. The significance of the steppe to neighboring civilizations was twofold. First, it served as a land trade route connecting the East and the West. Second, it was home to nomadic peoples who frequently swept down on their neighbors to plunder, loot, and conquer.

Geography of the Steppe There are two main expanses of the Eurasian steppe. The western steppe runs from Central Asia to eastern Europe. It was the original home of some of the ancient invaders you have read about, including the Hittites. The eastern steppe, covering the area of present-day Mongolia, was the first home of the Huns, the Turks, and the Mongols.

Very little rain falls on the steppe, but the dry, windswept plain supports short, hardy grasses. Seasonal temperature changes can be dramatic. Temperatures in Mongolia, for example, range from -57°F in winter to 96°F in the summer. Rainfall is somewhat more plentiful and the climate milder in the west than in the east. For this reason, movements of people have historically tended to be toward the west and the south.

The Nomadic Way of Life Nomadic peoples were pastoralists—that is, they herded domesticated animals. They were constantly on the move, searching for good pasture to feed their herds. But they did not wander. Rather, they followed a familiar
seasonal pattern and returned on a regular basis to the same campsites. Keeping claim to land that was not permanently occupied was difficult. Battles frequently arose among nomadic groups over grassland and water rights.

Asian nomads practically lived on horseback as they followed their huge herds over the steppe. They depended on their animals for food, clothing, and housing. Their diet consisted of meat and mare’s milk. They wore clothing made of skins and wool, and they lived in portable felt tents called yurts.

Steppe nomads traveled together in kinship groups called clans. The members of each clan claimed to be descended from a common ancestor. Different clans sometimes came together when they needed a large force to attack a common enemy or raid their settled neighbors.

Steppe Nomads and Settled Societies The differing ways of life of nomadic and settled peoples resulted in constant interaction between them. Often, they engaged in peaceful trade. The nomads exchanged horses, for example, for basic items they lacked, such as grain, metal, cloth, and tea. Nomads were accustomed to scarcity and hardship. They prided themselves on their toughness. However, they were sometimes tempted by the rich land and relative wealth of townspeople and took what they wanted by force. As a result, settled peoples lived in constant fear of raids.

Time and again in history, nomadic peoples rode out of the steppe to invade border towns and villages. When a state or empire was strong and organized, it could protect its frontier. If the state or empire became divided and weak, the nomads could increase their attacks and gain more plunder. Occasionally, a powerful nomadic group was able to conquer a whole empire and become its rulers. Over generations, these nomadic rulers often became part of the civilization they conquered.

The Rise of the Mongols

For centuries, the Mongol people had roamed the eastern steppe in loosely organized clans. It took a military and political genius to unite the Mongols into a force with a single purpose—conquest.

Genghis Khan Unites the Mongols Around 1200, a Mongol clan leader named Temujin sought to unify the Mongols under his leadership. He fought and defeated his rivals one by one. In 1206, Temujin accepted the title Genghis Khan, or “universal ruler” of the Mongol clans.

Over the next 21 years, Genghis led the Mongols in conquering much of Asia. His first goal was China. After invading the northern Jin Empire in 1211, however, his attention turned to the Islamic region west of Mongolia. Angered by the murder of Mongol traders and an ambassador at the hands of the Muslims, Genghis launched a campaign of terror across Central Asia. The Mongols destroyed one city after another—Utrar, Samarkand, Bukhara—and slaughtered many inhabitants. By 1225, Central Asia was under Mongol control.
Genghis the Conqueror Several characteristics lay behind Genghis Khan’s stunning success as a conqueror. First, he was a brilliant organizer. He assembled his Mongol warriors into a mighty fighting force (see below). Following the model of the Chinese military, Genghis grouped his warriors in armics of 10,000. These in turn were organized into 1,000-man brigades, 100-man companies, and 10-man squads. He put his most battle-proven and loyal men in command of these units.

Second, Genghis was a gifted strategist. He used various tricks to confuse his enemy. Sometimes, a small Mongol cavalry unit would attack, then pretend to gallop away in flight. The enemy usually gave chase. Then the rest of the Mongol army would appear suddenly and slaughter the surprised enemy forces.

Finally, Genghis Khan used cruelty as a weapon. He believed in terrifying his enemies into surrender. If a city refused to open its gates to him, he might kill the entire population when he finally captured the place. The terror the Mongols inspired spread ahead of their armies, which led many towns to surrender without a fight. As one Arab historian wrote, “In the countries that have not yet been overrun by them, everyone spends the night afraid that they may appear there too.”

The Mongol Empire
Genghis Khan died in 1227—not from violence, but from illness. His successors continued to expand his empire. In less than 50 years, the Mongols conquered territory from China to Poland. In so doing, they created the largest unified land empire in history. (See the map on page 334.)

History in Depth

A Mighty Fighting Force
Mongol soldiers were superb horsemen, having spent all their lives in the saddle. Annual game roundups gave young men the chance to practice skills they would use in battle and gave their leaders the opportunity to spot promising warriors. When on the move, each soldier was accompanied by three extra horses. By changing mounts, soldiers could stay in the saddle for up to ten days and nights at a time. When charging toward a target, they covered as much as 120 miles a day. If food was scarce, a Mongol soldier might make a small gash in the neck of one of his horses and sustain himself by drinking the blood.

A key to Mongol horsemanship was the stirrup, which was invented on the steppe in the second century B.C. Stirrups enabled a mounted warrior to stand, turn, and shoot arrows behind him.
The Khanates After Genghis's death, his sons and grandsons continued the campaign of conquest. Armies under their leadership drove south, east, and west out of inner Asia. They completed their conquest of northern China and invaded Korea. They leveled the Russian city of Kiev and reached the banks of the Adriatic Sea. The cities of Venice and Vienna were within their grasp. However, in the 1250s the Mongols halted their westward campaign and turned their attention to Persia. By 1260, the Mongols had divided their huge empire into four regions, or khanates. (See the map on page 334.) These were the Khanate of the Great Khan (Mongolia and China), the Khanate of Chagatai (Central Asia), the Ilkhanate (Persia), and the Khanate of the Golden Horde (Russia). A descendant of Genghis ruled each khanate.

The Mongols as Rulers Many of the areas invaded by the Mongols never recovered. The populations of some cities were wiped out. In addition, the Mongols destroyed ancient irrigation systems in areas such as the Tigris and Euphrates valleys. Thus, the land could no longer support resettlement. While ferocious in war, the Mongols were quite tolerant in peace. They rarely imposed their beliefs or way of life on those they conquered. Over time, some Mongol rulers even adopted aspects of the culture of the people they ruled. The Ilkhans and the Golden Horde, for example, became Muslims. Growing cultural differences among the khanates contributed to the eventual splitting up of the empire.

The Mongol Peace From the mid-1200s to the mid-1300s, the Mongols imposed stability and law and order across much of Eurasia. This period is sometimes called the Pax Mongolica, or Mongol Peace. The Mongols guaranteed safe passage for trade caravans, travelers, and missionaries from one end of the empire to another.
Trade between Europe and Asia had never been more active. Ideas and inventions traveled along with the trade goods. Many Chinese innovations, such as gunpowder, reached Europe during this period.

Other things spread along with the goods and the ideas. Some historians speculate that the epidemic of bubonic plague that devastated Europe during the 1300s was first spread by the Mongols. (See Chapter 14.) The disease might have traveled along trade routes or have been passed to others by infected Mongol troops.

For a brief period of history, the nomadic Mongols were the lords of city-based civilizations across Asia, including China. As you will read in Section 3, China continued to thrive under Mongol rule.

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.
- pastoralist
- clan
- Genghis Khan
- Pax Mongolica

**USING YOUR NOTES** 2. Which of the listed events do you think is the most important? Why?

**MAIN IDEAS** 3. In what ways did steppe nomads and the people of neighboring settled societies interact?
4. Why was terror an important weapon for Genghis Khan?
5. What happened to the Mongol Empire in the years after Genghis Khan’s death?

**CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING**

6. **MAKING INFERENCES** What characteristics of their culture do you think contributed to the Mongols’ military success? Explain your response.
7. **ANALYZING MOTIVES** What do you think drove Genghis Khan to conquer a great empire? Explain your answer.
8. **FORMING AND SUPPORTING OPINIONS** “The Mongols were great conquerors but poor rulers.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
9. **WRITING ACTIVITY** Write a brief essay discussing the impact of interaction between the Mongols and the various cultures that they conquered.

**MULTIMEDIA ACTIVITY**

**CREATING AN ILLUSTRATED REPORT**

Today, most Mongols live in the country of Mongolia. Use the Internet to find information on Mongolian ways of life. Then create an illustrated report comparing ways of life today and in Genghis Khan’s time.