

HISTORICAL LITERACY: HANDOUT A1

Tang and Song Dynasties: An Overview

TANG DYNASTY

The Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties are sometimes referred to in textbooks as Medieval China because they coincided in time with the Early and High Middle Ages of Western Europe. But life was very different in the refined empires of Tang and Song China than it was in the struggling Frankish kingdom of Charlemagne or England during the Norman invasion. By the time two Chinese military leaders rebelled against the Sui imperial family and established the Tang Dynasty in 618, Chinese administrations already had hundreds of years of experience building and maintaining empires. The Tang and Song dynasties spanned more than 600 years (from 618 to 1279) and witnessed astonishing advances in science, technology, arts, and philosophy. The Tang empire was noted as a center for foreign exchange in goods and ideas, a powerful expansionist military, a capable civil service and system of education, and an explosion of arts and culture. The Song dynasty built on many of the Tang's accomplishments but life for the Chinese in this period was different. The security of the Song empire was threatened by invaders on its northern and western borders making foreign interaction in the Song more dangerous. Many Chinese responded to these invasions by often turning away from foreign goods and ideas and focusing instead on philosophies and experiences closer to home.

When the Tang dynasty came to power the empire instituted many changes in Chinese government and society to strengthen and further unify China. The second Tang emperor, Taizong, revived and expanded the practice of choosing government officials through rigorous written examinations that emphasized Confucian values of loyalty and service. In this way, the emperors could be sure of placing loyal and hard-working officials all over the empire. This would be especially important as the empire expanded, making it necessary for officials to serve far from the capital city of Chang'an. The Tang rulers tried to expand their holdings as far as possible by placing military bases along the Silk Road. These outposts brought new products and ideas into China from as far away as Persia and Byzantium.

In order to feed the growing population, the Tang emperors also started a policy of land reform with the goal of putting more land into the hands of farmers. This policy significantly increased farm production. More rice was shipped from the fields in the south to the centers of power in northern China along the Grand Canal.

Increased trade and contact with foreign cultures led to the introduction of religions and philosophies from abroad. In addition to the native religious philosophies of Daoism and Confucianism, some foreign religions also became popular. The most important of these was Buddhism which spread along the Silk Road into China from India. Emperor Taizong who was a supporter of Buddhism ordered the building of a special pagoda in Chang'an to house important sutras brought from India by the famous monk, Xuanzang. It was through the desire to create large numbers of copies of Buddhist scriptures that the development of simple printing technology became widespread during Tang times.

During the tenth century, Tang rule was weakened as a result of invasions of nomadic peoples on their northern and western borders and internal political struggles. Further, China's government began to lose control of the Silk Road. Heavy taxes and imperial and administrative corruption finally caused rebellion, and in 907 the last Tang emperor was overthrown.

SONG DYNASTY

In 960, after a half century of fighting and disorder, a military leader named Zhao Kuangyin established the Song dynasty. The Song dynasty was the second great medieval period in China. Unlike the Tang period, however, the Song dynasty constantly faced the threat of invasion. Song emperors kept peace with the threatening northern kingdoms of the Qidan and the Tangut by sending them large amounts of silk, silver, and tea. Instead of expanding and controlling a far-flung empire like the Tang, the Song focused on increasing prosperity and stability at home.

The Song dynasty placed great value on diplomacy and civilian-controlled government. Examination as a means to obtaining official government positions became even more important during the Song dynasty. Only ten percent of the test candidates were allowed to pass at each level. Wealthy families spent large sums of money on books, schools, and tutors so their sons would have better chances of passing the civil service examination that included memorizing passages from Confucian classics and composing complex poems on given themes.

But the Song dynasty suffered a blow in 1127 when neither bribes nor military defenses could prevent the Jurchen peoples of Central Asia from invading the northern Song capital of Kaifeng. The Song administration and many of the Chinese people retreated to southern China and established a new capital at Hangzhou. The dynasty after this relocation has come to be referred to by historians as the Southern Song. But even after this defeat, scholars, artists, scientists, and engineers continued to thrive in the Southern Song period.

Cut off from the Silk Road in the north, China turned to ocean-going trade. Shipbuilders made crafts with several masts and stern post rudders replaced oars. The magnetic compass allowed mariners to sail out of sight of land for longer distances. Constantly on the defense from outside attack, the Song developed gunpowder technology to create flame-throwers and explosive rockets. The influx of people to southern China meant more mouths to feed in the rice-growing region of the south. Song scientists with the Ministry of Agriculture developed faster growing rice through selective breeding, thereby increasing the number of harvests.

The ever-present threat of invaders from the outside made many Song Chinese turn away from Buddhism—now considered a foreign religion—and focus on reviving the native values of Confucianism. One result of this was the weakening of women's autonomy and rights due to Confucius' philosophy that stressed women's obedience and dependency on men.

Intellectual life grew along with urban life. More and more people moved to urban centers of the Song to participate in manufacturing and trade. An increasing demand for books on many subjects spurred tremendous growth in publishing, and booksellers could be found in all major Song cities. Southern Song urban centers flourished until 1276, when the last Song regent surrendered to the Mongol forces of Khublai Khan rather than put up a futile resistance and ultimately see his people and cities destroyed.

1. What actions, goals and accomplishments do the Tang and Song dynasties share?

2. In what ways are the Tang and Song dynasties different in their actions, goals, and accomplishments?
