

Reunification and Renaissance in Chinese Civilization: The Era of the Tang and Song Dynasties

Chapter 12

EQ: How does China re-emerge from 4 centuries of turmoil? What makes the Tang-Song era the "Golden Age" of China? Why was there conflict between Buddhists and Confucian scholars?

Decline of the Han and the Aftermath

- Period of Six Dynasties (220-589 CE)
- The bureaucratic system of the Han collapsed and was replaced
 - Scholars were replaced by land owners as leaders
- Non-Chinese nomads and WARLORDS ruled much of China
- There was LARGE SCALE economic, technological, intellectual and urban decline (Dark Ages)
- Buddhism (religious impact on decline of a civilization) became a dominant force in cultural life replacing Confucianism


The Comeback Begins – The Sui

- The rise of the Sui appeared to be just another nomadic group exerting their power to dominate China
- However, Wendi, a member of a prominent noble family in northern China, consolidated his power
 - He married his daughter to the Northern Zhou ruler, then overthrew him and became emperor of the North
 - He then amassed an army and conquered the Chen kingdom in the South
- The Sui dynasty was established in 589 CE
- Wendi won favor from the people by lowering taxes and establishing a stable food supply for the people




The Sui – All Downhill from here...

- Wendi's son Yangdi murdered his father and took power
- Yangdi reformed the legal code and brought back for the first time the Confucian educational system for training bureaucrats
 - The scholar gentry was brought back into administrative power
- Yangdi's problem was his liked to build and conquer things
 - He spent lots of money building a new capital and the famed Grand Canal, which linked the Yangtze to the Huang He
 - He also unsuccessfully attempted to conquer Korea and was defeated handily in the West by Turkic nomads (Silk Road)
- Widespread revolt ensued based on these failures and Yangdi was assassinated in 618 thus ending the brief Sui era



I Love Tang...it's what the astronauts drink!

- This newly revived imperial rule of the Sui was saved thanks to the Duke of Tang, Li Yuan (Gaozu)...he "graciously" took the throne after Yangdi's assassination
- Together, with his second son (Tang Taizong), they amassed a great army and pushed back the Turkish nomads
- Rather than becoming brutal conquerors, Li Yuan and his son assimilated neighboring cultures into Chinese rule (Sinification)
 - Central Asian Turks, Vietnamese, Koreans, Manchuria and importantly Japan





The Rebirth of Bureaucracy and The Examination system

- The restored scholar gentry (smart/educated people) and a revitalized Confucian ideology maintained imperial unity
- The landed aristocracy's power was reduced and power was divided between the imperial family and the scholar gentry bureaucracy
- The imperial family held check over the scholar gentry and even established a Bureau of Censors (like a CIA) to watch over them
- The Han system of examination for position in the bureaucracy was reinstated
 - The highest offices went to those who could pass detailed tests on Confucian thought and Chinese literature
 - Birth and family connection also played an extensive role in jockeying for position for high office
 - Average commoners could still pass tests and make headway in the bureaucracy, BUT most officials were STILL from prominent families



Religion in Tang China

- A revival of Confucian/Daoist ideology threatened Buddhism's new hold
- Many rulers were patrons of Buddhism and the elite class accepted the faith because it allowed for easy subjugation of the people
- Empress Wu even spent state money on proliferating the faith (building monasteries and gold Buddha statues)
- This angered Confucian and Daoist fundamentalists causing an anti Buddhist backlash
 - Daoists used "magic" and their powers of prediction to scare people away from being Buddhist
 - Confucians devised a plan of taxation (similar to the taxation of non-Muslims in the Abbasid era) on Buddhists
- Emperor Wuzong enforced taxes on Buddhists in the 9th Century and open persecution of Buddhists began
 - Many monasteries were destroyed, many monks and nuns had to return to secular Chinese life...Buddhism was diminished though it remain a force in southern rural and mountain areas (Tibet)

Tang Decline

- Decline began under the rule of Emperor Xuanzong
 - Just like in the Abbasid Empire, women in a harem (prostitutes!) distracted the emperor from normal affairs
 - A young harem girl named Yang Guifei used her influence over Xuanzong to fill the court with her relatives
 - This led to one of Xuanzong's generals leading a rebellion in 755.. it was crushed, but several troops mutinied, killing Yang Guifei's family and forcing her to be executed by Xuanzong
- Eventually, nomadic peoples and regional rulers used the disorder as an opportunity to express autonomy from the empire
- Peasant revolts erupted as economic conditions worsened
- The Tang Dynasty ended in 907


A Brand New Song

- After a period of turmoil, a military commander named Zhao Kuangyin (aka Taizu) reunited China under one dynasty in 960 CE
 - Taizu was not only a fearless military leader, but a learned scholar...in his campaigns he collected knowledge, not booty
- One problem would plague Taizu -> Manchuria...he failed to defeat their Liao Dynasty, leading Taizu to have to pay heavy tribute to their ruler to keep them from invading his empire
- The Song were quite weak politically compared to the Tang
 - The military had to be controlled by the scholar gentry, and only civil officials could be regional governors, limiting the temptations of military warlords to wrest away power from the bureaucracy
 - Comparatively the Song ended up having less territory than the Tang and had difficulty even controlling that area (compare pg 265 to 273)



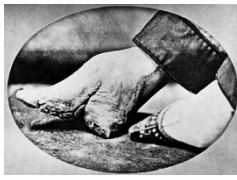
The Confucian Revival

- At least Confucianism made a major comeback during the Song period
 - Long lost texts were recovered, new schools and libraries were opened
 - Many new thinkers emerged to interpret the meanings of Confucius' teachings
- Zhu Xi emphasized the application of Confucian philosophy to everyday life in China
 - He argued that Confucian thought produced superior people who were capable of governing and teaching others
- This application developed into Neo-Confucianism
 - A hostility developed to foreign ideas and innovations (isolationism)
 - The emphasis on rank, obligation and deference reinforced class, gender and age divisions
 - Social harmony would be maintained, according to Neo-Cs, as long as men and women performed their tasks appropriately (man as patriarch, woman as subordinate)




Neo Confucian Male Dominance

- Independence and legal rights of women, particularly in the elite, worsened during the Tang-Song era
- The woman was stressed as a homemaker and mother, had to be prim and proper, a virgin upon marriage...while the men could be pigs!
- Laws favored inheritance and divorce rights to males only...women received NO education
- Lastly, the FOOT BINDING
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The Golden Age: Sui, Tang and Song

- The Grand Canal became an important waterway, connecting north and south China (Huang He to the Yangtze) and making agricultural transport much easier, justifying Yangdi's obsessions
- North/South trade revitalized Silk Road trade with Muslim empires, began a period of overseas trade on junks throughout the south seas, making connections with the Indian Ocean trading routes
- Trade revolutionized the use of money and credit in Chinese society...new banks/deposit shops sprung up with the first use of paper money in the world in the Tang era...it was called "flying money" and was like traveler's checks...later, however, the government, fearing forgery and poor currency backing by private banks, began to issue money, seriously deflating and destroying this new credit process



The Golden Age: Sui, Tang and Song

- Vast Urban centers surged...the Tang capital, Changan had 2 million people and many other cities had 100,000 inhabitants...the Song capital of Huangzhou was like a Venice, surrounded by water and was the key port of trade in that era
- During the Tang/Song era, we find the emergence of the most notable inventions from China
 - Gunpowder (first as magic, then as entertainment) and the associated weapons
 - The compass, for sea navigation
 - The abacus, the first calculator
 - Simple moveable type printing

The Song Ends...

- Again foreign nomads cause a decline in a Chinese empire...the Liao began to carve territory out of the Huang He region of Song territory
- The Tanguts from Tibet established the Xi Xia kingdom in the west
- The Song virtually paid tribute to these kingdoms to raise an army and defend their empire from other nomads...this drained the treasury and (as usual) put a burden on the peasantry
- Wang Anshi, chief minister of the emperor Shenzong, attempted to reform the Song system in the late 11th C
 - He brought Legalism back (Shi Huangdi) and expanded agricultural expansion by providing cheap loans from the treasury
 - Landlords and the scholar gentry were now taxed, because they were exempted from military service, in order to pay for a stronger military
- After his death, the Song collapsed and the dynasty fled to the south regions along the Yangtze. The smaller southern Song dynasty ruled this area until 1279, when the Mongols came!

