

## CHAPTER 12

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

#### CHAPTER SUMMARY

Basic themes of Chinese civilization underwent vital consolidation during the postclassical period. Less fundamental innovation occurred than in the Americas and Europe. Important developments took place in technology. Political turmoil followed the fall of the Han during the Period of the Six Dynasties (220-589 C.E.), and the empire's bureaucratic apparatus collapsed. The scholar-gentry class lost ground to landed families. Non-Chinese nomads ruled much of China, and a foreign religion, Buddhism, replaced Confucianism as a primary force in cultural life. There was economic, technological, intellectual, and urban decline. New dynasties, the Sui and Tang, from the end of the 6th century brought a restoration of Chinese civilization. Political unity returned as nomads and nobility were brought under state control and the bureaucracy was rebuilt. Major changes occurred in economic and social life as the focus of a revived civilization shifted from the north to the Yangzi valley and southern and eastern coastal areas. The Song dynasty continued the revival; their era saw the restoration of the scholar-gentry and the Confucian order. It was a time of artistic, literary, and technological flourishing. Male dominance reached new heights.

**Rebuilding the Imperial Edifice in the Sui-Tang Eras.** A noble, Wendi, with the support of nomadic military leaders, won control of northern China. In 589, he defeated the Chen kingdom, which ruled much of the South, and established the Sui dynasty as ruler of the traditional Chinese core. Wendi won popularity by lowering taxes and establishing granaries to ensure a stable, cheap food supply.

**Sui Excesses and Collapse.** Wendi's son Yangdi continued strengthening the state by further conquests and victories over nomads. He reformed the legal code and the Confucian educational system. The scholar-gentry were brought back into the imperial administration. Yangdi undertook extensive and expensive construction projects at a new capital, Loyang, and for a series of canals to link the empire. He attempted unsuccessfully to conquer Korea, and was defeated by Turkic nomads in central Asia in 615. Widespread revolts followed. Imperial rule crumbled and Yangdi was assassinated in 618.

**The Emergence of the Tang and the Restoration of the Empire.** Imperial unity was saved when Li Yuan, Duke of Tang and a former supporter of the Sui, won control of China and began the Tang dynasty. Tang armies extended the empire's reach to the borders of Afghanistan and thus dominated the nomads of the frontier borderlands. The Tang used Turkic nomads in their military and tried to assimilate them into Chinese culture. The Great Wall was repaired. The extensive Tang Empire stretched into Tibet, Vietnam, Manchuria, and Korea.

**Rebuilding the Bureaucracy.** A restored scholar-gentry elite and reworked Confucian ideology helped the Tang to maintain imperial unity. The power of the aristocracy was reduced. Political authority henceforth was shared by imperial families and scholar-gentry bureaucrats. The

bureaucracy, subject to strict controls, reached from the imperial court to district levels of administration. A Bureau of Censors watched all officials.

**The Growing Importance of the Examination System.** Under the Tang and Song, the numbers of scholar-gentry rose far above Han levels. They greatly extended the examination system, and civil service advancement patterns were regularized. Specialized exams were administered by the Ministry of Public Rites. The highest offices went only to individuals able to pass exams based on the Confucian classics and Chinese literature. Additional exams determined their ranking in the pool eligible for office and awarded special social status. Birth and family connections remained important for gaining high office. Intelligent commoners might rise to high positions, but the central administration was dominated by a small number of prominent families.

**State and Religion in the Tang-Song Era.** The Confucian revival threatened Buddhism's place in Chinese life. Many previous rulers had been strong Buddhist supporters. Chinese monks gave the foreign religion Chinese qualities. Salvationist Mahayana Buddhism won wide mass acceptance during the era of war and turmoil. Elite Chinese accepted Chan Buddhism, or Zen, which stressed meditation and appreciation of natural and artistic beauty. Early Tang rulers continued to patronize Buddhism, especially Empress Wu (690-705). She endowed monasteries, commissioned colossal statues of Buddha, and sought to make Buddhism the state religion. There were about 50,000 monasteries by the middle of the 9th century.

**The Anti-Buddhist Backlash.** Confucians and Daoists opposed Buddhist growth, castigating it as an alien faith. Daoists stressed their magical and predictive powers. Confucian scholar-administrators worked to convince the Tang that untaxed Buddhist monasteries posed an economic threat to the empire. Measures to limit land and resources going to Buddhists gave way to open persecution under Emperor Wuzong (841-847). Thousands of monasteries and shrines were destroyed; hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns had to return to secular life. Buddhist lands were taxed or redistributed to taxpaying nobles and peasants. Buddhism survived the persecutions, but in a much reduced condition. Confucianism emerged as the enduring central ideology of Chinese civilization.

**Tang Decline and the Rise of the Song.** The reign of Emperor Xuanzong (713-756) marked the zenith of Tang power. He initially advanced political and economic reform; later he turned to patronizing the arts and the pleasures of the imperial city. Xuanzong became infatuated with an imperial harem woman, Yang Guifei. She filled upper levels of government with her relatives and gained authority in court politics. Rival cliques stimulated unrest, while lack of royal direction caused economic distress and military weakness. A serious revolt occurred in 755. The rebels were defeated, and Yang Guifei was killed, but Xuanzong and succeeding rulers provided weak leadership for the dynasty. Nomadic frontier peoples and regional governors used the disorder to gain virtual independence. Worsening economic conditions in the 9th century caused many revolts, some of them popular movements led by peasants.

**The Founding of the Song Dynasty.** The last Tang emperor resigned in 907, but, after a period of turmoil, a military commander, Zhao Kuangyin, renamed Taizu, in 960 reunited China under one dynasty, the Song. His failure to defeat the Liao dynasty of Manchuria, founded by Khitan nomads in 907, established a lasting precedent for weakness in dealing with northern nomadic

peoples. Ensuing military victories by the Khitans led to the paying of heavy tribute to the Liao, who became very much influenced by Chinese culture.

**Song Politics: Settling for Partial Restoration.** The Song never matched the Tang in political or military strength. To prevent a return of the conditions ending Tang rule, the military was subordinated to scholar-gentry civilians. Song rulers strongly promoted the interests of the Confucian scholar-gentry class over aristocratic and Buddhist rivals. Salaries were increased, civil service exams were made routine, and successful candidates had a better chance for employment.

**The Revival of Confucian Thought.** Confucian ideas and values dominated intellectual life. Long-neglected texts were recovered; new academies for the study of the classics and impressive libraries were founded. Many thinkers labored to produce differing interpretations of Confucian and Daoist thought and to prove the superiority of indigenous thought. The most prominent neo-Confucianist, Zhu Xi, emphasized the importance of applying philosophical principles to everyday life. Neo-Confucians believed that the cultivation of personal morality was the highest human goal. Confucian learning, they argued, produced superior men to govern and teach others. Neo-Confucian thinking had a lasting effect on intellectual life. Hostility to foreign thought prevented the entry of innovations from other societies, while the stress on tradition stifled critical thinking within China. Neo-Confucian emphasis on rank, obligation, deference, and performance of rituals reinforced class, gender, and age distinctions. The authority of the patriarchal family head was strengthened. Social harmony and prosperity, claimed neo-Confucianists, was maintained when men and women performed the tasks appropriate to their status.

**Roots of Decline: Attempts at Reform.** Song weakness before the Khitan encouraged other nomads to carve out kingdoms on the northern borders. The Tangut from Tibet established the kingdom of Xi Xia, southwest of Liao. The Song paid them and other peoples tribute and maintained a large army to protect against invasion, thus draining state resources and burdening the peasantry. Song emphasis on scholar-gentry concerns contributed to military decline. Confucian scholar and chief minister Wang Anshi attempted sweeping reforms in the late 11th century. He used legalist principles and encouraged agricultural expansion through cheap loans and government-assisted irrigation projects. The landlord and scholar-gentry were taxed, and the revenues went for military reform. Wang Anshi even attempted to revitalize the educational system by giving preference to analytical skills.

**Reaction and Disaster: The Flight to the South.** When the emperor supporting Wang Anshi died in 1085, his successor favored conservatives opposing reform. Neo-Confucianists gained power and reversed Wang's policies. Economic conditions deteriorated, and the military was unable to defend the northern borders. The nomadic Jurchens, after overthrowing Liao, in 1115 established the Qin kingdom. They invaded China and annexed most of the Yellow River basin. The Song fled south and established a capital at Huangzhou in the Yangzi River basin. The small southern Song dynasty ruled from 1127 to 1279.

**Tang and Song Prosperity: The Basis of a Golden Age.** The Sui and Tang had built canals because of a major shift in Chinese population balance. Yangdi's Grand Canal, eventually more than 1,200 miles long, linked the original civilization centers of the North with the Yangzi River

basin. The rice-growing regions of the South became the major food producers of the empire. By early Song times, the South was the leader in crop production and population. The canal system made government of the South by northern capitals possible. Food from the South could be distributed in the North, while the South was opened to migration and commercial development.

**The World's Most Splendid Cities.** Urban growth surged during the Tang and Song eras. The 2 million inhabitants of the Tang capital of Changan made it the world's largest city. Other cities similarly grew; many had more than 100,000 inhabitants. Most preindustrial civilizations had few or no large urban centers, and China's estimated urban population—10 percent of the total population—surpassed all others. The late Song capital of Huangzhou exceeded all others in beauty, size, and sophistication. Its location near the Yangzi and the seacoast allowed traders and artisans to prosper. Its population of more than 1,500,000 enjoyed well-stocked marketplaces, parks, restaurants, teahouses, and popular entertainment.

**Expanding Agrarian Production and Life in the Country.** Tang and Song rulers pushed agricultural expansion. Peasants were encouraged to migrate to new areas where the state supported military garrisons and provided irrigation and embankment systems. The canals enabled their produce to move through the empire. New crops and technology increased yields. Sui and Tang rulers adopted policies designed to break up aristocratic estates for more equitable distribution among free peasants, the class Confucian scholars held to be essential for a stable and prosperous social order. The scholar-gentry gradually supplanted the aristocracy in rural society.

**Family and Society in the Tang-Song Era.** Family organization resembled that of earlier eras. The status of women was improving under the Tang and early Song but steadily declined during the late Song. Extended-family households were preferred, although only the upper classes could afford them. The Confucianist male-dominated hierarchy was common in all classes. An elaborate process of making marriage alliances was handled by professional female go-betweens. Partners were of the same age; marriage ceremonies did not take place until puberty. Urban classes consummated marriage later than peasants. Upper-class women had increased opportunities for personal expression and career possibilities under the Tang and early Song. The empresses Wu and Wei, and royal concubine Yang Guifei, exercised considerable power. The legal code had provisions supporting women's rights in divorce arrangements. The practice of wealthy urban women having lovers is an example of female independence.

**The Neo-Confucian Assertion of Male Dominance.** The independence and legal rights of elite minority of women worsened under the influence of neo-Confucian thinkers. They stressed the roles of homemaker and mother; advocated physical confinement of women; and emphasized the importance of bridal virginity, wifely fidelity, and widow chastity. Men were permitted free sexual behavior and remarriage. The decline of the opportunities once open in Buddhism also contributed to the deteriorated status of women. New laws favored men in inheritance and divorce, and women were excluded from the educational system. The painful, mobility-restricting practice of foot binding exemplifies the lowly position imposed on women in late Song times.

**In Depth: Artistic Expression and Social Values.** Examining artistic creativity is an effective approach for studying the values of a civilization. In preliterate societies, art and architecture provide evidence otherwise lacking. When civilizations have written records, we still can learn about social structure by discovering who produced art, for whom it was created, the technologies and materials used, and the messages it was meant to convey. In Indian and European societies, artistic creations were the work of skilled craftsmen, a role played in China by the scholar-gentry class. Indian, Muslim, and European artisans made anonymous creations for a mass audience. In China, identifiable individuals produced art for the pleasures of the elite.

**A Glorious Age: Invention and Artistic Creativity.** The Tang and Song periods are most remembered for their accomplishments in science, technology, literature, and the fine arts. Technological and scientific discoveries—new tools, production methods, weapons—passed to other civilizations and altered the course of human development. The arts and literature passed to neighboring regions—central Asia, Japan, and Vietnam. Engineering feats, such as the Grand Canal, dikes and dams, irrigation systems, and bridges, were especially noteworthy. New agricultural implements and innovations, such as banks and paper money, stimulated prosperity. Explosive powder was invented under the Tang; it was used for fireworks until the Song adapted it to military use. Song armies and navies also used naphtha flamethrowers, poisonous gasses, and rocket launchers. On the domestic side, chairs, tea drinking, the use of coal for fuel, and kites were introduced. Compasses were applied to ocean navigation, and the abacus helped numerical figuring. In the 11th century, the artisan Bi Sheng devised printing with movable type. Combined with the Chinese invention of paper, printing allowed a literacy level higher than that in any other preindustrial civilization.

**Scholarly Refinement and Artistic Accomplishment.** The reinvigorated scholar-gentry class was responsible for art and literary creativity. Well-educated men were supposed to be generalists capable of both official and artistic achievement. As the scholar-gentry replaced Buddhists as major art and literature producers, they turned to portraying daily life and the delights of nature. Literature focused on the doings and beliefs of common people. Poets, such as Li Bo, celebrated the natural world. Under the Song, interest in nature reached artistic fruition in symbolic landscape paintings, many accompanied by poems, that sought to teach moral lessons or explore philosophical ideas.

**Global Connections: China's World Role.** The Song dynasty fell to the Mongol invasions inaugurated by Chinggis Khan. Kubilai Khan completed the conquest and founded the Yuan dynasty. The Tang and Song dynasties had a great effect on both Chinese and world history. Centralized administration and the bureaucratic apparatus were restored and strengthened. The scholar-gentry elite triumphed over Buddhist, aristocratic, and nomadic rivals. They defined Chinese civilization for the next six and a half centuries. The area subject to Chinese civilization expanded dramatically, as the South was integrated with the North. The Chinese economy, until the 18th century, was a world leader in market orientation, overseas trade volume, productivity per acre, sophistication of tools, and techniques of craft production. Chinese inventions altered development all over the world. China, as a civilization, retained many traditional patterns, but it also changed dramatically in the balance between regions, in commercial and urban development, and in technology. Outside influences, such as Buddhism,

## KEY TERMS

**Period of the Five Dynasties:** Era of continuous warfare (220-589) among the many kingdoms that followed the fall of the Han. **Wendi:** Member of prominent northern Chinese family during the Period of the Six Dynasties; with support from northern nomadic peoples established Sui dynasty in 589.

**Yangdi:** Second Sui ruler; restored Confucian examination system; constructed canal system; assassinated in 618. **Li Yuan:** Duke of Tang; minister for Yangdi; took over empire after assassination of Yangdi; first Tang ruler.

**Ministry of Public Rites:** Administered the examinations for state office during the Tang dynasty. **Jinshi:** Title given students who passed the most difficult examinations; became eligible for high office.

**Chan Buddhism:** Called Zen in Japan; stressed meditation and appreciation of natural and artistic beauty; popular among the elite. **Mahayana (Pure Land) Buddhism:** Emphasized salvationist aspects of Chinese Buddhism; popular among the masses.

**Wuzong:** Tang emperor (841-847); persecuted Buddhist monasteries and reduced influence of Buddhism in favor of Confucianism. **Yang Guifei:** Royal concubine of Tang emperor Xuanzong; introduction of relatives into administration led to revolt.

**Khitan nomads:** Founded Liao dynasty of Manchuria in 907; remained a threat to Song; very much influenced by Chinese culture. **Zhao Kuangyin:** General who founded Song dynasty; took royal name of Taizu. **Zhu Xi:** Most prominent neo-Confucian scholar during the Song dynasty; stressed importance of applying philosophical principles to everyday life.

**Wang Anshi:** Confucian scholar and chief minister of a Song ruler in 1070s; introduced sweeping reforms based on legalism; advocated greater state intervention in society.

**Southern Song:** Smaller surviving dynasty (1127-1279); presided over one of the greatest cultural reigns in world history.

**Jurchens:** Founders of Qin kingdom that succeeded the Liao in northern China; annexed most of the Yellow River basin and forced the Song to flee south.

**Grand Canal:** Great canal system begun by Yangdi; joined the Yellow River region to the Yangzi basin.

**Junks:** Chinese ships equipped with watertight bulkheads, stern-post rudders, compasses, and bamboo fenders; dominant force in Asian seas east of the Malayan peninsula.

**Flying money:** Chinese credit instrument that provided vouchers to merchants to be redeemed at the end of a venture; reduced danger of robbery; an early form of currency.

**Changan:** Capital of Tang dynasty; population of 2 million; larger than any contemporary world city.

**Huangzhou:** Capital of later Song; location near East China Sea permitted international commerce; population of more than 1,500,000.

**Foot binding:** Male-imposed practice to mutilate women's feet in order to reduce size; produced pain and restricted movement; helped to confine women to the household.

**Bi Sheng:** 11th-century artisan; devised technique of printing with movable type; made it possible for China to be the most literate civilization of its time.

**Li Bo:** Most famous poet of the Tang era; blended images of the mundane world with philosophical musings.

**Empress Wu:** (690 – 705 C.E.) Tang ruler who supported Buddhist establishment; tried to elevate Buddhism to state religion; had multistory statues of Buddha created.

**Xuanzong:** Leading Chinese emperor of the Tang dynasty who reigned from 713 to 755, though he encouraged overexpansion.

**Zhao Kuangyin:** Founder of the Song dynasty; originally a general following fall of Tang; took title of Taizu; failed to overcome north Liao dynasty that remained independent.

**Liao Dynasty:** Founded in 907 by nomadic Khitan peoples from Manchuria; maintained independence from Song dynasty in China.

**Sinification:** Extensive adaptation of Chinese culture in other regions; typical of Korea and Japan, less typical of Vietnam.

**Neo-Confucians:** Revived ancient Confucian teachings in Song era of China; great impact on the dynasties that followed; their emphasis on tradition and hostility to foreign systems made Chinese rulers and bureaucrats less receptive to outside ideas and influences.

**Tangut tribes:** Rulers of Xi Xia kingdom of northwest China; one of regional kingdoms during period of southern Song; conquered by Mongols in 1226.

**Xi Xia:** Kingdom of the Tangut people, north of Song kingdom, in mid-11th century; collected tribute that drained Song resources and burdened Chinese peasantry.

**Jin kingdom:** Kingdom north of the Song Empire; established by Jurchens in 1115 after overthrowing Liao dynasty; ended 1234.

**Peoples Analysis** Tang-Song China

**Conflict Analysis** Buddhists versus Confucians and Daoists

**Change Analysis** Tang to Song dynasty

**Societal Comparison** Qin-Han and Tang-Song China

**Document Analysis** Ties That Bind: Paths to Power

**Dialectical Journal** In Depth: Artistic Expression and Social Values