Tang Dynasty

The Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) was a golden age of imperial China. Buddhism developed; poetry flourished; money drafts were invented. Political, legal, cultural, and economic developments of the Tang dynasty influenced later dynasties.

During Gaozu's reign the Tang dynasty expanded and consolidated the empire and established various institutions. Gaozu's armies defeated several major rivals and completed the pacification of the country in 624. Gaozu basically continued the administrative institutions of the Sui dynasty. In the central government three agencies reported to the emperor (the Secretariat, the Chancellery, and the Department of State Affairs, which were collectively known as the “Three Departments”). They served as the administrative core. Local administration consisted of two tiers: the inferior district and the superior prefecture. The military system of garrison militia (fubing) combined agricultural and military duties. Gaozu revived the civil service examination system to recruit government officials on the basis of merit, although aristocrats continued to be influential in dynastic politics.

Like that of the Sui, the Tang legal system consisted of four major components: the Code, Statutes, Regulations, and Ordinances, which not only laid the foundation for later dynasties of imperial China but also influenced the legal systems of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Gaozu's second son Li Shimin (temple name “Taizong,” reigned 626–649) took the throne in a military coup. Taizong’s reign, traditionally known as the “era of good government,” was one of close personal interaction between the ruler and his Confucian advisers. Generally, Taizong developed and refined the policies of his father’s reign, including revision of the law codes and expansion of the civil service examination system. He made particular efforts to balance the political influence of the regional aristocratic groups and to uphold the preeminent position of his own clan, the Li. In foreign affairs Taizong subdued...
the eastern Turks and began to expand Chinese power in central Asia.

**The Rise of Empress Wu**

Taizong’s ninth son, Li Zhi (temple name “Gaozong,” reigned 649–683) ascended the throne at the age of twenty-one. In the early years of his reign Gaozong relied on advice from the statesmen of his father’s court and continued some reform programs. Gradually, however, Gaozong’s court came to be dominated by Wu Zhao (627–710, reigned 690–705), one of the most remarkable women in Chinese history. Born into a merchant family, Wu Zhao had been a low-ranking concubine of Taizong who managed to become Gaozong’s legitimate empress in 655. In 660, when Gaozong suffered a stroke, the empress took charge of the central government. Over the next twenty years, while Empress Wu continued many of the policies of the former Tang rulers, she initiated some practices to consolidate her position. For instance, she designated Luoyang as a second capital in 657 and took up permanent residence there in 683, thus removing the political center from the base area of the northwestern aristocracy. Empress Wu also encouraged lower ranks of bureaucracy by creating new posts, providing more opportunities for advancement, and increasing salaries. In order to promote the legitimacy of the dynasty, Empress Wu revived the ancient *feng* and *shan* sacrifices on Mount Tai (Taishan), the eastern holy peak in present-day Shandong Province, and patronized Buddhism.

Under Gaozong and Empress Wu the Chinese continued their efforts to extend and consolidate the empire. By 661 they had defeated the western Turks and established a Chinese protectorate in the western regions. But the Chinese faced serious threats from Tibet. By the early seventh century Tibet had emerged as a unified state. Although Tibet became China’s tributary state under Songtsen Gampo (reigned 620–649), the Tibetans exerted constant pressure on present-day Qinghai and Sichuan provinces. After Gaozong died in 683, Empress Wu, now the empress dowager, took control of the imperial succession and purged her opponents at court by means of terror and a secret police force. In 690 she ascended the throne and proclaimed a new dynasty, sometimes referred to as the second Zhou period (690 to 705). Empress Wu then formally became an “emperor,” the only woman sovereign in China’s history. Some senior officials at court forced her to abdicate in 705 and restored the Tang dynasty.

Li Longji (temple name “Xuanzong,” reigned 712–756) took the throne by means of a series of political intrigues. The early years of his reign were the heyday of the Tang dynasty, a time of institutional progress, economic prosperity, and cultural flowering. The most important change occurred in the military. In the early Tang dynasty troops were organized through the *fubing* militia system, under which men of agricultural households served in the army on a rotation basis. Such a system proved inadequate to defend the empire against threats from the highly mobile nomadic horsemen of the frontiers. Xuanzong’s reign brought the development of professional soldiers who settled permanently in military colonies and a consequent growth of the military commanders’ power. In the 740s some non-Chinese governors were appointed to take charge of certain strategic military domains, among whom An Lushan, a professional soldier of Sogdian and Turkish ethnic background, rose to prominence and later led a rebellion.

Under Xuanzong the aristocracy reasserted its political dominance. Although under Empress Wu and in the early years of Xuanzong’s government many chief ministers had obtained their positions by passing the civil service examinations, after the year 720 men of aristocratic origins increasingly received appointments. What complicated court politics more was that from the 740s, the emperor refused to take an active interest in government affairs, being taken up by the charms of his concubine Yang Guifei, one of the most famous beauties in Chinese history. Those close to the emperor strove to become the power behind the throne; among them was An Lushan, who rebelled against the Tang dynasty in 755.

**An Lushan’s Rebellion**

The An Lushan rebellion (755–763) marked a turning point in the history of the Tang dynasty and indeed nearly destroyed the dynasty. The rebel troops seized the Tang capitals Luoyang and Chang’an and controlled most of north China. Xuanzong fled to Sichuan Province. Although An Lushan was assassinated by a subordinate in 757, the rebellion continued for six more years.
Eunuchs

Although the rebellion was put down, the Chinese lost their grip on many frontier areas, including the western regions. Within the Tang empire the political authority of the central government declined. Some northern regions became virtually autonomous, and other regions fell under the control of military governors who enjoyed enormous power in both military and civil matters. Under Xianzong (reigned 805–820) the Tang court regained a great deal of control over the powerful provinces and put down several major rebellions in Sichuan Province, the Yangzi (Chang) River delta, Hebei Province, and Shandong Province. Xianzong’s success, however, to a great extent was based on the loyalty of his eunuchs, who controlled the dynasty’s elite palace armies and supervised the provincial administrations. Eunuchs began to play an increasing role in Tang politics under Daizong (reigned 762–779). They murdered Xianzong and determined the succession of most subsequent young emperors. Although Wuzong (reigned 841–846) temporarily revived the fortunes of the dynasty by imposing some restrictions on the eunuchs’ power, Yizong’s reign (859–873) brought a resurgence of their influence at court.

During the last several decades of the Tang dynasty severe floods and drought, as well as political chaos and foreign threats, caused suffering and turmoil. In 874 a wave of peasant rebellions broke out; their leader, Huang Chao (d. 884), took Luoyang in 880 and Chang’an in 881. Although the rebel forces were finally suppressed, and the Tang court returned to Chang’an, the dynasty was left powerless. Most parts of the empire were either occupied by non-Chinese forces or controlled by rival military leaders. In 907 the warlord Zhu Wen ended the Tang dynasty and established his own Liang dynasty at the beginning of the Five Dynasties period (907–960).

Economic Prosperity

The Tang dynasty enjoyed economic prosperity. Under Gaozu the government undertook a land distribution policy known as the “equal-field system.” This system had been used during the northern dynasties and under the Sui dynasty; it granted peasants a certain amount of land, in return for which they paid taxes in grain, cloth, and labor on public works projects. This land and tax system remained in force until An Lushan’s rebellion. Gaozu also established mints and issued a new currency that remained standard throughout the Tang dynasty. The Grand Canal, an extensive system of waterways that was constructed during the Sui dynasty to link wealthy south China with the Huang (Yellow) River valley, facilitated the Tang economic transactions as well as political stability.

The Tang dynasty was cosmopolitan and open to foreign influence. About 2 million people lived in the capital Chang’an, the most populous city in the world at that time. A variety of foreign goods was displayed in the marketplaces of the major cities, where Chinese mingled with people from other Asian countries, including Japan, Korea, and India. Foreigners not only came to trade and study but also served as grooms, entertainers, dancers, and musicians. Some foreign customs, such as playing polo, became fashionable.

The social structure of the Tang dynasty changed significantly after An Lushan’s rebellion. With the decline of the aristocracy the ruling class obtained its political power more from education and possession of landed property than from birth alone. When the equal-field land distribution system collapsed, many peasants disposed of their lands and, on the basis of formal contracts, became tenants or hired laborers of the rich. Local elites seized opportunities to establish large, landed estates that were managed by bailiffs and cultivated by tenants, hired workers, or slaves.

After the mid-750s the old taxation system ceased to function. During Dezong’s reign (779–805) the chief minister, Yang Yan, applied a new two-tax system generally to the empire. This system combined various taxes into a single tax, which was to be paid, in the summer and autumn, on the basis of the value of property instead of the number of household members. This taxation system generated revenues for the Tang dynasty and remained China’s basic tax structure until the sixteenth century.

The late Tang dynasty also brought important demographic changes. By 742, according to an official population survey, about 9 million households or more than 50 million registered individuals lived in the empire. Because of factors such as warfare and natural disasters, the population in the north declined dramatically, and more
and more people migrated to the lower Yangzi River valley and into Zhejiang Province.

Despite political instability the economy continued to grow in the late Tang dynasty. The population movements to the south promoted the agricultural expansion in the more fertile and productive lands of the country. New crops such as tea, sugar, and new varieties of grain were developed, and the double-cropping of land with rice and winter wheat produced greater quantities of foods. Silk production also increased rapidly in the Yangzi River delta region. The merchant class enjoyed legal freedom to engage in business and became prosperous by dealing in salt, tea, banking, and overseas trade. In addition to the two great markets in Chang’an and Luoyang, large markets appeared in local areas, and the local markets facilitated the development of new urban centers. The increased volume of trade brought an increasing use of money, particularly privately circulated silver, and credit and banking institutions began to emerge. To facilitate commercial transactions, in 811 money drafts were invented.

**Buddhism Develops**

One of the most dramatic cultural achievements of the Tang dynasty was the development of Buddhism. Although members of the Tang court gave their preference to Daoism because of the claim that they were descended from Laozi, the legendary founder of the belief system, they also recognized the strength of Buddhism and provided it with great favor and patronage through most of the period. The famous pilgrim Xuanzang (602–664) went to India in 629 and returned in 645 with a large number of Buddhist sutras (precepts summarizing Vedic teaching). During the Tang dynasty Buddhist doctrine became sinicized, and Chinese indigenous Buddhist schools emerged. Three were most prominent. The Pure Land (Jingtu) school believed that salvation, or rebirth in the Pure Land, could be attained by chanting the Buddha’s name. The Celestial Terrace (Tiantai) school, named after a famous monastery, emphasized synthesis and harmony of all Buddhist teachings. The Meditation (Chan) school stressed intuitive enlightenment through...
meditation. Buddhist monasteries, free of obligations to the state, acquired great wealth by accepting gifts and conducting business. These communities, however, often encountered criticism from Confucianists and Daoists because of intellectual rivalry and because all these belief systems competed for economic resources from the government. From 843 to 845 the pro-Daoist emperor Wuzong persecuted Buddhism; during that period some 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 shrines and temples were destroyed, 260,000 monks and nuns were returned to lay status, and much monastic land was confiscated and sold. This suppression marked the beginning of Buddhism’s decline in China.

Other intellectual currents also developed in the Tang dynasty. Because Confucianism offered political theories and institutional rules to build the centralized empire, the court promoted its spread, particularly through the civil service examinations. During the late Tang dynasty the prominent writer Han Yu (768–824), while attacking Buddhism, emphasized the revival of the orthodox Confucianism, which influenced the development of neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty (960–1279). Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Nestorian Christianity also entered China.

During the Tang dynasty many fields of art flourished. Poetry reached its golden age. About three thousand Tang poets are known to us today, among whom Li Bai (701–762) and Du Fu (712–770) are perhaps the most prominent. The essayists Han Yu (768–824) and Liu Zongyuan (773–819) promoted the “ancient style of prose” (guwen) movement to reform literature. The Tang dynasty also included the first serious attempts to write short stories. Both Buddhist and secular sculpture flourished. Artisans created large monumental sculptures in Buddhist rock-cave temples and small metal images of the Buddha and bodhisattvas (beings that refrain from entering nirvana in order to save others and that are worshipped as deities in Mahayana Buddhism). The six relief sculptures of Taizong’s battle horses that guarded his tomb represented the masterpieces of the secular sculpture of the age. The frescoes at the caves of Dunhuang synthesized the cultural themes and artistic styles of China, India, and central Asian countries. Under the Tang dynasty wood-block printing also developed.

Legacy of the Golden Age

The Tang dynasty represented the golden age of China’s imperial times. The early Tang dynasty epitomized Chinese civilization to that point in time; the late Tang dynasty initiated reforms that had long-lasting effects on later dynasties. The extensive and unified empire strengthened a political ideology of “great unity.” Its achievements in political institutions and religion attracted a great number of foreign students to study and had far-reaching influences on neighboring countries. Japan, for example, learned from the Tang dynasty the imperial institutions, bureaucracy, law codes, written language, Confucianism, Buddhism, literature, art, and architecture. The economic prosperity in the Tang dynasty promoted international trade, which in turn promoted cultural exchange between Chinese and other peoples. The technology of making paper, for instance, was transmitted to the West during the Tang dynasty. The Tang dynasty was so influential on Chinese culture that present-day overseas Chinese call Chinatowns Tangren jie (streets of the Tang people).

Jiang Yonglin

Further Reading