

INTRODUCTION



MOST Chinese regard the Tang dynasty (618–907) as the highpoint of imperial China, both politically and culturally. The empire reached its greatest size prior to the Manchu Qing dynasty, becoming the center of an East Asian world linked by religion, script, and many economic and political institutions. Moreover, Tang writers produced the finest poetry in China's great lyric tradition, which has remained the most prestigious literary genre throughout Chinese history. But like most other dynasties that endured for centuries, this was also an age of transformation. The world at the end of the Tang was quite different from what it had been at the beginning, and the dynasty's historical importance is a consequence of the changes that took place during that time.

The military conquests and brilliant poetry that Chinese have traditionally celebrated occurred in the first half of the Tang dynasty. The imperial court never recovered from a cataclysmic rebellion in the middle of the eighth century, and within a few decades Chinese statesmen and authors were already writing of a golden age in whose shadow they now dwelled. Glorification of the Tang's early achievements in politics and art increased in later dynasties. With all of China or its northern half controlled by non-Chinese peoples for most of the empire's subsequent history, the Tang became the last great "Chinese" dynasty. This idea (which dismissed the militarily weak Ming dynasty) ignores the fact that the Tang ruling house was—both genealogically and culturally—a product of the frontier "barbarian" culture that dominated northern China in the fifth and sixth centuries.

For historians, especially in the West, the second half of the Tang is in

many ways more interesting than the first. The break marked by the An Lushan rebellion in 756 was a pivotal moment not only in the fortunes of the dynasty but in the entire trajectory of China's development. The Japanese historian Naitō Torajirō argued that the long transition from the Tang to the Song that began in the mid-eighth century marked the shift from "medieval" to "early modern" China. While it is dangerous to impose Western periodization on Chinese history, substantial scholarship since Naitō has confirmed his essential hypothesis. The Tang dynasty's abandonment of key economic, military, and social institutions after the An Lushan rebellion, its reconfiguration of the empire's cultural geography, the expansion of trade relations with the outside world, and the invention of new artistic forms to deal with this changing world were the initial steps that began to distinguish later imperial China from what had come before.

The first element in the transition was the abandonment of institutions whose origins could be traced back to the collapse of the Han dynasty, in A.D. 220. At the beginning of the Tang, the official landholding pattern, at least in the north, was the equal-field system, which periodically redistributed state-owned land to families who held and worked it. Associated with this landholding system were levies in grain, cloth, and labor service exacted according to a fixed standard from all households that received land. The military system inherited by the Tang combined foreign nomadic forces and professional soldiers at the frontier with elite military households organized into a regimental army concentrated around the capital, Chang'an. The capital itself, as well as other major cities, was divided into walled residential wards, with trade largely restricted to specified markets. Society was dominated by a small number of families at the highest level who had enjoyed empire-wide prestige for centuries, as well as a lower level of regionally eminent households. All of these inherited institutions were eliminated during the second half of the dynasty, except for the dominance of the great families, which ended with the fall of the Tang itself, at the beginning of the tenth century.

The overarching pattern of these changes was the loss of state control over property and subjects, coupled with rising commercialization and urbanization. After the An Lushan rebellion, the state abandoned its early efforts to regulate land ownership, and it largely replaced its family-based military system with professional soldiers. As spatial restrictions on trade in cities broke down, urban life shifted toward the late imperial model in which commercial establishments intermingled with residences

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along noisy city streets. New market towns grew up throughout the countryside to facilitate an increasingly commercialized system of agriculture dominated by a new class of brokers and tradesmen. Meanwhile, elite families linked their status and livelihood to the fortunes of the state through its examination system for imperial office, only to disappear when the Tang collapsed. The examination system itself, however, survived and prospered under subsequent dynasties.

A second step that differentiated the late Tang from the dynasties that preceded it was the emergence of a new cultural geography. In the centuries between the collapse of the Han and the rise of the Sui in 589, a succession of states had opened up the Yangzi River's drainage basin on a large scale, as well as regions farther south. After the marshy lowlands were drained, this newly developed region, with its reliable rainfall, began to achieve higher agricultural productivity than the Yellow River basin in the north, which had been the heartland of ancient China. The Yangzi region also boasted better water transport for shipping bulk commodities, which facilitated interregional trade and, consequently, local specialization. The Grand Canal—the crowning achievement of the short-lived Sui dynasty—transported grain, principally rice, all the way from the south to Chang'an in the northwest. While the population of the south in the late Tang was still somewhat lower than that of the north, the government's loss of control in much of the Yellow River basin after the An Lushan rebellion resulted in the Yangzi valley becoming the economic and fiscal center of the empire. This prototype of a demographically, culturally, and economically dominant south that was controlled—for strategic reasons—from a capital in the north lasted for the rest of imperial Chinese history.

In a third shift toward the pattern of later imperial China, Tang merchants restructured trade relations with the outside world. To the north and west, Tang China continued to deal politically with nomadic confederacies and city-states, and overland trade proceeded intermittently along the ancient "silk roads" when these routes were not disrupted by the rise of the Tibetan state. But it was the numerous natural harbors of the fertile south that facilitated overseas trade in the late Tang. Much trade went eastward to Korea and Japan, as it had in the preceding centuries, but substantial new commerce developed with maritime Southeast Asia, India, and the Persian Gulf. This sea-based trade in bulk commodities tied China to an emerging world economic system—a pattern that would continue throughout later imperial China despite the Ming dynasty's

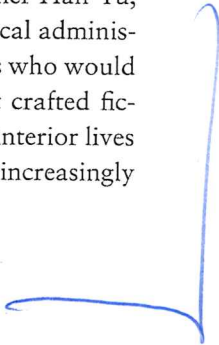
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abandonment of state-sponsored maritime expeditions. New commercial opportunities induced many foreign merchants to settle in major Chinese cities and also initiated a Chinese diaspora across Southeast Asia and far beyond.

Increased trade and the commercialization of cities encouraged the fourth transformative step in the Tang, the emergence of major new literary genres. The first half of the dynasty culminated in the High Tang golden age of lyric verse, as epitomized in the writings of Wang Wei, Li Bo (Bai), and Du Fu. The greater freedom and moral seriousness of these early Tang writers was facilitated by a shift of the center of artistic production away from the court—which emphasized a decorous, artificial style of composition—out into the greater capital and other major cities. This expansion of poetry's geographic range continued in the later Tang, when new genres of verse dealing with the joys and sorrows of urban life emerged in the brothels and pleasure quarters of Chang'an and beyond.

In the same period, several authors developed the critical prose essay into a major literary form. The most notable examples were produced by writers associated with the Confucian scholar and philosopher Han Yu, who spent much of their careers exiled from the capital to local administrative centers. And in the last century of the dynasty, authors who would become recognized as part of China's literati tradition first crafted fictional narratives as a means to explore the relationships and interior lives of Tang men and women, as they made their way through an increasingly complex world.



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inside China did not adopt Chinese institutions or its writing system. Moreover, the death of Taizong and the accession of his sickly successor Gaozong weakened the link between the Tang and the Turks. The rise of a government dominated by court favorites and examination-selected bureaucrats blocked the access of non-Chinese to government posts and reduced the status of military service.¹² In the 660s, when Chinese forces were preoccupied with campaigns in Korea, the rising Tibetan state conquered the Tuyuhun people in what is now Qinghai. In 670 they occupied Kucha, thus driving the Tang largely out of the area south of the Tianshan Mountains. A Tang counter-offensive was crushed at Kokonor, and in 678 another Tang expeditionary force was routed. These defeats allowed the Turks to form a new empire that militarily threatened China for several decades.¹³ The Turks remained major actors on the Chinese political stage even after their empire fell apart in 745, and when the Tang itself fell in the early tenth century much of north China was occupied by Turkish rulers.

The Emergence of East Asia

In addition to new policies toward the nomadic peoples of the north and northwest, Tang China's foreign relations were also shaped by the emergence of sedentary states to the east, south, and southwest that adopted major elements of Chinese civilization. The most important of these were Korea, Japan, and Nanzhao (Yunnan), although there were also important exchanges with the region that would become Vietnam.

The emergence of these states is a classic example of secondary-state formation, that is, the development of polities in part through the intrusion of an existing state that serves both as provocation and model. States around China were often founded through an investiture process in which chosen local chieftains sent gifts to the Chinese court, for which they received titles as kings or dukes and the appropriate seals of office. While Chinese emperors claimed the status of universal rulers and recognized neighboring states only as vassals, it is significant that in many cases these neighbors actively sought recognition as elements of the Chinese world order.

In the northern part of what would become Korea, the early state of Koguryŏ sent tribute to the Han in A.D. 32, and then its rulers adopted the title of king. A later state in the south of the Korean peninsula, Paekche, established relations with the Jin court in 372, and by 386 its

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ruler had received titles from the Chinese court as a general and deputy king. In the third century, Himiko, a priestess-chieftain in the Japanese islands, sought titles from the Wei court, and in the fifth century more than a dozen tribute missions were sent from the aspiring Japanese court in hopes of receiving titles and support from the dynasts of south China. These titles distinguished ambitious local chieftains from their rivals, bestowing prestige and influence on them from the reflected splendor of the Chinese empire.¹⁴ While the submission of these foreign rulers was purely formal and those who received titles would often actively combat Chinese influence and armies, the language and practices of statecraft in East Asia derived from the Chinese model.

At the beginning of the Tang, the Korean peninsula was divided into the kingdoms of Koguryō, Silla, and Paekche (see Map 5). The expense of unsuccessful campaigns against the first of these had led to the fall of the Sui dynasty, but at the installation of the Tang all three states sent tribute to the new court. With the return of all Chinese prisoners in 622, Gaozu agreed to recognize the independence of the Korean states as nominal Chinese vassals. In 640 princes of the Korean states, along with those from Gaochang (in modern Xinjiang), Japan, and Tibet, all studied at the imperial academy in Chang'an.

However, in 642 a Koguryō minister overthrew the prince who had studied at Chang'an, mutilated his corpse, and set up his younger brother on the throne. In response, Taizong led expeditions against Koguryō in 645, 647, and 648, but like the earlier Sui offensives these bogged down in the muddy roads of Liaoning and achieved nothing. Under the next emperor, Gaozong, the Tang allied with Silla, which had adopted the Chinese writing system and government institutions, occupied Paekche, and used their new base in Korea to launch an expedition against Koguryō. The death of Koguryō's ruler in 666 led to internal dissension, and in 668 the Chinese finally occupied the state and carried off more than 200,000 prisoners to Chang'an. In the 670s the newly sinicized Silla succeeded in uniting most of Korea, and the Tang, focused on the rising menace of Tibet, could no longer pursue the conquest of the peninsula. Korea remained a nominal Tang vassal institutionally modeled on the Chinese state.¹⁵

In 630 the Japanese sent their first delegation to the Tang, and, although Japan was too distant to interest the Tang court, the reform element in the Japanese leadership eagerly accepted China as a cultural and political model. In 649 the Japanese court launched a series of major political reforms that recreated Japan as a centralized monarchy with a legal

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code, military system, landholding patterns, and taxation all modeled on the Tang. The Japanese government also adopted the Chinese writing system for all official and literary activities, although modifications were required to adapt Chinese writing to the unrelated Japanese language. Other elements of Chinese elite culture, such as clothing, poetry, and music, also became models at the Japanese Heian court. With Buddhism emerging as a dominant intellectual and religious force in Japan, Tang China also became the destination of tens of thousands of Japanese pilgrims, who studied at monasteries and acquired statues and copies of scriptures to take back to Japan. These pilgrims and Japanese tribute missions became familiar sights in many Chinese cities.¹⁶

In 264 the large southeast region that had been known as Lingnan under the Han was permanently split into two regions, Guangzhou and Jiaozhou, which roughly corresponded to what would become Guangdong and north Vietnam. During the period of division, Jiaozhou, centered on the Red River valley, split off as a largely autonomous region and formally declared its independence in 541. It was retaken by the Sui but became independent again when that dynasty fell. The Tang reconquered most of modern Vietnam and in 679 established a southern protectorate-general that ruled the area until the end of the ninth century. Through most of the Tang, Jiaozhou remained an orderly region of the empire, but its capital, Jiaozhi (Hanoi), steadily lost its role in international trade to the rising entrepôt of Panyu (modern Guangzhou). When the Tang empire collapsed at the beginning of the tenth century, Jiaozhou became the scene of a bloody struggle for power that ended in 938 when a man named Ngo Quyen established an independent state that eventually became Vietnam. However, this state continued to employ Tang script, weights, measures, and coinage. Confucian culture patterned on that of China also flourished there.¹⁷

The southwest area that would later become Yunnan province was gradually forged into a unitary state known as Nanzhao. This kingdom, which emerged in the middle of the seventh century, played off Tang China against Tibet, leading each state to think that it was an ally, then supporting Tibet in the middle of the eighth century, only to reverse again and ally with Tang China as the century drew to a close. Its early kings received seals and titles from the Tang court, and its bureaucracy and examination system were largely patterned on the Tang, although the state also incorporated elements of Tibetan political practice, such as sumptuary regulations on the wearing of tiger skins.¹⁸

While these states were primarily linked through their shared imitation

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of Tang political and legal institutions, they also shared a common adherence to Buddhism (although Nanzhao formally converted only in the late ninth century) and a common nonalphabetic script. Buddhism had come to China along with Buddhist merchants from India and Central Asia. From China it spread to Korea, Japan, and the Vietnam region, so that the whole of the emerging East Asian cultural sphere shared a common Mahayana Buddhist faith. This common religion encouraged considerable movement of people in search of education and sacred objects.¹⁹ The East Asian cultural sphere was also defined by its use of Chinese writing. A nonalphabetic script had helped the first Chinese empires unite peoples who spoke mutually unintelligible languages, and in the same way Chinese script became the *lingua franca* in which Chinese, Japanese, and Korean people could read and understand the same text, even though they pronounced it in radically different ways. More importantly, since Chinese graphs carried a fixed semantic element, the introduction of the writing system brought with it a specific vocabulary with an associated ideology. The shared script thus encouraged the spread of certain root concepts or values throughout the East Asian sphere.²⁰

The Chinese empire had always defined itself through an artificial, court-based culture that transcended regional variation to draw together elites from what had been independent states. This translocal culture, as defined through a literary language and its texts, in turn provided a model of civilized life whose values were disseminated throughout East Asia under the Tang dynasty. The belief in ritual as a model for social behavior, the centrality of the family, the emphasis on hierarchy, the clear separation of genders, and the importance of text-based learning were among the ideas carried to Korea, Japan, and other new states of East Asia, along with the Chinese political and legal system and script.²¹ To the extent that there is any content to contemporary propaganda about "[East] Asian values," it stems from ideas disseminated in this period.

The Reconfiguration of International Trade

Even as the Tang model spread east and south, developments began that would lead to China's abandonment of Central Asia and the rupture of the trade routes that had served as the primary avenue for importing Buddhism from India to China. This shifting balance started before the outbreak of the An Lushan rebellion in 756. Silla's unification of Korea

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ended Tang attempts to annex the peninsula, and the rise of the Khitans in the northeast revived a northern threat that seemed to have vanished with the Turks. Soon the Turks themselves would form their second empire and once again raid China's frontiers.²²

However, the greatest changes occurred in the west. The rising power of Tibet, which offered nominal allegiance to the Tang in the 630s, continued to expand to the north and the west. After destroying the Tuyuhun, they began to threaten Tang positions in the southwest, where the rising Nanzhao kingdom allied with the Tibetans, and in the northwest, where the Tibetans expanded into the Chinese western protectorate-general in the Tarim Basin (see Map 6). To counter the Tibetan threat, the Tang court not only pressed militarily into the Western Regions and destroyed the Western Turks but also engaged in a frenzy of diplomatic activity with Kashmir, the Ganges valley, and parts of what is now Afghanistan. Following the route pioneered by the famous pilgrim Xuanzang (ca. 596–664), more than fifty diplomatic missions between 637 and 753 went to northern India in search of both trade and allies against Tibet.²³

The An Lushan rebellion marked the pivotal moment when the balance between the Tang and the outside world reversed. As foreign mercenary servants of the Tang state claimed dominance, many other foreigners similarly asserted themselves. When Emperor Xuanzong fled into temporary exile in Sichuan, the Uighurs, formerly vassals of the Eastern Turks, played a key role in rescuing the Tang dynasty. But when the Tang's reward did not meet the Uighur leader's expectations, he withdrew his support. Taking advantage of Tang weakness, the Tibetans in 763 occupied modern Qinghai and Gansu, pushed into Shaanxi, and pillaged Chang'an. Under Guo Ziyi, the Tang army recaptured the capital, only to face a combined Uighur and Tibetan army that once again captured the Tang capital in 765. Only the death of the Uighur commander and the subsequent rupture between the Uighurs and Tibet allowed the Tang to seize the initiative, form an alliance with the Uighurs, and regain Chang'an.

For more than half a century the Tang depended on the support of the Uighurs to defend against regular Tibetan incursions, and this dependence led Uighur soldiers and merchants living in China to disregard imperial authority in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.²⁴ Only an internal split in the Uighur leadership allowed another Turkic people, the Kirghiz, to attack them from the northwest. Eager to escape foreign domination, the Tang allied with the Kirghiz to defeat the Uighurs, who set-

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tled into a quiescent existence in what is now Xinjiang. Emboldened by their success, the Tang imposed a ban on all private dealings with "the darker races" that ended the Uighur dominance of money-lending in northwest China.²⁵

In spite of its on-again, off-again alliance with the Uighurs, the Tang dynasty was unable to reassert its authority in Central Asia. The Tibetans continued to control most of modern Qinghai and Gansu provinces and destroyed the western protectorate-general. However, in the southwest, the Tibetans' inability to maintain their alliance with Nanzhao prevented them from occupying the province of Sichuan despite a massive invasion in 779. A major Tang victory in 802 brought an end to serious Tibetan incursions, but in 821 the Chinese signed a treaty with the Tibetans that recognized the current boundaries. In doing so, the Tang, whose military and political energies were totally concentrated on restoring the central court's power over the military governors in the northeast, formally renounced all claims to its former position in Central Asia.²⁶

After checking Tibetan ambitions in the southwest, the Nanzhao kingdom invaded Sichuan in 829 and reached the outskirts of the capital, Chengdu. Despite formally amicable relations with Tang China to the north, in 859 the kingdom turned its attention to the east, overran Guizhou, and attacked the Annam protectorate-general. After repeated attacks, the capital, modern Hanoi, fell in 863, and more than 150,000 Tang subjects were taken prisoner. When the Tang recovered Annam in 863, Nanzhao once again invaded Sichuan and reached the capital but failed to take it.²⁷

Even after the Tibetan kingdom had collapsed by 850 and Nanzhao had gone into permanent decline in the last decades of the ninth century, the Tang empire still did not regain its position in Central Asia. This region fell under the sway of the expanding Arab power that was spreading Islam across Asia. Having destroyed the Persian Sassanian empire in the seventh century and swallowed up a number of smaller city-kingdoms, in 751 Arab troops clashed with Chinese forces for the first time, crushing them at the battle of the Talas River. The outbreak of the An Lushan rebellion and conquests in northwest China by Tibet left the Arabs free to push into Central Asia. The success of this invasion meant the loss of Chinese control west of the city of Dunhuang until the Manchu conquest in the eighteenth century. It also meant the permanent loss of Central Asia as a part of the Buddhist world and the Chinese cultural zone.²⁸

The old oasis cities of the Tarim and Dzungarian basins, abandoned

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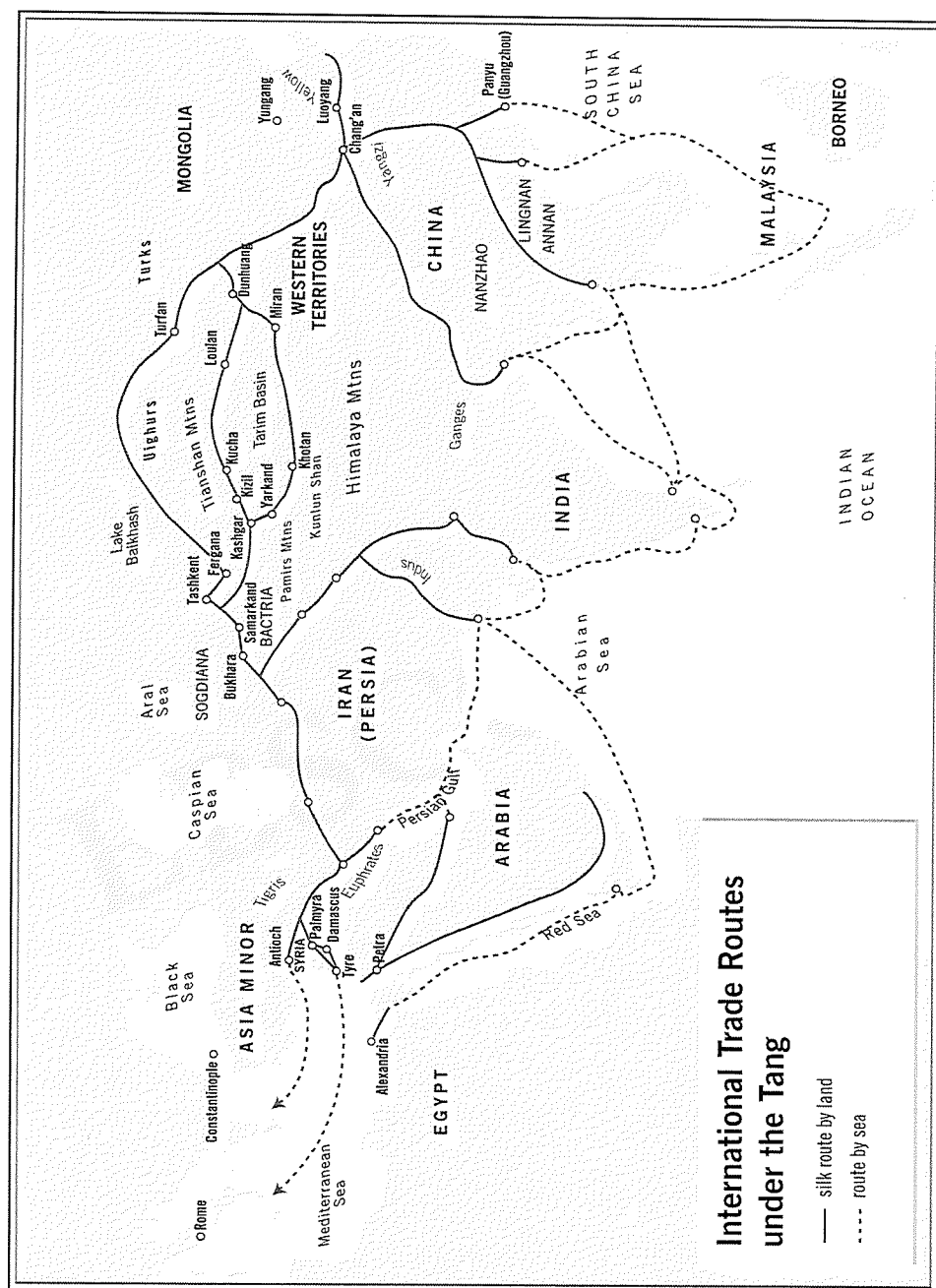
by the Tibetans, were occupied by the Uighurs, who had been driven from their steppe homeland by the Kirghiz. The rich and complex cultures of the area, an amalgam of Indo-European, Iranian, Indian, and Chinese influences, were destroyed under the successive onslaughts of Turks, Chinese, Tibetans, Arabs, and Uighurs. During the succeeding centuries the whole region up to the border of Gansu became a frontier zone of the Islamic world rather than an outpost of Chinese cultural and political influence. The disappearance of Buddhism in Central Asia and its simultaneous decline in India meant that after the suppression of Buddhism in the 840s in China, itself an expression of growing anti-foreignism, Chinese Buddhism could no longer look to its old Indian wellsprings for inspiration. Instead, dominated by indigenous intellectual traditions such as Chan and Pure Land, Buddhism emerged as a truly Chinese religion, permeating society in both the annual ritual calendar and several life-cycle rituals. The spread of Buddhism across Korea and Japan made China the center of a newly structured East Asian Buddhist world.²⁹

In addition to the old silk roads, a few other land routes were significant to international trade under the Tang (Map 16). The products of Manchuria and Korea came through the forests and plains of Liaoyang and down the coast of the Gulf of Bohai through a narrow passage between mountains and sea that became the east end of the Ming Great Wall. Another overland route, very old but little used before the Tang, passed south from Sichuan through Nanzhao (Yunnan), split into two roads through the chasms of the Irrawaddy in modern-day Burma, and led from there into Bengal. China's efforts to develop this route were frustrated by the rise of Nanzhao in the eighth century, which was friendlier to the Tibetans than to the Tang. Buddhist pilgrims sometimes took the difficult route from China through Tibet to India, descending by way of Nepal, but this mountain path was too hazardous and slow to be useful for trade.³⁰

The Tang's shift in orientation away from Central Asia and toward the east changed both China's relations to Buddhism and its trade ties to the outer world. As Chinese culture and political influence declined in Central Asia and broke its ties to India, it made deeper inroads in the east. Buddhism, particularly its Mahayana form, increasingly became an East Asian religion with China as its center. Only Tibet, more a part of Central than of East Asia, turned to India as its source for Buddhism in the Tantric form that marked the final flourishing of Indian Buddhism in the Pala state (750?-1155) of what is now Bengal. Consequently, over

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MAP 16

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the course of time commerce between India and China increasingly became the sphere of non-Buddhist traders, maritime routes became more important than the silk roads, and international trade focused on nonreligious luxury and bulk products. Even explicitly Buddhist objects and substances that had earlier been purchased from India, including esoteric ritual paraphernalia and lapis lazuli, would be eventually produced in China.³¹ But during the Tang dynasty, Buddhism remained a significant influence on foreign trade and on the relations of China with India and western Central Asia.

As overland routes into China—dominated by Sogdians, Parthians, and Indians and often trading precious goods used in Buddhist rituals—went into a slow decline from the middle of the Tang dynasty, new sea-based routes dominated by Muslim traders rose to prominence.³² From the establishment of the Sassanid state in A.D. 225, Persian traders had begun to dominate maritime trade between China, India, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea. Consequently, Persian became the *lingua franca* among maritime traders between the Red Sea and southeast China. The idea that all Persians were wealthy merchants was such an established stereotype in Tang China that the phrase “poor Persian” was considered an oxymoron. When Arab forces conquered Persia in the seventh century, many of the Persian traders converted to Islam and were joined by Arab merchants, although it was only in the Song dynasty that Arabs would become the leading non-Chinese merchants in East Asia.

Tang merchants themselves relied on foreign vessels. Tombs on the west coast of India and copper-plate edicts from the east show the spread of Arab merchant communities across India in association with the trade. An Arab writer indicated that thousands of Arab traders were massacred in Panyu (Guangzhou) when rebel forces under Huang Chao occupied the city in 879. By the late tenth century, Muslim merchants were transporting Chinese silk and porcelain through or around southern India to the Persian Gulf and shipping aromatics and spices back in the other direction.³³

From the middle of the eighth century, these maritime routes across the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea became more popular than the increasingly dangerous overland routes. This trade was governed by the periodic shifts of the monsoon. Ships outbound from Panyu sailed in late autumn or winter, before the northeast monsoon, while fleets from the Persian Gulf, thousands of miles to the west, relied on that same winter monsoon to carry them across the Indian Ocean. In

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June they caught the stormy southwest monsoon to carry them northward from Malaya across the South China Sea to their destinations in south China. The rule, when going both east and west, was southward in winter, northward in summer.

From the seventh to the ninth century, the Indian Ocean was a safe and rich sea protected by the Abassid caliphate, particularly after its capital was moved from Damascus to Baghdad, which was much closer to the head of the Persian Gulf. The Persian and Arab merchants headed out from the gulf, stopped at Muscat in Oman, and then either risked the pirate-infested ports of the Sind or proceeded directly to Malabar and then Sri Lanka, where they purchased precious gems. Then they sailed on to the Malay Peninsula, through the straits of Malacca and, riding the summer monsoon, north to Jiaozhi (Hanoi) or Panyu.³⁴

This growth of maritime trade was stimulated by developments in technology. As early as the eighth century, Chinese writers describe large sea-going vessels that could carry a thousand men along with a full cargo. The hulls of these so-called Kunlun ships (a general term for the dark-skinned people who came to China from the south and for the lands that produced them) were made from wooden planks tied together with cords made from the bark of coconut trees. Also known as "sewn" vessels, these ships were employed by both Arab merchants and those from South or Southeast Asia. During the Tang there is no evidence that Chinese merchants engaged in sea trade, and only in the Song dynasty do we find records of a maritime trade dominated by Chinese vessels that had bulkheads and nailed hulls, and navigated with the aid of the magnetic compass and accurate charts.³⁵

Because large ships can carry bulk cargos across great distances at reasonable expense, the rise of maritime trade changed the nature of the commodities China sold to the outer world. In previous dynasties, it had primarily exported silk to India along land routes, often in exchange for precious goods used in Buddhist rituals or for Buddhist ritual paraphernalia. Chinese silk declined as an export commodity after the tenth century, when Muslim Turks introduced sericulture and silk cloth production to India and the Middle East. Thereafter, porcelain became the major Chinese commodity trans-shipped through India. The Indians apparently did not use the porcelain themselves but made large profits by re-exporting it to the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, while local rulers filled their coffers with taxes from the sale of these goods.³⁶ Long-distance trade in such a heavy, fragile commodity, which sold at a relatively low

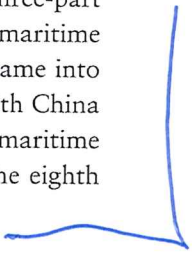
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price, was possible only with the advent of sea trade. The production and sale of porcelain would become a major world industry under subsequent Chinese dynasties.

The shift of Chinese trade toward the southern seas changed the pattern of Tang imports. In place of precious metals, semiprecious stones, coral, and similar luxury goods, the new maritime trade allowed China to import greater quantities and varieties of spices and medicines and several types of timber from southeast Asia. By the tenth and eleventh centuries, other imported staples included horses, sulphur, ivory, and cinnabar. The great supply of such goods was made possible by integrated inter-regional trading networks that delivered these products to any city in China and guaranteed a good return on the costs of purchase and shipping.³⁷

Maritime trade and large-scale exchange of bulk commodities constituted the first steps toward a genuine world economy, an integrated economic structure that transcended all defined political units. Unlike mere contact or low-level exchange between states or civilizations, a world economic system exists only when the social and economic order within each of its constituent elements is significantly altered by participation in the whole. By the late Song dynasty, world trade consisted of three large circuits: Western Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. In each of these areas the scale of foreign trade was sufficiently large to alter the social and economic order, so that a common division of labor bound all the areas together. This system, in contrast with the modern one, had no single center, but China was the greatest exporter and consequently the end point to which precious metals increasingly flowed. While this three-part global structure did not yet exist in the Tang, the East Asian maritime trade circuit through which China joined the world economy came into existence at this time. Thus, the pre-modern world economy, with China as its single greatest participant, was built on a foundation of maritime trade to the Tang empire pioneered by Muslim merchants in the eighth and ninth centuries.³⁸



Foreigners in Tang China

Two keys to the vitality of the Tang were eclecticism (its ability to draw on all the cultural strands that constituted the history of the preceding centuries) and cosmopolitanism (its openness to foreigners and their diverse ways of life). Foreigners and foreign cultures were a prominent el-

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CONCLUSION

THE SACK of Chang'an by the troops of the rebel and military man Huang Chao in 881 brought an end not only to the last remnants of Tang imperial power but also to more than a millennium in which Chang'an had often been China's capital and always an important strategic center. A few days after they occupied the capital, the rebel troops ran amok, looting the houses of wealthy families and slaughtering their inhabitants. The looters aimed to kill officials, in particular. However, as so often in Chinese verse, the poet Wei Zhuang, who immortalized the event in his "Lament of the Lady of Qin," focused on the plight of female victims, who stood in for the massacred courtiers with whom they were conventionally linked:

In house after house blood flows like boiling fountains;
In place after place victims scream: their screams shake the earth.
Dancers and singing girls have all disappeared,
Babies and young girls are abandoned alive . . .
My neighbor in the west had a daughter, lovely as a goddess;
Her lustrous eyes flashed from side to side cutting the autumn
waters like an inch of sword blade.
Her toilet completed, all she did was gaze at the reflection of spring
in her mirror,
So young she didn't know what happened outside her doors.
Some thug leaps up her golden staircase,
Rips the dress to bare half her shoulder, about to shame her,

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But dragged by the clothes she refuses to go through the vermilion gate,
So with rouge powder and perfumed cream on her face
she's stabbed down till she's dead.¹

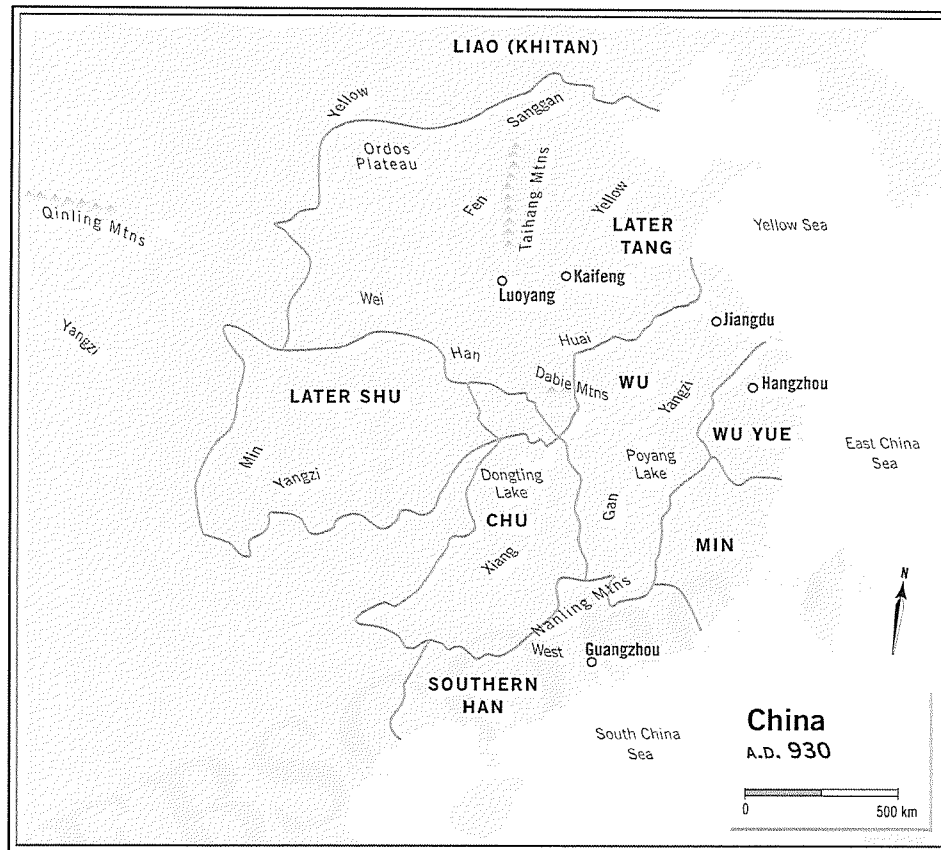
To the north, south, east, and west, Wei Zhuang traced out a mandala of violated women and burned houses that symbolized the apocalypse in which the Tang state perished. Presaging China's future development, the poem concluded with a vision that in the midst of universal disorder southern China alone was "as clear as water and as smooth as a whetstone."²

After the Tang's collapse, north and south China split apart, with each half in turn divided into competing states (Map 17). Like the earlier, longer periods of division—the Warring States (481–221 B.C.) and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (A.D. 220–581)—this period, known as the Five Dynasties (907–960), was a time of major changes. The first was the disappearance of the great families who had dominated Tang government and society and had defined a style or ideal against which the elite measured itself. The unquestioned supremacy of these families came to an end because they had linked themselves completely to high offices in the Tang imperial court. Having abandoned their local bases and physically moved to the capitals of Chang'an and Luoyang, where they bought up new properties, they had no place of retreat in times of disaster. The pillaging of the capitals resulted not only in the deaths of the leading members of the great families and the end of the dynasty to which they were tied but also the destruction of their material wealth.

A second and less obvious factor in the decline and disappearance of the great families was the proliferation of offspring over the centuries. A large percentage of the provincial elites in late Tang and tenth-century China, as shown in funerary inscriptions, were members of less successful lines of the great families and were not of local origin. The leading families of the Tang, like their predecessors in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, composed genealogies that acknowledged kin ties only with branches that continued to produce officials in the capitals. Less successful lines were excluded. They did not disappear, however, but seem to have sought new avenues of advancement with the military governors in the northeast or as local officials or businessmen in the south.³ Thus,

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MAP 17

while pride in genealogy continued into the eleventh century, as shown in the histories composed under the Song dynasty, the choronyms (surnames tagged with a place of origin) of the greatest families no longer distinguished members of the imperial elite from their provincial counterparts.

A related major change was the rise of a new ethic of merit, in which talent became generally accepted as the basis of social status. In accounts of Chinese history, this change in focus from genealogy to talent is often described as a central aspect of the transition from the Tang to the Song, but in fact it began during the Tang. The examination system had introduced merit or talent into the selection of Tang officials, even though

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the nature of the exams and the rituals in which they were embedded helped preserve the dominance of established families. More important, the staffs of the military governors who dominated the northeast and of the commissioners who administered the salt monopoly in the south, which was the fiscal foundation of the late Tang state, both emphasized talent in making appointments. These offices thus provided channels through which brilliant men of humble background could rise to positions of real power. Their courts even provided alternative avenues of advancement for leading poets in the last century of the Tang.

The new emphasis on talent developed further in the tenth century, as competing regimes emerged across the north and south. Leaders of the Five Dynasties in the north (Later Liang, Later Tang, Later Jin, Later Han, and Later Zhou), who were largely military men, and leaders of the Ten Kingdoms in the south (Wu, Wu Yue, Min, Chu, Southern Han, Former Shu, Later Shu, Jingnan, Southern Tang, Northern Han) depended on the recruitment of subordinates with genuine military, fiscal, and administrative ability. When warlords from the northeast captured major northern cities such as Luoyang and Kaifeng and made them their new capitals, the provincial soldiers and administrators who had served them relocated *en masse* to these new sites. The most significant importation of provincial talent was a Turkish-led invasion in 923 that placed men from the northeast in a dominant position in the new bureaucracy in Luoyang. This movement into the old imperial centers of men who had risen to power in the more meritocratic courts of the military governors changed the bureaucratic culture of major cities, making it more talent-based. This is demonstrated in a 996 funerary inscription by Liu Kai, a bureaucrat from the northeast who had accompanied the founding emperor of the Later Tang dynasty to Luoyang:

At the end of the Tang, when bandits overturned the two capitals, the genealogies of the officials were burned and destroyed. Using one's surname to masquerade as the descendant of a famous old family, this is to muddy things and fail to make distinctions. How can I imitate this practice? If through ability a peddler or a servant becomes useful to his generation and serves as minister to the prince, is he necessarily the son of a famous old family? As for somebody with no ability, even if he is the son of a famous family, what does it matter now?⁴

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The emergence of competing political centers in the tenth century affected the conduct and values not only of the rulers but also of members of the elite for whom these centers offered new career opportunities. A high degree of geographic mobility had characterized the Tang elite, as successful family members moved into the capital while their less eminent branches drifted toward the provinces, either to serve northeastern military governors or to make their fortunes in the economically developing south. Those who rose to office in the south often converted their salary income into land or commercial capital as their families resettled in the new region. Large numbers of ninth-century inscriptions in the south focus on the property of the deceased, suggesting that many southern families were no longer, or had never been, tied to the state. These inscriptions often emphasized the geomantic virtues of the tomb that would enhance the family's wealth: "As for his tomb, to the east it looks upon the edge of the ford; to the west it abuts on the long embankment; in front, it faces the Red Spirit; to the rear, it borders on the mounds and hills. The tomb is peaceful at this location. For ten thousand generations and one thousand years, children and descendants will from early years amass glory and fortune."⁵

As a multiplicity of local regimes emerged throughout China in the tenth century, each new political center increasingly monopolized the resources in its immediate vicinity, so that members of the elite often had to secure their positions by obtaining government posts. Those who could not obtain a position with one local ruler might have greater success with another, and consequently families moved from one local capital to the next as opportunities arose. More and more rulers copied the northeastern military governors in appointing their leading officials by decree rather than through the examinations and other bureaucratic procedures that had stabilized the old elite. Appointments by decree thus became a major tool for opening up top positions to men whose talents would have been concealed by literary examinations. Thus, although the Tang examination system established at least the idea of appointments based on merit, and the Song exams would institutionalize a new form of meritocracy, in the tenth century those who bestowed offices on the basis of merit deliberately circumvented the exam system.⁶

The extension of meritocratic values from their old centers in the northeast throughout all of China altered the makeup of the tenth-century elite. In funerary inscriptions, military servicemen celebrated one set of values, civil servants endorsed a second set, and wealthy families

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with no government contacts held yet a third. While late-Tang families had most often married within their own type, in the tenth century they began to opt for a strategy of diversification. This entailed educating each son to enter a different profession and arranging marriages with different types of elite families in order to extend their social networks and multiply the political and social niches into which they might fit.

A typical example was Wang Xuxian, a civil bureaucrat who sought to ingratiate himself with a local warlord by offering younger kinsmen to serve in both civil and military posts: "My son Qian likes to study and is conscientious and meticulous; he can be employed in your service. My younger brother's son Ren has integrity; he can become a general." This pattern had first emerged in the militarized culture of the northeast, where military and civil careers were closely linked and where there was no tradition of denigrating military service. As military regimes divided up the Tang empire in the tenth century, and as central military commands or rulers' personal armies emerged as the centers of political power from which the next generation of leaders emerged, such diversification of occupations within the family spread throughout the Chinese elite.⁷

Along with new patterns of political service and geographic mobility among elites, the late Tang and the tenth century also witnessed the continuing southward shift of Chinese civilization. This long-term trend had begun in the fourth century, accelerated during the southern dynasties, and continued under the Tang. In the first centuries of the dynasty, the longstanding appeal of good land and more reliable rainfall in the south was reinforced by the development of more efficient water transport over the region's rivers and by the Grand Canal that linked the most productive southern regions to northern markets. Following the An Lushan rebellion, the pull of southern prosperity was reinforced by a push from northern devastation. This migration did not lead to a demographic decline in the north, where the population continued to grow, but rather to an extraordinary increase of the southern population. Between 742 and 1080 (two years for which comprehensive census records have survived), the population in the north increased by only 26 percent, while that in the south increased by 328 percent.⁸ At the end of this process, the majority of the Chinese population lived in the south, and the demographic dominance of this region would increase over the rest of Chinese history.

The continued economic development of the south in the late Tang, and the chaos in the north, meant that the less successful lines of leading

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families, as well as any ambitious families without a background of imperial service, opted to move to the Yangzi drainage basin in search of greater opportunities. Textual evidence suggests that a rapid north-to-south demographic transition began in the ninth century and accelerated in the tenth. Inscriptions also show that elite migration accelerated significantly after the Huang Chao rebellion, both as a means to escape the chaos in the north and to seek employment opportunities with newly founded southern dynasties. The majority of officials in the southern courts for whom we have evidence were emigrants from the north. Thus, the temporary appearance of multiple southern courts in the tenth century added yet another inducement for elites to move into the Yangzi basin, thereby intensifying the established, long-term trend.

A final significant point is that these new waves of wealthier immigrants tended to push the earlier great families who had moved south during the southern dynasties and early Tang away from the major towns along the lower Yangzi and the Grand Canal and into regional peripheries. Thus, the population expansion of the south in the ninth and tenth centuries was a process of filling in what had been more marginal regions, while the already developed areas around major cities remained relatively unchanged. Inscriptional materials confirm that the majority of southern elites were more recent immigrants rather than long-established families and that the latter appeared increasingly in marginal towns.⁹

In conclusion, following the disappearance over the course of the Tang dynasty of the landholding patterns, urban design, and commercial constraints that had defined the reunited state under the Sui and early Tang, multiple changes in the tenth century—the end of the great families, the rise of a meritocratic ethos, and the permanent shift of China's demographic and economic centers of gravity to the south—set the stage for new geographic, social, economic, and political institutions that would define not just the Song dynasty but all of later imperial China.

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