

The Tang Dynasty

Internal disorder preceded the rise of the Tang dynasty in 618. The Tang conquered central Asia to the eastern border of Bactria (present-day Afghanistan), including portions of Tibet, Manchuria, and South Vietnam. In order to solidify control of their vast empire, the Tang used diplomacy and also strengthened the Great Wall to ward off the advances of nomadic peoples. The expanding Tang empire centered on a bureaucracy influenced by the **scholar-gentry** and by Confucian perceptions of effective government. During both the Tang and Song eras, the Chinese civil service examination was strengthened.

In spite of the emphasis placed by the Tang government on Confucian principles, Buddhism gained acceptance in China during the Tang period. Buddhism's popularity among both elite and peasant groups resulted in an initial acceptance of the faith by Tang rulers. Thousands of monasteries populated by Buddhist monks and nuns dotted the Chinese landscape under early Tang rule. Especially supportive of Buddhism was Empress Wu (ruled 690–705), who supported Buddhist art and sculpture and attempted to promote the faith as a state religion. As imperial tax exemptions and private gifts of property to Buddhist monasteries increased their wealth, the Tang began to fear the increasing power of Buddhism. Consequently, later Tang rulers placed restrictions on gifts of land and money to Buddhist monasteries, a policy that weakened the influence of the Buddhist faith in China. As Buddhism declined in power and wealth, Confucianism gained in popularity as an expression of Chinese tradition.

The Decline of the Tang

Following the pattern of earlier Chinese dynasties, the Tang dynasty weakened as internal rebellion spread through the empire. At the same time, the Tang were plagued by invasions of nomadic peoples along their northern borders. By the ninth century, these nomads had placed themselves in control of large portions of northern China. Civil disorder reigned between the fall of the Tang in 907 and the accession of the Song in 960.

Achievements of the Tang

Under Tang rule:

- Trade and travel along the Silk Roads was protected.
- Contacts with Islamic peoples increased.
- Ocean-going ships were improved, increasing interest in ocean trade.
- Chinese **junks** were among the world's best ships and Chinese merchants dominated trade in the Indian Ocean.
- Paper money was introduced to China.
- Letters of credit, or **flying money**, facilitated long-distance trade.
- Urban areas grew in size.
- Canals and irrigation systems increased agricultural productivity. The Tang extended the Chinese canal system to supplement the **Grand Canal**, a 1,100-mile waterway constructed under the Sui to ease trade by connecting northern and southern China.
- Large estates were broken up and land redistributed.
- Gunpowder was invented.
- Short stories and poetry were popular.
- Tea and fast-growing rice were imported from Vietnam.
- Population growth in the rice-growing south surpassed that of the millet-growing north.