

### The Tang Dynasty

After 300 years of division and fragmentation following the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 A.D., China was once again unified under the Sui dynasty (581–618). The political and governmental institutions established during this brief period laid the foundation for the growth and prosperity of the succeeding Tang dynasty (618-907). The dynasty was founded by Li Yuan. Marked by strong and benevolent rule, successful diplomatic relationships, economic expansion, and a cultural flowering of cosmopolitan style, Tang China emerged as one of the greatest empires in the medieval world. Merchants, clerics, and envoys from India, Persia, Arabia, Syria, Korea, and Japan thronged the streets of Chang'an, the capital, and many foreign languages were a common part of daily life.

In the beginning decades of the Tang, China subdued its nomadic neighbors from the north and northwest, conquering Mongolia, Manchuria and Tibet. They were also responsible for securing peace and safety on overland trade routes reaching as far as Syria and Rome. The seventh century was a time of momentous social change; the official examination system enabled educated men without family connections to serve as government officials. This new social elite gradually replaced the old aristocracy, and the recruitment of gentlemen from the south contributed to the cultural assimilation that had already begun in the sixth century.

1. How did the Sui dynasty help the Tang dynasty?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What were some positive effects of the Tang dynasty?

### Buddhism during the Tang

The revival of Confucianism under the Tang threatened the position of Buddhism in China. Both Mahayana and Chan versions of Buddhism had flourished during the Period of the Six Dynasties. Early Tang rulers continued to patronize both Buddhist monasteries and Confucian schools. By the middle of the ninth century, in part as a result of early Tang support, there were nearly 50,000 Buddhist monasteries in China. Even though Buddhism was a part of Chinese life before the Tang, many Tang emperors protected Buddhism. But soon it became a major problem of the Tang dynasty.

### The Anti-Buddhist Backlash

Both Daoists and Confucians attacked Buddhism as an alien importation into China. Confucian bureaucrats pointed out that the untaxed Buddhist monasteries represented a threat to the Chinese economy. By the eighth century, emperors began to take steps to halt the growth of Buddhism and the alienation of land. Under the emperor Wuzong, actual suppression of Buddhist monasteries and the recovery of their lands began. Tang repression marked the end of Buddhist expansion in China, although the religion continued to survive as a major aspect of Chinese culture. Confucianism was restored to its central position within Chinese intellectual and religious life.

1. Why did Buddhism grow in China?

2. Why did Taoists and Confucians attack Buddhism?
3. What happened to Buddhism afterwards?

### Emperor Xuanzong

The eighth century heralded the second important epoch in Tang history, achieved largely during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–56), called *minghuang*—the Brilliant Monarch. During his reign the Mongols were defeated and he helped to centralize the faltering Tang government.

This period is rightfully ranked as the classical period of Chinese art and literature, as it set the high standard to which later poets, painters, and sculptors aspired. The expressions and images contained in the poems of Li Bo (ca. 700–762) and Du Fu (722–770) reflect the flamboyant lives of the court and the conflicting sentiments generated by military campaigns. The vigorous brushwork of the court painter Wu Daozi (active ca. 710–60) and the naturalist idiom of the poet and painter Wang Wei (699–759) became artistic paradigms for later generations. Although the An Lushan rebellion in the middle of the century considerably weakened the power and authority of the court, the restored government ruled for another century and a half, providing stability for lasting cultural and artistic development.

### Decline

The turning point came in 755 during the closing years of Xuanzong's reign, where the An Lushan rebellion all but destroyed the Tang dynasty and the prosperity that took years to build up. Although the revolution failed to unseat the Tang, later emperors were unable to restore the dynasty's power. As central authority weakened, nomads on the frontiers gained control over large portions of China and generals were able to establish regional kingdoms. For the remaining 150 years the Tang never regained its glory days of the 7th and 8th century. The Tang were driven out of Central Asia, and China did not regain ground in that region for 1000 years.

1. How did Xuanzong's reign positively affect the Tang dynasty?
2. Who were some influential artists and writers of the time? How did they impact China?
3. How did the Tang dynasty decline?

## The Tang Legal Code

### Laws on Theft and Robbery

1. In cases of robbery by force, when no property is obtained, the punishment is penal servitude for two years. When the stolen property is valued at up to a foot of silk, the punishment is penal servitude for three years. For each additional two lengths of silk, the punishment is one degree heavier. When the value has reached ten lengths or someone has been injured, the sentence is strangulation. When killing has occurred, the sentence is decapitation.

3. In cases of embezzlement, where the one left in charge of the goods steals them, the sentence is two degrees higher than in ordinary robbery. When the value of the goods reaches thirty bolts of silk, the sentence is strangulation.

4. In cases of purposely setting fire to a person's house, to steal his goods, add the value of the damage caused by the fire to the value of the stolen goods in applying the law on robbery by force.

12. In cases of abducting people or abducting people and selling them as slaves, the sentence is strangulation. When those abducted are sold as retainers, the penalty is exile to three thousand *li*. When they are sold to be someone's wife, concubine, child, or grandchild, the penalty is three years penal servitude.

### Laws on Land Tenure

1. Those who occupy more land than allowed will be beaten ten strokes for the first *mu* (667 square meters), increasing one degree for each additional ten *mu*. After the penalty reaches sixty strokes, it increases one degree every twenty *mu*. The maximum penalty is one year penal servitude. No charges are brought for occupying extra land in an area of ample land.

2. Those who plant on public or private land they do not have rights to are liable to a beating of thirty strokes for the first *mu* or less, increasing one degree for each five *mu*. After the penalty reaches one hundred strokes, it increases a degree for every ten *mu*. The maximum penalty is one and a half years of penal servitude. The penalty is reduced one degree if the land had been uncultivated. If force was used, the penalty is increased one degree. The crops belong to the government or the owner.

### Questions

1. Based on these laws, how would you describe Tang government?
2. How did they handle the legal problems under the Tang government? Use examples.