

SUI

TANG

FIVE DYNASTIES

SONG

Chinese History

Part III

589 – 979 AD

Four centuries of dynasty, culture,
military expansion & economic transformation

Era Overview: 589–979 AD

Four transformative periods in Chinese history

→ TIME →

589–618

Sui Dynasty

Reunification
Grand Canal
29 years

618–907

Tang Dynasty

Golden Age
Silk Road peak
289 years

907–960

Five Dynasties & Ten Kingdoms

Fragmentation
Regional powers
53 years

960–979

Song Dynasty (Early)

Reunification
Paper money
19 years

The Sui Dynasty (589–618 AD)

DYNASTIES & RULERS

Brief but transformative — reunification after 370 years of division

Key Rulers

Emperor Wen (Yang Jian)

r. 581–604 · Reunified China in 589 after the conquest of the Chen dynasty. Reformed the government, standardized weights & currency.

Emperor Yang (Yang Guang)

r. 604–618 · Ambitious but overreaching — launched failed invasions of Goguryeo (Korea), triggering peasant revolts. Assassinated in 618.

Major Achievements

- Grand Canal construction (608 AD) — linked the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, revolutionizing grain transport
- Rebuilt and extended the Great Wall
- Restored the imperial examination system, selecting officials by merit
- Standardized law codes that influenced later Tang legislation
- Laid infrastructure the Tang Dynasty would inherit and build upon

The Tang Dynasty Founded (618–649)

DYNASTIES & RULERS

Li Yuan seizes power — Taizong builds China's greatest empire

618

Tang founded
by Li Yuan

289

years the Tang
dynasty lasted

~50M

population under
Emperor Taizong

2nd

largest empire
in the world (650s)

Emperor Gaozu (Li Yuan) led a rebellion from the northwest and seized Chang'an in 618, founding the Tang Dynasty. He modeled his government closely on the Sui system, retaining the civil service examinations.

Emperor Taizong (Li Shimin)

626–649 · Known as the "Brilliant Emperor," Taizong oversaw sweeping reforms: an efficient three-bureau government, expansion of the exam system, and the conquest of the Eastern Türk Khaganate (630). Neighboring rulers gave him the title Heavenly Khan. His reign is considered the beginning of Tang's golden age.

Tang Military Expansion

Building the largest empire in Tang history · Military & Expansion

Türk Khaganate (630)

Taizong crushes the Eastern Türks, extending Tang influence deep into Central Asia. Taizong becomes 'Heavenly Khan.'

Korea Campaigns (645–668)

Decades of warfare against Goguryeo. Tang-Silla alliance finally conquers Goguryeo and Baekje, reshaping East Asia.

Central Asia (640–751)

Tang defeats the Western Türks and annexes the Tarim Basin. Protectorates stretch to modern Afghanistan and Uzbekistan.

Battle of Talas (751)

Tang forces meet the Abbasid Caliphate in Central Asia. Defeat marks the western limit of Tang expansion.

Tibet Conflicts

The Tibetan Empire (Tufan) emerged as a major rival; prolonged border wars shaped the southwestern frontier.

Vietnam (Annan)

Tang maintained control of northern Vietnam as the 'Protectorate of Annan,' integrating it into the empire's southern frontier.

The Silk Road & Tang Economy

ECONOMY & SOCIETY

Chang'an — the world's most cosmopolitan city

~1M

People in Chang'an
at its peak (8th century)

Chang'an was the eastern terminus of the Silk Road and the world's largest city. Merchants, diplomats, monks, and artists arrived from Persia, Arabia, Central Asia, India, Japan, and Korea. The city had dedicated foreign quarters and markets trading in silk, spices, glassware, and horses.

Trade & Economic Highlights

- Silk, porcelain, and tea were China's primary exports — "Silk Road" is named for this era's dominant trade good
- Government equestrian trade brought in Central Asian warhorses essential for the army
- Equal-field system distributed land to peasants, boosting agricultural output and tax revenues
- By the 8th century, Tang economy was the largest in the world by GDP
- Maritime trade routes ('Maritime Silk Road') extended to Southeast Asia, India, and Arabia
- Foreign religions — Islam, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity — were tolerated and practiced in Chang'an

Tang Golden Age: Culture & Arts

CULTURE & ARTS

One of the greatest flowerings of art, poetry, and religion in world history

诗 Poetry

The Tang era is considered Chinese poetry's golden age. Li Bai ("Poet Immortal"), Du Fu ("Poet Sage"), and Wang Wei composed works still memorized today. The regulated verse form (lüshi) reached its perfection.

佛 Buddhism

Buddhism reached its apex under the Tang. Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India (629–645) brought back hundreds of sutras. Emperor Taizong patronized Buddhist monasteries; the Longmen Grottoes expanded with monumental sculptures.

画 Painting & Calligraphy

Court painters like Yan Liben depicted emperors and foreign envoys. Landscape painting (shanshui) emerged as a major genre. Calligraphy — especially the standard script — was elevated to a high art form.

乐 Music & Dance

Tang court music blended Chinese, Central Asian, Korean, and Indian traditions. The pipa (lute) became fashionable. Spectacular court dances like the 'Rainbow Skirt and Feathered Coat' dance were famous across Asia.

瓷 Ceramics & Crafts

Tang tri-color (sancai) glazed pottery is iconic — vivid amber, green, and cream figures of horses, camels, and court ladies. Porcelain production advanced significantly, driving export demand.

女 Women in Tang Society

Tang women had relatively more social freedom than in later dynasties. Empress Wu Zetian (r. 690–705) became China's only female ruler. Women played polo, wore flowing fashions, and some sat for the imperial exams.

Empress Wu Zetian (r. 690–705 AD)

DYNASTIES & RULERS

China's only female emperor — brilliant, ruthless, transformative

"She ruled with an iron fist and a keen intellect, expanding the empire and elevating talent over aristocratic birth."

Rise to Power

Wu Zetian entered Emperor Taizong's court as a concubine, but rose by marrying his successor Gaozong. She effectively ruled through Gaozong and, after his death, through her own sons before declaring herself Emperor in 690 — founding the Zhou Dynasty (a brief interruption of the Tang). She ruled until 705 when she was forced to abdicate at age 80.

Legacy & Achievements

- Expanded the imperial examination system, weakening hereditary aristocracy
- Commissioned the Longmen Grottoes' largest Buddha, the Vairocana — 17 meters tall
- Waged successful military campaigns in Korea and Central Asia
- Promoted capable officials from lower classes regardless of birth
- Left a blank stele at her tomb — letting history judge her actions

The An Lushan Rebellion (755–763 AD)

The catastrophe that broke the Tang's golden age · Military & Expansion

~36M

people killed or
displaced (est.)

8 yrs

duration of
the rebellion

2/3

of Tang territory
briefly lost

1

rebellion that ended
Tang's golden age

The Rebellion (755–763): An Lushan, a Tang general of Sogdian-Türk descent, commanded three frontier armies. In 755 he declared himself Emperor of the new Yan Dynasty and captured both Luoyang and Chang'an. Emperor Xuanzong fled in panic. En route, his imperial guard mutinied and forced him to execute his favorite concubine Yang Guifei.

The Aftermath: Tang forces, aided by Uyghur allies, eventually recaptured the capitals. But the empire never fully recovered. Warlords (jiedushi) retained local power, the equal-field land system collapsed, and tax revenues plummeted. The rebellion is considered China's worst pre-modern disaster and a turning point in Tang — and world — history.

Late Tang: Decline & Fall (763–907 AD)

DYNASTIES & RULERS

A century of warlords, eunuchs, and peasant revolts that unraveled the empire

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- 763** ● An Lushan Rebellion ends. Jiedushi (military governors) retain autonomous power in the provinces.
 - 780** ● Two-tax reform: replaced equal-field system. Government adapts to demographic displacement.
 - 820s–840s** ● Eunuch dominance at court. Eunuchs control the palace armies and influence imperial succession.
 - 845** ● Huichang Suppression of Buddhism: Emperor Wuzong destroys thousands of monasteries, forcing 260,000 monks to return to lay life.
 - 875–884** ● Huang Chao Rebellion: massive peasant uprising; rebels sack both Luoyang and Chang'an. Tang never recovers.
 - 907** ● Warlord Zhu Wen forces the last Tang emperor to abdicate. End of the Tang Dynasty.

Five Dynasties & Ten Kingdoms

DYNASTIES & RULERS

907–960 AD · Political chaos in the north — but cultural and economic continuity in the south

The Five (Northern) Dynasties

Later Liang 907–923

Later Tang 923–936

Later Jin 936–947

Later Han 947–951

Later Zhou 951–960

Context & Significance

- The north cycled through five short-lived dynasties as warlords competed; average dynasty lasted only ~11 years
- The Ten Kingdoms ruled simultaneously in the south — most were longer-lived and economically prosperous
- Southern kingdoms like Wu-Yue and Southern Tang became centers of arts, poetry, and trade
- Despite political chaos, Confucian culture, Buddhism, and economic life continued largely uninterrupted
- The printing press (woodblock printing) spread rapidly, making books affordable — a cultural revolution
- The Later Zhou's Emperor Shizong began to reunify China, laying ground for the Song Dynasty

The Song Dynasty Founded (960–979)

DYNASTIES & RULERS

Zhao Kuangyin ends the chaos and builds a new kind of empire

The 'Yellow Robe Incident' (960): General Zhao Kuangyin, commanding Later Zhou's army, was acclaimed emperor by his troops at Chenqiao. Rather than relying on military force alone, he shrewdly retired rival generals — giving them generous pensions in exchange for surrendering command. This 'Releasing Military Power over a Cup of Wine' moment set the tone for a dynasty that would prize civil administration over military power.

Reunification Campaign (960–979): Emperor Taizu (Zhao Kuangyin) and his successor Taizong systematically conquered the remaining southern kingdoms and the Northern Han (conquered in 979). The only major territory left outside Song control was the Sixteen Prefectures held by the Liao Dynasty — a sore point that would define Song foreign policy for generations.

Civil over Military

Generals rotated regularly, preventing warlordism. Scholar-officials ran the government.

Exam Expansion

Palace examinations added; more positions opened to merit, reducing aristocratic dominance.

Fiscal Reform

Centralized tax collection, ending the autonomous revenue of regional governors.

Early Song: Economic Innovation

The foundations of China's commercial revolution · Economy & Society

Paper Money (Jiaozi)

The world's first government-issued paper currency emerged in Sichuan in the early Song period, enabling large-scale trade without carrying heavy coins.

Printing Revolution

Woodblock printing, refined during the Five Dynasties, exploded under the Song. Books, contracts, and news sheets became widely available for the first time.

Iron & Steel Industry

Song China produced more iron than all of Europe combined. New smelting techniques and coal-fired furnaces drove industrial output.

Maritime Trade

The Song navy and merchant fleet dominated East and Southeast Asian seas. Quanzhou became one of the world's busiest ports.

Agricultural Advances

New rice varieties from Vietnam (Champa rice) doubled harvests. Population surged, urbanization increased, and surplus funded trade.

Urban Commercial Life

Cities like Kaifeng had permanent markets open day and night — a break from Tang's strict market hours. A vibrant merchant class emerged.

Society & Daily Life Across the Eras

ECONOMY & SOCIETY

How ordinary people lived from the Sui to the early Song

Sui & Early Tang

- Equal-field system: every adult male received farmland from the state
- Corvée (labor tax) built the Grand Canal — millions conscripted
- Buddhism was the most widespread religion; temples served as social centers

Tang Golden Age

- Chang'an was multicultural: foreign foods, fashions, and music were fashionable
- Women had relative freedom — horse-riding, polo-playing, public life
- Tea culture emerged and spread from Buddhist monasteries to elite households

Late Tang & Five Dynasties

- Displacement and population decline due to warfare and famine
- Southern regions flourished while north suffered repeated conflict
- Printing technology made literacy more accessible

Early Song

- Rise of a true merchant class; money economy expanded beyond elite
- Cities saw restaurants, entertainment quarters, and night markets
- Neo-Confucianism began reshaping social norms, including women's roles

Legacy of an Era

589–979 AD shaped China — and the world — in lasting ways

Unified China

The Sui and Song reunified a fractured empire. The idea of a unified Chinese state became permanent and central to Chinese identity.

Civil Service Exams

Tang and Song expanded merit-based bureaucracy — a system that influenced governance across East Asia and inspired later democracies.

Literary Heritage

Tang poetry (Li Bai, Du Fu) remains foundational to Chinese culture. Tens of thousands of Tang poems survive and are taught in schools today.

Global Trade

The Tang's Silk Road and the Song's maritime trade networks connected the world. China became the engine of global commerce for centuries.

Technological Innovation

Printing, paper money, advanced iron production, and agricultural innovation — discoveries of this era transformed world civilization.

Artistic Traditions

Tang ceramics, painting, calligraphy, and music set aesthetic standards that would define Chinese art for a millennium.