THE TANG AND SONG DYNASTIES OF CHINA

TANG

During the Tang Dynasty, China experienced a Golden Age. Early Tang rulers suppressed peasant uprisings, reunited China, revived traditional feudal relationships, and brought about peace and prosperity. They ruled over an immense empire of more than 50 million people. The government took careful censuses, gave examinations on Confucian texts to candidates for government service, and build public works. Under the early Tang, every adult male received a fixed amount of land from the government. Peasants had to perform labor for the imperial government and paid taxes in the form of grain and silk.

Under Empress Wu Zetian, government officials made recommendations for reforms. A magnificent capital city was built at Chang'an. At this time, this city was the largest city in the world. Merchants and officials from Persia, India, Arabia, and Syria could be found there.

Architecture, sculpture, painting, and porcelain all made great advances. Stimulated by its contacts with India and the Middle East, the Tang Dynasty became one of the high points of Chinese civilization, especially with its accomplishments in literature and art. Artists developed a distinct style of pottery with painted glazed figures of green, yellow, and orange. Artists also excelled in metalwork and jade. Vessels and utensils of all kinds were made by skilled craftsmen. Tang painters depicted nature with brushwork on scrolls, and Tang poets celebrated court life.

Under the Tang, the Chinese made important innovations in map-making, medicine, and printing. Tang China developed block printing, so that copies of Confucian texts could be printed to help candidates for government service with their examinations. The Tang encouraged commerce and handicrafts, making the Silk Road busier than ever before. Tang China benefited from its trade with Persia, Arabia, Japan, and the Byzantine Empire.

SONG

After the fall of the Tang Dynasty in 907, China again shrank in size. In 960 the Song Dynasty emerged in the south. Later, a rival dynasty was established in the north. Despite this reduction in area, Song China continued to build upon the achievements of the Tang.

The Song Dynasty was one of the most brilliant cultural eras in Chinese history. It was a time of great social and economic progress. China saw the first use of paper currency, making it possible to pay taxes using money rather than grain. The government further minted strings of standardized coins made of copper and iron. The Song also eliminated forced labor for the emperor. These factors helped bring about a large increase in farm production, which led to greater wealth for China’s people and government.

Song China was the most populous and advanced civilization of its day. Merchants, craftspeople, and scholars lived in the larger towns and cities. Bustling shops lined city streets. The Song capital house more than a million people. China engaged in trade with many other parts of the world.
The Grand Canal, connecting Beijing, the Hwang Ho, and the Yangtze River, was used to ship grain within China. Caravans carried silks over the Silk Road. Large ships brought Chinese goods to Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, and Africa. Science and technology also made advances. Song astronomers developed new instruments; doctors studied acupuncture; and mathematicians solved advanced equations. They introduced the use of gunpowder in war, the compass in navigation, and invented moveable type for printing.

WOMEN IN CHINA

The Tang and Song followed the traditional beliefs of Confucianism—a woman must obey her father, husband, and son. Girls left their families when they married. So long as they gave birth to sons, they would eventually gain a respected place in their new family by marriage. If a woman’s husband died, she could share in receiving a portion of her husband’s land. Divorce was allowed if accepted by both husband and wife.

The practice of female footbinding began under the Song Dynasty and illustrates the desire to limit female mobility. Girls’ feet were bound in tight bandages. This gave wealthy women small feet, which were considered attractive, but which often made it difficult to walk.