CHAPTER 10
The Flowering of Traditional China

CHAPTER OUTLINE AND FOCUS QUESTIONS

China After the Han
Q Why did China experience several centuries of internal division after the decline of the Han dynasty, and what impact did this period of instability have on Chinese society?

China Reunified: The Sui, the Tang, and the Song
Q What major changes in political structures and social and economic life occurred during the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties?

Explosion in Central Asia: The Mongol Empire
Q Why were the Mongols able to amass an empire, and what were the main characteristics of their rule in China?

The Ming Dynasty
Q What were the chief initiatives taken by the early rulers of the Ming dynasty to enhance the role of China in the world? Why did the imperial court order the famous voyages of Zhenghe, and why were they discontinued?

In Search of the Way
Q What roles did Buddhism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism play in Chinese intellectual life in the period between the Sui dynasty and the Ming?

The Apogee of Chinese Culture
Q What were the main achievements in Chinese literature and art in the period between the Tang dynasty and the Ming, and what technological innovations and intellectual developments contributed to these achievements?

CRITICAL THINKING

Q The civilization of ancient China fell under the onslaught of nomadic invasions, as did some of its counterparts elsewhere in the world. But China, unlike other classical empires, was later able to reconstitute itself on the same political and cultural foundations. How do you account for the difference?

ON HIS FIRST VISIT to the city, the traveler was mightily impressed. Its streets were so straight and wide that he could see through the city from one end to the other. Along the wide boulevards were beautiful palaces and inns in great profusion. The city was laid out in squares like a chessboard, and within each square were spacious courts and gardens. Truly, said the visitor, this must be one of the largest and wealthiest cities on earth—a city “planned out to a degree of precision and beauty impossible to describe.”

The visitor was Marco Polo (MAR-koh POH-loh), and the city was Khanbaliq (kahn-bahl-LEEKK) (later known as Beijing), capital of the Yuan (YOO-enn or YWAHN) dynasty (1279–1368) and one of the great urban centers of the Chinese Empire. Marco Polo was an Italian merchant who had traveled to China in the late thirteenth century and then served as an official at the court of Kubilai Khan (KOO-blah KAHN). In his later travels in China, Polo visited a number of other great cities, including the commercial hub of Kaifeng (KY-fuhng) (Ken-Zan-fu) on the Yellow River. It is a city, he remarked, of great commerce, and eminent for its manufactures. Raw silk is produced in large quantities, and tissues of gold and every other kind of silk are woven there. At this place likewise they prepare every
China After the Han

FOCUS QUESTION: Why did China experience several centuries of internal division after the decline of the Han dynasty, and what impact did this period of instability have on Chinese society?

After the collapse of the Han dynasty at the beginning of the third century C.E., China fell into an extended period of division and civil war. Taking advantage of the absence of organized government in China, nomadic forces from the Gobi Desert penetrated south of the Great Wall and established their own rule over northern China. In the Yangtze valley and farther to the south, native Chinese rule was maintained, but constant civil war and instability led later historians to refer to the period as the “era of the six dynasties.”

The collapse of the Han Empire had a marked effect on the Chinese psyche. The Confucian principles that emphasized hard work, the subordination of the individual to community interests, and belief in the essentially rational order of the universe came under severe challenge, and many Chinese began to turn to more messianic creeds that emphasized the supernatural or the promise of earthly or heavenly salvation. Intellectuals began to reject the stuffy moralism and complacency of State Confucianism and sought emotional satisfaction in hedonistic pursuits or philosophical Daoism.

Eccentric behavior and a preference for philosophical Daoism became a common response to a corrupt age. A group of writers known as the “seven sages of the bamboo forest” exemplified the period. Among the best known was the poet Liu Ling ( geliing), whose odd behavior is described in this oft-quoted passage:

Liu Ling was an inveterate drinker and indulged himself to the full. Sometimes he stripped off his clothes and sat in his room stark naked. Some men saw him and rebuked him. Liu Ling said, “Heaven and earth are my dwelling, and my house is my trousers. Why are you all coming into my trousers?”1

But neither popular beliefs in the supernatural nor philosophical Daoism could satisfy deeper emotional needs or provide solace in time of sorrow or the hope of a better life in the hereafter. Buddhism filled that gap.

Buddhism was brought to China in the first or second century C.E., probably by missionaries and merchants traveling over the Silk Road. The concept of rebirth was probably unfamiliar to most Chinese, and the intellectual hair-splitting that often accompanied discussion of the Buddha’s message in India was too esoteric for Chinese tastes. Still, in the difficult years surrounding the decline of the Han dynasty, Buddhist ideas, especially those of the Mahayana school, began to find adherents among intellectuals and ordinary people alike. As Buddhism increased in popularity, it was frequently attacked by supporters of Confucianism and Daoism for its foreign origins. Some even claimed that Siddhartha Gautama had been a disciple of Lao Tzu. But such sniping did not halt the progress of Buddhism, and eventually the new faith was assimilated into Chinese culture, assisted by the efforts of such tireless advocates as the missionaries Fa Xian and Xuan Zang and the support of ruling elites in both northern and southern China (see “The Rise and Decline of Buddhism and Daoism” later in this chapter).

China Reunified: The Sui, the Tang, and the Song

FOCUS QUESTION: What major changes in political structures and social and economic life occurred during the Sui, Tang, and Song dynasties?

After nearly four centuries of internal division, China was unified once again in 581 when Yang Jian (yayng JEE-YEN) (Yang Chien), a member of a respected aristocratic family in northern China, founded a new dynasty, known as the Sui (SWAY) (581–618). Yang Jian, who is also known by his reign title of Sui Wendi (SWAY wen-DEE) (Sui Wen Ti), established his capital at the historic metropolis of Chang’an (CHENG-AHN) (Ch’ang-an) and began to extend his authority throughout the heartland of China.

The Sui Dynasty

Like his predecessors, the new emperor sought to create a unifying ideology for the state to enhance its efficiency. But where Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty, had adopted Confucianism as the official doctrine to hold the empire together, Yang Jian turned to Daoism and Buddhism. He founded monasteries for both doctrines in the capital and appointed Buddhist monks to key positions as political advisers.

Yang Jian was a builder as well as a conqueror, ordering the construction of a new canal from the capital to the confluence of the Wei and Yellow Rivers nearly 100 miles to the east. His son, Emperor Sui Yangdi (SWAY yahng-DEE) (Sui Yang Ti), continued the process, and the 1,400-mile-long Grand Canal, linking the two great rivers of China, the Yellow and the Yangtze, was completed during his reign. The
The Grand Canal. Built over centuries, the Grand Canal is one of the engineering wonders of the world and a crucial conduit for carrying goods between northern and southern China. During the Song dynasty, when the region south of the Yangtze River became the heartland of the empire, the canal was used to carry rice and other agricultural products to the food-starved northern provinces. Many of the towns and cities located along the canal became famous for their wealth and cultural achievements. Among the most renowned was Suzhou (soo-JOE), a center for silk manufacture, which is sometimes described as the “Venice of China” because of its many canals. Shown here is a classic example of a humpback bridge crossing an arm of the canal in downtown Suzhou. Chinese engineers discovered how to construct such bridges several hundred years before their counterparts in Europe mastered the technique.

A new canal facilitated the shipment of grain and other commodities from the rice-rich southern provinces to the densely populated north. The canal also served other purposes, such as speeding communications between the two regions and permitting the rapid dispatch of troops to troubled provinces. Sui Yangdi also used the canal as an imperial highway for inspecting his empire. One imperial procession from the capital to the central Yangtze region was described as follows:

The emperor caused to be built dragon boats, . . . red battle cruisers, multi-decked transports, lesser vessels of bamboo slats. Boatmen hired from all the waterways . . . pulled the vessels by ropes of green silk on the imperial progress to Chiang-tu [Yangzhou]. The emperor rode in the dragon boat, and civil and military officials of the fifth grade and above rode in the multi-decked transports; those of the ninth grade and above were given the vessels of yellow bamboo. The boats followed one another to prowl for more than 200 leagues (about 65 miles). The prefectures and counties through which they passed were ordered to prepare to offer provisions. Those who made bountiful arrangements were given an additional office or title; those who fell short were given punishments up to the death penalty.³

Despite such efforts to project the majesty of the imperial personage, the Sui dynasty came to an end immediately after Sui Yangdi’s death. The Sui emperor was a tyrannical ruler, and his expensive military campaigns aroused widespread unrest. After his return from a failed campaign against Korea in 618, the emperor was murdered in his palace. One of his generals, Li Yuan (lee YWAHN), took advantage of the instability that ensued and declared the foundation of a new dynasty, known as the Tang (TAHNG) (T’ang). Building on the successes of its predecessor, the Tang lasted for three hundred years, until 907.

The Tang Dynasty

Li Yuan ruled for a brief period and then was elbowed aside by his son, who assumed the reign title Tang Taizong (tahng ty-ZOONG) (T’ang T’ai-tsong). Under his vigorous leadership, the Tang launched a program of internal renewal and external expansion that would make it one of the greatest dynasties in the long history of China (see Map 10.1). Under the Tang, the northwest was pacified and given the name of Xinjiang (SHIN-jyahng), or “new region.” After a long conflict with Tibet, Chinese control was extended for the first time over that vast and desolate plateau north of the Himalaya Mountains. The southern provinces below the Yangtze were fully assimilated into the Chinese Empire, and the imperial court established commercial and diplomatic relations with the states of Southeast Asia. With reason, China now claimed to be the foremost power in East Asia, and the emperor demanded fealty and tribute from all his fellow rulers beyond the frontier. Korea accepted tribute status and attempted to adopt the Chinese model, and the Japanese dispatched official missions to China to learn more about its customs and institutions (see Chapter 11).

Finally, the Tang dynasty witnessed a flowering of Chinese culture. Many modern observers feel that the era represents the apogee of Chinese creativity in poetry and sculpture. One reason for this explosion of culture was the influence of Buddhism, which affected art, literature, and philosophy, as well as religion and politics. Monasteries sprang up throughout China, and as under the Sui, Buddhist monks served as advisers at the Tang imperial court. The city of Chang’an, now restored to the glory it had known as the capital of the Han dynasty, once again became the seat of the empire. With a population estimated at nearly 2 million, it was possibly the greatest
city in the world of its time. The city was filled with temples and palaces, and its markets teemed with goods from all over the known world.

But the Tang, like the Han, sowed the seeds of their own destruction. Tang rulers could not prevent the rise of internal forces that would ultimately weaken the dynasty and bring it to an end. Two ubiquitous problems were court intrigues and official corruption. Xuanzong (shyahn-ZOONG) (Hsuan Tsung, r. 712–756), one of the great Tang emperors and a renowned patron of the arts, was dominated in later life by one of his favorite concubines, the beautiful Yang Guifei (yahng gway-FAY) (Yang Kuei-fei). One of her protégés, the military adventurer An Lushan (ahn loo-SHAHN), launched a rebellion in 755 and briefly seized the capital of Chang’an. The revolt was eventually suppressed, and Yang Guifei, who is viewed as one of the great villains of Chinese history, was put to death. But Xuanzong, and indeed the Tang dynasty, never fully recovered from the catastrophe. The loss of power by the central government led to chronic instability along the northern and western frontiers, where local military commanders ruled virtually without central government interference. Some historians also speculate that a prolonged drought may have played a role in the decline of the dynasty. It was an eerie repetition of the final decades of the Han.

The end finally came in the early tenth century, when border troubles with northern nomadic peoples called the Khitan (KEE-tan) increased, leading to the final collapse of the dynasty in 907. The Tang had followed the classic Chinese strategy of “using a barbarian to oppose a barbarian” by allying with a trading people called the Uighurs (WEE-gurz) (a Turkic-speaking people who had taken over many of the caravan routes along the Silk Road) against their old rivals. But yet another nomadic people called the Kirghiz (keeer-GEEZ) defeated the Uighurs and then turned on the Tang government in its moment of weakness and overthrew it.

The Song Dynasty

China slipped once again into disunity. This time, the period of foreign invasion and division was much shorter. In 960, a new dynasty, known as the Song (SOONG) (960–1279), rose to power. From the start, however, the Song (Sung) rulers encountered more problems in defending their territory than their predecessors. Although the founding emperor, Song Taizu (soong ty-DZOO) (Sung T’ai-tsu), was able to co-opt many of the powerful military commanders whose rivalry had brought the Tang dynasty to an end, he was unable to reconquer the northwestern part of the country from the nomadic Khitan peoples. The emperor therefore established his capital farther to the east, at Kaifeng, where the Grand Canal intersected the Yellow River. Later, when pressures from the nomads in the north increased, the court was forced to move...
advancing on Chinese territory from both the north and the west. By this time, the Song empire had been weakened by internal factionalism and a loss of tax revenues. After a series of river battles and sieges marked by the use of catapults and gunpowder, the Song were defeated, and the conquerors announced the creation of a new Yuan (Mongol) dynasty. Ironically, the Mongols had first learned about gunpowder from the Chinese.

Political Structures: The Triumph of Confucianism

During the nearly seven hundred years from the Sui to the end of the Song, a mature political system based on principles originally established during the Qin and Han dynasties gradually emerged in China. After the Tang dynasty’s brief flirtation with Buddhism, State Confucianism became the ideological cement that held the system together. The development of this system took several centuries, and it did not reach its height until the period of the Song dynasty.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IN CHINA: THE CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION

At the apex of the government hierarchy was the Grand Council, assisted by a secretariat and a chancellery; it included representatives from all three authorities—civil, military, and censorate. Under the Grand Council was the Department of State Affairs, composed of ministries responsible for justice, military affairs, personnel, public works, revenue, and rites (ritual). This department was in effect the equivalent of a modern cabinet.

The Tang dynasty adopted the practice of selecting some officials through periodic civil service examinations. The effectiveness of this merit system was limited, however, because the examination was administered only in the capital city and because the process was dominated by the great aristocratic clans, who had mastered the technique of preparing candidates for the exams. According to one source, fully one...
third of those who succeeded on the imperial examinations during the Tang era came from the great families.

The Song were more successful at limiting aristocratic control over the bureaucracy, in part because the power of the nobility had been irreparably weakened during the final years of the Tang dynasty and did not recover during the interregnum that followed its collapse.

One way of strengthening the power of the central administration was to make the civil service examination system the primary route to an official career. To reduce the power of the noble families, relatives of individuals serving in the imperial court, as well as eunuchs, were prohibited from taking the examinations. But if the Song rulers’ objective was to make the bureaucracy more subservient to the court, they may have been disappointed. The rising professionalism of the bureaucracy, which numbered about ten thousand in the imperial capital, with an equal number at the local level, provided it with an esprit de corps and an influence that sometimes enabled it to resist the whims of individual emperors.

Under the Song, the examination system attained the form that it would retain in later centuries. In general, three levels of examinations were administered. The first was a qualifying examination given annually at the provincial capital. Candidates who succeeded in this first stage were considered qualified but normally were not given positions in the bureaucracy except at the local level. Many stopped at this level and accepted positions as village teachers to train other candidates. Candidates who wished to go on could take a second examination given at the capital every three years. Successful candidates could apply for an official position. Some went on to take the final examination, which was given in the imperial palace once every three years. Those who passed were eligible for high positions in the central bureaucracy or for appointments as district magistrates.

During the early Tang, the examinations included questions on Buddhist and Daoist as well as Confucian texts, but by Song times, examinations were based entirely on the Confucian classics (see the box on p. 275). Candidates were expected to memorize passages and to be able to define the moral lessons they contained. The system guaranteed that successful candidates—and therefore officials—would have received a full dose of Confucian political and social ethics. Whether they followed these ethics, of course, was another matter. Many students complained about the rigors of memorization and the irrelevance of the process. Others brought crib notes into the examination hall (one enterprising candidate concealed an entire Confucian text in the lining of his cloak). One famous Tang scholar complained that if Mencius and other Confucian worthies had lived in his own day, they would have refused to sit for the examinations.

The Song authorities ignored such criticisms, but they did open the system to more people by allowing all males except criminals or members of certain restricted occupations to take the examinations. To provide potential candidates with schooling, training academies were set up at the provincial and district levels. Without such academies, only individuals fortunate enough to receive training in the classics in family-run schools would have had the expertise to pass the examinations. Such policies represented a considerable improvement over earlier times, when most candidates came from the ranks of the elite. According to one historian, more than half of the successful candidates during the mid-Song period came from families that had not previously had a successful candidate for at least three generations. In time, the majority of candidates came from the landed gentry, nonaristocratic landowners who controlled much of the wealth in the countryside. Because the gentry prized education and became the primary upholders of the Confucian tradition, they were often called the scholar-gentry.

Even with these changes, however, the system still did not truly provide equal opportunity to all. In the first place, only males were eligible. Then again, the Song did not attempt to establish a system of universal elementary education. In practice, only those who had been given a basic education in the classics at home were able to enter the state-run academies and compete for a position in the bureaucracy. Unless they were fortunate to have a wealthy relative willing to serve as a sponsor, the poor had little chance.

Nor could the system guarantee an honest, efficient bureaucracy. Official arrogance, bureaucratic infighting, corruption, and legalistic interpretations of government regulations were as prevalent in medieval China as in bureaucracies the world over. Another problem was that officials were expected to use their positions to help their relatives. As we observed earlier, even Confucius held that filial duty transcends loyalty to the community. What is nepotism in Western eyes was simply proper behavior in China. Chinese rulers attempted to circumvent this problem by assigning officials outside their home region, but this policy met with only limited success.

Despite such weaknesses, the civil service examination system was an impressive achievement for its day and probably provided a more efficient government and more opportunity for upward mobility than were found in any other civilization of its time. Most Western governments, for example, began to recruit officials on the basis of merit only in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, by regulating the content of the examinations, the system helped provide China with a cultural uniformity lacking in empires elsewhere in Asia.

The court also attempted to curb official misbehavior through the censorate. Specially trained officials known as censors were assigned to investigate possible cases of official wrongdoing and report directly to the court. The censorate was supposed to be independent of outside pressures to ensure that its members would feel free to report wrongdoing wherever it occurred. In practice, censors who displeased high court officials were often removed or even subjected to more serious forms of punishment, which reduced the effectiveness of the system.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT** The Song dynasty maintained the local government institutions that it had inherited from its predecessors. At the base of the government pyramid was the district (or county), governed by a magistrate. The magistrate, assisted by his staff of three or four officials and several other menial employees, was responsible for maintaining law and order and collecting taxes within his jurisdiction. A
During the interregnum between the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 C.E. and the rise of the Tang four hundred years later, Daoist critics lampooned the hypocrisy of the “Confucian gentleman” and the Master’s emphasis on ritual and the maintenance of proper relations among individuals in society. In the first selection, a third-century Daoist launches an attack on the pompous and hypocritical Confucian gentleman who feigns high moral principles while secretly engaging in corrupt and licentious behavior.

By the eighth century, the tables had turned. In the second selection, Han Yu (hahn YOO) (768–824), a key figure in the emergence of Neo-Confucian thought as the official ideology of the state, responds to such remarks with a withering analysis of the dangers of “doing nothing”—a clear reference to the famous Daoist doctrine of “inaction.”

**Biography of a Great Man**

What the world calls a gentleman [chun-tzu] is someone who is solely concerned with moral law [fu], and cultivates exclusively the rules of propriety [li]. His hand holds the emblem of jade [authority]; his foot follows the straight line of the rule. He likes to think that his actions set a permanent example; he likes to think that his words are everlasting models. In his youth, he has a reputation in the villages of his locality; in his later years, he is well known in the neighboring districts. Upward, he aspires to the dignity of the Three Dukes; downward, he does not disdain the post of governor of the nine provinces.

Have you ever seen the lice that inhabit a pair of trousers? They jump into the depths of the seams, hiding themselves in the cotton wadding, and believe they have a pleasant place to live. Walking, they do not risk going beyond the edge of the seam; moving, they are careful not to emerge from the trouser leg; and they think they have kept to the rules of etiquette. But when the trousers are ironed, the flames invade the cotton wadding, and believe they have a pleasant place to live. What difference is there between the gentleman who lives within a narrow world and the lice that inhabit trouser legs?

**Han Yu, Essentials of the Moral Way**

In ancient times men confronted many dangers. But sages arose who taught them the way to live and to grow together. They served as rulers and as teachers. They drove out reptiles and wild beasts and had the people settle the central lands. The people were cold, and they clothed them; hungry, and they fed them. Because the people dwelt in trees and fell to the ground, dwelt in caves and became ill, the sages built houses for them.

They fashioned crafts so the people could provide themselves with implements. They made trade to link together those who had and those who had not and medicine to save them from premature death. They taught the people to bury and make sacrifices [to the dead] to enlarge their sense of gratitude and love. They gave rites to set order and precedence, music to vent melancholy, government to direct idleness, and punishments to weed out insurrection. When the people cheated each other, the sages invented tallies and seals, weights and measures to make them honest. When they attacked each other, they fashioned walls and towns, armor and weapons for them to defend themselves. So when dangers came, they prepared the people; and when calamity arose, they defended the people.

But now the Daoists maintain:

Till the sages are dead, theft will not end . . . so break the measures, smash the scales, and the people will not contend. These are thoughtless remarks indeed, for humankind would have died out long ago if there had been no sages in antiquity. Men have neither feathers nor fur, neither scales nor shells to ward off heat and cold, neither talons nor fangs to fight for food. . . .

But now the Daoists advocate “doing nothing” as in high antiquity. Such is akin to criticizing a man who wears furs in winter by asserting that it is easier to make linen, or akin to criticizing a man who eats when he is hungry by asserting that it is easier to take a drink. . . . This being so, what can be done? Block them or nothing will flow; stop them or nothing will move. Make humans of these people, burn their books, make homes of their dwellings, make clear the way of the former kings to guide them, and “the widowers, the widows, the orphans, the childless, and the diseased all shall have care.” This can be done.

*How might the author of the first selection have responded to Han Yu’s arguments? Which author appears to make the better case for his chosen ideological preference?*
irrigation and transportation network, adjudicated local disputes, organized and maintained a militia, and assisted in collecting taxes (usually paid in grain) and delivering them to the district magistrate. As a rule, most Chinese had little involvement with government matters. When they had to deal with the government, they almost always turned to their village officials. Although the district magistrate was empowered to settle local civil disputes, most villagers preferred to resolve problems among themselves. It was expected that the magistrate and his staff would supplement their income by charging for such services, a practice that reduced the costs of the central government but also provided an opportunity for bribes, a problem that continued to plague the Chinese bureaucracy down to modern times.

The Economy
During the long period between the Sui and the Song, the Chinese economy, like the government, grew considerably in size and complexity. China was still an agricultural society, but major changes were taking place within the economy and the social structure. The urban sector of the economy was becoming increasingly important, new social classes were beginning to appear, and the economic focus of the empire was beginning to shift from the Yellow River valley in the north to the Yangtze River valley in the center—a process that was encouraged both by the expansion of cultivation in the Yangtze delta and by the control exerted over the north by nomadic peoples during the Song.

LAND REFORM The economic revival began shortly after the rise of the Tang. During the long period of internal division, land had become concentrated in the hands of aristocratic families, and most peasants were reduced to serfdom or slavery. The early Tang tried to reduce the power of the landed nobility and maximize tax revenues by adopting the ancient “well-field” system, in which land was allocated to farmers for life in return for an annual tax payment and three weeks of conscript labor.

At first, the new system was vigorously enforced and led to increased rural prosperity and government revenue. But eventually, the rich and the politically influential, including some of the largest Buddhist monasteries, learned to manipulate the system for their own benefit and accumulated huge tracts of land. The growing population, bolstered by a rise in food production and the extended period of social stability, also put steady pressure on the system. Finally, the government abandoned the effort to equalize landholdings and returned the land to private hands while attempting to prevent inequalities through the tax system. The failure to resolve the land problem contributed to the fall of the Tang dynasty in the early tenth century, although the reversion of farmlands to private hands did result in more efficient production in some instances as well as an expansion of the long-distance trade in food products.

The Song tried to resolve the land problem by returning to the successful programs of the early Tang and reducing the power of the wealthy landed aristocrats. During the late eleventh century, the reformist official Wang Anshi (WAHNG ahn-SHEE) (Wang An-shi) (1021–1086) attempted to limit the size of landholdings through progressive land taxes and provided cheap credit to poor farmers to help them avoid bankruptcy. His reforms met with some success, but other developments probably contributed more to the general agricultural prosperity under the Song. These included the opening of new lands in the Yangtze River valley, improvements in irrigation techniques such as the chain pump (a circular chain of square pallets on a treadmill that enabled farmers to lift considerable amounts of water or mud to a higher level), and the introduction of a new strain of quick-growing rice from Southeast Asia, which permitted farmers in warmer regions to plant and harvest two crops each year. It was during the Song dynasty that rice became the main food crop for the Chinese people.

AN INCREASE IN MANUFACTURING Major changes also took place in the Chinese urban economy, which witnessed significant growth in manufacturing and trade. This process began under the Tang dynasty, but it was not entirely a product of deliberate state policy. In fact, early Tang rulers shared some of the traditional prejudice against commercial activities that had been prevalent under the Han and enacted a number of regulations that restricted trade and industry. As under the Han, the state maintained monopolies over key commodities such as salt.

Despite the restrictive policies of the state, the manufacturing sector grew steadily larger and more complex, helped by several new technological developments (see the comparative essay “The Spread of Technology” on p. 277). During the Tang, the Chinese mastered the art of manufacturing steel by mixing cast iron and wrought iron. The blast furnace was heated to a high temperature by burning coal, which had been used as a fuel in China from about the fourth century C.E. The resulting product was used in the manufacture of swords, sickles, and even suits of armor. By the eleventh century, more than 35,000 tons of steel were being produced annually. The introduction of cotton offered new opportunities in textile production. Gunpowder was invented by the Chinese during the Tang dynasty and used primarily for explosives and a primitive flamethrower; it reached the West via the Arabs in the twelfth century.

THE EXPANSION OF COMMERCE The nature of trade was also changing. In the past, most long-distance trade had been undertaken by state monopolies. By the time of the Song, private commerce was being actively encouraged, and many merchants engaged in shipping as well as in wholesale and retail trade. The construction of the Grand Canal, as well as the expansion of the road system under the Tang, facilitated a dramatic increase in the regional trade network. Guilds began to appear, along with a new money economy. Paper currency began to be used in the eighth and ninth centuries. Credit (at first called “flying money”) also made its first appearance during the Tang. With the increased circulation of paper money, banking began to develop as merchants found that strings of
COMPARATIVE ESSAY

The Spread of Technology

From the invention of stone tools and the discovery of fire to the introduction of agriculture and the writing system, mastery of technology has been a driving force in the history of human evolution. But why do some human societies appear to be much more advanced in their use of technology than others? People living on the island of New Guinea, for example, began cultivating local crops like taro and bananas as early as ten thousand years ago but never took the next steps toward creating a complex society until the arrival of Europeans many millennia later. Advanced societies had begun to emerge in the Western Hemisphere during the classical era, but none had discovered the use of the wheel or the smelting of metals for toolmaking. Writing was in its infancy there.

Technological advances appear to take place for two reasons: need and opportunity. Farming peoples throughout the world needed to control the flow of water, so in areas where water was scarce or unevenly distributed, they learned to practice irrigation to make resources available throughout the region. Sometimes, however, opportunity strikes by accident (as in the legendary story of the Chinese princess who dropped a silkworm cocoon in her cup of hot tea, thereby initiating a series of discoveries that resulted in the manufacture of silk) or when new technology is introduced from a neighboring region (as when the discovery of tin in Anatolia launched the Bronze Age throughout the Middle East).

The most important factor enabling societies to keep abreast of the latest advances in technology, it would appear, is participation in the global trade and communications network. In this respect, the relative ease of communications between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indus River valley represented a major advantage for the Abbasid Empire, as the peoples living there had rapid access to all the resources and technological advances in that part of the world. China was more isolated from other civilizations by distance and the barrier presented by the Himalayas. But with its size and high level of cultural achievement, China was almost a continent in itself and was able to communicate with countries to the west via the Silk Road.

Societies that were not linked to this vast network were at an enormous disadvantage in keeping up with new developments in technology. The peoples of New Guinea, at the far end of the Indonesian archipelago, had little or no contact with the outside world. In the Western Hemisphere, a trade network did begin to take shape between societies in the Andes and their counterparts in Mesoamerica. But because of difficulties in communication (see Chapter 6), contacts were more intermittent. As a result, technological developments taking place in distant Eurasia did not reach the Americas until the arrival of the conquistadors.

In what ways did China contribute to the spread of technology and ideas throughout the world during the period from the Sui dynasty to the beginning of the Ming dynasty? How did China benefit from the process?
The Silk Road was so hazardous that it was necessary to follow the southern route, which passed along the northern fringes of the Taklimakan Desert to Kashgar and down into northwestern India. Travelers avoided the direct route through the desert (in the Uighur language, the name means “go in and you won’t come out”) and trudged from oasis to oasis along the southern slopes of the Tian Shan following a route littered by animal bones. The oases were created by the water runoff from winter snows in the mountains and dried up in the searing heat of the desert summer.

The eastern terminus of the Silk Road was the city of Chang’an, perhaps the wealthiest city in the world during the Tang era. The city’s days as China’s foremost metropolis were numbered, however. Chronic droughts throughout the region made it more and more difficult to supply the city with food, and the growing power of Turkic-speaking peoples such as the Uighurs in the hinterlands made the city increasingly vulnerable to attack by rebel forces. During the later Tang, the imperial court was periodically shifted to the old secondary capital of Luoyang (LOH-yahng). The Song dynasty, a product of the steady drift of the national center of power south, was forced to abandon Chang’an altogether as a historic symbol of imperial greatness.

THE MARITIME ROUTE The Silk Road was so hazardous that shipping goods by sea became increasingly popular. China had long been engaged in sea trade with other countries in the region, but most of the commerce was originally in the hands of Korean, Japanese, Southeast Asian, or Middle Eastern merchants. Under the Song, however, Chinese maritime trade was stimulated by the invention of the compass and technical improvements in shipbuilding such as the widespread use of the sternpost rudder and the lug sail (which enabled ships to sail close to the wind). If Marco Polo’s observations can be believed, by the thirteenth century, Chinese junks had as many as four masts and could carry several hundred men, many more than contemporary ships in the West.

The Chinese governor of Canton in the early twelfth century remarked:

According to the government regulations concerning sea-going ships, the larger ones can carry several hundred men, and the smaller ones may have more than a hundred men on board. . . . The ships’ pilots are acquainted with the configuration of the coasts; at night they steer by the stars, and in the daytime by the Sun. In dark weather they look at the south-pointing needle. They also use a line a hundred feet long with a hook at the end, which they let down to take samples of mud from the seabottom; by its appearance and smell they can determine their whereabouts.4

A wide variety of goods passed through Chinese ports. The Chinese exported tea, silk, and porcelain to the countries beyond the South China Sea, receiving exotic woods, precious stones, cotton from India, and various tropical goods in exchange. Seaports on the southern China coast exported sweet oranges, lemons, and peaches in return for grapes, walnuts, and pomegranates. The major port of exit in southern China was Canton (KAN-tahn), where an estimated 100,000 merchants lived. Their activities were controlled by an imperial commissioner sent from the capital.

Some of this trade was a product of the tribute system, which the Chinese rulers used as an element of their foreign policy. The Chinese viewed the outside world as they view their own society—in a hierarchical manner. Rulers of smaller countries along the periphery were viewed as “younger brothers” of the Chinese emperor and owed fealty to him. Foreign rulers who accepted the relationship were required to pay tribute and to promise not to harbor enemies of the Chinese Empire. But the foreign rulers also benefited from the relationship. Not only did it confer legitimacy on them, but they often received magnificent gifts from their “elder brother” as a reward for good behavior. Merchants from their countries also gained access to the vast Chinese market.
Under the early Tang, powerful aristocratic system.

The An Lushan revolt that sounded the death knell to the expansion of regional great families by recruiting officials through the civil service in the late seventh century, sought to limit the power of the empireal government, just as they had at the end of the Han dynasty four hundred years earlier (see the box on p. 280). Some Tang rulers, notably Empress Wu Zhao (woo ZHOW) in the late seventh century, sought to limit the power of the great families by recruiting officials through the civil service examinations, but in the end it was the expansion of regional power—often under non-Chinese military governors—after the An Lushan revolt that sounded the death knell to the aristocratic system.

THE RISE OF THE GENTRY  Under the early Tang, powerful noble families not only possessed a significant part of the national wealth, but also dominated high positions in the imperial government, just as they had at the end of the Han dynasty four hundred years earlier (see the box on p. 280). Some Tang rulers, notably Empress Wu Zhao (woo ZHOW) in the late seventh century, sought to limit the power of the great families by recruiting officials through the civil service examinations, but in the end it was the expansion of regional power—often under non-Chinese military governors—after the An Lushan revolt that sounded the death knell to the aristocratic system.

Perhaps the most significant development during the Song dynasty was the rise of the landed gentry as the most influential force in Chinese society. The gentry class controlled much of the wealth in the rural areas and, under the Song, produced the majority of the candidates for the bureaucracy. By virtue of their possession of land and specialized knowledge of the Confucian classics, the gentry had replaced the aristocracy as the political and economic elite of Chinese society. Unlike the aristocracy, however, the gentry did not form an exclusive class separated by the accident of birth from the remainder of the population. Upward and downward mobility between the scholar-gentry class and the remainder of the population was not uncommon and may have been a key factor in the stability and longevity of the system. A position in the bureaucracy opened the doors to wealth and prestige for the individual and his family, but it was no guarantee of success, and the fortunes of individual families might experience a rapid rise and fall. The soaring ambitions and arrogance of China’s landed gentry are vividly described in the following wish list set in poetry by a young bridegroom of the Tang dynasty:

Chinese slaves to take charge of treasury and barn,
Foreign slaves to take care of my cattle and sheep.
Strong-legged slaves to run by saddle and stirrup
when I ride,
Powerful slaves to till the fields with might
and main,
Handsome slaves to play the harp and hand
the wine;
Slim-waisted slaves to sing me songs, and dance;
Dwarfs to hold the candle by my dining-couch.³

For affluent Chinese in this era, life offered many more pleasures than had been available to their forebears. There were new forms of entertainment, such as playing cards and
chess (brought from India, although an early form had been invented in China during the Zhou dynasty); new forms of transportation, such as the paddle-wheel boat and horseback riding (made possible by the introduction of the stirrup); better means of communication (block printing was first invented in the eighth century C.E.); and new tastes for the palate introduced from lands beyond the frontier. Tea had been introduced from the Burmese frontier by monks as early as the Han dynasty, and brandy and other concentrated spirits produced by the distillation of alcohol made their appearance in the seventh century. Tea began to emerge as a national drink and took on ritual significance among intellectuals, poets, and Buddhist monks who believed that it could stimulate the brain cells and focus the mind.

VILLAGE AND FAMILY  The vast majority of the Chinese people still lived off the land in villages ranging in size from a few dozen residents to several thousand. A farmer’s life was bounded by his village. Although many communities were connected to the outside world by roads or rivers, most Chinese rarely left the confines of their native village except for an occasional visit to a nearby market town. This isolation was psychological as well as physical, for most Chinese identified with their immediate environment and had difficulty envisioning themselves living beyond the bamboo hedges or mud walls that marked the limit of their horizon.

An even more basic unit than the village in the lives of most Chinese, of course, was the family. The ideal was the joint family with at least three generations under one roof. Because rice farming was heavily labor-intensive, the tradition of the joint family was especially prevalent in the south. When a son married, he was expected to bring his new wife back to live in his parents’ home (see the box on p. 281). Often the parents added a new wing to the house for the new family. Women who did not marry remained in the home where they grew up.

Chinese village architecture reflected these traditions. Most family dwellings were simple, consisting of one or at most two rooms. They were usually constructed of dried mud, stone, or brick, depending on available materials and the prosperity of the family. Roofs were of thatch or tile, and the floors were usually of packed dirt. Large houses were often built in a square around an inner courtyard, thus guaranteeing privacy from the outside world.

Within the family unit, the eldest male theoretically ruled as an autocrat. He was responsible for presiding over ancestral rites at an altar, usually in the main room of the house. He had traditional legal rights over his wife, and if she did

---

**Du Fu, A Poem**

Third day of the third month
The very air seems new
In Ch’ang-an along the water
Many beautiful girls . . .
Firm, plump contours,
Flesh and bone proportioned.
Dresses of gauze brocade
Mirror the end of spring
Peacocks crimped in thread of gold
Unicorns in silver. . . .
Some are kin to the imperial favorite
Among them the Lady of Kuo and the Lady of Ch’in [Qin].
Camel-humps of purple meat
Brought in shining pans

---

Why does the author of this poem appear to be so angry at the festival goers described here?
The Saintly Miss Wu

The idea that a wife should sacrifice her wants to the needs of her husband and family was deeply embedded in traditional Chinese society. Widows in particular had few rights, and their remarriage was strongly condemned. In this account from a story by Hung Mai (hoong MY), a twelfth-century writer, the widowed Miss Wu wins the respect of the entire community by faithfully serving her mother-in-law.

Hung Mai, A Song Family Saga

Miss Wu served her mother-in-law very filially. Her mother-in-law had an eye ailment and felt sorry for her daughter-in-law’s solitary and poverty-stricken situation, so she suggested that they call in a son-in-law for her and thereby get an adoptive heir. Miss Wu announced in tears, “A woman does not serve two husbands. I will support you. Don’t talk this way.” Her mother-in-law, seeing that she was determined, did not press her. Miss Wu did spinning, washing, sewing, cooking, and cleaning for her neighbors, earning perhaps a hundred cash a day, all of which she gave to her mother-in-law to cover the cost of firewood and food. If she was given any meat, she would wrap it up to take home.

Once when her mother-in-law was cooking rice, a neighbor called to her, and to avoid overcooking the rice she dumped it into a pan. Owing to her bad eyes, however, she mistakenly put it in the dirty chamber pot. When Miss Wu returned and saw it, she did not say a word. She went to a neighbor to borrow some cooked rice for her mother-in-law and took the dirty rice and washed it to eat herself.

One day in the daytime neighbors saw Miss Wu ascending into the sky amid colored clouds. Startled, they told her mother-in-law, who said, “Don’t be foolish. She just came back from pounding rice for someone, and is lying down on the bed. Go and look.” They went to the room and peeked in and saw her sound asleep. Amazed, they left.

When Miss Wu woke up, her mother-in-law told her what happened, and she said, “I just dreamed of two young boys in blue clothes holding documents and riding on the clouds. They grabbed my clothes and said the Emperor of Heaven had summoned me. They took me to the gate of heaven and I was brought in to see the emperor, who was seated beside a balustrade. He said ‘Although you are just a lowly ignorant village woman, you are able to serve your old mother-in-law sincerely and work hard. You really deserve respect.’ He gave me a cup of aromatic wine and a string of cash, saying, ‘I will supply you. From now on you will not need to work for others.’ I bowed to thank him and came back, accompanied by the two boys. Then I woke up.”

There was in fact a thousand cash on the bed, and the room was filled with a fragrance. They then realized that the neighbors’ vision had been a spirit journey. From this point on even more people asked her to work for them, and she never refused. But the money that had been given to her she kept for her mother-in-law’s use. Whatever they used promptly reappeared, so the thousand cash was never exhausted. The mother-in-law also regained her sight in both eyes.

Q What is the moral of this story? How do the supernatural elements in the account strengthen the lesson intended by the author?

not provide him with a male heir, he was permitted to take a second wife. She, however, had no recourse to divorce. As the old saying went, “Marry a chicken, follow the chicken; marry a dog, follow the dog.” Wealthy Chinese might keep concubines, who lived in a separate room in the house and sometimes competed with the legal wife for precedence.

In accordance with Confucian tradition, children were expected, above all, to obey their parents, who not only determined their children’s careers but also selected their marriage partners. Filial piety was viewed as an absolute moral good, above virtually all other moral obligations. Even today, duty to one’s parents is considered important in traditional Chinese families, and the tombstones of deceased Chinese are often decorated with tile paintings depicting the filial acts that they performed during their lifetime.

WOMEN IN TANG CHINA The tradition of male superiority continued from ancient times into the medieval era, especially under the southern Song when it was reinforced by Neo-Confucianism. Female children were considered less desirable than males because they could not undertake heavy work in the fields or carry on the family traditions. Poor families often sold their daughters to wealthy villagers to serve as concubines, and female infanticide was not uncommon in times of famine to ensure that there would be food for the remainder of the family. Concubines had few legal rights; female domestic servants, even fewer.

On the surface, conditions improved for women in China during the era of Tang rule, in that a number of court ladies were active in politics, and several were prominent in the entertainment world. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that such limited achievements among the elite trickled down to the mass population. In any event, any progress in women’s rights was reversed under the Song, when Chinese social customs began to reflect a more rigid interpretation of Confucian orthodoxy. During the Song era, two new practices emerged...
that changed the equation for women seeking to obtain a successful marriage contract. First, a new form of dowry appeared. Whereas previously the prospective husband offered the bride's family a bride price, now the bride's parents were expected to pay the groom's family a dowry. With the prosperity that characterized Chinese society during much of the Song era, affluent parents sought to buy a satisfactory husband for their daughter, preferably one with a higher social standing and good prospects for an official career.

A second source of marital bait during the Song period was the promise of a bride with tiny bound feet. The process of foot binding, carried out on girls aged five to thirteen, was excruciatingly painful, as it bent and compressed the foot to half its normal size by imprisoning it in restrictive bandages. But the procedure was often performed by ambitious mothers intent on assuring that their daughters would have the best possible prospects for marriage. A jealous mother would also want her daughter to have a competitive edge in dealing with the other wives and concubines of her future husband. Bound feet represented submissiveness and self-discipline, two of the required attributes of an ideal Confucian wife.

Throughout northern China, foot binding became common for women of all social classes. It was less widespread in southern China, where the cultivation of wet rice could not be carried out with bandaged feet; there it tended to be limited to the scholar-gentry class. Still, most Chinese women with bound feet contributed to the labor force to supplement the family income. Although foot binding was eventually prohibited, the practice lasted into the twentieth century, particularly in rural villages, and the author of this chapter frequently observed older women with bound feet in Chinese cities as late as the 1980s.

As in most traditional cultures, there were exceptions to the low status of women in Chinese society. Women had substantial property rights and retained control over their dowries even after divorce or the death of the husband. Wives were frequently an influential force in the home, often handling the accounts and taking primary responsibility for raising the children. Some were active in politics. The outstanding example was Wu Zhao (c. 625–c. 706), popularly known as Empress Wu. Selected by Emperor Tang Taizong as a concubine, after his death she rose to a position of supreme power at court. At first, she was content to rule through her sons, but in 690, she declared herself empress of China. To bolster her claim of legitimacy, she cited a Buddhist sutra to the effect that a woman would rule the world seven hundred years after the death of Siddhartha Gautama. For her presumption, she has been vilified by later Chinese historians, but she was actually a quite capable ruler. She was responsible for giving meaning to the civil service examination system and was the first to select graduates of the examinations for the highest positions in government. During her last years, she reportedly fell under the influence of courtiers and was deposed in 705, when she was probably around eighty.
The Mongols, who succeeded the Song as the rulers of China in the late thirteenth century, rose to power in Asia with stunning rapidity. In the 1160s when Genghis Khan (JING-uss or GENG-us stainless steel KAHN) (also known as Chinggis Khan), the founder of Mongol greatness, was born, the Mongols were a relatively obscure pastoral people in the area of modern-day Outer Mongolia. Like most of the nomadic peoples in the region, they were organized loosely into clans and tribes and even lacked a common name for themselves. Rivalry among the various tribes over pasturage, livestock, and booty was intense and increased at the end of the twelfth century as a result of a growing population and the consequent overgrazing of pastures. Since they had no source of subsistence besides their herds, the Mongols were, in the words of one historian, in a “state of stress.”

This challenge was met by the great Mongol chieftain Genghis Khan (c. 1162–1227), whose original name was Temuchin (TEM-yuh-jin) (or Temujin). When Temuchin was still a child, his father, an impoverished noble of his tribe, was murdered by a rival, and the boy was forced to seek refuge in the wilderness. Described by one historian as tall, adroit, and vigorous, young Temuchin gradually unified the Mongol tribes through his prowess and the power of his personality. In 1206, he was elected Genghis Khan (“universal ruler”) at a massive tribal meeting in the Gobi Desert. From that time on, he devoted himself to military pursuits. Mongol nomads were now forced to pay taxes and were subject to military conscription. “Man’s highest joy,” Genghis Khan reportedly remarked, “is in victory: to conquer one’s enemies, to pursue them, to deprive them of their possessions, to make their beloved weep, to ride on their horses, and to embrace their wives and daughters.”

The army that Genghis Khan unleashed on the world was not exceptionally large—totaling less than 130,000 in 1227, at a time when the total Mongol population numbered between 1 million and 2 million. But their mastery of military tactics set the Mongols apart from their rivals. Their tireless flying columns of mounted warriors surrounded their enemies and harassed them like cattle, luring them into pursuit and then ambush ing them with flank attacks. John Plano Carpini (PLAN-oh car-pee-nee), a contemporary Franciscan friar, remarked:

As soon as they discover the enemy they charge and each one unleashes three or four arrows. If they see that they can’t break him, they retreat in order to entice the enemy to pursue, thus luring him into an ambush prepared in advance. If they conclude that the enemy army is stronger, they retire for a day or two and ravage neighboring areas. . . . Or they strike camp in a well chosen position, and when the army begins to pass by, they appear unexpectedly. . . . Their military stratagems are numerous. At the moment of an enemy cavalry attack, they place prisoners and foreign auxiliaries in the forefront of their own position, while positioning the bulk of their own troops on the right and left wings to envelop the adversary, thus giving the enemy the impression that they are more numerous than in reality. If the adversary defends himself well, they open their ranks to let him pass through in flight, after which they launch in pursuit and kill as many as possible.

In the years after the election of Temuchin as universal ruler, the Mongols defeated tribal groups to their west and then turned their attention to the seminomadic non-Chinese kingdoms of northern China. There they discovered that their adversaries were armed with a weapon called a fire-lance, an early form of flamethrower. Gunpowder had been invented in China during the late Tang period, and by the early thirteenth century, a fire-lance had been developed that could spew out flames and projectiles a distance of 30 or 40 yards, inflicting considerable damage on the enemy. The following account of a battle in the 1230s between Mongol forces and the army of the state of Jin (Chin) in northern China describes the effects of this weapon:

On the fifth day of the fifth month they sacrificed to Heaven, secretly prepared fire-lances, and embarked 450 Chin soldiers outside the south gate, whence they sailed first east and then north. During the night they killed the enemy guards outside the dikes, and reached the Wang family temple. . . . Kuan-Nu divided his small craft into squadrons of five, seven and ten boats, which came out from behind the defenses and caught the Mongols both from front and rear, using the fire-spouting lances. The Mongols could not stand up to this and fled, losing more than 3500 men drowned. Finally their stockades were burnt, and our force returned.8
In 1245, Pope Innocent IV dispatched the Franciscan friar John Plano Carpini to the Mongol headquarters at Karakorum with a written appeal to the great khan Kuyuk (koo-YOOK) to cease his attacks on Christians. After a considerable wait, Plano Carpini was given the following reply, which could not have pleased the pope. The letter was discovered recently in the Vatican archives.

**A Letter from Pope Innocent IV to Kuyuk Khan**

It is not without cause that we are driven to express in strong terms our amazement that you, as we have heard, have invaded many countries belonging to Christians and to others and are laying them waste in a horrible desolation. . . . Following the example of the King of Peace, and desiring that all men should live united in concord in the fear of God, we do admonish, beg, and earnestly beseech all of you that for the future you desist entirely from assaults of this kind and especially from the persecution of Christians, and that after so many and such grievous offenses you conciliate by a fitting penance the wrath of Divine Majesty. . . . On this account we have thought fit to send to you our beloved son [Friar John] and his companions, the bearers of this letter. . . . When you have had profitable discussions with them concerning the aforesaid affairs, especially those pertaining to peace, make fully known to us through these same friars what moved you to destroy other nations and what your intentions are for the future.

**A Letter from Kuyuk Khan to Pope Innocent IV**

By the power of the Eternal Heaven, We are the all-embracing Khan of all the Great Nations. It is our command:

This is a decree, sent to the great Pope that he may know and pay heed.

After holding counsel with the monarchs under your suzerainty, you have sent us an offer of subordination, which we have accepted from the hands of your envoy.

If you should act up to your word, then you, the great Pope, should come in person with the monarchs to pay us homage and we should thereupon instruct you concerning the commands of the Yasak.

Furthermore, you have said it would be well for us to become Christians. You write to me in person about this matter, and have addressed to me a request. This, your request, we cannot understand.

Furthermore, you have written me these words: “You have attacked all the territories of the Magyars and other Christians, at which I am astonished. Tell me, what was their crime?” These, your words, we likewise cannot understand. Jenghiz Khan and Ogatai Kahan revealed the commands of Heaven. But those whom you name would not believe the commands of Heaven. Those of whom you speak showed themselves highly presumptuous and slew our envoys. Therefore, in accordance with the commands of the Eternal Heaven the inhabitants of the aforesaid countries have been slain and annihilated. If not by the command of Heaven, how can anyone slay or conquer out of his own strength?

And when you say: “I am a Christian. I pray to God. I arraign and despise others,” how do you know who is pleasing to God and to whom He allots His grace? How can you know it, that you speak such words?

Thanks to the power of the Eternal Heaven, all lands have been given to us from sunrise to sunset. How could anyone act other than in accordance with the commands of Heaven? Now your own upright heart must tell you: “We will become subject to you, and will place our powers at your disposal.” You in person, at the head of the monarchs, all of you, without exception, must come to tender us service and pay us homage, then only will we recognize your submission. But if you do not obey the commands of Heaven, and run counter to our orders, we shall know that you are our foe.

That is what we have to tell you. If you fail to act in accordance therewith, how can we foresee what will happen to you? Heaven alone knows.

Based on these selections, what message was the pope seeking to convey to the great khan in Karakorum? What was the nature of the latter’s reply?
By then, the Mongol Empire was quite different from what it had been under its founder. Prior to the conquests of Genghis Khan, the Mongols had been purely nomadic. They spent their winters in the southern plains, where they found suitable pastures for their cattle, and traveled north in the summer to wooded areas where the water was sufficient. They lived in round, felt-covered tents (called yurts), which were lightly constructed so that they could be easily transported. For food, the Mongols depended on milk and meat from their herds and game from hunting.

To administer the new empire, Genghis Khan had set up a capital city at Karakorum (kah-rah-KOR-urn), in present-day Outer Mongolia, but prohibited his fellow Mongols from practicing sedentary occupations or living in cities. But under his successors, the Mongols began to adapt to their conquered areas. As one khan remarked, quoting his Chinese adviser, “Although you inherited the Chinese Empire on horseback, you cannot rule it from that position.” Mongol aristocrats began to enter administrative positions, while commoners took up sedentary occupations as farmers or merchants.

The territorial nature of the empire also changed. Following tribal custom, at the death of the ruling khan, the territory was distributed among his heirs. The once-united empire of Genghis Khan was thus divided into several separate khanates (KAH-tays), each under the autonomous rule of one of his sons by his principal wife. One of his sons was awarded the khanate of Chaghadaï (chag-hu-DY) in Central Asia with its capital at Samarkand; another ruled Persia from the conquered city of Baghdad; a third took charge of the khanate of Kipchak (KIIP-chahhk), commonly known as the Golden Horde. But it was one of his grandsons, named Kubilai Khan (1215–1294), who completed the conquest of the Song and established a new Chinese dynasty, called the Yuan (1279–1368), from a phrase in the Book of Changes referring to the “original creative force” of the universe. Kubilai moved the capital of China northward from Hangzhou to Khanbalig (“city of the khan”), which was located on a major trunk route from the Great Wall to the plains of northern China (see Map 10.2). Later the city would be known by the Chinese name Beijing (bay-ZHING), or Peking (pee-KING) (“northern capital”).

### Mongol Rule in China

At first, China’s new rulers exhibited impressive vitality. Under the leadership of the talented Kubilai Khan, the Yuan continued to flex their muscles by attempting to expand their empire. Mongol armies advanced into the Red River valley and reconquered Vietnam, which had declared its independence after the fall of the Tang three hundred years earlier. Mongol fleets were launched against Malay kingdoms in Java and Sumatra and also against the islands of Japan. Only the expedition against Vietnam succeeded, however, and even that success was temporary. The Vietnamese counterattacked and eventually drove the Mongols back across the border. The attempted conquest of Japan was even more disastrous. On one occasion, a massive storm destroyed the Mongol fleet, killing thousands (see Chapter 11).

Logistics may explain why the Mongol army failed everywhere after succeeding in China. The Mongol attacks on Japan, Vietnam, and the Indonesian kingdoms were too far afield for the army to be easily supported and resupplied. The terrain may also have contributed to their defeat. Mongol tactics, such as cavalry charges and siege warfare, were less effective in tropical and hilly regions than they were closer to the arid Mongol homeland.

The Mongols had more success in governing China. After a failed attempt to administer their conquest as they had ruled their own tribal society (some advisers reportedly even suggested that the plowed fields be transformed into pastures), Mongol rulers adapted to the Chinese political system and made use of local talents in the bureaucracy. The tripartite division of the administration into civilian, military, and censorate was retained, as were the six ministries. The civil service system, which had been abolished in the north in 1237 and in the south forty years later, was revived in the early fourteenth century. The state cult of Confucius was also restored, although Kubilai Khan himself remained a Buddhist.

But there were some key differences. Culturally, the Mongols were nothing like the Chinese and remained a separate class with their own laws. The highest positions in the bureaucracy were usually staffed by Mongols. Although some leading Mongols followed their ruler in converting to Buddhism, most commoners retained their traditional religion. Even those who adopted Buddhism chose the Lamaist (LAH-muH-ist) variety from Tibet, which emphasized divination and magic.

Despite these differences, some historians believe that the Mongol dynasty won considerable support from the majority of the Chinese. The people of the north, after all, were used to foreign rule, and although those living farther to the south may have resented their alien conquerors, they probably came to respect the stability, unity, and economic prosperity that the Mongols initially brought to China.

Indeed, the Mongols’ greatest achievement may have been the prosperity they fostered. At home, they continued the relatively tolerant economic policies of the southern Song, and by bringing much of the Eurasian landmass under a single rule, they encouraged long-distance trade, particularly along...
Why was the Mongol Empire divided into four separate khanates?

The Silk Road, now dominated by Muslim merchants from Central Asia. To promote trade, the Grand Canal was extended from the Yellow River to the capital. Adjacent to the canal, a paved highway was constructed that extended all the way from the Song capital of Hangzhou to its Mongol counterpart at Khanbaliq.

The capital was a magnificent city. According to the Italian merchant Marco Polo, who resided there during the reign of Kublai Khan, it was 24 miles in diameter and surrounded by thick walls of earth penetrated by a dozen massive gates (see the Film & History feature on p. 287). He described the old Song capital of Hangzhou as a noble city where “so many pleasures may be found that one fancies himself to be in Paradise.”

Ironically, while many of their subjects prospered, the Mongols themselves often did not. Burdened by low wages and heavy military obligations that left them little time for their herds, many Mongol warriors became so impoverished that they were forced to sell their sons and daughters into slavery. Eventually, the Yuan government had to provide funds from the imperial treasury to buy them back and return them to their families.

The magnificence of the empire impressed foreign visitors, including Marco Polo, whose tales of the glories of Cathay (ka-THAY) (a name adapted from Kitai, the Russian name for China) were not believed when he returned to Europe (see the box on p. 288). But the Yuan eventually fell victim to the same fate that had afflicted other powerful dynasties in China. In fact, it was one of the shortest-lived of the great dynasties, lasting less than a century. Excessive spending on foreign conquest, inadequate tax revenues, factionalism and corruption at court and in the bureaucracy, and growing internal instability, brought about in part by a famine in central China in the 1340s, all contributed to the dynasty’s demise. Kublai Khan’s successors lacked his
The famous story of Marco Polo’s trip to East Asia in the late thirteenth century has sparked the imagination of Western readers ever since. The son of an Italian merchant from Venice, Polo set off for China in 1270 and did not come back for twenty-four years, traveling east via the Silk Road and returning by sea across the Indian Ocean. Captured by the Genoese in 1298 and tossed into prison, he recounted his experiences to a professional writer known as Rusticello of Pisa. Copies of the resulting book, originally titled Description of the World, were soon circulating throughout Europe, and one even found its way into the baggage of Christopher Columbus, who used it as a source for information on the eastern lands he sought during his own travels. Marco Polo’s adventures have appeared in numerous languages, thrilling readers around the world, and filmmakers have done their part, producing feature films about his exploits for modern audiences.

But did Marco Polo actually visit China, or was the book an elaborate hoax? In recent years, some historians have expressed doubts about the veracity of his account. Frances Wood, author of Did Marco Polo Go to China? (1996), provoked a lively debate in the halls of academe with her suggestion that he may simply have related tales that he had heard from contemporaries.

Such reservations aside, filmmakers have long been fascinated by Marco Polo’s story. The first Hollywood production, The Adventures of Marco Polo (1938), starred the prewar screen idol Gary Cooper, with Basil Rathbone as his evil nemesis in China. Like many film epics of the era, it was highly entertaining but was not historically accurate, and it used Western actors in all the main parts. The most recent version, a Hallmark Channel production called Marco Polo, appeared in 2007 and starred the young American actor Ian Somerhalder in the title role. The film is a reasonably faithful rendition of the book, with stirring battle scenes, the predictable “cast of thousands,” and a somewhat unlikely love interest between Polo and a Mongolian princess thrown in. Although the lead character is not particularly convincing in the title role—after two grueling decades in Asia, he still bears a striking resemblance to a teenage surfing idol—the producers should be credited for their efforts to portray China as the most advanced civilization of its day. A number of Chinese inventions then unknown in Europe, such as paper money, explosives, and the compass, make their appearance in the film. Emperor Khubilai Khan (played by the veteran actor Brian Dennehy) does not project an imperial presence, however, and is unconvincing when he says that he would prefer someone who can speak the truth to power.

The Mongols’ Place in History

The Mongols were the last, and arguably the greatest, of the nomadic peoples who came thundering out of the steppes of Central Asia, pillaging and conquering the territories of their adversaries. What caused this extraordinary burst of energy, and why were the Mongols so much more successful than their predecessors? Historians are divided. Some have suggested that drought and overpopulation may have depleted the available pasture on the steppes, yet another example of the unseen impact of environmental changes on human history. Others have cited the ambition and genius of Genghis Khan, who was able to arouse a sense of personal loyalty unusual in a society where administrative genius, and by the middle of the next century, the Yuan dynasty in China, like the Mongol khanates elsewhere in Central Asia, had begun to decline rapidly (see Chapter 13).
commitments were ordinarily of a tribal nature. Still others point to his reliance on the organizational unit known as the ordos (OR-dohz), described by the historian Samuel Adshead as “a system of restructuring tribes into decimal units whose top level of leadership was organized on bureaucratic lines.”

Although the ordos system had been used by the Xiongnu and other nomadic peoples before them, the Mongols applied it to create disciplined military units that were especially effective against the relatively freewheeling tactics of their rivals on the steppes and devastating against the relatively immobile armies of the sedentary states in their path. Once organized, the Mongols used their superior horsemanship and blitzkrieg tactics effectively, while taking advantage of divisions within the enemy ranks and borrowing more advanced military technology.

Once in power, however, the Mongols’ underlying weaknesses eventually proved fatal. Unlike some of their predecessors, the Mongols had difficulty making the transition from the nomadic life of the steppes to the sedentary life of the villages, and their unwieldy system of royal succession led to instability in their leadership ranks. Still, although the Mongol era was just a brief interlude in the long sweep of human history, it was rich in consequences.

**THE MONGOLS: A REPUTATION UNDESERVED?** The era of Mongol expansion has usually been portrayed as a tragic
period in human history. The Mongols’ conquests resulted in widespread death and suffering throughout the civilized world. Nations and empires were humbled, cities destroyed, and irrigation systems laid waste. Then, just when the ravages of the era appeared to come to an end, the Black Death (bubonic plague), probably carried by lice hidden in the saddlebags of Mongol horsemen, decimated the population of Europe and the Middle East (see Chapter 13). Some regions lost as much as one-third of their population, with severe economic consequences.

Few modern historians would dispute the brutality that characterized Mongol expansion. But some are now beginning to point out that beyond the legacy of death and destruction, the Mongols also brought an era of widespread peace, known as the Pax Mongolica (PAKS or PAHKS mahn-GOH-lik-uh), to much of the Eurasian supercontinent and inaugurated what one scholar has described as “the idea of the unified conceptualization of the globe,” creating a “basic information circuit” that spread commodities, ideas, and inventions from one end of the Eurasian supercontinent to the other. That being said, there is no denying that the Mongol invasions resulted in widespread suffering and misfortune to millions of people in their path. If there was a Mongol peace, it was, for many, the peace of death. In any event, such conditions were not destined to last.

The Ming Dynasty

**FOCUS QUESTIONS:** What were the chief initiatives taken by the early rulers of the Ming dynasty to enhance the role of China in the world? Why did the imperial court order the famous voyages of Zhenghe, and why were they discontinued?

The Ming inaugurated a new era of greatness in Chinese history. Under a series of strong rulers, China extended its rule into Mongolia and Central Asia. The Ming even briefly reconquered Vietnam, which, after a thousand years of Chinese rule, had reclaimed its independence following the collapse of the Tang dynasty in the tenth century. Along the northern frontier, the Emperor Yongle (YOONG-luh) (Yung Lo; 1402–1424) strengthened the Great Wall and pacified the nomadic tribes that had troubled China in previous centuries (see the comparative illustration on p. 290). A tributary relationship was established with the Yi (YEE) dynasty in Korea.

The internal achievements of the Ming were equally impressive. When they replaced the Mongols in the fourteenth century, the Ming turned to traditional Confucian institutions as a means of ruling their vast empire. These included the six ministries at the apex of the bureaucracy, the use of the civil service examinations to select members of the bureaucracy, and the division of the empire into provinces, districts, and counties. As before, Chinese villages were relatively autonomous, and local councils of elders continued to be responsible for adjudicating disputes, initiating local construction and irrigation projects, mustering a militia, and assessing and collecting taxes.

The society that was governed by this vast hierarchy of officials was a far cry from the predominantly agrarian society that had been ruled by the Han. In the burgeoning cities near the coast and along the Yangtze River valley, factories and workshops were vastly increasing the variety and output of their manufactured goods. The population had doubled, and new crops had been introduced, greatly expanding the food output of the empire.

### The Voyages of Zhenghe

In 1405, in a splendid display of Chinese maritime might, Emperor Yongle sent a fleet of Chinese trading ships under the eunuch admiral Zhenghe (JEHNG-huh) (Cheng Ho) through the Strait of Malacca and out into the Indian Ocean. There they traveled as far west as the east coast of Africa, stopping on the way at ports in South Asia. The size of the fleet was impressive: nearly 28,000 sailors on sixty-two ships, some of them junks larger by far than any other oceangoing vessels the world had yet seen (although the actual size of the larger ships is in dispute). China seemed about to become a direct participant in the vast trade network that extended as far west as the Atlantic Ocean, thereby culminating the process of opening China to the wider world that had begun with the Tang dynasty.

Why the expeditions were undertaken has been a matter of some debate. Some historians assume that economic profit was the main reason. Others point to Yongle’s native curiosity and note that the expedition—and the six others that followed it—returned not only with goods and a plethora of information about the outside world but also with some items unknown in China (the emperor was especially intrigued by the giraffes brought back from East Africa and placed them in the imperial zoo, where they were identified by soothsayers with the coming of good government). Others speculate that the emperor was seeking to ascertain the truth of rumors that his immediate predecessor, Emperor Jianwen (jee-AHN-wen) (Chien Wen; 1398–1402), had escaped to Southeast Asia to live in exile.

Whatever the case, the voyages resulted in a dramatic increase in Chinese knowledge about the world and the nature of ocean travel. They also brought massive profits for their sponsors, including individuals connected with Admiral Zhenghe at court. This aroused resentment among conservatives within the bureaucracy, some of whom viewed commercial activities with a characteristic measure of Confucian disdain. One commented that an end to the voyages would provide the Chinese people with a respite “so that they can devote themselves to husbandry [agriculture] and schooling.”

Shortly after Yongle’s death, the voyages were discontinued, never to be revived. The decision had long-term consequences and in the eyes of many modern historians marks a turning inward of the Chinese state, away from commerce and toward a more traditional emphasis on agriculture, away from the exotic lands to the south and toward the heartland of the country in the Yellow River valley.

Ironically, the move toward the Yellow River had been initiated by Yongle himself when he had decided to move the Ming capital from Nanjing (nahn-JING), in central China, where the ships were built and the voyages launched, back to Beijing, where official eyes were firmly focused on the threat from beyond the Great Wall to the north. As a means of reducing that threat, Yongle ordered the resettlement of thousands of families from the fertile Yangtze valley. The emperor presumably had not intended to set forces in motion that would
divert the country from its contacts with the external world. After all, he had been the driving force behind Zhenghe’s voyages. But the end result was a shift in the balance of power from central China, where it had been since the southern Song dynasty, back to northern China, where it would remain for the rest of the Ming era. China would not look outward again for more than four centuries.

WHY WERE ZHENGHE’S VOYAGES ABANDONED? Why the Ming government discontinued Zhenghe’s explorations and turned its attention back to domestic concerns has long been a quandary. Was it simply a consequence of court intrigues or the replacement of one emperor by another, or were deeper issues involved? Some scholars speculate that the real purpose of the voyages was not economic gain, but “power projection,” and that when local rulers throughout the South Seas had been sufficiently intimidated to accept a tributary relationship with their “elder brother” in China, the voyages—which had been prohibitively expensive—were no longer necessary.

One recent theory that has gained wide attention and spurred scholarly debate contends that the Chinese fleets did not limit their explorations to the Indian Ocean but actually circled the earth and discovered the existence of the Western Hemisphere. Although that theory has won few scholarly adherents, the voyages, and their abrupt discontinuance, remain one of the most fascinating enigmas in the history of China.

In Search of the Way

FOCUS QUESTION: What roles did Buddhism, Daoism, and Neo-Confucianism play in Chinese intellectual life in the period between the Sui dynasty and the Ming?

By the time of the Sui dynasty, Buddhism and Daoism had emerged as major rivals of Confucianism as the ruling ideology of the state. But during the last half of the Tang dynasty,
The Way of the Great Buddha

According to Buddhists, it is impossible to describe the state of Nirvana, which is sometimes depicted as an extinction of self. Yet Buddhist scholars found it difficult to avoid trying to interpret the term for their followers. The following passage by the Chinese monk Shen-Hui (shun-HWEE), one of the leading exponents of Chan Buddhism, dates from the eighth century and attempts to describe the means by which an individual may hope to seek enlightenment. There are clear similarities with philosophical Daoism.

Shen-Hui, Elucidating the Doctrine

“Absence of thought” is the doctrine.
“Absence of action” is the foundation.
True Emptiness is the substance.
And all wonderful things and beings are the function.
True Thusness is without thought; it cannot be known through conception and thought.
The True State is noncreated—can it be seen in matter and mind?
There is no thought except that of True Thusness.
There is no creation except that of the True State.
Abiding without abiding, forever abiding in Nirvana.
Acting without acting, immediately crossing to the Other Shore.
Thusness does not move, but its motion and functions are inexhaustible.
In every instant of thought, there is no seeking; the seeking itself is no thought.

Confucianism revived and once again became dominant at court, a position it would retain to the end of the dynastic period in the early twentieth century. Buddhist and Daoist beliefs, however, remained popular at the local level.

The Rise and Decline of Buddhism and Daoism

As noted earlier, Buddhism arrived in China with merchants from India and found its first adherents among the merchant community and intellectuals intrigued by the new ideas. During the chaotic centuries following the collapse of the Han dynasty, Buddhism and Daoism appealed to those who were searching for more emotional and spiritual satisfaction than Confucianism could provide. Both faiths reached beyond the common people and found support among the ruling classes as well. The capital of Chang’an even had a small Christian church after Christianity was introduced to China by Syrian merchants in the sixth century C.E.

The Sinification of Buddhism

As Buddhism attracted more followers, it began to take on Chinese characteristics and divided into a number of separate sects. Some, like the Chan (Zen in Japanese) sect, called for mind training and a strict regimen as a means of seeking enlightenment, a technique that reflected Daoist ideas and appealed to many intellectuals (see the box above). Others, like the Pure Land sect, stressed the role of devotion, an approach that was more appealing to ordinary Chinese, who lacked the time and inclination for strict monastic discipline. Still others were mystical sects, like the Tantrism (TUHN-tri-zem), which emphasized the importance of magical symbols and ritual in seeking a preferred way to enlightenment. Some Buddhist groups, like their Daoist counterparts, had political objectives. The White Lotus sect, founded in 1133, often adopted the form of a rebel movement, seeking political reform or the overthrow of a dynasty and forecasting a new era when a “savior Buddha” would come to earth to herald the advent of a new age. Most believers, however, assimilated Buddhism into their daily lives, where it
joined Confucian ideology and spirit worship as an element in the highly eclectic and tolerant Chinese worldview.

The burgeoning popularity of Buddhism continued into the early years of the Tang dynasty. Early Tang rulers lent their support to the Buddhist monasteries that had been established throughout the country. Buddhist scriptures were regularly included in the civil service examinations, and Buddhist and Daoist advisers replaced shamans and Confucian scholar-officials as advisers at court. But ultimately, Buddhism and Daoism lost favor at court and were increasingly subjected to official persecution. Part of the reason was xenophobia. Envious Daoists and Confucianists made a point of criticizing the foreign origins of Buddhist doctrines, which one prominent Confucian scholar characterized as nothing but “silly relics.” To deflect such criticism, Buddhists attempted to make the doctrine more Chinese, equating the Indian concept of *dharma* (law) with the Chinese concept of *Dao* (the Way). Emperor Tang Taizong ordered the Buddhist monk Xuan Zang to translate Lao Tzu’s classic, *The Way of the Dao*, into Sanskrit, reportedly to show visitors from India that China had its own equivalent to the Buddhist scriptures. But another reason for this change of heart may have been financial. The great Buddhist monasteries had accumulated thousands of acres of land and serfs that were exempt from paying taxes to the state. Such wealth contributed to the corruption of the monks and other Buddhist officials and in turn aroused popular resentment and official disapproval. As the state attempted to eliminate the great landholdings of the aristocracy, the large monasteries also attracted its attention. During the later Tang, countless temples and monasteries were destroyed, and more than 100,000 monks were compelled to leave the monasteries and return to secular life.

**BUDDHISM UNDER THREAT** There were probably deeper political and ideological reasons for the growing antagonism between Buddhism and the state. By preaching the illusory nature of the material world, Buddhism was denying the very essence of Confucian teachings—the necessity for filial piety and hard work. By encouraging young Chinese to abandon their rice fields and seek refuge and wisdom in the monasteries, Buddhism was undermining the foundation stones of Chinese society—the family unit and the work ethic. In the final analysis, Buddhism was incompatible with the activist element in Chinese society, an orientation that was most effectively expressed by State Confucianism. In the competition with Confucianism for support by the state, Buddhism, like Daoism, was almost certain to lose, at least in the more worldly, secure, and prosperous milieu of late Tang and Song China. The two doctrines continued to win converts at the local level, but official support ceased. In the meantime, Buddhism was under attack in Central Asia as well. In the eighth century, the Uighur kingdom adopted *Manichaeanism* (mahn-ih-kay-uhhnizm), an offshoot of the ancient Zoroastrian religion with some influence from Christianity. Manichaeanism spread rapidly throughout the area and may have been a reason for the European belief that a Christian king (the legendary Prester John) ruled somewhere in Asia. By the tenth century, Islam was beginning to move east along the Silk Road, posing a severe threat to both Manichaean and Buddhist centers in the area. As its lifeline to the Indian subcontinent along the Silk Road was severed, Chinese Buddhism lost access to its spiritual roots and became increasingly subject to the pull of indigenous intellectual and social currents.

**Neo-Confucianism: The Investigation of Things**

Into the vacuum left by the decline of Buddhism and Daoism stepped a revived Confucianism. As during the Han dynasty, the teachings of "Master Kung" were used to buttress the power and majesty of the state. The emperor continued to be seen as an intermediary between Heaven and earth, while his legitimacy was based not on the hereditary principle but on his talent and virtue, a central component of Confucian doctrine since the era of the “hundred schools” of philosophy in ancient times.

At the same time, however, it was a new form of Confucianism that had been significantly altered by its competition for power with Buddhism and Daoism.
with Buddhist and Daoist teachings. Challenged by Buddhist and Daoist ideas about the nature of the universe, Confucian thinkers began to flesh out the sparse metaphysical structure of classical Confucian doctrine with a set of sophisticated theories about the nature of the cosmos and humans’ place in it. Although the origins of this effort can be traced to the early Tang period, it reached fruition during the intellectually prolific Song dynasty, when it became the dominant ideology of the state.

The fundamental purpose of Neo-Confucianism, as the new doctrine was called, was to unite the metaphysical speculations of Buddhism and Daoism with the pragmatic Confucian approach to society. In response to Buddhism and Daoism, Neo-Confucianism maintained that the world is real, not illusory, and that fulfillment comes from participation, not withdrawal.

The primary contributor to this intellectual effort was the philosopher Zhu Xi (JOO SHEE) (Chu Hsi) (see the box on p. 294). Raised during the southern Song era, Zhu Xi accepted the division of the world into a material world and a transcendent world, called by Neo-Confucianists the Supreme Ultimate, or Tai Ji (TY JEE). The Supreme Ultimate was roughly equivalent to the Dao, or Way, in classical Confucian philosophy. To Zhu Xi, this Supreme Ultimate was a set of abstract principles governed by the law of yin and yang and the five elements.

Human beings served as a link between the two halves of this bifurcated universe. Although human beings live in the material world, each individual has an identity that is linked with the Supreme Ultimate, and the goal of individual action is to transcend the material world in a Buddhist sense to achieve an essential identity with the Supreme Ultimate. According to Zhu Xi and his followers, the means of transcending the material world is self-cultivation, which is achieved by the “investigation of things.”

THE SCHOOL OF MIND During the remainder of the Song dynasty and into the early years of the Ming, Zhu Xi’s ideas became the central core of Confucian ideology and a favorite source of questions for the civil service examinations. But during the mid-Ming era, his ideas came under attack from a Confucian scholar named Wang Yangming (WAHING yahng-MING). Wang and his supporters disagreed with Zhu Xi’s focus on learning through an investigation of the outside world and asserted that the correct way to transcend the material world was through an understanding of self. According to this so-called School of Mind, the mind and the universe were a single unit. Knowledge was thus intuitive rather than empirical and was obtained through internal self-searching rather than through an investigation of the outside world. The debate is reminiscent of a similar disagreement between followers of the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Plato had argued that all knowledge comes from within, while Aristotle argued that knowledge resulted from an examination of the external world. Wang Yangming’s ideas attracted many followers during the Ming dynasty, and the school briefly rivaled that of Zhu Xi in popularity among Confucian scholars. Nevertheless, it never won official acceptance, probably because it was too much like Buddhism in denying the importance of a life of participation and social action.

For the average Chinese, of course, an instinctive faith in the existence of household deities or nature spirits continued to take
A Confucian Wedding Ceremony

During the twelfth century, the philosopher Zhu Xi attempted to reinvigorate Confucian teachings in a contemporary setting that would make them more accessible to a broad audience. His goal was militantly Confucian—to combat both popular Buddhist doctrines and the superstitious practices of the common people. With his new moral code, Zhu Xi hoped to put Chinese society back on the Confucian track, with its emphasis on proper behavior. He therefore set forth the proper rituals required to carry out the special days that marked the lives of all Chinese: entry into adolescence, marriage, and funerai and ancestral rites. In the following selection, he prescribes the proper protocol for the Confucian wedding ceremony.

Zhu Xi’s Family Rituals

4. Welcoming in Person

On the day before the wedding, the bride’s family sends people to lay out the dowry furnishings in the groom’s chamber. At dawn the groom’s family sets places in the chamber. Meanwhile, the bride’s family sets up places outside. As the sun goes down, the groom puts on full attire. After the presiding man makes a report at the offering hall, he pledges the groom and orders him to go to fetch the bride. The groom goes out and mounts his horse. When he gets to the bride’s home he waits at his place. The presiding man of the bride’s family makes a report at the offering hall, after which he pledges the bride and instructs her. Then he goes out to greet the groom. When the groom enters, he presents a goose. The duenna takes the girl out to climb into the conveyance. The groom mounts his horse and leads the way for the bridal vehicle. When they arrive at his house he leads the bride in and they take their seats. After the eating and drinking are done, the groom leaves the chamber. On reentering, he takes off his clothes and the candles are removed.

5. The Bride Is Presented to Her Parents-in-Law

The next day, having risen at dawn, the bride meets her parents-in-law, who entertain her. Then the bride is presented to the elders. If she is the wife of the eldest son, she serves food to her parents-in-law. Then the parents-in-law feast the bride.

6. Presentation at the Family Shrine

On the third day the presiding man takes the bride to be presented at the offering hall.

7. The Groom Is Presented to the Wife’s Parents

The day after that the groom goes to see his wife’s parents. Afterward he is presented to his wife’s relatives. The bride’s family entertains the groom, as in ordinary etiquette.

What was Zhu Xi’s apparent purpose in describing proper etiquette in this manner? How would adherence to such rigid rituals contribute to becoming a good Confucian?

The Apogee of Chinese Culture

FOCUS QUESTION: What were the main achievements in Chinese literature and art in the period between the Tang dynasty and the Ming, and what technological innovations and intellectual developments contributed to these achievements?

The period between the Tang and the Ming dynasties was in many ways the great age of achievement in Chinese literature and art. Enriched by Buddhist and Daoist images and themes, Chinese poetry and painting reached the pinnacle of their creativity. Porcelain emerged as the highest form of Chinese ceramics, and sculpture flourished under the influence of styles imported from India and Central Asia.

Literature

The development of Chinese literature was stimulated by two technological innovations: the invention of paper during the Han dynasty and the invention of woodblock printing during the Tang. At first, paper was used for clothing, wrapping material, toilet tissue, and even armor, but by the first century B.C.E., it was being used for writing as well.

In the seventh century C.E., the Chinese developed the technique of carving an entire page of text into a wooden block, inking it, and then pressing it onto a sheet of paper. Ordinarily, a text was printed on a long sheet of paper like a
But it was in poetry, above all, that Chinese from the Tang to the Ming dynasties most effectively expressed their literary talents. Chinese poems celebrated the beauty of nature, the changes of the seasons, and the joys of friendship and drink; others expressed sorrow at the brevity of life, old age, and parting. Given the frequency of imperial banishment and the requirement that officials serve away from their home district, it is little wonder that separation was an important theme. Love poems existed but were neither as intense as Western verse nor as sensual as Indian poetry.

The nature of the Chinese language imposed certain characteristics on Chinese poetry, the first being compactness. The most popular forms were four-line and eight-line poems, with five or seven words in each line. Because Chinese grammar does not rely on case or gender and makes no distinction between verb tenses, five-character Chinese poems were not only brief but often cryptic and ambiguous.

Two eighth-century Tang poets, Li Bo (Lee BOH) (Li Po, sometimes known as Li Bai or Li Taibo) and Du Fu (Tu Fu), symbolized the genius of the era as well as the two most popular styles. Li Bo was a free spirit. His writing often centered on nature and shifted easily between moods of revelry and melancholy. One of his best-known poems is *Drinking Alone* in Moonlight:

> Among the flowers, with a jug of wine,  
> I drink all alone—no one to share.  
> Raising my cup, I welcome the moon.  
> And my shadow joins us, making a threesome.  
> Alas! the moon won’t take part in the drinking,  
> And my shadow just does whatever I do.  
> But I’m friends for a while with the moon and my shadow.  

Where Li Bo was a carefree Daoist, Du Fu was a sober Confucian. His poems often dealt with historical issues or ethical themes, befitting a scholar-official living during the chaotic times of the late Tang. Many of his works reflect a concern with social injustice and the plight of the unfortunate rarely to be found in the writings of his contemporaries (see the box on p. 280). Neither the poetry nor the prose of the great writers of the Tang and Song dynasties was written for or ever reached the majority of the Chinese population. The millions of Chinese peasants and artisans living in rural villages and market towns acquired their knowledge of Chinese history, Confucian moralisms, and even Buddhist scripture from stories, plays, and songs passed down by storytellers, wandering minstrels, and itinerant monks in a rich oral tradition. One exception is the popular poem *Song of Lasting Pain* by the Tang poet Bo Ju-yi (BOH joo-YEE) (772–846), whose poignant portrayal of the emperor’s consort Yang Guifei resonates among Chinese readers down to the present day (see the box on p. 296).

**THE CHINESE NOVEL**

During the Yuan dynasty, new forms of literary creativity, including popular theater and the novel, began to appear. The two most famous novels were *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Tale of the Marshes*. The former had been told orally for centuries, appearing in written form during the Song as a scriptbook for storytellers. It was first printed in 1321 but was not published for mass consumption until 1522. Each new edition was altered in some way, making the final edition a composite effort of generations of the Chinese imagination. The plot recounts the power struggle that took place among competing groups after the fall of the Han dynasty. Packed with court intrigues, descriptions of peasant life, and gripping battles, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* stands as a magnificent epic, China’s counterpart to the Mahabharata.

*Tale of the Marshes* is an often violent tale of outlaw heroes who at the end of the northern Song banded together to oppose government taxes and official oppression. They rob those in power in order to share with the poor. *Tale of the Marshes* is the first prose fiction that describes the daily ordeal of ordinary Chinese people in their own language. Unlike the picaresque novel in the West, *Tale of the Marshes* does not limit itself to the exploits of one hero, offering instead 108 different story lines. This multitude of plots is a natural outgrowth of the tradition of the professional storyteller, who attempts to keep the audience’s attention by recounting as many adventures as the market will bear.
Art

Although painting flourished in China under the Han and reached a level of artistic excellence under the Tang, little remains from those periods. The painting of the Song and the Yuan, however, is considered the apogee of painting in traditional China.

Like literature, Chinese painting found part of its inspiration in Buddhist and Daoist sources. Some of the best surviving examples of the Tang period are the Buddhist wall paintings in the caves at Dunhuang (duhn-HWAHNG), in Central Asia. These paintings were commissioned by Buddhist merchants who stopped at Dunhuang and, while awaiting permission to enter China, wished to give thanks for surviving the rigors of the Silk Road. The entrances to the caves were filled with stones after the tenth century, when Muslim zealots began to destroy Buddhist images throughout Central Asia, and have only recently been uncovered. Like the few surviving Tang scroll paintings, these wall paintings display a love of color and refinement that are reminiscent of styles in India and Persia (see the comparative illustration on p. 297).

Beautiful Women: The Scapegoats of Legends

The capture and execution of the imperial concubine Yang Guifei during the An Lushan rebellion (see “The Tang Dynasty” earlier in the chapter) is one of the most famous episodes in Chinese history. Although for centuries Chinese historians have blamed her for distracting Emperor Xuanzong from his imperial duties, the Chinese people have always been fascinated by her passion, her beauty, and her dramatic downfall.

One who sought to capture her story was the Tang poet Bo Ju-yi (772–846), whose famous work *Song of Lasting Pain* has captivated the hearts of Chinese readers for more than 1,300 years. After describing her brutal murder and Xuanzong’s inconstant grief, the poem ends with the emperor and his lover united in everlasting sorrow.

Bo Ju-yi, *Song of Lasting Pain*

Han’s sovereign prized the beauty of flesh,
he longed for such as ruins domains;
for many years he ruled the Earth
and sought for one in vain.
A daughter there was of the house of Yang,
just grown to maturity,
raised deep in the women’s quarters
where no man knew of her.
When Heaven begets beauteous things,
it is loath to let them be wasted,
so one morning this maiden was chosen
to be by the ruler’s side.
When she turned around with smiling glance,
she exuded every charm;
in the harem all who wore powder and paint of beauty then seemed barren.

In springtime’s chill he let her bathe
in Hua-qing Palace’s pools
whose warm springs’ glistening waters
washed flecks of dried lotions away.
Those in attendance helped her rise,
in helplessness so charming—
this was the moment when first she enjoyed
the flood of royal favor.

She waited his pleasure at banquets,
with never a moment’s peace,
their springs were spent in outings of spring,
he was sole lord of her nights.
In the harems there were beauties,
three thousand there were in all,
but the love that was due to three thousand was spent on one body alone.

Tresses like cloud, face like flower,
gold pins that swayed to her steps;
it was warm in the lotus-embroidered tents
where they passed the nights of spring.
And the nights of spring seemed all too short,
the sun would too soon rise,
from this point on our lord and king avoided daybreak court.

If in Heaven, may we become
those birds that fly on shared wing;
or on Earth, then may we become
branches that twine together.
Heaven lasts, the Earth endures
yet a time will come when they’re gone,
yet this pain of ours will continue
and never finally end.

Like Yang Guifei, a number of other beautiful women in history and legend, including Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, and Rama’s wife Sita, have been blamed for the downfall of states and other misfortunes. Why is this such a familiar theme in many cultures around the world? Can you think of other examples?
Daoism ultimately had a greater influence than Buddhism on Chinese painting. From early times, Chinese artists removed themselves to the mountains to write and paint and find the *Dao*, or Way, in nature. In the fifth century, one Chinese painter, too old to travel, began to paint mountain scenes from memory and announced that depicting nature could function as a substitute for contemplating nature itself. Painting, he said, could be the means of realizing the *Dao*. This explains in part the emphasis on nature in traditional Chinese painting. The word for landscape in Chinese means “mountain-water,” and the Daoist search for balance between earth and water, hard and soft, *yang* and *yin*, is at play in the tradition of Chinese painting. To enhance the effect, poems were added to the paintings, underscoring the fusion of the visual and the verbal in Chinese art. Many artists were proficient in both media, the poem inspiring the painting and vice versa.

To represent the totality of nature, Chinese artists attempted to reveal the quintessential forms of the landscape. Rather than depicting the actual realistic shape of a specific mountain, they tried to portray the “idea” of a mountain. Empty spaces were left in the paintings because in the Daoist vision, one cannot know the whole truth. Daoist influence was also evident in the tendency to portray human beings as insignificant in the midst of nature. In contrast to the focus on the human body and personality in Western art, Chinese art

---

**COMPARATIVE ILLUSTRATION**

**The Two Worlds of Tang China.** In Tang dynasty China, the arts often reflected influences from a wide variety of cultures. On the left is an eighth-century wall painting from a cliffside cave at Dunhuang, a major rest stop on the Silk Road. The portrait of the Buddha clearly reflects Indian influence. The illustration on the right is a stone rubbing of Confucius based on a painting by the Tang dynasty artist Wu Daozi (woo DOW-ZEE) (c. 685–758). Although the original painting is not extant, this block print of a stone copy of Wu Daozi’s work, showing Confucius in his flowing robe, reflects the indigenous style for which the painter was famous. It became the iconic portrait of the Master for millions of later Chinese. The Chinese government recently commissioned a copy based on Wu’s original painting to serve as the standard portrait of Confucius for people around the world.

*How do the two portraits shown here differ in the way their creators seek to present the character and the underlying philosophy of the Buddha and Confucius?*
The Chinese displayed their paintings on long scrolls of silk or paper that were attached to a wooden cylindrical bar at the bottom. Varying in length from 3 to 20 feet, the paintings were unfolded slowly so that the eye could enjoy each segment, one after the other, beginning at the bottom with water or a village and moving upward into the hills to the mountain peaks and the sky.

By the tenth century, Chinese painters began to eliminate color from their paintings, preferring the challenge of capturing the distilled essence of the landscape in washes of black ink on white silk. Borrowing from calligraphy, now a sophisticated and revered art, they emphasized the brush stroke and created black-and-white landscapes characterized by a gravity of mood and dominated by overpowering mountains.

Other artists turned toward more expressionist and experimental painting. These so-called literati artists were scholars and administrators, highly educated and adept at music, poetry, and painting. Being scholars first and artists second, however, they believed that the purpose of painting was not representation but expression. No longer did painters wish to evoke the feeling of wandering in nature. Instead they tried to reveal to the viewer their own mind and feelings. Like many Western painters in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of these artists were misunderstood by the public and painted only for themselves and one another.

Second only to painting in creativity was the field of ceramics, notably the manufacture of porcelain. Made of fine clay baked at unusually high temperatures in a kiln, porcelain was first produced during the period after the fall of the Han and became popular during the Tang era. During the Song, porcelain came into its own. Most renowned perhaps are the celadons (SEH-luh-dahnz), in a delicate gray-green, but Song artists also excelled in other colors and techniques. As in painting, Song delicacy and grace contrasted with the bold and often crude styles popular under the Tang. The translucency of Chinese porcelain resulted from a technique that did not reach Europe until the eighteenth century. During the Yuan and the Ming, new styles appeared. Most notable is the cobalt blue–and–white porcelain usually identified with the Ming dynasty, which actually originated during the Yuan. The Ming also produced a multicolored porcelain—often in green, yellow, and red—covered with exotic designs.
Traditionally, Chinese historians believed that Chinese history was cyclical, driven by the dynamic interplay of the forces of good and evil, yin and yang, growth and decay. Beyond the forces of conflict and change lay the essential continuity of Chinese history, based on the timeless principles established by Confucius and other thinkers during the Zhou dynasty in antiquity.

This view of the dynamic forces of Chinese history was long accepted as valid by historians in the West and led many to assert that Chinese history was unique and could not be placed in a European or universal framework. Whereas Western history was linear, leading steadily away from the past, China’s always returned to its moorings and was rooted in the values and institutions of antiquity.

In recent years, however, this traditional view of a changeless China has come under increasing challenge from historians who see patterns of change that made the China of the late fourteenth century a very different place from the country that had existed at the rise of the Tang dynasty in 600. To these scholars, China had passed through its own version of the “middle ages” and was on the verge of beginning a linear evolution into a posttraditional society.

As we have seen, China at the beginning of the Ming had advanced in many ways since the end of the great Han dynasty more than a thousand years earlier. The industrial and commercial sector had grown considerably in size, complexity, and technological capacity, while in the countryside the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the aristocracy had been replaced by a more stable and more equitable mixture of landed gentry, freehold farmers, and sharecroppers. The civil service provided an avenue of upward mobility that was unavailable elsewhere in the world, and the state tolerated a diversity of beliefs that responded to the emotional needs and preferences of the Chinese people. In many respects, China’s achievements were unsurpassed throughout the world and marked a major advance beyond antiquity.

Yet there were also some key similarities between the China of the Ming and the China of late antiquity. Ming China was still a predominantly agrarian society, with wealth based primarily on the ownership of land. Commercial activities flourished but remained under a high level of government regulation and by no means represented a major proportion of the national income. China also remained a relatively centralized empire based on an official ideology that stressed the virtue of hard work, social conformity, and hierarchy. In foreign affairs, the long frontier struggle with the nomadic peoples along the northern and western frontiers continued unabated.

Thus, the significant change that China experienced during its medieval era can probably be best described as change within continuity, an evolutionary working out of trends that had first become visible during the Han dynasty or even earlier. The result was a civilization that was the envy of its neighbors and of the known world. It also influenced other states in the region, including Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It is to these societies along the Chinese rimlands that we now turn.
CHAPTER REVIEW

Upon Reflection

Q Why is the Tang dynasty often described as the greatest and most glorious era in Chinese history, and do you think that its reputation is justified?

Q What impact did the era of Mongol rule have on societies that were affected by it? Do you agree that some of the ultimate consequences were beneficial in their effects on world history? If so, why?

Q What are the arguments on both sides of the debate over whether Chinese society underwent fundamental changes during the period discussed in this chapter? Which arguments do you find more persuasive, and why?

Key Terms

Grand Council (p. 273)
scholar-gentry (p. 274)
foot binding (p. 282)
khanates (p. 285)
Chan (p. 291)
Pure Land (p. 291)
Tantrism (p. 291)
White Lotus (p. 291)
Manichaeanism (p. 292)
Neo-Confucianism (p. 293)
Supreme Ultimate (p. 293)
School of Mind (p. 293)

Suggested Reading

GENERAL For an authoritative overview of the early imperial era in China, see F. Mote, Imperial China (Cambridge, 1999). A global perspective is presented in S. A. M. Adshead, China in World History (New York, 2000). For an informative treatment of China’s relations with its neighbors, see C. Holcombe, The Genesis of East Asia, 220 B.C.E.—A.D. 907 (Honolulu, 2001).

FROM THE HAN TO THE MING For a readable treatment of the period from the Han to the Ming dynasties by reputable scholars, see the several volumes in the series published by the Belknap Press at Harvard: M. E. Lewis, China Between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties (Cambridge, Mass., 2009) and China’s Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); D. Kuhn, The Age of Confucian Rule: The Song Transformation of China (Cambridge, Mass., 2009); and T. Brook, The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties (Cambridge, Mass., 2010). Also see C. Benn, China’s Golden Age: Everyday Life in the Tang Dynasty (Oxford, 2004).


Go to the CourseMate website at www.cengagebrain.com for additional study tools and review materials—including audio and video clips—for this chapter.