

The Imperial Era: II

Restoration of Empire

隋

China was reunified in A.D. 589 by the short-lived Sui dynasty (A.D. 581-617), which has often been compared to the earlier Qin dynasty in tenure and the ruthlessness of its accomplishments. The Sui dynasty's early demise was attributed to the government's tyrannical demands on the people, who bore the crushing burden of taxes and compulsory labor. These resources were overstrained in the completion of the Grand Canal(大運河) --a monumental engineering feat--and in the undertaking of other construction projects, including the reconstruction of the Great Wall. Weakened by costly and disastrous military campaigns against Korea (朝鮮)in the early seventh century, the dynasty disintegrated through a combination of popular revolts, disloyalty, and assassination.

唐



The Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-907), with its capital at Chang'an (長安), is regarded by historians as a high point in Chinese civilization--equal, or even superior, to the Han period. Its territory, acquired through the military exploits of its early rulers, was greater than that of the Han. Stimulated by contact with India (天竺) and the Middle East, the empire saw a flowering of creativity in many fields. Buddhism (佛教), originating in India around the time of Confucius, flourished during the Tang period, becoming thoroughly sinicized and a permanent part of Chinese traditional culture. Block printing was invented, making the written word available to vastly greater audiences. The Tang period was the golden age of literature and art. A government system supported by a large class of Confucian literati selected through civil service

examinations (科舉) was perfected under Tang rule. This competitive procedure was designed to draw the best talents into government. But perhaps an even greater consideration for the Tang rulers, aware that imperial dependence on powerful aristocratic families and warlords would have destabilizing consequences, was to create a body of career officials having no autonomous territorial or functional power base. As it turned out, these scholar-officials acquired status in their local communities, family ties, and shared values that connected them to the imperial court. From Tang times until the closing days of the Qing empire in 1911, scholar-officials functioned often as intermediaries between the grass-roots level and the government.

By the middle of the eighth century A.D., Tang power had ebbed. Domestic economic instability and military defeat in 751 by Arabs at Talas, in Central Asia, marked the beginning of five centuries of steady military decline for the Chinese empire. Misrule, court intrigues, economic exploitation, and popular rebellions weakened the empire, making it possible for northern invaders to terminate the dynasty in 907. The next half-century saw the fragmentation of China into five northern dynasties and ten southern kingdoms.

宋



But in 960 a new power, Song (960-1279), reunified most

of China Proper. The Song period divides into two phases: Northern Song (960-1127) and Southern Song (1127-1279). The division was caused by the forced abandonment of north China in 1127 by the Song court, which could not push back the nomadic invaders.

The founders of the Song dynasty built an effective centralized bureaucracy staffed with civilian scholar-officials. Regional military governors and their supporters were replaced by centrally appointed officials. This system of civilian rule led to a greater concentration of power in the emperor and his palace bureaucracy than had been achieved in the previous dynasties.

The Song dynasty is notable for the development of cities not only for administrative purposes but also as centers of trade, industry, and maritime commerce. The landed scholar-officials, sometimes collectively referred to as the gentry, lived in the provincial centers alongside the shopkeepers, artisans, and merchants. A new group of wealthy commoners--the mercantile class--arose as printing and education spread, private trade grew, and a market economy began to link the coastal provinces and the interior. Landholding and government employment were no longer the only means of gaining wealth and prestige.

Culturally, the Song refined many of the developments of the previous centuries. Included in these refinements were not only the Tang ideal of the universal man, who combined the qualities of scholar, poet, painter, and statesman, but also historical writings, painting, calligraphy, and hard-glazed porcelain. Song intellectuals sought answers to all philosophical and political questions in the Confucian Classics. This renewed interest in the Confucian ideals and society of ancient times coincided with the decline of Buddhism, which the Chinese regarded as foreign and offering few practical guidelines for the solution of political and other mundane problems.

The Song Neo-Confucian philosophers, finding a certain purity in the originality of the ancient classical texts, wrote commentaries on them. The most influential of these philosophers was Zhu Xi (朱熹 b1130-1200), whose synthesis of Confucian thought and Buddhist, Taoist, and other ideas became the official imperial ideology from late Song times to the late nineteenth century. As incorporated into the examination system, Zhu Xi's philosophy evolved into a rigid official creed, which stressed the one-sided obligations of obedience and compliance of subject to ruler, child to father, wife to husband, and younger brother to elder brother. The effect was to inhibit the societal development of premodern China, resulting both in many generations of political, social, and spiritual stability and in a slowness of cultural and institutional change up to the nineteenth century. Neo-Confucian doctrines also came to play the dominant role in the intellectual life of Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.

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