

# Technology

Tang Dynasty: A Golden Age in China

Carousel Activity

## Block printing

While printing was around before the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, it was under the Tang Dynasty that printing became common through woodblock printing. The printer would carve a reverse image onto a block of wood, apply ink to the block and then press the block onto a piece of paper. Once the carved block was created it could be used over and over again, which was much faster than writing out everything by hand.

**Turn and Talk:** What do you think was the impact of block printing in the Tang Dynasty? What kind of materials do you think were printed?



## Naval Technology

Before the Tang Dynasty, Chinese trade mostly happened via land routes. However, during the Tang Dynasty they invested in improving ships and water travel so mariners could travel longer distances by sea routes. These improvements included more durable sails, watertight bulkheads, and the magnetic compass.

## Gunpowder



During the Tang Dynasty, alchemists accidentally discovered gunpowder while they were experimenting with creating mixtures that might prolong life. They learned that the combination of charcoal, saltpeter, sulfur and arsenic won't make you live any longer, but it will blow up buildings.

## Food production

Like other empires during this era, the Tang Dynasty benefitted from introducing new food crops from places with which it had contact. For instance, the Chinese started growing a fast-ripening rice from Vietnam which allowed them to harvest two crops per year instead of just one.

New agricultural techniques were also developed during the Tang Dynasty which increased productivity. These developments included heavy iron plows, harnessed oxen and water buffalo, fertilizer, extensive irrigation systems with pumps and water wheels.

What was the impact of all of this? More food meant the Chinese could support a bigger population. It also encouraged the growth of cities because people were freed up from food production responsibilities.

# Culture

Tang Dynasty: A Golden Age in China

Carousel Activity

## Religion

By 500 CE numerous belief systems were in existence throughout China, including Daoism and Confucianism. However, during the Tang Dynasty Buddhism became very popular and people followed all three beliefs systems at the same time. Buddhism made its way to China from India via traders and missionaries on the Silk Roads. The religion appealed to the Chinese for a variety of reasons. It offered salvation, high moral standards and was intellectually sophisticated. Additionally, some of the wealthy Chinese converts donated their land to Buddhist monasteries, which allowed Buddhists to play an important role in the local economies. These monasteries would grow, harvest and store surplus food which they would share with the local people during times of drought or famine. By the end of the Tang Dynasty, there were Buddhist monasteries in all major Chinese cities.



## The Arts

The arts like poetry, literature, dancing and painting thrived during the Tang Dynasty. People came from other parts of Afroeurasia in order to study art in China. In cities, social life was often centered around live music and live theater, and not just for the elite---it was free and everyone could attend.

The poetry developed during the Tang Dynasty is considered one of China's greatest cultural achievements. Poetry was considered to be so important that it was included on the civil servant examination and poets were well-respected in the culture. Students in China today still learn about the two most famous poets of the Tang Dynasty—Li Bai and Du Fu.



## Tea

Tea drinking in China became popular during the Tang Dynasty and was enjoyed by people of all social classes. It was prized for its medicinal properties. Buddhist monasteries grew their own tea in vast amounts because the caffeine was helpful for keeping monks awake during their long hours of meditation.

# Leadership & Systems

Tang Dynasty: A Golden Age in China

Carousel Activity



## Leadership

Tang Taizong became the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty after murdering two of his brothers (he ruled from 627-649 CE). While he was clearly ruthless, his leadership and policies are given a lot of credit for the success of the dynasty. Once on the throne, he took his responsibilities very seriously and saw himself as a leader working in the best interests of his people. His policies reportedly kept the price of rice low, eliminated banditry, and lowered taxes on peasants. During Taizong's reign both stability and prosperity were high.



## Government Bureaucracy & the Economy

The Tang Dynasty operated on a system of bureaucracy and meritocracy based on intellectual ability. In order to work for the government, one had to be recruited and trained in an elaborate Confucian education system based on classic Chinese works of literature and philosophy. Then one had to pass the civil servant exam. This system of choosing government officials worked so well for the Chinese that they kept it in place for thirteen centuries (it didn't end until the Twentieth Century)!

The Tang government used its bureaucracy to play a large role in the economy. One of the most successful policies of the Tang Dynasty was an "equal-field system." They wanted to prevent a concentration of wealth, so they instituted a policy in which land was distributed equitably among farmers based on their needs and the land's fertility. Farmers could keep and pass down to their heirs about one-fifth of their land---the rest of it could be redistributed by the government as needs changed. Additionally, the Tang Dynasty monitored the production/distribution of food and manufactured goods as well as the iron industry because of its importance to the military. Despite the strong government role in the economy, a market system emerged and flourished. For instance, farmers would sell their fruits and vegetables in an open market and trade escalated. In fact, trade grew so much during the Tang Dynasty that China ran out of copper coins. Merchants came up with a new system to deal with this problem---credit and checks. By the end of the Tang Dynasty, paper money was invented and spread across Afroeurasia.

## Communications and Transportation

Tang rulers invested in infrastructure like post offices, rest stops, roads, and canals to make trade and long-distance communication easier. The Tang Court would use couriers and human runners in a relay system to get both goods and communication across China (a courier could get a message to the furthest portion of the empire in just 8 days). The speed of the runners was impressive---the relay teams of 9,600 human runners could get *fresh* seafood delivered to the capital in Chang'an from the coast, which was 620 miles away.



# Interactions & Influence

Tang Dynasty: A Golden Age in China

Carousel Activity

## Military Expansion and Influence

From the very beginning, the Tang Dynasty engaged in military expansion. First, the Tang conquered Manchuria in the North and then it forced the Silla Kingdom in Korea to come under its control. The Tang also conquered Tibet, Northern Vietnam and extended its authority as far as the Aral Sea in the West. Ultimately, the Tang Empire was one of the biggest in Chinese history.

The Tang relationship with its neighbors was tributary in nature. The Chinese had a political worldview in which they considered themselves the “Middle Kingdom.” As part of this philosophy, they saw themselves as responsible for ensuring order in the surrounding “inferior” lands and peoples. This philosophy drove many of their interactions with neighboring states.

While the Tang never conquered Japan, they had a strong influence there. For instance, the Japanese modeled their court/government after the Tang system, instituted a similar bureaucracy, put in place an equal-field system, and replicated their capital after the Chinese capital of Chang’an.

## Trade

Interactions among peoples of Afroeurasia occurred at unprecedented levels during the Tang Dynasty. It was during this time that Silk Roads were revived and trade occurred with other empires such as the Abassids and Byzantines as well as with places in east Asia. This amounted to an economic surge for China---the world wanted its goods like silk and porcelain. Of course, goods were not the only things traded along the silk roads, so too were religious ideas and inventions such as paper, gunpowder and the magnetic compass.



# Decline

Tang Dynasty: A Golden Age in China

Carousel Activity

## Corruption

By the end of the Tang Dynasty, some careless emperors didn't use the merit system to choose political leaders and instead appointed individuals who ended up being corrupt.

The corruption eroded policies that were designed to maintain order and stability. For instance, initially the Equal-Field System policy did what it was intended to do---avoid a concentration of wealth that had caused so many problems during the Han Dynasty. However, over time the system stopped working due to bribery and corruption. Influential families figured out ways to get more land that was supposed to be redistributed and Buddhist monasteries got more and more of the land, which put it out of circulation for peasants.

## Poor Leadership and a Rebellion

*Gen. An Lushan*



While the early leadership in the Tang Dynasty was strong and able and helped the empire grow, careless leadership in the middle of the eighth century caused problems that contributed to the decline. In 755 CE the emperor ignored his responsibilities as the leader and focused most of his energy on music and his favorite girlfriend. The military commander, An Lushan, saw an opportunity and led a rebellion and was able to capture the main capital as well as the secondary capital. While An Lushan's rebellion did not last long---a soldier murdered An Lushan--- and the capitals were recaptured within six years. The incident left the dynasty weak and it never regained the control it previously enjoyed. This meant that it was easier for outsiders, like the Turks, to intrude.

In the ninth century, there were continually rebellions in the countryside, which caused the Tang emperors to give more and more military control to local leaders. Eventually, these leaders were the ones who were really controlling China instead of the emperor from the capital. The dynasty officially ended in 907 CE when the last emperor gave up his throne.

## Intolerance

Most of the Tang Dynasty is marked by tolerance toward religion and foreigners, which contributed to peace and prosperity. However, by the end of the Tang Dynasty there is a shift toward intolerance. After some friction between some foreign traders and Chinese merchants in various big cities, there was an upsurge in xenophobia (intense or irrational fear of people who are considered outsiders). In 836 CE, the Chinese government issued a ban on social contact between Chinese merchants and foreign merchants. Soon after that, in 845 CE, the Tang issued a ban on all foreign religions.