China

by Denis C. Twitchett

Foreign affairs under Yangdi

In addition to these farsighted construction works, Yangdi also pursued an active foreign policy. An expedition to the south established sovereignty over the old Chinese settlement in Tongking and over the Champa state of Lin-yi in central Nam Viet (present-day Vietnam). Several expeditions were sent to Taiwan, and relations with Japan were opened. Tuyuhun people were driven out of Gansu and Qinghai, and Sui colonies were established along the great western trade routes. The rulers of the various petty local states of Central Asia and the king of Gaochang (Turfan) became tributaries. A prosperous trade with Central Asia and the West emerged.

The principal foreign threat was still posed by the Turks. By the early 7th century, these peoples had been completely split into the eastern Turks, who occupied most of the Chinese northern frontier, and the immensely powerful western Turks, whose dominions stretched westward to the north of the Tarim Basin as far as Sasanian Persia and Afghanistan. During the early part of Yangdi’s reign, the western Turks, whose ruler, Chuluo, was half-Chinese, were on good terms with the Sui. In 610, however, Yangdi supported a rival, Shegui, who drove out Chuluo. The latter took service, with an army of 10,000 followers, at Yangdi’s court. When Sui power began to wane after 612, the western Turks under Shegui gradually replaced the Sui garrisons in Central Asia and established control over the states of the Tarim Basin. The eastern Turks had remained on good terms with the Sui, their khans being married to Chinese princesses. In 613 Pei Ju, Yangdi’s principal agent in dealing with the foreign states of the north, attempted unsuccessfully to dethrone the eastern Turkish khan and split up his khanate. Relations with the Turks rapidly deteriorated, and in the last years of his reign Yangdi had to contend with a hostile and extremely powerful neighbour.

His most costly venture was a series of campaigns in Korea. At that time Korea was divided into three kingdoms, of which the northern one, Koguryo, was the most important and powerful. It was hostile to the Chinese and refused to pay homage to Yangdi. Yangdi made careful preparations for a punitive campaign on a grand scale, including construction of the Yongjiqu Canal from Luoyang to Beijing. In 611 the canal was completed; a great army and masses of supplies were collected, but terrible floods in Hebei delayed the campaign.

During 612, 613, and 614 Yangdi campaigned against the Koreans. The first two campaigns were unsuccessful and were accompanied by the outbreak of many minor
rebellions in Shandong and southern Hebei. The severe repression that followed led to outbreaks of disorder throughout the empire. In 614 yet another army was sent into Korea and threatened the capital at P’yŏngyang, but it had to withdraw without a decisive victory. These futile campaigns distracted Yangdi’s attention from the increasingly vital internal problems of his empire, involved an immense loss of life and matériel, and caused terrible hardships among the civilian population. They left the Sui demoralized, militarily crippled, and financially ruined.

At that point, Yangdi decided to secure his relations with his northern neighbours. His envoy, Pei Ju, had continued to intrigue against the eastern Turkish khan, in spite of the fact that the Sui were no longer in a position of strength. When in the summer of 615 Yangdi went to inspect the defenses of the Great Wall, he was surrounded and besieged by the Turks at Yanmen; he was rescued only after a month of peril.

Rebellions and uprisings soon broke out in every region of the empire. Late in 616 Yangdi decided to withdraw to his southern capital of Jiangdu, and much of northern China was divided among rebel regimes contending with one another for the succession to the empire. Yangdi remained nominally emperor until the spring of 618, when he was murdered by members of his entourage at Jiangdu. However, by 617 the real powers in China had become the various local rebels: Li Mi in the area around Luoyang, Dou Jiande in the northeast, Xue Ju in the far northwest, and Li Yuan (who remained nominally loyal but had established a local position of great power) in Shanxi. At the beginning of 617, Li Yuan inflicted a great defeat on the eastern Turks and thus consolidated his local power in the impregnable mountainous area around Taiyuan. In the summer of 617 he raised an army and marched on the capital with the aid of the Turks and other local forces; Chang’an fell at year’s end. Xue Ju’s northwestern rebels were crushed, and the armies of Li Yuan occupied Sichuan and the Han River valley. A Sui prince, Gongdi, was enthroned as “emperor” in 617, while Yangdi was designated “retired emperor.” In the summer of 618, after Yangdi’s death, Li Yuan (known by his temple name, Gaozu) deposed his puppet prince and proclaimed himself emperor of a new dynasty, the Tang, which was to remain in power for nearly three centuries.

**Early Tang (618–626)**

When Gaozu became emperor (reigned 618–626), he was still only one among the contenders for control of the empire of the Sui. It was several years before the empire was entirely pacified. After the suppression of Xue Ju and the pacification of the northwest, the Tang had to contend with three principal rival forces: the Sui remnants commanded by Wang Shichong at Luoyang, the rebel Li Mi in Henan, the rebel Dou Jiande in Hebei, and Yuwen Huaji, who had assassinated the previous Sui emperor Yangdi and now led the remnants of the Sui’s southern armies. Wang Shichong set up a grandson of Yangdi at Luoyang as the new Sui emperor. Yuwen Huaji led his armies to
attack Luoyang, and Wang Shichong persuaded Li Mi to return to his allegiance with the Sui and help him fight Yuwen Huaji. Li Mi defeated Yuwen Huaji’s armies but seriously depleted his own forces. Wang Shichong, seeing the chance to dispose of his most immediate rival, took over Luoyang and routed Li Mi’s forces. Li Mi fled to Chang’an and submitted to the Tang. In the spring of 619 Wang Shichong deposed the puppet Sui prince at Luoyang and proclaimed himself emperor.

The Tang armies gradually forced him to give ground in Henan, and by 621 Gaozu’s son Li Shimin was besieging him in Luoyang. At that time Wang Shichong attempted to form an alliance with Dou Jiande, the most powerful of all the Sui rebels, who controlled much of Hebei and who had completed the defeat of Yuwen Huaji’s forces in 619. He held the key area of southern Hebei, where he had successfully resisted both the Tang armies and the forces of Wang and Li Shimin. Dou now agreed to come to the aid of the beleaguered Wang, but in the spring of 621 Li Shimin attacked his army before it could lift the siege, routed it, and captured Dou. Wang then capitulated. The Tang had thus disposed of its two most powerful rivals and extended its control over most of the eastern plain, the most populous and prosperous region of China.

This was not the end of resistance to the Tang conquest. Most of the surrendered rebel forces had been treated leniently, and their leaders were often confirmed in office or given posts in the Tang administration. Dou and Wang, however, were dealt with severely, Dou being executed and Wang murdered on his way into exile. At the end of 621 Dou’s partisans in the northeast again rebelled under Liu Heita and recaptured most of the northeast. He was finally defeated by a Tang army under the crown prince Jiancheng at the beginning of 623. The prolonged resistance in Hebei and the comparatively harsh Tang conquest of the region were the beginning of resistance and hostility in the northeast that continued to some degree throughout the Tang dynasty.

Resistance was not confined to the northeast. Liu Wuzhou in far northern Shanxi, who had been a constant threat since 619, was finally defeated and killed by his former Turkish allies in 622. In the south during the confusion at the end of the Sui, Xiao Xian had set himself up as emperor of Liang, controlling the central Yangtze region, Jiangxi, Guangdong, and Annam (Vietnam). The Tang army descended the Yangtze from Sichuan with a great fleet and defeated Xiao Xian’s forces in two crucial naval battles. In 621 Xiao Xian surrendered to the Tang, who thus gained control of the central Yangtze and the far south. The southeast was occupied by another rebel, Li Zitong, based in Zhejiang. He too was decisively defeated near present-day Nanjing at the end of 621. As had been the case with Xiao Xian’s dominions, the southeast was incorporated into the Tang empire with a minimum of fighting and resistance. A last southern rebellion by Fu Gongtuo, a general who set up an independent regime at Danyang (Nanjing) in 624, was speedily suppressed. After a decade of war and disorder, the empire was completely pacified and unified under the Tang house.

**Administration of the state**

The Tang unification had been far more prolonged and bloody than the Sui conquest. That the Tang regime lasted for nearly three centuries rather than three decades, as with
the Sui, was largely the result of the system of government imposed on the conquered territories. The emperor Gaozu’s role in the Tang conquest was understated in the traditional histories compiled under his successor Taizong \(^{10}\) (Li Shimin; reigned 626–649), which portrayed Taizong as the prime mover in the establishment of the dynasty. Taizong certainly played a major role in the campaigns, but Gaozu was no figurehead. Not only did he direct the many complex military operations, but he also established the basic institutions of the Tang state, which proved practicable not only for a rapidly developing Chinese society but also for the first centralized states in societies as diverse as those of Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and the southwestern kingdom of Nanzhao.

The structure of the new central administration \(^{11}\) resembled that of Wendi’s time, with its ministries, boards, courts, and directorates. There was no radical change in the dominant group at court. Most of the highest ranks in the bureaucracy were filled by former Sui officials, many of whom had been the new emperor’s colleagues when he was governor in Taiyuan, or by descendants of officials of the Bei Zhou, Bei Qi, or Sui or of the royal houses of the northern and southern dynasties. The Tang were related by marriage to the Sui royal house, and a majority of the chief ministers were related by marriage to either the Tang or Sui imperial family. The emperor’s court was composed primarily of men of similar social origins. At that level the Tang in its early years, like the Sui before it, continued the pattern of predominantly aristocratic rule that had dominated the history of the northern courts.

Gaozu also continued the pattern of local administration established under the Sui and maintained the strict control exercised by the central government \(^{12}\) over provincial appointments. In the first years after the Tang conquest, many prefectures and counties were fragmented to provide offices for surrendered rebel leaders, surrendered Sui officials, and followers of the emperor. But these new local districts were gradually amalgamated and reduced in number, and by the 630s the pattern of local administration closely resembled that under the Sui. The merging of the local officials into the main bureaucracy, however, took time; ambitious men still looked upon local posts as “exile” from the main current of official promotion at the capital. Until well into the 8th century many local officials continued to serve for long terms, and the ideal of a regular circulation of officials prevailed only gradually.

Local government in early Tang times had a considerable degree of independence, but each prefecture was in direct contact with the central ministries. In the spheres of activity that the administration regarded as crucial—registration, land allocation, tax collection, conscription of men for the army and for corvée duty, and maintenance of law and order—prefects and county magistrates were expected to follow centrally codified law and procedure. They were, however, permitted to interpret the law to suit local conditions. Local influences remained strong in the prefectures and counties. Most of the personnel in these divisions were local men, many of them members of families of petty functionaries.

**Fiscal and legal system**
Gaozu had inherited a bankrupt state, and most of his measures were aimed at simple and cheap administration. His bureaucracy was small, at both the central and local levels. The expenses of government were largely met by land endowments attached to each office, the rents from which paid office expenses and salaries, by interest on funds of money allocated for similar purposes, and by services of taxpayers who performed many of the routine tasks of government as special duties, being exempted from tax in return.

Land distribution followed the equal-allocation system used under the northern dynasties and the Sui. Every taxable male was entitled to a grant of land—part of which was to be returned when he ceased to be a taxpayer at age 60 and part of which was hereditary. The disposal of landed property was hedged around with restrictive conditions. Great landed estates were limited to members of the imperial clan and powerful officials, various state institutions, and the Buddhist foundations. Although some land was hereditary, and more and more passed into the hereditary category with the passage of time, the lack of primogeniture meant that landholdings were fragmented among all the sons in each generation and thus tended to be small. It is unlikely that the system was ever enforced to the letter in any region, and it was probably never enforced at all in the south. But as a legal system governing registration of landed property and restricting its disposal, it remained in force until An Lushan’s rebellion in the 8th century.

The tax system based on this land allocation system was also much the same as that under the Sui and preceding dynasties. Every adult male annually paid a head tax in grain and cloth and was liable to 20 days of work for the central government (normally commuted into a payment in cloth) and to a further period of work for the local authorities. Revenues were collected exclusively from the rural population—the trade sector and the urban communities being exempt—and the system bore more heavily on the poor, since it ignored the taxpayer’s economic status.

The Sui had made a somewhat desultory attempt to provide China with a unified coinage. Gaozu set up mints and began the production of a good copper currency that remained standard throughout the Tang era. But cash was in short supply during most of the 7th century and had to be supplemented by standard-sized lengths of silk. Counterfeiting was rife, particularly in the Yangtze valley, where the southern dynasties had supported a more highly monetized economy and where the governments had exploited commerce as a source of revenue.

Gaozu also undertook a new codification of all centralized law, completed in 624. It comprised a code that embodied what were considered basic, unchanging normative rules, prescribing fixed penalties for defined offenses; statutes, comprising the general body of universally applicable administrative law; regulations, or codified legislation supplementary to the code and statutes; and ordinances, detailed procedural laws supplementing the statutes and issued by the departments of the central ministries. Under the early Tang this body of codified law was revised every 20 years or so. The systematic effort to maintain a universally applicable codification of law and administrative practice was essential to the uniform system of administration that the Tang succeeded in imposing throughout its diverse empire. The Tang code proved remarkably durable: it
was still considered authoritative as late as the 14th century and was used as a model by the Ming. It was also adopted, with appropriate modifications, in Japan in the early 8th century and by the Koreans and the Vietnamese at a much later date.

Gaozu thus laid down, at the outset of the 7th century, institutions that survived until the mid-8th century. These provided strong central control, a high level of administrative standardization, and highly economical administration.

The period of Tang power (626–755)

Two of Gaozu’s sons were rivals for the succession: the crown prince Jiancheng, the general who had played a large part in the wars of unification. Their rivalry, and the factional strife it generated, reached a peak in 625–626, when it appeared that Jiancheng was likely to succeed. In a military coup, Li Shimin murdered Jiancheng and another of his brothers and forced his father to abdicate in his favour. He succeeded to the throne in 626 and is known by his temple name, Taizong.

The “era of good government”

The reign of Taizong (626–649), known traditionally as the “era of good government of Zhenguan,” was not notable for innovations in administration. Generally, his policies developed and refined those of his father’s reign. The distinctive element was the atmosphere of his administration and the close personal interplay between the sovereign and his unusually able team of Confucian advisers. It approached the Confucian ideal of a strong, able, energetic, yet fundamentally moral king seeking and accepting the advice of wise and capable ministers, advice that was basically ethical rather than technical. Some important changes in political organization were begun during his reign and were continued throughout the 7th century. The court remained almost exclusively the domain of men of aristocratic birth. But Taizong attempted to balance the regional groups among the aristocracy so as to prevent any single region from becoming dominant. They comprised the Guanlong group from the northwest, the Daibei group from Shanxi, the Shandong group from Hebei, and the southern group from the Yangtze valley. The most powerful Hebei clans were excluded from high office, but Taizong employed members of each of the other groups and of the lesser northeastern aristocracy in high administrative offices as well as in his consultative group of scholars.

A second change was the use of the examination system on a large scale. The Sui examinations had already been reestablished under Gaozu, who had also revived the Sui system of high-level schools at the capital. Under Taizong the schools were further expanded and new ones established. Measures were taken to standardize their curriculum, notably completing an official orthodox edition of the Classics with a standard
commentary in 638. The schools at the capital were mostly restricted to the sons of the nobility and of high-ranking officials. Other examination candidates, however, came from the local schools. The examinations were in principle open to all, but they provided relatively few new entrants to the bureaucracy. Most officials still entered service by other means—hereditary privilege as sons of officials of the upper ranks or promotion from the clerical service or the guards. The examinations demanded a high level of education in the traditional curriculum and were largely used as an alternative method of entry by younger sons of the aristocracy and by members of lesser families with a scholar-official background. Moreover, personal recommendation, lobbying examiners, and often a personal interview by the emperor played a large part. Even in late Tang times, not more than 10 percent of officials were recruited by the examinations. The main effect of the examination system in Tang times was to bring into being a highly educated court elite within the bureaucracy, to give members of locally prominent clans access to the upper levels of the bureaucracy, and in the long term to break the monopoly of political power held by the upper aristocracy. Employing persons dependent for their position on the emperor and the dynasty, rather than on birth and social standing, made it possible for the Tang emperors to establish their own power and independence.

In the early years there was a great debate as to whether the Tang ought to reintroduce the feudal system used under the Zhou and the Han, by which authority was delegated to members of the imperial clan and powerful officials and generals who were enfeoffed with hereditary territorial jurisdictions. Taizong eventually settled on a centralized form of government through prefectures and counties staffed by members of a unified bureaucracy. The Tang retained a nobility, but its “fiefs of maintenance” were merely lands whose revenues were earmarked for its use and gave it no territorial authority.

Taizong continued his father’s economic policies, and government remained comparatively simple and cheap. He attempted to cut down the bureaucratic establishment at the capital and drastically reduced the number of local government divisions. The country was divided into 10 provinces, which were not permanent administrative units but “circuits” for occasional regional inspections of the local administrations; these tours were carried out by special commissioners, often members of the censorate, sent out from the capital. This gave the central government an additional means of maintaining standardized and efficient local administration. Measures to ensure tax relief for areas stricken by natural disasters, and the establishment of relief granaries to provide adequate reserves against famine, helped to ensure the prosperity of the countryside. Taizong’s reign was a period of low prices and general prosperity.

Taizong was also successful in his foreign policy. In 630 the eastern Turks were split by dissension among their leadership and by the rebellion of their subject peoples. Chinese forces invaded their territories, totally defeated them, and captured their khan, and Taizong was recognized as their supreme sovereign, the “heavenly khan.” A large number of the surrendered Turks were settled on the Chinese frontier, and many served in the Tang armies. A similar policy of encouraging internal dissension was later practiced against the western Turks, who split into two separate khanates for a while. In 642–643 a new khan reestablished a degree of unified control with Chinese support and agreed to
become a tributary of the Chinese. To seal the alliance, Taizong married him to a Chinese princess.

The eclipse of Turkish power enabled Taizong to extend his power over the various small states of the Tarim Basin. By the late 640s a Chinese military administration had extended westward even beyond the limits of present-day Xinjiang. To the north, in the region of the Orhon River and to the north of the Ordos (Mu Us) Desert, the Tang armies defeated the Xueyantou (Syr Tardush), former vassals of the eastern Turks, who became Tang vassals in 646. The Tuyuhun in the region around Koko Nor caused considerable trouble in the early 630s. Taizong invaded their territory in 634 and defeated them, but they remained unsubdued and invaded Chinese territory several times.

The Chinese western dominions now extended farther than in the great days of the Han. Trade developed with the West, with Central Asia, and with India. The Chinese court received embassies from Sasanian Persia and from the Byzantine Empire. The capital was thronged with foreign merchants and foreign monks and contained a variety of non-Chinese communities. The great cities had Zoroastrian, Manichaean, and Nestorian temples, along with the Buddhist monasteries that had been a part of the Chinese scene for centuries.

Taizong’s only failure in foreign policy was in Korea. The northern state of Koguryo had sent tribute regularly, but in 642 there was an internal coup; the new ruler attacked Silla, another Tang vassal state in southern Korea. Taizong decided to invade Koguryo, against the advice of most of his ministers. The Tang armies, in alliance with the Khitan in Manchuria and the two southern Korean states Paekche and Silla, invaded Koguryo in 645 but were forced to withdraw with heavy losses. Another inconclusive campaign was waged in 647, and the end of Taizong’s reign was spent in building a vast fleet and making costly preparations for a final expedition.

Taizong’s last years were also marked by a decline in the firm grasp of the emperor over politics at his court. In the 640s a bitter struggle for the succession developed when it became clear that the designated heir was mentally unstable. The court split into factions supporting various candidates. The final choice, Li Zhi, prince of Jin (reigned 649–683; temple name Gaozong) was a weak character, but he had the support of the most powerful figures at court.

Rise of the empress Wuhou

Gaozong was 21 years old when he ascended the throne. In his first years he was dominated by the remaining great statesmen of Taizong’s court, above all by the emperor’s uncle Zhangsun Wuji. However, real power soon passed from Gaozong into the hands of the empress Wuhou, one of the most remarkable women in Chinese history. Wuhou had been a low-ranking concubine of Taizong. She was taken into Gaozong’s palace and, after a series of complex intrigues, managed in 655 to have the legitimate empress, Wang, deposed and herself appointed in her place. The struggle between the two was not simply a palace intrigue. Empress Wang, who was of noble descent, had the backing of the old northwestern aristocratic faction and of the great
ministers surviving from Taizong’s court. Wuhou came from a family of lower standing from Taiyuan. Her father had been one of Gaozu’s original supporters, her mother a member of the Sui royal family. She seems to have been supported by the eastern aristocracy, by the lesser gentry, and by the lower-ranking echelons of the bureaucracy.

But her success was largely the result of her skill in intrigue, her dominant personality, and her utter ruthlessness. The deposed empress and another imperial favourite were savagely murdered, and the next half century was marked by recurrent purges in which she hounded to death one group after another of real or imagined rivals. The good relationship between the emperor and his court, which had made Taizong’s reign so successful, was speedily destroyed. Political life became precarious and insecure, at the mercy of the empress’s unpredictable whims. The first victims were the elder statesmen of Taizong’s reign, who were exiled, murdered, or driven to suicide in 657–659. In 660 Gaozong suffered a stroke. He remained in precarious health for the rest of his reign, and Wuhou took charge of the administration.

Although utterly unscrupulous in politics, she backed up her intrigues with policies designed to consolidate her position. In 657 Luoyang was made the second capital. The entire court and administration were frequently transferred to Luoyang, thus removing the centre of political power from the home region of the northwestern aristocracy. Ministries and court offices were duplicated, and Luoyang had to be equipped with all the costly public buildings needed for a capital. After Gaozong’s death, Wuhou took up permanent residence there.

Gaozong and Wuhou were obsessed by symbolism and religion, with one favourite magician, holy man, or monk following another. State rituals were radically changed. For symbolic reasons the names of all offices were altered, and the emperor took the new title of “heavenly emperor.”

The bureaucracy was rapidly inflated to a far-greater size than in Taizong’s time, many of the new posts being filled by candidates from the examination system who now began to attain the highest offices and thus to encroach on what had been the preserves of the aristocracy. Another blow at the aristocracy was struck by the compilation in 659 of a new genealogy of all the empire’s eminent clans, which ranked families according to the official positions achieved by their members rather than by their traditional social standing. Needless to say, the first family of all was that of Wuhou. The lower ranks of the bureaucracy, among whom the empress found her most-solid support, were encouraged by the creation of new posts, greater opportunities for advancement, and salary increases.

The Chinese were engaged in foreign wars throughout Gaozong’s reign. Until 657 they waged continual war against the western Turks, finally defeating them and placing their territories as far as the valley of the Amu Darya under a nominal Chinese protectorate in 659–661. The Tang also waged repeated campaigns against Koguryō in the late 650s and the 660s. In 668 the Tang forces took P’yŏngyang (the capital), and Koguryō was also placed under a protectorate. However, by 676 rebellions had forced the Chinese to
 withdrawing to southern Manchuria, and all of Korea became increasingly dominated by the rapidly expanding power of the southern Korean state of Silla. The eastern Turks, who had been settled along the northern border, rebelled in 679–681 and were quelled only after they had caused widespread destruction and had inflicted heavy losses on the Chinese forces.

The most serious foreign threat in Gaozong’s reign was the emergence of a new and powerful force to the west, the Tibetans (Tubo), a people who had exerted constant pressure on the northern border of Sichuan since the 630s. By 670 the Tibetans had driven the Tuyuhun from their homeland in the Koko Nor basin. The northwest had to be increasingly heavily fortified and garrisoned to guard against their repeated raids and incursions. After a series of difficult campaigns, they were finally checked in 679.

When Gaozong died in 683, he was succeeded by the young Zhongzong, but Wuhou was made empress dowager and immediately took control over the central administration. Within less than a year she had deposed Zhongzong, who had shown unexpected signs of independence, and replaced him with another son and puppet emperor, Ruizong, who was kept secluded in the Inner Palace while Wuhou held court and exercised the duties of sovereign.

In 684 disaffected members of the ruling class under Xu Jingye raised a serious rebellion at Yangzhou in the south, but this was speedily put down. The empress instituted a reign of terror among the members of the Tang royal family and officials, employing armies of agents and informers. Fear overshadowed the life of the court. The empress herself became more and more obsessed with religious symbolism. She manipulated Buddhist scripture to justify her becoming sovereign and in 688 erected a Ming Tang (“Hall of Light”)—the symbolic supreme shrine to heaven described in the Classics—a vast building put up with limitless extravagance. In 690 the empress proclaimed that the dynasty had been changed from Tang to Zhou. She became formally the empress in her own right, the only woman sovereign in China’s history. Ruizong, the imperial heir, was given her surname, Wu; everybody with the surname Wu in the empire was exempted from taxation. Every prefecture was ordered to set up a temple in which the monks were to expound the notion that the empress was an incarnation of Buddha. Luoyang became the “holy capital,” and the state cult was ceremoniously transferred there from Chang’an. The remnants of the Tang royal family who had not been murdered or banished were immured in the depths of the palace.

Destructive and demoralizing as the effects of her policies must have been at the capital and at court, there is little evidence of any general deterioration of administration in the empire. By 690 the worst excesses of her regime were past. In the years after she had proclaimed herself empress, she retained the services and loyalty of a number of distinguished officials. The court was still unstable, however, with unending changes of ministers, and the empress remained susceptible to the influence of a series of worthless favourites. After 700 she gradually began to lose her grip on affairs.
The external affairs of the empire had meanwhile taken a turn for the worse. The Tibetans renewed their warfare on the frontier. In 696 the Khitan in Manchuria rebelled against their Chinese governor and overran part of Hebei. The Chinese drove them out, with Turkish aid, in 697. The Chinese reoccupied Hebei under a member of the empress’s family and carried out brutal reprisals against the population. In 698 the Turks in their turn invaded Hebei and were driven off only by an army under the nominal command of the deposed emperor Zhongzong, who had been renamed heir apparent in place of Ruizong. The military crisis had forced the empress to abandon any plan to keep the succession within her own family.

The expenses of the empire made it necessary to impose new taxes. These took the form of a household levy—a graduated tax based on a property assessment on everyone from the nobility down, including the urban population—and a land levy collected on an acreage basis. These new taxes were to be assessed based on productivity or wealth, rather than a uniform per capita levy. Some tried to evade taxes by illegally subdividing their households to reduce their liabilities. There was a large-scale migration of peasant families fleeing from oppression and heavy taxation in the Hebei and Shandong area. This migration of peasants, who settled as unregistered squatters on vacant land in central and southern China and no longer paid taxes, was accelerated by the Khitan invasion in the late 690s. Attempts to stop it were ineffectual.

By 705 the empress, who was now 80 years old, had allowed control of events to slip from her fingers. The bureaucratic faction at court, tired of the excesses of her latest favourites, forced her to abdicate in favour of Zhongzong. The Tang was restored.

Zhongzong, however, also had a domineering wife, the empress Wei, who initiated a regime of utter corruption at court, openly selling offices. When the emperor died in 710, probably poisoned by her, she tried to establish herself as ruler as Wuhou had done before her. But Li Longji, the future Xuanzong, with the aid of Wuhou’s formidable daughter, Taiping, and of the palace army, succeeded in restoring his father, Ruizong (the brother of Zhongzong), to the throne. The princess now attempted to dominate her brother, the emperor, and there followed a struggle for power between her and the heir apparent. In 712 Ruizong ceded the throne to Xuanzong but retained in his own hands control over the most crucial areas of government. A second coup, in 713, placed Xuanzong completely in charge and resulted in Ruizong’s retirement and the princess Taiping’s suicide.

Prosperity and progress

Xuanzong’s reign (712–756) was the high point of the Tang dynasty. It was an era of wealth and prosperity that was accompanied by institutional progress and a flowering of the arts. Political life was at first dominated by the bureaucrats recruited through the examination system who had staffed the central government under Wuhou. But a gradual revival of the power of the great aristocratic clans tended to polarize
politics, a polarization that was sharpened by the emperor’s employment of a series of aristocratic specialists who reformed the empire’s finances from 720 onward, often in the teeth of bureaucratic opposition.

After 720 a large-scale re-registration of the population greatly increased the number of taxpayers and restored state control over vast numbers of unregistered families. The new household and land taxes were expanded. In the 730s the canal system, which had been allowed to fall into neglect under Wuhou and her successors, was repaired and reorganized so that the administration could transport large stocks of grain from the Yangtze region to the capital and to the armies on the northern frontiers. The south was at last financially integrated with the north. By the 740s the government had accumulated enormous reserves of grain and wealth. The tax and accounting systems were simplified, and taxes and labour services were reduced.

Some important institutional changes accompanied these reforms. The land registration, reorganization of transport, and coinage reform were administered by specially appointed commissions holding extraordinary powers, including the authority to recruit their own staff. These commissions were mostly headed by censors, and they and the censorate became centres of aristocratic power. The existence of these new offices reduced the influence of the regular ministries, enabling the emperor and his aristocratic advisers to circumvent the normal channels and procedures of administration.

After 736 the political dominance of the aristocracy was firmly reestablished. An aristocratic chief minister, Li Linfu, became a virtual dictator, his powers increasing as Xuanzong in his later years withdrew from active affairs into the pleasures of palace life and the study of Daoism. In the latter part of his reign, Xuanzong, who had previously strictly circumscribed the power of the palace women to avoid a recurrence of the disasters of Wuhou’s time and who had also excluded members of the royal family from politics, faced a series of succession plots. In 745 he fell deeply under the influence of a new favourite, the imperial concubine Yang Guifei. In 751–752 one of her relatives, Yang Guozhong, thanks to her influence with the emperor, rapidly rose to rival Li Linfu for supreme power. After Li’s death in 752 Yang Guozhong dominated the court. However, he had neither Li’s great political ability nor his experience and skill in handling people.

Military reorganization

The most important new development in Xuanzong’s reign was the growth in the power of the military commanders. During Gaozong’s reign the old militia system had proved inadequate for frontier defense and had been supplemented by the institution of permanent armies and garrison forces quartered in strategic areas on the frontiers. These armies were made up of long-service veterans, many of them non-Chinese cavalry troops, settled permanently in military colonies. Although these armies were adequate for small-scale operations, for a major campaign an expeditionary army and a headquarters staff had to be specially organized and reinforcements sent in by the central government. This cumbersome system was totally unsuitable for dealing with the highly mobile nomadic horsemen on the northern frontiers.
At the beginning of Xuanzong’s reign, the Turks again threatened to become a major power, rivaling China in Central Asia and along the borders. Kapghan (Mochuo), the Turkish khan who had invaded Hebei in the aftermath of the Khitan invasion in the time of Wuhou and had attacked the Chinese northwest at the end of her reign, turned his attention northward. By 711 he controlled the steppe from the Chinese frontier to Transoxiana and appeared likely to develop a new unified Turkish empire. When he was murdered in 716, his flimsy empire collapsed. His successor, Bilge (Pijia), tried to make peace with the Chinese in 718, but Xuanzong preferred to try to destroy his power by an alliance with the southwestern Basmil Turks and with the Khitan in Manchuria. Bilge, however, crushed the Basmil and attacked Gansu in 720. Peaceful relations were established in 721–722. Bilge’s death in 734 precipitated the end of Turkish power. A struggle among the various Turkish subject tribes followed, from which the Uighurs emerged as victors. In 744 they established a powerful empire that was to remain the dominant force on China’s northern border until 840. Unlike the Turks, however, the Uighurs pursued a consistent policy of alliance with the Tang. On several occasions Uighur aid, even though offered on harsh terms, saved the dynasty from disaster.

The Tibetans were the most dangerous foe during Xuanzong’s reign, invading the northwest annually from 714 on. In 727–729 the Chinese undertook large-scale warfare against them, and in 730 a settlement was concluded. But in the 730s fighting broke out again, and the Tibetans began to turn their attention to the Tang territories in the Tarim Basin. Desultory fighting continued on the border of Gansu until the end of Xuanzong’s reign. From 752 onward the Tibetans acquired a new ally in the Nanzhao state in Yunnan, which enabled them to exert a continuous threat along the entire western frontier.

In the face of these threats, Xuanzong organized the northern and northwestern frontiers from Manchuria to Sichuan into a series of strategic commands or military provinces under military governors who were given command over all the forces in a large region. This system developed gradually and was formalized in 737 under Li Linfu. The frontier commanders controlled enormous numbers of troops: nearly 200,000 were stationed in the northwest and Central Asia and more than 100,000 in the northeast; there were well in excess of 500,000 in all. The military governors soon began to exercise some functions of civil government. In the 740s a non-Chinese general of Sogdian and Turkish origin, An Lushan, became military governor first of one and finally of all three of the northeastern commands, with 160,000 troops under his orders. An Lushan had risen to power largely through the patronage of Li Linfu. When Li died, An became a rival of Yang Guozhong. As Yang Guozhong developed more and more of a personal stranglehold over the administration at the capital, An Lushan steadily built up his military forces in the northeast. The armed confrontation that followed nearly destroyed the dynasty.

During the 750s there was a steady reversal of Tang military fortunes. In the far west the overextended imperial armies had been defeated by the Arabs in 751 on the Talas River. In the southwest a campaign against the new state of Nanzhao had led to the almost total destruction of an army of 50,000 men. In the northeast the Chinese had lost their grip on the Manchuria-Korea border with the emergence of the new state of Parhae in place of
Koguryŏ, and the Khitan and Xi peoples in Manchuria constantly caused border problems. The Tibetans in the northwest were kept in check only by an enormously expensive military presence. The principal military forces were designed essentially for frontier defense.

Thus, the end of Xuanzong’s reign was a time when the state was in a highly unstable condition. The central government was dangerously dependent on a small group of men operating outside the regular institutional framework, and an overwhelming preponderance of military power was in the hands of potentially rebellious commanders on the frontiers, against whom the emperor could put into the field only a token force of his own and the troops of those commanders who remained loyal.

**Late Tang (755–907)**

The rebellion of An Lushan in 755 marked the beginning of a new period. At first the rebellion had spectacular success. It swept through the northeastern province of Hebei, captured the eastern capital, Luoyang, early in 756, and took the main Tang capital, Chang’an, in July of the same year. The emperor fled to Sichuan, and on the road his consort Yang Guifei and other members of the Yang faction who had dominated his court were killed. Shortly afterward the heir apparent, who had retreated to Lingwu in the northwest, himself usurped the throne. The new emperor, Suzong (reigned 756–762), was faced with a desperately difficult military situation. The rebel armies controlled the capital and most of Hebei and Henan. In the last days of his reign, Xuanzong had divided the empire into five areas, each of which was to be the fief of one of the imperial princes. Prince Yong, who was given control of the southeast, was the only one to take up his command; during 757 he attempted to set himself up as the independent ruler of the crucially important economic heart of the empire in the Huai and Yangtze valleys but was murdered by one of his generals.

An Lushan himself was murdered by a subordinate early in 757, but the rebellion was continued, first by his son and then by one of his generals, Shi Siming, and his son Shi Chaoyi; it was not finally suppressed until 763. The rebellion had caused great destruction and hardship, particularly in Henan. The final victory was made possible partly by the employment of Uighur mercenaries, whose insatiable demands remained a drain on the treasury well into the 770s, partly by the failure of the rebel leadership after the death of the able Shi Siming, and partly by the policy of clemency adopted toward the rebels after the decisive campaign in Henan in 762. The need for a speedy settlement was made more urgent by the growing threat of the Tibetans in the northwest. The latter, allied with the Nanzhao kingdom in Yunnan, had exerted continual pressure on the western frontier and in 763 occupied the whole of present-day Gansu. Late in 763 they actually took and looted the capital. They continued to occupy the Chinese northwest until well into the 9th century. Their occupation of Gansu signaled the end of Chinese control of the region.

**Provincial separatism**
The post-rebellion settlement not only pardoned several of the most powerful rebel generals but also appointed them as imperial governors in command of the areas they had surrendered. Hebei was divided into four new provinces, each under surrendered rebels, while Shandong became the province of An Lushan’s former garrison army from Pinglu in Manchuria, which had held an ambivalent position during the fighting. The central government held little power within these provinces. The leadership was decided within each province, and the central government in its appointments merely approved faits accomplis. Succession to the leadership was frequently hereditary. For all practical purposes, the northeastern provinces remained semi-independent throughout the later part of the Tang era. They had been among the most populous and productive parts of the empire, and their semi-independence was not only a threat to the stability of the central government but also represented a huge loss of revenue and potential manpower.

Provincial separatism also became a problem elsewhere. With the general breakdown of the machinery of central administration after 756, many of the functions of government were delegated to local administrations. The whole empire was now divided into provinces (dao), which formed an upper tier of routine administration. Their governors had wide powers over subordinate prefectures and counties. The new provincial governments were of two main types.

In northern China (apart from the semiautonomous provinces of the northeast, which were a special category) most provincial governments were military, their institutions closely modeled on those set up on the northern frontier under Xuanzong. The military presence was strongest in the small frontier-garrison provinces that protected the capital, Chang’an, from the Tibetans in Gansu and in the belt of small, heavily garrisoned provinces in Henan that protected China—and the canal from the Huai and Yangtze valleys, on which the central government depended for its supplies—from the semiautonomous provinces. Military governments were also the rule in Sichuan, which continued to be menaced by the Tibetans and Nanzhao, and in the far south in Lingnan.

In central and southern China, however, the provincial government developed into a new organ of the civil bureaucracy. The civil governors of the southern provinces were regularly appointed from the bureaucracy, and it became customary to appoint to these posts high-ranking court officials who were temporarily out of favour.

All the new provinces had considerable latitude of action, particularly during the reigns of Suzong and Daizong, when central power was at a low ebb. There was a general decentralization of authority. The new provinces had considerable independence in the fields of finance, local government, law and order, and military matters.

Under Daizong (reigned 762–779) the court was dominated by the emperor’s favourite, Yuan Zai, and by the eunuchs who now began to play an increasing role in Tang politics. A succession of eunuch advisers not only rivaled in influence the chief ministers but even exerted influence over the military in the campaigns of the late 750s and early 760s. Under Daizong many of the regular offices of the administration remained unfilled, while the irregularities encouraged by Yuan Zai and his clique in the appointment of
officials led to an increasing use of eunuchs in secretarial posts and to their increasing dominance over the emperor’s private treasury.

The central government did achieve some success in finance. The old fiscal system with its taxes and labour services had been completely disrupted by the breakdown of authority and by the vast movements of population. The revenues increasingly came to depend on additional taxes levied on cultivated land or on property, and the government attempted to raise more revenue from the urban population. But its survival depended on the revenues it drew from central China, the Huai valley, and the lower Yangtze. Those revenues were sent to the capital by means of a reconstructed and improved canal system maintained out of the new government monopoly on salt. By 780 the salt monopoly was producing a major part of the state’s central revenues, in addition to maintaining the transportation system. The salt and transportation administration was controlled by an independent commission centred in Yangzhou, near the mouth of the Yangtze, and this commission gradually took over the entire financial administration of southern and central China.

The weak Daizong was succeeded by a tough, intelligent activist emperor, Dezong (reigned 779–805), who was determined to restore the fortunes of the dynasty. He reconstituted much of the old central administration and decided on a showdown with the forces of local autonomy. As a first step, in 780 he promulgated a new system of taxation, under which each province was assessed a quota of taxes, the collection of which was to be left to the provincial government. This was a radical measure, for it abandoned the traditional concept of head taxes levied at a uniform rate throughout the empire and also began the assessment of taxes in terms of money.

Those in the semi-independent provinces of the northeast saw this as a threat to their independence, and, when it became apparent that Dezong was determined to carry out consistently tough policies toward the northeast—reducing their armies and even denying them the right to appoint their own governors—the Hebei provinces rebelled. From 781 to 786 there was a wave of rebellions not only in the northeastern provinces but also in the Huai valley and in the area of the capital itself. These events brought the Tang even closer to disaster than had the An Lushan rising. The situation was saved because at a crucial moment the rebels fell out among themselves and because the south remained loyal. In the end, the settlement negotiated with the governors of Hebei virtually endorsed the preceding status quo, although the court made some marginal inroads by establishing two small new provinces in Hebei.

After that disaster, Dezong pursued a much more careful and passive policy toward the provinces. Governors were left in office for long periods, and hereditary succession continued. Nonetheless, the latter part of Dezong’s reign was a period of steady achievement. The new tax system was gradually enforced and proved remarkably successful; it remained the basis of the tax structure until Ming times. Revenues increased steadily, and Dezong left behind him a wealthy state. Militarily, he was also generally successful: the Tibetan threat was contained, Nanzhao was won from its alliance with the Tibetans, and the garrisons of the northwest were strengthened. At the same time, Dezong
built up large new palace armies, giving the central government a powerful striking
force—numbering some 100,000 men by the end of his reign. Command was given to
eunuchs considered loyal to the throne. The death of Dezong in 805 was followed by the
brief reign of Shunzong, an invalid monarch whose court was dominated by the clique of
Wang Shuwen and Wang Pei. They planned to take control of the palace armies from the
eunuchs but failed.

The struggle for central authority

Under Xianzong (reigned 805–820) the Tang regained a great deal of its power.
Xianzong, a tough and ruthless ruler who kept a firm hand on affairs, is notable chiefly
for his successful policies toward the provinces. Rebellions in Sichuan (806) and the
Yangtze delta (807) were quickly put down. After an abortive campaign (809–810) that
was badly bungled by a favourite eunuch commander, the court was again forced to
compromise with the governors of Hebei. A fresh wave of trouble came in 814–817 with
a rebellion in Huaiyi, in the upper Huai valley, that threatened the canal route. That
uprising was crushed and the province divided up among its neighbours. The Pinglu army
in Shandong rebelled in 818 and suffered the same fate. Xianzong thus restored the
authority of the central government throughout most of the empire. His success was
based largely upon the palace armies. The fact that these were controlled by eunuchs
placed a great measure of power in the emperor’s hands. Under his weak successors,
however, the eunuchs’ influence in politics proved a disaster.

Xianzong’s restoration of central authority involved more than military dominance. It
was backed by a series of institutional measures designed to strengthen the power of the
prefects and county magistrates, as against their provincial governors, by restoring to
them the right of direct access to central government and giving them some measure of
control over the military forces quartered within their jurisdiction. In an important
financial reform, the provincial government no longer had first call on all the revenue of
the province, as some revenue went directly to the capital. The government also began
the policy, continued throughout the 9th and 10th centuries, of cutting down and
fragmenting the provinces. It strengthened its control over the provincial administrations
through a system of eunuch army supervisors, who were attached to the staff of each
provincial governor. These eunuchs played an increasingly important role, not merely as
sources of information and intelligence but as active agents of the emperor, able to
intervene directly in local affairs.

The balance of power within the central government had also been considerably
changed. The emperor Dezong had begun to delegate a great deal of business, in
particular the drafting of edicts and legislation, to his personal secretariat, the Hanlin
Academy. Although the members of the Hanlin Academy were handpicked members of
the bureaucracy, their positions as academicians were outside the regular official
establishment. This eventually placed the power of decision and the detailed formulation
of policy in the hands of a group that depended entirely on the emperor, thus threatening
the authority of the regularly constituted ministers of the court.
The influence of the eunuchs had also begun to be formalized and institutionalized in the palace council; this provided the emperor with another personal secretariat, which controlled the conduct of official business and had close links with the eunuchs’ command of the powerful palace armies. The eunuchs’ influence in politics steadily increased. Xianzong was murdered by some of his eunuch attendants, and henceforth the chief eunuchs of the palace council and the palace armies were a factor in nearly every succession to the Tang throne; in some cases they had their own candidates enthroned in defiance of the previous emperor’s will. The emperor Wenzong⁷⁶ (reigned 827–840) sought to destroy the dominance of the eunuchs; his abortive schemes only demoralized the bureaucracy, particularly after the Sweet Dew (Ganlu) coup of 835, which misfired and led to the deaths of several ministers and a number of other officials. But the apogee of the eunuchs’ power was brief, ending with the accession of Wuzong⁷⁷ in 840. Wuzong and his minister, Li Deyu, managed to impose some restrictions on the eunuchs’ power, especially in the military.

In the second half of the 9th century the central government became progressively weaker. During Yizong’s reign (859–873) there was a resurgence of the eunuchs’ power and a constant fratricidal strife between eunuchs and officials at court. From the 830s onward the first signs of unrest and banditry had appeared in the Huai valley and Henan, and trouble spread to the Yangtze valley and the south beginning in 856. Major uprisings were led by Kang Quantai in southern Anhui in 858 and Qiu Fu in Zhejiang in 859. The situation was complicated by a costly war against the Nanzhao kingdom on the borders of the Chinese protectorate in Annam, which later spread to Sichuan and dragged on from 858 until 866. After the invaders had been suppressed, part of the garrison force that had been sent to Lingnan mutinied and, under its leader, Pang Xun, fought and plundered its way back to Henan, where it caused widespread havoc in 868 and 869, cutting the canal linking the capital to the loyal Yangtze and Huai provinces. In 870 war broke out again with Nanzhao.

Yizong was succeeded by Xizong (reigned 873–888), a boy of 11 who was the choice of the palace eunuchs. Prior to his ascension, Henan had repeatedly suffered serious floods. In addition, a wave of peasant risings began in 874, following a terrible drought. The most formidable of them was led by Huang Chao⁷⁸, who in 878 marched south and sacked Guangzhou (Canton) and then marched to the north, where he took Luoyang in late 880 and Chang’an in 881. Although Huang Chao attempted to set up a regime in the capital, he proved cruel and inept. Hemmed in by loyal armies and provincial generals, in 883 he was forced to abandon Chang’an and withdraw to Henan and then to Shandong, where he died in 884. His forces were eventually defeated with the aid of Shatuo Turks, and the Tang court was left virtually powerless, its emperor a puppet manipulated by rival military leaders. The dynasty lingered on until 907, but the last quarter century was dominated by the generals and provincial warlords. With the progressive decline of the central government in the 880s and 890s, China fell apart into a number of virtually independent kingdoms. Unity was not restored until long after the Song dynasty⁷⁹ was established.

Cultural developments
The influence of Buddhism

The Tang emperors officially supported Daoism because of their claim to be descended from Laozi, but Buddhism continued to enjoy great favour and lavish imperial patronage through most of the period. The famous pilgrim Xuanzang, who went to India in 629 and returned in 645, was the most learned of Chinese monks and introduced new standards of exactness in his many translations from Sanskrit. The most significant development in this time was the growth of new indigenous schools that adapted Buddhism to Chinese ways of thinking. Most prominent were the syncretistic Tiantai school, which sought to embrace all other schools in a single hierarchical system (even reaching out to include Confucianism), and the radically anti-textual, antimetaphysical southern Chan (Zen) school, which had strong roots in Daoism. The popular preaching of the salvationist Pure Land sect was also important. After the rebellion of An Lushan, a nationalistic movement favouring Confucianism appeared, merging with the efforts of Tiantai Buddhism to graft Buddhist metaphysics onto Classical doctrine and lay the groundwork for the Neo-Confucianism of the Song era.

In 843–845 the emperor Wuzong, a fanatical Daoist, proceeded to suppress Buddhism. One of his motives was economic. China was in a serious financial crisis, which Wuzong and his advisers hoped to solve by seizing the lands and wealth of the monasteries. The suppression was far-reaching: 40,000 shrines and temples—all but a select few—were closed, 260,000 monks and nuns were returned to lay life, and vast acreages of monastic lands were confiscated and sold and their slaves manumitted. The suppression was short-lived, but irreparable damage was done to Buddhist institutions. Buddhism had already begun to lose intellectual momentum, and this attack on it as a social institution marked the beginning of its decline in China.

Several types of monastic communities existed at the time. Official temples set up by the state had large endowments of land and property and large communities of monks who chose their own abbot and other officers. There were vast numbers of small village temples, shrines, and hermitages; these were often privately established, had little property, and were quite vulnerable to state policies. In addition, private temples or “merit cloisters” were established by great families, often to allow the family to donate its property and have it declared tax-exempt.

A monastic community was free of all obligations to the state. It was able to hold property without the process of division by inheritance that made the long-term preservation of individual and family fortunes almost impossible in Tang times. It
acquired its wealth from those taking monastic vows, from gifts of pious laypersons, and from grants of lands by the state. The lands were worked by monastic slaves, dependent families, lay clerics who had taken partial vows but lived with their families, and tenants. Monasteries also operated oil presses and mills, and they were important credit institutions, supplying loans at interest and acting as pawnshops. They provided lodgings for travelers, operated hospitals and infirmaries, and maintained the aged. One of their most important social functions was offering primary education. The temples maintained their own schools, training the comparatively large proportion of the male population, which, although not educated to the standards of the Confucian elite or the clergy, was nevertheless literate.

Trends in the arts

In literature, the greatest glory of the Tang period was its poetry. By the 8th century, poets had broken away from the artificial diction and matter of the court poetry of the southern dynasties and achieved a new directness and naturalism. The reign of Xuanzong (712–756)—known as Minghuang, the Brilliant Emperor—was the time of such great figures as Li Bai, Wang Wei, and Du Fu. The rebellion of An Lushan and Du Fu’s bitter experiences during it brought a new note of social awareness to his later poetry. This appears again in the work of Bai Juyi (772–846), who wrote verse in clear and simple language. Toward the end of the dynasty a new poetic form, the 句, in a less regular metre than the five-word and seven-word 诗 and meant to be sung, made its appearance. The 古文, or “ancient style,” movement grew up after the rebellion of An Lushan, seeking to replace the euphuistic 平文 (“parallel prose”) then dominant. It was closely associated with the movement for a Confucian revival. The most prominent figures in it were Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan. At the same time came the first serious attempts to write fiction, the so-called 传奇, or “tales of marvels.” Many of these Tang stories later provided themes for the Chinese drama.

The patronage of the Tang emperors and the general wealth and prosperity of the period encouraged the development of the visual arts. Though few Tang buildings remain standing, contemporary descriptions give some idea of the magnificence of Tang palaces and religious edifices and the houses of the wealthy. Buddhist sculpture shows a greater naturalism than in the previous period, but there is some loss of spirituality. Few genuine originals survive to show the work of Tang master painters such as Wu Daoxuan, who worked at Xuanzong’s court. As a landscape painter, the poet Wang Wei, was a forerunner of the 文人, or “literary man’s,” school of mystical nature painting of later times. The minor arts of Tang, including ceramics, metalwork, and textiles, give expression to the colour and vitality of the life of the period. Printing appeared for the first time during Tang. Apparently invented to help disseminate Buddhist scriptures, it was used by the end of the dynasty for such things as calendars, almanacs, and dictionaries.
Social change

By the late Tang period a series of social changes had begun that did not reach their culmination until the 11th century. The most important of these was the change in the nature of the ruling class. Although from early Tang times the examination system had facilitated recruiting into the higher ranks of the bureaucracy of persons from lesser aristocratic families, most officials continued to come from the established elite. Social mobility increased after the An Lushan rebellion: provincial governments emerged, their staffs in many cases recruited from soldiers of lowly social origins, and specialized finance commissions were established, a large part of their personnel often recruited from the commercial community. The contending factions of the 9th-century court also employed irregular appointments to secure posts for their clients and supporters, many of whom also came from comparatively lowly backgrounds.

Although the old aristocracy retained a grip on political power until very late in the dynasty, its exclusiveness and hierarchical pretensions were rapidly breaking down. It was finally extinguished as a separate group in the Wudai (Five Dynasties) period (907–960), when the old strongholds of aristocracy in the northeast and northwest became centres of bitter military and political struggles. The aristocratic clans that survived did so by merging into the new official-literati class; this class was based not on birth alone but on education, office holding, and the possession of landed property.

At the same time, there was a return to semiservile relationships at the base of the social pyramid. Sheer economic necessity led many peasants either to dispose of their lands and become tenants or hired labourers of rich neighbours or to become dependents of a powerful patron. Tenancy, which in early Tang times had most often been a temporary and purely economic agreement, now developed into a semipermanent contract requiring some degree of personal subordination from the tenant.

The new provincial officials and local elites were able to establish their fortunes as local landowning gentry largely because after 763 the government ceased to enforce the system of state-supervised land allocation. In the aftermath of the An Lushan and later rebellions, large areas of land were abandoned by their cultivators; other areas of farmland were sold off on the dissolution of the monastic foundations in 843–845. The landed estate managed by a bailiff and cultivated by tenants, hired hands, or slaves became a widespread feature of rural life. Possession of such estates, previously limited to the established families of the aristocracy and the serving officials, now became common at less-exalted levels.

Population movements

Censuses taken during the Sui and Tang dynasties provide some evidence as to population changes. Surviving figures for 609 and 742, representing two of the most complete of the earlier Chinese population registrations, give totals of some 9 million households, or slightly more than 50 million persons. Contemporary officials considered that only about 70 percent of the population was actually registered, so the total population may have been as much as 70 million.
Between 609 and 742 a considerable redistribution of population took place. The population of Hebei and Henan fell by almost one-third because of the destruction suffered at the end of the Sui era and in the invasions of the 690s and because of epidemics and natural disasters. The population of Hedong (present-day Shanxi) and of Guanzhong and Longyou (present-day Shaanxi and Gansu, respectively) also fell, though not so dramatically. The population of the south, particularly the southeastern region around the lower Yangtze, took a leap upward, as did that of Sichuan.

Whereas under the Sui the population of the Great Plain (Hebei and Henan) had accounted for more than half of the empire’s total, by 742 this had dropped to about one-third. The Huai-Yangtze area, which had contained only about 8 percent of the total in 609, now contained one-fourth of the entire population, and Sichuan’s share jumped from 4 percent to 10 percent of the total, exceeding the population of the metropolitan province of Guanzhong. The increase in the south was almost entirely concentrated in the lower Yangtze valley and delta and in Zhejiang.

The revolt of An Lushan and Shi Siming and his son Shi Chaoyi (755–763) precipitated more population movements from north to south, with some of these migrants penetrating into what is now southern Hunan and beyond. These shifts then and later in the Tang considerably redistributed China’s population: the south became more populous than the north, and the populations among regions in the south became more balanced.

There are no reliable population figures from the late Tang era, but the general movement of population toward the south certainly continued, notably in the area south of the Yangtze, in present-day Jiangxi and Hunan, and in Hubei. The chaos of the last decades of the Tang dynasty completed the ruin of the northwest. After the destruction of the city of Chang’an in the Huang Chao rebellion, no regime ever again established its capital in that region.

Growth of the economy

The 8th and 9th centuries were a period of growth and prosperity. The gradual movement of the population away from the north, with its harsh climate and dry farming, into the more fertile and productive south meant a great proportional increase in productivity. The south still had large areas of virgin land. Fujian, for example, was still only marginally settled along the coastline at the end of Tang times. During the latter half of the Tang, the Huai and lower Yangtze became a grain-surplus area, replacing Hebei and Henan. From 763 to the mid-9th century, great quantities of grain were shipped from the south annually as tax revenue. New crops, such as sugar and tea, were grown widely. The productivity of the Yangtze valley was increased by double-cropping land with rice and winter wheat and by developing new varieties of grain. After the An Lushan rebellion, silk production began to increase rapidly in Sichuan and the Yangtze delta region, whereas in early Tang times the chief silk-producing areas had been in the northeast.

A boom in trade soon followed. The merchant class threw off its traditional legal restraints. In early Tang times there had been only two great metropolitan markets, in Chang’an and Luoyang. Now every provincial capital became the centre of a large
consumer population of officials and military, and the provincial courts provided a
market for both staple foodstuffs and luxury manufactures. The diversification of markets
was still more striking in the countryside. A network of small rural market towns, purely economic in function and acting as feeders to the county markets, grew up. At
these periodic markets, held at regular intervals every few days, traveling merchants and
peddlers dealt in the everyday needs of the rural population. By the end of the Tang
period these rural market centres had begun to form a new sort of urban centre,
intermediate between the county town, with its administrative presence and its central
market, and the villages.

The growth of trade brought an increasing use of money. In early Tang times silk cloth had been commonly employed as currency in large transactions. When the central
government lost control of the major silk-producing region in Hebei and Henan, silk was replaced in this use by silver. The government neither controlled silver production nor
minted a silver coinage. Silver circulation and assay were in the hands of private
individuals. Various credit and banking institutions began to emerge: silversmiths took
money on deposit and arranged for transfers of funds; a complex system of credit
transfers arose by which tea merchants would pay the tax quota for a district, sometimes
even for a whole province, out of their profits from the sale of the crop at Chang'an and
receive reimbursement in their home province.

The increasing use of money and silver also affected official finance and accounting.
Taxes began to be assessed in money. The salt monopoly was collected and accounted for
entirely in money. The government also began to look to trade as a source of revenue—to
depend increasingly on taxes from commercial transactions, levies on merchants,
transit taxes on merchandise, and sales taxes.

The most prosperous of the merchants were the great dealers in salt, the tea merchants
from Jiangxi, the bankers of the great cities and particularly of Chang'an, and the
merchants engaged in overseas trade in the coastal ports. Foreign trade was still
dominated by non-Chinese merchants. Yangzhou and Guangzhou had large Arab trading
communities. The northern coastal traffic was dominated by the Koreans. Overland trade to Central Asia was mostly in the hands of Sogdian and, later, Uighur merchants. Central Asian, Sogdian, and Persian merchant peddlers carried on much local retail trade and provided restaurants, wine shops, and brothels in the great cities. Only in the 9th
century did the foreign influence in trade begin to recede.

In the late Tang many officials began to invest their money (and official funds entrusted
to them) in commercial activities. High officials took to running oil presses and flour
mills, dealing in real estate, and providing capital for merchants. The wall between the
ruling class and the merchants that had existed since the Han period was rapidly breaking
down in the 9th century, and the growth of urbanization, which characterized the Song
period (960–1279), had already begun on a wide scale.

Denis C. Twitchett
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