CHAPTER 12
Reunification and Renaissance in Chinese Civilization: The Era of the Tang and Song Dynasties

Chapter Outline Summary

I. Rebuilding the Imperial Edifice in the Sui-Tang Eras

Wendi
- nobleman
- led nomadic leaders to control northern China
- 589, defeat of Chen kingdom
- established Sui dynasty

A. Sui Excesses and Collapse

Yangdi
- son of Wendi
- legal reform
- reorganized Confucian education
- scholar-gentry again part of administration
- Loyang
  - new capital
  - building projects
- canals built across empire
- attacked Korea
- defeated by Turks, 615
- assassinated, 618

B. The Emergence of the Tang and the Restoration of the Empire

Li Yuan, Duke of Tang
- used armies to unite China
- extended borders to Afghanistan
- used Turks in army
- Empire into Tibet, Vietnam, Manchuria, Korea
- Great Wall repaired

C. Rebuilding the World’s Largest and Most Pervasive Bureaucracy

Unity
- aristocracy weakened
- Confucian ideology revised
- scholar-gentry elite reestablished
- bureaucracy
  - Bureau of Censors

D. Institutionalizing Meritocracy: The Growing Importance of the Examination System

Ministry of Rites
- oversaw examination system
- highest offices based on Confucian classics, Chinese literature
- Birth, connections important for office

E. State and Religion in the Tang and Song Eras

Confucianism and Buddhism potential rivals
- Buddhism had been central
- Mahayana Buddhism popular in era of turmoil
- Chan (Zen) Buddhism common among elite
Early Tang support Buddhism
Empress Wu (690–705)
endowed monasteries
tried to make Buddhism the state religion
50,000 monasteries by c. 850

F. The Anti-Buddhist Backlash
Confucians in administration
supported taxation of Buddhist monasteries
Persecution under Emperor Wuzong (841–847)
monasteries destroyed
lands redistributed
Confucianism emerged as the central ideology

II. Tang Decline and the Rise of the Song
Emperor Xuanzong (713–756)
height of Tang power
mistress, Yang Guifei
powerful
relatives gained power in government
755, revolt
but leaders were ineffectual
frontier peoples, governors benefitted

A. The Founding of the Song Dynasty
907, last Tang emperor resigned
Zhao Kuangyin (Taizu)
960, founded Song dynasty
Liao dynasty, Manchuria
Khitan nomads
unconquered by Taizu
Song unable to defeat northern nomads
Song pay tribute to Liao

B. Song Politics: Settling for Partial Restoration
Scholar-gentry patronized
given power over military

C. The Revival of Confucian Thought
Libraries established
old texts recovered
Neo-Confucians
stress on personal morality
Zhu Xi
importance of philosophy in everyday life
hostility to foreign ideas
gender, class, age distinctions reinforced

D. Roots of Decline: Attempts at Reform
Khitan independence encouraged others
Tangut, Tibet
Xi Xia
Song paid tribute
Wang Anshi
Confucian scholar, chief minister
reforms
supported agricultural expansion
landlords, scholar-gentry taxed

E. Reaction and Disaster: The Flight to the South
1085, emperor supporting Wang Anshi died
reforms reversed
Jurchens defeated Liao
1115, found Jin kingdom
invaded China
Song flee south
new capital at Hangzhou
Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279)

III. Tang and Song Prosperity: The Basis of a Golden Age
Canal system
built to accommodate population shift
Yangdi’s Grand Canal
links north to south
A. A New Phase of Commercial Expansion by Land and Sea
Silk routes reopened
greater contact with Buddhist, Islamic regions
Sea trade
developed by late Tang, Song
junks
Commerce expanded
credit
deposit shops
eyearly banks
flying money
credit vouchers
Urban growth
Changan
Tang capital
2 million
B. Expanding Agrarian Production and Life in the Country
New areas cultivated
canals helped transport produce
Aristocratic estates
divided among peasants
scholar-gentry replaced aristocracy
C. Family and Society in the Tang and Song Era
Great continuity
Marriage brokers
Elite women have broader opportunities
Empresses Wu, Wei
Yang Guifei
Divorce widely available
D. The Neo-Confucian Assertion of Male Dominance
Neo-Confucians reduced role of women
confinement
men allowed great freedom
men favored in inheritance, divorce
women not educated
footbinding
E. Invention, Artistic Creativity, and China’s Global Impact
   Influence over neighbors
   Economy stimulated by advances in farming, finance
   Explosives
      used by Song for armaments
   Compasses, abacus
   Bi Sheng
      printing with moveable type
F. Scholarly Refinement and Artistic Accomplishment
   Scholar-gentry key
      change from Buddhist artists
      secular scenes more common
   Li Bo
      poet
      Nature a common theme in poetry, art

Chapter Summary
The Song Capital, Hangzhou. Under the Tang and the Song dynasties, the cities of China embodied the achievements of the age. Among them, Hangzhou, the capital of the Song, was unsurpassed. Positioned on the Yangtze delta, Hangzhou was ideally placed for trade, both internal and external, and supported a population of more than one and a half million. The city abounded in amenities, including restaurants, tea houses, parks and public entertainment.

Chapter Summary. Basic themes of Chinese civilization underwent vital consolidation during the postclassical period. Although less fundamental innovation occurred than in the Middle East, the Americas, and Europe, important developments took place in technology. Political turmoil followed the fall of the Han, and the empire’s bureaucratic apparatus collapsed. The scholar-gentry class lost ground to landed families. Non-Chinese nomads ruled much of China and a foreign religion, Buddhism, replaced Confucianism as a primary force in cultural and political life. There was economic, technological, intellectual, and urban decline. New dynasties, the Sui and Tang, from the end of the 6th century brought a restoration of Chinese civilization.

Rebuilding the Imperial Edifice in the Sui-Tang Eras. A noble, Wendi, with the support of nomadic military leaders, won control of northern China. In 589 he defeated the Chen kingdom that ruled much of the south and established the Sui dynasty as rulers of the traditional Chinese core. Wendi won popularity by lowering taxes and establishing granaries to ensure a stable, cheap food supply.

Sui Excesses and Collapse. Wendi’s son Yangdi continued strengthening the state by further conquests and victories over nomads. He reformed the legal code and the Confucian educational system. The scholar-gentry were brought back into the imperial administration. Yangdi undertook extensive and expensive construction projects in the new capital, Loyang, and built a series of canals to link the empire. He attempted unsuccessfully to conquer Korea and was defeated by Turkic nomads in central Asia in 615. Widespread revolts followed. Imperial rule crumbled and Yangdi was assassinated in 618.

The Emergence of the Tang and the Restoration of the Empire. Imperial unity was saved when Li Yuan, Duke of Tang and a former supporter of the Sui, won control of China and began the Tang dynasty. Tang armies extended the empire’s reach to the borders of Afghanistan and thus dominated the nomads of the frontier borderlands. The Tang utilized Turkic nomads in their military, and tried to assimilate them into Chinese culture. The Great Wall was repaired. The extensive Tang Empire stretched into Tibet, Vietnam, Manchuria, and Korea.

Rebuilding the Bureaucracy. A restored scholar-gentry elite and reworked Confucian ideology helped the Tang to maintain imperial unity. The power of the aristocracy was reduced, and political authority
henceforth was shared by imperial families and scholar-gentry bureaucrats. The bureaucracy, subject to strict controls, reached from the imperial court to district levels of administration. A Bureau of Censors supervised all officials.

**The Growing Importance of the Examination System.** Under the Tang and Song, the numbers of scholar-gentry rose far above Han levels. They greatly extended the examination system, and civil service advancement routes were regularized. Specialized exams were administered by the Ministry of Rites. The highest offices went only to individuals able to pass exams based on the Confucian classics and Chinese literature. Additional exams determined their ranking in the pool of those eligible for office and accompanying special social status. Birth and family connections remained important for gaining high office. Intelligent commoners might rise to high positions, but the central administration was dominated by a small number of prominent families.

**State and Religion in the Tang and Song Eras.** The Confucian revival threatened Buddhism’s place in Chinese life. Many previous rulers had been strong Buddhist supporters. Chinese monks gave the foreign religion Chinese qualities. Salvationist Mahayana Buddhism won wide mass acceptance during the era of war and turmoil. Elite Chinese accepted Chan Buddhism, or Zen, which stressed meditation and appreciation of natural and artistic beauty. The early Tang rulers continued to patronize Buddhism, especially Empress Wu (690–705). She endowed monasteries, commissioned colossal statues of Buddha, and sought to make Buddhism the state religion. There were about 50,000 monasteries by the mid-9th century.

**The Anti-Buddhist Backlash.** Confucians and Daoists opposed Buddhist growth, castigating it as an alien faith. Daoists stressed their powers of magical and prediction. Confucian scholar-administrators worked to convince the Tang that untaxed Buddhist monasteries posed an economic threat to the empire. Measures to limit land and resources granted to Buddhists gave way to open persecution under Emperor Wuzong (841–847). Thousands of monasteries and shrines were destroyed; hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns had to return to secular life. Buddhist lands were taxed or redistributed to taxpaying nobles and peasants. Buddhism survived the persecutions, but in a much reduced condition. Confucianism emerged as the enduring central ideology of Chinese civilization.

**Tang Decline and the Rise of the Song.** The reign of Emperor Xuanzong (713–756) marked the zenith of Tang power. He initially advanced political and economic reform; later he turned to patronizing the arts and the pleasures of the imperial city. Xuanzong became infatuated with an imperial harem woman, Yang Guifei. She filled upper levels of government with her relatives and gained authority in court politics. Rival cliques stimulated unrest, while lack of royal direction caused economic distress and military weakness. A serious revolt occurred in 755. The rebels were defeated, and Yang Guifei was killed, but Xuanzong and succeeding rulers were ineffectual rulers. Nomadic frontier peoples and regional governors used the disorder to gain virtual independence. Worsening economic conditions in the 9th century caused many revolts, some of them popular movements led by peasants.

**The Founding of the Song Dynasty.** The last Tang emperor resigned in 907, but, after a period of turmoil, a military commander reunited China. Zhao Kuangyin, renamed Taizu, in 960 unity under the Song dynasty. His failure to defeat the Liao dynasty of Manchuria, founded by Khitan nomads in 907, established a lasting precedent for Song weakness in dealing with northern nomadic peoples. Ensuing military victories by the Khitans led to the paying of heavy tribute to the Liao who became very much influenced by Chinese culture.

**Song Politics: Settling for Partial Restoration.** The Song never matched the Tang in political or military strength. To prevent a return of the conditions ending Tang rule, the military was subordinated to scholar-gentry civilians. Song rulers strongly promoted the interests of the Confucian scholar-gentry class over aristocratic and Buddhist rivals. Salaries were increased, civil service exams were regularized, and successful candidates had a better chance for employment.

**The Revival of Confucian Thought.** Confucian ideas and values dominated intellectual life. Long-neglected texts were recovered; new academies for the study of the classics and impressive libraries were founded. Many thinkers labored to produce differing interpretations of Confucian and Daoism, and to prove the superiority of indigenous thought. One prominent neo-Confucianist, Zhu Xi, emphasized the
importance of applying philosophical principles to everyday life. Neo-Confucians believed that the cultivation of personal morality was the highest human goal. Confucian learning, they argued, produced superior men to govern and teach others. Neo-Confucian thinking had a lasting impact on intellectual life. Hostility to foreign thought prevented the entry of innovations from other societies, while the stress on tradition stifled critical thinking within China. Neo-Confucian emphasis on rank, obligation, deference, and performance of rituals reinforced class, gender, and age distinctions. The authority of the patriarchal family head was strengthened. Neo-Confucianists claimed that social harmony and prosperity was maintained when men and women performed the tasks appropriate to their status.

**Roots of Decline: Attempts at Reform.** Song weakness before the Khitan encouraged other nomads to carve out kingdoms on the northern borders. The Tangut from Tibet established the kingdom of Xi Xia southwest of Liao. The Song paid them and other peoples tribute, and maintained a large army to protect against invasion, thus draining state resources and burdening the peasantry. The dynasty’s emphasis on scholar-gentry concerns contributed to military decline. The Confucian scholar and chief minister Wang Anshi attempted sweeping reforms in the late 11th century. He used Legalist principles, and encouraged agricultural expansion through cheap loans and government-assisted irrigation projects. The landlord and scholar-gentry were taxed and the revenues went for military reform. Wang Anshi even attempted to revitalize the educational system by giving preference to analytical skills.

**Reaction and Disaster: The Flight to the South.** When the emperor supporting Wang Anshi died in 1085, his successor favored conservatives who opposed reform. Neo-Confucianists gained power and reversed Wang’s policies. Economic conditions deteriorated and the military was unable to defend the northern borders. The nomadic Jurchens overthrew Liao, and in 1115 established the Jin kingdom. They invaded China and annexed most of the Yellow River basin. The Song fled south and established a capital at Hangzhou in the Yangtze River basin. The small Southern Song dynasty ruled from 1127 to 1279.

**Tang and Song Prosperity: The Basis of a Golden Age.** The Sui and Tang had built canals because of a major shift in Chinese population balance. Yangdi’s Grand Canal, eventually over 1200 miles long, linked the original civilization centers of the north with the Yangtze River basin. The rice-growing regions of the south became the major food producers of the empire. By early Song times, the south was the leader in crop production and population. The canal system made possible government of the south by northern capitals. Food from the south could be distributed to the north, while the south was opened to migration and commercial development.

**A New Phase of Intercontinental Commercial Expansion by Land and Sea.** Tang conquests and the canal system promoted commercial expansion. Expansion into central Asia reopened the silk routes to the west and intensified international contacts with the Buddhist and Islamic worlds. China exported manufactured goods in return for luxury items. By late Tang and Song times, Chinese merchants and sailors went directly to foreign ports; Chinese junks were among the best ships in the world and allowed the Chinese to be the dominant force in the seas east of the Malayan peninsula. The increased role of commerce and a money economy showed in the numerous and enlarged market quarters in Chinese urban centers. The expansion accompanied growing sophistication in commercial organization and forms of credit. Deposit shops, an early form of banks, and the first paper money appeared. Credit vouchers, called flying money, assisted transactions in distant markets.

Urban growth surged during the Tang and Song eras. The 2 million inhabitants of the Tang capital of Changan made it the world’s largest city. China’s estimated urban population—10 percent of the total population—surpassed all others.

**Expanding Agrarian Production and Life in the Country.** Tang and Song rulers pushed agricultural expansion. Peasants were encouraged to migrate to new areas where the state supported military garrisons and provided irrigation and embankment systems. The canals enabled their produce to move through the empire. New crops and technology increased yields. Sui and Tang rulers adopted policies designed to break up aristocratic estates for more equitable distribution among free peasants, the class Confucian scholars held to be essential for a stable and prosperous social order. The scholar-gentry gradually supplanted the aristocracy in rural society.
Family and Society in the Tang-Song Era. Family organization resembled that of earlier eras. The status of women was improving under the Tang and early Song, but steadily declined during the late Song. Extended-family households were preferred, although only the upper classes could afford them. The Confucianist male-dominated hierarchy was common in all classes. An elaborate process of making marriage alliances was handled by professional female go-betweens. Partners, in contrast to India, were of the same age. Urban classes consummated marriage later than peasants. Upper-class women had increased opportunities for personal expression and career possibilities under the Tang and early Song. The empresses Wu and Wei, and the royal concubine Yang Guifei, exercised considerable power. The legal code had provisions supporting women’s rights in divorce arrangements. The practice of allowing wealthy urban women to have lovers is an example of female independence.

The Neo-Confucian Assertion of Male Dominance. The independence and legal rights of the elite minority of women worsened under the influence of Neo-Confucian thinkers. They stressed the roles of homemaker and mother, advocated physical confinement of women, emphasized the importance of bridal virginity, wifely fidelity, and widow chastity. Men were permitted free sexual behavior and remarriage. The decline of the opportunities once open in Buddhism also contributed to the decline in women’s status. New laws favored males in inheritance and divorce, and females were excluded from the educational system. The painful, mobility-restricting practice of footbinding exemplifies the lowly position imposed upon women in late Song times.

Invention, Artistic Creativity, and China's Global Impact. The Tang and Song periods are most remembered for their accomplishments in science, technology, literature, and the fine arts. Technological and scientific discoveries—new tools, production methods, weapons—passed to other civilizations and altered the course of human development. The arts and literature passed to neighboring regions—central Asia, Japan, and Vietnam. Engineering feats—the Grand Canal, dikes and dams, irrigation systems, bridges—were especially noteworthy. New agricultural implements and innovations—banks and paper money—stimulated prosperity. Explosive powder was invented under the Tang; it was used for fireworks until the Song adapted it to military use. Song armies and navies also used naphtha flame throwers, poisonous gasses, and rocket launchers. On the domestic side, chairs, tea drinking, the use of coal for fuel, and kites were introduced. Compasses were applied to ocean navigation, and the abacus helped numerical figuring. In the 11th century the artisan Bi Sheng devised printing with movable type. Combined with the Chinese invention of paper, printing allowed a literacy level higher than any other preindustrial civilization.

Thinking Historically: Artistic Expression and Social Values. Examining artistic creativity is an effective approach for studying the values of a civilization. In preliterate societies, art and architecture provide evidence otherwise lacking. When civilizations have written records we can learn about social structure by discovering who produced art, for whom it was created, by the technologies and materials utilized, and through the messages it was meant to convey. In India and European societies artistic creations were the work of skilled craftsmen, a role played in China by the scholar-gentry class. In another difference, Indian, Muslim, and European artisans made anonymous creations for a mass audience. In China, identifiable individuals produced art for the pleasures of the elite.

Scholarly Refinement and Artistic Accomplishment. The reinvigorated scholar-gentry class was responsible for artistic and literary creativity. Well-educated men were supposed to be generalists capable of both official and artistic achievement. As the scholar-gentry replaced Buddhists as artists and writers of note, they turned to portraying daily life and the delights of nature. Literature focused upon the doings and beliefs of common people. Poets like Li Bo celebrated the natural world. Under the Song, interest in nature reached artistic fruition in symbolic landscape paintings, many accompanied by poems, which sought to teach moral lessons or explore philosophical ideas.

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS: China’s World Role. The Song dynasty fell to the Mongol invasions inaugurated by Chinggis Khan. Kubilai Khan completed the conquest and founded the Yuan dynasty. The Tang and Song dynasties had a great impact upon both Chinese and world history. Centralized administration and the bureaucratic apparatus were restored and strengthened. The scholar-gentry elite triumphed over Buddhist, aristocratic, and nomadic rivals. They defined Chinese civilization for the next
650 years. The area subject to Chinese civilization expanded dramatically, as the south was integrated to the north. The Chinese economy, until the 18th century, was a world leader in market orientation, overseas trade volume, productivity per acre, sophistication of tools, and techniques of craft production. Chinese inventions altered development all over the world.

KEY TERMS

Period of the Six Dynasties: era of continuous warfare (220–589) among the many kingdoms that followed the fall of the Han.

Wendi: member of prominent northern Chinese family during the era of Six Dynasties; established Sui dynasty in 589, with support from northern nomadic peoples.

Yangdi: 2nd Sui ruler; restored Confucian examination system; constructed canal system; assassinated in 618.

Li Yuan: Duke of Tang; minister for Yangdi; took over the empire after the assassination of Yangdi; 1st Tang ruler.

Ministry of Public Rites: administered the examinations for state office during the Tang dynasty.

Jinshi: title given students who passed the most difficult examinations; became eligible for high office.

Chan Buddhism: called Zen in Japan; stressed meditation and appreciation of natural and artistic beauty; popular among the elite.

Mahayana (Pure Land) Buddhism: emphasized salvationist aspects of Chinese Buddhism; popular among the masses.

Wuzong: Tang emperor (841–847); persecuted Buddhist monasteries and reduced influence of Buddhism in favor of Confucianism.

Yang Guifei: royal concubine of Tang emperor Xuanzong; introduction of relatives into administration led to revolt.

Khitan nomads: founded Liao dynasty of Manchuria in 907; remained a threat to Song; very much influenced by Chinese culture.

Zhao Kuangyin: general who founded Song dynasty; took royal name of Taizu.

Zhu Xi: most prominent Neo-Confucian scholar during the Song dynasty; stressed importance of applying philosophical principles to everyday life.

Wang Anshi: Confucian scholar and chief minister of a Song ruler in 1070s; introduced sweeping reforms based on Legalism; advocated greater state intervention in society.

Southern Song: smaller surviving dynasty (1127–1279); presided over one of the greatest cultural reigns in world history.

Jurchens: founders of Jin kingdom that succeeded the Liao in northern China; annexed most of Yellow River basin and forced Song to flee south.

Grand Canal: great canal system begun by Yangdi; joined Yellow River region to the Yangtze basin.
**Junks:** Chinese ships equipped with watertight bulkheads, stern-post rudders, compasses, and bamboo fenders; dominant force in Asian seas east of the Malayan peninsula.

**Flying money:** Chinese credit instrument that provided vouchers to merchants to be redeemed at the end of a venture; reduced danger of robbery; an early form of currency.

**Changan:** capital of Tang dynasty; population of 2 million larger than any contemporary world city.

**Hangzhou:** capital of later Song; location near East China Sea permitted international commerce; population over 1.5 million.

**Footbinding:** male imposed practice to mutilate women’s feet in order to reduce size; produced pain and restricted movement; helped to confine women to the household.

**Bi Sheng:** 11th-century artisan; devised technique of printing with movable type; made it possible for China to be the most contemporary literate civilization.

**Li Bo:** most famous poet of the Tang era; blended images of the mundane world with philosophical musings.