The Cosmopolitan Empires of Sui and Tang China (581–960)

North and south China were politically reunited in 589 when the Sui Dynasty (581–618) defeated the last of the Southern Dynasties. After only two generations, the Sui was itself replaced by the Tang Dynasty (618–907), but progress toward cultural, economic, and political reunification continued, especially under three forceful rulers: Taizong, Empress Wu, and Xuanzong. The capital cities of Chang’an and Luoyang attracted people not only from all parts of China but also from all parts of Asia. The arts, and above all poetry, thrived in this environment. After the massive rebellion of General An Lushan wrecked China in the mid-eighth century, many of the centralizing features of the government were abandoned, and power fell more and more to regional military governors. Yet late Tang should not be viewed simply in terms of dynastic decline, as art and culture continued to flourish.

Historians of the Sui-Tang period have devoted much of their energy to understanding the processes of unification and the military, political, and cultural strength of the early Tang. How did the Tang solve the problems that had kept dynasties short for the preceding four centuries? Did the strength of the early Tang government owe anything to the mixed ethnic background of its founders? What happened to the aristocracies of the north and south? To understand the changes from early to late Tang, scholars have addressed other questions: Why did trade thrive as the government withdrew from active involvement in managing the economy? What were the connections between China’s changing military posture and cultural trends? Were late Tang trends in literature, Buddhism, Confucian learning, and other fields of culture linked to each other?
THE NORTHWEST MILITARY ARISTOCRACY AND THE SUI REUNIFICATION OF CHINA

That reunification came about from the north is not surprising, since by the fifth century the south had largely abandoned hope of reconquering the north. Reunification was delayed, however, by the civil war in the north after 523. Then in 577, when the Northern Zhou Dynasty defeated the Northern Qi, its battle-hardened armies were freed up to take on the south.

The rulers of the Northern Zhou were non-Chinese, like the rulers of the Northern Wei before them, though in this period ethnicity was fluid and intermarriage among ethnic groups common. Generally ethnicity was considered to be passed down with family names on the father’s side, but family names could be changed. Yang Jian, the founder of the Sui Dynasty, offers a good example. He claimed descent from Han Chinese, but since Yang was one of the names given to Xianbei in the late fifth century, his ancestors may well have been Xianbei. His wife had the non-Chinese surname Dugu, but her mother was Chinese. Yang Jian’s daughter married into the non-Chinese Yuwen family, the Northern Zhou royal house.

Yang Jian usurped the throne from his daughter’s young son and proclaimed himself emperor of the Sui Dynasty. He quickly eliminated the possibility of Zhou Dynasty loyalists’ ousting him in return by killing fifty-nine princes of the Zhou royal house. Nevertheless, he is known as Wendi, the “Cultured Emperor” (r. 581–604).

Wendi presided over the reunification of China. He built thousands of boats to compete for control of the Yangzi River. The largest of these had five decks, could hold eight hundred men, and was outfitted with six 50-foot-long bows that could be swung to damage an enemy vessel or pin it down. Some of these ships were manned by aborigines from southeastern Sichuan, which had recently been conquered by the Sui. By late in 588, Sui had 518,000 troops deployed along the north bank of the Yangzi River from Sichuan to the ocean. Within three months, Sui had captured Nanjing, and the rest of the south soon submitted.

After capturing Nanjing, the Sui commanders had it razed and forced the nobles and officials resident there to move to the new Sui capital at Chang’an. This influx of southerners into the northern capital stimulated fascination with things southern on the part of the old Northwest aristocracy.

Wendi and his empress were both pious Buddhists and drew on Buddhism to legitimate the Sui Dynasty. Wendi presented himself as a Cakravartin king, a Buddhist monarch who uses military force to defend the Buddhist faith. In 601, in imitation of the Indian king Asoka, he had relics of the Buddha distributed to temples throughout the country and issued an edict expressing his goal that “all the people within the four seas may, without exception, develop enlightenment and together cultivate fortunate karma, bringing it to pass that present existences will lead to happy future lives, that the sustained creation of good causation will carry us one and all up to wondrous enlightenment.”

Both Wendi and his successor, Yangdi (r. 604–617), had grand ambitions to rebuild an empire comparable to the Han. The Sui tried to strengthen central control of the government by denying local officials the power to appoint their own subordinates. They abolished the system of recruitment used during the Age of Division, the Nine Rank System, and returned to the Han practice of each prefecture’s nominating a few men for office based on their character and talents. Once in the capital, these nominees were given written examinations, an important step in the development of the civil service examination system.

The Sui helped tie north and south China together by a major feat of construction: the Grand Canal. Built by conscripted laborers, the canal linked the Yellow and Yangzi rivers. (In later dynasties, the canal was extended to the northeast as far as modern Beijing and to the south as far as Hangzhou.) The Sui canal was 130 feet wide and had a road running alongside it, with occasional relay posts and granaries. Water transport made it much easier to ship tax grain from the south to the centers of political and military power in north China.

Both Sui emperors viewed their empire building as incomplete because they had not recovered the parts of modern Korea and Vietnam that the Han Dynasty had held. The Hanoi area was easily recovered from the local ruler in 602, and a few years later the Sui army pushed farther south. When the army was

attacked by troops on war elephants from Champa (in southern Vietnam), Sui feigned retreat and dug pits to trap the elephants. The Sui army lured the Champan troops to attack, then used crossbows against the elephants, causing them to turn around and trample their own army. Although Sui troops were victorious, many succumbed to disease, as northern soldiers did not have immunity to tropical diseases such as malaria.

Recovering northern Korea proved an elusive goal. The Korean state of Koguryo had its capital near modern Pyongyang and also held southern Manchuria as far as the Liao River. When in 598 Koguryo troops joined a raid into Sui territory, Wendi ordered three hundred thousand troops to retaliate (see Chapter 6 and Map 6.3). However, the Sui army had to turn back when food supplies ran short. Sui then sent a fleet from Shandong, but it lost many of its vessels in storms and accomplished nothing. Another attempt was made in 611. Three hundred seagoing ships were built in Shandong, manned by ten thousand sailors and carrying thirty thousand crossbowmen and thirty thousand javelin men. Yangdi himself traveled to the region of modern Beijing to oversee preparations. Fifty thousand carts were built to carry clothing, armor, and tents. Reportedly, six hundred thousand men were conscripted to transport supplies in wheelbarrows. The History of the Sui Dynasty gives the undoubtedly inflated figure of 1,133,800 combat troops summoned for the expedition. Some went overland, weighed down with shields, armor, clothing, tents, and one hundred days’ supply of grain. Because the ships failed to resupply them, they had to turn back, hungry and exhausted. The vast majority of the soldiers sent across the Yalu River did not make it back to China.

The cost to the Sui Dynasty of this military debacle was enormous. When floods, droughts, and epidemics reached areas that had been hard pressed by mobilization for war, bandits were joined by deserters. Nevertheless, Yangdi was determined to try a third time to take Korea. The 613 expedition crossed the Liao River and set siege to Koguryo strongholds, but the campaign was cut short when word reached the emperor of a major rebellion in central China. Still, in 614, Yangdi ordered the Korea campaign continued. This time the naval force made enough progress that the Koguryo king sued for peace and Yangdi could claim victory. When the Koguryo king failed to appear at the Sui court as he had been commanded, Yangdi began mobilizing for a fourth campaign in 615. Unrest was growing so serious, however, that nothing came of it. Yangdi, by leading the Korean campaigns himself, was personally humiliated by their failures. The imperial dreams of the Sui emperors had resulted in exhaustion and unrest.

THE FOUNDING OF THE TANG DYNASTY (618–907)

With the Sui government unraveling, power was seized at the local level by several kinds of actors: bandit leaders, local officials trying to defend against them, and local elites trying to organize defense on their own. The contenders who eventually founded the Tang Dynasty were Li Yuan, the Sui governor of Taiyuan, and his general son, Li Shimin, known respectively as Gaozu (r. 618–626) and Taizong (r. 626–649). Their family belonged to the same northwest military aristocracy as the Sui emperors (Yangdi’s and Taizong’s mothers were in fact sisters, making them first cousins). Li was a Chinese name, and the Tang imperial family presented themselves as Chinese by descent, much as the Sui imperial family had.

Taizong was commanding troops from the age of eighteen and proved a highly talented general. Skilled with bow, sword, and lance, he enjoyed the rough-and-tumble of combat and placed himself at the head of crucial cavalry charges. He later claimed to have killed over a thousand men by his own hand. Taizong was also an astute strategist, able to outmaneuver his opponents. As he defeated one opponent after another from 618 to 621, he began to look like the probable winner, which led local leaders to join him in order to end up on the winning side.

In 626, Taizong ambushed two of his brothers, one of whom was the heir apparent. (He later had the histories record that he was forced to take this step because they were plotting against him.) Taizong then saw to the execution of all ten of their sons and demanded that his father abdicate in his favor. Despite these violent beginnings, Taizong proved a capable monarch who selected wise advisers and listened to their advice. He issued a new legal code and ordered it to be regularly revised. This code, the earliest to survive, had great influence on the codes adopted not only by later Chinese dynasties but also by neighboring countries, including Vietnam, Korea, and Japan.

In the early Tang period, the Xianbei presence rapidly faded as Xianbei assimilated and their lan-
guage fell out of use. Many men of Xianbei descent used the Chinese surnames that had been given to them at the end of the fifth century and served as civil rather than military officials.

Although the Sui and Tang founders evoked the memory of the Han Dynasty, they relied on the groundwork laid by the Northern Dynasties. The Sui and Tang governments retained the Northern Zhou divisional militia (fubing). Its volunteer farmer-soldiers served in rotation in armies at the capital or on the frontier in return for their allocations of farmland. Both Sui and Tang also retained modified forms of the equal-field system introduced by the Northern Wei and regularly redistributed land. They set the taxes in grain and cloth on each household relatively low, making it easier to enroll households on the tax registers. In the census of 609, the registered population reached about 9 million households (for a total population of about 46 million people). Even if considerable numbers of people escaped tax registration, it seems that the population of China had not grown since Han times (when the high point in 2 C.E. was about 59 million).

Both Sui and Tang turned away from the military culture of the Northern Dynasties and sought officials steeped in Confucian learning. Government schools were founded to prepare the sons of officials and other young men for service in the government. Recruitment through examinations grew in importance. In the mature Tang system, there were two principal examinations. One tested knowledge of the Confucian classics (the mingjing, or illuminating the classics examination). The other (the jinshi, or presented scholar examination) required less memorization of the classics but more literary skill. It tested the ability to compose formal styles of poetry as well as essays on political questions. Preparation for the jinshi examination was more demanding, but passing it brought more prestige. Even sons of officials who could have entered the government by grace of their father’s rank often would attempt the jinshi examinations.

During the sixth century, a new ethnic group, the Turks (Tujue in Chinese), emerged as the dominant group on the Inner Asian frontier. To keep them in check, Sui and Tang governments used all the old diplomatic and military strategies. They repaired fortifications, received trade and tribute missions, sent princesses as brides, instigated conflict between different ethnic groups, and recruited non-Chinese into their armies. In 630, the Tang wrested northern Shaanxi and southern Mongolia from the Turks, winning for Taizong the title of Great Khan of the Turks. For the next half-century, Tang China dominated the steppe. Turks were settled in the Ordos region (as the Xiongnu had been in Han times), and several thousand families of Turks came to live in Chang’an. Joint Chinese-Turkish campaigns into the cities of Central Asia in the 640s and 650s resulted in China’s regaining overlordship in the region much as it had during the Han Dynasty. (See Map 5.1.)

The early Tang rulers also embraced Sui ambitions with respect to Koguryo. In 644, Taizong began preparations for an invasion. A fleet of five hundred ships was built to transport forty thousand soldiers to the Korean coast, while an army of sixty thousand prepared to march. Despite impressive early victories, this army too had to retreat, and the retreat again proved an ordeal. It would not be until 668, when China allied itself with the southern Korean state of Silla, that Koguryo was finally subjugated (see Chapter 6). Eight years later, however, it was Silla, not Tang China, that controlled the area, and China had little to show for the effort put in over the course of eight decades to regain the borders staked out by the Han Dynasty so many centuries earlier.
THE TANG AT ITS HEIGHT

The Tang capital, Chang'an, was built by the Sui Dynasty near the site of the Han capital of the same name. It was the largest capital yet seen, nearly six miles east-west and more than five miles north-south. In the center against the north wall was the walled palace city, with the residence halls to the north and administrative offices to the south. From the south gate of the palace city stretched a wide avenue leading to the main south gate of the city wall. The rest of the city was divided by eleven north-south streets and fourteen east-west ones, making 108 rectangular walled wards, each with four gates. Two of the wards were government-supervised markets. Prime space was also reserved for temples.

Tang retained this city as its capital and made Luoyang a secondary capital. Both cities became great metropolises, with Chang'an and its suburbs growing to more than 2 million inhabitants. At these cosmopolitan cities, knowledge of the outside world was stimulated by the presence of envoys, merchants, and pilgrims from Central Asia, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Tibet, among other places. (See Connections: Cultural Contact Across Eurasia (600–900) and Material Culture: Tea.) Because of the presence of foreign merchants, many religions were practiced, including Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Islam, although none of them spread into the Chinese population the way Buddhism had a few centuries earlier. Foreign fashions in hair and clothing were often copied, however, and foreign amusements such as polo found followings among the well-to-do. The introduction of new instruments and tunes from India, Iran, and Central Asia brought about a major transformation in Chinese music. (See Color Plate 6.)

In Tang times, Buddhism fully penetrated Chinese daily life. In 628, Taizong held a Buddhist memorial service for all of those who had died in the wars, and the next year he had monasteries built at the site of major battles so that monks could pray for the fallen of both sides. Buddhist monasteries ran schools for children, provided lodging for travelers, and offered scholars and officials places to gather for social occasions such as going-away parties. The wealthy often donated money or land to monasteries, and many monasteries became large landlords. Merchants entrusted their money and wares to monasteries for safekeeping, in effect transforming the monasteries into banks and warehouses.

In the Tang period, stories of Buddhist origin were spread by monks who would show pictures and tell stories to illiterate audiences. One of the best loved of these stories concerned a man named Mulian who journeyed to the netherworld to save his mother from her suffering there. The popularity of this story gave rise to the ghost festival on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. On that day, Buddhists and non-
Tea

Tea is made from the young leaves and leaf buds of *Camellia sinensis*, a plant native to the hills of southwest China. By Han times, tea was already being grown and drunk in the southwest, and for the next several centuries it was looked on as a local product with useful pharmacological properties, such as countering the effects of wine and preventing drowsiness.

Tea was common enough in Tang life that poets often mentioned it in their poems (see Color Plate 7). Perhaps the most famous tea poem was by the eighth-century author of a treatise on the art of drinking tea, Lu Yu. Written to express his thanks for a gift of freshly picked tea, it reads in part:

To honour the tea, I shut my brushwood gate,
Lest common folk intrude,
And donned my gauze cap.
To brew and taste it on my own.
The first bowl sleekly moistened throat and lips;
The second banished all my loneliness;
The third expelled the dulness from my mind,
Sharpening inspiration gained from all the books I’ve read.
The fourth brought forth light perspiration,
Dispersing a lifetime’s troubles through my pores.
The fifth bowl cleansed ev’ry atom of my being.
The sixth has made me kin to the Immortals;
This seventh is the utmost I can drink—
A light breeze issues from my armpits.

By Tang times, tea had become a major commercial crop, especially in the southeast. The most intensive time for tea production was the harvest season, since young leaves were of much more value than mature ones.

Women, mobilized for about a month each year, would come out to help pick tea. Not only were tea merchants among the wealthiest merchants, but from the late eighth century on, taxes on tea became a major item of government revenue.

Tea reached Korea and Japan as a part of Buddhist culture, as a drink appreciated by Buddhist monks, since it helped them stay awake during long hours of recitation or meditation. The Japanese priest Saicho, patriarch of Tendai Buddhism, visited China in 802–803 and reportedly brought back tea seeds.

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Buddhists alike would put out food to feed hungry ghosts suffering in purgatory. Popular elaborations of the Mulian story emphasized the centrality of filial devotion and reinforced the Buddhists' message that the truly filial draw on Buddhism to aid their deceased parents. During the Tang period, a new sacred geography for East Asia developed, with a network of pilgrimage sites in China. The manifestation of the bodhisattva Manjushri on Mount Wutai became so renowned that it attracted pilgrims from India. The Japanese Buddhist monk Ennin, who spent the years 838 to 847 in China, set his sights on a visit to Mount Wutai.

At the intellectual level, Buddhism was developing in distinctly Chinese directions. New sutras were written, “apocryphal” ones that masked their Chinese authorship by purporting to be translations of Indian works. Some of these texts were incorporated into the Buddhist canon; others were suppressed by the state or the Buddhist establishment as subversive. Among the educated elite the Chan school (known in Japan as Zen) gained popularity. Chan teachings reject the authority of the sutras and extol mind-to-mind transmission of Buddhist truths. Chan claimed as its First Patriarch the Indian monk Bodhidharma, said to have come to China in the early sixth century C.E. The Sixth Patriarch, Huineng, was just as important to Chan traditions. The illiteracy of Huineng at the time of his enlightenment was taken as proof that enlightenment could be achieved suddenly through insight into one's own Buddha nature and did not require study of sutras. The “northern” tradition of Chan emphasized meditation and monastic discipline. The “southern” tradition was even more iconoclastic, holding that enlightenment could be achieved suddenly through a flash of insight, even without prolonged meditation.

In the late Tang period, opposition to Buddhism resurfaced, in large part because its tax-exempt status aggravated the state's fiscal problems. In 845, a Tang emperor ordered more than 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 temples and shrines closed and more than 260,000 Buddhist monks and nuns returned to secular life. Although this ban was lifted after a few