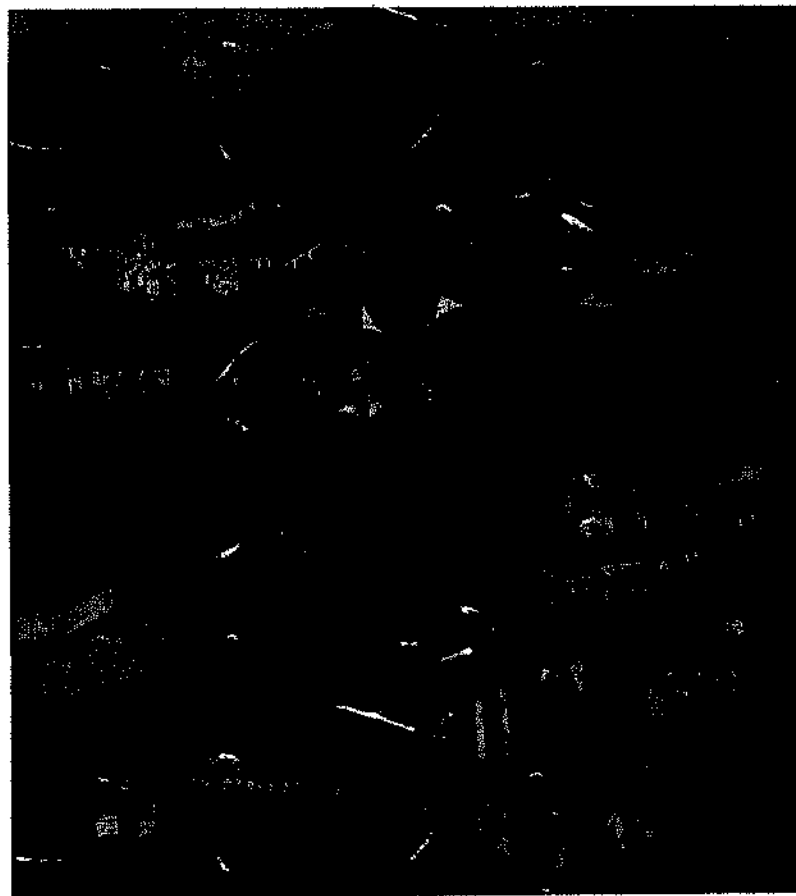


China's Sui & Tang Dynasties

581-907

WITH THE END OF THE Han dynasty in 220, China plunged into a period of disunity and discord that might be compared to what is sometimes called Europe's Dark Ages, in which central control was lost.

There were some important differences, however. Although China, like Europe, broke into separate localized kingdoms vying for power over the other, the society as a whole absorbed invaders and continued its own customs. And the nomads,



who were not administrators, allowed the landowners to continue the bureaucracy.

For three centuries China experienced civil strife. During this time of trial, Confucianism, more a code of ethical conduct than a religion, proved inadequate for the spiritual needs of the Chinese. Buddhism—which infiltrated through traders from India—began to fill this religious vacuum.

Confucianism remained the basis of the educational system. Taoism, a philosophy of a more mystical nature, offered some rivalry. But the adaptable Chinese incorporated benefits from all three religions that enriched their disparate society spiritually, intellectually, and culturally.

Cooperating with Turks in 552, the Chinese destroyed the "barbarian" Juan-juan confederacy, although the Turks then set up a northern dynasty as threatening as the conquered one had been. Dynastic quarrels created dissension among the Turks, and in 581 the Sui dynasty swept away the last of the northern barbarian states, reuniting China.

The first Sui leader, formerly General Yang Chien but now known as Emperor Wen Ti, was ruthless and ambitious. Yet in many ways he was an intelligent administrator. Under the previous system of separate kingdoms, defense of the home territory had required conscription of people into local armies for long periods of time, and taxes were high. Emperor Wen Ti reduced taxes and the length of required military

Sui emperor Yang Ti reviews his colorful fleet of sailing ships in this painting on silk.

Alone in Her Beauty

Who is lovelier than she?

Yet she lives alone in an empty valley.

She tells me she came from a good family

Which is humbled now into the dust.

When trouble arose in the Kuan district,

Her brothers and close kin were killed.

What use were their high offices,
Not even shielding their own lives? ...

The brook was pure in its mountain source,

But away from the mountain its waters darken ...

—Tu Fu (712–770), a Tang dynasty poet

service, set up irrigation schemes that increased production of food crops, and increased the empire by conquering southern and eastern China.

Under Wen Ti's successor, Yang Ti, the 1,240-mile Grand Canal was rebuilt, which allowed grain and trade to travel between the east-west Yangtze Valley of the south to the capitals of Ch'ang-an and Luoyang in the north. The canal was a feat of engineering to rival the Great Wall, and it helped to enrich and tie the country together until the 20th century.

Unfortunately, the Grand Canal came with an enormous price tag in terms of human labor; millions of workers were forced into years of servitude in order to complete the great work. Emperor Yang Ti also insisted on the construction of palaces and pleasure parks for himself and levied taxes against future years to pay for them. The peasants

rebelled, and Yang Ti was killed in 618. The reunifying Sui dynasty had lasted less than 40 years.

The Coming of the Tang

A strong Sui general named Li Yuan, the Duke of Tang, stepped into power. By 624 he had brought the country under control and begun the long period of progress and prosperity that would mark the Tang dynasty.

Just three years after he had pacified the country, Li Yuan was ousted by his son, T'ai Tsung. Like emperors before him, T'ai Tsung ascended the throne with blood on his hands, having murdered two brothers. However, he proved to be one of China's outstanding rulers, a generous and intelligent emperor who brought an end to banditry within his realm and kept taxes low for the beleaguered peasants. He also reduced the dangerous military power of the aristocrats by breaking up the army into small units headed by commoners.

As important as T'ai Tsung's military reforms were his improvements to the civil service. The new emperor revived the Confucian ideal of advancement on merit through the civil service examination system. Any literate man could take the annual examination for civil service posts. So difficult were the tests, encompassing poetry, administration, government, and the Confucian classics, that only 2 to 10 percent of the candidates passed. Government officials were chosen from that select group, and though family connections might aid some in finding jobs, the system nevertheless placed thousands of

NOTABLE DATES

■ 581–618

The Sui dynasty reunifies China.

■ 604–618

The second Sui emperor, Yang Ti, reigns.

■ ca 610

The Grand Canal is completed.

■ 618–907

The Tang dynasty encompasses one of the most brilliant eras in Chinese history.

■ 626–649

The Tang emperor T'ai Tsung, one of China's most able rulers, reigns.

■ 690–705

Empress Wu Chao, who usurped the throne from her son, rules.

■ 712–756

Emperor Xuanzong, also known as Ming Huang, rules.

■ 755–763

The An Lushan rebellion throws the empire into turmoil.

■ 875–884

Uprising of military commander Huang Chao occurs.

■ 907

The Tang dynasty collapses.

China's Song Dynasty

960-1279

AFTER THE FALL OF THE TANG dynasty, rival warlords ruled China for several decades. In 960, one of those warlords rose to power after his men proclaimed him emperor. Chao K'uang proceeded to overcome the other generals and regain control of much of China.

Though a military man, Chao K'uang proved a reasonable and generous ruler. To reestablish central authority over the many regional armies, he persuaded his various generals

to retire with substantial pensions and replaced military governors with civil officials. When Chao K'uang's brother replaced him on the throne and the Song dynasty continued, the realm would be marked by a reliance on a huge civil bureaucracy. Song rulers revived and expanded the Confucian policy of appointing officials based on their performance in literary examinations. To ensure impartial results, clerks recopied the exam papers and removed the names. Tens of thousands took the exam each year, with fewer than one

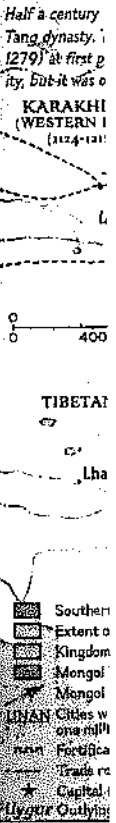
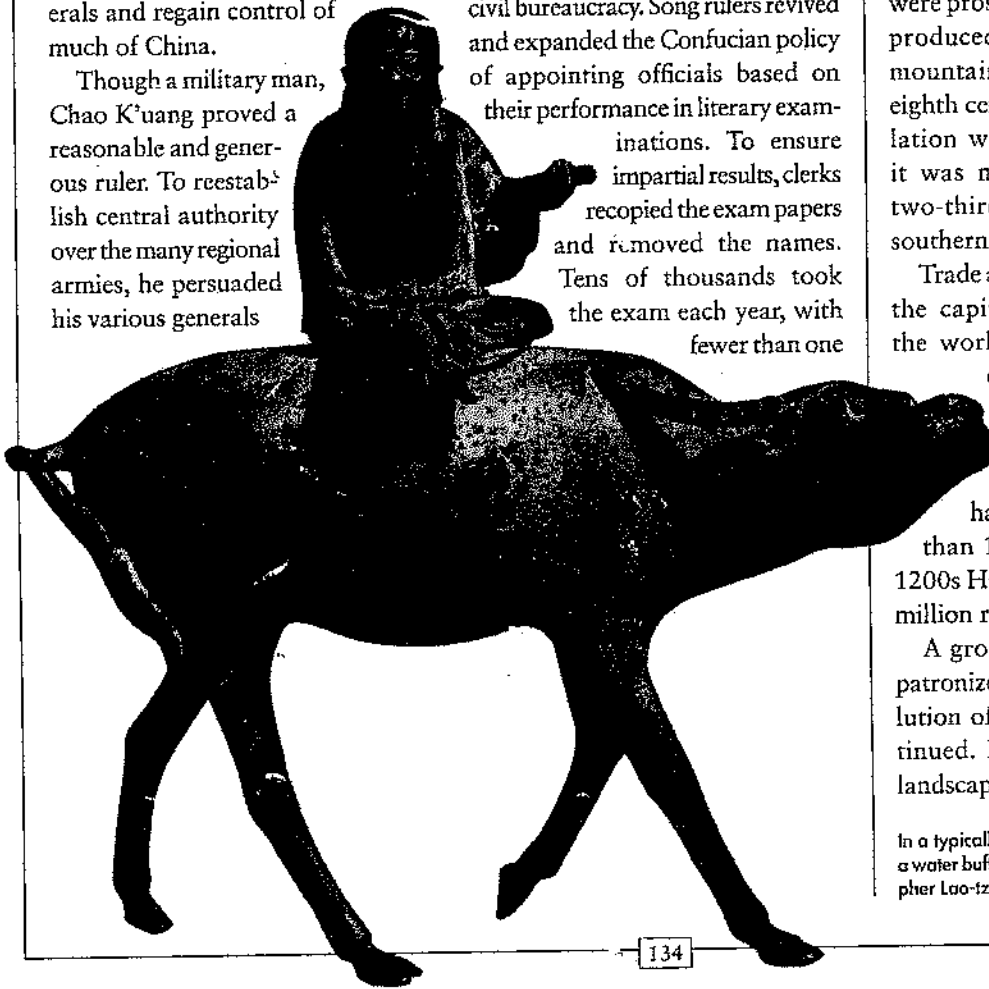
percent passing in some regions. Those scholars who succeeded created a large, effective, but costly civil service.

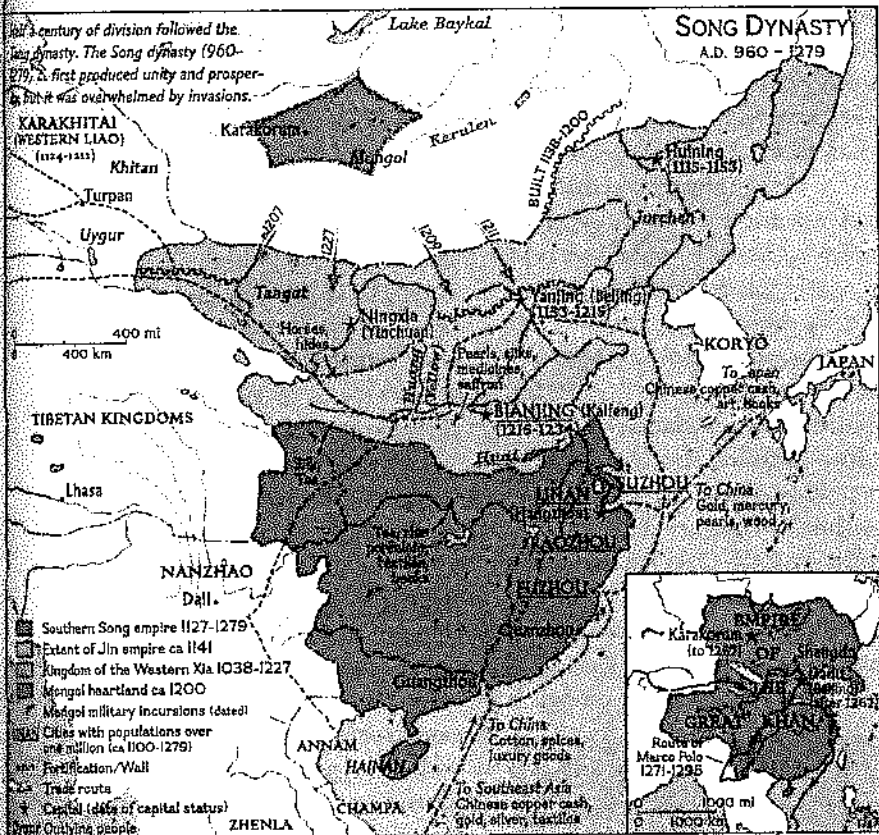
With a stable government, the Song reunified most of China, but its empire was never as extensive as those of earlier dynasties. Ultimately it could not hold the north against Tatar people known as the Khitan tribes. A corruption of that name led Europeans to refer to China as "Cathay," a term introduced by Marco Polo. Driven southward, the Song eventually controlled only central and southern China. In their more limited territory—perhaps because of it—the years of the Song dynasty were prosperous. The fertile south produced more food than the mountainous north. In the mid-eighth century, the Chinese population was 60 million; by 1100 it was more than 110 million, two-thirds of it in central and southern China.

Trade and industry boomed, and the capital, Hangzhou, became the world's greatest city. Other cities flourished, too; China became the most urbanized country in the world. Many cities had populations of greater than 100,000, and by the late 1200s Hangzhou had more than a million residents.

A growing urban middle class patronized art and drama. The evolution of exquisite porcelain continued. Painters created delicate landscapes on paper and silk.

In a typically skillful piece of Song metalwork, a water buffalo looks askance as Taoist philosopher Lao-tzu expounds from its back.





NOTABLE DATES

- **960-976**
Chao K'uang, the first Song emperor, rules; he reunified the country.
- **ca 977-983**
A 1,000-volume Song dynasty encyclopedia is compiled.
- **ca 1100**
The magnetic compass is invented.
- **1127**
Jurchen nomads seize northern China.
- **1130-1200**
The philosopher Zhu Xi lives; he helps establish a form of Confucianism mixed with Buddhism known as neo-Confucianism.
- **1215**
The Mongols move into northern China.
- **1279**
Mongols take over China and end the Song dynasty.

Although rich, urbanized, and populous, the Song state could not withstand waves of nomadic invaders. After the Jurchen took over the north in 1127, the Chinese retreated south and established a new capital at Linan (Hangzhou)—only to lose that land as well to the Mongols.

The Song as a Sea Power

Because trade with western lands was curtailed by loss of control over the northern land routes, the Song turned into a maritime power, trading along rivers and by sea with southeastern Asia, Indonesia, India, and the Persian Gulf. Merchants became immensely wealthy and set up complex commercial systems that included banks and credit systems. So populous and rich was the empire that it could no longer trade just in coins, which now numbered in the billions. Officials began to

issue the world's first government-backed paper money. As Europe during this time was still in a period of stagnation, China was perhaps the world's greatest power and its culture the most splendid.

The country's very prosperity, and its inward-looking, nonmilitaristic policies finally led to the Song dynasty's collapse. Landed gentry, made fat by good times, acquired large estates and then rented land to peasants at high rates. They reaped peasant rebellion. Bureaucrats who, like the gentry, had been made complacent by economic success, neglected the military even as nomadic armies gained control of northern China. By 1279, Mongol forces overran the country and ended the Song dynasty. ■