

# Comparing Tang and Song China

Scholars often refer to the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties as the "medieval" period of China. The civilizations of the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties of China were among the most advanced civilizations in the world at the time. Discoveries in the realms of science, art, philosophy, and technology—combined with a curiosity about the world around them—provided the men and women of this period with a worldview and level of sophistication that in many ways were unrivaled until much later times, even in China itself.

	Characteristics of the Tang Dynasty	Characteristics of the Song Dynasty	Characteristics shared by both dynasties
<b>Social</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender roles and relations</li> <li>• Family and kinship</li> <li>• Racial and ethnic constructions</li> <li>• Social and economic classes</li> </ul>			
<b>Political</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forms of government</li> <li>• Leaders</li> <li>• Development and expansion of states</li> <li>• Empires</li> <li>• Nations and nationalism</li> <li>• Revolts and revolutions</li> <li>• Warfare and diplomacy</li> <li>• Regional, transregional, and global structures/organizations</li> </ul>			
<b>Interactions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographics</li> <li>• Disease</li> <li>• Migration</li> <li>• Patterns of settlement</li> <li>• Technology</li> </ul>			
<b>Culture</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Religions</li> <li>• Belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies</li> <li>• Science and technology</li> <li>• Arts and Architecture</li> <li>• Interaction, dissemination and adaptation of ideas, beliefs, and knowledge</li> </ul>			
<b>Economics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agricultural and pastoral production</li> <li>• Trade and commerce</li> <li>• Labor systems</li> <li>• Industrialization</li> <li>• Capitalism and socialism</li> <li>• Production of goods and services</li> </ul>			

# The Tang Dynasty (618–906)

When the rulers of the Tang dynasty (618–906) unified China in the early seventh century, the energies and wealth of the nation proved strong enough not only to ensure internal peace for the first time in centuries, but also to expand the Chinese realm to include large portions of neighboring lands such as Korea, Vietnam, northeast, central, and southeast Asia. The Tang became a great empire, the most powerful and influential of its time any place in the world. Flourishing trade and communication transformed China into the cultural center of an international age. Tang cities such as the capital of Chang'an (modern Xi'an), the eastern terminus of the great Silk Road, were global hubs of banking and trade as well as of religious, scholarly, and artistic life. Their inhabitants, from all parts of China and as far away as India and Persia, were urbane and sophisticated. Tang society was liberal and largely tolerant of foreign views and ideas; in fact the royal family of Tang, surnamed Li, was of non-Han Chinese origin (perhaps originally from a Turkish-speaking area of Central Asia), and leaders of government were drawn from many parts of the region. Government was powerful, but not oppressive; education was encouraged, with the accomplished and learned well rewarded. Great wealth was accumulated by a few, but the Tang rulers saw that lands were redistributed, and all had some measure of opportunity for material advancement. This was also a time when many women attained higher status at court, and a greater degree of freedom in society.

This dynamic, affluent, liberal, and culturally diverse environment produced a great efflorescence of culture unparalleled in Chinese history. Buddhism, originally imported from India, thrived to such an extent that China itself became a major center of Buddhist learning, attracting students and pilgrims from other countries. In East Asia, Chinese, rather than Sanskrit, became the language of Chinese Buddhist texts that served to transmit Chinese culture, ideas, and philosophy abroad. Significantly, Buddhist influence also resulted in the compilation of huge encyclopedias of knowledge during the Tang, preserving much earlier Chinese cultural material for posterity, and inspiring advances in mathematics and the applied sciences such as engineering and medicine. The Tang was also an age of great figure painters, whose religious frescoes filled caves along the Silk Road through central Asia, and covered the walls of royal tombs. New styles of ceramics, bold and colorful with variegated glazes, embraced Indian, Persian, and Greek forms.

Above all poetry flourished during the Tang, and indeed the Chinese think of Tang poetry as the greatest of all literary achievements. Tang poets like Du Fu, Li Bo, Wang Wei, and Bo Juyi created works of art that powerfully explored the relationships between sounds, images, and philosophy. Tang poets aimed to capture the fleeting and profound, influencing Chinese writers until the present day. Together with the surviving examples of painting and sculpture, Tang poetry manifests a Chinese inner vision and view of the world and cosmos in a way that more abstract scholarly works did not; these creative works express what might otherwise remain theoretical or ethereal into palpable, understandable, and immediate terms.

The most magnificent urban center in the world at the time, the capital of Tang China, Chang'an (literally "Everlasting Peace"), was a walled city built in alignment with the stars to symbolize its role as the world in miniature. The city witnessed the most splendid cultural achievements during the eighth century. As home to the most accomplished artists and thinkers of the day, it played much the same role as Florence did in fifteenth-century Europe. Just as it was witness to the height of Tang culture in the eighth century, it also was destined to be the focal point of the dynasty's decline: when a rogue general decided to rebel in 756, not only was the emperor sent temporarily into exile, but the artists, poets, and priests of the city also fled. Although the political structure of the Tang remained in place for another 150 years (until 907), the city and state, with resources scattered, were weakened. Pretenders to the throne began to emerge, warlords began to consolidate authority, and nomadic peoples on the northern and western borders of the country also competed for political power. But it was a gentle decline: overall the three hundred years of the Tang were marked by impressive advances in all aspects of art, science, and philosophy.

By the early tenth century, the Tang ruling house fell, and a period of chaos ensued. China was divided into at least fifteen different independent political regimes, and peoples on the border areas set up their own states. The cultural glory of Tang was eclipsed, surviving only among tiny warring states. However in the year 960, another unified empire arose, the Song.

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# The Song Dynasty (920-1279)

The Song dynasty was the second great "medieval" period of China. But unlike the Tang, it coexisted uneasily with powerful rivals to the north. These rivals were the Khitan Tartars of Manchuria and Mongolia, kept at bay only through costly bribes, and the Jurchen people of Central Asia, who were intent on conquering China but could not be influenced by payoffs. While the Song dynasty managed to recapture—and develop—much of the glory of the Tang, it did suffer a blow in 1127 when the Jurchen took the capital of Kaifeng, and sent the Song Chinese administration southward, to establish the Southern Song capital at Hangzhou, near modern Shanghai. Still the Northern Song (while it lasted) and the Southern Song (from 1127 until 1279) achieved incredible feats of learning, science, art, and philosophy. To the Chinese, the Song was a period certainly as great as the Tang. International trade and exchange of ideas continued to flourish, although (during the later Song) primarily through expanding networks of southern sea ports and ocean-going argosies.

Song intellectuals reacted to the threatened existence of their dynasty by developing a defensive, inward-looking strategy: a belief that the Chinese and only the Chinese were capable of true greatness. Some closed their minds to the world outside China and set about the task of defining Chinese canons of proper behavior, government, and arts. Most Buddhist doctrines (judged to be non-Chinese) were largely purged during the Song, and the native Chinese philosophies of Confucianism (in particular) and Taoism saw a resurgence. In fact the great philosopher Zhu Xi taught hopeful students a new and “purer” version of Confucianism that came to be called “Neo-Confucianism.” This philosophy tried to recapture the Confucianism of the past, while integrating other philosophical ideas that had since come into existence. Neo-Confucianism taught people proper Chinese views of the cosmos and of behavior, and provided answers for other “big questions” of life. Most of its ideas and practices survive to the present day, and have also had a notable impact on later societies in Korea and Japan.

During the Song, great advances were also made in science and technology. Hydraulic engineering, from canal and bridge building to the construction of enormous seafaring vessels, was perfected. Chemical science, pursued in the secret laboratories of Taoist scholars, helped to produce important compounds and chemicals, including gunpowder—and by the year 1000, bombs and grenades became available to Song armies. Biology too made enormous strides: famous physicians conducted well-documented experiments, and many of their efforts helped to codify and improve what was already known in the healing arts of acupuncture and traditional medicine. Perhaps the most significant advance, however, was the invention of movable type printing, achieved around the year 1040, four hundred years before Gutenberg’s printing innovations in Europe. Song printed editions of texts—previously transmitted as handwritten manuscripts—helped to spread literacy and knowledge throughout the realm. Many books survive to this day; they are technological marvels that are highly prized as some of the most beautiful books ever produced.

Song dynasty artists explored new themes and techniques in painting and ceramics. The Song interest in science and minute observation of the world resulted, somewhat paradoxically, in large-scale grand landscape paintings that explore the world in fine detail. New glazes and porcelain techniques flourished. Song artists were interested in both the monumental and the delicate; in the functional and the mysterious, all of which they recognized as intrinsic natural phenomenon of the world. Ordinary and educated people alike were exposed to art and literature through the new invention of printing, which encouraged the development of drama and fiction. Creative pursuits were unified by a cultural inclination to connoisseurship: the wealthy and even not-so-wealthy shared an interest in art, literature, and science, and cultivated good taste in their patronage of the arts. The Song love of the refined extended to relics and antiques, which helped to foster the nascent science of archaeology, as well as the older art of forgery. Connoisseurs embraced even cuisine and gardening, which were transformed into gentlemanly concerns for the first time.

As with the Tang, Song poetry is held in high esteem by the Chinese, but it is different from the Tang varieties. Whereas Tang poets tried to capture fleeting moments and transcendent thoughts, Song masters enjoyed using poetry to explore all aspects of the world around them, including the mundane. Song poetry is thus filled with interesting, sometime humorous, accounts of picnics, travel, wine drinking, and even such quotidian events as going to the dentist or suffering in the summer heat. Nothing was off limits to the writers of Song, and with printing freely available, everything seemed to get published. While the surviving poems of the Tang might number in the tens of thousands, no one has inventoried how many poems survive from the Song; they could number as many as half a million.

The rule of the Song ended in 1279 when Mongol leader Khubilai Khan, having conquered the Jurchen regime in northern China, swept through southern China and brought the Song territories entirely within the fold of the newly proclaimed Yuan dynasty. But that begins another story. The Tang and Song dynasties, fraternal twin dynasties of China’s medieval period, stand out as among the most accomplished of all civilizations in global history: they gave the world many contributions and helped to shape Chinese civilization into what it is today.

# Science in the Tang and Song Dynasties

As with art, literature, and philosophy, the Tang dynasty (618-906) nurtured a Golden Age of development and innovation in science and technology that culminated in the Song dynasty (960-1279). The expansive exchange of foreign goods and information during the Tang, together with the high value placed upon close observation and analysis that characterized the Song, set the stage for vigorous scientific innovations. Important advances were made in astronomy, agriculture, industry, medicine, and military technologies.

## Astronomy

China was among the earliest countries to highly value astronomical research, including celestial observations and investigation of various methods for determining date and time. Astronomical records made by Chinese observers date back four thousand years. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the development of astronomical instruments and other tools for observation and measurement developed rapidly.

In the early Tang dynasty (around 633), Li Chun Feng expanded the ancient concept of an armillary sphere for mapping the heavens to include three intersecting rings—a red ring illustrating the sun path, a white ring for the moon path, and a yellow ring for the star path. One hundred years later, Tang astronomical administrator Yi Xing created a planetary model consisting of a copper armillary sphere, driven by water to complete one circular rotation daily. During the course of this rotation, two wooden mannequins that were part of the model would respectively strike a ring or a drum to indicate the time. As astronomical administrator, Yi Xing also led a national project to observe, identify, and locate stars. Based on the resulting data, he calculated the length of a degree of the meridian—the first astronomer in the world to measure the imaginary great circle around the earth.

By the time of the Song dynasty, Chinese astronomers had constructed extensive star maps and an array of complex and beautiful astronomical instruments for measuring the precise movement and location of heavenly bodies. Five armillary spheres, each using more than 10,000 kilograms of copper, were cast in one century during the Song. A star map made between 1094 and 1096 by Su Song, the prime minister, displayed 1464 stars.

Su Song was also responsible for what is probably the most colorful invention of the Song dynasty: an astronomical water clock-tower constructed in 1088. The clock tower stood thirty-five feet tall and included a celestial globe on the third floor, as well as an armillary sphere on the roof. Wooden mannequins emerged from the tower doors beating drums and gongs and displaying tablets announcing the time of day. One legend holds that Su Song spent seven years building the clock-tower after being embarrassed by the inaccuracy of a Chinese calendar that caused him to deliver birthday greetings on a diplomatic mission one day too early.

The technology for creating escapement mechanisms, developed for accurately adjusting and regulating timepieces in Tang and Song China, was exported to Europe, where clocks with escapement mechanisms appeared two hundred years later.

## Calendars

Probably the most important goal in mapping the heavens was the development of an accurate calendar for use in activities such as farming, navigation, rituals, and astrology. Advances in celestial observation during the Tang and Song led to the compilation of remarkably precise calendars. It is believed that the first systematic Chinese calendars appeared in the third and second centuries BCE. Early calendars were based on the phase changes of the sun and moon, as well as consideration of five visible planets (Venus, Jupiter, Mercury, Mars, and Saturn), all used to plot out years, months, and days. During the Tang dynasty, astronomical administrator Yi Xing published the most comprehensive and influential calendar in Chinese history: the Da Yan calendar. It was based on a sophisticated understanding of the sun's orbit, and calculated the new moon, full moon, twenty-four solar terms, and the ongoing movements of the sun and moon. After the Da Yan calendar was issued in 728, it was adopted in other parts of Asia and used in China without major modification until seventeenth century. Around 1090, an alternative calendar was compiled using twelve jieqi, or half of the earlier twenty-four solar terms (a system consistent with the Gregorian calendar developed in the West nine hundred years later); however, it was not adopted during the Song dynasty.

## Agricultural Engineering and Technology

Tang and Song official support for scientific research and development was also evident in domain of agricultural

engineering and technology. The Tang administration completed 1,088 large irrigation projects, 40 flood-control projects, and 27 waterway transportation projects across the country. An official bureau was established for effective management of these types of projects. Peasants were encouraged with ownership incentives and tax waivers to bring over two million hectares of extra farming land into production during the first century of the Song.

Agricultural engineering innovations included specific types of equipment such as the Tang dynasty East River plough, which had eleven parts and allowed for flexibility in the depth of furrowing. The human-operated waterwheel was invented and widely employed in irrigation, enabling water to be transported from lower to higher elevations. During the Song the capacity of the water-wheel was substantially enhanced with animal power.

Technological advances in rice growing supported a population explosion during the Southern Song, when northern invasions drove much of the Chinese population from the wheat-growing area of northern China to the rice-growing south below the Yangtze River. Superior seed varieties were imported from Vietnam and Korea. To bring wetlands into production, dams were built up, and the water subsequently drained out to produce cultivable land. In deep-water areas, people employed "floating farmland" for planting. This floating farmland was either formed naturally through long-term deposition of soil on the roots of masses of floating Feng grass, or artificially constructed by planting Feng grass in a wooden frame and then depositing soil on the roots.

Farming innovations also brought hillsides into agricultural production. When arable land was exhausted on the plain, people turned their efforts to creating hillside terraces for expanded planting. Agricultural terraces appeared during the Tang dynasty and were in relatively widespread use during the Song dynasty, mainly in Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, and Sichuan with their extensive hilly areas.

### **Medicine**

The Tang and Song interest in standardization and scientific observation also contributed to advances in the field of medicine. In 659, during the Tang dynasty, ancient traditions of Chinese herbal medicine were compiled into an imperial pharmacopeia called the Revised Materia Medica, the first recorded pharmacopeia in the world. It listed 844 medicines in nine categories with illustrations made from real specimens. About seventy years after this official standardization, Chen Zangqi compiled the *Supplements of the Materia Medica*, which introduced an additional 692 medicines.

The advent of moveable type in the Song dynasty contributed to a rapid spread of medical knowledge and further advances. An official bureau of medicine was established for compilation and correction of medical publications. Several national medical surveys were conducted and a medicine factory constructed.

The healing art and science known as acupuncture was invented in China as well. Acupuncture takes two forms: one employs long, thin needles to puncture certain points on the human body; the other involves heating up certain locations on the body. Conducting either type of procedure requires intensive training, and they are sometimes combined. Usually, acupuncture is also combined with Chinese herbal medicine. Acupuncture originated in the Neolithic China and, as with herbal medicine, was systematically recorded and taught as a science during the Tang and Song.

In the Tang dynasty, acupuncture was described in detail by many publications and widely taught in official medical institutions. The famous doctor, Sun Simiao (581–682) discussed acupuncture in extensive detail in his well-known medical book, *The Thousand Golden Formulae*. In

the Tang dynasty, people began to use acupuncture charts to teach and practice. In the Song dynasty, the imperial physician Wang Weiyi compiled a specialized acupuncture book, *Illustrated Manual of Acupuncture Points on a Copper Puppet*, using two copper puppets clearly indicating acupuncture points on the body for the purposes of teaching and practicing. The publication of manuals during the Tang contributed to a spread of acupuncture practice to Japan and Korea. In the Song dynasty, acupuncture was introduced to even more countries including England and France.

### **Explosives**

One of the most influential Tang dynasty inventions was perhaps produced by accident. Black powder, an explosive mixture of saltpeter, sulphur, and charcoal, is generally believed to have been an unintended discovery made by alchemists. These creative investigators frequently conducted chemistry experiments in a search for the elixir of immortality. The earliest written record concerning gunpowder is *Optimization of Alchemical Processes by Sulphuric Method*, a book written by Sun Simiao, the most famous doctor in Tang history.

During the Song dynasty, gunpowder technology was further refined for military purposes and many kinds of firearms were invented. In the year 1000, Tang Fu designed and manufactured a gunpowder arrow, gunpowder ball, and barbed gunpowder packages and donated them to the Song emperor. In 1132, the fire lance was introduced with gunpowder in a long bamboo tube. When fired, flames were projected on the enemy. In 1259, a fire-spitting lance was enhanced with bullets. When fired, bullets were ejected with the flames. Fire-spitting lances are regarded as the prototype of the musket or gun. At the end of the Song dynasty, a primitive rocket weapon was invented by using gunpowder to propel an arrow, which is similar in principle to the modern rocket. Song firearm weapons were produced in massive quantities. It was recorded that the weapons bureau had eleven large workshops and hired over 40,000 workers. On a daily basis they produced 7,000 ordinary gunpowder arrows, 10,000 cross-bow gunpowder arrows, 3,000 barbed gunpowder packages, and 20,000 ordinary gunpowder packages.

In addition, during the Tang dynasty, saltpeter, the most important ingredient for producing gunpowder, was introduced to India and Iran. In the Song, gunpowder itself reached these two countries. By 1255, gunpowder was introduced to the Arab world, and through Arab-controlled Spain to Europe. Firearms were introduced to Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe by Mongolian expeditionary forces during the Song and Yuan dynasties. Europeans learned gunpowder and firearmsmaking techniques from the Arabs and produced their own guns in fourteenth century.

### **Conclusion**

The Tang and Song dynasties were a Golden Age for Chinese science, just as they were for art, literature, and philosophy. Astronomical and medical research was officially supported and systematically recorded. All significant arenas of infrastructure, commerce, and manufacture, including agriculture and firearms underwent organized, rapid growth. The scientific and technological advances made during the Tang-Song period exerted significant influence on developments abroad as well as at home for centuries to come.

# The Invention of Woodblock Print in the Tang and Song Dynasties

Among the most globally significant innovations of the Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties were the inventions of woodblock printing and moveable type, enabling widespread publishing of a variety of texts, and the dissemination of knowledge and literacy. Scholars believe that woodblock printing first appeared in China around 600, probably inspired by the much older use of bronze or stone seals to make impressions on clay and silk, and the practice of taking inked rubbings of inscribed texts from bronze and stone reliefs. The process for block printing on paper was perfected by the end of Tang dynasty.

Once printing became widespread, it also stimulated the development of a sophisticated paper industry with many different specialized papers created for different purposes. Wood for printing blocks usually came from date or pear trees. Text to be printed was first written on a sheet of paper. The paper was then glued face-down to the wood block and, using a knife, the characters on the paper were carefully engraved on the wood. The surface of wood block was then inked and covered with a sheet of paper. By gently brushing the paper over the engraved characters, the text was printed.

At first, woodblock printing was mainly used for printing books on agriculture and medicine, as well as for printing calendars, calligraphy, and auspicious charms. In 762, the first commercially printed books were sold in the markets of Chang'an, the Tang capital. In 782, printed papers were available in the marketplace as receipts for business transactions and tax payments.

Although woodblock printing played an important role in the spread of information and commercial transactions in China, it was a time-consuming technology. For example, in 971, at the beginning of Song dynasty, the monk Zhang Tuxin began a project to print the *Tripitaka* (a collection of essential Buddhist scriptures) using wood blocks. It took him twelve years to finish printing the 1076 volumes. The limitations of woodblock printing led to the invention of moveable-type printing during the Song dynasty.

Moveable-type printing was invented between 1041 and 1048 by Bi Sheng, a common man who was highly experienced in woodblock printing. Song dynasty scientist Shen Kuo described the invention of moveable type in his book *Dream Stream Essays*. According to Shen Kuo, Bi Sheng made one clay type for each linguistic character, then had them fired for hardness. A layer of resin, wax, and paper ash mixture was placed on the bottom of an open iron box to hold the type with characters facing up. The bottom of the box was heated to melt the wax mixture, and simultaneously all the typeface was pressed down with a wood board to ensure that the types were level.

Finally the tops of the clay types were inked, and the mechanism would then be ready for printing just like a wood block. Afterward the clay types could be disassembled and reused. The moveable-type printing process substantially reduced the time for printing from several days to a matter of hours. Nevertheless, because of the thousands of ideograms required for written Chinese, moveable type was not as efficient as it would be four hundred years later in Western Europe. In fact, woodblock printing still remained popular in China for several centuries. Nevertheless, the diffusion of Tang and Song printing technology throughout East Asia, to the Middle East, and finally to Western Europe had a significant impact on the development of world history.

# Religion and Philosophy in the Tang and Song Dynasties

The Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties were periods of dynamic religious transformation and revival in China, as well as profound philosophical inquiry. The religious landscape was varied and colorful. Along with the ancient indigenous religion, Taoism, Tang dynasty China enthusiastically embraced major religions imported from abroad: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. During the Song period, Christianity disappeared from China, but Taoism and Buddhism continued to flourish and Islam began to take root. The popularity of these religions challenged the longstanding supremacy of Confucianism as the most influential philosophy in social and political life. In response, Song Confucian scholars developed a revised theory of Confucianism that assimilated certain Buddhist and Taoist elements. This philosophy became known as Neo-Confucianism and eventually reclaimed for Confucianism its role as the most influential social ideology in China. Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were the three major influences on Chinese life and art during the Tang and Song dynasties—sometimes competing with each other but often synthesizing and evolving together in ways that were uniquely Chinese.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the most conspicuous features of the religious landscape were the open rivalries as well as the relatively peaceful coexistence among different religions. Thus, the boundaries between different religions were fluid in two senses. First, through competition, different religions interacted with and influenced each other. Thus, while Buddhism and Taoism competed constantly for converts, they never excluded each other. For instance, early Buddhists frequently adopted Taoist terminology when they translated Indian sutras from Sanskrit. Taoists, for their part, also incorporated many Buddhist practices into their philosophical system. A notable example is the celibacy of the Taoist priests. Originally, Taoism did not require its priests to be celibate. However, as part of its interaction with Buddhism, a Taoist movement emerged during the Song which stressed priestly celibacy. As a result, today some branches of Taoism mandate clerical celibacy, while others do not. This tendency toward competitive religious interaction is likewise seen in the [Nestorian](#) adoption of Taoist and Buddhist concepts to facilitate the spread of Christian doctrine. Even Neo-Confucianism, which was in some ways a Confucian reaction against theistic religion, drew a great deal from Taoism and Buddhism in order to rejuvenate itself.

The boundaries among religions were also fluid because common believers had the freedom to choose and change their religions at will. In the Tang and Song, if the boundary between different religions existed, it mostly existed as a practical matter for priests. These priests had to compete for the support of the emperors, for numbers of converts, and for financial patronage. However, for a common believer, the boundary was not particularly important. An individual could participate in many different religious activities simultaneously. He could go to a Buddhist temple in the morning and offer sacrifice to a Taoist deity in the evening. She might worship Buddha and the Taoist deities side by side in her house. One chose a particular religion according to personal needs or taste.



# Neoconfucianism

Generally speaking, Confucianism had been the dominant ideology and philosophy in China since the Han dynasty. It was founded by an ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551–479 BCE). His philosophy and teachings were constantly developed, reinterpreted, and refined by his followers throughout the course of Chinese history. The predominant theme of Confucianism is its emphasis on social ties and duties as designated in the proper behavior for "five relationships": sovereign-subject; husband-wife; parent-child; elder brother-younger brother; and friend-friend.

In the middle of the second century BCE, Confucianism was established as the official state ideology. However, during the Tang and Song dynasties influences from Taoism and Buddhism significantly challenged the dominant status of Confucian ideology. Confucian scholars met this challenge by integrating elements of both Taoist and other native philosophies into a single integrative ideology known as Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism can be described as the culmination of an effort to integrate and harmonize several different religious and philosophical traditions that had developed in China over the preceding thousand years, and as a way of making sense of several diverse and sometimes competing philosophies. The Confucian emphasis on principles such as "humaneness," "filial piety," and "ritual" was integrated with more abstract Taoist notions of a "the Way" (Tao) that governed all existence, as well numerous Buddhist principles.

Neo-Confucianism is perhaps an expression of the tendency to seek "harmony" in all things—in this case, to try to synthesize complex religious and philosophical views. What resulted was a highly syncretic philosophy that was often very technical in nature; some ancient texts even present what might be described as flowcharts for their readers! Yet seemingly opposed ideas were unified by the notion of *li*, literally meaning "pattern," or more specifically the "patterned markings of a stone," but usually translated as "principle." Neo-Confucians sought to uncover the "pattern" of all things, and firmly believed that all phenomena, including life, nature, destiny, indeed the entirety of existence, were essentially a "pattern" that could be discerned if closely examined. This fundamental premise, many people believe, underlay the Song interest in all things "scientific," minute, and even trivial—since even the smallest entity had the potential to reveal the underlying pattern or *li* of all things.

# The Flourishing of Poetry in the Tang and Song Dynasties

The Tang (618-906) and Song (960-1279) dynasties were the golden ages of Chinese classical literature in general, and poetry in particular. Poets of these periods, including Li Bo, Du Fu, and Su Shi, are well known throughout East Asia and are still regarded as revered models for later generations of poets. However, Tang and Song poets clearly had different literary orientations, reflecting differences between Tang and Song societies. During the Tang period, China was open to the outside world and embraced the new and exotic, whereas Song China was a comparatively closed society that became introspective and philosophical. Tang poets were concerned with frontier adventures, embraced foreign elements, and celebrated spontaneous feelings. By contrast, Song poets tended to write about the more domestic moments of daily life, social duty, and the contemplation of philosophy in their poems.

*So why was there a flourishing of literature during the Tang and Song dynasties?* The answer to this question lies primarily in the fact that civil service exams instituted during the Tang and Song demanded significant literary skills. Poetry was considered the most refined and elevated means of expression, and was believed to be relevant to many professional arenas, including diplomacy, communication, reasoning, and philosophy. Civil service exams were used to identify capable people for government service and were the most important avenue for people from different social backgrounds to achieve political ambitions and gain prestige. Although the practice of the exams originated in the sixth century, it was not widely established until the Tang and significantly expanded during the Song. During the Tang, exam candidates were tested on poetry composition. This meant that if a person in the Tang wanted to achieve his social ambition or simply live a better life, he needed to be able to write poems. Even though by the middle of the Song, the exam requirement for poetry was replaced by essays, essays demanded no less literary skill. During the Song, along with the increase in the national literacy rate, the government increased exam enrollment among people of all classes. This development in turn prompted more people to acquire literary skills. Besides the great significance and widespread pursuit of the civil service exams, the invention and development of printing in the Tang and Song made the circulation of poems easier than before, and facilitated the study of poetry. All this contributed to the flourishing of poetry during the Tang and Song dynasties.

*And why do Tang and Song poems reflect different perspectives?* The answer to this lies in the contrasting cultural orientations and experiences of life during the two eras. By most measures, the Tang was the most successful dynasty in Chinese history. It expanded its territory into Central Asia, and by means of the Silk Road actively exchanged commodities and culture with other civilizations. Consequently, the people of the Tang were very open to the outside world. Reflecting this cultural atmosphere, Tang poets were preoccupied by the excitement of faraway adventures and the fascination of exotic things, sometimes overlooking the details of their immediate everyday lives. At the same time, an overall feeling of national confidence was reflected in the poets' confidence in their own senses. Poets celebrated spontaneous feelings.

By contrast to the Tang, the Song was a weak dynasty. Threatened by nomads on their borders and lacking the political ambitions of the Tang, the people of the Song looked inward. They observed the world close to them with discerning, scientific eyes. With a stronger appreciation for the details of their daily lives, the Song poets engaged in philosophical thinking based on their habits of close observation. Ongoing political strife during the Song also encouraged a stronger sense of political involvement among the educated people than was found in the Tang. All these factors contributed to the distinctive character of Song and Tang poetry.

## TANG DYNASTY RULERS

Taizong (reigned 626–649)

- Excellent scholar and calligrapher
- Emphasized Confucian ideas; but supported Daoism and Buddhism when practical
- Expanded power and trade through military force and diplomacy
- Limited public works projects and thereby reduced forced labor; lowered taxes

Wu Zeitan (reigned 690–705)

- Only woman to rule China in her own name
- Eliminated most of the extended imperial family and used secret informants to gain power
- Strongly supported Buddhism
- Generous to lower classes and gained their support
- Continued to expand Chinese power abroad

Xuanzong (reigned 713–756)

- Poet and musician
- Extended examination system to more commoners
- Established standard equal measures for silver, grain, and silk to help merchants
- Became obsessed with favorite concubine Yang Guifei and fell from power in rebellion led

## SONG DYNASTY RULERS

Taizu, first emperor of Song (reigned 960–976)

- Replaced military governors with civilian governors
- Created Council of State to freely debate policy
- Board of Censors controlled abuses and centralized power

Huizong (reigned 1100–1125)

- Painter and poet
- Developed "imperial style" of calligraphy
- Established first Academy of Painting
- Devout Daoist
- Captured by the Jurchen, his former allies, and imprisoned along with several thousand imperial relatives. He died a captive.

Xiaozong, emperor of Southern Song (reigned 1162–1189)

- Extended sea trade to India and Persian Gulf
- Oversaw growth of urban merchant class and increased tax revenue from trade
- Paper money system created under his administration