

## The Culture of the Tang Dynasty (618-907)

China's medieval era of disunity, the Six Dynasties, lasted three and a half centuries and its impact made some major long-term changes in Chinese culture. The division of China into separate kingdoms reinforced regional differences that had only begun to emerge during the Han. This was particularly true of the North/South divisions, which, over time, led to deep differences in language and culture within the larger Chinese context. The era of disunity, with its de-emphasis on the bureaucratic structures that had characterized the Han Confucian/Legalist synthesis, opened the door for cultural experimentation, both with the indigenous ideology of religious Daoism, and with the imported traditions of Buddhism. The remainder of the imperial era, until 1911, entailed an endlessly complex intermingling of these two religious forces with the Legalist structure of state and a re-emergent Confucian orthodoxy.

**The Sui reunification.** The era of disunity came to an end when, in the 580s, one of several Northern kingdoms of the era, the Northern Zhou, managed to extend its domain over the entire region of North China. One of the generals who had led this military triumph, a man named Yang Jian, used his power to usurp the kingdom's throne, and pursuing his campaigns southward, his forces swept over the remaining states, reunifying China in 589 under a single government. Yang named his new dynasty the Sui.

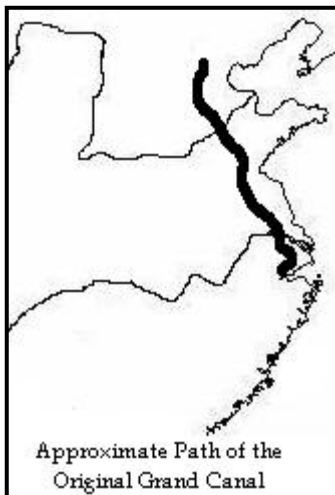
The Sui Dynasty in some ways resembles the Qin: it brought an end to a long period of disunity, it engaged in an ambitious

<i>Shang</i>	c. 1700 – 1045 BCE
<i>Zhou</i>	1045 – 256 BCE
<i>Qin</i>	221 – 208 BCE
<i>Han</i>	206 BCE – 220 CE
<i>“Six Dynasties”</i>	220 – 589
<b>Sui</b>	<b>589 – 617</b> ◀
<i>Tang</i>	618 – 907
<i>“Five Dynasties”</i>	907 – 960
<i>Song</i>	960 – 1279
<i>Yuan</i>	1279 – 1368
<i>Ming</i>	1368 – 1644
<i>Qing</i>	1644 – 1911

program of infrastructure building, it established key institutions that long outlived it, it was militarily ambitious, seeking to expand China's borders, and it was very short lived – though the Sui lasted about twice as long as the Qin, presiding over a unified China for 28 years, until 617.

Two key accomplishments of the Sui government should be stressed in this brief account. The first concerns infrastructure. When the Sui unified China, no division

within the state was so profound as that between the North, which had undergone long reigns by non-Chinese kingdoms, and the South, which was, in many respects, a pioneer culture, adapting Chinese traditions to very different surroundings. The Sui created a



highly tangible link between the two regions by completing construction of a man-made waterway that came to be known as the Grand Canal. The canal ran northward from Hangzhou, a major southern city that had served as capital for a number of local regimes, crossing the Yangzi and Yellow Rivers. Because China's rivers run east to west, the canal was the first true "highway" between North and South, and created opportunities for trade and communication between the regions that had never existed before. The influence of this new regional link on the political and commercial future of China was enormous.

The second major accomplishment of the Sui that influenced dynasties long after the brief Sui reign was extinguished was the form in which it revived Confucian administration of the Legalist state. The Sui founder was keenly aware that during the long period of disunity, one of the crippling features of the fragmented states of China had been a failure to devise administrative processes that could rival the efficiency of Han models. The various kingdoms of the time had relied chiefly on the influential great families and their networks of association to generate personnel for the state. Looking to the Han for the basic structure of government, the new emperor focused on the key element of personnel appointment and the way in which the state could identify and promote merit, without undue regard for birth or personal connections. He settled on a process that had begun in embryonic form as early as the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han: selection of state officers on the basis of an impartially administered civil service examination, open to any who demonstrated the basic qualifications for success. This initiative grew into the famous "Examination System" of China, which endured until 1905, and formed the core of governance for all remaining dynasties. (The nature of the examination system is examined in more detail in a separate section below.)

***The rise of the Tang.*** The second Sui ruler was, according to historical accounts, a dissolute reprobate, whose sole true interest was in getting access to his father's harem. It is said that the dynasty fell as a consequence of his lustful immorality. More realistically, it was probably the repeatedly frustrated attempts of the dynastic armies to win wars of conquest on the Korean peninsula that sapped the government's resources and made it unable to solidify the power of its first generation. From the midst of a brief period of chaos at the close of the Sui, one of the leading Sui generals, Li Yuan, emerged as the founder of a new dynasty, the Tang. Li had not only been a Sui officer, his family was

connected to the Sui imperial house by marriage. Consequently, the replacement of the Sui by the Tang did not involve an abrupt change of leadership, and the early Tang continued many of the institutions and policies of the Sui.

The dynasty that Li Yuan founded developed into one of the great dynasties of Chinese history, in many ways comparable to the Han. Exercising great power from their capital, located at the old Western Han government center of Chang'an, Tang emperors were able to restore China roughly to the broad boundaries that had been in place during

<i>Shang</i>	<i>c. 1700 – 1045 BCE</i>	
<i>Zhou</i>	<i>1045 – 256 BCE</i>	
<i>Qin</i>	<i>221 – 208 BCE</i>	
<i>Han</i>	<i>206 BCE – A.D. 220</i>	
<i>“Six Dynasties”</i>	<i>220 – 589</i>	
<i>Sui</i>	<i>589 – 617</i>	
<b><i>Tang</i></b>	<b><i>618 – 907</i></b>	◀
<i>“Five Dynasties”</i>	<i>907 – 960</i>	
<i>Song</i>	<i>960 – 1279</i>	
<i>Yuan</i>	<i>1279 – 1368</i>	
<i>Ming</i>	<i>1368 – 1644</i>	
<i>Qing</i>	<i>1644 – 1911</i>	

the Han, expanding somewhat Chinese territories in Central Asia, while acknowledging that some regions in Korea and Vietnam that the Han had controlled were beyond recovery. At its height, Tang society embodied a world-oriented – or “cosmopolitan” – culture that was diverse, tolerant, and rich beyond any other era of Chinese history. It is no exaggeration to say that in the seventh and eighth centuries, the center of world culture was located at the Tang capital city of Chang'an.

Great as Li Yuan's accomplishment in founding such a dynasty was, he is not generally regarded as the true initiator of the dynastic spirit that sent the Tang so high. Li's second son, Li Shimin, emerged from the founding struggles as a strong military commander in his own right. While his father reigned for eight years as the first Tang emperor (618-26), Li Shimin quickly asserted himself as a power behind the throne. In 626, having eliminated his older brother, the heir to the throne, in a palace coup, Li Shimin forced his father, contrary to all precedent, to abdicate his title while still alive. Li Shimin thereupon become emperor in his own right, and ruled for over two decades as Emperor Taizong (626-649). It was Taizong who was chiefly responsible for laying down the structures and policies that were to get the new dynasty off to so successful a start.

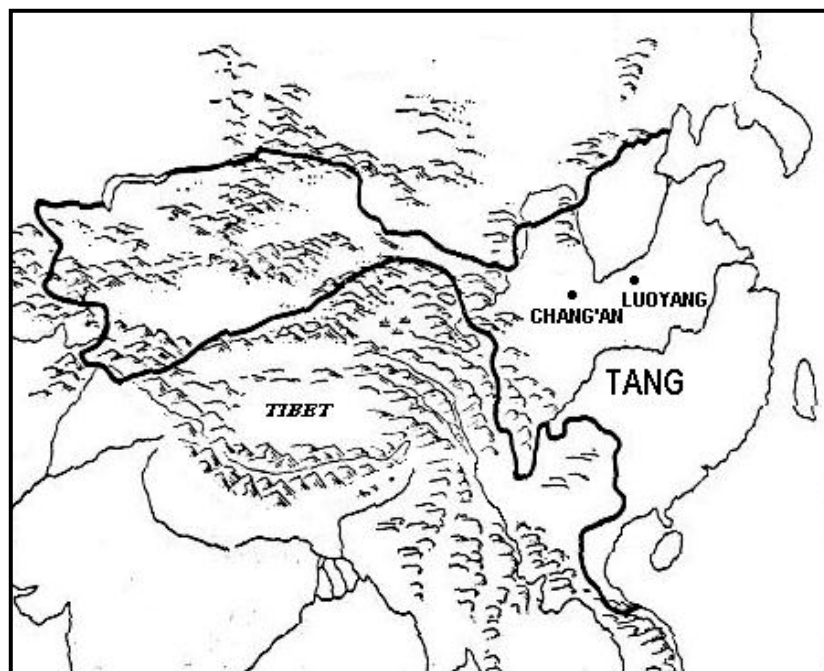
The founders of the Tang Dynasty early established a very broad intellectual basis for their government. Inheriting the revived Confucian system from the Sui, they strengthened the examination system, broadening further its reach in order to make it accessible to a broader range of young men and less subject to distortions of privilege. The basis of government was, as with Han, a partnership between Confucian orthodox ideology and the structures of the Legalist state, inherited from the Qin.

But the early Tang rulers were also conscious of the necessity to court the allegiance of the Buddhist community – indeed, that “community” of believers by this time fell not far short of numbering virtually everyone in the Tang empire, so pervasive had the influence of Buddhism become. Li Shimin set a precedent of exhibiting great deference to Buddhism, honoring Chinese pilgrims who returned from India bearing Buddhist *sutras* or relics. At the same time, he and other early Tang rulers were careful to put in place a series of oversight measures that allowed the government to maintain some measure of control over the ever-widening network of Buddhist temples.

In addition, the Tang emperors had a unique interest in religious Daoism. Legends of the primal Daoist figure, Laozi, often reported that the sage’s given name had been Li Er, and when the Tang came to power, their ruling family – the Li clan – explained as part of their rationale for claiming the right to rule China that they were the direct descendants of Laozi, inheritors of his sagely character. Throughout the Tang, therefore, the imperial house acted as strong patrons and supporters of the religious Daoist establishment, and imperial resources were devoted to ensuring that the temple network of Daoism would not be eclipsed by Buddhism.

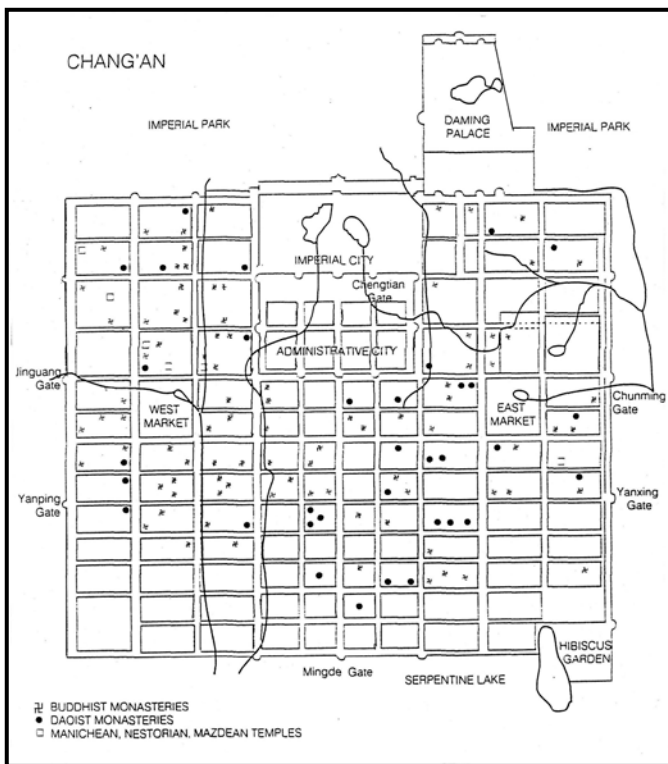
***Tang cosmopolitan culture.*** The Tang Dynasty represents the greatest cultural flourishing of traditional China. In its early period, Tang society was characterized by a cosmopolitan character that surpassed any other area of the world, and any other period of Chinese history. During this era, climate moderation in the Central Asian deserts

allowed travelers, pilgrims, and merchants to travel with relative ease between China and Central Asian regions such as modern day Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and northern India. Along this route, Buddhist monks carried their religion to China, persecuted Jews and Christian heretics fled into exile, and merchants from the Arab



countries brought rare goods and the teachings of Islam. At the same time, Chinese expansion southwards and advances in seafaring opened trade links between China and Southeast Asia, bring a different range of exotic material and cultural goods to China. Traders, exiles, and pilgrims found their way to the capital cities — the main capital of Chang'an in the west, the secondary capital at Luoyang further east — and many took up residence there, establishing immigrant outposts that greatly enriched Chinese culture.

The capital at Chang'an was unquestionably the greatest city in the world in its day. Whereas its location in the valley of the Wei River had been on the periphery of



China during the time when the site served as the capital city of the Zhou (as Zong-Zhou) and Qin (as Xianyang), the military and cultural importance of China's Central Asian regions now made it a central location. During the Tang, the caravan oasis route across Central Asia to the borders of Europe became the world's most lucrative trade route, carrying Chinese goods – particularly silk, which was much valued as a rarity in the West – to the Middle East, for transshipment further west, and bringing a wide variety of goods, people, and ideas to China. As the

eastern terminus of the “Silk Route,” as this highway of trade became known, Chang'an became an inland “port of entry” for the goods and cultures of the world to the west.

Although it was the center of secular administration, Chang'an was also filled with temples of all sorts – dozens of Buddhist and Daoist shrines were mixed with churches of Christian heresies, such as Nestorianism, and temples of Central Asian religions, such as Manicheanism and Judaism. Trading communities established immigrant neighborhoods in Chang'an, and the ethnic mix of peoples in the Tang capital and seat of government, most likely, unmatched anywhere else in the world.

All of this gave the early Tang an openness to cultural variety unique in Chinese history. Moreover, the variety of goods and arts provided resources that greatly enriched

the culture of China, even after dramatic events in the mid-Tang brought a close to the era of openness.

***The reign of Empress Wu.*** It may have been the more open cultural attitude of the early Tang that also allowed for the elevation to the imperial throne of the sole woman ever officially to rule as emperor. Although other women had been the de facto rulers of China, because their characters dominated their weak or infant sons when those children sat on the imperial throne, none before Empress Wu – and none after – ruled in her own right. The rise of Empress Wu is remarkable evidence that steeped in the doctrine of male superiority as China was, there remained room for exceptional cases, where a woman’s evident abilities simply overcame the prejudices of the culture.

Empress Wu began her life in 624 as the daughter of the wealthy Wu family; her name was Wu Zhao. “Zhao” was the name she was given by her parents for use by family and intimate friends; she is more often know by the name she was given by her son after her retirement as empress: “Zetian” ([she who] emulates heaven). Wu Zetian was educated well for a girl – it was not the custom of families in China to invest in the education of daughters, since they would marry out into other families, but there was a certain range of knowledge and skill required for a girl to be a desirable marriage partner, and bright and talented girls receiving such training would sometimes far exceed the levels expected of them. Wu Zetian was apparently such a young woman, and the result was that she was recruited by the imperial house to become a member of the harem of Emperor Taizong, Li Shimin.

The emperor was already an old man, but the young Wu Zetian became one of his favorites nevertheless, and, most likely, also attracted the attention of the emperor’s mature son and heir, the future Emperor Gaozong (r. 650-683). After Taizong died, Wu Zetian was assigned to a Buddhist nunnery to live out her life in chastity, as befitted the concubine of a deceased ruler. However, the new emperor, Gaozong, visited the nunnery, and after meeting with Wu Zetian decided to take her back to the palace and make her a member of his own harem.

Returning to palace life, Wu Zetian’s intelligence made her a favorite of the new emperor, as she had been of the old, and she began exerting such influence on his political thinking that she became an important member of the inner court, establishing a network of personal ties with influential ministers. When Gaozong suffered a stroke in 660, Wu Zetian, now a mature woman in her mid-thirties, became the de facto head of state, dominating court governance throughout the long period of her husband’s partial disablement.

When Gaozong died in 683, he was succeeded by one of several sons that Wu Zetian had borne to him. However, Wu Zetian continued to exercise control, and when her son proved to have goals of his own, she arranged for him to pursue in the afterlife. He was succeeded by a younger brother, who, understanding the fatal consequences of resisting his mother's wishes, did not do so. In 690, his mother wished to become emperor, and her son graciously – and prudently – stepped aside.

One reason that the all-male central government of the Tang permitted Wu Zetian to ascend the throne as emperor was that in her long tenure as de facto ruler, she had built a rich network of associates and dispensed to them great rewards for loyalty, generally making sure that any who betrayed her were, like her enemies, punished with great severity. Many high ministers owed their careers to her, and had the throne passed to anyone else, their history of loyalty to Wu Zetian would have placed them at great peril. Another reason was more straightforward – she was a highly competent person, and the prospects for political success with her at the helm were good.

Empress Wu put the loyalty of her ministers and the political tolerance of China to a great test at the outset. Realizing that she could not legitimately rule as a Tang emperor, since she did not stand in a line of descent from the Tang founder, she proclaimed a new dynasty – the Zhou Dynasty – using the same Chinese character as had been used for the ancient dynasty of that name (but only because it had been the name of territories assigned to her father by the Tang regime, and thus the name of her natal region). During the period she was on the throne, from 690 to 705, the people of China understood they were living not in the Tang, but in a new Zhou dynastic era.

Moreover, the empress legitimized her reign further in another novel way. A great patron of Buddhism, the empress declared that she was herself the reincarnation of a paramount religious figure, Maitreya, “the Buddha of future eras,” and she established Buddhism as the dynastically sponsored orthodoxy of state.

Empress Wu was an activist ruler. She further reformed the examination system by eliminating all barriers of social background to candidacy – thereafter, in theory at least, even the poorest peasant was eligible to sit for the exam, assuming he had somehow found the time and means to master the curriculum. Empress Wu was active in the development of agricultural policy and improved infrastructure as well. She is probably best known as a militaristic ruler, who maintained a high level of military activity at China's borders, in order to place pressure on China's neighbors and seek opportunities for expansion. Although she is famous for the cruelty she showed her political enemies, she is generally considered to have been one of China's most capable emperors.

In 705, court ministers, concerned about Empress Wu's great age and the instability that was likely to occur at her death began to plan for an orderly succession. They had earlier persuaded the empress to name as her heir the very son whom she had displaced in 690. Now, they launched an attack on members of the "inner court," the empresses intimate favorites, including her lovers, and once these men were eliminated, the senior ministers of state approached the empress and recommended that she step aside in favor of her son, rather than try to cling to power until death. Understanding that the basis of her power had been irreparably weakened, the empress agreed. Her son acceded to the throne and showered her with honors, but as he was a descendant of the Tang royal house, he reinstated the Tang Dynasty. Not many months later, Empress Wu died.

***The junzi and the literatus.*** As we discussed earlier, there was an essential tension between the structures of the Legalist state and the Confucian ideology which became orthodox within it. The Legalist state was created by the Qin as a means to maximize social control – the autocratic emperor, the sole source of power and the arbiter of what is right to do, is expected to maintain control over people by utilizing a system that prescribes, through law, precisely what actions people are intended to perform, rigorously rewarding or punishing them according to the way their acts meet or fail to meet the standard the state has set. The laws alone determine what one should do. The state does not depend on the good will or moral qualities of the people – it depends solely on their inborn dispositions to pursue reward with greed and avoid punishment in fear. The Confucian goal, in contrast, is the cultivation of virtuous people, whose study of history, ritual, and the teachings of tradition shapes them as both moral and wise. The Confucian strives to become a *junzi*, a cultivated and ethical "gentleman," who is independently a source of good judgment and initiative.

The great Han compromise between Legalism and Confucianism tried to find room for both approaches to coexist. The state remained a government of laws, after the Qin model, but it was held that only people imbued with moral education would have the judgment inevitably necessary to implement laws. The *junzi* was to be an independent moral actor, but only up to a point. The laws of state and the emperor's will was to be a framework within judgment had to be exercised. Once this was granted, the ideal of the *junzi* was reshaped – the *junzi* was to be a person (in practice, a man) whose background was as a scholar of tradition, but whose duties were as an officer of state. The scholar-official profile of the Han became the standard criterion for success.



With the Sui-Tang revival of Confucian training and the establishment of the exam system, this ideal was given renewed sanction. However, the experience of the Six Dynasties era led to the practical contours of the *junzi* idea looking somewhat different.

As we have seen, during the early Six Dynasties era, the elite class formulated a personal ideal that had much more to do with artistic skill, particularly in the art of poetry, than anything that had come before. Men such as the “Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove” were admired for these skills primarily, despite the fact that several of them, and many others like them, had actually been well trained in Confucian studies and served as officials for the government.

The legacy of Neo-Daoist high culture during the Six Dynasties era was to add to the ideal of the *junzi* an artistic dimension that had been lacking before. This legacy was inherited by the descendants of the Six Dynasties elite – the men of the Sui and early Tang. The training that was pursued by people of these eras who aspired to success in the exams and a career as scholar-officials included now intense training in the arts of poetry and calligraphy. When we speak of the ideal that Confucianism now posed for these men, we speak less of the *junzi* ideal, and more of one incorporating greater poetic and other artistic accomplishments, which we denote using the Latin word *litteratus* (plural: *litterati*). The word translates a Chinese term: *wenren*, meaning, literally, “a patterned person.”

It is important to understand that although the *litteratus* ideal was associated with training for the Confucian exams and the exemplary life of the Confucian scholar-official, the artistic elements that were incorporated from the Six Dynasties experience carried with them significant Daoist elements, particularly those resonant with the philosophy of Zhuangzi, which placed such great emphasis on the search for the *dao* through the exercise of mastered skill. During the Tang and after, organized Daoism existed only in the cults of religious Daoism, which drew from many sources other than the Classical Daoist texts that had been at the heart of the more intellectual Neo-Daoist movement of the early Six Dynasties.

In many ways, then, the *litteratus* ideal, so associated with Confucianism, came to be the final home of Classical Daoist influence as well. Much *litterati* poetry reflects this double perspective. Poetry continued, as among earlier Neo-Daoists, to be created in the context of male social gatherings, where wine and the display of virtuoso technique joined to create much needed psychological distance from the working world of the scholar-official. Many poems celebrated nature over society, depicted romantic encounters outside marriage, or expressed the cynical views of the hermit. Later, as skill in painting became a part of the *litterati* tradition, these same values were extended.

This, although the origins of the *litteratus* profile are most directly traceable to the Classical Confucian *junzi* ideal and the Han model of the scholar-official, Tang culture enriched the *litteratus* persona with elements that were, in a sense, precisely opposed to this rather straight-laced Confucian concept. The *litteratus* ideal was to persist through the remainder of the imperial period, into the twentieth century, and part of its longevity was undoubtedly due to the complexity and flexibility that this Confucian/Daoist fusion brought to the psychology and social environment of the men striving to fulfill the demanding goal of becoming the scholar-official-artists that the imperial state rewarded with power, prestige, and wealth.

***The Tang turning point – the Rebellion of An Lushan (755).*** In 713, perhaps the greatest of Tang emperors came to the throne. Known as Emperor Xuanzong (he is sometimes referred to as Emperor Minghuang: “the august bright emperor”), the emperor was himself an accomplished painter, calligrapher and poet – an exemplar of the *litteratus* ideal. He was a patron of the open and cosmopolitan Confucianism of the early Tang, and was greatly admired as a symbol of the self-confident dynasty. Like the First Emperor of the Qin and Emperor Wu of the Han, Xuanzong was also an ambitious expansionist, who invested enormous state resources in wars designed to secure China’s hold over Central Asia. In the course of pursuing these policies, Xuanzong blundered into one of the greatest fiascos in China’s history, a misadventure that permanently altered the shape of the imperial state, and which is one of the most famous stories in the narrative of Chinese history.

As an old man, Xuanzong became infatuated with a beautiful young woman named Yang Guifei. Although his attention was needed to manage the far-flung military campaigns he had been waging since his youth, he was increasingly careless about government affairs, spending great amounts of time with his alluring new concubine. Power flowed from the central court into the hands of the generals in command of Xuanzong’s armies. One of the most powerful of these was a man named An Lushan, a non-Chinese member of a Turkic tribe in Central Asia, which was allied with China. An’s abilities as a general were so great, that despite the fact that he was not Chinese, he commanded key troops, mostly Turks like himself, and did so with great autonomy. Moreover, An had become a great personal favorite of the emperor, and he traveled frequently to the capital at Chang-an to meet and spend time with Xuanzong. Ultimately he seems to have become the lover of Yang Guifei. Imperial soap opera — and it gets worse.

Many members of Xuanzong's government became concerned about the rising power of a non-Chinese general in the inner chambers of the palace. High ministers whose Confucian training had not earlier prevented them from sharing the open and tolerant attitude of popular culture to things non-Chinese began to voice complaints to the throne. They were silenced by the emperor, who only increased An Lushan's power, and appointed Yang Guifei's brother to the highest of court positions.

But in the year 755, this all turned on Xuanzong and on China. An Lushan had, in fact, long plotted to turn on the Tang and in 755, he brought his troops eastward on his own authority and turned them against the imperial armies at the capital. So powerful had his battalions become, that the Tang armies were quickly routed. Xuanzong had to flee from his own capital, protected by his palace guard, and he and those closest to him, including Yang Guifei, fled southward, as An Lushan and his troops occupied the capital and began campaigns to conquer all of China.

As the old emperor fled in disgrace, the troops protecting him became aware that Yang Guifei, whom they regarded as the source of the evils that had befallen China, was among the imperial entourage. Despite the majesty of the emperor and their duty as soldiers, Xuanzong's palace guard refused to proceed as protectors of Yang Guifei. They mutinied and refused to go on until Yang Guifei was delivered into their hands. After a stand-off, the emperor found he had no choice. He sent his young favorite out to the troops, and the soldiers strangled her. Afterwards, the march south continued, but the emperor, utterly broken, renounced the throne and gave way to his son. His reign – the golden age of the Tang – came to this sad end.

This story is worth telling for its dramatic elements, but it is more important because of the dramatic effects which these events had on the course of Chinese history. It took almost ten years for the exiled Tang ruling house to drive An Lushan's Turkic troops from China and restore imperial power. During this interval, the imperial government resided in exile in the southwestern region of Sichuan, until this time considered a provincial outpost. The lesson that the government took from all of this involved a deep distrust of non-Chinese peoples, and a rejection of the open, cosmopolitan, multi-cultural features that made the early Tang so vital an era. From the late eighth century until the end of the Tang in 907, Confucianism became increasingly devoted to "purging" China of elements that did not conform to a narrow vision of morality. The exam system became increasingly focused on rote memorization of classical texts. The government launched a series of persecutions against the Buddhist temple establishment. Cultural and commercial contacts with the outside world were curtailed. China was never again the center of world civilization, in the way in had been

before the Rebellion of An Lushan. Although the *literatus* ideal that had been represented by Xuanzong and institutionalized in the exam curriculum continued to be central to the aspiration of Confucian-trained members of the educated class, success on the exams and access to power and wealth increasingly depended on the ability to internalize and express conventional, orthodox ideas.

***The late Tang.*** There was enough greatness in the Tang government that it was able to recover from the An Lushan rebellion and continue on for well over a century. While the physical and economic devastation of the rebellion was quickly perceived, it took decades before the long term consequences – the closing of society and loss of energy – became visible.

One of the consequences of the restoration was a dispersion of power. In order to marshal the forces needed to reclaim the capital, the Tang government-in-exile had to rely on a number of generals, who pursued their campaigns in semi-independence of the weakened court in Sichuan. After the rebellion had been subdued, these men retained the loyalty of their armies, and became military and regional powers in their own right.

In order to rebuild the dynasty, several of the later emperors resorted to a personalistic style of governance, relying chiefly on men who had become loyal favorites, rather than the regular bureaucracy. Although this was effective in the short term and contributed to dynastic strength at a critical time, it gradually led to a reemergence of those most intimate of court insiders, eunuchs, gaining leverage at the centers of power.

The state was further weakened by the radical policies of Emperor Wuzong (r. 840-46), who, during his short time on the throne, determined to ensure the ascendancy of the Daoist establishment, to which his family claimed personal ties as descendants of Laozi, by launching a tremendous persecution of Buddhism. Emperor Wuzong closed all but a few Buddhist temples and confiscated their lands and treasures, and he ordered that hundreds of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns to leave their monastic lodgings and return to their original homes. Wuzong's orders allowed for only 800 monks to remain in service throughout the empire. Because Wuzong's reign came to an abrupt end with his early death, much of this damage to Buddhism was reversible. However, the change in tone of society after the An Lushan Rebellion ensured that although Buddhism would endure as a major force in Chinese society throughout the traditional period, as a foreign religion, it would never again reach the high crest of influence that had characterized its profile during the High Tang days.

The final dissolution of the dynasty followed a familiar pattern, closely resembling the latter days of the Han. With power increasingly dispersed in the hands of

regional warlords, rebellions against the central government became a feature of late Tang politics. The most serious of these, led by a man named Huang Chao in the decade surrounding the year 880, resulted in yet another capture and sacking of the capital at Chang'an. Although the rebellion was ultimately suppressed, the dynasty survived only because no one competitor to succeed it could achieve the balance of power necessary to defeat his rivals. In the end, the forces of disintegration became overwhelming. Internal dissension was matched by external pressures that emerged from an alliance of Turkish nomadic peoples to the North. When the Tang fell finally in 907, China was once again subjected to a period of disunity. Unlike the Six Dynasties era, however, the resulting era, known as the "Five Dynasties" period, lasted little over half a century.