Reunification & Renaissance in China: The Era of the Tang and Song Dynasties

- **The Emergence of the Tang and the Restoration of the Empire.** Tang armies extended the empire's reach to the borders of Afghanistan and thus dominated the nomads of the frontier borderlands. The Tang utilized Turkic nomads in their military, and tried to assimilate them into Chinese culture. The extensive Tang empire stretched into Tibet, Vietnam, Manchuria, and Korea.

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

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

- **State and Religion in the Tang-Sung Era.** The Confucian revival threatened Buddhism’s place of in Chinese life. Many previous rulers had been strong Buddhist supporters. Salvationist *Mahayana* Buddhism won wide mass acceptance during the era of war and turmoil. Elite Chinese accepted *Chan* Buddhism, or Zen, which stressed meditation and appreciation of natural and artistic beauty.

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

- **Tang Decline and the Rise of the Song.** Rival imperial cliques stimulated unrest, while lack of royal direction caused economic distress and military weakness. A serious revolt occurred in 755. The rebels were defeated, but succeeding rulers provided weak leadership for the dynasty. Nomadic frontier peoples and regional governors used the disorder to gain virtual independence. Worsening economic conditions in the 9th century caused many revolts, some of them popular movements led by peasants.

- **The Founding of the Song Dynasty.** The last Tang emperor resigned in 907, but, after a period of turmoil, a military commander, Zhao Kuangyin, renamed Taizu, in 960 reunited China under one dynasty, the Song.

- **Song Politics: Settling for Partial Restoration.** The Song never matched the Tang in political or military strength. To prevent a return of the conditions ending Tang rule, the military was subordinated to scholar-gentry civilians. Song rulers strongly promoted the interests of the Confucian scholar-gentry class over aristocratic and Buddhist rivals. Salaries were increased, civil service exams were routinized, and successful candidates had a better chance for employment.
• **The Revival of Confucian Thought.** Confucian ideas and values dominated intellectual life. Neo-Confucians believed that the cultivation of personal morality was the highest human goal. Confucian learning, they argued, produced superior men to govern and teach others. *Neo-Confucian thinking had a lasting impact on intellectual life. Hostility to foreign thought prevented the entry of innovations from other societies, while the stress on tradition stifled critical thinking within China. Neo-Confucian emphasis on rank, obligation, deference, and performance of rituals reinforced class, gender, and age distinctions. The authority of the patriarchal family head was strengthened. Social harmony and prosperity, claimed neo-Confucianists, was maintained when men and women performed the tasks appropriate to their status.*

• **Roots of Decline.** The Song maintained a large army to protect against invasion, thus draining state resources and burdening the peasantry. Song emphasis on scholar-gentry concerns contributed to military decline.

• **Reaction and Disaster: The Flight to the South.** Economic conditions deteriorated and the military was unable to defend the northern borders. The nomadic Jurchens in 1115 established the Qin kingdom. They invaded China and annexed most of the Yellow River basin. The Song fled south and established a capital at Hangzhou in the Yangtze River basin. The small southern Song dynasty ruled from 1127 to 1279.

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

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

• **The World's Most Splendid Cities.** Urban growth surged during the Tang and Song eras. Most pre-industrial civilizations had few or no large urban centers, and China's estimated urban population - 10% of total population - surpassed all others. The late Song capital of Huangzhou exceeded all others in beauty, size, and sophistication. Its location near the Yangtze and the seacoast allowed traders and artisans to prosper. Its population of over 1,500,000 enjoyed well-stocked marketplaces, parks, restaurants, teahouses, and popular entertainments.
• **Family and Society in the Tang-Song Era.** Family organization resembled that of earlier eras. The status of women was improving under the Tang and early Song, but steadily declined during the late Song. Extended-family households were preferred, although only the upper classes could afford them. The Confucianist male-dominated hierarchy was common in all classes. An elaborate process of making marriage alliances was handled by professional female go-betweens. Partners were of the same age; marriage ceremonies did not take place until puberty. Urban classes consummated marriage later than peasants. Upper class women had increased opportunities for personal expression and career possibilities under the Tang and early Song. The legal code had provisions supporting women's rights in divorce arrangements. The practice of allowing wealthy urban women to have lovers is an example of female independence.

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

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

**In Depth: Artistic Expression and Social Values.**

**Here --> primarily differences:**

• In India and European societies artistic creations were the work of skilled craftsmen, a role played in China by the scholar-gentry class / the ruling political elite - amateurs. In most of the other civilizations leadership was dominated by the warrior and priestly classes. (DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP / CIVILIZED / SUPERIOR)

• In another difference, Indian, Muslim, and European artisans made anonymous creations for a mass audience. In China identifiable individuals produced art for the pleasures of the elite.

• The highest art forms - linked to a common religion - bridged the gap between elites and the masses in Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim civilizations. In Confucian-Daoist China, artistic creativity accentuated the differences that separated the educated scholar-gentry and the common people.
The Legacy of Two Great Dynasties.

- The Song dynasty fell to the Mongol invasions inaugurated by Chinggis Khan. Kubilai Khan completed the conquest and founded the Yuan dynasty. The Tang and Song dynasties had a great impact upon both Chinese and world history.

- Centralized administration and the bureaucratic apparatus were restored and strengthened. The scholar-gentry elite triumphed over Buddhist, aristocratic, and nomadic rivals. They defined Chinese civilization for the next six and one-half centuries.

- The area subject to Chinese civilization expanded dramatically, as the south was integrated to the north.

- The Chinese economy, until the 18th century, was a world leader in market orientation, overseas trade volume, productivity per acre, sophistication of tools, and techniques of craft production.

- Chinese inventions - paper, printing, gunpowder - altered development all over the world.

- Until the 18th century, the dynasties of China had unmatched political power and economic resources.

- China, as a civilization, retained many traditional patterns, but it also changed dramatically in the balance between regions, in commercial and urban development, and in technology. Outside influences, such as Buddhism, were incorporated into existing patterns.

**CONTINUITY DOES NOT EQUAL STAGNATION.**