

5.14 Tang and Song Dynasties produce a Golden Age in China

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Introduction: The Tang (618–906) and Song (960–1279) dynasties are sometimes referred to in textbooks as Medieval China because they coincided in time with the Early and High Middle Ages of Western Europe. But life was very different in the refined empires of Tang and Song China than it was in the struggling Frankish kingdom of Charlemagne or England during the Norman invasion. By the time two Chinese military leaders rebelled against the Sui imperial family and established the Tang Dynasty in 618, Chinese administrations already had hundreds of years of experience building and maintaining empires. The Tang and Song dynasties spanned more than 600 years (from 618 to 1279) and witnessed astonishing advances in science, technology, arts, and philosophy.

Questions

1. What geographical features played a crucial role in the development of China's Golden Age?
2. What actions, goals and accomplishments do the Tang and Song dynasties share?
3. In what ways are the Tang and Song dynasties different in their actions, goals, and accomplishments?
4. In your opinion, what were the greatest achievements of China's Golden Age?

A. TANG DYNASTY -- The Tang Empire was noted as a center for foreign exchange in goods and ideas, a powerful expansionist military, a capable civil service and system of education, and an explosion of arts and culture. When the Tang dynasty came to power the empire instituted many changes in Chinese government and society to strengthen and further unify China. It revived the practice of choosing government officials through rigorous written examinations that emphasized Confucian values of loyalty and service. This would be especially important as the empire expanded, making it necessary for officials to serve far from the capital city. The Tang rulers tried to expand their holdings as far as possible by placing military bases along the Silk Road. These outposts brought new products and ideas into China from as far away as Persia and Byzantium. In order to feed the growing population, the Tang emperors also started a policy of land reform with the goal of putting more land into the hands of farmers. This policy significantly increased farm production. More rice was shipped from the fields in the south to the centers of power in northern China along the Grand Canal. Increased trade and contact with foreign cultures led to the introduction of religions and philosophies from abroad. In addition to the native religious philosophies of Daoism and Confucianism, Buddhism spread along the Silk Road into China from India. During the tenth century, Tang rule was weakened as a result of invasions of nomadic peoples on their northern and western borders and internal political struggles. Further, China's government began to lose control of the Silk Road. Heavy taxes and imperial and administrative corruption finally caused rebellion, and in 907 the last Tang emperor was overthrown.

B. SONG DYNASTY --The Song dynasty was the second great medieval period in China. Song emperors kept peace with the threatening northern kingdoms by sending them large amounts of silk, silver, and tea. Instead of expanding and controlling a far-flung empire like the Tang, the Song focused on increasing prosperity and stability at home. The Song dynasty placed great value on diplomacy and civilian-controlled government. Examination as a means to obtaining official government positions became even more important during the Song dynasty. Wealthy families spent large sums of money on books, schools, and tutors so their sons would have better chances of passing the civil service examination that included memorizing passages from Confucian classics and composing complex poems on given themes. The Song dynasty suffered a blow in 1127 when neither bribes nor military defenses could prevent peoples of Central Asia from invading the northern Song capital of Kaifeng. Even after this defeat, scholars, artists, scientists, and engineers continued to thrive in the Southern Song period. Cut off from the Silk Road in the north, China turned to ocean-going trade. Shipbuilders made crafts with several masts and stern post rudders replaced oars. The magnetic compass allowed mariners to sail out of sight of land for longer distances. Constantly on the defense from outside attack, the Song developed gunpowder technology to create flame-throwers and explosive rockets.

