Centralized Imperial Rule in China

Essential Questions
- How was centralized imperial rule restored in China?
- What were the important political, economic, and technological developments of the Sui dynasty?
- What were the important political, economic, and technological developments of the Tang dynasty?
- What were the important political, economic, and technological developments of the Song dynasty?

Keywords
- block printing
- Bodhisattva
- Chang'an
- civil service examinations
- commercial market-oriented cultivation
- equal-field system
- fast-ripening rice
- heavy iron plow
- merit
- metallurgy
- moveable type
- porcelain
- printing
- Uighur
- Wu Zhao
Set the Stage
The artisan starts with clay and fires it at a low temperature, creating a strong but clear material that seems to be part glass. Then the glaze is fired at high temperatures to create high glosses and bright colors. This is how the Chinese made ceramics. Ceramics were an art central to Chinese culture from ancient times, improved upon and changed over centuries to create new forms of art from the same basic process. These items were sometimes called porcelain, taken from an Italian word for a cowry shell, because the gloss resembled the inside of the shell.

When China finally began to open to the West, Europeans were amazed by the fine porcelain work they encountered. They had never seen ceramic work of this beauty, delicacy, or detail. Porcelain of all shapes and sizes was sent back to the homes of Europe. Of particular liking to the European ladies were the fine plate and serving wares made from this delicate porcelain. This beautiful Chinese craft could be found in the finest salons of Europe.

Interestingly, Europeans never called this beautiful ceramic work porcelain. They simply referred to it using the name of where it came from: China. Today, the word china has replaced porcelain in most English language uses.

The Return of Centralized Imperial Rule in China
By the year 220 C.E. the mighty Han dynasty of China had fallen into ruin. For the next few centuries China would be fragmented into many regional kingdoms. Each region looked to gain and retain as much power as possible. Some regions were governed according to the traditional Chinese system (under the power of a king or an emperor and a large bureaucracy conducting all in Chinese and a state run by Confucian ideals), while others adopted governing systems from Tibet, the Turks, or Buddhism. Regardless of how things were run, each kingdom faced the same issue: the fight to overpower neighbors and regain control of all of China. Unfortunately, no single kingdom had the power or resources to control all of mighty China. Instead the third through sixth centuries involved constant war between the kingdoms, and land and power constantly changed hands. It was a time when a centralized China did not exist politically, economically, or culturally. This all changed when Yang Jian took control of the Sui province in the north of China. He sent military expeditions to take over neighboring areas and by 589 C.E. controlled all of China. So began the return of a single united China centralized by imperial rule.

The Sui Dynasty
Yang Jian created the Sui dynasty. He and his son ruled a united China from C.E. 581 through 615. The Sui dynasty was centered in the north, but encouraged population growth south along the Yangzi River that would be central to China’s
future. The Sui created a strong central government that would set the stage for the Tang and Song dynasties. These later dynasties ran organized and efficient centralized commercial and industrial enterprises that affected the entire eastern hemisphere. The Sui dynasty was important because it created and used the structures and institutions that allowed dynastic China to expand and thrive after the Sui dynasty was gone.

**The Politics of the Sui Dynasty**

The warlord from the north Yang Jian unquestioningly restored centralized imperial rule to China. He claimed the Mandate of Heaven and became emperor of all China. He ruled a strictly disciplined political system. The center of Yang Jian’s empire was at his new capital at Chang’an (built in the Wei River Valley, in the modern province of Shaanxi). In order to build his strong central government Yang made enormous demands on his subjects. Chinese subjects were conscripted into the military, charged exorbitant taxes and forced into compulsory labor services. This harsh treatment was the backbone of the strong Sui central imperial government. Unfortunately it was also the undoing of the Sui. Subjects of the Sui were disgruntled and unhappy with their lot in life. After the additional strain of some expensive (and not all successful) military campaigns in Korea and Vietnam, the second and last Sui emperor (Sui Yangdi) was assassinated by one of his own ministers.

**Sui Economics**

The economies of the Sui dynasty were good for the future, but unfortunate for the people living during the dynasty. The Grand Canal integrated the economies of the north and south. This integration began the thriving commercial enterprise of the united China of later dynasties. The Sui rulers created strong economic institutions that would provide the basis for China’s future monetary success. Unfortunately all of these successes were at the cost of the peasants of the Sui dynasty. Chinese peasants suffered under the excessively high taxes and constant forced labor of the Sui dynasty. Sui economic policies secured the future but at a high financial and social cost.

**Sui Technological Accomplishments**

Though short-lived, the Sui dynasty made enormous technological advancements. Using forced peasant labor, the Sui built palaces and granaries, and made extensive repairs to the defensive Great Wall in the north. They created irrigation systems in the Yangzi Valley, allowing for population growth there. However, the greatest technological accomplishment of the Sui must be the Grand Canal.
The Grand Canal is both the oldest and longest canal in the world. It is longer than the Suez and Panama canals put together. When completed, the Grand Canal extended from Hangzhou in the south to the dynastic capital at Chang’an in the west and ended in the north near current-day Beijing. It encompassed a total of 1,240 miles (2,000 kilometers), was forty paces wide, and had roads running parallel to it on both banks. Emperor Sui Yangdi (r. 604–618) created the Grand Canal by starting with existing canals. These canals had originally been built during the Wu dynasty (486 B.C.E). They were extended during the Qi dynasty and then completed during the Sui. This final stage of building took six years and required six million workers to complete (three million of which died during construction). Emperor Yangdi rebuilt and added to these canals until one could travel the entire length of China from north to south by water. Water transport was the quickest and most efficient way to transport goods, especially food. The many rivers of China made water transport possible, but most of the rivers run east to west. The Grand Canal connected many of these rivers including the Yangtze, Yellow Huaihe, Quiantang, and Haihe. The creation of the Grand Canal allowed efficiency in transportation to such cities as Hebei, Tianjin, Beijing, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Zhejiang.

The canal’s success in improving movement of goods and helping to build the Chinese economy is a result that has lasted until today. It also played a huge part in strengthening cultural connections across the empire. The Grand Canal was not only the greatest accomplishment of the Sui dynasty but also a big part of its downfall. Unfortunately the building of the canal cost enormous sums of money and the lives of many of the workers. Because of these losses, many Chinese during construction felt that it was an enormous waste of life and resources. This sentiment would eventually help lead to the downfall of the Sui dynasty.

The Tang Dynasty
The Tang dynasty came quickly on the heels of the assassination of the last Sui emperor. A rebel leader declared himself emperor, took the reins of China, and established the Tang. The Tang emperors (who were descended from the Turk elites and Chinese officials of the north) ruled China for almost three hundred years (C.E. 618–907). Tang rulers established and maintained contacts throughout the Eastern Hemisphere. They had economic, political, and social relationships across the hemisphere. The many regions and cultures the Tang came into contact with greatly influenced Chinese sports, religion, music, language, literature, art, clothing, and other areas. The diversity and complexity that this cultural exchange created in the Tang dynasty has caused many historians to label it as a “cosmopolitan” society. The Tang dynasty made China the most important place in Asia, if not the entire Eastern Hemisphere.

The Tang rule of China was a success by all measures. The dynasty grew and flourished well into the late eighth century. It was only at this time that they finally had to give in to encroachment by the Turks. The dynasty hired an army of Uighurs (Turkish nomads) to help fight the other Turks and to put down internal rebellions. Unfortunately for the Tang rulers, this effort would be the beginning of the end. More rebellions and encroachments meant more and more power
was being handed over to the rebels and the Turks to protect what was left of the dynasty. Eventually, out of power and options, the last Tang emperor gave up his throne in C.E. 907.

The Politics of the Tang Dynasty
The political system during the Tang dynasty was stable and efficient. The Tang emperors used the traditional Chinese bureaucracy system, Buddhist ideals, military power, and China's place as the Middle Kingdom to create a highly successful government.

China's bureaucratic system was based on merit. Those who wished to earn a place in the government bureaucracy worked their way through the rigorous Confucian education program. They studied a sophisticated curriculum that included classical Chinese literature and philosophy. Once his education was complete, a bureaucratic candidate was required to sit for the imperial civil service examinations. The only way to get a position in the government was to get a high score on the exams (with a few exceptions of sons of influential families who knew how to use a well placed bribe). The bureaucracy was a highly intelligent and talented class, and they were extremely loyal to the dynasty. For the first time in China, educated men with no family connections could become government officials. This educated class of bureaucratic officials began to replace the old aristocracy in social status. Men were recruited from southern China and these officials greatly added to the size and status of this new elite class. This system was so effective that it would last for the better part of the next thirteen centuries in China.

The Tang emperors were also astute in their use of Buddhism as part of the state. Many of the regional kingdoms that had existed after the Han dynasty but before the reunification of China by the Sui were based in Buddhist ideals and used Buddhism to legitimize their governments. The Tang followed this precedent. They interpreted certain Buddhist doctrine to mean that rulers existed to weld mankind into a harmonious Buddhist society. The Tang emperors used this idea to legitimize their power. Their spiritual job was to rule because they had to create this society. Tang emperors also invoked protective Buddhist spirits for themselves and for their people. In addition, Buddhist monks were large contributors to the dynasty's treasury and were some of the emperors' most influential supporters.

The armies of the Tang dynasty were a force to be reckoned with. Emperor Taizong (r. 627–650) put down the rebellions in the north and northwest, allowing easy trade and communication. They used the foremost...
Barbarian steed, pride of Ferghana,
All jags and angles, well-knit bones;
two ears cocked, like bamboo tubes split sideways;
four hoofs fleet, as though buoyed on the wind.
Wherever headed, no distance too challenging,
fit indeed for a life-or-death charge.
With a mount superlative as this,
ten-thousand-mile sorties are at your command!

This selection gives historians an opportunity to make appropriate use of relevant historical evidence.

The poem shows something about the author. Du Fu wrote his poems during the Tang dynasty. His work was mostly autobiographical, showing what it was like living in a military society. As he moved around China and the military of China changed, so did his work.

Historians can also look at this poem for content. It shows how important the military was in the life of China, and it shows pride in the military of the time, not fear or frustration. Clearly the cavalry was held in special esteem, based on his description of the steed of the officer.

Historians can also learn something about the audience of the piece, namely Tang dynasty Chinese. The pride shown by Du Fu helps to show how the people of China felt about their military during the Tang. Clearly the military was strong and the people of China believed they could not be defeated. The Chinese probably supported the Tang military exploits and the strength of their military was a source of pride.

The format of the poem also tells historians something. The poem doesn’t rhyme but has a clear meter. This style of poetry was probably common during Tang era.

While the knowledge historians can glean from this poem is limited, when combined with other sources it spreads much light on Du Fu and the society in which he lived.
technology in weaponry and transportation. Tang armies did not hesitate to take on expeditions into neighboring lands. During the Tang dynasty, Chinese armies conquered Manchuria, Korea, northern Vietnam, land near the Aral Sea (in the west) and parts of Tibet. The Chinese empire during the Tang dynasty was geographically one of the largest in Chinese history.

China’s role as the Middle Kingdom in Asia was revived and used to every advantage during the Tang dynasty. It was an old tradition that China was considered the “Middle Kingdom” or the center of importance in Asia. Following this tradition meant that outlying regions of Asia that were not part of the Chinese empire still brought tribute to the Chinese emperor and kowtowed in his presence. A kowtow is when a person kneels on the ground and touches his or her forehead to the ground as an act of submission, obedience, or tribute. Emissaries from the many parts of Asia had traditionally kowtowed to the Chinese emperor as a symbol of their submission to China. During the Tang dynasty, tribute to the Middle Kingdom was more of a symbol than a reality because China had no real political power over these other areas. However, by maintaining the tradition, the Tang solidified their economic, cultural, social, and military ties with the rest of Asia.

One of the few things that weakened the Tang dynasty’s government was its forward-thinking acceptance of women in powerful political roles. Wu Zhao (626–705) became emperor of China in 690. She was a concubine of the second Tang emperor and by killing or otherwise eliminating all of her rivals in the court, became empress. She learned all the ways of Tang politics and expelled many political rivals. She began running the government in 660 when the emperor became incapacitated by a stroke. In 684 the emperor died and she officially became regent of China, ruling for her young son. In 690 Wu Zhao decided to seize power, depose her own son, and declare herself emperor. She was not only the first but the only female emperor of China. She claimed to be a bodhisattva, which is an enlightened Buddhist soul that chooses to remain on earth to help guide others. She used this claim to legitimize her rule. In many circles Wu Zhao became just another example of the evil of a woman with power. She was accused of horrifying acts of murder and torture. She was hated for her Buddhist fervor and vilified for having wild sexual appetites (most likely false). She was a devout Buddhist and supported the building of monasteries and the blossoming of Buddhist art during her reign. She was the first Chinese emperor to take a Buddhist title: Divine-Empress Who Rules the Universe. Wu Zhao was responsible for much of the Tang military power and success as well as the establishment of a solid bureaucratic official class based in education. Whether her success as an emperor was tempered by wild actions will likely never be known. In reality, not enough records exist to show much about Wu Zhao, but she ruled until 705, when she was deposed at over eighty years old. For centuries the men of China would exclaim that it was women of power like Wu Zhao that weakened and broke China.

**Tang Economics**

The Tang dynasty was highly prosperous largely due to the second emperor of the dynasty: Tang Taizong. During Tang Taizong’s rule, banditry ended, the price of rice remained low, and the tax rate was a low 2.5 percent. China began to have
a strong economy during his rule and it only continued to grow throughout the Tang period. This was in large part due to the equal-field system and the support of the monastic community.

The **equal-field system** was the equitable distribution of land to members of the society. Land was allotted to a family based on the fertility of the area and the need of the recipient. The purpose was to avoid the concentration of land property within a few families. This concentration of land in the hands of just a few had caused social upheaval during the Han dynasty. Under the equal-field system, one-fifth of the land allotted could be inherited by the next generation, with the rest remaining available for redistribution as needed. The equal-field system was highly successful during the Tang dynasty. Only in the late eighth century did the system show signs of weakening. At that point land allocation was strained because of a rising population. Over time, influential families had found ways to use bribes to hold on to land that was meant for redistribution. With an increasing population and a declining supply of land, the system that had made the Tang countryside so prosperous fell to ruin.

Buddhist monasteries also played an important part in the Tang economy. Much of the wealth of the dynasty came from large donations made by the monasteries. Buddhist monies funded many military operations. In exchange, Buddhist monasteries received tax exemptions, land grants, and other imperial gifts. Unfortunately it was the large parcels of land that were set aside for monasteries that played a large role in ending the success of the equal-field system.

**Tang Technological Accomplishments**

The Tang dynasty worked on technology that increased its already successful political and economic endeavors. Chinese of the Tang era were skilled in horsemanship, and rode using iron stirrups. They battled with crossbows and armored infantryman. All these were a large part of Tang military success. In addition, the Tang built and maintained roads that that aided not only in military excursions but also commercial ones. Horses and humans used the roads, and the entire Chinese empire could be crossed in only eight days. The Tang built inns, post offices, and stables along the important routes to make transportation easier. The Tang dynasty created a system of transportation and communication that made efficient trade and battle possible.

**Tang Culture**

Buddhism was an important part of Chinese culture during the Tang dynasty. It flourished in part due to state sponsorship, but also because many new Buddhist texts and ideas travelled back to China with merchants. Traders on the Silk Road brought back not only spices from India, but also Buddhist philosophy, practices, and sacred texts. Two types of Buddhist movements were especially popular: Chan or Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism. These were purely Chinese types of Buddhism. These schools of Buddhist thought quickly spread throughout East Asia. China was the center of Buddhist thought. Tang religious thought was also influenced by other religions from the West because of the open and tolerant nature of the Tang rulers.

The Tang dynasty made great accomplishments in the arts, especially during the eighth century. Emperor Zuanzong (r. 712–756) was called Ming Huang or
“the Brilliant Monarch.” His reign is what is today considered the classical period of Chinese art and literature. Li Bo (c. 700–762) and Du Fu (722–770) were famous poets of the period. They wrote of the wild lives of the Tang courts and the constant military campaigns. Li Bai and Bai Juyi also wrote poetry during this period. Their work continues to give historians a window into life during the Tang dynasty. In art, Wu Daozi, who was painting circa 710–760, and Wang Wei set the standard for later Chinese art. Wu Daozi was a court painter known for his vigorous brushwork. Wang Wei was both a poet and painter known for his naturalist work. Paintings of the Tang period are filled with mostly realist images. There was a great flourishing of Buddhist art during this period. Among the many wonderful sculptures created during this time is the Leshan Buddha, which is the largest of its kind.

**The Song Dynasty**

The Song dynasty (960–1127) took power after the fall of the powerful Tang. The Song emperors were the heirs to the successful Chinese empire built by the Sui and
Tang before them. The result was a dynasty that was highly successful economically; the hard work of many centuries before came to fruition during the Song. The Song empire was an urban society, known for its abundant shops, restaurants, taverns, gardens, teahouses, and brothels. The Song would leave their mark on China.

The Politics of the Song Dynasty
The Song dynasty was lucky to inherit the strong centralized imperial government that had been so carefully structured and maintained by the Sui and Tang dynasties. The Song rulers built and maintained an effective centralized bureaucracy that pulled from the new scholarly elite. They replaced military governors (and their supporters) with civil service officials of the central government. More power was now in the hands of the central Song government than ever before. Power rested in the person of the emperor and his palace bureaucracy.

By maintaining the government of the previous dynasties, they were not faced with political troubles. The major issue of the Song emperors was a large population surge. They spent much time managing food distribution. Overall the highly centralized and strong government that was passed down to them made managing the larger population possible, and left the Song rulers time and resources to focus on building what would become the highly successful economy of the dynasty.

Song Economics
The Song economy was the strength of the dynasty. There was a great surge in agricultural production partly because fast-ripening rice was discovered in Vietnam. When this particular strain of rice was put into the fertile soil of China, farmers could harvest two crops a year. Growing agricultural success led to a shift in the way Chinese farmers worked their land. They turned to commercial market-oriented cultivation. Farmers in China grew greater amounts of whatever crops were best suited to their land rather than diversifying to provide a full diet. By selling their crops, they were able to supplement their diets and buy rice.

Agricultural success led to greater trade both across China and the rest of Asia. Chinese merchants during the Song period began a thriving trade on the coasts of the Indian Ocean. Trade grew to include many exotic and luxury items such as feathers, pearls, tortoise shells, incense, melons, and horses. China was especially successful in trading fine silks and unique and beautiful porcelain.

As the Song economy grew, copper currency was in shortage, so people began to issue “flying cash”: letters of credit that replaced copper currency. These letters of credit eventually developed into the use of paper money across China. While this worked for a while, eventually the private printing of money caused problems in the economy. When merchants ran into situations where they could not honor the money they had printed, riots ensued. As a result, in the eleventh century the Song government made private printing of money illegal and took over the printing itself. Official Song money had serial numbers and warnings to counterfeiters. The supply of paper money was an enormous stimulus to the growing success of the Song economy.

The growing Song economy led to the urbanization of Song culture. Song cities were not only centers of administration, but also trade, industry, and maritime
commerce. A new class rose up in Chinese cities. Sometimes referred to as the gentry, this class was made up of the new scholar-officials, merchants, shopkeepers and artists. Those outside the inner government circle and the class of landowners could make money, and these new gentry took advantage of it. Song cities grew in size and wealth. Private enterprise was thriving along with printing, education, and the new market economy.

**Song Technological Accomplishments**

The Song dynasty made many technological accomplishments. These accomplishments were centered in three areas: agricultural development, military advancements, and new trade goods.

The agricultural technology that was invented and advanced during the Song dynasty was a key element in a surge in agricultural production. Song farmers began using **heavy iron plows**. In the north, oxen were harnessed to pull these plows, while in the south water buffalo were put to the same use. Manure and compost were used to fertilize the soil and increase growth. Irrigation systems were put into place to create more arable land and extend the growing season. These systems were quite advanced, making use of reservoirs, dikes, dams, canals, pumps, and waterwheels (which were powered by both people and animals). Song era farmers also began to use terraced mountainsides, which in combination with irrigation greatly increased the amount of arable land in China. By increasing the available land for farming and improving systems of farming, Chinese agricultural production numbers soared.

While the Song was not the military might that the Tang had been, the dynasty created some military technology that would forever change war in the future. One example was the improvement in naval technology in the form of the magnetic compass. The second was the invention of gunpowder. Gunpowder was actually discovered when a Taoist alchemist made a mistake, but its use in weaponry was quickly assessed and put to use by both the Song and their enemies. The Song people were also skilled in **metallurgy**, creating an improved type of iron useful for both military products and in everyday life.

The Song dynasty also introduced new trade goods. The first was porcelain, made into statuary and other décor (and later plates and other kitchen implements). Second were the strides made in **printing**. Song inventors first created **block printing**, then **moveable type**. Block printing was more successful because of the number and type of characters used in Chinese languages. Printed texts soon became readily available and another source of income for the thriving Song economy.

The Song dynasty made efficient use of technology to move the economy forward.

**Song Culture**

Religion during the Song dynasty was the progeny of the conflict between eastern schools of thought during the preceding dynasties. Traditional Confucian thinkers shunned the Buddhism that took hold during the Tang. The people of China, however, were attracted to Buddhism, especially its emphasis on high moral standards,
intellectualism, and promise of salvation. Confucian emphasis on family was in conflict with the Buddhist demand for celibacy and monasticism.

At this point, many Buddhist ideas were melded into traditional Chinese thinking. The Buddhist word *dharma* (which is the central force that governs the universe) became synonymous with *Dao* (the universal ideals that govern right and wrong) in Chinese Buddhism. The need for a monastic lifestyle would be satisfied for ten generations by sending just one son to the monastery. Chinese Buddhism became known as Chan. This Buddhist school focused on intuition, instances of mental clarity, and moments of insight. Chan Buddhism was a way to begin melding Buddhist thought with traditional Chinese philosophy.

However, there was much resistance to Buddhism in China. The Confucians put great pressure on the Tang rulers to expel Buddhism from China altogether. The Song emperors appeased the Confucians by making the civil exams based almost entirely on Confucian philosophy and ideas. They did not seek to eliminate Buddhism altogether, but rather to incorporate Buddhist ideas into traditional Chinese ones. Many Song era scholars came to appreciate Buddhist ideas during their intensive years of study. Rather than dismiss these ideas as wrong or conflicting with Chinese and Confucian values, they were intrigued by them and adopted some of them as their own. These scholars, known as Neo-Confucians, combined some Buddhist concepts with Confucian ideas. They were intrigued by the Buddhist interest in the nature of the human soul and the individual’s relationship to the cosmos. Early Chinese had dismissed both these ideas as in opposition to the Confucian teachings about the importance of the group over the individual. Neo-Confucianism sought to align these two areas of thought in a way that made sense to Chinese life. The writings of Zhu Xi espoused Neo-Confucian thought and helped it spread to other areas of Asia.

**Summary**

China spent centuries divided into regional kingdoms after the fall of the Han dynasty—none able to summon the resources to reunite China. In the late sixth century, Yang Jian managed to reunite China under a central imperial rule once again. Yang Jian became the first emperor of the Sui dynasty. The Sui was important because it reunified China. The Sui emperor created the institutions necessary to run China by a central imperial rule and for this central unified empire to maintain itself long after the Sui were gone. When the second and final Sui emperor was killed, the Tang dynasty took over. The Tang dynasty was the height of Chinese imperial power and efficiency. The bureaucratic system of the Tang took the traditional Confucian system to its height. Tang military power was mighty and made the empire geographically enormous. When the Tang finally fell (after almost three centuries), the Song emperors took over and made China a commercial empire. The roots put down in the Sui and the might and efficiency of the Tang led to the enormous growth and economic success of the Song. The Song dynasty was a time of growing population, expanding trade, and technological advancements.
Looking Ahead

The reunification of China would lead to centuries more of imperial rule. Chinese trade, particularly during the Tang and Song dynasties, would leave a lasting impression on the cultures of the rest of Asia. The exotic nature of Chinese goods would later lead to their high value in European markets and the entrance of European powers into Chinese politics. Because of the success of the economies of these dynasties, Europe would later encroach on China and strive to control trade there.

1. The Sui dynasty ended when the final Sui emperor, Sui Yangdi, was assassinated by one of his ministers.

2. Most of the rivers of China run in an east-west direction.

3. The Tang dynasty conquered Korea, northern Vietnam, Manchuria, parts of Tibet, and land along the Aral Sea.

4. Many in China hated Wu Zhao because she was a powerful woman as the emperor. Many Chinese believed that only evil could come from power in the hands of a woman.

5. Some luxury items traded by the Song dynasty merchants were feathers, pearls, tortoise shells, incense, melons, and horses.

6. Song farmers were able to grow crops on the terraced mountainsides because they had many forms of irrigation available to them.
Unit 4, Lesson 6