Essential Questions

• Why did a market economy emerge in Tang and Song China?
• What was the relationship between economic growth in the Tang and Song dynasties and the stimulation of trade and production in much of the Eastern Hemisphere for more than seven hundred years?
• What was the role of women in Chinese society?
• What were culture and religion like during the Song dynasty?
• What cultural changes took place in Tang and Song China?

Keywords

Annam
Buddhist monastery
Champa rice
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filial piety
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secular society
The Emergence of a Market Economy in China

China had traditionally been an economy centered in personal survival and the wealth of the government. Chinese peasants worked the land to feed their families and pay their taxes to the government. Wealth and power existed only in the landed nobility and the government. During the Tang and subsequent Song dynasty, this pattern began to change. A market economy began to emerge in China.

Agricultural Changes

Changes in Chinese agricultural production played a large part in the emergence of a market economy during the Tang and Song dynasties. Overall agricultural

Set the Stage

Women in traditional China were almost required to marry. A woman of adult age had little or no other choices. A girl was expected to marry and then enter her husband’s family, with little contact with her birth family after the marriage. Girls were considered ready to marry as soon as possible after puberty. The average age for a girl to marry was between thirteen and sixteen. Parents or grandparents of young people, never the couple, arranged appropriate marriages for their progeny. Attraction and compatibility were not considered. Marriages were business and social contracts for the betterment and continuation of the family, not for the pleasure of the couple. A girl could only hope that her husband and his family would be kind to her and that she would birth a son to ensure her place in his family.

A woman in China had few choices in her life and was even more restricted after her marriage. A woman could not divorce her husband, and divorce by the husband was uncommon. A man took concubines to satisfy his marital needs and kept his first wife to appease his family. After a divorce, a woman would have difficulty marrying again, and life for an unmarried woman would offer few if any options. Suicide was not uncommon for divorced women.

The other reality of these young arranged marriages was a great number of young widows. China was constantly at war and especially in rural areas, work was dangerous. Many women lost their husbands, not after long and prosperous marriages, but early in their life together. Widows were expected to observe a three-year mourning period and then could remarry, at least by law. However, custom in China praised the “chaste widow,” a widow who never remarried or engaged in a relationship with another man after her husband’s death. Memorial arches and other structures were erected to commemorate these chaste widows and they were the pride of their hometowns. This tradition meant that many young girls only their teens gave up all male relationships and hope of children for the rest of their lives. This kind of woman would remain in mourning for the duration of her life, even if that meant decades.
production increased because of the use of draft animals, the metal plow, and new irrigation techniques. Land that could not have previously been cultivated became arable (including terraced mountainsides). Different regions of China began to grow specific crops that grew well in that area. Trade of agricultural products therefore increased within China as each area became more specialized. The Chinese government distributed some food staples, such as rice, wheat, and millet. The people of China depended upon these staples, but also grew their own fruits and vegetables at home. These foods found their way to the open market and provided dietary supplements for those who grew them.

**Financial Changes**
Growing trade in China led to the need for financial changes. Trade grew rapidly and somewhat unexpectedly, and the result was a shortage of the copper coins used across China as currency. To make up for the shortage of coins, merchants used a number of substitutes to continue business. Traders began using what they called “flying cash”: they could deposit money or goods at one location and retrieve it in another when needed for trade. The traders were provided with a letter of credit that allowed them to retrieve the equivalent of their deposit at various locations. Two other methods used during this time were the promissory note (which allowed a person to take goods now, and pay for them later, based on what the note said) and checks (a person could withdraw money against capital held somewhere else).

In the ninth century the use of paper money became popular because of its convenience. The use of paper money greatly facilitated trade when China was short of hard currency. However, the use of paper money caused as many problems as it solved. Often a merchant could not honor the notes, which led to riots. By the eleventh century, paper money was too important to the economy to banish it altogether, but something needed to be done. The government decided to outlaw the private printing of money and print all money itself. When the government took on the job of printing money, it tried to alleviate some problems by putting serial numbers and warnings to counterfeiters on all printed money. This practice could soon also be found in the states of central Asia surrounding China. Unfortunately, the problems of not enough hard money to back up the paper currency continued. As a result, inflation (the lowering of the value of printed money and subsequent increase in prices) was rampant in China until the seventeenth century.

**Changes in Trade and Commerce**
The Song and Tang dynasties built a more integrated economy in China. Trade increased rapidly as foreign demand grew for Chinese goods, especially silk, porcelain, and lacquerware. China became a center of trade by both land and sea. Muslim and Byzantine merchants revived the Silk Road trading routes to trade with China. Guangzhou and Quanzhou, in south China, became bustling port cities. Arab, Persian, Indian, and Malaysian mariners were frequent visitors. Foreign merchants also became regular sights in the capital in Chang’an and the city of Zuoyang. Entertainers from Persia, including dancers and musicians, could be found in the homes
and courts of the many cosmopolitan cities of China. China became the destination for spices from southeast Asia, Kingfisher feathers and tortoise shells from Vietnam, pearls and incense from India, and horses and melons from Central Asia.

China became a prosperous and cosmopolitan society. Chinese people developed a taste for foreign and exotic goods. Ownership of foreign goods became a symbol of elegance and status because of their beauty and rarity. People flocked to the growing cities along trading routes and near seaports. These areas became centers of not only Chinese trade, but also Chinese culture.

**Chinese Influence in Asia**

As China’s own prosperity grew, it began to influence countries such as Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Like China, these societies were agrarian and depended on rice cultivation. Growing rice requires a large group effort during all the stages of cultivation: planting, maintenance, and harvesting. Asian countries that depended on rice as the staple of their diet knew how to work together in family and kinship groups to cultivate the rice. Areas where rice was grown tended to put the importance of the group over the needs of the individual because rice growing required the cooperation of the group. Having depended on each other for centuries to grow the rice that they needed to survive, families in Vietnam, Korea, and Japan could readily accept Confucian ideals about the importance of the community over oneself. The traditions in these countries also supported the Confucian idea of using agricultural profits to support the literate elite.

Korea, Vietnam, and Japan all centralized their rule during the early part of the Tang dynasty. For a long period (even after changes in China), their governments continued to look and act very much like the court of the early Tang. Government jobs went to nobility and landowning was the main if not the only real source of
income. There was no class of merchants, scholars, artists, and officials that would rise up later in China. Confucian ideals were easily integrated into Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. The learned elite held special status, and the basics of Confucian ideals were passed on to the peasant class too.

**Korea**

Korea is a small peninsula located to the east of northern China. It is a mountainous region that was heavily forested for most of its history. Less than 20 percent of the land there is arable and most of that lies in the south, where the warmth of the climate and a monsoon season generally provide for two crops a year. Before the arrival of the Chinese in the third century B.C.E., little is known about life there. When the Qin dynasty arrived there to colonize they found a region with a very strong hereditary elite and great talent for horse breeding. The Koreans of this time believed in shamanism. Shamanism is a belief system centered on the idea that certain individuals have the power to contact dead ancestors and other parts of the unseen spirit world. There were also a great number of languages and dialects spoken in Korea, in part due to the many migrations of people from Manchuria, Mongolia, Siberia, and Japan into the Korean region. Many of the languages spoken were quite different from the Chinese of the Qin.

With the arrival of the Chinese, Korea immediately began to change. The people of Korea quickly absorbed the ideals of the Confucian Buddhism that the Chinese brought. Chinese Confucian Buddhism worked in congruence with many of the Koreans’ own traditions and beliefs. By the sixth century, Korea was centralized under the Silla dynasty in the south part of the peninsula. The Silla kingdom made permanent the traditional inherited statuses, known as “bone ranks,” and the government of the Silla closely modeled the Tang court of the time. In 668 the Silla kingdom was able to take over the north of the Korean peninsula from the Koguryo rulers there with much help from the Tang Chinese. With continued help from the Chinese, the Silla would continue to run a strong centralized dynasty in Korea until the early 900s. When the Tang dynasty fell, so did the Silla.

The Koryo rulers took over the Korean peninsula when the Silla dynasty fell, (Koryo is where the modern word Korea derives from). The Koryo dynasty would rule a united Korean peninsula for the next three centuries. They maintained good relations with the Song dynasty in China after the fall of the Tang and were supporters of Buddhism in Korea. Many Buddhist texts were printed in Korea during the Koryo reign. The oldest known Chinese woodblocks for printing actually came from Korea and it appears that the Koreans made much advancement in printing. Korean advances in printing were shared with their allies in China, where they were improved and sent back to Korea. The exchange in printing technology between Koryo Korean and Song China led to very advanced printing techniques in both places.

Chinese government, technology, and Confucian and Buddhist ideas heavily influenced Korea.

**Japan**

Japan is an archipelago of islands in the Pacific near the coast of Korea to the east of northern China. The Japanese had a tribal social organization that included
groupings in agriculture, crafts, and ritual specialists, each group having its own community. It was said by early Chinese that the people of Japan were law-abiding, fond of drink, and concerned with ritual purity and divination. The Japanese were also skilled in wet-rice cultivation and other forms of agriculture, fishing, and weaving. The Chinese considered Japan the edge of the world and thought that it was made up of hundreds of islands, each of which being its own small country. It was believed that one shamaness known either as Himiko or Pimiko ruled these countries overall. Mythology states that around 660 B.C.E. a “divine emperor” descended from the sun-goddess Amatarasu was the first ruler of Japan. Historians are unsure of how the unification of Japan actually came about, but it is possible that the skilled horsemen and warriors of Korea played a part.

Japan was ruled by an elite group of powerful clans. One clan, from the Yamato area (modern Nara Prefecture or northern Kyushu) rose up as a line of kings. About the third century C.E. this family was in place as the imperial family. By the mid-600s Japan was united under the Yamato ruling family. The Taika reforms were instituted. These political and social changes emphasized Confucian ideals and led to a government modeled closely after the Tang model. Japan was aware of ideas from China from their relationship with Korea and from the information from a number of diplomatic missions sent to the Chinese capital at Chang’an. Emissaries had been sent to Chang’an by at least five different Japanese kings. The Japanese government created a legal code based on Confucian ideals. It also established legal respect for Buddhism and allowed the retention of some power by indigenous chieftains. Within a century of establishing this legal system, Japan had a highly complex system of law and rigid centralized government. Japan’s unified and centralized government was a direct result of interaction with Tang China.

Japan also adopted Chinese building styles and street planning. **Nara and Kyoto**, which were Japan’s early capitals, show intact examples of Chinese wooden architecture, most of which is now gone from China. The Japanese also readily accepted Buddhism and continued its development past what the Chinese achieved. The empress Suiko had a capital at Asuka that was alive with Buddhist art. In 752 Buddhists from all over Asia traveled to the Todaiji temple near Nara to see the “eye opening” ceremony of the “Great Buddha” statue. The temple complex at Todaiji was the most important of the series of Buddhist complexes built in Japan. The statue itself is almost 49 feet high and said to weigh over 500 tons. It used the entire supply of bronze in Japan and almost bankrupted the nation. The Great Buddha (or Nara Daibutsu) is located inside the Daibutsuden (Great Buddha Hall) of the temple. The entire temple complex was based on the wooden building techniques of the Chinese. The temple became so important and such a popular pilgrimage site that the capital of Japan was moved from nearby Nara to Nagaoka to decrease its political influence.

While the Japanese were greatly influenced by China (through both direct relations and also by Chinese ideas by way of Korea), they maintained some features unique to their culture and government. The tenno or emperor of Japan is considered to have always come from one continuous family; there is no change of dynasty. Japanese rulers did not claim the Confucian Mandate of Heaven, partly
because the real power remained in the hands of the prime minister and the leaders of the native religion (known as Shinto). Japanese emperors were also dominated by groups of court families and military rulers. Additionally central Japan was not plagued by the constant warfare experienced in China, so cities in Japan could be built without surrounding walls.

Chinese ideas were introduced into Japan around the same time as in Korea, and both centralized their governments during the early Tang period. However, each took Chinese philosophy and practices and created a unique and different society.

**Vietnam**

Vietnam is very mountainous area in Southeast Asia. Life in Vietnam was centered in two fertile areas: the Red River Valley in the north and the Mekong River Valley in the south. The people of Vietnam were likely using draft animals for agriculture and working with metals before the Chinese. The wet climate and mountainous terrain of Vietnam was very similar to China. Both societies had mainly agrarian economies based in the cultivation of rice with a need for expertise in irrigation. The Vietnamese used the tides that backed up the rivers for irrigation. The Vietnamese diet also included fish and meat. Hunting was accomplished using bows and arrows. Their arrows had bronze heads and were often dipped in poison, allowing them to take down large animals such as elephants.

Vietnam was very similar to the rest of Southeast Asia before the arrival of the Chinese. It was ruled by a hierarchal feudal society with tribal chiefs at the top. These chiefs were the civil, religious, and military leaders and their positions were hereditary. They owned the majority of the land and kept the rest of the population in submission. The king was the most powerful of the tribal chiefs. Religion in early Vietnam was centered on animistic beliefs in the souls of all things. Vietnamese revered dangerous animal spirits and the spirits of dead ancestors. The Chinese did not make contact with Vietnam until Tang times, but when they did, they found an area receptive to Chinese ideas.

The similarities between the two countries allowed Annam (as Vietnam was called by the Chinese) to quickly adopt Chinese ideas. The government of Annam became filled with officials trained in Confucian-style bureaucracy, and the Mahayana Buddhism popular in China spread throughout the people of Annam. Other aspects of Chinese culture also spread throughout the area. The leaders of Annam ruled in the Tang style even after the fall of the Tang dynasty in China.

In 936 Annam became the **Dai Viet** and solidified relations with the Song dynasty in China. However the Dai Viet had a rival in the south. The Champa state, located in what is today southern Vietnam, was more influenced by India and Malaysia, with whom it had longstanding maritime relations. The rivalry between the Dai Viet and Champa was strongest during the Tang, when the Dai Viet cooperated with China, but Champa did not. By the time of the Song, both areas, despite their differences with each other, created an alliance with the Song dynasty of China. The relationship between Champa and Song China is probably most important because it allowed the introduction of **Champa rice** into China. This fast-ripening rice allowed greater cultivation and the harvesting of two crops a year.
One large difference between Vietnamese and Chinese culture was the status and rights of women. Before the introduction of Confucian ideas from China, women in Vietnam had a status much more equal to that of men, likely because of the group effort (men and women) it took to cultivate rice. Even after the introduction of Confucianism, women retained greater status and rights than in China. Women in Vietnam had a say in the sale of property, and footbinding was never adopted there.

**Women in Tang and Song Society**
The status of women in China changed throughout the centuries. While China was always a patriarchal society, at times women had numerous rights. These rights degenerated greatly during the Tang dynasty and the Song that followed. The strengthening of Confucian ideals and new social customs brought women in China under the almost complete control of the men in their families.

**Return to Patriarchy**
China was a hereditary patriarchal society. During the Tang era the patriarchal hierarchy tightened. Probably because so many economic changes were occurring, families were turning more inward and asserting the traditional rules more harshly in order to protect family wealth. The landowning nobility was under financial threat from the rising merchant class and wished to protect what they had. At the same time, the rising merchant and official classes were earning large sums of money from the new market economy. As a result they too were looking for a way to preserve their new status for themselves and their families.

Part of this reversion to former traditions involved the increased importance of the cult of family ancestry. Typical ancestral veneration was limited mostly to household shrines and rituals before this era. During the Tang, families would search out the oldest members of their ancestry and travel, often in large groups of extended family, to their gravesites. These were often long journeys and upon arrival, elaborate rituals were performed at graves. These group trips and rituals involving the whole family were meant to help strengthen family identity and cohesiveness.

**Popularity of Footbinding**
The use of footbinding on girls became popular during the Tang period. This practice had great effects on the entirety of Chinese society, not just on the individual women who had their feet bound.

Footbinding was the practice of wrapping the toes with cloth so they would curve underneath the foot towards the heel. The wrapping was extremely tight, not only to cause the toes to curve under but to keep the entire foot from growing any larger. It was a grueling, painful process. When a woman’s foot was bound
successfully, the toes broke and healed under the foot. The feet had to be wrapped almost constantly to keep the toes from regaining their natural shape. In addition, the constant wrapping caused vicious infections and fungi to form. Unwrapped bound feet were often smelly and rotting. The ideal age to begin footbinding was between ages five and seven, before the feet had fully grown. In some situations it was started as late as the early teens, but in either situation, once a girl had her feet bound at a young age, her feet would never recover.

Not all women in China at this time had bound feet. The practice began among the slave dancers in the Tang court and quickly spread to the Tang elite. Women of the nobility and landed classes needed to have bound feet in order to be considered feminine and marriageable. Footbinding was a symbol of status and obedience, as most women with bound feet could not easily walk on their own. In the peasant classes, footbinding never became a trend because it was not practical. Any women who had to work, whether in the fields or elsewhere, could not have bound feet because of the great restrictions they put on a woman's movement and health.

Why bind a woman's feet? The tiny feet and precarious walk (a woman with bound feet walked almost as if she were balancing on a tightrope) was considered highly attractive, feminine, and sensual to the men of China. Certainly part of this attraction was the dependence upon men that bound feet created. The lack of mobility of a woman with bound feet also marked her as high in status. Unfortunately as the trend took hold, more and more mothers bound their daughters' feet to ensure their success in marriage and elite status. These women on the cusp of the upper class hoped that a daughter's bound feet would help her marry up the social scale.

The popularity of footbinding had great consequences. The women whose feet were bound suffered great pain and disease in their feet, possibly for their entire lives. Women with bound feet could not easily get around on their own, and many used a cane or were carried around in a litter. These women also lost their independence and freedom because of their lack of mobility. Sometimes equally awful were the consequences for elite daughters who did not have bound feet. Some mothers could not bear to inflict the horrible pain of footbinding and gave in to their daughters' pleas to stop the practice. These elite women without bound feet lost many of their marriage prospects. This knowledge of later rejection in society kept many Chinese mothers binding their daughters' feet even in the midst of their pain and cries. Chinese society became even more patriarchal as women became not only financially but also literally physically dependent on their husbands.

Footbinding was praised by many of the men of China; a large volume of poetry praises the beauty of a bound foot. However, some intellectuals denounced the practice as harsh and unnecessary. Footbinding did not travel to the rest of Asia with many other Tang Chinese customs.

**Changes in the Status of Women**

The status of women in China decreased continuously throughout the Tang and Song dynasties. Women experienced increasing subordination, legal disenfranchisement, and social restrictions. Women had some protection during the early Tang period. Inheritance and divorce laws gave women some rights, though clearly kept them subordinate to men. A woman’s family property passed directly to her husband and
then to her sons. Many wives of the merchant class were often left to run the family businesses and manage the property while their husbands traveled for trade and commercial ventures. Yet none of the results of their labor belonged to them. Women who divorced or became widowed could not remarry. Confucian ideals of the lowly woman and the subjugation of females to males were central to Chinese society.

During the Song period, women became even more restricted. Confucian ideals were advocated to restrict women to the household and limit the sexual exposure of women of all ages. Laws advanced the rights of men in inheritance and divorce. In careful negotiation of marriages, women were at the mercy of their fathers and husbands. Women were generally not taught to read and write. They could not participate in the education system and therefore could not participate in civic and political life. In some cases, however, girls were taught to read the Confucian writings on the place of women in society so they could follow Confucian rules and pass on those ideas to their sons and daughters. Also, as in any society, there were also examples of well-read literate women. Li Qingzhao (1033–1141) was a famous poet who may have been the exception to the rule. In general, such literacy and fame in women was highly frowned upon.

As Confucian ideals and footbinding strengthened the patriarchy, women lost status and independence in China.

**Life in the Song Dynasty**

Life in the Song dynasty centered around two key elements: religion and the growing unique culture of the era.

**Song Culture**

Song era culture was created by the new powers in China. The new class of officials in the bureaucracy and the urban dwellers of the growing cities set the standards for life in China.

During the Song dynasty, great weight was put on the importance of civil duties and the Chinese bureaucracy. The Chinese bureaucracy was very large and very powerful during the Song era. The civil man held greater status than the military man. The passing of civil exams was the goal of elite men, and the private schools that trained for the tests became very socially and politically powerful.

The tests themselves were very difficult and tested the examinee on Confucian classics as well as economic management and foreign policy. During the Song period, the exams were open to anyone who desired to take them. The distinctions of class and heredity were dying, and Chinese status became based much more on talent. Unfortunately the Chinese elite still had an advantage. Taking and passing the exams required enormous amounts of time to study, something most peasants didn’t have. Success on the official examinations meant good marriage prospects and the opportunity for a high salary and prestige. Failure on the exams almost certainly ensured bankruptcy and social ruin; therefore the stress on examinees was very high. Those taking the tests were under enormous psychological pressure from their families and Chinese society. The desire for test preparation books advanced the use of moveable type during this period. The printing of such books helped make the exams more accessible to non-elite candidates.
Agriculture during the Song dynasty changed immensely. The printing of books on harvesting, planting, irrigation, tree cultivation, threshing, and weaving (a result of moveable type) increased the knowledge of farmers. Illustrated versions were shown and explained to peasants working the fields. Land cultivation extended further, including south of the Yangzi River. This area would become key in Chinese agricultural success. A few wealthy families held land south of the Yangzi, and their farms would eventually supply much of the growing population of China. The area south of the Yangzi River became quite important during the time of the Song.

Song emperors encouraged many peasants to migrate to previously uncultivated areas, including south of the Yangzi. The state established irrigation systems and canals to promote cultivation in these areas. Increased acreage meant increased agricultural output. Many large land holdings of the wealthy had been broken up during the equal-field system of the Tang and now peasants working for the government cultivated this land.

The population growth during the Song dynasty also resulted in the rise of important cities. Cities such as Hangzhou (the capital) had multistory apartments to meet the needs of the growing populace. These same needs inspired new technology in the areas of water delivery, waste management, and fire. Visitors to Hangzhou were awed by the site of the river that ran through the center of the city (it had been redirected to supply the city and take care of waste, water, and to put out fires). Cities grew and were populated with restaurants, parks, bookstores, wine bars, teahouses, and theaters. The popularity of these establishments and the growing power of the urban population undermined the state monopolies on many goods. This breaking of state monopolies opened the way for males in China to make their fortunes as merchants and artists. The cities increased commerce and consumption and created a need for new forms of money and credit across China. The new class of scholar-gentry, merchants, and artists replaced the regional aristocracy.

**Song Religion**

Two modes of thought dominated Song dynasty religion: Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism.

Neo-Confucianism was the new interpretation of original Confucian teachings. It began with Zhu Xi (1130–1200). He wrote responding to centuries of dominance by Buddhist and Daoist thinking. Zhu Xi’s work brought Confucian thought back to the forefront in China. Espoused in Zhu Xi’s writing was the idea that human nature is moral, rational, and essentially good. Buddhist philosophy said that worldly concerns were distractions, but Neo-Confucianism emphasized the importance of individual moral and social responsibility. One could not ignore all worldly concerns; people and cultures had a responsibility to behave in a moral way. The ideal person in Confucian thought was the sage: a person who displayed mental stability and could remain serene while dealing, in a conscientious way, with difficult problems. Original Confucian thought referred to sage kings and leaders, but the Neo-Confucians said that anyone could become a sage. This idea was called universal sagehood.
Despite attacks from the Neo-Confucians and the abolition of Buddhist monasteries during the Tang dynasty, Buddhist philosophies and practices continued during the Song. The Buddhist ideas that had traveled to China during the Tang from India and Tibet persisted. The most popular was Chan-Buddhism (known as Zen-Buddhism in Japan and Son-Buddhism in Korea). Chan-Buddhists believed that mental discipline was the key to salvation. Among the key practices of Chan-Buddhism was meditation, which became popular in Song China, especially as a way to relieve stress for the men studying for the civil service examinations. This practice persisted among both Confucians and Buddhists during Song rule.

**Cultural Changes in China**

Chinese philosophical and religious beliefs had for centuries been based in Confucianism and Daoism. Though Buddhism had been introduced to China by travelers on the Silk Road as early as the second century B.C.E., it incurred little interest in the Chinese, who preferred their native beliefs. However, as economic and social changes occurred in China during the Tang and Song periods, they led to greater cultural and religious change also.

**Confucianism Declining**

Confucianism never left China. As other religions, especially Buddhism, gained popularity in China, it may have been changed or pushed aside for a while, but Confucianism always remained a central school of thought among the Chinese people.

Confucianism may have had its most dramatic decline with the fall of the Han dynasty. When the Han fell, China went into a period of competing warlords and nomadic invasions. The bureaucracy and the civil service institutions that supported Confucianism vanished. In the midst of this chaotic time, Confucianism struggled to remain viable. The central tenets of Confucianism were to maintain order and a stable society. When there was no order or stability, Confucian ideas lost their credibility and opened the doors for new schools of thought.

New religions entered China and gained some momentum with the populace, including Nestorian Christians, Manichaeans, Zoroastrians, and Muslims. These “religions of salvation” attracted many of the growing merchant class and former nomads. Religions that promise salvation in the next life have always had popularity among the suffering classes, who dream of a better life. At first the elite of China, though they enjoyed the entertainment, goods, and new cultural ideas brought to China, ignored the foreign religious ideas.

**Buddhism Rising**

Buddhists continued to enter China via the Silk Road from India. While their beliefs made little dent in mainstream Chinese society, the Buddhist ideas they brought did gain popularity in the oasis cities along the way. From the first or second century B.C.E., these oases began to become Buddhist cities. By the fourth century C.E. one of these oasis cities, **Dunhuang**, had become the center of Buddhism in the area. Dunhuang was located in western China, in what is the modern province of Gansu. The importance of Dunhuang Buddhists grew from 600 to 1000 C.E. when
they began to build a complex of cave temples nearby. The cave walls were covered with Buddhist art, mostly of the Buddha himself and bodhisattvas (enlightened souls who remained in the physical realm to help others achieve enlightenment; they are revered along with the Buddha in the Mahayana sect of Buddhism). The complex at Dunhuang also included libraries of Buddhist texts and scriptoria for the copying of these texts. Dunhuang, and other centers like it, sent many missions into the rest of China. The complex at Dunhuang and the missions sent out by them played a large part in the conversion of many Chinese.

As the Chinese population learned of Buddhism, they were attracted to it for both philosophical and practical reasons. The Chinese liked its high moral standards, intellectual sophistication, and the promise of salvation. Buddhism made positive contributions to the secular society of China. Monks introduced the chair to China, as well as the use of refined sugar. Many wealthy converts to Buddhism gave large land grants to the monks on which to build Buddhist monasteries. The monks living there cultivated these tracts of land with great success and retained a portion of their harvests to distribute to local residents during famines or other times of hardship. Overall, Buddhism was helpful and interesting and China began to adopt it as its own.

**Buddhism in China**

The conversion to Buddhism was not an easy one in China. There were many disparities between long-held native ideas and Buddhist ideas. In Buddhism, one uses

In this painting of the buildings and art of the unusual cave complex at Dunhuang, the number of people in the painting shows how popular Dunhuang was with pilgrims.
the religious texts as a basis for greater contemplation and metaphysical thought. On the other hand, Confucianism uses texts as a basis for solving practical issues, and shuns the abstract. Daoism rejects the use of texts altogether and the issue of texts was only one disagreement. Buddhism emphasizes the importance of an ascetic lifestyle, encouraging believers to live as celibate monks, which is in direct opposition to the central Confucian idea of **filial piety**. Chinese tradition and Confucian writings encouraged procreation to maintain the family group and create new generations who would continue the veneration of the family ancestors. Many Confucians disliked Buddhist monks because they were exempt from taxes. The simple fact that Buddhism was a foreign religion meant it lacked credibility in the eyes of many Chinese.

In order to combat these issues, Buddhism in China became something unique. Buddhists trying to convert related the central Buddhist idea of **dharma** (the central force that governs the universe) to the traditional Chinese **Dao** (the universal ideals that govern right and wrong). The concept of **nirvana** (the state of salvation that one achieves after the soul has completed the cycle of incarnation) was equated with the traditional Daoist idea of wuwei (a concept of non-action and disregard of competitiveness). Buddhists also dealt with the problem of a monastic lifestyle by proclaiming that one son sent to the monastery would guarantee salvation for the family for the next ten generations. The resulting Chan Buddhism was very similar to Daoism in its emphasis on flashes of insight rather than written ideas in texts.

China began to accept Buddhism. Monasteries and stupas (mounds of earth built to commemorate important Buddhist people or events) were in all parts of China. Many Chinese began making pilgrimages to India. One famous pilgrim was the monk Xuanzang (602–664 C.E.). He brought back many Buddhist texts and original ideas and spread them throughout his wide circle of influence.

Regardless of the growing acceptance and enthusiasm for Buddhism amongst most of the Chinese, there the traditional Daoists and Confucians still resisted. During the late Tang dynasty, these groups began to have a greater influence on the members of the court. Tang policy became very anti-Buddhist and in the 840s began closing Buddhist monasteries and expelling Buddhists and members of other foreign religions. However, the Tang did not make their expulsion total. Some monasteries and monks remained. Buddhism already had a strong following in China.

**Neo-Confucianism**

With the fall of the Tang dynasty, the Song rulers took a different approach to foreign belief systems. Instead of attempting to expel foreign religions, the Song instead chose to focus on reviving native Chinese traditions. Confucian education and study gained popularity again. Confucian scholars of the Song were different from their predecessors because they were intrigued by Buddhist ideas. Scholars studied Confucianism for ideas on politics and morality. The instructions of Confucian ideas existed to create a moral and stable society. However, Confucianism neglected more abstract philosophical ideas. In Buddhism, Chinese scholars found ideas on the nature of the soul and the human relationship to the cosmos that did
not exist in Confucian philosophy. It was the combination of the practical tenets of Confucianism and the metaphysical ideas of Buddhism that created the Neo-Confucian school that was so popular during the Song period.

Zhu Xi was the most important of these Neo-Confucian scholars and writers. He believed strongly in the Confucian ideals of proper personal behavior and social harmony. His work called “Family Rituals” gave explicit instructions for how to perform important ceremonies and rituals such as weddings, funerals, the veneration of ancestors, and family ceremonies. Zhu Xi emphasized that individuals must play their proper roles in family and society. These were all very traditional Confucian ideas. Zhu Xi also began studying Buddhist thought. He said that the philosophical ideas of Buddhism were important in explaining and legitimizing the practical affairs addressed by Confucianism. However, Zhu Xi’s Buddhist studies focused mostly on the most abstract beliefs, particularly the nature of reality. He used two terms, **li** and **qi**, to describe his thoughts on Buddhist teachings. Li is what defines the essence of a being, while qi is the material form of the being.

Neo-Confucianism was in some ways the final result of the cultural changes during the Tang and Song dynasties. It showed the great influence that Buddhism had in China over this time. Neo-Confucianism spread throughout East Asia and continued China’s influence in Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. Neo-Confucianism became the official creed of China during the Song dynasty and remained so until the early twentieth century.

**Summary**

The era of the Tang and Song dynasties was a time of tremendous change in China. After the reunification and restoration of the dynasty in China during the Sui, the next two dynasties were opportunities to grow and shape the Chinese nation. Beginning with Tang rule, China began developing a successful market economy. Agricultural production increased and the use of paper money made trade easier. China became the center of trade in the Eastern Hemisphere. It profited greatly from its production of fine silks and porcelain, which became desired the world over. The urbanites of China developed a taste for foreign goods of beauty and uniqueness. The strength of the Tang military made travel and trade easier during this time. China began to influence its neighbors by trading, but also influenced them in other ways. Chinese ruling systems and bureaucratic traditions were used to centralize governments in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Chinese Confucian ideas blended well with the native traditions of these nations. Buddhism found its way to East Asia through China, just as it had found its way to China through the Silk Road. By the time of the Song dynasty, China had a strong government based on Confucian educated officials, who now came from all classes of society. Agriculture and trade thrived, and China became home to many cosmopolitan cities. Women of this time experienced little freedom and choice. They were controlled by a strict patriarchal society and limited by the popularity of footbinding. The stability of the economy and the government allowed for greater interest in religion and philosophy. As a result, Neo-Confucianism was born. During the Tang and Song dynasties, China built a strong centralized government based in a class
of educated bureaucratic officials, a thriving economy of agricultural success, and widespread hemispheric trade. China tightened an already strict patriarchal society and developed a unique religious philosophy that would remain in China for centuries and spread to neighboring nations.

**Looking Ahead**

The economic changes during the Tang and Song dynasties were important because they set the stage for trade in Asia for centuries. It was the strength of this trade that would eventually lead to the encroachment of European powers into Chinese soil, in hopes of controlling and profiting from this well established commercial system.

The rise of Buddhism and the creation of Neo-Confucianism would affect not only China but also all the countries of East Asia for centuries to come.

Developments in currency, agriculture, and especially printing would eventually spread from China throughout the world, changing how things were done forever. Had China not remained isolated from the West for as long as it did, these technologies might have been seen in Europe much earlier than they were.

**SELF-CHECK ANSWERS**

1. When the Chinese government took over printing money, it put serial numbers and warnings to counterfeiters on the bills to prevent counterfeiting.

2. Inherited statuses in Korea were called bone ranks.

3. An elite woman in Tang China who did not have bound feet lost many of her marriage prospects and was in danger of rejection in society.

4. Some unique features of the Song capital were multistory apartment buildings, advanced water, waste, and fire technology, and an abundance of restaurants, parks, bookstores, wine bars, teahouses, and theaters.

5. Buddhist monks were not required to pay taxes, which caused resentment in many other Chinese people.
Unit 4, Lesson 7
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