

THE DRAGON NEVER SLEEPS

*China - Tang to Song Dynasties –
600 > 1300*

Rising Again... Again

China is the anomaly. Civilizations are supposed to rise and fall and then never rise again. In Europe, Rome rose, dominated a continent and then faded into history. Europe has since splintered into 47 countries.

In India, the Mauryans and Guptas created a vibrant empire, only to see its people fall victim to a series of foreign invaders over the next thousand years.

In the Middle East, the Persians, the British, the Turks and the Arabs have all taken a shot at ruling the meeting point of three continents, but each failed to maintain control over the fractious area.

Across the Asian steppe, the Huns, then the Turks, then the Mongols took turns being the master horse people of the region. But Central Asia is anything but united today.

The history of the world has been the stories of how divided people come together for a brief moment under a central empire, only to eventually fade back into sectional rule. The reality is this: humans are too different, geography is too diverse and the needs of peoples vary too much to make any kind of central rule a lasting endeavor. Even the United States of America had to compromise, creating a government that gives authority to a central power, but also to individual states and then to local cities. At any time, citizens of America are subject to federal, state and local laws. This has become the balance most nations have had to accept.

But China's different. China has had regional lords. China has been united under one central authority. However, unlike the rest of the world, China always rises again. No matter how evil a leader, no matter how far into chaos China sunk, the Chinese always believed the Mandate of Heaven controlled their fate. Through the depths of interregional strife, one ruling family would emerge, establish a dynasty and bring an era of peace. Inevitably, this ruling family would fade once corruption, external threats from nomads and natural disasters revealed the heavens had lost favor with the ruling family. A dynasty would die, regional lords would again spend generations vying for power, and then one would emerge triumphant, forging another dynasty, and the cycle would start all over again.

So no one should be surprised that China again threatens to emerge as the world's greatest economy. They've been there before, they will be there again. If history has taught us anything it's that you don't count out China. The 18th, 19th and 20th centuries were definitely steps backwards, but China has proven that a few century blip is relatively insignificant for a 5000-year-old civilization.

Three Kingdoms Period

When the Han fell out of power in 200 AD, the resulting Three Kingdoms period decimated society, dropping the Chinese population in one century from 50 million to 20 million. Through the 3rd, 4th and 5th centuries, China survived its own middle ages, where barbarism, violence and the utter breakdown of social order were more the norm than the exception. Yet, it was only a matter of time before the ingenuity, tradition and staggering workforce of the Chinese was again harnessed, taking China to yet another golden age.



Key Questions

- Why was China's population able to grow at such a rapid rate?
- How did China keep its society organized?
- What elements of Chinese society were attractive to outsiders?

Sui, Tang & Song Dynasties

The dynasties of Sui (581-618), Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) reinstituted much of what had made China great, while also expanding its culture across Asia, reaping the material and philosophical benefits that would allow the civilization to become, in the words of Venetian merchant Marco Polo, “the best that is in the world.”

China never could have grown unless they overcame two rather critical conundrums – they needed to make more food and they needed to move the food faster and further.

And what was the one food China could never get enough of? Rice. But rice doesn't naturally grow in Northern China. It's too dry and too cold. In fact, prior to the Sui (pronounced “sway”) Dynasty, most of China actually ate wheat or millet (looks kind of like corn), but by the close of the Song Dynasty, rice had become the dominant food for all of China. The Chinese had learned how to use a wheelbarrow, how to make the most of animal poop for fertilizer and how to build dams, dikes and canals to best irrigate the land. However, none of these developments was as important as an import from Vietnam in the 7th century that allowed the Chinese to almost overnight double their rice production – Champa rice. As a gift from the Vietnamese to the Chinese, Champa rice is a stronger rice that can grow in cold weather and actually only takes about two months to mature. This means that instead of harvesting only one batch of rice a year, the Chinese could now harvest two batches. Peasant incomes went up, the diet of the common man improved and people started living longer.

Sui: Grand Canal

With all of this rice, China now needed a way to link its people. In the 1950s, the United States of America underwent its most weighty public works project ever – the creation of the Interstate Highway System. Although some might argue it was created to help campers explore America on weekend vacations or even to transport nuclear weapons cross country in the dead of night, the true benefit of the highway system was the ability to transport manufactured goods from the heart of the continent to the coasts in less than a few days. Like the United States of the 1950s, China of the Sui Dynasty knew the necessity of transportation for recreational, military and commercial expansion.

Like his predecessors who conscripted the labor of the masses for public works such as enhancing the Great Wall or building palaces for the royalty (both for their present and afterlife), Yang Di decided he'd kill (umm... “utilize”) millions of laborers to construct the Grand Canal – a thousand mile long waterway that once and for all united the North and the South. Connecting the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, the Grand Canal was an engineering feat of remarkable proportions. The engineers connected the existing rivers by constructing intricate locks that could raise and lower the water elevation to allow a ship to traverse the changing topography. If your boat had to rise twenty feet to get to the next river, you'd park it in a lock, the water would fill the lock and you'd be miraculously raised to the next level. The doors would open and you'd be back on the canal again.

Taking close to a decade to complete and using the backbreaking labor of close to five million Chinese who moved the earth one pail at a time, the Grand Canal became the longest man made river in the world, and played the most important role in enabling China's population to grow at an unparalleled pace. Like most emperors who dream big (but kill a few too many thousands along the way), Yang Di's legacy wasn't appreciated until centuries later. Like the Qin emperor Shi Huangdi, his deadly public works projects became his undoing, causing the masses to revolt (although the peasants might have also been a bit perturbed at the fact that Yang Di took annual pleasure cruises of gluttony down the canal on hundreds of ornately decorated barges with thousands of his closest friends).

Tang & Song: Growth of Trade

The reign of the Sui came to an end. However, like the short-lived empire of Qin, the groundwork laid in this relatively temporary dynasty made it possible for future dynasties to reach unseen heights. When the Tang and then Song rose to power, they shepherded in eras of unprecedented commercial expansion. Farmers could

now start focusing on cash crops like silk, tea, oil, cotton, paper and wine, while manufacturers could mass produce ceramics, books and lacquer ware, knowing that they could send their goods to market across the empire. Instead of only policing the borderlands, the Tang and Song dynasties protected the roads of trade – both the famed Silk Road that extended across Eurasia and the internal network of commercial arteries that brought life and the potential for prosperity to the furthest reaches. The Tang and Song also actively encouraged peasants to move further away from the populated centers of the north, even taking land away from some of the wealthier landholders in the south. But don't confuse these relocation policies as the actions of an altruistic benefactor. This early take on the "rob from the rich and give to the poor" idea said almost more about the Tang and Song's desire to limit the power in the provinces, than it said about their desire to truly help out the struggling peasant.

Shift to Confucianism

With their empire thriving and their power relatively unchallenged, the Tang and Song took steps to remove the influence of foreigners. In the centuries following the fall of the Han Dynasty, Buddhism had spread across China. In an era of chaos and uncertainty, millions of Chinese were drawn to the Buddhist tenets of escaping the miserable cycles of life through good deeds, following a code of behavior that cared naught for class differences. Buddhism offered a solitary life of meditation for those weary of day-to-day rituals. However, the Tang and Song leaders were not too fond of the Buddhists. These monks shaved their heads, they cremated dead bodies, but most importantly, they didn't pay taxes or contribute to the economy. But they did keep asking the government to build Buddhist temples and craft grand art pieces. After peaking in the 9th century with over 50,000 monasteries and nearly a million Buddhist monks, the Chinese authorities stepped in to curtail their growing influence. Land was taken back from Buddhists, shrines were torn down and governments were encouraged to support the one true philosophy of China – Confucianism.

The philosophies of Confucius never died out, and like the Christian set of values that kept Europe together even during the darkness of its Middle Ages, Confucianism always stood in the back of people's minds, guiding their daily behavior. Adherents were challenged to be honest, to be clean, to be kind, to be humble and to be respectful. The young must show deference to their elders. Females must defer to males. Society must revere their government leaders. And in exchange, those in power must always earn their status through righteous deeds.

Unique to Chinese society, leadership was not determined by birth, by military success or by political connections. China, with its civil service exam, had created the world's first meritocracy. Any government bureaucrat could not be seated in office until he passed a week-long series of exams that tested the knowledge gained through a lifetime of study. To prevent any corruption in both the administering and marking of these exams, the Tang and Song leaders constantly revised the exam, even having students place random numbers on their exam packets to ensure anonymity. Because the exam was the key to a life of comfort and prestige, the number of students attempting the exam increased at a record pace. In 1100, 30,000 sat for the exam. Two centuries later, the number reached 400,000. By 1300, the competition for a few spots had become so intense that only one out of 333 even had a chance of passing. Compare this to the 2012 AP United States History exam that had about 360,000 students sit for the exam worldwide, with about 52% passing (or basically a one in two chance).

Although the civil service exam theoretically enabled any bright man the opportunity at government service, in reality, the wealthy disproportionately reached the highest level - jinshi. The wealthy were the only ones who could purchase any of the thousands of Confucian texts in existence, and they could provide all the tutoring needed to be successful. Over the course of three hundred years, pretty much the same few dozen families continually produced the greatest number of scholar gentry. Much like the Ivy League custom of admission by legacy, admission into the upper class of Chinese society still had a touch of nepotism, even with all of the safeguards put in place. Regardless of the social makeup of these leaders, their legacy cannot be underestimated. Monarchies and empires rely on the randomness of the ovarian lottery, but this crapshoot inevitably breeds corruption and ineptitude. Yet, in China, the ruling parties always kept the most educated

advisors close to their side. In this manner, Confucian ideology remained an integral part of all decisions. Also, the existence of an educated scholar aristocracy meant that China would never face challenges for a more representative form of government from powerful nobles and military leaders from the countryside, (think of the farmers, lawyers and merchants of the colonial United States who became so annoyed with taxation without representation). Between the Tang and Song dynasties, close to 700 years passed with relative political stability, allowing Chinese culture and society to blossom.

Culture

Aided by the patronage of the royal families and the wealth flowing into the urban areas, the art and intellectual achievements of the Tang and Song eras became the envy of other civilizations. The mass production of paper and the creation of a vibrant publishing industry enabled art to flow to and from the furthest reaches of the land. The first book ever published – The Diamond Sutra – rolled off the block in 868, about six centuries before a German named Gutenberg printed the Bible. The Chinese usage of iron and their invention of steel enabled the manufacture of weapons and architecture stronger than any object man had ever crafted. The Chinese knowledge of clay and high temperature kilns enabled the crafting of the finest porcelain dishes in the world – yes, that's why your mother's fancy plates are called "china." The Chinese acceptance of Mongol stirrups led to the production of iron stirrups. The Chinese usage of a rudder and a compass enabled merchants and explorers to take goods around the world, potentially "discovering" the Americas in 1421. The Chinese aptitude for spinning silkworms led to the fashioning of the finest fabric known to man (a skill they kept from the rest of the world until a couple Byzantine monks snuck these magic worms out of China in their hollow walking sticks). And the Chinese development of gunpowder, their early experiments with rocketry and their enhancement of the crossbow enabled the formation of weapon systems that, when later adopted by the Europeans, would lead to a complete shift in global relations into the next millennium. The Chinese were way ahead of their time, and the rest of the world would take centuries to catch up.

Role of Women

In many ways, however, the Chinese remained as backward as any other peoples. Women were treated as inferior creatures, and children conformed to the Confucian ideal of filial piety. Young children who spoke out against their parents could be beheaded and younger brothers or sisters who struck their siblings could find themselves imprisoned for three years (imagine how much time you'd have spent in jail had this been the rule when you were a young'un?). As the wealth of China increased, the role of women deteriorated. Women were goods to be exchanged or objectified. The rate of prostitution increased as did the size of dowries. Women were something to be purchased, to be objectified. The symbol of this objectification was the inhumane practice of footbinding. Upper class mothers trapped the feet of their five or six-year-old girls in fabric, preventing them from growing naturally. As the young girl matured, her foot bones gnarled inward, compacting her feet into tiny burdens of crushed bones. Women lived in constant, debilitating pain, many unable to even stand, all so their feet would remain "feminine." When the Mongols captured China in 1279, footbinding was attacked by Mongolian women who demanded the abolishment of the inhumane practice.

Mongols and the Yuan Dynasty

Like the Shang, the Zhou, the Qin, the Han, the Sui and the Tang, the Song Dynasty would also fall out of favor, and the Mandate of Heaven again bared its fateful hand. In 1279, the invading Mongol forces of Kublai Khan swept through the southern Song Dynasty and established the Yuan Dynasty, the first era of absolute foreign rule in the history of China. Kublai Khan had to walk a fine line between remaining true to his Mongol roots, but also contending with 100 million Han Chinese bent on his overthrow. What resulted was a century long reign that saw Kublai Khan embrace the parts of Chinese society that maintained order, expand the parts that could bring in more revenue and reverse the parts that threatened Mongol values.

Freedoms & Government

Kublai Khan knew his rule would only be possible if he protected the peasants. Their numerical superiority and history of overthrowing incompetent rulers meant he had to support farmers. He took land from the wealthy Chinese and distributed it to the poor. He created granaries to store surplus grain so during times of hardship

the peasants could still be fed. He also realized he could not interfere with the delicate balance between spirituality and secularism. Instead of outlawing or championing any one faith, Kublai Khan welcomed all voices. Whether Confucian, Muslim, Buddhist or Taoist, all sects were welcome.

Except the scholars. More than any other group, the scholar gentry threatened to undermine Kublai Khan's rule. He initially forbade the civil service exam, instead reserving all high governmental posts for fellow Mongols. Eventually he succumbed to pressure and reinstated the exams, but only after ensuring favorable quotas for Mongol applicants. He likewise shook up the class structure, putting Mongols at the top, followed by Muslims, then Northern Chinese and then Southern Chinese.

Merchants & Culture

Even more upsetting to ethnic Chinese was his treatment of merchants and performing artists. Since the age of Confucius, merchants fell to the bottom of the social hierarchy and singers, dancers and thespians of the day weren't even considered human. They were the undesirables of Chinese society.

Kublai Khan didn't exactly agree. He felt China's future rested with the merchant class. He subsequently poured even more money and labor into the expansion of the Grand Canal and focused the bulk of his military efforts on the protection of internal roads and the Silk Road. He allowed, and extensively encouraged, the usage of paper currency and even a primitive banking system. Before even his Grand Canal modifications had reached completion, he had already started designing a new capital city – Dadu (the city we today call Beijing). In Dadu where he could hide behind the walls of the Forbidden Kingdom, Kublai Khan became a rabid patron of the arts, inviting the best players from the land to perform for his court. He also welcomed the emissaries, merchants and ambassadors from distant lands. The European Marco Polo spent seventeen years in his court, while Muslim scientists arrived and improved the Chinese calendar, redirected Chinese astronomy and added to the Chinese knowledge of contemporary medical practices. Like Baghdad before, Dadu developed into a center of learning and thought, quite a far cry from the seemingly barbaric inclinations of the Mongols.

Role of Women

In one domain, the Mongols clearly tried to advance China's notion of "civilization." Mongol women weren't exactly what you would consider "ladylike." They rode with their husbands into battle, they spoke their minds and they walked freely down the streets of the empire. One rather impressive female member of the royal family was Khutulun. The niece of Kublai Khan, Khutulun was a tough chick, a Mongolian Fiona (a la Shrek), who offered her hand in marriage to any man who could defeat her in a wrestling match. Any would-be suitor had to first put up a bet of 100 horses. Win, you marry Khutulun. Lose...you're going home with a few less horses to feed. 10,000 horses later, Khutulun still had yet to be married, but her reputation only grew (as did her stable).

Needless to say, this type of woman wouldn't exactly welcome the art of footbinding and the priggish existence available to Chinese women. The Mongols pushed forth efforts to end footbinding, they increased inheritance rights for women whose husbands had died, they walked throughout the cities without concern for any rebuke and they played prominent roles in the governing of the territories and the maintenance of landholdings. Although future dynasties pushed women back into a subservient hole, for a brief moment in Chinese history, the status of women actually improved.

Conclusion

Yet when Kublai Khan died, none of his reforms proved enough to sustain the Mongol empire. The Mongols would one day fall to the Mandate of Heaven, but the improvements they had made to the economy and to the infrastructure continued to benefit the masses for centuries to come. Kublai Khan had also in his time created a navy unparalleled on the Asian seas. Although this navy proved unable to expand the Mongolian empire into Japan, it did prove capable of protecting commerce across the oceans and even led to maritime incursions as far as Africa and even the Americas. It also kept China aloft as the preeminent civilization on the planet – a title that was still centuries from being wrested away by the West. But they still had their own hole to dig out of.

But that is for another chapter.