CHAPTER 5 A Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty 618–907

North and South China were reunited at the end of the sixth century under the short-lived Sui dynasty (581–617) and fashioned into an expansive, dynamic cosmopolitan empire by its successor, the Tang dynasty (618–907). The reunification of the country, the opening of the Grand Canal linking north and south, the creation of two huge capitals, and the expansion of interregional and international trade all stimulated economic growth. The Tang capital, Chang'an, grew to be the largest city in the world, housing perhaps a million people and attracting traders, students, and pilgrims from all over Asia. At least until the massive Rebellion of An Lushan (755–63) brought to an end this era of expansion, the Chinese of the Tang showed themselves remarkably open to what other cultures had to offer. Music and art in particular absorbed considerable foreign influence, and Buddhism continued to be enriched by doctrines and rituals introduced from outside China proper.

EMPIRE-BUILDING

The recreation of a unified Chinese empire in the late sixth century was not inevitable. By then China proper had been divided into separate northern and southern states for over two centuries, each of which considered itself the true heir to the Zhou and Han dynasties. Given the geographical differences between north and south China, this situation might well have become a permanent one, like the division into eastern and western Roman empires in the west; the north and south could each have developed its own version of Chinese civilization.

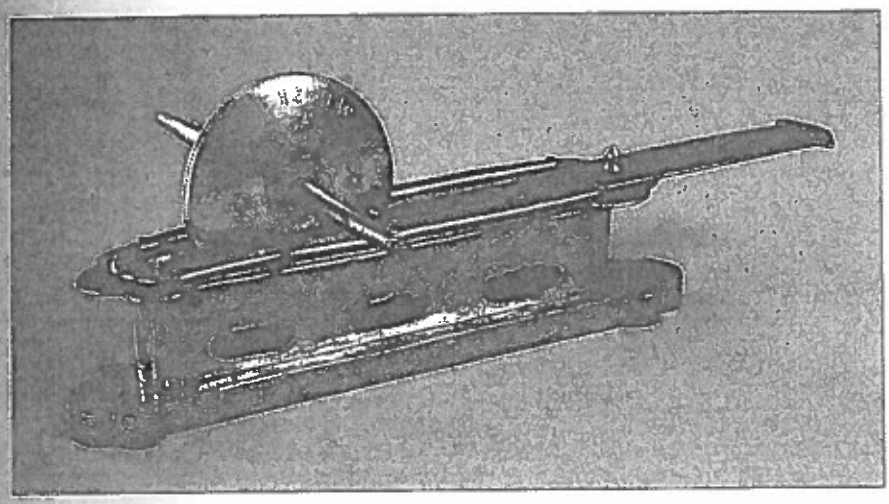
But union of the north and south did occur, and the long-term consequences for Chinese civilization were profound. The centralized bureaucratic monarchy was refashioned on an even stronger basis than in the Han. This reunification and the resultant peace ushered in three centuries of cultural flowering. From then on those who thought about the history of China had two examples from 'modern' times (the Han and Tang) to add to the three ancient dynasties (Xia, Shang, and Zhou) to prove the rightness of the unity of the Chinese world. Permanent division into independent states seemed less and less a natural, reasonable, or desirable state of affairs.

Unification came about through force of arms. The successors of the Xianbei Northern Wei, whose names changed as a result of palace coups from Western Wei to Zhou to Sui, took Sichuan in 553, the northeast in 577, and the south in 589. The conquest of the south involved naval as well as land attacks, with thousands of ships on both sides contending for control of the Yangzi River. The Sui conquerors razed the southern capital at Nanjing and forced the nobles and

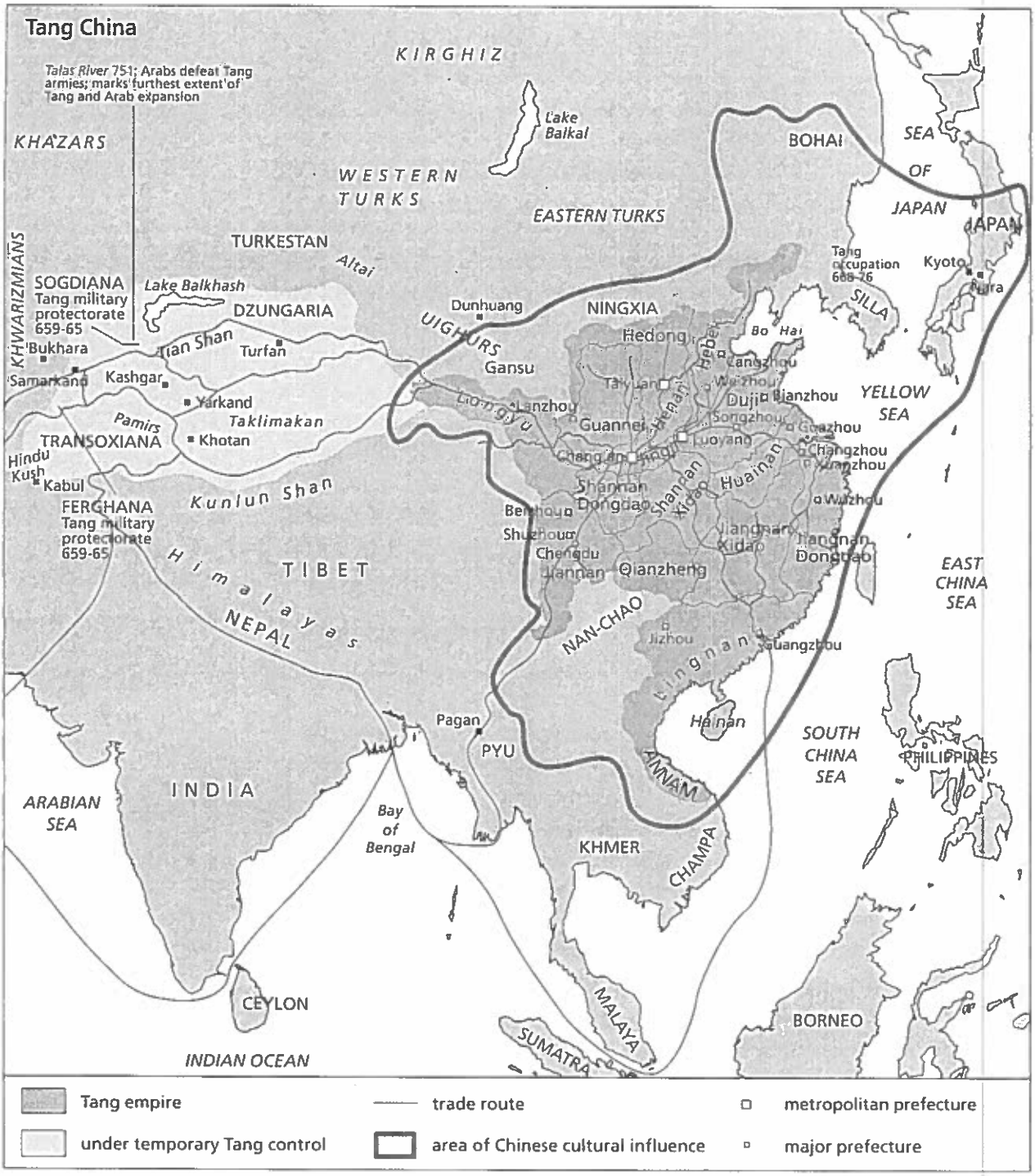
officials living there to move to the new Sui capital at Chang'an, thus eliminating them as a possible separatist threat and bringing their cultural traditions to the north of the country.

The Northern Zhou rulers who built the army that reunified China were unambiguously Xianbei, but in 581 Yang Jian, a general with a Chinese surname, ousted the heir to the throne (his daughter's son), secured his position by killing fifty-nine princes of the Zhou royal house, and founded the Sui dynasty. Known as Emperor Wendi (r. 581–604), he sought to legitimate his actions by presenting himself as a Buddhist Cakravartin King, that is, a monarch who uses military force to defend the Buddhist faith. Both he and his successor had grandiose plans for rebuilding China but tried to do too much too soon. Levies for labour service and military campaigns were onerous – 1,132,800 men were called up for a campaign against Korea in 612, for instance. In less than four decades rebellion resulted in the overthrow of the Sui dynasty. Of the many contenders who emerged, the most formidable came from the same northwestern elite that had produced the Northern Zhou and Sui rulers. The victor, Li Yuan (who reigned as Gaozong, 618–26), was in fact a first cousin of the second Sui emperor (their mothers were sisters). He and his son Taizong (r. 626–49) not surprisingly largely continued Sui initiatives. Taizong ruled three times as long as his father and is generally treated as a co-founder of the Tang. He used as much force as Wendi to come to the throne, killing two brothers and seeing to the execution of all ten of their sons. Then he demanded that his father abdicate in his favour. Despite this ruthless beginning, Taizong proved a wise and conscientious ruler, able to select good advisors and willing to listen to them, even when they criticized his personal behaviour.

Modern historians often describe the Sui and early Tang as sino-foreign regimes to draw attention to the large contributions of the Northern Dynasties to their institutional base and also the large component of families with Xianbei or other northern ancestry among the political and military elite of the period. It is



Drinking tea became popular in Tang times. The purpose of this gilded silver tea grinder was to pulverize powdered tea that had been made into cakes. Dated 869, it was among a set of objects donated by the imperial family to the Famensi Buddhist temple in Fufeng, near Xi'an, Shaanxi province.



Tang China's neighbours included states that had adopted many aspects of Chinese statecraft. These included the kingdoms of Silla and Bohai to the northeast, Nara Japan to the east, and Nanzhao and Tibet to the west. China also exerted political overlordship over large areas in central Asia where Chinese culture did not penetrate so deeply.

that both founders came from families that had worked closely with the Xianbei rulers and had intermarried with them. But none of these early rulers chose to present himself as synthesizing the best of Chinese and Xianbei traditions. Because both Yang and Li were Chinese names, they could present themselves as scions of old Chinese stock and emperors in the tradition of the Han. Certainly they did not think martial prowess or love of horses and hunting were unChinese. During this period the Xianbei presence rapidly faded as the Xianbei were assimilated and their language disappeared. Many men of Xianbei descent used the Chinese surnames they had been given at the end of the fifth century and served in civil rather than military offices. One of Taizong's chief experts in civil administration, for instance, was Zhangsun Wuji, a well-educated descendant of the Tuoba imperial clan.

Even if the Sui and Tang founders framed their state-building in entirely Chinese terms, they were heavily indebted to the groundwork laid during the Northern Dynasties. Both dynasties retained modified forms of the equal-field system started during the Northern Wei. By setting the uniform taxes in grain, cloth, and labour services relatively low, they were able to increase the numbers of households on the tax registers, and within a few years after reunification, the number of registered households had been doubled to about nine million (for a total population in the vicinity of fifty million). The Sui and early Tang also retained the Northern Zhou divisional militia, the army of volunteer farmer-soldiers who in return for their allocations of farmland served in rotation in armies at the capital and on the frontiers.

Using this army, the Sui and Tang rulers quickly extended their control beyond China proper. On the Inner Asian frontier, the powerful Turks had become a recurrent threat. To keep them in check, these rulers used the old strategies of strengthening fortifications, marriage diplomacy, investiture of their rulers, trade and tribute missions, and getting one tribe or contender to fight another. For instance, in 605, when the Khitan from the northeast made raids into China, a Chinese general was sent to lead 20,000 Turkish cavalrymen against them. When the Khitan were defeated, their women and livestock were given to the Turks as their reward. In 630, however, the Chinese turned against the Turks, wresting control of the Ordos and of southwestern Mongolia away from them, and winning for Taizong the title of great khan. This opened the way for joint Chinese–Turkish expeditions into the Silk Route cities of Central Asia in the 640s and 650s, which resulted in China regaining overlordship in the area.

The Sui and early Tang dynasties were also periods of empire building at home, of strengthening, standardizing, and codifying the institutions of political control. The Sui promulgated a code of law which combined elements of both northern and southern legal traditions, and the Tang built on it. The code of 653, the earliest to survive, has more than 500 articles specifying penalties to be imposed on those found guilty of a long list of crimes. The penalties ranged from a beating of

The calm, respectful, but determined demeanour of this stone statue was meant to capture the qualities desired in high officials. It was among a series of civil and military officials that lined the path to the grave of the first Tang emperor.

ten blows with the light stick, to a hundred blows with the heavy stick, to penal servitude lasting one to three years, to life exile to distant locations with penal servitude, to execution. Like earlier laws, these ones served to support social and political hierarchies by grading penalties according to the relationship of the parties; for example, it was more serious for a servant or a nephew to strike or kill a master or an uncle than vice versa. The legal principles articulated in this Tang code remained central to the Chinese legal system in all succeeding dynasties.

Imperial control over provincial administration was a critical issue in this period. During the Northern and Southern dynasties, the number of prefectures had proliferated, and staffing them had largely become the privilege of local elite families. To reassert central control over local government, the Sui reduced the numbers of prefectures and counties, gave the ministry of personnel the power to fill even the lower posts in them, and ruled that officials could no longer serve in their home prefecture or serve more than one tour in any prefecture. These new policies worked to limit the power of locally entrenched families and to keep centrally appointed officials from allying with them.

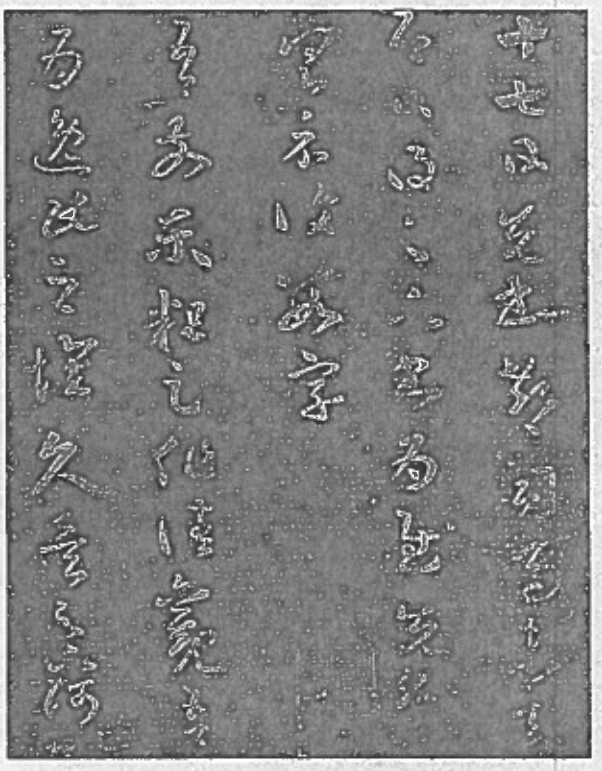
As in the Han period, appointing men imbued with Confucian values of loyalty to the ruler and duty to the people was another means of strengthening imperial power, since it was much less costly to appoint officials the government could trust than to supervise and monitor their every action. To identify true Confucians, the Sui introduced written examinations of candidates' literary abilities and knowledge of the classics. The Tang expanded this civil service examination system and took other measures to promote Confucian education, such as setting up state schools and issuing authorized versions of the Five Classics, complete with selected commentaries. Although in the Tang period on average only twenty to thirty men passed the civil service examinations per year, the exams gradually came to play an important role in identifying an elite within the bureaucracy, a group of men who would spend much of their careers in the central government, rapidly promoted from one post to the next. The new system moreover expanded opportunities for the highly talented from unconnected families; by mid Tang, a man from Guangdong province, far from any of the centres of aristocratic families, had risen through the examination system to hold some of the highest offices in the court. Still, members of the famous families were everywhere in the bureaucracy, especially at the highest reaches. Because men from old aristocratic families tended to do well in the examinations, this recruitment system did not put an end to their influence, but it did shape how they prepared themselves for government service.

Calligraphy as a fine art

In China, perhaps more than anywhere else, calligraphy came to be recognized as a fine art, practised by men of education and social eminence. Different scripts, such as 'seal', 'clerical', and 'draft' could be chosen to suit the calligrapher's mood or needs, and within each script a great number of styles evolved. Each piece of calligraphy was thought to reflect its writer's character and feelings. The strength, balance, and flow of the strokes made with a highly pliable hair brush were believed to convey the calligrapher's moral and psychological make-up as well as his momentary emotions. So indicative of character was calligraphy thought to be that in Tang times it was used as a criterion for assigning posts in the civil service. To attain a good hand took discipline and respect for tradition. Those aspiring to master the art of calligraphy would assiduously copy works by established masters before attempting to develop styles of their own. Thus the pieces of calligraphy by former masters were treasured, and the esteem accorded them had a profound influence on the development of the art.

The most famous piece of calligraphy in Chinese history is undoubtedly the *Record of the Orchid Pavilion Gathering*, written by Wang Xizhi in 353. Part of its fame is based on the story of how nearly three centuries later it got into the hands of the Tang emperor Taizong. Three times Taizong sent emissaries to request it from Biancai, an elderly monk living in a monastery in the south reputed to have possession of it, but each time Biancai claimed it had not survived the wars. Then Taizong sent Xiao Yi, a grandson of one of the last southern monarchs. Xiao Yi called on Biancai dressed as a Confucian scholar, and the two got along well, drinking, playing chess, and composing poetry. After several days of such visits, Xiao Yi brought out a painting to show Biancai and mentioned in passing that he possessed calligraphy by Wang Xizhi. Biancai asked him to bring the pieces the next day, and when he did, Biancai commented, 'These are authentic but not of the first rank. I happen to have a truly exceptional work, the original of the Orchid Pavilion manuscript.' Xiao Yi feigned disbelief, so the next day Biancai took his treasure out of hiding to show him. Xiao Yi pointed to flaws and declared it a copy, leading to a heated argument. When Biancai, flustered, failed to put it away before going off to participate in a monastic ritual, Xiao Yi grabbed the treasure and rode off. Overjoyed to get it, Taizong promoted Xiao Yi to a rank five government post and rewarded him with precious objects of gold and silver, a town mansion, a country estate, and two fine horses from the imperial stable. At first Taizong wanted to punish Biancai for his miserliness but in the end instead sent him silk and grain which the monk used to have a pagoda built. Taizong had many copies of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy made, but the original, we are told, he treasured so much that he had it interred with him in his grave.

Whatever the truth of the details of this anecdote, it was recorded in Tang times, revealing that by that period the love of relics of the past had already reached the point where collecting and protecting them could become an obsession.



To make copies of Wang Xizhi's calligraphy, Taizong had them carefully traced, then carved on a stone from which copies could be rubbed. This impression dates from the Tang or Song dynasty.

Love stories

Undoubtedly the two most famous women of Tang times were Empress Wu and Yang Guifei, and popular understanding of the power that women could gain over men was very much shaped by the stories told about these two rather different palace women. Before the end of the dynasty, however, fictional women were coming to play nearly as important a role in shaping understandings of male–female relations. Well-crafted short stories written in the classical language by leading men of letters came to shape cultural expectations concerning what makes men and women attractive to each other, how they differ in the ways they express love, and their varying proclivities for devotion or callousness.

Tang love stories frequently concerned young literati who became enamoured of courtesans or prostitutes. Bai Xingjian wrote about a young examination candidate who fell for the beautiful courtesan Li Wa on first glance. She and her proprietrix gradually squeezed him of all his money and then disappeared. Totally impoverished, the young man was reduced to supporting himself as a singer of funeral dirges. When his father discovered him in that demeaned capacity, he beat him nearly to death. For a while the young man lived by begging, until by accident he again encountered Li Wa, who out of a sense of guilt and compassion first purchased her freedom from her proprietrix, then took him in. After nursing him back to health, she convinced him to resume his studies. In the end he passed the examinations with distinction, became an official, and was able to win over his father, who even accepted Li Wa as a daughter-in-law.

An even more famous love story concerns an examination candidate who fell in love with a girl of good family, a distant cousin. It was written by the eminent man of letters, Yuan Zhen. In this story, Zhang, the son of an official, falls in love with Yingying after her widowed mother introduced her to him to thank him for doing them a favour. On the advice of Yingying's maid, Zhang tried to win her over by writing poems to her. Both Zhang and Yingying were literate and sensitive, Yingying especially:

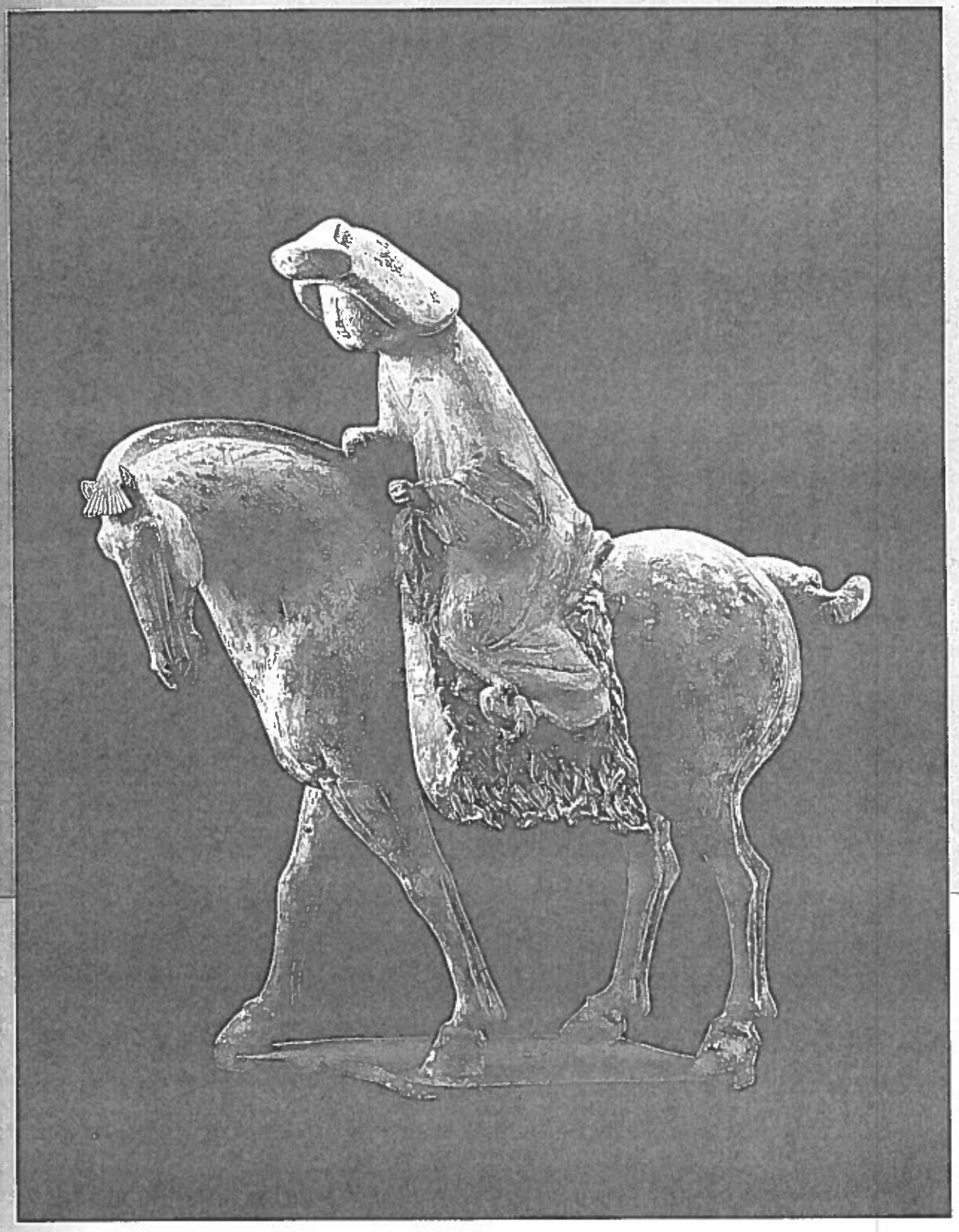
> She excelled in the arts but acted as if she knew nothing about them. She was quick and clever in speaking, but was not inclined toward repartee. She loved Zhang very much but never said so in words. She was subject to melancholy moods, but did not let her feelings show on her face. Once she was playing sad music on the zither alone at night. When Zhang, who had overheard her, appeared, he tried to get her to resume playing, but she refused. This made him all the more infatuated with her.

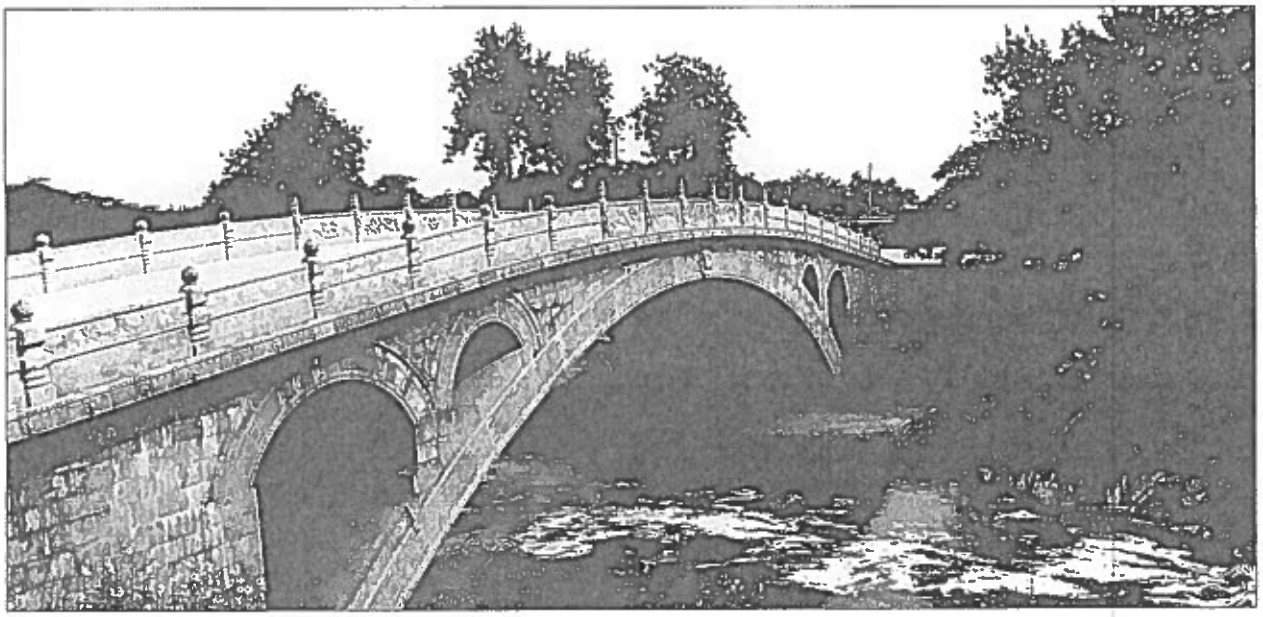
Without a formal engagement or the permission of either's parents, an affair began, interrupted when Zhang had to go to the capital to take the examinations. Yingying wrote him a long letter accusing him of faithlessness when he did not return, but he in the end broke with her, telling a friend that beautiful women spell disaster for men. Each married other partners chosen for them by their parents.

Opposite
Notions of what makes women attractive have changed over the course of Chinese history. The figurines found in Tang tombs reveal that active women, even ones playing polo on horseback, were viewed as appealing. So too were plump and full-faced women.

From Tang times on, the education of the upper class tended to become more bookish, and martial skills such as horsemanship, archery, and swordsmanship gradually came to play a lesser role in elite life.

The examinations system helped to standardize and overcome differences between the northwestern, northeastern, and southern elites. The economic and political integration of the empire was similarly aided by an engineering feat: the construction of the Grand Canal, dug between 605 and 609 by means of enormous levies of conscripted labour. Transport canals had been built since Qin times, but these had never been anything on this scale. The first stage linked the eastern capital of Luoyang to the Yangzi valley at modern Yangzhou. On its

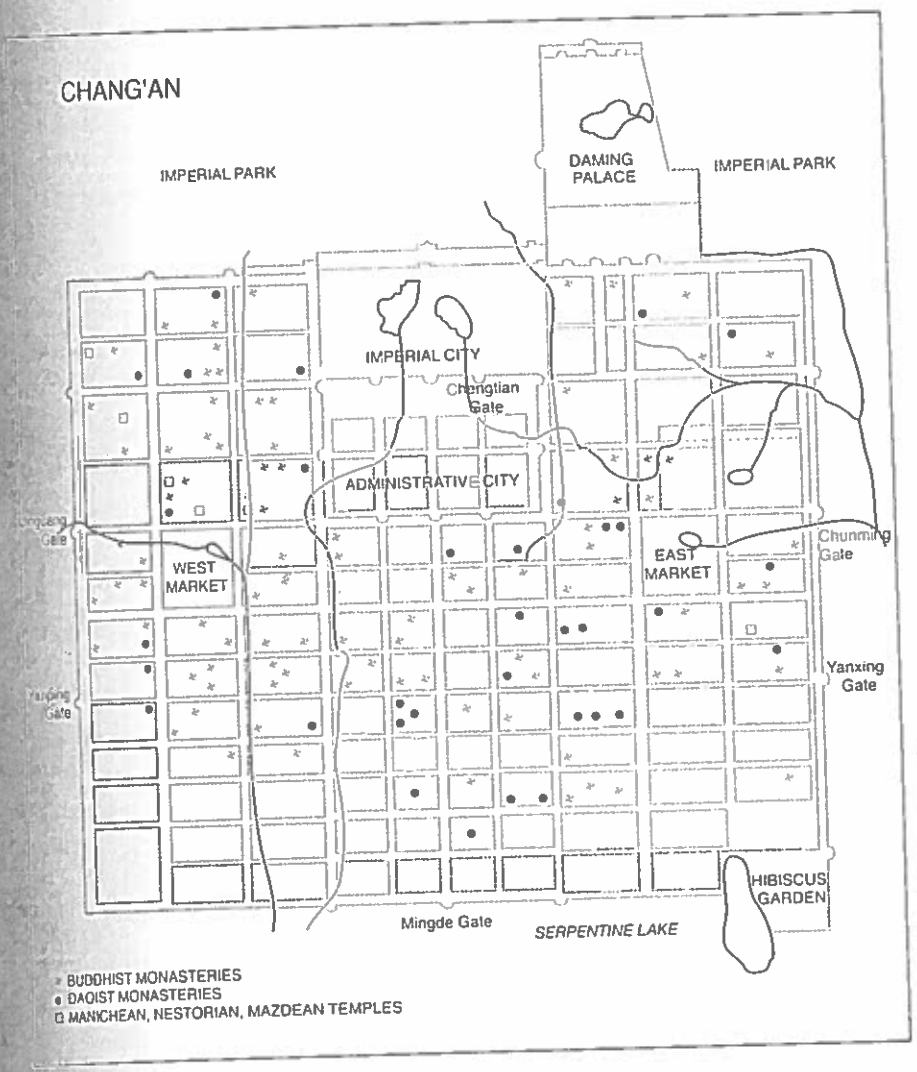




The Sui dynasty's contribution to the development of Chinese transportation was not limited to the construction of the Grand Canal. Roads were built in the north China plain to improve access to the northern frontier. This bridge in Zhouxian, Hebei province, was constructed between 605 and 616 using over a thousand stones weighing more than a ton each. It has a span of about 130 feet and a width of over 30 feet.

completion, the second Sui emperor led a 65-mile-long flotilla of boats down to his southern capital at Yangzhou. Soon the canal was extended south to Hangzhou and north to the Beijing area. An imperial road was built alongside the canal and relay post stations were provided. In total, the canal extended almost 1,200 miles, allowing the government to draw on the growing wealth of the Yangzi valley to support both the government in the capital area and the military garrisons along the northeastern frontier. This new long-distance supply system gradually obviated the need for the army to be self-supporting, as supplies could be brought from the south to the north.

Empire building continued apace during the late seventh century when the court was dominated by Empress Wu, a powerful personality, as ruthless and politically adroit as Wendi or Taizong. Her rise to power is that much more remarkable because she did not begin as an empress, but as Gaozong's concubine. Her influence on Gaozong (r.650–83) was such that within a few years of her entering the palace he was willing to oust his previous empress to install her instead, over the strenuous objections of his high officials. Once installed as empress, she moved quickly to eliminate her rivals and opponents. After Gaozong suffered a stroke in 660, Empress Wu took full charge. Even though he died in 683, she maintained her control during the reigns of her two sons, whom she summarily deposed, one after the other. In 690 she proclaimed herself emperor of a new dynasty, the Zhou, making her the only woman who took the title emperor in Chinese history. She circulated the *Great Cloud Sutra*, which predicted the imminent reincarnation of the Buddha Maitreya as a female monarch, under whom all the world would be free of illness, worry, and disaster, thus providing Buddhist legitimation for her ascent to the throne. During her reign the court fre-



Chang'an was laid out in the early years of the Sui and developed in Tang times into a great city. It was divided into walled wards, the gates to which were closed at night. To facilitate state supervision, buying and selling was restricted to special market quarters, but religious establishments were to be found throughout the city.

quently moved east to Luoyang and she recruited many officials from the east, probably seeing in them a counterweight to the northwest aristocracy so closely connected to the Tang imperial family. Execrated by later historians as an evil usurper, Empress Wu was, without question, forceful. She suppressed rebellions of Tang princes and maintained an aggressive foreign policy. Her hold on the government was so strong that she was not deposed until 705 when she was over eighty and ailing.

LIFE AT THE CENTRE

A woman in the role of emperor, as the link between heaven and humankind, was certainly anomalous in Chinese history, but was not the only anomalous feature of the Tang period. More than in any other epoch in Chinese history before the twentieth century, Chinese in early and mid Tang had the self-confidence to be open to the new and different. Perhaps because a universal religion of foreign

Silk remained a major item of trade through Central Asia in Tang times. The most luxurious silks were generally used for women's clothes, as seen in this painted wooden figurine excavated from the tomb of a Chinese official posted to the far western frontier near Turfan in Xinjiang province.

origin gave China links to all the other countries of Asia east of Persia, perhaps because the elite included many families of non-Chinese descent, perhaps because China had the military might to garrison the Silk Road and keep it open for trade, Chinese in this period were more than happy to gather about them the best of what the rest of their world had to offer.

The magnificent capital at Chang'an exerted a powerfully attractive force on the outside world. Like earlier capital cities in the north, Chang'an was a planned city laid out on a square grid, but it was constructed on a much larger scale than any previous capital. Its outer walls, made of pounded earth about ten to fifteen feet thick and thirty-five feet tall, extended over five miles north to south and nearly six miles east to west. The palace was in the north, so the emperor could, in a sense, face south towards his subjects, whose homes were in the 108 wards, each enclosed by a wall. Certain blocks were set aside for markets, open at specified hours each day. The great southern gate of the city opened out on to an extremely broad avenue about 500 feet wide. Foreign envoys seeking to see the emperor all travelled along this thoroughfare directly to the palace. This and other main avenues were bordered by ditches planted with trees. When the city was first built in the Sui, officials and nobles were offered incentives to build residences and temples in the city, and many southern aristocrats were forced to move there after their capital was conquered in 589. But incentives and coercion were not needed for long; by the early Tang leading members of society sought to live in Chang'an or the secondary capital at Luoyang, also rebuilt in the Sui period.

The culture of Chang'an and Luoyang was enthusiastically cosmopolitan. Taizong was fascinated by the monk Xuanzang (602–64) who returned to China in 645 to tell about his fifteen years travelling across Central Asia and India. Knowledge of the outside world was also stimulated by the presence of envoys, merchants, and pilgrims who came from the tributary states in Central Asia as well as from neighbouring countries like Japan, Korea, and Tibet. Goods from these distant regions – horses, jewels, musical instruments, and textiles – were sources of endless fascination to both the court and the capital elite. Foreign fashions in hair and clothing were often copied, and foreign amusements like the game of polo became favourite pastimes of the well-to-do. The caravans that came from Central Asia were so appreciated that pottery representations of camels and their non-Han grooms were among the objects people commonly placed in tombs. Foreign religions, including Islam, Judaism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity were practised among the thousands of foreign merchants resident there, though none of these religions spread into the Chinese population the way Buddhism had centuries earlier.

Foreign influence had longer-term impact in the arts. Silver-smithing was perfected, with cups, plates, ewers, and other small objects showing the influence of Persian designs and techniques. The introduction of new instruments and new tunes from India, Iran, and Central Asia brought about a major transformation of Chinese music. Interior furnishings were also transformed, as the practice of sitting on mats on the floor gradually gave way to the foreign practice of sitting on stools and chairs.

Prosperity undoubtedly aided the cultural vitality of the Tang period. The fortification of the country, the opening of the Grand Canal linking north and south, and the expansion of international trade via the Central Asian Silk Route

Ceramic model of a group of musicians seated on a camel, 26 inches tall, excavated in Xi'an (Chang'an) from a tomb dated 723. The dress of some of the musicians, along with their beards and facial features, indicate that they are from Central Asia. Tang tombs often contain ceramic models of Central Asian men, both musicians and grooms attending to horses or camels; the presence of these objects attests to the love of the Tang elite for Central Asian music and for the caravans that brought goods from the west.

and the higher-volume sea routes all stimulated the economy. Economic development of the south was particularly impressive, aided by convenient water transportation along rivers and streams. River traffic had grown so heavy that storms at Yangzhou in 721 and 751 were said to have led to the destruction of over 1,000 boats each time. Tea, native to the south, was no longer looked on as a medicinal herb, useful primarily to those trying to stay awake, but had come to be drunk all over the country, making it a major item in trade. The southern port cities of Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Fuzhou grew in size as maritime trade along the coast and throughout Southeast Asia expanded greatly, much of it in the hands of Arab merchants. By 742, when a census was taken, the proportion of the registered popu-lation living in the south had increased from only a quarter in the early seventh century to nearly a half.

Neither economic growth nor the development of thriving commercial cities brought about radical change in the composition of the social or political elite. Tang China was still an aristocratic society. In elite circles, genealogies continued to be much discussed and eminent forebears were looked on as a source of pride and admiration; the most prestigious families still largely married among themselves, giving coherence and visibility to the highest stratum of the elite. Early in the Tang dynasty the emperors sporadically made efforts to undermine the prestige of aristocratic pedigree and to assert that high office carries more honour than eminent ancestors. Once the families closest to the throne had become socially accepted as aristocratic families, however, the emperors largely gave up trying to challenge the aristocrats' pretensions.

Aristocrats and other educated men in Tang times engaged in a wide range of arts and learning. Confucian scholarship of many sorts flourished, especially the writings of histories and commentaries to the classics. In this period education in Confucian texts and commitment to Confucian principles of government service was not looked on as incompatible with faith in Buddhism or Daoism, and many men were learned in the texts of more than one tradition. The arts also attracted scholars, many of whom were esteemed for their calligraphy. Almost all educated men wrote an occasional poem, and poetic composition was tested on the most prestigious of the civil service examinations, the *jinshi*, or 'presented scholar' exam. Perhaps that contributed to the art of poetry, for the Tang produced many of China's greatest poets, including Wang Wei, Li Bai, Du Fu, Bai Juyi, and Li Shangyin. Over 48,900 poems by 2,200 Tang poets have survived. The parting of friends was a common theme of these poems, perhaps because officials were frequently transferred to the provinces. The immense distances of the empire, the dangers of travel, and the difficulty of keeping in touch once separated evidently made every parting seem momentous. Poets also frequented entertainment quarters of the cities where they could call on female musicians. In the late Tang period, courtesans played an important part in popularizing a new verse form by singing the lyrics written by famous men and by composing lyrics themselves.

The high point of Tang culture came in the first half of the eighth century, during the reign of Xuanzong (r.712–56), a grandson of Empress Wu whose court became the focal point of high culture. Xuanzong conducted state ceremonies on a grand scale and authorized a major codification of state ritual. Buddhist and Daoist clerics were also welcome at his court. Xuanzong invited teachers of the newly introduced Tantric school of Buddhism, in 726 calling on the Javanese monk Vajrabodhi to perform Tantric rites to avert drought and in 742 holding the incense burner while the Ceylonese Amoghavajra recited mystical incantations to aid the victory of Tang forces. To liven up the poetry written at his court and amuse him on his outings with his palace ladies, Xuanzong established a new academy for poets. The poet Li Bai served in this academy for a few years, writing light sensual poems celebrating the beauty of the imperial parks and the ladies in them. Xuanzong also enjoyed music and horses and even kept a troupe of dancing horses. Han Gan, a great horse painter, served at his court.

In his early years, Xuanzong's love of court life did not keep him from tending to affairs of state. He took prompt action to curb the power of imperial relatives and Buddhist monasteries, both of which had gained strength under Empress Wu. To deal with the declines in tax revenue caused by absconding peasants, he ordered a new census and reformed the equal-field system. Because of threats from the Turks, Uighurs, and Tibetans, he restructured the defence establishment, setting up a ring of military provinces along the frontier from Sichuan to Manchuria and giving their commanders great authority.

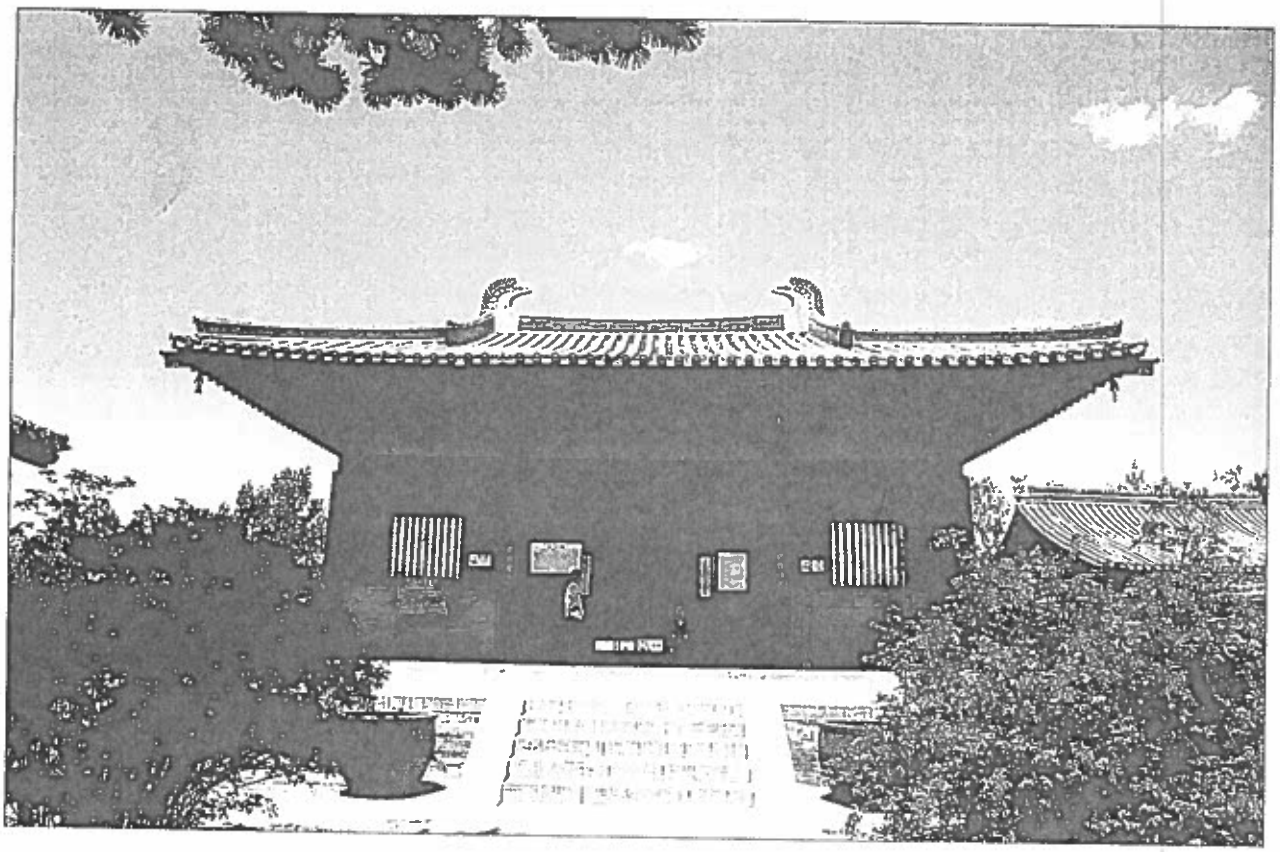
Xuanzong had many consorts and fathered thirty sons and twenty-nine daughters. But one woman had a special place in his life. In popular culture Xuanzong is remembered above all for falling in love, when nearly sixty, with the young imperial consort Yang Guifei, a beauty who shared his interest in music and dance but lacked sound political sense. She was amused by the company of An Lushan, one of the recently appointed military governors of non-Chinese origin. The doting Xuanzong showered An Lushan with favours and allowed him to amass 160 000 troops along the northern and northeastern frontiers. In 755 An Lushan rebelled and marched on Luoyang and Chang'an, compelling Xuanzong to flee west. The troops that accompanied him staged a mutiny and forced Xuanzong to have Yang Guifei strangled; Xuanzong, already over seventy and depressed by the turn of events, abdicated to his son and the most brilliant age of court culture came to an end.

THE PENETRATION OF BUDDHISM INTO CHINESE LIFE

The outwardly oriented, cosmopolitan mood of the Sui and Tang periods allowed Buddhist institutions to become an integral part of Chinese life. Buddhist monasteries ran schools for children; in remote areas they provided lodging for travellers; in towns they offered literati places to gather for social occasions like going-away parties. Monasteries also played a major role in the economy. Their

huge tracts of land and large numbers of serfs gave them the financial resources to establish enterprises like mills and oil presses and to open up new land. With the income they earned from these ventures, they often expanded into money-lending and pawn-broking businesses, making monasteries an economic force in local communities and contributing to further monetization and commercialization of the economy.

Buddhism was also instrumental in transforming the Chinese imagination. Stories of Buddhist origin became in Tang times among the most widely known and popular tales. To spread the faith, monks would show pictures and tell stories to audiences of illiterate laymen. The story of Mulian, who journeyed to the netherworld to save his mother, suffering the most harrowing punishments there, gave rise to the ghost festival held on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, one of the most important festivals in Chinese popular culture. On this day Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, from the most educated members of the clergy to ordinary illiterate villagers, would put out food in order to feed hungry ghosts suffering in the netherworld. The Japanese monk Ennin, who spent the years 838 to 847 in China, reported that on this day the forty-odd monasteries in Yangzhou would compete with each other to make unusual candles, cakes, and artificial flowers to offer in front of the Buddha halls. 'Everyone in the city



The Great Hall of Nanchansi at Mount Wutai, one of the oldest surviving buildings in China, was probably built shortly after the great suppression of Buddhism of 845 was relaxed.

Of all the large monastic complexes built in mountains far from cities, probably none attracted more pilgrims than the great establishment at Mount Wutai in Shanxi province. Its fame was so great that hundreds of miles away at Dunhuang in Gansu province it was depicted on a mural in Cave 61.

goes around to the monasteries and performs adoration during this most flourishing festival.'

By the mid-Tang period the most popular sects or schools of Buddhism were thoroughly sinified ones. Adherents of the Pure Land teaching devoutly paid homage to the Buddha Amitabha and his chief helper, the compassionate bodhisattva Guanyin, in order to be reborn in Amitabha's paradise, the Pure Land. Among the educated elite, the Chan school (known in Japan as Zen) was becoming just as popular. Chan teachings rejected the authority of the sutras and claimed the superiority of mind-to-mind transmission of Buddhist truth through a series of patriarchs, the most important of whom were the First Patriarch Bodhidharma, an Indian monk who came to China in the early sixth century, and the Sixth Patriarch Huineng, a Chinese monk who died in the early eighth century. The illiteracy of Huineng at the time of his enlightenment was taken as proof of the Chan claim that enlightenment could be achieved suddenly through insight into one's own true nature.

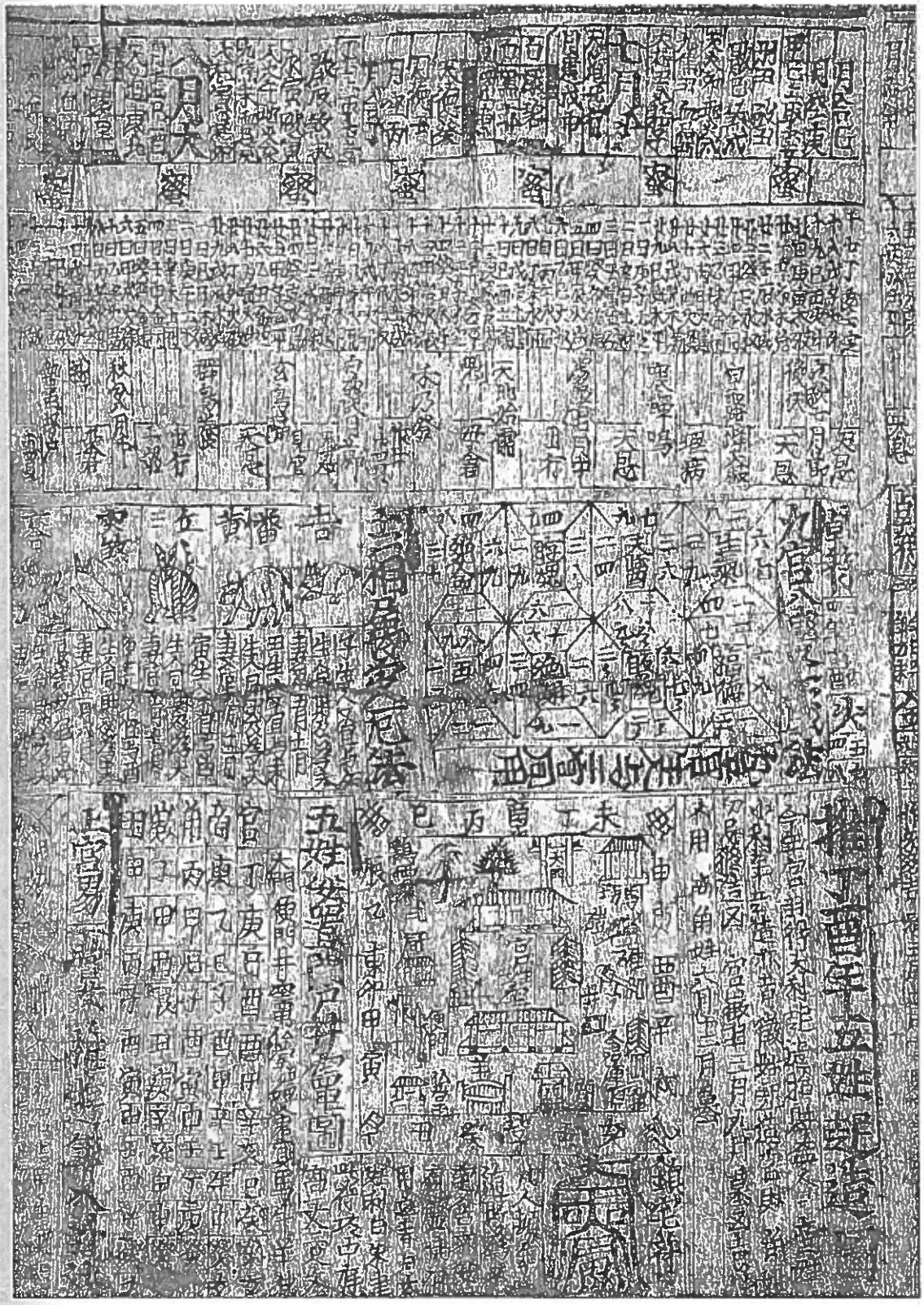
In the *Lotus Sutra*, the bodhisattva Guanyin was said to have the power to grant children to any woman who prayed to her, an attribute that undoubtedly added to Guanyin's appeal and the Chinese tendency to conceive of this bodhisattva as female. These pages from a ninth- or tenth-century illustrated version show a couple praying to Guanyin for the birth of a child (on the right), followed by a midwife attending the woman giving birth (on the left).

The history of Buddhism in Tang times was not solely one of expansion and penetration. In the late Tang period, opposition to Buddhism as foreign re-emerged as China's international position weakened, and the court's financial difficulties revived antagonism against Buddhism as an economic drain. In 841 the court initiated a massive suppression of Buddhism and other foreign religions. By 845, when the orders were rescinded, around a quarter of a million monks and nuns had been returned to lay life, 150,000 slaves had been confiscated, and some 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 chapels had been demolished or converted to other purposes. This blow came at an unfortunate time for Chinese Buddhism, for in this period it also lost the intellectual stimulation of contact with Buddhist centres in India and Central Asia due to the spread of Islam in Central Asia and the decline of Buddhism in India. As a result of these two blows, although Pure Land and Chan continued to flourish, the more philosophical and exegetical schools of Buddhist thought did not survive into later centuries.

Opposite
Printed calendar for the year 877 found at Dunhuang in the far northwest. It is perhaps not surprising that among the earliest surviving printed works are calendars giving the information needed to calculate what to do or avoid doing on particular days.

LIFE FAR FROM THE CENTRE

A sense of what life was like for subjects of the Tang who lived far from the capital and well below the upper reaches of society can be glimpsed from a great cache of documents found sealed in a cave temple at Dunhuang, at the far northwestern edge of China proper where the Silk Road across the desert began. Surviving



documents include contracts for the sale of land, houses, and slaves; household registration records used in the equal-field system; elementary education primers; forms for arranging divorce, adoption, or family division; sample or form letters for many occasions; circulars for lay religious societies; local histories and lists of local eminent families; and an enormous variety of government documents.

The farmers of Dunhuang may have lived far from the capital, but their daily lives were still profoundly affected by the policies established there, particularly the equal-field system. Documents found at Dunhuang prove that people did, in fact, receive allotments of land through this system, and this land did revert to the state after people died. But tenancy is also much in evidence. Not only were there government lands worked by various types of tenants, but also some people found it inconvenient to work the land allocated to them under the equal-field system and rented it to tenants while they worked as tenants themselves on other people's land. Monasteries were also large landlords, and their tenants were held on serf-like bondage, unfree to move elsewhere or marry outside their status group. Dunhuang documents show, nevertheless, that monastery dependants were free to own property of their own and to employ others to help them work it; some even had slaves of their own.

The state also had a large hand in the way goods were bought and sold. There are about ninety fragments of official price lists showing that every month the authorities established prices for three qualities of a wide range of commodities sold in government-supervised markets, including foodstuffs and textiles. In other matters, the role of the state was more indirect. Repair of irrigation ditches, for instance, appears to have largely been performed by small mutual-aid societies of those farmers most directly affected, supervised by men performing their labour-service duties.

This is not to say that there were no private or non-governmental collective activities in Dunhuang. The presence of Buddhist lay associations shows that even ordinary farmers could organize themselves, passing around circulars to call meetings. The expansion of education, largely outside government hands, can be seen from the great quantity and variety of educational texts that survived in Dunhuang. Confucian social ethics were taught in the primers used in schools run by monasteries. The *Family Instructions of the Grandfather*, which survived in forty-two copies in Dunhuang, employed simple verse to instruct young men in correct manners:

> When his father goes out to walk
> The son must follow behind.
> If on the road he meets a senior
> He puts his feet together and joins his hands.
> In front of a senior
> He does not spit on the ground.

The moral basis of women's manners was also expounded:

> A bride serves her husband
> Just as she served her father.
> Her voice should not be heard
> Nor her body or shadow seen.
> With her husband's father and elder brothers
> She has no conversation.

The Dunhuang documents also include many books for somewhat more advanced students, such as multiplication tables, arithmetic exercises, vocabulary lists and etiquette books with elaborate rules for how to vary polite language when addressing someone very superior, slightly superior, a peer, or an inferior; how to write a condolence letter or make a condolence visit; and how to conduct weddings and funerals.

The beginnings of printing can also be better understood in the context of the Dunhuang documents. There was clearly a large local demand for primers for children, calendars of lucky and unlucky days, manuals of charms for warding off evil, and guides for examination candidates. Another reason to make multiple copies was to earn religious merit by copying and distributing sacred Buddhist texts. It was perhaps not a large step to begin carving blocks to save time in reproducing texts, since the Chinese had long used seals made out of metal, stone, and clay to impress words on paper. They also knew how to make copies of texts by taking rubbings of inscribed stones. There is scattered evidence of the use of block printing as early as the eighth century, and by the ninth century the technique had been perfected. The oldest extant printed book is a copy of the *Diamond Sutra* preserved in Dunhuang, dated 868. Other Tang printed works preserved in Dunhuang include dictionaries and almanacs. At about this time the scroll format for long texts began to be superseded by flat books with folded pages, a format much more convenient for storage. Within a couple of centuries the invention of printed books would revolutionize the communications of ideas.

Metalwork in gold and silver reached a high point in Tang times. The shape of this gilded silver bottle, unearthed near Xi'an in Shaanxi province, recalls the leather bottles of nomadic horsemen, while the workmanship reflects Persian influence. The playful etching evokes the horses of Emperor Xuanzong, which were trained to dance with cups of wine in their mouths.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REALIGNMENTS

The Tang government never completely recovered from the rebellion started by An Lushan. After eight years of fighting (755–63), Xuanzong's successor had little choice but to make a compromising peace. To restore order he

pardoned rebel leaders, often appointing them as military governors in the areas where they had surrendered. From then on in several vital areas military governors acted like rulers of independent states, paying no taxes, appointing their own subordinates, and passing their power to their own heirs. In these provinces, military men, often non-Han or semi-sinified, came to staff a large proportion of government posts. Even in provinces with civil governors, the provincial governors were enhancing their administrative powers at the expense of both the central government and the prefects and magistrates.

In these circumstances, the central government finally abolished the long outgrown equal-field system it had inherited from the Northern Dynasties and in 780 substituted a twice-yearly tax on actual landholding. From this time on, regions were given quotas of taxes to fill and allowed considerable leeway in how they raised the required funds. Government withdrawal from control of land ownership amounted to a return to an open market in land, facilitating the growth of large estates as those who fell into debt had to sell their land and those with money could amass more and more property.

The new land tax worked well, but the central government discovered it could raise revenue even more successfully through control of the production and distribution of salt. By adding a surcharge to the salt it sold to licensed merchant distributors, the government was able to collect taxes indirectly, through merchants, even from districts where its authority was minimal. By 779 over half the total revenue was being raised through the salt monopoly. Success with salt led the government to attempt similar policies with other commodities, including wine and tea. The Salt Commission became a very powerful organization, independent of the old organs of government and run by officials who specialized in finance.

Besides withdrawing from control of the market in land, the post-rebellion Tang government largely gave up supervision of the operation of urban markets. This retreat from management of the economy had the unintended effect of stimulating trade. The circulation of goods increased and markets were opened in more and more towns, facilitating regional trade centred on the new provincial capitals. Merchants, no longer supervised so closely, found ways to solve the perennial problems of a shortage of coins by circulating silver bullion and notes of exchange. By the ninth century a new economic hierarchy of markets and towns had begun to emerge alongside the state hierarchy of administrative centres. The entire south was also benefiting from yet another influx of migrants as Hebei province in particular and the north more generally were hard hit by the rebellion and its aftermath. Because agriculture was more productive in the south, every shift of the population in that direction aided the overall economic prosperity of the country. Cities of the lower Yangzi area, such as Yangzhou, Suzhou, and Hangzhou, flourished, inducing many elite families from the north to relocate permanently in the region.

Chang'an continued to thrive as an urban centre in the post-rebellion era, but the court based there did not fare so well. Capable and determined emperors and court officials took many measures to strengthen central control, but with limited success. To counter the threat posed by the regional commanders, the court created a Palace Army and put the emperor's personal servants, the palace eunuchs, in charge of it. It did not take long for the eunuchs to prove as much a bane as the mutinous provinces. They gained control of palace affairs, and high officials found themselves reduced to forming alliances with one group of eunuchs or another. Accounts of court politics after 820 revolve around plots and counter-plots, with the eunuchs and their allies enthroning, coercing, and murdering one emperor after another. In 835 the emperor and a group of officials tried to strike against the eunuchs but their plot was discovered. In retaliation, the eunuchs ordered the immediate slaughter of over 1,000 officials. As a public display of their power, the eunuchs had the three chief ministers and their families publicly executed in Chang'an's western market place.

External pressures coincided with these internal threats. Antagonistic states were consolidating themselves all along the Tang's borders – from Bohai on the northeast to Tibet and Nanzhao on the west and southwest. The Turkish Uighurs proved a burdensome ally. The An Lushan rebellion was put down in part through their help, but to keep them from plundering Luoyang after they helped retake it, they had to be paid off with huge quantities of silk. Thereafter, to keep them from fighting, they had to be allowed to trade horses for silk at extortionate terms. At the same time Tibet had formed a strong empire, and when Chinese troops were withdrawn from the western frontier to help defend the capital after An Lushan rebelled, it was easy for the Tibetans to step in, cutting off Central Asia from metropolitan China. When the Tibetan empire collapsed in 842 and the Uighur empire broke up soon after, the Chinese court decided not to attempt the recovery of their former dominions in Central Asia.

After 860, the decentralized government with so much of its power concentrated in the hands of regional commanders proved unable to maintain even a semblance of order. Bandit gangs, some as large as small armies, ravaged the countryside and even attacked walled cities. These gangs preyed on traders and tax convoys, smuggled illicit salt, and sometimes went on rampages that took them far from their original base. Huang Chao, the leader of the most successful band, was a salt merchant who had failed the civil service examinations. His army moved rapidly across the country, from north to south and then north again, in 879 taking Guangzhou where they slaughtered thousands of foreign merchants, and in 881 taking Chang'an, where they set up a government. At one point in 882, after a poem ridiculing this new regime was posted on a government building, orders were issued to kill all those capable of writing poetry, and some 3,000 people perished as a result. It was not for another twenty years, however, that all pretence of Tang rule was abandoned, and the (short-lived) Liang dynasty pro-

claimed, beginning the period conventionally called the Five Dynasties (907–960) when China was fragmented into as many as ten regional states.

REASSESSING CHINA'S CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONS

In ancient times, when Chinese notions of their place in the world were first formulated, it was quite possible for Chinese thinkers to see China as the sole locus of civilization, the only place with writing, cities, and advanced manufacturing techniques. In Tang times such a view was no longer sustainable. For centuries pilgrims and missionaries had been travelling back and forth from India, bringing knowledge of a land with a written tradition that was fully the match of China's. Moreover, China's near neighbours could no longer be dismissed as primitives. Korea, Bohai (in Manchuria), Nanzhao (in Yunnan), Tibet, and Japan all constructed states, adhered to universal religions, made use of writing (sometimes inventing their own scripts), built cities, and engaged in long-distance trade. China could view itself as the superior on any of a number of grounds, but could not view itself as the only place with culture. In the early Tang, China's political, institutional, and cultural excellence received affirmation from all quarters; rulers

At the same time that printing was introduced as a means to reproduce texts, it also began to be used to decorate textiles. This fragment of an eighth-to-ninth-century silk banner, from cave 17 at Dunhuang, contains motifs of Persian origin (the roundels come from Persian metalwork) mixed with other designs of Chinese origin, such as the pair of birds.

In Tang times people began to sit on raised platforms, as depicted in this mural of a feast. The men seated are dressed in garb typical of scholars at their leisure, in gowns of blue or brown, black boots, and black hats. The mural, 70 by 92 inches, was painted on the wall of an eighth-century tomb near Chang'an.

in Korea and Japan, in fact, copied much of Tang culture and institutions wholesale in their own efforts to create powerful political centres. In the late Tang dynasty, however, a profound sense of cultural crisis pervaded intellectual life. The sense that some sort of action had to be taken motivated many of the best minds to rethink basic issues concerning the Chinese state and Chinese culture, in the process reinvigorating Confucian thinking. The ideas of two leading writers, Du You (732–812) and Han Yu (768–824), can be taken to represent these intellectual trends.

Du You, from an eminent aristocratic family, served with distinction in a series of provincial and capital posts. In 801 he submitted to the throne his *Tongdian*, an enormous history of Chinese institutions, in 200 chapters (over 5,000 pages in a

modern edition). This work can be read as a plea for an activist approach to the problems of his day, for reforming the government in order to strengthen the centralized, interventionist aspect of imperial rule, then under threat from the autonomous provinces. Most officials, of course, believed in the primacy and centrality of the emperor, but in Du You's view too many of them had an antiquated view of the imperial institution, elevating the emperor's ritual and cosmological roles and ignoring the ways government actually sustained itself. In organizing his compendium, Du You did not begin with court ritual, in the traditional way, but with food and money, the people's livelihood and the government's source of revenue. In discussing taxation, he had great praise for Gao Jiong, the Sui official who had taken charge of enrolling additional households in the equal-field system. During the period when the northeastern and northwestern courts had been in a state of constant war, 'cruel rulers and dilatory officials, heavy taxes and frequent labour service drove the people to seek the protection of local strongmen'. When the Sui imposed order and people saw the government would take a much smaller share of their harvests than the magnates did, they were willing to be registered. Thus to Du You, 'It was all due to Gao Jiong's efforts that the Sui fiscal system was instituted throughout the land and the people thus able to enjoy prosperity.' With hindsight we can see that the late Tang withdrawal of the state from management of the economy had positive effects, but to Du You well-designed government control was much to be preferred to leaving people to their own devices.

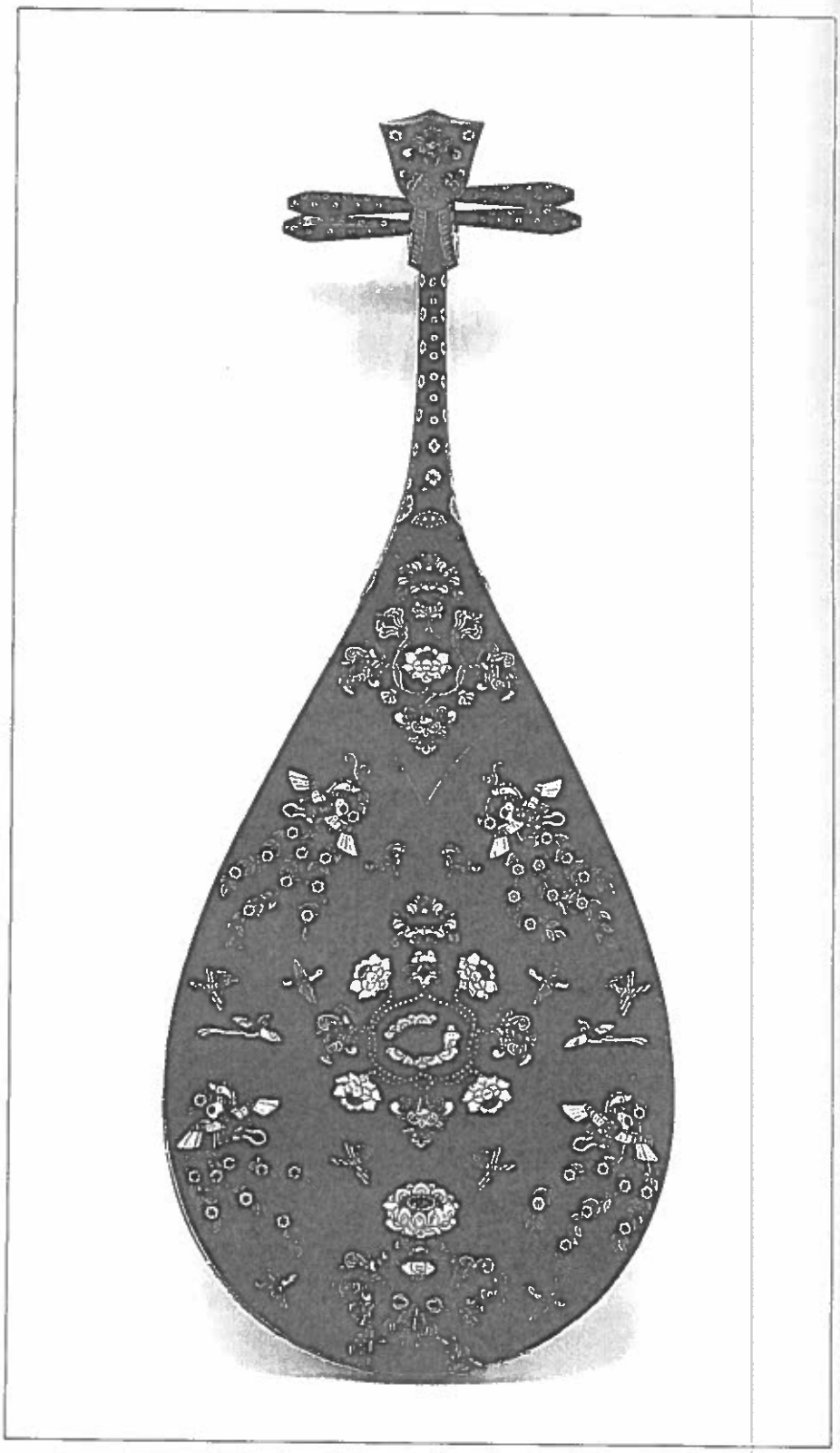
Du You took particular issue with Confucian scholars of a literalist bent who thought the government should pattern itself on ancient institutions described in the classics. To refute them he argued that in distant antiquity the Chinese had been as backward as some of the barbarians on the borders in his day. He contended that the prefecture and county system of government perfected in the Han and Tang was superior to the feudal system of the Zhou on the grounds that it made possible long periods of peace and population growth. The author of a preface to the *Tongdian* described Du You as believing that 'for the superior man, realizing his purpose lies in ordering the state, ordering the state lies in accomplishing things, accomplishing things lies in learning from the past, and learning from the past lies in changing with the times'.

Du's younger contemporary Han Yu saw China's problems much more in cultural terms. A committed Confucian, he reaffirmed the Confucian classics as the basis of education and good writing and promoted simpler styles of prose based on the ancient ideals of clarity, concision, and utility. He was as concerned as Du You with the weakness of the central government, but believed a rejuvenation of Confucian learning would bolster the state. He submitted a memorial to the throne protesting against the emperor's veneration of a relic of the Buddha. In it he labelled Buddhism a barbarian cult and the relic a foul object, much too inauspicious to touch. He argued that the emperor, by showing respect for it, was

encouraging the common people to give up their proper work and social obligations to pursue Buddhist goals, to the detriment of the state whose tax base was thereby reduced. In an almost equally famous essay on the origin of the Way, Han Yu argued that there was a single line of orthodox transmission of Confucian learning from the Duke of Zhou to Confucius and Mencius which had since been disrupted. Han Yu was, in a sense, proposing that to revive the 'Way of the Sages' it was necessary to go back to the *Analects* and *Mencius* to recover the authentic teachings. He provided a summary of Chinese civilization as broad in conception as Du You's but much more succinct: Chinese civilization began with the sages who saved people from peril, showed them how to secure food and clothing and defend against wild animals, taught them music and rituals, and created political institutions for defence and the suppression of crime; but it began to be perverted with the rise of Daoism and Buddhism. Han Yu ended his essay by advocating that Buddhist and Daoist clergy be layicized, their books burned, and their temples converted into homes.

Du You's and Han Yu's views are, of course, at odds with each other at many levels. Du You insisted on the need to grasp change and to know the details of concrete practices. Han Yu, by contrast, stressed what he saw as permanent and universal, and at the policy level stressed issues of moral character, arguing the need for leaders who had grasped the 'Way of the Sages'. Du You traced the successive stages of historical development, whereas Han Yu seemed to think it would be possible to leap back to a distant past as though the intervening centuries could be cancelled. Still, both men were in agreement on some matters. They both, for instance, had little interest in the sorts of cosmological theories about emperorship in vogue since the Han. Moreover, they shared a basic optimism about the possibility for men of good intention to take action in the world that would bring about change for the better. These attitudes were shared with many of their contemporaries and did a great deal to enliven intellectual debate in this period.

In Chinese historical consciousness, unity and expansion have been viewed as much more to the credit of the Chinese people than fragmentation and contraction. The first half of the Tang dynasty is thus viewed as one of the most splendid eras in Chinese history, the second half as its unfortunate aftermath. For a dynasty to decline in this way was not unexpected because traditional historians saw dynasties as progressing according to a predictable moral dynamic. Successful dynasties, like the Tang, were founded by men of vigour and purpose whose commitment to the larger good earned them the Mandate of Heaven. They built efficient governments on the basis of low but equitable taxes, having cleared away many of the local powers and corrupt practices that had accumulated before their rise. Their successors, however, would not all be supermen able to prevent power struggles at court, keep the cost of defence and local administration low, and



Instruments such as this three-foot-long, four-string pipa, a type of lute of Iranian origin, were given as gifts to envoys of Japan who visited China in the late seventh or early eighth centuries. The wooden marquetry on the reverse depicts flowers, birds, butterflies, and mountains.

preserve or enhance sources of revenue, all the while inspiring loyalty through their bearing and virtue. In this view of history, men of ability and integrity – both emperors and their counsellors – could arrest decline or even temporarily reverse it, but inevitably the dynasty would weaken and eventually fall.

To traditional Chinese historians, there was no comparable moral logic linking one dynasty to the next, and dynasties, presumably, could follow one after the other indefinitely. Thus, when Chinese historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries first came across European theories of linear progression from ancient, to classical, to medieval, and to modern civilization, they began to propose schemes for the larger periodization of Chinese history as well. As has already been mentioned in earlier chapters, they noted correspondences between Han and Rome, the Age of Division, and the Middle Ages. But the Sui–Tang reunification was an anomaly. In the west neither Justinian in Constantinople in the sixth century nor Charlemagne at Rome in 800 had been able to recreate an empire as large, centralized, or mighty as Rome. In China, the Tang more than matched the Han; it was able to contain more formidable external threats and manage a more diverse society with a more developed economy.

Few historians today accept either a cyclical view of Chinese history that downplays long-term change or a three- or four-stage periodization that assumes the normal pattern of historical development is the one that occurred in the West. In their search for China's own historical progression, it has become common for historians to focus on the late Tang as a key turning-point, elevating it from a period of lamentable decline to one of exciting growth. The distress that intellectuals felt as they witnessed the deterioration of central control sparked a major revitalization of Confucianism that continued into Song times. The inability of the central government to keep tight control over the economy may have hurt state coffers but it invigorated the underlying economy. Emerging from these confused and often distressing circumstances, China became a society less centred on the political and military structures of the state and therefore better able to weather political crises.