

Golden Ages in China

SECTION
1

**BEFORE
YOU
READ**

Reach Into Your Background

Suppose that future historians describe the 1900s as the “golden age” of the United States. Think about life as you

know it. What do you think are the best features of the American way of life? What accomplishments of the United States do you think people in the future will remember?

Questions to Explore

1. How did the ideas of Confucius influence Chinese society during the Tang and Song dynasties?

2. Why are the years of the Tang and Song dynasties called the golden ages of China?

Key Terms

dynasty porcelain
merit system movable type

Key People and Places

Tang Taizong Silk Road
Confucius Grand Canal

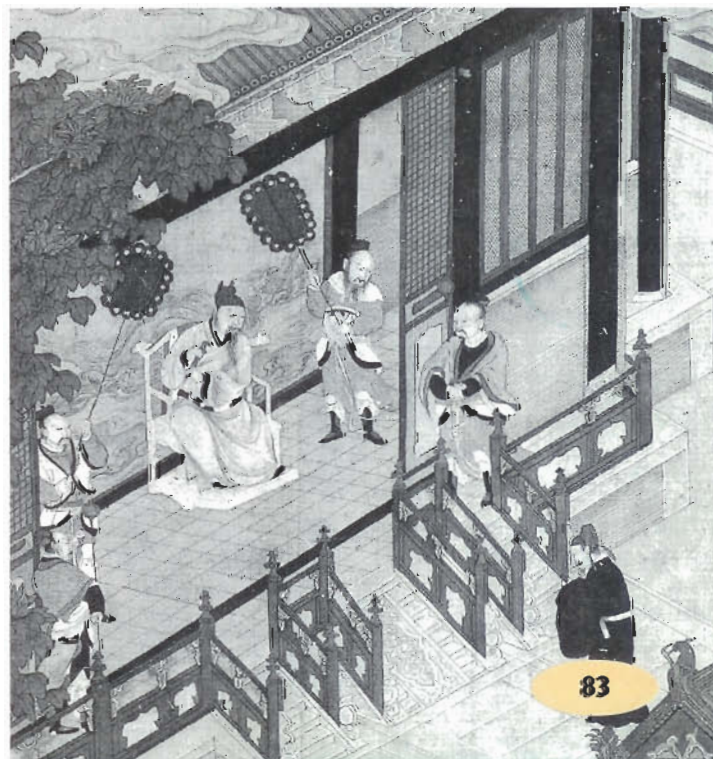
Tang Taizong (tang ty zung), who ruled China from A.D. 626 to 649, fought in many battles. From the age of 16, he had been in the military. Now, late in his reign, Taizong was tired of war. He read and reread the works of Confucius (kun FYOO shus), an ancient Chinese teacher. Confucius taught that if a ruler set a good example, no one would commit crimes.

According to legend, Taizong visited a prison and saw 290 men who had been sentenced to die. It was then a Chinese custom to kill all the condemned on the same day each year. Taizong took pity on the men. He said he would allow them to go home to visit their families if they promised to return the next day. All 290 men returned. Taizong was so moved that he set them all free.

A Glorious Heritage

The Chinese often tell this story to show what a good ruler Taizong was. He tried to put into practice the teachings of Confucius, who taught about relationships among family members and among members of society. Confucius wanted to bring peace and stability to China. He believed that if all people treated each other with respect, society

▼ This painting, which dates from the 1700s, shows Tang Taizong with his pet hawk.



The Tang and Song Empires

Map Study During the Tang dynasty, the land under Chinese control stretched into central Asia. Many people from these areas and even further west brought new ideas and goods to China. As a result, China became an important center for trade and culture. During the Song dynasty, invaders from central Asia pushed China's borders back. **Place** Under which dynasty did China lose control of much of the Silk Road?



LINKS TO LANGUAGE ARTS

Poems—and Legends Li Bo probably was the greatest poet of the Tang dynasty. He had an adventurous life—once he was even accused of treason. His poems, however, dealt with quieter subjects, such as nature and friendship. At the age of 61, while visiting relatives, he died. Soon a legend about his death spread across the country. It said that Li Bo was in a boat at night. The moon's reflection was so beautiful that he reached out to seize it, fell overboard, and drowned.

would be healthy. After Taizong's reign, many of Confucius' ideas took root in Chinese government.

Tang Taizong was the greatest ruler of the Tang dynasty. A **dynasty** is a series of rulers from one family. The Chinese give their family names first. Tang is the family name of Tang Taizong. The Tang dynasty lasted about 300 years, from A.D. 618 to 907.

The Tang dynasty united the Chinese in a large empire that reached from the Pacific Ocean to Persia. Fighting among different groups of people within the empire ended the Tang dynasty. Order was restored by the Song dynasty. The Song ruled from 960 to 1279. The map above shows the boundaries of the two dynasties.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, China entered a golden age, a time of great political and cultural achievement. The golden age of the Tang and Song dynasties happened for several reasons. One reason was the introduction of the **merit system** in hiring government officials. Under the merit system, officials had to pass tests and prove their ability to do the work. Before the Tang dynasty, officials came from rich and powerful families. They were allowed to keep their positions for life even if they did not do a very good job. Hiring people based on their ability to do the job, rather than on their wealth or social position, improved the government.

The Tang and Song rulers also encouraged music, art, and fine writing. In addition, the Chinese introduced a number of key inventions during this period. During its golden ages, China became one of the most advanced and powerful empires in the world.

A Golden Age in Trade

Another reason China flourished during the Tang and Song dynasties was its trade. China produced goods that were highly prized in Southwest Asia and Europe. And its system of roads and canals helped to make travel and trade easier.

Trade Goods: Silk, Porcelain, and Tea One of the most prized trade goods produced by China was silk. Because of its natural beauty, silk is often called “the queen of fibers.” Silk comes from the cocoons of caterpillars called silkworms. For a long time, only the Chinese knew how to make silk. Even after others discovered the Chinese secret, Chinese silk was of the best quality. People in Southwest Asia and Europe were willing to pay high prices for Chinese silk.

Another prized Chinese product was **porcelain**, a strong and beautiful type of ceramic. Because it was first made in China, porcelain is often called “china.” The Chinese developed the process for making porcelain during the Tang dynasty. They made beautiful vases, plates, cups, bowls, and figurines. For hundreds of years, the Chinese produced the best porcelain in the world.



Predict What products do you think China traded during its golden ages?

Tang Treasures

Europeans and South Asians paid dearly for Chinese trade goods, such as luxurious silk robes like the one worn by the woman in this illustration (left). Porcelain was another popular Chinese trade item. This man on horseback (right) shows the Tang love of green, brown, and yellow colors in ceramics. The vessel (below) shows the fine detail many Chinese porcelain-makers used. The vessel is designed to look like a well with a water jar.



LINKS TO ART

Art and Meditation

Traditionally, most Chinese paintings are landscapes painted on silk. Often the painter includes water, rocks, and plants. Usually, there are few signs of human life. The Chinese believed that such scenes, painted well, helped the painter and the viewer meditate, or focus, on important forces in the natural world. These forces—light and darkness, wind and water—were believed to hold the natural world together.

▼ Most goods carried along the Silk Road were small, costly items. These included tea, pepper, jade, ivory, and porcelain—like the goose shown below.



The Chinese also discovered the use of tea. At first, tea was used as a medicine. Later, during the Tang dynasty, it became the custom to drink tea as a beverage. The custom spread from China to Japan and other countries. Soon tea became a major crop. Every year, much of it was shipped out of the country for sale.

Trade Routes: The Silk Road and the Grand Canal

Chinese silk, porcelain, tea, and other products traveled across roads and waterways to other countries in Asia and Europe. One important trade route was the Silk Road, which stretched all the way from China to the Mediterranean Sea. Camels, horses, and donkeys carried goods along the 4,000-mile (6,436-km) Silk Road. The Silk Road was not one long road. It was really many roads that connected with one another. Long stretches of the route crossed mountains and deserts. Travel was often difficult and dangerous, even though rest stations were built along the road. A Chinese historian described a trip through the huge Gobi Desert:

“You see nothing in any direction but the sky and the sands, without the slightest trace of a road; and travelers find nothing to guide them but the bones of men and beasts.”

Travelers on the Silk Road



What might travelers on the Silk Road have worn? These paintings are reconstructions of clothing found in graves along the Silk Road in Central Asia. The outfits are of fine cloth decorated with gold.