



Chinese Empire Reunified and Split Again

During the Sui and Tang Dynasties (581–907), the second reunification period in ancient Chinese history, the Chinese Empire experienced prosperity again and unprecedented power.

The Sui Dynasty (581–618) ended centuries of division, and achieved the reunification and the establishment of the centralized state. The first Emperor of the Sui, Yang Jian, had been a court minister holding a key post in the last regime of the Northern Dynasties (386–581), the Northern Zhou Dynasty (557–581), who monopolized the political and military power. In 581, Yang Jian replaced the Northern Zhou with the Sui. Thus the Sui Dynasty was founded, with Chang'an



Modern buildings flanking the Beijing-Hanzhou Grand Canal.

(currently Xi'an in Shaanxi Province) as the capital. After the north was well consolidated, the Sui Court defeated the last of the Southern Dynasties, Chen, and unified the whole nation.

The Sui Dynasty lasted a very short time, less than 30 years, only some 10 years longer than the Qin Dynasty (221 BC–206 BC). The Sui Dynasty was often compared to the Qin Dynasty, which had a far reaching influence to the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). There would be no the Tang Dynasty (618–907) without the Sui. The Sui ended a long period of division, laying an important foundation for the future development of the Tang Dynasty. The Sui period saw great pioneering undertakings unparalleled in history: the one imperial civil examination system, which connected studying, the taking of examinations and attaining an official position, profoundly influencing the selection of talent in Chinese history; another the grand canal, which has always been the main artery in the nation's transportation between southern and northern areas, playing an important role in economic and cultural exchange between southern and northern



Sketch Map of Territory of the Tang Dynasty (618–907).



areas and the consolidation of the nation. The decline of the Sui Dynasty started from the second monarch, Emperor Yang, who was a typical tyrant. Emperor Yang led a luxurious and corrupt life. He employed over one million laborers to build irrigation ditches, some half of them died within ten days. As a result, the regime of the Sui Dynasty became rather unstable, rebellions happened frequently, the national power declined, and finally collapsed.

The Sui Dynasty was succeeded by the Tang Dynasty. As one of the longest dynasties, which lasted 289 years, with Chang'an as the capital, the unified and centralized Tang Dynasty was an unparalleled powerful and prosperous period in China's history. This historic period is divided into the early one, having a powerful national strength and cultural prosperity, and the later one, featuring social unrest and people's declining livelihood. The first emperor of the Tang Dynasty, Li Yuan, a vassal in the Sui Court, seized the opportunity to take

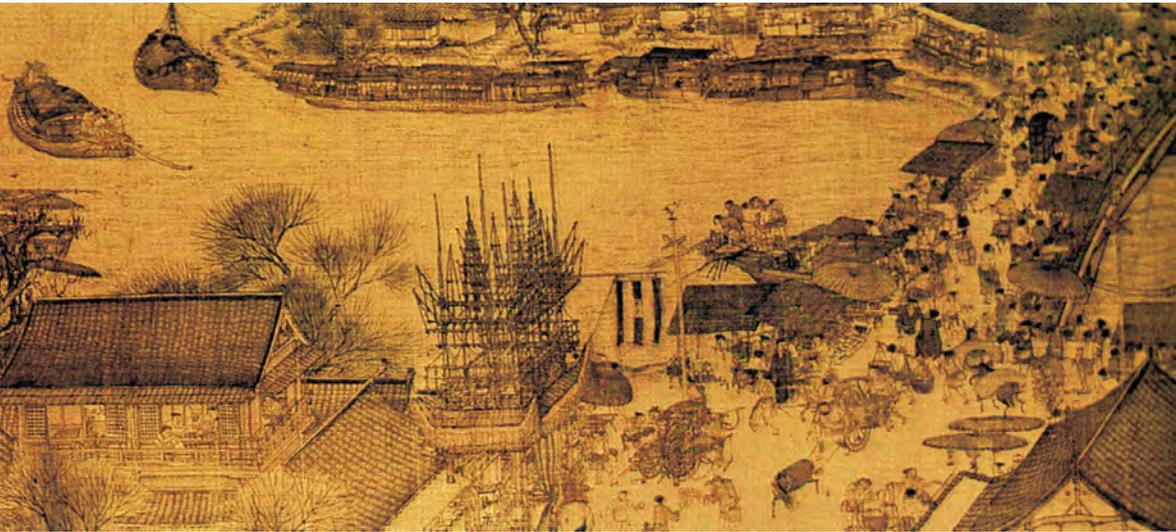


Horse Herding drawn by Han Gan of the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

control during the rebellions at the end of the Sui, proclaimed himself emperor and changed the state title into Tang, still with Chang'an as the capital city. The nation thus was unified.

Taizong, Li Shimin, was the second of the Tang emperors. He was the second son of Emperor Gaozu, Li Yuan. He is considered to be one of the greatest of the Chinese emperors. Li Shimin led the army in a campaign to secure the whole of the empire for his father and finally created a united China in about four years. Li Shimin wasn't the Crown Prince. He launched a palace coup and killed his brother to seize the Crown Prince position. The emperor was forced to abdicate. Li Shimin became Emperor Taizong. He rethought the experience of the Sui's decline, listened to opinions and proposals from all sides, used able people, reduced the tax burden on people and encouraged and developed production. He successfully strengthened the relationship between the Han and minority nationalities. This era of peace and prosperity is called the Prosperity of Zhenguan in history. This peaceful time reached a summit during Emperor Xuanzong's reign, who was Taizong's successor. That period is called the Heyday of Kaiyuan in history. Taizong's capacity for recognizing a man's ability, regardless of his background was demonstrated by appointments he made. People who had been opposed to him even got positions. Taizong practiced the art of control. He looked at the people as water and the government a vessel, saying the water can both float and capsize a vessel.

During the Tang Dynasty, the achievements in ideology, culture and arts in ancient China was taken to new heights. Buddhism, Taoism and Islam coexisted. Many great poets and writers emerged, such as Li Bai, Du Fu and Bai Juyi. There were new developments in the aspects of astronomy, calendar, medical treatment and construction. During the Tang Dynasty, the business road was restored; as a result, envoys from over 40 countries came to Chang'an, to build relationships with the Tang Dynasty. The state, under the rule of the Tang Dynasty, became the most powerful and prosperous country in the world.



Life in Bianjing (present-day Kaifeng of Henan Province), then the national capital, as described in the *Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*, masterpiece of Zhang Zeduan of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127).

In 755, two military generals of the Tang Dynasty, An Lushan and Shi Siming, launched a rebellion. Although it was put down, the central authority weakened increasingly from then on. A new local separatism emerged. The internal struggle for power grew. The national control was gradually lost. In the later Tang Dynasty, most parts of China broke out in a peasants' rebellion. The peasants seized the opportunity to fight. In 907, the Tang was replaced by the Liang Dynasty.

After the Tang Dynasty came to an end, ancient China stepped again into more than 50 years of division. Five dynasties of the Liang, Tang, Jin, Han and Zhou emerged sequentially in the central plain region in the north. In order to distinguish between them and the same names of former dynasties, the five dynasties were termed as the Latter Liang, the Latter Tang, the Latter Jin, the Latter Han and the Latter Zhou in history. The period of the five dynasties lasted for only 53 years, from 907 to 960. At the same time, some small separate states

were built in the southern areas and some places in the north. As a total of 10, they were also called the Ten States in Chinese history. They lasted for 88 years, from 891 to 979. Thus The Period of the Five Dynasties and Ten States was named by China's historians.

The Song Dynasty (960–1279) succeeded the Five Dynasties and Ten States. By means of the capital and boundaries changing, the Song Dynasty consisted of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127) and Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), in China's history, also called the "two Songs". Its founder Emperor Taizu, Zhao Kuangyin, through a mutiny seized imperial power in 960 AD. He changed the state title into Song, and named Bianjing (today Kaifeng in Henan Province) as the capital. This period was known as the Northern Song Dynasty in history. In the early period of the Northern Song Dynasty, southern China had been basically reunified, and most parts of the country were under the control of the Song.

Emperor Taizu of the Song Dynasty, Zhao Kuangyin, was originally senior officer of the imperial guards in the Latter Zhou Dynasty. He was draped with the imperial yellow robe by his supporters and seized political power by launching a mutiny. To avoid the recurrence of his story, he decided to find ways to weaken the power of the generals. Carefully designed, he hosted a dinner inviting the generals who had followed him for many years, and had contributed a lot to the establishment of his reign. During the banquet, he lamented: "Thanks to you all, I will never forget that it is you who brought me today. But do you know that the emperor is not happier than a military governor?" The generals didn't understand his meaning, felt surprised and asked why. He replied: "The reason is easy, who does not want to be the emperor?" The generals said: "Your Majesty, Why did you say so? Now who will think and do that?" He calmly said: "May it be right. Even if you don't think so, there is no guarantee that your subordinates will not covet the wealth. Once they draped the imperial yellow robe on you, it could not be help." The generals were scared and answered quickly: "In our ignorance we



implore the guidance of Your Majesty to give us a way out.” He said, “ You’d better relinquish the leadership of the military, and buy more fertile farmland and big houses to enjoy yourselves. There isn’t any problem between us. Let’s live in peace. Is it all right?” The next day, the generals handed in letters saying they decided to resign because of illness. He immediately agreed, and rewarded them large amounts of money. This is the famous story in China’s history, called remove from military position by means of cups of wine.

In 1127, the Northern Song regime was defeated by the Jin in the north. And Southern Song Dynasty was established in Lin’an (present-day Hangzhou of Zhejiang Province).

With a prosperous economy, radiant arts, education and culture, developed science and technology and liberal governing, the Song Dynasty was one of the “golden age” periods in Chinese history, and also considered as another period of Renaissance and economic revolution by Western scholars. There were more than 50 countries with trade relations with China in the Song Dynasty.