

Encarta Historical Essays reflect the knowledge and insight of leading historians. This collection of essays is assembled to support the National Standards for World History. In this essay, Craig Lockard of the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay examines the influence throughout Asia of China under the great Tang Dynasty. Tang China, he demonstrates, maintained a superpower status that only a few nations have equaled.

Tang Civilization and the Chinese Centuries

By Craig Lockard

In every era, one or two countries have existed that can be called superpowers because of their influence in world military, economic, political, and cultural affairs.

Superpowers even developed in ancient times, as the ancient Persian Empire and the conquests of Alexander the Great set the stage for Rome, Maurya India, and Han China to dominate the western, southern, and eastern regions, respectively, of Eurasia. Over the centuries that followed, the Arabs, Mongols, Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch, successively, achieved powerful positions in a widening world, followed by the British in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 20th century, the dominant nation has been the United States. Indeed, the decades since 1945 have sometimes been called “the American Century” because U.S. power and influence have been so great around the world. Transregional dominance is difficult to maintain, however, as other civilizations eventually catch up and forge ahead. The influence of the United States will have to prove enduring to match the longevity of China’s status as a superpower, which began in the middle of the first millennium AD.

The period from 300 to 1000 was a time of intensive exchange and interaction across Eurasia. Several civilizations stand out as major influences. Gupta India, Byzantium, and the Islamic caliphates of the Middle East were remarkable powerhouses. Some world historians view the years from about 600 to 1500 as the Chinese Millennium, with China as the largest, strongest, and most populous civilization in Eurasia. China's success beginning under the great Tang dynasty (618-907) would prove to be the longest

lasting period of success in world history. Indeed, the Tang dynasty is regarded by many historians as the most glorious period of China's long history.

The years during which the Tang empire experienced its greatest power established a pattern for China that would continue throughout the Song and Ming dynasties into early modern times. Tang rule set a standard mark on many facets of Chinese life, including literature and the arts. For this reason, Tang China was admired and copied by many other peoples. During Tang rule, China had its greatest influence on eastern Asia and, at the same time, carried out active trade with peoples across Eurasia. For more than 100 years, the Tang empire stretched deep into Central Asia, and various aspects of Chinese culture spread to Korea and Japan. Buddhism flourished, linking China to a widespread religious community. Tang China was an open forum for people and ideas from many cultures.

Tang Imperial Power in Asia

During the 8th and 9th centuries, a series of empires large and small stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Tang China was the greatest of them all; the only comparable civilization in the world at that time was ruled by the Arabs. The Tang dynasty established imperial control over peoples far from China proper, building an empire comparable in size to that of the great Han dynasty half a millennium earlier. Korea and Japan acknowledged Chinese leadership of the region and cultivated the good will of Tang China. Ambitious military campaigns brought Central Asia, Mongolia, Manchuria, Tibet, and parts of Siberia under Chinese domination.

Meanwhile, satellite kingdoms that recognized Chinese leadership existed as far across Asia as Persia and Afghanistan. This widespread recognition generated intense commercial relations between Islamic and Chinese civilizations. The great Islamic caliph Harun ar-Rashid, for instance, forged a treaty with the Tang empire. This treaty served as an example of China's diplomatic clout in Western Asia. Hence, the Tang

dynasty exercised considerable power over the countries of East, Southeast, and Central Asia, and many other peoples admired the Tang system of rule.

In much the same way as the prosperous 20th-century United States fueled the global economy, the wealth and power of Tang China was so great that it stimulated commerce throughout much of Eurasia. During the rule of the Tang dynasty, China was open to the world. Tang military garrisons protected the Silk Road trade routes of Central Asia, encouraging the flow of goods, ideas, and people between China and Western Asia. Through this vast network, Chinese products, such as silk and porcelain, reached Europe. Tang porcelain, which has been found in Egypt and Turkey, was especially prized in the Middle East. A dynamic sea trade linked China with India, Persia, and various Southeast Asian countries. During Tang rule, merchants from all over Asia formed temporary or permanent communities in several Chinese cities. For example, of the 200,000 inhabitants of the great southern port of Canton (present-day Guangzhou) during Tang rule, perhaps two-thirds were immigrants, including many Arabs and Persians.

This multicultural exchange also benefited the Chinese. Among the new products to appear was Southeast Asian tea, which soon became a hugely popular drink. Gift-bearing ambassadors from diverse regions, such as Burma (now Myanmar), Java (in Indonesia), and Nepal were regularly sent to the Tang court. In addition, renewed contacts with peoples in India and the Middle East generated a flowering of creativity. Of all the native Chinese dynasties throughout history, the Tang was the most cosmopolitan.

The Tang Golden Age: The Hallmarks of Superpower Status

Like the United States did during the 20th century, the Tang dynasty achieved superpower status in its day through a combination of factors. These factors include a dynamic metropolitan base, efficient and credible centralized government, strong economic growth, religious tolerance, and technological leadership. China's huge

population fostered a sophisticated urban civilization, which attracted talent from all over Eurasia. The imperial government was structured for effective administration of its vast territories and staffed by able officials. China's productive economy supplied a substantial revenue base. A diversity of religions stimulated intellectual and cultural life, while Tang science and technology, including weapons, were the most advanced in the world.

Modern superpowers are metropolitan, with dynamic and culturally rich cities. Tang China was the most urbanized civilization of its day, with many cities larger than any in Europe or India at the time. The Tang capital was the glorious city of Chang'an (present-day Xi'an), which was home to two million people. Cosmopolitan Chang'an, then the largest city in the world, governed a population of perhaps 60 million. This was as many people as lived in European and Islamic civilizations combined and more than a quarter of the world's total population. A masterpiece of urban planning, Chang'an featured streets carefully laid out in a grid. Its broad thoroughfares were crowded with visitors who included Arabs, Persians, Jews, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Turks, Indians, and Tibetans. Many foreign craftsmen and artists worked in Chang'an, as well as entertainers from as far away as India and Afghanistan. Foreigners came as merchants or to join the Tang army. This influx of culture brought about many challenges: Some traditionalists complained that so much foreign influence threatened Chinese culture.

One key to the superpower status of the United States has been its efficient and credible government; under Tang rule, centralized governmental structure reached maturity. The Chinese perceived their empire, with some justification, as the Middle Kingdom, the central civilization of the world. An imperial family who claimed universal authority ruled this kingdom. Under the emperor's rule were many government agencies. A competent bureaucracy was necessary for administering this large, diverse empire. To staff it, the Tang dynasty recruited officials from aristocratic clans. Additional talented and educated individuals were chosen based on their performance on the competitive

civil service examinations. The civil service exam system, which was based on classical Confucian learning and literary composition, was one of Tang China's finest achievements. This system insured that government officials had a shared Confucian ideology that emphasized ethics and loyalty. The Tang empire's unified administration gave a coherence and sophistication to Chinese society that was the envy of other civilizations.

As the United States has shown, superpowers are generally centers of economic growth. This was the case with Tang China. To adequately feed a growing population, the Tang Chinese had to achieve higher agricultural yields. In the course of doing so, the Chinese became one of the world's most efficient farming peoples. Increased food supplies and better transportation led to more trade and population growth, especially in the cities. Crafts and merchant guilds appeared in Tang China, as did the world's first paper money. In addition, Chinese traders regularly acquired luxury goods from Southeast Asia.

Religious tolerance has been another hallmark of superpower status. Just as the United States tolerated the importation of such non-Christian religions as Islam and Buddhism during its past century of global power, Tang China welcomed new faiths. In ancient times, the Chinese had developed several unique philosophies, including Confucianism and Daoism. Later, Mahayana Buddhism filtered in, bringing with it closer ties to other Buddhists in Central and southern Asia. Some Chinese Buddhist pilgrims journeyed to India, and Chinese support also helped Mahayana Buddhism achieve dominance in Central Asia, displacing earlier versions of Buddhism. During Tang rule, these three very different beliefs—Confucianism, Daoism, and Mahayana Buddhism—coexisted and even merged together to some degree, creating the mixed Chinese way of thought that characterized later centuries. Buddhism lost some of its vigor but remained part of popular art, literature, and religion.

The Silk Road brought other new religions into China. These included Nestorian Christianity, a sect persecuted in the West as heretical; Judaism, brought by Jewish merchants who settled in several cities; Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian faith; Manichaeism, a mix of Christianity and Zoroastrianism; and Islam, which became influential in northwest China. Many Tang emperors, who held an ecumenical view, tolerated these religions.

Another characteristic of a modern superpower is a lively cultural scene that extends across its borders. For example, the 20th century has seen the spread of elite and popular U.S. culture throughout much of the world. Tang culture, most notably its literature and art, influenced regions far beyond China. The Tang era was the greatest age of Chinese poetry; such poets as Li Bo and Du Fu are still widely read in East Asia even today. In addition, many of China's greatest artists, including painters, calligraphers, and sculptors, lived during the Tang empire. The dynasty also became famous for its splendid lacquerware, luxurious brocades, decorated furniture, and musical instruments.

Just as the United States was the most creative technological civilization of the 20th century, Tang China led its world in the fields of science and technology. Many significant scientific and technological achievements, especially in astronomy and mathematics, characterized the era. Tang astronomers studied sunspots and accurately measured the solar year (365 days). Centuries before Europeans accepted the view, some Tang scientists suggested a round Earth that revolved around the Sun. The Chinese pioneered the analysis, recording, and prediction of solar eclipses. Chinese technical experts perfected gunpowder, an elaboration of the firecracker. Furthermore, Tang military forces had primitive cannons and even flaming rockets.

Superpowers also export technology. Many Chinese inventions, such as printing, reached Western Eurasia by land or by sea. Although paper had first been invented in China centuries earlier, the Tang developed woodblock printing. This breakthrough allowed the mass production of Buddhist writings and texts for the civil service exams.

Scholars compiled great encyclopedias to record the accumulated knowledge, classifying the wisdom of the past for the benefit of future generations. Printing fostered a writing-based culture in the cities. By 900, Islamic Spain and Baghdâd had established silk and papermaking trades based on Chinese principles. Printing practices developed in China later helped transform European civilization.

The Tang Model in Korea and Japan

Long before and after the Tang dynasty, China was the cultural heartland of East Asia and strongly influenced its neighbors, especially Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. Both Vietnam and Korea derived much of their higher civilization from China, including writing systems, philosophies, and political institutions. Chinese influences were adapted to surviving local customs, and both Vietnamese and Koreans retained separate cultural identities. Japan produced an even more distinctive version of East Asian civilization, although Japan accepted many Chinese influences. China's cultural influence on Korea and Japan reached its height during the Tang dynasty.

The Tang empire made the Korean state Silla a vassal, and it became an eager importer of Chinese culture and institutions. Buddhism triumphed, and many Korean monks traveled to China. The Tang system became the governmental model, and Confucianism was adopted as a political ideology. The Tang influence on Korea was important in other ways. Koreans adapted Chinese writing to their own language. The origins of such martial arts as karate and tae kwon do are based on Chinese teachings, some of which later found their way to Japan. After the 10th century, Chinese influence continued. Koreans even set up an examination system and Confucian schools. Koreans retained or developed many of their own social institutions, however. The Koreans were never mere imitators of the Chinese.

The Chinese ideas and methods that Japan adopted helped transform it into a dynamic, sophisticated civilization. During the Tang Dynasty, the Japanese carried out three centuries of deliberate cultural borrowing from China, enabling Japan to enter the

mainstream of world history. Using the Chinese writing system, the Japanese began conducting their daily activities and recording their history. The adoption of Buddhism also brought a rich heritage of art and architecture to Japan. Change in Japan accelerated when Prince Naka no Ôe launched the Taika (Great Change) Reform of 645. This reform was an attempt to transform Japan into a centralized bureaucratic empire like Tang China.

Japan's conscious borrowing from China reached its height from 710 to 794. This period is known as the Nara period, named after Japan's first capital city, which was built on the model of Chang'an. Land was nationalized and, using Tang models, reallocated to the peasants. In practice, the policies that were so successful in Tang China never quite worked in Japan. The Japanese emperor could not become a powerful Chinese-style ruler, because influential aristocrats dominated emperors, controlled the bureaucracy, and held large landholdings.

Nara leaders actively promoted Chinese culture. People in Japan were encouraged to build Chinese-style buildings and wear Chinese clothing. The imperial court's rituals and ceremonies, such as the orchestral music and stately dances still practiced in modern times, were mostly based on Tang models. The Chinese written language gained prestige and was adapted to Japan's spoken language. Such Tang literary forms as poetry and calligraphy, as well as landscape painting, became popular in Japan. Chinese philosophical and religious ideas also spread to Japan. The Japanese borrowed Confucianism but modified its political and ethical message to suit their own social structure. The Japanese also accepted and adapted Mahayana Buddhism. Furthermore, the Japanese retained their practice of Shinto, a kind of nature worship.

Japan's direct cultural borrowing from China began to fade in 794, when the capital moved from Nara to Heian-kyo (present-day Kyôto). Over several decades, Japan gradually returned to a period of relative isolation. In the 9th century, the Japanese again began consciously absorbing and adapting Chinese patterns, attempting to make them

genuinely Japanese under the theme "Chinese learning, Japanese spirit." This era saw a flowering of Japanese culture with a strong Buddhist influence. Even during Japan's long feudal period, finding Tang influences in religion, literature, and the arts was not difficult.

The Tang Decline and Heritage

During the Tang Dynasty, China truly was the Middle Kingdom. Measured by any standard, Tang China surpassed the rest of Eurasia. Empires are expensive to maintain, however, and superpowers do not endure forever. The reign of Emperor Xuanzong (Hsüan-tsung) from 712 to 756 is usually considered the zenith of Tang greatness as a world power. The Tang began to decline after a military defeat by Arabs at the Talas River near Samarqand (in present-day Uzbekistan) in 751. This defeat halted Chinese expansion and compelled a gradual retreat and a governor's rebellion, which removed the emperor, in 755. Islam filled some of the vacuum created by the declining Tang empire, becoming the dominant religion in Central Asia. The gradual loss of the Central Asian empire led to eventual Tang collapse. Rebel bands sacked Chang'an, and China broke apart for several decades. The Tang dynasty was followed by the Song dynasty, which had many achievements but much less world and regional power than the Tang empire. Together, these two dynasties are considered the height of China's Golden Age. The Ming dynasty, which began in 1368 and lasted until 1644, reasserted regional power in the Tang tradition.

The period from 618 to 907 can indeed be called the Chinese centuries since the Tang Dynasty established a firm foundation for greatness during this time. During these centuries, China launched an era of unparalleled political, social and cultural stability, as well as economic prosperity. From the 7th through the 15th centuries, China forged ahead, becoming the richest, best-organized, and most populous civilization in the world. China remained a superpower until the Industrial Revolution in Europe established the basis for the West to move into unchallenged global leadership.

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