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4 The Creation of a Community

China, Korea, and Japan (Seventh–Tenth Centuries)

Chinese Imperial Restoration: The Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) Dynasties

The Sui Reunification (589) and the Founding of the Tang

In 581, a palace coup brought a new dynasty, called Sui, to power in the history-haunted region "Within the Passes" in northwest China. The founder of this dynasty was a man named Yang Jian (541–604). As emperor, he is known as Sui Wendi (the "Cultured Emperor of the Sui"). His father had been a high official, ennobled as the Duke of Sui, under the last Xianbei-ruled regime in northwest China (the Northern Zhou Dynasty). Yang Jian inherited his father's title as Duke of Sui, and his daughter was selected to be a consort for the imperial crown prince. When this crown prince, in due course, inherited the throne in 578, it made Yang Jian the father-in-law of the reigning emperor – always a potentially influential position. Because this emperor only lived two more years and was succeeded by a young boy, Yang Jian was then well placed to step in and grab supreme power for himself. After eliminating all potential legitimate heirs to the throne, and quelling a certain amount of armed opposition, Yang Jian usurped the throne outright, founding the Sui Dynasty.

A few years earlier, in 577, the last independent Xianbei-ruled dynasty in northeast China (the Northern Qi) had already been conquered by the predecessor of the Sui Dynasty in the northwest (that is, Northern Zhou), accomplishing the reunification of north China. The new Sui Dynasty now aspired to conquer the south too, and complete the reunification of a Chinese world that had been divided (with one brief exception) ever since the disintegration of the Han Dynasty that began in 184. The south, meanwhile, had never recovered from a devastating mid-century rebellion (548–552), which had severely diminished Southern dynasty imperial resources. In particular, control over the strategic upper (western) reaches of the Yangzi River had now passed from the south to the north. During the centuries of division, the north had frequently been able to field superior cavalry-based armies, but the south had always been protected, when all else failed, by the

formidable natural barrier of the Yangzi River. Now the south was vulnerable to attack down the line of the river from the west. The final southern military defense also appears to have been ineptly led. Although the Sui Dynasty spent eight years preparing for its invasion of the south, a relatively small Sui expeditionary force was able to capture the southern capital (modern Nanjing) in less than one month of combat operations in 589.

The southern capital, which may have been the largest city in the world in the early sixth century, was completely destroyed. The city that we know today as Nanjing had to be rebuilt again later, almost from scratch. Nearly four centuries of southern independence also ended forever (with only fleeting temporary exceptions). Chinese dynasties would continue to rise and fall, punctuated by occasional brief periods of division, but China had now been fairly permanently reunified. The Sui completion of the Grand Canal in 611, a manmade waterway linking the Yangzi River in the south to the Yellow River in the north, can be said to have capped the Sui Dynasty's military, economic, and cultural unification of the entire Chinese world.

This spectacular Sui Dynasty success story soon unraveled, however, due to a classic example of what historian Paul Kennedy calls "imperial overstretch."[1] The second Sui emperor (Yangdi, r. 604–618), who gained the throne under a cloud of suspicion of having murdered his own father, attempted to continue the Sui imperial expansion. Most of south China had fallen quickly to Sui armies in 589, but the Red River valley area in the extreme south (in what is today northern Vietnam) was not reconquered by Sui until 602. From there, under its second emperor, the Sui launched an even more ambitious invasion farther south into the wholly foreign realm of Champa, in what is now central Vietnam, in 605. Despite some military victories, the expedition suffered heavy losses due to tropical diseases. The Sui also launched an invasion of an island that may have been Taiwan.

In the north, by 612, the Sui had subdued the Eastern Türks. The Türks — who may have originated in the southern foothills of the Altai Mountains as a small group of ironworkers in the service of another steppe qaghanate (khanate) in Mongolia — emerged from obscurity in 552 by swiftly defeating their former overlords and seizing control over Mongolia. Forging an alliance with Sassanid Persia, by around 563 the Türk empire had extended its sway westward across much of Central Asia, after which they approached the Byzantines with an offer of alliance against Persia.

This enormous Eurasian Türk empire soon split into largely separate eastern and western qaghanates. The Eastern Türks established relations with both of the rival Xianbei regimes in north China in the mid-sixth century, but tended to favor the Northern Zhou in the northwest, which may have helped strengthen Northern Zhou and contributed to its reunification of north China in 577. After the Sui Dynasty replaced the Northern Zhou in 581, the Sui was now expansively ascendant on all fronts. In the far northwest, Sui authority was extended as far as Turfan and Hami in Xinjiang. Even successful Sui military campaigns placed heavy burdens on the resources of the empire, however, and in 612 Sui began an attack

on the northeastern kingdom of Koguryŏ (in northern Korea and southern Manchuria) that proved to be a fatal failure.

In 607, the second Sui emperor had discovered that Koguryŏ was making secret diplomatic contacts with the Türks. Because he felt this was improper behavior for what he haughtily regarded as a vassal state, the Sui emperor threatened that if Koguryŏ did not promptly dispatch an appropriately submissive embassy, he would personally lead an armed "inspection" into Koguryŏ. More than imperial vanity and protocol was at stake: a military alliance between Koguryŏ and the Türks might seriously threaten the Sui. In addition, much of the territory of Koguryŏ had once lain inside the Han Dynasty frontiers, and a desire to match the glories of the Han may have also fired Sui imperial ambition.

A Koguryŏ raid into Sui territory in 598 had already been met with a large but unsuccessful Sui counter-invasion that same year. In 612, a massive Sui army, reportedly involving over a million combat troops, was assembled for an invasion of Koguryŏ. Although one Sui naval contingent actually penetrated the outer walls of the Koguryŏ capital, it was quickly expelled. The Sui armies operating in northern Korea could not obtain adequate provisions and eventually were forced to retreat – or starve. Much of the Sui invasion force was annihilated during this retreat. Undeterred by this first fiasco, however, the Sui emperor called for a second attack on Koguryŏ in 613. This time, the Sui forces were obliged to turn back quickly to deal with a domestic rebellion. Yet a third invasion was ordered in 614, which achieved some limited success, but by this time, the Sui Dynasty was rapidly disintegrating from within.

The massive conscription and mobilization of resources that made possible these monstrous invasions put a severe strain on the common people, especially in northeast China. In 611, one rebel, based in the Long White Mountains of modern Shandong Province, attracted draft evaders to his camp with a song about not "rashly dying" in northeastern military campaigns. Further rebellions quickly spiraled out of control. Some of these rebellions were led by high-ranking former Sui Dynasty officials rather than by desperate peasants. Clearly, even well-placed men within the dynastic establishment were turning against it. Eventually, as many as two hundred separate identifiable rebel groups arose.

Meanwhile, in 615, the Sui emperor was encircled and trapped by Türks at a place called Wild Goose Gate (Yanmen) in northern Shanxi, near the great northward loop of the Yellow River. He was rescued from this trap by troops led by his maternal cousin Li Yuan (566–635), the Duke of Tang. On the strength of Li Yuan's proven combat effectiveness against the Türks, Li was made garrison commander of the frontline northern city today known as Taiyuan, in Shanxi, while the Sui emperor himself retreated to the comfort of his favorite refuge in the south. The Sui emperor was suspicious of his cousin Li Yuan, however, and delegated two officers to keep their eyes on him. When these men conspired with the Türks against him, Li Yuan was tipped off and trapped them instead, rising in open rebellion against the Sui emperor in 617. In 126 days, his army marched south to occupy the Sui capital in the region "Within the Passes." In 618, the second (and last) Sui emperor was strangled to death at his southern refuge by

some of his own courtiers, and Li Yuan ascended the throne as the founding emperor of a new Tang Dynasty.

The Consolidation of Tang Rule

After proclaiming the establishment of this new Tang Dynasty, the name of its capital city (modern Xi'an) was restored to what it had been in the glorious days when it had served as the capital of the Former Han Dynasty (i.e., Chang'an), to invoke the memory of China's first great age of imperial unity.[2] (The actual layout of the Sui and Tang dynasty city, however, more closely followed the recent example of the Tuoba Xianbei Northern Wei capital at Luoyang.) A claim was also publicized that the spirit of the ancient Daoist sage Laozi had supernaturally revealed himself to be Li Yuan's ancestor (the "Old Master" Laozi's surname was believed to have also been Li) and divinely predicted that Li Yuan was destined to win the empire. Despite such brave assertions, however, at the time Li Yuan seized the throne he actually controlled little more than the region "Within the Passes," and years of further warfare would be necessary before all the many other rebel bands were eliminated and all China reunified again. Significantly, early Tang population figures (as of 639) show serious population decline from the heights of the Sui Dynasty just a few decades earlier. Whether or not there were actually fewer people, fewer people were being counted by the government. The years of transition from Sui to Tang witnessed much upheaval.

The second Tang emperor (Tang Taizong, r. 626–649), then, came to the throne in an especially horrifying manner. In the final stages of a power struggle with his own elder brother (during which, at one point, Taizong supposedly survived an attempted poisoning), in 626, the future emperor Taizong (keep in mind that Taizong is his posthumous temple name, and not a name by which he would have been known at that time) bribed the commander of a palace gate (the Xuanwu gate) to set up an ambush. As his older brother, accompanied by a younger brother, rode in, they discovered the trap and spurred their horses in an attempt to escape. Taizong chased them, firing arrows, and his older brother was shot and killed. Taizong himself was then knocked from his horse by some branches, but before his younger brother could take advantage of this sudden vulnerability, Taizong's men arrived and put the younger brother to death also. When the heads of the two assassinated princes were displayed, resistance ended. Taizong then dispatched a man to "safeguard" his father, the reigning emperor, who was boating on a palace lake at time. Whether out of shock and horror, or perhaps because he had all along coldly calculated that the succession would have to be determined by such ruthless competition,[3] the father soon vacated the throne, elevating himself to the ceremonial position of Retired Emperor, and Taizong became emperor of Tang.

Despite the bloody way in which he gained the throne, and the fact that just days after becoming emperor, a massive Türk army penetrated to within a few miles of the capital and had to be humiliatingly appeased before withdrawing, Tang Taizong is remembered as one of the most outstanding emperors in all of Chinese history. The reign of Taizong became a time of peak Chinese political and military power, and Taizong also presided over an age of exceptionally glorious cosmopolitanism. This cosmopolitanism extended even to the Tang imperial family itself, which was of culturally mixed descent. It has even been suggested that the fratricidal power struggle that brought Taizong to the throne may have been a lingering influence of Xianbei nomadic cultural traditions.

Until the establishment of the Sui Dynasty in 581, the rulers of north China had mostly still been identifiably non-Chinese Xianbei. In the mid-sixth century there had even been a revival of Xianbei names and language. Although the new Sui imperial family are said to have been Chinese (tracing descent through the paternal line), and they did restore the use of Chinese names after 581, they had also lived for generations in what we now call Inner Mongolia and had extensively intermarried with the Xianbei elite. Their cousins, the Tang imperial family, sprang from identical origins. Li Yuan, the Tang founder, was said to have been a great archer and hunter who "never missed his shots."[4] Elements of nomadic culture long remained noticeable at the Tang court, and during the Sui and Tang dynasties, Xianbei-style clothing even became a new standard Chinese costume.

Actual Türks gave valuable assistance to Li Yuan in establishing his Tang Dynasty, and although relations between the Tang and Türk empires then turned hostile for a generation, in 630, the Eastern Türks were decisively defeated, and Tang Taizong assumed for himself the title of "Heavenly Qaghan" as a Türkic-style supreme ruler over the eastern steppe (as well as Chinese-style emperor of China).[5] By the mid-seventh century, Tang military and political influence had penetrated deeply into Central Asia, although direct Tang administration probably never extended any farther west than Hami and Turfan in Xinjiang. The renowned Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (ca. 596–664), who traveled to India in 629–645 to study Buddhism at its source, reported encountering an "orphan city" near the Talas River, in what is now Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, where more than three hundred households of formerly Chinese inhabitants lived. By the time Xuanzang arrived, they had become acculturated to Türkic standards of dress and activity, but they still preserved the Chinese language and certain Chinese customs.[6]

Traveling in the other direction, the game of polo, which appears to have originated in Persia, became popular in Tang China. Nestorian Christianity also reached China during Taizong's reign, and a Christian church was established in the Tang capital by imperial decree in 638. A number of Nestorian Christian churches apparently existed in Tang China, although the religion never sank deep roots into Chinese society. Other exotic Western religions, such as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, also enjoyed official toleration and may have been more widespread.

If the Tang began as a militarily expansive, culturally mixed, and "self-consciously multi-ethnic empire," however, it ended three hundred years later, in 907, as a much more "self-consciously mono-ethnic empire united by significantly more homogenous Chinese culture." The Tang Dynasty was "perhaps *the* crucial period in the formation" of a Chinese ethnic, and even proto-national, identity.[7]

The aborigines who had lived scattered throughout south China, and who had made up a substantial portion of the total population of the Southern dynasties, largely disappeared during the Tang – absorbed into the general Chinese population (although a considerable number can still be found even today, especially near the frontiers). Many descendants of the Xianbei and of the other non-Chinese groups who had ruled north China from 304 until 581 also lost their separate identities and simply became Chinese during the Tang era. The term "Han," which had first begun to be used as an ethnic label to distinguish the conquered subject population ruled by Xianbei elites during the Northern Wei Dynasty, came to refer to all of the people of the Tang Dynasty.[8]

At least forty-three persons of traceable non-Chinese descent are known to have reached the highest government office (grand councilor) during the Tang Dynasty. The general who captured Tashkent in remote Central Asia for the Tang in 750 was a second- or third-generation descendant of an émigré from Korea. Several of the most renowned Tang Dynasty Chinese-language poets, such as Li Bai (also spelled "Li Po," 701–762), Liu Yuxi (772–842), Bai Juyi (also spelled "Po Chü-I," 772–846), and Yuan Zhen (779–831), were all of known, or suspected, non-Chinese descent. Whatever their ancestry, however, by this time, they had all effectively become Chinese, and unparalleled masters of the Chinese language. As already mentioned, a rhyming dictionary (the *Qieyun*), which set an influential standard for "correct" Chinese-language pronunciation, was compiled in 601 in part by a man of known Xianbei descent. And, even as persons of Xianbei descent became native speakers of Chinese, the Xianbei language itself became extinct. Of the many Xianbei-language songs that had frequently been performed at Northern dynasty courts, by 801, although fifty-three were still in existence, only six titles could still be understood.[9] Despite the fact that some degree of multilingualism was probably only normal throughout much of the premodern world, this was less true of Tang Dynasty China. Within the geographic place we call China, the Chinese language had triumphed.

The Harmonization of Diversity

An obscure mid-sixth-century religious figure named Lu Fahe (dates unknown) may help illustrate how the cultural diversity of the Age of Division came to merge into the relative uniformity of the late Tang. Lu Fahe first attracted notice while living in reclusion as an ascetic *śramaṇa* (Buddhist monk) on Thirty Mile Island, in the middle reaches of the Yangzi River. His place of origin was unknown, but some said he came from the centermost of the five sacred peaks in the ancient Chinese cultural heartland in the north. He spoke, however, with a southern aboriginal accent, and he appeared frequently in close association with aborigines. Lu developed a reputation for being able to predict the future and was much sought after in helping people design houses and lay out graves in such a way as to bring good fortune (what is called *fengshui*, or geomancy). He also gathered medicines to cure the many diseases of the lush southern climate, and he cast imprecations that allegedly prevented venomous insects and wild animals from biting or stinging.

Once, when someone tested a new blade on an ox, severing its head with one blow, Lu warned the man that he must perform meritorious services for the spirit of the ox or be struck by karmic retribution. The man scoffed, but died a few days later.

At the time of a major southern rebellion in 548, Lu joined loyalist imperial forces in counterattacking the rebels. He summoned eight hundred aboriginal disciples to a river ferry and set sail aboard a warship with some regular imperial troops. At a place called Red Sands Lake, they encountered the enemy. Because the wind was wrong for releasing fireships to drift down on the rebel fleet, Lu (according to the story) magically changed the direction of the wind by waving a white feather. After the defeat of the rebel forces, Lu became an imperial official, but when the southern empire split, and the southern emperor he served was killed by an invasion from the Xianbei-ruled dynasty in the northwest, Lu Fahe defected in 555 to the rival Xianbei regime in the northeast. As Lu Fahe approached the northeastern capital (Ye, near modern Anyang in Henan), the northeastern emperor, who had heard of Lu's uncanny arts, went out from his city several miles to respectfully meet him. When Lu caught sight of the distant city, he dismounted and performed the Pace of Yu. In the city, later, Lu would again rise to high office.[10]

The Pace of Yu refers to the legendary founder of the first Chinese dynasty, Great Yu. According to the legend, Great Yu traipsed the length and breadth of China taming floods that were ravaging the land and, in the process, supposedly became lame, developing a peculiar gait or pace. By the Age of Division, something called the Pace of Yu had become a potent performance in the ritual arsenal of religious Daoism.

Lu Fahe is an extremely obscure and unimportant figure, but his career is of some interest nonetheless. Aside from illustrating the role of religion in China in living practice (as opposed to scripture-based sectarian doctrine), it also nicely demonstrates the inextricable mingling of Indian Buddhism with assorted native Chinese religious ideas, and the merging of north and south, aborigines, Xianbei, and Chinese, and the possibility of bringing them all together through the invocation of the grand Chinese cultural tradition, symbolized by the legend of Great Yu. The stage was set for reunification.

The Age of Division had been marked by sweeping physical population movements, which not only brought non-Chinese people such as the Xianbei to power in north China but also dispersed large numbers of Chinese refugees from the ancient heartland in the Central Plain to new locations in the far northeast, northwest, and, above all, south of the Yangzi River. The result was to promote cultural exchange, ethnic intermixing, and a general expansion of Chinese civilization. For example, the manuscript of a set of civil service examination answers written in 408 has recently been discovered near Turfan, Xinjiang. Although the test itself had probably actually been administered in Gansu, in the somewhat less extremely remote northwest, and the literary quality of the writing is hardly outstanding, it is nonetheless noteworthy that Chinese-language written civil service examinations were being conducted at such a time and place.[11]

The last Xianbei-ruled dynasty in the northwest, based in the region "Within the Passes," initially had only a small number of Xianbei warriors at its disposal – perhaps fewer than ten thousand. After a military defeat by its northeastern rival in 543, it began recruiting ethnic Chinese into the army out of necessity and, in the process, erasing the long-standing occupational division between Xianbei warriors and Chinese (Han) farmers. When its successor dynasty, the Sui, forced many soldiers to return to civilian status and farming in 590, following its reunification of China, the division between non-Chinese warriors and Chinese farmers effectively ended.

Meanwhile, despite a revival of Xianbei names, language, clothing, and culture in the mid-sixth century, that same final northwestern Xianbei Dynasty had also, paradoxically, simultaneously revived an idealized memory of ancient Chinese Zhou Dynasty institutions, and pointedly called itself [Northern] Zhou. This may have been in part simply because the regime happened to be based in the ancient Zhou homeland "Within the Passes," and also because it needed some unifying ideology to rally an otherwise decidedly mixed population. The Sui Dynasty emerged directly out of this regime in 581, and reunified China in 589.

The reunified Sui and Tang dynasties then transformed the empire into a single, centralized country. The Tang, for example, established a network of 1,639 post stations along the main roads leading to the capital to facilitate communications. Beyond mere administrative centralization, moreover, Tang also began promoting a more uniform Chinese culture. Near the beginning of his reign, in 619, the Tang founder established temples to the Duke of Zhou and Confucius at the Imperial Academy, with seasonal sacrifices to their spirits. In 628, Confucius was elevated to a position of superiority over the Duke of Zhou, and in 630, every province and county in the empire was ordered to establish such Confucian temples. Although the practice of offering sacrifices to the spirit of Confucius at his own home state of Lu (in modern Shandong) dates back to at least the beginning of the Han Dynasty, and a Confucian temple may have first been erected at the Imperial Academy in the capital in 386, these seasonal rites at Confucian temples, which became a hallmark of traditional Chinese civilization, reached mature form only in the Tang Dynasty.

The early Tang also established empirewide standard editions of the Confucian Classics and went to unprecedented efforts to construct a continuous narrative history of the Chinese past. In 593, the Sui Dynasty had imposed a ban on the private composition of state histories, which did not begin to be relaxed until the middle of the Tang. History writing was therefore concentrated at the imperial court, as a great affair of state. The Tang Dynasty then sponsored major imperial history-writing projects. Of the unparalleled sequence of "Twenty-four Dynastic Histories" that provide the standard version of the story of China from the time of the legendary Sage Kings to the end of the premodern era, eight, exactly one-third of the total (including two that were somewhat unofficial), were compiled within roughly a twenty-year period at Tang Taizong's court.

Education is a particularly powerful tool for promoting a common cultural identity. Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty had, to a large extent, first defined the Confucian canon and established Confucianism as state orthodoxy when he appointed teachers and established an Imperial Academy in the second century BCE. Now, in 624, the Tang founder ordered every province and county in the empire to establish schools. By 738, at least on paper, there were nineteen thousand official schools in Tang China.[12]

Before long, official state-run schools came to be eclipsed by private education. Such late-Tang literary giants as Li Bai, Du Fu (712–770), and Han Yu (768–824) all received their educations privately. The result of this privatization may have only been to further universalize education in late Tang, however. Many people undoubtedly were still illiterate or poorly educated, but in 824, it was nonetheless claimed that the latest fashionable poetry was in the mouths of every "prince, duke, concubine and wife, child tending cattle, and passerby on horseback."[13] What had once been exclusively elite cultural standards were increasingly diffused to become universal Chinese norms, and in the process, the old divisions between Great Families and commoners, and between Chinese and non-Chinese, were collapsing into a more universal Chinese civilization. For example, in a cache of old texts preserved by the arid climate of remote northwestern Dunhuang, over a thousand anonymous popular lyrics from the Tang period have been found, many of which may have been written by fairly ordinary folk.

The new technology of woodblock printing was also already beginning to play a role in this process of diffusing a common Chinese culture by the end of the Tang Dynasty. The origins of printing are obscure, and the oldest known surviving printed text is a Buddhist charm discovered in Korea dating from sometime before 751. By the early ninth century, however, a complaint was already heard in Tang China that printed calendars were on sale in the markets throughout the empire even before the Bureau of Astronomy issued its official calendar each year.[14] Although a genuine explosion in the availability of books due to printing would have to wait until the next dynasty, such humble printed items as calendars were already becoming available for use by ordinary people in late Tang, and were helping to promote a common Chinese culture in the process.

Even private education in Tang times was, furthermore, directed toward specifically imperial goals by the civil service examination system. Tests had been used in the selection of Chinese officials since at least the beginning of the empire, but only as part of a selection process that was driven mostly by personal recommendation. During the Age of Division, beginning in 220, a so-called Nine Ranks system had been introduced, under which specially designated regional administrators evaluated potential candidates for office and ranked them – in practice, largely based on family background. The result was to deeply entrench the status of a few Great Families, who acquired something even of an aristocratic aura. In the early sixth century, however, one Southern dynasty emperor asserted the radical idea that officials should be selected purely based on ability as demonstrated through examination, without regard to family background. In 587, the Sui Dynasty terminated the evaluating authority of the Nine Ranks administrators and began to move toward a system based more on examinations.

Several different academic degrees came to be offered. For the Understanding the Classics (*ming jing*) degree, all but one line of a selected passage from one of the

Confucian Classics would be covered up, and several characters of the remaining line would also be concealed. The candidate was then expected to be able to supply the missing characters from memory. After this, there would also be an oral examination and answers to test questions. During the reign of the second Sui emperor, another new degree, called *jinshi* (Presented Scholar), was introduced, which put more emphasis on questions of current relevance, as well as poetry and literature, and less on memorization of the classics. The *jinshi* quickly became by far the most esteemed degree, and in later dynasties it would eventually come to be the highest of a standard sequence of three successive degrees. During the late Tang Dynasty, an annual average of about thirty *jinshi* degrees were awarded, and the degree's prestige was incomparable.

Obtaining a degree such as the *jinshi* conferred status and qualified a man to potentially hold government office, but to actually be appointed to office it was still necessary to be further examined by the Ministry of Personnel. In the Tang, this examination paid special regard to physical appearance and deportment, speaking ability, calligraphy, and ability to pronounce judgments. Under the growing authority of Empress Wu Zetian (624–705) in the late seventh century, anyone who believed they had talent – even commoners – were encouraged to recommend themselves for advancement, and the practice of testing candidates anonymously may have first been introduced.

The civil service examination system, which reached full maturity only after the Tang, became perhaps *the* defining institution of late imperial China (until it was abolished in the name of modernization in 1905). Although the system always had its critics, it may be said that it did promote a relatively fluid and apparently meritocratic social and political order, and it was certainly a powerful force for cultural homogenization. For example, several grandsons of one eighth-century Türk from the remote northwest, who had himself attained distinction through military service to the Tang, "all became known for Confucianism" and achieved success through the examination system.[15]

Commercial exchange also contributed to Tang Dynasty cultural integration, as will be examined in more detail later. One new product circulated by the Tang commercial markets was tea. Tea had been mentioned as early as the Han Dynasty, and during the Age of Division tea drinking became popular in the south. In the north, meanwhile, the prevalence of livestock raising had made dairy products the beverage of choice (for perhaps the only time in Chinese history). Under the reunified Tang Dynasty, the passion for drinking tea spread from the tea-producing regions in the southeast to the entire country. One explanation for tea's new popularity was that it was promoted as an aid to staying awake during Buddhist meditation.

Domesticating Chinese Buddhism

Although the reunified Sui and Tang dynasties depicted themselves as restorations of the earlier Han Dynasty imperial unity, in many ways, China was now a substantially different place. The spread of tea, and chairs, during Tang times

are but two examples of such innovations. The most glaring difference was probably Buddhism. Buddhism had been unknown in China at the start of the Han Dynasty, and even at the end of the Han it was still very much a religion for foreigners. By the time of the Sui reunification in 589, however, there were reportedly more copies of the Buddhist *sūtras* in China than of the Confucian Classics. China had become a thoroughly Buddhist land.

In Sui and Tang, monks from the major capital monasteries took turns contemplating the Buddha in a place of worship within the imperial palace, day and night without cease. Once under the Sui, and four times under the Tang, empirewide networks of Buddhist temples were ordered constructed, with obligations to perform services for the imperial family and recite *sūtras* for the religious protection of the state. Public preaching reached a large popular audience by late Tang, and ordinary people sometimes bankrupted themselves making religious donations. By late Tang times, even criticism of Buddhism was frequently couched in Buddhist terms. For example, if all earthly activity is an illusory dream – the mere "shadow of a bubble," as the Buddhists liked to say – then a counterargument could be offered that expenditure and labor on behalf of Buddhist temples is also in vain, and that efforts might more appropriately be diverted to the relief of the poor and the service of the state. Although there never was a time when all Chinese people universally were Buddhist – there were always other religious traditions, and belief remained largely a matter of individual choice – by Tang times, China had become deeply Buddhist. At the same time, though, Buddhism had also become thoroughly Chinese.

Buddhist monks in China frequently resided in permanent, sometimes magnificent, monasteries. By Sui and Tang times, some of these monasteries had grown into complex tax-exempt economic institutions with their own estates, slaves, pawnshops, and sometimes even floating high-interest loans. Following the secular Chinese family model, the Chinese Buddhist abbot handed monastic property down to a chosen successor, establishing patriarchal lines of succession. This, combined with certain doctrinal variations, helped generate what are often called the sects of Chinese Buddhism. It should be emphasized that while these sects did become formally distinct in Japanese Buddhism, in China, especially through Tang times, the situation remained more fluid.[16] Nonetheless, there were certain subdivisions in Chinese Buddhism that can loosely be considered as sects. In particular, through long resonance with native Daoist language and ideas, the Chinese domestication of Buddhism reached a kind of culmination in something called Chan (in Japanese, Zen; in Korean, Sŏn).

From the early Chinese conviction that there was a Buddha Nature in every person, it began to be supposed that this Buddha Nature was everywhere and that salvation could be attained in this life merely through realization of this truth. In Chan Buddhism, enlightenment may be sought not by escaping from the world but by awakening to the reality of the world around you. The word *Chan* literally means "meditation" (from the Sanskrit *dhyāna*), and meditation was central to Chan: not merely as a way to enlightenment but as enlightenment itself in practice. Chan meditation – the stripping away of thoughts and sensations and the elimination of

superficial distinctions to realize the fundamental unity of all things – was aided by characteristically enigmatic riddles intended to stimulate awakening. The study of scripture, on the other hand, was said to be useless, because ultimate truth simply cannot be reduced to words. Chan Buddhism famously has been described as "a special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded upon words and letters" but rather "pointing directly to [one's] mind."[17] Appropriately enough, the renowned Sixth Chan Patriarch Huineng (638–713) began life as an illiterate firewood seller and apparently never learned to read.

By the end of the Tang Dynasty, and especially under the next dynasty (Song, 960–1279), Chan had become perhaps the mainstream of Chinese Buddhism. Chan, by this time, was quite thoroughly Chinese, and most of its actual development can be traced back to that Chinese Sixth Patriarch Huineng. Even with Chan, however, a legendary Indian origin was still obligatory. According to tradition, the Chan transmission had passed through twenty-eight generations in India, starting from Śākyamuni Buddha himself, until an Indian Brahman known as Bodhidharma brought it to China sometime around the year 500. This Bodhidharma was a real historical figure, but most of the legends associated with him developed only later. He is best known for supposedly introducing the meditative technique of "wall watching" as a method of calming the mind. Bodhidharma is regarded as the First Chan Patriarch.

Despite the Chinese domestication of Buddhism, genuine Indian connections still existed. The great Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang went on a seventeen-year journey to India and the western regions in early Tang. He returned in 645 and presided over the translation into Chinese of more than thirteen hundred rolls of Indian scriptures he had brought back. In the middle of the Tang Dynasty, three prominent South Asian missionary monks, Śubhakarasiṃha (637–735), Vajrabodhi (671–741), and Amoghavajra (705–774), introduced Esoteric (Tantric) Buddhism to the Tang court. Amoghavajra (who had come to China while still a child) was especially influential, enjoying the support of three Tang emperors. In 765, when the Tang capital was threatened by an invading enemy army, the emperor, instead of organizing military resistance, sent copies of Amoghavajra's new version of the *Sūtra for Benevolent Kings* to two temples, where priests recited the scripture and officials burnt incense for the protection of the state. When the invasion failed, Amoghavajra was credited with the victory.

Among Amoghavajra's Chinese disciples was the monk Huiguo (d. 805), who in turn instructed the visiting Japanese monk Kūkai (774–835) as well as at least one monk from Korea and another from what may have been the island of Java. Kūkai was then responsible for introducing Esoteric Buddhism to Japan, where it is called Shingon. In Japan, this Esoteric Buddhism became much more important than it was in China, largely as a result of Kūkai's incomparable talents. As Kūkai described it, a direct sequence of transmission from Vairocana (the first of the five celestial Buddhas) linked Esoteric Buddhism directly to Amoghavajra, then Huiguo, and finally Kūkai himself. Despite such claims, however, Kūkai actually studied under the Chinese master Huiguo a mere six months. Any real transmission of learning must have been somewhat tenuous.

Chinese contacts with India continued during the Tang and afterward, and the volume of maritime trade with Indian ports actually accelerated. But the center of gravity for Chinese (and East Asian) Buddhism had shifted now to China, and Chinese Buddhism developed thereafter almost exclusively in the Chinese language. A number of late Tang monks, such as Huaisu (b. 737), are best known for their achievements in calligraphy, which is not only a quintessentially Chinese art form but is also necessarily writing in the Chinese language. Other late Tang monks are famous for their Chinese-language poetry, including Jiaoran (ca. 734–ca. 792), who once playfully wrote, "I don't like foreign languages; I won't study them; And I've never translated barbarian words."[18] Given the extreme importance placed on translating Indian scriptures in the early phase of Chinese Buddhism, this represents a remarkable loss of interest in anything foreign. Such self-absorption, however, is entirely consistent with the general monolingual self-confidence that Chinese civilization was beginning to display.

Watershed: The Mid-Tang Crisis

Tang Taizong was succeeded on the throne in 649 by a weaker son, who was (inappropriately) attracted to one of his father's former concubines, Wu Zetian (624–705). This Lady Wu soon became the real power behind the throne, and after the emperor's death, she placed two of her own sons on the throne in quick succession. In 690, drawing on the support of the Buddhist *Great Cloud Sūtra*, which predicted that the Future Buddha Maitreya would one day be reincarnated as a female ruler, she broke completely with precedent and proclaimed herself the founding emperor of a new Zhou Dynasty. Although there have been several women in Chinese history who exercised actual supreme power, typically from the position of empress dowager, Wu Zetian is the only woman to ever officially hold the title "emperor." Wu Zetian was ruthless (and undeniably a usurper), but she was also a dynamic individual and a capable monarch, and she has understandably been the subject of considerable fascination ever since.

In her old age, however, when Empress Wu was about eighty, power finally slipped from her hands. Not long before her death, she was compelled to restore the Tang Dynasty in 705 and allow her son to resume the throne. After several more years of palace intrigue, in 712, another great Tang emperor, Xuanzong (r. 712–756), ascended the throne (see Figure 4.1). The reign of Emperor Xuanzong is commonly regarded as the golden age of the Tang – the most glorious period of a generally glorious dynasty – and is especially celebrated for the outstanding poets it produced. Xuanzong's reign ended, nonetheless, in disaster.

For roughly a century, the Tang Empire had remained militarily dominant. In 647, a Tang army had been able to intervene as far away as India to suppress a rebellion. In 659, the Tang defeated the Western Türks (having already defeated those in the east). In 668, in alliance with Silla, Tang crushed the northern Korean kingdom of Koguryŏ. The ultimate Tang military high water mark did not come until as late as 750, when Tang armies captured Tashkent in Central Asia. Long before that time, however, the military tide had already begun to turn. Korea,

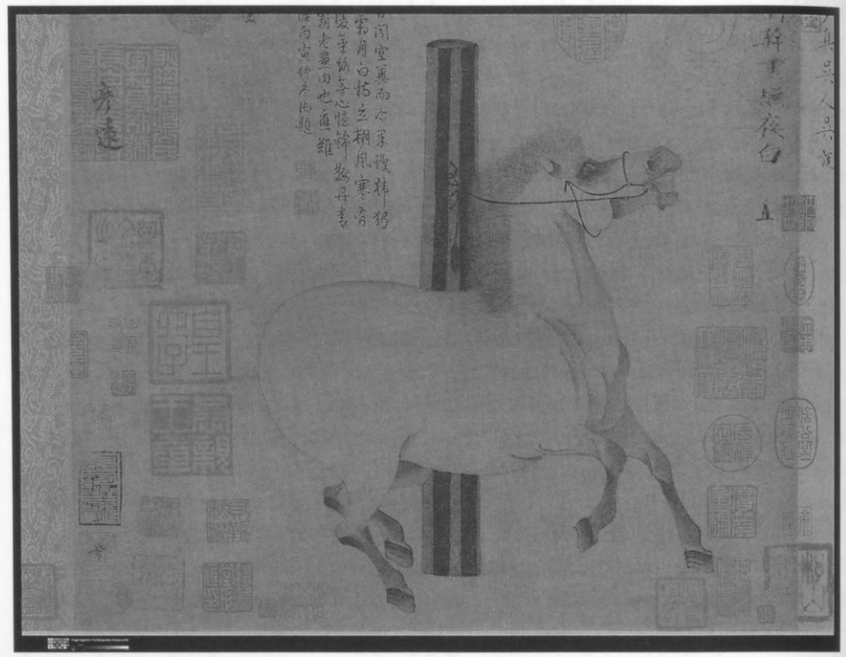
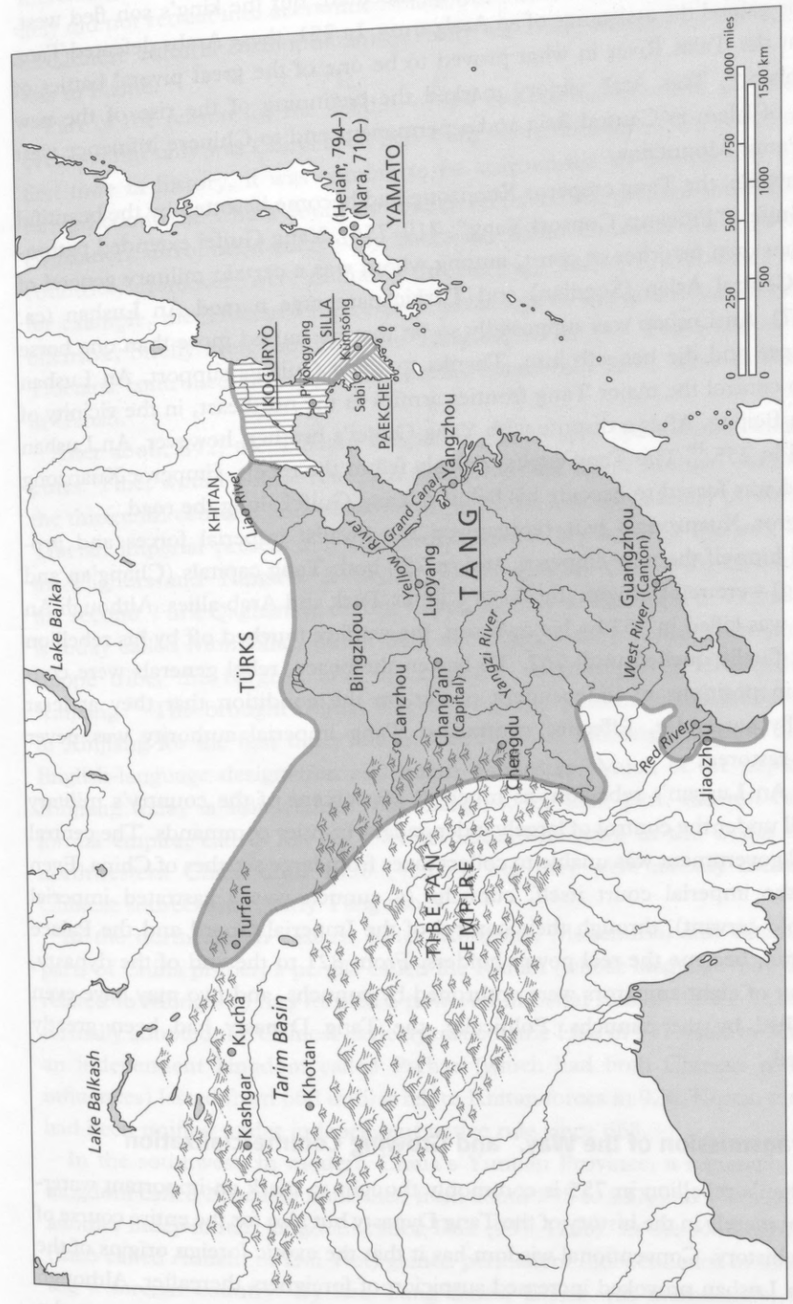


Figure 4.1. Han Gan (active ca. 742–756), "Night-Shining White," a horse belonging to Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756). Handscroll, ink on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, New York.

under unified Sillan rule, proved stubbornly independent. Around 679, the Eastern Türks restored their independence in Mongolia as what is sometimes called the second Türk Qaghanate. By the end of the seventh century, there were also the first stirrings of Khitan power in the northeast. Most dangerous, however, was the rising new Tibetan Empire.

The various tribes of Tibet were first unified under King Songtsen Gampo (Srong-btsan sgam-po, r. ca. 618–641). The royal seat was initially in the southeast, at Yarlung, and then later at Lhasa. Songtsen Gampo's reign also coincides with the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, from both Tang China in the east and India in the south. The king accepted a royal Chinese bride, who supposedly discouraged the Tibetan practice of smearing their faces with red ochre, but the king also married a princess from Nepal and adopted an Indian, rather than the Chinese, writing system, laying the foundations for the emergence of a distinctive Tibetan civilization. Beginning around 665, this new Tibetan Empire overran Khotan, Kuchā, Karashar, and Kashgar in previously Tang-dominated Xinjiang and, shortly before that time, also captured the area of modern Qinghai. Although Tang counteroffensives recaptured some of these outposts, the Tang now confronted a highly formidable imperial military rival in the west.

In 747, a Tang general of Korean descent named Gao Xianzhi (Ko Sŏnji in Korean; d. 756) won a victory in the vicinity of Gilgit, Kashmir. Growing



Map 4.1 East Asia in 650 CE

overconfident, he began offensive operations against the small kingdoms in the western regions, and in 750, he took Tashkent. The captive king of Tashkent was sent to the Chinese capital, where he was executed, but the king's son fled west, where he gained the assistance of an Arab army. In 751, these Arabs defeated Tang forces at the Talas River in what proved to be one of the great pivotal battles of world history. This Arab victory marked the beginning of the rise of the new religion of Islam in Central Asia and a permanent end to Chinese influence west of the Pamir Mountains.

Meanwhile, the Tang emperor Xuanzong had become besotted by the beautiful Yang Guifei ("Precious Consort Yang"; 719–756). Yang Guifei extended patronage to her own favorites at court, among whom was a certain military general of mixed Central Asian (Sogdian) and Türkic parentage named An Lushan (ca. 703–757). An Lushan was supposedly so fat that he caused more than one horse to collapse and die beneath him. Thanks to Yang Guifei's support, An Lushan came to control the major Tang frontier armies in the northeast, in the vicinity of modern Beijing. After a dispute with Yang Guifei's brother, however, An Lushan rebelled in 755.[19] The Tang capital quickly fell to the rebels. Emperor Xuanzong fled, and was forced to execute his beloved Yang Guifei along the road.

Emperor Xuanzong's heir reorganized the loyalist imperial forces and proclaimed himself the new emperor, and in 757 both Tang capitals (Chang'an and Luoyang) were retaken with the aid of Uighur Türk and Arab allies. Although An Lushan was killed in 757 by his own son, the warfare touched off by his rebellion was not finally quelled until 762. To hasten the peace, rebel generals were confirmed in positions of independent power on the condition that they at least nominally surrender. Effective centralized Tang imperial authority was never entirely restored.

After An Lushan's rebellion, as much as 80 percent of the country's military force fell under the control of largely independent frontier commands. The central imperial government was unable to collect taxes from large swathes of China. Even within the imperial court itself, eunuchs (a eunuch was a castrated imperial household servant), through their control of the Imperial Guard and the Palace Secretariat, became the real power holders. From 821 to the end of the dynasty, seven out of eight emperors were enthroned by eunuchs, and two may have even been killed by the eunuchs. Politically, the Tang Dynasty had been greatly weakened.

The "Transmission of the Way," and Growing Commercialization

An Lushan's rebellion in 755 is commonly thought to mark an important watershed, not merely in the history of the Tang Dynasty but also for the entire course of Chinese history. Conventional wisdom has it that the exotic foreign origins of the rebel An Lushan provoked increased suspicion of foreigners thereafter. Although Uighur Türks and other non-Chinese forces helped Tang loyalists suppress the rebellion, they also unleashed much looting and slaughter of the Chinese population in the process. Despite these developments, however, the volume of foreign

trade actually increased after the rebellion, bringing with it, among other things, increasing numbers of Arabs and Persians to Chinese coastal ports. China definitely did not retreat into economic isolationism after An Lushan. But the great age of Chinese cultural cosmopolitanism really was over, whether or not An Lushan was to blame.

Part of the reason for the decline of the old cosmopolitanism may have been because, not only was China itself becoming more homogeneous, but also, for the first time in history, it was coming to be surrounded by comparably organized foreign countries. China could no longer very credibly pretend to be a universal civilization surrounded merely by barbarian tribes. Some of these new foreign countries, moreover, were militarily threatening. During An Lushan's rebellion, for example, the Tibetan Empire took advantage of the distraction to resume its offensive, briefly even capturing the Tang capital in 763. From 780 to 848, the Tibetans controlled the important northwestern Silk Road oasis at Dunhuang, in Gansu.

After about 842, the Tibetan Empire began to split apart due to internal disputes. Tibet would not be reunified again until the era of Mongol domination in the thirteenth century, and would never again be a major military power. But the Tibetan imperial presence in the northwest was replaced by the new forces of the Uighurs and Tanguts. A Uighur Türkic Empire (744–840) had succeeded the second Türk Qaghanate on the steppe directly to the north of China (in what is today called Mongolia), but in 840, the Uighurs were scattered by yet another steppe tribe, the Kirghiz, and the center of Uighur power relocated west to Xinjiang.[20] This brought Uighur Türkic-language speakers in substantial numbers to Xinjiang for the first time, and is the source of Xinjiang's modern alternative English-language designation as Eastern Turkestan. Much of the population of Xinjiang today is still Uighur. The Tanguts, for their part, did not establish a formal empire, called Xia (or "Western Xia," Xi Xia), in the Ordos region of northwestern China until 1038 (–1227), but they were already mentioned in Chinese sources from early Tang times.

In the northeast, in eastern Inner Mongolia, Manchuria, and extending into parts of China proper, a people called the Khitan (whose language may have been related to Mongolic) had formed a powerful imperial state by 907 (–1125), which formally adopted the Chinese-style dynastic name Liao in 947. Also in Manchuria, an independent kingdom called Parhae (which had both Chinese and Korean influences) lasted from 698 until it fell to Khitan forces in 926. Korea, meanwhile, had been unified under independent native rule since 668.

In the southwest, in modern China's Yunnan Province, a regionally powerful kingdom called Nanzhao flourished from about 738 to 937, and was succeeded by another independent kingdom called Dali (937–1253). In the southeast, Vietnam (then called Annam or Dai Viet) gained permanent independence in 939, becoming a foreign country. By late Tang times, China was increasingly, therefore, becoming just one country among other roughly equivalent countries. Some of these foreign countries were organized in fashions similar to the Chinese Empire, and some posed serious military threats. The result was a multistate international

system, fostering some of the preconditions for what might even be called proto-national identity formation. Two short Tang Dynasty essays written in the late ninth century explicitly considered the issue of what was Chinese identity, and both concluded that political loyalty and adherence to Confucian ideals were the main criteria for being Chinese.[21]

Another reason for the end of the great age of cultural cosmopolitanism in China may have been because, as described earlier, Chinese culture was by this time becoming increasingly standardized. The extension of formal Chinese-language education and the spread of common cultural expectations during the Tang Dynasty may have been more responsible for a growing consciousness of difference between Chinese and foreigners than any fear inspired by An Lushan's rebellion. Central to this more unified culture of late Tang were the first stirrings of a great Confucian revival, which would color all the remainder of premodern Chinese and East Asian history. This Confucian revival began with a call to reject the ornate literary parallelism of recent prose writing and return to the simpler so-called ancient writing of the classics. A new emphasis was placed on fundamental philosophical principles, such as human nature and "principle" itself (*li*), and on understanding the broad meaning of the Confucian Classics rather than narrow textual study.

Two authors in particular prefigure what has come to be known as Neo-Confucianism: Han Yu (768–824) and Li Ao (d. ca. 844). In their writings, they fabricated a new vision of an "orthodox transmission" of the Confucian Way, or *Dao*, that began with the legendary Sage Kings Yao, Shun, and Yu and was passed to the founders of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the Duke of Zhou, and finally to Confucius and Mencius. As Han Yu wrote in a letter in 820, this Orthodox Dao then went into decline after the time of Confucius and never completely recovered from the First Emperor of Qin's notorious book-burning campaign, hanging at times by only a thread.[22] The implicit claim was that this Confucian Dao had now been rediscovered and revitalized in a kind of Chinese Renaissance. The explicit claim, unambiguously, was that there is only a single line of correct succession and a unitary Confucian truth. Under the next dynasty (the Song), this would begin to be called the *Dao tong*: the "Transmission of the Way."

Despite the claim to origins in remote antiquity, this was actually a rather new idea that may furthermore have even been influenced by contemporary Buddhist concepts of patriarchal lines of transmission. Neo-Confucianism, in fact, was deeply shaped by Buddhist and Daoist influences. However innovative it may have been, however, this idea of the *Dao tong* helped cement in place a powerful vision of a unitary China that had supposedly existed since the dawn of time.

The circulation of material goods through trade, even as it brought China into more extensive contact with foreigners, also helped create a more uniform Chinese market and provided expanded opportunities for both physical and social mobility throughout the empire. Late Tang China was becoming highly commercialized. Following An Lushan's rebellion, the Equitable Fields farmland allocation system that had first been put into operation by the Northern Wei collapsed, together with many of the other old government economic regulations. Agriculture came

increasingly to be performed by tenant farmers, based on written contracts. Trade and commerce boomed. Even the government turned toward sources of commercial profit to sustain its finances, and state monopolies on such products as salt and alcohol relied increasingly on the operations of expert merchants and market forces.

The story of Dou Yi (d. ca. 840) may help illustrate the new entrepreneurial energy of late Tang China, as well as some of its limitations. As a youth, Dou Yi had some female relatives in the imperial palace and an uncle who was a high official, with a family temple in the capital. When Dou was a teenager, he received a pair of fine silk shoes as a gift, which he promptly sold in the market for 500 cash, beginning a small accumulation of capital. In spring, when there were many winged elm seeds floating in the city air, Dou collected some and planted them in his uncle's family temple. The trees that grew from these he cultivated and sold in various forms, beginning to amass real wealth. After various other clever initiatives, Dou purchased some inexpensive, apparently worthless, low-lying swampland in the city's western market. He set up stalls around the edges of the depression, where he sold fried pastries and dumplings, and he encouraged children to throw bits of rubble at a flag he planted in the middle of the mire, rewarding those who hit the flag with pastry treats. The rubble they threw into the muck quickly filled it in, and Dou then built a handsome shop with twenty rooms on the newly reclaimed land. Dou went on to cultivate good relations with officials and become a broker in government offices and an investor, dying a wealthy man.[23]

This story of Dou Yi does not come from an orthodox history and may even be more what we would today consider fiction than an accurate record of actual events. The story was recorded already in the ninth century, however, so the type of entrepreneurial behavior it describes must at least have not seemed entirely implausible to a late Tang audience. Clearly Dou Yi's brand of enterprise is not modern-style industrial capitalism, but the tale is nonetheless colorful testimony to the kind of urban business energy and acumen that was fueling unprecedented economic development by late Tang times. The market-based commercial development that began in late Tang and culminated in the subsequent Song Dynasty was "so remarkable that some scholars . . . view it as an early stage of protocapitalism."[24]

By the end of the Tang Dynasty in 907, although modern nationalism and the nation-state were still far in the future, something like an emergent Chinese national identity may have already been prefigured. The economy was highly commercialized and largely market based. The social order was becoming surprisingly fluid, with a nonhereditary meritocratic elite increasingly determined by anonymously graded performance on written tests. Even the technology of woodblock printing was beginning to have an impact. The obvious contrast is with what was happening in Western Europe, where, although Charlemagne was anointed "Emperor of the Romans" in 800 and promoted a justly famous "Carolingian renaissance," Charlemagne himself was scarcely literate, the former unity of the Roman Empire throughout the Mediterranean was never restored, status was

becoming rigidly hereditary, and there had been a long-term decline in the production and commercial exchange of material goods. This was a time in human history when Western Europe became a relative backwater, and China, which may have contained one-third of the world's total population by the tenth century, strode to global center stage.

The Birth of Korea: Unified Silla (668–935)

Unification of the Korean Peninsula (668)

Among the new countries that emerged along the borders of the Tang Empire was the one we call Korea. The early histories of both Korea and Japan would be incomprehensible except as parts of a larger East Asian community. During the centuries of division in China following the collapse of the Han Dynasty, and continuing on through the reunified Sui and Tang dynasties, a degree of shared international aristocratic culture had developed throughout East Asia. This was a time when elites in China, Korea, and Japan (as well as northern Vietnam, which remained part of the Chinese Empire until 939) in some ways had more in common with each other than they did with their own peasants living in nearby villages. In particular, educated East Asians shared a common written language and literary canon. The glories of Tang poetry were as much admired by contemporary elites in Korea and Japan as they were in China. In fact, Bai Juyi was arguably even more highly regarded in Japan than he was at home in China – a healthy reminder that even direct cultural influences can take different local forms, based on local variances in taste and experience and the almost universal human desire for self-assertion.

Particularly vital to the formation of a shared East Asian cultural community were the connections provided by Buddhism. (See Figure 4.2.) When the Sui Dynasty in China ordered the establishment of a network of Buddhist reliquary pagodas in every province, for example, ambassadors from the Three Korean Kingdoms all requested relics from the Sui court and erected similar pagodas in their own states. A monk from Koguryŏ called Hyegwan (J: Ekan; fl. 625–672) studied in China under the master who is credited with founding the Three Treatise school of Buddhist doctrine. After returning to Koguryŏ, he traveled to Japan in 625, where he is considered to have formally introduced the Three Treatise school (although he may not really have been the first to bring its ideas to Japan), and eventually even became official head (*sōjō*) of the Japanese Buddhist church.

The sacred scriptures of East Asian Buddhism came to Korea and Japan in Chinese-language translation. Almost imperceptibly, this Buddhist transmission was a lubricant bringing with it other Chinese influences as well. For example, the Sillan monk Chajang went to Tang China in 636 to study Buddhism. In 643, he was summoned home by the king of Silla. It was at his suggestion, then, that in 649, Silla officially adopted Tang-style clothing and, in 650, the Tang calendar and reign periods for dating purposes.

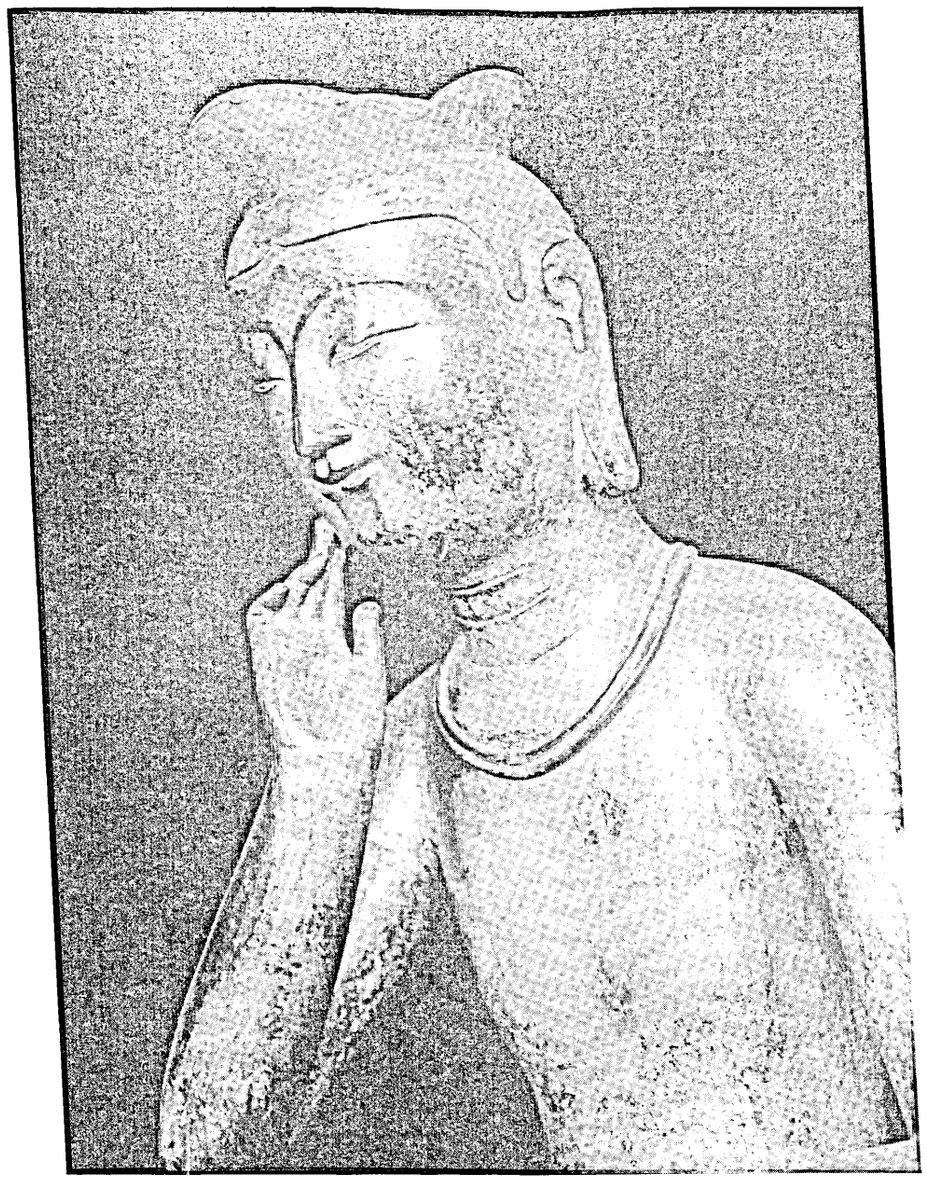


Figure 4.2. Maitreya (the Future Buddha). Gilded bronze statue. Three Kingdoms Korea, seventh century. National Museum, Seoul. © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, New York.

Another Sillan monk, Wŏn'gwang (d. 640), studied for eleven years in Tang and was subsequently honored at the Sillan court, lecturing frequently on the scriptures. Wŏn'gwang is credited with formulating, in 602, a highly influential Sillan secular code of conduct in five precepts: (1) serve one's lord with loyalty, (2) serve

one's parents with filial piety, (3) interact with friends in good faith, (4) do not retreat from battle, and (5) exercise discretion in the killing of living things. The first two of these precepts are explicitly Confucian, even using the standard Chinese characters for *loyalty* and *filial piety*. Only the last precept can be called Buddhist, and even it appears somewhat modified, since, presumably, a proper Buddhist should refrain from killing altogether. The fourth precept, enjoining fearlessness in battle, may represent native Korean tradition. Altogether, these five precepts constitute a classic example of cultural interaction. Wŏn'gwang is also credited with drafting a successful Chinese-language written request on behalf of the Sillan king for Chinese military assistance against the rival Korean kingdom of Koguryŏ.[25]

In the early seventh century, each of the Three Korean Kingdoms sent envoys requesting Chinese military assistance against their Korean neighbors. Somewhat surprisingly, it was Silla that proved successful. There had been little contact between Silla and China until the end of the sixth century. According to one sixth-century Chinese report, Silla was still preliterate, and all communication had to go through Paekche. Over the course of the sixth century, however, Silla was reorganized along more familiar East Asian lines. Sillan Buddhist monks began to make the journey west to China in search of the dharma. In 631, the new Chinese Tang Dynasty constructed expanded school facilities in its capital, and thousands of foreign students were reportedly attracted there from the Three Korean Kingdoms, Tibet, Turfan, and elsewhere. Beginning in 640, members of the Sillan royal family itself went to study at the Tang capital.

There had been repeated conflicts between China and Koguryŏ throughout the Sui and early Tang dynasties. The first Sui clash with Koguryŏ had come in 598. The massive series of disastrous Sui invasions of Koguryŏ that began in 612 are conventionally blamed for the rapid disintegration and fall of the Sui Dynasty. In 618, Tang replaced Sui, and after Tang rule was stabilized, conflicts with Koguryŏ reignited. Between 644 and 658, Tang conducted five substantial campaigns against Koguryŏ. The repeated Chinese inability to defeat Koguryŏ by direct invasion, and the stiffness of Koguryŏ resistance, may have finally persuaded Tang to adopt a new strategy: outflanking Koguryŏ with an attack from the south, in alliance with Silla.

This shifted the immediate point of attack to the southwestern Korean kingdom of Paekche. In 650, a Sillan emissary (the future King Muyŏl, r. 654–661) was sent on a mission to personally ask the Tang emperor for military assistance against Paekche. In 651, a member of the Sillan royal family named Kim In-mun (d. 694) began service in the Tang imperial bodyguard. Kim In-mun was then able to use his position as an intermediary with a foot in both the Tang and Sillan courts to help coordinate a successful military alliance between Tang and Silla. Kim finally died at the Tang capital in 694, after helping to smooth over later ruptures between the two allies.

With guidance from Kim In-mun, and a hundred Sillan warships to convey Tang troops to the battlefield, a combined Tang and Sillan attack on Paekche in 660 successfully captured its capital. The Paekche royal family was brought back to China as prisoners, but a Paekche prince who had been away in attendance at the court in Japan was proclaimed by the Japanese as the new king, and with Japanese support, an expedition was launched to restore Paekche. At a great river battle fought in 663, the combined Tang and Sillan navies reportedly sank four hundred Japanese warships, sealing the fate of Paekche and ending Japanese influence on the continent for almost a millennium.

Meanwhile, Koguryŏ had been weakened by internal conflict. In 642, the Koguryŏ aristocrat Yŏn Kaesomun killed the king and, appointing a figurehead monarch, assumed the role of strongman himself. When he died in 666, his sons quarreled among themselves. One of these sons, Chŏn Namsaeng, eventually defected to Tang, bringing with him a powerful force. This last strongman of Koguryŏ then contributed to the final Tang and Sillan conquest of his own former kingdom in 668, for which he was rewarded with an appointment as a Tang general.

After the fall of Koguryŏ in 668, the Tang Dynasty is reported to have relocated as much as 5 percent of its total population to sparsely inhabited areas of China.[26] A surprising number of persons from both Koguryŏ and Paekche are known to have subsequently served with distinction in the Tang military – the most famous being the second- or third-generation descendant of a Koguryŏ émigré who captured Tashkent for the Tang in 750. In Korea, the victorious Tang Dynasty apparently expected to incorporate the peninsula directly into the Chinese Empire. Tang governors were appointed, but the Tang did not station sufficient occupation forces on the peninsula to maintain control against determined resistance. By 676, Silla had expelled the Tang presence, and the Korean peninsula (up to a line somewhere north of modern P'yŏngyang) was now unified, for the first time ever, under native rule.

Silla

Silla may have originated as a cluster of six tribes governed by a council of tribal elders. Although Silla gradually became a more centralized (and larger) state, acquiring a single hereditary ruler known as the *maripkan* by the fourth century, and reportedly adopting the Chinese title "king" (*wang*) in 503, a degree of collective decision making by the top aristocracy always remained a distinctive feature of Sillan society. A Council of Nobles (*Hwabaek*) decided such crucial issues as the royal succession. Sillan society also remained highly aristocratic, graded in terms of something called bone rank (*kolp'um*). The framework of a Chinese-style bureaucratic government had been proclaimed in 520 with new legal codes that established seventeen official titles, but these titles were awarded strictly according to hereditary bone rank. Bone rank determined the highest possible title to which a man could aspire, the maximum size of his home, and even what clothing he could wear.

There is some evidence to suggest that the status of women in Sillan society may have been somewhat higher than it was in contemporary China (or later Korean history). There were, for example, three reigning Sillan female kings (*yŏwang*), as

distinct from queens, who were merely consorts of male rulers. In general, descent continued to be traced through both paternal and maternal lines throughout the Sillan era, which naturally also made the inheritance of family names awkward. The Sillan royal Kim and royal consort Pak families may have been among the first in Korea to adopt hereditary surnames, by perhaps the sixth century, but the use of patrilineal surnames remained inconsistent even among royalty until as late as the tenth century – a clear indication that Silla was still a very different society from neighboring China. China, by contrast, may have been the first place on earth where hereditary family names were universal.

Also unlike nearby China, Silla had a warrior culture. Particularly renowned were the young aristocratic warriors called *Hwarang*, or Flower Youths. The *Hwarang* cultivated military skills and a heroic image. They also traveled to sacred mountains and rivers to perform ceremonial songs and dances and appear to have had multiple dimensions beyond mere fighting ability. In addition, in 583, a new oath banner system was implemented, organizing some of Silla's military forces around flags with differently colored borders (an intriguing organizational forerunner of the much later seventeenth-century Manchu banner system). Since top aristocrats of True Bone status sometimes still controlled their own private armies, this oath banner system may have helped bring military force more closely under centralized royal control.

After a Sillan king died in 632 without leaving any direct heir, and following two subsequent female kings, the exclusively royal bone rank of *sŏnggol*, or Hallowed Bone, became extinct, and Sillan kings thereafter shared the next lower True Bone rank (*chin'gol*) with the top aristocracy. This may be one reason why later Korean kings never claimed the pretensions to divinity that Japanese emperors did and why Korean kings also never (except briefly in the tenth century, and again in 1897) assumed the supreme East Asian title of "emperor" (unlike Japanese and Vietnamese as well as Chinese monarchs). This may also help explain why Korean kings, despite their determined and ultimately successful struggle for independence from Tang China, remained more willing than Japanese rulers to accept the nominal status of tributaries to the Chinese emperor, since the delegation of their status from a Chinese sovereign gave Korean kings some leverage against the otherwise powerful domestic Korean aristocracy.

In a phenomenon that has been observed in many other monarchies throughout world history, Sillan kings also aligned themselves domestically with persons of relatively humble rank against the independent power of the top nobility. In the case of Silla, that meant especially persons of Head Rank Six, which was the next highest rank below True Bone. Here, again, the Chinese bureaucratic model, with its ideal of possible upward mobility based on demonstrated merit (and service to the throne) rather than heredity, may have been useful in supporting the interests of the Korean kings.

After the unification of the Korean peninsula and the expulsion of Tang forces, Sillan contact with Tang China, ironically, seems to have actually increased. Much of this contact was commercial. In late Tang times, Sillans came to dominate the maritime trade of northern East Asia, despite the fact that Silla produced no coins

of its own and used Chinese money instead. With a favorable breeze, it was a two- or three-day voyage by boat from the west coast of Korea to China, and there seems to have been a large Korean presence in late Tang China. Several Tang cities had "Sillan wards," or "Sillan villages" in the suburbs.

There was also a "Sillan Office" in the Tang capital, designated to house Korean embassies. Sillans remained probably the most numerous group of foreign students studying in late Tang Chinese schools. Some eighty-eight Sillans are known to have passed the civil service examinations in China during roughly the last century of the Tang Dynasty. Several of them served in Tang government office before returning to Korea, where they became voices for the promotion of Confucian ideals.

Confucianism in Korea was still only in its infancy, however. In 682, Silla established a National Academy, where a small number of young Koreans were instructed in a Chinese-style curriculum that included the Confucian Classics, Chinese history, and Chinese literature. In 788, Silla inaugurated its first Chinese-style civil service examinations. The examination model had obvious attraction for both strong monarchs and ambitious men born into anything less than the highest ranks of the nobility. The role of examinations remained quite limited in Sillan times, but the introduction of Chinese-language education had profound implications for Korea (as well as Japan). The use of the Chinese writing system brought Korea into a distinctive East Asian cultural sphere to which some of Tang China's other neighbors – such as Tibet, with its Indian-derived script – did not equally belong.

At the same time, although the Chinese written language prevailed in Korea (only twenty-five native Korean-language poems survive from the tenth century or earlier, and even they had to be written using Chinese characters), the spoken language was overwhelmingly Korean. The modern Korean language, which is spoken today fairly uniformly throughout the peninsula, probably derives from Sillan. Before Silla unified the peninsula in 668, there had certainly been at least some regional linguistic diversity. After the Sillan unification, however, everyone on the peninsula gradually came to speak the same language. This Korean language is, furthermore, entirely unrelated to Chinese and quite unlike even its probable closest relative, Japanese. Despite significant Chinese influences, therefore, the people of the peninsula became very distinctively Korean.

After about 780, the rising power of local warlords caused Sillan central government to enter a period of decline. Between 800 and 890, Silla experienced no fewer than fourteen revolts or coups by members of the royal family. Few Sillan kings died natural deaths in those years. Perhaps the most colorful figure from this age of warlordism was Chang Po-go (d. 846). Chang was an apparently Sillan-born swashbuckler of obscure origin who had traveled to Tang China, where he had served as a minor officer in the Tang army. Later, returning to Silla, he reported to the king that he had observed Sillans serving as slaves everywhere in China. Chang Po-go proposed establishing a garrison on what is now called Wando (Wan Island), off the southwestern tip the Korean coast, from where he could dominate the sea lanes and prevent further slave raids. The island base was duly established in 828,

and Chang Po-go became a powerful sea lord, dominating the entire Yellow Sea region. When Chang Po-go tried to arrange a wedding between his daughter and the Sillan king, however, he was murdered by an outraged member of the aristocracy in 846.

As the Sillan state weakened, between 901 and 935, the Korean peninsula was temporarily divided once more into three kingdoms, which briefly even revived the old names Paekche and Koguryŏ. This division did not last, however, and in 935, the peninsula was again reunified under a new kingdom called Koryŏ. This name was an abbreviation of Koguryŏ (written with two characters instead of three) and is the origin of our English word *Korea*. The dynasty's founder was a man named Wang Kŏn (King T'aejo, r. 918–943). The subtlety of his position as the ruler of a fiercely independent country with a uniquely Korean culture that was nonetheless also simultaneously firmly part of a larger East Asian cultural sphere is nicely expressed by his injunction to his heirs in 943:

> We in the east have long admired the Tang style. Our literary matters, ritual, and music all follow their institutions. Yet, in strange regions and different lands, peoples' natures are each different. They need not improperly be made the same.[27]

Imperial Japan: Nara (710–784) and Early Heian (794–ca. Tenth Century [–1185])

The Taika Coup (645)

The reunification of the Chinese Empire under the Sui Dynasty in 589 dramatically altered the strategic balance in East Asia. For the first time in centuries, a resurgent, unified China was asserting its traditional nominal claim to authority over all "Under Heaven" and aggressively expanding its empire beyond the nuclear area of the Chinese heartland. This had serious implications for China's neighbors, and when the Sui Dynasty began to threaten offensive operations against the Korean peninsula, the Yamato court in Japan felt compelled to open direct contact with the Sui at the start of the seventh century. Within a period of just fourteen years after 607, Yamato dispatched no fewer than five embassies to first Sui and then Tang China. By this time, however, the Japanese court was no longer interested in buttressing its domestic authority with delegated Chinese titles, nor was it willing to play the humble Chinese-allotted role of tributary. Instead, the Yamato court was now claiming rival – if not actually superior – imperial status. The credentials of the embassy that was sent to Sui in 607 were notoriously addressed from the "Son of Heaven in the place where the sun rises to the Son of Heaven in the place where the sun sets."[28]

Japanese rivalry was inseparable from a certain degree of imperial imitation, however. Leading figures at the Japanese court were now consciously trying to build a powerful centralized state, somewhat like the model provided by Sui and Tang China. Japanese monks who had been sent to study in China with the early embassies began returning home in the 630s, bringing with them firsthand

knowledge of conditions in the Tang Dynasty. A coalition developed involving some of these returned masters of Chinese learning, centering around the royal figure of Prince Naka no Ōe (who ruled later as Emperor Tenji, r. 662–671) and led by a man named Nakatomi Kamatari (614–669). According to tradition, Nakatomi Kamatari carefully weighed the ability of all the royal princes and judged Naka no Ōe the most promising for the purpose of promoting his cherished project of government centralization. Kamatari still lacked a personal relationship with Prince Naka no Ōe, but one day (the story goes), when the prince was playing kickball, he accidentally threw off a shoe, and Kamatari, respectfully retrieving the shoe, was finally able to establish the necessary connection. Only one thing now stood in the way of continental-style imperial centralization: the power of the Soga family.

After the death of the great Prince Regent Shōtoku in 622, the Soga, who had already been the most powerful court family for more than thirty years, began casting a lengthening shadow over the Yamato court. The Soga were even suspected of harboring ambitions to usurp the throne. Then, at a state ceremony in 645, in the presence of the empress herself, Prince Naka no Ōe and his co-conspirators struck suddenly, assassinating the leaders of the Soga family. A new Chinese-style imperial reign period was proclaimed, Taika (645–650), which literally means "Great Change" (although it is possible that this highly symbolic reign period name may have actually been chosen only retroactively, a few years later), and a momentous program of reforms was initiated. As a reward for his crucial service in this Taika coup d'état, a new family name was bestowed on Nakatomi Kamatari: Fujiwara. The name Fujiwara literally means "Wisteria Plain," and it supposedly commemorates the place where the conspirators first met to plot the removal of the Soga. This Fujiwara family would later become the leading family in Japan.

Traditional Japanese accounts probably paint a somewhat idealized portrait of the Taika reforms that were implemented after 645, but there is little doubt that a radical new centralization of power began to be rapidly asserted in the middle to late seventh century. As of the early 600s, it is likely that many local Japanese chieftains had still been really little more than "autonomous allies of the king," and the reach of the Yamato court may not have extended very far beyond the palace itself, except for some direct royal estates and certain groups of workers.[29] After the Taika coup d'état, the process of centralized state development in Japan accelerated and intensified. Part of the urgency behind this drive may have been fear of invasion from Tang China.

The Taika coup in Japan in 645 happened to coincide with the beginning of a new series of Tang Dynasty attacks on Koguryŏ, in Korea. When the Tang strategy shifted from direct frontal assault from the north to an alliance with Silla and an attack on Koguryŏ from the south, through Paekche, Yamato sent an expeditionary force to assist Paekche. The Japanese expeditionary force was annihilated in 663, however, with the reported loss of four hundred boats and ten thousand men. Paekche ceased to exist, and in 668, Koguryŏ was obliterated also. For a few years after 668, it even appeared as though the entire Korean peninsula might be brought

under Tang control, which would have put Japan within easy reach as the next potential target of Tang conquest. Efforts to strengthen the Japanese state in this moment of crisis took the form of an accelerated adoption of Chinese-style imperial institutions, which was simply the most impressive administrative model then available. This Chinese model was probably mostly introduced only indirectly, through the intermediary of Silla in Korea rather than directly from Tang, but even the Sillans and Japanese sometimes communicated with each other using the Chinese written language.[30]

These late seventh-century innovations included a new name for Japan. In speech, the old name Yamato probably long continued to be used, but Yamato was not a written word. The oldest written name for Japan was Wa. But, although the origins of this name Wa are obscure and it did not become flagrantly offensive until much later, by the late 600s the Japanese court had already apparently become dissatisfied with Wa and favored a new written name, chosen for the meaning of its Chinese characters: Nihon ("Origin of the Sun," sometimes also pronounced *Nippon*). Nihon is still the standard Japanese name for Japan today. It was also about this time that the rulers of Japan definitely began using what has since become the standard Japanese title for "emperor," *tennō* (literally, "Heavenly Sovereign"). This is a variant of the Chinese imperial title, and the complete set of standard Chinese imperial titles were also officially adopted in Japan.

These Chinese titles were originally used only in writing, however. The commentary to an eighth-century Japanese law code specified that in speech, Japanese monarchs should continue to be referred to by native-language titles such as *sumera mikoto*.[31] Oral pronouncements, in Japanese, remained central to the self-representation of the Japanese monarchy. The uniquely Japanese cult of imperial descent from the sun goddess Amaterasu, and imperial worship at the shrine in Ise, may have also only really crystallized at the end of the seventh century, and in the seventh and eighth centuries the conception of Japanese emperors as manifest deities (*arahitogami*) was also clarified. In these centuries, Japan was refashioning itself as a Chinese-style centralized empire, but in a manner very much of its own choosing.

Nara (710–784)

The administration of this newly organized Japanese Empire received its clearest expression in a series of Chinese-style penal and administrative law codes. The earliest of these Japanese legal codes may have been issued in 668, but the system reached maturity with the Taihō Code of 701. Eight or nine of the nineteen persons who drafted this Taihō Code came from immigrant families, and some had participated in embassies to the continent, so its authors must have been reasonably familiar with continental precedents. The Japanese imperial bureaucracy that was structured by these codes included a state council, eight ministries, and forty-six bureaus. A comprehensive administrative hierarchy of provinces, districts, and villages was established throughout the empire. Household registration began in 670 as the basis for government-directed farmland allocation, tax collection, and

military conscription. A new census was intended to be conducted every six years, and rice paddies were to be reallocated after each census, roughly along the lines of the Equitable Fields system that was then still in effect in China. Mandatory military service for all adult males was instituted, coins began to be minted, and the preparation of Japan's first written national histories began (resulting in the *Kojiki* and the *Nihongi*). Japan had now become a unified empire, even though some of the outlying islands still remained beyond imperial reach, and the far northeastern tip of the main island also remained largely independent until the twelfth century or even later.

At the heart of this newly centralized Japanese Empire was a great new capital city, Nara, which was planned and built between 708 and 712. Early Japanese capitals had changed with each ruler and often consisted of little more than a thatch-roofed wooden palace, not much different from the halls of other local Japanese chieftains. By the early seventh century, more impressive structures were being constructed, and Japan's first true Chinese-style capital city was at Fujiwara, just south of Nara, which was occupied from 694 to 710. Nara was not exactly, therefore, really Japan's first capital, nor did it serve as capital very long. But Nara was a permanent city that still exists today. Notably, Nara's eighth-century Tōdai-ji (Eastern Great Temple) is still operational in its current reconstruction. In typical Chinese fashion, Nara was laid out in a regular grid design, orientated north to south, although Nara differed notably from most traditional Chinese cities in not being surrounded by a wall. The significance of this city is so great that it has given its name to what is conventionally called the Nara period of Japanese history.

Standard textbook descriptions of the Nara period emphasize the functional administrative aspects of the law codes, and Buddhism. Confucianism, however, was inseparable from the contemporary Chinese model, and written Japanese sources (at least) also do contain much Confucian-style rhetoric about rule by virtuous example. In 757, for example, Empress Kōken (r. 749–758) proclaimed, "To secure the rulers and govern the people, nothing is better than the [Confucian] Rites."[32] In the same year, she also ordered every household to maintain and study a copy of the *Classic of Filial Piety*, in imitation of an earlier Tang decree. Because it is inconceivable that many eighth-century Japanese households could have actually satisfied this command, this may also illustrate the extent to which continental influences were often a rather thin façade.

An academy was established in Nara, near the palace gate, where instruction was provided in the Confucian Classics, calligraphy, law, mathematics, and Chinese-language pronunciation (necessary for orally reciting books written in Chinese). A network of schools, extending to every province, was also ordered opened. Twice-annual sacrifices to the spirit of Confucius were mandated at the academy, by law, beginning in 701. In ninth-century Japan, after participating in a spring sacrifice to Confucius and attending a lecture on the *Classic of Filial Piety*, Sugawara Michizane (845–903) exclaimed that the spirit of "the Sage [Confucius] was never far away."[33]

Ironically, however, this same Sugawara Michizane is more famous for recommending the abandonment of the last official Japanese embassy to Tang

China in 894. Unlike in Korea or Vietnam, a Chinese-style examination-based meritocracy never matured in Japan, and growing frustration at the poor chances for bureaucratic promotion through the academy caused Miyoshi Kiyotsura (847–918) to lament in 914 that the academy had become "a pit of disappointment," to the extent that "parents warned each other not to let their children mention school."[34] In the eighth century, out of a total Japanese population of perhaps six million, it has been estimated that only about twenty thousand participated in elite literate culture, and the academy had only four hundred students. Provincial schools had difficulty finding qualified instructors, and even in the capital teaching positions gradually became hereditary. In the twelfth century, the academy burned down and was not replaced.

Chinese influences had always been limited, and they were often wielded, moreover, in a conscious spirit of rivalry. Japan became, not part of the Chinese imperial order, but the center of its own independent Chinese-style imperial order. Highlighting this is the fact that, although the Nara period is conventionally considered to have been the peak period of continental influence on Japanese institutions and culture, paradoxically, compared with both earlier and later periods, "the country was in fact relatively closed."[35] Following the defeat of the Japanese expeditionary force to Korea in 663, an office was established on the southwestern island of Kyūshū, at the point of closest approach to Korea, which was intended to regulate all international contact, and for the first time effectively sealed Japan's borders.

Rather than a regional superpower (in this case, Tang China) simply "influencing" its neighbors, what actually happened was that elements of the powerful Chinese model were selectively borrowed by China's East Asian neighbors and domesticated, often becoming ingredients of their own "native" culture having independent dynamics. Some continental influences were also obviously inadvertent. A disastrous epidemic of smallpox introduced from the continent, for example, spread from Kyūshū to all the major population centers of Japan in 735–737 and may have killed a quarter or more of the entire Japanese population.[36] Buddhism, although it came to Japan from the continent in Chinese-language translation, and often in specifically Chinese forms, nonetheless functioned as an independent variable. Buddhism had, moreover, originally been a foreign influence in China too, and it stimulated complex patterns of interaction. For one thing, Buddhism arguably became a more powerful presence in Nara Japan than it did in Tang China.

After 746, the Buddhist Tōdai-ji (Eastern Great Temple) Construction Office in Nara became the largest Japanese government office. Tōdai-ji served as the headquarters for an empirewide Japanese system of state-sponsored Buddhism, with a branch temple in every province. For this there was Sui and Tang Dynasty Chinese precedent, but no temple in the Tang capital overshadowed the city in quite the way Tōdai-ji did in Nara. The temple's awesome influence was symbolized by the completion of the sixty-four-foot-tall bronze Great Buddha at Tōdai-ji in 752 (see Figure 4.3). This Great Buddha also illustrates the international range of Buddhist connections. The grandson of a Korean who had fled to Japan

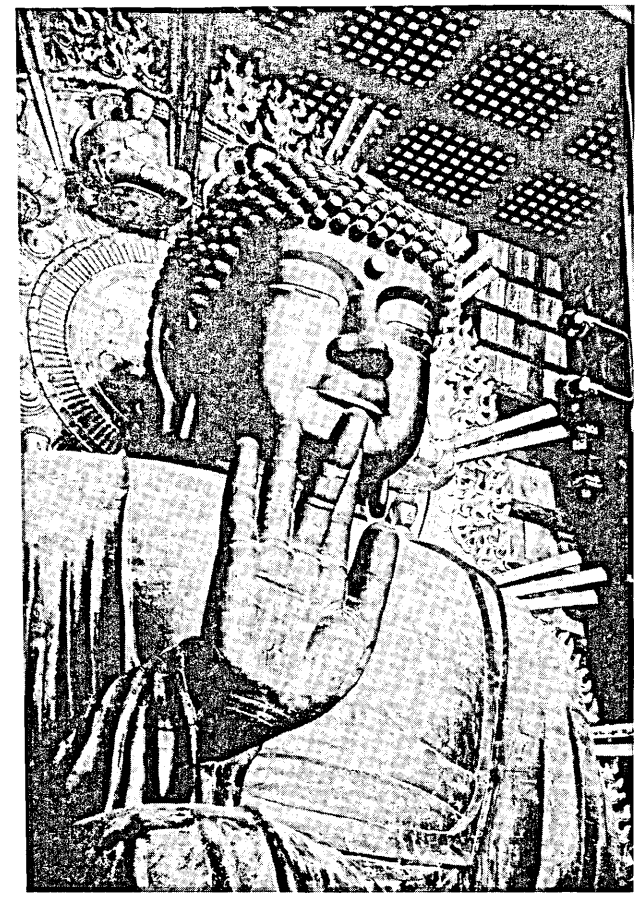


Figure 4.3. The Great Buddha (*Daibutsu*) at Tōdai-ji in Nara, Japan, bronze statue, 748–751 CE. Vanni/Art Resource, New York.

after the fall of Paekche in 663, Kuninaka Kimimaro (d. 774), played a role in the casting of the Great Buddha, and the ceremonial opening of its eyes in 752 is said to have been performed by an actual Brahman from India named Bodhisena (704–760).

Chinese may have been the language of the Buddhist scriptures throughout East Asia, but the Indian Sanskrit language retained an aura of at least potentially superior sanctity. Around 770, one Japanese empress had a million copies of a *dhāraṇī* charm, written in Sanskrit using Chinese characters, printed and placed in miniature wooden pagodas.[37] Shortly after the end of the Nara period, the renowned Japanese monk Kūkai was motivated to pursue Buddhist studies in China in part because he could not obtain a satisfactory explanation of the Sanskrit mantras and other esoteric symbolism in Japan, and he carefully brought forty-four rolls of Sanskrit texts back to Japan as evidence of his interest in Sanskrit. We may doubt that Kūkai really learned much Sanskrit, but as far as that is concerned, it is unlikely that he became very fluent in spoken Chinese either. After only one year in the Tang capital, Kūkai petitioned to be allowed to return to Japan

with the embassy of 806. In Japan, Kūkai then played a decisive role in shaping the Japanese Shingon (Esoteric) sect, and put his religion to the service of the Japanese state.

Early Heian (794–ca. Tenth Century [–1185])

In 764, a Buddhist nun and retired female emperor resumed the throne again, and in 766 she elevated a Buddhist monk to a position of virtual co-ruler, awarding him the title "dharma king." In 769, an oracle was even presented to the court suggesting that it might be auspicious if this monk himself were to become emperor – threatening to turn Japan into an outright Buddhist theocracy (and simultaneously also entailing a change of dynasty, and of ruling family). This must have alarmed many people at court, and the interpretation of this oracle was quickly reversed. The nun emperor promptly died in 770, and a greater distance was soon introduced between the sources of imperial legitimacy (rooted especially in the claim to descent from the native sun goddess Amaterasu) and Buddhism.

It may have been in part to escape the influence of the powerful Nara Buddhist temples that the imperial capital was permanently moved away from Nara in 784, although at the time, frequent shifts of capital were also still simply customary. After an abortive effort to build a capital somewhere else, a small village was chosen as the location for the new capital in 794, and the site was renamed Heian. This new city of Heian, known today as Kyōto (which literally means "capital"), would serve as the imperial capital of Japan for over a thousand years, until 1869. After 1185, however, real political power shifted for many years away from the imperial court, and historians therefore refer to the years between 794 and 1185, when Heian was the functioning center of Japan, as the Heian period.

Over the course of these four Heian centuries, the pattern of Japanese history profoundly shifted, and it also diverged fairly pointedly from the continental trajectory. The early Heian period can be viewed to some extent as a continuation of the Nara period from a different location. In some ways, Chinese influences were still only increasing in late Nara and into early Heian times, especially in matters of aristocratic high culture. The frequency of female monarchs in early Japanese history (between 593 and 770 there had been six female rulers), which stands in sharp contrast to the Chinese patrilineal imperial model, came to an abrupt end in 770, for example.[38] There would be none in Heian times, and in all of Japanese history thereafter there would only be two more reigning female emperors (Meishō, r. 1630–1643, and Go-Sakuramachi, r. 1762–1771). In the early Nara period some of the palace buildings had still been constructed in native Japanese style – which typically featured cedar bark roofs, plain untreated wood, and elevation above the ground on posts – but in the mid-eighth century the Nara palace and administrative center was entirely rebuilt in the Chinese style, with heavy tiled roofs. Although the Nara period produced one magnificent collection of native Japanese-language poems, the *Manyōshū* (*Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves*, ca. 760), much of the literary energy in early Heian times was directed toward writing poetry in Chinese. By late Heian, however, the balance was reversing itself, and more uniquely Japanese styles and themes began to emerge.

In general, the tipping point between two quite different eras in Japanese history fell in mid-Heian, roughly around the tenth century, although most changes occurred only gradually and almost imperceptibly. Two particularly critical Heian era developments were the long-term weakening – to the point of virtual irrelevance – of centralized imperial government, and the rise of a new class of provincial warriors, who would come to be known as *bushi* or *samurai*. Both developments were largely without parallel in China. Another notable divergence was the almost complete triumph in Japan of a Buddhist-centered worldview, even as China was experiencing its great Neo-Confucian renaissance and the beginning of a relative decline in the pervasiveness of Chinese Buddhism.[39] The roots of all these uniquely Japanese developments, which came to full fruition in late Heian, can be traced as far back as Nara times.

After the anticipated invasion from Tang China never materialized in the seventh century, for example, Japan no longer faced any serious foreign military threats, and the conscript army was allowed to lapse by as early as 792. Eventually, even the business of policing the Japanese countryside was abandoned by the central government and was delegated (or fell by default) to local warriors – the embryonic samurai. Meanwhile, the Nara system of direct imperial farmland allocation also began to fray in as little as half a century. The minting of copper coins, which had begun in 708, ended in 958. Japan had largely reverted to direct commodity exchange by the ninth century, due to inflation and other problems with the use of money, and many government-imposed market regulations also lapsed around that time. This did not mean that commerce necessarily declined – in fact, there is some evidence that commerce may have actually been increasing – but it did coincide with a weakening of the central government. Diminishing government revenue also encouraged powerful nobles to find other, private, sources of income beyond their official stipends. These especially took the form of private landed estates, which, over time, characteristically became exempt from taxation and even entry by government officials.

Already in the Nara period, great noble families typically employed large private household staffs, and increasingly these private aristocratic family administrations came to be the real bases of power. Even the imperial family itself eventually came to exercise its greatest authority privately, through the offices of so-called "Retired Emperors," by the end of the Heian period in the twelfth century. Among the small group of court nobles who came to dominate Heian politics and society, the Fujiwara family that had been founded by Nakatomi Kamatari at the time of the seventh-century Taika coup emerged as absolutely preeminent.

The formal basis of Fujiwara power was appointment as regent over either minor or adult emperors (two different titles in Japanese), but the real secret of Fujiwara success was intermarriage with the imperial family. Especially in a society such as Heian Japan, where children were commonly raised in the homes of their mother's (not their father's) families, the father-in-law or maternal grandfather of an

emperor could wield great authority. The most renowned member of the Fujiwara family, Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1028), for example, actually held the title of regent for only one year, but four of his daughters married emperors, who gave birth to three more emperors, and at one point, Michinaga was simultaneously both grandfather and father-in-law to the same emperor![40]

While these political and economic structural changes were occurring, there were also important new developments in Japanese culture. As direct centralized imperial administration of the provinces was increasingly abandoned to custodial governors who collected taxes and forwarded them to the court, the perspective of the great Heian aristocrats increasingly shrank, until it was effectively confined to the capital city alone. The lives of aristocratic women were especially sedentary and secluded. This was not because the status of Heian women was unusually low – Heian women, for example, retained their family name after marriage and had the right to initiate divorce – but they were expected to stay at home, secluded from prying eyes behind screens. If they ventured out, they traveled in covered oxcarts and generally did not go far. Though the mansions of leading Heian aristocrats could be very large, including multiple buildings and gardens with artificial hills and lakes, this was still a very circumscribed existence. For entertainment, some women turned to literature and developed it into a fine art.

By the tenth and eleventh centuries, self-consciously literary diaries began to be compiled, which were sometimes deliberately intended for others to read. In one famous case, Sei Shōnagon (b. ca. 965) claimed that her so-called *Pillow Book* began as private jottings that were accidentally discovered by a visitor and passed around at court.[41] Fictional tales were also composed to entertain the household and circulated in manuscript form. This newly developing Heian women's literature was written in the Japanese language, using the new Japanese syllabic writing system.

The Japanese Hiragana script, which had come into use by the start of the tenth century, was largely reserved for informal documents, frivolous entertainments, and women's writing. Serious texts were still expected to be written in Chinese. Hiragana was, in fact, commonly known as women's hand (*onnade*). This was so much the case that, although the first great literary diary in Japanese, Ki no Tsurayuki's (883–946) *Tosa Diary*, was actually written by a man (around 936), he apparently felt obliged to adopt the pose in writing it of being a woman. The *Tosa Diary* is an account of a fifty-five-day return journey by the governor of Tosa, on the southern island of Shikoku, to the capital. The diary is introspective and self-consciously artistic, with a generous admixture of poetry, and it ends with the governor returning to his old home in Heian to find his garden in ruins – evoking the artistic melancholy and sensitivity to the mutability of all things that was the favorite sentiment of Heian Japan.

The full-length fictional prose novel also emerged from this Heian women's literature. The titles of some eighty tales survive from the ninth and tenth centuries, but the renowned *Tale of Genji* overshadows all other Heian productions and puts its stamp on the age. Lady Murasaki's (978–1016) lengthy fictional narration of the life and loves of the Shining Prince Genji is the consummate example of the exquisitely refined aesthetic taste perfected by the Heian court at its eleventh-century peak. This Heian period women's literature, moreover, although not without references to China, was uniquely and thoroughly Japanese. From the late ninth century, a distinctively Japanese high culture had emerged that was not so much a return to ancient pre-Taika native traditions as a dynamic new creation, revealing itself in cooking, clothing, and painting styles as well as the new Japanese-language literature.

Between 607 and 894, the Japanese government commissioned twenty official embassies to China. Of these, three never left Japan, and four got no farther than Korea. Perhaps three thousand people altogether participated in these embassies, but by one estimate, only about 130 Japanese pursued longer-term study in China during these centuries. China remained a very remote place for even the best-educated Heian aristocrats. It took, for example, three years for news of An Lushan's rebellion to reach the Japanese court. In 839, three people who had been assigned to accompany an embassy to China as students ran away and hid rather than obey the terrifying order.[42] In 894, the last embassy was simply cancelled.

The six great Chinese-style Japanese national histories (*Rikkokushi*) that were compiled, beginning with the *Nihongi* in 720, came to an end in 887. Under the reign of Emperor Murakami (r. 946–967), one more official national history was commissioned but never finished, and the last Chinese-style legal code was begun but was also never completed.[43] The last Japanese coins were minted in 958. Meanwhile, after a lengthy period when Chinese-language poetry had been favored, the first imperial collection of Japanese-language poems, the *Kokinshū* (*Collection of Ancient and Modern* [*Poetry*]) was compiled in 905. Clearly the early tenth century, which witnessed the fall of the Tang Dynasty in China and of Silla in Korea, and the permanent independence of Vietnam, was also an important watershed for Japan.

The cancellation of the last Japanese embassy to China in 894 did not mean an end to all contact with the continent. Trade would actually continue to grow, continental cultural influences remained strong, and China may have even gradually come to seem somewhat less remote. After about 850, private Chinese and Korean merchants developed maritime trade with Japan, often becoming residents of a port in northern Kyūshū. By the mid-thirteenth century it was reported that forty to fifty ships came from China to Japan each year.[44] Zen Buddhism (in Chinese, Chan) had made only a limited impact on Japan before the tenth century. The first recognized Chinese Zen master arrived in Japan only in 1246, and during the thirteenth century the full array of Chinese-style Zen practices was eagerly embraced by the new Japanese warrior elite.[45] But this warrior elite itself, which had no counterpart in China, and even the growing dominance of Zen culture in medieval Japan – unlike its position in contemporary China, and despite its self-proclaimed Chinese sources – was eloquent testimony that the broad course of Japanese history had begun to follow a distinctly independent trajectory.

For Further Reading

Authoritative coverage of China during this period is provided by Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, vol. III. Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part 1* (Cambridge University Press, 1979). On the Sui Dynasty, see Arthur F. Wright, *The Sui Dynasty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), and Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty: His Life, Times, and Legacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006). On the Tang, see Marc S. Abramson, *Ethnic Identity in Tang China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); S. A. M. Adshead, *T'ang China: The Rise of the East in World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the T'ang* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973). A somewhat revisionist view of the importance of the Tuoba Xianbei in Tang and Chinese history may be found in Sanping Chen, *Multicultural China in the Early Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). For Tang Dynasty religion, see Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

On the controversial figure of Empress Wu Zetian, see Jo-shui Chen, "Empress Wu and Proto-Feminist Sentiments in T'ang China," in *Imperial Rulership and Cultural Change in Traditional China*, ed. Frederick P. Brandauer and Chun-chieh Huang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); R. W. L. Guisso, *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China* (Bellingham: Western Washington University, 1978); and Norman Harry Rothschild, "The Mother of Laozi and the Female Emperor Wu Zhao: From One Grand Dowager to Another," in *China and Beyond in the Mediaeval Period: Cultural Crossings and Inter-Regional Connections*, ed. Dorothy C. Wong and Gustav Heldt (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014). On Empress Wu and the invention of printing, see also Timothy H. Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

The "Silk Roads" were perhaps most flourishing during the Tang. See Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and, for a strongly argued revisionist approach, Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton University Press, 2009). For interactions with the steppe, see Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

The Tang Dynasty is considered to have been the golden age of Chinese poetry. The glories of Tang poetry may perhaps best be encountered through a series of books by Stephen Owen: *The Poetry of the Early T'ang* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High T'ang* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), and *The Late Tang: Chinese Poetry of the Mid-Ninth Century (827–860)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006). For an innovative study of how poetry may have circulated at the time, see Christopher M. B. Nugent, *Manifest in Words, Written on Paper: Producing and Circulating Poetry in Tang Dynasty China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010).

An excellent general introduction to Korean history is Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, trans. Edward W. Wagner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). For premodern Korea, see also the more recent volume by Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic Period through the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

On Japan's relations with China in this era, see Zhenping Wang, *Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals: China–Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005).

Valuable studies of pre-Heian Japan include Herman Ooms, *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan: The Tenmu Dynasty, 650–800* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), and Joan R. Piggott, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (Stanford University Press, 1997). See also Bruce L. Batten, "Foreign Threat and Domestic Reform: The Emergence of the Ritsuryō State," *Monumenta Nipponica* 41, no. 2 (1986). On pre-Heian Japanese Buddhism, see also Kyoko Motomochi Nakamura, trans., *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition: The Nihon Ryoiki of the Monk Kyōkai* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973). On the development of writing, consult David B. Lurie, *Realms of Literacy: Early Japan and the History of Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011).

For Heian Japan, Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough, eds., *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 2. *Heian Japan* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), is authoritative. See also Mikael Adolphson, Edward Kamens, and Stacie Matsumoto, eds., *Heian Japan, Centers and Peripheries* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Robert Borgen, *Sugawara no Michizane and the Early Heian Court* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Paul Groner, *Saichō: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School* (Seoul: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1984); and Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, [1964] 1985).