

Week 16: From Early to Later Imperial China

Historical Overview

The An Lushan Rebellion shook the Tang Dynasty off its previous course. It was forced to pull back from its positions in the North and in Central Asia. Its economic base shifted to the Southeast.

Military governors sought to build local power bases. And in culture, society, and politics there were calls for a new order of things. And a new order of things did indeed begin to emerge, such as when the tax system was restructured to recognize private land ownership.

These trends would mark the century that followed Huang Chao's devastating rebellion in 880. There was political fragmentation within China, and incursions from without.

While local regimes sought to develop their own ways of recruitment and rule. We know this period today as the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms - a kaleidoscope of short-lived polities and social upheavals.

The successive short-lived Five Dynasties of the North, the Later Liang, Tang, Jin, Han, and Zhou, sought to centralize control over resources and to conquer the South. At the same time, they faced a state being built on their northern border - the Liao state of the Khitans in the Northeast.

Later on, the Tangut people in the Northwest would create their own state, the Xia state. For the first time in China's history, the South was able to support a number of regional states, as local military powers amassed resources of their own.

These states, referred to as the Ten Kingdoms, benefited from population influxes from the North and institutional changes that allowed for the greater amassing of private wealth.

The Northern dynasty that would conquer the South, but fail to dominate the foreign states of the North, was the Song Dynasty. Its founder was the military commander Zhao Kuangyin.

But it would soon be dominated by a new kind of civil elite. The scholar officials, or shidafu, who would try to create a new order, one that would combine a recognition of new geopolitical, social, and economic realities with a desire to at last realize ancient ideals.

Section 1: Periodization and the Tang-Song Transition

Let me begin with the historical context of the topic today. The Tang comes to an end 907. It's followed by a period of division, with multiple states. The five dynasties this period is sometimes called, but in fact five dynasties in the north and ten kingdoms, mainly in the south. This period is succeeded by the Song dynasty. The Song dynasty begins in the north in 960, and over the next 20 years conquers the remaining states in the south.

But I want to begin with a bit of an experiment with you. And it has to do with how we think about history. The point of this inquiry is to provide evidence for making a distinction between two periods in Chinese history, one that might be called the early imperial order, which the Tang is the height of. And the other is the later imperial order that begins with the Song and comes to its full glory, in the late Ming and Qing dynasties.

And to do this, I want to ask how we should divide up time? How do we periodize history? And the idea is this. That if we think of historical time extending over hundreds and thousands of years, there are periods sometimes lasting 100 years or more than that, sometimes only a decade, when a lot changes in many different fields, foreign relations, domestic relations, the economy, society, culture, and so on. And then things settle down again. And then things go along that line pretty much until another period of many, many changes taking place. So we're not going to treat every moment in history as equal. We're interested in those periods when lots changes in order to understand what comes out of the period of change, the more stable, long-term trends and developments.

Now in the Chinese case, the typical period we use is the dynasty, the temporal period during which one family controls the throne, the imperial throne. And of course the dynasty is also the territory that that central government, that court, controls. So we're going to talk about periodization. But in doing this, my goal is to think about the difference between dynastic time and historical time, and to try to come up with ways of dividing historical time that don't just rely on dynasties.

Now consider how we tell time today in the West. We have a calendar for the year based on the sun, 12 months in that year, four weeks. In China they had three weeks of 10 days. Days, like in the West, were defined by the sun. And there weren't 24 hours; there were 12 hours, what we would call two-hour periods. And of course in the West, the Western method of counting continuously, cumulatively, going back to the birth of Christ begins at a certain moment, it's not uniformly recognized for several centuries, but that's the way we work.

But in China before the 20th century there was no single calendar that worked cumulatively, continuously from some point in the past on into the present. Time was kept by the emperor's reign title, and the year in that reign title. So you might say the fourth year of the Yongle emperor, or the second year of the honor the sage reign period, or something like this. This wouldn't matter very much, if there was only one dynasty at a time. But in fact in Chinese history, sometimes there are many dynasties at once, competing states, each one of which proclaims itself the true dynasty.

Now thinking in terms of dynasties has its advantages. After all, if you were talking about that place during that period of time, it has its historical sources. It has its sort of continuous time series. It has its legal code. It has its institutions, and so on. And people were conscious of this. Certainly elites knew that they lived in a world with a certain emperor, under a certain dynasty. What people are conscious of at the time certainly is important. If we think about the United States, for example, after the attack on the World Trade Center building so-called 9/11, that was an event that impinged on the consciousness of everybody, and it had great consequences. So that would be an example of something that breaks that continuous flow of time with a major event.

But if we focus on dynasties too much, we lose sight of long-term change. Now what I mean by this is this. We might think of a dynasty not as something that simply creates time and creates the social order, but something that is created in response to the times, in response to the developments that are taking place at that moment in history, and trying to figure out institutions that can be used to fix the problems of the moment, to establish power, to establish stability. And we tend to think about dynasties, in fact, not as progressive, but as endlessly repeating cycles. It has a beginning. It has a maturity. It has an old age. It ends.

But dynasties in fact are founded for different reasons, under different circumstances, and they fail for different reasons under different circumstances. So in thinking about dynasties, we still are better off asking, what's the situation the dynasty confronts? How successful was it in addressing and resolving the issues of the day? What was the internal situation that developed after a period of extended peace? How might those developments have destabilized the dynastic order itself, or was it due to an outside intervention, an invasion or whatever?

Dynasties thus are a historical event of importance, not to be underestimated. But there are other historical changes that have tremendous long term significance that don't go together with dynasties. And in fact, many of the most important changes in history happen during dynasties not because the dynasty wanted them to happen at all, because it couldn't help it. And so I want to think today about how we're going to identify some of the larger changes that take place in time that dynasties have to cope with to survive. And for that we really need to think about how we periodize history using something other than dynasties.

Now one of the most popular ways of periodizing has come from Karl Marx, who had this notion that society developed along a progressive path, from the primitive, through the slave, to the feudal, to the capitalist, and eventually the golden age to the socialist. And for Marx, these stages were defined by one causal factor - who controlled the means of production. And that basic issue defined how culture developed, how the legal system developed, how religion developed, everything else. This is what he called the superstructure.

Now Marxism as a theory of history has not survived very well, at least not in the West. But its assumption about progressive stages in history has been in fact quite common in the West and has a very long history, goes back in fact to the beginning of the Christian era, when the Christians had Christian historians had to think of how it was that classical civilization had given way to Christianity and what that meant. They wanted to argue that it was a better stage, and that even better was still to come.

The Chinese writing of history is not the same. The Chinese writing of history doesn't see times as progressive. Even though we ourselves might speak of it in terms of cumulative change. The Chinese view of history emphasizes union and disunion, many states coming together into one and then falling apart into many. Others have tried to find, and this includes Chinese historians, different ways of defining historical change in China other than the Marxist way.

Some people talk about technology. We have this in the West too. We talk about the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, the Industrial Age, and so on. And technology actually does play a role in China. But I'm not sure we could define Chinese history through a series of changes in technology. It is true, however, that between the Tang and the Song dynasty, we see three great new inventions, technologies appearing, that are important. And eventually, much later, will reach the West and help define what the modern age means in the West. And these were the mariner's compasses, which allowed ships in principle to sail out of the sight of land. Printing, which allowed language, books, poems, and ideas to be spread further and at a lower cost than ever before. And gunpowder, with which, in fact in the Chinese case, rockets and bombs, artillery could be built, to extend power further than the bow and arrow, further than before.

Another way in which Chinese history has been periodized is in terms of foreign invasions, and these were great turning points in history. I'm not convinced in fact by any of these. I'm not looking for one cause. What I want to do is ask the following question. If we take two points in time, 750, the Tang at the height of its power, 1050, when in the middle of the eleventh century, the Song dynasty is now 100 years old, people are thinking about all that government can do, how society can develop, I want to take these two moments and ask, what kinds of changes, what differences were there in the many areas of life between these two moments in time? Were there connections between the changes that were taking place, or that had taken place between these two moments? And then we can ask, how do we account for these changes? And we will be doing that in the following sequences.

Section 2: Changed Foreign Relations, Changed China

Let's begin with international relations. What was the situation in 750?

750. The Tang was supreme. It extended its power out through the Western regions. Past Kashgar across the mountains. Into Sogdiana in Fergana where it had garrisons. And where the various states there recognized the hegemony of Tang.

It had not successfully invaded Korea. And had stopped trying. But certainly its power extended into the Northeast, to the north, down to the south.

Jump ahead now to 1050, 300 years later. In 1050, the Song Dynasty no longer holds the massive territory of Tang. It's become a much smaller place.

In the Northeast, the Khitan people-- the Khitans-- had established the Liao Dynasty even before the Song. In fact, in sheer amount of territory, they probably rivaled the Song. The Liao dynasty, founded in 907, would go on into the 1120s, when it would be overthrown by another group of pastoral people coming out of the Northeast.

The Khitans had occupied 16 prefectures around modern-day Beijing, prefectures that were settled mainly, or populated mainly, by Chinese speakers. The Song wanted them back. But it could not beat the Khitan. It went to war.

In the end the Song and the Liao sued for peace. And they established a peace treaty in 1004, a peace treaty that required the Song to pay indemnities. I'll talk about that in a moment.

In the Northwest, the Tanguts had established themselves. And in 1038, they proclaimed the state of Xia. Known usually in Chinese as the Xixia in Chinese history. Song goes to war with them. But in the end has to sign a peace.

How does the Song keep the peace? Well, it has peace treaties for one thing. Second, it agrees to pay subsidies. It agrees to pay the Khitans, the Liao, 200,000 rolls of silk every year, and 100,000 ounces of silver.

And after 1038, it agrees to pay the Xixia a lesser amount. It keeps a large standing army along the northern border. Heavily garrisoned. It uses its superior technology. Gunpowder, rockets, bombs.

But it also accepts the fact that this is a world where there will be multiple states. In fact, recognizes that the Liao emperor is a legitimate Son of Heaven. Even though his economy is far smaller than Song. Its population is smaller. This is not a sedentary state in the Song style by any means.

Still the Liao and Xia have understood state building. And they built their states. There have been a couple books that have been written about relations between Song and these northern states. One is called China Among Equals. And another is called Two Sons of Heaven.

Both of them point to very important facts. One is that Song sees itself as having to deal with states that are in some sense equal to it in terms of diplomacy at least, and to the fact that the Liao emperor is a real emperor from the Song perspective as well.

Did this mean China was weak? For many comparing the territorial expanse of Song with that of Tang, China has become a much smaller place. And that must mean some people would say that China has become weak.

But, in fact, China was still strong. It had a very large army. It had superior technology. It was far wealthier than any of the Northern states.

But the Northern states had learned something. They had learned from Tang how to build states and how to project power. The fact that they had very strong cavalries made them a constant threat. And they were always willing to use it if they felt threatened.

Remember that in Sui and Tang, China had tried to conquer Korea again, too, and had failed. And had decided to accept the existence of Korea, because Korea also had learned state building before.

So that's the great change from 750 to 1050 in foreign relations.

Section 3: Changes at Home – The Reconfiguration of Domestic Power and Wealth in Song China

Let's turn now to the domestic situation and the reconfiguration of power and wealth domestically.

We can begin with demography. Tang had a population of, at its height, around 50 million people. By the end of the 11th century, the population would have been close to 100 million people-- a doubling of population.

But this population growth did not happen equally across the country. Let me give you some numbers. In 752, the North had 4.86 million households. When we say that precise a number, what we're talking about is households that were registered by the state. The South, Sichuan, in the West, had 4.07 million. So there were more people in the North than all the rest of the country.

In 1085, the northern population had grown. It had grown to 5.6 million households. But the South, in Sichuan, had grown to almost 11 million households. It had more than doubled. In some areas, the registered population had grown 10 times. And population had departed from the northern border.

There's another aspect of this. We see from Tang to Song the development of multiple centers of population and wealth. In Tang, in 750, the capital Chang'an was the great center, with the eastern capital of Luoyang-- off not so far to the east, on the other side of the passes-- as the second center. And that corridor between the two capitals was really the heart of Tang civilization.

By the 11th century, there are lots of centers. It's not just the North, but the South-- where the Ten Kingdoms had been-- that multiple regional centers have developed.

The internal elaboration of the South is one of the most important developments in Chinese history to this point. Different political centers meant that local power holders had wanted to accumulate resources to build armies, to attract trade, to attract men of culture.

And if you look at a map, you'll see that the states of the South, the kingdoms of the South, actually are closely related to the physiographic macro-regions that exist in Chinese history.

What are the implications of this? Well, the growth of the South-- more than doubling of the Southern population-- means that, all in all, the South now had a greater proportion of national wealth, more wealthy families in the South, and a growing representation in the bureaucracy.

Probably by around 1070, the majority of people in policy-making offices would have been Southerners, whereas in the Tang, in 750, the vast majority of people in office were Northerners.

The differences in climate benefited the South as well. The North was temperate and dry, suitable for barley and wheat. The South was wet and warm, didn't freeze hard.

And as people opened up the lands-- going down from the highlands, down to the more marshy wetlands-- they built paddy fields for rice.

And in the 11th century, new strains of rice appear from Southeast Asia ripen very early. And because they ripen early, you could plant a second crop, not of rice, but of beans and vegetables.

But that means the land is producing more income and more food. It could sustain population growth. Eventually rice strains will be improved. And there will be double cropping of rice crops, as well.

The transportation costs in the South gave this-- particularly in the Southeast, where there are many waterways-- gave the South a further advantage. Transportation costs by water versus land were 1/10 or 1/5 as much. So if you had a good river system-- good canal system, good water system-- it was much, much cheaper to transport goods than it was by land.

What's more interesting is the fact that in the Song-- in the 11th century, when goods were transported by water-- it was 1/10 the cost, 1/5 the cost by land. But in the Tang, when they were transported by water, it was only 1/3 to 1/4 the cost.

So something had happened to make water transport more efficient and cheaper during the Song. That seems to have been boat-building technology. That Song boats could carry more and move more quickly than Tang boats could.

In fact, it's estimated that around the year 1000, the beginning of the 11th century, boats that traveled on the Grand Canal-- these would be boats transporting rice from the South to the North to the capital-- averaged around 18 tons. And they could make three trips.

By 1050, thanks to improvements in locks along the canal, boat building, and water management, boats averaged 25 tons and could make four to five trips a year.

There's another difference to be pointed to. And that's the different priorities of North and South. The North necessarily was concerned with border defense. And that meant they had to get as much revenue out of the North to pay the armies on the border as they could. And they had to transport goods to the border overland uphill, which is tremendously expensive.

The Southern concerns-- the Southern priorities-- were rather different. Along the southeastern coast, people thought about trade and investment. They didn't really have the burdens of defense.

It was still rather too expensive to expect Southern rice to feed the Northern garrisons. The Southeast coast was flourishing with foreign trade: the ports of Fujian, traded with Southeast Asia; the ports of northern Zhejiang, Ningbo, traded with Japan.

Investment in irrigation, in canals-- was generally called water conservancy-- tripled during the Song. 75% of these investments were in the South. The amount of investment during the 11th century doubled.

There is a theory which I've talked about before, that there is a certain Northern style of governance in which the central government is central. That it taxes the people to the maximum in order to pay for defense. And distributes the surplus income that it has gotten to its own officials.

The South has a different style of government, where it's more commercial, where it's petty capitalist rather than state enterprise, if you will, where families play a larger role and private interests play a larger role.

And in Song, we could say that the Tang really had a Northern style of governance. And the Song had both a Northern and a Southern style. We'll talk more about this in a minute when we look at the issue of commerce and urbanization.

Section 4: Commerce and Urbanization

1. Changing Capitals, Changing Cities

To talk about commerce and urbanization, we could begin just by looking at the two capitals.

In 750, the capital of Chang'an, this great administrative city, a planned city, built to be a capital, all the streets regular, grid pattern.

Great walls surrounded an imperial palace in the North, symmetrically organized, markets on the East, markets on the West, walled wards around the city.

But compare this with Kaifeng, the capital of the Song. Kaifeng had been a commercial city during the Five Dynasties period. It's where a canal from the South went into the Yellow River. It was a city of commerce. And in fact, even today, it is a city of commerce.

Note the difference in location: Chang'an, behind the pass in the Wei River Valley, outside of the North China Plain; and Kaifeng, right in the heart of the Western North China Plain.

There's a difference, too, in the role of the capitals. Chang'an, and sometimes Luoyang, were the great cities of Tang. They certainly were the greatest cities in the world at that point.

But just being one great city, dependent on tax revenues, does not necessarily mean it's a great economy. And in fact, there were points when the city of Chang'an began to starve from lack of resources.

Kaifeng was a large city, too. Not as large as Chang'an. Although they built a Great Wall around it to try to make it look like a great capital city.

But, in fact, in the Song period in the eleventh century, there were other great cities as well: Suzhou, Yangzhou, Hangzhou, all in the South, and Chengdu in the Western Plain of Sichuan.

And you'll see here some commercial maps. Maps of commercial tax quotas showing you where the major centers were.

2. Development in Commerce

Let's turn to commerce, because commerce is one of the things that really drive urbanization. In 750, the state, by and large, controlled commerce. Markets were expected to be in administrative towns, and to be regulated by the local government. By 1050, the government has learned how to tax commerce, and is encouraging it.

One half of government revenue is coming from non-land sources in 1050. That's an amazing number, the first time in Chinese history that that had happened. Commercial tax quotes from 1078 show something else as well, that many of the sources of commercial tax revenue are not administrative towns at all. They

have put tax collection stations in those towns, because there are markets there. And so the administrative hierarchy and the economic hierarchy, by 1050, have started to come apart.

The Song has learned how to use commerce to its benefit. And it has learned, also, that monopolies, monopolies on salt, on iron, monopolies-- they try at one point, monopolies on tea-- but also, auctioning off, profit-making institutions like wineries, and ferries, to private citizens who will pay a fee, that this is also a way of generating revenue. It's a far more commercial state than Tang ever could have envisioned in 750.

Here's another example, fundamental to commerce, the money supply. In 750, the annual mint was around 327,000 strings of cash. Now one string of copper cash has maybe 1,000 coins on it, at least, nominally 1,000 coins. By the year 800, this had declined. It had declined to about 135,000 strings of cash minted, annually. In 1050, 1.5 million strings of cash were being minted, annually. And by the 1080s, 4.5 million strings of cash were being minted, annually.

We'll take this a bit further and consider, what happens when you put silver into the mix. Well, when silver is included, it's just as stark. In 750, the money supply, including silver, going into the economy-- the new money being minted in silver-- the value would have the value of 360,000 strings of cash. By 1080, it would have equaled 9 million strings of cash. This is a 30-fold increase in the money supply. There was inflation, but not inflation at that rate. And still, there was not enough money to supply demand. And the Song is the first period in Chinese history that uses paper money as currency in the economy, successfully.

3. A New Tax System

Finally, changes in the tax system. In 750, the government had continued the tax system, which was based on the notion that land will be redistributed to the population. And every adult, or every household, would have a certain tax obligation. The obligation to the government that could be measured in terms of, a certain amount of grain, it was set alike for all households, a certain amount of textile, that was also set alike, and a certain amount of labor, annually, days of labor given to the government.

In Tang, the assumption was that, the burden would be distributed, the tax burden would be distributed by the person, and the state would make sure that each family had enough land to farm, to be able to pay it's tax, and survive. In Song, there is a radically different system. Now, they didn't tax the person, they tax the property. There was a new system, called the Dual Tax System, or the Twice a Year Tax.

Tax was based on the productivity of the land, and each parcel of land, based on its productivity, had a certain tax rate associated with it. A household was graded according to its wealth, there were five grades. And those with the greatest resources were expected to pay-- to provide more labor service, to provide more. But it was based on the amount of wealth, not based on the person.

This was possible because profound changes had taken place in how the economy was organized. In 750, land was redistributed by the government. So people got land when they reached a certain age. When they reached an older age, retirement age, the land went back into the system.

In 1050, it's the market that redistributes land. And the market means that some people can buy more land than others. There are implications to that, which we'll come back to later. The larger point, I think, is that the economic hierarchy that had existed in Tang, had been subordinate to the state hierarchy, to the administrative hierarchy. Tang was much more of a command economy. In Song, the market economy and the administrative hierarchy had separated to a large extent. And the government was learning how to tax the market economy in order to gain revenue for itself. But so could private people, and private individuals, see how they could use the market economy to increase their wealth.

Section 5: A Shifting Social and Political Elite

1. Who is the Elite?

Let's turn our attention now to these political elite, the social elite, and the whole issue of social change between 750 and 1050.

We go back to Tang at the height of its powers in 750 and ask, who is the elite? It's very clear. We would know where they lived. In the North, Luoyang, Chang'an, in the space in between predominately.

They would be members of great families, great clans, we've called them, whose history of service in government and court extended back for many generations. In fact, extended back for many dynasties into the past.

In 1050, there were no great clans. They had disappeared. The new elite was composed of scholar officials, people from educated families that had entered government, whose claim to importance was often based on their scholarship and learning.

They're a new elite, which doesn't mean, of course, that they didn't want to perpetuate themselves in office. They might very well-- if things had turned out otherwise-- have become a new kind of aristocratic elite of great clans. But that is not what happened.

And one of the reasons it didn't happen, was because the way in which people were recruited into government office had changed. The recruitment system in Tang was, to a large extent, a matter of family connections.

And the use of what's called the yin privilege, or the protection privilege-- that is that people of a certain rank have the right to place their sons, grandsons, brothers into office at a certain rank, which makes them eligible for appointment. Those of lower rank could place their sons and their grandsons in lower level but honorable clerkships. From which they could promote into the regular bureaucracy.

In 1050, the vast majority of government officials are chosen by an examination system, a blind system, a fair system, in which people compete. And those who succeed, those who pass-- probably around 600 every two to three years-- are given government office.

The Song still uses the protection privilege, still uses yin privilege. But it's clearly a transitional moment. When the clans have gone, they found a new way of recruiting officials. And still families want to make sure that government service remains the family business. But that's being undermined constantly by the examination system.

Let's talk about family orientation. In 750, members of great clans understood their role. Not simply as cultural leaders, as social leaders, the social elite, although they were that. And there were lists of Great Clans that ranked them in court in order of their prestige.

But there were also families that saw government service as the family occupation. And over time, as the number of families or the membership in those families grew-- because they would have more sons than there were government offices-- more and more official and honorable statuses were created by the Tang to at least keep the sons of these families in some kind of official service, as Guardsmen, as senior clerks and managers, as registered students in schools, and so on.

In 1050, scholar official families had come to recognize that, in fact, it would not be easy to keep their sons and grandsons in office. It would not be easy to make government service the family business.

They weren't sure what to do about it. Because they still assumed that to be a shi, to be a member of the elite, to be a literatus-- as I'll now begin to translate this term shi, because they do examinations, because they learn, because they are literary. To be a literatus was still meant to serve.

But it was beginning to dawn on people that it could not mean that forever. Either the government would have to be expanded greatly to make more positions, or people who saw themselves as members of the national political and social elite would have to do something else.

2. Elite Culture

We turn, briefly, to elite culture and some shifts in elite culture.

For people who like to read, in 750, the way you would read is you would take a scroll and you'd unroll it and you'd read down the scroll. In 1050, you'd pick up a book and you'd read a book.

Printing had appeared. Printing by the government, by the central government, by the local government, by private printers, as well. Printing and growth in literacy brought with it an expanded pool of people who wrote.

We know of-- these are not my numbers. I've gotten them from other scholars. We know of 2,200 Tang poets. We know of 9,000 Song poets.

So the number of Song poets is four times as many as Tang. Although the population of Song is only double that of Tang.

What did the elite write? How do they write? Well, in 750, they write elegant prose and refined poetry, highly parallel, very demanding styles. In 1050, some of the most popular kinds of writing are either far more lyrical or far more argumentative.

The older forms of literary writing still exist. But now people are writing in ways that are much more concerned with values, with ideas. They become more ideological.

Section 6: A Tang-Song Transition – The An Lushan Rebellion

1. The Problem of Comparison: 750 and 1050

So now we've seen changes taking place in all these areas. Let's see how they're connected.

You may have already surmised that some were. And let's think about how we can account for it. But it's important that I tell you first that I have deceived you to some extent.

By choosing the years 750 and 1050, and making a comparison between them, I've suggested perhaps that the great difference was simply between the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty.

But, in fact, many of the trends that resulted in the world of 1050 began in the latter half of the eighth century. Continued on through the ninth.

If I had made the comparison between 750 and 850, many of the same trends would have started to become visible. And certainly between 750 and 900, they would be obvious.

So the turning point is actually not between the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty. But we have to push it back to somewhere in the Tang when things begin.

And the turning point most of us would point to would be in 755, when the general on the Northeastern border rebels. This was An Lushan, the famous rebellion.

2. The An Lushan Rebellion

The famous rebellion, famous in part because the literary works that were written about it perhaps, but also a devastating rebellion, and certainly one of the deepest shocks that Tang had ever experienced.

An Lushan was a Sogd from the Western regions, recruited into Tang service, a family that probably had been serving Tang in the military for a number of generations. An is commonly used for Sogdian names. And his personal name, Lushan, is probably a Chinese version of the name Roxanne. "Luxan" would have been the pronunciation in his own time.

The rebel, or An Lushan, who wants to take over the throne, marches on the capital, Chang'an. The emperor flees west to Sichuan.

There's a famous story involved in this. The Emperor's favorite concubine, Yang Guifei, has connections of some kind to-- and her brother is a prime minister-- they have connections to An Lushan. And An Lushan, one of the reasons he rebels is the feeling that he was not being treated correctly by the court.

Popular opinion blames Yang Guifei for beguiling the emperor. That's what led to the sacking of the capital by An Lushan's troops. And as the emperor marches west, flees west, the soldiers surrounding him demand that she be executed. And she is.

The great poet, Bai Juyi, writes a famous, famous poem about this event. It's called The Song of Everlasting Sorrow, the Chang Hen Ge. This poem eventually makes its way to Japan, where it becomes immensely popular, as Bai Juyi's poems generally were in Japan. And this poem, then, is the inspiration, it is said, for the great 11th century Japanese novel The Tale of Genji.

Well, having said that the An Lushan rebellion was such an important event, we need to go further now, and explain how it mattered, and how it started to bring about the changes that I've been talking about.

Section 7: Late Tang – Changes at Home and Abroad

1. Shrinking Borders and A Shifting Economic Base

The literary perspective of An Lushan's Rebellion. It's a perspective of the tales of suffering, of betrayal, of sadness, of families destroyed, emperors fleeing. From a historian's perspective, we emphasize different things.

Internationally, the rebellion on the northern border meant the breakdown of northern border defense. The attack on the capital led the Tang court to try to seek alliances with other Northern peoples to come to their defense, who in turn did sack the capital.

Foreign peoples now are getting opportunities to build their own states. And of course, that's what happens. The northern border-- the northern frontier-- becomes a war zone. Families flee. Population declines. The Western regions that had once been held by Tang are now independent. And Tang no longer has control over them and is withdrawing.

Domestically, new economic institutions become necessary. Because of the rebellion, the rich Northeastern provinces on the North China Plain, which have been a major source of income for the Tang court, now were no longer willing to pay revenue in a constant stream to Chang'an. They were holding it back.

And the court begins to grow increasingly dependent on the grain shipments from the Southeast. The Southeast is rice growing. And you can't redistribute land in a rice growing region in every generation if the farmers have to invest in building paddy field.

So, how are you going to get revenue? The old tax system won't work. And it's in the years-- the decades-- after the rebellion, that the government develops a new tax system, one that, in fact, is the tax system that's adopted that the Song has as well in 1050.

The tax not to be placed on the person, but on the land. But that means the state is no longer going to redistribute land. It's going to leave it to the market. And that means people build larger states. And there'll be greater inequality.

It won't just be government officials that have large estates, but private citizens could put them together as well. And that's what of course happens in the Southeast. With a growing number of families that become wealthy families, gain education, and start to want to be apart of the political system.

The government institutes monopolies, as a way of gaining revenue, salt, which is essential to human life, essential to preserving food. Salt, coming out of the southeastern coast, coming from the seacoast, can be monopolized and sold by merchants who pay into the government.

But this legitimates private merchants, private commerce. It legitimates and opens new trade routes. And many are concerned with this in the eighth century, when this happens. But it has to continue.

And finally, those who are set out to make this work become more independent. The government appoints commissioners. The commissioners start to appoint their own staffs. And they're the ones who make the monopolies work, who put the new tax system into effect, who opened the trade routes. And so on.

2. Regional Development

Regional development also begins at this point. Not only with refugees coming out of the North fleeing south. But the Southeast becomes crucial for the capital's survival, the lifeline, the Northeast out of control.

But stability depends in large part on the governors of the provinces, military governors often, being willing to pay tax.

The problem is that military governors who need to support their troops, their armies, start to see themselves as the centers of power, and want to pass on their governorships to their descendants, rather than giving them back to the Tang government.

And they, too, start to hold back taxes. So this is constant battle now between the regions, between local governments, military governors, the provinces, and the center.

3. Calls for A New Ideology in A Changed Tang

There's also ideological change beginning. It's in the eighth century.

It's in the generation after the An Lushan rebellion that we start to see people calling for a profound change in the way Tang political leaders thought about the role of government.

These are the people that call for a return to antiquity, to the models of antiquity, as a world where government had real responsibility for the welfare of everybody were an organized society for the common welfare, where people rose to their position not on the basis of family connection but on the basis of their learning.

These were the people that created what was called the Ancient Style Movement. People like Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan, whose writing you'll be reading later, in a later topic.

But this idea that antiquity could be a model meant that recent history was no model. That we did not have to be loyal to the models of early Tang or the Han Dynasty, the two great, unified, long-lasting empires that had existed to this point in history. We could go back to the times of the former kings and the sages.

People were beginning to see the need for a new order of things. They had not figured out how to do it. They had not figured out what exactly it required. But they knew that a change was necessary.

But the great clans were still in power. And in fact, that's one of the interesting phenomena of Tang-- is that the number of people coming from great clans that had occupied high government positions increases after the rebellion, rather than decreases.

Because these are the people that are most afraid of losing, they're the people who are anxious to stay in control even as government resources shrink, even as the positions available to them shrink.

Thus, they try to occupy whatever space is left. They control appointments. They intermarry. They are continuing.

However, in 880, Huang Chao, a rebel who began in Shandong, apparently, had swept through the country, and gone south, come back north, crossed the Yangtze River.

In 880, he attacks and pillages Luoyang, goes through the corridor between Luoyang and Chang'an, the Western capital, and pillages Chang'an.

The majority of great clan residents of these capitals in the corridor-- who thought at first that they could collaborate with Huang Chao, that they could continue in their position-- upset him, disturb him, anger him. Whatever happens they end up being massacred. And suddenly the great clans are no longer.

The Tang Dynasty continues for 20 more years. And then in 907, it's gone. The South splinters into different military states. The North becomes a series of short-lived dynasties.

There's not yet a new order of things. But it's quite clear that the old Han and Tang model will no longer work. And this is the world which the Song dynasty will become part of.

And by 1050, people in the Song are beginning to figure out what it is they think they have to do to deal with the world as it has now become. If you want to hear about that, you'll have to go to the next topic.