China’s Tang Dynasty gave rise to a new period of expanded growth by trading along the Silk Road routes, and the later Ming Dynasty built on that with expansion across most of Afro-Eurasia.
Introduction
A series of dynasties ruled China over much of its 4,000-year history. The same basic structure existed from the Shang dynasty, founded in 1600 BCE to the Qing. The last dynasty of China, the Qing, fell in 1911. The Republic of China was created after its fall. Under the dynasty system, the emperor had supreme control. Chinese territory was divided into different provinces governed by a large bureaucracy, and most people were farmers. Each dynasty followed the same pattern. It rose, flourished, declined, and fell. In most of the periods between dynasties, rebels or warlords fought for control. Some dynasties ruled for hundreds of years, which enabled the country to grow, while others failed after only a few decades.

The rise of the Tang
The Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE) unified China after years of turmoil. Eventually, they lost control in a rebellion. Li Yuan (Emperor Gaozu), the first emperor of the Tang Dynasty, claimed to be a descendant of Laozi, the founder of Daoism. His son, Emperor Taizong, forced him off the throne and spread Buddhism throughout China. Now China had three belief systems: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.
Empress Wu and China’s “Golden Age”

Taizong fell in love with one of his concubines, Wu Zetian. After Taizong died, Wu Zetian became a concubine of his son, who became emperor Gaozong. When Gaozong fell ill, Wu ruled from behind the scenes. She declared herself emperor in 690 CE and named her dynasty the Zhou, after the famous Zhou Dynasty that had ruled China from 1046-256 BCE. However, her Zhou Dynasty ended in 705, and Tang rule continued. She was the only woman to ever be emperor in all of Chinese history.

Some historians see her negatively and say she ignored Confucian teachings and preferred Buddhism. However, Wu did use the ideas of Confucius in her changes. Wu reformed the education system. She made sure that teachers were well qualified and started exams for the military to make sure officials were qualified.

Wu reopened the Silk Road trade routes, which had been closed because of disease and raids. Foreign goods and ideas flowed into China, influencing its culture. In turn, Chinese traditions, goods, and ideas spread to other areas of Afro-Eurasia. Buddhism thrived and spread as monks made pilgrimages to India.
As the economy grew, so did the population. From the seventh to the tenth century, the Chinese population went from 50 million to 100 million. China under the Tang also established a strong trading presence on the seas. Some say this was a “golden age”, but it was not golden for everyone.

Decline and fall

By the ninth century, the dynasty began to lose its hold over the region. Traditionalists became worried about the power and influence of foreigners. Tang leaders began to restrict both foreigners and trade. Businesses controlled by Buddhist monasteries were shut down, and Buddhist monks and nuns were persecuted. The Tang Dynasty fell. It was followed by an unstable period known as the Five Dynasties (907-960 CE).

The creation of the Ming Dynasty

China faced more ups and downs as the centuries progressed. The Song Dynasty came into power in 960 CE. In 1269 CE, they were defeated by Mongols, who invaded from the north and started the Yuan Dynasty under Kublai Khan. Some scholars see the Mongols as invaders and outsiders. Other historians say the Mongols blended their traditions with Chinese culture and brought diversity to the country. In 1368, the Mongols were defeated by the Ming, whose rule lasted until 1644.

Under the Ming, ocean trade was greatly expanded. The ships of Chinese explorer Zheng He were much larger than those of Christopher Columbus. One ship carried 500 people along with goods for trade. Zheng He even reached the east coast of Africa in the 1400s to trade. Chinese explorers wanted to improve trade, rather than conquer new colonies.
Expansion of agriculture and trade

Ming emperors wrote laws and strengthened the government. Civil servants were hired based upon abilities rather than family lines. The Ming began massive irrigation projects, which increased farm production and began producing iron at an amazing rate. Under the Ming, construction was completed on the Great Wall, which protected the border from invasion.

The first Ming emperor, Hongwu, led a successful rebellion against the Mongols. He redistributed land to the poor and also gave soldiers land so that in times of peace, they would farm. Agricultural production went way up, and the population of China grew from 65 million to 160 million. Hongwu believed that farming should be the basis of the economy, and he limited trade.

Later, Europeans reached the Americas. They introduced new crops and goods from the Americas into China, such as peanuts and sweet potatoes, and wanted to sell even more to China.

At first, the Chinese were not interested in what the Europeans were selling. Then the Spanish found silver in the Americas, and silver became their doorway into China. The Chinese became dependent on Spanish silver. When the Spanish reduced the supply of silver, an economic crisis hit the region. These economic problems coupled with famines weakened China, and the Ming emperors struggled to maintain control. People rebelled and the Ming Dynasty’s rule ended in China.
China Under the Tang and Ming Dynasties

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