

The Tang and Song Dynasties in China

By ReadWorks

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations. Historians know that Chinese history dates back to at least 2000 B.C.—nearly 4000 years before the United States became a country! However, China has not always been the country we know today. In fact, throughout its history, parts of the country were under the control of various kingdoms and warlords, and the different parts of the country were not united, but rather fought against each other for land. It wasn't until 221 B.C. that an emperor united various kingdoms to form the first Chinese empire. This began the reign of the Qin Dynasty, which only lasted until 206 B.C.

A “dynasty” is a sequence of rulers from the same family. Eras in Chinese history are named by the dynasty that ruled over the country during that period. Since China was unified, it was ruled by more than a dozen dynasties, each of which helped China grow and advance to become the country we know today. Two of the most important dynasties were the Tang Dynasty and the Song Dynasty. Under the rule of these two dynasties, China saw significant technological and commercial developments which helped the country prosper and grow. Many of these developments made an impact outside China's borders as well, helping civilizations around the world.

The Tang Dynasty started ruling in 618 A.D. Scholars generally believe the Tang Dynasty was one of the high points of Chinese civilization. One of the most influential technological innovations of the Tang Dynasty was woodblock printing. Woodblock printing is a technique for printing text, images or patterns. It involves cutting away at a block of wood until a pattern is created. The block could then be covered with ink, and applied to a paper or cloth to create the print. Woodblock printing made it possible for books to be more widely available to the general public. Literacy rates and social mobility increased, and more people from the lower classes were able to pass the examinations to gain entrance into the civil service. Woodblock printing was the most widely used form of printing in East Asia until the 19th century, when the European mechanical printing press became more popular.

The Tang Dynasty was also a high point for China for trade with the outside world. During this period, the Chinese conducted trade by land using the Silk Road, and maritime trade at sea. The Silk Road is the name of an ancient trading route that extended from Europe, through many countries in Asia, all the way to China. It was named the Silk Road because silk was the main item traded along the route from China. While the trading route was established centuries before the Tang Dynasty, it had been closed at some point, until the Tang Dynasty reopened it. During this period, the Chinese also increased their maritime presence in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Thanks to the increased trade, the Chinese gained many new technologies, cultural

practices, and luxury items from the 70 (or more!) countries it traded with. Buddhism and Islam also came to China through trade with India and the Middle East, and Buddhism became an especially important and influential religion during this period. At this height of trade and culture, China also attracted thousands of people from foreign countries who wanted to live and trade in China, bringing diverse culture and wealth to the country.

The period after the fall of the Tang Dynasty was filled with chaos, and the country rapidly changed hands between several different regimes. In 960 A.D., the Song Dynasty took power. In the eyes of scholars, the Song Dynasty also ranks with the Tang Dynasty in terms of economic growth, artistic and intellectual achievement. This dynasty has even been compared to the European Renaissance!

The time under the Song Dynasty is sometimes regarded as the start of the industrial revolution in China. The economy of China during this period was one of the most prosperous and advanced in the entire world. The iron industry grew more than six fold during this period, and China continued to be an important figure in world trade, bringing iron, silk, porcelain, textiles and much more to its trading partners. However, the most important advancement during this time was the establishment of the world's first government-issued paper money. The Song rulers created factories in several cities, employing thousands of workers just to print paper money. Today, paper currency can be seen in countries all around the world, including our own!

During this period, the Chinese also made progress in weapons technology. According to scholars, the Chinese may have invented gunpowder during an earlier dynasty, but it was during the Song dynasty that it really came to prominence. The Chinese used gunpowder to create flamethrowers, grenades, cannons, firearms and land mines. By the thirteenth century, these developments had reached Europe, India and the Middle East.

There were also significant developments in mathematics, astronomy, cartography, architecture, and virtually every other field of study during this golden age of the Chinese empire. It was also during this period that the Chinese discovered a compass could be used to discern which way was north. This discovery became crucial in maritime navigation, and it is still important to us today.

The Song Dynasty struggled with Mongol invaders during its reign, and ultimately fell to invading forces in 1279 A.D.

Combined, the Tang and Song Dynasties span just a little more than 600 years. Considering how long Chinese civilization has existed, this is just a small fraction of that time. However, during these two eras, Chinese civilization made enormous technological and commercial advancements. Without many of these advancements, the world we know today might be quite different.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____

1. According to the text, what were two of the most important dynasties in China?

- A) the Ming and Song Dynasties
- B) the Song and Qin Dynasties
- C) the Tang and Song Dynasties
- D) the Tang and Qin Dynasties

2. Which of the following events happened after the Song Dynasty took power in China in 960 A.D.?

- A) the development of woodblock printing
- B) the start of the industrial revolution in China
- C) the fall of the Tang Dynasty
- D) the Qin Dynasty reigned over China

3. Inventions created during the Song Dynasty still impact people today. What evidence from the text best supports this conclusion?

- A) "The iron industry grew more than six fold during this period, and China continued to be an important figure in world trade, bringing iron, silk, porcelain, textiles and much more to its trading partners."
- B) "[T]he most important advancement during this time was the establishment of the world's first government-issued paper money. Today, paper currency can be seen in countries all around the world[.]"
- C) "During this period, the Chinese also made progress in weapons technology. [. . .] The Chinese used gunpowder to create flamethrowers, grenades, cannons, firearms and land mines."
- D) "It was also during this period that the Chinese discovered a compass could be used to discern which way was north. This discovery became crucial in maritime navigation[.]"

4. What was one result of the invention of woodblock printing during the Tang Dynasty?

- A) Trade between China and the outside world increased.
- B) European countries began to appreciate the Tang Dynasty's power.
- C) Literacy rates and social mobility increased.
- D) The European mechanical printing press became more popular.

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A) the unification of China under the Tang Dynasty
- B) the influence of the Tang and Song Dynasties on China
- C) changes in Chinese leadership from 221 B.C. to 1279 A.D.
- D) important Chinese inventions that influenced other societies

6. Read these sentences from the text.

"The Tang Dynasty was also a high point for China for trade with the outside world. During this period, the Chinese conducted trade by land using the Silk Road, and maritime trade at sea. [. . .] Thanks to the increased trade, the Chinese gained many new technologies, cultural practices, and luxury items from the 70 (or more!) countries it traded with."

What does the author most likely mean by the sentence, "The Tang Dynasty was also a high point for China for trade with the outside world"?

- A) China had a higher amount of trade with the outside world during the Tang Dynasty than during other periods in its history.
- B) China conducted trade at higher altitudes during the Tang Dynasty than it did during other periods in its history.
- C) China had limited trade during the Tang Dynasty compared to other periods in its history.
- D) China only traded with certain countries during the Tang Dynasty, unlike during other periods in its history.

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence.

During the Song Dynasty, there were significant developments in mathematics, astronomy, cartography, architecture, and virtually every other field of study during this golden age of the Chinese empire. _____, it was during this period that the Chinese discovered a compass could be used to discern which way was north.

- A) Therefore
- B) In contrast
- C) However
- D) Additionally

8. According to the passage, what was China's economy like under the Song Dynasty?

9. The Silk Road was reopened under the Tang Dynasty. What impact did the reopening of the Silk Road have on Chinese civilization?

10. How did the Tang and Song Dynasties impact China's advancement? Support your answer with at least three examples from the text.
