

If you read or watch world news stories, you probably already know some things about China. But do you know about the political and cultural changes that occurred during some of the country's most influential dynasties? The Tang and Song dynasties brought many changes in the focus of government and in Chinese philosophy and art. Let's take a look at the territory struggles, political ideas, philosophy, and achievements in the arts during these important dynasties.

Tang Dynasty(618–907)

Although the Han dynasty is very well known, the Tang dynasty is a strong rival to the Han in its accomplishments. The high point of the dynasty is generally considered to have occurred between the reigns of the emperors Xuanzong and Taizong. They were also known as Zhen Guan and Kai Yuan, respectively. Historians on China have concluded a few reasons for the success of the dynasty. The emperors' love of the people, their openness to criticism and suggestions, and their skilled and moral government appointees all contributed to the changes and accomplishments of the Tang.



Portrait of the famous Tang poet Li Bo (also known as Li Bai), 701–762.

Ideology and philosophy tended to change under each dynasty. Buddhism spread during this period. It became an integral part of Chinese culture. Taizong supported Taoism and Confucianism, which were also gaining popularity at the time. The emperor encouraged some of the empire's scholars to create the book *Five Classics of Confucianism*. Under Taizong and later emperors, this text and the Confucian beliefs upon which it was based guided scholar-officials as they prepared for service in government.

Foreign relations have often changed drastically under different dynasties. Under Taizong, China was very open in its relations with foreign countries and carried out diplomatic relations with over 300 countries. Wu Zhao served as empress during the dynasty. Historians have judged her reign to be one of stability and positive changes. She was very beloved by the people of China.

The Tang dynasty is known for its contributions to art and learning. The colorful poems of Li Bo (also known as Li Bai) and Du Fu were written during this period and the court painter Wu Daozi created many works of art. Furthermore, the practice of block printing was created. Block printing helped

printed texts be delivered to more people across the vast lands of China.

During the Tang, civil service exams were frequently used. These were exams that helped assign jobs to people based on their skill and merit instead of their family or wealth. The Tang exams created a new class of scholar-officials. These were people who served in the government. Their position was decided based on how well they performed on the exam. They brought stability and served as communicators between the citizens and government officials.

In addition to its stability, the government was also very strong. This led to the borders of China growing larger than during the Han dynasty. The military was able to stop invaders from the Muslim powers to the west. The military also helped push China's reach into Korea and Tibet.

Song Dynasty (960–1279)

After the collapse of the Tang dynasty, China experienced a period of dark and troubled times, called the Five Dynasties. After this, the people of China were ready for happier times. A period of peace and unification came for most of China under the Song dynasty. Historically, the period is divided in two parts. The Northern Song lasted from 960 through 1127. The Southern Song lasted from 1127 through 1279.



Shown here is a mounted Khitan nobleman dressed in Chinese silk.

The Song dynasty brought new ideas to the government and people of China. Buddhism became less popular with the intellectuals of the time. Instead a mixture of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian beliefs emerged as the official viewpoint for resolving issues. This set of beliefs was called Neo-Confucianism. The philosophy started during the late part of this dynasty and endured for several hundred years after its reign.

The Song continued open diplomatic relations with many countries. The countries included Indonesia, Egypt, and India, among others. As with the Tang dynasty, there was a return to reliance on scholar-officials. The openness of the dynasty and the impact of the scholar-officials are often given as reasons for the success of the dynasty. During the Tang period, scholar-officials worked to

communicate between the citizens and the government. In the Song era, however, they worked with the military governors. This created a disconnect with everyday citizens and led to the emperor gaining more power.

There were also big changes in the areas of social classes, philosophy, and the arts. The famous Silk Road trade route was revived during the Song dynasty, which enabled more trade of goods with the West. With the increase in trade, a new class of merchants blossomed. This class brought new hope for success for those who chose this path.

The accomplishments of the Song don't end there. Imagine a country with only coins in use for currency. Another major achievement for the dynasty came with the adoption of paper money. This change helped the economy grow and reinforced a hopeful outlook for the people of China. And with such a large and prospering country, the empire needed protection from foreign invaders. To aid in this much-needed protection, the founding of the Chinese navy took place in 1132. Both of these dynasties, the Tang and the Song, made lasting changes in China's culture.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** During the Song dynasty, scholar-officials served as communicators between the citizens and government officials.
 - A.** true
 - B.** false

- 2.** Which philosophy guided the policies and actions of the Tang dynasty?
 - A.** Buddhism spread and was the main philosophy.
 - B.** Confucianism gained popularity and was the main philosophy.
 - C.** A mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism was practiced.
 - D.** Daoism became very popular and was the only philosophy practiced.

- 3.** Which news headline best illustrates the legacy of the Tang emperors?
 - A.** Emperor's Beliefs Feared by the People of China
 - B.** Corruption of Scholar-Officials Discovered by Emperor
 - C.** Emperor Approves Suggestions by Scholar-Officials
 - D.** Scholar-Official Tests Reveal Practice of Cheating

- 4.** The Tang and Song dynasties are noted for their achievements in culture, innovations, and government rule. Name some of the greatest achievements of each dynasty and explain why each achievement was important. Use details from the reading passage to support your answer.