

# 6 The Spread of Civilizations in East Asia

(500–1650)

## Main Ideas

- China expanded and grew rich under the powerful Tang and Song dynasties.
- During the 1200s and 1300s, the Mongols ruled much of Asia. After the fall of the Mongols, the Ming restored Chinese culture and later imposed a policy of isolation.
- During the 1100s, Japan created a feudal society ruled by powerful military lords.

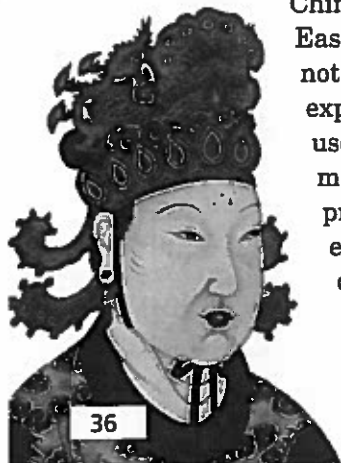
After the Han dynasty collapsed in A.D. 220, China remained a divided land for nearly 400 years. Various Chinese dynasties rose and fell. Then in the 500s, China reemerged as a united empire. For a short period, the Sui dynasty ruled. Then a Sui general and his son, Tang Taizong, led a successful revolt and established their own dynasty, the Tang.

## Two Golden Ages of China

Under the rule of the Tang dynasty (618–907), China was restored to its earlier glory. Tang armies marched deep into Central Asia and surrounding regions. They forced neighboring lands to become tributary states. That is, while these states remained independent, their rulers had to acknowledge Chinese supremacy and send regular tribute to the Tang emperor. Tang emperors restored the bureaucracy. They redistributed land to the peasants. They also completed a system of canals to encourage internal trade and transportation. The Tang dynasty finally collapsed in 907. The Song dynasty soon rose to take its place.

In 960, the Song reunited much of China to rule for 319 years. The Song period was a golden age.

Chinese wealth and culture dominated East Asia even when its armies did not. Farming and foreign trade expanded. Paper money came into use. China's cities, which had been mainly centers of government, now prospered as centers of trade. Several cities even had populations over one million.



The first empress of China, Wu Zhao



The Western Market of the Tang dynasty specialized in foreign goods.

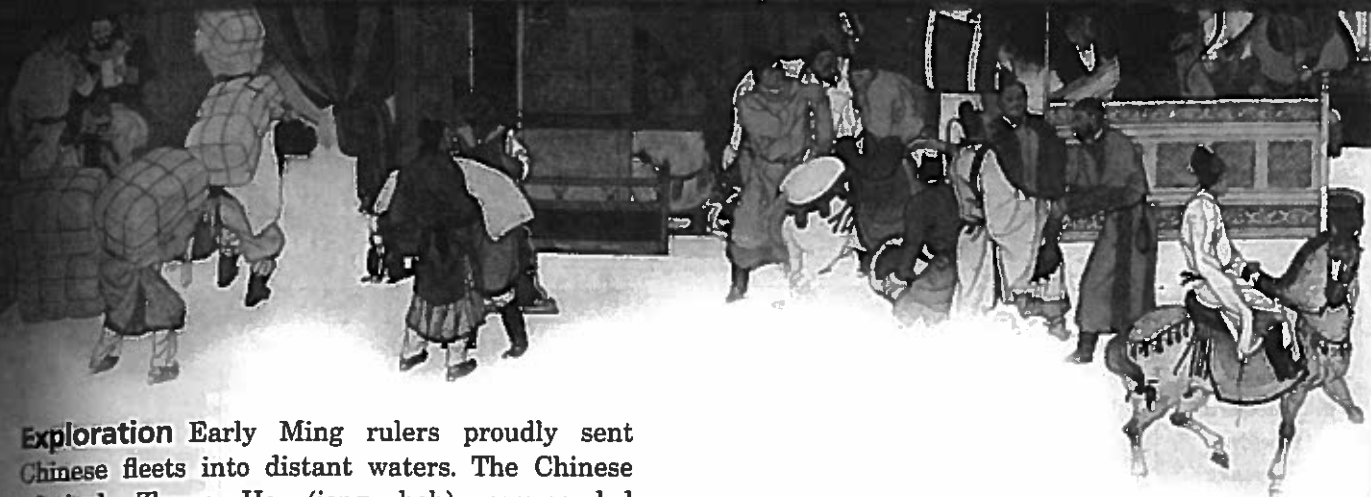
**Government and Society** Under the Tang and Song, China was a well-ordered society. Besides the emperor and the aristocratic families, the two main classes were the gentry and the peasantry. The gentry were wealthy landowners who valued scholarship more than physical labor. Most scholar-officials at court came from this class. The peasants farmed on the land. However, even peasants could move up in society through education and government service.

**Cultural Achievements** A rich economy supported the thriving culture of Tang and Song China. Prose and poetry flourished. Scholars produced works on philosophy, religion, and history. Painting and calligraphy became essential skills for the scholar-gentry.

## The Mongol and Ming Empires

In the early 1200s, the Mongols dominated Asia. They invaded China and finally toppled the Song dynasty in 1279. The Mongols established peace and order within their domains. Political stability set the stage for economic growth. Under the protection of the Mongols, trade flourished along the Silk Road and across Eurasia.

**Ming Dynasty** In 1368, a rebel Chinese army pushed the Mongols back beyond the Great Wall. A new dynasty, the Ming—meaning brilliant—sought to reassert Chinese greatness after years of foreign rule. The Ming restored the civil service exams. Confucian learning again became the road to success. Chinese cities were home to many industries, and the economy thrived.



**Exploration** Early Ming rulers proudly sent Chinese fleets into distant waters. The Chinese admiral Zheng He (jeng heh) commanded hundreds of vessels carrying 25,000 sailors during a series of expeditions. His goal was to promote trade and collect tribute. Zheng He's fleet explored as far as the coasts of East Africa.

### Korea and Its Traditions

As early as Han times, China extended its influence to peoples beyond the Middle Kingdom. To the northeast, the Korean peninsula lay within the Chinese zone of influence. While Korea absorbed many Chinese traditions over the centuries, it also maintained its own identity. Additionally, Koreans improved on a number of Chinese inventions. They advanced Chinese woodblock printing techniques by creating movable metal type to print books. They also created an alphabet for the sounds of their language that was easier to use than Chinese characters. Its use led to an extremely high literacy rate in Korea.

### The Emergence of Japan

Like Korea, Japan felt the powerful influence of Chinese civilization early in its history. Even so, the Japanese continued to maintain their own distinct culture. The surrounding seas both protected and isolated Japan. While Japan was close enough to the mainland to learn from China, it was too far away for China to conquer.

By about A.D. 500, Japan's first and only dynasty—the Yamato—dominated Honshu, the largest Japanese island. In the early 600s, the Yamato dynasty sent young Japanese nobles to study in China. They returned to Japan spreading Chinese thought, technology, and arts. For a time, the Japanese modeled much of their society on Chinese culture and government. Eventually, however,

the Japanese chose to adopt some Chinese ways while discarding or changing others.

### Japan's Feudal Age

In theory, the emperor headed Japanese society. In fact, he was a powerless, though revered, figurehead. Real power lay in the hands of the shogun, or supreme military commander. He distributed lands to vassal lords who agreed to support him with their armies in time of need. These great warrior lords were called daimyo (DY myoh). They, in turn, granted land to lesser warriors called samurai, meaning "those who serve." Samurai were the fighting aristocracy in the constant struggle for power. Japan had evolved into a feudal society.

In 1603, Tokugawa Ieyasu (toh koo gah wah ee AY ah soo) founded the Tokugawa shogunate, which ruled Japan until 1868. The Tokugawas brought peace and stability to Japan. They imposed central government control on all of Japan and created a unified, orderly society. Trade flourished, merchants prospered, and prosperity contributed to a flowering of culture. Still, the shoguns were extremely conservative. They tried to preserve samurai virtues and ancient beliefs. This commitment would bring them into sharp conflict with the foreigners who arrived in the 1500s.

### Assessment

1. **Identify (a)** Tang **(b)** Song **(c)** Mongols **(d)** Ming **(e)** Tokugawa
2. **Define (a)** tributary state **(b)** shogun **(c)** daimyo **(d)** samurai
3. How did the Tang and Song dynasties benefit China?
4. Who held the most power in feudal Japan?