

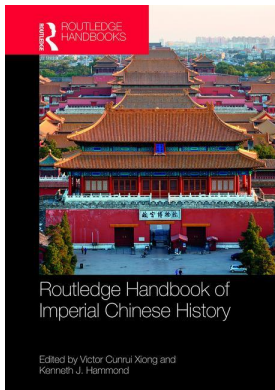
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THE TANG DYNASTY II (756–907)

Anthony DeBlasi

The 750s initiated a series of complex changes with profound implications for China's developmental arc in subsequent centuries. As one would expect, characterizing the period from 755 to the end of the dynasty in 907 raises tricky historiographical challenges. The most important of those is how to deal with a period of "transition." As the discussion here shows, the final century and a half of the Tang laid the foundations for the emergence of a new economic, social, cultural, and political order in the Chinese imperium. But for all the drama of its beginning during the An Lushan Rebellion, it was not a radical break with what came before. It is necessary then to recognize that the late eighth and ninth centuries were simultaneously the culmination of one set of developments and the beginning of a new set. In emphasizing the latter, it is important to acknowledge the former. The simple fact is that Tang officials and elites remained committed to the continuity of Tang power, looked back to its earlier reigns for guidance, and were unaware of the future to come.

The most common interpretations of the Tang Dynasty's final 150 years generally fall within the paradigm of the "Tang-Song Transition." The idea of such a transition was first advanced by the Japanese scholar Naitō Torajirō 内藤虎次郎 in the early twentieth century.¹ He argued that a number of interrelated changes occurred between the middle of the eighth century and the eleventh century that initiated China's modern era. While details of Naitō's thesis have been challenged and modified, scholars have generally accepted his insight that Chinese society and culture changed fundamentally during these centuries. The following account attempts to sketch out the interwoven processes that remade the civilization and yet connected it to the earlier traditions of the Tang.

The political and military context

The challenges of managing an empire with a population approaching 50 million that extended from the Pacific Ocean to beyond the Tarim Basin in Central Asia required a number of institutional innovations early in the eighth century. Specifically, defending such far-flung frontiers was beyond the practical capabilities of the Early Tang militia-based military establishment, the so-called *fubing* 府兵 system. Beginning in the 720s, it was replaced by a string of military commissionerships (*jiedu shi* 節度使) created along the northern and northwestern frontiers. Professional armies garrisoned these under the command of men with military

experience. This shift toward professionalization enabled the dynasty to secure its fractious border with the non-Tang tribal groups on the other side without the inefficiency of the militia system and the logistical disruptions entailed by moving inexperienced militiamen far from their homes and the capital region.²

This solution brought with it a danger, however. Using professional armies on long-term service with a single commander risked the creation of alternative power bases that could support anti-dynastic rebellion. Managing this danger required vigilance by the court and careful personnel management. The emperor and his officials attended to this initially, but in the 740s, the court's attention to the issue waned. The result was the gradual accumulation of military authority by a general named An Lushan 安祿山 (d. 757), a part-Sogdian commander with long experience on the northeastern frontier and remarkably close relationships with the Emperor and his favorite consort Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–756). By 755, An Lushan had been given concurrent command of three contiguous commands. Such a threat inevitably rose to the attention of court officials even as Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) remained unconcerned with the situation. The political maneuvering to neutralize the threat posed by An eventually persuaded him that his interests were best served by challenging the court directly. Consequently, on December 16, 755 (in the eleventh month of the Chinese calendar), he rose in rebellion, declaring himself emperor of his own Yan Dynasty, and launched a military campaign against the Tang's twin capitals, Chang'an and Luoyang. An's military strength enabled him to defeat the imperial armies placed in his way and capture Luoyang (in modern Henan province) in January of 756. Although the next stage was more challenging, his forces took the main capital of Chang'an in July forcing Emperor Xuanzong to flee to Sichuan.³

That was the high point of the rebels' success. An Lushan himself was assassinated the next year, and internal divisions among the rebels kept them from capitalizing on their early victories. Nevertheless, a seven-year struggle that ranged across much of the empire's heartland resulted in the fracturing of the pre-rebellion order. The historical forces that initiated the Tang–Song Transition emerged in that changed environment.

The loss of imperial control, the paralysis of ordinary administrative mechanisms, and the disruption of provincial communications during the military campaigns ironically required the court, now in the hands of Xuanzong's successor Tang Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756–762), to rely more on *ad hoc* commissionerships to defend against rebel incursions and protect the flow of resources needed for imperial operations. Such commissionerships were no longer restricted to the frontiers. In the context of the widespread internal rebellion, the entire empire was the frontier. Commissionerships therefore came to cover the entire territory of the empire, and the court granted the commissioners extraordinary autonomy in the administration of their jurisdictions, which even included playing a role in the appointment of subordinate officials. The levels of autonomy, however, varied widely across the empire. One of the tactics used by the court to undermine rebel commitment was targeted amnesties and the granting of commissionerships to surrendered rebel generals in the North China plain and the rebel heartland on the northeastern frontier. Those military commissioners were particularly independent. Whereas commissioners in the South reliably submitted taxes to the court, a number of wealthy ones in the North China Plain did not submit taxes for decades after the suppression of the rebellion in 763.

The proliferation of commissionerships was one symptom of a larger phenomenon that characterized Tang government in the late eighth and ninth centuries: a persistent decentralization of authority combined with institutional innovation through which the court could address new foreign and domestic challenges. Besides territorial administration, the

other sector where this was most obvious was in the fiscal administration. The interruption of regular tax submissions was the immediate prod for improvisation in the fiscal system, but some of the need predated the An Lushan Rebellion. The premise of the taxation system implemented in the early years of the dynasty, the so-called Equal Field (*juntian* 均田) System, was the periodic redistribution of land to the farming population which was thereby liable for the supply of a grain tax in kind (*zu* 租), a corvée labor obligation (*yong* 庸), and a cloth tax in kind (*diao* 調).⁴

Although this system, which had been inherited from earlier dynasties, had the advantage of breaking the aristocracy's hold over local land ownership and forging a direct connection to the population, it required diligence in maintaining population registers and suffered as the population attempted to evade taxes. Already in the 730s, the government faced the significant problem of a growing unregistered population that had fled the tax rolls. The destruction of government records during the rebellion and the mediation of the commissionships meant that the dynasty lost the mechanisms to reliably implement the equal field system. In response, the financial official Yang Yan 楊炎 (727–781) proposed, and the court adopted, a new Double Tax law (*liangshui fa* 兩稅法) in 780. Although so named because the taxes were collected in two installments, one in the autumn and one in the summer, the real significance of the innovation lay elsewhere. First, it shifted the basis of taxation from a per head basis, which required detailed knowledge of the individual taxpayer, to a per wealth basis. As long as assets were known, collection was possible. Second, it gave the commissionships a direct role in the collection of taxes. The court negotiated a quota that a given commissioner would submit from his jurisdiction, which relieved it of the need to directly monitor and enforce local financial operations.⁵

Its need for revenue, however, was not solely satisfied by the receipts from the Double Tax system. It also fell back on a tried and true method of finance: the Salt Monopoly. In fact, the monopoly became so important that its jurisdiction expanded to a general supervision of the financial operations in much of the South. At the same time, these financial changes shifted the center of gravity within the central government ministries. The Ministry of Finance (*hu bu* 戶部), one of the traditional Six Ministries of the central government, was gradually eclipsed by one of its subordinate offices, the Bureau of General Accounts (*duzhi si* 度支司), which came to dominate the dynasty's financial operations in the northern portions of the empire.⁶ It was this latter bureau that eventually became one of the central constituents of the subsequent Northern Song dynasty's State Finance Commission (*san si* 三司) system.

Institutional improvisation and financial restructuring were ultimately designed to accomplish a restoration of the kind of court sovereignty that had characterized the Tang imperium during the first half of Xuanzong's reign. The suppression of the rebellion had left the northeast under the control of military men with little inclination to subordinate themselves to direction from Chang'an. Although they nominally accepted Tang authority, over time, a number of them sought to have relatives, especially sons, succeed them in their commissionships. Such hereditary appointment naturally threatened the primacy of the court and raised the specter of further rebellion. As a result, post-rebellion emperors devoted themselves to reining in the recalcitrant commissioners, with mixed results. The first serious attempt was made early in the reign of Tang Dezong 德宗 (r. 779–805). Beginning in 780, he took a decidedly confrontational approach to the commands in the North China Plain, provoking a cascading rebellion that nearly unseated him and almost ended the dynasty. Nevertheless, although he had been temporarily driven from the capital, the residual loyalty of capital officials and staff officers among the rebels enabled him to survive the challenge.

While Dezong's experience was a sobering indication of the difficulty in reasserting administrative control over the entire empire, his grandson was more successful. Tang Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805–820) was able to gradually bring most of the recalcitrant provinces to heel, but that effort required thirteen years, from 806 until 819, and a series of military confrontations. Even then, although he was from then on credited as the quintessential "restoration ruler" (*zhongxing zhi jun* 中興之君), his successors could not sustain his achievement. Control over the independently minded commissionerships once again began to slip from court control after his death. Yet, Xianzong and his officials had laid the foundation for sustained court political relevance for decades to come. This last point is an important one if we are to avoid a common pitfall in assessing the final century and a half of Tang history.

Much of the historiographical treatment of the post-755 period, the foundation for which was laid in the eleventh century by Northern Song historians, has emphasized the decline of Tang power and interpreted this decline as the result of three intertwined forces.

The first of those forces was the drive for autonomy in the northeastern commands. The reasons for that desire are complex and need not detain us here, but to later historians, its persistence placed the dynasty always on the defense. Their efforts to understand the problem led them to the second two forces: eunuch influence and bureaucratic factionalism. The increasingly public role of eunuchs in dynastic affairs was the more sensational of these two, and there was long historiographical precedent for interpreting the spread of eunuch influence as a sign of political decline going back to the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). The manipulation of the imperial succession by eunuchs during Eastern Han era in the first two centuries of the Common Era was a natural analog to what Song historians, and even ninth century commentators, saw in Tang political life. In some ways, the blurring of the roles between the "inner court" (i.e. the imperial household establishment, from which the eunuchs came) and the "outer court" (the regular bureaucracy) was a natural temptation to emperors suspicious of self-interested officials. The eunuchs, given their dependence on imperial support, seemed like the perfect surrogates to emperors like Dezong and Xianzong who worried about the loss of direct imperial control. As a result, from initial emergency appointments as imperial representatives to palace armies, eunuch activity spread to include actual command of armies. One powerful example of this was Tutu Chengcui 吐突承璀 (d. 820), who commanded a campaign against a recalcitrant military commissioner in 810. Besides their role in military affairs, eunuchs also took up management roles in various financial organs, especially the emperor's personal treasury, which allowed them to influence imperial finances, independent of ordinary fiscal oversight.

Not surprisingly, their proximity to the throne and their increased political role led them to ever more active efforts to control the imperial succession. Traditional sources even accuse some eunuchs of engineering the assassination of emperors. Whether true or not, these accusations speak to a perception of the eunuchs as a central force in the political life of the late eighth and ninth centuries.

While civil officials may have chafed at eunuch political involvement, they recognized the reality of the situation and attempted to work with the eunuchs while minimizing their intrusion into realms they believed the rightful preserve of the bureaucrats. The 835 episode known as the Sweet Dew Incident made evident the difficulty of achieving this, even with the backing of an emperor. In the event, the emperor Tang Wenzong 文宗 (r. 827–840) conspired with trusted advisors to ambush and eliminate powerful eunuchs when emperor's entourage left the palace grounds to observe the auspicious omen of "sweet dew" that had appeared on a fruit tree. Unfortunately for the conspirators, the eunuchs discovered the plot

and outmaneuvered them resulting in increased eunuch power at court after the slaughter of the plotters and their sympathizers by troops under eunuch control.

Traditional historians pointed to the third force, bureaucratic factionalism, as a further explanation of why momentum to restore dynastic power waned and the court grew impotent after Xianzong's reign. The existence of bureaucratic patronage networks and rivalry for political power was an ever-present feature of Tang institutions, certainly predating the An Lushan Rebellion. But later commentators found the prolonged rivalry between Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–850) and Niu Sengru 牛僧儒 (780–849) particularly significant. It began in earnest in 821 (though some historians have sought earlier roots), and was marked by an acrimonious struggle that saw each alternating in and out of power as Grand Councilors while their supporters were periodically promoted or demoted and sent to provincial postings. There have been many attempts in the past century to find explanations for the struggle, either social or ideological. None has proved completely persuasive. Instead, it was probably fed by multiple considerations, including institutional culture, social change, material interests, and intellectual differences, that interacted in complex ways that scholars are still working to untangle.

These accounts of the Late Tang, by focusing on the court and its relationship with the recalcitrant commands in the North China Plain have, however, obscured a larger truth. Historians from the Song dynasty on already knew that the Tang had fallen, and culturally the event that resonated most for traditional literati was the tragedy of Tang Xuanzong and the calamitous end of his glorious reign with the An Lushan Rebellion. It has therefore been easy to cast the final century and a half of the Tang imperium as the story of the Tang collapse. Yet, we might switch the question from “Why did the Tang fall?” to “Why did the Tang last so long?” One hundred and fifty-one years (from 756 to 907) is not a short time, and the ability of the Tang court to withstand the problems and changed circumstances wrought by the rebellion and its aftermath is testament to the resilience of the Tang system and its evolving institutions. Evidence compiled by Nicolas Tackett and others has demonstrated that the court did actually play an active role in making appointments of senior officials, including military commissioners, in most parts of the empire into the 870s, even in such strategically crucial places as Bianzhou 汴州 (present-day Kaifeng in Henan province), a crucial transportation hub that controlled access to the vital tax base in the southeast and stood as a protective barrier for movement from the northeast to the capital region. Beyond the functioning of the appointment mechanisms, the continued engagement of the civil elite, as evidenced by the intensity of their factional struggles and their willingness to lay their personal safety on the line, shows that they retained a commitment to the Tang dynasty and a belief in its continuing legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the Tang did end, and the question of why is one of import for China's political history. The precise mechanism of that end derived from the political changes discussed earlier. The emergence of semi-autonomous commissionerships did determine the pathway that the final collapse of the Tang followed, but the chain of events began more narrowly in the mid-870s with yet another empire-shattering rebellion. This was the Huang Chao 黃巢 (835–884) Rebellion, which raged for several years, and, unlike the An Lushan Rebellion, devastated wide swaths of the South as well as the North. As a result, the court lost its remaining grasp on military and political power, which now fell into the hands of powerful generals with regional commands. The two most important, Zhu Wen 朱溫 (852–912) and Li Keyong 李克用 (856–908), engaged in their own protracted struggle that ended with Zhu taking control of the court, relocating it to his base at Bianzhou 汴州, and ultimately forcing the abdication of the last Tang emperor, Emperor Ai 哀帝 (r. 904–907).

He then declared himself emperor and founded his own dynasty, the Later Liang 後梁 (907–923).

Li Keyong, ethnically a Shatuo 沙陀 Turk, died before mounting an imperial challenge, but his descendants created the Later Tang 後唐 (923–937) which overthrew the Later Liang and became the second of the Five Dynasties, for which the period following the Tang is named. The final end of the Tang then, as perhaps is always the case with long-lasting dynasties, was a confused and humbling affair, whose contrast with the remembered glory of the early eighth century continued to resonate in later cultural memory. But while 907 marks the political end of the Tang dynasty, the years from 755 to 907 initiated processes that continued well past that date and are central to the Tang-Song Transition.

The social basis of empire after 755

The establishment and stabilization of the Tang dynasty in the early seventh century depended largely on its ability to harness the support of a few dozen aristocratic clans that traced their ancestry back to the second century CE, controlled great wealth through landed estates, and had dominated government office during the Northern and Southern Dynasties through their command of the cultural canon. Tang rulers had to balance recognition of the Great Clans' social dominance with the penetration of local society to extract the resources needed for a stable imperial government. By the middle of the eighth century, however, the Great Clans had become completely committed to the Tang project. Most of the clans, regardless of their regional origins, had made the important move of acquiring residences in the capital regions (in Chang'an or Luoyang). In many cases, this included the crucial step of moving clan graveyards to the capital corridor. Ritually and politically, then, the Great Clans had identified their interests with the Tang, and service in the Tang government proved lucrative for them in return.

By inducing the Great Clans to accept their authority, the Tang rulers subtly changed the terms of the relationship between the social elite and political authority. As Peter Bol has argued, once the authority to determine the suitability for office was controlled by the dynasty, instead of by family status, it became possible for those not from the most elite clans to aspire to office by acquiring the knowledge and cultural refinement that the clans used to justify their political power.⁷ The elaboration of the civil service examination system provided an institutional mechanism for demonstrating that mastery. Of course, the Great Clans continued to hold the advantage in the competition for office. The vast majority of Tang officials qualified for office via the so-called "protection privilege" (*yin* 蔭) whereby the sons of high-ranking officials were automatically eligible for appointment to office.⁸ Moreover, the curriculum for the examinations and the qualities assessed in the selection evaluations were those on which the Great Clans had prided themselves for centuries. And they had the resources, both material and temporal, to pursue the education necessary to compete for office. Nevertheless, the narrow pathway left for less prominent families to enter the service had a profound impact after 755. One measure of the changing environment was the increasing number of Great Clan scions who chose to compete directly in the examinations. The increasing prestige of the examinations among those with other institutional avenues open to them clearly implies that demonstrating their intellectual qualities was more advantageous than relying solely on their clan status.

After 755, these trends accelerated. Although mid-twentieth-century scholarship attempted to locate the significant transformation in the composition of the Tang social elite in the initial expansion of the examination system under the Empress Wu Zetian 武則天

(r. 690–705), both during her regency and then during her reign as Empress Regnant, that moment was, at most, a preparatory stage. There is no evidence of a large enough influx of non-Great Clan members into officialdom to significantly alter the social basis of the government. After the An Lushan Rebellion, however, other dynamics, namely, institutional, cultural, and social, reinforced the social leveling potential of the examinations in a way that resulted, over the long term of two centuries, in the emergence of a new social elite, often referred to as the *shidafu* 士大夫, or literati, by the eleventh century.

Scholars have long known that the Tang society was more complexly stratified than a simple division between aristocrats and non-aristocrats, or even the traditional functional differentiation of the population into the educated (*shi* 士), the farmers (*nong* 農), the artisans (*gong* 工), and the merchants (*shang* 商). Leaving aside ethnic communities and regional variations for the moment, we know that between the farming population, which formed the basis of the equal-field system, and the Great Clans, there was certainly a spectrum of locally prominent families who had not achieved the ranks of the aristocracy, but who had acquired some wealth and had invested some of it into educating sons in order to place them in government service.

The relocation of the Great Clans to the Chang'an-Luoyang capital corridor likely created the social space necessary for this lower-rung elite to fully emerge, but essential to its development was the institutional environment following the suppression of the rebels in 763. The proliferation of military and surveillance commissionerships throughout the empire created administrative staff positions that could absorb the newly qualified talent when the regular organs of the central government were filled.

Two other considerations reinforced this institutional opportunity. First, throughout the Tang, institutional culture favored capital service, and specifically court service, over service in provincial areas. This bias meant that even high-ranking provincial appointments were often treated as though they were demotions. The best connected individuals therefore preferred to stay in the capital in order to remain politically relevant. In the late eighth and ninth centuries, the sources attest to the role of provincial and staff service in career development for those who had difficulty securing a position in the capital. The most famous case is probably that of Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) who finally took service on the staff of Dong Jin 董晉 (724–799), the Military Commissioner in Bianzhou, when even his extraordinary gambit of appealing directly to the Grand Councilors yielded no post.⁹ The second consideration was the nature of commissioner's staff work. Although there was certainly plenty of administrative work to be done in the capital, work on a commissioner's staff was very much practically oriented, dealing with personnel issues, tax collection, and often military matters. Although many of the men appointed to staffs were identified for the same skill set that was the mark of all Tang bureaucrats, commissioners tended to be less status-conscious and therefore more willing to appoint a talented individual who had mastered the administrative culture regardless of whether or not he was a member of a Great Clan.

By the late ninth century, provincial commissioner's staffs were more socially diverse, just as the court was becoming more dominated by members of the Great Clans. As David Johnson has argued, the clans seem to have sacrificed their connection with the provinces and committed completely to the Tang and its court.¹⁰ When it was devastated during the Huang Chao upheaval and then fell in the usurpation of Zhu Wen, they ceased to have the economic or political resources to sustain themselves, but the provincial commissioner administrations had already developed a more diverse pool of officials that could step into national politics when the conditions allowed.¹¹

By 907, the Early Tang aristocratic empire had given way to a fractured polity with a wider social elite but a shared cultural legacy.

Economic development in the decentralized empire

Periodization is always a complex problem, and a single scheme is rarely sufficient for marking transitions. The relationship between the political and economic histories of the Tang dynasty is a good example. When the Tang dynasty reached its political end in 907, economic changes central to the “medieval commercial revolution” had just begun and would not run their course until well into the Southern Song dynasty. Those economic developments, however, depended on the decentralization of power and institutional experimentation that took hold after the rebellion.

The upswing in economic activity during this period is another indicator that, as chaotic as the official histories made the second half of the dynasty look, there was sufficient stability to allow for economic development. The medieval commercial revolution that took hold in these centuries did not alter the base of the economy. That remained agriculture, but to this agrarian foundation was added a much more dynamic and nationally integrated commercial network.

The work of Mark Elvin and Richard von Glahn shows that during the Tang era, the agrarian economy witnessed the introduction of new seed varieties and new farming methods beginning in the eighth century that ultimately paid dividends by increasing the carrying capacity of the land and producing surplus wealth that could be channeled into new forms of commercial activity.¹² This growth was particularly strong in the southern portions of the empire, which were relatively insulated from the areas most affected by the struggles with recalcitrant commissioners in the North China Plain and with states along the northern and western frontiers.

The institutional decentralization and the shift of court priorities after 755 created space for various forms of economic experimentation. Early Tang commercial and sumptuary regulations placed serious constraints on the exercise of commerce in the empire, and these were more stringently enforced in the capitals. Commerce was restricted to specific market spaces on a fixed schedule, while walls separated residential wards and city-wide curfews limited the times when individuals could move between them. From the 760s onward, however, the court found it increasingly difficult to enforce these restrictive regulations, and the merchant community responded by expanding market activities. Even in Chang’an, a more organic commercial life took hold as the old restrictions relaxed.¹³

Political distraction and the consequent neglect of regulations provided a space for commercial development, but contemporary conditions also created incentives to encourage merchant prosperity. The court relied on the merchant distribution network in the operation of its salt monopoly, and once the Double Tax system uncoupled the ownership of land from the taxation of wealth, the rigid focus on the agricultural sector weakened.¹⁴ At the same time, the regional administrations recognized the potential resources available from increased mercantile activity and therefore competed to attract merchants to their jurisdictions.¹⁵ In this environment, commercial hubs developed around the empire in places such as Bianzhou, Yangzhou 揚州, and Chengdu 成都.

The movement of large quantities of agricultural commodities had long been a feature of the imperial tax system. The sources indicate that already in the seventh century, agricultural production in the region around Chang’an could not support the capital’s expanding population, which probably reached a million individuals by the early eighth century. In addition to supplying the needs of the capitals, since taxes were largely collected in kind, the government had to move commodities to other places where needed. This inevitably drove the development of transportation infrastructure including roads and canals to facilitate the transfer of tax goods. The most famous, and most massive, of those projects was the Grand Canal system. Begun under the Sui Dynasty (581–618), it linked the capital corridor to the grain producing

areas of the North China Plain and the Lower Yangzi. Once the regulatory brakes on commercial activity eased, long-distance commerce could take advantage of this infrastructure.¹⁶

Monetary innovation was a natural corollary to increased interregional trade. The Tang currency system, as had been the case with earlier dynasties, relied on a combination of bronze coins and commodity money. For larger transactions, the bronze coins were theoretically denominated in strings of one thousand coins, while the most common commodity money was silk measured in bolts of approximately 40 feet by 2 feet.¹⁷ Such a currency system worked for relatively short-distance trade and tax collection in kind, but both bronze coinage and cloth bolts made poor choices when resources had to be transported. They were heavy and bulky, which meant that transport costs reduced the profitability of commerce. In this situation, provincial authorities developed a paper instrument called “flying money” (*fei qian* 飛錢) that dramatically lightened the load. These were paper certificates of deposit denominated in “strings” that enabled merchants to deposit currency in the capital in exchange for certificates of equal value and redeem them at their final destination.¹⁸ In this way, transport costs derived entirely from the trade goods themselves.

These developments—an increasingly permissive regulatory environment, a more convenient monetary system, and a developing interregional transport system—continued after the political demise of the Tang. But the coming sophistication of the Song dynasty economy depended on this foundation laid during the Tang.

Cultural change after 755

It would be remarkable if an intellectual and cultural reorientation had not accompanied the aforementioned changes. From the perspective of the pre-rebellion court, the basic intellectual and cultural networks were fundamentally altered after 755. At the same time, the specific ideas that came to the fore began an intellectual exploration that had profound implications for the subsequent late imperial period. Taken together, these trends—the alteration of intellectual relationships and the unfolding of new ideas—constitute yet another dimension of the Tang–Song Transition.

Thinking about the shift of elite relationships along different axes helps to clarify the mechanisms by which new ideas and modes of inquiry could develop and spread through the educated elite. Three decades ago, David McMullen mapped the intellectual component of the pervasive decentralization that followed in the wake of the An Lushan Rebellion.¹⁹ The seventh-century Tang court was a commanding force in a politically essential intellectual project: the reintegration of a divided intellectual culture following the political reunification of the empire in the late sixth century. This process drove both the production of official histories of the pre-Tang dynasties and a court-sponsored, standard edition of the Confucian Classics with sanctioned commentaries. The court’s officials continued to refine its ritual code into the early eighth century to express the coherence of the moral order that the imperial Li family had given the empire. Besides these inherently political projects, the centrality of the court in the intellectual imagination gave it a wider cultural significance. Stephen Owen, for example, has extensively documented the way writers located in proximity to the court developed styles that led ultimately to the poetic brilliance of Tang Xuanzong’s reign so admired by critics in later centuries.²⁰

After 755, the court lost influence as more immediate political concerns rendered intellectual projects secondary. At the same time, the increasingly diverse social background of the educated class and the growing importance of provincial service during the formative stages of political careers shifted the initiative away from formal court positions and into a new network of personal relationships forged in the course of shared institutional experience.

Anna Shields's work on evolving notions of friendship in the mid-Tang period demonstrates how individual, non-kin relationships, such as that between the famous officials Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) and Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), became culturally compelling and remade the entire range of literary genres.²¹ As the Great Clans and the imperial court became more isolated, these personal connections became the conduit for the development of a broad range of philosophical, religious, historical, and literary ideas.

The development of these ideas shows clearly how the conscious commitments of thinking individuals and the long-term significance of their ideas can diverge dramatically. The thinkers who followed each other on the historical stage for more than a century after the An Lushan Rebellion had the singular goal of restoring the dynasty to greatness. That they also laid the foundation for a world in which the Early Tang system was irrelevant does not diminish their dedication. Yet the catastrophe of the rebellion forced them to face a difficult reality: the classical tradition had proposed that good government led to a harmonious society and a culture that reinforced the moral order, but the rebellion was proof that Tang government had not guaranteed the “moral edification” (*jiaohua* 教化) that the Sages of antiquity had promised. Already during the rebellion and continuing through the rest of the dynasty, intellectuals called for cultural and political reform, identifying the ills they saw in both. These calls ranged from a moderate approach that sought to ground an inclusive culture in a morally serious tradition that would place political power in the hands of educated men, to more extreme positions that no longer trusted the tradition to guide values and instead saw the need for a radical reconnection to a reconstructed “antiquity.”²² The former was represented by successful officials such as Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818) and Bai Juyi, while the more radical position is well known under the banner of the “Ancient Style” (*guwen* 古文) movement. Its practitioners were the group associated with Han Yu that emphasized the need for a personal connection to the sages of antiquity and thereby shifted the conversation from collective engagement in the cultural tradition to individual moral exploration. Although a marginal position in their time, this “individual turn” ultimately culminated in the reorientation of intellectual culture in the Northern Song and the rise of Daoxue 道學 (often referred to as Neo-Confucianism) in the Southern Song.

The contrast between mainstream reform efforts and Han Yu's circle threatens to suggest a binary debate over what constituted the relationship between morality and culture, so it is important to recognize that these were simply the most visible aspects of a complex intellectual scene. Although the production of private commentaries on the Confucian classics is rightly associated with the Song dynasty and periods thereafter, the shift of initiative in classical commentary away from the court and bureaucracy had already begun in the late eighth century. A circle of thinkers interested in the lessons of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* that included Dan Zhu 啖助 (b. 723), Zhao Kuang 趙匡 (766–779), and Lu Chun 陸淳 (d. 805) had achieved some fame by the beginning of the ninth century. Moreover, beyond classical scholarship, a number of statecraft thinkers began to think more systematically about the nature and evolution of institutions. Chief among these at the turn of the ninth century was Du You 杜佑 (735–812), whose massive *Comprehensive Institutions* (Tongdian 通典) set the pattern for a new tradition of institutional histories.

Cultural identity and empire after 755

One important aspect of the changed situation in the post-755 empire involves a complicated nexus of geopolitics, cultural identity, and religion. Given the scope of these individual elements, it is not surprising that a simple and persuasive account has thus far eluded scholars.

Nevertheless, more sophisticated approaches are appearing, so our picture is becoming clearer, although more complicated than earlier interpretations suggest.

The geopolitical context is the simplest part of the equation. As noted earlier, prior to the An Lushan Rebellion, Tang power extended into Central Asia (as far as Transoxiana well beyond the Taklamakan desert to the west). Although this marked the limit to which the Tang had projected power into Central Asia, the scope of the empire changed drastically following An Lushan's revolt. During the course of the rebellion, the court was forced to withdraw from the Tarim Basin, essentially shifting the boundary of the dynasty eastward into what is today eastern Gansu. Furthermore, the strategic relationship between the Tang and its frontier neighbors was permanently altered. Not only did the dynasty come to rely on the military support of the Uighur states to the north in suppressing the rebels, the Tang capital was sacked on a number of occasions by both the Uighurs and a newly emboldened Tibetan state. The late eighth century therefore marked a shift, with the Tang dynasty losing the strategic initiative and assuming a defensive posture on its frontier.

The change in the geopolitical situation between the dynasty and what Tang officials saw as barbarian peoples has led to a long tradition of interpreting other events in the post-rebellion period in ethnic terms, specifically the positing of a binary relationship between "Chinese" and "non-Chinese." Hugh Clark and others have pointed out, however, that the notion of what constituted "Chinese" was still a developing concept. The South itself was still a diverse area marked by significant cultural distinctiveness.²³ When considering the relationship of the empire and its people to ethnic groups beyond its borders, it is important to keep the cultural variation within the empire firmly in mind. Recognizing the diversity of the empire and the danger of anachronistic understandings of ethnic identity is necessary because a common misinterpretation of post-Tang history is that China lost a cultural cosmopolitanism that had marked the Tang culture prior to the mid-eighth century and witnessed the development of a xenophobia after 755 that continued to define China's relationship with the world thereafter.

Buddhism is often the focus when considering evidence for such an inward turn in the latter part of the Tang period. By far the most famous examples cited are two polemical texts by Han Yu. His "Memorial Discussing the Buddha Bone" (Lun Fogu biao 論佛骨表), in which he criticized Emperor Xianzong for personally welcoming a procession for a relic of the Buddha, was so confrontational that it led to his demotion to a post in the far south and almost resulted in his execution for *lèse-majesté*. Han Yu's opening line dismissively asserted that Buddhism was a late addition to China that had been unnecessary when the sages of antiquity had guided society. Almost a decade earlier, in his "Approaching the Origin of the Way" (Yuandao 原道), Han argued that one of the problems with contemporary society was the emergence of parasitical segments of the population, especially the large number of Buddhist and Daoist monastic communities. While the critique here was not exclusively a critique of foreignness—Daoism after all was an indigenous tradition—it connected the Buddhist consumption of resources to its role in distracting people from the values of the Confucian sages.

The middle of the ninth century saw the demonization of the Buddhist monastic community raised to the national political level. In the early 840s, the Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840–846) issued a series of edicts targeting Buddhist and other non-indigenous religious establishments. These culminated in a general suppression in 845, the terms of which required the destruction of Buddhist shrines, confiscations of monastic estates, and the laicization of all Buddhist monks and nuns. Although the opportunity to confiscate the wealth of the religious establishments and return clergy to the tax rolls was certainly a dimension

of the initiative, the most comprehensive edict issued by the emperor in the eighth month of 845 made the same connection to values and social stability that Han Yu had articulated four decades earlier.

No doubt that the Buddhist establishment suffered damage during the episode, but the suppression was reversed by his successor soon after Wuzong's death in 846. Although scholars once argued that the suppression drove Chinese Buddhism into a long decline thereafter, recent scholarship has emphasized the continued vitality of the tradition, both during the final decades of the Tang and in the centuries following. In this light, critiques such as those by Han Yu and Wuzong were rare expressions of the cultural angst and fiscal insecurity of the post-An Lushan environment that drew on a strain of critique that went back to the earliest arrival of Buddhism in China. But by the mid-ninth century, Buddhist ideas were so ingrained that isolated polemics and a brief political suppression could not trigger a collapse of the tradition.

In other ways, however, Later Tang Buddhism echoes the broader changes highlighted earlier. Although the wealth of monastic establishments had continued to draw the attention of cultural critics and fiscal officials, those establishments were subject to the same economic trends that were reshaping the rest of the Tang economy. Economic developments had certainly reduced the centrality and self-sufficiency of all types of manorial estates, be they Great Clan estates or monastic estates. By the twelfth century, Buddhist establishments would rely much more on their provision of religious services to the wider society and the patronage of local elites to support their continued existence.

More broadly, as the court played a less determinative intellectual role and private social networks came to dominate the culture, Buddhist thinkers similarly reoriented themselves toward personal relationships that highlighted the individual in the moral universe.²⁴ Although scholarship since the 1980s has shown that the idea of a separate, institutionalized Chan 禪 (Japanese: Zen) school during the Tang was largely an anachronistic creation of Northern Song writers, they have also demonstrated the continuing appearance of new approaches to the textual tradition and the growing importance of master-disciple transmission in various schools of Buddhist philosophy.²⁵

Conclusions

It is perhaps true that all historical periods are transitional since they begin from an inherited legacy and set the stage for subsequent developments. The latter half of the Tang was “transitional” in a more profound way. It was the launching pad for the complete restructuring of Chinese society and culture known as the Tang-Song Transition. That transition was not complete when the Tang dynasty came to an end in 907, but it ultimately led to a China that was almost unrecognizable in the twelfth century from what it was in the early eighth century.

Notes

- 1 For an account of Naitō's views, see Joshua Fogel, *Politics and Sinology: The Case of Naitō Konan, 1866–1934* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
- 2 Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, 205–223.
- 3 Pulleyblank, *The Background of the An Lu-shan Rebellion*.
- 4 Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 24–29.
- 5 Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 39–48.
- 6 Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 99–100, 110–120. Note the translation of office titles remains inconsistent among scholars. I have used translations that indicate the duties of the offices without following any scholar consistently.

- 7 Bol, "This Culture of Ours," 44–46.
- 8 Twitchett estimated that the examination system produced only about ten percent of Tang officials: Denis Twitchett, "Introduction" in Twitchett, *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 3*, 21.
- 9 Hartman, *Han Yü*, (1986), 30–35.
- 10 Johnson, "Last Years of a Great Clan," 99–102.
- 11 Tackett, *The Destruction of the Medieval Chinese Aristocracy*, 187–234.
- 12 Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 118–24 and von Glahn, *An Economic History of China*, 218–25.
- 13 Twitchett, "Merchants, Trade and Government," 77.
- 14 Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 51–52 on the salt monopoly; and "Merchants, Trade, and Government," 78–79.
- 15 Twitchett, "Merchants, Trade, and Government," 79–80, on local government commercial taxation; Twitchett, "The T'ang Market System," 240–41, on the encouragement of local commercial activity.
- 16 Elvin, *Pattern of the Chinese Past*, 131–32.
- 17 Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 70–71.
- 18 Twitchett, *Financial Administration*, 72–73.
- 19 McMullen, *State and Scholars*, 28.
- 20 Owen, *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry*, 1981.
- 21 Shields, *One Who Knows Me*, especially, 82–132.
- 22 DeBlasi, *Reform in the Balance*.
- 23 Clark, *The Sinitic Encounter*.
- 24 Peter Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- 25 See, for examples, Griffith Foulk, "Myth, Ritual, and Monastic Practice in Sung Ch'an Buddhism," in Patricia Ebrey and Peter Gregory, eds., *Religion and Society in T'ang and Sung China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), 147–59; and John McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1983).