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The Tang Dynasty

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The Tang Dynasty ruled China from 618-907 AD.¹ It has been said that the Tang were among the most influential rulers in China. Their greatest contribution to Chinese history is “The Golden Age” of Chinese culture and politics.² There were many events throughout their rule that led to what author Mark Edward Lewis, gives account for in his book “*China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*”. In this book the author gives a detailed description about the interactions with the outside world in terms of international trade by land and sea. Hence the key word being Cosmopolitan.³ The most well-known of all these trade routes at the time was the Silk Road.

This essay is going to focus on culture and trade under the Tang rule. It will illustrate how people at the time were influenced by other prominent civilizations. These events will show what made China flourish during the Tang dynasty to a world leading culture. It will show a different side of China, one before the communist rule and censures that have been the reality of Chinese people since Mao Zedong, Cultural Revolution in 1966. A revolution that would strip the Chinese of their culture and traditions in favor of the communist ways of one coherent and unilateral China.⁴

During the Tang Dynasty the Chinese maritime trade had grown too a big and strong power. It stretched from China all the way to the Red Sea and Persian Gulf, Egypt and Somalia. Sa'd ibn Abi-Waqqas was the first person to bring a copy of the holy script of the Quran to China which resulted in later years in the building of the

¹ Edward Lewis, Mark. *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*. 2009. p.1

² Edward Lewis, Mark. *China’s Cosmopolitan Empire*. 2009. p.1

³ Free from local, provincial, or national ideas, prejudices, or attachments; at home all over the world. 13 Feb. 2012. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cosmopolitan>>

⁴ Wiki contributors. “Early mass rallies.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 10 Feb. 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_Revolution#1966>

Mosque of Remembrance, the first mosque of China. Pearls, spices and jade were just some of the many types of merchandise brought to China by foreign ships. The main trading took place in the great city of Guangzhou the center of commercial trading. Trade connections were established due to thousands of foreigners residing in several Chinese cities. In 758 the city was attacked and looted by Arab and Persian pirates, therefore the Tang government decided to close down the port. This event lasted for five decades until it finally reopened. Fortunately, foreign ships could dock at Hanoi in Vietnam and the commercial revenues did not suffer too much damage.⁵

It was the Tang Dynasty that opened up China for the outside world and welcomed foreign delegations, merchants, scholars and pilgrims among other travelers. The Silk Road was not a new phenomenon during the time of Tang's in fact it had already been established during the Han dynasty under the rule of emperor Wu of Han (141-87 BC).⁶ It was during Pax Sinica (Chinese Peace) that the Silk Road truly experienced its highpoint.⁷ The Silk Road was at the time 6500 km of international trade route for merchants that linked together East, South and Western Asia with the Mediterranean and Europe.

Courier stations were established along the main roads where travelers were given shelter and food. This contributed to the supervision and somewhat security of the Silk Road. Adding to the safety of travel along the Silk Road, a registration system was implemented by the Tang Dynasty. All travelers had to register their name, age

⁵ Wiki contributors, "Seaports and maritime trade." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 10 Feb. 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tang_dynasty#Seaports_and_maritime_trade>

⁶ Wiki contributors, "Silk Road." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 10 Feb. 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk_road>

⁷ Wiki contributors, "Pax Sinica." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 12 Feb. 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_Sinica>

and belongings along with paying taxes in order to receive a pass which allowed them to use the Silk Road.⁸

It was through the Silk Road that Buddhism reached China from India and would later spread to other parts of Asia.⁹ It was during this period that it rooted itself in China and came to be adopted by the imperial family. Buddhist religion would flourish during the Tang rule before its decline in 845 AD. Buddhism interacted in other parts of life during Tang dynasty, it influenced art and poetry.

Some of the most prominent Chinese poets are from the Tang era. There has been found a direct link with the imperial examinations and poetry. Before the Tang ruled over China there was a nine-rank system in place. This hierarchical society was left behind to make way for a large social service system. This made it possible for a larger amount of people to attend school. The imperial examinations were made up by two different exams. The first one was *mingjing* (illuminating the classics examination) the student got tested on their knowledge about Confucian literature. The second of this exam was *jinshi* (presented scholar examination). This exam was a combination of writing essays on matters of government and politics and the student skill of composing poetry. It became a must to master this form of art. Over 48900 poems have been found from this era by 2200 different authors.¹⁰

It is not an easy task to summarize a 289 years of ruling and even harder to pick out one of the many accomplishments of the Tang dynasty. But one cannot ignore the importance of the trade along the Silk Road. It was an exchange of culture and technology. I would argue that most important contribution the Tang's made was

⁸ (SOURCES: XJTS)Editor: enmb, "International Trade during Tang Dynasty" 13 Feb. 2012. <http://www.aboutxinjiang.com/topic/content/2008-01/31/content_2425100.htm>

⁹ Edward Lewis, Mark. *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*. 2009. p.156

¹⁰ Wikipedia contributors. "Literature." Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*. 13 Feb. 2012. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tang_Dynasty#Literature>

opening up its borders for the influence of other civilizations. This made a positive impact on their society in terms of the development that occurred during their rule. Due to the imperial examinations and the change from rank system to social service system more citizens got an education, something that would not have been possible before. If all mankind had the same attitude the Tangs had about opening up their empire towards foreign cultures and adopt a more open minded mindset maybe the world would look different than it does today. The Tang made their print on society in many aspects but what would have been the outcome if they had stayed in power just a little bit longer? Would it have changed the outcome of China? One can only speculate in what Chinese society would have look like if communism never had occurred.