Chinese Dynasties: Sui, Tang and Song
Sui Dynasty (581-618 CE)

- short-lived but ambitious dynasty (much like the Qin)
- two major emperors: **Sui Wendi** (aka Yang Jian) and **Sui Yangdi**
- Wendi removed private armies, lowered taxes and redistributed land
- Yangdi completed the Grand Canal but was a tyrant; he was murdered in 618 while returning from a failed campaign in Korea
The Grand Canal
Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE)

• Became perhaps the richest, most sophisticated nation at the time
• Booming trade along the Silk Road
• Literature and art are esp. advanced
• Other countries (like Japan and Korea) seek to imitate it
Tang Empire
- Founder of dynasty, Li Yuan, the Duke of Tang, took the imperial name of Gaozu and granted an amnesty to the Sui imperial family.
- His rule (618-626 CE) and that of his chief minister, Wei Zeng, was considered a model of good governance.
- Son and successor Li Shimin sullied his reputation.
- In quest for power, killed his brothers, then forced his father to abdicate in his favor
- Reformed government, put in place new law code
- Extended China’s boundaries north into Manchuria, south to Vietnam
- Under his rule, China reached the zenith of its power and influence up until then
- Succeeded by Gaozun (r. 649-683)
Empress Wu Zetian, aka Wu Zhao (r.690-705)

- Only Empress in Chinese history
- Renowned for her beauty, she first entered palace at age 13 as one of Emperor Taizong’s concubines; childless, went into retirement in 649
- Then, in 655, became one of the principal concubines of Taizong’s son and successor, Gaozong; rise to power was steeped in blood (e.g., she killed two rivals for Gaozong’s affections); later she married Gaozong
- Ruled first through husband and two of her sons (655-690)
- Then she started her own dynasty (Zhou) in 690 when she was 66 and ruled on her own
- Launched military campaign to take Korea
- Favored Buddhism - she helped build many monasteries and eventually made Buddhism the state religion
- Reign was controversial; instituted a reign of terror in court circles (her secret police targeted internal enemies)
- Overthrown in coup d’état (705); died later that year
Xuanzong, aka the Profound Emperor (r. 712-756)

- Empress Wu’s grandson
- Took over via a palace revolt
- Political and economic reform at first
- Great patron of arts also
- Decline sets in as a result of corruption, emperor’s infatuation with mistress Yang Guifei
- Rebellion by An Lushan, general of nomadic background, failed
- Emperor had to agree to execution of Yang Guifei and her greedy relatives, then had to abdicate
Is Chinese History a history just of emperors and dynasties? What of the Chinese people? What of their art, literature, and music? What about their religion?
The Tang Era = Golden Age of Culture

• **Famous lyric poets**
  - Wang Wei (699-759)
  - Li Bo, aka Li Bai (701-762)
  - Du Fu (712-770)
  - Han-Shan (fl. 9th cent.)

• **Famous artists**
  - Yan Liben (ca 600-673)
  - Zhang Xuan (713-755)
If I hide out at Cold Mountain
Living off mountain plants and berries –
All my lifetime, why worry?
One follows his karma through.
Days and months slip by like water,
Time is like sparks knocked off flint.
Go ahead and let the world change –
I’m happy to sit among these cliffs.

Han-Shan, *Cold Mountain Poems*, translated from colloquial Tang Chinese by Gary Snyder
• Tang rule weakens over the course of the 9th century
• Equal land system breaks down
• Neglect of infrastructure (e.g., the lack of attention paid to the upkeep on canal and irrigation systems) also a problem
• Some emperors (e.g., Wuzong, r.841-847) openly persecute Buddhists
• Series of military defeats at end., esp. at the hands of the Kirghiz, cause the dynasty’s demise
Song Dynasty (960-1279)

-The Song ruled China during a time of political and military upheaval
-Many innovations in science and technology during this period
-Vibrant economy also
-Military was not very strong
-Bureaucracy, however, was large and put a strain on the economy; this angered some Chinese
Emperor Taizu (r. 960-976)
- The first of five very capable Song emperors
- Came from an aristocratic Northern family
- Military officers had persuaded him to become emperor
- Humane and tolerant ruler; interested in painting, calligraphy, and philosophy
- Reorganized the government and ushered in a period of peace and prosperity
Wang Anshi (1021-1086)

-Song minister and perhaps “one of the most original minds in Chinese history”
-Able but abrasive reformer
-Brought about reforms in education, agriculture, taxes, and military conscription to deal with mounting unemployment, border threats from the Western Xia
-These reforms, generally meant to aid the peasantry and small merchants, were controversial and encountered strong opposition from landowners and wealthy merchants
-Eventually he was dismissed from office by the emperor Zhezong (r.1086-1101)
Song innovations/ inventions: gunpowder, multi-stage rockets, mechanical clock, compass, porcelain, use of paper money, moveable-type printing
Similarities and Differences between the Tang and Song dynasties

- **Similarities**
  1. The bureaucracy continued to grow during each dynasty.
  2. The scholar-gentry dominated Chinese life politically and intellectually.

- **Differences**
  1. Song China was geographically smaller in size than China under the Tang dynasty.
  2. Song China had greater difficulty controlling the nomadic groups in the North (e.g., the Khitan Mongols in Manchuria).
  3. Song China often had to pay tribute to these nomadic states whereas the Tang didn’t.
  4. The military decline experienced by China under the Song reinforced the aristocracy’s lack of power over the scholar-gentry class.
  5. The failure of Wang Anshi’s reforms during the Song dynasty helped contribute to China’s eventual military collapse.
The Mongols

- Under Ghengis Khan, they attacked much of Central Asia in the early-to-mid 13th century.
- They also attacked China in the mid-13th century, then established the Yuan dynasty there under Kublai Khan.
- Lastly, they attacked Baghdad, other parts of the Middle East in the 1250s, causing much turmoil and devastation.
In China the Mongols dominated the country’s political and economic life at first but by the late 14th century the Chinese were able to mount a successful rebellion and expel the Mongols.