CHAPTER 8 - IMPERIAL CHINA (589-1368)

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter concentrates on China's imperial age and emphasizes the cultural and philosophical contributions of this important period. During this time, which corresponds to the European "middle ages," the most notable feature of Chinese history was the reunification of China and the recreation of a centralized bureaucratic empire consciously modeled on the earlier Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. - 220 C.E.). China was able to develop a unified state at a time when political fragmentation in Europe brought about small, independent kingdoms.

The Sui dynasty (589-618) sprang from Chinese-Turkish origins, reestablished a centralized bureaucracy and rebuilt the Great Wall and other public works. After a period of political disintegration and civil war among contending aristocratic factions, the T'ang dynasty was established. Chinese historians have often compared the short-lived Sui dynasty with that of the Ch'in in that it provided a foundation for the subsequent progress of China.

The T'ang dynasty (618-907) established an efficient bureaucracy through frugality, and expanded Chinese borders to their greatest extent. The chapter explains the intricacies of T'ang administration especially during the years of good rule from 624-755. Although the government was centered around the figure of the emperor, aristocrats were given generous tax concessions and served as officials at court. Women continued to play a role in government; a concubine, Wu Chao, (625-706) ruled for seven years as regent before she deposed her son and ascended to sole power herself.

The reign of the emperor Hsuan-Tsung (713-756) is particularly noted for its cultural brilliance and the capital grew to approximately 2 million people. The T'ang dynasty applied a four tier foreign policy of military aggression, use of nomads against other nomadic tribes, establishment of strong border defenses (Great Wall), and diplomatic action. However, during the mid-eighth century, China's frontiers began to contract and external enemies in Manchuria and Tibet contributed to growing internal dissension. By 907, the T'ang dynasty had been carved into independent kingdoms. Still, the fall of the T'ang did not lead to the kind of division that had followed the Han.

The chapter continues with a section on T'ang culture. The creativity of the T'ang period arose from the juxtaposition and interaction of cosmopolitan, medieval Buddhist and secular elements. T'ang culture was cosmopolitan not just because of its broad contacts with other cultures and peoples, but because of its openness to them.
The reestablishment of a centralized bureaucracy stimulated the tradition of learning and contributed to the reappearance of secular scholarship. For the first time, scholars wrote comprehensive institutional histories, compiled dictionaries, and wrote commentaries on the Confucian classics. The most famous poets of the period were Li Po (701-762) and Tu Fu (712-770), who were often quite secular in their literary approach.

The Sung dynasty (960-1279) continued the normal pattern of dynastic cycles set in Chinese history. The breakdown of the empire into northern and southern sections after 1127 was followed by the Mongol conquest of the Southern Sung in 1279. Instead of a detailed enumeration of emperors and court officials, the chapter emphasizes the various changes during the T'ang and Sung dynasties that affected China's agriculture, society, economy, state and culture; taken together, the developments in these areas explain why China did not lapse into disunity after the political collapse of the T'ang dynasty (see detailed analysis under "KEY POINTS and VITAL CONCEPTS").

The greatest achievements of the Sung dynasty were in philosophy, poetry and painting. The chapter details the Neo-Confucian ideas of Chu Hsi (1130-1200), which brought a degree of stability to Chinese society. The outstanding poet of the period was Su Tung Po (1037-1101), who believed in a limited role for government and social control through morality. A leading painting style was created by Shih K'o in which human figures were not the dominant focus of the art form.

The Sung dynasty collapsed by 1279, under the military dominance of the Mongols. Genghis Khan united the various Mongol tribes and, bent on world domination, established an empire that extended from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific Ocean. The Mongol rule in China is but a chapter of a larger story. In 1279, under Genghis' grandson, Kublai, the Yuan dynasty was established, but did not change Chinese high culture to any degree. The language barrier assisted in preserving the Chinese way of life. The Southern Sung area was the last to be conquered and the least altered by Mongol control. The Yuan dynasty collapsed in 1368.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. Varieties of Buddhism: During the early T'ang, the principal Buddhist sect was the T'ien-t'ai. But after its mid-9th century suppression, other sects came to the fore. They included Maitreya (Mi Lo), a Buddha of the future who will appear and create a paradise on earth; Amitabha (A Mi T'o), the Lord of the Western Paradise, who helped humans
obtain salvation and whose sect was the largest in China; and finally, Ch'an, or Zen in Japanese. Zen was anti-intellectual in its emphasis on direct intuition into one's own Buddha-nature. It taught that the historical Buddha was only a man and exhorted each person to attain enlightenment by his or her own efforts. The discipline of meditation, combined with a Zen view of nature profoundly influenced the arts in China, Korea and Japan.

2. **Transitional Elements in Late Imperial China:** Long term changes in the society, economy and state explain why China experienced only brief periods of disunity after the collapse of the T'ang and Sung dynasties. The aristocracy weakened over the course of the T'ang, and its fall allowed serfs to gain greater control of their land and the independence to move as they pleased. Trade increased during the T'ang and commerce became more sophisticated with exchange no longer based on silk but rather on coins of copper and silver. The commutation of land tax to a money tax gave farmers more control over their own time. The transition during this period from conscript to professional armies also resulted in the stabilization of society. In government, imperial China became more autocratic with the Sung emperors assuming direct personal control over state offices and appointments. The aristocracy thus declined as a separate political competitor and were elevated to positions of influence through the examination system. The central government during the Sung was also better funded because of a growing population, tax base, and the establishment of government monopolies on salt, wine and tea. Thus the gradual establishment of an efficient, well-funded and autocratic state reduced the potential for long-term dislocation of Chinese civilization.

3. **Mongol Control of China:** The Mongol's major objective in the world was to conquer China. This movement brought them into contact with other superior civilizations. However, the major concentration on China diverted their small resource base to lessen the impact on the Chinese population. Therefore, the high culture of China was not lost to the barbarians and after the fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368, Chinese civilization continued in the pattern of the great empires. The Mongol efficiency in controlling empire proved to be a greater obstacle than the more populated areas could overcome. The four groups, with the Mongols at the top and the Chinese at the bottom, brought about division within the Yuan Empire. The continued language barrier between the Mongols, speaking Altaic, and the Chinese brought constant friction to the area. This
activity did not permit the Chinese civilization to continue in a manner much the same as before the arrival of the Mongols.

4. Imperial China in World Perspective: Rough parallels between China and Europe persisted until the 6th century C.E. But then, a fundamental divergence occurred. Europe tailed off into centuries of feudal disunity while China reunited and attained a new level of wealth, power and culture. Why? One reason was that the victory of Buddhism was less complete than that of Christianity in Europe. Confucianism survived within aristocratic families and the concept of a united empire was integral to it. In contrast, the Roman conception of political order was not maintained as an independent doctrine, and empire was not a vital concept in western Christian thought. In addition, China possessed a greater cultural homogeneity and higher population density; this explains why China could absorb barbarian conquerors more quickly than could Europe. Although comparisons across continents are difficult, it seems likely that T'ang and Sung China had longer stretches of good government than any other part of their contemporary world. Not until the nineteenth century would comparable bureaucracies of talent and virtue begin to appear in the West.

SUGGESTED FILMS

*Chinese History, No. 6 China: The Golden Age.* Traveling Films Custodians. 23 min.

*Chinese History, No. 7 China: The Heavenly Khan.* Traveling Films Custodians. 22 min.

*Chinese History, No. 8 China: The Age of Maturity.* Traveling Films Custodians. 23 min.

*Chinese History, No. 9 China: Under the Mongols.* Traveling Films Custodians. 18 min.

*Chinese Porcelain.* Chinese Art Films. 22 min.

*Chinese Sculpture Through the Ages.* Contemporary Films. 20 min.