

POSTCLASSICAL CULTURE

The Silk Road. The culture of post-classical China reached its pinnacle under the Tang (618-907). The capital city of Tang China was Chang'an, the eastern terminus of the Silk Road. This was important for the Tang economy, but it had an equally important effect on culture. Chang'an was a vast, cosmopolitan city which brought its inhabitants into close contact with foreigners from all over the world. Exposure to art forms from all over the world created an environment where new forms of painting, sculpture, porcelain and literature found expression. From eastern Persia came paintings of Polo matches; from India came Buddhist icons and statues of various Bodhisattva, to name just a few. These influences are evident in the art of the era. Of course, reverse pollination of culture occurred as well. The Chinese introduced fine porcelain into Mediterranean world, and later, the art of paper making and movable type. Tang artists are perhaps most well-known for sculpture and were world leaders in the molding of figurines of horses. In literature, the poet Li Bai (701-762) is remembered as one of the greatest men of letters of his time. He led an interesting life. Li was a member of the court, expelled for drunkenness and for writing romantic poetry about the emperor and his eunuch; then served the leader of the An Lushan Rebellion in 755 and was charged with treason, was pardoned and exiled; married four times and ended his life as a wandering poet. His poetry is known for its pedestrian tone, rich imagery and celebration of strong drink. As was the case in most monarchies, the crown supported various forms of the arts, from calligraphy, to poetry, to metallurgy, to painting and the like. Royal support for the arts during the early Tang period was sustained and significant.

Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism flourished during most of the Tang period. In the years since its founding in the 5th century BCE on the border between Nepal and India, Buddhism had slowly become more and more accepted in China. During the early Han period (206 BCE-220 CE), it was a religion with very few followers, in part because it had to compete with two other well-established religions: Confucianism and Daoism. Nonetheless, as it took on more and more Chinese characteristics, it slowly gained followers late in the Han period. In so doing, however, it looked less like the religion which had been an offshoot of Hinduism. We know the branch of Buddhism that flourished in Northeast Asia as Mahayana (greater vehicle) Buddhism. This is to distinguish it from Hinayana (lesser vehicle) Buddhism practiced in Southeast Asia.

State Support for Buddhism. Unlike Confucianism, Buddhism minimizes the importance of the temporal world and emphasizes the afterlife. It is therefore easy to understand that in the political chaos following the collapse of the Han in the 3rd century CE that this religion would naturally appeal to larger segments of the population. By the time of the early Tang period, it was a major religion, supported by the crown and given special tax and landholding privileges. However, state sanction of any religion is a problematic situation. A monarch can easily withdraw support, require the clergy to bless a poor decision or otherwise change the religious landscape in very short order. During the reign of the Empress Wu (624-705), the Confucians had been savage critics of her policies and, in particular, her usurpation of the throne. In an effort to undermine their authority, she moved the crown even closer to the Buddhist institutions. Upon her death, the special privileges they had enjoyed were stripped from them. Much of the land they had acquired over hundreds of years was taken and many of the temples themselves were shuttered. In the aftermath of the death of Empress Wu, the practice of Buddhism was not always proscribed by law, but it was clearly frowned upon.

Cultural Backlash. After Empress Wu, Tang China appears to have undergone a conservative backlash in more ways than just religion. The state removed some of the incentives that foreigners enjoyed in the capital city of Chang'an. It was also no longer legal to socialize with foreigners and many left China altogether or went to other cities. Buddhism, as an indisputably foreign religion, suffered as a result as well. And there was a state-sanctioned renaissance of Confucianism. In addition, the rich cultural expressions and outbursts of creativity that had characterized the early Tang period were found with less frequency.

The Mongol Interruption. During the Song period (960-1279), Chinese culture remained vibrant and strong. Indeed, Song period art objects are considered some of the most brilliant in all of Chinese history. However, Chinese culture was shattered by the Mongol invasions, particularly in the north where early fighting was intense and sustained. Though the Mongols did not seek to completely remake or destroy Chinese culture, an action they visited upon other conquered peoples, their influence on China was undeniable. There was a clear break between the culture and society of China before the Mongols and the culture and society of China after the Mongols.