

CHINESE ECONOMIC HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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Grand Engineering Projects. In post-classical China, the Sui (589-618) and Tang (618-907) Dynasties are well known for supporting massive and important infrastructure projects. Some, such as the Grand Canal reshaped the economy of China. The Grand Canal ran north to south linking several major river systems, the Qiantang River near Hangzhou in the south, Yangtze River a little further north, the Yellow River in Shandong province and finally the Hai River near Beijing in the north. It spans 6 modern provinces and is more than 1100 miles long, the longest man made river in the world. Portions of it are still in use today for transporting commerce. The Grand Canal was so important to the economy of China for more than a thousand years and was such a monumental feat of engineering in the post-classical world that it has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage by the United Nations alongside such sites as the Great Pyramids of Egypt, the Acropolis in Greece and the Forbidden City. Though China is known historically for its macro-economic regions, the Grand Canal made possible for the first time the transportation of bulk goods from the densely populated regions of the south to the more sparsely populated regions of the north. This created a functioning, national economy. Rice and other food stuffs, in particular, are well known for being transported in bulk along the Grand Canal. This waterway was so important that if it silted over, which it did from time to time after Yellow River floods, emperors are well known for throwing enormous resources at dredging projects for fear of losing the Mandate of Heaven. In time of war, disabling the Grand Canal which your enemy was using to transport supplies could lead to victory. This project was started in antiquity, but was completed under the Sui. It is one of the reasons that the economy under the Tang grew so fast and was so strong.

Security. The southern areas of post-classical China produced far more rice and other food stuffs than could be consumed in the region. This was facilitated because the crown supported the dispersal of knowledge of advances in agriculture such as crop and field rotation, the use of fertilizers and the like. Irrigation and flood control projects both in the south and the north were high priorities. The Tang are known for rebuilding the system of roads that had been left to decay since antiquity. In addition, the Tang took seriously the problem of security and sought to end enduring problems with banditry and the like. They built post-stations along the most important roads and waterways to maintain law and order. The basis for taxation was land and not goods produced on the land. This simplified the tax system and made land-owners, not peasants, largely responsible to the authorities. All of these things contributed to a thriving economy.

The Pax Mongolica. The above mentioned initiatives were all labor intensive and required constant monitoring. Law and order, stability and peace, above all, were required to maintain an effective nationwide economy. When this period of relative peace came to an end with the Mongol invasions, the economy of north China disintegrated. Tens of millions of people in the north were removed from the work force and the population collapsed. Of course, the Silk Road thrived under the Mongols. For the first time in history, it was possible for someone with permission from one of the Mongol monarchs to travel without harassment from Beijing all the way through Persia to Europe and back. Silk, porcelain and tea were particularly valued commodities in Europe. Marco Polo from Venice and others such as the historian Rashid Al Din are well known for having made the trip. Of course, the Pax Mongolica was relatively short lived and came at a tremendous cost. Domestically, the Mongols ruled China after the conquest using many of the same Confucian elites who has served the Song (960-1279) and so, after the recovery, maintained the economy at a diminished, but sufficient level.

Economic Recovery under the Ming. When the Ming came to power after the ouster of the Mongols in 1368, the economy of China returned to its traditional boundaries. The Silk Road was no longer safe and freely accessible. The economy in China, though smaller, continued to thrive. Agriculture existed much as it always had. Peasants worked the land, some as free-holders, others tied to the land as something like serfs. In the devastated and depopulated areas of the north, the first Ming emperors provided incentives for peasants to resettle and return land to cultivation. Road and canals were rebuilt and

irrigation projects were again prioritized. For a century or so, the economy of Ming China grew dramatically. China prospered.