

THE CHINESE WORLD

CHINA IN MEDIEVAL WORLD HISTORY

The Han and Roman empires were succeeded by petty barbarian states that changed borders and rulers constantly.

For China it was the longest period of Disunity of its history, lasting almost four centuries. These were hard and uncertain times and the loss of confidence in the former classical worldview allowed the penetration of new universal religions, with their temples and their priests: Buddhism in China and Christianity in Rome.

Both religions spread in a similar way: both relied for their advance on monasteries and missionaries. Both involved gentle figures, be they saints or bodhisattvas, who could kindle people's devotions. Both came with relics that were honored in beautiful shrines, and both enriched people's lives with their gorgeous religious festivities.

The first Buddhist pagoda was erected in China's capital in the first century, and the following centuries saw an extraordinary growth of Buddhism both in north and south China, and a staggering effort to translate the Indian Buddhist sutras to the totally alien Chinese script.

Chinese pilgrims came and went to India with the great merchant caravans in search of new texts and new teachings. Chinese political division didn't wipe out long-distance trade, on the contrary, it flourished as never before. During these centuries, isolation seriously affected Western Europe but not China.

In fact, by the end of the Disunity period, China as a whole was much wealthier than it had been in Han times. From a scientific point of view, this ancient and medieval period was not wasted at all.

By the middle ages, the Chinese had gone a long way in many scientific branches, like mathematics (especially algebra, although not geometry) as well as acoustics, optics, physics, astronomy - in which they excelled - and medicine, that they developed along very different lines from the Europeans.

Furthermore, the Chinese never let their discoveries fall into oblivion as was the case in Europe with Greek science.

Although modern science was born in Renaissance Europe, for the first millennium and a half of our era the Chinese were at the vanguard of world science.

In the seventh century the Sui and Tang dynasties ensured the reunification of China. The Sui were short-lived but they left as a legacy the Grand Canal, probably the most impressive engineering work of China, that linked south China with the north and guaranteed the effective integration of the rich Yangzi basin into the new empire, bringing it within effective reach of imperial bureaucrats and tax collectors.

The Sui dynasty was toppled by the Tang dynasty.

It was the Tang that created the world's **largest empire at that time** and ensured a permanent Chinese presence in central Asia. The Tang was an extraordinarily cosmopolitan Chinese dynasty. All kinds of religions found their way to the Tang capital: Tibetan Buddhists, Persian Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Jews, Nestorian Christians and of course Muslims.

Tributary embassies came regularly to China from India, Central Asia, Persia, and also from Korea, Vietnam and Japan. Their boats were loaded with hundreds of people who stayed for months or years in China studying everything that could be learned: law, astronomy, medicine, Buddhism, and the great variety of techniques in which the Chinese excelled.

The Japanese now adopted whole aspects of Chinese civilization, as Korea and Vietnam had done before. From China to Japan came rice cultivation, Chinese script, the Tang code, bronze and iron metallurgy, city planning, Chinese Buddhism, Confucianism and Chinese aesthetics.

The Japanese took everything from China, except the Chinese bureaucratic system and the Chinese system of meritocracy through civil service examinations, which was unacceptable for the feudal samurai world.

With the fall of the Tang came a short period of Disunity, until China was reunified by the Song dynasty. With the Song, Chinese relations with the outside world were changed and intensified. The loss of north China limited foreign connections through the land routes, but it turned China towards the sea.

Chinese vessels now took to the high seas and reached all the important ports of Southeast Asia. They even plied the Indian Ocean as far as the African coasts.

Remember that by the twelfth century, Benjamin of Tudela saw them in Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Song China was exceptionally rich and creative and its inventions matched its economic success.

The Song had the largest iron-smelting industry in the world and the best naval technology ever seen. One of its innovations, **the mariner's compass**, was immediately adopted by all boats sailing in the Indian Ocean.

The compass had been in use for centuries for divination purposes, but the extension of the Song navy brought it to its boats. Another of its great innovations was gun powder, which like the **mariner's compass**, was first used for quite different purposes, in this case, fireworks.

The Chinese developed both the gunpowder formula and the propelling force of gunpowder, something that was also quickly introduced into the armies of its close enemies: military technology always diffuses very quickly.

Printing also found its way into the Song's religious, cultural and economic worlds. Printing thrived in Song China because the elites were by now thoroughly dependent on civil service examinations to maintain their status and win a position in the government.

And to prepare for the exams they needed books. The Chinese meritocracy and the social mobility that this career open to talent ensured, reached its maturity in Song times when China put in place the first civil service in world history. European travelers to Ming China would report about it from the sixteenth century on, to the great astonishment of their European audiences.

Some centuries later, the Chinese examination system would have a decisive influence on European education systems. It is worth noting that when these three inventions, **the mariner's compass**, gunpowder and printing, reached Europe some three centuries later, they brought about the radical changes that led to the Renaissance and modern times.

By contrast, Chinese society absorbed them with only minor adjustments.