

# Week 12: The Unified Empire: Cosmopolitan Tang

## Historical Overview

To give some historical context, our story in this third mini-course begins not in 618 when the governor of Taiyuan, Li Yuan, declared himself the emperor of the new Tang dynasty. Rather, we begin with the political reunification of China in 589 under the short-lived Sui Dynasty. The Sui's defeat of the southern dynasties put an end to the four centuries of division between north and south and between ethnically Han and non-Han peoples that followed the demise of the Han Dynasty in 220.

This short period in the late sixth and early seventh centuries also sewed the seeds for the political, cultural, social, and religious trends that the early Tang rulers would bring to fruition. These included the strengthening of central, civil control over local administration and the militarized aristocracy, the economic linkage of the politically powerful north and the fertile south through the building of the Grand Canal, the attempted expansion of the empire into Southeast and Northeast Asia, and the flourishing of a Sinicized, state patronized Buddhism across the realm.

But amid the military overextension and environmental pressures that sent the Sui spiraling into civil war, the northwestern military Li family emerged among its equals to subdue its domestic opponents by 618, and of equally great importance, to win by 630 hegemony of Central Asia from the Turkic tribes who had dominated it throughout the previous century.

The first century and a half of the Tang saw the establishment of a new, centralized, and cosmopolitan empire. Internal political competition subsided to some extent as aristocratic families were enticed to lay down their weapons in exchange for the privilege and prestige of civil power. Tang-dominated trade was resecured along routes through Central Asia and a reorganized tax system, the equal field system, brought income and the land that produced it back under central control. Non-Chinese peoples were integrated into the empire, and the flourishing of scholarship, literature, and law that we will examine in this unit attracted envoys, pilgrims, and traders from across Asia.

Expansion into new areas, however, soon taxed the Tang militia system, requiring the establishment of professional armies and reliance on frontier peoples to staff and run them. The An Lushan Rebellion of 755 to 763, headed by one such frontier military official and growing out of the political turmoil of this situation, wreaked havoc upon the dynasty, ushering in the developments we associate with later Tang, generally the period between 760 and 918. These included a breakdown in the tax and military systems supporting the dynasty and the search for solutions in terms of a reformed tax system and concessions to local military governors and ascended frontier kingdoms, such as those of the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Turks. It also included the retreat of central government from commerce and the resultant development in private enterprise as well as the search in literature and philosophy for new modes of expression in relation to self, state, society and universe.

From 874 to 884, one time civil service aspirant Huang Chao led his bands of merchants, farmers, and bandits in revolt, executing the aristocratic families at the core of the state. The Tang system, long overstrained, soon collapsed, ultimately devolving into the shifting, local warlord domains that we know today as the Five Dynasties in 10 Kingdoms, which would precede the establishment of the Song Dynasty in 960.

## **Section 1: A Great Tang, A Troubled Tang, A Cosmopolitan Tang**

We turn now to the Tang Dynasty. Like the Han Dynasty, which it saw as its great predecessor, the Tang Dynasty followed a short-lived dynasty before it-- in this case, the Sui-- which had done much of the work to unify north and south after a period of division and warfare.

Now the Tang is seen today, I think, as one of the greatest dynasties in Chinese history. It was not untroubled. In the late 7th/early 8th century, the Empress usurped the throne and created a new dynasty with herself as Emperor, or Empress-- the only female ruler in Chinese history. 100 years later, in 755, the general on the northeastern border, An Lushan, rebelled, and the dynasty was thrown into chaos.

And yet, despite that, it is seen as one of the greatest periods in Chinese history. But why? Was it the territorial expanse of the Tang-- which in some sense gives us a sense of China as the great hegemon of East Asia. Was it the centralized hierarchical order that Tang created-- a new model of a highly rational state that others could imitate? Or was it Tang as the great cosmopolitan moment in Chinese history? We might pause for a minute and think about what we understand the word cosmopolitan to mean.

I think one of the things we'll see is that cosmopolitan can mean at least two things. One is to take in from the world, but at the same time, to give something back to the world. And both of those things, I think you'll see, are true of Tang. But in order to understand why it could be a great cosmopolitan country, with a centralized bureaucratic order, with a vast territorial expanse, we need to talk about the Tang system itself.

## **Section 2: The Social-Political Order**

Let's begin with the socio-political order that the Tang created. And to do that, I want to begin with the imperial family itself. It was one of the great clans of the northwest. But the northwestern clans had a quality that set them apart from the other great clans. They had intermarried with the tribal peoples of the northwest.

The Li family, the imperial family of Tang, was, in fact, of so-called mixed blood. They had intermarried with the Turks. In fact, the son of the founder of the dynasty, at various points, lived in the palace grounds in a yurt, trying to speak Turkish.

This was true of the Sui Dynasty as well. The wife of the Sui founder had the surname of Dugu, which was a Turkish surname. Foreign clans provided generals for the military. There was not a sense of anti-foreignism at this point. For the Tang, what was foreign just meant what was still outside the imperium. And we find in the Tang period, many people from foreign countries serving as part of the Tang administration.

One of the things we see in the Tang-- and this is already suggested by the fact that Empress Wu could usurp the Dynasty and get away with it for a number of years-- was the role of imperial women, or the role of women in the north and the northwest, was rather different from that in the south. In the south, the

expectation had been that they would be secluded and stay at home. In the north, women were out in public, they rode horses, they played polo.

And, in fact, the wife of the founder of the Sui Dynasty had said that she should be regarded as one of the two sages on the throne-- that she and her husband were ruling together, and that he might not have any children by any other person besides her. Empress Wu, the Empress of the Tang Emperor Gaozong-- her usurpation brings with it a proclamation of a new dynastic name even, the Zhou Dynasty, going back to the ancient Zhou-- although it ends with her death.

One of the policies of the Tang Empire, and one of the reasons for its success, was its ability to bring the great clans into government. The great clans from the northwest, where the dynasty was founded, the northeast, the southeast, and from Sichuan. The problem though, that they faced, was how to get these clans to shift their loyalty to the dynasty, rather than seeing the dynasty and the government merely as a means to advance themselves. How were they to do this? Well, they settle on, of course-- which is the obvious solution. They make sure that these families are able to stay in government, and put their descendants in government as well.

They have another problem. How do they cut the tie that links these great clans from their home bases where they dominate the locality-- sometimes whole counties dominated by a single clan. The solution is an administrative reform.

They start to set a series of rules. They reorganize some of the prefectures and counties. They set in place a rule of avoidance-- this was already done in the Sui Dynasty. The rule of avoidance says, and it still operates in China today, that you may not serve as an official in a place where you have relatives. The idea was to break the great clans from local government, to give local government independence. The government takes control over appointment and rank. That is, great clans can make their children-- their male children eligible for offices, for roles in government. But they can't decide what roles they'll get. They can't pass on office to them.

And finally, they make education one possible path into office. And education, at least potentially, is something that all could compete for. They have another problem which is that the great clans had prestige that was so high that they rivaled the prestige of the ruling house.

The solution to this problem was to create national lists-- ranked lists of all the great clans in the Empire-- and then to adjust the ranking to reflect what people had done for the dynasty. That is, the higher you served, the higher your ranking would be-- to try to make the prestige of a clan dependent on its service to the dynasty.

And they put in another rule as well, although it's not clear that it was actually put into thorough effect. That was to forbid the top-ranked clans from marrying each other-- all in an effort to try to establish the supremacy of the imperial house over the great clans that dominated the government. The emperor in Tang was in some sense still, what's called a *primus inter pares*-- the first among equals. But the great clans around him certainly were rivals in some sense, or equals to the imperial Li clan.

## **Section 3: The Cultural Order**

We turned to the cultural order that the Tang established. I want to talk about that in terms of what are sometimes called the three religions or the three teachings-- Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. We can think of these three teachings in terms of the people that staff them and their institutions. We can see them

as textual traditions. And we can look at the way in which the emperor patronized and the throne patronized the three teachings, and why they did it.

Let's begin with the Confucians. Who were the people and what were the institutions? And in fact we could ask, is it legitimate to think of this as a religion? Well the Confucians were, in some sense, all the bureaucrats. They were the civil officials in particular. They were the scholars.

They had as their institutions, the Confucian temples that were located in all the counties and prefectures. They had schools in some of the Confucian temples. Not all of them, by any means. Not all counties and prefectures at this point had schools.

But they had an imperial academy at the capital. They were engaged in scholarly projects. But also, as local officials, they had religious duties. They performed sacrifices, they offered prayers. They were in fact both political figures and cultural figures and religious figures at the same time.

Rather than thinking of Buddhists as people who were converts, because that was not something that worked with Buddhism. In the Christian West, beginning around the 12th century, people born into Christian families were automatically treated as Christians and baptized in infancy. Although before that, they had to convert to Christianity.

In Buddhism-- and this is also true for Taoism and Confucianism-- there is really no such thing as conversion. There is no baptism. One chooses to patronize a Buddhist establishment, to make offerings to Buddhism. One could call people who do that Buddhists. But in fact, the real Buddhists are the monks and nuns. And there were lots of them.

The estimate is, according to the government, that in 589, when the Sui unified north and south, there were two million registered Buddhist monks and nuns in the north. A much smaller number in the south. Of course, at this point, when we talk about the south, we're really talking mainly about the southeast. Only 57,000 in the south.

They lived in monasteries and nunneries. They had extensive land holdings, both as a result of gifts from officials and from the government and from the emperors. But also as gifts from local families, from local patronage. Households very often belong to monasteries and, as such didn't pay rent or didn't pay taxes to the government but paid rent to the monasteries. If we think about this there were far more Buddhist clergy than there were officials.

By the sixth century, Daoism had really restructured itself as a religion in imitation of Buddhism. They had Daoist temples, Daoist officiants-- people who could perform ceremonies just as the Buddhists had priests. The Daoists were probably only 1/10 the size of the Buddhist establishment. They did, however, have a special claim.

The imperial house has the surname Li. Laozi, the ancient figure who is seen as the progenitor of Daoism was also surnamed Li, it was said. The imperial house claimed that it was descended from Laozi. And thus it had special favor for Daoism.

Now all these three religions had textual teachings as well, but rather different. The Confucians had their classics with commentaries. They had histories, their books of ritual, their legal codes. They wrote literary works.

The Buddhists had scriptures-- the Sutra-- the preachings of the Buddha, that had come from the west and been translated into Chinese. Come from the west meaning India and Central Asia. Although in fact, in China a number of Sutra were written that didn't exist in India or Central Asia that were written for the first time in Chinese, although they claimed to be representing the teachings of the Buddha.

The Daoists didn't have a founding figure in the sense that the Confucians had Confucius or the Buddhists have the Buddha. The Daoists had immortals. And the immortals had given revelations to Daoist masters. And so they had scriptures, too, in some sense, given to them by the immortals, revealed to them by the immortals.

If we turn to imperial patronage, we see, in fact, that patronage was extended to all of the three religions. This Sui had ended pogroms against the Buddhist establishment. The Buddhists-- as the number of two million monks and nuns in North China might indicate-- had in fact started to set up independent organizations outside of government, depriving government of much revenue.

It had been attacked prior to this Sui Dynasty by government, who was anxious for its revenue, anxious for its land holdings, for all the copper in its statues. And it would be attacked again in the 830s, under the Tang. But at this point, in early Tang and in Sui, Buddhism is allowed to go its own way. Tang and Sui balanced support for Buddhism and Daoism with great support for Confucians as well.

They bring Confucian scholars into government to write the histories of the previous dynasties in the period after the Han. They bring people in to work on ritual codes, to collect the literary writings of the past. And to write commentaries on the classics or to collect the commentaries on the Confucian classics-- The Five Classics-- and try to mix them into one integrated whole that combine both northern traditions from the period of division and the southern traditions of classical commentary.

The Tang rulers were patrons to all and beholden to none. I think that's the best way of describing their attitude. They're concerned with control. They want to set limits on how many people can be ordained as Buddhist monks, for example. They urged the centralizing of temple networks and patronized those temple networks. They regulate the entrance of Confucian scholars into government.

The Emperor can present himself as a Daoist master, a Confucian sage, and a Chakravartin King, a Buddhist King. And they have the representatives of the three teachings debate in their presence at the palace. We have records, in fact, of these debates, the debates between Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians. And typically, the Daoists are the official winners, given the imperial throne.

But religious leaders respond that Confucians do try to show that the different traditions of commentary on the classics can be integrated into one. Just as the country, with all its diverse states during the Period of Division, has now been integrated into one. Some Buddhists, the Tiantai Buddhists, for example, offer a new vision of Buddhism in which all the different Buddhist sects are grouped together and ranked. Again, a unified view of Buddhism. And the Daoists got involved in producing a Daoist canon, which takes all their texts and puts them together in an orderly fashion.

Now I've talked about Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. But if we look at a map of the capital city of Chang'an, you'll see that these were not the only religious establishments. We have Manicheans, Nestorian Christians, and Mazdaists-- the Zoroastrians.

The capital city of Chang'an-- we'll talk about this more in a second-- was in some sense a concretization of the expansive inclusiveness of the imperial house. The city, a million people, six kilometers to the side on the outer walls. It was for its time, the greatest city in the world.

## **Section 4: The Economic Order**

The economic order that the Tang created was a response, in many ways, to the decline in the economy that had taken place during the period of division. They had become a barter economy. The farmers were tied to

great estates and monasteries. The country was more or less living barely above the poverty line, except for the well-to-do. And the government needed revenue. How to get it?

Well, building on the traditions that had been developed during the previous dynasties in the north, the Tang adopted a tax system called equitable field system, in Chinese, the *juntianfa*. What was this? In principle this was a contract between the farmers and the government. The government said we will guarantee you a certain amount of land-- enough land to support your family and pay revenue to us.

One might think of the tax as a kind of rent on the land the government distributes to people. But the tax obligation belongs to the household. So the government will say, we'll give you-- I think the amount of land they're giving is actually quite large for traditional farming, around 23 acres at maximum. But it really depends upon how productive the land was. More productive land, you give less. Less productive land, you give more.

The land was given when they turned 18 years old. 18 years by Chinese count would be around 17 in the West today. And it was returned at death or some say that half of the land was returned at age 60, retirement age, so to speak, and the rest at death. And what did the farmer have to do for that land?

Well he had annual responsibility to deliver three bushels of grain, 20 feet of textile-- and this would have been ideally silk-- and 30 days of labor. Now 20 feet of silk is a lot of silk. Could have been linen in some places. Cotton has not appeared yet. But, as far as we understand, the way this would work that people in the village would get together and produce the silk in single rolls. And thus, make up their allotment.

I've mentioned that there were great clans. How are they going to be treated? What we find is that the government gives the great clans special allotments of land, large pieces of land. They give them this as part of their salary. That's when they're serving in office, they have land.

But they also give large estates, maybe 1,500 acres, which would include in fact the farmers who are farming that land, to high officials. And that land could be inherited. It doesn't have to be given back. So whenever a family has a very high official, it's made it for generations to come.

They give grants to religious institutions, which are tax-exempt, just as the lands of the great clans are tax-exempt. The government gets the wealth through its revenue received through its tax system, but it redistributes the wealth as well. It redistributes it through land holdings, redistributes it through other kinds of grants to officials and those leading the government.

Another important part of the economic order was the successful linking of the Southeast, this rich grain growing, rice-growing region, with a capital in the northwest. And this was done by the Sui Dynasty, in fact. Which built a canal that extended from the Southeast from Yangzhou all the way into the Northwest. The Sui Emperor is said to have, once the canal was completed, taken a tour of the South. And that tour required 65 miles of boats to go down.

What was the Tang vision of empire, ultimately? It was a vision that had great clans at its peak, as the social, political, cultural, and economic elite. Where the surplus wealth went to the government. Where there is distribution from the top down. It was in fact, if I think I had to summarize this, the Tang model, the Tang ideal was a unified hierarchy from the top down of power, status, culture and wealth.

## **Section 5: The Military Order**

Another piece of the Tang system was the military order. And here again, we can see the problems that had been created during the period of division-- when military power was highly decentralized-- where Army's belonged, in some sense, to the commander. And in fact, in some places in the north, soldiers were expected to take on the surname of their commander, to show that they were, in some sense, his sons-- loyal members of his family.

This meant military leaders who had a high degree of independence, control of their own power-- did not easily fall under the control of the government. The Tang response to this is to create a militia system. In those frontier areas, or strategically important areas, a certain percentage of the farmers were relieved of all tax burden, and were instead trained in military tactics, and in army formations, the use of weapons-- so that they could be called up, if necessary, to defend the country.

Gradually, as the Tang began to expand-- revenue came in and it used that revenue to expand to the Northwest, out into Inner Asia along the Silk Route, to establish its hegemony in new territories-- it needed a standing army. And as it needed a standing army, and as it began to have to defend its borders and compete with other powers, the pastoral peoples of the North, the militia system ceased to function. And instead, order was kept through the appointment of military governors.

The problem was that these military governors began to gain a certain degree of independence. And when the center was weak, they would increase their power, and would often try to make sure that it remained in their family in that place. That's a problem we'll come to later, when we talk about the demise of the Tang.

## **Section 6: Tang as a Luxury Market**

Tang was also a market. A market that consumed the best goods from wherever they could be found. It was a market for luxury goods. We shouldn't think of this as the massive importing of cheap manufacturers from another country. What they're anxious for are luxury goods-- goods that would serve the interests of aristocrats.

Well, think of the colors of the clothes people wore. The blue is from indigo, coming from Central Asia. The yellow is with a dye made from the gamboge tree from Cambodia. The red requires sappan wood from Java. The smells that people had-- they chewed cloves from Java, much like breath mints. A loose wood from Vietnam could serve the same purpose.

You don't wash silks easily. What you do is you fumigate them. And for that you need incense. Incense is also used in temples and all sorts of ceremonies. For incense using sandalwood, from Southeast Asia. Or Frankincense coming all the way from Arabia. Jasmine oils and camphor oil, from South China. The tastes of what people ate-- grapes imported to the capital of Chang'an from Central Asia, pistachios from Iran, dates from the desert oases along the Silk Route, pepper from Java.

We even have records of the popular hairstyle at Chang'an at one point-- the posi-- the Persian hairstyle. Entertainments-- dancers coming from Indochina performing Buddhist plays, or Buddhist dances-- religious dances. Dancing horses coming from Central Asia. Troops of boy dancers coming from Tashkent-- all congregating in Chang'an-- but also, in Canton, in the far south-- a seaport, particularly for Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Arab traders. Yangzhou-- the terminus of the Grand Canal, or the starting point of the Grand Canal, on the Yangtze River-- another place of great trade and entrepot where goods would pass through. Tang was a market that attracted ambassadors and merchants from around the world.

## **Section 7: Tang as a World Power**

From Baghdad in Iraq to Chang'an in northwestern China is 3,250 miles. That space between those two capitals was contested. And until the middle of the century, Tang was certainly the most successful power in that area. I want to talk a bit about how Tang established itself as a world power.

To the north-- and you'll see this as we look at the map-- we have a Turkic speaking tribes. Federations led by a Khan, broken into Eastern Turks and Western Turks. Far to the west, the Sassanid Empire of the Persians, modern Iran. People practiced Zoroastrianism, worshipping their God, Ahura Mazda, in the form of fire. But also a country or empire that was beginning to adopt or include some forms of Christianity and forms of Nestorian Christianity.

The Arabs and Islam spreading out of Baghdad in the sixth and seventh century. A theocracy, with a ruler who is a Caliph, who is also supposed to be the successor to the Prophet, the successor to Muhammad. The Tibetans also pushing into this area. And all these powers are fighting with each other and competing with each other for space, for control over trade, control over routes.

But Tang certainly was the most successful. Its armies controlled large segments of the trade routes. It established garrisons going out along the western routes. It forced local rulers to recognize Tang hegemony. Its protectorates in Central Asia, we can begin in the West or in a sense, the eastern end of this part in the Tarim Basin, where it establishes a protectorate called Anxi-- pacify the west.

Going further west, crossing the mountains, we come to Sogdiana, the rich Fergana Valley. There it establishes a protectorate as well. In Turkistan, where the great city of Balkh, it establishes another protectorate.

And this continues until 753, when Tang and Arab armies meet up at the Talas River. And the Tang is defeated. Now both armies, it's argued, were overextended. This is more of symbolic defeat than a real major turning point. However, once several years later domestic problems arise in Tang, the armies start to be pulled back. And the northern peoples start to increase their power at Tang's expense.

Tang is in East Asia, too. It's not just looking to the west, it's looking to the east and to the southeast. To the Philippines, to Indonesia, to the Ryukyu Islands, to Sri Vijaya, which is now Singapore, Malaysia, in that area. It has a protectorate in An-nan-- pacify the south. What we today call northern Vietnam. And Vietnam, in fact, remains under Tang control. It doesn't really become independent until the early 10th century.

To the east there's also Korea. First Koguryo, which Sui had three times tried to conquer and three times failed. Tang attacks as well and is also pushed back. In the end, Tang makes an alliance with an upstart southern kingdom in Korea, Shilla. And joining with Shilla, Koguryo is defeated and Shilla establishes a unified kingdom on the Korean peninsula.

In Japan, which Tang does not invade or try to invade, there's the Yamato State. An emperor who traces his descent in an unbroken line from the sun god, even to today. Tang brought order to China. But I think it's fair to say, Tang also brought order to the world, as it knew it.

## **Section 8: Tang as a Model**



Rich, centralized, powerful, led by a cohesive elite; Tang presented the world with a model. People can go to Tang to learn what modern civilization meant. And Korea, Japan, and Vietnam did. To be so rich, to be so orderly, to be so civilized, to be like Tang.

For those in Central Asia, however, and inner Asia, the Tang model was one of the exercises of power, and perhaps state-building, but not necessarily a model of civilization that they wanted to adopt. The contrast with Japan and Korea is very important.

Well how did the countries that wanted to learn from Tang, such as Japan and Korea, how did they learn? They sent embassies. They sent embassies of students, of monks, of high officials, of their own aristocrats, to spend time in Tang. To learn about how Tang governed, to learn Tang reading and writing, to read the classics, the histories, that Tang had. To learn technology, the water wheel, for example, is imported then, into Japan from Tang.

Tang became, through this process, the basis of East Asian civilization. Or provided the foundations for shared East Asian civilization that crossed the barriers of spoken language in different countries. It wasn't only Tang's secular order that these countries learned.

They had also been learning Buddhism from China. So it's Buddhism that takes form in China-- the Mahayana Buddhism of China-- that becomes the Buddhism of Korea and Japan. And in the mid 8th century, Japan wants to establish its presence in the world. And to do this, it decides to build the greatest Buddha that has ever been built.

Between 747 and 752, they gather three million pounds of copper, 15,000 pounds of gold to build a great Vairocana Buddha. And that Buddha is there today in Todaiji in Nara. And they had a great eye opening ceremony when one enlivens the statue, so to speak. By painting on the eyes, opening the eyes, taking the blindfold off the eyes, in some cases, to which all the countries of that world sent ambassadors.

Well what did they learn from Tang? What did these embassies and students and monks, what did they learn? Some of them stayed in Tang for the rest of their lives and became officials. Those who went back brought with them not only Buddhism, but the idea of government by law.

The Tang legal system in two parts. A Tang code, a criminal code, which defined what the crimes were and what the appropriate punishments were. And brought with it the idea of a universal code that would apply to all regions and all people equally. And the statutes. The statutes, which were not just a civil code or an administrative code, but which defined how government should function. Define out the tax system should work, what the obligations of people were to government, and the government to the people.

This combination of codes and statutes provided both Japan and Korea ideas for how to reorganize their own countries in the Tang model. Government by law also included a bureaucratic system. The system in which the government was organized into functional divisions for revenue, for the military, for public works, and so on. Where officials were promoted through ranks on the basis of their accomplishment.

Power was delegated from the top down to those below. Where local officials were sent from the central government, from the court to the locality. And where there was a field administration of circuits, of prefectures, and counties that was hierarchically organized.

They also learned a relationship between state and society. Of an aristocracy that did not exist independently of government, but was in some sense sponsored by the government. A government that had the power to redistribute land to its subjects. They learned as well the relationship between state and church, in which Buddhism would be subordinate to the state.

And yet, the appeal of Buddhism was often the fact that could be independent from the state. That it would fall outside of the rules of the state, of the state's tax system, that it provided a refuge and a home in its monasteries in nunneries for people who had taken themselves apart from politics and society. So this was an enduring tension in the Tang system between the desire of Buddhist establishments for greater independence, economic, social, political, and the Tang government's desire to dominate the religious sphere.

As I mentioned before in the 830s, the government, in an effort to gather revenue to meet with the crises, particularly crises that had began in the aftermath of the An Lushan Rebellion of 755-757. The government demanded that Buddhist monks and nuns return to lay life. Took away their temples. Use the wood for other purposes. Melted down the statues to make coin.

And yet, ten years after that, the suppression was lifted. And the government went back to supporting Buddhism and rebuilding the temples. And the monks returned and so on.

There's another thing that they learned, the most extraordinary thing, perhaps, of all. They learned writing. They learned Chinese writing and used that writing, in some sense, to sound out their own language. Eventually they would create their own syllabaries.

The Kana system in Japan, much later, long after Tang. The Kana system in Japan and the Hangul system in Korea. But to this day, Chinese characters have remained part of Japanese and Korean. And in fact, for much of history, Korean and Japanese scholars wrote not only in their own languages, but also in Chinese.

To live in square cities with streets organized in a grid pattern, like Nara or Kyoto. To eat with chopsticks, whether you're in Vietnam or Korea or Japan. To drink tea, to dress in silk. To write with a brush, on paper, by grinding ink.

To pay with coins, to pay taxes to civil officials. To read and write poems and other kinds of literature. This was to live in the Tang manner.

One part of the world that's now part of China stayed outside. And that was Tibet. Tibet, in some sense, the eighth century was making a choice. Is it going to become part of the Tang cultural order? Or is it going to, through its Buddhism, identify with the Sanskrit cultural order. And it chooses for the Sanskrit cultural order.

One final reflection: when I was a student, I learned about the history of the world, beginning with the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians. Going on to the Greeks, the Romans, the English, and the French. And maybe in the Modern Period, something about how Western powers went to modernize East Asia.

And I was taught that China and East Asia were isolated. That's the question I want to leave you with. Who was isolated? Was it Tang? Or was it Europe?