

Medieval China

Slideshow Commentary

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Introduction

This activity can be used as a stand-alone exercise, as an introduction to this topic in world history; or as a wrap up/reinforcement exercise.

The slideshow can also be used by students in their project work. For this they will need to access the resource themselves, as well as the student commentary (or a printout of it). This will require a multi-user licence.

For each slide, this commentary mostly follows the same formula:

1. Slide number and date

2. Introductory paragraph (in bold)

This seeks to encapsulate in a sentence or two what's going on in the map. These are in bold.

3. Bullet points

One or more bullet points, giving very brief points of interest in the map, or in the period it covers.

4. Additional note(s)

For most slides there are additional notes. These give more in-depth support to the bullet points. Much of the information these contain may be superfluous to your needs, especially if you are covering the topic quickly. However, we have included it so that it is there for you if you want it.

We suggest that, prior to using the Presentation with your class, you go through these additional notes and highlight any you wish to use.

A suggestion:

To keep your students more engaged (and, by the way, if your students are not engaged or benefitting from these maps, then let us know and we'll refund your money!), why not start each new map with a question, such as, "How is this map different from the previous one?"

Commentary

You might find it helpful to print these notes out.

Slide 1, 589 CE: China reunited

After 350 years of division, China has been recently reunited under the Sui dynasty.

- During the centuries of disunity the **north** was divided into a number of kingdoms, under non-Chinese rulers from **central Asia**. **Southern China** remained united under native Chinese rulers (note 1).
- This period of disunity has been a time of turmoil, but in both north and south China, the old Han **bureaucratic** form of government has continued (note 2).
- Great changes have come to China, however. Major shifts in **population** from north to south have occurred, important **technological** advancements have taken place, and new **religions** are coming to the fore (note 3).
- In 589 CE the **Sui dynasty** at last reunited the huge country (note 4).

Additional notes

1. A China divided

After the fall of the **Han dynasty** in 220 CE, China experienced more than 350 years of disunity and barbarian invasion. Northern China was over-run by non-Chinese peoples from central Asia, who established several kingdoms there.

Southern China remained united under native Chinese dynasties. These were unable to reconquer the north, however.

2. The civilization of Ancient China had been preserved intact.

Unlike in the West, where the fall of the western Roman empire led to the loss of much of the ancient civilization of Greece and Rome, the Chinese succeeded in preserving their civilization throughout this difficult period.

A large reason for this success was that in all the different kingdoms into which China was divided, even in those ruled by non-Chinese dynasties, the old Han **civil service** continued to function, at least to some extent.

The officials needed to be educated to carry out their tasks, and so schools continued in being. This helped to preserve the traditional learning of China.

However, in all parts of China, powerful **aristocracies** gained control of government, and came to own most of the farmland in China. Many ordinary peasants lost their land, becoming landless **serfs** tied to the large estates on which they worked.

3. The period of disunity was a time of great changes for China.

Population movements

In ancient China, most of the population of China had lived in the north, in the Yellow River region. The south was a thinly inhabited frontier region.

Following the fall of the Han dynasty, the chaotic conditions in the north caused a large-scale **migration** of peasants southwards. By 589 CE about a third of the population live there.

Technological advance

The **stirrup** and the **horse collar** were invented during this period, making controlling horses easier and allowing them to carry heavier loads. **Water clocks** and **water mills**, both of which had been invented in Ancient China, were improved and became more widely used.

Religion and thought

In Ancient China, **Confucianism** had become the official philosophy of the Han empire. **Daoism** had also been popular amongst all levels of society; and **ancestor worship** was generally practiced as well. In late Han times, **Buddhism** had been introduced into China by missionaries from India and central Asia,

During the period of division which followed the fall of the Han, Buddhism became firmly established across China. Confucianism remained important in educating officials, but lost its hold over the hearts and minds of most people, even at the highest levels of society.

4. The reunification of China under the Sui dynasty

In 589 CE China was reunited by a general who founded the **Sui dynasty**. The first Sui emperor brought firm government to the whole country, and introduced changes that would have great importance for long-term developments in China.

Good government

After centuries in which high government posts had been held by members of a few aristocratic families, the first Sui emperor made sure that officials were recruited and promoted on merit. He even re-instituting a rudimentary **examination system** for selecting some officials. Thus system had been started in Han times, but had gone out of use.

The "Equal-Fields" system

The first Sui emperor imposed the **Equal-Fields** system across the whole of China. This had been first introduced but the rulers of one of the northern kingdoms, and freed ordinary farmers from the control of powerful landowners. It gave them their own plots of land with which to feed themselves and their families.

Pushing out the borders

As happened so often when the whole of China came under unified rule, the first Sui emperor was able to **expand the borders** of his empire, especially into **central Asia**.

Slide 2, 624 CE: A new dynasty

The second Sui emperor overstretched his empire's resources, and so brought about the fall of the dynasty. A new dynasty called the Tang came to power.

- To complete huge projects and to fight major wars, millions of peasants were required to do years of **forced labor** and **military service**. This caused great suffering (note 1).
- **Rebellions** started to break out, which eventually led to the fall of the Sui. In 618 CE a new dynasty, the **Tang**, came to power (note 2).

Additional notes

1. The Sui lose popular support

The Grand Canal

This first Sui emperor had ordered the construction of a system of inland waterways, known as the **Grand Canal**. These would allow grain and other commodities to be transported in bulk all over China, at comparatively low cost. This would later give a huge boost to the economy of China.

He also had many new **roads** constructed, and more repaired.

The second Sui emperor continued with the construction of these great public works. He seems to have been a megalomaniac, and wanted these projects completed as soon as possible.

Throughout Chinese history peasants were required to do labor-service - **corvée** - for the government, and wise emperors tried to ensure that these burdens were not too heavy.

An immense amount of forced labor was required for the construction of the Grand Canal and the road-building schemes. These would have great benefits for the economy of China, which, sadly for the Sui, would only become apparent later. Meanwhile, their construction projects fell heavily on the peasantry. Millions of peasants were forced to work on them, in very harsh conditions.

The peasants were also liable for **military service**, and the second Sui emperor waged long and very costly wars in **Korea** and elsewhere. This added to the peasants' burdens, and in the end achieved nothing.

2. The replacement of the Sui dynasty by the Tang

The Chinese believed that a dynasty could only reign so long as they ruled wisely, for the benefit of the people. If they did this, they would enjoy the **Mandate (support) of Heaven** (or, as Westerners would say, God). Once the rulers of a dynasty started treating the people harshly, however, this support would be taken away from them and they would be swiftly replaced by another dynasty.

Motivated by this belief, rebellions started breaking out against the second Sui emperor. One of these was led by a leading general, the duke of Tang, who within a few years had gained control of China from the Sui.

The Sui emperor was assassinated in 618, and the general founded the **Tang dynasty**.

Slide 3, 698 CE: The Tang dynasty at its height

The early Tang period was a time of great prosperity for China, and the empire's borders reached far out into central Asia.

- The early Tang rulers brought **peace and prosperity** to China, and pushed its borders far out into **central Asia** (note 1).
- China's influence on its **neighbors** reached a peak at this time (note 2).
- This was a time of **good government** and **economic expansion** at home, as well as being one of the high points of Chinese **culture** (note 3).
- It was also the period when **Buddhism** reached a peak of influence within China (note 4).

Additional notes

1. The early Tang emperors

The first two Tang emperors were great generals and administrators. After them, China was ruled by the famous and highly capable **empress Wu**, the only woman in Chinese history to reign as ruler in her own right.

The Tang empire reached its height under the **emperor Xuanzong** (reigned 712-762 CE). Abroad, Chinese armies moved as far west as they would ever go. However, they met defeat at the hands of an Arab army at the battle of the river **Talas** (751).

One important outcome of this battle, little noticed at the time but of great significance for the future, was that some Chinese soldiers, captured by the Arabs, passed on the techniques of **paper-making** to their new Arab masters. This had been developed in China more than 600 years before. From the Arabs this very important technology would later spread to Europe.

2. China and its neighbors in early Tang times

All the peoples who bordered China had been deeply influenced by Chinese civilization for centuries, but this process reached a new level under the Tang.

Korea and **Japan**, in particular, sent regular **tribute embassies** and imported many features of Chinese civilization. These included

- China's system of **writing**;
- China's **bureaucratic** institutions, complete with the examination system;
- **Confucianism**;
- **Buddhism**;
- and Chinese styles of **art and architecture**.

3. Peace, prosperity and culture

Good government under the early Tang

The Tang expanded the rudimentary **examination system** inherited from the Sui, so that more officials (though still only a minority) were recruited on merit. Also a special government department called the **Censorate** was set up to try and ensure that officials did their job honestly and efficiently.

Society under the early Tang

During the reigns of the early Tang emperors, **peace** was maintained within the borders of the enormous country. This allowed **trade** and **industry** to flourish, and merchants and craftsmen grew in numbers and wealth. Both internal and international trade reached new heights.

The Grand Canal and the road network greatly stimulated trade, and the famous international trade route across the center of Asia known as the **Silk Road** flourished as never before. In the south, ports such as Guangdong (**Canton**) became major bases of maritime trade in the **Indian Ocean**.

The expansion of the economy was reflected in a strong rise in **urbanization**, as towns and cities increased in size and number. **Chang'an**, the capital, was the greatest city in the world at that time.

The population of China expanded, especially in the south.

High culture under the early Tang

The emperor Xuanzong had perhaps the most intellectually brilliant court in the history of China. It was particularly famous for its **poetry**. In **calligraphy** and **painting**, too, the Tang period was a time of pioneering achievement, with the skilful use of brush and ink becoming an art form.

Xuanzong also established the famous **Han Lin Academy**, an institution in which the best scholars of the day met at court and were available for consultation by the government when required. For example, they were consulted on the correct drafting of state documents.

4. Religion and thought under the early Tang

Buddhism reached its peak of influence in China under the early Tang. Buddhist teaching was greatly aided when a monk, **Xuanzang**, visited India and brought back many Buddhist texts.

Confucianism, however, remained the official ideology of the imperial government.

Slide 4, 761 CE: The Later Tang dynasty

The last years of Xuanzong's reign saw a terrible rebellion break out, which gravely weakened the Tang dynasty.

- Between 755 and 763, a very destructive rebellion, instigated by a leading general, **An Lushan**, caused huge destruction over northern China (note 1).
- As a result of the rebellion, China saw great changes, but her civilization continued to advance under the **late Tang** (note 2).
- **Buddhism** lost its place as the dominant belief-system in China, and began to be replaced by a reformed **Confucianism** (note 3).
- The weakening of Tang rule within China was accompanied by a weakening of Chinese **cultural influence** over its neighbors (note 4).

Additional notes

1. A great rebellion

An Lushan's uprising is regarded as was one of the most catastrophic episodes in China's history.

In the years leading up to the rebellion, the elderly emperor Xuanzong was spending more and more time indulging his interests in poetry and culture, and falling under the spell of one of his **concubines**. As was so often the case when an emperor was not attentive and forceful, **factionalism** increased at court.

Tensions mounted between powerful **frontier generals**, many of whom were linked to one or other of the court factions. In 755, one of these, the general An Lushan, fearing that he was being out-manuevred at court and greedy for supreme power, marched on the capital and captured it, forcing the emperor and his court to flee.

It took until 762 for the rebellion to be put down. During these years, bitter fighting over much of northern and eastern China had led to many cities being destroyed, including the capital, Chang'an (though it was later rebuilt on a smaller scale). The regions of **central Asia** had all broken free of Chinese rule.

2. The impact of the rebellion

Government

Although the **civil service** continued to function, the later Tang emperors were never able to regain the firm rule over the whole of China that the early Tang emperors had enjoyed. Some provincial governors were able to escape the tight control of the court and become largely independent of it. Some even managed to pass on their offices to their sons, rather than to officials appointed by the court.

The rebellion weakened the landed **aristocracy** which had dominated China's governments since the late Han period. Much of the aristocracy's wealth (and therefore power) was based in north-central China, the ancient heartland of Chinese civilization. This is where the destruction of the rebellion was most severe. Many aristocratic families were wiped out altogether. Many others were ruined, with their estates ravaged and depopulated.

The diminished power of the aristocracy enabled more men from non-aristocratic families to be selected for careers as government officials. The public **examination** system was expanded to aid this process.

Population

An Lushan's rebellion brought great destruction to northern China, setting off another huge wave of **migration** to the south. By the time order had been restored, China's population was more or less equally divided between north and south for the first time in its history.

The economy and technological advance

The economic center of gravity in China shifted decisively southwards. The **trading cities** there flourished and expanded, and south China merchants became more active in **overseas trade**. They started establishing trading colonies throughout **south east Asia**. Some began developing direct trading links with **India** and the **Middle East**, and perhaps as far as **East Africa**.

The expansion in economic activity led to important technological advances. **Wood block printing, gunpowder, porcelain** and **paper money** were all either invented or became more widely used at this time.

3. Religion and thought in the Late Tang period

Buddhism began to lose ground, especially amongst the ruling classes. The Buddhist **monasteries'** vast wealth became too tempting a target for the cash-strapped Tang court to ignore. In a purge between 841 and 845, the vast majority of Buddhist monasteries were closed, their wealth confiscated by the government and their monks forced to enter normal society.

Buddhism never recovered as a public organization. However, it remained a popular religion in the towns and villages of China right down to the 20th century.

This period also saw the first stirrings of a revival of **Confucianism** as a source of spirituality and intellectual influence (see information on the next map).

4. China and her neighbors in late Tang times

China's neighbors had sent regular tribute missions to the Tang court up to the time of the rebellion. After it, these became less frequent, and eventually stopped altogether.

An area on the southwest frontier of China, which had been loosely controlled by the early Tang, became the fully independent kingdom of **Nanzhao**. Both **Korea** and **Japan** lessened their cultural and political ties with China. Chinese cultural elements were not ditched, but fused with their more ancient native traditions to produce the distinctive national cultures which have come down to modern times.

Slide 5, 907 CE: The “Five Dynasty” period

With the end of the Tang dynasty, China fragmented into separate states.

- At the beginning of the 10th century the last Tang emperor was finally deposed, and China once again **fragmented** into several kingdoms (note 1).
- **Non-Chinese** kingdoms were established in the northern and western frontier regions, and the rest of northern China was damaged by repeated civil wars (note 2).
- **Southern China**, though covered by several rival states, mostly experienced peace, and the **economic expansion** of late Tang times continued (note 3).
- The **technological advances** which can be traced to the late Tang period now became widespread (note 4).

Additional notes

1. The fall of the Tang dynasty

During the 9th century, the Tang regime became less and less effective. Weak emperors (often children) were unable to impose their will on the imperial court, the center of government. The court became increasingly consumed by **factional in-fighting**. Standards of government slipped badly.

The government was now unable to protect the population from oppression by corrupt officials, and little by little the peasantry started to fall under the control of big landowners again. From the late 9th century onwards, large-scale **peasant uprisings** broke out. In 881 CE rebels seized the capital, Chang'an, and the Tang court again had to flee.

From now on the emperors were mere pawns in the hands of rival warlords and foreign invaders. The feeling spread that the **Mandate of Heaven** had at last left the Tang dynasty.

In 907 a warlord deposed the last of the Tang emperors and mounted the throne himself. This was the signal for rival warlords to declare their independence, and the Tang empire simply **broke apart** into several independent kingdoms.

2. Northern China

Instability

Much of northern China was covered by one large state. This experienced chronic **political instability** as repeated rounds of heavy fighting saw a series of regimes (the “Five Dynasties”, according to traditional Chinese history) rise and fall in rapid succession.

The bouts of anarchy ruined key areas of the north, including the great historic capital, Chang’an, and the region round it. This became largely depopulated, never again to be the center of the Chinese world.

In this process, what remained of the old landed aristocracy vanished.

The northern border areas

At the end of the Tang period, the northern and western border areas of China fell away from Chinese control altogether and formed two kingdoms under non-Chinese rule, the **Liao** and the **Western Xia**.

3. Southern China

This region was covered by **several states** of varying size and power. The rulers of these states were for the most part content to govern their own kingdoms, without ambitions to conquer the whole of China. Wars between them did occur from time to time, but were on a comparatively small scale.

For most of the time the people of southern China experienced **peace**, and the region was able to continue the **economic expansion** which had begun during the Tang period.

4. Technological advances

In southern China, **printing** became much more common. Numerous publishing houses sprang up, **education** and **literacy** spread amongst larger sections of the population. The first fiction books began to appear.

The use of government-backed proto-**paper money** came into use and spread rapidly, as did a **banking system** to support it. **Porcelain**, also, became a major industry with state backing.

Slide 6, 980 CE: Song dynasty China

This period of disunity did not last long, and after half a century the Song dynasty unified most of China under its rule.

- A northern general founded the **Song dynasty**, and went on to unify most of China under his rule (note 1).
- The Song regime paid close attention to governing well. Many more officials were recruited through the **examination system** than before (note 2).
- The period was one in which the **population** grew, the **economy** expanded strongly and **technological** advance continued (note 3).
- Under the Song dynasty a revised version of Confucianism, which modern scholars label “**Neo-Confucianism**”, came to dominate Chinese thought (note 4).

Additional notes

1. Re-unification

In the northern kingdom, a general deposed the last emperor of the last of the **Five Dynasties**, and in 960 CE took the throne himself. He thus became the founder of the **Song dynasty**.

He then went on to **unify most of China** under his rule. He did this more by **diplomacy** than by warfare.

However the **non-Chinese kingdoms** of the Liao and Western Xia continued to exist in the far north and west of China.

2. Government under the Song

Under the Song dynasty, the **examination system** was expanded so that the majority of officials were recruited in this way. This ensured that most officials were able men, trained in the Confucian ideology, with its emphasis on service to the people. The public examinations therefore came to be widely regarded in China as playing a key role in **legitimizing** government in the eyes of the ordinary people.

Thus finally emerged that iconic figure in Chinese history, the **scholar-official**, and with him, the triumph of the **gentry**, a class mainly composed of small landowners, as the ruling class of China in place of the aristocracy.

This development was made possible by the fact that the old **landed aristocracy**, already weakened by An Lushan's rebellion in mid-Tang times, had been completely ruined in the anarchy of the Five Dynasty period. The devastation of these years had been much worse in north-central China than elsewhere, and this was where the aristocracy's wealth and power had been based.

3. Economy and society under the Song

Agriculture

New crops and technologies led to major **population growth** in the 10th and 11th centuries. New crops, above all **Champa rice** from Vietnam, were introduced, and crop yields multiplied. Improved **agricultural techniques** were promoted by the Song government.

Industry, commerce and finance

Industry and **commerce** expanded. Internal trade thrived on the back of the bulk transportation of grain along the **waterways** of China (with the **Grand Canal** at their center). A **banking** system spread throughout the empire, providing many of the services that modern banks provide, including the acceptance of deposits, making of loans, issuing notes and long-distance remittance of money. Printed **paper money**, issued by the government, circulated widely.

Porcelain, silk and other products were manufactured for both home consumption and export. The **iron, steel** and **coal** industries flourished, largely to meet the demands of the huge army.

The growth in **maritime trade** to south east Asia and beyond, which had begun under the Tang, continued. **Communities of Chinese merchants** flourished in many overseas trading ports.

Technological advances

Inventions and innovations of great significance made their appearance in Song times, or came into widespread use:

- **moveable-type printing** made books much cheaper and more widely available, and helped Song China to be by far the most literate society in the world at this time;
- the **compass** and printed **charts** aided navigation;
- **gunpowder weapons** such as rockets, primitive grenades and proto-guns came into use in the army;
- and other advances were made, including highly engineered **water-powered mechanical clocks**, and improvements in the production of fine **porcelain**.

Towns and cities

The pace of **urbanization** increased, especially in the south. An upper class of wealthy **merchants, industrialists** and **bankers** flourished, and an urban **middle class** of businessmen, teachers, doctors and professional managers grew.

Education expanded dramatically, due to the spread of printing and the incentive provided by the examination system, which held out the prospect of rising high in government for any bright boy.

4. Religion and Thought in Song China

Under the early Song a revised version of Confucianism, which could trace its roots back to the late Tang period and which modern scholars label **Neo-Confucianism**, came to dominate Chinese thought.

This borrowed metaphysical and cosmological ideas from Buddhism and Daoism, and turned Confucianism into a belief-system which could exert a deep hold over both the hearts and intellects of educated people.

One practice which began to spread amongst the upper classes, which traced its origins back to the “Five Dynasties” period, was **foot binding** for women. This development may have been linked to the revival Confucianism emphasis on **patriarchy**; on the other hand, it may, oddly, have been partly due to fashionable upper class women feeling that this was a way of making themselves more attractive.

Slide 7, 1126 CE: The Southern Song dynasty

In 1126, Song forces were driven out of northern China by the Jürchen, a non-Chinese people. The Song dynasty continued to rule southern China.

- The Song were never able to reconquer the north, and the **Jürchen** were never able to conquer the south: for a century and a half China was **divided** in two (note 1).
- In South China, **population** and **economic** expansion continued (note 2).
- During this period **Chinese influence** over its neighbors waned, but did not cease altogether (note 3).

Additional notes

1. Northern China

The **Jürchen** were a tribal group from a region to the north-east of China which lies in today's Manchuria and Inner Mongolia. In the early 1120s they conquered the Liao kingdom of northern China and founded the **Jin** kingdom.

Many Jürchen leaders had a deep respect for Chinese culture, and the Jin soon modeled their government along Chinese lines.

The Jürchen could never conquer the south. This largely due to their inability to master the kind of amphibious warfare that was required amongst the rivers, lakes, swamps and canals of southern China.

The Song, on the other hand, were never strong enough to reconquer the north, despite their huge army. This period in Chinese history is therefore known as the **Southern Song Dynasty** (1127-1279).

2. Southern China under the Southern Song

The Jürchen invasion of the north led to another wave of **migration** from north to south China, shifting population levels decisively in favor of the latter for the first time in history.

South China had already become the wealthiest part of the country, and economic and population expansion continued in the region. **Hangzhou**, the Southern Song capital and a major port, was by far the largest city in the world at this time.

3. China and her neighbors in Southern Song times

The Southern Song made no claims to superiority over their neighbors - indeed they themselves usually paid large amounts of **tribute** to the Jürchen state of northern China.

This is not to say that Chinese civilization had ceased to exert cultural influence throughout East Asia. Korean and Japanese scholars and monks still visited China, and Chinese Buddhist monks still visited Korea and Japan.

It was in Southern Song times that **Chan Buddhism**, which had become the dominant form of that religion in China, passed to Japan, where, as Zen Buddhism, it would become a key element of Japanese civilization.

Slide 8, 1236 CE: The Mongols conquer northern China

Over the period 1215 to 1236 the Mongols conquered northern China. This caused terrible suffering for the population of the region.

- The **Mongols** were warlike **nomads** who inhabited the **steppes** of Mongolia, in central Asia. They forged a vast empire under their leaders, **Genghis Khan** and his sons (note 1).
- The Mongols conquered **northern China** between 1215 and 1236, with catastrophic results for the people of that region (note 2).
- the **Southern Song** state in southern China, meanwhile, continued to flourish as before (note 3).

Additional notes:

1. The Mongol conquest of northern China

In 1206 Genghis Khan was elected the leader of the Mongols. He and his sons led Mongol armies across much of Eurasia, bringing vast territories under their control - all of **central Asia**, much of the **Middle East** and **Russia**, and **northern China**.

2. The Mongol impact on northern China

The people of northern China suffered terribly from the Mongol conquests. Cities were sacked, huge areas of crop-growing farmland were devastated, and the population shrank drastically.

There is even a story that the Mongol leader, **Ogedei**, considered annihilating the population of northern China and turning the whole region over to pasturage for the Mongols' herds of horses.

The people were saved (so the story goes) by a Chinese official, who proposed instead that the land was of far more value to the Mongols if it were farmed and taxed.

Whether this story is true or not, other evidence suggests that the north's share of China's population shrank to a quarter.

3. The Southern Song

The Mongols tried at this time to conquer the Southern Song more than once. However, the Mongol armies, highly successful elsewhere, were completely unsuited to the type of terrain found in this region: formations of horse nomads found it difficult to campaign in land devoid of grass pastures and broken by numerous rivers, canals, lakes and paddy fields.

Slide 9, 1279 CE: The Mongols conquer southern China

Genghis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan, added southern China to the mighty Mongol empire.

- **Kublai Khan** completed the conquest of southern China in 1279. He founded the **Yuan dynasty**, and ruled more as a Chinese emperor than a Mongol warlord (note 1).
- He did much to restore China's economy, and Mongol control of **central Asia** allowed long-distance trade on the **Silk Road** to flourish on an unprecedented scale (note 2).

Additional notes

1. Kublai Khan completes the Mongols' conquest of China

Kublai Khan completed the conquest of southern China in 1279. He accomplished this by abandoning the traditional nomadic warfare used by Mongol armies. He drafted large numbers of northern **Chinese troops** experienced in fighting in the watery terrain of southern China, and formed his own river-based **naval forces**.

He founded the **Yuan dynasty**, and ruled more as a Chinese emperor than a Mongol khan. He established his capital at Dadu, the modern city of **Beijing**, in north-east China. This had been the Jürchen capital.

Kublai modeled his court and **bureaucracy** on Chinese lines, though the topmost posts were usually filled by Mongols and other central Asians. Chinese officials mostly filled less important positions.

Kublai also brought China's neighbors, including **Tibet** and **Korea**, under Mongol rule. He attempted to conquer **Japan** and **Java**, launching huge naval expeditions against them, but was unsuccessful.

The Tribute System revived

Nevertheless, the other countries in East Asia, with the exception of Japan, sent **tribute** to the Yuan court in Beijing. Once again, therefore, China was at the center of an international tribute system, as it had been under the Tang emperors. Moreover, China's cultural influence on its neighbors was still far from dead: it was in this period that **Neo-Confucianism** crossed to Korea and then to Japan.

2. Kublai's rule

Kublai worked hard to restore China's economy and society, particularly in the north, after the devastation of the Mongol conquests.

He constructed roads, improved canals, including the repair and extension of the **Grand Canal**, and he developed the **postal system**. **Paper currency** aided commercial activity.

In **popular culture**, plays and novels became much more popular under the Mongols than before.

The Silk Road

The Mongol control of central Asia allowed long-distance trade along the **Silk Road** to flourish on an unprecedented scale. As well as luxury goods such as **silk** and **porcelain**, ideas and technologies travelled out of China along this route, notably **gunpowder** and probably **block printing**.

The **maritime** trade routes from southern China to **South East Asia** and **India** also thrived.

For the first time, Christian and Muslim **travelers** from Europe, the Middle East and North Africa left detailed accounts of travels to and within China. The most famous of these were the Italian **Marco Polo** and the Muslim **Ibn Battuta**.

Slide 10, 1450 CE: Early Ming China

A huge rebellion drove the Mongols out of China in 1368, and the rebel leader founded a new dynasty, the Ming.

- Under Kublai's successors, Mongol rule became corrupt and oppressive, and **peasant revolts** drove them out of the country. A new dynasty, the **Ming**, was established (note 1).

- The third ruler of the Ming dynasty, the Yongle emperor, built the **Forbidden City** in Beijing, and ordered a series of **great voyages** to the west (note 2).
- The Mongols destroyed a Ming army in 1449, and captured the young emperor. After that, the Ming government set about upgrading the **Great Wall** (note 3).
- The Ming dynasty gave China a large measure of political **stability** and internal **peace**. The economy flourished, even though international trade declined from levels seen under the Yuan (note 4).

Additional notes:

1. The decline of the Yuan dynasty

By Kublai Khan's time, the other Mongol khanates were effectively independent states, though while he lived they continued to recognize him as their overlord, the **Great Khan** of the Mongols.

After Kublai's death, the Mongol Empire broke apart, but Kublai's Yuan dynasty ruled China and neighboring countries for nearly another century.

Under Kublai's successors, however, the quality of Mongol rule seriously declined. Weak rulers allowed corruption to grow. To fund the extravagant court, taxation and demands for the peasants' **labor service** ("corvée") grew harsher; also more and more peasants were forced into serfdom when their lands were put into vast estates granted to court favorites or Mongol garrisons.

Large-scale **peasant revolts** began to break out from the late 1320s onwards. A series of terrible **floods** in northern China in the 1330s and 1340s made things worse, as did a **plague** which was probably the Black Death.

These misfortunes fueled anti-Mongol feeling: the disasters pointed, in the Chinese mind, to the idea that the **Mandate of Heaven** had left the Yuan dynasty.

Finally, in 1368, the rebels occupied the capital, and the Mongol court fled across the borders of China into Mongolia.

Zhu Yuanzhang, the leader of the great rebellion against the Mongols, took the throne in 1368 and became the first emperor of the **Ming dynasty**.

2. The Yongle emperor

The third emperor of the Ming dynasty, the **Yongle** emperor (reigned 1402-1424) had the great imperial palace complex known as the **Forbidden City**, in Beijing, constructed.

He is best known, however, for the series of **great voyages** which he ordered to be carried out. These astonishing armadas were commanded by the court eunuch **Zeng He**, and were made up of hundreds of ships. Some of these, the fabled treasure ships, were by far the largest in the world at the time.

These huge fleets sailed to India, the Middle East and even as far as the coast of East Africa.

3. The Mongol threat and the Great Wall of China

The Mongols, though driven out of China, had not disappeared as a threat. In 1449 they destroyed a Chinese army sent against them, and captured the young emperor who had accompanied it.

After this humiliation, the Ming government set about restoring and extending the great defense system known as the **Great Wall** of China. Most of what tourists see today is the result of this huge construction project.

4. China under the Ming

Ming China was, at least until its later years, very well governed by pre-modern standards. Officials were recruited through the very tough **examination system** and promoted on merit. They ensured that the routine business of government remained at a high standard - despite the fact that the imperial court was often rent by struggles between ministers and senior officials on the one hand, and the **eunuchs** who surrounded the emperor on the other.

The economy

The economy of China soon recovered from the turbulence of the last years of the Yuan dynasty. Apart from international trade, which the Ming effectively prohibited (see below), the government took a hands-off approach to commerce and industry. The **porcelain**, **glassware** and **silk** industries boomed.

Paper money remained in widespread circulation, but loose government policies soon caused inflation to take off, and the Ming regime went back to a purely metal coinage, based on silver.

Peace and stability brought renewed **population growth**. The Ming took particular pains to repopulate the north, and its share rose again to about a third of the total.

International trade and tribute

After the expansionist program of the Yongle emperor, the Ming court adopted a very different approach. Private merchants were largely **forbidden** to engage in overseas trade, which was increasingly confined to a single port, **Canton**. International trade across central Asia also declined, with the **Silk Road** now being in the hands of hostile tribes.

To some extent the decline in international trade was compensated for by the increased use made of **tribute missions**. Korea, Burma and other countries (but not Japan) continued to send tribute missions to Beijing, just as they had under the Yuan; they thus acknowledged the Ming emperor as their superior. These missions involved trade as well as diplomacy, and many merchants accompanied the officials.

Questions

The answers are given (*in Italics*).

1. What was the dynasty which reunited China after centuries of division? (*The Sui dynasty*)
2. A major inland waterway was constructed under this dynasty - what was it? (*The Grand Canal*)
3. This dynasty was succeeded by another one after a brief rebellion - what was this? (*The Tang*)
4. Which religion reached its peak under the early emperors of this dynasty? (*Buddhism*)
5. When this dynasty collapsed, it was followed by a period traditionally known to Chinese history as the ... what? (*The Five Dynasties period*)
6. What dynasty followed this period? (*The Song*)
7. By what name is the revised version of an ancient Chinese philosophy which evolved around this time known? (*Neo-Confucianism*)
8. Name two technological developments which reached fruition under this dynasty? (*You could chose printing, gunpowder, the compass or printed navigation charts*)
9. Which people from the steppes of central Asia conquered first north, and then south, China in the 13th century? (*The Mongols*)
10. Who was the Great Khan of this people, who ruled as a Chinese emperor and established a Chinese dynasty? (*Kublai Khan*)
11. What was the great trade route called which ran across Asia? (*The Silk Road*)
12. Name either a European or a Muslim traveler who visited China during this period? (*Marco Polo or Ibn Battuta*)
13. What was the dynasty called which ruled China after these rulers from central Asia had been driven out? (*The Ming dynasty*)
14. The Yongle emperor was the second emperor of this dynasty - what is he particularly famous for? (*Voyages to the west*)
15. What great defensive system did this dynasty renovate? (*The Great Wall of China*)
16. China governed its relations with neighboring countries through a particular system of trade and diplomacy - what is this called? (*The tribute system*)
17. What was the quasi-religious concept which was so important in the Chinese mind which determined whether a dynasty should continue ruling? (*The Mandate of Heaven*)

18. What was the highly-prized kind of ceramic which the Chinese developed in these centuries? (*Porcelain*)

Further reading

Here is a selected list of the key articles in the Timemaps website which students should find helpful.

[Medieval China](#)

[Society and Economy in Medieval China](#)

[Government and warfare in Medieval China](#)

[Philosophy, Religion and Culture in Medieval China](#)

[Ancient China](#)

[The Han Dynasty](#)

[Divided China](#)

[The Sui Dynasty](#)

[The Tang Dynasty](#)

[The Song Dynasty](#)

[The Mongol Empire](#)

[The Ming Dynasty](#)