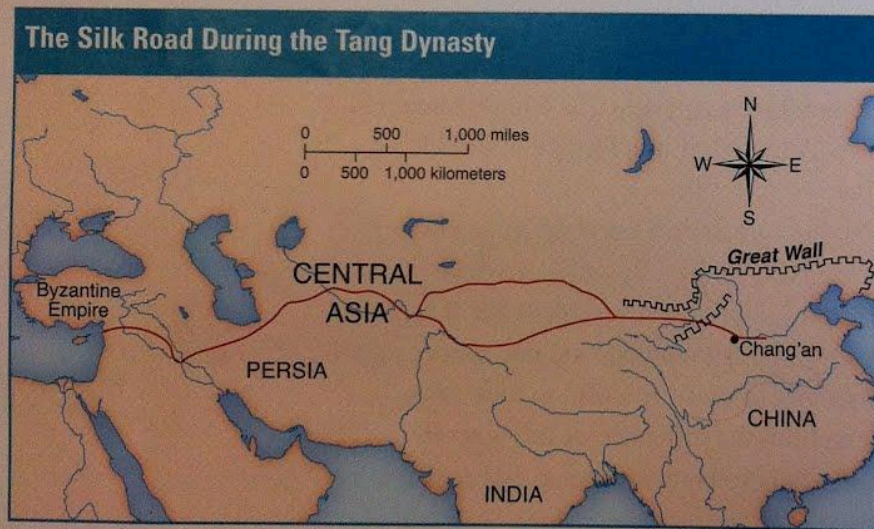


19.2 Foreign Contacts Under the Tang Dynasty

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), China welcomed contact with foreigners. Traders and visitors brought new ideas, goods, fashions, and religions to China.

The Influence of Traders and Visitors Beginning in the Han dynasty, traders and visitors came to China by a network of trade routes across Central Asia. From Chang'an, China's capital, camel caravans crossed the deserts of Central Asia through oases. The routes followed by the caravans are called the Silk Road, though many goods besides silk were traded.

For a time, travel along the Silk Road became unsafe because of fighting in Central Asia. The Tang made travel safe again by taking control of much of Central Asia. As a result, trade flourished with Central Asian kingdoms, Persia (modern-day Iran), and the Byzantine Empire. Traders also traveled by sea between China and Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and India.



Merchants, missionaries, and other visitors also came to China. Thousands of Arabs, Turks, Persians, Tibetans, Indians, Jews, Koreans, Japanese, and other people lived in seaports and in Chang'an.

All these foreign contacts brought much cultural exchange. Chinese sent their silk, porcelain, paper, iron, and jade along the trade routes. In return, they received ivory, cotton, perfumes, spices, and horses. From India

the Chinese learned to make sugar from sugarcane and wine from grapes. New medicines also came from India.

The Tang Chinese, especially the upper classes, welcomed new products and ideas from foreign cultures. They wore rubies, pearls, and other jewels. They drank from goblets made of glass, a material that had been unknown in China. They ate new foods, such as spinach, garlic, mustard, and peas. They used cloves to treat toothaches. Sitting in chairs from Central Asia instead of on floor cushions became a status symbol. Polo, a Persian sport played on horseback, became the rage among upper-class women and men.

Chinese music was greatly influenced by melodies and musical instruments from India, Persia, and Central Asia. Artists and artisans also copied new foreign styles. Silversmiths, for example, began using

Persian designs. Not all Chinese, however, were happy about this imitation of foreigners.

New religions also entered China. The Tang tolerated foreign religions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims built houses of worship in Chang'an. They could even preach, although they converted few Chinese.

The Indian religion of Buddhism had come to China hundreds of years earlier. Under the Tang, it became a major part of Chinese life. Many Chinese became Buddhists. Buddhist monks came to teach in China, and Chinese pilgrims went to India to study. Buddhist monks and nuns paid no taxes. They ran schools, public baths, hospitals, and lodgings for travelers. Monasteries accumulated great wealth. Buddhism influenced Chinese art by providing new subjects for painting and sculpture. Buddhist festivals became popular holidays.

Changing Attitudes Toward the end of the Tang dynasty, foreigners and their beliefs became less welcome in China. The government placed restrictions on foreigners when a people called the Uighurs began attacking China from across the border. In cities, violence broke out against foreign merchants. Many Chinese resented their prosperity.

The wealth of Buddhist monasteries also brought resentment. Some people, it was said, became monks just to avoid paying taxes. In addition, influential Chinese began attacking Buddhism as a foreign religion.

In 843, the Tang government, which needed money, began seizing Buddhist property. Thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns were forced to give up their way of life. Monasteries, shrines, and temples were destroyed. Precious metals from statues were melted down and turned over to the treasury. The persecution of Buddhists lasted only a few years, but it greatly weakened the power of the monasteries.

Despite this distrust of foreigners, the Chinese continued to trade with other lands. By the end of the Tang dynasty, trade was shifting from the Silk Road. A flourishing sea trade developed between China, India, and the coasts of Southeast Asia. Thanks to the compass and improved shipbuilding techniques, overseas trade continued to thrive during the Song dynasty (960–1279).

Foreign visitors, such as those from the west and Korea, were always welcomed in the court.

