

# Decline and Overview of the Tang Dynasty

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**Abstract:** *The Tang dynasty remains one of the most important dynasties in China according to historians. First it was a rule by one of the minority groups of China and secondly, the complicated Land tenure system which was enacted as a source of revenue generation for the Empire proved to be a good policy but lacked the proper implementation. The resultant effect was high corruption and a sharp decline of revenue. It was a period of high hierarchical administrative structures that were in effective in meeting the needs of the Empire. Nevertheless important landmarks within this period were the rise of women to the political atmosphere, the reformations of the civil service administration system, the great stability witnessed in the early era of the dynasty and the invention of block printing. Furthermore the Tang Legal Code remains a yet comprehensive legal system that strictly pays huge attention to punishment and retribution. It's partiality for women, disabled, the deaf and dumb, mentally derailed people within its penal code show the heart of the Emperor towards his weak people. This work sets out to examine the Tang dynasty, its method of administration, its successes and his decline in dynastic China.*

**Keywords:** Administration, Tax, Penal Code, Status and Women

## 1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty is one of the most important dynastic rules in China because of its political, cultural, religious, economic and scripturally undertones. It was an epoch of poetry, transformation, military conquest and more importantly was the richness of its poetry during the first and the second eras of this dynasty. These poetries have shaped the structure of Chinese literal works and have had an over lasting influence in the years afterwards. [1] Important landmarks further included the reunification of the country, the linkages of the North and South through the creation of the Grand Canal and the stimulation of economic growth through interregional and international trade. The Tang Dynasty was a well planned city not only in policy implementations but also in design and structure of the city. The welfare of the people was also of paramount important to the Emperor who specifically built his palace facing his 108 wards. [2] This location significance of the Emperor facing South and his wards had two imperative meanings, the first to show the official philosophy he had towards commerce and second to connote of great importance the welfare of the people. [3]

The successes of the Tang were marred by the An Lushan rebellion of 756 which diminished the fortunes of the dynasty and affected the further developments of the entire Chinese nation. The An Lushan rebellion reshaped the ideological policies of the Tang which led to abandonment of key institutions such as economic, military and social institutions. These events, the use of artistic forms to describe the dynasty, international trade, and the rebellion, cultural and geographical design of the dynasty marked a great transition from what existed in former imperial China. [4]

## 2. Research Questions

- What policies and regulations did the Manchu of the Tang Dynasty engage in using to make its Dynasty one of the greatest dynasties in the history of China?
- What significant changes occurred during the Tang dynasty?

- What factors led to the demise and decline of this dynasty?

## 3. The Tang Dynasty Administrative System

### 3.1 Equal Field System

In dynastic era of China, it was predominantly an agrarian culture despite the development of trade and industry which characterized this period, the land remained the major means of manufacture and the principal basis of income. Land therefore served two purposes, that of survival and also an instrument of labor exploitation.

Citizens' could acquire a status based on their ownership of the Land; they could be land-owners who had exploitative tendencies or dependants who were continuously exploited by the land-owners. It was also a way to accumulate wealth and a profitable venture in this era. This lucrative venture therefore became a form of struggle and agitation between the government who wanted control and domination over land tenure. Their principal reason was to ensure a free flow of income for the dynasty however the land owners sought exploitative measures for their personal advantages. This rift of state-management of land tenure therefore became a core issue of contention in the Tang Era. [5] Financial insolvency of the new dynasty therefore preempted the formulation of the 'Equal-fields system' to guard against a steady financial flow of income and taxes for the new regime. [6]

The Tang dynasty therefore reinstated the Chun-t'ien system which was modeled after the system of the Chin with a central aim of land allocation on a broad and social basis. It was a principle based on the State ownership of the land but was given to each couples for a period regarded as 'working time' [the age in which the couples could work]. These people therefore had the obligation to pay tax and labor services in return since land now became the property of the Empire. However, under the Tang dynasty tax payable came in form of commodities and products, the Tsu Tax was paid in grain and used to provide the requirements of the armies and the capital to pay official salaries. The Tiao Tax was paid in cloth [preferably Silk] which was the customary means of exchange in this region, in many cases the cloth

collected for tax in kind was silk. Silk was accrued a status of the wealthy group and the privileged within the Tang dynasty as it had an equal importance to silver bars and copper coins at this particular time. [7] Silk was indeed a special and unique fabric that had established its association with China and beyond its borders. With a great deal of silk been produced in China it offered a variety of colors after being dyed, it was the most cherished of all textiles with other attributes of softness, light-weight and long-lasting. [8] This adoption of Silk complicated the land tenure system of the Tang since silkworms needed more time to grow and this facilitated the incorporation of two separate tenure systems for its administration. The first land tenure system was called the 'Open field tenure system' [lu-t'ien] or 'personal share land tenure' [K'ou- fen t'ien] which specified the tenure of arable land use and timeframe. The 'Mulberry field tenure system' [sang-t'ien] was a tenure system for the cultivation of mulberries and it was hereditary. In clear details the Tang had Land statutes [T'ien-ling] which included the use of land and the punishments to be awarded for the breach of Land usage. Their law includes the distribution of land between different age groups, Land consideration for widows, the concept of land held in perpetuity and reverting land to the Empire. Land division between the merchant, artisans, officials, Buddhist monks, Taoist monks, nuns. With such a rigid, inflexible and strict policy of Land enacted by the Tang it was due to strengthen its ruler of China. [9] Despite such rigidity the flaws of the Tang Land statutes were enormous and it proved quite ineffective as a means to generate revenues for the Empire. The Imperial Family and all their relatives had tax exemptions commercial taxes were minimal; merchants who had no land were untaxed and there were a great number of false registrations in the government registers. Invariably the implementation of the Equal- Field system under the Tang brought under usage of land and money.

However as the Tang began to develop this rigid land tenure proved to be inflexible, many people including the imperial family and all their relatives remained exempted from paying taxes, commercial taxes were very light, merchants who did not own land went largely untaxed, many people falsified their registration, so that government registers showed too few people and too little land throughout the empire, this a chronic shortage of funds resulting from these inefficiencies plagued the Tang dynasty. Thus the equal-field system was a legacy of land policies that was designed for an economy in which land was underused and money underdeveloped as a means of exchange. [10]

#### 4. Tang Legal Code

The Tang Legal code is an important policy that makes its dynasty unique, Emperor Taizong ordered a revision of the code and produced the 637 Zhenguan Lu (Laws of the Zhenguan Period), furthermore a compilation was made of the first Tang ritual code, the Zhenguan Li (Ritual code of the Zhenguan Period) also known as the Xin Li (New ritual code). The creation of the Bureau of Historiography which oversaw the completion of no less than six dynastic histories and the Wujing (Five Classics) are great important landmarks of this dynastic rule. Finally, he sponsored the creation of a standard edition of texts and commentaries for

the Wujing (Five Classics). [11] Nonetheless, a shortcoming of this Legal code was the way punishments were executed; it was based on social status. [12] The Tang code separated the Tang society into three societal groups, the privileged, commoners and inferior [low-grade] people. The privileged consisted of imperial relations and high administrators, the inferior [low-grade] people consisted of personal retainers, bondsmen and slaves, slaves came in different forms such as prisoners of war, others were condemned to slavery when a close relative was convicted of a crime and others could sell themselves of their children into slavery to pay off debts. A bulk of the Tang population was commoners, although low-grade group received heavier punishments than commoners for the same crime, the Code also standardized punishments with the age, sex, and mental and physical condition of the offender. Ages younger than seven and older than ninety could not be sentenced to death, women especially pregnant women were given lighter sentences. Leniency was based on those with impaired visions, the deaf and dumb, disables, people with deformities and tumors. [13] The Tang Legal code differed from other codes also based on the legal recognition it gave to status groups, aristocrats, bondsmen, freemen. Its code served out punishments basely on status of the victim and the criminal with the slaves at the end of the hierarchy; consequently it offered punishments that differed based on rankings within the bureaucracy and the family. As a result of this, offences carried out against a superior of the bureaucratic administrator was treated and considered more severe. [14]

#### 5. The Age of Women in Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty was also the age of women as a lot of women rose to spotlight through political power. Empress Wu (ca. 625-705) was a remarkable woman in this dynasty, she rose from being a consort to a top political position and eventually rule the dynasty. With Emperor Gaozong illness with stroke, Wu began to make decisions at the palace; she followed the traditional propriety of "ruling behind a screen" and the councilors would not see her when they talked to her. She nevertheless was a meticulous ruler and one momentous event come to pass in 665. In 665 she and the Emperor Gaozong traveled with a large entourage of princes and high officials to Mount Tai in Shangdong province to perform the sacred 'feng and shan' sacrifices to heaven and earth which had not been performed since the Western Han dynasty. She argued that it was appropriate for the Emperor to perform the sacrifice to heaven at the top of the mountain since it was a Yang sacrifice, she and her palace ladies should perform the sacrifices to the earth at the bottom of the mountain, since it was a 'Ying sacrifice, thus demonstrating the true complementarities of 'Ying and Yang' [15].

Wu was a woman with astonishing political endowment, prettiness and prudence and steadily she achieved supremacy over politics with the death of Emperor Gaozong. With the dissatisfaction of her two sons rule on the throne, she became an Empress herself. Significant changes were the change of the dynasty to Zhou and made Luoyang its capital, the Divine Capital; she also reformed the civil service examination system, method of recruiting officials, increase the importance of agriculture, showed leniency and eliminated the hierarchical system in the north. It was an era

marked with stability, a promotion of the dynastic national strength, and increase in population with a flourishing culture. [16] Her dynasty was further bolstered by the embracement of Buddhists tradition and culture, she promoted it due to the legitimacy she derived from the Great Cloud Sutra which prophesied that the Maitreya Buddha would be reincarnated as a female monarch and bring about an age free of illness, worry, and disaster. A commentary in the Buddhist Sutra in 689 which stated that the reincarnation of this female monarch was therefore an instrument of propaganda by Emperor Wu who ensured that the Sutra was circulated around the country and ensured that every province established a Temple in preparation for her reincarnation.[17]

## 6. The Decline of the Tang Dynasty 755- 907

The Tang Dynasty within 618-755 enjoyed great success with internal stability; it also had several military victories in Central Asia with a deep control over the populace with the introduction of the Equal-Field System of Land Tenure. However, insufficient tax revenues marked with infidelities between the Emperor and the Generals consort which lead to a mutiny against the Emperor. This suppression of this mutiny by the Emperor marked a watershed in the stability of the Tang dynasty as existing institutions collapsed, revenues declined even greater and efforts to regain revenues by promulgating new policies all failed. Efforts to tax the monks lead to an important discovery in the history of China's dynastic rule, the discovery of woodblock printing as a means of documentation of ancient texts and materials. This endeavor created the world's most primitive surviving printed book from 868, a Buddhist Text called "The Diamond Sutra". This development was further used in this dynasty as a means of keeping ancient texts and materials for future documentation. Nevertheless, with the problem of dwindling revenues, the Tang had strict laws, developed the civil service examination and promoted the Buddhist religion and tradition on a general basis [18].

## 7. Conclusion

The Tang dynasty is an important dynasty in China based on the achievements that were achieved within these periods, first it was an era marked with conquest and victories in Central Asia thereby ensuring the strength of the Chinese Nation. It further strengthened its ruler ship by the promotion of Chinese culture and tradition in this age, remarkable the ability to make an important discovery for the upkeep of documents provides a great insight into the events of the past that we have and can make reference to. This dynastic rule also offered the first opportunity for women to rule China in the dynastic era, the exemplar of Empress Wu despite her shortcomings offers a paradigm of dynastic rule in China on how women would rule the nation if they intend to. It was also a dynasty that regarded the people first before all other forms of activities or institutions however its tax system, its land tenure acts, its penal code and discrimination in status and strata in the society shows a major weakness of Tang dynastic rule. The great reforms of the Civil service administration and the promotion of Buddhism are among

the important features that marked the tang dynasty in a unique way.

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