

Dragon Roads: The Tang Dynasty and the Making of Global China

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Introduction

This book tells the story of a China that was never alone. Between the seventh and tenth centuries, the Tang dynasty presided over a realm threaded by caravan trails and monsoon sea lanes, braided together by embassies, merchants, monks, and artisans. From Chang'an's market wards to the wharves of Guangzhou, the Tang world pulsed with goods, ideas, and people in motion. The "Dragon Roads" of this book are not a single highway but a mesh of routes—overland and maritime—that made Tang-era China a crucible of early globalization and a stage on which Eurasia learned to speak across distance and difference.

Global China did not begin in the twentieth century or with contemporary infrastructure projects; its roots reach back to the Tang, when the empire fused ambitious statecraft with a remarkably open urban culture. Court ritual welcomed distant envoys bearing tribute and technology; metropolitan markets licensed foreign guilds and languages; monasteries, shrines, and churches mapped the sacred geography of Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity onto the city. The result was a cosmopolitanism built not on abstraction but on daily practice—contracts struck in many tongues, textiles weighed by officials, glassware and spices tallied at customs posts, and new aesthetics emerging from encounters at the stalls and in the streets.

To recover this world, the chapters that follow braid archaeological discoveries with close readings of primary sources. Tomb murals, hoards, and shipwreck cargoes attest to the movement of objects and the skills embedded in them. Manuscripts from desert caves preserve the paperwork of connectivity—contracts, liturgies, and travel permits alongside poems and sermons. Inscribed stela, diplomatic memorials, and court chronicles record how the dynasty imagined its place among neighbors and rivals, while legal codes and market regulations reveal the practical infrastructures that sustained exchange. By bringing artifacts and texts into the same frame, we can see not just what moved along the Dragon Roads, but how those movements changed the movers.

Trade, culture, and diplomacy were not parallel lanes; they continually intersected. A gift horse could alter military strategy and breeding programs; a new glaze recipe transmitted by artisans could shift imperial tastes and tax regimes; a monk's itinerary could redraw the mental map of Asia. The tributary system, often treated as the master key to East Asian diplomacy, appears here less as a timeless structure than as a flexible theater—ceremonial on the surface, negotiated in practice, and dependent on the security of routes and the credibility of promises. When crises came—above all during the An Lushan Rebellion—the disruptions did not end connectivity so much as reconfigure it, rerouting commerce, reviving maritime corridors, and compelling the state to innovate fiscal and military tools.

Urban life anchors this narrative. In the planned grids of Chang’an and Luoyang, in the specialized wards and night markets, we witness a society learning to manage difference. Ethnic quarters and religious enclaves coexisted with imperial oversight; music, dance, and fashion traveled as swiftly as ceramics and aromatics; and women at court, in workshops, and in monasteries participated in and shaped currents of change. Ports like Guangzhou and riverine hubs like Yangzhou extended the cosmopolis to the sea, connecting the empire to Southeast Asia, India, and the Middle East through monsoon-timed convoys and shared commercial protocols.

This is not a triumphalist tale. The Tang cosmopolis was built on environmental constraints, frontier violence, and the hard labor of transport and taxation. Droughts, epidemics, and warfare punctuated the era; supply lines frayed; piracy and banditry rose and fell with opportunity. Yet it is precisely in these pressures that we glimpse the resilience and adaptability of the networks that bound Eurasia. The afterlives of Tang connectivity—through the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms and into the Song—show how institutions, commodities, and ideas outlasted the empire that had first assembled them at scale.

“Global China,” as used in this book, is not a claim that the Tang invented globalization or that all roads led to Chang’an. Rather, it names a historical moment when a Chinese state, its cities, and its neighbors made deliberate choices to engage beyond familiar horizons, and when those choices transformed identities at home and abroad. By following the Dragon Roads—by reading a ledger beside a mural, a customs edict beside a ship’s cargo—we can see how connectivity worked in practice and how it forged a cosmopolitanism that later generations would remember, reinvent, and sometimes resist.

Readers drawn to the textures of premodern connectivity will find here a focused narrative that stays close to the evidence while keeping an eye on the larger stakes: how polities manage flows, how cultures translate difference, and how economic and diplomatic infrastructures create possibilities—and limits—for encounter. The Tang story illuminates not only an era but also enduring patterns in China’s foreign relations and self-understanding. In tracing these patterns, the chapters ahead invite us to rethink what we mean by “global” and to recognize in the Dragon Roads an early, influential experiment in making a world.

CHAPTER ONE: The Mandate and the Map: Founding the Tang and Reorienting Eurasia

Every great dynasty in Chinese history needed an origin story worthy of the throne.

The Tang had a particularly good one. In 617 CE, a man named Li Yuan, a distinguished military commander and imperial kinsman stationed in Taiyuan, received word that the capital Chang'an was in chaos. The Sui emperor Yang Guang had bankrupted the realm with wars against Korea, canal projects of staggering ambition, and a lifestyle that taxed every province to feed his ego. Rebel armies were coalescing across the empire like storms gathering over a dry plain. Li Yuan's own son, Li Shimin, urged him to act. The old man hesitated, then committed. By the following year, he had occupied Chang'an, declared a new dynasty—the Tang—and set about the long work of convincing China, and the wider world, that the Mandate of Heaven had passed decisively into his family's hands.

The Mandate of Heaven was not a mere platitude. It was the operating system of legitimate rule in China, a principle that linked cosmic order to political competence. A dynasty that governed well enjoyed Heaven's favor; one that governed poorly lost it, and with it the right to rule. The concept was elastic enough to accommodate a surprising amount of political violence and flexible enough to travel beyond China's borders, shaping how neighboring states understood sovereignty, legitimacy, and the hierarchy of civilizations. When Li Yuan proclaimed the Tang, he was not merely starting a new administrative chapter. He was resetting the terms of Heaven's contract with the Chinese world.

But the Sui collapse had not occurred in a vacuum, and to understand what the Tang inherited and what it set in motion, one must appreciate the extraordinary disorder of the preceding centuries. After the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 CE, China fractured into the so-called Sixteen Kingdoms and the Southern and Northern Dynasties, an era of division that lasted nearly four hundred years. During this period, steppe confederations periodically overran the northern plains, founding short-lived dynasties that blended Chinese bureaucratic traditions with Inner Asian martial customs. The Northern Wei, established by the Tuoba clan of Xianbei origin, reunified the north in the fifth century and moved its capital to Luoyang, presiding over a court that would become almost pathologically devoted to Buddhism. The south, meanwhile, cycled through a series of largely ephemeral Chinese dynasties—Song, Qi, Liang, Chen—each controlling a shrinking slice of territory south of the Yangtze.

This fragmentation was not only political. Trade networks that had once linked Han China to Central Asia, India, and Rome thinned and rerouted. The great overland corridors through the Hexi Corridor and the Tarim Basin remained active, but on a diminished scale, serving a patchwork of small kingdoms and oasis city-states rather than a single imperial patron. Maritime commerce continued along the southern coasts, but without centralized sponsorship it became more episodic, more dependent on private initiative and local conditions. The world had not stopped moving, but the movements were scattered, less coordinated, and less visible in the historical record.

The Sui dynasty, founded in 581 CE by Emperor Wen, reversed this trajectory with

remarkable speed. Wen reunified China by conquering the southern Chen dynasty in 589, restoring a single imperial authority over the north and south for the first time in generations. He undertook massive infrastructure projects—most famously the Grand Canal, which linked the Yellow River basin to the Yangtze Delta—and reorganized the military and administrative systems with a rationalizing zeal that bordered on the obsessive. His successor, Emperor Yang, inherited this infrastructure and squandered it on campaigns that overextended the empire's resources and patience. The war against Goguryeo in Korea proved catastrophic, draining the treasury and exhausting the peasantry. By the time Li Yuan raised his banner, the Sui collapse was less a surprise than an inevitability deferred.

What made the Tang founding different from the usual cycle of dynastic replacement was the scale of the vacuum it filled and the geopolitical moment in which it occurred. When Li Shimin succeeded his father in 626—having cleared the path, with characteristic ruthlessness, through a fratricidal episode at the Xuanwu Gate—he became emperor at a moment when much of Eurasia was simultaneously in flux. The Byzantine and Sassanid empires were locked in their final great wars, a conflict that would exhaust both and leave them vulnerable to the rapid Islamic expansion that followed. On the Central Asian steppe, the Eastern Turkic Khaganate dominated the northern frontier, a vast confederation whose power had been checked but not broken by the Sui. To the south, Indian subcontinent was a quilt of regional kingdoms, while the Tibetan Yarlung dynasty was beginning its own imperial consolidation in the highlands. Korea's Three Kingdoms were still jealously independent. Japan, in the midst of its own transformative borrowing from the continent, sent its first formal embassy to the Sui court in 600 and would continue to do so under the Tang.

Li Shimin, better known by his temple name Taizong, was the right man at the right historical juncture. He was a cavalry commander of extraordinary ability, a student of military history who reportedly kept an annotated copy of a Sui-era strategic manual as a bedside companion. More importantly, he possessed an instinct for the political dimensions of warfare that went beyond mere battlefield victory. His campaigns against the Eastern Turks, culminating in the decisive defeat of the khagan Jiali in 630, did more than secure the northern frontier. They demonstrated that a Chinese emperor could dominate the steppe not through static defense but through mobile strike forces and a willingness to exploit internal tribal divisions. The submission of the Turks brought Taizong an unprecedented honorific that would define the Tang's relationship with the Inner Asian world: the title of Tian Kehan, or "Heavenly Khan," bestowed by Turkic chiefs who acknowledged his supremacy.

The title was more than ceremonial. It signaled a reorientation of the Sinocentric world. Previous Chinese dynasties had claimed supremacy over known peoples, but the Tang's assertion of the khan title explicitly adopted the language and framework of steppe sovereignty, layering it atop the Confucian vocabulary of the Mandate. Taizong was simultaneously the Son of Heaven ruling through moral virtue and a

universal khan commanding loyalty through personal charisma and military power. This dual identity was not a contradiction. It was a pragmatic adaptation that allowed the Tang to project authority across radically different political cultures—from the agrarian bureaucracy of the Chinese interior to the horse-lord assemblies of the Mongolian steppe.

The implications for Eurasia were considerable. A reunited China operating under a leadership comfortable with steppe diplomacy created a gravitational center that pulled together political fragments across the continent. Turkic tribes, Sogdian merchant communities, Tibetan envoys, Korean delegations, and eventually emissaries from the distant Western Turkic realms all found reasons to engage with Chang'an. The city, refashioned as the Tang capital on a grand scale, would become the physical embodiment of this new centrality, but that urban story belongs to the next chapter. What matters here is the principle: the Tang founding reoriented Eurasia not simply by creating a powerful state, but by creating a state whose leadership understood how to operate simultaneously within multiple political and cultural registers.

Taizong's reign also set important precedents for the management of conquered or submitted territories. Rather than simply extracting tribute and withdrawing, the Tang court practiced a form of indirect integration that borrowed from earlier precedents but reached new levels of sophistication. Turkish generals were given commands in the Tang military. Sogdian communities in the western provinces were permitted to maintain their own commercial and religious institutions. Princes from Central Asian kingdoms were invited to study at the imperial academy. This openness was partly strategic—it reduced the cost of maintaining a vast frontier—but it also reflected a genuine cosmopolitanism that would become one of the Tang's most distinctive features.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all of this was planned from the beginning. The Tang state, like any political entity, lurched from crisis to crisis, improvised responses to unexpected challenges, and occasionally lurched toward catastrophe. But the early Tang decades, roughly from 618 to the 680s, established a template for engagement that proved remarkably durable. The military reconquest of the Western Regions, the opening of direct diplomatic contact with Persia and the Byzantine Empire, the patronage of Buddhist translation projects that drew monks from across Central and South Asia—all of these initiatives drew on energies that Taizong and his successors released by unifying the empire and projecting its power outward.

One should not forget the material foundations of all this activity. Reunification meant that the Yangtze grain basket, the northern wheat and millet plains, and the Sichuan rice surplus could be mobilized under a single fiscal apparatus. The Grand Canal, inherited from the Sui but expanded and improved under the Tang, linked these productive zones and allowed the court to project economic power far beyond the

capital's immediate hinterland. The equal-field system, which assigned agricultural land to households on the basis of family size, provided a stable tax base that funded the military machine and the diplomatic apparatus alike. None of this was glamorous, but it was the scaffolding on which the Tang's outward-facing grandeur rested.

By the time Taizong died in 649, the Tang had already begun to resemble something far more than a merely Chinese dynasty. Its armies had reached the edges of the Tarim Basin. Its court hosted nobles and monks from dozens of polities. Its capital was being rebuilt on a scale designed to awe visitors from every direction. The Mandate of Heaven, once an abstraction confined to Chinese political philosophy, had been transformed into a claim of universal relevance—one that resonated across deserts, mountains, and seas. The maps that Tang officials drew of their world placed the empire at the center, not out of vanity alone but because the connections radiating outward from Chang'an gave that placement a functional truth. Trade, diplomacy, war, and faith all converged on the same nodes, and the Tang sat at the nexus.

What happened next—how those connections deepened, how Chang'an became the most cosmopolitan city on earth, how merchants, monks, and envoys turned roads and sea lanes into arteries of exchange—is the story the following chapters take up. But it begins here, with a dynasty forged in civil war and steppe conflict, laying claim to a mandate that was as much about the wider world as it was about China itself.

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