

## China's Contacts with the Outside World

*How did the foreign-contact policies of three medieval Chinese dynasties affect China?*

### 1. 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 into the country.

#### 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 between oases. The routes followed by the caravans are known collectively as 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 dynasty made travel safe again by taking control of much of Central Asia, which allowed trade to flourish 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 foreigners lived in seaports and in Chang'an.

All these foreign contacts brought about much cultural exchange. The Chinese sent their silk, porcelain, paper, iron, and jade along the trade routes, and in return, they **imported** 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, and they drank from goblets made of glass, a material that had previously been unknown in China. They ate new foods, such as spinach, garlic, mustard, and peas. They used cloves, a type of spice, to treat toothaches. Sitting in chairs from Central Asia instead of on floor cushions became a **status** symbol. The game of polo, a Persian sport played on horseback, became the rage among the upper-class.

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

New religions also came to China, which the Tang dynasty tolerated. Jews, Christians, and Muslims built houses of worship in Chang'an and were even allowed to preach, although they converted few Chinese.

The Indian religion of Buddhism had come to China hundreds of years earlier, but it became a major part of Chinese life under the Tang dynasty. Many Chinese became Buddhists. Buddhist monks came from India to teach in China, and Chinese pilgrims went to study in India. 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.

### **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 (WEE-gourz) began attacking China from across the border. In cities, violence broke out against foreign merchants, in part because many Chinese resented their prosperity.

The wealth of Buddhist monasteries also brought resentment, with some claiming that people 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 and forcing thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns to give up their way of life. Monasteries, shrines, and temples were destroyed, and 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 being taxed and shifting from the Silk Road. A flourishing sea trade developed between China, India, and the coastal cities of Southeast Asia. Thanks to the compass and improved shipbuilding techniques, overseas trade continued to thrive during the Song dynasty (960–1279).

## **2. Foreign Contacts Under the Yuan Dynasty**

As you have read, the Song dynasty came to an end when the **Mongols** conquered China. Recall that the Mongol leader Kublai Khan became emperor of China in 1279. He called his dynasty the Yuan dynasty. Under the Mongols, foreigners ruled China for nearly 100 years.

The vast Mongol empire stretched clear across Asia. Travel along the Silk Road became very safe because the entire region was now under the control of one government. The Mongols also developed a far-reaching **maritime** trade. Travel and trade expanded as never before, and more and more foreigners came to China.

### **Thriving Trade and Cultural Exchange**

By welcoming traders and other foreigners, the Yuan leaders encouraged cultural exchange. They respected merchants and actively promoted trade. They set up stations along the Silk Road every 20 miles where traders could find food and a place to sleep. Muslim merchant associations managed the Silk Road trade and traded Chinese silk and porcelain for medicines, perfumes, and ivory.

Some of the foreign visitors who traveled the Silk Road from Europe to China were Christian missionaries. They wanted to convert the Chinese to Christianity, and they also wanted Kublai Khan to form an alliance with Europeans against the Muslims. Both goals failed. Still, Christian missionaries did make some converts, and they helped bring new ideas to China.

Sea trade also flourished under the Yuan emperors. Ships from India brought diamonds and pearls. Ginger, cotton, and muslin came from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). From Java came black pepper, white walnuts, and cloves.

Many foreigners who came to China brought special skills. Muslim architects, for example, built the Yuan capital of Dadu, today's Beijing. Persians brought their advanced knowledge of astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and water management. Jamal al-Din, a Persian astronomer, introduced new and better astronomical instruments, helped to develop a new calendar, and set up an observatory, which was a special building for the study of astronomy. Muslim and Persian doctors established new hospitals.

Foreign contacts also allowed skills and information to flow from China and spread to other parts of the world. Europeans, for example, learned about the Chinese inventions of gunpowder and printing.

### **The Role of Foreigners in China**

Foreigners enjoyed high status under the Yuan rulers, and foreign merchants, in particular, were given special privileges. Unlike Chinese merchants, they could travel freely and did not have to pay taxes. They also spoke other languages, which the Chinese were forbidden to learn.

Kublai Khan appointed many visiting foreigners to official positions in his government. The most famous was Marco Polo, a young Italian merchant and adventurer who traveled throughout China.

Polo first traveled to China as a teenager with his father and uncle, who were merchants from Venice in Italy. Their route took them across Persia and along the southern branch of the Silk Road. Throughout the long journey, Marco Polo paid attention to the interesting new things he saw.

After three and a half years and over 5,000 miles, the Polos reached the court of Kublai Khan. The khan liked Marco and enjoyed his accounts of his travels, so he sent Marco to represent him on inspection tours around China.

Although Marco Polo did not read or write Chinese, he observed carefully. He traveled around China for about 17 years before beginning his journey home. When he returned to Italy, he dictated an account of his experiences to an author who wrote a book about him. The tale of Polo's travels gave Europeans firsthand knowledge of China and further stimulated interest in trade.

Under Kublai Khan, life was more pleasant for Mongols and foreigners, such as Marco Polo, than it was for the native Chinese. The Chinese were at the bottom of the social order and resented the restrictions placed on them. They also disliked being ruled by foreigners, especially since a few foreign government officials were harsh and dishonest. The Chinese hated a Muslim finance minister named Ahmed so much that they assassinated him. The resentment that built up under Yuan rule helped make the Chinese suspicious of further contact with foreigners.

### 3. Foreign Contacts Under the Ming Dynasty

The Chinese eventually rebelled against the Yuan. From 1368 to 1644, the **Ming** dynasty ruled China. Although foreign contacts continued, later Ming rulers tried to isolate China from foreign influences.

#### Tributaries and Maritime Expeditions

The Ming dynasty saw China as the oldest, largest, most civilized, and most important country in the world. Other nations, they felt, should acknowledge China's superiority by paying tribute.

Under the Ming, many other countries were China's **tributaries**. The Chinese emperors acknowledged their rulers, provided military help, and allowed them to trade with China. When ambassadors from the tributaries visited China, they had to kowtow before the emperor. This meant they had to kneel and touch their heads to the floor three times.

In return for bringing tribute, the ambassadors were given valuable gifts. They were also allowed to buy and sell goods at official markets. These exchanges benefited the foreigners as well as the Chinese.

Emperor Chengzu (sheng-ZOO), who came into power in 1402, wanted more tributaries. He gave a trusted adviser, Zheng He (JENG HAY), the title "Admiral of the Western Seas" and told him to sail to "the countries beyond the horizon . . . all the way to the end of the earth." Zheng He was to display China's power, to give gifts, and to collect tribute.

In 1405, Zheng He set off with a fleet of more than 300 ships, the largest fleet in the world at that time. It carried about 28,000 men, including sailors, soldiers, translators, merchants, and doctors. To feed this enormous force, ships carried huge loads of rice and other food. They had tubs of soil for growing vegetables and fruit onboard, as well as large watertight compartments that were converted into aquariums to hold fresh fish for the crew.

The largest ships had four decks, nine masts with twelve sails, and twelve watertight compartments. Cabins were provided so that merchants on long trading voyages could bring their wives.

Zheng He made seven expeditions between 1405 and 1433. At first, he traveled only as far as India.

Later, he reached the Persian Gulf and even sailed to ports along the east coast of Africa. Thirty or more of the places he visited became tributaries of China.

Zheng He's ships returned laden with precious cargo. From India they brought shawls made of gold thread, decorated with pearls and gems. They also carried medicinal herbs, dyes, spices, gems, pearls, ivory, and even exotic animals such as zebras, ostriches, lions, leopards, and giraffes.

### **Turning Inward**

When Zheng He died, in about 1434, a new emperor ruled China. The government needed money to fight off attempts of the Mongols to retake control, and scholar-officials persuaded the emperor to stop the expensive expeditions.

From that time on, the dynasty turned inward. Ming rulers wanted to protect their people from foreign influences, so they forbade travel outside China. All contact between Chinese people and foreigners had to be approved by the government.

The Ming dynasty and its scholar-officials wanted a strongly unified state based on a single ruler and traditional values. The huge and complex government bureaucracy was staffed by scholar-officials chosen by examinations. The conservative outlook of these officials dominated Chinese thought and government into the 20th century.

The Ming desire for uniformity made it difficult for the government to change in response to new conditions. In the end, it became too rigid to adapt. Peasant rebellions helped to bring down the government in 1644, ending the Ming dynasty.