People

Qin Shi Huangdi
Li Si
Wudi
Sima Qian
Cao family
Taizong
Xuanzang
Wu Zetian
Li Bai
Huizong
Su Shi
Zhu Xi
Kublai Khan
Hongwu
Yongle

Head with green flesh
tones, Qin dynasty, terracotta,
lacquer, pigment. Museum of
Qin Terracotta Warriors and
Horses, Lintong.
In 221 BC, having defeated the six principal contenders for supreme power, the leader of the Qin dynasty assumed the new title of Shi Huangdi, “first august emperor,” and laid the basis for an empire whose structure remained intact for more than two thousand years. To increase the central power, the first emperor divided the country into thirty-six administrative units, the governors of which had to report to central authorities and were supported in their tasks by generals in charge of military control. The laws of the individual kingdoms in force until then were replaced by a penal code destined to remain at the base of the Chinese judicial system until the threshold of the 20th century. Coins, weights, and measures, even the width of cart axles were standardized; the writing forms in use were standardized, creating so-called small seal script, making possible the codification of a unitary literary language for the empire. The first emperor undertook massive construction projects, building new roads and canals that eased the movement of people and goods, existing fortresses were strengthened and connected to form a barrier along the northern border, the Great Wall. Sumptuous palaces and an immense mausoleum were built to preserve the imperial power for eternity. The enormous strain placed on the people of China to provide the money and labor demanded by these undertakings led to a general insurrection and thus the end of the dynasty only a few years after the first emperor’s death.

Qin Shi Huangdi

First emperor of China
Period
Qin (221–206 BC)
Reign
247–221 BC (ruler of Qin); 221–210 BC (emperor)
Family name
Zhao or Qin
Given name
Zheng
 Terms
Small seal script (xiao zhuo)
Related entries
Li Si, Mandate of heaven, Controlling water, War, Great Wall, The quest for immortality, Xianyang

He changed the calendar and chose black as the color . . . and chose six as the basic number: seals and official hats measured all six inches, carts six feet” (Sima Qian)

Ding tripods are among the most ancient ritual food vases; they were used for meat offerings in the royal tombs of the Shang epoch.

The earliest sources that tell of the Nine Legendary Tripods, cast during the mythical Xia dynasty, date to the 6th–4th centuries BC. The tripods were said to have been handed on from dynasty to dynasty, symbols of the passage of political power and the right to rule.

The historian Sima Qian (mid-2nd century BC) lamented the loss of the Nine Tripods and repeated the legend according to which they had sunk in the Si River near Pencheng 150 years before the unification of the country by the Qin. During the Han period it was said that Qin Shi Huangdi had sent thousands of men to remove the tripods from the river, but at the critical moment a dragon had bitten through the cables, making them fall back into the waves.

The scene depicts the moment in which the cables broke and the men tumbled back. The image is thus symbolic of heaven’s disapproval of the Qin government and thus legitimized the Han seizure of power.

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Qin Shi Huangdi

As soon as he ascended the throne of Qin, in 246 BC, the first emperor had work begin on his tomb at Mount Li near the capital of Xianyang. The work continued until 208 BC.

The three enormous pits of the mausoleum, containing more than seven thousand terracotta soldiers, are famous throughout the world, but few knew that the statues were all covered by a natural lacquer that had been applied as an undercoat for the layer of paint made using precious mineral pigments.

The horse trappings and accessories for the carts are decorated with inlaid gold and silver. Both carts were covered by very thin bronze canopies.

Carts, charioteers, and horses were all painted, increasing the realistic effect of the quadrigas.

The emperor arranged to have himself surrounded by all the comforts he would require in the afterlife; the two quadrigas would prove useful for the inspection trips he would take in the other world.

The two bronze single-shaft carts, made to a scale of 1:2, are perfect working models that reproduce the royal carriages down to the smallest detail.

The two quadrigas as they were found, in 1980, in the western area of the mausoleum of the first emperor at Lintong, Shaanxi, Qin dynasty.

The two quadrigas after their restoration, Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses, Lintong.

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Only in recent years, and with the use of various chemical methods, has it been possible to reattach the paint to the terracotta. The archers were restored in 1999 using a procedure developed especially for the terracotta army.

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When the statues were removed from the moist soil, the layer of lacquer dried out and flaked off the surfaces, remaining stuck to the ground that had held them for more than two millennia.

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According to legend, in 212 BC, the year after the book burning, 460 Confucian scholars were buried alive for having defended their ideas. Chinese historiography relates that Li Si, promoter of a centralized state, urged the first emperor to silence dissent by means of a drastic measure: the burning of books, an event that took place in 213 BC.

Li Si

Prime minister of Qin Shi Huangdi
Period
Qin (221–206 BC)
Life
circa 280–208 BC

Tiana
Legalism
(Chao, lit., “school of law”)

The Book of Lord Shang
(Shangjunshu)
The Book of Master Han Fei
(Han Feizi)
Law (fa)
Methods (shu)

Related entries
Qin Shi Huangdi, Officials and literati, Writing, Confucianism

The intransigent politics of Qin Shi Huangdi received theoretical support from the Legalist school, represented at court by Prime Minister Li Si. The oldest text related to this movement is the Book of Lord Shang, the creator of which had served the Qin king in the 4th century BC. The author of the principal Legalist work, Han Feizi, was put to death in 233 BC; by Li Si, following a court intrigue. In the ideal Legalist state, power is concentrated in the hands of the ruler, who makes use of the “law,” inflexible and equal for everyone with the exception of the ruler himself, and of “methods,” deceptive tactics by which he maintains control of the state, manipulating human instincts. The Legalist state does not recognize cultural differences and does not have room for individual expression. This was also the ideological thinking behind the standardization of weights and measurements and writing. Later Chinese historians credited Li Si for having created the new uniform writing system, but also found fault with him for persecuting literati and for destroying works of literature and history from earlier periods. Following the death of Qin Shi Huangdi, Li Si took part in the plot that brought the second emperor to the throne. Later, he himself fell victim to a plot, shortly before the collapse of the Qin dynasty, which also marked the end of the supremacy of the Legalist school.

“In the state of the intelligent ruler there is no literature . . . the law is the only teaching. There are no quoted sayings of the early kings, the magistrates are the only instructors” (Han Fei)

“The victims of this type of books included not only the chronicles of feudal states but also Confucian classics, only the chronicles of the Qin and scientific texts were spared.”

During the state of persecution Fu Sheng had hidden a copy of the Classic of Documents inside the walls of his home, and he spent the rest of his life, well into his nineties, teaching its contents.

Fu Sheng is seated cross-legged on a simple mat; on the low table in front of him are the tools of a man of letters: a pen and an ink stone. On the floor near the mat is the famous book he managed to keep hidden.

According to legend, in 212 BC, the year after the book burning, 460 Confucian scholars were buried alive for having defended their ideas.
The first emperors of the Han dynasty had a conciliatory attitude toward bordering peoples and lands, most of all the Xiongnu tribes of northern China. Wudi replaced this with an expansionist policy that, over the 54-year course of his reign, fully doubled the size of China. In terms of domestic affairs, Wudi’s centralising policies brought about a gradual decline in the local centres of power and weakened the power of merchants by way of the institution of state monopolies on the mining of coins and the sale of salt, iron, and alcohol. China’s administrative units were divided into thirteen “regions,” regularly visited by inspectors directly subordinate to the central government. Like his predecessor, Wudi was in constant search of educated and competent officials; governors were instructed to call attention to noteworthy people, who then had to take a national civil-service examination in the capital. In 124 BC the emperor created the imperial university, where chosen candidates were given lessons in the Five Confucian Classics. These works, which collected the essence of the traditions of the past, confirmed the validity of the current social order, most especially the imperial institutions. Beginning with Wudi the empire’s cultural identity was founded on the principles of Confucianism, safeguarded by the class of officials and literati.

In 138 BC the Han emperor Wudi sent Zhang Qian with a hundred men on an embassy to the Yuezhi, located in ancient Bactria in Central Asia, to make an alliance with them against the powerful Xiongnu nomads. General Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu, and ten years passed before he succeeded in escaping and reaching the Yuezhi, only to find they had no intention of becoming involved in a war with the Xiongnu.

The mission failed in its objective but was of fundamental importance to the Chinese government, which as a result obtained its first eyewitness account of the populations of the “western lands.”

“...for those able to become our generals, our ministers, our ambassadors…” (Han emperor Wudi)
The Records of the Grand Historian by Sima Qian relate the outlines of the historical and cultural events of the ancients and do so in a realistic and straightforward language often enlivened by dialog. The period covered begins with the semimythical days of the Yellow Emperor and ends at the period when the book was compiled, the reign of the Han emperor Wudi. Sima Qian’s father handed on to him his post as court astronomer-astrologer and also began collecting the material relating to the past that Sima Qian concluded by way of careful research in the imperial archives as well as a long journey to track down witnesses. The work contributed to the further consolidation of Confucian thought as the basis of political and social order since it presented the historical evolution from the ethical and moral point of view of contemporary ideology, which saw, for example, the succession of dynasties as the inevitable result of the absence of “virtue” with the consequent loss of the right to govern. The structure and style of the Records of the Grand Historian, a result of the private initiative of one official, became exemplary for the official historiography of all later dynasties after every dynastic change, the new government took upon itself the compilation of a history of the preceding dynasty with the aim of learning from the past but also of legitimizing the present.

“I have brought together the scattered fragments of ancient lore . . . I studied the events of history and set them down in significant order” (Sima Qian)

Dian was one of the kingdoms located in the southeastern region of the empire that maintained their independence until the ascent of Wudi to the throne of Han.

Despite influence from the surrounding populations as well as from the distant Han empire, the Dian had developed an autonomous and highly developed use of bronze.

Along with various types of weapons used most of all in hunting and in wars against neighboring peoples, agricultural tools have been found along with containers, musical instruments, and buckles.
Around the end of the Western Han period the central government passed into the hands of the court eunuchs, while various military leaders vied for domination of the empire's peripheral zones. In AD 196, General Cao Cao, who controlled vast areas of central-northern China, forced the Han emperor Xiandi to relocate the capital to Xuchang (Henan) and then assumed all power himself. In AD 200 Cao Cao defeated the soldiers of his principal rival, but his attempts to advance south of the Yangtze River to again unite the country under a single ruler were foiled, and he met final failure in AD 208, when his army was defeated by the combined forces of his two major opponents, the future founders of the kingdoms of Shu (AD 221) and Wu (AD 229). When he died, in AD 220, his son Cao Pi assumed the title of emperor of the Wei dynasty, thus formally ending the four hundred years of Han rule. Cao Cao and his sons Cao Pi and Cao Zhi were among the most highly regarded poets of the period, grouped together stylistically under the name of the last dynastic era of the Han, Jian'an (AD 196–220). The poetic art of the Jian'an style is expressed in verses of five characters that reflect the passage from earlier poetry based on popular songs to the learned poetry of the literati. It is poetry that often laments the precarious nature of life and exalts wine for its ability to provide moments of illusory joy.

“Here is the wine! So let us sing, because life is as short as the morning dew, and the past is so very sad” (Cao Cao)
During the period of disorder following the fall of the Han dynasty, powerful men quickly rose to power in various regions of China and struggled to reunite the country, battling their rivals in large fratricidal battles. Warrior and strategist but also poet and reformer, the figure of Cao Cao has fascinated Chinese historians and literati, most of all beginning in the Song epoch.

Cao Cao is one of the leading characters in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, attributed to the man of letters Luo Guanzhong, and is also among the traditional characters in the musical theater and opera of Beijing. Historiography describes Cao Cao as a brilliant strategist, but the novel—and even more the theatrical productions—present him as a cruel and suspicious tyrant, a personification of evil.

The scene depicts Cao Cao, standing, offering defeated general Guan Yu a splendid palace, a famous sorrel horse, and brocaded clothing. The balustrade with stone pillars marks off the edge of the stone terrace that served as the base for timber constructions.

The novel, which tells of the period of wars that followed the fall of the Han dynasty in AD 220, reaches epic proportions; many historical figures are endowed with supernatural powers. Historiography describes Cao Cao as a brilliant strategist, but the novel—and even more the theatrical productions—present him as a cruel and suspicious tyrant, a personification of evil.

A teapot on the square table, Ming dynasty, 15th-16th century, lacquered wood with inlays in mother-of-pearl, 34 cm high, Lee Family Collection, Tokyo.

A double page from the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Ming dynasty, Yu Fangzhou edition, 1548, Real Biblioteca del Escorial, Madrid.

The incomplete example, today preserved in Spain, is the only known version of this edition. The version on which Western translations are based dates to the early Qing period.
Although he ascended the throne with a coup d’état, forcing his father, former military commander under the short Sui dynasty and then founder of the Tang dynasty, to abdicate in his favor, the second Tang emperor, Taizong, is described by Confucian historiography as one of China’s most excellent rulers. A learned man with a pragmatic approach to matters of general interest, Taizong was open to criticism and new ideas. He strengthened the organization of the national exam system, and having understood the value of history as a tool of moral education and political legitimation, he set up a historiography office charged with writing down histories of preceding dynasties and making records of current events. China’s growing economy was boosted by agrarian and fiscal reforms that favored the well-being of the common people and permitted the large-scale expansion of the empire: With the help of the military, Taizong extended Chinese domination to the areas of today’s Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, diplomatic contact with bordering foreign powers as well as with distant lands contributed to China’s fame as the most highly evolved and cosmopolitan power in the ancient world.

“Dynasties have always waxed and waned, but what deed of the kings of old could compare with the emperor of Tang returning to life?” (Journey to the West)

Taizong's cosmopolitan policies are also revealed by such measures as the official recognition, in AD 642, of the music from Central Asia. At Chang’an, ten orchestras were granted permission to perform.

The bearded man is playing the *pipa*, a stringed instrument originally from the Near East, while the woman holds a small drum to strike with a stick or by hand.

The two musicians, perhaps found in the same tomb, are dressed in the style of the Kucha oasis, with narrow-sleeved, tight-fitting clothes and ample skirts that spread out around the kneeling figures.

A pair of musicians, Tang dynasty, first half 7th century AD, glazed terracotta, 17 cm high, Musée Guimet, Paris.

A vase with dragon-shape handles, Tang dynasty, 7th century AD, glazed terracotta, 55 cm high, Shaanxi History Museum, Xi'an.

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“Dynasties have always waxed and waned, but what deed of the kings of old could compare with the emperor of Tang returning to life?” (Journey to the West)
The six war horses of the emperor Taizong, copies from the Song epoch (AD 973) of originals dating to the Tang dynasty (circa AD 636–645), stone bas-reliefs, each circa 170 x 220 cm, Forest of Stone Tablets Museum, Xi’an, and University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia.

The six horses were originally located in the northern area of the tomb of Emperor Taizong at Zhaoling, in the area of Chang’an. The subjects are carved with a dynamic realism that displays both the details of the saddles and the muscles of the horses in movement. The horses have fascinating names, such as Purple of the Misty Dew; their manes are woven to form the so-called “three flowers” (sanhua), indicating they belong to the imperial stables.

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In AD 636 the emperor asked the famous painter Yan Liben to paint the six horses he had ridden during the military campaigns that had preceded his ascent to the throne. These portraits served as the models for the stone sculptures.

General Qiu Xinggong is depicted withdrawing an arrow from the chest of an imperial horse, wounded in battle.

In 1914, a group of smugglers broke the reliefs while attempting to take them to the United States. Two of the six sculptures are today in Philadelphia, the others were taken to a museum in Xi’an.

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In AD 641 Emperor Taizong received an emissary from the first king of Tibet, sent to escort Princess Wencheng to Tibet.

The princess married the king of Tibet, following the “matrimonial diplomacy” tradition of the Chinese emperors. The union proved very happy, but other Chinese brides were consumed by nostalgia for home in the cold tents of their nomadic husbands.

Most of the figures are depicted with subtle but homogeneous features; the leading figures in the work are given strikingly individual features, while the faces and clothes of the others are not differentiated.

The attribution of an ancient work of art to any one artist is almost always uncertain, given the habit of artists of reproducing famous paintings to closely study their details and understand their essence.
The monkey Sun Wukong is the second main character in the novel; the playful and irreverent monkey had been chosen by the Buddha to protect the monk during his trip.

While basing his government on the norms of Confucianism, Emperor Taizong personally preferred the Daoist school and permitted the expression of other religions. In consideration of the great social importance of the Buddhist faith in China, a large temple was built in the capital of Chang’an dedicated to the memory of the emperor’s mother. When the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang returned to the capital in AD 645, after a 16-year trip to India, he was offered a position at court. When the monk declined the position, the ruler suggested he write his Record of the Western Regions (completed in AD 646), which relates primarily the history, customs, products, geography, and climate of the countries he had visited. Xuanzang had chosen the land route across the Gobi Desert and the mountains of Tianshan and Pamir and had found support from such powerful rulers as the king of Turfan and the great khan of the Western Turks, at the time on friendly terms with the Chinese emperor. He had spent years in India studying the most important centers of Buddhist knowledge and devotion. Xuanzang brought to China 637 works from the Buddhist canon, and with the support of Taizong, who put the temple dedicated to his mother as his disposal, he undertook the translation of 75 of these sacred texts, an activity that occupied him until the end of his life.

Xuanzang’s trip inspired the man of letters Wu Cheng’en (1500?–1582) to write the novel Journey to the West, a bestseller that still fascinates the world’s readers.

In the novel Xuanzang is the reincarnation of a disciple of the Buddha who is escorted on his long trip by three monstrous monsters with supernatural powers and features that are part animal and part human.
Xuanzang was the first Chinese pilgrim on the Silk Route; the monk Xuanzang reached India during his long trip, from 629 to 645, followed in 711 by the monk Huiyuan.

In the left hand he holds a flyswatter, while his right rests on a walking stick.

The monk travels on a cloud accompanied by a tiger and a small meditating Buddha seated on another cloud. The striking figure expresses vigor and dynamism.

A small perfume holder hanging from a chain falls to a stick swinging over a stack of written scrolls, apparently sacred texts of the Buddhist canon that the monk carries like a backpack.

The pilgrim’s features are almost caricatural to indicate his foreign provenance; thick lips over square teeth, a large nose, and thick eyebrows.

The stone architraves over the ground-floor doors are decorated with motifs of Buddhist inspiration, which legend attributes to the famous painter Yan Liben.

The Big Wild Goose Pagoda (Dayanta), Tang dynasty, circa 652, brick, 64 m high, Xi’an, Shaanxi.

The texts brought by Xuanzang were preserved in this pagoda, built by the successor of Taizong.

In his left hand he holds a flyswatter, while his right rests on a walking stick.

The pagoda is part of a complex dedicated to the ruler’s mother called the Temple of Great Goodwill (Da Ci’en Si).

The texts brought by Xuanzang were preserved in this pagoda, built by the successor of Taizong.

Inside, a winding wooden staircase leads to the seventh floor. Beginning at a small central space of each floor, four narrow passages lead the visitor to door windows, which open on the four sides of the construction.

The pagoda rises from its square base, narrowing upward floor by floor. The building has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, with two floors being added to the original five.

The texts brought by Xuanzang were preserved in this pagoda, built by the successor of Taizong.

China_008-061  10/15/08  9:58 AM  Page 32
Two twin stele were erected opposite the southern entrance of the combined tomb of Gaozong and Wu Zetian: one bears 8,000 characters celebrating the emperor’s deeds; the other, dedicated to the empress, bears no writing.

“...and if a wife does not serve her husband, the proper relationship between man and woman and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed” (Ban Zhao)

Wu Zetian

Formerly a concubine of the emperor Taizong, Wu Zetian managed to rise to the rank of principal wife of his successor, Gaozong, who fell ill in 660 and handed over to her the reins of government. At Gaozong’s death, in 683, Wu Zetian accepted the formal nomination of her son Zhongzong, but at his first sign of autonomy she replaced him with another son. In 690 she began a new dynasty, the Zhou, and took the throne. The only woman in Chinese history to assume sovereignty, Wu Zetian was later treated harshly by Confucian historians for having deserted the traditional role of a woman. A better reason for such condemnation was the cruelty with which she imposed her will, a cruelty that did not stop even when dealing with her own family members. Her reign did have positive aspects: Wu Zetian favored the ascent of a new elite by promoting the system of national exams and transferring the capital to Luoyang, thus distancing the court from the direct influence of the ancient northwestern class. Chinese Buddhism experienced its period of greatest prosperity during her reign. Temples were built throughout the country dedicated to the Great Cloud Sutra, which contains a prophecy concerning the reincarnation of a goddess in the form of a universal sovereign. In 705 the empress fell ill and was forced to abdicate and the Tang dynasty was revived.

Why did the empress leave vacant the space usually dedicated to the glorification of the ruler? Various possible explanations have been advanced. Perhaps she believed her merits could be judged only by future generations, and in fact during the 10th–11th centuries thirteen epitaphs were inscribed on the stele, although with the passage of time they have almost disappeared.
The poems of one of the greatest poets of Chinese literature are fresh and spontaneous, full of wonder and infantile playfulness, of love for life and for wine. Li Bai, who was fascinated by Daoism, speaks with the moon and meets with mountains, using all the traditional poetic genre, but giving preference to the ancient style, which involves fewer restrictions in terms of the length of verses, rhythm, and the parallelism of words. His poems are often retrospective and express nostalgia for the glorious past and melancholy over the flow of time, but there are also the pleasures of idleness and inebriety. Parting with friends, traveling, and being far from home are themes that Li Bai shared with many poet-officials of the period who were forced to perform their duties in far-off locales. Li Bai, however, traveled as a matter of choice and never took the national exam in order to obtain a position. Such was his fame that he was summoned by the emperor Xuanzong (reigned AD 712–756) to the Hanlin Painting Academy at Chang’an, but the position proved brief. Exiled because of his presumed involvement in the great An Lushan rebellion, which shook the Tang empire at the middle of the 8th century, Li Bai was pardoned several years before his death. Legend has it that while out boating, and drunk, he met his death by drowning, falling overboard in the attempt to embrace the moon’s reflection on the water.

“...I sat drinking and did not notice the dusk until falling petals filled the folds of my dress. Drunken, I rose, I walked toward the moonlit stream” (Li Bai)

Li Bai

The poems of one of the greatest poets of Chinese literature are fresh and spontaneous, full of wonder and infantile playfulness, of love for life and for wine. Li Bai, who was fascinated by Daoism, speaks with the moon and meets with mountains, using all the traditional poetic genre, but giving preference to the ancient style, which involves fewer restrictions in terms of the length of verses, rhythm, and the parallelism of words. His poems are often retrospective and express nostalgia for the glorious past and melancholy over the flow of time, but there are also the pleasures of idleness and inebriety. Parting with friends, traveling, and being far from home are themes that Li Bai shared with many poet-officials of the period who were forced to perform their duties in far-off locales. Li Bai, however, traveled as a matter of choice and never took the national exam in order to obtain a position. Such was his fame that he was summoned by the emperor Xuanzong (reigned AD 712–756) to the Hanlin Painting Academy at Chang’an, but the position proved brief. Exiled because of his presumed involvement in the great An Lushan rebellion, which shook the Tang empire at the middle of the 8th century, Li Bai was pardoned several years before his death. Legend has it that while out boating, and drunk, he met his death by drowning, falling overboard in the attempt to embrace the moon’s reflection on the water.

“I sat drinking and did not notice the dusk until falling petals filled the folds of my dress. Drunken, I rose, I walked toward the moonlit stream” (Li Bai)
Li Bai

Li Bai's fondness for wine was the subject of many legends. The state of drunkenness was not deplored in China, being considered instead one of the ways to stimulate the free flow of creativity.

Du Fu, another great poet of the period, claimed that one cup of wine was enough for Li Bai to write one hundred poems.

The emperor, although relaxed, sits composedly on a stool in the inner court of the palace; the poet, without his outer clothes, is sprawled across a nearby bench.

Two maidservants are busy heating the wine, made of grains and always served warm.

Only once did Li Bai and Du Fu actually meet, but Du Fu, a poet of dramatically realistic works with an innovative form, was profoundly struck by the encounter.

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The painter Liang Kai, a highly esteemed academy master during the period of the Northern Song, specialized in the depiction of figures, landscapes, and Buddhist and Daoist subjects. At the height of his fame he retired to private life.

The head is defined with a few simple lines that give a concise but at the same time magical image of the great poet.

Free from official obligations, Liang Kai adhered to the Chan Buddhist sect, better known by its Japanese name, Zen, and developed a spare but also generous pictorial style. The portrait of Li Bai belongs to the Zen phase of the painter’s work.

“Last night the spring wind entered my room again. I cannot bear to remember the bright moon of my lost kingdom, the marble steps and carved balustrades” (Li Yu)

Huizong, passionate connoisseur of the arts and himself a talented artist, gave new impulse to China’s traditional artistic disciplines as well as to artisan creations. He took personal care of the wares made in porcelain kilns and founded a famous painting academy in the capital of Bianliang, today’s Kaifeng. Under his rule the scholastic system was improved as was the structure of the national exams, but he also found time for new subjects, such as archaeological research and the encyclopedic collection of scientific and historical information. In truth, the business of state was neglected, and the court was not aware of the danger looming in the new state of Jin, founded by the Nüehén nomads to the north of China. The Jin pressed on the Liao, a dynasty formed by the Khitans, another nomadic people that occupied large areas in northern China. In the hope of finally driving the Khitans out of Chinese territory, the Southern Song dynasty allied itself with the Jin. The undertaking succeeded despite the poor military contribution of the Song, but the Nüehén then invaded China, conquering the capital in 1127. Huizong, who had abdicated in 1126, was deported along with his successor and lived out the last eight years of his life in prison, reduced to the status of an ordinary man.
The emperor’s elegant and refined taste is best expressed in his personal calligraphic style, known as "slender gold" (shoujin). The characters are composed of sharply defined and vigorous strokes, making them appear imprinted rather than brushed on the absorbent support. The structure and proportions are perfectly balanced, and despite their markedly personal style the characters are easily legible.

The emperor took a personal interest in the painting academy he founded, sometimes instructing and correcting the painters and often suggesting themes to work on, including auspicious events, such as this work. The unusual angle of the painting reflects the emperor’s respect for the private life of all citizens. He once severely criticized a painter who had depicted scenes of daily life inside homes for having invaded privacy.

The emperor’s paintings are equally lucid and precise, but also so detailed they seem static, lacking the dynamic touch that characterizes his calligraphy. The characters are composed of sharply defined and vigorous strokes, making them appear imprinted rather than brushed on the absorbent support. The emperor’s paintings are equally lucid and precise, but also so detailed they seem static, lacking the dynamic touch that characterizes his calligraphy.

The white wings of the cranes stand out luminously against the blue background without need of further definition. The emperor adopted the "boneless" (mogu) style of painting, which did without the classic black outlines given figures. The white wings of the cranes stand out luminously against the blue background without need of further definition. The emperor adopted the "boneless" (mogu) style of painting, which did without the classic black outlines given figures.

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Su Shi lived during the reigns of five of the Northern Song emperors, and his public career, characterized by a series of highs and lows, reflected the transitory fortunes of the two principal opposing political trends that alternated in the rule of the country. A Confucian man of letters drawn to Buddhism and Daoism, Su Shi, best known in the West by his pseudonym, Su Dongpo, was a poet, calligrapher, painter, art critic, and essayist. He and his fellow artists, struck by the simplicity of the ancient works of art just then being discovered during the first archaeological excavations and inspired by neo-Confucian ideas, promoted a new theory of artistic creation, seen as a means for the spontaneous expression of human nature. The “imprint of the heart” left on the page expresses the essence of the person through the means of personal expression even though conditioned by taste and modesty. In that way art approaches the Universal Principal that exists beyond the concrete depiction of objects. Calligraphy, particularly in the loose but legible running-band cursive style, and painting in ink were the expressive genres most agreeable to this concept and beginning in the Song period were considered superior to other genres. The literary production of Su Shi, a brilliant and candid man, is formally perfect but without prejudice and never dogmatic. He was one of the promoters of the free style in prose, and certain of his works have inspired later generations of artists.

But do you understand the nature of water and of the moon?—he asked—The first of them flows without ever ending, the other now waxes, now wanes, without ever increasing or diminishing” (Su Shi)

Su Shì

Su Shi
Man of letters
Period
Northern Song
(AD 960–1127)
Life
Ai 1037–1101
Family name
Su
Given name
Shi
Pseudonym
Su Dongpo
Terms
Imprint of the heart
(xinyin)
Universal Principal
(li)
Running hand
(xingshu)
Related entries
Huizong, Zhu Xi,
Education and exams,
Poetry, Calligraphy,
Landscape painting

Su Shi, Poetry in the Ancient Style of Li Bai, written in running-hand cursive, Northern Song dynasty, dated to 1093, ink on paper, 34.0 x 211.5 cm, Municipal Museum of Art, Osaka.
Su Shi

Su Shi (/H17073\nInkstone of Su Shi, shown top and bottom, Northern Song dynasty, 11th century, black stone, 11.4 x 7.9 x 3.3 cm, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

The rock and tree seem to have been made in a single circular gesture from left to right, ending in the short lines that suggest dried branches. The effect is dynamic, and at the same time balanced.

Several calligraphic works by Su Shi have survived, but of his paintings in black ink there is only this one black-and-white photograph; all trace of the work was lost several decades ago.

The composition does not seem copied from life and corresponds instead to a mental image created by the artist, who had studied and memorized forms to create an ideal image.

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Su Shi wrote, "In the moment in which you take brush in hand, staring fixedly, what you wish to paint will appear before your eyes, and you must get up in a hurry to pursue it."

The moment of inspiration distinguished painter-literati from painter-artisans, a distinction created by Su Shi that became fundamental to the history of Chinese painting in later dynasties.

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During the Song period, Confucian teaching was thoroughly reexamed because, unlike both Buddhism and Daoism, its moral and ethical teaching could not respond to metaphysical questions and it did not include a cosmology. Zhu Xi offered a synthetic arrangement of the “school of universal principles” of the so-called neo-Confucians: beginning with the scrupulous analysis of Confucian texts, he identified the origin of all things in the “universal principle,” which was manifested as “vital force” and which in turn permeates everything, making possible the birth, evolution, and destruction of things through an alternation of yin and yang. The universal principle is reflected in humans as an innate moral principle, while the quality of vital force determines social role. Since all humans are endowed with the moral principle, wisdom is not restricted to an elect few but is instead the concrete goal of everyone. Education and the cultivation of the self take place through the process of socialization based on the obligations made clear in the “five relationships” and the “investigation of things,” which is the study of objects and concrete events. At first opposed, Zhu Xi’s concepts were soon reevaluated and the Four Confucian Books he had chosen from among the classic texts and had written commentaries on, were included in the program of national examinations beginning in the Yuan dynasty.

“Knowledge and action always require each other, like eyes and legs. Without legs, the eyes cannot walk; without eyes, the legs cannot see” (Zhu Xi)

Zhu Xi

Philosopher

Period

Northern Song (AD 960–1127)

Life

AD 1030–1100

Terms

School of universal principles (lixue)

Neo-Confucianism (daoxue)

Universal principle (li)

Vital force (qi)

Five relationships (wulun)

Four Books of Confucianism (Sishu): Analects (Lunyu), Mencius (Mengzi), and two chapters of the Liji (Record of Rites) entitled The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong Yong) and The Great Learning (Daxue)

Related entries

Huizong, Su Shi, Confucianism, The five relations

Ai Li Musha, Portrait of Three Literati Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, Zhu Xi, Yuan dynasty, 14th–15th century, ink and color on silk, 32.2 x 66.6 cm, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

As a result of the affirmation of neo-Confucianism, a trend began in the Song period of representing the “universal principle” by way of intimate and simple paintings.

An excellent sense of observation, united with the careful execution of details, distinguished the painters who specialized in the depiction of flowers and insects.

The bamboo, outlined in black and painted in rich tonalities of green, creates a diagonal, accentuated by the wasp at upper right.

A second diagonal is created between the grasshopper and the dragonfly. The center of the painting, the virtual meeting point, does not attract attention, instead drawn first to the attractive colors of the bamboo and then led to the study of the insects.

Wu Bing, Bamboo and Insects, Southern Song dynasty, circa 1190–1194, album leaf, ink and color on silk, 24.2 x 27 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art.
Although he declared himself a promoter of Mongolian politics, Kublai Khan became inserted in the tradition of Chinese civilization, assuming the Chinese dynastic name Yuan (“origin”) in 1271 for his empire, at the time not yet entirely conquered. To avoid being absorbed by the numerically superior Chinese, the Mongols divided the population in four categories kept apart by impossible social barriers: the Mongols paid no taxes and occupied key hereditary positions in the government; their Central Asian allies also enjoyed fiscal privileges and were used in the administration as subordinates or as tax collectors, when they were not involved in commerce. The third category was composed of the inhabitants of northern China—Chinese, Nushan, Khitans—and coming last were the “southerners,” the Chinese inhabitants of the territory of the Song dynasty in the south, discriminated against and excluded from all important positions. The extension of the Mongol domination, from China to the Caucasus, and Kublai Khan’s multiracial state organization facilitated intercontinental exchanges: firearms, paper, and hydraulic and metallurgical techniques traveled all the way to Europe. Mongol inexperience in the field of rural politics, however, led to impoverishment, and after Kublai’s death there were revolts of the peasant population, forced to abandon their fields to build canals and palaces and subjected to the payment of increasing tributes.

“...He is a man of good stature... His limbs are well fleshed and modeled in due proportion. His complexion is fair and ruddy like a rose, the eyes black and handsome” (Marco Polo)
The genre of portraiture of the imperial family began taking shape during the Song period and was continued during the Mongol domination, reflecting the identity of the foreigners, made clear in their facial features and clothing.

Perhaps the painter intended to emphasize the emperor’s Mongolian origin. The subject of the painting itself must have seemed strange to the Chinese, but in addition, there is the presence of a woman along with men of clearly foreign extraction. It seems the emperor truly loved his consort—which did not prevent him from frequenting concubines—and that her death threw him into a state of grave depression.

The imperial family was careful to maintain Mongol habits and customs, in part because they were deeply tied to them and in part to avoid being seen as having betrayed their culture in the eyes of the Mongol aristocracy. The portraits of the Mongol emperors were held in state temples dedicated to Lamaism, which had become the official religion of the Mongols in 1253. The painter emphasizes the emperor’s regality in every detail but presents him busy in an informal activity in a wild setting, thus breaking with the schemes of royal portraiture known until then.
Son of poverty-stricken peasants, a Buddhist monk, then leader of the many secret societies that rose in rebellion at the end of the Yuan dynasty, this future ruler triumphed over the jockeying for power then forced the Mongols to withdraw to the interior of Mongolia. Known by the dynasty-era name of Hongwu, the emperor improved the lot of the poor masses with the hereditary division of the population into farmers, soldiers, and artisans. The farmers were grouped in small autonomous administrative units, responsible for their own census and the collection of taxes. The soldiers were given allotments of previously untended land so they could provide for their own sustenance. The artisans worked in the imperial factories or were at least obliged to perform temporary services. Most of the tax revenue came from the pockets of the merchants, looked upon as parasites. Hongwu, forced to depend on councilors from the literati class, but highly distrustful of them, eliminated all hereditary roles and strengthened the Confucian system of national exams. The heads of ministries and other high offices had to report directly to the emperor, to the detriment of the imperial chanceller. This dangerous concentration of power led, under his successors, to the growing power of the eunuchs.

"We have been chosen by our people to occupy the imperial throne of China in the dynastic name of the 'Great Luminosity'" (Hongwu)

Hongwu Empress Period Ming (1368–1644) Reign 1368–1398 Family name Zhu Given name Xingzong, later Yuanzhang Temple name Taizu Posthumous name Gao Era name Hongwu Terms Luminosity (ming) Vast military (Hongwu) Related entries Eunuchs, Officials and literati, Ceramics, Technology and industries, Nanking, Beijing

In 1298, held prisoner of war in Genoa, the Venetian Marco Polo dictated a report of his trip to the Orient and the seventeen years spent at the court of Kublai Khan to his fellow prisoner, a Pisan named Rustichello.

Polo’s description of the splendors of the court and the wealth of the cities seemed to be incredible to 14th-century European readers that they took it for pure invention.

The Mongol Khan was described with great respect: the Venetian emphasized not only the magnificence of the ruler, surrounded by splendid courts, but gave admiring descriptions of his cosmopolitism and his efficient administration.

In his role of foreign merchant, Marco Polo found himself as a privileged tourist compared to the native Chinese, who were the victims of the hierarchy of Mongolian society.

The figures and settings of the Mongol court were of a style completely unknown to the 14th-century European artist, who had certainly never seen an elephant and who gave the Mongols classical European features.

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Hongwu

Hongwu's tomb complex, built between 1381 and 1383, is near Nanjing, the city that he chose, as first emperor of the Ming dynasty, as his capital.

Geomancers identified a spot in the Purple Mountains (Zhongshan) as the ideal location to erect the tomb. The site was then occupied by the Ling Gu monastery, founded in the 6th century, but the emperor had it relocated to the north.

This enormous stele is enclosed within the walls of a pavilion that long ago lost its original timber roof; it marks the beginning of the Sacred Way that leads to the tomb complex.

The turtle is the animal of the north, symbol of long life and constancy. The turtles that support imperial commemorative steles often have dragon-shaped heads.

Wang Meng, one of the many literati who suffered harsh punishments following the installation of the Ming, was imprisoned for having looked at paintings together with another man later condemned for treason; he himself died in prison.

Last of the "Four great masters of the Yuan dynasty," Wang Meng made liberal use of stylistic elements and techniques from the entire history of Chinese landscape painting to develop his own expressive style, admired and imitated by later painters.

Wang Meng was one of the many literati who suffered harsh punishments following the installation of the Ming: imprisoned for having looked at paintings together with another man later condemned for treason, he himself died in prison.

The paintings made after the foundation of the dynasty in 1368 are dense, almost obsessive in their tendency to completely cram the surface, whereas this landscape is given luminosity and breadth by its few empty spaces.

The human presence is limited to small huts located on the edges of the composition.

The famous critic Dong Qichang (1555–1636) said of this painting, "Master Wang's brushstrokes are strong enough to lift a tripod; for five hundred years there has been no one like him."

Wang Meng, The Qingbian Mountains, Ming dynasty, dated 1366, ink on paper, 141 x 42 cm, Shanghai Museum.

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The stele was erected by Hongwu's son, the emperor Yongle, three years after his illicit appropriation of the throne, and it commemorates the deeds and virtues of his father.

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Like some of the greatest Chinese rulers, Yongle usurped the throne from the legitimate successor, Hongwu’s grandson, and succeeded in legitimizing his seizure of power with a far-sighted government and large-scale territorial expansion. To more adequately protect the northern borders, he moved the capital northward from Nanjing to the former capital of the Mongols, which now took the name Beijing (“northern capital”). After the multi-ethnic governments of the Yuan, the Ming dynasty, with its home-grown roots, was strongly Sinocentric, in some cases resulting in political xenophobia. Emperor Yongle, curious and tolerant in terms of religion, was able to transform nationalism into a productive attitude. Under his rule six great maritime expeditions were carried out that took Chinese emissaries as far as the eastern coast of Africa, demonstrating China’s high level of technology as well as the intense diplomatic and mercantile activity of China at that time. The Yongle Encyclopedia, compiled by more than three thousand literati in four years of research and collected in 22,877 books, was to contain all the scientific knowledge of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The inside of the bowl is decorated with peony flowers, while the outside is painted with chrysanthemums. Both motifs often appear often in the repertory of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Over the course of the Yuan dynasty, the Jingdezhen kilns, located in southern China, developed a porcelain with a transparent underglaze painted decoration that profoundly influenced ceramic production. The underglaze technique involved a first firing at high temperature, after which the “bisque” was decorated and covered by a transparent glaze and fired a second time at lower temperature.

“Let commerce flourish on our frontiers and foreigners from distant lands be welcome among us” (Yongle)
Zheng He returned from his first expedition with two giraffes, highly prized by the Chinese because they were associated with the unicorn, a mythical animal that signaled the presence of a wise and benevolent ruler.

Yongle

It is not known when the Central Asian technique of cloisonné was introduced to China, but the oldest examples known today date to the early 15th century.

The technique of cloisonné consists in the creation of decorative designs on a metal vessel by soldering copper or bronze strips to it and filling the areas with a colored-glass paste that is then melted when the vessel is fired at a temperature of about 800°C.

The metallic wire of this plate has been gilded along the scalloped edges, on the two inner circles, and along the entire base.

Initially condemned as vulgar and showy, cloisonné wares were highly appreciated in the second half of the Ming dynasty as well as during the Qing.

Emperor Yongle clearly intended to use this enormous fleet to make clear the glory and power of the new China, which had freed itself from foreign rule only a few years earlier.

For the first time direct official contacts were made between the Chinese court and several African countries, which sent ambassadors and precious gifts to Beijing.

Despite the diplomatic and commercial successes achieved by the fleet, the most modern of its time, the costly trips were criticized after the death of Yongle and were ultimately suspended after the final 1433 expedition, in which the elderly admiral died.

Between 1413 and 1433 the Muslim eunuch Zheng He (1371–1435), nominated admiral of the Chinese fleet by the emperor Yongle, led seven large-scale naval expeditions, reaching India and Persia and going as far as Africa.

At least sixty-two transoceanic ships, each more than 400 feet long with holds large enough for 2,500 tons, accompanied by more than one hundred smaller ships, carried crews numbering more than 30,000.

For the first time direct official contacts were made between the Chinese court and several African countries, which sent ambassadors and precious gifts to Beijing.