1.4A. The Sui Dynasty: Re-establishing Unity in China

What do you see? What is unique about the sailing vessels? This body of water is actually part of the Great Canal. What difficulties would the builders of this canal face? How would these canals be helpful to the Chinese?

In this slide we see Sui Emperor Yang Di traveling by dragon boat on the Grand Canal.

- Through the use of costly military campaigns, the Sui dynasty was able to establish an empire that reunited much of the territory ruled by the Han dynasty. Wen Di, the first Sui emperor, extended his control over large stretches of China that had been conquered by foreigners during the period of division, an era of disunity that followed the Han dynasty. To the north, Wen Di repulsed Turkic forces. Sui armies defeated Turkish and Tibetan soldiers who had encroached on China's central Asian garrisons to the west. In the south, Wen Di's armies attacked South Vietnam and Taiwan in two unsuccessful campaigns that ended up costing the emperor much money.

- A general named Yang Jian emerged from the confusion and disunity of the period of division to conquer a weak northern kingdom called the Northern Wei in A.D. 581. Yang Jian led his soldiers to victory over a southern kingdom called the Chen, and in A.D. 589 established an empire that unified China for the first time in nearly 400 years. Yang Jian's victory marked the beginning of the Sui dynasty, with Yang Jian—who was later called Wen Di, which means "civic" or "polished" Emperor—as its ruler. Wen Di situated his capital at Changan, site of the present-day Chinese city of Xian, which three hundred years earlier had also been the capital of the Han empire. Changan was located on the south bank of the Wei River, just upstream from the confluence of the Wei and the mighty Yellow River.

- The two Sui emperors, Wen Di and his son Yang Di ("Zealous Emperor"), are remembered in Chinese history for their harsh rule. They forced peasants who owed taxes to the government to work off their debt by fighting in the army or working on extensive public works projects. While Wen Di and Yang Di both are remembered for their leadership in recreating the viability of a centralized, powerful state—realized in full by the Tang—Yang Di is considered greedy and egotistical by Chinese historians. His desire to expand the palace at the eastern capital of Luoyang required more than a million workers, 40 percent of whom reportedly died during construction. One contemporary writer reported that their was a steady flow of carts carrying away the dead from the capital under construction.
• Though he was a Buddhist, Wen Di also encouraged the practice of Confucianism and Daoism as a way to unite his many Chinese subjects. To spread Buddhism, Wen Di erected thousands of stupas, or Buddhist shrines, across China. He supported Buddhist monasteries and sent monks into the Chinese countryside to exhibit the relics of Buddhist saints and teach Buddhist beliefs. Wen Di recognized that many Chinese followed Confucian beliefs, valuing scholarship, hard work, and respect for elders and traditions. The emperor officially supported scholarship by establishing schools in Changan and Luoyang to train government officials. Wen Di also supported Daoism by encouraging Daoist monks to continue to study the similarities between Buddhism and Daoism.

• Extensive public works projects undertaken by leaders of the Sui dynasty reunited and reinvigorated Chinese society. The most important of these projects was the construction of the Grand Canal, completed in A.D. 610, during the rule of Yang Di. The Grand Canal, at its narrowest point 130 feet wide, connected the Yellow River in the north with the Yangzi River in the south, covering a twisty 600 miles. Though taxes collected in the form of rice, grown in the south, produced the majority of funds for Yang Di’s government, economic stimulus was not Yang Di’s prime motive. A cultured scholar who longed to exhibit his sophistication, Yang Di made frequent trips on the Canal in his four-storied dragon boats, traveling in the imperial barge at the head of a flotilla that sometimes stretched for sixty miles. Millions of peasants worked to build and repair the Canal, many perishing while working like slaves for little pay under harsh conditions. Still, the Grand Canal underscored the growing importance of the south in Chinese culture. Rice was replacing millet as the staple food in the Chinese diet, and farmers and merchants in the south used the canal to extend their business and influence up into the traditional heart of Chinese imperial (or ceremonial) culture, the north.

• Another important public works project under Yang Di was the reparations undertaken on the Great Wall in A.D. 607. The Great Wall—first built under the Qin emperor Shi Huang Di (reigned 221–210 B.C.)—eventually stretched 1,500 miles from the shores of the Yellow Sea to the Mongolian interior. Of the hundreds of thousands of workers who worked on the Great Wall, those who died during its construction were often buried among the wall’s bricks, giving the wall the nickname “the world’s longest cemetery.” Despite the toll it took on Chinese peasant workers, the Great Wall—with its thousands of 40-foot-high defense towers—increased the security from northern raiders, which allowed cultural and economic growth in the Chinese interior.
1.4B. The Tang Dynasty: Golden Age of Chinese Culture

What do you see? Describe the buildings and the people. What do you think the buildings might be used for? Which figure seems to be the most powerful? Why? What does this image tell you about the quality of life in China under this dynasty?

In this slide we see a Tang dynasty emperor at his palace where officials congregate and participate in recreational activities.

- The Tang dynasty ruled one of the most geographically extensive empires in Chinese history. After the army of Empress Wu Zhao defeated the Korean Koguryo kingdom in the northeast, the Tang reached its greatest expansion. From her capital at Luoyang, Wu Zhao—the only female emperor in Chinese history—ruled a territory that stretched from inner Mongolia in the north to Vietnam in the south, and from Korea in the east to the lofty Himalayan province of Kashmir in the west. The dynasty’s most significant expansion was in the west because the reconquering of the Tarim basin allowed for the reopening of the Silk Road.

- The Silk Road, a series of trade routes connecting China to central Asia and the Middle East, first opened during the Han dynasty. The route followed a string of oases perched between Central Asia’s northern wastelands and mighty mountains like the Himalayas in the south. Chinese merchants headed west along the Silk Road with caravans of camels and ox-drawn carts laden with silk, porcelain, jade, bronze, tea, and other commodities, often handing their goods over to other participants in a chain of trade. They returned to China, along with traders from dozens of countries, with glass, rugs, horses, precious metals and stones, cotton products, and exotic spices and medicines. The Silk Road also served as an avenue for the exchange of cultures and ideas. Chinese technologies and ideas—paper, printing, agriculture, weapons, and weaving, among many others—traveled westward along the trans-Asian highway. Religions also passed along the road, bringing the beliefs of Christianity and Islam to the Tang capital at Changan.

- One of the keys to the success of the long-lasting Tang dynasty was general and emperor Li Shi Min’s ability to control the army. In A.D. 618, Li Shi Min captured Changan and Luoyang, ending the Sui dynasty. His father Li Yuan served as emperor until A.D. 626, when Li Shi Min—known posthumously as Emperor Dai Zong, which means Great Ancestor—took the throne. Dai Zong realized that the greatest threat to stability for his new empire were the armies of the rich military aristocrats, who often grew tired of imperial rule and broke off to start civil wars. To curb the generals’ power, the emperor assigned them to northern border provinces and equipped them with largely inexperienced
soldiers. Serious training was conducted during the harsh northern winters. Dai Zong kept close watch over the border militias by employing imperial inspectors to report on their actions. By controlling the generals directly, he was able to use the army to expand the empire and return China to the size of the Han empire. Dai Zong’s generals became so famous as conquerors that statues made in their image were used to guard the gates of temples and palaces.

- Tang emperors ruled according to the ideals of Confucius—in Chinese, Kong Fu Zi, (551–497 B.C.)—which supported a scholarly class of civil servants. To maintain orderly rule over such an extensive empire, rulers like Dai Zong and Wu Zhao relied on a bureaucracy. Chinese bureaucracy was composed of departments, or bureaus, each with its own specific area of responsibility—an outgrowth of the Confucian teaching that harmony and stability in the social order could only result from respecting hierarchies. During the Tang era, civil servants were not only officials, but poets and artists as well, because Confucius stressed scholarship, the study of calligraphy, poetry, and painting along with history and government.

- During the rule of Xuan Zong, the “Brilliant emperor,” Chinese arts, particularly painting and poetry, reached their zenith. Influenced by Daoism, Tang artists stressed the beauty, power, harmony, and peace of nature. Mountains and water, symbols of the timeless perfection of nature, dominated landscape paintings. In line with Laozi’s teachings that humans should live in harmony with nature to discover the Dao, or natural path to truth, people appeared as small and insignificant in the landscape painting. Poetry also reflected Daoist beliefs, concentrating on images of nature that inspired contemplation. Li Bo, one of China’s most celebrated poets, lived during this time. The following example of his verse illustrates the influence of nature on Chinese poetry: My friend is lodging in the Eastern Range, / Dearly loving the beauty of valleys and hills, / A pine tree wind dusted his sleeves and coat; / A pebbly stream cleans his heart and ears. / I envy you who far from strife and talk / Are high-propped on a pillow of grey mist. Other artists sculpted large bronze and ceramic likenesses of horses, Buddhas, court performers, and famous generals.

- Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism all flourished during Tang rule, though Buddhism experienced a threat to its continuation in China. During the first part of Tang rule, many emperors and officials practiced and supported Buddhism. For instance, before her marriage to emperor Gao Zong, Wu Zhao had lived in a Buddhist monastery. Also, the number of Buddhist monasteries in China was at its highest during the early Tang. But the Tang leaders had based their government on Confucian ideals, particularly the imperative of orderly respect between ruler and ruled, and feared the growing power of Buddhists. Increased xenophobia with the shrinking of the empire after the mid-eighth century led some to condemn Buddhism as a foreign, and therefore impure, belief system. In addition, the growing economic power of the monasteries, which were not taxed, and the increasing numbers of monks and nuns entering monasteries where they were beyond the taxing power of the state, led Emperor Wu Zong (ruled A.D. 841–847) to repress
Buddhism. He ordered the destruction of 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 stupas, yet Buddhism continued to be practiced underground.

- During the Tang dynasty the scholar class became the new ruling elite through the implementation of a system of land reform. Called the “equal-field system,” it limited the power of the aristocracy by taking away vast tracts of revenue-producing land. Under the equal-field system, each person in the empire was assigned a rank, and each rank was allotted a certain amount of land. The highest-ranking people were the heads of traditional landowning aristocratic families, who received about 1370 acres of land, an amount that considerably reduced their power. Each healthy male between the age of 18 and 59 was supposed to receive 13.7 acres of land, but the system sometimes broke down due to corrupt or inefficient civil servants. Under the new system, people paid taxes according to how much land they received. They paid three kinds of taxes: agricultural products, or grains, such as wheat or rice; textiles, such as silk or hemp, and labor service, which could be converted into a money payment. Peasants who did not produce enough to pay their taxes could cancel their debt by working for the government on public works projects, such as constructing dams or rebuilding canals. Thus, the government benefited from an increased number of taxpayers, the limited power of rural aristocrats, and the loyalty of peasants who received land.

- Land reform during the Tang era also benefited commoners. Land reform helped peasants by giving them a chance to gain wealth. With increased wealth, some peasant families were able to send a son to private school, where he would be able to study Confucian ideals, poetry, history, government, and painting in preparation for the civil service. If he earned a position in the government, the son would bring his formerly poor family wealth, prestige, and, potentially, power.
1.4C. The Song Dynasty: Rise of Meritocracy

What do you see? These men are taking a test. What visual clues can you use to support that fact? Who is administering the test? By the looks on the faces of the test takers, what can you say about the difficulty of the exam? This is a government exam. What sorts of skills might the test assess? What qualifications might they need to take the test?

- In this slide we see Chinese taking civil-service examinations under the watchful eye of an emperor, who overlooks the scene from a pavilion at rear. Officials of several cities compose essays designed to demonstrate their knowledge of Confucian texts.

- Unlike the Tang empire, Song China was limited to China’s provinces south of the Great Wall. The greatest challenge to unity during Song rule involved containing the many hostile ethnic groups clustered on China’s borders. The primary threat came from the north, where Mongolians and Jurchens and Khitans constantly attacked northern provinces and eventually split the empire. The end of the Song dynasty also came at the hands of a northern invasion.

- During the Song dynasty, the center of Chinese culture shifted from the north to the south because invasions on the northern borders eventually split the empire. After almost 60 years of civil wars, known as the Five Dynasties, a general named Zhao Kuang Yin rose to power to unite China once again. When Zhao Kuang Yin—posthumously known as Tai Zuo—named himself emperor in A.D. 960, he made his capital in the city of Kaifeng, located near the junction of the Grand Canal system and the Yellow River. Northern people from Mongolia and the northeast harassed China’s northern border for almost 200 years, eventually breaking through the Great Wall and capturing Kaifeng in A.D. 1126. The royal family fled south to the heavily populated Yangzi River valley. The northern conquerors, called the Jurchen, stayed north of the Yangzi River, and the Song established a new capital in the south at Hangzhou, located on the East China Sea. Thereafter, because the north was under foreign rule, government officials came primarily from members of southern Chinese families. In addition, southern merchants became very wealthy because northern products like wheat and millet were no longer available, making southern rice crops extremely valuable.

- Government by meritocracy was one of the crowning achievement of the Song dynasty. In the Song meritocracy, bureaucrats earned and kept their positions according to their abilities and performance. Song meritocracy was squarely based on Confucian traditions, which theoretically required the state’s most talented subjects to serve in the civil service. In reality, Confucian-based bureaucracy before the Song had been dominated by the sons of wealthy, landowning aristocrats and civil servants. This was true in large part because
only the upper classes in Chinese society had enough money to spend on the private education necessary to prepare their sons adequately for the civil-service examinations, which tested whether applicants should be eligible for government positions. In addition, for a long time, public servants received their positions through recommendations. Song emperors, however, insured that the most talented Chinese young men, despite their economic status, could become civil servants by seeking out promising students among all ranks of society. Conversely, more Chinese had the free time to study for the exams when the government-regulated equal-field system fell into disuse after the late eight century. Thus, during the Song dynasty, students showing aptitude were recruited and educated so that they would be able to take the all-important Civil-Service Exam.

- During the Song dynasty, as civil servants, or scholars, grew to be the most powerful people in the emperor’s government, the Civil-Service Examination became the most important event in Chinese society. Civil servants were chosen according to the scores they achieved on the exam, also called “the Ladder to the Clouds.” The exam was exceedingly difficult: each of the four levels of increasingly challenging tests took all day and required superior knowledge of Confucian classic texts, poetry, government, administration, and sometimes calligraphy. Most students took the first exam around the age of 23, and the few people who passed the final tests—between 2 and 10 percent of thousands that took the tests each year—were usually in their mid-30s. Those who passed the exams were conferred the prestigious title of scholar and could become administration officials, poets, or historians. To insure that no corruption existed, the Bureau of Examination Copyists copied every test before it was graded, so that no test taker’s handwriting could be recognized by the official exam correctors employed by the Board of Civil Office. Passing the exam, however, did not guarantee a candidate an automatic appointment to a position; it merely allowed him to apply for a job in the government.

- During the Song dynasty, a new and vibrant form of Buddhism called Chan became popular across East Asia. (In Japan, were it became quite prevalent, Chan is called Zen.) Chan stresses personal enlightenment not through study of classical Buddhist texts, but rather through intense, quiet meditation called zazen. The Chan sect was a small one that appealed primarily to the elite who could afford the time to meditate and to retreat into the world of contemplation. Chinese Buddhist monks were attracted to Chan because of simplicity and because it could easily be combined with Daoist ideas. Chinese Chan monks transported Zen teachings to Korea and Japan, and the religious connection became a path of cultural exchange between East Asia’s various cultures.

- The Song era saw the rise of the merchant class in Chinese society. In traditional Confucian theory, a merchant was considered lower than a peasant or artisan because a merchant neither worked the land or created a product. But the Song government realized that wealth could be raised by taxing commerce, so trade was encouraged, both in China and overseas. A new strain of faster-growing rice, imported from Cambodia, doubled China’s output of the grain, allowing for surplus stock that could be traded to bring in
extra wealth. This extra income allowed more merchants to enter the lucrative overseas trade. Chinese junks, or ships, sailed on China’s elaborate canal system and plied the coasts of East and Southeast Asia, trading the varied products of China’s agricultural and industrial might. Innovations in Chinese technology, in part made possible by the stable Song government, led to the invention of printing—which increased literacy and the availability of books—and created other new products such as copper and paper money, and expensive art objects. These products, along with the traditional Chinese goods such as tea, coal, porcelain, and especially silk, became very popular in Korea, Japan, Persia, the Arab world, and East Africa.
1.4D. The Yuan Dynasty: The Age of Foreign Rule

What do you see here? Who seems to have the most political power? What aspects of the emperor’s court indicate that he is quite powerful? In what ways are the men in the lower left corner different from the rest of the people in the slide? These are the Polos from Venice, Italy. What would bring these Europeans to China?

☐ In this slide we see an illustration of the court of Kublai Khan, where Marco Polo and his father were treated with great hospitality and were entertained by fire-eaters and jugglers.

- The lands of the Yuan empire made up the Chinese sector of the Mongol empire, and was called the Khanate (kingdom) of the Great Khan (Khan means leader in Mongolian). This region was one fourth of the enormous Mongol empire, which stretched from the arctic circle in the north to the Gulf of Tonkin in the south. Yuan emperors ruled from the shores of the East China Sea to the Himalayas in the West. Kublai Khan (reigned A.D. 1279–1294), the first Yuan emperor, had both a winter and a summer palace, the latter located north of the Great Wall. In the winter he ruled from his palace in Dadu, present-day site of Beijing. During the summer he held his court at Shangdu.

- The Yuan dynasty was founded by the grandson of Genghis Khan, one of the most feared leaders the world has ever seen. Genghis Khan—originally named Temujin—was born in A.D. 1167, high on the Mongolian plains. When he was 12 years old, his father was murdered and Temujin swore he would become a great leader to avenge his father’s death. Temujin’s reputation as a fearless fighter and leader grew as he led his ever-increasing army to one victory after another. In A.D. 1206, an assembly of Mongol chiefs chose Temujin to be their khan. They gave him the title Genghis Khan, which means “ruler of all within the seas.” Under Genghis, the Mongol armies swept across Asia striking terror into the hearts of people from Poland to Korea. Genghis’ magnificent cavalry men carried six weapons at a time, including a bow that shot arrows that could pierce armor from a distance of 200 yards. Genghis reportedly said, “Man’s highest joy is in victory; to conquer one’s enemies, to pursue them, to deprive them of their possessions, to make their beloved weep, to ride on their horses, and to embrace their wives and daughters.”

- Genghis’ grandson, Kublai Khan, inherited the Khanate of the Great Khan in A.D. 1260, eventually establishing the only foreign-ruled dynasty in China’s history to that date. Kublai Khan fought against the Song for 40 years before finally establishing the Yuan dynasty in A.D. 1279. Like his grandfather, Kublai Khan was a great warrior, but he faced the problem of finding a way to rule in traditional Chinese style while keeping power in the hands of the Mongols. Kublai was successful because he retained the civil-service bureaucracy, but staffed it with foreigners, especially Turkish and Persian Muslims and Christians. In this way, Kublai was able to maintain control without giving power to the
former Southern Song civil servants. Under Yuan rule, a strict hierarchy of social classes
developed: nontaxed Mongols at the top; non-Chinese collaborators, who made up the
civil service, second; Northern Chinese third; and Southern Chinese fourth. Under the
Khan, no Chinese were allowed to walk the streets after sunset or to carry a weapon, and
they could not learn the Mongol language or marry a Mongol. These rules applied to all
Chinese, including Northerners, even though they had lived with the Mongols for
150 years prior to Yuan ascendancy.

- Chinese belief systems were largely unaffected by Yuan rule, despite the fact that the
  Mongols did not strongly support any Chinese belief system. Kublai Khan retained the
  belief system of his ancestors, called shamanism, which holds that good and evil spirits
  pervade the world and can be summoned and heard only through priests called shamans.
  At his court in Dadu, Kublai Khan retained hundreds of shamans, who read the stars and
  communicated with the spirits of nature and fate on behalf of the Great Khan. Chinese
  commoners continued to practice their traditional religions largely without interference,
  and under Kublai Kahn’s patronage the number of Buddhist establishments in China rose
to 42,000, with 213,000 monks and nuns.

- Yuan rule was not popular among the Chinese because of the suffering and economic
disunity caused by Mongol governmental practices. The wars of conquest fought by the
Mongols resulted in the death of millions of Chinese, including a significant portion of
the empire’s northern population. Additionally, the Mongols seized land from many
Chinese and turned it into pasture for their horses and flocks of livestock. This meant that
many Chinese became impoverished because land was the source of their wealth. The
seizing of land also decreased the amount of food available to the Chinese, causing many
to die of disease and starvation. Additionally, though under Kublai Khan China
maintained an advanced, efficient transportation and communication system—which
included a postal system of relays with post horses that traveled between stations—later
Mongol rulers lost favor by not maintaining roads and canals; roads in poor condition
slowed Chinese commerce by isolating farmers from markets and ports.

- Although Yuan China represented a step back from the glory of Chinese culture under the
Tang and Song, Europeans who arrived in China were amazed at the empire. The most
famous traveler in China during Yuan rule was Marco Polo, a young Italian from Venice
who accompanied his merchant father across the Silk Road to China. Marco was 17 when
he arrived at Shangdu in A.D. 1275. He spent 17 years in the service of Kublai Khan as an
ambassador and civil servant, travelling from Burma to Korea and throughout China.
Upon returning to Europe, Polo turned his adventures into a book about his travels called
A Description of the World. The world he described, of rocks that burned (coal); of
mountains of jewels; of palaces whose walls were plated in gold and silver and decorated
with dragons, beasts, and birds; of parades of 5,000 elephants; of currency made from the
bark of mulberry trees (paper money); and much more, was so amazing that few believed
him. On his deathbed, when asked to recant his stories, Polo responded, “I have only
*described half of what I saw.*"
1.2E. The Ming Dynasty: Exploration and Isolation

What do you see? Describe the people. What do you think these people are doing here? What is unique about the architecture of the building in this slide? Why do you think Ming emperors had the building constructed in this manner?

- In this slide we see a nineteenth-century Chinese painting of the Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City in Peking (present-day Beijing).

- The early years of Ming rule are characterized by an overt attempt to reassert Chinese rule in China. After defeating the Mongols in A.D. 1368, Ming rulers set about securing the borders of China to insure that no foreign invasion would bring alien rule to the Middle Kingdom again. Once the country had been reunited under Chinese rule, the Ming emperors sent emissaries to all border states, demanding that they recognize the Chinese emperor as the Son of Heaven. The Chinese ambassadors accomplished this by having the ruler sign a list of vassals, or subordinate nobles, and send a gift of tribute. Chinese emissaries collected tribute from Japan, Korea, Annam (Vietnam), Champa (South Vietnam), Siam (Thailand), Burma, and Tibet.

- The Ming empire was founded by Zhu Yuan Zhang, a Chinese commoner who took advantage of the chaos of late Yuan rule to unite China. By A.D. 1367, Zhu had taken control of the Yangzi River basin, making a capital at Nanjing. One year later, he led a huge peasant army across the Yellow River and captured Dadu. He proclaimed himself emperor Hong Wu ("vast military power") and called his dynasty the Ming ("brilliant"). His rule brought stability back to the common Chinese by rebuilding the infrastructure of the country. Imperial work forces rebuilt bridges, canals, roads, temples, shrines, and the walls of 500 cities. Hong Wu reestablished the Civil-Service Exam, again making it available to all literate Chinese.

- Starting with Hong Wu, Ming emperors took a much more active role in Chinese government, overseeing and administering the civil service directly. This new style probably developed because Hong Wu was a suspicious person, always afraid that high-ranking officials doubted him or were plotting against him. He made his decisions in secret, consulting only a few trusted eunuch advisors, and allowed no discussion of his decisions. (Eunuchs were men who had their testicles cut off and were employed by the emperor because they could not father children, which insured they would not plot to set their sons up in the government.) To maintain more direct control over his officials, Hong Wu abolished the Imperial Secretariat, which traditionally had functioned like the American cabinet, and assumed their duties. He created a secret police of eunuchs loyal to him, whose findings led to the execution of thousands of people.
The lasting symbol of the Ming’s despotic rule is the palace complex, called the Forbidden City, located in Peking (today called Beijing). The magnificent new capital city—which took the labor of many thousands to build—was erected just north of the ruins of the Mongol capital of Dadu. At the center of Peking were the 40-foot-high walls of the Imperial City, each 5 miles in length. Behind the City’s walls the highest-ranking civil servants lived in their beautiful homes, famous for their gently sloping tile roofs, built with the slightly curled eaves associated with Chinese architectural developments of antiquity. In the center of the Imperial City stand the high red walls of the emperor’s palace, the Forbidden City. Surrounded by a moat 2 miles in circumference, the Forbidden City is a magnificent complex of palaces, great halls, courtyards, gardens, moats, and beautifully arched bridges. Only the emperor, his family, and trusted officials and eunuchs were allowed inside the red walls.

The renewed vigor of traditional Chinese society during the Ming era resulted in a rebirth of adherence to Confucian philosophy. Many Chinese combined belief in all three belief systems traditionally popular in China: Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. For instance, Emperor Hong Wu had been a novice Buddhist monk before he led his peasant army against the Mongols, yet he presided over many Confucian services as China’s emperor.

The Ming Dynasty sponsored extensive overseas exploration at the beginning of their rule. The period of distant overseas exploration was begun by Emperor Yong Le (reigned A.D. 1403–1424), which means “perpetual happiness.” Yong Le commissioned a Muslim eunuch named Zheng He to lead a fleet of 63 junks on a trip west across the Indian Ocean. The fleet made seven journeys between A.D. 1405 and 1433. No one knows what the ultimate goal of Zheng He’s sea journeys were, but he did force 50 different heads of state to enroll on the list of states paying tribute to the emperor. When they refused to cooperate, the leaders of Sri Lanka and Sumatra were captured and forcibly brought to Yong Le in the Imperial City. Another accomplishment of these journeys was a pilgrimage by four Chinese sailors to Mecca during the fifth voyage. During the seventh voyage, 27,500 sailors travelled up and down the East African coast. They returned with ostriches, zebras, and a giraffe, animals never before seen in China. Zheng He’s ships weighed 1,500 tons, or three times the weight of European ships of the time. Navigation by magnetic compass, an Chinese instrument then unknown in Europe, allowed the Chinese ships to know their location whether they were in sight of land or not.

For unknown reasons, the overseas explorations ceased in A.D. 1433, marking the beginning of China’s imperially mandated isolation from the rest of the world. At first, the effect of isolation on commoners was minimal, since most peasants were mostly concerned with only getting their crops to market. But the Ming emperors disallowed foreign trade, and this eventually reduced the market for Chinese goods dramatically. Less demand for Chinese products meant that peasants and workers who produced imported goods, like surplus agricultural products, or art objects, such as silk and
porcelain, lost income. The deleterious effects of isolation were compounded when Ming emperors began wasting money on lavish court life. Huge feasts for 6,000 guests, giant hunting parties, and expensive renovations to the Forbidden City drained the royal treasury. To raise funds to cover the expenses of this opulent lifestyle, Ming emperors raised taxes on the commoners. Forced with this heavy burden, and unable to capitalize on foreign markets, peasants became indebted to the government. Many were forced to sell their lands to ruthless large landlords, who indentured them as laborers. Eventually this trend led to peasant uprisings and civil wars, which weakened border security and opened China to invasion. The last Ming emperor hung himself on Prospect Hill, overlooking the Forbidden City, in A.D. 1644, as Beijing burned and the Manchus, another northern people bent on invasion, massed on the northern border.