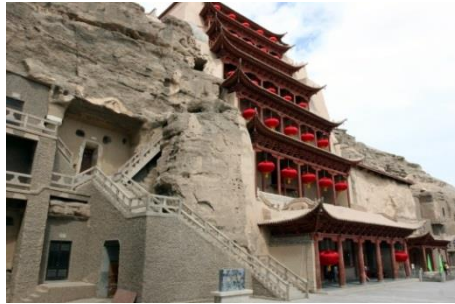


## Tang Dynasty Culture



The Tang Dynasty is synonymous with Chinese culture at its creative best: at its height, the capital of Chang'an (modern day Xian) was the greatest city in the world, a liberal and cosmopolitan place with great wealth and sophisticated cultural life.

The Tang rulers were in control between the seventh and tenth centuries, a time of peace and prosperity in China, when the emperors encouraged people to push the boundaries of art, poetry, dance, architecture and literature.

Vast riches poured into Chang'an from the Silk Road trade between China and the nations beyond its western borders. Merchants came from far afield to acquire this previously-unknown material, created only in China, which was much prized by women in Europe. Silk and Tang fashion styles were also in demand in the neighbouring countries of Japan and Korea.

The success of the Tang Dynasty was built on a solid system of administration, plus a powerful military to keep potential invaders at bay. During the Tang era talented scholars were able to progress up the government system on merit, by passing the civil service administration examinations. New blood from around the country broke the previous domination of aristocratic northwestern families.

The Empress Wu, one of the few women to rule during China's long and illustrious history, took a shine to the more gifted bureaucrats and promoted them to key posts, bringing wealth and influence to their families.

The height of Tang dynasty splendour came under Emperor Xuanzong, who reigned from 713 until 755. China used mercenaries to bolster its military power - often people from ethnic minorities who proved to be fiercely loyal to the ruler - and readily incorporated fighting tactics and weaponry from other armies.

But later in his reign, weakened and slowed by age, the Emperor Xuanzong became infatuated by a beautiful concubine Yangguifei - who distracted him further from the court powerplays. A military rebellion was quashed, but the days of Tang domination were numbered.

But the Tang legacy lives on, ten centuries later, particularly in architecture and art forms. Tang influence can be seen throughout China and also in Japan and Korea, where Tang culture took a firm hold.

Around Xi'an, the site of Chang'an, there are fabulous treasures from both Tang and other eras. Indeed, the western region of China is blessed with a vast store of wonders, both man-made and natural. The Shaolin Temple has become famed worldwide for its energetic kung-fu style of fighting, a system invented and refined by warrior-monks who had helped to protect a Tang emperor from his enemies.

Shaolin is within easy reach of Xi'an. There are historical, cultural and natural sites. The Forest of Pagodas boasts 240 such buildings, making it the biggest single collection in the entire country, while a close-by pottery replicates the distinctive three-coloured style of the Tang Dynasty era.

Close to Xian itself is Mount Huashan, one of five famous mountains in China, which boasts a series of strikingly-shaped peaks. Other rocks or valleys are given fanciful names, such as Hundred-foot Gorge, Laojun Furrow, Heavenward Ladder and Old Dragon Ridge.

The many museums in the region have fascinating displays which trace China's long and illustrious history. The Luoyang Folk Custom Museum displays the folk arts and customs of Henan Province, while Xian itself has a new, purpose-built museum which showcases China's development through the centuries.

Visitors are invariably awed by the richness of the country's civilisation: it is a testimony to the enormous contribution of the Tang Dynasty that its greatness is still being celebrated in the 21st century.