Changes in Chinese Society

China’s prosperity produced many social changes during the Tang and Song periods. Chinese society became increasingly mobile. People moved to the cities in growing numbers. The Chinese also experienced greater social mobility than ever before. The most important avenue for social advancement was the civil service system.

Levels of Society  During Tang and Song times, the power of the old aristocratic families began to fade. A new, much larger upper class emerged, made up of scholar-officials and their families. Such a class of powerful, well-to-do people is called the gentry. The gentry attained their status through education and civil service positions rather than through land ownership. Below the gentry was an urban middle class. It included merchants, shopkeepers, skilled artisans, minor officials, and others. At the bottom of urban society were laborers, soldiers, and servants. In the countryside lived the largest class by far, the peasants. They toiled for wealthy landowners as they had for centuries.

The Status of Women  Women had always been subservient to men in Chinese society. Their status further declined during the Tang and Song periods. This was especially true among the upper classes in cities. There a woman’s work was deemed less important to the family’s prosperity and status. Changing attitudes affected peasant families less, however. Peasant women worked in the fields and helped produce their family’s food and income.

One sign of the changing status of women was the new custom of binding the feet of upper-class girls. When a girl was very young, her feet were bound tightly with cloth, which eventually broke the arch and curled all but the big toe under. This produced what was admiringly called a “lily-foot.” Women with bound feet were crippled for life. To others in society, such a woman reflected the wealth and prestige of her husband, who could afford such a beautiful but impractical wife.

The social, economic, and technological transformations of the Tang and Song periods permanently shaped Chinese civilization. They endured even as China fell to a group of nomadic outsiders, the Mongols, whom you will learn about in Section 2.

Terms & Names

1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.
   - Tang Taizong
   - Wu Zhao
   - movable type
   - gentry

Using Your Notes

2. How are the accomplishments of the two dynasties similar?
   - Tang only
   - Song only
   - Both

Main Ideas

3. How did the Tang Dynasty benefit from the accomplishments of the Sui?
4. What steps did the Tang take to restore China’s bureaucracy?
5. Describe the urban social classes that emerged during the Tang and Song periods.

Critical Thinking & Writing

6. Recognizing Effects What impact did improvements in transportation have on Tang and Song China?
7. Forming and Supporting Opinions “Gaining power depends on merit, not birth.” Do you agree with this view of China under the Tang and Song? Explain.
8. Primary Sources How do the feelings expressed in Tu Fu’s poem on page 326 still relate to life today?
9. Writing Activity Empire Building Write two short paragraphs, one discussing how Tang and Song emperors strengthened China’s empire, and the other discussing how they weakened it.

Connect to Today

Creating a List

Gunpowder is used in the making of fireworks. Conduct research to find interesting facts about fireworks in the United States—the number produced in a year, the amount of gunpowder in a typical firework, and so on. Present your findings in a list titled “Fun Facts About Fireworks.”