Imperial China at Its Height (Lecture 2.1)

¶ 2.1



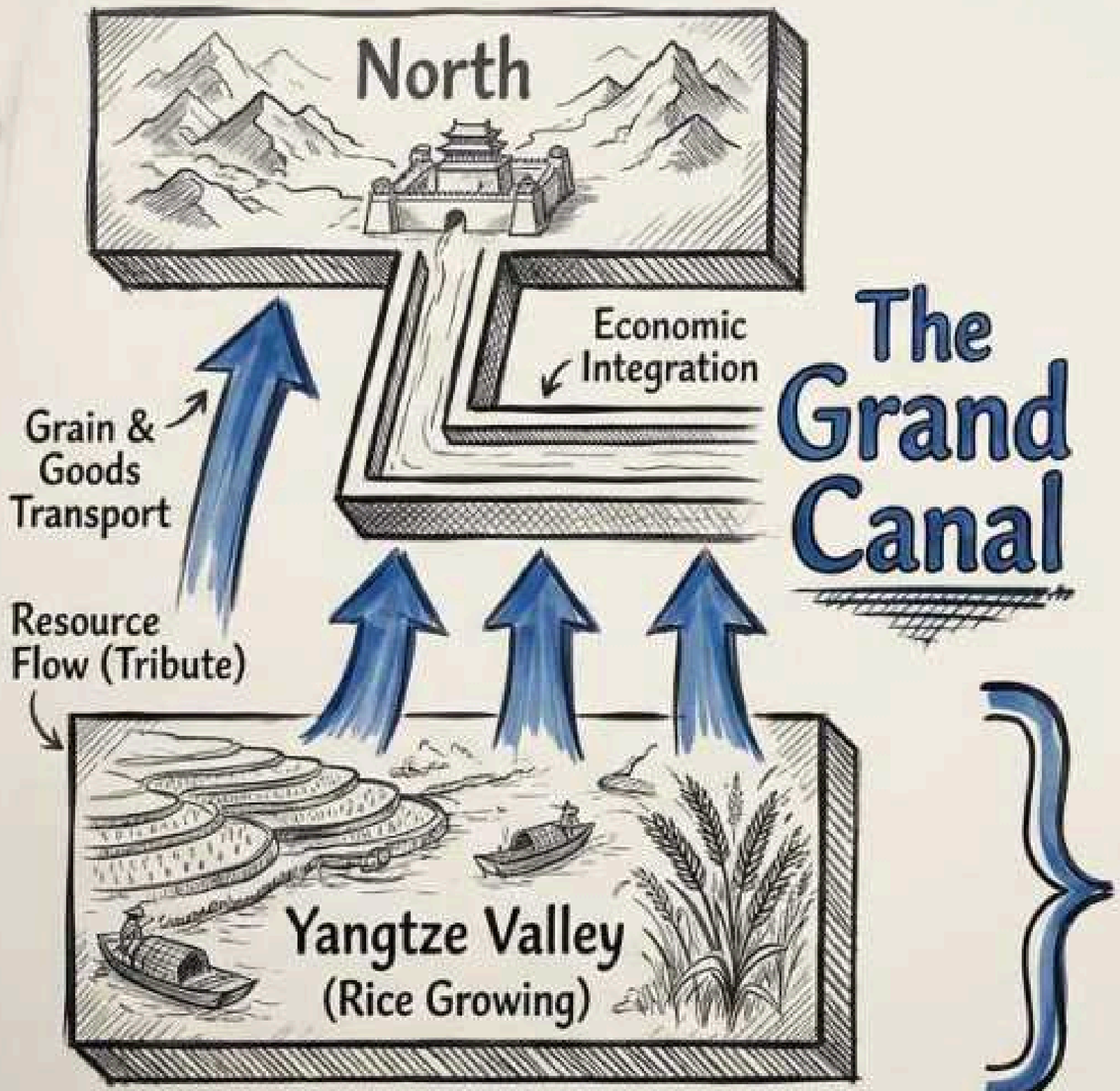
Origin: Spread from India along the Silk Roads during the centuries of division post-Han dynasty.

Adaptation: Evolved into native forms (Chan/Zen Buddhism emphasizes meditation).

Landscape Transformation: Monasteries, cave temples, and pagodas appeared across the land, physically altering the landscape.

The Sui Foundation

¶ 2.2



Lifespan Equation

Short-lived Dynasty

Massive Burden & Unrest

Reunification (589) − (Heavy Labour + Failed Korean Wars) = Collapse (618)

Massive Burden & Unrest

Rapid Overthrow

Key Insight: Like the Qin dynasty, the short-lived Sui laid the massive engineering foundations for a greater successor empire.

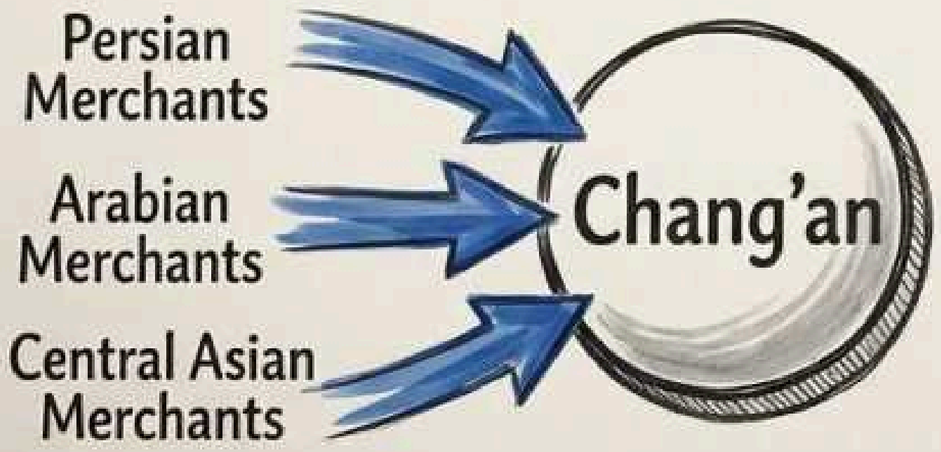
The Tang Golden Age

¶ 2.3

Tang Dynasty (618–907)

Chang'an Pop ≈ 1,000,000

Largest city in the world.





Empress Wu Zetian
(ruled 690–705, the only woman to rule in her own name in Chinese history).

Notable Figures: Master poets Li Bai and Du Fu (still loved today).

The Examination System Mechanics

¶ 2.4



Key Concept: A distinctive institution of imperial China used to select officials based on tested knowledge rather than pure aristocracy.

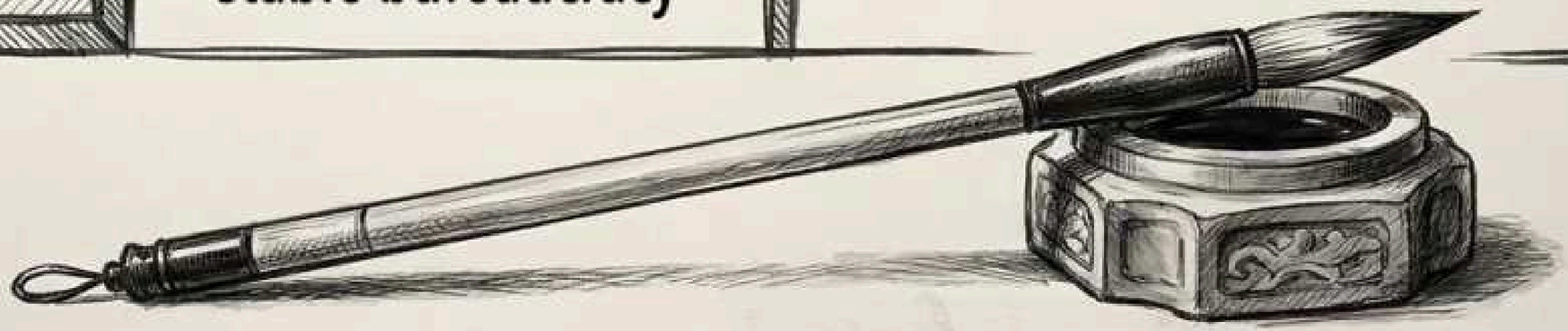


The Scholar-Official Class (Literati / Gentry)

¶ 2.5

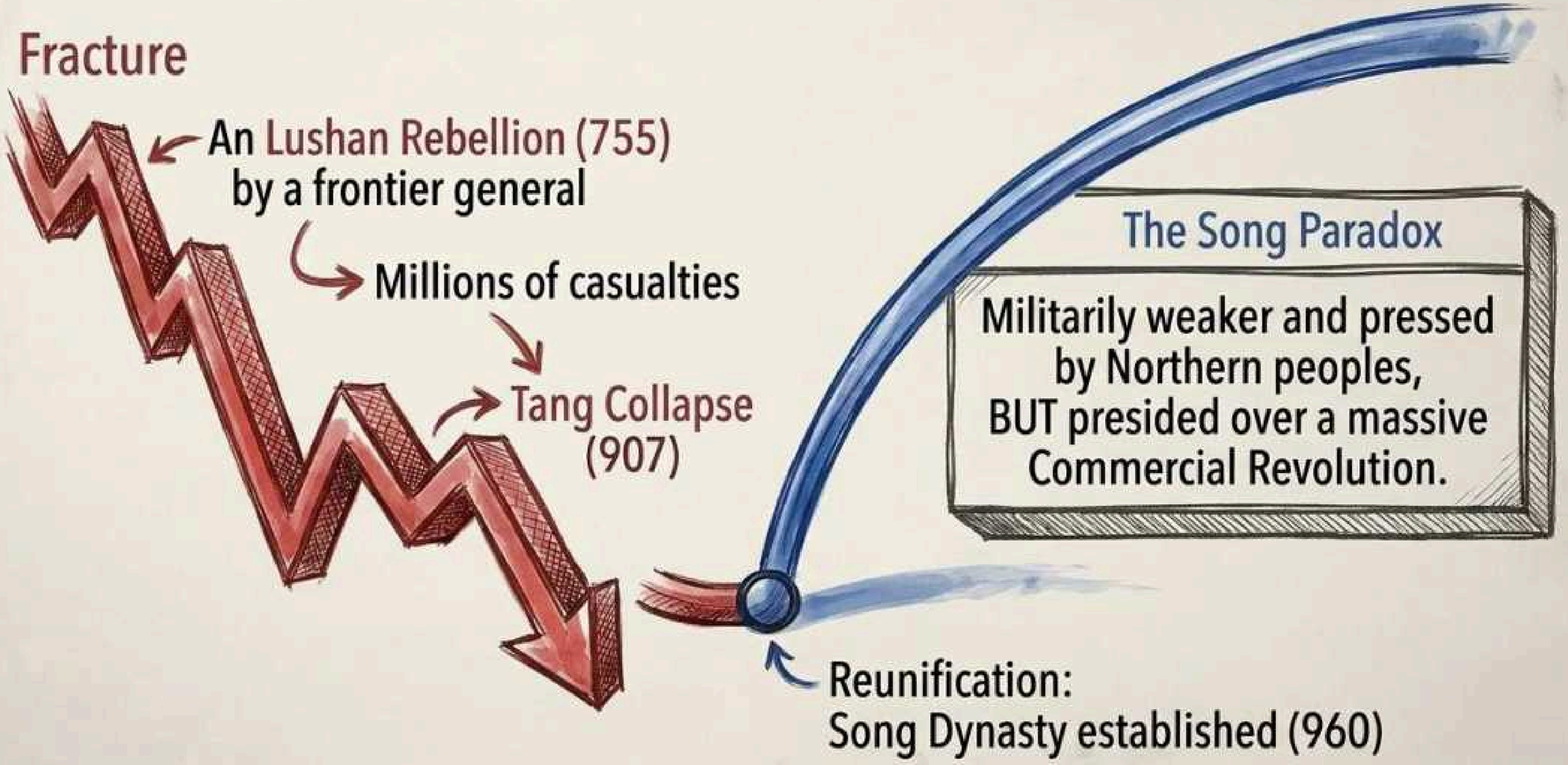
The Literati Profile: Men who shared a common education, wrote with brushes in classical Chinese, painted, and composed poetry.

Pro/Con Diagnostic Matrix	Systemic Flaws (Cons)
Systemic Benefits (Pros)	
– Gave the empire a unified elite culture	– Strongly rewarded rote memorisation
– Created a remarkably stable bureaucracy	– Entirely excluded women



Transition & The Commercial Revolution

¶ 2.6



Song Economic Dominance

¶ 2.7

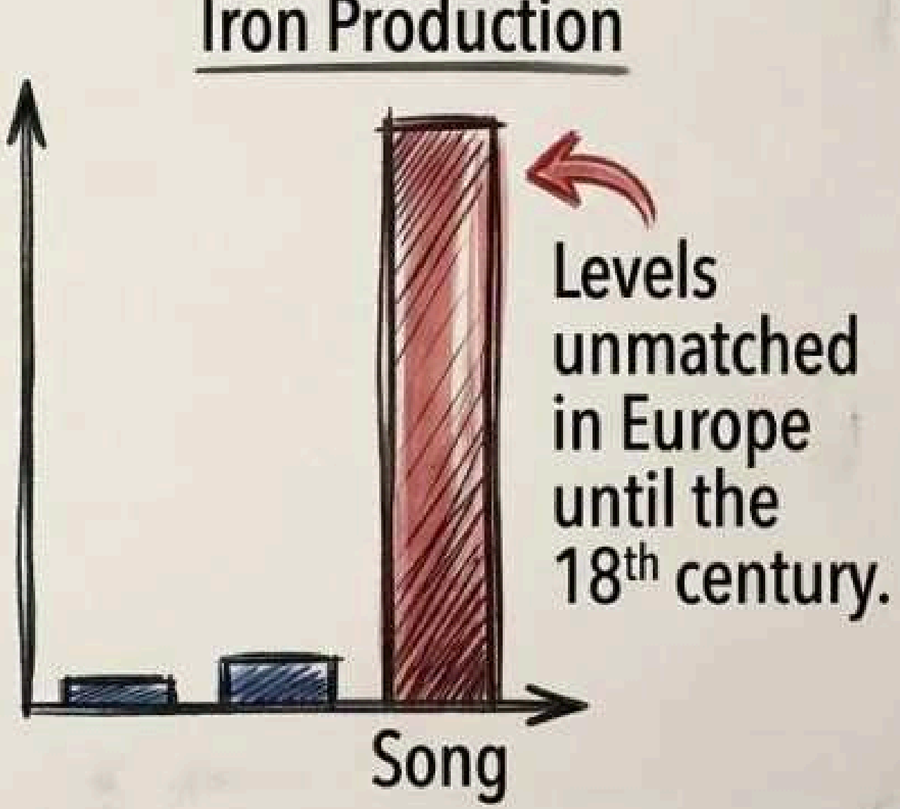
New Rice (Vietnam) x 2 Harvests/Yr = Pop > 100,000,000

(Noted as most advanced economy in the world)



Monetary Innovation:
World's first paper money eases trade.

Urbanization:
Cities like Kaifeng and Hangzhou bustle with shops, restaurants, and entertainers.



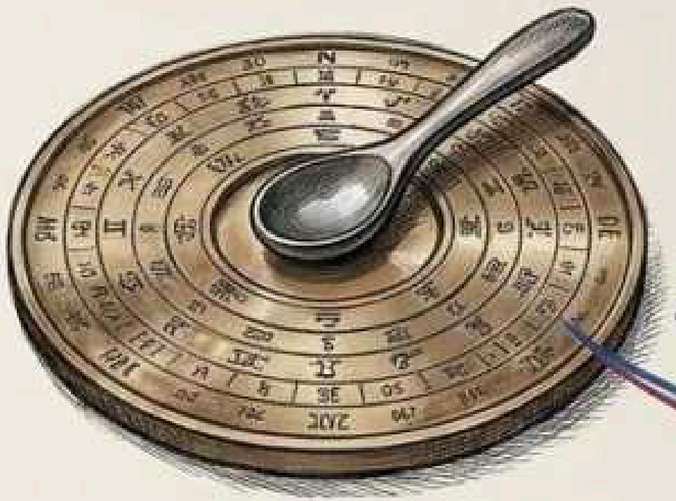
Song Technological Innovations

¶ 2.8



Printing:
Woodblock printing
printing spread
(Diamond Sutra, 868)

→ Movable type
invented by Bi Sheng.



Navigation:
Guided ships for
global shipping.





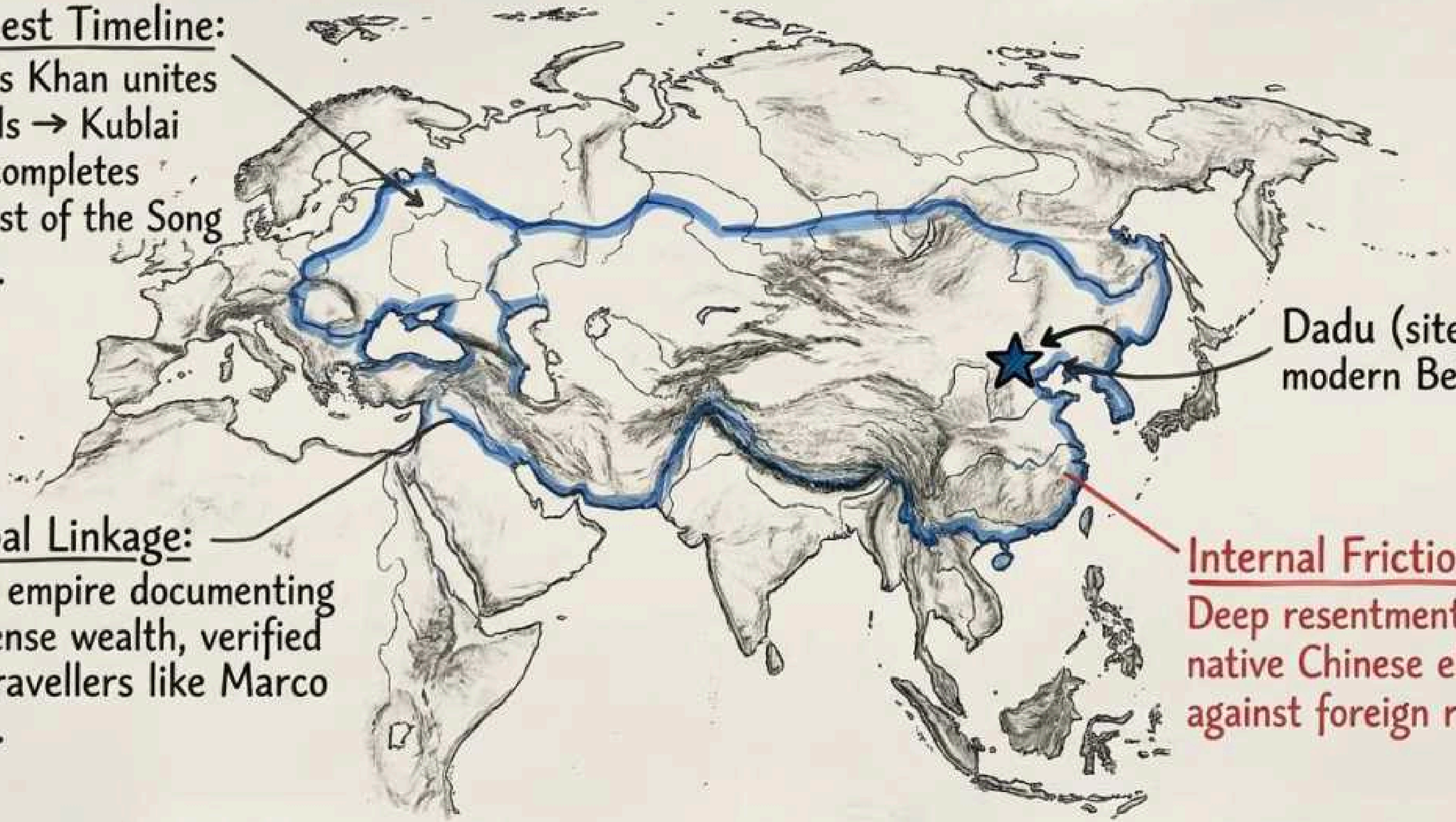
Chemistry:
Gunpowder
(discovered by
alchemists,
transitioned
to weapons).

Philosophy:
Neo-Confucianism
(Zhu Xi renewed
Confucian thought).

¶ 2.9

The Mongol Yuan Dynasty

Conquest Timeline:
Genghis Khan unites Mongols → Kublai Khan completes conquest of the Song (1279).



Dadu (site of modern Beijing)

Global Linkage:
Vast empire documenting immense wealth, verified by travellers like Marco Polo.

Internal Friction:
Deep resentment from native Chinese elites against foreign rule.

The Ming Dynasty Foundation

¶ 2.10

Former Peasant/Monk

↓

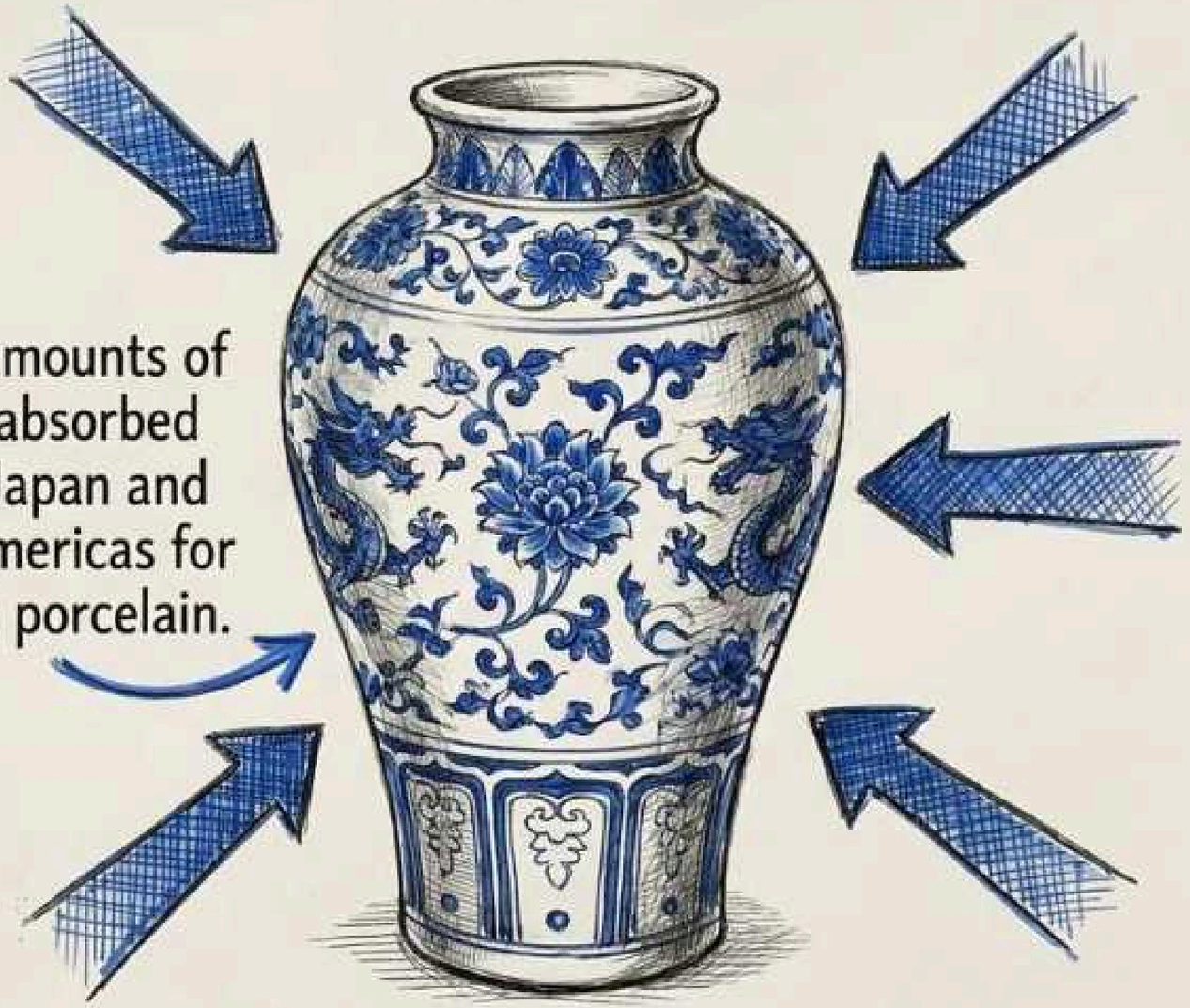
Emperor
(Zhu Yuanzhang) [1368]

↓

Drives out the Mongols

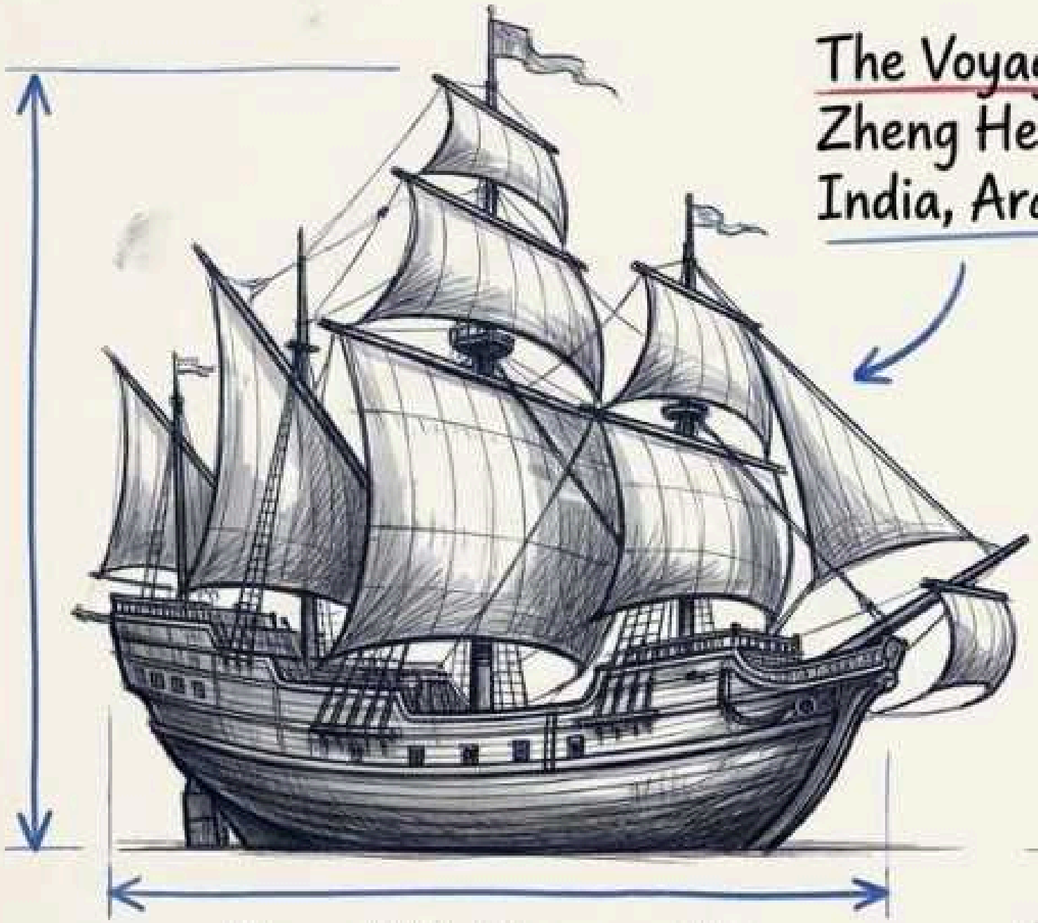
Architecture: Rebuilt Great Wall (in stone/brick form seen today) and constructed the Forbidden City in Beijing.

Vast amounts of silver absorbed from Japan and the Americas for prized porcelain.

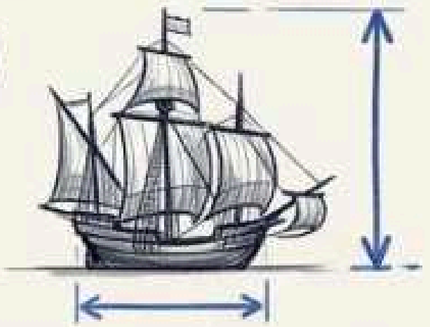


Zheng He's Fleets (1405–1433)

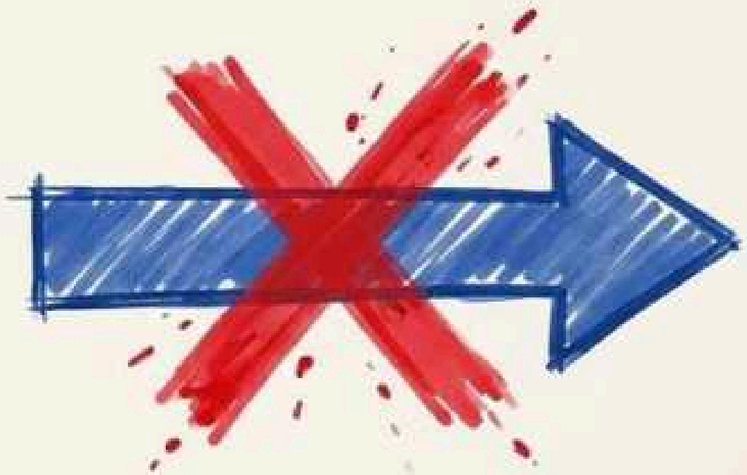
The Voyages: Seven great expeditions led by Ming Admiral Zheng He across the Indian Ocean (reaching Southeast Asia, India, Arabia, East Africa).



Zheng He's Treasure Ship



Columbus's vessel
(sailed decades later)



The Pivot: Court abruptly stops voyages to focus on northern defence. Sparks historical debate over why overseas expansion ended.

The Qing Dynasty Foundation

Conquest (1644): Rebels capture Beijing → Manchus (from the northeast) seize the chance to conquer and found the Qing.



Submission: Required Chinese men to wear the Manchu queue hairstyle as a sign of submission.

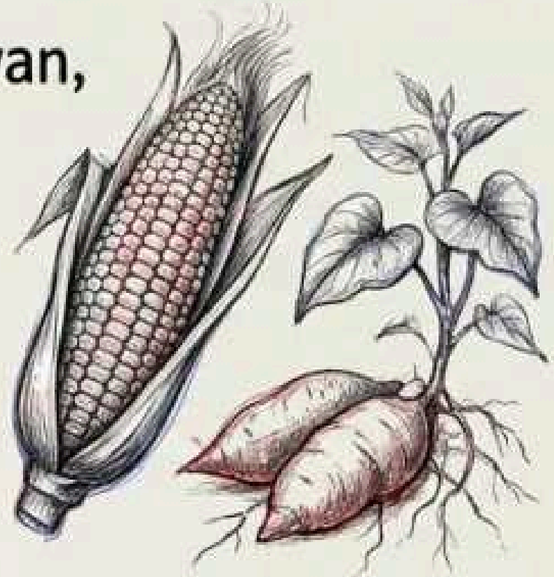
Continuity: Ruled through existing Chinese institutions and the examination system.

Peak Rulers: Reached its height under the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors.

Qing Territorial & Population Peak

- Territory: Doubled (incorporating Taiwan, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet—roughly modern borders).





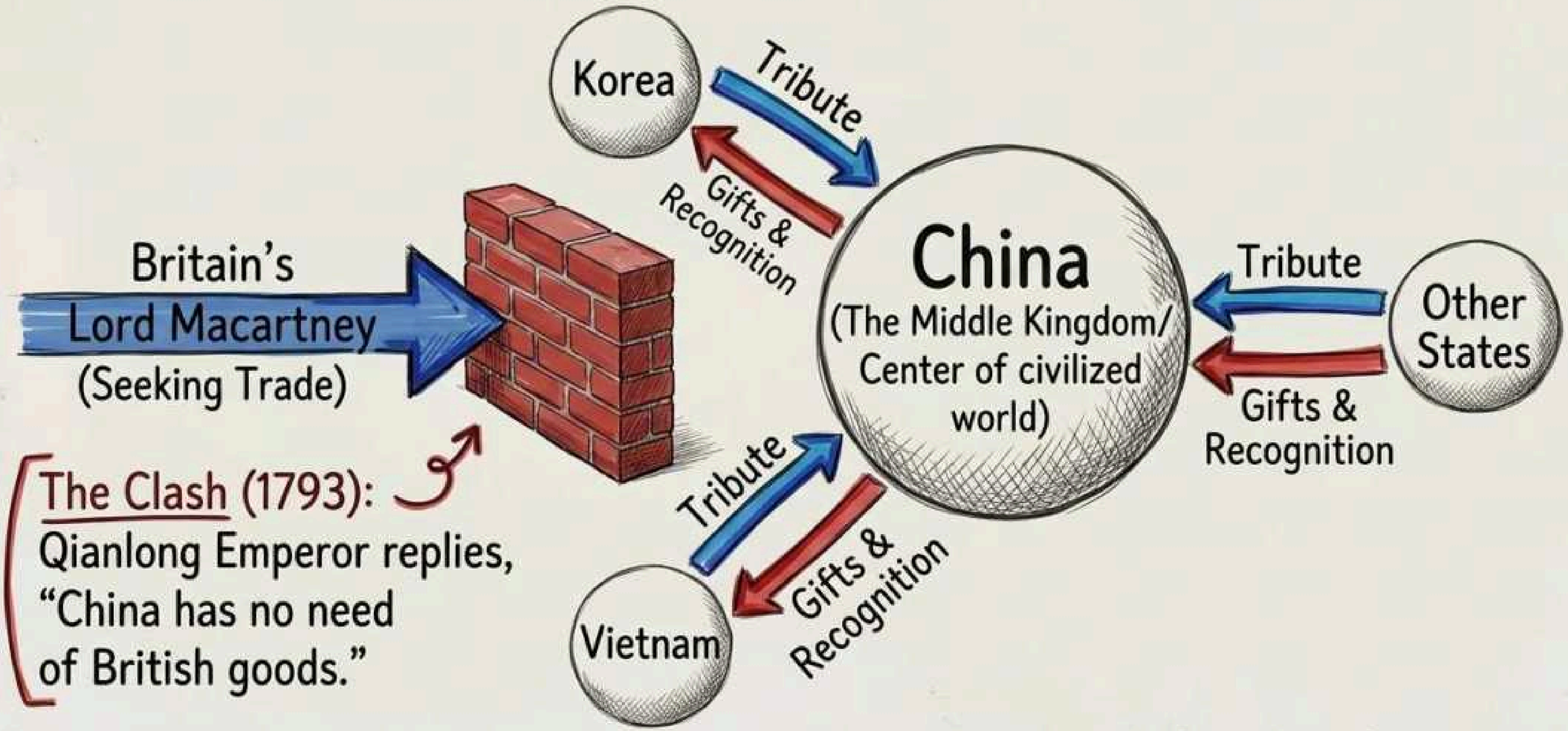
Population Growth: 150M → >300M (During the 18th century). Catalyzed by New World crops (Maize, Sweet Potatoes).

The Strain Equation

↑ Rapid Population Growth > (Arable Land + Gov Capacity) = Imminent 19th-Century Crisis

The Tributary System (Middle Kingdom)

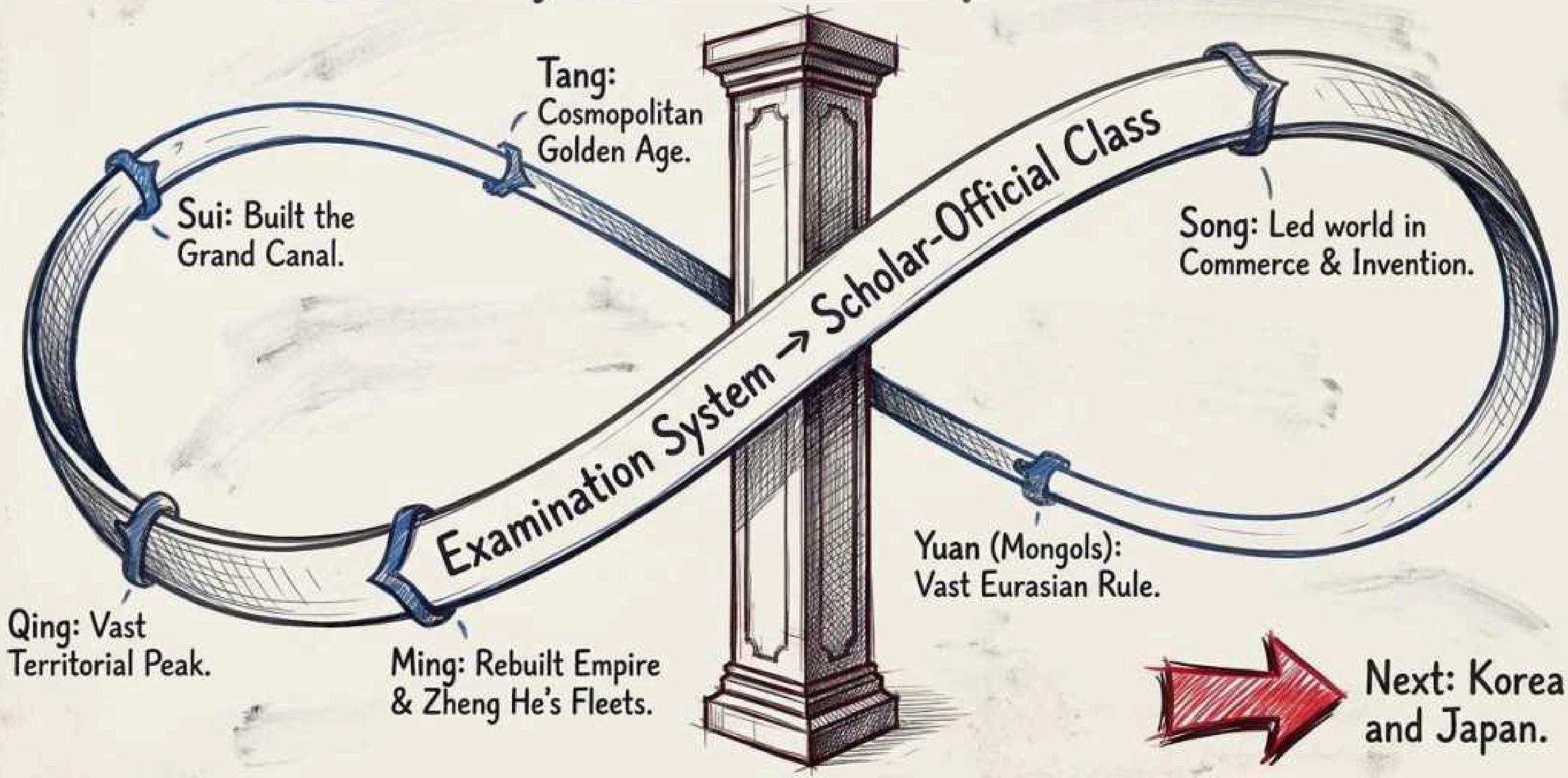
¶ 2.14



The Clash (1793):
Qianlong Emperor replies, "China has no need of British goods."

Grand Synthesis of Imperial China

¶ 2.15



Next: Korea and Japan.