Why did the T’ang ‘golden age’ end in political failure?

The T’ang ‘golden age’ was dealt a blow from which it never recovered in 755. Before the An Lushan uprising of 755, the central government enjoyed great power and controlled a profitable and stringent tax system. In fighting the rebellion however, the central government suffered significantly. The overarching pattern of these changes was the loss of state control over property and subjects as the dynasty steadily ceded power at the centre to eunuchs and in the provinces to military governors, coupled with rising commercialization and urbanization. Although it lasted for another century and a half, the T’ang survived in name only. Indeed, the An Lushan rebellion may be seen as the major turning point in medieval Chinese history. The T’ang’s abandonment of key economic, military and social institutions after the An Lushan rebellion, its reconfiguration of the empire’s cultural geography, the expansion of trade relations with the outside world and the invention of new artistic forms to deal with this changing world were the initial steps that began to distinguish later imperial China from what had come before.

To fully understand the extent of the T’ang’s political failure, we must first examine the dynasty at the height of its success. The T’ang enjoys a reputation as China’s most glorious dynasty partially because of the enormous territory the dynasty succeeded in conquering and ruling but it was also a period of extraordinary cultural integration and foreign influence. Many Chinese of high and low social status intermarried with non-Chinese, often Turkic, people. Anything Indian or Central Asian was all the rage. Learned monks travelled through Central Asia to reach Indian teachers, merchants accompanying them, brought back exotic trade goods, and even the Chinese who stayed home wore non-Chinese fashions as they composed poems set to the latest foreign melodies. Thus, the people of the T’ang lived in a culturally diverse world filled with foreign art, music and fashions. Prosperity undoubtedly aided the cultural vitality of the T’ang period; the reunification of the country, the opening of the Great Wall, the trading north and south, and the expansion of international trade via the Central Asian Silk Route and the higher volume sea routes all stimulated the economy and the T’ang capital, Chang’an, grew to be the largest city in the world, housing perhaps a million people and attracting students and pilgrims from all over Asia. Yet, perhaps more importantly, the T’ang was able to forge just of cultural openness but also of political strength. According to Hansen, the central government had more power over its inhabitants than did any other medieval dynasty. The T’ang issued a law code so influential that it was later adopted in Japan, Korea and Vietnam by rulers who sought to replicate the strength of the T’ang. The Chinese of the T’ang period also lived in a world governed by regulation; officials supervised all markets carefully stipulating what hours they could open and where they were located. They kept just as close a watch on rural residents, tallying members in their households and redistributing land at regular intervals. They collected taxes in kind, and made sure that citizens performed their labour and military duties. The examinations system helped to standardize and overcome differences between north western, north eastern and southern elites. Thus, the Sui and early Tang dynasties were periods of empire building at home as well as abroad, of strengthening, standardizing and codifying the

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1 V. Hansen, The Open Empire (New York, 2000), p. 221
2 M. Lewis, China’s Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty (Harvard, 2009), p. 2
3 ibid, p. 2
4 V. Hansen, The Open Empire, p. 196
5 V. Hansen, The Silk Road (Oxford 2012), p. 115
6 ibid, p. 219
7 P. Ebrey, The Cambridge Illustrated History of China (Cambridge, 1996), p. 120
8 ibid, p. 108
9 ibid, p. 114