The Tang dynasty, founded in 618, developed in the subsequent years into a powerful empire in Chinese history.

The political structure of the Tang society was somewhat different from either that of the previous age of the Wei, Jin, and the Northern and Southern dynasties, or that of the Song dynasty afterwards. The unification of the entire country and the prosperity of the nation somehow strengthened the imperial power, and the aristocratic families were in one way or another restricted in their forces. The civil service examinations did not play as strict and significant a role as in times after the Song dynasty, but to some degree they still helped to open up political opportunities for the middle and lower social strata, and thus made it possible for talented people from among them to show more enthusiasm for participating in the political and cultural activities in the society. On the other hand, the imperial power did not become an absolute autocratic force either. Shortly after he was in power, Emperor Taizong issued a decree to write and compile the Records of Clans, the actual import of which was to make adjustments to the relationship of various interest groups. Aristocratic families, both new and old, and local forces still wielded their influence in politics. Nor was a singular and powerful ideological control ever established throughout the Tang dynasty. In the Early and High Tang dynasty, in particular, Confucianism was not attached more importance than Taoism and Buddhism by either men of letters or with the rulers at the top. In general, the Tang society was quite free in thought.

Due to the relative liberalness of the social condition, as well as the merging of the cultures of the many different ethnic groups in the country and the frequent exchanges of Chinese and foreign civilizations, the culture of this age gradually displayed its iridescent and lively aspects. Poetry had been the core genre of the literature of the literati since the Wei and Jin. It had developed and changed over a long time, learned valuable lessons through rich experience, and opened up a great variety of possibilities. From the Early Tang to
the High Tang, under favorable conditions in many different aspects, poetry reached its artistic heights.

In his anthology, *A Critical Collection of Tang Poetry*, Gao Bing of the Ming dynasty divided the history of the development and evolution of Tang poetry into four stages: the Early Tang, the High Tang, the Mid-Tang and the Late Tang. Later it has become the conventional format of periodization of Tang poetry, and expanded to the other genres of Tang literature. However, it has often been controversial as regards how these four stages should be divided by specific dates. Considering the age-old convention, we shall continue to use this method of periodization, but we should put more emphasis on the differentiation between the Early/High Tang and the Mid-/Late Tang, with the “An-Shi Rebellion” that broke out in the last years of the Tianbao reign as the line of demarcation. Generally speaking, the literature of the Early/High Tang developed in the same direction as the literature of the Wei, Jin, the Northern and Southern dynasties, with its core spirit in the pursuit after beauty. By the Mid-Tang, there appeared a series of complicated changes in literature. On the one hand, there was an obviously increase of the consciousness of regarding literature as an attachment to, or a tool of, politics and morality. On the other hand, the representation of emotions in human life in literature continued its process of expansion and deepening. Such changes continued all the way throughout the Song dynasty.

1. Poetry of the Early Tang

*Palace Literati of the Early Tang*

In the Early Tang, the rulers assumed a liberal attitude toward literature and arts. Li Shimin (Emperor Taizong) personally wrote the “Commentary” on the “Biography of Lu Ji” in *History of the Jin* in which he praised the “beautiful and varied diction” of Lu Ji’s works, showing his appreciation of the *belles-lettres* literature. Afterwards, rulers such as Gaozong, Empress Wu and Zhongzong were also fond of arts and literature. In order to make a show of the atmosphere of the time of peace and prosperity of the great Tang Empire, they recruited numerous men of letters in the country, commissioned the compilation of encyclopedias and concordances, and composed poems in exchanges with their subjects. Accordingly the imperial court of the Early Tang,