

# 3 Han Emperors in China

## TERMS & NAMES

- Han Dynasty
- centralized government
- civil service
- monopoly
- assimilation

### MAIN IDEA

The Han Dynasty expanded China's borders and developed a system of government that lasted for centuries.

### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The pattern of a strong central government has remained a permanent part of Chinese life.

**SETTING THE STAGE** Under Shi Huangdi, the Qin Dynasty had unified China. Shi Huangdi conquered the rival kings who ruled small states throughout China and established a strong government. After Shi Huangdi died in 210 B.C., his son proved to be a weak, ineffective leader. China's government fell apart.

## The Han Restore Unity to China

Rumblings of discontent during the Qin Dynasty grew to roars in the years after Shi Huangdi's death. The peasants—bitter over years of high taxes, harsh labor quotas, and a severe penal system—rebelled. The rival kings—eager to regain control of the regions they had held before Shi Huangdi—raised armies and fought over territory.

**The Founding of the Han Dynasty** During the civil war that followed, two powerful leaders emerged. Xiang Yu (shee-ANG yoo) was an aristocratic general who was willing to allow the warlords to keep their territories if they would acknowledge him as their feudal lord. Liu Bang (LEE-oo bahng) was one of Xiang Yu's generals.

Eventually, Liu Bang turned against Xiang Yu. The two fought their final battle in 202 B.C. Liu Bang won and declared himself the first emperor of the Han Dynasty. The **Han Dynasty**, which ruled China for more than 400 years, is divided into two periods. The Former Han ruled for about two centuries, until A.D. 9. After a brief period when the Han were out of power, the Later Han ruled for almost another two centuries. The Han Dynasty so influenced China that even today many Chinese call themselves “people of the Han.”

Liu Bang's first goal was to destroy the rival kings' power. He followed Shi Huangdi's policy of establishing **centralized government**, in which a central authority controls the running of a state. Reporting to Liu Bang's central government were hundreds of local officials of provinces called commanderies.

To win popular support, Liu Bang departed from Shi Huangdi's strict legalism. He lowered taxes and softened harsh punishments. People throughout the empire appreciated the peace and stability that Liu Bang brought to China.

**The Empress Lü** When Liu Bang died in 195 B.C., his son became emperor—in name only. The real ruler was his mother, Empress Lü. Although Lü had not been Liu Bang's only wife, she had powerful friends at court who helped her seize power. The empress outlived her son and retained control of the throne by naming first one infant and then another as emperor. Because the infants were too young to rule, she remained in control. When Empress Lü died in 180 B.C., people who remained loyal to Liu Bang's

## HISTORY MAKERS



**Liu Bang**  
256–195 B.C.

Although Liu Bang was born a peasant, legend says that dragons attended his birth. According to Chinese belief, this meant he would rise to great power.

Liu Bang was a village official who turned rebel general after Shi Huangdi died. He wasn't a great military leader. According to one story, nomads once captured him and held him for ransom.

However, Liu Bang had other skills that made him a successful emperor. Wisely, he chose educated advisers. He strengthened the central government. With foreign powers, he knew when to negotiate and when to use force. He was such a strong leader that Chinese historians call him “Gaozu,” which means exalted founder.

### Background

In feudal societies, nobles receive land in exchange for service to a higher noble or king.



## Han Dynasty, 202 B.C.—A.D. 220



### GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps

- Place** What was the approximate size, in square miles, of the Han empire at its greatest extent?
- Location** Along which border did the Chinese build the Great Wall? Why did they build it there and not in other places?

family, rather than to Lü's family, came back into power. They rid the palace of the old empress's relatives by executing them.

Such palace plots occurred often throughout the Han Dynasty. Traditionally, the emperor chose the favorite among his wives as the empress and appointed one of her sons as successor. Because of this, the palace women and their families competed fiercely for the emperor's notice. The families would make alliances with influential people in the court. The resulting power plays distracted the emperor and his officials so much that they sometimes could not govern efficiently.

### GlobalImpact

#### Xiongnu and the Huns

Eventually, Wudi defeated the Xiongnu. After their defeat, the nomads moved deeper into Asia. This had long-range effects. As the Xiongnu pushed south and west, they displaced other nomadic peoples. Because of this, successive waves of central Asian invaders pushed into northwestern India.

In addition, some historians theorize that over the centuries, the Xiongnu wandered thousands of miles westward across central Asia into Europe. The fierce horse-riding Huns who invaded the Roman Empire may have been the distant grandsons of the Xiongnu.

**The Martial Emperor** When Liu Bang's great-grandson took the throne, he continued Liu Bang's centralizing policies. Wudi (woo-dee), who reigned from 141 to 87 B.C., held the throne longer than any other Han emperor. He is called the martial emperor because he adopted the policy of expanding the Chinese empire through war.

Wudi's first set of enemies were the Xiongnu (shee-UNG-noo), a nomadic people known for their fierceness as arrow-shooting warriors on horseback. The Xiongnu roamed the steppes to the north and west of China. They made raids into China's settled farmland and stole grain, farm animals, valuable items, and hostages. The early Han emperors tried to buy off the Xiongnu by sending them thousands of pounds of silk, rice, alcohol, and money. Usually, the Xiongnu just accepted these gifts and continued their raids.

#### Vocabulary

martial: warlike.



When Wudi realized that the bribes were simply making the Xiongnu stronger, he sent more than 100,000 soldiers to fight them. To help defeat the Xiongnu, Wudi also made allies of their enemies:

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

The Xiongnu had defeated the king of the Yuezhi people and had made his skull into a drinking vessel. As a result the Yuezhi . . . bore a constant grudge against the Xiongnu, though as yet they had been unable to find anyone to join them in an attack on their enemy. . . . When the emperor [Wudi] heard this, he decided to try to send an envoy to establish relations with the Yuezhi.

SIMA QIAN, *Records of the Grand Historian*

After his army forced the nomads to retreat into Central Asia, Wudi attempted to make his northwest border safe by settling his troops on the Xiongnu's former pastures. Although this tactic succeeded for a time, nomadic raiders continued to cause problems during much of China's later history.

Wudi also colonized areas to the northeast, now known as Manchuria and Korea. He sent his armies south, where they conquered mountain tribes and set up Chinese colonies all the way into what is now Vietnam. By the end of Wudi's reign, the empire had expanded nearly to the bounds of present-day China.

## A Highly Structured Government

Just as Han emperors tried to control the people they conquered, they exerted vast control over the Chinese themselves. Because the Chinese considered their emperor to be semidivine, they accepted his exercise of power. He was in charge of keeping order on a cosmic level. If the emperor did his job well, China had peace and prosperity. If he failed, the heavens showed their displeasure with earthquakes, floods, and famines. However, the emperor did not rule alone.

**Structures of Han Government** The Chinese emperor relied on a complex bureaucracy to help him rule. Running the bureaucracy and maintaining the imperial army were expensive. To raise money, the government levied taxes. Like the farmers in India, Chinese peasants owed part of their yearly crops to the government. Merchants also paid taxes.

Besides taxes, the peasants owed the government a month's worth of labor or military service every year. With this source of labor, the Han emperors built roads, canals, and irrigation ditches. The emperors also filled the ranks of China's vast armies and expanded the Great Wall that stretched across the northern frontier.

**Confucianism, the Road to Success** Wudi's government employed more than 130,000 people. The bureaucracy included 18 different ranks of **civil service** jobs—government jobs that civilians obtained by taking examinations. At times, Chinese emperors rewarded loyal followers with government posts. However, another way to fill government posts evolved under the Han. This method involved testing applicants' knowledge of Confucianism—the teachings of Confucius, who had lived 400 years before.

The early Han emperors had employed some Confucian scholars as court advisers, but it was Wudi who began actively to favor them. Confucius had taught that gentlemen should practice “reverence [respect], generosity, truthfulness, diligence [hard work], and kindness.” Because these were exactly the qualities he wanted his government officials to have, Wudi set up a school where hopeful job applicants from all over China could come to study Confucius's works.

#### Background

According to the Mandate of Heaven, divine forces appointed Chinese emperors to rule—and would take away the throne if they governed badly.

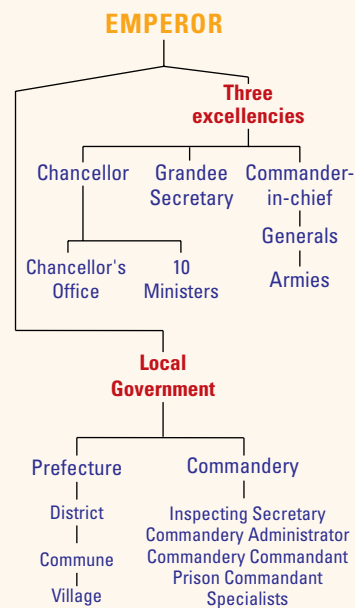
#### THINK THROUGH HISTORY A. Making Inferences

Why would Wudi want his officials to have qualities such as diligence?

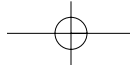
### SPOTLIGHT ON

#### Chinese Bureaucracy

The Chinese bureaucracy reflected top-down rule. Each level of officials had authority over the officials below them. The emperor had authority over all.







After their studies, job applicants took formal examinations in history, law, literature, and Confucianism. In theory, anyone could take the exams. In practice, few peasants could afford to educate their sons. So only sons of wealthy landowners had a chance at a government career. In spite of this flaw, the civil service system begun by Wudi worked so efficiently that it continued in China until 1912.

## Han Technology, Commerce, and Culture

The 400 years of Han rule saw not only improvements in education but also great advances in Chinese technology and culture. In addition, the centralized government began to exert more control over commerce and manufacturing.

**Technology Revolutionizes Chinese Life** Advances in technology influenced all aspects of Chinese life. Paper was invented in A.D. 105. Before that, books were usually written on silk. But paper was cheaper, so books became more readily available. This helped spread education in China. The invention of paper also affected Chinese government. Formerly, all government documents had been recorded on strips of wood. Paper was much more convenient to use for record-keeping, so Chinese bureaucracy expanded.

Other technological advances included a collar harness that made it possible for horses to pull heavy loads. The Chinese perfected a plow that was more efficient because it had two blades, improved iron tools, and invented the wheelbarrow. In addition, the Chinese began to use watermills to grind grain.

**Agriculture Versus Commerce** During the Han Dynasty, the population of China swelled to 60 million. Because there were so many people to feed, Confucian scholars and ordinary Chinese people considered agriculture the most important and

**Vocabulary**  
**commerce:** the buying and selling of goods.

**THINK THROUGH HISTORY**  
**B. Making Inferences**  
 Which of the inventions discussed here helped the task of feeding China's huge population?

## GlobalImpact: Trade Networks

### Silk Roads

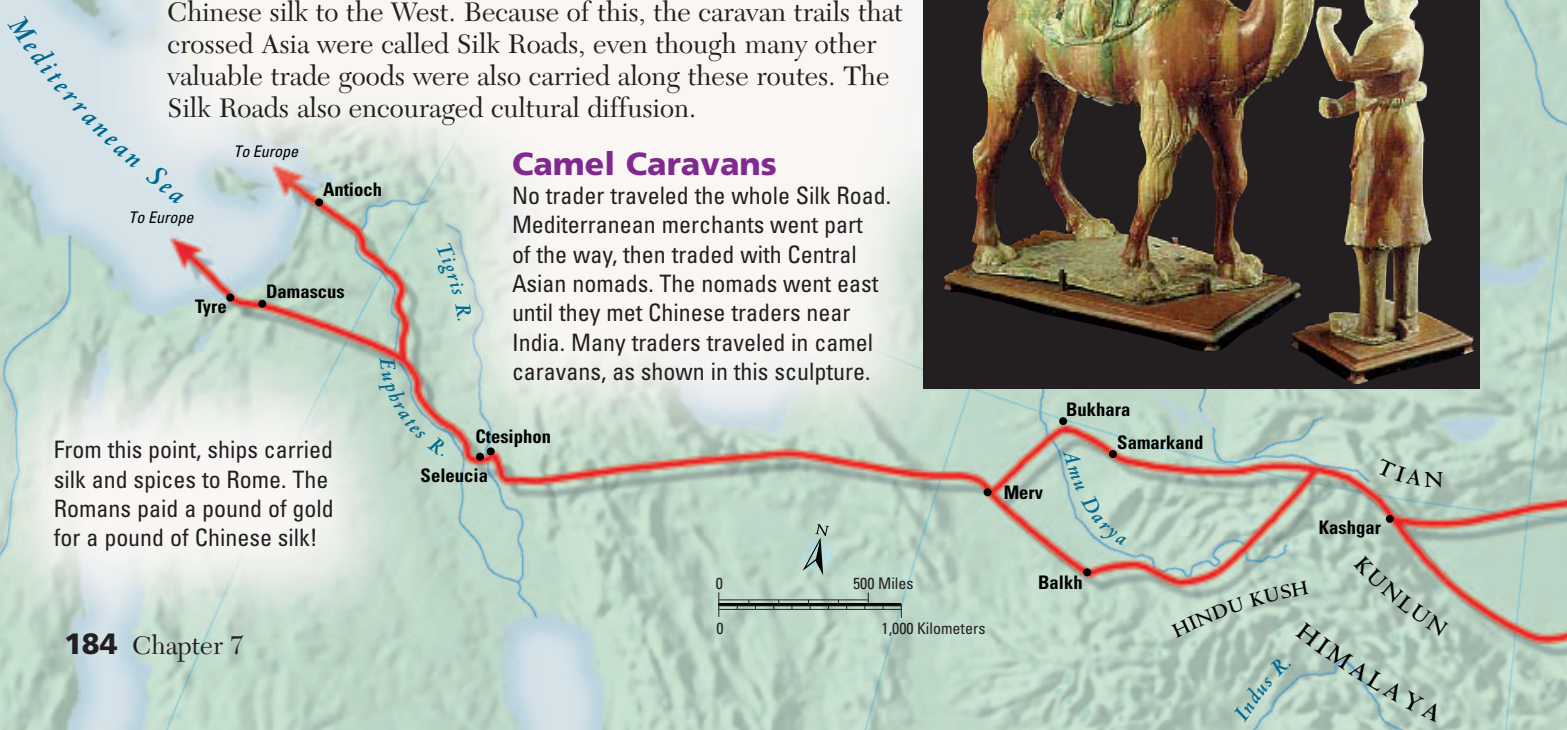
Why would anyone struggle over mountains and across deserts to buy fabric? The ancients valued silk because it was strong, lightweight, and beautiful. Traders made fortunes carrying Chinese silk to the West. Because of this, the caravan trails that crossed Asia were called Silk Roads, even though many other valuable trade goods were also carried along these routes. The Silk Roads also encouraged cultural diffusion.

#### Camel Caravans

No trader traveled the whole Silk Road. Mediterranean merchants went part of the way, then traded with Central Asian nomads. The nomads went east until they met Chinese traders near India. Many traders traveled in camel caravans, as shown in this sculpture.



From this point, ships carried silk and spices to Rome. The Romans paid a pound of gold for a pound of Chinese silk!





honored occupation. An imperial edict, written in 167 B.C., stated this philosophy quite plainly:

#### A VOICE FROM THE PAST

Agriculture is the foundation of the world. No duty is greater. Now if [anyone] personally follows this pursuit diligently, he has yet [to pay] the impositions of the land tax and tax on produce. . . . Let there be abolished the land tax and the tax on produce levied upon the cultivated fields.

**BAN GU** and **BAN ZHAO** in *History of the Former Han Dynasty*

Although the same decree dismissed commerce as the least important occupation, manufacturing and commerce were actually very important to the Han empire. The government established monopolies on the mining of salt, the forging of iron, the minting of coins, and the brewing of alcohol. A **monopoly** occurs when a group has exclusive control over the production and distribution of certain goods.

For a time, the government also ran huge silk mills—competing with private silk weavers in making this luxurious cloth. As contact with people from other lands increased, the Chinese realized how valuable their silk was as an item of trade. Because of this, the techniques of silk production became a closely guarded state secret. Spurred by the worldwide demand for silk, Chinese commerce expanded along the Silk Roads to most of Asia and, through India, all the way to Rome.

**Unifying Chinese Culture** As the Han empire expanded its trade networks, the Chinese began to learn about the foods, animals, and fashions that were common in foreign lands. Similarly, the expansion of the Han empire through conquest brought people of many different cultures under Chinese rule. To unify the empire, the Chinese government encouraged **assimilation**, or the process of making these conquered peoples part of Chinese culture. To accomplish this, the government sent



#### Traded Gold

First-century traders near Samarkand traded for these gold and turquoise bracelets. The lion heads show Persian influence. Many artifacts found in the same site as the bracelets show a mix of Greek, Central Asian, and Indian styles. This shows that ideas as well as objects traveled the Silk Roads.


#### Patterns of Interaction

Throughout history, the desire for material goods led to the development of long-distance trade routes like the Silk Roads. In turn, trade caused cultural diffusion. Similarly today, trade in the Pacific Rim has helped spread many products across the globe.

 **VIDEO** *Trade Connects the World: Silk Roads and the Pacific Rim*

#### Connect to History

**Hypothesizing** If the Romans had learned the secret of making silk, how might patterns of trade and cultural diffusion have changed?

 **SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R11**

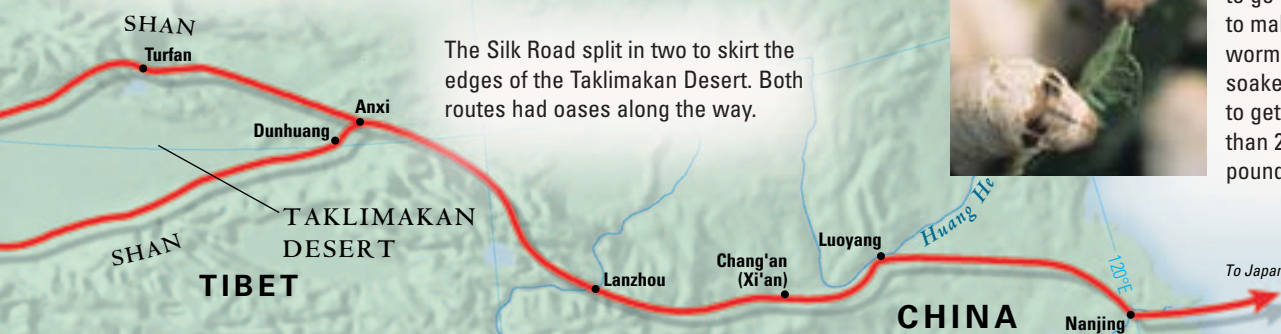
#### Connect to Today

**Researching** What are China's top three exports today? What countries buy those products? Cite the sources of your information.

The Silk Road split in two to skirt the edges of the Taklimakan Desert. Both routes had oases along the way.



Silk sold for so much money that the Chinese were willing to go through a difficult process to make it. The cocoons of silk worms like these had to be soaked in water and unraveled to get silk thread. It took more than 2,000 cocoons to make a pound of silk!







This is the lid of a Chinese bronze vessel from Han times. The figures on top are women who are weaving cloth, perhaps silk.

Chinese farmers to settle newly colonized areas. The government also encouraged them to intermarry with local peoples. Government officials set up schools to train local people in the Confucian philosophy and then appointed local scholars to government posts.

Several writers also helped to unify Chinese culture by recording China's history. Sima Qian (SU-MAH chee-YEHN), who lived from 145 to 85 B.C., is called the "Grand Historian" for his work in compiling a history of China from the ancient dynasties to Wudi. To write accurately, Sima Qian visited historical sites, interviewed eyewitnesses, researched official records, and examined artifacts. The resulting book is called *Records of the Grand Historian*.

Another famous Chinese book was the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*. Ban Biao (BAHN bee-OW), who lived from A.D. 3 to 54, started the project. After his death, his son Ban Gu (bahn goo) and later his daughter Ban Zhao (bahn jow) worked on it. Ban Zhao also wrote a guide called *Lessons for Women*.

**Wives, Nuns, and Scholars** Although Ban Zhao gained fame as a historian, most women during the Han Dynasty led quiet lives at home. Confucian teachings dictated that women were to devote themselves to their families. They were supposed to obey their parents in childhood and their husband and husband's parents after they married. To add to their family's honor, women were to be faithful, pure, and modest.

A few upper-class women broke out of this mold. As explained earlier, some empresses wielded great power. Daoist and later Buddhist nuns were able to gain an education and lead lives apart from their families. Women in aristocratic and land-owning families also sometimes pursued education and culture.

## Rebellion and Restoration

In spite of economic and cultural advances, the Han emperors faced grave problems. One of the main problems was an economic imbalance caused by customs that allowed the rich to gain more wealth at the expense of the poor.

**The Rich Take Advantage of the Poor** According to custom, a family's land was divided equally among all of the father's male heirs. Unless a farmer could afford to buy more land during his lifetime, each generation inherited smaller plots. With such small plots of land, farmers had a hard time raising enough food to sell or even to feed the family. Because of this, small farmers often went into debt and had to borrow money from large landowners, who charged very high interest rates. If the farmer couldn't pay back the debt, the landowner took possession of the farmer's land.

Large landowners were not required to pay taxes, so when their land holdings increased, the amount of land that was left for the government to tax decreased. With less money coming in, the government pressed harder to collect money from the small farmers. As a result, the gap between rich and poor increased.

**Wang Mang Overthrows the Han** During this time of economic change, political instability grew. At the palace, court advisers, palace servants, and rival influential families wove complex plots to influence the emperor's choice of who would succeed him as ruler. From about 32 B.C. until A.D. 9, one inexperienced emperor replaced another. Chaos reigned in the palace, and with peasant revolts, unrest spread across the land as well.

Finally, Wang Mang (wahng mahng), a Confucian scholar and member of the court, decided that a strong ruler was needed to restore order. For six years he had been acting as regent for the infant who had been crowned emperor. In A.D. 9, Wang Mang took the imperial title for himself and overthrew the Han, thus ending the first half of the Han Dynasty known as the Former Han.

### Background

In China, the family name comes first and the personal name comes second. These historians belong to the Ban family.

### Vocabulary

**regent:** a person who rules temporarily while a monarch is too young



## Two Great Empires: Han China and Rome

### Han Dynasty—202 B.C. to A.D. 220

- Empire replaced rival kingdoms
- Centralized, bureaucratic government
- Built roads and defensive walls
- Conquered many diverse peoples in regions bordering China
- At its height—area of 1,500,000 square miles and a population of 60,000,000
- Chinese became common written language throughout empire
- Ongoing conflict with nomads
- Empire fell apart; restored by Tang dynasty in 618

### Roman Empire—27 B.C. to A.D. 476

- Empire replaced republic
- Centralized, bureaucratic government
- Built roads and defensive walls
- Conquered many diverse peoples in regions of three continents
- At its height—area of 3,400,000 square miles and a population of 55,000,000
- Latin did not replace other written languages in empire
- Ongoing conflict with nomads
- Empire fell apart; never restored

Silk was the trade good that linked the Han and Roman Empires. Han artists often did beautiful paintings on silk, such as this one.

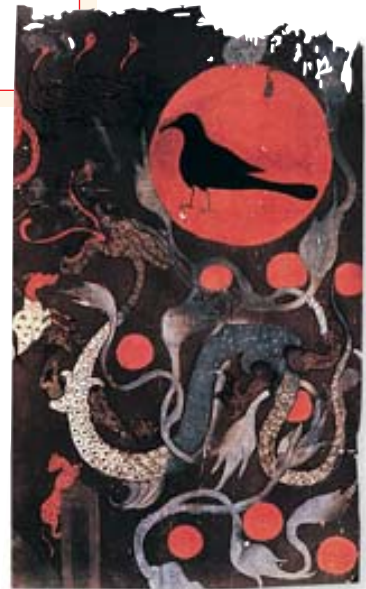
### SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Charts

1. How long did each empire last? During what years were they both in existence?
2. How were Han China and the Roman Empire similar? How were they different?

Wang Mang tried to bring the country under control. He minted new money to relieve the treasury's shortage. He set up public granaries to help feed China's poor. He took away large landholdings from the rich and planned to redistribute the land to farmers who had lost their land. This plan angered powerful landholders. And Wang Mang's larger supply of money disrupted the economy because it allowed people to increase their spending, which encouraged merchants to raise prices.

Then, in A.D. 11, a great flood left thousands dead and millions homeless. The public granaries did not hold enough to feed the displaced, starving people. Huge peasant revolts rocked the land. The wealthy, opposed to Wang Mang's land policies, joined in the rebellion. The rebels assassinated Wang Mang in A.D. 23. Within two years, a member of the old imperial family took the throne and began the second period of Han rule—called the Later Han.

**The Later Han Years** With peace restored to China, the first decades of the Later Han Dynasty were quite prosperous. The government sent soldiers and merchants westward to regain control of posts along the Silk Roads. But this expansion couldn't make up for social, political, and economic weaknesses within the empire itself. Within a century, China suffered from the same economic imbalances, political intrigues, and social unrest that had toppled the Former Han. By 220, the Later Han Dynasty had disintegrated into three rival kingdoms.



### THINK THROUGH HISTORY C. Recognizing

**Effects** How did Wang Mang's policies help cause his own downfall?

## Section 3 Assessment

### 1. TERMS & NAMES

Identify

- Han Dynasty
- centralized government
- civil service
- monopoly
- assimilation

### 2. TAKING NOTES

Create a spider map like the one shown to record the methods that Han rulers used to centralize the government.



Explain which method you think was most important and why.

### 3. IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS

What problem do you think was most responsible for weakening the Han Dynasty's power?

#### THINK ABOUT

- problems at court
- problems with non-Chinese peoples
- economic and social problems

### 4. THEME ACTIVITY

#### Religious and Ethical Systems

Review the five qualities that Confucius said all gentlemen should practice (see page 183). Working with a small team, think of actions that government officials could take to demonstrate each of those qualities. Choose the best actions and illustrate them on a motivational poster that could hang in a government office.