Han Emperors in China

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—rebelleled. 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 and the Later Han. Liu Bang's central government was divided into two periods, the Former Han and the Later Han.

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

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

HISTORYMAKERS

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.
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.

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.

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.
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.
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

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**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.
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...
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 (BAH-N 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 landowning 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.
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.