

The Han Dynasty

The short-lived Qin Dynasty was succeeded by one of the most important and long-lasting dynasties in all of Chinese history: the Han Dynasty. The Han ruled China from 206 BC–220 AD, roughly the same time as the Roman Empire ruled the entire Mediterranean world, and like the Romans, the Han Dynasty ushered in a period of peace and prosperity during which progress and cultural development took place.

The Birth of a New Dynasty

The Qin Dynasty did not last four years after the death of its founder, Qin Shi Huang. After the first emperor's death, intrigue at the court and incompetent leadership gave rise to rebellion, which led to the collapse of the dynasty, followed by more rebellion throughout China. One of the rebels was Liu Bang. A man from a peasant background, he achieved a minor provincial rank and was escorting prisoners to work on the tomb of Qin Shi Huang when some of the prisoners escaped. Knowing that his failure to prevent the escapes meant he would be executed by the merciless Qin rulers, Liu Bang became a fugitive and leader of one of the many bands of rebels fighting the Qin. Through luck and victories over Qin soldiers, Liu Bang eventually acquired control over lands; he defeated the last Qin king in battle, and became king of the old state of Han.

Though eighteen separate kingdoms had declared their independence from the Qin, after the fall of the dynasty the states of Han and Chu were the two most powerful, and all the other states formed coalitions around one or the other. In the Chu-Han Contention, a four-year civil war, the state of Han, under the leadership of Liu Bang, fought against Chu for control of China, and in the end Han emerged victorious. Liu Bang reunified China by 202 BC, and was declared *Huangdi*, the new emperor of China, founding the Han Dynasty. From that point on he was known as Emperor Gaozu. Though he was born a mere peasant, Gaozu established one of the great empires in history. Unlike Qin Shi Huang's dynasty, which did not last long after him, Gaozu's dynasty lived on for over four centuries and saw the height of ancient Chinese power and culture.

The Western Han

The Han Dynasty, under Emperor Gaozu and his successors, established themselves in a new capital, Chang'an, in western China. They largely continued the policies of the Qin, and did not differ significantly from the Qin in how they governed China. Like the Qin, they continued to expand the bureaucracy, and encouraged a centralized state. There were, however, minor differences between the two dynasties, and it was perhaps these differences that allowed the Han to rule so much longer than the Qin. First, the Han were more interested in the lives of the Chinese masses, in the wellbeing of their subjects. The Han promoted Confucianism, which had been persecuted by the Qin, in order to promote harmony among the classes.

Nonetheless, the Han faced many challenges. After his victory over Chu, Emperor Gaozu rewarded his prominent supporters with grants of land to be ruled as fiefs. This started the same danger that brought down the Zhou Dynasty: powerful local lords controlling their own petty kingdoms. Gaozu soon replaced these lords with members of his family, in hopes that his family would be loyal and govern these far-flung territories in the name of the emperor. Still, these local kings began minting their own coins, making their own laws, levying their own taxes, maintaining their own armies, and soon they saw little need to listen to the emperors in Chang'an. Several rebellions broke out against the Han dynasty, the most serious being the Rebellion of the Seven States. Nonetheless, the Han emperors were able to put down these rebellions; they defeated the most prominent warrior-landlords, and they gradually reduced the power of the small kingdoms (though they never abolished them).

Besides these internal threats, another major danger to the Han was the external threat of the barbarians. The most dangerous barbarians in this period were the Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu), or Huns, a nomadic-pastoralist warrior people from the Eurasian steppe.

The Han Dynasty was able to face these threats and survive because of a strong centralized state. The state was funded primarily by a poll tax (a set tax on every individual) and land taxes (a portion of the harvest). This meant that the prosperity of the agricultural estates determined the prosperity of the Han government. It was in the Han period that the Chinese system of class hierarchy became well developed (though Han scholars claimed that it dated back to the Zhou period). This hierarchy, called the "four occupations," gave aristocratic scholars (called *shi*) the highest status, followed by farmers (who were precious to the state, both because they produced food and paid the land tax), followed by craftsmen and artisans, and finally merchants at the bottom of society (because, according to the thinking of the time, they did not produce anything, they merely sold what others produced).

Perhaps the most important early Han emperor was Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BC), the seventh emperor of the Han Dynasty. During his fifty-four year reign, the Han Dynasty reached its height. The Xiongnu were driven back and the borders were pushed farther than ever before, roughly doubling the size of the empire. As the Chinese pushed farther west, trade contacts were established with Persia, India, and the Roman Empire. At home, Emperor Wu attempted to weaken the authority of the regional aristocracy by giving more authority to handpicked governors drawn from the *shi* class.

Emperor Wu centered the state on Confucian teachings. Although the first few Han emperors promoted Confucianism along with Daoism and Legalism, Emperor Wu promoted Confucianism exclusively, abandoning state support for other philosophies. The Confucian ideals that order and harmony were the result of good government and that social harmony depended on each person accepting his social position helped legitimize the state and make people more willing to accept state power over them. At the same time, these ideals encouraged the state to act justly toward its people. From the time of Emperor Wu on, the Han Dynasty accepted Confucianism as the state philosophy.

In another important move, Emperor Wu created civil-service examinations, in which potential government officials were tested on their knowledge of the Confucian classics. The exams were designed to ensure that bureaucrats would be chosen for their intelligence, instead of their birth or connections. While the civil-service exams would not be the most important factor in selecting officials until after the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wu's program was an important first step. In addition, by making the Confucian classics the subject of the exams, Emperor Wu ensured that these texts would remain the most important Chinese texts for centuries to come.

Finally, Emperor Wu reformed the Chinese economy. Although merchants had the lowest status in classical China, some had grown exceedingly rich by selling salt and iron, which were produced by peasants who would otherwise farm and thus be subject to the land tax. Emperor Wu nationalized the salt and iron industries, but avoided unrest and inefficiency by employing the former businessmen as government officials in charge of the industries. Emperor Wu also promoted officials who were experts in agriculture, and initiated reforms that made farming more efficient.

The Eastern Han

Rebellion and political chaos briefly brought down the Han Dynasty from 9 to 25 AD. Wang Mang, who ruled as regent because the emperor was too young, overthrew the child emperor and claimed that the Han Dynasty had lost the divine support of the Mandate of Heaven. He proclaimed his own new dynasty, the Xin Dynasty. Wang Mang attempted a number of radical reforms, such as introducing new forms of currency, outlawing slavery, and a return to old models of land distribution. A series of major floods on the Yellow River, however, displaced thousands of peasants, which caused massive unrest. A rebel army called the Chimei ("Red Eyebrows") developed out of the peasantry, and they defeated Wang Mang's armies, and stormed the capital of Chang'an. They killed Wang Mang and put their own puppet ruler on the throne.

Meanwhile, in the east a member of the Han royal family, Liu Xiu, later known as Emperor Guangwu (r. 25–57 AD), was declared emperor and ruled from Luoyang. He defeated the Chimei rebels, and then went on to defeat rival warlords, thus reunifying China under the Han Dynasty. Since Emperor Guangwu and his successors kept the capital at Luoyang, his reign is considered the beginning of the Eastern Han period.

Under Emperor Guangwu, the empire was strengthened and reunified. Areas that had fallen away from Chinese control (such as Korea and Vietnam) were reconquered, and the Xiongnu Confederation, which had grown strong during China's period of instability, was pacified. Emperor Guangwu was succeeded by Emperor Ming and then Emperor Zhang. The Rule of Ming and Zhang, as it is called, is remembered for being an era of prosperity. Taxes were reduced, Confucian ideals were encouraged, and the emperors appointed able administrators. It was also in this period that paper—one of China's most important inventions—emerged. Though early forms of paper had existed for centuries, around 100 AD the Chinese eunuch Cai Lun perfected the papermaking process. With paper, Chinese texts could circulate on a durable and relatively inexpensive medium, instead of on clay, silk, or bamboo, as before. This allowed Chinese texts to become more readily available and encouraged learning. Another

important invention of this time was porcelain, which also had existed in previous forms for centuries but was perfected in the Eastern Han period, allowing for durable, high quality, and attractive ceramic ware.

The Fall of the Han

After Emperor Zhang's death in 88 AD, corrupt officials increasingly gained control of the state, while family feuds tore the dynasty apart. The emperors became more and more dependent on their officials. Eunuchs became increasingly powerful at court, and Chinese histories have asserted that their thirst for money and power, and their willingness to sow dissention, fatally weakened the Han. At the same time, as the power of the emperor weakened, military commanders acted more independently and tried to secure power for themselves. Often the eunuchs and the generals competed for influence and position.

In 184 AD, two major Daoist rebellions—the Yellow Turban Rebellion and the Five Pecks of Rice Rebellion—broke out. In order to fight these rebellions (and in an attempt to avoid further rebellions) the emperor gave much wider powers to military commanders, giving them control over their own provinces. These military commanders ended up using their provinces and their armies for their own ends in a long power struggle.

In 189 AD, at the capital, Luoyang, the general He Jin became embroiled in a power struggle with the court eunuchs for control of the emperor. He Jin plotted to kill all the eunuchs, but the eunuchs found out and killed him. In response, He Jin's soldiers massacred all of the court eunuchs. With a power vacuum and political chaos in the capital, the general Dong Zhou marched on the city, deposed the reigning emperor, and raised his own puppet emperor, Emperor Xian. Xian would be the last emperor of the Han Dynasty.

Dong Zhou ruled the state through the young Emperor Xian, but eventually he became too arrogant in his use of power. A number of other generals, ruling from their provinces, rebelled. Soon, they harbored plans of ruling their provinces as their own kingdoms, free from the authority of Dong Zhou or the emperor. Dong Zhou was eventually assassinated, and Emperor Xian fell under the control of another warlord, Cao Cao.

Cao Cao ruled over Emperor Xian just as Dong Zhou had, and Cao Cao wanted to reunite the Han Empire by defeating the rebellious warlords. He came close to succeeding over the course of a twelve-year war of reconquest. In the end, however, Cao Cao was defeated in 208 AD at the Battle of Red Cliffs, an important turning point in history. With this defeat, all hope that the Han Empire would be reunited disappeared. When Cao Cao died in 220 AD, Emperor Xian abdicated the throne, claiming that he had lost the Mandate of Heaven. He gave the throne to Cao Cao's son, Cao Pi. With this act, the Han Dynasty was no more. Since many did not accept Cao Pi as the new emperor, China splintered into three kingdoms ruled by warlords. This marks the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history.

Summary:

- The Han Dynasty was founded by Liu Bang, who became known as Emperor Gaozu after he defeated the Chu in a struggle for control of China.
- The Han had to deal with disloyal aristocrats and nomadic invaders, but a strong centralized state aided them in weathering these challenges.
- The Han continued many Qin policies, such as a strong bureaucracy and a centralized state, but the Han were more concerned for their subjects, and Emperor Wu's adoption of Confucianism as the state ideology helped create bonds between the people and the government.
- Under Emperor Wu, China reached its farthest territorial extent up to that point, and his reforms helped the empire thrive.
- Later, civil unrest and a brief usurpation by Wang Mang caused the Han to move their capital from Chang'an to Luoyang. This marks the start of the Eastern Han period.
- The Eastern Han period was one of prosperity and progress, during which important innovations were made, such as in paper and porcelain production. Nonetheless, by the second century AD, the Han began to decline.
- By the end of the second century AD, weak emperors under the control of eunuchs and powerful independent warlords fractured the empire. The warlord Cao Cao attempted to reunify China under the Han, but he was defeated in 208 AD at the Battle of Red Cliffs. This marks the end of the Han Dynasty and the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period.