Han Emperors in China

MAIN IDEA

ETHICAL SYSTEMS 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.

TERMS & NAMES

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

SETTING THE STAGE Under Shi Huangdi, the Qin Dynasty had unified China. Shi Huangdi established a strong government by conquering the rival kings who ruled small states throughout China. 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. Peasants were bitter over years of high taxes, harsh labor quotas, and a severe penal system. They rebelled. Rival kings were eager to regain control of the regions they had held before Shi Huangdi. They raised armies and fought over territory.

Liu Bang Founds 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 provincials 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, but 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 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), fierce nomads known for their deadly archery skills from horseback. The Xiongnu roamed the steppes to the north and west of China. They made raids into China’s settled farmland. There they took hostages and stole grain, livestock, and other valuable items. 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.
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:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**
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 Society**
Chinese society under the Han Dynasty was highly structured. (See Social History below.) Just as Han emperors tried to control the people they conquered, they exerted vast control over the Chinese themselves. Because the Chinese believed their emperor to have divine authority, they accepted his exercise of power. He was the link between heaven and earth. 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 and dug canals and irrigation ditches. The emperors also filled the ranks of China’s vast armies and expanded the Great Wall, which 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, which were 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 [industriousness], 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.

Another technological advance was the collar harness for horses. This invention allowed horses to pull much heavier loads than did the harness being used in Europe at the time.
The Chinese perfected a plow that was more efficient because it had two blades. They also improved iron tools, invented the wheelbarrow, and began to use water mills 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 honored occupation. An imperial edict written in 167 B.C. stated this philosophy quite plainly:

> 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.

**Silk Roads**

Why would anyone struggle over mountains and across deserts to buy fabric? Ancient peoples 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 length of the Silk Roads. Mediterranean merchants went partway, then traded with Central Asian nomads—who went east until they met Chinese traders near India. Many traders traveled in camel caravans.
The Silk Road split in two to skirt the edges of the Taklimakan Desert. Both routes had oases along the way.

**The Han Unifies Chinese Culture**

As the Han empire expanded its trade networks, the Chinese began to learn about the foods and fashions common in foreign lands. Similarly, expanding the empire through conquest brought people of different cultures under Chinese rule.

**Unification Under Chinese Rule** To unify the empire, the Chinese government encouraged assimilation, the process of making conquered peoples part of Chinese culture. To promote assimilation, the government sent Chinese farmers to settle newly colonized areas. It 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. His book is called *Records of the Grand Historian*. Another famous 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

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**Traded Gold**

Gold was an important trade good. The object to the right is a Chinese gold dagger handle from the Zhou Dynasty. Many artifacts found along the Silk Roads show a mix of Greek, Central Asian, and Indian styles. This indicates that ideas traveled as well as objects.
The Fall of the Han and Their Return

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 Former Han, the first half of the Han Dynasty.

Wang Mang tried to bring the country under control. He minted new money to relieve the treasury’s shortage and set up public granaries to help feed China’s poor. Wang Mang also took away large landholdings from the rich and planned to redistribute the land to farmers who had lost their land. But this plan angered powerful landholders. 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 could not 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.

In the next chapter, you will learn about the early civilizations and kingdoms that developed in Africa.
India and China Establish Empires

Mauryan Empire

- **321 B.C.** Chandragupta Maurya seized throne and began Mauryan Empire.
- **269 B.C.** Asoka began rule; conquered Kalinga; regretted slaughter and converted to Buddhism; sent out missionaries.
- **232 B.C.** Asoka died; empire started to break apart.
- **185 B.C.** Greeks invaded India, beginning five centuries of turmoil.

Han Dynasty

- **202 B.C.** Liu Bang started Han Dynasty; strengthened central government.
- **141 B.C.** Wudi began reign; conquered neighboring regions; started civil service.
- **A.D. 9** Wang Mang temporarily overthrew the Han.
  - 1st century A.D. Later Han rulers encouraged Silk Road trade with West.
  - Chinese invented paper, collar harness, water mill.

Gupta Empire

- **A.D. 320** Chandra Gupta I began empire.
- **A.D. 375** Chandra Gupta II started reign. Indian art, literature, and dance flowered.
- **A.D. 500** Indian astronomers realized Earth was round; mathematician calculated value of pi and length of solar year.
  - Buddhism and Hinduism developed more popular forms.
  - Trade spread Indian culture, Hinduism, and Buddhism.

TERMS & NAMES
For each term or name below, briefly explain its connection to the empires in India and China between 321 B.C. and A.D. 550.

1. Mauryan Empire
2. Asoka
3. religious toleration
4. Gupta Empire
5. Kalidasa
6. Silk Roads
7. Han Dynasty
8. centralized government
9. civil service
10. assimilation

MAIN IDEAS
India’s First Empires Section 1 (pages 189–192)

- 11. What were three significant accomplishments of the Mauryan rulers?
- 12. How did India change during the 500 years between the decline of the Mauryan Empire and the rise of the Gupta Empire?
- 13. How did the southern tip of India differ from the rest of India?

Trade Spreads Indian Religions and Culture Section 2 (pages 193–199)

- 14. How did changes in Buddhism influence art in India?
- 15. What advances in science and mathematics had been made in India by about 500?
- 16. What were the economic and cultural links between India and Southeast Asia?

Han Emperors in China Section 3 (pages 200–207)

- 17. Why was Wudi one of China’s most significant rulers? Explain.
- 18. Under the Chinese civil-service system, who could become government officials?
- 19. How did silk influence China’s government, economy, and culture during the Han period?
- 20. How did economic problems lead to the decline of the Han?

CRITICAL THINKING
1. USING YOUR NOTES
   In a diagram like the one to the right, fill in the information comparing the Mauryan, Gupta, and Han empires.

2. CONTRASTING
   **RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS** Contrast Buddhism’s influence on India’s government with Confucianism’s influence on China’s government.

3. EVALUATING
   **POWER AND AUTHORITY** Which of the three empires—the Mauryan, Gupta, or Han—was most successful? Explain and support your opinion.

4. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS
   **CULTURAL INTERACTION** How significant were the Silk Roads to the economy of India? Defend your viewpoint with text references.

5. DEVELOPING HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
   What was the importance of the Chinese invention of paper?
Use the quotation and your knowledge of world history to answer questions 1 and 2.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

Kalinga was conquered by his Sacred and Gracious Majesty when he had been consecrated eight years. 150,000 persons were thence carried away captive, 100,000 were slain, and many times that number died. . . . Thus arose his Sacred Majesty’s remorse for having conquered the Kalingas, because the conquest of a country previously unconquered involves the slaughter, death, and carrying away captive of the people.

**ASOKA** in *A History of Modern India* by Percival Spear

1. Why was Asoka remorseful about the campaign against Kalinga?
   
   A. His army was not victorious.
   B. The battle took too long to fight.
   C. Many people were killed or made captives.
   D. He was not able to play a more active role in the battle.

2. What did the conquest of Kalinga cause Asoka to realize about the nature of war?
   
   A. War leads to the deaths of innocent people.
   B. War is the best means possible to expand an empire.
   C. War cannot be avoided.
   D. War is very expensive to fight.

3. What does this sculpture reveal about life in Han China?
   
   A. that the Chinese invented the wheel
   B. that the Chinese used chariots in warfare
   C. that only privileged classes used this form of transportation
   D. that the Chinese were skilled in the use of bronze

**INTERACT WITH HISTORY**

On page 188, you looked at a situation in which a government hired people to spy on each other. Now that you have read the chapter, reevaluate your decision about being a spy. What do you think are the best methods for a government to use to control large numbers of people? Consider the methods used by Chandragupta, Asoka, and the Han emperors.

**FOCUS ON WRITING**

Write a newspaper editorial either praising or criticizing Asoka and his methods of governing.

- In the first paragraph, introduce your opinion.
- In the middle paragraphs, give reasons and historical evidence to support your opinion.
- In the conclusion, restate your opinion in a forceful way.

**MULTIMEDIA ACTIVITY**

**Creating a Virtual Field Trip**

Plan a two-week virtual field trip through China and India. Decide which cities you would visit from the Mauryan and Gupta empires in India and the Han Empire in China. Make sure also to include sites along the Silk Roads. Create an online or classroom presentation that includes the following:

- maps showing the route of your trip
- images of the major historic sites you would visit and why each site is historically significant
- images of the commercial goods and art objects you might see along the way