



Han Dynasty China

By Trevor Getz

For hundreds of years, the Han Dynasty was the eastern pillar of the great silk route across Eurasia. This dynasty's achievements provided a lasting legacy for China both as a society and a state.

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Transformative Dynasty

The Han dynasty is one of the great dynasties in Chinese history, encompassing nearly 400 years. A dynasty is, essentially, a period of rule of a kingdom or empire by a single family. In China, though, the size and makeup of an imperial “family” can be quite flexible. In Chinese history, there have been nine major dynasties. Most were created by royal families who emerged from within China, although two were created by leaders from central Asia—the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) and the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1912).

The Han dynasty was created by leaders from Han, one of the regions of China. It coincided with the period of the Roman Republic and Empire in western Afro-Eurasia. Politically, it established the imperial system that many later dynasties used, although technically it was not the first Chinese dynasty. Philosophically, it fostered the development of a landscape of communal ideas and beliefs. Together, these changes helped to create a widespread sense of a shared Chinese culture and identity for the first time.

The period is usually broken down into three stages:

- Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE), with its capital at Chang’an
- Wang Mang (9–23 CE), also called Xin dynasty or Wang interregnum (pause between wars)
- Eastern Han (25–220 CE), with its capital at Luoyang

Qin Origins of the Han Imperial System

Prior to the third century, the region of China was broken into many smaller states. At the core was a set of small kingdoms—including Han—that roughly shared their language, values, and form of political organization. Farther away, the states looked a bit different, becoming more rural and speaking languages associated more with the people of central Asia. The most significant of these people on the periphery were the Xiongnu, a loose grouping of pastoral people who saw the growing populations of central China as a threat. In turn, those residing in the Chinese communities or in states to the east also found the Xiongnu to be threatening.

Around the middle of the third century, the northwest kingdom of Qin briefly dominated the other states and created a single administrative structure under Qin Shi Huangdi (ruled 221–210 BCE), literally “First Emperor of Qin.” He created a military structure of administration and appointed people to govern the different states. The Qin state also adopted and spread philosophies that helped it rule—especially Legalism, which emphasized obedience to the state. As a result, it was also able to extend Qin’s rule beyond the core Chinese states to some neighboring societies, threatening the Xiongnu and other neighbors.

Following the death of its founder, the Qin dynasty crumbled. There was just too much outside opposition with people unwilling to be ruled in such an authoritarian manner. Two Qin officials then fought to take control. One, Liu Bang, later known as Emperor Gaozu, led the state of Han after 206 BCE, making that the date of the start of the Han dynasty. He won a civil war and four years later, his firm control brought the central kingdoms of China under a single empire.

Consolidation

How did this new dynasty eventually come to be so influential in Chinese history?

The Han rulers—beginning with the Emperor Gaozu—mixed the harsh but effective Legalism of the Qin dynasty with the softer ideology of Confucianism. Confucianism is based on the community-first ideas of the thinker Confucius. Obedience was still demanded, but the blended philosophy also recognized that rulers and the state had an obligation to provide for its people. Even ideas from the religion Daoism crept into this philosophy. For example, the Han emperors generally embraced the idea that humans were part of the natural world and that agriculture and

nature could only thrive if they were good rulers. All of this came together in the central idea of Han rule—known as the Mandate of Heaven. It said that the emperors ruled because they had fulfilled their *ren*, meaning “benevolent duty,” to the community. But it also said that if they ruled badly, heaven would let them know it with crop failures or natural disasters. Under the Mandate of Heaven, if these disasters came to be seen as the result of poor governance, then these rulers could be replaced.

The Mandate of Heaven philosophy was supported by a government led by Confucian scholars who were literate and effective. They put in place systems to communicate with each other, collect data, and report on problems. The result was a period of peace and relative wealth. Peasants could safely work the land, producing more food. Trade within the state expanded, and the millet-growing regions of the north and rice-growing regions of the south supported each other by trading food. Han emperors, in many cases, expanded the state, and there is evidence that some people outside of central China welcomed their rule. Populations exploded as a result of this stability and reliable food production.



Han Dynasty China at its greatest extent, with its “commanderies and kingdoms”, the administrative units through which its efficient bureaucrats ruled.

Various economic measures were taken to expand state control, including (in 119 BCE) a state monopoly of iron and silk production. Forty-nine foundries, or metal factories, produced large numbers of agricultural implements. Experimentation with irons of different carbon contents and the alloys they could make led to the production of steel. Many farms were involved in silk production, a fabric so valuable it could be used to pay taxes and buy horses. The Romans, 7,000 miles away, were the high-volume customers for which the Silk Road trade networks were formed. During the Eastern Han, a form of paper made from boiled remnants of fabric, bark, and hemp was produced and used widely. The first Chinese dictionary (*Shuowen jiezi*) was compiled around 100 CE, listing more than 9,000 characters and their meanings.

The Xiongnu and the Zhang Qiang mission

The main problem facing the Han for much of this period was the nomadic (roaming) people of the central Asian interior, the Xiongnu. Likewise, the Xiongnu saw the expansion of China into their territory as a problem. At first, the Han emperors tried to be friendly, even sending a princess to marry the Xiongnu leader and calling him an equal to the emperor. Making nice with these dangerous enemies seemed smarter than fighting them. The Xiongnu were important partners in the Silk Road trading route. However, the two states just had interests that were too different, and their leaders argued about territory, trade, and border raids.

In 138 BCE, Emperor Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE) sent a diplomat named Zhang Qiang to the Greek-ruled central Asian state of Bactria to get horses and allies for fighting the Xiongnu. He was captured by the Xiongnu and eventually escaped. Meanwhile, Wudi warred against the Xiongnu effectively enough to capture much territory, then went back to using diplomacy. Wudi also led an expansion of Chinese influence (and to some degree territory) into parts of Korea and Southeast Asia.



An image of Zhang Qian departing for Central Asia on his expedition. From a mural in the Chinese city of Dunhuang.

Mang and Eastern Han

However, Wudi's expansion basically emptied the state's bank. That created many problems for the government, which had to raise taxes. It also created problems for many Chinese people, who could not pay those taxes and still feed their families. At the same time, Wudi's reign saw the growing power of court eunuchs over the professional Confucian-trained scholars. The eunuchs were men who were thought to be specifically loyal to the emperor, and they began to control the imperial court, isolating the emperor from the people, who were increasingly unhappy.

A Confucian-trained imperial minister named Wang Mang saw that this was the time to play the "Mandate of Heaven" card, and took the throne in 9 CE. He took power partly with the support of large numbers of angry, hungry peasants. As emperor, he hoped to address the people's problems.

Mang tried to reform the state, but without great success. As a result, a Han successor to Wudi named Liu Xiu (the Emperor Guang Wudi) managed to retake the throne in 23 CE. He established his capital in Luoyang, to the east of the old capital. That's why the second period of Han history, about two centuries long, is called the Eastern Han. It was culturally a very rich period, but it suffered from various political challenges. In particular, the dynasty faced conflicts within the imperial court. Often, these were fights between the long-standing administrators, the court eunuchs, and the families of empresses. Empresses were usually the daughters of powerful lords who married into the imperial family. They brought their own people with them, who wanted some authority as well, and so they clashed with the eunuchs. Sometimes this led to actual fighting, but more often it fostered scheming and corruption.



Four gentlemen in debate, Eastern Han Dynasty period. While this was a culturally rich period, it was also one in which disagreements at court and politics created a lot of problems.

The corruption angered the trained Confucian administrators in the provinces, who were just trying to govern, but who found it impossible to work with imperial court obsessed with in-fighting. It got harder to address local problems, so peasants suffered. Ultimately, the Han dynasty simply could not serve its people effectively. The imperial court's chaos also prevented effective responses to natural disasters such as floods and droughts. And that was a pretty big no-no if your dynasty was trying to prove you held the Mandate of Heaven—and the Han no longer could.

Despite its problems—the results of which we will see in a later era—the Han dynasty had an enormous legacy. It created an economic powerhouse that played a key role in the growth of trade across Afro-Eurasia. It established the larger borders of China and created a shared (if still somewhat limited) sense of Chinese identity for tens of millions of people.

Equally, even today, many Chinese refer to themselves as *Han ren*, or Han people. In terms of legacy, that's not bad for a dynasty that ended 1,800 years ago.

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Han Dynasty China at its greatest extent, with its “commanderies and kingdoms”, the administrative units through which its efficient bureaucrats ruled. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_commanderies_and_kingdoms_CE_2.jpg

An image of Zhang Qian departing for Central Asia on his expedition. From a mural in the Chinese city of Dunhuang. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/Zhang_Qian.jpg

Four gentlemen in debate, Eastern Han Dynasty period. While this was a culturally rich period, it was also one in which disagreements at court and politics created a lot of problems. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gentlemen_in_conversation,_Eastern_Han_Dynasty.jpg



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