



The Fall of the Han Dynasty

By Dennis RM Campbell

Much of China's identity can be linked to the powerful Han Dynasty two millennia ago, and its eventual collapse has fascinated historians ever since.

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The Han Dynasty

The Liu family was an important family of rulers. They began China's second dynasty, which was called the Han dynasty. A dynasty is a line of rulers who all come from the same family.

The Han dynasty was very influential. It lasted more than 400 years. During these years, there was growth and progress in China.

The rule of the Han spread over two periods. The Western Han began in 206 BCE about 2,200 years ago. It lasted until 9CE. The Eastern Han lasted from years 25CE to 220CE. At its most powerful, the Han controlled about 2.5 million square miles of land. It ruled nearly 60 million people.

The emperor was called "huangdi" in Chinese. The Chinese people thought their emperor was more than just a world leader. They believed he was connected to the spiritual world. They saw him as a sort of god.



Map showing the extent of the Eastern Han empire compared to the size of modern China (outlined in orange). By Arab Hafez, Public Domain.

The collapse of the Han Dynasty

The Eastern Han emperors faced many challenges.

There were natural disasters outside of their control. These included plagues, locusts, droughts, floods, and earthquakes. These events were costly. Over time China became too expensive to run.

The Han and outsiders

Tribal groups lived along China's borders. They did not get along with the Han. The Han people thought the non-Han tribes were inferior. They believed people born in China were better than all others.



Handscroll supposedly depicting various individuals, including tribal people bringing tribute to the Han emperor. By Walters Art Gallery, Public Domain.

In the year 89, the Han defeated a large tribal group called the Xiongnu. Today its members are called the Huns. The Xiongnu lived at the edge of the empire. The Han pushed them away from China.

The Han did not realize that the Xiongnu tribe was actually helping them. Having the Xiongnu at the border kept other dangerous tribes away. Without the Xiongnu, the Han now had to deal with these tribes. They had to fight off many invasions. This cost the empire a great deal of money.

Problems from within

There were problems inside the Han dynasty, too. Taxes were one problem. Small farmers paid the most taxes. Rich landowners paid very little. Soon, the small farmers figured out how to pay less, too. They gave up their land and started working for the rich. This meant less and less tax money for the rulers.



[Drawing depicting the likely fictional account of general Guan Yu chasing and then killing the Yellow Turban warrior Guan Hai.](#) Guan Yu would go on to play an important role in the battles between the warlords in the last decades of the Han empire. Public Domain.

There were also rebellions in the dynasty. The Yellow Turban revolt was one of the most dangerous. It happened in the year 184.

About 10 years earlier, a deadly disease broke out. Many people got very sick and died. People blamed their ruler, Emperor Ling. They felt he could stop the disease if he wanted. Yet it kept spreading.

The poor people of the Han dynasty turned to faith healers. They were looking for magical cures. One of these healers was named Zhang Jue. His power grew. Then he led a rebellion. His followers rose up against Ling. They tried to fight for power. This was known as the Yellow Turban Revolt. The army defeated Zhang Jue's rebels. Still, more revolts happened. They continued over the next 10 years.



Map showing the breakdown of the Han empire as warlords carved out their own territories. Cao Cao (upper center) would try to reform the Han, but ultimately failed. By SY, CC BY-SA 4.0.

In the year 189, Emperor Ling died. His 13-year-old son was named emperor. Ling's wife wanted to secure power. She made sure that the teen was put in charge. A general named Dong Zhou also wanted power. He took over the capital city. He defeated the young emperor. Then he put an even younger child on the throne. This emperor was only 8 years old! His name was Emperor Xian. He would be the last emperor of the Han dynasty.

Dong Zhou tried to control the government through Xian. Dong Zhou was not well liked. Eventually, he was killed. Now there was no center of power. Warlords started fighting for control. In the year 220, about 1,800 years ago, Xian was pushed from the throne. The Han Dynasty ended.

Theories of collapse

Chinese historians have tried to understand why the Han Dynasty fell. They developed three main theories, or ideas. The first theory says bad rulers were to blame. The second says that there were too many child emperors. These kid-rulers were controlled by grown-ups, which was not a good way to lead a government. The third theory blames the end on the Yellow Turban Revolt.

Today, experts have even more ideas. Some say the fall of Han started when the Xiongnu were pushed out. Without an enemy like the Xiongnu to fight, the Han generals had little to do. They wanted to fight someone. So they turned on the empire. They tried to grab power for themselves.

Another theory says the empire did not have enough support from rich people. The empire needed money. But the wealthy did not want to contribute. Without their help, the Han did not have the money it needed to keep responding to difficult events. Invaders, rebels, and natural disasters won out in the end.



[This painting on paper shows gentlemen involved in a discussion.](#) Men like these would play an important role in running the empire, Public Domain.

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Image credits

Cover: A display of terracotta warriors unearthed from a site in Weishan, 02 December 2002, in Shandong Province, Northern China. Two villagers were planting trees in the area on 23 November when they found the ruins and reported it to local officials. It has been determined that the terracotta warriors date from the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), a later period than China's most famed terracotta warriors found in the ancient capital of Xian from the Qin Dynasty (221 BC - 207 BC). © AFP PHOTO STR / AFP / Getty Images

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