



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.

790L



The Han Dynasty

The “golden age” of China’s Han Dynasty lasted more than 400 years. This period was a time of economic, cultural, and scientific growth in China. It led to the creation of a Chinese national identity. The emperors of the Han Dynasty all belonged to the Liu family. Their rule spread over two periods. The Western Han began in 206 BCE, about 2,200 years ago. It lasted until CE. The Eastern Han lasted from the years 25 CE to 220 CE.

Between these two periods, a non-Liu general was able to take control. He became emperor of the Xin Dynasty. But the Xin lasted just nine years. That was only a brief interruption in the Han’s rule.

At its height, the Han emperors controlled about 2.5 million square miles of territory. They ruled nearly 60 million people. The emperor, or “huangdi” in Chinese, was more than just a worldly ruler. The Chinese believed he was closely 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, including natural disasters outside of their control. During these years the empire experienced droughts, floods, and earthquakes. The Han were strong enough to withstand these disasters for almost 100 years. However, over time, such disasters cost the government too much money. By 220, warlords had torn the empire apart. They established three separate kingdoms.

The Han and outsiders

Tribal groups lived along China’s borders and had a difficult relationship with the Han. The Han believed that non-Han (Chinese) people were born inferior. Sometimes, when a tribal group was causing trouble, the Han emperors would move the group into the empire. Once inside the Han dynasty, tribe members were often mistreated. Over time, as their anger grew, they became a growing source of trouble.



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

In 89, the Han defeated a large tribal group called the Xiongnu, later known as the Huns. They lived at the border of the empire. The Han pushed the Xiongnu away from China. They did not realize at the time that the Xiongnu tribe was actually helpful to the dynasty. With the Xiongnu at the border, other dangerous tribes were less likely to attack. Without the Xiongnu, the Han had to fight off invasions from other tribes. This drained the empire's resources.

Problems from within

The Han did not only face struggles at and beyond its borders. There were also problems within the empire. Taxation was one of them. By the year 100, the government was not bringing in enough tax money to support itself. Small farmers contributed the most in taxes, while wealthy landowners contributed much less than their fair share. In response, small farmers started giving up their land to work for the wealthier elites. As a result, the wealthy produced more, and the small farmers could stop paying taxes. This meant less and less tax money for the empire.

Throughout the first and second centuries CE, eunuchs became a powerful group. The eunuchs were men whose reproductive organs had been removed. They had no children or wives. All of their loyalty was to the emperor. The elites felt threatened by this. Under the reign of Emperor Ling, a small group of elites planned to kill hundreds of eunuchs. They failed spectacularly. Of the three elite leaders, one was thrown in prison and killed, and the other two killed themselves. As for Emperor Ling, he was seen as a weak and corrupt ruler. Many rebellions and protests broke out during his reign. One of the most dangerous was the Yellow Turban Revolt of the year 184.

About 10 years earlier, a deadly plague broke out across China. People thought the emperor had the power to end the sickness. They blamed him when it continued. To make matters worse, he increased taxes. The peasants turned to faith healers for magical cures. One of these faith healers, Zhang Jue, gained a huge following. By the year 184, Zhang Jue led his followers against the Han. This peasant rebellion is known as the Yellow Turban Revolt. The army was able to defeat the rebels, but peasant rebellions continued over the next decade.



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.



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.

Five years after the Yellow Turban Revolt, Emperor Ling died. His 13-year-old son was proclaimed emperor by Ling's widow. The widow's brother, wanting to secure power for family, soon attacked the eunuchs. A general named Dong Zhou took advantage of the chaos that followed. He took control of the capital city of Luoyang. He overthrew the young emperor and put an even younger one on the throne, an 8-year-old called Emperor Xian. The general tried to control the government through this child emperor. He was not well liked, though, and was eventually killed. Warlords started fighting for control of the empire. In 220, about 1,800 years ago, Emperor Xian was forced to give up his throne. This officially ended the Han Dynasty.

Theories of collapse

Chinese historians have spent more than a thousand years trying to understand why the Han Dynasty fell. Over time they developed three main theories. The first theory says bad rulers were to blame. The second theory says that empresses and eunuchs had too much influence over child emperors. The third theory says that the Yellow Turban Revolt was the real cause of the dynasty's end.

Modern scholars offer even more theories. One argument says that the Han victory over Xiongnu was the beginning of the end. Those who support this theory claim that war against outside tribes was the only thing that kept the generals loyal to the empire. When there were no more powerful enemies, like the Xiongnu, to fight, generals turned their aggression on the empire itself. They tried to grab power for themselves.

Another theory says the empire's lack of support from its wealthiest members was the real cause of the Han's decline. The emperors needed money from the elites. Without it, they did not have the necessary funds to keep responding to difficult events. Invaders, rebellion, 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.

Sources

- Beck, B.J. Mansvelt. "The Fall of Han." In D. Twitchett and J.K. Fairbank eds., *The Cambridge History of China Volume 1: The Ch'in and Han Empires 221 B.C.-A.D. 220*, 317-376. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- de Crespigny, Rafe. *Fire Over Luoyang: A History of the Later Han Dynasty 23-220 AD*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2017.
- di Cosmo, N. *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2002.
- Hardy, G. and A.B. Kinney. *The Establishment of the Han Empire and Imperial China*. Westport, CT/London: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Hsu, Cho-yun. "The Role of the Literati and of Regionalism in the Fall of the Han Dynasty." In N. Yoffee and G. L. Cowgill eds. *The Collapse of Ancient States and Civilizations*, 176-195. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988.
- Lewis, M.E. *Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Scheidel, W. ed. *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Dennis RM Campbell

Dennis RM Campbell is an associate professor of History at San Francisco State University. He primarily conducts research on esoteric topics in ancient history and writes about ancient language, religions, and societies.

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

Map showing the extent of the Eastern Han empire compared to the size of modern China (outlined in orange). By Arab Hafez, Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_Dynasty_206_BC_%E2%80%93_220.PNG#/media/File:Han_Dynasty_206_BC_%E2%80%93_220.PNG

Handscroll supposedly depicting various individuals, including tribal people bringing tribute to the Han emperor. By Walters Art Gallery, Public Domain. <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/409/barbarians-and-envoys-bring-tribute-to-the-emperor/>

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. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4b/Guan_Yu_slays_Guan_Hai.jpg

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. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:End_of_Han_Dynasty_Warlords.png#/media/File:End_of_Han_Dynasty_Warlords.png

This painting on paper shows gentlemen involved in a discussion. Men like these would play an important role in running the empire, Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gentlemen_in_conversation,_Eastern_Han_Dynasty.jpg

newsela

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.



The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.