



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 “golden age” of the Han Dynasty was a period of economic, cultural, and scientific growth. It led to the creation of a Chinese identity. In the Han dynasty, the emperors all belonged to the Liu family. The Han was China’s second imperial dynasty. Its rule spread over two periods. The Western Han lasted from 206 BCE to 9 CE, and the Eastern Han lasted from 25 CE to 220 CE. Between those two periods, a non-Liu general was able to take control for nine years, establishing the Xin Dynasty. But that was just a short interruption in the Han Dynasty’s rule. Really, this era was still all about the Han.

At its height, the Han emperors controlled about 2.5 million square miles of territory and ruled over nearly 60 million people. The emperor, or “huangdi” in Chinese, was more than just a worldly ruler. His people saw him as closely connected to the spiritual world and respected him as a kind of holy being.

The collapse of the Han Dynasty

The Eastern Han emperors faced many challenges, including natural disasters beyond their control. These included droughts, floods and earthquakes. The empire was strong enough to withstand these disasters for almost 200 years. However, over time the expense of dealing with these disasters became too great. By the year 220, warlords had torn the empire into three separate kingdoms.

The Han and outsiders

Tribal groups living along China’s borders had a tense relationship with the Han. The Han believed that non-Han (Chinese) people were inherently inferior. The emperors saw themselves as “enlightened” bringers of peace and order to the tribes. They believed this even when “bringing peace” meant fighting those outside tribes.



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



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

Tribal groups that continually caused problems for the Han would be resettled deep in the empire. Many officials mistreated and cheated these tribes. Over time, they would become a source of greater trouble for the empire.

In 89, the Han defeated a large tribal group known as the Xiongnu and drove the group away from China. Later this tribe would become known as the Huns. Before pushing out the Xiongnu, the Han did not realize that this particular tribe had been serving as a buffer against other dangerous tribes. The Xiongnu had been effectively protecting the empire's border. Their departure left an opening for other tribes to invade China. Fighting off these tribal threats seriously drained Han resources.

Problems from within

The Han also experienced struggles within the empire. By 100, bringing in enough money to support the government through taxation was a growing problem. Small farmers contributed the most in taxes, while local elites, who owned large estates, contributed less of their wealth to the empire. Many small farmers started giving up their land to work for these local elites. As a result, the wealthy could increase their productivity and the smaller farmers could stop paying taxes. This meant less and less tax money for the empire.

Throughout the first and second centuries, eunuchs became a powerful group in the empire. The eunuchs were men who were castrated, meaning they had their reproductive organs removed. They had no children or wives, and so could give all their loyalty to the empire. The elites felt threatened by the eunuchs. Under the reign of Emperor Ling in the 160s, a small group of elites hatched a plan to kill hundreds of eunuchs. They failed spectacularly. One of the three leaders of the planned murders was thrown in prison and killed. The other two committed suicide after losing to the eunuchs. Their severed heads were put on display. As for Emperor Ling, he was seen as weak and corrupt. His reign was marked by rebellions and protests. One of the most dangerous was the Yellow Turban Revolt. It happened in 184.

The Yellow Turban Revolt was a peasant rebellion. It was sparked by outbreaks of a deadly plague. People began to blame the emperor for the plague. They believed he had the power to end the disease if he wanted to. The emperor could not stop the plague, though, and to make matters worse, he raised taxes.



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.

The peasants started turning to faith healers, looking for magical cures. One of these faith healers, Zhang Jue, was very successful and gained a huge following. By the year 184, Zhang Jue led his followers to revolt against the Han. The army was able to defeat the rebels, but peasant rebellions continued to flare up over the next decade.

Five years after the Yellow Turban Revolt, Emperor Ling died. His 13-year-old son was proclaimed Emperor Shao by the dowager empress He. She was the widowed wife of Emperor Ling. He's brother, He Jin, took this opportunity to attack the eunuchs. In the chaos that followed, a general named Dong Zhou was able to take control of the capital city of Luoyang. He overthrew the young emperor Shao. In Shao's place, Dong Zhou put on the throne an even younger puppet emperor, the 8-year-old Emperor Xian. The general tried to control the government through Xian, but he was not well liked, and was eventually killed. The Han Empire quickly broke down after that as warlords fought each other for control. In 220, about 1,800 years ago, Emperor Xian was forced to give up his throne, officially ending the Han Dynasty.

Theories of collapse

Chinese historians have spent more than a thousand years trying to understand why the Han Dynasty collapsed. Over time they developed three main theories. The first theory says that the empire fell simply because of bad rulers. The second theory blames the fall on the influence of dowager empresses and court eunuchs over child emperors too young to rule by themselves. The third theory suggests that the Yellow Turban Revolt caused the end of the dynasty.

Modern scholars offer many more theories. According to one argument, the Han victory over Xiongnu was the beginning of the end of the Han. Some believe that only warfare could keep the generals loyal to the empire. When there were no more strong tribal enemies to fight outside the empire, generals turned their aggression on the empire itself. They tried to take power for themselves. Other scholars blame the fall on the divide between the empire and its wealthiest members, pointing out that the emperors needed the support and money of the elites. Without it, they could not keep responding to crises such as invaders, rebellion, and natural disasters.



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

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