Section 5: The Han Dynasty

The Rise of the Han Dynasty

The strong but benevolent Han Dynasty began a golden age of reform and expansion. The first period, called the Western Han, lasted until 9 CE.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Compare the Han Dynasty with the earlier Qin Dynasty, and explain the Western Han period

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The Han Dynasty put an end to civil war and reunified China in 202 BCE, ushering in a golden age of peace and prosperity during which progress and cultural development took place.
- The Western Han period continued a lot of the Qin’s policies, but modified them with Confucian ideals. Because of this, the Han lasted far longer than the harsher Qin Dynasty— the Western Han period in particular lasted until 9 CE, when there was a brief rebellion.
- One of the most exalted Han emperors was Emperor Wu. He made Confucianism the official philosophy, encouraged reciprocity between the state and its people, reformed the economy and agriculture, made contact with India, defended China from the Huns, and doubled the size of the empire.
- Rebellions and external threats posed challenges to the Western Han, but it was able to survive.

Key Terms
• **four occupations**: A hierarchy in which aristocratic scholars had the highest social status, followed by farmers, then craftsmen and artisans, and finally merchants.

• **golden age**: A happy age of peace and prosperity; a time of great progress or achievement.

• **patrilineal**: Descent through the male line in a family.

• **xian**: Mythical afterlife paradise during the Han Dynasty.

• **socialism**: A political philosophy based on principles of community decision making, social equality, and the avoidance of economic and social exclusion, with preference to community goals over individual ones.

• **laissez-faire**: A policy of governmental non-interference in economic affairs.

• **Chu-Han Contention**: A four-year (206-202 BCE) civil war between the Chu and Han states.

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**Formation of the Han Dynasty**

By the time the Qin Dynasty collapsed in 207 BCE, eighteen separate kingdoms had declared their independence. The Han and Chu states emerged as the most powerful, but the Han state was the victor of the Chu-Han Contention, a four-year civil war. Gaozu, who had been born a peasant, founded the Han Dynasty in 202 BCE, reunifying China.

![Emperor Gaozu of the Han Dynasty:](image)

**Emperor Gaozu of the Han Dynasty**: Emperor Gaozu, formerly known as Liu Bang, founded the Han Dynasty.

The Han Dynasty would become one of the most important and long-lasting dynasties in all of Chinese history. It would rule China for over four hundred years, from 206 BCE-220 CE, and ushered in a golden age of peace, prosperity, and development. Today, both the majority ethnic group in China and Chinese script are called Han.
Comparison of Han to Qin

In many ways, the Han carried on policies that began in the Qin. Provincial rule occurred in both, and the Han continued Legalist rule, although in much less stricter fashion. Confucianism was banned during the Qin, but resurrected during the Han. The Qin, with its focus on the power of the state, was not shaped by religion in the same way the Han was. The Han were considered with the afterlife, and worshipped their ancestors. Both had defined social classes, but in the Han, peasants were treated with greater respect and classes were based on occupations.

The Western Han Period and Political Reform

At first the Han Dynasty established its capital at Chang’ an, in western China. This Western Han period would last from 206 BCE to 9 CE, when the dynasty’s rule would be briefly interrupted by rebellion and the short-lived Xin Dynasty.

Throughout the Western Han period, the Han largely continued the governing policies of the Qin, continuing to expand the bureaucracy and encouraging a centralized state. There were, however, differences between the two dynasties, and it was perhaps these differences that allowed the Han to rule for so much longer than the Qin. The Han were more interested in the lives and well-being of their subjects, and they modified some of the harsher aspects of the earlier dynasty’s rule with Confucian ideals of government. Freedom of speech and writing was restored, and the more laissez-faire style of governing allowed harmony, prosperity, and population growth.

This period also saw the further development of the four-class hierarchy, called the “four occupations,” which gave aristocratic scholars the highest social status, followed by farmers, then craftsmen and artisans, and finally merchants.

The family during this time was patrilineal and featured a small number of nuclear family members. Arranged, monogamous marriages were the norm for most. Sons received equal shares of family property and were often sent away when married.

Ritual sacrifices of animals and food were made to deities, spirits, and ancestors at temples and shrines. Each person was seen as having a two-part soul. The spirit-soul, which went to the afterlife paradise of immortals, called xian, and the body-soul, which remained in its earthly tomb.

Other innovations included the first use of negative numbers in mathematics, the recording of stars and comets, the armillary sphere, which represented star movements in three dimensions, the waterwheel, and other engineering feats.

Emperor Wu

One of the most exalted Han emperors was Emperor Wu, who ruled from 141-87 BCE. He was responsible for a great number of innovations and political and military feats.
Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty: A portrait of Emperor Wu, one of the most influential rulers of the Han Dynasty.

Emperor Wu experimented with socialism, and made Confucianism the single official philosophy. The Confucian classics were reassembled and transcribed. The Confucian ideal of each person accepting his social position helped legitimate the state and made people more willing to accept its power. At the same time, these ideals encouraged the state to act justly toward its people. There was reciprocity too in the fact that the state was funded partly by land taxes (a portion of the harvest); this meant that the prosperity of the agricultural estates determined the prosperity of the Han government.

Emperor Wu also founded great government industries and transportation and delivery services, developed governmental control of profit, and imposed a 5% income tax. He created civil-service examinations to test potential government officials on their knowledge of the Confucian classics, so that bureaucrats would be chosen for their intelligence instead of their social connections. Emperor Wu also reformed the Chinese economy and nationalized the salt and iron industries, and he initiated reforms that made farming more efficient.

Through Emperor Wu's southern and western conquests, the Han Dynasty made contact with the Indian cultural sphere. Emperor Wu repelled the invading barbarians (the Xiongnu, or Huns, a nomadic-pastoralist warrior people from the Eurasian steppe), and roughly doubled the size of the empire, claiming lands that included Korea, Manchuria, and even part of Turkistan. As China pushed its borders further, trade contacts were established with lands to the west, most notably via the Silk Road.
Challenges During the Western Han Period

Nonetheless, the Han faced many challenges. Emperor Gaozu rewarded his supporters with grants of land, which started again the same problems that had brought down the Zhou Dynasty. Several rebellions broke out, the most serious of which was the Rebellion of the Seven States. Nonetheless, the Han emperors stamped out the rebellions and gradually reduced the power of the small kingdoms (though never abolished them completely).

Another major danger to the Han was the external threat of the barbarians, the most dangerous of whom were the Huns. However, the Han Dynasty was able to face these internal and external threats and survive because of the strong centralized state they had established.

The Silk Road

The Silk Road was established by China’s Han Dynasty, and led to cultural integration across a vast area of Asia. It persisted until the fall of the Mongolian Empire in 1360 CE.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the importance of the Silk Road

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The Silk Road was established by China’s Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) through territorial expansion.
- The Silk Road was a series of trade and cultural transmission routes that were central to cultural interaction between the West and East.
- A great deal of protection and stability was provided on the Silk Road by the Han.
- A second Pax Sinica in 737 CE helped the Silk Road reach its golden age of cultural integration.
- The Mongol Empire, and Pax Mongolica, strengthened and re-established the Silk Road between 1207 and 1360 CE. However, as the Mongol Empire disintegrated, so did the Silk Road.

Key Terms

- nomadic-pastoralist: A lifestyle in which livestock are herded to find fresh grazing pastures in an irregular pattern of movement.
- Pax Sinica: Latin term for “Chinese peace” maintained by Chinese hegemony.
- Tang Dynasty: An imperial dynasty of China, from 618-907 CE.
- Pax Mongolica: Latin term for “Mongolian peace” during their Empire.

Establishment of the Silk Road

Through southern and western conquests, the Han Dynasty of China (206 BCE-220 CE) made contact with the Indian...
cultural sphere.

Emperor Wu repelled the invading barbarians (the Xiongnu, or Huns, a nomadic-pastoralist warrior people from the Eurasian steppe) and roughly doubled the size of the empire, claiming lands that included Korea, Manchuria, and even part of Turkistan. As China pushed its borders further, trade contacts were established with lands to the west, most notably via the Silk Road.

![Map of Silk Road](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I_(Boundless)/Chapter_5%3A_Civilizations_of_Early_Eastern_Eurasia/Map_490029.png)

**Map of Silk Road:** In this map of the Silk Road, red shows the land route and blue shows the maritime route.

The Silk Road was a series of trade and cultural transmission routes that were central to cultural interaction between the West and East. Silk was certainly the major trade item from China, but many other goods were traded as well. These routes enabled strong trade relationships to develop with Persia, India, and the Roman Empire.

![Example of Woven Silk Textile](https://human.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/History/World_History/Book%3A_World_Civilizations_I_(Boundless)/Chapter_5%3A_Civilizations_of_Early_Eastern_Eurasia/Example_490030.png)

**Example of Woven Silk Textile:** This woven silk textile from the Western Han era was found at Tomb No. 1 at Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan Province.

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**Chinese Control of the Silk Road**

This expanded western territory became particularly important because of the silk routes. By this century, the Chinese had become very active in the silk trade, though until the Hans provided sufficient protection, the Silk Road had not functioned well because of nomad pirates. Expansion by the Han took place around 114 BCE, led mainly by imperial envoy Zhang Qian. The Great Wall of China was expanded to provide extra protection.

The Tang Dynasty reopened the route in 639 CE, but then lost it to the Tibetans in 678 CE. Control of the Silk Road
would shuttle between China and Tibet until 737 CE. This second *Pax Sinica* helped the Silk Road reach its golden age. China was open to foreign cultures, and its urban areas could be quite cosmopolitan. The Silk Road helped to integrate cultures, but also exposed tribal and pastoral societies to new developments, sometimes causing them to become skilled warriors.

### The Mongolian Empire and the Disintegration of the Silk Road

The Mongol Empire, and *Pax Mongolica*, strengthened and re-established the Silk Road between 1207 and 1360 CE. However, as the Mongol Empire disintegrated, so did the Silk Road. Gunpowder hastened the failing integration, and the Silk Road stopped being a shipping route for silk around 1453 CE. A lasting effect of this was to inspire Europeans to find alternate routes to Asia for trade, including Christopher Columbus ‘ famous overseas voyage in 1492.

### The Eastern Han Period

The Eastern Han period was a time of reunification and prosperity that also saw the perfection of paper and porcelain.

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the Eastern Han period

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

**Key Points**

- The 400-year Han Dynasty was briefly interrupted by the rebellious Xin Dynasty. The first part of the Han Dynasty is known as the Western Han period; the Eastern Han period began when the Han overthrew the rebellion and reestablished the dynasty in 25 CE.
- Emperor Guangwu, the first emperor of the Eastern Han period, regained lost land and pacified the people.
- The Rule of Ming and Zhang was an era of prosperity; taxes were reduced, Confucian ideals were encouraged, the government was capable and strong, and the processes of creating paper and porcelain were perfected.
- A series of rebellions led to powerful generals who attempted to control the young emperor. Eventually, three states gained control and the Han Dynasty was ended.

**Key Terms**

- **Chimei**: A rebel army that ended the Xin dynasty after unrest.
- **regent**: A relative in a royal family who looks after the throne for an underaged king until he is mature enough to receive power.
- **porcelain**: A Chinese innovation perfected during the Eastern Han Period; durable, high-quality, and attractive ceramic ware.

#### Interruption by the Xin Dynasty

When the Western Han period ended in 9 CE, the regent to the prior emperor, Wang Mang, proclaimed his own new
dynasty, the Xin Dynasty. He attempted a number of radical reforms, such as new forms of currency, a ban on slavery, and a return to old models of land distribution. A series of major floods on the Yellow River, however, displaced thousands of peasants, and caused massive unrest. A rebel army called the Chimei (“Red Eyebrows”) developed out of the peasantry, and they defeated Wang Mang’s armies and stormed the capital of Chang’an. They killed Wang Mang and put their own puppet ruler on the throne.

The Eastern Han Period

A new Han emperor, Emperor Guangwu, took control and ruled from Luoyang, in eastern China; thus began the Eastern Han period, which lasted from 25-220 CE. He defeated the Chimei rebels, as well as rival warlords, to reunify China again under the Han Dynasty.

Under Emperor Guangwu, the empire was strengthened considerably. Areas that had fallen away from Chinese control, such as Korea and Vietnam, were reconquered. The Hun Confederation, which had grown strong during China’s period of instability, was pacified.

Emperor Guangwu: Emperor Guangwu ruled during the Eastern Han Dynasty.

Emperor Guangwu was succeeded by Emperor Ming, followed by Emperor Zhang. The Rule of Ming and Zhang, as it is called, is remembered for being an era of prosperity. Taxes were reduced, Confucian ideals were encouraged, and the emperors appointed able administrators. It was also in this period that paper, one of China’s most important inventions,
emerged. Though early forms of paper had existed for centuries, the process was now perfected. With paper, Chinese texts could circulate on a durable and relatively inexpensive medium, instead of on clay, silk, or bamboo. This allowed Chinese texts to become more readily available and encouraged learning. Another important innovation of this time was porcelain. Porcelain existed in previous forms for centuries, but was perfected in the Eastern Han period. The improvement of porcelain allowed for durable, high-quality, and attractive ceramic ware.

### Ceramic Candle Holder from the Eastern Han Dynasty
A ceramic candle holder from the Eastern Han Dynasty, with prancing animal figures.

### The Fall of the Eastern Han
A series of rebellions, including the Yellow Turban and Five Pecks of Rice, began in 184 CE. Military generals appointed during these crises kept their militia forces intact even after defeating the rebels. General-in-Chief He Jin plotted to overthrow palace eunuchs. He was discovered and killed, however, in the end 2,000 eunuchs were also killed. A series of generals attempted to control the young emperor, culminating in three spheres of influence. Cao Cao ruled the north, Sun Quan ruled the south, and Liu Bei controlled the west. After Cao Cao’s death, his son Cao Pi forced Emperor Xian to give up his throne to him. This ended the Han Dynasty, and started a period of conflict between these three states,
called Cao Wei, Eastern Wu and Shu Han.

**Invention of Paper**

Paper was invented by Cai Lun during the Han Dynasty of ancient China. It was used for a variety of purposes, including wrapping and writing, and eventually spread throughout the world.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Analyze the importance of paper and its invention

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

**Key Points**

- Cai Lun (202 BCE-220 CE), a Chinese official working in the Imperial court during the Han Dynasty, is attributed with the invention of paper.
- A basic process is still followed today that consists of creating felted sheets of fiber suspended in water, then draining the water and allowing the fibers to dry in a thin matted sheet.
- Early paper was used for wrapping and writing, as well as for toilet paper, tea bags, and napkins.
- After the Battle of Talas in 751 CE, during which the Chinese were defeated, two Chinese prisoners are believed to have leaked the secrets to making paper.

**Key Terms**

- **papyrus**: A material prepared in ancient Egypt from the pithy stem of a water plant, used in sheets throughout the ancient Mediterranean world as a surface for writing or painting.
- **bast fibers**: Fibrous material from the phloem of a plant, used as fiber in matting, cord, etc.

While the word “paper” is derived from papyrus, the early Egyptian thick writing sheets, it is made quite differently. While papyrus is made from the dried pith of the papyrus plant that has been woven, paper has been disintegrated and reformed.

During the Shang (1600-1050 BCE) and Zhou (1050-250 BCE) dynasties, bone, bamboo, and sometimes silk were used as writing tablets. Cai Lun (202 BCE-220 CE), a Chinese official working in the Imperial court during the Han Dynasty, is attributed with the invention of paper. However, earlier examples have been found, and he may have simply improved upon a known process. Legend states that he was inspired by the nests of paper wasps.
Portrait of Cai Lun: This portrait of Cai Lun depicts the invention of paper.

Cai Lun’s paper was made using mulberry and other bast fibers along with fishnets, old rags, and hemp waste. The bark of the Paper Mulberry and Sandalwood were often used and highly valued during the period. His basic process of creating felted sheets of fiber suspended in water, then draining the water and allowing the fibers to dry in a thin matted sheet is still followed today.
Chinese Hemp Wrapping Paper: These examples of Chinese hemp wrapping paper date from 100 BCE.

Uses of Paper

Paper was often used as a wrapping material. Paper used to wrap bronze mirrors has been dated to the reign of Emperor Wu in the 2nd century BCE. Paper was also used to wrap poisonous medicines. By the 3rd century CE, paper was commonly used for writing, and by 875 CE it was used as toilet paper. During the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), paper was folded and sewn into tea bags, and used to make paper cups and napkins. During the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE), the world’s first known paper money was produced, and often presented in special paper envelopes.
The Oldest Paper Book: This is the oldest paper book, dating to 256 CE.

Spread of Paper-making to the Islamic World

After the Battle of Talas in 751 CE, during which the Chinese were defeated, two Chinese prisoners are believed to have leaked the secrets to making paper. A paper mill was soon established, and many refinements were made to the process.

The Fall of the Han and the Three Kingdoms Period

As the Han Dynasty government weakened over time and ultimately collapsed, the empire fractured into the war-torn Three Kingdoms period.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Demonstrate the significance of the Battle of the Red Cliffs and the Three Kingdoms Period

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points
• The Han government began to weaken and fracture by the end of the second century CE. General Dong Zhuo captured Emperor Shao and installed his own puppet ruler, Emperor Xian.

• The warlord Cao Cao attempted to reunify China under the Han, but was defeated at the Battle of Red Cliffs.

• The Han Dynasty ultimately collapsed in 220 CE, and China splintered into three warlord kingdoms in what is known as the Three Kingdoms period.

• The Three Kingdoms period was war-torn, but also a time of great technological advancement.

Key Terms

• **hydraulic**: An engineering technique in which liquid is in motion and transmits energy.

• **Battle of Red Cliffs**: A turning point in history that marked the last attempt to reunite the Han, and the beginning of a time of bloodshed for the Chinese.

After the death of Emperor Zhang (of the Eastern Han period’s Rule of Ming and Zhang) in 88 CE, corrupt officials increasingly gained control of the state, while family feuds tore the dynasty apart. As the power of the emperor weakened, military commanders acted more independently and tried to secure power for themselves.

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**The Fall of the Han Dynasty**

In 184 CE, two major Daoist rebellions—the Yellow Turban Rebellion and the Five Pecks of Rice Rebellion—broke out. In order to fight these rebellions Emperor Ling gave military commanders control over their own provinces, but this gave way to a long power struggle. In 189 CE, Emperor Ling died and was succeeded by his 13 year old son, Liu Bian, known as Emperor Shao. Empress Dowager He was regent, and her older brother, General-in-Chief He Jin, became the most powerful official in the court. He Jin wanted to exterminate the Ten Attendants, a group of influential eunuch officials. He summoned General Dong Zhuo to march on the city. The plot was discovered by the eunuchs, and He Jin was killed. In response the Emperor ordered indiscriminate killing of the eunuchs. The survivors kidnapped the Emperor and fled, only to later commit suicide upon General Dong Zhuo’s arrival. The General would then replace Emperor Shao with the Prince of Cheniliu, known as Emperor Xian. Xian would be the last emperor of the Han Dynasty.
Portrait of Dong Zhuo: This portrait of Dong Zhuo dates from a Qing Dynasty edition of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

Dong Zhuo was eventually assassinated and was succeeded by another warlord, Cao Cao, who wanted to reunite the Han Empire by defeating the rebellious warlords. He nearly succeeded but was defeated in 208 CE at the Battle of Red Cliffs, a memorable turning point in history. With this defeat, most of the hope that the Han Empire would be reunited disappeared. When Cao Cao died in 220 CE, Emperor Xian abdicated the throne, claiming that he had failed to keep the Mandate of Heaven. China splintered into three kingdoms ruled by warlords; this marks the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history.

The Three Kingdoms Period

When the Han Dynasty collapsed in 220 CE, no one was powerful enough to reunify China under a single emperor. The result was the period of the Three Kingdoms, which lasted until 280 CE, when the Jin Dynasty took over. These three
kingdoms, Wei, Shu, and Wu, battled for control in a long series of wars. This was one of the bloodiest times in Chinese history—according to census data, the population decreased from 50 million to 16 million—but it also has long been romanticized in East Asian cultures and remembered as a time of chivalry and honor. It has been celebrated and popularized in operas, folk stories, and novels, and in more recent times, films, television, and video games.

The Three Kingdoms: The Three Kingdoms in 262 CE after the fall of the Han dynasty

Technology advanced significantly during this period. Shu chancellor Zhuge Liang invented the wooden ox, suggested to be an early form of the wheelbarrow, and improved on the repeating crossbow. Wei mechanical engineer, Ma Jun, invented a hydraulic-powered, mechanical puppet theatre designed for his emperor. He also invented a new irrigation device, the south-pointing chariot, and a non-magnetic directional compass.