Comprehensive index starts
in volume 5, page 2667.

Han Dynasty

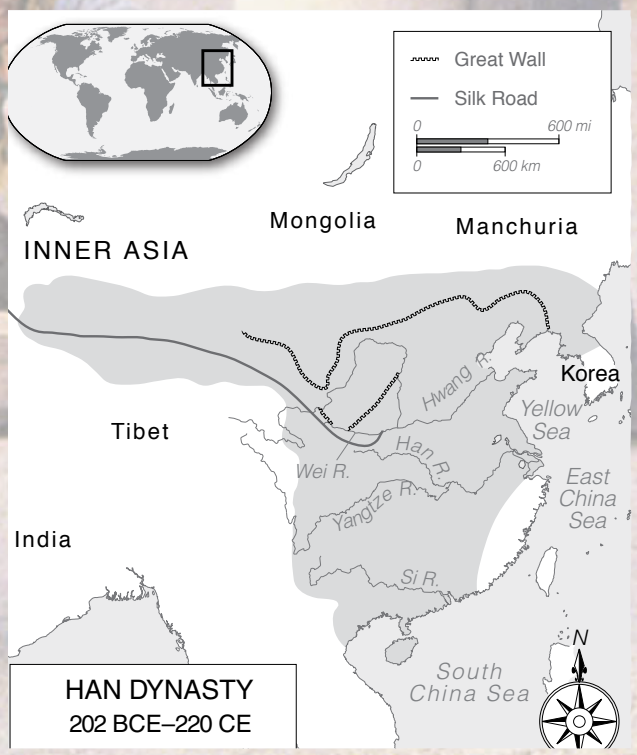
Hàn Cháo 汉朝

206 BCE–220 CE

One of the most dynamic periods of Chinese history, the Han dynasty was a time of political consolidation, military and economic expansion, invention, and empire building. The dynasty began with the fall of the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) after a widespread insurgency by peasants, soldiers, and nobles led by military commander Xiang Yu.

The Han dynasty 汉朝 ruled by the prominent Liu 劉 clan was established in 206 BCE and created an empire based on militarism and economic power that endured to 220 CE. The Han was preceded by the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) and was succeeded by the Three Kingdoms period (220–265 CE). The Han dynasty arose following a brief civil war in which the Han defeated a Qin army in the Wei Valley and established a capital at Chang'an (western Shaanxi Province). It retained much of the Qin administrative structure but also established vassal principalities or kingdoms in some regions. Confucian ideals of governance, in disfavor during the Qin regime, were ultimately reinstated, and Confucian scholars attained prominent status in the civil service. During the more than four hundred years of Han hegemony, China prospered in agriculture, science and technology, commerce, military expansion, and empire building. Following a brief disruption in the dynastic succession, the capital was relocated east to Luoyang (Henan Province). By the first century CE, the Han population grew to about 55 million. The gap between a peasant proletariat and landowning dynasty class widened, and the wealthy became more independent and relied less on the central government. Overexpansion coupled with domestic intrigues and foreign pressures led to a political fragmentation and the rise of the Three Kingdoms after 220 CE.

The dynastic history is divided into two periods: the Former Han dynasty (Qianhan 前汉) or Western Han dynasty (Xi Han 西汉), conventionally 206 BCE–24 CE, seated at Chang'an; and the Later (or Latter) Han dynasty (Hou Han 后汉) or Eastern Han dynasty (Dong Han



东汉), 25–220 CE, was seated at Luoyang. Scholars employ the Western and Eastern Han designations to avoid confusion with the Later Han dynasty of the period of the Five Dynasties and the Ten Kingdoms (907–960 CE). The Former or Western Han period had fifteen rulers who succeeded in an orderly manner. The era between the periods, the Xin dynasty of Wang Mang (9–23 CE), was tumultuous until succession resumed under the Eastern or Later Han, a period marked by fourteen sovereigns as the dynasty moved toward collapse.

When Han dynasty sovereigns took office, they were identified by their personal names but are posthumously designated by their imperial names, conventionally Han plus the posthumous name. The title of "Emperor" is a convenient Western descriptor. To complicate this duality of names for an individual, after 179 BCE there are era names assigned to the periods of reign; a single ruler might have numerous eras within his reign (for example, Wu Di, 140–87 BCE, had eleven era names within his reign). But for conciseness, only the posthumous names are used hereafter.

Former or Western Han: 206 BCE–23 CE

Widespread insurgency by peasants, soldiers, and nobles led by a military commander named Xiang Yu against the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) resulted in that monarch's death and the formation of the Han dynasty in 206 BCE. Xiang Yu divided the country into nineteen feudal kingdoms. But he lacked political acumen and Liu Bang (who posthumously became Emperor Gao Zu) gained control and became sovereign from 202–195 BCE. Some scholars date the Han dynasty to the fall of the Qin in 206 or to the ascendancy of Gao Zu in 202. He consolidated Han power and reorganized the country into ten feudal states. Three administrative branches of ex-Qin governance were retained: chief counselor (*chengxiang*), grand marshal (*taiwei*), and inspector-in-chief (*yushi dafu*). The chief counselor ruled nine chief ministers and oversaw thirteen governmental departments.

Emperor Gao Zu was succeeded by his son Hui Di, although Gao Zu's widow (a member of the rival Lu clan) retained great political power; Hui Di reigned from 194–188 BCE and was replaced by infant rulers under her control (Shao Di Gong, 188–184 BCE, and Shao Di Hong, 184–180 BCE). When she died in 180 BCE, administrators restored the Liu clan and named Wen Di as monarch. He brought an era of economic prosperity in government and social reform, but was opposed by princes of the imperial family. Barbarians from the north (Xiongnu) conducted cavalry raids into Han territory but were repulsed by Han armies, and a peaceful, albeit transitory, alliance was eventually negotiated. Wen was succeeded by his son, known as Jing Di (156–141 BCE), who faced a serious uprising known as the Revolt of the Seven Kingdoms in the year 154 BCE, which was led by princes of the imperial family who had gained wealth and power in southern Han territory. Because of the threat of the accumulation of power by these feudal princes, Emperor Wen and his successor deprived them of the right to appoint their own ministers and forced the princes to divide their lands among their sons, thereby diluting their resources for potential future uprisings.

Emperor Jing Di's son, Wu Di, took office in 140 BCE and remained in power until 87 BCE. Central powers were reinforced, skilled officials recruited, and the Qin calendar and emblems abandoned. He also enhanced and greatly expanded road and riverine communications systems for political and economic control. This was an era of great military expansion into Korea and Central Asia, attacks on the Xiongnu, initial economic prosperity, tax reduction, and China's lip-service adoption of Confucianism, displacing Daoism. A Grand School (*taixue,* a kind of university) was created, and essays called *Five Classics* (separate books on changes, documents, odes, rites, and annals) became the official moral and political ideology of the state. The colonization of the northwest frontier south of the Gobi Desert during his reign involved the transfer of an estimated two million colonists from the east. But this fifty-year period of foreign adventures, war and territorial expansion, and domestic expenditures—notably for extravagant diplomacy and a magnificent court—left the empire in a state of unrest and the treasury greatly diminished.

At the age of eight, Wu Di's son became sovereign (87–74 BCE); during his reign as Zhao Di, the government was administered ably by Minister Ho Kuang. A grandson of

Horses and cart from the Han dynasty tombs, Mancheng County, Hebei Province. The burial goods give a glimpse into life in Hebei Province during the Western Han dynasty. PHOTO BY PAUL AND BERNICE NOLL.

Emperor Wu Di, Liu He (Prince of Changyi) was to succeed to the throne, but he did not follow appropriate protocols in mourning his predecessor and was stripped of the office by Ho Kuang. Therefore, he was replaced by Wu Di's great-grandson, who became Xuan Di (73–48 BCE). His reign was one of great prosperity in agriculture and foreign relations; notably, the Xiongnu accepted Han sovereignty. By the first century BCE, the capital, Chang'an, reached its greatest extent. Rectangular in shape and laid out on a north-south axis, it housed palaces, administrative buildings, arsenals, two large markets, and elite residences, and was protected by a 25-kilometer wall around the perimeter. Next to Rome, it was the largest city in the world at its time.

Emperor Yuan Di (48–33 BCE), son of the previous sovereign, diminished government expenses, expanded welfare for the peasants, and promoted Confucians and eunuchs to high offices. But he erred in granting great power to his Wang-clan maternal relatives and enhanced the authority of the eunuch secretaries, thereby diluting central authority and setting a precedent that would result in the demise of the dynasty. Yuan Di's son, known as Cheng Di (32–7 BCE) was a weak ruler who further gave additional control to the Wang clan. Three other short-term sovereigns (Ai Di, 7–1 BCE; Ping Di, 1 BCE–5 CE; and Emperor Ruzi Ying, 6–8 CE) were ineffective rulers.

Xin Dynasty: 9–23 CE

The dynastic succession was interrupted by Wang Mang, who established the Xin dynasty (9–23 CE). His radical reforms during this interregnum were ineffective. The nephew of the widow of the sovereign Yuan Di, he was eventually overthrown by a peasant secret society called "Red Eyebrows" (so-called because they painted their eyebrows red) and killed in 22 CE by an army of nobles under the leadership of Geng Shi Di (23–25 CE).

Eastern or Later Han: 25–220 CE

Guang Wu Di of the Later or Eastern Han, an educated Confucian scholar who served as emperor from 25 CE to 57 CE, won the support of other aristocratic clans who dominated Han society and established great estates worked by tenant farmers and slaves. Based on the accumulation of wealth and supported by a bureaucracy drawn for these supporters, he moved the capital eastward to Luoyang (in present-day Henan Province) in the year 25 CE. The city was organized along a north-south axis, encompassed about four square miles, and would become one of the largest cities of the ancient world, with a population exceeding

one-half million. It functioned as an administrative and commercial center and international marketplace. Two palace complexes each covered 125 acres. There were separate wards or districts for foreigners (usually merchants or envoys from other lands). Central Asian envoys came in 94 CE, west Asian jugglers in the year 122 CE, and Japanese diplomats in 57 CE and 107 CE; economic links with Rome are documented in 166 CE. The central government became weaker and relied more on private armies for the protection of the state. Guang Wu Di's son, known as Ming Di (58–75 CE) initiated the conquest of Turkestan, but upon his death, Zhang Di (76–88 CE) succeeded to the throne and favored an isolationist policy for the homeland. By this time, the dynasty was in disarray and a succession of minor rulers became sovereigns (He Di, 89–105 CE; Shang Di, in the year 106 CE; An Di, 106–125 CE; Shao Di, the Marquess of Beixiang, in 125 CE; and Shun Di, 125–144 CE). By the year 100 CE, Buddhism, which likely had reached China in 60 CE and is documented in the form of rock carvings at the site of Kungwangshan in Jiangsu Province, began to make inroads into Han Chinese culture. An Qing (also known as Anshigao), a Buddhist missionary from Parthia, was active in the Luoyang area in 148 CE. As political corruption led to internal struggles for power and divided the peasantry, the succeeding sovereigns (Chong Di, 144–145 CE; Zhi Di, 145–146 CE; Huan Di, 146–168 CE; and Ling Di, 168–189 CE) were weak emperors. A revolt, led by the "Yellow Turbans," began in 184 CE and served to unite the divided peasant factions. But the defeat of these revolutionaries further weakened the dynasty and did not result in Han China returning to a united state. Dong Zhou, a military dictator, arranged for the succession of eight-year old Xian Di (189–220 CE). A series of warlords succeeded Dong Zhou following his assassination in 192 CE. Ts'ao Ts'ao gained control and was opposed by other militarists who controlled the western and southern regions of the disintegrating empire. Upon his death in 220 CE, the three regions emerged as independent polities called the Three Kingdoms, and the Han dynasty came to an ignominious end.

Han Sociopolitical Organization

The Han bureaucracy was both centralized and local, with the former including cabinet officials (called Three Lords and Nine Ministers), led by a chancellor who was also one of the lords. During the Western Han period, there were local administrative levels, approximately 1,180 subprefectures, and counties; governors of the latter had great autonomy and were delegated legal, economic, and military authority by the central government, including powers of taxation and conscripting corvée labor. Slaves were

The jade burial suit of Liu Sheng, Prince Jing of the Zhongshan State. Liu Sheng was the son of Emperor Jing Di and half brother of Emperor Wu Di. The tomb was found in the Han Dynasty tombs in Mancheng County, Hebei Province. Liu Sheng's wife, Empress Douwan, was similarly buried in a nearby tomb. PHOTO BY PAUL AND BERNICE NOLL.

A model well from a Han tomb. Han funerary objects often included the essential items of daily life. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

both private and state-owned. Officials were appointed to office on the basis of skills rather than clan affiliation. A professional civil service developed, and record-keeping enhanced the ability of the emperor to tax his subjects and expand the empire.

The Han empire expanded to encompass most of present-day Mongolia and continued westward to Lake Baikal (in present-day southern Siberia) , eastward to northern Korea and Japan, and southeast to Gansu and Vietnam. Han political and cultural influence extended westward through the Tarim Basin (the modern Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) and portions of central Asia, notably most of the former Soviet central Asian states to the Caspian Sea (including portions of present-day Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), as well as northern Afghanistan and eastern Persia (Iran). The conquest of Dayuan (the Ferghana Valley and adjacent regions in Central Asia) in 101 BCE gave the Han the opportunity to seize long-legged "celestial" horses (*tianms*); unlike the Han's short-legged Mongolian ponies, they greatly enhanced the Han cavalry speed and mobility. There was a notable military campaign in Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan) in 73 CE to maintain the trading monopoly. The so-called Silk Roads (a series of east-west and north-south commercial routes used for millennia) facilitated caravan trade between China and the West, notably for the export of Chinese silk, gold, bronze artifacts, and porcelain. In return, the Chinese received woolen fabrics, glass, pottery, spices, grapes, wine, sesame, pomegranates, alfalfa, and a variety of other Western foods. A tribute system developed in which non-Chinese polities remained autonomous in exchange for a symbolic acceptance of the Han as overlords.

Sima Qian (145–87 or 80 BCE), a Chinese historian, wrote *Records of the Great Historian* (also called *Historians Records* or *Shiji*), which was facilitated by the invention of paper; this was the initial attempt to document Chinese history in book form. This 116-chapter work set a standard for government-sponsored histories that continued into the twentieth century. The compilation of encyclopedias and other books, such as *Book of the Mountains and Seas* (a geography and natural history), expanded education and the rise of literate gentry. The arts, including calligraphy (with texts on wooden and bamboo slips or on silk), poetry, literature, philosophy, music, painting, and mural art flourished, as did medicine and alchemy and imperial cults oriented to magic and sorcery.

Han Economic Organization

Since 119 BCE, the state sought to monopolize the production of iron and salt, and less so copper working and silk weaving, which remained in both private and federal hands. Iron tools, especially the swing plow drawn by yoked oxen, allowed agricultural productivity and expansion, which necessitated the construction of irrigation systems (dams, dikes, and canals). Crop rotation was practiced from 85 BCE onwards. Chinese inventions during this era included paper, porcelain, the compass, water clocks, sundials, astronomical instruments, the seismometer, water wheel, the hydraulic trip-hammer, piston bellows, and

the forging of steel. Terracotta figures; textiles; gold, silver and bronze working (including gilt bronzes); lapidary in semiprecious stone; jade carving; wood working; and lacquer wares are among the crafts that flourished. Ceramic spirit models (*minqqi*) in the form of soldiers, attendants, entertainers, and other human depictions expanded to include house models, towers, granaries, wells, stoves, farm scenes, and other implements and accoutrements. Scholars interpret these as marking a change from mystical beliefs regarding the afterlife to a presumption that the activities of everyday life would continue after death. Pure rag paper is known from the second century BCE and was mass produced by the early first century CE; hemp paper was developed in 109 CE.

By 100 BCE, monumental stone sculptures were erected in public areas and placed on tombs, and by the first century CE, clusters of stone monuments and figures lined avenues or "spirit roads" leading to imperial tombs (replacing the terracotta armies of earlier dynasties). Tombs for the imperial family and official and nobility contained elaborate burial goods that document the lives of rich landowners and traders in contrast to peasant poverty and slavery.

The Han created the first centralized state and conducted major military expansion into Mongolia, Manchuria, Korea and Central Asia, as well as advances into Southeast Asia. The period was characterized by technical progress and economic expansion that enhanced merchants and gentry. Culturally this was the zenith of classical studies and an intellectual renaissance with courtly literature, scholastic philosophy, and the performing and graphic arts including music, theater, painting, and textiles.

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