



## THE HAN EMPIRE

While the Pax Romana unified the Mediterranean basin, China's classical civilization, the Han empire, developed along similar lines. The Han empire (206 BCE to 220 ce) would prove the longest and most influential of all Chinese dynasties, prompting the Chinese of future generations to refer to themselves as "People of Han."

The Han Dynasty was preceded by the Qin Dynasty (whose internal improvements would have a bearing on the success of the Han Dynasty). The Qin arose after the collapse of the Zhou Dynasty in the third century BCE. The Qin were noted for their extensive use of bronze and iron. Their most lasting achievement, however, was the construction of public works such as canals and roadways. The Chinese had long possessed a line of walls to hold back the advances of invaders. Under the Qin, these walls were connected, resulting in the beginning stages of the Great Wall, a 1,400-mile structure that protected the Chinese from potential invaders from the west and north.

Upon coming to power, Liu Bang, the founding Han ruler, immediately instituted a strong centralized government that ensured peace and stability for the Chinese people. Particularly influential was **Empress Lü** (195–180 BCE), who seized and retained control over the throne by naming her infant sons as emperors. The achievements of the Qin were expanded by the longest-ruling of the Han rulers, **Han Wudi** (141–87 BCE), who appointed provincial administrators to promote governmental efficiency.

During the Han Dynasty, Chinese emperors used a complex bureaucracy to aid their rule. To pay for this large bureaucracy, as well as for the imperial army, the government levied taxes. Chinese peasants paid their taxes by giving the government part of their yearly crop. Merchants also paid taxes. In addition to taxes, peasants also were required to give the government a month's worth of labor or military service every year. Han emperors used this source of labor to build roads, dig canals, and create irrigation systems.

Roads and canals encouraged trade and communication throughout the Han empire. The **Silk Roads** linked China to the Mediterranean world. Some of the Han people migrated southward into the present-day areas of Burma, Laos, and Thailand. Like Rome, the Han empire expanded its borders, expanding into Korea and Vietnam and encouraging the assimilation of those areas into Chinese culture. Most Han Chinese were farmers; however, the rapid growth of the iron industry produced fine manufactured goods for trade along the Silk Roads. Knowledge of the production of silk spread to most parts of China; silk was a valued commodity in long-distance trade with the West, especially with the Roman Empire.

Funded by taxes on trade, agriculture, and the work of artisans, the Han Empire boasted an imperial university. The **shi**, or scholar class, promoted education, while the first civil service examination was instituted under the Han.

The prosperity of the Han period produced significant population growth as well as technology more advanced than that of any other classical civilization. Among the inventions and advances attributed to the Han are paper, the rudder, the compass, porcelain, the seismograph, acoustical studies, and a calendar of 365 days. It is possible that the practice of acupuncture originated with the Han.

## The Decline of the Han

In spite of the achievements of the Han period, the empire also saw inequities which, as in the case of Rome, precipitated its decline and eventual fall. Land was distributed unequally between rich and poor. Women were kept in a subordinate position, although upper-class women were often educated in writing and the fine arts. The Hsiung-nu, peoples along the Han borders whom the Chinese considered barbarians, presented an ever-present threat; the Han Chinese paid them tribute to prevent them from invading Chinese territory. The economic strain of efforts to contain the Hsiung-nu and expand the empire further weakened it. Han Wudi confiscated the property of the upper class, a policy which weakened both trade and manufacturing. Peasants continued to revolt against their plight. A series of poor harvests prompted many small landowners to sell their property or even themselves into slavery.

Inept rule by the successors of Han Wudi led to the overthrow of the Han dynasty in 6 CE by Wang Mang. The strict control executed by Wang, however, led to peasant rebellion resulting in the overthrow of Wang in 23 CE and the restoration of the Han. Still plagued by poor emperors and internal weakness, the later Han were forced to contend with repeated invasions of the Hsiung-nu. Epidemic disease significantly reduced the population of the Han empire as it had in Rome. Han generals increasingly seized power as the empire declined. The collapse of the Han empire in 220 CE allowed barbarians into the Chinese borders, producing 400 years of political and economic turmoil and the division of the former empire into numerous regional kingdoms.

## THE SILK ROADS

An intelligence mission undertaken by an envoy of Han Wudi led to the opening of the Silk Roads, which eventually would link western China to the easternmost reaches of the Roman empire. Embracing both land and sea routes, the Silk Roads would play a prominent role in world history during two periods, the first from 150 BCE to 900 CE. During this period, the Silk Roads were used by nearby societies who were attracted to the wealth and material goods of the classical empires. Trade routes encompassed by the Silk Roads included the regions of central Asia, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Indian Ocean. In the Indian Ocean, an active route linked Ceylon and India with the societies of Southeast Asia. Pastoral nomads from the steppes of central Asia proved key players in the story of the Silk Roads—sometimes by threatening to interfere with trade and sometimes by fostering conditions that led to improved trade connections. Travelers and traders could acquire pack animals and buy protection through tribute payments to nomadic peoples.

Trade along the Silk Roads promoted the development of regional resources and manufactures offered as trade items. Among the items traded along the Silk Roads were spices, jewels, cosmetics, grain, wine, olive oil, and jewelry. The introduction of the stirrup spread both east and west, contributing to the success of the cavalry in China and the horsemanship of the European medieval knight.

Few people traveled the entire length of the Silk Roads with their merchandise; instead, they relied on middlemen to transport their goods part of the distance. Indians and Parthians (from the present-day Persian Gulf area)

were particularly active as middlemen along the Silk Roads, as were the Jews, Greeks, and Armenians in the Mediterranean basin. Malay merchant mariners were noted for their long-distance voyages from the islands of southeast Asia to both India and East Africa, capitalizing on the seasonal patterns of monsoon winds to facilitate their journey.

## Religion Along the Silk Roads

By the first century BCE, Buddhism had traveled the Silk Roads through the travels of merchants, reaching as far as China. Oasis towns along the Silk Roads harbored Buddhist monasteries that served as inns for early traders. Nomadic peoples along the Silk Roads would trade with oasis cities and, in the process, learn of Buddhism. By the fifth century CE, the Chinese had become sufficiently comfortable with the presence of the Buddhist monks, nuns, and traders among them to accept the Buddhist faith in a widespread fashion. Both Buddhism and Hinduism spread through Indian Ocean trade to Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, the Malay peninsula, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Christianity diffused across the land routes and sea lanes of the Silk Roads through the activity of missionaries. By the third century CE, Christianity had reached central Anatolia, and Christian communities had emerged throughout the Mediterranean basin as far as Spain and Gaul as well as North Africa. Christianity also spread to Persia and India, remaining a prominent faith in those areas even after the arrival of Islam in the 600s. By the third century CE, Christian monasteries began to form in the Roman world.

Another religion that traveled the Silk Roads was **Manichaeism**, named after its founder Mani (216–272 CE). Appealing to merchants, Manichaeism was a blend of beliefs of other major religions and considered Zoroaster (Zarathustra) as the prophet of Persia, Buddha as the prophet of India, and Jesus as the prophet of the Mediterranean basin. Manichaeism held that life was a struggle between good and evil and that good could be achieved by abandoning worldly pleasure. A life after death awaited those who achieved the good in this life in an eternity filled with goodness and light. The subject of persecution by the Sasanids of Persia and the Romans, Manichaeism was transmitted to central Asia, where it was accepted by some of the Turkish nomads.

## Epidemic Disease Along the Silk Roads

Epidemic disease transmitted along the Silk Roads accounted for sharp population declines in the final days of both the Roman and Han empires, with China affected by epidemic disease slightly later than the Roman world. Persia also appears to have suffered from outbreaks of epidemic disease. India, however, apparently was spared a major outbreak of epidemic disease. In both China and Rome, Silk Road trade declined as a result of the reduction in population.