

Han China
World History
Kienast

Much of what came to be China proper was unified for the first time in 221 BCE. In that year the western frontier state of Qin, the most aggressive of the Warring States, conquered the last of its rival states (Qin is pronounced Ch'in, from which the English China probably derived).

To silence criticism of imperial rule, the kings banished, or put to death, many who opposed his rule. To fend off invaders, the fortification walls built by various warring states were connected to make a 5,000-kilometer long wall. What is commonly referred to as the Great Wall is actually four great walls rebuilt or extended during the Western Han, Sui, Jin, and Ming periods rather than a single, continuous wall.

Rumblings of discontent during the Qin Dynasty grew to roars in the years after Shi Huangdi's death. Peasants were bitter over years of high taxes, harsh labor quotas, and a severe penal system. They rebelled. Rival kings were eager to regain control of the regions they had held before Shi Huangdi. They raised armies and fought over territory.

After a short civil war, a new dynasty, called Han (206 BCE-CE 220), emerged with its capital at Chang'an. The Han rulers modified some of the harsher aspects of the previous dynasty, lowering taxes and softening harsh punishments. One of the first great Han emperors was Wudi, who ruled from 141 to 87 BCE. Wudi's government employed more than 130,000 people. The bureaucracy included 18 different ranks of civil service jobs, which were government jobs that civilians obtained by taking examinations. At times, Chinese emperors rewarded loyal followers with government posts. However, another way to fill government posts evolved under the Han. This method involved testing applicants' knowledge of Confucianism—the teachings of Confucius, who had lived 400 years before. The early Han emperors had employed some Confucian scholars as court advisers, but it was Wudi who began actively to favor them.

Confucius believed that respect for one's leader started in the home. If you respected your parents, especially your father, then you would naturally respect your father-figure leader as well. Confucius also taught that you should respect your elders, both alive and dead, which made people respect those above them. Confucius had taught that gentlemen should practice "reverence [respect], generosity, truthfulness, diligence [industriousness], and kindness." Because these were exactly the qualities he wanted his government officials to have, Wudi set up a school where hopeful job applicants from all over China could come to study Confucius's works. After their studies, job applicants took formal examinations in history, law, literature, and Confucianism. In theory, anyone could take the exams. In practice, few peasants could afford to educate their sons. So only sons of wealthy landowners had a chance at a government career. In spite of this flaw, the civil service system begun by Wudi worked so efficiently that it continued in China until 1912. The civil service examination system created a meritocracy, or government based on someone's actual skills, rather than just their inheritance of power.

Under the Han rulers, science and technology made remarkable strides; paper, the compass, and the seismograph were invented; and steel was manufactured. The empire expanded into southern China, northern Vietnam and parts of Korea, and forged trade routes through Central Asia to India and Persia. The empire expanded westward as far as central Asia, making possible relatively secure trade across Central Asia to the Roman Empire. The paths of trade are often called the Silk Roads because the route was used to export Chinese silk to the Roman Empire. Chinese armies also invaded and annexed parts of northern Vietnam and northern Korea toward the end of the second century BCE.

The Han Dynasty lasted four hundred years. The term "The Han people" comes from the name of this dynasty. (The English term for "China" comes from the name of the previous dynasty Ch'in). The Han dynasty is the East Asian counterpart of and contemporary with Rome in its golden age. During this dynasty, China officially became a Confucian state, prospered domestically, and extended its political and cultural influence over Vietnam, Central Asia, Mongolia, and Korea before finally collapsing under a mixture of domestic and external pressures.