

THE HAN DYNASTY OF CHINA

The Chinese think of the Han years as a time of glory, unity, and peace. The Chinese even call themselves "the people of Han." There were several reasons for the high reputation of the Han.

First, though the emperor still had great power, the hated laws of the Ch'in emperors were revoked. Legalist thinkers were expelled from the imperial palace. Second, the Han ruled during a time when barbarians rarely threatened the Chinese. Thus, scholars spoke highly of the Han dynasty because these were the years when Confucius's teachings won widespread influence.

The most powerful of the Han emperors was **Wudi**, who ruled from 140 BCE to 87 BCE. Wudi was known as the "Martial Emperor" because of his success in battle ("martial," a word from the Greek and Roman god, Mars, means "warlike") Northern barbarians, the Huns, had earlier broken through the Great Wall and pitched their tents in one corner of the empire. But Wudi's armies drove them back beyond the wall. At the same time, the boundaries of the empire were extended westward to central Asia, south to modern-day Vietnam, and east into what is now Korea. The armies of the Han attacked up to 2,000 miles from their emperor's palace.

Wudi and the Confucian Scholars

During Han rule there was a renewal of learning. Scholars were again allowed to read

the old Chinese classics, the poetry and history so loved by Confucius. Ch'in book burners had destroyed many ancient works, but a few scholars had hidden their classics. Others had memorized them. The most precious books were known as the "Five Classics" because shortly before his death, Confucius was said to have collected the greatest writings of Zhou times and organized them into five books. A sixth book, the *Analects*, contained Confucius's words of wisdom as recorded by his students.

Wudi proclaimed Confucianism the official set of beliefs for his government. In 124 BCE, Wudi founded a national university to teach the Five Classics and other great writings of the past. Graduates who passed examinations on the Classics were chosen for high positions in Wudi's government. Soon the most powerful officials in China (outside of the imperial family) were scholars who had mastered the Classics. In later years, these examinations were a key feature of Chinese government.

The Great Silk Road

Wudi's conquests to the west of China encouraged the growth of overland trade. According to legend, Wudi sent a trusted Chinese official in search of a fresh supply of horses for his armies. Traveling far beyond the Great Wall, the official brought back reports that stunned Wudi. Far to the west he had discovered foreigners (Persians) who were almost as civilized as the Chinese.

It was silk that first linked China with Persia and the rest of the civilized world. Camel **caravans** (a group of people, especially traders or pilgrims, traveling together across a desert in Asia or North Africa) carried bundles of silk over a rocky, mountainous route that led past Tibet, across the Takla Makan Desert, and into Central Asia. This route was known as the **Great Silk Road**. After a journey of 4,000 miles, Chinese silk reached the great markets of Syria and Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. By that time, the silk had changed hands many times, each time for a higher price.

Technology, Commerce, and Culture

During the Han Dynasty there were many innovations, and the government began to exercise more control over trade and manufacturing.

Paper was invented around 100 CE. You may recall that the Egyptians used papyrus (made from reeds) and other cultures used clay tablets (cuneiform) to record their writings. Prior to the development of paper, Chinese officials kept records on strips of wood. Paper was easier to use and store.

Another technological development was a harness that allowed a horse to pull a heavier load. A more efficient plow was also developed, and water-powered mills were used to grind grain.

The population of China grew to approximately 60 million people. For

practical reasons, agriculture was stressed (and Confucius had also praised farmers as an anchor of society).

The government also took an interest in commerce. Salt (used in preserving food) and iron ore (for weapons and armor) were precious commodities. The officials of the Han Dynasty established a **monopoly** (when one group has exclusive control of the production and distribution of a good or commodity) on salt production and iron ore mining.

The Chinese government also ran silk mills (for a time), which competed with private producers. Silk is made by a special worm that eats mulberry leaves. The Chinese soon realized how rare and valuable other peoples considered silk to be.

Trade brought **cultural diffusion**, but the Chinese government was afraid of diluting the national culture. To keep culture intact and unify the empire, the government made conquered people **assimilate** (to take on the habits and beliefs of another culture) into Chinese culture. Often, Chinese farmers were resettled in newly conquered areas to teach the freshly conquered people. In addition, intermarriage between native Chinese and conquered peoples was encouraged. Historians wrote works glorifying China (and the Han Dynasty in particular).

Collapse of the Han Dynasty

In the years following Wudi's reign, China's prosperity declined. Chinese peasants

suffered most in any time of troubles. They lived under a crushing burden of debts and taxes, and were also required to perform a month's worth of labor (or military service) to the central government each year. With this source of labor, the government was able to dig irrigation ditches, create and maintain roads, and keep up troop strength.

Still, in times of bad harvests or drought many peasant families were forced to sell their children into slavery. Famine and plague stalked China's villages. Thousands of peasants fled into the mountains and became bandits.

They joined secret societies, each known by a colorful name: the Red Eyebrows, the Green Woodsmen, the Yellow Turbans, and others. Led by these rebels, the peasants staged revolts.

Twice the Han dynasty was overthrown, partly due to peasant discontent and partly because of ambitious and rebellious warlords. Thus, there are TWO periods of Han rule. The Early Han dynasty lasted from 206 BCE to 8 CE. The Later Han ruled from 25 CE to 220 CE.

A period of peace followed the return of the Han to the throne after the first dynasty, but soon the empire was in difficulty again. Cruel and corrupt officials gained power within the government. In the countryside, generals led armies in the emperor's name but, in fact, ruled for themselves. Peasants turned again to banditry. As disorder spread through China, the Han Dynasty neared its end.

The Spread of Buddhism

During the late years of the Han Dynasty (between 50 BCE and 100 CE), Buddhism became increasingly popular in China. Buddhism came to China via traders from the Great Silk Road or on ships that sailed the Indian Ocean.

In the villages of China, Buddhist monks taught that the Buddha had been a merciful god who came to earth to earth to save human souls. Of course, Buddha (who had been dead for 500 years) never claimed he was a god. Yet people in both India and China were carving statues of him and bowing down before them. Huge statues of the Buddha were carved into sandstone cliffs and caves.

In these bitter times for Chinese of all classes, the need for religious comfort was great. The worship of family ancestors continued, but people were also eager to embrace new beliefs. Millions of people turned to the image and sayings of the kindly Buddha. Thus, as the once glorious Han Dynasty collapsed, the religion of Buddhism spread rapidly through the troubled land.