

Artisans

Artisans, or craftspeople, were one of several groups in Han society that made up the class of commoners. As a group, artisans earned more money than farmers, but not as much as merchants. Although artisans did not enjoy the high social status of nobles or officials, they were well respected in Han society.

The artisans of the Han empire included painters, jewelers, weavers, potters, carpenters, and metalworkers. Many worked in government-owned factories and workshops under strict supervision. Others worked in private workshops that produced goods for the wealthy.

Metalworkers were responsible for some important technological developments during the Han period. Prior to the Han dynasty, metalworkers shaped iron by hammering it while it was red hot. Han metalworkers, however, learned how to pour molten iron into clay molds to cool. Many scholars believe this was the first time in history in which a cast-iron process was used. Han metalworkers also learned how to make steel by heating cast iron until most of the carbon was gone. Using these techniques, they were able to produce agricultural tools, cooking pots, various everyday objects such as scissors, and weapons of very high quality.

Another group of artisans were skilled weavers, who worked with silk. Those who sewed elaborate patterns into the silk were known as *embroiderers*. These silk craftspeople, most of whom were women, were highly valued because silk was an important product in ancient China.

Many clothes for wealthy people were made from silk, including imperial robes. In addition, important paintings were sometimes done on silk, and silk was sometimes used as a writing material for special occasions. Because silk was so valuable, high officials were sometimes paid in silk. They received rolls, or *bolts*, of the material as payment for their work. Silk also became ancient China's most popular trade good. Traders and merchants exchanged China's fine silk for goods such as gold and glassware from such faraway places as Rome and Syria.

Other skilled artisans worked with *lacquer*. Lacquer was a substance made from the natural sap of a tree. It was used as a protective coating and decoration on a variety of everyday items. These items included tableware, furniture, shoes, weapons, and even coffins. Some of these objects were made of wood, and the lacquer was brushed onto the surface, like paint. Craftspeople lacquered many objects with decorations in black or red colors, and highlighted them with precious metals such as gold, silver, and bronze. It took fine workmanship and many long hours to create these objects. Many of them became high-priced luxury items, and were supplied to the imperial court and the households of nobles and high officials.

The Imperial Family

During the Han dynasty the most powerful political figures were the emperors and members of the imperial family. The emperors, the empresses, and their families both ruled *and* served the Chinese people. Like the Chinese emperors who preceded them, the Han emperors claimed to be the “Sons of Heaven” with the authority to rule all the earth. This meant that the emperor was responsible only to Heaven and not subject to human authority. He expected obedience and loyalty from the people and, in turn, he was responsible for the people’s well-being and welfare.

The ruling emperor normally chose his own brother or one of his sons to succeed him. This son, called the “crown prince,” was often the emperor’s eldest son. However, sometimes the emperor chose his favorite son, his most intelligent son, or even a son by one of his wives who belonged to a wealthy and powerful family.

Once the emperor chose his successor, the mother of the crown prince automatically became empress. Her family then began to assume power and influence. Her father and brothers were often granted estates of land, or *fiefs* (pronounced FEEFS). Many of her other close relatives managed to obtain government positions. Soon the imperial family—which consisted of relatives of both the emperor and empress—grew quite large.

The imperial family ruled the empire from a palace in the capital city. The emperor lived in the innermost part of the palace, protected from criminals and bandits, and hidden from the watchful eyes of common onlookers. Various servants, advisers, and other court officials saw to his every need.

The emperor had many responsibilities. He led religious and official ceremonies. The most important ceremonies were those in which he asked Heaven and Earth for a good harvest. On the longest night of the year, he dressed in a blue robe and went without eating, or *fasted*, all night long. Before dawn the next morning, he prayed at a special outdoor altar. On the first day of spring, the emperor plowed part of a field on the palace grounds. Finally, on the longest day of the year, he dressed in a yellow robe and offered thanksgiving sacrifices for the harvest his people had received.

The emperor and the imperial families enjoyed a royal lifestyle. The main palace in the capital contained many grand halls and apartments for use by the emperor, his family, and other court favorites. Gardens and courtyards enclosed this area, and the entire palace was surrounded by a beautiful park with lakes, rare birds, and exotic animals. Inhabitants of the palace were often treated to lavish feasts, served on fine porcelain plates and in gold and silver goblets. There were also all-night parties, where poets, musicians, singers, dancers, and jugglers often performed for the imperial families.

Merchants

The merchant class of the Han empire was made up of people of various occupations. It included traders, moneylenders, animal breeders, and people who worked in mining and manufacturing. Many merchants had more than one occupation. For example, one merchant might be an animal breeder, a trader, and a salt manufacturer.

Although they were a part of the commoner class, most merchants were quite wealthy. Some of the richest merchants were those who took the money they made and invested it in land. These people accumulated great fortunes and acquired vast estates. It was not unusual for a merchant to own a huge estate containing hunting parks and fishponds, and to be served by more than 1,000 slaves.

Wealthy merchants enjoyed a luxurious and pleasant life, similar in many ways to that of nobles and high officials. Some wealthy merchants dressed in fine silk. They kept the fastest horses and rode in fine carriages. They ate nothing but the best foods—the same fine meats (beef, mutton, pork) and cereals (wheat and barley) that nobles and high officials ate. For a time, merchants enjoyed nearly the same superior status as those at the higher levels of Han society.

During the latter part of the Han dynasty, the status of the wealthy merchants changed. Their great fortunes and landholdings became a threat to some people, particularly those of the official class. The Han government passed regulations to restrict and punish merchants to prevent them from becoming more powerful.

Under these regulations, the emperor sent many merchants, their sons, and their grandsons to far-off places to join the military and become frontier guards. The government also heavily taxed merchants' property. If merchants failed to report their income, or made a false report, the government took away, or *confiscated*, their property. Some rules were passed just to humiliate merchants. One rule prevented them from wearing fine silk clothes, carrying weapons, and riding horses. The government also prohibited merchants from owning land and becoming officials. However, these last two laws were not always enforced and were not very effective.

Not all merchants were wealthy. There were other merchants, such as peddlers and shopkeepers, who had much less money and property. They sold everyday necessities, produced by farms and workshops, to commoners. These merchants often worked in the great public markets in large cities, such as the capital. They sold their goods in an atmosphere made lively by street acrobats, storytellers, and visiting foreigners. Shopkeepers sold objects of bronze, leather, silk, and wood, as well as items of food and drink. These merchants—unlike those with great fortunes and vast estates—lived on their small profits and led modest lives.

Officials

Han government workers, or *officials*, played an important role in governing the vast Han empire. These officials were chosen because of their education, and obtained their power and authority from the emperor.

Officials began their education at an early age. Young people who went to school were first trained as scholars. In school they studied classical texts—including the writings of Confucius—mathematics, and the rules for social and political behavior. Most young people who attended school were boys, usually the sons of officials and other powerful families. When their education was complete, the young men took demanding exams to determine whether they could become officials. Many did not pass the tests. However, they often achieved other respectable jobs because of their education.

Women were never appointed officials, and as a rule Han women were not as well educated as men. However, there were some outstanding women scholars. Most of them were the daughters of great scholars. These women sometimes served the government by writing and editing texts and essays, and becoming teachers in the imperial court.

Han officials were arranged in a series of ranks. Two top officials of the central government were responsible for consulting with the emperor and helping him rule over the empire. Below these two officials were the senior officials who headed nine major offices of state, or *ministries*. These officials, along with a few assistants, were responsible both for overseeing the operation of the government and for maintaining the imperial court.

One such senior official was the Grand Controller of Agriculture. He was responsible for collecting government income, or *revenues*, part of which was delivered in grain. His assistants supervised the upkeep of the state storage areas for grain, or *granaries*. They also arranged for the shipment of large amounts of grain to areas where it was most needed. Another senior official was the Keeper of the Imperial Purse. His ministry was responsible for preparing the emblems and badges needed by officials. He also supervised the craftspeople who built the finely-made furnishings and equipment for the palace.

Most officials lived very comfortable lives. Many had servants and slaves to do their chores. The officials' high status allowed them to acquire wealth in the form of land or money, or both. When senior officials traveled to the palace to meet with the emperor, they were often carried aloft in carriages. They dressed in their official robes and headdresses, and wore special seals and ribbons to show, or *designate*, their rank. The workplaces of many high officials resembled wealthy private homes. Many contained wide gateways, large courtyards, and shaded apartments. These surroundings reminded visitors that they were in the presence of an important person to whom they should pay respect.

Peasants

During the Han dynasty, most of China's population were peasants. As a class, the peasants were near the lowest level of Han society. Since they were not connected by birth to wealthy and powerful families, many peasants lived in conditions of despair and poverty. For this reason, other groups in Han society looked down upon them. However, peasants' work was considered important because they supplied food for society.

The vast majority of peasants lived and worked off small pieces of land. The typical peasant family consisted of a husband, wife, and two or three children. Their land was approximately 10 acres, and might also contain a garden, a walled farmyard, and mulberry trees. Most peasants lived in one- or two-story mud houses with tile or straw roofs. Barns and other buildings surrounded the houses. In many cases, several families lived together in a small village, allowing them to work the fields together.

Some peasants were better off than others. Some could afford oxen to pull their carts, and simple wells to help draw water to irrigate the fields. Others were less fortunate. They worked with wooden hand tools, and hauled water in heavy buckets across their shoulders. Peasant men did most of the physical labor around the farm. The women had two main responsibilities: taking care of the household, and weaving and sewing, either to provide clothing for the family or to add to the family income.

Most peasants dressed in plain, rough clothes. Their shirts and pants were made of scratchy cloth. Their sandals were made of straw. In winter, they wore padded clothing to keep warm.

Peasants ate simple meals. They steamed much of their food in small stoves. Meals consisted of steamed *dumplings*—balls of cooked dough stuffed with meat or rice—small portions of fish, and very small portions of meat. Peasants ate wheat or a grain called *millet*. Many families grew ginger, garlic, and onions in their own gardens. These crops could be added to their meals for flavor, or sold at the market to bring in some money.

Most peasants had hard lives. They worked nearly every day of the year. They were often exposed to harsh weather, including dust and windstorms, the burning sun, heavy rains, and bitter cold. Floods and severe dry weather, or *drought*, could quickly destroy their livelihood. Peasants whose land was destroyed or severely damaged might find themselves with no money to buy seed for the next year's harvest. They might have to sell all their tools or oxen just to survive a harsh winter. After the government collected taxes from the peasants, many found themselves with little left to live on.

Some peasants who faced hard times borrowed money from neighboring landowners. Often, when it came time to repay the debt, the peasant had already sold his tools and animals—and his children into slavery—and could not repay the loan. Then the landowner would take the peasant's land, having him work on it for practically nothing.

Slaves

As a group, slaves were at the bottom of Han society. Most wore certain clothing to note their lowly status. The social distance between free people and slaves was great. There was no social communication between slaves and free people, and intermarriage between the two groups was forbidden. Furthermore, it was very difficult for a slave to move up to a higher level of society, or to experience *social mobility*.

Originally, slaves were male and female relatives of convicted criminals. As part of criminals' punishment, the government took away their household goods and forced their relatives into slavery. The Han also used a small number of non-Chinese slaves. These foreign slaves were captured and brought from distant regions. They were presented as gifts, or *tribute*, to honor the emperor.

Sometimes, very poor people who had no means of support sold themselves or their children into slavery. The Han government allowed, and at times even encouraged, this practice. This occurred especially during times of war and great starvation, or *famine*. When these periods of hardship passed, the Han emperors issued laws, or *edicts*, that freed those people who had sold themselves into slavery.

Slaves fell into two basic categories: government slaves and private slaves. Government slaves performed a variety of duties. Some worked in the palaces or offices as messengers, doorkeepers, or banquet attendants. Others worked in the imperial parks and looked after dogs, horses, and other animals that were housed in stables. Government slaves also loaded and towed large river boats, or *barges*, filled with products and supplies that helped maintain trade among the cities.

Private slaves had to obey all of their masters' commands. They were their masters' property. However, this did not mean the slaveholder had unlimited rights. For example, a slaveholder's rights did not include the power to punish a slave with death.

Private slaves also performed a number of duties. Some slaves helped run households, which included looking after the kitchens. Other slaves acted as their masters' bodyguards. Still others might be trusted with secret, or *confidential*, work. This work could involve a business deal or guarding the graves of the masters' ancestors. Slaves who were skilled might be trained as acrobats, jugglers, or musicians. Female slaves who were beautiful and talented often danced and sang. Some female slaves were trained as singers and dancers from the time they were young girls, and were sold for this purpose.

Many things determined the status and living conditions of slaves. While most slaves lived modest lives, some actually lived quite well. Some slaves lived better than the poor commoners who were free. Slaves who worked for powerful, wealthy families benefited from them. They might dress in silk and other fine clothes and enjoy meals of meat, vegetables, and wine.

Soldiers

Soldiers played an important role during the Han dynasty. During the early years of Han rule, enemies from the north constantly threatened China. The emperor frequently called on his army of soldiers to defend the empire. Later, Han rulers used the army to expand their empire. During the period from 140 to 87 B.C.E., soldiers captured lands in southern China and started colonies there. Han troops also crossed the Great Wall and the huge Gobi Desert to the north. They defeated the raiding tribes from this region and brought the people under Chinese rule.

All Han men in good health between the ages of 23 and 56 had to serve in the army. This service lasted for two years. After this period, the men could be recalled to the army at any time if the emperor declared an emergency. Soldiers spent the first part of service in training. They spent the next part of their service stationed inside China or on China's far frontiers. Soldiers in the Han army received basic allowances, or *rations*, of food, clothing, and equipment. However, they were not paid for their service.

During the Han empire, a large body of foot soldiers, or *infantry*, made up the main part of the army. An advance guard of archers with bows and arrows and horsemen, or *cavalry*, supported the infantry. In earlier times, soldiers on horse-drawn battle cars, or *chariots*, had been an important part of the fighting army. During the reign of the Han, large numbers of cavalry replaced the chariots in battle. The cavalry was faster because the horses could move along uneven ground and required only one rider. However, the chariot remained a symbol of authority and continued to be used by officers.

The Han infantry wore full uniforms. Soldiers wore knee-length gowns, cloth leg-wrappings called *puttees*, square-toed sandals, and protective armor that covered the upper body. Archers had similar uniforms, except they wore pants instead of puttees. Soldiers' armor was made of a combination of metal and leather plates secured by bolts and cords. Square or rectangular iron plates fitted tightly to the chest and back, and moveable leather plates covered the shoulders, stomach, and neck. Officers' uniforms were made of a finer quality and were extended in front like a kind of apron. Decorations on their uniforms showed their officer status.

Han soldiers used a variety of weapons. Infantry commonly used spears, knives, or crossbows. The crossbow fired a solid missile-shaped object, and was more powerful and accurate than the bow and arrow. Most weapons were made of bronze, and a few were made of iron. The infantry did not normally use swords, but some officers and cavalrymen carried them.

The Han government appointed experienced soldiers to lead military battles. These officers might command troops from several provinces. For minor battles, the government might appoint a junior officer to lead the forces. For major battles, the government assigned one commander-in-chief and several general officers.

Nobles

During the Han dynasty, the members of the noble class changed frequently. The most stable part of the nobility were family members of the emperor and empress, who became nobles at birth. Other people became nobles by demonstrating their excellence, or *merit*, usually through military accomplishments. However, the status of the nobles rose and fell quite often. Sometimes nobles fell out of favor with the ruling emperor. Or if a new emperor came to power, he might lower the status of some nobles, while raising other people to noble status. One hundred years after the Han dynasty began, not one of the descendants of those given noble status by the first emperor held noble titles.

Nobles often became powerful landholders who ruled large estates of land called *fiefs* (pronounced FEEFS). Fiefs contained anywhere from several hundred to 10,000 homesteads. Nobles collected taxes from each household on their fiefs. Therefore, a noble family's income depended on the size of their fief and the number of households on it.

Members of the nobility had to give a percentage of their income to the emperor. In return, they benefited from a certain amount of protection from the law. They could not be severely punished without permission from the emperor. Those who were guilty of the harshest crimes and were sentenced to death were granted a special "favor." They were allowed to commit suicide, which was considered a more honorable death.

Many nobles were wealthy and lived very well. Noble men and women wore fine silk clothes. They owned expensive jewelry made of gold, silver, bronze, and jade. Their homes contained finely made furniture and tableware made of *lacquered* wood—wood that was protected and decorated with *lacquer*, a substance made from the sap of a tree. Because it took fine workmanship to create lacquer-covered objects, they were more expensive than bronze. While common people used bamboo mats as beds, nobles slept on wooden couches or low, movable platforms with canopies. The walls of their homes might be covered with paintings on fine silk.

Nobles rarely had to worry about having enough food, and usually ate a varied diet with plenty of meat and fish. The wealthiest nobles entertained guests at large, expensive banquets. Feasts might include ox or deer stew, snail, bear's paws, various kinds of fish, and vegetables such as bamboo shoots and lotus roots. For dessert, guests ate fruits such as tangerines, peaches, and berries. Drinks included alcohol made from rice and a grain called *millet*, as well as wine made from grapes.

Besides holding lavish banquets and parties, nobles also attended hunting parties for recreation in the spring, fall, and winter. They hunted quail, pheasants, foxes, and deer with bows and arrows.