CHAPTER 3

The Creation of the Bureaucratic Empire:

The Qin and Han Dynasties 256 BCE–220 CE

With Qin's victories over all of its rivals, China became a great agrarian empire. The centralized bureaucratic monarchy, the form of government that was to characterize most of the rest of Chinese history, was created by the Qin (ruled in all of China 221–206 BCE) and entrenched during the much longer Former and Later Han dynasties (202 BCE–220 CE). It was in this period too that the geographic scope of China proper – the region in which Chinese were to become the dominant ethnic group – was staked out as the government extended overlordship across vast regions as far south as Vietnam. The ideology of the new state incorporated elements of Legalist, Daoist, and Confucian origin, with correlative cosmology becoming pervasive as a mode of explaining the world and taking ritual action in it. The officials who administered the state came to be identified more and more with Confucian learning. Over time local elites were drawn both to Confucian learning and to government service, and the Han government came very much to depend on cooperation between local officials and local elites. The lives of ordinary people centred more on family and religious life, but they too were tied to the state through taxes, labour service, and conscription.

KEY DATES

246 BCE	Accession of King Zheng of Qin, the future First Emperor
235	Lü Buwei arrives in Qin
221	Qin defeats last rival, creating unified empire
202	(Former, Western) Han dynasty is founded by Liu Bang (Gaozu)
198–185	Regency of Empress Dowager Lü
141–87	Reign of Wudi
139–126	Zhang Qian on mission to Central Asia
111	Conquest of Nam Viet
101	Han army reaches Central Asia
91–86	Witchcraft scare
55	Xiongnu confederation breaks up
2–23 CE	Wang Mang's Xin dynasty
25–220	Later (Eastern) Han dynasty; Luoyang is made capital
30	Abolition of universal military service
91–102	Ban Chao in Western Regions
124	Eunuchs put child on the throne
166, 169	Eunuchs persecute opponents
175	Classics are inscribed on stone at the Imperial Academy
184	Rebellion of the followers of the Way of Great Peace

Unification by Qin

Qin, the westernmost of the Zhou states, had begun as a royal domain assigned the task of raising horses and defending against the barbarians. After the Zhou royal house fled the Wei River valley to resettle at Luoyang in 770 BCE, Qin was able to expand its territory and become the main power in the west. Not as urban or as culturally advanced as the eastern states, Qin seemed in early and mid Zhou times a rough and crude place, not that far removed from the nearby Rong, Qiang, and Di tribes with which it regularly fought.

Bronze weight, 6¾ inches (17 cm) high, excavated from the ruins of the Qin palace in Xianyang, Shaanxi province. Cast on to it are the name of the workman who made it and the unit of weight, bearing testimony to the Qin standardization of measurement.

To help them strengthen their state, the Qin rulers of late Zhou times recruited advisors, strategists, and diplomats from the territories of their rivals. Lord Shang arrived in Qin in 361 BCE and soon launched a series of Legalist measures to strengthen the power of the ruler (see pages 55–58, Chapter 2). By the third century BCE, the people of Qin had become exceptionally law-abiding and agricultural production had been increased. Every household was registered with the government, making possible careful planning and direct taxation that brought substantial revenues to the king's coffers.

Qin was always thought to have had a particularly harsh legal system, with penalties including execution, hard labour, mutilation (such as cutting off the whiskers, nose, or the left foot) and fines. Little, however, was known about its exact provisions until 1975 when 625 bamboo strips inscribed with Qin legal texts were found in a tomb of a man who served the Qin government as a prefectural official, and more have been found since. They reveal a sophisticated legal system based on statutes that made distinctions based on criminal intent and allowed appeals. Besides punishments for crimes like theft and murder, these statutes also specified penalties for 'unfilial behaviour', commonly identified with Confucianism. Qin officials themselves had to follow elaborate sets of regulations and reporting requirements.

The man who was to preside over the unification of China, King Zheng, came to the throne in 247 as a boy of twelve. With the aid of two key ministers, Lü Buwei and Li Si, he led Qin to one military victory after another. In the final decade, from 230 to 221 BCE, Qin conquered the states of Han, Zhao, Wei, Chu, Yan, and Qi. Finally ruling 'All-Under-Heaven', King Zheng took a new title for himself, First Emperor (*Shi huangdi*). 'Emperor' (*huangdi*) was a term he coined by combining

Opposite
The vast size of the terracotta army buried about half a mile (800 m) from the tomb of the First Emperor of Qin, near Xi'an in Shaanxi province points to both the might of the Qin military machine and the concern of the First Emperor with the afterlife. Originally painted in twelve or thirteen bright colours, these life-sized figures were made from moulded interchangeable parts but were hand finished, so that no two are identical. To add to the sense of verisimilitude, they were equipped with real chariots and bronze weapons.

two words for 'august' and 'lord', words that until then had been used for the legendary sage rulers of China's remote past. He soon set out on a series of tours of the country, to inspect his new realm and awe his subjects. At sacred places he erected stone tablets inscribed with accounts of his exploits; his empire, he declared in one, extended in all directions, so that 'Wherever human life is found, all acknowledge its sovereignty.'

Later Chinese historians did not celebrate the First Emperor as one of the greatest conquerors of all time (as one suspects Greek or Roman historians would have), but rather castigated him as a cruel, arbitrary, impetuous, suspicious, and superstitious megalomaniac. The First Emperor was without doubt forceful and disciplined. He was determined not only to amalgamate China into a single state, but to impose uniformity on it. Maintaining local forms of currency, weights and measures, or writing scripts was outlawed. The old states and their noble houses were abolished; the country was divided into thirty-six commanderies, each in turn divided into counties. The government dispatched officials to administer these new units. To guard against the possibility of local leaders organizing rebellions, private possession of arms was made illegal and hundreds of thousands of prominent or wealthy families from the conquered states were ordered to move to the capital, Xianyang (near Xi'an in Shaanxi province). As a result of the First Emperor's thoroughness, many local traditions were lost.

Criticism of the government was not tolerated by the First Emperor, who wanted the government to control education. After his advisor Li Si complained that scholars used records of the past to denigrate the emperor's policies and undermine popular support, all writings in private hands other than useful manuals on topics like agriculture, medicine, or divination were ordered to be collected for burning.

Ordinary people were subject to onerous labour service, and both conscripted and penal labour were used for the building of palaces, roads, canals, imperial tombs, and fortifications. Several hundred thousand subjects were conscripted to build a huge new palace complex in 212 BCE. Even more were drafted to construct the Great Wall. Earlier states had built ramparts of rammed earth along their borders. Qin knocked down those that separated the old states and connected those along the northern frontier to make a vast defensive system to protect against incursions from the nomads to the north. These projects required so much timber that entire forests were cut down. Qin road building also had an environmental impact. Wide, tree-lined roads were built from Chang'an to the east and west, north and south. A precarious road was even built along a cliff to open up passage into Sichuan. Roads were needed to facilitate sending armies, government orders, and tax payments, but they also made it easier to open new land for agricultural development.

The First Emperor's successes were due in no small measure to his determination to manage every detail of his government himself. He set quotas for the weight of documents he would read and dispose of each day, not resting until he had finished his paperwork.

After surviving three assassination attempts the First Emperor became obsessed with avoiding death and tried to discover the secrets of immortality. He reportedly sent a delegation of young men and women out to sea to search for Peng Lai, a mythical land of immortality. Historical accounts of the vast sums and huge labour contingents he expended on the secret construction of his tomb have been verified by archaeological excavations. Three pits discovered about half a mile (800 m) from the emperor's tomb (not itself yet excavated) contain thousands of life-size terracotta figures of armed soldiers and horses, lined up to protect the emperor.

The bureaucratic government of Han times produced huge quantities of documents on wooden and bamboo strips, and great caches of such documents have been found among the ruins of the garrisons established along the northwestern frontier. The one shown here was excavated at Juyan in Gansu province; dated 95 CE, it is an inventory of the equipment of two infantry units.

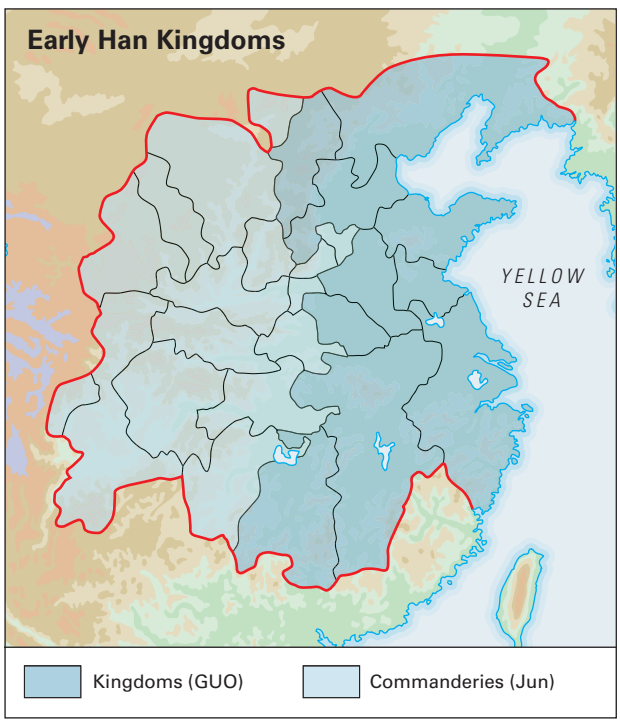
The institutions Qin had fashioned to concentrate power in the hands of the monarch made the stability of the government dependent on the strength and character of the occupant of the throne. After the First Emperor died in 210 BCE, the Qin imperial structure was undermined from within. The eunuch Zhao Gao arranged the death of the legitimate heir and the installation of a younger brother who became the Second Emperor. With this eunuch's advice, the new emperor alienated much of the government, dismissing top officials and punishing those who brought bad news. Dissatisfaction became widespread. In 209 BCE, a group of conscripted peasants delayed by rain decided to become outlaws rather than face death for arriving late for their frontier service. To their surprise they soon found thousands of malcontents eager to join them. Similar revolts of people eager to escape the burden of Qin labour and military service broke out elsewhere. In 208 BCE the Second Emperor killed his minister Li Si; in 207 BCE he was assassinated by Zhao Gao, who was in turn murdered by the successor he placed on the throne. Meanwhile, Qin generals began defecting and former nobles of the late Zhou states took to raising armies.

The two Han dynasties

The eventual victor was Liu Bang, known in history as Gaozu (r. 202–195 BCE), a man of modest background who had served the Qin as a minor local functionary, in charge of a postal relay station. In 206 BCE he took the title King of Han and in 202 BCE defeated his main rival, the brilliant aristocratic general Xiang Yu. Gaozu made his capital at Chang'an, only a few miles from the site of the Qin capital, which had been burnt to the ground during the rebellion. A planned city, Chang'an became a major metropolis, a cultural, political, and economic centre with some 250,000 residents. Imperial tombs were located nearby, and following the example of the Qin, powerful local families were ordered to relocate near them. In time, many officials were drawn from these relocated families.

Gaozu maintained most of the Qin centralized government structure and even retained the invented title 'emperor'. Still, at the time Qin was overthrown, most people apparently associated centralization with tyranny and believed the Han government should parcel out domains as the early Zhou had. Gaozu thus began by rewarding his old comrades with large territories in the east to govern as vassal states, an action he soon recognized as a mistake. Remarkably, the new Han government survived this and also the fifteen-year regency of Gaozu's widow, Empress Dowager Lü, who promoted her own male relatives while she ruled in the place of the young heir and the infants she subsequently placed on the throne.

The key figure in the strengthening of the Han governmental apparatus and expanding Han territory was Gaozu's great-grandson Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE), emperor for more than fifty years. After coming to the throne as a vigorous young man of fifteen, Wudi set about curbing the power of princes and other lords; he confiscated the domains of more than half of them on one pretext or another. Moreover, he decreed that domains would have to be divided among all the lord's heirs, thus guaranteeing that they would diminish in size with each passing generation. He curbed the power of great merchants as well, in the process gaining new sources of revenue through his state monopolies and commercial taxes. In foreign relations he was especially aggressive, reversing earlier conciliatory policies (see below). In the cultural realm he imposed his authority as well. He instituted grand imperial rituals. He lured the finest writers and scholars to his court and at the same time suppressed rival cultural centres, including some princely courts.



Fully half of the territory under Han control at the beginning of the dynasty was granted as fiefs to kings. It took more than a century for the government to largely reverse this action.

Wudi and other Han emperors, like the Qin emperors before them, were essentially above the law, autocrats of theoretically unlimited powers. But rather than try to control officials through Legalist means such as exhaustive specification of rules and procedures, Wudi and other Han rulers made use of Confucian notions of the moral basis of superior–subordinate relations, appreciating that in the long run the ruler would achieve his goals more efficiently when his subordinates viewed their relationship with the ruler in moral terms of loyalty and responsibility. To cultivate such attitudes in his officials, Wudi became a patron of Confucian education.

In contrast to the Qin, the Han rulers permitted debate on political issues at court, even when they disagreed with the proposals made. Scholars trained in the Confucian Classics urged eliminating interventionist policies, reducing cultic activities, and adopting policies associated with the highly idealized image of the early

The two Han dynasties asserted sovereignty over vast regions from Korea in the east to Central Asia in the west and Vietnam in the south. Once garrisons were established, traders were quick to follow, leading to considerable spread of Chinese material culture throughout the region.

Zhou period found in the Classics, such as equal land holdings for all farmers. Willingness to listen to dissent strengthened the Han rulers' legitimacy.

One problem Wudi did not solve was the vulnerability of the imperial institution when a young or weak-willed emperor succeeded to the throne. Men of the imperial lineage – brothers and sons of emperors – were regularly sent out of the capital to their princely domains and were thus effectively kept out of court politics. The same was not true of the male relatives of emperors' wives and mothers, who thus often became influential figures at court. Gaozu's strong-willed widow, Empress Lü, had promoted the interests of her family. No one seemed able to prevent her from doing this, on her death fifteen years later, and her relatives were executed. More than a century later Wang Mang came to power as a relative of Empress Wang (d. 13 CE),

a woman of importance at court for more than forty years as the widow of one emperor, mother of another, and grandmother of a third. In 9 CE, after serving as regent during the reigns of two child emperors, Wang Mang took the throne himself and founded the Xin or 'New' dynasty.

Although condemned by later historians as a usurper, Wang Mang was a learned Confucian scholar who sincerely wished to implement political programmes described in the Classics. He renamed offices, asserted state ownership of forests and swamps, built ritual halls, revived public granaries, and cut court expenses. Yet Wang Mang's policies, particularly the repeated issuing of new coins and nationalization of gold, led to economic turmoil. Added to this, in 11 CE the Yellow River changed course to exit south rather than north of the Shandong peninsula, flooding enormous tracts of land and driving millions of peasants from their homes.

Opponents of Wang Mang soon came to include displaced and hungry peasants, landlords who had suffered under his fiscal policies, Confucian scholars who regarded Wang Mang as a usurper, and members of the Liu imperial family. The eventual victor was Liu Xiu (reigned as Guangwu, 25–57 CE), a member of the imperial clan whose family for generations had lived not as nobles but as substantial local landlords. From the beginning, he made Luoyang on the eastern plain his capital. The period after Wang Mang is conventionally called the Later or Eastern Han (25–220 CE), the period before him the Former or Western Han (206 BCE–9 CE), east and west referring to the location of the capitals. The new rulers presented themselves as restoring the Han dynasty. They reinstituted sacrificial rites to the earlier emperors, for instance, and kept the basic institutional structure and celebration of Confucian teachings. But many scholars today prefer to see each as a separate dynasty, with differences in their power structures and imperial ambitions.

Gilt bronze figure of a maidservant holding an oil-lamp excavated from the tomb of Dou Wan, wife of one of Wudi's brothers, at Mancheng in Hebei province. This elegant gilded bronze lamp almost 19 inches (48 cm) tall, was cleverly designed to allow adjustments in the directness and brightness of the light and to trap smoke in the body. It was one of the nearly 3,000 objects of bronze, iron, gold, silver, jade, pottery, lacquer, and silk from this huge tomb which testify to the luxury and refinement of palace life.

The steppe and the Silk Road

The success of the unified bureaucratic form of government owes a great deal to military necessity: in order to fend off incursions from the steppe, which began in the third century BCE, north China needed a government capable of deploying huge, well-trained fighting forces.

From long before Han times, China's contacts with the outside world had involved a combination of trade and military conflict. Chinese products like silk and lacquerware were superior to those of its neighbours, creating a demand for Chinese goods. Some neighbours had goods they could offer in exchange, such as timber, horses, sheep, and cattle. But raiding was a common alternative to trade. Those normally willing to trade might turn to raiding when previously established trade relations were disrupted or when drought drove them to desperate measures. Defending against the raids of northern peoples had been a problem since Shang times, but with the rise of nomadism in the arid steppe north of China proper in mid Zhou, the severity of the problem was greatly exacerbated.

Sima Qian and the Historical Records

The way the Chinese have conceived of their past – and thus of themselves – was profoundly shaped by a book written in Han times, the *Historical Records (Shiji)* of Sima Qian 145–*c.* 85 BCE). Before Sima Qian was able to complete his history, he made the political mistake of defending a general who had surrendered to the Xiongnu. Given a choice between death and becoming a palace eunuch, he chose the humiliation of castration rather than leave his history unfinished. He wrote to a friend that he had chosen to live in disgrace 'because I have things in my heart that I have not been able to express fully'.

The resulting monumental work in 130 chapters presents the past from several perspectives: a chronological narrative of political events; topical accounts of key institutions; and biographies of important individuals. The political narrative begins with the Yellow Emperor and continues through the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, down to Wudi of Sima Qian's own day. Chronological charts with genealogical data and information on government posts come next, followed by topical treatises on matters of interest to the government, such as state ritual, the calendar, the construction of waterworks, and government finance. Thirty chapters are devoted to the ruling houses of the states of the Zhou period, recounting the reigns of successive rulers. These are supplemented by seventy chapters on other important individuals, including not only great officials and generals, but also personalities not associated with the government, both famous and infamous – philosophers, poets, merchants, magicians, rebels, and assassins. Even non-Chinese peoples along the frontiers were given narrative accounts.

The punishment Sima Qian suffered did not incline him to flatter those in power; in fact he gave ample evidence of Wudi's credulity and policy errors. If he was biased in anyone's favour, it was toward those whose courage, chivalry, and loyalty had gone unrecognized in their day.

Sima Qian saw himself as writing fact-based, objective history and attempted to separate his personal judgments from his basic narrative. He visited many of the sites he discussed and drew on nearly one hundred named sources. He quoted directly from documents when they were available. In their absence he invented speeches and dialogues that he felt fitted the characters and situations, thus bringing events to life. For example, he reported a conversation between the first emperor of the Han, Gaozu (or Liu Bang), and his chief minister Xiao He in the eighth year of his reign:

> Chief Minister Xiao was in charge of the construction of the Eternal Palace and was working on the eastern and western gate towers, the front hall, the arsenal, and the storehouse. When Gaozu arrived and saw the magnificence of the buildings, he was outraged. 'Warfare has kept the empire in turmoil for years, and victory is not yet assured. What is the idea of building palaces on such an excessive scale?'
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> 'It is precisely because the fate of the empire is not yet settled', Xiao He responded, 'that we need to build palaces and halls like these. The true Son of Heaven treats the four quarters as his family estate. If he does not dwell in magnificent quarters, he will have no way to display his authority, nor will he establish the foundation for his heirs to build on.'
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> On hearing this, Gaozu's anger turned into delight.

The *Historical Records* set the pattern for the government-sponsored histories compiled by later dynasties. The composite style – with political narratives, treatises, and biographies – became standard. Sima Qian had a profound impact on Chinese thinking about government, personal achievement, and the nature of China. Government, for instance, was too complex to be narrated around rulers alone: institutional practices had their own complex histories that had to be told in their own terms. The way Sima Qian constructed biographies similarly reflected and shaped understandings of the individual. He selected incidents that showed consistency in a person's character and how well the person performed a role.

Sima Qian's descriptions of 'barbarians' indirectly helped to shape ideas about the Chinese. The group that provided the key 'other' to Sima Qian was clearly the Xiongnu. Everything about them seemed to be the opposite of the Chinese: they had no written language, family names, or respect for the elderly; they had no cities, permanent dwellings, or agriculture. Where the Xiongnu excelled was in warfare, for their men could all ride and shoot and would raid without hesitation: 'When they see the enemy, eager for booty, they swoop down like a flock of birds.'

The Inner Asian steppe (the region of the Eurasian steppe nearest China) is a vast region of grasslands, mountains, and deserts, capable of supporting only a thin population. In the best grasslands, such as those of modern Mongolia, rainfall is too light for grain to grow but animals can be pastured. Nomads of the steppe near China raised sheep, goats, camels, and horses, moving their camps north in summer and south in winter. Their skill as horsemen and hunters, especially their ability to shoot arrows while riding horseback, made them a potent military striking force. The typical social structure of the steppe nomads was tribal, with family and clan units held together through loyalty to chiefs selected for their military prowess. This structure could be exploited for efficient military mobilization when enough tribal units joined forces. The differences in the modes of living of farmers and herders led to sharp contrasts in their social values. For most of the imperial period, Chinese farmers looked on horseriding pastoralists as a scourge, as gangs of bullies who preferred robbing to working for their living. The nomads, for their part, gloried in their military might and looked with scorn on farmers as weaklings incapable of defending themselves.

Part of a brocade sleeve from *c.* 2nd–3rd century CE discovered at Niya, Xinjiang. It bears the legend 'Five planets arising in the East are beneficial to China'.

The first great confederation of nomadic tribes in Inner Asia was formed by the Xiongnu in the late third century BCE. The First Emperor of Qin sent 100,000 troops against them in 213 BCE, and his Great Wall was intended for defence against them. In 200 BCE the Xiongnu attacked a major northern city, and Gaozu personally led an army to retake the region, but ended up surrounded by a fresh Xiongnu army under their ruler Maodun, and Gaozu sued for peace. Thereafter, the court turned to conciliatory policies, wooing the Xiongnu leaders with generous gifts, including silk, rice, cash, and imperial princesses as brides. Critics of these policies feared that they merely strengthened the enemy; and indeed, in 166 BCE 140,000 horseman raided deep into China, reaching a point less than 100 miles (161 km) from the capital. The Han government knew it needed more horses to fight the Xiongnu and set up state horse farms along its northern and western borders. It also took to training soldiers in mounted warfare.

Wudi switched from defensive to offensive policies. He sent 300,000 troops far into Xiongnu territory in 133 BCE. Subsequent expeditions, like those in 124 BCE, 123 BCE, and 119 BCE, often involved more than 100,000 troops, half of them cavalry. These campaigns were enormously expensive, required long supply lines, and entailed great losses of men and horses. The gain was territory. Wudi sent troops into today's North Korea to establish commanderies that would flank the Xiongnu on their eastern border. Regions north and west of the capital were also acquired, cutting off the

Xiongnu from the proto-Tibetan Qiang, whom they had subjugated. Four commanderies were established in Gansu, and more than a million people were dispatched from the north China plain to colonize this northwestern region. Forts were built and the grasslands put to the plough, which in the long term had negative environmental consequences. When the government later pulled back or farmers fled, the land did not simply revert to grassland, but turned to desert after the irrigation works were abandoned.

Wudi turned his attention to Central Asia as well, in part to find allies, in part to improve the supply of horses for the army. In 139 BCE, he sent one of his officials, Zhang Qian, west in search of allies to fight against the Xiongnu. Captured and kept prisoner for ten years, Zhang eventually escaped and made his way to Bactria and Ferghana, returning in 126 BCE. In 115 BCE, he set out on a second journey west. From his reports, the Chinese learned for the first time of urban civilizations that had developed independently of China. Ferghana, for instance, he described as 10,000 *li* (about 3,000 miles/5,000 km) due west of China, a land of fortified cities and dense population, which grew wheat and grapes for wine and had fine horses that sweated blood.

The metal ornaments of the Xiongnu provide convincing evidence that they were in contact with nomadic pastoralists further west in Asia, such as the Scythians, who also fashioned metal plaques and buckles in animal designs. This gold buckle or ornament, about 3 inches (7.5 cm) long, probably dates from the third century BCE.

Zhang Qian described Parthia in similar terms, but drew particular attention to its merchants and to its coins, made of silver and bearing the image of the king's face. He discovered that these regions were already importing Chinese products, especially silk. In 101 BCE, after three years' effort, a Chinese army made its way beyond the Pamir Mountains to defeat Ferghana, seize large numbers of its excellent horses, and gain recognition of Chinese overlordship, thus obtaining control over the trade routes across Central Asia. The Han state had projected its power across a vast region.

With time, the threat of the Xiongnu receded. In 55 BCE, the Xiongnu confederation broke up into five contending groups. Not long afterward, the chief of the southern Xiongnu agreed to participate in the Han diplomatic system in a way comparable to that of the smaller polities along China's western and southern borders. Each had to send a prince as a hostage to the Chinese capital where he would be given a Chinese education. They also had to send periodic missions with diplomatic gifts, a practice that appealed to them because it allowed opportunities for trade. To the Chinese the diplomatic mission system was costly but it avoided war and confirmed that China was the centre of the civilized world. Over the course of the dynasty the Han government gave enormous quantities of silk to the states and tribes that sent missions; in 25 BCE, for instance, it gave out 20,000 rolls of silk and about 20,000 pounds (9,000 kg) of silk floss. It has been estimated that nearly 10 per cent of state revenues were spent on gifts of this sort.

Much of the silk acquired by the Xiongnu and other northern polities eventually ended up in lands far to the west. Chinese silk was already popular in Rome by the time Julius Caesar died in 44 BCE, and was imported in even larger quantities in subsequent decades. This silk reached Rome after passing though many hands;

the middlemen included Sogdian, Parthian, and Indian merchants. The silk arrived both as skeins of silk thread and as woven silk cloth produced in China itself or in Syrian workshops. Caravans returning to China brought gold, horses, donkeys, mules, and camels, and occasionally luxury goods of west Asian origin such as glass beads and cups.

When the power of the Han government waned under Wang Mang and the civil war that accompanied his fall, many of the distant territories broke away from China. The Later Han government was not as determined to expand and in 30 CE abolished universal military service. Still, after a few decades, Chinese authority was reasserted in Central Asia by the generals Ban Chao and his son Ban Yong, Ban Chao marching an army past the Pamir Mountains in 97 CE. The city-states along the Silk Road did not necessarily resist the Chinese presence; they could carry out the trade upon which they depended more conveniently with Chinese garrisons to protect them than with rival tribes raiding them or fighting over them.

The danger for the Han government was over-extension; supplying such distant frontiers could bankrupt the government. Maintaining the supply of horses, for instance, was a constant problem, even after the government set up vast horse farms. The Han government vigorously pursued cost-cutting ways to defend its far-flung borders. It set up military colonies along the frontiers where soldiers could be self-supporting and recruited non-Chinese nomads to serve as auxiliary forces. In the Later Han, the Southern Xiongnu, who had been offered land and other inducements to ally with the Han, were frequently used as the main forces to fight the common enemy, the Northern Xiongnu. But defence remained costly, putting pressure on the government to keep revenue flowing.

The spirit world

The First Emperor, on his five tours, regularly stopped to worship local mountains and rivers and other local deities. Qin local officials also were actively involved in

Retinues of soldiers and attendants that accompanied officials when they travelled were an important symbol of official rank, and many Later Han tombs had paintings of them on their walls. More spectacular is this set of bronze figures excavated from a second-century CE tomb at Leitai in Gansu. Altogether this procession included seventeen soldiers, twenty-eight attendants, thirty-nine horses, and fourteen carriages, each roughly a foot (30 cm) tall.

Bronze 'money tree' of Eastern Han date. The common coin of Han times (round with a square hole) magically grows on this 5-foot-tall (1.5 m) tree. The Queen Mother of the West is shown perching like a bird, seated on her dragon-and-tiger throne. About 200 money trees of this sort have been found in Sichuan.

sacrificial rites; excavated records show they made offerings of meat, grain, salt, and beer at local shrines to deities such as the First Farmer. Gaozu, the Han founder, both before and after his victory, made offerings to Chiyou, a god of war known for his epic battle against Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor, also a key figure in the spirit world of the Han period, associated with the centralized state and sanctioned violence. The Han government also set up shrines to the dynastic ancestors around the country. The *History of the Han* reported that in 40 BCE there were more than 300 shrines in the capital or the commanderies, where nearly 25,000 offerings were made and more than 65,000 individuals served as guards, musicians, dancers, or in other capacities. Worship of Heaven, once a year at the suburban altar, was introduced a few years later.

Religious activity was pervasive outside government realms as well. Han art and literature are rich in references to spirits, portents, myths, the strange and powerful, the death-defying and the dazzling. The *Huainanzi*, a Daoist-tinged compilation of texts sponsored by the prince of Huainan during the mid second century BCE, contains lore of mountain gods, some with human faces and dragons' bodies, and describes the magic realm of the Kunlun Mountains in the far west where immortality could be attained.

Both at court and among the general population the desire to understand the workings of cosmic forces and predict the future led to intense interest in omens and portents. Wudi welcomed to his court astrologers, alchemists, seers, and shamans. In the years leading up to and following Wang Mang's accession, portents of coming change were repeatedly discovered, including rocks and other objects with messages inscribed on them. Although both Wang Mang's allies and opponents may well have manipulated much of this, they were building on an abiding belief in messages from Heaven. There was a negative side to understandings of the spirit world as well, such as fear of witchcraft. Wudi in his old age became convinced that his illness was caused by black magic and in 91 BCE he ordered an investigation into people close to the throne which led to the deaths of the empress, two princes, and many high officials.

The fate of the dead was similarly a subject of intense concern in Han times. The soul was conceived to have two aspects. The lighter, more heavenly part would ascend to the clouds and might possibly enter the realm of the immortals. The more earthly part of the soul stayed in or near the grave and benefited from the food and other goods placed in the grave. Constructing and furnishing a grave was thus not simply an act of good will toward the dead, but also a way for the living to protect themselves from the anger of dissatisfied ghosts. Notions of post-mortem judgement – so important in later Chinese religion – began to appear in Han times. Soon after the establishment of the centralized bureaucratic empire, it seems, the otherworld became bureaucratized as well. Han tombs contain itemized lists of their contents addressed to the Lord Master of the Dead. Other texts mention the tribunal on Mount Tai, a sacred mountain

in Shandong, where the records of the living and the dead were judged and appropriate rewards and punishments were meted out.

The desire for deathlessness was also widespread in Han society. Wudi listened to stories of how the Yellow Emperor had ascended to the realm of the immortals with his whole court and all his consorts. Another deity associated with immortality was the Queen Mother of the West. Her paradise was portrayed as a land of marvels where trees of deathlessness grew and rivers of immortality flowed. Mythical birds and beasts were her constant companions, including the three-legged crow, the dancing toad, the nine-tailed fox, and the elixir-producing rabbit. People of all social levels expressed their devotion to her, and shrines were erected under government sponsorship throughout the country. At times worship of her reached frenzied proportions. The first recorded messianic, millenarian movement in Chinese history occurred in 3 BCE, when thousands of people headed for the capital from across the country, handing out texts saying, 'The Mother tells the people that those who wear this talisman will not die.' This movement coincided with prophecies foretelling the end of the dynasty, fulfilled when Wang Mang took the throne.

This 6¾-foot/2 m-long painting on silk was found draped over the coffin in the grave of Lady Dai (*c.* 168 BCE) at Mawangdui near Changsha in Hunan province. The scenes depicted on it seem to illustrate the journey of the woman's soul. The top section shows the heavenly realm, complete with dragons, leopards, and hybrid creatures. At the corners are the crow that symbolizes the sun and the toad that represents the moon, the pairing of sun and moon representing the cosmic forces of yin and yang.

The agrarian economy

Han civilization was built on an agrarian base. At the technical level, agriculture made advances. Improved methods included planting two crops in alternate rows and planting a succession of carefully timed crops. Han ploughs were notable for such advanced features as struts that could be adjusted to control the depth of furrows and curved metal mould-boards that reduced friction. Use of oxen to draw ploughs became common, allowing farmers to cultivate larger fields. Better irrigation was achieved not only through large state-sponsored canal projects, but also through the spread of improved techniques like brick-faced wells to ordinary farmers. The donkey, an animal of Western origin introduced into north China by the Xiongnu, came to be widely used as a pack animal. Probably equally useful was the wheelbarrow, first seen in Han times.

As a result of advances of these sorts, as well as relative peace and the extension of frontiers, the Chinese population grew rapidly in the Former Han period; the census of 2 CE recorded a population of 58 million, making the Han empire somewhat larger than the contemporaneous Roman empire. Nevertheless, in most texts written in the Han period, the fragility of the economy seems to have been much more on people's minds than its underlying strengths. This sense of insecurity was aggravated by key features of the political economy that were to characterize much of the rest of Chinese history. Land tenure, inheritance practices, and government fiscal policies all fostered the simultaneous presence of both very small family farms and large landed estates, with rapid mobility between wealth and poverty as some families lost their land and others were able to build up substantial holdings.

The economic insecurity of smallholders was described by Chao Cuo in 178 BCE in terms that could well have been repeated in most later dynasties:

> They labour at ploughing in the spring and hoeing in the summer, harvesting in the autumn and storing foodstuff in winter, cutting wood, performing labour service for the local government, all the while exposed to the dust of spring, the heat of summer, the storms of autumn, and the chill of winter. Through all four seasons they never get a day off. They need funds to cover such obligations as entertaining guests, burying the dead, visiting the sick, caring for orphans, and bringing up the young. No matter how hard they work they can be ruined by floods or droughts, or cruel and arbitrary officials who impose taxes at the wrong times or keep changing their orders. When taxes fall due, those with produce have to sell it at half price [to raise the needed cash], and those without [anything to sell] have to borrow [at such high rates] they will have to pay back twice what they borrowed. Some as a consequence sell their lands and houses, even their children and grandchildren.

Inscribed on this small Han bronze mirror are the words: 'The blue dragon made this mirror of unsurpassed quality. May you attain the highest political rank like the King Father of the East. May you attain longevity like the Queen Mother of the West.' The Queen Mother, with wings, has two seated attendants at her side, while the King Father is attended by a standing man. Probably because the dominant yin-yang cosmology called for complementary pairing, by Later Han times the Queen Mother of the West was often paired with the King Father of the East.

One fundamental reason farmers often had barely enough to survive was the equal division of family property among all sons, a custom fully established by Han times. In the Zhou period, aristocratic titles and offices as well as the responsibility to maintain ancestral rites had been passed to a single heir, generally the eldest son. With the decline of feudal tenures and the spread of free buying and selling of land, the division of family property became customary. The Chinese family remained patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal, but it no longer favoured oldest sons in the transmission of property. Ownership of land changed hands frequently as those with wealth (perhaps from office or commerce) purchased land and those who inherited land had to sell parts of it to meet expenses.

Hard-pressed small farmers were driven to cultivate marginal land and to farm intensively whatever they had. When that was not enough, they could search out patrons, becoming tenants or dependants of local magnates, whose land and power accordingly swelled. When demands became too great, the poor were left to choose between migration to areas where new lands could be cleared or quasi-servile status as the dependant of a magnate.

The Han government, like most of its successors, was unhappy with the shrinkage of its tax base and tried to stem the loss of independent, land-owning peasants. It promoted irrigation works to enhance production. It issued limits on the size of landholdings. It responded to bad harvests with tax reductions and direct relief. For those who had fled in time of famine, it offered tax remissions and loans of seed to induce them to return. Its most basic policy, however, was to try to keep land taxes light. The Han drew revenues both from a poll

tax and a tax on agricultural production which for most of the Han period was only one-thirtieth of the autumn harvest. Large landowners, of course, benefited at least as much as small ones from the light taxation on land.

Because the Han government did not want to burden farmers, it had to find other ways to increase its revenues. To pay for his military campaigns, Wudi banned private minting of coins, confiscated the lands of nobles, sold offices and titles, and increased taxes on private businesses. A widespread suspicion of commerce – from both moral and political perspectives – made it easy to levy especially heavy assessments on merchants. Boats, carts, and shops were made subject to property taxes. The worst blow to businessmen, however, was the government's decision to enter into competition with them by selling the commodities that had been collected as taxes. In 119 BCE, government monopolies were established in the production of iron, salt, and liquor, enterprises that had previously been sources of great profit for private businessmen. Large-scale grain dealing had also been a profitable business, which the government now took over under the name of the system of equable marketing. Grain was to be bought in areas where it was plentiful and cheap and either stored in granaries or transported to areas of scarcity. This procedure was supposed to eliminate speculation in grain, provide more constant prices, and bring profit to the government. These were heavily interventionist policies, with the state participating actively in the economy.

The expansion of the area of cultivated land under the Han probably owes something to the development of the animal-drawn plough, depicted here on a stone relief found at Mizhi, Shaanxi province.

The long-term result of these fiscal policies was a disruption of the development of the private commercial sector of the economy. During the first century of the Han, the prosperity of this sector had led to the growth of towns and cities and increased specialization in trade and manufacture. After the government took over the iron foundries and salt works and became deeply involved in the grain trade, the vitality of the business sector suffered. Even though the Later Han government abandoned these ventures, its laissez-faire policies tended to benefit large landowners more than merchants. The Chinese economy thus became firmly agrarian, a pattern that was to continue through Chinese history.

Confucianism, the state, and the educated elite

Confucianism became closely connected to the state in Han times. Where the Qin had given political support to Legalism, the Han eventually gave it to Confucianism. The special status of Confucianism did not keep all sorts of non-Confucian ideas about spirits, portents, or the marvellous from gaining a hold on the Han

Houses

Because the Chinese used timber as the primary building material, there are no remains of the palaces of the Qin or Han, much less more ordinary buildings. Nonetheless, basic features of house construction can be discerned from ceramic models of houses placed in tombs and sketches of the layout of houses drawn, carved, or impressed on the walls of tombs. Much can also be learned from tombs themselves, which were built like underground houses.

Laying out a house around a courtyard creates a series of inner and outer spaces. Outdoor activities such as washing dishes or processing grain could still be done within the confines of the home. This scene of a courtyard house was impressed on a brick used to face a second-century CE tomb in Sichuan province.

Wood, tile, plaster, brick, and stone were the standard materials used to construct houses. Medium-sized houses were usually built around one or more courtyards, with rooms (set a few steps above ground level) on some sides and covered walkways or galleys on others. Multistorey buildings were also constructed, either as main buildings within courtyard structures or as watch towers outside.

The basic structure of any residential building was a timber frame with wooden pillars to support the thatched or tiled roof. The walls built up around the wooden frame were not load-bearing, and were commonly made of brick, stamped earth, or mud. Projecting eaves, which served to protect the walls from rain, were supported by wooden brackets that were sometimes elaborated for decorative effect. The ends of the roof tiles also were commonly decorated with moulded designs.

Ceramic models of multistorey houses were often placed in Han tombs.

imagination. Moreover, Han Confucianism itself was eclectic, fortifying itself with precepts and philosophical concerns drawn from what had been competing philosophical schools in the pre-Qin period. The Han 'victory' of Confucianism thus did not entail the eradication of other ways of thinking. Its historical importance lies rather in the ways it coloured the connections between the elite, the society, and the state.

The first Han emperors, although prudently avoiding the harsh policies of the repudiated Qin government, were not partial to Confucianism. Gaozu found the Confucian scholars of his day useful primarily as formulators of court rituals that would elevate him above his erstwhile companions and keep them from getting rowdy in court. Wendi (r. 179–157 BCE) favoured Daoism, finding much of value in its laissez-faire message. Ironically it was under his grandson Wudi, who was often accused of Legalist tendencies, that Confucianism gained a privileged position

at court. Wudi set up an imperial academy staffed with professors for each of the Five Classics (*Book of Changes*, *Book of Documents*, *Book of Songs*, *Book of Rites*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*).

These books, most of which attained their final form in this period, came to be regarded as canonical scriptures containing the wisdom of the past, to be studied with piety and rendered more useful for moral guidance through written and oral exegesis. Confucian scholars often specialized in a single Classic, with teachers passing on to their disciples their understanding of each sentence in the work. Two separate sets of texts of the Classics gained currency – the 'new texts', recorded in Han period script from the oral recitation of elderly scholars who had memorized the Classic before the Qin destroyed all copies, and the 'old texts', based on books in Zhou-period script discovered hidden in a wall in the home of descendants of Confucius. Two great Confucian scholars of the Later Han, Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan, fused these two traditions; they mastered all of the Classics and wrote important commentaries to them, usually favouring the old text versions. Nevertheless, disputes about which set of texts truly contained the wisdom of the ancients persisted into the twentieth century.

Emperor Wudi himself did not recruit many Confucian scholars to serve in his government, but his successors did. Before the end of the Former Han, it became widely accepted that men trained in the Confucian Classics and respected for their character would make good officials. Men could enter government service in several ways, including being promoted from functionary or being recommended by local officials. If their father or grandfather was an official, he could nominate them. The prestige and influence of government posts steadily rose, and men of wealth and local standing throughout the country began to compete to gain recognition for their learning and filial piety to secure recommendations. All over the country teachers attracted large numbers of students and disciples, and enrolment at the Imperial Academy increased from a few dozen students to more than 30,000 in the mid second century CE.

Credit for the political success of Confucianism should also be given to scholars who developed Confucianism in ways that matched the mood of the time and met the needs of the state. It was as though the unification of the country called out for a synthesis of ideas of diverse origin. Han Confucians sought ways to comprehend the world around them as a self-generating and self-sustaining organism governed by cyclical yet never replicating flows of yin and yang and the five phases

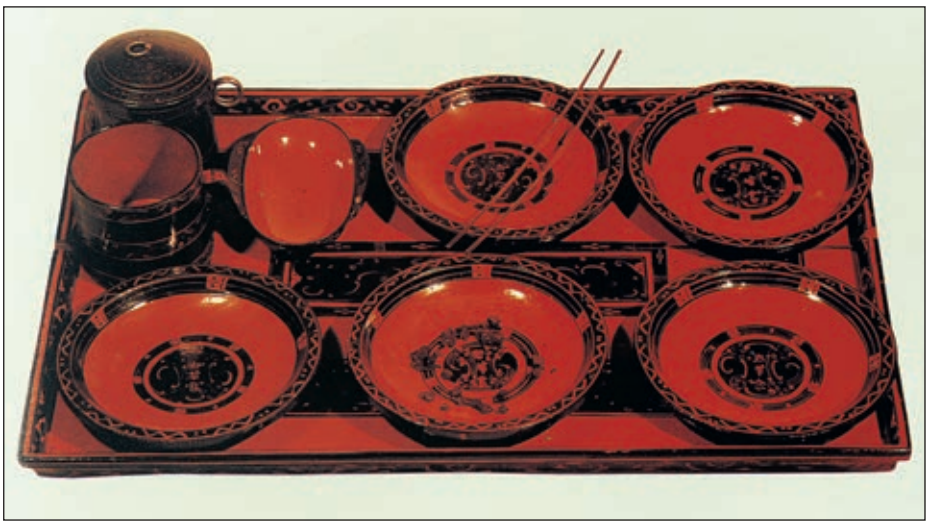
The pre-Han texts that survived the Qin burning of the books came to be greatly revered, especially the Five Classics. In 175 CE, the government had them carved in stone in the calligraphy of the eminent man of letters Cai Yong and erected the stone slabs at the Imperial Academy. Scholars could come there to copy or take rubbings of them, fostering the establishment of definitive versions of these classics. This surviving fragment is from the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and measures 19 inches (48 cm) tall.

(fire, water, earth, metal, and wood). These cosmological theories were incorporated into explanations of historical cycles and dynastic succession. Confucian scholars propounded correspondences between the qualities of the successive phases and other sets of categories (the seasons, cardinal points, tastes, smells, colours, musical notes, numbers, planets, bodily organs, feelings, and so on), theorizing that disturbance in any one category would resonate with corresponding alterations in every other category, in much the way that a note played on one musical instrument resonates on a similarly tuned instrument nearby.

This correlative and relational cosmology was used to legitimate the imperial state and to elevate the role of the emperor. Among human beings, the ruler was deemed unique in his capacity to link the realms of Heaven, earth, and humanity. The philosopher Dong Zhongshu (*c.* 179–104 BCE) spoke of the ruler in terms that echo Daoist and Legalist conceptions, describing him as ruling through non-action and keeping away from everyday affairs to maintain his exalted status. Confucian moral conceptions of the ruler nonetheless pervade his thinking. A ruler who did not fulfil his role properly, Dong wrote, would directly disturb the balance of Heaven and earth, causing floods, earthquakes, and other natural calamities. As a revived and expanded theory of the Mandate of Heaven, these ideas became intrinsic to imperial ideology, never publicly questioned even in later dynasties.

Han Confucianism also strongly supported the family. Confucius had praised filial piety, which to him meant loving, respectful, and dutiful attention to the needs and wishes of family elders, especially parents and grandparents. In the Han dynasty, the exaltation of filial piety was carried considerably further. The text of the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiao jing*) came to be a common primer, used to inculcate generations of students with such dicta as 'He who really loves his parents will not be proud in high position, insubordinate in a low position, or quarrelsome among his peers.'

In the art of the Han, visual representation of famous figures from history was popular. The lacquer panels on the sides of this covered basket shows a series of men identified by name, each about 3 inches (7.5 cm) tall. The basket was unearthed from a second-century CE grave in northern Korea, the site of the Lelang colony established after the region was conquered by Wudi's forces in 109 to 108 BCE.



Lacquer cups, bowls, chopsticks, and trays unearthed from Tomb 1 at Mawangdui near Changsha in Hunan province. Lacquer, made from the sap of a tree indigenous to China, was used from Neolithic times to waterproof bamboo and wooden objects. In Han times lightweight, brightly coloured lacquer objects were so highly valued they could cost more than bronze pieces.

In order to gain a reputation as a paragon of filial piety, some men would perform exaggerated acts, such as refusing to end their mourning for their parents. Tales circulated about filial sons whose devoted service to the whims of peculiar parents brought natural or supernatural reward. Exemplary women were similarly celebrated. The eminent scholar and bibliographer Liu Xiang (79–78 BCE) wrote the *Biographies of Heroic Women* (*Lienü zhuan*), a collection of accounts of the gallant deeds and unselfish behaviour of 125 women of antiquity, who were notable for their loyalty to the ruler, wise counsel to their husband or father, or preservation of chastity under duress.

The fact that Confucianism was politically promoted by the Han government does not mean that all traces of the Qin Legalist system were eliminated. The Han dynasty retained Qin's principal weapon against the old aristocracy, namely direct administration of localities by officials appointed by the court for their merit, not their birth, and subject to dismissal, transfer, and discipline. Han prefects and magistrates had broad responsibilities and powers: they judged lawsuits, collected and dispatched taxes, performed ceremonies of the state-sponsored religion, commanded troops, decided when and how to undertake public works like flood control, kept an eye on the local economy and local education, and selected subordinates from the local population. Those successful as local administrators could be promoted to serve at court or in a central government ministry.

At the same time, Confucianism inspired many scholars and officials to see criticism of unwise policies as the highest form of loyalty to the ruler. Many opposed activist policies such as government monopolies, questioning their morality and their effect on people's livelihoods. Aggressive foreign policies were similarly criticized on the grounds that military campaigns took a great toll on the people and might not be as effective as conciliatory policies in securing peace. Scholars also regularly objected to imperial extravagance, urging emperors to reduce their

spending on palace ladies, entertainment, hunting parks, and stables. In the Later Han, especially after 150, Confucian scholars were active in opposing the eunuchs then influential at court, often risking their careers or even their lives to stand up to those in power (see below). Thus, the coupling of Confucianism and the Chinese bureaucracy created a sort of balance of power between the 'inner court' of the emperor and those who relied directly on him (the consort families and eunuchs) and the 'outer court' of the Confucian-educated officials.

A common set of ideas, values, and historical references contributed to ties between officials and the educated local elite, which was expanding in this period, especially in the Later Han. Local officials often promoted education, sending promising young men to the capital for advanced study. The spread of education was undoubtedly aided as well by the invention of paper in Han times, making books easier to make and less bulky to store. By the end of the Han, educated men throughout the country, despite their geographic separation and the local focus of most of their activities, came to see themselves not just as leaders of their communities but also as participants, however marginally, in countrywide literary, scholarly, and political affairs. In the succeeding centuries, the strength and coherence of this literati elite of educated gentlemen proved as important as political centralization or economic integration as a basis for the unity of Chinese civilization.

Colonizing the south

The Qin–Han period was one of great territorial expansion southward encouraged by the state. Throughout these four centuries settlers kept advancing along the river valleys, intermingling with and sometimes dominating the indigenous

The wooden and ceramic figures unearthed from Han period tombs offer many glimpses of everyday life, including games and entertainment. This pair of wooden figures, about 11 inches (28 cm) tall, were excavated from a first-century BCE tomb at Mozuizi in Wuwei, Gansu province.

Ban Zhao and Women's Education

Ban Zhao (*c.* 45–116) was born into a family of officials. She had twin older brothers, one of whom, Ban Gu, distinguished himself with court appointments and wrote the *History of the Former Han Dynasty (Han shu)*. The other, Ban Chao, pursued a military career and distinguished himself by securing the recovery of the Central Asian territories that had fallen away during Wang Mang's reign. Ban Zhao married at the age of fourteen but moved back in with her natal family after her husband died, leaving her with young children. Her natal family's political connections and her reputation for learning led to an invitation to enter the palace to serve as a teacher to the women there and an advisor to the empress. Several pieces written by Ban Zhao have been preserved, including a few poems and two memorials, one requesting permission for her brother to return from Central Asia after spending thirty years there. She is best known for her *Admonitions for Girls (Nü jie)*, a short text addressed to the young women in her family, urging them to take seriously the cultivation of virtues appropriate to women, such as humility, obedience, deference, cleanliness, and industry. But she also argued that girls should be taught to read much the way their brothers were. We see this in her discussion of the relationship between husbands and wives:

> The way of husband and wife fulfils the workings of yin and yang, and as such has the power to move the gods. It truly is the greatest duty of heaven and earth, the highest norm of human relationships. That is why the *Rites* place such value on the relationship of man and woman, and why the *Odes* expatiate on the meaning of 'The Ospreys'. To judge from these books, one must take the way of husband and wife most seriously. If the husband is not wise, he will be incapable of governing his wife and if the wife is not wise, she will be unable to serve her husband. If the husband does not govern his wife, he will lose his dignity. If the wife does not serve her husband, she will be neglecting her duties. But these two tasks are one in their function. I have noticed that the gentlemen of today understand only that a wife must be governed and that one's dignity must be preserved, and for this reason they instruct their sons and test their reading ability. But they completely ignore the fact that a husband and master must be served and ritual duties must be performed. Does not instructing only the sons and not the daughters betray a total ignorance of the different norms governing the one and the other? According to the *Rites*, children should be taught to read and write when they are eight years old, and at fifteen they should be sent to school. Cannot we simply make this the general rule?

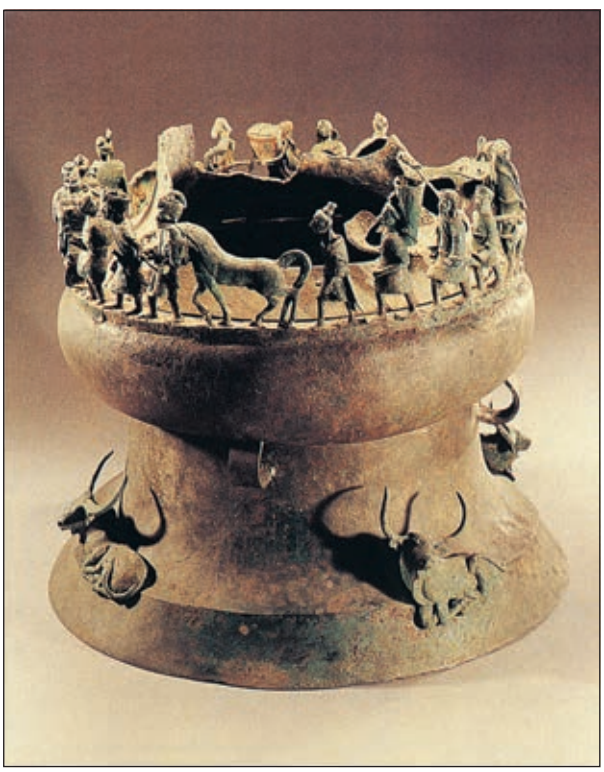
This book, the first explicitly addressed to women, became one of the most common texts used in the education of girls. Most educated families probably were comfortable with the idea that girls should be taught the womanly virtues it advocated, but we should not infer that they all taught their daughter to read.

Small models of deferential women were often placed in Han tombs.

population (the 'hundred Yue'), some of whom moved further south or into more marginal upland areas. The pace of colonization was particularly fast in the first and second centuries CE, as peasants fled the economic confusion, natural disasters, and upheaval of Wang Mang's reign, and then the incursions of the Xiongnu and other non-Han peoples to the north and northwest. When the censuses of 2 and 140 CE are compared, it appears that between roughly 5 to 10 million people migrated from the north to the Yangzi valley and further south during the first and early second centuries.

Armies played a role in this vast expansion. The Qin had sent expeditions into Fujian and Guangxi provinces, and even into what is now Vietnam, and convicts were sent to settle the areas. The Han re-established these garrisons, protecting merchants, settlers, and adventurers and thus aiding the commercial penetration of Chinese products. Once a sizeable population of settlers was established, the government would assign officials to govern and tax them, resulting in a steady increase in the numbers of counties in the south. Some local officials set up schools to encourage non-Chinese to assimilate to Chinese ways. Those who resisted the Chinese government presence, however, were dealt with through military force.

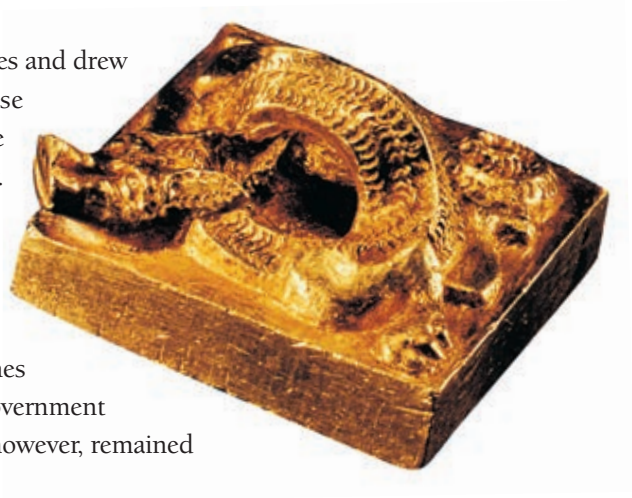
The life and career of Chao Tuo offers a good example of how adventurers contributed to Chinese expansion and some of the complexities of cultural encounters. Born in north China, Chao went south as a member of the Qin expeditionary force and soon took a wife from among the local Yue clans. With the death of his superior and the collapse of the Qin, he took control of the Guangdong region, allying himself to the leaders of the Yue. By the time the Han was established, he had amalgamated the three most southerly commanderies and declared himself King of Southern Yue. When an envoy of the new Han emperor approached him, Chao Tuo consented to being enrolled as a vassal king. He nevertheless continued to act independently, conquering and annexing territory in the northern part of present-day Vietnam. When Empress Lü came to power, she tried to curb him by prohibiting the export of useful products to his territory, such as iron implements and horses. He responded by attacking Changsha in Hunan and taking the title 'emperor'. Wendi took a more conciliatory approach toward Chao Tuo, bestowing honours on his brothers still in the north and offering to renew friendly relations if he would just stop calling himself 'emperor'. Chao Tuo's strength was based on gaining the support of the local population; he called himself Great Chief of the Southern Barbarians, used local warriors as generals and officers, and encouraged intermarriage. At the same time, he strove to promote the absorption of Chinese material culture by the local population. After Chao Tuo's death in 137 BCE at the age of ninety-three, Wudi was able to gain relatively effective control over his successors through concerted military efforts on the southern front. The population probably remained predominantly Yue. The later Vietnamese would look back on Chao Tuo and his state as a central element in their own history.



The expansion of the Han empire to the south brought China into contact with many distinctive cultures. The vivid, realistic depictions of people and animals on this 15 inch/ 38 cm-tall drum-shaped cowrie container are quite unlike anything from the heartland of China but typical of Dian artefacts of the period before extensive Han influence. Bronze drums were also found in southeast Asia, suggesting contact between the Dian and cultures further south. Excavated at Shizhaishan, Yunnan province; about 100 BCE.

More often, of course, strongmen in the frontier zones were not Han Chinese in origin. The Dian state, which held the region of modern Yunnan, was dominated by

horse-riding aristocrats who made captured enemies into slaves and drew considerable wealth from trade conducted both in Chinese coins and in cowry shells. Dian religious life centred on bronze drums that symbolized both political power and fertility. Although the Dian had no system of writing, their material culture was advanced; archaeological excavations have unearthed bronze weapons, tools, and ritual implements. In 109 BCE, Wudi attacked and defeated the Dian and incorporated them into the Han realm. The Dian rebelled several times (in 86 and 83 BCE, 14 and 42–5 CE), but each time the Han government was able to maintain or regain its presence. The population, however, remained overwhelmingly indigenous, not Han Chinese.



Seals inscribed with names or titles were potent symbols of authority; the Han emperor conferred this dragon-embellished one on Zhao Mei, Zhao Tuo's successor as king of Nanyue. Gold, 1¼ inches (3 cm) long, unearthed at Guangzhou, Guangdong province, first century BCE.

The fall of the Later Han

The first seventy years of the Later Han dynasty was a time of recovery and reassertion of imperial power. During the second century CE, however, Han court politics turned nasty as the eunuchs who served as palace servants vied with relatives of the empresses for control of the court. Rulers had long used eunuchs for more than tending to the needs of their women's quarters, since eunuchs, recruited from insignificant families, had no outside power base and could therefore be depended on to do their master's bidding; moreover, emperors raised in the palace often trusted them. Weak emperors, however, ran the danger of becoming the captives rather than the masters of the eunuchs. In 124, a group of eunuchs staged a coup and put on the throne a child that they could manipulate. In 159, an emperor turned to the eunuchs to help him oust a consort family faction, and from then on the eunuchs were in command. 'Outer court' officials who protested were persecuted; hundreds were jailed, killed, or barred from office and expelled from the capital in the purges that took place in 166 and 169.

With the central government in disarray, little was done to stem the shrinkage of the tax base brought on by the steady decline in smallholdings and rise of local magnates. With the fiscal resources of the Han government steadily deteriorating it became more and more difficult for the government to provide relief during bad harvests. In 143, government revenue was so depleted that official salaries were cut and the government made the kings and nobles pay their land tax a year in advance. Deadly epidemics suggest that by this point smallpox had reached China. In 153 swarms of locusts and a flood of the Yellow River resulted in several hundred thousand people taking to the roads in search of food, but all the central government could do was give local authorities permission to requisition 30 per cent of private stores of grain.

The Han imperial institution never recovered from the outbreak in 184 of a large-scale rebellion staged by followers of the Way of Great Peace, a religious cult inspired by Daoist ideas that offered mystical faith healing and social welfare programmes.

Known as the Yellow Turbans, followers attacked local government offices simultaneously in several parts of the country, killing magistrates and prefects wherever they could. Although this uprising was suppressed within a year, other rebels, some preaching similar doctrines and using similar principles of organization, appeared elsewhere in the country and proved difficult for the government to defeat or contain. The generals sent to put down the rebellions used the armies they amassed to gain power for themselves, and this resulted in several decades of civil war as they fought each other. In 189, Dong Zhuo, the warlord who gained control of the capital, slaughtered more than 2,000 eunuchs and made the emperor his own pawn. Luoyang was sacked and burned, the government libraries and archives almost totally destroyed and the population forced to move west to Chang'an. The Han dynasty had effectively come to an end, though the battle to determine which warlord would emerge supreme continued for decades.

One of the aims of Qin Legalism was direct rule by the emperor of everyone in society. Even though the Han government moderated many Qin policies, it did not abandon the goal of uniform administration reaching down to each household. The Han imposed its taxes directly on each subject according to age, sex, and imperially granted ranks. Periodically, rich and influential families were forcibly relocated; in 198 BCE, for instance, 100,000 were moved to the new capital at Chang'an. Public works projects similarly continued to involve the drafting of huge labour armies, including convict labour, albeit at a less onerous pace than under Qin; over the course of the Han these projects included extensions of the Great Wall, repairs on the dykes of the Yellow River, and great road-building projects.

Nevertheless, in Han times the state and the capital did not totally dominate life in local communities. Only the exceptional official (labelled a 'harsh official' in the terminology of the time) ignored the reality of the local power structure and attempted to enforce in the local context all of the theoretical powers of the state. More typical was a conciliatory approach, with officials sent from the centre offering subordinate posts to members of locally prominent families and leaving many matters in the hands of the local elite in return for their support. This sort of balancing act between the central government and local society was as much a part of the heritage of the Han imperial system as it was the assertion of unlimited imperial authority.

The Han dynasty was contemporaneous with the Roman Empire and has often been compared to it. Han and Rome both had strong governments that expanded geographically, promoted assimilation, and brought centuries of stability to the central regions. Both managed to deal with enormous problems of scale, ruling roughly similar numbers of people over roughly similar expanses of land. Both developed bureaucratic institutions, staffing them with educated landowners. Both invested in the construction of roads, defensive walls, and waterworks. Both were threatened by barbarians at their frontiers and often used barbarian tribal units as military auxiliaries.

Murals depicting scenes of daily life decorate the walls of the vaulted burial chamber of a tomb for an official in Zhengzhou, Henan province, dating from the first century CE.

The contrasts between the Han and Roman empires are equally instructive. Reflecting differences in its natural environment, China was a civilization based much more profoundly on crop agriculture. Not only did animal husbandry play less of a role in agriculture, but cities and commerce played a lesser role in the overall economy. The Mediterranean Sea encouraged seafaring in the Roman world on an order not found in Han China. Cultural cohesion was also of a different order in Han China than in Rome. In this period, none of China's neighbours had a written language. By Han times 'Chinese' already had developed mutually unintelligible 'dialects', but they were written identically using the same logographic script. Thus the educated elite of each region could read the same books, encouraging common ways of thinking at the level of those who could read. Latin became a lingua franca in the Roman Empire, but other written languages continued to be used, including Greek, Hebrew, and Demotic Egyptian. This facilitated the survival of non-Roman ideas in a way unknown in China.