**Imperial Strategies in the Early Chinese Empires**

0.0 – Module Lesson Plan

This module is part of the History for the 21st Century project (H21). History for the 21st Century is a collaborative project designed to serve students in introductory college history courses and their instructors. Together, we build, assess, and progressively improve free, online educative, enquiry-based curriculum. You can find out more about H21 by visiting <https://www.history21.com/> .

**Module Overview**

This module introduces students to the imperial strategies of the Han Empire (202 BCE–220 CE), the first long-lasting centrally administered empire in the area we now call China. Through four class meetings, students will explore the question of imperial expansion, first by studying the prior Western Zhou and Qin dynasties, and then from the vantage point of Han emperors and their advisors. By exploring Han expansion north, into Central Asia, and south, students will aim to understand the motivations of imperial officials, their understanding of the challenges they faced, and their strategies to overcome those challenges and grow their empire. By the end, students should able to identify both why and how the Han dynasty pursued and achieved such remarkable territorial expansion.

In order to make sense of this, students will study:

* What motivated expansion? That is the *why*.
* What strategies leaders used to expand? That is the *how*.

More broadly, the module aims to help students understanding both the motives and strategies of rulers who proved successful at building power states, as well as the fact that although the political borders of states seem pretty stable, they are not natural to the world. Rather, they are the outcomes of decisions made by people, that could have worked out quite differently.

In addition, the module provides opportunities for students to practice the following historical skills:

* Analyzing individual primary sources from the ancient world to understand the motivations and strategies of people in the past.
* Synthesizing multiple historical sources – that offer very different perspectives about the past – to help answer a single historical question.

**Module Map**

**Lesson 1: Introduction and Theorizing Empire**

The lesson begins by introducing the module, and asking students to think about the basic structures of world politics – states – not as stable and self-evident, but the product of human decisions, and thus contingent. After this can follow a discussion of the definition of states and empires. The first lesson also helps students consider what motivations shape the leaders of empires, as well as what kinds of strategies they might adopt to achieve their goals. The first meeting concludes by introducing the Zhou dynasty and asking them to consider what they can learn from maps about their imperial strategies, in preparation for a primary source analysis assignment.

**Lesson 2: Early Imperial Strategies**

The next lesson begins by reviewing the imperial strategies adopted by the Western Zhou and Qin dynasties, which students explored through the prior lesson’s primary source analysis assignment. Students will the refine their understanding of the kinds of strategies for imperial expansion available to rulers. From there, they explore the Qin and the founding and imperial dynamics of the Han dynasty, and begin comparing Han expansion to the efforts of earlier empires. Through an analysis of a series of maps from 195 BCE to 60 BCE, they will consider changes in both internal and external Han borders, as well as the relationship between the two. The goal of this lesson will not be to come to clear conclusions, but to develop a set of observations that build on their earlier brainstorming and primary source analysis, and prepare them to further examine Han imperial expansion.

**Lesson 3: Exploring Han Expansion**

In the third lesson, students will learn about Han expansion during the first two centuries BCE. It focuses on three geographical areas: the north, where the Han confronted nomadic tribes on the Inner Asian steppe; Central Asia, where Han leaders extended their economic, diplomatic, and finally military influence as part of a strategy to weaken their nomadic enemies; and the South, where the Han dynasty struggled to bring a variety of indigenous groups under its control. Students will break into groups to begin their examination of primary sources related to these three geographical areas and complete their analysis for the final meeting.

**Lesson 4: Explaining Han Expansion**

Finally, either using short in-class presentations or in a combination of small and large group discussions, students will present their findings and together look for patterns across their primary source evidence. The goal is to work towards a larger synthesis of materials, to identify explanations for success of the Han court in expanding its empire. Students will use the information from this meeting, and prior lessons to complete their final assessment.