**Imperial Strategies in the Early Chinese Empires**

0.2 - About this Module for Students

**Introduction**

This module introduces you to the imperial strategies of Han Empire (202 BCE–220 CE), the first long-lasting centrally administered empire in the area we now call China.

Though most your life, with a few important exceptions, the political borders of states around the world have remained pretty stable. In fact, they have been so stable that many people wrongly assume that people within certain boundaries inherently have certain innate characteristics, including a shared language, belief system, cultural practices, and political loyalties. Oftentimes, the longer those boundaries have remained stable, the more confident humans feel in assuming that those characteristics are stable and innate to that people. But learning history teaches us to challenge those assumptions!

Think of an example of a recent change in political borders that you are familiar with. Since 2008, for instance, Russia has invaded and occupied parts of neighboring Georgia and Ukraine. In 2011, after a civil war, South Sudan broke off from Sudan. Such changes usually happen because of a military invasion or as part of the diplomatic resolution to a war or other conflict. For the most part, that’s also how the borders that exist today came to exist. Indeed, all of the world’s political borders today were created by people who aimed to expand their states to other areas, mostly where other people already lived. They had *motivations* for doing so, as well as *strategies* to achieve their goals. Sometimes those strategies failed. But sometimes they succeeded, leading to powerful governments that had tremendous influence on the world in the short and long term.

For the next two weeks, we will consider this process through an examination of early empires in East Asia. Following an examination of the prior Western Zhou and Qin dynasties, you will consider imperial expansion from the vantage point of Han emperors and their advisors. Over its four-hundred-year history, the Han Empire stretched north, west into Central Asia, and from what is now North Korea, to the north coast of Vietnam. Even beyond the reach of its armies, Han economic influence reverberated across Eurasia. Merchants and diplomats carried Han goods as far as the Roman Empire, following thousands of miles of interlinked trade routes now collectively called the Silk Roads. Though only dimly aware of each other, these two great empires were economically intertwined and shared numerous similarities. Like the Romans, the Han’s leaders gradually extended their power over much of the world they knew, building waterworks, military garrisons, and roads connecting their metropolitan areas to distant and diverse peoples.

In this module, you will try to figure out how this enormous expansion was possible. Doing so may help you reflect on some of the forces shaping our interconnected global world today as well as understand the reasons that China became such an important global force so long ago.

We designed this lesson to require roughly six hours of class time over two weeks and about twice that amount preparing for class. If it takes significantly more than that, you should talk to your professor. It may be that they can offer some useful guidance to you, or it may be that they can offer some guidance to the *History for the 21st Century* project to adjust the lesson for future students.

**Format**

In this module, you will work with your instructor and your fellow classmates to understand what forces drove imperial expansion during the Han, and how it was accomplished. First, you will cover some basic concepts that can help you begin thinking systematically about imperial motivations and strategies. Then you will begin applying these concepts as you learn about the Western Zhou and Qin dynasties - the background to the founding of the Han empire in 202 BCE. Next, you will follow the story of Han expansion in the first two centuries BCE. In this segment, there will be three key geographical focal points: The north, where the Han confronted the power of nomadic tribes on the Inner Asian steppe; Central Asia, where the Han extended economic, diplomatic, and finally military influence as part of a strategy to weaken their nomadic enemies; and finally, the South, where the Han dealt struggled to bring a variety of indigenous groups under its sphere of control. Along the way, you will analyze sets of primary sources and start to develop conclusions based on a comparison of the various types of evidence that survives. You will end with preparing a final assignment that explains your findings.

**Learning Goals**

By the completion of our module, you will have analyzed a diverse collection of primary documents that relate to the history of imperial expansion in early Chinese empires. These sources will help you identify both why and how the Han dynasty pursued such remarkable territorial expansion, and enable to you to answer the following questions:

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

In addition, you will also practice historical skills of source analysis, that will help you to consider the following questions:

* How can we analyze individual primary sources from the ancient world to understand the motivations and strategies of people in the past?
* How can we use multiple historical sources – that offer very different perspectives about the past – to create a single synthesis that can answer a historical question.

**Schedule and Readings**

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| **Topic** | **Readings before the class** | **In-class activities** |
| **Before the module** | * About this Module |  |
| **Lesson 1: Introduction and Theorizing Empires** | * + Reading 1: Imperial Strategies and Pre-Han World | * Discuss empire, and motivations and strategies of expansion * Analyze a Western Zhou dynasty map * Assignment: Primary Source Analysis |
| **Lesson 2:**  **Early Imperial Strategies** | * + Primary Sources: Western Zhou and Qin Imperial Strategies   + Reading 2: The First Centralized Empire | * Compare Zhou and Qin imperial strategies * Analyze a series of Han dynasty maps |
| **Lesson 3:**  **Exploring Han Expansion** | * Reading 3: Han Expansion | * Group work on primary sources analyzing Han expansion north, into Central Asia, and south |
| **Lesson 4: Explaining Han Expansion** | * Primary Sources: The North * Primary Sources: Central Asia * Primary Sources: The South | * Compare findings on Han dynasty expansion in the north, Central Asia, and the south * Synthesize findings and discuss explanations for Han expansion |