

Imperial Strategies and the Pre-Han World



Introduction

In 202 BCE, a commoner named Liu Bang emerged as the victor of a devastating war to establish the Han Empire (202 BCE–220 CE). Liu Bang would later be known as Emperor Gaozu (“High Ancestor”), the first ruler of an empire that last over four hundred years, extending its power over vast territories in East Asia. But in 202 BCE, Liu Bang could hardly have foreseen any of this. At the time, his new empire was economically devastated from years of warfare, and more than half of the territory supposedly under his control was in fact ruled by local elites whose loyalty to the emperor was fragile at best. At the same time, a new threat was growing to the north as tribes of pastoral nomads united under a charismatic ruler for whom the Han armies were no match. It was by no means certain that imposing a centrally administered empire over such a large area was even possible. A previous attempt—the first in East Asia’s history—had collapsed within fifteen years. How, then, were Han rulers able to consolidate control not only within the empire’s original boundaries, but also well beyond them?

In the next lesson, we will explore this question by examining primary sources written during a period of rapid imperial expansion. Although the descendants of Gaozu ruled as Han emperors until 220 CE, our focus will be on the first one hundred and fifty years of Han rule, when the empire experienced its greatest expansion. Within these parameters, we will observe the multiple strategies the Han used and how they changed.

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But, in addition to asking *how* the Han expanded, we will also ask *why*. While all empires in world history expanded—that is how they became empires, after all—it was never unanimously accepted that expansion was a good thing. Expansion was costly, both in terms of resources and human life. Numerous obstacles stood in the way: geography, military logistics, cultural differences. And, in some cases, the territories won through conquest were more costly to maintain than if the empire had simply left them alone. So, in addition to understanding the *means* of Han expansion, we will also try to understand its *motivations*.

By examining the Han Empire in this way, we will be using it as a case study to lay the groundwork for comparing empires in world history. While the Han—like all empires—was shaped by its own contexts (the technology and worldviews of the time, for instance), it was not unique. The motivations that drove its leaders, the challenges they faced, and the solutions they devised were similar to those of other empire, both those that existed at the same time and in later periods in history. By getting a good grasp of how an early empire like the Han functioned, we can better understand how empires changed over time. For example, what meaningful differences existed between a land-based empire like the Han and the early modern sea-based empires of Spain, Britain, France and the Netherlands? Are the basic motivations and strategies generally the same across space and time, or do they differ depending on the context? To what extent does understanding these motivations and strategies help us understand global politics today, as that exerted by the United States? A close examination of the Han will provide a conceptual framework to begin answering such questions.

Key Terms:

Liu Bang

Han Empire

Imperial Expansion

Technological

Organizational

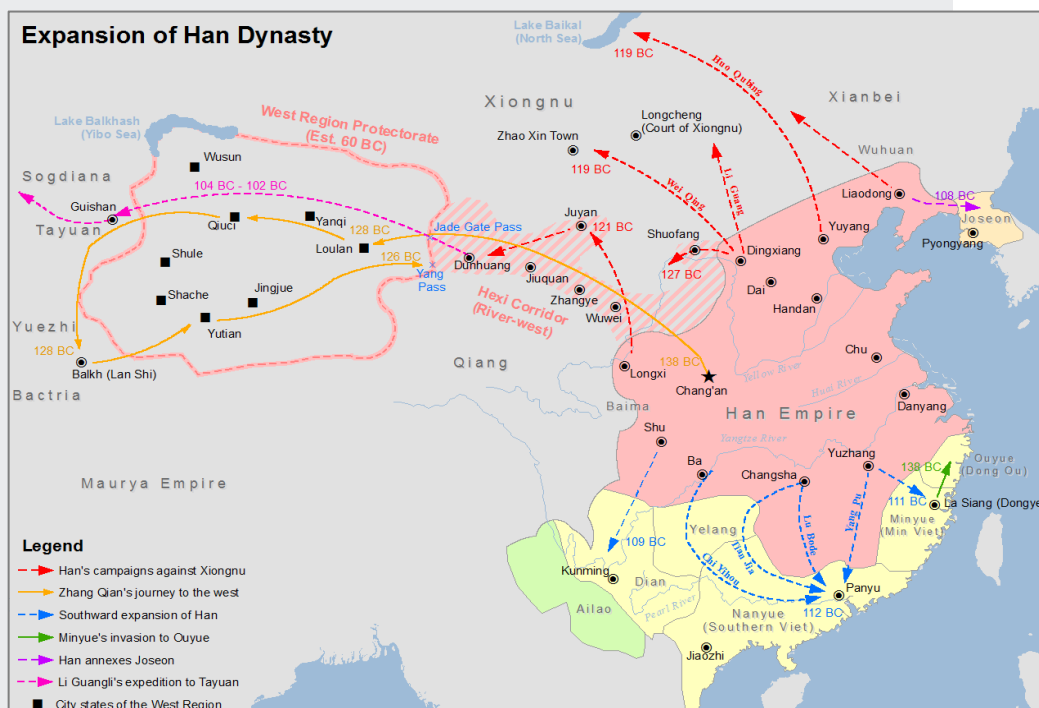
Economic

Cultural/Ideological

Zhou Dynasty

Warring States Period

Qin Dynasty



Map of Han dynasty expansion during the 2nd century, BCE



Imperial Strategies

Qin dynasty era bronze horse and chariot

Before looking at the Han specifically, we should take a moment to consider empires in general. What motivates their leaders? What constrains them, especially in pre-industrial times? And how do they overcome the obstacles they face?

To some extent, answering these questions requires an act of historical imagination. In the 21st century, the ability of states to project power over long distances far outstrips what was possible only a few centuries ago. The speed with which information and people travel, the staggering capacity of modern militaries to inflict violence, the ability of governments to surveil, record, censor, protect and punish—all of this would have been unimaginable for an empire like the Han. Yet the Han nonetheless managed to expand and administer an enormous and diverse territory without the aid of any modern technology.

While the capacity for expansion may require us to think in different times, when considering motivations, it may not seem that the early empires were living in such a different world. Many of the forces driving imperial expansion in previous millennia are familiar to us today: the desire for wealth and status; the perceived need to dominate geopolitical rivals to pursue the interests of one's own state; or the attempt to confirm the superiority of one's own group by forcing others to adopt its ways. But on closer examination, it may not be so easy...



Empires might expand in pursuit of economic interests, but the people who benefit—and how they benefit—will depend on a given society's social structure and its institutions for allocating wealth. This in turn will affect how "economic interests" are perceived and pursued. The case is similar with status: Who enjoys the prestige that comes with conquest? Soldiers? Emperors? All the inhabitants of that empire? People in different empires will likely think about military conquest in a variety of ways, celebrate or mourn the outcomes of battles differently, and transform prestige into power according to different political needs and institutions. In other words, while certain motivations might be common across space and time, empires are nevertheless capable of great variation.

19th century portrait of Qin Shi Huang, first emperor of the Qin dynasty

Regardless of their motivations, pre-industrial empires like the Han faced numerous obstacles. Resting on agrarian economies, such empires had far less wealth than those of more commercialized eras, not to mention the industrial empires of the 19th and 20th centuries. While pre-industrial empires could amass enormous armies and inflict devastating violence, simply keeping them fed long enough to get to the battlefield proved to be an enormous challenge. And once new areas had been conquered, there came the problem of keeping them under control. While all empires used terror and intimidation (some more than others), this was rarely an effective long-term strategy. Somehow, empires needed to get enough people—officials, local elites, or even commoners—to “buy in” to the imperial order. And this required a convincing strategy of legitimation. Pre-industrial empires needed this especially because they simply could not control everything. While many empires had detailed law codes, there was no surveillance and no police. Censorship was virtually impossible. Knowledge of local geography and customs was limited by technology and the ability to put boots on the ground. Messages took weeks, even months, to travel from the center to the periphery. In an age before paper, simple record-keeping required the use of bulky and expensive materials like wood, silk, papyrus, or parchment. Given such limitations, it is hard to see how any stable political entity could exist over large areas.

But they did exist. And it is the goal of this module to figure out how. To begin thinking systematically about imperial strategies, we can divide them into four categories: technological, organizational, economic, and cultural/ideological. You can use these categories to help analyze the specific case of the Han empire and to organize what you learn. At the same time, you can use them as a basis for comparison as you move forward in your course.

Technological: A technological strategy makes use of physical tools to further imperial goals such as the effective use of violence; the gathering, storing, and communication of information; or the transportation of resources like food, water, precious metals, or luxury goods. Some examples of technological strategies include: the use of advanced weaponry; the building of infrastructure like roads, canals, walls, and beacons; the use of writing for administration, record-keeping, and long-distance communication; advanced astronomical and mathematical techniques that enable sophisticated time-keeping practices; cartographic techniques like surveying and the use of scale which enable detailed knowledge of local areas



Qin dynasty crossbow

Organizational: An organizational strategy involves the use of social and political structures to distribute power and manage populations. Political institutions like monarchy, in which ultimate political authority is held by one person, or oligarchy, in which it is held by a small group of elites, can be considered organizational strategies. Likewise, some states rely heavily on kinship ties to determine political status and delegate administrative powers, others develop merit-based systems. Bureaucracy, which is often contrasted with kinship-based systems, is an organizational strategy in which authority derives from one’s position in a well-defined administrative hierarchy. In addition to granting authority, organizational strategies can be used to define subjects’ subordination and their obligations to the state. Organizing peasants into households or other population units for administration or military conscription can also be considered an organizational strategy.

Economic: An economic strategy involves the way in which leaders of the state or society orchestrate the production and distribution of wealth. Such strategies might involve the extraction of wealth from subject peoples through taxation or tribute. Or, they might involve the creation of economic incentives for service to the empire, such as granting victorious armies the right to the spoils of war, or directly rewarding successful generals with lands, titles, or payments in cash. Empires might also use wealth to extend their spheres by regularly lavishing gifts on local elites.



Han dynasty gold discs, used as rewards and gifts

Cultural/Ideological: A cultural and/or ideological strategy involves the attempt to shape people's beliefs or identities so that they are aligned with imperial interests. Many such strategies involve legitimation, or justification, of imperial rule by claiming divine approval or highlighting the value, benefit, or virtuous nature of the empire. Cultural and ideological strategies also seek to address problems emerged as the result of differences in custom, religion, or identity within the empire. Some imperial leader chose not to interfere in local customs. Others try to assimilate subject peoples, or promote a single imperial identity. Such a strategy is sometimes accompanied by the spread of a sense of "civilizing mission," in which leaders present imperial rule as bringing cultural improvement to supposedly less enlightened people. In the same vein, empires may promote scholarship and the arts to build good will or loyalty.

These four categories of imperial strategies are not meant to be comprehensive. But they are useful to begin thinking about how empires function, and to compare different governing strategies to one another. You may be able to think of strategies do not fit into any of these categories. Or, the same strategy might have different aspects that belong to multiple categories. As you move through the module, think about how these categories overlap, or how some strategies might serve multiple purposes. The more nuances you can find, the better you will be understanding the complex operations of empires in world history.



A scene from the Dahuting Tomb, showing two women wearing Hanfu silk robes, a traditional garment of the Han Chinese. The tomb was constructed during the late Eastern Han dynasty, and is located in contemporary Zhengzhou Henan province, China.

The Pre-Han World



The Han Empire emerged in part of Asia that we now call China, centered around the Yellow and Yangzi River valleys. The floodplain of the Yellow River—called the Central Plains—was especially conducive to the formation of large states because of its relatively flat, agriculturally productive land. The emergence of the Han has its roots in the history of the agrarian states that developed in this area.

In the late 2nd millennium BCE, a state called Shang extended its influence over much of the Central Plains. In 1046 BCE, after several centuries of supremacy, the Shang were defeated by a people from its western periphery called the Zhou, who proceeded to conquer much of the Yellow River valley, extending a loose political structure over the region that lasted until 771 BCE. Because its capital was situated in the Zhou homeland in the west, this time period is typically called the Western Zhou. To legitimize their rule, the Zhou introduced the concept of the “Mandate of Heaven.” The Zhou believed that a supreme deity in the sky gave the ruler a “mandate” (or command) to hold political power. If he ruled well, he kept the mandate. If he did not, then Heaven would give the mandate to someone else. This allowed the Zhou to justify their violent seizure of power by claiming that the Shang had lost the mandate because they were morally corrupt.

While this might have been a satisfactory justification for conquest, it was impossible for the Zhou to directly administer the large and diverse area that they now claimed. They therefore adopted a strategy of decentralized rule. The Zhou divided their lands into separate, effectively independent polities. They then gave relatives of the Zhou royal family the power to rule these polities, including the authority to maintain armies, extract resources from the local population, and conduct diplomatic relations amongst themselves. Although these aristocrats formally recognized the superiority of the Zhou ruler—who was the only one who could claim the title of “king”—they in fact ruled their domains with almost complete independence. These domains themselves often adopted a strategy of decentralized rule, subdividing themselves even further and parceling out land and power to lower ranking elite families. The Zhou realm was therefore an extremely complex patchwork of local polities, whose relationship to the Zhou king most often took the form of symbolic recognition.

This process of dividing up sovereign authority and recognizing local rulers is known as investiture, or enfeoffment. Once enfeoffed by the Zhou king, local rulers had very few restrictions on their power. They were expected to acknowledge their subordination to the Zhou king, to lead armies in support of the king if needed, and to send some of their local products to the king as tribute. Beyond this, however, local rulers were free to tax local populations, raise their own armies, make war on neighbors, and perform elaborate rituals that reinforced their own authority. The relative freedom of local rulers to manage their own affairs is called autonomy, and typically goes hand in hand with the strategy of decentralization.



Zhou ceremonial vessel, inscribed to record that the King of Zhou gave a fiefdom to Shi You

Map of the early Warring States period

Over time, the bonds of kinship, subordination, and allegiance that knit the Zhou realm together weakened. In 771 BCE, nomads sacked the Zhou capital and killed the king, further accelerating the decline of Zhou prestige. Although a new Zhou capital was founded and a new king enthroned, the damage was done. The various rulers of the Zhou realm began to compete openly amongst themselves to fill the vacuum of power. The period from roughly 475 BCE to 221 BCE is often called the Warring States period because it was marked by ceaseless warfare between independent kingdoms vying for political supremacy.



In this context, two interrelated trends of this period are especially important for our purposes:

- 1) the development of increasingly sophisticated techniques for centralized rule, and
- 2) rapid territorial expansion.

In order to survive in this world of constant military conflict, states needed to maximize their ability to extract resources from the population through levies on agricultural produce, labor, and soldiers for increasingly large armies. To accomplish this, many rulers took steps to strengthen their personal power and extend the reach of their administration further into the lives of ordinary farmers. These rulers gradually abolished the smaller autonomous domains ruled by subordinate elite families and replaced them with territorial units directly administered by officials' whose power and status depended on royal appointment. At the same time, they implemented more direct systems of taxation and military conscription.

Internal centralization and outward expansion were closely related. The above changes in administration allowed rulers to field and feed ever larger armies, increasing their military strength. Conquering and incorporating new territories gave rulers new sources of revenue and soldiers, enabling them to amplify their power even further. In this world, it was often difficult to distinguish between offensive and defensive military action.

One state—called Qin—is a good example of this. The core area of this kingdom was to the west of the Central Plains, in a large, fertile valley ringed by mountains called the “Area within the Pass,” giving it the distinct geographical advantage of a well-protected agricultural heartland. Across the mountains to the south of Qin were the “barbarian” kingdoms called Shu and Ba, who also boasted exceptionally productive land. In the fourth century BCE, Qin was particularly successful at implementing centralizing reforms that boosted its military capability. At the same time, the rival kingdom of Chu—which had grown to encompass much of the Yangzi River valley—was expanding upriver toward Ba. But Qin got there first. Building a road through the mountains, Qin conquered Shu and then Ba in 316 BCE, giving it an enormously productive area safe from the encroachments of rival powers. This enabled Qin to embark on a century of conquest.

Territories of the Qin Empire, 221 BCE- 206 BCE

In 246 BCE, a new king of Qin took the throne. Qin had been expanding steadily for more than a century, but under this new ruler it managed to conquer every last one of its rivals. By 221 BCE, Qin dynasty had brought all the territory of the former Warring States under its military control. Subjecting such an enormous and diverse area to the authority of single ruler posed an enormous challenge. As we have seen, this had previously only been possible through highly decentralized rule.



To further emphasize that this empire was a new kind of political entity, the king of Qin created a new title for himself: the First Emperor of Qin. This word translated as “emperor”—*huangdi*—was a totally new combination of two separate words: *huang*, meaning “august;” and *di*, meaning “lord.” Both of these terms had previously been used only to describe deities or ancient sage kings. In this way, the First Emperor raised himself above the former kings of Zhou and the Warring States, fashioning himself as the semi-divine, universal ruler of the first centrally administered empire.

Conclusion

The history of agrarian states on the Central Plains prior to the Han reveals a whole spectrum of imperial strategies, from decentralized, kinship-based rule to more centralized, expansionist states centered on a supreme ruler. Although many of the Warring States had made advances in the latter form of rule in 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, Qin had been able to extend their administration over the whole of the former Zhou realm. In the next section, we will take a closer look at how Qin, and then Han, created the first centralized empires.

Terracotta warriors from the tomb of the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty



Further Reading

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Qin Shi Huang in a 19th century portrait, based on a 1609 portrait, Public Domain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qin_Shi_Huang#/media/File:QinShiHuang19century.jpg

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