

The First Centralized Empire

Rise and Fall of the Qin

The First Qin Emperor carried forward the centralizing trends of the Warring States on an enormous scale. One major challenge was preventing the ruling families of the former independent kingdoms from using their power bases to challenge his rule. To do this, he forced all of these clans to move from their ancestral homelands to the Qin capital at Xianyang, located in the “Area within the Pass,” where they could be watched closely. He had the walls of their former capitals torn down, and converted their territories into thirty-six directly administered units called “commanderies,” each governed by officials appointed by Qin. Local variations in script, weights, measures, and currencies were replaced by empire-wide standards, and a network of roads and canals were built to facilitate the movement of troops, officials, and communications.

The Qin empire expanded its reach far beyond the limits of the former Warring States. To strengthen its defenses to the north, it engaged in a decade-long military campaign to drive nomads out of the Ordos, a region lying close to the north of the Qin homeland. Qin armies then built a line of fortifications along the northern reaches of the Yellow River, a project which required enormous expense and several hundred thousand laborers. At the same time, the Qin moved south in search of resources and trading opportunities. It pushed far beyond the Yangzi River valley, all the way to subtropical regions on the south China coast. There, the Qin also created new “commanderies,” but the extent of actual Qin control of populations in these regions is unclear. It seems likely that these “commanderies” were in fact no more than military outposts.

Despite these enormous gains in centralized rule and territorial expansion, the Qin collapsed in just fifteen years. In 209 BCE, rebellion began to spread throughout the empire, with many armies led by nobles of the former Warring States. Succession struggles wiped out the First Emperor’s heirs, and Qin was finally destroyed by allied groups of rebels in 206 BCE.



THE FIRST CENTRALIZED STATE

RISE AND FALL OF THE QIN

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The Founding of the Han

After the collapse of the Qin, local elites turned to fighting amongst themselves, and it seemed likely that there would be a return to a collection of independent states. The rapid failure of the Qin seemed to indicate that the model of a centrally administered empire was simply not workable over an area of such size and diversity. Its brief fifteen years would historically amount to nothing more than a striking—but failed—experiment.

As it happened, Liu Bang, later known as Emperor Gaozu, defeated the other contenders and founded the Han, which would eventually prove to be much more stable. But, in the beginning, the Han was in fact far weaker than the Qin had been at its own founding. Although Gaozu had captured the former Qin capital—which he renamed Chang'an, or "Eternal Peace"—he was only able to directly rule about half its former territory in the form of centrally administered commanderies. For the rest of the empire, military weakness forced him to adopt a form of decentralized rule. He enfeoffed his former allies in large, autonomous territories in the eastern two thirds of the realm, which contained some of the most populous and culturally prestigious parts of the empire. These new territories were called kingdoms, and their new rulers were called "kings." Many of these Han kingdoms resurrected the names of the former independent polities of the Warring States.

Extent of the Han dynasty, 60 BCE



Key Terms:

Liu Bang/Emperor Gaozu

Han Dynasty

The Central States

The Outer World

"All Under Heaven"

"Mandate of Heaven"

"Son of Heaven"

Central Administration

Commanderies

Kingdoms

Marquisates

Dependent States

Just as centralized control receded, so did the territorial gains made by the Qin. The fortifications along the Yellow River were abandoned, and the nomads soon moved back into the Ordos region, dangerously close to the Han capital. When the Qin government collapsed, all commanderies in the far south were lost. The contending warlords were far more interested in consolidating control over the agriculturally fertile land in the Central Plains, having little time to spare for far-flung outposts of uncertain value.

Over the next century and a half, the Han would not only regain most of the territories conquered by the Qin, but also expand far beyond them. At the same time, during the first two centuries BCE, the Han would gradually expand centralized control over its core territories, weakening the kingdoms, reducing their size, and often abolishing them altogether. But all of this took time, and was debated at every step of the way. We will follow this story later on in the module. For now, we need to look at some the key concepts that will help us understand this process.



Liu Bang, later known as Emperor Gaozu of Han

The Han Geographical Imagination

Like all empires, Han leaders drew on rich cultural traditions to fashion an image of their empire and its place in the world. Often, this self-perception involved notions of cultural superiority and inferiority. It is important to appreciate these in order to understand Han processes of expansion for two reasons. First, imperial expansion always closely involves geographical knowledge: it enables—and is enabled by—knowledge of different places, their natural resources, and the peoples who live in them. But while geographical knowledge can be highly technical and “scientific,” it is not totally objective. The way people think about geographical space is often shaped by cultural biases and political purposes. This is why we can speak of a “geographical imagination,” rather than simply thinking about knowledge of geography in a culturally neutral sense. Second, the justification—or criticism—of expansion often makes use of the demarcation between the “civilized” and the “barbarian,” which is often inseparable from people’s imagination of geographical spaces. Below are some important concepts that make up the Han geographical imagination...

漢

“Han” in ancient seal script (left) and Han-era clerical script (right)



Map of the full extent of the Han Dynasty, 2 CE

The Central States: The Han empire was centered on the complex societies that emerged in the Yellow and Yangzi River valleys. While the Han eventually expanded beyond this region, encompassing an ever-greater variety of peoples, this core area itself was also highly diverse. Its peoples spoke different (though related) languages, followed different customs, and worshiped different local gods. The period of Zhou expansion over the Central Plains facilitated the thin spread of a common elite culture based on Zhou traditions.

Later, the heritage of the Zhou came to be seen as enshrined in classical texts like the *Odes (Shijing)*, an early work of poetry sometimes called *The Book of Songs*, and the *Documents (Shangshu)*, a collection of speeches attributed to famous historical figures sometimes called *The Book of Documents*. But this sense of shared high culture was largely confined to the tiny fraction of the population who could read and write. This literate elite used a common written (not spoken) language based on Chinese characters, though scripts varied widely before the Qin.



Women literati of the Han palace depicted reading

They also maintained a sense of mutual involvement in history and politics: princes, aristocrats and ministers travelled frequently between the courts of the different states on diplomatic missions. The general sense of superiority that amongst this elite supported the common assumption that they collectively occupied the center of the world. For this reason, texts from this time often refer to this collection of kingdoms as the Central States (*zhong guo*).



The elite of the Central States did not have concepts equivalent to the English words "civilization," or "culture" in the sense of the sum of norms, beliefs and practices belonging to a defined group of people. In their own view, what defined them—and what marked them as superior—was their sense of ritual propriety (*li*) and moral duty (*yi*). In other words, the Central States elites believed—or liked to believe—that their possession of a deep moral sensibility and a sophisticated set of norms distinguished them from the "inferior" peoples in the outer world.

Han scholars, depicted on a pictorial brick



Ruins of a Han-dynasty watchtower

The Outer World: According to the Central States elite, people who lived far away were less likely to possess a recognizable set of ethical norms. Some believed that the moral influence of the Central States radiated outward and transformed these “barbaric” peoples. In part, this seemed confirmed in recent centuries, as the complex societies of the Yangzi River valley gradually (and selectively) adopted cultural elements from the more “civilized” peoples of the Yellow River valley.

A few of the great powers of the Warring States period—the kingdoms of Chu, Wu, and Yue—were not originally part of the Zhou order, and were initially perceived as semi-barbaric at best. But despite certain forms of acculturation, many of these areas retained their local character well into the Han era. In fact, the Han ruling house originally hailed from Chu, and infused Han court culture with elements drawn from the culture of their ancestral homeland.

The elite supported their self-perception by portraying the lands and peoples on their periphery as crude, hostile, and lacking in ethical principles. To the north lived the peoples of the Inner Asian steppe, a vast swath of grasslands where nomadic herders made their living raising animals and acquiring other goods from nearby sedentary peoples. The elite of the Central States tended to portray these people as violent, greedy, and animalistic. The lands of the south, in the Yangzi River valley and beyond, were seen as fearsome and inhospitable, a place where poisonous miasmas and diseases ran rampant. To the west were the Qinling and Kunlun mountain ranges, beyond which lay the Tibetan Plateau and the states of Central Asia. Before the age of imperial expansion, little was known about these places, which often formed the setting of tales of fabulous creatures and immortals. Indeed, even after expansion had brought less fantastic accounts of these lands, these types of stories retained their grip on the Han imagination.

All Under Heaven: One of the most expansive Han geographical concepts is the phrase “All Under Heaven” (*tian xia*). This notion was inherited from the Zhou, for whom the notion of “Heaven” had important political connotations, as we will see below. In its most literal understanding, “All Under Heaven” meant “the whole world,” or “everything under the skies.” But in actual usage, this often just meant the territories ruled by the Zhou kings and, later, the Han emperors. In that sense, it is better understood simply as “the realm.” But the overlap between these meanings is significant. It reveals the need for rulers to lay claim to a universally acknowledged cultural and political supremacy. While Han emperors did not literally believe that their domain extended to the ends of the earth, the phrase “All Under Heaven,” as a metaphor, provided a useful fiction that strengthened their legitimacy.



Han-era bronze mirror, thought to depict the structure of the universe. Earth is square, surrounded by the four cardinal directions, while heaven is round.

Son of Heaven was a title of King Wu of Zhou, adopted by subsequent Chinese sovereigns

Han Discourses of Legitimacy

A “discourse of legitimacy” is a set of concepts, beliefs, or narratives that supports a particular regime’s right to rule. As part of a larger set of cultural/ideological strategies, empires usually draw on multiple discourses of legitimacy at the same time. Some discourses might promote the assumption that military strength alone is sufficient to justify political power. Others might emphasize that only rulers who act justly and in the interests of subjects deserve their positions. Or a regime might draw on beliefs in the supernatural to claim that a given ruler’s power was conferred directly by the gods, or even that rulers themselves were gods. The Han Empire was no exception. In addition to emphasizing virtue and strength, the Han elite elaborated on the belief that the emperor maintained a special link to the divine. We need to take a brief look at some of the Han discourses of legitimacy because they offer insight into how the Han might have justified expansion, and how they understood the emperor’s relation to other political actors.

The Mandate of Heaven: One of the most important concepts the Han inherited from the Zhou was the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian ming*). The Zhou believed in a supreme deity in the sky, whom they called “Heaven,” or *tian*—the same Heaven as in the phrase “All Under Heaven.” In later times, Heaven would become less of a human-like figure and more of an impersonal, divine moral force. In either case, the Zhou believed that Heaven appointed the ruler, conferring upon him a “mandate,” or command, to rule justly. But while this belief could strengthen the legitimacy of a reigning dynasty, it could also serve to undermine it. The theory of the Mandate of Heaven also held that a ruler could lose the mandate if he did not behave in accordance with Heaven’s will. In this way, the Mandate of Heaven placed responsibility on the ruler, always holding out the possibility that, if he did not meet those responsibilities, he might be legitimately overthrown.

The Son of Heaven: Related to the Mandate of Heaven was the title of “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi*), given to Zhou kings and, later, Han emperors. This marked out the ruler’s unique, elevated status by emphasizing his special relationship to Heaven. Only the ruler, for example, could offer Heaven sacrifice. As the crucial link between Heaven and the human community, the Son of Heaven was a fundamental element in the structure of the universe itself. It is important to keep this discourse in mind when thinking about Han expansion and contact with foreign peoples. Ideally, the Han wished to base any interaction between the emperor and foreign rulers on the assumption that the emperor’s superiority was rooted in the very structure of the cosmos. Any challenge to that assumption risked undermining the foundations of Han imperial rule. In this way, foreign people’s recognition of the emperor’s status as the Son of Heaven was essential to the internal stability of the dynasty.



Han Political Structure

Painted figures on a lacquer box depict filial piety, excavated from a Han-era tomb in the former Lelang Commandery

The internal dynamics of an empire are important for understanding its expansion. Examining internal political structure shows what kind of organizational strategies an empire uses to govern its core population groups. At the same time, because expansion often took shape as the political incorporation of new areas, an empire's political structure gives us some idea of the "building blocks" of administrative units that it uses to enlarge its territory.

Central Administration: As we have seen above, the Han ruled much of their territory through a centralized administration. This was an enormous structure that linked the emperor, at the very apex of authority, to the county magistrates at the lowest level of government. At its height, the Han bureaucracy was composed of 130,000 officials administering a registered population of about 60 million people, making a ratio of roughly one official per four hundred and sixty-two registered people, an enormous feat for a pre-modern empire.

Commanderies: The commandery was the basic unit of local administration. Commanderies were headed by governors who oversaw all civilian and military affairs in their jurisdiction, including the collection of taxes and the administration of law. The number of commanderies gradually increased over the course of the Han, replacing territory formerly governed by kingdoms, or incorporating new territories. Like the outermost commanderies of the Qin, many of these were most likely military outposts, rather than regular units of administration.



Mural from the Dahuting Tomb, depicting cavalry and charots of the Eastern Han Dynasty

Kingdoms: As noted above, at the time of its foundation, the Han lacked the power to centrally administer the whole empire. Gaozu established ten kingdoms ruled by his former allies, comprising roughly two thirds of the empire. In part, this was because the central court needed time to establish an efficient central administration. At the same time, Gaozu needed to reward his former allies with land, power, and wealth in order to prevent another war from breaking out. This tension between the kingdoms and the central court was a major theme of the first century of Han rule.

Realizing that allowing warlords to develop local power bases could potentially threaten the Han, Gaozu maneuvered over the course of his reign to remove his former allies and have his own sons installed in the kingdoms instead. From that point on, the kingdoms would be ruled only by members of the imperial clan.

In certain ways, the existence of the kingdoms seemed like a return to the world of the Warring States. But, whereas in the pre-Han period, the term “kingdom” and “king” were used in a loose sense, they were now adopted as a part of the formal administrative vocabulary of the empire. The political structures of the Han kingdoms were supposed to follow a set pattern, modeled after the central imperial court, and the “kings” were meant to recognize that their titles were dependent on and subordinate to the emperor, to whom they owed specific obligations. In this way, the Han adapted the vocabulary and institutions of a former period to suit its own purposes.



Map of the Han dynasty in 195 BCE, illustrating vassal kingdoms.

Marquisates: Another type of administrative unit was the marquisate. These were essentially small territories granted to officials and generals as reward for special service to the Han house. These officials were then given the title “marquis”—another term adapted from the ranks of the Zhou aristocracy. In their small domains, marquises had the right to collect taxes—some of which they took as their own personal income—and to manage governmental affairs. These were similar to kingdoms in that they were not part of the regular bureaucracy. However, they were below the kingdoms in status: they were not ruled by members of the imperial clan, and they were not intended to be smaller replicas of the central court.

Dependent States: Finally, the unit of administration at furthest remove from the central administration were the dependent states. These were not established until the latter part of the 2nd century BCE, during a period of rapid expansion that we will examine in more detail later in the module. Dependent states were territories on the borders of the commanderies and kingdoms, populated by foreign peoples. While the exact nature of Han power in these areas is unclear, it appears they were often used as buffers between the core Han areas and foreign peoples totally beyond Han influence.

Conclusion

Han elite self-perceptions and internal institutions shaped the motivations and means of Han imperial expansion. The belief that the elites of the Han empire possessed a superior morality could potentially justify conquering and “transforming” foreign peoples, through military conquest if necessary. Conversely, labeling a people too barbaric to change might serve arguments *against* conquest, or provide a face-saving explanation for retreat. At the same time, Han conceptions of power and political authority—couched as they were in universalizing terms—made external recognition of Han supremacy an important aspect of internal legitimacy.

Importantly for this module, the internal political structure of the Han Empire provided a set of concepts that could be used to help expand the empire’s borders. Recall how the metaphor “All Under Heaven” was used in service of the fiction of the emperor’s universal supremacy. The terminology of “commanderies,” “kingdoms,” “marquisates,” for instance, could be used toward the same end. Han leaders might establish new commanderies on its northern border which were little more than isolated military outposts, but in the language of imperial administration they looked little different from the commanderies which boasted fertile fields and thousands of tax-paying subjects. If the Han encountered a foreign people whom it wished to subjugate, it might make use of the old tradition of investiture, enfeoffing the local chieftain as a “king” or a “marquis.” Local power structures and cultural traditions might remain fully intact, and Han rulers may not even station troops in the new domain. But on paper, the empire had brought a new “kingdom” into its fold, confirming the supremacy of the emperor. Under the surface of this apparently neat hierarchical order was a great deal of diversity and unevenness. For those incorporated into the empire, accepting Han rule was a complex negotiation between accepting Han superiority—at least symbolically—and retaining autonomy and indigenous forms of authority. As we move forward in this module, we will examine the tensions produced by this balancing act.

**19th century ruins of a
Han-era ornamental
gateway**



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