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The Early Dynasties

From the Ancient Three Dynasties to the Qin Dynasty (c. 2070 – 206 BCE)

The ancient Three Dynasties

The history of the Chinese civilization traditionally begins with the ancient Three Dynasties, the Xia (c. 2070 – c. 1600 BCE), the Shang (c. 1600 – c. 1046 BCE) and the Zhou (c. 1046 – 221 BCE). A major project commissioned by the Chinese government in 1996 placed the Xia between approximately 2070 BCE and 1600 BCE. However, the earliest written mention of Xia is from the Western Zhou period (c. 1046 – 771 BCE). There is no reference to Xia in the earliest Chinese written sources, which include the inscriptions on oracle bones dating from the later Shang period (thirteenth to twelfth centuries BCE). The historicity of the Xia therefore remains a matter for debate. Archaeologists in China continue to search for signs of the Xia capital city, with little success so far. Some Chinese scholars suggest that the Xia may be identified with the Bronze Age Erlitou Culture, which is determined to have existed in the Yellow River valley during the eighteenth to the sixteenth centuries BCE.

Inscriptions on an oracle bone (turtle shell) from the late Shang period. (*Museum of the Institute of History and Philology, Taipei, Taiwan (ROC)*: retrieved on 30 November 2023 from

https://museum.sinica.edu.tw/en/exhibitions/21/?lang=en&item=21)

Although there were also no written records of the Shang dynasty until the Western Zhou period, archaeological evidence firmly supports its existence. Excavations near present-day Anyang allow the site to be identified with the ruins of Yin, the capital city of the Shang. This site yielded a large collection of oracle bones, which provide important information about this early stage in the Chinese civilization.

The Zhou dynasty, which followed the Shang, lasted for nearly 800 years, the longest of any Chinese dynasty. The Zhou is noted for its remarkable bronzeware, for being the cradle of three major Chinese philosophies (Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism), and for the evolution of the Chinese written script.

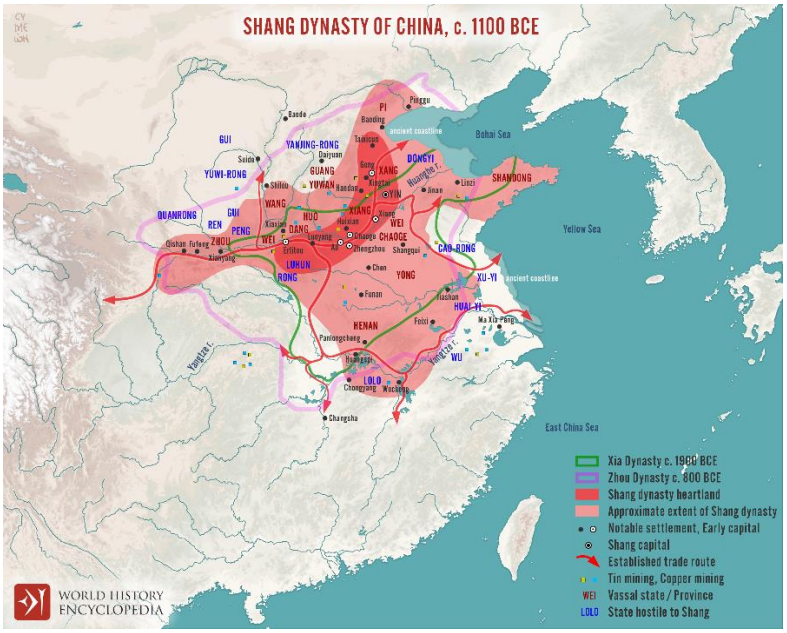
We shall now describe, in broad outline, some essential features of the early Chinese polity represented in these dynasties, which we shall see repeated many times in the later dynasties.

Characteristic features of the early Chinese polity

During the two millennia when these dynasties waxed and waned, until 221 BCE when the Qin unified China under its rule, many of the basic and long-lasting features of Chinese civilization were already in evidence. The power of the state was vested in the person of the head of the state, the emperor or king, who ruled, in theory, absolutely. Those who assisted him would form a part of the ruling elite. The society was patriarchal as well as hierarchical, with fine distinctions of status and position. Even within families, the fundamental building blocks of society, there was a clear ordering. A father was considered superior to his son, just as a man was to his wife and an elder brother to his younger brother. Those in the inferior positions were obliged not only to respect their superiors but also to obey them. Relatives on the paternal side took precedence over those on the maternal side. One of the most significant forms of social division was that between the ruling elite and the ruled. The ancient philosopher Mencius (372 – 289 BCE) summarized the situation succinctly with the statement that those who work with their minds rule over those who work with their hands. The ruling elite was spared the arduous physical toil of the primary producers, the fruits of whose labour sustained this upper social and political stratum and their high living standard.

What were the sources of the ruler's power or authority? Like heads of state in other civilizations, Chinese rulers relied on physical force, on their ability to muster, organize, control, and deploy armed personnel, for maintaining internal security and resisting external foes. The founder of a Chinese dynasty often achieved his goal of controlling a larger area by conquering and annexing the territory of his neighbours. However, force alone was not sufficient for him to govern the country. For this he also depended on the assistance of civilian administrators, who ruled on his behalf. Another important source of his authority was spiritual in its origin, and this was derived from the cult of ancestor worship. The Chinese believed that

the spirits of the ancestors in the world of the afterlife when appealed to, served, and propitiated, would protect their descendants and help them to thrive in this world. Those who prospered must have mighty ancestral spirits who blessed and supported their earthly enterprises. The Chinese head of state was believed to be crucial in the performance of the rite of ancestor worship. This awe-inspiring role would confer upon him a spiritual authority that was further reinforced by the idea that he was the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi*), a god or god's representative on earth. He had the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*), meaning a divinely ordained right to rule over All under Heaven (*Tianxia*), a term customarily taken to mean China, before the Chinese became aware of a much larger world outside their polity. Heaven, *Tian*, stood for a spiritual realm possessing supernatural power over our mundane world, though without a supreme deity.



Map of the approximate boundaries of the Three Dynasties (*World History Encyclopedia:* retrieved on 8 April 2024 from https://www.worldhistory.org/image/16231/shang-dynasty-of-china-c-1100-bce/)

In any given dynasty, succession normally went to the male heirs of the founder in succeeding generations. After many generations, a time would come when a Son of Heaven appeared to have lost his grip on his patrimony. Chaos would ensue. There would be a period of dynastic interregnum, and after power struggles and military contests among ambitious would-be Sons of Heaven, a new dynasty would be founded by the head of another powerful family or lineage group. Such a phenomenon has been described by Chinese historians as the *dynastic cycle*. To Chinese observers, a dynasty seemed to have a life cycle: it underwent birth, maturity, and decay, like a living organism. Although the length of dynasties varied, they inevitably

came to an end, which was widely understood by the populace as the judgment of heaven. The consequent withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven from the ruling dynasty was a result of the ruler's lack of virtue.

The above conclusion was in line with the ancient Chinese ideology as expressed by the Confucian school, a major philosophical school of thought based on the teachings of Confucius, who lived from 551 BCE to 479 BCE. These thinkers saw the universe as a moral entity, and human society, being a part of this cosmos, must obey the same universal moral code. Apart from being a legitimate successor to his forebears, an emperor's right to rule rested on another, very different, test: his moral character. In a well-ordered society, the emperor was like a benevolent patriarch of a state-wide family. A good emperor, who demonstrated exemplary propriety in his conduct, would inspire his ministers to govern the country well. He would be successful in his role as an intercessor for his people with the powers in heaven. His prayers would be heard, and heaven would rain blessings on his land. Were he to fail this test, the opposite would result. The end of a dynasty was often accompanied by natural disasters, such as widespread floods or droughts, and by man-made troubles such as internal rebellions and foreign invasions. These negative events would have been viewed more as signs that the ruler had lost his mandate to rule because of his moral shortcomings, rather than any actual mistakes or wrong decisions made while governing his realm. Historians of another time or from a different culture might offer other explanations for the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties, but in traditional China the foregoing was the commonly accepted account. The rise of a new dynasty in China did not mean wholesale innovation in the Chinese political, economic, or cultural sphere. Changes and refinements were continually being made, but they mostly took place within the framework of a cultural tradition that had already developed a certain established pattern.

Portrait of Confucius by the Tang dynasty painter Wu Daozi (*Mesosyn*: retreived on 30 November 2023 from http://mesosyn.com/cp2.html)

Confucianism was only one among many schools of thought that vied with one another for popular following and princely sponsorship before the grand unification of China by the Qin Dynasty (221 – 206 BCE). Besides being a philosophy of individual ethics like other competing schools, it was also deeply concerned with the morality of government. However, the ancient Chinese thinkers who were most narrowly focused on governance and statecraft were the Legalists (c. 400 - 300 BCE). Proponents of this school had no use for the Confucian ideal of a benevolent monarch governing his country by moral leadership and putting his people and their needs before himself and his own interests. The Legalists, on the contrary, held that social and political order could only be ensured through strong state control and absolute obedience to authority. The ruler was viewed as a means to achieving this aim. All the machinery of the state, together with its people, were to be used to serve the ruler's interests and objectives, first and foremost among which was the preservation of his own position and power, in order to secure social and political stability.

The establishment of the Qin

The Legalists were masters on the subject of power and its exercise, in theory as well as in practice. Not surprisingly, the rulers of the Qin found the teachings of this school so attractive that two outstanding Legalists were, as Qin prime ministers, given the opportunity to put their ideas into practice. Around the middle of the fourth century BCE, Shang Yang, a talented exponent of Legalism, helped Duke Xiao, the head of the Qin, to concentrate power into his own hands at the expense of the old aristocracy. The government was systematically reorganized and staffed by bureaucrats, who became a new elite group to rival the old aristocrats. The bureaucrats were government appointees, chosen irrespective of birth or privileged social connection. These people owed their position, authority, status, and income to the ruler alone, and so they became the ruler's dependants. At the local level, the authority of the feudal lords in their fiefdoms was replaced by that of the centrally appointed county magistrates, who reported directly to the court and were subject to recall. In addition to losing political authority, the nobles lost their privileged position in the eyes of the law. Traditionally they were exempt from criminal punishment, a practice sanctioned by the conservative Confucianists. When the Qin government adopted a Legalist measure that treated all people as being equal under the law, the nobles (in theory) no longer enjoyed this immunity.

Chinese civilization would not have developed without agricultural surpluses sufficiently large to support an upper stratum of the ruling elite and their servants, as well as other functionally specialized members of the society, such as artisans and merchants, who did not work on the land. Ancient Chinese rulers including the Qin recognized the importance of agriculture and saw it as the economic mainstay of their states. The

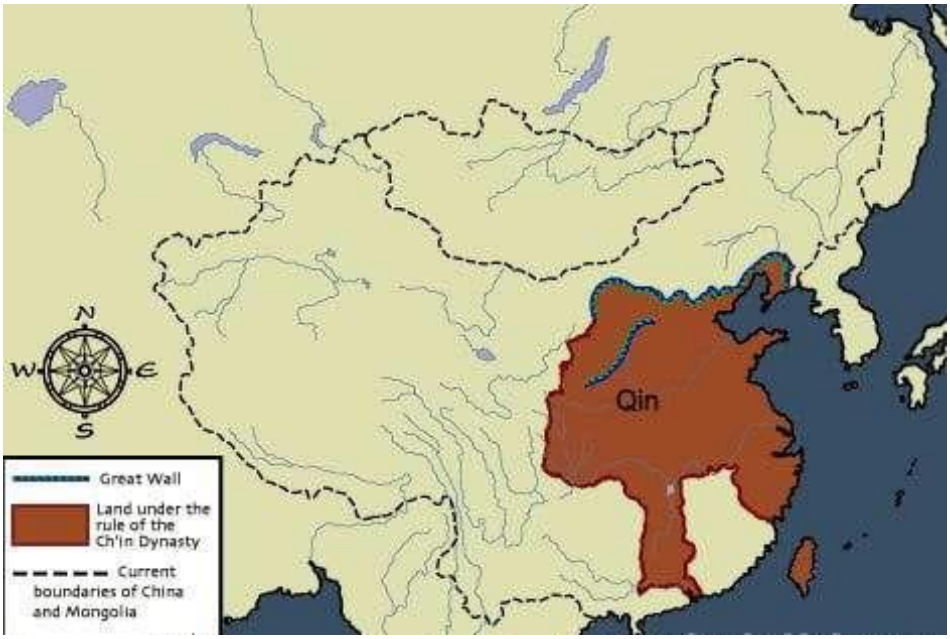
foundation of the wealth of the feudal lords also lay in their hereditary right in connection with the land in their fiefdoms. The Qin court, as guided by Shang Yang, effected a revolutionary change on the millennia-old ancient Chinese system of land tenure, by giving the tillers the right to own the land they cultivated. Land was no longer an inalienable part of the feudal domain of the aristocrats; it became a commodity that could be bought and sold. This reform, in addition to the curtailment of the power and privileges of the aristocracy as described above, brought about the terminal decline of feudalism in the kingdom of Qin.

Since the livelihoods of the bulk of the people and the income of the state came from land cultivation, increasing land yield was a preoccupation of not only the agriculture producers; the Chinese ruling elite also took an interest and at times played a significant role, especially in connection with organizing large-scale irrigation and water control works. The state of Qin strengthened itself economically by providing leadership in irrigation projects and canal building. The change in the system of land tenure also stimulated the economy and increased state revenue.

Following Shang Yang's reform, the Qin became a dominant player among the seven major states of the Warring States Period (475 – 221 BCE). These kingdoms conquered or absorbed their weaker neighbours through diplomacy or war, after the Zhou Dynasty gradually but irreversibly lost authority and control over the multitudes of fiefdoms within its empire. As the name of this period suggested, the states that remained intact were rivals, continually at war with each other. During several hundred years of military contests, warfare grew more ruthless, and the technology of war became more efficient. Harder iron weaponry was introduced, and that of bronze; massive infantry forces armed with crossbows were deployed, and chariots were replaced by the more mobile cavalry.

About a century later, another Legalist statesman, Li Si, as the Qin prime minister (246-206 BCE) under King Ying Zheng (later known as Qin Shi Huang), reinforced the Legalist style of government. Having subjugated the nobles and with greater control of the economic resources, the autocratic Qin king commanded the obedience of the people to his will through a regime of harsh laws and severe punishments. But for those who served him well, there were rewards. The Legalists advocated the use of rewards and punishments as the 'two handles' by which the ruler could dominate and subdue his people. With power so effectively centralized, the Qin king was able to mobilize the population massively for war, or for other purposes according to his wishes. By 221 BCE Ying Zheng was able to conquer all the other major kingdoms of the Warring States to establish the Qin dynasty (221– 207 BCE), and crown himself as Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of the Qin empire. This was one of the climactic moments in Chinese history.

The Qin might appear superficially to be just another dynasty replacing the Zhou, though with a much larger domain. But there were significant differences. While the king of Zhou presided as a suzerain over feudal vassals, who were the real hereditary powerholders of the fiefdoms, the emperor of Qin exerted control of his far-flung empire through his own bureaucratic appointees, whose income and career depended on him, and who exercised power on his behalf. The first emperor ruled at the capital, where he held court, and where he was assisted by the officials of the central government heading various specialized departments. Civil governors and military commanders governed the thirty-six (later increased to forty-eight) commanderies at the next level, and magistrates administered the hundreds of counties at the base. His regional and local government officials implemented his policy, reported to the court in writing, and were subject to central supervision and recall. The aristocratic families of the vanquished kingdoms were moved to the capital, away from their former power base to prevent their resurgence. The feudal or *fengjian* institutions of China's classical age thus came to an end, and were replaced by a centrally controlled bureaucratic system, which prevailed in China for over two millennia thereafter. The Qin unification therefore marked the beginning of China's existence as a centralized bureaucratic state, occupying a significantly increased area as compared with the ancient Three Dynasties.



Map of the territory of the Qin dynasty (*China Education Center*: retrieved on 30 November 2023 from https://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/whychina/qin.php)

In addition to setting up the administrative structure and promulgating a code of law for the entire conquered area, certain measures were taken by the Qin court to enable it to govern the extensive territory more effectively. Standardized weights and measures, and currency, were adopted throughout the empire. To

facilitate transport and communications, major road building and canal construction programmes were undertaken. A government postal system was established. Communication in writing was facilitated by the standardization of the styles of written characters, whereby one formal and one cursive style became the norm.

The imposition of uniformity on the Chinese script was possible because the language was not based on a phonetic alphabet, although the pictographic-representational characters sometimes incorporated a phonetic element in their composition. The earliest writing in the development of the Chinese civilization consisted of inscriptions on the shoulder blades of slaughtered domestic animals, or on turtle shells - 'oracle bones'- apparently used in connection with divination. Such writing evolved into a powerful and versatile tool for the ruling elite in government administration, its function being by no means limited to communicating with the world of ancestral spirits. Laws and edicts were promulgated in writing. Population censuses and taxation business were carried out in writing, with records also kept in writing. Compared with oral tradition, written records had far greater reliability and permanence. Before the invention of paper during the Han Dynasty (206 - 220 CE), ancient Chinese writing on bamboo or silk remained available for future generations. The usefulness of writing was not limited to transmitting information from one period to another, however; it was also a vitally important medium for official communications between the central government and the regional and local officials, and among the officials themselves. (Of the many large historical empires, only the Inca managed the functions of government without a written language.) The first emperor of Qin, with the help of his officials, was able to control his large empire, with people speaking a variety of dialects and tongues, largely because the business of government was conducted in the common system of writing. The imposition of uniformity on the written characters lessened the chances of mistakes and misunderstandings in the information transmitted. A unified written language gave China a common linguistic thread. It was a vital factor contributing to the longevity of China's civilization, and to the repeated reassertion of a unified empire under other major dynasties during the two thousand years following the Qin, even after long periods of disunion.

Having extended his government and consolidated his rule of the conquered areas, the first Qin emperor set about strengthening the defence of his realm. Military governors were placed in all the commanderies alongside their civilian colleagues. A system of collective responsibility tailored towards controlling the population was set up, which obliged groups of households to curb or report to the government unlawful activities among family members or neighbours, or suffer the penalties for not doing so. With a little variation in the details, this divisive means of maintaining internal security was used by many subsequent regimes down to the modern era. However, the most intractable security problem was external, posed by the warlike nomads on the northern and the north-western frontier of the Qin empire.

The challenge of maintaining the security of the northern border

North of a band where rainfall became variable or scarce, conditions of grassland, steppe, and semi-desert or desert prevailed. This kind of environment could not fully support the intensive arable farming of the North China Plain, where the Chinese Three Dynasties had carved out their domains. A vast area unsuitable for farming was instead only able to support migratory pastoral herders of livestock, who laid down tents where they could find food and water for their domesticated animals. These animals provided for their basic material needs such as food, materials for clothing, bedding and shelter, as well as acting as their beasts of burden. Other needs they could endeavour to satisfy by trade or by raid.

To the sedentary Chinese agriculturalists in the south, the nomadic Northerners appeared lacking in both material civilization and high culture. Without adherence to the kind of manners, morals, and the regulated social relationships commonly practised by the Chinese, they were perceived as rough and uncouth, and even labelled as barbarians. Through successful intensive agriculture in a settled region, the Chinese were able to produce the surplus wealth to support politicians, scholars, artisans, and a host of other specialists, to produce an abundance of material things, and to build a rich and varied civilization. In contrast, pastoralists faced significant challenges in meeting even their basic needs, often lacking sufficient resources for themselves and their animals. Given their desire for Chinese goods, and their mobility on horseback, some of the tribal peoples were easily tempted to raid and loot weakly defended Chinese farming communities in their vicinity. When bands of nomads of similar ethnic origin joined together under a strong and ambitious leader, they could and often did pose serious military challenges to many Chinese dynasties.

The difference in economic and societal organization had a bearing on the disposition towards combat between the nomadic tribes and the Chinese. Physical contests, trials of strength, and military skirmishes were a way of life among the tribal peoples living on the otherwise unprotected grassland or open steppe. When armed with crossbows and other weapons, they were formidable as mounted warriors, well versed in military manoeuvres. Every nomad was a potential soldier. They constituted, in effect, a standing army, always ready to be called upon to fight. The Chinese, on the other hand, were not so warlike. Apart from the generals and the high-ranking officers who were professionally involved in military service, the Chinese fighting forces were made up mostly of farmers, who were mobilized to serve as soldiers in times of need.

How did the Chinese deal with this constant frontier threat in the north? Over the next two thousand years, the rulers of China would use several strategies. Under a militarily strong regime, the Chinese could and often did choose to fight. If the nomads did not want to fight, they would flee and retreat to a point where the Chinese army in pursuit would find themselves in an untenable position of being far from their base

with an over-extended supply line. The first emperor of Qin, being a strong and aggressive ruler, wanted to stabilize this borderland. He sent an army of reportedly 300,000 to drive out the Xiongnu, a powerful Turkic tribal people, from the northern and north-western frontier. An imperial highway was built straight into the semi-desert Ordos region, and in 211 BCE roughly 30,000 Chinese families were moved to settle in this area previously controlled by the Xiongnu. Walls were erected in the north to protect this settlement.

Chinese civilization was, in fact, closely identified with fortified walled cities. Before China was unified under the Qin, walls were also built by various states along their borders to defend themselves against both Chinese and nomad enemies. After the unification, the Qin emperor connected those walls of the Warring States which could serve as defensive walls against nomad incursion. Together with the wall north of Ordos, this extremely long wall was extended westward to Ningxia. Although even such a fortified wall could not fully keep nomad invaders out of China, it remained a key long-term defensive strategy against invasion from various pastoral tribal peoples along the northern border of the Chinese empire, stretching from the northwest to the northeast.

The conquest under the first emperor of Qin represented a major expansion of the Chinese state and civilization. The Qin readily consolidated its rule over the territory of the other former Warring States as these areas were already largely Chinese in culture. The Chinese hold on Ordos to the north, an area more suitable for the pastoral economy, was shakier. To the south, the Qin's hold on the conquered Yue (today's Guangdong and Guangxi provinces) and northern Annan (Vietnam) was also tenuous, because these areas were already settled by people ethnically and culturally distinct from the Chinese.

The first emperor's harsh rule and his massive mobilization of the people for war, wall construction, road, and canal building, not to mention his stupendous tomb[1], proved to be too much for the long-suffering peasants of China. Not long after his death in 210 BCE, peasant rebellions broke out and spread rapidly. A powerful force under Xiang Yu, a scion of the former kingdom of Chu, gave the Qin dynasty the fatal blow, ending the dream of a dynasty that was supposed to last forever, and the life of an emperor who fervently sought immortality.

[1] In present-day Xi'an, now known to millions for the army of terracotta warriors, guarding the mausoleum.

The terra cotta army at the tomb of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, in Xi'an (c. 210 BCE) (*Archaeology Wiki*: retreived on 30 November 2023 from

https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2022/03/31/the-terracotta-army-the-clay-army-with-the-greek-signature/)

After several years of general chaos and civil war, an astute rebel leader of peasant origin called Liu Bang emerged as the winner. He became the new Son of Heaven and founded the Han dynasty in 202 BCE, with its capital at Chang'an (now Xi'an).

The Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 9 CE, 25 – 220 CE)

After peace was once more restored, the Han dynasty succeeded in taking control of what had been the Qin empire. Although not from an aristocratic lineage himself, the Han founder, Liu Bang, divided his empire roughly down the middle, and gave the territory in the eastern part to his royal relatives as their fiefdoms. The remaining territory in the western part was administered as commanderies and counties under the direct control of the imperial government and its delegates, who became the regional and local bureaucrats, as had been the case under the Qin.

In 206 BCE Liu Bang assumed the dynastic title of Han Gaozu, the first emperor of the Han dynasty. The dynasty was relatively long-lived: it lasted over four hundred years, from 206 BCE to 220 CE, apart from a brief interruption and a change of capital. The longevity and prestige of this dynasty made such an impact on China that an overwhelming majority of people in modern mainland China identify themselves as ethnically Han, which is also an official designation distinguishing them from the ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China.

The Han's adoption of Confucianism

The Han emperors, especially the Martial Emperor (Emperor Wu) who reigned from 141 to 87 BCE, sought to solidify the dynasty's political power by putting it on a strong cultural or ideological foundation. The Han avoided the harshness of the Legalist philosophy as practised by the Qin, and instead embraced as the state orthodoxy a large body of ideas of Confucian origin. Emperor Wu established an Imperial Academy in the capital to train students and promote scholarly study of the state-authorized Confucianism. Graduates from this establishment would constitute a body of literate, well-educated young people, providing a pool of talents to draw upon for governmental service. This became a regular new channel for civil service recruitment, in addition to the established practice of recommendation by other officeholders. Its most distinguished scholars could be called upon to advise the emperor on subjects ranging from public policy to ritual observances. Proper performance of rites devoted to the imperial ancestors and to heaven was a very serious matter, which required the emperor personally to take an active part. To perform this important duty properly, the emperor needed the assistance of consummate interpreters of Confucianism, who functioned as the guardians of these rites.

In general, any stable political regime cannot govern by force alone. It needs at least the acquiescence of the people, if not also their acceptance and active cooperation. Legalism had relied on imposing the will of the government on the people by using rewards and punishments. While not wholly abandoning this 'carrot and stick' approach, the Han endeavoured to secure the people's acceptance and cooperation by placing more emphasis on the spiritual foundation of its legitimacy. This was pursued through the active promotion of Confucian traditions, including the worship of heaven and reverence for imperial ancestors. By strengthening the popular belief that the dynasty had the Mandate of Heaven, and was protected by powerful ancestral spirits, this Confucian-inspired policy likely contributed to social stability.

The selection of government officials from among those who had received an education based on the Confucian classics had several implications. The officials so selected could be expected to have achieved a certain standard of literacy and cultural attainments, and to have a solid grounding in the morality and ethics

central to the teachings of Confucius and Mencius. They formed a new elite, commonly known as *shi dafu* (scholar-officials), sharing a common worldview and code of morality. In time, the language and moral precepts in communications between the court and its officials, and among the officials themselves, were couched in the Confucian cultural framework.

Confucian philosophy presupposed an orderly universe or world, where the universal order would be preserved if everyone behaved according to the ethics governing his or her station or position in life. It taught the way of the golden mean, which valued harmony, modesty, and moderation, while opposing assertiveness, competitiveness, strife, and extremism in personal behaviour and social conduct. Despite the religious elements in connection with the role of the emperor and the legitimacy of the dynastic rule, Confucianism as a political ideology was notable in the pre-modern world for its secular and this-worldly orientation.

Transgression in this moral universe, particularly if committed by the ruler, was likely to result in disorder. While an emperor stood above the law, which was made by him or in his name, the universal morality applied to the whole society, the emperor included. A wise emperor would exercise his power within the Confucian moral framework in order not to invite a 'lecture' from his bolder ministers, or risk heaven's disapproval and witness the dynasty losing the Mandate of Heaven. This moral framework provided some restraint on autocratic excesses of an emperor.

While law and punishment were mechanisms of external control on a person, internalized morality could predispose a person to exercise self-control. A person might evade law without suffering punishment; immoral behaviour, however, might lead to self-reproach and a feeling of shame. The Confucian philosophy was orientated more towards collective wellbeing than the rights of an individual. It stressed obligations rather than rights. The cardinal Confucian virtues such as benevolence, loyalty, filial piety, righteousness, trustworthiness, and good faith were the commonly held values of the educated class. Although government officials in traditional China were often recognized for their human foibles rather than for being embodiments of virtue, they had at least a body of ethical standards and moral criteria to uphold, by which the conduct of themselves and others would be judged. Confucianism provided an ethical framework for the governing elite, and a moral foundation for the formulation and application of government regulations. This approach in governing a society in effect gave morality rather than law the primal position.

The Han promotion of Confucianism as the official philosophy of the state and society was a visionary as well as a practical stroke of immense significance, with far-reaching consequences for the dynasty itself and for China. It was a kind of Chinese Renaissance. Like the Western Europeans harnessing and building upon the knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome to achieve their cultural Renaissance, the Han dynasty

Chinese reached back to draw upon the valuable cultural heritage of a not so distant past and used it to satisfy the political and administrative needs of the time, as well as to provide long-term social stability in a sustainable social order with a strong cultural underpinning. When the Han dynasty eventually declined and disintegrated, Confucianism was eclipsed to some extent until its great resurgence, in a reinterpreted form, about one thousand years later in the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). Subsequently, apart from a brief spell under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 CE), Confucianism grew from strength to strength until near the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644 -1911 CE). It was disseminated by a myriad of schools, private as well as government-run, which catered to the education of the candidates for the greatly expanded state-sponsored examination system for the selection of officials. During this long period, Confucianism was not only the prevailing culture of the ruling elite; it came close to being a traditional Chinese mass culture. Although this philosophy served the Chinese state and society in some ways, such as promoting social harmony, it did have important drawbacks. One was the low position of women, who were relegated to second-class citizenship. Another was the conservatism that glorified the past and past achievements, rather than embracing the future and its potential for innovative changes.

Internal and external challenges to the Han state

Chinese statesmen were aware that the stability of a state depended on many elements which included, in addition to the political and administrative aspects, also economic and military security. Some of the more benevolent Han rulers paid attention to the peoples' livelihood by lowering taxes, supporting irrigation works, and by encouraging agriculture and the rural handicraft industry. Since peasant rebellions were often fomented by people who were desperately poor, these positive measures that enabled the people to enjoy economic wellbeing, or at least to have means for subsistence, were no doubt helpful towards maintaining a peaceful society. When challenged by force internally, or threatened by an invading army from the outside, military strength came to the fore in ensuring the security and continuity of the dynasty. For over four hundred years, the Han dynasty - both the Western Han (202 BCE - 8 CE) and the Eastern Han (25 - 230 CE) - were sufficiently strong militarily to defeat enemies from within and beyond the empire's frontiers.

Notwithstanding such stabilizing factors, there were internal structural weaknesses and external forces that threatened the security of the Han empire. One major weakness was connected to the founder's policy of awarding large tracts of land to his relatives as their fiefdoms. The ten kingdoms thus created had the wealth and the manpower to raise armies and challenge the authority of the court. One such major challenge, known as the Seven Kingdoms Rebellion, took place early in Emperor Jing's reign (157-141 BCE). Although the

rebellion was promptly put down, it exposed a weakness in the system that remained a problem for the central authority.

Another structural weakness was related to the emperor's own household establishment. There were two groups of people close to the emperor, the centre of power. One group was the empress together with her relatives. A powerful empress could dominate a weak emperor and rule the country with her relatives placed in key posts. An emperor in his minority was especially vulnerable to being controlled by an ambitious dowager empress. Near the beginning of the Han dynasty, the founder's consort, Empress Lu, was such an example. Later, in 9 CE, an empress' nephew, Wang Mang, usurped the throne and set up a short-lived Xin dynasty (9-23 CE).

A second group that could potentially threaten the central power were the eunuchs, the castrated male servants of the emperor and his wives, who lived in their private quarters inside the palace. They were mostly from lower social classes without a Confucian-style education. Those who won the emperor's trust, or became his favourites, could use their positions in the inner court to gain enormous power and wealth through manipulation and intrigue. Some of them even became high officials. They tended to represent a corrupting influence. When a strong empress or her relatives, or a powerful eunuch, interfered too much in the affairs of the state, the dynasty could become weakened or be set on the path of decline. From the point of view of Confucian scholars, these were perennial problems of the Chinese dynastic rule, and likely contributory factors in the later stages of the dynastic cycle.

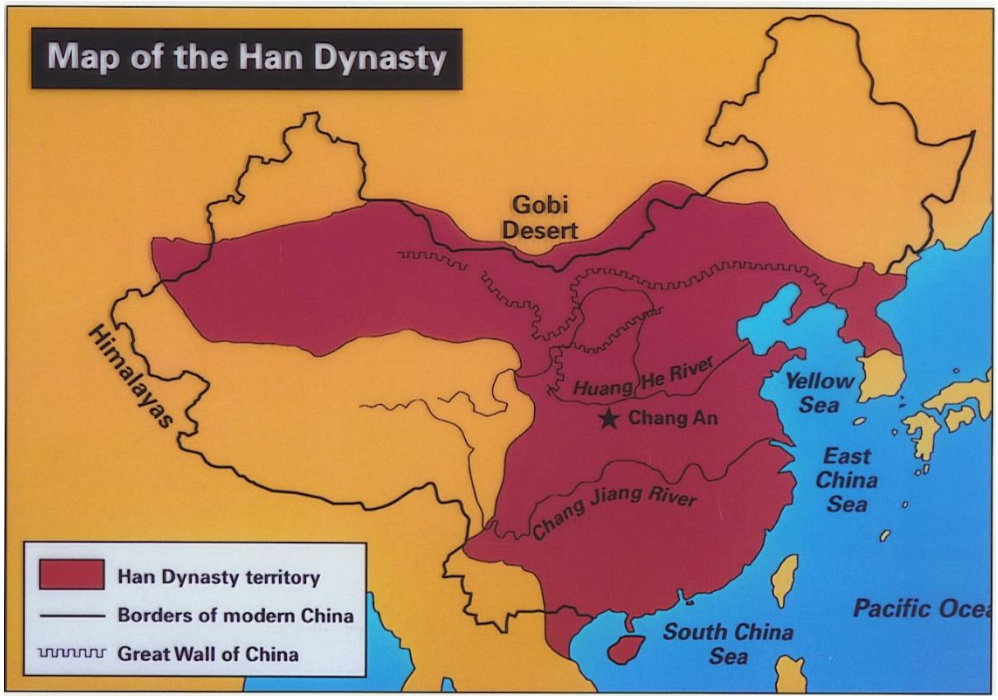
The Han ability to impose peace along its extended border survived many trials of strength during the dynasty's existence. There were challenges from two different directions at the empire's frontier: Chaoxian (or Gaoli) and Nanyue. The former was situated in today's Korean peninsula, and the latter occupied today's Guangdong and Guangxi provinces in southern China. The rulers of these regions were vassals to the Han and some of its predecessors. Should they rebel or refuse to acknowledge Chinese suzerainty, strong Chinese rulers would send punitive expeditions against them. During Emperor Wu's long reign (141-87 BCE), the Han suppressed rebellions from these regions by force and governed them as commanderies, because the two regions were ethnically non-Han. The people there were not nomadic, being sedentary farmers like Han Chinese. While Guangdong and Guangxi eventually became a part of China, Chaoxian did not. A strong central authority in China could retain Chaoxian's allegiance as a subordinate state, but it would break away when China became weak or disunited. Its people had a different ethnic identity and language from the Han Chinese. Instead of being absorbed by China, the people of Chaoxian eventually became modern Koreans.

The Han empire was particularly threatened by a Turkic tribal alliance, called the Xiongnu, who frequently raided and invaded Han territory on its north-western frontier. Several Han emperors despatched punitive military expeditions to subdue the Xiongnu with only temporary and partial success. Sometimes, the Xiongnu were able to muster a large force of several hundred thousand men, strong enough to match or outnumber the Han army gathered to fight them. With their martial habits and skilful horsemanship, they were able to score some victories against the Han. Against such a formidable foe, some Han emperors resorted to a conciliatory policy called *heqin,* 'peace and kinship'. Accordingly, Han princesses would be given in marriage to Xiongnu tribal chieftains with a dowry, lavish gifts, and concessions in trade, to secure peace with these troublesome neighbours. This approach bought peace now and again for some periods of time, but it provided no lasting solution against nomadic encroachment.

Emperor Wu, one of the most vigorous of the Han emperors, was determined to find a long-term winning strategy against the Xiongnu by combining war with diplomacy. Near the beginning of his reign, he despatched an envoy, Zhang Qian, to the western region to seek allies against the Xiongnu. During his first trip, Zhang was captured and detained by the Xiongnu for ten years, and he returned to the court having failed to find any tribal group who would join the Han to fight the Xiongnu. Undeterred, Wu sent him west for the second time. He traversed again the ancient Silk Road, this time reaching as far as Persia. From his two journeys, the information he brought back about the different lands and peoples of Central Asia enabled the Han empire to expand westward with an army across the Pamir Plateau to occupy Ferghana, where exceptional horses were bred. In parallel with the diplomatic efforts, Wu sent large armies of up to 300,000 men at a time, led by his best generals, who waged a series of victorious campaigns to remove the Xiongnu from around the Gobi Desert region. Wu's efforts curbed the Xiongnu's aggressive activities for several decades. Later, renewed Xiongnu incursions prompted other Han emperors to station troops, with military settlements, to support a Protector General to keep peace in Xiyu, or Western Territory. This region corresponds to today's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

The Han dynasty saw a further expansion of China's territory beyond what it had inherited from the Qin. The process was seldom easy. The Han might conquer and occupy neighbouring regions by force or even rule them as commanderies, but the people there were liable to rise up to throw off the Han yoke as soon as the Han court showed signs of weakness. For example, when Wang Mang usurped the Eastern Han throne to set up his own Xin Dynasty (9-23 CE), the Han Protectorate in Xiyu was lost for a time until the Western Han rulers re-conquered the territory. Neighbouring areas that favoured lasting Chinese rule were those that could sustain a sedentary agricultural economy or absorb a significant number of Chinese migrants amid a local population susceptible to Sinicization. At its greatest expanse, Han territory extended

westward to Ferghana, and eastward and southward to present-day Korea and Vietnam. These latter areas remained non-Chinese in the long run, while parts of Xiyu and Nanyue are within contemporary China.



Map of the territory of the Han dynasty (*China Mike*: retrieved on 30 November 2023 from https://www.china-mike.com/chinese-history-timeline/part-4-han-dynasty/)

After having ruled China for over four hundred years, the Han dynasty suffered a terminal decline and came to an end in 220 CE. In its final decades, the elements of instability inherent in the system came to the fore. One of these was the appearance of a separatist tendency from powerful regional authorities against a discredited centre. The court was enfeebled by factional fighting, power struggles, and intrigues among empresses, eunuchs, and their relatives and supporters amid a rapid succession of emperors too young or too weak to keep the palace in order, all compounded by insubordinate regional competitors for power.

There are parallels to be found between the Han and the Roman empires, which were comparable in size and overlapped to some extent in time. Both empires declined and disintegrated with ‘barbarian’ invasions and successor states occupying parts of the old empires. In the case of Rome, the barbarians established themselves in the western parts, while Roman rule continued in the east. In the Han case, barbarian states controlled northern China, while ethnic Han regimes ruled southern China. From the fourth century, religions of foreign origin spread like wildfire in the lands once governed by Rome and by the Han capital.

Christianity from the Middle East took firm hold in the barbarian successor states of Western Europe and in the Eastern Roman Empire. Meanwhile, Buddhism from India made enormous headway among people of all social classes in China, both in the barbarian-ruled north and in the Han-controlled south. The similarities must have been coincidences, since these empires had no direct contact or influence over one another, apart from the fact that Chinese silk found its way into Roman markets through intermediaries over the Silk Road. One difference worthy of note was that Rome's fragmentation in the west gave rise to many different nation states in Europe, whereas the barbarian dynasties in northern China voluntarily Sinicized themselves and became incorporated later into a unified Chinese state.

The Northern Wei was not the only nomad regime that willingly adopted the Chinese manner of government. For example, the Western Wei (535-557 CE) and the Northern Zhou (557-581 CE) used the Han *fubing* system of dividing the country into cantons, each populated by farmers-cum-soldiers, who were exempt from taxes but obligated to fight for the state when needed. One might ask: why did they follow the Chinese way so willingly? The nomad rulers must have realized that they were called upon to govern a region with a sedentary agricultural economy different from their own, and that they had little experience in so doing. On the contrary, the Chinese in northern China had, over the centuries, developed a demonstrably successful model for ruling such a land. The nomads therefore adopted the Chinese model and employed Chinese officials to help them create Confucian governments. Although the Chinese did not espouse a martial way of life, many Chinese people in the north were seasoned enough at warfare, due to frequent military combats, to have earned the respect of the more militaristic steppe people. Perhaps the prestige associated with the material and cultural attainments of the Chinese was sufficiently strong to attract these border people to join with the Chinese, rather than retain their separate identity. Intermarriage between the nomad and Chinese aristocratic families led to a situation where the ruling houses of three important dynasties, the Sui, the Tang, and the Song, which later controlled the whole or a major part of China, came from a mixed nomad-Chinese background.

At this point one might ask: why was it that the disintegrated Han empire did not remain in a permanent state of fragmentation like that of the Roman empire after its break-up in the West? Rome started its expansionist career through military conquest as a city-state with the characteristic limits in territory and population of such a city-state, and within a few hundred years it came to rule a vast empire of alien lands and large groups of heterogeneous peoples. Unlike Rome, the Chinese expanded from a much larger and more populous core area, the North China plain, Zhongyuan, which had a history dating back to antiquity. By the time of the Qin-Han unifications, the Chinese had had two thousand years of accumulated experience in developing relatively sophisticated political institutions and infrastructures to govern distant regions from

their ancient power base, where they also developed the art of war. During this long period, the people of the Chinese empire had much time to assimilate the culture of the ruling elites, and to become more homogeneous. The Qin-Han unifications demonstrated the potential for China to exist as a single stable political entity covering a far greater area than its ancient heartland, over an extended period of time. After the Han, a unified China, *tongyi,* was generally regarded as the norm, although periodically the unity could not be sustained. During a period of disunion, a state of war would normally prevail in China, because tension and military conflicts usually arose among the warlords or successor states that followed the dismemberment of the empire. Towards the end of such struggles, a winner would emerge, who would have defeated all his competitors for power and would claim to be the new Son of Heaven, at the head of a new dynasty with the Mandate of Heaven to rule the whole of China.

Short-lived Dynasties and the Great Disunion (220 - 589 CE)

After losing its mandate, the Han dynasty was succeeded by three regional powers: the kingdoms of Wei, Shu, and Wu (220 – 280 CE). The head of the Wei, Cao Cao, was portrayed in the Chinese classic, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms,* as someone who practised Machiavellian statecraft. He had a eunuch connection at the Han court, and from the position of prime minister, he dominated and controlled the last Han emperor, Xian (r. 189-220 CE). The Wei dynasty proclaimed by Cao Cao's heirs effectively took over from the Han the old Eastern Han capital of Luoyang, and its surrounding areas in North China along the Yellow River. The Kingdom of Shu in southwestern China (today's Sichuan) was created by Liu Bei, who possessed an aura of legitimacy through being a descendant, though a fairly distant one, of the founder of the Western Han. The Wu was led by Sun Quan, an aristocratic general, who controlled the lower Yangtze region in southeastern China. For sixty years, these kingdoms were incessantly at war with each other until the demise of the Shu in 263 CE, the Wei in 265 CE and the Wu in 280 CE. The Jin dynasty founded in 265 CE by Sima Yan, a Wei General who usurped the Wei throne, ruled over a once more united China, but not for long.

Early in the Jin dynasty, there was already much evidence of a serious power struggle and intrigue inside the palace, an element of instability that had undermined the Han dynasty. In 316 CE, the Xiongnu overran the Jin capital of Luoyang and the court fled to Jiankang (present-day Nanjing) in southeast China, where an Eastern Jin dynasty with its capital at Jiankang was established in 317 CE. Its predecessor from Luoyang came to be known as the Western Jin dynasty in Chinese historical chronicles. The Eastern Jin ruled southern China for over one hundred years from 317 CE to 420 CE.

Meanwhile, northern China fell into the hands of various nomadic tribal invaders with the Xiongnu as only one such among other major tribal and ethnic groups. These included the Xianbei, (proto-Mongol), the Qiang (proto-Tibetan), the Jurchen (proto-Manchu), the Liao and the Di (Mongol), and the Tuoba (Turks). When they settled and ruled northern China, they became rapidly Sinicized. Leaders of these tribes established a succession of Chinese-style dynasties with reign titles. They adopted Chinese political institutions and governed with the support of Chinese ministers. These regimes were relatively unstable: many of them did not last more than three decades and did not rule northern China entirely. This period, from 304 to 439 CE, was known as the Sixteen Kingdoms in northern China, while the Eastern Jin ruled southern China.

In 420 CE, the Liu Song dynasty took over from the Eastern Jin dynasty in the south. From then on for 169 years, southern China, ruled by ethnic Chinese, was also characterized by political instability. Three different dynasties succeeded the Song, each lasting only a few decades.

When south China was troubled by the conflicts accompanying the rapid turnover of ruling houses, the political situation in north China became more settled with the ascendancy of the Tuoba Turks, who brought the whole of north China under their sway by military conquest. The Northern Wei dynasty (386-534 CE), which they created, chose to submerge their own language and customs, and embrace the Chinese way of life instead. They encouraged inter-marriage with the Chinese, and the use of Chinese language, even to the extent of adopting Chinese names. They provided leadership in managing the country's agriculture-based economy. To stimulate farm production and increase revenue from taxes, a Northern Wei emperor, Xiaowen (r. 471-499 CE), carried out a programme of land redistribution that was modelled on the 'equal field' system used in late Western Han. Remarkably, the Northern Wei dynasty survived for 148 years during this age of turmoil.

Political chaos and internecine wars lasted for more than three centuries (220-589 CE), a time characterized by Chinese historians as the Period of Great Disunion. We will witness China breaking down into warring regional political entities again, but not for quite as long. The political cohesion of the country depended not just on the state, but also on the society. There were regional differences between different parts of China in the culture, history, and ethnic origin of the people and in the physical environment, leading to differences in the economy. A united China with a high degree of cohesion, particularly as the territory controlled by the dynasties in China expanded, was a developing process that took a long time in the making. Factors contributing to this process included the Sinicization of non-Chinese peoples, the Qin-Han

policy of settling Chinese in military colonies on the frontiers, and the institutions devised by various dynastic central authorities, refined over the centuries, to govern and control the far-flung regions. The frequent invasion of the nomadic tribes after the collapse of the Han dynasty led to significant population movement of Han Chinese from north China to the south. As mentioned previously, the court of the Jin dynasty fled south when the Xiongnu took Luoyang and re-established itself in a new capital at Jiankang. Many northern Chinese aristocratic families also moved south, inserting themselves into south China as an upper-class ruling elite.

For nearly two hundred years during the Great Disunion, there was a clear political division between north and south China with the Huai River as the line of demarcation. This was the time of the Northern and Southern dynasties. The Northern dynasties, with rulers of nomadic tribal origin, occupied the Yellow River basin region that contained the North China plain, the core area of the ancient Three Dynasties which had achieved cultural and political dominance. The Southern dynasties, which began with the migrant Eastern Jin, controlled the Yangtze River basin, a more sparsely settled area with the local population made up of various semi-Sinicized tribal groups with their own language and customs. The agricultural economy of the warm and watery south was based on rice, whereas millet and wheat were the northern staples. The regional differences tended to undermine political unity, unless a strong regime ruling from north China managed to keep a firm grip on the south. For decades during the time of disunion, the more militaristic Northern dynasties were too devastated to conquer the prosperous and politically more tranquil south. In 383 CE when the Northern Qian Qin emperor, Fu Jian, attempted to invade Eastern Jin with a massive cavalry force, he was resoundingly defeated by the far smaller force of his southern adversaries, who were fighting for survival. This won the Southern dynasties a respite from Northern aggression until 581 CE, when the Sui dynasty, starting from the north, united China once more.

The Sui Dynasty (581 CE – 618 CE)

The post-Han armed struggle for ascendancy lasted well over three centuries. The length of this interregnum may be attributed to the fact that north China sustained much economic damage and population loss from the unprecedented waves of invasion of different nomadic tribes, in addition to natural disasters and civil wars among the Chinese themselves. The population loss was not simply due to mortality caused by those events; they also triggered large-scale internal migrations of the Han Chinese who fled *en masse* from north China to areas south of the Yangtze River. Many great northern aristocratic families, *men di*, together with

other bearers of the Han Chinese culture, also uprooted themselves and went south. These movements contributed to the increase in agricultural production south of the Yangtze and helped to Sinicize non-Han ethnic groups in southern China.

The relative peace and prosperity enjoyed by the southern dynasties did not incline them to invade north China, from where the winners of contests for supreme power in China appeared to have originated so far. Surrounded by warlike nomadic tribes to the north, northeast and northwest, Chinese rulers with their capitals situated traditionally in this region were obliged to develop strong military forces and be prepared to defend their territory against frequent tribal incursions. The north China plain had been the scene of much large-scale warfare. During the period of the Great Disunion, Chinese rule in the north succumbed to the more militaristic nomadic tribal leaders, many of whom, as we have seen, chose to adopt Han Chinese culture and style of government. This marriage of nomad military vigour with Chinese statecraft bore fruit.

The unification of China that ended the absence of central authority did indeed come from north China. After this region had sufficiently recovered from the ill effects of the wars and disorder, all that was needed was the emergence of a capable and ambitious leader from a powerful northern dynasty, who was able to mobilize massively the economic and human resources of this region to embark on a war of conquest of rival regimes, both north and south. Yang Jian, the product of the successful union of a Chinese aristocratic family from the ancient Chinese heartland and a leading nomad clan, was such a leader. As a senior military commander of Northern Zhou, the last of the northern dynasties, he led victorious military campaigns that destroyed Northern Zhou's competitors in the north before he usurped the throne and founded the Sui dynasty in 581 CE, as Emperor Wen. In 589 CE, his army brought about the demise of the Chen, the last of the southern dynasties. The Sui dynasty (581-618 CE) brought an end to the relatively long period of strife that characterized the Great Disunion, and restored peace to a once more unified empire, encompassing the large territories of what were the northern and southern dynasties.

Wen's ambition to rule the united empire was matched by a capacity for the role. In the areas of government administration, he pursued an innovative approach while seeking inspiration from the past. He re-invigorated the use of the examination system for official recruitment. His methodically structured central government with separate ministries and well-defined functions has a modern ring. This system stood the test of time as it was adopted by later dynasties, many of which also continued to use the preventive measures against corruption that Wen introduced. In consideration of the people's livelihood and government revenue, he fostered agriculture and re-instated the 'equal field' system of land tenure that had been used in the more distant past. Having the resources of the entire country at his command, he embarked on many major public works, among which were the rebuilding of both the capitals at Chang'an and Luoyang. Between these great cities, huge granaries were constructed. To keep the nomad raiders out, the

Great Wall was further extended. Despite funding such a major public works programme and absorbing the expenses of a strong military stance against insubordinate frontier states, he managed to reduce taxes, and his reign left a legacy of economic prosperity and full granaries to his successor.

Map of the territory of the Sui Dynasty (*Wikipedia:* retrieved on 8 April 2024 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sui_dynasty#/media/File:Cheui_Dynasty_581_CE.png)

Emperor Yang (r. 604-618 CE), who ascended to the throne following a succession dispute, pursued public works with even more enthusiasm. He was faulted by future generations for lavishing enormous expense on building luxurious palaces and enormous parks for his personal pleasure, and for his megalomaniacal display of power and grandeur. Yang was compared with the first emperor of Qin for making excessive demands on the resources of the country for gigantic construction schemes and military campaigns. As the Qin emperor was remembered for connecting and extending the ancient Great Wall, Yang's monument was the Grand Canal, a premodern feat of water engineering. The Sui Grand Canal was approximately 1,750 kilometres long and 40 metres wide, with an imperial road running parallel to it. There were also imperial resting places and relay-post stations liberally dotted along it. It started at Hangzhou in southeast China, traversing in a northeast direction and crossing the Yangtze River to reach the prosperous city of Yangzhou. From there it headed north to Kaifeng and the region of Luoyang, Sui's eastern capital. Then it continued on to Chang'an, the western capital, before eventually turning northeast to end at Beijing.

Constructing such a canal was only conceivable in a unified China. A principal driving force behind this project was to enable the politically dominant north to exploit the rich economic resources of the south, grain in particular, to support the large population in the region of the two capitals and beyond. Between these populous cities, huge granaries were located, with a capacity for storing 33 million bushels of grain. While north China was suitable for farming cereals, such as wheat, millet, and barley on dry fields, south China's warm climate and water-rich environment lent itself to wet rice farming. During the three centuries preceding the Sui unification, the economy of the region of the Yangtze estuary and plain had developed rapidly, largely as a result of the mass movement of people from north China into this area. Many had been displaced by wars and included families of the vanquished ruling elite. The Grand Canal was of vital importance for the shipment of grain from the abundant rice-producing regions in south China to support the capitals and the troops at the frontiers. In addition to rice, much silk, salt, and tea was produced in south China, and these too were transported along the Grand Canal to the north and from there via the Silk Road to foreign countries in the west. This man-made waterway, together with the lakes and rivers it incorporated on its way, formed a vital economic artery between northern and southern China.

The re-establishment of a strong central authority in China usually signalled a re-adjustment of its relationships with the neighbouring countries. The states that had been willing to pay homage to the Son of Heaven in this East Asian 'Universal Empire', or accept the status of being his vassals, tended to break away from the Chinese orbit when the empire became weakened or fell apart. Faced with the challenge of re-asserting Chinese control of the once submissive frontier regions, the two Sui emperors forced the tribal regimes in the northwest and in the extreme south to return to the Chinese fold. Emperor Yang, for example, despatched troops to Liuqiu to subdue this island. Neither of them succeeded in imposing Sui suzerainty over Gaoli (Korea), however, though military forces as large as a million men were massed for this purpose.

Like the first emperor of the Qin, Emperor Yang's overambitious construction projects and military campaigns, particularly the failed military efforts to subdue Gaoli, severely strained the human resources of the country, and consequently peasant uprisings and aristocratic rebellions spread rapidly, leading to the rapid decline of his reign, and with it the Sui dynasty. Among the rebels was a commander of Yang's army, Li Yuan, who marched into the capital Chang'an and forced Yang to abdicate in 618 CE. In that year, Li Yuan installed himself as the head of a new dynasty, the Tang.

The Tang Dynasty (618 - 907 CE)

Like the Sui rulers, Li Yuan and his successor, Li Shimin, were descended from a similar north China mixed lineage of Chinese aristocratic and nomad clans, and were well equipped to fight and to govern. Unlike the long hiatus in central authority between the Han and the Sui, the transition between Sui and Tang was brief, more like a succession within the same ruling house than a transfer of power from one to another. At its beginning, the newly proclaimed Tang dynasty did not remain unchallenged by other contenders for supreme power, but within seven years, Li Shimin defeated all his rivals and consolidated Tang power in a once more united empire.

The Tang dynasty started with many advantages: two magnificent refurbished capitals, the Grand Canal, and a unified empire – all its predecessor's achievements. Capping this promising beginning, Li Shimin, the second Tang emperor with the reign title of Taizong (r. 626-649), turned out to be a strong ruler. As regards government institutions, he had already inherited a relatively mature and finely tuned instrument for central and regional government. With the help of a group of distinguished advisors, he modified and re-organized both the central and regional governments to tailor them into even more effective instruments for his purposes, and for the needs of his time. Schools and academies of different levels were set up in provincial cities and at the capital, to train potential civil servants in the Confucian classics for entering government service. A comprehensive code of law laying down the penalties covering various types of offences was compiled and twice revised during his reign. On the economic front, he adopted a system of equal distribution of plots of land *(juntian*) to peasants, with life-tenure, to enable them to support themselves and to pay taxes and render labour services to the state. On military matters, he enlarged the *fubing* system of militias used in the Northern Zhou (557-581 CE) to include not just professional military families but also peasant recruits. Those who served in the militia enjoyed tax exemption, but they had to provide their own food and military equipment. Since horses played a vital part in any military conflict with the people of the steppes, the Tang set aside large pastures for stud-farms, and went into horse breeding in a serious way, raising as many as 700,000 horses in the middle of the seventh century, before nomad incursions made it very difficult for the Chinese to continue to do so.

With the empire internally at peace and well-ordered, the early Tang rulers, Taizong and his successor Gaozong (r. 649-683 CE), had the economic strength, political power, and military preparedness to take a strong position towards the border states, particularly the different nomadic tribal powers formed in the north, northeast, and northwest of the empire, where incursions often occurred. The Turks, who founded empires of the steppes in northwest China and Central Asia during the middle of the sixth century, were especially menacing to the Tang around this time. Between 629 and 630 CE, the Tang forces defeated the Eastern Turks, and other nomadic tribal armies that threatened the Tang's security or that of its allies or protectorates. The Chinese drive secured the trade and communication of oasis towns and cities along the

Silk Road, and it had such a momentum that the Tang military and political presence was felt on the far side of the Pamirs in Central Asia, all the way to Persia. When the powerful kingdom of Tibet sent a force to invade a Chinese-pacified nomad area, the Tang stopped its advance. Good neighbourly relationships were restored when Taizong accepted the marriage proposal of the Tibetan king to a Tang princess in 641 CE. The marriage of King Songtsen Gampo and Princess Wencheng was a success, since it brought peace between the two empires for a while, and it facilitated the transfer of Chinese knowledge and technology to Tibet. Tang miliary prowess brought Manchuria, the Korean peninsula, and northern Vietnam under Chinese control. This vast territory conquered by force was organized into six military protectorates, *Duhu Fu*. These were Anxi (in modern-day Kansu), Annan (northern Vietnam), Andong (northeastern China and Korea), Anbei (in northwestern Ordos), Beiting (Urumqi) and Shanyu (northeastern Ordos). The extensive military thrusts supported by administrative organization and diplomatic activities during the seventh and the first half of the eighth century made Tang China the greatest power in Asia, meeting and halting the eastward Arab advance during that time.

Map of the territory of the Tang dynasty (*Wikipedia*: retrieved on 8 April 2024 from https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Tang_Empire_and_its_Protectorates_circa_660_CE.png)

The Tang expansion into Central Asia secured the commercial and communication links between East Asia and this region, facilitating the two-way exchange of goods and cultural influences between east and west. The seventh century Tang capital at Chang'an was a grand cosmopolitan city without peer. Among its two

million inhabitants, half of whom lived outside the city wall, there were foreigners from Central Asia and many other lands, including Persians, Sogdians, Indians, Arabs, Jews, Nestorian Christians, and Japanese, bringing with them foreign produce, arts, and religions.

Buddhism in early China

The foreign import that had the greatest impact on China was Buddhism from India. Its introduction to China around the beginning of the Christian era was closely linked with foreign mercantile activities. Foreign merchants brought Buddhism to China through two types of trade routes. One was the Central Asian oasis overland route, and the other the Indo-Iranian Sea route from the Indian Ocean around Southeast Asia to China. According to Chinese records, by 65 CE a Buddhist community existed in northern Jiangsu. Two centuries later, the influence of Buddhism in China was still hardly noticeable. During the third and fourth centuries, Buddhist texts translated by bilingual monks of Central Asian origin caught the attention of some Chinese upper-class circles in the Southern Dynasties, as they found certain philosophical ideas in Buddhism corresponded with their own Taoist world view. In northern China, several rulers of nomad origin became believers and offered patronage to Buddhist monks. Some Taoists became interested in Buddhism because of its practice of meditation and yoga. After a slow start and a longish period of gestation, during which better and fuller translations and interpretations of Buddhist texts became available, Buddhism began to take China by storm during the fifth century. From then onwards until the middle of the ninth century, it grew into the dominant religious force in Chinese life, at times over-shadowing Coinfucianism.

Figure of the Maitreya Buddha, Dunhuang caves (c. 400 CE) (*Vision Times*: retrieved on 30 November 2023 from https://www.visiontimes.com/2022/11/13/dunhuang-caves-earthly-glimpse-otherworldly-realms.html)

Around the middle of the fifth century, Buddhism became virtually a state religion in the Northern Wei dynasty through its rulers' enthusiastic support. Court patronage led to a situation where Buddhist institutions, such as monasteries, temples, schools, great shrines carved into rocks, and lay communities, flourished near the capital, which was first at Datong and later at Luoyang. In southern China, it grew at first through the leadership of scholarly monks and the support of aristocratic converts. As a result, the centres of Buddhist activities were not concentrated at the sites of one or two capital cities but were more scattered. Because of the largesse of rich and powerful patrons, Buddhist monasteries and lay communities became owners of large estates that were governed by their own rules and were exempt from the taxes, labour, and military services normally imposed by the state. Their autonomy extended to being free from the application of the State's penal code. During the high tide of Buddhist religious fervour, there were many pilgrimages by Chinese monks, who undertook the arduous journey through the Central Asian oases to Kashmir and India (though some took the sea route), to learn from Indian masters and to obtain Buddhist scriptural texts. 'New Translations', *xinyi*, made in the Tang dynasty, were carried out as teamwork with division of labour and careful checking to exacting standards, and these were accompanied by voluminous bibliographical catalogues.

The appeal of Buddhism was not limited to the rulers and the elite of the society. As a religion of universal salvation, it had mass appeal. The Buddhism that had taken hold in China had already undergone a process of adaptation to, and assimilation of, Chinese traditional ideas, morality, and ways of worship. The translation of the texts itself unavoidably gave rise to a certain amount of Sinicization. Its attraction to the Chinese was not that it was foreign, but that it contained elements that resonated with and echoed what was already familiar and understood by the Chinese. The foreign elements that succeeded in inserting themselves into Chinese Buddhism were accepted as sources of enrichment, rather than as upsetting or unsettling influences. For example, the worship of ancestors and the Earth God could easily accommodate the worship of the Buddhist pantheon of the Bodhisattvas and Buddhas. There was no need for them to be mutually exclusive. The Buddhism that conquered China was an amalgam of Chinese and foreign religious ideas and practices, a syncretistic product also containing elements of Taoism and Confucianism. As a result, Buddhism existed, on the whole, peacefully in China, alongside local religions like Taoism and philosophical schools like Confucianism.

The enormous success of Buddhism during the height of its popularity in China probably contributed to its undoing. Apart from suppression by the government of peasant rebellions marching under the banners of

religious cults, traditional China was relatively free from wars over religious differences[2]. There had not been any war between the adherents of Taoism and Buddhism, but rivalry between these two groups existed. Taoist jealousy of the wealth, power, and privileges of the Buddhist church, led to two instances of persecution of the Buddhists by certain monarchs in northern China. In any case, the expansion of the autonomous Buddhist religious community that deprived the state of taxation and jurisdiction was bound to come into conflict with the interest of the state. Under the Tang dynasty, the revived imperial bureaucracy, whose education was cast in the Confucian mould, moved to bring the Buddhist church under firm state control through administrative regulations. For example, the government took over the function of the issue of ordination certificates. For a monk to be ordained, he would need to be educated well enough to pass examinations not only on Buddhist canons but also on Confucian classics. During the ninth century, particularly around the time of the well-remembered persecution in 842-845 CE, the Tang authorities made attempts to reduce and restrict the amount of property held by Buddhist churches, as well as the number of monks, some of whom were forced to return to the laity. Buddhism's foreign origin did not help its cause when society's mood that had earlier been receptive to foreign influences instead turned antipathetic. In general, without a centralized state-wide organization (or large regional ones), supported by an active and politicized lay congregation, neither the Buddhist nor the Taoist churches could mount a substantial challenge to the authority of the state. Not surprisingly, the kind of struggle for power between Church and State known in Western Christendom did not occur in China. Buddhist and Taoist temples and priesthoods existed as local religious expressions in China, and they depended on the support of the local communities; they lacked the capacity to challenge the authority of the ruling government.

The persecutions, particularly the 842-845 CE proscription under the Tang, undermined the autonomy of the Buddhist religious institutions and its free expansion in China. From the middle of the ninth century onwards, the Buddhist fervour subsided in China, but that was not entirely or even largely due to the temporary expression of official hostility. The political, social, and economic situation that favoured the reception, adoption, and expansion of this religion of foreign origin in Chinese life from the fifth to the ninth centuries, had changed so much that the social fabric which had helped Buddhism spread had become weakened. However, it was not going to vanish from the Chinese scene. The Buddhism that had undergone transformation in China had also transformed China itself permanently and was there to stay. This religion had important effects on many aspects of Chinese life: social, political, economic, and cultural. The Chinese landscape had been changed by the presence of Buddhist temples, pagodas, and statues, large and small, carved out of rocks, and by religious wall paintings in rocky grottoes or shrines. It was a source of

[2] The nineteenth century Taiping Rebellion based on a Christian cult might be considered an exception, though the rebellion was not entirely motivated by religion.

enrichment that exercised a profound influence on Chinese literature, art, and artistic sensibility, as well as on the Chinese worldview as embodied in a new kind of Confucianism developed in a later period. Its religious ideas and practices inspired the development of the Taoist churches and the pantheon of Taoist deities. It promoted charitable activities of a more public and universalistic kind outside the close family network. Its beliefs and moral precepts modified peoples' behaviour and even their dietary habits: for example, some people practised fasting, or avoided eating animal products at certain periods, or became entirely vegetarians.

At a time when the Buddhist influence was still strong during the Tang dynasty, Empress Wu Zetian, the wife of the third Tang emperor Gaozong (r. 649-683 CE), made herself the sovereign ruler of a new dynasty called the Zhou, a few years after her husband's death. In a male dominated society such as China, a strong empress had been known to exercise power through her husband or her son, as dowager empress. Empress Zetian's reign (690-705 CE) was unprecedented, and no woman ever ruled as emperor in China again. She was a devout Buddhist and a great benefactress of the Buddhist church. Besides her extraordinary political skill, her cause must have been helped by the Buddhist prediction that she was a reincarnation of the Bodhisattva Maitreya and was destined to be emperor. Zetian's claim of divine origin is reminiscent of Hatshepsut (r. 1478/9 – 1458 BCE), ancient Egypt's only female pharaoh, who also claimed divine ancestry to support her right to rule. During Empress Zetian's reign, and even before she assumed formal control, she endeavoured to destroy the power of the north-western aristocracy, which together with the royal Li clan had managed the affairs of the Tang empire from its beginning; many of them were executed under her orders. She gave more opportunity for the elite families of the old North China plain to participate in government, and she revitalized and reorganized the examination system for entry into government service.

The later Tang, An Lushan Rebellion, and the fall of the Tang

After Empress Zetian's death, the Tang dynasty was restored in 705 by her son Zhongzong (r.705-710 CE), who was soon murdered by his consort, Empress Wei. Fortunately for the Tang, Emperor Xuanzong (r.712-756 CE), who killed Empress Wei and took over the throne from his father, was an able monarch. He energetically and effectively put the affairs of the government in good order, and was popularly acclaimed as the Brilliant Emperor, Ming Huang[3]. For nearly half a century he presided cover the 'golden age' of the Tang dynasty. Tang China's prestige and influence in Asia reached its peak. It was a period of relative

[3] The Chinese character Ming, as in the Ming dynasty, can also be translated as 'enlightened'.

peace and prosperity. The highly accomplished Tang works in scholarship, art, and literature, poetry in particular, greatly enriched the Chinese culture.

Tang dynasty glazed earthenware camel. Courtesy of the Asian Art Museum, The Avery Brundage Collection.

(*Khan Academy*: retrieved on 8 April 2024 from https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/imperial-china/tang-dynasty/a/an-introduction-to-the-tang-dynasty-618906)

During Xuanzong's long reign, serious societal changes had taken place, and a re-organization of the military system became necessary. The military aristocracy and the conscripted *fubing* militia had combined successfully to enable the Tang dynasty to become a formidable military power and carve out the greatest empire in Asia during the seventh century. But the aristocracy had settled into a long-term decline and the *fubing* militia could no longer be relied upon to defend the realm. To remedy the situation, the frontiers were divided into military regions guarded by military governors or generals, each commanding a professional fighting force of mercenary soldiers. This system was not without shortcomings, partly because of its high cost, but more importantly because of the enormous power of the generals, who could act independently of, or even become a threat to, the central government.

By the middle of the eighth century, the emperor in his twilight years fell in love with a beautiful young imperial concubine Yang Guifei, and became engrossed in amorous activities with her rather than attending

to state affairs. There was a disastrous competition for the prime ministership between Yang Guozhong, a powerful cousin of Yang Guifei, and the ambitious Sogdian general, An Lushan, a favourite of the emperor and of Yang Guifei. An Lushan was made the military governor of three frontier regions, with a large army under his control. When Yang Guozhong became the prime minister, An Lushan marched with 150,000 troops to capture Chang'an, causing the emperor and his court to flee from the capital. The rebellion started by An Lushan in 755 CE devastated the country before it finally ended in 763 CE. The Tang dynasty never fully recovered from this severe blow.

Even before the rebellion, troubles on the frontiers were already brewing. In 751 CE, defeat by the advancing Arabs forced the Tang to relinquish control of the Pamirs and territory further to the west. During the second half of the eighth century, the kingdom of Silla in Korea in the northeast declared itself independent of the Tang, and in the southwest, the kingdom of Nanchao in present-day Yunnan extracted territorial concessions and the control of communication lines to Vietnam from China. Meanwhile, the Tibetans were advancing into the western part of the empire, and periodically their forces threatened Chang'an. With the growing powers of the semi-nomadic Uyghur Turks in the northwest, and with the Arabs controlling the Kashgar region, the territories west of the Yumen Pass were lost to the Tang. The high tide of Tang Chinese expansion that began in 630 CE receded by the middle of the eighth century, and the empire was rolled back from its outlying regions.

The Tang dynasty limped on after these setbacks and continued to provide the political superstructure over a Chinese society that was undergoing momentous changes underneath it. One of these changes was the shift of the economic centre of gravity from the dry farming (wheat, millet, and barley) of the north China plain to the wet rice farming of the Yangtze basin. The waves of southward migration that had started during the period of the Great Disunion contributed to this change and produced by late Tang a shift in the centre of gravity of the population to south China. The equal-field system used in early Tang to provide the farmers with land and the government with taxes became increasing untenable, particularly in the rice growing regions. In recognition of this reality, in 780 CE the Tang government overhauled its policy on taxation from taxing the person (as was used in all the preceding dynasties) to taxing the land. Subsequent dynasties also adopted this fiscal approach.

Another significant change was the decline of the endogamous aristocracy, which constituted the ruling elite, meaning the people of a particular social stratum who served as government officials under a given dynasty. In imperial China power, wealth, and high social standing were normally associated with being in the service of the government. Although members of this group were mostly not hereditary nobles as under the pre-Qin feudalism, a way had been found to perpetuate their privileged position in society that lasted several hundred years, going back to the Northern and Southern dynasties in the fourth century, and through

to the Sui-Tang unification and beyond. These dynasties kept lists of great families or lineages, nomad clans included, from whose ranks government officials were chosen. These lineages made marriage alliances within their own narrow circles and networked with one another politically. The Tang founders remade the lists in favour of the mixed nomad-Chinese aristocracy of the northwest, like themselves. Among these illustrious lineages, the imperial Li clan stood out as *primus inter pares*. Empress Wu decimated the aristocratic clans of the northwest and advanced the interests of the old Chinese families of the northeast. She also strengthened the system of official selection through examination. Although the examination provided some opportunities for ambitious outsiders to rise socially, most of the officials came nevertheless from the long-established office-holding lineages. Because of the Chinese practice of partible inheritance (division of an estate among all the male heirs, as opposed to primogeniture) members of these families needed to enter and re-enter government service without long generation gaps if they were to maintain their high social and economic positions.

After An Lushan's rebellion, from the middle of the eighth century, certain events and developments militated against the interest of this upper-class society, making it very difficult for them to keep their social and economic ascendancy. One was the division of the country into many military regions, not just at the frontier, but also into the interior. This was the policy adopted by the weakened court for the sake of maintaining order and security, but a high price had to be paid for it. These regional military governors, who controlled their own troops and revenue from taxes, became increasingly independent of the centre. Although the succession of the Tang emperors in Chang'an took place as usual for another one hundred and fifty years, the court could only control a small sector of the country, which, in addition to the region around the capital, fortunately included the rich rice-producing lower Yangtze and Huai River basins. As time went on the country became more militarized and regionalized. The military governors were likely to have been self-made militarists (rather than central appointees), who rose to the top because they had proved themselves in the arena of war and had the loyalty and support of their troops. They ruled their regions with a high degree of autonomy, organized their own civilian administration, and used local staff. This development greatly reduced the career opportunities of the aristocratic lineages, whose declining fortunes reflected the dwindling power of the court. Furthermore, these once powerful and wealthy clans were not spared the effects of the devastating civil disorder caused by a savage itinerant rebellion led by a bandit chief named Huang Chao. From 875 to 884 CE, his horde of outlaws raged up and down the empire, plundering, pillaging, and wreaking havoc in their wake. The trail of destruction covered the areas in and around the two capitals, Chang'an and Luoyang, where many of the estates of the aristocratic families were located. Finally, in 907 CE, a military governor, who was a former rebel himself, ended the Tang Dynasty

officially by setting himself up as the emperor of the Later Liang, with its capital at Kaifeng, in the province of Henan. The fall of the Tang brought the Chinese aristocratic era to a close.

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