**4. THE HAN EMPIRE (202 BC-AD 220)**

The four-century-long Han rule is divided into two periods: the Earlier or Western Han and the Later or Eastern Han. In between these two was the short-lived Hsin Dynasty (AD 9-23).

**Earlier (Western) Han (202 BC-AD 9)**.

The Han Kao Tsu preserved many features of the Ch'in imperial system, such as the administrative division of the country and the central bureaucracy. But the Han rulers lifted the Ch'in ban on philosophical and historical writings. Han Kao Tsu called for the services of men of talent, not only to restore the destroyed classics but to serve as officials in the government. From that time, the Chinese Empire was governed by a body of officials theoretically selected on merit. Such a practice has few parallels elsewhere at this early date in human history.

In 124 BC, during the reign of Wu Ti (140-87, the Martial Emperor), an imperial university was set up for the study of Confucian classics. The university recruited talented students, and the state supported them. Starting with 50 when the university first opened, the number of government-supported students reached 30,000 by the end of the Han Dynasty. Emperor Wu also established Confucianism as the official doctrine of the state. This designation lasted until the end of the Chinese Empire.

The Early Han faced two major difficulties: invasions by the barbarian Huns and the influence of the imperial consort families. In the Han Dynasty, the Huns (known as Hsiung-nu by the Chinese) threatened the expanding Chinese Empire from the north. Starting in Wu Ti's reign, costly, almost century-long campaigns had to be carried out to establish Chinese sovereignty along the northern and northwestern borders. Wu Ti also waged aggressive campaigns to incorporate northern Korea in 108 BC and northern Annam in 111 BC into the Han empire. The Early Han's other difficulty started soon after the first emperor's death. The widowed Empress Lu dominated politics and almost succeeded in taking the throne for her family. Thereafter, families of the empresses exerted great political influence. In AD 9 Wang Mang, a nephew of the empress, seized the throne and founded a new dynasty of Hsin.

Wang Mang's overambitious reform program alienated him from the landlords. At the same time the peasants, disappointed with Wang's inability to push through the reform, rose in rebellion. In AD 17 a rebel group in Shandong painted their faces red (hence their name, Red Eyebrows) and adopted religious symbols, a practice later repeated by peasants who rebelled in times of extreme difficulty. Wang Mang's force was defeated, and he was killed in AD 23.

**Later (Eastern) Han (AD 23-220)**.

The new ruler who restored peace and order was a member of the house of Han, the original Liu family. His title was Kuang Wu Ti, "Shining Martial Emperor," from AD 25 to 57. During the Later Han, which lasted another 200 years, a concerted but unsuccessful effort was made to restore the glory of the former Han. The Later Han scored considerable success in recovering lost territories, however. Sent to befriend the tribes on the northwestern frontier in AD 73, a great diplomat-general, Pan Ch'ao, eventually led an army of 70,000 almost to the borders of eastern Europe. Pan Ch'ao returned to China in 101 and brought back information about the Roman Empire. The Romans also knew about China, but they thought of it only as the land where silk was produced.

The Later Han period was particularly plagued with evils caused by eunuchs, castrated males recruited from the lower classes to serve as bodyguards for the imperial harem. Coming from uneducated and poor backgrounds, they were ruthlessly ambitious once they were placed within reach of power. Toward the end of the Later Han, power struggles between the eunuchs and the landlord-officials were prolonged and destructive. Peasant rebellions of the Taoist-leaning Yellow Turbans in 184 and the Five Pecks of Rice in 190 led to the rise of generals who massacred over 2,000 eunuchs, destroyed the capital, and one after another became dictators. By 207 General Ts'ao Ts'ao had emerged as dictator in the north. When he died in 220 his son removed the powerless emperor and established the kingdom of Wei. The Eastern Han came to an end, and the empire was divided into the three kingdoms of Wei, Shu Han, and Wu. The pattern of the rise and fall of Han was to be repeated in later periods. This characteristic came to be known as the dynastic cycle.

**Han culture.**

The Chinese show their pride in Han accomplishments by calling themselves the Han people. Philosophies and institutions that began in the Chou and Ch'in periods reached maturity under the Han. During Han times, the Chinese distinguished themselves in making scientific discoveries, many of which were not known to Westerners until centuries later. The Chinese were most advanced in astronomy. They invented sundials and water clocks, divided the day equally into ten and then into 12 periods, devised the lunar calendar that continued to be used until 1912, and recorded sunspots regularly. In mathematics, the Chinese were the first to use the place value system, whereby the value of a component of a number is indicated by its placement. Other innovations were of a more practical nature: wheelbarrows, locks to control water levels in streams and canals, and compasses.

The Han Chinese were especially distinguished in the field of art. The famous sculpture of the "Han flying horse" and the carving of the jade burial suit found in Han period tombs are only two superb examples. The technique of making lacquer ware was also highly developed. The Chinese are proudest of the tradition of historical writing that began in the Han period. Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145?-85? BC) was grand historian (an office that combined the duties of court recorder and astronomer) during the time of Wu Ti. His `Historical Records', which took ten years to complete, established the pattern and style followed by subsequent histories. In the Later Han, the historical tradition was continued by the Pan family. Pan Piao, the father, started to bring Ssu-ma Ch'ien's `Records' up to date. The work was continued by his son Pan Ku (twin brother of the general Pan Ch'ao) and was completed by his daughter Pan Chao, China's earliest and most famous woman scholar. Unlike Ssu-ma Ch'ien, the Pan family limited their work to 230 years of the Early Han. This was the first of the dynastic histories, subsequently written for every dynasty. Pan Chao also wrote a highly influential work on the education of women, `Lessons for Women'. `Lessons' emphasized the "virtues" of women, which restricted women's activities. The Confucianism that the Han Dynasty restored differed from the original teachings of Confucius. The leading Han philosophers, Tung Chung-shu and others, used principles derived from the early Chinese philosophy of nature to interpret the ancient texts. The Chinese philosophy of nature explained the workings of the universe by the alternating forces of yin and yang--dark and light--and the five elements: earth, wood, metal, fire, and water. The Han period was marked by a broad eclecticism. Many Han emperors favored Taoism, especially the Taoist idea of immortality.

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| **Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD)**  The majority ethnic group in China today is called the “Han nationality.” The name derives from the first great empire that lasted over four hundred years at about the same time as the Roman Empire (though the two states knew very little about each other’s existence). The Han empire was founded in the chaos after the fall of the Qin by a rebel leader known as Liu Bang, or by his reign name (given after his death), Han Gaozu (Kao Tsu). The early years of the Han were ones of consolidation of power.  At the start, power was shared to some degree with local kings, but as time went on and the bureaucracy was revitalized along lines similar to the Qin, the emperor’s power grew. Legalist theory was also gradually replaced by a re-vitalization of Confucianism. This eventually resulted in the strengthening of the role of the “Son of Heaven” and in a more moderate state in terms of what we would call “human rights.” Social classes included the ruling imperial family, civil bureaucrats, landed gentry (who acted as small-scale local powers), farmers, artisans and craftsmen, and merchants.  Great advances were made in intensive agriculture, including crop rotation, fertilizers, and new techniques in the use of draft animals. Town and country were linked in a more advanced agrarian economy, and many farmers had sideline activities such as textile production. There were also attempts (not always successful) to keep tax burdens on peasants low. This was done in part by creating state monopolies on high-consumption essentials such as salt, iron, and alcohol in order to temper the growing economic wealth of the merchant-class. Graves of the Han dynasty gentry class offer a wealth of insights into everyday life, as scale clay models of everything from prosperous houses, to ample kitchens, to well-stocked courtyards, to nursing farm animals were interred with the dead. The borders of the Han grew, with advances along the Silk Road towards Central Asia, and large scale migrations into southern China.  **Han Emperor Wu DiHan Emperor Wu Di**  After the founders, the greatest Han emperor was Wu Di (Wu Ti), who reigned from 141-87 BC. The role of the emperor as a model of virtue who worked for the good of the people was expanded under his reign. Confucian philosophy also advanced, including the idea offered by Dong Zhongshu that nature would give signs such as earthquakes or floods if a ruler was losing the “Mandate of Heaven,” and speculated on the inter-relations between the heavens, earth, and mankind. In 124 BC, an examination system was set up that offered an opportunity to males of any respectable background to elevate their (and their family’s) positions in life. It also served as a way to get true talent into the system. Much of what we know about early Chinese history comes from the writings of the historian Si Maqian (died c. 85 BC), who dedicated his life despite being castrated for displeasing the emperor to researching and editing the surviving writings of the past. Buddhism arrived from India by the first century BC and gradually grew in popularity.  Throughout the Han era the Xiongnu on the northern borders were a threat dealt with first by warfare and then by a policy of diplomacy and appeasement that included Chinese brides. Under Wu Di, the borders were expanded in a series of wars against the Xiongnu and command posts were established on the Korean peninsula in 108 BC.  As time went on, however, the wars with the Xiongnu and other border peoples grew costly, lifestyles at the court grew lavish, and the tax burdens on the populace increased. After Wu Di’s death attempts were made to rectify the situation, but eventually a usurper named Wang Mang came to power. He was the nephew of Empress Wang — one of a number of women who held powerful, but temporary positions during the Han.  Once Wang Mang took over the throne and attempted to institute social reforms by taking from the rich and giving to the poor. His reforms included the re-division of landholdings, freeing of slaves, social welfare and revolving credit programs for the poor and farmers, taxes on the use of firewood and natural resources, and reinstitution of government monopolies on certain goods. In practice, most of the reforms were not effectively instituted, or had the effect of adding even greater economic pressures on the populace. He also launched costly, disastrous campaigns against the Xiongnu.  Wang Mang  **Xiongnu invaders crossing a river**  Eventually both the upper-class gentry and the greater population vehemently opposed the attempted reforms. As the young government de-stabilized (possibly due in part to a traumatic shift in the course of the Yellow River in northern China), popular revolts led by the Red Eyebrows brought the death of Wang Mang and an end to his experimental rule. The historian Wolfram Eberhard notes that Wang was decapitated while reading ancient scriptures in his chambers, and his skull preserved for two hundred years.  After Wang’s death, the Han dynasty was revived by surviving members of the Han imperial line and returned to its former glory, though the capital in Chang’an (modern Xi’an) was moved eastwards to Luoyang. By about 189, however, the realm was again on the road to crisis and collapse. Wars with borders peoples like the Xiongnu and Xianbei, internal problems with powerful military cliques, weakening leadership in the imperial court, and more popular revolts – this time by the Yellow Turbans and other groups— finally weakened the dynasty, which collapsed in 220 AD, ushering in a period of in which China was in a state of disunion for about three hundred years. As Professor J.A.G Roberts has observed, Rome fell at nearly the same time – and for similar reasons (especially pressure from nomadic peoples) –though Europe was never reunited in the same way again. |