

THE HAN DYNASTY (206 B.C. – A.D. 220)

The Han is one of China's great historical dynasties. Like the Qin, the Han emperors ruled over an enormous and unified territory, but very different from the Qin, they were able to sustain their rule – despite a brief interruption – for over four centuries. Given that the latter half of the Zhou Dynasty was a period where the ruling house exercised no effective power, the Han stands as the longest era of Chinese history in which a single hereditary line of rulers controlled the government. To this day, the overwhelming majority of Chinese are called “people of the Han” – the name of China's dominant ethnic group referring to the expanse of time when the Chinese people were subjects of the Han Dynasty.

Although there are many facets of the Han's long cultural history that are worthy of attention, we are going to focus here on the interplay between intellectual currents and practical politics, because the relation between them in the Han was fundamental to the shape of much later Chinese history and culture.

When the Han replaced the Qin, a fundamental question of governmental and social philosophy came alive: Would the new dynasty be, like the Qin, a Legalist one, dedicated to the principle of centralized bureaucracy and amoral governance in the interests of state power and wealth, or would it return to the feudal past, adopting, perhaps, the values of Confucian governance by “virtue” and tradition. Or would it be an even more fundamental reaction against Qin totalitarianism, and look to Daoism as an alternative way to realize government according to the dictates of *wuwei*? The answer to these questions shaped the future of China.

In this section, we will focus largely on these issues, which were at the core of political and cultural developments during the first phase of the dynasty. The Han, like the Zhou, is a dynasty whose era was split in two. In the case of the Han, the dynasty's earlier phase ended after a slow decline of imperial power, when a high minister named Wang Mang usurped the throne and founded his own dynasty, which he called the Xin Dynasty. The Xin Dynasty died with Wang Mang after only fourteen years, and is not usually included in China's dynastic lists – largely because the ruling house that succeeded it was part of the Han ruling house, and chose to revive the dynastic name and treat Wang Mang as a brief interruption in a continuous dynastic line.

The early Han is usually called the “Western Han,” because its capital, the city of Chang'an, was in the West, at roughly the same location as the Western Zhou and Qin capitals, Zong-Zhou and Xianyang. The revived Han Dynasty ruled from the old Eastern Zhou capital site on the Luo River, at a city known as Luoyang.

The founding of the dynasty

The founder of the Han Dynasty was born a peasant – no fact underscores more dramatically the changes that the Qin era had brought about than this. Although the Qin had ruled China for only thirteen brief years, the break with the aristocratic society of the past was stark.

When the rebellions against the Qin began, the empire was thrown into chaos. Although Chen She, the initial rebel, was himself killed shortly after the uprising began, his early successes inspired men with leadership abilities or local renown to form their own armies against the Qin. Among these men, a young, well-bred, and ruthless leader from an old aristocratic family of the state of Chu came to be acknowledged as leader. His name was Xiang Yu, and for a brief time after the fall of the Qin he was acknowledged as the leading figure of China. Among those who had competed with him for primacy during the rebellion was a low-born, rather crude man named Liu Bang, born in east China. It was Liu who led rebel armies into the Qin homeland and received the surrender of the Qin heir Ziyang, but because he was aware of the superior power of Xiang Yu, Liu surrendered Qin to him when Xiang Yu arrived with his own armies, and settled for appointment as a “king” in the region of Han, in the upper Han River valley of West China. After a brief hiatus, however, Liu sensed that other former subordinates of Xiang Yu were dissatisfied with the new ruler’s leadership, and before many months were out, Liu led his troops against Xiang Yu’s in a brief civil war that resulted in Xiang Yu’s death and Liu’s elevation as the successor to the Qin.

Because of his family origins, Xiang Yu was looked to as the restorer of the aristocratic society of the past, and had he ultimately prevailed to found his own dynasty instead of the peasant Liu, China’s history might have been very different. Xiang Yu was a man whose place in society had been brought down by the Qin revolution, and it is very likely he would have done his best to reverse it. Liu, however, owed his chance in life to the fact that as the ambitious son of a relatively well off peasant, he was able to secure an official appointment under the Legalist system of the Qin. While he had opposed the tyranny of the Qin, he was in a position to understand the positive features that had accompanied the ruthless style of Qin Legalism.

Liu Bang’s political policies and the retention of the Legalist model

When Liu Bang came to power, he had clear choice: should he reverse the Qin’s abolition of feudalism and hereditary rank, returning to the highly personalistic Zhou model of power dispersed among a group of men of common background, or should he continue the centralized system of the Qin, which combined features of an impersonal bureaucracy with the autocratic power of a single hereditary ruler.

Liu chose to retain the Qin model, but with several key changes. First, in order to placate the other rebel leaders who had, in the end, sided with him over Xiang Yu, he carved out about

<i>Shang</i>	<i>c. 1700 – 1045 B.C.</i>	
<i>Zhou</i>	<i>1045 – 256 B.C.</i>	
<i>Qin</i>	<i>221 – 208 B.C.</i>	
Han	206 B.C. – A.D. 220	◀
WESTERN HAN	206 B.C. – A.D. 8	
XIN ERA	9 – 23	
EASTERN HAN	25 – 220	
“Six Dynasties”	220 – 589	
<i>Sui</i>	<i>589 – 617</i>	
<i>Tang</i>	<i>618 – 907</i>	
“Five Dynasties”	907 – 960	
<i>Song</i>	<i>960 – 1279</i>	
<i>Yuan</i>	<i>1279 – 1368</i>	
<i>Ming</i>	<i>1368 – 1644</i>	
<i>Qing</i>	<i>1644 – 1911</i>	

half the empire, most of the eastern territories, and divided it into fiefs to award these generals. However, once this had been done, Liu embarked on a ruthless policy of provoking these men to rebel, and one by one, picking off their “kingdoms,” returning them to central control. His successors continued this policy methodically, and within about fifty years, all these kingdoms had either been dissolved or turned into honorary positions without any independent power.

Second, in order to win popular support, Liu announced that although the Qin law codes would be retained, their enforcement would no longer be severe. He proclaimed a period of rest and ease for

the people – he could afford to, since the astonishing program of internal improvements under the Qin had provided his empire with by far the most advanced infrastructure in the world.

However, Liu felt he could not abandon the Legalist goals of state wealth and expansion. The Qin had pressed China’s boundaries far to the west and south, and the Han inherited a huge territory that had many hostile neighbors. The most formidable of these was an extended alliance of nomadic tribes called the Xiongnu, whose lands bordered China to the north, stretching deep into the Central Asian corridor China that the Qin had established in the extreme west. During the initial years of his reign, Liu made many attempts to push these borders even further, hoping to conquer the Xiongnu and ensure China’s security. He went so far as to lead troops into battle personally. But Liu was never much of a field commander, and his armies were routed by the Xiongnu. Turning from valor to prudence, Liu chose to pacify the Xiongnu by negotiating treaties with them, and by the time of his death in 195 B.C., China’s military had assumed a merely defensive posture.

The Daoistic experiment of the early Han

Liu Bang was a rough and ready man – a peasant turned general, who had little use for ritual and traditions of learning and ideology. His power was based on military triumph and his own charismatic personality, and he did little to establish for the Han imperial house a clear basis for its own legitimacy – a persuasive argument for its right to rule, and for the principles it would uphold.

It was up to the next leaders of the Liu family – the Han imperial clan – to worry about these things, and after Liu’s death, his successors began to appoint as governmental advisors increasing numbers of men learned in the traditions of the Classical past, as they sought for political and ideological guidelines.

It became clear very early that while the structure of the Han state remained essentially Legalist, the memory of the Qin as a tyrannical era made it impossible to advertise the Legalist bases of the new dynasty. Instead, government leaders began exploring other options among the various philosophies that had flourished during the late Zhou, searching for one that could accommodate the realities of Han politics.

As we mentioned earlier in discussing Legalism, although the Legalist program involved a law-bound state that exercised extremely tight social control, the premise of that state was to be the almost mechanical operation of law, to the extent that people would behave almost robotically, and, in a sense, “without striving,” that is, in accord with the Daoist value of *wuwei*. This was likely an important inspiration for a growth of interest in Daoist ideas during the early Han. Within a decade of the dynasty’s founding, leaders of government, including the widow of Liu Bang, a powerful empress, who ruled behind the scenes after her husband’s death, had become attracted by a new ideology called “Huang-Lao,” which was a blend of Daoist and Legalist ideas. This school of thought, which ascribed its teachings to both Laozi and the mythical Yellow Emperor of high antiquity (the “Huang” in the school’s name abbreviates his Chinese name, Huang Di), became over time an unofficial government ideology. It stressed the value of law and of a type of automatic reward/punishment process, but it also promoted an idea of limited government intervention, and urged that the people should be treated in a way that made their lives easy (just as Liu Bang had urged).

Sixty years after the founding of the Han, the state was relatively unified and prosperous, secure within well established boundaries, and ruled roughly in accord with a mixture of bureaucratic Legalism and *laissez-faire* Daoism. High ranking courtiers and major officers of the state in the various regions of China were generally adherents of Huang-Lao, though some still dared to state their admiration for pure Legalism. Confucianism – whose late Zhou adherents had been confident their followers would rule over a future state operating through dispersed power and an activist ritualized ethics – was a school of thought in semi-eclipse. The Han government sponsored the study of Confucian texts, but chiefly for their historical value and because, like Legalism, they celebrated social obedience within a well defined hierarchy. All that changed suddenly with the accession to the throne of the most dynamic and powerful of the Han emperors.

The rise of Han Dynasty Confucianism, and the Legalist/Confucian compromise.

Although at the time that Liu Bang first founded the dynasty the basic structures of the Qin state were retained, and the ideology of state initially drifted deeper and deeper into a Legalist/Daoist synthesis, all this changed after 135 B.C. when the young and ambitious, Emperor Wu (r. 140-87 B.C.), proclaimed Confucianism to be state ideology and required that all future officers of the Han be trained in Confucian teachings. From that point, Confucianism became a partner with the autocratic Legalist state structures, rather than an adversary. This change of status led to fundamental changes in the nature of Confucianism, and to understand what it means for people to say, as they often do, that traditional China was “a Confucian state,” it is critical to understand the nature of Emperor Wu’s act, and the fundamental compromises in Confucian ideas and goals that it entailed.

The background to Emperor Wu’s act concerned his own ambitions and the brilliant political strategy of a Confucian scholar named Dong Zhongshu (c. 179-104 B.C.), historically perhaps the most influential Confucian after Confucius himself. Dong reformulated Confucianism by systematically adapting to it popular ideas about the structure of the universe and man’s relation to Nature and by carefully tailoring these ideas to exalt the role of the emperor in the structure of the Qin-Han state. Using this revised, emperor-centered version of Confucianism, Dong successfully proposed to Emperor Wu an adoption of Confucianism as state orthodoxy that perfectly fit the emperor’s own, decidedly non-Confucian, ambitions.

Emperor Wu’s ambitions. Emperor Wu’s own character and predicament contributed greatly to the Confucianization of his empire. The Emperor’s grandfather, Emperor Wen, had been a saintly and popular ruler, perhaps the most sincerely humane ruler in China’s long history. He died in his prime and been succeeded by Emperor Wu’s father, a weak man who was entirely under the thumb of his mother, Empress Dou, who gradually took control of the reins of government. A strong-willed woman who attracted the allegiance of the most powerful ministers at court, Empress Dou was a strong believer in Huang-Lao thought. When Emperor Wu was a boy, this Legalistic Daoism was the only doctrine acceptable to the court, though it had never been officially declared state orthodoxy.

Then, in 141 B.C., Emperor Wu’s father died suddenly and his heir, still a teenager, found himself the titular leader of a court dominated by his grandmother. Emperor Wu was not like his father--he was ambitious and aspired to a reign as dramatic as the First Emperor of the Qin’s. He immediately announced that he would be open to policy proposals for strengthening the state from all officials. Having thus signaled his ambition, the new emperor ordered his high ministers to arrange performance of the great sacrifices to Heaven on Mt. Tai, a ceremony that had not been performed since the time of the First Emperor.

But Empress Dou was not about to give up the power she had enjoyed. She sent a swift signal of her own to her grandson--the ministers planning his sacrifices were suddenly charged with various crimes, arrested, and then granted the dignity of jailer-assisted suicides. Empress Wu was left totally isolated in his own court, surrounded by ministers who were the friends of his grandmother, but their ruler's enemy.

Consequently, when responses to Emperor Wu's call for policy proposals began to arrive, he was in no position to implement any of them. However, one minor official's proposals for a complete renovation of government ideology and *the rapid replacement of all court personnel* did catch his eye, and he pocketed that proposal for later use.

Dong Zhongshu's new Confucianism. The author of the proposals, Dong Zhongshu, had not risen high in government, but he was a respected leader among the community of Confucian scholars, who were more or less frozen out of high positions during the early Han. (The early Han rulers were no friendlier towards Confucians than the Qin had been. The Han founder, Liu Bang, had once publicly urinated in a Confucian ritual hat to indicate his assessment of heads that wore them.) His concrete proposals for government reform were based on an elaborate new model of the cosmos that he had developed for Confucians.

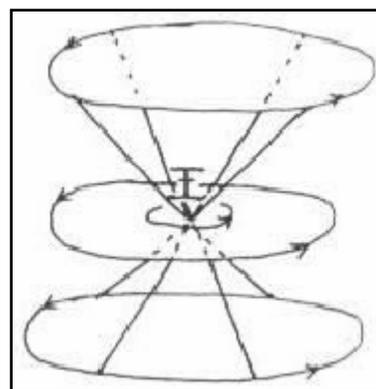
Classical Confucianism had been remarkably free of speculation about the cosmos, natural forces, and the world of spirits. But early Han thought and the Huang-Lao ideas of the Han court were steeped in such interests, and Dong's goal was clearly to graft these popular beliefs to Confucian ethical and political values and create a brand of Confucianism acceptable to the Han.

Dong pictured the universe as an organically connected composite of three separate realms of existence: the realm of heaven above, the realm of earth below, and the realm of man between them. Heaven and earth possessed natural types of cyclical rhythms, governed by the polar forces of yin (the dark, feminine force) and yang (the bright, masculine force) and by the successive influences of five material forces: water, fire, earth, wood, and metal (this set of five was much used in Huang-Lao thought). This natural realm was largely a homeostatic (balanced and self-correcting) system that harmonized a concatenation of rhythms: the day, the month, the seasons, the year, the circuit of Jupiter, and so forth. Within this balance of forces, mankind acted as a type of governor. Human action, principally through ritual and orderly governance, could keep these forces in harmony. Human errors could cause disruptions and result in natural disorders: shooting stars, comets, earthquakes, Elvis sightings, and so forth.

The central regulator of the human sphere was the king, or emperor. The actions of mankind could not hope to accord with natural patterns if each individual invented his or her own guidelines. Instead, over the course of history, sages had traced the appropriate forms of

confluence between human and natural patterns, had developed the complex array of everyday life rituals and focal state ceremonies that ensured a proper fit between man and the cosmos. At the center of this system stood the king, who represented the pivot of all human society, the hub of a constantly revolving wheel of action. The directionality of his actions--his ritual observances, his manifestations of character, his policies--synchronized the action of the entire human realm. If his acts were appropriate, the entire realm would harmonize with nature. If the king deviated from the appropriate path, all human action would be distorted and the homeostasis of the cosmos disturbed.

Dong Zhongshu's model of the harmonious universe can be represented by this diagram, which pictures the realms of heaven, man, and earth in synchronous motion, with the king at the center, his own directional action tied to the operation not only of the human sphere, but of all the lines of force (yin, yang, five elements, spirituality, and so forth) that link the three realms. The character for "king" (王) was, in Dong's view, a representation of this model. Dong Zhongshu elaborated the role of the ruler in this system at great length. In doing so, Dong was



not only currying favor for Confucianism by appealing to Emperor Wu's own self-appraisal as the center of the universe. The portrait of the emperor as the center of the cosmos certainly had the potential to exalt his political standing to heights that were semi-divine, but it also had the effect of sharply *constraining* the emperor. Under Dong's system, the ruler had a very extensive set of "cosmic duties" to perform. And in light of the stimulus-response model which pictured the effect of the emperor's actions on the realm of nature, any natural anomaly could be interpreted as a sign of imperial error, thus opening the door to ministerial remonstrance. It seems clear that when Dong fashioned his model as part of his "package" to the emperor, his hope was that the emperor would select Confucianism as a handmaid to his autocratic power, but discover too late that he had made Confucianism the master of autocracy.

Dong Zhongshu's proposals. It was most likely an act of great courage for Dong Zhongshu to submit to the emperor a long and blunt memorial (memo) calling for a complete revolution in Han government. This is the way in which Dong's long initial memorial closed.

When a sage king takes the throne after an era of chaos, he must make a clean sweep of all traces of that era, restore the proper teachings that can transform the people, and exalt them. Once the teachings have been illuminated and the customs of the people reformed, if his descendants follow in his footsteps they will rule for five or six hundred years.

Now at the end of the Zhou era, the house of Zhou utterly departed from the Dao and so lost its empire. The Qin succeeded the Zhou, but was unable to reform and in fact merely exaggerated the evils of the time. With a heavy hand it banned the study of culture and books could not be owned; it discarded ritual and righteousness and detested so much as hearing of them. The purpose was to wipe out the Dao of the former kings entirely and have free rein to exercise an arbitrary and illicit form of government. It was because of this that after reigning as Sons of Heaven for a mere fourteen years, their empire was broken and destroyed. From the beginning of time, none has ever matched the Qin in ravaging the people of the world by following upon chaos with chaos.

The enduring poison of the Qin persists to this day. It has made the customs of the people coarse and evil. The people lie and cheat, they are presumptuous and disobedient, so far has the rottenness has penetrated!

Confucius said, “Rotted wood cannot be carved, a wall of manure cannot be whitewashed.” Now the Han has succeeded the Qin, but China is like rotten wood or a wall of manure: though you wish to govern well there is no way it can be done. You pour forth laws and outrages spring up; you send down ordinances and deceit arises. This is like cooling a boiling pot with hot water or using sticks to beat out a fire, things only become worse.

Let me compare the situation to a zither that has lost its tuning. If it goes too far, you need to unstring the zither and string it anew, only then will the zither be playable. If the failures of government reach an extreme, the form of government must be changed, only then can things be put into order. . . .

The *Poetry* says, “Serve the people, serve the gentlemen; blessings shall come down from Heaven.” If you govern so as to serve the people, blessings will surely come from Heaven. What a true king should cultivate are the five norms of *ren*, righteousness, ritual, wisdom, and faith. When these five are embellished blessings will come down from Heaven and the magic of the spirits will assist you. The power of your grace will extend beyond the borders and reach to all living things.

Recall that the emperor was at this time waiting impatiently for an opportunity to free himself from the constraints of a court that reflected the power and perspective of his grandmother. Here was a proposal that urged him to thoroughly remake his government, and the emperor was intrigued. He called on Dong Zhongshu to spell out his plan in more detail, and Dong replied with yet another lengthy memorial, filled with Confucian quotations and tales of the sage kings of the past.

In his second memorial, Dong Zhongshu focused upon the issue of staffing a reform government. His goal was clearly to persuade the emperor to make a clean sweep of government offices. But apart from requesting a change in personnel, Dong also proposed far reaching reforms in the manner in which officials should be selected in the future.

Your majesty, you perform the ceremony of ploughing the ritual field each spring to support the primacy of agriculture. Rising at dawn and retiring late, you labor anxiously for the myriads of people. You ponder the ancient ways and concentrate on seeking worthy men. . . . Yet you have not yet harvested a crop of worthy men. This is because your current gentlemen officers do not exert themselves.

To wish for worthy men without having nurtured one's corps of officers is like looking for beautiful patterns in unpolished jade. In nurturing officers, nothing could be more important than establishing an academy. An academy is the gateway of worthy gentlemen and the source of the transformations of the proper teaching.

At the present time, within the entire population of a commandery or a kingdom there is often not a single person suitable to respond to an imperial call for candidates. This is because the kingly Dao has been cut off. I would wish your majesty to erect a central academy and appoint enlightened teachers to it in order to nurture the gentlemen of the world. They should be periodically tested in order to push them to the limits of their abilities.* If this is done, it should be possible to recruit the flower of the empire's youth. . . .

At present, the officers of the state have no teaching to pass on. Many do not carry out the laws of their ruler. They brutalize the common people and consort with scoundrels in order to get rich. Those who are poor or without any means of support live in bitterness without gainful employment. How deeply this fails to accord with your majesty's intent! It is for this reason that yin and yang are confused in their order, the cosmic vapors and energies are blocked, births among the animals are rarely carried to term and the common people are left stranded.** This is all because the senior officials are unenlightened!

The senior officers generally have been selected from among the mid-level palace attendants, while those who rise to the highest positions are selected from among the existing body of officials, often on the basis of their wealth and prestige. They are not necessarily worthy. Moreover, in ancient times, assessments of merit were made on the basis of an appraisal of different levels of achievement in the course of fulfilling one's office, not solely on the basis of seniority. Thus a man of minor abilities, though he had great seniority, would not rise above minor office, while a worthy man's lack of seniority was no barrier to his becoming a high ranking aide.

Whether Emperor Wu was impressed by the ethical weight of these arguments we do not know. But they fit well with his wish to recruit his own corps of men to replace those beholden

* This appears to be the initial proposal for the Chinese civil service examination system. It was several decades before sporadic and informal exams actually began (with Emperor Wu acting as chief examiner), but this famous meritocratic system predated Western government examinations by about fifteen hundred years, and lasted until 1905.

** Dong here applies his cosmological model, which makes mankind and the emperor responsible for maintaining natural order. Errors in government policy bring forth natural anomalies, or "omens." This is the first of thousands of examples of Confucian "omenology": ministers arguing for policy reform on the basis of nature's evident dissatisfactions.

to his grandmother. Dong's request to reorient appointment towards Confucianism, with the prerequisite of academic Confucian training would eliminate all the Huang-Lao and Legalists advocates at court, and his proposal to eliminate considerations of seniority would allow for the rapid installation of a new group of men nationwide. It was most likely considerations such as these which led the emperor to implement the greater portion of Dong's proposals almost immediately after his grandmother's death in 135 B.C. Within just a few years, the imperial academy had been set up, and all ministers who professed to be followers of schools of thought other than Confucianism had been driven from court by imperial edicts. Confucianism, as reformulated through Dong Zhongshu's emperor-centered cosmology, was established as the orthodox ideology of the Han state.

State Confucianism in the Legalist state. Once established as a state-sanctioned ideology, Confucianism gradually grew into a mass movement. Young men of all backgrounds who hoped for advancement needed to become well acquainted with Confucian ideas and at least some Confucian texts. Those who wished to rise to the topmost levels of government henceforth had to serve time as textual scholars, studying with one or another of the academy teachers for a number of years. This did not happen overnight, and in the course of Emperor Wu's reign those studying at his new academy probably did not exceed one or two hundred. But the future seemed to be limitless for the Confucian school, and from this time on, it is customary to refer to the imperial state as "Confucian China."

There are good reasons why the label "Confucian China" is inappropriate for the Han or for any other era of Chinese history. These reasons concern the meaning that we assign to the word "Confucian." If we use that word simply to denote the fact that the figure and recorded sayings of Confucius were officially orthodox, and that all candidates for public office needed to show knowledge of and a worshipful attitude towards his teaching, then the term is appropriate.

If, however, the term were meant to suggest that China was ruled according to principles consistent with the early school of Confucianism, then it would be deeply inappropriate. The structures of Chinese governmental practice never varied in their basic form or goals from those established by the Qin – despite Dong Zhongshu's hopes that Confucian cosmology would constrain the ruler, things rarely worked that way. Instead, a corps of Confucian-trained bureaucrats became the law-enforcers and tax-collectors of the Legalist state, and if we want to apply a Classical label to traditional Chinese government, "*Legalist*" would be the proper one to use. However, Legalism had been tarnished by the conduct and fate of the Qin. The proclaimed ideology of the state from the time of Emperor Wu on was Confucianism. It is an irony of Chinese history that Confucianism, which initially shunned engagement with any ruler who fell

short of the legendary sages, endured for thousands of years as the handmaid of despotic autocracy.

Moreover, as subordinates of a Legalist autocrat, Confucian-trained bureaucrats throughout the ages had to face the hollowness of their ethical training. A small percentage of brilliant or outstanding ministers and scholars did help to mitigate the brutality of China's autocratic political culture. But a far greater number of academy or examination graduates ended up either cynics or blatant hypocrites, and while they mouthed Confucian pieties to enhance their status and coerce the population they ruled, their personal and political conduct was deeply scarred with loyalties to self and family over the state and the people. Corruption in all levels of politics was endemic throughout the Imperial era in China. Dong Zhongshu's complaint to Emperor Wu about the Huang-Lao era officials became equally apt to characterize the Confucians: "Many do not carry out the laws of their ruler. They brutalize the common people and consort with scoundrels in order to get rich. Those who are poor or without any means of support live in bitterness without gainful employment."

As the Chinese imperial state matured under the Han, the divergence between Confucian ideals and the realities of bureaucratic "Confucian" governance became a persistent theme of Chinese cultural history. This divergence involved two distinct aspects, which it is important to distinguish:

1. Ethics. Although in time all officers of government were selected on the basis of their mastery of a Confucian curriculum of study, because this was the *only* path to power and prestige, those who embarked upon it were often merely self-serving men of ambition. Some officials truly reflected the ethical values of their training, but the greater portion were merely career men, who employed Confucian rhetoric to achieve personal goals at any cost necessary to those they ruled.

2. Competence. The Confucian curriculum focused on the cultivation of personal virtue, rather than on pragmatic issues of governance, such as personnel management, law enforcement, economics and accounting, agricultural infrastructure, and so forth, all areas of responsibility that newly appointed officers sent to administer local regions of China would quickly encounter. Some officials were bright men, who were able to acquire practical skills on the job, but most were at best semi-competent, and these men often responded to their complex duties with dogmatic stubbornness, or simply relied on powerful local figures to enforce social control through coercion.

Dong, whose genius brought Confucianism to power, was himself partly responsible for these results. By reconfiguring Confucianism through the lens of yin-yang five-forces theory, he had created an ideology centered upon the figure of the autocrat. This was a powerful attraction to Emperor Wu, but it was also a great distortion of Confucius's original message, which linked

efficacious rule to ethical self-cultivation, rather than to ritual punctiliousness and a view of the universe as a mirror of the ruler's grandeur. Dong's ideology weakened the stress on personal self-transformation and the ethical dimensions of ritual society, and this weakened Confucianism's resistance to the selfishness and arbitrariness of China's political culture, against which Confucius had been the first to fight. And as himself an idealistic Confucian with little practical experience in governance, Dong failed to address the gap between the Zhou Dynasty basis of Confucian ideology and the practical requirements of administration in a "modern" Legalist state.

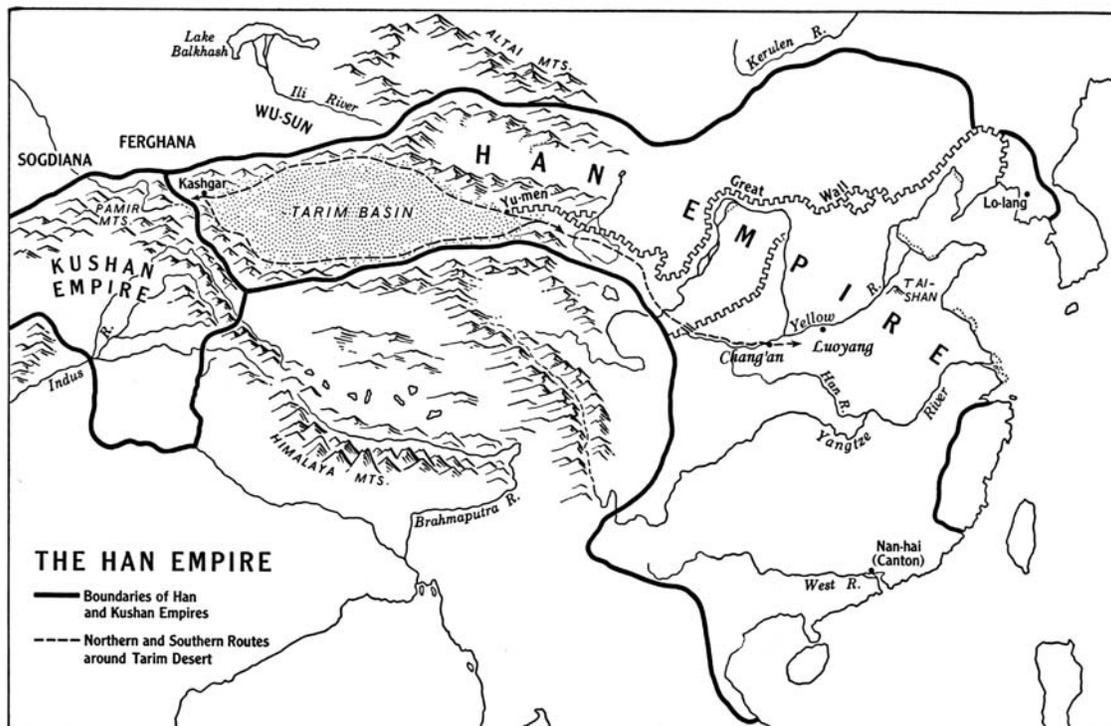
The Legalist agenda of Emperor Wu. The Confucian-trained government officials that came to office under Emperor Wu served him well, but the goals of the emperor's administration were far from Confucian. In fact, Emperor Wu's model was not the legendary sages of the past or the Zhou Dynasty founders, the Confucian heroes, but the First Emperor of the Qin. Since the early defeat of the Han at the hands of the Xiongnu nomads, the Chinese empire had remained within the boundaries secured by the Qin. Emperor Wu's goal was to break that stalemate by following the two primary Legalist principles: increase state wealth by enlarging the state treasury to support stronger armies.

The emperor instituted a severe tax policy that maximized the amount of goods extracted from agriculture for state use. Using these revenues, he enlarged the military and financed a series of exploratory expeditions in Central Asia and beyond, in order to better plan for the expansion of the state. Ultimately, using his swollen treasury and the intelligence that had been collected, he launched during his long reign a series of military campaigns designed to make China a large and permanent presence in Central Asia, broadening the narrow corridor the Qin had opened over the deserts there, and foreclosing any opportunity for the Xiongnu and their allies to overrun the lands that China had occupied there.

At the same time, the emperor's armies pushed northeast into Korea, establishing Chinese colonies in the region of modern North Korea, and south into what is now Vietnam, setting up a regional garrison city where Hanoi is located today.

By the close of Emperor Wu's range, China's territory was of almost unimaginable size, given the highly centralized form of government, the early state of communications and transport, and the forbidding nature of the newly conquered terrain, including vast desert lands in the west and jungles in the south. Except for the region of Tibet and some unexplored lands beneath the Himalayan mountains and along the coastland jungles of the southeast, China now approximated in its domain the land of China today, including regions in Mongolia, Korea, and Vietnam that no longer are part of China. All this, a century before the Roman Empire began its great, but far more decentralized expansions.

But the cost to the state of these sustained military adventures was enormous. If Emperor Wu had emulated the First Emperor of the Qin in the success of his conquests, he had equally duplicated the degree to which the Qin had exhausted the people. And unlike the Qin, he had not, in the end, been able to secure adequate revenues to maintain his treasury. Ultimately, the economy was depleted, and the aged emperor, in his final years, was forced to scale back dramatically the ambitions of the state. Peace treaties brought an end to wars, and the imperial establishment at the capital Chang'an was forced towards greater austerity in expenditures. The



weakened emperor even began to hear weak policy protests from the Confucians who now peopled his court, who throughout his reign had acquiesced in his policies, since they owed their standing personally to this highly Legalist emperor.

When Emperor Wu died in 87 B.C., he left a state firmly marked with the stamp of Legalist policies and ambitions, but in its exhaustion, also receptive to the more moderating ideas of a Confucian-trained bureaucracy.

The Later Han and the rise of the Confucian establishment

After the reign of Emperor Wu, more moderate economic and military policies allowed for some reinvigoration of government finances and some respite from war. However, the dynasty was unable to recapture the strength that it had possessed during the middle years of Emperor Wu's long reign. Open tensions began to emerge between the leaders of the Confucian academy that Emperor Wu had established, and high government ministers, more committed to the Legalist

goals of state that had animated Emperor Wu. The contradictions of the adoption of Confucian moralistic ideology by a pragmatic Legalist state became increasingly obvious.

Wang Mang and the Xin Dynasty. Late in the first century B.C., a series of emperors who were either incompetent or infants seriously weakened the ruling house. In 1 B.C., a child too young to rule independently came to the throne, and the high minister who was appointed to act as regent on his behalf, a man named Wang Mang, engineered his own elevation to the imperial throne, apparently bringing an end to the Han Dynasty.

Wang Mang was not merely a man hungry for power – he was in many respects a Confucian reformer. During the brief period when he ruled as emperor of the Xin Dynasty (A.D. 9-23), he instituted a wide variety of policies designed to restore the pre-Legalist institutions of the Zhou Dynasty. Some of his policies appear very forward looking, such as the outlawing of slavery, but others were radically idealistic and counterproductive. Wang’s approach to government had limited success, and his “dynasty” was already in trouble when a natural disaster of catastrophic proportions hit China: the Yellow River overflowed its banks and made a dramatic shift in its course, altering its path to the sea by hundreds of miles, so that rather than emptying into Bohai Bay, north of the Shandong peninsula, it flooded a new channel directly to the Pacific south of Shandong. The human toll of this change was enormous. Unknown numbers of peasants drowned or died in the famine that ensued, and millions migrated away from the North China Plain into the jungles of South China (migrations that lay a foundation for the later rebalancing of China’s population and power towards a North-South equilibrium). This social and economic instability led to widespread uprisings against the government, and in the failed attempt to suppress these, Wang Mang was killed and his era brought to an end.

Restoration and renewed decline. The man who emerged from this chaotic period as the new ruler of China, known as Emperor Guangwu (r. A.D. 25-57), was a collateral branch of the Liu clan, descendants of the Han founder Liu Bang. He chose to revive the dynastic name of the Han and continue the traditions of his forbears. Moving his capital from Chang’an in the west to his own power base in central China, Emperor Guangwu established a renewed Han government at Luoyang, the site of the old Eastern Zhou capital of Cheng-Zhou.

Although imperial governance was effective during the initial period of the Eastern Han, a number of forces joined to weaken the government and, ultimately, bring it down amidst a period of widespread rebellion and political dissolution. The most important of these was probably a slow but steady growth in the influence of large, powerful clans, whose increasing control over economic goods and government affairs drew power away from the imperial house

and the central court, and dispersed it among regional lords, somewhat reminiscent of the process that led to fragmented government during the Eastern Zhou, eight centuries earlier.

However, a more immediately damaging blow to the dynasty was a long term struggle that emerged at the capital between the Confucian elite, including the masters and students at the large imperial academy, and an entirely new group of competitors for power: eunuchs.

Throughout the Han, eunuchs played an increasing role in court politics. Originally, eunuchs were cultivated by emperors solely because, as castrated men, they could be reliable keepers of the imperial harem. However, the eunuch's intimate role in the inner court of the emperors – the emperors' dependence upon them for sexual gratification and their inevitable involvement in competition among the women of the harem for the emperor's favors – gave them unique leverage at the center of the state. In time, court eunuchs numbered in the thousands, and many of them came to serve in high court positions outside the official structure of government, as the emperor's personal appointees. Confucians, who were, by imperial policy, the rightful candidates for all state positions, deeply resented the role of the eunuchs, and they attacked eunuchs both on the basis of their often corrupt behavior, and because as castrated men they were seen as a defilement of imperial governance.

The scale of the infighting between these two factions was enormous, and brought great instability to the capital. In successive purges during the late decades of the second century, thousands were murdered. Academy students were victimized first in the years surrounding 170, and in 189, two thousand eunuchs were put to death as the Confucians had their revenge.

As chaos in Luoyang weakened the government, a series of rebellions arose in the provinces. These movements were inspired by dissatisfaction with the increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of privileged families and disillusionment with the amorality of Confucian governance. The distinguishing trait of the largest of these rebel groups, known as the Yellow Turbans, was adherence to a new form of Daoism that had begun to spread through China with great rapidity. This ideology was a fusion of teachings derived from texts like the *Laozi*, Huang-Lao ideas, arts associated with *fangshi* traditions, and Han imperial ritual. Although the rebel groups that espoused versions of this newly forming ideology were defeated by late Han generals, their tradition grew into a pervasive set of cults that are often called “religious Daoism,” and that persist as a major component of spiritual belief in China to this day.

With the central government weakened by Confucian-eunuch wars in the capital, the rebellions of the late Han were put down by leading generals stationed in the provinces. As the third century began, the power of these men had come to outweigh the power of the imperial throne; with the end of the Han Dynasty in view, they vied to succeed as founders of a new dynasty. Ultimately, no one man or family was able to prevail, and the final fall of the Han in 220 led to a split in the state, ushering in an era of disunity that lasted over 300 years.