

4.4 THE REIGNS OF THE EARLY HAN EMPERORS

The Han Dynasty is usually viewed as having extended from 206 (or 202) B.C. until A.D. 220, with an interregnum during the period A.D. 9 - 23. Over those intervening years, China was ruled by a man named Wang Mang who, as a powerful minister in during a period of weak child emperors, dethroned the line of the Lius and established his own dynasty, the Xin. Wang Mang was in turn overthrown by relatives of the imperial branch of the Liu clan, who chose to establish their legitimacy by claiming to be restoring the Han Dynasty, rather than founding a new one.

Thus, the Han Dynasty is a very long dynasty divided in two: the Former Han (206 B.C. - A.D. 8) and the Latter Han (A.D. 25 - 220). (These periods are also called the Western Han and the Eastern Han, because the capital shifted from Chang'an to Luoyang: almost identical to the shift that marked the Western and Eastern Zhou periods.)

In this course, we will not overstep the proper bounds of our B.C. orientation: we will not venture into the Latter Han. Nor will we study the entire Former Han. Instead, the endpoint of our survey will be the reign of Wu-di (the Emperor Wu; “Di” stands for emperor in imperial titles; Han emperors are usually referred to by a posthumous name honoring some quality associated with their reign plus the term *di*), whose long reign (141 - 87) marked turning points in Han social, political, and intellectual cultures.

We will consider the reign of Wu-di in detail later on. The agenda for this section is to describe briefly the main outline of Han history from the close of the civil wars in 202 to the ascendance of Wu-di in 141. The following is the list of emperors whose reigns we will examine:

Gao-di (Liu Bang)*	206 - 195
Hui-di	194 - 188
Empress Lü**	188 - 180
Wen-di	179 - 157
Jing-di	157 - 141

The reign of Gao-di (Liu Bang), 206-195

The restoration and control of patrician states. During the course of the civil wars, most of the major participants anticipated that any new political arrangement which emerged from the chaos would resemble the multi-state polity of the pre-Qin period. The leaders of the largest

*Gao-di 高帝 (Founding Emperor) is Liu Bang's official posthumous title. Texts more commonly refer to him as Gaozu 高祖 (Founding Ancestor).

**The Empress Lü, who controlled the state during the reigns of two infant emperors, is generally listed as a ruler, though she did not appropriate the title “emperor,” as did the Empress Wu, who reigned during the Tang Dynasty, about a thousand years later.

armies frequently laid claims to the royal throne of whatever region their troops had come to occupy. At some periods of the wars, it appeared that the outcome might resemble the Warring States arrangement of strong independent states with a figurehead emperor; at other periods, it seemed more likely that the outcome would resemble the Western Zhou, with a strong emperor commanding the fealty of patrician lords who were supreme within their own domains.

When Liu Bang became emperor, he needed to decide whether to restore the system of “Zhou feudalism,” which under Li Si’s stewardship had been thoroughly abolished, or to continue the Qin revolution and confirm the bureaucratic structure of the Chinese state. His decision was a compromise between two extremes. He gave imperial endorsement to those royal titles which his rebel confederates had already appropriated, thus ceding to ten “feudal” lords about sixty percent of the total empire, comprising its eastern half. These regions would not be under the emperor’s direct control, but would be under the control of the various victorious generals of the anti-Xiang Yu forces. The western portion of the empire remained under the emperor’s direct control, organized in the system of commanderies and counties.

This compromise was quickly adjusted much in the emperor’s favor. The rebel generals who comprised the new royalty were for the most part volatile men from the lower classes, well seasoned as leaders of troops, but unskilled in administration and diplomacy. They, like Liu Bang, were little more than warlords with private armies, and they were well aware of the fact that the new emperor was likely to look upon them as threats to his unstable throne. Thus, during the first half-decade of the Han, first one then another of these kings instigated or was driven to a preemptive revolt against the forces of the emperor. Once again, Liu Bang’s cadre of skilled advisors and military personnel served him with great skill, and one by one, the kings were cut down. By 196, just six years after the Han empire and its royal kingdoms had been settled, only one of the initial set of kings remained on his throne. In the other nine states, a son or brother of Liu Bang had been established as hereditary king. When Liu Bang died in 195, his family was in firm control of China.

The Xiongnu. At the time of the Qin collapse, the Xiongnu confederacy in the north had appreciated the opportunity provided by political dissolution in China. Their military pressure on the north increased throughout the period, and the Xiongnu were strengthened by the defection of one of the early Han regional kings, who abandoned his throne by taking his forces north.

During the first years of the Han, Gao-di’s policy towards the Xiongnu was antagonistic. He sent off several campaigns against them, and even took the field against the Xiongnu himself in 201 (barely escaping capture in a rout). Subsequently, he settled on a policy of accommodation. A Han princess was sent as bride to the leader of the Xiongnu confederacy, and scheduled exchanges of tributary presents were arranged, which really amounted to a symbolic submission of the Han to the Xiongnu in exchange for being left in peace. The policy was a remarkable expression of pragmatic diplomacy. It would be scarcely credible to suggest that the First Emperor of the Qin would ever have considered the possibility of appeasing a non-Chinese enemy in such a way.

The Lü family. As a young man, Liu Bang had been given in marriage a woman who was greatly above his station, and he was much indebted to her family, the Lü clan. Liu Bang's wife had endured hardships when Liu was a humble officer. The family had been poor and she had worked in the fields. She was a woman of great mettle, and those difficult times and the adventures that had subsequently followed seem to have strengthened her character. Just as Liu Bang was the first man to achieve the highest position in China from a commoner position, Empress Lü was unique in having reached her position not through a passive process of harem selection but through a process of struggle in which her own merit was a critical factor.

After Liu Bang was enthroned, many members of the empress's family received high imperial positions, and the empress and her relatives formed a conspicuous power bloc at court. It may be that the leverage of the empress was increased by the fact that after the conquest, Liu Bang became infatuated with concubines that now became available to him. Ordinarily, the transference of the emperor's affection spelled the end of his wife's power; the designation of another heir would shortly follow. But Empress Lü was no ordinary empress. When the emperor made a move to designate another woman's son as the crown prince, she was able to block him by mobilizing the support of high ministers at court. It seems entirely possible that the emperor's reluctance to follow through with this plan was equally due to the fact that his relation to his wife was far more balanced than in other cases – his wife had earned her position, and perhaps a peasant felt less comfortable throwing a wife aside than a patrician, born to rule a harem.

When Liu Bang died abruptly, the child whom he had thought to raise to crown prince held only the title King of Zhao, and his mother, Liu Bang's favorite young concubine, was trapped at court in a very vulnerable position (we will describe her unfortunate fate later on).

Liu Bang as a Legalist ruler. Liu Bang was a colorful character, and his quirks, along with his remarkable rise as a peasant emperor tend to dominate accounts of his court. It is easy to overlook the fact that the most remarkable feature of his reign lies in what he did not do – he did not dismantle the Qin revolution.

While Liu Bang was forced to accommodate the feudal pretensions of those of his allied leaders who set themselves up as kings, the active policy that he followed in administrative organization of the empire was to reserve as much territory as he could to his personal control, and then use the Qin system to exercise that control. He viewed the patrician states of eastern China as a temporary phenomenon, and was very active in creating or exploiting conditions that would allow him to gain de facto control over those areas. He was clearly moving towards a full restoration of the centralized empire of the Qin when he died. The design of the Han empire was, as much as was possible, aligned with the models of Shang Yang.

Liu Bang is famous for having relaxed the laws of the Qin; he did so with some fanfare, noting that the people had become exhausted by the burdens that the laws and regulations had imposed upon them. But Liu Bang only relaxed the *implementation* of the Qin law code. He did not abrogate or even significantly revise that code. The Legalist codes that the Qin had created remained substantially in force throughout the Han.

Even the most pernicious of these laws, the prohibition of non-approved books, was not repealed. Li Si's policy that none could possess the works of the philosophers or cite ancient precedents to criticize contemporary policies remained in force throughout Liu Bang's reign, though it was repealed four years after his death. As we will see below, Liu Bang viewed Confucians with much greater aversion than the First Emperor.

The central bureaucracy that the Qin had established was also kept, as were the systems of imperial shrines and places of sacrifice. And as important as these, the symbolism of the supreme dominance and sanctity of the imperial throne that had been so carefully cultivated by the First Emperor was revived by Liu Bang, to the best of his plebeian abilities. In every major respect, Liu Bang attempted to retain the structure of the Qin state.

The importance of this cannot be underestimated. Throughout the rest of the early Han period, subsequent rulers retained the policy of whittling away the powers of the feudal kingdoms and restoring centralized control of all China to the throne. We will see that after 135, Confucianism enjoyed a swift rise to the position of sanctioned state orthodoxy, and all subsequent officials of the dynasty (and of most of the period of traditional China) were men who had been trained in Confucian texts and modes of conduct. In this sense, the first century of the Han appears to represent the emergence of a "Confucian state."

But while China's bureaucrats may have been educated through Confucian texts and trained to preach the values of Confucianism, they were in fact the servants of an essentially *Legalist state*, the legacy of the Qin revolution, as preserved by Liu Bang.

The reign of Hui-di, 194-188

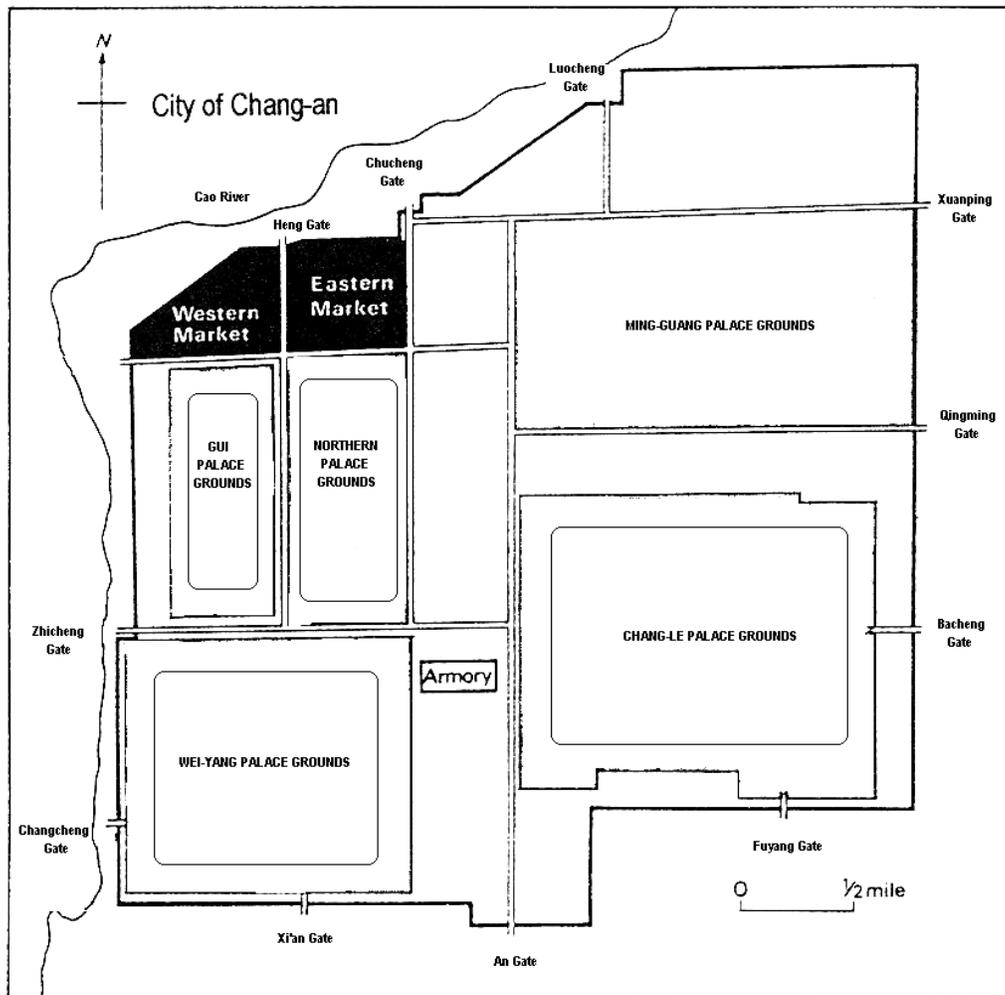
The son of Gao-di and the Empress Lü was only twelve at the time that he succeeded to the throne. He had been a delicate child who seems to have been a disappointment to his rough-hewn father. Preserving his rights to the throne had been a bitter battle for the empress, and the reign of Hui-di was, from the beginning dominated by the influence of his mother. During Hui-di's brief reign, the sole major accomplishment was the completion of a new capital city, located in the Wei River valley, near the sites of the capitals of the Western Chou and of the Qin, the latter city, Xianyang, having been burnt to the ground by Xiang Yu in 207.

The construction of the new capital. The capital city of the Han, Chang'an, was a massive planned city, the layout of which was intended to reflect the grandeur of imperial power and the magnificence of the emperor. Chang'an became the model for subsequent capitals of China, and also of the capital cities of Japan.

Chang'an was planned to be a major population center. The city walls, which were slightly irregular, were approximately three and a half miles on each side, enclosing an area of approximately thirteen square miles. (Some early texts claim that the irregularities were planned with reference to certain features of important constellations, and had cosmic significance.) The walls were about fifty feet thick at the base, about forty at the top, and were over twenty five feet

high (almost three storeys). Each wall was pierced by three gates, and from each of these gates a major roadway extended into the city. The gates were not aligned directly opposite one another, so there were, in total, nine main roads running through the city. The texts record that the construction crews mobilized to build the walls of Chang'an numbered 150,000.

The entire city was constructed on a grid, with over a hundred separate neighborhoods laid out, with two major market places and a number of minor ones. But what was most striking about the city was the domination of the palace grounds. Over half the total area of the city was given over to five walled compound areas, the largest two well over a mile square, within which were located arrays of palaces and pavilions for the use of the imperial family.



Chang'an was the greatest physical expression of the exaltation of the imperial throne during the Han. Around it would grow in time a set of enormous tumuli, the tombs of the Han emperors and their consorts, which made the entire region a monument to the new imperial order first conceived by the ruler of Qin.

The domination of the Empress Lü. The central theme of the reign of Hui-di was the growing power of the empress dowager, the wife of Liu Bang. With her young son on the throne and many of her family members well placed in upper ministerial ranks at court, the empress held the greatest share of power, and used it.

Our principal historical source for the early Han, the *Shiji*, is not kind to the Empress Lü: Sima Qian depicts her as a woman whose temperament had grown ungovernable. The pivotal event of Hui-di's reign, which led to his early death at the age of eighteen, concerns the vengeful conduct of the empress with regard to her formal rival, the Lady Qi, whose son, the child king of Zhao, Liu Bang had initially wished to make crown prince. The story is told this way in the *Shiji*:

Empress Lü felt deep resentment against Lady Qi and her son, the King of Zhao. She ordered that Lady Qi be held captive within the long lane of women's quarters on the palace grounds and summoned the King of Zhao to return to court from Zhao, where he had been sent. Three times envoys were sent to Zhao, but the prime minister who had been assigned to serve the child king in Zhao, Zhou Chang, responded to them by saying, "The emperor Gao-di entrusted the King of Zhao to my care because of his young age. I am aware that because of her grudge against Lady Qi the empress dowager wishes to summon him back so that she may kill both of them. I do not dare send the king. Moreover, the king is ill and cannot respond to the summons."

Empress Lü was enraged and sent an envoy to summon the prime minister himself. When the prime minister obeyed her order and arrived in Chang'an, she sent a man to summon the King of Zhao once again, and the king set out. He had not yet arrived at the capital, when Emperor Hui, aware of his mother's anger and moved by compassion, went in person to meet him at the River Ba and accompanied him on his arrival at the palace. The emperor kept the younger boy by his side at all times, whether eating or sleeping, so that although the empress dowager wished to kill him, she could find no opportunity.

At the end of the first year of Hui-di's reign the emperor arose one day at dawn to go hunting. The King of Zhao, being too young to go out hunting so early, kept to his bed. When the empress dowager heard that he was at last alone, she sent someone to him bearing a poisoned drink. By the time that Hui-di returned, the King of Zhao was dead. . . .

Then Empress Lü cut off the hands and feet of Lady Qi. She ordered that her eyes should be plucked out and her ears burned off, and she was given a potion to drink that took away her ability to speak. Then she was cast into the trough beneath the palace privy. The empress dowager gave her the title "Human Pig." After a few days, she sent for Hui-di to see the Human Pig. Staring at her, he asked who this was, and only then did he learn that this was Lady Qi.

Hui-di began to sob uncontrollably, became ill, and took to his bed. For over a year he was unable to rise. He sent a man to deliver a message to his mother. “What you have done no human being could do. Since I am your son, I can never be fit to rule the empire.” From this time on, Hui-di gave himself up to drink and debauchery and no longer attended to affairs of state. His illness grew progressively worse.

(Shiji 9.397)

Given the enormous bias against powerful women that all early texts exhibit, it is difficult to know what to make of a tale such as this. It does, however, convey the traditional view of the character of the Empress Lü and the circumstances that led to her rise to power. After the death of her son, she ruled China directly for eight years in every way except in name.

The rule of the Empress Lü, 188-180

Hui-di died very young, and his principal wife had borne him no sons. The succession was in doubt. The Empress Lü arranged that one of Hui-di’s children by a secondary consort should be allowed to ascend the throne, but because he was an infant, he was not actually invested as emperor and the empress ruled as a regent. In 184, the boy died under mysterious circumstances, and another infant son of Hui-di was designated as ruler-in-waiting. There was, in fact, widespread doubt that either of these boys was actually a son of Hui-di, and it was suspected that the empress had merely claimed their descent in order to avoid power passing to another branch of the Liu family. Throughout the period when these two boys stood as designated emperors, Empress Lü exercised actual control of the government. Neither child was ever formally installed as emperor.

Instability of the border regions. The central government was not destabilized by the devolution of power into the empress’s hands, but there was growing factionalism at court, and this weakened the ability of the Han to respond to emergencies at its borders. During the years of the empress’s reign, there was renewed trouble in the northwest, where the Xiongnu once again began to raid territories settled by Chinese farmers, in some cases carrying off large numbers of Chinese as prisoners.

In the south, a kingdom that had been established decades earlier by Chinese refugees from the Qin created a significant disturbance. This polity, which was centered near the South China Sea, near the present city of Canton, was composed of non-Chinese tribes under the leadership of Chinese rulers. It was known as Southern Yue. During the reign of Gao-di, emissaries from the Han had negotiated treaties of peace with Southern Yue. Now, however, angered by an economic blockade that the Han had established, the aged ruler of this state appropriated the title of emperor and invaded the regions under Han control south of the Yangzi River.

The rise and fall of the Lü clan. The central court became increasingly unable to respond to these border threats as the period of Empress Lü’s dominance went on. The empress, anxious to

solidify her own base of support, continued to fill the government with members of her own clan, appointing them both to ministerial positions and as rulers in the eastern patrician states. By the time of her death, the influence of the Lü clan far outweighed that of any other family group, including the Liu clan. The greater portion of ministers, however, belonged to neither of these two clans, many still being men who had served Liu Bang during the civil war.

The Empress died in 180 and attempted to perpetuate the dominance of her clan post-mortem by leaving a testamentary command appointing Lü family members to the highest of all ministerial posts: prime minister and general-in-chief. As the child emperor had not yet been formally enthroned, and as there was doubt as to his paternity, the Lü clan thereupon launched a coup d'état intending to seize power from the Liu clan, the most powerful members of which were scattered in three of the outlying kingdoms in the east.

However, the Lü clan had aroused much resentment among the senior ministers loyal to Liu Bang, and these ministers, still in control of great power at the capital, thwarted the coup by taking control of the palace guard and regular army. A bloody period ensued wherein virtually the entire Lü clan was wiped out.

This was the first of many instances in Chinese history where the power of an empress's family threatened the power of the regularly appointed officers of a dynasty or of the imperial clan. It became, along with the periodic threat of eunuch power (of which Zhao Gao of the Qin is the earliest example) a feature of the dynamics of the imperial court. It is a convention of traditional historians, who generally wrote the stories of dynasties only after they had ended, to account for the downfall of a ruling house by describing the undue influence of the families of empresses or of eunuchs. While it is easy to imagine how these two groups, whose power derived from the sexual lives of emperors rather than from merit gained through avenues of advancement open to all, could have been a frequent threat to the government, it is hard to avoid the impression that in many cases, the effects of other factors pertaining to dynastic strength have been ignored by historians, anxious to emphasize a basic moral lesson.

Because of the later history of the imperial court, the Empress Lü has always been portrayed as the prototype of an evil and dangerous court woman. If she accomplished any important achievements during the course of her rule, Sima Qian and other annalists of the period have carefully covered them up.

The reign of Wen-di, 179-157

The annihilation of the Lü clan in itself did not create stability at court. The child whom the Empress Lü had designated as heir to the throne was not generally believed to be Hui-di's son by the ministers who had foiled the Lü coup d'état. These men, who were fiercely loyal to the Liu clan, were also anxious to see a strong and able emperor installed, rather than a child. Among the various possible alternatives to the designated emperor, the strongest claimants were three brothers of Hui-di who held positions as kings of regions in the east.

The process by which one of these, the future Wen-di, was selected was unusual. The court ministers, controlling an extraordinary degree of power in the aftermath of their counter-coup, simply determined which of the three would be the best. The brother whom they selected was not the most powerful of the three – that brother had actually led troops to Chang’an during the coup and was in best position to coerce a decision in his favor. But the ministers, the histories tell us, viewed him with suspicion because of the strong personality and connections of his mother, whom they feared could become another Empress Lü. A second brother suffered the same maternal handicap. In the end, so widespread was the disaffection for the late empress that the ministers were able to designate Wen-di as the new heir, despite the forces of the other brothers, because his mother was known for her modesty and posed no family threat.

Wen-di was probably in his mid- or late-twenties when he assumed the throne, and he is generally celebrated as the most personally virtuous of all the Former Han emperors. He was modest and gentle with people, and was famous for his thrift in government – a rare quality in a Chinese ruler. The moderately long period of his rule is often pictured as a golden era in the Former Han.

Wen-di’s procession to the capital for his formal installation as emperor was viewed with delight by his future subjects. A loyal follower of Liu Bang known as Lord Teng (whose tender concern for children was illustrated by an incident recounted in “The Rise of the Han”) entered the palace beforehand and led out the child who had formerly been the emperor-designate. “Where are you taking me?” asked the boy. “We are going to a new home,” replied the loyal Lord Teng. Then he reported back to Wen-di that the palace had been purified and, amidst great ceremony, Wen-di entered and ascended the throne. That night, a subaltern was dispatched and the boy was murdered. Wen-di’s reign of virtue would now be unchallenged.

The reduction of the kingdoms. The principal achievement of Wen-di’s reign was to move forward the process clearly envisioned by his father Liu Bang to reduce the number and range of the feudal kingdoms. Although all but one of the kingdoms were now ruled by members of the imperial clan, Wen-di recognized that as time progressed, the sense of family connection with the lineage at the capital was bound to decline, and the kingdoms represented a long-term threat.

The reduction of the kingdoms proceeded piecemeal in two ways. Occasionally, one of the royal rulers would defy some order from the imperial throne and raise troops in resistance. In such cases Wen-di’s armies would crush the revolt and remove the ruler. In other cases, a ruler would die without an heir. Generally, Wen-di responded to either sort of vacancy with an extremely diplomatic procedure. He would not terminate the kingdom, but would reduce its territory and the privileges of its royal house in the course of selecting and installing a new occupant to the throne. Thus whereas Gao-di had attempted to bring the kingdoms under centralized control by bringing them within the Liu family, Wen-di pursued the same goals by reducing their status and resources.

Foreign conflicts. Wen-di inherited unstable situations on both his northern and southern borders. In the north and west, the Xiongnu confederation continued to threaten the border

farming areas; in the south, the kingdom of Southern Yue still controlled Han lands and claimed imperial sovereignty. During his reign, Wen-di made great progress on both fronts.

The Southern Yue situation was the simpler. Wen-di decided to take a conciliatory stance. Recognizing that the diplomacy of his father had succeeded where the economic blockade imposed by Empress Lü had failed, Wen-di sent to Southern Yue the very same emissary that his father had sent years earlier, a famous scholar. The result was an instant and positive response from the Southern Yue ruler, who declared himself a loyal subject of the Han, immediately ending all conflict on the southern front and effectively extending the political influence of Han to the South China Sea.

The Xiongnu were more troublesome. Again, Wen-di revived Liu Bang's policies by negotiating treaties and sending gifts to the Xiongnu chieftains. This was done several times during Wen-di's reign, but the peace brought by such treaties was short-lived in each case, and in 166, Xiongnu cavalry rode to within a hundred miles of Chang'an, although they withdrew without engaging Chinese forces. In the end, Wen-di ordered the construction of system of garrisoned outposts in the west, and these seem to have settled the issue of the Xiongnu for the next decade or two.

Economic prosperity. Wen-di's reputation for governmental thrift appears to have been well earned, and his reign is generally distinguished by signs of growing economic strength. The basis of this seems to have been increasing crop yields, perhaps brought about by the fact that Wen-di's reign was the longest sustained period of general peace throughout China since the middle years of the Western Chou.

Chinese farmers, an overwhelming majority of the population, typically paid four kinds of taxes: poll tax, land tax, production tax, and corvée (for one month each year). In 168, Wen-di ordered that the most onerous of these, the production tax, be cut in half, lowering it from about six percent to about three; in 169 he abolished it altogether (although it was reintroduced at three percent after Wen-di's death). Nevertheless, according to records made close to that time, the granaries were kept overflowing throughout Wen-di's reign due to the strict austerity measures which he imposed on the government.

An example of Wen-di's attitude towards government spending concerns the treatment accorded to those whom the Han had rewarded with noble ranks and estates who were not kings or significant power holders. The Han had continued the Qin practice of distributing rewards for merit according to a finely graded system of rankings. At the top of this ladder, the highest ranks were generally given Zhou titles such as *hou* (marquis) and many of these *hou* were provided with lands to whose income they were entitled. While the scale of these awards was such as to pose no threat to the power of the center, it did create a class of economic elite. Many of these nobles chose to live not on their remote estates but in the capital, the social and political hub of the empire. Since one of the services to which nobles had claim on government officers was the collection and delivery of their incomes, this meant that significant government funds had to be spent transporting tax revenues from estates to their lords in the capital.

Soon after Wen-di ascended the throne, he put an end to this practice by ordering that all nobles, even those whose duties involved their presence at the capital, should set up permanent residences in their estates and move there. This seems to have achieved a variety of goals. It reduced government expenditures, but its greater purpose may have been to break up concentrations of the wealthy and powerful at the capital. In addition, it was a means whereby some important officers were, with great politeness, dismissed from power. For example, a little more than a year after the original order for the relocation of the nobility was issued, many families at Chang'an had failed to respond. So Wen-di issued a second order, and to show that he meant business, he had the new exodus led by his prime minister, who was himself a marquis. This was indeed a great honor for the prime minister; however, as he had returned to his estate, he was no longer very well positioned to fulfill his ministerial duties, and he was therefore immediately replaced by a man unburdened by such exalted rank.

Wen-di's policies of austerity extended even to his own style of living. He wore coarse silk robes and limited the styles that his consorts could wear. He turned down all proposals to improve or enlarge the imperial palace, reduced the size of the imperial retinue, and when his tomb was constructed, he ordered that its fittings and grave goods be entirely fashioned from pottery, without the use of any precious metals. Wen-di was also famous for his generosity with amnesty proclamations and forgiveness of tax debts in times of need.

Wen-di's public character. Wen-di became famous for the humanity and generosity of his reign. During the first year of his reign, he issued a proclamation questioning the morality of laws that punished an entire family for the crimes of a single member, a venerable feature of Chinese law.

Laws constitute the upright means of governance: they restrain violent people and guide the good. But now, when sentencing a person who has broken the law, his parents, wife and children, and other members of his family, even though guilty of no crime, share the sentence of guilt and are even forced to become convict laborers. I utterly refuse to adopt such practices.

(Shiji 10.418)

After submitting the issue to court deliberations, Wen-di abolished the practice. Later in his reign, Wen-di abolished the various mutilating punishments and rescinded sedition laws that punished people for remonstrating with the ruler or high officers.

It was very common for Chinese rulers to issue proclamations in which they mouthed pious beliefs in traditional ethical values and spoke of their own unworthiness. But the proclamations of Wen-di carry an unusual tone of sincerity. For example, early in 178 two eclipses occurred in quick succession, one of the sun and one of the moon. Eclipses were generally viewed as very inauspicious events, especially solar eclipses, which Chinese astronomy was unable to predict. After the second of these eclipses, Wen-di issued the following proclamation, which illustrates the qualities that caused later generations to view him as an ideal ruler.

I have heard it said that when Heaven gave birth to the teeming people it appointed for them a ruler so that he might look after them and order them. If the ruler of men acts without virtue or if his governance is not fair, then Heaven will express this fact through some disastrous anomaly in order to alert him to his errors. Now on the last day of the eleventh month an eclipse of was manifest in the heavens. What portent could be greater?

I have been entrusted with the protection of the ancestral temples and my insignificant person has been placed above the masses of people, lords, and kings. Whether the empire is ordered or disordered depends upon me, a lone man, with the support of those few who ministers of state whom I rely upon as I do my arms and legs. But here below I have not been able to bring good order and succor to living creatures, while in the realms above my failure has affected even the sun, moon, and stars. How profoundly my conduct has lacked virtue!

Wherever this order shall reach, let all ponder my errors and consider in what respects my understanding, vision, and thought have fallen short. I beg you to inform me and to recommend to me wise and upright men who will speak straightforwardly and remonstrate with me, and so help me correct my shortcomings!

On this occasion I call on all who occupy official positions to strive to reduce their expenditures in order to benefit the people. Because I have been unable to spread virtue wide, the misdeeds of foreign peoples ever preoccupy my anxious thoughts, and because of these I am not yet able to dispense with measures for defense. But although I cannot presently withdraw the garrisons that guard the borders, there is no further to maintain so great a Palace Guard protecting me. Therefore I order that the army of the General of the Palace Guard be abolished, and that all horses now under the care of the Master of the Palace Stables, beyond those necessary for practical use, be released for the use of messenger relay stations.

(Shiji 10.422)

Ideological trends. The early Han emperors were careful to maintain the structure of religious symbolism that the First Emperor of the Qin had constructed to convey the exalted status of the emperor. Complex rituals of sacrifice and the maintenance of a widespread system of shrines, sustained by imperial funds, were characteristics of state religion that the Former Han emperors took most seriously. During the reign of Wen-di, considerable effort was expended on such shrines. But apart from these activities, the first Han emperors did not emulate the Qin example of designating a specific school of thought to represent state orthodoxy.

During Wen-di's time, two sharply contrasting ideological tendencies developed at court. The first of these owed a great deal to Wen-di's principal consort, the Empress Dou (another formidable female figure in early Han politics). Empress Dou was devoted to the texts of Daoism.

We are not quite sure what the term “Daoism” denoted at this time, but it is recorded that among the texts she most treasured was the *Dao de jing*. The empress sponsored Daoism strongly at court, and insisted that her eldest son, the future emperor, study it. In the form that Daoism took at this time, the ideology was generally referred to as the “Huang-Lao School,” with the word Huang denoting the name of the Yellow Emperor, who was bracketed with Laozi. Twenty years ago, archaeologists excavated from an early Han grave a set of texts that included among them the *Dao de jing*. Others of the texts spun doctrines around the figure of the Yellow Emperor, and we now presume that the full corpus of texts such as these comprised the basis of Huang-Lao ideology. (In a later section, we will examine portions of one of these texts.)

Huang-Lao ideology seems to have advocated an extreme form of laissez-faire administration, in combination with a regular pattern of government actions or regulations that was conceived as harmonizing with the rhythms of nature. This minimalist program dominated Wen-di’s court and that of his son, Jing-di, who was under the sway of his mother. Huang-Lao combined in certain ways with Legalism, a relationship we saw earlier in the doctrines of the *Han Feizi*, and it is recorded that the ministers who rose to power during the reigns of Wen-di and Jing-di were generally Huang-Lao or Legalist adepts.

But Wen-di also was the first Han emperor to patronize Confucian studies. During the reign of Wen-di, Confucian membership among the Erudites increased, and included men selected for their mastery of certain texts that Confucianism had come to hold most sacred, known as “classics.” Some of these Confucian “classics” had become extremely difficult to obtain because of the prohibition on them that had been in force between 213 and 191. Wen-di endorsed vigorous efforts to recover these lost texts and even sent one of his highest ministers to travel to Shandong to recover the *Book of Documents* from the memory of an aged Confucian scholar. We will discuss further the rise of Confucianism during the early Han in a separate section.

In sum, during the reign of Wen-di, forms of Daoism and Confucianism both thrived at court. Between the two, Daoism was clearly in the dominant position, and would become even more so during the two decades following Wen-di’s death. However, as some thinker once said, “Reversal is the motion of the Dao” – the Dao will bring down the mighty and raise the lowly. This was to be the case with Daoism and Confucianism at the Han court.

The reign of Jing-di, 157-141

The last of the early Han emperors who preceded the epochal reign of Wu-di was Jing-di, the son of Wen-di and the Empress Dou. Although his reign is noteworthy for its highly successful domestic policy, which essentially brought to a close any threat to the empire that the feudal kingdoms might have presented, Jing-di is generally remembered as a ruler under the thumb of his mother, Empress Dou.

The resolution of the feudal question. Jing-di faced the first widespread uprising against the authority of the Han since Liu Bang’s wars to eliminate the original array of kings. In 154, a

coalition of seven kingdoms revolted against the authority of the Han, led by the king of Wu (where the ancient Yangzi delta kingdom of Wu had been), whose son had earlier been killed at Chang'an following a dispute with the crown prince, who had since become emperor. The coalition represented lands stretching from Wu in the southeast to Zhao in the north, and temporarily took the easternmost strip of China out of the control of imperial forces.

But the dynasty was well prepared for this. It had been a feature of domestic court policy for years to provoke rebellion in individual kingdoms in order first to subdue the king and then reduce the size and prerogatives of the kingdom. Some historians believe that even the widespread revolt of 154 was intentionally courted by Jing-di. The outcome was, in any event, highly congenial to the house of Liu. The rebel states were conquered quickly and their kings deposed. In some cases the lands of the rebel kingdoms were reduced when a new ruler was appointed. In several instances, one large kingdom was carved into several small and politically powerless hereditary estates. The result was so devastating to the power of the kingdoms empire-wide that they no longer represented a political threat, though a few scattered revolts would still occur from time to time.

Overall, with the reign of Jing-di we see the culmination of the gradual process to recentralize power in the hands of a single emperor. Though there remained many kings, their thrones were positions of honor, luxury, and local prestige. The kings no longer played any significant role on the imperial stage, and the empire once again resembled in substance, if not in form, the administrative ideal of the Legalist state.

KEY NAMES AND TERMS

Gao-di
Lü family

Empress Lü
Chang'an

Wen-di
Huang-Lao

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1. Describe the process whereby feudalism was revived and the effectively extinguished during the early Han.*
- 2. Which rulers, according to our accounts, altered the course of China by virtue of their personal idiosyncrasies?*
- 3. What qualities of Confucianism and Daoism can you discern in the pronouncements of Wen-di?*