n the year 99 B.C.E., Chinese imperial officials sentenced the historian Sima Qian to punishment by castration. For just over a decade, Sima Qian had worked on a project that he had inherited from his father, a history of China from earliest times to his own day. That project brought Sima Qian high prominence at the imperial court. Thus, when he spoke in defense of a dishonored general, his views attracted widespread attention. The emperor reacted furiously when he learned that Sima Qian had publicly expressed opinions that contradicted the ruler’s judgment and ordered the historian to undergo his humiliating punishment.

Human castration was by no means uncommon in premodern times. Thousands of boys and young men of undistinguished birth underwent voluntary castration in China and many other lands as well to pursue careers as eunuchs. Ruling elites often appointed eunuchs, rather than nobles, to sensitive posts because eunuchs did not sire families and so could not build power bases to challenge established authorities. As personal servants of ruling elites, eunuchs sometimes came to wield enormous power.

Castration was not an appealing alternative, however, to educated elites and other prominent individuals: indeed, Chinese men of honor normally avoided the penalty by taking their own lives. Yet Sima Qian chose to endure his punishment. In a letter to a friend he explained that suicide would mean that his work would go forever unwritten. To transmit his understanding of the Chinese past, then, Sima Qian opted to live and work in disgrace until his death about 90 B.C.E.

During his last years Sima Qian completed a massive work consisting of 130 chapters, most of which survive. He composed historical accounts of the emperors’ reigns and biographical sketches of notable figures, including ministers, statesmen, generals, empresses, aristocrats, scholars, officials, merchants, and rebels. He even described the societies of neighboring peoples with whom the Chinese sometimes conducted trade and sometimes made war. As a result, Sima Qian’s efforts still provide the best information available about the development of early imperial China.

A rich body of political and social thought prepared the way for the unification of China under the Qin and Han dynasties. Confucians, Daoists, Legalists, and others formed schools of thought and worked to bring political and social stability to China during the chaotic years of the late Zhou dynasty and the Period of the Warring States. Legalist ideas contributed directly to unification by

Qin (chin)
outlining means by which rulers could strengthen their states. The works of the Confucians and the Daoists were not directly concerned with unification, but both schools of thought profoundly influenced Chinese political and cultural traditions over the long term.

Rulers of the Qin and Han dynasties adopted Legalist principles and imposed centralized imperial rule on all of China. Like the Achaemenids of Persia, the Qin and Han emperors ruled through an elaborate bureaucracy, and they built roads that linked the various regions of China. They went further than the Persian emperors in their efforts to foster cultural unity in their realm. They imposed a common written language throughout China and established an educational system based on Confucian thought and values. For almost 450 years the Qin and Han dynasties guided the fortunes of China and established a strong precedent for centralized imperial rule.

Especially during the Han dynasty, political stability brought economic prosperity. High agricultural productivity supported the development of iron and silk industries, and Chinese goods found markets in central Asia, India, the Persian Empire, and even the Mediterranean basin. In spite of economic prosperity, however, later Han society experienced deep divisions between rich landowners and poor peasants. Those divisions eventually led to civil disorder and the emergence of political factions, which ultimately brought the Han dynasty to an end.

**In Search of Political and Social Order**

The late centuries of the Zhou dynasty led eventually to the chaos associated with the Period of the Warring States (403–221 B.C.E.). Yet the political turmoil of that period also resulted in a remarkable cultural flowering, because it forced thoughtful people to reflect on the proper roles of human beings in society. Some sought to identify principles that would restore political and social order. Others concerned themselves with a search for individual tranquility apart from society. Three schools of thought that emerged during those centuries of confusion and chaos—Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism—exercised a particularly deep influence on Chinese political and cultural traditions.

**Confucius and His School**

**Confucius** The first Chinese thinker who addressed the problem of political and social order in a straightforward and self-conscious way was Kong Fuzi (551–479 B.C.E.)—"Master Philosopher Kong," as his disciples called him, or Confucius, as he is known in English. He came from an aristocratic family in the state of Lu in northern China, and for many years he sought an influential post at the Lu court. But Confucius was a strong-willed man who often did not get along well with others. He could be quite cantankerous: he was known to lodge bitter complaints, for

Zhou (joh)
Confucianism (kuhn-FEW-shuhn-iz'm)
example, if someone undercooked or overcooked his rice. Not surprisingly, then, he refused to compromise his beliefs in the interest of political expediency, and he insisted on observing principles that frequently clashed with state policy. As a result, Confucius was unable to obtain a high position at the Lu court. Confucius then sought employment with other courts in northern China but after a decade of travel found none willing to accept his services. In 484 B.C.E., bitterly disappointed, he returned to Lu, where he died five years later.

Although Confucius never realized his ambition, he left an enduring mark on Chinese society through his work as an educator and a political advisor. He attracted numerous disciples who aspired to political careers, and those disciples compiled the master’s sayings and teachings in a book known as the Analects—a work that has profoundly influenced Chinese political and cultural traditions.

**CONFUCIAN IDEAS** Confucius’s thought was fundamentally moral, ethical, and political in character. It was also thoroughly practical: Confucius did not address philosophical or religious questions but focused instead on the proper ordering of human relationships. In an age when bureaucratic institutions were not yet well developed, Confucius believed that the best way to promote good government was to fill official positions with individuals who were both well educated and extraordinarily conscientious. Thus Confucius concentrated on the formation of what he called *junzi*—“superior individuals”—who did not allow personal interests to influence their judgments.

In the absence of an established educational system and a formal curriculum, Confucius had his disciples study works of poetry and history that provided insight into human nature. He and his students carefully examined works produced during the Zhou dynasty, such as the *Book of Songs*, the *Book of History*, and the *Book of Rites*, concentrating especially on their practical value for prospective administrators. As a result of Confucius’s influence, literary works of the Zhou dynasty became the core texts of the traditional Chinese education. For more than two thousand years, until the early twentieth century C.E., talented Chinese seeking government posts followed a program of study deriving from the one developed by Confucius in the fifth century B.C.E.

**CONFUCIAN VALUES** For Confucius, though, ideal government officials needed more than an advanced education: they also needed a strong sense of moral integrity and a capacity to deliver wise and fair judgments. Several qualities were particularly important to Confucius. One of them he called *ren*, by which he meant an attitude of kindness and benevolence or a sense of humanity. Confucius explained that individuals possessing *ren* were courteous, respectful, diligent, and loyal—characteristics desperately needed in government officials. Another quality of central importance was *li*, a sense of propriety, which called for individuals to behave appropriately: they should treat all other human beings with courtesy, while showing special respect and deference to elders or superiors. Yet another quality that Confucius emphasized was *xiao*, filial piety, which obliged children to respect their parents and other family elders, look after their welfare, support them in old age, and remember them along with other ancestors after their deaths.

*li* (LEE)
*xiao* (SHAYOH)
Confucius emphasized personal qualities such as ren, li, and xiao because he believed that individuals who possessed those traits would gain influence in the larger society and in the process would lead others by their example. Only through enlightened leadership by morally strong individuals, Confucius believed, was there any hope for the restoration of political and social order in China. Thus his goal was not simply the cultivation of personal morality for its own sake but also the creation of junzi who could bring order and stability to China.

Because Confucius expressed his thought in general terms, later disciples could adapt it to the particular problems of their times. Indeed, the flexibility of Confucian thought helps to account for its remarkable longevity and influence in China. Two later disciples of Confucius—Mencius and Xunzi—illustrate especially well the ways in which Confucian thought lent itself to adaptation.

**Mencius** Mencius (372–289 B.C.E.) was the most learned man of his age and the principal spokesman for the Confucian school. During the Period of the Warring States, he traveled widely throughout China as a political advisor. Mencius firmly believed that human nature was basically good; thus he placed special emphasis on the Confucian virtue of ren and advocated government by benevolence and humanity. This principle implied that rulers would levy light taxes, avoid wars, support education, and encourage harmony and cooperation. In his lifetime, Mencius’s advice had little practical effect, and critics charged that his views about human nature were naïve. Over the long term, however, his ideas deeply influenced the Confucian tradition. Since about the tenth century C.E., many Chinese scholars have considered Mencius the most authoritative of Confucius’s early expositors.

**Xunzi** Like Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi (298–238 B.C.E.) was a man of immense learning, but unlike his predecessors, he also served for many years as a government administrator. His practical experience encouraged him to develop a less optimistic view of human nature than Mencius’s. Xunzi believed that human beings selfishly pursued their own interests and resisted making any voluntary contribution to the larger society. He considered strong social discipline the best means to bring order to society. Thus, whereas Mencius emphasized the Confucian quality of ren, Xunzi emphasized li. He advocated the establishment of clear, well-publicized standards of conduct that would set limits on the pursuit of individual interests and punish those who neglected their obligations to the larger society.

Like Confucius and Mencius, however, Xunzi also believed that it was possible to improve human beings and restore order to society. That fundamental optimism was a basic characteristic of Confucian thought. It explains the high value that Confucian thinkers placed on education and public behavior, and it accounts also for their activist approach to public affairs. Confucians involved themselves in society: they sought government positions and made conscientious efforts to solve political and social problems and to promote harmony in public life.

**Daoism**

Some contemporaries, however, regarded Confucian activism as little more than misspent energy. Among the most prominent of these critics were the Daoists. Like Confucianism, Daoism developed in response to the turbulence of the late Zhou dynasty and the Period of the Warring States. But unlike the Confucians, the Daoists considered it pointless to waste time on social activism. Instead, the Daoists devoted their energies to reflection and


Confucius never composed formal writings, but his disciples collected his often pithy remarks into a work known as the Analects (Sayings). Referred to as "the Master" in the following excerpts from the Analects, Confucius consistently argued that only good men possessing moral authority could rule effectively.

The Master said, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place, while all the stars turn toward it...."

The Master said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity be imposed on them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but will have no sense of shame."

"If they be led by virtue, and uniformity be provided for them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good...."

The duke Ai asked, saying, "What should be done in order to secure the submission of the people?" Confucius replied, "Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, and then the people will submit. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, and then the people will not submit."

Ji Kang asked how to cause the people to reverence their ruler, to be faithful to him, and to go on to seek virtue. The Master said, "Let him preside over them with gravity; then they will reverence him. Let him be filial and kind to all; then they will be faithful to him. Let him advance the good and teach the incompetent; then they will eagerly seek to be virtuous...."

Zigong asked about government. The Master said, "The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler."

Zigong again asked, "If it cannot be helped, and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which of them should be foregone?" The Master answered, "Part with the food. From olden times, death has been the lot of all men; but if the people have no faith in their rulers, there is no standing for the state...."

Ji Kang asked Confucius about government, saying, "What do you say to killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled?" Confucius replied, "Sir, in carrying on your government, why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend when the wind blows across it...."

The Master said, "When a prince's personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed."

Compare Confucius's understanding of moral virtue with Zarathustra's notion of morality discussed in the previous chapter.


Laozi and the Daodejing  
According to Chinese tradition, the founder of Daoism was a sixth-century B.C.E. sage named Laozi. Although Laozi has been credited with composing the Daodejing (Classic of the Way and of Virtue), the basic exposition of Daoist beliefs, it is almost certain that the book acquired its definitive form over several centuries. After the Daodejing, the most important Daoist work was the Zhuangzi, named

Daodejing (DOW-DAY-JIHING)
Zhuangzi (joo-wong-dz)
LAOZI, I
A jade statue produced about the tenth century C.E. depicts the sage Laozi on an ox. Legends reported that Laozi rode a blue ox from China to central Asia when spreading his teachings.

Why is Laozi depicted wearing common, simple clothing?

after its author, the philosopher Zhuangzi (369–286 B.C.E.), which provided a well-reasoned compendium of Daoist views.

THE DAO Daoism represented an effort to understand the fundamental character of the world and nature. The central concept of Daoism is the elusive concept of dao, meaning “the way,” or more specifically “the way of nature” or “the way of the cosmos.” In the Daodejing, dao figures as the original force of the cosmos, an eternal principle that governs all the workings of the world. Yet the Daodejing envisioned dao as a supremely passive force and spoke of it mostly in negative terms: dao does nothing, and yet it accomplishes everything. Dao resembles water, which is soft and yielding, yet is also so powerful that it eventually erodes even the hardest rock placed in its path. Dao also resembles the cavity of a pot: although it is nothing more than an empty space, it makes the pot a useful tool.

Daoists believed that human beings should live in harmony with the passive and yielding nature of dao. To the Daoists, that meant retreating from the world of politics and administration. Ambition and activism had only brought the world to a state of chaos. The proper response to that situation was to cease frantic striving and live in as simple a manner as possible.

THE DOCTRINE OF WUWEI Thus early Daoists recognized as the chief moral virtue the trait of wuwei—disengagement from active involvement in worldly affairs. Wuwei required that individuals refrain from advanced education and personal striving, and that they live simply, unpretentiously, and in harmony with nature.

Wuwei also had implications for state and society: the less government, the better. Instead of expansive kingdoms, the Daodejing envisioned a world of tiny, self-sufficient communities where people had no desire to conquer their neighbors or even to trade or visit with them.

Although Daoist thought opposed the activism of Confucianism, in fact the Daoist encouragement of self-knowledge appealed strongly to many Confucians. And, since neither Confucianism nor Daoism was an exclusive faith, it was possible for individuals to study the Confucian curriculum and take administrative posts in the government while devoting their private hours to reflection on human nature and the place of humans in the larger world—to live as Confucians by day, as it were, and Daoists by night.

Legalism

Ultimately, neither Confucian activism nor Daoist retreat was able to solve the problems of the Period of the Warring States. Order returned to China only after the emergence of a third school of thought—that of the Legalists—which promoted a practical and ruthlessly efficient approach to statecraft. Unlike the Confucians, the Legalists did not concern themselves with ethics, morality, or propriety. Unlike the Daoists, the Legalists cared nothing about the place of human beings in nature. Instead, they devoted their attention exclusively to the state, which they sought to strengthen and expand at all costs.

SHANG YANG AND HAN FEIZI Legalist doctrine emerged from the insights of men who were active in Chinese political affairs during the late fourth century B.C.E. Most notable of them was Shang Yang (ca. 390–338 B.C.E.), who served as chief

wuwei (woo-WAY)
minister to the duke of the Qin state in western China. His policies survive in a work titled *The Book of Lord Shang.* Though a clever and efficient administrator, Shang Yang was despised because of his power and ruthlessness. Thus, when his patron died, Shang’s enemies at court executed him, mutilated his body, and annihilated his family. Another Legalist theorist, Han Feizi (ca. 280–233 B.C.E.) also fell afoul of ambitious men at the Qin court. During his life, Han Feizi synthesized Legalist ideas in a collection of powerful and well-argued essays on statecraft. However, his enemies forced him to commit suicide by taking poison. Thus, the Legalist state itself consumed the two foremost exponents of Legalist doctrine.

**Legalist Doctrine**  Shang Yang, Han Feizi, and other Legalists reasoned that the foundations of a state’s strength were agriculture and armed forces. Since both lines of work directly advanced the interests of the state, Legalists sought to channel as many individuals as possible into cultivation or military service. Meanwhile, they discouraged others from pursuing what they believed were less useful careers as merchants, entrepreneurs, scholars, educators, philosophers, poets, or artists.

The Legalists expected to harness subjects’ energy by means of clear and strict laws—hence the name “Legalist.” Their faith in laws distinguished the Legalists clearly from the Confucians, who relied on education and example to induce individuals to behave appropriately. The Legalists believed that this was not enough: to persuade individuals to serve the needs of the state, they imposed a strict legal regimen that clearly outlined expectations and provided severe punishment for violators. They believed that if people feared to commit small crimes, they would hesitate all the more before committing great crimes. Thus Legalists imposed harsh penalties for even minor infractions: individuals could suffer amputation of their hands or feet, for example, for disposing of trash in the street. The Legalists also established the principle of collective responsibility before the law, whereby all members of a family or a community were liable to be punished along with the actual violator.

The Legalists’ principles of government did not win them much popularity. Yet Legalist doctrine lent itself readily to practical application, and Legalist principles of government quickly produced remarkable results for rulers who adopted them. In fact, Legalist methods put an end to the Period of the Warring States and brought about the unification of China.

**The Unification of China**

During the Period of the Warring States, rulers of several regional states adopted elements of the Legalist program. Legalist doctrines met the most enthusiastic response in the state of Qin, in western China, where Shang Yang and Han Feizi oversaw the implementation of Legalist policies. The Qin state soon dominated its neighbors and imposed centralized imperial rule throughout China. Qin rule survived for only a few years, but the succeeding Han dynasty followed the Qin example by governing China through a centralized imperial administration.

**The Qin Dynasty**

**The Kingdom of Qin** During the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., the Qin state underwent a remarkable round of economic, political, and military development. Shang Yang encouraged peasant cultivators to migrate to the sparsely populated state by granting them private plots. That policy dramatically boosted agricultural production

Han Feizi (hahn-fay-zi)
while it simultaneously weakened the economic position of the hereditary aristocratic classes. As a result, Qin rulers found fewer obstacles to establishing centralized, bureaucratic rule throughout their state. Meanwhile, they devoted their newfound wealth to the organization of a powerful army equipped with the most effective iron weapons available. During the third century B.C.E., Qin rulers attacked one state after another, absorbing each new conquest into their centralized structure, until finally they had brought China for the first time under the sway of a single state.

**THE FIRST EMPEROR** In 221 B.C.E., Qin Shihuangdi, the king of Qin (reigned 221–210 B.C.E.), proclaimed himself the First Emperor and decreed that his descendants would reign for thousands of generations. In fact, the dynasty lasted only fourteen years, dissolving in 207 B.C.E. because of civil insurrections. Yet the Qin dynasty had a significance out of proportion to its short life, because like the Achaemenid empire in Persia, the Qin dynasty established a tradition of centralized imperial rule that later rulers sought to emulate.

Like his ancestors in the kingdom of Qin, the First Emperor of China ignored the nobility and ruled his empire through a centralized bureaucracy. He governed from his capital at Xianyang, near the modern city of Xi’an. The remainder of China he divided into administrative provinces and districts, and he entrusted the implementation of his policies to officers of the central government who served at his pleasure. He disarmed regional military forces, and he built roads to facilitate communications and the movement of armies. He also drafted laborers by the hundreds of thousands to build a massive defensive barrier that was a precursor to the Great Wall of China.

**RESISTANCE TO QIN POLICIES** It is likely that many Chinese welcomed the political stability introduced by the Qin dynasty, but it did not win universal acceptance. Confucians, Daoists, and others launched a vigorous campaign of criticism. In an effort to reassert his authority, Qin Shihuangdi ordered execution for those who criticized his regime. In the year following this decree, for example, he sentenced some 460 scholars residing in the capital to be buried alive for their criticism of his regime. Qin Shihuangdi also demanded that all books of philosophy, ethics, history, and literature be burned. Although he spared some works on medicine, fortune-telling, and agriculture on the grounds that they had some utilitarian value, many classical literary or philosophical works were lost.

**QIN CENTRALIZATION** The First Emperor launched several initiatives that enhanced the unity of China. In keeping with his policy of centralization, he standardized the laws, currencies, weights, and measures of the various regions of China. Previously, regional states had organized their own legal and economic systems, which often hampered commerce and communications across state boundaries. Uniform coinage and legal standards encouraged the integration of China’s various regions into a society more tightly knit than ever before. The roads and bridges that Qin Shihuangdi built throughout his realm, like those built in other classical societies, also encouraged economic integration because they facilitated interregional commerce.

**STANDARDIZED SCRIPT** Perhaps even more important than his legal and economic policies was the First Emperor’s standardization of Chinese script. Before the Qin dynasty, regional Chinese scripts had developed along different lines and had become mutually unrecognizable. In hopes of ensuring better understanding and uniform application of his policies, Qin Shihuangdi mandated the use of a common script throughout his empire. The regions of China continued to use different spoken languages, as they do

Qin Shihuangdi (chin she-huang-dee)
Xianyang (SHYAHN-YAHNG)
Xi’an (shee-ahn)
today, but they wrote those languages with a common script—just as if Europeans spoke English, French, German, and other languages but wrote them all down in Latin. In China, speakers of different languages use the same written symbols, which enables them to communicate in writing across linguistic boundaries.

In spite of his ruthlessness, Qin Shihuangdi ranks as one of the most important figures in Chinese history. The First Emperor established a precedent for centralized imperial rule, which remained the norm in China until the early twentieth century. He also pointed China in the direction of political and cultural unity, and with some periods of interruption, China has remained politically and culturally unified to the present day.

**TOMB OF THE FIRST EMPEROR**  Qin Shihuangdi died in 210 B.C.E. His final resting place was a lavish tomb constructed by some seven hundred thousand drafted laborers as a permanent monument to the First Emperor. Rare and expensive grave goods accompanied the emperor in burial, along with sacrificed slaves, concubines, and many of the craftsmen who designed and built the tomb. Qin Shihuangdi was laid to rest in an elaborate underground palace lined with bronze and protected by traps and crossbows rigged to fire at intruders. Buried in the vicinity of the tomb itself was an entire army of magnificently detailed life-size pottery figures to guard the emperor in death.

The terra-cotta army of Qin Shihuangdi protected his tomb, but it could not save his successors or his empire. The First Emperor had conscripted millions of laborers from
One detachment of the formidable, life-size, terra-cotta army buried in the vicinity of Qin Shihuangdi's tomb to protect the emperor after his death. What does the construction of such an elaborate tomb tell us about Qin Shihuangdi's ability to command resources?

all parts of China to work on massive public works projects. Although these projects increased productivity and promoted the integration of China's various regions, they also generated tremendous ill will among the drafted laborers. Revolts began in the year after Qin Shihuangdi's death, and in 207 B.C.E. waves of rebels overwhelmed the Qin court, slaughtering government officials and burning state buildings. The Qin dynasty quickly dissolved in chaos.

The Early Han Dynasty

Liu Bang  The bloody end of the Qin dynasty might well have ended the experiment with centralized imperial rule in China. However, centralized rule returned almost immediately, largely because of a determined commander named Liu Bang. Judging from the historian Sima Qian's account, Liu Bang was not a colorful or charismatic figure, but he was a persistent man and a methodical planner. He surrounded himself with brilliant advisors and enjoyed the unwavering loyalty of his troops. By 206 B.C.E. he had restored order throughout China and established himself at the head of a new dynasty.

Liu Bang called the new dynasty the Han, in honor of his native land. The Han dynasty turned out to be one of the longest and most influential in all of Chinese history. It lasted for more than four hundred years, from 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E., although for a brief period (9–23 C.E.) a usurper temporarily displaced Han rule. Thus historians conventionally divide the dynasty into the Former Han (206 B.C.E.–9 C.E.) and the Later Han (25–220 C.E.).
The Han dynasty consolidated the tradition of centralized imperial rule that the Qin dynasty had pioneered. During the Former Han, emperors ruled from Chang'an, a cosmopolitan city near modern Xi'an that became the cultural capital of China. During the Later Han, the emperors moved their capital east to Luoyang, also a cosmopolitan city and second in importance only to Chang'an throughout much of Chinese history.

**EARLY HAN POLICIES** During the early days of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang attempted to follow a middle path between the decentralized political alliances of the Zhou dynasty and the tightly centralized state of the Qin to reap the advantages and avoid the excesses of both. On the one hand, he allotted large landholdings to members of the imperial family, in the expectation that they would provide a reliable network of support for his rule. On the other hand, he divided the empire into administrative districts governed by officials who served at the emperor’s pleasure.

Liu Bang learned quickly that reliance on his family did not guarantee support for the emperor. In 200 B.C.E. an army of nomadic Xiongnu warriors besieged Liu Bang and almost captured him. He managed to escape—but without receiving the support he had expected from his family members. From that point forward, Liu Bang and his successors followed a policy of centralization. They reclaimed lands from family members, absorbed those lands into the imperial domain, and entrusted political responsibilities to an administrative bureaucracy. Thus, despite a brief flirtation with a decentralized government, the Han dynasty left as its principal political legacy a tradition of centralized imperial rule.

**THE MARTIAL EMPEROR: HAN WUDI** Much of the reason for the Han dynasty’s success was the long reign of the dynasty’s greatest and most energetic emperor, Han Wudi, the “Martial Emperor,” who occupied the throne for fifty-four years, from 141 to 87 B.C.E. Han Wudi ruled his empire with vision and vigor. He pursued two policies in particular: administrative centralization and imperial expansion.

**HAN CENTRALIZATION** Domestically, Han Wudi worked strenuously to increase the authority and prestige of the central government. He built an enormous bureaucracy to administer his empire, and he relied on Legalist principles of government. He also continued the Qin policy of building roads and canals to facilitate trade and communication between China’s regions. To finance the vast machinery of his government, he levied taxes on agriculture, trade, and craft industries, and he established imperial monopolies on the production of essential goods such as iron and salt. In building such an enormous governmental structure, Han Wudi faced a serious problem of recruitment. He needed thousands of reliable, intelligent, educated individuals to run his bureaucracy, but there was no institutionalized educational system in China that could provide a continuous supply of such people.

**THE CONFUCIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM** Han Wudi addressed that problem in 124 B.C.E. by establishing an imperial university that prepared young men for government service. Personally, the Martial Emperor cared little for learning. In that respect he resembled all the other early Han emperors: Liu Bang once emptied his bladder in the distinctive cap worn by Confucian scholars in order to demonstrate his contempt for academic pursuits. Yet Han Wudi recognized that the success of his efforts at bureaucratic centralization would depend on a corps of educated officeholders. The imperial university took Confucianism—the only Chinese cultural tradition developed enough to provide rigorous intellectual discipline—as the basis for its curriculum. Ironically, then, although he relied on Legalist principles of government, Han Wudi ensured the long-term survival of the Confucian tradition by establishing it as the official imperial ideology.
The Xiongnu frequently mounted raids into this border region.

MAP 6.2 | East Asia and central Asia at the time of Han Wudi, ca. 87 B.C.E. Note the indication in this map that Han authority extended to Korea and central Asia during the first century B.C.E. What strategic value did these regions hold for the Han dynasty?

HAN IMPERIAL EXPANSION While he moved aggressively to centralize power and authority at home, Han Wudi pursued an equally vigorous foreign policy of imperial expansion. He invaded northern Vietnam and Korea, subjected them to Han rule, and brought them into the orbit of Chinese society. He ruled both lands through a Chinese-style government, and Confucian values followed the Han armies into the new colonies. Over the course of the centuries, the educational systems of both northern Vietnam and Korea drew their inspiration almost entirely from Confucianism.

THE XIONGNU The greatest foreign challenge that Han Wudi faced came from the Xiongnu, a nomadic people from the steppes of central Asia. Like most of the other nomadic peoples of central Asia, the Xiongnu were superb horsemen. Although their weaponry was not as sophisticated as that of the Chinese, their mobility offered the Xiongnu a distinct advantage. When they could not satisfy their needs through peaceful trade, they mounted sudden raids into villages or trading areas, where they commandeered supplies and then rapidly departed. Because they had no cities or settled places to defend, the Xiongnu could quickly disperse when confronted by a superior force.

During the reign of Maodun (210–174 B.C.E.), their most successful leader, the Xiongnu ruled a vast federation of nomadic peoples that stretched from the Aral Sea to the Yellow Sea. Maodun brought strict military discipline to the Xiongnu. According to Sima Qian, Maodun once instructed his forces to shoot their arrows at whatever target he himself selected. He aimed in succession at his favorite horse, one of his wives, and his father’s best horse, and he summarily executed those who failed to discharge their arrows. When his forces reliably followed his orders, Maodun targeted his father, who immediately fell under a hail of arrows, leaving Maodun as the Xiongnu chief.
With its highly disciplined army, the Xiongnu empire was a source of concern to the Han emperors. During the early days of the dynasty, they attempted to pacify the Xiongnu by paying them tribute—providing them with food and finished goods in hopes that they would refrain from mounting raids in China—or by arranging marriages between the ruling houses of the two peoples in hopes of establishing peaceful diplomatic relations. Neither method succeeded for long.

**HAN EXPANSION INTO CENTRAL ASIA** Ultimately, Han Wudi decided to go on the offensive against the Xiongnu. He invaded central Asia with vast armies and brought much of the Xiongnu empire under Chinese military control. He pacified a long central Asian corridor extending almost to Bactria, which served as the lifeline of a trade network that linked much of the Eurasian landmass. He even planted colonies of Chinese cultivators in the oasis communities of central Asia. As a result of those efforts, the Xiongnu empire soon fell into disarray. For the moment, the Han state enjoyed uncontested hegemony in both east Asia and central Asia. Before long, however, economic and social problems within China brought serious problems for the Han dynasty itself.

### From Economic Prosperity to Social Disorder

Already during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, a productive agricultural economy supported the emergence of complex society in China. High agricultural productivity continued during the Qin and Han dynasties, and it supported the development of craft industries such as the forging of iron tools and the weaving of silk textiles. During the Han dynasty, however, China experienced serious social and economic problems as land became concentrated in the hands of a small, wealthy elite class. Social tensions generated banditry, rebellion, and even the temporary deposition of the Han state itself. Although Han rulers regained the throne, they presided over a much-weakened realm. By the early third century C.E., social and political problems brought the Han dynasty to an end.

**Productivity and Prosperity during the Former Han**

**Patriarchal Social Order** The structure of Chinese society during the Qin and Han dynasties was very similar to that of the Zhou era. Patriarchal households averaged five inhabitants, although several generations of aristocratic families sometimes lived together in large compounds. During the Han dynasty, moralists sought to enhance the authority of patriarchal family heads by emphasizing the importance of filial piety and women's subordination to their menfolk. A widely read treatise titled *Admonitions for Women*, for example, emphasized humility, obedience, subservience, and devotion to their husbands as the virtues most appropriate for women. To Confucian moralists and government authorities alike, orderly, patriarchal families were the foundations of a stable society.

The vast majority of the Chinese population worked in the countryside cultivating grains and vegetables, which they harvested in larger quantities than ever before. The increased agricultural surplus allowed many Chinese to produce fine manufactured goods and to engage in trade.

**Iron Metallurgy** During the Han dynasty, the iron industry entered a period of rapid growth. Han artisans experimented with production techniques and learned to craft fine utensils for both domestic and military uses. Iron pots, stoves, knives, needles,
axes, hammers, saws, and other tools became standard fixtures in households that could not have afforded more expensive bronze utensils. The ready availability of iron also had important military implications. Craftsmen designed suits of iron armor to protect soldiers against arrows and blows, which helps to explain the success of Chinese armies against the Xiongnu and other nomadic peoples.

**SILK TEXTILES** Textile production—particularly sericulture, the manufacture of silk—became an especially important industry. The origins of sericulture date to the fourth millennium B.C.E., but only in Han times did sericulture expand from its original home in the Yellow River valley to most parts of China. Although silkworms inhabited much of Eurasia, Chinese silk was especially fine because of advanced sericulture techniques. Chinese producers bred their silkworms, fed them on finely chopped mulberry leaves, and carefully unraveled their cocoons so as to obtain long fibers of raw silk that they wove into light, strong, lustrous fabrics. (In other lands, producers relied on wild silkworms that ate a variety of leaves and chewed through their cocoons, leaving only short fibers that yielded lower-quality fabrics.) Chinese silk became a prized commodity in India, Persia, Mesopotamia, and even the distant Roman empire. Commerce in silk and other products led to the establishment of an intricate network of trade routes known collectively as the silk roads (discussed in chapter 9).

**PAPER** While expanding the iron and silk industries, Han craftsmen also invented paper. In earlier times Chinese scribes had written mostly on bamboo strips and silk fabrics, but about 100 C.E. Chinese craftsmen began to fashion hemp, bark, and textile fibers into sheets of paper. Although wealthy elites continued to read books written on silk rolls, paper soon became the preferred medium for most writing.

**POPULATION GROWTH** High agricultural productivity supported rapid demographic growth and general prosperity during the early part of the Han dynasty. Historians estimate that about 220 B.C.E., just after the founding of the Qin dynasty, the Chinese population was twenty million. By the year 9 C.E., at the end of the Former Han dynasty, it had tripled to sixty million. Meanwhile, taxes claimed only a small portion of production, yet state granaries bulged so much that their contents sometimes spoiled before they could be consumed.

**Economic and Social Difficulties**

In spite of general prosperity, China began to experience economic and social difficulties in the Former Han period. The military adventures and the central Asian policy of Han Wudi caused severe economic strain. To finance his ventures, Han Wudi raised taxes and confiscated land and personal property from wealthy individuals, sometimes on the pretext that they had violated imperial laws. Those measures discouraged investment in manufacturing and trading enterprises, which in turn had a dampening effect on the larger economy.

**SOCIAL TENSIONS** Distinctions between rich and poor hardened during the course of the Han dynasty. Wealthy individuals wore fine silk garments and ate rich foods, whereas the poor classes made do with rough hemp clothing and a diet of mostly grain. By the first century B.C.E., social and economic differences had generated serious tensions, and peasants in hard-pressed regions began to organize rebellions in hopes of gaining a larger share of Han society’s resources.

**LAND DISTRIBUTION** A particularly difficult problem concerned the distribution of land. Economic problems forced many small landowners to sell their property under unfavorable conditions or even to forfeit it in exchange for cancellation of their
Burial suit. In Han times the wealthiest classes enjoyed the privilege of being buried in suits of jade plaques sewn together with gold threads, like the burial dress of Liu Sheng, who died in 113 B.C.E. at Manzheng in Hebei Province. Legend held that jade prevented decomposition of the deceased's body. Scholars have estimated that a jade burial suit like this one required ten years' labor. What can such a suit tell us about the lives of the Chinese elite?

debts. In extreme cases, individuals had to sell themselves and their families into slavery to satisfy their creditors. Owners of large estates not only increased the size of their holdings by absorbing the property of their less fortunate neighbors but also increased the efficiency of their operations by employing cheap labor.

By the end of the first century B.C.E., land had accumulated in the hands of a relatively small number of individuals who owned vast estates, while ever-increasing numbers of peasant cultivators led difficult lives with few prospects for improvement. Landless peasants became restive, and Chinese society faced growing problems of banditry and sporadic rebellion.

The Reign of Wang Mang Tensions came to a head during the early first century C.E. when a powerful and respected Han minister named Wang Mang undertook a thoroughgoing program of reform. In 6 C.E. a two-year-old boy inherited the Han imperial throne. Because the boy was unable to govern, Wang Mang served as his regent. Many officials regarded Wang as more capable than members of the Han family and urged him to claim the imperial honor for himself. In 9 C.E. he did just that: announcing that the mandate of heaven had passed from the Han to his family, he seized the throne. Wang Mang then introduced a series of wide-ranging reforms that have prompted historians to refer to him as the "socialist emperor."

The most important reforms concerned landed property: Wang Mang limited the amount of land that a family could hold and ordered officials to break up large estates, redistribute them, and provide landless individuals with property to cultivate. Despite his good intentions, the socialist emperor attempted to impose his policy without adequate preparation and communication. The result was confusion: landlords resisted a policy that threatened their holdings, and even peasants found its application inconsistent and unsatisfactory. After several years of chaos, in 23 C.E. a coalition of disgruntled landlords and desperate peasants ended both his dynasty and his life.

The Later Han Dynasty Within two years a recovered Han dynasty returned to power, but it ruled over a weakened realm. Nevertheless, during the early years of the Later Han, emperors ruled vigorously in the manner of Liu Bang and Han Wudi. They regained control of the centralized administration and reorganized the state bureaucracy. They also maintained the Chinese presence in central Asia, continued to keep the Xiongnu in submission, and exercised firm control over the silk roads.

However, the Later Han emperors did not seriously address the problem of land distribution that had helped to bring down the Former Han dynasty. The wealthy classes
still lived in relative luxury while peasants worked under difficult conditions. The empire continued to suffer the effects of banditry and rebellions organized by desperate peasants with few opportunities to improve their lot.

**COLLAPSE OF THE HAN DYNASTY** In addition, the Later Han emperors were unable to prevent the development of factions at court that paralyzed the central government. Factions of imperial family members, Confucian scholar-bureaucrats, and court eunuchs sought to increase their influence, protect their own interests, and destroy their rivals. On several occasions relations between the various factions became so strained that they made war against one another. In 189 C.E., for example, a faction led by an imperial relative descended on the Han palace and slaughtered more than two thousand eunuchs in an effort to destroy them as a political force. In that respect the attack succeeded. From the unmeasured violence of the operation, however, it is clear that the Later Han dynasty had reached a point of internal weakness from which it could not easily recover. Indeed, early in the next century, the central government disintegrated, and for almost four centuries China remained divided into several large regional kingdoms.

**SUMMARY**

The Qin state lasted for a short fourteen years, but it opened a new era in Chinese history. Qin conquerors imposed unified rule on a series of politically independent kingdoms and launched an ambitious program to forge culturally distinct regions into a larger Chinese society. The Han dynasty endured for more than four centuries and largely completed the project of unifying China. Han rulers built a centralized bureaucracy that administered a unified empire, thus establishing a precedent for centralized imperial rule in China. They also entered into a close alliance with Confucian moralists who organized a system of advanced education that provided recruits for the imperial bureaucracy. Moreover, on the basis of a highly productive economy stimulated by technological innovations, Han rulers projected Chinese influence abroad to Korea, Vietnam, and central Asia. Thus, like classical societies in Persia, India, and the Mediterranean basin, Han China produced a set of distinctive political and cultural traditions that shaped Chinese and neighboring societies over the long term.

**STUDY TERMS**

- Analects (105)
- Confucianism (104)
- Daodejing (107)
- Daoism (106)
- Former Han (112)
- Han dynasty (112)
- Han Wudi (113)
- junzi (105)
- Laozi (107)
- Later Han (112)
- Legalism (108)
- li (105)
- Liu Bang (112)
- Maodun (114)
- Mencius (106)
- Qin (103)
- Qin Shihuangdi (110)
- ren (105)
- Sima Qian (103)
- Wang Mang (117)
- wuwei (108)
- xiao (105)
- Xiongnu (113)
- Xunzi (106)
- Zhuangzi (107)
FOR FURTHER READING


