The Han Dynasty

Huang He Valley, 206 B.C.

The Qin dynasty fell in 206 B.C., and a period of civil war followed. Peasants, Qin generals and officials, and nobles fought one another for power. That same year, Liu Bang, a Qin official, claimed the title of king of Han, a state within the Qin Empire.

With the support of his army, Liu Bang had gained control over all the former Qin lands by 202 B.C. He declared himself emperor and was given the name of Han Gaozu, or “High Ancestor.”

Gaozu’s rule began the Han dynasty, one of the most important dynasties in China’s history. Even today, many Chinese call themselves Han-ren, or Han People. The long-lasting Han dynasty continued for more than 400 years, until a.d. 220.

The Han made their capital Chang’an, near the old Qin capital of Xianyang. Chang’an later became known as Xi’an.

As the first Han emperor, Gaozu was well-liked by the peasants. Because he came from a family of poor farmers, Gaozu understood how hard peasant life was. He helped the peasants by giving them land and reducing their taxes.

Gaozu, and later Han emperors, built on the Qin achievement of uniting China. Like the Qin, the Han accepted the idea of a strong central government and an all-powerful leader. Unlike the Qin, the Han followed some of the teachings of Confucius. Han rule became known for mixing Confucian and Legalist ideas.

The Han dynasty emperors came to be as feared and respected as Shi Huangdi had been, yet they did not use the many laws of the Qin. Instead, they depended on the Confucian idea that people should obey their rulers in the same way that children obey their parents.

The use of both Legalist and Confucian ideas helped the Han rulers make important political contributions that changed the course of China’s history. They led to expansion of China’s empire. At the same time, they brought about development of an imperial bureaucratic state, which lasted more than 2,000 years.
Wu Di and Civil Service

In 141 B.C., Wu Di rose to the Han throne. The name Wu Di, or “Warlike Emperor,” suited him well. He formed large armies, some with as many as 300,000 soldiers, to protect and expand the empire. Wu Di sent soldiers north to drive back tribes who tried to attack the empire. He also used armies to add more lands to the empire. By 101 B.C., Wu Di’s expansion of the empire included western China and parts of ancient Korea and Vietnam.

Wu Di’s military wins had a price. To pay for his troops and growing empire, the emperor created new taxes. These new taxes were not popular with the people.

Wu Di had a deep respect for the ideas of Confucius. The Qin had burned books about Confucianism. Wu Di started a university to teach Confucian ideas. He also made Confucianism the empire’s official religion.

Wu Di even founded China’s first civil service on Confucian ideals. A civil service is a part of a bureaucracy that does the day-to-day running of a government. According to Confucius, only skilled people should govern a state.

Wu Di helped start a system in which civil servants could be picked based on their abilities and achievements. Before, government jobs had been filled through family ties and loyalty to the emperor. Under the Han, educated people could become civil servants by passing written tests.

The civil service that Wu Di set up had many benefits. It placed educated people in government jobs. It also let people who did well on these tests receive jobs and social status. This meant that education became more important than ever in China.

Cultural Achievements

Beginning in about 200 B.C., China entered a Golden Age. Success in war, economic growth, and education led to good times for the Han Empire.

Art also flourished under the Han. Artists made China’s first major stone sculptures. They also became skilled at painting land and people as well as at silk weaving and pottery making.

The Han also took giant steps in science. They improved the way they made paper and built the first seismograph, an instrument that shows the location and strength of an earthquake. They also invented sundials and water clocks to measure time.

Han writers enjoyed great success as well. Many poems written during the Han dynasty are still read in China today. One writer, Sima Qian, contributed to Chinese culture by writing the first history of China.

Reading Check

MAIN IDEA AND DETAILS:

What made the Han civil service different from earlier methods of running the government?

In what areas did the Han make advances during the Golden Age?