Chapter 3

The formation of empire: The Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC - 220 AD)

Key ideas:
This chapter provides a sketch of the structures of empire that took shape in the Qin and Han periods. Questions pursued are: What accounts for the admiration and abhorration of the Qin in Chinese history writing? How could the Han inherit Qin structures and yet build an empire of great stability? How were cultural, political and economic structures transformed through the four centuries of the Han? What was the legacy of the early empire for China’s subsequent history?

3.1 The Qin conquest

In 246 BC King Zheng (政, 259-210) came to the throne of Qin 秦 as a boy of thirteen. Nine years later, the young king took power into his own hands and started an all-out war of conquest on the remaining six of the central states. As conquest advanced, the Qin administrative system was extended into the newly occupied territories. In 221 BC, the last states succumbed. Qin had succeeded in unifying China.

For a map of the Qin state and its conquests, see http://www.fsmitha.com/h1/map08ch.htm
Upon the completion of conquest, no new dynasty was proclaimed. All of China had simply become Qin. King Zheng marked the event by taking a new title, calling himself the First Emperor, Qinshi huangdi 秦始皇帝. The translation hardly carries the connotation of the name. More literally, but still rather too technical, it could be rendered as "Founding august emperor of the Qin." Huang, usually as huangtian 皇天, "august heaven," and di, usually shangdi 上帝, "God Above" of the Shang, had perhaps become vague and lost some of their religious meaning, yet combining them as the title of a living ruler at the very least gave him an almost divine rank. "King" (wang 王) henceforth was no more than a title of a lesser lord who recognized the august emperor as his overlord. Furthermore, the First Emperor decreed that his successors were to name themselves after him, exchanging the ordinal number of their reigns, becoming the Second Emperor, the Third Emperor and so forth.

As it were, the new dynasty barely outlasted its founder. When the First Emperor died in 210 BC, his eldest son was ordered to commit suicide through the intrigues of a eunuch called Zhao Gao 赵高 (died 207 BC), whose machinations also led to the execution of the great Legalist chancellor Li Si 李斯 (died 208 BC). The second son mounted the throne under the title Second Emperor (Ershi Huangdi 二世皇帝). Amidst mounting confusion at the court and major rebellions, the Second Emperor was forced to commit suicide only two and a half years later. He was succeeded by his young son who stayed on the throne for only forty-six days before the capital was taken by rebel forces led by a certain Liu Bang (刘邦, 256-195). The boy-emperor was spared then but killed by the next rebels to occupy the capital later that year. The new dynasty had lasted for only 14 years. After four more years of civil war, Liu Bang emerged victorious and became the first emperor of the Han dynasty.

Throughout Chinese history writing, attitudes towards the short-lived Qin dynasty have been highly ambivalent, torn between admiration for the unification of China into a powerful empire and abhorration of the ruthless despotism.

The founding of the Qin dynasty in 221 BC was the result of conquest. The relative latecomer Qin, arising from the Western frontier and considered half-barbarian by some, in the end subjugated the other states, thus ending the Warring States period. The swift military success of the Qin is amazing. It is even more so if we consider that the Eastern part of the Central Plains, modern Shandong and the surrounding plains, was leading in all respects. It was the cultural centre, most densely populated and economically most powerful.56

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56 Shi Nianhai (1991), Zhongguo lishi renkou dili, 9f. and 127-135. Through the Eastern Zhou period a gradual shift of the central region of China in terms of both population and wealth can be made out. In the 8th and 7th centuries BC, the Luoyang area on the Western rim of the North China Plain was regarded as the centre of the Chinese world. By the late Warring States period, however, it had
For a map of population densities during the Early Han, see Blunden/Elvin, Cultural Atlas, p. 30.

What enabled the state of Qin to achieve unification by conquest? And why was their empire to short-lived? What mark could such a short-lived phenomenon leave on Chinese history?

The third question is most easily answered: The Qin is tremendously important. It set the structures of imperial China, not so much through the example it set during its existence than by the fact that the succeeding long-lived Han dynasties took them over. For the former two questions, we need to take a closer look at pre-imperial and imperial Qin.

**Reasons for Qin strength**

Qin military superiority has been attributed to a number of reasons. Technical aspects include a good supply of horses, efficient, because irrigated farming and a superior transport system, all going back to the period from the 7th century BC onwards. The state is thought to have originated in the Northwestern frontier zone. By maintaining its steppe contacts even after moving its capital eastwards into the Weihe valley, Qin continued its superiority in horse-breeding. Apart from the question of horse supply, superiority in several fields of transport technology can be identified, including road and bridge construction, vehicle building, canal construction, cartography, generating important logistic and advantage.57

The development of efficient administration from the mid-4th century onwards is regarded as the decisive reason for Qin strength. This administration is described as bureaucratic and Legalist. Bureaucratic, because it was made up by professionals working in stable institutions, having done away with all remnants of feudal structures. Legalist, because it realized the goals of the philosophical school that had taken practical, this-worldly and political oriented thinking furthest.

**Legalism**

Legalists (Fajia 法家 according to Han categorization) rejected Confucian values. They denied that there was any point in trying to return to ancient ritual, because that was irrecoverably lost and contributed nothing to solving the problems of the present age. Taking scepticism to its bitter end, they concluded that human nature was inherently evil and had to be contained as best as possible. The best means to do so were strict laws that applied to all

shifted to Dingtao, the capital of the small state of Song on the confluence of four rivers. It was this city, renowned mostly as a trading hub that was now called "the world’s centre" (tianxia zhì zhōng 天下之中). See Tian Changwu (1998), Zhongguo lidai jingjishi, 305.

without difference (even to members of the royal family, though not to the ruler himself) and tight, military-style organization.

The “four people” and state efficiency

Legalism was not a Qin specialty. Rather, it could be regarded as the school of thinking that centred on statecraft issues. In the Guanzi, a tricky, because multi-layered text written mostly in the 3rd century BC with later additions, we first find the common population divided into the “four people,” the occupational groups of “knights (later to become literati), peasants, artisans and merchants.” (simin: shi nong gong shang 四民：士农工商). These categories obviously are not simply descriptive, for as such they would be incomplete, but a division of subjects along ideological lines. The ideology is expressed in the ranking, with the educated leading, followed by the peasants and the artisans, with the traders in the lowliest position. In terms of living conditions, this ranking of course is highly unlikely. Artisans, often unfree, may have been more lowly than ordinary peasants, but historic sources mention enormously wealthy merchants in the period. There is no doubt that the categorization reflects normative ideology rather than social reality.

When we read the ranking as indicating the groups’ usefulness from the perspective of the state, it becomes more telling. Educated knights were crucial as strategists, warriors and administrators. Peasants were the next useful because they were indispensable and exploitable, producing the food and clothes for elites and armies, and serving as infantryists and corvée labourers, to boot. Artisans, who produced necessary and valuable things, but they were less immediately useful and also had to be maintained by the peasants. Traders were least useful because as a highly mobile group they were hard to exploit. While indispensable for goods they provided, often from distant regions, they were a nuisance for being so hard to control. This little excursion into the classical categorization of the people illustrates the context of relatively general efficiency-oriented statecraft thinking, in which Legalism emerged.

Shang Yang’s administrative system

The legalist prime minister Shang Yang (?-338 BC) completely restructured the Qin state in the years from 359 to 338 BC. According to the Shiji, he implemented the following measures:58 The whole population was registered and assigned to groups of five and ten. These groups were mutually responsible if anyone among them should commit a crime under the threat of dire punishments:

Anyone who failed to report criminal activity would be chopped in two at the waist, while those who would report it would receive the same reward as that for obtaining the head of an enemy.

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58 Lewis (1990), Sanctioned violence, 61f.
The entire society was divided into different ranks, each with its own allowances and sumptuary regulations. Ranking was based strictly on performance, soldiers obtained rise in rank by presenting heads of enemies, farmers could rise by over-fulfilling their tax quotas in grain and cloth. All adult males had to provide military and labour service.

The landscape was redrawn in accordance with requirements of administrative efficiency. Fields became narrow strips clearly demarcated by paths and roads that formed a regular grid. The administrative unit of the county was established disregarding "natural" units such as towns and villages.

A rural totalitarian system all geared to production which makes us cringe. How much of this was really put into practice? How could such an exact census be undertaken and maintained? What happened to the regular grid of paths and roads in hilly country? Clearly, the system could not have been fully workable. The Shiji description probably in part reflects a normative ideal type promoted by Shan Yang rather than reality and in part may be consciously overdrawn in order to highlight the inhumane cruelty of the Qin. Much of it, however, was actually implemented.

The Shuihudi finds of Qin legal code

The discovery of excerpts from the Qin legal code in the grave of a minor official near Shuihudi in Hubei provides evidence for an effective Qin administration in the territory of the conquered large southern state of Chu around the foundation of the new empire. These regulations, too, are normative, providing us with the way things were supposed to be done rather than how they actually were done. Yet, different from the account by the Han period historian Sima Qian, they are an unmediated Qin source.

Derk Bodde points out that there is an impressive "insistence on fixed routine and exactitude in administrative procedure:"

- When a request is to be made about some matter, it must be done in writing. There can be no oral requesting, nor can it be entrusted [to a third person.] ...
- When documents are transmitted or received, the month, date and time of day of their sending and arrival must be recorded, so as to expedite a reply.

Criminal and administrative laws were draconian but not indiscriminate. Precisely defined judicial procedures were stressed to establish the severity of a crime. Manslaughter and deliberate murder were differentiated. The most common punishment for criminal offences was forced labour, for administrative offences fines

59 The interpretation of the Shiji formulation "he opened up paths (qianmo) and set up boundaries" has been interpreted variously as the setting up of a new system of paths and roads or as abolishing a formerly existing system. My interpretation follows Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 38-43.

were common. The emerging picture certainly is one of an effective bureaucracy.61

The reshaping of China under the First Emperor

During the eleven years of his rule, the First Emperor had the face of China changed. Greatly simplified, his policies can be described as a combination of implementing Legalist structures and of enacting and augmenting the imperial dignity. On the one hand, administration was set up, society was reorganized so as to be geared towards production, wars were fought to expand the empire and to pacify its borders, involving great infrastructure projects of highways and the linking up of the walls on the Northern frontier to form the Great Wall (not the one we see today, though, and which dates from the Ming). On the other hand, the First Emperor enacted his claim to almost divine status in new ritual, in six great tours of the empire, in the pursuit for achieving immortality, and, most famously, in having a mausoleum of unprecedented scale built for himself. A corner of this mausoleum is being excavated since 1974, the terracotta army of more than life-size terracotta soldiers with real weapons. After the First Emperor’s death, the workers involved in building the underground structures and defensive mechanisms were entombed with the dead emperor, in order to protect its secrets. Even the Emperor’s concubines, it is said, were ordered to follow their lord in death.

For a photo of two soldiers of the First Emperor’s terracotta army with restaurators – showing the size of the statues, see

http://www.n24.de/n24/Wissen/History/d/1547238/weitere-terrakotta-krieger-entdeckt.html

This is the last instance of sacrificial burials in China. The aim of protecting the grave from grave-robbers was not achieved. Less than three years later, the Qin imperial line had come to an end and the mausoleum was looted.

Let us take a closer look at two sets of policies that were decisive for the long-lived unity of empire, the great standardization and the granary and transport system.

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61 A new discovery of large sets of Qin wooden slips in 2002 near Liye in Hunan consisting mainly of administrative records, will provide a much more detailed picture of how Qin administration actually worked.
The "great unification" of the Qin

The impression administrative and organizational efficiency is driven home by sweeping measures of standardization. Qin standards and technologies were implemented throughout the conquered regions. "Great unification" \( (da \ yitong \ 大一統) \) was carried out in measures and weights, in currency and the gauge of carts and chariots, in writing, and in a new orthodoxy of tradition. Everything, from the precise size and quality of measures to the width and length of a piece of cloth was precisely regulated. Of all these measures, the unification of the written tradition elicited most wrath among the literate elite. It was enforced with draconian measures, including - so the history books say - the burning of all books excluded from the new orthodoxy and the slaughter of 2000 scholars. Nevertheless, the Qin standardization was perhaps the measure that truly established lasting unity of the realm. It also set the standard for later dynasties, with regard to both technical and cultural standardization - although usually by less violent means. "Common writing, common gauge" \( (tong \ wen \ tong \ gui \ 同文同軌) \) became the expression that summarized integrated unity throughout the realm.

For the transformation of the character 漢 漢 from about 1000 BCE-200 CE, see \url{http://chinese-linguipedia.org/clk/chinese}

When we consider the long-drawn difficult processes of unifying the currency within the European Union or the inability of adapting global standards for measurements and weights, it is not hard to imagine that the Qin standardization must have been carried out with great efficiency and ruthlessness.
The structure of the imperial political economy

The second fundamental structure allowed the Qin to maintain their capital in the Weihe (渭河) valley of West China, but rule over over and draw resources from most of China proper. Thus, a geographical distance between political and economic centre was established.

The old Qin central region on the Weihe was called Guanzhong (关中), the "land within the passes," for it was accessible only via mountain passes. To the south lay the Qinling mountains (秦岭山), with their up to 3000 m high jagged peaks, to the north the loess plateaus with their deeply cut ravines. To the west the upper Weihe cut through hilly land, linking the area to the Gansu corridor and the Western steppe, to the east was the confluence of Weihe and Huanghe. No doubt, strategically Guanzhong was ideally placed: Easily defendable thanks to the natural barriers surrounding it, in a position to swiftly reach the Central Plains and Eastern China downstream on Weihe and Huanghe, and positioned on the main trade route connecting China with Central Asia, to boot. In addition, it also was richly endowed with natural resources. The warmer and more humid climate meant agricultural fertility, while metal, wood and clay were plentiful. Agricultural productivity was further enhanced by the irrigation system built in the 3rd century BC.

In relation to the territorial expanse of the Qin empire, however, Guanzhong was a western appendage rather than the natural centre. The regions "East of the passes" (Guandong 關東), in particular what is now the eastern parts of the North China Plain and Shandong, were not only vastly larger, but much more populous and wealthy. Guanzhong was separated from the open plains by the difficult 200 km passage of the Sanmen gorges (三门峡) where the Taihang (太行山) and the extension of the Qinling mountains meet.

The granary and transportation systems and the accumulation of Eastern resources in the West

By their determination and organizational capability, the Qin succeeded in establishing the structure to maintain the unity of the empire despite the great distance between political and administrative centres. The grain transportation and granary system provided the link.

Taxation in kind, the concentration of grain, cloth and other tax levies in granaries and storehouses, and their redistribution for the upkeep of state officials, armies as well as a buffer in times of dearth was well established by the time of Qin conquest. It was now expanded to a network channelling resources from all regions of the empire towards Guanzhong. Three central granaries were located along the main transport route from East to West on the Huanghe in the centre of the great plain, at the confluence of Huanghe and
Weihe, and next to the capital. These were huge, fortified complexes that had the size of small cities.\(^{62}\)

The transports that allowed the imperial government to concentrate resources from the whole Eastern part of the realm were enormous. It should be noted that the Huanghe and Weihe transport routes required upstream shipping and included the passage through the Sanmen Gorges with its highly dangerous rapids.\(^{63}\) Organizational challenge was compounded by the fact that grain is a perishable good. If we take into account that transporters and their draught animals had to eat while under way, we get a hunch that the taxpaying regions shouldered a much heavier burden than the equivalent of the grain (and other goods) ultimately provided to the capital area. All in all, the system constituted a great institution that siphoned off resources of the East and South for the maintenance of empire in general and the Western capital region in particular.

**The downfall of the Qin**

While little opposition to the First Emperor's rule is recorded, his empire quickly disintegrated after his death. Almost instantly large rebellions broke out. Although the first wave of spontaneous popular rebellion was put down, when more organized forces rose in rebellion, the government was unable to muster sustained resistance.

The sources on the Qin period date from its successor, the Han, and necessarily are hostile in tone. Nevertheless, the accusation of having driven the people “without rest” (不得休息) and of having ruled without “humaneness” (ren 仁) and “righteousness” (yi 义) appears well founded in a general way\(^{64}\).

**Devastations of war and of large-scale conscription for empire-building projects**

From the period of conquest to the foundation of the Han, China experienced 33 years of almost unbroken war and mass mobilization. While the population of the late Warring States is estimated to have reached between 40 and 45 Mio.; at the end of the Qin it is thought to have fallen to 15 to 18 Mio.\(^{65}\) Unification and Qin imperial grandeur brought death and devastation over China for a whole generation.

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62 One of these granaries, the Han period Huacang (華倉) at the confluence of Weihe and Huanghe has been partly excavated. Enclosed by massive walls stood an as yet undetermined number of granaries. These had dimensions at their basis of about 60 x 25 m. Objects found within the complex show that an older Qin granary was in existence on the same site in 332 BC. The excavation thus provides evidence that Qin possessed a granary system well before the imperial age. See Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 325f. and 329.

63 In the Sanmen Gorges, paths for tugging boats upstream were cut into the rock-face or constructed as galleries in the vertical walls in the Han period.

64 The moral condemnation of Qin rule as lacking humaneness and righteousness goes back to the early Han scholar Jia Yi 賈誼 (201-169 BC).

65 See Ge Jianxiong, Zhongguo renkoushi, 300, 308-312.
In the unification wars, armies ranging in the hundred thousands were mobilized. The some ten years of the First Emperor’s rule were even more disruptive than the preceding years of war. Wars were now fought at the distant northern and southern frontiers. This saved the heartland from destruction but placed huge burdens on the population for the long-distance provisioning of the troops. The construction of infrastructure for military logistics included still visible projects, such as the Straight Road (zhidao 直道) from Guanzhong to the northern loop of the Huanghe or the Magic Canal (Lingqu 灵渠) that links the upper Xiangshui 湘水 and the Lijiang 漓江 on the Hunan-Guizhou border.  

Further strategic and administrative projects were the Great Wall, a defensive bulwark cutting through frontier territory, and the highway network of 6,800 km, that expanded extant roads into a network that made all regions of the empire readily accessible from the capital and controlled the borders. As popular stories such as the tale of Lady Mengjiang (see: http://www.meet-greatwall.org/english/gwcn/egwcn4.htm) tell, those recruited for the Great Wall were not expected to return.

Other projects aimed at consolidating the new rule. The greatest numbers, up to 700,000 were reportedly recruited for the construction of a great new palace and the First Emperor’s mausoleum. The figures have to be regarded with some suspicion, as they were recorded by authors intensely hostile to the Qin.  

The total number of people conscripted for military and construction projects during the decade of the First Emperor’s rule is estimated to have amounted to some 1 Mio people. These were not only taken from their farms and workshops, starving the countryside of able-bodied labourers, but they had to be maintained in placed often far from the agricultural centres, thus increasing the burden of the population.

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66 It is said that for the road leading due north from the capital, across the loess highlands and Mongolian plateaus to the Huanghe “mountains were cut and valleys filled” (Cf. Shi ji: 256). Shi Nianhai documented sections of the highway still visible in the 1970s. See Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 34. For the Magic Canal, see Needham (1971), Science and civilisation in China. Vol. 4. pt. 3: Civil engineering and nautics, pp. ???


68 Ge Jianxiong, Zhongguo renkoushi, 308f.
remaining population as well as binding many more in transport corvée.

In addition, large numbers of people were resettled for political and strategic reasons. In the resettlement policies, we can discern a pronounced bias against the wealthy east of the empire, modern Shandong, Henan and southern Hebei. Thus, the courts and entourage of the subdued lords were resettled to Guanzhong, merchants and iron magnates of the East were removed to Sichuan. It is estimated that altogether 15% of the population were made to leave their home areas. Clearly, the construction of empire was a project demanding a perspective on the population as a mere human resource on the part of the government and was a traumatic experience of totalitarian oppression, toil and death for the majority of its subjects.

All considered, however, we need to keep in mind that the four years of war after the downfall of the Qin, fought by often poorly organized armies and rebel bands, certainly deepened the devastation. To those looking back from the Han period, it appeared natural to blame the Qin for all the suffering from the conquest to the warfare in the wake of the dynasty’s downfall. From our much further removed perspective, it is easier to see both the devastation and to recognize that through four years turmoil, Qin local officials kept up a rule of law and order in many parts of the empire.

3.2 The Han empire

The Han 汉 dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) was extraordinarily long-lived. It is traditionally divided into the Western Han (西汉 206 BC – 3 AD), founded by Liu Bang, the successful rebel leader emerging from the wars after the downfall of the Qin with the capital Xianyang 咸阳 (northwest of modern Xi’an), the short-lived Xin 新 dynasty founded by Wang Mang (王莽, 3-25 AD), that fell when attempting to restore Chang’an 长安 (near modern Xi’an) as capital, and the Eastern Han (东汉 25 – 220 AD), with another branch of the Liu family reinstated on the throne and the capital shifted to Luoyang 洛阳.

For a map of the greatest expansion of the Han empire, see http://www.arte-tv.com/static/c1/030201p_chine/cartes/fr_2.html

69 Ibid.
Emerging victorious from protracted war, the Han proceeded to take over Qin structures with superficial changes such as renaming offices and abolishing the most gruesome punishments. They took over a powerful system but a devastated empire. It seems that the generation of leaders who survived the wars realized that peace and recovery were the goal of their rule. Under the early emperors, the Han succeeded in transforming Qin military despotism into a stable administration that was capable of forceful and forcible organization for the purposes of war, large-scale infrastructure projects and imperial representation while keeping the state as “slim” and the burden of its subjects as light as possible. Taxes and corvée services were reduced, tolls and even the monopoly on the minting of coins were abolished. At the northern frontier, the empire refused to be provoked into military conflict despite the rise of the Xiongnu federation. Instead, a policy of “appeasement” was adopted, with massive “gifts” of silk, grain and other commodities furnished by the Han and princesses sent to wed Xiongnu leaders. Six decades of such policies that “gave the people rest” (yu min xiuxi 與民休息) brought about the flourishing of the Han. Population figures not only recovered but probably surpassed those of the late Warring states; and so did economic prosperity and cultural achievement.

The early Han does not offer historians much to write about and often appears as a prelude leading up to the great age of Emperor Wu (Han Wudi 汉武帝). When we stop to consider that, with the exception of some relatively localized conflicts, a whole generation was able to live out their lives in peace, and that this was achieved
after centuries of endemic warfare, we begin to recognize the age as a rare achievement in human history in its own right.

**Forceful expansion under Emperor Wu**

Under emperor Wu (Han Wudi, reigned 141-87 BC) the basic political outlook changed. First, from 135 onwards, the Han took the military initiative against the Xiongnu, eventually bringing the Gansu corridor up to Dunhuang under Chinese rule and expanding their sphere far into Central Asia. Military and political expansion also led to the setting up of new administrative outposts from modern Sichuan and Yunnan to Hainan island in the south and Korea in the north. The new policy of powerful assertion was accompanied by lavish representation of the imperial court in Chang’an. It was funded by an interventionist state economy, based on monopolies on iron, salt and liquor, state transport and trade, as well as large state manufactures for luxury goods and tightly controlled markets.

**Continued growth, mounting pressures and political indecision**

Towards the end of Emperor Wu’s reign, the expansion gave way to retrenchment. The remainder of the century was politically indecisive with short reigns and weak emperors. The widening gap between rich and poor and the mounting pressure on peasants who found themselves unable to pay their taxes for all their toil was observed with concern. The debates of the period centred on political and moral ills, advocating frugality and thrift at court in order to instigate moral reform from above, as well as taking thoroughly practical approaches of promoting better agrarian techniques. In the climate of frugality, the state manufactures were reduced and monopolies relaxed.

From our perspective we are privileged to be able to see long-term trends. It would appear that especially in the densely inhabited Central Plains, the gradually cooling climate in conjunction with considerable population increase was putting society and nature under increasing strain.

Over the last century before our era, the population is estimated to have risen from ca. 50 Mio to perhaps 63 Mio. During the same period, mean temperatures fell from slightly above to slightly below today’s levels. In addition, the Huanghe was getting instable. The first major breach had taken place in 134 BC. It was recognized as a danger to the Han empire: Emperor Wu himself came to oversee the finishing of the new dikes that would contain the river for another century.

**Wang Mang’s Xin dynasty**

Around the turn of the era, destabilizing developments culminated in political turmoil. When the Han imperial house seemed at its end, Wang Mang (reigned 9-24 AD) set up his own dynasty, called Xin (i.e.

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“New”). For two decades, the dynastic shift was little challenged and seemed to succeed in restoring stability. It was brought down by a natural calamity. In 23 AD, the Huanghe shifted its course southwards.

For a map showing the shifts of the Huanghe between 134 BC and 23 AD, see Elvin and Blunden, Cultural Atlas, p. 14.

Wang Mang, vilified as usurper, has traditionally been blamed for the disastrous end of the Western Han. While certainly ambitious, however, his career does not suggest that he worked to dismantle the Han, but that he strove to preserve the dynasty for many years until the instability at the court seemed threaten the integrity of the empire. While his policies were highly ideological, aiming at restoring idealized earlier structures and probably disruptive to the economy, the main catastrophic event, that overshadowed his reign, the shift of the Huanghe, certainly was outside any human control.71

Uprisings and civil war

The floods brought death and misery to millions in the densely inhabited south of the Great Plains. It also disrupted the structure of the empire’s supply system for the political and military centre in Guanzhong. When peasants of the formerly prosperous southern Shandong rose in rebellion, the government was helpless. Rebels painted their foreheads with reddish soil for recognition and were therefore called Red Eyebrows. The rebellion spread quickly, with huge, disorganized bands moving westwards. Eventually, the Red Eyebrows entered Guanzhong, looted and burnt Chang’an and then moved on westwards into the arid steppe. Those who managed to turn back eastwards surrendered when they came up against the army of one of the newly risen aristocratic warlords.

China had descended into civil war. Warlords held regional power, while eleven contenders at some time or other had themselves proclaimed emperor. Although the Eastern Han is dated from 25 AD, it was only by 39 AD that Emperor Guangwu (光武帝, reigned 25-57 AD), who was related to the imperial house as a seventh generation descendant from Emperor Jing (景帝, reigned 157-141 BC), had extended his rule from the Northern part of the great plains over the whole empire.

By the end of the civil war, the population had fallen from about 63 Mio. to no more than 30 Mio. Guanzhong was devastated and largely empty, and the Huanghe in its instable southern course continued to threaten the southern plains.72

Reconstruction

Despite all odds, the Eastern Han succeeded in restoring a stable state. Emperor Guangwu chose Luoyang as imperial capital, oriented

towards the great plains and open rather than hemmed in by mountains.

Most importantly, in a great effort that was concluded in 70 AD, the new course of the Huanghe was stabilized. The regulation consisted of dikes and a system of ten weirs and sluices that separated Huanghe and Bian 洙, a canalised river that connected Huanghe and Huaihe 淮河. The point where it now emptied into the Huanghe was the critical point for the protection of the southern plains, for if the great river in spate should discharge its water into the Bian, all land along the lower Huaihe might be flooded. The regulation stabilized the great river for eight centuries.

On the northern and western borders, despite mostly defensive policies, an accordance with the Southern Xiongnu who now settled in the Ordos region was reached, and in the late first century the Western regions were brought under Han control again. The pacification lasted to the mid second century, when the Far West slipped out of Chinese control and north-western peoples began settled on territories inside the Great Wall.

The rise of the aristocracy

The political and social basis of the Eastern Han, had shifted fundamentally. It was now a small number of aristocratic lineages that dominated politics and shaped social units. Many peasants who formerly were direct subjects of the state had sought shelter as unfree tenants of powerful landholders. These aristocrats consequently were able to expand their landholdings into vast latifundias. Due to their scale and economic power, new and more efficient agricultural techniques such as large oxen-drawn ploughs could be employed, which smallholders could not afford. This in turn increased the pressure on smallholding peasants to go into bondage. At the same time, many landholding aristocrats engaged in manufacturing and trade on a large scale, blurring the formerly upheld distinctions between the educated, bureaucratic and aristocratic elite and rich but socially despised merchants and entrepreneurs.

Through the two centuries of the Eastern Han, the great aristocratic lineages came to dominate court politics through shifting factions and the administration through a system of recommendation that amounted to cooptation. As a result, the empire saw an impressive economic recovery, while the political system was weakened. Major uprisings from the early second century onwards were signs of mounting tensions and receding administrative presence.

The end of the Eastern Han

From about 170 onwards a serious agrarian crisis caused terrible famines in many regions. Within a decade, whole regions were depopulated, cities empty, and the dynastic rule a mere shadow.

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73 Yao Hanyan, Zhongguo shuilishi, 61-67.
Another great peasant uprising became a millenarian movement. Its members believed that the world had reached the end of an age and a new world would take shape after great catastrophes. As the insurgents wound yellow strips of cloth around their heads, they were called Yellow Turbans. By the end of the second century, Han territory was carved up by powerful warlords and a few religious leaders.

What was left of the Han dynasty was preserved in the seignieurial manors of great aristocrats that succeeded in either entrenching themselves as defended islands or in organizing their move to the south, taking sizeable populations with them.

Yet the glory of the Han was to become the focus of reference for all later dynasties and empires. The Qin and Han had created the structure of empire in China. Four centuries of disunity an momentous change followed, but neither the basics of bureaucratic administration nor the idea of a united empire were lost. In the following, we will take a closer look at some issues that are crucial to our understanding of how the Han legitimised and maintained their empire and why they possessed such lasting normative power on the one hand, and what made the Han so singular and different from all other Chinese ages, on the other.

3.3 The structure of empire

The structure of imperial rule
Administrative continuity, political reorientation

Let us first turn to the question why the Han, unlike their Qin predecessors, were so long-lived. We have already mentioned, that the new Han rulers basically took over the Qin administration, the very system that they denounced as inhuman, legalist, and as one of the factors that brought the Qin down. During the early Han, we find traces of considerable efforts invested in analysing the rise and downfall of the Qin, thus buttressing Han legitimation and providing political guidance for the new system of rule. We do not know which consequences were drawn, but from the ways in which the Han political centre and the imperial administration worked, we can glimpse some features that were constitutive.

The dignity of the throne and the unimportance of the emperor’s person

At first look, the emperor, standing at the apex of a the human hierarchy and cosmic representation, seems all-powerful. Yet the account we find in the official histories, while focussed the central imperial government, is rather disappointing. The history of the Han court is a dreary story of endless maneuverings and intrigues, succession disputes, of empresses and their families dominating political leadership as long as their fortune holds, of many short reigns and infants on the throne. In the midst of all this petty conflicts with far-reaching consequences, the personalities of the emperors themselves remain vague.
Even Emperor Wu, who presided the most brilliant and longest reign of the Han period, appears oddly unconnected to the great strategic policies adopted in his name. We hear of him making offerings, presiding ritual, and ordering the affairs of court and his relatives. It is impossible to ascertain, however, to which degree it was him who decided matters of peace and war or of state economics.

Even more puzzling, political stability often appears to be little influenced by dramatic changes at court. Even when emperors died leaving neither a son to inherit the throne nor even a designated heir from another line of the Liu clan, day-to-day business of administration appears unaffected.

**Bureaucracy and the emperor as persona**

How could the all-powerful emperor be so dispensable? The answer lies in the institutionalized, bureaucratic administration. While we tend to despise bureaucrats as inflexible, regulation-wielding little despots out of touch with reality, in the Warring States, the Qin and Han periods, the formation of bureaucratic rule was a great achievement. It replaced feudal rule and status by birth with an administration built on merit and run by professionals.

The efficiency and functionality of this administration was built on a centralized structure and inbuilt checks and balances through overlapping competences. This independent and stable administration may have been perfectly able to run the country without any help of the emperor. But only technically, for dynastic legitimacy rested with the emperor's person. It was the son of heaven whose forebears had founded the dynasty and who served as the representative of heaven in the human world. It was the emperor who presided over court and dynastic ritual, creating the aura necessary for authority. In this respect, we may imagine the Chinese emperor rather like the pope in medieval Europe: kings and even states might come and go, but a world without the pope was unthinkable, irrespective of (or perhaps even enhanced by) the fact that he was hardly known as a person by all but a few.

Differently from the papal seat, however, in the persona of the Chinese emperor not only the world order but also the actual political structures of the Chinese empire converged. Therefore, a powerful person on the imperial throne could play a decisive political role. Yet the very centrality of the emperor's person in a bureaucratic government structure also constituted tight limitations of his power. The emperor's life was regulated by ritual and submitted to the exigencies of political demands, especially in the choice of an empress and in the necessity to produce an heir. Both in order to retain some political weight and private liberty, emperors had to rely on the inner court, their consorts, relatives, in-laws and their servants.

**The eunuchs**
It was this inbuilt tension between the administration that was naturally opposed to the disrupting effects caused by an emperor's personality and, in particular, of his in-laws’ influence in politics and the emperor and his entourage that gave the eunuchs such a prominent role. Eunuchs were castrates who served in the inner quarters of the imperial court. While only a few dozen served at the Qin court, by the late Eastern Han their numbers reached some 2000.

Eunuchs were deeply despised in a society in which death sentences could be commutated to castration, and in which ancestor worship made the production of (male) offspring the foremost task of filial sons and daughters. Yet it were the leading eunuchs who enjoyed direct contact with the emperor and his consorts and thus were in the best position to know and to influence him. Inofficial power might be converted to official rank, as in the case of the above-mentioned Zhao Gao, who was a counsellor of the First Emperor. Identified by later historians as the person behind the intrigues at the late Qin court, he also became the first of many notorious eunuchs in Chinese history.

The eunuchs' privileged but irregular position made them the natural adversaries of the regular officials. It should be mentioned that as it were officials who kept the historic records, and the eunuchs’ highly negative depiction is only to be expected. The Han dynasty was a time when empresses, in particular dowager empresses held great power and eunuchs played a considerable role in politics. Although the inner court would never become as powerful in later dynasties, the basic conflict between officials on the one hand and the emperor's entourage with his in-laws and the eunuchs on the other, would stay to the end of dynastic China.

*The instability at the top and the stability of the political system*

In short, the disjunct structure of a bureaucratic administration centred on the emperor for legitimacy and the emperor as the ritual head of empire certainly engendered much factional strife at the top, but also ensured stability of rule. Powerful individuals could shape an office during their lifetime, but bureaucratic structure outlived them. Even in the case of the emperor, it was his persona that was crucial to the functioning of the dynastic state, his actual person was secondary.

*The structure of resource redistribution: The granary system*

If the linking of ritual power and practical administration shaped the political landscape of China, the granary and transport system did the same for the geography of its political economy. Although not a Han innovation, it is only with the better documentation of this period that we are able to outline an institution now extending over the whole empire.

For a Han period model of a granary see

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eastern_Han_pottery_granary.JPG
The granary system was the lifeline of administration both literally and with regard to its legitimation. It was an enormous organization that involved the collecting of taxes in kind, mostly grain and cloth, their transport over huge distances and concentration in storage facilities, and their distribution, in the form of regular salaries for government officials and troops as well as anti-cyclical sales of grain in early spring in order to help the population to bridge the lean months when autumn’s harvests were all but consumed and new crops not yet available, and as famine relief in regions struck by natural calamities.

The granary system served two purposes: First, it provided the direct material basis for imperial power - the maintenance of the court itself, the payment of courtiers, officials and the artisans and labourers working on the numerous state projects directly or indirectly depended on it, while the empire’s military strength rested on the ability to feed, clothe, equip and pay its armies, to maintain the provision lines of the border garrisons and to command ample stores in the event of major campaigns. Second, it ensured food security and price stability for the population.

The maintenance of government and army

Or did it? There is ample evidence for the first purpose. We have discussed the key role of the granary and transport system for the capital region above. We know of deliveries by ox cart for the border post of Dunhuang that had come all the way from the lower Huaihe region! The sheer size of the central granaries attests to the need for large-scale logistical operations.

74 In the monetarized Han economy, it seems that taxes were largely collected in money rather than in kind. This would mean that some proportion of the grain and cloth in the state storage facilities would not have been shipped there under state auspices. Instead, tax collectors would have brought the money and bought merchandise on nearby markets, which may have originated from quite different places than the tax money spent in purchasing the goods. We know too little about the Han taxation, transport and granary system to be able to describe its concrete workings in any detail.

75 Preserved by the desert climate, bamboo strips with recordings of 395 deliveries were found in Dunhuang. 88 transporters came from the southeastern regions of the empire. See Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 287.
efficient concentration of resources for the purposes of the central government. In moments of crisis we can observe their strategic importance. Thus, in wars after both the downfall of the Qin and of the Han, the great granaries played a decisive role in turning military fortunes several times.  

Did the granary system “nourish the people”?  

Was however the second purpose, the “nourishing the people” ever more than symbolic? After all, the extraction of taxes always is a one-sided affair: tax-payers are made to pay, valuable resources are taken from them and concentrated beyond their reach, while we may doubt whether anything flowed back. In the agrarian society of the early empire, peasants were made to shoulder most of the burden, paying taxes in kind and in money as well as serving as conscripts in the army and for corvée projects. Grand claims that the far-away son of heaven was a caring father as well as a semi-divine being, capable of providing tangible help to his subjects in times of need, may appear to us as a smart move to make people pay and even feel thankful for it.

Unfortunately, the workings of the granary system have not attracted much focused research. Available investigations suggest that anti-cyclical sale of grain were common practice in the Warring State period. This measure aimed to stabilize prices and thus to ensure that people would be able to cover their basic needs and markets generally remained stable. For the Han period, numerous instances of famine relief are mentioned. The importance accorded to such emergency measures is reflected in the fact that not only the regional granaries were involved, but the three central granaries, which by regulation were reserved for the central government, were opened in several instances. We cannot conclude that the Han state was able to protect its subjects from starvation in times of natural disaster, but we may assume that the justification of state and granary system was not pure rhetoric.

Inbuilt tensions

Nevertheless, inherent tensions also become visible from this short discussion of the granary system.

First, there is no doubt that more was extracted from the countryside than flowed back. This, of course, lies in the nature of the agrarian state. The Chinese empire may be credited with an awareness of this fundamental effect of rule and of having attempted to offset the

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77 The lack of interest could go back to an Eurocentric historical perspective: As economic functions in general and measures to prevent or relieve famines were not central in European states, the importance of the Chinese granary system was overlooked. Chinese historians, having adopted Western methodology and mostly oriented towards Western questions, also display relatively little interest.
78 The main source for the granary system in the Warring States period is the Guanzi, a many-layered programmatic work.
79 Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 339-343
imbalance by offering some degree of security and some compensation through the production and distribution of iron tools and of salt.

Perhaps more important is the imbalance between cities and core areas on the one hand and remote rural areas on the other. Clearly preferential treatment was accorded to the former, both on organizational grounds, as the granaries were located in the urban centres and the three great granaries in the Central Plains and the capital area, and on strategic ones, as in cases of emergency, food riots of urbanites might directly disrupt state functions, whereas a grave famine in some remote region would primarily affect the region only.

Second, the dual purpose meant an always difficult balance. The granary system was the main measure for “nourishing the people,” which again was the central legitimisation of rule. Yet an expansion of armies or of the state apparatus and, in particular, military campaigns and large-scale state projects could place great burdens on the system, depleting the granaries and threatening the very survival of whole populations and the state itself.

Grain and legitimacy

We need to keep in mind that storekeeping on a massive scale was essential to settled agriculture in China. Good soils but an unreliable climate meant that several years of bumper harvests were as likely as complete losses to draughts or floods. An organization in quite large communities was expedient for survival - though certainly not on the scale of an empire. Nevertheless, it appears readily understandable that the collecting, keeping and distributing of stores became a central task and legitimisation of the state in China. By the Han period, the granary system was conceived of in terms similar to the Mandate of Heaven: it was called the “great mandate of the empire” or even of “the world” (tianxia zhi daming 天下之大命).  

In the context of the both very concrete and highly ideological importance of the granary system and the idea of the state “nourishing the people,” influential arguments on statecraft and political ethics become intelligible. It is for this reason that Chinese discussions on statecraft and good rule remain focussed on agricultural production. Agriculture, the occupation producing the necessities of life, is regarded as the basis or “root” (ben 本) of a country. Implying that its products were made accessible to the state through taxation and storage, agriculture enabled the state to fulfil its most basic obligation and thus to justify its existence. By contrast, other activities that produced useful or necessary items were tolerated, though not particularly valued, while purely commercial occupations were considered secondary and unproductive “tips of the branches” (mo 末), which consumed rather than produced wealth.

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80 *Hanshu*, 1130.
A government attentive to the well-being of peasants, to agrarian problems and improvements was perceived of as fulfilling its purpose, thus buttressing its authority. At the other end of the scale, a government that allowed the granaries run low was clearly incapable and irresponsible, and one that was unable to preserve the livelihood of the peasants, be it following natural disaster or a consequence of its politics, had violated its mandate. Economic and political argument thus came to be closely intertwined, as we will further explore in the following section.

Economic transformation, social and ecological change

As mentioned above, the Qin and Han were a period of gradually cooling climate. Temperatures reached about the present conditions around the year 0 and fell below present levels during the Eastern Han and until the 5th century. As the summary of major events and disasters has shown, climatic change cannot be regarded as the cause for changes in human societies. Nevertheless, the Northern frontier conflicts and the beginning of the southward migration in China need to be considered in the context of increasingly difficult agrarian conditions throughout the North.

As far as we know, environmental changes were most marked in the Northwest, where centuries of agrarian settlement, dense populations and the cooler and drier climate combined to change the landscape. At the beginning of the imperial era, the loess plateaus were still covered by forests and bush. These had mostly disappeared by the end of the Han, leading to the great erosion we are familiar with today. The changes are most clearly traceable for Guanzhong, the Western Han capital region. At the outset, great forests covered the upper Weihe valley and the lower reaches of the Qinling mountains. The urbanized imperial centre consumed great amounts of wood for buildings, for metal and ceramic production. Simultaneously, all lowland and increasingly also upland areas were opened up for agriculture. Effects of severe deforestation are reflected in the seasonal changes in water levels and the increasingly high sediment charges of the rivers of Guanzhong. Rather than a purely political move dictated by imperial weakness and the destruction of Chang’an, the shift of the capital to Luoyang thus was also a response to environmental degradation in Guanzhong.

Agrarian progress and rural poverty

For ploughing with an oxen-drawn plough depicted on a rubbing from an Eastern Han relief stone, see http://news.xinhuanet.com/collection/2005-03/06/content_2657461.htm

81 Liu Zhaomin, Qihou, 74-81.
82 Wu Xiangding (1994), Lishi shiqi Huanghe liuyu huanjing bianqian yu shuihsa bianhua schriftgrad.
Agrarian productivity was a main concern of imperial government. Improvements in agrarian technology apparently permitted remarkable development despite less favourable conditions. Key technologies, such as the heavy plough drawn by oxen were not a Han innovation, but it was under the stable conditions and due to active government promotion that they became common. Very generally speaking, the Western Han saw the replacement of the digging stick throughout much of the North together with crop rotation and manuring, presumably significantly increasing the land under cultivation as well as the productivity per labourer.

Further innovations from the late Western Han onwards point into a different direction. Rice transplantation in irrigated paddies and the planting of millet and beans in manured and irrigated pits were now promoted. These farming methods are labour-intensive, allowing greater outputs on smaller plots and did not require oxen. They

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84 Archaeological excavations and inventories of households show that almost each farming household kept cattle as draught animals. The density of cattle population is reflected in the record of the lethal effect of a bovine disease that gravely influenced agriculture in. For recordings of transportation by ox-cart, the summary of an excavation report of a Han village in Liaoning, and bovine disease, see Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 147-151.
indicated a turn towards intensive farming in areas of high population densities and restricted resources, especially a short supply of water for irrigation. This development is highlighted by the observation that rice cultivation in paddies was practiced in the quite small rice-growing areas within the Central Plain region, whereas in the South rice cultivation still consisted in burning off the weeds after a fallow season and planting the seeds directly in the fields. In the thinly populated old South, methods economizing on land and water apparently were not yet expedient.

From indirect evidence, such as larger private granaries and the increased used of brick for buildings, Hsu Cho-yun concludes that improvements in agricultural technology in fact succeeded in improving general living standards. It would appear that Eastern Han society was able to withstand climatic cooling to some extent and that smaller plots did not mechanically mean lower incomes.85

Would this mean that the trend for peasants to be reduced to tenants working the fields of seigneurial aristocrats were the result of social change rather than an inevitable trend caused by ecological change and the weak central government of the Eastern Han? We know too little about Han agriculture and society to be able to answer this question. It would appear, however, that many factors played a role and that tenancy was not exclusively the result of poverty, but rather of falling into debt, greatly accelerated by insecurity during periods of war and social breakdown.

The monetarized economy86

The advanced monetarization transformed Han economy and society. Barter was for barbarians and the most basic exchange of goods at the village level. The amount of coins in circulation is stunning. Over the last century BC, for example, an average 220 Mio coins were minted per year. This output was not to be reached again until the high Tang (the mid-eighth century) and again the Song (11th century).87

The money economy reached all levels of Han society and beyond into the trade network of Central Asia. To stay with rural society for the moment, a work of agricultural instruction from the mid second century AD explicitly recommends commercial activities, such as the buying and selling of grain at certain times of the year for profit and the production of marketable materials. Based on the information of this manual, Hsu reconstructs a fictive farming household that would have had to spend cash to pay 26,3% of its basic expenses.88

85 Hsu, *Han agriculture*, 126-128.
86 On trade during the Western Han and the different professional groups involved in it, see Sadao, “Economic and social history,” 577-579; on the economic system and trade in the Eastern Han period, see Ebrey (1986), “Economic and social history,” 612-614.
87 Sadao, “Economic and social history,” 588.
88 Hsu, *Han agriculture*, 79, 58ff, and 133f.
He concludes that the rise of the manorial system was a response to turmoil. As the roads became insecure, market-oriented production was abandoned and rural society retreated into localized, closed, manor-style systems.89

At the other end of the social scale, there were fabulously rich merchants and entrepreneurs. Long distance merchants travelled in huge convoys and are said to have possessed several hundred ox carts or some 200 boats, easily covering distances of a thousand Li (ca. 400 km).90 Mention of great merchants and of private manufactures continue despite government discrimination against trade.

Already in the early Han, a depiction of social imbalance focuses on the poverty of peasants and the wealth of merchants. An argument of 44 BC uses an already established contrast between the hardships of peasants against the easy life of merchants:

The merchants strive for profits. North, south, east and west, they everywhere apply their wisdom and craftiness, and are able to dress with fine clothing and enjoy good food. Each year a merchant [makes] 20 % profit [on his capital], and yet he pays no tax. In the case of the farmer, father and son are exposed in the midst of the field, escaping neither heat nor cold. They pull the weeds and harrow the soil so that they suffer from calluses and blisters on both hands and feet. After having paid a [regular] tax in kind of grain, and also having paid the hay tax, the private demands solicited by authorities of the district and the village become too heavy a burden to bear. Therefore, the people give up the fundamental profession [i.e. farming] and pursue the secondary profession [i.e. commerce]. The poor, though, having been granted land, still sell it cheaply in order to become traders. When their capital is exhausted then they become thieves and robbers. Why? It is in the secondary profession that one makes handsome profits and yet it is money that makes one become bewildered.91

State interventionism under Emperor Wu

The quote calls for the curbing of commercial activities. The argument is in tune with the discussion associated with the rise of Confucian statecraft thinking. As it were, over half a century earlier under Emperor Wu, the state had already embarked on a program of intervention in the economy, directed mainly at wresting income and influence from merchants and entrepreneurs.

The extent of the state economy established under Emperor Wu was remarkable. By far the largest agencies were those for salt and iron, for which figures are not available. We know a little more about the

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89 Ibid. 135f.
90 Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 380.
91 Hanshu, translated in Hsu, Han Agriculture, 166f.
state manufactures. The textile workshops of Northern Shandong that produced the finest silks comprised thousands of workers each and are said to have had annual wage bills amounting to several hundred million cash.\textsuperscript{92} In the manufacture of lacquerware at Chengdu 成都, work was specialized, with five different artisans or groups of artisans under a headman responsible for the different stages in the production of a lacquered object, each signing their names upon completion of their workstep. A lacquer box excavated in the vicinity of modern P'yeongyang 平壤 in the North of the Korean peninsula attests to the quality and the wide distribution of the goods produced.\textsuperscript{93}

All these measures were rationalized with tenets of practical-minded statecraft – the Han adoption of Legalism without the name – that considered trade a base occupation that was not only non-productive, but actually harmful. Merchants were thought to sap the people's wealth by buying cheap and selling dear, while debasing popular morale through their cherishing of profit and luxury. For these reasons, it seemed advisable to discourage trade by tolls, licences and supervised markets. The monopolies were a final measure of state interventionism in economics. They extended from the mining of ores and the extraction of salt brine to the distribution and selling networks. Would not the replacement of profit-oriented merchants by the state that was dedicated to "nourish the people" ensure the just and equal distribution of goods?

The debate on salt and iron

Contemporaries noted the problematics of state economy: They observed, for example, that the quality of iron tools from the imperial manufactures was unreliable and that the distribution network ended in the county towns, while private producers had peddlers taking their tools right into the villages. Problems of state enterprises some two millennia ago were not much different from the ones we are familiar with today, most notably lacking flexibility and incentive to do more than necessary to fulfil set quotas. On a more fundamental level, state monopolies were criticized for "competing with the people for profit" (yu min zheng li 与民争利).\textsuperscript{94} This implied that the state engaged in a type of activity that the merchants as one of the constituent groups of the population already fulfilled, thus depriving this group of its perhaps not very honourable but certainly legitimate livelihood. Worse still, in joining in these inherently profit-seeking activities the state itself became contaminated with moral baseness. Rather than providing the service of better and more equal distribution of important goods, all the monopolies achieved was transferring profits from the monopolized areas of industry and trade

\textsuperscript{92} Sadao, Economic and Social History, 582, 583.
\textsuperscript{94} Huan Kuan 桓宽, Yantie lun 盐铁论 (Discourses on salt and iron); juan 1, chapter 1: benyi 本议 (Fundamental argument).
more directly into state coffers. At, in the eyes of Confucians, too high a moral price.

After the shift from imperial expansion to retrenchment in the 90 BC, the rigorous measures of state interventionism were soon relaxed. The state's role in the economy was widely discussed. In 81 BC, a great debate was held at court, with the acting ministers and proponents of the interventionist state defending their policies with rather legalist arguments and scholars of the imperial academy criticizing them with rather Confucian ones. A paraphrased protocol of this debate has come down on us as the “Discourses on Salt and Iron” (Yantie lun 盐铁论). This is the reason why we are quite well informed about economic policies and thought of the time.

**Issues of state interventionalism versus relaxation**

The issue of whether at all and, if yes, to which degree the state should actively engage in economic affairs that, according to Chinese terminology, belonged to the domain of the merchants was there to stay, and debates on the issue would arise many more times through the course of Chinese history.

Although Confucianism rose to become the mainstream of erudition and the Confucian scholars are presented as having carried the day in the debate on salt and iron, their impact on state economic policies was limited. Only the monopoly on alcoholic beverages, which was next to impossible to control anyhow, was abolished. Other monopolies and policies were quietly relaxed. The income from these activities had become too important to the state budget to be given up. The divergence between Confucian ideology and efforts to increase popular welfare on the one hand and the needs of state finance on the other was at the core of first debated in the Han. With inconclusive results. And the issue would be taken up time and again in later ages.

**Cultural cohesion and new departures**

**Shared elite culture**

Imperial unification created a culturally integrated elite. Although lettered culture was still restricted to a small proportion even within the elite, the use of writing for all purposes and the importance throughout society of a classical education at its upper end grew. Wooden or bamboo tablets were still the ordinary writing material, but silk was increasingly used for important texts. The development of a form of writing fully adapted to the use of the brush attests to increased use, speed and convenience of writing. Although many more writing styles developed later on, this type of writing remained the basis and is perfectly legible to anyone familiar with modern Chinese.

For a private letter written on wooden slips, Han period, see http://www.sinica.edu.tw/info/ihp1998/exhibit/han7.htm

Rich archaeological finds of burials display a regionally distinct, yet altogether surprisingly homogenous burial culture among the social elite. Much luxury trade actually served the needs of the dead, including precious objects as well as massive coffins of the best wood, originating from the middle and upper Yangzi. We know little of Han ideas of death and afterlife, however, the notion of a continuation of life just as it was in this world is richly documented in the burial goods and pictures with their manifold and extremely lively models and depictions of everyday life and enjoyment. It is through these burial goods that we can assemble a detailed and vivid picture of many facets of Han life, especially during the Eastern Han when the practice became widespread of furnishing graves with brick or stone relief pictures and clay or wooden models of everything needed for a good and modern lifestyle.96

For a model of a chariot, a burial gift from the Western Han period, Shandong, see http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/shandong/2.html
And for a banquet scene depicted on a rubbing from a Han relief stone, see http://www.sinica.edu.tw/info/ihp1998/exhibit/hanw3.htm

Speed and mobility were at the core of Han culture. This in itself is nothing new. During the preceding Zhou period, the horse chariot was the symbol of the aristocrat and mobility differentiated the elite from peasants and artisans, whose sedentary lifestyle governments sought to enforce. Yet the Han cherishing of horses and chariots was a departure from earlier periods. First, by the Han, the chariot certainly had lost all military and directly practical use. The ox cart had become the ubiquitous means for transporting goods and the low-ranking. Mounted messengers provided fast communications. The horse-drawn chariot or cart had become a status symbol that differentiated the elite from the rest of the population and displayed its mobility. At the same time, the actual speed and efficiency of this mobility was greatly enhanced by the Han road network. The network of highways is thought to have extended over perhaps 32 000 to 40 000 km, while the density and quality of bridges proves the great efforts invested in road transport. In addition, imported

horses from the Northwestern steppe regions and large-scale horse-breeding resulted in an increasing differentiation of races available for different purposes. Finally, the development of the breast harness greatly improved the efficiency of horse-drawn vehicles, replacing older forms based on the yoke and not really suitable for the anatomy of the horse. Altogether, the speed and fun expressed in Han depictions appear quite feasible with Han state-of-the-art chariots on a smoothly tamped road.

While wards within the cities as well as individual mansions were walled and thus turned inwards, horse and chariot were the means of displaying wealth in public. Naturally, this was a contest, as changing fashions in chariot design and the enormous numbers of up to a thousand chariots used in a single procession show. And it was not restricted to the established elite. Upstarts such as rich merchants joined in, much to the annoyance of impecunious aristocrats.98

Patrilineal kinship patterns and the position of women99

The world of mobility, public display and activity was male. A woman's place was in the house and womanly occupation was housework and textile production. This sweeping statement needs some qualification. There is mention of a military commander also engaged in trade whose wife travelled overland by cart and carried out the actual transaction.100 We also hear, mostly in the negative, that men and women mingled in the capital streets, disregarding - probably imaginary - ancient custom according to which men and women ought to use different sides of the road.101

Women's work

In tax and law, men and women were treated as independent economic actors. All adult men and women had to pay the poll tax, the basic tax of the Han taxation system. Women could possess property, buy and sell in their own right and name.102 Economic equality can also be inferred from the fact that within a family, the male members would be responsible for taxes payable in grain, while female members would produce those payable in cloth. The gendered division of labour, with men working in the fields and women doing textile work, certainly has always been normative, as many women helped out with farmwork at least during the busy season and there is no reason to exclude that men were not active in specialized textile manufactures. Nonetheless, in general areas of responsibility and economic activity were defined along these lines in

98 The Han government maintained several ranches with 10 000 to 30 000 horses each. In addition, in the trade of “silk against horses” steppe horses were bought on a large scale, mainly for the cavalry and the courier system. See Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 135-137. For quotes mentioning huge convoys used in processions, see Ibid. 102f.
99 Hinsch, Bret (2002). Women in Early Imperial China.
100 Hinsch, Women in Early Imperial China, 72f.
101 Wang Zijin, Qin-Han jiaotongshi, 258.
102 Hinsch, Women in Early Imperial China, 60-62.
the Han dynasty as well as in later ages. It would appear that a specialized weaver was able to make a living for herself and even maintain a small family as a single breadwinner.

For a Han depiction of women weaving and spinning, rubbing from a relief stone, Jiangsu, see http://elib.lib.tsinghua.edu.cn/techlibrary/image/imageware/more/weave/14.jpg

However, while a picture of female submission would be overdrawn, women’s lives did indeed become more restricted in roles serving their mensfolk. The consolidation of patrilineal kinship organization was the social force behind this restriction. Aristocrats of course had had instituted inheritance, genealogy and blood ties along the lines from father to son for a long time, but during the Han these rules of kinship became more systematic and established as general norms.

For women, this meant that marriage constituted a break in their lives. They were transferred from their natal family to their husband’s and now were to serve their line by serving her parents-in-law and bearing children for her new family. Patrilineal kinship involved social standing increasing with age. Within a family, the oldest person held ultimate authority. A newly-wed young woman therefore was particularly vulnerable and exploitable, lowly both for her sex and for her age and completely on her own. Her position would improve when she succeeded in producing a male heir to her new family, and in due course she might reach the position of family leader herself, provided that she outlived her in-laws and husband.

In the Eastern Han, elite ideas of propriety, such as woman not showing themselves in public, and of womanly virtues, such as chastity, including the refusal of widows to remarry and meek submission in service of patrilineal ideals at all times, were disseminated in stories of virtuous women. We have no way of knowing, to which extent these stories influenced life at the time, but
there is no doubt that they became tremendously influential in later ages.

The canonization of learning and the establishing of Confucianism

In the realm of learning, the Han was a period of systematisation. From the gathering and studying of extant texts, a tradition of the interpretation of ancient texts and a gradually confirmed canon of classical works emerged. The reconstruction of old text transmitted in rolls of bamboo or wooden slips from the Qin and pre-Qin periods resulted in two schools of classical tradition, termed old text (guwen 古文) and new text (xinwen 新文) after the styles of writing - the new Qin-period characters or older forms.

In this process, the tradition of learning which we term Confucianism became established as the received scholarly learning. This trend became institutionalised with changes in the court academy under Emperor Wu, narrowing down the fields of study to six classical works. As scholarly ability became increasingly important in the recruitment of officials, these changes at the top shaped the intellectual landscape. During the later Western and the Eastern Han, the size and role of the court academies grew. With 30,000 to 50,000 students, these institutions became intellectual and political forces to reckon with. By the late Han, the canonization had become established. Shortly before the empire descended into final turmoil in the late second century AD, by imperial decree the texts of the classics were cut in stone tablets, thus to provide a durable mother copy for all times.

Philosophical systematisation and syncretism

Befitting an age of relative stability and self-conscious novelty, Han philosophical thinking aimed for systematisation. With striking self-confidence, Han thinkers proposed systems that would encompass and explain everything. Daoism as developed in the Huainanzi of 139 BC attempts a “systematic explanation of the universe,” encompassing both the natural and supernatural. Cosmic correlative thinking combining the dualist principles of yin (阴 “female, dark, humid”) and yang (阳 “male, bright, dry”) and the Five Elements (wuxing 五行) sought to explain how human society and individuals were influenced by and themselves influenced the surrounding universe. The critical thinker Wang Chong (王充, about 27 - 100 AD) proposed to explain the world exclusively by reason, refuting the possibility of links between human destiny and superhuman spheres. The historical and political universe was ordered by linear chronologies, ranking and ritual featuring many new cultural heroes, who presumably were adopted from newly integrated cultures. We cannot discuss these complex philosophical edifices here, but have to

be content with a superficial impression of grand, mutually overlapping and sometimes incompatible conceptions.

Turning towards religion: Religious customs, new ideas and millenarian movements

We do not know to which degree ordinary people participated in the highly intellectual, speculative thinking outlined above, or even whether they shared elite ideas of afterlife. For the Western Han, we can gather not much more than the existence of quite diverse, often shamanist local popular cults. From the first century AD, however, there is a sense of growing religious feeling and organization among all social strata.

For the rebellion of the Red Eyebrows of the years 18 to 23 AD, the sources mention no religious background or organizational structure. By contrast, the popular rebellions of the second half of the second century were instigated by “magic bandits” (yaoze/妖贼), led by religious leaders. The last and greatest of these, the Yellow Turbans who rose in 184 AD, were a tightly organized religious community.

At the other end of the social scale, we hear of a younger brother of Emperor Ming (reigned 57-75 AD) who is mentioned to have been deeply interested in religion and surrounded himself with Daoists and Buddhists in the 60s and 70s.

It would seem that religion gradually developed larger organizational structures and elicited increasingly “religious” rather than “intellectual” interest in the course of the Eastern Han. Whether this impression is due to the available historical records, a response to increasing social and political insecurity, a turn away from former this-worldly orientations, or even a development of religious structures adopting models of administrative structure and making use of the integration provided by centuries of imperial rule we can but guess at. It seems clear, however, that the religious age that succeeded the early empire had its roots in Eastern Han society and culture.

The expanding world of Han China

The great expansion of the Qin and Han empires has already been mentioned. Westward expansion was the most remarkable. It was also the most important in ideological and economic terms.

The Xiongnu

With the formation of the Xiongnu confederation in 206 BC an organized and hostile power had risen on the Northern frontier. Where did the Xiongnu come from? Much research and speculation about their origin has not solved the mystery. Relations between the Xiongnu of the Han period, the Huns who raided Europe in the 4th century AD and the later Mongols remain unclear. From the continuity of the archaeological record in the area and from the Chinese accounts it would appear, however, that the Xiongnu were

105 Di Cosmo, Ancient China and its Enemies, esp. chapters 5 and 6.
no alien newcomers. Furthermore, Nicola di Cosmo has argued convincingly that it was the northward expansion of Chinese states during the Warring States and Qin periods that triggered Xiongnu state formation. As a result of the formation of two powerful political entities, the zone of transition between settled agriculture and pastoral nomadism became a contested frontier; the main military preoccupation of Chinese empires until the late 19th century.

The Western lands

At the same time, and right through periods of peace and war with the Xiongnu and the Western border people, trade along the silk road developed, establishing a far-flung network of Eurasian contacts. From the European point of view, the silks from the mysterious land of Sina that became available to very wealthy Romans, might be the most fascinating effect of these trade links. From the Chinese point of view, Roman glass objects were of secondary interest. It was horses, especially the famous steeds of Ferghana, that fascinated the Chinese elite. And it was the contacts to India that would prove to have the most far-reaching effect on Chinese thought and life – when Buddhism entered China.

The expanding South

The southward expansion was less spectacular. It initiated a trend of migration and colonization that would continue despite enormous odds. Southward migration took place after the devastating Huanghe floods, during the war of reconquest after the fall of Wang Mang and during the civil war at the end of the Eastern Han. About the scale and impact of this migration we know little. Under the Eastern Han, an echo of the colonization of the South can be grasped from the increasing frequency of conflict with aboriginals who were dislodged by Chinese settlers, new counties set up for others who had apparently submitted to Han rule and adopted Han lifestyle, and accounts of rather nominal submission and tribute trade throughout Southwestern China.106

The Eastern Seas

The maritime world suddenly appears on the stage of Chinese history. Scattered remarks remind us of the fact that China is not a landlocked empire. At the same time, the sparse information about the coast and overseas contacts show the strong landward orientation on the part of metropolitan historians and thinkers of the time. We hear, for example, that a magician talked the First Emperor into sending him together with 3000 young boys and girls out into the Eastern Seas to find the islands of the immortals. Harbours and exotic goods are mentioned, and fugitives from the Qin wars are said to have retreated to Korea and Guangzhou.107 In addition, the Han

106 Bielenstein “Wang Mang, the Restoration of the Han Dynasty, and Later Han,” 272f.,
histories contain the first descriptions of the inhabitants of Korea and Japan and records of official contacts.

All this suggests the existence of seagoing ships (or rafts?) at least suitable for coastal shipping as well as some navigational knowledge. In this context we need to emphasize that it was the Yue (越, also 粤) who had been associated with seafaring since pre-imperial times and that their core territories along the southern cost, especially modern Southern Zhejiang and Fujian, were not integrated into the empire. The sources are vague about who the Yue were and how far south their cultural region extended. It appears certain, however, that the Yue indeed were able seamen and carried the southbound and eastbound trade.\(^\text{108}\)

Even while the sea as well as the rivers, marshes and lakes of the south remained a perhaps fascinating but always alien and threatening world to the metropolitan inhabitants of the Central Plains, considerable and growing numbers of imperial subjects did not share these concerns but had taken to live at, on and of the water. This is most obvious in depictions of merchants, who in Eastern Han carved pictures are routinely represented standing on a boat.

For a clay model of a houseboat, excavated from a grave near Guangzhou:
http://elib.lib.tsinghua.edu.cn/techlibrary/image/imageware/ship/01.jpg

Expansion, the complexities of contacts with other polities and cultures within and outside the empire and the universal claims of rule by the son of heaven gave rise to a system of foreign relations that was shaped by ritual and extrapolation. It was the ministry of rituals that was in charge of foreign relations, and the inclusion, conferring recognition and diplomatic exchange was argued on the grounds of civilization. Policies ranged from the imposition of commanderies, outposts of imperial rule set up in the wake of conquests in regions where no polities worthy of official recognition had been identified, such as in today's Northern Korea and Vietnam,

\(^{108}\) For a survey of the Yue, see William Maechlam (1983), “Origins and Development of the Yüeh Coastal Neolithic: A Microcosm of Culture Change on the Mainland of East Asia.”
to a de facto - though never formal - acceptance of conditions set by the opponent, as in the case of the Xiongnu for much of the period. The result of flexible diplomacy coupled with an insistence on universal centrality was a somewhat confusing system of investiture, ranking and recognition. Thus, the title king (wang 王) within the empire had become a formal title granted to an emperor's sons and close relatives, but much like other former fiefs constituted little more than the right to the tax revenues from quite restricted areas. Outside the empire's borders, the same title was quite freely bestowed upon rulers of different polities. While these remained fully independent, in the metropolitan perspective a clear hierarchy and orderly relations had been established. It may be added that kings were recognized the more freely, the further away and less potentially relevant their territory was.

For the golden seal of investiture bestowed to the king of Wo (i.e. of some part of Japan), see [http://museum.city.fukuoka.jp/gold/index.html](http://museum.city.fukuoka.jp/gold/index.html)

**Conclusion**

The history of the early empire is of bewildering complexity. We have encountered ruthless despotism and a political system claiming to be founded on benevolence; we have touched upon an administrative and economic system that strikes us as modern in many respects but remains archaic in others; we have tried to picture lives of people far removed from our own experience. The early empire is rendered more distant and enigmatic by the period of division and discontinuity that followed. Although the break after the first imperial age in China was much less severe than the change from the Roman empire to the Middle Ages in Western Europe, the centuries after the fall of the Han were marked by a great loss of lives, traditions and sources.

If we feel early imperial China rather too strange to comprehend, however, we may take comfort in the knowledge that is hardly more strange to us than to our Chinese contemporaries. To modern or even late imperial Chinese an agriculture of relatively low intensity accompanied by the raising of cattle and horses would seem incredibly wasteful, the rich forests and mild climate of much of Northern China unbelievable in their richness, and a culture not centred upon a firm and extensive written tradition too rustic to imagine.

For the moment, it may suffice if we keep in mind that all subsequent dynasties looked back upon the Qin and Han, drawing inspiration and legitimation from these founders of empire, using
both positive and negative models for their own politics as well as taking up arguments in debates of their ages. We will need to scrutinize their rhetorics with great care, as they may both help us understanding historical context and mislead us into believing the claimed “return to the past” did indeed take place.
Further reading:

for an excellent and well illustrated account of Han culture and life.

For a picture of society, individuals and Han thought.


for the political and social history of the Qin and the transformation of the Eastern Han.

For the seriously interested, the following works provide well-written studies on more specific issues:

on women, quite well written

on the Northern Frontier

on the iron industry as an example of state economy, short and very legible

For the political history

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Outstanding pictorial sources:


Stories from China's past: Han dynasty pictorial tomb reliefs and archaeological objects from Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China. (ed. Lim, Lucy; Chinese Culture Center of San Francisco).