



# **Concise Essay on the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) and Tang (618-907) Empires in China**

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## The Han Empire (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE) and Tang Empire (7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries) in China

**Origins.** How did China's Han and Tang Empires originate?

A consistent and intriguing pattern emerges from a comparison of the Han Empire (206 BCE-220 CE) and the Tang Empire (618-907).



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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han\\_dynasty\\_\(60\\_BC\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_dynasty_(60_BC).png)

*Han Chinese Empire (206 BCE-220 CE) – c. 60 BCE*

Both empires arose after several centuries of intellectual ferment in China – the development of Confucianism in the later Zhou era

(6<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE) and the conflicts between Buddhism and Daoism preceding the Tang (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at  
<[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tang\\_Dynasty\\_circa\\_700\\_CE.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_Dynasty_circa_700_CE.png)>

### *Tang Chinese Empire (618-907) – c. 700*

Both inherited a unified China from a powerful, but short-lived, founding dynasty that overextended itself – the Qin (221-206

BCE), which ruled for 15 years before the Han, and the Sui (589-618), which lasted for 29 years prior to the Tang. Those earlier building kingdoms each provided a strong central government operated by skilled scholar-officials and an important transportation network – the Qin built 4000 miles of roads integrating the country, and the Sui constructed the Grand Canal linking north and south China.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at  
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*Qin Unification of China (400-221 BCE) – c. 260 BCE*

Both founding kingdoms were led by brilliant, harsh, and megalomaniacal leaders of Turkic-Chinese origin from northwest China – Shi Huangdi (246-210 BCE) of Qin and Wendi (581-604) and Yangdi (604-618) of Sui, who over-strained their economies with extensive military campaigns and massive public works. The founder-king of the Han dynasty, Liu Bang (Han Emperor Gaozu (202-195 BCE)), was a commoner who gained power through a peasant rebellion. His counterpart in the Tang dynasty, Li Yuan (Tang Emperor Gaozong (618-624)), was a Sui military commander who claimed the throne through a military coup d'état. Both empires reached the peak of their power, territory, and creativity about a century after their founding – the Han under Emperor Wudi (141-87 BCE) and the Tang under Emperor Xuanzong (712-756).

**Wealth.** What were their main sources of wealth and power – agriculture, foreign trade, or foreign conquest? The taxation of

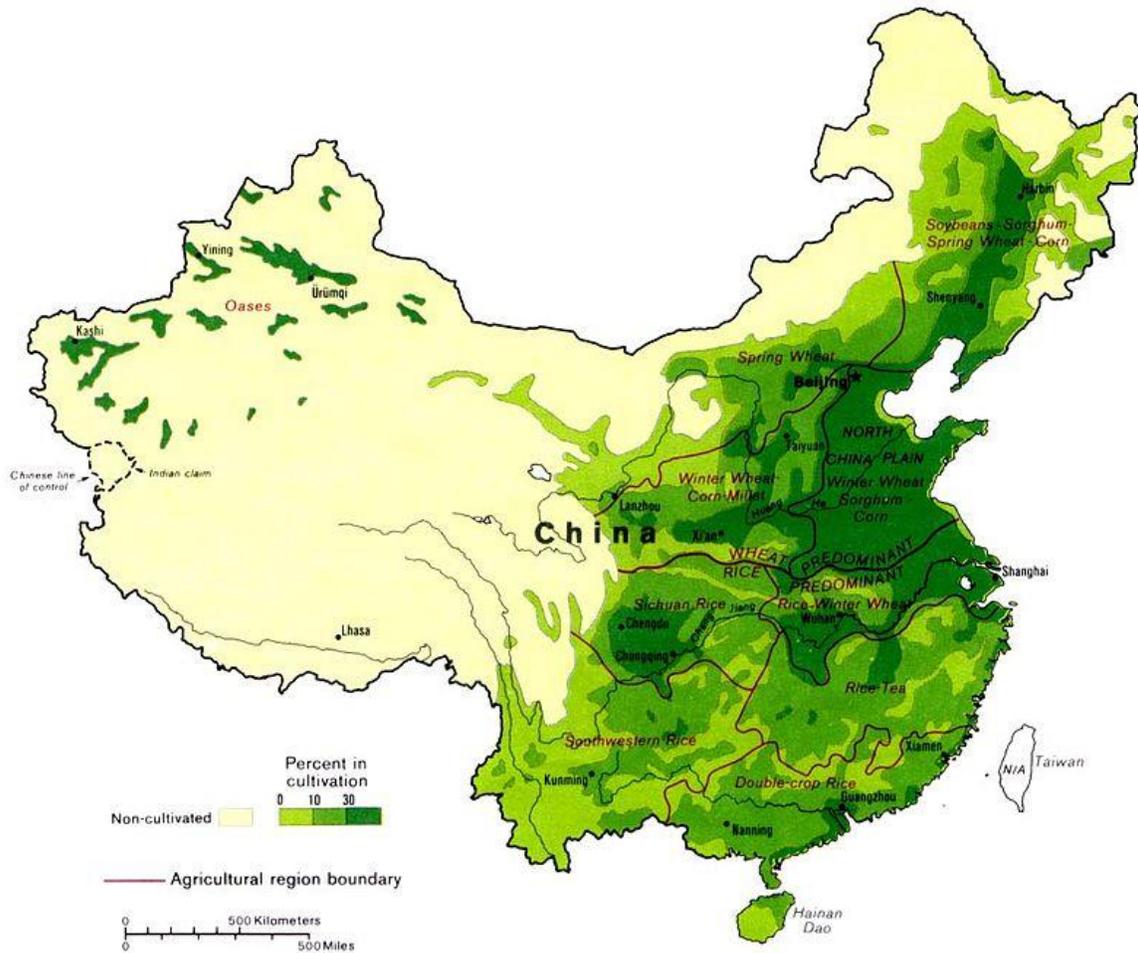
crop agriculture was the main source of wealth and power for both of these early Chinese empires, and most Chinese people worked as farmers. The evolution of landholding during both the Han and Tang eras was similar – early land reforms to benefit free peasants were gradually undercut by acquisitive, land-grabbing aristocrats.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China\\_Traditional\\_Divisions.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_Traditional_Divisions.png)

### *The Physical and Cultural Divisions of China*

The Han and the Tang governments thus faced the same dilemma in land policy – how to maintain control over their main tax base (the free peasantry) while fending off the avaricious demands of the aristocrats for increased productive estate-land that they could farm profitably with tenant laborers. At the end of the Han period (220), the peasantry controlled three-fourths of arable land, but that portion had declined to only half at the close of Tang rule (907). Han increases in agricultural production came mostly from opening new land, whereas the Tang governments increased productivity through investments in irrigation and the introduction of improved rice varieties from Southeast Asia.



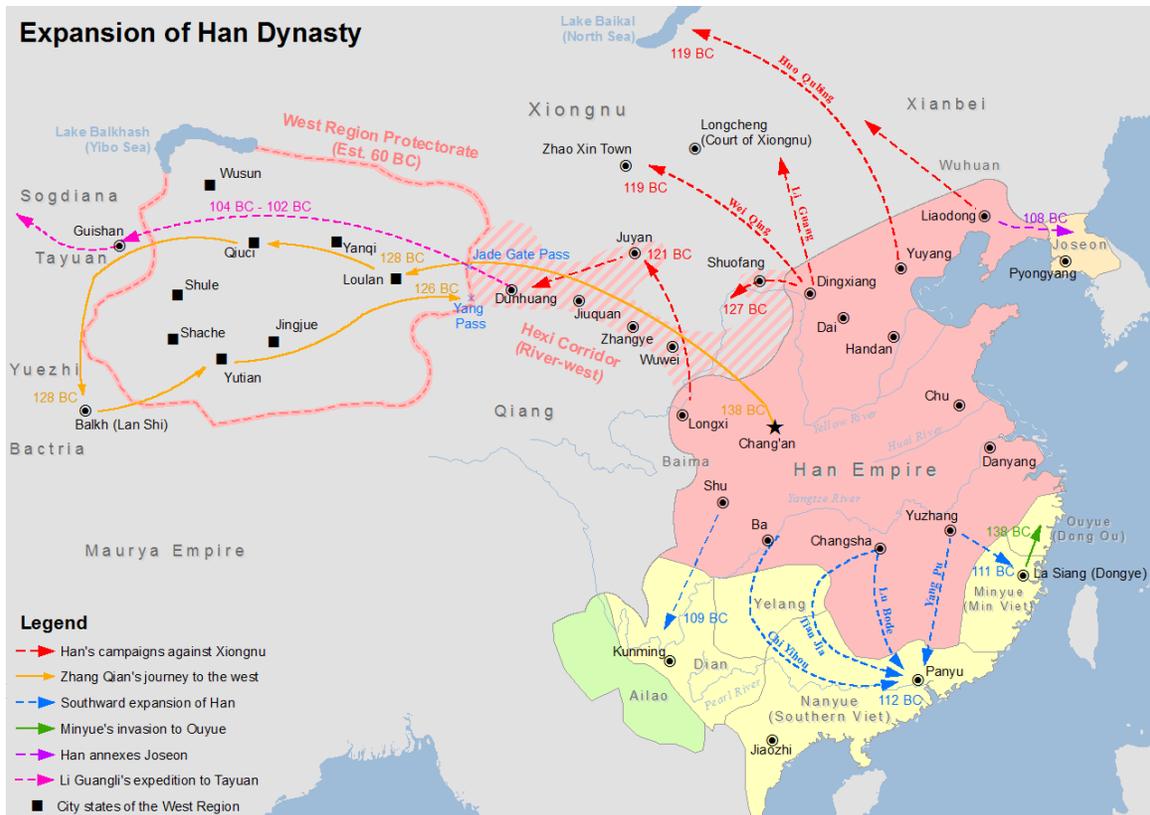
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Source: Wikimedia Commons available at  
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### *Agricultural Land Use in Modern China*

Despite the growing concentration of landholdings in aristocratic estates and the negative buffeting of natural disasters, the wealth and power of both the Han and Tang Empires rested on the backs of their millions of small-scale farmers.

In both the Han and Tang eras, foreign trade was integrally connected with foreign conquest. The taxation of foreign trade provided a secondary source of wealth for the Han and Tang Empires. But westward, land-based trade on the Silk Road, China's key trade route, required political stability to ensure safe passage through Turkestan (now Xinjiang Province of western China) en route to Central Asia and the Mediterranean region. Both early Chinese dynasties thus accommodated steppe nomadic empires, paying reverse tribute (extorted subsidies and favorable trading terms) for military protection and Silk Road access – the Han with the Xiongnu Empire (209 BCE-155 CE), and the Tang with two Turkish Empires (552-734) and the Uighur Empire (745-840). The Han and the Tang also expanded westward through military conquest – the Han claiming the Gansu Corridor (the key east-west passage between China and Turkestan), and the Tang going beyond to the Tarim Basin (for a century controlling much of Turkestan).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han\\_Expansion.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_Expansion.png)

*Han Chinese Expansion –  
South within Inner China, West into Outer China*

Emperor Wudi (141-87 BCE) was the principal Han expansionist, incorporating the Gansu Corridor into China, gaining suzerainty over Tibet and several smaller states in Turkestan, and expanding southward into and beyond the Yangzi River basin.

Han expansion into the south and east contributed substantially to the wealth and power of the Han Empire – by extending its agricultural tax base in the rich Yangzi River valley and in south

China. Emperor Taizong (626-649) was the leading Tang empire builder, expanding north and west into Mongolia and Turkestan.

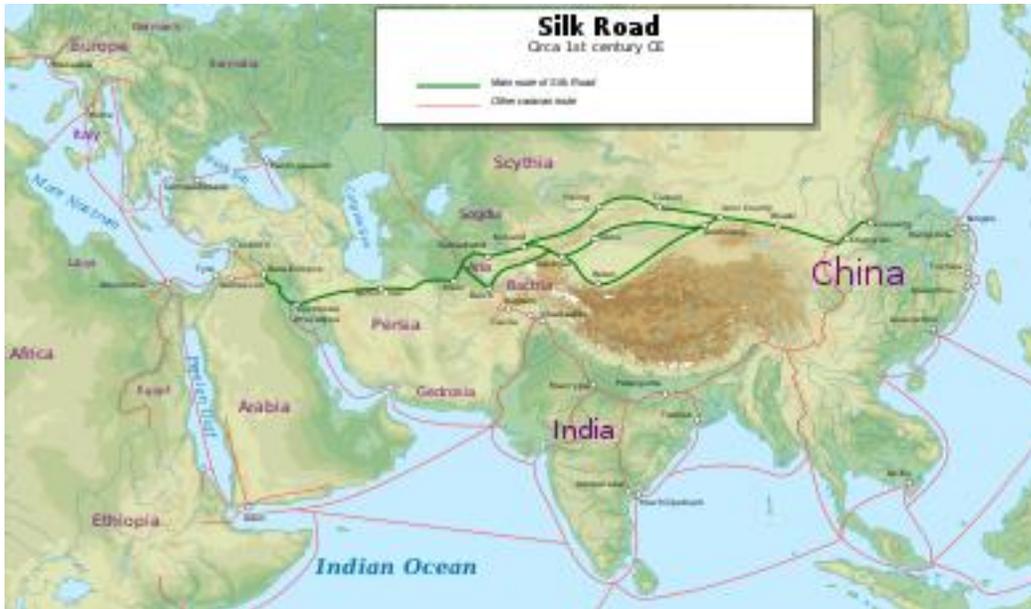


Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang\\_Protectorates.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tang_Protectorates.png)

### *Expansion in the Early Tang Empire, 618-755*

In spite of its cachet and romantic appeal, the Silk Road was not a major source of wealth for either the Han or Tang Empires. The Han governments probably broke even in their interactions in the foreign regions located north and west of China. Government revenues earned in producing trade goods and taxing Silk Road trade about matched the amounts expended on reverse tribute to

the Xiongnu and on military campaigns to control their raiding and pillaging. In Tang times, the Silk Road provided a valuable trading link between China (Chang'an, the Tang capital) and India, Central Asia, and Byzantium (Constantinople).



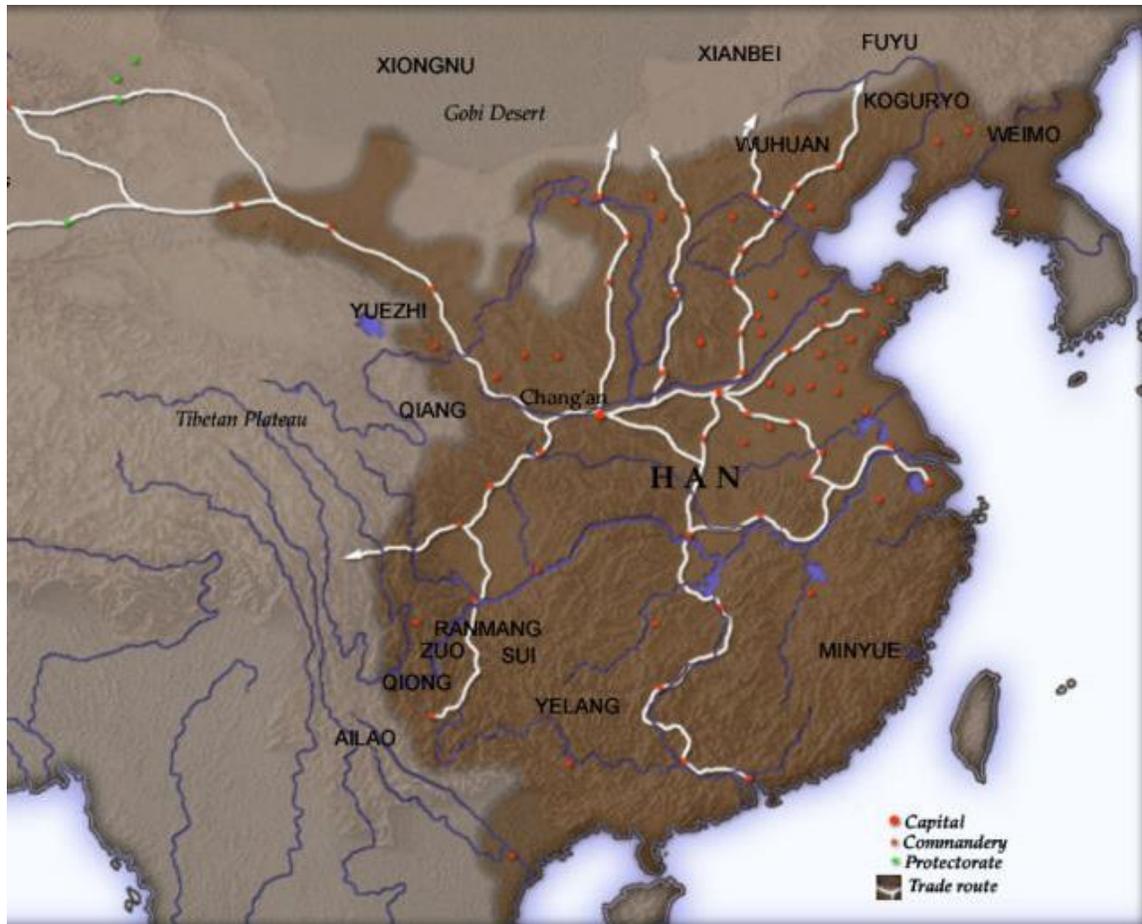
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk\\_Road\\_in\\_the\\_I\\_century\\_AD\\_-\\_en.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Silk_Road_in_the_I_century_AD_-_en.svg)

*The Silk Road – Linking the Han Chinese and Roman Empires, 1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE-3<sup>rd</sup> c. CE*

Foreign and domestic trade provided a significant supplemental source of wealth for the Tang, despite government policy that distrusted merchants and attempted to control trade. But Tang leaders lost control of their conquered territories in Central Asia and Turkestan in the 750s, and foreign military

adventures that earlier provided tributary resources for China soon became a major drain on government revenues. Silk Road trade declined rapidly after the Uighur Empire fell apart in 840.

**Control.** What forms of political organization and religious persuasion did the two Chinese empires use to extract wealth for the elite and maintain imperial power? The early Han emperors relied mainly on Daoism, using magicians, astrologers, seers, and shamans to interpret omens and set policies. Emperor Wudi (141-87 BCE) introduced Confucianism as the basis of government, employing highly literate scholar-officials who ran the bureaucracy according to principles, rituals, self-restraint, and loyalty. At the peak of its efficiency under Wudi, the Han government had strong bureaucratic control, effective taxation, and a powerful, centrally-controlled military.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at  
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han\\_map.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Han_map.jpg)>

*Han China's System of Roads and Political Control,  
c. 87 BCE*

The early Tang emperors installed a centralized bureaucracy, collected taxes efficiently, and created a strong military machine. Tang rulers were eclectic, accommodating two million Buddhist monks in 30,000 monasteries, powerful exam-based Confucian officials in the government bureaucracy, and Daoist cults for their

urban and rural masses. The cosmopolitan Tang government effectively inter-married two cultures (Chinese and Turkic), welcomed foreign merchants, technologies, and ideas, and promoted artistic creativity (notably poetry).



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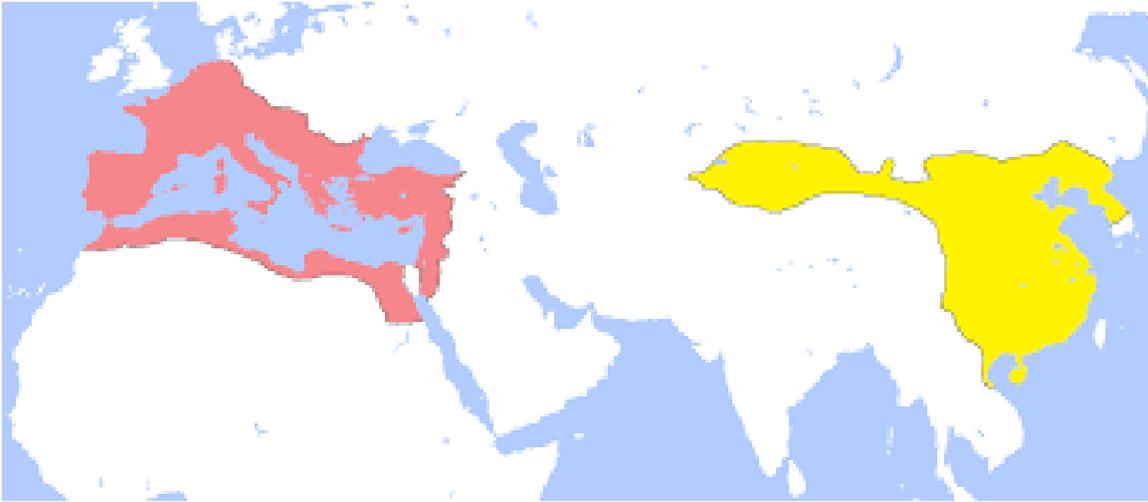
*The Tang Empire At Its Greatest Territorial Extent, c. 750*

**Decline.** What combination of internal revolts and external incursions caused the early Chinese empires to decline? The Han

and the Tang similarly were shattered by mid-regime rebellions that ushered in long periods of decline – the Wang Mang coup in mid-Han (9-23 CE), and the An Lushan Rebellion in mid-Tang (755-763). Central authority in both the Han and Tang Empires broke down because Confucian officials lost power to palace eunuchs and military leaders who undercut imperial authority. In both of China's formerly great early empires, the inability to provide food relief to desperate peasants after prolonged natural calamities (droughts and floods) and the encroachment by rich aristocrats on free peasant land led to widespread peasant rebellions. Those rebellions drained the central government treasury, forced the squabbling bureaucracy to rely on mercenaries to quell the revolts, and made the empire ripe for coup d'états by rebellious, aristocratic generals. Both the Han and the Tang dynasties thus fell because of internal erosion, not foreign invasions.

The Han Empire imploded in 220 through internal decay and nobles' greed leading to peasant rebellions and regional

splintering. Near the end, the palace eunuchs, the intelligentsia, the great families, and military warlords vied for control of the weakening central government. Aristocratic estates had increasingly usurped land that had been farmed by free peasants.



*Source: Wikimedia Commons available at*

< <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RomanandHanEmpiresAD1.png> >

*Han China Imploded in 220 CE – Two and one-half Centuries  
Before the Roman Empire Fell*

The tax base available to the central government thus shrunk. Later Han governments then were unable to provide food relief during emergencies caused by droughts and floods, spurring peasant rebellions. Because the central military was under-funded, regional warlords formed their own armies to take its place and suppress the rebellions. Central authority further splintered and

was sporadic after the Yellow Turban peasant rebellion of the 180s. In 220, a warlord, Cao Bei, created a new dynasty, the Wei, and ignobly ended the Han era after more than four centuries – the longest reign in Chinese dynastic history.

The downfall of the Tang dynasty followed the same pattern as that of the Han. Palace eunuchs exploited their roles as the emperor's personal spies to foster court intrigue, gain control of the emperor's palace army, and manipulate the inner court (enthroning, controlling, and murdering eight emperors in the 9<sup>th</sup> century). At the same time, the emperors and their bureaucratic officials permitted greedy aristocrats to gain control eventually of half of the arable land in China. Peasant resentment increased as free peasants lost their land and as remaining free peasants were forced to pay higher taxes. As a consequence, in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Tang faced a series of peasant rebellions that exhausted the imperial treasury. The most serious uprising, led by a salt merchant, Huang Chao, spread throughout much of China between 875 and 884. In 904, a Tang commander, Zhu Wen,

murdered the imperial entourage, and in 907 he declared a new dynasty, the Liang, thereby ending the crippled Tang Empire.

**Aftermath.** After the fall of these two empires, what local or foreign groups succeeded to power and how successfully did they wield power? In the aftermath of the Han dynasty, China entered an Age of Division (220-589) that lasted for nearly four centuries. The country split into three major kingdoms, Wei, Wu, and Shu (220-265), and then was briefly reunified under the Jin dynasty (265-316). Later the Toba Turks from Manchuria set up the Northern Wei kingdom (386-535) in northern China and assisted the conversion of most northern Chinese to Buddhism. During that time, small, unstable regional dynasties ruled south China, often from a capital at Nanjing. With the breakdown of central authority, large landed estates expanded at the expense of the free peasantry, tenancy and personal bondage spread, and social inequality increased. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Northern Zhou kingdom (534-581) re-united north China and the Sui kingdom

(581-618) re-unified north and south China through conquest. The Tang Empire (618-907) began with a military coup.

After the Tang Dynasty collapsed in 907, China disintegrated into numerous small kingdoms. When the Song dynasty (960-1279) reunited China, the Yangzi River valley became the economic heart of the country. Between 900 and 1200, the number of people in China doubled – from 60 million to 120 million – indicating growing prosperity. The Song dynasty fostered an agricultural revolution in southern China by 1100 – crop rotations, improved seeds to permit two rice crops per year, better water control, and crop specialization encouraged by better transportation. But the Song lost northern China to Manchurian-led kingdoms (Khitan Liao (907-1125), Tangut Xixia (990-1227), and Jurchen Jin (1115-1234)). The Southern Song dynasty was overrun in 1279 by Kublai Khan’s powerful Yuan Mongol Empire (1260-1368).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China - Southern Song Dynasty-en.svg?](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:China_-_Southern_Song_Dynasty-en.svg?)

### *Southern Song, Jin, and Xixia, 1127-1279*

In the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, the Mongols established four khanates in Eurasia – Chaghatai (western Turkestan and Central Asia), Ilkhanate (Iran, Iraq, and western Asia), Golden Horde (Russia), and Empire of the Great Khan (China, Mongolia, and

Manchuria). Kublai Khan's Yuan government controlled an empire that combined all of China with most of Mongolia and Manchuria and incorporated as tributary vassals the neighboring states of Korea, Tibet, Annam (in north Vietnam), and Champa (in south Vietnam).



*Source: Wikimedia Commons available at*  
< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yuen\\_Dynasty\\_1294 -  
\\_Goryeo\\_as\\_vassal.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yuen_Dynasty_1294_-_Goryeo_as_vassal.png) >

*Yuan Empire of Kublai Khan and Heirs (1271-1368) –  
Territorial Extent in 1294 with Korea as a Tributary*

Internal administrative decay in Yuan China arose from poor governance, weak accountability, nepotism, and widespread corruption. Over-spending led to over-taxation of farmers and peasant revolts. The Yuan Mongol government was undercut by succession disputes, palace intrigues, military weakness, bureaucratic disputes, and neglect of irrigation.

In 1366, a southern Chinese peasant leader, Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398), gained control of a revolutionary peasant movement and established his capital in Nanjing on the Yangzi River. Two years later, he took advantage of a civil war among Mongol factions, ended the Yuan dynasty, and established the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

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### *Ming China, 1368-1644*

The early Ming emperors were avid reformists who redistributed land to the peasants. But in the late Ming period, large landowners gradually regained their control of estates through bureaucratic backsliding and corruption. Once again, corrupt officials helped elite landowners undercut the free

peasantry and hence the government's tax base, thereby encouraging peasant revolts. Foreign trade under the Song dynasty had been virtually free of government restrictions, and the Yuan dynasty had controlled trade largely to obtain revenue. But Ming Emperor Hongwu banned foreign trade and decreed that all foreign transactions should be tribute. Under the Ming dynasty, China lost its international leadership in scientific and technological advances, and it watched Europeans begin to make productive use of Song Chinese inventions – the magnetic compass, gunpowder, and the printing press. In 1644, the Ming dynasty crumbled because of peasant rebellions and an incursion by Jurchens from Manchuria who proclaimed the Manchu Qing dynasty.

The Manchu-led Qing dynasty ruled China from 1644 to 1911. During the first 150 years of Manchu rule, China had only three emperors – Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong. All were both Manchu military leaders and defenders of the Chinese cultural heritage.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qing\\_Dynasty\\_1820.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qing_Dynasty_1820.png) >

### *Qing China, 1644-1912*

Agriculture remained the primary source of Chinese wealth in the Qing era. The success of agricultural expansion is reflected in the growth of China's population during the Qing period. From 160 million in 1644, China's population expanded to 437 million by 1913. The Manchu Qing dynasty adopted an aggressive and successful strategy of foreign conquest. Much of the territory of

contemporary China outside of China proper – Taiwan, Mongolia, Tibet, and Turkestan (modern Xinziang Province) – was added during the golden age of Qing rule (1662-1795).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qing\\_Empire\\_circa\\_1820\\_EN.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qing_Empire_circa_1820_EN.svg)

### *Qing China's Imperial Expansion, 1644-1757*

From the 1850s through the 1870s, the Qing government was faced with rebellions that affected about half of the areas under its

control. The unpopular Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911, when military revolts in the provinces led to secessionist movements in opposition to the central government. A massive military mutiny in Wuhan, in October 1911, ignited the collapse of the Qing dynasty and ended twenty-one centuries of Chinese dynastic rule.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qing\\_Dynasty\\_Map\\_durnig\\_Xinhai\\_Revolution.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qing_Dynasty_Map_durnig_Xinhai_Revolution.JPG)

### *Areas of Uprisings in China's 1911-1912 Revolution*

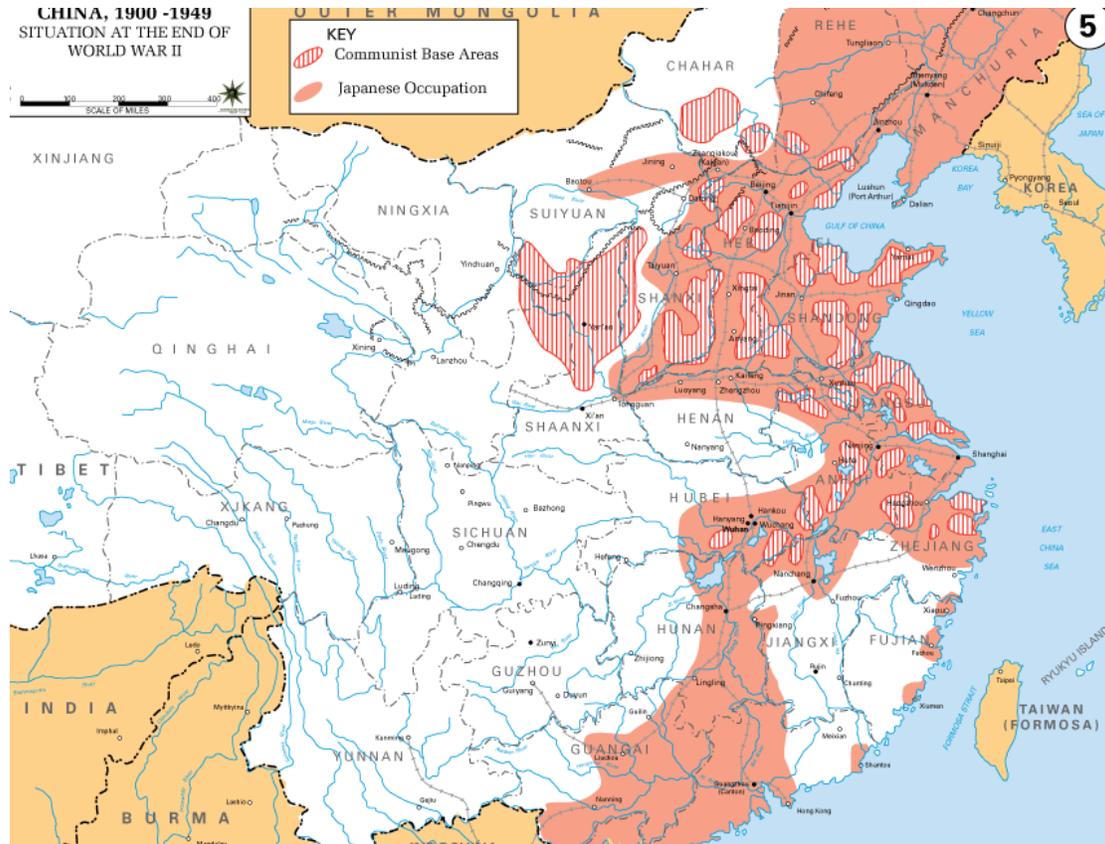
The Republican Revolution initiated nearly four decades of warlordism and civil war in China, which prevented significant economic progress. Chiang Kai-shek assumed leadership of the Nationalist Party in 1925. By 1928, Chiang loosely controlled nearly all of China, except Manchuria and limited areas under Communist control. Mao Zedong led the Communists' Long March in 1934-1935 and consolidated his control of the Communist Party in China.



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< [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_the\\_Long\\_March\\_1934-1935-en.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_the_Long_March_1934-1935-en.svg) >

### *Long March of China's Communists, 1934-1935*

The Nationalists and Communists continued to oppose each other while nominally in alliance to fight Japan's invading army.



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### *Japan's Invasion of China during World War II, 1937-1945 – Areas Under Japanese Control in 1945*

When the Allies defeated Japan in 1945, most observers expected Chiang Kai-shek to emerge as China's leader. But the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists resumed shortly after the Second World War ended.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at  
 < [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gu%C3%A8rra\\_Civila\\_Chinesa\\_\(1946-1950\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gu%C3%A8rra_Civila_Chinesa_(1946-1950).png) >

### *The Chinese Civil War, 1946-1949*

The Nationalists created rampant inflation, carried out military brutalities, and permitted corrupt administration. The Communists enacted popular land reforms, disciplined their troops, and were efficient, though brutal, administrators. Nationalist resistance dissipated, and the Communists took over in 1949.

**Lessons.** What lessons for contemporary powers can be drawn from the experiences of the two early Chinese empires? One key lesson emerges from the experiences of the Han, Tang, and all other Chinese dynasties – to avoid peasant rebellions and protect their primary tax bases, political leaders must contain the greed of the rich and powerful. A common pattern can be observed in land policy in Chinese dynastic history. Popular land reform to aid the free peasantry, carried out early in the dynasty, was followed by backsliding to allow powerful aristocrats to amass large estates and transfer wealth away from the government to themselves.

That policy error had two fatal outcomes for the ruling dynasts. The governments undercut their own tax bases, since most wealth came from agriculture and it was easier to tax peasant farmers than aristocratic landowners. Consequently, revenue-short governments were increasingly unable to provide emergency food relief to peasants and to support their armies and thus maintain their ability to control rebellions and foreign border incursions.

Politically convenient, but short-sighted, land policy also angered free peasants who lost their land and were forced to become tenant farmers on large estates. Food emergencies – caused by droughts, floods, or pestilence – triggered rebellions among angry, landless peasants. Although peasant farmers had no ability to vote in elections, in calamitous situations they could threaten or end dynasties through violent rebellions.

A second lesson can be drawn from the paranoid isolationism of the Ming dynasty. Ming isolationism began early in the period of Ming rule (1368-1644). Through the Maritime Interdict (1371-1567), the Ming leaders banned non-official overseas trade and travel and interdicted maritime transportation, even coastal shipping, to try to limit the power of coastal regions. That extreme, inward-looking policy caused Chinese scholars and practitioners to ignore advances made outside of China and thus to lose their technological and scientific prominence. Ming emperors and their advisors were paranoid about the possibility of another Mongol invasion and takeover of China. They allowed commerce

on the Silk Road to atrophy because of their reluctance to negotiate with the steppe nomadic warrior states. The Ming dynasty's policies of anti-commercialism (banning foreign trade and throttling maritime commerce) and xenophobia (limiting foreign contact and ignoring foreign inventions) had a deleterious effect on the Ming economy and thus on tax revenues. Isolationist policies were convenient in the short-term for Ming leaders, but they proved to be disastrous for China in the long run. Ultimately, starting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, they culminated in two centuries of economic weakness, military decline, and international impotence.

A related lesson is the danger of self-righteous smugness among a country's leaders and their technical advisors. Confucianist ideology placed China and its emperor at the center of the world. That degree of nationalistic self-confidence might have been warranted when China led the world in technological innovations and artistic creativity. But under the Ming and Qing dynasties, both Chinese and Manchu emperors relied too heavily on reassurances from their Confucian bureaucrats that China

indeed was invincible. They all began to believe their own rhetoric and ignore external signs of increasing Chinese political, economic, and military weakness. Triggered by Ming myopia and Qing self-confidence, China retrogressed from international leadership in science and technology in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to lagging traditionalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Self-inflicted weakness thus led to the nadir of China's dynastic era – the cession to Western powers of Chinese ports in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Republican Revolution in China in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.