The Han Dynasty

In what ways did the Han dynasty improve government and daily life in China?

Introduction

The Han (Hahn) dynasty arose because the Chinese people were unhappy with the harsh, Legalist rule of the Qin. After the first emperor's death, they rebelled against the Qin.

Liu Bang (LEE-oo bahng), a rebel who had gained control of the Han kingdom, conquered the Qin army and ended the Qin's fourteen-year reign over China. He then established the Han dynasty, which lasted from about 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E., under numerous rulers.

Over time, Han emperors began to change the way China was ruled. Gradually, they incorporated Confucian ideals of moral behavior into Chinese government.

Under Han rule, China had a golden age, or a long period of stability and wealth. Education, literature, and art flourished, while new practices, inventions, and discoveries improved people's lives.

The Han dynasty was also known for its military achievements. Han emperors expanded the empire to include parts of present-day Korea and Vietnam, in part due to new technologies. Once Central Asia was under its control, the Han established trade relationships with the West.

In this lesson, you will explore warfare, government, agriculture, industry, art, medicine, and science under the Han dynasty. You will see how the accomplishments of the Han dynasty improved daily life in China.
1. Warfare

The Han excelled in warfare. Their military methods and new weapons helped them expand their dynasty. At its height, the Han dynasty reached west into Central Asia, east to present-day Korea, and south to present-day Vietnam.
The Han dynasty had a large and well-organized army. All men from about the ages of twenty-five to sixty had to serve two years in the army. Historians estimate that Han armies had 130,000 to 300,000 men.

New technologies helped the army. Advances in iron making improved the strength and quality of armor. Han ironworkers produced a kind of fish-scale armor that flexed and moved with the body. The Han were among the first people to make iron swords. The strength of iron allowed skilled workers to fashion longer swords that soldiers could use to swing at an enemy from a safer distance.

Another favorite weapon of the Han was the crossbow. A crossbow is made of two pieces of wood in the shape of a cross. A string is attached to each end of the horizontal piece of wood. When that string is pulled back and released, an arrow is shot.

The Han invented the kite and used it in clever ways for military purposes. According to one legend, a Han general once used a kite to measure the width of a heavily guarded wall. Kites were used to send messages from one part of an army to another. They were also used to frighten the enemy. Kites with bamboo pipes were flown over enemy camps at night. Enemy soldiers would hear a ghostly noise coming from the darkness above them. It sounded like “fu, fu” (“beware, beware”). The alarmed soldiers often ran away.
2. Government

The Han emperors made significant improvements in Chinese government. They adopted the centralized government established by Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi. But they softened the harsh ruling style of the Qin emperor and brought Confucian ideas back into government.

Han emperors needed many government officials to help run the vast empire. The government of China during this time functioned as a **bureaucracy**. A bureaucracy is a large organization that operates using a fixed set of rules and conditions. At each level of the bureaucracy, people direct those who are at the level below them.

The highest-level Han officials lived in the capital and gave advice to the emperor. Lower-level officials lived throughout the empire. They had many responsibilities, such as overseeing the maintenance of roads and canals. They also had to make sure that, in case of famine, enough grain was produced and stored.

One key improvement made by the Han concerned the way civil
servants, or government workers, were hired. Before the Han dynasty, social status determined which government officials got jobs. The Han, however, based their choices on ability and knowledge. To become officials, young men had to pass a long, difficult civil service exam. It was based on the principles of classic Chinese writings. The candidates had to learn five books by heart. Legend says that the men then had to spend several days taking the exam in tiny rooms. All the while, they were watched by guards to prevent cheating.

Once hired, civil servants were not allowed to serve in their home districts. This rule was intended to prevent officials from giving special favors to friends and relatives. Every three years, civil servants could be promoted or demoted depending upon an evaluation of their work.

3. Agriculture

Farmers in ancient China faced a number of difficulties. Several important advances made in agriculture during the Han dynasty improved their lives.
Han farmers were expected to grow enough food to feed their families and to help stock the shared granaries, or grain storehouses. In addition to growing crops, farmers had to make their own clothing, build their own homes, and give one month of unpaid labor to the government for building projects like canals and roads. Hard as this life already was, floods and drought often destroyed crops, presenting farmers with yet another challenge.

One invention that helped farmers was the chain pump. The chain pump made it easier to move water from low irrigation ditches and canals up to the fields. Workers used pedals to turn a wheel, which pulled a series of wooden planks that moved water uphill to the fields.

The Han skill in ironwork also came to the farmers' aid. The Chinese were the first to learn how to pour melted iron into molds. This process enabled them to make strong iron plows. Han plows were designed to push the dirt away from the row being plowed so that the soil would not pile up in front of the plow.

Additionally, the Han invented the wheelbarrow. The Chinese wheelbarrow had one large wheel in the center. Goods were carried on either side of the wheel. It was much easier for farmers to push a heavy load in a wheelbarrow than to carry it on their backs or in buckets suspended from a pole across their shoulders.
4. Industry

Like agriculture, Chinese industry benefited from advances made during the Han dynasty. The Han government controlled the two most important industries in China: silk and salt. New inventions helped both industries.

Silk is a material produced from the fibers of a silkworm cocoon. For the ancient Chinese, making silk was difficult and involved time-consuming labor. During the Han dynasty, the Chinese developed a foot-powered machine that could wind the silk fibers onto a large reel, ready for use. Making silk production more efficient was important because there was a high demand for silk outside of China. The valuable silk trade began during the Han dynasty.

Salt was an equally important trade item. Salt was valued in ancient times because people used it to help preserve meat and vegetables. At first, people only knew how to get salt from the sea. During the Han dynasty, the Chinese learned how to mine salt from under the ground.

Salt water, or brine, exists deep beneath Earth's surface. The Chinese used iron-tipped bamboo drills to dig deep wells. When the drills
reached salt water (sometimes 1,000 feet below the surface), a hollow bamboo pole was dropped into the well. The pole had a valve that allowed the salt water to enter the pole. The valve was then closed, and the pole filled with the salt water was brought back to the surface. Workers placed the water in large iron pots, which were heated until the water evaporated and only the salt remained. Using this process, the Chinese people could find salt, even in regions far from the sea.

5. Art

During the Han dynasty, a key advance was made in art—the invention of paper. Paper was the ideal material for calligraphy, which is the art of fine handwriting. Calligraphy was important in Chinese culture. It was a style of writing especially valued for its natural flow, as if inspired by nature.

Chinese scribes used some of the same tools and techniques as painters did. They wrote their characters by painting them with a brush and ink. Characters were created by one or more strokes, drawn quickly in a particular order. The ideal stroke created both delicate and bold
lines. Paper was perfect for this art because of the way it absorbed the ink.

Before the invention of paper, the Chinese wrote on silk. Although silk could easily be rolled into scrolls, it was very costly. People also wrote symbols vertically on bamboo strips. To make books, they tied a series of strips together in a bundle. Bamboo was less expensive than silk, but it was bulky and awkward to use.

The invention of paper, in about the first century C.E., not only benefited calligraphers but also changed the way people communicated. It was cheaper to produce paper than bamboo or silk, so more people could now afford writing materials. Paper was also easier to bind together into books.

A variety of materials were used to make paper. They included silk fibers, hemp, bamboo, straw, and seaweed. These were boiled into a soupy pulp. A screen was dipped into the pulp and then pulled out. When the pulp dried on the screen, the result was paper.
The practice of medicine during the Han dynasty involved some ideas and treatments that are still used in traditional Chinese healing today. The ancient Chinese believed that illnesses occurred when the forces of yin and yang in the body were out of balance, so healers tried to restore the natural balance of these opposite forces.

One technique Chinese healers developed for this purpose was acupuncture. In acupuncture, thin needles are inserted into specific parts of the body with the intention of rebalancing the forces of yin and yang. Acupuncture is believed to be useful for curing illnesses that strike quickly, like headaches.

A second healing technique was moxibustion. In this method, a moxa—a small cone of powdered leaves or sticks—is placed on or near the skin and burned. The heat is believed to reduce pain and promote healing. This technique is used to treat long-term diseases, such as arthritis.

Chinese doctors also made several discoveries about how the human body works. For example, they learned to judge health by listening to a person's heartbeat or by feeling his or her pulse. The pulse is the little throb in your blood vessels caused by the contraction of your heart as it pumps blood through the body. The Chinese also discovered that blood circulates from the heart, through the body, and back to the heart. Western science did not make this discovery until the 1600s C.E.
The Chinese achieved a number of scientific advances during the Han dynasty. Chinese astronomers closely observed the heavens. They recorded the appearance of comets, which they called “broom stars.” They discovered that the moon shines because it reflects the light of the sun. They also learned that solar eclipses occur when the moon blocks our view of the sun.

The Chinese of this period also invented two very useful instruments: the seismograph and the magnetic compass. A seismograph is an instrument for detecting earthquakes. The first Chinese seismograph was a circular machine made of bronze. The machine had a pendulum in the center, surrounded by eight sculpted animal heads. During an earthquake, the pendulum vibrated, which triggered the release of one of eight balls. The ball would then fall in the direction of the earthquake. Using this ingenious machine, the Han were able to detect earthquakes up to several hundred miles away.

The magnetic compass is an instrument for determining direction, such
as north or south. The Chinese believed that using direction to correctly position their temples, graves, and homes would bring good fortune. By the 200s C.E., Chinese scientists understood that a lodestone, a type of iron ore, tends to align itself in a north-south direction because of Earth's magnetism. With this knowledge, they used lodestones to make compasses. The lodestone was carved into the shape of a spoon with a handle that would always point south.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson, you read about the golden age in China during the Han dynasty. During this period, the Chinese made many advances that improved their government and daily life. The Chinese word Han is still used to describe China's culture.

Warfare and Government New weapons helped Han emperors succeed in war and expand their empire. They organized the government into a bureaucracy. Civil servants who were chosen for their ability worked in the bureaucracy.
Agriculture and Industry Several inventions improved production in agriculture and in the silk and salt industries. Farmers used the chain pump for irrigation and iron plows. Workers used foot-powered reeling machines to make silk thread, and they used iron-tipped bamboo drills to mine salt.

Art, Medicine, and Science The invention of paper advanced the art of calligraphy and changed the way people communicated. Healers learned about the human body and developed techniques that are still used today. Chinese scientists made careful observations of the heavens, and invented the seismograph and the compass.

Daily Life During the Han Dynasty

China enjoyed a long period of peace and stability during the Han dynasty (about 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.). You have learned about some of the great achievements the Chinese made during this time. But what was daily life like?

Visiting the Capital City of Ch'ang-an

Suppose you had visited Ch'ang-an, the first capital city of the Han, in the year 100 B.C.E. What would you have seen?

If you started your visit outside the city, on a nearby hill, you would probably notice that the city was built in the shape of a square. That was because the ancient Chinese believed that Earth was square, and they built their cities to match.

Around the city were high walls made of packed earth. The walls had
three gates guarded by men in watchtowers. Inside the walls, the streets were perfectly straight. They crisscrossed the city from north to south and from east to west. The emperor's palace was in the north. Close by the palace were the spacious houses of the nobles. Many of the nobles were officials at the court. The ordinary people were crowded into smaller houses, in neighborhoods called wards. Each ward was surrounded by walls and had gates that were closed at night.

This brief tour of Chang'an contains some hints of what daily life was like during the Han dynasty. Now let's take a closer look.

**Life in the City**

The daily lives of nobles and ordinary Chinese were quite different. For one thing, nobles had bigger, more comfortable homes. Like the city, their houses were surrounded by walls and were entered through gates. To reach the house of an important official, a visitor had to pass through a gate and an outer courtyard, and then through a second gate into an inner courtyard.

The houses of wealthy people were two, three, or four stories high. They had painted wood pillars and plaster walls. The roofs were made of pottery tiles. Noble women usually had their own rooms at the back of the house. They did not socialize with men outside their own family.

The homes of ordinary people were much smaller and only one story high. The walls were made of dried mud. The roofs were made from thatched reeds. Women did not usually have their own rooms.

Ordinary people worked hard and did not have a lot of leisure time. When they did have time off, they enjoyed going to city festivals and flying kites. The rich enjoyed these pastimes as well. Wealthy people also liked to give banquets with many courses. Musicians and entertainers performed for the guests.

**Life in the Country**

In the 1st century C.E., Han officials governed about 60 million people, the great majority of them productive farmers. Chinese farmers grew the food for those who lived in the cities. They worked very hard, often from sunrise to sunset. Some farmed their own land. Others worked land that had been loaned to them by the government or by wealthy land-owning families. In the south, farmers mostly grew rice. In the north, they grew wheat and millet. Some Chinese farmers made great technological advances like iron farm tools and the collar harness.
Farmers lived in two-storied houses with thatched roofs. These, too, had walls surrounding them. Men worked the fields. Women cooked, made the family clothes, and raised their children.

In addition to farming, men between the ages of about 20 and 50 had to serve the government for one month each year. During that month, they helped to build roads, bridges, and canals.

**The Importance of Family**

Most Chinese, both rich and poor, lived in large families. Grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and children all lived together.

Family was extremely important in Han China. Most Chinese believed in the ancient tradition of ancestor worship. They believed that the spirits of dead men and women influenced what happened to them. The way to please ancestors was to pray to them and to offer them food and drink.

There was also a newer influence on the Han: Confucianism. As you have learned, Confucianism was based on the teaching of Kongfuzi (called Confucius by westerners).

Recall that Confucius believed that society worked best when people acted properly based on their roles and their relationships with others. He believed that there were five basic relationships: ruler and subject, husband and wife, father and son, older sibling and younger sibling, friend and friend. Confucius taught that all people must respect and obey those above them. In return, those above must behave properly to those below.

Confucianism, then, emphasized respect, obedience, and responsibility. Along with the ancient tradition of close family ties, these teachings helped to strengthen Chinese families. In turn, strong families helped to strengthen the entire social structure of the Han.

**Learning and Literature**

The ancient Chinese valued learning highly. During the Han dynasty, all Chinese parents tried to give their sons as good an education as possible. Boys from the ordinary classes learned their fathers' job. Boys from wealthy families went to school or were tutored at home. It was not considered as important to educate girls, although many did learn to read and write.
The primary purpose of education was to train boys to pass the civil service exams. Passing these exams meant that they could work as officials in the government. Boys learned how to read and to write Chinese characters with a brush. Then they studied the classic works that Confucius used in his teaching.

After seven or eight years of study, a boy could take the first exam. If he passed and then studied for a few more years, he could take the second exam. After still more study, he took the third and most difficult exam. If a young man passed this exam, he was considered a scholar, and his name was added to a waiting list for a job as a junior official.

As you have learned, the Han dynasty was a golden age for the arts. Literature was no exception. During this period, the Chinese language grew from 3,000 to 9,000 characters. The first Chinese dictionary was written around 100 C.E. The Han also made an effort to recover many of the writings and teachings that the Qin emperors had tried to destroy.

One of the best-known writers of the Han Dynasty was Sima Qian (also spelled Ssu-ma Ch‘ien). He wrote the first history of China. His book was called *Shih-chi*, or *Historical Records*. He took 18 years to write it. Perhaps that isn't so long when you consider that he tried to include as many people and events as he could from the past 2,000 years.

**Manufacturing and the Sea Trade**

During the Han dynasty, industry also flourished. You have already learned about the production of silk and salt. Han craftspeople also began making many items in larger quantities, including fine dishware, jewelry, bronze vessels, and cast-iron products.

Many trade routes were opened under the Han. The most famous was the Silk Road. The Han also found sea routes that connected China to the Mediterranean world and Rome. Chinese ships took goods around the Malay Peninsula to southern India. From there, the ships sailed to towns along the Red Sea. Goods were then moved by camel inland to the Nile River. Riverboats took the goods to the port city of Alexandria, in Egypt. From there they could be shipped to Rome.

Sea routes would eventually become the main trading routes for the Chinese, and trade along the Silk Road would end. But this would occur long after the Han dynasty had become history.

**The Life of an Emperor During the Han Dynasty**
This lesson highlights the advancements and achievements made during the time of the Han dynasty. One of the most famous emperors of the Han dynasty was Emperor Wu. Under his leadership, China experienced a time of reform and expansion. Only 16 years old when he became emperor, Wu ruled from 141 to 87 B.C.E. He was a talented and capable ruler.

Below is a biography of Emperor Wu. As you read, think about this question: What is most important to remember about the life of this skilled ruler?

Emperor Wu made many political and economic reforms. He brought back the ideas of Confucius by setting up the civil service. This system gave government positions to those with the best ability. Before this system, government jobs were given to people based on their social class. Now individuals would recommend talented candidates to the emperor. The candidates would take a long and challenging test. Once the test was graded, Emperor Wu appointed those candidates with the highest scores to be his officials. Emperor Wu also set up a university for the training and education of government officials.

Emperor Wu also made advancements to China's economy. He improved canals and roads. He set up a system to prevent food shortages. He took over the iron and salt businesses in the China so that the government would have a regular income. In this way, he would not have to rely on taxes alone to fund his programs. Emperor Wu did have to raise taxes many times to pay for all of his projects.

One of Emperor Wu's main projects was to protect and expand China's borders. He added to the Great Wall. He was also known for the strength of his army. This army was charged with defeating the many nomadic groups that lay beyond the Great Wall. Sometimes the emperor would use diplomacy instead of warfare. He arranged marriages between nomadic leaders and noble Chinese women. This helped China gain friends instead of having to fight enemies. Still, it was difficult for women to leave their families when they had no part in the decision.

Emperor Wu is most remembered for his expansion along the Silk Road. He sent military general and explorer Zhang Qian on an expedition in 138 B.C.E. The mission was to form an alliance with western peoples against China's northern enemy, the Huns. After 13 years, Zhang Qian returned with news of what wonders lay beyond China. There were other cities and countries as advanced as the Han. This information allowed Emperor Wu to promote the expansion of trade routes in the
Emperor Wu also supported the development of China's culture. As Confucius had taught, Emperor Wu believed that a strong culture encouraged proper behavior. He collected the books that were not burned under the Qin dynasty. They were preserved in the Han capital of Chang'an. He promoted the development of literature, and many historians recorded information about China's past. *Historical Record* by Sima Qian (also spelled Ssu-ma Ch'ien), written during the reign of Emperor Wu, is one of China's first accurate historical accounts. Emperor Wu even set up a government agency to support music education in China.

Emperor Wu died in 87 B.C.E. After his reign, the power of the Han dynasty declined. Peasants revolted against heavy taxes. Invaders came in over the Great Wall. Regional leaders rejected the central government's authority, and new centers of power emerged led by warlords. The Han emperor was eventually overthrown in 220 C.E. In the 400 years that followed, China was not unified under a single leader. However, the achievements of the Han dynasty under Emperor Wu were lasting. Later dynasties that modeled themselves on the Han sought to unify the country under a centralized state that was ruled by Confucian principles.

*Muk Lan's Parting: An Anonymous Ballad*

In this lesson, you learned that China enjoyed a time of peace and prosperity during the Han dynasty. Education, literature, and art flourished. Under the rule of Emperor Wu, the Chinese established a music bureau, or *yuefu*. The purpose of the yuefu was to collect and record songs and ballads of the ordinary people. Many of these pieces were anonymously written, though educated people also wrote for the yuefu. The word *yuefu* also came to mean the type of poetry that came from these songs and ballads.

Emotions and relationships were one theme of yuefu poetry. The most popular theme was the daily life of common people, such as peasants. During the Han dynasty, about 90 percent of the people were peasants. They lived in small villages in simple homes and traveled to work in the fields. The peasants worked long and difficult hours raising livestock and cultivating grain. They did not own the land, but rented it from the landowner. The government required peasants to pay taxes and to work one month each year on government projects. During wartime, peasants served as soldiers.
One of the most well-known examples of yuefu poetry is the Ballad of Mulan. Although not credited to an author, some say that a women poet around the year 5 C.E. wrote it. It is the story of a young woman who was living the typical life of a commoner. As you read the poem, think about what happens to Mulan.

**Muk Lan’s Parting:**
**An Anonymous Ballad**

Chiek, chiek, and o'er again chiek, chiek,
Muk Lan sits at her door and weaves.
Not heard the loom nor shuttle's click,
Only is heard the sighs she heaves.

Ask her on what her thoughts do dwell,
Ask her who 'tis she bears in mind;
Nought does her thought, she'll say, impel,
On none her memory dwells you'll find.

Last night a war placard she read;
His Majesty calls men to fight;
The notice o'er twelve sections spread.
And each her father's name did cite.

Her father has no grown-up son,
No elder brother has Muk Lan;
So she to buy a horse has gone,
That for her father fight she can.

In the Eastern mart she buys a steed,
In the Western mart a saddle buys,
In the Southern mart a bridle to lead,
And the Northern mart her whip supplies.

At morn she from her parents parts,
At eve she stands by Wong Ho's shore.
At parents' call not now she starts;
Heard but the rapid river's roar.

She fords and from the river parts,
By eve has gained the Amur's source.
At parents' call not now she starts;
Heard but the tramp of Mongol horse.
At the Great Wall their arms they snatch;
They pass like birds the border line;
The bleak airs pierce the steel-clad watch;
The cold lights on their armour shine.

Their chief in a hundred fights lies low;
The brave, who fought and toiled ten years
Keturu and to the Emperor go;
His Majesty in state appears;

Nobility on all bestows,
"With money freely all rewards,
And bids each one a wish disclose.
Muk Lan all office disregards,
She only asks for camels fleet.
That to her home she may retreat.

Her parents heard their daughter come.
And to receive and help her went;
Her elder sister heard her come,
And dressed herself for the event;
Her younger brother heard her come,
And he on killing sheep was bent.

Oh, ope for me my East room door!
Let me sit on my "West room bed
And doff my martial robes! Once more
In clothes of old days let me tread;
At window dress my cloudy hair,
At glass deck it with flowers rare.

Her comrades she goes forth to see;
They, in astonishment, all say
'Twelve years together marched did we,
Yet you did not your sex betray.'

She says 'With hares the buck may slide,
The doe deceit and cunning show.
How, when a pair run side by side,
Can you distinguish buck from doe?'

Notes:
Wong Ho – Huang He, the Yellow River
Amur – Heilong Jiang, the Black Dragon River

Entire Selection:  
https://archive.org/stream/cu31924023430147#page/n139/mode/2up/selection

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