Making Empire Last: The Western Han Dynasty

Political Events of the Period

The Qin dynasty conquers the last of the feudal lords and creates a centralized bureaucratic empire in 221 BC

Liu Bang/Liu Pang is victorious in the civil war that begins in 206 BC and founds the Han dynasty; he is known posthumously as Emperor Gaozu/Kao-tsu, reigns 202-195 B.C.

The Former or Western Han dynasty, 202 B.C.-A.D. 9, capital at Chang'an

Liu Bang's wife, Empress Lü controls the government in 195-180 B.C.

The height of Han power came during the reign of Emperor Wu in 141-87 B.C.

Wang Mang usurps the Han throne in A.D. 9 and founds the Xin/Hsin (Xin=“New”) Dynasty, A.D. 9-23, capital at Luoyang

The Xin dynasty is destroyed, the Liu family recovers the throne, and the Han dynasty is restored: this is the Later or Eastern Han dynasty, A.D. 23-220, capital at Luo-yang

Why Did the Han Dynasty Last?

A. Balancing Tensions in the Imperial System: Qin/Ch’in and Han compared

1. Centralization versus regionalism
2. Feudalism versus bureaucracy
3. Hereditary right versus merit
4. Military versus civil interests
5. Inner court versus outer court

B. Institutionalizing Knowledge and Limiting Imperial Power: Three Approaches from Emperor Wu's reign

1. Sima Qian (Ssu-ma Ch‘ien) and the Records of the Historian (Shiji/Shih-chi)

2. Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung-shu) and the Confucian Classics

  The Classic of Documents, the record of the sage-kings' governance
  The Classic of Songs, poems as emotional responses to the quality of rule
  The Classic of Change, the universal process of dualistic change
  The Spring and Autumn Annals, the moral judgment of politics
  The Record of Ritual, rituals and self-cultivation in public and private life
  [The Music, music as the expression and vehicle of social and comic harmony]

3. Interpreting the "portents" from heaven

  The theoretical foundation for “portents”
  Yin and yang, Five Phase theory, and “cosmic resonance”
A selection from the Peking Opera: Zhan Jingtang -- The Beheading in the Hall of the Classics

Wu Han (sung by Zhou Xinfang 1895-1975), the military commander at Dong pass is the son of an official executed by Wang Mang, who has recently usurped the Han dynasty throne and established his own Xin dynasty. However, Wu grows up without having been told how his father had died. When Wang Mang marries his daughter to Wu, however, his mother tells him that he must avenge his father’s death by killing Wang’s daughter (who is a princess after all) and joining the rebel troops of Liu Xiu who is trying to restore the Han.

Wu thus finds himself with conflicting loyalties: between ruler and family and between wife/personal feeling and mother/moral duty. He does not want to kill his wife even though he agrees on the need for revenge. He tells his wife the situation. She, being a righteous women, kills herself, thus allowing him to fulfill his moral duty. His mother, seeing that Wu is likely to mourn over this, proceeds to kill herself as well. This frees Wu from his need to care for his mother. He quits his office, burns her corpse, collects her bones, puts them in his knapsack, and goes off with the rebel leader Liu Xiu.

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