

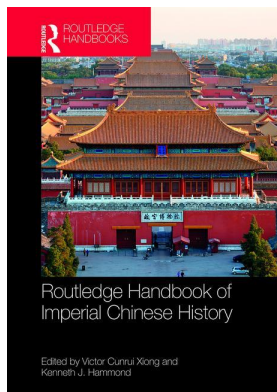
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THE EASTERN HAN

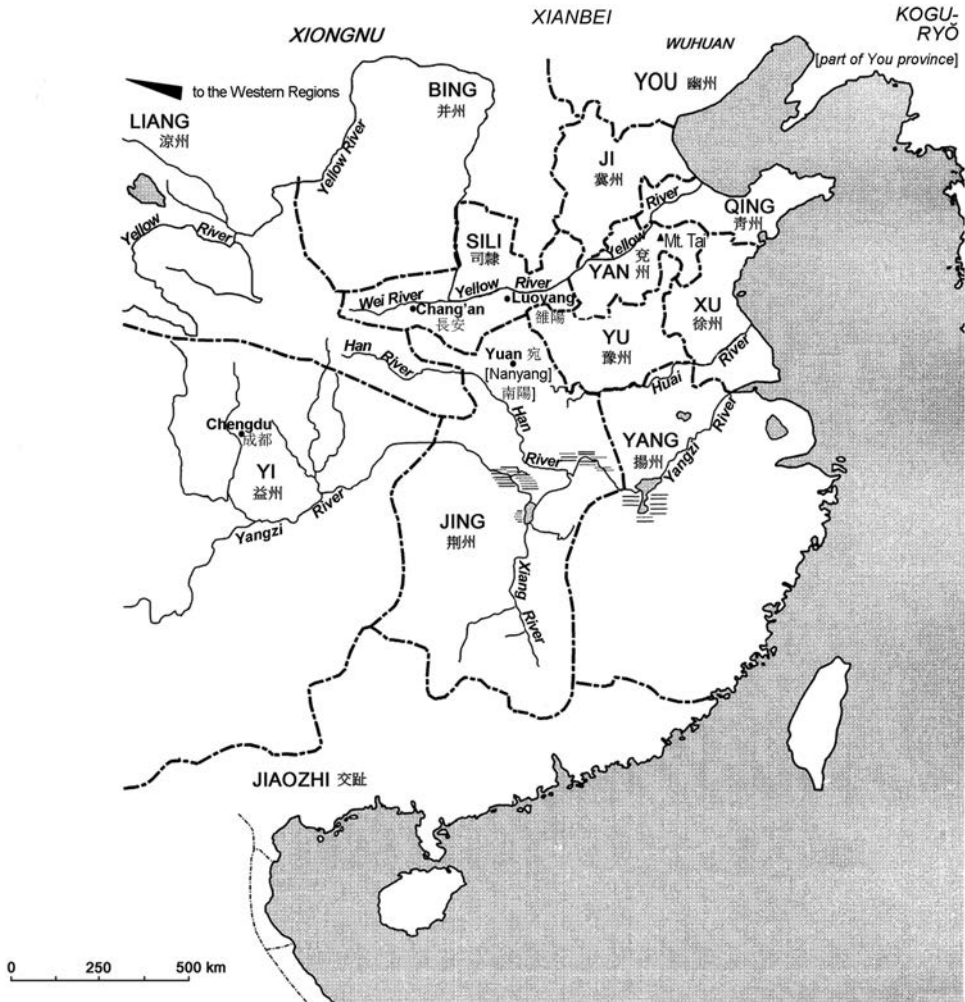
*Rafe de Crespigny***Foundation and the first rulers 23–88 CE**

Under the regime of Wang Mang 王莽, the former imperial Liu 劉 clan had lost many of its privileges, and in the winter of 22 CE, members of the family in Nanyang 南陽 rose in rebellion. While the armies of the “usurper” were distracted by the need to defend the northern frontier against the newly hostile Chanyu 單于 Yu 輿 of the Xiongnu 匈奴, the insurgents received support from large troops of people driven from their lands by floods ravaging the North China plain. On March 11, 23 CE, Liu Xuan 劉玄 was proclaimed emperor of a new “Gengshi” 更始 reign period; Liu Xuan’s cousin Liu Bosheng 劉伯升 had been first leader of the rebellion, but he was eliminated soon afterward.

On October 6, the rebels captured Chang’an 長安, Wang Mang was killed, and Liu Xuan took up residence. Liu Bosheng’s brother Liu Xiu 劉秀, however, had retained a following and was permitted to act as an agent of the new government in the North. When Liu Xuan came into the hands of the Red Eyebrows (Chimei 赤眉) rebels in 25 CE, Liu Xiu claimed the throne for himself and set his capital at Luoyang 雒陽. There were a number of rival chieftains, some of whom also took the imperial title, but by 30 CE, Liu Xiu had destroyed his opponents in the basin of the middle Yangzi and in the southeast. Northwest in present-day Gansu, he was faced by the warlords Wei Ao 隗囂 and Dou Rong 竇融, but Dou Rong agreed to an alliance and Wei Ao was destroyed in 33 CE. A final campaign in 36 CE saw the defeat and death of Gongsun Shu 公孫述 in present-day Sichuan, and Liu Xiu, best known by his posthumous title as Emperor Guangwu 光武帝 (r. 25–57), was master of China (Map 3.1).

In 29 CE, toward the conclusion of the first stage of civil war, Guangwu ordered the end of the Former Han system of military service. Up to this time, all subjects had been required to undergo training, but this was now required only in frontier regions. Within the empire, men could be called up in emergency, but it was considered that untrained rebels would be less dangerous to the government, while the elite Northern Army (*beijun* 北軍), based at the capital and forming the central reserve of the empire, was sufficient to control most local trouble.

In the far south, a rebellion led by the Sinicized Trung sisters (徵氏姐妹) affected the Red River basin of present-day Vietnam, but was put down by Guangwu’s general Ma Yuan 馬援; the sacred bronzes of the local people were melted down to form the statue of an ideal horse to



Map 3.1 The Eastern Han. (By Rafe de Crespigny.)

adorn the imperial palace. And in Wuling commandery 武陵郡, west of Dongting Lake on the middle Yangzi, the non-Han people of the hill country were a source of continuing trouble.

More dangerously, the Chanyu Yu of the Xiongnu, old enemy of Wang Mang, maintained hostility in the North, with raids and constant pressure against the frontier, so that the newly restored empire was forced onto the defensive and obliged to cede ground. In 46 CE, however, the death of that long-lived ruler brought a succession of quarrels, and the unsuccessful prince Bi 比 sought refuge in the Ordos region within the loop of the Yellow River. Recognized as Southern Chanyu, he and his followers were granted settlement and became vassal allies of Han. So the Xiongnu were divided and weakened, and much of the lost territory was regained. North of present-day Beijing, a stretch of land about present-day Chengde lay now beyond the former frontier, but otherwise the Eastern Han empire was largely coterminous with its Western predecessor.

Though member of a cadet branch, the new emperor descended from the sovereigns of Western Han, so he gained authority from that connection and was able to claim that his

government represented a continuation and indeed a “restoration” (*zhongxing* 中興) of the former dynasty. Confirming his position, he established an Ancestral Temple to the founding Emperor Gao at Luoyang, together with the altars to Heaven and Earth and to the Gods of the Soils and Grains (Sheji 社稷). The Imperial University (Grand Academy) (Taixue 太學) was established soon afterward, and further sacred sites and buildings were added during the course of his reign. Despite formal denunciations of Wang Mang, many ceremonies and rituals of Eastern Han followed precedents he had established and emphasized the same Confucian moral principles as its predecessor.

Apart from the new arrangements for military service, the government of Emperor Guangwu was organized on much the same pattern as that of Western Han. The major difference was at the head of the administration, where the office of Imperial Chancellor was replaced by the Three Excellencies (Dukes) (*sangong* 三公): the Grand Commandant (defender-in-chief) (*taiwei* 太尉), the Excellency over the Masses (minister of education) (*situ* 司徒), and the Excellency of Works (censor-in-chief) (*sikong* 司空). There was some sense of seniority among the three, but Guangwu held control of his government, and the system was designed for personal rule. One consequence was that the Imperial Secretariat (*shangshu* 尚書), controlling the receipt of official reports and the issuing of imperial orders, had a central role in administration; another was that personal rule required a mature and competent ruler—this became a problem later.

Early in 56 CE, 30 years after taking the imperial title, Guangwu traveled east to Mount Tai and carried out the Feng 封 and Shan 禪 sacrifices, highest manifestations of universal peace and good order. He died the following year, succeeded by Liu Zhuang 劉莊 or Emperor Ming 明 (r. 57–75). Though he was the fourth son of his father, Liu Zhuang was the eldest by his current empress Yin Lihua 陰麗華. Born in 28 CE and appointed heir or crown prince (*taizi* 太子) in 43 CE, he had taken an active part in discussions on policy at court, and he came to the throne at the age of 30.

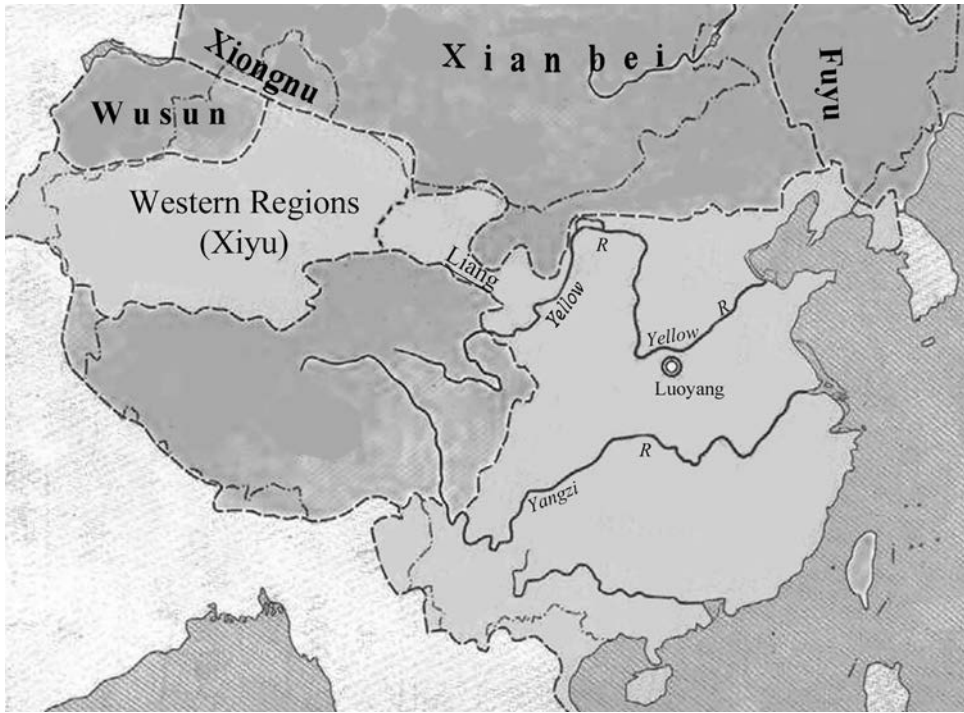
Emperor Ming died in 75 CE, and he in turn was succeeded by a mature-age son, Emperor Zhang 章. The inheritance, however, would change thereafter.

Non-Han peoples: Xiongnu, Qiang, Central Asia, and the South 58–118 CE

The empire of the Eastern Han extended from the borders of Inner Mongolia to the northern part of present-day Vietnam, but the imperial government had limited interest in the lands beyond the Yangzi and had no effective presence in the southeast—present-day Fujian and southern Zhejiang. While southern China was controlled by commanderies and counties in much the same fashion as the North, the distance and difficulty of communication over mountainous territory meant that the region as a whole received little attention (Map 3.2).

One strange exception was the far southwest, where in 69 CE, the Ailao 哀牢 people acceded to the empire. Their territory was claimed to extend from the west of present-day Yunnan into the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy in Burma/Myanmar, and their number is given as half a million. A new commandery, Yongchang 永昌, was established to govern the new territory, and was maintained until the end of the dynasty. On the other hand, while the region produced many minerals, including iron, copper, and gold, and there may have been prosperous trade with India, it is doubtful Han authority was effective over so many people at such a distance.

Closer to home, the North and the northwest—present-day Gansu—were of more immediate concern. In the early 70s, Emperor Ming sent an expedition against the Northern Xiongnu and also attempted to establish a position in the Western Regions (Xiyu 西域),



Map 3.2 The Eastern Han and Its Neighbors. (See Tan Qixiang, vol. 2, 40–41.)

present-day Xinjiang, with garrisons about Turfan. Both ventures failed: the armies sent north gained no success, and the garrisons were destroyed by the local city-states and their Xiongnu allies.

Emperor Ming died at this time, and his son Emperor Zhang 章 (r. 75–88) was less ambitious. Following his death, however, the government of Emperor He 和 (r. 88–106), first of a series of rulers who came to the throne as minors, was controlled by the regency of Empress Dowager Dou 竇. As the Northern Xiongnu suffered the effects of a prolonged drought, and their Chanyu was defeated and killed by the Xianbei 鮮卑 people from the east, the Southern Chanyu proposed another attack. The Dowager's brother Dou Xian 竇憲 was given command of a major army: the majority of the troops were provided by the Southern Xiongnu and other non-Han allies, but they were supported by the Northern Army, by local militia, and by troops under the General on the Liao (du Liao jiangjun 度遼將軍), whose base near present-day Baotou guarded the Ordos loop of the Yellow River. The combined force was 50,000 men, some three-quarters of them non-Han.

The enterprise was a complete success. As the forces of the Han and its allies ravaged their homeland, the new Northern Chanyu and the remnants of his people were driven northwest beyond the Altai Mountains. The Southern government, however, proved quite incapable of extending its rule, as conflict between the men of the South and their former enemies was exacerbated by rivalries within the ruling family. So the regime was weakened, and the northern steppe was left open to the expansion of the Xianbei, less organized, less controllable, and more hostile to the Han than the Northern Xiongnu had been.

In the Western Regions, Dou Xian's success enhanced the authority of the Han, and the enterprising agent Ban Chao 班超, with little direct support but with remarkable skill in

diplomacy, united the city-states of the Silk Road about the Tarim basin under a general hegemony. He was named Protector-general (*xiyu duhu* 西域都護) in 91 CE, but although he had restored the authority formerly held by Western Han, his achievement lasted only a few years after he left office in 102 CE. In 106 CE, a rebellion against Han influence persuaded the court that the benefits of empire in Central Asia were not worth the effort, and orders were given for withdrawal.

Closer to home, the Qiang 羌 people of the northwest had caused occasional trouble since the beginning of the dynasty, and there had been incursions and frontier war from the time of Emperor Ming. Peace was largely established by the turn of the century, but the government had brought many non-Han to settle within imperial territory as a means to control them. The program, however, was not a success, for the tribespeople were treated badly by Han officials.

In 107, the signs of weakness shown by withdrawal from the Western Regions inspired a massive rising of the Qiang. As the insurgents turned against their neighbors, the leader of the rebellion, Dianlian 滇零, established a headquarters on the Yellow River just south of present-day Ningxia. In 108, he proclaimed himself emperor, and for the next 10 years the northwest was devastated by internal warfare. Communication along the Gansu Corridor was broken, imperial armies were defeated, and rebel forces approached Chang'an and Luoyang and reached even to the North China plain.

Dianlian died in 112, but his successors—including renegade Han—maintained themselves for another six years. They were finally killed by treachery, and a form of peace was restored. The court considered whether the whole northwest should not be abandoned, but emotive arguments about sacred tradition and ancestral territory carried the day, and civil administration was restored. Han farmers, however, had been forced from their homes either by the rebels or by a scorched-earth policy of the government, and many were reluctant to return.

In sad juxtaposition, the triumph of Han over the Northern Xiongnu had overextended and eventually broken the Southern regime, while success in the Western Regions under Ban Chao was countered by the devastation of the Qiang, far closer to home. Ban Chao's son Ban Yong restored a brief authority in Central Asia during the mid-120s, but the overall effect of these expansionist policies weakened the frontier position of the Han.

Young emperors and regency families 88–147 CE

When Emperor Zhang, third sovereign of the Eastern Han, died in 88 CE, he was just over 30 years old. His son Liu Zhao 劉肇, known posthumously as Emperor He 和, was nine, and the widowed Empress Dou 竇, now Empress Dowager (*huang taihou* 皇太后), took regency power; she was in her mid-20s.

The arrangements for the minority of an emperor had been established by the Western Han: the dowager ruled on his behalf and, should an emperor die without appointing an heir, she could select any male of the imperial clan to take the throne. Naturally enough, she often allowed her kinsmen to assist her, but the dowager attended court (*linzhao* 臨朝) and held the regency.

The Dowager Dou was not the natural mother of Liu Zhao (Emperor He), for he had been born to Honored Lady Liang 梁貴人, a first-rank concubine. Honored Lady Song 宋 had previously given birth to an imperial son, Liu Qing 劉慶, and he was initially named as heir. The Empress Dou, however, had the Lady Song charged with witchcraft. Song died in prison, her son's appointment was canceled, and Liu Zhao took his place. The Liang family

of his mother was then accused of treason. As the Lady Liang was either killed or committed suicide, the empress took over official care of the new heir.

This was a remarkable set of conspiracies, all based within the imperial harem and centered upon young women in their teens or early 20s. Having survived—or arranged—the political turmoil, Empress Dowager Dou brought her four brothers to share the fruits of power. The eldest, Dou Xian, arrogant and violent, was accused of murdering an imperial kinsman who had appeared to be a rival for his sister's favor. Despite his high position, Dou Xian was in danger of imprisonment or execution, but just at that time the Southern Chanyu of the Xiongnu proposed the great expedition against his Northern rivals. The Empress Dowager swiftly approved, and Dou Xian departed to military glory.

Dou Xian returned in triumph to the capital in the summer of 92 CE, but while he was on campaign, Emperor He had taken the Cap of Manhood (*jia yuanfu* 加元服). Although he was only 12, through this ritual he was formally of full age and was entitled to rule in his own right. The Empress Dowager was reluctant, but the young emperor ran a coup, which placed her under arrest and killed her brothers. Despite his youth, he appears to have taken some initiative, and he was aided by his half-brother, the former heir Liu Qing 劉慶, but critical support came from the eunuch Zheng Zhong 鄭眾 and his fellows within the palace. This model of conflict and resolution would be followed over generations to come.

Emperor He died in early 106 at the age of 27, and his consort Deng 鄧, now Empress Dowager, took power. No heir had been named, and the Empress Dowager chose one of his two sons. When that boy died, she claimed his brother was unfit and selected Liu You 劉祐, a son of Liu Qing; he became Emperor An 安.

Empress Dowager Deng maintained her regency regime largely independent of her family, and continued to exercise power after Liu You came of age. Faced with the great Qiang rebellion and growing financial problems for the empire, she was evidently a competent ruler with broad acceptance. Unlike Empress Dowager Dou, she faced few internal challenges or threats. One of the great female sovereigns of Chinese history, she died in 121 after 16 years' government. But soon after her death, Emperor An had the members of the Deng family executed, exiled, or disgraced.

Influenced by his empress Yan 閻, Emperor An 安 dismissed his only son Liu Bao 劉保 from his position as heir, and when he died in 125, Empress Yan brought the five-year-old Liu Yi 劉懿 to the throne. His relationship was distant, and the Yan family planned a long regency.

Liu Yi died at the end of that year, however, and palace eunuchs led by Sun Cheng 孫程 took the opportunity to destroy the Yan group and bring Liu Bao, Emperor Shun 順, to power. The new ruler had taken no action of his own, but his accession was well received, and during his reign there was a period of Confucian reform. The eunuchs had now intervened on two occasions, and their leaders were rewarded, but they played no role in regular politics at this time.

In 132, the emperor appointed his concubine Liang Na 梁嬀 as empress. She was one of four favorites, but a major factor in her selection was that she came from a distinguished family of the northwest and was related to the mother of Emperor He. Emperor Shun had little interest in government, and in 135, he appointed his father-in-law Liang Shang 梁商 as General-in-chief (*da jiangjun* 大將軍) with authority over the Imperial Secretariat (*lu shang-shu shi* 錄尚書事) to control the administration of the empire. When Liang Shang died in 141, he was succeeded by his son Liang Ji 梁冀.

Three years later, Emperor Shun died. He too had failed to reach the age of 30, and his only son Liu Bing 劉柄 was barely a year old. His consort Liang took the regency as Empress

Dowager and continued to grant power to her brother Liang Ji. When the infant emperor died a few months later, the Empress Dowager and Liang Ji replaced him with a distant cousin, Liu Zuan 劉纘, aged seven. This young man showed some resentment at his tutelage and died in suspicious circumstances in 146. A few days later, another kinsman, Liu Zhi 劉志, was brought to the throne at age 14, and in the following year he was married to Liang Nüying 梁女瑩, younger sister of the Empress Dowager, who continued her regency.

Through an unfortunate set of mortalities, over a period of 60 years, eight emperors had commenced their reigns as minors, and each was subject to the regency government of a former consort and her family. Though the process followed precedent, it was inherently unstable, as each regency ended with a political coup or purge, two carried out by eunuchs of the palace. Thanks to the initial favor of Emperor Shun and their own arrangements since, the Liang family had gained a dominant position over the court and the government. This too was based upon a special situation, however, and its future was uncertain.

Population, local government, communications, and migration

The empire of the Eastern Han was organized into 12 provinces (*zhou* 州), with subordinate commanderies (*jun* 郡) and kingdoms (*guo* 國), which were in turn divided into counties (*xian* 縣). Each of these was required to present an annual report to the capital, with details of finances and population. There was no formal census, but households and individuals were registered, and the information was checked each year. The *Han shu* 漢書 (Book of the Han), the official history of the Western Han, provides details of the situation in 2 CE, and *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Book of the Later Han) has parallel figures for the Eastern Han in the first half of the 140s.

The total number of registered imperial subjects at the end of the Western Han in 2 CE was just under 59 million, and in the mid-2nd century it was 49 million. The difference may be accounted for by loss of territory in the North at the beginning of the Eastern Han, by a fall of population among the northern frontier commanderies during the course of the dynasty, and by migration to the South—where many subjects escaped the full control of government. The number was nonetheless impressive, comparable to that of the contemporary Roman Empire in the west.

Outside the capital—Luoyang in present-day Henan—the basic units of administration were the counties, with population averaging some 10,000 households or 50,000 people; and each county was headed by a magistrate (*ling* 令 or *zhang* 長) appointed by the central government. Below this level were village headmen and locally appointed junior officers, while the counties were controlled by commanderies headed by Administrators (governors) (*taishou* 太守), or by kingdoms, nominally ruled by a member of the imperial house but in fact governed by a chancellor (*xiang* 相). And each commandery and kingdom was supervised by the Provincial Inspector (*zhou cishi* 州刺史). In an elegant balance, the inspector was of lower rank than the head of a commandery unit. He could report wrongdoing to the throne, but could take no executive action; in the same manner it was ordered that no man should hold office in the territory of his own family or that of his wife's.

The imperial government maintained a broad network of roads, with some remarkable engineering across the great mountain ranges of the west, while the major rivers and man-made canals in the east aided bulk transport. There were posting stations for official communication, official granaries for storing tax grain, and the network of the Vast Canal (Honggou 鴻溝)—forebear of the Grand Canal—which brought supplies to the capital from the Huai valley and the south of the plain. There was sea traffic along the coast, supported

by way-stations in present-day Fujian, but the general territory of that modern province was beyond imperial control, and most communication in the South followed the Yangzi River and its tributaries.

Further afield, trade in rare and luxury goods from Southeast Asia and even India was carried in both foreign and non-Han ships, but the central government had limited control. To the west, on the other hand, the so-called Silk Road followed caravan routes through the present-day Gansu Corridor and across Central Asia, reaching eventually to the Mediterranean. For two periods in the late first and early second centuries, the Eastern Han established a short-lived hegemony over the oasis city-states around the Tarim basin of Xinjiang—the Western Regions—but most trade was likewise in private hands. Besides the eponymous silk, it also included Roman glass.

As mentioned earlier, however, during the course of the dynasty, there was a steady decline of the numbers of people along the northern frontier of the empire, and a concomitant increase in the lands south of the Yangzi. Throughout the first and second centuries CE, the northern commanderies were affected by frontier raiding—first from the Xiongnu, and later from the Qiang in the west, and then the Xianbei approaching from the east. Imperial armies were generally able to defeat the invaders, but such military activity was itself disruptive. Although people were forbidden to move away from the North, the legislation was largely ineffective.

The great rebellion of the Qiang from 107 to 118 saw widespread devastation in the northwest of the empire. Although the insurgency was eventually put down, vast numbers of people had been driven from their homes and many would not return. Subsequent attempts at resettlement had little long-term effect, and the problem was compounded by increasing trouble with the Xianbei and by the quiet expansion of Xiongnu tribes within the Ordos loop of the Yellow River.

The figures from the mid-second century show a dramatic reduction: registrations in the 10 commanderies along the northern frontier had fallen from almost three million in 2 CE to less than 500,000, and in the near northwest about present-day Gansu, they had gone from 1.5 million to fewer than 250,000. In many regions, the population which remained was too small to support traditional peasant agriculture, and the ground was held not by civilian settlement but by military garrisons. As the process continued, imperial sway became increasingly tenuous, and when the central government collapsed in civil war at the end of the second century, the Ordos and great areas on the northern frontier elsewhere were lost to any Han control.

In the South, by contrast, there was dramatic expansion of registered imperial subjects in the basins of the middle and lower Yangzi. In present-day Jiangxi, numbers rose from 350,000 in 2 CE to 1.7 million in the mid-second century; in Hunan, three commanderies on the Xiang River saw comparable growth from half a million to 2.5 million, while changes elsewhere were not so extraordinary but were nonetheless impressive. Local administration, however, did not keep pace: the commandery borders remained the same, and few new counties were established, so government control was slightly more relaxed in the expansive South than in the settled heartland of the empire.

Some of this development can be attributed to physical migration from the North and some to intermarriage with local people, while several local officials encouraged Sinicization: attacking local cults and emphasizing marriage and other civilized rituals. It was a continuing process of colonization and integration, which, combined with growing weakness in the North, was altering the demographic balance of China. By the early third century, the population south of the Yangzi was strong enough to support the separate warlord state of Three Kingdoms Wu 吳, and a 100 years later the region would serve as a place of refuge for the exiled dynasty of Jin 晉.

Great families, society, and government

Though traditional China was based on farming, there has been considerable debate on the percentages of the Han population that were free-holders and tenants. It is generally accepted, however, that by the beginning of the first century CE, large numbers were working the lands of others, and that the process continued through the Eastern Han. Great landed families, with large numbers of dependents, became the norm rather than the exception.

There were several reasons for this. Official exactions of taxation and corvée pressed most firmly on the individual farmer, whereas a tenant could look for protection through the local influence of his lord. Again, a small farmer would find it difficult to hold the reserves of cash or grain to cope with a time of poor harvest, and once he had entered into debt it was difficult to extract himself. A large landowner, on the other hand, storing grain and maintaining credit, could lend to those in need and later demand payment or take over their properties. The *Simin yueling* 四民月令 (Monthly Ordinances for the Four Classes of People), an estate-owner's manual compiled by Cui Shi 崔寔 of the second century, describes how the wise man buys low in time of plenty and sells high when profit can be made.

As the core economy of the Han was agriculture, the basis of government was the landed gentry. In a simple syllogism, administration of a vast territory and a large population required the ability to read, write, and calculate; acquiring such knowledge required leisure; few but the sons of a wealthy family could afford that leisure; and the administration of a great estate required similar skills. Since men engaged in trade, handicraft, or other professions were broadly prohibited from entering the imperial service, moreover, the vast majority of officials were members of the landlord class.

The standard procedure was nomination from the commandery or province, sometimes followed by a period of probation; also, there was no formal examination system as in later times. The commissioned official was then appointed either to an office at the capital or as head of a county or larger unit in the provinces. In the latter case, he was dealing with gentlemen of similar background to his own, while his junior staff likewise owed local allegiance. Apart from natural sympathy, any official would recognize that any leading families that he treated too harshly might have kinsmen or allies who could hold office in his own country and take revenge upon his family.

So government in the empire was strongly influenced by the landlord gentry, protecting their dependents and clients, and themselves from excess taxation. The imperial budget was measured in the billions of cash (*qian* 錢 or bronze coin, the basic monetary unit), but much potential revenue was withheld in private hands, and some families became vastly wealthy.

Commentators of the time tended to distinguish worthy men or good officials from those who sought only to profit from their positions and to oppress their neighbors. However, though some might choose to play a role in national politics and administration, while others devoted their time to scholarship or philosophy, and many had no more than local interests, all were based upon landed property and privilege. In that regard, there is limited value in debate about the difference between “cultured gentlemen” (*shi* 士) and local men of power (*haozu* 豪族): they may have spread along a spectrum of conduct and opinion, but they came from the same background.

A feature shared by these gentry was the search for prestige and occasion of display. During the Western Han, great monuments and tombs had been prepared for the emperors and their kinsmen, but in the later dynasty an increasing number of such shrines and burial grounds were created by private families. Decorations and inscriptions were designed to emphasize the virtues and prowess of the family, and social occasions such as weddings and

funerals provided opportunities for a show of wealth and for a gathering of the broader clan and its network of allies. There were also numbers of public stelae, celebrating the works both of government officials and of local worthies.

One aspect of this power in private hands was the vendetta. Taken to logical conclusion, Confucian virtues of family duty could call for conflict and murder. Although faction and disruption of the imperial peace was a crime against the state, by the second century CE, violent action—including the slaughter of an enemy's innocent family—was often endorsed by the leaders of opinion. When Su Buwei 蘇不韋 broke into the house of his father's enemy and killed his concubine and their newborn child, the respected moralist Guo Tai 郭泰 praised the courage with which he had defied and humiliated a powerful opponent.

From this point of view, the countryside was less peaceful than one might expect under the benevolent rule of a unified empire. Beneath the surface of official control, the *Simin yueling* tells of the need to maintain weapons in good condition for protection against brigands or jealous neighbors, and many magnates gathered retainers or recruited tenants to support them in private warfare.

The imperial relatives by marriage, the consort families (*waiqi* 外戚), comprised another group, distinct from the gentry of the provinces. In theory, any woman of respectable background could enter the emperor's harem through the annual recruitment—and many were indeed chosen by this open method. In practice, however, a limited number of clans provided the senior concubines and possibly the empress. There were a few cases of “outsiders” reaching such high position, but the Ma 馬, Dou 竇, Deng 鄧, and Liang 梁 lineages, all associated with the founding Emperor Guangwu, were regarded as the most suitable.

Though these “aristocratic” families may have had formal connection to a territory in the provinces and received income from fiefs or from private land-holdings, they were in fact based at the capital and were chiefly concerned with affairs at court. Whereas men of the gentry who joined the imperial service retained links with their provincial background and regarded government policy from that perspective, members of the consort families—who seldom took regular civil office and more often held military positions—were more likely to identify with central authority and imperial power.

Despite their differing points of view, both groups sought the support of clients and were prepared to form political alliances, and when a consort family gained access to regency power it could look for acceptance and support from the gentry-based bureaucracy. It was a complex relationship, not always working to the best interests of the emperor himself; in the year 159, it became a matter of critical importance (see Section on Eunuch power 147–189).

Scholarship, philosophy, and religion

In 25 AD, soon after he had claimed the throne and set his capital at Luoyang, Emperor Guangwu established there the Southern Suburban Altar to Heaven (Nanjiao 南郊), the Altars to the Gods of the Soils and Grains (Sheji 社稷), and an ancestral temple for Gaozu (Exalted Progenitor) Liu Bang. These were central to the imperial cult and gave authority to his rule. Further places of worship were added later, including the Northern Suburban Altar to Earth (Beijiao 北郊), sites for seasonal sacrifices in the suburbs, and a Sacred Field where ritual plowing was carried out to ensure good harvest throughout the empire.

In 56 CE, toward the end of his long reign, Guangwu performed the *Feng* 封 and *Shan* 禪 sacrifices at holy Mount Tai in present-day Shandong, confirming his achievement and the unity of the civilized world. In addition, he inaugurated the Spiritual Terrace (Numina Es-trade) (Lingtai 靈臺), the Sacred Hall (Hall of Brilliance) (Mingtang 明堂), and the Circular

Moat (Biyong 辟雍) at Luoyang. Like the altars, these Three Enclosures (Sanyong 三雍) were the scenes of annual ceremonies, including the Great Archery (*dashe* 大射) and Entertaining the Aged (*yanglao* 養老), while the court astronomer (grand astrologer) (*taishi ling* 太史令), who supervised the Spiritual Terrace, advised on celestial and mundane portents and maintained the imperial archives.

Guangwu was similarly swift to re-establish the Imperial University (Taixue 太學) and took an active interest in its teachings; an emperor was expected to be a patron of learning. Based on New Text Confucianism, official scholarship emphasized filial piety but was also strongly influenced by mystical theories of yin-yang 陰陽, the Five Powers (Five Phases) (Wuxing 五行) and the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes).

Over time, the New Text scholarship became notorious for lengthy but pointless treatises. Whereas Emperor Ming had published a treatise on the Five Powers, his son Emperor Zhang sought to promote the Old Text. In 79 CE, he called a conference at the White Tiger Hall (Baihu guan 白虎觀) to debate the matter, but the imperial preference was embarrassingly ignored and New Text theories were endorsed more strongly. So official learning suffered, and the Imperial University entered a period of decline and neglect. There was revival and expansion under Emperor Shun and the Liang regency, but the teachings were irrelevant. As leading scholars maintained private academies with thousands of students, Emperor Ling found it necessary to engrave the classics on stone so that academics of the Imperial University could not forge alterations to suit their arguments.

In the broader community, beliefs in afterlife followed long-established tradition, with emphasis on the realm of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu 西王母) and her counterpart the King Father of the East (Dongwanggong 東王公), with magical mountains, plants, dragons, and other creatures, all of which could be reached by the soul with the aid of cosmic forces and appropriate patterns—notably those of “TLV mirrors” (*guiju jing* 規矩鏡), the obverse of which was engraved with special symbols and placed with the dead in the tomb.

As in other cultures, grave goods accompanied the dead: clothing and jewelry, weapons and armor, dishes with food and drink, and models of everyday items, from houses to personal servants. Many tombs were decorated with scenes of daily life, and some officials were buried with books, maps, and other documents related to their work. All are valuable to archaeologists and historians.

Beside the formalities of official and traditional religion, there were many superstitions, frequently involving the Five Powers and occasional threats of poison and witchcraft. More generally, people of every rank were influenced by sects of the so-called popular Daoism, of which the most important was that of Huang-Lao. This held that the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) and Laozi 老子 represented two manifestations of an eternal sage-deity, and that later generations would be blessed by further incarnations. The concept is attested in the Western Han and was accepted at all levels of society in the later dynasty.

The first century CE, moreover, saw the first references to Buddhist belief in China. The doctrine appears to have come by sea route from India through Southeast Asia, and the earliest mention is in an edict of Emperor Ming in 65 CE to his cousin King (Prince) of Chu Liu Ying 楚王劉英 in the valley of the Huai, north of the mouth of the Yangzi—he appears to make specific reference to monks (*sangmen* 桑門; *śramaṇa*) and to the community of the faithful.

By the second century, Buddhism was established at the capital, benefiting greatly from the work of An Shigao 安世高, a man from Parthia, who published renderings of Buddhist texts. They were not very accurate, but they did allow some concepts and teachings of the religion to enter Chinese discourse, and they gained influence among students and minor officials.

Many conflated the teachings of Buddhism with those of Daoism, seeing the Buddha as just one aspect of the Huang-Lao deity, while Daoists claimed that the new religion was no more than a re-importation from India of the original Chinese. Imperial endorsement came in 166, however, when Emperor Huan, seeking to counter and subvert the criticisms he faced from orthodox Confucianists, held formal sacrifice and worship to Huang-Lao and the Buddha.

Emperor Huan died soon afterward, and his initiative was ignored by his immediate successors, but elsewhere in the empire there were renewed movements of popular religion, some of which developed into rebellion.

According to the theory of the Five Powers (Five Phases), the Han dynasty ruled by virtue of Fire, but Fire should eventually be succeeded by Earth, and numbers of people looked for signs of that change. From the middle of the second century, a variety of rebel leaders, particularly in the south of the North China plain, took such titles as Yellow Emperor and sought to overthrow the imperial authority. All were put down, most without great difficulty, but the popularity of such movements continued to grow, and even those which were not openly hostile to the imperial regime were nonetheless outside the official orthodoxy.

From the 160s onward, moreover, Chinese records describe frequent outbreaks of sickness with a high rate of mortality. Details of the nature and incidence of the disease are scanty, but it was very likely related to the Antonine Plague which ravaged the Roman Empire at the same period.

One consequence of the epidemic was a widespread interest in faith-healing, with different sects in different parts of China. They appeared to have shared some common ground: magical charms and potions; some form of public charity; and particularly a belief that ill health was a consequence of wrongdoing, so sufferers were required to confess their faults and purge themselves of sin. The two most important groups were the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice (*wudoumi dao* 五斗米道) in present-day Sichuan—probably named from the contribution demanded of followers—and the Yellow Turbans of eastern China. The Rice Sect would play a role in the early years of the Three Kingdoms period, and its leaders are regarded as the first in the lineage of Daoist popes. The Yellow Turbans would have more immediate impact (see section on Rebellion and collapse).

Eunuch power 147–189

The section on “Young emperors and regency families 88–147 CE” describes how the Liang family acquired regency power following the death of Emperor Shun and his short-lived successors. Having brought Emperor Huan 桓 to the throne in 146, Empress Dowager Liang and her brother Liang Ji married him to their younger sister in the following year. The emperor came of age in 148 and the empress dowager died in 150, but Liang Ji continued to exercise power: his sister was an effective agent within the palace and the young ruler spent most of his time with the women of his harem.

In 159, however, the death of the Empress Liang deprived Liang Ji of one of his chief supporters. The emperor was then attracted to the Lady Deng Mengnü 鄧猛女 and intended to appoint her as his new consort. Liang Ji planned to re-establish and confirm his influence by adopting the Lady Deng. When her family objected, he had her brother-in-law killed and sent assassins to attack her widowed mother. Though the attempt was foiled, the danger was apparent and the emperor himself felt threatened.

So Emperor Huan called five trusted eunuchs to assist him, and with their aid he issued the necessary edicts to arrest Liang Ji and his allies, strip them of their appointments, and have them variously done to death or exiled. Liang Ji’s people had been well entrenched in

the ministries, the guards, and the regiments of the Northern Army, but the emperor's authority was overwhelming and the coup was carried out with surprising ease. Emperor Huan began his personal rule.

Despite his authority as head of state, Emperor Huan faced major problems, for the long hegemony of the Liang family meant that associates and clients could be found at every level of the court and the bureaucracy. So the emperor relied upon his eunuch attendants rather than upon the officials who were supposed to serve him, but the difficulty was greater because members of the gentry tended to admire such aristocratic families as the Liang, while regarding eunuchs as mean-spirited and inadequate. Emperor Huan tried to establish *good relations* with his officials, but he naturally *rewarded* the eunuchs who had aided him. When two junior officials, Li Yun 李雲 and Du Zhong 杜眾, made ill-advised protest, he took personal offense and had them executed.

For their part, the eunuchs took advantage of the imperial favor to provide their kinfolk with offices and land, and to acquire large estates in their home countries. There was naturally a degree of resentment at the connections of such imperial favorites holding influence and office in government, and the incursion of these newcomers into the gentry-controlled lands of the provinces caused even greater indignation. There were constant complaints about the corruption of eunuch associates, and after a series of serious and justified attacks, Emperor Huan was obliged to acknowledge their failings and approve their punishment or dismissal.

On the other hand, the conduct of the local gentry, particularly some energetic local officials, was equally violent, and when alleged wrongdoers were killed in defiance of an imperial amnesty, the heads of the relevant commanderies were arrested and executed.

In 167, the eunuchs claimed that the general opposition to their position was evidence of faction—and such partisan pressure was lese-majesty. The emperor agreed, and a 100 senior officials were sent to prison. Though they were later released, they were proscribed from holding further office.

Just at this time, however, Emperor Huan died. His Empress Deng had been dismissed and replaced by the Lady Dou, who was now empress dowager. Guided by her father Dou Wu 竇武, she brought a distant cousin, the boy Liu Hong 劉宏 (Emperor Ling 靈), to the throne, and governed as regent.

Dou Wu was closely connected to the opponents of the eunuchs. He prepared for a purge, but in 168, the eunuchs persuaded the young emperor to have *their enemies* dismissed. Dou Wu sought to rally the Northern Army, but the well-known frontier general Zhang Huan 張奐 was persuaded to face him and the soldiers took his lead. As Dou Wu and his allies were executed, the eunuchs renewed the charges of faction against their opponents. Further executions and exile followed, the Imperial University was purged in 172, and a process of proscription denied the survivors and their kinsmen entry to the imperial service.

As the young emperor continued to accept their advice, the palace eunuchs controlled the government for the next 20 years. Before his accession, Liu Hong (Emperor Ling) had held a petty fief in the North China plain, and he had no other contacts at the capital. Influenced also by his mother, who sought to make up for previous poverty by corruption and extravagance, he was in any case glad of the opportunities afforded by the imperial harem and paid little attention to the government carried on in his name.

Despite the proscription, there were others willing to join the imperial service, and official families such as the Yang and the Yuan were respected for their high rank and acquired numbers of former subordinates and other associates. Personal loyalty, indeed, became a greater factor in bureaucracy than disinterested concern for the public good. On the one hand, gentlemen would refuse nomination or appointment if they considered their potential patron

unworthy—*fei qiren* 非其人; on the other, there were men who sought anxiously to attract the favor of a powerful figure and claimed status as his client or “student” (*mensheng* 門生).

The situation was further confused when Emperor Ling introduced a broad system of purchase for official positions and also established his own school at the Gate of the Vast Capital (Hongdumen xue 鴻都門學), offering swift entry to the imperial service based upon a largely non-Confucian curriculum. Both measures were widely disapproved, but purchase at least allowed the government to extract some wealth from ambitious men who had avoided taxation; Cao Song 曹嵩, for example, adopted son of a eunuch and father of the future warlord Cao Cao 曹操, paid the enormous sum of a hundred million cash to become Grand Commandant (Defender-in-chief).

Cao Song and other high-ranking colleagues, however, held their positions for only a few months. There was little stability or coherence at the notional head of government; policy depended upon personal favor and decisions were based upon short-term interest. Given the threats faced by the empire, it is remarkable how well it dealt with them, but the credit was owed largely to men outside the court and the capital.

Rebellion and collapse

After some years’ uneasy peace in the North, in 140, there was a second great rebellion of the Qiang, supported by the Southern Xiongnu. The trouble was put down, but imperial control of the northwest was now tenuous. The frontier generals Zhang Huan and Huangfu Gui 皇甫規 maintained a degree of stability, and in the late 160s, Duan Jiong 段熲 attacked the Qiang of present-day Shaanxi, killing thousands and claiming the region had been settled.

In fact, the frontier was becoming a wasteland: few settlers remained and the Southern Xiongnu state was disintegrating. So the territory was largely occupied by non-Han tribes, while the lack of civilian population meant that frontier armies became self-sustaining, loyal to their own leaders, and effectively independent of the imperial state.

Spreading east along the steppe, the Xianbei regularly raided the northern frontier, and from the early 170s, the war-leader Tanshihuai 檀石槐 held suzerainty and coordinated their attacks. A punitive expedition by the Han in 177 was disastrously defeated, and though Tanshihuai died in the early 180s and his short-lived state broke up, the embarrassment to Han arms was remembered and the empire was generally on the defensive.

Just at this time, moreover, widespread sickness saw the growth of sects based upon faith-healing, and the millennial preacher Zhang Jue 張角 gained adherents across eastern China. In 184, he called his followers to overthrow the Han dynasty; they wore yellow cloth about their heads as a badge and sign of the new era to come, and are known as the “Yellow Turbans” (Huangjin 黃巾).

Though Zhang Jue’s supporters in Luoyang were quickly eliminated, the insurgency affected the whole North China plain and the region of the capital. The government had been taken by surprise, but its forces responded remarkably swiftly, and the conflict became concentrated about Zhang Jue’s headquarters near present-day Beijing, and Yuan 宛 city, the capital of Nanyang 南陽 commandery in the south of present-day Henan. Fighting was ferocious, with no quarter and an enormous death toll on both sides. Despite their quarrel with the eunuchs and the court, local gentry refused to join the fanatical rebels, but the proscription was ended in case they did so. By the end of the year, professional troops aided by local levies had destroyed the last resistance, and imperial success was celebrated with the new reign-title Zhongping 中平 “middle peace.”

The damage, however, was immense, and even as trouble was being settled in the east, a new rebellion appeared in the west. Beginning as a mutiny among tribal auxiliaries in Liang Province 涼州, it soon acquired a Han leadership, and within a few months a large army was approaching Chang'an. The enemies were held and eventually driven back, but the upper valley of the Wei River was disputed ground, and imperial control of the further west was gone.

Regardless of these misfortunes, however, and the consequent loss of tax revenue from regions which had been either devastated or removed from government control, Emperor Ling and his intimates continued their extravagance and even demanded new levies to pay for rebuilding palaces and for new public works at Luoyang.

The emperor had a large harem and sired two sons, Liu Bian 劉辯 born of Empress He 何, and Liu Xie 劉協, whose mother Lady Wang 王 was murdered by the empress. Emperor Ling mourned her deeply, and was barely dissuaded from dismissing the empress. But although Liu Xie was his favorite, he did not name him as heir.

The emperor died in 189, again was in his early 30s, and Empress Dowager He 何 placed the teenage Liu Bian on the throne. Her brother He Jin 何進 took charge of the government under her regency, but the He family came from humble origins and He Jin was impressed by those of noted lineage. Chief among these was Yuan Shao 袁紹, an energetic young man who persuaded him to eliminate the eunuchs. Less bloodthirsty, Empress Dowager He demurred. In an attempt to pressure her into agreement, He Jin called the frontier general Dong Zhuo 董卓 to the capital.

Before any action could take place, however, the eunuchs discovered He Jin's intentions and, waylaying him as he visited his sister, they killed him. As on previous occasions, they sought to have the Secretariat issue edicts in their favor, but they did not have the emperor with them, and He Jin's troops broke into the palace to exact revenge. Amidst fighting, looting, burning, and massacre, a small group fled with the two imperial sons, but they were caught and killed and the boys were brought back.

By this time, however, Dong Zhuo had brought his army into the capital, ostensibly to restore order but in fact taking control of the government. Seeking to confirm his new powers, he forced the young emperor Liu Bian to abdicate in favor of Liu Xie, known by his posthumous title as Emperor Xian 獻; he would be the last sovereign of Han.

Dong Zhuo's dictatorial conduct, however, weakened his regime and the legitimacy of the dynasty. Yuan Shao escaped to the east, where he gathered an army of self-proclaimed loyalists, and in 190 he embarked upon an open civil war. Dong Zhuo and the puppet court were driven away to Chang'an. As the allies in the east then quarreled amongst themselves, each leader recruited men and seized territory.

Though Liu Xie was formally recognized as emperor, he held no power of his own and came under the control of the great warlord Cao Cao 曹操. In 220, with the empire divided among warring territories, Cao Cao's son Cao Pi 曹丕 compelled his abdication and declared his own dynasty of Wei 魏.

The history of the last 30 years of the Han, however, is best considered as part of the Three Kingdoms period, dealt with by the next entry.

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SECTION 2

The Six Dynasties

Strictly speaking, the “Six Dynasties” (*liuchao* 六朝) is an imprecise term. It covers a time period that began when the state of Wu moved its capital from Wuchang 武昌 down the Yangzi River to Jianye 建業 (Nanjing, Jiangsu) in 229. But, in reality, the period had officially started in 220 when the last Han sovereign Emperor Xian 獻 abdicated in favor of Cao Pi 曹丕, the son and heir of Cao Cao 曹操, who ascended the throne as the founder of the Wei (Cao-Wei) dynasty in the North. From then on until 589, at Jianye (later Jiankang 建康), a total of six regimes set up their capital, hence the term “Six Dynasties.”

However, the term itself suggests a southern orthodoxy, which is not quite justifiable. Neither was the occupation of Nanjing as capital continuous. There was a lacuna of 37 years when the national capital was at Luoyang in the North while Jiankang was reduced to a regional city. Nevertheless, the “Six Dynasties” is the most inclusive traditional term available that covers most of the period in question.

Also known as “Early Medieval China” or controversially as “China’s Dark Age,” this period opened at a time when China proper was divided into three political entities, with Cao-Wei in the North, Wu in the South, and Shu (Shu-Han) in the southwest (there was a fourth regime, that of Yan 燕 by Gongsun Yuan 公孫淵 in the northeast, which was of short duration). The leading power Cao-Wei annexed Shu in 263 before the Simas 司馬 usurped power from within and replaced Wei with their own Jin dynasty in 265/266.

The newly founded (Western) Jin proceeded to conquer Wu in the South in 280, bringing about the reunification of the realm. But China did not stay united for long. By the early 300s, internal strife among the royals greatly weakened the Jin power base. When some non-Han ethnic groups revolted, they touched off a firestorm that engulfed the entire realm. Soon the capital Luoyang was sacked and razed by the Xiongnu 匈奴, and another Jin court was set up in Jiankang in the South in 317, which marked the beginning of its second phase, known as “Eastern Jin.”

China would remain divided for more than 200 years. In 420, a new Southern dynasty replaced the Eastern Jin at Jiankang (Nanjing), with “Song” (or Liu-Song) as its dynastic title. It would be followed by three more dynastic regimes (Qi, Liang, and Chen) consecutively.

The North, starting in the early fourth century, was itself split into smaller political entities mostly founded by non-Han peoples such as the Xiongnu 匈奴, Xianbei 鮮卑, Qiang 羌, Di 氐, and Jie 羯. In all, there were no less than 20 such regimes. Sixteen of these were

relatively of more importance, hence the name of the “Sixteen States” or “Sixteen Kingdoms.” By 439, as the Xianbei (Tuoba 拓拔)-dominated Northern Wei conquered the north-western power of the Northern Liang 北涼, the North was once more united.

Thereafter, a new phase of North-South rivalry began, which is also known as the “Southern and Northern Dynasties” (*nanbeichao* 南北朝) (or “Northern and Southern Dynasties”) (420/439–589). The evolution of power in the North and South took different courses. The Northern Wei of the Tuoba split into two northern regimes, Eastern Wei and Western Wei, in 534/535, which in turn evolved into Northern Qi (550) and Northern Zhou (557). The eastern regime (Eastern Wei-Northern Qi) was under the Gaos 高, a Xianbeinized Han lineage, whereas the western regime (Western Wei-Northern Zhou) was under the Yuwens 宇文, a Xianbeinized Xiongnu lineage.

While a similar split did not happen in the South, the South was torn apart by a vicious rebellion led by Hou Jing 侯景, a renegade general from the North, in 548–552, against the Liang at Jiankang. Surviving the rebellion, the new southern regime of Chen was possessed of a greatly reduced territory. A tiny power of Later Liang based in the middle Yangzi spun off to become a client state of the northwest and North.

Initially, both North and South cherished the dream of unification. Revanchist generals under the Eastern Jin invaded the North on several occasions to recapture “lost” territory. Such campaigns eventually lost momentum. By Chen times, the dream all but vanished.

The North, on the other hand, had kept the dream of unification alive. After its conquest of the Northern Qi in 577, the Northern Zhou intended to launch a southern invasion, which did not take place due to the untimely death of the sovereign. And the reunification of the entire realm would not be accomplished until 589 under the Sui dynasty.

Chronology 2: The Six Dynasties

189–220 Late Han Warlords.

- 189–192 Dong Zhuo 董卓 takes control of court; deposes Emperor Shao 少 (Liu Bian) and establishes Liu Xie 劉協 as Emperor [Xian 獻]; relocates court to Chang’an 長安.
 196 Cao Cao 曹操 takes custody of Emperor Xian and relocates court to Xu 許.
 200 Cao Cao defeats Yuan Shao 袁紹 at Battle of Guandu 官渡.
 208 Allied forces of Sun Quan and Liu Bei defeat Cao Cao at Battle of Red Cliffs.
 214 Liu Bei 劉備 takes control of Yi province.

220–265 State of Wei (265–280, see Western Jin).

- 220 WEI: Cao Cao dies. Succeeded by Cao Pi. Emperor Xian of Han abdicates to Cao Pi. Wei dynasty established.

221–229 Kingdom of Wu

221–263 State of Han (Shu; Shu-Han).

- 221 SHU: Liu Bei proclaims himself emperor of Han in Chengdu. Sun Quan 孫權 accepts appointment from Cao Pi as King of Wu.
 223 SHU: Liu Bei dies. Succeeded by Liu Shan 劉禪, under the regency of Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮. Peace treaty between Shu-Han and Wu.
 226 WEI: Cao Pi dies. Succeeded by Cao Rui 曹叡 (Emperor Ming 明).

229–280 State of Wu

- 229 WU: Sun Quan proclaims himself emperor of Wu in Jianye 建業.
 234 SHU: Zhuge Liang dies.
 239 WEI: Cao Rui dies. Succeeded by Cao Fang 曹芳, under regency of Cao Shuang 曹爽 and Sima Yi 司馬懿.

- 249 WEI: Sima Yi takes control of government in Wei.
252 WU: Sun Quan dies. Succeeded by Sun Liang 孫亮.
254 WEI: Sima Shi 司馬師 deposes Cao Fang. Establishes Cao Mao 曹髦 as emperor.
258 WU: Sun Liang dies. Succeeded by Sun Xiu 孫休.
260 WEI: Cao Mao dies in attempted overthrow of Sima Zhao 司馬昭. Cao Huan 曹奂 placed on throne.
263 SHU: Liu Shan surrenders to army of Wei.
264 WU: Sun Xiu dies. Succeeded by Sun Hao 孫皓.
265 WEI: Sima Zhao dies. Succeeded as chancellor of Wei by Sima Yan 司馬炎.
266–316 Western Jin
266–290 JIN: Sima Yan's 炎 (Emperor Wu) reign.
266 JIN: Cao Huan abdicates throne to Sima Yan. Jin dynasty established.
279 Jin attacks Wu.
280 WU: Sun Hao surrenders to the Jin invading army and the state of Wu falls.
290–307 Emperor Hui's 惠 reign.
290 Yang Jun 楊駿 assumes regency.
291–306 The War of the Eight Princes.
291 Empress Jia Nanfeng 賈南風 kills regent Yang Jun.
300 Sima Lun 司馬倫 kills Empress Jia.
304–439 Sixteen States
304 XIONGNU: Liu Yuan declares himself king of Han 漢. BA-DI: Li Xiong 李雄 declares himself king of Chengdu 成都.
307–313 Emperor Huai's 懷 reign.
311 Sima Yue died. Shi Le wipes out the main force of the Western Jin. Liu Yao and Wang Mi sack Luoyang.
313–316 Emperor Min's 愍 (Sima Ye) reign.
315 XIANBEI: Tuoba Yilu is made king of Dai 代 by the Western Jin court.
316 Emperor Min in Chang'an surrenders to the Xiongnu. The Western Jin falls.
317–420 Eastern Jin
317–322 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Yuan 元 (Sima Rui 司馬睿).
319 XIONGNU/FORMER ZHAO: Liu Yao makes Chang'an his capital and renames the Han dynasty as (Former) Zhao 趙. LATER ZHAO: Shi Le declares himself king of (Later) Zhao.
322–325 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Ming 明.
322–324 EASTERN JIN: Wang Dun 王敦 rebellion, which starts in Wuchang 武昌 (Ezhou, Hubei) in 322.
325–342 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Cheng 成.
327 EASTERN JIN: Su Jun 蘇峻 rebels.
329 LATER ZHAO: Shi Le captures Liu Yao at Luoyang in early 329 and has him killed later. Shi Hu takes Chang'an and destroys the Former Zhao.
333 LATER ZHAO: Shi Le dies. Shi Hu dominates the court.
334 LATER ZHAO: Shi Hu kills Shi Hong to usurp power.
335 LATER ZHAO: Shi Hu moves the capital to Ye.
337 FORMER YAN: Murong Huang 慕容皝 of Xianbei declares himself king of (Former) Yan.
342–344 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Kang 康.
344–361 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Mu 穆.
347 EASTERN JIN: Huan Wen 桓溫 conquers Cheng-Han and enters Chengdu 成都.

- 349 LATER ZHOU: Ran Min 冉閔 carries out an ethnic cleansing, killing more than 200,000 Hu and Jie people.
- 350 RAN-WEI: Ran Min declares himself emperor.
- 351 FORMER QIN: Fu Jiàn declares himself Heavenly king of the (Former) Qin.
- 352 FORMER QIN: Fu Jiàn declares himself emperor. FORMER YAN: Murong Jun 慕容儁 kills Ran Min, takes Ye 鄴, declares himself emperor.
- 353 EASTERN JIN: Yin Hao 殷浩 leads a northern expedition that ends in failure.
- 354 EASTERN JIN: Huan Wen defeats the Former Qin in Guanzhong 關中, then withdraws.
- 356 EASTERN JIN: Huan Wen seizes Luoyang.
- 357 FORMER QIN: Fu Jian 苻堅 declares himself heavenly king. FORMER YAN: Murong Jun moves the capital to Ye.
- 361–365 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Ai 哀.
- 361 EASTERN JIN: Huan Wen defeats the Yan and takes Xuchang 許昌 (northeast of Xuchang, Henan).
- 365–371 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Fei 廢.
- 369 EASTERN JIN: Huan Wen is defeated by Murong Wei at Xiangyi 襄邑 (Suixian, Henan).
- 370 FORMER QIN: Qin troops enter Luoyang and Ye, conquering the Former Yan.
- 371–372 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Jianwen 簡文.
- 372–396 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Xiaowu 孝武.
- 373 EASTERN JIN: Huan Wen dies. Xie An 謝安 dominates the court.
- 375 FORMER QIN: Chief Minister Wang Meng 王猛 dies.
- 376 FORMER QIN: Fu Jian unites the North by conquering the Former Liang and Dai 代 of the Xianbei.
- 383 EASTERN JIN: Xie Shi 謝石 and Xie Xuan 謝玄 trounce the Qin's invading army in the battle of the Fei River 淝水.
- 384 FORMER QIN: Murong Chui 慕容垂 rebels and declares himself king of Yan. LATER QIN: Yao Chang 姚萇 of the Qiang declares himself king of Qin.
- 385 FORMER QIN: Fu Jian is captured and killed by Yao Chang.
- 386–534 Northern Wei dynasty at Pingcheng and Luoyang.**
- 386–409 NORTHERN WEI: reign of Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪.
- 386 NORTHERN WEI: the Tuoba state is revived under Tuoba Gui. LATER QIN: Yao Chang declares himself emperor in Chang'an.
- 394 LATER QIN: conquers the Former Qin.
- 395 NORTHERN WEI: Tuoba Gui 拓跋珪 defeats the Later Yan army at Canhepi 參合陂 (east-northeast of Liangcheng, Inner Mongolia).
- 396–418 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor An 安.
- 398 SOUTHERN YAN: Murong De 慕容德 declares himself king of Yan.
- 399–402 EASTERN JIN: Sun En 孫恩 rebellion.
- 402 EASTERN JIN: Huan Xuan 桓玄 sacks Jiankang 建康. Rebel Sun En dies.
- 404 EASTERN JIN: Liu Yu 劉裕 defeats Huan Xuan.
- 409–423 NORTHERN WEI: reign of Tuoba Si 拓拔嗣.
- 410 EASTERN JIN: Liu Yu conquers the Southern Yan.
- 416 EASTERN JIN: Liu Yu launches a campaign against the Later Qin. Jin troops enter Luoyang.
- 417 EASTERN JIN: Liu Yu enters Chang'an and conquers the Later Qin.
- 418–420 EASTERN JIN: reign of Emperor Gong 恭.

- 418 EASTERN JIN: Jin troops retreat from Chang'an.
- 420–589 Southern and Northern Dynasties (Nanbeichao)**
- 420–479 Liu-Song dynasty at Jiankang.**
- 420–422 LIU-SONG: reign of Liu Yu 劉裕 (Emperor Wu 武), founder of the Liu-Song dynasty.
- 423–452 NORTHERN WEI: reign of Tuoba Tao 拓拔燾 (Emperor Taiwu 太武).
- 424–453 LIU-SONG: reign of Liu Yilong 劉義隆 (Emperor Wen 文)
- 430 LIU-SONG: Luoyang is lost to the Northern Wei.
- 431 XIA: conquered by Tuyuhun 吐谷渾.
- 436 NORTHERN YAN: conquered by the Northern Wei.
- 439 NORTHERN WEI: conquers the Northern Liang and controls the eastern end of Silk Road. The North is unified.
- 444–452 NORTHERN WEI (Tuoba Empire): suppression of Buddhism under Tuoba Tao.
- 446 LIU-SONG (Jiankang Empire): invades and plunders Linyi 林邑 (Cham in central Vietnam).
- 450–451 NORTHERN WEI: major Wei invasion of the Liu-Song ends with little gain.
- 465–467 LIU-SONG: civil war (the “War of Uncles and Nephews”) weakens the South.
- 467–469 LIU-SONG: Wei invasion takes most of the territory between the Yellow and Huai Rivers.
- 471–499 NORTHERN WEI: reign of Tuoba (Yuan) Hong 拓拔(元)宏 (Emperor Xiaowen 孝文).
- 479–501 Qi dynasty at Jiankang.**
- 479 QI: Xiao Daocheng 蕭道成 (r. 479–482) (Emperor Gao of the Qi dynasty) assumes the throne.
- 483–493 QI: reign of Xiao Ze 蕭曠 (Emperor Wu); Yongming 永明 poetic flourishing.
- 485 NORTHERN WEI: implements the equal field system.
- 493–495 NORTHERN WEI: moves its capital to Luoyang.
- 494–495 QI: Ruthless succession struggle at Jiankang leads to rise of Xiao Luan 蕭鸞 (Emperor Ming 明; r. 494–498).
- 495–498 QI: Major Wei invasions of the South along the Huai frontier and at Xiangyang 襄陽.
- 499–501 QI: Succession battle at Jiankang.
- 501–557 Liang dynasty at Jiankang.**
- 501 LIANG: Xiao Yan 蕭衍 (r. 501–549) (Emperor Wu 武 of the Liang dynasty) takes the Jiankang throne.
- 506–509 LIANG: campaigns against the Northern Wei along the Huai frontier, without success.
- 523 NORTHERN WEI: start of the rebellion of the Six Garrisons along the northern frontier.
- 524–527 LIANG: engages in several ultimately unsuccessful attacks against the Northern Wei.
- 525 NORTHERN WEI: Du Luozhou 杜洛周 starts a rebellion in north Hebei; one of his followers is Gao Huan 高歡.
- 526 NORTHERN WEI: Ge Rong 葛榮 rebels in north Hebei.
- 528 NORTHERN WEI: succession struggle at Luoyang; Erzhu Rong 爾朱榮 seizes control, launching major crisis.
- 534–550 Eastern Wei dynasty at Ye.**
- 534–535 NORTHERN WEI: splits into Eastern Wei (534) backed by Gao Huan and Western Wei (535) backed by Yuwen Tai 宇文泰.

- 535–557 Western Wei dynasty at Chang’an.**
537 WESTERN WEI: Yuwen Tai decisively defeats Gao Huan in the battle of Shayuan 沙苑 (south of Dali, Shaanxi).
543 EASTERN WEI: Gao Huan defeats Yuwen Tai of Western Wei at Luoyang.
548–552 LIANG: Hou Jing 侯景 rebels (548), seizes Jiankang (549), controls and then overthrows the Liang rulers (causing Emperor Wu’s death), leading to widespread civil war.
- 550–577 Northern Qi dynasty at Ye.**
550 NORTHERN QI: Gao Yang 高洋 (son of Gao Huan; Emperor Wenxuan 文宣 of the Qi) takes the Eastern Wei throne.
552 LIANG: death of Hou Jing.
553 LIANG: Western Wei seizes Sichuan.
554 WESTERN WEI: Yuwen Tai captures Liang Emperor Yuan 元, Xiao Yi 蕭繹, at Jiangling 江陵, who is later killed (555); and seizes much of the central Yangzi region.
555 LATER LIANG (XIAO): Liang prince Xiao Cha 蕭詧 declares himself emperor in Jiangling. His regime (Later Liang) is a client state of Western Wei.
555–557 NORTHERN QI: seizes control of the territory between the Huai and Yangzi Rivers.
- 557–581 Northern Zhou dynasty at Chang’an.**
557 NORTHERN ZHOU: Yuwen Jue 宇文覺 (Emperor Xiaomin 孝閔 of the Zhou) takes Western Wei throne.
- 557–589 Chen dynasty at Jiankang.**
557 CHEN: Chen Baxian 陳霸先 (Emperor Wu 武 of the Chen) takes the Jiankang throne; begins to reconquer the empire (in the central Yangzi and southern regions).
574–578 NORTHERN ZHOU: Yuwen Yong 宇文邕 (Emperor Wu 武) engages in several proscriptions of Buddhism and Daoism.
577 NORTHERN ZHOU: conquers the rival Northern Qi.
581 SUI: Yang Jian 楊堅 takes throne at Chang’an as Emperor Wen 文 of the Sui.
588–589 SUI: launches massive invasion of the South, destroying the Chen dynasty and leveling the city of Jiankang.