

The Han Dynasty of China: A Chinese Golden Age



(206 BCE-220 CE)

Historical Setting of the Han

- Followed the **Qin dynasty**
 - 221-206 BCE
 - Qin ended in rebellion and civil war due to weak ruler and unrest (206-202 BCE)
- **Han dynasty** was China's second imperial dynasty
 - 206 (or 202) BCE-220 CE
 - Over 400 years
- Followed by the **Three Kingdoms**
 - 220-265 CE

Liu Bang – Emperor Gaozu of Han

- Civil war
 - Two strong leaders
 - Xiang Yu (aristocratic general)
 - Liu Bang (peasant-class general under Xiang Yu)
- 202 BCE
 - Liu Bang beat Xiang Yu for good
 - Liu Bang declared start of Han dynasty



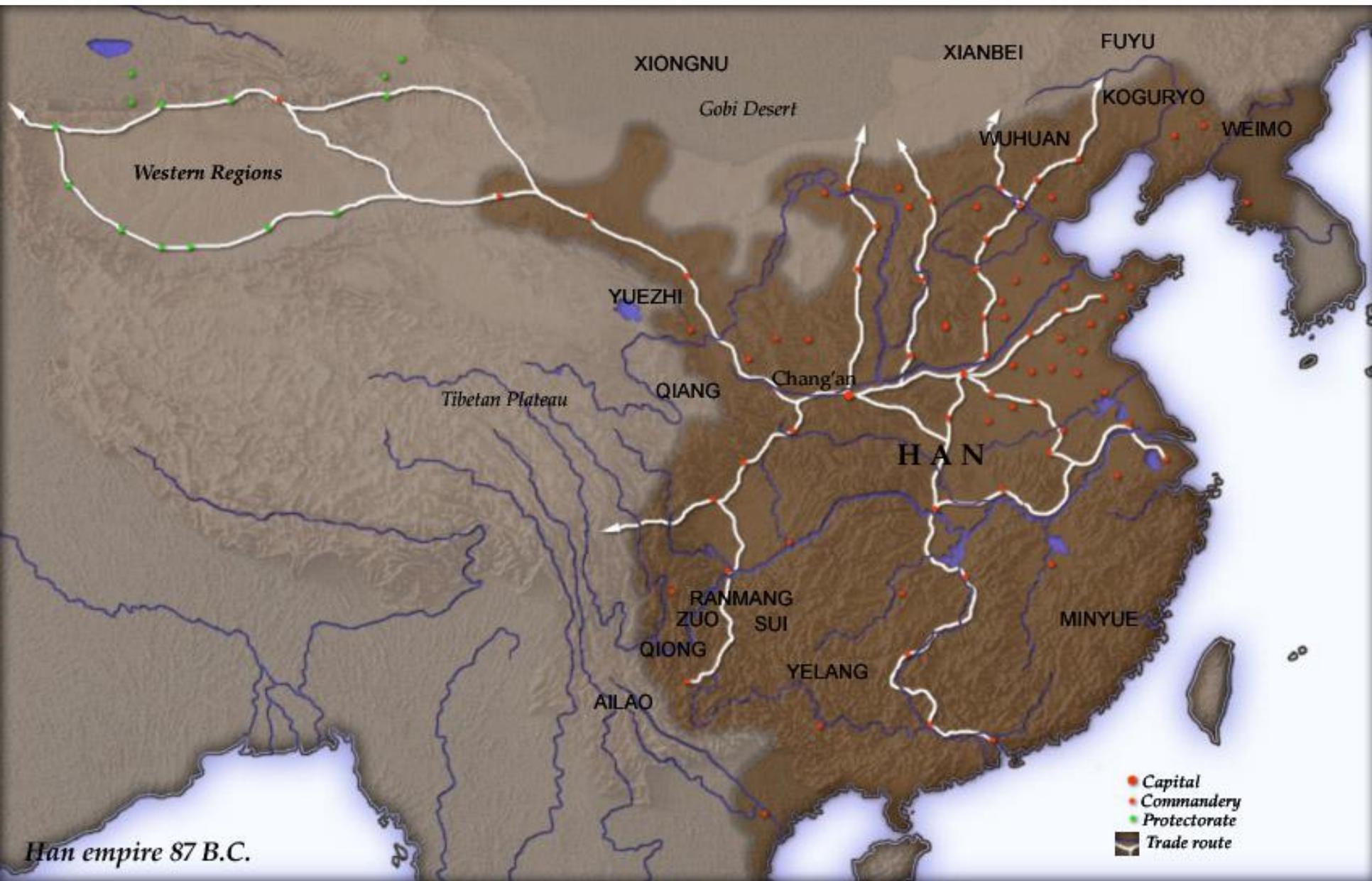
Liu Bang reigned
202 BCE-195 BCE.

Two Periods of the Han Dynasty

- **Former Han**
 - Also called the **Western Han**
 - 206 BCE-9 CE
- **Interrupted by the Xin dynasty**
 - Under Wang Mang
 - 9-23 CE
- **Later Han**
 - Also called the **Eastern Han**
 - 25-220 CE

Government under the Han

- Centralized government
 - Capital cities
 - **Chang'an**
 - **206 BCE-9 CE** (all of the Former or Western Han) and **190-195 CE** (Later or Eastern Han)
 - **Luoyang**
 - **25-190 CE** and **196 CE** (most of the Later or Eastern Han)
 - **Xuchang**
 - **196-220 CE** (very end of the Later or Eastern Han)
- Lowered taxes
- Less harsh punishments



Han empire 87 B.C.

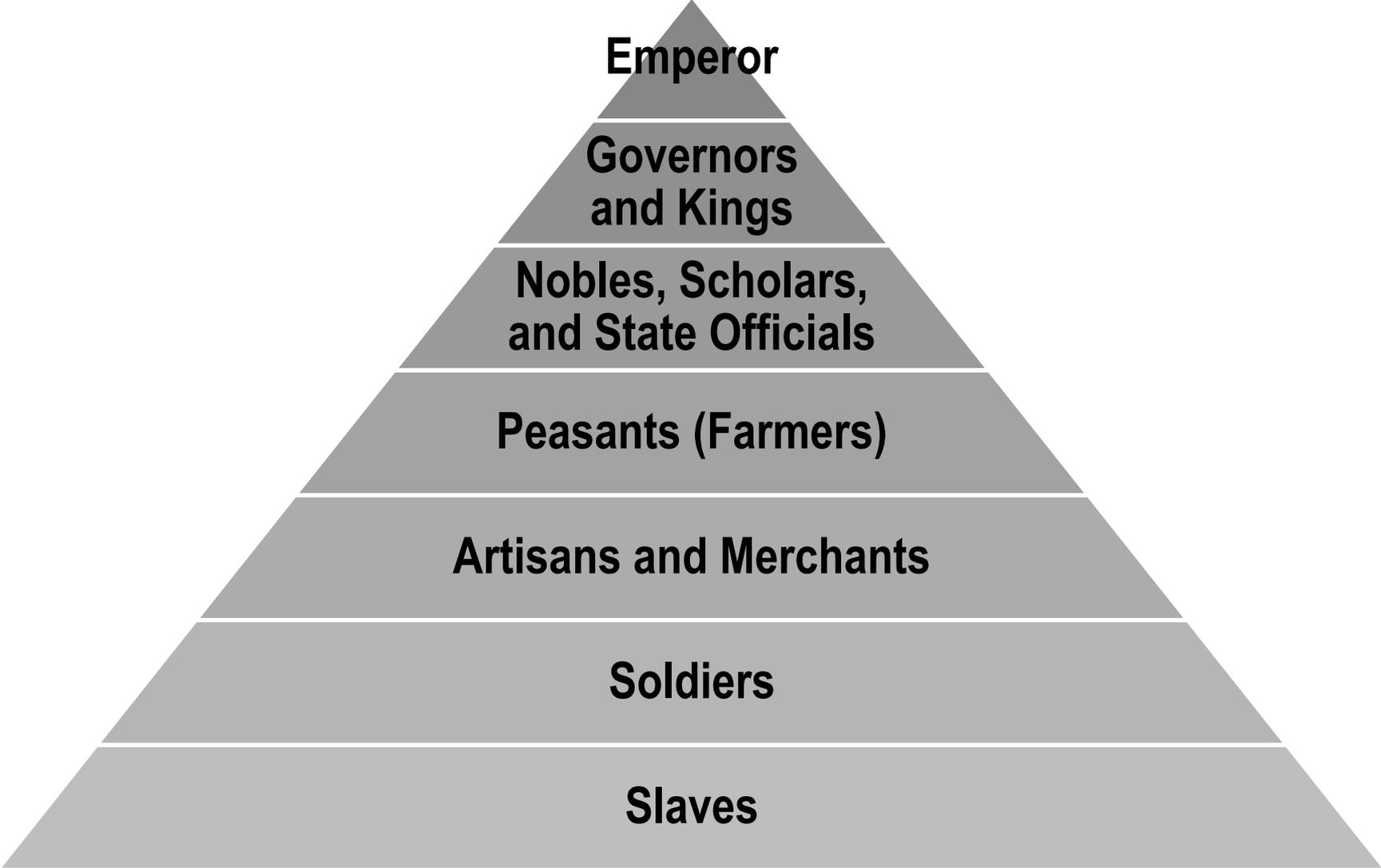
Empress Lu

- **One of Liu Bang's widows**
- **Retained power by naming various children as emperor in turn**
- **Example of power gained through the manipulation of court politics**
 - **Families vied for power**
 - **Alliances among powerful and influential people**

Wudi – The Martial Emperor

- **Wudi** lived 141-87 BCE
- Used warfare to expand the Chinese empire
 - **Northern steppes**
 - **Xiongnu** – steppe nomads from the north and west
 - Commonly raided Chinese villages
 - Traditionally kept at bay through bribery
 - Wudi made allies of the Xiongnu's enemies and sent in 100,000 soldiers
 - Pushed the Xiongnu back
 - Settled soldiers on former Xiongnu lands
 - But the nomads of the steppes provided ongoing conflict
 - Modern-day **Korea, Manchuria, Vietnam**, etc.
 - Conquered and colonized
- Borders under Wudi nearly what they are today

Social Classes under the Han



Emperor

**Governors
and Kings**

**Nobles, Scholars,
and State Officials**

Peasants (Farmers)

Artisans and Merchants

Soldiers

Slaves

Bureaucracy under the Han

- Taxes supported the government and military
- Merchants
 - Paid taxes
- Peasants
 - Gave the government a portion of their annual crops
 - Each year gave a month of labor (for public works projects) or of military service

Civil Service under the Han

- Over 130,000 employees
- 18 ranks of employees
- Civil service exams
 - **Confucian principles** described the qualities that emperors wanted in civil servants
 - **Wudi** set up a Confucian-themed school
 - **Formal examinations** in Confucianism, history, law, and literature for civil service positions
 - **Theoretically a merit-based system**
 - But poor could not afford to educate their children
 - **In effect until the downfall of China's last dynasty in 1912**

Technology under the Han

Paper

- Invented in 105 CE
- Books became inexpensive to produce; expanded education
- Bureaucracy grew and became more efficient

Collar harness

- Horses could carry heavier loads
- Best harness available at the time worldwide

Plow

- The Chinese made one with two blades
- Much more efficient

Wheelbarrow

- Invented independently (Greeks had invented as well)
- Central wheel and axle let Chinese wheelbarrows carry very heavy weights

Waterwheel

- Used to power things such as the bellows for smelting iron

Review Questions

1. What dynasty preceded the Han?
2. Who founded the Han dynasty?
3. What are the two periods of the Han dynasty?
4. Imagine that you are a Chinese soldier relocated to former Xiongnu lands. What might your life be like?
5. Explain how the civil service system both was and was not a merit-based system.
6. Describe Chinese technological advances under the Han.

Agriculture under the Han

- **P**opulation of 60,000,000 to be fed
- **F**arming thought to be a pivotal and honored occupation
- **B**ut in reality small farmers were burdened by government taxes and became heavily indebted to the rich



Ancient Chinese wheelbarrow

Commerce and Trade under the Han

- **Trade and commerce were not respected but were still very important**
- **Government had monopolies**
 - Salt mining
 - Iron forging
 - Coin minting
 - Alcohol brewing
- **Government engaged in industry**
 - Silk weaving
- **Growth of trade along the Silk Roads**

Silk Roads under the Han

- Trade routes across Asia
 - To Mediterranean (access to Europe) in the west
 - Chinese silks were sold in the marketplaces of the ancient Roman empire
 - To Yellow Sea and China Sea (access to Japan) in the east
- Traded silk and other goods
- Cultural diffusion
 - Trade goods reflected the many cultures across this trading region

Unification of the Han Empire

Colonization

- Farmers sent to settle new areas
- Settlers encouraged to marry locals

Assimilation

- Established Confucian schools in colonized areas
- Chinese became the common written language

Historians during the Han Period

Sima Qian (145-85 BCE)

- Known as the Grand Historian
- *Records of the Grand Historian*
 - Told Chinese history from the first dynasties
- Early version of the historical method
 - Examined artifacts and official records
 - Interviewed eyewitnesses and others
 - Toured historical sites for perspective

Ban Biao (3-54 CE)

- Began writing the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*
- Completed by his son, Ban Gu, and daughter, Ban Zhao

Roles of Women under the Han

Traditional Roles

- Confucianism limited women to the home and to subservience to men (fathers, husbands, sons)
- Women worked hard for their families with little reward

Women with Power

- Some women wielded political power because of court alliances
 - e.g., Empress Lu
- Nuns
 - Educated
 - Lived apart from families
- Medicine practitioners
- Shop managers
- Writers

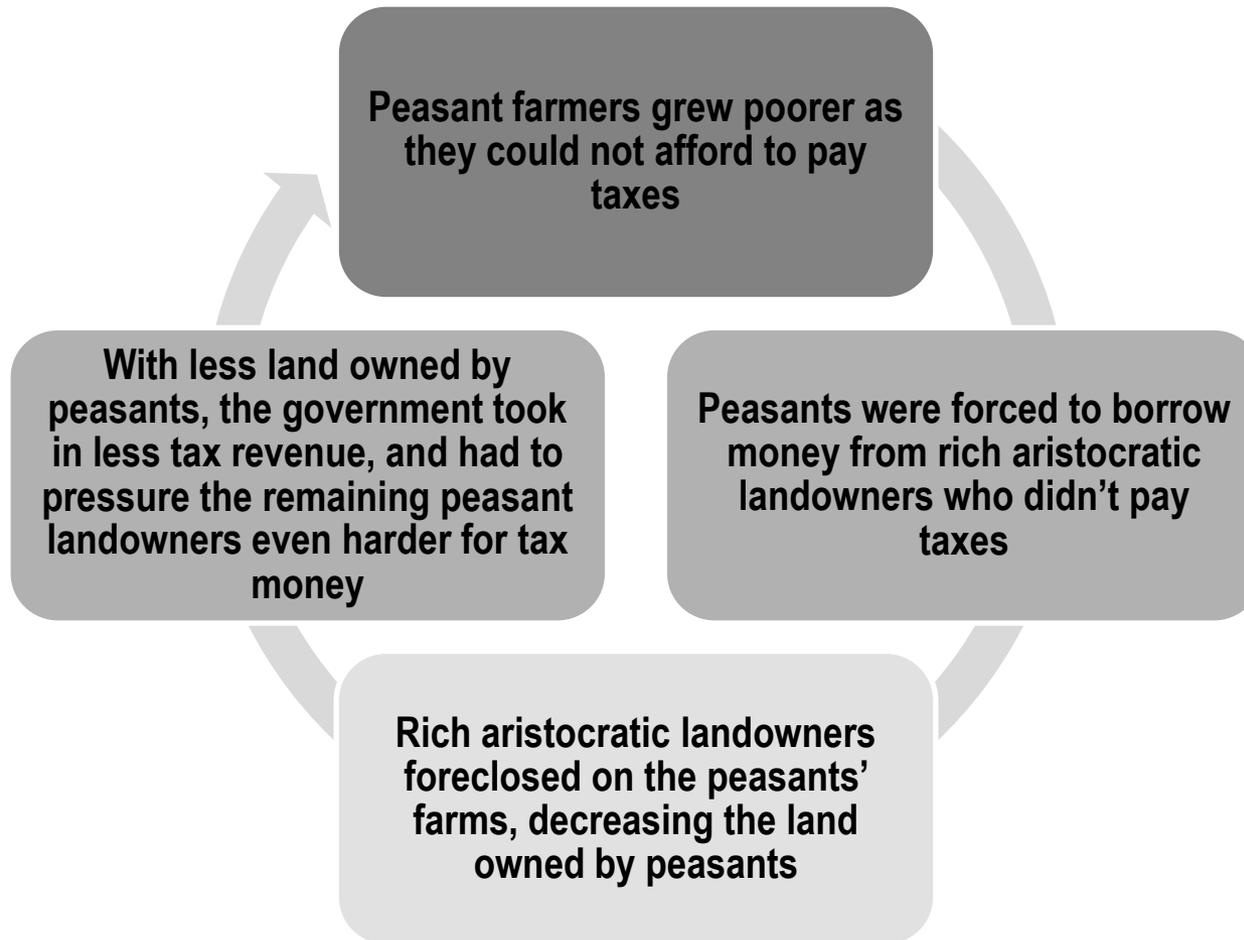
Paradox?

- Ban Zhao
 - Helped finish her father's *History of the Former Han Dynasty*
 - Wrote *Lessons for Women*
 - Urged women to obey the Confucian social order
 - Also encouraged women to be industrious
 - Went against convention by writing professionally

Rich vs. Poor

- **Inheritance law was the root cause of the problem**
 - Land divided among male heirs (sons)
 - Reduced the size of plots with each generation
 - Small farmers couldn't support themselves and had to borrow money
 - Became indebted to rich, aristocratic landowners
 - These aristocratic landowners did not have to pay taxes
 - Decreased tax revenue for the government
 - Government pressed peasants even harder for taxes
 - Rich grew richer and poor grew poorer

Rich Get Richer, Poor Get Poorer



Wang Mang

- 32 BCE-9 CE – unstable, chaotic period
- 3-9 CE – Wang Mang, a Confucian scholar, served as regent for an infant Han emperor
- 9 CE – Wang Mang overthrew the Han and became emperor
- Wang Mang's rule called the Xin dynasty

Xin Dynasty under Wang Mang

- **Changes under Wang Mang**
 - Minted more money to solve the budget crisis
 - Led to inflation
 - Established public granaries to feed the poor
 - Cost more money
 - Land redistribution
 - Upset wealthy, aristocratic landowners

End of the Xin Dynasty

- **11 CE** – flood killed thousands and displaced millions
 - Not enough food
 - Peasant revolts
 - Wealthy aristocrats joined the revolts
 - Upset over land redistribution
- **23 CE** – Wang Mang assassinated
- **23-25 CE** – chaos
- **25 CE** – Han family regained power

Later (or Eastern) Han Dynasty

- 25-220 CE
- Imperial family eventually regained power after Wang Mang
- Initially brought prosperity to China
- Eventually fell apart for largely the same reasons that the Former (Western) Han fell apart
- Followed by the Three Kingdoms

Review Questions

1. How were farmers viewed during the Han dynasty, compared to how they were treated?
2. In what ways was the Han government engaged in industry?
3. Imagine that you are an ancient trader along the Silk Roads. What goods would you trade? With what cultures would you interact?
4. Describe Chinese colonization under the Han dynasty.
5. What was life like for women under the Han dynasty?
6. Explain the crisis which allowed Wang Mang to come to power.