JunXian Ma (Victor) 11/14/14

8-8 Global

The Han dynasty is the second dynasty of Imperial China, preceded by the Qin dynasty, and it lasted from 206 BCE. to 220 AD. The first emperor of the Han dynasty came from quite humble beginnings, rising in ranks through a rebellion against the Qin’s cruel Legalistic rule. Liu Bang, established his empire after a war against a rival warlord Xiang Yu. When Liu Bang ascended to the throne, he established a few key defining elements of the Han dynasty. One of these accomplishments was a strong, centralized government influenced mostly by Confucianism. As the dynasty aged, the Han government proved to be a powerful friend to the common people by establishing Confucian colleges, monopolizing daily necessities, and establishing an orderly social hierarchy.

During the reign of the prominent emperor Wudi of Han from 206 BCE to 8AD, Confucianism was made the state ideology.[[1]](#footnote-0) Thus, Confucian colleges were established for Confucian scholars who wanted to be an official in the court.[[2]](#footnote-1) During the Han dynasty, many of the aristocratic positions were still hereditary, meaning that it was passed down from one generation to the next.[[3]](#footnote-2) As time passed on, these old aristocrats became threats to the emperor and the hereditary system prevented many talented men from becoming officials or aid the emperor. Dong Zhongshu a renowned Confucian scholar and official during Wudi’s reign wrote in “The Responsibilities of Rulership” from Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals that “He who rules the people is the foundation of the state. Now administering the state, nothing is more important for transforming [the people] than reverence for the foundation.”[[4]](#footnote-3) This means that a ruler had to try to prove to the common people that he was the base of the state and that they should respect him. However, if the emperor was not able to abolish the hereditary aristocratic system or make a move to do so, he will not be able to unite the people. With the introduction of Confucian colleges, the emperor could use the tests to choose the men they wanted to be officials.[[5]](#footnote-4) Confucius’s teachings also tell his followers to be loyal and love the people.[[6]](#footnote-5) This way, the Confucian scholar officials would give advice to the emperor that would improve the people’s lives, instead of some advice from aristocrats that might not always be geared towards the common people, but instead to their own benefits.

Along with establishing the first Confucian Colleges, Wudi also monopolized daily human necessities, such as salt and iron to raise more funds for the government.[[7]](#footnote-6) According to His Lordship [the Imperial Secretary Sang Hongyang] in A Record of the Debate On Salt and Iron, “The Xiongnu have frequently revolted against our sovereignty and pillaged our borders. … The former emperor [Wu] took pity upon the people of the border areas … he established the salt, iron, and liquor monopolies and system of equitable marketing in order to raise more funds for expenditures at the borders.”[[8]](#footnote-7) Here, the Imperial Secretary Sang Hongyang is trying to say that the monopolization of salt, iron and liquor by Wudi was by all means to improve the people’s lives. Sang Hongyang is saying that the Xiongnu tribesmen have been trying to invade the Han territory, and in order to protect the people from these barbarians and to keep the people near the borders safe, he needed money and resources for the soldiers, which was where the monopolization came in. In addition to this, emperor Wudi’s monopolization of salt and iron helped prevent starvation throughout the Han empire by providing an additional way of income for the government.[[9]](#footnote-8) Wudi tried during his reign to perform a process called leveling, where he bought food from an area with surplus and sold it at another place that needed the food.[[10]](#footnote-9) In order to do this, Wudi needed a lot of funds, which he received through the iron and salt industries that provided the excess income instead of heavy taxation on the common people.[[11]](#footnote-10) Although Wudi’s initial intention by leveling the food was to make the government rich, the process instead stabilized prices and helped the people by preventing starvation throughout the Han empire.[[12]](#footnote-11)

The Han dynasty government also helped the common people by establishing an orderly social hierarchy.[[13]](#footnote-12) On top of the hierarchy were the emperors, nobles, and scholars.[[14]](#footnote-13) The emperor was the ultimate power in the Han dynasty, and no one was to address him by name.[[15]](#footnote-14) Nobles in the earlier, or Western Han were sometimes given the name of kings and ruled “semi-autonomous” fiefs, but this was scrapped during the later, or Eastern Han.[[16]](#footnote-15) The second class in the Han dynasty social structure comprised of farmers and peasants, who were above slaves and laborers, but well below rich landowners.[[17]](#footnote-16) They were still respected because they were the ones who produced food for the wealthy.[[18]](#footnote-17) The third class was comprised of artisans and craftsmen whose duties were to craft goods, such as knives and jewelry.[[19]](#footnote-18) The merchants belonged in the same class as the servants and slaves, and were viewed as lowly by scholars. Slaves made up about one percent of the Han empire, and can be privately owned or state owned.[[20]](#footnote-19)

All in all, the Han dynasty government proved to assist the common people by founding Confucian colleges, monopolizing daily necessities, and forming an orderly social structure. The emperor Wudi of Han monopolized salt and iron, which proved to both lessen the burden of taxes on the common people and prevent starvation throughout the empire. He also created Confucian colleges, which not only kept the old aristocrats at bay, but also allowed Confucian scholars to take on positions in the court. This benefitted the common man because Confucius taught his followers to love the common people. The government also made a social structure that laid out where a person with a certain occupation stood and their social status.

1. "Han Wudi," Ministry of Culture, P.R. China, last modified 2003, accessed November 16, 2014, http://www.chinaculture.org/gb/en\_aboutchina/2003-09/24/content\_22864.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Jean Elliott Johnson and Donald James Johnson, *The Human Drama World* [*History*](http://www.noodletools.com/noodlebib/footnoteNewCitationCHI.php?entryID=341872)*: From the Beginning to 500 C.E.* (n.p.: Markus Wiener, 2006), 252-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Dong Zhongshu, "From [Luxuriant](http://www.noodletools.com/noodlebib/footnoteNewCitationCHI.php?entryID=341931) Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals: 'The Responsibilities of Rulership,'" in *Asia for Educators*, by Asia for Educators (2009), 1-3, accessed November 16, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/dongzhongshu\_rulership.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Johnson and Johnson, *The Human Drama World*, 252-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Asia For Educators, "A Record Of The Debate On Salt And Iron," in *Asia for Educators* (n.p.: n.p., 2009), [Page #], accessed November 16, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/debate\_salt\_iron.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Johnson and Johnson, *The Human Drama World*, 252-265. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. "Han Dynasty [Social Structure](http://www.noodletools.com/noodlebib/footnoteNewCitationCHI.php?entryID=341881)," TotallyHistory, last modified 2012, accessed November 16, 2014, http://totallyhistory.com/han-dynasty-social-structure/. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
17. ThehanDynasty.com, "Han Dynasty Social Structure," The Han Dynasty, accessed November 18, 2014, http://thehandynasty.com/han-dynasty-social-structure.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
18. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
19. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
20. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)