The Han Dynasty- Economy

The Han Dynasty in China succeeded the Qin Dynasty and lasted from 206 BCE to 220 AD. The economy started off damaged due to the suppressive laws of the preceding Qin Dynasty, including heavy taxes and labor corvée. The first few emperors took action by lowering taxes imposed on peasants and merchants and heavily encouraging farming.[[1]](#footnote-1) After an initial depression the economy of the Han Dynasty underwent huge prosperity and success due to the emphasis on agriculture, trade, and the monopolization of the salt and iron industries. New advancements in the field increased agricultural revenue. The Silk Road opened China up to the west and new foods and products were introduced into the empire. The monopolization of the salt and iron industries even further added to the wealth of the empire.

**Agriculture was very important during the Han Dynasty due to its practicality and tax revenue. Chao Cuo, a high ranking official during the time, stated that “Poverty is bred of insufficiency that is caused by lack of agriculture. If men do not farm, they will not be tied to the land; and if they are not tied to the land, they will desert their villages, neglect their families, and become like birds and beasts.”**[[2]](#footnote-2) **Farming ties men down; it makes them pay attention to their families and villages. “Grains and fibers, on the other hand, are produced from the land, nurtured through the seasons, and harvested with labor… Yet if people go without them for one day they will face hunger and cold.”**[[3]](#footnote-3) **Grains could be used to feed the hungry and fibers could be used to cloth the cold and warm them. Everybody needed agriculture, including the government: the output of the farmers and peasants was also the base for the tax revenue.**[[4]](#footnote-4) **Because of this, the Han encouraged people in the field. In the beginning, taxes were lowered on small land owners and peasants and farmers to encourage farming. Land was even taken from nobles to encourage farmers to plant more.**[[5]](#footnote-5) **During this time, due to the improvement of iron, new agricultural tools were developed and helped increase the output and tax revenue for the empire. Horse and oxen also became more important as draught animals, or animals used to pull a load. More advanced plows were now pulled by two oxen and mastered by three men, which helped speed along planting.**[[6]](#footnote-6)**﻿**

**Merchants during the Han dynasty didn’t work as hard as farmers for their wealth, but they still made a difference in the economy. Chao Cuo states “Now pearls, jewels, gold, and silver neither allay hunger nor keep out the cold, and yet people hold them dear because these are things used by the ruler… Thus though there men neither plow nor weed, though their women neither tend silkworms nor spin, yet their clothes are brightly patterned and colored, and they eat only choice grain and meat.”**[[7]](#footnote-7) **The things they sold couldn't always contribute actively to the economy, unlike grains and fibers, and they didn't always work for the things they sold. They were, however, rewarded if they substantially contributed to the economic output.**[[8]](#footnote-8) **They could also sell their wares at high prices if demand was high and if they exploited the ruler's wants and desires. Because of this, it was possible for merchants and traders to become extremely wealthy and obtain land estates.**[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Silk had already been around in China for centuries, but proved to become very important in the Han Dynasty. The invention of the loom allowed silk to be produced faster and traded to western people through the Silk Road.**[[10]](#footnote-10) **The Silk Road was a network of trade routes that linked two superpowers, China and the west. It began in the Han Dynasty's capital Chang'an, then crossed the Yellow River and wound through deserts and mountains to reach the west.**[[11]](#footnote-11) **The Han traded silk and in return got new foods such as grapes, figs, and cucumbers from Southern Asia, furs from Central Asia, muslin from India, and glass from Rome.**[[12]](#footnote-12) **This brought the empire even more economic success and would last for centuries to come, eventually stretching for over 4,000 miles.**

Emperor Wudi was the most famous Han emperor and furthered strengthened the economy and government. He improved canals and roads and bought grain when it was abundant and sold it at stable prices when it was scarce.[[13]](#footnote-13) **The biggest thing he did, though, was monopolize the iron and salt industries. Lord Grand Secretary Sang Hongyang states “But the resources of these areas were insufficient, and so he established the salt, iron, and liquor monopolies and the system of equitable marketing in order to raise more funds for expenditures at the borders.”**[[14]](#footnote-14) **It brought in a separate income from agriculture and the Silk Road and helped raise funds for defense at the border. Traders profited immensely from transporting the goods. State-owned slaves were also important during this time.** **These were people enslaved as a result of crime, war, or debt.**[[15]](#footnote-15) **Because of this, peasants could go to work for merchants if they owed a debt and help them with their salt and iron workshops. After the debt was paid off, they could go back to their farm and increase the agricultural output.**[[16]](#footnote-16)

**The Han Dynasty was a period of success for China’s economy. It brought in huge agricultural output due to the creation of new iron tools and from the governments encouragement to farm. Though merchants weren’t valued as much as farmers, they could still make a big impact and contribution to the economy through trade, especially on the newly opened Silk Road. The Silk Road opened up the path for new items to be brought into the empire. The monopolization of the salt and iron industries brought even more income separate from agriculture and trade. All of the dynasty’s work paid off into one of the most successful economies in China.**

1. Leng Pengfei, "Chinese History- Han Dynasty Economy" [Chinese History- Han Dynasty Economy], China Knowledge, accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Han/han-econ.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chao Cuo, "Memorial on the Encouragement of Agriculture," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, by Theodore Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 199), 1: 2, accessed November 14, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/chaocuo\_agriculture.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cuo, "Memorial on the Encouragement," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1: 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pengfei, "Chinese History- Han Dynasty," China Knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cuo, "Memorial on the Encouragement," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1: 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Pengfei, "Chinese History- Han Dynasty," China Knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cuo, "Memorial on the Encouragement," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1: 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Totally History, "Han Dynasty Economy" [Han Dynasty Economy], Totally History, accessed November 15, 2014, http://totallyhistory.com/han-dynasty-economy/. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Totally History, "Silk Road History" [Silk Road History], Totally History, accessed November 16, 2014, http://totallyhistory.com/silk-road-history/. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Elisabeth Gaynor Ellis and Anthony Esler, *Prentice Hall World History* (Boston, Mass: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ellis and Esler, *Prentice Hall World History*, 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Literati and Sang Hongyang, "A Record of the Debate on Salt and Iron," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, by Theodore Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York City, NY: Columbia Unniversity Press, 1999), 1: 2, accessed November 16, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/debate\_salt\_iron.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pengfei, "Chinese History- Han Dynasty," China Knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Totally History, "Han Dynasty Economy," Totally History. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)