

Expansion, Prosperity, and the Silk Road

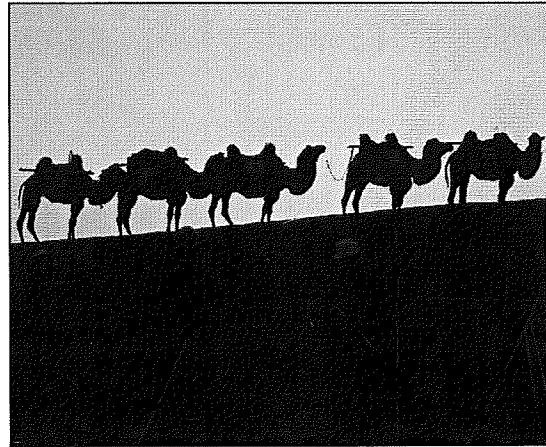
Emperor Shi Huangdi ruled the Qin Dynasty harshly. According to an early Chinese historian, the first emperor "killed men as though he could never finish. . . . [T]he whole world revolted against him."

After Shi Huangdi's death, peasants, farmers, soldiers, and even landowners and nobles rebelled against the government. The emperor had bragged that his dynasty would last for years "without end." In fact, the Qin Dynasty lasted only about 15 years.

During the uprisings, a young general named Liu Bang rose to power. He wanted to keep the Qin empire in one piece. This would require a powerful government. At the same time, he believed that Emperor Shi Huangdi had treated the Chinese people badly. He wanted to make the government more humane.

Pronunciation Key

Ban Gu (ban GOO)
Chang'an (chang AN)
Liu Bang (liou BANG)
Qin (chin)
Shi Huangdi (shuh hwong DEE)
Xi Ling shi (she ling shuh)



About 200 B.C., caravans began carrying jewels, spices, tea, and silk from Chang'an to Asian and Mediterranean cities.

Liu Bang invited Confucian scholars to help him change the harsh Legalist justice system. He released slaves who had served the Qin nobility. Liu Bang's rule marked the beginning of the Han Dynasty. Liu Bang's more humane laws helped Han Dynasty rulers govern China for nearly 400 years.

A New Prosperity

During the Han Dynasty, China's population grew. Its economy boomed, helped by several important inventions. The Chinese began making silk well before 2000 B.C. It comes from the cocoon of silkworms, caterpillars that feed on mulberry trees. By

500 B.C., many parts of China were producing silk.

About 300 B.C., the Chinese people invented cast iron, which could be molded into pots, plows, armor, and swords. The Chinese cast-iron plow was far better than those used in Europe.

About 100 B.C., paper was invented. The word "paper" comes from papyrus, a stemmed plant that grew in the Nile River in Egypt. Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans wrote on scrolls made of papyrus. But this was not paper as we know it. The Chinese invented a process for making paper from trees. This invention did not reach the West for another thousand years. Before the invention of paper, Chinese used bones, shells, bamboo, and even silk to write on. Paper was better and cheaper. Paper helped the Han Dynasty keep records and communicate.

Han officials made sure that anyone could buy cast-iron tools such as plows, knives, axes, saws, pots, even toys. The government manufactured weapons. It built mines, shipyards, and granaries, giving work to many people.

This prosperity allowed the Han rulers to expand their empire. Han armies marched north to Mongolia. They even went north to the Korean Peninsula and south into what is today known as Vietnam. As their empire expand-

ed, trade grew among China's diverse and far-flung populations.

A trade route called the Silk Road helped China expand and become prosperous. The Silk Road was not a road at all, but a series of winding trails that snaked 6,000 miles westward to the Mediterranean Sea from the capital city of Chang'an. (This was about 4,000 miles as the crow flies.) It would take anywhere from 10 months to a year to go the whole distance. But no one person usually went all the way. Traders would exchange goods at various points and return home.

Chang'an—City of the Silk Road

Chang'an stood in the middle of the Yellow Valley at the meeting place of two large rivers. Like most walled cities, Chang'an was built in the shape of a square. It had a strong wall "eight horses thick and five men high" surrounding it for protection.

The people of Chang'an came and went through four heavily guarded gates facing north, south, east, and west. Inside, the streets were laid out in straight lines from north to south and east to west. The emperor's palace was located in the north of the city. Nobles and government officials lived close to the emperor. Merchants and craftsmen lived further away from the palace, but still within the city walls. Farmers and other

peasants lived outside the gates, but were allowed to come and go to Chang'an's busy markets.

Merchants in the markets accepted gold for goods. They also used barter, trading one item for another. Ban Gu, a Han Dynasty poet, describes a Chang'an street scene:

In the nine markets they set up
bazaars,

Their wares separated by type,
their shop rows distinctly
divided.

There was no room for people
to turn their heads,

Or for chariots to wheel about.

People crammed into the city,
spilled into the suburbs,

Everywhere streaming into the
hundreds of shops.

About 200 B.C., trade caravans, using camels as beasts of burden, began traveling along the Silk Road between China and the Mediterranean. The caravans formed inside the walled city of Chang'an. When the traders had gathered enough camels, trade goods, and soldiers for protection, they began their difficult journey. Silk Road travelers risked freezing to death, being buried by sandstorms, dying of thirst in the high, dry desert, or being attacked by roving bands of robbers.

THE LEGEND OF XI LING SHI

According to ancient Chinese legend, a young princess named Xi Ling shi was walking in a grove of mulberry trees near the palace. Caterpillars wrapped in cocoons hung from the branches. Xi Ling shi pulled a cocoon from a mulberry tree and brought it back to the palace. She dropped the cocoon in a cup of hot tea. The cocoon floated off the caterpillar in a loose tangled web. When Xi Ling shi picked up the web, she found she could unravel it into a single, long thread of silk. She set about to weave the new material into the first silk cloth.

Why would these Silk Road travelers risk such hardships? The promise of riches lured merchants, soldiers, and adventurers to brave the hazards of the Silk Road. Silk Road trade goods changed hands many times before they reached their destinations. Each time they were bought and sold, the price of the goods rose higher. Because it cost so much to carry goods along the Silk Road, the caravans carried only luxury items such as jade, spices, tea, incense, porcelain, and—of course—silk.

As China expanded its trade beyond its borders, people in far-off kingdoms wanted silk. No one

outside China knew how to make the precious, durable cloth. China guarded its secret carefully. Smuggling silkworms out of China was punishable by death. By the first century A.D., silk had become the most important product in Chinese society.

The Romans loved Chinese silk. It was first seen in Rome about 40 B.C. At times in Rome, silk was literally worth its weight in gold. One pound of gold would buy one pound of silk. Silk became so popular in Rome that the government had to ban nobles from wearing it. They were sending too much Roman gold to China to buy it. At the height of the silk trade, one caravan left Chang'an each month.

The caravans returned with gold, silver, ivory, glassware, wool, horses, and new foods. Ideas also spread along the Silk Road. Travelers brought Buddhism and later Islam to China. Officials visited Chang'an from the Asian empires of Persia and Kushan. The Romans sent an official to the Han court to discuss trade, and Chinese officials traveled west to visit the royal courts of Asian empires. The Silk Road formed a powerful link between the formerly isolated China and the growing civilizations of Persia, Rome, India, and Kushan.

For Discussion

1. How did government change in China during the Han Dynasty?
2. What are some factors that helped China prosper?
3. What was Chang'an? What was life like in Chang'an?
4. What was the Silk Road? Why was it important? What were some dangers on the Silk Road? Why did people risk going on the Silk Road?