

# The Fall of the Han Dynasty

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Image 1. Li Ling, a Han Dynasty general, and his army attacking the Huns in 99 B.C. Photo by: Universal History Archive/UIG via Getty Images

The Han was China's second imperial dynasty. It is considered a golden age in China. It was a period of economic, cultural, and scientific growth and led to the creation of a Chinese identity. During the Han Dynasty, the emperors all belonged to the Liu family. Their rule spread over two periods: the Western Han, which lasted from 206 B.C. to A.D. 9 and then Eastern Han, which lasted from 25 to 220. Between these two periods, General Wang Mung ruled China, but his Xin Dynasty only lasted 9 years. So really it was still all about the Han in this era.

At its height, the Han emperors controlled approximately 2.5 million square miles of territory and ruled over nearly 60 million people. The emperor, or "huangdi" in Chinese, was more than just a worldly ruler. The Chinese saw him as closely connected to the divine world and respected him as a kind of spiritual being.

## The collapse of the Han Dynasty

The Eastern Han emperors faced a variety of challenges. These included rebellions and warfare, as well as natural disasters such as cattle plagues, locusts, droughts, floods, and earthquakes. The empire was strong enough to withstand these disasters for almost two hundred years. However, over time, the expense of dealing with these disasters became too great. The end result was that by 220, warlords tore the empire apart into three separate kingdoms.



## The Han and outsiders

Tribal groups living along China's borders had a tense relationship with the Han, who thought people born not Chinese were inferior. The Han emperors saw themselves as enlightened bringers of peace and order to the tribes, even if it meant fighting them to do so. They resettled tribal groups, who opposed their rule, deeper in the empire. But because the Chinese despised these tribal groups, many officials mistreated and cheated them. They became a potential source of trouble for the empire.

In 89, the Han defeated a large tribal group known as the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu were driven away from China. They would later become known as the Huns. The Han had failed to realize that the Xiongnu had been serving as a buffer against other dangerous tribes. Removing the Xiongnu opened the floodgates to invasion. Fighting off these tribal threats was a serious drain on Han resources.

## Problems from within

The Han also experienced internal struggles. Taxation became an increasing problem by 100. While the small farmers paid the majority of taxes, local elites, who owned large estates, contributed less of their wealth and energy to the empire. Many small farmers gave up their land to work for local elites, either willingly as tenants, or unwillingly as debt slaves. In this way, the wealthy could increase their productivity and the smaller farmers could avoid paying taxes. This meant less and less tax money the empire could use to deal with new problems.

Throughout the first and second centuries, imperial eunuchs became a powerful group. The elites felt threatened by this. Because eunuchs, men who have been castrated, had no children or wives, they could give all their loyalty to the empire. The elites were loyal to their families, but the eunuchs' power only came from their connection to the emperor. This powerful resource could be targeted. For example, when Emperor Huan died in 168, a young boy from the ruling dynasty was made emperor. The new emperor was just 11 or 12 years old. During that transition, a small group of elites hatched a plan to kill hundreds of eunuchs. They failed spectacularly. One of the three leaders of the planned murders was thrown in prison and killed. The other two committed suicide after losing to the eunuchs, and their severed heads were put on display. As for the child ruler, Emperor Ling, he was seen as weak and corrupt, and his reign was marked by rebellions and protests. One of the most dangerous was the Yellow Turban Revolt of 184.



The Yellow Turban Revolt was a peasant rebellion, sparked by outbreaks of a deadly plague throughout the decades of the 170s and 180s. People believed that the emperor had the power to stop the disease, and began blaming him when it continued. To make matters worse he placed heavy taxes on his people. The peasants started turning to faith healers for magical cures. One of these faith healers, Zhang Jue, was very successful and gained a huge following. By 184, Zhang Jue turned his movement into a violent uprising and led his followers to revolt against the Han. The army was able to defeat the rebels, but peasant rebellions continued to flare up over the next decade.

Five years after the Yellow Turban Revolt, Emperor Ling died. His 13-year-old son was proclaimed Emperor Shao by the dowager empress He, the widowed wife of the dead emperor. The dowager empress's brother, He Jin, tried to destroy the eunuchs, and the resulting chaos allowed a general named Dong Zhou to seize control of the capital city. He overthrew the young emperor and sat an 8-year-old

on the throne as Emperor Xian. The general tried to control the government through this puppet emperor, but he was not well liked, and was eventually killed by his bodyguard. The Han Empire quickly broke down as warlords fought each other for control. In 220, the emperor Xian was forced to give up his throne, officially ending the Han Dynasty.

## Theories of collapse

Chinese historians have spent more than a thousand years trying to understand why the Han Dynasty collapsed. Over time they developed three main theories: 1) bad rulers; 2) the influence of empresses and court eunuchs over child emperors too young to rule by themselves; and 3) the Yellow Turban Revolt. The first theory simply held that the Han fell because too many individual rulers were poor at their jobs. The second is based on the fact that most of the Eastern Han emperors died young, sometimes without a clear heir to the throne. The widowed empresses and their families would choose the new emperor and rule for them behind the scenes. The third idea blames the collapse on peasant rebellions directed against bad emperors.



Modern scholars offer many more theories. One argument says that the Han victory over Xiongnu was the beginning of the end. Some believe that only warfare could keep the generals loyal to the empire. When the Han forced the Xiongnu people to abandon the frontier, there were no more strong enemies to fight, and generals, like Dong Zhou, turned on the empire itself. Yet another theory suggests a divide between the empire and the wealthy, land-owning elites. Without the support and money of these elites, the emperors could not continue to respond to crises such as invasion, rebellion, and natural disasters.

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