

Nobles

During the Han dynasty, the members of the noble class changed frequently. The most stable part of the nobility were family members of the emperor and empress, who became nobles at birth. Other people became nobles by demonstrating their excellence, or *merit*, usually through military accomplishments. However, the status of the nobles rose and fell quite often. Sometimes nobles fell out of favor with the ruling emperor. Or if a new emperor came to power, he might lower the status of some nobles, while raising other people to noble status. One hundred years after the Han dynasty began, not one of the descendants of those given noble status by the first emperor held noble titles.

Nobles often became powerful landholders who ruled large estates of land called *fiefs* (pronounced FEEFS). Fiefs contained anywhere from several hundred to 10,000 homesteads. Nobles collected taxes from each household on their fiefs. Therefore, a noble family's income depended on the size of their fief and the number of households on it.

Members of the nobility had to give a percentage of their income to the emperor. In return, they benefited from a certain amount of protection from the law. They could not be severely punished without permission from the emperor. Those who were guilty of the harshest crimes and were sentenced to death were granted a special "favor." They were allowed to commit suicide, which was considered a more honorable death.

Many nobles were wealthy and lived very well. Noble men and women wore fine silk clothes. They owned expensive jewelry made of gold, silver, bronze, and jade. Their homes contained finely made furniture and tableware made of *lacquered* wood—wood that was protected and decorated with *lacquer*, a substance made from the sap of a tree. Because it took fine workmanship to create lacquer-covered objects, they were more expensive than bronze. While common people used bamboo mats as beds, nobles slept on wooden couches or low, movable platforms with canopies. The walls of their homes might be covered with paintings on fine silk.

Nobles rarely had to worry about having enough food, and usually ate a varied diet with plenty of meat and fish. The wealthiest nobles entertained guests at large, expensive banquets. Feasts might include ox or deer stew, snail, bear's paws, various kinds of fish, and vegetables such as bamboo shoots and lotus roots. For dessert, guests ate fruits such as tangerines, peaches, and berries. Drinks included alcohol made from rice and a grain called *millet*, as well as wine made from grapes.

Besides holding lavish banquets and parties, nobles also attended hunting parties for recreation in the spring, fall, and winter. They hunted quail, pheasants, foxes, and deer with bows and arrows.