

Peasants

During the Han dynasty, most of China's population were peasants. As a class, the peasants were near the lowest level of Han society. Since they were not connected by birth to wealthy and powerful families, many peasants lived in conditions of despair and poverty. For this reason, other groups in Han society looked down upon them. However, peasants' work was considered important because they supplied food for society.

The vast majority of peasants lived and worked off small pieces of land. The typical peasant family consisted of a husband, wife, and two or three children. Their land was approximately 10 acres, and might also contain a garden, a walled farmyard, and mulberry trees. Most peasants lived in one- or two-story mud houses with tile or straw roofs. Barns and other buildings surrounded the houses. In many cases, several families lived together in a small village, allowing them to work the fields together.

Some peasants were better off than others. Some could afford oxen to pull their carts, and simple wells to help draw water to irrigate the fields. Others were less fortunate. They worked with wooden hand tools, and hauled water in heavy buckets across their shoulders. Peasant men did most of the physical labor around the farm. The women had two main responsibilities: taking care of the household, and weaving and sewing, either to provide clothing for the family or to add to the family income.

Most peasants dressed in plain, rough clothes. Their shirts and pants were made of scratchy cloth. Their sandals were made of straw. In winter, they wore padded clothing to keep warm.

Peasants ate simple meals. They steamed much of their food in small stoves. Meals consisted of steamed *dumplings*—balls of cooked dough stuffed with meat or rice—small portions of fish, and very small portions of meat. Peasants ate wheat or a grain called *millet*. Many families grew ginger, garlic, and onions in their own gardens. These crops could be added to their meals for flavor, or sold at the market to bring in some money.

Most peasants had hard lives. They worked nearly every day of the year. They were often exposed to harsh weather, including dust and windstorms, the burning sun, heavy rains, and bitter cold. Floods and severe dry weather, or *drought*, could quickly destroy their livelihood. Peasants whose land was destroyed or severely damaged might find themselves with no money to buy seed for the next year's harvest. They might have to sell all their tools or oxen just to survive a harsh winter. After the government collected taxes from the peasants, many found themselves with little left to live on.

Some peasants who faced hard times borrowed money from neighboring landowners. Often, when it came time to repay the debt, the peasant had already sold his tools and animals—and his children into slavery—and could not repay the loan. Then the landowner would take the peasant's land, having him work on it for practically nothing.