



## First Unification and Separation of China

The Qin and Han Dynasties from 221 BC to 220 AD witnessed the first unification and prosperity in China's history, exerting great and deep influence on later generations.

After the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), the formerly centralized and unified country separated. The ensuing 400 years saw the emergence of many kingdoms and coexistence of various dynasties.

The Qin Dynasty was the first dynasty to establish the emperor as the ruler of the entire country. The first emperor Ying Zheng took the throne at



Sculpture of Emperor Qin Shihuang of the Qin Dynasty (221 BC–206 BC) and the Mausoleum of Emperor Qin Shihuang in Lingtong of Shaanxi Province.

the age of 13 years old. He adopted the policy of “making the nation affluent and strengthening military forces” and implemented the strategy of preventing alliances between different kingdoms in order to defeat them one by one. In 221 BC or the 26th year of his reign, he unified China and established Xianyang (in Shaanxi Province today) as the capital and the nation of China was born. From this point forward various forces always desired to be the emperor and establish a new dynasty.

The Qin Dynasty established a relatively complete central government. It replaced the system of “granting titles to kingdoms” with the “prefecture-county system”. The country was divided into 41 prefectures governed by prefects. During this period, the currency, weights and measurements, the vehicle axle length and written characters were all standardized. The Qin’s reign lasted only 15 years, but exerted great influence on China’s history. It laid a solid foundation for the unification of China’s politics, economy and culture. The Qin’s tyranny destined it to a short reign. The Qin’s rule came to the end shortly after the first emperor’s death. His son ascended the throne but was quickly overthrown by a peasants’ uprising. The country plunged into conflict and chaos until the Han Dynasty came to power.

Qin emperor Ying Zheng is regarded as the greatest emperor in China’s history. He made great contribution to China’s history. He lifted China out of the “Warring States Period” and unified all the ethnic groups to form the nation of China. Regardless of these achievements he was an arrogant and violent emperor. He granted himself “Huangdi (meaning emperor)” implying his virtue and merit had surpassed “the three sovereigns and five emperors in ancient China’s history”. He hoped his offspring would govern China forever. During his 12-year reign, he levied heavy taxes, imposed serious punishment, and built many extremely luxurious palaces. He also engaged in wars for several years. He placed a heavy burden on people and life was harsh. He burnt books which were opposed to the Qin and buried scholars who spoke against the Qin. This was the



famous event known as “burning books and burying Confucian scholars alive” in China’s history. He organized many large-scale projects and recruited tens of thousands of people to build the 5,000-km-long Great Wall and the marvelous Mausoleum of Emperor Qinshihuang (The famous Terracotta Warriors and Horses are part of it).

The Han Dynasty was the next monarchy after the Qin Dynasty. It was controlled by one family (Liu Family) throughout its history. The Han Dynasty was divided into the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–25 AD) and Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220). because the emperor reestablished the regime and moved the capital in 25 AD. The first emperor of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang, was born to a common family. He was a low official of the Qin Dynasty. He had great talent and bold vision and employed all kinds of talents despite their family or educational backgrounds. The Han Dynasty was totally different from the previous dynasties in that the emperor came from the ordinary people and his



Qin Shihuang Terracotta Army Museum in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province.

generals and ministers also rose up from the grass-roots level. The ensuing dynasties followed suit.

The Western Han Dynasty had its capital set up in Chang'an, present-day Xi'an of Shaanxi Province. It followed the Qin policy of strengthening centralized power. It also learnt from the failure of the Qin Dynasty and introduced the policy of "developing economy and increasing population". At the beginning of the Han Dynasty, many soldiers were allowed to return home, and their taxes were reduced or abolished. Efforts were also made to support agriculture and discourage businesses. This period saw a stable society and fast economic development. Peace and prosperity appeared for the first time in China's history. In the later period of the Western Han Dynasty, social conflicts intensified, and the peasants revolted repeatedly. Other families coveted the imperial power and tried to usurp the throne, which resulted in a war. Finally Liu Xiu, a member of the royal family, reestablished the regime of the Family Liu as



Emperor Wudi Liu Xiu (6 BC–57 BC) of the Eastern Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).



the Eastern Han Dynasty with its capital in Luoyang (Luoyang, Henan Province today). At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the famous Huangjin (Yellow Turbans) Uprising broke out. Taking advantage of this, various warlords set up separatist regimes and the Eastern Han Dynasty only existed in name. Much headway was made in foreign relations during the Eastern Han Dynasty. In 57 AD, Japan sent an envoy to China, marking the beginning of the Sino-Japanese relationship. Ban Chao, a famous general of the Han Dynasty, visited the western regions of Asia. During the Han, the western regions refer to Xinjiang and Central Asia, located to the west of today's Yumen Pass of Gansu Province.

In the latter period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, various warlords fought to take the throne. Peasants revolted. The most famous peasant uprising was the Yellow Turbans Uprising. After a long-period of fighting, there were three kingdoms left: Wei, Shu and Wu. Cao Cao, a famous politician who had built a solid foundation for the Kingdom of Wei, unified north China. In 220 AD, Cao Pi, son of Cao Cao, forced the last emperor of the Eastern Han Dynasty (Emperor



Relief sculpture of Cao Cao (155–220).

Xiandi) to abdicate. He came to power, named the Kingdom Wei and established a capital in Luoyang (Luoyang, Henan Province today). Liu Bei, espousing the slogan of “Restoration of Han Dynasty” established the Han Kingdom in 221AD in Chengdu. It was also known as “Shu” or “Shuhan”. Zhuge Liang, the famous militarist, was the Primer Minister of the Kingdom of Shu. In 229 AD, Sun Quan, the representative of southeast China, established the Kingdom of Wu with its capital in Jianye (Nanjing, Jiangsu province today).

After the Three Kingdoms, there were the Western Jin Dynasty (265–316) and Eastern Jin Dynasty (317–420). Both dynasties are ruled by the Sima family. The difference is their choice of capital: the Western Jin’s capital was in Luoyang (Luoyang, Henan Province today), and the Eastern Jin’s capital was in Jiankang (Nanjing, Jiangsu Province today). The Jin was derived from the reign of the Wei. The Sima family had high official ranks in the Kingdom of Wei. Later, after years of struggle, the Sima family managed to take over the reign. The Western Jin won a war against the Wu in 280, ending 90 years of turbulence since the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty and China was temporarily unified. Before long, China was plunged into separation once again during the Eastern Jin Dynasty, and the chaotic situation lasted for about 300 years.