

# Comparing Rome and Han

## IMPERIAL PARALLELS

The similarities between the Roman and Han Empires begin at the level of the family. In both cultures the family was headed by an all-powerful patriarch. Strong loyalties and obligations bound family members. Values first learned in the family—obedience, respect for superiors, piety, and a strong sense of duty and honor—created a pervasive social cohesion.

Agriculture was the fundamental economic activity and source of wealth in both civilizations. Government revenues were primarily derived from a percentage of the annual harvest. Both empires depended on a free peasantry—sturdy farmers who could be pressed into military service or other forms of compulsory labor. Conflicts over who owned the land and how it was to be used were at the heart of the political and social turmoil

in both places. The autocratic rulers of the Roman and Chinese states secured their positions by breaking the power of the old aristocratic families, seizing their excess land, and giving land to small farmers (as well as keeping extensive tracts for themselves). They veiled the revolutionary nature of these changes by claiming to restore the institutions of a venerable past. The later reversal of this process, when wealthy noblemen once again gained control of vast tracts of land and reduced the peasants to dependent tenant farmers, signaled the erosion of the authority of the state.

Both empires spread out from an ethnically homogeneous core to encompass widespread territories containing diverse ecosystems, populations, and ways of life. Both brought those regions a cultural unity that has persisted, at least in part, to the present day. This development involved far more than military conquest and political domination. The skill of Roman and Chinese farmers and the high yields that they produced led to a dynamic expansion of population. As the population of the core areas outstripped the available resources, Italian and Han settlers moved into new regions, bringing their languages, beliefs, customs, and technologies with them. Many people in the conquered lands were attracted to the culture of the ruler nation and chose to adopt these practices and attach themselves to a “winning cause.”

Both empires found similar solutions to the problems of administering far-flung territories and large populations in an age when men on horseback or on foot carried messages. The central government had to delegate considerable autonomy to local officials. These local elites identified their own interests with the central government they loyally served. In both empires a kind of civil service developed, staffed by educated and capable members of a prosperous middle class.

Technologies that facilitated imperial control also fostered cultural unification and improvements in the general standard of living. Roads built to expedite the movement of troops became the highways of commerce and the thoroughfares by which imperial culture spread. A network of cities and towns served as the nerve center of each empire, providing local administrative bases, further promoting commerce, and radiating imperial culture out into the surrounding countryside.

Cities and towns modeled themselves on the capital cities of Rome and Chang’an. Travelers could find the same types and styles of buildings and public spaces, as well as other attractive features of urban life, in outlying regions that they had seen in the capital. The majority of the population still resided in the countryside, but most of the advantages of empire were enjoyed by people living in urban centers.

The empires of Rome and Han China faced similar problems of defense: long borders located far from the administrative center and aggressive neighbors who coveted the prosperity of the empire. Both empires had to build walls and maintain a chain of forts and garrisons to protect against incursions. The cost of frontier defense was staggering and eventually eroded the economic prosperity of the two empires. As the imperial governments became ever more beholden to the military and demanded more taxes and services from the hard-pressed civilian population, they lost the loyalty of their own people, many of whom sought protection on the estates of powerful rural landowners. Eventually, both empires were so weakened that their borders were overrun and their central governments collapsed.

In referring to the eventual failure of these two empires, we are brought up against different long-term consequences. In China the imperial model was revived in subsequent eras, but the lands of the Roman Empire never again achieved the same level of unification. Several interrelated factors help account for the different outcomes.

First, these cultures had different attitudes about the relationship of individuals to the state. In China the individual was deeply embedded in the larger social group. The Chinese family, with its emphasis on a precisely defined hierarchy, unquestioning obedience, and solemn rituals of deference to elders and ancestors, served as the model for society and the state. Respect for authority was (and remains) deeply seated. Confucianism, which sanctified hierarchy and provided a code of conduct for professionals and public officials, had arisen long before the imperial system and could be revived and tailored to fit subsequent political circumstances. Although the Roman family had its own hierarchy and traditions of obedience, the cult of ancestors was not as strong as among the Chinese, and the family was not the organizational model for Roman society and the Roman state. Also, there was no Roman equivalent of Confucianism—no ideology of political organization and social conduct that could survive the dissolution of the Roman state.

It is probably also fair to say that economic and social mobility, which allows some people to rise dramatically in wealth and status, enhances a society's sense of the significance of the individual. Opportunities for individuals to improve their economic status were more limited in ancient China than in the Roman Empire, and the merchant class in China was frequently disparaged and constrained by the government. The greater importance of commerce in the Roman Empire and the absence of government interference resulted in greater economic mobility. Roman law gave great weight to the sanctity of

property and the rights of the individual. To a much greater extent than the Chinese emperor, the Roman emperor had to resort to persuasion, threats, and promises in order to forge a consensus for his initiatives.

Although Roman emperors tried to create an ideology to bolster their position, they were hampered by the persistence of Republican traditions and the ambiguities about the position of emperor deliberately cultivated by Augustus. As a result, Roman rulers were likely to be chosen by the army or by the Senate; the dynastic principle never took deep root; and the cult of the emperor had little spiritual content. This stands in sharp contrast to the clear-cut Chinese belief that the emperor was the divine Son of Heaven with privileged access to the beneficent power of the royal ancestors.

Finally, Christianity, with its insistence on monotheism and one doctrine of truth, negated the Roman emperors' pretensions to divinity and was essentially unwilling to come to terms with pagan beliefs. The spread of Christianity through the provinces during the Late Roman Empire, and the decline of the western half of the empire in the fifth century C.E., constituted an irreversible break with the past. On the other hand, Buddhism, which came to China in the early centuries C.E. and flourished in the post-Han era (see Chapter 10), was more easily reconciled with traditional Chinese values and beliefs.