

The Eagle and the Dragon: Rome and the Han Compared

Pardon the pun, but this is one of the classic points of interest for ancient and world historians. It's just so striking that two empires arose at about the same time on either end of the Eurasian landmass with so much in common; which only makes the differences more interesting! I know this is a tad more detail than Strayer is giving you, but hey, it will help, and I'm here to enrich your experience! And I'm pretty sure you won't die if you read this...

Similarities:

Both the Roman Empire and the first Chinese empire arose from relatively small states that, because of their discipline and military toughness, were initially able to subdue their neighbors.

Ultimately they unified widespread territories under strong central governments.

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

The later reversal of this process, when wealthy noblemen again gained control of vast tracts of land and reduced the peasants to dependent tenant farmers, signaled the erosion of state authority.

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. As the population of the core areas outstripped available resources, Italian and Han settlers moved into new regions, bringing their languages, beliefs, customs, and technologies. 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 communication depended on men on horseback or on foot. 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 spread of imperial culture. A network of cities and towns linked the parts of the empire, providing local administrative bases, promoting commerce, and radiating imperial culture into the surrounding countryside. The majority of the population still resided in the countryside, but those

living in urban centers enjoyed most of the advantages of empire. Cities and towns modeled themselves on the capital cities of Rome and Chang'an. Travelers found the same types of buildings and public spaces, and similar features of urban life, in outlying regions that they had seen in the capital.

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 their prosperity. Both had to build walls and maintain chains 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 imperial governments 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. Rough neighbors gradually learned the skills that had given the empires an initial advantage and were able to close the "technology gap."

The Roman and Han governments eventually came to rely on soldiers hired from the same "barbarian" peoples who were pressing on the frontiers. Eventually, both empires were so weakened that their borders were overrun and their central governments collapsed. Ironically, the newly dominant immigrant groups were so deeply influenced by imperial culture that they maintained it to the best of their abilities.

Differences:

In referring to the eventual failure of these two empires, there are important differences that led to different long-term outcomes.

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 account for the different outcomes.

First, these cultures had different attitudes about the relationship of individuals to the state. In China the individual was more 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. Confucianism, which sanctified hierarchy and provided a code of conduct for public officials, arose long before the imperial system and could be revived and tailored to fit changing 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.

Opportunities for economic and social mobility were greater in the Roman Empire than in ancient China. Whereas the merchant class in China was frequently disparaged and constrained by the government, the absence of government interference in the Roman Empire resulted in greater economic mobility and a thriving and influential middle class in the towns and cities.

The Roman army, because it was composed of professional soldiers in service for decades and constituting a distinct and increasingly privileged group, frequently played a decisive role in political conflict. In China, on the other hand, the army was drawn from draftees who served for two years and was much less likely to take the initiative in struggles for power.

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 unambiguous Chinese belief that the emperor was the divine Son of Heaven with privileged access to the beneficent power of the royal ancestors. Thus, in the lands that had once constituted the western part of the Roman Empire, there was no compelling basis for reviving the position of emperor and the territorial claims of empire in later ages.

Finally, Christianity, with its insistence on monotheism and one doctrine of truth, negated the Roman emperor's pretensions to divinity and was unwilling to compromise 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 was more easily reconciled with traditional Chinese values and beliefs.