

In 710 two acts further consolidated centralized rule. First, a new capital, modeled on Chang'an, was built at Nara. Second, the Japanese ruler now claimed to rule through divine mandate, although, unlike the Chinese "Mandate of Heaven", it could never be revoked. (To this day, the same family occupies the imperial throne, although after World War II, its divinity was officially repudiated; see Chapter 19.) At about the same time, again following Chinese models, the Japanese began to record their history for the first time in the *Nihongi*, in Chinese, and their legends in the *Kojiki*, which was written in a mixture of Chinese and Japanese forms.

The emperor served as the chief priest of Japan's Shinto faith, but as Shinto is a religion that worships the gods of nature—streams, trees, rocks—it can be practiced anywhere. Buddhism, by contrast, provides a more centralized form of organization, through monasteries and temples. Many new Buddhist temples were, therefore, constructed in Chinese form at Nara to centralize worship in Japan. From this time onward Buddhism and Shinto have coexisted in Japan, with millions of Japanese declaring themselves devotees of both faiths.

As centuries passed and Japan became more secure in its own political organization and cultural identity, the reliance on Chinese models declined. But in the centuries when its basic cultural and political identity was formed, Japan had followed carefully and devotedly the hegemonic examples of China, without compulsion or force of any sort.

LEGACIES FOR THE FUTURE WHAT DIFFERENCE DO THEY MAKE?

The Roman and Chinese Empires are among the greatest empires in history in terms of longevity, population, geographical extent, and lasting influence. A comparison between them will help to clarify the characteristics and significance of each and help establish guidelines for thinking about other empires of other times, and our own.

Differences

Not surprisingly, there are important differences between these two huge empires, separated by such great distances.

Geopolitical. China's heartland was far larger and more cohesive, geographically and culturally, than Rome's. Rome had as its heartland only central Italy, and even after conquering Italy, it held just that single peninsula bounded by the Alps Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. In the time of Augustus in Rome and the Han dynasty in China, the Roman and Chinese empires each held about 60 million people, but in Rome only a few of these millions lived in Italy. In China virtually all inhabited "inner China." Ninety percent of them were in the north China plain.

Ideological. Although Confucian China spoke of a mythological golden age of equality among people living in harmony with each other and with nature, realistically the Confucianists believed that the best possible government was a well-ordered empire. Many philosophers and writers in imperial Rome, on the other hand, believed in an actual, historical republican past (albeit an idealized past) and always looked back to it as a golden age. Roman imperial expansion and stratification were often regarded as violations of the earlier republican ideals.

Longevity and Persistence. Rome's empire rose, fell, and disappeared, although it lived on as a concept. China's empire has lasted for the past 2000 years. Dynasties have come and gone, sometimes the empire has broken into fragments, and sometimes it has been ruled by conquering "barbarians," but finally the empire endured as a single political entity. Today, although there is no emperor, China's geopolitical unity continues.

Policy and Powers of Assimilation. As China moved both north and south, it assimilated a great number of the peoples it invaded and conquered. Non-ethnic Chinese were absorbed culturally and biologically. Many of the 95 percent of today's Chinese population who are called "Han" are descended from ancestors who were not. Confucian and Buddhist ideology held the empire together, supported by the power of the emperor and his armies. Rome's empire was held together by law and backed by military power. Selected non-Romans could gain citizenship under law, but ethnically and culturally the conquered peoples remained "other." Intermarriage with non-citizens was usually forbidden. Romans maintained the cultural distinctions between themselves and those they conquered far more than did the Chinese.

Language Policy. The Chinese language unified the Chinese Empire across space and through time—even today—far more than Latin did the Roman Empire. Chinese was never subordinated to another language and culture, as Latin was to Greek for many years and in many regions. Nor did Chinese compete with regional languages as Latin ultimately did. Indeed, Chinese helped to bring even neighboring countries—Vietnam, Korea, and Japan—together into a single general cultural unit.

Ideology and Cultural Cohesion. China's Confucian bureaucracy provided a core cultural identity throughout the empire and beyond. Even the alternative political-cultural philosophies of China, such as Daoism, Legalism, and later Buddhism, usually (but not always) served to broaden and augment the attraction of Confucianism. Rome's emperor worship did reinforce its cohesion, but its principal philosophies of polytheism, Stoicism, and, later, Christianity did not significantly buttress and augment its imperial rule. The latter two may even have diminished popular loyalty to the empire, except in its later continuation in the east as the Byzantine Empire.

Influence on Neighbors. The Roman Empire influenced the lands it conquered, but had less influence on those outside its boundaries. China exercised lasting hegemonic influence even on neighbors it did not conquer, such as Japan, or conquered only briefly, such as Korea. A considerable part of this legacy was religious and cultural as well as political, economic, and administrative.

Similarities

The many points of similarity between China and Rome reveal some basic truths about the nature of empires.

Relations with Barbarians. Both empires faced nomadic groups from central Asia who threatened and penetrated their boundaries. Indeed, the Huns, who invaded Europe, and the Xiongnu, who invaded China, may have belonged to the same ethnic group. Both empires settled the "barbarians" near their borders and enlisted them in their imperial armies. In both cases, the barbarians came to hold great power. Ultimately, however, they dismembered the Roman Empire, while the Chinese absorbed them.

Religious Policies. Both empires incubated foreign religions, especially in times of imperial disorder. In China, Buddhism was absorbed into Confucianism and Daoism and helped to sustain the national culture in times of political trouble. In Rome, however, Christianity did not save the empire. In fact, by challenging the significance of earthly power it may even have contributed to the empire's weakness.

The Role of the Emperor. Both empires ascribed divine attributes to the emperor, and both frequently had difficulty in establishing rules for imperial succession. The Romans often attempted to choose their best general, while the Chinese selected a man who could control the imperial family and court. Neither empire believed that a single imperial family should rule forever. The Chinese believed that eventually the Mandate of Heaven would pass from one dynasty to another.

Gender Relationships and the Family. The family was extremely important for both empires, and both empires subordinated women to men at all stages of life. Both drew analogies between hierarchies and loyalties in a well-run family and those in a well-run empire. Both empires used marriages as a means of confirming political alliances with foreign powers. Both periodically felt that excessive concern with sexual relationships distracted energy from the demands of sustaining the empire, and both proclaimed strict codes of sexual morality.

The Significance of Imperial Armies. In both empires the army was crucial in creating and sustaining the political structure in the face of domestic and foreign enemies. The Roman Empire was established and ruled by generals, as were the Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties in China. Both empires were periodically threatened and usurped by rebel generals asserting their own authority. The cost of the armies, especially on distant, unprofitable expeditions, often drained the finances of the government and encouraged its subjects to evade taxes and military service and even to rise in revolt. Both empires established colonies of soldier-colonizers to garrison and develop remote areas while simultaneously providing compensation and retirement benefits for the troops.

Overextension. Both empires suffered their greatest challenges in confronting simultaneously the strains of overexpansion and the subsequent internal revolts that were triggered by the costs. In Rome these dual problems, along with the barbarian invasions, finally precipitated the end of the empire in the west. In China they led to the loss of the Mandate of Heaven and the downfall of dynasties. The external battles against Qin-Jurchen border tribes, for example, combined with the revolt of the Yellow Turbans, brought down the later Han; the loss of the distant Battle of the Talas River, combined with the internal revolt of An Lushan, sapped Tang power.

Public Works Projects. Throughout their empire the Romans built roads, aqueducts, public monumental structures, administrative/military towns, and the great capital cities of Rome and Constantinople. The Chinese built the Great Wall, the Grand Canal, systems of transportation by road and water, public monumental structures, administrative/military towns throughout the empire, and several successive capitals, especially Chang'an and Luoyang.

The Concentration of Wealth. In both empires, the benefits of imperial wealth tended to flow toward the center and to the elites in the capital cities. The capitals grew to unprecedented size. Both Chang'an and Rome housed more than one million people.

Policies for and against Individual Mobility. To maintain power and stability in the face of demands for change, both empires periodically bound their peasantry to the soil and demanded that the sons of soldiers follow their fathers' occupations. Both found these policies difficult to enforce. Both offered some individual mobility through service in their armies. In addition, the Chinese examination system provided for advancement within the imperial bureaucracy.

Revolts. Both empires experienced frequent revolts against the emperor and his policies. In Rome, which housed a much larger slave population, slaves led some of the revolts. In China they were more typically initiated by peasants. Rome attempted to forestall mass revolts in the capital and other large cities through the provision of "bread and circuses." Both empires faced constant challenges from those living on their peripheries.

Peasant Flight. In both empires during times of upheaval, peasants sought to evade taxes and conscription by finding refuge as tenants on large, landed estates. Whenever imperial government was weak, the largest of these estates challenged the power of the central government.

The influence of the early Chinese Empire continues today, not only in China itself, but in east Asia, southeast Asia, and central Asia. Consistent patterns in language, culture, geopolitical organization, and international relations are there to be discovered through the ages. The same is true of Rome throughout the areas it ruled directly in western and southern Europe, the Mediterranean, and North Africa. To a lesser degree, its influence extends to eastern Europe and to the European settler colonies in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. The imperial ideals of China and Rome have entranced many who have studied them, and repelled many as well. As we turn to study the empires of ancient India, these models help to guide our thinking.

Review Questions

- Many kinds of standardization accompanied the creation and consolidation of empire in China. What were these forms of standardization, and which do you think were the most important?
- What were the three most prominent philosophies of rule in the Chinese Empire? They seem to have been applied under different circumstances. Under what circumstances do you think each was most appropriate? Why?
- What were the attitudes of Confucianism toward the role of women in society? How did these attitudes compare with those of other Chinese philosophies, and with philosophies from ancient Rome?
- Compare the policies of the Tang dynasty with those of the Han. You might consider the geographical extent of the empire under these dynasties, their administrative mechanisms, philosophies of government, and international relations.
- Why are Vietnam, Korea, and Japan often considered to be daughter civilizations of China?
- How did China regard the barbarians on its borders, in terms of international relations and in terms of assimilation? How did China's policies compare with those of Rome?