The Decline of the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire - by Rit Nosotro

The Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire were two of the most powerful entities to rule their respective parts of the world. The Han Dynasty dominated Asia from the Korean peninsula to present day Vietnam for more than four hundred years. The Roman Empire stretched from the present British Isles to present day Iraq, and lasted nearly five hundred years. The Eastern Roman Empire went on to last another one thousand years. Both the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire enjoyed times of immense prosperity during their golden years. They both ended in chaos. How were their declines similar?

Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire, brought order to the vast lands Rome had conquered and brought an end to over one hundred years of civil war. He disbanded the large armies that had been recruited during the civil war and consolidated his power. The people welcomed the new dictator, and enjoyed peace and prosperity. With peace came increased trade and commerce, and ideas traveled freely along the Roman Empire's well designed roads. However, the emperors after Augustus were not as politically gifted as Augustus. Four emperors and fifty-four years later, the Roman Empire was once again thrown into a violent civil war.

After four coups in a single year, another line of emperors emerged. The line started by Vespasian was also a stable time. The Roman Empire reached its largest size during this time, and many historians consider those years the golden age of Rome. Inevitably, out of such a successful line of emperors, there would eventually emerge a bad apple. The emperor Commodus threw himself into immoral and violent practices, and gave no respect to any of the leaders. He was assassinated in 192 A.D., bringing an end to one century of stability. This date marked the beginning of the end.

The Romans gradually lost power, and barbarian people in the north frequently went on raids against the now disintegrating empire. The Roman Empire became steeped in debt as emperors tried desperately to buy the loyalty of the army, and the moral condition of its subjects continued to spiral downward. Christians were persecuted, and large, bloodthirsty crowds would in arenas to cheer as various people died violent deaths. Rome steadily lost control of the frontiers, and roads and bridges were not maintained, leading to a breakdown in trade and communication. Riots and revolts became commonplace in Rome itself. The civil war affected the lives of all the citizens. As the government fell deeper into debt, it raised taxes. The armies of different generals seized any supplies they needed from local people. Food became a precious commodity, and for the first time in centuries, large numbers of people went hungry.

Ultimately, the emperor Diocletian restored a semblance of order during his reign from 284 to 305. He recognized the fact that one man could not keep all the armies loyal to him, and could not coordinate a defense against the barbarians. This led to the division of the Roman Empire into eastern and western portions. Constantine briefly united the Eastern and Western empires in the 320’s and established new capital Constantinople in present day Turkey, but his son Theodosius I was the last emperor of the united Roman Empire. When he died in 395, he divided the eastern and western portion between his two sons. The western emperors became weaker and weaker, and tribes of barbarians roamed freely. In 476, the Western Roman Empire officially ended. Most of the common people’s lives were unaffected by this. Local governments remained
much the same. The Eastern Roman Empire continued to prosper until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottomans.

Long before the Roman Empire had been united under one man, an empire in the East was thriving. The Han Dynasty was established by a former policeman. After the collapse of the Qin Dynasty, the first to unite China, a period of anarchy ensued. Liu Bang, the son of peasants, raised an army and conquered his foremost rival in 202 B.C. He continued to war against other rivals and former allies until he consolidated his power. He pacified the nomadic Xiongnu by offering them tribute. He was popular among the peasants, who had been oppressed and overworked under the Qin Dynasty. Lowered taxes, less demands for labor from the state, and his own humble origins made him well-liked. He carefully appointed loyal officials and administrators, making sure that the power remained with him. Harboring a deep distrust of merchants, he put rich landowners in positions of power. At his death in 195 B.C., he had left a stable and prospering kingdom in the hands of his family. Power struggles occurred in the royal family, but the dynasty produced capable rulers. The reigns of Wendi, Jingdi, and Wudi were marked by peace, prosperity, a better life for peasants, expansion of China’s lands, art, and trade. Confucianism became the official state philosophy.

Under Wudi, China conquered many lands, expanding their power and influence. The Han Dynasty now controlled northern Vietnam and the Korean Peninsula, and the Xiongnu were pushed back. Wudi sent explorers toward Central Asia, eventually opening up the famous trade route known as the Silk Road. Buddhism was introduced from India. However, the wars and large armies put an enormous burden on the economy. The land became overpopulated, and thousands were forced into banditry or even selling their children as slaves. Government officials became increasingly corrupt. Confucian moralists decried these events, but little was changed. Toward the end of Wudi’s reign, violence erupted between the empress and Wudi’s concubine over the heir to the throne. Eventually, a compromise ruler was chosen, but the decline of the Han Dynasty had already begun. Later emperors were incompetent, and their reigns were marked by corruption, immorality, and apathy. Some Confucian scholars declared that the Han Dynasty had lost the Mandate of Heaven, a belief that rulers were appointed by Heaven.

Wang Mang was a Confucian who was appointed regent of the child emperor Ruzi. The outsider seized power in 9 A.D., and attempted to implement sweeping reforms that damaged the already feeble economy. Though most Confucians had looked to him as the father of a new dynasty, economic and natural disasters caused a massive food shortage. The peasants rebelled, and Wang Mang’s attempted usurpation died with him in 23 A.D. Millions died in the resulting war for power, but a Han prince named Liu Xui emerged victorious. Though the Han Dynasty had been reestablished, it never reached the heights of its first years. Trade increased to new levels, and the first Nestorian Christians arrived, but corruption continued, and few reforms were made. Gradually, court officials and warlords gained more and more power, and the Taoist religion, which preached equal rights and land redistribution began to take hold among the peasants. The Han Dynasty’s later years were filled with internal conflict, as court officials battled with the emperor and the Taoists. During this time, nomads in the north and near the Korean Peninsula destroyed the Chinese settlements as civil war rocked the Han. In the end, the emperors lost most of their power, and China split into various warring factions that were eventually transformed into three new kingdoms. The Han Dynasty’s glorious reign formally came to an end in 220 A.D.

Both the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire were powerful and impressive. They both fell because of weak leaders and power hungry individuals. The Han practice of concubinage led to
much violence and strife in the royal family, causing disunity and internal conflict. Regents often attempted to seize power. Love of money led to the precarious situations of Rome’s later emperors, as soldiers demanded gold for loyalty. In both empires, corruption of government contributed to the bitterness of the common people. All of these things arise from the selfishness in the human heart. In James 3:16, we see the unavoidable consequences of selfish gain. “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.” Man’s desire for power over himself and over others has led to much suffering. These two empires could not escape the corruption of human nature.

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