

CHAPTER
7

Section 3

HISTORYMAKERS

Wudi

A Long Reign of Change

*"[Wudi's] reign was the high point of Han power, prestige, and morale."
—historian Charles Hucker*

The Han emperor Wudi took the throne in 141 B.C. as a young man full of energy, confidence, and plans. He died 54 years later, having achieved one of the longest rules in Chinese history. He is known for far more than the length of his reign, however. Wudi made profound changes on Chinese society—changes that had an impact long after his death.

Wudi was an unlikely emperor. He was the eleventh son of emperor Chingdi and had many brothers with better claims to the throne. However, a group of court officials convinced Chingdi to name the boy as his successor. Before Wudi there had been five Han emperors, all of whom had ruled cautiously. Wudi took a different approach.

First, he moved to break the power of the local nobles. He began by draining their wealth with heavy financial burdens. Nobles were required, for instance, to give certain gifts to the emperor to show their loyalty. But those gifts could only be purchased from the royal treasury at extremely high prices. The emperor also took a direct approach, seizing the land of many lords. Those who escaped these two actions faced a third. Wudi ordered that, upon the death of a land owner, all his property was to be divided equally among all his sons. With this, large estates were broken up by the passing of each generation.

The emperor acted against merchants and traders as well. Under previous rulers, trade had thrived. Many business owners had built huge fortunes, especially in the trade of iron, salt, liquor, and grain. Wudi put the imperial state in charge of all these goods. He then taxed these products heavily to increase the flow of funds into the royal treasury.

The emperor also increased his hold on government officials. He created a new system that ignored the nobles who had previously run the government. Instead, he used scholars trained in the ideas of Confucius. He formed schools throughout the empire to teach these ideas. Now, through a system of recommendations, able men could rise to high office.

Wudi also adopted Confucianism as the state religion. This move had a profound impact on later Chinese society. The Confucian emphasis on acting

out important rituals became a central part of Chinese government and religion.

Finally, Wudi worked to expand Han China. For 18 years his soldiers fought against the Xiongnu nomads to the north. The emperor followed up his victories by sending Chinese settlers to conquered areas. He sent about 700,000 people to live in colonies that extended Han China into central Asia.

The emperor also made arrangements with the rulers there. They were forced to admit the superiority of China and pay tribute. They were also instructed to send a son to the Chinese court. The sons were educated in Chinese ideas and were, in effect, hostages that ensured that their fathers would cooperate. With these steps, Wudi established a pattern of relations with foreign powers that the Chinese followed for many future centuries.

Wudi expanded Han influence to other areas as well. The Chinese took much of Korea and moved into what is now Vietnam. Along with political control, the Han brought in their culture. While Korea and Vietnam modified Chinese ideas and practices, they were still strongly influenced by them.

Late in his reign, Wudi's policies backfired. Heavy spending on wars—and on the luxuries of his lifestyle—reduced the treasury. For three generations Han emperors had built a huge surplus of money. Wudi spent it all. His aggressive tax and business policies did more than break the power of the merchants. They also slowed the economy.

The aging emperor had other troubles as well. In 91 B.C., after 50 years of rule, he was shocked to hear that the son he had named to follow him was accused of witchcraft against him. Wudi died four years later.

Questions

- Identifying Problems and Solutions** How did Wudi reduce the power of nobles?
- Drawing Conclusions** Do you think Wudi's economic policies were wise? Why or why not?
- Developing Historical Perspective** Which of Wudi's actions do you think had the most lasting impact? Explain.