

HIST195: Asian Pasts

Faculty of Arts and Sciences

School of Humanities

Assignment 1: There Is No Single Asian Past

Due Date: May 14, 2012

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Marker's Comments: 91% (High Distinction)

This is an excellent effort. You demonstrate that you have made progress in your thinking and reading on Asian history. You have provided a coherent response to the assignment task and your ideas and opinions were presented in a clear and logical fashion. Presentation, spelling and grammar are acceptable. The writing style is clear. Appropriate research has been undertaken. Analytical skills are displayed. All this is very good. My only criticism is that your conclusion could be a little stronger by highlighting further how your analysis demonstrates that there is no 'single' Asian past. Nevertheless, you have responded intelligently to the assignment task, marshalled some evidence, and presented your case in an organised manner.

Essay Question

“There is no "single" Asian past. We must always acknowledge the diversity of experiences related to class, gender, ethnicity, religion, caste, family and kinship arrangements, or other indices of social differentiation, to fully appreciate the complex history of Asia.

Critically examine this claim. Your analysis must include examples drawn from at least two different regions or societies in East, Southeast or South Asia.”

1. Introduction

Ancient Asia was a time of feudalism. On such a culturally diverse continent history would prove that bringing nations together required strong, innovative empires. The first long lasting successful attempts at unification were the Han dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE) in China and Mauryan dynasty (322 – 180 BCE) in India. The rule of these dynasties was similar in many ways. It will be shown that both empires required legitimacy, powerful economies, efficient centralized administration and often, an iron fist. Though these elements were mirrored in each dynasty, their implementation differed. The Mandate from Heaven, Legalism and in particular Confucianism were the basis for almost all elements of Han China. The Mauryans relied on the *Arthashastra* (“Science of Polity”), a “ruler’s guidebook” written by Kautilya, chief minister to the first king Chandragupta¹. The influence of Hinduism and caste, so evident in the book and Indian society, would eventually make way for Buddhism. These empires’ respective declines show that above all, rulers needed a firm grip on power to maintain unification. The Han and Mauryans ruled successfully for many centuries utilizing

Comment [d1]: In some parts of Asia, not all. Were there feudal empires or did they replace feudalism?

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¹ Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*. London, Allen Lane, 2002, p. 184.

various philosophical, social and cultural beliefs indigenous to their countries, demonstrating that there is no single Asian past. ✓

2. Legitimacy

The Han rulers claimed divinity and adopted Confucian ideology. Distancing themselves from the Qin legitimacy of material strength², the Han claimed the Mandate from Heaven dating back to the Zhou dynasty³. Heaven, earth and man were linked and the emperor, the “Son of Heaven”⁴ maintained this link⁵. The emperor’s infallibility was balanced by the influence of portents from Heaven such as civil strife or natural disasters, interpreted as deficiencies in his rule⁵. The emperor set an example by adopting Confucian order, hierarchy and humanity. He promoted literature⁶, displayed moral behaviour, avoided extravagant luxury and adhered to traditional values upholding virtues that strengthen families; the most important unit in the community⁷. Confucianism became official state philosophy guiding administration, community and individual alike. ✓

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Brahmanical sources emphasised Mauryan kingship based on divine approval rather than mandate⁸. The foundation of Mauryan rule was Hindu *dharma*; the carrying out of one’s earthly duties based on caste. The king was the protector of dharma responsible for serving and protecting his people’s dharma⁹. The first kings, including Asoka, conformed to this ideology. However after his bloody conquest of the Kalingas, Asoka converted to Buddhism¹⁰. Wary of the potential cultural backlash, he avoided adopting Buddhism’s ethics of social behaviour in favour of *dhamma*. It was an ideological attempt to unify the people of his empire regardless of religion or caste and demonstrated Asoka’s understanding of the link

² Michael Loewe, *The Government of the Qin and Han Empires*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2006, p. 14.

³ Harold M. Tanner, *China: A History*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2009, p. 100.

⁴ Loewe, *Government of Qin and Han*, p. 11.

⁵ Janet E. Richards and Mary Van Buren, *Order, Legitimacy and Wealth in Ancient States*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 123.

⁶ Loewe, *Government of Qin and Han*, p. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸ Thapar, *Origins to AD 1300*, p. 207.

⁹ Aseem Prakash, ‘State and Statecraft in Kautilya’s Arthashastra’, paper presented to the Fall Semester Mini-Conference: Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis, Indiana University, Bloomington, 11-13 December 1993, p. 8.

¹⁰ Rhoads Murphy, *A History of Asia*. 6th edn. New York, Pearson Longman, 2009, p. 77.

between social ethics and kingship¹¹. Despite Buddhism's belief in the "infinite" as opposed to deities,¹² Asoka referred to himself as "Beloved of the Gods" connecting him with the diverse religious beliefs of his people and linking his rule to divine approval. ✓

3. Administration

The strength of both Han and Mauryan empires lay in their bureaucracies. Centralised administration drove economies, equipped armies and encouraged growth. Though the bureaucracies and imperial structures differed between the dynasties, they worked in a similar manner. The major difference between the two bureaucracies was the basis for selection. The Han chose officials based on merit whereas the Mauryans relied on caste and nobility. ✓

3.1 Structure of the Empire

The empires of the Han and Mauryans were divided into smaller political regions. Han China was split into commanderies and kingdoms¹³. By 140 CE there were 99 commanderies led by governors, and kingdoms; fiefs granted to a marquis or king who were relatives of the emperor¹⁴. These were subdivided into counties led by a civil governor and military commandant¹⁵. Below this were districts and villages with their own headman¹⁶. In Mauryan India the empire was split into four provinces outside the capital Pataliputra. These were governed by relatives of the king as princes or viceroys¹⁷. These provinces were subdivided into districts (possibly hundreds of thousands of people)¹⁸ headed by *mahamatras* (high officers) and villages led by locals¹⁹. ✓

3.2 Structure of Central Bureaucracy

Both the dynasties embraced centralised bureaucracies with the emperor or king as head of state. In Han China the "three excellencies" headed the central administration; these were the

¹¹ Romila Thapar, "The Mauryan empire in early India." *Historical Research* 29, no. 205, 2006, pp. 289–303.

¹² Murphy, *History of Asia*, p. 28.

¹³ Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, *The Han Dynasty*. Trans. Janet Seligman. New York, Rizzoli International Publications Inc., 1982, p. 22.

¹⁴ Loewe, *Government of Qin and Han*, p. 38.

¹⁵ Grant Hardy and Anne Behnke Kinney. *The Establishment of the Han Empire and Imperial China*. Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 33.

¹⁶ Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, *The Han Dynasty*, p. 22.

¹⁷ Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund. *A History of India*. Vol. 4. London, Routledge, 2004, p. 68.

¹⁸ Pillar Edict IV in Asoka's *The Edicts of Asoka*. Trans. & ed. Richard McKeon, and A N Nikam, New Delhi, Asia Publishing House, 1959, p. 56.

¹⁹ Kulkeand and Rothermund, *A History of India*, p. 68.

chancellor who was second only to the emperor, supreme commander, and imperial counsellor²⁰. Beneath them were the nine ministers; the grand rector, master of ceremonies, constable of the court, director of agriculture, privy treasurer, constable of the guards, superintendent of the palace, grand coachman, and director of the imperial clan²¹. In Mauryan India the two key offices of treasurer and chief collector lay directly under the king and his council of ministers. Superintendents were in charge of departments for everything from gold²² to prostitutes²³. Pataliputra was administered by six boards of five member councils²⁴; traditional *panchayats* that also administered local municipalities²⁵. ✓

3.3 Eligibility of Officials

In Han China all free men were eligible for employment as government officials. This Confucian philosophy stressed that an individual's ability rather than social status was the best way to safeguard the state from mediocrity and corruption²⁶. New recruits schooled in classical Confucian learning²⁷ would take up junior positions in administration. Due to the large number of commanderies and kingdoms, an annual quota of recommendations for officials was enforced for higher positions²⁸. Around 124 BCE the Imperial Academy was established at Chang'an where fifty pupils studied approved literary texts such as the Five Confucian Classics²⁹. By the 2nd century CE there were as many as thirty thousand students at the Academy who were selected for official posts or dismissed³⁰. The emperor or his closest ministers had the final say in all postings. ✓

Comment [d8]: Theoretically yes, but in practice??

²⁰ Loewe, *Government of Qin and Han*, p. 20.

²¹ Pirazzoli-t-Serstevens, *The Han Dynasty*, p. 21.

²² Book II Chapter XIII in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Trans. R. Shamasastri, Bangalore, Bangalore Government Press, 1915, p. 116.

²³ *Ibid.*, Book II Chapter XXVII, p. 175.

²⁴ Megasthenes, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*. Trans. J. W. McCrindle, London, Trübner and Co, 1877, p. 87.

²⁵ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*. Oxford, Oxford City Press, 2004, p. 56.

²⁶ Murphy, *History of Asia*, p. 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²⁸ Hans Bielenstein, *The Bureaucracy of Han Times*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 134.

²⁹ Hardy and Kinney, *Establishment of the Han*, p. 74.

³⁰ Loewe, *Government of Qin and Han*, pp. 74-75.

In contrast, the Mauryans based selections on caste and nobility. According to the Arthashastra, noble extraction (Brahman or Kshatriya³¹), high training, mature judgment and intellect, decision-making, energy, integrity and loyalty were key components of high ranked officials³². Middle or lower ranks required “half or a quarter of these qualifications”³³. The positions in the *mantriparishad* (council of ministers) were either selected by the king or hereditary with the exception of the king’s closest advisor, the *purohita*³⁴. Many lower ranks were chosen or advised by higher officials. ✓

4. State Control

Han rule masked legalism with Confucian philosophy. The state initially eased the suffering of the people by removing Qin controls on education, travel and thought as well as encouraging Confucian learning³⁵. Yet they retained Legalist methods of control. Recommendations for moral officials (Confucianism) were combined with the threat of dismissal for those who failed to identify capable recruits (Legalism)³⁶. Historian Ban Gu wrote that on the outside, it looked as though punishments had eased while in reality people were still put to death³⁷. Mutilation as a punishment was reduced under the Han, however another historian Sima Qian was castrated for criticizing emperor Wu Di³⁸. The Han reduced the tyranny of the Qin, but retained their methods.

Mauryan monarchs utilised the coercive methods of the Arthashastra. The *Arthashastra* stated that coercion was a legitimate tactic³⁹. One example was espionage. Spies kept watch over everyone from ministers to merchants and the people⁴⁰. Megasthenes the Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court mentions that the seventh Indian caste, the overseers, reported secretly to the king⁴¹. These forceful methods eased with the adoption of dhamma.

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³¹ Dr. F W. Thomas, *The Cambridge History of India: Volume 1 Ancient India*. ed. E J Rapson. Vol. 1. London, Cambridge University Press, 1922, p. 498.

³² Book I Chapter IX in Kautilya’s *Kautilya’s Arthashastra*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁴ Thomas, *Cambridge History*, p. 498.

³⁵ Murphy, *History of Asia*, p. 101.

³⁶ Hardy and Kinney, *Establishment of the Han*, p. 43.

³⁷ Achim Mittag and Fritz-Heiner Mutschler. “Empire and Humankind: Historical Universalism in Ancient China and Rome.” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 37, no. 4, 2010, p. 539.

³⁸ Loewe, *Government of Qin and Han*, p. 127.

³⁹ Book I Chapter IV in Kautilya’s *Kautilya’s Arthashastra*, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Wolpert, *A New History of India*, p. 55.

⁴¹ Megasthenes, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, p. 95.

Asoka advocated loyalty through means other than coercion⁴². He sent forth *dhamma-mahamattas*, overseers of the law, to spread his vision of unity and harmony⁴³. Despite promoting non-violence he was not above threatening force where required, and maintained his army⁴⁴. *Dhamma* eased the pressure on people, but Asoka still utilised the *Arthashastra* to hold power.

5. Economy

Agrarian economies were the basis of each empire. The development of iron based tools and state sponsored irrigation works helped create surplus⁴⁵ ⁴⁶. Crop taxes were one-thirtieth of average yield in Han China⁴⁷. In Mauryan India there were two land taxes; *bali* (cultivated land area) and *bhaga* (produce) which was typically one-sixth of the yield⁴⁸. Han and Mauryan financial security relied on similar techniques of taxation on agriculture; it was trade that encouraged differing strategies towards industry and commerce. ✓

Trade and industry were monopolised by the Han. Silk was the most lucrative export and the state created large-scale silk workshops⁴⁹. The Han expanded their frontiers to safeguard the Silk Route and funded military expenditure by monopolising the salt and iron industries. Emperor Wu Di created the *equitable marketing system* whereby the government bought grain at low prices and sold grain at high prices, thought this was removed after his death under pressure from Confucian scholars⁵⁰. This control of trade and industry helped boost state coffers. ✓

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The Mauryans' taxation of trade led to the establishment of merchant guilds. Trade duties were applied to import and export items⁵¹ and tolls of one-fifth of the commodity were

⁴² Sugata Bose and Ayesha Salal. *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*. 2nd edn. New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 13.

⁴³ Thapar, *Origins to AD 1300*, p. 194.

⁴⁴ Rock Edict XIII in Asoka's *The Edicts of Asoka*, p. 26.

⁴⁵ Ying-Shih Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁶ Thapar, *Origins to AD 1300*, p. 187.

⁴⁷ Harold M. Tanner, *China: A History*. Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2009, p. 104.

⁴⁸ Thapar, *Origins to AD 1300*, p. 187.

⁴⁹ Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ Tanner, *China: A History*, pp. 99-101.

⁵¹ Thomas, *The Cambridge History of India*, p. 479.

applied to merchandise⁵². This system led to the establishment of merchant guilds encouraging individuals to come together to eliminate costs of working alone. Importantly the guilds facilitated state price and product quality control, as well as tax collection⁵³. The stability from taxation encouraged the formation of guilds benefitting the merchants and state alike. ✓

6. Decline

The collapse of the Han dynasty came at the hands of wealthy landowners. In the early Han dynasty emperors separated the larger feudal families in order to minimize their influence. By around 40 BCE these families were no longer checked allowing accumulation of great wealth⁵⁴. Landowners, mainly nobles, officials or merchants falsely registered their land with local officials thus evading taxation⁵⁵. With growing wealth the landowners bought the influence of corrupt local and state officials including regents and eunuchs at court. The state squeezed the peasants to make up losses. As pressure grew on the farmers they were forced to sell the land to landowners, further increasing their wealth and influence⁵⁶, and provoking peasant revolt. Completely at the mercy of the landowners, Emperor Xian abdicated in 220 CE. ✓

The destabilisation of the bureaucracy crippled the Mauryans. The powerful central administration relied on the strength of its ruler and Chandragupta, Bindusara, and Asoka were all capable of the excessive demands required⁵⁷. Asoka was well known for his untiring efforts even requesting official work when dining or at rest⁵⁸. However his power waned in his later years due to his obsession with dhamma and his successors lacked his indefatigable energy⁵⁹. With this weakening of administration, the revenue required to maintain the army and bureaucracy proved too great⁶⁰. Loyalties shifted from king to local aristocracies who

⁵² Thapar, *Origins to AD 1300*, p. 188.

⁵³ Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 55.

⁵⁴ Tung-tsu Ch'u, *Han Social Structure*, ed. Jack L Dull, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1972, pp. 207-208.

⁵⁵ Tanner, *China: A History*, p. 114.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁷ Prakash, 'State and Statecraft in Kautilya's Arthashastra', p. 15.

⁵⁸ A S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India*. 3rd edn. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1958, p. 317.

⁵⁹ Thapar, *Decline of the Mauryas*, p. 197.

⁶⁰ Thapar, *Origins to AD 1300*, pp. 205-206.

asserted their independence after the assassination of the last king Brihadratha in 180 BCE⁶¹.



⁶¹ Wolpert, *A New History of India*, p. 67.

7. Conclusion

Unification of an empire requires a legitimised ruler with centralised administration, firm state control and a strong economy. The Han and Mauryan dynasties proved that there is no common method for their implementation. Divine mandate and Confucian ideology legitimised Han rule while the Mauryan kings simply sought divine approval, Hindu dharma and Buddhist inspired dhamma. Though their empires were similarly structured, they recruited officials differently. Eligibility based on merit in Han China was revolutionary for its day, in contrast to the traditional birthright of caste in Mauryan India. The differences in ideology, caste, and legitimacy were unique to each country. ✓

Autocratic rule required force to maintain control. The Han utilised Confucian ideology to mask legalism while the Mauryans looked to the *Arthashastra* to justify coercion. Both empires' financial security relied on agrarian revenue. The Han supplemented income by monopolising trade and industry, whereas the Mauryans implemented taxation of trade and established merchant guilds, also a pioneering achievement. Finally, weak leadership claimed the downfall of both dynasties. The power of the landowners brought down the impotent Han emperors, whereas the unrelenting pressures of kingship proved too much for the later leaders of the Mauryans. These dynasties inspired numerous subsequent attempts at unification and are still studied today as models of successful empire building. ✓

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