

# CHINA and ROME: HOW DO THEY COMPARE?

## *SIMILARITIES*

### **Relations with Barbarians**

- both empires faced nomadic groups from central Asia who threatened and penetrated their boundaries (may have belonged to the same ethnic group)
- both empires settled the "Barbarians" near their borders and enlisted them in the imperial armies
- in both cases, the Barbarians came to hold great power
- ultimately, however, they dismembered the Roman Empire, while they were absorbed by the Chinese

### **Religious Policies**

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

### **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
- the Chinese selected a man who could control the imperial family and court
- neither empire believed that a single imperial family should rule forever

### **Gender Relationships**

- both empires subordinated women to men at all stages of life, and 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 was distracting energy away from the demands of sustaining the empire and instituted strict codes of sexual morality
- in China, far more than in Rome, women of the imperial family played an important role in politics behind the scenes, particularly in terms of determining succession

### **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 bankrupted the government and encouraged its subjects to evade taxes and military service and even to rise in revolt

### **The Deployment of Armies of Colonization**

- both empires used colonies of soldier-colonizers to garrison and develop remote areas while simultaneously providing compensation and retirement benefits for the troops

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## ***SIMILARITIES***

### **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 border tribes combined with the revolt of the Yellow Turbans brought down the later Han

### **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

### **The Concentration of Wealth**

- in both empires, the benefits of imperial wealth tended to flow toward the center, to the elites in the capital cities -> the capitals grew to unprecedented size (over 1 million people)

### **Policies For and Against Individual Mobility**

- in order 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, many of the revolts were led by slaves
- 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 so-called "bread and circuses"

### **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 -> when imperial government was weak, the largest of these estates challenged the power of the central government

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## DIFFERENCES

### CHINA

### ROME

#### Geopolitical

- heartland was far larger and more cohesive, geographically and culturally
  - Han dynasty: 60 million people, virtually all were in "inner China"
- had as its heartland only central Italy, bound by the Alps and the Mediterranean
  - also about 60 million people but only a few of these million in Italy

#### Ideological

- Although Confucian China spoke of a mythological golden age of equality among people in harmony with each other and with nature, realistically the Confucians believed that the best possible government was a well-ordered empire.
- Imperial Rome knew of its actual, historical republican 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

- China's empire has lasted for the last 2000 years. Dynasties have come and gone, and sometimes the empire has broken into fragments, but finally the empire endured as a single political entity.
  - Today, although without an emperor, China's geopolitical unity continues.
- Rome's empire rose, fell, and was gone, although it lived on as a concept.

#### 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
  - The empire was held together by Confucian and Buddhist ideology, 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.
  - Rome maintained the cultural distinctions far more than did China.

#### Language Policy

- The Chinese language unified the Chinese Empire across space and through time, far more than Latin did the Roman Empire.
  - Chinese was never subordinated to another language, as Latin was to Greek for many years and in many regions.
  - Nor did Chinese compete with regional languages as Latin ultimately did.
- Latin was gradually supplanted as a spoken tongue by its successor Romance languages: Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, and Romanian.

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## DIFFERENCES

### CHINA

#### Ideology and Cultural Cohesion

- China's cultural, Confucian bureaucracy provided a core cultural identity throughout the empire and beyond.
- Even the alternative political-cultural philosophies, such as Daoism, Legalism, and later Buddhism, usually (but not always) served to broaden and augment the attraction of Confucianism.

#### Influence on Neighbors

- 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.

### ROME

- Rome's principal philosophies of paganism, Stoicism and, later, Christianity did not significantly buttress and augment its imperial rule -- and the latter two may even have diminished popular loyalty to the empire.

- The Roman Empire influenced the lands it conquered, but had less influence on those outside its boundaries.