CHINA AND ROME: HOW DO THEY COMPARE?

DIFFERENCES

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 were in Italy. In China virtually all were in "inner China," 90 percent of them in the North China Plain.

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
Rome's empire rose, fell, and was gone, although it lived on as a concept. China's empire has lasted for the last two thousand 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.

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. 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, to 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. Latin was gradually supplanted as a spoken tongue by its successor Romance languages: Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, and Romanian.

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 of China, such as Daoism, Legalism, and later Buddhism, usually (but not always) served to broaden and augment the attraction of Confucianism. 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.
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

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 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, but in Rome, Christianity did not save the empire, and by challenging the significance of earthly power it may even have 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, 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.

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 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. One woman, the Empress Wu (r. 690-705), took the throne herself.

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 as established and ruled by generals, as were the Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasties in China the 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.
Overextension
Both empires suffered their greatest challenges in, confronting simultaneously the strains of overextension and the subsequent internal revolts that 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, 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
In order to maintain power and stability in the face of demands for change, both empires periodically built 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. In times when imperial government was weak, the largest of these estates challenged the power of the central government.