

Han Dynasty Biography Activity

#6 Peasants



Peasants made up most of China's population during the Han Dynasty. As a class, the peasants were near the lowest level of Han society. Since they were not connected by birth to wealthy and powerful families, many peasants lived in conditions of despair and poverty. For this reason, other groups in Han society looked down upon them. However, peasants' work was considered important because it supplied food for society.

The vast majority of peasants lived and worked off small pieces of land. The typical peasant family consisted of a husband, wife, and two or three children. Their land was approximately 10 acres, and might also contain a garden, a walled farmyard, and mulberry trees. Most peasants lived in one or two story houses. In many cases, several families lived together in a small village. Such shared living allowed them to work the fields together.

Some peasants were better off than others. Some could afford oxen to pull their carts and simple wells to help draw water to irrigate their fields. Others were less fortunate. They worked with wooden hand tools and hauled water in heavy buckets across their shoulders. Peasant men did most of the physical labor around the farm. The women had two main responsibilities: taking care of the household and weaving and sewing, either to provide clothing for the family or to add to the family income.

Most peasants dressed in plain, rough clothes. Their shirts and pants were made of scratchy cloth. Their sandals were made of straw. In winter, they wore padded clothing to keep warm. Peasants ate simple meals. They steamed much of their food in small stoves. Meals consisted of steamed dumplings - balls of cooked dough stuffed with meat or rice - small portions of fish, and very small portions of meat. Peasants ate wheat or a grain called millet. Many families grew ginger, garlic, and onions in their gardens. These crops could be added to their meals for flavor or sold at the market to bring in some extra money.

Most peasants had hard lives. They worked nearly every day of the year. They were often exposed to harsh weather, including dust and windstorms, the burning sun, heavy rains, and bitter cold. Floods and severe dry weather, or drought, could quickly destroy their livelihood. Peasants whose land was destroyed or severely damaged might find themselves with no money to buy seed for the next year's planting of crops. They might have to sell all of their tools or oxen just to survive a harsh winter. After the government collected taxes from the peasants, many found themselves with little left to live on.

Some peasants who faced hard times borrowed money from neighboring landowners. Often, when it came time to repay the debt, the peasant had already sold his tools and animals - some even sold their children into slavery - and could not repay the loan. Then, the landowner would take the peasant's land, having him work on it for practically nothing.