

Han Dynasty Biography Activity

#7 Slaves



As a group, slaves were at the bottom of Han society. Most wore certain clothing to note their lowly status. The social distance between free people and slaves was great. There was no social communication between slaves and free people, and intermarriage between the two groups was forbidden. Furthermore, it was very difficult for a slave to move up the higher level of society, or to experience social mobility.

Originally, slaves were male and female relatives of convicted criminals. As part of a criminal's

punishment, the government took away their household goods and forced their relatives into slavery. The Han also used a small number of non-Chinese slaves. These foreign slaves were captured and brought from distant regions. They were presented as gifts, or tribute, to honor the emperor.

Sometimes, very poor people who had no means of support sold themselves or their children into slavery. The Han government allowed, and at times encouraged, this practice. This occurred especially during times of war and great starvation, or famine. When these periods of hardship passed, the Han emperors issued laws, or edicts, that freed those people who had sold themselves into slavery.

Slaves fell into two basic categories: government slaves and private slaves. Government slaves performed a variety of duties. Some worked in the palaces or offices as messengers, doorkeepers, or banquet attendants. Others worked in the imperial parks and looked after dogs, horses, and other animals that were housed in stables. Government slaves also loaded and towed large river boats, or barges, filled with products and supplies that helped maintain trade among the cities.

Private slaves had to obey all of their master's commands. They were their master's property. However, this did not mean that the slaveholder had unlimited rights. For example, a slaveholder's rights did not include the power to punish a slave with death.

Private slaves also performed a number of duties. Some slaves helped run the household, which included looking after the kitchen. Some others might be trusted with secret, or confidential, work. This work could involve business deals or guarding the graves of the master's ancestors. Slaves who

were skilled might be trained as acrobats, jugglers, or musicians. Female slaves who were beautiful and talented often danced and sang. Some female slaves were trained as singers and dancers from a young age and were sold for that purpose.

Many things determined the status and living conditions of slaves. While most slaves lived modest lives, some actually lived quite well. Some slaves lived better than the poor commoners who were free. Slaves who worked for powerful, wealthy families benefited from them. They might dress in silk and other fine clothes and enjoy meals of meat, vegetables and wine.