

What lessons can we draw from the rise and fall of the Qin dynasty?

Most modern scholars have argued that the harshness of Qin Shi Huang was responsible for the rise and fall of his empire. He held tough, strong laws and issued harsh punishments and through this he was able to unite China. However, he used the same governmental techniques to run his empire. Despite creating massive change and unifying a country that would last for over 2000 years, it was the fact that he was too conservative, and not revolutionary enough that ironically led to his downfall.

From 475BCE the Zhou dynasty (1040-221BCE) was fractured into smaller states by nobles who no longer supported the empire. These were also known as the 'Warring States' in which kings sought independence and to conquer other states. By 246BCE, only seven 'Warring States' remained, of which the strongest was Qin.

The reason Qin was the strongest state is that they enjoyed a sheltered base in the Wei Valley, bordered by the non-Chinese agricultural and nomadic peoples to the west, mountains to the north and south and the Wei river to the east. This strategic base meant that the Qin were not to be easily attacked yet could build an army and attack neighbouring states relatively easily.

The state of Qin also embraced the leadership of Shang Yang (390-338BCE), the leading official of Qin from 361-338BCE. Shang Yang implemented a strict system of reward and punishment, forced everyone into productive occupations, placed spies, replaced hereditary aristocracy with that based on military achievement, and brought all territory under direct control of a central government.

Fast forward more than 100 years and King Ying Zheng became leader. Ying Zheng (later known as the self-titled Emperor Qin Shi Huang) continued the system of harsh punishment, employing facial tattooing, branding, cutting off limbs and beheading as means of punishment. He followed Legalism, believing that strict laws were important in order to maintain social order.

The Chinese historian Sima Qian wrote of Qin "The Sovereign Emperor came to the throne, made decrees and laws which all his subjects heeded; In his twenty-sixth year the land was unified, all obeyed his rule".¹

Qin Shi Huang also conscripted citizens into a corvée army and developed this army into a strong force. They learnt cavalry skills from the Xiongnu (nomadic horseman) over the border to the North-West and became more powerful and skilled than the armies of the neighbouring states.

Within a period of nine years, from 230-221 BCE Qin Shi Huang proceeded to attack, destroy, overthrow and seize the neighbouring states of Han, Zhao, Yan, Wei, Chu and Qi, thus unifying China into one nation or empire, in 221BCE.

Following Shang Yang's Legalist ideals, Qin Shi Huang unified China and established a central government headed by himself. His advisors were the Prime Minister, Defender in Chief (Military Chief), and Grand Censor (Chief Inspector). There were nine inferior ministers, and a hundred officials and ministers. He divided Qin empire into 36 prefectures, each headed by a chancellor, a member of the imperial family. These chancellors oversaw the running of each prefecture which was then divided into counties.

Currency, weights and measures were standardised under the Qin empire. Qin minted coins and implemented the 'same ruts for carriages' and 'same script for writing' policies meaning that the entire Qin state could travel easily, and one form of writing became universal. At the time several

¹ Sima, Qian *The Records of the Grand Historian*, trans. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Beijing, China: Foreign Language Press, 1979), pp. 169-72.

languages and dialects were spoken which made communication difficult between regions. Missions of diplomacy and trade would need an interpreter, as despite the peoples being geographically close, their languages could be as dissimilar as two European languages. The introduction of one system of writing for all unified Qin, allowing people from different regions to communicate through reading and writing. This writing system spread throughout China and these characters became the basis for Japanese and Korean scripts too.

Qin Shi Huang built irrigation systems and transport canals which increased productivity and population. Qin also rebuilt and restructured parts of the Great Wall of China, unifying it where needed and undoing parts that divided states. The war was over, labour was available, and Qin extended the wall to over 5000km long and 10m in height. The wall prevented the Xiongnu in the north from entering China.

One idea that Legalism introduced was keeping the Imperial family but making other roles based on meritocracy rather than hereditary. Considered by many to be the 'perfecter of Legalism', Han Feizi wrote "The enlightened ruler assigns posts and hands out titles and stipends as a means of promoting men of worth and talent and encouraging men of achievement".² This led to a knowledgeable and talented government as opposed to a government that existed through favour and connections. The government was able to rule better and achieve more through smarter and skilled ministers and officials. As Zhang Qizhi³ expresses "These capable persons became a distinct social group and the main source of professional highranking officials who were able to have influence over the hegemonic policy". Li Si was one such official who through his capabilities managed to ascend the ranks to Prime Minister and advised Qin Shi Huang in state matters. An example of this is Li Si advising the Emperor on how to deal with banditry.⁴ The benefits of having a government based on merit rather than connections is universally recognised and this system is in place in China today. Potential presidential candidates are put forward by the presidium of the National People's Congress and the election is held by the delegates. Amongst other qualities of assessment, the potential president must be politically mature with a rich work experience and have a good reputation.

It is without a doubt that Qin Shi Huang and the Qin dynasty enjoyed many successes despite lasting only 15 years. The rise of Qin could be viewed as the unification of China, the creation of a great state, the introduction of standardisation which lasted into the 'golden age' of the Han dynasty and beyond. The system of a central government with wider provincial representatives still exists today. Many of the roads, canals and walls built by the Qin still survive today. Modern China has a standardised currency, and units which follow from their Qin beginnings.

Yet if the Qin dynasty was so successful, why did it fall so soon? There are several reasons for this of which important lessons may and should be drawn.

Legalism, as the central ideology throughout the Qin dynasty stated that men were inherently bad and need strict laws to keep them in line. Confucianism, having a following at that time, stated the opposite, that men are inherently good. In order to empower Legalism over Confucianism, the Prime Minister Li Si, suggested that Qin have other political history and ideological (including Confucian) books burned, drowning out free political thought and silencing disagreeing scholars. Qin

² Watson, Burton. *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün Tzu, and Han Fei Tzu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967 p47

³ Zhang, Qizhi *An Introduction to Chinese History and Culture* (New York: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Publishing Co., Ltd and Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg 2015) p145

⁴ Sima, Qian *The First Emperor, Selections from the Historical Records*, trans. Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p88

agreed to this and subsequently ordered the burning of all books he deemed 'unnecessary'. Two scholars, Masters Hou and Lu fled in protest, resulting in Qin also ordering the burying alive of 460 scholars to serve as a warning to those who might otherwise dare to contradict him.⁵

The 'burning of books and burying of scholars' could be viewed as an early form of censorship. In fact, Mao Zedong said of Qin Shi Huang "He buried 460 scholars alive- we have buried 46,000 scholars alive".⁶ We can even see reminders of this in China today, with certain political books, films, pictures and maps either banned outright or heavily censored.

Another reason the empire failed is the harsh corvee labour and high taxation. Qin Shi Huang was not an emperor that worked for the people but an emperor that made the people work for him. During the building of the Great Wall Qin employed over a million slaves, and a quarter of them died in the process. At the time, women would pray for a daughter because to give birth to a son meant there was a large chance of him being conscripted as corvee labour, either building the new empire of Qin or joining the army. Either way, the soldiers and slaves were under-fed, under-clothed and many died doing their duties.

Many others were forced into building the tomb for Qin Shi Huang- a grand mausoleum of over 180 pits filled with life size soldiers, slaves, women and more. The actual burial chamber had jewels on the ceiling to represent stars, and liquid mercury on the floor charting the rivers of Qin. Many died during the creation of this mausoleum, and upon completion many were purposely sacrificed, including architects, so they could not give away the secret of the tomb's location, and the emperor's concubines, who were to accompany him into the next life.

On one occasion, 900 soldiers led by Chen Sheng and Wu Guang were delayed returning to their posts due to bad weather. The penalty for tardiness was execution by beheading. Chen and Wu quickly formed a plan to avoid their inevitable demise. They created a fake omen which they placed inside a fish: a handkerchief upon which was written 'Chen Sheng Future King'. They drew this out in front of the superstitious troops, proclaiming Chen Sheng as the future king, claimed that the soldiers should not die such an ignoble death, and managed to incite a rebellion. They gathered more and more supporters and the people responded with "wooden weapons and banners". Chen and Wu attacked Da'ze in Anhui province, conquered the prefecture of Chen in Henan province and arrived at Xianyang (the capital) with over 100,000 soldiers. Chen and Wu were defeated; however, the rebellion paved the way for later rebellions and is still remembered today in Chinese history. (Zhang, 2015, p. 37).

One could posit that the reason for the initial rebellion was the harsh laws of the Qin. Had the law at the time not held that the punishment for lateness was the death penalty or allowed for exceptional circumstances and a fair trial it is possible, even likely, that the Chen, Wu and the army would not have dared, or even considered rebelling. That they faced certain death otherwise due to the strict laws was the determining factor of the rebellion. In *the Faults of Qin*, (过秦论) Jia Yi (200-168BCE) makes this argument

[...] a single common rustic could nevertheless challenge this empire to cause its ancestral temples to topple and its ruler to die at the hand of others, a laughing-stock in the eyes of all. Why? Because they lacked humaneness and rightness; because preserving power differs fundamentally from seizing power.

In today's modern China we can still see the remnants of the Qin dynasty, notably the existence of a central government system, the importance of law and China's unifying properties. In a survey of

⁵ Sima, Qian *The First Emperor, Selections from the Historical Records*, trans. Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p76-78

⁶ The 1st speech at the 2nd session of the 8th party congress, 8th May 1958

my Chinese peers, when asked “What impression do you have of Qin Shi Huang and how do you think the Qin dynasty has affected modern China?” The answers ranged from considering Qin Shi Huang as a ‘great statesman’ and the Qin as a ‘great unification dynasty’ to him being ‘cruel’ and a ‘tyrant’. One student said,

(He) adopted a series of measures to consolidate unification in the fields of politics, economy, culture and ideology [...] its autocratic centralized rule system has been followed for more than 2000 years, with far-reaching influence [...] Qin unified writing, currency and weights and measures [...] but he was also a very tyrannical feudal emperor [...] people were tortured to death [...] cruel criminal law [...] burned books and Confucianism, suppressed ideas and destroyed culture [...]

This shows that people remember him today, by both his strengths and weaknesses. Modern Chinese realise that he did great things but that his tyranny was his downfall.

What Qin did not do was adapt once he had achieved his goal of unifying China. He ruled as he conquered, brutally. The lack of empathy and lack of respect for human life under Qin Shi Huang ultimately helped cause the downfall of the Qin dynasty. Qin ruled with an iron fist and strict laws. He allowed no-one to undermine him and accepted no criticism. The crux of why the Qin dynasty failed is that he was brutal, tyrannical, and most importantly of all he *ruled without benevolence*.

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