

Exploring the Reasons for the Rapid Demise of Qin Dynasty

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Keywords: Qin dynasty, Rapid Demise, Reasons

Abstract: The reasons that causes the rapid demise of the Qin empire has always attracted much attention, as to find an example of an empire as powerful and advanced as the Qin Empire that declined in such a short period of time is very hard. This makes the fall of the Qin Empire an extremely useful and important example to study when exploring the reasons why a seemed very efficient and advanced system would rapidly collapse. This article mainly explores the decline and fall of the Qin Empire from the role that Legalism and the system of taxation and corvee collection of Qin played in the collapse of the empire. This paper can help to expand the academic understanding of the causes of the collapse of Qin and provide a basis for future related research. After going through 6 previous studies from Google Scholars and several original historical materials, the article came to the conclusion that Legalism and Qin's state system, two most important factors that lead to Qin's rise, eventually caused the rapid collapse of the empire.

1. Introduction

As the first of the Chinese empires, Qin's accomplishment was remarkable: It made unification the main theme in the Chinese history, and division an episode; remote areas such as Lingnan were brought under the jurisdiction, to a certain extent. More importantly, although the Qin Empire's vast territory and long frontier were unprecedented, it still can establish an effective management system. This system does not rely on giving lands to feudal lords, nor is it satisfied with nominal submission and tribute, but tries to be directly governed by officials sent by the central government. That was more or less inherited by all subsequent dynasties. It was no doubt the most advanced and elaborated system at the time. Because otherwise, why would it be Qin, not any other state, be the state that eventually unified all under heaven? Qin seemed stable and it is ever lasting, but only 15 years after Qin annexed Qi the empire collapsed. It lost not only the land it conquered from the states east of Shanhaiguan, but as well as its native land. Therefore, understanding how Qin demise in such a short time did is very useful for exploring the reasons why a state or any organization with a seemed efficient and advanced system would rapidly collapse. In the last thirty years, most studies on this topic focuses on Legalism, they believe Legalism and the harsh laws it advocated and represented is the most important cause of the decline of Qin. Some studies, in the other hand, suggested it is precisely because Qin failed to grasp the essence of Legalism. However, the idea that another important reason that cause Qin's decline and fall is its extremely efficient, and perhaps excessively efficient, system of taxation and corvee collection seems to have been little or not at all mentioned.

This article uses the Qin Dynasty, decline, and Legalism as the keywords, and after searching google scholar for articles from 1990 to the present, after screening, a total of 6 articles were included in the analysis scope of this article.

2. Reasons for the rapid demise of Qin Dynasty

2.1 Legalism

Harsh laws, unreasonable punishments for breaking the laws, and the tyranny of Qin's monarch were commonly believed to be the most important cause of Qin's collapse. Therefore, it is no surprise that traditionally, Legalism, which was famous for advocating these, was thought of as one of the

most important reasons that leads to the empire's demise.

Thus, as early as the Han dynasty, many famous scholars already held such views. The most well know example is Jia Yi, and his famous article *Disquisition Finding Fault with Qin (Guò Qín Lùn)*. The sentence that best illustrates his point of view is 'Because benevolence and righteousness were not to be applied, therefore the position of attack and defend was reversed.' Jia Yi believe the reason why Qin could defeat the invading coalition of nine states in Hangu Pass during the Warring States period but was defeated by Chen Sheng and other rebel armies which were not at all comparable to the invading coalition of nice states, is Qin's tyranny and unjust, is that Qin ignored rule with morals and ethics [1]. Jia Yi is the best representative of the Confucian view on the collapse of Qin, while another scholar from the Han dynasty, Lu Jia, and his *Xin-Yu* embodies the view of the Huang-Lao School and Taoism on legalism and Qin's collapse [2]. Lu Jia wrote in his work *Xin-Yu (Xīn Yǔ)*, 'the more these troublesome things are, the more chaotic all under heaven becomes; the more law grows, the eviller flourish; the more the soldiers there are, the more the enemies would be increased [3]. Of course, the passage mainly reflects the Huang-Lao School's idea of 'rule by non-active, but we can also see Taoism's Views on Legalism and the decline of the Qin Dynasty. Lu Jia disagreed with the legalist idea of law-based, arguing that it is the numerous and complicated laws, and that the government of Qin did too much, thus the society was unable to rest, and the economy was unable to recover. In general, Huang-Lao School focuses on Qin's use of resources beyond the limit the society bear, and Confucian focuses on Qin's lacking rule by morals and ethics, but they both agreed that Legalism was to take a big part in the collapse of the Qin empire [2].

Most studies in more recent times still held similar views. For example, *On the Relationship between Legalism and the Rise and Fall of the Qin Dynasty* [4], *Legalist Culture and the Rise and Fall of Qin Dynasty* [5], *Legalism and the rise and fall of Qin Dynasty* [6], and *Legalism and the rapid demise of Qin dynasty* [2]. It is suggested in these studies that Legalism was beneficial and indeed was the key factor that led to Qin's rise during the Warring States period — When the war was the main theme, and all the states were competing fiercely. But when the last of the state's east of Shanhai Pass, Qi, was annexed by Qin and all under heaven was united under one, Legalism's disadvantages became apparent: Its overemphasis on the monarch's absolute power made the monarch and the people near him able to greatly influence the running of the imperial government. Thus later, the Second Generation and Zhao Gao were able to cause some very negative effects on the reign of the Qin empire; While its advocating of cruel laws and harsh punishments sharpened contradictions, and eventually led to the uprising of the people.

On the other hand, some other studies, such as *New View Point on the Relationship between Legalist's Theory and the downfall of Qin Dynasty* [7], believe that the problem is not Legalism itself — or at least Legalism in its early stages — but Qin failed to apply the essence of legalism, discarding its essence and leaving the dregs. According to these studies, in the early time of Legalism, while it emphasizes the rule of law, it did not entirely ignore the role of moral education. It also suggested that in order to ask the people to obey laws, monarchs should as well respect and obey laws, not putting their power above the law. 'Therefore, a wise monarch knows that the people take him as the starting point, so he must establish rule by law to govern himself, establish etiquette to regulate himself. Because, if the top does not set an example, the bottom will not obey. If people refuse to obey laws and regulations and refuse to die in the law system, the country will be in chaos. So, a wise monarch, in carrying out laws and regulations, always precedes the people in practice' [8]. But in the theory of Legalism in its late stages, moral education was entirely abandoned, all that was left was strict laws and severe punishments. At the same time, the status of monarchical power was further enhanced. The state was regarded as the private property of the monarch [9]. That is well shown in Qin Shi Huang and the Second Generation's reign, if to say the Great Wall and the roads were beneficial to the entire state, the construction of huge palaces and tombs which used resources no less than the two above has no use at all to the benefit of the entire empire.

2.2 Large Scale Constructions, wars, and immigration

Throughout the history of imperial China, usually the first priority of a new dynasty established

after years of wars was to let the people rest and have the social and economy slowly recover from the harm that warfare had left. However, when it comes to the case of the Qin dynasty, which was about the opposite of what the imperial court did. The scale of a series of construction projects, external expansion, and immigration carried out right after the Qin dynasty united all under heaven was rare in all dynasties. Except for the three listed in Table 1, Qin also constructed a road system that starts from the imperial capital and spread all over the country, ‘*In the thirty-fifth year a road was opened via Jiuyuan as far as Yunyang*’ [11], given the scale of the project, it must have involved no fewer people than the ones mentioned in Table 1. Such large-scale construction projects will undoubtedly bring a great burden to the society and the government even in a peaceful and prosperous age, not to mention the Qin empire had just ended years of war and unified the country. —though, it must be mentioned that except for Epang palace and Mount Li, which we know from Shih Chi that there are 700,000 convicts, the number of corvees used in other construction projects and immigrants that’s moved to remote regions is unclear. It is only predictions. But still, considering the size of these construction projects and immigration, the total number of forced labors is likely to be as much as 2-3 million. The total population of Qin at the time was commonly believed to be 20-30 million, which means around ten percent of the total population is removed from agricultural production. And the fact that such a large proportion of the population was removed from their daily production will undoubtedly lead to extremely serious social problems in an agricultural society.

Table 1. The biggest uses of corvee in the Qin dynasty [10]

	Tomb & Palace	Guarding the five ridges in the south	The Great Wall
Time	212 BC -	219 BC - 214 BC	221 BC-
Corvee Number	1,500,000	500,000	Estimated 300,000

Then comes an obvious question, why would the Qin rulers do so? Did they not see the danger of using forced labor on such a large scale right after hundreds of years of war and instability? The fact is, it is likely that they did not see it. One reason why is Qin had been putting so large percentage of its population to war in the previous Warring States period. For example, in the famous Battle of Changping, ‘*When the king of Qin learned that the passage of Zhao for transporting grain had been cut off, he went to Hanoi to confer one rank of title to the common people himself and levied all the young and middle-aged men over the age of fifteen to the Changping battlefield to intercept the rescue troops of Zhao and cut off their supply*’ [12]. If Sima Qian’s record is accurate, Qin could levy all man of age in a region to battlefield at the time. But what the Qin rulers didn't realize was that as the country got bigger, the proportion of the population that the government could expropriate would not remain the same. A small city-state with a population of several thousand might be able to put all its men of the right age into a war, since the war of a small city-state is probably only few miles away from the city. People can return to their daily routine after maybe no more than few days; When Qin's territory was limited to Shanxi and parts of Sichuan, it may also be able to levy as high as one-tenth of the population is devoted to wars or other uses. Because to go from the hinterland of the country to the frontier is no more than half a months at most; But when the territory of the Qin Empire expanded northward to Liaodong, and southward to Lingnan, and eastward to the Pacific Ocean, and it would took months for someone in Anhui to get to the border, it would be a problem to pull such a large proportion of the population away from agricultural production——Not mentioning the various of uncertainty you would encounter on the way to the border that could delay you —— If you cannot reach your destination on the given time, by law you should be executed. These sorts of laws for sure worsen the effect of making such large proportion of the population corvee. As we can tell from the story of Chen Sheng and Wu Guang’s rebellion. ‘*In the seventh month of the first year of the Second Emperor people who were not liable to compulsory service were sent forth to guard Yuyang, and 900 men made camp at Dazexiang. Chen Sheng and Wu Guang had both been due to go, and they had been made heads of the camp. But it happened to rain heavily, and the road became impassable, and they reckoned that they were already too late for the appointed time. And if they were too late, by law they should all be executed.*’ [11].

Another reason is that Qin Shi Huang himself was extremely proud and idealistic. This can be seen

from his self-proclaimed to achieve far higher than the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors and belief that his family would rule ‘*right down to Ten Thousand Generation, and this tradition would continue without end.*’ [11]. However, an idealized leader is not necessarily a good thing for a country that has just ended war and instability, as we can see from many countries in the last century. And the extremely efficient system of tax collection and corvée established by the Qin Dynasty gave Qin Shi Huang the ability to carry out these grand construction projects and external expansion right after Qin unified all under heaven to contribute to his greatness.

Generally speaking, the unified dynasties established after years of wars are often not able to carry out large-scale wars or construction projects until around three or four emperors after the founding of the dynasty [13]. One reason is that the government usually only controls little household registrations right after the dynasty was established. It does not have enough resources and control over the population to do such things — for example, when the Tang Dynasty just established, only 2 million households were registered in the government profile [14]. As time goes on, more and more households get registered and become under the control of the government.

Usually, only after the reign of three or four emperors, the populace can become rich enough to afford the burden that a series of large government projects brings. For example, in the Han Dynasty, if not counting a few short-lived puppet emperors, the large-scale outer expansion by Emperor Wu was after the rule of three emperors since the founding of the country. However, the effectiveness of the system of Qin dynasty made the Qin government able to control a big percentage of the population, and thus it was possible for Qin to start these projects when the society can’t actually afford them yet.

3. Conclusions

The collapse of an empire as huge as Qin clearly has many reasons, but unlike many other empires, outer forces played a very unimportant role in Qin’s decline. The Xiongnu in the north did not become a force enough to threaten imperial china until the Han Dynasty; The Qiang people in the west had to wait until the Eastern Han Dynasty to be troublesome. The main causes of Qin’s collapse were the inner forces. Legalism helped Qin to rise, but its over-emphasis to the moarch’s power and promotion of harsh laws as well caused its decline; Qin’s extremely efficient system of taxation and corvee collection helped Qin to extract resources efficiently from the people, it made Qin stand out among all the states during the Warring States period. But as it continued to operate after Qin’s unification, it eventually leads to popular revolts all over the empire. Compare to Legalism — which there’s already many studies about it — the study toward Qin’s state system and its role in Qin’s collapse is still little. It’s a topic that should be more researched.

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