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The First Empire

An analysis of the rise and fall of the Qin Empire

The Qin Dynasty was one of the most important dynasties not only in Chinese history, but in the rest of the world as well. The establishment of a bureaucratic state first appeared in Qin China, and its impact has resonated through out the rest of the civilized world. There are many reasons for Qin Shi Huangdi to establish a bureaucratic society and to adapt a legalist philosophy. Establishing a legalist state did not come without consequences. The military, social, and economic situations of the time all come into play, as well as the strength of the ruling members during this short period. Though can the blame of the Qin's failure be placed purely on these aspects alone? Can one even find answers in these happenings at all? It is the goal of this paper to look at some of the reasons that prompted China to become a bureaucratic and legalist state, and explain why this is responsible for the fall of the Qin Dynasty and not minor issues like the economy.

Before one can look at the ramifications of legalism on the Qin Empire, it is necessary to first understand why the Qin Shi Huangdi implemented this system of government. Prior to the establishment of the Qin Dynasty, China endured nearly 200 years of continuous warfare known as the 'Warring States' period. It is a result of this period that the origins and the necessity for a bureaucratic system in China came about. As Edgar Kiser and Yong Cai stated: "The key is to explore the effects of a particular type of war (long and severe) on the recruitment of officials and on monitoring capacity, thus linking structural conditions to strategies of control in agency relations."¹ The Warring States period brought about the weakening of the aristocracy, the development of roads, trained personnel, and a structure of bureaucracy in the military. It is these

¹ Edgar Kiser and Yong Cai, 'War and Bureaucratization in Qin China: Exploring an Anomalous Case', *American Sociological Review* (2003) 511-539

things that led to the need for bureaucratic reform in China.² At the time, empires were under control and dependent upon powerful aristocrats who were avidly opposed to bureaucratization, as it would undermine their authority. However, during periods of revolutions, or extended warfare, the aristocratic class becomes weakened. They become responsible for leading their armies in war, and as a consequence endured heavy casualties. A second reason leading to the development of a bureaucratic state is that a form of bureaucracy was already apparent in the military of the day. One of the primary reasons bureaucratization didn't appear any sooner than 1450 in European states was because they lacked a proper model.³ The argument that a more bureaucratic military existed comes from Kiser and Cai:

Typical semi-feudal forms of military organization were replaced during the Warring States era by a more bureaucratic military system. This was the result of the development of cheap iron weapons and the shift from aristocratic armies using chariots and cavalry to larger peasant-based infantry armies... ..These large infantry armies required much more training and organization, thus they had to be at least semi-bureaucratic. They required that the state have more detailed information about the people and resources under its control.⁴

This need for a system of record keeping helped to create the model for civil bureaucratization that would be realized in the future, not only in structure and organization, but also in training officials for proper civil bureaucratization. Along with all of this, technology also played a major role. With wars come advances in infrastructure that can be very useful for administration and bureaucracy. The development of roads used to move troops more effectively is an example of this improvement in infrastructure. All of these bureaucratic values, such as a necessity of order above all else, would in some minds lead to the adoption of legalism as a philosophy.

² Edgar Kiser and Yong Cai, 'War and Bureaucratization in Qin China: Exploring an Anomalous Case', *American Sociological Review* (2003) 511-539

³ Thomas Ertman, *Birth of the Leviathan: Building States and Regimes in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

⁴ Edgar Kiser and Yong Cai, 516

Now that some of the reasons Qin Shi Huangdi chose a bureaucratic system for his empire are understood, it is time to explore the reasons for its downfall. Popular opinion points to the military, economic, and social changes made during the Qin as the causes of its demise. It can be argued however that these were not the reasons. One of the most popular charges against the Qin was the massive mobilization of manpower for military and construction campaigns.⁵ During the Qin Dynasty, three large construction projects were begun, the construction of Afang Palace, the building of the First Emperors tomb, and the building of the Great Wall. It may not be possible to argue that these undertakings were simple and cheap, but it can be argued that they did not require need for the massive mobilization of manpower that many believe them to have had. During the Second Emperors reign, construction on the First Emperors tomb was still underway, although nearly completed. It was at this time that a rebel army was discovered moving close to the capital, and the Second Emperor asked for advice from his advisors. This is the response given by his Privy Treasurer Zhang Han, taken from *Shiji*:

The bandits have already become numerous and powerful. Now there is no time to mobilize troops in nearby prefectures. The convict laborers on the Mount Li⁶ are numerous. I request that you pardon them and provide them with weapons in order for them to attack [the bandits]. The Second Emperor granted a general pardon to the empire and commissioned Zhang Han as general. He attacked and smashed the [rebel] army.

In this text it is said that the Emperor used convict labor on the tomb, and not conscripted labor. From this it can be argued that conscription was never used for labor on Afang Palace, the First Emperors tomb, and the Great Wall. Knowing this, it is difficult to make a case that conscription policies led to the downfall of the Qin.

It is impossible to argue against high taxes as being a cause for the demise of the Qin without introducing the real reason behind the death of the Qin: the First and more so the Second Emperors adoption of legalism as the states philosophy. Lu Jia and Jia Yi, both of whom wrote during the early Western Han period, have essays on what they believe went wrong with the Qin. Both men indicate that high taxes and conscription

⁵ Jack L. Dull, 'Anti-Qin Rebels: No Peasant Leaders Here', *Modern China* (1983) 285-318

⁶ Mount Li – the location of the First Emperors tomb

were not as important or highly ranked reasons for the downfall. Instead, they primarily blamed general regime dislike and the mistakes of the First and Second Emperors. During the reign of the Second Emperor, the Qin state was unraveling. Patricia Ebrey explains: “The legalist institutions designed to concentrate power in the hands of the ruler made the stability of the government dependent on the strength and character of a single person.”⁷

Furthermore, from Jack L. Dull:

Lu Jia admonishes his imperial reader that the successful ruler is one who relies upon sages, not men such as Zhao Gao and Li Si. By implication, the Qin failed because the Second Emperor tried to rely on these men. Not until Chapter four, ‘Wu-wei’ (‘Non-action’), is the First Emperor singled out for attention. There, Lu refers to the cruel punishment that the First Emperor created.⁸

And summarizing Jia Yi’s ‘Faults of Qin:’ People eagerly accepted Qin rule because it re-established a peace and order that made people feel secure. But when the time came for the Qin founder to maintain his empire, he failed to alter his administration accordingly. Jia then goes on to list nine policies that the Second Emperor might have pursued that would have prevented the loss of the empire. The Second Emperor should have employed only the loyal and worthy; that the ruler should have been of same mind as the subject so he could show concern for the grief-stricken; that he should have corrected the mistakes of the First Emperor; that he should have created fiefs; that he should have moderated the punishment system; and so on.⁹ All of the causes for failure pointed out by Lu Jia and Jia Li were standards of legalism.

It is common to blame high taxes, massive conscription efforts, and so on as leading causes of the Qin’s downfall. Though these factors must have certainly played a role, they are not nearly as important as the general dislike for the regime brought about by the institution of legalism as the state philosophy. The harsh punishments, refusal to accept advice from worthy sages, allowing one person to hold sole power, and the failure to adapt from a wartime government to a civil government were essentially the three strikes for the Qin Dynasty. Evidence of this was apparent when a bureaucratic state was

⁷ Patricia Ebrey, *Pre-Modern East Asia: To 1800 A Cultural, Social, and Political History* (Houghton Mifflin Company 2006), 48-49

⁸ Jack L. Dull, ‘Anti-Qin Rebels: No Peasant Leaders Here’, *Modern China* (1983) 285-318

⁹ Jack L. Dull, 298

first instituted. The government is one that is based on military, and the power of the aristocratic rulers and other advisors was lessened. The bureaucratization of early Qin China led to the logical adoption of legalism as the state philosophy. In other words, the Qin was doomed to fail right from the start. Although better decision making by the Emperors on issues such as punishment and the military (ideas like combining legalism with some Confucian values) most likely would have prevented the fall of the Qin. But, even though they did fail, the Qin did succeed in instituting the beginnings of a more efficient bureaucratic system, which paved the way for the great Han Dynasty who were able to overcome the mistakes made by the Qin emperors, and all other governments in the world.

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