

Behind Qin's Rapid Collapse: Legalist Policies and Consequences

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Abstract

The Qin Dynasty (221 BCE-207 BCE) is the first unified empire in Chinese history and marks the beginning of Imperial Chinese history. The legalist system designed by Shang Yang allowed Qin to rapidly expand for over a century, because of its ability to massively mobilize people and resources. However, the Qin system implemented after unification was highly unstable. Qin Shi Huang's legalist political system could be characterized by centralized power, various policies and strict punishment to control people, homogenization, a unique military system, and an agrarian-heavy economy, mostly inherited and adapted from Shang's policies. While legalism is not the sole cause of the demise of the Qin empire, many factors identified in this paper, which originated from Shang Yang's ideas, collectively contributed to the decline of the empire. Qin unified a country with a diverse population with vastly different cultures, yet the Qin political system was imposed without consideration or modification that accounted for the differences, and it was proved to be detrimental as it provoked numerous conflicts and rebellions, especially among the aristocracy, who was affected the most by the new system. Therefore, the Qin legalist policies, forced homogenization, and intense conflicts with the aristocracy all exacerbated the already unstable rule of the Qin empire.

Keywords: Qin Dynasty, Qin legalist policies, consequences, Shang Yang, reasons

1. Introduction

The Qin Dynasty is often regarded as a major turning point in Chinese history. In 221 BCE, after defeating and annexing the six other states in China, Ying Zheng, also known as Qin Shi Huang, established the Qin Dynasty and crowned himself the first emperor of China. The establishment of the Qin Dynasty marked the beginning of a unified and imperial China. Even though Qin only ruled China for a short span of 15 years, it had significant political, social, and ideological influence on succeeding dynasties

over the two millennia. In 209 BCE, revolts broke out all around this newly founded empire, one of the most famous led by Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, as well as another one led by Liu Bang, who would later become the first emperor of the Western Han Dynasty.¹ The Qin Dynasty, once a highly militaristic state with the strongest army in China, which employed the legalist system that supported its expansion for around 150 years, found itself rapidly demising when

¹ Qian Sima, (2010). *Shiji (Records of the Grand Historian)*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 596.

the system backlashed and caused various revolts.

2. Thesis

By the time Qin Shi Huang conquered China, Qin had already operated under Shang Yang's system of mass mobilization for expansions for more than a century. Shang's legalist system sought to control citizens' lives, the economy, agricultural production, and the social structure in order to ensure that the state and its people function solely for Qin's expansion. The legalist system, while a success in the short term, supporting Qin's territorial expansion, was highly unstable in the long term because of various weaknesses within the system. The legalist system was unable to govern a recently united state of vastly different people, culture, and languages, nor was it adequate to maintain stability within this newly unified empire.

Nevertheless, the system itself, however oppressive, was not the sole factor behind the collapse of the Qin Empire. Various political, economic, structural, and social factors collectively contributed to the numerous uprisings that led to the eventual demise of the empire. The harsh laws of Qin and various imperial projects, including the Great Wall, suppressed and exploited the massive peasant population. The implementation of the revolutionary county system after the unification deprived the local aristocracy and nobility of almost all privilege and power of being a feudal lord.¹ The unique military system of Qin further weakened the aristocrats as the primary way of gaining social status was through military merit. The forced assimilation of culture, languages, currencies, and measurements was also met with strong local resistance. The Qin system, while having short term success in a smaller region, was unstable and vulnerable to rebellion when it was applied nation-wide, especially when the speedy revolution of social structure was met with a huge aristocracy, which played a significant part in the rebellions.

3. Qin's Development

In the 8th century BCE, Duke Xiang of Qin was awarded the western frontier territories by King Ping of the Zhou Dynasty for rescuing the Zhou Court from the nomadic tribes Xi Rong and

Quan Rong.² Qin started as an underdeveloped state with highly unfavorable conditions because they had to constantly fight nomadic tribes such as Yi Qu and Xi Rong on the western frontier, which was considered the barbaric outskirts of Chinese civilization.³ After generations of warfare, Qin wiped out the nomadic Xi Rong tribes and seized vast territories further west during Duke Mu's reign (659-621 BCE).⁴ However, after the reign of Duke Mu, Qin entered a period of decline. The reigns of the following dukes were unstable, and the territories west of the Yellow River were taken by the state of Jin. Qin was despised and considered barbaric and uncultured by the other states in central and east China, which were more sophisticated and developed.⁵

When Duke Xiao inherited a weak Qin in 361 BCE, China was in the Warring States Period, an era characterized by continuous warfare, the centralization and consolidation of power, and a series of political and military reformations. Duke Xiao desperately sought reformation in Qin to restore Qin to its former glory under the reign of Duke Mu.⁶ Shang Yang, a legalist philosopher, convinced Duke Xiao to implement a series of reformations. These reformations included harsh laws and regulations on citizens' lives, reforming the agricultural, county, and military system in Qin, and transforming Qin into a state where most aspects of society function for the military.⁷ These reformations made Qin a highly efficient militaristic state and laid the foundation for Qin Shi Huang to eventually conquer the remaining states in 221 BCE, uniting China for the first time in history.⁸ Nevertheless, the seemingly efficient system fell short when Qin Shi Huang attempted to assimilate the conquered states and impose the system on the rest of China.

4. The Qin Society

Legalism, which advocates for a system of laws that rigidly prescribed punishments and rewards for specific behaviors, is essential to

¹ Sima, *Shiji*, 519.

² Sima, *Shiji*, 349.

³ Sima, *Shiji*, 353-359.

⁴ Sima, *Shiji*, 395-396.

⁵ Sima, *Shiji*, 420-421.

⁶ Sima, *Shiji*, 421.

⁷ Sima, *Shiji*, 423-425.

⁸ Sima, *Shiji*, 511.

Shang Yang's reforms and his policies.¹ The "Qin System" is a rather broad term which spans from Shang Yang's reformations to the national system implemented by Qin Shi Huang after conquering the Warring States, whose policies are largely based on the legalist system and policies that Shang designed. Qin's society, operating under the system designed by Shang Yang that supported it through over a century of expansion, could be defined as a legalist, militarist regime where the power was highly centralized to the ruler, maintaining strict control over the civil life, and linking social status solely with military merit.

4.1 Overview of the Legalist System

Qin's control on its people relied on various legalist policies that emphasized mutual supervision and a developed system of rewards and punishments. Shang rejected the traditional way of ruling through kindness and benevolence, and instead ruled with harsh laws and punishments.² Shang believed in separating the people and having them supervise each other, to prevent crimes and infiltrate the rule of law in every aspect of the civil life.³ For instance, Shang implemented five-men and ten-men squads throughout the state, and residents in these squads monitored and regulated each other for crimes and misbehavior.⁴ Those who report crimes would receive the same reward as those for obtaining the head of an enemy, and those who shielded crimes would be punished the same as surrendering to the enemy.⁵ Shang believed that cruel punishments, one example being "chopping the waist in half", were an apt measure to strengthen the country and reduce crime.⁶ Some lighter punishments were paid in the form of military equipment like shields and armor, further illustrating Shang's idea of integrating the civil life with the military.⁷

Shang also established a unified tax rate and rewarded those who surpassed the production quotas with the exemption of tax or corvee labor.⁸ These policies, along with others reforming the military and social structure, allowed direct state control of Qin people and radically altered the Qin society. However harsh the legalist system established by Shang Yang was, it provided Qin's various expansions and wars with ample supplies, soldiers, and resources, ensured by the system of merciless laws. The unitary and centralized system effectively increased efficiency in policy implementation, as well as mobilizing the Qin population for wars and production.⁹

4.2 A Uniquely Militaristic Society

Shang Yang, through a uniquely designed policy that sought to connect social status and wealth with military merit, forged Qin into a highly militaristic society. Shang's belief that by connecting social status and wealth solely with military merit, Qin will maximize its ability to allocate people and resources for expansion, as well as to motivate more people to join the army or contribute to the expansion efforts.¹⁰ There is specific documentation in *Shang Jun Shu* (The Book of Lord Shang) on the military ranks and quotas. For instance, in a five-man squad in the Qin army, if one member flees, all the remaining members will be demoted unless they attain the head of one enemy. The quota for an attack on a besieged fortress was eight thousand heads, while the quota for an open field battle was two thousand heads. Soldiers were punished and rewarded collectively, and some rewards and privileges that officers with higher ranks could enjoy were also detailed: They were granted settlements and taxes of three hundred families, promoted to higher ranks, and, most importantly, were awarded land.¹¹ These lands were ordered to be cultivated, as Shang believed that agriculture was the root of wealth and expansion.¹²

This system directly connected social status and material reward with military merit, which was highly effective in Qin's expansions. Qin

¹ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, (2019, February 12). "Legalism," in Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Legalism>.

² Yang Shang, (2017). *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China*, ed. and trans. Yuri Pines. New York: Columbia University Press, 147-148.

³ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 148.

⁴ Sima, *Shiji*, 4654.

⁵ Sima, *Shiji*, 4654-4656.

⁶ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 143.

⁷ Shuihudi Qin Mu Zhu Jian (*Bamboo Strips from a Qin Tomb at Shuihudi*). Gu Shi Wen Website, gushiwen.com/dianji/80.html.

⁸ Sima, *Shiji*, 4654.

⁹ Mark Edward Lewis, (2007). *Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 32.

¹⁰ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 151-152.

¹¹ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 223-224.

¹² Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 33.

peasants and commoners were encouraged to serve in the army as there were significant incentives for land that they could own privately.¹ In addition, Shang also established military districts called *Xian* or *Jun* (counties and their subunits), where these counties were the primary source of peasant recruits for the army, establishing universal military service for Qin.² In addition, Shang's system made a substantial increase in the size of armies possible because of the incentives, and it also established a uniform administration for the entire Qin population that was centered around military service.³

Essentially, the new system encouraged the common people of the Qin to engage in the war and expansion efforts, as they had the chance to advance socioeconomically and gain substantial rewards.⁴ Nevertheless, the military reform eliminated the existing aristocracy, as those without any military merit were expelled from the royalty.⁵ City-based hereditary nobility, a dominant political unit prior to the Warring States, were replaced by autocratic rulers, who were appointed by the Duke and acted as an agent of his power in a region.⁶ Shang Yang's military reforms overthrew the hereditary aristocracy class and established a centralized, authoritarian, militaristic regime with the ability of massive mobilization for war and expansion.⁷

Over a century later, Qin Shi Huang would extend Shang's military system to the whole country, fundamentally overthrowing the entirety of the Zhou feudal system, and eliminating the powers and privileges of the aristocracy of the conquered states. This reform agitated the aristocracy and triggered great resistance nationally, one of the fundamental causes of Qin's rapid demise. The system itself would also become contradictory, as the military system nurtured a new class of military aristocrats, and the lack of a system to select officials and talents caused wide resentment among the aristocracy, who inarguably played a vital role in the social movements that

ultimately overthrew the Qin reign.⁸ As Qin's military system reached its limits on rewarding land and money, the massive population of peasants and conquered aristocrats began to revolt.

The Shang idea of standardizing and unifying rewards of military merits so that monetary rewards, emoluments, official position, and rank only and uniformly derived from military attainments was effective in the short term, yet highly impractical when war and expansion ceased to be the priority of Qin.⁹ As Qin became a unified empire with people from vastly different vassal states, Shang's military system had become highly unfitting for the administration of the country.

5. Policies Under Qin Shi Huang

Later Qin rulers, including Qin Shi Huang, continued to adapt and employ Shang's legalist policies, extending state monitoring and harsh laws, as well as the social structure that were solely connected to military merit. In its expansionist phase, the Qin administration under the legalist system allowed massive mobilization of men and resources in the short term for wars.¹⁰ However, after Qin Shi Huang finished annexing the Warring States, the system quickly fell short when imposed on the conquered people and the aristocrats, which arguably was the cause of many uprisings.¹¹ Various Qin homogenizing policies were met with strong discontent and resistance from the conquered states and aristocrats, as the Qin system was vastly different from theirs. In comparison, other empires around this time, such as the Achaemenid Empire and the Roman Empire, also went through rapid expansions like Qin, yet the ways they approached the conquered people were vastly different from Qin. While Qin made various attempts to homogenize the conquered states and their people, the Romans and Persians were more tolerant of different people and cultures, which led to vastly different endings for these empires and vastly different political structural developments in their respective histories.

5.1 Homogenization Policies

¹ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 30.

² Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 33.

³ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 31-33.

⁴ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 30.

⁵ Sima, *Shiji*, 4656.

⁶ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 32.

⁷ Xingkun Ye, (1999). Shang Yang's Reforms and Systemic Innovation. *Journal of Finance and Economics*, 25(2), 59.

⁸ Qu, "A Re-Examination of the Relationship between the Legalist Governing Strategy and the Rapid Demise of the Qin Dynasty," 143.

⁹ Sima, *Shiji*, 4657.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 31-32.

¹¹ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 45-46.

After the unification, Qin Shi Huang's attempts to homogenize the country and the harshness of Qin's system was quickly met with resistance from other states. Qin's policies of enforcing homogeneity and standardization augmented the discontent among the conquered states towards Qin, which accelerated the rebellions. Prior to the unification, all the states had different currencies, scripts, measurements, and roads. Qin Shi Huang changed the calendar and unified measurements, currencies, scripts, as well as the width of roads and carriages.¹ This largely improved the efficacy of communication and trade between different parts of the country, and fortified the emperor's control of his territories.² Although the standardization increased the efficiency of communication, transportation, and economic activities, for the average citizen of the conquered states, their individual culture, ways of life, language, and identity were eliminated and homogenized.³ While standardization was crucial for the administration of Qin's landmass, the rapid standardization and homogenization exacerbated the hostilities towards the emperor.

Qin also rejected Confucianism and the old social structure that was deeply intertwined with the ideas of Confucianism. Qin Shi Huang sought to gain more control of the conquered states through cultural despotism, attempts to detain people's thinking, and refusal to incorporate the culture of the conquered states, yet instead, these actions collectively contributed to the decline of Qin.⁴ The Qin government created a new, simplified script that might have suppressed as much as 25% of the pre-Qin scripts, which allowed swifter writing, which was deemed essential for imperial record keeping.⁵ In 213 BCE, Qin Shi Huang ordered the burning of all the historical records that were not Qin, as well as the works of Confucianism, such as the *Canon of Odes (Shi Jing)* and the *Canon of Documents (Shang Shu)*.⁶ This is one of the examples of Qin Shi Huang's attempts to assimilate and homogenize the culture and

history of the conquered states.⁷ The next year, after burning and banning the discussions of Confucianist works, Qin Shi Huang killed 460 Confucianist scholars, claiming that their ideas negatively affected the legitimacy of his rule.⁸ Qin Shi Huang's anti-Confucianism policies had severe consequences, as his policies diminished *Li*, or rite, the core concept of Confucianism, which was formed before the Shang Dynasty and deeply rooted in Chinese civilization. *Li* had become deeply embedded in the everyday lives of Chinese people throughout the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, as it became the foundation for laws and basic moral codes.⁹ Consequently, the elimination of long-practiced Zhou and Confucianism practices and traditions, such as a hereditary social structure and religious conventions, caused enormous discontent among the conquered states, when they were forced to abandon traditions and culture that were practiced for over a thousand years.¹⁰

5.2 The County System and Induced Migration

In addition to the standardization of measurements, currency, scripts, and the homogenization of culture, Qin Shi Huang also established the county system nationwide, which was based on the county system designed by Shang Yang, who believed that appointment based on reputation was harmful to the administration.¹¹ The county system is arguably one of the most important political reformations in Chinese history in the long term, yet it was met with huge resistance, especially from the aristocrats of the conquered states. Qin Shi Huang divided the country into 36 counties, with officials appointed directly by the emperor.¹² The county system is often regarded by many as the most vital means to exert strong territorial control and avert the chaos and wars that feudal or multistate systems engendered. The implementation of the universal administrative reform was the culmination of bureaucratization and territorialization attempts

¹ Sima, *Shiji*, 518, 521, 535.

² Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 55-56.

³ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 53-55.

⁴ Huang, (2017). Research on the Causes of the Destruction of the Qin Dynasty. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 119, 992.

⁵ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 53.

⁶ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 53-54.

⁷ Sima, *Shiji*, 555-558.

⁸ Sima, *Shiji*, 566-570.

⁹ Yonghua Qu, (2007). A Re-Examination of the Relationship between the Legalist Governing Strategy and the Rapid Demise of the Qin Dynasty. *Chinese Journal of Law*, 29(5), 143.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 55.

¹¹ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 147.

¹² Sima, *Shiji*, 520-521.

made by states during the Warring States Era.¹

Accompanying the county system was the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of people from the conquered states. Sending various types of people, including prisoners of war, amnestied criminals, and manumitted slaves, to settle among conquered state territory to project state control over newly conquered territories was commonly used during the Qin and Han dynasties.² After Qin Shi Huang unified China, more than 120,000 households of the aristocracy of the conquered states were forcefully migrated to Xian Yang, the then capital of Qin. Weapons from the states were confiscated and transported to Xian Yang and were forged into enormous bells and 12 bronze statues in order to debilitate resistance across the country.³ Besides mandated migration from the state, the Qin people could not easily migrate within the country as hostels were abolished, and one of the earliest systems of household registration was established in order to maintain strong control of the people.⁴ There were also extensive checkpoints along the road system to regulate and sometimes prohibit the movement of people.⁵ Shang believed that people would remain ignorant and lack the motivation to rebel if they could not be exposed to new ideas.⁶ Notably, Qin Shi Huang also altered the term referring to the people to “Qian Shou,” which lowered the status of people and substantially increased the status of the emperor.⁷

5.3 Economic Policies & Internal Projects

The harsh laws and punishments were even further extended during Qin Shi Huang’s reign when he initiated various internal projects such as the Great Wall, the Mausoleum, the Epang Palace, and the Terracotta Warriors. One of the

potential explanations for the incompetency of Qin’s army when facing rebellion troops was the massive construction projects and endless warfare after the annexations. The Qin war machine envisioned by Shang Yang was never to stop functioning. The unified Qin state, after years of warfare between Qin and the conquered Warring States, was in desperate need of peace and recovery and needed different techniques of governing.⁸ Under Qin Shi Huang’s reign, in addition to paying heavy harvest and poll taxes, the peasants’ other obligation was to provide mandatory annual labor on Qin Shi Huang’s projects or other miscellaneous duties.⁹ Qin Shi Huang waged warfare against the *Xiongnu* in the north and the *Nanyue* region, and ordered the construction of the Great Wall in the north. Yet the conquered lands in the north and the south were not suitable for agriculture in addition to taking many resources and men.¹⁰ The construction of Epang Palace, supposedly the new royal palace of Qin, the Great Wall, and Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum also exhausted manpower and resources. The construction of the Epang Palace and the Great Wall took over 700,000 men, many of whom were prisoners, and were forced to perform their mandatory labor service under harsh conditions.¹¹

Furthermore, the Qin’s economic policies were designed by Shang to support war efforts in the cost of trade, freer commerce, and a diverse job market. These characteristics of the Qin militaristic economy worked against Qin after the annexation, as Qin failed to rebuild a post-war economy, contributing as one of the factors of widespread rebellions across the country. Qin’s militaristic and highly agrarian economy focused on providing resources for its expansion efforts. Shang’s legalist system encouraged agriculture and discouraged mercantile activities and commerce to a great extent.¹² Policies to oppress merchants included increasing taxes on goods considerably in order to direct resentment of the peasants to the merchants and discourage mercantile activities.¹³ In addition, taxes on luxury goods were as high as ten times the original costs, and

¹ Chun Fung Tong, (2021). *The Construction of Territories in the Qin Empire*. *T’oung Pao*, 107, 509-554.

² Maxim Korolkov and Anke Hein, (2020, December 11). State-Induced Migration and the Creation of State Spaces in Early Chinese Empires: Perspectives from History and Archaeology. *Journal of Chinese History*, 5(2), 4.

³ Yi Jia, (n.d.). *Guo Qin Lun (Disquisition Finding Fault with Qin)*.

⁴ Michael Loewe and Edward L Shaughnessy, (1999). *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 646.

⁵ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 56-57.

⁶ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 128.

⁷ Sima, *Shiji*, 520-525.

⁸ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 71.

⁹ Lewis, *Early Chinese Empires*, 60.

¹⁰ Sima, *Shiji*, 550-553.

¹¹ Sima, *Shiji*, 559-563.

¹² Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 134.

¹³ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 130.

the buying and selling of grains were banned in order to coerce more people to engage in agricultural activities and dissuade large scale commerce on agricultural products.¹ Nevertheless, the various projects and was waged by Qin Shi Huang imposed a tremendous burden on the people, whether peasants or merchants. The post-unification Qin economy was stagnant and unsuitable for the long-term development of a newly unified nation, factoring significantly towards the demise of the regime.

6. Consequences of Legalist Policies

6.1 Rebellions

Shang's legalist system and Qin Shi Huang's various homogenization policies agitated and stimulated conflicts with the aristocracy to a great degree. The effects of Qin's military system reform could be seen in the various uprisings, including one that was led by Xiang Yu, whose family had been aristocrats of Chu for generations.² In 206 BCE, after more than three years of battles with Qin, Xiang Yu and his troops eventually seized Xianyang, then the capital of Qin, and declared himself King of Western Chu.³ After killing the emperor of Qin, as the leader of the rebellion, Xiang restored the feudal system and established 18 vassal states across the country.⁴ Xiang Yu and many other rebellion leaders represented those who belonged to the aristocrats of conquered states, whose privileges and land were deprived by the Qin system. It is clear that the drastic decline of social status, from the nobility of a state to a regular citizen, likely triggered the rebellions when the discontent caused by various homogenizing and culturally diminishing policies capped.

Sima Qian's *Shiji* documented the first and perhaps the most impactful uprising against Qin — one that was led by Chen Sheng and Wu Guang. This comprehensively and aptly illustrates the effects of the laws and policies of Qin Shi Huang on the conquered people. In 209 BCE, Chen Sheng and Wu Guang, two captains of squads going to Yuyang to fulfill corvee labor, encountered weather that obstructed their travel. According to Qin codes, the whole squad

would be executed due to the delay; thus, Chen and Wu decided to start an uprising that would be known as the Dazexiang Uprising. Chen Sheng seized multiple counties and seven hundred chariots, recruited over one thousand cavalry, and several hundred thousand infantry. Soon, Chen declared himself as King of Zhangchu. Consequently, people who suffered under the Qin system revolted across the country, formed numerous rebellion troops, and declared themselves kings across the country.⁵ Although the Qin army was able to eventually suppress the rebellions, Chen Sheng had significant effects on the numerous following rebellions, including the one led by Liu Bang, who became the first emperor of the Western Han Dynasty. The uprisings reflected the harsh laws and punishments that Qin imposed on its people, as the sole reason that Chen started the uprising was because of the punishment his squad would receive for being late to their construction site of the Great Wall. Moreover, the Dazexiang rebellion was responded to by many people, and revolt broke out across the country, showing the discontent of people across the annexed territories, especially in the state of Chu, which was the most prosperous and developed state before being annexed by Qin.⁶ Another documentation of Wu Chen, a rebel under Chen Sheng, further illustrates the harsh laws and exploitative system of the Qin from the people's perspective: "There is corvee in the north to build the Great Wall, and guarding the mountains in the south; There is instability and turmoil both domestically and foreign, yet the Qin government still imposes heavy taxes and labor on the people, in addition to the severe laws and punishments."⁷ These uprisings further illustrate the discontent and agitation of the conquered people living under Qin's harsh laws and policies of homogenization.

6.2 Ideological Explanations

On the other hand, some scholars have also tried to offer an explanation for the collapse of Qin on an ideological basis. The traditional thinking of legalism by Shang Yang included *Shu*, which was the means and ways that monarchs utilized to control their people.⁸ Some of these ways

¹ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 128.

² Sima, *Shiji*, 669.

³ Sima, *Shiji*, 720.

⁴ Sima, *Shiji*, 720-729.

⁵ Sima, *Shiji*, 3851-3859.

⁶ Sima, *Shiji*, 3859.

⁷ Sima, *Shiji*, 5640-5643.

⁸ Qu, "A Re-Examination of the Relationship between the Legalist Governing Strategy and the Rapid Demise of the Qin Dynasty," 146.

were illustrated in *Shang Jun Shu*, or *The Book of Lord Shang*: “He who rules the state well consolidates force to attain a rich state and a strong army; ... Hence, he who is able to consolidate force but is unable to use it will surely bring about turmoil.”¹ Qin Shi Huang, while being able to consolidate force, was not able to use it well, and failed to attain a rich Qin. Instead, the Qin regime only exhausted its population through the heavy taxes and corvée labor.² In a rebellion recorded in Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, two rebellion leaders, Zhang Er and Chen She, when recruiting troops alongside Chen Sheng, claimed that Qin “annexed many states, eliminated many people’s hereditary titles, exhausted its people and resources.”³ Zhang and Chen were just among many other revolts all around Qin, yet their claim reflected Qin’s exploitative policies and their effects on the conquered people.

As the Western Han scholar Jia Yi argued in his work *Guo Qin Lun* (*Disquisition on the Qin Dynasty*), seizing land and guarding the seized land require different techniques.⁴ Qin’s ambition of a unified empire failed due to many reasons. The Shang system, after being adapted and implemented throughout the country, quickly proved to be ineffective because of many reasons. The old aristocrats and conquered people were among the most significant factors in instability within the Qin Empire. The Qin system was imposed on the states without modification, which was a likely explanation of why Qin Shi Huang’s attempt to homogenize and truly create a unified China was a failure. Qin’s military system and county system wiped out the massive aristocrats of the conquered states, while various Qin policies of standardization of measurements, scripts, and currency and anti-Confucianism were met with strong resistance across the country. Jia held that Qin lacked benevolence, and the harsh homogenization policies and punishments eventually led to the demise of the empire.⁵

7. Qin’s Legacies

While the Qin Empire collapsed after a short

15-year reign, it left the following dynasties with immense political legacies, as the system created by Shang Yang and implemented nationally by Qin Shi Huang was modulated and adapted for many times throughout the following 2000 years of Chinese history, until the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. The title “Emperor”, created by Qin Shi Huang, would also be used until the perish of the Qing Dynasty.

The Western Han Dynasty, established by Liu Bang, an uprising leader who beat Xiang Yu, inherited, modulated, and compromised the Qin system. While the Han Dynasty restored *Li* (rite), *Xiao* (filial piety), and Confucianism as the basis of the administration, it kept many institutions of the Qin Empire.⁶ Despite restoring some Zhou traditions, Han operated under a system of a combination of feudalism and the county system, in which only the titles of the family of the emperor were hereditary, while the country was redivided into different counties. The Qin system revolutionized the governmental structure in Chinese history, as the vast majority of governmental positions became non-hereditary, compared to the largely kinship-based aristocrats of the Zhou Dynasty. It was no longer families that ruled a region, rather the emperor and his proxies — officials directly appointed by the government. Power was highly concentrated on the emperor, and all the local governments — and counties reported directly to the emperor and his administration.⁷ On the other hand, the Han Dynasty adopted a vastly different system of determining social status and selecting talents to become government officials. Although Han’s system was less standardized than the *Keju* (The Imperial Examination), which was established in the Sui Dynasty, it was vastly different from the solely military merit-based system in Qin. People were either recommended by locals or self-recommended to fulfill open government positions, which gradually formed a new aristocratic class.⁸ Economically, the early Han rulers adopted lighter taxes and drastically modulated the Qin militaristic economy. During Emperor Wen’s rule, there were no taxes on land for 11 years, which was the only occurrence of

¹ Shang, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 174.

² Qu, “A Re-Examination of the Relationship between the Legalist Governing Strategy and the Rapid Demise of the Qin Dynasty,” 147.

³ Sima, *Shiji*, 5637-5639.

⁴ Jia, *Guo Qin Lun*, n.d.

⁵ Jia, *Guo Qin Lun*, n.d.

⁶ Yunfei Xiao, (2018, June). New Discussion of the Parallel System of County and Feudal Kingdom in the Early Han Dynasty. *Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 18(3), 34.

⁷ Mu Qian, (2001). *Traditional Government in Imperial China: A Critical Analysis*. Beijing: San Lian Books, 1-3, 10-11.

⁸ Qian, *Traditional Government in Imperial China*, 13-14.

such in Chinese history. Shang's military system was abandoned; instead, people could buy and sell land rather freely, and people's social status was no longer directly linked to military performance.¹ The Han political system, while a scale-back from Qin's autocratic, militaristic system, drew many lessons from the Qin system.

8. Conclusion

Qin, being the first unified Chinese dynasty and its milestone political system, had profound impacts on Chinese history. Shang Yang's legalist system, which forged Qin into a regime that was able to mobilize massively and support its immense expansions and warfare, failed as it was both too idealistic and unsuitable to govern a newly unified empire with a vastly different population and culture. Under Shang's system, the Qin was a state in which almost every aspect of the society functioned solely for the purpose of war and expansion. The military system encouraged Qin people to join the army as military merit was the only method to gain social status, wealth, and land. However, this system quickly sparked resistance after there was nowhere else to expand to. The homogenization of culture, abolishment of Confucianism, and the standardization of measurements, roads, scripts, and currencies was detrimental to the individual cultures and identities of each of the conquered states. Reforms of the county system, military system, and homogenization policies all stimulated great conflict in the existing aristocracy of the states, who inarguably played a huge role in the demise of Qin. The harsh laws and punishments, the exploitative nature of the Qin system, and a stagnant agrarian economy, along with Qin Shi Huang's numerous campaigns and projects, exhausted a newly formed Qin Empire whose people desperately needed recovery. In essence, the grand legalist system designed by Shang was too idealistic and unrealistic of a revolution for Qin Shi Huang to impose on such a huge landmass in such a short time. Ultimately, while the collapse of the Qin Empire resulted from a variety of reasons, most of them are rooted from Shang Yang's legalist system and the failure of Qin Shi Huang to gradually modify and adopt a more comprehensive system to govern the unified Qin empire.

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¹ Qian, *Traditional Government in Imperial China*, 17.

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