

The Changes in the Ruling Ideology of the Qin Dynasty since the Shang Yang Reforms and Their Impact on Society

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Abstract:

Legalist ideology served as the main guiding principle for governance in the Qin state. It offered important theoretical support for Qin's quick rise to power. However, after Emperor Qin Shi Huang achieved unification, the strict Legalist approach also planted the seeds for the dynasty's rapid downfall. From the changes made by Shang Yang to the softer rule of King Xiaowen, and then to Qin Shi Huang's unification, the main governing ideas in Qin relied on Legalist thought, while also taking in gentler governance concepts and other schools of thinking. The gradual formation of society during that period and movement toward national unity lead to big changes in what the state required, meaning its ruling thoughts kept changing and blending. This research will use literature analysis and look at three main phases: the Reform of Shang Yang, the Reform of King Xiaowen along with the publication of *The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü Buwei*, and the establishment process of a unified state. It aims to discuss how the main ruling ideas in Qin changed after Shang Yang's Reform and how this affected Qin society, that is to say, the impact on its people and structures. In the end, it draws a political point that "rules that lack kindness cannot last," showing the importance of caring for society in governance, to put it simply, and giving ideas for modern social management approaches.

Keywords: Qin Dynasty; Governance concept; Legalist ideology.

1. Introduction

The literature analysis approach was utilized to search and look at relevant materials and documents. The benefit of this method is it can get a full picture

of how different historical events affected the society, economy, politics, cultural customs, and other aspects of the Qin State, which helps carry out the research more effectively. To put it simply, the main goal of this study is to draw lessons from history and provide

suggestions for today's society governance based on historical experiences. This research focuses on the changing governing ideas in the Qin State across generations, which centered around Legalist thinking, gives a two-sided evaluation of these ideas, and looks at their effects on social culture and other areas. That is to say, this has reference value for understanding the governance rules of ancient feudal dynasties and also modern social governance approaches.

The innovation of this research lies in studying the ruling ideology of the Qin Dynasty in its development process, rather than confining it to a specific period. At the same time, it does not deviate from the core theme of "Legalist thought". Moreover, in this study, the personal reasons of some historical figures were also taken into account, which provided a direction for further research.

2. The Rise of Legalist Thought in the State of Qin

2.1 Background

During the Warring States period, the Zhou royal court was in decline, and the annexation wars between the various vassal states became more intense. Located in the far-western region, the State of Qin was often described as „being secluded in Yongzhou and not participating in the alliances of the Central Plains states.“ For a long time, it was considered a peripheral political entity, that is to say, on par with groups like the Rong, Di, Man, and Yi peoples [1]. It had a social and cultural environment that was relatively primitive, and its social economy and level of productivity were also relatively underdeveloped. When Duke Xiao of Qin was ruling, many other states were carrying out reform movements one after another. To change the situation where „the other feudal lords despised Qin, which was the greatest disgrace,“ and to overcome the state's long-standing weakness, Duke Xiao of Qin issued the „Edict to Recruit Talents.“ The purpose of this was to attract capable and virtuous individuals, in other words, to implement reforms and strengthen the state.

2.2 The Reform of Shang Yang

In 356 BC, Shang Yang started to carry out a set of changes in the Qin state. The content of these reforms touched upon several areas such as politics, economy, society and culture: Politically speaking, the military rank system came to take the place of the hereditary positions and salaries method. That is to say, this measure broke the monopoly over political affairs by the nobility, opening paths for outside talents and common people to become officials. Central authority was becoming stronger bit by bit; a fighting-focused culture was developed, which improved the fighting ability of Qin's troops. The idea of „ruling

through law“ highlights that the law applies to everyone equally, building up law's importance and making social management more standardized over time.

Economically, the land tax arrangement took over from the previous field division methods. To put it simply, this action gave private land ownership in Qin, allowed trading of land freely, boosted the productivity of peasants, and helped with land distribution and production activities. At the same time, by focusing on farming and limiting trade and business, along with incentives for crop growing and weaving cloth, the people became connected to their farmland plots. This simplified the collection of labor duties and ensured steady tax revenue. Furthermore, the rule about dividing families, specifically indicating „if a home having two or more grown sons doesn't split, they face doubled taxes“, successfully increased the number of taxpayers. The policies mentioned before created a strong material base for aiming at dominance.

At the social and cultural levels, the prefecture-county structure was implemented to strengthen central management. The policy of „groups of five or ten households watching each other and reporting illegal actions“ was put in place at the local level, which aided in stabilizing order within society. The removal of things like ritualistic practices improved both the quantity and quality of Qin's workforce.

2.3 Evaluation

“When Qin's Duke Xiao adopted Shang Yang's legal reforms, the social habits and customs were changed. That is to say, the people became more prosperous, the state became wealthy and powerful, commoners were willing to serve the state, and neighboring states showed deference. To put it simply, the armies of Chu and Wei were defeated by Qin, taking over lands stretching vast distances, and even today remains well-governed and strong. The reforms initiated by Shang Yang steered Qin toward prosperity. Consequently, the legalist ideology emerged and became the dominant political concept for later generations. During this period, the most noticeable characteristics were the development of Qin's widespread respect for legal systems and its martial-focused culture, that is to say, a culture emphasizing military strength and preparedness. The reforms, in other words, deeply influenced the state's governance structure and societal values, making Qin's legal systems a model for others to follow. The widespread respect for these legal systems, for instance, became a defining feature of Qin society, ensuring order and compliance among the populace. This martial-focused culture, meaning the emphasis on military discipline and expansion, further solidified Qin's position among neighboring states. The legal systems and the culture together formed the foundation for Qin's later achievements and its enduring legacy.”[2].

The reforms initiated by Shang Yang were without doubt

the main driving force for the Qin state's Legalist thought. These reforms transformed not only Qin's society and laid the groundwork for its imperial ambitions, but also had deep and lasting effects on China's imperial structures over the next millennia. The systems of prefectures and counties and the way officials were organized established the basic political frameworks for later dynasties, which fit well with a unified, multi-ethnic national form. The approach of making law the teaching and officials the teachers started the tradition of rule by law, that is to say, creating the foundation for ancient governance. The farming-centered policy that limited commerce was also adopted by later generations, helping to maintain small-scale farming economies stable in agricultural societies. The household registration method, which allowed state power to reach every level indirectly, strengthened central control over ordinary citizens and was continuously reinforced in later periods.

However, applying Legalist ideas during this time still had certain historical issues and some negative results. While the farming-first policy effectively kept peasant economies functioning, it also suppressed commercial activities and the emergence of early capitalism in China over the long term. At the same time, the governance concept of keeping people weak and uninformed tended to suffocate non-official social forces. To put it simply, the lack of connection between rulers and the masses led to repeated collapses of governing systems later on [3].

3. The Concepts of “Benevolent Governance” and “Appointing the Virtuous” of King Xiaowen and King Zhuangxiang

3.1 Background

In the final years of King Zhaoxiang of Qin's rule, there were ongoing military actions. Although lands were expanded, this led to difficulties for the people, using up resources, and the common people faced quite heavy labor obligations. Later, under King Zhaoxiang of Qin, what happened was the removal of the Marquis of Rang and the Lord of Huayang being sent away, which meant getting rid of influences from relatives, and also the famous general Bai Qi being forced to his death. This caused tensions within the decision-making group and weakened its effectiveness. Prompted by this conflict, that is to say, people with military achievements started to become involved in certain Qin regions, transforming them from being primarily farming areas to places focused more on defense purposes [4]. This situation led to a shortage of available people, creating a void in keeping the nation supplied properly. Therefore, after King Xiaowen of Qin took power, he was faced with the main challenge of easing in-

ternal conflicts within the group responsible for decisions, appeasing ministers and the common people, and creating favorable conditions for handing over power smoothly and without issues.

3.2 The Concepts of “Benevolent Governance” and “Apt Appointment of Talents” during the Reigns of King Xiaowen and King Zhuangxiang

King Xiaowen and King Zhuangxiang mainly focused on this idea of benevolent governance, that is to say, ruling kindly. Alongside this, they paid attention to the importance of finding capable people and putting them in the right positions, which involved getting the proper placement for talents and so forth. These concepts turned out to be very important for bringing back stability and trust after the preceding difficult period. For instance, their way of doing things involved listening to different opinions and making choices that considered what people needed. By putting these ideas into practice, what they aimed for was to reconstruct the strength that had been lost and also to lay the foundations for things that came later, meaning setting the stage for future developments. The effort to choose those with merit and assign them roles was part of a larger way to manage the state's affairs effectively.

In the first year that King Xiaowen was ruling, criminals were let go, that is to say, amnesty was granted. Also, the meritorious officials who had served earlier kings were honored once more, and the royal relatives received generous rewards, while the imperial parks and gardens were opened up to the ordinary people. „In the first year of King Zhuangxiang's time, amnesty was granted to criminals. Honors were brought back to the meritorious officials of former kings. Kind actions were shown to the royal family, and benevolence was given to the common folk.“ [1]. The two kings carried out policies that were good for the people, establishing stronger ties with the royal family and the ministers at court, and also adjusting the harsh criminal laws that had been in place. To put it simply, these measures effectively reduced the conflicts happening inside the ruling group of Qin, helping the Qin ruler gain the support of the royal family members for his way of governing. Since the reforms by Shang Yang, the Qin State had operated under high social pressure for many years, and the social contradictions accumulated during this long period were also eased during this time. This measure prevented civilian conflicts from getting worse, gave common people a chance to rest, revived production that had stalled during King Zhaoxiang's military campaigns, and laid the groundwork for later wars of annexation and unification. Beyond what the nation's development and social factors required, there were also personal reasons behind the reforms of Kings Xiaowen and Zhuangxiang. King Xiaowen became ruler mainly because Lady Huayang had no children of her own. King Zhuangxiang was

originally held in another country, Zhao. Through political actions, for instance, with Lü Buwei's help and being adopted by Lady Huayang, he managed to become king. In the complicated political situation, the positions of both individuals weren't very stable. Therefore, they needed to implement relatively moderate policies to win over court officials and imperial relatives, which helped stabilize the situation.

3.3 Evaluation

During the times of King Xiaowen and King Zhuangxiang, while they didn't exactly make a complete change to the Legalist ideology that was at the root of how Qin operated its governance, they were able to have brought down social tensions by covering it over with that „benign governance“ concept, meaning the more caring way of handling state affairs, which was full of Confucian thinking. This marks an early kind of practice where there was Confucianism outside but Legalism inside, and it showed the governing intelligence of blending Confucian and Legalist methods, which would be used by feudal dynasties over the next two thousand years. The rule of these two kings can actually be seen as a kind of bridge period, transitioning between things, from the Shang Yang reforms and King Zhaoxiang strengthening royal power to the unification under the First Emperor, connecting what came before and what came after, that is to say. During this important time, pressures in society were briefly yet effectively reduced, and the foundation built by earlier kings which had been run down due to all the wars under King Zhaoxiang, was restored, providing a stable situation within the state for Qin's unification efforts.

4. Lu Buwei's Absorption of Legalist Thought

4.1 Background

The impact of Lü Buwei on the governing approaches of the Qin State is mainly seen in the book *Lüshi Chunqiu*. From a historical perspective, the reason Lü Buwei directed the writing of *Lüshi Chunqiu* was to combine ideas from different schools, that is to say, to create a complete structure for ruling the state. After the hard work of earlier kings, the direction of Qin's unification had become more and more clear. Being the prime minister, Lü Buwei created this book to give a plan for governance to the Qin state. From Lü Buwei's personal standpoint, we must consider his growing ambitions as his status got higher. Lü Buwei was originally merchant with lower status. He gained court control by helping Ying Yiren become King Zhuangxiang. Putting together „*Lüshi Chunqiu*“ satisfied his wish to remove the „merchant-noble“ identity and to leave name in history as literati.

After Ying Zheng became ruler, Lü Buwei served as person who helped govern. Compiling this book not only became a method to show his political aims but also provided a chance to teach his ideas to the young Qin king. Simply put, this helped him strengthen his position in both court and Qin society, while assisting him in competing with others like Queen Dowager Zhao Ji and the palace figure Lao Ai [5].

4.2 Content

The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü Buwei incorporates a range of philosophical theories, particularly the Confucian principles of ethical behavior and moral thinking, alongside the broader life outlook and perspectives found in Daoist approaches, not to mention the Legalist framework focusing on fairness concepts and rule of law principles, as well as the basic practical application ideas of the Mohist tradition. What this means is that it strongly emphasizes bringing together aspects of Confucian and Mohist viewpoints, combining these with the School of Names logic and also the School of Law structural ideas, thereby showing characteristics that could be described as broadly inclusive or synthesizing elements. The entire book, it should be noted, is organized into twenty sections called „Chapters,“ into eight groupings referred to as „Collections,“ and also includes six longer „Treatises,“ covering various areas such as government policy ideas, trade and economic matters, military strategy information, astronomical observations, and agricultural production methods. Its main purpose, in other words, is essentially to offer the governing body of the State of Qin with a full and comprehensive strategy set for governance and administration.

Although „*Lüshi Chunqiu*“ contains ideas from many different schools, Legalist thought still makes up a large part of it. That is to say, Lü Buwei brought together and refined Legalist thinking, which can be broadly grouped into areas such as the ideology of supreme fairness and the ideology of rule of law. Before Lü Buwei, the concept of supreme impartiality focused on the law's fairness, meaning the equal treatment principle where „the law doesn't favor nobles,“ the just principle of „always rewarding the worthy and punishing the guilty,“ and the public-minded approach of „removing personal biases.“ Before the Spring and Autumn Period, society had very fixed hierarchies, and the practice of „rites not for common people and punishments not for officials“ was common in how things worked [6]. Legalist thinking broke this unequal ritual system, letting rulers govern everyone fairly through law. In „*Lüshi Chunqiu*“, building on this, the idea of utmost fairness is given more meaning related to „the public nature of state power,“ which is different from earlier Legalist ideas that stressed monarch control and central power [1]. The rule of law concept, which is the core of Legalist thought, believes both nobles and common peo-

ple should follow the law equally. The famous Legalist saying, „If a state lacks law-abiding officials and advisors inside, and faces no strong enemies outside, it will surely perish,“ deeply shows the connection between laws and a nation’s survival.

Legalists hold the view that only a strict legal system, to put it simply, can keep the state secure and society stable. The Legalists’ emphasis on „strictness without leniency“ indicates that all individuals are equal before the law, and no one can obtain privileges based on personal relationships.

4.3 Evaluation

Lü Buwei fully recognized the importance of Legalist thinking for running the country effectively. That is to say, he also thought about the problems for the country’s stability caused by having very strict laws and punishments, viewing this issue from a long-term view and so on.

The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lü Buwei shows how its compiler tried to shift Qin’s way of leading, moving from a hegemonic style toward a royal governance model. To put it simply, by making things better between different groups inside the state and reducing harsh treatment, it managed for a short period to keep a kind of calm situation. This then gave rulers who came later enough time to look for a middle way in their thinking about governance, specifically trying to find a mix between Confucian ideas and Legalist approaches, offering them an example they could use.

5. The Ideology of Autocratic Monarchy after the Unification under Emperor Qin Shi Huang

5.1 Background

After the Qin state unified the various regions, its territory became extremely vast. However, the cultures and governing methods across different areas showed quite significant differences. To administer such a large area effectively, establishing a uniform set of systems became necessary. At the same time, a strong ruler system could ensure orders flowed from top to bottom properly, meaning it could stop local powers from breaking away. During the earlier periods of constant warfare among states, the conflicts under the enfeoffment system, including those involving annexation battles and rival lords fighting each other, made Emperor Qin Shi Huang along with his advisors—for instance, Li Si—believe that powerful central control was essential to prevent the country descending into chaos once more [7]. Finally, towards the end of those turbulent warring times, the legalist philosophy promoted by thinkers including Shang Yang argued that rulers should hold all authority and manage society through strict regulations

and an official bureaucracy. The rise of Qin itself benefited from the concentration of power established via Shang Yang’s changes, which provided practical basis for Emperor Qin Shi Huang putting into practice a high degree of centralization, that is to say, controlling everything from the center.

5.2 Content

Regarding institutional and bureaucratic system reforms, the Zhou Dynasty’s enfeoffment system was completely done away with, being replaced by the prefecture-county system instead. That is to say, local officials were directly appointed and removed by the central government. While prefectural and county military officers did have the power to „appoint officials,“ this power was quite limited, only applying to the lowest-level assistants and those doing official labor services such as neighborhood leaders and postal workers [8]. This naturally led to power becoming concentrated in the emperor’s hands. At the same time, many grass-roots regions were gradually given basic functions, for instance social security, transportation and postal services, and also military defense tasks. Together with the document transmission system, these laid the groundwork for the smooth implementation and feedback mechanisms for the Qin State’s decrees [9]. Through the system of Three Councillors and Nine Ministers, a bureaucratic structure centered around the Chancellor, the Imperial Secretary, and the Grand Marshal was set up. This system featured a clear division of labor and mutual checks and balances, with everything ultimately reported to the emperor. To put it simply, administrative measures based on official documents and the annual revenue reporting system further strengthened the emperor’s control over the state machinery, that is to say, making the emperor more powerful. This institutional reform completely cut off the foundation of hereditary noble power, resulting in a monarchy that was unprecedentedly strong and centralized. In terms of the social-economic and military foundation, after the Shang Yang Reform, the State of Qin established a national mobilization system centered around agriculture and military affairs, known as the farming-warfare system, which focused on food production and fighting wars. Following the great unification, this system was extended across the entire country, enabling the central government to more easily control economic information and resources, such as grain and manpower, which helped the emperor manage things better [10]. Meanwhile, weapons from all over the country were gathered up, and expressways and straight roads were built to make military deployment easier. Military campaigns were launched, for example attacking the Xiongnu in the north and to conquer the Baiyue tribes in the south to expand the territory, thereby establishing the emperor’s authority through military operations and campaigns.

5.3 Evaluation

The formation of Emperor Qin Shi Huang's ideology of autocratic monarchy, that is to say, came about due to a mix of various factors happening at that time. These factors included the historical changes during the Warring States period, putting into practice the theories of Legalism, what was needed by the political reality back then, and also the personal desire of the Emperor himself. This ideology is largely considered to have been the foundation for the centralized system that operated in China for two thousand years after, and it also greatly influenced the way later dynasties were governed, to put it simply. The effectiveness of this ideology was that it managed a huge empire with very high efficiency. However, the harshness of the laws it used and its control over culture, in the final analysis, became the main reason why the Qin Dynasty fell so quickly and suddenly after all that effort.

6. Conclusion

From the setting up of the foundation by Shang Yang to the Qin Dynasty's collapse after just two emperors, the legalist methods of the Qin State showed us a deep political truth, that is to say, the ruling ideas must be adjusted over time as society gets bigger and its problems change and grow. After that, the long-lasting way of ruling used by later generations, which was „Confucianism on the outside but Legalism inside“, came about because they learned from Qin's mistakes - to put it simply, a legal system without kindness can't last, so they wrapped softer thinking around a hard rule structure. Qin's history acts like a warning mirror telling later rulers that any very efficient ways of organizing things that lack care for people and can't bend with society will likely break down by themselves. When we look at these old lessons in modern times, it requires those in charge to find a middle path, for instance, balancing getting things done quickly with doing things fairly, mixing control with trust, and letting new ideas live together with including everyone. Society really needs trust and connections. While laws set limits for people, we should also use right and wrong feelings to build a sense of belonging together. Mixing Confucian and Legalist ways is what makes stability last long. Only by constantly adjusting how we balance speed and fairness can we avoid that bad pattern of quick wins followed

by sudden collapse.

This study still has some shortcomings: although it is centered on the Legalist thought, the research on the laws of the Qin State takes up a relatively small proportion in the text. This research adopts a relatively macroscopic perspective, viewing each historical event as a whole. However, in the analytical process, the details are somewhat lacking. In future research, I will pay attention to this point and focus on the more detailed aspects of historical events, using a micro perspective to understand the macro situation.

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