

Fall of the Qin Dynasty Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
What caused the fall of the Qin dynasty?

Materials:

- Qin Dynasty PowerPoint
- Copies of Qin Dynasty Documents A-C
- Copies of Qin Dynasty Graphic Organizer
- Copies of Qin Dynasty Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: PowerPoint

- a. Slide 1: Title slide.
- b. Slide 2: The Rise of Qin. *In the 5th century BCE, the Zhou dynasty held no effective control over ancient China. Fighting among the states of the territory intensified, marking the beginning of the Warring States Period. In this period, the seven major states attempted to conquer one another as well as the minor states.*

Note: Press the play button at the bottom of the image.

One of the warring states, Qin, had the advantage of controlling two of the most fertile regions of ancient China. The centuries of warfare between the Qin and their northern nomadic neighbors made the Qin army skilled and strong. The Qin ministers enacted new political reforms that brought stability to the state, which led farmers to migrate there, further enriching the economy.

- c. Slide 3: The First Emperor. *Zhao Zheng became king of Qin in 246 BCE. When he was twenty-seven years old, he began military campaigns to conquer the other remaining states. After two hundred years of war, Zhao Zheng conquered all the states in twenty-five years. For the first time, all of the states of ancient China were unified under the control of one government, the Qin dynasty. Zhao Zheng took the title Qin Shi Huang, which is often translated as First Emperor.*

Note: You might wish to return to Slide 2 to see how rapidly Qin expanded during Zhao Zheng's campaigns in 247-221 BCE.

- d. Slide 4: Legalism. *The reforms Qin ministers had enacted to strengthen and stabilize the state were modeled on the new political philosophy of Legalism. Once Qin Shi Huang's armies had conquered the other states, he applied Legalist policies to the rest of the empire. One of the most important Legalist*

philosophers was Han Fei. Read this quote from Han Fei describing Legalism. According to this quote, what seem to be main principles of Legalism?

Students should note that Legalism emphasized clearly stated laws, strict adherence to those laws, and harsh punishments for anyone that disobeyed.

- e. Slide 5: Qin Dynasty. *Qin Shi Huang further unified the empire by standardizing units of measurements, currency, the length of cart axles (to improve transport on roads), and Chinese script. The photo on the right is of a plaque inscribed with seal script, the official script of the dynasty. The Qin dynasty also ordered massive construction projects, such as the development of a road system and canals, the unification of various northern states' walls (creating what would become what we know as the Great Wall of China), and the creation of the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor. On the left we see a portion of the Great Wall first built under Qin and rebuilt during the Ming dynasty more than a thousand years later. Beyond these reforms and projects, the Qin model of central government influenced governments in China for centuries, and it's believed that the Western name for China comes from the name Qin.*
 - f. Slide 6: Fall of Qin. *Despite these achievements, the Qin dynasty lasted only fifteen years, just three years after the death of Qin Shi Huang in 210 BCE. Pictured here are some of the estimated 8,000 terracotta soldiers that guard the tomb of the First Emperor.*
 - g. Slide 7: Central Historical Question. *Today we are going to read a series of documents to answer the question: What caused the fall of the Qin dynasty?*
2. Hand out Document A, Graphic Organizer, and Guiding Questions. Have students read Document A and complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and the Graphic Organizer.
 3. After students have completed the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses. Students should note that the textbook reports that Qin Shi Huang instituted a series of harsh policies, including the burning of books and forced labor gangs. Moreover, he took away power from local lords. The textbook suggests that anger about these policies led to opposition in many parts of society, which likely contributed to the fall of the dynasty. However, it is important for students to note that the textbook does not explicitly say that this is what caused the fall of the Qin dynasty.
 4. Hand out Document B and have students complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and the Graphic Organizer.

5. After students have completed the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses. It is important for students to pay careful attention to this document's source information. They need to note that Jia Yi was a Confucian poet and a Han statesman. The persecution of Confucian scholars under the Qin dynasty and his connection to the Han dynasty may have negatively shaped how Jia Yi portrayed the fall of the Qin dynasty.

Students should also note that Document B provides a slightly different answer to the Central Historical Question than the textbook. Jia Yi suggests that the Qin dynasty fell as a result of the incompetence of the second emperor. However, Jia Yi corroborates the textbook's description of the brutal rule of the Qin.

6. Hand out Documents C and have students complete the corresponding sections of the Guiding Questions and the Graphic Organizer.
7. After students have completed the Guiding Questions and Graphic Organizer, ask them to share their responses. Students should note that the newspaper article provides a very different answer to the Central Historical Question. It claims that the Qin dynasty fell because it was not sufficiently harsh against opposition groups. Like Document B, students need to pay careful attention to the source information of this document. They need to understand that this article was written during the Cultural Revolution, when there was heavy government censorship and repression. Students must consider the article's claim that the Qin dynasty was not sufficiently harsh as a reflection of contemporary Chinese politics.
8. Discussion: *How do the documents corroborate one another? What contradictions did you notice across documents? Why might each document be useful evidence to understand the fall of the Qin dynasty? What are the weaknesses of each document as evidence of the fall of the Qin Dynasty?*
9. Final Question: Students use evidence from the Graphic Organizer to determine which document they believe is the most reliable source of information about the fall of the Qin Dynasty.

Explain to students that it is likely that they will have different answers from each other. This is part of history. Different people can arrive at different conclusions. What's important is to have historical evidence to support your claims.

Citations

Document A

Farah & Karls, *World History: The Human Experience*, (New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 222

Document B

Jia Yi (200-168? BCE), "The Faults of Qin." In *Sources of Chinese Tradition: Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600*, ed. De Bary, W.T. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 229-230

Document C

T'an Hsiao-Wen, "A Refutation of Some Confucian Fallacies Concerning the Causes of the Downfall of the Ch'in Dyansty," *Kuang-ming jih-pao (Enlightenment Daily)*, September 1, 1974, Peking. In *The Politics of Historiography: The First Emperor of China*, ed. Yu-ning, Li, (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, Inc., 1975), pp. 192-201

Document A: Textbook

Qin Shi Huang imposed a new order on China. He ended the power of the local lords by taking land from many of them and imposing a tax on landowners. He appointed educated men instead of nobles as officials to run his government.

Qin even imposed censorship, clamping down on scholars who discussed books and ideas. In 213 B.C. he ordered all books burned except those about “practical” subjects like agriculture, medicine, and magic. In this way he hoped to break people’s ties to the past so they would not criticize the present. About 460 scholars resisted and were executed.

Qin’s subjects saw him as a cruel **tyrant** who had lost the **Mandate of Heaven**. Nobles were angry because he had destroyed the **aristocracy**; scholars detested him for the burning of books; and peasants hated his forced-labor gangs. In 210 B.C. Qin died, and soon the dynasty itself came to an end. Even so, the rule of the Qin established foundations for the Chinese state that would last 2,000 years.

In 207 B.C. Liu Bang overthrew the Qin. A military official from a peasant background, Liu defeated his most powerful rival in 202 B.C. and declared himself the emperor of a new dynasty, the Han. The Han governed China until A.D. 220, more than 400 years. The Han emperors used Qin forms of centralized power, but without the harshness of Qin rule.

Source: *Farah & Karls, World History: The Human Experience, (New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill, 2001), p. 222*

Vocabulary

tyrant: a cruel and unfair ruler

Mandate of Heaven: ancient Chinese belief that monarchs received their power to rule from heaven

aristocracy: a form of government in which power is held by the nobility

Document B: Confucian Essay

Jia Yi (200-168? BCE) was a Confucian poet and statesman of the Han dynasty. Below are excerpts from his essay “The Faults of Qin.”

Chen She was a man who grew up in humble circumstances . . . and was a mere hired field hand and roving **conscript** of mediocre talent. . . . Yet, even stumbling as he did amidst the ranks of common soldiers and shuffling through the fields, he called forth a tired motley crowd and led a mob of several hundred to turn upon the Qin. . . . They had the whole world come to them like gathering clouds. . . . These men of courage from the East rose together, and in the end they defeated and extinguished the House of Qin. . . .

Chen She’s weapons made of farm implements and thorny tree branches were no match in battle against spears and **halberds**, his roving conscripts in no way compared to the armies of the nine states. . . . Qin, from a tiny base, had become a great power, ruling the land and receiving **homage** from all quarters for a hundred-odd years. Yet a single common person could nevertheless challenge this empire and 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 the ruler lacked humaneness and rightness; because preserving power differs fundamentally from seizing power. . . .

Had the Second Emperor been even a mediocre ruler who knew how to employ local and capable persons . . . ; had he divided the land and appointed deserving officials . . . ; had he emptied the prisons and reduced harsh punishments . . . ; had he only reduced taxation and statutes to alleviate oppression . . . ; had he indeed fulfilled the wishes of the multitudes and bestowed high virtue on them, he would have certainly brought peace and quiet to the world.

Source: *Jia Yi (200 – 168 BCE), “The Faults of Qin.”*

Vocabulary

conscript: someone required to join the military

halberd: a weapon that is a combined spear and battle ax

homage: respect or honor

Document C: Newspaper Article

The following newspaper article was written in China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976 CE), a time of very severe government censorship. People who criticized the government were often punished by the state. The article's author analyzes Confucian criticism of Qin and the fall of the empire.

On the question of the causes of the downfall of the Qin dynasty, the first **fallacy fabricated** by the reactionary Confucian scholars was the “theory that the Legalist line destroyed Qin.” . . .

Actually the opposite was true. Originally, Qin was a small feudal state in the western part of China. Until the early years of the Warring States period, it was still rather backward, and was looked upon by the various eastern states as a “barbarian” country. Later, Qin . . . implemented the Legalist line and, as a consequence, rapidly became strong and prosperous. Qin Shi Huang was an outstanding statesman of the Legalist school. Within a short period of time he unified the six states and established the first centralized feudal state. . . .

However, Qin Shi Huang had one great flaw: he did not strike at the opposition hard enough, or suppress them thoroughly. After the establishment of the Qin dynasty, he forcibly moved 120,000 influential and wealthy families from all parts of the country to Xiangyang, thus forcing them to move far away from their old homes . . . But the Qin government did not adopt effective measures for exercising dictatorship over these reactionary slave owners.

Source: T’an Hsiao-Wen, “A Refutation of Some Confucian Fallacies Concerning the Causes of the Downfall of the Ch’in Dyansty,” *Kuang-ming jih-pao (Enlightenment Daily)*, September 1, 1974, Peking.

Vocabulary

fallacy: misconception

fabricated: made up

Qin Dynasty Guiding Questions

Document A: Textbook

1. According to the textbook, what reforms did Qin Shi Huang enact during his reign?

2. According to the textbook, how did Qin's subjects react to his reforms?

Document B: Jia Yi

1. (Sourcing) Who was Jia Yi? How long after the fall of the Qin Dynasty was this document written?

2. (Contextualization) The rebel leader Liu Bang founded the Han dynasty in 206 BCE. Jia Yi was a statesman of the Han dynasty. How might this have affected Yi's account of the fall of Qin?

What caused the fall of the Qin Dynasty?

Document	Close reading According to this document, what caused the fall of the Qin Dynasty?	Corroboration How is this account similar or different from the other documents?	Reliability Why might this be a reliable source to understand the fall of the Qin Dynasty? Why not?
A: Textbook			
B: Confucian Essay			
C: Newspaper Article			

Final Question

Do you believe Document A, B, or C is the most reliable source of information about the fall of the Qin Dynasty? Explain your selection using evidence from the Graphic Organizer and Guiding Questions.