

No One Expects a Peasant Rebellion: A Qin Legal Document (213 BCE)

Sheila McManus¹

¹ Department of History, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Canada

E-mail: sheila.mcmanus@uleth.ca

This is a great document for a first year class because it is short but really dramatic: it's an order to burn all the books and scrolls in the new Qin dynasty (221-207 BCE) except for useful ones like texts on medicine and agriculture and ones that praise the new empire. Any document that criticized the new regime was to be destroyed and any people who defended the older texts were to be executed. The source invites students to think about censorship, state authority, and different notions of the common good, issues often close to their own hearts, but in a very different time and place. Before our October 2015 class I circulated four prep questions to my 90 students to help them understand the document itself, its historical context, and the perspective of what the primary source calls the "lowly multitude," that is the vast majority of the Chinese population. When class started I gave each portion of the room a different role: the students sitting the back row, literally the highest row in the room, took on the role of the emperor and his advisors. The next two rows were the scholars and elite who wrote or owned these now-forbidden texts. The rest of the class, about two-thirds of the students, were the "lowly multitude" of peasants. Within each of these big groups they worked in smaller teams to come up with their own answers about the meaning and context of the primary source, and how their particular social group might have responded to the order.

What happened next will forever be one of the highlights of my teaching career, and I have even given a conference presentation on it. I circulated through the room, pleased that one of the quiet students in the back row who never talked had somehow wound up as "Emperor" and was working on his defense of the order; the two rows of elites and scholars were weighing their desire to stay alive with their desire to defend their scholarship or their private scroll collections; and one little "peasant village" was plotting a rebellion. The Qin dynasty marked the end of two centuries of warfare known as the Warring States period (403-221 BCE), and some of the peasants felt like they had paid a really high price during that war and didn't want the new Emperor limiting what they could learn or know. The rest of the peasants disagreed; they, too, had survived the Warring States period, and as long as the Emperor brought peace and stability, and preserved the practical knowledge of farming and medicine, they could not have cared less if he wanted to censor philosophical debates and consolidate his grip on the new empire. For a split second I wondered if I should intervene. After all, there was no record of a peasant rebellion during the Qin dynasty, so should I try to put an end to the anachronism? I decided to let it go, and see how the students would work it out.

When the whole class started sharing their teams' perspectives and news of the rebellion got out, I was immensely grateful that I had trusted my students enough to let them run with their ideas because I got to see a wide range of their historical thinking skills all at once. The Emperor himself, that quiet student who had rarely spoken before, gave a passionate statement about the peace and security he was bringing to the empire and stressed that he was committed to preserving practical knowledge. One student in the elite/scholar group suddenly offered to collaborate with the rebellious peasants, not because he cared that much about his scrolls but he figured that if they were successful he had a shot at becoming the next Emperor. Some other students in the elite/scholar group offered to assassinate him to win favor with the Emperor. The majority of the peasants themselves, wanting some peace after a long period of war and recognizing that they were illiterate anyway, were willing to turn against the rebellious peasants. In short, this group of 90 first year students showed me their deep grasp of the meaning and context of this short primary source, and their ability to empathize with the options and decision-making processes of some very different groups of people who lived more than 2000 years ago.

Bibliography

de Bary, William Theodore, and Irene Bloom, editors. "A Qin Legal Document: Memorial on the Burning of Books." (213 BC). In *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. Reprinted in *World Together, Worlds Apart: A History of the World from the Beginnings of Humankind to the Present*, edited by Jeremy Adelman et al., 4th ed., New York: Norton, 2010.

History 1200 – Discussion Questions

Worth a max of 2 points towards your participation grade

You can choose to submit your answers on Moodle before class or hand in this sheet at the start of class, but you can only earn the points if you are ALSO in class for the discussion

Re-read pp. 242-246 of your textbook (4th ed.; 244-249 of 3rd ed.) and then focus on the Qin legal document on p. 244 (4th ed)/p. 247 (3rd ed).

- 1) Briefly describe the historical context.

- 2) Briefly answer the two "Questions for Analysis" from the textbook.

- 3) If you were a member of the "lowly multitude," how would this decree affect you?

- 4) The textbook does not tell you the original date of the document, whether or not the document is complete, or that it has been both translated and the language modernized. Briefly weigh the pros and cons of using this as a "primary document" (i.e. an original source from the time period you are studying).