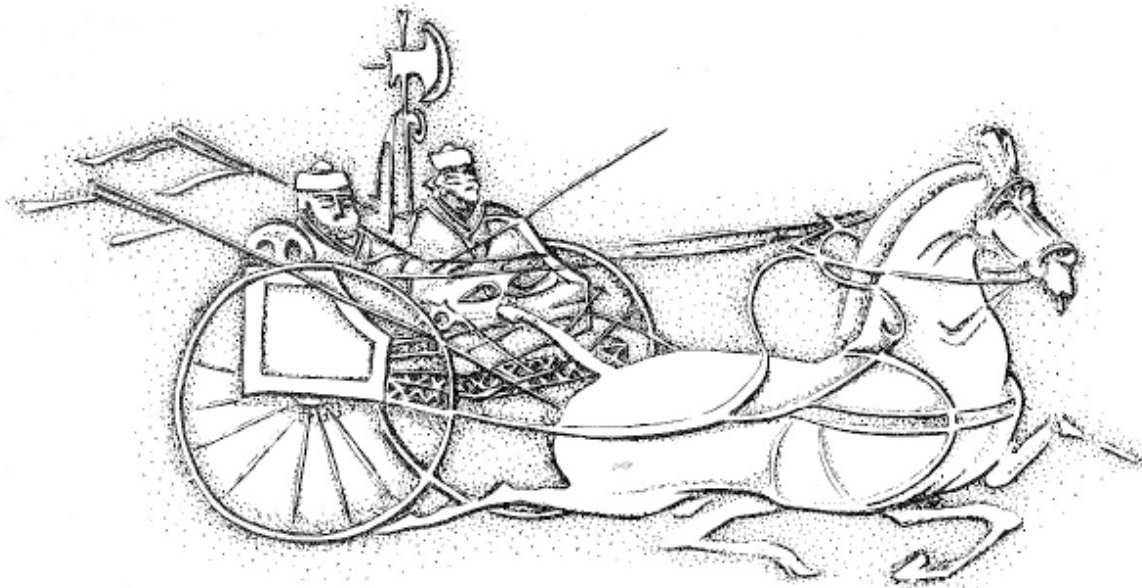


# Wang Mang: Confucian Success or Failure?

**A Unit of Study for Grades 6–10**

Joseph Palumbo



**National Center for History in the Schools  
University of California, Los Angeles**

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## TEACHER'S BACKGROUND

### I. UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit's main focus is to have the students utilize their knowledge of Confucian thought by evaluating a fascinating historical figure, Wang Mang. Students will study his success or failure as a Confucian ruler during his tenure as the Son of Heaven. Then students will predict, based on a careful reading of the primary source materials, what might lead to Wang Mang's overthrow, and then judge him for his successes or failures as a leader. The culminating lesson of this unit involves both a role play and a mock trial.

Wang Mang's short but fascinating Hsin Dynasty (A.D. 9–23) provides students with an excellent opportunity to view a leader who attempts to implement Confucian teachings hundreds of years after Confucius' death. Through the use of both original Confucian writings and excerpts from the history of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) students will be able to apply what Confucianism says to the real-life situation of governance and judge its subsequent effectiveness. Using primary source materials, the students will become members of co-operative learning groups to participate actively in both evaluating Wang Mang and judging his success or failure. This helps students see that historical "fact" is very open-ended and subject to values and opinion (in fact, their own). At the end of this unit, students will have a more critical eye as to the history they read and its interpretation.

### II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit should be taught after the ideas of the "hundred schools" period have been studied. Students should be familiar with Confucius and Mencius and their main concepts for the improvement of society. Wang Mang's Hsin Dynasty is the "break" between the former Han and the latter Han and should be taught in that context. Wang Mang can be treated as an important figure worthy of study alone or you may want to use his Hsin Dynasty as an "exception" to the dynastic cycle.

### III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL HISTORY STANDARDS

*Wang Mang: Confucian Success or Failure?* provides teaching materials that address *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 3**, "Classical traditions, major religions, and giant empires." The unit specifically address **Standard 3C** "How China became unified under the early imperial dynasties."

## ***Teacher Background Materials***

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This unit likewise integrates a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards including: “analyze cause-and-effect relationships,” and “examine the influence of ideas” (**Standard 3**—Historical Analysis and Interpretation); “interrogate historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created” (**Standard 4**—Historical Research); and “evaluate the implementation of a decision” (**Standard 5**—Historical Issues, Analysis and Decision Making).

### **IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will become familiar with the events and conflicts during the Hsin Dynasty.
2. Students will become versed in Confucian thought regarding the role of good government.
3. Students will synthesize the above information and use it to evaluate the emperor of the Hsin Dynasty, Wang Mang.
4. Students will judge Wang Mang (through mock trial and role play) as a historical figure and determine the success or failure of his reign.
5. Students will gain skills in historiography and realize that history is a story well told but that much depends on who is telling it.

### **V. INTRODUCTION TO *Wang Mang: Confucian Success or Failure***

The reign of Wang Mang (A.D. 9–23) represents a break in the four-hundred-year rule of the Han dynasty. Inaugurated in 202 B.C., the Han dynasty had by the end of the first century B.C. nearly run its course. Inept and corrupt emperors did not attend to the affairs of state; eunuchs and imperial in-laws acquired unprecedented influence at court; state revenues and institutions were declining; landownership was becoming highly concentrated in aristocratic hands, bringing hardship to the peasantry; and large-scale revolts were breaking out all over the country. The imperial family was losing its prestige, and prominent officials believed that it was losing its mandate to rule as well.

Wang Mang was a member of a powerful aristocratic family related by marriage to the Han imperial line. Widely known as a man of great Confucian virtue, he held a number of high positions in court, including regent to several underaged emperors. In A.D. 9, at the behest of the court ministers, he assumed the throne himself and inaugurated his own dynasty called the Hsin (Xin), meaning "new."

A committed Confucian, Wang Mang believed that the only way to save the empire from the chaos of the time was to reinstitute the early Chou order (Zhou, 1122–256 B.C.) as described in idealized form in the Confucian classics. To that end, he declared slavery illegal, attempted to stabilize prices, changed the coinage, introduced tighter state controls of merchants and marketing, and reformed the salary system of officials, whose pay was now to vary from year to year depending upon the quality of the harvest.

His boldest and most controversial measure was his attempt to equalize the ownership of land. He attempted to do so by first setting limits on the amount of land that any one family could own. The excess land was to be given away to peasant families who did not own enough. He eventually hoped to institute the well-field system that supposedly had existed in antiquity.

Wang Mang's policies and programs, however idealistic, seriously threatened the existing social and political order. Officials resented their lowered salaries, and aristocratic landholders feared the loss of their lands. The common folk suffered as well, not so much because of the ruler's policies, as because of a series of natural disasters, the effects of which Wang Mang was powerless to ameliorate. A serious drought afflicted the Shensi (Shaanxi) basin, where the capital city of Ch'ang-an (Chang'an) was located. Worse yet, in A.D. 11 the Yellow River overflowed its poorly maintained dikes, inundated the eastern portion of the fertile northern plain, and shifted its course to run south rather than north of the Shantung (Shandong) Peninsula (one of the river's periodic and disastrous changes of course in Chinese history). Untold thousands of people were killed or left homeless. A severe famine broke out, and food prices skyrocketed. Desperate refugees roamed the land, many of them turning to banditry to stave off starvation.

In A.D. 18 widespread discontent coalesced into open rebellion led by a large peasant group called the Red Eyebrows. Their choice of red, the official color of the Han, reflected their desire for a return to that dynasty. In A.D. 23, the rebels stormed Ch'ang-an (Chang'an), broke into the imperial palace, and killed Wang Mang. Civil war then broke out among the Red Eyebrows and other rebel groups. Order was finally restored in A.D. 25, when a member of the Han imperial family vanquished his rivals and reestablished the Han dynasty, which was to endure until A.D. 220.

Subsequent Chinese historians vilified Wang Mang as a traitorous usurper who cloaked himself in the trappings of Confucianism merely to seize power and to enrich himself. Pan Ku (Ban Gu, A.D. 32–92), the author of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, is a good representative of this view. Western scholarship has generally treated Wang Mang more kindly, viewing him as an idealistic intellectual who was genuinely committed to Confucian reform and to alleviating the sufferings of the peasantry. But opinion is split on the reasons for the failure of his rule. Some



## ***Teacher Background Materials***

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scholars contend that Wang Mang eventually was corrupted by power and thus sowed the seeds of his own downfall. Others contend that his rule was doomed to failure from the outset because it so threatened the entrenched interest of powerful aristocrats and officials.

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\*The Chinese words are all in Wade-Giles. The pinyin equivalents are in parenthesis.

### **VI. LESSON PLANS**

1. Wang Mang's Demise
2. The Story of Wang Mang
3. Wang Mang on Trial



An official, wearing robes and a sword and carrying a writing tablet.  
From a wall-painting in a tomb, ca. A.D. 182.

Source: Michael Lowe, *Everyday Life in Imperial China* (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1968), p. 41.

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## LESSON ONE

### WANG MANG'S DEMISE

#### A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To be able to draw inferences to explain Wang Mang's fall from power.
- ◆ To describe Wang Mang's demise and speculate as to how something so violent could happen to the Son of Heaven.
- ◆ To evaluate a good ruler based on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius.

#### B. Lesson Activities (1–2 days)

1. Ask the students for words that describe the emperor of China. (Write suggestions on board).
2. Read the **Dramatic Moment** of Wang Mang's demise aloud to the students. Ask the students "How could it be that a Son of Heaven would have such an awful fate befall him?"
3. Explain that the purpose of this unit is to evaluate the story of Wang Mang and arrive at reasons for his fall from power.
4. Review with them their study of Mencius and Confucius and their belief in good government and just rulers.
5. Pass out *The Ruler's Handbook* (**Document A**) and explain that the students are going to take the information and try to come up with a checklist of what a "good" government and ruler would be like.

(At this point, depending on your class, you can follow different approaches.) Pass out **Worksheet 1** with the objective of having students fill it out based on the readings in *The Ruler's Handbook*. You can:

- a. Answer numbers one and two on the board with the students, then allow them to work individually on the rest.
- b. As a class discuss numbers one through ten on the board, allowing ample time for probing questioning and discussion.

- c. Break the class into groups assigning specific question numbers to each group. The groups could report their individual findings on the board while the other groups listen and fill in their sheets, (i.e., ten groups of one question each, five groups of two or more questions each, etc.)
7. Once the worksheet is completed, the students will have a working method of evaluating good government according to the Confucian tradition which they can begin to apply to the story of Wang Mang.
8. Homework Assignment:

Using the final quote of *The Ruler's Handbook*, find a current-event story that is an example of the intent of the quote.

### **C. EVALUATING THE LESSON**

Have the students read and paraphrase in their notebooks or learning logs the final quote on the last page of *The Ruler's Handbook*. Discuss as a class their individual interpretations.

## The Ruler's Handbook

"The truly great is he who is capable of rectifying what is wrong with the ruler's heart." [IV A:20]

### I. Personal Qualities of the Ruler

Tzu Kung asked about the gentleman.

Confucius said: "The gentleman first practices what he preaches and then preaches what he practices." [II:13]

Confucius said: "The gentleman reaches upward; the inferior man reaches downward." [XIV:23]

Confucius said: "The gentleman is always calm and at ease; the inferior man is always worried and full of distress." [VII:36]

Confucius said: "The gentleman understands what is right; the inferior man understands what is profitable." [IV:16]

Confucius said: "The gentleman cherishes virtue; the inferior man cherishes possessions. The gentleman thinks of sanctions; the inferior man thinks of personal favors." [IV:11]

Confucius said: "The gentleman makes demands on himself; the inferior man makes demands on others." [XV:20]

Confucius said: "The gentleman seeks to enable people to succeed in what is good but does not help them in what is evil; the inferior man does the contrary." [XII:16]

### II. How This Will Influence The People

Confucius said: "If a ruler himself is upright, all will go well without orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders they will not be obeyed." [XIII:6]

Just so you genuinely desire the good, the people will be good. The virtue of the gentleman may be compared to the wind and that of the commoner to the weeds. The weeds under the force of the wind cannot but bend." [XII:19]

Confucius said: "Lead the people by laws and regulate them by penalties, and the people will try to keep out of jail, but will have no sense of shame. Lead the people

by virtue and restrain them by the rules of decorum, and the people will have a sense of shame, and moreover will become good.” [II:3]

### **III. What is Important to the Ruler**

Mencius said: “There are three things that a feudal lord should treasure—land, people, and the administration of the government. If he should treasure pearls and jades instead, calamity is sure to befall him.” [VII B:28]

If a king says, ‘What will profit my kingdom?’ the high officials will say, ‘What will profit our families?’ and the lower officials and commoners will say, ‘What will profit ourselves?’ Superiors and inferiors will try to seize profit one from another, and the state will be endangered. . . . Let your Majesty speak only of humanity and righteousness. Why must you speak of profit?” [IA:I]

Mencius said to King Hsüan of Ch’i: “When the ruler regards his ministers as his hands and feet, the ministers regard their ruler as their heart and bowels. When the ruler regards his ministers as his dogs and horses, the ministers regard their ruler as a stranger. When the ruler regards his ministers as dust and grass, the ministers regard their ruler as a brigand or foe.” [IV B:3]

Remember . . .

Mencius said: “States have been won by men without humanity, but the world, never.” [VII B:13]

### **IV. What is Good Government?**

Mencius said: “[In the constitution of a state] the people rank the highest, the spirits of land and grain come next, and the ruler counts the least.” [VII B:14]

Tzu Kung asked about government. Confucius said: “The essentials are sufficient food, sufficient troops, and the confidence of the people.” Tzu Kung said: “Suppose you were forced to give up one of [these three, which would you let go first?” Confucius said: “The troops.” Tzu Kung asked again: “If you are forced to give up one of the two remaining, which would you let go first?” Confucius said: “Food. For from of old, death has been the lot of all men, but a people without faith cannot survive.” [XII:7]

### **V. How to Win The People**

Mencius said: “It was because Chieh and Chou lost the people that they lost the empire, and it was because they lost the hearts of the people that they lost the people. Here is the way to win the empire: win the people and you win the empire. Here is

the way to win the people: win their hearts and you win the people. Here is the way to win their hearts: give them and share with them what they like, and do not do to them what they do not like. The people turn to a humane ruler as water flows downward or beasts take to wilderness.” [IV A:9]

When men are subdued by force, it is not that they submit from their hearts but only that their strength is unavailing. When men are won by virtue, then their hearts are gladdened and their submission is sincere.

## **VI. How to Win Their Hearts**

As for the multitude, if they have no certain means of livelihood, they surely cannot maintain a steadfast heart. Without a steadfast heart, they are likely to abandon themselves to any and all manner of depravity. If you wait till they have lapsed into crime and then mete out punishment, it is like placing traps for the people. If a humane ruler is on the throne how can he permit such a thing as placing traps for the people? Therefore, when an intelligent ruler regulates the livelihood of the people, he makes sure that they will have enough to serve their parents on the one hand and to support their wives and children on the other, so that in good years all may eat their fill and in bad years no one need die of starvation.

Let poultry, dogs, and swine be kept and bred in season, and those over seventy may all be provided with meat. Let the cultivation of the hundred-mu farm not be interfered with, and a family of eight mouths need not go hungry.

## **VII. How to Keep Them from Hunger**

When the land system is not in proper operation, then the well-field farms are not equally distributed among the farmers or the grain for salaries equitably apportioned among the ministers. So a wicked lord or a corrupt magistrate usually lets the land system fall into disuse. When the land system is in proper operation, on the other hand, the distribution of land and the apportioning of salaries can be settled where you sit.

Each well-field unit is one li square and contains nine hundred mu of land. The center lot is the public field. The eight households each own a hundred-mu farm and collaborate in cultivating the public field. When the public field has been properly attended, then they may attend to their own work. This is how the countrymen are taught their status.

“The above are the main features of the system. As to adapting it to your present circumstances, it is up to you and your prince.” [III A:3, 12-20]

### **VIII. Once They are no Longer Hungry**

When Confucius was traveling to Wei, Jan Yu drove him. Confucius observed: “What a dense population!” Jan Yu said: “The people having grown so numerous, what next should be done for them?” “Enrich them,” was the reply. “And when one has enriched them, what next should be done?” Confucius said: “Educate them.” [XIII:9]

”Let attention be paid to teaching in schools and let the people be taught the principles of filial piety and brotherly respect, and white-headed old men will not be seen carrying loads on the road. When the aged wear silk and eat meat and the common people are free from hunger and cold, never has the lord of such a people failed to become king.” [I A:7]

### **IX. If the Ruler Fails, is Not Righteous, Does Not Win the People's Hearts**

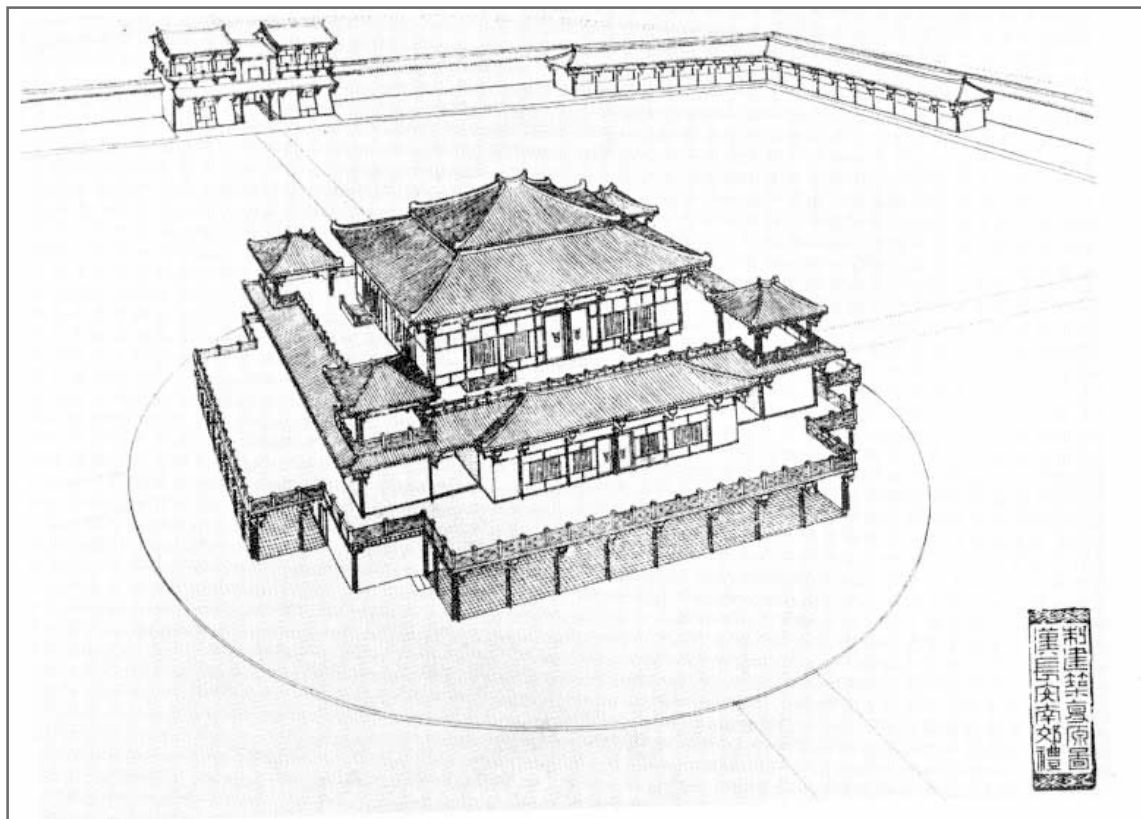
“May a subject, then, slay his sovereign?” Mencius replied: “He who outrages humanity is a scoundrel; he who outrages righteousness is a scourge. A scourge or a scoundrel is a despised creature [and no longer a king]. I have heard that a despised creature called Chou was put to death, but I have not heard anything about the murdering of a sovereign.” [I B:8]

### **X. How Will Heaven Indicate Who is to be the New Ruler?**

[Mencius’ disciple] Wan Chang asked: “Is it true that Yao gave the empire to Shun?” Mencius replied: “No. The emperor cannot give the empire to another.” Wan Chang asked: “Who then gave it to him, when Shun had the empire?” Mencius said: “Heaven gave it to him.” Wan Chang asked: “You say Heaven gave it to him—did Heaven do it with an explicit charge?” Mencius said: “No. Heaven does not speak. It simply signified its will through his conduct and handling of affairs.” Wan Chang asked: “How was this done?” Mencius said: . . . “Of old, Yao recommended Shun to Heaven and Heaven accepted him. He presented him to the people and the people accepted him. This is why I said that Heaven does not speak but simply signified its will through Shun’s conduct and handling of affairs.” Wan Chang said: “May I venture to ask, how was this acceptance by Heaven and the people indicated?” Mencius said: “He was appointed to preside over the sacrifices, and all the spirits were pleased with them: that indicated his acceptance by Heaven. He was placed in charge of public affairs, and they were well administered and the people were at peace; that indicated his acceptance by the people. Heaven thus gave him the empire; the people thus gave him the empire. That is why I said, the emperor cannot give the empire to another. . . . This is what is meant in the Great Declaration [in the Book of History] where it is said: ‘Heaven sees as my people see, Heaven hears as my people hear.’” [V A:5]

Confucius said: “[A government is good when] those near are happy and those far off are attracted.” [XIII:16]

Source: Reprinted as published in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, by Theodore de Bary et al., copyright 1960, with the kind permission of Columbia University Press.



Reconstruction of a ceremonial building that Wang Mang had built based on archaeological finds near Ch'ang-an. Reproduced as published in *Everyday Life in Early Imperial China*, by Michael Loewe. Text (c) Michael Loewe, 1968, Line drawings (c) B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1968, London.



**Discussion Questions**

1. What personal qualities should the ruler have?
2. How will this influence people?
3. What should be important to the ruler?
4. What makes a government good?
5. How does the government win the people's support?
6. How does the government win the people's hearts?
7. How does the government keep people from going hungry?
8. If the people are no longer hungry, what should happen?
9. If the ruler is bad, what should happen?
10. How does Heaven indicate who is the new ruler?