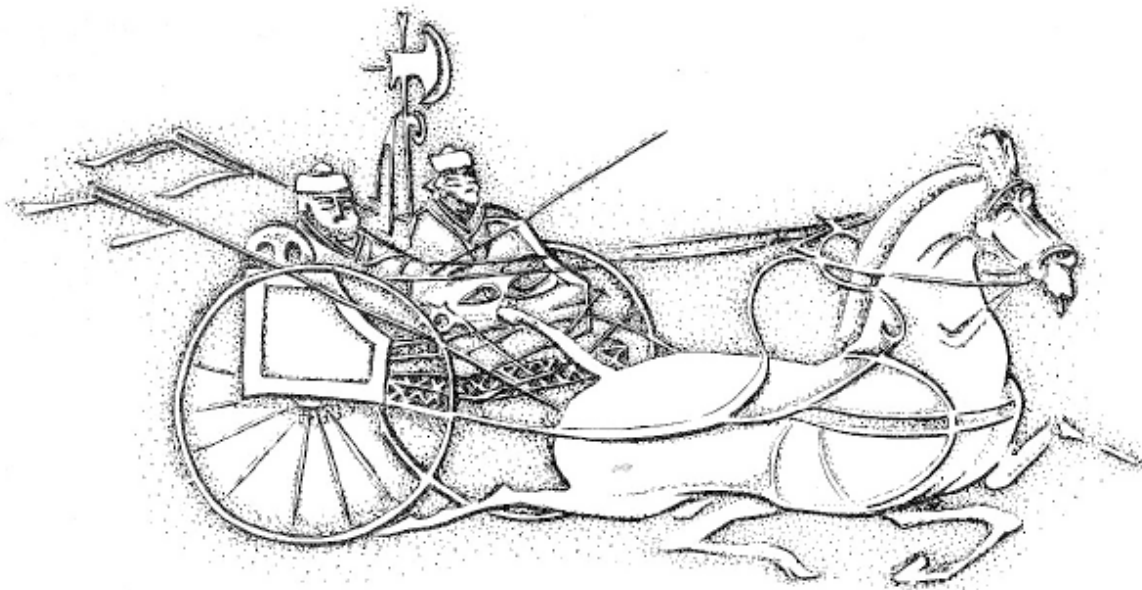


# Wang Mang: Confucian Success or Failure?

**A Unit of Study for Grades 6–10**

Joseph Palumbo



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

**NATIONAL CENTER FOR HISTORY IN THE SCHOOLS**  
**University of California, Los Angeles**



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COVER ILLUSTRATION: *Official's carriage*. From a relief from west China. Reprinted in Michael Lowe, *Everyday Life in Imperial China* (London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1968), p. 69.

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## Introduction

### APPROACH AND RATIONALE

*Wing Mang: Confucian Success or Failure?* is one of over sixty teaching units published by the National Center for History for the Schools that are the fruits of collaborations between history professors and experienced teachers of World and United States History. They represent specific issues and “dramatic episodes” in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turningpoint in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected issues and dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow’s history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, private correspondence, literature, contemporary photographs, and paintings from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of “being there,” a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian’s craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

### CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Within this unit, you will find: 1) Unit Objectives, 2) Correlation to the National History Standards, 3) Teacher Background Materials, 4) Lesson Plans, and 5) Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain issues and key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 7–10, they can be adapted for other grade levels. The teacher background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific “dramatic moment” to the

## ***Introduction***

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larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level to understand the materials.

The Lesson Plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source documents, any handouts or student background materials, and a bibliography.

In our series of teaching units, each collection can be taught in several ways. You can teach all of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

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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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## Dramatic Moment

When the men of the army entered the [Palace] Halls, they called out, “Where is the rebellious caitiff, Wang Mang?” and a Beauty came out of a room and said, “He is in the Tower Bathed [By Water].” The bands of soldiers pursued after him, and surrounded it several hundred deep. Those on the Tower also exchanged shots with them, using bows and crossbows, but gradually dropped out and left [off shooting]. When their arrows were exhausted, so that they had no way of returning shots, they met [the attackers] with their short weapons. Wang Yi and his son, [Wang Mu], Tai Yun and Wang Hsün, died fighting, [whereupon Wang] Mang entered the room [on top of the Tower]. In the very late afternoon, the bands of soldiers went up the tower. Wang Yi, Chao Po, Miao Hsin, T’ang Tsun, Wang Sheng, the Regular Palace Attendant Wang Ts’an and others all died on top of the Tower. Tu Wu, a man from [the prefecture of] Shang, killed [Wang] Mang and took his [seals] and cords. A Colonel from Tunghai [Commandery], Kung-pin Chiu, who had formerly been a [Gentleman] Dealing With the Rites, [a subordinate of] the Grand Messenger, saw [Tu] Wu and asked him where the owner of the sealcords was. He replied, “In the room, in the northeast corner.” [Kung-pin] Chiu recognized [Wang] Mang and cut off his head. The men of the army cut [Wang] Mang’s body to pieces. His members and his flesh and bones were sliced and divided. “Those who killed each other in the struggle [to secure parts of Wang Mang’s body numbered] several tens of persons.” Kung-pin Chiu bore [Wang] Mang’s head to Wang Hsien.

... [Wang] Mang’s head was transmitted to the Keng-shih Emperor and was hung up in the market-place at Yüan. The people all together picked up [things] and threw them at it. Some cut out and ate his tongue.

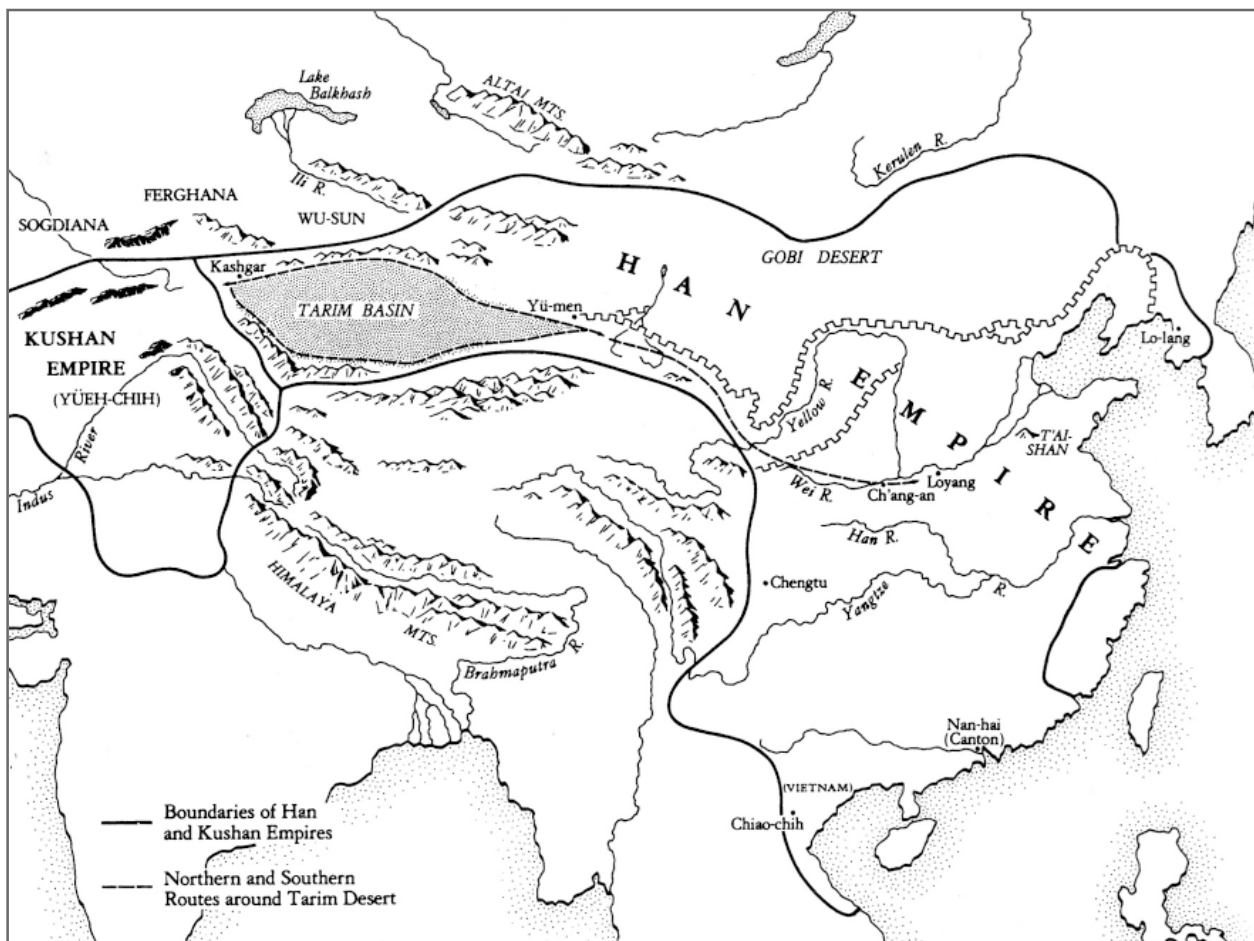
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## **Chronology**

Chou (Zhou) dynasty	1122–256 B.C.
Confucius	551–479 B.C.
Mencius	372–289 B.C.
Ch'in (Qin) dynasty	221–207 B.C.
Former Han dynasty	202 B.C.–A.D. 9
Hsin (Xin) dynasty	A.D. 9–23
Wang Mang assumes the throne	A.D. 9
Yellow River floods	A..D. 11
Red Eyebrow Rebellion begins	A. D. 18
Wang Mang is killed	A. D. 23
Latter Han dynasty	A. D. 25–220

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## The Han Empire



Source: John Fairbank, ed. *China: Tradition and Transformation*, revised ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989).

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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 checksheet 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.