

Emperor Qin Shi Huang or Shi Huangdi -- First Emperor of China

Emperor Qin Shi Huang (259 BC - 210 BC) fascinates people when they talk about the Great Wall and the Terracotta Warriors and Horses - his two greatest achievements. As the first emperor of China, he indeed has a profound influence on Chinese history and culture.

▶ How did he come to the throne?

Qin Shi Huang, born as Ying Zheng in 259 BC, was the son of the king of the Qin State. At the age of thirteen, he succeeded his father's regality. Ying Zheng was very aggressive and ambitious at an early age. He assumed full power at 22 by ridding himself of his premier, Lu Buwei, who acted as regent (an advisor who rules in place of a young autocrat) while he was a minor. He wanted to unify and subjugate all the states like Han, Zhao, Wei, Chu, Yan and Qi by the powerful political, economic and military strength of the Qin State. Ying Zheng realized his ambition and built the first feudal and centralized empire in Chinese history in 221 BC. This was what we called - the Qin Dynasty (221 BC - 206 BC). Ying Zheng was the first emperor of a united China, so he proclaimed himself Qin Shi Huang.



▶ "Qin Shi Huang"

When Ying Zheng unified China, he considered his achievement surpassing the legendary "San Huang (three emperors)" and "Wu Di (five sovereigns)". He created a new title for himself: "Huangdi" together with "Shi (means the first)", hence get the name "Qin Shi Huang" or "Qin Shi Huangdi", which means he was the first emperor of China. He hoped his descendants would follow in his steps to rule the country for eternity.

▶ Emperor of China

To herald his achievement, Zheng assumed the sacred titles of legendary rulers and proclaimed himself Qin Shi Huang ("First Sovereign Emperor"). With unbounded confidence, he claimed that his dynasty would last "10,000 generations."

As emperor he initiated a series of reforms aimed at establishing a fully centralized administration, thus avoiding the rise of independent satrapies (governors). Following the example of Qin and at the suggestion of Li Si, he abolished territorial feudal power in the empire, forced the wealthy aristocratic families to live in the capital, Xianyang, and divided the country into 36 military districts, each with its own military and civil administrator. He also issued orders for almost universal standardization—from weights, measures, and the axle lengths of carts to the written language and the laws. Construction of a network of roads and canals was begun, and fortresses erected for defense against barbarian invasions from the north were linked to form the Great Wall.



In 220 Qin Shi Huang undertook the first of a series of imperial inspection tours that marked the remaining 10 years of his reign. While supervising the consolidation and organization of the empire, he did not neglect to perform sacrifices in various sacred places, announcing to the gods that he had finally united the empire, and he erected stone tablets with ritual inscriptions to extol his achievements.

Another motive for Qin Shi Huang's travels was his interest in magic and alchemy and his search for masters in these arts who could provide him with the elixir of immortality. After the failure of such an expedition to the islands in the Eastern Sea—possibly Japan—in 219, the emperor repeatedly summoned magicians to his court. Confucian scholars strongly condemned the step as charlatanism, and it is said that 460 of them were executed for their opposition. The continuous controversy between the emperor and Confucian scholars who advocated a return to the old feudal order culminated in the famous burning of the books of 213, when, at Li Si's suggestion, all books not dealing with agriculture, medicine, or prognostication were burned, except historical records of Qin and books in the imperial library.

► Decline of the First Emperor

The last years of Qin Shi Huang's life were dominated by an ever-growing distrust of his entourage—at least three assassination attempts nearly succeeded—and his increasing isolation from the common people. Almost inaccessible in his huge palaces, the emperor led the life of a semi-divine being. In 210 Qin Shi Huang died during an inspection tour. He was buried in a gigantic funerary compound hewn out of a mountain and shaped in conformity with the symbolic patterns of the cosmos. (Excavation of this enormous complex of some 20 square miles [50 square km]—now known as the Qin tomb—began in 1974, and the complex was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987.

Among the findings at the site were some 8,000 life-sized terra-cotta soldier and horse figures forming an "army" for the dead king.) The disappearance of Qin Shi Huang's forceful personality immediately led to the outbreak of fighting among supporters of the old feudal factions that ended in the collapse of the Qin dynasty and the extermination of the entire imperial clan by 206.



Qin Shihuang's Mausoleum

Answer the following questions based on the reading:

1. What were Qin Shi Huang's two greatest achievements?
2. Which states within China did Qin Shi Huang want to subjugate and unify under his Qin Dynasty?
3. What did the name "Qin Shi Huangdi" mean?
4. How long did Qin Shi Huangdi claim his dynasty would last?
5. Shi Huangdi centralized his power and land. Aside from that, what were three other accomplishments of his reign?
6. What did Qin Shi Huang try to do in order to live longer?
7. Why did Qin Shi Huangdi burn books?
8. What was uncovered at Qin Shi Huangdi's tomb?