



China's first emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, was both a strong and a cruel ruler.

# The First Emperor of China

## 22.1 Introduction

In Chapter 21, you learned about three Chinese philosophies and how China fell into disorder at the end of the Zhou dynasty. In this chapter, you will learn about the **unification of China** under **Qin Shihuangdi**.

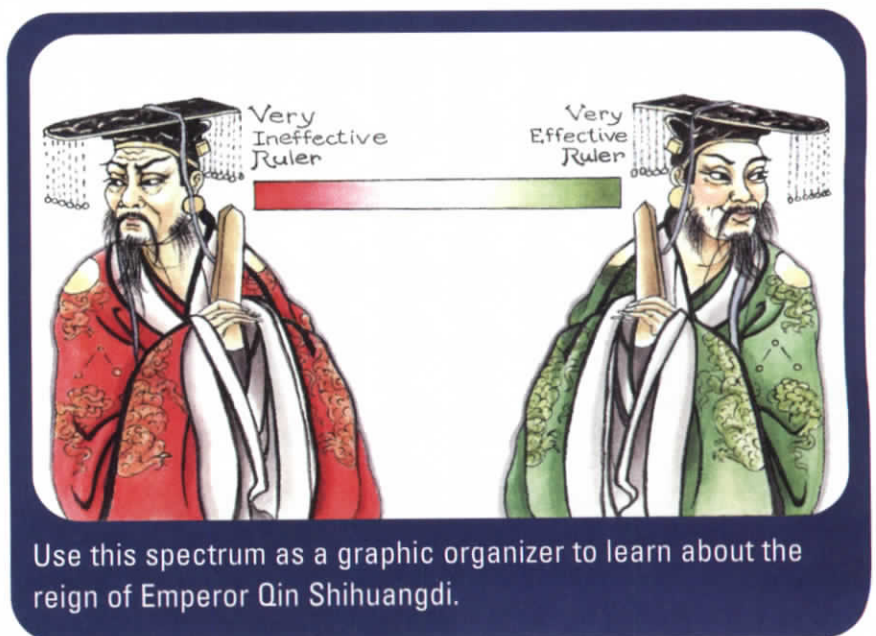
The Emperor of Qin (pronounced *chin*) ruled over a united China from 221 to 210 B.C.E. His reign was marked by great contrasts. He executed hundreds of enemies, and his building projects killed thousands of his own people. But he also unified Chinese government and culture. And his construction projects were among the most spectacular in the world.

The emperor's most ambitious project was the building of the Great Wall along China's northern border. The purpose of the wall was to protect the north China border from invasion. The Emperor of Qin set about building the wall like a general trying to win a war. Supply camps were set up to bring food and materials to the mountains and deserts of the northern frontier. Soldiers were posted to fight off bandits and to stop workers from running away.

Thousands of Chinese were marched from their homes and forced to work on the wall. It is said that many of them never returned.

Clearly, the Emperor of Qin was both a strong leader and a cruel one. It's little wonder that later Chinese historians had very differing opinions of him.

In this chapter, you'll find out more about the Emperor of Qin's reign. Then you can form your own opinion of China's first emperor.



## 22.2 Creating an Empire

China's first emperor began life as Prince Zheng of the royal family of the state of Qin. He was born in 259 B.C.E., near the end of the Warring States period. In 256 B.C.E., Qin took over the state of Zhou, ending the Zhou dynasty. Ten years later, 13-year-old Prince Zheng became king.

Sometimes called the Tiger of Qin, Zheng was an extremely ambitious man. He used military might, spies, bribery, and alliances to conquer the remaining rival states. His empire became far larger than the kingdoms of earlier dynasties. In 221 B.C.E., he gained control of all of China. He decided then to take a new title, Qin Shihuangdi, or First Emperor of Qin.

As a ruler, the Emperor of Qin was greatly influenced by Legalism. Recall that Legalists believed in strict laws, harsh punishments, and a strong central authority. The emperor adopted these ideas. So that he would not be threatened by powerful lords, he replaced the old system of feudalism with a government he controlled personally. He divided his vast territory into 36 districts. Three officials were appointed to govern each district. One was responsible for the army. Another took care of the laws and agriculture. The third reported what was going on to the emperor.

The Emperor of Qin used harsh measures to maintain his power. When he discovered plots against his life, he had the leaders of the plots and their families killed. He even exiled his own mother from court when he feared she was plotting against him.

*The Emperor of Qin's wars of conquests cost many millions of lives.*



## 22.3 Standardizing the Culture

The Emperor of Qin wanted to unify China. One way he did this was by **standardizing** cultural practices that differed from place to place.

One key step was to create a unified system of laws. Many of the emperor's new laws were aimed at government officials. For example, officials were punished if the grain in storehouses spoiled or if a wall built under their supervision collapsed. Other laws governed everyday life. For example, widows were not allowed to remarry.

The emperor's laws were based on Legalist beliefs. They were very detailed, and they spelled out exact punishments for bad behavior. Rich and poor were punished equally. Typical punishments included fines paid in suits of armor, shields, or gold. But there were also physical punishments, including forced labor, whippings, and beheadings.

To make it easier to trade, the emperor standardized money, weights, and measures. Throughout China, people had used various types of items as money, including shells, pearls, silver, tin objects, and coins. Under the Emperor of Qin, the only acceptable form of money became metal coins made of gold or bronze. The coins had holes in the center so that people could carry several of them together on a cord. The emperor also ordered measuring cups to be made so they held the same amount. To standardize weights, he had metalworkers create bell-shaped weights out of bronze or iron in a variety of standard sizes.

The emperor also simplified the writing system. He got rid of many of the written characters that were in use across China. A later dictionary listed 9,000 approved characters.

**standardize** to make the same



The Emperor of Qin frequently went on inspection tours to make sure his orders were being obeyed. During his tours, he performed sacrifices and erected stone tablets that told of his achievements.

## 22.4 Protecting the Northern Border

To protect his empire from invaders, the Emperor of Qin ordered a long wall to be built along China's northern border. Earlier kingdoms had already built smaller walls of their own. The emperor had long sections built to connect these walls. He also extended the wall to the west. It was called the "10,000 Li Long Wall." (One *li* is about three tenths of a mile.) Later it became known as the Great Wall.

Few traces of this Great Wall survive. (The Great Wall as we know it today was built by later rulers.) Most likely, it was made of layers of earth pounded into wooden frames that held everything together.

Construction of the wall took 10 years. A workforce of 300,000 men was assembled to build it. Some were soldiers. Many were peasants who were forced to leave their fields to work on the project. Still others were musicians, teachers, writers, and artists that the emperor sent into **exile** in the north.

The workers who built the wall labored under difficult conditions. The wall crossed high mountains, desert, swampland, and quicksand. The weather was bitterly cold in the winter and blazing hot in the summer. According to later accounts, tens of thousands of men died while working on the project. Their bodies were buried in the wall.

When the Chinese armies to the south were strong, the Great Wall proved very effective at stopping invasions. The nomads living to the north could not move sheep or cattle over it, and horses could not jump over it. So invaders were left without supplies or a cavalry.

**exile** living away from one's native country

Later Chinese rulers rebuilt and added to the Great Wall. Soldiers guarded the frontier from the watchtowers you see here. They lit fires to warn of approaching invaders.



## 22.5 Ending Opposition

The changes introduced by the Emperor of Qin to unify and protect China aroused a great deal of opposition. They were especially unpopular with Confucian scholars. The Confucians believed in proper behavior and good example, not harsh laws.

The emperor was determined to end opposition to his rule. It is said that he executed 460 Confucian scholars for plotting against him.

The conflict between the emperor and the scholars came to a head during a royal banquet in 213 B.C.E. During the banquet, a Confucian scholar criticized the emperor. He warned that the Qin dynasty would not last unless the emperor followed the ways of the past.

The scholar's comments angered the emperor's trusted advisor, Li Si. Li told the emperor that the scholars' criticisms were causing trouble and must be stopped. No one, he said, should be allowed to learn about Confucianism. All Confucian books should be brought to the capital city and burned. Only books dealing with medicine, farming, and the history of the Qin kingdom should be spared.

The Emperor of Qin agreed to order the book burning. He said that scholars who disobeyed the order would be marked with a tattoo on their faces and sent to do forced labor. Anyone who discussed ancient teachings to criticize the government would be executed.

The emperor's brutal action shocked China. Some scholars chose to die rather than give up their books. Even the emperor's son became a victim of the campaign to end opposition. When he criticized the killing of the scholars, he was sent to oversee work on the Great Wall.



Later emperors said the Emperor of Qin crushed opposition to his rule by executing Confucian scholars. According to legend, some scholars were buried alive. Others were buried up to their necks and then beheaded.

## 22.6 The Emperor's Death and the End of the Qin Dynasty

Despite the Emperor of Qin's many achievements, ancient Chinese writings say that he was unable to find happiness. Above all, the emperor was afraid to die. He called magicians to his court, asking them how he could become **immortal**. Some magicians said that he must find a magic potion. The emperor searched far and near for the potion. Once he sent an expedition to islands in the sea east of China, but the potion was never found.

### The Death and Burial of the Emperor of Qin

In 210 B.C.E., after just over 10 years as ruler of China, the Emperor of Qin died. He had been searching for the magic potion and was 600 miles from the capital city. No one knows the cause of his death. He may have been poisoned.

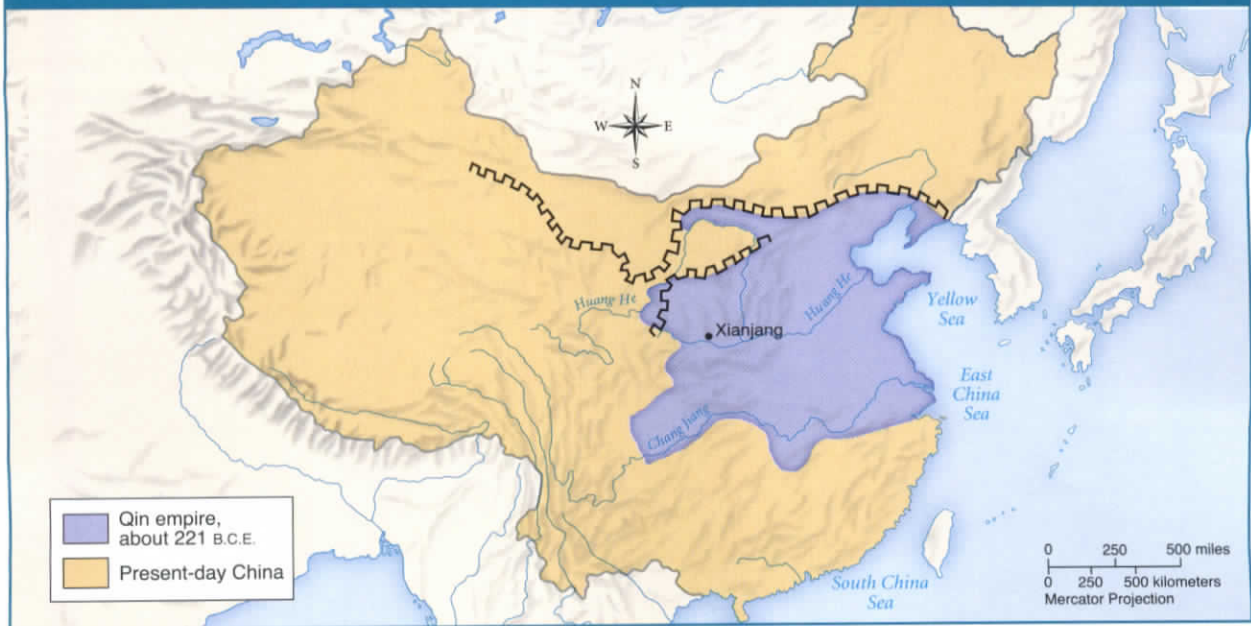
The Emperor of Qin's body was taken back to the capital and buried in a gigantic tomb in a man-made mound. The tomb complex, or group of structures, covered many square miles. Ancient Chinese writings say that more than 700,000 workers helped build it. Some of them were buried with the emperor to prevent grave robbers from learning about the tomb's fabulous treasures.

The treasures in the Emperor of Qin's tomb were not discovered until 1974 C.E. Among them were tools, precious jewels, and rare objects. Most amazing of all, there was an entire army made of a kind of clay called *terra-cotta*. The army included more than 6,000 life-size figures such as archers, foot soldiers, chariot drivers, and horses. So far, archeologists have not found any two figures that are exactly alike. Each seems to be unique.

The terra-cotta army found in the Emperor of Qin's tomb faces east to lead the emperor into the next world.



## The Qin Empire, About 221 B.C.E.



### The End of the Qin Dynasty

When he took the title of Shihuangdi, the Emperor of Qin said his dynasty would last 10,000 years. In fact, it fell apart shortly after his death.

The harshness of the emperor's rule had caused a great deal of unhappiness. Soon after he died, rebellions broke out in the countryside. Members of the royal families of conquered states joined in the revolt. Civil war followed as various leaders struggled for control. Finally, in 206 B.C.E., Liu Pang, a peasant leader, defeated his rivals and established the Han dynasty.

### 22.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about Qin Shihuangdi, China's first emperor. The Emperor of Qin had a major influence on China. He unified China and greatly expanded its borders. He centralized the government. He standardized Chinese laws, money, weights, measures, and writing. Among his many construction projects was the Great Wall.

Later Chinese rulers built on what the Emperor of Qin left behind, including government institutions and the Great Wall itself. The office of emperor that he created lasted for 2,000 years. Even China's name in the western world comes from the word Qin. But the harshness of the Emperor of Qin's rule led to an early end for his dynasty. In the next chapter, you will learn about the dynasty that followed, the Han dynasty.