

4.1 THE QIN DYNASTY

Background

The state of Qin was the westernmost of the patrician states of China, and had originally been viewed as a non-Chinese tribe. Its ruler was granted an official Zhou title in the eighth century B.C. in consequence of political loyalty and military service provided to the young Zhou king in Luoyang, the new eastern capital, at a time when the legitimate title to the Zhou throne was in dispute after the fall of the Western Zhou. The sustained reign of Duke Mu during the seventh century did much to elevate the status of Qin among the community of patrician states, but the basic prejudice against Qin as semi-“barbarian” persisted.

Never during the Classical period did Qin come to be viewed as fully Chinese in a cultural sense. Qin produced great warriors, but no great leaders after Duke Mu, no notable thinkers or literary figures. Its governmental policies were the most progressive in China, but these were all conceived and implemented by men from the east who served as “Alien Ministers” at the highest ranks of the Qin court, rather than by natives of Qin. Yet Qin aspired to full membership in the Chinese cultural sphere. Li Si, the Prime Minister who shepherded Qin’s conquest of the other states, captured what must have been a widely held view of Qin in a memorial he sent to the king before his elevation to highest power. “To please the ear by thumping a water jug, banging a pot, twanging a zither, slapping a thigh and singing *woo-woo!* – that is the native music of Qin. . . . But now you have set aside jar-thumping and pot-banging and turn to the music of Zheng and Wey.”

However, Qin’s outsider position provided it with certain distinct advantages. Most obviously, its marginal location gave it a defensive security against the other Chinese states, and the valley of the Wei River was more than distant, it was a natural fortress, easily guarded at the great Hangu Pass just south of the Yellow River’s elbow.

Qin’s cultural marginality proved an advantage in the long run as well. The far less developed customs of patrician privilege allowed Qin to advance the principles of central government, bureaucratic administration, and appointment by merit far more rapidly than could any other state. The great service



that Shang Yang rendered to Qin in the fourth century was precisely to realize this latent potential in Qin society. And the very fact that Qin did not produce great political minds accustomed rulers and courtiers to accept the need for outside help, and recruit outstanding ministerial talent from among all the states of the east.

One other advantage that the Qin state possessed by virtue of its peripheral position was the mixed blessing of frequent military encounters with nomad peoples. The western nomad tribes – the groups that had led to the downfall of the Western Zhou, harassed the Qin for many centuries, and while this would surely have seemed a disadvantage at the time, eventually it instilled in Qin systems of military discipline exceeding those of the eastern states. It also brought Qin into frequent contact with non-Chinese methods of warfare, including cavalry warfare and advanced crossbow technology, all of which greatly enriched the generalship that Qin was able to bring to bear in conquering China.

The combination of a weak patrician class and a strong military tradition in Qin was reflected in an important Qin innovation, a finely graded system of honorary social ranks that was chiefly a reflection of success in war. These non-hereditary ranks, of which there were about eighteen, conferred various types of privileges upon warriors: tax exemptions, government positions, land, and so forth. Although by the late third century these ranks could be purchased, by then the incentives had yielded a firm tradition linking social mobility to valor in battle, a great asset to a state about to launch a decade-long final push for supremacy.

The rise of Li Si

The fortunes of Qin seem in retrospect to be very closely tied to the abilities of the foreign ministers that it recruited. Shang Yang was the most prominent but not the first of these – the successes of Duke Mu at a much earlier time had been largely due to an outstanding group of foreign talent that he had assembled in his ministerial staff. In the mid-third century, Qin domestic politics was dominated by Lü Buwei, originally from Han. Lü does not himself seem to have been a remarkably able Prime Minister, for all his success as a schemer, but he provided the great service of recruiting to Qin as his personal retainers a very large group of persuaders (the men who composed *The Almanac of Lord Lü*). Lü's eventual successor, Li Si, first rose in Qin as a member of Lü's entourage.

Li Si, whom many regard as the true architect of the Qin conquest, was originally from the town of Shangcai in the state of Chu. He was a man of humble background, and as an ambitious youth he sought to better himself by traveling to Qi to study under the Confucian Xunzi, who was the senior master at Jixia. After some time spent in Qi, Li determined that the future lay with Qin rather than in his native Chu, and he traveled west to seek his fortune as a persuader. Like his "classmate" Han Feizi, he chose not to follow the idealistic program of Confucianism, with its dictum to avoid political engagement in times of immorality, and instead gravitated towards the doctrines and methods of Legalism, an appropriate set of wares to peddle in Qin.

Li Si arrived in 247 B.C., a year of transition in Qin. The young King Zhuangxiang, the former Prince Zichu, died that year, and the fortunes of Lü Buwei rose to new heights with the

installation of the new boy king, Zheng. King Zheng was only thirteen upon his enthronement, and was under the thumb of his merchant prime minister (whom the *Shiji* identifies as his father).

Lü Buwei was impressed with his newly arrived retainer Li Si and before long he introduced him to the king, who appointed him to a major government position. Over the next decade, Li became increasingly active in the Qin government, and his role at the Qin capital of Xianyang seems to have increasingly involved service to the king rather than to Lü Buwei. Thus when Lü met his downfall in 237, Li Si seems to have weathered the event well, initially suffering no ill effects.

But within months, the native patricians of Qin, long weak and subject to domination by alien ministers, made a move to regain power they had lost over a century earlier. The affair of Lü Buwei's transgressions, combined with the state of Han's attempt to sabotage Qin military preparedness through the affair of the Zheng Guo Canal (see reading 2.3: "Technological Change in Warring States China," pp. 6-7), prompted the native elite to persuade the king to abandon the Qin tradition of recruiting foreigners to high positions. The danger of treachery had grown, they argued, and Qin would now need to rely on its own resources.

The king accordingly issued an order to banish all foreigners from Qin, and Li Si was caught in the net. However, Li Si promptly composed a long and eloquent memorial to the throne, reviewing the many goods that Qin had derived from its tradition of recruitment. This memorial, much admired by later writers, led the king to reverse his orders. Li was reappointed, and seems from this time on to have become indispensable to the king. Although he did not actually occupy the position of prime minister until after the unification of China in 221, from 237 on he appears to have had unparalleled influence. King Zheng was now twenty-two, and he and Li Si formed an energetic axis of political energy that brought the institutions of Qin to higher levels of efficiency than had ever before been achieved. The final campaign to conquer China began shortly thereafter.

The political role of the Qin military

Li Si is often given the greatest amount of credit for the Qin conquest of China. The conquest campaigns began in earnest in 230 and required only nine years to complete, the conditions for victory having been slowly established over the preceding century. Much is made of the fact that Li Si implemented an extensive program of diplomatic bribery between 237, when his power first crested, and the commencement of the conquest wars: hundreds of thousands of gold pieces were slipped into the pockets of high ministers in the eastern states to secure intelligence and policies friendly to Qin at those patrician courts. These measures, coupled with a tightening of Qin administration, were essential to Qin's eventual success.

But Li Si fought no battles – he was neither a warlord minister nor a military tactician. The success of the armies of Qin was due in large part to an outstanding group of military leaders. It is a remarkable feature of Qin politics that these generals do not appear to have used their military prestige to attempt to gain personal influence at court, and so their impact on the history of Qin remained limited to their accomplishments in the field. The apolitical conduct of these generals was of great benefit to Li Si.

There were probably a number of factors that allowed a militaristic state like Qin to maintain so clear a separation between civilian and military authority. The Qin armies had, from an early time, been firmly under centralized control. With its weak patrician class, Qin did not have the history of private warlord power centers that had plagued Jin and Qi, and the reforms of Shang Yang had enhanced the control that the king exercised over all military operations. Moreover the linkage of military success to social standing fostered by the Qin system of ranks meant that the leaders of the armies were more likely to be men trained in military skills rather than persuader skills or military theory. These were men less likely to be comfortable with ministerial assemblies and royal audiences, or with the politics of court intrigue.

It is possible to picture the military success of Qin as solely a product of an effective political “system,” over which Li Si was steward. But there is at least one other critical fact to consider: the character of King Zheng, whom we may now refer to using the title by which he is famous: the First Emperor.*

The First Emperor and the failed assassin Jing Ke

There is in the historical texts considerable information concerning the behavior of the First Emperor after 221, but very little about his early character or his role in the conquest. It is possible to view the First Emperor as a passive beneficiary of the system within which he ruled, the talent of his ministers and generals, and the weakened state of Qi and Chu during the time of his rule. However, one famous event suggests, if the accounts we have of it are at all accurate, that the First Emperor was seen as the controlling force of Qin politics. That event is the failed assassination attempt of Jing Ke. The story appears below in a free retelling (not a translation).

The Story of Jing Ke

Jing Ke was a native of Wey who was well educated and skilled in swordsmanship. He seems to have attempted a career as a persuader, but failing to attain any position in Wey he began a life of wandering and eventually wound up in the state of Yan.

In Yan, a famous swordsman recognized that Jing had great qualities as a man of valor and became his patron. Jing himself lived a life of insignificance in Yan, keeping company with a dog butcher and a lute player named Gao, with whom he would drink in the marketplace day after day until all three collapsed in maudlin tears, moved by Gao's remarkable musical abilities.

About 230, the crown prince of Yan, who had been residing in Qin as a diplomatic hostage, fled back to his home state in resentment over the poor treatment he had received at the hands of King Zheng of Qin. Holding this grudge against Qin, he became alarmed to

*Zheng was the personal name of the First Emperor, who had no posthumous title as king (we will discuss his imperial title further below).

see the forces of Qin begin their march eastward, destroying the state of Han and threatening the other eastern states.

Shortly thereafter, a General Fan of Qin who had committed some offense against the throne fled to Yan, where he was harbored by the crown prince. The prince's advisors were anxious to return the general to Qin, but the prince would not hear of any plan that would accord with wishes of Qin. Understanding, however, the danger of openly provoking the king of Qin in this way, the prince set out to find a man who could relieve the threat of Qin by assassinating King Zheng. His courtiers recommended the swordsman who had become Jing Ke's patron, but when they met, the man disappointed him.

"They say," the swordsman said to the prince, "that when a thoroughbred is in its prime it can gallop 1000 li in a day, but when it is old, the weakest nag can outdistance it. It seems that you have heard reports of how I was in my prime and do not realize that now my strength has left me. Nevertheless, I have a friend named Master Jing who could be consulted for a task serving the state."

The prince eagerly requested an interview, but added, as the swordsman departed, "These matters are of vital concern to the state. Please do not let a word of this leak out!"

The swordsman sought out Jing Ke and conveyed to him the wishes of the prince. Then, speaking of the prince's caution to keep silent he said, "If my actions have given him cause to mistrust me, I am not a worthy warrior. When you visit the prince, tell him that I died without betraying him." And with that he slit his throat and died.

The death of his patron not only spurred Jing Ke on to serve the prince, but assured that the prince would trust Jing Ke to the utmost. Together they set out to determine how Jing Ke could either coerce a favorable peace with the king of Qin or assassinate him. But how was Jing Ke to gain admission to the Qin court?

Jing Ke proposed to kill General Fan and carry his head to Qin as a token of Yan's submission, so that he could, in presenting this trophy, come close to the person of the king. But the prince refused. "I could never bear to betray the trust of a worthy man for the sake of my own wishes," he said. "I must ask that you think of some other plan."

Despite this, Jing Ke decided to go directly to General Fan. "In retaliation for your actions," he said, "Qin has killed your parents and all the members of your family. I am told that Qin has offered a reward of 1000 catties of gold and a city of 10,000 households for your head. What shall we do?" Then he revealed his plan. "Give me your head so that I can present it to the king of Qin! He will surely receive me with delight. Then with my left hand I will grab hold of his sleeve and with my right I will stab him in the chest – your wrongs will all be avenged."

Baring his shoulder, General Fan stepped towards Jing Ke. “Day and night I gnash my teeth and eat out my heart searching for some plan. Now you have shown me the way!” And with this he slit his throat and died.

The prince was greatly upset, but had no choice now but to carry forth Jing Ke’s plan. He equipped him with an assistant and gave him a set of maps to the state of Yan as a further token of good faith to Qin. He ordered that a stiletto dagger with a poisoned tip be cast and prepared for Jing Ke’s mission, and had it tested on several men, all of whom died instantly. Then Jing Ke set out.

At the crossing of the River Yi, the party of men who had joined to send off Jing Ke and his assistant stopped to sacrifice to the spirit of the road and bid their friend farewell. Gao the lute player began to play and Jing Ke stood forward and sang:

*Xiao, xiao, cries the wind,
and the waters of the Yi run cold;
The brave warrior, once he has gone,
will never again return.*

As all the followers wept, Jing set off without so much as looking back.

The king of Qin was so delighted with the news that an envoy had arrived from Yan bearing the head of General Fan that he called a full court assembly to receive him. Jing Ke entered the palace throne room carrying the box with General Fan’s head, his assistant trailing behind with the case of maps. But before they had reached the throne, the assistant’s courage ran out and he began to tremble visibly, attracting the attention of the courtiers. Jing Ke turned, and realizing that all was about to be lost he let out a great laugh. “This bumpkin from the northern borders is trembling to see the Son of Heaven! Pardon him, your majesty! Let me complete my mission to you.” Then taking the map case along with General Fan’s head, he approached the throne and presented them to the king.

When the king opened the container of maps, the dagger was revealed. Jing Ke had hidden it there because the laws of Qin forbade any man to carry arms in court in order to safeguard the person of the king. Jing Ke instantly seized the dagger and gripped the king by the sleeve. But instead of plunging the knife, he hesitated, intending first to whisper to the king a proposal for peace and release him if it were accepted.

The king, however, did not hesitate. He leapt from the throne, ripping his sleeve, and dashed away from Jing Ke, his scabbard tangled in his robes so that he could not draw his sword. Jing Ke pursued him to a bronze pillar and the two began a chase around the pillar while the unarmed courtiers watched helplessly. Only the king’s physician attempted to intervene, thrashing at Jing Ke with his medicine bag. Eventually, the king was able to push back his scabbard and draw his sword. He slashed Jing Ke in the thigh, and as he fell, Jing Ke hurled the poisoned dagger at the king. But the dagger struck the pillar and the king was saved. He cut down Jing Ke, who soon lay sprawled against the pillar, laughing.

“I failed because I tried to threaten you without killing you!” he cried. And then the king’s guard silenced him forever.

Yan fell in 222, and after the conquest, the First Emperor made every effort to hunt down all the men who had been involved in the assassination attempt. His agents failed, however, to find the lutenist Gao, who went into hiding and covered up his skills as a lutenist in fear that he would be identified. But after a time, his skills came to light and his fame spread, and at length he was summoned to play for the emperor. As he played, an attendant identified him, and the emperor, unable to bear killing so fine a musician, ordered that Gao’s eyes be put out.

Later, the emperor often ordered that Gao be brought to court to play, and Gao, each time he was led into court, would move his mat a bit closer to the emperor. At last, when he believed the emperor no longer feared him, Gao hid a heavy lead weight in his lute and approached nearly to the side of the throne. Then, in the midst of his playing, he suddenly raised his lute and attempted to strike the emperor dead. But once again, the emperor dodged an assassin, and Gao was immediately executed, ending the last breath of Jing Ke’s plot.

(based on Shiji 86)

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While assassinations of rulers were about as common as dinner parties in Classical China, etiquette demanded that one murder one’s own lord, not the ruler of another state. The accepted goal of assassination was the acquisition of power, although personal revenge could also play a role (recall the attempts of Wu Zixu to bring about the death of the king of Chu, and General Fan’s role here). We do not often see assassination employed as a part of state policy because rulers were not generally the determining factor in an enemy state’s political behavior. To sabotage a state, it was far more effective to murder or bribe key ministers, or to bring about their downfall by means of slander.

The plot of Jing Ke and the prince of Yan may be viewed as a personal matter – the prince had been slighted in Qin, and the *Shiji* tells us that his resentment was strong because he had been a boyhood friend of the First Emperor when both were sons of royal hostages in the state of Zhao. But the political goals of the assassination figure in every version of the story. All who recorded it saw it as an attempt to deflect the whirlwind military campaigns of Qin by eliminating their guiding force, the king – not Li Si.

As we will see, the First Emperor was more than able to live up to the role of universal despot that he fashioned for himself after the conquest. It seems reasonable to portray him sharing the stage with Li Si as a major factor in the rise of the Qin Dynasty.

The future comes in 221 B.C.

The wars of conquest that brought the Qin Dynasty into being were surprisingly brief, lasting under a decade. They are not documented in the historical sources in great detail, perhaps a function of the social dislocations of the times, which may have hampered communications and militated against detailed chronicles being kept outside of Qin, a state not known for literary attention.

The swiftness of this final close to half a millennium of political fragmentation and competition may be an indication of simple failure of will – so bankrupt had the contention of the patrician lords come to appear, that unification under any ruler, even one so greatly feared in the east as the ruler of Qin, may have seemed less dreadful than a continuation of what had come before. When Qi finally surrendered in 221, the last barrier to a reunified empire, surely a great sigh of relief must have followed from ordinary people throughout China.

In understanding the nature of the early Chinese empire, that is, the years following the Qin conquest, it is important to consider the impact of the events of the 220s. That decade had begun with the dissolution of the state of Han by the armies of Qin. This represented the first extinction of a major power by military force since Yue had annihilated Wu almost 250 years earlier, and the event surely shook the security of the elite in every state in eastern China. Yet all the other major powers still remained in place, their weakness not yet evident. It is true that both Wei and Chu had suffered serious encroachments from Qin during the preceding decades, but individual states had become strong in the manner of Qin many times in the former centuries. Even men who proclaimed that the end was near were surely thinking in terms of a generation or two, rather than nine short years. The decade was perhaps the greatest cataclysm in Chinese history.

For centuries, the people of China had anxiously looked for the coming of the future – has any culture ever awaited the coming of a New Age with more patience? It had always been understood that the era that replaced the bloody age of war we call Classical China would be a utopian one, where China was reunited under a sage ruler who would be the successor, if not of Yao and Shun, then of Yu, Tang, and Wen, the dynastic founders. Now, suddenly, the future had arrived, and whatever the reputation of Qin as a barbarian and legalistic state, and of its ruler as a ruthless patrician lord, the Ying clan of Qin was now in receipt of the Mandate.* For the generation of the time, nothing must have seemed so sure as that the new order that was to be created would be one governing the lives of their children and descendants for many generations to come. Heaven had never invested its trust in a short-term dynasty.

And for the thirty-eight year-old king of Qin, what must his position have been like? It is difficult to find any parallel in history. He now ruled the entire civilized world, as he knew it. Yet who was he? He was not a conquering general like Tang, King Wu, Alexander, or Caesar. There is no hint that as king, Zheng ever ventured into the field of battle to establish his abilities as a leader

*For those who are curious, the Qin annals record that the Ying clan was founded by the son of a grand-daughter of the Emperor Zhuanxu. It seems that she gave birth to him after a dark bird dropped an egg to her while she was weaving. She swallowed the egg, and the eventual result was the reunification of China.

of men. As a child, he had lived in hiding with his commoner mother in Zhao, not even entering the state he was to rule until five years before his accession to the throne. He had inherited the throne as a boy and faced, during his earliest years, a most difficult type of challenge – the scandal of his mother’s sexual excesses and the complicity of his chief minister, whom he had grown up trusting as the anchor of his family and who, if the gossips are right, also happened to be his father. Chinese historical texts, for all their voluminous records, are among the world’s most barren when it comes to the personal character of rulers; how are we to imagine the psychological stresses that bore upon the conquering ruler of Qin as the Chinese world watched him take his place beside the demi-gods who had founded previous dynasties?

No turning point in Chinese history was a more decisive pivot than 221 B.C. Yet, in many ways, none involved a more delicate balance of unstable political and personal factors.

The Qin revolution

The First Emperor wished to be the founder of dynasty that would last forever. The accomplishments of the Qin were, as this section will make clear, astonishing. Nevertheless, he has traditionally been regarded as a failure and his ambitions mocked as the grossest form of megalomania. It is true that the Qin Dynasty lasted a mere fifteen years and that the First Emperor himself completed the last of his many imperial tours as a decomposing corpse whose smell was camouflaged by cartloads of rotting fish. How much more astonishing, then, that in so brief a time the Qin managed to thoroughly transform the nature of the Chinese state and establish the structures that would organize and constrain political life in China until the end of the Imperial era in 1911. All this was accomplished before the First Emperor died in 210, at the age of forty-nine, having seen the sun set upon his empire no more than 4,000 times.

Abolishment of feudalism. After the conquest, the central issue was how the *empire* of Qin was to be related to the *state* of Qin. Now that King Zheng occupied the imperial throne, was he to revive the long moribund polity of Zhou and guide it towards its next historical stage, or was he to impose upon the empire the radically different political forms that had come to characterize the legalist state of Qin? Would the Duke of Zhou be his model, or Shang Yang?

At the time of the conquest, Li Si did not yet occupy the highest position in the Qin government. His official position was Commandant of Justice; the prime ministership belonged to a man named Wang Wan, about whom we know virtually nothing. Wang proposed to the king-turned-emperor that the only feasible way to administer a polity the size of China would be on the model of Zhou feudalism. He urged the king to establish his sons as kings in various realms at some remove from the capital and so begin the process of reviving the system of rule by dispersed clan leaders.*

*The capital itself was to be relocated; the city of Xianyang, the royal seat of the Qin state, would become the capital of all China. Ironically, Xianyang was the approximate site of the Western Zhou capital, (near the modern city of Xi'an).

Li Si, however, opposed this plan in strident terms. He maintained that the system of bureaucratic autocracy that Shang Yang had established in Qin was fully competent to administer the empire, and, moreover, he believed that only such a system could avoid the dispersion of power that had, in the end, brought down the Zhou and the more traditional ruling houses of the multi-state period: those of Jin and Qi.

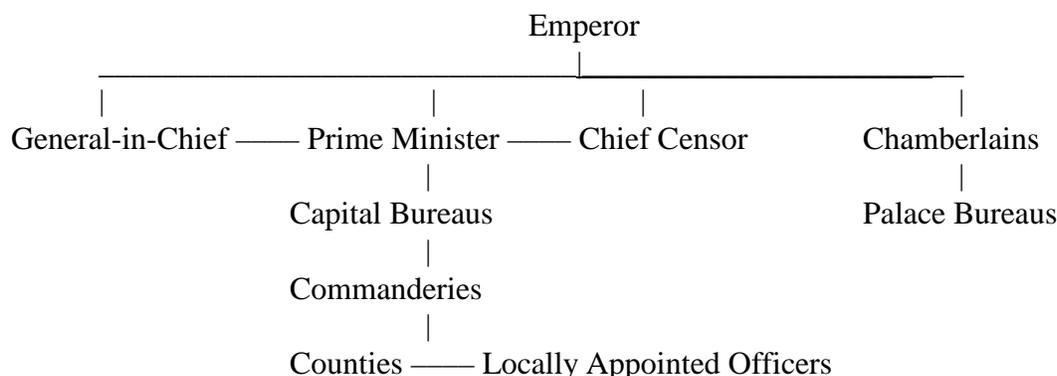
Commanderies and counties. It was Li Si's plan that prevailed, and the result was a transformation of China that may have been the most sudden, widespread, fundamental, and long lasting social revolution in history. During the first months of Qin rule, a new administrative map of China was drawn, which divided the land into 36 military districts called "commanderies." Each commandery was administered by a military governor, whose principal attentions were devoted to regulating his portion of a system of garrisons constructed throughout the empire, with particular attention to regions subject to attack by non-Chinese nomads.

Within each of the 36 commanderies a much larger number of counties were demarcated. Each county was administered by a chief magistrate, who supervised subordinate magistrates in every city, town, and significant village within his domain. The city magistrate was the lowest level of government appointed administrator, but his locally recruited staff and representative headmen designated for neighborhoods and small villages also served the central government.

Relocation of the patrician clans. To ensure that no wealthy clans who represented existing sources of local power could rival the government's influence in the counties, the Qin court financed a massive removal of the patrician clans to the region surrounding Xianyang, where they could be closely supervised. The historical annals tell us that 120,000 clans were relocated in this way, and provided with incomes that would keep them uninterested in fomenting revolt. The walls of their former estate fortress-cities were demolished, both the inner walls surrounding their palaces and the outer walls of military defense, and a massive program to collect and melt down weapons was instituted – there was to be no more civil war in China!

Design of a nationwide government. With the states abolished and the hereditary patrician class curtailed, the Qin needed to put into place new forms of administrative management that would allow them to control so large a country as China. The forms that they created became a basis for later generations of imperial Chinese governments.

Qin government can be conceived as an interlocking of four elements: the emperor at the apex; a nationwide civil and military bureaucracy that was managed by the civil ministers at court through their well-staffed bureaus; a group of nine to eleven palace chamberlains, who managed an extensive and compartmentalized palace bureaucracy; district officers and clerks selected from the local populace by low-level civil officials.



Under this scheme, which was likely derived from Shang Yang’s reforms in Qin, the prime minister held enormous power. The office of the Censorate was commissioned as an investigative arm of the government, empowered to evaluate the conduct of all officeholders and report directly to the emperor. This function was a potentially powerful one, and it became so at certain periods during the Han and later. In the Qin, however, the Censorate does not seem to exercise a great deal of power.

The Prime Minister, Chief Censor, and General-in-Chief were termed the “Three Dukes,” and enjoyed the highest of state ranks. The “Nine Chamberlains” were, in some cases, more intimate with the emperor and could exercise influence beyond their apparent function. During the Han, these positions often became stepping stones to the prime ministership.

We know virtually nothing about the process through which these various positions were staffed. Our operating assumption is that personal connections and irregular solicitations of regional recommendations were employed to find talented men for government service. Our texts have not preserved the names of men who rose from the lower ranks of government. Those with whom we are familiar, such as Li Si, had generally held high office prior to the conquest. It is certain, however, that as in all governments influence was not tied strictly to office. The eunuch Zhao Gao who, as we shall see, did more than any other man to corrupt the Qin court for his own advancement, took control of events even though his official post was only Supervisor of the Palace Carriages.

Economic standardization. During this period, the Qin also set out to erase the diversity that had distinguished the various regions of China. Massive programs intended to unify standards and customs were instituted. Carts and carriages were hereafter to be constructed with uniform axle measurements so that roads throughout the empire would be suitable for travel by vehicles from any place. Old forms of locally minted currency were taken out of circulation in favor of universally distributed imperial coinage. Weights and measures were unified so that goods produced and marketed were in all places priced and taxed equivalently.

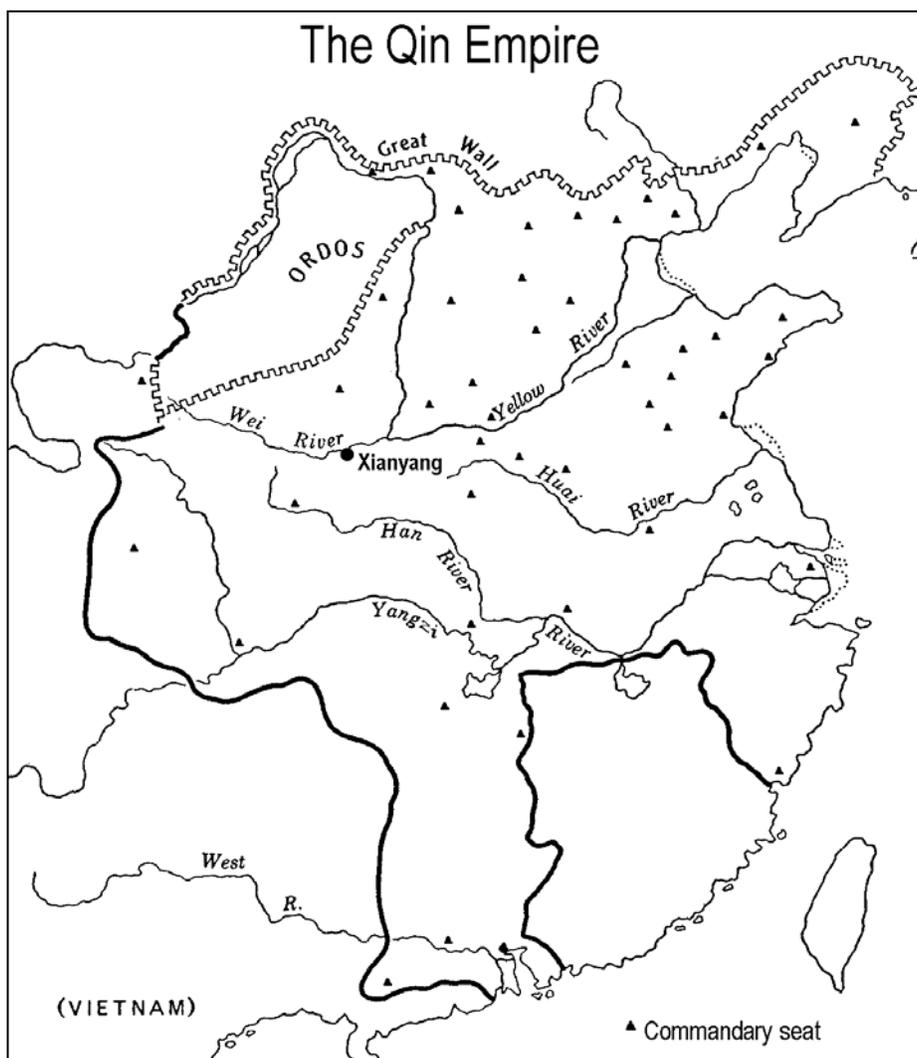
Legal standardization. The Qin system of law was now enforced in all regions of the empire. This meant the promulgation of vast codes of administrative regulations, directives concerning proper forms of criminal investigation and prosecution, and norms for sentencing. The mutual responsibility system that registered five families together as legal units was extended to all regions,

and the Qin systems of official appointments and salaries regulated all levels of offices. In addition, the system of eighteen ranks was extended. All official designations of social prestige and privilege were now to be regulated according to this non-hereditary ranking of merit, based on contributions to the state.

Writing reform. Li Si's name is connected with all these reforms, but most closely with one particular feature of Qin universalization that was entirely new. During the Classical period, the various regions of China had evolved different versions of written script, sometimes making documents unintelligible across state borders. Li Si supervised a project to rationalize the Zhou scripts and create an entirely new version, suitable for use throughout the empire. This new script became a legal standard for all official documents and for instruction, and is the ancestor of modern Chinese characters. More than any other reform, the standardization of script symbolized the cultural unity that Qin intended to bring to the empire.

Internal improvements. In addition to the programs of standardization, the Qin began a massive program of internal improvements intended to modernize China and facilitate commercial and military strength. This program took two principal forms: road building and wall building.

During the brief span of the Qin, the government sponsored the construction of over 4000 miles of highways. These highways were to be designed for rapid transit; they were built to high specifications, broad and tree-lined, constructed to last. Derk Bodde has noted that in terms of length, the Qin in fifteen years constructed a highway system far lengthier than the famous roads of Rome. Like the Roman roads, these highways were so durable that many stretches remain clearly visible today.



It is even more remarkable to realize that these highways were built at the same time as the Qin was erecting the Great Wall. Although the wall that was constructed by the Qin was neither as long nor as solidly built as the currently existing wall, which is a Ming Dynasty restoration only about five hundred years old, it still represented the greatest single construction feat recorded up to that time.

Recall that China had always been distinguished from its neighboring peoples by the social activity of wall-building, which dated from the third millennium B.C. with the rise of Longshan Culture. The presence of Chinese culture was signaled by the erection of city walls in regions to which the Shang and Zhou peoples emigrated, and we have seen that accounts of the Classical city include mention not only of outer walls, but of the inner fortress walls, and neighborhood walls. Successive layers of family, community, and political space was demarcated in early China by the erection of walls. The Qin wall is generally viewed as an expression of China's desire for cultural insularity and military security – it was intended to wall *out* the non-Chinese tribes of the north and west, the only significant military threats to the Chinese state. But when we consider the construction of the Great Wall in combination with the Qin policy of destroying the patrician-built walls within China, it seems just as much a matter of defining by wall the essentially unitary political entity that the Qin wished to create – a walling *in* of the homogenous social space of the new empire.

The greatest of the Qin generals, Meng Tian, was entrusted with the task of supervising the construction of the wall and of the branches of the road system that would serve it. Meng Tian's plan was to make use of extensive sections of defensive walls that had been constructed earlier by all four Classical states that defined China's northern borders: Qin, Wei, Zhao, and Yan. He was empowered to recruit up to 300,000 men to serve as a standing army of construction workers. The logistics of the task were forbidding. The lands where the wall was to stretch were distant from the centers of Chinese population and agriculture. Massive amounts of food and goods would need to be shipped long distances. The wall was erected not over fertile plains, but over very steep mountain ridges and desert wastes, where construction difficulties were maximized. And the length of the wall stretched over 2,000 miles, which was not only a huge area to supervise, but which was also precisely the line along which China was vulnerable to raids by nomads, who, as we will see, were now well organized in a complex and powerful polity known as the XIONGNU.

Military expansion and colonization. Legalist ideology conceived the goals of the state and its ruler solely in terms of increases in wealth and in territory. Now that China was a unified state, the imperative to increase territory took on a new meaning. Whereas it had previously been conceived entirely in terms of the competition among the patrician rulers of the Chinese polity, it now meant extension of that polity itself. Although the Qin enforced a policy of domestic peace and internal disarmament, it also maintained a large network of standing armies and garrisons on the borders. The militaristic culture of the Qin was now simply turned outward rather than in.

The north and west. In the north and west, the Xiongnu had brought into political coherence many of the previously isolated tribes of the steppes. These were nomadic peoples, whose way of life was constrained by the settling of an agricultural population at the northern extreme of the Chinese

cultural sphere. The Xiongnu seem to have had no designs on the major territories of China, but raiding and border warfare, at which their swift cavalry was extremely effective, was a part of the rhythm of life alongside the edge of China, and the Xiongnu were a constant military threat. This was particularly true once the Qin made it clear, by means of the Great Wall project, that China meant to lay permanent claim to lightly settled regions of land from the Ordos plain within the great loop of the Yellow River in the west to the mountains of Korea in the east.

The Xiongnu were formidable adversaries. They were united under the political leadership of a ruler known as the *shanyu* (sometimes there were more than one) who was viewed by the Xiongnu as the peer of the Chinese emperor. Strong *shanyu* were able to coordinate military operations among various tribal constituents of the Xiongnu confederacy along a very long border territory. General Meng Tian, whose duties, in addition to overseeing the Great Wall project, included control of the Xiongnu and pacification of northern lands so as to allow migration and settlement there of a portion of China's farming population, was forced to maintain large standing armies in the field, in addition to his quarter million-plus wall builders.

The south and east. The Qin actively pursued policies of expansion into areas that had previously been, for China, terra incognita. Some of these regions were unsettled pockets within the reach of the traditional settled lands of China. For example, the First Emperor ordered the removal of 30,000 families to the coastal region along the south of the Shantung peninsula, which had been for centuries homeland to tribes known as the Eastern Yi. But the most dramatic resettlement projects were designed to extend the borders of China far to the south.

So successful were these southern settlement efforts during the decade and a half of Qin rule that Chinese administration was established south of the Yangzi in the fertile rice-growing areas along the branches of the West River, all the way to modern Canton. Chinese magistrates operated in areas as remote as northern Vietnam, and the mountain fastnesses of the southeast coastal regions were for the first time explored. Under the Qin, the total area under at least some form of Chinese control was increased by perhaps forty percent, even as an internal restructuring of unprecedented extent was being carried out.

The First Emperor

As mentioned earlier, it is very difficult to cull significant information concerning the character of the First Emperor prior to the Qin conquest; his role in the politics of Qin is unclear, and there is little specifically pertaining to his personal conduct. This situation is dramatically reversed when we come to the years following the conquest.

As most of you know, some years ago, archaeologists working near the tumulus where the First Emperor's tomb lies (still unexcavated, though twice robbed in early times) unearthed an army of larger than life sized terra cotta figures prepared as a guard for the emperor in the next life. Construction of his tomb had been a major preoccupation of the First Emperor during his life, and the scale of this advance guard indicates a great deal about the emperor. The figures were magnificently fashioned, each one uniquely modeled, suggesting that the emperor's actual palace guard had posed for the figures. There were a total of over 7,000 human figures, all equipped with

standard weaponry, and they were accompanied by over a hundred chariots with terra cotta war horses. Surely, such an assemblage as an *adjunct* to the imperial tomb is expressive of an outsized desire for self-exaltation. Yet it may be more significant that the army was composed of terra cotta soldiers, rather than the real article. Four centuries earlier, the First Emperor's ancestor, Duke Mu, had felt it appropriate to order that his palace guard be buried with him, rather than using models of them (see reading 1.4: "Verses from *The Book of Poetry*," p. 18). The First Emperor does not seem to have anticipated his death as justification for the deaths of others (though the *Shiji* says that his concubines were buried with him, upon the order of his successor).

Most of what we know of the First Emperor after the conquest reflects an increasing tendency towards self-aggrandizement, religious obsession, despotism, paranoia, and secrecy.

The imperial title. One of the first problems facing the Qin was deciding the title its ruler should have. The Zhou founders had been titled "Wang," or King. But this title had long since been employed by lesser rulers, starting with the Chu lords in the seventh century. King Zheng already possessed this title and clearly a grander one was called for.

The legendary emperors, as well as Shang kings, had been titled "Di," the name given to the supreme divinity in the early pantheon (see the discussion in reading 3.6: "Shang Religion," pp. 4-12). This is the term that has traditionally been rendered "emperor" in English. Were the Qin ruler to adopt this title, he would be placing himself in a class with the Yellow Emperor (Huang *Di*) as a semi-divine ruler.

A commission of the highest ministers was formed to study the issue of the title (Li Si was among the commissioners). Their finding was that the Qin had "brought peace to the world, made the entire area within the four seas into commanderies and counties, and insured that laws and ordinances proceed from a single authority. From highest antiquity to the present such a thing has never before occurred, nor could any of the Five Emperors equal this." Accordingly, they recommended that the ruler adopt an entirely new title that would designate his superiority to all previous rulers, from the Yellow Emperor on. The title they recommended was Grand Augustness.

It was the First Emperor himself who determined his own title. He liked the ring of "August," so he retained that. But he seems to have wished to maintain a link with the ancient sage emperors, and so he ordered that he be known as "August Emperor," rather than "Grand Augustness." In addition, he determined that it was inappropriate to continue the Zhou practice of bestowing upon late rulers a posthumous title indicative of their virtue or the nature of their reigns, titles such as "Wen," "Wu," "Huan," and so forth. "This allows the son to pass judgment upon the father and subjects upon their ruler," he exclaimed. "It is highly improper!"

Instead, he insisted that all Qin emperors, down to the thousandth and ten thousandth generation, be numbered rather than named. He himself, though, would not have a number. He would be known as the "Initial" emperor, with his successor to be known as "Second Generation Emperor" (note that in this way, in an infinite line of Qin rulers, there would only be one whose name stood out). Hence came the title by which King Zheng was to be known: The Initial August

Emperor of the Qin, *Qin Shi Huangdi*, more commonly called in English “The First Emperor of the Qin.”

The emperor’s title was the first indication that as part of the Qin revolution, the nature of the Son of Heaven was to be fundamentally redesigned as well.

Tours. The *Book of Documents* records that the great emperors at the beginning of Chinese history made regular tours of their realm, traveling far and wide to allow the charismatic influence of their virtue to have its full transforming effect, and to perform sacred rituals to the spirits of the land that only the Son of Heaven could properly perform. We now know that even the late Shang kings made such tours, but this fact (which would not have raised the prestige of the imperial tour) was unknown to the First Emperor, and he believed that the rite of the emperor’s tour had been abandoned after the reigns of the legendary sages.

Accordingly, the First Emperor determined to signal the revival of most customs of the most venerated of culture heroes by embarking on a series of imperial tours. These elaborate ventures, during which the emperor proceeded to truly distant points of his realm, were by no means pro forma ceremonies for the First Emperor. Since his days in Zhao, far to the north, he had lived only in Qin, and had seen nothing of the true cultural heartlands of China, about which he had been educated since his youth.

The emperor began his touring in 220, and traveled widely throughout his reign, dying by the sea in Shantung, far from his capital. In 219, he went to Mt. Tai, the sacred mountain of eastern China, to perform the most holy of all sacrifices to Tian. After having done so, he had a monument erected inscribed with an account of his virtues and accomplishments. This rite became standard for the emperor’s tours, and the *Shiji* has recorded a series of the monumental inscriptions commissioned by the emperor on his tours. Perhaps the greatest of these he erected at Mt. Langye, a promontory on the coast of southern Shantung that so delighted him that he remained there for three months, and subsequently ordered that 30,000 families be moved to the region of Langye to more perfectly establish the Qin hegemony in that area. The Langye inscription gives us some insight into the manner in which the First Emperor viewed himself and his reign.

In the twenty-eighth year of his reign, the August Emperor made a new beginning. He equalized all the laws and regulations and the standards for all things in the world, in order that human affairs should be made clear and that father and son should act in harmony. Sage, wise, *ren*, and righteous, he rendered the principles of the Dao clear.

He brought comfort to the eastern lands, touring east to review the troops stationed there, and once those affairs were complete, his presence approached the sea. The August Emperor’s achievement is diligently to offer assistance to the root affairs, that is, to place agriculture first and eliminate superfluous activities. Hence the black-haired people have become wealthy.

All under heaven are of a single heart's resolve, gripping a single will. The vessels and measures of the land accord with a single standard and words are written in a single style. Wherever the sun and the moon shine down and vessels and carts bear cargo, all live out their allotted life spans and none fails to achieve their heart's wish.

To initiate activities in accord with the seasons, such is the way of the August Emperor. He has brought to propriety diverse customs, sailing the rivers and crossing the land. Caring for the black-haired people, from dawn to dusk he is never slack, eliminating doubts and settling the laws so that all will know what they must avoid.

Local elders all know their tasks; all is ordered by simple norms. Decisions are always on the mark and none is not made with the clarity of a picture.

The August Emperor in his brilliance gazes over the four quarters. The honored and humble, high and low never overstep their proper ranks. None tolerate evil and wrongdoing, all devote themselves to perseverance and integrity. Exerting their utmost in matters large and small, none dares to be remiss. Near and far, in remote and hidden corners, all strive in solemn seriousness. Upright and honest in deep loyalty, they are constant in their devotion to their labors.

The virtue of the August Emperor preserves and brings order to the four ends of the earth. He punishes the rebellious and eliminates harm, gives rise to all benefits and brings blessings down. He times affairs according to the seasons, so the fruits of the earth proliferate. The black-haired people are at peace and no longer take up weapons. The six degrees of family relations all care for one another, never again fearing bandits and thieves. All delight in receiving the teachings and fully understand the laws and regulations.

All within the four quarters, between the heavens and the earth below, is the land of the August Emperor: in the west to the land of the shifting sands, in the south to Beihu, in the east to the sea, in the north to Daxia. Wherever the footprint of man is found, none is not his subject.

His achievements stand above the Five Emperors of the past, his bounty extends to the realm of the beasts. None does not receive the gift of his virtue, all at peace in their homes. . . . (*Shiji* 6.245)

Religious observances. The First Emperor's tours were an indication of the seriousness with which he took his role as a dynastic founder. Another manifestation of this was the urgency with which the emperor sought to fulfill the religious role of the Son of Heaven. The most famous of his exploits in this regard was his enactment of the *fengshan* sacrifice to Heaven.

The *fengshan* sacrifice was the most sacred of all the sacrifices to Heaven. It was well known that every sage king since the predecessors of Fu Xi, many dynasties before the Yellow Emperor, had journeyed to Mt. Tai to offer this supreme sacrifice to Tian.

Only the holder of the Mandate of Heaven could perform this holy rite. Only at the summit of the sacred peak of Mt. Tai, on the border of the regions of Qi and Lu on the Shantung peninsula, could this solemn ritual be enacted. Only, records of the specifics of the sacrifice were somewhat scanty, perhaps owing to the fact that the entire idea of the *fengshan* was in all likelihood the invention of some third century charlatan at the court of Qi!

The First Emperor entertained no suspicions concerning the authenticity of the *fengshan* sacrifice. His only concern was to do the thing with absolute propriety so as to confirm his receipt of the Mandate. For this purpose, on a tour in 218, the emperor summoned all the great Confucian ritual scholars in the regions of Qi and Lu to attend him as he made preparations for the ritual. Seventy men were recruited and joined the emperor's entourage at the foot of Mt. Tai.

When the Confucians were assembled to instruct the emperor, an unfortunate scene ensued. Each scholar had his own version of the proper *li* to follow. One said that the emperor must ride a carriage with wheels wrapped in grass, so as not to damage the ground of the sacred mountain; another said that the ground must be swept and sacrifices offered along the route; others said that mats of certain grasses must be laid down. The emperor listened closely as the Confucians rose one after another, maintaining their contradictory views, each more complicated than the last, until, disgusted, he finally sent the lot of them away and designed the ritual himself.

The fact that the emperor called upon Confucians to advise him suggests, if the story is true, that the Qin court did not maintain the strident anti-Confucian stance that Legalist ideology would seem to demand. It points towards the fact that in his efforts to accord with the precedents of past sage kings, the emperor was, in many respects, trying to satisfy Confucian, rather than Legalist, visions of the ideal ruler – as the inscription translated earlier equally suggests – though it could be argued that the sage emperors were the property of many ideological schools.

In any event, the *fengshan* incident is often cited by historians as a key factor in what ultimately did become a strong anti-Confucian bias. When the First Emperor finally set out on his journey up the mountain he encountered a terrific storm. The wind and rain forced him to leave the path and seek shelter under a tree. When news of the storm was leaked to the Confucians they were delighted and spread satiric accounts of the incident, poisoning further relations between the Confucians and the emperor.

The quest for immortality. More famous than his attempts to fulfill religious prophecy by according with the expectations for a Mandate recipient are the excesses of the First Emperor's personal religious obsessions. It appears from many accounts that the First Emperor set great store by those who professed to possess the arts of magic and immortality characteristic of popular religion, and lavishly expended government funds in pursuit of these superstitious goals.

As mentioned earlier, the First Emperor took a great liking to the region of Langye on the Shantung coast. Langye was the locality most prominently associated with the magical systems of a variety of practitioners known as *fangshi*, or “men of the arts.” During the last century of the Warring States era, Qi had become famous as the home of these *fangshi*, and they were sharp competitors with Confucians, also a native movement of the Shantung peninsula.

One of the best known cults among the many *fangshi* arts was the cult of immortality. Practitioners had specialized knowledge concerning the formulas of certain rare and secret vegetable and mineral elixirs that could engender immortality in ordinary men. They also knew all that mortals could know about the realms and practices of the immortals, many of whom lived on islands in the Pacific opposite the Shantung coast, especially on the island of Penglai.

In 219, after erecting the great inscription at Langye translated earlier, the emperor was approached by an immortalist from Qi named Xu Fu, who informed him of the islands. He told the emperor that the elixirs of everlasting life could be distilled from herbs that grew upon Penglai, and requested funds for a sea voyage to bring these back. He said that for such a voyage to be successful, it would be necessary for him to sail with a large retinue of young boys and girls. The emperor, fascinated by these exotic eastern teachings, eagerly bestowed upon Xu Fu funds adequate to sustain several thousand young people on the proposed trip.

Xu Fu apparently made a number of such trips on behalf of the First Emperor. Several times, he and his crew got near enough to these magical islands to sight them through the mist, but each time, an enormous fish interposed itself and blocked their way, leaving Captain Xu Fu no alternative but to return in defeat, and request (and receive) funds for another try.

Xu Fu was not the only *fangshi* to receive patronage from the emperor. At one point in the *Shiji* account of the First Emperor’s reign (a narrative that must be seen as exaggerating every negative feature), a *fangshi* courtier complains: “The laws of Qin forbid a man from practicing more than one kind of magical art and puts him to death if he fails to show results. Consequently, the 300 experts who now practice the arts of divination by stellar *qi* at court are terrified of offending the emperor and merely flatter him.” It is difficult to determine how, if the law had been applied with the efficiency for which Qin is famous, there could have been any large group of diviners at court, much less hundreds expert in a single divination form. But it is clear that regardless of how they came to be there, the *fangshi* at court understood that their duty, to the state and to themselves, was to cater to the superstitious emperor’s whims, rather than practice any of the arts they had been taught.

The burning and the burying. Few events of the Qin are more famous than the emperor’s orders to burn all the books in China and bury alive all the Confucians. The first of these was probably far more limited in scope than the histories suggest. The second may never have occurred, and if it did, was directed against *fangshi* rather than Confucians. Yet the reputations that Li Si and the First Emperor widely share as essentially evil men derives principally from the reports of these two incidents.

The burning of the books. The First Emperor, who seems to have been fond of adopting the customs of the state of Qi (perhaps to escape the taint of his regional origins) established at his court a new ministerial position that the rulers of Qi had employed. This office, the title of which meant “broad-studied *shi*” is usually rendered in English as “Erudite.” The First Emperor recruited seventy erudites for his court.

The erudites were a consultative body of men who were supposed to represent a wide range of learned viewpoints. Their function at the Qin court was advisory, and they were assembled at the pleasure of the emperor. Among the erudites whose names and skills are familiar to us, there appear to have been two groups: Confucians and *fangshi*. This lack of diversity is only apparent, however, for the term *fangshi* covers practitioners of a very broad range of pseudo-scientific arts.

The presence of Confucians in this entourage is significant. One of the most basic tenets of Confucian tradition in the Classical period had been that the man truly devoted to the Dao of the ancient sages did not serve at courts of debased rulers, both to protect the Tao from being manipulated for immoral ends (as in the case of Mencius in Qi) and to protect himself and his school against the whims of arbitrary rulers who might retaliate against those who admonished them for their misdeeds. That Confucians were willing to serve the First Emperor is a reflection both of the emperor’s desire to confirm the universality of his rule, and of the Confucian’s recognition that, however unexpected Tian’s long-awaited decision concerning the Mandate may have been, the Mandate had indeed been bestowed and the future had arrived.

In 213, the presence of Confucians led to a disaster to that school of unprecedented scale. Here is the *Shiji* account of how the book burning first began.

The First Emperor held a ceremonial banquet at the Xianyang Palace. The seventy erudites all stood before him and pledged him long life. The Master of Archery Zhou Qingchen stepped forth and praised the emperor with these words:

“In former times, the lands of Qin did not exceed 1000 *li* square, but through your majesty’s spirit-like intelligence and brilliant sagacity, all within the four seas has been settled in peace and the barbarians of the south and east have been driven away. Wherever the sun and moon shine, all have submitted as subjects of Qin. The patrician domains have been transformed into commanderies and counties and every person finds spontaneous peace and happiness therein, free from distress of war and strife. May this continue for 10,000 generations! From the beginning of time, there has never been one whose awesome virtue equals your majesty’s!”

The First Emperor was pleased. But an erudite from Qi named Chunyu Yue stepped forward and spoke.

“I have heard that the kings of the Yin and Zhou Dynasties ruled for a thousand years and more by allocating domains to their younger brothers and sons,

and to their meritorious ministers, that they might serve as supports to the throne. Now your majesty possesses all within the seas, but your sons and brothers are mere commoners. If usurpers such as Tian Chang or the former high ministers in Jin were suddenly to appear, you would be without any aid or support – how could anyone save you? I have yet to hear of any ruler who did not take the past as his teacher but was yet able to endure for long. And now Qingchen has spoken like a toady to render the error you are making even graver. He is no loyal subject!” (Shiji 6.254)

The emperor referred Chunyu Yue’s views to his high ministers for consideration, and Li Si replied with a blistering memorial. The gist of his response was to defend the abolition of Zhou feudalism (which had initially been his own proposal) and to attack the very notion that imperially sanctioned measures should be subject to evaluation by any but those officers charged with the responsibility of governance. Li said that the views that Chunyu Yue expressed showed no appreciation of a basic tenet of Legalism, that as times change forms of government must change as well. Instead, men like Chunyu Yue, whom Li Si called “adherents of private teachings,” employ the ideas of the past, in which they have a vested interest, to oppose and subvert the necessary policies of the present.

The climax of Li Si’s memorial was the following proposal, intended to eliminate the source of the private teachings that Li viewed as the enemy of progress.

I request that apart from the annals of Qin all the records kept by scribes be burnt. Any in the empire, other than those who hold the office of Erudite, possessing copies of the *Book of Poetry*, *Book of Documents*, or the teachings of any of the Hundred Schools should be required to deliver them to their local wardens or commanders in order that they be burnt. Should any person dare to cite the *Poetry* or *Documents*, he should be executed in the marketplace. Anyone who cites precedents from antiquity to criticize present policies should be executed along with his entire family. Any officer with knowledge of such crimes who fails to report them should suffer a similar punishment. Anyone who fails to submit banned works for burning within thirty days of the promulgation of this order should be tattooed as a criminal and sent off to forced labor. Books concerning medicine, divination, and agriculture are to be exempted. Anyone wishing to study laws and statutes shall hereafter be permitted to do so only with an officer of state as his teacher. (Shiji 6.255)

This proposal, which was clearly directed principally at Confucian defenders of the Zhou system, was approved by the emperor and made law. This is the great Qin burning of the books.

There is no doubt that this policy was implemented. The loss of ancient texts through this event is the single most dramatic fact facing scholars of early China. There has been much recent debate over the scope of enforcement of this edict and the nature of its effects, but whatever the outcome of those discussions, the simple fact is that the First Emperor, together with Li Si, the student of a Confucian, attempted to destroy the fundamental traditions of Confucianism and the

memory of the Zhou Dynasty and create a new cultural norm that viewed the past as irrelevant and the authority of the reigning emperor the sole standard of value and action. No action in Chinese history better captured the soul of Legalism.

The burying of the scholars. While we are assured of the historicity of the Qin book burning, the incident of the burying of the scholars seems quite likely to be an invention by later Confucians, hoping to further blacken the image of the Qin. If the incident did occur, it was an example of the First Emperor's wrath being directed not against Confucians, but against their competitors, the *fangshi*.

In 212, the emperor learned that some of his most valued *fangshi*, tired of living in fear of his whims, had fled the court. This incident brought to a head the emperor's many dissatisfactions with the magicians and immortalists upon whom he had increasingly placed his hopes. He was furious to hear that some among the *fangshi* were speaking ill of him and that others whom he had sent off on missions in search of magic herbs had never returned or sent word. And Xu Fu, still complaining about that fish which shielded the isle of Penglai, was asking for more money!

In his pique, the emperor is said to have ordered an investigation of all the *fangshi* at court, and apparently each fell all over himself in his rush to slander some other practitioner. Of the several colorful accounts of what next ensued, the following first century B.C. account, which pictures the victims as Confucians, is surely the most imaginative.

The emperor ordered that melons be planted thick in a damp area of a ditch near Li Hill (where the emperor's tomb was under construction). When the melons ripened, he summoned his erudites and learned men to explain how they came to grow there. No two explanations were alike, so the scholars were ordered to go to Li Hill to investigate. Now a trap had been set at Li Hill where these scholars and eminent Confucians were led. When they descended into the ditch and began to argue endlessly with one another the trap was sprung. Masses of earth came tumbling down upon them from above and they suffocated one and all until, in the end, not a sound could be heard.

(cited in *Shiji zhengyi* 121 [3117 n.1])

The closing of the court. About this time, the emperor began to grow increasingly secretive. We are told that one of his *fangshi* convinced him that the cause of his inability to procure the herbs of immortality was due to black magic exercised by some enemy. To counter the magic, it would be necessary for the emperor to conceal his whereabouts so that the magic could not find its target. Consequently, the emperor had a network of elevated walkways and walled roads constructed so that none would be able to detect his movements. Access to the emperor became restricted to a few high ministers and the emperor's eunuch attendants. The court began to close down.

Even the heir apparent felt the effects of this change. When, in 212, he attempted to remonstrate with his father about the growing unpopularity of the state's increasingly severe policies, the First Emperor ordered his son to leave the capital area and travel to the northern borders to supervise the wall-building activities of General Meng Tian.

* * *

If we consider the entire course of the First Emperor's career, we can see that he does, in fact, appear to have had a considerable influence on the fate of the Qin Dynasty. The assassination attempt of Jing Ke prior to the conquest suggests that he was no passive patrician lord presiding over a court of talented ministers, he was a key factor in the rise of the Qin.

After the conquest, the emperor's active efforts to define the role of the new universal ruler probably contributed to the rapid establishment of Qin authority, as reflected in the astonishing accomplishments that were made during the First Emperor's eleven-year imperial reign. Later, his personal obsessions with immortality and his willingness to increase the severity of Qin tyranny beyond its productive limit probably laid the foundations for the downfall of Qin.

The death of the First Emperor

The gruesome circumstances surrounding the death of the First Emperor delighted Confucian historians throughout the centuries of traditional Chinese history. The First Emperor's postmortem fate, as portrayed by the *Shiji*, parallels in some respects the dreary fate that met the greatest ruler of the Classical period, Duke Huan of Qi.

The First Emperor died near Langye, the point from which he had first dispatched Xu Fu to seek the isles of the immortals. The emperor returned there in 210, accompanied by Li Si, his most intimate eunuch attendant, a man named Zhao Gao, the emperor's favorite son, a younger boy named Huhai, and a large entourage of eunuchs and palace guards. While at Langye, he dreamed that he was fighting with the spirit of the sea, who appeared to him as a man. A soothsayer of dreams interpreted this as a sign that the emperor's quest for immortality was, in fact, being obstructed by the spirit of the sea. "The water spirit cannot himself be seen," he told the king, "but he may appear as a huge fish."

This seemed to confirm the reports that the emperor had received from Xu Fu. He ordered that all future expeditions to Penglai be equipped with gear for capturing so great a fish. In the meantime, he himself marched north along the coast, searching for his enemy, the spirit of the sea. At length, he did indeed see a huge fish swimming in the waters near the coast, and using a powerful crossbow, he killed it. But soon thereafter, he fell ill.

Apparently, the spirit of the sea exacted swift revenge. The emperor died within days. The only people who were aware of the emperor's death were his son Huhai, Li Si, the eunuch Zhao Gao, and a few of Zhao's eunuch subordinates. Huhai and the two ministers found themselves faced with a perilous choice. The emperor's rightful heir was a man of good reputation and a close intimate of General Meng Tian, the most powerful of the Qin military leaders. It was clear to all three men that as soon as the prince was informed of the death of his father, he would cast off Li Si and Zhao Gao and appoint Meng Tian – no friend to either – as prime minister. Huhai, one of twenty sons of the emperor, would live out his life in obscurity. The three hatched a plan.

They informed no one among the imperial entourage of the emperor's death. They continued to carry food to the emperor's curtained tent or carriage as before. Meanwhile, they forged a letter to the heir apparent in the emperor's name, instructing him to commit suicide for his unfilial admonitions to his father, and Meng Tian to do likewise. After that had been sent north, they forged a testimonial edict, said to have been entrusted by the emperor to Li Si, designating Huhai as the new heir apparent.

Then they ordered the imperial procession to return to the capital. As the weather was hot, the emperor's corpse soon began to decay, and the plotters ordered that fish be loaded on the carts near the imperial carriage in order to mask the smell.

The revolt of Chen She and the end of the Qin

The story of the final years of the Qin is dominated by the eunuch Zhao Gao, who was able to use his knowledge concerning the events of the First Emperor's death to manipulate his fellow conspirators. While the influence of Zhao and others in his party was corrupting the Qin from within, widespread discontent with the burdens that Qin had imposed on the people of the empire gave rise to attacks from without. In the end, even the skills of Qin's superb corps of generals prolonged the life of the dynasty by merely a few months.

When the First Emperor's heir apparent received the forged letter from his father ordering him to commit suicide along with Meng Tian, he went to notify the general. Meng Tian was suspicious of the letter and he urged the prince to send a messenger to the emperor to confirm that it was genuine. "When a father tells his son to die," replied the prince, "how can the son ask for a confirming letter?" Then he proceeded to carry out what he believed to be his father's order. Meng Tian was unwilling to follow suit, and he was therefore transported back to the capital. He was put in prison in one of the capital districts, and eventually he died there by swallowing poison that had been officially sent to him by the court.

Once news of the crown prince's death was confirmed, the death of the First Emperor was officially announced, along with the forged testament naming Huhai as his successor. Huhai was enthroned as the Second Emperor, and Zhao Gao promoted to the office of Chief of Palace Attendants.

Over the course of the next year, Zhao Gao's personal influence over the Second Emperor allowed him to gain increasing control of events. He employed this influence to arrange for a mass slaughter of the emperor's brothers, who could have challenged his claim to the throne, and to urge the emperor to tighten the laws still further. Li Si, dissatisfied with the course of policy and discovering himself increasingly denied access to the emperor, began making desperate attempt to reverse the course of government.

In the late summer of 209, a minor officer named Chen She initiated the first military challenge to Qin rule in China since the founding of the empire. Chen's revolt was unplanned. During the summer, Chen and a fellow officer were fulfilling normal duties and transporting a band of convicts to garrison labor on the frontier when they encountered torrential rains that

blocked their progress until it was too late for them to keep to their assigned schedule. The punishment for failure to meet such a transport schedule was death. Realizing that he had nothing to lose, Chen She convinced his colleague to join with him and transform their convict band into a private army for the purpose of rebellion. So great was dissatisfaction with the Qin, that in a matter of weeks, Chen's troops were swelled with volunteers from many adjacent regions.

Li Si and Zhao Gao took contrary positions on the matter of the rebellion. Li was an advocate of immediate mobilization and a redirection of Qin military efforts from the border to the regions in revolt. But the revolt had taken place in the east, distant from the capital, and reports of its dimensions were vague. Zhao argued that there was no need to dispatch more than a minor corps of soldiers to suppress the uprising, which he insisted on characterizing as an outbreak of banditry.

Apart from making these arguments, Zhao contrived to convince the emperor that the militant group led by Li Si was attempting to undermine the security of the state in order to gain power for themselves and ultimately seize the throne. In 208, after submitting a strongly worded memorial to the emperor, Li Si was thrown in prison. He was sentenced to be cut in two at the waist along with his son, whom Zhao Gao had managed to implicate in Li Si's "plot" in order to avoid the threat of a family vendetta. As Li Si and his son walked from the prison to the execution grounds, it is said that his thoughts turned back to his home town in Chu. "How I'd like to join you once more, leading our dog out through the east gate of Shangcai to hunt the crafty hare. But there is little hope of that now, isn't there!"

Upon Li Si's death, Zhao Gao was appointed to succeed him as prime minister. Unfortunately for him, however, Chen She's uprising was spreading too rapidly for the Second Emperor to be further deceived. Zhao became increasingly anxious that the reports arriving at the capital about the extent of the revolt would reach the emperor's ears. He determined to take action before that happened, and he enlisted a group of his closest companions, all now high ranking officials of the Qin, to plan a coup d'état.

In 207, Zhao set his forces in motion. Claiming that rebel agents had penetrated the palace, Zhao's forces rushed past the emperor's guard and chased the emperor from the throne room. Pursuing him to the top of a tower, they cornered him there. Left with no alternative, the Second Emperor killed himself.

The final act in the Qin drama was a succession of melodramatic scenes. Zhao Gao, now holding absolute power but without any possible claim to the throne, chose to enthrone a grandson of the First Emperor named Ziyang. After the Second Emperor had been buried in a common grave, Zhao ordered Ziyang to repair to one of the ritual pavilions of the palace and undergo the rites of purification appropriate before a coronation.

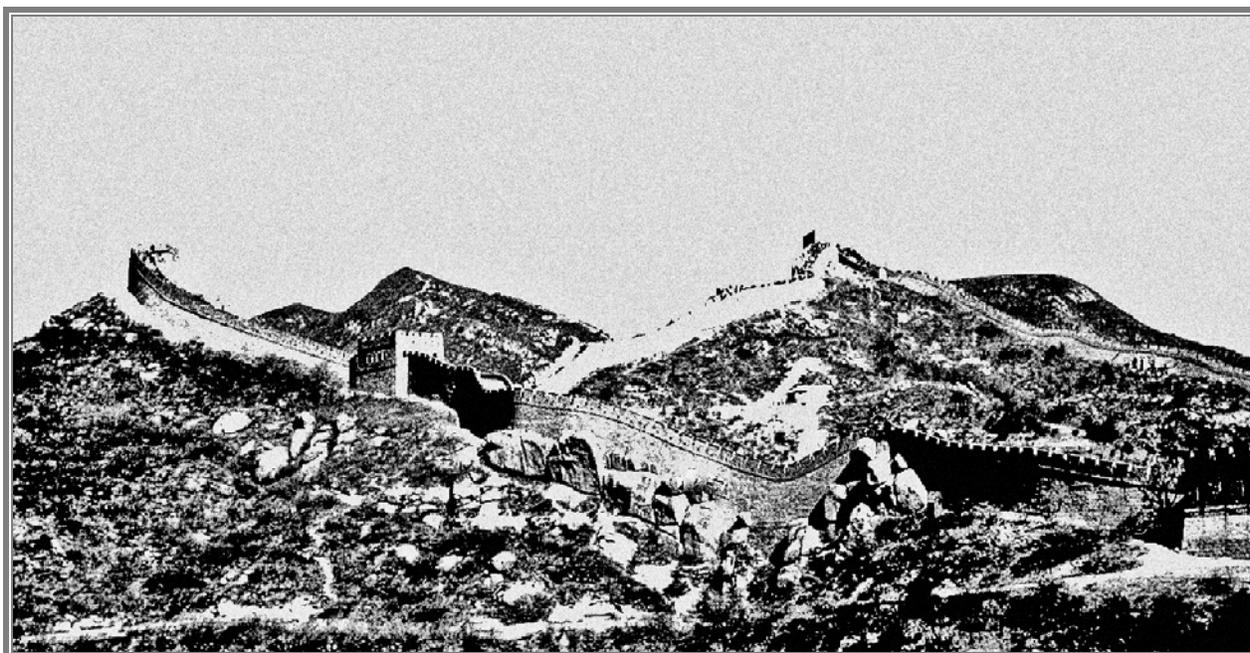
Then Zhao, recognizing publicly for the first time the threat of the rebel forces, declared that the empire had already been effectively dissolved, and that Ziyang would not be crowned as Third Emperor, but rather as the king of Qin. Ziyang, who was engaged in the requisite five days of fasting in the ritual pavilion, was informed of this. He was also told that the impetus for this proclamation was that Zhao Gao had made arrangements with the rebels to divide the empire, and

that he himself was destined to rule a new state in the region formerly commanded by the feudal state of Qin. Zhao's plan was to murder Ziyong during the coronation ceremony and receive the crown himself.

When the day for the coronation arrived, Zhao and the other high officers of the Qin waited at court while a messenger was sent to summon Ziyong from the ritual pavilion. Again and again, the messenger returned saying that Ziyong declined to come. At last, Zhao Gao himself walked to the pavilion to escort Ziyong. But when he confronted Ziyong, Ziyong with his own hand stabbed him to death. Then, marching with his own comrades to the throne room, he announced his deed, ordered the annihilation of Zhao's family, and took the throne.

But after only forty-six days, the troops of the rebel armies marched up to the walls of Xianyang. They were led not by Chen She, who had been killed some time before, but by another man of lowly origins named Liu Bang, who was one of a number of military leaders pressing the rebellion to all regions of the empire.

When Liu, hoping to avoid bloodshed, sent a messenger to request a peaceful surrender, Ziyong tied a noose around his neck, collected the various insignia of the Son of Heaven, loaded them all into a plain white carriage, and drove it out through the gates of Xianyang to the rebel camp, where he surrendered himself and his office to the protection of Liu Pang, and so brought the Qin Dynasty to a close.



A section of the Great Wall as rebuilt during the Ming Dynasty

KEY NAMES AND TERMS

| | | | |
|---------|----------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| Li Si | Jing Ke | standardization | Zhao Gao |
| Xiongnu | <i>fengshan</i> sacrifices | Penglai | Chen She |

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *What were the roles that the First Emperor and Li Si played in the Qin Revolution? Apart from their different official positions, how do their roles seem to differ?*
2. *What features should be listed as the most dramatic aspects of the revolution? Which of these represented the greatest breaks with the Classical past? In what respects did the Qin represent continuity with the late Warring States period?*
3. *List the major ways in which the central government of the Qin exercised control over China.*
4. *What factors shape the “foreign policy” of the Qin, and how is this policy an innovation for China?*
5. *Compare the scale of Qin accomplishments with the factors that we learn brought down the Qin? Why was the Qin so weak?*
5. *Would you classify the Qin period as a progressive period or a repressive period of Chinese history? To what degree are these complementary in the context of the Qin?*

Sources and Further Readings

It would be difficult to recommend a better survey of the Qin state and dynasty than Derk Bodde’s “The State and Empire of Ch’in,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: 1986), pp. 20-102. I have relied heavily on Bodde’s organization and descriptive account.

All sections of the *Shiji* relating to the Qin Dynasty have been translated by Burton Watson in a separate volume of his *Records of the Grand Historian (Qin Dynasty)* [Hong Kong and New York: 1993].