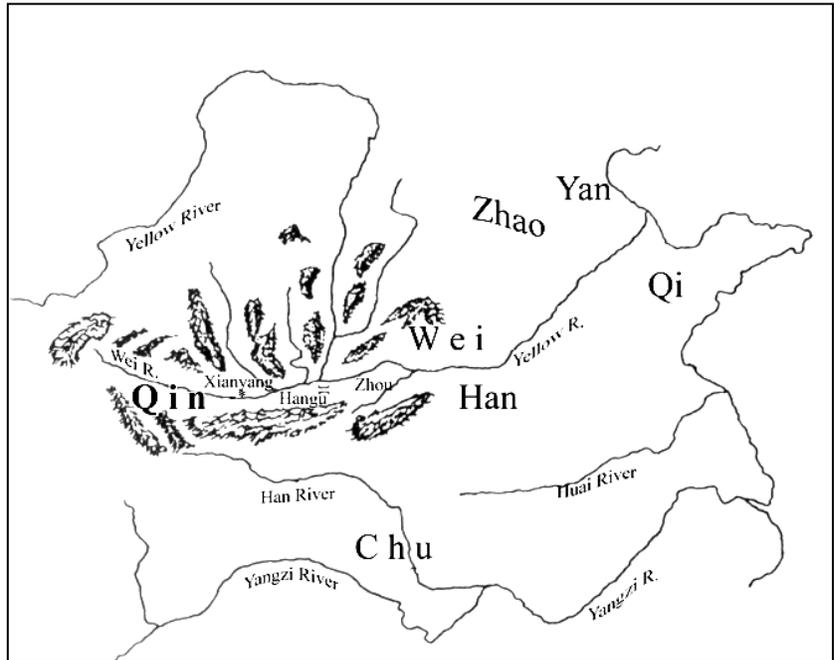


THE QIN REVOLUTION AND THE FALL OF THE QIN

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 BCE in consequence of political loyalty and military service provided to the young Zhou king in Luo-yang, 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 of Qin 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

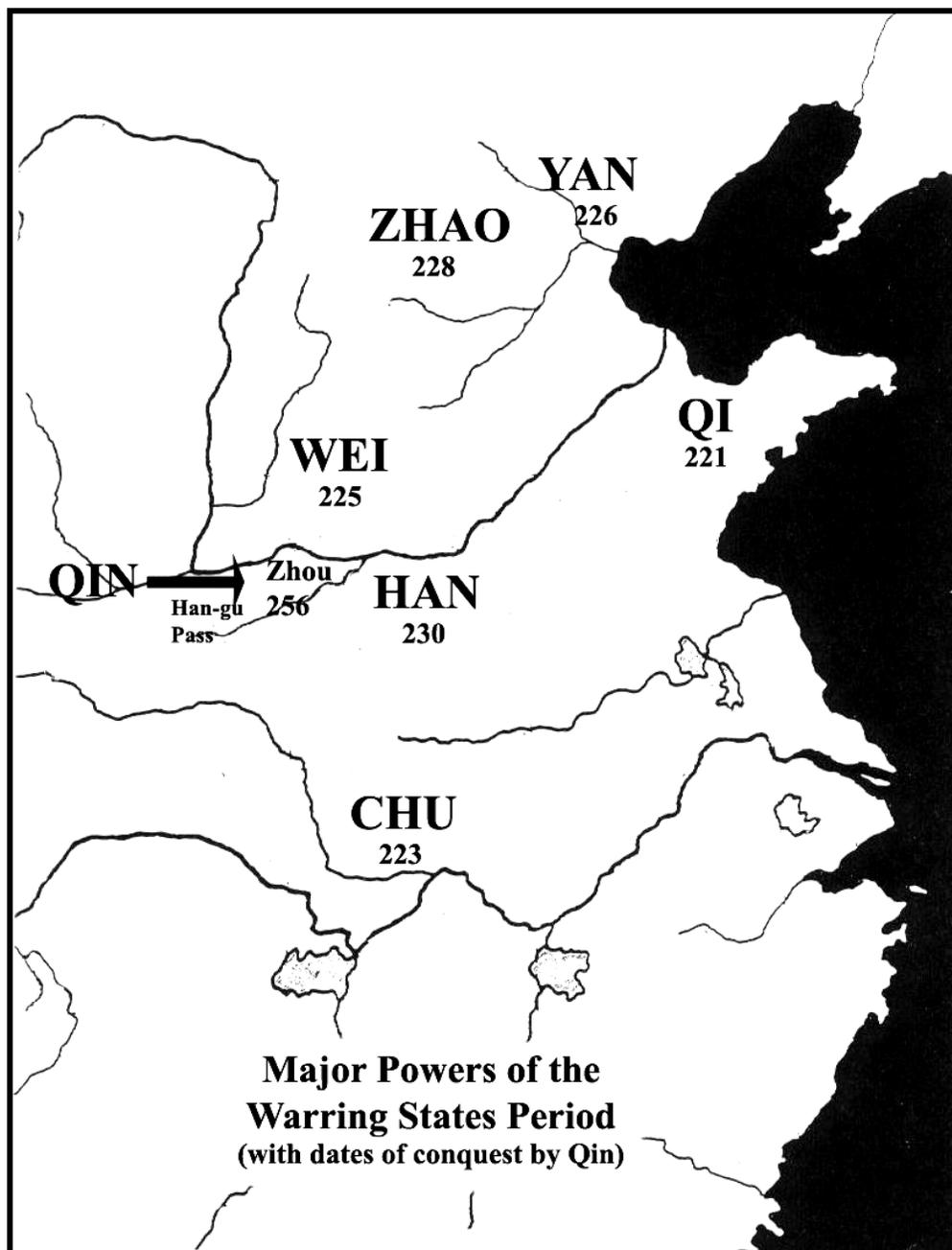


the Chinese cultural sphere. Li Si, the minister who shepherded Qin’s conquest of the other states, captured a widely held view of Qin in a memorial he sent to the king. “To please the ear by thumping a water jug, banging a pot, twanging a zither, slapping a thigh and singing *woo-woo!*--that is the native music of Qin. . . . But now you have set aside jar-thumping and pot-banging and turn to the music of Zheng and Wei.”

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, its capital at

Xianyang, very near the old Zhou homeland center of Zong-Zhou, 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 future comes in 221 BCE

The wars of conquest that brought the Qin Dynasty into being were surprisingly brief, lasting under a decade. They are not recorded in great detail, perhaps a function of the extreme 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.

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 old state of Han by the armies of Qin. 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. Even men who proclaimed that the end was near were surely

<i>Shang</i>	<i>c. 1700 – 1045 BCE</i>	
<i>Zhou</i>	<i>1045 – 256 BCE</i>	
Qin	221 – 208 BCE	◀
<i>Han</i>	<i>206 BCE – 220 CE</i>	
<i>“Six Dynasties”</i>	<i>220 – 589</i>	
<i>Sui</i>	<i>589 – 617</i>	
<i>Tang</i>	<i>618 – 907</i>	
<i>“Five Dynasties”</i>	<i>907 – 960</i>	
<i>Song</i>	<i>960 – 1279</i>	
<i>Yuan</i>	<i>1279 – 1368</i>	
<i>Ming</i>	<i>1368 – 1644</i>	
<i>Qing</i>	<i>1644 – 1911</i>	

thinking in terms of a generation or two, rather than nine short years. The decade was perhaps the greatest cataclysm in Chinese history. One after another, the five hundred year-old ruling houses of the Eastern Zhou states fell before the armies of Qin – the state that had been least regarded as a possible heir to the Zhou and the sage kings of antiquity.

Qin Legalism. The strangeness of Qin was related to the fact that the ruling house of the Qin state had adopted, in the fourth century BCE, a revolutionary new theory of government, designed by a Prime Minister of the day who had come to Qin from another state which had no use for his policies. This theory of government came to be known as “Legalism,” and during the third century BCE, its ideas became widely known due to the successes of reforms implemented in Qin.

Legalist thought was a rejection of Confucian beliefs in the value of creating social order through the rule of virtue and ethical example, and was equally a rejection of *laissez-faire* Daoist ideas of the minimalist state. Legalists held that the key to effective state governance was the cultivation and use of absolute power, and the ends to which power was to be put were simple: the realization of state expansion and state wealth (by which was meant the wealth of the ruling house). Legalists viewed the old institutions of privilege and protocol as the enemies of effective governance. They approved the long accelerating trend away from granting power and prestige on the basis of hereditary

privilege, and championed a highly mechanistic model of assuring that men of talent would be appointed to positions of responsibility. For Legalists, the sole hereditary officer of the state should be the ruler, whose certain accession on the basis of family ties assured the stability of the state. Everyone else should be appointed to position solely on the basis of talent and accomplishment, and they should be hired and fired on the command of the ruler.

Although the early Legalist adherents in Qin did not possess sufficient power to destroy all the hereditary patrician clans of the state, in the century before the Qin unified China, they were able to strengthen the Qin monarchy greatly and diminish the role of the aristocrats. More and more Qin territory came under the direct control of the Qin rulers, rather than being aristocratic fiefs, and within those royal territories, officers of state were appointed directly by the ruler, on the basis of their qualifications, rather than the social standing of their families.

Legalists were also known for the stress they laid on well designed codes of administrative and criminal law. They believed that the well designed state did not need to depend on the virtue or good will of its citizens. Rather, if carefully structured legal codes were written to control people's behavior, if the people were clearly informed of what the codes said, and if the codes provided absolute standards of reward for good behavior and strictly enforced punishments for violations, people would be so motivated by greed for rewards and fear of certain punishment that they would simply obey the law in all respects. The goal was, in essence, to design a state that would be entirely predictable, because all human initiative had been reduced to obedience to explicit rules, motivated by fear of certain punishment, and desire for reward. A famous example by a prominent Legalist thinker illustrates the way a Legalist ruler should enforce this type of system:

Once Marquis Zhao of Han got drunk and fell asleep. The keeper of the royal hat, seeing that the duke was cold, laid a robe over him. When the marquis awoke, he was pleased and asked his attendants, "Who covered me with a robe?" "The keeper of the hat," they replied. The marquis thereupon punished both the keeper of the royal hat and the keeper of the royal robe. He punished the keeper of the royal robe for failing to do his duty, and the keeper of the hat for overstepping his office. It was not that he did not dislike the cold, but he considered the trespass of one official upon the duties of another to be a greater danger than cold.

By enforcing narrowly framed rules in this way, without allowing personal sentiment or favoritism to influence the function of the system, the ruler, himself and through his officers, could control his state with little effort – so little effort, in fact, that some Legalists portrayed the art of rulership in the Legalist ideal state as a form of Daoist

wuwei, despite the fact that this spontaneously functioning society was not guided by the natural forces of the cosmos, but instead by the well crafted legal policies of the state government.

Legalism was a highly mechanistic portrait of government. Its ideas and institutions were, in fact, the earliest fully developed form of bureaucracy in world history. Because it advocated a tightly designed hierarchy of governance and valued merit over heredity, it shared some features in common with Confucianism. However, Legalism had no use at all for ritual *li* or the precedents of history, and was a completely amoral philosophy, aiming not at ethically good people or even an ethically good government, but only at a large and powerful state and a ruling house with the wealth necessary to preserve and enjoy power. Where Confucians pictured a future utopia of good people ruled by sages, the Legalists pictured obedient subjects, working feverishly for their ruler's own benefit out of fear of punishment and a greed for reward. For this reason, Confucians viewed Legalists as the enemies of the good.

Even more distressing, the Legalist policies of Qin had yielded the results that the early Legalists had predicted. Qin had become a strong, wealthy, organized state, free of a self-serving aristocracy and obedient to the ruler's direction

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. All traditional histories of China agree in portraying the sudden final conquest by Qin as an event viewed as a catastrophe by the people of the time.

And for the thirty-eight year-old king of Qin, Ying Zheng (always called the First Emperor in histories), what must his position have been like? It is difficult to find any parallel in history. He was not a conquering general like King Wu of the Zhou, Alexander in Greece, or Caesar in Rome. There is no hint that as king of the pre-conquest state of Qin Ying Zheng ever ventured into the field of battle to establish his abilities as a leader of men. As a child, his father had been no more than an insignificant junior son with no expectation of succeeding to the throne of Qin. A series of strange events had changed all that, but not before the boy Ying Zheng had passed his childhood in the distant state of Zhao, where he had lived in hiding with his commoner mother at a

time when his father was rising to power in Qin. Ying Zheng did not even enter the state he was to rule until five years before his accession to the throne. He had inherited the throne when still a boy and faced, during his earliest years, a most difficult type of challenge – his mother was disgraced in a wild sexual scandal and his prime minister and chief mentor, whom some reports claim as his secret father, was involved. Ying Zheng, among his early acts as a young king, was forced to banish his mother and his closest male senior companion and counselor. Now, quite suddenly, this lonely man found the world fall into his absolute power. He now ruled the entire civilized world, as he knew it.

No turning point in Chinese history was a more decisive pivot than 221 BCE. In many respects, the Qin conquest and subsequent reshaping of the Chinese state was the most dramatic social and political revolution in human history. 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.

Abolition 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 “feudal” structure of the 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?

At the time of the conquest, some ministers of Qin 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. These men urged the king to do what the Zhou founders had done 800 years earlier: 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 minister Li Si, one of the most influential Legalist thinkers, opposed this plan in strident terms. He maintained that the system of bureaucratic autocracy that had been established in the old state of Qin a century before was fully adequate 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.

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.

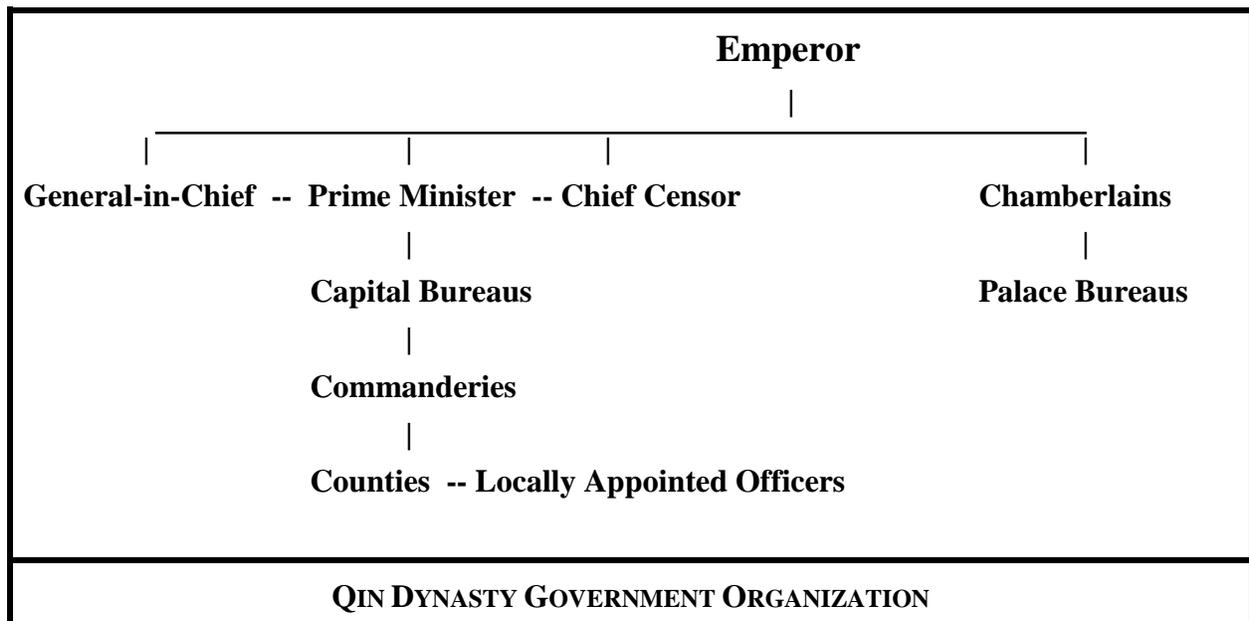
Within each of the 36 commanderies a much larger number of counties were demarcated. Each county was administered by a chief magistrate, who supervised subordinate magistrates in every city, town, and significant village within his domain. The city magistrate was the lowest level of government appointed 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 the capital city of 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 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. 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.



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 4,000 miles of highways. These were designed for rapid transit; they were built to high specifications, broad and tree-lined, constructed to last. 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.

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.

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 network of standing armies and border garrisons. The militaristic culture of the Qin was now turned outward rather than in.

In the north and west, the Qin made it clear to the nomadic tribes of that region, 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. In 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 Shandong 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, where 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 and Chinese magistrates operated in areas as remote as northern Vietnam. Under the Qin,

the total area under at least some form of Chinese control was increased by perhaps forty percent.

The First Emperor

It is difficult to find 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, when, for a time, Ying Zheng, the first “emperor” of China, was by far the most powerful man on earth, overseeing a revolution of unprecedented scale and with an impact lasting to this day. 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. This is the term that has traditionally been rendered “emperor” in English. Were the Qin ruler to adopt this title, he would be clearly signalling his status 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.

Ying Zheng determined that he should be known as “The August Di” -- “August Emperor.” 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 Shih Huang-Di*, 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 ancient *Book of History* records that the great emperors at the beginning of Chinese history made regular tours of their realm. 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 Shandong, 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.

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. . . .

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.

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 *feng-shan* sacrifice to Heaven.

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 Shandong peninsula, could this solemn ritual be enacted. At enormous expense, the emperor, accompanied by a vast entourage, made a ritual journey from the capital west of the Yellow River's bend, to Mt. Tai in the far east. There, battling furious winds and rains, the Emperor climbed to the peak of the mountain to commune with the highest powers and fulfill his image as a world-transforming Son of Heaven.

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 Shandong 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 Shandong 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 Shandong 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.

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. 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. In 213 BCE, a Confucian advisor to the Qin court had the temerity to reopen the question of whether to restore the old feudal state system of the Zhou. At a banquet for the Emperor, after the toasts of sycophants had warmed the Emperor's heart, this Confucian, a man named Shunyu Yue, stood up 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 your ministers have spoken like toadies to render the error you are making even graver. They are no loyal subjects!”

Prime Minister Li Si, the principal designer of the anti-feudal revolution, was furious. He responded with a blistering memorial. Men like Shunyu Yue, he said, 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 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.

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. No action in Chinese history better captured the soul of the Legalist Qin Dynasty.

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. But the story is too good to miss.

In 212, the emperor learned that some of his most valued courtiers, tired of living in fear of his whims, had fled. This incident brought to a head the emperor's many dissatisfactions with both Confucians and with the magicians upon whom he had increasingly placed his hopes of immortality. He was furious to hear that some among these men 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, 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.

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.

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 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. Hu-hai 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, 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 Ziyang 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 Ziyang from the ritual

pavilion. Again and again, the messenger returned saying that Ziyang declined to come. At last, Zhao himself walked to the pavilion to escort Ziyang. But when he confronted Ziyang, Ziyang 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, Ziyang 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 Bang, and so brought the Qin Dynasty to a close.