

The Qin Dynasty

Emerging from the chaos of the Warring States period, the Qin (or Ch'in) Dynasty conquered its rivals and unified the country. The Qin dynasty was one of the shortest in all of Chinese history. It lasted only about fifteen years. But it was one of the most important dynasties, because it united China for the first time in centuries, and unified China as a single state—in many ways, for the first time.

Foundations of the Unification

The forces that allowed the Qin to grow from a small state to a power that dominated China had developed before the first Qin emperor was born. The state started out as a fief in the west bestowed by King Ping, the first of the Eastern Zhou kings, from the lands around the old Zhou capital in the west. As one of the powerful states of the time, Qin competed with its rivals during the Eastern Zhou period. But for centuries it was just one of several states, none of which could overpower the others. Qin was home to perhaps the strongest traditions of Legalism, however, which advocated the importance of the state at the expense of the individual. Rooted in Legalist philosophy, the Qin were known for being ruthless and ignoring gentlemanly etiquette and proper battlefield protocol in order to win at all costs.

Perhaps one of the most important figures in building the Qin state into a force capable of dominating China was the Legalist statesman Shang Yang. In the fourth century BC he became the adviser to the Qin king, and from this position embarked on a number of reforms. As a Legalist, he believed that all people should be loyal foremost to the state, and enacted laws to force subjects of the kingdom to act in ways that helped the state: he forced them to marry early, have many children, and produce certain quotas of food. He discouraged commerce in favor of agriculture. Most importantly, he stripped the nobility of power, and centralized authority in the king. Thus, the independent and disloyal nobility that had plagued the Zhou would not pose a problem.

Ironically, Shang Yang was executed for suspicion of disloyalty to the state, the very crime he most ardently opposed. Nonetheless, his reforms were kept in place, and they meant that the Qin state was the most centralized and efficient of all the Chinese states. By 246 BC, when Ying Zheng ascended the throne, the state of Qin was the most powerful state in China and had already begun to conquer its neighbors. Under Ying Zheng, who was assisted by his cunning adviser Li Si, the remaining states of China would be rapidly subdued and integrated into the expanding Qin Empire.

The First Emperor of China

By 221 BC, Ying Zheng had completed his conquest of China. With the entire country under his rule and the Zhou kings gone, he claimed the Mandate of Heaven and ruled over all China. Instead of taking the traditional title of king (*wang*), however, Ying Zheng claimed a loftier title, *Huangdi*, which is usually translated as “Emperor.” *Huangdi* was previously a title reserved for the ancient, semidivine rulers of China from the legendary past, and the title had connotations of divinity, literally meaning “Holy

Emperor.” Ying Zheng was above a king, and he is henceforth known by his new name—Qin Shi Huang, or First Qin Emperor.

With the firm Legalist roots of the Qin Dynasty, Qin Shi Huang presented himself as the unchallenged leader of China and ruled as a totalitarian autocrat. All schools of philosophy besides Legalism were suppressed. Qin Shi Huang’s adviser, Li Si, advised the emperor to burn all books that were not beneficial to maintaining Qin power. Philosophical texts were destroyed, especially Confucian texts, as well as historical works that covered any history that was not about the Qin state. Later, Qin Shi Huang ordered scholars of non-Legalist philosophical schools to be buried alive, supposedly in revenge for being deceived by a pair of alchemists, but perhaps also to unite China under Legalist thought. Qin Shi Huang’s burning of books and execution of philosophers marks the end of the Hundred Schools of Thought. The philosophy of Mohism was completely wiped out.

Qin Shi Huang instituted a number of grand building projects. After inconclusive warfare with the pastoralist nomad tribes that lived to the north of China, Qin Shi Huang had a large defensive wall built in the north. This wall served as the foundation from which, in later centuries, the Great Wall of China would eventually be built. Qin Shi Huang also ordered the construction of the Lingqu canal, a massive, man-made waterway that connected the Xiang and the Li Rivers and allowed the emperor to more easily transport soldiers and supplies. Thousands of workers died in order to quickly create such building projects, but this was in line with Legalist philosophy, which held that the interest of the state was worth the lives of its subjects.

With the guidance of Li Si, Qin Shi Huang set about standardizing weights and measures, creating a single currency, and expanding roads and other methods of travel and communication. A standardized system of writing was created for all of China, and the burning of books helped eliminate the old, outdated scripts. Everything in the kingdom was standardized, down to the approved size of a chariot’s axel.

Qin Shi Huang and Li Si also continued to weaken the nobility, to keep them from becoming too powerful, as had happened under the Zhou. In place of the nobility, they developed an organized bureaucracy, all under the authority of the emperor. The bureaucrats carried out the emperor’s will, and they were rewarded with influence, but not land.

The Collapse of the Qin

The most obvious weakness of the Qin Empire, centered on Qin Shi Huang, was that it was his authority and personality that kept China unified. He survived numerous assassination attempts, but his death, and the disintegration of his empire, was a major threat. Perhaps he worried about this, for he started to become obsessed with finding ways to prolong his life and achieve immortality. He employed alchemists and sorcerers, and went on journeys with his court in search of a life-giving elixir. In the end, his desire to live forever is what killed him. He died ingesting a poisonous concoction in hopes that it would give him immortality.

Perhaps the greatest building project of Qin Shi Huang was the one built for his death. Before he died, he had created a massive tomb for himself on Mount Li, near

modern-day Xi'an, and after he died and was buried there. The tomb was filled with thousands upon thousands of life-sized (or larger) terracotta soldiers, meant to guard the emperor in his afterlife. This terracotta army, which was armed with real weapons, had been long forgotten when it was rediscovered in the twentieth century.

After Qin Shi Huang died in 210 BC, his death was initially kept secret by Li Si and Zhao Gao, the emperor's chief eunuch. They knew the empire would fragment on news of Qin Shi Huang's death. Qin Shi Huang's eldest son and heir apparent, Fusu, had been sent off to fight a campaign in the north, because he had argued with his father about executing scholars. Li Si and Zhao Gao knew that they could not control Fusu, so they quickly took steps to make Qin Shi Huang's younger son, Huhai, emperor. Fusu was killed, and Huhai was made the new emperor—called Qin Er Huang, the Second Qin Emperor—before anyone really knew what happened.

Li Si and Zhao Gao started fighting over power, however, and Zhao Gao managed to get Li Si, along with his entire family, executed. He forced the new, young emperor to do as he said, but his orders ended up being cruel and inefficient. With people angry at Emperor Qin Er Huang's mismanagement, and claiming that Fusu should have been emperor, a number of rebellions broke out. The states of Chu and Han, which had been conquered by Qin Shi Huang, declared themselves independent once more, and sought to overthrow the Qin Dynasty. Although initially in denial, Qin Er Huang soon had to face the fact that the empire was slipping from his hands. He tried to blame Zhao Gao and remove him, but Zhao Gao had the loyalty of the soldiers and forced Qin Er Huang to kill himself.

The new emperor, Ziyang, finally executed Zhao Gao, but by then the rebellions had grown too powerful. Ziyang tried to negotiate with the rebels by declaring himself one king among many, but the rebels had no reason to agree to this. The armies of Chu attacked and defeated Ziyang, and he was killed. Within a year, the Qin capital of Xianyang was destroyed, and the Qin Dynasty was no more.

Despite Qin Shi Huang's boast that his dynasty would last 10,000 generations, it survived only fifteen years. But that fifteen-year period was of immense importance to Chinese history. It saw a standardization and unification of Chinese society that enabled the Chinese to think of themselves as members of a single kingdom. It also proved that one dynasty could effectively rule all of China. Though the fall of the Qin Dynasty plunged the state into civil war, it was not long before others learned from these lessons, and unified China under a more enduring dynasty. The Han Dynasty, which soon replaced the Qin, would rule for over four hundred years, and usher in the golden age of ancient China.

Summary:

- The state of Qin was rooted in Legalist philosophy, and the reforms of the Legalist statesman Shang Yang, including encouragement of agriculture and a weakening of the nobility, helped make Qin the most powerful state at the end of the Warring States period.

- Under Ying Zheng and his adviser Li Si, the Qin state conquered the other Chinese states. Ying Zheng declared himself emperor (*Huangdi*) and changed his name to Qin Shi Huang. This marks the beginning of the Qin Dynasty.
- Qin Shi Huang, with the help of Li Si, centralized the state, imposed standard weights and measures, standard writing, and improved travel and communication. They created a loyal bureaucracy. However, Qin Shi Haung's rule was autocratic, and he had books burned and scholars killed in an attempt to impose Legalist thought.
- After the death of Qin Shi Huang, the Qin Dynasty collapsed, lasting only fifteen years. Nonetheless, its unification of China served as an example, and China was soon to be reunified by the Han.