Chapter 7: Qin: The First Unified Empire

During the Warring States period, many people fervently hoped that a powerful king would emerge to unite China and usher in a great new age of peace and stability. Few would have predicted that this king would hail from the small northwestern state of Qin. Situated between the rest of China and the raiding "barbarian" tribes of the frontier, Qin was regarded as an uncouth buffer zone not worth much notice. The eastern states of Zhao, Wei, Han, Song, Qi, Yan, Chu, Lu, and Zhou thought of themselves as the repositories of Chinese culture and scholarship.

These civilized states hired sages and advisers who leaned toward modified Confucian ideals. For the most part the sages de-emphasized the ideal of humility and virtue expected of the ruler. Instead, they emphasized obedience to and respect for the king (to be exhibited by courtly rituals and protocol), along with the study of earlier--and, to their minds, more virtuous--times. The Qin state, however, had little interest in these traditions of ritual, politeness, and erudition. Legalism, very different from this prevailing Confucian Chinese thought, appealed more to the Qin.
In 352 b.c. the Qin king Xiaokong selected Shang Yang, a prominent early Legalist, as his prime minister. Shang Yang advised that if the ultimate goal was supremacy, the Qin ruler should alter the traditional social and administrative structure of his realm so that resources could be focused toward defeating militarily the other states. Shang Yang's approach was deeply pragmatic: the king, he counseled, should institute "whatever works." King Xiaokong ultimately enacted Shang Yang's five-point program:

1. Redistribute the land. Starting with unassigned land, and then encroaching on the hereditary nobles' productive domains, land was given directly to the peasants who farmed it (peasants were even permitted to buy and sell land). This simultaneously reduced the wealth of the nobles--thus making it less likely that they could successfully rise up against the king--and encouraged the peasants to make their land as productive as possible. Peasant prosperity, in turn, created wealth for the state that could be used to support a strong army.

2. Divide the state into administrative districts. This further undercut the power of the nobles (who had previously administered the realm for the king) and concentrated authority with the central government. It also ensured that the central government could collect more of the state's wealth for itself.

3. Change the taxation system to break the traditional loyalty to family (and replace it with loyalty to the state). Those homes that included two or more grown sons, for example, had to pay double tax.

4. Establish a severe penal code based on collective responsibility. Several families were organized into a group. If one member of the group did wrong, the others were bound to turn the offender over to the authorities; otherwise they were all assigned the same punishment (typically violent death, regardless of the infraction).

5. Establish a merit system whereby those who distinguished themselves in war would be rewarded. A nobleman who failed to distinguish himself in battle lost his noble status, a fact that was surely an incentive to fight bravely. Commoners in the army--a universal draft of 15-year-olds supplied a huge fighting force of crossbow-bearing foot soldiers--were motivated by the promise of more freedom and the possibility of advancement and prosperity. And because the state of Qin had more iron deposits than other states, it was able to outfit its army with more effective iron swords and crossbows, giving Qin an advantage in battle.

After the implementation of Lord Shang's five-point program, the centralized wealth of the Qin state grew steadily over the next 100 years. And paralleling that increase in wealth was a rise in Qin military might (a major ingredient of which was its cavalry).

In 255 b.c. the Qin king Zhaoxiang defeated the last Zhou king in the capital of Luoyang. Because the Zhou had remained--in theory if not in fact--China's ruling dynasty, Zhaoxiang assumed that his victory meant he could now claim rulership over all of China. But just as they had long ignored the weak Zhou rulers, the other states now ignored the upstart Qin. It was clear to the Qin that they must also conquer all the other states to enforce their claim on China. It took just 23 years for the Qin war machine to vanquish one state after another under Zheng, the next Qin king. Fear of "the Qin Tiger," as Zheng became known, was so great that in 221 b.c., the final two states gave up without a fight.

**Founding of the Qin Dynasty**

After the capitulation of the last warring state, Qi, King Zheng established the new Qin dynasty and, as was the custom, changed his name. Recalling the name of the legendary Yellow Emperor--Huang Di--Zheng dubbed himself Shi Huang Di (pronounced "sher-hwahng-der"), the "First High Emperor."

The new emperor set about centralizing authority in all of China, as his forefathers had earlier done in the state of Qin. First, Qin Shi Huang Di dismantled China's feudal structure. He built a grand new capital in
Xianyang (near today's Xi'an) and made the former rulers of each of the conquered states move there so that he could keep an eye on them. The later historian Sima Qian wrote that an exact replica of each ruler's palace was built in a vast, carefully guarded park. There the former rulers and lesser nobles could entertain one another and play, but they were not allowed to rule their conquered states. Their weapons were melted down and recast into bells, statues, and other harmless objects. In all, some 120,000 families were moved to Qin Shi Huang Di's guarded park.

Everyone was declared equal under the law. Hereditary titles were abolished, and all land that had formerly belonged to the elite was redistributed to the peasants, who paid their taxes to the central treasury.

The emperor divided the realm into 36 major districts called commanderies (jun) and assigned a loyal Qin administrator to each. Each commandery was further divided into counties (xian). Recommendations, orders, and reports were required to be in writing, and the volume of bamboo-strip writing traveling back and forth between the 36 commanderies and the capital was apparently staggering. It was said that the emperor himself—as hard a worker as any of his administrators—would not retire for the night until he had processed 120 pounds of reports and memos over the course of the day.

Qin Shi Huang Di was guided by seven principles for rulers that had been enunciated by the Legalist philosopher Han Feizi:

1. Know and compare all the various possibilities.
2. Punish failure with unvarying severity to discourage others from breaking the law.
3. Grant generous and reliable rewards for success.
4. Listen to all views, and hold the proposer responsible for every word.
5. Issue unfathomable orders and make deceptive assignments to keep potential enemies under control.
6. Conceal one's own knowledge when making enquiries of a minister; that way you can see if you are being lied to.
7. Speak in opposites and act in contraries to keep the element of surprise in your own sphere. The emperor promulgated a written code of law, similar to the one that had helped transform the small Qin state into China's greatest power. The new code replaced all other laws in the empire.

It was detailed and harsh. Citizens were expected to inform on their neighbors and even family members if a law were broken. Criticizing the law was punishable by death.

Qin Shi Huang Di intended to make his dynasty so great and powerful that it would last forever. In 213 B.C., at a banquet for the emperor, a guest suggested that previous dynasties had lasted for centuries because they had adhered to old traditions. This was taken not simply as a criticism of the emperor's break with tradition, but also as an implication that the Qin dynasty would not last. Li Si, the emperor's Legalist prime minister, replied to the imprudent speaker that the past must not be used to discredit the present. And the dinner conversation provoked an event that would arouse bitter resentment among Chinese people through the ages: Qin Shi Huang Di decreed that the works of the past, especially the literature compiled and written by the Zhou Confucian scholars, be destroyed. He put a death sentence on anyone who hid, or even quoted, the ancient writings. He sent his police throughout the empire, with orders to burn any book they found except for practical how-to manuals on agriculture and medicine. When Confucian scholars refused to let their libraries be burned, they were beheaded, buried alive, or, if lucky, sent to work as slaves on the Great Wall—and their books were set to flames anyway.
So the empire, whose dynasty took the color black and the element water, was finally stabilized. The peace, however, was maintained only through strict and brutal control.

Foundations for the Future

Qin Shi Huang Di was a consummate administrator. He realized that his empire would work smoothly only if everything of importance were standardized, from the central capital to the farthest border post. He made the Qin version of writing the official one. This enabled all reports and orders to be processed without the need for translators and special scribes. Qin Shi Huang Di standardized the measures to be used throughout the empire, which facilitated the collection and recording of taxes and improved trade throughout the vast lands. The emperor minted round coins with square cutouts in the center, which made the coins easy to string and minimized the amount of metal needed; these coins remained in use in China into the early 20th century. He built roads throughout the empire to improve communication and trade, and he even set the width of wheel axles so that all vehicles would fit on these roads. Qin Shi Huang Di’s ideas regarding the importance of efficient administration provided the foundation for the characteristic imperial Chinese bureaucracy of the next 2,100 years.

With the resources of a vast empire to draw on, and with virtually unlimited power over his subjects, Qin Shi Huang Di could think big. A total of 700,000 workers spent his entire reign building his tomb and sculpting a vast terra-cotta army to guard him in the afterlife. Vast amounts of materials and labor were expended on construction of the new capital and the royal park of palaces, and providing for the day-to-day living expenses of the tens of thousands who lived there must have consumed incredible treasure. Qin Shi Huang Di had 1,000 divers search a river for the legendary dings of Yu—which were rumored to have fallen into that river during the Warring States period—but the ancient bronze tripods were never found. More than 1,250 miles of canals, many of them still used today, were dug to improve communication. New roads and bridges, all of the same width to accommodate the standardized carts and wagons, crisscrossed the land.

But the most enormous project of all was the 1,500-mile-long Great Wall. This massive wall, studded with beacon towers, was built to keep out nomadic raiders from the Gobi Desert in the north. Hundreds of thousands of laborers were conscripted to work on the project, and way out on the edge of the desert, conditions were appalling. Soon work on the wall was considered a death sentence, so criminals were added to the ranks of the unfortunate conscripted laborers. Taskmasters were unconcerned about living conditions, since they could count on more criminals arriving each day. And in the event that too many laborers fell, the foremen would simply kidnap those who delivered food and water. When workers on the supply trains grew wary of completing their deliveries, villages were raided for able-bodied men to continue building the wall. In all, it is estimated that more than 100,000 men perished over the course of the project. Their bodies were simply tossed into the foundation of the next portion of the wall because no time was allowed for proper burial. Poems lamenting the loss of husbands and sons sent to work on the wall survive to this day.

As his reign progressed, Shi Huang Di became obsessed with avoiding his own death. He began to exhibit bizarre behavior, gradually withdrawing from other people and losing his sense of reality. In 210 B.C., only 11 years after he began his reign as emperor, Qin Shi Huang Di died on an expedition in search of the secret of immortality. Keeping the death a secret until he could work out the succession to his own advantage, the Legalist minister Li Si tricked Qin Shi Huang Di’s capable older son into committing suicide. This left the younger son to take the place as the second Qin emperor, Er Shi.

Er Shi was as cruel as his father, but he lacked Qin Shi Huang Di’s brilliant gift for administration. As soon as Er Shi had murdered Li Si and his father’s other ministers, he installed his own favorites and began a career of oppression and waste. Tax levies were raised so high, and brutal punishments became so commonplace, that peasants began to flee to the mountains. There they formed bands of brigands and
plotted to overthrow the Qin dynasty. In the end, however, Er Shi’s prime minister, Zhao Gao, disposed of the emperor through trickery. Realizing that Er Shi was secretly afraid for his own sanity, Zhao Gao brought a deer to the palace but forced all the courtiers to say it was a horse. Convinced now that he was hallucinating, Er Shi retired to a distant palace for some rest. Zhao Gao hired actors to impersonate a group of rebel bandits and descend on the palace, and there, in 207 B.C., Er Shi either committed suicide in a panic or was murdered.

Qin Shi Huang Di’s grandson became the third Qin emperor, but his reign lasted only 46 days. Real rebels had marched on the capital, and they put a definitive end to the Qin dynasty. The first Chinese imperial dynasty, which Qin Shi Huang Di had dreamed would rule forever, had endured for only 15 years.

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