Emperor Qin Shi Huang biography

**Qin Shi Huang** (Ying Zheng) (260-210 BC) – Emperor of the first unified state of China. From an early age he was King of the state of Qin. During his lifetime, he conquered all the seven warring and diverging states – becoming the first person to unify China. He took the title Emperor of the Qin dynasty and shaped the history of modern China.

Qin Shi Huang used his power and influence to standardise Chinese customs, teachings, and political practises. He was ruthless in dealing with opposition, burning books and executing scholars who opposed his centralisation. Qin Shi Huang is credited with unifying fragmented walls in northern China to complete the Great Wall of China – providing a ballpark against Monghuls to the north.

Fixated by his own immortality, during his lifetime he ordered the building of a city sized mausoleum, guarded by a life size Terracotta army. He ruled as King of Qin from 247BC to 220 BC, and as Emperor of China from 220 BC to 210 BC.

**Early Life**

Ying Zheng was born in 259 BC. He was the son of Prince Yirn, the King of Qin. Later records suggest he was the illegitimate son of his father and his concubine. This illegitimacy may have been an attempt to diminish his reputation by later scholars.

In 246 BC, his father – King Zhuangxiang died after a short reign, makin Ying Zheng king at the age of 13. Due to his age, Lu Buwei acted as the regent.

In 238 BC there was an attempted coup by Lao Ai, who had a relationship with Zheng’s mother. The coup was unsuccessful and King Zheng had Lao and his extended family executed. After this attempted coup, Ying Zheng assumed full power as King.

The major political issue of the time, was the constant fighting between the different Chinese states. But the Qin state was the most powerful, and gradually they succeeded in conquering neighbouring states, expanding their sphere of influence. There was much resistance from the other states, but Qin had the most advanced military and disciplined army. In desperation, the smaller state of Yan sent an assassin Jing Ke to kill Zheng by hiding a sword within a gift of a map. However, the assassination attempt failed.

A second assassination attempt was later carried out by a former friend of Jing Ke – a musician named Gao Jianli. The assassination attempt failed again, but it made King Zheng even more paranoid about attempts on his life.

Between 230 and 222, King Zheng successfully oversaw the conquest of other Chinese states such as Hann and the northern country of Yan, Wei, and the largest state Chu in 223. The last state to fall was Qi. Despite 200,000 people defending Qi’s Western borders, they were over-run
by the more powerful Qin armies. Historians have stated that after conquest, Emperor Huang ordered many of the people from conquered territories to be castrated and made into his slaves

On unifying China, King Zheng pronounced himself Emperor of China, claiming a mandate from Heaven. He became known as Qin Shi Huang

The Emperor made an Imperial Seal with the below words carved onto the seal. This was passed on from Emperor to Emperor.

“Having received the Mandate from Heaven, may (the emperor) lead a long and prosperous life.”

Emperor Qin Shi Huang’s empire was one of the greatest empires of the ancient world, Frances Wood, curator of the Chinese collection at the British Library stated the Empire stretched:

“From Mongolia down to Hong Kong, and from the sea right the way across to Sichuan – it’s an enormous territory… It’s the equivalent of the whole Roman Empire added together, if you like. And you’ve got one man ruling all of it”

Reforms

Emperor Qin Shi Huang sought to unify the divergent areas of his conquered territories. He was worried about these states descending into factionalism and rebelling against his rule. He divided China into administrative provinces, reducing the importance of clans, and making civil appointments on the basis of merit rather than hereditary rights.

It was one of the world’s first centralised bureaucracy and many aspects of his government influenced later Chinese states.

In economics, the currency and units of measurement were unified, and a series of transport links were built, such as roads and the impressive Lingqu canal. The Qin script was also standardised. The biggest public works scheme was strengthening the Great Wall of China – an immense defensive work to keep out Xiongnu tribes from the north.

Qin Shi Huang also sought to unify philosophical thought; he was distrustful of philosophical texts which he feared may undermine his current power. Many books were banned and burnt, with severe penalties for their ownership. It is said 400 scholars were buried alive for holding onto banned books.

“I have collected all the writings of the Empire and burnt those which were of no use.”

As quoted in The Tyrants: 2500 Years of Absolute Power and Corruption (2006) by Clive Foss, Huang eliminated the Hundred Schools of Thought and elements of Confucianism. Instead a legalism was made the official ideology of the Qin dynasty.
Qin Shi Huang is reported to have had 50 children, with many different concubines. There is no record of an Empress.

Towards the end of his reign, Qin Shi Huang became obsessed with finding the elixir of immortality. He ordered many scholars and young men to seek out potions and secrets which would enable him to gain immortality. He even had secret tunnels built under his palace, because he believed travelling in tunnels enabled him to escape the sight of evil spirits.

His most famous legacy is the Emperor’s Mausoleum, which was discovered in 1976. An estimated 16,000 men (probably slaves from captured territories) would have been needed to build the huge edifice and 6,000 life sized Terracotta warriors.

The Emperor died whilst visiting Eastern China. The cause of death is thought to be from ingesting Mercury pills, which were ironically likely to have been an attempt at giving him immortality.

His Prime Minister Li Si, sought to hide the Emperor’s death for two months before the royal entourage returned to the capital. Li Si was worried his death would lead to an uprising – taking advantage of his death and power vacuum.

After his death his second son Qin Er Shi assumed command, but the Empire quickly fragmented during great civil unrest.

Qin Shi Huang’s Qin dynasty was disparaged by later Confucian scholars who had suffered censorship during his reign. Many later Confucian scholars were highly critical of Huang’s absolute power and tyrannical rule.

In later history, the view of Huang’s leadership changed depending on the political climate. Mao Zedong praised Qin Shi Huang’s dictatorship over ‘reactionaries’ but claimed his failing was that he didn’t go far enough. Mao stated that he went much further against intellectuals

“He buried 460 scholars alive; we have buried forty-six thousand scholars alive… You [intellectuals] revile us for being Qin Shi Huangs. You are wrong. We have surpassed Qin Shi Huang a hundredfold. When you berate us for imitating his despotism, we are happy to agree! Your mistake was that you did not say so enough.”