

# Shihuangdi



Figure 1: Shihuangdi, the founder of China's Qin Dynasty and its first emperor, is depicted in 19th-century Korean illustration.

## Introduction

(259? B.C.–210 B.C.). The founder of the Qin dynasty, Shihuangdi (or Shih-huang-ti) created the first unified Chinese empire. He reigned as emperor of China from 221 B.C. until he died in 210 B.C. The empire Shihuangdi founded collapsed, however, less than four years after his death.

## Early Years

His name at birth was Zhao Zheng (or Ying Zheng). He was born about 259 B.C. in Qin state, in what is now northwestern China. Qin was centered in what is now Shaanxi province. Zheng's father, Zhaungxiang, later became the king of Qin. The other Chinese states considered Qin to be a barbarous country. However, Qin developed a powerful military and government with a central bureaucracy. The government was based on the political philosophy of Legalism, which emphasized a strong central state and harsh punishments for disobeying the law.

## Rise to Power

In 246 B.C., at age 13, Zheng became the king of Qin. By then, Qin had become the most powerful of the Chinese states. Because Zheng was not yet an adult, a minister of state, Lü Buwei, initially controlled the government. Upon Zheng's coming of age in 238 B.C., Zheng took full power as king. With the aid of his minister Li Si, Zheng began to conquer the six other Chinese states. He relied on spying, bribery, and ruthlessly effective military campaigns. One by one, Zheng eliminated the rival states, taking control of their land. He conquered the last enemy state, Qi, in 221 B.C. For the first time in history, China was united, under the supreme rule of Qin.

## Reign as Emperor

As emperor of China, Zheng proclaimed himself Shihuangdi, which means "First Sovereign Emperor." He declared that his dynasty would last "10,000 generations." Shihuangdi showed an unbending will in pursuing his aim of uniting and strengthening the empire. He ruled harshly, ordering severe punishments for disobedience.



Figure 2: Shihuangdi

Shihuangdi initiated a number of reforms to create a fully centralized administration. He did away with the Chinese feudal system, in which a network of lesser rulers held power locally based on extended family relationships. Shihuangdi divided the country into about 40 provinces, each led by officials appointed by the central government. To unify China, Shihuangdi began a program of standardization, or making things uniform. He made the laws, the Chinese writing system, and the system of weights and measures the same throughout the country.

To control his vast empire, Shihuangdi built a network of highways so he could more easily move his troops about. To protect against invasions, several hundred thousand people were put to work connecting and strengthening the existing walls along the northern border. The resulting defensive system is known as the Great Wall of China.

In 220 B.C. Shihuangdi began the first of a series of inspection tours. He traveled throughout China, supervising the uniting and organizing of the empire. Afraid of death, Shihuangdi also traveled in search of a substance that could make him immortal. His interest in magic led to conflicts with the Confucian scholars, many of whom he executed. In addition to criticizing the emperor's reliance on magicians, the scholars also advocated a return to old feudal ways. Finally, in 213 B.C. Shihuangdi ordered the "burning of the books." Upon Li Si's advice, all books outside the emperor's library were burned, except for those dealing with such subjects as agriculture, medicine, history, and fortune telling.



*Figure 3: Life-size clay statues of soldiers are arrayed in battle formation at the tomb of the Qin emperor Shihuangdi, near Xi'an, China.*

During his last years, Shihuangdi grew ever more distrustful of the people around him. At least three attempts to assassinate him nearly succeeded. Shihuangdi died in 210 B.C. during an inspection tour in what is now Hebei province.

Shihuangdi was buried in a gigantic tomb, now known as the Qin tomb, near what is now the city of Xi'an, in Shaanxi province.

Archaeologists began unearthing the tomb complex in 1974. Among their findings was an "army" of some 8,000 life-size clay statues of soldiers and horses guarding the dead emperor. The Qin tomb was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987.



Figure 4: Realistic terra-cotta statues of soldiers stand in the Qin tomb, near Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China.

In Chinese history, Shihuangdi was traditionally seen as the ultimate villain—cruel, unrefined, and superstitious. Modern historians, however, generally stress the endurance of the bureaucratic and administrative structures he created. Though the Qin dynasty came to an end soon after his death, his government structures remained the basis of all later Chinese dynasties.

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