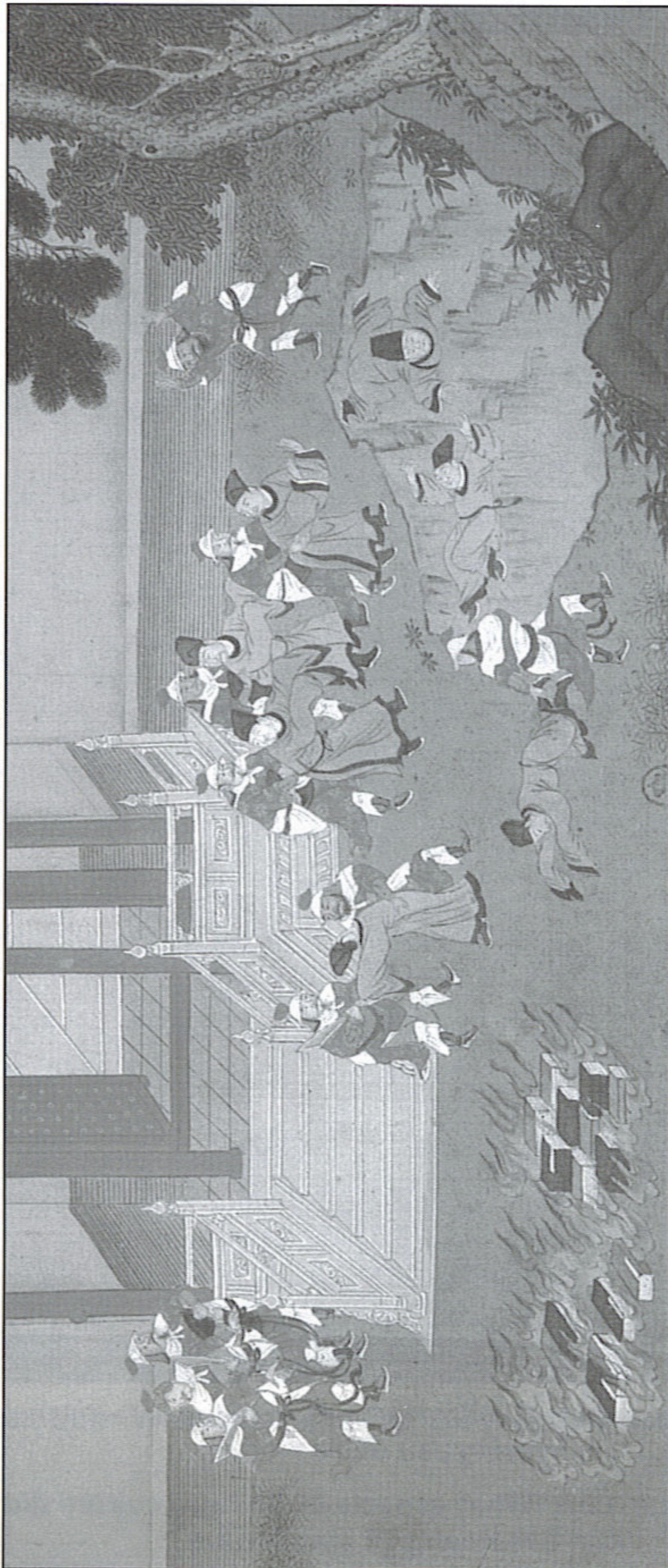


Event C: The Book Burnings



In this image, we see Confucian books burning and Confucian scholars being executed
by Qin Shi Huang Di's soldiers.

Focus Question: Why was there conflict between Qin Shi Huang Di and Confucian scholars?

Information About the Book Burnings

The Emperor's Conflict with Confucian Scholars

- Many of the reforms instituted by Qin Shi Huang Di (pronounced CHIN-SHIH-HWONG-DEE) were in direct conflict with the beliefs of the empire's Confucian scholars. These scholars followed the teachings of Confucius, a Chinese government official and teacher, who lived from 551 to 479 B.C.E. Confucius believed that a ruler's good, or *virtuous*, behavior, and not laws, would encourage the people to "behave in a moral and respectful manner." This belief was in direct contradiction to the Legalist view held by Qin Shi Huang Di. Legalists believed that people were essentially evil, and only strict laws and harsh punishments would make them behave properly. Qin Shi Huang Di also rejected the past and devoted himself to new ideas and methods. As a result, Confucian scholars' emphasis on past traditions and rituals often angered him.
- The disagreements between Qin Shi Huang Di and the empire's Confucian scholars came to a head at an imperial banquet in 213 B.C.E. The banquet was held in honor of the emperor's birthday, and was attended by Qin Shi Huang Di's 70 "scholars of wide learning." During the banquet, a Confucian scholar named Yue (pronounced YOO-EH) boldly criticized the emperor's refusal to honor past traditions. Yue warned that the Qin dynasty would not last unless it modeled itself on the ways of the past. Yue's statement was a direct criticism of Qin Shi Huang Di's bureaucratic and law-driven form of government. Emperor Qin's trusted advisor, Li Si (pronounced LEE-SUH), came to the emperor's defense and attacked the Confucian scholars. Later, he warned the emperor that the scholars' criticisms could lead to the empire's downfall and must be stopped.

Book Burnings and the Execution of the Scholars

- Li's solution to the scholars' criticisms shocked the imperial court: "Anyone who possesses [Confucian books]...must present them to the proper civil authorities for burning," Li declared. He stated that scholars who disobeyed the order would be marked with a facial tattoo and sent into forced labor. He further vowed that any scholars who discussed Confucian teachings in public would be executed and their bodies put on public display. Qin Shi Huang Di agreed with Li Si and authorized the book burnings. He spared only the imperial library's books and some Confucian books devoted to practical subjects that interested him, such as architecture and medicine.
- According to some ancient Chinese texts, the following year Qin Shi Huang Di executed 460 Confucian scholars for plotting against him. The emperor accused the scholars of spreading vicious rumors about him in order to confuse the people. As punishment, the enraged emperor had 460 of the scholars buried alive or beheaded and forced the others—including his eldest son, who criticized the scholar executions—to work on his great project in northern China: the building of the Great Wall.