

The Law of Shi Huangdi

The time of Confucius was marked with warfare and unrest. Things did not improve after he died in 479 B.C. For more than 250 years—from 475 to 221 B.C.—seven Chinese kingdoms fought each other. Historians call this violent time the period of Warring States. One of these warring states, called the Qin, built a strong army.

Near the end of the Warring States period, a young prince named Zheng became king of Qin. Because he was only 13 years old, Zheng's mother and an advisor ruled the Qin state until Zheng grew up.

When Zheng turned 21, he became the ruler. He was not satisfied to be the most powerful king of the seven warring states. He wanted to bring all the kingdoms of China together. Then he would be emperor of all China. No one had ever tried this before.

To become the first emperor, Zheng used spies and bribery to keep the other kingdoms from

Pronunciation Key

Li Si (LEE suh)

Qin (chin)

Shi Huangdi (shuh hwong DEE)

Zheng (cheng)



Thousands of life-sized clay soldiers guarded the entrance to Qin Emperor Shi Huangdi's tomb.

ganging up on him. He built the Qin army into a powerful force of 600,000 men, mostly poor peasants who had little choice but to fight for King Zheng.

In 230 B.C., Zheng began his effort to conquer the other six

Chinese kingdoms. Nine years later, he named himself "Qin Shi Huangdi," the first emperor of all China.

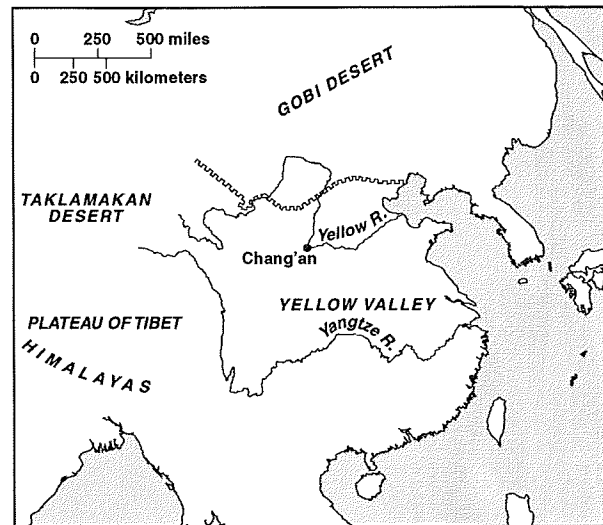
"All Under Heaven"

According to an ancient book, Shi Huangdi owned "all under heaven." He predicted that his dynasty would last for years "without end."

Shi Huangdi threw away many old Chinese laws and customs. He wiped out laws that gave the land to powerful lords. His new laws allowed peasant farmers to own land. He divided China into 36 districts. He chose officials to run each district. He ordered the royal families from the other kingdoms to live near his palace in the capital city of Chang'an. There he could watch them closely.

Next, the first emperor and his advisors made Chinese writing, coins, and units of weight and length the same for all 36 districts. They built a network of tree-lined highways. They built palaces, canals, and Shi Huangdi's tomb. It took 700,000 workers to build the tomb. It contained thousands of life-sized clay statues of warriors, horses, and chariots. Shi Huangdi believed that the clay army would protect him when he died.

Shi Huangdi also ordered a wall built along the northern borders of



The ancient Chinese built walls to protect them from Mongolian invasion. Emperor Shi Huangdi build a higher, stronger, and longer Great Wall.

China. Earlier kings had built crude walls to keep out invading Mongolians. But these early walls were low and uneven. Invaders could easily ride over and around them. Shi Huangdi built the first Great Wall. It was 20 to 25 feet tall and about 12 feet wide. The Great Wall ran without stopping for 3,000 miles. (Later in Chinese history, it was extended another 1,500 miles and rebuilt more solidly.)

These projects—roads, palaces, canals, and the Great Wall—cost money. To pay for them, Shi Huangdi took half of every family's yearly grain crop as a tax. In addition, all males age 15 to 60 had to fight in the emperor's army and build the emperor's projects.

Peasants who could not pay their

taxes were sent away to work as slaves, building the Great Wall. Crops often died because men were away fighting in the army or working on the emperor's projects. One ancient writer said that under the Shi Huangdi's rule, the poor often "ate the food of dogs and pigs."

Confucius and the Legalists

Before Shi Huangdi became emperor, most leaders had looked to the teachings of Confucius (551–479 B.C.). This thinker believed in an orderly society. He placed great value on knowledge and the wisdom of ancestors. He believed that a ruler should act as if he were the leader of a large family. Confucius believed that leaders should rule by kindness, not force. A leader should avoid war and make life easier for the poor. According to Confucius, a leader who did not live by these laws would lose the support of the ancestors. His rule would end in disaster.

Shi Huangdi turned away from the teachings of Confucius. He took up another school of thought, called Legalism. Legalists believed that people were driven by self-interest. They believed that to be good members of society, people had to be controlled by a strong ruler, strict laws, and harsh punishments. The ruler should be all-powerful. One of Shi Huangdi's

Legalist advisors said, "The ruler alone should have power, using it like lightning or thunder."

The first emperor believed that Legalism would help him rule his empire. He ordered Legalists to write new laws. The Legalist laws gave district officials the power to investigate crimes, arrest suspects, and act as judges. The courts were allowed to beat suspects until they confessed. They treated suspects as guilty until they could prove their innocence. Courtrooms had no lawyers. Judges made all the decisions.

Legalist laws set harsh punishments. Minor crimes brought fines, beatings with a stick, or hard labor on the emperor's projects. Lawbreakers were forced to wear red cloths identifying them as criminals. For more serious crimes, lawbreakers could be tattooed on the face or whipped. Criminals who plotted against the emperor could have their heads chopped off. They could be cut in two at the waist, boiled in a large pot, or torn apart by horse-drawn chariots.

Legalists believed that harsh punishments would frighten people away from committing crimes. The Legalist laws listed thousands of crimes. Most Chinese people could not read. They often did not know they had done something wrong until they were arrested. All family

members faced punishment when one member violated the law. Many people were arrested and punished.

Book Burning

In 213 B.C., eight years after becoming emperor, Shi Huangdi held a meeting of scholars to debate the future of the empire. During this debate, one scholar called for a return to Confucian teachings. This so enraged Li Si, the emperor's chief adviser, that he made this radical proposal to Shi Huangdi:

"These scholars learn only from the old, not from the new, and employ their learning to oppose our rule and confuse the people. . . . It must be stopped. . . . Let all historical records but those of the Qin be destroyed."

Sensing that he was losing control of the empire, Shi Huangdi agreed with Li Si. He ordered the burning of history books, the classics of Confucius, and the writings of other schools of thought.

According to some accounts, after the book burning, Shi Huangdi ordered hundreds of scholars killed, and he banished others to work on the Great Wall.

The Fall of the Qin Dynasty

During the next few years, Shi Huangdi cut himself off from other people. He began to look for a potion to make him immortal. In

his search, he drank potions that contained mercury and other poisons. Instead of lengthening his life, the potions killed him. He died at age 49 while touring his empire.

The Qin Dynasty did not last long after Shi Huangdi was buried in his fancy tomb. Peasant revolts erupted. Lords from the six conquered kingdoms rose up against the Qins. In 206 B.C., the last Qin ruler surrendered to a rebel army and was beheaded. The rebels then burned Chang'an, the Qin capital.

Shi Huangdi's Qin Dynasty did not last, as he had predicted, for years "without end." But Chinese dynasties continued until the 20th century. Later dynasties turned to Confucianism instead of Legalism to make Chinese justice more humane. Shi Huangdi never found the secret of eternal life, but he influenced China for hundreds of years.

For Discussion

1. What were the achievements of Emperor Shi Huangdi?
2. What were some of the policies of Emperor Shi Huangdi? Do you think they were wise? Why or why not?
3. What was Legalism? How did it differ from Confucianism?
4. Why did Shi Huangdi order the burning of books? Do you think this was a good idea? Why or why not?

Confucianism or Legalism?

Imagine that Emperor Shi Huangdi has called all the scholars in China to a meeting. He wants to discuss whether the Qin Dynasty should follow Legalism or Confucianism. Your teacher will assign you a role as Legalist or Confucianist scholars.

Reread the article so that you know the differences between Legalism and Confucianism.

If you are Legalists, do the following:

1. Think of reasons why harsh punishments might be helpful and necessary.
2. Think of reasons why holding on to traditions might be harmful.
3. Prepare to argue in favor of harsh punishments and against the traditions of Confucianism. Make your strongest case to the emperor.

If you are Confucianists, do the following:

1. Think of reasons why following tradition might be helpful and necessary.
2. Think of reasons why harsh punishments might be harmful.
3. Prepare to argue in favor of upholding the traditions of Confucius and against harsh punishments. Make your strongest case to the emperor.