

A Biography of Qin Shi Huang: First Emperor of China

Part 3 - by Kallie Szczepanski

This handout has been adapted from this website: <https://www.thoughtco.com/qin-shi-huang-first-emperor-china-195679>

1 As you read the text, highlight the following, using different colours:

- 3 of Qin Shi Huang's achievements
- 3 methods that he employed to gain and maintain control
- 3 tyrannical acts
- one indication that Qin Shi Huangdi was losing contact with reality or suffering from delusions of grandeur

2 After you read the text, find and write down the words that match these definitions. The words to choose from are underlined>:

(a) – flourished, grew

(b) – group of officials who implement government policy

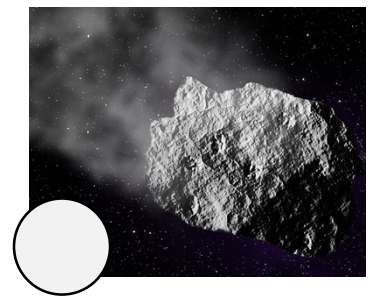
(c) – huge, enormous

(d) – a defensive wall / reinforcement

(e) – having the opposite effect of that intended, often in a way that causes a certain wry humour...

(f) – removal of a group of people who are considered undesirable, often in a violent way

3 Match each of the numbered events in bold ¹⁻⁸ with a picture below.



↑<https://vinceart.deviantart.com/art/Emperor-Qin-and-The-Great-Wall-57341546>

China Unified

With the defeat of **the other six warring states**¹, Qin Shi Huang had unified northern China.

As emperor, Qin Shi Huang reorganized the bureaucracy, abolishing the existing nobility and replacing them with his appointed officials. He also built a network of roads, with the capital of Xianyang at the hub. In addition, the emperor simplified the written Chinese script, **standardized weights and measures²**, and **minted new copper coins²**.

The Great Wall

Despite its military might, the newly unified Qin Empire faced a recurring threat from the north. Consequently, Qin Shi Huang **ordered the construction of an enormous defensive wall⁴**. The work was carried out by hundreds of thousands of slaves and criminals between 220 and 206 BCE; untold thousands of them died at the task.

This northern fortification formed the first section of what would become the Great Wall of China.



The Confucian Purge

The Warring States Period was dangerous, but the lack of central authority allowed intellectuals to flourish.

Confucianism and a number of other philosophies had blossomed prior to China's unification. However, Qin Shi Huang viewed these schools of thought as threats to his authority, so **he ordered all books not related to his reign to be burned in 213 BCE⁵**. The Emperor also had approximately 460 scholars buried alive in 212 for daring to disagree with him, and 700 more stoned to death.



Qin Shi Huang's Quest for Immortality

As he entered middle age, the First Emperor grew more and more afraid of death. He became obsessed with finding the **elixir of life⁶**, which would allow him to live forever. The court doctors and alchemists concocted a number of potions, many of them containing "quicksilver" (mercury), which probably had the ironic effect of hastening the emperor's death rather than preventing it.

Just in case the elixirs did not work, in 215 BCE the Emperor also ordered the construction of a gargantuan tomb for himself.

The Terracotta Army



To guard Qin Shi Huang in the afterworld, and perhaps allow him to conquer heaven as he had the earth, the emperor had a terracotta army of at least 8,000 clay soldiers placed in the tomb. The army also included terracotta horses, along with real chariots and weapons. Each soldier was **an individual, with unique facial features⁷**, although the bodies and limbs were mass-produced, presumably from moulds.

The Death of Qin Shi Huang

A meteor fell in Dongjun in 211 BCE⁸ - an ominous sign for the Emperor. To make matters worse, someone etched the words "The First Emperor will die and his land will be divided" onto the stone. Since nobody would confess to this crime, the Emperor had everyone in the vicinity executed. Nevertheless, the Emperor died less than a year later, while touring eastern China in 210 BCE. The cause of death most likely was mercury poisoning, due to his immortality treatments.