

六十五

We followed the footsteps
of men made from clay
who travelled the Silk Road
in Chang An by day
at night in their chariots
they served their Huang Di
he died, they died too
far away from the sea

秦 始 皇
秦 始 皇

Chapter 65 – Emperor with an Ego

As far as dynasties go, the First Emperor of China's was really short. During his reign of only eleven years (221-210 BCE), Emperor Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇帝 Qín Shǐ Huáng Dì) left a legacy that continues to this day. Indeed, the very name “China” may have its origins in this first imperial dynasty. Qin is actually pronounced very similar to the English word “chin.” Emperor Qin Shi Huang standardized Chinese writing, weights and measures, established a common currency and connected the various walls at the northern border of China to create the Great Wall of China (万里长城 Wànlǐ Chángchéng.)



The image displays two rows of Chinese characters for 'Qin Shi Huang'. The top row shows the characters in seal script (Zhuànshū), which are highly stylized and compact. The bottom row shows the characters in clerical script (Lìshū), which are more standardized and easier to read. The characters are arranged in three columns: 'Qin' (秦), 'Shi' (始), and 'Huang' (皇).

The Qin Dynasty was pivotal in the standardization of the Chinese written language. Emperor Qin did that by making the script that he was most familiar with – the Qin script - the official script of China. Other styles once popular in different parts of China eventually disappeared. In the picture above, the first row of characters and the second row are the same. The top script, known as Zhuànshū 篆書 is usually translated as “seal script”, because it was used in “chops” or “seals” that appeared on documents and works of art. The second form of writing was called Lìshū 隸書, “clerical script” and was the traditional Qin form of writing – a simplified form of the seal script. A side note here. While Emperor Qin was very intent on unifying the Chinese written language, he also sought to unify Chinese thought. What better way to make history begin with him, than to kill scholars and destroy documents of recorded history? And so, he tried – with some success.

Emperor Qin also simplified and standardized weights and measures. When he became emperor, China was a mishmash of different measuring systems. Qin Shi Huang started by going decimal and dividing a day by 10's. A day was actually made up of one hundred kè (刻). Emperor Qin also had a special affinity for the number 6. Six chǐ (尺) = one bù (一步 yī bù). A chǐ was roughly equivalent to a foot (the approximate length of the space between the joints of a standard stalk of bamboo.) 300 bù was equal to one lí 厘 (sometimes called a 'Chinese mile' – actually about 1/3 of an English mile.) Finally one jīn 斤 equalled about 1.1 pounds or approximately 500 grams. A jīn is also referred to as a “catty”. A liǎng 两 was also known as a “Chinese ounce” or a “tael” and was how foreigners weighed silver. In the past a jīn was equal to 16 liǎng, but nowadays there are 10 liǎng in one jīn.

Contrary to popular belief, Qin Shi Huang did not build the Great Wall of China. Early portions of the wall, built to protect kingdoms, began to appear in the Spring and Autumn Period (771–476 BCE) and were followed by more sections of walls in the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE). What Emperor Qin did was to connect those east-west walls in northern China from Gansu to Manchuria. Emperor Qin was a brilliant military strategist who ruled with an iron fist. One by one, the kingdoms of the Warring States fell. He killed, castrated, and enslaved those who stood in his way. He was a megalomaniac who was obsessed with the after-life and was tenacious in his search for immortality. To that end, Qin Shi Huang decided to make his tomb a mini-kingdom of Qin where he would take an entire life-size army with him (as well as real life servants, concubines and craftsmen.) While Qin Shi Huang was building his tomb, he sent 徐福 XúFú , a Chinese alchemist and explorer from Guangdong, off on a sea voyage with 3000 virgin boys and girls to search for the pill of eternal life (長生不老藥 Chángshēngbùlǎo yào.) Legend has it Xu Fu and his entourage ended up in Japan, and some scholars credit him with helping to develop farming techniques and introducing new plants and agricultural advances there. In some parts of Japan people still worship Xu Fu as the God of farming. And Marvel features him as a Chinese character in some of their comic books.



Since the uncovering of a terracotta head and bronze arrowhead by peasant farmer, Yang Zhifa (杨志发) and his five brothers while digging a well during a drought in the village of Xiyang (西杨乡), about 35 kilometers east of Xi'an in 1974, only a small portion of the entire tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi has been unearthed. The parts which have not been removed are rumored to have rivers flowing with mercury, gem encrusted ceilings and treasures galore. Legend says that the tomb was shaped like a miniature map of China at the time of his rule (I'm thinking Shenzhen's "Miniature China" (小人国) - complete with the kind of crossbow booby traps which likely inspired some of the special effects in the Indiana Jones and National Treasure films. So far, only about 2,000 life size terra-cotta soldiers, horses, and chariots have been uncovered and about 1,000 restored. On average, it takes almost six months for a team of three experts to restore one soldier. The work is painstaking and made more difficult by the fact that the clay quickly loses its color when it is exposed to air. Estimates suggest there may be upwards of 8,000 more terra cotta figures to unearth. Sima Qian (the most famous Han Dynasty historian) said that 700,000 laborers worked to create 'a macabre monument to narcissism.'

Qin Shi Huang Di arranged for a plethora of steles (碑石 bēi shí) - stone slabs with intricately inscribed words created to memorialize individuals and events) to be prominently displayed all over "the middle kingdom" with accolades dedicated to Qin's accomplishments. Of those, seven still remain. Nothing says "ego" better than the words from one of four of the 2200 year old still intact steles memorializing Qin Shi Huang. Before it was carved, it would have most certainly have been approved by the emperor himself:

" . . . Within the universe and realm
One followed receptively His sage intent.
The multitude of officials recited His merits,
Asked to carve (this text) into stone,
To express and transmit the constant model."

Source: Ouellette, P. (2010, February 1). Power in the Qin Dynasty: Legalism and External Influence over the Decisions and Legacy of the First Emperor of China. Retrieved October 10, 2014, from Haverford College.