The Qin Dynasty

The First Chinese Empire

Qin began as a small state in the western region of the Wei River Valley. During the Warring States Period, the kingdom grew as Qin generals conquered other states. The unbeatable Qin army rode horses into battle and fought with iron weapons. When the Zhou dynasty finally fell in 256 B.C., Qin became northern China’s most powerful state.

In 246 B.C., a 13-year-old boy took the Qin throne. With the help of a powerful Qin government official named Li Si, the boy grew to become a successful king. By 221 B.C., the Qin kingdom controlled all of the northern states. The Warring States Period was over—the Qin king now ruled over China’s first empire.

After founding the Qin Empire, the king named himself Qin Shi Huangdi, or the “First Emperor of China.” Shi Huangdi expected his dynasty to rule for generations, but that was not to be. The Qin dynasty lasted only 15 years, until 206 B.C., just four years after his death. Yet in this short time, Shi Huangdi unified northern China and made changes that had a lasting influence on China. Even the name China comes from the name Qin.

Shi Huangdi did not rule by showing respect, as Confucius had taught. Shi Huangdi relied on fear to rule. His way of governing, called Legalism, gave absolute power to one ruler, who governed under strict laws. Legalism allowed Shi Huangdi to create an efficient government, but it was cruel. The government strictly enforced its laws. Those who did not obey faced severe punishments. Shi Huangdi ruled harshly and killed those who opposed him.

Building a Bureaucracy

Legalism needed a strong government to control the people and the economy. To keep this control, Shi Huangdi built both a strong army and a bureaucracy. A bureaucracy is a large group of appointed officials.

The old feudal system, which depended on noble families, had to be broken apart before Legalism could replace it. Feudal lords ruled their land and collected taxes. Shi Huangdi wanted his own officials to control the land and taxes. He also did not trust the nobles, so he ordered land to be taken away from them. Then he gave some of the land to the peasants. The peasants’ taxes went straight to his government instead of first passing through the hands of feudal lords.
To prevent the nobles from turning against him, Shi Huangdi forced them all to move to the Qin capital city of Xianyang. There, officials watched the nobles to make sure they did not rise up against the emperor.

To further protect against rebellion, Shi Huangdi made it against the law for people who were not in his army to have weapons. Any weapons that did not belong to the army were collected and melted.

In place of feudal lands, Shi Huangdi divided the empire into many provinces, or administrative regions. He further divided each province into districts. Shi Huangdi then picked officials to manage the provinces and districts. He also sent out people to report back on the officials. This system of dividing large areas and the management of those areas among officials was important for China’s later dynasties.

**Standardization**

Shi Huangdi made other changes that helped unify his empire’s people and economy. Before his rule, people in different parts of the empire paid for goods with different kinds of money. They also used different units for weights and measures. Lastly, the people of China did not share a common writing system.

To overcome these differences, Shi Huangdi began a policy of standardization. Standardization is making systems, such as money, weights and measures, and writing, the same for everyone.

To standardize writing, Shi Huangdi allowed only two kinds of Chinese writing. People had to use one kind for official documents and stone carvings and another, which was easier to write, for everyday uses. Standardized writing improved communication and recordkeeping.

To improve trade, Shi Huangdi standardized coins and the units for weights and measures. He also ordered the building of canals and roads to connect major cities within the empire. Shi Huangdi required that all roads, as well as the carts that traveled on the roads, have the same width.

Education became another focus of standardization. Shi Huangdi wanted tight control of all the books used to teach. His advisor Li Si said that too many books questioned Qin ideas. Because of this, Shi Huangdi ordered certain books, including many about Confucianism, to be burned.

Although some of Shi Huangdi’s policies were harsh, most helped different groups in the empire think of themselves as one united people. This unification made the empire easier to control.

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**Reading Check**

**MAIN IDEA AND DETAILS:**

Why did Shi Huangdi take power and land away from the nobles?

What steps did Shi Huangdi take toward standardization?