The Qin Dynasty

If YOU were there...
You are a scholar living in China in about 210 BC. You have a large library of Chinese literature, poetry, and philosophy. The new emperor is a harsh ruler with no love for learning. He says you must burn all the books that disagree with his ideas. The idea horrifies you. But if you do not obey, the punishment may be severe.

Will you obey the order to burn your books?
Why or why not?

BUILDING BACKGROUND
Different dynasties held very different ideas about how to rule. As the Zhou period declined, putting new ideas into effect brought great changes.

The Qin Emperor’s Strong Government
The Warring States period marked a time in China when several states battled each other for power. One state, the Qin (CHIN), built a strong army that defeated the armies of the rivaling states. Eventually, the Qin dynasty united the country under one government.

Shi Huangdi Takes the Throne
In 221 BC, the Qin king Ying Zheng succeeded in unifying China. He gave himself the title Shi Huangdi (SHIH hwahng-dee), which means “first emperor.” Shi Huangdi followed Legalist political beliefs. He created a strong government with strict laws and harsh punishments.

Use the graphic organizer online to take notes on the achievements and policies of Shi Huangdi. Note how he affected life in China.
Shi Huangdi demanded that everyone follow his policies. He ordered the burning of all writings that did not agree with Legalism. The only other books that were saved dealt with farming, medicine, and predicting the future. Many scholars opposed the book burnings. The emperor responded to the opposition by burying 460 scholars alive.

Shi Huangdi also used his armies to expand the empire. First, they occupied the lands around both of China’s major rivers. Then his soldiers turned north and advanced almost to the Gobi Desert. To the south, they invaded more lands and advanced as far as the Xi River.

Shi Huangdi ensured that there would not be any future revolts in his new territories. When his soldiers conquered a city, he had them destroy its walls and take all the weapons.

**China under the Qin**

Shi Huangdi changed China’s old political system. He claimed all the power and did not share it with the lords. He even took land away from them and forced thousands of nobles to move with their families to the capital so he could keep an eye on them. He also forced thousands of commoners to work on government building projects. Workers faced years of hardship, danger, and often, death.

To control China, Shi Huangdi divided it into districts, each with its own governor. Districts were subdivided into counties that were governed by appointed officials. This organization helped the emperor enforce his tax system. It also helped the Qin enforce a strict chain of command.

**Reading Check** **Summarizing** How did Shi Huangdi strengthen the government?
A Unified China

Qin rule brought other major changes to China. Under Shi Huangdi, new policies and achievements united the Chinese people.

Qin Policies

As you read earlier, mountains and rivers divided China into distinct regions. Customs varied, and people in each area had their own money, writing styles, and laws. Shi Huangdi wanted all Chinese people to do things the same way.

Early in his reign, the emperor set up a uniform system of law. Rules and punishments were to be the same in all parts of the empire. Shi Huangdi also standardized the written language. People everywhere were required to write using the same set of symbols. People from different regions could now communicate with each other in writing. This gave them a sense of shared culture and a common identity.

Next, the emperor set up a new money system. Standardized gold and copper coins became the currency used in all of China. Weights and measures were also standardized. Even the axle width of carts had to be the same. With all these changes and the unified writing system, trade between different regions became much easier. The Qin government strictly enforced these new standards. Any citizen who disobeyed the laws would face severe punishment.

In 1974 archaeologists found the tomb of Emperor Shi Huangdi near Xi’an and made an amazing discovery. Buried close to the emperor was an army of more than 6,000 life-size terra-cotta, or clay, soldiers. They were designed to be with Shi Huangdi in the afterlife. In other nearby chambers of the tomb there were another 1,400 clay figures of cavalry and chariots.
Qin Achievements

New, massive building projects also helped to unify the country. Under Shi Huangdi’s rule, the Chinese built a network of roads that connected the capital to every part of the empire. These roads made travel easier for everyone. Each of these new roads was the same width, 50 paces wide. This design helped the army move quickly and easily to put down revolts in distant areas.

China’s water system was also improved. Workers built canals to connect the country’s rivers. Like the new roads, the canals improved transportation throughout the country. Using the new canals and rivers together made it easier and faster to ship goods from north to south. In addition, the Qin built an irrigation system to make more land good for farming. Parts of that system are still in use today.

Shi Huangdi also wanted to protect the country from invasion. Nomads from the north were fierce warriors, and they were a real threat to China. Hoping to stop them from invading, the emperor built the Great Wall, a barrier that linked earlier walls across China’s northern frontier. The first section of the wall had been built in the 600s BC to keep invading groups out of China. The Qin connected earlier pieces of the wall to form a long, unbroken structure. Building the wall required years of labor from hundreds of thousands of workers. Many of them died building the wall.
The Fall of the Qin
Shi Huangdi’s policies unified China. However, his policies also stirred resentment. Many peasants, scholars, and nobles hated his harsh ways.

Still, Shi Huangdi was powerful enough to hold the country together. When he died in 210 BC China was unified, but that didn’t last. Within a few years, the government began to fall apart.

Rebel forces formed across the country. Each claimed to have received the mandate of heaven to replace the emperor. One of these groups attacked the Qin capital, and the new emperor surrendered. The palace was burned to the ground. Qin authority had disappeared. With no central government, the country fell into civil war.

**Reading Check**
Recall What massive building projects did Shi Huangdi order to unify China?

**Summary and Preview**
Qin emperor Shi Huangdi’s policies and achievements unified China, but his harsh rule led to resentment. After his death, the dynasty fell apart. In the next section you will learn about the Han dynasty that came to power after the end of the Qin.

**Section 3 Assessment**

**Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and People**

1. a. **Identify** What does the title **Shi Huangdi** mean?
   
   b. **Explain** After unifying China, why did Shi Huangdi divide the country into military districts?
   
   c. **Rate** Which of the following acts do you think best showed how powerful Shi Huangdi was—burning books, forcing nobles to move, or forcing commoners to work on government projects? Explain your answer.

2. a. **Recall** Why was the **Great Wall** built?
   
   b. **Summarize** What actions did Shi Huangdi take to unify China and standardize things within the empire?
   
   c. **Evaluate** In your opinion, was Shi Huangdi a good ruler? Explain your answer.

**Critical Thinking**

3. **Evaluating** Using your notes and a diagram like this one, rank the effectiveness of the emperor’s achievements and policies in unifying China.

   Most important

   1.  
   2.  
   3.  

   Least important

4. **Evaluating Contributions to History** When evaluating a person’s contribution to history, it is important to consider both the person’s good impact and bad impact. In what ways was Shi Huangdi great? What negative impact did he have on China? Write down your ideas.
Emperor Shi Huangdi

If you were a powerful ruler, how would you protect yourself?

When did he live? c. 259–210 BC

Where did he live? Shi Huangdi built a new capital city at Xianyang, now called Xi’an (SHEE-AHN), in eastern China.

What did he do? Shi Huangdi didn’t trust people. Several attempts were made on his life, and the emperor lived in fear of more attacks. He was constantly seeking new ways to protect himself and extend his life. By the time Shi Huangdi died, he didn’t even trust his own advisors. Even in death, he surrounded himself with protectors: the famous terra-cotta army.

Why is he important? Shi Huangdi was one of the most powerful rulers in Chinese history. The first ruler to unify all of China, he is also remembered for his building programs. He built roads and canals throughout China and expanded what would become the Great Wall.

Drawing Conclusions Why do you think Shi Huangdi feared for his life?