



# 17 SHIH HUANG TI

259 B.C.- 210 B.C.

The great Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti, who ruled from 238-210 B.C., united China by force of arms and instituted a set of sweeping reforms. Those reforms have been a major factor in the cultural unity that China has maintained ever since.

Shih Huang Ti (also known as Ch'in Shih Huang Ti) was born in 259 B.C. and died in 210 B.C. To understand his importance, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the historical background of his times. He was born in the final years of the Chou dynasty, which had been founded about 1100 B.C. Centuries before his time, however, the Chou monarchs had ceased

to be effective rulers, and China had become divided into a large number of feudal states.

The various feudal lords were constantly at war with one another, and gradually, several of the smaller rulers were eliminated. One of the most powerful of the warring states was Ch'in, in the western portion of the country. The Ch'in rulers had adopted the ideas of the Legalist school of Chinese philosophers as the basis of state policy. Confucius had suggested that men should be governed primarily by the moral example of a good ruler; but according to the Legalist philosophy, most men were not good enough to be ruled in that way and could only be controlled by a strict set of laws firmly and impartially enforced. Laws were made by the ruler and could be changed at his pleasure to further state policy.

Possibly because of their adoption of Legalist ideas, possibly because of their geographical position, or possibly because of the capability of the Ch'in rulers, that state had already become the most powerful of the Chinese states at the time that Cheng (the future Shih Huang Ti) was born. Nominally, Cheng ascended the throne in 246 B.C., at the age of thirteen, but, in fact, a regent governed until Cheng came of age in 238 B.C. The new monarch chose able generals and vigorously prosecuted the wars against the remaining feudal states. The last of these were conquered in 221 B.C., and he could now have declared himself Wang (king) of all China. To emphasize, however, the complete break he was making with the past, he chose a new title, and called himself *Shih Huang Ti*, which means "the first emperor."

Shih Huang Ti immediately began to institute a large number of important reforms. Determined to avoid the disunity which had destroyed the Chou monarchy, he decided to abolish the entire feudal system of government. The territory he ruled was re-apportioned into thirty-six provinces, each with a civilian governor appointed by the emperor. Shih Huang Ti decreed that the office of provincial governor was no longer to be hereditary. Indeed, the practice soon developed of shifting governors from one province to another after a few years, to avoid the possibility

of an ambitious governor attaining a strong power base of his own. Each province also had its own military leader, appointed by the emperor and removable at his pleasure, and a third, centrally-appointed official to maintain the balance between the civil and military governors. An extensive system of good roads was constructed, connecting the capital city with the provinces, and insuring that the central army could be quickly dispatched to any province besieged by a local revolt. Shih Huang Ti also decreed that the surviving members of the old aristocracy would have to move to Hsien Yang, his own capital, where he could keep an eye on them.

But Shih Huang Ti was not content with merely political and military unity in China; he sought commercial unity as well. He instituted a unified set of weights and measures throughout the country; standardized the coinage, various implements, and the axle lengths of wagons; and supervised the construction of roads and canals. He also established a system of unified laws throughout China and standardized the written language.

The emperor's most famous (or perhaps infamous) act was the decree of 213 B.C. in which he ordered the burning of all the books in China. Exceptions were made for writings on such technical topics as agriculture and medicine, the historical records of the state of Ch'in, and the philosophical works of the Legalist writers. But the writings of all the other schools of philosophy—including the doctrines of Confucius—were to be destroyed. By this Draconian decree, probably the first example of large-scale censorship in all of history, Shih Huang Ti hoped to destroy the influence of rival philosophies, and particularly that of the Confucian school. However, he did order that copies of the prohibited books were to be kept in the imperial library, in the capital city.

Shih Huang Ti's foreign policy was equally vigorous. He made extensive conquests in the southern part of the country, and the regions that he annexed were eventually absorbed into China. In the North and West also, his armies were successful, but he could not permanently conquer the peoples living there.

However, to prevent them from making raids into China, Shih Huang Ti connected the various local walls already existing on China's northern frontiers into one gigantic wall, The Great Wall of China, which has endured to the present day. These construction projects, together with the series of foreign wars, necessitated high taxes, which made the emperor unpopular. Since rebellion against his iron rule was impossible, attempts were made to assassinate him. None of these attempts succeeded, however, and Shih Huang Ti died a natural death in the year 210 B.C.

The emperor was succeeded by his second son, who took the title *Erh Shih Huang Ti*. But Erh Shih Huang Ti lacked his father's ability, and revolts soon broke out. Within four years he was killed; the palace and the imperial library were burned; and the Ch'in dynasty was totally destroyed.

But the work that Shih Huang Ti had accomplished was not to be undone. The Chinese were glad that his tyrannical rule was ended, but few of them wanted to return to the anarchy of the preceding era. The next dynasty (the Han dynasty) continued the basic administrative system set up by Ch'in Shih Huang Ti. Indeed, for twenty-one centuries the Chinese Empire continued to be organized along the lines he had established. Although the harsh system of laws of the Ch'in were soon moderated by the Han emperors, and although the whole Legalist philosophy fell into disfavor and Confucianism became the official state philosophy, the cultural and political unification which Shih Huang Ti had created was not reversed.

The critical importance of Shih Huang Ti for China and for the world as a whole should now be apparent. Westerners have always been awed at the enormous size of China; however, throughout most of history China has not really been much more populous than Europe. The difference is that Europe has always been divided into many small states, while China has been united into a single large state. This difference seems to have resulted from political and social factors rather than geography: internal barriers, such as mountain ranges,

are just as prominent in China as they are in Europe. Of course, the unity of China cannot be ascribed to the work of Shih Huang Ti alone. Various other persons—for example, Sui Wen Ti—have also played important roles, but there seems no doubt of Shih Huang Ti's central importance.

No discussion of Shih Huang Ti would be complete without mention of his brilliant and celebrated chief minister, Li Ssŭ. In fact, so important was the influence of Li Ssŭ on the emperor's policies, that it is difficult to know how to divide the credit between them for the great changes instituted. Rather than attempt that, I have assigned all the credit for their joint achievement to Shih Huang Ti. (After all, although Li Ssŭ offered advice, it was the emperor who had the final say.)

Shih Huang Ti, partly because of his burning of the books, has been vilified by most later Confucian writers. They denounce him as a tyrant, superstitious, malevolent, illegitimately born, and of mediocre ability. The Chinese Communists on the other hand, generally praise him as a progressive thinker. Western writers have occasionally compared Shih Huang Ti to Napoleon; however, it seems far more appropriate to compare him to Augustus Caesar, the founder of the Roman Empire. The empires that they established were of more or less the same size and population. However, the Roman Empire endured for a far shorter period, and the territory ruled by Augustus did not in the long run retain its unity, whereas the territory governed by Shih Huang Ti did, making him the more influential of the two.