**Qin Shihuangdi**

**The rise to power**

Before its unification under Qin Shihuangdi, its First Emperor (259 – 210 BC), China was made up of seven major states which were often at war with each other, vying for power and supremacy. Historians call this time the Warring States period (475 – 221 BC).

The First Emperor’s ancestors were from a small state in the far west of the region called Qin. The Qin were horse breeders for the ruling Zhou people. After the Zhou gave them land for the task, they began to organize themselves and develop political skills. They gradually assumed power, giving their leaders the title of ‘Duke of Qin’ and then in 325 BC raising it to ‘King of Qin’.

When they conquered and occupied the lands that belonged to the Zhou, the Kings of Qin also felt they had inherited the right to rule from them. That feeling fuelled the ambition of the 13 year old boy Ying Zheng, who became King of Qin in 246 BC.

In 221 BC the King of Qin defeated the last of the Warring States and gave his state’s name to the unified empire. Historians believe that this is the origin of the western word China.

He chose a new title for himself: Qin Shihuangdi, which means First August and Divine Emperor of Qin:

* ‘First’ because he planned a long line of successors
* ‘August and Divine’ as he was now equal to a god
* ‘Emperor’ to separate himself from his ancestors who were only kings and dukes, and align himself with mythical emperors of the past.

# Ruling an empire

The First Emperor governed his vast land with a mixture of strict discipline and excellent organization. He divided it into 36 parts called ‘commanderies’, and chose officials to administer them. Going against tradition, he abolished the aristocracy and awarded posts on the basis of ability alone. He also created a central bureaucracy, which continued throughout following dynasties.

His harsh rule was based on the philosophy of Legalism, which grew from the theory that human beings were by wayward by nature and needed regulation by law. Obedience was rewarded but there were defined punishments for every crime and no one was immune. This differed from the teaching of Confucius, who believed that people would follow a good example.

## Unification

When the First Emperor unified China, he made the banliang coin of the Qin state the single currency of the new Qin Empire. All other forms of bronze money, which came in a number of different shapes and sizes, became obsolete. The standardization of coinage can be seen as both a symbol of the emperor’s political authority and as an important economic development.

The circular shape of the coin with a square hole within is significant because in early Chinese cosmology, the earth was seen as being square and the heavens were considered to be domed. This shape could therefore be seen as a powerful symbol combining both heaven and earth. The word banliang, inscribed on the coin, refers to its weight.

The First Emperor also announced that standard weights and measures would be used throughout his empire and standardized written Chinese characters to produce a script that could be read everywhere. Before his reign, Chinese words could be written in a variety of ways, but this key reform allowed him to govern and control the unified empire more easily. People in China today still use characters based on his innovations.

## Protecting and defending

China’s First Emperor built a great wall to protect his land from invaders from the north. Around 300,000 captured soldiers and conscripts lived, worked and died in remote areas of the empire to complete this huge project. The Great Wall of China we know today is built on the foundations of the Qin wall.

## A universal ruler

China's First Emperor saw himself as more than the ruler of China – the whole universe was his empire. He demonstrated this by visiting China’s sacred mountains, as mythical emperors of the past are said to have done. There he sacrificed to the gods and communicated with powerful spirits.He had the mountains inscribed with descriptions of his great achievements and character, beginning a tradition of mountain inscription that still continues in China today.

Death did not suit the ambitions of a man who believed he ruled the universe. The First Emperor wanted to govern forever, and tried out many pills and potions to prolong his life. He even sent servants to look for magic herbs which were thought to grow on the mythical islands of the immortals off the east coast.

Qin Shihuangdi became increasingly afraid of dying after at least three attempts to kill him were made between 227 and 218 BC. The most famous of these attempts happened in 227 BC. The assassin, Jing Ke, sent by another state, hid a knife in a scroll and attacked the Emperor during an audience, though he was ultimately unsuccessful as his weapon struck a pillar rather than its target. He died of natural causes in 210 BC, and the Qin dynasty was overthrown soon after

**Questions for Homework:** Answer each in a complete paragraph on a separate piece of paper.

1. How did Qin Shi Huangdi become the first emperor of China?
2. What did Qin Shi Huangdi do to unite China?