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**Qin Shi Huang: The First Emperor**

History has always proven itself to have no shortage of characters who are both cruel and incredible at the same time. Kings, dictators, revolutionaries, and warriors leave their mark on the world and often times, their vast impact effects people’s lives today. Looking back at many historical figures of importance leaves humanity wondering if their contributions justify their actions. This is not an original phenomenon, and has been a topic of debate all over the world. The circumstantial and societal differences of historical eras has resulted in many contrasting view points and quarrels about the merits of history. Early on in history, people became more civilized and the need for hierarchy resonated within ancient nations. Naturally, certain people became rulers and often abused their power on their working class followers. In societies such as ancient China, this traditional idea of order and social class became a strong foundation for their kingdoms. For example, when China first became a unified nation, the very emperor who united the land did so through the use of slaves and strict authoritarianism. This emperor is known as Qin Shi Huang, and today his historical legacy speaks for itself. However, it is noted in records that many innocent people died to build his reputation. Did the good things the emperor did for China justify the bad things? How did this society come into place? In order to truly understand history, scholars must analyze the culture, origin, and circumstance of people and past events. Regardless of moral opinion, Qin Shi Huang’s legacy and cruelty were the result of cultural development of his united China and the people long before him.

Before the time of Qin Shi Huang, the Eastern Zhou Dynasty was in its latter years. A wealthy merchant named Lu Buwei met a beautiful woman named Zhao Ji and married her. He then arranged a meeting with the Qin prince Yiren in order to pair him up with his wife later on. This was in exchange for a plan to help Yiren to become king and give Lu Buwei influence over the empire. Zhao Ji, who had become pregnant from the merchant gave birth to a baby in Hanan during the year 259 B.C.E (**2**). Thinking the baby was his, the prince named it Ying Zheng, who would later be known as Qin Shi Huang. In ancient times, nobles in china had 2 distinct surnames. Their ancestral surname and their clan surname. A topic of study regarding the origin of the first emperor’s name involves his name being debated. Some say that Qin Shi Huang actually went by the name Zhao Zheng, combining his personal name with his clan surname, which is not normal for royalty in ancient China. Ying represents the emperor’s ancestral name so today most records of the emperor use that name to acknowledge him. Growing up, he was mostly looked after by his father Yiren, who later, with the help of Lu Buwei became king Zhuangxiang. Due to the success of the plot, the newly appointed king made Lu Buwei the chancellor of the kingdom (**1**). The Qin dynasty believed in the fatalistic idea of ruling elements, where each dynasty that had the most power ruled with a certain element. This system revolved around a cycle and each dynasty had to follow that cycle if they wanted to be the most powerful kingdom in China. Before Qin Shi Huang became emperor, the Eastern Zhou Dynasty was the most powerful. They used the element of fire to rule, and the next element in the cycle, water, was Qin Shi Huang’s birth element (**2**). This belief resembles the earliest sign of the events that would come to be in the next few decades.

Only three years after his reign started, King Zhuangxiang died and his 13 year old son, Ying Zheng succeeded his throne. Because the young king was only a child, Lu Buwei, the assumed control of the dynasty for the foreseeable future. During Lu Buwei’s rule, there was a lot of power struggles within the empire and the war between the 7 dynasties of China continued (**1**). For 8 years until he became the legal age, the young king Ying Zheng remained in a state of powerlessness, becoming overly eager for his chance to claim what he knew was rightfully his. Historians agree this might have been another route cause of his future cruelty and abuse of power. A pressure cooker can only be filled so much before it pops, and the amount of time he had to wait due to his father’s untimely death drove the young king mad. Psychologically, the king had no true mentor on how to be a King, due to his father’s untimely death. Therefore many misconceptions regarding governing tactics and the way the kingdom worked influenced the personality of Qin Shi Huang. When he finally rose to the throne, this influence began to show itself in his methods.

Qin Shi Huang dealt with a lot of adversity growing up as an adolescent, but it would only continue for the young man. When he finally inherited the throne, the 7 different major kingdoms in China still had conflicts with one another and were at war. The idea of a 22 year old kid ruling the dynasty destined to become the most powerful in China also caused strife. Even within his family, problems soon arose. Qin Shi Huang’s half- brother Chengjiao, often known as lord Chang’ an, believed he had the right to the throne. Qin Shi Huang was given the throne due because he was the son of king Zhuangxian’s current wife, Zhao Ji. Near the beginning of the reign of the new king, Chengjiao plotted a rebellion to take the throne from his brother. The fight took place at Tunliu, where the lord Chang’an eventually surrendered to Qin Shi Huang. The rebels and every member of lord Chang’an’s family were executed along with the lord himself, at the hands of the young king (**2**). Nobody ever doubted Qin Shi Huang’s wrath after this moment and the young king began to make a name for himself within all of China. Unfortunately for Qin Shi Huang, this only created more struggle and created more enemies to him and his state.

Perhaps the most famous failed attempt to over throw the king was the Lao Ai rebellion. This story has a very unique plot and the outcome arguably shaped the destiny of all of China. It started with the actions of a man who already established himself as a cornerstone of the infrastructure of the Qin kingdom. Lu Buwei, the merchant, who had successfully colluded with many people to gain power, decided he needed to play his games one more time. As Qin Shi Huang grew older, the merchant began to fear that his plot with the king’s father would soon be discovered. Out of sheer paranoia, Lu Buwei concluded that he needed to find Zhao Ji a new lover so that any suspicion of their relationship would be destroyed. The mercenary found a man named Lao Ai, who claimed to be famous in his town for being very well endowed. Zhao Ji bore Lao Ai two sons, and eventually Lao Ai became a noble man, earning the title of Marquis. The simple plan of Lu Buwei merely intended to help himself, but Lao Ai became power hungry and began plotting a coup to overthrown the king. The plan revolved around replacing the king with one of the two sons he had with Zhao Ji (**3**). The newly appointed nobleman, however messed up his plan by being overheard bragging about being the step father of the Qin kingdom’s ruler. Qin Shi Huang heard about this and instantly became skeptical of Lao Ai. In 238 B.C, Qin Shi Huang traveled to the ancient capital city of Yong. During his travels he found out about Lao Ai’s treachery. He ordered Lu Buwei, to authorize his most trusted military advisors, lord Changping and lord Changwen attack Lao Ai in the capital city. As a mercenary, Lu Buwei felt conflicted because neither outcome truly benefited him at all, but he ultimately followed the orders of Qin Shi Huang. The military of the Qin kingdom ruthlessly killed all of the enemy troops, although Lao Ai succeeded in fleeing the scene of the battle. As a result, Qin Shi Huang placed a 1 million copper coin bounty on Lao Ai to be taken to him alive. Along with the hunt for the new fugitive, the king also ordered all of Lao Ai’s supporters to be vanquished. The support perished and Lao Ai eventually surrendered himself to execution at the hands of Qin Shi Huang. The king once again proved his merciless nature by killing Lao Ai by tying his limbs to chariots and having the horse run apart thus tearing him apart by the limbs. Lao Ai’s whole family proceeded to be executed in the third degree soon after. Not even the two hidden sons were spared because the king saw them as a threat. Qi Shi Huang then placed his mother, Zhao Ji on permanent house arrest. Lu Buwei, torn apart by recent events, drank poison and committed suicide. Qi Shi Huang now had full control of the Qin kingdom and the warring states began to view him as a very serious threat to their existence (**3**). The aftermath after the rebellion ushered in an era where the Qin kingdom truly became a dynasty and began to conquer other states in the name of power and glory. Qi Shi Huang would soon notice a pattern that he knew all too well. The higher he rose in strength, the more people desired to take that strength away.

Because the Qin Dynasty had recently became more powerful after the recent events previously mentioned, other kingdoms were now too intimidated to try to overthrow the Qin armies formally, so they had leaders try to personally assassinate the king himself. There were 2 major direct attempts on the life of Qi Shi Huang (**5**). Both these attempts occurred during the Qin Dynasty quest for mass domination of China. The first attempt was perhaps one of the most famous assassination attempts in all of the world’s history due to the emotional trauma behind it. In 227 B.C. The Qin dynasty forces were in the process of crippling the Yan state. States such as the Han dynasty fell and the Yan state basically symbolized a last resistance to the massive power of Qin forces. The crown prince Dan of Yan plotted an assassination attempt to get rid of Qin Shi Huang and begged his friend Jing Ke to aid him. Jing Ke agreed and they succeeded in tricking the king to allow them in his presence to give gifts. The two gifts that were requested by the Qin king were a map of duking and a decapitated head of Fan Wuji, a general who betrayed the Qin dynasty. Fan Wuji voluntarily killed himself to aid this assassination attempt due to pure fright of Qin Shi Huang’s power. Jing Ke was accompanied by a man named Qin Wuyang to carry out the plot. The two assassins went into the private room and across the hall the saw the king sitting in a throne staring at them dead silent. As the men got closer Qin Wuyang trembled with fear and would not go any closer to the king. Jing Ke, now having to present both gifts, told Qin Shi Huang that his partner became cowardly because he had never seen a son of heaven before. As the King unrolled his map, a dagger revealed itself. Instantly Jing Ke grabbed it and Qin Shi Huang immediately knew what was happening. Qin Shi Huang reached for his sword as he dodged the dagger which Jing Ke threw at him repeatedly. Jing Ke wound up getting eight cuts from the kings sword and after the failed attempt, both he and his friend Qin Wuyang were executed (**5**). The second major assassination attempt on the king’s life happened shortly after. A good friend of Jing Ke’s, Gao Jianli, wanted to avenge the death of his comrade. Gao Jianli had a skill for playing the lute, an ancient Chinese instrument, and Qin Shi Huang summoned him to play for him. Upon his arrival to the palace, someone in the palace who knew the musician’s origins informed the emperor. Because the emperor couldn’t bring himself to kill such a skilled musician, he ordered his executioner to tear his eyes out instead of doing it himself. Gao Jianli proceeded to play his song for the king, who let him come close to him even though he knew what was going on. Qin Shi Huang had an aura of invincibility and I think other people within and outside his empire sensed this and that is why he became such an influential and feared figure. The lute player had a piece of lead in his instrument and attempted to strike the king, but missed due to shaking from fear in the process. He then was of course executed (**5**). Soon after then Yan kingdom fell to the king’s wrath. After these events the resistance to Qin Shi Huang’s army was very low. What was once a dream for the young king now seemed more like a reality. He could easily become the ruler of all of China. Eventually he defeated the small and weak Qi kingdom in the far east and for the first time in history, China was united as one nation under one ruler, who had no shortage of physical evidence of his superiority (**4**).

Qin Shi Huang soon declared himself the first emperor of China. Instead of continuing to worry about the individual dynasties, he began imagining his dream of a United China and how he would rule it. At this point, the emperor was no longer such a young man and had been driven power hungry beyond return. The first emperor realized that to run all of China he had to rule differently than he would a smaller kingdom. His ambition grew so large he’d do anything to make his goals happen. He decided to change his political system and the general policies throughout China’s old dynasties. He disbanded the feudal system of class and created an authoritarian government where every citizen, regardless of status, would obey or be punished accordingly. Along with this change in infrastructure, Qin Shi Huang also ended the schools of thought and Confucianism scholar education system. In order to express his power over his country, he commanded the construction of monuments such as the terracotta army to protect him in the afterlife and other monuments of himself to let the whole world know his authority. Along with this, he connected the Great Wall of China going all the way from east to west. Before his conquest, each dynasty had their own section of the wall and after his work, it became one single wall. He utilized slave labor and became notorious for his cruelty regarding how he treated his slaves. Thousands of people died building his monuments and the wall (**4)**.

Eventually the emperor began fearing death and grew obsessed with finding the elixir of life, to make him immortal. He traveled all across his empire, mainly to remote islands off the coast. He often was ripped off by false alchemists who claimed to have the medicine for eternal life. Because he had a superstitious nature, Qin Shi Huang was very scared of evil spirits. He had an image of spirits sending a meteor to crash in the yellow river to wipe him out. He immediately sent his commanders to the villages of the river to investigate. Of course, nobody knew anything and the emperor killed every living person in the area (**2)**. Eventually the emperor died on a tour to the east in 210 B.C. in a palace in the Shaqiu prefecture. His Qin Dynasty fell due to political turmoil and angry citizens a few years after his demise, however his legacy paved the way for new emperors to learn from him and continue his dream of a united China (**4**).

Over the course of time China evolved and grew as one nation and it is not debatable that this could not have happened without the actions of the first emperor. History will always remember him as the man who successfully united China. Reflecting on his actions, however, leads one to question his moral pedigree. Many people think that he could have achieved his goals without doing a lot of the cruel inhumane stuff he did. This debate requires the understanding of the culture and environment of his empire and his life. As mentioned earlier, the cultural development of any person or event defines its value and significance. The first emperor being an illegitimate Child and having a father and mother who were rarely there for him really hurt his human development. Even after his father’s death, his advisors and mother constantly were involved in plots against his best interest. Due to this, Qin Shi Huang developed serious issues involving paranoia and anger. Because of his lack of a true mentor, he never truly learned how to control these emotions. After his agonizing wait in line to become the official king at age 22, his personality had already been tainted. As more and more people grew to hate him and wanted to bring him down, these feelings of anger and paranoia only became worse. Due to the warring states all being against him, he developed mentality where he would conquer the whole world and once he gained power to control people, he went crazy. He used his anger and paranoia to kill all enemies and control all his slaves and people. He truly was a ruthless and merciless man, but what truly created that personality. Was it the way he was raised? Was it his environment? Historical records have sufficient evidence that both of these aspects played a strong part in Qin Shi Huang’s development. People will debate about the morality of the first emperor forever, but maybe someone like him was needed to do the things he did. After all there were so many warring dynasties and none seemed to be interested in anything but fighting each other. Often times in history a truly powerful and fearsome character is needed to achieve order and control. Civilization is often built on top of the bones of old societies and infrastructures. History is often times immoral, but regardless of personal views, history is also inevitable due to constant cultural and societal changes. Qin Shi Huang did very immoral things, but the historical events during the time could never have been stopped from happening regardless. Like history itself, the strong legacy of the great first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, will never cease to exist.

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