

Burning Books and Burying Scholars: On the Policies of the Short-lived Qin Dynasty in Ancient China (221-207 BC)

Dr Xiangshu Fang

School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Deakin University,
221 Burwood Highway,
BURWOOD 3125, VIC
Australia

Email: xiangshu.fang@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

In 221 BC, the battle-hardened warriors of the Qin state, the western frontier state and the most aggressive of the Warring States, subjugated the last of its rival states, thus establishing the Qin dynasty, with its capital in Xianyang, near the modern Xi'an. The Qin dynasty is customarily regarded by Chinese and Western scholars as the beginning of a new age – the Chinese empire – that lasted until 1911 AD. The dynasty lasted only fifteen years. This study examines the main policies of the Qin dynasty and seeks to address the question what brought the quick downfall of the Qin rule. This paper takes the cultural and political contexts carefully into consideration, and argues that the Qin annexation of its rival states might be better understood as an end of an old era as much as a beginning of a new epoch.

Key words: Chinese history; the Qin dynasty

1. Introduction

The Qin people were originally the “barbarous tribe” in the western region called Rong (Xu, 1996, p.72). During the period of approximate half a century till Qin conquered the whole China, the Qin people almost conformed to the culture of the Middle Kingdom in terms of food, clothing and language. However, the difference in culture between the state of Qin and the states of the central area was still noticeable. When all of the rival states had been brought under his control in 221 BC, how would King Ying Zheng govern? King Ying Zheng issued a decree, stating that from then on he should be addressed as the First Emperor – *Shihuangdi*, and his successors should be known as Second Emperor, Third Emperor, Fourth Emperor, and so on and so forth, until thousands of generations to come, without ending.¹ The year of 221 BC is customarily regarded by Chinese and Western scholars as the beginning of a new age – the Chinese empire – that lasted until 1911 AD. But, if we take the historical and political contexts more carefully into consideration, the Qin annexation of its rival states might be better understood as an end of an old era as much as a beginning of a new epoch. The dynasty lasted only 15 years. This paper investigates the major policies of the Qin reign and searches for the causes of its swift demise.

1. Destroying the old culture

When celebrating his victory of conquering other six rival states, the First Emperor spoke of having relied upon the magic power of his ancestors and gave them the retrospective title of August Exalted Sovereigns – *Taishanghuang*. The First Emperor simply refused to accept the concept of Mandate of Heaven, which would have implied a dynastic cycle and an eventual end to the rule of the Qin house, and he stated explicitly that he expected his line to endure for infinity. Fairbank and Goldman (1998) describe the Qin as “less renowned for culture” at the time of their rise to the most powerful state in the period of Warring States (403–221 BC), but they were better warriors (p.54). The First Emperor of Qin was most conscious of this humble origin. In Chinese, *huangdi* means “august god” (Makeham, 2008, p.108). When he announced himself *Shihuangdi* (the First Emperor), he was challenging the traditional concept of the divine ancestry and superior culture of the central area. He intended to create new myths of his divine ancestry and, even more ambitiously, of himself as the beginning of history, culture and tradition. Accordingly, his chancellor Li Si, petitioned the First Emperor to burn all histories, except the official history of the Qin state, and those who have in their possession the *Classic of Odes*, the *Classic of History*, and other works of various philosophers should hand in the works, which should be subsequently burned. Li Si also requested that those who criticized the present regime by invoking the ancient writings should be put to death, together with all members of their families, and government officials who knew that violations occurred but opted not to prosecute should be regarded as having committed the same crime as that committed by the offenders.

The vanity of the new monarch always led him to endeavour to destroy all records written before his own reign, so that he might be regarded as *the First Emperor (Shihuangdi) of the Chinese race and the beginning of the culture* by posterity. He approved Li Si’s proposal. His command was executed to such an extent that many of the later Chinese literati believed that not a perfect copy of the classical works escaped destruction. When learning was once again respected one generation later in the early Han dynasty, many books had to be written from memory, while others were permanently lost. The book-burning was so thorough and vicious that even the records of his own ancestry were destroyed. In order to force his policy to destroy the old culture, he issued law to prohibit private education and use of classical allusion from the history of the Middle Kingdom in any speech or writing, with the capital punishment for the offender.

The purpose of these measures was, as Sima Qian commented, “to make the common people ignorant and to see to it that no one in the empire used the past to criticize the present” (cited in Keay, 2008, p.97). His law prohibited more than three individuals to get together, even for a drink. He ordered to gather all private weapons to be melted down to make twelve giant statues to decorate his new palace and to destroy all fortifications to ensure there were no strongholds to oppose his rule. Across China, the First Emperor took powers away from the former local nobles.

In 213 BC, he perpetuated one of the most pernicious and hated acts in all of Chinese history. During his book-burning campaign, dissent was vigorously suppressed and dissidents severely punished. He ordered the execution of the first group of 460 Confucian scholars by burying them alive for daring to criticize him, and, in order to silence potential criticism of his policies, he trapped a second group of over 700 Confucian scholars, who had not even uttered a word of dissent, and ordered them to be executed by burying them alive. His cruel treatment of scholars was frowned upon by his own eldest son, the Crown Prince, Fusu, who tried to convince the First Emperor not to execute those scholars, but in vain. Subsequently, Fusu was sent to the north to supervise General Meng Tian for the project of building the Great Wall.

2. Creating new myths

The First Emperor of Qin tried to create new myths about his own divinity. With almost all cultural heritages were erased, he began to rewrite history. The following is part of a long inscription that the First Qin Emperor, Ying Zheng had it engraved on the summit of Mount Yi:

The (Qin) Empire established by the emperor
 Is the foremost since all ages past
 Descendent of a line of many kings.
 He has rooted out disorder and rebellion,
 With authority effective to the world's four bounds,
 And military justice undeviating and exact.
 When his scholars and officials received his decrees,
 Only the brief time elapsed
 Before they had smashed the six unruly powers.
 In the six and twentieth year of his reign
 He offered up announcement of his august title,
 Making the way of filial piety brilliant and manifest.
 Since presenting them with great accomplishment
 And bestowing below the benefits of his complete devotion,
 He has travelled in person to distant places.

....

The retinue officials following him
 All think on things far-off but once long-lasting
 They recall the age of disordered confusion
 When the land was divided and separate states established,
 So opening wide the fissures of strife,
 When assaults and battles every day arose,
 And blood flowed on the plains,
 As it had since earliest antiquity.
 For generations past all count
 Till the time of the Five Emperors
 None could forbid it or make it stop.
 Not until now, when this our emperor
 Has made the world one family,
 And weapons of warfare are lifted no longer.²

Most of such inscriptions on mountain terraces mentioned no "Mandate of Heaven", and virtually they all gave credit to the First Emperor of Qin alone. He believed that his fortune was associated with the number of six, the colour of black and the power of water. He held his destiny to these things with typical thoroughness. He himself wore black and his soldiers were in black armour issued from black-flagged fortifications beneath black emblazed standards. The number of six posed no problem. The interlocking tally-sticks represented the imperial commission and the emperor kept one half and the commissioned official the other and now they were ordered to be six inches long. The official hats were made six inches wide. The length of a "pace" was calculated as exactly six feet and six feet was the prescribed width of official carriage, drawn by six horses, most ideally black ones. The whole empire was divided into thirty-six "commanderies" (郡).

To ensure the implementation of his orders and to promote bureaucratic efficiency in the thirty-six commanderies of his empire, he needed, first of all, to standardise the writing. In the course of 800 years of the Zhou dynasty, especially, during the Spring and Autumn (770–403 BC) and Warring States (403–221 BC) periods, the script of so-called “Large Seal” had acquired local characteristics. With the help from his chancellor, Li Si, the First Emperor introduced what came to be known as “Small Seal” script, which was designed to counter all diversity, eliminating obsolete and offensive characters, simplifying others and standardising each and every one. Li Si authored the first Chinese language primer *Cangjie Pian*. In this reform, approximately 25% of the earlier characters were eliminated. To standardise writing unquestionably facilitated communications, but for the government, it erased the last excuse for misunderstanding or misinterpreting the law.



Small seal script

Weights and measurements were also standardised throughout the whole empire, and heavy penalties were prescribed for any variation beyond an acceptable fraction which was carefully specified in the case of each measurement. Qin’s coins, flat and circular with a square hole in the centre so that they could be easily strung together, became the standard tender throughout the empire and the design was to last over two thousand years.

The First Emperor of Qin seems to have been fully aware that he was unprecedented and a series of inscriptions were therefore engraved on the terraces of various sacred mountains to record his achievements which should co-exist with nature for eternity. The following is extract from one such inscription:

In his twenty-eight years the August Emperor made a new beginning
He adjusted the laws and the regulations and standards for ten thousands things

....

The merit of the August Emperor lies in diligently fostering basic concerns, exalting agriculture, abolishing lesser occupations, so the black-headed people may be rich.

All under Heaven are of one mind, single in purpose.

Weights and measure have a single standard; words are written in a uniform way.

Wherever sun and moon shine, where boats and wheeled vehicles bear cargo, all fulfil their allotted years, none do not attain their goal.

To initiate projects in season – such is the August Emperor’s way.³

All this was only part of his grand plan which, he believed, would make him immortal and his dynasty never-ending.

3. Grand projects

One of grand projects was to build a new palace, Epang, in the capital Xianyang, which itself was rebuilt to inspire awe and to serve as a symbol of the empire's strength. Two hundred and seventy palaces lined up for a distance of many miles. According to Sima Qian's *Shiji – Records of History*, Epang was the most magnificent, measuring 1.5 miles in length, 3000 feet in depth and more than 400 feet in its highest point. Fearing assassination, the First Emperor had secret passages throughout his great palace and slept in a different palace apartment each night.

The First Emperor liked touring his capital city incognito at night, and he liked to travel through his empire, to cities, mountains, rivers, lakes and to the shores of the sea. He liked beautiful praises about his achievements engraved on these sites. Trunk roads with trees planted along both sides at regular intervals were built to link the capital Xianyang to the farthest frontier of the empire. He was trying to find life prolonging elixirs and the word "death" became a taboo, with any talk of it being punishable by the actual meaning of the word. In spite of this, the First Emperor started work on his tomb at Mount Li shortly after he came to the throne. The area near his tomb was made a separate administrative district and the people of this district were made responsible for the construction and maintenance of the tomb. In 211 BC, 30,000 families were resettled in the district and several hundred thousand forced labourers were sent there to hasten the construction. The tomb itself has yet to be opened up to reveal its riches, but its glory and size are beginning to be appreciated by the discovery of the underground pottery army that was guarding his tomb. In 1974, about a kilometre from the site, which is mostly believed to be the tomb but could well be a decoy, 64 kilometres from the modern city of Xi'an, which is situated in the area covering the Qin capital Xianyang in central China, a group of people were digging a well and discovered a pit filled with life-sized terracotta figures of soldiers. As hundreds of workers pulled away wheelbarrows of earth, heads of infantry emerged from the yellow earth. The site soon became the star attraction of Chinese tourism. Sima Qian and other historians did not even bother recording anything about this underground army, and they might have deemed that these clay soldiers were not worthy of mention. Nevertheless, these archaeological discoveries have proved most valuable to our understanding of the Qin dynasty. For example, all the pits have been plundered for weapons. The looting most likely took place in 206 BC, when the rebel general Xiang Yu, according to Sima Qian, razed the Qin capital, Xianyang, burned the palaces and destroyed the First Emperor's tomb. The construction of an elaborate underground world tells us a lot about the First Emperor, whose personal fears and beliefs no doubt contributed to his decision for such a grand project.

In China, the building of the Great Wall has been traditionally attributed to the First Emperor of Qin. In truth there were earlier sections of the Wall built by kings of Yan, Zhao and other northern states in the last stage of the Zhou dynasty. During the eleven years of his reign, what he was accomplished was linking up, rather than building, the entire complex defensive walls along the northern ranges which divide China from the Mongolian steppe, hence creating the Great Wall, known in Chinese as *Changcheng* (long wall), or *Wanli changcheng* (ten thousand-*li* long wall), which in fact is about 2,225 kilometres long.

The purpose of the nomad tribal attacks from the north was not to invade to conquer the Chinese empire, but to conduct limited raid on the districts nearest at hand and to escape with the booty back to the Mongolian steppe.

In 215 BC, the First Emperor of Qin ordered his best combat general Meng Tian to lead a huge army, said to be 300,000 strong according to Sima Qian's *Siji*, to attack Xiongnu. Once General Meng Tian succeeded in driving them out of the Ordos region, he was ordered to build forty-four fortified towns along the Yellow River and moved many prisoners to settle there. He built roads to the region and linked, consolidated and extended the existing but separated defence walls, projects that required tens of thousands of labourers. This was the beginning of a huge construction project – the Great Wall of China.

The Great Wall or rather, the *long wall*, was built along the crest line of mountain range, where topography permitted, to make it a considerable barrier to nomad horsemen. The passes were fortified with massive, often triple walled castles or forts. It was not intended that every yard of the long wall should be manned at arms, or every watch tower should be manned at all times. Sentries ready to light fire signals were stationed at the commanding points, from which they could observe and signal for the approach of an unfriendly force. The main forces garrisoning the forts then were able to prepare suitable counter-measures. As a deterrent to the kind of raid conducted by the northern nomads, the Wall was most effective. It would not be an easy operation to get a large number of horses over a 12-meter-high wall, sheer to the grounds on both sides. It would take time and equipments. During that time, the watchmen would be able to alert the garrisons in the neighbouring fortresses, who would have time to intervene. Even if the raiders managed to get inside the Wall in the first place and collected the booty in the nearby villages, they must still return to the Wall to get out, this time with their booty, which was the whole purpose of the operation. The booty often consisted of animals as well as loads of grains and food, and these things were hard to get over a high wall. However, the project of building such a wall needed tens of thousands of labourers ceaselessly toiling under ruthless foremen. The popular tradition has held the First Emperor in undying hatred for building the Wall. After 2,000 years, the Chinese people today still maintain that a million men perished at the task, and every stone cost a human life.

The First Emperor of Qin comprehensively created a most repressive system in which it harnessed all human and physical resources of the empire to his “one mind, single in purposes”. In many respects, the empire resembled a giant prison camp, in which he forced the entire population into corvée labour service to work hard toward his overwhelming ambitions. The Qin reign had a particular harsh legal system. The penalties imposed by the Qin laws consisted of hard labour, physical mutilation, banishment, slavery and death. Hard labour could last from one to six years. Mutilation included shaving of the beard and head, branding the forehead, cutting off the nose or the left foot or castration. Execution could be carried in several forms and the most severe one was being torn apart by horse driven chariots. Mutual responsibility units of five households were set up, and the members of these units had to inform each other or suffer the same penalty of the offenders. For the worst offence, even distant relatives could be enslaved. The most common punishment was penal labour. Many were sentenced to exile to the frontiers, some becoming slave soldiers serving in the hostile and harsh north and west and some less fortunate becoming coolies for building the Great Wall.

The grand projects so far discussed, the maintenance of a huge standing army for the possible use against the northern nomads and internal rebels and opening up new frontier in the south for agriculture to provide food for the army and coolies all required extensive use of manpower. It is estimated that the size of the population of the Qin Empire was around twenty million. A force of 300000 worker-soldier were maintained along the northern frontier, 500000 coolies were sent to the deep south to open up virgin fields, and the construction of Epang Palace and the lavish tomb engaged 1500000 coolies, totalling 2300000 forced labourers. Besides, a huge regular army had to be maintained to force the implementation of all the projects. Hence, the Qin taxes were particularly heavy. Peasants had to pay the state two-thirds of their harvest, only being allowed to keep the one-third to themselves, and the rations were hardly enough. Furthermore, they were conscripted whenever the government thought it needed them regardless of seasons for farming, and sometimes were sent hundreds and even thousands of miles away to be used as coolies in the construction of the emperor’s projects. The period of work was indefinite. Many of the conscripts did not expect to return and never did.

The First Emperor succeeded in creating an empire, but pressed its population so savagely in these huge and often unrealistic projects that eventually the population could not bear any more. The question,

which might have been only whispered at first, eventually began to be uttered aloud: how long could the population endure such a tyranny?

4. Conclusion

The Qin liquidated the fragmentation of the “Warring States” and established a new amalgamated imperial system, hence putting an end to the chaos that had lasted five centuries. But, for obvious reason, the Qin dynasty has always been viewed by traditional Chinese scholars with extreme distaste. The image of the First Emperor as murderer, usurper, burner of books, and oppressor of the masses has been deeply imbedded in the Chinese mind. He has been cursed and excoriated by Confucian historians for the last 2000 years. Nevertheless, he has had some great admirers, among whom are the famous Tang dynasty essayist, Liu Zongyuan (773–819 AD) and Mao Zedong (1898–1976). Whereas Liu Zongyuan esteemed the pioneering spirit of the First Emperor for establishing a new system, Mao Zedong never concealed that he thought highly of the First Emperor’s firmness in dealing with dissent and his resolution for destruction of the old. The political and administrative system that the First Emperor of Qin created virtually lasted, although with many modifications, over two thousand years until 1911. The Qin epoch marked a cultural transition in history. The destruction of old books and compulsory reform of the script meant that almost all the old writings were either transmitted to the new script for later ages or lost altogether. It was this uniformity of written language that tied all those peoples of diverse areas together and made the centralisation of administration feasible. The bond of a common written language, together with a uniformed currency and standardised system of weights and measurement, not only made the central government able to control communications throughout the land, but also enhanced regional administrative, cultural and economic integration.

The First Emperor of Qin was a man of rage, impetuosity, megalomania and a huge ego and ambition for his place in history. He was prepared to grasp the absolute power. The authority of the old traditions was destroyed, but the First Emperor had no new ideology to fill up the vacuum. As long as his colossal personality reigned and his armies and bureaucrats kept a firm grip on the land, the masses would comply. They complied out of fear of his brutality, not out of conviction of his moral authority. When power was concentrated entirely with the single person, the crises created by his departure from the political stage would be particularly acute. This happened to the Qin rule after the death of the First Emperor in 210 BC. The Qin ruled through naked cruelty. This cruel rule was a terror to everyone, including the rulers themselves. It was characterised by never-ending massacre, murders and assassinations. In a short period of the last three years of the regime, the acute power struggle in the imperial court led to a distinct phenomenon: to kill or to be killed.

NOTES

1. The main source for this study is Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, reprinted by Zhonghua shuju, Beijing, 1959.
2. The English translation is taken from Blunden, C. & Elvin, M., p.80.
3. The English translation is taken from Keay, 2008, p.94.

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