CHAPTER 13

CHINA GOES IMPERIAL

THE RISE OF THE UNIFIED STATE

RECORD OF THE HISTORIAN

It's sometimes dangerous to be too good at your job. An official named Shang Yang found this out when he was sentenced to a horrible death after trying to make laws more fair.

The state of Qin was in the northwest corner of what was then China, meaning the area where people spoke the Chinese language and observed Chinese customs. The borders of this China were constantly shifting, and in Shang Yang's time, Qin was just barely inside them. Qin was an area of high, dry, dusty plains, whose ruler relied on a prime minister to handle much of his administrative work. In the second half of the fourth century BCE, the Duke of Qin's right-hand man was his prime minister, Shang Yang. Shang Yang made many changes to improve the way Qin was run. One of the most important was a requirement that the law must apply to everybody, no matter how high the status of a lawbreaker.

The First Emperor of Qin was buried with a powerful army made of clay whose soldiers would defend him and his tomb after his death. The army included cavalry and horse-drawn carriages to drive off any ghostly invaders.

So when the duke's oldest son and heir committed a crime, Shang Yang had a problem. The law said that the young man should be punished, but another law said that "the heir could not be mutilated." Instead, Shang Yang ordered the young man's tutor to be punished severely. The duke's son was deeply offended at this insult to his tutor, and when he became duke he had his revenge: Shang Yang's limbs were tied to four chariots that then raced off in different directions, tearing him apart in front of a crowd in the marketplace.

But before he died, Shang Yang had made some important changes in how the state was run. He established rewards for reporting criminals, military promotion based on merit (not on birth or favoritism), and reforms in local government. He standardized weights and measurements, so that something weighing a ***jin*** in one part of Qin, for example, would weigh a *jin* in any other part of Qin. A new ruler, Ying Zheng, took over as king (the title had changed from "duke" to "king" in the fourth century) almost 100 years later. At that time, Qin was running more smoothly and more prosperously than most of its neighbors. This was thanks in great part to the efforts of a man who had been executed as a consequence of his own reforms.

By the time Ying Zheng was three years old, members of his family had taken over the last of the land that the formerly powerful Zhou clan had controlled. When he grew up, his appearance reflected his strong personality. According to an eyewitness description in the *Record of the Historian,* "The ruler of Qin has a big nose, long eyes, a powerful chest like that of a bird of prey, and the voice of a jackal. He rarely does anyone a favor and has the heart of a tiger or wolf."

Ying Zheng had to get to work right away, putting down a revolt when he took the throne at age thirteen. When he had taken care of that, he settled down to the business of war, conquering his neighboring states during the 220s BCE.

Understandably, the people in those other states weren't thrilled at being conquered. Prince Dan, who was next in line for the throne of the state of Yan, also had a personal reason for hating Ying Zheng. The two men had gotten to

❝ Sima Qian, "Basic Annals," *Record of the Historian,* about 100 BCE

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A *jin* is about one pound, or half a kilogram.

HOW DO YOU SAY "CHINA"?

In modern Chinese, the land of China is called *zhongguo,* 中國 or Central Kingdom (as in "Center of the Earth"). The ancient Chinese people used the words *hua* 華 ("flowery") and *xia* 夏 (the name of the first dynasty) to refer to their land. Even today, the Chinese sometimes refer to themselves as *huaren* 華人 ("flowery people"). The name used in many other languages derives from Qin (秦) (also spelled Ch'in), since it was under the Qin rulers that China as we know it today was born.

know each other as boys when they were hostages in another state. You would think that this would lead to a lifelong friendship, but once Ying Zheng had become King of Qin, Prince Dan became his hostage. The prince wasn't happy with the way Ying Zheng treated him. He managed to flee home to Yan, where he plotted a way to get revenge and eliminate the threat to his country's independence. He came up with a plan: he sent an assassin named Jing Ke to kill Ying Zheng. Jing Ke "loved reading and swordplay," according to the *Record of the Historian*. Maybe his love of reading gave him the imagination necessary for the ingenious plot he hatched to get close to the king.

> Sima Qian, "Biography of Assassins," *Record of the Historian,* about 100 BCE

Jing Ke told a former Qin general, who now hated the king, that he had a plan to assassinate Ying Zheng. He needed an excuse to approach the throne, and his brilliant idea was to carry the general's head in a box to the king to prove that this enemy had been killed.

You might think that the general would prefer some other plan. But he was overjoyed at the thought that his death could help get rid of his hated enemy. According to the account, he said, "'Day and night I have gnashed my

> Sima Qian, "Biography of Assassins," *Record of the Historian,* about 100 BCE

The Qin government issued standard weights, such as this one made of bronze, which reassured people that trade was fair.

teeth and seared my heart for such a plan. At last I have been able to hear of it.' Then he slit his [own] throat."

Sure enough, Ying Zheng was so pleased at the sight of his enemy's head in a box that he allowed Jing Ke to approach him. But then "Jing Ke seized the king's sleeve with his left hand," says the *Record of the Historian*, "and with his right he picked up a dagger and stabbed at his chest. Before it reached his goal, the king . . . pulled himself to his feet, so that his sleeve tore away." Jing Ke chased the king around the throne room and threw his knife at him, but it struck a pillar. His attendants weren't allowed to carry weapons, so it took a while before they finally killed the would-be assassin, after which "the king sulked for some time."

Ying Zheng then brutally conquered Yan and much of the rest of China, making him the first Chinese emperor. He became known as Shi Huangdi, or "First Emperor."

After he had unified these different states into the Chinese Empire, Shi Huangdi continued the reforms that Shang Yang had begun a century earlier. Three of his more important accomplishments were the standardization of Chinese writing, so that people all over the empire could read what everybody else wrote, no matter what type of Chinese they spoke; direct rule from a central government, so that the laws were the same all over the empire; and the establishment of standard weights and measures and standard cart-widths (so that carts could all fit on the same roads).

Some of the First Emperor's actions might not look advanced to people today. For instance, some philosophical writings told the emperor how to behave, and Shi Huangdi thought this was improper. So he ordered the burning of all nontechnical books (he did keep a copy of each for the imperial library). When the book burning wasn't enough to keep the scholars quiet, he ordered 400 of them buried alive. After this most of the scholars stopped giving advice to the emperor and turned their thoughts to other matters.

Long before Shi Huangdi died in 209 BCE, he ordered the construction of his own **mausoleum**. An enormous labor force spent 40 years building the huge structure. The historian Sima Qian said in the "Basic Annals" that the First Emperor

"Sima Qian, "Biography of Assassins," *Record of the Historian,* about 100 BCE

PLEASE OBEY THE TREATY, DAD!

States often exchanged hostages—frequently the sons of rulers or high officers—to make sure that their relationships stayed friendly. If a treaty or other agreement was broken, the hostage could be killed. Sometimes a defeated state would send hostages to the winner, probably to guarantee that they would follow the terms of their surrender.

{ Named for King Mausolus of Caria (now part of Turkey), whose wife had an elaborate tomb built for him, a mausoleum is a structure containing the bodies or coffins of one or more people.

> Sima Qian, "Basic Annals," *Record of the Historian,* about 100 BCE
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> assembled more than 700,000 convict laborers from all over China. They dug through three springs, sealing them with molten bronze. They filled it [the mausoleum] with palaces, towers, and the hundred officials [perhaps statues of warriors] as well as marvelous devices and precious rarities. He ordered the craftsmen to make booby-trapped crossbows so that anyone who bored into [the mausoleum] would be shot.

The next emperor ordered the execution of Shi Huangdi's wives and concubines who had not had sons, and all the craftsmen and workers who had worked on the tomb were buried alive in it.

Skip ahead more than 2,000 years to the spring of 1974. Much of China was suffering from drought that year and people near the city of Xi'an in central China were digging a hole in hopes of finding an underground spring for a new well. Instead they came upon a terracotta (hard-baked pottery) head. Chinese archaeologists knew that Shi Huangdi had been buried nearby, so they hoped that they might find artifacts from his tomb. Perhaps this head belonged to the emperor's funeral goods, buried along with him to serve him in the next life. They began to excavate in earnest.

After years of digging, archaeologists unearthed more than 1,000 warrior statues, as well as statues of many horses and some chariots. The statues stand in the same formation that the members of a living army would take. The artists who crafted them took some effort to make them look like individuals, mixing and matching noses, eyes, facial hair, and other features. They stand in different poses: at attention, poised to attack, kneeling to draw a bow. Their clothing differs, often reflecting their rank or their position in the army, such as archery or infantry.

In 1995 archaeologists made a puzzling discovery: a fourth pit, carefully dug in a similar fashion to the three pits they had already excavated, was empty. Some scholars speculate that this pit was intended for the burial of living humans, not statues. Perhaps the emperor suddenly needed

IMPERIAL POWER

An emperor or empress rules an empire, a political unit made up of separate countries. Sometimes these countries may govern themselves, at least in part, but sometimes they become consolidated under one government. This was the case in China under the Qin. The title that Ying Zheng chose was brand new. He took *huang* (majesty) from the legendary Three Majesties (*sanhuang*) who ruled the world at the beginning of time, and *di,* meaning "god" from the ancient rulers called the Five Gods (*wudi*). His new word, which is translated into English as "emperor," means majestic god.

The First Emperor had an entire army of terracotta soldiers buried near his tomb to protect it after his death. In earlier times, human beings (some of them while still alive), and not just statues, were buried with dead rulers.

soldiers and decided that the men who had been destined to serve him in the afterlife might turn out to be more useful in the present world.

Modern people interested in these statues can see a replica in an unexpected place: the town of Katy, Texas, a suburb of Houston. Miniature reproductions of the terracotta statues stand in rows inside holes in the ground shaped like the First Emperor's burial pits. Even in miniature, the exhibit (which includes a copy of the emperor's palace complex) is the size of several football fields. The large numbers of tourists who visit this attraction show that this long-dead culture still fascinates many people.