

Chapter 12

The Making and Breaking of Empire

(350 BC–500 AD)

Qin, the Unifier

By 221 BC, after the Yayoi expansion in Japan and after decades of warfare on the Mainland, the Late Zhou state of Qin had conquered its six major rivals and proclaimed a unified dynasty. This was facilitated by administrative reforms in the mid-4c BC that strengthened the state. However, Qin's glory was short-lived, the first empire collapsing after only 15 years.

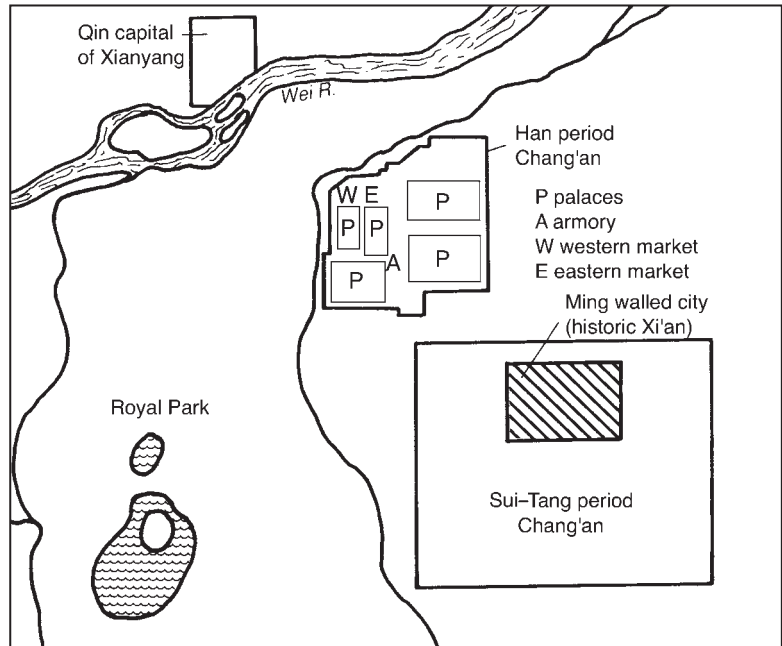
Warring states reforms¹

Instigated mainly by one man, Shang Yang, but following trends in all Zhou states, reforms revolutionized the Qin legal code, dissolved the aristocratic class and its ritual system based on bronze vessels, established a meritocratic ranking system allowing participation of the lower classes in state administration and military, extended land registration and taxes, and instituted a nested territorial system of commanderies and counties that bypassed the old aristocracy and brought land under direct state control. Qin reconstituted itself as a war machine, targeting the entire male populace for conscriptive service.

The conquest of the Ba and Shu peoples in the Sichuan Basin to the southwest between *ca.* 441 and 316 BC provided extra agricultural resources to support Qin's subsequent takeovers of individual Zhou states beginning in 312 BC. Given that warfare was endemic in Late Zhou (the Warring States period), Qin was not alone in fighting its Zhou neighbors or outlying pastoralists, but it was the most successful. A special ethos of Qin identity different from traditional Zhou is hypothesized to have consolidated all levels of the Qin populace and supported major military campaigns. This identity was a throwback to Qin's alleged origin as a 'barbarian' tribe, which set it against all other Zhou states. This served Qin well during the unification wars but was not suitable as an ideology of empire as being 'united under heaven', thus possibly contributing to the short life of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC).²

Figure 12.1 Dynastic capitals of Qin, Han and Tang

North of Xi'an in the Wei River valley stood Xianyang, the last capital of Qin after several relocations around the river basin in the Zhou period. South of the river were two cities named Chang'an – one forming the capital of the Early Han Dynasty, the other built in the Sui Dynasty (581–618, 84km²) and in use through Tang. The Late Han Dynasty capital was at Luoyang, about 200 km east of Chang'an. The Ming Dynasty walled city (hatched, 12km²) forms the core of modern Xi'an. The Royal Park of the Qin emperors focused around an artificial lake, used in the Han period both as a reservoir for Chang'an and as a naval training ground (in this land-locked Wei River basin!).



United China

With the establishment of the Qin Dynasty, for the first time it is possible to talk in terms of a unified 'China' (the name itself being derived from Qin). The territory of this newly consolidated and expanded state was divided into 36 commanderies,³ occupying the whole of the northern Mainland above the Yangzi River and governed from the new capital at Xianyang in the Wei River valley (Figure 12.1). The First Emperor of Qinⁱ expanded his authority by building a system of roads radiating from Xianyang and a canal to link rivers in the south, and by establishing local commanderies. A new Great Wall was built beyond the earlier Zhou walls, incorporating the entire Great Bend of the Yellow River and stretching across the Northern Zone to the Korean Peninsula;ⁱⁱ it is estimated to have taken more than 300,000 people five years to complete.⁴

The military preparedness of the imperial forces is extravagantly illustrated by the ceramic statues that were buried *en masse* in orderly rows in pits near the First Emperor's mounded tomb outside the modern city of Xi'an (Figure 12.2). As one of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, this 'terracotta army' is now well known through several books and many exhibitions

ⁱ Known as Qin Shihuangdi, *huangdi* meaning 'emperor', and *shi*, 'the First'.

ⁱⁱ Previously it was thought that pre-existing walls were merely linked together (CKJ: 193).

abroad.⁵ These life-size figures (mean height 177.7cm)⁶ facilitated the first large studies of the styles and construction of body armor (Figure 12.3),⁷ of which only miscellaneous pieces made of leather or metal had previously been recovered. Research on the production technology for arrowheads and bronze trigger mechanisms and bolts for cross-bows buried with the terracotta warriors reveals a cellular organization of workshops overseen by supervisors; each workshop made and contributed bundles of weapons to be interred with the ceramic sculptures.⁸

Interestingly, the sudden manufacture of large ceramic figures seems to have been stimulated by Hellenistic sculptures of Central Asia following the conquests of Alexander the Great.⁹ As part of the Qin Emperor's "gigantism",¹⁰ he had weapons collected and recast into twelve huge bronze statues, one of which lasted into the 4c AD, though no illustrations survive.¹¹ Not only were such statues without precedent in China, neither did they give rise to a new sculptural tradition, though

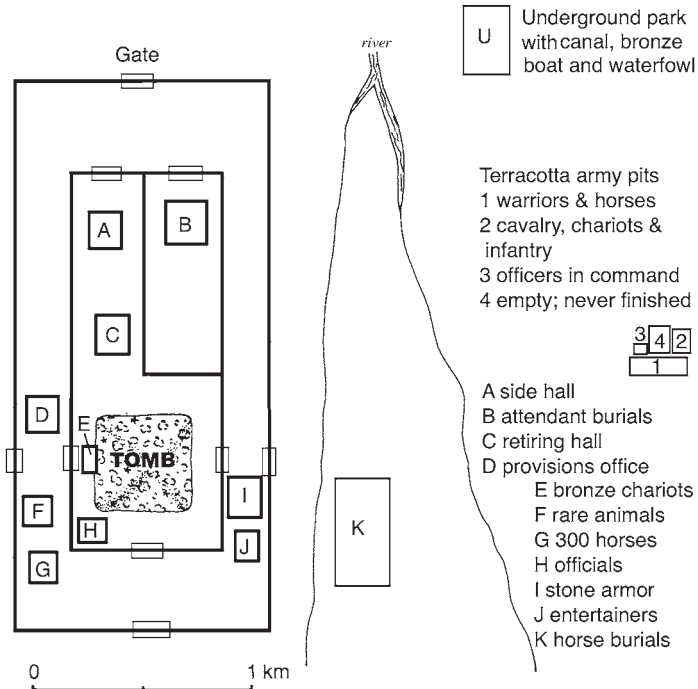


Figure 12.2 Qin Shihuangdi's tomb in double compound and associated pits

Pit E left yielded two half-life-size bronzes – a chariot (above) and carriage – each drawn by four horses. Their position between the tomb mound and western gate of the inner compound demonstrates their readiness to serve the Emperor on tours of his realm. Several pits yielded members of his entourage, but the main tomb chamber remains unexcavated.

Figure 12.3 Qin Shihuangdi's terracotta army

The pits accompanying the First Emperor's tomb have yielded more than 7000 figures. Shown here are officers and soldiers, some wearing lamellar armor, some holding absent weapons. Sizes vary by rank, the tallest reaching 195cm. The variety of hairstyles and facial features suggests the presence of several ethnicities.



smaller figurines placed inside tombs became a feature of the succeeding Han period.

Strategies for unification were pursued in parallel with military conquest and administrative consolidation. Some of the most familiar and numerous united-Qin artifacts are sets of graduated bronze or ceramic measuring cups and bronze or iron weights. These usually bear inscriptions of edicts by the First Emperor, including his exhortation for standardized measurements: “When they are not uniform or are in doubt, make them clear and make them uniform.”¹² He banned the spade and knife coinage issued by the previous Zhou states, extending usage of the Qin coin (see Figure 10.12) throughout the Empire, and he had a new script devised for administrative purposes. The latter “led to the founding of an imperial academy intended to control the dissemination of texts and the interpretation of their meanings.”¹³

Numerous causes led to Qin's downfall. Foremost among these appear to be bureaucratic micro-management and undertaking several massive construction projects at once.¹⁴ Even in Late Zhou, Qin had been constructing gigantic buildings at its capital of Xianyang: one building has been conceptually reconstructed in a drawing as a three-story, 17m-tall ‘terrace pavilion’ on a high, tamped-earth platform 45 × 60m.¹⁵ With the achievement of peace, the peasant army ‘war machine’ was reassigned to construct the Great Wall, canals and roads, the First Emperor's tomb, and up to 700 temples and palaces for the 120,000 Zhou aristocrats forcibly rehoused in Xianyang. With taxes running at 60% and the populace suffering