

# THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA

## A STUDY GUIDE



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# INTRODUCTION

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Few people realize that it was one man who founded the great nation of China. His name was Qin Shihuang, the First Emperor. He not only gave China its name, but also founded the longest-enduring nation state in the history of the world.

THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA chronicles the period of Qin Shihuang's rule. Much of the story has never been told before, and few Westerners are aware of his incredible achievements.

From the grandiose inner sanctum of Emperor Qin's royal palace, to fierce battles with feudal kings, this 40-minute historical drama recreates the glory and the terror of the Qin Dynasty. The film also includes the first documentary footage of Qin's life-sized terra cotta army, constructed almost 2,200 years ago for his tomb.

As the vast and secret land of China opens more of its doors to western eyes, there is a growing curiosity about the history and traditions of this nation of 1.2 billion people. THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA offers us a unique opportunity to increase our understanding of the nature of ancient Chinese civilization and its achievements. This Study Guide is designed to extend the viewing of the film into an exciting and fruitful learning experience for your students.



# THE FILM

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The year is 246 B.C. and China is at war. Ying Zheng, the young ruler of Qin, is waging ruthless battles against neighboring states. However, at home revolution is in the air, for in this corrupt and dangerous court of intrigue, the young King's control over the kingdom of Qin is tentative — his reform measures meet with resistance. But the ensuing coup attempt led by his advisors is foiled and the leaders of the rebellion are executed. Having established complete control within his own state, the King presses on with his military campaigns abroad.

After years of battle and an assassination attempt, Qin orders a final assault on the state of Qi, the last nation to fall to his army. In victory, he declares himself Qin Shihuang — “First Emperor.” China is unified for the first time in history.

To consolidate his vast conquests, Qin institutes sweeping reforms. He unifies the system of measures and currency, standardizes the written language, and lays out a radiating system of roads and canals for transportation. Yet, life in the new empire is harsh. More than 700,000 slaves are organized into huge labor gangs to join together the Great Wall of China, and hundreds of thousands more are drafted to work on Qin's 270 palaces and his burial tomb. Thousands of books are burned in a scourge against freedom of thought; scholars who voice opposition are buried alive.

After several attempts on his life, Qin Shihuang becomes obsessed with death and has his alchemists prepare a potion that would make him immortal. The elixirs he ingests to achieve everlasting life contain poisonous chemicals such as mercury, lead and arsenic. When Qin eventually dies, Eunuch Zhao Gao and Prime Minister Li Si secretly forge a new will. They engineer the suicide of Qin's oldest son, and enthrone a younger — and weaker — son.

Qin's Dynasty, predicted to last “ten thousand generations,” survives his own death by only four years. Yet the Imperial system he created does, in fact, endure for more than 2,000 years, proving to be one of the world's most durable political structures.

The story ends in contemporary China where Qin's “guardian army” is slowly being excavated. In 1974, well-diggers in China's Shaanxi Province stumbled upon a huge subterranean vault — the forgotten tomb of Emperor Qin. Within the underground chamber, archaeologists discovered an extraordinary treasure: an army of 7,000 life-sized terra cotta men, horses and chariots. The uniform rows of clay soldiers, each with a distinctly different face, appear life-like, poised in time, as if they are waiting for a signal from the Emperor himself.

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# THEMES TO WATCH FOR IN THE FILM

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Historically, China has been a donor civilization, enriching the culture of the whole world with her science and technology, her arts and her philosophy. The achievements of the First Emperor symbolize the heights reached in his own time by those whom he called "The Black-haired People."

In only 36 years of rule, Qin Shihuang achieved what few others have accomplished, and, if historical comparisons are to be made, such people as Alexander the Great, Napoleon, and Julius Caesar come to mind. Qin Shihuang was a man of "firsts," and in a real sense, the maker of China.

The following themes to watch for in the film are but a few of Qin Shihuang's "firsts."

## ■ The Dragon Motif

The dragon motif is seen throughout the film. In Chinese mythology, the "lung," or dragon, is essentially a benevolent divinity and is held in high regard. The dragon is the rain-bringer, the master of waters, clouds, rivers, lakes, and seas. Extremely versatile, it can make itself as tiny as a silkworm or become big enough to overshadow the whole world. The dragon's appearance is made up of the horns of a stag, the head of a camel, the eyes of a demon, the scales of a fish, the claws of an eagle, the feet of a tiger, the ears of a bull, and the long whiskers of a cat.



Although dragons are traditionally associated with Chinese emperors, for the First Emperor these potent divinities had a special appeal.

During the time of Qin Shihuang, a theory existed called the "Five Elements" or the "Five Phases." According to this theory, fire, water, earth, wood, and metal succeeded each other in an endless cycle, each destroying its predecessor to give a dominant character to its age. The wise ruler harnessed the dominant element and used it along with its associated color and number to legitimize his reign.

Qin Shihuang chose water as his element. He likened himself to the dragon, the "master of the waters," a super-human, a demi-god. Since water was considered a cold and harsh element, he determined his law would also be harsh and repressive and his rule, severe. Qin Shihuang came to be known as "The Dragon," or "The Emperor of the Dragon Throne."

## ■ Qin Dynasty Warfare

Following five centuries of war, the seven states of central China were united after 25 years of constant battle. Li Si, the First Emperor's chief advisor, described Qin's leadership:

*"For four generations now, Qin has won victory. Its armies are the strongest in the world and its authority sways the other feudal lords. It did not reach this position by benevolence or righteousness, but by taking advantage of its opportunities."*

The sophistication of the Qin war machine is evident from the findings at Qin Shihuang's tomb.

Prior to the Qin Dynasty, the principal weapon of war was the war chariot, a heavy vehicle, clumsy on rough terrain. Qin introduced mounted cavalymen, armed with crossbows and swords, for greater mobility. In fact, the arrangement of the terra cotta soldiers suggests a formal arrangement similar to that of nineteenth-century western armies. The main body of the force was composed of infantry, while a smaller, more mobile force of mounted troops was detached to act separately, and a command unit oversaw the whole operation.

Qin Shihuang's soldiers were equipped with excellently designed weapons. Most of the weapons, including swords, crossbows, halberds, spears and pikes, were made of cast bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, and the surface treated with chrome — a method not discovered by Europeans until the 1930s.

It is clear that Qin's war machine was the result of centuries of technological development, as well as shrewd leadership. In addition, rank was awarded according to accomplishment and not according to social status. Failure or insubordination in the army was severely punished.

## ■ Qin's Chinese Script

In 221 B.C., Ying Zheng declared himself "Qin Shihuang," the "First Emperor" of China. The seven warring states — Qin, Yan, Qi, Zhao, Han, Wei, and Chu — were united, albeit at great human cost.

The imposition of a greater degree of cultural unity became Qin Shihuang's primary task. Each state had developed its own form of artistic expression, folklore, metallurgy, coinage, agriculture, measures, and notably, its own script. This lack of systematic script made any common literary heritage impossible, and impeded the work of Qin's Imperial government.

According to the "Record of the Historian" (*The Shiji*, by Sima Qian, 91 B.C.), in the very year of China's unification, Qin ensured that the script was also "unified." Archaeological finds indicate that this standardization was primarily a simplification of the complexities of the earlier script, and the suppression of variant forms of the same words. A dictionary of the newly-standardized forms consisted of 3,300 characters.

The effects of this standardization cannot be over-estimated. The 3,300 characters have provided the standard for all further evolution of written Chinese script. However, it is ironic that an emperor so dedicated to written communication that he was the first to systematize script in China, should later be the first to order a "Burning of the Books."

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## ■ Qin's Code of Law

The First Emperor, Qin Shihuang, was a student of "Legalism" — he believed that man was by nature evil, and that harsh law was the most effective regulator of human behavior. The State was the highest "good," and the Emperor, vested with the supreme power of an absolute ruler, was a god-like, dragon-like figure.

Basing it upon such Legalist tenets, Qin Shihuang established the first Code of Law with a centralized bureaucracy. In this code, the presumption for criminals, or even those denounced as criminals, was not "innocent until proven guilty," but the opposite. Torture was permitted in Qin's jails to extract confessions, and punishments were physically severe.

For the crimes of premeditated murder, treason, or incest, the convicted was beheaded, torn apart by chariots, or cut in two at the waist. The principle of joint responsibility was applied, and lighter punishments such as forced labor imposed upon the criminal's family. If found guilty of infanticide, the criminal was often sentenced to forced labor on the Great Wall and mutilated to show shame — the nose cut off, tattooed on the cheek or forehead, or a limb amputated. Lesser crimes of theft were punishable with specified periods of forced labor, flogging, banishment, castration, or fines.

Just as they are in our own society, murder, infanticide, and injuring a fellow citizen were considered serious crimes during Shihuang's rule. All in all, the laws of the Qin period were considered strict rather than unduly harsh. Unfortunately, there were too many convictions of people who unwittingly broke the complicated Code of Law. These people considered their punishment unjust, and many of them finally rebelled.

## ■ The Great Wall

During the Warring States period, prior to Qin's reign as the First Emperor, seven states had constructed walls to protect their northern borders from the nomadic Steppe tribes. When Qin Shihuang ordered the building of the Great Wall, it was both a consolidation of earlier walls and an extension.

In 221 B.C., the huge task of erecting the Wall was given to General Meng Tian, along with a work force of more than 300,000 soldiers and thousands of convicts, sentenced to labor punishment. The task took ten years and covered 4,100 kilometers.

The men worked through brutally cold winters and blazing summers, building over quicksand, marshes, semi-deserts, and on mountains up to 6,000 feet above sea level. The men had to simultaneously construct the roads to transport supplies and equipment to the work sites, build the Wall, and fight off the "barbarians" from the north. There was little rest as General Tian urged the men to work faster and faster. The death toll was enormous; many of the workers were buried within the Wall itself.

The Wall is an incredible engineering feat, but the suffering caused by its construction was not forgotten. The Great Wall of China came to be known as "The Wall of Tears" and "The Longest Graveyard in the World."





# CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

There is no doubt that most students now come from a visually oriented culture. Their curiosity is aroused more by seeing than by reading. Film offers a heightened sense of the "feel" of an era and helps students to achieve a better understanding of what life was like in former times. A few sweeps of the camera reveal a mosaic of inter-related facets of the physical environment, the economic conditions, aesthetics, and the social behavior of any given situation.

Showing a film to a captive audience in class ensures that all the students have an equal exposure to the material. Furthermore, since watching the film is a group experience, it is natural for a class to react to it and interact together. Film provides an excellent stimulant for class discussion.

Six classroom activities are suggested on the following pages, using the screening of *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA* as a collective experience. These suggestions are meant only as a guide; classroom discussion may well lead to other avenues of significant and pertinent study which you may choose to follow.

The activities have not been designated a grade level, leaving you, the teacher, to decide which are appropriate for your students. Each activity is accompanied by attitudinal and/or knowledge objectives.

## ■ Understanding the Camera

### OBJECTIVES

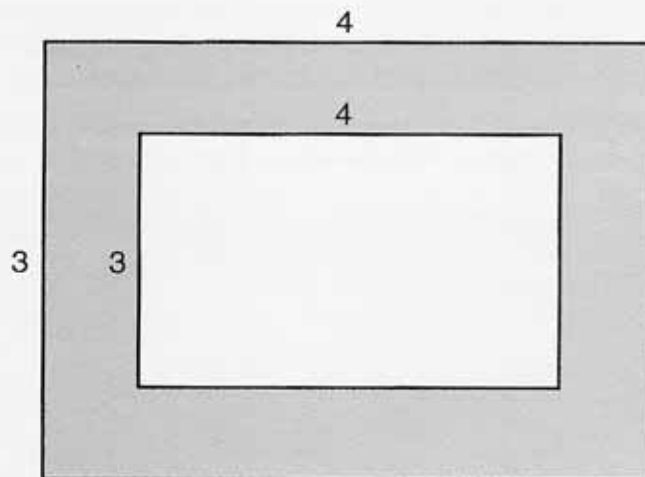
To understand how filming works and how "reality" is constructed

To explore the visual language of film in a variety of ways

To develop a willingness to cooperate in group undertakings

The format of a film affects the way in which a film is "shot." For example, in the IMAX format, the camera is best suited to long shots as opposed to the television camera which is best suited to close-ups.

Students can experiment and practise with camera point of view without using a real camera; all they need is a home-made viewfinder. To make this, they should take a piece of heavy paper and cut a rectangle into the middle, creating a frame with a 3:4 ratio. Simply by looking through the viewfinder, they will be able to search out and select "shots."



Have some students perform a simple scene in front of the class, while others use their viewfinders to "shoot" the performance. Students should take turns performing and recording the presentation. To get a "long shot" of the group, students should stand at a distance from the performers and hold the viewfinder close to one eye. As they move the viewfinder away from their eye, they will obtain a "medium" shot, and as they move it farther away, they will get a "close-up" of one person in the group. Have students stand on chairs and focus their viewfinders down on the group.

This gives them a "high-angle" shot. Ask students what effect is achieved through this style of shot. Have students take a "low-angle" shot by getting on the floor and focusing their viewfinders straight up at the group. Ask students how this position gives the group the appearance of power.



By moving the viewfinder from left to right and then from right to left, students will learn how to “pan” by moving straight towards the group, students will learn how to “dolly”; and by following along with someone who is moving, they will learn to “track.”

Finally, have the students point their viewfinders down to shoot the feet of the group and then move the viewfinders upward. This will give an example of “tilting” the camera.

Students can watch for examples of each of these camera movements in the film *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA*.

## ■ An “Image Scan” of the Film

### *OBJECTIVES*

To develop a sensitivity to the opinions of others

To learn to differentiate between one’s own existing values and those created by the filmmaker

An audience accepts the reality that a filmmaker has created. In this way, the lives and emotions of the film’s characters can have a powerful effect on the audience. The first response is primarily an emotional one rather than intellectual, and this response varies with the individual’s personality, values, and background.

An “Image Scan” is designed to help teachers and students deal with the emotional responses before delving into a film’s intellectual implications or its technical aspects. Listening to individual image scans can help students understand that we can all see the same film and yet respond differently.

Following the viewing of *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA*, ask students to note which images or sounds from the film were most memorable. As images and sounds are recalled, they prompt other images and sounds by association, and students begin to discuss the movie and how it was perceived by others in the class.

Direct the discussion with one or more of the following questions:

What emotions did the film arouse in you?

To what extent did the film confirm your experience? Intensify it? Extend it?

What impact did the large format of the IMAX film have on you? What changes take place in an audience’s perception of a film as a result of the size of the screen?

This kind of exchange sets the stage for discussing other elements that are basic to the film, such as the THEMES presented earlier in this guide.

## ■ Reviewing *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA*

### *OBJECTIVES*

To learn the location, major achievements, customs, and beliefs of an ancient civilization

To learn the value of critical thinking

To develop writing skills

Writing a film review is not a simple task. As Jay Scott, film critic for the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, said “The evaluation process is one of reacting and trying to order that reaction. Then what you try to do is analyze the emotion and find out what created it.”

Ask students to focus their review of *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA* on one or more of the following elements.

A brief summary of the content or “story” of the film, identifying the main conflict, mentioning the setting, and giving some overall assessment of the film in terms of its major strengths or weaknesses, particularly with regard to viewer interest and believability. The theme of the film — the point the film attempts to make — should also be mentioned.

A discussion of the film direction. Does the film seem to flow well? Does the audience know why the characters are doing what they are doing? Is it visually pleasing? Is the pace appropriate? Is the music suitable? Does the visual impact match the requirements of the story? Do the directors elicit the intended reaction from the audience?

References to the script and scriptwriter. Is the film well written? Is it a good story? Does it have unity? Is it melodramatic? Does it capture the interest of the audience? Does it say something new?

Comments on the special effects, camera work, soundtrack, editing, color, and so on. Mention should be made of the pictorial qualities of the film.

Two reviews of THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA, from different newspapers and magazines, have been included in this guide (see pp. 13/14). Students can compare the professional reviews with their own, and discuss whether or not they agree with these assessments of the film.

## ■ A Map Study

Note: This exercise uses the map entitled “China in the Qin Period (246-210 B.C.)” which is on the cover of this guide.

### OBJECTIVES

To develop an appreciation of the qualities needed to build a civilization

To understand the achievements of a past civilization

To develop mapping skills

There were many cradles of civilization; China is one of them. The response of an ancient civilization to its environment contributed to the cultural and technological innovation — in the form of the development of a calendar, methods of transportation and navigation, and processes of mathematics, astronomy and metallurgy. The factors that best explain the growth and development of the ancient Chinese civilization therefore require examination in terms of geographical advantages and limitations.

An effective way to study the Qin Dynasty is to use a map showing the growth of the Qin Empire and a detailed map of China’s geographical features. Explore with the students the geographical reasons that help explain Qin’s growth. The discussion may be directed through one or more of the following tasks.

On the map included with this guide, locate the eight Warring States that existed before Qin Shihuang’s unification of China.

On a detailed map of China, locate the major rivers, ports and cities of China.

In THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA an assassination attempt is made on Qin by Jing Ke, the general from the State of Yan. Locate the Warring State of Yan on the map and explain why that province was of strategic importance to Qin.

After exhausting the geographical factors for the expansion of the Qin Dynasty, the map study may be turned to Qin’s methods of physically unifying the great Empire of China.

On the map, trace the routes of expansion of the Qin Dynasty.

On the map, trace the Great Wall, the northern border of the Qin Empire.

Finally, compare the China of the Qin Dynasty to the borders of China today — what are the differences?

## ■ The Time Line

### OBJECTIVES

To develop an appreciation for the position of our civilization in the history of human civilization

To appreciate the fact that civilizations developed through history in parallel periods of time at different places

To understand that European civilization is one civilization among others

A graphic time line accompanies this guide, showing the periods when different classical empires existed in China, Europe and in the Americas. None of these empires or the civilizations associated with them is ours, although we find our origin in at least one of them.

Ask students the following questions:

Among the ancient empires listed, which is the oldest? Which one lasted the longest?

What was going on in Rome, Athens, and the Americas while Qin was building his empire?

From which ancient civilization(s) does present-day North American society descend?

## ■ Parallels to China Today

### OBJECTIVES

To become aware of the historical background of the modern age

To understand the ways in which contemporary thought has been fashioned by past civilizations

To develop a sensitivity to human needs and social problems

To study the ways in which the past has helped shape the present

In any discussion of ancient civilizations, probably the greatest emphasis must be placed on the development of modern times, and class time should be taken to review significant current affairs.

In the introduction to the book *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA* (written in conjunction with the film), R.W.L. Guisso wrote a particularly poignant piece:

*“As this book was going to press in the early summer of 1989, events as remarkable as those recorded in these pages were again taking place in China. Extraordinarily noble crowds of people in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square were calling for unprecedented, yet basic, human rights in the most unique and dramatic way.*

*The students of Tiananmen Square seemed to be writing history in a manner as large as their First Emperor Qin Shihuang did more than two thousand years ago — as this time they engaged and galvanized a watching world using the 20th century’s electronic media.*

*The leadership of The People’s Republic appeared to be retreating to the same secrecy as the First Emperor himself had employed in the face of unparalleled threats... In a quite unexpected way then, *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA* presents a most uncannily relevant portrait of the nature of China and its approach to people and government — then and now.”*

Two newspaper articles on the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square have been included in this guide (see pp. 15/16). In the light of these, and the film *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA*, discuss the validity of Guisso’s statement:

Why is *THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA* a “portrait” of China’s approach to people and government today? What parallels support this portrait?

The events of the past are significant human experiences and are applicable to the social problems of today. Historic forces have shaped human lives. Our own age has been marked by a certain reluctance to change with new developments, such as space travel and nuclear power. Consider the question — are we any more or less reluctant to change, as a nation, than China?



# ACTIVITY PROPS

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## ■ Fast Facts about the Film

A co-production of the National Film Board of Canada, the China Xi'an Film Studio and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

- Principal photography took place in China's Shaanxi Province between October 30, 1988 and February 13, 1989.
- Includes the first foreign film footage of the archaeological dig of Qin Shihuang's underground terra cotta army.

## Crew

At peak production 368 Chinese and 9 Canadians were working on the film including:

- 39 costume designers
- 35 makeup artists
- 30 prop builders
- 22 art designers
- 40 lighting technicians
- 50 horse trainers

## Sets

- 11 studio sets
- 20 location shoots
- Labor on sets took the equivalent of 4,200 working days.
- A royal palace 129 meters long and 23 meters high (approximately 7 stories) was constructed on the studio lot.
- Built out of concrete, stone and wood, the palace has 7 interior chambers.
- Over 1,000 people worked on the palace (91,500 person hours).
- 12 steel statues — 7.3 meters high, weighing 2.2-2.5 tonnes each — were built for the palace entrance.

## Props and Costumes

- THE FIRST EMPEROR OF CHINA is the largest production Xi'an Studio has ever undertaken. Over 37 factories were employed by the studio to make the props and costumes. Some worked exclusively for this film production. For example, it took one factory a month to print the silk used in the film and another factory a month just to make the shoes. Museum specialists have helped to ensure that all aspects of the film, from props to script, are historically accurate.
- At peak production, 1,100 people were employed behind the scenes.

## Props

- 3,200 weapons
- 200 cross-bows
- 200 shields
- 40 chariots
- 250 bronze and lacquer vessels and furniture. Some props used are actual artifacts from the Qin dynasty
- 350 meters of carpet
- a miniature model of the terra cotta army (7,000 soldiers, horses and chariots)

## Costumes

- 500 hats
- 657 wigs
- 150 costumes of the emperor's court
- 1,500 peasant costumes
- 1,300 soldier costumes
- 150 slave costumes
- 3,200 pairs of shoes and boots
- 2,000 pairs of socks
- 2,300 helmets
- 1,000 suits of armor

## Epic Battle Scenes

In order to get everyone to the location, 66 trucks, 12 buses and 15 vans were needed. The battle scenes consisted of:

- 1,600 extras
- 150 drivers
- 180 horses
- 30 battle chariots
- In one shot where the Emperor celebrated his final victory, more than 1,300 musicians were assembled in front of the palace.