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## China United

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In the beginning, China was never a united country. For a long while, the landscape was dotted with hundreds of city-states. Sometimes, the heads of the smaller city-states would swear allegiance to the head of the biggest, strongest city-state. Sometimes, they would not. During this chaotic period of time, wars were very common. Around the 11th century B.C., the State of Zhou became a dominant powerhouse. The head of that state, Ji Fa, eradicated the Shang dynasty and established his own. He called it the Zhou dynasty. Ji Fa, who later became known as Zhou Wuwang or King Wu of Zhou, was a good emperor. So were the other earlier rulers of the Zhou dynasty. They encouraged arts. They pursued sound economic policies. Together, they made their nation strong and affluent. Just when things started to look promising, it began to go downhill. A series of weak, less competent Zhou emperors assumed power. They lacked the resolution to command respect from other city-states. In 771 B.C., the rebels killed Emperor Zhou Youwang (or King You of Zhou) and ransacked the capital. Though Zhou Youwang's son (Zhou Pingwang or King Ping of Zhou) escaped the slaughter and later managed to move the kingdom to a new location, he could never rebuild the glory and prosperity. Historians often use this disaster as the dividing point of the long history of Zhou. They call the era before the coup the Western Zhou dynasty and the era after the Eastern Zhou dynasty.



The Eastern Zhou dynasty, in many ways, was a dynasty in name only. Its rulers did not have any real authority. They were, literally speaking, living at the mercy of other city-states. Over the nearly half millennium of its existence, the Eastern Zhou dynasty could be further divided into two periods. The first was the Spring and Autumn Period (770 B.C. - 476 B.C.), and the second the Warring States Period (476 B.C. - 221 B.C.). Both epochs were marred with wars.

During this turbulent time of Chinese history, building a united nation was a farfetched idea. But one man took up the challenge and succeeded. That remarkable man was Ying Zheng (259 B.C. - 210 B.C.). He united China in 221 B.C.

Ying Zheng was the son of Zichu, a prince of the State of Qin. As was the custom of the time, the heads of the seven strongest city-states of the Warring States Period often held each other's sons as hostages. The concept behind this idea was that nobody would want to rush into wars unless they had no regard for their own offspring. Zichu was the hostage in the State of Zhao. He was miserable there. He wanted to go back to his own country, but he could not. One day, he had a chance encounter with a rich merchant named Lu Buwei. The two struck up a conversation, and Lu Buwei was very impressed by the prince. He decided to help Zichu to become the next Qin emperor. Using his personal wealth and connection, Lu Buwei persuaded the childless Madam Hua Yang to adopt Zichu as her son. He figured that Madam Hua Yang, the crown prince's favorite concubine, had a good chance of becoming a queen. If he teamed up with her, he could make Zichu the next crown prince.

Just as Lu Buwei tried to work things out, the relationship between the States of Zhao and Qin worsened. Suddenly, Zichu found himself in a dire situation. With his life on the line, he sneaked across the border and went back to the state of Qin. Given the dangerous circumstance, he could not afford taking his wife and infant son, Ying Zheng, with him on the journey. The two went into hiding. They could not reunite with Zichu until years later when the states of Zhao and Qin reached peace again.

In 249 B.C., Zichu ascended the throne and became known as King Zhuangxiang. One of his earliest orders was to reward Lu Buwei. As a token of his appreciation, he made Lu Buwei the new prime minister.

Unfortunately, luck was not on King Zhuangxiang's side. Merely three years later, he passed away. Because both he and the previous king died unexpectedly, some people suspected foul play. They pointed out that Lu Buwei and King Zhuangxiang's wife were once lovers. If Ying Zheng were indeed their son, as a rumor had suggested, it would explain why Lu Buwei would go through all the trouble to help King Zhuangxiang. It would also explain why Lu Buwei would want to make Ying Zheng the new emperor as soon as possible. Though we may never find out why King Zhuangxiang died or whether Ying Zheng was a legitimate heir, we know one thing for sure. Ying Zheng ascended the throne in 247 B.C. He was only about 12 years old then.

When Ying Zheng first became king, he had no control of the state affairs. For several years, he watched Lu Buwei manipulate and use him as a mere figurehead. He resented that very much. He wanted to put an end to Lu Buwei's growing influence. He wanted to take back the power that was rightfully his. Shortly before he turned twenty-two years old, he staged a coup and ousted Lu Buwei who later committed suicide. Finally, Ying Zheng became a full-fledged emperor, both in name and in reality.

Ying Zheng was a warrior king with an ambitious dream. He wanted to build a united nation. In his vision, everybody in this new nation would learn a single script of writing, use a single currency, and adopt a single measuring standard. He knew that this grand plan of his would put him at odds with other city-states. To make it happen, he would definitely have to go to war.

With that in mind, he began to prepare the troops. By 230 B.C., he was ready. He launched his first attack and brought down the State of Han easily. For the next decade or so, he methodically picked out his target. One by one, the remaining city-states fell like dominoes. The last one, the State of Qi, collapsed in 221 B.C. At the age of 38, Ying Zheng did the unthinkable. He united China! Overjoyed, he declared himself "Shih Huangdi" (also spelled as "Shi Huangdi"), meaning "The First Emperor," and named the new era the Qin dynasty.

Shih Huangdi died unexpectedly in the beginning of September 210 B.C. At the time, he was far away from the capital, Xianyang. Li Si, his prime minister, was with him then. He was worried that the news could trigger uprisings across the country. He really did not want to deal with the rebels until he could rush back to the capital and make necessary arrangements. As he contemplated a suitable solution, two ideas came to his mind. En route

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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back to the capital, Li Si made the point of entering the emperor's wagon every day, pretending to discuss what was going on in the country. He also ordered two carts of fish be carried immediately before and after the emperor's wagon, so the smell of fish could overpower the foul odor of Shih Huangdi's decomposing body. The entire journey lasted two months. Nobody found out the secret!

Before Li Si finally broke the news in Xianyang, he and Zhao Gao, the palace's chief eunuch, devised up a scheme. Knowing that Shih Huangdi hated to talk about death and never named a successor, the duo persuaded Shih Huangdi's second son, Huhai, to forge his father's will. In it, the document said Huhai should be the new emperor and called for the death of the first son, Fusu. Just like that, Huhai ascended the throne. His reign, however, was very short-lived. Lacking both his father's intelligence and strong-will, Huhai had no ability to rule the country. He cared only about having fun. Soon, people grew angry, and uprisings broke out like wildfire. Over a power struggle, Zhao Gao brutally murdered Li Si and executed his family members down to the third generation in 208 B.C. Fearing that he might be held responsible for all the violence across the country, he then forced Huhai to commit suicide the following year. With both his conspirator and boss gone, Zhao Gao made Ziyong, Fusu's son, the next emperor. Ziyong was in power for only 46 days. When the rebellion force moved into the capital in early December of 207 B.C., Ziyong killed Zhao Gao and surrendered. He died a month later. Merely a couple of years after Shih Huangdi's death, the Qin dynasty ended. Some historians placed the demise of the Qin dynasty in 207 B.C. (using the year of Ziyong's surrender), but others 206 B.C. (using the year of Ziyong's death).

As the first emperor of a united China, Ying Zheng left behind many legacies. Some of those legacies were admirable. Some were not. To his fans, Ying Zheng carried out policies enforcing a single writing style, a single currency, and a single measuring standard. All three helped to make China a truly united nation. Furthermore, he ordered the construction of the Great Wall of China. The fortification helped to fend off Xiongnu, an aggressive nomadic tribe from the north. To his critics, Ying Zheng had little respect for Confucius, China's greatest teacher and philosopher from the Spring and Autumn Period. He authorized the burning of classic literatures. And he ordained the slaughter of Confucius scholars. Both offences, in the eyes of many historians, outweighed all his accomplishments. They were his biggest mistakes!

Whatever you may think of him, Shih Huangdi will forever remain in history as the first person to bring China together. His story continues to intrigue people, inspiring the making of movies like *Hero* and *The Emperor and the Assassin* in recent years. Sure, Shih Huangdi is a controversial figure. For thousands of years, people debated over him because they were fascinated by both his vision and brutality. And for thousands of years, people tried to locate his tomb because they believed that there would be a vast hidden treasure. They dug everywhere but found nothing. At last, a breakthrough came in 1974. When a group of farmers were drilling wells for irrigation, they uncovered the so-called terracotta army. Those fierce-looking forces were made of clay. Since 210 B.C., they have been standing there guarding Shih Huangdi's mausoleum. Today, archaeologists believe that they know the exact location of the emperor's burial chamber. But they have yet to excavate it. Who knows what surprises Shih Huangdi might have planned for people who dared to cross him -- even in his afterlife!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

China United

## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which of the following about China's first unification is true?
- A. Ji Fa was the first person to unite China.
  - B. It occurred in 210 B.C.
  - C. It occurred in 230 B.C.
  - D. The Warring States Period preceded China's first unification.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Which of the following about Shih Huangdi is not true?
- A. He ordered the construction of the Great Wall of China.
  - B. He was the first emperor of the Qin dynasty.
  - C. He united China.
  - D. His real name was Lu Buwei.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Which city-state was the last to surrender to Shih Huangdi before the unification?
- A. the State of Yan
  - B. the State of Han
  - C. the State of Zhao
  - D. the State of Qi
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. When was Shih Huangdi's mausoleum discovered?
- A. 1930
  - B. 1974
  - C. 1800
  - D. 1925
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Why did Li Si arrange to have two carts of fish be carried immediately before and after Shih Huangdi's wagon?
- A. because he wanted to sell them when they reached the next town
  - B. because he wanted to cover the smell of Shih Huangdi's decomposing body
  - C. because he had no other place to put those two carts
  - D. because everybody knew that was what Shih Huangdi liked
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Why did many historians dislike Shih Huangdi?
- A. because he killed scholars
  - B. because he insisted on using a single measuring standard
  - C. because he promoted a single currency
  - D. because he built the Great Wall of China
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. How many years did the Qin dynasty last?
- A. 27 years
  - B. 14 years
  - C. 38 years
  - D. 40 years
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. How long did Shih Huangdi live?
- A. 70 years
  - B. 38 years
  - C. 49 years
  - D. 99 years

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_ 9. What does the term "Shih Huangdi" mean?

- A. the Best Emperor
- B. the Mighty Emperor
- C. the Last Emperor
- D. the First Emperor

\_\_\_\_\_ 10. Who was the last emperor of the Qin dynasty?

- A. Ziyang
- B. Huhai
- C. Fusu
- D. Zhao Gao

☐ Do you agree with the historians who said Shih Huangdi did more evil than good to China? Explain your reasoning.

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