Qin Shi Huangdi
The Early Life of Qin Shi Huangdi:

Qin Shi Huangdi was born in 259 BCE with the name Ying Zheng. At this time, China was divided into 7 states that were constantly at war with each other (the Warring States Period). Ying Zheng became king of the Chinese state of Qin when he was only 13 years old. He quickly began to work on achieving his goal of ruling all of China. From 246 BCE to 221 BCE, Ying Zheng conquered the 6 other Chinese states that had been at war with each other for over 250 years! He was able to accomplish this because the province he ruled, Qin, had a surplus of iron, and therefore, his army had many more iron weapons than any other army. In 25 years, Ying Zheng had united all of China. He then took the throne and declared himself emperor of all of China.

Qin Dynasty:

When Ying Zheng came to power in 221 BCE, he wanted to show that he was superior to kings of other Chinese states. He changed his name to Shi Huangdi (which meant First Emperor). Because he felt he was so magnificent, he believed that he was beginning a dynasty that would rule China for 10,000 years. Instead, he began one of the shortest Chinese dynasties in history. However, despite its brief time, Qin Shi Huangdi had many accomplishments, even though many people saw him as a cruel dictator.

When Qin Shi Huangdi first came to the throne of China, he abolished the practice of trading land for work (feudalism). He believed that this would make sure the Warring States Period would never occur again. Now, anyone could own land, provided they could pay a land tax. This meant that Huangdi’s government controlled the land, not the nobles. He also assigned governors to help him rule over China. If any governor did anything to displease Qin Shi Huangdi, including disagreeing with one of the emperor’s ideas, he would be fired or killed.

Qin wanted to make sure he controlled everything that was happening in China. Because he was a firm believer in Legalism, he felt that harsh punishments were a necessity. He would use punishments to send messages to all the people in the empire, especially his military. If a general showed up late for a meeting or he incorrectly moved troops, that general was killed. Qin Shi Huangdi believed this would keep the military in line and help him gain more power.

Qin Shi Huangdi also made all of the nobles (2nd class) move to his capital city so that he could watch over them closely. This was done to make sure that the nobles could not try and rebel against the emperor. Instead, they would all be controlled and there would not be a repeat of the Warring States period.

To make sure that rebellions did not occur, Huangdi even attempted to control how people thought in China. He wanted to make sure everyone in his empire thought the same way as he did. He was very concerned that people would read books and complain about their current state of life, and maybe even attempt to overthrow the emperor. Qin Shi Huangdi kept people uneducated so they would not come up with new ideas. He banned different philosophies than Legalism, and in fact, in 213 BCE, he burned books that he considered “useless,” including any books written about Confucianism or Daoism. If the book was not written about how great the emperor was, medicine,
agriculture, or prophecy, it was considered useless. He even destroyed works of art. He is probably most infamous (famous for a bad deed) for burying around 400 scholars alive because they refused to cooperate with his government. Qin Shi Huangdi had them killed in this way to send a message to anyone else who thought about speaking out against the government. This included his mother, whom he had arrested, and his oldest son, whom he had exiled.

Accomplishments:

When Qin Shi Huangdi came to power, he wanted to make sure that all people were united in China. To accomplish this goal, he undertook many large and expensive projects. He developed an entirely new network of roads and canals. This helped connect the entire country of China and also influenced trade. Qin Shi Huangdi believed that as long as everyone was connected, then China would prosper, and so would he.

Another way that Qin Shi Huangdi helped to unify the country was to standardize a system of weights and measures. This meant that all trades would be fair. He also standardized the money in China. Now everyone could use the same money, which helped bring people closer together.

Perhaps one of the most important accomplishments that Qin Shi Huangdi was able to achieve was standardizing the sizes of the wheel axles on carts. Every road in China had ruts that the wheels would fit into. However, not all wheels would always fit in the ruts because of different axle lengths, making the roads impossible for some carts to use. By making every wheel axle the same size, all carts could use any road in China.

Qin Shi Huangdi also unified the writing of the Chinese people. Many of the different warring states had had their own version of Chinese writing. Being the king of Qin, Huangdi had used the version of writing from the state of Qin. He made all Chinese people learn this style of writing, and he also let Heaven know of the new writing by carving his new laws onto mountains.

When Huangdi came to power, many of the different warring states had their own set of laws. He removed all of these different laws and made only one code of laws for the whole of China. This also helped to bring about an end to the wars that were constantly plaguing China.

Qin Shi Huangdi was a man who wanted to make his mark in history. Because of this, he had thoughts of building grand monuments in his name, as well as attempting to live forever. One of his greatest structures was the first Great Wall of China. Huangdi cared little for the people that he sent to build it for him. It is rumored that over 1,000,000 people died in the 10 years it took to construct Huangdi’s portion of the Great Wall of China. Some Chinese people believe that every brick in the Great Wall represents a life that was lost during the construction.

This Great Wall served as an excellent defensive wall during the time Huangdi was in power. He brought a military culture to China that while it helped to unify the country, it also brought many enemies upon Huangdi.
Death of Qin Shi Huangdi:

One of Qin Shi Huangdi’s major goals in his life was to find a way to live forever. His researchers made many potions for him to drink in an effort to allow him to become immortal. Unfortunately, one of their potions actually killed Qin Shi Huangdi. In 210 BCE, it is possible that he drank a potion (made to keep him alive forever) containing too much mercury, a deadly liquid. He died shortly after consuming this potion.

Many of the advisors to Huangdi were not prepared for his death. They waited for two months before announcing it to the public. However, one of the major problems they had was the terrible smell that began to come from the body of the emperor. To cover the smell, they kept dead fish around his body at all times to hide that he was dead until they were ready to make the announcement.

After his death, Huangdi’s second son, Huhai, became emperor. Unfortunately, because Qin Shi Huangdi had mistreated his people, there was an uprising against Huhai (led by two people who had been forced to work on the Great Wall) that eventually led to the downfall of the Qin Dynasty in 206 BCE after only 15 years in power.

Tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi:

While Qin Shi Huangdi was in power, he began ordering the construction of a massive tomb that was to be built in his honor. Along with the tomb, he also wanted a large army to defend him not only in death, but to be his army in the next life.

Qin Shi Huangdi was buried in an elaborate tomb. He had an underground palace built for him by hundreds of thousands of people who were forced to work for him. The palace included a banquet hall large enough to hold 100 people. In the center of the tomb chamber was a model of the topography of China (a map of China). There were even rivers made from mercury on this map. In the rivers there were birds made from gold and silver. On the ceiling, there was a picture of the sky with pearls used for the sun, moon, and stars. The tomb was also filled with models of other palaces, precious stones, and many other valuable objects. There were lamps, which burned salamander oil, because it was thought that this would help provide light for the longest possible time. While this shows that a large amount of people worked on the details of the tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi, their efforts were largely not rewarded. It is widely believed that anyone who worked on the tomb of the emperor was buried alive when the tomb was closed.

This was a major break from recent tradition. Before Qin, kings were buried with women, slaves, and sometimes soldiers. However, Qin Shi Huangdi’s burial chamber was (and still is) guarded by a huge Terracotta Army of over 8,000 figures of soldiers and horses. There were many different kinds of soldiers, including archers, infantry, and even chariots. They were all positioned in such a way as to be ready for a potential battle. These soldiers were all unique and had remarkable details. They were brightly colored and their heights were different based on their rank in the Terracotta Army. Those with higher ranks were made to be taller than those with lower ranks. Each soldier was made of Terracotta clay and had been baked in a kiln before they were ready to defend the body of Qin Shi Huangdi.

Along with that, Huangdi’s actual burial chamber was supposedly booby-trapped in attempt to keep out would-be robbers. To this day, Qin Shi Huangdi’s burial chamber has not been opened.