

## 9th Grade China Inquiry

# Did Emperor Shi Huangdi Improve China?



Unknown artist, Image of Emperor Shi Huangdi, ca. 1850. Public domain.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qinshihuang.jpg#/media/File:Qinshihuang.jpg>.

### Supporting Questions

1. How did Shi Huangdi unify China politically?
2. How did Shi Huangdi's reforms standardize society?
3. To what extent did Shi Huangdi's treatment of opponents diminish his success?

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### Did Emperor Shi Huangdi Improve China?

<p><b>New York State Social Studies Framework Key Idea &amp; Practices</b></p>	<p><b>9.3 CLASSICAL CIVILIZATIONS—EXPANSION, ACHIEVEMENT, DECLINE:</b> Classical civilizations in Eurasia and Mesoamerica employed a variety of methods to expand and maintain control over vast territories. They developed lasting cultural achievements. Both internal and external forces led to the eventual decline of these empires.</p> <p>✔ <b>Gathering, Using, and Interpreting Evidence</b> ✔ <b>Chronological Reasoning and Causation</b></p>
<p><b>Staging the Question</b></p>	<p>Discuss what photographs of the Terra-cotta Army and the Great Wall of China communicate about the ruler responsible for them.</p>

<p><b>Supporting Question 1</b></p>	<p><b>Supporting Question 2</b></p>	<p><b>Supporting Question 3</b></p>
<p>How did Shi Huangdi unify China politically?</p>	<p>How did Shi Huangdi’s reforms standardize society?</p>	<p>To what extent did Shi Huangdi’s treatment of opponents diminish his success?</p>
<p><b>Formative Performance Task</b></p>	<p><b>Formative Performance Task</b></p>	<p><b>Formative Performance Task</b></p>
<p>List the actions Shi Huangdi took to unite the former Warring States.</p>	<p>Write a summary of the laws and reforms passed by Shi Huangdi that unified China through standardization.</p>	<p>Develop a claim supported by evidence about the extent to which Shi Huangdi’s harsh treatment of his opposition diminished his success.</p>
<p><b>Featured Sources</b></p>	<p><b>Featured Sources</b></p>	<p><b>Featured Sources</b></p>
<p><b>Source A:</b> Map of the Warring States period in China  <b>Source B:</b> Excerpt from “The Five Vermin”  <b>Source C:</b> “Memorial on Annexation of Feudal States”</p>	<p><b>Source A:</b> Image bank: Objects showing the accomplishments of Shi Huangdi</p>	<p><b>Source A:</b> “Memorial of the Burning of the Books”  <b>Source B:</b> Excerpt from <i>The Records of the Grand Historian</i>  <b>Source C:</b> <i>Killing the Scholars and Burning the Books</i></p>

<p><b>Summative Performance Task</b></p>	<p><b>ARGUMENT</b> Did Emperor Shi Huangdi improve China? Construct an argument that addresses the compelling question using specific claims and historical evidence while acknowledging competing views.</p> <p><b>EXTENSION</b> Have students create a Great Wall of China. Each student would complete a “brick” that represents different elements of this time period for China.</p>
<p><b>Taking Informed Action</b></p>	<p><b>UNDERSTAND</b> Investigate how suppressing freedom of speech affects a society.</p> <p><b>ASSESS</b> Research current policies of suppression of freedom of speech in China and individuals who are currently imprisoned for criticizing the Chinese government (e.g., Chinese poet and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo).</p> <p><b>ACT</b> Write a letter to Cao Jianming (through the PEN American Center website) asking for Liu Xiaobo’s release from prison or write a letter to the editor explaining a position on the freedom of speech using Liu Xiaobo or another person as an example. Either letter should discuss how limiting speech has affected Chinese expression.</p>

## Overview

### Inquiry Description

This inquiry leads students through an investigation of the actions, policies, and laws of Emperor Shi Huangdi of the Qin dynasty, 220–210 BCE. By investigating the compelling question “Did Emperor Shi Huangdi improve China?” students evaluate whether Shi Huangdi’s policies and practices ultimately hurt or helped Chinese society. By investigating historical sources, students will assess the extent to which the measures Shi Huangdi took to unify China (politically, geographically, and culturally) ultimately improved Chinese society and, if so, for whom. It is important to note that this inquiry will require prerequisite knowledge of historical events and ideas. Teachers should introduce the inquiry after students have studied classical China and established Chinese philosophies including Confucianism, Daoism, and legalism.

In addition to the Key Idea listed previously, this inquiry highlights the following Conceptual Understandings:

- (9.3a) Geographic factors encouraged and hindered a state’s/empire’s expansion and interactions.
- (9.3b) Empires used belief systems, systems of law, forms of government, military forces, and social hierarchies to consolidate and expand power.

NOTE: This inquiry is expected to take four to six 40-minute class periods. The inquiry time frame could expand if teachers think their students need additional instructional experiences (i.e., supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources). Teachers are encouraged to adapt the inquiries in order to meet the needs and interests of their particular students. Resources can also be modified as necessary to meet individualized education programs (IEPs) or Section 504 Plans for students with disabilities.

### Structure of the Inquiry

In addressing the compelling question “Did Emperor Shi Huangdi improve China?” students will work through a series of supporting questions, formative performance tasks, and featured sources in order to construct an argument with evidence while acknowledging competing perspectives.

## Staging the Compelling Question

The compelling question “Did Emperor Shi Huangdi improve China?” could be staged by having students look at photographs of two artifacts of Shi Huangdi’s empire: the Terra-cotta Army and the Great Wall of China. Discuss what these items communicate about the ruler responsible for them. Students should be encouraged to consider their function and meaning for the Chinese people as well.



## Supporting Question 1

The first supporting question—“How did Shi Huangdi unify China politically?”—helps students establish a foundational understanding of the actions Shi Huangdi took to create a unified China by consolidating power and unifying warring states. The formative performance task calls on students to use the featured sources—a map of the Warring States and two descriptions of Shi Huangdi’s actions as emperor—to generate a list of the actions he took to fuse the former Warring States politically.

## Supporting Question 2

The second supporting question—“How did Shi Huangdi’s reforms standardize society?”—challenges students to examine the reforms implemented by the emperor who created a unified Chinese society through standardization of currency, measurements, weights, and written language. The formative performance task calls on students to summarize these reforms and their effects on China. Students should be encouraged to use the information discussed around the first supporting question in evaluating the emperor’s efforts to centralize power. The featured source in this task is an image bank of museum objects from the time period.

## Supporting Question 3

The third supporting question—“To what extent did Shi Huangdi’s treatment of opponents diminish his success?”—asks students to explore how Shi Huangdi unified China through the persecution of all opposing thought. The formative performance task for this supporting question requires students to write a claim based on evidence about whether Shi Huangdi’s tactics were warranted. The featured sources include descriptions of the harsh treatments received by opponents of legalism and/or the Qin and a painting of the book burnings and burying of scholars.

## Summative Performance Task

At this point in the inquiry, students have determined how Shi Huangdi unified China by consolidating power, creating standardized reforms, and silencing his opposition. Students should be expected to demonstrate the breadth of their understanding and abilities to use evidence from multiple sources to support their claims. In this task, students are asked to construct an evidence-based argument responding to the compelling question “Did Emperor Shi Huangdi improve China?”



Students' arguments will likely vary, but could include any of the following:

- Emperor Shi Huangdi brought an end to the period of Warring States and created a unified China, both culturally and politically.
- Though his regime was oppressive, Emperor Shi Huangdi's reforms created the precedent for a more structured and unified Chinese culture.
- Emperor Shi Huangdi may have unified the area politically and socially with legalist policies and standardization, but he did so by destroying culture using oppressive tactics.

Students could extend these arguments by considering the ongoing impact of Shi Huangdi's reforms on modern China. Students would create a "Great Wall of China." Each student would create a brick illustrating a Qin-era reform and explaining how it is still relevant today. The purpose is to create a wall with many different elements of the time period to demonstrate how they became a foundation for modern-day Chinese society.

Students have the opportunity to Take Informed Action by using their knowledge to explore the consequences of a rulers' actions. They demonstrate that they *understand* by examining the detrimental impact of Shi Huangdi's legacy on Chinese culture, specifically as it relates to suppression of speech and expression. Students *assess* how suppressing freedom of speech affects a society and then research current policies suppressing free speech in China. In particular, students could focus on Chinese poet and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, who is currently imprisoned for his calls for reforms in China. Students then *act* by writing a letter to Cao Jianming (through the PEN American Center website: <http://www.pen.org/content/demand-immediate-release-liu-xiaobo>) asking for Liu Xiaobo's release from prison or by writing a letter to the editor explaining their position on the freedom of speech using Liu Xiaobo or another person as an example. Either letter should discuss how limiting speech may affect the Chinese people's ability to express their ideas.

## Supporting Question 1

**Featured Source**

**Source A:** Map showing the regions under each dynasty in the period of Warring States, “The Warring States of China c. 260 BCE,” no date

*NOTE: The 250 years between 475 and 221 BCE is called the Warring States period because the region of the Zhou Dynasty was divided among seven states. These states had frequent wars until 221 BCE when Shi Huangdi conquered them all.*



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## Supporting Question 1

**Featured Source**

**Source B:** Han Feizi, description of Shi Huangdi’s reforms by Han Feizi, a philosopher and contemporary of Shi Huangdi, “The Five Vermin” (excerpt), c233 BCE

Hardly ten men of true integrity and good faith can be found today, and yet the offices of the state number in the hundreds. If they must be filled by men of integrity and good faith then there will never be enough men to go around; and if the offices are left unfilled, then those whose business it is to govern will dwindle in numbers while disorderly men increase. Therefore the way of the enlightened ruler is to unify the laws instead of seeking for wise men, to lay down firm policies instead of longing for men of good faith. Hence his laws will never fail him, and there is no felony or deceit among his officials.

From “The Five Vermin,” in *Han Feizi: Basic Writings*, by Han Feizi, translated by Burton Watson. © 1997 Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

## Supporting Question 1

**Featured Source**

**Source C:** Li Si (recorded by Sima Qian), description of Shi Huangdi’s reforms, “Memorial on Annexation of Feudal States,” no date

Through military victories, the state of Qin has, in the time of the last six kings, brought the feudal lords into submission. And by now the feudal states yield obeisance to Qin as if they were its commanderies and prefectures. Now, with the might of Qin and the virtues of Your Highness, at one stroke, like sweeping off the dust from a kitchen stove, the feudal lords can be annihilated, imperial rule can be established, and unification of the world can be brought about. This is the one moment in ten thousand ages. If Your Highness allows it to slip away and does not press the advantage in haste, the feudal lords will revive their strength and organize themselves into an anti-Qin alliance. Then no one, even though he possesses the virtues of the Yellow Emperor, would be able to annex their territories.

From “Memorial on Annexation of Feudal States,” by Li Si (recorded by Sima Qian), in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, compiled by William Theodore de Bary, Irene Bloom, and Joseph Adler. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.



## Supporting Question 2

Featured Source

Source A: Image bank: Objects showing accomplishments of Emperor Shi Huangdi



Image 1: Unification of currency. Bronze banliang coin. China, Qin dynasty, Third century BCE. The Chinese inscription on this coin reads *banliang*, with *ban* to the right of the hole and *liang* to the left. *Banliang* means “half-ounce”—the weight of the coin.

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Image 2: Vehicles of the same track.

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Image 3: Major water conservancy project, the Lingqu Canal.  
Photographed by Farm and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0.  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lingqu\\_Canal.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lingqu_Canal.jpg).

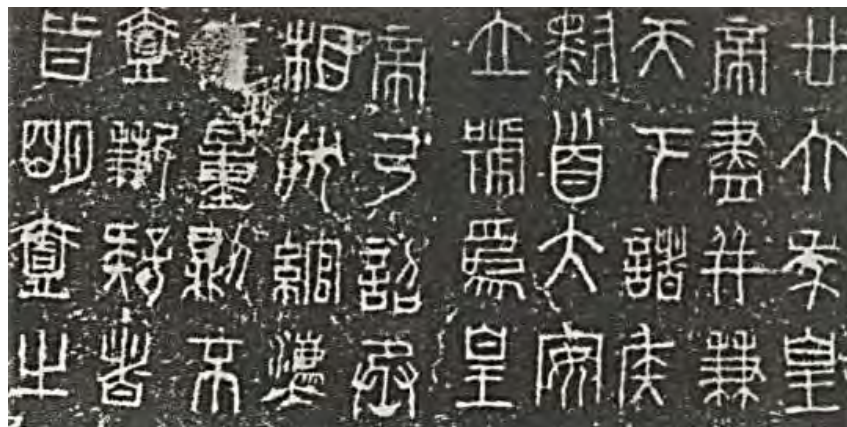


Image 4: Books with the same characters.  
Public domain. Available at Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:XiaozhuanQinquan.jpg>.



Image 5: Construction of the Great Wall.

© iStock/© zhudifeng.



## Supporting Question 3

### Featured Source

**Source A:** Li Si (recorded by Sima Qian), historical account of the harsh treatment of the emperor's opposition, "Memorial of the Burning of the Books," 213 BCE

*Introduction: Among the most infamous acts of the First Exalted Emperor of the Qin were the "burning of books," ordered in 213 BCE, and the "execution of scholars," ordered in 212. The first was an effort to achieve thought control through destroying all literature except the Classic of Changes, the royal archives of the Qin house, and books on technical subjects, such as medicine, agriculture, and forestry....The execution of some 460 scholars in the following year was an attempt to eliminate opposition to the emperor by ruthlessly destroying all potentially "subversive" elements in his entourage.*

### ***Memorial on the Burning of Books***

#### ***By Li Si (as recorded by Sima Qian)***

In earlier times the empire disintegrated and fell into disorder, and no one was capable of unifying it. Thereupon the various feudal lords rose to power. In their discourses they all praised the past in order to disparage the present and embellished empty words to confuse the truth. Everyone cherished his own favorite school of learning and criticized what had been instituted by the authorities. But at present Your Majesty possesses a unified empire, has regulated the distinctions of black and white, and has firmly established for yourself a position of sole supremacy. And yet these independent schools, joining with each other, criticize the codes of laws and instructions. Hearing of the promulgation of a decree, they criticize it, each from the standpoint of his own school. At home they disapprove of it in their hearts; going out they criticize it in the thoroughfare. They seek a reputation by discrediting their sovereign; they appear superior by expressing contrary views, and they lead the lowly multitude in the spreading of slander. If such license is not prohibited, the sovereign power will decline above and partisan factions will form below. It would be well to prohibit this.

Your servant suggests that all books in the imperial archives, save the memoirs of Qin, be burned. All persons in the empire, except members of the Academy of Learned Scholars, in possession of the Classic of Odes, the Classic of Documents, and discourses of the hundred philosophers should take them to the local governors and have them indiscriminately burned.

Those who dare to talk to each other about the Odes and Documents should be executed and their bodies exposed in the marketplace. Anyone referring to the past to criticize the present should, together with all members of his family, be put to death. Officials who fail to report cases that have come under their attention are equally guilty. After thirty days from the time of issuing the decree, those who have not destroyed their books are to be branded and sent to build the Great Wall. Books not to be destroyed will be those on medicine and pharmacy, divination by the turtle and milfoil, and agriculture and arboriculture. People wishing to pursue learning should take the officials as their teachers.

From "Memorial of the Burning of the Books," by Li Si (recorded by Sima Qian), in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, compiled by William Theodore de Bary, Irene Bloom, and Joseph Adler. © 1999. Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publisher. [http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/lisi\\_legalist\\_memorials.pdf](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/lisi_legalist_memorials.pdf).

## Supporting Question 3

### Featured Source

**Source B:** Sima Qian, historical account of the harsh treatment of the emperor's opposition, *The Records of the Grand Historian* (excerpt), 109 BCE

Chunyu Yueh, a scholar of Chi said "I have yet to hear of anything able to endure that was not based on ancient precedents."

The emperor ordered his ministers to debate this question.

The prime minister Li Si said, "The Five Emperors did not emulate each other nor did the Three Dynasties" adopt each other's ways, yet all had good government. This is no paradox, because times had changed. Now Your Majesty has built up this great empire to endure for generations without end. Naturally this passes the comprehension of a foolish pedant. Chunyu Yueh spoke about the Three Dynasties, but they are hardly worth taking as examples. In times gone by different barons fought among themselves and gathered wandering scholars. Today, however, the empire is at peace, all laws and order come from one single source, the common people support themselves by farming and handicrafts, while students study the laws and prohibitions.

"Now these scholars learn only from the old, not from the new, and use their learning to oppose our rule and confuse the black-headed people. As prime minister I must speak out on pain of death. In former times when the world, torn by chaos and disorder, could not be united, different states arose and argued from the past to condemn the present, using empty rhetoric to cover up and confuse the real issues, and employing their learning to oppose what was established by authority. Now Your Majesty has conquered the whole world, distinguished between black and white, see unified standards. Yet these opinionated scholars get together to slander the laws and judge each new decree according to their own school of thought, opposing it secretly in their hearts while discussing it openly in the streets. They brag to the sovereign to win fame, put forward strange arguments to gain distinction, and incite the mob to spread rumors. If this is not prohibited, the sovereign's prestige will suffer and factions will be formed among his subjects. Far better put a stop to it!

"I humbly propose that all historical records but those of Qin be burned. If anyone who is not a court scholar dares to keep the ancient songs, historical records or writings of the hundred schools, these should be confiscated and burned by the provincial governor and army commander. Those who in conversation dare to quote the old songs and records should be publicly executed; those who use old precedents to oppose the new order should have their families wiped out; and officers who know of such cases but fail to report them should be punished in the same way.

"If thirty days after the issuing of this order the owners of these books have still not have them destroyed, they should have their face tattooed and be condemned to hard labor at the Great Wall. The only books which need not be destroyed are those dealing with medicine, divination, and agriculture. Those who want to study the law can learn it from the officers. The emperor sanctioned this proposal.

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## Supporting Question 3

Featured Source

Source C: Hung Wu, painting, *Killing the Scholars and Burning the Books*, 18th century



Qin Shihuangdi, 259–210 BCE, the first Qin emperor, 221–210 BCE, scene of burning books and executing scholars, by Hung Wu, from *Lives of the Emperors*, watercolor on silk. Bibliothèque Nationale Paris. Photo: The Art Archive at Art Resource, New York. Used with permission.