

Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.)

By Department of Asian Art

, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Previously a minor state in the northwest, Qin had seized the territories of small states on its south and west borders by the mid-third century B.C., pursuing a harsh policy aimed at the consolidation and maintenance of power. Soon thereafter, Ying Zheng (259–210 B.C.), who would reunite China, came to the Qin throne as a boy of nine. He captured the remaining six of the “warring states,” expanding his rule eastward and as far south as the Yangzi River, and proclaimed himself First Emperor of the Qin, or Qin Shihuangdi. Qin, pronounced *chin*, is the source of the Western name China.

Throughout his rule, Qin Shihuang continued to extend the empire, eventually reaching as far south as Vietnam. His vast empire was divided into commanderies and prefectures administered jointly by civil and military officials under the direction of a huge central bureaucracy. This administrative structure served as a model for government in China until the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. Qin Shihuang also standardized the Chinese script, currency, and system of measurements, and expanded the network of roads and canals. He is credited with building the Great Wall of China by uniting several preexisting defensive walls on the northern frontier; and reviled for a state-sponsored burning of Confucian works and other classics in 213 B.C.

Excavations begun in 1974 brought to light over 7,000 lifesize terracotta figures from the vast army guarding the tomb of Qin Shihuang, one of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries in Mainland China. Although his tomb chamber has not yet been unearthed, historical records describe it as a microcosm of his realm, with constellations painted on the ceiling and running rivers made of mercury.

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