

# Rethinking on the Historical Evaluation of Qin Shihuang Based on *Shiji*

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## ABSTRACT

Qin was the first empire to realize reunification in Chinese history. Qin Shihuang changed the traditional political system and established China's first unified empire. When ancient Chinese historians affirmed the achievements of Qin Shihuang, their comments on Qin Shihuang always lacked comprehensive and objective analysis and evaluation. This aspect is mainly represented by Sima Qian's *Shiji*. Influenced by the limitations of the times, Sima Qian criticized and attacked Qin Shihuang more in *Shiji*, and rarely recognized and praised his contribution to national progress. This view of history has influenced the historical writing of later generations. After combing the evaluation of relevant historical documents, this paper also further combs the academic reevaluation of Qin Shihuang in recent years. Obviously, there are more comprehensive and positive evaluations. This paper also attempts to analyze the historical records and affirm the historical contribution of Qin Shihuang. In general, Qin Shihuang made some new contributions to cultural rule in addition to his political achievements. This paper will provide new materials and perspectives for rethinking and evaluating Qin Shihuang, and also contribute to the reflective study of historical figures in history.

**Keywords:** *Qin Shihuang, Sima Qian, Shiji, Cultural rule.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The First Emperor of Qin changed the traditional political system in China's history, and he created the first federal empire of China. He was the first person who united the entire country created with multiple ethnic groups, which laid the basis of China's feudal United Kingdom in the following hundreds of years. He established and practiced the centralized feudal monarchy, leaving a political system foundation for the development of federal society. He not only created monetary standards, but also created measurement and writing standards, which promoted the economic and cultural development, exchange and unity among different nationalities in the country. The First Emperor of Qin's contribution in these various areas was great and facilitated the progress of Chinese society. However, some mistakes he made during his reign are still criticized by many historians. Sima Qian in the historical records mostly attacked and blamed the first emperor, and rarely recognized and praised his contribution to national progress, because Sima Qian's views were limited by his time. Sima Qian's evaluation of Qin Shihuang is unreasonable, because these evaluations lack

objective analysis and comprehensive understanding of long-term history.

The First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty is mostly described that he favored violence and cruelty over benevolence and propriety in many historical works in Chinese history[1]. Even officials in the Qin dynasty also commented the First Emperor as conceited and arrogant that he never listened to other people's opinions. The First Emperor's policies were mainly focused on the application of violence to eradicate those who hold different views[1]. In *Shiji*, Sima Qian used a comparatively objective and impersonal tone to give comment on the First Emperor's policies of strengthening his control of power; but when he talked about other events, such as the burning of books, Sima Qian emphasized the First Emperor's arrogance, greed, and selfishness, which was an especial symbol of irresponsibility for an emperor [2]. The First Emperor of Qin was presented as a greedy and abject manipulator of politics, and the people of the entire country were suffering from his application of violence and cruelty [3]. The historian believed that the ultimate extinction of the Qin dynasty was a result of the First Emperor's ruthless pursuit of power, which was also the precise factor that had made Qin so powerful [3]. Although the First

Emperor did unify the whole country and settle the resistance from different places, thousands of people died under his reign because of his tendency of using violent ways [5].

Based on the academic research and evaluation of Qin Shihuang in recent years, this paper puts forward some new thoughts based on the relevant records of *Shiji*. This paper will help to provide some reference materials and viewpoints for historical research.

## **2. PRESENT COMMENTS TOWARDS THE FIRST EMPEROR OF QIN**

The First Emperor of Qin's achievements was undeniable; he completed different aspects of the unification of China, which left many historical treasures for later generations [2]. He overcame many difficulties to finish an unprecedented achievement to unify ancient China, and his political heritage built a basis for China's main future political system [2]. For the burning of books, many scholars have different thoughts from what Sima Qian describes in *Shiji*: this application was not aimed to destroy all Confucian classical books and bury all Confucian scholars as *Shiji* presents, and the purpose was to put down the people who used typical Confucian books to defame the royal government and defy the order of Qin Shihuang and bury adverse books all over China [6]. Qin became the ultimate "mirror" for the Han rulers so that conflicting approaches toward policymaking were usually shaped in the form of criticism of the Qin, or, conversely, support for its politics [7]. Moreover, the very legitimacy of the Han rule was ultimately based on Qin's legacy: Han inherited many of Qin's practices and institutions, ruled from the former Qin heartland, and partly owed its initial legitimacy to the success of the dynastic founder, Liu Bang, to secure Qin's surrender [7].

The evaluation of Qin Shihuang is inseparable from the study of his ruling thought. In the past, scholars mostly started from the Han Dynasty people's cognition of the academic system of the Pre-Qin Dynasty, and believed that Qin Shihuang absorbed the thoughts of Legalists, yin-yang, zaju and so on, and integrated the thoughts of these different thoughts. Some scholars believe that this study of ideological history ignores the common ideological and cultural basis of scholars in the Warring States period, and also ignores the thinking personality of Qin Shihuang as a politician[8]. Different from thinkers, politicians are not loyal to the pursuit of truth, but choose their own ruling thoughts around the actual political needs. It is a kind of identity dislocation to treat politicians' thoughts with the analytical framework of thinkers, and it is impossible to explore the true meaning of their thoughts. Therefore, there is a new view on the ruling thought of Qin Shihuang, which holds that Qin Shihuang is not a legalist, Confucian, yin-yang, nor a zaju. He has a particularly distinctive ideological personality[8].

At the level of ruling tools, Qin Shihuang was regarded as a dissolute ruler in the past. In recent years, according to the textual research data, scholars believe that the mausoleum of Qin Shihuang, as a valuable material carrier, can not only reflect the characteristics of the Qin Dynasty and the status of the tomb owner Qin Shihuang, but also reflect the ideal pursuit and interest quality of Qin Shihuang. Through the investigation of the unearthed cultural relics in the mausoleum of Qin Shihuang, scholars believe that Qin Shihuang should be an ideal and warm emperor based on the unearthed cultural relics. This is different from the description and records of Qin Shihuang's extravagance, cruelty and violence in previous historical documents. Some scholars believe that this is a forged and incomplete history[9]. The burning of books and Confucianism has stigmatized the first emperor of Qin. Burning books and burying Confucianism should be understood as the basis and product of the formation of Chinese culture. Li further believes that "burning books" and "burying Confucianism" are two events of completely different nature. They are symbolically regarded as one thing in history, and are constantly cited by later dynasties to prove the cruelty of the first emperor, which led to the demise of the second Qin Dynasty. "Burning books" is the result of the immature means used by the autocratic Dynasty in its early stage of development to control public opinion and carry out cultural dictatorship. Its occurrence has its inevitability and even a certain degree of rationality, while "burying Confucianism" can be classified into the internal contradictions of the ruling class, It can even be said that the first emperor had taken thorough measures to eradicate the contradiction before it was formed[10]. Such a view has initially formed a consensus. Chen also believed that the tyranny of Qin Shihuang was not the embodiment of personal will. At the beginning of the unification of the whole country, Qin Shihuang adopted the policy of cultural compatibility, and the reasons for the "burning books and pitching Confucianism" event are also various. One is the stickiness of Confucian culture, and the other is the embodiment of the political struggle of the emerging landlord class against the remnants of the old feudal aristocracy in the field of culture and thought[11].

Dong Tao's research further affirmed Qin Shihuang's other political behaviors from the perspective of political culture, which is also criticized. After the unification of the Qin Dynasty, the separatist forces all over the country had existed and created a series of special events endangering the unification politics, which made the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty realize that the rule of the Empire was not stable, and it was necessary to take various ways to deter the separatist forces and maintain the unification of the Empire. One of the special means was to seek magic medicine to achieve immortality. Therefore, Qin Shihuang's quest for immortality is not only for his own blessing, but also from the perspective

of political culture. In addition, Qin Shihuang's respect for each other's warlocks not only hopes that they will obtain magic medicine, but also has practical political considerations. He wants to suppress the separatist forces of the former six countries by raising the status of Fang warlocks, and try to give up the traditional theory of witches and ghosts to rule, so that the people of the six countries can accept the legal orders that have been implemented in Qin. It can be found that Qin Shihuang's act of seeking immortality was actually an attempt to control people's beliefs at that time. The actual focus was the unity, stability and long-term stability of the Empire[12].

Qin Shihuang was also open and inclusive in political thought. He inherited his predecessor's thought of destiny and accepted the theory of Fengchan by Qilu scholars. When he first granted Zen to Mount Tai, its political significance was far greater than its religious significance, which was to illustrate the sanctity of unity[13]. This explains not only the identity and conflict between Qin Shihuang's thought and power, but also between Qin culture and Qilu culture, and reflects the tortuous process of contradiction and integration between cultural pluralism and political unity[14].

Of course, there are still many positive studies on Qin Shihuang. To be sure, the academic community has jumped out of the rut of historical documents and gave a very fair and comprehensive evaluation of Qin Shihuang's historical achievements and personal behavior.

### 3. ANALYSIS BASED ON SHIJI

The First Emperor of Qin of Sima Qian reflects The First Emperor negatively through different events. Sima Qian disagrees with the way that The First Emperor built the country through violence and military force, and he reflects the entire state that was created by The First Emperor was "favored violence and cruelty over benevolence and propriety"[1]<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, Sima Qian states that the Qin "possessed the mind of a tiger or wolf" negatively [1]<sup>9</sup>, which was negative since Chinese people in ancient reflected the tiger and wolf as barbaric and uncivilized rather than a purely positive symbol of power and authority. In *Shiji*, "according to another charge leveled against the Qin, this western state was not only barbaric, but it was also becoming increasingly savage" [1]<sup>10</sup>. The Qin empire and The First Emperor of Qin were both viewed as symbols of cruelty and violence in *Shiji* and other historians' perspectives in the Han dynasty. Such an irrational stereotype toward the Qin dynasty and The First Emperor implies Sima Qian's unjustified analysis.

Sima Qian in *Shiji* exaggerates The First Emperor's mistakes and does not recognize The First Emperor's success and achievements in building the first united

entire in China. Sima Qian believes that "The First Emperor was simply in the right place at the right time" [1]<sup>14</sup>. Sima Qian argued that the west's terrain, where Qin was located, gave Qin advantages to apply the unification and also highlights the function of geomantic practice on The First Emperor's achievements. He credited the Qin's location for most of its success.

One of the most important events that The First Emperor is criticized for is the burning of books. In *Shiji*, Sima Qian demonstrated this event that as violence. The First Emperor burned the books that "might reveal historical alternatives to his form of Legalist government" to control people's thoughts; many scholars were "all buried alive at the capital Xianyang, and the whole Empire was made to know about this to serve as a warning for the future" [1]<sup>17</sup>. The burning of books was a cultural autocracy event, and it produced profound impacts on the development of Qin.

However, the entire responsibility should not be undertaken by The First Emperor. From The First Emperor united the whole country to the burning of books, he did not apply any policies to promote the cultural autocracy during these eight years. The burning of books is a demonstration of the intensification of social and cultural conflicts during the period of social transformation. Since The First Emperor preferred Legalism instead of Confucianism, Confucianists' social and cultural status was lower than before. The beginning of the burning of books is that some Confucian scholars publicly protested the new political system that The First Emperor applied according to some historical Confucianism recordings, and they slandered and made rumors that seriously injured The First Emperor and Qin's reputation.

Besides, The First Emperor prescribed a range limit for the burning of books: "There should be an exemption for books concerned with medicine, pharmacy, divination by tortoiseshell and milfoil, the sowing of crops, and the planting of trees" [1]<sup>24</sup>. The First Emperor treated other ideologies like Confucianism as a block in his unification of the country into a whole empire, which was the main reason he only targeted burning books related to other cultures and ideologies but not books related to medicine and other technologies. On the other hand, the burning of books can help with the cultural unification of the Qin empire, so historians should not deny some of the advantages of burning books. The burning of books brought the resentment of intellectuals toward The First Emperor, and also the laboring masses had the resentment for the enormous physical burdens toward The First Emperor. The other main event that drew The First Emperor a lot of criticism in *Shiji* was the construction of the Great Wall that "vast numbers of convict-laborers were employed upon this task and that the death rate was extremely high"[1]<sup>24</sup>. Nevertheless, the construction of the Great Wall was actually good for the

consolidation of the country's governing and development of society. For example, the Great Wall successfully prevented the invasion of Huns from the North. Without the Great Wall, the expense to prevent the Huns from invasion would be uncountable. Also, the building of the Great Wall was actually based on the original construction, which saved a lot of money for Qin. Therefore, the benefits brought by the construction of the Great Wall were huge for the entire country.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Overall, in order to set the Qin and the First Emperor in the objective historical context, historians need to look at the contributions of The First Emperor and ancient Chinese history through a wider-ranged and multiple-perspective lens. Sima Qian's *Shiji* was not justified and objective enough to comment on the First Emperor since Sima Qian's thoughts were limited in his own era without a wider scope. However, in recent years, the relevant research has filled these gaps, and given quite comprehensive affirmation to the achievements and relevant political behaviors of Qin Shihuang from different aspects, especially praising Qin Shihuang's contribution to cultural governance from the perspective of cultural rule. This paper combs some representative viewpoints in the above research, and tries to further affirm the cultural wisdom and cultural strategy of Qin Shihuang through the preliminary text analysis of historical records, which can also be called the cultural soft power of Qin Dynasty. This paper will help the academic circles to further think and explore the historical achievements of Qin Shihuang, and provide some research enlightenment for the critical reflection of historical figures.

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