On the Place of
Chin Shih-huang-ti in Chinese history

There has been considerable controversy regarding the place that Chin Shih-huang-ti occupied in Chinese history. Scholars of different schools have so far failed to come to an agreement on this issue. On the one hand the Scholars of the Confucian school are of the view that Shih-huang-ti was a tyrant. On the other hand the scholars of the Legalist school consider Shih-huang-ti to be a shrewd emperor. Thus there is still no agreement on the matter. The aim of this academic exercise is to examine the impact of Shih-huang-ti's reformatory measures on the development of Chinese history and finally to arrive at an objective evaluation of Shih-huang-ti's place in Chinese history.

In line with the trend of historical development at that time and by taking advantage of the favourable circumstances of the State of Chin, Shih-huang-ti succeeded in annexing all the six states and brought the Warring States period to an end. He thus accomplished the great task of unifying China and established the first centralized and autocratic government in Chinese history. He became the First Emperor in Chinese history and ruled over the first united, multi-national nation. However, Shih-huang-ti's greatest achievement lies in his reformatory measures rather than in his unification of China. For the success of the latter was largely due to the favourable circumstances prevailing at that time. But more important was the enforcement of a series of drastic political, military, social and economics reforms. Although these reforms were aimed at consolidating the central government, they nonetheless in the long run contributed to the moulding of a unified China.

Shih-huang-ti's main political reforms involved the establishment of a commandary system (郡县制) which formed the basic model of the Chinese political structure. Reforms in transport and communication saw the construction of the imperial highway; the opening of canals; the standardization of the axle length of wagons; the width of road and the demolition of the city walls. The sea and land communication of ancient China was thus greatly improved.

Economic reforms involved the standardization of currency, weights and measures. Large scale irrigation works were also carried out. All these helped to prosper the nation's economy.
In the military aspects the First Emperor erected the Great Wall which is today well known to the world. It was designed to be a permanent barrier separating the agricultural Chinese on the south from the nomadic 'barbarians' on the north. It thus checked the invasions of the Hsiung-Nu (or Huns:匈奴 ) Instead Shih-huang-ti mounted attacks on the neighboring states and extended the territories of China.

In the cultural field, Shih-huang-ti unified the Chinese writing system known as 'Li-shu' (隸書 ). This played a very important role in the unification of Chinese culture. His policy of 'Burning the books and burying the Scholars alive' (焚書坑儒 ) was aimed at having one 'thought' for the people and prevent any rebellions by the descendants of the six states. Many scholars have attacked Shih-huang-ti on this issue. However, once we understand the rationale behind this policy, we should be less critical of Shih-huang-ti.

Those inscription which Shih-huang-ti engraved on stone monuments wherever he went, carried a enlogistic character, and even these are very helpful to the archaeologists engaged in the study of ancient Chinese culture. Other reforms included the changing of emperor's way of self address, court-etiquette and court-dress. All these reforms had great influence on the subsequent dynasties. In short, all Shih-huang-ti's reformatory measures not only benefited the newlyformed Chin Empire, but had also greatly contributed to the further development of China. And these contributions and achievements of Shih-huang-ti's can never be obliterated.

As a result of these drastic measures, the imperial treasury of the Chin Dynasty became dried up, and under the pressure of Shih-huang-ti, the peasants were burdened with heavy taxes and carvée labour. Hundreds of thousands of people were conscripted to build the splendid, luxurious Ah-fang-kung Palace (阿房宫 ) and a mausoleum (陵墓 ) for him. Countless numbers of forced labours were drawn into the war against Huns and Vietnam. The people's burden increased after the Second Emperor (秦二世 ) ascended the throne. Moreover, the law of Chin government was very strict and one can easily be punished at any moment by imprisonment or execution. Under the situation of heavy taxation, forced labour, cruel strict laws, rebellion was rife throughout the empire. And it was these rebel forces which overthrew the shortlived Chin Dynasty. Therefore, the main fault of Shih-huang-ti was said to be that of overstraining the people and overdraining of the nation's financial resources.
Although Shih-huang-ti has both his fault and merits in a general evaluation of his whole career, his merits out weighed his faults. Furthermore, he demerits cannot possibly negate his great achievements. In conclusion, Shih-huang-ti's contributions and achievements should be rightfully acknowledged. His place in Chinese history should be highly exalted.

This academic exercise consists of six chapters. The first chapter introduces the historical background of Shih-huang-ti right up to the time when he became the First Emperor. The second chapter analyses the factors which favoured Shih-huang-ti's unification of China and discusses the process of his conquest of the six states and the establishment of the multi-national states. The issues on the political, military, social, cultural and economic reforms of Shih-huang-ti are dealt with in the next two chapters (3 & 4). Chapter five analyses the factors which lead to the decline of the Chin Dynasty. Chapter six examines the impact of Shih-huang-ti's reforms on the development of the subsequent dynasties. It finally ends with a conclusion on the place of Shih-huang-ti in the history of China.