

# **The Accomplishments of the Ch'in Emperor Shih Huangdi**

## **Standardizing Elements of Chinese Culture**

Prior to the rule of Shih Huangdi, Chinese culture differed from region to region. Each region had its own customs, money, measures and weights, and writing system. One of Shih Huangdi's first acts was to simplify and establish standards for, or standardize, the Chinese writing system. Assisted by his trusted advisor, Li Si, Shih Huangdi eliminated about one-fourth of the writing symbols (characters) used in written Chinese. He forbade writers to use anything but about 3,300 government-approved characters, which were listed in an official dictionary. The standardized writing system improved communication throughout the empire and provided a strong foundation for Chinese culture.

Shih Huangdi standardized other aspects of Chinese culture. He chose the number 6 as the basis for all measurements, and he ordered that all measuring cups be made the same size. In addition, he had metalworkers create bell-shaped weights out of bronze or iron in a variety of standard sizes. Shih Huangdi also replaced the various regional coins with a single round coin called a banliang. A banliang was made of either gold or bronze, and it had a hole in the middle that allowed people to carry several coins together on a cord.

## **Maintaining Order in the Empire**

As a Legalist, Shih Huangdi believed that laws were essential to maintaining social order and harmony. Therefore, he and his advisors created a vast, unified system of laws that governed every aspect of Chinese life. The laws were extremely detailed, and outlined various punishments and rewards for bad and good behavior. Many laws were aimed at government officials. For example, officials were punished if they let the grain in their storehouses spoil or if a wall built under their supervision collapsed. Other laws applied to everyday citizens. For example, widows were forbidden to remarry, and planned (premeditated) murder was punished severely. Like other Legalists, the emperor believed punishments should be swift and harsh. Typical punishments were fines -- usually payments of suits of armor, shields, or gold -- beheadings, forced labor, whippings, and cutting off body parts. Everyone -- rich or poor, noble or peasant -- was punished equally under the law.

## **The Emperor Tours His Empire**

Shih Huang Di built an impressive network of roads linking the capital city Xianyang to different parts of the empire. Hundreds of thousands of laborers built over 4,200 miles of hard-packed dirt roads, which were typically 38 feet wide and lined with willow trees.

Shih Huangdi used the roads to conduct inspection tours of his empire to make sure his laws were being followed. He often erected pillars carved with royal messages, or imperial edicts, along his travel route. The edicts usually praised the emperor for bringing unity, order, and harmony to the empire.