

# Primary Sources: *Western Zhou and Qin Imperial Strategies*



## Introduction

Below are two primary sources that illustrate the imperial strategies of pre-Han Chinese rulers. The first represents the Western Zhou, who expanded from about 1046 BCE and conquered much of the Yellow River Valley until about 771 BCE. The second comes from the Qin, which expanded steadily from the fourth century BCE, and by 221 BCE held domain over an enormous and diverse area.

As you read, consider what these sources tell you about the imperial strategies of these two empires. You may find it helpful to refer back to Reading 1: Imperial Strategies and the Pre-Han World to help you think about how you would describe them.

## PRIMARY SOURCES

### INTRODUCTION

ZHOU: THE MAI WINE-VESSEL  
BRONZE INSCRIPTION

QIN: THE ANNALS OF QIN

# Primary Source 1: *The Mai Wine-Vessel Bronze Inscription*

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**Early western Zhou vessel**

Zhou elites used elaborate bronze vessels in sacrifices to their ancestors. These vessels were often created to commemorate important events like victory in battle or appointment to political office. Inscriptions on the vessels described such events or ceremonies, praising the people involved and their ancestors.

The following inscription comes from a wine vessel made to commemorate the appointment of the ruler of Xing, one of the Zhou states in the east. It was cast by one of the ruler's subordinates, named Mai. It describes the ceremonies by which the Zhou king delegated power to a local ruler.

Source: The translation of this inscription is based on that by Edward Shaughnessy, in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, eds. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 318-19. Brackets indicate places where the translation has been modified for clarity or consistency with translations in other parts of this module.

The king commanded the ruler, Lord of Xing, to depart Bu and be lord at Xing. In the second month, the lord appeared [for a royal audience] at Zhongzhou [the Zhou capital] and was without [error]. He joined the king and approached Pangjing [a detached palace area] and performed a libation ritual.\* On the next day, at Biyong Lake, the king rode in a boat and performed the [Great Enfeoffment] rite. The king shot at a large goose, bagging it. The lord rode in a red-pennanted boat\*\* following and arrayed it. That day the king together with the lord entered into the apartments. The lord was awarded a black, carved dagger-axe. When the king was at An, in the evening, the lord was awarded many axe-men vassals, two hundred families [to be his ministers], and was offered use of the chariot team in which the king rode; bronze harness-trappings, a dustcoat, a robe, cloth, and slippers.

When the lord returned, he [proclaimed] the Son of Heaven's grace, reporting that there was no error. Using a ritual, he gave repose to [his] brilliant deceased father at Xing...Together with grandsons and sons, may he eternally be without end, and use the vessel to [bring] virtue upon us and send down many blessings, and receive the command to move to Xing.

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\*The ritual pouring of a liquid - in ancient China, generally rice wine or tea - as an offering to deity, spirit or ancestors.

\*\*That is, a boat decorated with red pennants.

## Primary Source 2: “*The Annals of Qin*,” from the *Records of the Grand Historian*



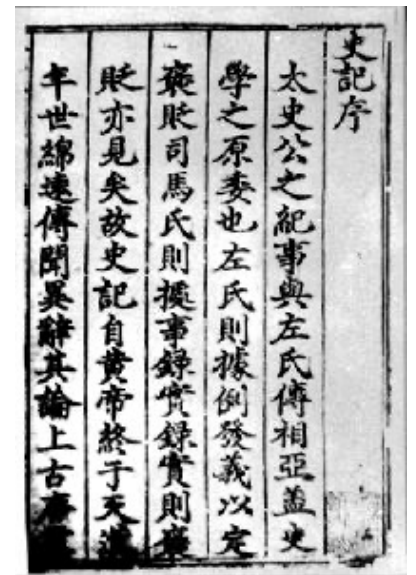
**Sima Qian**

The following primary source is taken from a work of history written around 100 BCE by a Han official named Sima Qian (died ca. 86 BCE). This excerpt describes the early years of the Qin Dynasty. It begins with a record of a discussion between the First Emperor and his advisers over how to administer the empire. Then it moves on to describe many of the key transformations brought about by Qin rule. It concludes with a stone inscription set up by the First Emperor after his performance of an important sacrifice.

Source: Adapted from the translation in Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty*, translated by Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 44–46.

The chancellor Wang Wan and others stated the opinion that, since the feudal rulers had just recently been defeated and the regions of Yan, Qi, and Jing were situated far from the capital, unless kings were set up in such regions it would be impossible to control them. They therefore requested that sons of the ruler be set up, if the emperor would be so kind as to give his approval.

The First Emperor referred the proposal to the ministers for deliberation. The ministers all indicated their approval. But the commandant of justice Li Si voiced this opinion: “[the Zhou kings] enfeoffed a great many of their sons, younger brothers, and other members of their own surname. Later, however, these men became increasingly estranged and even fell on one another like sworn enemies, and when the feudal rulers attacked each other in this manner, the Zhou Son of Heaven was helpless to restrain them. Now, thanks to the spiritual might of the sovereign, all the area within the seas has been united under a single rule and made into [commanderies and counties]. If the sons of the ruler and the ministers who have won merit are rewarded with generous gifts from public taxes, that will be quite sufficient. They can be easily controlled, and the world will be without dissension. This is the correct method for ensuring peace. To establish feudal rulers would not be expedient.”



**Early printed edition of the *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji)**

The First Emperor said: “It was because of the marquises and kings that the world suffered so long from unending strife and warfare. Now thanks to the aid of the ancestral spirits, the world has at last been pacified. If the feudal states are re-established, this will encourage the use of arms. To hope for peace and tranquility under such circumstances will be difficult indeed! The view of the commandant of justice is correct.”





**Portrait of Qin Shi Huangdi, First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty**

Thus the empire was divided into thirty-six provinces, each province provided with a governor, a military commandant, and a superintendent. The common people were renamed "black-headed ones." There was great feasting. Weapons from all over the empire were confiscated, brought to Xianyang, and melted down to be use in casting bells, bell stands, and twelve men made of metal. These last weighed 1,000 piculs\* each and were set up in the palace. All weights and measures were standardized, the gauge of wheeled vehicles was made uniform, and the writing system was standardized.

The empire extended east to the sea and to Chaoxian (Korea), west to Lintao and Qiangzhong, and south to Beihu. In the north fortresses were established along the Yellow River and the over the Yin mountains to Liaodong.

Rich and powerful families from all over the empire, 120,000 families, were moved to Xianyang [the Qin capital]. The various ancestral temples, as well as the Zhangtai Palace and Shanglin Park, were all situated south of the Wei River. And whenever Qin would wipe out one of the feudal states, it would make replicas of its halls and palaces and reconstruct them on the slope north of Xianyang, facing south over the Wei. From Yongmen east to the Jing and Wei rivers, mansions, elevated walks, and fenced pavilions succeeded one another, all filled with beautiful women and bells and drums that Qin had taken from the feudal rulers.

Twenty-seventh year (220 BCE): the emperor toured Longxi and Beidi, going as far as Chicken Head Mountain and returning by way of Huizhong. He built the Xin Palace south of the Wei River and then renamed it Apex Temple in imitation of the [star called] "Heavenly Apex." A road was opened up from Apex Temple to Mt. Li, where the Front Hall of the Palace Sweet Springs was built. A walled road was constructed for the emperor running from Xianyang to connect with it. This year, officers were advanced one step in rank and fast roads were constructed.

**Commanderies (Prefectures, the Jun) of Qin Dynasty**



\* Piculs are a Chinese unity of weight. One picul is about 133 pounds or 60.5 kilograms.

**Map of the Qin Dynasty, 221 - 206 BCE**



Twenty-eighth year (219 BCE): the emperor visited the [commanderies and counties] of the east and ascended Mt. Yin in Zhuo. He set up a stone marker and, consulting with the Confucian scholars of Lu, had it inscribed with praises of the virtue of the Qin. He also consulted with the scholars on matters pertaining to the Feng and Shan sacrifices and sacrifices to the various mountains and rivers. Afterward he ascended Mt. Tai, set up a stone marker, and performed the Feng sacrifice. On the way down, he encountered violent wind and rain and had to rest under a tree. He accordingly enfeoffed the tree with the title of fifth rank counsellor. He performed the Shan sacrifice at Liangfu and set up a stone marker inscribed with these words:

The August Emperor mounted the throne, issuing edicts,  
clarifying laws, which his subjects observe and obey.  
In the twenty-sixth year of his rule he first united the world;  
there were none who did not come to him in submission.  
In person he visited the people of distant regions, ascending Mt. Tai,  
surveying the eastern extremity all around.  
The ministers in his retinue, mindful of his deeds, seeking the source of his  
achievements, reverently praise his merits and virtue.  
The way of good government is implemented, the various occupations  
obtain what is needful, all is gauged by law and pattern.  
His great principles are noble and pre-eminent, to be bestowed on future  
generations, who will receive and honor them without change.  
The August Emperor, sage that he is, has brought peace  
to the world, never neglectful of his rule.  
Early rising, late to retire, he takes measures to bring  
lasting benefit, devoting himself earnestly to instruction and precept.  
His admonitions circulate, his proclamations spread abroad,  
so that near and far alike are properly ordered, and all bow to the  
will of the sage.  
Eminent and humble are clearly distinguished,  
men and women are observant of ritual,  
cautious and attentive to their duties.  
Inner and outer concerns are carefully demarked,  
uniformly faultless and pure, to be passed on to future heirs.  
His transforming influence is unending, in ages after his decrees  
will be honored, handed down forever with gravest caution.

***Tomb of the First  
Qin Emperor***



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