

## Historical background

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Chinese dynasty, Zhou, was founded ~1000 BC. It was actually made up of hundreds of quasi-independent principalities, with Zhou as the most powerful principality and playing the role of hegemon. However, by 771 BC, the power of Zhou had declined and it lost the control of other principalities. A war then started among these states. After the “Spring and Autumn Period” (771-476 BC, named after Confucius’s chronicle “Spring and Autumn”), hundreds of small states were eliminated, leaving seven powerful kingdoms (upgrading themselves from the old principalities by naming their rulers king): Qin, Yan, Han, Zhao, Qi, Chu, Wei; and several other small weak states. In the following “Warring States Period” (476-221 BC), the size of the war became much larger, featuring massive armies (500,000 per army was not uncommon) and long battles and sieges. In ~260 BC, the army of Qin won a decisive battle against Zhao, in which hundreds of thousands of soldiers from both sides died in the battlefield and 400,000 Zhao prisoners of war were buried alive afterwards.

By 221 BC, Qin’s king Yin Zhen finally subjugated the other six kingdoms and founded the first unified China – the Qin Dynasty. He gave himself the title “Huang-Di”, a formulation previously reserved for deities and the mythological sage-emperors. He then imposed Qin’s centralized, nonhereditary bureaucratic system on his new empire, and standardized legal codes and bureaucratic procedures, the forms of writing and coinage, and the pattern of thought and scholarship.

To silence criticism of imperial rule, Shi-Huang-Di (“Shi” means the first) banished or put to death many dissenting Confucian scholars and confiscated and burned their books. He also launched a number of public works projects including the Great Wall and the 100-mile-long E-Fang Palace. These activities required enormous levies of manpower and resources, not to mention repressive measures. Revolts broke out right after his death in 210 BC, and his dynasty was extinguished four years later. The imperial system initiated during the Qin dynasty, however, was adopted by the succeeding Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD), and set a pattern that was developed over the next two millennia.

## **The Emperor and the Assassin: movie and history**

Q: When did the story in the movie happen?

A: This is a movie about China at the end of Warring States period (476-221 BC), circa 230 BC, right before it was unified in 221 BC under the famous Shi-Huang-Di (“the first emperor”, the one in this movie).

Q: Is this a real story or made-up?

A: This story is based on the “historical record”, compiled ~100 BC. Both the emperor (Yin Zhen) and the assassin (Jin Ke) are very famous in Chinese history. Other characters including the Queen, the Marquis (Nao Ai), the prince of Yan (Yan Dan), General Fan (Fan Wuji), even the assistant assassin (Qin Wuyang) are all real, except the lady of Zhao. According to “the history”, the prince of Yan asked Jin Ke to assassinate the king of Qin to save his kingdom, in the disguise of an ambassador. He brought two things the king of Qin wanted: the map of Yan, and General Fan’s head. A dagger for killing the king was hidden at the end of the map. But Jin Ke failed and the emperor later unified China.

Q: How could the king of Qin be the son of the prime minister?

A: According to the “historical record”, the king of Qin (later to become the Emperor) was the son of the prime minister, Lv Buwei. When Lv was still a rich businessman in the kingdom of Zhao, he met a prince of Qin, a hostage at the time. Lv saw a chance and invested a lot in this prince. He even sent his pregnant lover (later became the Queen) to the prince as a gift. Later, Lv managed to help the prince flee back to Qin and finally become the king, making himself the most powerful person in Qin. After this king died, Lv’s own son succeeded him.

Q: What’s the relationship between the prime minister and the Marquis?

A: In history, the Marquis was sent to the Queen by the prime minister as a spy in the palace. However, the spy won the love of the Queen and soon started to acquire power for himself. As the Marquis, he controlled the palace of Qin.