

**WE ARE THE
FIRST EMPEROR!**
Stewart Ross





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TO THE READER

We Are the First Emperor! is based on true events. The three main adult characters in the story – Zhang Liang, the First Emperor and Prime Minister Li Si – were real people. The book burning and Cone Plot actually happened, too. I invented the two girls, Wei and Ji, to help younger readers imagine an important time in Chinese history.

Stewart Ross

THE STORY SO FAR ...

THE WARRING STATES

2,500 years ago, the country we call China did not exist. The land was there, of course, but it did not have one government, one law or even one language. Instead, there were seven kingdoms. Each had its own ruler and customs.

For 250 years, during a period known as the Warring States (475–221 BCE), the seven kingdoms fought long and brutal wars. One kingdom came out on top, then another, and so it went on until the year 238 BCE.

THE KING OF QIN

The people of Qin, the most westerly of the seven kingdoms, were fierce warriors. They were descended from practical, tough tribesmen who had moved into Chinese territory from the barren lands to the north. They built a capital city at Xian-yang and organized their kingdom around the army.

Our story begins in 250 BCE, when Prince Yiren came to the throne of Qin. He took the name King Zhuang-xiang. Although still a young man, he died three years later. In 246 BCE, his crown passed to his 13-year-old son, Zheng.

KING ZHENG

The young king did not rule on his own for another seven years. But when he took charge, at the age of twenty-one, it was as if a volcano had exploded! King Zheng turned out to be one of the most determined, ferocious, intelligent and single-minded men ever to rule in China.

Once he had got a grip on Qin, Zheng started conquering his neighbours. The Kingdom of Han was the first to fall, in 230 BCE. The Kingdom of Zhao fell next, followed by Yan, then Wei. In 223 BCE, Zheng overcame Chu, the most powerful of his enemies. This left Qi, which he conquered in 221.

Now, for the first time, the land of China was under a single king. At this point Zheng changed his title. He was no longer 'King', he was Qin Shi Huang, the 'First Emperor'. His power, he claimed, came from Heaven.

As you may imagine, in achieving such power, Zheng had made many, many enemies. The story that follows is about just one of them ...

TIME LINE

BCE (Before Common Era)

475

Period of Chinese history known as the 'Warring States' begins

246

King Zhuang-xiang dies;
13-year-old Zheng is proclaimed king

230

King Zheng defeats his western neighbour, the Kingdom of Han

500

259

King Zhuang-xiang of Qin has a son, Zheng

238

King Zheng takes over as ruler of Qin

228

King Zheng conquers the Kingdom of Zhao

227

First unsuccessful attempt to assassinate King Zheng

226

King Zheng conquers the Kingdom of Yan
Second unsuccessful attempt to assassinate King Zheng

225

King Zheng conquers the Kingdom of Wei

223

King Zheng overcomes the Kingdom of Chu,
his most powerful enemy

221

King Zheng conquers the Kingdom of Qi

207

The Qin Dynasty comes to an end when Er Shi,
son of the First Emperor, commits suicide

200

1974 CE

1974

Farmers discover the
Terracotta Army near
the tomb of the First
Emperor

210

The First Emperor dies

218

Attempt to assassinate the First Emperor

221

King Zheng calls himself Qin Shi Huang,
the First Emperor

Chapter 1

WE ARE THE FIRST EMPEROR!

Wei twisted her neck from side to side, trying to stop her new silk dress from itching.

‘Don’t do that!’ hissed Ji. ‘You’re a lady now, remember?’

‘But my collar’s scratching me,’ said Wei. She walked a few more steps along the covered walkway. ‘Anyway, I’ve changed my mind. I’m only twelve and I don’t want to be a lady.’

Ji tutted quietly. ‘Too late, Wei. If you’re wanted at court, you go to court. No questions.’

She’s right, thought Wei. The First Emperor wished to be surrounded by the most beautiful women and girls in all China, and his wish was a command. So when a courtier had spotted Wei playing in her garden a few days ago, her father had been ordered to send her to court immediately. She had no say in the matter.

So here she was, walking with her friend Ji to see the Emperor for the first time. It’s all right for Ji, she thought. As the daughter of Prime Minister Li Si, she’s been around the Grand Palace all her life. She knows how to behave. I don’t.

‘Don’t take such long strides, Han girl!’ barked a lady-in-waiting behind them. ‘You walk like a cow!’

Better than looking like one, thought Wei angrily.

Nevertheless, she forced herself to keep her head still and take the short, neat steps required of a fine lady. She had promised her parents she'd try to behave; after everything they had been through, the last thing she wanted to do was disgrace them.

Her father had been a grand nobleman in the Kingdom of Han, where their life had been happy and relaxed, full of music, poetry and books. Then the terrible armies of Qin arrived. Killing, burning and looting, they conquered the Han people in a few months. Wei and the rest of her family were taken to live in Xian-yang, the capital of the Qin.

The Qin Emperor said it was an honour to dwell in the gigantic Grand Palace. But Wei and her parents knew he didn't invite them there out of kindness. He wanted to keep an eye on his old enemies. Mighty though he was, Emperor Qin Shi Huang did not trust a single soul.

The two girls and their escort of ladies-in-waiting climbed the hundred steps to the Throne Room and shuffled noiselessly into a corner far from the Emperor's glittering chair. Keeping her head still, Wei looked around. The hall was breathtakingly magnificent. Above the Pool of Life in the centre, black flags hung from tiers of golden columns and beams that seemed to reach as high as Heaven itself.

Courtiers entered silently and took up their positions below the throne. Finally, everyone fell to their knees and bowed their heads as the First Emperor himself

strode into the room. Out of the corner of her eye, Wei caught a glimpse of a pair of suspicious eyes above a long beak of a nose. His voice was like the bark of a dog.

‘Heaven has appointed us,’ he began, ‘and therefore we will live forever.’

How strange to call himself ‘we,’ thought Wei. That was not the only odd thing about him. Although his name was Zheng, he made everyone call him Qin Shi Huang, meaning the “First Emperor”. Mentioning his real name meant instant death. He had declared that the next emperor would be the Second Emperor – except, as he’d live forever, there wouldn’t be a second emperor.

Wei tried to concentrate on what was going on. Ji’s father, the Prime Minister, was reading out a list of the First Emperor’s achievements. He had crushed all his enemies and ruled All the Land Under Heaven. From now on there would be no weapons, except in the Emperor’s armies, and everyone would be forced to do something useful.

The Prime Minister paused. People who thought too much or wasted their time reading books, he continued, would be punished.

Oh no! thought Wei. What a horrible, cruel idea! What will poor Father say when he hears this?