Chinese Imperial Authority
Document-Based Question (DBQ)

How did the Qin and Han rulers exercise authority over their subjects?

In order to ultimately answer this question, you need to carefully examine the evidence provided in the following historical documents. Answer the analysis questions for each document.

Document 1
Source: Sima Qian, The Annals of Qin (2nd century BCE). [This was a Chinese biography of Emperor Qin]

In the 28th year the First Emperor travelled eastwards through his provinces and districts and ascended Mount Zouyi. He set up a stone tablet, and after discussion with the various scholars of Lu an inscription was carved on the stone extolling the virtue of Qin…

So next he ascended Mount Tai, set up a stone tablet, and made the sacrifice [to Heaven]. The stone tablet that he had set up was inscribed with the following words:

When the August Emperor came to the throne, he created regulations and made the laws intelligent, and his subjects cherished his instructions.

In the 26th year of his rule, he for the first time unified all under Heaven, and there were none who did not submit.

His maxims and rules spread all around, and far and near everything has been properly organized, and everyone receives the benefits of his sagely ambitions.

His influence will last to all eternity, and the decrees he bequeaths will be revered, and his grave admonitions will be inherited forever.

Analysis:
What is the purpose of these inscriptions on these stone tablets? How do they reinforce the authority of the Qin Emperor?
Document 2
Source: Dong Zhongshu, Confucian adviser to Han emperor, Wudi (141-87 BCE), Essays on Kingship

Those who in ancient times invented writing drew three lines and connected them through the middle, calling the character, “king”. The three lines are Heaven, earth, and man, and that which passes through the middle joins the principles of all three. Occupying the center of Heaven, earth, and man, passing through and joining all three—if he is not a king, who can do this?

Thus the king is but the executor of Heaven. He regulates its seasons and brings them to completion. He patterns his actions on its commands and causes the people to follow them.

Analysis:
How does the Chinese character for “king” represent their understanding about a ruler’s authority? How would the representation of this Chinese word for “king” enhance the ruler’s authority?
Document 3
Source: Anonymous, Killing the Scholars and Burning the Books, painted album leaf (18th Century)

This painting depicts the execution of Confucian scholars and the burning of Confucian books by Qin Shi Huangdi’s soldiers.

Analysis:
What is happening in this painting? What does this image reveal about how Qin Shi Huang Di asserted authority over his subjects?
An army of life-sized terracotta (clay) soldiers was discovered in an underground pit near the burial mound of Qin Shi Huangdi. Archaeologists estimate that there were originally more than 8,000 figures buried along with horses, wooden chariots, and 7,000 bronze weapons.

The figures are life-like and life-sized, varying in height, uniform and hairstyle according to their rank. According to Chinese historian Sima Qian (145–90 BC), the project required more than 700,000 workers to complete.

Analysis:
Why would the First Qin Emperor order such an enormous and elaborate “army” to be constructed for his tomb?
What do these artifacts reveal about how Qin Shi Huangdi asserted authority over his empire?
Document 5
Source: Anonymous, Portrait of a Civil Service Examination, Song Dynasty

This image depicts a civil service examination from a later dynasty (Song). These regularly administered examinations for entry for government service began under the Han dynasty.

Analysis
What impressions does this painting give about how the Chinese viewed the civil service examination system? What can you infer about how Han emperors exercised power and maintained authority in their empire?