

THE FIRST EMPEROR OF QIN:
BETWEEN LEGEND, SCIENCE, AND NATIONALISM

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Accounts of the First Emperor of Qin stem from a narrative tradition in China that combines historical texts with myths and other folk narratives. Within the past century, however, the historically entrenched view of the First Emperor has shifted in many directions, and material evidence of the Qin empire and its ruler have significantly shaped public perception of the emperor's reign. Narratives concerning the First Emperor have branched out of scholarly works and limited folklore into a wide variety of public media worldwide, from schoolbooks to cinema. The image of the First Emperor is now a collage of folklore, history, scientific archaeology, popular culture, and nationalistic agendas.

In 221 B.C., the king of the state of Qin completed the conquest of the other feudal states and declared the foundation of the Qin dynastic empire, proclaiming himself the “First August Emperor of Qin” – Qin Shihuangdi. His vision of a dynasty that would last for ten thousand generations collapsed, however, in 206 B.C., only four years after his death. The persona of the First Qin Emperor and his dynasty has endured for more than two thousand years through written records, oral traditions, art, and material remains. Perceptions of the emperor and of Qin rule have varied, drastically at times, according to the narrating media, narrating party, and target audience. This discussion concerns the manner in which the numerous narratives about the First Emperor have transformed.

THE CHINESE “MYTHO-HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS”

If we are to discuss the changing narratives and perceptions of the First Emperor, we must be aware of the nature of Chinese narratives of the past. The common connotation of myth to false account distorts the Chinese understanding of myth and its place in historical narratives. The Chinese “mytho-historical mind” does not polarize myth and history; instead, it elevates folklore and oral traditions to the same level as written histories, allowing for a complementary, rather than contradictory, relationship between the two (Bantly 1996). The

plurality of sources for early historical compilations attests to this mindset. The infamous *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* – the model for later historical writings – “embraced not just the proliferating texts of the past but the different forms of the vast literature” (Durrant 1995:xvii). The mythical element of Chinese historical narratives affords an assortment of archetypes delineated through the biographical accounts of legendary individuals. These archetypes help establish a “didactic use and understanding of history as a tool for better government and more virtuous rulers” (Bantly 1996:184).

Most significantly, legendary individuals, supernatural occurrences, and folk tales, which in Western narrative traditions only find a place in the faux world of “myth,” hold a central role in Chinese historical narratives. Many of the significant events in politics and warfare are attributed to the fickle acts of Heaven or the masterful planning of a single individual. It is these illustrious individuals, and the myths surrounding them, that dominate Chinese historical narratives (Bantly 1996).

While it is important to understand the issues addressed in debates of Chinese historians and archaeologists within scholarly circles and academic publications, the present discussion shall focus more on how the available material for narratives of the First Emperor and the Qin dynasty have been presented to a broader, public audience both in China and abroad. The written histories, as alluded to, are often archetypal narratives. In the case of

archaeological material and its presentation to the general public, interpretations of the material remains also appear as narratives in a variety of media, from newspapers to schoolbooks and museum exhibits to motion pictures, and often attend to contemporary political concerns (Silberman 1995).

TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES

A hundred years after the death of the First Emperor, court astronomer Sima Qian – an official of the Han imperial court, the dynasty founded four years after the fall of the Qin – compiled existing written records, as well as oral accounts, into an encyclopedic collection of all known history up to that point. This landmark historical work, known as the *Shiji*, contains chapters on the Qin state and empire, the First Emperor, and other significant individuals in the Qin conquest and governing. As one might expect, the Han historian composed a deprecating account of the previous dynasty's emperor. Sima Qian spoke through the voices of characters in the narrative on the cruel and supercilious character of the Qin emperor:

The King of Qin, with his arched and long eyes, puffed-out chest like a hawk and voice of a jackal, is a man of scant mercy who has the heart of a tiger or wolf. When he is in difficulty he readily humbles himself before others, but when he has gotten his way, then he thinks nothing of eating

others alive... if the King of Qin should ever get his way with the world,
then the whole world will end up his prisoner. (Qian 1993:38-39)

Sima Qian also included the entire text of the commentary essay, “The Faults of Qin,” by the early Han Confucian scholar Jia Yi. The essay denounces the pattern of governing strategies of the Qin rulers up through the First Emperor who

cracked his long whip and drove the universe before him... scourging the world with his lash, and his might shook the four seas... the First Emperor was greedy and short-sighted, confident in this wisdom, never trusting his meritorious officials, never getting to know his own people. He cast aside the kingly way and relied on private procedures, outlawing books and writings, making the laws and penalties much harsher, putting deceit and force foremost and humanity and righteousness last, leading the whole world in violence and cruelty. (Qian 1993:79-81)

This type of censuring treatise characterizes the treatment of the First Emperor in the *Shiji*, but the comments and constructed narratives of these early Chinese scholars are likewise complemented by a strong oral tradition, elements of which one finds in the *Shiji*.

The assortment of legends about the First Emperor portrays a cruel tyrant, much in the same manner of the written histories of the Han and after. These tales attack the legitimacy of his rule, his temperament, and his manner of governing. One such myth _ the story of the search for the Nine Cauldrons _ receives brief

mention in *Shiji* (Qian 1993:49). The story speaks of nine legendary cauldrons (*ding*) that were allegedly made by the ancient sage emperor Yu and handed down through generations. These cauldrons, emblematic of a righteous reign, were sunk into the Si River centuries before the Qin dynasty, and the First Emperor sought to recover them as a symbol of his mandate to rule. On one of his imperial tours, he ordered a crew of men to dive into the river and retrieve them. As the men stood on the shores and in boats, pulling the heavy cauldrons up with ropes, a dragon emerged from one of the bronze cauldrons and broke the ropes. The action of the dragon – a mythical creature emblematic of the will of Heaven – symbolized Heaven’s disapproval of the First Emperor. In addition to this divine censure, tales of court intrigue, which possibly began at the time of Qin rule, rumored that the First Emperor was the product of the Qin queen and minister Lü Buwei, not the son of King Zhuangxiang of Qin. Whether he gives credence to this tale or not, Sima Qian demonstrates its prevalence in the oral tradition by its detailed inclusion in the biography of Lü Buwei.

Another tale that receives mention in the *Shiji* is the First Emperor’s obsession with immortality, more specifically, his command for Xu Fu to depart on a search for the mountains of the immortals. This, too, results in futility, and the emperor is unable to procure the herbs of immortality. Tales circulated about his desire to cheat death and his paranoia of conspirators, though the latter seems justifiable, considering the numerous attempts on his life. After many such efforts,

the emperor threatened the life of any minister, servant, or other who told of his location when moving about his palaces and secret walkways. The most famous assassination attempt is the story of Jing Ke, sent by the crown prince of the state of Yan, who feared invasion from Qin. The *Song of the River Yi* laments of Jing Ke's departure for Qin at the banks of the river and praises the honor of men like himself, as contrasted to the cowardice of men such as the First Emperor: "Brave men, once gone never return again" (Qian 1993:174).

The now-famous story of Meng Jiang-nu does not appear in the *Shiji*, and neither does the story always give direct mention of the First Emperor. Nonetheless, it is a reproaching tale of life under the Qin Empire, as seen in the lives of a man, Fan Qiliang, and his chaste wife, Meng Jiang-nu. Fan is sent off to perform hard labor on the Great Wall, a notoriously arduous task, and dies, as many people did under the harsh working conditions. Meng Jiang-nu, unaware of her husband's death, departs to find him and give him some warm winter clothes that she sewed. After a long, strenuous journey, she comes to the point of the Great Wall where her husband had worked, only then to hear of his death. She knelt down at the wall in grief and wept for three days. The miracle of the tale is that her wailing and tears shook the wall, so that the part of it where she wept crumbled to the ground and revealed the remains of her loved one buried inside. Some versions of the tale extend the legend so far as to include a direct interaction

between Meng Jiang-nu and a despicably pining First Emperor (Luo and Luo 1986) and her tears turning to blood (Zhong 1985).

The Chinese peasantry bore the brunt of the arduous labor of the empire's public works, namely the Great Wall, and, understandably, a folk tradition of mock ballads expressing grievances arose (Waldron 1990). Han scholars took interest in these *yuefu* songs, and, through their chronicling, some of these songs have survived.

I water my horse at a Long Wall hole,
The water's chill hurt my horse's bones.
I go and tell the Long Wall officer,
'Mind you don't keep us Taiyuan men for good!'
'Corvée has a set time to run!
Swing your sledge! Lend your voice!'
We men would rather die fighting!
Why we bored to death Building the Long Wall?'
Don't you see just below the Long Wall
Dead men's skeletons prop each other up.¹

Folk songs and legends like the story of Meng Jiang-nu serve to berate the rule of the First Emperor and the ruthless strain his reign placed on the people; the destruction of a monumental icon, such as the Great Wall, speaks to the cries of the people for the end of the tyrannical Qin rule.

REEVALUATION OF HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

In the wake of the 1911 Revolution, criticism of the retrogressive nature of Chinese culture cast doubt and remorse on China's own histories. The *Gushi Bian* movement ("disputing ancient history") of the early 1900s reexamined the mythical constructs of Chinese traditional historical narratives. One of the landmark retractions was the belief in the mythical Three Dynasties of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, only the latter of which was believed to have been a real dynasty and which preceded the founding of the Qin dynasty. This movement called into question the validity of all the ancient texts, which, for more than two thousand years, Chinese historians had considered authentic. Although the discovery and excavation in the 1920s of the late Shang capital at Anyang restored some faith in the Chinese mytho-historical past, the margin for demystifying the past and calling into question the validity of past narratives remained.

The influx of Marxism into China also affected the way scholars view historical narratives. Socialist _ and, later, Chinese communist _ thinkers attempted to fit the Chinese past to the Marxist linear-progressive view of history, which emphasized a socio-economic impetus for change (Li 1975). The Maoist/Marxist ideal of a "unilinear evolutionary theory," in time, came to

dominate both historical and archaeological narratives (Tong 1995:180). Moreover, the explanations for the events and change in history lay in an inevitable process fueled by power struggles within society, not in the singular power of an individual. In light of this, the Marxist perspective may have seemed a more modern way of approaching history; nevertheless, the Chinese mytho-historical consciousness persisted, and history remained didactic in character (Bantly 1996). Chinese politics of the early 1900s _ with prominent figures like the militarist and self-proclaimed emperor Yuan Shikai, the revolutionary Sun Yatsen, and the self-proclaimed “generalissimo” Chiang Kaishek _ highlighted the historical adherence to the archetype of the individual who single-handedly changes or controls the course of history.

The 1911 revolutionaries Zhang Binglin and Xia Cengyu, who advocated a constitutional monarchy, each wrote scholarly pieces praising the First Emperor’s policies and manner of governing. Some revolutionary scholars, like Xia Yishan, even saw the First Emperor as a savior fighting off invaders and the “preserver of Chinese culture” (Li 1975:xxi). This trend of praising the First Emperor and the Qin conquest, begun after the 1911 Revolution, continued through the Northern Expedition campaign of the Nationalists during the Warlord Period of the 1920s _ a period of disunity and civil unrest often compared to the Warring States Period that preceded Qin unification _ and on into the reestablishment of the republic under Chiang Kaishek. By the time of the

communist-nationalist civil war of 1945-1949, however, scholarly opinion returned to the vilification of the First Emperor as many of the intellectuals sought analogous means of criticizing Chiang Kaishek's harsh policies. Though the vast majority of the above mentioned opinions circulated within a small circle of intellectuals and politicians, publications that were intended for widespread public consumption began to appear in the 1940s.

Ironically, under the auspices of the Nationalist government, a series of historical biographies were published in Chongqing titled *Collection of Stories of Celebrated and Outstanding People in Chinese History*. This included a volume by Gu Jiegang about the First Emperor. In certain parts of this volume, Jiegang found a way to berate the "willfulness, dislike of criticism, and desire to exert his power" which, in Jiegang's mind, characterized both the First Emperor and Chiang Kaishek (Li 1975: xxii). It is such candid efforts as this to situate modern reevaluations of the First Emperor into the public sphere that really began to affect both popular perception and, reflexively, scholarly research. The Chinese Communist Party would find a way to take it to "the people" in a barrage of propagandist media.

PAST NARRATIVES AND POLITICAL AGENDAS

The fundamental strategy of the Chinese Communist Party to procure popular confidence and support found its way into, and by means of, historical disciplines. Debates typically limited to scholarly spheres were suddenly propelled into the public sphere through various media, such as party publications like *Red Flag* and newspapers, including the nationwide *People's Daily*.² The communist government quickly demanded a radically new perspective on all issues, so as to coincide with party philosophy. From the time of the civil war and 1949 “liberation” up through present day, a multiplicity of perceptions has characterized narratives of the First Emperor _ fluctuating between condemnation and praise _ as political and social agendas have constantly shifted in the last 50 years.

In 1954, a new school textbook, *Outline of Chinese History*, was published; its vilifying narrative of the Qin dynasty followed much of Gu Jiegang’s line of argument and allusion to the barbaric cruelty of the Nationalists and their Draconian leader, Chiang Kaishek (Yue 1954). The atmosphere of a constant threat from a large aggressive world power (i.e. the United States) created by the Korean War proved the perfect comparison to the Qin threat of domination over the state of Yan in the story Jing Ke. Newspaper advertisements in 1951 for the play *Song of the River Yi* (Wu 1951) said, “Invasion will definitely end in defeat: Peace must be won at any price” _ slogans that epitomized the

theme of the underdog's fight against the savage aggressor, as it was manifested in the story of Jing Ke (Li 1975: xx-xxi).

Critics of Mao Zedong and his policies _ especially the devastating upheaval caused by the Cultural Revolution _ capitalized on this negative public view of the First Emperor and likened Mao Zedong to the oppressive tyrant of the Qin dynasty. The most famous of the critiques came from the major contender for the position of party chairman (held by Mao Zedong): Lin Biao. After Lin Biao's failed attempt at insurrection in 1971, the "Criticize Confucius" campaign of the same year quickly became the machine for discrediting Lin Biao and his supporters _ even though Lin Biao died in a plane crash attempting to escape China. The Anti-Lin Biao and Confucius campaign of 1972 sought to debunk every criticism made for Mao Zedong. Because of Lin Biao's likeness of Mao Zedong to the First Emperor in that "he is the biggest feudal tyrant in Chinese history," the only logical step for Mao Zedong and his supporters _ most especially the "Gang of Four" headed by his wife Jiang Qing _ was to counter that defamatory historical argument with an exaltation of the entire persona of the Qin emperor (Li 1975: 1-li; Spence 1990: 636).

Despite his apparent dislike for being equated with the First Emperor, the campaign utilized a defense of the First Emperor in order to endorse the policies of Mao Zedong that had come under harsh criticism from both home and abroad. Historical discussions and research, most during the later years of the Cultural

Revolution, sought to reaffirm Mao Zedong's political authority (Tong 1995) and, some believe, the legitimacy of Jiang Qing succession (Bantly 1996). This crusade to promulgate public support for Mao Zedong and justify the Cultural Revolution proceeded to systematically debunk, not only the historical texts and scholarly treatises (Guo 1972), but also the disparaging myths about Qin and the First Emperor that had been ingrained in the oral tradition. The most significant publication in this campaign was Hong Shidi's slim, illustrated biography of the First Emperor. When it was first out in 1972, and again in 1973, 1.85 million copies were printed in less than two years (Li 1975: liii). Shidi portrayed the First Emperor as the progressive-minded grand unifier of a divided nation who "stressed the present and slighted the past" and, justifiably, used fierce means to crush those who stood in the way of progress or who fought against the will of the people. The text of the small book was simplified for ease of public consumption. Its pages contained party-line rhetoric, as seen in such phrases as: "the urgent demand of the masses of people for unification," "the destruction of the restorationist forces within the state of Qin," "the establishment of a unified multinational state,"³ and "burning books and burying Confucian scholars alive was a powerful measure of implementing thoroughly the policy of 'emphasizing the present while slighting the past.'"

This defense of the use of violence by the First Emperor, which was analogous to the violence during the Cultural Revolution, found further support in

the newspapers (Beijing 1974). Condemnation of violence used by the First Emperor from the Soviets and the West was denounced as an attempt to “maliciously attack and insult [the Chinese] proletarian dictatorship and Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (Mass Criticism Group 1975:133). Narratives about the Qin defended, not only violence used against the Confucian scholars within the empire, but also the battles fought against the Xiongnu barbarian forces outside the empire and to the north of the Great Wall. The latter was a military campaign that had previously been deemed unnecessary and detrimental to the people. One can easily make the connection in such narratives to the threat of both “counterrevolutionary intellectuals” within China (such as those purged during the anti-rightist movement following the short-lived Hundred Flowers campaign of 1957) and the feared invasion from the north by the Soviets, who, by 1972, had become the primary foreign enemy of China.

The debunking of criticisms in legendary accounts did not spare the story of Jing Ke. A 1973 article in the *People's Daily* equated the famous assassin to “counterrevolutionary buffoons” who might plot to act against the progressive policies of the present government (Li 1975: lxviii ft.38). The tale of Meng Jiang-nu, seen as representative of those who would attempt to make their communist government topple like the Great Wall, was linked with the “repulsive counterrevolutionary” Lin Biao through his alleged pilgrimage to the Temple of Meng Jiang-nu, recounted in a 1974 newspaper article in the *Guangming Daily*

(Tang 1975: 204-205). The story of Meng Jiang-nu suffered an attack of invalidation in an extensive article in a 1973 edition of the *People's Daily*. In it, the origins of the story were traced to a much earlier text, the *Zuo Zhuan*, and any link between the story of a wailing woman bringing down a mighty wall and the Qin dynasty was discredited (Shao 1973).

The fabrication of an oversimplified Confucian-Legalist struggle in ancient China appeared, among many publications in a series of articles from 1975 to 1976 in the *China Reconstructs* journal. This discussion was one of many departures from a reevaluation of just the First Emperor and Mao Zedong. The obvious attempt to link the political correctness of Legalism for early China with that of Maoist/Marxist philosophy for modern China separated and exalted the philosophical issues purported by the Gang of Four from any issues of character similarity. This separation, however, seems to have proved disastrous. Condemning comparisons between Mao Zedong (and, hence, the Gang of Four) and the First Emperor persisted. Among the mass of people who assembled in Tiananmen Square to mourn the death of Zhou Enlai in April of 1976 appeared placards declaring the end of the rule of Qin Shihuangdi and demanding a return to “genuine” Marxism/Leninism (Spence 1990). In many ways, the reevaluation of the First Emperor in the 1970s took on political and nationalistic proportions far greater than the individual character. The new debates and treatises spelled out the beginning of broader, more nationalistic themes to the Qin narratives that have

promulgated, far beyond Mao Zedong's death in 1976, "pure" Mao Zedong Thought and Mao Zedong's vision of a strong and modern China.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES AND MATERIAL SYMBOLS

For more than two thousand years, the historical texts and oral traditions have dominated the perceptions of the First Emperor. But within the past few decades, the material remains of the Qin and its imperial legacy have been catapulted into the limelight of popular historical narratives. The body of material culture produced by, attributed to, and concerning the Qin has fashioned a mass of narratives — some of which are quite contradictory. The archaeological record has served to validate these narratives with claims of a more tangible and, at times, more scientific approach than before. Yet, as we have observed the wide variety of narratives constructed from the same written sources, we should be reminded of the notion that our constructions of the past are subjectively formed in the present. Material culture can be read like a text, and the resulting perception depends upon who is reading it (Hodder 1991). For this matter, when discussing material remains related to the Qin, we must remain conscious of both the narrator and the audience of the diverse narratives of the past.

Materially expressed narratives of the Qin have existed for as long as the oral traditions have carried the related legends. Tomb wall carvings of the Han

dynasty exhibit some of the above-mentioned myths and events surrounding the First Emperor. An engraving from the Wu family shrines in the Shandong province depicts the futile attempt of the First Emperor to retrieve the nine sacred cauldrons. Another engraving from a tomb in Yinnan of Shandong province illustrates the assassination attempt by Jing Ke on the First Emperor. In both oral and artistic traditions, folk narratives that reviled the First Emperor occurred widely during the Han dynasty, because he represented the fallen dynasty. In support of the First Emperor, though, stone steles were erected during his tours of the empire, bearing inscriptions that praised him for his peace-bringing and unifying accomplishments. Such monumental stone placards, which attempt to establish symbolic control, are not unlike many of the candid slogans of present day China: “Long Live Mao Zedong Thought!” and “First Rate Civilization!” While the erection of propagandist inscriptions and the proliferation of the oral tradition into tomb art are both intriguing, such material is the direct expression of a particular narrative, which is intended to be read in a singular way. This discussion, however, will look more at the ancient material remains of the Qin that have been *read* in a variety of ways to serve modern agendas.

The most notorious material legacy of the First Emperor, ever since the time of the Qin Empire, is, without a doubt, the Great Wall. Although the wall we see today is that of the present Ming dynasty (1368-1662), it has, nonetheless, remained an icon of the Qin and the reign of the First Emperor. Early historical

texts and folk traditions that referred to the wall contained evocations of the oppression and the suffering of the people under Qin rule. Myths arose quickly about the bodies of the laborers who died while building it buried under the original earthen wall. Alongside this connotation of the wall as the “world’s largest grave,” stood the tale of Meng Jiang-nu and the discovery of her husband’s body deep inside the massive construction.

The Great Wall stands today as evidence of the immense amount of labor commanded by the First Emperor. These early narratives, which still persist, allude to the suffering of those who labored under Qin. Yet, the wall and the labor associated with it have also, at times, come under a more positive light through narratives of the last century. The Chinese government made several efforts after 1949 to preserve the Great Wall, but it was not until after the Cultural Revolution that an aggressive preservation campaign began (Zhu 1985). In 1984, under the auspices of nationalistic fervor, Deng Xiaoping declared a campaign to “Love China, Repair the Great Wall.” Legends about the monumentality of the Great Wall returned in full force. They spoke of the engineering mastery needed to construct such a wall, often emphasizing that it is the only manmade structure that can be seen from the moon.⁴ The power of the labor and engineering force, as well as the power needed to command such a force, became emblematic of scientific excellence and political power in a historically strong China. Journal articles praised the efforts to preserve it and reiterated the joy with which

volunteer donations of money and labor came to endorse those efforts (Zhu 1985). It is most peculiar, in this case, how the eagerness of the laborers who rebuilt the wall contrasts with the suffering of those involved in the original construction.

The Great Wall also served to relate a glorifying narrative of the First Emperor during periods of great external threat to China's national security. During the first half of the twentieth century, both academic and popular Chinese sentiment cried out against intruding dominance by Western imperial powers that sought to colonize China and threatened to return the country to a rule by foreign power(s), the likes of which it had just thrown off in the 1911 Revolution against Manchu rule. Essays, articles, and art alike spoke to this grievance, and narratives of the First Emperor recounted with glorification his construction of the Great Wall and military campaigns that kept out the invading Xiongnu barbarians. A similar narrative returned with the Qin reevaluation of the 1970s, when the wall was praised, in the context of invasion from the north by the Russians, for keeping out the raiding barbarians.

The famous long wall has also stood as a significant Chinese icon in the eyes of Western observers for centuries past. Travelers to China during the Western age of exploration returned to Europe with artistic renditions and tales of the monumental wall in northern China. Mythologizing narratives that accumulated by the dawn of the twentieth century created less of a concern for facts about the wall and more of a fascination with the concept of the grand wall

itself. It was not until well into the twentieth century that the Chinese joined in the awe-stricken praise of the engineering accomplishments of the wall and the First Emperor's command of the necessary labor (Waldron 1990). The nature of this admiration was such that it placed an extinct grandeur of the Qin alongside that of Babylonian kings and Egyptian pharaohs. Such splendor and power was seen as having faded from modern nations. The Great Wall was, for many years — and still is — emblematic of the might of the exotic Far Eastern country known as China. Concomitantly, the construction of the wall and the power it represents was attributed to the might of the First Emperor.

Archaeological materials recovered from excavations in the later twentieth century spawned nationalistic narratives that evoked an image of Qin and the First Emperor as politically, socially, scientifically, and militarily progressive. Textual references in the *Shiji* to the mass standardization efforts of the Qin were tangibly demonstrated by the tallies, measures, weights, and coins discovered at numerous archaeological sites of the Qin. The nation-building efforts of the Qin were equated to the task of the Chinese Communist Party to unify and modernize the nation of China. A surge of excavations related to iron manufacturing in the 1950s and 1960s mirrored the government's emphasis on industry and science. Iron production in early imperial China far surpassed the rest of the world, and the attribution of the iron industry to Qin's military and economic success further

highlighted the importance of a modern, industrial China to compete with the world powers and reaffirm its rightful status as one.

Terra-cotta Army Is Unearthed

Considering the context of growing nationalistic sentiments and urgent attempts to legitimize the leadership of Mao Zedong, the discovery of the underground army of the First Qin Emperor could not have come at a more opportune time. The location of the First Emperor's mausoleum had been known from the time of its construction, but the legends surrounding it did not receive as much attention as the Great Wall until the extraordinary discovery of the terra-cotta army in 1974. The significance of the sculpted army was of equally great magnitude to art history, archaeology, and the political uses of the ancient Chinese material culture. For centuries, superstitious tales, also recorded in the *Shiji*⁵, surrounded the First Emperor's tomb. These tales spoke of the hundreds of thousands of commoners who toiled to build it, crossbow traps set to prevent tomb robbery, and the artisans responsible for its construction who had been buried alive inside the mausoleum. Coupled with similar tales of burying Confucian scholars alive and forcing labor for the construction of the Great Wall, the First Emperor's tomb stood as an icon of imperial self-indulgence and all who suffered under his tyranny. The discovery of the terra-cotta army in the First Emperor's mausoleum fueled nationalistic agendas. The site was rendered as a symbol of the power of an absolute ruler who defeated all those who posed a

threat to the sovereignty of the Chinese state, brought peace and prosperity, and led the nation toward social, political, and economic progress.

The full-scale excavation of the terra-cotta army easily received funding, as urgent efforts were made to acquire materials that would glorify the Chinese past and exalt the First Emperor.⁶ The timing of this discovery also came a year after the slight relaxations of the Cultural Revolution had reopened the academic field of archaeology in 1973. Archaeology again became a pursuable discipline for a barrage of new hands and minds (Guldin 1994). Despite any protests that may have been voiced as to the speed or manner of the excavations, work on unearthing the underground army progressed at a miraculous rate within the first few years. By 1980, a substantial amount of the terra-cotta horses and soldiers had been uncovered. A small collection of them subsequently left the country to be seen abroad as part of *The Great Bronze Age of China* traveling exhibit.

The discovery of the terra-cotta army was accompanied by many other archaeological discoveries of Qin material. Finds such as the bronze chariots of the First Emperor's tomb mound amplified the Chinese archaeologists' interest in the high level of craftsmanship of the Qin material. Tangible evidence of their brilliant craftsmanship and metallurgy, again, found its place in attesting to a superior ingenuity of the Qin. Archaeological narratives also stressed the military advancements and might of the Qin, and the colossal underground army allowed archaeologists to view the Qin military standing at attention in perfect battle

formation. The emphasis on military strength and scientific ingenuity of the Qin served perfectly the goals of Mao Zedong's vision for a strong and modern China. These nationalistic narratives of the Qin communicated their message not only to the Chinese people, but also to the world at large.

NARRATING TO THE WORLD AND THE WORLD NARRATING

Tales of the Great Wall, as well as other intriguing and monumental narratives, had for many years shaped the Western perception of China. Here, China was conceived of as possessing both an exotic character and an oppressive and regressive governing tradition. Great accomplishments, such as the engineering feat of the Great Wall, were seen as remnants of the past fallen dynasties of imperial China. That the so-called backward thinking Chinese could have achieved such greatness seemed unbelievable. The archaeological narratives of the Qin that began in the 1970s sought to change the inexplicable miracles of ancient Chinese accomplishments into scientific and social advancements of a strong, progressive civilization. Beyond archaeological discoveries providing narratives of the past, they became a visually powerful material vehicle for conveying China's message to the world.

Nixon's visit to China in 1972 demonstrated the easing of Chinese isolationism in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, and the Open Door policy of

Deng Xiaoping leading into the 1980s turned China's attention further toward the outside world. The timing of *The Great Bronze Age of China* exhibit coincided with increased interaction between China and the United States, as well as the rest of the world. Four pieces of the First Emperor's terra-cotta army traveled with the exhibit, and the instant fascination of the Western audience with the monumental underground army paved the way for the Qin soldiers to appear in many subsequent exhibits (*Son of Heaven* [1988], *Imperial Tombs of China* [1995], and *The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology* [1999] among some of the larger ones). These were often the paramount attraction, regardless of the exhibit's theme.

The larger exhibits, as well as the smaller, less traveled exhibits, have filled Western museums with a stream of Qin material culture that was intended to emphasize greatness in art, culture, and warfare of the first Chinese empire. In addition, travel companies use the terra-cotta soldiers as the flagship to their pamphlets and itineraries for vacations to China. The underground army of the First Emperor has drawn masses of tourists to Xi'an. A sea of souvenir statues replicating the terra-cotta soldiers surrounds the entrance to the museum. Tourists from all over the world are shown a planetarium-sized surround-film that reenacts the grand conquest of the First Emperor, as well as the burning of the necropolis after his death, where the underground army lies (all this before any of the visitors even enter the hangars housing the terra-cotta army).

The narratives of Qin and the First Emperor accompanying the archaeological material impress the vision of a strong leader as the helmsman to the rise of an advanced nation, and the colossal underground army serves as “a demonstration of power and status. In the emperor’s necropolis, it is the ability to marshal the resources required to produce these likenesses _ proof of economic, organizational, and technical power _ that has become the mark of his prestige” (National Gallery 1999: 32). The distinction of Qin social and military greatness contributes to the desired modern “sleeping dragon” and almost fearful image of China the Mighty. The Qin terra-cotta army has been so well preserved that it has advanced beyond its emblematic role for the magnificence of Qin into a greater symbol of the magnificence of China.

Museum catalogs and the exhibitions themselves impart, both directly and indirectly, China’s nationalistic narrative of their Qin past. As all the legends, texts, and materials surrounding the Qin dynasty have been feverishly fleshed out in the past few decades, it has also fallen on Western narrators to tell the story of the First Emperor. The narratives have penetrated even beyond museum catalogs and magazine articles into coffee-table tomes and discovery-intrigue volumes by publishing companies, such as Time-Life Books, and retail stores like The Nature Company. Though the Chinese do not compose these narratives, they are still guided by the strong sentiments of the Chinese attached to the First Emperor. Popular literature, and even scholarly books, still resound the fearful aspect of the

Qin. The First Emperor's reign is likened to "a giant prison camp...pressing its population so savagely...the Qin finally forced the common people into revolt," and the terra-cotta soldiers are seen as "powerful manifestations of the coercive nature of Qin rule and its prodigious ability to mobilize hundreds of thousands, even millions, of its citizens in massive, harsh corvée labor projects" (Yates 1994: 103-104).

Western audiences show an interest in every aspect of Qin history, including the oppression of the First Emperor, which does not seem to be the focus of the material narratives emphasized by the Chinese. Though Chinese narratives do not ignore the tyrannical facet of the First Emperor's reign, there are certainly no attempts to correlate this aspect of the Qin to modern China the way the scientific and social advancements of the Qin are correlated. Mentions of the tyranny of the emperor in Western writings, however, allude to, and occasionally state outright, a connection to the present communist government. The famous burning of the books and execution of the Confucian scholars, which writers of early twentieth century China used to criticize the government of their own time, now find comparisons in Western writings to a totalitarian rule under the communist regime. Even some middle school history textbooks in the United States have discussions of censorship and the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989 mixed in with historical narratives of Qin and the First Emperor.

The collection of Western narratives on Qin is not wholly critical. High school and college textbooks attempting to gain an impartial and factual perspective on China's past detail the political and economic accomplishments of the Qin imperial unification (Price and Feinman 2001). The recounting of military advancements and engineering feats through public works resounds with the Chinese nationalistic perspective. This places the supposedly cruel actions of the emperor in a context that seems to justify the means with the ends. Children's books tell of the heroic efforts of the emperor in building the Great Wall to keep out the barbarians (Fisher 1986) and praise the results of his unifying conquests. "Qin was now the strongest of all China's kingdoms. It had a firm central government, efficient irrigation systems and farming, and a powerful army" (Williams 1996). But these texts are not devoid of the mythical characteristic of Chinese narratives. Portrayals of the First Emperor relate the stories of paranoia and obsession that have long surrounded him, and the underground army, a more recent material icon of the Qin, receives fantastical description and promulgation of its own myths (e.g. every soldier is sculpted as an individual portrait of men in the emperor's army). The overall perspective resulting from the myriad of Western narratives is dually respectful and fearful of the Qin. Such perspective comes seemingly close to the reserved reverence for "China the Mighty" that the Chinese government aspires to receive from the outside world.

“LET THE PAST SERVE THE PRESENT”:
STRUGGLING WITH SUBJECTIVE NARRATIVES

After the heavily propagandist and “distorted history” of the Qin reevaluation in the 1970s (Bai 1978), Chinese scholars and journalists alike have attempted to again correct the historical narratives of the First Emperor by allowing archaeological material to guide them into a more impartial and scientific reconstruction of the past. The renowned status of the terra-cotta army and the publication of stories within the ancient texts in modern Chinese language have revived Qin Shihuangdi and his empire as a symbol of China. One of the lingering comparisons, however, is that with Mao Zedong’s reign over revolutionary China. A recent attempt to un-deify the legendary emperor of Qin, in the film *Jing Ke ci Qinwang* (Kaige 1999), is perhaps representative of the people of modern China’s struggle with how to judge their own modern legendary ruler, Mao Zedong.

In this movie, the young Qin king has a vision for the future in which “a great empire will emerge...all under heaven will be its subjects...[one ruler] will protect all his subjects...grain will grow everywhere, there will be peace and prosperity for all.” As the film progresses, though, the audience witnesses the king committing numerous acts of cruelty and mass murder in an unwitting manner on his campaign to create the grand empire. The king’s lover, Lady Zhao,

a character who did not appear in the traditional story of Jing Ke and only slightly in other stories about the emperor, tells of the sad transformation seen in the king from benevolent visionary to “ruthless killer.” His lust for power makes him forget the greater vision of the great empire of peace and prosperity. The king rises to become emperor but falls traitor to the vision. This separation of the man from the vision echoes the differentiation between Mao Zedong the man, with all his human faults, and the great guiding principles of Mao Zedong Thought.

Attempts to search for the true history of Qin and the First Emperor have not escaped the “mytho-historical mindset” insofar as the historical narratives continue to provide the subjective mindset of the present with didactic archetypes for comparisons with the past (Bantly 1996). Mao Zedong’s equivocal assertion to “let the past serve the present” has guided nationalistic goals of the Chinese government just as much as the political stance and concerns of Western writers have guided their own narrations of the Qin emperor. Despite perceptions that the adherence to archaeological material has eliminated any subjective character of the more recent narratives, the material record of the First Emperor continues to be read subjectively somewhere between legend, science, and nationalism.

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NOTES

¹ This English translation comes from Anne Birrell's *New Songs for a Jade Terrace* (1982), but these songs can be found in a number of early sources, as far back as the third century A.D. (Waldron 1990).

² All of the English translations of Chinese newspaper and periodical articles referred to in this paper, except those from *China Reconstructs*, appear in *The First Emperor of China* (1975), Yuning Li, ed.

³ This phrase seems to best summarize one of the main goals of the increasingly nationalistic aims of the Chinese Communist Party after 1949, and the “multinational” characteristic is especially noteworthy, considering the CCP's desire to accommodate and, at least ostensibly, appease the numerous ethnic minorities living in China.

⁴ This myth of seeing the Great Wall from the moon began well before space exploration programs had even begun (see Waldron 1990:212-214).

⁵ c.f. Qian 1993:63-64.

⁶ Many insights into the events surrounding the discovery of the Qin underground army are indebted to personal conversations with Ye Wa, who was present in the Xi'an area during the early discovery and excavations.