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Terracotta Ambassadors, the First Emperor, and the “Cursed” Farmers

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In honor of the current exhibit of Terracotta Warriors in China Beat’s own backyard (in other words, Orange County, California), we asked contributor Xia Shi if she would visit the Bowers Museum where the warriors are on display and reflect on the exhibit and the warriors’ history.

By Xia Shi

About twenty terracotta figures are currently on display at the Bowers Museum of Cultural Art in Santa Ana, California in an exhibit scheduled from May 18 through October 12. Later, the exhibit, including statues of ten warriors, court officials, an acrobat, a bare-chested strongman, musicians, a stable boy, chariot horses and bronze water birds, will make stops in Atlanta, Houston, and Washington, D.C. It is said that this exhibit not only includes pieces of the highest quality, but is also the largest collection of the figures ever to leave China.

"As China gears up for the 2008 Olympics, it’s a debut timed to the Beijing Olympics that was millions of dollars and four years in the making," says Peter Keller, Bowers president. Last year, a similar exhibit attracted 500 people per hour at the British Museum. At the Bowers, there are about 250 visitors per hour, according to staff.

The Underground World

Life-sized, over two thousand years old, but only unearthed since 1974, these soldiers are generally believed to be the guardians of the mausoleum of China’s first emperor—Qin Shi Huang (r. 246-210 B.C.), which is located in Lintong, Shanxi province. The terracotta army has been regarded

It was the emperor’s belief in eternal life that brought the necropolis into being, reputedly a vast underground palace that took about 700,000 conscripted workmen more than 36 years to complete. The first great Chinese historian Sima Qian (145–85 B.C.) left a record that allows us to imagine this mysterious and still not fully excavated underground world:

"The laborers dug through three subterranean streams, which they sealed off with bronze to construct the burial chamber. They built models of palaces, pavilions, and offices and filled the tomb with fine vessels, precious stones, and rarities. Artisans were ordered to install mechanically triggered crossbows set to shoot any intruder. With quicksilver the various waterways of the empire, the Yangtze and Yellow rivers, and even the great ocean itself were created and made to flow and circulate mechanically. With shining pearls the heavenly constellations were depicted above, and with
figures of birds in gold and silver and of pine trees carved of jade the earth was laid out below. Lamps were fueled with whale oil so that they might burn for the longest possible time."

Scientists have repeatedly found that the mercury concentration in frozen earth samples from the mausoleum is much higher than that of areas nearby and that the mercury map surprisingly matched the shape of the Qin empire and its waterways. However, since the site has not been fully explored (archaeologists say they are delaying some exploration until preservation technology is better developed) there remain at least nine major questions about Qin Shi Huang’s Mausoleum, such as how many precious treasures are in the underground palace and whether there is really an automatic ejector on site.

The First Emperor
The arrogant, Chinese-inflected voice of the museum’s audio guide makes the visitor even more curious about the ancient strongman who built the tomb. Qin Shi Huang, who lived for about fifty years, has been a controversial figure over the past two millennia.

Chinese have largely remembered him as one of two things: a unifier of commendable achievements, or a brutal tyrant who favored legalist policy. It could be said that both of these images have greatly impacted the political mentality of Chinese rulers and subjects for two thousand years. His unification made the concept of “oneness” take root in Chinese people’s minds and led to the preference of a unified empire over separate states competing with each other. Since his death, all rulers of China have prioritized unification; for their subjects, unification also became an important criterion of a ruler’s political achievements. Accordingly, Qin Shi Huang ranks among the greatest rulers in Chinese history, and he is often mentioned alongside other powerful emperors, such as Han Wudi, Tang Taizong, and Kangxi of the Qing dynasty. Almost all these emperors were greatly admired by the populace and in recent years history dramas in which they feature as the protagonists have been a favorite for both the general public and the central propaganda machine, to the degree that some commentators have coined the phrase “the great emperors drama fever.”

However, Qin Shi Huang’s second deeply entrenched image—that of a ruthless tyrant—apparently troubled some Chinese political leaders and made for special treatment even of his historical dramas. Unlike other great emperors’ dramas, the handsomely sponsored CCTV show “Qin Shi Huang” was “hidden” for six years after it was finished and was said to be repeatedly re-edited to cut or alter some scenes which did not “accord with history.” When it was finally shown on CCTV, it was not scheduled at prime time, for although its eulogizing of national unification is a politically correct theme, one of the central anxieties was that the First Emperor’s popular image as a tyrant might incite agitation and stir social conflicts as opposed to promoting the social harmony that was so carefully nurtured in the difficult and crucial reform period of 2001.

The power of Qin Shi Huang’s image as a ruthless despot is not only witnessed in the case of this history drama. Over the past two thousand years, rulers have been learning from his lesson based on Confucianists’ view and often remind themselves to “give people rest” (与民休息). On the other hand, the populace also gradually began to use the name “Qin Shi Huang” to accuse rulers of being a tyrant
and justify their rebellions. This kind of accusation usually worked, until they met Mao Zedong, who as a ruler displayed not even a single tinge of fear of being compared to the First Emperor. Reviled for his persecution of intellectuals, Mao reputedly responded: “He buried 460 scholars alive; we have buried forty-six thousand scholars alive…You [intellectuals] revile us for being Qin Shi Huang. You are wrong. We have surpassed Qin Shi Huang a hundredfold.” Even with regard to the First Emperor’s achievements, Mao also hinted that his aspiration was even greater than his and that of all other revered emperors. After the victory of the Long March and the establishment of his control of the Communist Party, in high spirits, the later “Great Helmsman” wrote a dashingly ambitious poem titled “Snow” in 1936, later published in school textbooks in the PRC, with the following key lines:

But alas! Qin Shihuang and Han Wudi,  
Were lacking in literary grace;  
And Tang Taizong and Sung Taizu,  
Had little poetry in their souls;  
And Genghis Khan,  
Proud Son of Heaven for a day,  
Knew only to shoot eagles, bow outstretched;  
All are past and gone!  
For truly great men,  
Look to this age alone.

As we all know from later history, in China communism found its most iconoclastic leader, whose ambitious idealism stirred red China into fervent revolution. A similarly controversial unifier who also preferred Legalism to Confucianism, Mao still retains his reputation as the ruler who most resembles the First Emperor in China’s thousands of years of history.

So far, readers may wonder how cruel the First Emperor truly was, that his tyrant image has lasted so long? Interestingly, recent history research suggests that few verifiable actions can testify to his presumed ruthlessness in implementing his decisions. The well-known stories of the burning of the books of Confucianism and burying scholars alive have already been discredited by modern scholars. Perhaps it is helpful, when thinking about this question, to keep in mind two key points. First, Qin Shi Huang was an emperor who strongly favored Legalist policies, the philosophical basis of which is that people are bad by nature and so need to be controlled by the government. Second, the historical commentaries of most far-reaching influence were primarily written by Confucian scholars under the rule of Qin’s overthrows—the Han emperors. Recent research has also noted that probably the most controversial parts on Qin Shi Huang of Sima Qian’s the Historical Record were actually later additions to it, judging from the language used in them.

The standard Confucian judgment of the emperor and his short-lived empire was that of a Han Confucian scholar and statesman called Jia Yi (贾谊, 201 BC-169BC). In his political essay The Faults of Qin (过秦论), he condemned Qin Shi Huang’s ruthless pursuit of power, harsh laws and unbearable burdens placed on the population in projects such as the Great Wall. Admired as a masterpiece of rhetoric and reasoning, this classic illustration of Confucian theory has been extremely influential upon Chinese political thoughts—quoted often by later Chinese intellectuals almost any time they evaluated Qin Shi Huang. It also seems that the imperial patronage of Confucianism received under Han Wudi (140-87 BC) symbolized to the world who was the final winner of the longtime struggle among different schools of thought, and especially signaled the victory of Confucianism over the once predominant Legalism, as represented by the “cruel” Qin Shi Huang. However, it is better not to forget that historian Ho Ping-ti has already pointed out that, after the founding of the Han Empire, the various schools of thought—particularly Confucianism and Legalism—began to merge.

It seems that it would be wiser to cast a doubtful eye on some of the historical records on Qin Shi Huang, especially those compiled by Confucian scholars. In this sense, any archaeological evidence already presented or to be discovered from his tomb is of great significance.

The Terracotta Ambassadors
The minute they emerged from Qin Shi Huang’s over two thousand-year-old underground palace, his
terracotta soldiers stunned the world with their unique charms. Each and every one of the thousands of soldiers has a unique face. It has now been shown that the manufacture of the army was an early feat of mass production instead of individual portraits in clay of actual soldiers. People are also amazed by the detail and accuracy of their creators: dozens of individual rivets on their plate armor; shoes sculpted with delicate shoelaces; or soldiers sporting strands of hair that delicately curl over their foreheads.

Charming enough to arouse national pride and attract foreign admirers, the soldiers have been frequently dispatched by the Chinese government on important diplomatic missions. Since open reform, these military men have become ambassadors of Chinese culture and friendship. The majority of them remain in Xi’an, where they have received more than 50 million visitors and 130-odd foreign leaders since 1979, according to People’s Daily Online. Meanwhile, a small, carefully selected group has been sent to more than 30 countries and regions with more than 20 million people having had a glimpse of China’s past imperial glory. Handsomely sponsored by the government, it is hoped that they might display the “great Chinese civilization and its splendid history.”

Obviously equipped with superb work ethic, these warriors had been patiently and lively explaining to hundreds of Bower visitors per hour of their imperial duties, despite the fact that they are not in great shape. After the large fire set by general Xiang Yu to the wooden structures that once housed the Terracotta Army, only one kneeling archer survived intact. However, these cultural ambassadors decided that they would never let people down. In Britain, the protagonist was the First Emperor, so they dutifully played their supporting role, to testify to the vast territory he controlled and the enormous power he wielded. In the US, they learned that this is a country without a monarch and were happy to know that the focus of the Bowers Museum exhibition would be on them. After their initial excitement, they were told that they were required to speak English—the international language of the 21st century—with a deliberate Chinese accent to “authentically” tell their stories via audio guide. Being military men for two millennia, they were not so good at rhetoric; however, they tried their best to present an impressive display of the greatness of China, especially since they heard that their hosts—the museum curators—hoped their show would “pique the interest of Americans who are inundated with news of lead-contaminated Chinese toys, human rights violations in Tibet and rapid economic expansion—but who know nothing of the nation’s ancient and storied past.” Mixed in with public interest in them, they also found, are several reports that go beyond the mission of their visit. For instance, their trip to the U.S. was used by an American Express delivery company named UPS as an advertisement to boast their “incredible” capability of “planning and logistics,” in the words of the president of UPS Airlines. Even for those who are still in China, they are used as witnesses to remind people the world over how bad China’s air pollution is nowadays and to show their deep concern for them as victims who are suffering from “nine different kinds of mould.” Confused as to whether the report is due to foreigners’ genuine concern about their health, they decided to focus on the satisfying idea that they have been continuously attracting the world’s attention since they were dug out of their common grave.

The “Cursed” Farmers
In terms of the attention they have received so far, they are indeed lucky, especially compared to the seven farmers who first found them but have been continuously denied their proper recognition as the
discoverers of the Eighth Wonder of the World. Since the moment in that dry spring of 1974 when these seven farmers were digging a well on their communal farm in Yang village stumbled across “the most priceless archaeological discovery of modern times,” until today, they still find it difficult to say whether this event was a curse or a blessing. Thanks to the Western media’s curiosity, we now know that one of them committed suicide, two “died in their 50s, jobless and penniless” and the four remaining men “earn £2 a day sitting in official souvenir shops at the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor and sign books for tourists,” after spending three months learning how to write their own names.

If the act of “discovery” can only be applied to “an intelligent action of recognizing what the objects are,” as some officials once claimed, these farmers are indeed a far cry from Indiana Jones. Assuming that the statue head they accidentally dug out was a head of Buddha, they were afraid to touch it for fear that the Buddha would punish them. Someone even hung the head on a tree to expose it to the scorching sunshine to pray for rain. Their fellow villagers regarded the seven as inauspicious and kept a fearful distance. Before long, they learned that archeologists “discovered” that what they found was a big treasure related to Qin Shi Huang and magnificent enough to be called “the Eighth Wonder of the World.” They also saw how subsequent “pioneers” utilized these clay figures to make money, and heard about the new local popular saying: “to be liberated, you need the Communist party, to get rich, you need Qin Shi Huang” (翻身要靠共产党，致富要靠秦始皇). Perhaps out of an elusive consciousness of their rights of discovery, or maybe just to get a share of its benefits, they petitioned the government for compensation, but were denied and got nothing. Disappointed villagers believe that “almost all the compensation paid by the government was siphoned off by officials” according to the report.

It is also said that one particular farmer, after pondering over the superstitions that surrounded their discovery, “has vowed never to set eyes on the Terracotta Army again.” The farmer is afraid “they might have brought misfortune in some way,” and still wonders “if maybe the soldiers should have been left beneath the ground.” In sum, the report links the reasons why the famous Terracotta Army brought wealth and glory to many but not to the poor villagers who first found them, to “the brutal pace of development in modern China.”

Emperors, soldiers, and farmers: stories behind the Terracotta statues are admittedly complicated. Back to the exhibit itself, it is lively and creative, as demonstrated by those personal stories in the audio tour. It is reasonable to predict that these Terracotta ambassadors’ American debut would be a success.

All photos for this story taken in Xian, China by Matthias Merkel Hess.

Tags: bingmayong, terracotta warriors