

## The First Emperor and His Army in Imagery and Sculpture

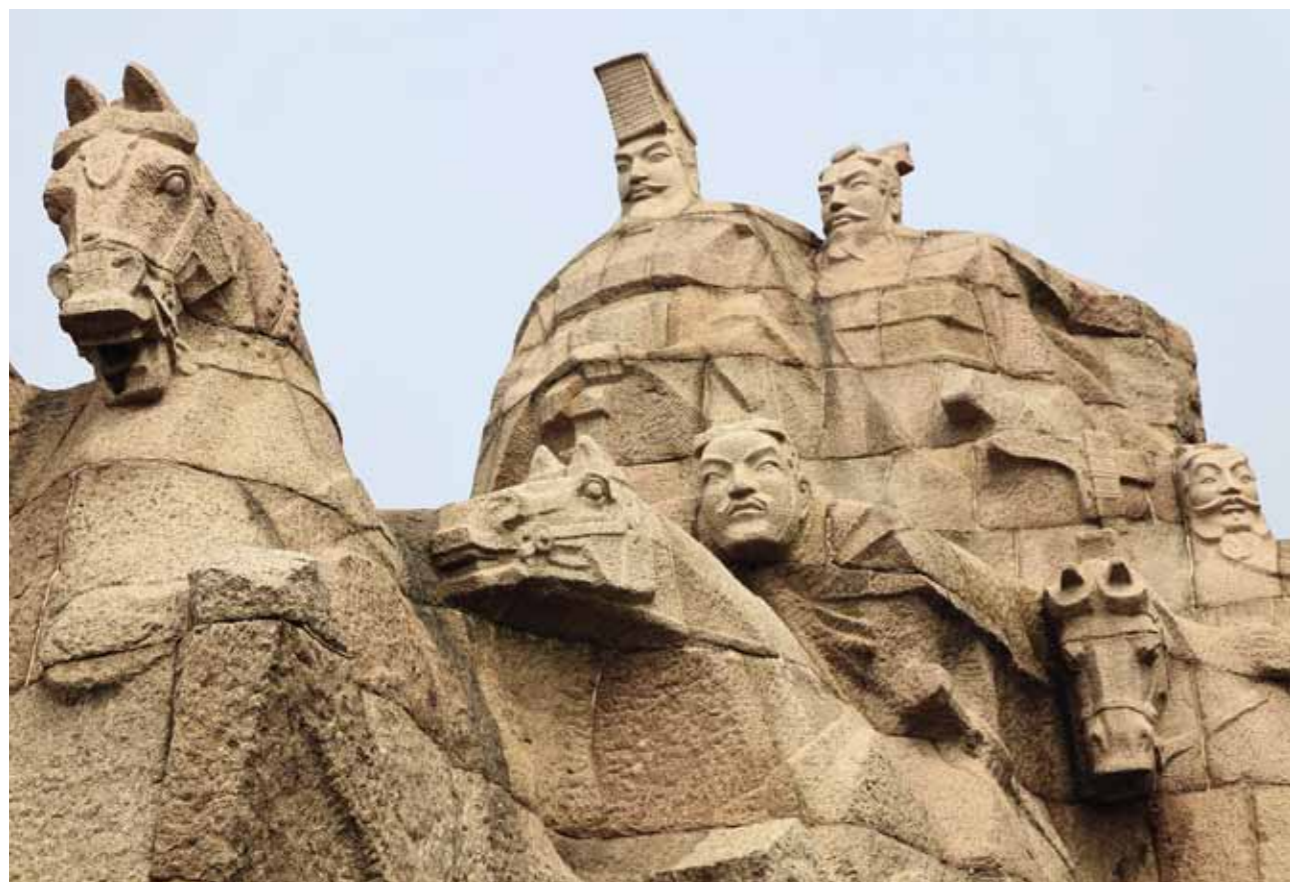
Maria Khayutina

In modern-day China, the First Emperor of Qin is encountered in many different places: in the streets of various cities, on the pages of school books or in the virtual space of computer games. His terracotta army has also become one of the most important cultural symbols in China, as well as a phenomenon of mainstream culture and contemporary art. This chapter presents several of these examples and explains them in light of their cultural and historical background.

What Ying Zheng, the First Emperor of Qin (r. 221–210 BC) actually looked like, is not known. Unlike Roman Emperors, no coins were produced with his countenance and no statues were erected in cities. Descriptions given in lit-

erary sources are, for the most part, trivial and unreliable. During his lifetime, his enemies ascribed to him “a high nose, long eyes, the chest of a bird of prey, the voice of a jackal and the heart of a tiger or a wolf”.<sup>275</sup> The earliest pictorial representations of his person have been handed down from the Eastern Han period (25–220 AD).<sup>276</sup> Reliefs on the walls of burial chambers or on stone sarcophagi present Ying Zheng, however, only as a supporting actor. In fact, the unsuccessful assassin Jing Ke (d. 227 BC) is placed in the centre of the scene in the role of the hero: he has just thrown his dagger but the weapon sticks fast in one of the columns of the Xianyang palace, the King of Qin shrinks

back and his subordinates stand bewildered (see fig. 21). Even Sima Qian (ca. 145–90 BC), the famous historian, was not sure whether the story of Jing Ke’s assassination attempt was correct or not. The fact that the story was depicted relatively often about 200 years later in the periphery of the Han Empire, particularly in the modern provinces of Shandong and Sichuan, suggests historical reasons. The former regional independence of the Warring States was mourned after and was still romanticized, whereas Qin Shi Huangdi received nothing but hatred and disapproval for the destruction of this independence. By contrast, the figure of Jing Ke embodied the missed



88 The First Emperor and his entourage at the motorway exit to Lintong

opportunity to save the good old days. However, the representations carved into stone are schematic and facial features are not discernible.

Following all the disruptions and periods of fragmentation, the Chinese Empire, nevertheless, proved to be surprisingly stable over the next millennia. Although Qin Shi Huangdi was mostly viewed with criticism by intellectuals influenced by Confucianism for his tough methods of government, admiration for this controversial character gradually became more widespread (see Chapter 4 for more details). During the later imperial period (from ca. 17<sup>th</sup> century until 1911), fictitious appearances of important historical rulers were created by painters with the result that Qin Shi Huangdi finally obtained tangible physical features. He is portrayed as a bearded man with bushy eyebrows, thoughtful eyes, wide shoulders and a portly stomach (see fig. 18).<sup>277</sup> At several places in the provinces of Shaanxi, Henan, Anhui and Shandong, i.e. places where he lived or stayed during his imperial tours, even First Emperor temples emerged. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, temple construction was the usual form of commemorating significant historical personalities. Colourfully painted figures of the First Emperor were erected in the prayer halls. Similar to the worship of Daoist gods, Buddhas or ancestral spirits, fruit and baked goods were brought as offerings for the First Emperor, incense sticks were burnt for him and supplications were made to him. Today, it is difficult to determine just how popular the First Emperor temples actually were. The majority of these temples were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Only the temple on Chengshan Mountain situated on the outermost tip of the Shandong peninsula was spared.

89 “Creating a civilised and clean city of the country!” The city of Xianyang advertises with this slogan

and representation of the city, with the First Emperor in a horse-drawn chariot all to himself.

It was not until the middle of the last century that monumental sculpture became more widespread in China as a means to root the memories of historical events or significant people in public spaces without a connection to religion. Initially, statues of Mao and groups of figures of the People’s Liberation Army found their way into the cities. Since the 1980s, role models in earlier phases of Chinese history have been sought. Made of stone, bronze or concrete, they are erected in newly created squares as well as in the park landscapes of growing cities (fig. 88). Stone figures of the First Emperor can be found in large numbers in Xi’an, the provincial capital of Shaanxi, and in Xianyang, the former capital of the Qin Empire. On the sites where wooden palaces with decorated roofing tiles made of fired clay stood over two thousand years ago, now industrialized apartment blocks with over twenty storeys are shooting up everywhere. And the First Emperor watches these goings-on with a satisfied and serene air (fig. 89).

The raising of statues of the First Emperor not only reflects the recognition of his historical achievements but is also sometimes economically motivated. After the elaborate renovation of the First Emperor temple on Chengshan Mountain in the 1990s, today a new group of sculptures welcomes visitors in front of the en-



90 Procession of Qin warriors in Qinhuangdao

trance. This increases the appeal of the small town and invites tourists to interrupt their beach holiday on the coast to have photographs taken with Qin Shi Huangdi and his minister Li Si (ca. 280–208 BC). On the south coast of the Shandong peninsula where the Emperor once had a simple stone stele erected to praise the unification of China and his reforms (see Chapters 4 and 5), scenes from historical sources and corresponding legends are recreated in stone in the landscape park Langye Terraces. While historical Disneyland of this kind seem tasteless to European visitors, they are very popular with Chinese travellers. In the town of Qinhuangdao, located in Hebei province and named after the First Emperor, even an entire artificial landscape was created at the beginning of the current century with impressive staircases and walls, spacious pavilions, large numbers of bronze tripods and monumental sculpture groups (fig. 90).

Alongside statues of the Emperor, his “black-headed” subjects can often be seen in such arrangements. The individuality of the terracotta figures excavated in the imperial tomb complex still fascinates onlookers today. An immediate reaction is to see them not only as representations but as real people from a very distant past. Similar to these models and unlike current depictions of the Qin Emperor that are extremely schematic and rigid, contemporary representations of ordinary people from Qin show individual faces. Cast in bronze, carved

out of stone, painted on canvas or, like two thousand years ago, formed out of clay, they embody different attitudes and feelings.

In Qinhuangdao, various bronze figures follow the imperial carriage. Calmness and happiness can be read clearly from several of the faces; others appear to be thoughtful but not worried. Only the armour, halberds and decorated shields remind us of the fact that they are actually warriors. They have triumphed, and now come in peace. The Emperor brings prosperity for all, both then and now, and the small coastal town hopes to receive its share.

What would a person from the Qin Empire do if he undertook a journey through time to the present day? This question has been pursued by various artists in a fantastic and playful manner. Thus, three armoured men made of bronze ride on a motorbike through the pedestrian zone of Lintong. Another pulls his neigh-

bour's sleeve (the latter has his sunglasses pushed down on the tip of his nose) to draw his attention to a female passer-by wearing a crop top (fig. 91). And an officer, who is not wearing any armour, takes a short nap on a bench after an exhausting shopping tour. Two kilometres away, their counterparts in the tomb complex of the First Emperor are marvelled at, photographed and purchased as copies in the museum shop; by contrast, the men in the town enjoy their evening after a hard day and consume the joys of modern life. They no longer have any need for weapons; the warriors have become likeable fellow townsmen.

In the oil paintings of the contemporary artist Zhou Mian, the warriors also have no weapons. But despite this, they do not look particularly friendly. They appear in buttoned-up blue jackets with clenched fists, their bent hand raised threateningly in the air. Cold, empty eyes

fix an opponent who is not visible to the onlooker. The viewer is relieved that he himself is not being stared at in such a way. Represented here are the "Terracotta Warriors in Our Hearts" (fig. 92). The imagery is very simple, arresting, perhaps even primitive, and in spite of this, these images prey on our minds and torment us with questions: Are such terracotta beings only at home in China? Who do they serve now that the Emperor is dead? How can we protect ourselves against them?<sup>278</sup>

In the oil painting created by the successful TV producer and painter Gao Haige, the terracotta figure of a commanding officer with his hands joined in front of his stomach is depicted

91 Qin warriors and a passer-by on a building site in Lintong



92 "Terracotta Warriors in Our Hearts", oil painting by Zhou Mian, 2007 (above)

93 "Plundered Tomb", oil painting by Gao Haige, 2006 (below)

true to the original (fig. 93; cf. cat. 129). At first glance, the figure seems to be standing. However, the objects spread around the body obviously lie flat on the light brown earth and are viewed by the onlooker from above. After a short time, it becomes clear that the commanding officer also rests on his back and is lying on the floor. His face has a slightly yellow skin tone: it is in actual fact a real person who has been given the appearance of the artist himself. His eyes are closed. He is not sleeping, but is

dead and buried in a tomb with a selection of modern weaponry: a Kalashnikov, a hand grenade and a telescope. In the Qin Empire, terracotta warriors in their pits and deceased officers in their tombs were provided with real, state-of-the-art weapons. If this custom was continued today, what would be taken with the deceased on their last journey? The painting is called "Plundered Tomb". But all burial goods lie in their place in an orderly fashion and there are no recognizable traces of a break-in. This is what professionally excavated tombs look like in archaeological reports. Is it archaeologists then who "plunder" burials?<sup>279</sup>

Zhang Wanxin, a sculptor living in San Francisco since 1992, not only deals with the topic of the terracotta army but also with ceramic as a material. Similar to the Qin prototypes, his sculptures are mainly larger than life-size. Faces, hairstyles, clothing and other attributes are partly very finely modelled and partly left intentionally rudimentary. Coloured glazes provide the figures with a partly realistic, partly phantasmagoric appearance. The "Untitled Warrior" is wrapped in a thick jacket and wide baggy trousers. These garments are recognizable as the typical Chinese winter clothing made of quilted cotton worn in the 1960s and 1970s. The red band on his left elbow identifies the man as a Red Guard. He can be distinguished from his comrades-in-arms shown on old propaganda placards not only due to his hair being tied in a knot in the Qin style. Large, low-hanging hands also convey the impression of helplessness or self-abandonment. The face, with its open mouth, appears to be slightly confused as if the man is asking: "Whatever am I doing here?" (fig. 94) In the 1980s, Zhang regarded the First Emperor of Qin as the "inventor of political propaganda in China" and the terracotta army as an instrument for brainwashing the people. He compared the hundreds of thousands of forced labourers who sacrificed their lives for the construction of the imperial tomb complex with the millions that followed Mao Zedong in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After resettling in the US, the sculptor soon went beyond the scope of direct comparisons. His figures have



94 "Untitled Warrior", sculpture by Zhang Wanxin, fired clay, glazed, 2008

Asian, European or African facial features, they hide their faces behind gas masks and beneath Mickey Mouse hats, or wear a panda head on their shoulders. Their clothing cannot be assigned to any particular time period. Most of them have one thing in common, though: a pair of broken, round, John Lennon-type glasses as a symbol for the destruction of all illusions (fig. 95).<sup>280</sup>

The reader has probably become aware of the fact that only terracotta men have been mentioned so far. The First Emperor did not order any female figures to be created. A substitute for his concubines was not necessary: they were to be killed after his death and buried

in close proximity to him (see Chapter 6 for details). Women, as the sufferers in a patriarchal society, as the victims of war, as the mothers of fallen soldiers, are easily forgotten when the main focus lies on victory and power. The Norwegian Marian Heyerdahl aims to close this gap with her large-scale project “terracotta women”. Her father, the Norwegian ethnologist and adventurer Thor Heyerdahl, became world-famous for his voyages on ships recreated using ancient technologies. In a Lintong workshop, his daughter took lessons in how the Qin craftsmen modelled and fired the figures. In 2007, seventy larger than life-size figures of women and young girls were exhibited in the Space Gallery in the artists’ quarter 798 of Beijing and attracted much interest among Chinese visitors. Several figures are painted red, white or black. These three colours symbolize pain, purity and grief. Each figure tells its own story. In



95 “Trinoculars”,  
sculpture by Zhang Wanxin,  
fired clay, glazed, 2005

“Heritage” a red woman wearing chest armour pushes a cart containing six babies. The latter are small terracotta warriors modelled on examples of the Han period: fresh cannon fodder (fig. 96). The cart with its exaggeratedly large wheels is made of iron and thus symbolizes the material of the future. The cart rolls on, the war continues.<sup>281</sup>

The tomb complex of the First Emperor, his colourful personality and his terracotta army will undoubtedly occupy many future generations not only of archaeologists and historians, but also directors, painters, sculptors and other artists. It will continue to be interesting to experience the work arising from one or other group. The Qin war bells have not yet faded away completely.



96 “Heritage”,  
sculpture group  
by Marian Heyerdahl,  
fired clay, painted,  
and metal, 2007