

Qin's Terracotta Army Goes Abroad

Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of imperial China, ordered the construction of a massive terracotta army as a royal retinue to guard him in the afterlife. Consisting of terracotta warriors and horses to represent a form of funerary art, the army was buried with the emperor in 210-209 BC, and has thus sometimes been known as 'Qin's Army'.¹



Qin's buried army

Prior to the rise of the Qin Dynasty (221 BC - 206 BC), political rule in China was characterized by a semi-feudal system under the Zhou Dynasty (1122 BC - 256 BC). This state of affairs was the result of the disintegration of the central Zhou power in the 7th century BC – the time that has been known as the “Spring and Autumn Period”. During this time, China consisted of hundreds of states, some only as large as a village with a fort. Following a reconsolidation of political power, only seven prominent states remained towards the end of the 5th century BC, and the years in which these states battled one another are known as the “Warring States Period”.²

The Qin, which was one of these warring states, eventually succeeded in incorporating the other six powers into a unified China in 221 BC during the reign of Ying Zheng. This marked the beginning of imperial China, a period in the history of this country that was to end with the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912.

Emperor Qin, a controversial historical figure with a reputation for both tyranny and cruelty in imposing a central rule over China, was credited with progressive changes that produce impact more than 2,000 years later, especially the standardization of legal codes,

¹ “Terra Cotta Army”, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terracotta_Army

² “History of China”, *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_China

bureaucratic procedures, forms of writing and coinage, weights and measures, as well as the patterns of thought and scholarship. The length of the wheel axle and expressways were also standardized to ease transportation. However, the emperor was notorious for his ruthless methods of consolidating political power: silencing criticism of imperial rule; banishing or sentencing to death many dissenting Confucian scholars; and confiscating and burning books. Moreover, to prevent a resurgence of feudal lords, he destroyed the walls and fortifications that had separated the previous six states.³

We know of the emperor's tomb from the historian Sima Qian (145 BC - 90 BC), who wrote about it a century after the completion of its construction. According to this ancient historian, the first emperor of China was buried with palaces, scenic towers, officials, valuable utensils, and "wonderful objects", including 100 rivers fashioned in mercury with both heavenly bodies above, and earthly features below.⁴

The location of the tomb, which was positioned on a mound near the ancient city of Xian in northwest China, had long been known. However, the terracotta warriors and horses had been forgotten and were discovered only accidentally. In 1974, Yang Peiyan and some other local farmers were working on the fields, building a well some two kilometres from the tomb site, when they dug up the head of a warrior. Realizing that the finds he had stumbled upon were important and valuable, he contacted local officials. "Back at that time, we villagers were digging a well because of the drought; after three metres down we hit something; the fragments turned out to be a terracotta warrior", Yang recalled the chance discovery that would stun the world.⁵



Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi

³ "Qin Dynasty", *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia* http://en.org/wiki/Qin_Dynasty

⁴ "Terra Cotta Army"

⁵ Cited by Quentin Sommerville, "China's Terracotta Army on the Move", *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/6935754.stm>

The excavations that followed uncovered numerous terracotta figures dating from 210 BC. These include warriors, chariots, horses, officials, acrobats, strongmen, and musicians. The figures vary in height (184 - 197 cm), depending on their roles, the tallest being the generals. The excavations have actually continued, and there are thus new or recent discoveries, especially of marvelous life-size terracotta acrobats, civil officials, bronze birds, and stone arms.⁶ According to current estimates, there are over 8,000 soldiers, 130 chariots, 520 horses, and 150 cavalry horses in the three pits containing the terracotta army. The majority of them are still buried in the pits.⁷

The more than 8,000 life-size warriors, built out of terracotta and originally brightly painted, were buried in battle formation according to rank and duty, and accompanied by their horses, wooden chariots and weapons. The recent finds in other parts of the tomb complex indicate that Emperor Qin not only sought military protection in his afterlife but also wanted to recreate his entire realm. That is, the necropolis complex was constructed to represent an imperial compound itself. Terracotta figures of acrobats, weightlifters, as well as musicians and bronze birds are believed to have been designed to entertain him, while stern figures of officials with their arms folded in their long sleeves perhaps symbolize his civilian ambitions.⁸



The terracotta soldiers were originally brightly painted

Researchers have been trying to trace where these terracotta figures originated. Since soils from different regions contain distinct pollen "signatures", ancient pollen, for example, has been relied upon as a lead to the kilns where the figures were made. Though certain theoretical as well as technical problems still need to be thrashed out to refine this method, it has been found that the horse and soldier had different pollen signatures.

The transportation problem must also have been involved in determining where the figures were manufactured. Researchers have argued that the horses were made near the mausoleum: they were heavier than the soldiers, with more fragile legs. Hence, making them locally would have minimized the effort involved in their transportation and reduced breakages. Several ancient kilns have actually been found

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ "Terra Cotta Army"

⁸ Penny Spiller, "Terracotta Army's New UK Formation", *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/6980040.stm>

in this region of China, but it is difficult to determine whether any of them was used to make the terracotta figures.⁹

A most striking feature of the terracotta soldiers is that they are life-sized and than no two of them are alike. Most researchers believe that each statue is based on an actual soldier of that time. The head, arms, legs and torsos were produced separately and then assembled. Studies show that eight facial moulds were most likely used, and the clay was added to give them individual features. The figures thus vary in height, uniform and hairstyle in accordance with rank. The coloured finish, individual facial features, and replica weapons and armour used in creating these figures produce a realistic appearance. Once finished, the terracotta figures were placed in the pits in precise military formation.¹⁰

The pits lie approximately 1.5 kilometres to the east of the burial mound outside the walls of the tomb complex, presumably to guard the tomb from attack by the conquered states. Pit 1, which is 230 metres long, contains the main army of about 6,000 figures. Pit 2 features cavalry and infantry units as well as war chariots: it is believed that they represent a military guard. Pit 3 is the command post consisting of high-ranking officers and a war chariot. Finally, Pit 4 is empty, seemingly left unfinished by its builders.¹¹

The tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi, lying near an earthen pyramid 76 metres high and covering an area of nearly 350 square metres, is yet to be opened. Only a portion of the site is presently being excavated. In 2007, Chinese archaeologists, using remote sensing technology, located a mysterious underground chamber inside the imperial tomb. Historical records on the tomb make no mention of this chamber. Lying 30 metres deep inside a pyramidal earth mound 51 metres high, and on top of Emperor Qin's tomb, the chamber remains unexplored because Chinese authorities have not given permission to



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⁹ *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/science/nature/6494851.stm>
¹⁰ "Terra Cotta Army"
¹¹ "Terra Cotta Army"



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excavate the site. They probably want to perfect archaeological techniques before probing any further.¹²

The chamber thus remains mysterious. However, with the use of remote sensing technology, it has been found to be located near the life-size terracotta warriors, and consists of four stair-like walls. Archaeologist Duan Qinbo has speculated that it might have been built to aid the departure of the Emperor's soul.¹³

The discovery of "Qin's Army" is one of the most celebrated archaeological finds of all time. However, despite his importance in Chinese history, the Emperor remains so relatively unknown outside China. Hence, during his visit to the Xian museum in Shaanxi province in 2005 to strengthen cultural ties between Britain and China, Neil MacGregor, the British Museum director, took the initiative in proposing to host an exhibition, "The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army", in London. According to Jane Portal, who was accompanying MacGregor on this visit, the latter was "bowled over" by what he saw, and plans for a temporary exhibition were formed "pretty much there and then".¹⁴

The initiative was actually a product of close cultural cooperation between the two countries that has been going on since China's rise as an economic powerhouse and growing engagement with the West. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair had signed a memorandum of understanding, pledging cultural collaboration between the British Museum and similar Chinese institutions. The British Museum had already sent four touring exhibitions to China, including the Rosetta Stone and paintings by European Renaissance masters. In return, the Qin's Army was going to the United Kingdom to promote the British people's greater understanding of China and Chinese history.¹⁵

The exhibition, which was staged between September 2007 and April 2008, featured about a dozen of warriors, together with more than 100 objects. The figures, on loan for this exhibition, included the new,

¹² "China Finds Secret Tomb Chamber" *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/aisa-pacific/6258586.stm>

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ Spiller, "Terracotta Army's New UK Formation"

¹⁵ Robin Millard, *Bangkok Post*, 20 September 2007



Transporting the precious and fragile artefacts was a major challenge

recent discoveries of life-size terracotta acrobats, civil officials, bronze birds and stone arms. They were all first-class objects – that is, those which came from within the Emperor's tomb – and represented the largest collection of artefacts ever brought out of Xian to a foreign land.

The transportation of such a large number of precious (and fragile) objects was in itself a major challenge. They were packed into 46 crates and sent in four batches by air from Xian to London. The journey from Xian to Beijing alone took two days, and the terracotta horses had to come on cargo flights via Amsterdam because they were so bulky. The process also involved specialist packing and a lot of condition checks.¹⁶

The exhibition looked set from the very beginning to become one of the most successful the British Museum had ever held. Full price tickets cost £12 (approximately US\$18) and with advance ticket sales (of about 100,000) already breaking the box office records, the event was expected to potentially outstrip the "Treasures of Tutankhamen" exhibition in 1974, which was seen by 1.7 million people.¹⁷ Ms Portal, the exhibition curator, hoped that those who came to the exhibition would gain a sense of the grand scale of the Emperor's vision and aims – particularly that of ruling the universe even after his death.¹⁸

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¹⁶ Spiller, "Terracotta Army's New UK Formation"

¹⁷ Millard, *Bangkok Post*, 20 September 2007

¹⁸ Spiller, "Terracotta Army's New UK Formation"