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Selectivity in Imaging the First Emperor

December 17, 2008 in [Watching the China Watchers](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [2 comments](#)

With the [Mummy 3 DVD](#), with its reanimated [Qin Shi Huang Di](#) (played by Jet Li), coming out just in time for last minute holiday shopping, with a [video game tie-into](#) come out as well, we asked [K.E. Brashier](#) of Reed College, a specialist in early China, to provide our readers with some background on previous views of the First Emperor in high culture and pop culture media. He very obligingly sent us what follows. Dealing with many issues, including earlier films and video games to make use of the Qin rulers, it is an expanded version of an essay that served as a "Preface" to an [Oxford World Classics book](#), Raymond Dawson's translation of a set of relevant Sima Qian writings: [The First Emperor: Selections from the Historical Records](#).

Selectivity in Imaging the First Emperor (Or "Looking at us looking at Sima Qian looking at the First Emperor.")

By K.E. Brashier

The story of Qin may vaunt grandiose armies and new empires that encompass all under heaven, but it also extends to more humble images:

Li Si, [the chief minister of Qin], was a man of Shangcai in Chu. In his youth, when he was a minor clerk in the province, he noticed rats eating filth in the latrines of the clerks' hostel; and if they approached a man or dog, they were generally scared of them. But when Si entered a granary, he observed that the rats in the granary were eating the stored-up grain, living underneath the main chamber of the granary, and not being worried by either man or dog. At this Li Si sighed and said: "A man's status is just the same as with rats. It simply depends on where one locates oneself!"

Excavated Qin legal statutes indeed allude to granary rodent problems in which three mouse holes equated with one rat hole, two rat holes warranted a beating and three or more a fine.[1] Yet the opportunist rat in these opening lines of the chief minister's biography is intended to characterize the political entrepreneur Li Si in the Warring States Period (481-221 B.C.E.), an era that marked the end of the Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 B.C.E.). The biography's author, Sima Qian, would elsewhere extend this trait of opportunism to the new ruler whom Li Si would serve. That is, Sima Qian took a dim view of the First Emperor of Qin and his advisors in general – much dimmer than does modern popular culture – and he brands the ruler as a cruel charlatan who, like Li Si, simply put himself in the right place at the right time.[2] Both Li Si and the First Emperor merely took advantage of the situation and didn't endeavor to nourish the people through moral rectitude.

In contrast, modern culture highlights the First Emperor as the glue that brought Chinese culture together in terms of territory, currency, measures, roadways, written language and more. Books and documentaries routinely dub him "the man who made China," elevating him to creator status. Images of his cruelty may persist, but the warfare, the quest for immortality and the exacting laws that extended down to mere mouse holes are now often treated as necessary evils and personal quirks leading to the much greater prize of unification, of fusing 'all under heaven' or *tianxia* 天下.

Deciding whether to see him as an opportunistic charlatan or a cultural unifier depends upon which lens we use. Looking at the First Emperor of Qin is itself a lesson in looking, in seeing us seeing him. First, there is the self-projected image of the Qin ruler, an image now being reconstructed through the things he left behind ranging from terracotta warriors to mountain inscriptions. Second, there is the lens ground and polished by Sima Qian, the grand historiographer who lived a century after the First Emperor. For him, the First Emperor wasn't the founder of an imperial tradition that would last two thousand years; he was the unpopular Qin tyrant from a few generations ago whose brief dynasty was justifiably overthrown by the worthy Han, Sima Qian's own court. Finally, there is our own lens transforming the First Emperor into the focal point of operas and video games, of movies and theme parks. Why we choose to see the First Emperor today as epitomizing martial valor and cultural unity may tell us more about what we want out of the present rather than the past. All three lenses – the First Emperor's, Sima Qian's and our own – tell us what we want to remember or to have

remembered, not necessarily what the Qin story actually is. Like Li Si's own status, how we view the First Emperor "simply depends on where one locates oneself."

The First Emperor of Qin's self-projected image

Had there been no Sima Qian to leave behind his *Shi ji* or Historical records that tell us almost everything we know of the First Emperor, how might we have viewed this man based on the physical evidence alone? For example, would we see him and his ancestors as western outsiders relative to the dominant cultural sphere of the Zhou Dynasty, or would we see them as part of mainstream civilization? To be blunt, was China's first emperor Chinese?

If seen through Sima Qian's lens, the people of Qin historically derived their culture and morality from their western tribal neighbors; they were "in the same category of the Rong and Di," a classification clearly intended to be derogatory. Sima Qian has Li Si himself admitting to the backwardness of Qin culture when it comes to entertainments such as music. "Now striking earthenware jugs and banging jars, strumming the zither and smiting the thigh while singing 'Wu! Wu!' to delight the ear is truly the sound of Qin," the chief minister laments, thereby justifying the importation of eastern amusements and advisers.[3] Mere backwardness might not have been bothersome to the Central States had Qin been satisfied to remain quietly on the periphery, but the grand historiographer lamented that state's greater ambitions:

In this case the Qin customs were mixed up with those of the Rong and Di, favoring violence and cruelty over benevolence and propriety, and yet they occupied the position of a subordinate who would protect the royal house and set out the suburban sacrifice. The gentleman would be fearful of this.[4]

Furthermore, Qin's eastern neighbors would complain that Qin "possessed the mind of a tiger or wolf," failing to recognize ritual or propriety in its pursuit of violence.[5] This barbarian and even animal-like stereotype of Qin would persist within the marketplace of images over the next two millennia. For example, Tang poetry would highlight and even romanticize the First Emperor's persona as a fearsome warrior emerging from the pre-imperial Chinese version of the Wild West. As Li Bo (701-762) wrote:

The King of Qin swept through the six directions, his tiger gaze so courageous! Brandishing his sword, he parted the floating clouds, and the feudal lords all came westward.[6]

Following Li Bo's lead, Li He (791-817) also associated the First Emperor with a menacing tiger:

The King of Qin mounted his tiger and roamed the eight directions; The flashes from his sword illuminated the air, the heavens turning jade green.[7]

Both geographically and cosmologically, the tiger formally symbolized the West throughout imperial history. That is, the First Emperor was not only branded formidable and terrifying, he was also from beyond the cultural milieu of the Central States. Even in the 20th century, scholars still questioned the Qin ruling family's ethnicity and cultural identity.

Yet archeology tells a different story that would deny Qin's alien status. Qin royal tombs since at least the eighth century were by no means humble and backward, and they sometimes housed up to a hundred elaborate ritual bronze vessels. The types of vessels in their tombs and the structures of their above-ground ancestral halls are thought to heed Zhou sumptuary regulations, and the remnants of their capital cities indicate impressive palaces and temples. As Lothar von Falkenhausen summarized in 2004:

Whether or not the Qin rulers were originally members of the elite stratum of the Shang and Zhou core population, the overwhelming majority of currently observable cultural traits, as well as the pattern of their articulation, are in tune with Zhou practices, suggesting that 'Qin culture' should be defined as a regional phase of Zhou culture – distinctive and idiosyncratic in some respects, but still well within the Zhou fold.[8]

Even more recently, Gideon Shelach and Yuri Pines have also surveyed the archeological evidence and echo von Falkenhausen's conclusions:

Because most of the aspects we were able to analyze, such as the funerary practices of the elite, public buildings, and epigraphic sources, are associated with formal display in the public arena, we assume that the identity we 'see' is the one Qin rulers and elite wanted to project to themselves, to their subordinates and to the elite of other states. This public image is far from being the 'barbarous Other'; actually, Qin ruling elite displayed remarkable adherence to many aspects of the Western Zhou tradition, often observing it more closely than their peers from other Zhou states.[9]

Judging from the physical remains, Von Falkenhausen, Shelach and Pines all argue that the Qin culturally numbered among the Central States throughout much of its history and only in the 4th century B.C.E. pursued a different course after adopting major Legalist reforms that broke up the aristocracy and replaced its power with an increasingly deified ruler. Labels of barbarianism appear in Chinese texts only after this time. That is, instead of the alien Qin state gradually becoming more like the Central States, it actually began like the Central States and then separated itself from them.

In some cultural practices, the Qin even led the Central States such as in the general usage of *mingqi* 明器 or 'bright vessels,' burial imitations made of cheaper materials and often reduced in size. Instead of interring a functional bronze vessel, a full-size granary or indeed a living attendant, Qin mourners buried substitute forms that pointed to or indexed such utility, and gradually the other states followed Qin's lead. The reasons behind this major transition – whether economic frugality or changing religious conceptions of the invisible realm – remain unknown, but pre-imperial texts occasionally reference the possibility of mass producing these function-free alternatives. As the Legalist philosopher (and Li Si's classmate) Han Fei (c. 280-c. 233 B.C.E.) once noted, "Even if one possessed a million human figurines, he still wouldn't be considered strong ... [because] human figurines are ineffective in resisting the enemy." [10]

Han Fei considered such human figurines as useless in practical terms, but other early thinkers regarded them as worse than useless. According to the fourth century B.C.E. philosopher Mencius: "When Confucius said, 'Whoever created burial figurines for the first time should have no successors,' he was referring to those who made and used human representations." [11] Several Han sources refer to Confucius sighing when he gazed upon burial figurines, adding that "he saw the beginning and knew where it would end." [12] The end he foresaw was how this practice would lead to burying the living to accompany the dead. Commentators during the Han explain that Qin rulers had first used figurines in their burials, but this practice put them on the slippery slope to this later, more brutal practice as in the case of the Qin's Duke Mu having three worthies of his state buried with him at his death in 621 B.C.E. Commemorated by a famous Book of songs poem entitled *Huangniao* or "Yellow birds," this event is also said to have led to Confucian predictions of the Qin's early demise. That is, the proper sage kings left behind good institutions that caused a state to last forever, but the state of Qin would surely have no successors because it readily killed its best people. [13] The grand historiographer himself blamed Qin royalty in 678 B.C.E. for beginning the practice of burying the living to accompany the dead. [14]

Yet here again story has departed from history. Sima Qian and his Han colleagues viewed the whole of history as a steady decline from the loftiness of a distant Golden Age, the Qin being the bottom of the slope that the Han would endeavor to correct. This assumption on the nature of historical time was a lens that skewed their interpretation of objects such as burial figurines and eras such as the Qin. Specifically, archaeology reveals that at least since the Shang Dynasty – well before the reported Qin commencement of the practice – people were being executed or were committing suicide to escort their patrons or masters into the afterlife. In contrast, Qin and Han earthenware substitutes of human attendants and household things are generally regarded as a trend away from using real people and things, transforming the character of the burial "from that of a treasure chest to that of a model dwelling" as one modern scholar describes it. [15] The earliest known case of figurines being used in a Zhou period mortuary context is indeed in the state of Qin, namely a pair of crudely-hewn wooden figurines about 80 cm in height and dating to around 700 B.C.E. [16] The oldest known Qin terracotta figurines – a pair of ten-centimeter-tall statues found in a ceramics workshop – were excavated in 2006 and only date back to the beginning of the Warring States Period (481-221). [17] This increasing reliance upon substitutes is not to imply the rulers of the Qin state altogether shunned the burial of live attendants, but they carried out human sacrifices no more frequently than its eastern contemporaries and the practice did not evolve from burying human figurines. [18] The charge that Qin was becoming increasingly barbaric runs contrary to the archeological record.

Yet what of the charge concerning the First Emperor's general 'violence and cruelty' exemplified by his martial might? Was the hyperbolic language of Jia Yi (201-169 B.C.), quoted in Sima Qian's history, justified when he wrote:

The king of Qin ... waved his long whip and drove the contents of the cosmos before him, swallowing up the two Zhou [courts] and eliminating the feudal lords. He stepped into the position of highest honor and orchestrated the six directions around him; he brandished his staff and club to whip and bastinado all under heaven, his might causing everywhere within the four seas to quake.[19]

Our modern image of him is closely allied with the army of eight thousand life-size terracotta warriors discovered since 1974 near his grave mound in Shaanxi Province. The very nature of that army forces the viewer to shift orders of magnitude, not seeing individual infantrymen or particular archers but a structured military mass beyond any personalized scale. The vast scale of his underground terracotta army would seem to justify Jia Yi's awesome image, although why the army was created remains a mystery. Was it (as most people today conjecture) a dynamic fighting force to fend off his ghostly enemies in the afterlife? Or was it instead a static definition of his grandeur, an extension of his identity permanently embedded in the silent landscape?[20]

Whatever the answer, archaeology itself is an accidental science, meaning that we can't control what will be discovered or when, although the pace of that science is accelerating. The spate of road, bridge and factory building in the increasingly industrialized Shaanxi Province has uncovered more than fifty major new finds in recent years, including in 2006 a tomb that is thought to belong to the First Emperor's grandmother.[21] Furthermore while there are no immediate plans to excavate the First Emperor's own tomb, archeologists are indirectly probing its structure with ground penetrating radar, electrical resistance measurements and thousands of core samples, together generating a three dimensional schematic of the tomb mound's interior. Instead of pyramid-shaped, the tomb itself is now envisioned as like a square volcano with the football-field-sized tomb down in the crater and access corridors cutting through the east and west rims.[22] The core samples reveal high levels of mercury, perhaps confirming Sima Qian's own description of the structure that depicted a model of the Chinese cosmos wherein rivers of mercury flowed for eternity.[23]

While the tomb interior itself remains the stuff of conjecture, more and more is now known about the pits of grave goods around that tomb, and those pits are beginning to reveal that the First Emperor's grand martial image, while definitely significant, is only a partial picture.

- a) In 1999, excavators within the cemetery complex uncovered a pit containing a dozen life-sized acrobats, their shirt-less bodies realistically depicted with some muscular and heavy set whereas others were of slighter build.
- b) In 2000, they found civil officials wearing long jackets with knives and whetstones hanging from their belts which were tools for scraping off wooden and bamboo slats used in record keeping.
- c) In 2001, they exhumed more than two score highly detailed life-sized bronze water fowl including geese, ducks and storks from a single tunnel, and they uncovered fifteen life-sized terracotta musicians from an adjoining tunnel.[24]

Other finds include the remains of exotic animals and numerous horses among the building foundations and the many adjoining graves located within the walls of the First Emperor's tomb complex. When assessing how the First Emperor valued these newly excavated burial goods, we might consider their detail, their material composition and especially their proximity to the ruler's final resting place. While the terracotta warriors are numerous, they still stand a kilometer away from the tomb. The question we might ask ourselves when evaluating the First Emperor's image is how our picture of him based on the physical evidence alone might have been different had *these* pits been excavated in 1974 rather than those of the infantry and archers.

Yet the tomb complex as a whole was not necessarily a self-projected image; it was never intended to be exhumed, broadcasting his fame to later generations. On the contrary, Sima Qian tells us it was sealed up with its workers inside, and "vegetation and trees were planted to make it look like a hill." However, the First Emperor did leave behind other physical evidence explicitly intended to vaunt his reputation among the living, namely the seven or eight mountain inscriptions dedicated to him, written between 219 and 210 B.C.E., that record the merits of China's unifier, his standardization

schemes, his pity felt for the people, his righteousness, humanity and wisdom. These inscriptions in tetra syllabic verse, most of which are set down in the *Historical records* and translated by Dawson in this anthology,[25] not only extol his virtues but self-referentially note that they were made to proclaim and preserve the fact of these virtues. They served as banners of imperial merit, both praising territorial unity and even enhancing it by their very presence on the eastern mountains, far from the western capital of Xianyang. Explicitly inspired by the Confucian traditions from the state of Lu, these territorial markers balance his martial valor with his concern for the people:

Armed force exterminates the violent and rebellious, but civil power relieves the guiltless of their labours, and the masses all submit in their hearts.

The inscriptions are conscious of the need to eulogize both military strength and popular welfare. Instead of merely "eliminating the feudal lords" as Jia Yi described the First Emperor's might:

Abroad he taught the feudal lords, gloriously bestowing the blessings of culture, and spreading enlightenment by means of the principles of righteousness.

These inscriptions evince that his self-projected image was not intended to be that of a strict, heavily armed Legalist.

Thus he clarifies human affairs, and brings concord to father and son. With sagacity, wisdom, humaneness, and righteousness, he has made manifest all principles.... Farming is put first and non-essentials are abolished, and it is the black-headed people who are made wealthy.

If the First Emperor were telling his own story, it would not be that of a megalomaniac who "brandished his staff and club to whip and bastinado all under heaven."

However, the story's principal teller is the Han's Sima Qian, not the Qin's First Emperor, and while these various inscription texts are preserved in the former's *Historical records* – only a few characters of the actual mountain inscriptions survive today[26] – the grand historiographer frames each of them in such a way so that we might question the First Emperor's sincerity. As Martin Kern has pointed out, the emperor both pursued personal immortality but also dignified the dynastic principles of culture and righteousness, and Sima Qian may have intended to draw attention to the contradiction between these two messages:

The two notions of personal transcendence and dynastic permanence are mutually exclusive: the first is narrowed to the individual yet transcends the social realm; the second is within this realm yet not restricted to the individual ruler. When [Sima Qian] repeatedly places the account of the emperor's efforts to achieve personal transcendence immediately after the inscription texts, which stress dynastic continuity, he strives to play off the person against the institution of the emperor. The positive dynastic myth created by the First [Emperor] ... is contradicted by the negative personal myth worked out by the Han historian.[27]

That is, Sima Qian's framing technique may be intentionally skewing how we view the First Emperor's own assertions. Kern goes so far to speculate that the stories of the First Emperor's quest for immortality were Sima Qian's later insertions based upon local folklore.

To recapitulate, post-Qin writers including Sima Qian would have us see the First Emperor as alien, as cruel, as warlike and as ultimately fixated by the quest for immortality. Those writers may be right, but the physical evidence so far does not support those charges. That being the case, we ought to consider where Sima Qian would focus our attention and why he chose his particular focal point.

How Sima Qian sees the First Emperor

In 1989, an IMAX documentary entitled "First Emperor of China" dramatized the Qin ruler's unification and drew upon the imagery of the terracotta army. "Perhaps his empire has lasted for ten thousand generations after all," it concluded. "That would not be a surprise to Qin, the First Emperor." [28] In 2006, a documentary entitled "The First Emperor" on the Discovery Channel also dramatized the unification and highlighted some new finds at the tomb complex, and this documentary carried the

subtitle "The man who made China."^[29] Why didn't Sima Qian share the modern popular assessment of the First Emperor as a ten-thousand-generation empire builder or "the man who made China"?

Today we may perhaps see him as the founder of an imperial legacy and cultural sphere that has generally persisted in terms of language and territorial unity up to the present – putting the "Qin" in "China" – but Sima Qian was in a very different position. He was an official of the Han court that had defeated the fifteen-year Qin Dynasty less than a hundred years earlier, and that defeat had to be justified. Furthermore, the First Emperor had elevated himself well above his own past. "He does far more than imitate antiquity" brags one of his own inscriptions, and Sima Qian's appraisal of him ends, "The First Emperor himself thought that his achievements surpassed those of the Five Emperors [of antiquity], and his territory was more extensive than that of the Three Kings, so he felt embarrassed to be considered on par with them." From Sima Qian's perspective as the man who literally wrote the history on the three pre-Qin dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou, the First Emperor's self-projected image of a cosmic unifier who would outshine and outlast all previous courts may have seemed rather inflated.

Thus on one hand, the First Emperor did not live up to his own press in the eyes of Sima Qian. Yet on the other hand, the First Emperor was clearly not just another commoner. How might Sima Qian account for the emperor's meteoric rise and fall? Here we return to the larger theme of being in the right place at the right time, a theme fully developed in the biography of Li Si.

The Shangcai rats are said to have taught the future chief minister how circumstances shape behavior with timid rats hiding in the latrine and brave rats fearlessly living under the granary. The trick was to recognize opportunity and locate oneself in the right circumstances, the right place and time. Sima Qian has Li Si leaving his teacher with the words, "I have heard that if one gets an opportunity one should not be slow to seize it." For him, the right place was the up-and-coming western state of Qin, and the right time was just after the death of its king, leaving a young, malleable heir on the throne – the future First Emperor. He traveled to the Qin court and communicated this same message to the king:

The ordinary person misses his chances.... This is the one opportunity in 10,000 generations. If you are idle and do not press ahead, the feudal states will regain their strength and will combine with each other to form north-south alliances, and even if you had the fine qualities of the Yellow Emperor you would not be able to unify them.

According to Sima Qian, the young king took this message to heart, grabbed the opportunity, completed the empire and promoted Li Si as its chief minister.

Sometimes translated as 'tragic flaw,' hamartia is any disproportion in a character's being that leads to his or her downfall. Sima Qian seems to say that opportunism was Li Si's hamartia as later evident when the First Emperor himself dies and leaves the next young, malleable heir on the throne. This time the opportunist is not Li Si but the dreaded court eunuch Zhao Gao, and the future ruler isn't the First Emperor's rightful heir, Fu Su, but merely a younger brother whom Zhao Gao would use to replace him. (Fu Su was subsequently forced to commit suicide.) This time it was Li Si's turn to become the victim of ambitious opportunism. With Zhao Gao now playing Li Si's role, the eunuch pressures the younger brother to dragoon the chief minister into their own machinations:

"The time has come, the time has come!" said Zhao Gao. "If we delay, we shall not achieve our plans. There are abundant provisions and swift horses, and the only fear is that we shall be too late."

The problem with relying upon opportunism to establish power is that, once power is established, other opportunists will in turn seek out the right time and place to tear that power down. With Zhao Gao as the new political entrepreneur, Li Si meets his end by mistakenly siding with him. Opportunists do not keep their friends, and Zhao Gao ensured the tragic Li Si would eventually be tried and executed.^[30]

Here Sima Qian may be less historian and more writer as he thoroughly develops this theme of Qin opportunism.^[31] At the end of "The Annals of Qin," he includes an essay by Jia Yi that addresses the question of why the First Emperor was able to "brandish his staff and club to whip and bastinado all

under heaven," and his answer is exactly the same as the theme of the Li Si biography. The First Emperor was simply in the right place at the right time. The place was Qin itself, a state in Western China that was naturally fortified with surrounding mountains and rivers. From such a citadel, the twenty hereditary rulers of Qin could flex their muscles among the feudal lords. "Surely it wasn't because [Qin] produced worthies generation after generation?" Jia Yi rhetorically asks. "It was all because they occupied this vantage point." He even recounts how once during the Warring States Period the feudal lords rallied to attack Qin, but despite their skilled generals and wise rulers, they were frustrated by the steep slopes and narrow ravines. Qin coaxed their combined armies into its passes and then crushed them. Sima Qian himself would modify Jia Yi's thinking, arguing that it wasn't so much the west's mountainous terrain that gave Qin its advantage but something more geomantic. When explaining the Qin ascent to power, he affirms the cosmological generalization that "The east is where things arise; the west is where things come to fruition." For proof, he then lists all of history's great leaders who had first arisen in Western China.[32] Thus Jia Yi and Sima Qian both credited the Qin's location but for different reasons. Topologically or cosmologically, the Qin enjoyed the high ground.

As for being in the right time, the First Emperor found himself at the end of a long period of history without strong kings and without any hegemony who could lead the states in the name of the king. As Jia Yi summarizes:

In terms of their immediate past, it had become a long time since there had been a [true] king. Once the House of Zhou had fallen into insignificance and the five hegemony were gone, [the court's] commandments could not circulate throughout the land under heaven. Therefore the feudal lords ruled with might; the strong invaded the weak; and the many turned violent against the few. Weapons and armor were never laid down, while officials and commoners became weary and ragged. Once Qin occupied the southward-facing position [of the ruler's throne] and served as king for all under heaven, it meant that there was a son of heaven above. All of the masses longed for securing a peaceful life, and everyone set aside his preconceptions to look up to the sovereign.[33]

The war-weary Central States were dangerously susceptible to anyone who might bring them together, and given this opportunity, the First Emperor could have flourished by proving himself worthy of the people's adoration. Yet in Jia Yi's opinion, he was too greedy, short-sighted and self-consumed. That is, circumstance might locate a person in a potentially powerful position, but that person must also be right for the circumstances, must possess the virtuous integrity to fulfill his function, must work for the people's interests to win their backing. Otherwise he was merely playing the role of ruler rather than *being* a ruler; he was a lofty façade rather than a true sage king.

By adding Jia Yi's essay to the end of "The annals of Qin" and by replicating this message in his Li Si biography and elsewhere, Sima Qian makes the theme of opportunism in his overall Qin story rather explicit.[34] It is indeed a universal theme, perhaps most famously expressed by Shakespeare's Brutus: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries." [35] Yet the very fact that it is a *story* with a *universal theme* should begin to make the careful reader of these translations wary. When does the narrative eclipse the history? When does the storyline dictate selectivity of the facts? When does the message of an eye-catching rat anecdote take precedence over the subject's self-projected image?

Larger themes aside, it should also be noted that the grand historiographer is really a story teller; as Dawson rightly points out, Sima Qian is explaining 'traditions' (*zhuan* 傳) about people and not unfolding histories in the modern Western sense. For him, the traditions surrounding the First Emperor have all the markings of a supermarket checkout-counter tabloid:

- a) *Sex*. The First Emperor's patron, Lü Buwei, hires the well-endowed gigolo Lao ai to sleep with the future ruler's mother in order to cover up Lü Buwei's own illicit affair with her that led to no less than the First Emperor's birth, or so Sima Qian would have us believe. "Sometimes, to the strains of licentious music, he made Lao ai walk along with a wheel of tong-wood attached to his penis, and he ensured that the Queen Dowager heard about it so that she might be tempted."
- b) *Violence*. In a bid for thought control, the First Emperor burned the books that might reveal

alternatives to his own form of Legalist government, and as for the scholars who were still talking about the Golden Age, "although they tried to exonerate themselves, more than 460 who had infringed the prohibitions were all buried alive at [the capital] Xianyang, and the whole Empire was made to know about this to serve as a warning for the future."

c) *Mystery*. The emperor was called "the mysterious one," and no one ever knew in which of his many palaces he was residing. "And if anyone mentioned the place which he honoured with his presence as he moved about, he would be condemned to death."

d) *Intrigue*. After becoming the chief minister himself, the eunuch Zhao Gao attempts to drive the second Qin ruler mad and eventually succeeds in forcing him to commit suicide. The third ruler clearly recognized his danger. "Now supposing I present myself at the ancestral temple after I have fasted, this person intends to kill me, taking advantage of the fact that I am in the temple." Thus he plotted, "I will plead illness and not go, and the Chief Minister is bound to come here himself, and when he comes, we will kill him."

e) *And a tear-jerking final scene*. As Li Si and one of his sons support each other as they walk out to the place of their execution, the former chief minister in tears laments, "I would like to go with you again and take our tawny dog out through the eastern gate of Shangcai to chase the cunning hare, but how could that be done!"

There is a cinematic element in these stories, an element requiring that the wary reader consider the threshold between story and fact. The veracity of many such stories has rightfully been questioned,[36] and it is up to us to figure out as best as possible where the facts are clear and where we are really looking through a tinted lens.

How we see the First Emperor through Sima Qian

In the final scene of "The emperor's shadow," the movie's title is explained as the musician Gao Jianli lies dying on the palace steps. Employed by the emperor to write the Qin anthem, this would-be assassin predicts, "History will record that when you were installed I attacked you," to which the emperor responds, "Wrong: I write the history books, and they will say I kept you alive because you are my eternal shadow." [37] The audience well knows that Sima Qian indeed recorded the story of Gao Jianli's attempted assassination of the First Emperor in which Gao tried to hit him with a lead-filled zither; the audience clearly understands that it is in fact the emperor who is wrong. We are seeing through Sima Qian's lens and not through the lens of the emperor.

With Gao dead, the emperor then walks majestically down the palace steps, across the courtyard and up a massive altar to light the pre-imperial cinematic equivalent of the eternal flame while the Qin anthem is sung in the background. The anthem itself is in fact derived from the end of one of the mountain inscriptions the First Emperor had left behind and Sima Qian had recorded. The chorus sings:

The area within in the six directions is the August Emperor's land.

To the west it crosses the shifting sands, and in the south takes in the whole of the north-facing households.

In the east there is the eastern sea, and to the north it extends beyond Daxia.

Wherever human footsteps reach, there are none who are not his subjects.

His achievements surpass those of the Five Emperors, and his beneficence even extends to the cattle and horses.

No one does not receive the benefit of his virtue, and everyone is at peace in his dwelling-place. [38]

Here the screenwriters had to make a conscious choice. Out of the mountain inscriptions' combined thirteen hundred characters, they chose roughly fifty that stress the theme of absolute unity in several different ways. That is, the First Emperor had this inscription composed, Sima Qian framed it in his Historical records, and we apply our own filters through our selectivity, a selectivity that ignores other themes in these inscriptions such as his "civil power," his "principles of righteousness" and his promotion of farming before all other activities.

Chinese and Japanese plays and movies about the First Emperor date back to the 1950s, but his popular image is not static. In modern cinema, the closer the film stays to the Historical records, the more negative is the emperor's image. All films of course take great liberties with their storylines, particularly with the addition of prominent female characters, but those that cite the most legends end up casting the First Emperor in the worst light. On this end of the spectrum, "The emperor and the assassin" begins and ends with the emperor being reminded to carry out his ancestors' wishes to unite all under heaven, although by the finish we've learned to be skeptical with this ancestral call for unity because 1.) we've discovered along with the First Emperor that he is really the bastard son of Lü Buwei from the state of Zhao and not the descendant of the Qin rulers and 2.) just before the credits roll, we are reminded that this Qin vision of unity collapsed within fifteen years. More importantly, while the Qin sovereign began the movie as sincere and well intended in his drive toward unity, by the end he is portrayed as a tyrant as bad as any other contemporaneous ruler.[39]

On the other end of the spectrum are films such as "Hero" that have almost nothing to do with Sima Qian's history even though the First Emperor still serves as the focal point. One of the four famous assassins named Broken Sword has realized through his study of calligraphy that a thing endures when it returns to a state of simplicity. He understands that, in terms of the Central States, simplicity equates with a single absolute unity, and to dissuade one of his cohorts from killing the Qin ruler and stopping the unification, he instructs the second assassin by writing in the sand the two characters 'All under heaven' (*tianxia* 天下), a phrase denoting territorial totality since the first Confucian and Daoist classics. At the end of the film after this second assassin relates Broken Sword's lesson to the emperor himself, the emperor exclaims:

Who would have thought an assassin would understand me the best! Alone in my position, I have endured endless criticism, endless attempts on my life. No one has ever grasped what I have been trying to do. Even my own court regards me as a tyrant. And yet, Broken Sword, a man I barely knew, was able to see clearly what is truly in my heart.[40]

This unity-espousing emperor bears little resemblance to that portrayed in "The emperor and the assassin" or indeed in Sima Qian's *Historical records*.

Sitting somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum are films such as "The emperor's shadow" that very loosely draw upon a handful of stories found in Sima Qian – such as that of the musician Gao Jianli – but radically embellish the storyline to appeal to the modern audience. Here the main metaphor is of course music, and Gao is excited by the prospect of all musical notes becoming standardized via the unification. Furthermore, the different musical qualities of each state would become harmonized with one another as the Qin martial drums find common voice with the fine zither music of Yan. Portrayed as an aesthete, the emperor ultimately wants a singular imperial anthem because, along with unifying the currency, weights, measures and language, he also wants to unify the minds of his people.

Thus while all these films espouse unity, the image of the unifier depends upon how close the screenwriters kept to Sima Qian – the closer ones end up reflecting Sima Qian's dislike of the First Emperor – but images of "the man who made China" are by no means limited to the silver screen.

- a) On television in the 1980s, Asia Television Limited (Hong Kong) dramatized the First Emperor's life over the course of roughly fifty episodes.
- b) In books, treatment of the First Emperor ranges from the generally factual account of Jonathan Clements' *The First Emperor of China* to the bizarre speculations of Maurice Cotterell's *The terracotta warriors: The secret codes of the emperor's army* in which the warriors' hair skeins mimic the sun's magnetic field, their varied hand positions reveal secret numerical codes and the Braille-like rivets on their armor contain hidden messages.[41] One fictional work identifies the First Emperor as an alien exile stranded on earth, and another transforms his terracotta warriors into an army of robots.
- c) In computer games, one can explore the emperor's tomb in the adventure-puzzle game "Qin: Tomb of the Middle Kingdom,"[42] or one can build a global empire in his name via the strategy game "Sid Meier's 'Civilization IV'." [43] Even the emperor's rightful heir, Fu Su, becomes the protagonist in the action role-playing game "Prince of Qin." [44] Here instead of committing suicide, Fu Su ventures off to the capital to face down Zhao Gao and various possessed terracotta enemies.

d) On the stage, the New York Metropolitan Opera cast Plácido Domingo in the role of Tan Dun's "The First Emperor" in an extremely elaborate 2006 remake of "The Emperor's Shadow."

Amidst the proposals to build a theme park beside his tomb and the ubiquitous image of his netherworld army now even appearing on Coca-cola bottles, the First Emperor has achieved an unforeseen kind of immortality in the 21st century that ranges from the glitzy to the glamorous.

What is it about the First Emperor that has earned him this immortality today despite Sima Qian's dismissal of him as just being in the right place at the right time? Obviously his martial valor attracts movie-goers, gamers and adventure-loving readers, but an easily overlooked quality is the fact that he is only one man, a single individual rising above a distant, complex confusion of warring states with their divergent infrastructures. Chinese unification becomes easily reduced to a single emperor; the Qin Dynasty means a single man. Just as Broken Sword learned from calligraphy that a thing endures when it returns to a state of simplicity, the simplest image likewise survives when all extraneous, easily-forgotten detail is trimmed away. Had China's unification been achieved by a complex corporate endeavor or had there been a succession of powerful Qin emperors, the First Emperor would have become lost in the crowd.

If the early historians are to be believed, the Qin rulers themselves are responsible for this image as aloof soloists. As seen above, there were Confucian predictions for Qin's early demise because it did not leave behind enduring institutions but instead had its best people killed by burying them with the departed rulers. Sima Qian would continue to emphasize this notion of elevating the single law-giver at the expense of government institutions in his own descriptions of the First Emperor. Once the First Emperor united the empire, he used the term *zhen* 朕, 'the mysterious one' or 'the secluded one,' thereby highlighting his solitary position. Furthermore, he adopted the formal title of Qin Shihuang Di 秦始皇帝 that not only deified him – *huangdi* 皇帝 can be rendered 'august god' – but also caused all subsequent emperors to be numbered relative to himself as he alone was the shi 始 or 'First.' Yet this soloist image was not in name only, and Sima Qian records one complaint against the First Emperor as follows:

The business of the Empire, no matter whether trivial or important, is all decided by the Supreme One, who goes so far as to have the documents weighed, so that he cannot rest until he had dealt with the right number of documents for that day and night.

("The Emperor's Shadow" accentuates this image of the First Emperor as massive pallets of documents are carried back and forth behind the workaholic emperor.) Other similar complaints include the emperor's choice not to establish his relatives to oversee the more distant kingdoms on his behalf, thus radically breaking from tradition. Instead, everything funneled through himself alone. Just as his empire became unified into one state, he himself became explicitly singular in name and action. As singular, he evolved into an easily preserved simple symbol within the communal memory of the next two millennia.

Thus the First Emperor as a symbol of unity possessed the potential to survive, but why is he enjoying particular popularity in the 21st century? First, Chinese economic development can be directly linked with a general upsurge in historical awareness. As Kishore Mahbubani contends:

As more and more Asians lift their lives up from the level of mere survival, they have the economic freedom to think, reflect, and rediscover their heritage. There is a growing consciousness that their societies, like those in the West, have a rich social, cultural, and philosophical legacy that they can call upon as they develop their own modern and advanced societies. The richness and depth of the Indian and Chinese civilizations, to name just two, have long been acknowledged by Western scholars.... What we are witnessing today is only the bare beginning of a major cultural rediscovery. The pride that Asians are taking in their culture is clear and palpable.[45]

Economic development not only fuels interest in the past, it literally uncovers more of that past in which to be interested as road, dam and factory construction reveals more and more archeology sites. Yet the speed of this development should not be overemphasized. In 2006, it still cost a tenth of a person's average monthly income in Shaanxi just to visit the terracotta warriors.[46]

Second, the particular popularity of the First Emperor as a symbol is perhaps related to an even grander form of perceived unity developing in the 21st century. Once also considered an outsider and even provincial in the eyes of the predominant cultural sphere to its east, China is self-conscious of its growing importance on an increasingly ecumenical world stage. The question naturally arises as to how this unity will evolve and whether the global village's oldest, largest and fastest developing resident will become its mayor. 'All under heaven' now means 'all under heaven.'

Conclusion

The translations that follow may not record the facts surrounding the Qin unification because we are looking at them through the lenses ground and polished first by the First Emperor, second by Sima Qian and third by our own selectivity that is in part based upon what we want to see. Fictions may at times eclipse facts, but does that devalue what you are about to read in these translations? The answer to that question is definitely not.

Here fictions can be more important than facts because it is these fictions that shaped history subsequent to the Qin. Sima Qian's opportunistic tiger-hearted First Emperor became a watchword and yardstick by which to measure later rulers. Qin's unifier transformed into a lesson plan of what to do and what not to do, making the grand historiographer's work as much prescription as it was description. Thus for a better understanding of post-Qin history, we must read Sima Qian's version of what happened.

Furthermore, fictions tend to last longer than facts. As is evident from the above, archeology continues to change what we know about the Qin, and some of the greatest archeological endeavors – including the excavation of the First Emperor's tomb itself – still remain in the future. Thus, the self-projected image of "The man who made China" will carry on evolving as the known facts change. Likewise the third lens, namely our own selectivity, will not remain static as our needs that inform selectivity also change. In terms of our seeing the First Emperor, "it simply depends on where one locates oneself," and where we will choose to locate ourselves in the future – whether in the global village or on a provincial periphery – may refocus our lens on the First Emperor.

Because the facts we know and choose to know will continue to transform whereas Sima Qian's mixture of fact and fiction will not, prefaces such as this one should be published with a perforation on one side so they can be discarded after a few years, but the translations that follow will endure.

[1] A.F.P. Hulswé, *Remnants of Ch'in law* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 162-163.

[2] With regard to Sima Qian's attitude toward the First Emperor, Grant Hardy has written that the Historical records consistently praises the institutions and personages condemned by the First Emperor, and Hardy concludes:

It is useful to think of Sima Qian as the anti-First Emperor, the opposite who would later despoil the kingdom. Strange as it may seem, Sima Qian wrote a history whose intent was to undo, point by point, the ideological constructs of the First Emperor.

See Hardy, *Worlds of bronze and bamboo: Sima Qian's conquest of history* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 184. While Hardy's point is somewhat extreme and interpretive, Sima Qian's strong disapproval of the First Emperor is indeed evident.

[3] *Shi ji*, 87.2543-2544.

[4] *Shi ji*, 15.685. For other similar associations between Qin and its tribal neighbors, see *Shi ji*, 5.202 and 68.2234.

[5] *Shi ji*, 44.1857.

[6] Yu Xianhao 郁賢皓, *Li Bai xuanji 李白選集* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1990), 461-464 ("Gu feng" 古風 III).

[7] Ye Congqi 葉蔥奇, *Li He shi ji 李賀詩集* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1959), 53-55 ("Qin wang yinjiu" 秦王飲酒).

[8] Von Falkenhausen, "Mortuary behavior in pre-imperial Qin: A religious interpretation," *Religion and Chinese society* vol. 1, John Lagerwey, ed. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004), 155.

Among the "distinctive and idiosyncratic" practices that differentiate Qin mortuary tradition are flexed burials (i.e. the body, on its side, has its knees drawn upward toward the upper body) and westward tomb orientations that are probably Central Asian customs.

[9] Shelach and Pines, "Secondary state formation and the development of local identity: Change and continuity in the state of Qin (770-221 B.C.)," in *Archaeology of Asia*, Miriam T. Stark, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 216.

[10] Han Feizi xinjiaozhu, 1139 ("Xian xue" 顯學). The term here for 'human figurine' is xiangren 象人. Li Si and Han Fei were both students of Xunzi, and Sima Qian has Li Si quoting from "Master Han" in his biography.

[11] Mengzi zhengyi, 63 ("Liang Hui wang" 梁惠王).

[12] For examples, see Huainan honglie jijie, 339 ("Miu cheng" 繆稱), similarly 542 ("Shuo shan" 說山); Wenzhi shuzheng, 324 ("Wei ming" 微明); ;Li ji jijie, 265 ("Tan Gong" 檀弓).

[13] Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhu, 546-549 (Wen 文 2).

[14] Shi ji, 5.183.

[15] Jessica Rawson, *Ancient China: Art and archaeology* (London: Book Club Associates, 1980), 204.

[16] Von Falkenhausen, "Mortuary behavior in pre-imperial Qin: A religious interpretation," 129-130.

[17] People's Daily Online (August 15, 2006), originally reported by Xinhua News Agency.

[18] Von Falkenhausen, "Mortuary behavior in pre-imperial Qin: A religious interpretation," 129.

[19] Shi ji, 6.280.

[20] I tend to favor the latter perspective and see the First Emperor's tomb complex in a manner similar to how Emily Vermeule interprets the objects found in Mycenaean graves:

[T]he sword and dagger, the gemstone, the smith's tools or the priest's implements complete a man's identity underground, more surely than they help him in future spiritual life.... One cannot understand the "meaning" of such gifts, because in a sense they are meaningless, or mean more than one thing, and are not quite in the realm of rational gesture.

See Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 56.

[21] Petra Kolonko, "Am Grab der Kaiser-Ahnen," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (1 June 2006), 10.

[22] Marc Grellert, Manfred Koob and Mieke Pfarr, "Eine dreidimensionale Computerrekonstruktion der Kaisergräber von Xi'an," in *Xi'an: Kaiserliche Macht im Jenseits* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2006), 131-134.

[23] Lion Television in early 2006 aired a two-hour document entitled "First emperor: The man who made China" on the Discovery Channel that summarizes some of the recent work on the tomb. While it reviews new evidence about the tomb, this documentary also presented as fact much fanciful speculation. This speculation ranged from claims that the First Emperor was an illegitimate child – a claim dating at least to Sima Qian's time – to charges that the First Emperor became a madman who lost his grip on reality in his last years due to mercury poisoning.

[24] For images of these various finds, see Xu Weimin 徐衛民, *Dixia junchen: Qin bingma yong keng Kaogu da faxian 地下軍陳：秦兵馬俑坑考古大發現* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2002); *War and peace: Treasures of the Qin and Han dynasties* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of History, 2002) and *Xi'an: Kaiserliche Macht im Jenseits*.

[25] Shi ji, 6.242-262.

[26] For photographs of the stone at Langya Mountain along the East China Sea, see National museum of Chinese history, *A journey into China's antiquity*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Morning glory publishers, 1997), 73. The First Emperor's inscriptions vaunt the unity he brought to China but are often not explicit as to the identity of the particular individual who brought about this unity. The Second Generation Emperor ordered that secondary inscriptions accompany the first, clarifying that it was indeed his father who was the subject of the first inscriptions. The remaining Langya inscription is mostly this secondary inscription, the text of which also appearing in Sima Qian's Historical records.

[27] Martin Kern, *The stele inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and ritual in early Chinese imperial representation* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2000), 160.

[28] National film board of Canada, Canadian museum of civilization and China Xi'an film studio, "First emperor of China" (1989).

[29] "The First Emperor: The man who made China" (Lion television, 2006) aired on the Discovery Channel on 29 January 2006.

[30] This notion of seizing the right moment frequently appears in Li Si's biography, and it is when Li Si seized the wrong moment that his fate is sealed. He wanted to remonstrate with the First Emperor's wayward successor, and Zhao Gao maliciously orchestrated the worst possible opportunity to meet. "Thereupon Zhao Gao waited until the precise moment when Second Generation was feasting and

enjoying himself, with women in his presence, when he sent someone to report to the Chief Minister: 'The Supreme One is at this moment free, and he can have business submitted to him.'" Li Si unintentionally interrupted the banquet, and after furiously pointing out it was the wrong moment for such affairs, the angry emperor then became susceptible to Zhao Gao's subsequent slanders of the chief minister.

[31] This theme of opportunism runs deep throughout Li Si's biography, and Sima Qian may even be highlighting the hypocrisy of Li Si, the First Emperor and others by contending that their proposed Legalism was anti-opportunist. Legalism was a strict adherence to clearly demarcated laws and required immediate punishments for anyone who would infringe upon those laws or indeed for anyone who might know about the infringement. Theoretically, even tossing ashes out onto the roadway merited an automatic heavy punishment. If the Qin legalist machine were fully in place, it would leave nothing to chance, nothing to opportunism and would thereby "frustrate the activities of ardent men of action," according to the opportunist Li Si himself.

[32] Shi ji, 15.685-686.

[33] Shi ji, 6.283.

[34] Dawson's translations do not include the Jia Yi essay which is unfortunate because Sima Qian's choice to include it probably speaks to his attitude toward the Qin in general, particularly as Jia Yi's theme of opportunism is replicated in Sima Qian's biographies, as noted above. For English translations of Jia Yi's essay, the reader is directed to Burton Watson's translation of Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 74-83, or William H. Nienhauser's edition entitled The grand scribe's records: The basic annals of pre-Han China by Ssu-ma Ch'ien (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 163-169.

[35] William Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar," IV.iii.

[36] For six examples of questionable interpolations in the Historical records, see Derk Bodde, "The state and empire of Ch'in," The Cambridge History of China vol. 1, eds. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 94-98.

[37] "The emperor's shadow" (Fox Lorber Films, 1999).

[38] Shi ji, 6.245.

[39] "The emperor and the assassin" (Sony Pictures Classics, 2000).

[40] "Hero" (Miramax, 2002).

[41] Jonathan Clements, The First Emperor of China (Phoenix Mill, England: Sutton Publishing, 2006); Maurice Cotterell, The terracotta warriors: The secret codes of the emperor's army (Rochester, VT: Bear & Company, 2004).

[42] "Qin: Tomb of the Middle Kingdom" (SouthPeak Interactive, 1995).

[43] "Sid Meier's Civilization IV" (Firaxis Games, 2005). The author of this preface is proud to report that, in his role as First Emperor, he won the space race but sadly had to wipe out the British, Roman and Aztec empires in the process.

[44] "Prince of Qin" (Strategy First, 2002). The author of this preface regrets to report that, in his role as Fu Su, he never made it very far south of the Great Wall before he was eaten by a "tiger-fish."

[45] Kishore Mahbubani, Can Asians think? Understanding the divide between East and West (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 2002), 26-27.

[46] Kolonko, "Am Grab der Kaiser-Ahnen," 10.

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