The Grandeur of Empires

**EARLY IMPERIAL CHINA (221 BCE – 924 CE)**

The history of imperial China, lasting more than two thousand years, has been amply documented in officially sponsored dynastic chronicles, supplemented by classic literature and yeshi — unofficial histories — that provide valuable information on particular states, cultures, peoples, customs, and events. These records, however, devote little attention to art and aesthetics, and tracing that history has largely fallen to archaeology. While in many cases, the historical records have pointed excavators in specific directions or have assisted in identifying the owners of particular tombs, the texts are more often silent on the wonders of recently discovered imperial art. Sima Qian's Shi ji (Records of the historian), for example, contains a detailed account of the First Emperor’s mausoleum, and places it near the present-day city of Xi’an. Archaeological surveys located the necropolis, but even Sima Qian’s extravagant description of the splendors of the mausoleum did not prepare archaeologists for an astonishing discovery a few hundred meters from the tomb: the First Emperor’s underground army, comprising more than seven thousand life-size terra-cotta statues of officers, footsoldiers, archers, charioteers, and horses (cats. 123–128).

The grandeur of the underground army mirrors the ambitions and accomplishments of the First Emperor, who united squabbling, disparate kingdoms in 221 BCE to create China’s first centralized government. The unification of China during his reign and its consolidation during the ensuing Han dynasty resulted in a cultural and artistic synthesis, manifested by stylistic similarities that often surmount great distances. The Han prince Liu Sheng, buried at Mangcheng in the northern province of Hebei, and the King of Nanyue, buried at Xianggang in the southern province of Guangdong — separated by 3,500 kilometers as the crow flies — were encased in remarkably similar armorlike shrouds composed of thousand of pieces of jade (compare cats. 123 and 139).

Cultural exchange and assimilation, facilitated by diplomacy and trade, opened China to the outside world, and Chinese art of the imperial era provides tangible evidence of these contacts. The most celebrated of the trade routes — the Silk Road — extended from continental China to Western Asia (and ultimately to Europe), but there were other routes to other regions as well. Trade through the South China Sea — the “Ocean Silk Road” — linked the mainland to southern and western Asia, and the influences of these regions are embodied in burial artifacts from the King of Nanyue’s tomb (see cats. 138–150). A second route, which connected the present-day southwestern regions of Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Tibet, and Guangxi to southeastern Asia and India, was an additional avenue for social and artistic contacts. Buddhism, which originated in the Indian subcontinent, was embraced by the Chinese (prior to the twentieth century, it was in fact the only “foreign” religion that truly took root throughout China—the objects discovered in the crypt of the Famen Monastery pagoda (cats. 160–168) testify to its profound influence. Buddhist imagery — in particular, painted stone sculptures of stuccoized Buddhas and bodhisattvas discovered at Qingzhou in Shandong province (the farthest reaches...
of eastern China) (cats. 151–153) — is evidence of the extent to which “non-Chinese” religion and aesthetics informed the art of imperial China.

In the early stages, Chinese art and civilization evolved from indigenous cultures; with the development of trade and social contracts, however, elements of foreign cultures became increasingly apparent. Gold and silver objects from the Tang dynasty (cats. 154–166) epitomize the integration of Chinese and foreign styles. The art of the Tang dynasty, one of the most prosperous and liberal periods in Chinese history, shows that exotica was cherished for its own sake: a bronze ewer (cat. 169), so highly valued that it was enshrined in a reliquary cache along with the sacred relics of the Buddha, was probably exported from India; glass dishes (cat. 168) found in another reliquary deposit likely came from Iran. During the Tang era many foreigners lived, studied, or worked in China; ceramic funeral figures depicting native Chinese women and clearly non-Chinese men engaging in sport or hunting (cat. 170) portray a climate of cultural exchange and coexistence.

While it provides vivid evidence of a nation engaged in the world that lay outside of its vast borders, the art of imperial China nonetheless reflects the evolution of an indigenous culture. The Han scripts on a bronze hu vessel (cat. 132) and on the seal of “Emperor Wen” (cat. 138), for example, trace their origins back to prehistoric pictographs (cat. 23), mediated by Shang oracle-bone inscriptions (cats. 55–56), Western Zhou bronze inscriptions (cats. 77–85), and inscribed Eastern Zhou bronze tallies (cat. 117) and bamboo slips (cat. 119). Tang representations of the human form (cats. 170–175) hearken back to a prehistoric terra-cotta torso (cat. 21), to bronze statues, masks, and heads of the Shang period (cats. 65–71), to the life-size terra-cotta warriors
of the First Emperor's army (cats. 123 – 127), and to a miniature jade dancer (cat. 146). The mate-
rial culture of imperial China reflects technological advancements that extended the range of
artistic media, but even here continuities link China of the Common Era to its prehistoric an-
tecedents. To be sure, particular materials are associated with the artifacts of specific periods:
prehistoric China had a rich tradition of pottery vessels, the Three Dynasties favored bronze
and lacquer, while gold, silver, and porcelain were creatively mingled with the art of imperial
China. We can nonetheless trace a continuity that stretches from the Hongshan culture
through the entirety of imperial China in the use of jade to create some of the most cherished
— indeed, revered — works of art.

The art of imperial China embodies a distinctively humanistic, even modern, sensibility.
Art that was primarily sacred, religious, ritualistic, and imaginary in its early stages, is trans-
formed here into a secular, realistic, practical, and ultimately human aesthetic. Two examples
show the extent to which the aesthetic had changed. A chime of bronze bells from the Chu
culture (cat. 91) served as an element of ritual and as a mark of social status; an orchestra de-
picted on a Tang marble relief (cat. 175), by contrast, points to a view of the afterlife that
resounds with enjoyment. xv

1 An extraordinary jade rhyton (not in this exhibition) from
the King of Nanyue's tomb, reflects Central and Western
Asian influence; horn-shaped cups were not traditionally
made in China or its dependencies. See Guangzhou 1991,
2202 and color pl. 15.
2 Wang Binghua argues that there were two continental
trading routes: the grassland route and the oasis route,
which is the better-known Silk Road. See Wang 1993. For
the southwestern silk road, see Jiang 1995.
3 In the twentieth century, however, Marxism was transmit-
ted to China from Europe and was embraced by the
socialist society.
THE TERRA-COTTA ARMY NEAR THE FIRST EMPEROR'S MAUSOLEUM, LINTONG, SHAANXI PROVINCE

The terra-cotta army of the first Chinese emperor, Shihuangdi (r. 246 – 210 BCE), while undeniably a dramatic find, constitutes but one element of an enormous and complex necropolis, the construction of which reportedly began with the emperor's accession to the throne. Its massive scale sets it apart from other burials, but the Lintong necropolis nonetheless represents a continuation of more than five centuries of Qin funerary structures and beliefs, and its design integrated elements of non-Qin funerary structures.²

At the center of the necropolis, enclosed within two sets of walls lies an as-yet unexcavated underground tomb chamber, marked by an enormous tumulus. According to a famous passage in Sima Qian's (c. 145 – 86 BCE) Shi ji (Records of the historian) the tomb chamber was built as a microcosm of the universe, with waterways made of mercury and depictions of celestial constellations and terrestrial topography. Excavated components of the Lintong necropolis, however, indicate that the microcosm extended beyond the tomb itself. Nearly one hundred pits, containing hundreds of horse skeletons and kneeling terra-cotta figures of grooms, were discovered to the east of the compound's outer wall; inscriptions identify these pits as "imperial stables." Nineteen tombs located near the tumulus have yielded human remains, possibly those of officials and retainers to accompany the emperor in death. Two half-size models of chariots, each pulled by a team of four horses and manned by a driver — all carefully rendered in bronze — were buried to the west of the tumulus within the inner wall of the necropolis; they were probably intended as transport for the emperor in the afterlife.³ In the same pit, large quantities of the organic remains of hay were found, suggesting that these structures represented depots. Between the inner and the outer wall on the west side of the tumulus, a cluster of small pits contained clay models and the remains of various birds and animals; the pits may have been intended to represent the emperor's parks and forests.

The terra-cotta army was found in three pits — underground wooden structures — located about 1.25 kilometers east of the tumulus. Pit 1 contained approximately six thousand warriors and horses, as well as several chariots, in battle array in eleven parallel trenches. Pit 2 contained some fourteen hundred figures — cavalrymen, infantry, and horses — as well as ninety wooden chariots. Pit 3 contained sixty-eight soldiers, one chariot, and four horses. A fourth pit, much shallower than the other structures, was empty. The contents of the first three pits were looted and the structures burned, apparently by the army of Xiang Yu, soon after their completion.

Various theories have been proposed regarding the configuration of the underground vaults. A standard view maintains that Pit 1 represents the right (or main) imperial army, Pit 2 the left army, Pit 3 the command, and the unfinished fourth pit the central army.⁴ Another theory suggests that the pits themselves were not constructed merely as an ersatz army, but rather as a staging of typical situations in which the Qin army might be engaged. Pit 1 thus depicts the deployment of the Qin imperial guard in battle formation; Pit 2 represents the army's barracks; Pit 3 depicts a scene at military headquarters; Pit 4 — the "unfinished pit" — is the ground of battle.⁵ Under this reading, the group of pits might have represented the Qin
forces symbolically defending the imperial city against invaders or, alternatively, mounting an aggressive campaign of conquest. The terra-cotta army should in any event be viewed as a complex representation—both a substitute for a "real army" and a theatrical enactment.

The sculptures have often been characterized as masterpieces of naturalistic art. However, far from being simply realistic, the significance of the figures lies in the interplay of the stylized rendering of human body with the close transcription of details of body parts and outfits, such as belts and belt hooks, boots, armor, and coiffures. The effect of verisimilitude is further enhanced by veristic painting and the real bronze weapons which the figures carried. These components literally transcribed the appearance of each figure's attributes. Together with postures and gestures, which spatially define and therefore differentiate the function of individual figures within the entire configuration, they represent the specific rank and function of each soldier.6

The First Emperor's terra-cotta army constitutes the first known instance of the massive deployment of tomb figures in early China. The use of figurines and models in the mortuary context developed during the Middle and Late Eastern Zhou periods, particularly within the territory of Qin state. Small anthropomorphic clay figures have been unearthed from several Qin tombs that predate the Lintong necropolis; pottery models of granaries have been found in late sixth-century BCE Qin tombs.7 A separate tradition of wooden tomb figures developed toward the end of the Eastern Zhou period in another area with distinct cultural traits—the state of Chu.8 Such figures and models and other miniature or nonfunctional objects are collectively termed mingqi ("spirit articles"), and they have been traditionally viewed as substitutes for the animals and human victims sacrificed at burials, as well as surrogates for objects of value placed in the tombs.9 Research based on recent archaeological finds, however, suggests that these objects in fact constitute an integral part of the strategy to re-create—in the tomb—the earthly dwelling of the deceased. This concept of a tomb as a living environment modeled on the mundane world gained currency during the Late Eastern Zhou period; it may have originated within the territory of the Qin state and evolved more quickly in this region than in the Zhou territories.10

The replication of the living world in tombs and the widespread use of mingqi models and figures to furnish and populate that environment have been interpreted by some scholars as reflecting a new religious trend that emphasized the separation of the dead from the living,11 or the material manifestation of new religious ideas motivated by structural changes in Late Eastern Zhou society.12 The Lintong necropolis suggests a slightly different possibility: it made sense for the designer, whoever he was, to use different modes of representation and to employ elements with varying degrees of verisimilitude. It contained both "real" things—sacrificed humans and animals, actual weapons, hay—that were, properly speaking, presented, and elements such as the terra-cotta army that were re-presented. The goal of the ritual specialists and artisans responsible for the First Emperor's posthumous abode was not to illustrate or to follow
Excavation photographs of the terra-cotta army pits.
Top left and bottom: Pit 1; top right: Pit 2.
some precise metaphysical idea but to produce a self-sustaining version of the world—a fictive and efficacious reality. The practical constraints of such image-making must have played a decisive role in the creation of the First Emperor’s necropolis. For how, after all, does one reproduce “all the myriad waterways,” or the requisite personnel and matériel of an entire army? How does one supervise the countless logistic, technological, and aesthetic problems implicated in re-creating the world?

Supported by the unparalleled power and economic resources of the state and using all available representational modes and strategies, the First Emperor’s necropolis could have been created as a comprehensive replica of the real world. Chinese tombs and burials signified the power and status of their builders and occupants: during the Bronze Age, the ability to sacrifice the lives of retainers, soldiers, concubines, or animals, or to put precious articles into the tomb constituted a sign of power; by the Qin period, the ability to have them depicted—possessing the aesthetic, cognitive, technological, and economic resources to reproduce the world—became a more efficient way of asserting power and status.

The terra-cotta army and the Lintong necropolis show that complex representation is not a result or fulfillment of some preconceived religious doctrine, nor a mirror of Qin ideology. Rather, the most consistent ideas regarding the afterlife are to be found in the tombs and monuments themselves, where current metaphysical and religious conceptions intersected with personal wishes and anxieties and were transformed by the practical constraints and conditions of making the afterlife a material reality.¹⁴
Terra-cotta figure of a high-ranking officer

Height 192 (75 1/2)
Qin Dynasty, third century BCE (c. 210)
From Pit 1 at Xiyangcun, Lintong, Shaanxi Province
Qin Terra-cotta Museum, Lintong, Shaanxi Province

The height, clothing, and headgear of this officer all indicate his high rank. He wears a double-layered tunic under a fish-scale armor apron, and a rectangular cap tied with ribbons under the chin. His sleeves are half-rolled and his hands are folded across his belly, his left index finger raised as if resting on a long sword. One of seven similar figures found in Pits 1 and 2, it was positioned directly behind one of the chariots in the second column of Pit 1, as if riding into battle. The seven figures have been identified as generals (jiangjun), but it is more likely that they represent officers (gongseng) of the eighth of the Qin army's twenty grades. The highest-ranking commanders of the Qin forces are not represented in the terra-cotta army.²

The production of the figures that compose the army was a large-scale, workshop operation that involved standardized, prefabricated components.³ The torsos were modeled from the bottom up using coiled strips of coarse clay. Heads and hands were usually made in composite molds (as were individual elements such as ears) and assembled to form the figure, which was then covered with a fine clay slip; separately cast details (such as belt hooks) were then attached to the slip-coated figure. Armor and physiognomy were detailed by low-relief carving and incised lines. The figures were fired (at temperatures of around 1000 degrees Celsius) and subsequently painted with pigments suspended in a lacquer base. Only faint traces of the original color remain, but it is clear that the craftsmen sought to reproduce the colors of the armor and garments worn by specific ranks of warriors.⁴

Creating the terra-cotta army must have posed formidable technological and logistical challenges, and it stands as a monument to administrative efficiency as much as an artistic achievement.
Cross section of one of the pits, showing wood supports and the disposition of the figures. After Shaanxi 1988b, 44, fig. 19.

No written record regarding its production has survived, but simply procuring and transporting the large volume of requisite raw materials and supervising the manufacture must have involved meticulous planning and coordination — although administrative efficiency was characteristic of Qin society. The use of prefabricated (often molded) components or modules, which rationalized production to a great degree, can be viewed as another instance of the pervasive standardization efforts that characterized other areas of Qin society.5

The human body had played a relatively minor role in Bronze Age Chinese art. Creating the tomb as a microcosm, however, provided an impetus for the development of figural art. While there are precedents for the use of anthropomorphic clay models in Qin tombs prior to the First Emperor’s burial, the Qin sculptures represent a quantum leap from these small, stylistically rather simple works.6

The First Emperor’s terra-cotta army was emulated on a more modest scale in Han mortuary art. In several terra-cotta armies excavated from second-century Western Han tombs (the twenty-five hundred soldiers from Yangjiawan near Xi’an, or figures from pits around the tomb of the Han emperor Jingdi), the monumentality of the Qin army figures gives way to a more organic, three-dimensional style.7

1 Excavated in 1976; reported: Shaanxi 1988b, 151–53; 2: fgs. 44–45:
2 Several authors have sought to associate particular figures with specific Qin military ranks recorded in contemporary texts. The most exhaustive treatment is provided by Wang (1994a, 168–208), who suggests that the eighth rank is the highest rank represented in the First Emperor’s terra-cotta army. See also Chen and Lu 1985.
3 Regarding mass-production with respect to Chinese artistic practices, see Ledderose 1992.
5 Bodee (1986, 52–64) discusses Qin efforts at standardization.
7 For the Yangjiawan terra-cotta army, see Shaanxi 1977; for the figures from the Jingdi mausoleum, see Mou 1992; for the relationship between the Qin terra-cotta figures and their Han antecedents, see Wang 1994a, 450–471.