



A large jade pendant with stylised owl motif, a burial accessory from the Spring and Autumn Period. Owl-shaped jade pendant; collection of Fengxiang County Museum

# Immortal Remains

## The Enduring Legacy of China's First Emperor

By Rachel Choo

The Chinese have a saying that one should not waste good iron for nails, nor good men for soldiers. The latter were not often considered men of honour but rather killers, rapists and looters – little better than uniformed bandits. Certainly the Chinese have had ample reason for over 3,000 years to be wary of armed men in uniform. The overthrow of China's old ruling houses has traditionally been accompanied by the onslaught of armies that frequently showed little regard for civilians.

This June, however, some very special Chinese soldiers will get a hero's welcome in Singapore. The famed terracotta warriors from the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi, are to be the centrepiece of the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) exhibition, *Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor and His Legacy*. The exhibit will contain over 100 artefacts including weapons, armour, pottery, jade, silver, gold and bronze ritual vessels, ornaments and human and animal figures from 12 museums in the People's Republic of China.

Qin Shi Huangdi (the title means the First Emperor of Qin) lived from the mid-third century to 210 BCE. He ended the chaos of China's Warring States Period, during which the seven states which had emerged through the decline of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty battled for supremacy. The strongest was the state of Qin (pronounced with a rising intonation as if to say "Chin?"), the ancestral domain of the man who would capitalise on his predecessors' efforts to conquer the other six states and unite them into an empire.

From the mid-second to late first millennia BCE, Chinese kings and their families had already ruled the territories that the first emperor would incorporate into his empire. The Qin Empire was, however, different from the earlier

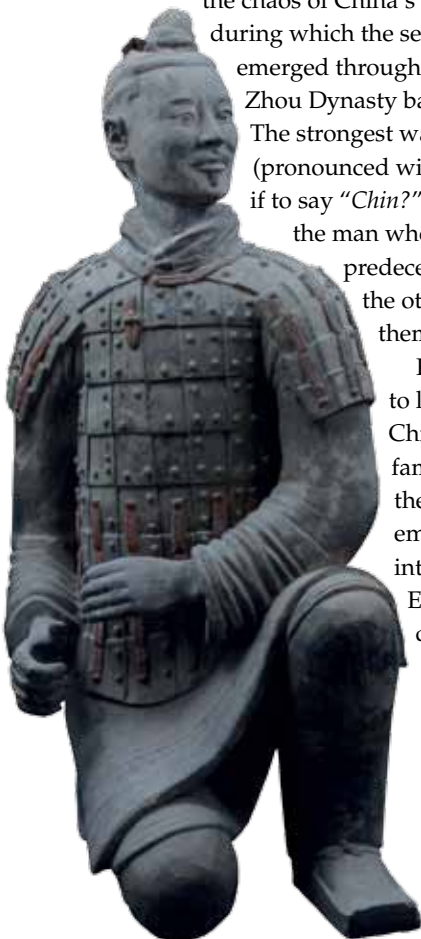
Shang and Zhou Kingdoms. It covered a geographical range two to three times larger than any earlier Chinese state, and unification of this area meant that China (or *Zhongguo* as it is known in Mandarin) could now be considered a nation rather than merely an informal grouping of culturally related – if politically divided – principalities. This first Chinese empire forged the country's template for sovereignty; from then on, any land subject to China's cultural or political influence that bordered the empire was fair game for takeover.

The formation of this vast empire was matched by new ideas of greatness and monumentality. Before the first emperor, the country's rulers had already instituted major projects such as water management, but it was Qin Shi Huang who initiated the first truly enormous works, a practice enthusiastically embraced by subsequent dynasties. His huge palaces at Xianyang (modern Xi'an) and his Great Wall were the precursors of the later Grand Canal, Forbidden City, the Ming Dynasty Great Wall and even the modern Three Gorges Dam.

The grand endeavour closest to the emperor's heart, however, was his gigantic mausoleum, which covers an estimated 56 sq. km. Located near the modern city of Xi'an in China's western Shaanxi province, the tomb was discovered in 1974 by farmers digging a well in their fields. Besides the emperor's body, it contained both flesh-and-blood as well as fabricated companions for the afterlife. Figures of bureaucrats, entertainers, servants, animals, ritual items and of course, thousands of life-sized terracotta warriors were included to protect, entertain, serve and be ruled by the tomb's owner in the great hereafter.

Upon their discovery, these extraordinary finds revealed a previously unimagined aspect of Qin culture. Before the excavation, the Qin Dynasty was thought to have been austere, militaristic and probably incapable of producing anything deserving the name of art. It was remembered for its brutal enforcement of a rigid uniformity of thought, allegedly burying alive over 400 dissenting Confucian scholars and burning books challenging its harsh legalist philosophy, with only texts of practical use being spared. And yet, each terracotta warrior of that vast underground army was made with meticulous attention to the details of individual faces, hairstyles, clothing and armour.

In a country with over 3,000 years of history, everything has to be understood in the context of what came before and what came after. The discoveries in the Qin emperor's mausoleum are no exception. The Qin Empire was made possible by over 600 years of building and consolidation by the pre-imperial Qin state. We know about the Qin Dynasty era largely through artefacts found in the tombs



Defender for the afterlife – an armoured kneeling archer from the First Emperor's tomb. Collection of Emperor Qin Shihuang Mausoleum Museum, Xi'an; photo by Fang Guowei

**The exhibition 'Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor and His Legacy' will be on display at the Asian Civilisations Museum from 25 June to 16 October 2011.**

of its elites. This is partly because tomb finds are usually the only surviving material remains of the time. The Spring and Autumn Period (from 8th to 5th C. BCE) was an age which set great store by the provision of objects for rituals associated with death and burial in order to secure the afterlife. During the subsequent Warring States Period, artistic technologies such as bronze casting were improved amid numerous opportunities for court patronage in the competing states.

The ACM exhibition will reflect the influence of these earlier periods. On show will be many fine items of gold and jade jewellery and ornaments, weapons and musical instruments, and zoomorphic, ritual and other objects from tombs in the pre-imperial state of Qin of both the Spring-Autumn and Warring States Periods.

The Qin Dynasty inaugurated the early imperial period in Chinese history by unifying and centralizing China's government and infrastructure as well as instituting a common currency and a standardised written script. However, the dynasty lasted only about 15 years. It was overthrown in 206 BCE by Liu Bang, founder of the Han Dynasty. The Han Dynasty, which lasted until 220 CE, is considered a golden age of imperial expansion, economic prosperity, intellectual reawakening and religious receptivity – in many ways both a complement and foil to the Qin Dynasty. Qin autocracy and the Han reaction against it and the debate between these two contrasting models of government was first played out in these early dynasties. In time they were reconciled into a model of government described by some as an 'iron fist in a velvet glove' – tremendous centralized power cloaked in genteel Confucian philosophy. It is a system of power which China has upheld for most of the past 2,000 years.

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*A ritual vessel from the bronze age Warring States period, from which the Qin Empire had sprung. Chu-styled vessel; collection of Shangluo City Museum*



*A bronze crane with a fish in its beak. Animal models were included in the First Emperor's tomb to complete an afterlife universe over which he would rule. Collection of Emperor Qin Shihuang Mausoleum Museum, Xi'an; photo by Fang Guowei*



*A Han Dynasty terracotta pig. Models of animals domesticated for food were handy for farming and consumption in the afterlife. Collection of Han Yangling Museum*

In acknowledgement of the Qin influence on the Han Dynasty, the exhibition will include a section on Han burial goods. The landscape around Xi'an is dotted with grand Han tombs – some containing Han-style terracotta soldiers – suggesting that the later dynasty took a leaf or two out of the book of Qin. Visitors can view these Han terracotta soldiers, as well as Han pottery and other human and animal figures, bronze and stone ritual objects – and quite a few other curious and delightful surprises besides, in what promises to be an exciting exhibition about the legacy of a man who still inspires debate and wonderment more than 2,000 years after his death.

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**Rachel Choo** is co-heading the *Terracotta Warriors* exhibition research group. She is an ACM docent and has a longstanding interest in Chinese history, politics and culture.

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