

# Qin shi huang in society and modern media history essay



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Scholars debate over Qin Shi Huang Di's legacy that he left after his reign 2, 200 years ago. To the western public, he has been perceived as a disillusioned, power-hungry, tyrannical man whose lust for immortality he sought brought about the buried legacy of perfect, baked clay models dating from before the birth of Christ. In the last 50 years or so, his history has been re-analyzed into a colossus of a historical figure in Chinese history almost equivalent to Alexander the Great and Caesar rolled into one. By ruthless force of will, he bound warring states together and knit them into a tightly centralized system, standardized China's language and law, and built major structures such as the early Great Wall of China. Even the style of his coinage, round with a square-shaped hole in the middle, lasted until the dawn of Communist rule. Few other rulers have so shaped the sinews of their country. However, these feats pale in comparison to his greatest legacy, the establishment of a bureaucracy that would survive for more than 2, 000 and would be " the largest in the world, staffed by educated men and reaching to the lowest peasant in the land" (Wood). The view held by the western public reflects the darker aspects of his life. Despite his massive reforms in the economic and political systems of China, he also garnered the reputation of being an oppressive and borderline psychotic ruler, the most commonly cited example being the Great Wall of China, which was built with hundreds of thousands of conscripted workers in such a small timeframe that thousands were overworked to their deaths. (Many of these workers are believed to be actually buried within the Great Wall) Perhaps one of the greatest stories that personified these psychotic and tyrannical tendencies is one regarding his obsession with immortality. In an attempt to obtain the fabled elixir of life, he dispatched thousands of people to Penglai mountain. When none

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returned (because failure meant execution), he sent another expedition consisting of three men, only to be offered the feeble excuse that they had been frightened off by a gigantic fish. He duly set off to shoot it with a repeating crossbow, though despite his attempts, the elixir continued to elude him. His next attempt, immortality pills, consisting of mercury, which his alchemists assured would confer the same power that the substance displayed in absorbing gold, would prove fatal. The dynasty he had promised to last for thousands of years would barely struggle through a decade.

The root of China's current alteration of the perception of Qin Shi Huang Di roots from the similarities derived between Qin Shi Huang Di and Mao Ze Dong. Both were inspirational leaders who united China in their times of need. Qin Shi Huang Di united China following a 200 year period, known as the Warring States period, creating a political entity recognizable as the China we know today. Similarly, Mao Ze Dong united a war-torn China following the collapse Qing dynasty, managing to create stability in a land which was used as World War II's battlefield. However, the similarities do not end there. Qin Shi Huang Di was also know for his massive public works projects, often recruiting hundreds of thousands of workers at the expense of tens of thousands of lives yto complete great engineering marvels such as the Great Wall of China, the Lingqu Canal, and the Mausoleum of the First Emperor. Mao Ze Dong similarly ordered huge public works projects, such as dams, canals and other infrastructure projects, which millions of peasants and prisoners had been forced to toil on and in many cases die for. However, these projects often proved useless as they had been built without the input of trained engineers, whom Mao had rejected on ideological grounds. Other

policies set out during Mao's reign parallel Qin Shi Huang Di's actions during his reign. For example, both were extremely well known for their persecution of intellectuals in their empires that Mao would later be quoted as bragging: " He [Qin Shi Huang Di] buried 460 scholars alive; we have buried 46, 000 scholars alive." As Tun Dun, the musical composer for *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*, would put it, "" Qin Shi Huang Di was pretty much like Mao Zedong. He unified China. He made the language, made the measuring system, made the currency." With these similarities, it would come as no surprise that the Communist party, just as it has protected the reputation of Mao in order to defend both the legitimacy of his leadership and the foundation of the Communist government in China, would protect the reputation of Qin Shi Huang Di in a similar manner lest Mao be compared to Qin Shi Huang Di in a historical sense.

The Communist government has commonly censored foreign films, a practice almost completely alien to Americans. Instead of a " free speech" clause in their equivalent Constitution, the Communist government is allowed completely control over the media world of China. Especially with foreign films, the Communist government uses a list of criteria to screen the film from the following attributes:

Criticism against social order and government

Disruption on the unity of various ethnicities of the state

Endanger the sovereignty and territorial of the state.

Endanger security of the state; harm the public reputation and interests of the state.

Disrupt the unity of various nationalities of the state

Divulge a state secret

Advocate inappropriate sexual relationship; violate moral standard, or obscene content; having strong visual stimulation; tempt people degeneration

Advocate superstitious belief; offense against social order

Advocate violence; appeal people despise dignity of law; tempt crime; disrupt public security

If failing to meet any of these requirements, the movie is typically banned from the country. While the Communist government has long had a stronghold on foreign films and has gained a strong reputation recently for its restriction of foreign films, domestic films face even closer scrutiny. While foreign movies must be screened by censors, domestic productions must submit their plots and final product for approval. The examination period for reviewing in the first step is 15 days, examine fees are based on government policy in different case. In second step, producers get response from censorship department for content should be modified. Last, after modification made accordingly, production will be sent back to review by censorship department. If content has been modified accordingly, the film will then be certified to be broadcasted. In addition, if filmmakers who are

not agree with the examination, they are allowed to apply for reviewing no later than 30 days of the first time submission.

Because of this strict screening process, many of China's prominent filmmakers have run afoul of the censors (such as some of the films mentioned below). But the communist government's ability to block unwanted material has withered, thanks to the Internet and a black market that made copies of unauthorized movies available. Hit films often generate tens of thousands of black-market copies, and are generally widely available on pirated DVDs.

As the government controls much of the major media within China today, Qin Shi Huang Di's legacy and current perception is altered based on his portrayal in modern media outlets. Filmography is perhaps the simplest way to reach major audiences. A modern marvel that can instantly reach millions of viewers at once in just days, it comes to no surprise that Qin Shi Huang's greatest appearances in modern media are in movies. The most recent movie to portray Qin Shi Huang Di or reference him would be *The Mummy Returns: The Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*. However, this movie will not be discussed due to the fact that it is an entirely Western-Based movie and thus, involving no direct influence from the Chinese government and Chinese directors. It is interesting to note that in this movie, many of Emperor Han's "signature" aspects such as terra cotta warriors or obsession with immortality are based off of Qin Shi Huang Di. *The Myth*, the next most recent mainstream Chinese movie to feature Qin Shi Huang Di is indeed directed by a Chinese (Hong Kong) director. However, Qin Shi Huang Di similarly plays a barely supporting role (his persona not even being seen once in the entire <https://assignbuster.com/qin-shi-huang-in-society-and-modern-media-history-essay/>

film). However, his obsession with immortality and his large mausoleum are referenced as well.

Finally, *Hero*, the third most recent movie to feature Qin Shi Huang Di actually features the emperor on a rather important level. On at least three levels, “*The Hero*” violated the “consensus” of today’s Chinese audience. First, ordinary people’s common judgment, which has lasted for thousands of years, that Qin Shi Huang Di was a tyrant, and that tyrants should be condemned. Although the aspiration for a benevolent ruler implied in this view is still a longing under autocratic rule, the condemnation of tyranny is universal. However, the movie “*Hero*” is intended to reverse the public view towards Qin Shi Huang Di, and goes against the sentiment of the audience. “*Hero*” is based on a stance that reverses the judgment towards tyrants. It takes the perspective not of the majority but of a tiny group of people.

Second, ordinary people’s general view of martial arts heroes. You have to pay a price for the so-called “wandering in the wilderness”, but by paying the price you free your heart and spirit, and realize the desire to be in charge of your own life. People’s general yearning for martial arts and acceptance of it are based on this longing for freedom. But in “*Hero*,” when Can Jian and Wu Ming give up their idea of assassinating Qin Shi Huang Di, ostensibly it marks a transcendence of their personal hatred. However, in reality it coincides with the emperor’s personal ambition, that “the world under heaven” is the world ruled by the “son of heaven,” and that consideration of the benefits of “the world under heaven” is the consideration for the benefit of the “son of heaven.” The film makes no secret of this view, which is

expressed from the mouth of Qin Shi Huang Di: I didn’t expect that “the one  
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who knows me best,” “ the soul mate” who “ echoes my wants and mind” is the one “ wandering the wilderness”. Realistically speaking, this movie captures the heart of propaganda towards the legitimacy of Qin Shi Huang Di. Even going so far as to accuse his own officials of calling him a “ tyrant”, Qin Shi Huang Di (the actor) fails to even touch upon the actual actions that made him a tyrant (the building of the Great Wall of China, etc). Instead, he spews out highly theoretical talks of unification, idealized to the point of unreality. Perhaps the greatest indication of this movie aligning its ideals towards Communist ideals is the last translation of Tian Xia, another name for China. Of all the translations of such a name, the most common and literal one being under the heavens, the producers of Hero chose to instead translate it as “ Our land”, to justify Qin Shi Huang Di’s conquests. “ Our Land”, the idea that the land is shared by the common person and that it was Qin Shi Huang Di’s responsibility to unify China for the sole sake of protecting the common person would have been alien in Ancient Chinese society. The consolidation of power into a single family has been the entire basis of Chinese history (dynasties). It has not been since the start of the Communist rule where the common person’s ideals and welfare was truly looked out for by the government. Thus, in summary, Hero was a Communist ideal spouting movie sugar coated in the goodness of martial-arts fight scenes and dramatic and unpredictable plot twists.

When the Map is Unrolled, the Dagger is Revealed.” This is a famous figure of speech in China, which fits Chen Kaige’s latest epic drama perfectly both in story and meaning. It means that only at the end we see people’s real intentions and their true nature. The figure of Ying Zheng (Qin Shi Huang Di)



assumes gigantic proportions in this near-Shakespearean tragedy. He's painted as a fair and just man at the beginning, but he eventually submits to his thirst for power and the dogma of his ancestral mandate. Thanks to pressure and paranoia, Ying Zheng betrays his initial intentions - which were to unite all of China peacefully and lead it to years of prosperity. That's what he initially promises. However, like most politicians, the promises become dead air when he finally reaches his goals. One of Ying Zheng's concubines and the love of his life, Lady Zhao, functions as a counterpoint to the Emperor. A fictional character, she's used by the director to give voice to the masses. She represents people who want humanity to prevail over bloodletting and power-thirsty dictators. These are the people who weep over the senseless loss of life, and want a peaceful solution instead. The film is structured into five acts which lay the groundwork for the final part in which the reluctant assassin Jing Ke plots to kill Ying Zheng. The intricate story might be difficult to follow for someone who's not used to Chinese history, but the script flows well and the characters are developed so effectively that such apparent shortcomings don't really matter at the end. Chen Kaige could have decided to focus on a history lesson, but instead he's more interested in three central characters (Ying Zheng, Lady Zhao and Jing Ke) and their motives. He's able to create a psychological profile for Ying Zheng, who at first seems in control, but ultimately is the cause of his own undoing. His attempts to bring peace and prosperity to his kin conflict with the danger of holding too much power in one's hands. He can't handle the situation and the consequences are terrible. And guess who pays the price? The same people he was trying to "help". Interestingly enough, this movie does not attempt to draw as many parallels between Qin Shi Huang Di and <https://assignbuster.com/qin-shi-huang-in-society-and-modern-media-history-essay/>

Mao Ze Dong. Dealing with less of his political actions throughout his reign and more with his relationship with his friends and family around him, it is hard to say whether or not the censors in China even bothered to red flag the film. Considering the difficulty of processing this film into anti-Communist propaganda rather a criticism of Qin Shi Huang Di's rule in general, this movie could have easily slipped under the scope of Chinese censors.

"The Emperor's Shadow" is an extravagant take on the life and times of Qin Shi Huang Di. Through the friendly relationship between a musician and the Emperor and lavish sets ("billed as the most expensive film ever shot in China"), it paints an epic picture of Qin Shi Huang Di's rise to power.

Realistically speaking, taking out the historical information and the luxurious backgrounds, the movie is really nothing more than the altogether familiar (and relatable) story of two childhood-best-of-friends from different backgrounds and their ideological differences that separate the two. Though he may be portrayed as a ruthless conquerer, he produces some redemptive qualities that would draw him into a more positive light as a character. Qin Shi Huang Di's portrayal is almost identical to the one mentioned in hero as he is portrayed "as being concerned with the symbols and identity of the new Qin Dynasty, and the way that these new symbols will come to represent all of China, and be accepted by the people". In 1996, it did brisk business at the box office during a brief release in five major Chinese cities; but then was banned for censorship reasons. The idea that art could not be controlled by the media (a practice indeed supported during the reign of Qin Shi Huang Di) was also well supported Mao as well. This idea of restricting media in order to control the intellectual in China for both time periods,

however, rang a negative light towards the censors, and in a swift act of irony, red flagged and consequently banned the film. However, it should be of note that the film was generally well received by the Western public. For whatever reason, it served as an actual inspiration for the musical “ The First Emperor”. However, again, this was indeed a Western production and thus prospective on Qin Shi Huang Di’s rule, which is not relevant to the thesis of this paper.

Based upon the few movies portraying Qin Shi Huang Di, it can concluded that the Chinese government has altered Qin Shi Huang Di’s perception in modern Chinese culture as a benevolent (if not heroic) figure that directly conflicts the nature of his past in order to draw parallels to and support the Communist government due to many of the similarities between the Chinese Communist party Mao and the emperor. Movies that either seem to conflict with Qin Shi Huang Di’s ideals that coincide with Communist party agenda seem to become red flagged by Chinese censors while films that only portray Qin Shi Huang Di in a less than favorable light receive no punishment whatsoever. However, it definitely must be noted that this analysis of the role of the Communist government in Qin Shi Huang Di’s is limited in several ways, the first being that the oldest movie with Qin Shi Huang Di was created in the late 90s. However, this only man point further to the similarities of Qin Shi Huang Di and Mao as it would seem to indicate that Qin Shi Huang Di was too sensitive of a subject to work upon until the advent of the 90s where the Chinese government relatively relaxed their censorship laws. Finally, it must be noted that only three movies were referenced for this analysis due to the

fact that there have only been three Chinese-made movies that have featured Qin Shi Huang Di ever created.