

China's terra-cotta army



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In March of 1974, while drilling a well, a work brigade of farmers discovered a subterranean chamber nearby the royal tomb of Qin Shi Huangdi, the first Emperor of China (Encyclopedia Britannica). The superstitious old women of the village believed that the digging would disturb the Earth God. Therefore, due to these spiritual beliefs, they did not report the discovery right away. Eventually, archeologists came to Xi'an in droves to study and extend the digs. This led to the uncovering of three vast pits to the east of the burial tomb.

In these pits, chariots, weapons and over 7, 000 terracotta soldiers and horses were unearthed (Roberts p. 25). After extensive research, historians and archeologists concluded these terracotta soldiers were buried there to protect Emperor Qin (pronounced Chin) and his underground kingdom in the afterlife. Ying Zheng was born in 260 BC. He was a member of the Qin Dynasty and ascended to the throne in 247 BC at the age of thirteen. The Qin rule became the most powerful during the Warring States Period, a hectic, brutal, and unsafe time in Chinese history where the seven states were at constant war with one another.

After conquering the rival states, King Zheng, ruling over a now unified state he called China, renamed himself Qin Shi Huangdi, the First Emperor (Man p. 28). Under Emperor Qin's rule, China, which is a derivative of his name, was ruled by strict law. He was a cruel ruler who readily killed or banished those who opposed him or his ideology. He is notorious for burning virtually all the books that remained from previous regimes and burnt over 460 alchemists because they failed to provide him a life prolonging elixir.

After many attempts on his life were made, including one from his own mother, Emperor Qin ruled with a schizophrenic mind (China's First Emperor). " It was perhaps his insatiable desire for security in an uncertain world that drove him on. " (Man p. 28) Emperor Qin undertook many projects in his organization of China. He is accredited for connecting existing farming walls to defend his kingdom from outside barbarians creating the first adaptation of the Great Wall of China. He constructed an extensive network of roads and canals for travel and trade throughout his empire.

Perhaps the two key changes that ensured the unity of Chinese culture were the standardization of currency and the written script (China's First Emperor). One of his projects was the construction of his mausoleum at Mount Li, which took 700,000 workers an estimated 11 years to finish. It is believed to contain a model of his empire and includes rivers of mercury and booby traps, as well as many buried treasures and sacrificial objects. It is speculated that in order to guard its secrets, the workers who constructed it were also entombed. This is said to be one of the last examples of mass human sacrifice in Chinese history.

Although the location of the emperor's tomb has long been known, it has yet to be excavated (Roberts p. 25). Another of his projects, which was unknown until the 1974 discovery, was the three vast pits containing the terracotta army. The first pit measures 252 yards long, 68 yards wide and 16 feet deep. There are over 6,000 terracotta warriors and horses, of which 1,000 have been unearthed. The soldiers were assembled from separately kiln-fired sections of terracotta; the lower halves of the bodies are made of solid terracotta clay and the upper halves are hollow.

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The warriors vary in height ranging from 5'8" to 6 1/2' tall. They were given individually detailed faces which were believed to be based on the faces of the Emperor's actual soldiers. However, it has since been proved that all the soldiers are based on ten basic designs (Travel China Guide). The figures are assembled into a well-organized battle array composed of the infantry and cavalry. The vanguard bowmen include 210 foot soldiers divided equally into three lines. The cavalry and war chariot follow close in line, forming the main body of the battle formation.

The foot soldiers are alternated with the chariots drawn by horses, lined into 38 columns. On both the northern and southern sides of the war formation stand 180 warriors which serve as flank guards. The rear guards are on the western end, with two lines facing east and another facing west. Some soldiers are armed with battle robe, and some are equipped with armor. The war formation is elaborately set in a line and is poised as if prepared for battle at any moment (Travel China Guide). The second pit is the most spectacular of the three.

The combat formations are more complex, and the units of armed soldiers are more complete. There are over 80 war chariots, about 1,300 terracotta warriors and horses, and thousands of bronze weapons. It is here where the terracotta general, the kneeling archer and the warrior with a saddled horse were discovered (Travel China Guide). The third pit is believed by experts to be the command center for all the groups in the other two pits. The unearthed artifacts include 68 terracotta warriors, four horses and one chariot all arranged in a unique layout.

Upon entering the pit, there is a passageway where the 68 warrior figures stand orderly along the two sides (Travel China Guide). During the excavation and repair work on the terracotta warrior figures, experts discovered many names carved or printed on the bodies of these figures. So far 87 different names have been recognized. They were found hidden in such places as the hips or under the arms of the terracotta warrior statues. Further research has shown that these 87 people were the master craftsmen, and that these craftsmen had assistants of their own.

In all, it is estimated that about a thousand people participated in the making of the terracotta warriors (Travel China Guide). The compound was declared a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site in 1987. After more than two decades of work on the site, archaeologists in the 1990's anticipated that it would take many more years, perhaps several generations, to unearth the remainder of the tomb complex. In 1978, the former French president, Jacques Chirac visited the Museum of Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses.

He called the Qin warriors " the eighth wonder of the world". From then on, the Qin terracotta warriors became famous all over the world. In the years since its discovery, the tomb of the terracotta warriors has become one of China's most important tourist destinations, drawing thousands of visitors to Xi'an each year (Encyclopedia Britannica). Emperor Qin's terracotta army is a remarkable demonstration of the First Emperor's ambition to rule, not only in his lifetime but also in his afterlife.