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Gifts of Rivers and Resources: Art and Power in Ancient Asia
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China First Unifies: Art of Qin and Han Periods

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Introduction

In 221 BCE, upon unifying the realm, the soon-to-be First Emperor of Qin (r. 221-210 BCE) issued an order to the Chancellor and the Grand Master of the Imperial Scribes, in which he lists all the grievances the State of Qin had suffered at the hands of the other six, before he went on to describe his own campaign: “As such an insignificant person, I raised troops to punish the felonious and the unruly. With the help of the divine spirits in our ancestral temple, all these six kings have been brought to account for their crimes and the world is generally *pacified*.” The self-effacing rhetoric notwithstanding, the purpose of the order was to have his ministers coin a new designation to account for the new political reality: an unprecedented territory now reined by a singular ruler. What ensued was a series of ritual and institutional reforms that laid the foundation for the next two millennia of the imperial history in China. This lecture samples several large state projects under the early empires of the Qin (221-206 BCE) and Han (202 BCE-220 CE), in which the political (and cosmological) visions of the First Emperor and his successors, contenders, and usurpers translated into compelling artistic and architectural expressions. We will end our discussion, however, with a few cases of resistance, when the juggernaut of imperial power met its equal in the resolve of the lowly individual.

List of Major Works

The “Gaonu” Standard Weight, Cast Bronze, Dated 244 BCE, Excavated at Gaoyao Village, Outside Xi’an, Shaanxi Province.

Qin Imperial Inscription Carved on a Stele on Mount Yi, Dated 219 BCE; From a stele Recarved in 933 CE.

The Mausoleum of the First Emperor

- Tomb Mound
- Officials Pit
- Stone Armor Pit
- “Acrobats” Pit

- Birds and Musicians Pit
- Terracotta Army Pits 1-3
- Bronze Horses and Chariots Pit

The Bright Hall, Chang'an, Built under the Wang Mang Interregnum (9-23 CE)

The Bright Hall, Luoyang, Built under Emperor Guangwu of Han (r. 25-57 CE)

The Wu Family Shrine, Jiexiang, Shandong Province, mid-2nd century CE

Further Reading

Portal, Jane, and Hiromi Kinoshita. *The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Powers, Martin Joseph. *Art and Political Expression in Early China*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.

Sun, Zhixin *et al.* *Age of Empires: Art of the Qin and Han Dynasties*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2017.

The Grand Scribe's Records / by Ssu-Ma Ch'ien; William H. Nienhauser, Jr., Editor; Tsai-Fa Cheng ... [et Al.], Translators. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Virtual Wu Liang Shrine Remastered (2.0)

<https://barbierilow.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/?p=841>