

BOOK REVIEWS

The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China

By Anthony J. Barbieri-Low. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2022. xii + 337 pp. \$65.00 (cloth)

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This monograph by Professor Barbieri-Low, like its predecessors, offers brilliant insights into the history of China, and into ways of doing history, by finding a useful perspective that was hitherto ignored. Here he traces evolving depictions of the First Emperor from the earliest literary account (written a century after his death) down to his modern incorporation into films and video games. Thus, this is not a critical biography, nor a historical study of the Qin, but rather an examination of how people over the millennia, and recently across the globe, have imagined the man who first unified continental East Asia and established there the model for imperial government. By examining the “lenses” through which people have regarded the First Emperor, Barbieri-Low offers insights into changing ideas and attitudes over the centuries, thus showing how a character is “good to think” with in writing history.

The book has four parts. The first traces evolving literary-historical portrayals, from the first account by Sima Qian through twentieth-century versions. Sima Qian formulated what Barbieri-Low describes as the “tragic” vision of the First Emperor as a man of great accomplishments who was ultimately destroyed by his own ruthlessness, his refusal to listen to others, and the self-obsession that culminated in his vain search for immortality. He then traces the development of the moralistic account (which he calls “Confucian”), which focuses entirely on his lack of the basic virtues (*ren* and *yi*) and his reliance on the violence of warfare and punishments. This moralist discourse dominated accounts of the First Emperor until the late Qing, with a few exceptions such as Liu Zongyuan (773–819) who in his “Fengjian lun” celebrated Qin’s creation of the first imperial institutions, while criticizing its governance, and Li Zhi (1507–1602), who argued that the First Emperor was one of the greatest of rulers, despite occasional stupid mistakes.

At the end of the imperial era such writers as Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, and Xiao Yishan began to praise Qin and the First Emperor for fulfilling the drive towards unification, creating a strong state based on law, and acting as a great “hero” in history. This pattern of seeing the First Emperor as a model for creating a strong nation-state to resist European colonialism was developed further in the twentieth century, when Marxists and others devoted to the ideal of historical progress embraced Qin as a state that defended the rising, progressive classes, against the reactionary conservatism

of the Confucians. Under the Communist Party, the First Emperor was celebrated in even loftier terms as a “heroic nation builder” and a historical model for Mao Zedong.

The second part turns away from the First Emperor, focusing instead on the government of Qin as exemplified in newly discovered documents. The first of its two chapters studies “voices of the Qin state,” including “The Instructions of Governor Teng” (where a newly appointed governor in a recently conquered area of Chu instructs his subordinates on the importance of obeying laws and avoiding being corrupted by Chu customs), a “Language Reform Board” found at Liye that details some reforms of usage and script, the “Instructions of Governor Li” (also found at Liye, and dating to seven years after that of Governor Teng) which shows the Qin government extracting products (such as armor and weapons) and resources (such as feathers) from the territory, and the “Inaugural Edict of the Second Emperor,” where this hitherto maligned ruler expresses a deep concern for commoners.

The second chapter, which records “voices of the people,” features testimony from legal cases, including an appeal from a musician accused of stealing cattle, a confession by an unemployed veteran of robbing a woman in the market, and a self-denunciation by a woman for inducing a miscarriage in a brawl. Even more striking are two personal letters home written by scribal assistants, letters that provide detailed evidence on the material conditions and economic needs of men in the Qin army, as well as aspects of family relations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the hymn entitled “Our Countrymen [referring to Chu] Who Died before their Time” (“Guo shang,” preserved in the *Chu ci*). This song of deceased warriors who endured as “heroes among the shades” is a product of the court, and not an expression of the “people’s voice,” but its inclusion is justified by Barbieri-Low because it was fear of such deceased enemy heroes that led to the creation of the terracotta army defending the First Emperor’s tomb.

The third part traces the evolution of accounts of the First Emperor’s attempted assassination by Jing Ke, stories of the usurper Zhao Gao, and accounts of the burning of the books and execution of the “Confucian” scholars. In addition to demonstrating the fluidity of these accounts across time, this part also makes skillful use of visual depictions of such stories, beginning with Han tombs, then illustrations from literary accounts in the Yuan and Ming dynasties, and ending with depictions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including “comics,” movies (such as “Hero” and “The Emperor and the Assassin”), and video games. Accounts of visual images from the imperial era also appear in the first chapter of part four, including stories of “raising the tripods,” Meng Jiangnü bringing down the Great Wall, and the First Emperor sending expeditions to search for immortals.

However, this final part is largely devoted to depictions of the First Emperor and his tomb in television, movies, and video games. While textual accounts, notably Sima Qian’s description of the tomb, are discussed, the most striking recurrent features are the deviations from texts, including archaeological reports, and the imaginative visions (appearing even in some “archaeological” writings) of the tomb’s appearance. Depictions of the tomb in *National Geographic*, movies, and video games (including one featuring Indiana Jones) show a tomb that is larger than any realistic possibility, in a better state of preservation, and including terracotta warriors (who certainly would not have figured in the tomb proper). This last point shows how the terracotta warriors have become fundamental to the world’s image of the First Emperor, indeed swallowing up his life and career. A final aspect of modern mythologizing is the conflation of the First Emperor’s search for immortality with the later usage of mercury and

other chemicals, which led to imperial deaths in the Tang dynasty. As Barbieri-Low discusses, this theory (popularized by Joseph Needham) is almost certainly wrong. Nevertheless, it is striking that the First Emperor has become a figure in world culture through the visual impact of the widely circulated terracotta warriors, and through his entanglement with ideas about drugs.

The above sketch only suggests the intellectual and visual riches of this book, which all readers should fully explore. I will discuss now a few points that could modify or extend Barbieri-Low's discussion. First, accounts of the First Emperor have also assessed Qin institutions, and Barbieri-Low continues this in his section on newly discovered documents. This issue figured prominently in Liu Zongyuan's essay that celebrated Qin *institutions* as a major advance, while attributing its failure to brutal governance.

The argument that Qin's institutional reforms marked a major advance adapting to changing circumstances was also presented by Liu's contemporary Du You (735–812) in his compendia of the evolution of institutions, the *Tong dian*. Du's work further provided the model for the historical works identified by the word *tong* (通 “comprehensive”), which were produced through the Qing dynasty and focused on how institutions and the social order evolved over time, rather than the deeds of individuals.¹ As Barbieri-Low notes, the first modern biographer of the First Emperor, Ma Feibai (1896–1984), adopted as his formal model an example of the *tong* history, the *Comprehensive Examination of Documents*. Ma's work, which celebrated the accomplishments of the First Emperor and analyzed his failures, was above all a “socioeconomic analysis of the Warring States and Qin periods.” This shows how the positive evaluation of Qin institutions formed an alternative discourse to Confucian moralism, one which fed into the modern re-evaluation of the First Emperor as a state builder.

More important than this distinction between the ruler's person and the state's institutions was how accounts of the First Emperor highlight internal contradictions that defined emperorship. These can be analyzed in a series of ever more abstracted forms. First, focusing on the case of Qin, the contradictions in its role as both *the* model of empire and a target of criticism underlay many accounts of the First Emperor. Jia Yi and Sima Qian denounced him for megalomaniacal attempts to extend his rule to all of nature and to wage war on the spirits, but such deeds defined imperial power throughout the Han and later dynasties. Accounts mock the First Emperor's paranoia in hiding away behind covered passageways, but the emperor's invisibility was an ideal from the early Han. Again, Qin is criticized for relying on laws rather than moral virtues to govern, but such criticisms scarcely mask the fact that all subsequent dynasties did likewise.²

Beyond the case of Qin, early Chinese mythology and philosophy elaborated tales and arguments highlighting contradictions in the role of emperor. Most important were legends of using abdication in high antiquity to guarantee that the best man ruled, then shifting to the hereditary dynasty where the ruler was ideally both “heir and sage,” or where his officials performed the sagely aspects of rule.³ The first

¹David McMullen, *State and Scholars in T'ang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 201–5, 261–62; McMullen, “Views of the State in Du You and Liu Zongyuan,” in *Foundations of State Power in China*, edited by Stuart Schram (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1987).

²Mark Edward Lewis, *The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 60–74, esp. 70–74.

³Sarah Allan, *The Heir and the Sage: Dynastic Legend in Early China* (San Francisco: Chinese Materials Center, 1981); Allan, *Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and Ideal Government in Early Chinese*

major study of these themes in English, Sarah Allan's *The Heir and the Sage*, employed Levi-Strauss's theory of the role of myths to confront fundamental social contradictions, just as Barbieri-Low cites him when arguing that some historical figures should be studied because they are "good to think."

Late Warring States philosophers also incorporated the idea that the role of emperor entailed contradictions. Thus, the *Han Feizi* argued that an emperor had to be dynamic, amoral, and able to transcend the desires that bound ordinary humans, but that it was impossible to guarantee that any emperor would have such qualities, or that any series of fathers and sons would all meet these standards. The same text also rejected the "Confucian" argument that these problems could be solved by transferring the conduct of government to advisers and officials, because without constant surveillance and manipulation by the emperor such men invariably formed factions that sabotaged the state's interests to benefit themselves and their families.⁴

Another approach to study contradictions in the images of the First Emperor is using comparative cases, a style of doing history that Barbieri-Low exemplified in *Ancient Egypt and Early China: State, Society, and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021). One comparison is the figure of Augustus Caesar, the founder of another great empire that shared many features with the Han, and who like the First Emperor justified his new position (without acknowledging its novelty) in stone inscriptions. Like the First Emperor, Augustus created both the title and form of the emperor, and like the former he was both celebrated for his achievements and condemned for his cruelty and deceitfulness in climbing to power. As in Han China, the position of emperor in Rome was viewed with both adoration and suspicion.⁵ The more positive historical assessment of Augustus also provides insight into the different paths through which the two empires emerged, and their distinct institutional foundations.

The most abstract level of contradiction in the role of the founding dynast is what Robert A. Yelle has called "the antinomian sacred as a political category."⁶ This idea—derived from thinkers including Weber, Schmitt, and Agamben—argues that founding a polity and establishing sovereignty invariably involve acts of violence that are criminal within the earlier order. Nor is this idea a Western invention, as the Chinese theory of the "Mandate of Heaven" accepts that each new dynasty is established through rebellion against the old one, and that Heaven's support is known only when the rebellion succeeds. Thus, the First Emperor was only shown to be criminal when the state that he founded was overthrown, but the Han and all subsequent dynasties were established in the same violent manner.

These additional approaches to examining Qin and the First Emperor are not offered as criticisms of Barbieri-Low, who has provided more than anyone could demand, but instead as further demonstrations of the validity of his argument that the First Emperor is indeed "good to think."

Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015). This second book, which incorporates recently discovered materials, also cites major related articles by Yuri Pines.

⁴Mark Edward Lewis, "The Ruler in Fa-Based Government (Governance through Impersonal Standards)," in *Dao Companion to the Chinese Philosophy of Governance by Impersonal Standards*, edited by Yuri Pines (Dordrecht: Springer, forthcoming).

⁵Kaius Tuori, *The Emperor of Law: The Emergence of Roman Imperial Adjudication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), ch. 2, 4.

⁶Robert A. Yelle, *Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), esp. ch. 1–2.