

**THE PAST THAT NEVER PASSED: A REVIEW
OF THE NGV TERRACOTTA WARRIORS
AND CAI GUO-QIANG EXHIBITION**

It was at the moment when I was confronting each Terracotta Warrior at the NGV exhibition that I suddenly realised how remote I was, away from the history of China. Yet at the same time somewhere deep in my heart, I started to murmur: the past has never truly passed. Each of the eight Terracotta Warriors is placed in an individual glass cabinet with reflective mirrors, a design that brings without a doubt a sensational impression to the viewers. Given the fact that there are in total 6,000 or more Terracotta Warriors (many of those are still unearthed) in Xian, guarding the tomb where the first Emperor of China was buried, the reflective mirrors compensate for the shortage of warriors in number and provide the viewers an opportunity to closely examine the skills of ancient Chinese craftsmen. Although the Terracotta Warriors were supposed to be the theme and centre of the exhibition, I was astonished by the number of artefacts and artistic objects that the exhibition had to offer. Indeed, there are many connections between the exhibition and the histories behind it.

THE RULE

Many know of the Terracotta Army, but few know that the army is merely a part of the Emperor's collection.

Next to the pit where the army was excavated is the Emperor's Mausoleum, the size of which is no smaller than the Giza pyramids (see fig.1). Seven hundred thousand workers and craftsmen were laboured to the construction of the Mausoleum, which is still not excavated since according to the work of Sima Qian in 94 B.C., the Mausoleum has 'crossbows and arrows primed to shoot at anyone who enters the tomb,' and '[m]ercury was used to simulate the hundred rivers, the Yangtze and Yellow River, and the great sea, and set to flow mechanically'.¹ Cautiousness is required before any decision is made regarding the excavation. The craftsmen of the emperor once painted the warriors with the finest colour possible. However, due to Xian's dry climate, much of the colour flaked away within minutes before the eyes of the archaeologists when the mud protecting it was removed during the 1974 excavation.²

THE RITUALS

China was, as history remembers, a 'Nation of Rituals' (*liyi zhibang* 礼仪之邦). The nineteenth century American missionary W.A.P. Martin noted in his memoir, '[a] book containing

¹ Qian Sima 司马迁, *Shi Ji* 史记 (Records of the Grand Historian), juan 6, (*Qin Shi Huang ben ji* 秦始皇本纪), 47.

² Brook Larmer, "Terra-Cotta Warriors in Color," *National Geographic*, 10 Sep, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2012/06/terra-cotta-warriors/>.



Figure 1: The Emperor's Mausoleum.¹



Figure 2: One kneeling warrior on exhibit. The figure was once colourful.
Photographed by Luke Yin, 2019.

¹ Sunqianxiang 孙千翔, "Weishenme qinshihuang ling zhijin weikai? 为什么秦始皇陵至今未开?," [Why Don't They Excavate the Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum?], www.zhihu.com, 25 Aug, 2019, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/19616066>.



Figure 3: 'Bell of Duke Wu of Qin'.



Figure 4: 'Transience (Peony)' by Cai Guo-Qiang. The peony is the national flower of China.



Figure 5: The creation of 'Transience (Peony)': The explosion.

three thousand rules of etiquette is studied at school, so that a well-bred lad always knows how to do the right thing at the right time'.³ Martin's impression on Late Imperial Chinese ritual practices can be traced back to the Emperor's Era. The artefacts of the Emperor's palace represent not only an extravagant lifestyle, but also a deep connotation on how 'music' (*yue* 乐) was connected to 'rituals' (*li* 礼). The 'Bell of Duke Wu of Qin' on exhibition (see fig. 3), in which Duke Wu was the ancestor of the Emperor, provides such connotation in its exquisiteness. The sophisticated carving on the bell witnessed the ascension of Emperor's power, and in his dream: an empire in immortality. The bronze object was made to be immortal, with the practices of 'music' and 'ritual' two thousand years has passed but worship to the history of classicism reinforced.

THE RECONSTRUCTION

Cai Guo-Qiang's work 'Transience (Peony)' brings the audience to the emotional climax of the exhibition, especially the video at the end of the exhibition demonstrating how the artwork was produced using an explosion. The explosive performance immediately catches the attention of the viewers, yet the meaning behind

the final work is even more profound. Cai was born in the 1950s, an era many would refer to as the most 'chaotic' period of modern Chinese history. The Great Leap Forward (1958-60) under the government's ambition of rapid nationwide industrialisation eventually caused hundreds of thousands of people to die from famine. But 'chaos' is the rhythm of twentieth century China, which echoes the revolutionary tone of a 'new China's' eagerness to be 'modernised' and to 're-embrace' the world; yet at what cost? A complete denial of the cultural tradition found in Chinese history as far back as the Emperor, if this is what the people of China desire? There might be no direct answer to it. Cai uses this artwork to indicate the short-lived Qin Empire, but its indication goes beyond: after Qin Dynasty, the Han Dynasty was to be built on the ash of Qin, and together with Qin, Han laid the foundation of Chinese civilisation for the next two thousand years. This history has never passed, and a true 'new China' is about to embrace the world with its long history and rich culture.

Reviewed by Luke Yin

³ William Alexander Parsons Martin, *A cycle of Cathay: or, China, south and north* (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson and Ferrier, 1896). 323.