

秦始皇帝的兵馬俑



CHINA on the march



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That China was once the most advanced country in the world is indisputable. That it will be so again is the salutary fact of this century's first decade. The opening of the British Museum's exhibition "The First Emperor: China's Terracotta Army" gives us a timely opportunity to reflect upon the might of the "Middle Kingdom". Huw Owen, our North and Central Asia Regional Manager, previews the exhibition.

The Emperor in question was Qin Shihuangdi, progenitor of the Chinese nation and, by all accounts, an inveterate paranoiac (though not without cause – attempts on his life were many and varied). His reign brought an end to the Warring States Period (475–221 BC) when the Yangtze and Yellow River basins were ruled by warlords, and thus established China as the most powerful unified state in East Asia.

History has been kinder to him than his contemporaries, many of whom were broken on the rack of his megalomania. The concomitant urge to defend the state from attack, symbolised by the construction of the Great Wall, resulted in the deaths of countless thousands of labourers. The Emperor's love of order and legality didn't go down too well either, though the Chinese have him to thank for the standardisation of their language, weights and measures, the national currency and the construction of China's first true network of roads and canals – all essential to the growth of the economy in peacetime. Perhaps the Emperor had simply read and understood his Sun Tzu, who wrote in his *Art of War*:

“All warfare is based on deception. Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear to be ineffective.”

The Emperor eventually died from alleged mercury poisoning, after listening too closely to his court doctors and scientists, who had recommended its ingestion as a shortcut to immortality. That might have been the last we knew or heard of Qin Shihuangdi, barring the occasional mention in academic history

books. However in 1974, in the countryside outside Xian in central China, local farmers who were drilling for water discovered an underground chamber containing thousands of life-sized terracotta warriors, dressed for battle and standing in military formation. The original accompaniment to this display of earthly power, according to later reports, was a scale replica of the universe, with pearls as planets, and flowing mercury as the rivers and seas of the known world.

Further excavations have revealed a necropolis of quite staggering proportions – the main chamber measures 80 metres long and 50 metres wide. Lest an ambitious general thought it was all just elaborate bluff, the Emperor put real weapons into the hands of his statues – the swords were treated so that they neither corroded nor blunted in the 2,000 years that they spent underground. If any visual sign of China's past (and future) strength were needed, then here it is.

The British Museum's exhibition of these warriors will be the largest ever seen outside China and the biggest exhibition at the museum for 40 years, comparable in scope and interest to the 1972 display of the death-mask of Tutankhamun, visited by 1.69 million people. 10 complete warriors will be on display, plus 7 new figures only recently excavated, including musicians and acrobats (thought to entertain the emperor). Perhaps the best news of all is that visitors will be able to get within six feet of the statues, something not previously allowed in China.

Huw Owen
North & Central Asia Regional Manager

Terracotta Warriors *in situ*

Seeing the warriors *in situ* in Xian is easily combined with a wider tour of China. Sights now familiar to us – the Forbidden City, the Yangtze River, the karst pinnacles of Guilin – retain their capacity to awe the visitor, and all three can be configured around a visit to Xian to create a self-contained two week “classic” China tour, starting from £2,500 per person. For an insight into the future of China, I would recommend rounding off your visit in Shanghai or Hong Kong. Both are modern metropolises with everything we expect of international cities: fine hotels and fine dining as well as stunning views. Repeat visitors, or those with more time, have an incredible selection of sights from which to choose. Aside from better-known provinces such as Yunnan, Xinjiang and Tibet, the hill tribe areas of Guizhou and the mountains of Sichuan are only now truly opening up. For details of travel to China or Tibet please contact our North & Central Asia team on 01993 838 200.

In conjunction with the Friends of the British Museum, we are running a 15 day group tour to China in October 2008, led by a specialist academic tour leader. The tour, entitled *The Middle Kingdom*, will include time in Beijing, Datong, Pingyao, Xian and Shanghai. For details please contact Ian on 01993 838 214.

Finally, we are operating a group tour *Along the Silk Route* with two departure dates in 2008 (June and September). The tour starts in Xian with a visit to the Terracotta Warriors *in situ*, lasts three weeks and traverses the ancient Silk Road route through western China and over the high passes into Central Asia. For details of this please contact Ben on 01993 838 217.

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Pic A: Armoured general, terracotta, Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Museum of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuang, Lintong, Shaanxi Province, China.

Pic B: Bronze crane, Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Museum of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuang, Lintong, Shaanxi Province, China.

Pic C: Infantryman, terracotta, Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Shaanxi Provincial Archaeological Institute, Xian, China.

Pic D: Armoured infantryman, terracotta, Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Museum of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuang, Lintong, Shaanxi Province, China.

Pic E: Kneeling archer, terracotta, Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Museum of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuang, Lintong, Shaanxi Province, China.

Pic F: Acrobat, terracotta, Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Shaanxi Provincial Archaeological Institute, Xian, China.

Pic G: Suit of armour, limestone, Qin dynasty (221–206 BC). Shaanxi Provincial Archaeological Institute, Xian, China.



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To view more details about the British Museum's exhibition and travel in China