QIN SHIHUANG'S TERRACOTTA WARRIORS AND COMMEMORATING THE CULTURAL STATE

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The Silent Army as a Place for Memory

The terracotta funerary statues discovered in the vicinity of the second-century BC tomb of Qin Shihuang (259 BC–210 BC) are among the most globally recognized Chinese archeological artifacts. Domestically, images of the gray earthen statues regularly appear in advertising campaigns endorsing a wide variety of products from alcohol to computer accessories, while museum-quality reproductions of the soldiers in various poses are a common sight in hotel lobbies and in corporate and government offices. Internationally, the warriors’ images routinely appear on the glossy covers of tourist brochures and books about Chinese culture, while reproductions of the figures circulate as valued tourist souvenir, treasured kitsch, and exotic Chinese collectible.

The site of the statues’ twentieth-century discovery, enclosed by the Museum of Qin Shihuang’s Soldier and Horse Funerary Statues (Qin-shihuang Bingmayong Bowuguan; hereafter, the Terracotta Warrior Museum), is located just beyond the Qin emperor’s burial mound, some thirty-five kilometers (22 miles) outside the city of Xi’an in northwestern China’s Shaanxi Province. A visit to the museum—second only to the other world-famous construction attributed to the Qin emperor, the Great Wall—is a highlight of even the most modest Chinese domestic and foreign tourist itineraries.¹ According to the museum, it hosts between two and three million visitors annually, and tens of thousands more view the terracotta warriors at international traveling exhibitions. For Chinese and non-Chinese alike, visiting the world-famous guardians of the Qin emperor’s afterlife, or

¹ For a detailed discussion of representations of the Great Wall and cultural nationalism, see Waldron 1993.
encountering them in images or reproductions, is expected to be an experience with profoundly authentic Chinese objects.

Despite their prolific number, ancient provenience, and artistic beauty, however, the silent figures themselves provide very little information about the Chinese past they so compellingly seem to represent. The historical record, like the terracotta army itself, is silent. For a nation-state that claims continuity with thousands of years of written history, it would seem unlikely that one of the most significant contemporary symbols of China is entirely absent from that history. While the Chinese historian Sima Qian 司马迁 (ca. 145–86 BC) and others in the centuries following Qin’s death describe the emperor and his mausoleum, there is no mention of the buried army. Other than geographic proximity to Qin’s tomb and chronological proximity to the period of his short reign, so little links the warriors to the Qin emperor that one Chinese researcher, Chen Jingyuan 陈景元, has maintained that they may not actually even be related.2

This chapter examines how the shattered silent remains of forgotten funerary soldiers—an ancient army without a history—represent China’s post-Mao cultural patrimony as a globally recognizable shorthand for “China” itself and how these meanings have changed during the reform period.3 While the underground fragments are ancient, they did not begin to have a history—they did not “exist” in a social sense—until after their discovery in early 1974 by a group of local

2 Chen Jingyuan’s ideas were featured in a multipart broadcast on China Central Television’s New Frontiers. The TV show aired during the summer of 2009, coinciding with new excavations at the museum, and is archived on the show’s Web site (CCTV 2009). Chen also maintains a blog with copies of many of his papers (Chen 2009).

3 The data and observations that form the foundation of this chapter were collected in three periods spanning thirteen years. Initial materials, observations, and interviews were done during the fall of 1995 and the summer of 1996 during a short field-research period on tourism funded by the University of Washington’s Department of Anthropology. The earlier period included three months of participant observation as an international tour guide frequently leading tours to the museum. A return during the summer of 2009 offered ample opportunity to collect new interview data and museum materials, as well as learn about the changes in the museum and its new buildings from museum staff. I would very much like to thank the Xi’an branch of the China International Travel Service, the Xi’an Holiday International Travel Service, the China Commercial International Travel Service, and the Reception Department of the Museum of the Terracotta Warriors in Xi’an for their assistance in providing information and interviews about the museum and its warriors. I would also like to thank Marc Matten, Melissa Monnier, and Saul Thomas for comments on the final versions of this chapter.
peasants digging a well. The remains were subsequently excavated, painstakingly reconstructed, and exhibited. Meanwhile, the representational technologies and social practices of the state, academia, the media, tourism, museums, and others transformed them into “Qin Shihuang’s Terracotta Army.”

Precisely because the warriors have no history, their social meanings have been defined through practices and narratives of memory. Of course, this is not to suggest that any person claims to have remembered the design, creation, or meaning of the warriors themselves at the original historical moment of their burial. This is not a question, in other words, about the individual human memories of the past—or “what actually happened”—or the accuracy of those memories. There is also no evidence of traces of the historical moment of the warriors’ creation and burial that have persisted through time, encoded in social rituals or ceremonies of the type Paul Connerton describes as “social memory” (Connerton 1989). Rather, by memory, I mean the ways that the collective expression, evocation, and circulation of meaningful representations of the past become intimately felt and remembered as personal experience (Halbwachs 1980).

Social practices of memory claim truths about the past in a form outside the narrative practices common to history, in the sense Hayden White describes (White 1987), by way of “re-membering” the past—taking useful pieces and cobb[ing them together for use in the present. Pierre Nora highlights the way that places and objects evoke meanings through memory (Nora and Kritzman 1998). These lieux de mémoire are not places for conveying historically accurate memories; instead, they are locations for meaningful experiences that claim a relationship to the past and assert meaning in the present and for the future. In other words, memory is not a question of “what happened” but the contemporary value of that past as it is commemorated through social practice.5

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4 Daniel Schacter (1995, 1996, 2001) describes recent work on biological memory that highlights the importance of social context in the encoding and decoding of memories.

5 Nora (1998) takes up the issue of commemoration explicitly within the context of his exploration of places of memory. An excellent volume edited by John R. Gillis (1994) addresses the issue of commemoration, directly collecting together a wide variety of essays that examine the ways that sites are constructed as contexts for remembering a national identity.
As “tradition” need not be ancient, historically grounded, or “true” to be socially efficacious (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), meaningful memories emerge in social encounters—such as those of tourism, museums, and heritage sites that represent or simulate “what actually happened.” The meanings negotiated at a museum or tourist site, in this view, depend on the site as a space for visitors to animate with their imagination of the past. This imagination is, of course, informed by the preexisting understandings visitors bring with them or have interpreted for them. Of course, recognizing that meaning depends to some extent on imagination does not mean “anything goes.” As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued, historical representations must be related to a shared sense of historical knowledge—authenticity is required or the representation will be read as a fake or an unacceptable spectacle.

As this chapter describes, the Terracotta Warrior Museum as informed by accompanying tourist texts provides precisely such a space for visitors to imagine the ancient past. Though the earliest narratives of the site were influenced by a Marxist historiography that read the warriors through the position of their artisanal creators or the poor peasants who discovered them, narratives of class were subsequently displaced by those that emphasize the site as expressing a deeply felt Chinese “ethnic spirit” (minzu jingshen 民族精神). More recently still, the market invites tourists to imagine history from the position of Qin Shihuang and the splendor of his empire—an “aesthetic history” that invites visitors to appreciate and consume the beauty of past culture.

Seeing the warriors and imagining the ancient past at the museum links representation and the visceral certainty of individual human memory; remembering the experience of the representation or simulation may be real enough. The past experienced during a museum visit is validated by the physical objects on display, and the lessons learned can be shared beyond the museum with friends or family back home through the purchase of a souvenir—often a warrior reproduction—that seeds subsequent narration (Stewart 1993). The museum’s numerous

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6 Benedict Anderson (1991) suggests the importance of museums in his classic examination of the formation of national “imagined communities.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) adds insights into the way visitors’ imaginations are central to the experience of the place that is visited.

7 Trouillot 1995: 149.
warriors—each individually unique, endlessly reproducible, and all profoundly Chinese—offer, this chapter argues, an apt metaphor for understanding the cultural politics of the market economy.

“Co-memorations”: Remembering Culture after Revolution

On October 1, 1979, the anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was marked by a celebration and parade at Tiananmen Square commemorating the moment when Mao Zedong proclaimed the victory of the Chinese Revolution three decades earlier. On the same day, a thousand kilometers (621 miles) to the southwest, a much more ancient past was commemorated. In remote Lin Tong district on the outskirts of Xi’an, a new museum was inaugurated—the Terracotta Warrior Museum.

The timing of the museum’s inauguration—on National Day—asserted the new museum’s significance in state history. It was a place, furthermore, formally authorized at the dedication ceremony by a gift of calligraphy penned by Ye Jianying (1897–1986), the chairman of the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People’s Congress and a key member of the post-Mao reform leadership. Rather than accompanying the Qin emperor into the afterlife, the ancient warriors were pressed by the museum into the service of the PRC, and their transfer orders had been ceremoniously issued by Beijing through Ye’s inscription. That Ye was an early supporter of economic liberalization is important because, as I suggest in what follows, the history of the terracotta warriors reflects the reform period’s politics of culture. Ye’s calligraphy was also the model for the stone inscription of the museum’s name at its entrance—incorporating its text into the physical environment of the museum itself. Today, the original calligraphy is preserved in the museum under glass (figure 2.1).

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8 Wu Ge 1982: 92.
9 In his fascinating work on calligraphy and political power, Richard Kraus (1991) provides a history of the written word in China, giving numerous examples of how power in modern Chinese politics is practiced through the pen.
10 Writing on the historical significance of Chinese inscriptions, Richard Strassberg (1994: 5) has commented that they “incorporate a text into the environment,” whereby a traveler seeks to “participate enduringly in the totality of the scene.”
How museums institutionalize objects and represent meanings through organization, display, narrative, and other social practices has been the subject of much work in museum studies, anthropology, and related disciplines. The literature has unpacked, deconstructed, and made visible the politics of representation in museums, often focusing on how placement and display of objects affects the significance and meanings that are read into them by viewers. At its founding, the Terracotta Warrior Museum was intended to communicate a specific vision of the past, to achieve specific social goals. The most modern Chinese museum of its time, built with the most up-to-date materials, it was envisioned as a state public relations tool. It was to be

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11 Unless otherwise noted, all photos are copyrighted by the author.
12 Many of these arguments are summarized in essays collected in edited volumes by Karp and Lavine (1991); Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine (1992); and Karp et al. (2007).
13 It is perhaps not surprising that this would be the case, as art and museums in China during the revolutionary period were heavily influenced by Mao Zedong’s (1967) assertion that they serve the social goals of the revolution.
the largest museum in the world... a most magnificent historical museum that will propagate our country's splendid ancient culture. Thus it will have benefit for educating the masses in patriotism and historical materialism and displaying [China] to foreign friends.  

In 1979, China had few institutions that collected, curated, preserved, and displayed objects and art for public display or research. Even a decade later, foreign tourists desiring to see Chinese art or ancient objects in a museum were surprised to learn that they would have to be satisfied by a small room of clocks in the Forbidden City and the modest Shanghai Museum. During the first thirty years of the PRC, the state built and maintained sites significant to revolutionary history—preserving the locations of important meetings or the homes of influential historical figures, commemorating revolutionary martyrs, or celebrating modern technological innovations. All museums were history museums tasked with communicating the progress of the revolution from the exploitation of the feudal past to the promise of socialist modernity. Remnants of the prerevolutionary past, sites such as the old imperial palace in Beijing, were not places to admire beautiful objects, but places for public education.

The Terracotta Warrior Museum was initially considered to be just such a historical museum; however, it provided very few details of that past. Assuming that the terracotta figures were related to Qin Shihuang, this is understandable as the Qin emperor's historical legacy is contradictory; he is famous for creating the first united Chinese dynasty and infamous for burning history books and burying scholars alive to silence opposition. Founding a history museum to one of China's founding feudal autocrats—exactly the past from which New China asserted its distance—on the heels of the Cultural Revolution was no doubt a challenge. As described in what follows, early attempts to narrate the site into Marxist historical categories were quickly abandoned. By the late 1980s, the museum offered a new politics of historical representation. Rather than a site for teaching revolutionary lessons, the museum became a site for visitors to experience a timeless and enduring "splendid ancient culture" (gudai de canlan wenhua 古代的灿烂文化).

Examining the "Splendid China" theme park that opened in 1989, Ann Anagnost observes how the park “reaches back into deep antiquity” to map locations significant to national history while “betraying a curious
blindness in its exclusion of the sites of a revolutionary tradition.” The park avoids narrating a post revolutionary history by evoking an explicitly cultural past. At the founding of the Terracotta Warrior Museum, “splendid ancient culture” was already invoked as a means to appreciate the past in a way that was unifying and stable—in contrast to, for example, the Marxist model of history as class conflict.

Of course, the “culture” on display at the museum was not only for domestic consumption. The desire to see the ancient remains attracted early tourists from all over the world, and each visit brought valuable foreign exchange into China. Tourism to China during the revolutionary era was largely structured around displaying socialism to foreigners through visits to model factories and communes (Brown 2006). For a reform-era China eschewing Cultural Revolution-era radicalism and seeking an accommodating posture toward tourists from countries only recently labeled imperialist, “culture” provided an apolitical ground for displaying China to “foreign friends.” Perhaps nothing did more to spread the news of the ancient terracotta figures in the United States, for example, than an essay and full-color photos by Audrey Topping in the April 1978 issue of *National Geographic*. The daughter of a retired Canadian ambassador, Topping got access to the warriors before the museum had even been completed (Topping 1978).

One of the most enduring comments about the terracotta warriors came from then French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac (1932-): upon seeing the site in 1978, he proclaimed it “the eighth wonder of the world.” Today, Chirac’s words are frequently quoted in the museum and printed on tourist materials and souvenirs for sale in and around the site. By claiming the warriors as the eighth wonder of the world, Chirac served the cause of China’s “reform and opening” by discursively drawing a Chinese site into the company of the other seven ancient wonders. He literally put the terracotta warriors on the map—bringing China into global flows of difference marked as “culture.” While international

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15 Anagnost 1997: 164.
16 In his study of the “Beautiful Indonesia” theme park, John Pemberton provides examples of the way the Soeharto regime in Indonesia represented an apolitical “traditional culture” as a “stabilizing point of reference” to imagine its order. As a timeless “cultural state,” it could deny the violence of its historical origins (Pemberton 1994: 152–161, 318).
visitors flocked to the site for a glimpse of “ancient China,” for Chinese, the museum itself became a sign of the global in the local.17

The Museum “Sight”

The Terracotta Warrior Museum consists of a large walled compound of buildings enclosing the archaeological site. Three buildings built on top of the primary excavation pits and an exhibition hall are the spaces most frequented by visitors. In addition, the site has a wide variety of service buildings, office spaces, and a theater. Just outside the museum’s main gates, where tour guides gather to vie for customers, is a large developed area that includes numerous restaurants and shops selling tourist guidebooks and souvenirs. Nearby, the newly redeveloped village of Xiyang 西杨村 illustrates the prosperity the influx of tourist money has brought to the local economy.

The buildings that enclose the three pits of the museum were built over two decades from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. The earliest building was constructed in the late 1970s over the largest pit, Pit 1. Counter intuitively, the second building, built a decade later, covers Pit 3, a much smaller site of warriors and chariots. In both pits, the museum has painstakingly reconstructed many hundreds of warriors and completely excavated large portions of the pits to offer visitors views of what they may have looked like in the past. Pit 2, enclosed by a building that was completed in 1994, reflects changing curatorial approaches.18 The site has been excavated down to the original roofs of the warriors’ trenches. Other than a few test pits dug deeper beneath the surface, the view is one of the undulating partially collapsed roofs of the ancient trenches. Comparatively few warriors can be seen, and those that are seen have been left as piles of crushed fragments partially encased in earth.

Visitors begin at Pit 1 and then move through pits 3 and 2—capped by a final stop at a newly completed exhibition center, which contains

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17 Beth Notar (2006) describes a similar dynamic—where foreign tourists add value to domestic tourist sites—in her fascinating study of the city of Dali 大理 in Yunnan 云南 Province.
18 It is rumored that this building was built in an effort to build up the site and reinvigorate tourist interest both in the site and in China more generally, which flagged following the events leading up to June 4, 1989.
tourist services, museum galleries, and event spaces. The galleries contain objects such as weapons and trinkets found during site excavations and a selection of very complete warriors and horses behind glass for closer inspection. An additional gallery focuses entirely on the museum’s history and its famous visitors and their gifts, including Ye Jianying’s founding gift of calligraphy.

Together, the contents of the pits—described at the museum’s opening as “the warriors on their original ground”—are framed by a tourist industry and museum complex that structure the context that makes the ruins meaningful and memorable. The site is certified by the state as a “national class tourist area” (guojiaji lüyou jingqu 国家级旅游景区), “a national first class museum” (guojia yiji bowuguan 国家一级博物馆), and a “national civilized work unit” (quanguo wenming danwei 全国文明单位). It was also among the first sites designated in the late 1990s as important for patriotic education.

Of all the sights in the museum, however, it is the view at the entrance of Pit 1 that offers visitors the “iconic view”—the spectacle of rows of warriors standing at attention in the excavated pits—that is the earliest and most-often-presented image of the site (figure 2.2). The vast majority of visitors to the museum first see the warriors as they walk into Pit 1. A single massive roof arches over the mass of excavated warriors. The main source of illumination is natural light filtering in through skylights. Upon entering the expansive space, visitors look down to see nine trenches, about four warriors wide, extending into the distance. From within each trench, lined up in battle formation, the warriors and horses directly face visitors as if participating in a military review. Visitors commonly greet their first view of the grand spectacle with “oohs” and “ahs.” On days when many tourists are at the museum, the buzz of visitors’ excited conversation, their jockeying for desired positions from which to take photos, and the overlapping narration of numerous tour guides in multiple languages can be cacophonous.

Each of the warriors has been carefully cleaned and painstakingly pieced together from the shattered condition in which they were discovered. The floors of the pits have been completely swept of all rubble and the sides of the pits carefully sculpted so that the soldiers can fit shoulder-to-shoulder without crowding. Warriors that have not been reconstructed are at the far end of the hall, and most are covered with plastic sheets. From the viewing stand, the image presented to the visitor is one of complete order. After the flurry of photographs, the enthusiasm of the opening scene quickly wanes as visitors disperse to
Figure 2.2: The iconic view of the amassed terracotta figures.
mill about the vast museum space. While visitors subsequently experience different parts of the museum in different ways, all share in the experience of the first iconic view of the assembled army of warriors at the entrance to Pit 1.

The emotional reaction at seeing the carefully reconstructed and arranged figures is disproportionate to the amount of explanation the museum offers. Texts and labels throughout the museum that might provide interpretation provide, upon closer inspection, very little context. In each of the pits, various locations are marked with numbers that highlight points of interest. In most cases, the arrows point to traces of objects that have been moved or are absent: “An entire quiver of arrows was unearthed here. It is currently on display in the exhibition hall,” or “This indentation is from a log which formed part of the ceiling of the underground chamber.” When texts and labels posted in the museum do interpret what is seen, they describe little beyond the obvious:

All the pottery warriors and horses were made using local clay, then baked in the kiln. After firing the figures were completed with painted detail. The Qin Terracotta Warriors and Horses were big in life-size and exquisitely made with ancient high technology.

The museum provides facts and figures that attempt to offer an explanation—from the dimensions of each pit to the number of statues of each type found, from the age of the pits to the size of the entire site. The numbers are an illusion of meaningful data, however, providing no more information to tourists than establishing that the site is large and that the soldiers are old and numerous. An example of such text, the introductory preface panel to Pit 3, which introduces the entire pit and contains the same information as the Chinese text, reads as follows:

Pit 3 was discovered in June 1976, located north of Pit 1 at the western end. It is 25 meters to the south of Pit 1 and 120 meters to the east of Pit 2. It is of U-shape about 520 square meters, measuring 28.8 meters long from east to west, 24.57 meters wide from north to south and 5.2–5.4 meters deep. Investigation shows that pit 3 was seriously damaged at some point in history. Only 68 pottery figures, one chariot and 34 bronze weapons were unearthed from this pit. Pit 3 is now known as the command center of Pit 1 and Pit 2.

The lack of historical context for the warriors evident throughout the museum is offset by a detailed explanation at only one point. It is the place on the outside edge of Pit 1 where, in 1974, Chinese peasants digging a well had an authentic experience with the past—they dug it up. While visitors cannot experience the moment of discovery,
they can meet a person who did—and take home a memory of that experience. Since the early days, an added attraction at the conclusion of the museum visit has been the opportunity to meet one of the peasant-discoverers, Yang Zhifa 杨志发 (1938–). In the mid-1990s, he sat in an upstairs gallery selling a paperback entitled The Discovery of the Eighth Wonder of the World, and for a small additional fee, he was happy to autograph a book or pose for a photograph (Mao Qi 1985). Fifteen years later, he sits enthroned in a faux black leather chair at a modest table surrounded by boxes of books at a much more central location, his book upgraded to an expensive, large-format, full-color work (Meng Jianming 2005).

*The Museum “Memories”*

The museum brings visitors face-to-face with the remains of the terracotta army—and the emotional experience of seeing the assembled warriors for the first time is powerful. The order of the museum’s display is, of course, not the order of the past. Over two thousand years ago, the warriors were laid out in formation and buried. They were created to spend eternity underground. In the museum, the figures stand reconstructed in the open air. The displacement of their original mission and the “accuracy” with which they have been reconstructed—the cleanliness and order of the exhibit—imply an agent behind the scenes that has mediated it. While tourists cannot touch the warriors, others obviously have.

Their reconstruction is, however, not complete. When the figures were originally produced, they were painted with brilliant colors to more closely resemble actual soldiers. In the museum, however, they remain unpainted. When asked why the museum did not choose to repaint the warriors during the reconstruction of the site, guides and museum workers usually respond with incredulity. While they see the work of piecing the warriors back together as unproblematic, adding color would be going too far. As Wei, a local guide in the museum, explained to me on a tour, the warriors could never be repainted because “they would look too new.”

In the context of the museum, the warriors are neither left buried nor are they completely restored to

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their original likeness. A tension is maintained between leaving them on their “original ground” and removing them from the context with too much reconstruction. While they have been pieced together to offer the semblance of being complete, they must remain “old”—an evocative image of the ancient past.20

As recent work on museums has observed, the experiences of visitors are heavily mediated by the various strategies of interpretation and display (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 2000). Text and graphics teach the visitors information and interpretations beyond their field of vision (Kirshenblatt Gimblett 1998). Yet as just described, the museum offers strikingly little context for making its contents meaningful,21 leaving the conclusion that seeing the warriors is the most important aspect of the museum. In the words of an American journalist after visiting the site in the mid-1990s, “the most important thing about them is simply that they are there.”22

As the largest and first building visitors encounter, Pit 1 clearly plays the primary role of framing visitors’ experience of the museum. It is the iconic view that visitors desire to see as indicated by the throngs of people who gather at the entrance and by the great deal of photographs taken there. Most importantly, it is the location within the museum where memories are most powerfully negotiated in two important ways. The sight of the warriors lined up for review is, in a very real way, remembered before it is experienced. It is one for which visitors have been prepared by the countless images of the warriors they have seen before the encounter in the museum. It is safe to assume that every visitor to the museum has a memory of having seen an image of the warriors that informs their first sight within the museum.

In this way, the memory of prior texts informs the context for understanding the encounter with the museum’s warriors. The exhibition offers a spectacular tableau upon which the visitors can imagine the past.

20 Visitors recognize this partial reconstruction and express discomfort. It is not uncommon to hear the occasional tourist display skepticism that the site is even real. While I was leading tours to the site in the mid-1990s, more than a few American tourists would quip that it was possible for the Chinese to have made the whole thing up—“They have enough man power in this country. They could do it.” Chinese tourists also recognize the constructed nature of the scene; current guides comment that visitors regularly ask if contemporary materials were used to remake the bricks on the floor or the statues and whether or not they are the actual figures in their original historical locations.

21 In an examination of a very different type of exhibition, I describe how minimal narration is used as a tactic to evoke memories of the past while avoiding the potential complications of dealing with the contentious history of the Cultural Revolution (Davies 2007).

22 Hopkins 1996: 5.
creating a personal memory of having seen the real warriors. It is the museum experience that is personally remembered. Visitors regularly express how pleased they are to “finally see” the warriors for which they have waited so long. In a very real sense, every view of the warriors is always at the end of numerous experiences with earlier representations read as inauthentic. Viewed for the first time in the museum, the earlier memories are validated by the objects’ existence, even as they interpret the heavily reconstructed warrior-remains as “authentic.”

Visitors do not, however, passively observe the views of the warriors the site presents to them. A majority of tourists actively participate as image-makers in the further creation and circulation of the warriors’ images. The museum’s sights are preeminently photographable, and like the warriors themselves, the photos are each both unique and part of a standardized whole. While in the early years of the museum photography was forbidden, presumably to enhance the value of images for sale in the gift shops, today the proliferation of image-capture technology is so widespread that the museum has capitulated to the visitors’ photographic desires. Interestingly, this increases the experience’s memorial effect. The site entices visitors to actively participate in the reproduction of the warriors’ image that they might share the memory of their trip with others, no doubt generating future tourists. A photograph always makes reference to an original and relies on narrative to animate it (Stewart 1993).

The museum derives its memorial power not as a place that explains the past in the register of history, but as a site that represents the past in a way whereby meaningful individual memories are actually encoded from social experience. These experiences—the sights, the practice of photography, the purchase of souvenirs, and a signature from a hand that discovered the warriors—are all remembered as real experiences with the warriors and, by extension, the distant Chinese past. In other words, the museum is not only a site where remembering is done, but a place that is itself remembered.

“The People’s Warriors”: Early Interpretations of the Warriors’ Significance

Of course the gaze of a knowing subject informs the sights and experiences of the museum. Given the limited context it offers for visitors to

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make sense of what they are viewing, it is necessary to examine the narratives that inform visitors’ views and expectations. While it is impossible to track all of the sources that inform the museum’s different interpretive communities, museum publications, site reports, and guidebooks are among the most influential. This was especially true in the first decade when there were few publication outlets. A brief review illustrates how the silent warriors were first used as an object lesson about the Qin—one that encouraged visitors to identify with the artisans of the ancient past. By the late 1980s, however, the emphasis on workers disappeared and only an aesthetic appreciation of their creations remains.

The earliest announcement of the warriors’ discovery was made in the People’s Daily on July 12, 1975, over a year after local Lintong villagers recovered the first warrior fragments from the ground. The brief announcement betrayed little of the site’s magnitude, describing the find only as that of “giant Qin Era terracotta funerary statues” discovered to the east of Qin Shihuang’s tomb. In line with the conventions of the late Mao period, the article described how the archaeologists at the site worked closely with local “poor and middle peasants” on the excavation. The value of the find was described as useful for researching Qin dynasty martial arts, weaponry, and early sculpture technology. Consistent with the Mao-era emphasis on interpretations that focused on social class analysis, the statues were interpreted from the perspective of their creators, as objects that “display the high level of skill and excellence in sculptural techniques of the working people of the Qin Dynasty.”

Reports from the museum’s first years draw on the basic assumptions and themes communicated in that first news article, continuing to interpret the site in Mao-era language. They assume the figures are related to Qin Shihuang by their proximity to his mausoleum and use them as iconic references to the actual armies of the Qin in order to talk about that past. Using them as a metaphoric bridge to the Qin, readers are reminded that Qin was responsible for uniting all of China. As the museum described in 1981,

The group of huge Qin dynasty army statues that have been unearthed in the funerary pit are the symbol of the centralized autocracy that Qin Shihuang established, built and expanded.25

The texts seem aware that upon coming face-to-face with the assembled warriors, visitors might be impressed by the awesome sight:

The image of this group of soldiers embodies the emergent landlord class as “revolutionaries”, “progressives”, “real tigers”—as very lively and engaged—expressing the high-spirits of the time.26

Nevertheless, readers are urged not to identify with those responsible for the spectacle of feudal power but rather with the artisans and working people who actually crafted the figures, or the ordinary soldiers after whom each was modeled:

This large collection of figures that have emerged from the earth of Qin’s burial pit are the outstanding products of Qin Dynasty artisans, displaying the intelligence and ability of the working people. They are a glorious page handed down from our nation’s ancient history of sculpture.27

The success of Qin’s unified kingdom and centralized systems are, the museum explains, responsible for mobilizing so many talented workers. The lesson of the warriors, however, is that the work of their creation was coerced and that it no doubt involved great suffering—“here Qin Shihuang is certainly a representative of the exploitive nature of the landlord class.”28

In one of the first full-length reports of the site, Yuan Zhongyi 袁仲一 (1932—), the museum’s director, describes the artistic value of the warriors and their aesthetic impact in great detail. Throughout his lovingly crafted descriptions of the warriors, however, Yuan repeatedly reminds readers of the “low and humble” people who are the figures’ creators.29 In a particularly telling passage, Yuan describes a particular type of warrior figure:

Some are lean and small and emaciated showing suppressed emotion and dispirit. It was said that severe and hard labor, including forced military service, had been imposed on the people during the first emperor’s reign. The severe punishment meted out to those who disobeyed brought untold suffering to the people. The look on the emaciated soldiers is the expression of dissatisfaction and anger of the people. Though few in number the clay figures are much treasured as they are a reflection of the deep

26 Ibid.: 12.  
27 Ibid.: 12.  
and sharpening social contradictions of the Qin Dynasty. They show the resistance of the people.\(^{30}\)

Similar to the museum reports, guidebooks from the early 1980s introduce the warriors and use them as a means to discuss the legacy of the Qin emperor to whom they are attributed. Descriptions generally begin with brief descriptions of the Qin emperor and the location of his mausoleum. Very quickly, they then turn to the “magnificent” (宏伟的) emperor’s deeds.\(^{31}\) A text written in 1981 by Wang Chongren 王崇仁 (1931) is a good example of this:

Qin Shihuang was a great politician and military strategist in our country’s ancient feudal society. He adopted many political measures that made the Qin Dynasty prosperous and strong. By exercising his great power, he established the first unified China and the first centralized feudal system.\(^{32}\)

Wang writes that Qin’s emphasis on agriculture and restraints on commerce resulted in “great development in the agricultural economy,” and that he abolished slavery and implemented policies that regulated farming, well-digging, the demarcation of counties, and the construction of waterworks.\(^{33}\) Qin Shihuang is described as a reformer who united China and made correct political decisions that resulted in development toward the eventual prosperity and strength of his dynasty.

The description of the Qin emperor’s accomplishments is expressed in language familiar to the book’s Chinese readership. The emphasis on unity, development, prosperity, and strength resonate with national development discourses. “Unity” (统一) is commonly referenced in the context of debates about the fate of Taiwan and Tibet. “Development” (发展) toward the end of creating a “prosperous and strong” (富强) China frequently appears in newspaper reports, economic forecasts, and government modernization campaigns. Guidebooks even describe the museum itself as a demonstration of development—it will aid in the development of education, economics, and tourism.\(^{34}\)

Wang’s description of Qin Shihuang’s history is typical of writings on the first emperor that connect the concerns of the modern state to

\(^{30}\) Ibid.: 19.


\(^{33}\) Ibid.: 84.

the past through the archaeological remains. Emphasizing his role as unifier, centralizer, and “great politician” creates continuity between his concerns at the founding moment of a unified China and those of the contemporary state. As another guidebook author describes, “They [the warriors] serve as a link between the past and the present.” When tourists visit the museum, they are visiting the remnants of this past and reminded of the unfinished future goals.

Wang hints at that legacy of the feudal despot described by Yuan Zhongyi in the early museum reports when, near the end of his introduction, he adds, “But, because of his extremely ruthless treatment of the people, shortly after his death, the Qin Dynasty died out.” His history of the Qin then ends with no further explanation for the demise of the empire. Readers are left with the narrative of Qin’s rise—the lessons of unity and development—but little explanation for his dynasty’s end.

Guidebooks unanimously agree, however, that the warriors have great artistic value. Like the museum publications, they describe the warriors and the site in exhaustive detail. The explanations are usually divided up into a number of sections covering the construction of the pits, the positions of the warriors, and the classification of the warriors into different groups. Following this are separate discussions of how they were sculpted and what military equipment was found. A great deal of attention is paid to the intricate details of the warriors’ individual faces—the lifelike faces of the past. In one of the earliest guidebooks, this kind of descriptive information filled eighty-five of ninety-three pages. As improvements in printing technology reduced the costs of including more full-color photographs, images increasingly displaced extended written description.

Through such detail, the authors emphasize the value of the warriors as aesthetic objects. The iconic association of the terracotta soldiers, which are seen as art, with the real armies of the past and their association with Qin’s feudal exploitation is displaced. Rather than models of the armies of Emperor Qin, the soldiers become the creation of ancient Chinese artisans. A book edited by Shi Lan and Peng Huashi in 1983, for example, reminds readers of the ordinary people: “People

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37 Sun Xinyuan 1981.
of such low and humble position are actually the creators of the Qin Terracotta warriors in the pits.”

For Fu Tianchou 傅天仇 writing a few years later, the warriors “express the courageous boldness of vision of the Chinese people.”

The guidebook, published in 1985, that peasant-discoverer Yang Zhifa sold in the museum up through the mid-1990s, asserts that “the wonder that was created by the laboring people has finally been discovered by the laboring people themselves.”

Early in the reform period, the significance of the warriors as the “people’s warriors” was reinforced by the story of their discovery. The narrative of the warriors’ discovery and the construction of the museum are central to every guidebook’s narrative. Each recounts how seven young peasants set out to dig a well on a spring morning in 1974. The spring was dry and they needed the water for their crops. Instead of finding water, they found a clay head. Uncertain of its significance, the peasants reported their find to the authorities. State archaeologists immediately rushed to the scene to begin excavation, and through the application of “modern scientific methods,” the local discovery uncovered by the peasants becomes a treasure of national significance. The story concludes with the construction and inauguration of the modern museum.

In the first decade of the terracotta statues’ contemporary existence, museum reports and tour guidebooks interpreted the silent terracotta army as a means to recount some simple historical lessons about Qin Shihuang’s empire. The ancient relics’ aesthetic value was invoked to illustrate the talents of the past masses of Chinese working peoples—to tell a story about the artisans who made them two thousand years ago. Since the figures were identified as “national treasures,” the anonymous artists who created them became more important than the patron who commissioned the work. The ancient workers who fashioned the warriors and their descendants in the modern state can thus lay claim to the past the warriors represent. They are not Qin Shihuang’s warriors so much as they are warriors created by the Chinese people for Qin.

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40 Fu Tianchou 1985: 11.
41 Mao Qi 1985: 60.
Imperial Tourists, Remembered Ancestors

Traces of the warriors’ earliest meanings can still be found in the contemporary museum. They persist in the older areas at the site that have not been renovated—such as the museum’s old movie theater, which still shows a 1980s-era documentary film—or in the accounts told by senior guides who learned from old tour scripts. As the reform era’s economic and political transformations have dramatically transformed the social context within which the warriors are made meaningful, the warriors now represent the past in new ways. Since the mid-1990s, the ancient artisans have all but disappeared, eclipsed by their beautiful creations and the majestic sublime of the Chinese imperial past. Rather than interpret the site, contemporary museum reports detail new discoveries and discuss the technical issues of museum conservation. Reports might describe, for example, the technology involved in manufacturing armor and helmets, but they make no mention of the workers who manufactured them (Shaanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo and Qinshihuang Bingmayong Bowuguan 2006). The “much treasured” emaciated warriors that Yuan Zhongyi described in the 1981 report, for example, are nowhere to be seen—they are neither part of any display or tour, nor are their images in any collection of photos of the terracotta warriors. While it might still be problematic to celebrate the ambivalent legacy of Qin himself, the ancient objects that are traces of that imperial legacy—examples of Chinese “culture” or “civilization” itself—endure and must be interpreted for visitors.

Tour guides are the frontline authorities who explain and answer visitors’ questions about the museum’s ancient objects. Guides are frequently used by tour groups and individuals, and when they speak, many nearby visitors also hear. Especially given the museum’s sparse narrative, guides are among the primary voices that inform visitors’ experiences. Interviews with guides and participation in a number of guided tours with foreign and Chinese groups suggest the ways that contemporary visitors read the museum in terms of an ahistorical “culture” and “civilization” that is emotionally experienced. Wang Lan, a senior museum guide who has been leading tours since the earliest days of the museum, described affective experience as being the most commonly shared response to the warriors:

I have been working here at the museum for almost forty years, and the reaction that I see most often when guests first walk into pit number one is, “Oh, this is so very incredible! Oh, so shocking!” It is a very powerful
and moving experience. Certainly, when you first walk into the first pit the initial impression is of facing head on an awesome army fully equipped and ready to engage! All people are shocked by this feeling… So this is why I say that the discovery of this place is not only significant to Chinese, but to everyone in the world.43

Tellingly, for Wang, the “iconic view” of first seeing the reconstructed mass of warriors is most significant. It is entirely an effect of the museum, as it provides a perspective on the collection with no historical precedent. The position from which tourists view the warriors is the position of an imperial eye—the position of the emperor himself at first surveying and then moving down to review the assembled soldiers. Wang described the feeling as particularly significant for Chinese who experience the shock combined with a great feeling of “self-respect and ethnic pride” when faced with the warriors’ “spirit.”

The spirit is one of strength and revitalization, she explained—one that has endured despite the “difficulties” and “decline” that China has had during the past century and a half. The view of the warriors directly evokes a sense of past imperial strength and grandeur. For her, however, this feeling has important lessons for today:

You could say that after hearing my explanation of the museum, all university students—one hundred percent of those who hear my introduction—have a similar feeling. They all say things like, “Today I really and truly feel proud to be a Chinese and I also feel a sense of responsibility as a university student in this new period. We must not lose face in front of our ancestors”… Here they can see a civilization that is over two thousand years old, and they can understand the course of China’s development. Afterwards, they reconsider the events of the most recent century—the tragedy of China’s defeat and decline. And then they will have a feeling of responsibility—a sense of duty.44

As Wang described it, an encounter with the museum’s warriors is an antidote to the melancholy of modern Chinese history. It is an experience with the culture and civilization of the past—the root of Chinese-ness—that makes claim on present generations to carry forward.

On guided tours, much is made of the fact that each warrior is an individual with its own unique features and clothing. Guides regularly emphasize that when tourists look upon the faces, they are seeing the

43 Personal Communication, June 2009.
44 Personal Communication, June 2009.
individual faces of the past. To look upon the faces is to recognize thousands of ancestors. Unlike earlier narratives that saw them as the product of Qin-era workers—linking them to the present through a line of class labor—considering them “ancestors” makes new claims through ethnic solidarity. These are, of course, not the ancestors of one’s individual family but the anonymous ancestors of the Chinese nation. They are no longer the buried remains of terracotta funerary statues that express the rule of the Qin emperor. They no longer tell the story of past artisans. In the new museum narrative, the unique individual warriors themselves are read as members of an ancient Chinese family extending back over two thousand years.

A guide in a tourist gift shop tied the sense of primordial Chinese-ness directly to the local political geography in a striking description of the shape of a single warrior:

Look at this kneeling archer. From the side, the outline of his shape looks much like the outline of the map of Shaanxi province. Think about it, this soldier was made over 2,000 years ago, and to discover that it is the same form as the map of the province! We think that is very mysterious! The terracotta warriors are one of the eight wonders of the world, right? So naturally it is also used as a symbol of tourism to Shaanxi. We all call ourselves the people of Qin—because of Qin Shihuang. Calling ourselves dragon’s descendants came from this. After all Chinese are descendants of the dragon. It all started with Qin Shihuang.

In the guide’s description, the present is connected to the past through the outline of the contemporary province of Shaanxi, which uncannily reflects the shape of a two-thousand-year-old figure. In a parallel way, contemporary Chinese are the heirs of Qin. Referencing yet another image felt to be primordial, the guide equates Qin to the founding “dragon” ancestor from which the Chinese have descended.

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45 Contrary to this popular belief, Kesner (1995: 115) describes how the warriors are not modeled on individual people.
46 Personal Communication, June 2009.
47 This phrase, “descendants of the dragon” (long de chuanren 龙的传人), was the title of a 1978 song written by the Taiwanese pop music singer Hou Dejian 侯德健 (1956—). While the song was apparently written in protest of the United States’ recognition of Mainland China in 1978, this origin has been lost over time. Today, the song continues to be a popular verse with strong national-ethnic overtones. The dragon claims a common primordial ancestor for all Chinese, and also evokes images of China’s powerful “reawakening.” In the mid-2000s, I was surprised, for example,
With class distinctions gone, all Chinese—including both Qin and the warriors—are of one family. In the absence of historical narrative, or even the earlier narrative of the warriors’ creators, there are only the narratives of the imperial tourists and the warrior-ancestors. The museum offers many opportunities to dress up as and play the role of one of the ancient warrior-masses. A visitor might pose next to a warrior, lending her hands and feet to the figure, or more ingeniously, a visitor might have his head digitally blended with a figure’s in an image.

to see the song performed right before the Chinese national anthem at high school convocations.
Beth Notar examines this “transperformance” in her study of tourism practices in southwestern China where Han tourists dress up in the clothing of local minority groups. She observes that “dressing up” offers a moment of idealized play in which tourists act out roles different than their ordinary lives, in which the Others are not considered actual people but “symbolic representatives” of touristic desire. While ethnic mimicry often takes place in a context of inequality, Notar argues that Hans engage in this play to “romantically reembody” their nostalgia for an idealized past—one that Notar interprets as a commentary on their present lives. If the terracotta warriors are the iconic representatives of China’s national past, then transperforming them can be seen as inhabiting, acting out, and playing an idealized “Chinese culture” that is deeply shared.

While the museum still marks the site and guides still tell the story of the warriors’ discovery by peasants, many tourists both in the excavated pits and at the autograph table interpret the experience quite differently. In the museum’s first decades, a signature by Mr. Yang was an encounter with a history-making peasant. Today, the signature is a tie to an ordinary person who had extraordinarily good fortune. Like the successful entrepreneurs whose prosperity in China’s hot economy began with a “first pot of gold,” the Lintong villagers were winners in the lottery of fate (Davies 2009). Even the book sold by Yang expresses this change. During the 1990s, he sold a book about the historical “wonder created by the laboring people.” Over a decade later, he is simply an oracle of the mystery, and his book, *The Legion of Imagination*, provides only a brief historical lesson accompanied by hundreds of beautiful full-color photographs for readers’ viewing pleasure (Meng Jianming 2005). A similar book sold outside the museum by another discoverer surnamed Yang, *The Heroic Imperial Army of 2200 Years Ago*, describes the warriors as “a symbol of ethnic pride.” “As the mysterious veil covering the Mausoleum of Qin Shihuang is progressively lifted,” the text explains, “a day of imperial elegance over 2200 years old is becoming gradually clearer and more distinct before our eyes.”

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49 Wu, Xiaocong et al. 2007: 14.
In and around the museum, one cannot miss the many thousands of reproduced miniature warriors for sale, spread out along the tables in the many dozens of tourist shops. Unlike the generally uniformly sized warriors in the museum, however, the “authentic reproductions” that have been “carefully modeled after the originals” can be purchased in different sizes to fit any tourist’s budget (figure 2.4). In fact, a visit to a factory that produces officially certified museum-quality replicas is part of many package itineraries to the Terracotta Warrior Museum.

These reproductions are central to the memorial power of the Terracotta Warrior Museum. On a basic level, their size reflects their financial value and perhaps the status of the consumer—the closer to full-size, the more authentic. They are more important, however, as souvenirs that visitors take with them to keep for themselves or give to friends or family. As souvenirs, they provide visitors with both a connection to the experience of having visited the site and the sight of the amassed warriors. Writing on the power of souvenirs as objects valuable for their ability to be narrated, Susan Stewart describes how the objects allow for the translation of historical experience into personal time through telling a story (Stewart 1993). While memory is not a term that she uses in her discussion, the stories Stewart describes are clearly narratives of memory, and the souvenir is the bridge between the past experience and the present retelling. It validates the story that is told, lending the persuasive power of a physical object to prove the truth of the narrative. Thus, the souvenir connects together the site, the object, the giver, and the receiver into an imagined relationship.

In the case of the museum, the reproduced warriors serve to semiotically deliver the warriors’ contemporary meanings—even while their purchase in the store practices touristic consumption of “high culture.” As a salesperson in a factory making certified reproductions summarized, the reproductions claim a relationship to the meanings and feelings imputed to the original warriors:

Many people like to take one of our warriors and put them by the door to be very Chinese in flavor. By doing this, they get a feeling and send a message for people not to forget the pride of China—our two-thousand-year-old pride... Unlike ancient objects from other countries, these are
QIN SHIHUANG’S TERRACOTTA WARRIORS

Figure 2.4: Warrior figure souvenirs of every size for sale in the museum
unique because they are a huge number of individual faces. These are the individual faces of thousands of our ancestors.  

The reproductions in this formulation are unique ancient Chinese objects emotionally and memorially charged with nationalist pride and filial obligation.

If the emotional reaction upon encountering the reconstructed warriors is a “museum effect” felt upon “finally seeing” the reconstructed warriors as informed by prior texts, then the reproductions serve to amplify and proliferate the value of an “original” that is already a contemporary staging of the past. In other words, the souvenir remembers the reconstructed warriors in the museum as “originals” and the narratives of their value. This, then, adds more significance to actually seeing the “real” (reconstructed) warriors. As was suggested in the previous section, however, what is circulated is the memory of an emotional reaction to an experience where the lack of a historical context is read as a “sublime” expression of China’s national essence.

Conclusion

The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing was a moment in which the Chinese government signaled its arrival on the international stage. The multiweek extravaganza offered symbols both in the achievements of Olympic athletes and in associated performances that China had overcome its past and was heading toward a prosperous future (Caffrey 2009). Qin Shihuang’s Terracotta warriors also made an appearance. Thanks to the sponsorship of the American Johnson and Johnson Corporation, five actual warriors were shipped from the Xi’an museum and put on display.

Beffiting the spectacular nature of the Olympic event, however, the company also sponsored an impressive performance with a giant nine-meter-tall Terracotta warrior marionette. The performance, enabled by cranes and teams of puppeteers, featured the ancient funerary statue and an equally large marionette of a young Chinese girl in modern dress together chasing a blue butterfly. Ostensibly, the performance

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50 Personal Communication, June 2009.
51 Of course, this is not to suggest that because culture in this case is an “imagined” museum effect, it is not real. In his formulation of “imagined communities,” Benedict Anderson (1991) demonstrates how the imagining creates very real communities.
was described as offering a reminder to preserve the valuable world cultural heritage that the ancient warriors represent. The language of the advertising materials, however, described the performance as a “vibrant cultural performance” that brought the ancient warrior into interaction with modern China, as represented by the Chinese girl. Chasing the butterfly in playful wonder was intended to demonstrate the “timeless strength and loving concern of the warriors” and the equally “timeless values of caring, peace and friendship” (cf. Nanfang Ribao 2008 & Johnson and Johnson 2008).

In the Olympic performance, the warriors’ memory was entirely refigured as a symbol of ancient culture and transnational friendship that is free of politics and infused with emotion. Today, the giant figures created for the Olympics stand together holding hands in the spacious atrium of the new exhibition center at the Terracotta Warrior Museum, which is typically the final stop on a visit to the museum (figure 2.5).

The emergence of the warriors at the crucial moment between the end of the Cultural Revolution and China’s push to globalization serendipitously provided the reform-era state with objects that could
flexibly “re-member” the state in explicitly ethnic or cultural terms rather than the earlier anti-imperialist or Marxist ones. As ancient artifacts, they work to elide politics—for example, the revolutionary foundation of a new stage of history upon which the young PRC was founded—in favor of a remembered cultural China that is many thousands of years older. In the process, they reorient national identity along cultural nationalist lines (Guo Yingjie 2004). Because their authenticity is based on practices of memory, their social value is flexible and emotionally persuasive.

Given the global recognition of the terracotta warriors, it is not surprising that the Museum of Qin Shihuang’s Soldier and Horse Funerary Statues is a significant site for representing and negotiating “Chinese culture.” The representational contexts of memory that this chapter has outlined describe how the silent terracotta warriors have been imbued with meaning and value by tying national identity to the imaginings of place as sited and framed by the museum and the tourist industry. The museum offers a carefully organized “sight,” a tableau of the ancient Chinese past that is animated by touristic imagination as informed by prior texts of the warriors’ significance—with each visit propagating new memories of an ancient China.

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52 Such a transition finds common ground with Vijay Prashad’s (2007) descriptions of the change in Third World nationalisms.
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