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The Emperor Is Dead. His Army Marches On.

Two millennia ago, when the last shovelful of dirt fell on China's terra-cotta soldiers, the thought was that they would be seen in this life no more. Buried in an emperor's tomb, they would thenceforth secure and patrol imperial turf in the afterlife.

Fate had other plans. Since being exhumed in the late 20th century the same soldiers have been on a global Long March, moving from one sold-out museum appearance to the next, and serving as, among other things, emblems of China's neo-imperial clout in the here and now.

HOLLAND COTTER That army, or a small piece of it, has just arrived in New York City in an exhibition called "Terracotta Warriors: Defenders of China's First Emperor" at Discovery Times Square. Only nine of the estimated 8,000 figures entombed at Xian in central China have made the trip. But they're in great shape and, fitted out with weapons, armor, livestock, cash and a portable kitchen, they're a sight to see.

They also come with an action-adventure narrative, part deep history, part archaeological romance. The history goes back to well before the third century B.C., when north-central China was a chaos of feuding states, all intent on domination. The one called Qin, ruled by horse breeders whose main trade came to lie outside China, seemed least likely to succeed. But when, after centuries of clashes, the dust finally settled, the Qin was left standing, and in command.

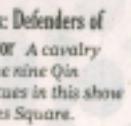
Its leaders were almost absurdly ambitious.

Forget about being big fish in a small territorial pond. They wanted to fill and control the biggest pond, China itself, then consider the center of the world, and make quick progress toward this goal.

Victories bred further ambitions. Why stop at China? Why not rule the cosmos, or a healthy slice of it?

That was the aim of the penultimate and greatest Qin ruler, Ying Zheng, who was born in 259 B.C., as-

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Terracotta Warriors: Defenders of China's First Emperor. A cavalry soldier is one of the nine Qin dynasty tomb statues in this show at Discovery Times Square.

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sumed the throne at 13 and bestowed on himself a freshly invented title: Qin Shi Huangdi, or First Emperor of Qin, which really meant first emperor of China. Power, for him, was the elixir of life. He couldn't get enough, and seemed neurotically afraid to stop trying.

Having subdued immense tracts of China's geography he set about conquering its history too. He gave orders that all chronicles other than those that flatteringly documented the Qin family line be destroyed. Once he had the past under his thumb, he turned a cold-freak eye to the future: he would colonize heaven.

This he did, or tried to, by creating one of the most ambitious monuments to self on record: a tomb complex more than 40 years in the making — it was still under way when he died at 50 — that reproduced, to scale and in imperishable form, imperial life as he knew it on earth.

Empires can't exist without armies, so he commissioned one made up of thousands of fighters, from five-star generals to humble foot soldiers, modeled from clay, roughly life size, ready to serve. Each figure was dressed by rank, though with uniforms individually customized: an extra sash here, a bulkier coat there. Faces were differentiated too. Although a very limited number of facial molds were used, each face was given hand-modeled features — noses, ears, mouths, mustaches and so on — so that no two looked alike.

The collective result was, and is, remarkable: a fighting machine with multiple personalities. All the figures were finally placed, in battle formation and with teams of terra-cotta horses, in three basementlike pits, which were covered over. Other types of clay figures — of civic officials, servants and court acrobats — were buried nearby. And all were under the watchful eye of the emperor, who was interred deep within a mountain of packed earth, his coffin reputedly surrounded by a mot of toxic mercury.

So that was the history. The Qin empire survived the emperor by four years, to be replaced by the long-lived Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.). The tomb remained; its contents were forgotten for centuries, which is where the archaeological romance kicks in.

In 1974 farmers who were sinking a well outside Xian hit pottery fragments, which turned out to be the figures of soldiers. Archaeologists were summoned and digging began. It continues today in and around the Terra-Cotta Museum.



PHOTOGRAPH BY GLENNDON TOWERS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

In "Terracotta Warriors," a life-size charioteer and horse from the third century B.C., above, and an older pre-Qin dynasty roof tile, top left.

now at the site.

Huge size and a huge tourist draw, the museum is an interesting mix of art display, theater and theme park. The Times Square show — organized with the Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau, the Shaanxi Provincial Museum Association and the China Institute in Manhattan — in certain ways brings it to mind.

First, theater. Visitors, admitted by timed ticket to the Discovery center, are ushered into a smallish room to watch a four-minute docudrama-style film on the First Emperor's tomb.

When it's done, the screen lifts to reveal a gallery holding several ponderous bronze ritual objects and an extraordinary suit of Qin tomb armor made from tiny wire-linked limestone

plaques.

There you move past many more objects, including festive ceramic bowls, stoves, jugs and ceremonial dinnerware, along with some previews of coming attractions. Among them is the earliest example of a terra-cotta warrior yet found in China. Dating from about a century before the First Emperor's reign, it is clearly a prototype of the army to be, though a horsey and diminutive one, the size of a child's toy.

An optional second film interlude follows, and there is more theater, as the first life-size tomb figures come into view.

We've seen some of these sculptures in the city before, notably in the Guggenheim Museum's 1998 exhibition "China: 5000 Years." But they lose some

of their punch with repeat viewings, and the no-frills display here makes a haunting thing of them.

Under spotlights, details of craftsmanship and marks of shattering are equally visible. An extra-tall army general seems intent on nailing us with his glance, though what we focus on are the maimed fingernails on his demurely crossed hands.

A bare-chested acrobat, face set in stoic concentration, one finger raised high, is, almost tragically, missing a leg. Repair lines cover his body like veins.

With its extremes of light and dark, the show at this point gets a little churchy. But that doesn't last, thanks to the intervention of a third and last short film, an excerpt from a longer one on regular view at the Xian museum. The

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More images from the exhibition:
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clip shows a full-dress re-enactment of a Qin battle scene, with an army of archers shooting at an enemy town. The whizzing arrows on the soundtrack sound genuinely dangerous, like a tornado.

The clip is a hoot, pure Hollywood, special effects and all, and a useful reminder of what the emperor's army is really about: imperial policing in perpetuity, potential war without end, amen.

This impression softens with the appearance of Han material in the last few galleries. Some viewers may find this a letdown. I found it a relief. Militarism is still here, but it's no longer the whole story. And gigantism is gone, replaced by a modestly proportioned naturalism. You see this in tenderly observed clay images of farm animals, and in the figures of two-foot-high, anatomically correct nude soldiers, looking childlike and vulnerable without their fabric uniforms, now turned to dust.

The show's final piece, a set of heavy stone panels, from a Han tomb door, mixes all this up. There's plenty of violence: hunts in heaven, battles on earth. At the same time there are goddesses in bloom, lovers in windows and what seem to be amateur theatricals in progress.

At the beginning of the Discovery show we enter a dark tomb and the realm of imperial ego. At the end we exit through another tomb, unassuming, even charming, out into the bustle and lights of the theater district. Art is great. The terra-cotta warriors are awesome. And ours is a good way to go.



The warriors even had stone armor, above. Spotlights make details of craftsmanship and damage clearly visible.