Another Life of the First Emperor: A Story of Scholarly Biases

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Antony Barbieri-Low presents an engaging and well researched analysis of the changing image of the First Emperor of Qin throughout centuries. Yet the study suffers from insufficient attention to nuances of Chinese political culture, from outright dismission of looted manuscripts (some of which are essential for understanding the Qin), and, primarily, from the author's own biases. Do these biases suggest the author's desire to use the First Emperor as a foil in U.S. political debates?

The First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇帝 (r. 247–210, emp. 221–210 BCE) is a pivotal figure in China's history. Having conquered the rival "hero-states" in a series of brief yet bloody campaigns of 230–221 BCE, he put an end to the era of fragmentation and internecine warfare that had plagued the Zhou 周 realm for more than five centuries. This in itself was a monumental achievement, but more was to follow. During his short tenure as an emperor, he reshaped China's terrain, destroying internal fortifications and ordering the creation of new lines of communication; established a uniform administrative system; unified weights, measures, laws, coins, script, and the official lexicon; engaged in aggressive social engineering projects; and the like. Not all of these steps were equally successful, but overall, they shaped the contours of the Chinese empire for millennia to come.[1] Not a single person before Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976) would rival the First Emperor in terms of his impact on the realm's social, political, and even cultural trajectory.

Yet these achievements were marred by no less monumental failures. The emperor's military campaigns (which violated his solemn promise that "warfare will never rise again" 兵不復起),[2] his fervent construction activities (of which a megalomaniacal mausoleum complex and the Great Wall are the most notable), his harsh penal regime that turned dozens if not hundreds of thousands of people into involuntary laborers, and his brutal assault on independent scholars, which culminated in the infamous biblioclasm of 213 BCE—all weakened his regime. Just a few years after his death, the Qin dynasty, which was projected to rule for "a myriad generations," was swept away by a popular uprising of unprecedented scope and ferocity. This fiasco contributed to the highly negative image of the Qin and the First Emperor in the eyes of imperial literati and their modern heirs in world academy. Despite periodic reevaluations of the First Emperor, most notably in the waning years of Mao's rule, his image remains overwhelmingly negative. The controversies around this figure are fasci-

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1. For the magnitude and depth of Qin's impact on the conquered territories—and for the challenges it faced—see, e.g., Maxim Korolkov, *The Imperial Network in Ancient China: The Foundation of Sinitic Empire in Southern East Asia* (London: Routledge, 2022).

2. Cited from the First Emperor's inscription on Mt. Yi 嶧山 (219 BCE); see Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: AOS, 2000), 14.

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nating, especially viewed through the prism of the discussants' overt or covert political and intellectual agendas.

The changing views of the First Emperor stand at the core of Anthony Barbieri-Low's new monograph. This lucidly written and lavishly illustrated book (with no fewer than ten color plates) will surely be welcomed by teachers and students. The book comprises ten chapters divided into four sections. The first section introduces historical narratives and evaluations of the Frist Emperor starting with Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 90 BCE) and ending with modern scholars. The second explores paleographic evidence about Qin's administration and social life. The third focuses on conflicting views of picturesque aspects of First Emperor's reign, such as a failed attempt on his life by Jing Ke 荊軻 (d. 227 BCE) and the book burning of 213 BCE. The final section, "The First Emperor in the Cultural Imagination," explores literary and cinematic presentations of the Qin ruler and of his mausoleum, famous for its terracotta warriors. In his ten chapters, Barbieri-Low excels at combining an extraordinary broad range of evidence—from letters written by Qin conscripts to a novel by Elias Canetti (1905–1994) and a short story by Franz Kafka (1883–1924); from essays by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819) and Zhang Binglin (otherwise known as Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, 1869–1936) to Anti-Confucian Campaign-era (1972–1975) pamphlets, from Han stone reliefs to current movies, TV series, and even video games.[3] The result is a rich and highly readable book. Both the author's erudition and the effort invested in collecting relevant evidence are awe-inspiring.

The author's primary goal is to offer "a meta-analysis, a longue durée examination of the historical interpretation and cultural reception of the First Emperor" (p. 8). The book, which is hoped to become "a kind of sourcebook for students and scholars interested in Qin studies" (p. 8) primarily targets undergraduate students, as is clear from the very limited use of Chinese characters (most of which are relegated to the glossary). Nonetheless, parts of the book will be of great interest for a professional audience as well. Some of the chapters (most notably chapter 5, "Voices of the People," which explores the human costs of Qin campaigns, as well as chapter 7, "Burning the Books and Killing the Scholars," which focuses on the perceptions of Qin's most infamous atrocities) are truly excellent, and I shall incorporate them in my classes. And yet, with all due respect to Barbieri-Low's efforts, erudition, and eloquence, I think that the book as a whole does not deserve to become a sourcebook; actually, in the eyes of the present reviewer, it suffers from severe flaws that invalidate much of its undeniable strengths. In what follows, I shall enumerate these flaws in increasing order of severity.

1. QIN AND CHINA'S POLITICAL CULTURE

I shall start with a mild point. At times the author seems to have been overwhelmed by the magnitude of his collected evidence, which results in a less nuanced discussion than could have been hoped for. This is particularly notable when the discussion touches upon sensitive issues of imperial Chinese political culture. Recall that the First Emperor was regarded—

3. The only significant genre omitted by Barbieri-Low is drama (both traditional operas and modern plays). For instance, chapter 6, which discusses the image of Jing Ke and of the evil genius of Qin, Zhao Gao 趙高 (d. 207 BCE), could benefit from addressing their conceptualizations on the stage. For Jing Ke, the most notable piece is the play by the Nobel Prize-winning writer, Mo Yan 莫言 (b. 1955), "Our Jing Ke" (*Women de Jing Ke* 我們的荊軻 (first published in 2004; performed in 2011); see Yue Zhang, "Reconfiguring History through Literature: Cultural Memory and Mo Yan's Historical Play *Our Jing Ke*," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 34.1 (2022): 97–127. For Zhao Gao, see, e.g., the traditional opera, *Yuzhou feng* 宇宙鋒 (The cosmic cutting edge); Luo Tao 羅濤, "Jingju *Yuzhou feng* zhong Zhao Gao de shiyan tihui" 京劇《宇宙鋒》中趙高的飾演體會, *Zhongguo wenyijia* 2019.1: 51.

for good or for bad—as the creator of the empire's political system and political culture, in particular its intrusive and activist political apparatus and the imperial institution itself. Since major aspects of the imperial system could not be openly debated, it was easier for the discussants to express their views through denigrating (or, conversely, endorsing) the figure of the First Emperor. Many of the arguments about the First Emperor should be understood through the prism of the debaters' ideological viewpoints.

Take, for instance, chapter 2, "The Confucians' Villain and His Rehabilitation." Barbieri-Low begins by pointing out, correctly, that Confucians detested the First Emperor because of his failure either to "select upright ministers (like themselves) or listen to the remonstrance of scholar-officials (like themselves)" (p. 30). He is also right that supporters of the First Emperor were those who sought "a forceful figure of a unified and powerful China" (p. 44). What is lost, however, is that sometimes a single person could both dislike the First Emperor's sidelining of righteous ministers and yet admire his centralizing policies. Take Zhang Juzheng 张居正 (1525–1582), discussed on pp. 40–43. Barbieri-Low is right in pointing out that Zhang's *Emperor's Mirror: Illustrated and Explained* (*Dijian tushuo* 帝鑒圖説) could be read as a "simplified . . . Confucian indictment of the First Emperor." What he fails to note, however, is a variety of other references to Qin in Zhang's essays and memorials, in which he displayed greater sympathy to the First Emperor's enterprise.[4] The reasons for this divergence in judgment are not difficult to find. In his position as the young emperor's tutor, Zhang followed the Confucian path of deriding the First Emperor, who sidelined the literati. In his capacity as a major statesman, predicated on subjugating excessively powerful local elites, Zhang was a part of the centralizers' camp to which the First Emperor himself belonged.[5] By obliterating this complexity, Barbieri-Low inadvertently flattens his narrative, making imperial Chinese political discourse appear much more simplistic than it was.

Another instance in which one could dig deeper into the hidden topoi of Qin-related debates is the case of Zhao Gao 趙高 (d. 207 BCE), discussed in chapter 6. Zhao Gao was the infamous plotter who had allegedly contributed more than anybody else to Qin's collapse in the aftermath of the First Emperor's death. Barbieri-Low laudably dismisses the common erroneous identification of Zhao Gao as a eunuch; rather, Zhao was among those who "*privately* served the emperor in the palace" (as distinguished from "*li* 吏 officials who *publicly* served the government" [p. 148; italics in the original]). Zhao Gao "was put in charge of the emperor's entourage and his personal care when he was on tour, even controlling the imperial seals and all imperial correspondence" (p. 151). This position allowed him to manipulate the imperial succession, elevating an inept and pliable prince Huhai 胡亥 (d. 207 BCE) instead of the incumbent crown prince Fusu 扶蘇 (d. 210 BCE). If the *Shiji* narrative is to be trusted, under Huhai, Zhao Gao became the de facto dictator of the empire; he even plotted to ascend the throne himself, but failed and was eventually eliminated by Huhai's heir, Ziying 子嬰 (d. 206 BCE).

Barbieri-Low excels in narrating Zhao Gao's story. He correctly identifies Zhao Gao as one of the characters who "were originally only sideshows to the main event" of the First Emperor' rule, but who later "became useful 'to think with.'" Yet the author's reduction of later invocations of Zhao Gao to "interpretations of the nature of ambition, gender, and evil" (p. 156) strikes me as a missed opportunity. Actually, Zhao Gao's story as narrated by Sima

4. For details, see, e.g., Gao Shouxian 高壽仙, "Zhiti yonggang: Zhang Juzheng zhengzhi sixiang lunxi" 治體用剛：張居正政治思想論析, *Jiangnan daxue xuebao (renwen shehuikexue ban)* 12.1 (2013): 65–73.

5. For Zhang's policies and his clashes with the literati (and especially with local elites in the rich Jiangnan area), see Harry Miller, *State versus Gentry in Late Ming Dynasty China, 1572–1644* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 31–54.

Qian and referred to in later literature is not just about of Zhao's personal vice. It can be read as Sima Qian's reflection on the power of the inner court in the aftermath of the establishment of imperial institutions.

To understand the peculiarity of Zhao Gao's case, recall that in China's long preimperial history one can find almost no examples of the inner court playing a significant political role. Except for the ruler's wives and concubines who could wreak havoc in succession by promoting their offspring at the expense of an incumbent crown prince,[6] we find very little evidence that personal proximity to the ruler mattered a lot. In *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Zuo Tradition*) and other historical and quasi-historical texts from the Warring States period, we do have examples of disgruntled bodyguards, eunuchs, and even entertainers who either assassinated their master, or helped the external assassins, or otherwise undermined the sovereign's power; but almost invariably their role was auxiliary to that of major players from among princes and powerful ministers.[7] For instance, in *Han Feizi* 韓非子—the true encyclopedia of treachery—we do encounter warnings against the ruler's sons, wives, concubines, bedfellows, jesters, entertainers, and the like, but their role is overall negligible in comparison to high ministers who are identified as the ruler-devouring tigers.[8] A usurpation by a ruler's personal servant would have been next to unthinkable prior to Zhao Gao.

The major reason for Zhao Gao's emergence as an unprecedentedly powerful political actor was the change in the nature of China's rulership once King Zheng of Qin proclaimed himself "emperor" (more accurately, "August Thearch," *huangdi* 皇帝) in 221 BCE. The change was not just in the ruler's title. Rather, the First Emperor appropriated the posture of the long-awaited savior, the sagacious True Monarch, who had put an end to centuries of turmoil and realized the universal aspirations for peace and stability. The implications were first of all political: by proclaiming himself sage, the emperor placed himself at the top of intellectual and not just political hierarchy, relegating the ministers from the position of potential teachers of the sovereign to his obedient servitors.[9] Second, the change was symbolic: the emperor adopted a new theomorphic posture, as exemplified by the title August Thearch with

6. Two famous examples are Baosi's 褒姒 machinations, which brought about a major crisis of the Zhou royal house in 771 BCE (see details in Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou 1045–771 BC* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006], 198–203), and Li Ji's 麗姬 plot in the state of Jin 晉 in the mid-seventh century BCE (see *Zuozhuan*, Zhuang 28.2; Xi 4.6; Xi 9.4; references to *Zuozhuan* are to Stephen W. Durrant, Li Wai-yee, and David Schaberg, trs., *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* [Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2016]; for a more embellished version, see *Guoyu jijie* 國語集解, ed. Xu Yuangao 徐元誥, Wang Shumin 王樹民, and Shen Changyun 沈長雲 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002], chaps. 7–8 [Jin 1–2]).

7. For bodyguards (more precisely, a ruler's charioteer and the spearman) assassinating the ruler, see, e.g., *Zuozhuan*, Wen 18.2; for a palace attendant helping the assassins, see Xiang 25.2; for a music master instigating political crisis, see Xiang 14.4a. Perhaps the most notorious group of a ruler's personal servants responsible for political turmoil are the cook Yiya 易牙 and the eunuch Diao 豎刁, who served Lord Huan of Qi 齊桓公 and instigated a succession struggle in the aftermath of his death in 643 BCE (*Zuozhuan*, Xi 17.5). Whereas in *Zuozhuan*, it is clear that succession struggles were in place even before Yiya and Diao's plots, in later texts, the sinister nature of the plotters becomes ever more explicit. See, e.g., the chapter "Xiao cheng" 小稱 of *Guanzi* (*Guanzi jiaozhu* 管子校注, ed. Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004] 32.608–9) and the chapter "Shi guo" 十過 of *Han Feizi* (*Han Feizi xin jiaozhu* 韓非子新校注, ed. Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷 [Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2000], 10.228).

8. See especially chapters 9, "Eight Villainies" ("Ba jian" 八姦) and 17, "Guarding Against the Enemy Within" ("Bei nei" 備内). For the tiger simile, see *Han Feizi* 5.74 ("Zhu dao" 主道); 8.163 ("Yang quan" 揚搉).

9. See Yuri Pines, "The Messianic Emperor: A New Look at Qin's Place in China's History," in *Birth of an Empire: The State of Qin Revisited*, ed. Yuri Pines et al. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014), 258–79.

its explicit religious connotations.[10] All of a sudden, the relative parity between the ruler and his ministers, which had characterized much of the Warring States period was gone. The ruler became sacrosanct, and this sacredness emanated from his personality onto his paraphernalia (such as seals) and even, to a certain extent, onto the members of his personal entourage. Therefore, Zhao Gao, the emperor's trusted servitor in possession of the seals, could first manipulate the succession, and second, rule unopposed in the name of the weakling emperor. Both acts would have been difficult or next to impossible to perform in the Warring States era. In Imperial China, by contrast, they became common, as will be proven again a few years later, when Empress Lü 呂后 (d. 180 BCE), monopolized the power of the Han dynasty and almost ended the rule of the imperial Liu 劉 clan.[11]

The story of Zhao Gao as told by Sima Qian and as invoked by countless remonstrators and historians throughout history was less about "ambition, gender, and evil" (although these topoi were surely present). It was the sad story about the immense magnitude of the imperial power that could easily fall into the hands of unscrupulous and inept persons. It was a subtle rumination about the price that came with the success of China's imperial system. The position of an absolute monarch was the logical outcome of the Warring States-period thinkers' common quest: "stability is in unity."[12] Yet having created the Golem of emperorship, Chinese thinkers and statesmen discovered that it could become the weakest link in the imperial enterprise. The solution to the ensuing tension was not found until the very end of China's imperial era.

2. THE PROBLEM OF LOOTED MANUSCRIPTS

The book's second problem is incomparably graver: the deliberate neglect of data that were not obtained according to the standards adopted by the author, viz., the content of looted manuscripts. For two decades, from roughly 1994 to 2015, the field of early China studies witnessed the rapid proliferation of looted manuscripts purchased by the leading academic institutions in China's mainland and Hong Kong at the Hong Kong antiquities market. This deplorable, even if indirect, cooperation between respected research centers and tomb looters has given rise to much indignation, which was first voiced with utmost clarity by Paul R. Goldin, who declared in 2013 that he refuses to make use of looted manuscripts. Since then, the issue—in both its ethical and its practical aspects (the latter referring to the problem of authenticating unprovenanced manuscripts)—has been discussed by half a dozen scholars in the field, including the current reviewer.[13] Naturally, our views differ, but at

10. See Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 225–42.

11. For Empress Lü's power, see chapter 9 in *Shiji* and chapters 2–3 in Ban Gu's 班固 *Hanshu* 漢書.

12. For the slogan "stability is in unity" 定于一, see *Mengzi yizhu* 孟子譯注, ed. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 1.6. For China's monarchic system as the common desideratum of competing thinkers, see Liu Zehua 劉澤華, *Zhongguo de wangquan zhuyi* 中國的王權主義 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2000); Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2009) 13–111.

13. See Goldin, "*Heng xian* and the Problem of Studying Looted Artifacts," *Dao* 13 (2013): 153–60; Christopher J. Foster, "Introduction to the Peking University Han Bamboo Strips: On the Authentication and Study of Purchased Manuscripts," *Early China* 40 (2017): 233–39; Martin Kern, "'Xi Shuai' 蟋蟀 ('Cricket') and Its Consequences: Issues in Early Chinese Poetry and Textual Studies," *Early China* 42 (2019): 45–49; Yuri Pines, *Zhou History Unearthed: The Bamboo Manuscript* Xinian *and Early Chinese Historiography* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 2020), 43–44; Michael Friedrich, "Producing and Identifying Forgeries of Chinese Manuscripts," in *Fakes and Forgeries of Written Artefacts from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern China*, ed. Cécile Michel and Michael Friedrich (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 329–30; Edward L. Shaughnessy, "A Note on the Authenticity of the

least we have one thing in common: we all explain our choice as to whether to take looted manuscripts into account. By contrast, Barbieri-Low opts for a simple imperative: "scholars should completely avoid engaging with these texts" (p. 8). Not a single reference to current debates follows. The goal is not to discuss the matter but to intimidate students and junior researchers. This imperious tone is, to put it mildly, annoying.

To clarify: any scholar has the right to engage or ignore any piece of evidence, be these looted manuscripts or Cultural Revolution-period pamphlets, which were often written under duress. Our field is broad enough to allow research into topics that do not require the use of problematic materials. If Barbieri-Low had restricted himself to imperial-era debates about the First Emperor, he could easily have avoided engagement with looted manuscripts altogether. Yet once he decided to include topics related to, e.g., Qin's historiography or Qin's social life, his disregard of looted materials became untenable.

I shall illustrate this point with a single example: the story of the First Emperor's heir, the Second Emperor, Huhai (r. 210–207 BCE), discussed on pp. 103–8. The discussion is generally perceptive and engaging, with one major omission. Barbieri-Low analyzes the narration in Sima Qian's *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian) as though it were reflective of Sima Qian's personal agendas. This line of argumentation could have been valid prior to 2011, when the manuscript *Zhao Zheng shu* 趙正書 (Zheng of Zhao's document), from the collection of the Han-era looted manuscripts in the possession of Peking University (PKU), was published. The text, which adopts a clear anti-Qin stance (as is immediately evident from its pejorative name for the First Emperor, "Zheng of Zhao" 趙正), focuses on Huhai's enthronement and ensuing reign of terror. Despite certain similarities to *Shiji*, the narrative differs in many crucial details, and is neither derivative of *Shiji* nor did it serve as major source material for the latter. Rather, it reflects some of the "bad press" that Qin in general and its Second Emperor in particular received early in the Han dynasty. Sima Qian's portrait of the Second Emperor cannot be understood without paying attention to the proliferation of anti-Qin narratives before and during his lifetime, of which *Zhao Zheng shu* is representative.[14] By refusing to acknowledge the existence of this manuscript—not even in a footnote—Barbieri-Low does a huge disservice to his readers. Such examples can easily be multiplied.[15]

Tsinghua Manuscripts and the Ethics of Preserving Looted Cultural Artifacts," in *The Tsinghua University Warring States Bamboo Manuscripts: Studies and Translations*, vol. 1 (Beijing: Tsinghua Univ. Press, 2023), 16–21. See also Goldin's follow-up, "The Problem of Looted Artifacts in Chinese Studies: A Rejoinder to Critics" *Dao* 22.1 (2023): 145–51.

14. For a sample of studies of *Zhao Zheng shu* and its relevance for understanding the *Shiji* narrative, see Chen Kanli 陳侃理, "*Shiji* yu *Zhao Zheng shu:* Lishi jiyi de zhanzheng" 《史記》與《趙正書》：歷史記憶的戰爭, in *Beijing luntan (2016): Wenming de hexie yu gongtong fanrong; huxin, hezuo, gongxiang* 北京論壇（2016）：文明的和諧與共同繁荣; 互信·合作·共享 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2016); Xin Deyong 辛德勇, *Shengsi Qin Shihuang* 生死秦始皇 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2019); Chun Fung Tong, "Framing the Qin Collapse: Redaction and Authorship of the *Shiji* 史記," *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 75.4 (2021): 901–46. On the authenticity of PKU manuscripts, see Foster, "Introduction."

15. Recall the richness of the looted Qin manuscripts acquired by the Yuelu Academy 嶽麓書院 (Hunan). Their content is highly pertinent to Barbieri-Low's discussion in chapters four and five. However, the author does not even acknowledge these manuscripts' existence. This contrasts with a more prudent approach adopted by Barbieri-Low in his previous publication coauthored with Robin D. S. Yates, *Law, State, and Society in Early Imperial China: A Study with Critical Edition and Translation of the Legal Texts from Zhangjiashan Tomb No. 247* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). There the Yuelu Academy materials were referred to in dozens of footnotes.

3. "USING THE PAST TO SERVE THE PRESENT"

My final point of criticism concerns the most problematic aspect of Barbieri-Low's book, namely, its manipulativeness. Look, e.g., at the author's use of historical parallelisms. Time and again, the First Emperor is compared to Adolf Hitler. This comparison could be understandable if it remained on the level of the infamous book burning (pp. 173–78), although in this regard Barbieri-Low laudably notes the differences between the two cases (p. 182). But parallels are hinted at elsewhere (e.g., pp. 148, 220, 224, and 239). If the author were an undereducated journalist or politician for whom "Hitler" is simply a commonplace term of abuse, I would ignore it. But I would expect a professional historian either to undertake a serious comparison or avoid such a misleading and emotionally loaded parallel altogether.

Sometimes, the Nazi parallels are woefully off the mark. For instance, the author compares Jing Ke's failed plot to assassinate King Zheng of Qin (the future First Emperor) with Claus von Stauffenberg's (1907–1944) attempt on Hitler's life (July 20, 1944) (p. 148). Yet recall that Stauffenberg and his co-conspirators were not outsiders, but mid-level officers in the Nazi regime, whose plot materialized when the war was already lost; their goal was not to prevent Hitler's aggression, but to save Germany from devastation, and, if possible, from the coming Soviet occupation. By contrast, Jing Ke was a desperado serving the moribund Yan 燕 polity, whose resort to a dagger as a means to change history was repeatedly ridiculed by later critics, even though Jing Ke's personal courage was greatly admired.[16] Perhaps he could be compared to a Russian student, Dmitry Karakozov, who tried—unsuccessfully—to kill Tsar Alexander II in 1866, thereby starting the era of revolutionary terror in Russian history. Or if we want to fantasize about what would have happened had the assassination succeeded, we may compare Jing Ke with the Serb student Gavrilo Princip, whose 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand sent Europe into the Great War. Or, in terms of the futility of Jing Ke's plans to reverse history through killing an individual, his attempt can perhaps be compared to John W. Booth's assassination of Lincoln in 1865. Each of these cases were much closer to that of Jing Ke than that of Stauffenberg. That Barbieri Low used the latter parallel, even if only en passant, is reflective of his desire to strengthen the Nazi parallels with Qin, while avoiding a serious discussion.

Let us leave misleading parallels or weird insinuations aside (e.g., that Qin might have outlawed homosexuality [p. 91]).[17] What makes the book truly manipulative is its intolerable flattening of studies of the First Emperor in current China. Having discussed in sufficient detail the changing views of the First Emperor prior to Mao's death in 1976, the author dedicates a single passage to the post-1976 debates, telling the readers that China's research thenceforth focused on the First Emperor's mausoleum or Qin laws, whereas dealing with the emperor's role as a political symbol shifted to "novels, movies, and television serials. From these and other media, we observe that in the last thirty years, the First Emperor has been used as a tool of ultranationalism in China and is even now used to bolster authoritarianism at home and abroad" (p. 80). Period.

I shall not quibble with the author's much abused "nationalist," "ultranationalist" or "very nationalist" label applied to any expression of support of Qin's unification for ending centuries of internecine warfare.[18] If Barbieri-Low prefers life under the Warring States, I respect

16. See more in Yuri Pines, "A Hero Terrorist: Adoration of Jing Ke Revisited," *Asia Major* 21.2 (2008): 1–34 (cited by Barbieri-Low on p. 141).

17. There is evidence of outlawing homosexual rape under Qin's laws (Barbieri-Low and Yates, *Law, State, and Society*, 624 n. 28). But I am not aware of any evidence that consensual intercourse was forbidden.

18. The (ultra)nationalist label would be more appropriate had the authors and screenwriters hailed the First

his choice. Nor will I address the author's simplistic analysis of Chinese movies (chapter 9), because these are in any case quite shallow and do not merit in-depth discussion. What matters to me is the deliberate and appalling disregard for the divergence of opinions among Chinese scholars and intellectuals about the First Emperor's role, and the ongoing heated debates. Take for instance, the author's silence about such a major study as Zhang Fentian's 張分田 *Biography of Qin's First Emperor* (2003).[19] Or think of the following summary of Qin's unification by a Chinese colleague:

> It is true that putting an end to prolonged military turmoil and attaining unification reflected the general course of social development and was attuned to the people's aspirations. Yet the fact that unification was attained by Qin and not by another state and that it was attained in this and not in an alternative manner means the victory of savagery over civilization. It is a hugely unfortunate event in the history of our nation.[20]

If the above extract—written by a scholar employed in the Party School University in Gansu and not a diehard dissident—is considered by Barbieri-Low as ultranationalist or as glorifying authoritarianism, then I am afraid we have very different understanding of these terms.

If Barbieri-Low wants to prove (rather than just insinuate) that the lionization of the First Emperor reflects the current Party line, he could turn to history textbooks used in China's classrooms (which display a more nuanced understanding of the country's history than Barbieri-Low acknowledges).[21] A more balanced exposition would have mentioned the tsunami of comments criticizing Qin and the First Emperor in China's blogosphere in the aftermath of the screening of the (ridiculously laudatory) *Great Qin Paean* (Da Qin fu 大秦賦) TV series of 2020. By repeatedly glossing over the nuances and debates in China, Barbieri-Low manufactures a distorted vision of China as a monistic state that follows a single discursive line.

Originally, I felt that Barbieri-Low's manipulations testify to his jumping on the China-bashing bandwagon, but this may be a wrong impression. The author's deeper concerns emerge on p. 81, where he laments US students' acceptance of the idea that the First Emperor was a nation-building hero rather than a cruel tyrant (in reality, of course, he was both, like many other empire builders worldwide; but Barbieri-Low—in what strikes me as anti-historical fashion—demands of his students to select only one characteristic). Barbieri-Low decries this reassessment of the First Emperor by domestic students as "reflecting larger trends in American society that reveal a worrisome attraction towards strongmen and demagogues" (p. 81).

This lamentation—coupled with the author's assertion that "any portrayal of the First Emperor makes a political statement, whether consciously constructed or not" (p. 220)—is revealing. Maybe the eleventh, unwritten chapter of the book should be about the life of the First Emperor outside East Asia; and the book itself constitutes this unwritten chapter. Maybe what really matters to the author is not the First Emperor as such but his possible role as a foil in US political debates? Maybe the author mimicked Sima Qian's method of "pointing at Qin to criticize the Han" 指秦罵漢,[22] and wove into his book a highly negative image of

Emperor's post-221 BCE wars aimed at expanding the Qin territories northward and southward. Yet I am unaware of any interest in—not to say laudation of—this expansion in the materials surveyed by Barbieri-Low.

19. Zhang Fentian, *Qin Shihuang zhuan* 秦始皇傳 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2003).

20. Zhang Linxiang 張林祥, "Progress or Change? Rethinking the Historical Outlook of the *Book of Lord Shang*," tr. Yuri Pines, *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 47.2 (2016): 106.

21. See, e.g., Nimrod Baranovitch, "Others No More: The Changing Representation of Non-Han Peoples in Chinese History Textbooks, 1951–2003," *Journal of Asian Studies* 69 (2010): 85–122.

22. For this interpretation of Sima Qian's narrative, see, e.g., Hans van Ess, "Emperor Wu of the Han and the First August Emperor of Qin in Sima Qian's *Shiji*," in *Birth of an Empire: The State of Qin revisited*, ed. Yuri Pines,

the First Emperor just to caution the undergrads against endorsing domestic "strongmen and demagogues"?

Speculations aside, I think the outcome is unsatisfactory. While I share the author's dislike of "strongmen and demagogues" in politics (though weaklings and soft-speaking hypocrites are not necessarily preferable), I do not think that historians should subordinate their research to current political needs. At least in democratic countries, one can find adequate avenues of political engagement without turning an academic publication into a polemical tool. Whatever the ultimate intentions of Barbieri-Low's book, the results are disappointing. That the author's most impressive efforts and his undeniable abilities were wasted for the sake of producing a biased narrative is regrettable.

Lothar von Falkenhausen, Gideon Shelach, and Robin D. S. Yates (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2014), 239–57.