

## THE CONTINGENCY OF CHINA'S IMPERIAL UNITY Assassins Attack the First King of Qin

by Emily M. Hill



### The First Emperor of China

Co-directed by Tony Ianzelo and Liu Haoxue  
Distributed by Slingshot Entertainment ([www.slingshotent.com](http://www.slingshotent.com))  
1988. 40 Minutes

### The Emperor's Shadow

Directed by Zhou Xiaowen  
Distributed by Fox Lorber Films ([www.foxlorber.com](http://www.foxlorber.com))  
1996. 123 Minutes

### The Emperor and the Assassin

Directed by Chen Kaige  
Distributed by Sony Pictures Classics ([www.sonyclassics.com](http://www.sonyclassics.com))  
1999. 161 Minutes

### Hero

Directed by Zhang Yimou  
Distributed by Edko Films Ltd. ([www.herothemovie.com](http://www.herothemovie.com))  
2002 (US release in August of 2004). 98 Minutes.

**F**our films made recently in the People's Republic of China (PRC) dwell on the circumstances of China's creation as a unified imperial state during the third century BCE. As the instructor of a one-semester Chinese history introductory survey of the imperial period (221 BCE to 1911 CE), I use the films to introduce the course and raise questions about state power, unity, and legitimacy in early Chinese history. Supplemented by two short reading assignments, the films orient students within the vast panorama of Chinese history by zooming in on a single colorful character, King Ying Zheng of Qin, whose conquests of other kingdoms ended a five-century "Warring States" period and allowed him to declare himself the "First Emperor" of a glorious new dynasty that would rule "all under Heaven" for "ten thousand generations." Not only do the films provide contrasting depictions of the King of

Qin and his achievements, each also highlights the costs and conditions of the founder's conquests by featuring failed attempts to assassinate him.

During one of the first classes of the course, students watch *The First Emperor of China* (1988). An informative dramatized documentary, the film lacks aesthetic appeal but is an engaging starting point for exploration of early Chinese history. Certain inaccuracies should be pointed out in the course of class discussion; the Great Wall as it stands today, for instance, is not the same as the system of fortifications constructed of pressed earth that existed in Qin times. Moreover, there is no good evidence for the legend that in 212 BCE the First Emperor of Qin flew into a rage and ordered that 460 learned men be buried alive. A highlight of *The First Emperor of China* is the dramatization of the attempt by Jing Ke to assassinate the King of Qin. The failed attempt, which occurred in 227 BCE, is shown to hasten the Qin conquest of Jing Ke's home state of Yan, a territory in the vicinity of modern-day Beijing.

The theme of attempted assassination of China's great unifier may be explored further in subsequent classes with the help of excerpts from two other films. Presenting alternative enactments of Jing Ke's assassination attempt, the excerpts of about ten minutes each are drawn from *The Emperor's Shadow* (1996) and *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999). The latter English title is inaccurate as the protagonist was not yet Emperor during the events depicted. In preparation for class discussion, students study two short readings: "The Biography of Jing Ke" by Sima Qian,<sup>1</sup> and "The First Emperor of Qin" by John E. Wills, Jr.<sup>2</sup> Students see that the 1996 film is a fanciful elaboration of a detail about Jing Ke's life found in Sima Qian's history, composed during the second century CE, while the later film follows Sima's account faithfully in its depiction of the assassination scene.

Jing Ke's assassination attempt is a fascinating episode because the history of "China" as a unified state is considered to begin with the Qin ruler's conquest of neighboring kingdoms. I ask students: What obstacles prevented the Qin dynasty, or any other dynasty in Chinese history, from lasting for "ten thousand generations"? Which was more normal or natural during the period of history covered in the course: China's unity or its disunity? Did the consolidation of China's ancient states into an Empire appear to have lasting effects on culture? Why did the unified government take the form of an absolute monarchy? Do you think Jing Ke was motivated by a sense of injustice? Do the films celebrate or critique the consolidation of power achieved by the King of Qin?

The roles and personalities of the King of Qin and Jing Ke of Yan are animated in the films in contrasting ways. Sima Qian and other traditional historians describe the First Emperor of Qin as a cruel megalomaniac. Sima's implicit argument is that there's an important lesson to be learned from the fall of the Qin dynasty shortly after the First Emperor's death: to ensure survival of the current dynasty, its rulers should avoid harsh exploitation of their subjects in the service of personal ambition and statist expansion. The negative evaluation of the First Emperor of Qin continued beyond the imperial era and into the contemporary period. After 1949, PRC Chairman Mao Zedong became associated allusively with the First Emperor. Mao was also a great unifier who pushed the Chinese people to sacrifice their lives and well being to achieve statist goals. The historical allusion was used to criticize Mao's regime, as when protestors cried "Down with the First Emperor of Qin!" during demonstrations in Beijing in April 1976. Exploiting the ambiguity of the conventional emphasis on the First Emperor's ambition and power, however, Mao had actually declared himself proud of the comparison and encouraged scholarly re-evaluation of the Qin legacy.<sup>3</sup> Each of the four films features scenes of battles fought by massive armies and show the King of Qin enthroned in resplendent opulence reigning over awed and obedient subjects. Positive emphasis on the King's power is most clear in *The Emperor's Shadow* in a scene that occurs close to Jing Ke's assassination attempt. Although the allusive link between the King of Qin and Mao Zedong is no longer relevant for many young Chinese film viewers, the celebration of the power of the Chinese state at the time of its founding seems to resonate closely with the resurgent nationalistic pride now observable in the PRC. To varying degrees, however, each film assesses the costs of China's early unification by means of prolonged military campaigns and scrutinizes the character of the King of Qin.

The earlier two of the films discussed here do not depart from the traditional negative judgments of the First Emperor and the Qin political system. As well as recounting his legendary excesses, *The First Emperor of China's* narration takes on an ominous tone at certain points, seeming to imply that the Qin achievement laid the foundations for totalitarianism. In *The Emperor's Shadow*, the King of Qin's grotesque capriciousness inevitably dooms those near and dear to him. The two more recent films, however, develop intriguingly nuanced interpretations of the founding Emperor's personality and motivations. They also call into question the virtue of his unification project.

In *The Emperor and the Assassin*, the noted actor Li Xuejian masterfully presents a complex and conflicted King of Qin whose arbitrary behavior may be explained by personal trauma as well as by a grand dynastic destiny. As the would-be assassin Jing Ke, Zhang Fengyi also performs stupendously in the film, in a portrayal of a former hit man whose soul has been shaken by violence. Carrying out his assignment with deeper motives than those of a mission of patriotic revenge or abhorrence of tyranny, Jing Ke bares the King's formidable courage as well as his vulnerability in a suspenseful stand-off. As in Sima Qian's account, Jing Ke dies with heroic dignity, mocking the King with his last breath.

In *Hero* (2002), both the reputed tyranny of the King of Qin and the historic individuality of the would-be assassin Jing Ke have been elided for an exploration of the essence of the encounter between the Qin autocrat and the clandestine, organized resistance to his expanding power. In director Zhang Yimou's allegory, both the ruler and the three (or possibly four) would-be assassins whom he confronts at separate moments appear fixed in a constellation, destined to move only within a grand scheme of political and cultural unification. Fixed in his historical role, the King is unable to ignore the demands for execution shouted in unison by masses of his subjects. He seems powerless to decide, instead, to pardon a superbly prepared assassin who has pulled back his weapon at the last moment. The ruler has apparently understood that the assassin, for his part, has realized that to complete the act of regicide would not be in accordance with history's grand scheme. The significance of the moment of aborted assassination, however, is not defined explicitly by the film's shifting and ambiguous narration. At some points the King is the narrator and at others the narration is by Nameless (Jet Li), an interlocutor whose role, possibly that of a would-be assassin, is also ambiguous. The soon-to-be First Emperor is not a cruel despot in this portrayal, nor is he an unchallenged narrator or author of his own legacy.

Zhang Yimou's *Hero* features mesmerizing color that shifts with the narrative perspective, enthralling music (composed by Tan Dun and performed by Itzhak Perlman), and extended displays of virtuoso martial artistry. Familiarity with Chinese history and with the other films discussed enables viewers to reflect upon the film as well as enjoy it.

I have found that to show the film in class near the middle of the term gives students a welcome break from the routine of lectures and serves as a framework for discussion questions about the legacies of China's imperial unity. ■

#### NOTES

1. Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian: Qin Dynasty*. Trans. by Burton Watson. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1993:167-77.
2. John E. Wills. *Mountain of Fame: Portraits in Chinese History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994:34-50.
3. Li Yu-ning. *The Politics of Historiography: The First Emperor of China*. White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1975.

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