

Unearthing New Lessons from Ancient China

By Elizabeth K. Eder



Archaeologists excavating Pit No. 1 in the tomb complex. Source: Screen capture from the *Smithsonian Learning Lab* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y26kmchy>.

In March 1974, local farmers discovered fragments of terracotta figures when digging a well near the outskirts of the city of Xi'an, China. Unknown to the farmers, or anyone else who knew about the find at the time, the discolored pieces were part of what would later be known as the Terracotta Army—yes, an entire army in full battle dress, hidden in formation just below the farmland where they were placed more than 2,000 years ago.

Created for the elaborate tomb complex of China's first emperor, Emperor Qin Shihuang [*chin shurr hwong*] (259–221 BCE), this group of more than 7,000 terracotta warriors and horses, alongside bronze weapons and wooden chariots arranged in battle formation, is no doubt one of the greatest archaeological finds of the twentieth century.¹ Each life-size terracotta figure was originally brightly colored, realistically portrayed, and uniquely detailed enough to be identified as a specific type of soldier in the Qin army.²

Although he reigned for just eleven years, as Emperor Qin Shihuang conquered rival states to extend his empire, his tomb complex also expanded.³ About 300 burial pits and tombs have been uncovered thus far, and the tomb complex extends over 17.6 square miles.⁴ As decades of archeological excavation and research have revealed, the tombs contain objects that the First Emperor may have desired to take with him into the afterlife. They provide insight into how the First Emperor of China may have seen himself and how he may have understood his world. In addition, the vast majority of known artworks from the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) were unearthed in the tomb complex.⁵ They present important evidence for understanding the cultural, historical, political, and artistic practices of this significant period of Chinese history. Given these reasons, it's not surprising that when students study the beginnings of early civilizations, the Terracotta Army is used to exemplify ancient China.

Although some objects from the tomb complex have been exhibited in museums around the globe, few authoritative teaching resources about the Terracotta Army exist that are accessible for a K–12 audience. To address this need, the Emperor Qin Shihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum in Xi'an, home of the Terracotta Army; the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art; and the Smithsonian Center for Learning and Digital Access in Washington,



Home page for "China's Terracotta Army: Information and Teaching Resources." Source: Screen capture from the *Smithsonian Learning Lab* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y5khz12t>.



Terracotta infantry warrior without armor in the Terracotta Army pits. Source: Screen capture from the Smithsonian Learning Lab website at <https://tinyurl.com/y3y9anu4>.



This is Bronze Chariot No. 1, one of two bronze chariots found in the Pit of Chariots and Horses. It is half the length of actual chariots used during the Qin dynasty. Source: Screen capture from the Smithsonian Learning Lab website at <https://tinyurl.com/yxjstxu6>.

DC, collaboratively developed a suite of six digital collections focused on the Terracotta Army, the Qin dynasty, and the First Emperor.

Activities are built on the Smithsonian Learning Lab (learninglab.si.edu), a free web platform for accessing and creating educational materials using digital museum resources.⁶ The collections are designed for teachers to serve as an entry point for studying ancient Chinese civilization with their students. Available at s.si.edu/TerracottaArmy, each activity incorporates national curriculum-related and/or Common Core standards, instructional techniques, new high-resolution images of objects and the tomb complex, and recently translated accompanying information from the Emperor Qin Shihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum, as well as various digital tools that can be used to annotate the resources in several ways.⁷ For example, "hotspots" can highlight areas of interest on an image, discussion questions can be added to deepen student analysis, or quiz questions can be used to assess student knowledge. The user can also upload complementary websites, images, and text from other sources. In addition, visible thinking routines from Harvard University's Project Zero are embedded in each collection. These use open-ended questions to spark student discussion and test comprehension.⁸

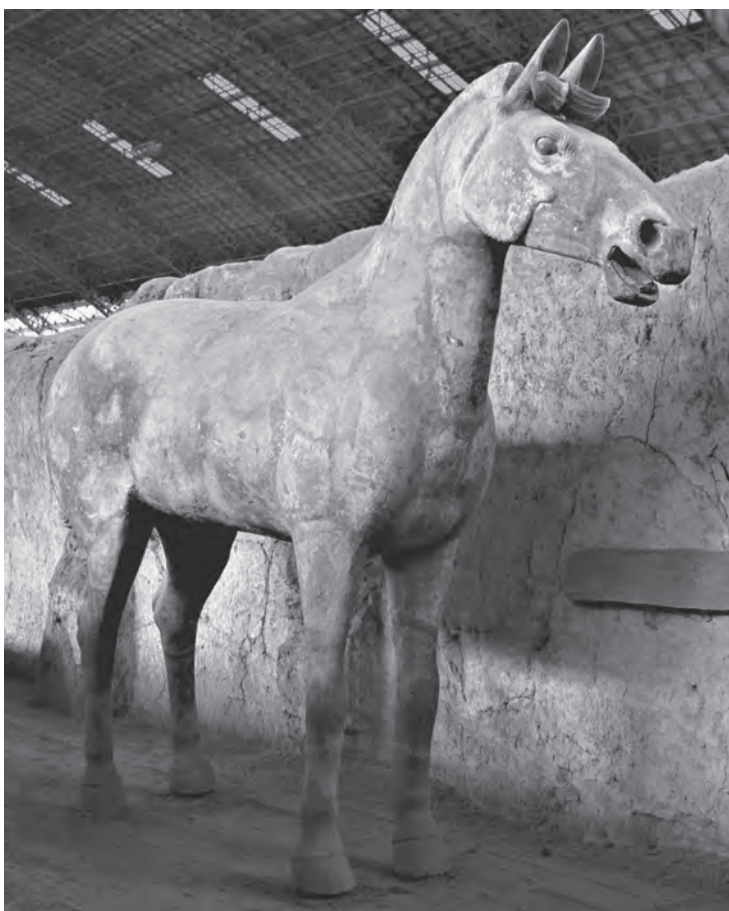
What follows is a brief overview of each of the six digital collections to orient teachers to their content. Teachers may want to start their exploration with "China's Terracotta Army: Information and Teaching Resources" (<https://tinyurl.com/y4ujkz5>).

This overview collection contains background information and resources covering a wide range of topics. It describes the discovery of the Terracotta Army, how the terracotta figures were made, the different types of warriors and bronze weaponry found in the burial pits, and information about the First Emperor and Qin dynasty, including his unification of China and the spiritual beliefs of the period. Additional materials include an illustrated timeline of the art and archaeology of ancient China, an interactive map of the tomb complex created especially for these collections, and maps of the battle formation in the Terracotta Army pits.

Designed to be completed in small groups or as a class, "Terracotta Warriors and Figures: Object Analysis" (<https://tinyurl.com/y47xhpbq>) may be used as an introduction to the other related collections or as a starting point for research. Created especially for elementary and middle school students, students engage in a series of close looking activities with an array of figures found in the tomb complex. As students work through each of the seven "mystery object" activities, they discover what roles the figures may have played based on visual evidence. They are then asked to hypothesize about why the particular type of figure may have been included and what that might reveal about the First Emperor, and how he imagined himself and the world.

"China's Terracotta Army: Introduction to China's First Emperor and the Terracotta Army" (<https://tinyurl.com/yxa6c3nq>) is part 1 in a series of three collections created especially for social studies classrooms. The collection can be used as part of the sequence or on its own. In this activity, students will learn about the life, achievements, and historical legacy of Emperor Qin Shihuang.

Students start with an activity to promote close looking that has them compare and contrast three terracotta warrior figures. They then place the Terracotta Army into a broader historical context by using an interactive timeline of the art and archaeology of ancient China. Through close examination of an inscription on a Terracotta Army figure's armor, students



Terracotta horse in Pit No. 1. Horse figures are found either placed next to members of the cavalry or attached to chariots. Source: Screen capture from the *Smithsonian Learning Lab* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y26zpubk>.

learn about how the First Emperor governed his new empire with strict organization and discipline. This included the standardization of the system of measures, weights, currency, and written language across his empire. A coin and measuring ladle, surviving objects from the period in the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery collection, are used as examples. Two concluding activities encourage students to think more deeply about why the First Emperor and his contributions are historically significant.

“China’s Terracotta Army: The Terracotta Warriors” (<https://tinyurl.com/y39an5l9>) is part 2 in the series. In this activity, students create their own arguments about what the Terracotta Army reveals about Emperor Qin Shihuang. In order to do so, they begin by examining a “mystery object,” one of the terracotta warriors, and answering questions based on close looking and prior knowledge. They then read about the discovery of the Terracotta Army and look at an overall map of the tomb complex. Students also examine differences between the burial pits using photographs and illustrated diagrams. Next, students compare and contrast different types of terracotta figures by studying details in full figures, faces, and parts of uniforms. Methods of manufacture of the terracotta figures and a brief overview of other objects included in the vast mausoleum complex are also included in the activity.

Part 3 in the social studies-focused series is “China’s Terracotta Army: Exploring the Tomb Complex and Values of China’s First Emperor” (<https://tinyurl.com/y3wc3d6b>). This collection focuses on selected objects from the vast tomb complex of the First Emperor, including warrior



All the figures found in Emperor Qin Shihuang’s tomb complex were originally brightly painted. Source: Screen capture from the *Smithsonian Learning Lab* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y24z52b6>.

figures from the Terracotta Army. Students take on the role of an archaeologist to examine and make inferences about what these objects can reveal about the values and beliefs of Emperor Qin Shihuang. As in part 2, they begin by examining a “mystery object,” one of the life-size terracotta acrobats, and answering questions based on close looking and prior knowledge. They learn where the object was found in the tomb complex and how archaeologists interpret evidence. Finally, students engage in an activity that asks them to think like an archeologist to make inferences about different terracotta and bronze objects in order to determine what may have been important to the First Emperor.

In “China’s Terracotta Army: Exploring Artistic Practices” (<https://tinyurl.com/y6g57vfw>), students study figures from the Terracotta Army in order to explore some of the artistic practices used during the Qin dynasty. The activity encourages students to use the elements of art as a focus. It begins with a close looking exercise of one of the terracotta figures, an armored infantryman. Students answer several questions, based on what they observe, before moving to the next section. Here, information is revealed that places the object into a larger story, bringing to light the historical and cultural context with background about the First Emperor and his tomb complex. Students can then choose to find out more about the multistep process of manufacturing scholars believe was used to create a terracotta figure. Students will also reexamine the object through new prompts featuring elements of art such as color, line, shape, and texture. In order to spark further inquiry and expand knowledge, students can then compare and contrast a variety of Terracotta



Pit No. 1: Figures in this pit consist of infantrymen, middle-ranking officers, charioteers, and horses arranged in a large military battle formation. Source: Screen capture from the Smithsonian Learning Lab website at <https://tinyurl.com/y3bybylw>.



This Bronze Charioteer is used as a "mystery object." Source: Screen capture from the Smithsonian Learning Lab website at <https://tinyurl.com/y2uxllpd>.

Army figures. One of the figures then serves as a focus so that students can make further observations. Finally, students use a "question starts" activity to reflect on their overall understanding of the Terracotta Army and brainstorm ideas to explore in the making of their own papercraft terracotta warrior. Instructions to complete the activity are included.

A recent study of non-Western artistic traditions taught in US classrooms, including lessons focused on China, found that superficial connections were often made that did little to address students' understanding of the culture. These connections may cause certain stereotypes to be perpetuated.⁹ These digital collections seek to address this by creating object-focused activities to study the material culture from the First Emperor's extensive tomb complex. By encouraging students to look carefully and think critically about significant aspects of ancient Chinese civilization, they will become active participants in a process of discovery. In doing so, students will better understand how Chinese art, culture, and history were shaped in important ways during the short-lived Qin dynasty.

The world should be grateful to the curious farmers who found some interesting fragments while walking around their farmland. Their serendipitous harvest changed the way we think about Chinese history. ■

NOTES

1. The Terracotta Army is found in three pits to the east of the emperor's mausoleum. Pit No. 1, Pit No. 2, and Pit No. 3 are named according to the order of their discovery. Researchers believe they were placed in this direction and proximity to protect the First Emperor in his afterlife. "China's Terracotta Army: Information and Teaching Resources" contains a map of Emperor Qin Shihuang's Tomb Complex with a description of its location, size, and objects. Also see He Hong, *An Interpretive Guide to Emperor Qin Shihuang's Mausoleum and the Terracotta Army Museum* (Xi'an, Shaanxi, China: Shaanxi People's Education Publishing House, 2015), 39–51.
2. A terracotta warrior's rank and role can be identified by his hairstyle, clothing, armor, and pose. In addition, each face is thought to be unique. For information about different types of warriors such as infantrymen, archers, cavalrymen, charioteers, middle-ranking officers, and generals, and methods of manufacture of the Terracotta Army, see "China's Terracotta Army: Information and Teaching Resources."
3. The First Emperor's tomb was originally smaller in scale, following funerary traditions of previous kings. See He Hong, *An Interpretive Guide to Emperor Qin Shihuang's Mausoleum and the Terracotta Army Museum* (Xi'an, Shaanxi, China: Shaanxi People's Education Publishing House, 2015), 39–51.

4. Historical records suggest that the First Emperor is buried inside an elaborate mausoleum. Although excavations of the First Emperor's tomb complex are ongoing, there are no current plans to excavate the mausoleum. See He Hong, *An Interpretive Guide to Emperor Qin Shihuang's Mausoleum and the Terracotta Army Museum* (Xi'an, Shaanxi, China: Shaanxi People's Education Publishing House, 2015), 39–51.
5. While objects from ancient China are often referred to as art in the present day, they may not have originally been created as fine art. Scholars believe that many ancient Chinese objects were originally used for ritual or practical purposes, accruing value for their aesthetic qualities with the passage of time. See *The Art and Archaeology of Ancient China: A Teacher's Guide* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 2003).
6. For an overview of the Learning Lab and user guide, see <https://learninglab.si.edu/about>.
7. Although there are several English-language sources describing the Terracotta Army, this digital collection relies on recently translated information from the Emperor Qin Shihuang's Mausoleum Site Museum.
8. Additional information on how each routine can be used is found in the resource tile in each collection or on the Project Zero Visible Thinking website (<https://tinyurl.com/y34sujk8>).
9. Melanie Buffington, "Changing Practice: Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Art Education," *Art Education* 72, no. 2 (March 2019): 20–25.

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