Anthony Barbieri-Low’s *The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China* sets out to explore the ways in which Qin Shihuang, whom the author refers to as either the First Emperor or Ying Zheng, is "good to think with," particularly about topics like "heroic failure, obsession, mortality, despotism, historical causation, national unity, anti-Japanese patriotism, individual rights, personality cults, revolutionary violence, cruelty, and even the alienation of modernity" (p. 1). This is an ambitious volume, divided into four parts and ten chapters with an introduction, overture, timeline, plates, maps and figures, a glossary of East Asian characters, endnotes, works cited, and an index. The author explains that the First Emperor of Qin has taken on enormous cultural significance because of the foundational institutional formations attributed to him—not least of which is a centrally administered, multiethnic, territorial empire with advanced legal and administrative apparatuses—and that he serves as a “foundation myth for the [Chinese] nation, with the core idea of an essential unity, painfully forged out of chaos by a visionary leader” (p. 3). Because of this weighty significance, "everything that is said or written about the First Emperor has metaphorical import and political significance, even if the author is not fully aware of it" (p. 3). Indeed, as the author states, the goal of the volume is not to be a detailed study of the Qin dynasty, nor a thorough biography of the First Emperor; rather, he is interested in the cultural reception of the First Emperor and the various interpretations of his legacy across time and space. In other words, this book is not so much about the First Emperor as much as it is about what people have thought the First Emperor means, and what people have used his legacy to signify. The author also states that it is his intention to provide numerous original translations of both ancient and modern sources so that the volume might serve as a sourcebook for students and scholars interested in Qin studies (p. 8). In addition to laying out these goals, the introduction to the volume includes a brief overview of the history of the scholarship on the Qin, taking us first through developments in China and the West. Special attention is paid in
this overview of the source materials that different groups of scholars have relied upon, including transmitted histories and their translations, archaeological finds such as the Terracotta Army discovered in 1974, the Qin legal and divination texts from Shuihudi excavated in 1975, and those more recently acquired though looted cashes of even more Qin administrative and legal documents.

The first part of the volume is dedicated to the historical narrative of the First Emperor's life, beginning in the first chapter with Sima Qian's account in *Records of the Grand Scribe*, which the author reasons provides the proper beginning because this narrative is the foundation upon which all future narratives are built and with which all future re-imaginings are in dialogue. He argues in this first chapter that Sima Qian portrays the First Emperor as a tragic hero who performed great deeds despite also possessing a fatal kind of hubris that led to his downfall. In the second and third chapters of part 1, Barbieri-Low offers a chronological overview of later historical accounts of the First Emperor's life and personality, from the early Western Han period to the late twentieth century. Each chapter is divided into two parts, corresponding broadly to two major ways that the First Emperor is characterized by the sources discussed. He argues in chapter 2 that orthodox Confucian historians such as Jia Yi (ca. 201-169 BCE), Dong Zhongshu (ca. 179-104 BCE), and Zhang Juzheng (1525-82 CE) are responsible for negative portrayals of the First Emperor. They depict him as a tyrant whose major failings, amidst qualities like ambition, greed, and cruelty, included failure to select and properly make use of upright ministers like themselves (p. 30). He further argues in this chapter that, beginning from the latter half of the Tang dynasty and extending into the twentieth century, the image of the First Emperor was periodically rehabilitated as a strong figure associated with positive aspects of the Chinese state, such as its bureaucratic efficiency, especially during times of political and social upheaval such as the nineteenth-century era of Western imperialism. He develops the latter point in the first part of chapter 3, where he argues that under the influence of Marxist historiography during the 1930s-70s, characterizations of the First Emperor focus less on his individual foibles but rather treat him as an embodiment of broader, often teleological, historical narratives. In the second half of the chapter, which covers the 1970s to the present, the author argues that the First Emperor's individual personality returned to the forefront of historical interpretations at the same time as, and also as result of, Mao Zedong's cult of personality, in which the First Emperor was glorified as an index of Mao, while Confucians (the traditional enemy of Ying Zheng) were vilified as indices of Mao's opponents Lin Biao and Zhou Enlai. One of the overall strengths of part 1 is the author's concise summaries of various thinkers. These summaries provide a useful background as well as guidance for students who might be assigned the actual selections of these thinkers' essays in class. One of its main weaknesses is chapter 2, which, in my view, oversimplifies a long and complex historiographical tradition in attempting to fit it into fewer than thirty pages. This condensation sometime results in chapter subheadings that appear forced when trying to provide an overarching characterization of the First Emperor.

In the second part of the volume, the author discusses newly excavated archaeological evidence from the Qin state, focusing primarily on excavated texts from Shuihudi in Hubei province and Liye in Hunan, among several others. It is divided into two chapters, the first of which focuses on voices from the Qin state, and the second of which looks at writings by and about nonstate representatives. In this part of the book, the author's strengths as a Sinologist shine through, as he includes detailed and yet still approachable original translations of paleographic texts alongside photographs of the original bamboo slips. These chapters are a valuable resource for teaching about early Chinese history, as translations of this sort are still scarce. Chapter 4 surveys edicts by
local officials regarding the purging of local customs to be replaced by more acceptable Qin ones, imperial efforts to control written and spoken language, instructions for the proper treatment of conscripted local peasant labor, and a new copy of an edict issued by the Second Emperor that, among other topics, issues amnesties for crimes committed by the common people during the previous emperor's reign. In this chapter, the author strives to demonstrate that these Qin state voices do not contradict the broad outlines of Sima Qian's traditional account, which are necessarily biased due to having been written over a century after the collapse of the Qin and from the perspective of the subsequent dynasty's court, but rather add depth and color to it (p. 85). Chapter 5 discusses legal cases in which detail is provided about the lives and concerns of common people, including soldiers and veterans, musicians, pregnant women, and scribal assistants. Unfortunately, the author does not offer a guiding argument about what these various accounts tell us about Qin people relative to the First Emperor, but rather lets the reader surmise what they will from the various translations. Taken together, however, these accounts suggest, in contrast to Sima Qian's claim of widespread discontent among the masses, that great care was taken on the part of the state to ensure that those who ran afoul of the law had their cases adjudicated properly and thoroughly. One notable omission in this section is the absence of any discussion about the terracotta soldier pits, which were discovered outside of the First Emperor's mausoleum in Shaanxi in 1974. It seems to me that a discussion about archaeological evidence related to aspects of the First Emperor, particularly as they concern common people, ought to include mention of the unique and lifelike characteristics of these clay simulacra.[1]

The third and fourth parts of the volume venture into the cultural imagination of various aspects of the First Emperor's life. Part 3 focuses on significant events, such as the assassination attempt by Jing Ke, the coup attempt by Zhao Gao, and two major events in the First Emperor's life that became prominent in later narratives—the burning of books and the killing of scholars. The aim of the two chapters is ostensibly to demonstrate that the side characters and events provide "metaphorical lenses through which authors and artists have been able to think about issues such as revolution, bravery, justice, censorship, and the nature of evil" (p. 156). At the same time, this section seems also to have been designed to explore pictorial art from the Han to the present that takes the First Emperor as a main theme. Chapter 6, which discusses Jing Ke and Zhao Gao, is interesting because it demonstrates that these two characters, who were peripheral to the First Emperor in Sima Qian's original account, have come to assume active roles in historical imagination, particularly as they embody themes of loyalty, righteousness, ambition, and even gender identity. In this way, the stories that continuously revive these characters illustrate the author's main point, which is that the life of the First Emperor is "good to think with." At the same time, however, I feel as though many of the themes embodied by Jing Ke and Zhao Gao could stand alone as a separate article, and their presence in this book feels a little extraneous. Chapter 7 provides a much stronger demonstration of how events that in the original account were not treated with vehement vilification have taken on new meanings through appropriation by Confucians and others to make political statements about violence and iconoclasm both in the ancient world and in the modern one. It is odd, however, that this chapter is the only one that has a dedicated conclusion with a clear heading, and one wonders if this was deliberate (if so, why does this chapter deserve a conclusion where others do not?), or if it was simply an oversight.

The final part of the book comprises three chapters. The first focuses on fictional tales about the First Emperor, the second on portrayals of him in film and television, and the final chapter on the cultural imagination surrounding the First Emperor's mausoleum. The structure of each chapter
mirrors those that have come before, being comprised mainly of descriptions, translations, and brief analyses of selected works. Chapter 8's opening pages articulate how tales of the First Emperor were used by groups during later time periods to work through contemporary issues, including morality and sexuality, feminism, mental illness, and mortality, while its latter half outlines contributions made, albeit unconsciously and no doubt problematically, by early Western writers such as Franz Kafka and Jean Levi. Careful readers of this volume might find it useful to discuss with students and other interested parties what potentially damaging perceptions about China such works of fiction might also have contributed. Chapter 9 takes a different angle, focusing on filmic representations, though many of the themes explored in writing reappear in this chapter, in particular the First Emperor's personality as a result of trauma and mental illness. Here, the author argues that fantasy-filled romantic films about the Qin dynasty, which were a popular genre in the latter part of the twentieth century, fulfill Chinese audiences' desires to connect with a past that they have been alienated from due to twentieth-century cultural upheavals, and further that they also humanize the people of Qin by focusing on stories of individual craftsmen, soldiers, and women rather than loftier and more abstract concepts like despotism and tyranny. In his discussion of Zhang Yimou's film Hero, the author notes the controversies surrounding the film's reception both within China and without, which highlights his point that "any portrayal of the First Emperor makes a political statement, whether consciously constructed or not" (p. 220). The tenth and final chapter of the book focuses on how various interest groups, from historians past and present to early Sinologists, archaeologists, journalists, digital creators, and tourists, have attempted to "reconstruct" the unexcavated First Emperor's mausoleum. The "reconstructions" range from those that are grounded in scientific observation to those that imagine an underground microcosm, complete with magical protections and technologies that would have far surpassed the abilities of ancient Qin. In many ways, it is fitting that the volume ends with this topic, as the project of "reconstructing" a tomb that we have never seen (nor are likely to see) represents the furthest leap of historical and cultural imagination, allowing us to project our hopes and fears onto it and making this final lens into the past the most abstract and fanciful of all. At the same time, the short section on the archaeological imagination could have been made more robust by reference to a few more recent archaeological discussions, such as an excellent piece by Jie Shi in the 2014 issue of Early China.[2]

Overall, The Many Lives of the First Emperor of China is an excellent survey of the ways that the First Emperor has been created and re-created through time, illustrating how the history and cultural legacies of a single figure can be manipulated in any age and among any group to process and articulate contemporary concerns. The author is also very successful in providing numerous approachable descriptions and translations of primary sources that can used by educators at all levels to introduce students both to ancient China as well as to its relevance to the modern world through a wide variety of means, from archaeology to fiction to videogames. These qualities make this volume an important contribution not only to scholarship on early China but to pedagogy as well.

Notes

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