

Why China's Invisible Army Fights

By Ryan Woodring

The same year the United States passes the Privacy Act of 1974, restricting access to the U.S. military's personal records, China begins unearthing its underground army. Ironically, this army's intent is not to destroy other armies or conquer new lands, but to remain undestroyed in its original formation. Since day one of excavation of the invisible army when the first soldier's position was determined and myth became a reality, the terra cotta soldiers have been fighting a war of paradoxes that detail a human will to both create and destroy.

Unlike any other army, it is the fragility of the terracotta soldiers that keeps them and their emperor protected. The tourists who come to wonder at this static army unknowingly exhale bullets of oxygen that slowly wear at the soldiers, while UNESCO and other nonprofit companies try to protect it. As their colors fade and their limbs give way to gravity, I am reminded of Shelley's *Ozymandias*, who pitifully sought immortality in fading objects. Did Emperor Qin Shi Huang share this naivety towards future contextualization, unaware of the decay of all things? Or did he, the same historical figure who ordered that all books be burned whose historical accounts spoke of rulers before his ascendancy to First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty, plant an army whose sole purpose was to eventually be discovered and tell of a great leader.

As an artist who constantly struggles with the contextualization of my own object making, I am interested in discovering the uncanny pairings of objects that come from changes within any given culture. In Uzbekistan, it is images of fishing boats on the desert that was once part of the Aral Sea that capture my imagination. In China, it is the army, silent and unable to communicate the exact reason it stands and waits, that speaks to my affinity for the absurd. Despite its silence, the army has fought battles both for and against its native China. Recently, two soldiers on a mission to spread Emperor Qin's hubris at the British Museum suddenly mutinied by donning signs around their necks: one reading "boycott the Chinese Olympics," and the other, "China stop killing Tibetans."

If the army's intended function was to exist as a simulation of an army so that it could be reassembled in Qin's afterlife, then the multitudes of replicas that have been made since its discovery, from silk-screened images to small statues, have surely added size and grandeur to this second army. One does not even need to leave the United States to see a terracotta army standing one-third the height of Emperor Qin's original. Does this army help the original army

fight far-off mythical battles or does it hold its own importance on earth and fight its own battles for permanence? Much of history will play out this way, with references to objects outlasting their predecessors, and it is therefore with great insecurity that an emperor builds an army whose existence stands to simultaneously augment and diminish his power.

Silently, perhaps even invisibly, most of us will end up in history books as parts of larger numbers and generalized figures. We will line the pages in static formation. If ever again an emperor has our records burnt, our ashes will spread across the lands, falling upon soil and waves. And these ashes will form underground into ranks of forgotten soldiers. We will, like the terracotta army, fight a war against time. When I think of China, I do not just think about its great leaders or its architectural splendor, or its Westernization, or its environmental crisis. I think about the billions of forgotten people that have helped mold its slow and steady history; the real invisible army.