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***The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation*, By Martin KERN. New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2000. Pp.viii+221.**

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The short-lived Qin dynasty (秦, 221–207 B.C.) occupies a place of pride in Chinese history. Having unified “All-under-Heaven” after five odd centuries of prolonged war of all against all, it laid solid administrative, sociopolitical and intellectual foundations for the Chinese imperial polity that continued to dominate the East Asian subcontinent for the next two millennia. In particular, the very institution of emperorship, without which traditional China would be unimaginable, was created by Qin’s founder, King Zheng 政, who adopted the imperial title (*huangdi* 皇帝, literally “August Thearch”) in 221 B.C. Although for centuries to come the First Emperor (r. 221–210 B.C.) was continuously reviled for his ruthlessness, and although his dynasty met an inglorious end just three years after his demise, the momentous impact of Qin on China’s political trajectory is undeniable.

Qin’s overall importance notwithstanding, throughout the twentieth century its history was all but neglected by Western Sinology. For decades, Derk Bodde’s seminal *China’s First Unifier: A Study of the Ch’in Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Ssu* (1938) remained the only scholarly monograph on Qin history in English, serving, together with Bodde’s chapter on the Qin in the first volume of the *Cambridge History of China* (1986) as the major

source of information about Qin for the Anglophone public.<sup>1</sup> While a series of monumental Qin-related discoveries in the 1970s, such as the First Emperor's Terracotta Army or the large cache of Qin legal and administrative documents and divinatory manuals unearthed from Tomb 11 at Shuihudi, Yunmeng 雲夢睡虎地 (Hubei), triggered many important publications, no attempt was made to reassess fundamental aspects in the history of the Qin dynasty. Its image as a harsh, “Legalist,” “anti-Confucian” and “anti-Traditional” polity remained — and to a certain extent remains even nowadays — firmly embedded in textbooks and in scholarly writings throughout the English-speaking world.

The primary reason for scholars' reluctance to address anew Qin history is not difficult to find. For generations, debates about Qin, its ideology, its cultural affiliation, and the appropriateness of its policies revolved overwhelmingly around conflicting interpretations of a single major source of Qin history — the *Historical Records* (*Shi ji* 史記) by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–90). In particular, the sixth chapter of this magnum opus, “Basic Annals of the First Emperor of Qin” (秦始皇本紀) served as an almost exclusive source for the history of China's first imperial dynasty. And, while the literary accomplishments of Sima Qian's narrative are undeniable, its reliability remains bitterly disputed. Whereas some scholars routinely incorporate Sima Qian's observations as if they reflected pure historical facts, many others point out the historian's agenda (or agendas) which might have prompted him to tarnish the image of the First Emperor, especially in light of suspicious parallels between the portrait of the First Emperor and that of Sima Qian's employer and nemesis, Emperor Wu of Han (漢武帝, r. 141–87 B.C.). Although Sima Qian's narrative is fairly sophisticated and cannot be reduced

1 See Derk Bodde, *China's First Unifier: A Study of the Ch'in Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Ssu* 李斯 280–208 B.C. (Leiden: Brill, 1938); Bodde, “The State and Empire of Ch'in,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 1, *The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A.D. 220*, edited by Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 20–102. In contrast, Qin was intensively studied by Chinese and Japanese scholars, with research greatly accelerating since the late 1970s. It was also an important focus of exploration by Russian Sinologists, especially by Leonard S. Perelomov, who published his seminal *Imperiia Tsin'—Pervoe Tsentralizovannoe Gosudarstvo v Kitae* (Moscow: Nauka, 1961) and several related articles.