CHAPTER SEVEN

Burning the Books and Killing the Scholars

While the orthodox Confucian interpretation of the First Emperor of Qin was dominant, his brutal and tyrannical reign was summed up by the four-character clause “Fenshu kengru”: “[He] burned the books and buried the Confucian scholars alive.” This refers to two largely unrelated incidents that the historian Sima Qian tells us took place late in the reign of the First Emperor. He wove them into his historical narrative as evidence of the emperor’s increasing paranoia and omens of his imminent tragic downfall. In the first incident, the First Emperor decreed that private copies of *The Book of Documents* (Shangshu), *The Book of Songs* (Shijing), and the histories of the defeated rival states be banned and turned over to the authorities for destruction. This literary inquisition resulted in an enormous loss of historical knowledge and cultural heritage and earned the First Emperor the enmity of tradition-honoring and book-revering Confucian scholars for two millennia. While there is abundant historical proof for the book burning, the second alleged atrocity, the killing of 460 Confucian scholars by burying them alive in a pit, has been greatly misinterpreted and may have never occurred.[1] Nevertheless, for over two millennia, authors and artists have linked these two incidents and used them in representations to vilify the First Emperor, and on occasion, to praise him.

My first exposure to these atrocities, and the first exposure for many Americans, was the April 1978 issue of *National Geographic* magazine, whose feature story by Audrey Topping was devoted to the amazing terracotta army of the First Emperor.[2] The article also featured several paintings by the Taiwanese artist Yang Hsien-min (1932–2011). For the issue, Yang painted several Qin-related scenes, including the assassination attempt of Jing Ke, a painting of how the terracotta warriors were constructed, and another of what the tomb chamber of the emperor might have looked like (plate 7), but the image that gave me nightmares as a ten-year-old child was the painting of the Killing of the Scholars

by the First Emperor: old men buried up to their necks, having their heads lopped off with an ax by a merciless soldier (plate 3). These images are indeed gruesome and chilling, but images also have a history and a political discourse behind them. Yang Hsien-min relocated with his family to Taiwan as a teenager in 1949 and spent the next several decades of his life there, during a time when the First Emperor was explicitly identified with Chairman Mao Zedong. While the First Emperor was glorified during the early 1970s in mainland China as part of a political campaign (see chapter 3), the traditional interpretation of him as a monstrous destroyer of culture remained in Taiwan. Thus, Yang's depiction of the brutal emperor's atrocities may have been colored by his attitude toward the recently deceased brutal unifier of the People's Republic of China, another infamous destroyer of traditional culture. Let us see how these atrocities have been portrayed in literature, monuments, and pictorial art from the Han Dynasty to the Cultural Revolution, with special focus on the political motivations behind the representations.

Han-Period Historical Representation

According to our sole historical account of the Qin dynasty, *Records of the Grand Scribe* by Sima Qian, in 213 BCE the First Emperor hosted a large banquet in the imperial palace to celebrate recent military victories. In attendance were seventy of his court academicians.[3] He had proclaimed his universal empire eight years previously, but resistance to the new order was apparently still strong. The First Emperor not only changed the political arrangements and upended society by eliminating the old aristocracy, but he also imposed Qin's harsh laws on territories accustomed to more flexible customary laws and imposed a standardized writing system, weights and measures, and a coinage system.

The first man to toast the emperor at this banquet was Zhou Qingchen, the chief administrator of the academicians.[4] In an effusive toast, Zhou lauded the First Emperor's achievements in the grandest terms. Then a man named Chunyu Yue stepped forward. He was a court academician from the area of the former polity of Qi, most likely a specialist in Confucian texts. He blasted Zhou Qingchen for flattering the emperor directly to his face and then launched into a tendentious lecture on how the Qin had made a fatal mistake in eliminating the old system of feudal principalities, which had been followed by the Shang and Zhou dynasties, and imposing a completely centralized administration. The First

Emperor had heard all these arguments before, when the empire was first established. At that time, he had listened to the two sides of the debate and had chosen the centralized provincial system, which had already been followed in the state of Qin since the fourth century BCE. He had considered the matter closed at that time, but here was Chunyu Yue, one of his own academicians, once again using the past as a model to criticize his new world order.

His reaction was swift and violent, though not entirely unpredictable. Through his mouthpiece—and some would argue the true architect of his regime—the chief minister, Li Si, we hear a long speech of denunciation, in which the ultimate targets are reactionary ideas held in books. It was only because books still circulated in private hands, works that glorified the supposed golden age of the Western Zhou dynasty or promoted non-Legalist philosophy, that resistance to the new system still survived. Li Si then stated:

> I therefore request that all the chronicles in the scribal records office, other than those of the state of Qin, be burned. With the exception of the academicians, whose duty it is to possess them, if there are persons anywhere in the empire who have in their possession copies of *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Documents*, or the writings of the hundred schools of philosophy, they shall in all cases deliver them to the governor or his commandant, where they will be thrown together and burned. Anyone who ventures to use *The Book of Songs* or *The Book of Documents* in analogies[5] [to the present day] shall be cast away in the marketplace (i.e., executed). Anyone who uses antiquity to criticize the present shall have his whole family exterminated. Any official who observes or knows of a violation and fails to report it shall share the same crime. Anyone who has failed to burn such books within thirty days of the promulgation of this order shall be subjected to tattooing on the face and being made a wall builder. The books that are to be exempted are those on medicine, divination, agriculture, and forestry. Anyone wishing to study the legal principles and ordinances should have an official for his teacher.[6]

This was the infamous Burning of the Books (*fenshu*). When the emperor approved Li Si's proposal, it was drawn up into a legal statute, specifically the Statute on the Private Possession of Books (Xieshu lü), though how broadly and effectively it was enforced we cannot be certain. The late Qing revolutionary Zhang Taiyan argued that the law was almost impossible to enforce and that Li Si and the First Emperor were too fond of literature to really implement it fully.[7]

The statute was not rescinded until the reign of Emperor Hui of the Han dynasty in 190 BCE.[8]

Which books were actually banned? Well, the law clearly targeted *The Book of Songs* and *The Book of Documents,* which were the greatest treasures of the Confucian scholars and their primary arsenal for criticizing the present age. Since the days of Confucius, any man with even a pretension to learning would recite and memorize these texts. There had been antipathy toward these works in the state of Qin since the fourth century BCE, for Han Fei reports that Lord Shang (d. 338 BCE), the powerful minister to Duke Xiao of Qin (Qin Xiao Gong; r. 361–338 BCE), had ordered these two works burned in the state of Qin.[9] So burning these two Confucian texts was not really a new Qin policy in 213 BCE; it was just being extended to the entire empire.

The law proposed by Li Si also mentions "the writings of the hundred schools of philosophy" (*baijiayu*), which would include the writings of Daoists, Mohists, the Yin-Yang school of Zou Yan, the Hedonist school of Yang Zhu, the Agriculturalist school of Xu Xing, and dozens of other schools of thought of which we have only fragmentary knowledge.[10] The other targeted books were historical chronicles from those rival states that Qin had recently conquered. Such chronicles would likely contradict the Qin interpretation of those events and would obviously be targeted for destruction. Modern scholars Zhang Taiyan and Ma Feibai concur that it was the destruction of the chronicles of the defeated states that was the true target of the law and the aspect that was most destructive in its impact, for most of the Confucian Classics and many of the works of the philosophers were later revived by scholars, either from memory or from concealed copies.[11]

According to Sima Qian, one year later, in 212 BCE, the emperor reacted violently once again to a challenge to his authority. Two of his court wizards, Master Lu and Master Hou, who had been commissioned to discover the elixir of immortality, slandered the emperor and fled in secret. An investigation followed in which numerous court scholars and wizards implicated each other. As a result, 460 men were charged with violating various laws and executed in the capital. The text says they underwent *keng,* a word that as a noun means "a pit" and as a verb could mean simply "to be executed" or literally "to be pitted"—actually buried alive in a pit. The same word was used to describe what the Qin general Bai Qi did to the four hundred thousand surrendered soldiers of Zhao after the battle of Changping. This, then, was the equally infamous Killing of the Scholars (*kengru*). When the emperor's eldest son, Fusu, objected to this act, he was

chastised and sent into exile to supervise construction on the Great Wall.[12]

Two years later, the First Emperor died at the age of fifty, and his empire crumbled about three years after that, soon be replaced by the longer-lasting Han Dynasty. Such a catastrophic political collapse had to be explained and avoided by later rulers. Among the atrocities of the Qin said by later critics to have turned Heaven and the people against it, foremost were the destruction of literate culture and the execution of scholars. These two events, historically quite separate, later became wedded together into a set phrase, "Burning of the Books and Killing of the Scholars" (*fenshu kengru*), which forms a shorthand alluding to atrocities committed by a tyrant, including the wanton destruction of culture and the brutal slaughter of the learned.

One of the greatest historical problems with the Killing of the Scholars incident is that, unlike the Burning of the Books, there is no independent evidence confirming that it actually happened. Scholarly consensus in the last few decades is that the Killing of the Scholars was a story embellished or fabricated to unify the Han Confucian school through a legend of martyrdom.[13] The mention of this massacre in Sima Qian's account dates to more than a century after the Qin dynasty. Among the writings of earlier Han scholars, such as Lu Jia, Jia Yi, and Jia Shan, who all enumerated the faults of the Qin, none mention the massacre at all.

So who might Sima Qian have drawn on as a source for his account of the mass execution? Ulrich Neininger argued that the Han historian learned of this account from Kong Anguo (d. ca. 100 BCE), the eleventh-generation descendant of Confucius who claimed that classical texts in ancient script had been discovered hidden away inside the walls of his family's mansion (ca. 128 BCE).[14] Kong tied the Killing of the Scholars incident to the Burning of the Books, and the literary persecution and terror were given as reasons why his ancestors had to conceal the Classics. Sima Qian knew and consulted with Kong when writing his work of history, so it is possible that he borrowed this tale from Kong or that it was a legend known to both men, perhaps with some basis in fact. Unfortunately, Kong Anguo's preface to the Old Text version of *The Book of Documents*, where the massacre is mentioned, is probably a forgery or reconstruction of the fourth century CE, so we do not actually know what Sima Qian could have taken from Kong Anguo.[15]

Recently, Li Kaiyuan has proposed a more likely source for Sima Qian's account.[16] He points to a version of the story in the collectanea *Garden of Eloquence* (Shuoyuan), compiled by Han imperial bibliographer Liu Xiang (ca.

79–8 BCE) around 17 BCE from various collections of historical anecdotes he found in the imperial library, in his personal collection, and among the people.[17] The first part of the *Garden of Eloquence* version mentions the massacre and is very close to the text of Sima Qian's account, but then the story goes in an unexpected direction, as the absconded wizard Master Hou is apprehended and returns to court to confront the First Emperor with an elaborate remonstration about his profligate and arrogant ways that humbles the ruler into contrition. Li Kaiyuan argues that Sima Qian had access to an earlier recension of this account but only borrowed the part about the massacre, since the latter part did not work for his narrative purposes. Once the Killing of the Scholars was incorporated by Sima Qian into his history, however, it took on the guise of incontrovertible fact. At best, the incident is apocryphal; it is certainly not historical.

Furthermore, Sima Qian's written account does not say that the condemned men were all Confucian scholars, as the martyr legend would have us believe. In fact, they were said to be scholars of all types, "various masters" (*zhusheng*), including probably wizards, alchemists, doctors, chefs, and specialists in other texts. Now, part of the reason for the transformation of the various masters into exclusively Confucian scholars in the traditional interpretation is because in the original account, Prince Fusu, when pleading for the condemned men, is made to say that "the scholars all take Confucius as their model." While there may have been some Confucian scholars among the 460 implicated men, most were probably wizards and alchemists like Master Lu and Master Hou, whose original slander and deception had brought down the emperor's wrath.[18] Several famous Confucian court academicians survived the reign of the First Emperor, and some, like Fu Sheng, became quite illustrious during the succeeding Han dynasty, helping to transmit and explicate *The Book of Documents*.[19] So clearly the First Emperor had not tried to massacre all the Confucian scholars at his court, but this did not make for a compelling martyrdom to later Confucians, so it was glossed over.

By the first century of the common era, the legend of the Confucian martyrs had become ever more elaborate, so much so that the scholar Wang Chong felt compelled to express some doubts about the exaggerations in the story and its tenuous connection to the Burning of the Books.[20] The Eastern Han Confucian scholar Wei Hong, a gentleman consultant at the court of the founding Eastern Han emperor, was known for his classical commentaries and his compilation of Han institutions. He wrote out the following comic-tragic version of the story around 57 CE:

> After the [First Emperor of] Qin had burned the books, he was very distressed that the empire still did not follow the laws that had been reformed by him. Now when the various masters, approximately seven hundred men, came to apply for positions as palace gentlemen, he gave orders to secretly plant in wintertime some melons in a temperate place in a valley at the base of Mount Li (map 1.2, inset). When the melons were ripe, he summoned the court academicians (*boshi*) and the various masters (*zhusheng*) to discuss [what they were, and why they could ripen in winter]. All uttered different opinions, and so he ordered them to go down and look at them [in person]. Yet before the arrival of the masters and the worthy Confucian scholars, a hidden mechanism had been constructed, and as they incriminated each other and did not reach a consensus, this mechanism was triggered, which filled the valley with earth, squeezing them all to death. In the end, there was only silence.[21]

Scholars have long been puzzled by this "melon version" of the story, because it does not really narrate the same event as the original account from *Records of the Grand Scribe.* There are now seven hundred scholars, and they have all been tricked by the emperor's wicked scheme. Clearly Wei Hong is elaborating on the tradition that interpreted the verb *keng* in Sima Qian's account as meaning "to bury alive in a pit," and so he provided for a dramatic pit burial. However, the "worthy Confucians" (*xian Ru*) do not come across as perfectly pure in Wei Hong's account. Why did they have to argue so much about those melons?

Tang Dynasty Traditions

We do not hear much about the Confucian martyr legend during the long period of disunion from 220 to 589 CE, when China was divided between northern non-Chinese regimes and poorly centralized, ethnically Chinese southern regimes. Confucian orthodoxy was certainly weakened by the disintegration of the unified empire of the Han. The growing importance of Buddhism, which often received generous imperial patronage, also helped to overshadow Confucianism and the singular importance of the Confucian scholar. With the subsequent reunification of China under the short-lived Sui (581–618 CE) and the powerful and much longer-lived Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), Confucianism experienced a thorough revival. Temples were established in the capital and provinces for regular

sacrifices to Confucius and his disciples.[22] Imperial examinations were promoted to recruit officials, based in part on familiarity with canonical Confucian texts. By the tenth century CE, the new technology of block printing encouraged the mass publication of official versions of Confucian texts, and once again the Confucian scholar reigned supreme in society.

It was during this time, at the height of the Tang dynasty, that the legend of the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars became reanimated and, incredibly, crystallized into real physical remains. During the Tang, a specific site was identified where the Killing of the Scholars was supposed to have taken place. Sometime during 741 CE, Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–56 CE) was staying at his favorite palace near the Huaqing Hot Springs (map 1.2, inset), when he noticed on a local map a certain township called "Killing the Scholars Township" (Keng Ru Xiang).[23] According to a Tang-era commentator, the precise site of the Qin massacre near this township was the Ravine of Horses (Magu), where a pit cut into the western bank of the ravine was identified by old men in the area as the original site of the burial of the scholars.[24]

After visiting the location of the "ruined trench that still survived" and sympathizing with the aggrieved spirits of the martyred Confucians, Emperor Xuanzong commissioned officials to build a temple near the site. It was dedicated on December 1, 742 CE, and was called Temple to Honor the Confucians (Jing Ru Miao).[25] The emperor also set up a stele commemorating the establishment of the temple, authored by the Tang poet and official Jia Zhi (ca. 728–72 CE). The most evocative lines of this prose piece describe the desolate and haunted setting:

> Just to the north of Mount Li, the remains of the pit are still faintly detectable. The grass and trees here are devoid of color, and gloomy clouds drift in a constant twilight haze. At times, one hears cries during the night and knows that the spirits of those who have suffered injustice are present.[26]

The temple was to provide regular food offerings for the wronged spirits of the immolated scholars, preventing them from causing calamity and illness to those living in the area, for though they were being honored, they were also feared like the massacred soldiers we met in chapter 5.

The Tang poet and official Sikong Tu (837–908 CE) authored a later inscription that was likely also inscribed on a stele at the site, titled "Inscription for the Scholar Pit of the Qin" (Ming Qin Keng):

The Legalist methods of Qin ruthlessly opposed Confucianism,
So their people were cruelly tortured on account of this.
After the Confucian scholars of Qin were buried alive in the pit,
Their sacrifices to Heaven died out with them.
Heaven took revenge for the Confucians,
For even though the Confucians were terminated,
They eventually became the dominant school of thought.
Did the Qin really bury the Confucians?
Or did Confucianism bury the Qin?[27]

In this brilliant little piece, Sikong Tu enhances the martyr legend by bringing in the notion of heavenly vengeance. Since Confucians made sacrifices to Heaven, when the First Emperor terminated the scholars, he also deprived Heaven of their sacrifices. Heaven took revenge by destroying the Qin dynasty and making Confucianism the dominant ideology ever since.

Thus, we see that the Tang state's promotion of Confucianism went as far as fixing the apocryphal legend of the Killing of the Scholars in a concrete place and marking that with a temple to honor their sacrifice. Some local villagers today call this place the Ravine of Ghosts (Guigu). It is located a few miles from modern Xi'an city, in Lintong County, just south of Hongqingbao village (map 1.2, inset). People here relate a story that during the 1960s more than a truckload of human skulls was unearthed from the ravine. Locals also repeated a different legend, which says the First Emperor killed the scholars by striking their heads with boards embedded with iron nails.[28] Unofficial digging was carried out in the area during the 1980s, and the most striking find was a headless statue of a scholar-official, dated to the Tang period (figure 7.1). The statue may have been one of a group of life-size sculptures that once stood at the Tang temple site to commemorate the martyred scholars.[29]

Yuan Dynasty Representations

To find the first pictorial, rather than purely literary, depiction of the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars, we must move forward to the 1320s CE, during the Mongol-led Yuan dynasty. One might ask why it took so long to have a pictorial representation of these iconic atrocities of the First Emperor. Is it just an accidental survival that our earliest depiction of the incidents comes from

the Yuan dynasty?

The first flourishing of narrative illustration in China occurred during the Han period (206 BCE-220 CE). Popular forms of Han narrative illustration included depictions of stories from history and mythology with a strong didactic message, focusing on paragons of virtuous behavior and reprehensible actions of immoral individuals used as an admonition. The First Emperor does figure in these early narrative illustrations, in stories demonstrating his lack of virtue and unsuitability to receive the Mandate of Heaven, but the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars do not make an appearance on any of the extant monuments. There are numerous Han depictions of the legend of the Nine Tripods (figure 8.1), in which the First Emperor sought and failed to recover the bronze cauldrons of the Zhou that confer legitimacy on a ruling dynasty. We commonly also see the First Emperor depicted under threat by the assassin Jing Ke (figures 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4). Yet despite the didactic power of the *fenshu kengru* stories, archaeologists have yet to find any Han images of the First Emperor burning texts or burying scholars alive. Perhaps the subject matter was too violent and gruesome for this period in Chinese narrative illustration, for Han narrative illustrations usually do not indulge in sensational imagery for fear of distracting from the moral of the story. After the arrival of Buddhism, however, Chinese narrative illustration does start to explore images of death and torture, especially in depictions of the gruesome punishments of the Ten Kings of Hell (e.g., flaying, burning alive, slicing), which were very popular in Song- and Yuan-period paintings.[30]

Figure 7.1: Scholar statue. Tang Dynasty, ca. 741–42 CE. Stone, height: 140 cm. Possibly from site of the Temple to Honor the Confucians. Hongqingbao village, Lintong County, Shaanxi. Lintong County Museum. Photograph by Dou Lei, August 15, 2016.

Thus, it is during this cultural climate that we see the first depictions of the atrocities of the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars. They are found in a book titled *The Completely Illustrated Plain Narrative of the Qin Annexation of the Six States: The Biography of the First Emperor of Qin* (Quanxiang Qin bing linguo pinghua: Qin Shihuang zhuan).[31] The one surviving edition was probably printed during the reign of Emperor Yingzong (Gegeen Khan) of the Yuan, around 1321–23 CE, in Jian'an, in what is now Fujian province, where a flourishing publishing industry had operated since the Song dynasty.[32]

Books in this genre of “plain narratives” (*pinghua*) were illustrated texts that narrated historical periods and were the predecessors of the historical novels of late imperial times, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Sanguo yanyi). Every page was illustrated in the upper third, and the text itself was a curious amalgam of excerpts from historical texts in simple classical Chinese, vernacular narrative, and a good dose of Tang poetry. The texts contain many errors and were probably not meant for the highest elite clientele, though a certain level of literacy was required to appreciate more than just the illustrations. They also contain popular legends and historical tales not found in traditional histories like *Records of the Grand Scribe.* Despite the sometimes sensational illustrated content, they were mostly morality tales drawn from history.[33]

The Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars are depicted near the end of the illustrated book. Even though the image was carved onto a single wooden block, the viewer/reader had to flip the page to see the whole scene, since the sheet was folded for binding.[34] I have reconstructed it as one image in figure 7.2. In this depiction, the two events are connected visually and chronologically. At the right, the First Emperor sits under a tent, leaning on a sword, while guards heap books onto a bonfire. Flipping the page, one sees that the bonfire is on the edge of a chasm, into which guards wielding pitchforks and halberds have thrown three hapless scholars.

There is something curious about this and other images of the First Emperor in *The Completely Illustrated Plain Narrative.* When he is depicted as a noble ruler, unifying All under Heaven, commanding armies, or even fleeing the assassin Jing Ke, the First Emperor is almost always shown wearing traditional Chinese court robes. Yet when we see him presiding over the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars, he appears in full military horse-riding armor, reminiscent of a Mongol Great Khan.[35]

Now, obviously, the artisans who created this scene were drawing from their own experience when they represented weapons, clothing, or architecture of the present day, even though they are depicting events of Qin times. Notice that the books being burned on the fire are stitched fourteenth-century-style books on paper and not bundles of bamboo slips, which would have been more appropriate for a Qin setting. Yet one cannot escape the sense that there may be some subtle political message here—namely, that when the First Emperor is destroying Chinese culture and persecuting scholars, he is depicted like a Mongol ruler, an oblique criticism of oppressive Mongol rule in China.

Figure 7.2: “Burning of the Books and Killing of the Scholars.” Yuan Dynasty, 1321–23 CE. From *Quanxiang Qin bing liuguo pinghua: Qin Shihuang zhuan.* National Archives of Japan.

The scene is unquestionably violent. Yuan dynasty religious and popular art sometimes has a tendency to show violence and gore. Even elite Yuan art occasionally has an edginess that one scholar believes represents a sublimation of the violence and threat felt in Yuan society.[36] The “plain narrative” books were meant for a fairly broad audience and show no reserve in depicting some pretty gruesome scenes. In another example from the same book, we see chief minister Li Si and one of his sons bound naked and being cut in two at the waist (figure 7.3).[37]

The Completely Illustrated Plain Narrative’s account of the Burning of the Books is interrupted by a poetic quotation introduced by the clause “the poems say” (*shi yue*). This is a reference not to the classic *The Book of Songs,* but to the works of Tang poets, which had achieved a sort of canonical status in this semipopular genre. The poem quoted here is “Book-Burning Pits” (Fenshu keng) by Zhang Jie (ca. 836–905 CE), written around 877 CE.

The empire was weakened after the books went up in smoke.
The pass and the river futilely guarded the Primal Dragon’s residence.
Disorder erupted in the East before the pit ashes had turned cold.
Neither Liu [Bang] nor Xiang [Yu] ever studied books.[38]

The first and third lines of Zhang’s poem causally link the two events. Zhang is implying that by burning the books, the Qin not only destroyed culture but, in doing so, invalidated its mandate from Heaven to rule. The poet even brings the events closer in time than their actual succession, for he says that the ash pits had not even turned cold when the rebellion that would bring down the Qin arose in the east. In fact, that rebellion broke out four years after the Burning of the Books.

Figure 7.3: “The Execution of Li Si, Father and Son.” Yuan Dynasty, 1321–23 CE. From *Quanxiang Qin bing liuguo pinghua: Qin Shihuang zhuan.* National Archives of Japan.

This poem by a minor Tang poet would figure prominently in the debates over the First Emperor during the twentieth century. In August 1945 at Yan’an, Chairman Mao made a gift of this poem in his own calligraphy to the famous May Fourth scholar Fu Sinian (1896–1950), as part of a veiled criticism of do-nothing intellectuals during the Chinese Revolution, a time that called for men of action (like Liu Bang or Mao himself).[39] Criticism of this poem also formed a centerpiece in the reappraisal of the First Emperor during the late Cultural Revolution, when the verse was attacked in numerous articles.

Ming Dynasty Representations

For the next widely disseminated image of the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars, we turn again to Zhang Juzheng’s Ming-era primer *The Emperor’s Mirror* (Dijian tushuo). The second part of that textbook introduced thirty-six anecdotes of immoral imperial conduct, titled “The Tracks to Ruin of the Wanton and Stupid” (Kuangyu fuzhe). The entry on the Qin atrocities in this section reverses the normal order and is called “Killing of the Scholars and Burning of the Books” (Kengru fenshu), possibly to emphasize the severity of the massacre over the bibliocaust. The main text in *The Emperor’s Mirror* gives a detailed recounting of Li Si’s arguments for the book burning. When it comes to the wizards Master Hou and Master Lu, whose slander and subsequent escape triggered the investigation and later execution of their colleagues, Zhang Juzheng deliberately calls the two men “Confucian scholars” (Rushi), even though that is obviously ahistorical.[40] Once again, the wizards have been

transformed into Confucian scholars for the expediency of the martyr legend. To make the orthodox Confucian interpretation more powerful, it was best to lump all the victims together as Confucian scholar-martyrs, rather than to acknowledge that many (or all) of them were wizards. Zhang Juzheng's compilers even put words into the First Emperor's mouth, having him state, "These Confucians all spout harmful nonsense, agitating people with their demagoguery, so they must be executed."

The concluding commentary to this entry in *The Emperor's Mirror* highlights the evil aberration of the First Emperor as the only ruler in history who did not uphold Confucian values:

> Now, among all the rulers since ancient times who wanted to govern the world well, there had never been one who did not make reverence for Confucians and emphasizing the Way his highest priorities. The First Emperor alone went against the Way, even to the point of causing the Classics to all become ashes and those who wear robes and caps (i.e., scholars) to be slaughtered. His crimes are beyond words! Later, Emperor Gao of the Han passed by the territory of Lu and made a Great Sacrifice for Confucius; Emperor Wen removed the law against the private possession of books; Emperor Wu made the Six Classics the orthodox canon; and Gongsun Hong was made chief minister because he was a Confucian master. Then, finally, the teachings of Confucius were revitalized. Thus, when surveying the reasons why the Qin perished and the Han arose, the models for gaining the empire and losing it are very clearly seen![41]

Thus, the Qin dynasty fell because they persecuted the Confucians, and the Han dynasty thrived because they glorified them. Lesson concluded.

In the middle of 1573, Zhang Juzheng sponsored for general circulation among officials a reduced-scale, woodblock-print edition of *The Emperor's Mirror,* based on preliminary drawings made for the imperially presented large-format painted albums (figure 7.4).[42]

It is possible, though by no means certain, that the artists who created the "Killing of the Scholars and Burning of the Books" vignette in *The Emperor's Mirror* based their composition on the Yuan dynasty "plain narrative" graphic books or their descendants. While it is true that there are some similarities between the two compositions, such as placing the book burning and the scholar killing in close proximity to one another, or the fact there are two face-down

scholars and one on his backside, they are generally quite different.

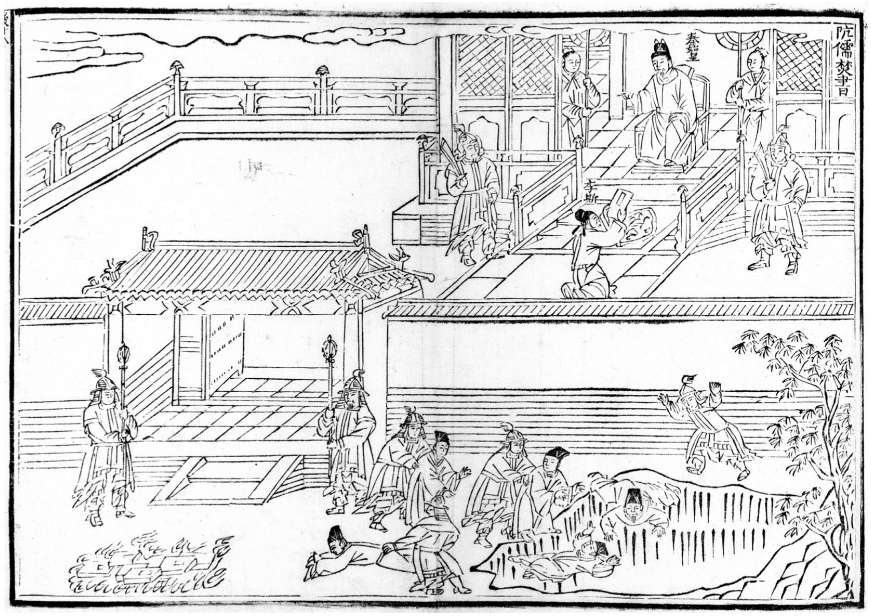

Figure 7.4: “Killing of the Scholars and Burning of the Books.” Ming Dynasty, 1573 CE. Woodblock print. From Zhang Juzheng, *The Emperor’s Mirror: Illustrated and Explained* (Dijian tushuo). Courtesy of the East Asian Library and the Gest Collection, Princeton University Library, call no. TB367/609Q.

In the *Emperor’s Mirror* version, three linked events are now portrayed in a chronological narrative sequence within the same composition. At the top, we see Li Si presenting his memorial on burning the books to the emperor, who nods his approval. Following the narrative, we must now exit the courtyard through the gate at the lower left to witness the next event, the burning of the books. We then travel to the right and see the final act, the live burial of the scholars.

The illustrations in the small woodblock-printed edition published by Zhang (figure 7.4) are rather sketchy and do not represent the sumptuous colors and details that must have graced the original palace album. Unfortunately, the two large-format painted albums of *The Emperor’s Mirror* that Zhang presented to the emperor are considered to be no longer extant. However, there is a two-volume anonymous album housed in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris that contains numerous scenes from an edition of *The Emperor’s Mirror*, including the “Killing of the Scholars and Burning of the Books” scene (plate 4).[43] These album leaves are finely detailed and sumptuously painted in expensive pigments, exactly like one would expect from a palace edition.

There is compelling evidence that this album in Paris was a faithful copy of the original presentation album, made some time after 1573. There is also a very slight possibility that it contains salvaged portions from the original album.[44] The case rests on a comparison between the Paris album and a woodblock-printed edition of *The Emperor's Mirror* held by the Imperial Household Agency in Japan.[45] The colophons to those large-format albums in Japan explain that the unique original of *The Emperor's Mirror* was removed from the history office in the Ming palace in the fall of 1573 by the retiring metropolitan censor Pan En (1496–1582 CE), who took it to Jiangsu, where his son Pan Yunduan (1526–1601 CE) had a copy made from it on large-format wooden blocks.[46] A side-by-side comparison of several vignettes (including "Killing of the Scholars and Burning of the Books") reveals that the Paris album is nearly identical in composition and details to the edition in Japan, proving its genetic affiliation.[47] Whether or not the Paris album represents a portion of the original Ming palace album has still yet to be determined. It is interesting that in the Paris album, the face of the First Emperor is missing, apparently scratched off (plate 4). If this leaf were from the original 1573 album presented to the nine-year-old Wanli Emperor, it is humorous to speculate that he "defaced" the First Emperor himself, to avenge the terrible atrocities inflicted upon the Confucians and their culture.

Early Twentieth-Century Interpretations

Previously, we saw how the illustrious scholar and anti-Manchu revolutionary Zhang Taiyan became the man chiefly responsible for systematically undermining the orthodox Confucian interpretation of the First Emperor and paving the way for his rehabilitation. In his 1911 essay, "Account of Qin Contributions to Literature" (Qin xian ji), Zhang downplays the significance of the Burning of the Books and dismisses the Killing of the Scholars as a minor political skirmish.

First, Zhang's essay stresses that the Burning of the Books was not a new policy of the First Emperor, for according to Han Fei, Lord Shang had ordered the burning of *The Book of Songs* and *The Book of Documents* in the state of Qin back in the mid-fourth century BCE. Li Si was only expanding the scope of the law to include the newly conquered lands.[48]

Second, Zhang argues that the law banning private possession of books was unenforceable and had never really been enforced by the Qin or early-Han

rulers. He states, “Literary study leads to eloquence and erudition and penetrates deeply into the mind, becoming quite habitual. [The state] is incapable of forcibly snatching away such a thing that elites and commoners both enjoy, even if one writes ordinances [like that on the burning of the books].”[49] He notes the names of many famous scholars of Qin and early-Han times who continued to routinely quote the banned books, demonstrating that the prohibition was never effective.[50] Zhang suggests that Li Si and the First Emperor, who were both very literate men, did not fully implement the ban, because their hearts were not in it. He claims, “The First Emperor’s love of literature actually surpassed that of other rulers.”[51] Thus, “even though the law [banning books] was officially promulgated, it was just empty words. In the end, there was no mechanism for inspection to guarantee true implementation.”[52]

Third, Zhang denies that the Burning of the Books had such a great impact on the survival of Chinese literature. While archaic works like *The Book of Documents* emerged from the ban damaged and disordered, since they were written in difficult-to-recite ancient prose, and the historical chronicles of the other states were lost completely, *The Book of Songs* continued to be transmitted orally with ease, since these were rhyming poems. Most of the major philosophical works also survived, being filled with easy-to-memorize vernacular anecdotes and arguments.[53] Finally, Zhang disagrees that the infamous Killing of the Scholars was a concerted effort by the Qin to eradicate scholarship, arguing that it was merely a political reaction to specific historical events, similar in some ways to the Great Proscription (*danggu*) of Eastern Han times.[54]

Adolf Hitler and the First Emperor

While the notion of book burning is just as abhorrent to Western liberal intellectuals as it was to Confucians in traditional China, it conjures up the ghost of a different tyrant. In Germany, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party came to power in early 1933. While the party’s official cultural policy on literature was not yet in place, an ultranationalist college student organization staged a coordinated event at over thirty German universities on May 10, 1933, called “Action Against the Un-German Spirit,” in which they burned thousands of books that they considered un-German, including the works of Jewish authors, books by Marx and other socialists, pacifist works, books on sex and eroticism, and the works of “degenerate” American authors like Ernest Hemingway.[55] The largest

staged event was at the plaza near the Berlin Opera House, where forty thousand spectators watched while zealous college students chanted “fire incantations” (Feuersprüche) as they tossed the books into the flames (figure 7.5). For the Nazis, the public burning of books signified the ritual cleansing and purging of diseased elements from the national body, a reverberation of the premodern burnings of heretics and witches in Europe. At this event in Berlin, Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels said in his speech:

> My fellow students, German men and women, the era of exaggerated Jewish intellectualism is now at an end. The triumph of the German revolution has cleared a path for the German way; and the future German man will not just be a man of books, but also a man of character and it is to this end we want to educate you.… That is the mission of the young and therefore you do well at this late hour to entrust to the flames the intellectual garbage of the past.[56]

Figure 7.5: Burning of books at the Berlin Opernplatz, May 10, 1933. Photo courtesy of Bundesarchiv (Federal Archive of Germany), Bild 102–14597. Photographer: Georg Pahl.

The actions in Germany on May 10 were quickly condemned across the world as a barbaric act, and the reaction in America was particularly strong.[57] In New York City, one hundred thousand people marched to protest the book burnings and the treatment of Jews, and the event was covered in both *Time* and *Newsweek*.[58] Famous American authors like Helen Keller, whose books were

also burned, wrote open protest letters to German students.[59] For decades after the burning of the books in Germany, the event reverberated throughout Western culture and collective memory as an admonition against fascism and censorship and a reminder of the disregarded Cassandric prophecy of a holocaust that would kill millions of people. These sentiments found their greatest expression in Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* of 1953, published at the height of McCarthyism in the United States.[60]

Later in the summer, on July 11, 1933, in Asia, China's most famous living author, Lu Xun (1881–1936), writing under a pseudonym, published a newspaper article that examined the Nazi book burning in comparison to that of the First Emperor of Qin.

> "A Discussion of the Differences and Similarities between Chinese and German Book Burning" (Hua De fenshu yitong lun)
>
> *By Ru Niu [pen name of Lu Xun]*
>
> As soon as Hitler and his men in Germany started to burn books, essayists in China and Japan all compared him to the First Emperor of Qin. But actually, the First Emperor has been quite unjustly treated in this regard. His dynasty came to grief during the reign of the Second Emperor, and a party of literary hacks, on behalf of the new leadership, was able to make malicious remarks about him.
>
> Yes, the First Emperor of Qin did burn books, but the book burning was an attempt to unify philosophical thought. Moreover, he did not burn books on agriculture or medicine. He enlisted the help of many "guest ministers" from other states and did not just insist on a particular Qin ideology. On the contrary, he was very eclectic in his selections from different schools of thought.
>
> It is said that the people of Qin highly valued children. The First Emperor's mother was a lady from the kingdom of Zhao, and people from Zhao highly valued women. Indeed, from the literature of the so-called severe Qin dynasty, we see very little textual evidence disparaging women as "mean and worthless."
>
> Hitler and the Nazis are quite different from this. The kind of books he burned were, first of all, those that "did not embody a German ideology." He did not accommodate the bold initiatives of ministers from foreign

states. The second category of books the Nazis burned were books about sex. This was meant to wipe out the liberation of sexual morals that had been brought about through the application of science to research on human sexuality. The result will certainly be to cause women and children to be degraded into their old base statuses and to never see the light [of liberation]. If one compares this to the First Emperor of Qin's great accomplishments, like unifying axle widths or standardizing the writing system, [the Nazis] are not accomplishing anything at all.

When the Arabs attacked the Great Library at Alexandria (ca. 641 CE), they destroyed all the library's holdings. Their reasoning was like this: If the principles discussed in those books were the same as those in the Koran, and the Koran still exists, there was no reason to retain those other books. Or, supposing if the precepts found in these books were different, then these would be heterodox texts, and they also should not be preserved. These were the direct ideological ancestors of Hitler and his Nazis. Even though the Arabs were also of the "not of German ideology" sort of case, one still cannot compare them to the case of Qin's Burning of the Books.

However, the results, more often than not, are not the same as the great men might predict. The First Emperor of Qin thought he would pass on the emperorship to ten thousand generations, and yet, contrary to his expectations, it was extinguished in the second generation [or, with the Second Emperor]. He gave an amnesty to those books on medicine and agriculture, yet of the books on those subjects that existed before the Qin, none survive till today.

As soon as Hitler mounted the political stage, he immediately burned books, attacked the Jews, and acted with insufferable arrogance. His "yellow-faced adopted sons" from our area of the world (viz., the Nationalists) were quite jubilant when they heard of this, and this heaped more ridicule on the oppressed, firing back a cold arrow of mocking at those who use words to criticize [Hitler or the Nationalists].

——Do you yet understand the cold, cold truth of the question: Do you want freedom or not? If you are not free, wouldn't you rather die? Why don't you just go out there and risk your life?

This time, however, there won't necessarily be a "Second Emperor of Qin

> [debacle],” for only half a year later, when the disciples of Hitler were banned in Austria, the “unification party” used three colors of roses [red, black, and white] as their insignia [in place of the swastika]. The most interesting thing is that because they were also not allowed to give the [Nazi] salute, everybody would just cover their mouth with their hand to give a silent salute. This is a great satire. But who is really being mocked? Well, all right, maybe we won’t look into this further. But, one can see that satire is not just “talking in one’s sleep.” To put it plainly, those yellow-faced adopted sons [of the Nazis], do they not know what to make of this?[61]

Lu Xun’s article clearly justifies the book burning of the First Emperor, refusing to acknowledge its fundamental similarity to the Nazi book burning of May 1933. This is quite understandable, since Lu Xun was once an informal student in Japan of Zhang Taiyan, who was the first great apologist for the First Emperor in the twentieth century. Lu Xun claims that while Hitler and Goebbels wanted to purge all books that were un-German in their ideology, the First Emperor, in contrast, was merely trying to “unify philosophical thought” (*tongyi sixiang*), just as he had unified coinage, weights, and measures. In contrast to the Nazis, Lu Xun argues that the Qin were known for adopting ideas from foreign states. The distinction is unconvincing, for by purging un-German ideas from books, the Nazis were certainly working toward the same goal as the First Emperor. Lu Xun also argues that the Nazis were against books about sex and women’s liberation, whereas the Qin promoted the status of women in society.

Lu Xun’s real target in this article was the Nationalist government in China. He was most concerned that the aspiring fascist regime of Chiang Kai-shek was taking the Nazis as its model in their censorship campaigns and suppression of literature critical of the government. He refers to the Nationalists indirectly as the Nazis’ “yellow-faced adopted sons from our area of the world.”

In March 1930, Lu Xun was one of the organizers and the nominal head of the League of Left-Wing Writers, a Communist Party cultural front organization that sought to use socialist realism to promote proletarian-focused literature and revolutionary objectives.[62] In December 1930, the Nationalist regime passed rigid new censorship laws prohibiting books that “endangered the Republic.” Some bookstores were raided, and the league was banned. The following month, police arrested and quickly executed by gunshot a group of twenty-three (or twenty-four) leftists in Shanghai, including five writers from the league. Some

sensational accounts say they were buried alive. These were the so-called Longhua Martyrs. One of them was Rou Shi (1902–31), who was a young protégée and friend of Lu Xun. This outrage was certainly still fresh in Lu Xun's mind when he wrote this article on the book burning.[63]

Representations during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution

When Mao Zedong assumed the helmsmanship of the People's Republic of China in 1949, he found himself strongly identified with the First Emperor of Qin, particularly in the sense that both had "unified China" and were opponents of old, conservative ideas. By the time of the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1958, however, Mao openly embraced the atrocities of the First Emperor as well, expressing admiration for his efforts to exterminate those "who use the past to criticize the present," a direct allusion to the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars. He even boasted of killing one hundred times as many scholars as the First Emperor had.

In November 1966, during the first tumultuous year of the Cultural Revolution, as part of the campaign to cleanse the country of the "Four Olds,"[64] the temple and burial ground of Confucius and his descendants in Qufu, Shandong, were desecrated by Red Guards.[65] Confucius's tomb was opened, his cult statues were disemboweled and burned, and steles and altars at the temple were destroyed. Here and around the country, the Confucian Classics were once again consigned to the flames. Prominent Communist intellectuals like Guo Moruo had to witness their own books go up in smoke. The strong resemblance between this cultural holocaust and the original Burning of the Books was not lost on the regime's critics.

Later, toward the close of the Cultural Revolution, Mao's chosen successor and the strongest promoter of his cult of personality, Lin Biao, fell from power and slandered Mao as a "contemporary First Emperor of Qin." In the massive propaganda campaign begun after Lin's death, the only suitable countermeasure to labeling Mao as a contemporary First Emperor was to cement a positive interpretation of the emperor and his actions in the public consciousness. Accordingly, the First Emperor was portrayed as a progressive ruler who was moving history forward into the next Marxist stage of history. Those who opposed his rule, including Confucian scholars like Chunyu Yue, were counterrevolutionaries trying to block the progress of history. Thus, the Burning

of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars were progressive acts, eliminating counterrevolutionaries and their ideas.

In dozens of essays published in major newspapers and journals during 1974, the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars were justified as progressive acts of "revolutionary violence."[66] The essays often included quotes from Friedrich Engels's *Anti-Dühring* which argued for the necessity of using force as a means to achieve revolutionary socioeconomic progress. They further argued that the book burning should not be seen as the wanton destruction of culture. As one widely disseminated essay stated, "The First Emperor had no intention of destroying culture and burning all books. His book burning was just aimed at 'unifying philosophical thought' (*tongyi sixiang*)," using the same phrase employed by Lu Xun to differentiate the Qin book burning from that of the Nazis.[67]

An important part of the campaign to valorize the First Emperor and to criticize Confucius was the mass printing of inexpensive graphic booklets. The cover of the booklet *Qin Shihuang* (First Emperor of Qin), published by Shanghai People's Press in 1974, depicts the Burning of the Books as a huge bonfire in front of the palace gates (plate 5). Hearty soldiers hurl dozens of bamboo books into the flames. Among the titles of the books on the pyre, one can make out *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chunqiu), *Mencius* (Mengzi), and *The Analects* (Lunyu). This scene was chosen for the cover to positively exemplify the First Emperor's entire reign.[68]

It is related in the booklet that when the book-burning edict was announced, "the common people had always hated the philosophy of Confucius and Mencius, and many people came from far away to Xianyang to see the commotion, and many helped search out copies of *The Book of Songs* and *The Book of Documents.* The people were exceedingly happy."[69] The authors of the booklet conclude that all those 460 men killed by the emperor were indeed Confucians (and not wizards), who conspired with those who used the past to criticize the present. As the men were led to the execution ground, common people along the path mocked these "despicable counterrevolutionary Confucian scholars who were in the midst of plotting a restoration."[70] One poor old peasant was heard to say, "That scoundrel, eating rich foods and wearing silk, who thinks we can retreat back to the society of the Western Zhou period. He wants us to be slaves again. He deserves to die!"[71]

The manner in which the participants in these events are depicted reinforces the positive image of the Qin leaders and the negative image of the Confucian

scholars. The First Emperor and Li Si are depicted as resolute and bold, while Chunyu Yue is shown as a shriveled and decrepit man (figure 3.1). In a subsequent scene showing the eighth-generation descendant of Confucius, Kong Fu, hiding away a copy of *The Analects,* Kong is given an intentionally horrifying, simian appearance (figure 7.6, right).

Figure 7.6: Kong Fu and Chen Yu hiding a copy of *The Analects.* Painted by Dai Dunbang. From Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, *Qin Shihuang,* 106. Reprinted courtesy of Dai Dunbang.

Representations in Cinema, Television, and Video Games

In the realm of film, no director could fail to notice the dramatic and cinematic potential inherent in the *fenshu kengru* incidents. In movies and popular documentaries about the First Emperor, it has always made more sense to the directors to depict the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars as causally linked. For the dramatic narrative, it just seems logical to portray the chain of events thus: Scholars use books to criticize emperor → emperor destroys books → scholars object → emperor buries scholars alive. Although technical advisers might suggest to the director that the verb *keng* probably does not literally mean "to bury alive," the dramatic potential is just too great to pass up.

Figure 7.7: Burning of the Books and Killing of the Scholars. (top) Boulders and dirt raining down on the scholars. (bottom) Scholar trying to prevent official from burning *The Analects.* From Tanaka Shigeo, *Shin no Shikōtei.*

The first portrayal of the atrocities on film that I am aware of is in the big-budget 1962 Japanese film epic, *Shin no Shikōtei* (*The First Emperor of Qin;* marketed in the West as *The Great Wall*), directed by Tanaka Shigeo.[72] In Tanaka's take, the scholars strongly criticize the emperor, calling him a "tyrant" (*bōkun*). The emperor then tells them that he is above god and condemns them to death. In this film's depiction, the pit is dug impressively deep, and carts full of boulders rain down on the scholars from above, while soldiers pile on the dirt (figure 7.7, top). One of the scholars folds his arms, and many of the men face their martyrdom with Zen-like equanimity. The First Emperor is present at the scene and is slightly disturbed by all the people yelling "tyrant!" at him. In an unusual turn, the Burning of the Books is presented after this live-burial scene, but this was required by the plot structure. The books are burned in a large public spectacle, with fences to hold back the angry people. A student of *The Analects* begs an official not to destroy his classical text, which he says means more than his life to him (figure 7.7, bottom). The book fails to hit the bonfire and is picked up by another Confucian student, named Wan Xiliang, who runs off with it. In a strange plot twist, this young man then intrudes on a maiden

named Meng Jiangnü in her garden, thereby connecting the Burning of the Books to the famous legend "Meng Jiangnü Brings Down the Great Wall."

The next portrayal of these incidents in a major film was in *The First Emperor of China*, a documentary filmed and screened in the IMAX format in 1989.[73] It was a joint production between the Canadian Film Board and the Xi'an Film Studio, one of the up-and-coming units of movie production in China, and was narrated by the inimitable Christopher Plummer (1929–2021).

The Burning of the Books is convincingly portrayed as a huge nighttime bonfire spectacle in the presence of the First Emperor, undoubtedly influenced by newsreels of the Nazi book burning at the Berlin Opera House (figure 7.8, top). The historical Burning of the Books in China would not have been conducted as a public spectacle, as was depicted in these two films, but rather carried out in government offices. The First Emperor, who was quite paranoid about assassination and making his whereabouts known, would certainly not have been present. The narration to this scene says that the books burned had "promoted freedom of thought," which seems to be a very Western overlay on the concept of burning books, for the Confucian Classics that were burned certainly did not promote free thinking and encouraged their own orthodoxy. When in suitable positions of power during later dynasties, the Confucians would carry out their own literary purges.

The depiction of the Killing of the Scholars in this documentary is a bit underwhelming (figure 7.8, bottom). The scholars stand waist deep in a shallow pit, probably due to a limited production budget, and they make feeble attempts to climb out of the pit while soldiers throw paltry amounts of dirt on their heads. While Qin military officers look on and snicker, the narrator reads, "The Burning of the Books enraged the intellectuals of the day. Qin also had a solution for them. He buried 460 of them alive. The criticism stopped." This implausible scene usually elicits more laughs from the audience than pathos.

One last media representation I would like to introduce transpires in a video game, the first-person role-playing game *Prince of Qin.*[74] In a scene midway through the plot, Fusu comes across a girl named Chunyu Yi, who is portrayed as the daughter of the academician Chunyu Yue, the man whose inflammatory remarks set off the whole Burning of the Books incident. In the scene, we learn that his daughter is caretaker of an enormous library of banned books in her basement, carrying out her father's cultural mission after his demise in the scholars' pit at Xianyang (figure 7.9) As Fusu, you can vicariously rescue the books, and the cultural heritage of China, by saving Chunyu Yi from peril. In his

verbal exchange with Chunyu Yi, Fusu struggles to accept the atrocities committed by his father, whose legacy is treated rather ambivalently in the game as a whole. In an enormous understatement, Fusu tells her, “But generally speaking it is not proper to burn so many books and kill so many people.”

Figure 7.8: Burning of the Books and Killing of the Scholars. (top) Public burning of the books in front of the palace gates. (bottom) Burial of the scholars in a shallow pit. From Ianzelo and Liu, *The First Emperor of China.*

Figure 7.9: Chunyu Yi speaking with Fusu in her father's underground library. Object Software, *Prince of Qin.*

Conclusion

For the greater part of two thousand years, "He burned the books and buried the scholars alive" was used as a label to characterize the entire reign of the First Emperor. The atrocities were used by Confucians for centuries to portray the First Emperor as a monstrous tyrant who relinquished his mandate from Heaven and tried to destroy culture. The author of our only account of these events, the Han historian Sima Qian, had not originally meant for these actions to take on such a large role. He had placed these records toward the end of the reign of the First Emperor, along with other omens and portents of doom, to show the emperor's tragic descent into paranoia and obsession.

It was only during the Cultural Revolution that propagandists were able to put a positive spin on both incidents, portraying them as progressive and necessary uses of revolutionary violence in a class struggle to prevent a restoration of slave society. For modern audiences, especially those in the West, images of book burning and the killing of intellectuals elicit different traumatic cultural memories, resonating with our own struggles with fascism, extremism, and malign forces that endanger our freedoms of speech and thought. Loosely anchored in historical fact, the Burning of the Books and the Killing of the Scholars become critical lenses through which authors can project onto paper or the silver screen the political and cultural struggles of any contemporary age.

The First Emperor of Qin is a paradoxical historical figure. Known as both a revolutionary founding emperor and a cruel and oppressive despot, his multilayered legacy has allowed later generations to use him as a model or as an admonition, depending on their political needs. Imagine, in our case, if the American founding father, George Washington, not only had won the

Revolutionary War but had followed this a few years later by the wanton destruction of pro-British literature and works of English history. Imagine that when the Tories of Boston objected to this, he buried 460 of them alive in a pit. It has been hard enough for defenders of colonialism to justify Washington's semidivine founding-father status with the knowledge that he personally owned over a hundred enslaved Africans, but it would be nearly impossible to do so if he had committed such brutal atrocities against Euro-American culture as well.