Actio 2: Ancient Libraries –

Qin Dynasty’s Order of Book Burning and Burial of the Scholars

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This is a story about China’s First Emperor, Shi Huangdi, of the Qin Dynasty, and how he unified China by attempting to erase the history that came before him with the use of suppression and censorship, denying the people of a unified China the freedom to freely think in opposition to his legalist rule. This was that famous ruler who, between 221 and 206 BCE (some say 210 BCE), began an autocracy that went as far as burning writings that differed from those of his imposed government. It is reported that Shi Huangdi also went as far as ordering the live burial of philosophers and thinkers of dissent (Lubow, 2009).

He is also known for leading a victorious run against larger feuding states, thus unifying a people of discord. He is also well known for ordering the construction of the famous Great Wall of China, one of the Seven Wonders of the World; but his infamy was due to his execution of legalism which swallowed up every other school of thought which included Confucianism and Mohism (Rodri & Carreiro, 2013), which originated from the Chinese philosopher, logician and teacher, Mo Di. It must be noted that Shi Huangdi and his closest advisors did not order the burning of all preexisting writing on record. There were certain subjects that kept favor with the dynasty’s rule. So, yes, Qin Shi Huangdi unified and forcefully ruled over 20 million people, but unification came with a price that until this day, in some form, still exists where intellectual freedom, as well as other freedoms are concerned.

Shi Huangdi, a notorious Qin warrior, punished those found to possess books that were now forbidden. Having a reputation of being a megalomaniac with a preoccupation with people who might be out to get him. As emperor, he overhauls the region’s entire societal structure: he created new currency, as well as new systems of weights and measures. He even recreated the writing that his people would now need to learn under his rule. Huangdi reestablished a new feudal system that ranked nobles, land owners at the top of the food chain, and at the very bottom, no, not peasants but the worst of the worst – mainly Confucian scholars, merchants and craftsmen at the very bottom. He ordered the construction of man-made waterways. Then there was, the wall, which was supposed to thwart assaults and surprise attacks from enemies from the north. The people of the land became angry for the taxes were raised and censorship had come to town. He ordered ancient texts and collections to be burned during the year of 213 BCE. Shi Huangdi ordered this consequence of noncompliance into law. Mohist texts and Confucian ritual and writings were punishable by law now. The infamous book burnings began in 213 BCE. These ritualistic burnings were public affairs. The people had to know where the materials were offensive culturally, religiously, or politically. Ironically, Shi Huangdi would publish his propaganda by inscribing it in stone, making the message known to the people, thus (Yang & Xiao, 2012).
Shi Huangdi wasn't alone in the commission of these crimes. His chancellor and partner in crime, Li Si, of the legalist political party, advised suppression of any opposing thought among the people. Scholars were especially targeted since they questioned things, and this seemed to threaten the rogue Qin regime. As for which written material was ordered for burning, Shi Jing, or, classic poetry, was sentenced for extinction; the Shujing, or, classic history, was also subject to fire; and one was in possession of writing that encompassed one of the hundred schools of philosophy in China, they too, were ordered to deliver these books to the governor. God forbid a person would dare to discuss the prohibited material, they would simply be ordered to suffer execution – that person and possibly their family. Those knowing of any such material was supposed to report this to authorities or else, they too, would suffer the same punishment. In an effort to unify all thought and political opinion Chancellor Li Si advocated the blatant suppression of free speech wherever there was dissent.

All schools of thought became prohibited, except for legalism, and was subject to book burning, lest the legitimacy of the dynasty be challenged. Let it be understood that historical record accounts for just 460 scholars that were punished by live burial after being found guilty by the Qin regime.

Bao Chen was the youngest of seven brothers who mother died at birth. He was also the smallest in size next to his six siblings, who ranged in age, from 41 to his 16th year. He was filled with a charcoaled colored lament from early as he could remember, feeling somehow responsible for taking the only single love that his father had ever come to know. This would also explain the sense of separation that he felt for all of his days, even until now. Bao Chen was alone. His father did his best to keep from shunning his youngest child but Bao Chen could see his father’s resentment in the gradual decrease in stature. Ever increasingly, Bao espied his father’s diminishing frame, so that he could only nowadays look at his father out of the corner of his eye, and that, being his left. He could remember the days when he would look at his father out of the corner of his right eye. He stood fragile, yet erect; but now, ever since a time that he never planned to keep to memory, the shape of his father’s withering frame resembled that of a sickled moon, dirty, tagged, and encrusted.

While his isle from others drifted he cowered his reverence under the tent of studies. He felt shame for having this much while his brothers toiled soy, grazed sheep, not one like he, had managed the art of self-service, pristine, for they all had children ahungered, even as young, and one older than Bao Chen, who chased wisdom, reflection, and the arrows from his brethren, the ruin of his sire was about to bring his great fortune under a brow breathing with ire.

"Come under fire"
I, son, family,
Smallest, I war with thee in time of your chaos;
Our heart is lost by my birth
It is as if I am fated to collect unto me
All that would rather war;
I, youngest, will bring you under rule
In my independence, indifference;
You will miss me when I'm gone
But until that time I will conquer...”

Some claim that the Qin Dynasty’s purge of books of dissent and burial of the scholarly thinker of its time, was merely an exaggeration, one comparable in size to the historical account of the same fate that visited the Library of Alexandria, in 48 BCE. Cultural historian and author, Matthew Battles, has gone as far as suggesting that the Qin burning of books was mythical (Battles, 2004). Furthermore, according to Battles, there is proof that Confucian thoughts were found engraved throughout the Shi Huangdi reign. However, this may also suggest a resistance to the supposed Shi Huangdi rule taken up by the scholars and intellectuals whose philosophies and wisdoms echo even until this day. How else could there have been a number of surviving pre-Qin writings that stood in line to be copied after the collapse of the Qin dynasty? They must’ve hid well during the much reported book burnings.

When Bao Chen was sentenced to labor north with other scholars and intellectuals who, like Bao Chen, had some hidden belief that the meaning of his name would grant him either fortune or favor in times of trouble, but it seemed as if he was only a treasure hiding in the plain sight of grave misfortune. Although he no more had tools to see his thoughts, he had the stone that he was charged to work with, and crimson life within. He remembered the words, that like the wet splash of crimson self, was given by the Great One. The old was passing away, so he had hoped that one from tomorrow would no longer recognize the crimson characters on the in-turned stones in each that he placed.

“This perpetual granting
And Subtraction

Teach this
And by that

You, O’ Great One, have spoken a riddle

None can uncover, fathom nor deny...

... each toad along the way

On its back

I make right

Hoping for return

Of this same gesture.”

There are some who have come to believe that the burial of scholars didn’t happen, without denying that they paid a price for their resistance against the legalist rule of Shi Huangdi. To further hint at the proof of China’s First Emperor’s futile attempt to intimidate his way towards monopolizing a new way of thought by demanding an intellectual conformity, Lewis paints Shi Huangdi with hues of whimsy and strokes of intemperance, failing to fully achieve fulfillment of his vision (Lewis, 1999) due to the inevitable collapse of the Qin dynasty.

_Bao Chen stands for “great treasure”. All of his days until now, the meaning had escaped him. He was looking for this great treasure in the mirror instead of expecting it to arrive, as if a name is a gift, but only if we know what we mean, so that we know what to expect, not to look for._

From Li and Niu (2010), we learn that thousands of ancient titles from the pre-Qin era make up an integral part of The Chinese Basic Ancient Book Database, a full-text database of ancient books, a project sponsored by Peking University, located in Beijing, China’s capital. It is said that The Great Wall of China was built to protect the China unified from the Northern enemy. At times this was the Mongolian.

_Bao Chen, sickened, the color of his people, towers broken, and like his father, now curved and bent over, ruinous sections of his body issued pain. Sand and mud filled each of his eyes, from corner to corner of each, so that he no longer longed to see the words he had long ago etched into stone with the blood that once filled his body ……. _
When we consider the Qin period and what might be considered an ancient library we must simplify our ideation of such to a mere collection and its storage. Lin & Chan (1998) place emphasis on the influence that political, social, and economic forces have over the transformation of library services, and the Qin period of dominance did nothing to water down the rumor. The burning of books along with the suppression of independent thought was considered a hindrance to the development of library services during its time, even if we consider libraries to be information in the making. Despite China’s much reputed vice grip on free thinkers and censorship of the written word, the country has a long history of writing, reading, literacy, and even librarianship. According to Yi & Thompson (2015), “recognizable libraries and archives emerged during the brief Qin Dynasty.” It was only after Qin’s collapse, during the subsequent Han Dynasty that the development of classification, etc. had come under way, as far as the record here shows.
References


