

Archaeologists amend the written history of China's first emperor

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The exploits of China's first emperor, Qui Shihuangdi, are richly documented in 2,000-year-old records of his conquests across eastern China. His reign was indeed noteworthy - he is responsible for initiating construction of the Great Wall, and the discovery of life-size terracotta soldiers that guard his tomb in central China has generated worldwide attention.

But as the saying goes, history is written by the winners. Ancient texts can contain inaccuracies favorable to a strong ruler's legacy. That's why two Field Museum scientists and their Chinese collaborator have integrated textual information with archaeological research in order to further understand the impact of Shihuangdi's reign.

The scientists are Gary Feinman and Linda Nicholas - husband and wife anthropologists who, since 1996, have spent four to six weeks each year walking across fields in rural [China](#) looking for pottery sherds and other artifacts with colleagues including Fang Hui of the School of History and Culture at Shandong University. They compared ancient written records to [archaeological evidence](#) and the result of their work is a more holistic view of China's first emperor and his influence on the eastern province of Shandong.

A report of their research will be published in the online early edition of the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) during the week of February 22, 2010.

Shi Huangdi first unified China in 221 BC but scholars have few details of his distant conquests or how they changed the path of local histories. Records show that in 219 BC the emperor visited Langya Mountain on the southeastern Shandong coast. Written accounts from that time say the area "delighted" him and he stayed for three months. Afterwards, he ordered 30,000 households (about 150,000 people) to colonize the area with the promise that new immigrants would be free from tax and labor obligations for 12 years. He began construction of a network of roads in this region far distant from his capital in order to facilitate the movement of officials, troops, and commerce. Proximity to resources such as salt and iron made the Langya Mountain area attractive for economic activities.

"His order to colonize the area was not just a whim resulting from his 'delight.' He probably wanted to move people loyal to him into a somewhat hostile region on the edge of the empire. He had a unification strategy in mind - he was consolidating his empire and laying a foundation for today's modern Chinese nation," explained Feinman.

Little had been written about the coastal area of Shandong, China, prior to Shi Huangdi's order to move people there, and it was thought by some historians to have been sparsely populated before the arrival of the colonists. However, the Field Museum scientists and their Chinese colleagues found pottery sherds, stone tools and other traces of past settlements that showed the area's first significant occupation happened between 2600-2400 BC (the Longshan period).

"Shi Huangdi didn't just move people in to fill up the area. We now know there were already people living there - pottery sherds don't lie. The area had its own independent history and development. But historians write about kings and emperors, they seldom write about common people," said Feinman.

The changes brought about by the influx of colonists generated political changes that affected the size of settlements across the region. However, not until the scientists surveyed the area around the modern town of Langya in 2008 did they recognize the immense size of the first emperor's footprint. As they surveyed around Langya, they encountered continuously dense scatters of ancient pottery over an area of 24 square kilometers. The settlement dating to the Shihuangdi reign spreads across the lands of more than 25 modern towns and villages. The scientists' findings support the written accounts that 150,000 people were moved into the area.

"Our research provides a holistic context for this imperialistic episode and the changes that followed in coastal Shandong. By comparing written records with recent [archaeological research](#), we now know that the area was well populated prior to Shihuanghi's order to colonize it and that the emperor's footprint on this coastal zone far from his capital was significant and lasting. The archaeology amplifies the textual records and fills in the blanks with new details about this important period in China's history," said Feinman.

Provided by Field Museum

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