Lecture Abstract

In less than a decade - from 1995 to 2002 - three cinematic representations of the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuangdi (259–210 BCE), came out: Zhou Xiawen’s “The Emperor’s Shadow” (1995), Chen Kaige’s “The Emperor and the Assassin” (1998), and Zhang Yimou’s “Hero” (2002). In 2006, commissioned by NYC’s Metropolitan Opera, the New York-based Chinese conductor Tan Dun co-wrote the libretto for “The First Emperor,” which shared the same basic storyline as Zhou’s film.

In one way or another, all four works are set against a mytho-political construction of the first emperor started by Chairman Mao more than half a century ago. Each seeks to depict the emperor’s human, personable, or sympathetic aspects. The paradox is that in their efforts to humanize him, the three directors and the librettist created a new version of the myth of the first emperor, one that reflects a rampantly morphing culture over two decades of unprecedented political changes, social transformations, and economic acceleration.

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