Bright new light on ancient ideas

REVELATIONS ON THE EMPEROR OF THE TERRACOTTA WARRIORS

By PAUL BOLINGER
For China Daily

The first Chinese emperor, Qin Shi Huang, continues to fascinate, most recently in television series hit in Britain through Andrew Graham-Dixon's "The Art of China" (BBC). His Terracotta Army in Xian attracts tourists by the bucketful, but what he is least known for is his obsession with the destruction of all books except those covering medicine, war, divination or agriculture. He is supposed to have believed that no value or idea had existed before he seized power in 221 BC. A kind of zero-sum game.

Top of his hit list was the Shang Shi, but it survived at least in part, and is the topic of a new translation by Martin Palmer. It is one of the five classic manuals of Chinese administration, and has benefited from the connection with Confucius, who is no longer thought to have written the text, but did comment on it.

Confucian, the ideal state for the individual man was that of the sage but since that was difficult to achieve, he created the text (which, usually translated as gentleman). That was based on his reading of the ancient texts like the Shang Shi. The five texts were central to the Chinese Imperial Examinations system that was abolished only in 1905. Reading it today brings anyone who seeks to understand the traditions that underpin the way China is run.

The Shang Shi is a guide to the evolving leadership styles in China over many centuries. Palmer has provided us with what the Latin calls a "fide" translation, and it certainly reads well. We also get a clear comprehensive introduction that adds life and meaning to the text. He goes through its history and its rediscovery in a style that is vigorous and engaging. It is not for the people who can see clearly, we read, is chapter 4.

This is persuasive because of the implication that if the people believe that Heaven has withdrawn its mandate from a leader, it is legitimate to inaugurate regime change. As recently as 1979, writes Palmer in his introduction, that thinking was part of the background to the overthrow of the "Gong of Four". The author, himself a Christian lay preacher, explains the role of the Emperor of Heaven or Lord of Heaven, the figure sometimes referred to as "God" by the earlier translators. "I have not used that term because I think it gives a false sense of what the nature of the various Chinese terms mean," Palmer writes. "Surely the notion of the Ruler of the High Region, a standard of retribution and authority which has to be at the top of the classic model of the universe advocated by the Confucian world view."

The Shang Shi is divided into four sections reflecting traditional era of Chinese history, the Ta Xia, Shang and Zhou, covering the last part of two millennia from 1570 BC, but with long gaps.

In the book of Xia, the Council at Ga is a major cry from a king to his warriors before going into battle. "Be as you are expected and you will be honored in front of the ancestors," Alvery R. B.

In the book of the Shang, the King of Shang addresses his subjects in terms of the "Great Four".

The book of the Zhou, the book of the Zhou is the longest and most detailed of the four, as an account by King Wen of the Zhou of how he was commanded by Heaven to overthrow Zhou, the ruler. Zuo's chronology is well known in China and his name is referred to in the text. He saw himself as the heir to the line of the Shang, and the Zhou. The book of the Zhou is the longest and most detailed of the four.

The book of the Zhou is the longest and most detailed of the four, as an account by King Wen of the Zhou of how he was commanded by Heaven to overthrow Zhou, the ruler. Zuo is known in China and his name is referred to in the text. He saw himself as the heir to the line of the Shang, and the Zhou.

The book of the Zhou is the longest and most detailed of the four, as an account by King Wen of the Zhou of how he was commanded by Heaven to overthrow Zhou, the ruler. Zuo is known in China and his name is referred to in the text. He saw himself as the heir to the line of the Shang, and the Zhou.