**First Emperor - exhibition synopsis**

The unification of China under the First Emperor of Qin in 221 BC marks a watershed in Chinese history. Rival kingdoms are brought together for the first time, a new system of government is put in place and ambitious construction projects are initiated, linking distant parts of the Empire. Despite such exceptional military success and immense organisational and cultural achievements the Emperor’s life is cut short and within 15 years the Qin dynasty is torn apart by civil war. But the systems the First Emperor put in place and the highly centralised form of government he created was to underpin the following Han dynasty which lasted for more than 400 years and in many ways laid the foundation for modern China. It is thanks to an abundant amount of information surviving in historical texts that we know so much about the characters that played such a central role in shaping China’s future. This combined with hundreds of recent archaeological discoveries from royal tombs and urban sites allows us step into the world of ancient China.

Lying at the heart of our exhibition is the First Emperor. The extraordinary achievements of Qin Shi huangdi are symbolised by his vast tomb complex and burial site, the latter discovered by chance near Xi’an in North West China in 1974. Covering an area of 100 square kilometers, it is the biggest burial site on earth and 200 times bigger than the Valley of the Kings in Egypt. Research over the last 40 years has unearthed some remarkable discoveries, including an army of 8,000 life sized terracotta warriors, intended to protect the Emperor in his afterlife. But the secrets of the Emperor’s tomb have remained hidden for more than 2000 years, protected by a pyramid of earth; the only clues to what lies inside provided by Chinese historians.

To understand what inspired this revolutionary leader, what may have influenced his success and driven him to make such extensive preparations for his burial we begin our story in the 6th century BC in the Qin state, home to the First Emperor’s ancestors. During the centuries that followed China existed as a series of independent kingdoms, ruled by powerful families, bitter rivals who tried to gain control of their neighbours through political allegiances and warfare. From this period of civil war and unrest the Qin state emerges as a dominant force conquering and expanding its territory, strengthening its position through trade, introducing new laws, military reforms and strong central government, creating a firm foundation for the King of Qin, Ying Zheng (259-210 BC) who succeeds to the throne in 246 BC when he is just 13 years old and goes on to unify China in 221BC creating a new title for himself Huangdi (Emperor). It is for this reason he is known as Qin Shi huangdi (The First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty).

We are told that the First Emperor was ruthless in pursuit of his ambitions, championing the rule of law but suppressing opposition. Almost immediately he initiated major construction projects, building a network of roads, extending defensive walls along the northern frontier, connecting the Yangzi and Xi rivers with a canal. He built more than 200 palaces in his new capital at Xianyang, on the north slope of the river Wei, imitating those of the states he had conquered. But he is perhaps best known for his introduction of a centralised form of government, for his unification of Chinese scripts and for his standardisation of currency, weights and measures. Tragically, the Emperor’s reign and the Qin dynasty lasted for just 15 years, torn apart by a disputed succession and rebellion. Despite this destructive civil war, the Emperor’s system of government and reforms survived, underpinning the success of the following Han dynasty which lasted for 400 years, a period of economic prosperity, characterised by significant advances in arts, literature and science, in many ways a golden age, laying the foundation for modern China. It was an empire that was arguably one of the most powerful in the world, developing extensive contact with central Asia and trade routes that linked the ancient capital of Xi’an to the Levant coast on the Mediterranean.

When he died in 210 BC the First Emperor was buried in the most opulent tomb complex ever constructed in China. A city-sized collection of underground palaces and chambers, containing everything the Emperor would need for the afterlife. It is this tomb and the Emperor’s search for immortality which will take centre stage in our exhibition. But why should the Emperor choose to build a tomb on such a massive scale and how did his burial differ from those of his predecessors or from those of the ruling dynasties that followed, what is so distinctive about his burial and what secrets still lie hidden below ground? The Chinese believed that life continued after death and for this reason buried the deceased with everything they would need for the next life. It is the burials of the wealthiest members of society, furnished with beautifully crafted funerary objects which provide us with the greatest insight into the beliefs, culture, traditions and contacts of the time. We will use the exhibition to explore how these practices evolve, reaching an unparalleled scale with the First Emperor’s mausoleum.

The Han emperors followed in the footsteps of the First Emperor, showing a great interest in the afterlife. Their tombs outside Xi'an on the bank of the River Wei illustrate the grandness and prosperity of the Han Empire. None have been opened but from surveys we know that they seem to have been designed in a similar way to Qin burials, as underground cities. One of the best preserved tombs belonged to Jingdi, the sixth emperor, whose burial site was discovered when the Airport expressway was constructed. The site is amongst the most important in China and over the last 40 years a wealth of chambers and passages containing large numbers of pottery animals and figurines, both male and female, as well as storage jars and food containers have been found. The figurines are small-size, beautifully made with moveable limbs, painted and carefully dressed in silk clothing. They were intended to function as the Emperor’s servants and guardians in the next life.

Ritual was extremely important to the Chinese and the objects buried with the deceased showed a high level of craftsmanship which is evident in the royal burials throughout the period covered by the exhibition. Jade, bronze and gold were amongst the most treasured materials. During the warring states we see elaborately cast bronzes, designed specially for burial, replaced in later periods by more functional everyday objects such as cooking dishes and lamps. Jade was believed to have magical properties and becomes more extensively used in the Han dynasty with entire suits made to protect the spirit of the highest ranking individuals and prevent the body from decay but it was also used in the search for immortality. We are told that the Han emperor Wudi believed his life would be extended by drinking dew and jade powder from a jade cup so had a device for collecting dewdrops in his palace.

The artefacts found on burial sites tell us about custom and practice but they also provide clues about trade and cultural contacts between different states. It is clear from royal tombs that the Qin kings were trading with central China to the east and the nomads on their northern borders. Exquisite jewellery made from gold and precious stones, carved animal ornaments uncharacteristically naturalistic in their execution, representations of horsemen and riders, as well as thousands of horse skeletons hint at an enduring and evolving relationship between the Chinese ruling dynasties and the herdsmen on their northern frontier. This cultural contact across borders almost certainly influenced craftsmen and officials as they travelled and shared ideas and may in part explain the extraordinary appearance of life-like figures in the First Emperor’s burial. That such exchange exists and develops is clear as we move into the Han dynasty and see the establishment of the Silk Road, a series of trade routes connecting civilisations across Asia, North Africa and Europe, with Chinese silks appearing in markets in the Roman Empire.

Using the very latest interpretive techniques we will transport visitors back more than 2,000 years to the magical and exotic world of ancient China, to, breath taking landscapes, imperial cities and magnificent tombs. Central to the exhibition will be national treasures, some of China’s most important archaeological finds which will be displayed alongside more recent discoveries. Visitors will have the chance to see first hand, the artistry and technical accomplishments that led to the casting of elaborately decorated bronze vessels, the production of huge quantities of weapons - an essential commodity during such troubled times - reaching a tremendous level of sophistication in the exquisitely made bronze chariots buried with the First Emperor. Visitors will be brought face to face with his warriors, marvelling at the exquisite craftsmanship that has gone into creating these giant life-like figures in clay, comparing them to the smaller, beautifully moulded officials, maids and animals of every type made to accompany later emperors to the afterlife. In stark contrast visitors will also be able to see and appreciate the delicate touch needed to produce finer pieces of jewellery for personal adornment. There will lots of surprises along the way, not least as visitors leave the exhibition with a lasting impression of the First Emperor and the world he hoped to create.