The *E-Pang Palace*: Memories and Imaginations

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**Abstract**

The *E-Pang Palace* was a famous palace of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE), located in the capital city Xianyang. Preliminary excavations of the *E-Pang Palace* site in Xi'an of the season 2002–04 drew two conclusions: first, constructions of the *E-Pang Palace* had not been finished in the Qin Dynasty; second, the *E-Pang Palace* survived the war fires of late Qin. Announcement of these conclusions has aroused strong reactions from society, particularly because they contradict tremendously with the well-known *E-Pang Fu* (Rhapsody on E-Pang Palace) by the Tang poet Du Mu, which has been incredibly popular with generations of Chinese people since the 9th century.

As a matter of fact, the *E-Pang Fu* was intended as a metaphor of literature for the purpose of criticizing the political reality of the late Tang Dynasty. It was generated rather from the Chinese literary tradition itself, than from historical facts *per se*. However, the metaphorical narrative of this work on the historical subject, somehow had found its way through mass popularity, and become basic "historical" knowledge of average public on the *E-Pang Palace*.

From the 9th century on, a great amount of paintings were created through inspirations from the *E-Pang Fu*. The delicate yet rather fixed forms of these paintings, to some extent has changed the critical nature of the original writing, and made the "immoral" palace in the *E-Pang Fu* an object of admiration; these paintings thereby became products for indulgence themselves. The political and economic factors behind such an interesting phenomenon are worth studying.

In addition to paintings, visual imaginations and expressions on the E-Pang Palace also include movies, TV shows, artificial tourist attractions, and even online games.

How come a palace that did not even exist inspired such a wealth of literary and artistic works? And how did these works in turn "build" the imagined palace in history? In this article I attempt to rethink about the historical phenomenon of the *E-Pang Palace* spanning more than two thousand years of time, by examining the real palace in history, historical writings about the palace, visual and literary representations of the palace, as well as the fate of the relic of the E-Pang Palace. Through these discussions, I hope to demonstrate specific characteristics of these historical phenomena and their complicated relationship to each other; I will also touch upon some theoretical issues pertinent to our subject.
Rhapsody on E-pang Palace
Du, Mu (803-852 CE)

China became unified when the State of Qin conquered the six states.
Only after all the trees on Shu Mountain were felled did E-pang Palace appear.
The mammoth complex of buildings and towers stretched more than 300 miles
And separated people from the sun and sky.
The construction of the palace began in the north at the foot of Li Mountain,
Turned west, and then advanced toward Xian-yang City.
Two mighty rivers ran through passages in the wall of the palace.
Every fifty feet, there was a tower.
Every one hundred feet, there was a pavilion.
The long corridor was full of twists and turns.
The corners of the roof’s ridges were protruding as if beaks were pecking upward.
Each building matched its terrain and showed its craftsmanship.
If one viewed the structure from a mountain peak,
The yards appeared aligned like a honeycomb
And the gutters seemed to wind like a whirlpool.
The torrential rain cascaded down like a waterfall from the high rising eaves.
A long bridge lay above the waves like a dragon.
One wondered why one could not see clouds that always surround a dragon.
A four-lane overpass ran across the sky like a rainbow.
However, how could a rainbow appear without any rain?
One might easily become lost in the misty maze of tall and short buildings.
When the stage was warmly enlivened with dancing and singing,
One felt like one was bathing in Spring sunshine.
After the dance was over,
The quiet stage and cold sleeves of the dancers’ garments would make one feel
Bleak and desolate as if one was caught in wind and rain.
On the same day and in the same place, one’s feelings varied greatly.
The royal concubines and princesses of the six states
Were forced to leave their palaces and were taken to the State of Qin.
They were singing in the morning
And playing music in the evening to amuse the emperor.
At first glance, it seemed that stars were twinkling.
However, it was only the mirror boxes the ladies opened to apply cosmetics.
At first glance, it seemed that copious rolls of green clouds were floating by.
It was discovered that the ladies were combing their long hair into buns.
The Wei River swelled and became oily
Because they removed their make-up and washed it into the river.
Plumes of smoke rose at a slant and fog spread sideways
Because the ladies were burning fragrant plants.
Suddenly a thunderous sound surprised the ladies.
It was the emperor’s carriage passing by.
By listening to the distant rumbling of the wheels,
It was difficult to tell where the carriage was going.
The complexions and faces of the ladies were extremely charming and beautiful.
They craned their necks, looked far away and wished the emperor would visit them.
Some of them never saw the emperor during his 36-year reign.
The collections of the States of Yan and Zhao,
The productions of the States of Han and Wei,
And the treasures of the States of Qi and Chu
Were plundered from their people for generations.
They were piled up like mountains.
People were not allowed to keep any of these treasures
And they were all moved to Qin’s palace.
Precious sacrificial vessels were used as caldrons.
Jade was treated like stone.
Gold was considered chunks of earth.
Pearls were considered sand.
They were discarded everywhere around the palace.
The Emperor of Qin did not cherish them.
Well, what the Emperor of Qin desired was also what all the people in China wanted.
The Emperor of Qin loved gaiety.
Everyone wanted his family to live happily as well.
Why did the Emperor of Qin not allow people to keep a trifling amount
When he collected the treasures from them
Given that he only planned to use them as dirt?
In the palace,
There were more columns supporting the beams than there were farmers in fields.
There were more rafters attached to the ridgepoles than there were women around looms.
There were more nail heads than there were grains in a barn.
There were more staggered seams between shingles
Than there were silken threads woven in the clothes one wears.
There were more vertical railings and horizontal thresholds
Than there were city walls in the nine states.
There were more musical sounds from the royal orchestra
Than there were chattering noises in a market.
The extravagance of the emperor made all the people irate,
But they did not dare to voice their anger.
The dictator was becoming more arrogant and stubborn.
Once the border guards staged an uprising,
Han-gu Pass immediately fell to the rebels. It was pitiful that E-pang Palace became an expanse of ashes. After the rebel leader, General Yu Xiang, set it on fire. Alas! It was not Qin, but the six states that destroyed themselves. It was not the rebels, but the Emperor of Qin himself who killed his entire family. Alas! If each of the six states had loved their people, They would have become strong enough to keep Qin at bay. If Qin could have loved its people, Then the Qin dynasty could have lasted not only three but thousands of generations. Who would have been able to kill the entire royal family of Qin? The government of Qin was not able to mourn its own demise, And caused later generations to lament them. If the later generations only lamented Qin’s tragic ending, But failed to learn a lesson from it, Then the vicious cycle would repeat itself. That is, the later generations would be lamented by their posterity as well.

杜牧《阿房宫赋》

六王毕，四海一。蜀山兀，阿房出。覆压三百余里，隔离天日。骊山北构而西折，直走咸阳。二川溶溶，流入宫墙。五步一楼，十步一阁。廊腰缦回，檐牙高啄。各抱地势，钩心斗角。盘盘焉，囷囷焉，蜂房水涡，矗不知几千万落。长桥卧波，未云何龙？复道行空，不霁何虹？高低冥迷，不知西东。歌台暖响，春光融融。舞殿冷袖，风雨凄凄。一日之内，一宫之间，而气候不齐。

妃嫔媵嫱，王子皇孙，辞楼下殿，辇来于秦，朝歌夜弦，为秦宫人。明星荧荧，开妆镜也；绿云扰扰，梳晓鬟也；渭流涨腻，弃脂水也；烟斜雾横，焚椒兰也；雷霆乍惊，宫车过也；辘辘远听，杳不知其所之也。一肌一容，尽态极妍。缦立远视，而望幸焉。有不得见者，三十六年。

燕、赵之收藏，韩、魏之经营，齐、楚之精英，几世几年，剽窃其人，倚叠如山。一旦不能有，输来其间。鼎铛玉石，金块珠砾，弃掷逦迤，秦人视之，亦不甚惜。

嗟乎！一人之心，千万人之心也。秦爱纷奢，人亦念其家。奈何取之尽锱铢，用之如泥沙。使负栋之柱，多于南亩之农夫；架梁之椽，多于机上之工女；钉头磷磷，多于在庾之粟粒；瓦缝参差，多于周身之帛缕；直栏横槛，多于九土之城郭；管弦呕哑，多于市人之言语。使天下之人，不敢言而敢怒，独夫之心，日益骄固。戍卒叫，函谷举，楚人一炬，可怜焦土。

呜呼！灭六国者，六国也，非秦也。族秦者，秦也，非天下也。嗟乎！使六国各爱其人，则足以拒秦。使秦复爱六国之人，则递三世可至万世而为君，谁得而族灭也？秦人不暇自哀，而后人哀之；后人哀之而不鉴之，亦使后人而复哀后人也。

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