“One of Canada’s finest writers of epic and extended narrative poetry. *The Terracotta Army* is a brilliant example of his remarkable ability.”

— Patrick Lane

This stunning sequence of poems was inspired by a visit to the archaeological site of the terracotta warriors — more than 8,000 individually sculpted, life-sized soldiers and horses interred in 210 BC to accompany Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, into the afterlife. In this ideologically charged volume, Geddes gives voice to twenty-four of these compelling figures. They engage in debates about the abuse of power, the yin-yang dance of narrative and silence, and the sanctity of the idiosyncratic self in the face of conformity. Together, they form a marvelous history of the Qin dynasty.

An accomplished craftsman, Gary Geddes has written and edited more than 35 books of poetry, fiction, non-fiction, drama, criticism, and translation, including his celebrated travel memoir, *The Kingdom of Ten Thousand Things*. His legion of literary awards includes the E.J. Pratt Prize; the National Poetry Prize; the Gabriela Mistral Prize from Chile; the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, Americas Region; and the Lieutenant Governor’s Award for Literary Excellence. Gary Geddes has lectured and performed in Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. His work has been translated into six languages.
Critical Acclaim for *The Terracotta Army*

“In *The Terracotta Army* Gary Geddes’s talent is to connect with some of those ancestral figures and give them to us... the poem cycle for the China figures is a NOBLE one... wonderful stuff...
I was stunned and awed and this is so good.”
— Margaret Laurence, novelist

“I was on the Commonwealth Poetry Prize Jury the year *The Terracotta Army* won the Americas Division Prize; it was the jury's unanimous choice, breathtaking in its imaginative reach, its verbal dexterity.”
— W.H. New, critic and editor of *Canadian Literature*

“I have known Mr. Geddes for many years through his written work, especially his *Terracotta Army*, which I have found one of the most stunning works of poetry published in English-Canada in the last few years.”
— Emile Martel, poet and Minister of Cultural Affairs, Paris

“Gary Geddes is unquestionably one of Canada’s finest writers of epic and extended narrative poetry. *The Terracotta Army*... won the Americas Award for 1985 and is a brilliant example of his remarkable ability to maintain the tone, structure, and rhythms of the long, connected narrative.
As a writer, anthologist, critic, teacher, and thinker, he is in a class with the best this country has to offer.”
— Patrick Lane, poet
Also by Gary Geddes

Swimming Ginger, 2010
Falsework, 2007
Skaldance, 2004
Flying Blind, 1998
The Perfect Cold Warrior, 1995
Girl by the Water, 1994
Light of Burning Towers, 1990
No Easy Exit, 1989
Hong Kong Poems, 1987
Changes of State, 1986
The Acid Test, 1980
War & other measures, 1976
Letter of the Master Horse, 1973
Snakeroot, 1973
Rivers Inlet, 1971
Poems, 1971
GARY GEDDES

The Terracotta Army
陶俑军阵
Introduction

In the summer of 1981, with the help of Richard Liu, I organized the first formal tour of seven Canadian writers to China. My companions on this trip — accomplished poets, novelists, short story writers, and editors — were Alice Munro, Adele Wiseman, Patrick Lane, Robert Kroetsch, Suzanne Paradis, and Geoff Hancock. We had to go begging at home for funds to get there, but once in China we were treated as special guests by the Chinese Writers Association: fêted, housed, and chaperoned to literary gatherings, important landmarks, and the homes of famous writers.

Because the Bamboo Curtain was newly lifted, the phenomenon of international visitors was new to China, and foreign guests were closely watched. So it was a surprise to us, and to our hosts, not to have been relegated to the confines of Beijing Youyi Binguan, the old Soviet-style dormitory otherwise known as The Friendship Hotel. Seven unaccompanied laowai were still an unusual sight for most Chinese, especially when the foreigners showed up singing and dancing in a back alley in one of the hutongs.

Out for an unofficial evening stroll, our group steered towards the sound of music, where two young men perched on wooden crates were tentatively trying out some chords on a beat-up classical guitar. Assuming all Westerners knew how to play this instrument, they immediately handed the guitar to me. To protect the West’s reputation, I was obliged to mask my ignorance and embarrassment by strumming a few chords and belting out the lyrics of “Red River Valley,” unaware that this song had been recently translated and popularized by a Chinese singer. As Adele, Geoff, and the others came to my rescue, significantly increasing both the volume and quality of the performance, Patrick Lane, in jeans and a weathered straw hat, began to do a lively jig on the spot. Our performance,
such as it was, brought a huge round of applause from several hundred curious locals, who materialized out of nowhere to investigate. I’m sure we could have continued into the night, but my repertoire was soon exhausted and, out of politeness, we gave the guitar and stage back to the two young men.

One of the principal stops on our literary excursion was the archaeological site outside Xi’an, the ancient capital of Chang’an in the Wei River Valley, where an underground army of approximately 8,000 terracotta soldiers and horses had been discovered quite by accident when farm workers were sinking a well.

A structure resembling an airplane hangar had been built to protect the pottery figures while they were carefully unearthed and reconstructed. It was deeply moving to see an arm or head emerging from the earth or a small cluster of terracotta body parts half cleared of two millennia of sediment. Some of the configurations resembled the horrifically beautiful sepia photos of trench warfare from World War I.

Columns of warriors, some of them already reconstructed and set in place, stood in rows, looking down the long corridor to eternity — to a moment when war would be no more, and when it would be viewed as one of the quaint aberrations of our primitive ancestors.

I could not speak. If I’d been able to say anything at all, never mind articulating the maelstrom of emotions that welled up in me, it would have been to utter a brief prayer requesting that the gifted companions flanking me be struck blind and dumb. Instead, I experienced both exhilaration at the spectacle and the depressing conviction that Patrick, Robert, or Suzanne were already giving imaginative shape to the terracotta warriors in their heads.

As it happened, my unuttered prayer was partially answered. None of the others who submitted work for *Chinada: Memoirs of the Gang of Seven*, the published account of our journey, had chosen to write about this unique encounter with history in Xi’an.
Shortly after Chinada appeared in print, I had some unexpected visitors in the reconverted chicken coop and horse barn where I did most of my writing. Each had an urgent message for me, not only about the first empire, but also about the potter who masterminded the placement and construction of Emperor Qin Shi Huang’s posthumous insurance policy, the massive army that would protect him or, at least, scare off ‘unfriendlies’ in the afterlife*.

The potter’s name, I learned, was Bi, though he was often referred to affectionately as Lao Bi, or Old Bi. From what these insistent but disembodied voices had to tell me, Lao Bi was a strange mixture of artist and anarchist, wit and iconoclast, as capable of understanding the psychology of his subjects as he was of capturing their appearance and essence in clay. Bi’s iconoclasm — a peculiar term to apply to a sculptor, who is a maker rather than a breaker of images — lay in his determination to insist on the individual characteristics of the men he sculpted, in his resistance to the pressures to mass-produce an army of clones or look-alikes.

As the stories unfolded, they took the form of run-on rather than closed couplets (which would have been the Chinese method). I felt I needed the freedom of the more open form and that the soldiers deserved it too; besides, the couplets had an appropriately military aspect on the page. Since double-ninth day is special on the Chinese calendar, I thought nine couplets would suffice for each soldier to have his say, in what — because the Chinese, like Texans, do everything in a big way — I would come to call my Chinese sonnets. Within these confined forms, much would transpire: debates about the abuse of power and the meaning of art; the yin-yang dance of narrative and silence; the sanctity of the idiosyncratic self in the face of conformity; and, yes, a belief in the permanence of memory.

* In Pinyin, the romanized spelling of Chinese words, the ‘Q’ of the emperor’s name and dynasty is a ‘ch’ sound, as in Ch’in; the ‘X’ as in Xi’an is a ‘sh’ sound.
The Terracotta Army
CHARIOOTEER

So they call you layabouts a standing army; there’s more life in this terracotta nag

than in the whole first division. With that, Bi leapt on the back of a cavalry pony he had fired

the previous day and dug his heels into the outline of ribs. I wouldn’t have been surprised

to see it leap into action and clear the doorway with the potter shouting death to the enemy.

Most of the animals were cast from a single mould and could be distinguished one from the other

only by the application of paint and dyes. I took exception to this and remarked that, as charioteer,

I found more distinctive characteristics in horses than in men. Bi swung his legs over the neck

and dropped to the ground. He was no taller than the ponies he fashioned. Then, with a flourish,

he drew a green moustache on the horse’s muzzle and fell about the pottery amused by his own joke.
持矛武士
SPEARMAN

Before double-ninth day, my measure was taken in a single sitting, so sure were Lao Bi’s eye and hand. The tenth month I returned with armoured vest and spear and struck a pose that pleased him so much he laughed out loud and threw his wineskin at my feet.

He called me the youngest of the Immortals and promised me a place in the glory-line.

The likeness was uncanny — not just the face, but the way the sleeves bunched up at the wrists, the studs and fluted leather of the shoulder pads. I was drawn to it again and again, as if by magic.

One day, without warning, we left for the frontier and I felt a greater reluctance to part with his pottery replica of myself than I had in taking leave of my village.

Bi used to slap me on the back and say, you’re too serious to be a soldier.
GUARDSMAN

At first I did not like him and put it down to the arrogance of the creative mind,

his not mine. I’d been the previous day, guarding the entrance to Qin Shi Huang’s tomb,

where the artisans and craftsmen were at work fashioning god knows what final luxuries

for the imperial after life. By the sounds of it, they were feeling no pain. I mentioned this

quite casually, by way of small talk, to the master potter as he examined my skull

and he exploded like a devil, threatening to cut off my head for more detailed study.

Needless to say, I wasted no time absenting myself from his presence and stopped in for a drink

at my quarters. They told me the tomb was finished and the great door had been dropped into place,

sealing in every artist and workman employed there. My hands flew, of their own accord, to cover my throat.
MINISTER OF WAR

I was a young man on the make, a brain for hire, a travelling politician. I saw my chance, adopted Qin, advised the death of the feudal tenure, not to mention purges and the burning of books.

I scorned the golden mean of men like Mencius and learned my politics from rats in the latrine; yet I had respect enough for the written word to know that old records and systems are better destroyed than left to seed rebellion and discontent in the period of transition. The same logic applied to scholars and authors, those masters of anamnesis, or recall. I kept the Emperor occupied with toy soldiers and the arts, or fears of death and court intrigue, while the real politics unfolded as I know it would: highways, taxes, centralization, promotion by exam. He might have stopped my war against the past, but I saw to the depths of his and all men’s hearts, where artist lies down, at last, with bureaucrat.
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