

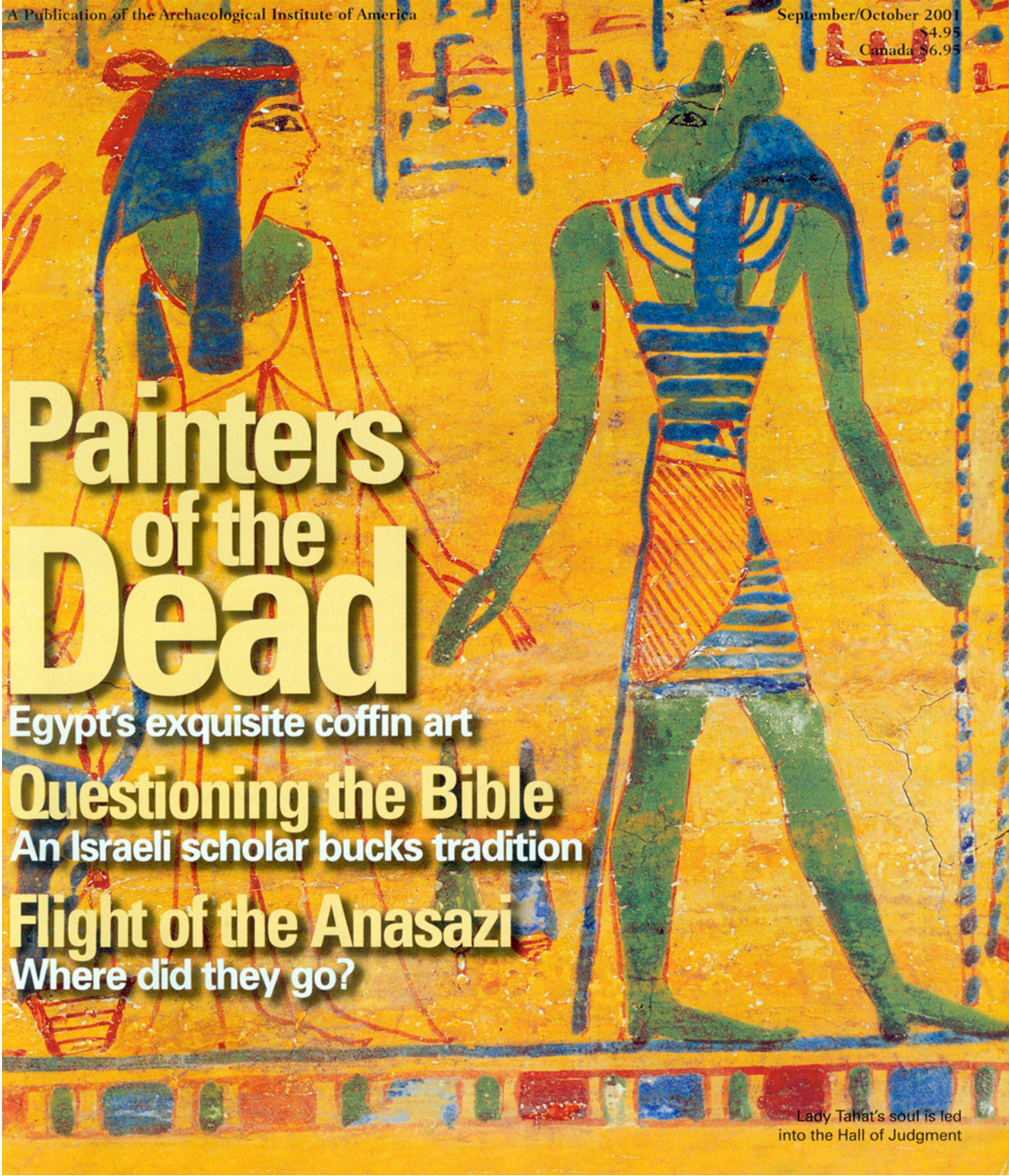
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The background of the cover is a reproduction of an ancient Egyptian tomb painting. It depicts a woman, Lady Tahat, on the left, wearing a blue headscarf with a red bow and a green dress with red straps. She is shown in profile, facing right. To her right is a man, her husband, depicted in a green body with a blue and yellow striped kilt. He is also shown in profile, facing right, and is holding a long staff or scepter. The background of the painting is yellow, with various hieroglyphs and decorative elements in blue, red, and green. The overall style is characteristic of ancient Egyptian art, with bold outlines and a limited color palette.

Painters of the Dead

Egypt's exquisite coffin art

Questioning the Bible

An Israeli scholar bucks tradition

Flight of the Anasazi

Where did they go?

Lady Tahat's soul is led
into the Hall of Judgment

China's Great Enigma

What's inside the unexcavated tomb of Emperor Qin Shihuangdi?

by ERLING HOH



"There are two parties in Shaanxi. Those who do not want to excavate, and those who do. I belong to the latter," says Wang, while acknowledging that much preparatory work remains to be done before an excavation can take place. Others, like Zhang Yinglan, an archaeologist at the Terra-cotta Warrior Museum, believe caution—and a bit of time—is necessary before the tomb can be opened properly. "There is only one tomb of Qin Shihuangdi. We cannot afford to make any mistakes," says Zhang.

The mystique enveloping Qin Shihuangdi's tomb is deeply linked to the emperor's pivotal role in history. In 231 B.C., as the 28-year-old king of Qin, one of the seven major states at the time, he embarked on a remarkable series of campaigns, conquering neighboring nations "like a silkworm devouring a mulberry leaf," according to one historical text. In only ten years, the empire known as China was created.

Qin Shihuangdi's political skills and ruthlessness were legendary, as were his megalomania and fear of death. Construction on his splendid mausoleum east of his capital Xianyang began soon after he became king at age 13. As his fortunes waxed and he subdued new kingdoms, the tomb grew in scale and ambition. At the peak of the 36 years it took to construct the underground complex, more than 700,000 laborers toiled at the site. A gigantic pit, measuring some 820,000 square feet, was dug in terraces to a depth of more than 100 feet. Archaeologists estimate the subterranean palace built at the bottom of the pit to be about 400 by 525 feet, the size of more than three-and-a-half football fields. After the sepulchral vault, side chambers, and passageways were in place, the pit was covered with earth and topped with the terraced mound.

According to the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 25) historian Si Ma Qian's *Shi Ji*, or *Historical Records*,

Artist Zhang Hongnian's reconstruction of the interior of the tomb of Qin Shihuangdi following his interment in 210 B.C. According to historical sources, a river of mercury surrounds the emperor's bronze coffin.

The weathered tumulus of Qin Shihuangdi, China's first emperor, has sat among the cornfields and fruit trees east of Xian for over two millennia. While the discovery 27 years ago of the fabled terra-cotta warriors that guard the emperor came as a complete surprise, the burial mound has always been known. Yet to this day, the tomb of Qin Shihuangdi remains untouched by the spades of archaeologists. A conundrum wrapped in legends and rumors, the resting place of the first emperor, believed to be a virtual

underground palace, holds the promise of remarkable discoveries that stagger the minds of those who have studied it, contemplated it, and who dream of unearthing it.

"It is the greatest enigma in archaeology," says Wang Xueli, a professor at the Shaanxi Provincial Archaeological Institute who is one of the foremost experts on the tomb. Upon its completion in 210 B.C., the emperor's earthen mound rivaled the pyramids of Egypt in scope and ambition. While the pyramids have been opened and found largely looted, nobody knows exactly what Qin Shihuangdi's

sepulchral chamber contains. In the past ten years, the Shaanxi provincial government, mindful of the vast potential for tourist revenue, has repeatedly sought a green light for excavation from the National Cultural Relics Bureau. But the answer has remained the same: China at present does not have the financial and technological resources for such a vast undertaking. There are more urgent excavations to be done. This task should be left to future generations. Says an official at the bureau: "We have the responsibility to preserve the artifacts for posterity."

“There is a 99 percent chance that Qin Shihuangdi’s grave has been looted,” says one prominent Beijing archaeologist. “A wish is a wish. Reality is reality. It is better to keep it that way.”

which contains the earliest account of Qin Shihuangdi’s mausoleum, when the emperor died in 210 B.C., he was laid to rest in a bronze sarcophagus amid rivers of mercury circulated by a kind of perpetual motion machine. Other records describe the emperor dressed in jade and gold, with pearls in his mouth, his coffin floating on the mercury. The vaulted ceiling was covered by constellations of the night sky made of pearls, the floor was covered with a miniature landscape of his empire, with models of pavilions and palaces, and the tomb was lit by whale oil lamps. Entrances to the vault were booby-trapped with hair-trigger crossbows.

The foundations of two massive rectangular walls encircling the tomb area have been found. Tests have also confirmed the presence of unusual amounts of mercury, up to 100 times above normal, under the tumulus. According to Wang, measurements with geophysical survey equipment have established that the height of the main chamber is 33 feet: While Yuan Zhongyi, the honorary head of the terra-cotta museum, says changes in the structure of the sediment layers in the mound indicate that the vault has caved in, Wang dis-

agrees: “I do not believe that the main vault has collapsed.”

Another crucial issue over which scholars disagree is whether the vault has been looted. Only three years after Qin Shihuangdi was entombed, his vast empire collapsed. Construction of his mausoleum and the Great Wall, as well as the maintenance of a huge army to guard the far-flung border regions, had impoverished the country’s peasants, who, under the leadership of Xiang Yu, the king of Chu, rose up and marched on the Qin capital. According to Si Ma Qian, Xianyang was burned and the tomb looted.

“There is a 99 percent chance that Qin Shihuangdi’s grave has been looted,” says one prominent Beijing archaeologist who has asked not to be named. “A wish is a wish. Reality is reality. It is better to keep it that way.” Yuan holds a different opinion. “The layers of earth appear to be in order. If 300,000 soldiers had looted the tomb, everything would have been in chaos,” he says, adding that the only evidence of attempted looting consists of two 30-foot-long collapsed tunnels discovered during the excavation of a bronze chariot on the western side of the mound in 1980. Adds Wang: “The mercury is poisonous. If Xiang Yu’s soldiers had opened the tomb, they would have been poisoned, and the mercury would have evaporated. But it is still there.”

Until the tomb is excavated, no one will know for sure. The difficulties of such an undertaking would indeed be daunting. Nobody has even dared calculate how much an excavation would cost, or how long it would take. For starters, according to several Chinese scholars, a proper excavation would require that the whole tumulus be removed layer by layer. A way of dealing with the mercury vapors would have to be devised. Another major problem is how to preserve the multitude of artifacts that accompanied Qin Shihuangdi in his death. When the mausoleum of the Ming Dynasty emperor Wan Li was opened outside of Beijing, for example, silk found in the tomb began deteriorating immediately after coming

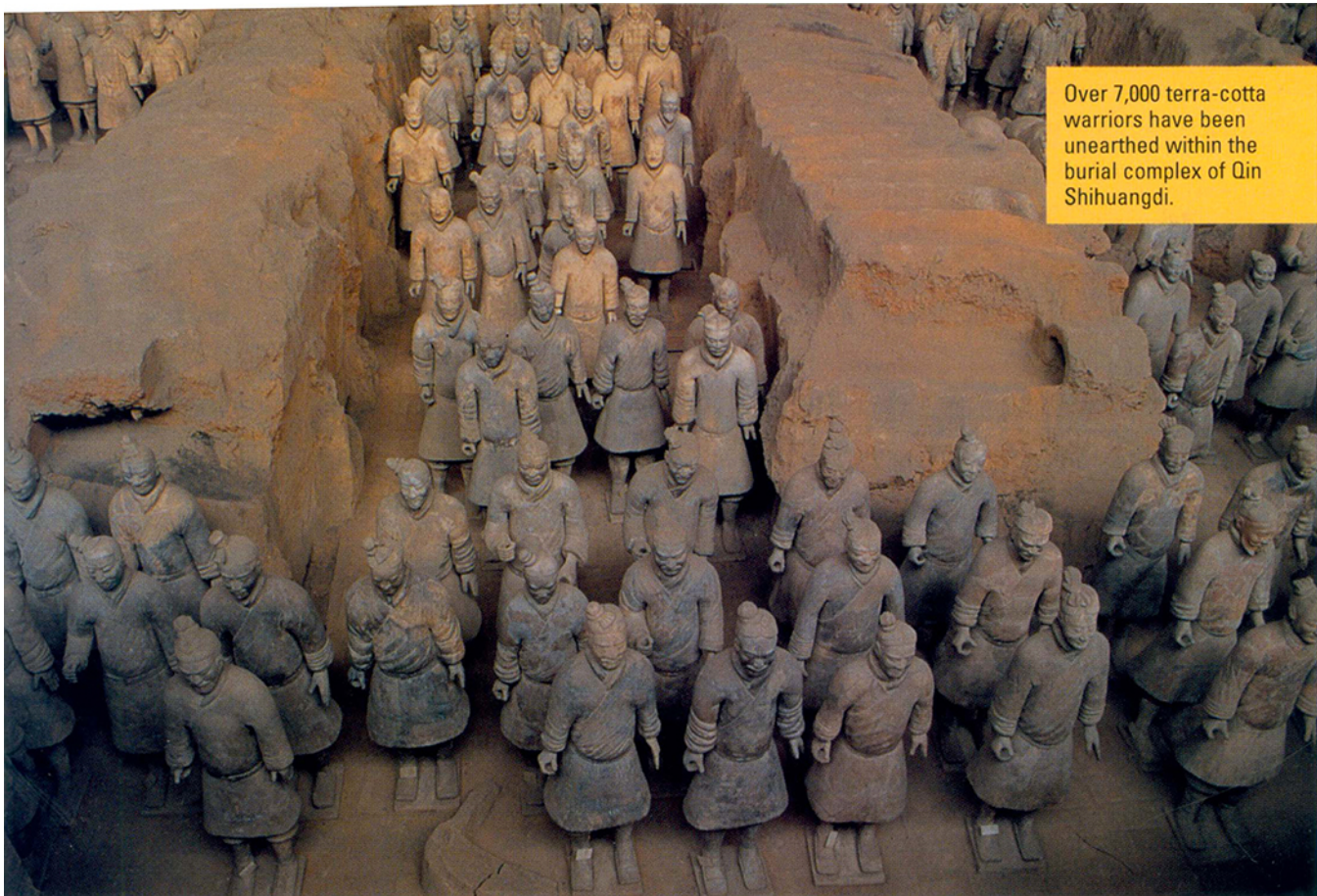
Nearly a dozen terra-cotta acrobats were recently discovered southeast of Qin Shihuangdi’s tomb.



Archaeologists debate whether the tomb of China’s first emperor, which lies below this unimposing tumulus in Shaanxi province, has been looted.

Courtesy Museum of Terra-cotta Warriors and Horses of Qin Shihuang

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Over 7,000 terra-cotta warriors have been unearthed within the burial complex of Qin Shihuangdi.

©Christopher Lau/ChinaStock

in contact with air. "I would really like to know what is in the grave. But I would like to do it without ruining the mound," says Yuan, who was present on the day that peasants discovered the first terra-cotta warrior 27 years ago.

As for cooperation with other countries, given Qin Shihuangdi's status as China's founding father, there is the element of national pride to be considered. "It would be hard for us to cooperate with foreign organizations," says Zhang Yinglan. The terra-cotta warriors are being excavated largely without outside help, and it seems clear that the Chinese wish to deal with the Qin Shihuangdi tomb in the same way. NHK, the Japanese broadcaster, has offered to sponsor a high-tech, minimally intrusive investigation of the tomb, but the Chinese have declined. The Japanese have a special interest in Qin Shihuangdi: Some scholars believe that an expedition dispatched by the first emperor to islands off of China's coast in search of a rare herbal remedy for longevity marked the first contact between China and Japan. While the debate on how, when, and even whether to excavate Qin Shihuangdi's tomb rages, archaeologists in Xian continue to discover extraordinary artifacts buried around the mound. Recent finds include a giant bronze cauldron, terra-cotta acrobats

as large as the warriors, and a cache of rare, armored vests made of polished stones. Archaeologists have also found the graves of 300 laborers who toiled at the site. East of the mound, 17 graves with the remains of decapitated bodies have been unearthed, and scholars speculate that they may be Qin Shihuangdi's children, executed by Hu Hai, the son who succeeded the first emperor.

With the tombs of 11 Han Dynasty and 18 Tang Dynasty emperors spread out over the fields surrounding Xian, archaeologists have their work cut out for them. Many scholars believe these mausoleums should be excavated first, to gather experience and expertise before going for the grand prize, and it is common to hear them say that Qin Shihuangdi's tomb will have to wait "one or two generations." Nevertheless, for archaeologists who have toiled with the terra-cotta warriors for 27 years, the

allure of the emperor's tomb refuses to fade. "I don't dream about it at night," says Wang. "I dream about it during the day, when I am working." ■

ERLING HOH is *ARCHAEOLOGY's* Stockholm correspondent. An earlier version of this article appeared in the September 30, 1999, issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

