Storing Chinese treasures on discs

By Howard Altman
Staff Writer

NEWTON — Over 2000 years ago, Qin Shi Huang Di, the First Emperor of China, completed the Great Wall, instituted a unified written language and built a magnificent tomb that included over 7,000 lifesize terra cotta soldiers buried with the Emperor to guard him for eternity.

Today, Simmons College professor Ching-chih Chen is utilizing videodisc technology enabling her to "store an entire library in my coat pocket."

By next fall, ancient and modern technologies will merge with the completion of PROJECT EMPEROR I: China's Treasure Revealed via Videodisc Technology.

The project, Chen's brainchild, will use modern video technology to record and analyze the excavation of the area around the Emperor's tomb — a massive site covering some 1¼ square miles in the mainland city of Lintong.

"I am an information specialist," Chen, principal investigator and project director, says in the computer lab/basement of her Newton home. "I specialize in new technology applications in terms of using it as a tool to disseminate, organize and retrieve information. What better way to find out about the Emperor's amazing accomplishments than to have a videodisc at your fingertips?"

According to Chen, while videodisc technology has been around for more than a decade, it was, until recently, used mostly for recreational purposes — "take-home movies like Saturday Night Fever."

She adds that 3,000 slides, almost one hour of video or film footage — 108,000 frames of information — can be stored on one videodisc.

"Most people think of a library in terms of the print media," Chen says. "With videodisc technology, we can use all forms of media — print, video, audio and still photography — to store information in a convenient, compact manner."

Chen, professor and associate Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons, is overseeing the work of experts in the fields of computer technology, research and video production. She is very quick to acknowledge the contributions of her colleagues — Dr. Robert Stueart, Simmons dean and professor who is research director for the project and Rus Gant, an MIT research fellow responsible for the technology.

More than just an information project, EMPEROR I combines the fields of technology and archaeology to bring the wonders of the emperor's tomb to "the average person who can't afford to go to China," according to Chen.

The idea for the project, Chen says, came about as a way to combine technology and the humanities to give people access to information they otherwise wouldn't get because of financial or practical limitations.

"Can everyone go see a traditional archaeological site?," Chen asks.

"No," she answers, "only a handful can go, but with the videodisc — an aggressive, active, dynamic way of providing information, people can get to see the excavation without going to China."

Once completed, the viewer will be treated to scenes reminiscent of the Twilight Zone. Row upon row of eerie, life-like soldiers guard the emperor's tomb, each with individual hair styles, uniforms, facial expressions and belts. Accompanying the soldiers, armed with what was then the latest in weapons technology — crossbows and chrome-tipped spears and arrows — is a cavalry made up of clay horses. Considering the prevailing technology of those times, Chen says she is in awe of the work that went into the site.

The project is made possible by a $200,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Chen also credits the government of the People's Republic of China for their assistance.
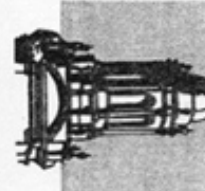

Dr. Ching-chih Chen holds her laser discs, on which she is documenting Chinese art.
Paul Drake photo