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Sunday, February 17, 1985

LEARNI

FOR THE RECORD

CORRECTION: Because of a reporting error, a story in Sunday's Learning section about the Simmons School of Library and Information Science misidentified the government that gave permission for Dr. Ching-Chih Chen's Emperor I videodisc project in China. The correct name of the government is The People's Republic of China. With respect to the same story, credit for the accompanying photographs should have been given to the Bureau of Museum Affairs of the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China.

China's Emperor I: a pocket history

Simmons dean to capture an era on videodisc

By Laura White
Special to The Globe

The old: The treasures of Emperor I of China, 221-206 B.C., including a pottery army of 7000 life-size men and horses.

The new: Videodisc technology with the capability to store one billion characters of multimedia information on a single disc four and a half inches in diameter.

The project: Approval from the ~~Republic of China~~ to organize and store information on the historical/archaeological period of the Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang-Ti on a videodisc for education and research.

The catalyst: Dr. Ching-chih Chen, professor and associate dean of the School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College. She recently received grants of more than $200,000 from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and $59,000 from Simmons for the project.

In March, Chen, with a team of experts in technology, arts, humanities and archaeology will go to China to begin collecting information and to photograph the excavation, where rows of thousands of clay soldiers still stand at attention after 2000 years.

"Videodisc technology is a wide-ranging educational tool," said Chen, a specialist in new technology applications in libraries and author of 15 books.

She explained that videodiscs range in size from a saucer to a long-playing record and can store about one billion characters of multimedia information from printed pages, graphics, narratives, motion pictures, slides, sound, three-dimensional images and different languages. The videodisc is hooked into a microcomputer and videodisc player. At the push of a button, specific information combining different media can be called up on a monitor screen, like a television.

Dr. Ching-Chih Chen shows how a videodisc containing enough information to fill a library can be slipped into her pocket.
GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY TED DULLY

"For example, if a child is learning about a bird, he looks at it in a book. Then he might listen to a record of bird sounds. Videodisc technology can provide three-dimensional images of a bird, a close-up, the bird sounds and narration at the same time by pushing a button," said Chen.

In her grant application to NEH, Chen proposed using videodisc technology to collect and organize all the archaeology and history of Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, the first emperor of China. During his brief 15-year reign, the emperor unified China.

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Life size terra-cotta figures of troops and horses, on display in Xiang, China, as part of Emperor I's burial tomb, will be reproduced in three-dimensional photographs for the Simmons videodisc project. Inset at top shows a detail of a soldier's face.

A videodisc library at Simmons

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completed the Great Wall, created a written script for the oral language and built a spectacular burial tomb at Xian with 7000 terra-cotta life-size troops and horses to accompany him into the next life.

The figures are spectacular not only for their sheer numbers, but also for the rich detail depicting different ethnic groups in the emperor's army. Individual strands of hair on warriors and horses, folds on uniforms, even slight expressions on the troops give a life-like appearance. Craftsmanship was so refined that pottery heads had grooves at the neck to screw into the terra-cotta bodies. Two warriors and two horses were exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts four years ago.

"I wanted to make this wonderful period of Chinese history to come alive through multimedia for people who might never visit China or for those researching the subject. I proposed designing three levels of information programs for general audiences, intermediate researchers and experts. The information would be accessible at a library or by bringing the technology to public gatherings," said Chen.

Everyone said such a project was impossible, said Chen.

"The Chinese Government is protective of this major historical/archaeological discovery at their ancient capital of Xian, in 1974. And most people cannot comprehend what can be stored on a videodisc," continued Chen.

It took Chen several visits to China and lengthy negotiations with the Minister of Culture and the Bureau of Museums before she finally received permission for her project.

"The Chinese were very impressed with the technology. We will bring the technical hardware with us and leave one unit at Xian," said Chen, who expects the project will be complete in the fall of 1986.

Conferring about the project "Emperor I" are, from left to right, Dr. Robert Stueart, dean and professor of information science at Simmons, Dr. Chen and Russ Grant, a research fellow at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at MIT.

A closeup of the life-sized terra cotta figures of the army of China's first emperor.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY TED DULLY

The Emperor I project is the first of its kind. "But I hope it will be the beginning of many projects that make all kinds of information available to the public."