

Chinese  
Archaeological  
Discoveries

Edited by Zhang Dongxia



# THE LEGEND OF MAWANGDUI

A recount of the past and a revealing of the secrets

CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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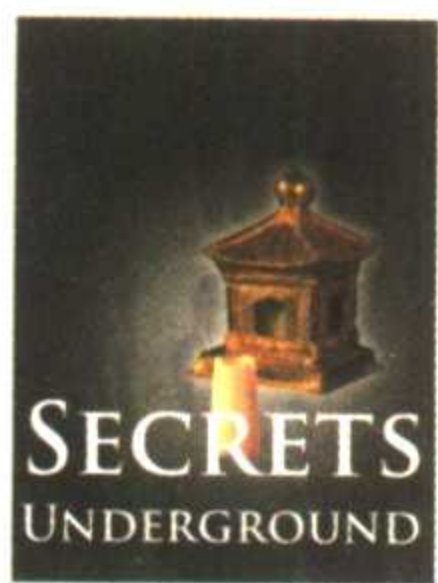
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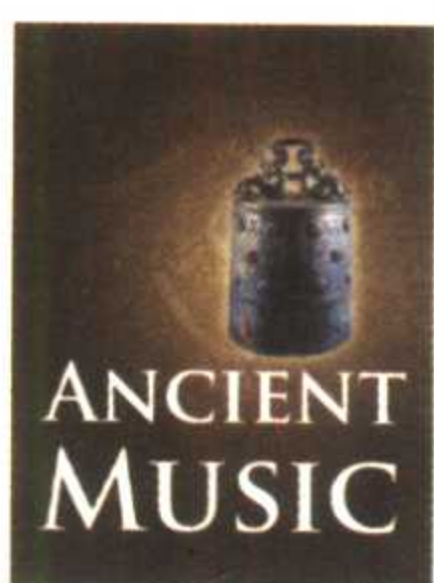
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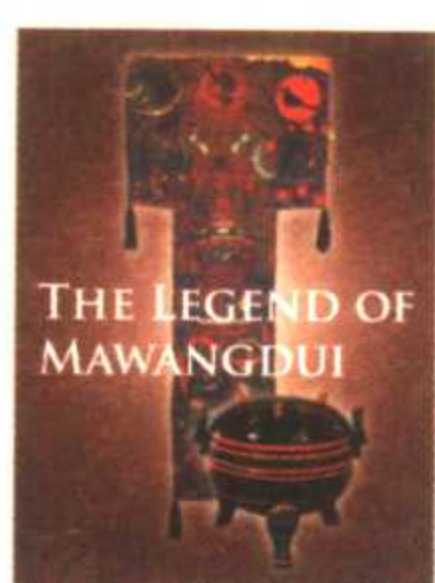




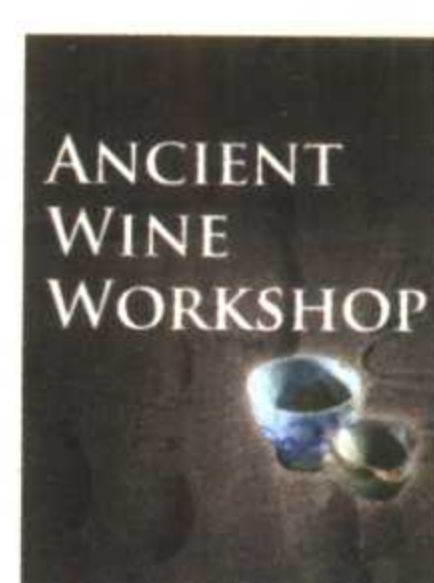
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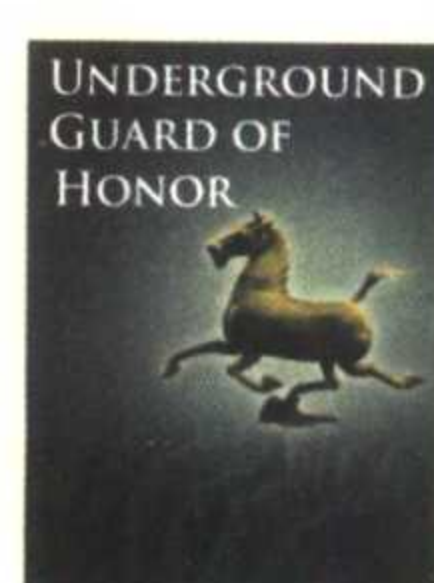
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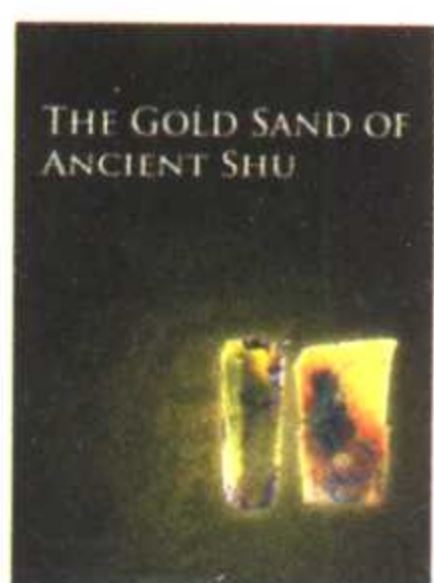
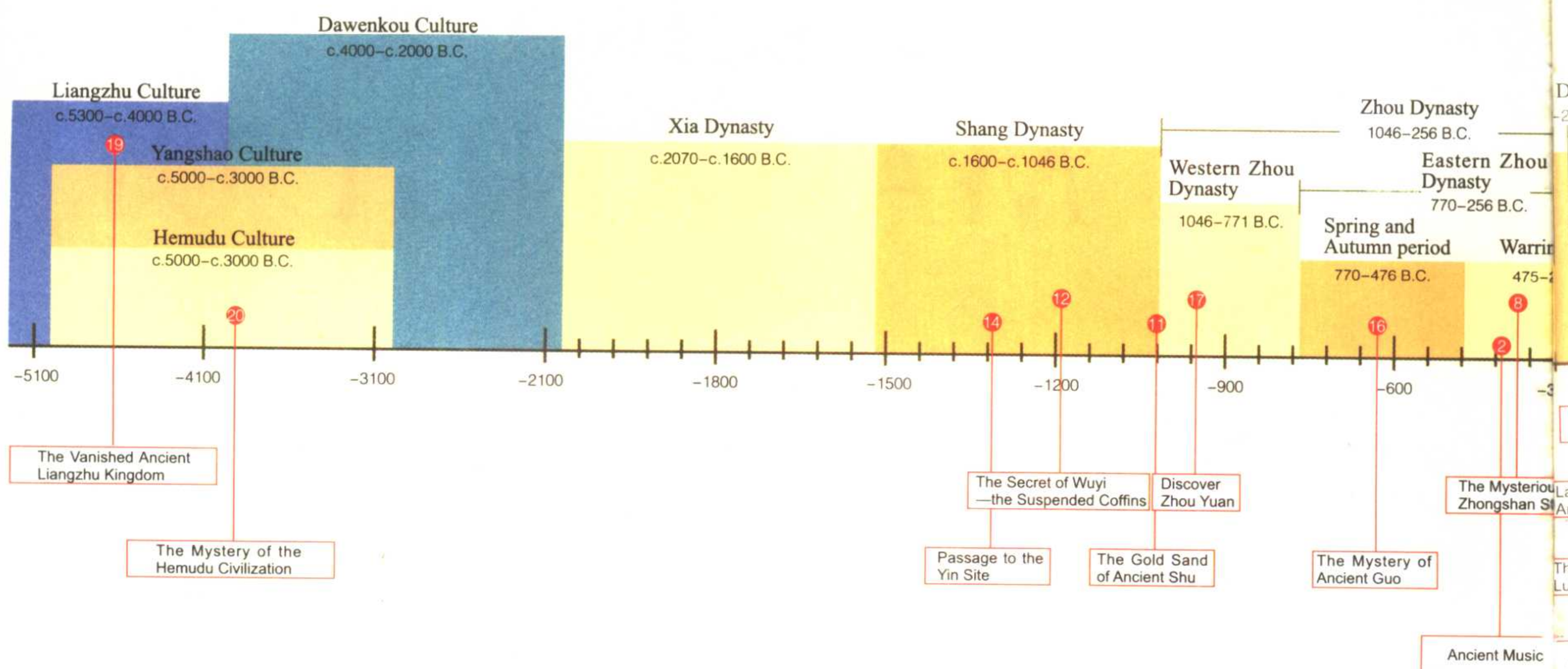
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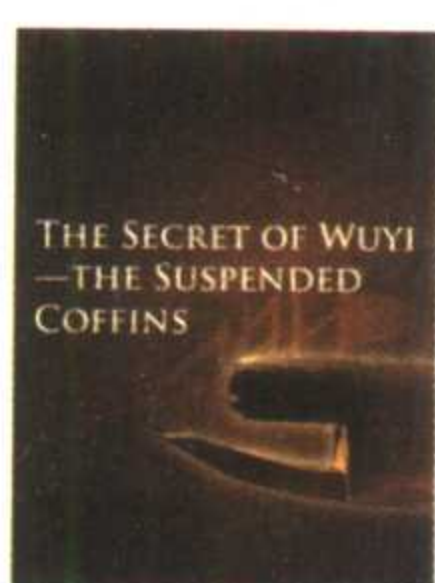
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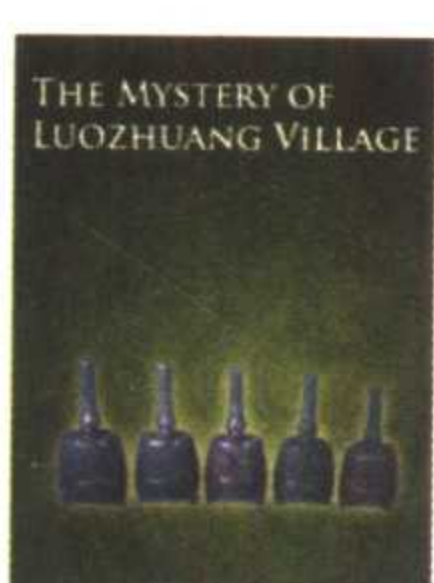
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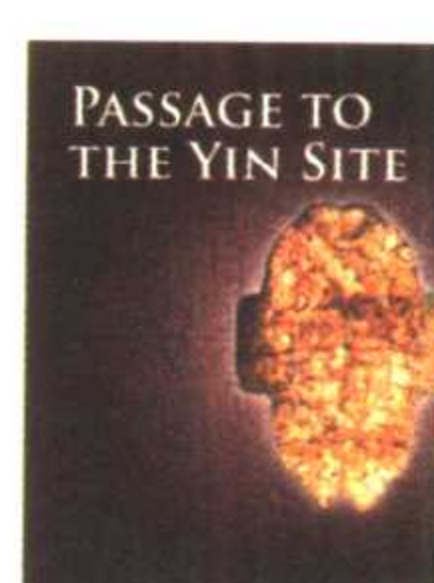
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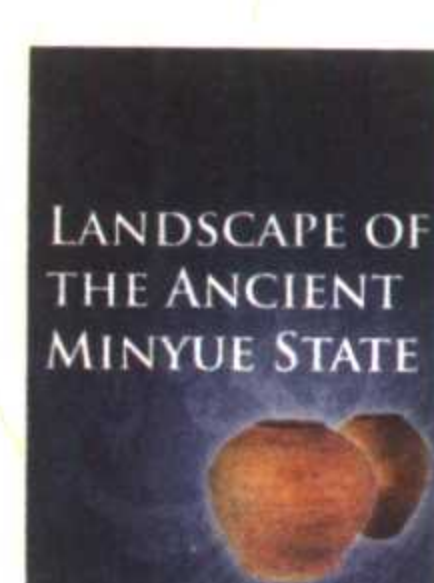
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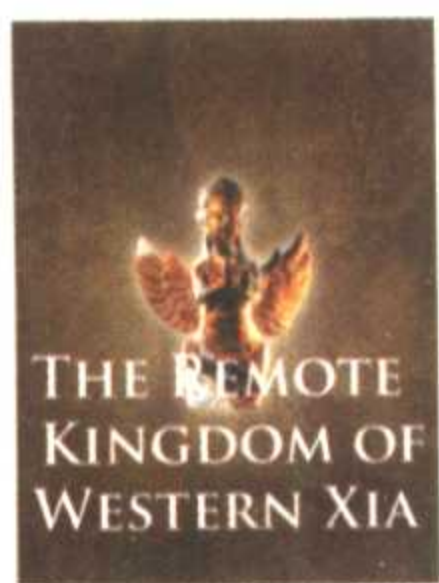


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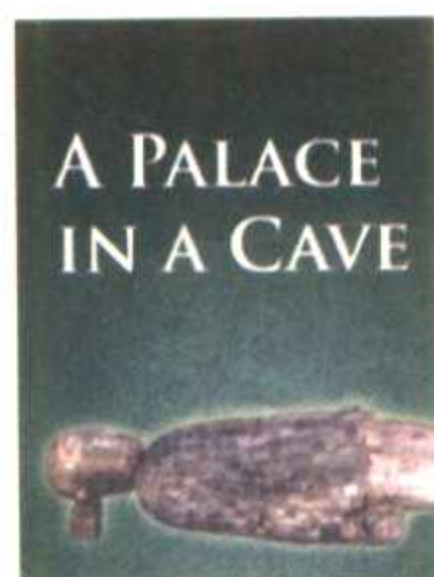


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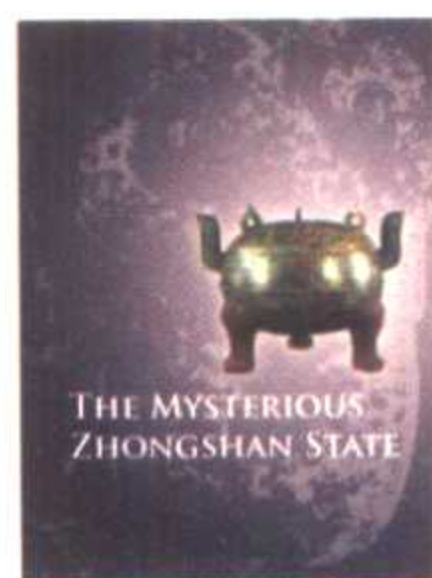




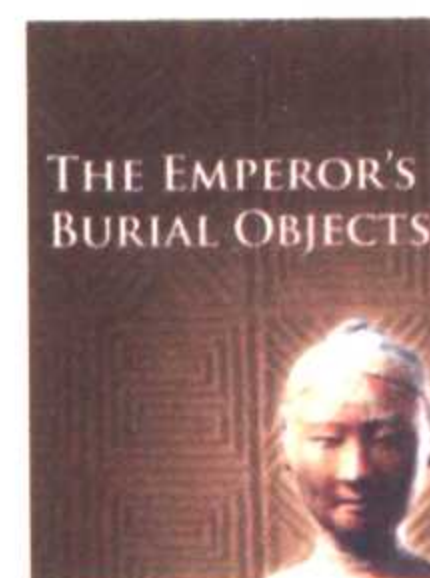
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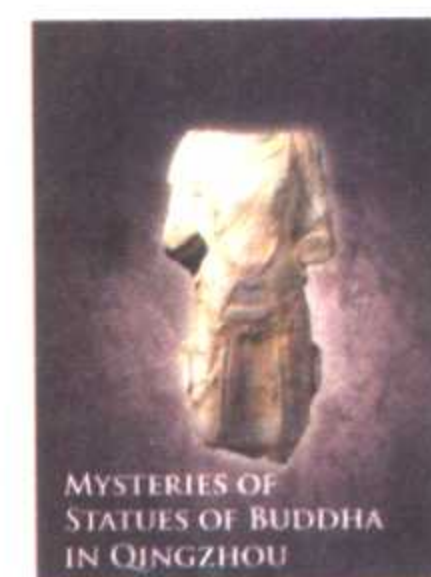
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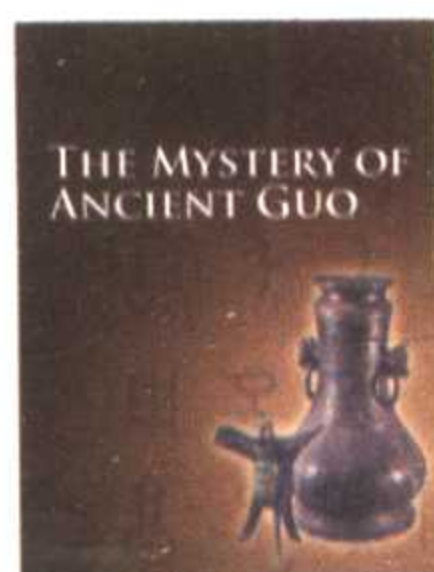
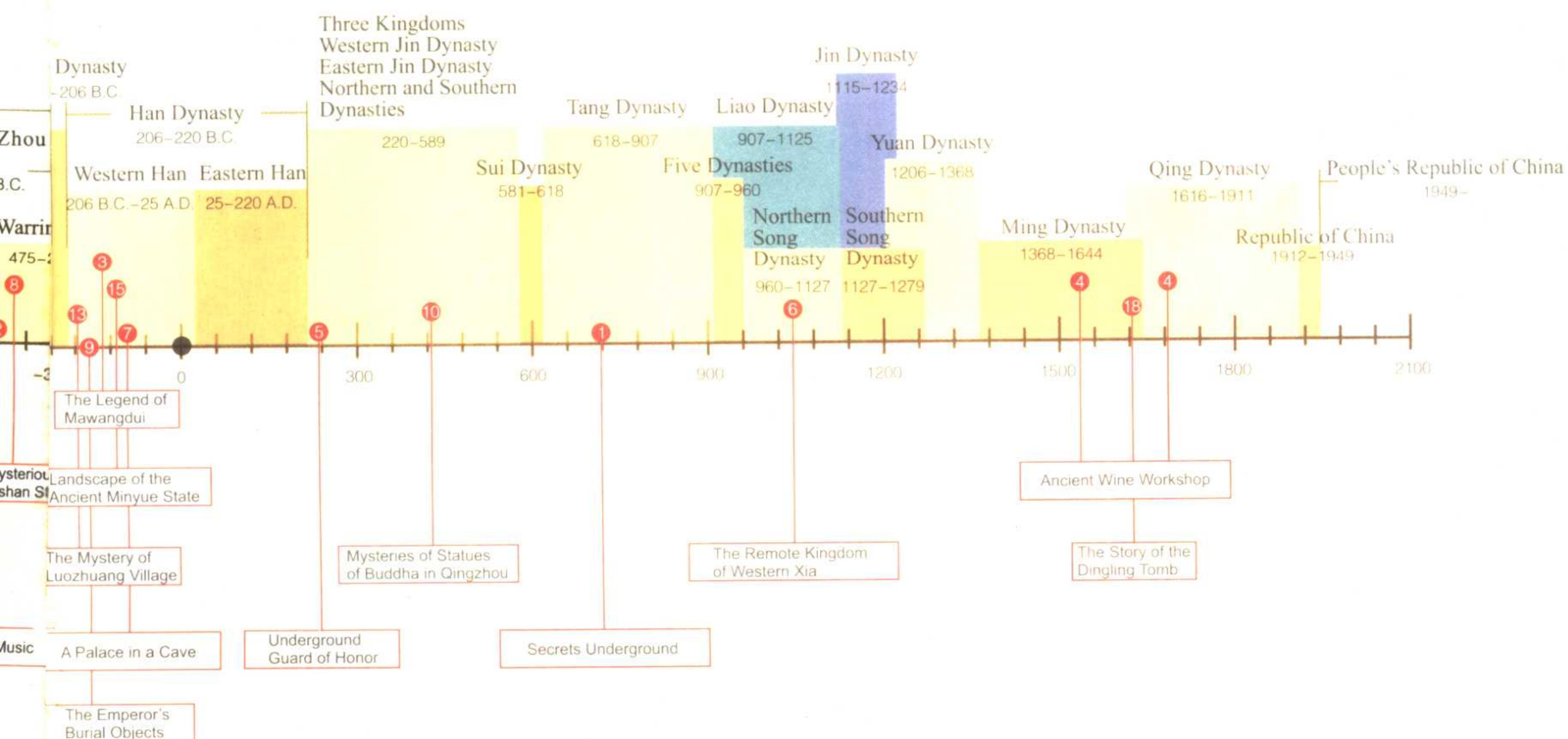
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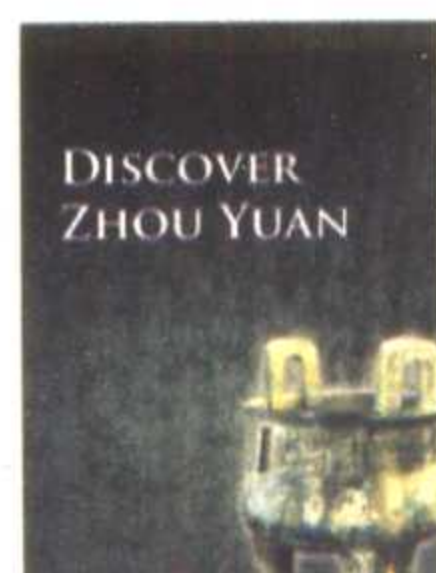
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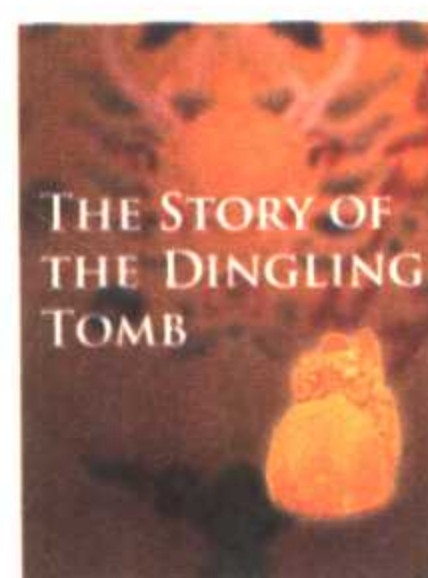
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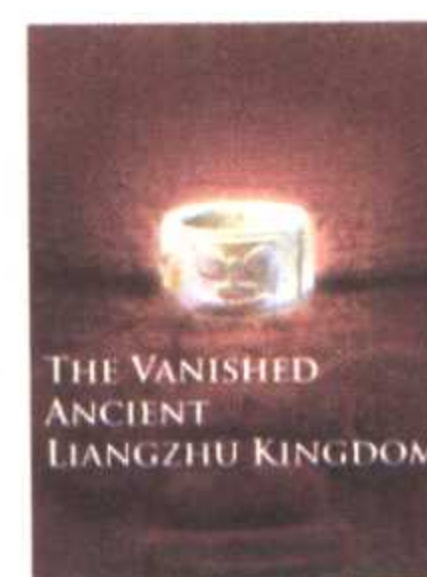
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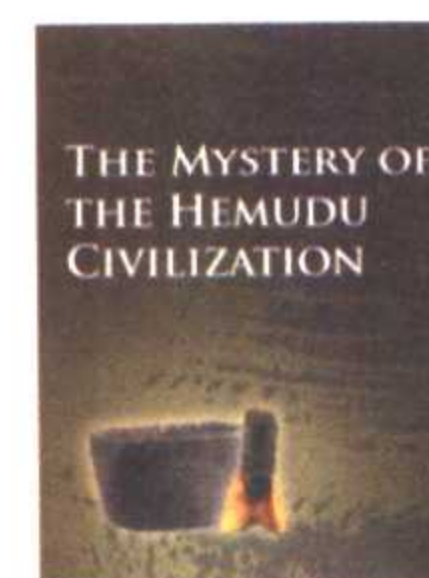
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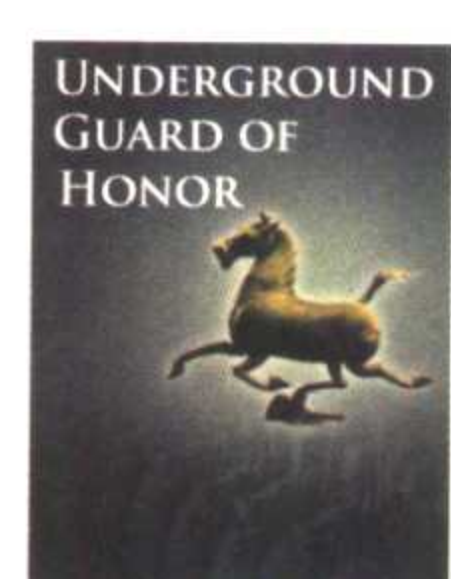
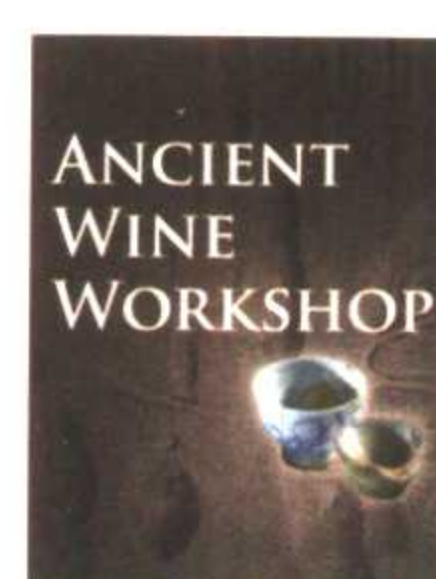
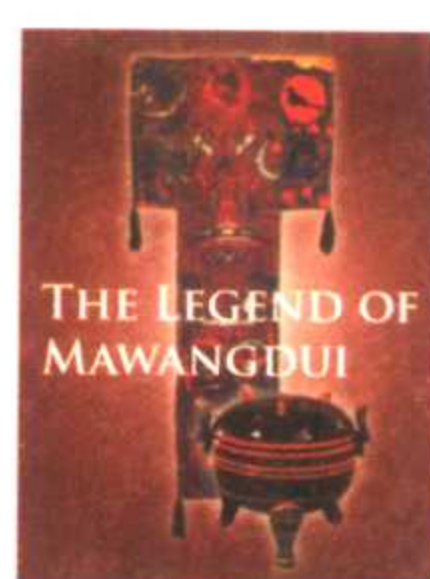
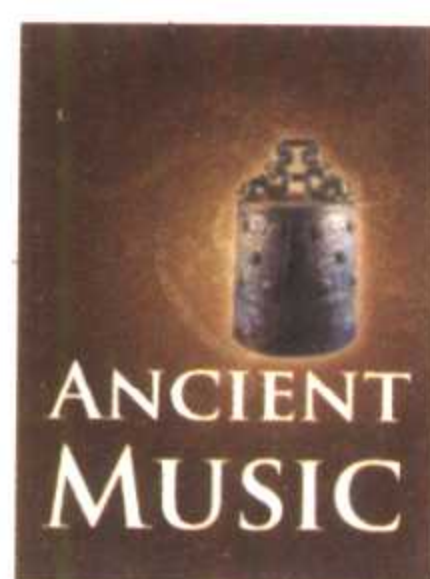
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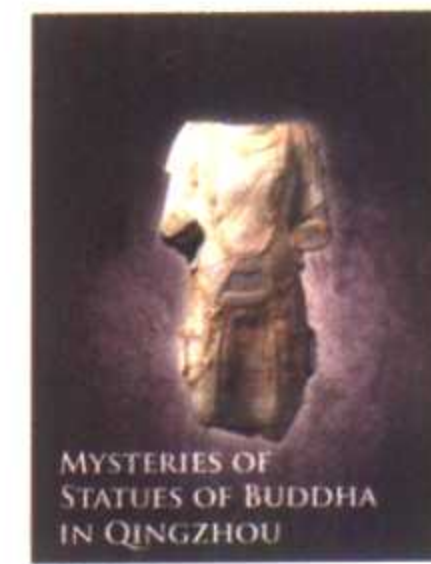
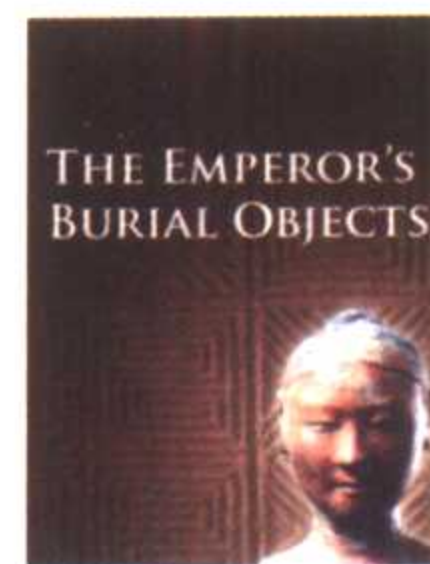
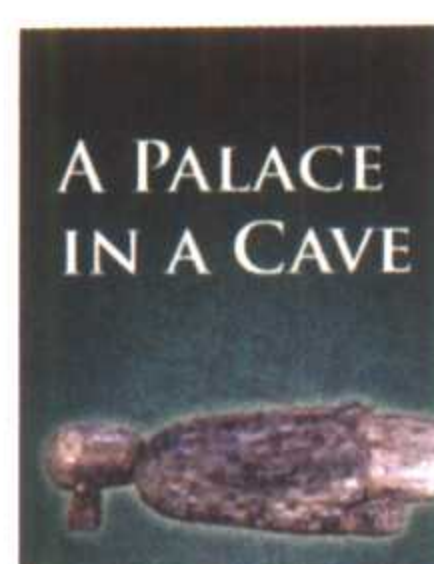
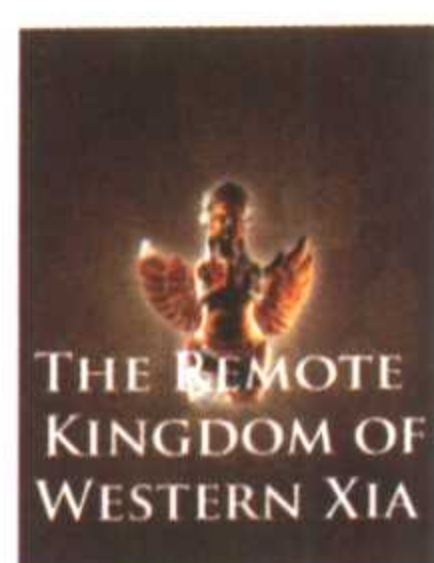
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# SECRETS UNDERGROUND



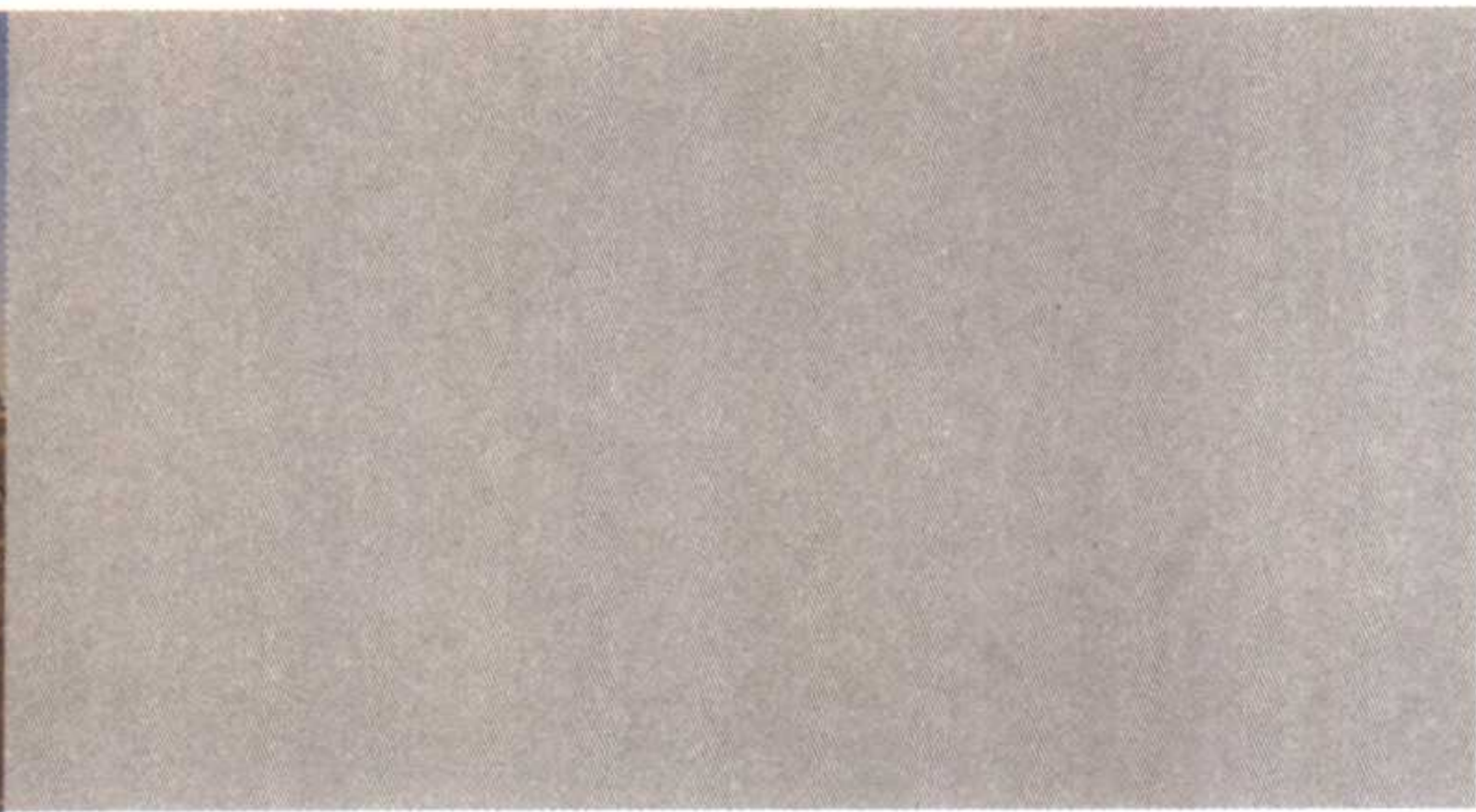
In the fall of 1981, a rampant rainstorm ravaged the Guanzhong plain of Shanxi province. A pagoda was hit and halved by the bolt. Buddhist scriptures and statues of Buddha fell into ruin. The monks were dumbfounded by the sudden strike of the storm. Nobody then could ever imagine that the collapse of the pagoda would unveil a secret hidden underground for thousands of years.





# SECRETS UNDERGROUND





Xi'an, of northwestern China, used to be the capital of 11 dynasties in Chinese history. Around its suburban region, there are numerous imperial tombs and palaces of ancient times, including the world-renowned terracotta army.

Famen temple is another famous ancient site. It is located in Fufeng County, 110 km away from Xi'an. The earliest description of this Buddhist temple was in the Northern Wei dynasty from around the 5th century. But according to local folklore, its existence stretches back to the early stages of Buddhism's introduction to China.

Buddhism originated in ancient India. Its founder, Sakyamuni, was a prince of an Indian tribe. He gave up his life of luxury at the age of 29 and founded the Buddhist religion after realizing the true meaning of life under a bodhi tree. In 486 AD, Sakyamuni died in a forest in Northern

India at the age of 80. His body was cremated and the crystal remains, known as Sariras, were preserved as sacred Buddhist articles.

250 years after Sakyamuni's death, the great Indian king, King Asoka, unified warring India and converted to Buddhism



The Terracotta Warriors in Qin Shihuang's Imperial Mausoleum





in his late years. To promote and spread Buddhism, he gathered up the Sariras and distributed them to various regions around the world. As the story goes, some of the Sariras were carried to China. As a result, Buddhist pagodas emerged all over China to enshrine the sacred Sariras. Famen Temple was one of them.



**Han Jinke**

**Head of Fufeng Cultural Bureau and one of the participants of the excavation. He was the first to discover the secret underneath the pagoda.**

It was February 27th 1987 when we started the excavation with this foundation and were digging a cross-shaped whole. On April 2nd, our shovel bounced back against a stone surface. Clearing off the dirt, there appeared a marble cover about 1 square meter across. Northwest to the cover were three pieces of gravel.

In Buddhism, a pagoda is built to contain Sarira. In India, pagodas are shaped like tombs while the ones in China inherit the Chinese architectural tradition. It has been said that the Famen pagoda in the Tang dynasty was constructed from wood in the mold of a towering palace with delicately-carved columns and eaves. However, the wooden Tang pagoda is no longer in sight and the visible Ming pagoda had also

collapsed during that storm in 1981.

For Buddhists and locals, the fall of the Famen pagoda aroused great sadness and sorrow. They believed for generations the genuine Sarira was buried right under the pagoda. But for archeologists, the collapse of the pagoda provided them a golden opportunity to unveil the secrets of thousands of years. Though historical references indicate there is an underground palace beneath the pagoda and that there are a Buddha's phalanx Sarira and countless treasures, nobody was sure of it.

Soon archeologists cleared out the foundation of the Ming pagoda and then that of the Tang pagoda. When the exploration on the Tang foundation went further, people became more and more curious: did the underground palace and Buddha Sarira referred to by folklore and historical references ever exist? If they did, are they still intact? Have they ever been visited by tomb-robbers?

People pushed the gravel away and a hole in the ground was exposed.

### **Han Jinke:**

Since there was no pagoda to cover it, the sun shone directly into the hole. It looked misty and mysterious and spectacular. Right under the cloud of the mist lay the glittering magnificent gold and silver wares.

Though people were still unsure what

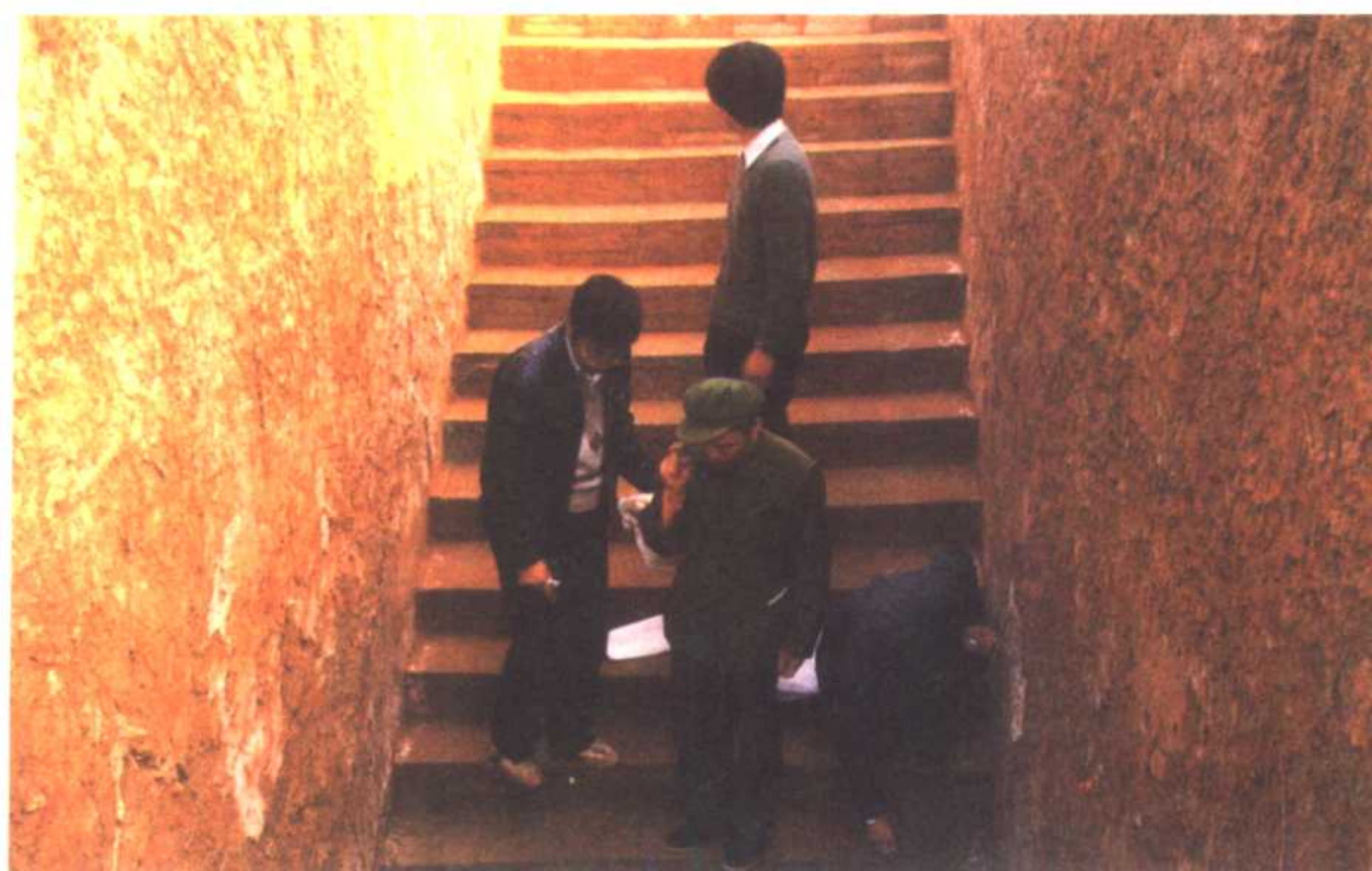


exactly these treasures were, they realized a great archeological discovery was about to come to life. The excited archeologists swiftly re-covered the hole and found the proper entrance at the south side of the foundation to the underground palace.

19 bluestone steps stretched to the entrance of the palace. Then appeared a stone gate with mysterious symbols on it. Apparently, they were not Sanskrit of ancient India. They were characters that could not be understood by human beings. To this day, people still have no clue what they mean. Perhaps they are powerful curses to prevent invasion.

Archeologists were not concerned at all with the curse. They skillfully opened the rusted lock on the stone gate. Later on, they found that this lock had been there for 1,113 years.

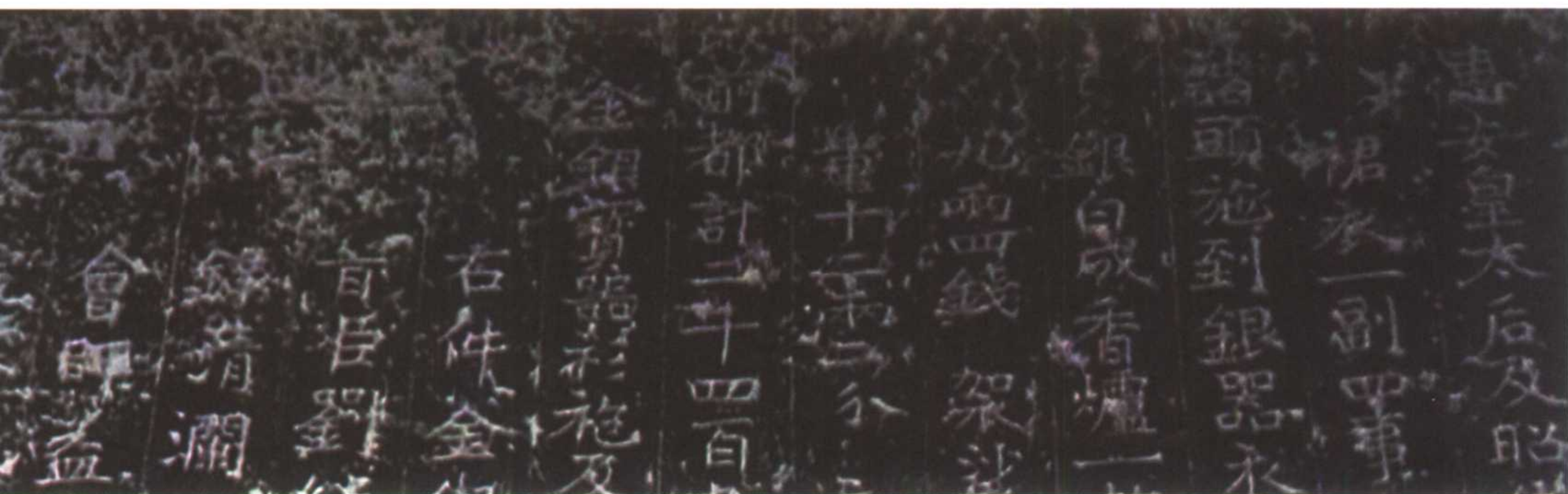
Behind the stone gate was the long



19 Bluestone Steps Stretching to the Entrance of the Underground Palace

corridor, flooded with a layer of coins. About 20,000 coins were found in total. 13 of them were made from hawksbill, the first discovery of its kind in Chinese numismatics history.

At the end of the corridor was another stone gate. Standing in front of it were two steles chiseled with Chinese characters.



Itemized Stele





One stele recorded stories of King Asoka distributing Sarira to Famen Temple and Chinese emperors, especially Tang emperors paying tribute to the Sarira. On the other, there was a list of detailed offerings to the Buddha, the quantity of the offerings, and names of the contributors.

These two steles had proven that the mysterious Buddha Sarira and numerous other treasures do exist. But are they really here in this underground palace?

The stone gate behind the stele was hard to open due to distortion of the structure inside.



**Han Wei**

**Former Head of Shaanxi Provincial Archaeology Bureau**

When we uncovered the palace, we found the floor stones were all jutting upward. The ceiling was broken too. The stones on the ceiling were dangling over our head. We crawled in. it was very dangerous. So sometimes we worked alone. Sometimes in pairs. While one was working, the other would take care of the situation to make sure no incident would occur. Besides we must be responsible for the artifacts. So the work was really tough.

Although the underground palace's floor and ceiling were distorted by the pressure of the pagoda, earthquakes, and the erosion of time, articles stored within, to every archeologist's amazement, were still as they were originally and kept intact. Among them is this craftwork, as bright and lively as it was a thousand years ago. Experienced scholars immediately recognized that this was a miniature King Asoka pagoda. It was made out of a whole piece of white marble. Bodhisattva figures were chiseled around it. The color of the figures' vermeil skirt and light green belt were so clear and fresh that it seemed they were painted just recently.

Around the miniature pagoda were piles of silkwork. Though the color had faded due to the erosion of time, the delicate design and fine stitches reflected the splendor and delicacy of Chinese ancient silk industry. What excited archeologists even more were some silk clothes found in a white vine box.

### **Han Wei:**

We used to have no knowledge at all about the Tang imperial silk. This time we found this box and 780 layers of silks. If fully unwrapped, these silks would be 400 meter long. They include several hundred clothes. Some belonged to the Queen Mother Hui'an. Wu Zetian's skirt was among them too.

According to the list on the stele, archeologists found all the named articles. This made them believe this silk-work was





The King Asoka Pagoda



Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty

from the Tang dynasty. Among them was this Empress Wu skirt worn by Wu Zetian, the only empress in Chinese history. And this skirt is the only belonging of Wu Zetian's found so far.

Disappointingly, most of the silk-work was either partially or entirely carbonized. In the Silk Preservation Lab of Shannxi provincial Archeology Bureau, we met Dr Andrica, the silk preservation specialist. She has been endeavoring for years on restoration of the silk-work of thousands of years ago.



## Dr Andrica

### German Silk Preservation Specialist

Before I worked on this silkwork, I had another piece of silk to experiment with. I used this machine to dampen and dry the silk. The results were excellent.

To Dr Andrica, the restoration is a chance to create. She must carefully analyze the lines and designs of the silk. As for the parts which are not restorable, she has to employ her own perception and imagination to make it up through modern technology.

### Dr Andrica:

This column of clothes was superposed in piles when it was not buried here in the Tang dynasty. The back of the column, about 4 cm thick, has been carbonized.

In unwrapping layer after layer, carbonized silk-work needs tremendous patience and care. Sometimes unwrapping one or two layers would take a year. But Dr Andrica has enjoyed her work and has been confident and enthusiastic about it.

### Dr Andrica:

While working, I found out how subtle and delicate the ancient, especially Tang, craft-making technology was, which amazed me so much. The impression the Chinese silk gives the world is that you will never forget it once you cast





Empress Wu Zetian's Gold-thread Silk Skirt

your eyes on it. When we deal with the silk, the work itself is a kind of beauty and enjoyment.

From the carbonized silks, people found that 5 pieces of gold-thread silks were intact. What is it that made them succeed in preventing the erosion of thousands of years?

Through microscope, we learnt that these gold threads were actually stretched gold. They are only 0.1 mm thick in average with the finest being 0.06 mm, which is thinner than human hair. This is a miracle that no modern technology could ever achieve. And these golden threads have the miraculous function of protecting the silk from erosion and enabling us to envision the genuine wonder of the Tang silk over a thousand years later.

This mini gold thread silk dress has short sleeves. The cuffs reach only up to the height of the chest. Its design is very much like modern women's wear. In fact, this is the emblematic dress of Tang handmaidens. From the Tang paintings, we

can see beautiful handmaidens of the Tang dynasty. They have a round face, twinkling eyes, and towering hairdos. They proudly expose their plump bosoms and soft skin. And the elegant and delicate silk clothes they are wearing make them even more stunning.

The glory, wonder and splendor of ancient Chinese culture is transported to the West through the world-renowned Silk Road, from Xi'an to the Mediterranean coast. And the Tang dynasty was the peak of the Chinese silk industry. Tang silk is number one among the world's silk in terms of quantity, variety, quality and technique. And this statement can be verified by thousands of silk works of over 40 kinds discovered in the underground palace. All these gold-woven and delicately designed silk pieces inspire our imaginations to ponder that remote era of astonishing wisdom.

More astonishment lies in wait behind other closed stone gates. But archeologists decided to first retrieve treasures of the cave found at the beginning, in case the underground palace collapsed suddenly.



The Emblematic Dress of Tang Handmaidens

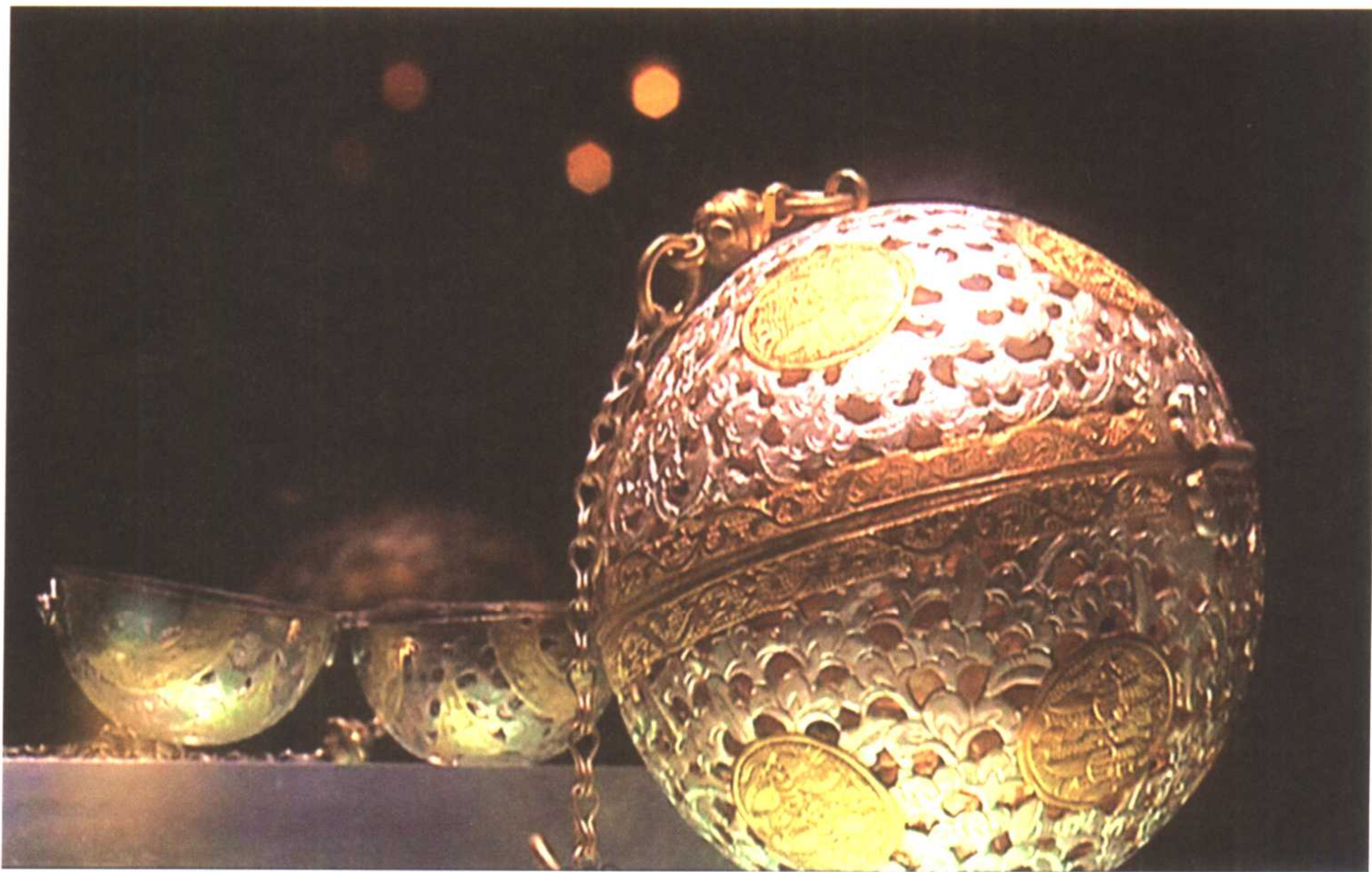


According to the structure of the discovered corridor and front chamber, this cave was believed to be the back chamber of the underground palace. When archeologists removed the shattered marble cover and entered the cave, they found it full of treasures. 121 pieces of gold and silver articles were found, together with over 400 pieces of jewelry and jades. This reminds people of the ancient description about treasures in the underground palace: the most sublime in the world, the most splendid on earth. This description is, by no means, an overstatement.

The most astonishing articles among these gold works are these two gilt silver

balls, called perfume bags. Fragrant herbs are put in the small bowl within the ball. Once lit, the aromatic air would overflow through the hollowed designs around the ball. During that time, they were hung in the air to purify the air. To prevent the herbs from pouring out, craftsmen set two loops inside the ball to keep the bowl in balance. When the ball rolls, the balance loops roll as well, so that the bowl in the ball keeps its balance. It is the same principle that is in the balancing equipment of a gyroscope.

The Buddhist Wand is believed to be used by Sakyamuni to disperse snakes or pests, and later on became the symbol of



Perfume Bags