

# A NEW TECHNOLOGY CAPTURES AN ANCIENT EMPEROR

By RICK VANDERKNYFF

Videodisc technology never caught on in the home market it was designed for, but it has found an unlikely champion among information specialists.

Ching-chih Chen, a professor and associate dean at the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science in Boston, has combined videodiscs and microcomputers to tell the story of China's first emperor, who ruled from 221 to 206 BC.

Shih Huang-ti, known as "the great unifier," is credited with standardizing weights and measures and written characters, completing the Great Wall of China and establishing a system of roads and canals during his 15-year reign. He was buried in a spectacular tomb that includes more than 7,000 life-size terra-cotta figures, including soldiers and horses.

Since "Project Emperor I" was first shown in December, 1985, Chen has traveled almost non-stop—logging more than 200,000 miles and visiting 18 countries—

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BILL BEATTIE

*Ching-chih Chen explains her videodisc, "Project Emperor I," to San Jose State University audience.*

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# VIDEODISC

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demonstrating the product to a variety of audiences. She will visit Cal State Fullerton's University Center Theater for two sessions today, from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. and 7:30 to 9:45 p.m.

"Project Emperor I" can be played sequentially, like a standard movie or videotape, complete with narration. But coupling the videodisc player with a microcomputer allows the user instant access to any part of the videodisc (each side of a disc stores 54,000 visual images). "The system user can actually sit in front of a microcomputer and try to retrieve information in the way they want it, not the way we want it," explained Chen, reached by phone in San Jose earlier this week.

The use of a computer also allows the addition of a data base containing textual information. "What use is having just the image and not knowing what the image is about?" asked Chen. "The second part of the project is a very comprehensive electronic data base, so when a picture pops up on the screen, automatically the affiliated information would show up as well."

Chen and her associates are designing a series of computer programs to accompany "Project Emperor I," targeting users ranging from elementary school stu-

dents to graduate students. The flexibility allowed by the technology gives it an edge over books or journals, Chen believes.

With books or journals, "it's very difficult for you to write something intended for specialists at the same time it is appreciable or understandable by people who have absolutely no background in that subject field," Chen said. "But the videodisc is different because it is such an enormous electronic data base, there is so much information and the material stored is neutral. So how we target our audience depends on how we retrieve the information, organize it and then present it."

Robert Emry, Cal State Fullerton's acting librarian, has high hopes for interactive technology. "As it relates to data retrieval in general, it will find more and more uses in the future," he said in an interview this week, adding that the videodisc is "especially attractive in the arts" because of its capacity for storing visual information.

He pointed out that the university library is already using a search service for social science source material that employs an electronic data base. "That's the wave of the future," he said.

"Project Emperor I" was developed under a \$270,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a matching grant of \$56,659 from Simmons College. Director Chen filmed much of "Project Emperor I" at the emper-

or's burial site in the ancient capital of Xian. Art history, archeology and anthropology experts from Harvard University and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts served as consultants.

The finished product consists of two videodiscs. The first contains videotaped, filmed and still images of the site and its artifacts, along with one hour of narration (with dual tracks, in Chinese and English). The second consists of videotaped interviews with 10 experts on the reign of Shih Huang-ti and the recent archeological finds at his tomb.

Chen hopes that "Project Emperor I" will soon be made available for lending to schools, libraries and museums. The equipment required to use the package would be loaned as well, since most institutions don't have it.

Ironically, the technology em-

ployed in "Project Emperor I" is already becoming somewhat obsolete. Digital technology, already used widely for storage of audio information, as in the popular home compact discs, is now being used also for storing visual information.

Chen says the basic principles developed in designing the interactive aspects of "Project Emperor I" are easily translated to digital technology. In fact, her team has already experimented with digitizing the images in the project.

The concepts developed in "Project Emperor I," she believes, will someday enjoy widespread use in teaching humanities-related subjects. "There are just enormous capabilities right now," she said. "Our overall goal for this project is to show that technology indeed can enhance the general understanding and appreciation of humanities."

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**"BRILLIANT"**

—Neil Rosen, *WOR-TV*

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