

WHEN WEST

Victor Mair first encountered the Bronze Age mummies of China's Tarim Basin 23 years ago. He—and others—have been trying to figure out what those people were doing there ever since.

By Samuel Hughes



The first time Victor Mair saw a Tarim mummy, he didn't believe what his eyes were suggesting. It was the summer of 1988, and Mair, professor of Chinese language and literature at Penn, was leading a Smithsonian tour through Xinjiang, the northwestern Chinese province in the vast, desolate expanse of east-central Asia. They stopped in Ürümqi, Xinjiang's capital, where the provincial museum had recently opened a small room at the end of its archaeological section. It was labeled *Mummy Exhibition*. Mair, his charges trailing behind him, parted the hanging curtains of the gallery doorway and entered the dimly lit room.

WENT EAST



He found himself surrounded by mummies, maybe half a dozen in all. Not the usual sort of mummies, wrapped in rotting gauze or looking like something out of a zombie movie. These were astonishingly well-preserved people of decidedly un-Chinese appearance, dressed in their everyday clothes. Though their remains were identified as thousands of years old, they looked as though they were sleeping and could wake up at any moment.

Mair was stunned—and skeptical.

“I looked at the mummies and said, ‘Oh, this is a hoax,’” he says. “They looked like something out of Madame Tussauds Wax Museum—they’re too well preserved. Then all the clothing was so immaculate, so pristine, and the colors were very vivid and bright. And perfectly intact! Nothing destroyed.”

Mair had examined enough ancient manuscripts from the area to know that the salty sands and freeze-drying climate of the Tarim Basin, where the mummies were found, are highly conducive to preservation. (“The most linguistically diverse library in the ancient world has survived in the drying sands of the Tarim Basin,” he and co-author James Mallory wrote in their 2000 book, *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West*.) But their remarkable condition wasn’t the only puzzling thing about these mummies.

“They had all this advanced technology: bronze, and high-level textile technology, different kinds of tools—they had wheels, for example. Everything made me think this was too advanced for this time in this place.”

Even more brain-scrambling was the fact that they looked so ... European. Their height (tall). Hair (blond, reddish-brown, fine-textured). Facial structure. Clothing.

Mair was especially drawn to one mummy whose remains were identified as dating back to 1000 BCE. Chärchän Man, excavated from Chärchän (Qiemo in Modern Standard Mandarin), was six-foot-seven, with longish blond-brown hair and beard, and his clothing included a reddish-purple woolen shirt trimmed with red piping. Mair promptly dubbed him Ur-David, on account of the remarkable resemblance to his very-much-alive brother Dave. But beyond that eerie resemblance bubbled a serious question: What in God’s name was a tall, fair-haired man with that kind of clothing doing in east-central Asia 3,000 years ago?

Mair sent his tour members back to the hotel, and spent the next few hours in that dark room, meditating on the implications of its inhabitants. He filed the mental images away and went back to studying manuscripts.

Three years later, he found himself reading a story in *The New York Times* about a frozen 5,300-year-old body that had just been discovered in the Ötztal Alps on the border between Austria and Italy. Ötzi the Iceman, as he became known, “died at the top of the Similaun Glacier, right near where my father pastured his animals when he was a boy,” says Mair. The weird convergence of time and place and professional interests prompts a grin. “I was *born* to be a mummy guy,” he says.

At that point, though, he was still a “Chinese language and literature guy with a lot of experience about central Asia,” albeit one who was “curious about everything.” And the discovery of Ötzi “galvanized” him.

“What really goaded me to go to the mummies was that [Ötzi] had an army of researchers working on him,” he adds. “It wasn’t fair. Those Xinjiang mummies—nobody was working on them; nobody even knew about them. I said to myself, ‘They’re every bit as important as he is. Maybe even more important.’ They’re in the center of Asia, at the crossroads of Asia. Before that it was just a big lacuna in that part of the world; then all of a sudden there were all these Caucasian people with all this advanced technology, right up there against China—very early.”

He pauses for just a moment, and adds: “That very afternoon, I became an archaeologist.”

Richard Hodges, the Williams Director of the Penn Museum and an eminent archaeologist in his own right, is talking with easy precision about the “two great issues” in world archaeology today.

One, he explains, is “that whole issue of man coming out of Africa, particularly sub-Sahara Africa, and crossing into the Middle East, then moving eastwards and northwards.” That’s a sort of prelude to the second issue—which, he says, involves “what was happening between Asia and Europe and the Middle East and this crucible of the Old World” over the past three millennia.

“The Tarim Basin is smack-bang in the middle of this crucible,” Hodges says forcefully. “And the archaeology that’s come from it, the new finds that have been made in that region, are extraordinary.” The result is “a remarkable chance to get to grips with those extraordinary issues that have interested archaeologists for centuries on a big scale”—until they “lost interest

because they were myopic,” Hodges adds. “And now this big, grand narrative is back for us.”

The narrative takes physical form in *Secrets of the Silk Road*, an exhibition of Tarim Basin mummies and artifacts that opens at the Penn Museum February 5 and runs through June 5. The exhibition is “fantastic,” says Hodges, “because it really demands that you have the kind of imagination to look across huge distances and ask big questions about who we are and where we came from.”

For Mair, the fact that an exhibition of Tarim mummies and artifacts is coming to the Penn Museum at all borders on the “miraculous.” Not just because it’s a blockbuster show with dazzling objects and a raft of innovative special programs that represents a quantum leap forward for the Museum, though it is and it does. (See sidebar on p. 44.) It’s also that he had long since given up hope that any of those mummies and artifacts would ever make it out of China, let alone to West Philadelphia.

Fifteen years ago, he was turned down for a similar show, on



The salty sands and freeze-drying climate of the Tarim Basin, where the mummies were found, are highly conducive to preservation.

the not-unreasonable grounds that the Museum was ill-equipped to handle either the crowds or the climate-sensitive mummies. Efforts to get a venue at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County also foundered. So Mair went back to studying, excavating, writing about, and organizing conferences on the remarkable discoveries in Xinjiang.

Then, in February 2009, he got a phone call from Peter Keller, head of the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California. The museum, Keller told him, was planning an exhibition of Tarim mummies.

"I said, 'Oh, no, you can't be,'" Mair recalls. "He said, 'Oh yes we can. Do you want to be involved?'"

Mair had to pick his jaw off the floor before he could answer.

"I said, 'Man, this is like a dream! It's not gonna happen!' He said, 'Yes, it is.'"

When Keller asked Mair if he wanted to edit the catalogue, the response was a high-octane affirmative. He then asked if Mair would be interested in having the exhibition come to the Penn Museum.

"I said, 'What?! That's what we've been trying to do all these years!'"

At that point Mair went to see Hodges, knowing he was facing long odds. But this time, the stars were in alignment.

"We're trying to work on two fronts that I think the University feels pleased about," says Hodges. "First, we're trying to work with faculty and students, and it's great to have these sorts of ideas come from a distinguished member of the faculty. Second, we're trying to get a much larger audience for the Museum as a public museum, and we felt that this exhibition, albeit a little academic, actually meets the kind of interest that the public have at the moment in archaeology."

Though his efforts to get an exhibition of Tarim mummies at the Penn Museum in the mid-1990s fell short, Mair did organize a major international conference on the subject that he views as a "watershed," one that "changed how people viewed the development of Eurasian civilization." That 1996 conference yielded two volumes worth of papers, covering everything from linguistics and pottery styles to methods of tomb construction and ancient metallurgy.

"That was, to the best of my knowledge, the only international conference that brought together so many people working on the major problems of east-central Asia," says James Mallory, professor of prehistoric archaeology at the Queen's University in Belfast. Soon he and Mair began working together on the manuscript that became *The Tarim Mummies*. "Victor brought all of the content based on primary Chinese language resources," Mallory explains, as well as strong editing skills and the "type of enthusiasm and passion that drove the project forward as fast as it did."

Central to their investigations was a somewhat mysterious people known loosely as the Tocharians. It's not clear what they called themselves, but they spoke Tocharian, a "sub-

group of the Indo-European family, one that has no close connections with any other subgroup," in the words of Don Ringe, professor of linguistics at Penn. And either they or their ancestors came from the west.

"What's clear and important is that the mummies are burials of people who originally came to that part of the Silk Road from far to the west," says Ringe. "It's not so clear whether they're the ancestors of the Tocharians or are one of the Iranian tribes that occupied most of the steppe for more than two millennia." Though Tocharian documents dating back to the 5th century CE have been found, "the mummies are much, *much* older than any of these documents—they date to the 2nd millennium BCE. Whether the Tocharians were in Xinjiang at such an early time is an open question."

In his investigations, Mair "was searching for cultures whose core technologies and languages bore striking similarities to those of the ancient Caucasian cultures of Xinjiang," wrote archaeology journalist Heather Pringle in *The Mummy Congress: Science, Obsession and the Everlasting Dead*.

"Slowly, patiently, he worked his way back through time and space, tracing the territories of these ancestral groups." He eventually concluded that their homeland lay in southeastern Europe.

Though some people with political agendas tried to commandeer his research for their own ends, it turned out to be essentially hijack-proof—too scholarly, too dense, too impartial. "By the end of the 1990s, nobody was bothering me," Mair says. "They saw I was trying to do serious research. They weren't gonna get me on their side."

Politics aside, that European ancestral homeland is a *long* way from the Tarim Basin—many thousands of miles over often-forbidding terrain. Which raises the question: how did these Caucasian settlers get there?

In a word, horses. Some 5,700 years ago, as Pringle explained, "along the eastern fringes of Europe, people had begun rounding up wild horses, and sometime later they started sliding bits into their mouths and swinging their bodies onto their backs. These seemingly simple acts led them to conquer terrestrial space ..."

"Some of the invaders swept northward, becoming the Germanic tribes; others journeyed west to become the Celts of the British Isles. But the ancestors of the Xinjiang people had headed east across the grassy steppes of Asia, dispensing with any who tried to bar their path, and four thousand years ago, a small group of late-comers ventured into the vacant river valleys of the Tarim Basin."

In the centuries that followed, they introduced bronze metallurgy and chariots, as well as some sophisticated textiles made of wool, among other things. (Domestic woolly sheep arrived in central Asia about 2000 BCE, brought by "the Caucasoid folk who left their mummified remains," as Elizabeth Barber writes in an essay for the catalogue.) But the earliest documents found in Xinjiang were written in Chinese. The flow of goods and ideas and art—even religions—moved in more than one direction.



“It was a two-way street—actually, a three- or four- or five-way street,” says Nancy Steinhardt, professor of East Asian art and curator of Chinese art at the Penn Museum. “Religion, ideas, and specific art forms and motifs traveled across central Asia from the key production centers of art: China, India, and Iran.” While one can probably see “more of China in Xinjiang than of places west of China in China,” there are also “hybrids, blends, mixtures, and juxtapositions,” she adds. “The confrontation and sometimes merging of cultures is, in my opinion, what makes the Silk Road sites so interesting.”

Despite the romantic images associated with its name, the Silk Road was never a real road, just a series of shifting trade routes connecting the area that is now Xinjiang to the rest of Eurasia. And it was only in the 1870s that Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German geologist and the Red Baron’s uncle, coined the moniker.

Though those routes spanned some 4,000 miles, and linked East with West, the eastern portion didn’t begin to open up until 108 BCE, when the Chinese Emperor Wu began pushing the rival Xiongnu empire westward into central Asia. (Fun fact: Several hundred years later, a branch of the Xiongnu would reinvent itself as the Huns.) Both of the real mummies in the *Secrets of the Silk Road* exhibition—the Beauty of Xiaohe (1800-1500 BCE) and the Infant Mummy (8th century BCE)—thus predate the opening of what we call the Silk Road by quite a few centuries. But the Silk Road wasn’t the only point of cultural interface. As Steinhardt points out, “whenever anyone travels across Asia, in peace or for war, there is the possibility of cultural interaction and exchange.”

The Silk Road had pretty much died out by the 15th century CE, victim of improved maritime routes and the decline of the Mongol Empire, among other things. By then the Tocharians were long gone, at least as a recognizable people.

“By about the 10th century, the Tocharians had almost disappeared from the stage of history,” Mair said during a 1998 *Nova* episode filmed in Xinjiang. “I suspect that what happened to them is that they were primarily absorbed by the Turkic peoples who were moving into this area and replacing them. I believe that the legacy of the earliest inhabitants of the Tarim Basin survive in the current modern populations.

“They now believe that they are Uyghurs, or Tajiks, or some other group,” he added. “But in my estimation, these are just carrying on the old Tocharian influence.”

Having studied the Tocharians for so long that he’s become a “bit of a Tocharian” himself, Mair has no doubt that he could “channel” them—and that they would be glad to know there’s so much scholarly interest in them these days.

“I think they’d be very proud,” he says, and as the late-afternoon light illuminates his gray beard he looks rather proud himself. “I think they’d say, ‘We’ve been rescued from obscurity. People had forgotten about us for a thousand years, and we could have been forgotten forever. Now these people, in a very far-away place, care so much about us, and are figuring out things about our past that even we didn’t know, and they’re bringing us back to life. And we’re very grateful.’” ♦

ANCIENT SECRETS FOUND AND SHARED

**A blockbuster exhibition,
Secrets of the Silk Road,
is coming to the
Penn Museum.**

Human beauty is evanescent.
Yet when you gaze on the
flaxen-haired Beauty of
Xiaohe—even in a photograph—
the usual metrics crumble.
She’s 3,800 years old, after all.

Chinese archaeologists unearthed the sleeping Beauty in 2003, and when they opened her coffin, “her hat was slanted like this,” says Victor Mair, professor of Chinese language and literature, angling his hand across his brow. “I always refer to her as very alluring—almost seductive. She has such beautiful features—just lovely. Her lips are great; her teeth are great. She is gorgeous!”

That Mair is so cheerfully besotted with a woman whose age can be measured in millennia isn’t only because he’s an archaeologist, though that’s certainly a big part of it. (See main story.) Her beauty gives new meaning to the word *timeless*, and the artifacts buried with her suggest that a similar reverence attended her death.

“All in all, this is a sumptuous burial of a stunningly beautiful woman who was much loved by those who interred her,” notes the *Secrets of the Silk Road* catalogue, which cites such other “striking attributes” as “the wooden phallus on her chest, the magnificent felt hat, the fine fur-lined leather boots, and the string skirt.”

The Beauty of Xiaohe is just one of the more eye-dazzling sights in the *Secrets of the Silk Road* exhibition, which opens February 5 at the Penn Museum and runs until June



Sleeping Beauty: "The Beauty of Xiaohe,"
1800-1500 BCE. Below: wooden container,
circa 5th century BCE.

5. (Organized by the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California, in conjunction with Xinjiang's Institute of Archaeology, its provincial museum, and its Cultural Heritage Bureau, the exhibition arrives at Penn after a stop at the Houston Museum of Natural Science.) Its incredibly well-preserved contents include two mummies and the full burial trappings of a third, plus more than 150 additional artifacts. Those range from sophisticated textiles, paintings, and statuary to gold plaques and 1,200-year-old spring rolls, all of which provide contextual significance, not just for the mummies but for the history of human migration across Eurasia.

The exhibition also marks the first time that the Beauty of Xiaohe or any of the mummies have traveled outside of China. The high degree of cooperation between the two nations was an encouraging sign, especially since the show's contents suggest that China's westernmost province was populated by somebody other than ethnic Chinese for several millennia—a potentially touchy point given the political sensitivities surrounding Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

"It's a very high-level exhibition, and there will be a lot of Chinese officials coming over here to the opening," notes Mair. "The fact that we can have these very precious objects, including some human remains, coming to Penn means that there is a greater degree of openness and cooperation. I think the exhibition is serving as a kind of bridge between the two countries.



It's a very positive sign that we can do this exhibition, and it gives you hope that things will get even better."

Equally hopeful for Mair and others is the fact that the Museum is investing so much psychic capital and coin in the exhibition and its accompanying events.

"The Penn Museum is going all out with this exhibition," says Mair. "It's going to be academically sound—serious research has gone into it—but it's also educational. There's a very strong intent to help the public understand what these mummies and all the cultural artifacts mean."

In the view of Nancy Steinhardt, professor of East Asian art and curator of Chinese art at the Museum, "this is the biggest thing Penn has done in an Asian art field in recent memory, maybe since the 1920s, when the core of the Asian collection came to Penn." For the public, she adds, it's also a "chance to see objects they will not see when they visit Xinjiang," where many of the pieces would be in storage or archaeological research institutes.

"I think viewers should come with the expectation of being overwhelmed," Steinhardt concludes. "And I think they will be."

For Richard Hodges, the Williams Director of the Museum, *Secrets* is not just a "really exciting exhibition," but also one that the Museum hopes will "reach all sorts of audiences."

"We're in a sense relaunching the Museum as a public museum," he explains, a process that has involved "restructuring"

both its galleries and its personnel. Instead of simply putting window air-conditioning units in each gallery, for example, “we saw it as an opportunity to refurbish the original 1899 west wing,” a process just now being completed.

Another change has involved “putting a new team in exhibitions to cope with the scale of this project as a blockbuster,” Hodges adds. “This museum hasn’t been known for blockbusters, and so that’s what we’re trying to do.”

“We look on this as the renaissance and rebirth of the Museum,” says Mair. “The president, the provost—everybody collaborated with us wonderfully. The Museum hired a lot more young blood, and there are a lot of outreach things as well. It’s not just an exhibition. There’s a whole panoply of ideas. It’s one of the most out-reaching kinds of exhibitions I’ve ever been involved with.”



Above: half-sleeved silk robe, 2nd-4th century CE. Top right: gold mask, 5th-6th century CE. Bottom right: “Yingpan Man,” clothed body and mask of male mummy, 3rd-4th century CE. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: silk robe with painted motifs, 3rd-4th century CE; bronze figurine of kneeling warrior, circa 500 BCE; infant mummy, circa 8th century BCE.

The outreach events have been building for months. In October, for example, Nancy Steinhardt gave a lecture on “Great Sites on the Silk Road,” and in November Mair spoke on “Mummies of the Tarim Basin.” (For videos and podcasts of those and other lectures, as well as information about the exhibition and related events, tickets, and hotel rooms, see www.penn.museum.)

In addition to regular weekend programs on “Mummies: Through Time, Across Continents” and “Explore the Silk Road,” visitors can:

- Follow costumed travelers—a merchant, a princess, a horseman, an entertainer—based on composites of actual Silk Road travelers from the time of the Tang Dynasty.

- Attend monthly “Great Adventures Along the Silk Road” lectures, such as “The Plague: Deadly Travel Companion of Trade Routes,” by Lester Little, emeritus professor of history at Smith College (February 2); and “Samarkand in the Age of Tamerlane,” with Renata Holod, professor of art history at Penn (March 2).

- Follow anthropology PhD candidate Jeremy Pine’s “On the Silk Road” travel blog along the modern-day Silk Road (www.penn.museum/sites/silkroadblog).

- On March 19, some 15 years after Mair organized an international conference on the Tarim mummies, the Museum will host another international symposium, this one titled “Reconfiguring the Silk Road: New Research on East-West Exchanges in Antiquity.”

There will be a raft of interactive stations at the exhibition itself, including:

- “Textiles of the Silk Road: Fabric Testing and Digital Microscopes,” in which visitors can perform tests on swatches of silk and felt to check out their breathability, insulation, and protection.

- A Chinese translation station where visitors can try their hand at translating Chinese poetry.

- A computer interactive station that allows visitors to hear how words from distant countries and centuries evolved into words we use today.

- A mummification section, with pictures, a video, and silicone swatches that “mimic the feeling of mummified flesh.”

Secrets of the Silk Road is a lot more than its mummies. Yet even Steinhardt, who as professor of East Asian art is quick to talk up some of the remarkable artifacts and artwork, acknowledges that the mummies are “probably the most important” elements of the exhibition, “because they confirm the ethnicities of those who were traveling—if not living—and dying in Xinjiang in the last centuries BCE and early CE centuries.” Textiles are “amazingly informative” in terms of art and juxtaposition of symbols, she adds, and—speaking of juxtapositions—“we find blue-eyed figures and Chinese supplications for progeny from nearby sites at approximately the same time.”

Even more poignant than the Beauty of Xiaohe is the Infant Mummy from the 8th century BCE, excavated from the same Chärchän region as Victor Mair’s Ur-David.

The baby was found “lying on its back and shrouded in dark red wool wrapped with intertwined red and blue cords, giving the appearance of swaddling clothes,” notes the catalogue. A pillow beneath its head makes it “seem as if the baby is sleeping soundly.” Though the two blue-gray stones covering the eyes might look a little like dark glasses, “stones of such color are not common,” the catalogue notes, and “their use to cover the eyes of dead children must convey important symbolic information.” Equally poignant, though perhaps easier to decode, are the artifacts found on either side of the baby: an ox horn and a nursing device made from a goat’s udder.

“I call this infant ‘Little Baby Blue Bonnet’ because of the incredibly soft and fluffy cashmere wool wrapped over his/her—we don’t know which!—head,” says Mair. “The wool fibers still spring back if you press gently on them. Charming as all get out, this child almost looks as though it could be a doll.”

The most sartorially glamorous mummy is not actually a mummy at all but rather the spectacular funeral clothing and mask of one. Yingpan Man, as he’s called (based on the area of excavation), is also the most recent of the three, dating “only” to the third or fourth century CE. The pattern of the sumptuous red-wool-and-gold robe “reflects the influence of West Eurasian art,” notes the catalogue, “mainly Greco-Roman and secondarily Persian.”

“Here’s a guy that was really out to make a fashion statement,” says Mair. “He’s the most resplendently garbed mummy I’ve ever seen, which is saying a lot for a six-foot-six guy with a mustache!”

A Greco influence can also be found in Mair’s favorite artifact, the Kneeling Bronze Warrior, from 500 BC.

“He’s wearing a kilt,” says Mair. “He looks like a Greek warrior, and he was found in a high mountain valley. When I first saw him, I said, ‘This is a quirk.’ I didn’t say, ‘This is a hoax.’ I said, ‘How did he get here?’”

“He’s got like a USC Trojan’s helmet on,” Mair adds wryly. “A Phrygian helmet. He looks very Greek, and he has a big nose, and he would have had a weapon in his hand—but he’s bare-chested, just like the Greek warriors. And then, 20 years later, they found another piece, just like him, at a nearby cemetery. I said, ‘OK, he belongs.’”

“I’ve been to that [Xinjiang] museum so many times, and every time I go I spend a lot of time meditating on this piece,” he says. “Why is there this Greek warrior up in the mountains of central Asia? I don’t attempt to come up with an answer. I just meditate. And he’s coming to our museum! It almost makes me cry.”—S.H.

