

Ming tombs echo with imperial intrigue

By Patricia Arrigoni

BEIJING, China – The Ming Tombs, 30 miles northwest of Beijing, provide a popular tourist attraction to visitors on their way back to Beijing after climbing the Great Wall.

Of the 13 tombs created between 1409 and 1644 A.D, only one, called “Ding Ling,” has been excavated so that visitors may climb down to the underground vaults. The 3,000 treasures removed from this tomb, some of which are in exhibits in a nearby museum, include a fine gold thread crown decorated in the back with two dragons and a pearl, rich silks, florid garments, gold ornaments, jewels, jade and porcelain.

There are gold and jade figures of Buddha, gold hairpins carved with birds, gold earrings with jade pendants, and four coronets which were worn at important ceremonies. These were called “phoenix coronets” and were adorned with varying dragons and phoenixes plus jewels and feathers.

The 13 tombs were built in the Tianshan (Heavenly Hills), a name later changed to the Hills of Heavenly Longevity. These hills are surrounded on three sides by mountains that helped secure the protection of the tombs.

Visitors approach from the south, passing through a white marble archway built in 1540 A.D. They then proceed down the “Sacred Way” to the Great Red Gate and the entrance of the chief tomb, that of the Emperor Yongle (Zhu Di).

The most awesome part of the layout is the famous Avenue of Stone Animals which leads up to the sacred gates. On either side of this sacred road are colossal hand-carved lions, mythical animals called “xieshi,” camels, elephants, gilin (a unicorn-like mythical animal), and horses. There are two pairs of each, one pair standing and the other kneeling, making 24 in all.

These exquisite and lifelike carvings are followed by 12 human statues of generals, ministers and other officers in full uniform.

Though the buildings, gates and carvings are impressive, the history of the Ming Dynasty is one of atrocity. Records show 16 imperial concubines were buried alive in pits adjacent to the burial chamber of the Emperor Zhu Di. As compensation, those buried alive were granted honorable titles and their families assigned official posts.

In a later reign, Emperor Shen Zong, whose tomb, “Ding Ling,” is the one visitors are taken through, is known to have beaten to death more than 1,000 eunuchs and maids.

The immense project of Ding Ling was started in 1584. Some 20,000 to 30,000 workmen toiled daily for six years to build this tomb . There were three single arched bridges built of white marble, a double-eaved pavilion, a second sacred gate with five arches, five kitchens and five sacred store-houses. The kitchens and store-houses were later burned.

There is another gate called “Eminent Favours” and a “Hall of Eminent Favours” flanked by nine halls on either side. Lifelike carvings of flowers, dragons, phoenixes, unicorns, mountains, rivers, sea horses, tortoises and snakes decorate the tomb walls.

The underground palace consists of several chambers, seven stone gateways, and vaulted passages. It is built entirely of stone using vaulted ceilings.

In the central chamber, excavators found three thrones carved out of white marble for the emperor and his empresses. In front of each throne were blue and white porcelain jars containing oil and wicks which were supposed to be “everlasting lamps.” Evidence indicated that they had been lit, but died out when the chamber was sealed and oxygen ran out.

I climbed down what seemed like endless flights of stairs to reach the burial chamber where the three original coffins had been laid side by side on a stone couch. What archaeologists had found in these coffins were only skeletons and hair.

Emperor Shen Zong (also called Zhu Yijun) wore a gold crown and a long “dragon robe” with a jade girdle around his waist, and high boots. His long hair was coiled up in a knot secured with gold pins.

Yijun’s first wife, Xiao Duan, died at age 57, only three months before her husband, so she was placed next to him instead of in a separate side chamber already built.

On his other side was his second wife, Xiao Jing. She entered the palace as a maid at 17 and was seduced by the emperor. During her pregnancy she was granted the title of imperial concubine. Her son later was chosen as the crown prince, provoking the jealousy of another imperial concubine, Zheng. Zheng had Xian Jing murdered when the woman was 47.

The coffins in the Ding Ling tomb are now empty, so visitors can only imagine their former contents. I shuddered as I looked, and was happy to escape back up the long flights of stairs into the warm summer sunshine.