Old warriors face new battle

Xi’an, September 2000

China’s world famous terracotta warriors are facing their first real battle in over 2,000 years. Curators report these life-sized statues are now besieged by armies of mould. More than 40 mould types have attacked 1,400 of the 8,000 clay-baked foot soldiers, archers, generals, horses and chariots. The build-up is being blamed on poor excavation work and modern pollution. Many of the rammed earth corridors, brick pavers and solid timber pillars and roof beams have also collapsed over time allowing moisture to seep down through the tomb’s woven matting and clay ceiling.

In March 1974, local farmers digging a well found the clay army, which was buried with Emperor Qin Shi Huang in 210 BC. Amazingly, they all have individually-carved faces that could have been based on actual warriors of the time. Every statue also faces east, casting a watchful eye over Qin’s then conquered provinces. Although quite faded today, it’s thought that vegetable dyes, egg white, charcoal and blood were used to paint their detailed faces and clothes. In addition, many are armed with real weapons.

A Belgian pharmaceutical company will work with the Chinese excavation team to research the mould invasion and treat the statues with special, clay-safe chemicals. Archaeologists are also looking into ancient tales that some of the massive tomb’s ceiling is studded with pearls designed to shine like stars at night. This doesn’t seem so far fetched when you consider the ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian wrote this about the tomb: Artisans were ordered to fix up crossbows so that any thief breaking in would be shot. All the country’s streams, the Yellow River and the Yangtze were reproduced in quicksilver (mercury) and by some mechanical means made to flow into a miniature ocean.

Use the information above and any reference below to answer the following questions:

1. What are the terracotta warriors and what do they look like?

2. What have archaeologists uncovered about them and why are they placed in a tomb?

3. What is attacking the terracotta warriors and how did it get there?

4. What plans are there to protect the terracotta warriors?

References: SOSE Alive 1, pp108-109 • Retroactive 1, pp118–119 • SOSE for Queensland 1, p66
Jacaranda SOSE 1 2E, pp110–111 • SOSE Alive History 1, pp108-109