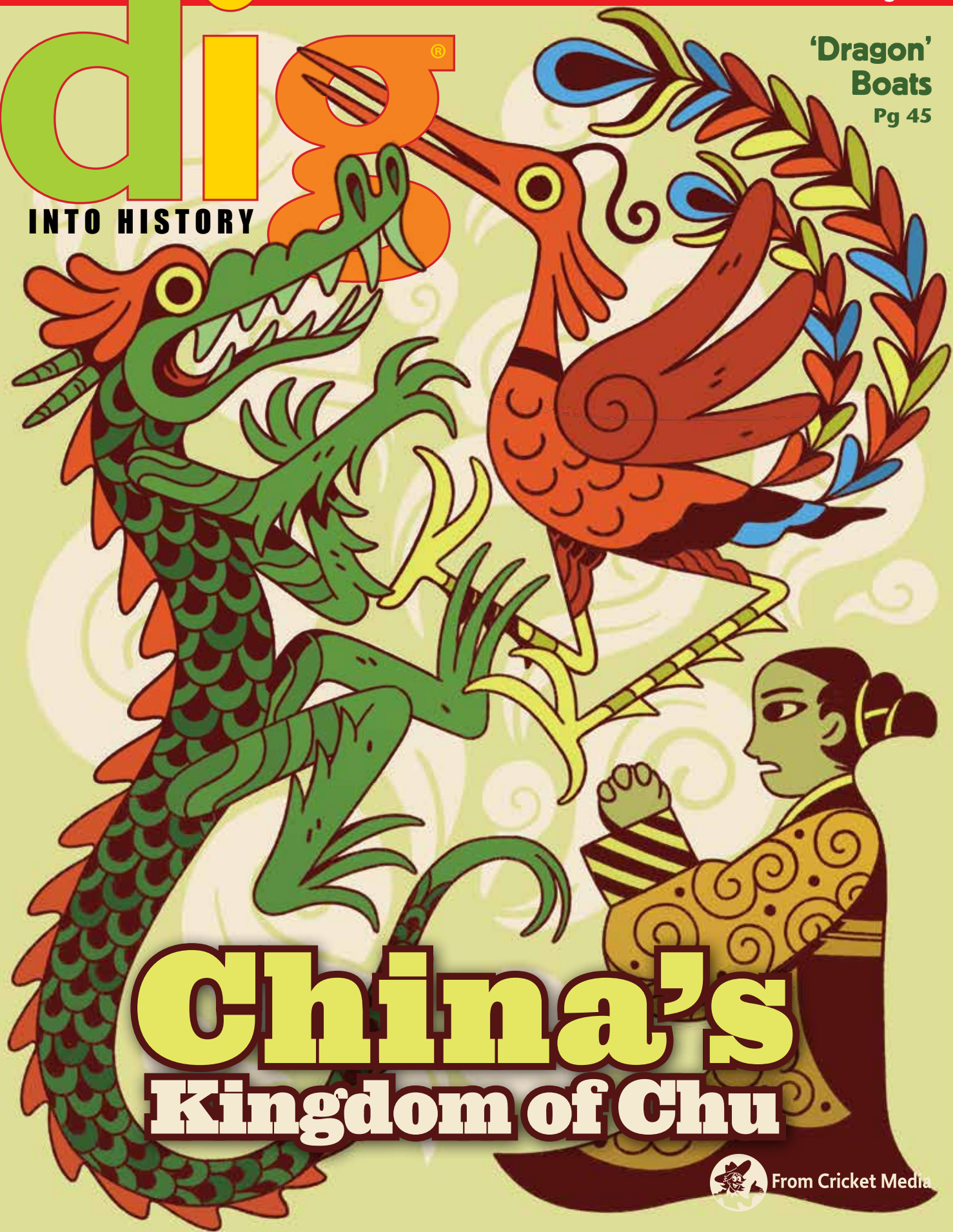


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China's Kingdom of Chu



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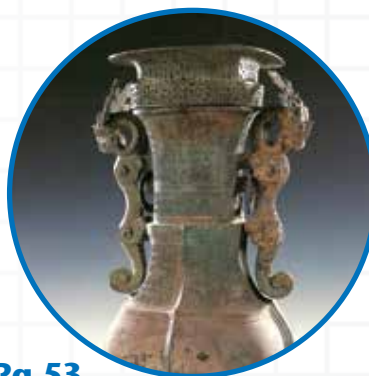
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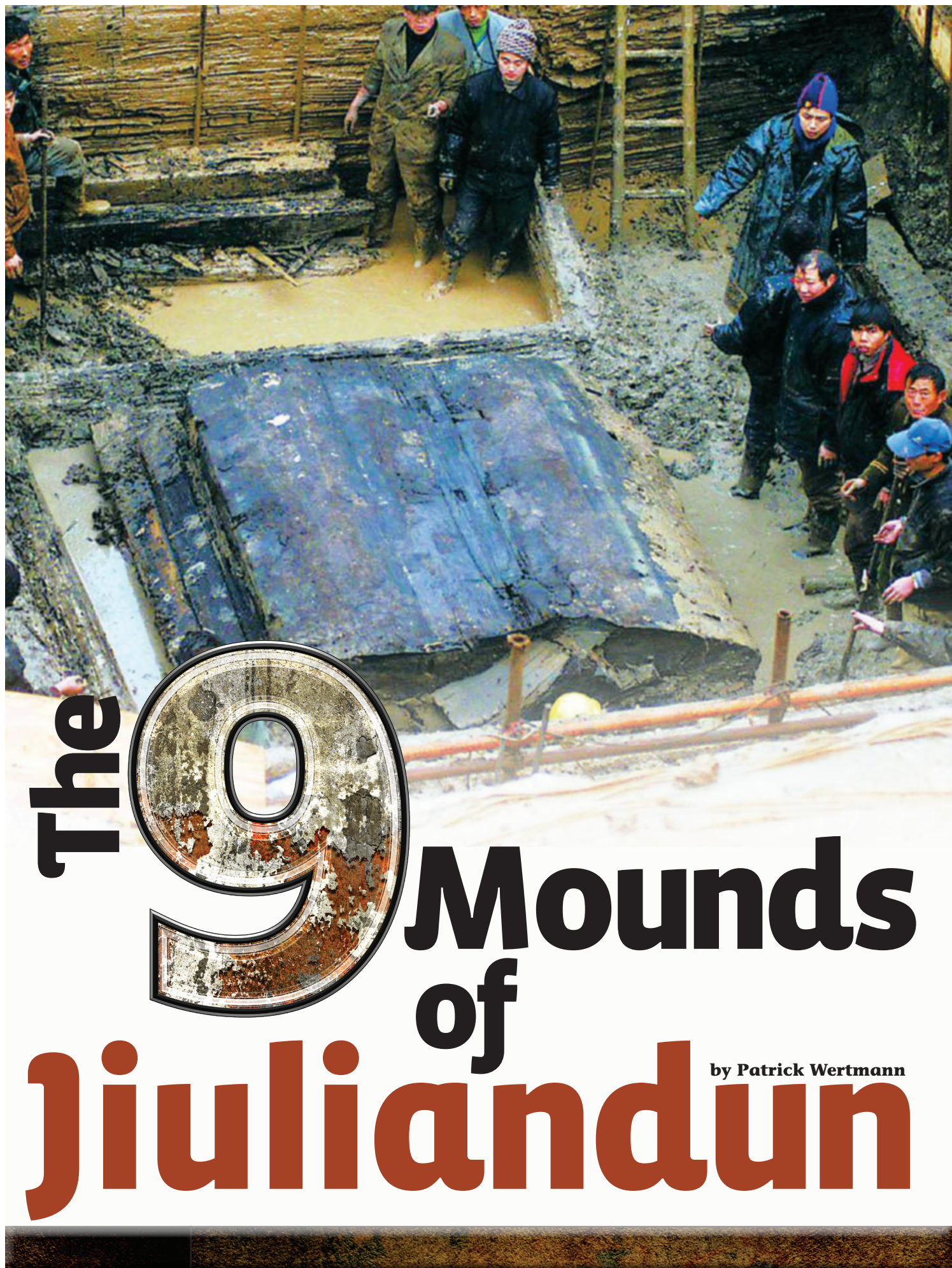


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The

9

**Mounds
of**

Jiuliandun

by Patrick Wertmann

Everybody is exhilarated with the new finds being uncovered every day!

So said the archaeologist leading the excavations at the Jiuliandun Site in September 2002 (see photo above). Indeed, his eyes still sparkle when he thinks of this great project.

Where and What

The name of the site translates literally as “Nine Connected Mounds.” These grave mounds — like pearls on a string — are aligned on a ridge of a hill just beyond central China’s Zaoyang City in Hubei Province. Experts believe that these graves belonged to a noble family from one of the seven most powerful states during the late Warring States Period. This state, better known as the

Kingdom of Chu, existed more than 2,300 years ago. A powerful kingdom, it came to an end in 223 B.C.E. when its king was captured by the king of Qin, who would soon become China’s first emperor (see also pages 4–5).

Most of what we know about this kingdom is based on archaeological finds in central China. There, the **soil is neutral**, and the groundwater level is relatively high. In addition, during the Warring States Period, it was customary to dig tombs rather deep into the ground. As a result, many of the artifacts have remained untouched, protected by the groundwater. As archaeologists uncover and study them, their stories will begin telling the forgotten history of Chu.

Jiuliandun was first discovered in 1958. However, it was the planned construction of a new highway in 2002 that seriously began to threaten the site. The road was to cross right through one of the nine mounds. So, to protect the ancient relics, excavation had to begin. Based on the preceding observations, the archaeologists knew that the burial site was composed of two large graves referred to as tombs No. 1 and No. 2. Each was paired with a sacrificial pit that housed chariots and horses.

The Race to Uncover

Given the large size of the graves, the archaeologists had little hope of finding them still untouched. Indeed, soon after the excavations had started, a hole was discovered in one of the graves, which had been caused by looters. When was an

Soil is neutral means that the soil is slightly acidic (sour) to slightly alkaline (salty).



Excavating Tomb No. 1



Amazing — this carriage uncovered in Tomb No. 1

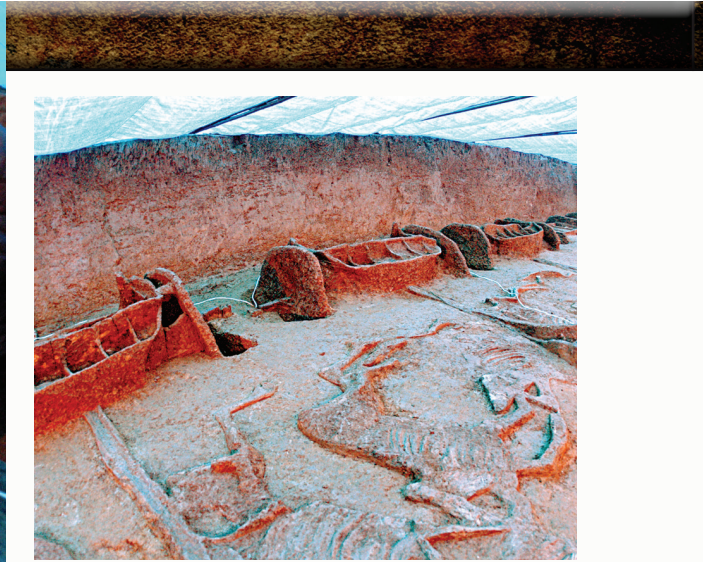
unknown. What the archaeological team did know was that the excavation was becoming a race against time. The damage done by looters, in addition to steady rainfall and snow, had caused the outer coffin to crack. In fact, it was obvious that the coffin had been so weakened that it could collapse at any time. The situation became even more complicated as time passed.

Aware of the deadlines given them, the archaeologists decided to excavate the two graves simultaneously. But concern mounted as they neared the cover of the outer coffin. Would there be nothing inside? Or, would they find the inside destroyed?

As if through a miracle, the coffin chambers seemed untouched, except for a small section. Fortunately, the water inside the chamber had preserved the ancient relics. What a relief this was for all involved! Now let us take a look at what the archaeologists found.

Grave No. 1

Grave No. 1 housed an outer coffin that had five separate chambers, each for one of the four cardinal directions (north, south, east, west) and one in the center. It measured approximately 26 feet by 23



**ABOVE:
Tomb No. 1
with the
carriages
and horse
skeletons**
**BELOW:
Tomb No 2**

feet. The remains of the deceased were lying inside a coffin that had been placed in the central chamber. Analysis of the skeletal remains tells us that the deceased was a male and that he was 35 to 40 years old at the time of his death. Dressed in silk, he was armed with a sword and adorned with precious jade ornaments. The remaining chambers housed a total of 4,067 burial objects. While some were meant for sacrificial purposes — to worship the ancestors or gods, for example — others were for daily use, such as cooking, eating, drinking, and washing. The belief was that the deceased should enjoy the same lifestyle in the next world as he had had in this world.



Taking a look inside one of the uncovered coffins

The chambers that represented the cardinal directions housed different types of objects. In the eastern one were ritual bronze vessels and lacquered objects. The northern chamber housed musical instruments. The western chamber housed items of daily use. It was the southern chamber that looters had reached. The tomb finds were many. Among them were spare chariot parts, a harness, 28 suits of leather armor, and weapons, including swords. With such protection, the tomb owner definitely would have no reason to fear any threats to his existence in the afterlife.



Archaeologists record every detail of the coffin and tomb in Grave No. 2.



The head bones of the female found in a coffin in Grave No. 2

Grave No. 2

Grave No. 2 was almost identical. The deceased in this grave was a female between 26 and 30 years old when she died (see head bones above). Most likely, she was the wife of the male in No. 1. Her tomb contained more daily life items, especially lacquered ones, but no swords. Inside her northern chamber, excavators found a most remarkable musical instrument — a lacquered drum fixed on a rack in the shape of two birds that stand on top of a tiger. We know today that the people of Chu respected Confucian rites, and so music was surely an important part of this philosophy.

Near each of the tombs, archaeologists unearthed two rectangular pits that housed chariots and horses. With a total of 22 chariots and 72 horses, the pit belonging to the male in No. 1 was larger than that of his wife in No. 2.

Mysteriously, not a single inscription was found. Such a find might possibly offer a clue to the identity of the couple. However, considering the size and construction of the graves, the types and composition of the burial objects, and what is known about the historical background, experts are quite sure that the graves belonged to a high-ranking senior official and his wife who died around the year 300 B.C.E.

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Patrick Wertmann works at the People's University in Beijing where he conducts research on Chinese history and archaeology.