

J. P. MALLORY · VICTOR H. MAIR

# THE TARIM MUMMIES

Ancient China and the Mystery of the  
Earliest Peoples from the West

*With 190 illustrations, 13 in colour*



**Thames & Hudson**

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# THE TARIM MUMMIES

*Ancient China  
and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West*

J. P. Mallory and Victor H. Mair

The best-preserved mummies in the world do not lie in Egypt or Peru but in the museums of Xinjiang, the westernmost province of modern China. For thousands of years the occupants of the barren wastes and oases that would later become the Silk Road buried their dead in the desiccating sands of the Tāklimakan, the second greatest desert on earth. This arid environment, preserving both body and clothing, presents us with an unparalleled glimpse into the lives and appearance of a prehistoric people. While the mummies lie mute their faces eloquently challenge modern scholars to identify them. For these are not the faces of ancient Chinese but rather those of Indo-Europeans who settled in the Tarim Basin on the western rim of ancient China some four millennia ago, 2,000 years before West and East admitted each other's existence. How did these blond Caucasians come to be in the heart of Asia and to what ethnic group did they belong?

J. P. Mallory, archaeologist and leading authority on the Indo-Europeans, and Victor Mair, instigator of much of the recent research on the Tarim burials, combine forces here to conduct the most comprehensive investigation of the enigmatic mummies to date. They describe their discovery, and reveal the latest attempts of Chinese and Western scientists to explain their origin and determine their ethnic identity. The book examines the clues left by the physical remains of the mummies, their economy, technology and textiles (some of the mummies even wore tartans), and the later traces of the languages of the Tarim region. The trail of clues ultimately leads to two major contenders: the Indo-Iranians, the masters of the Eurasian steppes who poured south into the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, India and China, and the Tocharians, the most elusive of the major branches of Indo-Europeans. The suspense is maintained to the very end, and the authors conclude by demonstrating the central place of the Tarim peoples in mediating between East and West.

Lavishly illustrated and authoritatively written, *The Tarim Mummies* is the definitive account for general reader and scholar alike of one of the most extraordinary archaeological discoveries of recent times.

With 190 illustrations, 13 in colour

ON THE JACKET: An aristocratic Europoid couple from Niyā wearing fine silk clothing and face covers. Photo courtesy of Culture Arts Publishing Company, Beijing.

*'China's Tarim mummies rank among the most remarkable archaeological finds of the twentieth century. J. P. Mallory and Victor Mair take us on a linguistic and archaeological investigation of great importance to anyone interested in the Silk Road and relationships between east and west.... A major contribution to the history and archaeology of a remote and little known part of the ancient world.'*

– Professor Brian Fagan, University of California, Santa Barbara

*'The astonishing Chinese discovery of wonderfully preserved four-thousand-year-old human bodies with clothing in perfect condition in the Tarim Basin of western China is fully described by Mair and Mallory in this fascinating and well-researched account. They reach the daring, perhaps provocative conclusion that these were "the first Europeans in China" – a view certain to prove controversial.'*

– Professor Colin Renfrew, University of Cambridge

