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Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion. By Guolong LAI. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015. Pp. xi+320.

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Lai Guolong has produced in this new book both a solid argument for a new understanding of early Chinese tombs as well as an eminently useful introduction to the intersection of archaeology and art history as applied to early China. The central claim of the argument is stated in the opening paragraph: "The tomb is a bridge, a way station on the journey to the afterlife, and a physical manifestation of established conceptions of the afterworld" (p.1). Throughout the book, Lai contrasts this claim with other competing claims, while adducing evidence — most of it from the most recent sources available — to support his thesis. It is in the broader context of gathering this evidence that Lai is able to articulate his broader aim: "This book seeks to define the nature of these religious activities [evidenced by tomb objects] and provide a synthetic account of the changing religious beliefs and ritual practices beginning with the Warring States period and extending through to the Qin and Han periods" (p.11). Thus, one type of reader will be interested in this book for the specific argument about what exactly was going on with the construction of early Chinese tombs, but another type of reader will more broadly benefit from a wide-ranging examination of recent archaeological discoveries and how they should shape our apprehension of early Chinese intellectual history.

The book has four chapters bookended by a well-wrought Introduction and Conclusion. The Introduction includes both theoretical considerations and specific findings from the ongoing bonanza of excavations in China. The theoretical considerations span several academic fields, including religion and paleography, but the art-historical analysis is particularly well stated. Lai gives an overview of things to come in the following chapters: "In the realm of religious art, several notable and enduring innovations transpired: (1) new burial practices associated with the horizontal chamber-style tombs within which rituals associated with the cult of the dead took place; (2) new

funerary customs, such as the pervasive use of spirit artifacts (*mingqi* 明器) to mark the severance of ties between the dead and the living; (3) wider use of anthropomorphic and hybrid images and written texts to communicate with the spirit world; (4) formation of the underworld bureaucracy; and (5) newly evolved conceptions of cosmology, empire, and the afterlife, the last being defined as a journey to a cosmic destination" (p.12). These five foci are investigated and woven together throughout the book.

In Chapter One, "The Dead Who Would Not Be Ancestors," Lai charts the burgeoning scope of the recipients of sacrifice. Ancestors (along with various nature deities) were the primary recipients from late Shang and early Zhou times, but this "pantheon" of invisible spirits subsequently expanded to include groups of people who were previously ignored. This community of newcomers "consists of individuals who died without posterity" (*juewuhouzhe* 絕無後者), who perished violently (*qiangsi* 強死), and who were slain with weapons (*bingsi* 兵死). This class of spirits, who could not become part of the ancestral lineage because of their violent death or lack of progeny, challenged the religious system passed down from the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties" (p.28). Lai argues that one central "challenge" to the religious system was the uncertainty posed by this previously disenfranchised group of individuals. Whereas ancestors might be interested in the welfare of their descendants (who, after all, were somehow "feeding" them with sacrificial offerings), those in this other group of prescient spirits were unpredictable and, depending on the circumstances of their deaths, vindictive, and perhaps capriciously so. How should one appease a potentially powerful and angry stranger? Including them in your sacrificial rituals and divinatory appeals is one good way to defuse any possible tension and misunderstanding.

Other spirits, both heavenly and earthly, also swelled the ranks of those receiving sacrifice. Grand One (太一), Earth Lord (后土), Lifespan Controller (司命), Misfortune Controller (司禍), Grand Water (大水), and several others are given their due, but Lai (in a later chapter) especially tracks the evolution of the fecundity god (*zu* 祖). This increase in the population of the spirits of dead people who may need to be pacified correlates with the number of people dying in the aptly-named Warring States period. Though such calculations are always constrained by meagre evidence, Lai relays that "[b]ased on anecdotal accounts in historical sources, historians estimate that between the middle Warring States period and the early Han dynasty the population decreased by almost half" (p.48). Survivors of military conflict in earlier times may have stopped to thank their ancestors for whatever influence they might have exerted in the battle, but in the decades and centuries prior to the Qin unification, it

appears that survivors were also concerned with the potentially malevolent influence of the spirits of those recently killed, whether or not they were related to you, and whether or not they were even on your side of the conflict.

In Chapter Two, "The Transformation of Burial Space," Lai describes the transition from vertical "pit" tombs to horizontal "chamber" tombs and, building on the previous chapter, argues that this shift was partially motivated by "the new conception of the dead as baleful and potentially threatening ghosts that needed to be pacified and segregated" (p.56). Exactly where the dead went remains a puzzle, with evidence pointing both up to heaven and down into the earth. There is, of course, no evidence that any kind of "judge" decided where one would go after death, much less that the decision would be made based on moral considerations. Rather, status seems to have been key: a working hypothesis is that the illustrious and powerful went up, while regular folk went down to a variously-named underworld.

Both the form and the contents of the later horizontal tombs are employed as evidence for Lai's central argument. The form evolved to represent a kind of house, and the contents evolved to include "travel gear." The house-like tomb Lai construes "as a way station, a liminal place from which the soul would journey to a cosmic destination" (p.76). This claim is supported by the "travel gear" that is both listed in tomb inventories and excavated from actual graves. At Leigudun Tomb One, "the inventory list excavated at the tomb divides grave goods into several categories, and one category is explicitly designated as travel gear for the deceased to use in its spirit journey in the afterlife" (p.76). Lai goes on to analyze the excavated "travel gear" in the following two chapters.

In Chapter Three, "The Presence of the Invisible," Lai describes the anthropomorphic images found in tombs. These images relate, and conflate, living humans, dead human spirits, deities, and animals. With some exceptions that may or may not function as fertility icons, most early anthropomorphic figures were of servants meant to accompany the elite dead to the afterlife. These were followed, in the mid-Warring States period, by "portraits" of the deceased. Only four paintings from this period survive; one is unfortunately folded up and stuck together, and another has yet to be published. The other two feature human portraits: the Zidanku tomb painting has a male riding a dragon, and the Chenjiadashan tomb painting features a female accompanied by a dragon and a phoenix. Taken together with the well-known Mawangdui tomb banners, Lai argues that "[t]hese paintings represent the tomb occupant on a spirit journey in the afterlife and thus possessed the magical power to assist and guide the deceased through the liminal stage to the afterlife" (p.117).

Another kind of anthropomorphic image found in early tombs is the

"hybrid image" (*zhenmushou* 鎮墓獸). Lai describes the evolution of the fecundity god (*zu* 祖) from a bare phallic symbol to a deer-antlered anthropomorphic figure. He also makes a bold claim: "It is my contention that the so-called tomb guardian figure, a popular feature of the vertical pit-style Chu tomb in the south, is not in fact a tomb-securing device but a symbol of the fecundity god in early China" (p.122). After considering both archaeological and textual evidence, he concludes: "Based on the available evidence, it seems that the cult of the fecundity god has its origins in burial practices for elite women, usually the wives and consorts of nobles and rulers.... Over time, these stands came to be buried with other members of elite society, including men" (p.128). The remainder of the chapter presents Lai's very interesting reconstruction and interpretation of the Mawangdui Taiyi silk diagram. While I do not wish to spoil the impact of his interpretation in this review, suffice it to say that "[t]he key religious concept here is 'spirit possession'" (p.132).

Whereas Chapter Three dealt with images, Chapter Four, "Letters to the Underworld," deals with writings. The three main types of tomb writings that Lai examines are the funerary-object list (*qiance* 遣冊), of things provided by the tomb occupant and his family, the donated items list (*fengshu* 賵書), and the official memorials addressed to the underground bureaucracy (*gaodishu* 告地書). Regarding the two types of lists, Lai says: "Among these grave goods, the chariots, ritual vessels, and musical instruments were symbols of the tomb occupant's social status, and the clothing, furniture, and foods were newly introduced categories of grave goods that became popular during the Warring States period" (p.140). The official memorials are similar to memorials used in the land of the living, and appear to have acted as passports to an afterlife destination. They are thus "travel documents," which, along with the "spirit journey paintings" of the previous chapter, constitute a subset of the "travel gear" that is central to Lai's argument. He goes on to analyze these official memorials into those for commoners, those for royalty, and those for convicts.

The "underground bureaucracy" to which the memorials are addressed "first emerged during the Qin-Han period of imperial formation" (p.154). Lai speculates that this may have originated with the earlier Warring States idea of "an enclave where the war dead could gather" (p.155), hinted at in "The Dead Who Would Not Be Ancestors" of Chapter One. This bureaucracy was articulated by a diverse group of diviners, ritual specialists, and local officials, which Lai considers in the closing section of this chapter.

In Chapter Five, "Journey to the Northwest," Lai refers to a number of post-mortem destinations, from the "vertical axis" with the "court of the High God (Di 帝)" and the "underground bureaucracy" to the "horizontal axis" with Kunlun

and Penglai. But his emphasis is on a less well-known place, where the spirits of "those who died by weapons" go: Mount Buzhou 不周 , in the northwest. Under the direction of Wuyi 武夷 , who was charged by Di to act as administrator, Mt. Buzhou is an early example of a specific destination for the recently departed. Lai remarks that "[o]ne can only speculate that the purpose of gathering the souls of the war dead in a place administered by Wuyi was to control these potent and potentially harmful spirits..." (p.165). Of equal importance to Lai's argument is the fact that the location of Mount Buzhou on the periphery of the Zhou cultural area necessitates a journey for the spirit of the tomb occupant.

In addition to the written "travel gear" of tomb lists and memorials to after-life bureaucrats mentioned in Chapter Four, are the "daybooks" (*rishu* 日書) that have been found in several early tombs. These "daybooks" include "calendars, almanacs, cosmographic models, and technical manuals" (p.167), all of which are useful for a journey. Like the *Yijing*, daybooks posit good or bad fortune based on one's particular position in time and space, and not on the will of a deity or ancestor, or upon the interpretation of a diviner.

Lai summarizes his findings in the brief Conclusion. Of his broader aim in this book, he writes: "In the earlier Shang and Western Zhou periods, the dead were mainly conceived of collectively as benevolent but anonymous ancestors. In the Spring and Autumn period, however, the religious importance of the ancestors began to decline. At the same time, the dead came to be considered primarily as individuals and as threatening, and a previously undocumented group of individuals who died violently or without posterity appeared in the Warring States religious pantheon..." (p.190). Of his more specific argument, he concludes that "the deceased undertook an arduous otherworldly journey from the burial site to an imagined, cosmic destination called Mount Buzhou in the northwest, where dead individuals gathered to form bureaucratized communities. Images, texts, maps, and objects were entombed as travel paraphernalia outfitting the deceased for the journey" (p.191).

Lai Guolong has succeeded in writing a book that will be of genuine interest to archaeologists, art historians, intellectual historians, religionists, and those broadly interested in early Chinese culture. He contextualized his theories with those of his predecessors, and adduced his evidence from the archaeological record of the past several decades. I found both the narrower argument that tombs should be seen as "way stations" at the beginning of an afterlife journey, and the broader argument that the Chinese religious "pantheon" expanded to include the important and potentially worrisome war dead, to be well-articulated and well supported. A wealth of other details that could not be fitted into this review awaits the reader.