

# To Please Those on High: ritual and art in ancient China

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## Ancestral rites: temples, vessels, music and banquets

We proceed to make spirits and prepare viands,  
For offerings and sacrifice;  
We seat the representatives of the dead, and urge them to eat:  
Thus seeking to increase our bright happiness.

.....  
Their Spirits happily enjoy the offerings;  
Their filial descendent receives blessing:  
They will reward him with great happiness,  
With myriads of years, life without end.<sup>1</sup>

Thus is the account of an ancestor worship ceremony in an ode collected in the *Shijing* (*Book of Odes*), the earliest anthology of Chinese poetry, written in the Western Zhou dynasty (1046-771 BCE). This ode underscores the significance of the ancestor worship cult in ancient China, a practice that was based on the belief that life continued after death, and that there was reciprocity between the deceased and the living kin.<sup>2</sup> The royal ancestors were often represented as somewhere ‘on high’, in the presence of the heavenly deity, continuing to exercise power over the living with the ability to influence the fates of their descendants: ‘King Wen is on high; Oh! bright is he in heaven.... King Wen ascends and descends, On the left and the right of God.’<sup>3</sup>

Thus, ancestral spirits needed to be well looked after in

order to effect some communal good. People ‘served the dead as they would have served them alive; they served the departed as they would have served them had they continued among them.’<sup>4</sup> This led to the establishment of ancestral temples to accommodate such needs, as noted in the *Liji* (*Classic of Rites*), a compilation by various Confucian scholars on Zhou dynasty rites, written between 500 and 100 BCE: ‘When a superior man is about to engage in building, the ancestral temple should have his first attention, the stables and arsenal the next, and the residences the last. In all preparations of things by [the head of] a clan, the vessels of sacrifice should have the first place; the victims supplied from his revenue, the next; and the vessels for use at meals, the last.’<sup>5</sup>

A clan’s successive ancestors were worshipped at such temples. Bronze vessels were cast and consequently employed to offer food and wine to those ‘on high’ in elaborate ceremonial banquets. Inscriptions on most bronze vessels dating to the Shang (c1600-c1046 BCE) and Western Zhou (c1046-771 BCE) revealed that they were not only dedicated to deceased ancestors, but also intended for use as lavish ritual banquet utensils. Nevertheless, their significance extended beyond such practical usage. As spirits and deities in such temples are shapeless and can only be represented by memorial tablets, or through an impersonator during ceremonial rites (see below), these

1. ‘Chuci’ (楚辞), in the section of *Xiaya* (小雅) in the *Shijing* (Book of Odes); English translation is from James Legge, trans, *The Shi King or the Book of Poetry*, vol 4 of *The Chinese Classics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1871

2. See David N Keightley, ‘The religious commitment: Shang theology and the genesis of Chinese political culture’, *History of Religions*, 1978, 17, 3-4, pp 211-25, especially p 217

3. ‘Wenwang zhishen’ (文王之什) in the *Daya section*, *Shijing*; translation in Legge, 1871, vol 4

4. ‘Zhongyong’ (中庸) chapter in *Liji*, annotated by Sun Xidan, Zhonghua Press, Beijing 1983. The original text of the *Liji* is believed to have been compiled during the Spring and Autumn period, whilst the edition usually referred to today was edited and re-worked by various scholars during the Han dynasty

5. ‘Quli’ (曲禮) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in James Legge, *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, 2 vols, University Books, New York, 1885/1967

ritual bronzes served as a means to communicate with invisible beings. Such a function was fulfilled through mystical decorations, particularly metamorphic animal images.<sup>6</sup> The *Liji* states that, ‘In presenting the sacrifice to his parent in the ancestral temple, [the deceased son] offered it in his disembodied state, hoping that his shade would peradventure return [and enjoy it].’<sup>7</sup> This implies that the ritual bronze vessels displayed in the temple not only provided the owners with the means to present offerings, but also conveyed their good will to their ancestors. The *Liji* also states, ‘The tripods have inscriptions on them. The maker of an inscription named himself, and took the occasion to praise and set forth the excellent qualities of his ancestors, and clearly exhibit them to future generations.’<sup>8</sup> In other words, casting ritual bronze vessels also gave the living a chance to acknowledge their debt to their ancestors, and to recognise the deeds and virtues of the deceased. In this way and as scholar Wu Hung asserts, ritual bronze vessels gave meaning and authority to a temple. However, these ritual bronzes were only functional and meaningful within the confines of a temple and in the service of ritual ceremonies.<sup>9</sup>

The ritual vessels were revered as sacred and solemn as the temple that housed them. According to the *Liji*, such ritual vessels were consecrated with the blood of a young boar when completed.<sup>10</sup> Ritual vessels were also prohibited from sale in marketplaces.<sup>11</sup> When they were worn out, they would be buried.<sup>12</sup> Some vessel types such as the *ding*

tripod (see cat. no. 1) gradually became a symbol of state power or a mandate to rule. The philosopher Mencius (c372-289 BCE) stated that an invading state would often ‘destroy their [enemies] ancestral temples and plunder all treasured vessels.’<sup>13</sup> Such incidents were common during the Eastern Zhou period (770-256 BCE). For example, in 710 BCE, Duke Huan of the Lu state attacked the neighbouring state of Song. Not only did he ransack the Song capital, he also bought back a large *ding* tripod which he then set in his own ancestral temple. Ironically, this *ding* was not cast by the Song ruler, rather, it was looted earlier by the Song army from the state of Gao.<sup>14</sup>

Why was ancestor worship vital to the Western Zhou ruler and his kingdom? The ancestral temple was a place that accommodated ritual paraphernalia, as well as functioned as a site where ritual activities were conducted. By extension, it marked the royal clan’s political status and preserved memories of its past, thereby linking it to a larger social network. This can be explained by the structure of Zhou society and the subsequent patrilineal clans that emerged from the Zhou royal household.<sup>15</sup> When the Zhou dynasty was founded around 1046 BCE, the system of government was based on the Zhou ruler and the fiefdoms given to his relatives and clan members. This resulted in a tightly inter-related hierarchical structure. The *Liji* provides a clue as to what safeguarded this hierarchical structure and maintained control of the social order. The essence of the ancestral temples’ ceremonies, as expressed in the *Liji*,

6. Kwang-chih Chang, *Art, myth and ritual*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp 56-80

7. ‘Wensang’ (問喪) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge, 1885/1967

8. ‘Jitong’ (祭統) chapter; English translation in Legge 1885/1967

9. Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1995, p 78

10. ‘Zaji’ (雜記) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge, 1885/1967

11. ‘Wangzhi’ (王制) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge, 1885/1967

12. ‘Quli’ (曲禮) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge, 1885/1967

13. ‘Liang huiwang’ (Duke Hui of Wei) chapter in *Mencius*. There are many such instances, which occurred especially during the Warring States period. When the state of Wu made an incursion into Chen, for example, they destroyed places of ancestral sacrifice. See *Liji*, ‘Tangong’ (檀弓) chapter

14. *Chunqiu jing* (春秋經), ‘Second year of Huan’ gong’; the book was attributed to Confucius but was probably written by others during the Han dynasty. See Wu Shizhou, *Liangzhou liqi zhidu yanjiu* (A study of the ritual vessel system of the Zhou dynasty), Wunan Tushu Press, Taipei 2003, p 130

15. Chang, 1983, pp 9-32; Wu, 1995, chapter 2, pp 77-142

was ‘to go back to the Origin, maintain the ancient, and not forget those to whom they owe their being.’<sup>16</sup> The performance of rites was about the maintenance of hierarchical order. It served as a reminder to everyone involved of their common ancestry and of the homogeneity of the lineage. It was also a recognition of this hierarchy and the irrefutable order, from the heavens to the rulers, courts, and people.<sup>17</sup>

As part of the ritual practices maintaining this hierarchical order, bronze vessels, along with other valued objects, were often bestowed by the Zhou king on his subjects.<sup>18</sup> Such gift-giving entailed the presentation of ritual vessels from superiors to subordinates, such as kings to dukes, dukes to officials, and so forth. These vessels were always treasured by the recipients, who would in turn memorialise the events in the form of inscriptions etched onto the ritual vessels. This practice continued until the Warring States period. The large set of 65 bells excavated from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng is a good example. The set contains a non-matching *bo* bell that is clearly not from the original group. From the inscription on its body, it is clear that this *bo* bell was gifted to the Marquis by King Hui of Chu (ruled c489-432 BCE) in 433 BCE.<sup>19</sup> As the ruler of the small state of Zeng was subordinate to the powerful Chu, the Marquis treasured this gift so much that he substituted the central *yongzhong* bell from the lower level of the wooden rack with this *bo* bell from King Hui, even though it was not in keeping with the rest of the set.

Bestowing bronze vessels was a mark of privilege, and enabled a show of compliance, submission and devotion by

the recipients. However, such gifts also highlighted differences in rank. The *Zuozhuan* (*Chronicle of Zuo*) relates that the Zhou king once conferred a *jian* water vessel on the duke of the Zheng state and a *jue* goblet on the duke of the Guo state. Discontentment began to ferment in the state of Zheng because a *jue* was more prestigious than a *jian*.<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary literature and inscriptions inscribed on bronze vessels reveal that ceremonial rites dedicated to ancestral deities at temples were solemn affairs that included the utilisation and extensive display of vessels. The *Liji* records a royal ceremony conducted to honour the duke of Zhou: ‘In the last month of summer, the sixth month, they used the ceremonies of the great sacrifice to make offerings to the Duke of Zhou in the great ancestral temple, employing for the victim to him a white bull. The bronze *zun* vessels employed were those cast in the forms of the bull victim, or an elephant, and hills; the vessel for fragrant wine was the one with gilt eyes on it. For libations they used the cup of jade with the *gui* sceptre-like handle. The *dou* vessel with offerings were on stands of carved wood, adorned with jade. The *jue* cups were of jade carved in the same way. There were also plain cups and those of horn, adorned with round pieces of jade; and for the meat they used those with four feet, the chopping board *zu*.’<sup>21</sup>

Such ceremonies also involved a lavish display of food and wine, beginning with the customary claim: ‘According to the rules for all sacrifices in the ancestral temple’, the *Liji* lists a typical group of offerings used in the ceremony: ox, pig, sheep, cock, dog, pheasant, hare, dried flesh,

16. ‘Liqi’ (禮器) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Wu, 1995, p 83

17. See Wu, 1995, chapter 2, pp 77-120

18. See Wu, 2003, pp 105-06

19. There are two differing interpretations of the inscription. The first claims that the bell was a memorial to Marquis Yi from King Hui of Chu. It records that when King Hui heard the sad news of Marquis Yi’s death from Xiyang, he ordered the bell to be made and attended the Marquis’s funeral during the fifty-sixth year of his reign (433 BCE). Another reading asserts that the bells were cast after King Hui returned to the capital from a hurried trip to Xiyang. It was presented to Marquis Yi for his use in an ancestral rite. See Tan Weisi, *Zeng houyi mu* (The tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng), Wenwu Press, Beijing, 2001, pp 42-43

20. In the ‘21st year of Duke Zhuang’, *Zuozhuan*, in *The Annotation of Zuozhuan Chunqiu*, annotated by Yang Bojun, Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1990. Yang Bojun maintains that the work was compiled during the Warring States period no later than 389 BCE

21. ‘Mingtangwei’ (明堂位) chapter in the *Liji*, English translation is based on Legge 1885/1967

dried fish, fresh fish, water, wine, millet, large-grained millet, sacrificial millet, paddy, scallions, salt, and so forth.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, *Liji* remarks: ‘Thus it is that the dark-coloured liquor, the sweet wine, the reddish liquor, and the clear and light liquor, are all held in vessels and available in the hall [of the ancestral temple]. The victims also are displayed, and the *ding* tripods and *zu* chopping board are prepared. The lutes and citherns are put in their places, with the *qin* and *se* zithers, flutes, chime stones, bells, and drums. The prayers [of the principal in the sacrifice to the spirits] and the benedictions of the representatives of the departed are carefully framed. The object of all the ceremonies is to bring down the spirits from above, even their ancestors; serving also to rectify the relations between ruler and ministers; to maintain the generous feeling between father and son, and the harmony between elder and younger brother; to adjust the relations between high and low; and to give their proper places to husband and wife. The whole may be said to secure the blessing of Heaven.’<sup>23</sup>

The ‘representatives of the departed’ mentioned in this excerpt from the *Liji* are known as *shi* (尸). A *shi* refers to a substitute physically resembling the deceased or an impersonator who serves as a reminder of the deity to whom the sacrifice is being offered. The *shi* was generally a close and/or young relative of the dead person: ‘The minister would be the *shi* of a king; the leading official would be the *shi* of a duke; the grandson would be the *shi* of an official.’<sup>24</sup> During the ceremony, the impersonator was much more than an actor in a drama. As Confucius (551-479 BCE) said, the role of a *shi* in a rite

was to be a ‘representative of the deceased at sacrifices, and of one who presides [at the services] in the ancestral temple, was intended to show the people that they still had those whom they should serve.’<sup>25</sup> The *Liji* claimed that the ‘*shi*, is the image of the spirit.’<sup>26</sup> As a part of the ritual, the *shi* would wear a costume, possibly including a mask, to reproduce the features of the dead person.<sup>27</sup> The use of a costume and/or a mask was intended to identify the wearer with the figure he represented. In a ritual ceremony, donning a mask as the embodiment of a divine figure or spiritual force is to assume the form of divine figure or force. Thus, a magic-religious transformation is brought about by wearing a costume and/or a mask.

Thus, the living fed their ancestors with offerings held in sumptuously decorated bronze vessels, and the ancestors in turn blessed their descendants with food, children and fortune. This reciprocal relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds was maintained through the ancestral ritual ceremony and closely attached to the hierarchy of lineages.

Musical instruments, in the form of massive bell sets and a grand assemblage of various instruments, became important adjuncts to the ritual ceremony as music became an integral element in communicating with the spirits.<sup>28</sup> This is attested by the inscriptions on many musical instruments recently excavated from sites dating to the Western Zhou dynasty.<sup>29</sup> In the early 900s BCE, Xing, the aristocratic chief of a clan of the late Western Zhou dynasty, commissioned several sets of ritual bronzes for use in his ancestral temple. On one musical instrument he cast a lengthy inscription, which runs partially as follows:

22. ‘Quli’ (曲禮) chapter in the *Liji*, English translation is based on Legge 1885/1967

23. ‘Liyun’ (禮運) in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge 1885/1967

24. He Xiu’s commentary on the early text *Gongyang zhuan* (公羊傳), compiled from the Warring States period to the Han dynasty, appears in *Shisanjing zhushu* (十三经注疏, 1816, reprinted by Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1980, vol 6, p 4949

25. ‘Fangji’ (坊記) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge, 1885/1967.

26. ‘Jiao te sheng’ (郊特牲) chapter in the *Liji*

27. ‘Yuzao’ (玉藻) chapter in the *Liji*

28. See Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Suspended music: chime-bells in the culture of Bronze age China*, University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1993

29. Wu, 2003, p 103



*Detail of the bronze bianzhong bell stand featuring a figure*

‘...I made this set of harmonically tuned chime bells. Use it so as to please and exalt those who arrive in splendour, so as to let the accomplished men of former generations rejoice. Use it to pray for long life, to beg for an eternal life-mandate, [so that I may] extensively command a position of high emolument in respected old age and [enjoy] unadulterated happiness. My venerable august ancestors are loftily facing these illustrious achievements, [looking down] sternly from up on high. May they let me be rich and prosperous... Use [this set of bells] to make me radiate with glory, forever shall I treasure it.’<sup>30</sup> At Chaochen in Fufeng, Shaanxi province, a number of chime stones, decorated with patterns in relief and painted in red and green, were excavated from what is believed to be an ancestral temple, datable to the late Western Zhou, from the archaeological site of the Zhou capital.<sup>31</sup>

Music is strongly linked to ritual throughout the world, and in China, from the Western Zhou dynasty onwards, there were profound political implications in linking ancestral rites and music. As the Zhou ruled through fiefdoms and maintained a strict hierarchy based on a patriarchal clan system, an individual’s duties, power and incumbency were confirmed by his respective social status. Confucians maintained that without harmony, society would become discordant. Therefore, music was emphasised as a means to regulate people’s conduct and to follow the moral and social order. The Western Zhou was the first dynasty to lay down rules of ‘rites’ in accordance with ‘music’. Rites were for differentiating and regulating order, and music promoted harmonious synthesis. The *Liji* states that music comes from within, producing stillness of the mind, whereas ritual ceremonies come from without, producing elegancies of manner: ‘Let music attain its full

results, and there would be no dissatisfactions [in the mind]; let ceremony do so, and there would be no quarrels. When bowings and courtesies mark the government of the kingdom, there would be what might be described as music and ceremony indeed. Violent oppression of the people would not arise; the vassals would appear submissively at court as guests; there would be no occasion for the weapons of war, and no employment of the five punishments; the common people would have no distresses, and the son of Heaven no need to be angry – such a state of things would be an universal music. When the son of Heaven could secure affection between father and son, could illustrate the orderly relation between old and young, and make mutual respect prevail all within the four seas, then indeed would ceremony [be seen] as power.’<sup>32</sup>

When the formal and solemn sacrificial ceremony drew to an end, the boisterous banquet began. An ode possibly written during the reign of King Zhao or King Mu (c995-922 BCE) during the Western Zhou described one of the extravagant feasts hosted by the Zhou royal family:

The ceremonies having thus been completed,  
 And the bells and drums having given their warning,  
 The filial descendent goes to his place,  
 And the able priest makes his announcement,  
 ‘The Spirits have drunk to the full.’  
 The great representative of the dead (*shi*) then rises,  
 And the bells and drums escort his withdrawal,  
 [On which] the Spirits tranquilly return [to their place].  
 All the servants, and the presiding wives,  
 Remove [the trays and dishes] without delay.  
 The [descendant’s] uncles and cousins,  
 All repair to the private feast.<sup>33</sup>

30. These bronze bells were excavated in 1976 from the Storage Pit 1 at Zhuangbai in Shaanxi; English translation in Lothar von Falkenhausen, ‘Ritual Music in Bronze Age China: An Archaeological Perspective’, PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1988, pp 967-71, and in Wu, 1995, p 97

31. Yin Shengping, ‘Zhouyuan xizhou gongshi zhidu chutan’ (A preliminary exploration of the Western Zhou palatial system at Zhouyuan), *Wenwu*, vol 9, 1981, pp 13-17

32. ‘Yueji’ (樂記) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge, 1885/1967

33. ‘Chuci’ (楚辭) in *Xiaoya* section in the *Shijing*; English translation in Legge, vol 4, 1871

Inscriptions carved on bronze vessels suggest that many of them were cast for the purpose of such feasts. The living participants would share the food prepared for the ancestral spirits in the ritual space. In this sense, enjoying the food placed in ritual vessels symbolised a communication with the unseen world. Living lineages appreciated the wealth and fortune their ancestors bestowed upon them through such feasts at the sacred ancestral temple. Moreover, at these feasts, the living could also re-affirm their social identity and hierarchy. The feast was held to strengthen communications, love and hierarchical order in society.<sup>34</sup>

### The transformation from solemn temple to lavish tomb

During the Warring States period, a time of social and cultural upheaval, ceremonies in honour of the ancestors continued to be a major part of ritual and religious life. The number of sets of bronze vessels from the Warring States period tombs of Marquis Yi of Zeng and an unknown aristocratic couple at Jiuliandun suggest that the Chu elite consumed more resources than the aristocracy of earlier times.

The tomb of the Marquis Yi was discovered by accident,



View of the Marquis Yi of Zeng's tomb at Leigudun, Suizhou, Hubei province

and the total size of the tomb at ground level is unclear. The outer coffin chamber measures (in metres) 21 (length) x 16.58 (width) x 13 (depth), making it 220 square metres in area. It constitutes a timber-built structure furnished with an astonishing array of priceless possessions. The tomb comprised four chambers, each with a clearly defined function.

The east chamber served as a private room to hold the coffins of the Marquis, eight female attendants (all were strangled) and a dog. There was also a large quantity of jade ornaments and lacquer wares, in addition to a smaller number of chariot fittings, bronze weapons, musical instruments, textiles and ornaments made of animal bone and so forth. A pair of daggers, each bearing the inscription 'Bedroom dagger of Marquis Yi of Zeng', is further proof that this was the Marquis' living quarters.

The central chamber contained 130 vessels: a composite set of 65 bronze bells (hung on a wooden rack), a set of 32 stone chimes and a set of bronze vessels in various forms. The latter group included nine *ding* tripods and eight *gui* vessels. A side chamber, the room to the west, contained the coffins of a further thirteen young women, who were most likely entertainers and servants, as well as a small group of ornaments.

A small armoury was positioned at the rear in the northern chamber, with bronze weapons of diverse shapes, chariot fittings, bamboo strips with documentary inscriptions, and a pair of large bronze *zunfou* wine vessels. Altogether, the chamber held more than 4,000 bronze items. The pair of *zunfou* are the largest wine vessels known to date, measuring 125 - 26cm high. The placement of the wine vessels in this northern chamber is puzzling, and it has been playfully suggested by Chinese scholars that they may have been used to serve drinks to warriors upon their triumphant return.<sup>35</sup>

The two tombs at Jiuliandun are equally large. Both

34. For a study of the mortuary feast from an archaeological perspective, see Constance A. Cook, 'Moonshine and Millet: Feasting and Purification Rituals in Ancient China', in Roel Sterckx, ed, *Of tripod and palate: food, politics, and religion in traditional China*, Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, New York, 2005, pp 9-33

35. Liu Binhui, *Chuxi qingtongqi yanjiu* (A study of Chu-style bronzes), Hubei Jiaoyu Press, Wuhan, 1995, p 182

were constructed with fourteen-step ledges down each of the four sloping sides (12.8 x 12m deep). The wooden structure of each tomb's outer section (*guo*) comprises four chambers that surround a central area in which was laid the coffin containing the body of the grave owner. Similar to the structure of the tomb of Marquis Yi, each of these five chambers served a distinct purpose. For example, in Tomb 1, the eastern chamber held the ritual paraphernalia, including bronze and lacquer vessels. The northern chamber seems to have been a ceremonial hall, with a large set of 34 bronze bells and other instruments, including wind and string instruments, drums and stone chimes. The western chamber served to store personal items, such as cloth, belt hooks, chests, ornaments and toiletry boxes. This chamber also contained everyday utensils such as ear cups, charcoal braziers, censers, lamps, small pieces of furniture, mat weights, as well as tools, such as dustpans and strainers, axes, chisels and other items. The southern chamber functioned as an armoury and storeroom, with weapons and chariot fittings.

Tombs 1 and 2 together yielded over 5,000 artefacts. They were furnished with ritual offerings of food and drink, proffered in diversely shaped bronze vessels, weapons and armour, along with a wealth of other luxury



View of Tomb 2 at Jiuliandun, Zaoyang, Hubei province

goods. The contents are a remarkable example of the all-encompassing preparations made for the afterlife. The large quantities of vessels required indicate just how instrumental they were to the ritual ceremonies of the time.<sup>36</sup>

Compared with earlier tombs, these two tombs exhibit a great variety and quantity of burial goods. Also unique is the layout of the tombs, with carefully designed multiple chambers that fulfilled distinct purposes. Extant royal Shang dynasty tombs, such as that of Fu Hao (died 1200 BCE), the wife of King Wuding, are single pits, often quite deep. No royal Zhou tombs have been excavated to date, but the plans of late Zhou dynasty aristocrats' tombs – like the standard form of the Shang – consist of a vertical shaft and coffins nested at the base. One of the largest tombs of the late Spring and Autumn period (770-476 BCE), the grand tomb of Duke Jing (r576-537 BCE) from the state of Qin in Fengxiang, Shaanxi province, is only divided into two compartments, with the back chamber functioning as a repository for the corpse.

A radical departure from these earlier standards is witnessed in Marquis Yi's tomb and in Jiuliandun Tombs 1 and 2 from the Warring States period. Chu aristocrats now preferred a tomb arrangement that extended the space into several linked rooms on a horizontal rather than a vertical axis. This development emerged from aristocrats' efforts at approximating their living quarters in the afterlife with those during their earthly existence. These tombs are the earliest known attempts at recreating a veritable underground palace, and more such multi-chambered tombs appear in the succeeding Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE).

Chinese archaeologists have discovered that in the Chu kingdom the scale of the tomb and the chamber's structure (size and number of compartments) were planned according to the social status of the occupant. They have unearthed tombs with a single chamber, but have also

36. See Hubei Provincial Museum, ed., *Jiuliandun: changjiang zhongyou de chuguo damu* (Jiuliandun: the large tombs of the Chu aristocrats in the mid Yangzi reaches), Wenwu Press, Beijing, 2007, pp 18-21



found those with two to nine linked chambers. A reconstruction of the tomb of King You (r238-228 BCE) at Shouxian in Anhui province revealed that it had nine chambers; sadly this tomb was robbed in 1933.<sup>37</sup>

Another interesting feature of tomb structure is the inverted pyramidal construction: the four walls of the tomb pit are graded in a series of fourteen to fifteen stepped ledges. This is the standard structure of tombs of Chu aristocrats of the Warring States period. From extant historical records and literature, we know that Chu rulers and aristocrats preferred building palaces on towering *tai* (臺), or terraces, approached by flights of stairs.<sup>38</sup> During this period there was constant conflict and competition between the different states. The lavish and public display of wealth was one way for a ruler to assert his prestige before his allies and rivals. It is said that a Chu king constructed an imposing *tai* as the site for a meeting with other feudal lords. Struck with awe, his guests agreed to join the Chu alliance and made a vow: 'How tall his platform! How deep the mind it shows! If I betray my words, let me be punished by other states in this alliance.'<sup>39</sup> It is certainly tempting to speculate on the link between the towering terrace and the fashionable structure of the tomb pit constructed with multiple stepped ledges down all four sloping sides. The latter could well be a mirror image of the four-sided Chu-style *tai* with stepped sides and a flat top surmounted by palaces.

A study by Wu Hung shows that during the Eastern Zhou period, there was a shift of focus in ancestor worship from the temple to the tomb. Increasing attention was paid to tomb structures, even to the extent of building an elaborate terraced pavilion over the burial site. This new

interest in tombs, along with the change to ritual ancestral worship, was associated with political and social transformations that took place at this time. With the collapse of the archaic social and political system - based on a large clan-lineage network - after the Western Zhou dynasty, princes and lords no longer submitted to the central authority, nor received their mandate through royal investitures. Lineage systems fragmented internally, and kinship units narrowed. Consequently, 'the lineage based temple system declined, and tombs belonging to families and individuals became symbols of the new social elite.'<sup>40</sup>

There was, however, another momentum that simultaneously drove such transformation in ancestral worship cults. It was during the Warring States period that the idea of immortality increasingly became an avid concern. As it developed, this new interest began to embody the idea of a physical departure from human society. People began to discuss how after death, man's soul ascended as a *hun* (魂), or wandered on earth as a *po* (魄).<sup>41</sup> An idea emerged which espoused a belief not only in the permanence of spirits, but also of the physical body.<sup>42</sup> Hanfeizi (c280-233 BCE) mentioned the so-called *busi yao* (不死藥), or 'drug of deathlessness', and *busi dao* (不死道), or 'way of deathlessness'.<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy that many of those who believed in, or advocated the idea of, immortality were natives of the Chu kingdom. The concept of a *hun* or soul separate from one's body was more fully evolved in southern regions and subsequently spread to the north sometime during the sixth century BCE.<sup>44</sup> A path to immortality was already mentioned in the *Zuozhuan* in the discussion of the phrase 'die but not decay' (*si er buxiu* 死而不朽).<sup>45</sup> The great

37. Guo Dewei, *Chuxi muzang yanjiu* (A study of Chu tombs), Hubei Educational Press, Wuhan, 1995, pp 59, 75-86

38. See Gao Jiehuha and Liu Yutang, *Chuguo de chengshi yu jianzhu* (City and architecture in the Chu state), Hubei Education Press, Wuhan, 1995, pp 237-44; see also Wu, 1995, pp 102-03

39. Liu Xiang (c77-76 BCE), *Shuoyuan* (Garden of Sayings), quoted in *Taiping yulan*, compiled under imperial auspices by Li Fang (925-96 CE) and others and completed in 983 CE; Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1960, *juan* 863; translated in Wu, 1995, p 102

40. Wu, 1995, pp 110-14

41. 'Jiaodesheng' (郊特性) chapter in the *Liji*; English translation in Legge, 1885/1967

42. For the origin of this new interest in immortality, see Yü Ying-Shih, '“O soul, come back!” A study in the changing conceptions of the soul and afterlife in pre-Buddhist China', *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol 47, no 2, Dec 1987, pp 363-95

43. Hanfeizi, *Hanzi qianjie*, annotation by Liang Qixiong, Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1982, *pian* 22, p 189

44. Yü, 1987, p 373

Chu poet Qu Yuan (340-c278 BCE) argued how one could achieve longevity and avoid death (*busi* 不死) in his poems 'Tianwen' (Heavenly question) and 'Yuanyou' (Far-off journey):

Where is it that people do not age? Where do giants live?  
Where is the nine-branched weed? Where is the flower of  
the Great Hemp?  
How does the snake that can swallow an elephant digest  
its bones?  
Where is the Black Water that dyes the feet, and where  
is the Mountain of Three Perils?  
The folk there put death off for many years: what is the  
limit of their age?

Having heard this precious teaching, I departed,  
And swiftly prepared to start off on my journey.  
I met the Feathered Men on the hill of Cinnabar;  
I tarried in the ancient land of Immortality...<sup>46</sup>

The late Spring and Autumn period gave birth to two great schools of thinking: Confucianism and Daoism. The former mainly flourished in the north and later in the south, while Confucianism maintained its great influence in the middle and lower Yellow River area. Daoism flourished in the region of the Huai river and the middle Yangzi area.<sup>47</sup> The Daoists mentioned in the writings of the esteemed Chu thinker Zhuangzi (c369 – 286 BCE) were mostly natives of the Chu kingdom.

It is not surprising then that such idealistic desires became widespread and were profoundly influential in the Chu region. Clearly, an idea that looked forward to the survival of the whole person, including the body, was much more attractive than one which only concerned an eternal life in spiritual terms. If one were successful in reaching the ultimate attainment of physical and spiritual

immortality, he would 'not eat the five grains, but suck the wind, drink the dew, mount the clouds and mist, ride a flying dragon, and wander beyond the four seas,'<sup>48</sup> like the immortal described by Zhuangzi in his writings.

In conclusion, the emergence of new ideas coupled with transformations in social, political and religious concerns during the Warring States period made the old Zhou political structure, based on the large clan-lineage network, no longer viable. The ideas expressed during the Warring States were, in turn, replaced by a focus on individual salvation or immortality. Now, access to Heaven was no longer exercised through the hierarchy of ancestors associated with defunct Zhou ancestors, but rather through a variety of alternative methods, such as meditation or drinking an elixir.

The centre of ancestral worship thus shifted from the temple to the tomb. The latter was now thought of as an eternal dwelling for the soul. The notion of living in the tomb developed, and to provide an attractive dwelling for the soul, tombs were fashioned after palaces and furnished with goods made more for the well-being of the deceased in the afterlife than as offerings to ancestors. In the case of the tomb of Marquis Yi, it is interesting to notice that there were hatches between the chambers enabling the marquis to roam in that world. The structural mimesis of the earthly abode in the format of the tomb and the luxurious furnishings of these chambers reveals the hopes of filial sons that their deceased parents would continue to enjoy a comfortable existence underground, one which was as privileged as their life above ground.

45. In the chapter 'Twenty-fourth year of Duke Xiang' of *Zuo*zhuàn; see Yang Bojun, 1990, vol 3, p 1087

46. David Hawkes, *The songs of the south: an anthology of ancient Chinese poems by Qu Yuan and other poets*, Penguin Books Ltd, Middlesex, 1985, pp 128-29, 196

47. Zhang Zhengming, *Chushi* (*The history of Chu*), Hubei Jiaoyu Press, Wuhan, 1995, pp 273-74

48. See the chapter of 'Xiaoyao you' (逍遥游) in *Zhuangzi jishi* (Annotated Zhuangzi), annotation by Guo Qinfan, Zhonghua Press, Beijing, 1978