

MAKING AND UNMAKING ANCESTORS: EARLY CHINESE TOMBS AND FOOD PRACTICES ABOVE AND BELOW GROUND

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Abstract

The period between the fifth century BCE and early third century CE witnessed significant social changes as social statuses increasingly depended on individual merit. As status competitions intensified, members of new elites turned their tombs into highly visible, socially salient places. Commensal meals with the dead at aboveground shrines and elevated positions created ancestors and, simultaneously, maintained families. Yet, after a few generations, the buried ancestors lost their social lustre and descendants “unmade” them by ceasing to feed them and gradually abandoning their tombs. Scholarship has disregarded the intrinsic link between food practices above and below ground and its repercussions on the ontological status of the dead. I argue that the abandoned dead were not at all condemned to die but perfectly equipped to sustain themselves. Various kinds of food-related grave goods highlight that buried ancestors were highly capable of feeding themselves and their own ancestors in perpetuity.

Introduction

Traditionally, Chinese history began in the thirteenth century BCE when the last kings of the Shang dynasty (ca. sixteenth–thirteenth century BCE) started to record the process of divinations on all kinds of matters of state, written on bovine scapula and turtle plastrons (Keightley 1978). At this stage, society had become significantly complex and individuals enacted status differences in mortuary practices (Campbell 2018: 212–246). In subsequent centuries, aristocracy gradually diversified as the role of kings—especially after the fall of the Western Zhou dynasty (ca. 1046–771 BCE)—diminished, and multiple polities vied for factual hegemony (Hsu 1999). In general, sons of nobles inherited the social statuses of their fathers, but established nobility eventually had to contend with

the slow but inexorable rise of intellectuals (*shi* 士) during the so-called Warring States period (481–221 BCE; Hsu 1965: 88–89; Li 2008: 196–187; Pines 2012: 78). Political advisors gradually prevailed even as the First August Emperor (Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝) united the empire by brute force in 221 BCE. His victory over six remaining regional polities marked the beginning of a central state that was governed by concrete laws and run by trained bureaucrats. Despite ongoing military conflicts and the overall political significance of warfare, social status now predominantly rested on the achievements of individuals and their immediate forbears in civil administration, rather than century-old lineages (Houn 1956; Selbitschka 2018a).

We know all this from a variety of sources. For instance, transmitted texts that are mainly ahistorical for events that date earlier than the eighth century BCE. The most reliable data for early Chinese history stem from excavated texts. Such texts include oracle bone inscriptions and inscriptions that were cast on the surfaces of bronze ritual objects yielded by tombs and hoards (Shaughnessy 1991) as well as the finds and features of tombs themselves (Falkenhausen 2006). Histories such as Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 140–ca. 90/85 BCE) *Records of the Historian* (*Shi ji* 史記) and Ban Gu's 班固 (32–92 CE) *Book of Han* (*Han shu* 漢書) as well as philosophical writings such as *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* by Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (ca. 300–ca. 235 BCE) convey somewhat trustworthy information on some aspects of the lives of socio-political elites for the period between the eighth century BCE and the early third century CE.

Sets of bronze ritual vessels and bells commonly surface from wooden chambers that were built at the bottoms of fairly deep vertical shaft pits. The assemblages in such tombs often also comprise different kinds of weapons, chariots (or parts thereof), and some ceramic vessels that all appear in discrete deposition clusters (Campbell 2018: 95–96, 214–221; Rawson 1999a). From the first century BCE onward, horizontal brick chambers with vaulted ceilings supplanted wooden chambers in vertical shaft pits (Figs. 1 and 2). The primary reason for this fundamental change in tomb structure was that family members, who did not establish their own households, could be buried with their parents (Selbitschka, forthcoming; also, Erickson 2010: 13–29). Moreover, the fifth century BCE heralded novel tomb assemblages that relied less on artefacts related to warfare and ancestor rituals and more on objects of everyday use such as tableware, storage containers, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines as well as miniature architecture models (Selbitschka 2015; Wu 2011: 85–126, 163–173).

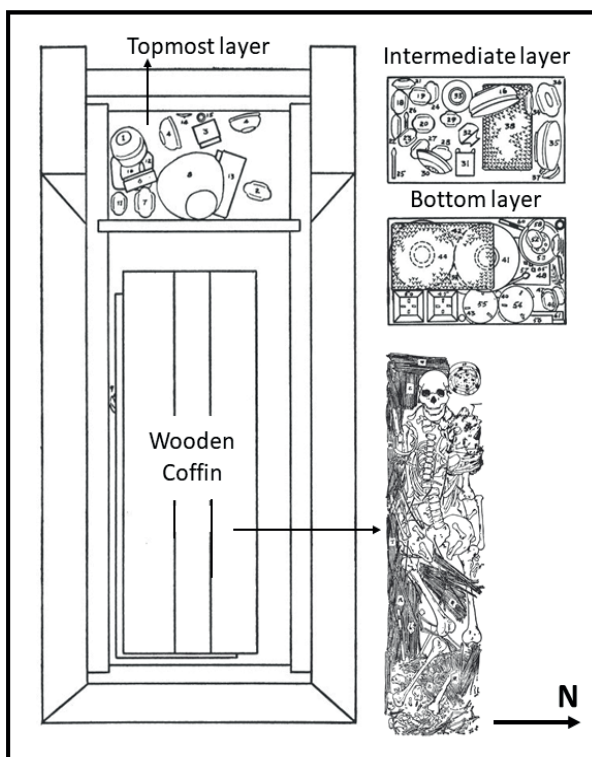


FIGURE 1: Small wooden chamber (L 352cm, W 172cm, H 116cm) of tomb no. 1 at Shuihudi, Yunneng, Hubei province (dated 217 BCE). The grave goods in the western compartment (L 56cm, W 100cm) were stacked in three layers. After Selbitschka 2018a: 434–435 (figs. 1, 2).

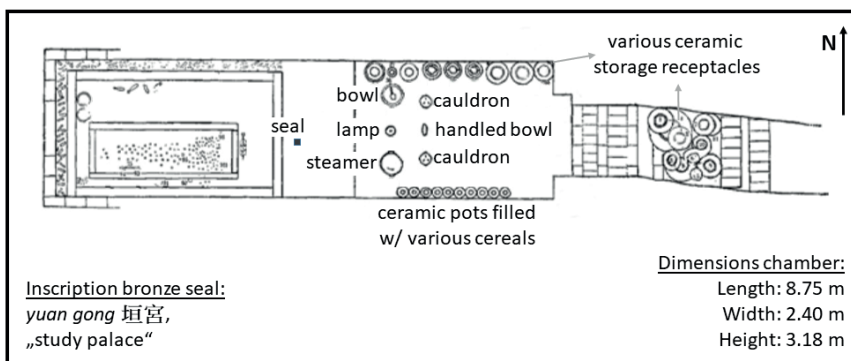


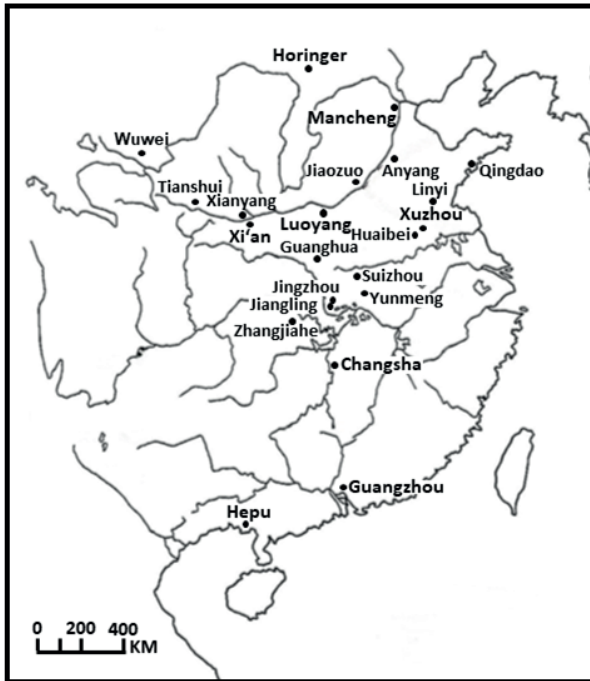
FIGURE 2: Bronze ritual vessels in a vaulted brick chamber tomb at Maquan, Shaanxi province (dated late first century BCE). Their neat arrangement suggests sacrificial rituals in the afterlife. After Xianyang 1979: 126 (fig. 2).

Changes in funeral practices below ground coincided with significant changes above ground. In the eighth century BCE, burial mounds, or tumuli, had started to appear and the higher echelons of society eagerly adopted this new trend. By the fifth century BCE, tombs of socio-political elites were not only crowned by tall mounds, but also built at elevated positions, much to the chagrin of intellectuals (Selbitschka, forthcoming). The statesman and author Lü Buwei, for instance, complained that, in his day and age, it was *en vogue* to have mounds that were “as tall as mountains, that were covered by so many trees to make them look like forests, and that featured towers and halls whose grandeur matched those of palaces” 其高大若山，其樹之若林，其設闕庭，為宮室 (Lü 2009: 224; Knoblock and Riegel 2000: 230). Lü’s comment illustrates that contemporaries indeed took notice of elite burials, even though they did not always appreciate what they saw (e.g. Riegel 1995). In addition, walled enclosures and architectural shrines represented the pinnacle of mortuary rituals that emphasized visibility.

Scholarship has latched on to altered tomb assemblages and viewed them as expressions of a shift in afterlife beliefs. It took quotidian artefacts as representations of so-called underground “happy homes” that soothed the souls of the dead (e.g. Barbieri-Low 2021: 214; Falkenhausen 2004: 138, 153; Loewe 1979: 15; Poo 1998: 165; Wu 2011: 33, 38; Yü 1987). Such readings were ultimately unconvincing as they relied on selective archaeological and textual evidence (Selbitschka, forthcoming; also, Brashier 1996). Further, they failed to acknowledge and expound the significant changes in mortuary practices that occurred above ground after the fifth century BCE. At best, scholarship has mentioned burial mounds in passing and when it did, it considered them in relation to the cultural origins of the practice (Rawson 1999b: 24; for an exception, see Shi 2014). The elevated positions of graves were non-issues, often even in Chinese excavation reports. Finally, scholars have studied only the spatial organisation of multiple architectural structures at tombs, while essentially ignoring the socio-religious significance of their individual elements (e.g. Wu 1989: 30–37; 1995: 190–192).

This article presents the results of a decidedly different approach. For the past twelve years, I have systematically analysed the finds and features of graves that date between the fifth century BCE and early third century CE. I have augmented my arguments by comprehensive studies of transmitted texts of historiographic and philosophical contents that were thematically and chronologically appropriate (Selbitschka, forthcoming; for a selection of sites, see Map 1). In what follows, I will explain that changes in mortuary rituals above and below ground were

mutually connected and mainly based on food-related practices; they coincided with drastic changes in early Chinese society for a reason. The first section below will highlight that burial sites developed into perfect venues for the bereaved to perform social norms at a time when the judgment of one's immediate social environment instead of lineage descent translated into social status. By offering food and drink to the deceased at tombs—along with repeated sacrifices at lineage temples (contra Wu 1988)—descendants of families with considerable social standing actively *made* their ancestors and kept the dead alive. At least for the time being, as the second section will illustrate. It explains that after a few generations, the living *unmade* the vast majority of ancestors by ceasing to offer sacrifices at graves (and temples). Then again, the living eventually may have erased most dead from their collective memories, but they did not condemn them to irretrievable death. Instead, descendants had fashioned tombs into afterlife-worlds by providing the means to produce, store, process, and prepare food and drink. This way, the dead were able to nourish themselves and their own ancestors in perpetuity.



MAP 1: Overview of significant burial sites (fifth century BCE–early third century CE) in the People's Republic of China. After: Bielenstein 1979: 256 (map 13).

FIGURE 3: Wooden chamber tomb including mound near the crest of a solitary hill (height 36 m; dated late third–early second century BCE) and covered by a mound. Six ancillary burials likely of family members accompanied the grave at lower elevations.

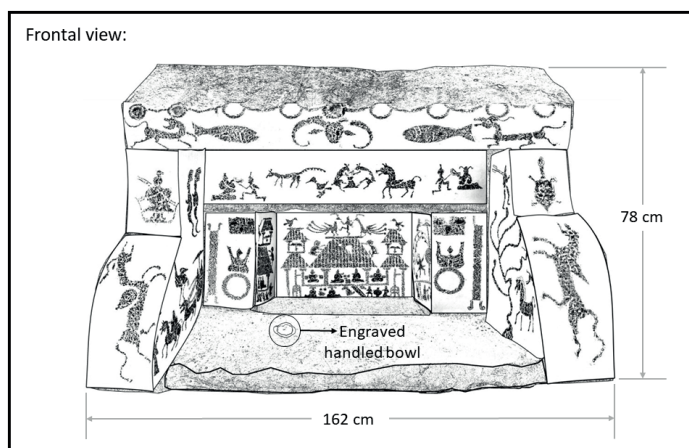
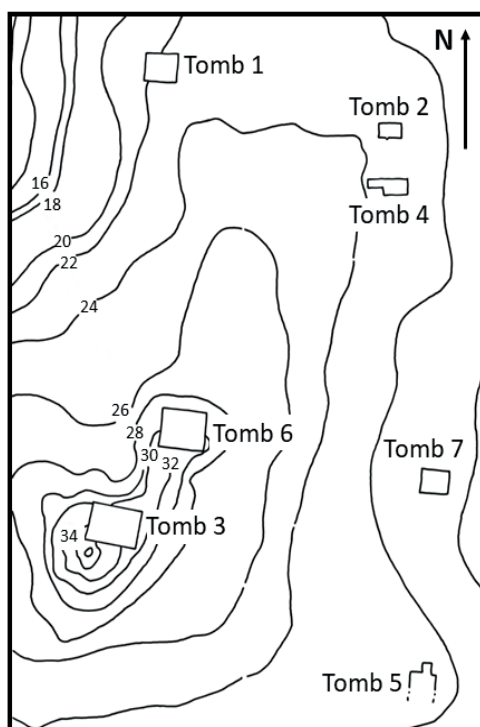


FIGURE 4: Engraved stone slab shrine (line drawing) that accompanied a destroyed brick chamber tomb near Huaibei in Anhui province (dated ca. late 1st century CE). After Huaibei 2019: 24 (fig. 8).

Feeding the Dead and Making Ancestors Above Ground: Sacrifices and Shrines at Tombs

By the fifth century, the living sought out elevated locations to bury their dead (e.g. Anhui 2015: 12; Henan sheng 1986: 1, 3). Simultaneously, burial mounds became staple features of elite tombs; they added a layer of visibility by sheer height and as a backdrop for architectural structures (e.g. Hubei 2003: 2; Suizhou 2008: 2). This period was defined by radical social changes as society no longer *ascribed* status by birthright. Rather, individuals increasingly were in the position to *achieve* status through their own actions (Foladare 1969; Hsu 1965: 89; Pines 2012: 78). As a consequence, descendants developed mortuary practices with long-term effects to ensure maximum social returns. The intention was to turn tombs into highly visible, socially salient places that allowed the living to display their social skills and strengthen bonds between family members (Gieryn 2000). Unlike the old days, when century-old lineages enacted their social status at lineage temples or other designated areas (Campbell 2018: 106–108; Shaanxi sheng 1985; Shaanxi Zhouyuan 1979), social upstarts after the fifth century BCE had no pedigree to fall back on. Their parents and grandparents inevitably gravitated to centre of their attentions as immediate families steadily replaced lineages as key social units.

Deriving from contemporary beliefs, early China scholarship often assumes that all dead were ancestors (Hu 2016). Yet, anthropologists have convincingly shown that “ancesthood is an achieved status” (Whitley 2002: 122; also, Brashier 2011; Keightley 2004) that was reserved for individuals whom the living considered important. This means that acts of offering sacrifices, in fact, created and subsequently maintained ancestors. Initially, it was not quite that important whether persons that were not part one’s own lineage witnessed such rituals. However, later bronze inscriptions illustrate that audiences widened after the eighth century BCE as more and more non-lineage members attended temple ceremonies (Khayutina 2003: 39–42). Over time, the acts of making and maintaining ancestors were no longer privileges of established lineages, but became an imperative for the families of lower elites to ascertain their stations in society.

With mounting social complexity, social competition and the need to display one’s familiarity with social norms increased. Pushing the idea of elevated burial places to its vertical limits, the ideal was to possess one’s own hill and build a tomb near its top while family members were buried on its slopes (Fig. 3; Hubei sheng 2022: 41, 42, figs. 2, 3); Shandong 2007: 20; Suizhou 2008: 2).

One location exemplifies this particularly well: archaeologists have discovered numerous tombs on solitary, yet mutually visible hills in modern-day Xuzhou in north-western Jiangsu province (dated ca. late third–second century BCE; Map 1). Liu Bang 劉邦 (r. 202–195 BCE), the first emperor of the Western Han dynasty (206 / 202 BCE–9 CE), was born in the area and it is not surprising that many of his close relatives were buried there. Epigraphic evidence shows that Liu Bang’s brothers, uncles, and nephews, who served either as kings (*zhuhouwang* 諸侯王) or high officials in the local Chu principality, occupied most of these deeply conspicuous graves. They are also among the first burials that yielded remnants of dry wall enclosures and architectural shrines (esp. rooftiles) along with mounds (Xuzhou 1997: 4; 1999: 4; 2005: 49–50; 2008: 11). Seeing that the social statuses of nobles and bureaucrats were inherently insecure (Loewe 2010: 305–307), it was almost inevitable that their descendants turned towards prominent burial places as stages on which they performed themselves and their families. Moreover, contemporaneous histories record that aboveground shrine constructions were not available to everyone as emperors bestowed them on meritorious civil servants and family members (Ban 1962: 2948, 3084–3085). In the second and first centuries BCE, shrines, by definition were status symbols.

By the end of the first century CE, lower elite strata had adopted the use of shrines, albeit in different forms. Rather than timber frame buildings covered by ceramic rooftiles, some tombs featured distinctly smaller monuments that were assembled from several engraved stone slabs. Stone slab shrines usually measured no more than 200cm in width, 150cm in height, and 150cm in depth (Fig. 4) and several bore inscriptions that reveal that families spent between 5000 and 323,000 bronze cash [i.e. bronze coins] on them (Ouyang 2009: 76). The monthly income of civil servants at the lower end of the mid-level paygrades—i.e. the kinds of persons who occupied the respective brick chamber tombs—was about 3500 cash and 21 bushels of cereals in 106 CE. At the same time, low-level administrators had to get by on 550 cash (Bielenstein 1980: 126, 130). Assuming that the latter paid 5000 cash for a simple version of a stone slab shrine, they spent almost half of their annual salary. This is not even factoring in the expenditures for the burial plot and the actual chamber; according to inscriptional evidence, their prices varied between 3000 and 170,000 cash. Besides prices, respective inscriptions identify stone slab shrines either soberly as “stone chambers” (*shi shi* 石室) or, more fittingly, “feeding halls” (*shi tang* 食堂; Ouyang 2009: 76). In turn, the shrines of the highest elites came with their own kitchens. An imperial tomb dating from 71 CE is said to have featured “a

kitchenette that offered sufficient resources to prepare sacrificial meals” 小廚, 足財祠祀 (Liu and Wu 1987: 58). Other emperors and their consorts were not quite that modest; vestiges of vast building complexes have yielded copious amounts of animal bones, vessels, iron tools, and stoves (Luoyang and Luoyang 2022: 47; Shaanxi 2011: 29).

Of course, shrines were not prerequisites for sacrifices to buried ancestors. Inscribed wooden slips discovered in the wooden chamber of a low-ranking official of the late pre-imperial period (dated 239 BCE) recounts the story of a man who returned from the dead three years after he had been buried. Although beliefs in resurrection were not common in early China, the manuscript still is instructive. It states that the dead would forever leave if those, who offered sacrifices, wept during the proceedings. It follows that ancestors would unilaterally cut communications with the living if their communal meals involved too many emotions. Also, sacrifice actors were supposed to clean the location after they were finished, but not flush the surface. This means that offerings on the ground probably were quite common (Gansu 2009: 107 [slips 5, 7]; Harper 1994), even if pertinent archaeological evidence is extremely limited (Selbitschka 2018b: 199–210). It might be tempting to treat this account as confirmation of comprehensive tomb sacrifices and, by extension, ancestor worship among all social strata, but archaeological data do not support such a reading. After analysing thousands of burials (Selbitschka, forthcoming), my impression is that even the simplest kinds of tombs—shallow earth pits that may have contained one or two ceramic jars—were not at all occupied by what scholarship has called “commoners.” Lest we forget, this story of resurrection hailed from the grave a low-level bureaucrat, who was a member of the rank and file of the pre-imperial Qin polity (ca. 800–221 BCE). As one of roughly 130,000 state officials, the story of this individual surely does not represent wide swathes of a population, comprising about 60 million people in the first century CE (Loewe 2004: 70, 113).

The Dead Feeding Themselves Below Ground: Food and Food-related Grave Goods

Although the first section has focused on the living and their public displays of social skills and statuses, we must not mistake performative sacrifices as meaningless charades. On the contrary, commensality between the living and the dead was mutually beneficial. On the one hand, descendants established themselves as fully-fledged members of their peer groups and on the other hand, offerings of food and drink kept the deceased alive for some time.

Compelling evidence that the dead indeed were very much alive in their afterlife-worlds below ground are foodstuffs and food-related grave goods. The most comprehensive and well-known assemblage surfaced from tomb no. 1 at Mawangdui in Changsha, Hunan province (dated 168 BCE). A 50–55-year-old woman, occupied a sizeable wooden chamber whose four storage compartments were filled with more than 1000 artefacts (Hunan Yixueyuan 1980: 267–293; Hunan and Zhongguo 1973). Among those were 30 bamboo hampers stocked with meat, including cattle, ovicaprids, pigs, deer, rabbits, chickens, ducks, cranes, and fish. Wooden labels also refer to the contents of boxes that contained roasted and dried meats, rice, eggs, fruits, and medicinal herbs (Hunan and Zhongguo 1973: 111, 115–118). 22 lacquer jars held chicken, beef, and fish broths as well as a variety of sauces and alcoholic beverages. Labels tied to hemp pouches point to rice, millet, beans, and hemp seeds as their contents, while 24 out of 312 inscribed bamboo inventory slips further mention dog, chicken, deer, and fish broths along with many other foodstuffs and pre-prepared dishes. The inventory slips further record different kinds of alcohols that were supposed to be consumed from dozens of lacquer bowls inscribed with the graph “alcohol” (*jiu* 酒), while meats, cereals, and broths were eaten from lacquer bowls and plates adorned by the graph “food” (*shi* 食; Hunan and Zhongguo 1973: 35, 77–78, 137, 133–139). In addition, the arrangement of a lacquer tray laden with lacquer bowls, plates, meat skewers, and chopsticks in front of a screen and a woven seating mat in the northern compartment of the wooden chamber clearly marks the spot where the woman would have her meals while wooden servant figurines catered to her needs and miniature musicians provided entertainment (Hunan and Zhongguo 1973: 97–100, 120–121; Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens 1991; Selbitschka 2015; Wu 2011: 64–68). Some additional tombs yielded evidence of ready-made dishes and provisions that were stored in bamboo hampers and baskets (Hunan 1963: 19–23; Hunan and Hunan 2004: 58–59; Yangzhou 1980: 5).

However, burials mainly stocked produce rather than dishes. Ceramic jars and flasks in varying numbers were standard grave goods in elite tombs. Most significantly, miniature granaries were common in tomb assemblages by the second century CE. Ink inscription on numerous granaries and flasks claim that the respective vessels contained “ten thousand bushels,” i.e. roughly two hundred cubic metres, of wheat, broomcorn millet, foxtail millet, soybeans, barley, sorghum, and sometimes rice (Fig. 5). Frequently, the roughly 30cm-tall granaries appeared in sets of five, each holding one of the so-called “five grains” (*wu gu* 五穀) that contemporaneous intellectuals had declared staple

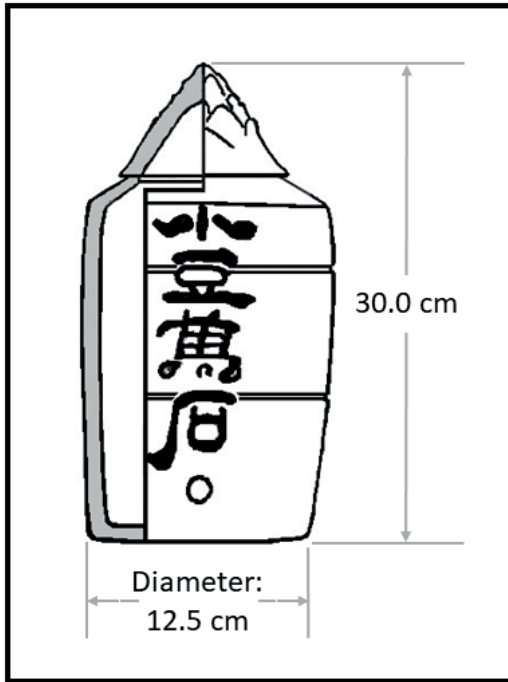


FIGURE 5: Miniature ceramic granary discovered in a small brick chamber tomb at Yongtai near Nanyang, Henan province (dated ca. early first century CE). Translation black ink inscription: “ten thousand bushels of azuki beans” (*Vigna angularis*) 小豆萬石. After: Nanyang 2021: 23 (fig. 3.12).

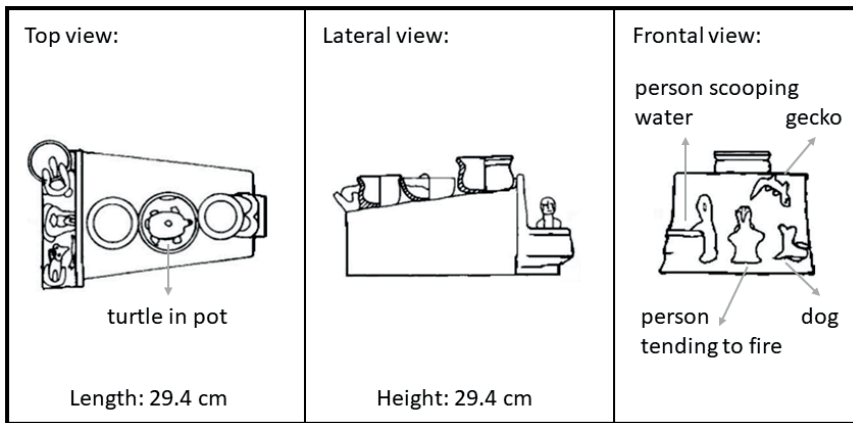


FIGURE 6: Miniature ceramic stove yielded by a brick chamber tomb near Guigang, Guangxi province (dated ca. late second CE). After: Guangxi and Guigang: 47 (fig. 6.6).

foods (Zheng and Kong 2008: 1525). By the power of writing—and actual grain deposits in many items—individual tomb occupants could rely on 1000 cubic metres of cereals, despite the fact that the factual volumes of each vessel did not exceed 28 litres (i.e. 0.028 cubic metres; Selbitschka 2017).

The five grains emerged in different contexts as well. A wooden label tied to a silk sachet identified the artefact as “five-[grain]-seed-pouch” (*wu zhong tuo* 五種囊; Yangzhou and Hanjiang 1981: 19). The item surfaced from a tomb in central Jiangsu province (dated 70 BCE), but, once again, this was not an isolated find. Several other graves yielded either ceramic vessels or textile bags that inscriptions link with cereal seeds (Henan 1964: 118; Hunan and Hunan 2004: 56, 61 [slips 201, 202, 204]; Luoyang 1959: 112, 158). Apparently, the dead grew their own crops. Further, the caption of a mural showing two farmers, each leading an ox-drawn plough, in a brick chamber tomb in Gansu province (date early third century CE) unmistakably explains the depicted actions as “ploughing and seeding” (*geng zhong* 耕種; Jiayuguan 1972: 26). Comparable images (Finsterbusch 2000: 739) and miniature ceramic paddy fields (Chengdu and Qingbai 1999: 26; Guangzhou and Guangzhou 2006: 123, 299–301) in multiple other burials dating from the first through early third centuries CE confirm that elite tomb occupants were keenly concerned with sustaining themselves.

Granaries, seeding materials, and paddy fields supplied carbohydrates, but the dead required proteins as well. Several tomb assemblages comprised miniature ceramic ponds populated by fish, shellfish, frogs, and turtles that tomb occupants could harvest from the waterscapes (Chengdu and Xindu 2007: 44; Guangxi and Hepu 2006: 78; Huanghe 1965: 34–39). Zoomorphic figurines of various livestock species—most ceramic, some wood (Selbitschka 2015: 28–29)—were sources of wealth (as were cereals) and food for the deceased. For instance, a 94m-long and three-metre-wide ancillary pit at Emperor Jing’s tomb (r. 157–141 BCE) near modern-day Xi’an revealed unspecified numbers of miniature ceramic chickens, dogs, cattle, and horses and 455 pigs, 45 piglets, 235 goats, and 189 sheep. The animals were accompanied by 55 miniature granaries filled with cereals and 33 jars holding animal bones. Some seal impressions in dried clay explain that the “Assistant of the Office of Food Supplies” (*Daguan cheng yin* 大官丞印) oversaw the stocking of this massive wooden chamber. However, another set of bureaucrats took charge of the emperor’s livestock in the afterlife, as tiny bronze seals on the belts of human figurines from a nearby pit indicate. (So far, archaeologists have documented 86 ancillary pits in total.) The officials were in charge of Sweet Well Granary (*Ganquan cang yin* 甘泉倉

印] and thus responsible for food supplies of the entire underground court (Ban 1962: 1175, 3216; Shaanxi 2008: 12–14, 17–19; Sima 1959: 1441). As such, they ensured that the departed sovereign and his trusted servants would not starve to death. Most crucially, the livestock figurines in this pit and in many other graves usually came in pairs of male and female animals. The emperor's piglets attest to the success of breeding in the afterlife. They play the same vital role in yet another type of ceramic miniature. Pigsties-cum-privies that came to light in hundreds of tombs display small huts that open into round or rectangular pens below where one or two coprophagous pigs feed on human faeces. Frequently, the pigs were replaced by one sow suckling five or more piglets (Hengshui 1995: 21; Xiangfan 1996: 42–43; Xuzhou 1994: 1065).

Naturally, produce generated by the dead needed to be prepared for consumption. For instance, miniature ceramic grain hullers and millstones were common grave goods, as were miniature buildings that show humans winnowing and pounding grains (Hengshui 1995: 20; Hengyang 2000: 136). The next step was to cook whole grains, flours, and meats. Notably, vegetables are conspicuously absent. This task was the domain of ceramic chef figurines that were part of the standard grave goods repertoire of elite tombs by the late third century CE (Selbitschka 2015: 29, 32, 34–37). Wielding knives in their hands, they often dissect fish on low chopping blocks in front of them. Miniature stoves from similar contexts, in turn, offer even more insights into the process of cooking. Occasionally, they feature turtles in steamers as well as fish, meat, and cutlery on countertops, while humans scooping water or handling kindling add even more descriptive detail (Fig. 6; Changjiang 1974: 49; Guangxi and Guigang: 48; Hengyang 2000: 133–134).

Yet, dishes prepared in the afterlife-worlds of the dead benefited the tomb occupants themselves *and* their ancestors. Contrary to popular opinion, quotidian artefacts never replaced ritual vessels; they merely outnumbered them. In fact, bronze and ceramic ritual paraphernalia usually were arranged in neatly organized clusters that resembled sacrifices in ancestral temples. Some such artefacts even bore inscriptions that linked them to shrines and their contents to specific stages of sacrificial rituals (Fig. 2; Guangzhou 1991: 39–70; Luoyang 1959: 115; Selbitschka 2018b: 235–240; Xuzhou 2009: 47). In other words, the dead indeed continued to feed their ancestors long after the living had stopped to remember them.

Conclusion

Food practices at early Chinese tombs above and below ground were intrinsically linked to the process of making and unmaking ancestors. Highly visible burial places provided excellent stages for descendants to ascertain their elite statuses by frequent sacrifices to the dead and thus creating their ancestors in the first place. Once the social salience of ancestors faded, the living discontinued food offerings and seemingly condemned the deceased to permanent death. Yet, tomb assemblages were curated in ingenious ways. Multiple kinds of artefacts related to food and drink enabled the deceased to feed themselves and their own ancestors in perpetuity. Fully self-sufficient, the dead truly lived forever.

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