



Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion

Anke Hein

To cite this article: Anke Hein (2016) Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion, *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 44:2, 183-188, DOI: [10.1080/0737769X.2016.1207377](https://doi.org/10.1080/0737769X.2016.1207377)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0737769X.2016.1207377>



Published online: 13 Oct 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

unidirectional and, as my students commented (they read this in an upper-division Comparative Ethics course), it would be helpful to see each topic as a conversation, where the Cheng brothers are more like partners and less like inevitable victors. I will note as well that the students overwhelmingly enjoyed the text and suggested it should continue to be used in the course. However, one of the things they did not come away from the text with is a careful understanding of the Cheng brothers as having different, and sometimes not unified, perspectives. Huang often refers to “Cheng” as having written or thought something, in cases where presumably the original authorship is difficult to discern. Although he does attribute quotations and views to each specific brother sometimes, there is very little concern for telling their views apart, and a non-specialist might leave the text with the feeling that they always or mostly thought the same things. Finally, I would say that some chapters are more convincing than others—in the idea of the Neo-Confucian response as being a philosophically superior response to the given problem.

In conclusion, I think this is a very valuable text that could be used in a variety of contexts, from research to teaching. I think this could be used particularly well in a comparative ethics course for undergraduate or graduate students (some of the text might be too advanced for early undergraduates), where students might read it in conjunction with selections from the western philosophers Huang engages, really making the text and its concerns come to life in a more conversational manner. This text makes a genuine contribution to comparative philosophy and to contemporary ethics.

SARAH A. MATTICE
University of North Florida

GUOLONG LAI, *Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. 320 pp., 81 b and w illustrations, 14 color plates, 1 map. US\$60 (hb). ISBN 978-0-8249-4120-1

Funerary customs and concepts of the afterlife in early China have been topics of heated discussion over many decades. In recent years, the excavation of well-preserved graves in southern China, some of them containing texts concerned with various types of rituals, shed new light on this issue. In his monograph entitled *Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion*, Lai Guolong undertakes the challenging task of combining archaeological, paleographical, and art historical evidence to explore “changes in religious beliefs and ritual practices in early China” (p. 1). He does not stand alone with this approach; while earlier scholarship relied largely on transmitted textual accounts, in recent years several works have tried to integrate archaeological and textual evidence to gain new insights into the nature of early Chinese religion, most notably Constance A. Cook’s 2006 monograph *Death in Ancient China: The Tale of One Man’s Journey*—building on Lai Guolong’s 2002 dissertation—and Wu Hung’s 2010 book on *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs*.¹ Also the

¹ Constance A. Cook, *Death in Ancient China: The Tale of One Man’s Journey* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006); Lai Guolong, “The Baoshan Tomb: Religious Transitions in Art, Ritual,

2009 edited volume on *Early Chinese Religion* by John Lagerwey and Stephen Teiser contains perspectives from material culture and transmitted and excavated texts, albeit analyzed separately by various scholars.² Nevertheless, Lai's study differs markedly from these earlier publications in breadth, depth, and overall approach.

Cook focuses on the single, particularly well-known 316 BCE tomb of Shao Tuo 邵舵 in Baoshan 包山, Hubei, containing records of prognostications, treatments, and rituals that the tomb occupant underwent before finally succumbing to his illness. Although Cook's analysis is detailed and insightful, her sometimes far-reaching inferences on early Chinese religion and ideas of the afterlife are hampered by the limited amount of material she analyzes. Wu Hung takes a different approach, discussing a large number of tombs from Neolithic to modern times. Where Cook is specific, Wu is general, smoothing out complexities to tell a coherent story of "the fundamental logic of traditional Chinese tombs."³ In terms of scope, Lai takes a middle path by covering the time from the fifth to the first century BCE and focusing on the well-preserved tombs from the Chu realm in southern China, including the last resting places of people from all levels of society. Nevertheless, the southern focus makes this "a distinctly regional perspective of early Chinese mortuary tradition," as the author admits in an endnote (p. 197, n. 67).

The book consists of five numbered chapters, and an introduction and a conclusion explaining approach and results. The declared aim of the book is to examine "the dialectical relationship between sociopolitical change and mortuary religion from an archaeological perspective" (p. 1). Building on recent advances in religious studies, the author claims to follow Lawrence Sullivan and Gregory Schopen in giving priority to archaeological evidence over texts in the study of religion,⁴ but it remains debatable if this study is actually archaeological in nature. This is not necessarily a shortcoming; in fact, the book nicely balances material evidence such as tomb structure and burial goods with textual evidence from excavated and transmitted sources, often with a strong emphasis on excavated texts. Given his focus on the practice of religion, the interpretation of objects and archaeological context are crucial to Lai's argument.

Chapter 1, "The Dead Who Would Not Be Ancestors," discusses textual evidence for changes in the conception of death during the Warring States period. Focusing on religious texts from Chu tombs, the author argues that with the increasing violence and upheaval of the Warring States period, the dead turned from benevolent ancestors to possibly revengeful ghosts. Citing both textual and archaeological evidence, Lai describes how the scale and nature of warfare changed in this period, now involving conscripted commoners and large

and Text during the Warring States Period (480-221 BCE)," (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2002); Wu Hung, *The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

² John Lagerwey and Stephen F. Teiser, *Early Chinese Religion, Part I: Shang through Han (1250 BC-220 AD)* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

³ Wu Hung, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*, 17.

⁴ Lawrence E. Sullivan, "'Seeking an End to the Primary Text' or 'Putting an End to the Text as Primary,'" in *Beyond the Classics? Essays in Religious Studies and Liberal Education*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Sheryl L. Burkhalter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 41-59; and Gregory Schopen, *Burial "Ad Sanctos" and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archeology of Religions* (London: Academic Press Inc., 1987).

battles with high mortality rates. As Lai shows, those who died a violent death and/or without posterity were thought to become hungry ghosts instead of benevolent ancestors. This changed relationship between the dead and the living is reflected in new categories of grave goods and changes in burial ritual and grave structure.

Chapters 2–4 trace these changes in religious customs and beliefs as reflected in tomb structure, images, and texts accompanying the dead. Chapter 2, “The Transformation of Burial Space,” is largely identical with Lai’s 2006 article on “The Transformation of Space in Early Chinese Burials” and argues that the change of tomb structure from vertical pit-style burials to horizontal chamber-style tombs was driven by the three forces: (1) a shift in burial ideology from hiding to displaying the corpse; (2) a demand for burying husband and wife together, reflecting a shift from lineage-based to family-based social structures; and (3) a change in status of the deceased from benevolent ancestors to potentially harmful spirits, requiring sacrificial spaces inside the tomb to pacify the ghosts.⁵ Lai’s convincing interpretation of the burial space is influenced by Bernard Tschumi’s concept of architecture as event-place, focusing on the funerary ritual process.⁶ Following Wu Hung,⁷ Lai argues that during the Warring States period, religious activities were transferred from temple to tomb as it was no longer the deceased making offerings but the living conducting rituals for the dead. Consequently, the tombs grew larger and more accessible.

Chapter 3, “The Presence of the Invisible,” is concerned with image-making in connection with the grave. Lai argues that verisimilitude is not necessary to invoke presence in early Chinese depictions. Building on Lothar von Falkenhausen’s suggestion that there was likely an image taboo in early China,⁸ Lai holds that gods, ancestors, and members of the elite were “seen as too important to be represented in material form” (p. 103). During the Shang and Zhou periods, ancestors were represented by wooden or stone tablets. The first human images, Lai points out, were barbarians, slaves, or prisoners whose depiction expressed control through image magic. Furthermore, the author holds that tomb figurines were not substitutes for human sacrifice but represented types or functions, thus being “representations without presence” (p. 109). Besides depictions of humans, mythical and hybrid creatures also occur in graves. Most groundbreaking is Lai’s explanation of the meaning and function of figures consisting of a human bust, protruding tongue, and deer antlers. Placed at the entrance, these figures previously were interpreted as guardians of the tomb, or as guides for the spirit to the netherworld.⁹ Some

⁵ Lai Guolong, “The Transformation of Space in Early Chinese Burials,” in *A Bronze Menagerie: Mat Weights of Early China*, ed. Michelle C. Wang, Guolong Lai, Roel Sterckx and Eugene Yuejin Wang (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, distributed by University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 34–49.

⁶ Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

⁷ Wu, *The Art of the Yellow Springs*.

⁸ Luo Tai 羅泰 (Lothar von Falkenhausen), “Lüetan Zhongguo qingtongshidai de renwu biao xian jiqi lishi yiyi 略談中國青銅時代的人物表現及其歷史意義,” in *Hua Xia wenming de xingcheng yu fazhan: Henan sheng Wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo wushimian qingzhubui ji Hua Xia wenming de xingcheng yu fazhan xueshu yantaohui lunwenji* 華夏文明的形成和發展: 河南省文物考古研究所五十年慶祝會及華夏文明的形成與發展學術研討會論文集 (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2003), 265–267.

scholars suggested Central Asian influence as explanation for the sudden emergence of the antler-and-tongue motive in Chu graves,¹⁰ a notion that Lai rejects. Instead, he argues that these figures were of local origin, depicting the fecundity god previously represented through phallic symbols. According to Lai's line of argument, changes in the conception of the netherworld and the relationship between the dead and the living thus lead to the emergence of new images.

Chapter 4, "Letters to the Underworld," turns to sacrificial records, registers, and letters to the underworld bureaucracy found in tombs. The accounts of divination and sacrifice, so the author argues, were likely meant to "establish a solid contractual relationship with the gods and spirits" (p. 137). In the case of higher-ranking individuals, Lai suggests that the composition and official reading of such lists at the funeral may have been a mechanism of sumptuary control. Two particularities of these lists remain unfortunately not fully explored in this study. Firstly, parts of the list were placed in different parts of the tombs; the nature of and reasons for this spatial separation remain unexplored here. Secondly, the items listed and the objects found in the graves do not match up; this fact is noted but not discussed.

Chapter 5, "Journey to the Northwest," then ventures to make some suggestions concerning religious beliefs in early China. Lai argues that the cosmology of the afterlife changed substantially during the Warring States period: previously, otherworldly journeys were the privilege of royal ancestors or religious specialists; now, normal human beings traveled to the Northwest to reach the netherworld. Whether this change came about through the increase in travel and knowledge of foreign abodes, as Lai argues, is difficult to ascertain, but he is surely right in pointing out that it is necessary to understand the nature of travel in this life to understand how the travel to the netherworld was envisioned. These realities of travel included the dangers of the road and the perceived importance of timing for a safe journey. Travel paraphernalia interred in graves therefore included not only chariots, maps, and travel clothes, but also daybooks, divining boards, calendrical texts, apotropaic items, and finally, communications to the officials in the netherworld, prepared to insure that the deceased would be received in the correct manner. Lai argues that these objects, the burial ritual, and the form of the grave itself were meant to orient the deceased in time and space as well as "within a social, political, and cosmic order" (p. 168).

Overall, this book provides a very nuanced, detailed, and vivid account of the "mortuary religion" of southern China from the Warring States to the Han period, following its formation through the analysis of "religious structures, inscriptions, and artworks" as Schopen described the three main subjects of the archaeology of religion.¹¹ There are two issues with this approach, however: the words "artworks" and "archaeology." An archaeologist may argue that the objects discussed here are not works of art but ritual objects. The author remains vague on this issue, speaking of "works of art or objects" (p. 15) without explaining the difference between the two. In actual analysis, however, Lai very appropriately does not

⁹ Cook, *Death in Ancient China*, 136–143.

¹⁰ Arthur A. Salmony, *Antler and Tongue: An Essay on Ancient Chinese Symbolism and Its Implications*, Artibus Asiae, supplementum 13 (Ascona, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1954).

¹¹ Schopen, *Ad Sanctos*, 14. The exact wording was taken from Lai, *Excavating the Afterlife*, 14.

address any of these objects in their aesthetic dimension, but considers them as objects with a ritual function and religious meaning. The somewhat confusing use of the terms “object” and “artwork” is a minor issue in this volume that could be easily remedied by a short explanation. The issues surrounding the use of the term “archaeology of religion” for this study are somewhat more complex. Throughout the book, actual archaeological analysis comparing grave content, body treatment, and material traces of ritual acts in a systematic manner is not a major focus. Instead, the study is particularly strong in the analysis and critical reading of palaeographic material and its integration with material evidence and transmitted texts. Indeed, in this context, statistical or spatial analyses may not be necessary, but then the claim to be first and foremost an archaeological study seems not quite appropriate. What would be helpful regardless of the nature of this volume is the addition of tables listing all graves discussed in the study with their location, orientation, measurements, form, and content, as well as tables comparing grave content and object lists. Such addition in an appendix would have greatly raised the value of this volume as a basis for future research without disrupting the nicely flowing narrative.

Overall, the author nevertheless has managed to tell a gripping story even as he integrates a large number of primary and secondary sources, and addresses many controversial issues. A few editorial details, however, make it difficult to use this book for scholarly purposes, most importantly the use of endnotes instead of footnotes, the limited literature review, and a one-level table of contents. The beautifully phrased but somewhat opaque chapter headings make it difficult to envision the content, but the short outlook at the beginning and short summary at the end of each chapter help greatly with orientation. Although this may have been the decision of the publisher, the issue of endnotes is more cumbersome, especially as a considerable amount of the discussion of previous research was placed in the notes. Even very important points, such as some of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the study, are discussed solely in the notes; this would have been less of an issue in the case of footnotes, but with endnotes a careful read of the book requires constant page turning.¹² Especially the controversial dating of many of the written sources should have been discussed in the main text. Even in the notes, critical reflections on the reliability of the sources could be more extensive. Nevertheless, even without such references, the number of endnotes is truly staggering, making this volume a very valuable resource for future studies in this field.

The author touches on many if not all the major controversies related to the topic of his study, including the late rise of human depictions in China and their origin, the function and meaning of tomb figurines and spirit artifacts, and even the somewhat peripheral question of whether the Chinese preserved corpses. The bold but always well-founded stance that Lai takes on these topics combined with the richness of source material and exemplary nature of his approach make this volume a true milestone in the study of early religion in southern China. However, although the author acknowledges the singularity and limited reliability of many of his sources, he nevertheless uses the terms “China” and “Chinese” rather freely without making clear how

¹² For example, see remarks on the methodological basis (p. 200f., n. 13), and remarks on the book as providing a regional perspective (p. 67, n. 197).

far this “China” may have extended spatially or temporally. Lai is probably right in pointing out that “Chu and its adjacent areas in southern China have contributed tremendously to the formation of early Chinese civilization” (p. 191), but the leaps that he takes from singular local discoveries to inferences on early Chinese religion as a whole seem overly bold at times. In my eyes, this book is therefore first and foremost an exemplary multi-resource and multi-disciplinary study of changes in mortuary religion in one specific region of China, i.e., Chu and its adjacent areas in southern China; how much these local developments influenced mortuary practices and beliefs in other parts of China will hopefully be the subject of future research.

ANKE HEIN
University of Oxford

LOTHAR LEDDEROSE and HUA SUN, eds., *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China, Sichuan Province 1*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014. xx, 445 pp, 36 ill., 240 plates. €148 (hb). ISBN 978-3-447-06932-8

SUEY-LING TSAI and HUA SUN, eds., *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China, Sichuan Province 2*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2015. xii, 448 pp, 26 figs., 248 plates. €148 (hb). ISBN 978-3-447-10267-4

This pair of folio volumes represents the culmination of four years of collaboration between scholars at the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and specialists from Peking University along with the Institutes of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Sichuan Province and Chengdu Municipality. Part of the larger book series “Buddhist Stone Sutras in China 中國佛教石經,” they focus on the inscribed Buddhist texts at the seventh-century Buddhist site of the Grove of the Reclining Buddha (Wofoyuan 臥佛院) in Anyue 安岳, within which is found Sichuan’s earliest and greatest number of carved sutras, which, at 341,300 characters, is the most extensive in the world (vol. 1, 17). Both volumes are lined with mapped aerial photos that show the two main sections of the site. Color coded, these photos are further divided into subsections A through H and then used as the basis for structuring the text that follows. Exemplary in terms of documenting the Buddhist texts inscribed at the site with photographs, rubbings, and transcriptions, both volumes are well organized, consistent in their approach to each cave and the documentation of each text as compared with those found within the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, variations being listed in the footnotes. The bilingual nature of the volumes—Chinese and English—makes them structurally dense, but accessible to a broader audience.

The first volume contains a preface by Sun Hua 孫華 followed by two essays: one by series editor Lothar Ledderose explaining Wofoyuan across time and space, the other an essay by Stephen Teiser on the *Lotus Sutra* and its importance at the time of the site’s creation. The first volume then analyzes Caves 1 and 2. The essays in both volumes are building blocks for constructing the greater narrative of how Wofoyuan may have functioned in the early medieval period. Considering each of the Buddhist texts carved at the site within a greater social and historical