[Review] (Liu Zunzhi: Auxiliary Surrounding Structures of Han Dynasty Tombs. Case Studies on Tombs of the Nobility and Small-and Medium-Sized Tombs)

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Reviewed by Eric Bouteiller (PhD candidate EPHE-PSL, CRCAO)

This timely book shines a new light on archaeology of the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE), collecting almost all the recently published data concerning above-ground funerary features of tombs left by Han era social elites. It includes numerous high-quality maps, drawings, and photographs from published excavation reports. The focus of the book is an area often neglected by archeologists in China, who are usually fixated on underground architecture – and the “treasures” therein – in isolation from above-ground facilities, thus de-contextualizing the tombs. Han period graves are very complex structures with often lavishly decorated underground chambers, and features above ground that include all sorts of funerary monuments, such as memorial halls and offering shrines, but also a wider range of facilities built within extensive cemetery gardens.
Liu Zunzhi received his PhD in archeology from Zhengzhou University in 2007 and has authored or co-authored over 90 archaeological reports and research articles, mostly focusing on Han Dynasty burials. He started his archeological career at the Xuzhou Museum (Jiangsu). Xuzhou, the birthplace of the founder of the Han Dynasty Liu Bang, is one of the richest cities for Han Dynasty remains, at the same level of the two Han capitals (Chang’an and Luoyang). Liu Zunzhi is now a professor of archeology at Nankai University in Tianjin. This new center is developing capabilities in archeology and hopes to catch up with heavyweights in archeology from Beijing, Xi’an, Jilin, and Nanjing.

The remarkable growth of the Chinese economy has led to a “golden age of archeology”. This is due both to the boom in infrastructure development and real estate construction resulting in extensive excavation activity and an increased awareness of, and new resources provided for, archeological work in recent years. There is more to read today regarding archaeology in China than for any other part of the world, with an “ocean of findings and excavation reports”. While there are no official statistics, it has been estimated that more than 50,000 Han tombs have been discovered since 1949. However, only a fraction of related reports have been published. In the introduction, Liu explains that he spent nearly a decade collecting data for this study. He estimates, thanks to abundant historical records, that during the entire Han period there were 1688 nobles (liehou 列侯) who were granted territories and buried in large tombs. However, only 140 of these tombs have been discovered so far. Thousands of other tombs, the resting places of those from the lower ranks of society, have been excavated in each province. Facing this “ocean of data,” there is an urgent need for synthesis and theorization. Chinese archeologists have already done some very promising studies in this regard, but these are mostly limited to specific regions and the findings are often hidden away in unpublished academic theses. Liu Zunzhi’s book is an essential step in synthesizing the numerous excavation reports to get a fuller overview of the four centuries of the Han period.

Liu does not include those unexcavated imperial mausoleums with significant above-ground features which have previously been studied in detail. His focus is on the kings (zhuhou wang 諸侯王) and the aristocracy (liehou) whose members had the social status and economic resources to build mausoleums composed of vast underground multi-chamber tombs and above-ground cemetery gardens. He also presents his findings on the social class below the aristocracy, with “small and medium tombs.” The analysis of this data constitutes only one tenth of the book (75 pages), but it is very important for understanding the burial practices of those affluent social classes not belonging to the aristocracy.

Beyond the simple collection of data, this book is groundbreaking in its focus on above-ground architectural features. Chinese archeologists are usually concerned only with rescuing artifacts and generally disregard anthropological research questions. Objectively, Han tombs are very rich in art treasures, and the official policy has been to retrieve these artifacts. As one archaeologist told me, “We only get on stage after the bulldozers have hit a tomb, so nothing remains on the surface.” However, the above ground context provides numerous indications about what lies underground. A recent publication on the discovery of Baling 霸陵, the tomb of
Emperor Wen of the Han 漢文帝 (202–157 BCE), is a good example of how the quality of information obtained when actively looking at above-ground features can improve archeologists’ capabilities in deducing the location of a mausoleum and the identity of the owner.\[5\]

At first glance, Liu's study seems limited in scope, but it collects all the details that enable us to understand the “system” built around a tomb and go beyond mere treasure hunting. These details make it possible to re-contextualize a tomb. The author describes many types of remains that can be shortlisted as follows:

- enclosures around cemetery gardens, such as walls, fences or ditches;
- entrances of the cemeteries with que 閥 (stone pillar gates), roads, and stone sculptures;
- pits and trenches accompanying the tombs, filled with offerings, such as cattle or yong 俑 (figurine servants) serving the tomb owner after his death;
- memorial halls and offering shrines used during burials and later rituals;
- hydraulic systems to collect and drain the runoff water inside the tombs or the funerary enclosures. The largest mausoleums often include ponds and pools used to store water and maybe to decorate the gardens. There were also wells, which provided drinking water for the people working on-site and perhaps also served ritual purposes.
- cemetery garden, with tumuli, the natural topography, artificial landscapes and vegetation.
- workshops, kilns, and stone quarries used to produce building materials. Sometimes, tombs and graveyards are enormous and require a large amount of pottery, tiles, bricks or stones which had to be locally produced.
- human settlements, including housing for people guarding and maintaining the site. These are difficult to analyze as the remains are often only tiles and pillar bases. In some cases, temporary installations for the workers who built the tomb are also recorded.

The author's list of above-ground features is quite exhaustive, but one dimension is missing. That is the tombs' localization and the topographical context which can help answer the key question of how the burial site was selected. From a traditional Chinese perspective, it would be interesting to compare the location with Chinese geomantic practices (fengshui 風水). The question is not a simple one. In the same graveyard, there can be tombs of almost the same period which are oriented in exactly opposite directions. No unique model applies. Perhaps some of the variations are due to the families' choices. From an urban planning point of view, the location of tombs could also provide an important clue about the social practices of the Han period. Tombs were located outside of cities, but how far away? Were they in “forbidden” areas, or, on the contrary, placed in open and visible locations? Many more questions could be raised about, for example, the organization of graveyards. At some sites, hundreds of tombs from the Han era can be found in one place, but the logic of their spatial organization remains to be studied.
The structure of the book is a compromise among several perspectives. Liu starts with the tombs of the kings. Due to the abundance of materials available, this part is split into two different chapters focusing on the Western Han period (202 BCE–8 CE) and the Eastern Han period (23–220 CE). Chapter three presents the tombs of the nobility. Chapter four focuses on the expansion of sacrificial infrastructures, including offering shrines and memorial halls for the elite as well as small and medium tombs throughout the period under consideration. According to Liu, these developments are probably due to the increase of economic resources and the evolution of practices and beliefs. Chapter five describes above-ground remains of small and medium tombs. It is very difficult to tell who the owners of these tombs were (as opposed to those tombs described in the previous chapters). Liu Zunzhi is aware of the importance of social context in archeological work and research. His PhD thesis focused on the relationship between tombs and society during the Han period. However, on this question, Liu is constrained by the available sources. Most excavation reports have limited information on tomb owners because the archeologists did not spend enough time on this question.

Chapter six explains the “system” behind the structures found above ground. However, this attempt stops at the descriptive stage. Liu merely states that there were many different practices, which varied according to the social origin of the tomb owner, the location, and the time of the burial. He does not attempt to identify “models” of tombs and their above-ground features. Liu could have used quantitative data and analysis to discern patterns, for example, in the frequency of each type of remains. The book would have also benefited from an index to enable the reader to cross search data by function, geographical location, and period.

This book does not fully explain the role of above-ground features in funerary behaviors during the Han period. This is not the fault of the author but primarily due to limitations in the data available (from excavation reports) and the methodology used to obtain that data. This shows the current limits of Chinese archaeology as a discipline, which is dominated by relic rescue projects and the saving of artefacts jeopardized by the steamroller of economic development. It is to be hoped that, in the future, Chinese archeologists will be able to spend more of their time and resources to follow stratigraphy and fully explore tomb surroundings to capture the burial contexts better.

In summary, this book offers a substantial and complete database on the context of Han tombs from the social elites that will facilitate to reaching a more complete understanding of funerary practices in the Han period. The implicit message of the author is also a loud call to the Chinese archeology community to “slow down” and consider the above ground features of tombs.


Liu Qingzhu 刘庆柱 estimates that 30,000 Han tombs have been discovered from 1949 to 1999 (“Qin Han kaoguxue wushinian 秦汉考古学五十年” [Fifty Years of Archeology of the Qin and Han Dynasties], Kaogu 考古, no. 9 (Sept. 1999), pp. 35–50, see p. 39). Since then, thousands of excavation reports of Han tombs have been published.

For example, over one thousand alone in the province of Zhejiang, which was at the periphery of the Han empire at that time (Hu Jigen 胡继根, Zhejiang Hanmu 浙江漢墓 [Han Tombs in Zhejiang], Wenwu Chubanshe 文物出版社, 2016).


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