

THE EMBRACE OF BODY AND SOUL

In archaeology, one basic issue is “the concept and operation of classification.”¹ The ten thousand objects housed in the Mancheng tombs fall, in both functional and morphological terms, into two major groups that I categorize as “outfits” and “instruments.”² An outfit clothed, equipped, or decorated the body. These consist of small, portable, and personal objects, such as hairpins, belt hooks, seals, and swords, and usually feature no legs (or bases) on which they could stand on their own but sometimes have holes so they can be suspended from the body. Either worn or carried, they traveled with the human subject. In contrast, instruments, including kitchenware, couches, tables, and food vessels, are usually large, heavy, or cumbersome, and often had feet or bases that allowed them to remain firm on a level surface. Rarely related to a specific body part such as the head, neck, chest, waist, or hands, these objects were not made to move with the body but were usually sacrificial objects for the ancestors to eat, see, scent, and so forth.

This binary classification finds historical justification in early Chinese texts, which also juxtaposed “outfits” (*fu*) and “instruments” (*qi*) as the two basic categories of ritual objects. In the *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu*, compiled third century BCE) text, the author recalled that in the good ancient times when rituals were not corrupted, people held orderly sacrifices to the gods and “made sacrificial instruments and outfits in accord with the proper season.”³ According to the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*, dated fourth to second centuries BCE), a proper gentleman should never place too much emphasis on his outfits and instruments.⁴ Ancient Chinese people recognized that what divided these two categories were their differing relationships to the human subject: outfits were to be “worn”

(*fu*) while instruments were to be “used” (*yong*). ⁵

In the thick forest of objects furnishing the Mancheng tombs, it may seem that everything, be it *fu* or *qi*, could be placed anywhere in the chambers, but in fact the distribution of objects is highly regular. Some basic patterns are easy to recognize. For example, the front chamber was filled with various utensils (i.e., “instruments”) but almost no small personal paraphernalia such as garment hooks, seals, hairpins, and mirrors (i.e., “outfits”).⁶ But in the two nested coffins in the rear chamber, we see exactly the opposite: No utensils were deposited at all, and all objects could be put on the human body. In the rear chamber, a space situated between the coffins and the front chamber, archaeologists found a modest number of both utensils and personal items. The same pattern is repeated in Mancheng tomb no. 2 as well as in some other royal tombs from the same period.⁷ Does this variation in object placement, which has always been taken for granted, yield any significance?

In this chapter, through a close analysis of the type and placement of material remains, I will argue that the various interred outfits symbolize the changing postmortem appearance of the deceased. First, I will examine the “jade suit” as the imperishable jade body and man; second, by studying the placement of the objects in their original positions, I will discuss a hitherto ignored ritual outfit in the outer coffin, which was arranged as if it were worn by an invisible body of the deceased. Third, I will show that the outfit in the casket is reduced and scattered without holding to an anthropomorphic form. Next, by situating the three outfits (the “jade suit,” the invisible outfit, and the scattered outfit) in the larger context of the tomb, I will demonstrate that their presence is not a coincidence but rather part of a program of showing the deceased’s varying appearance, which might echo the metaphorical notions of “the form breaking down” (*xingjie*) and “people flowing into form” (*liuxing*) found in early Chinese texts. Finally, I will demonstrate that the spatial arrangement of different objects at Mancheng embodied a religious and philosophical understanding of longevity during the Western Han. The body and soul of the king were harmonized in order to attain an inseparable unity of life (or afterlife), which served as the basis for King Liu Sheng’s political mission of restoring social order and stability among the local people of Zhongshan.

I will begin with the overall structure of the tomb and then proceed to

examine the tomb, layer by layer, from the innermost zone (the inner coffin) to the outermost zone (the front chamber). This chapter will conclude with a discussion of the religious and political meaning of the embrace of body and soul.

ENCASING: THE HORIZONTAL “CHINESE BOX”

The first step in understanding the patterns within the tomb furnishings is to study the architectural setting. This space not only framed all objects within it but also defined their relationships with one another.

As mentioned in the introduction, Mancheng tomb no. 1 is an artificial cave complex cut horizontally into the east slope of Mt. Ling ([map 3](#), [figs. 0.2, 0.3](#)). Visitors could only approach the Mancheng tombs through a lateral door, albeit permanently sealed, which defined the burial space horizontally into *inner* and *outer*. Inside the door, the concealed area was further divided into a front and a rear section. Offerings lay on sacrificial tables in the front, while the coffin rested in the rear. For a human subject standing before the doors, the deceased’s body was located at the “back” of the tomb complex rather than in the center, as in earlier tombs.

Although Liu Sheng’s tomb does represent a new principle of organizing burial space—horizontality, the Mancheng tombs also retained the traditional structure of nested coffins and caskets, which turned the tomb into a kind of multilayer box characteristic of large pit graves during the Shang and Zhou periods.⁸ This fact is most obvious in the rear chamber. Holding the two nested coffins, the rear chamber was designed essentially like a box within a box. The outer case, namely the stone casket, was a compound assembled with stone slabs to imitate a two-room apartment under a hip-gabled roof ([fig. 1.1](#)). The main room in the north ([fig. 1.1](#), no. 8) housed a set of two nested coffins, while the side room in the south was used as a bathroom ([fig. 1.1](#), no. 9). Whereas the stone casket was constructed on site, the wooden coffins, with bronze wheels fitted beneath them, must have been pushed or pulled into the casket before they finally settled on the rectangular stone platform located on the north side of the main chamber.

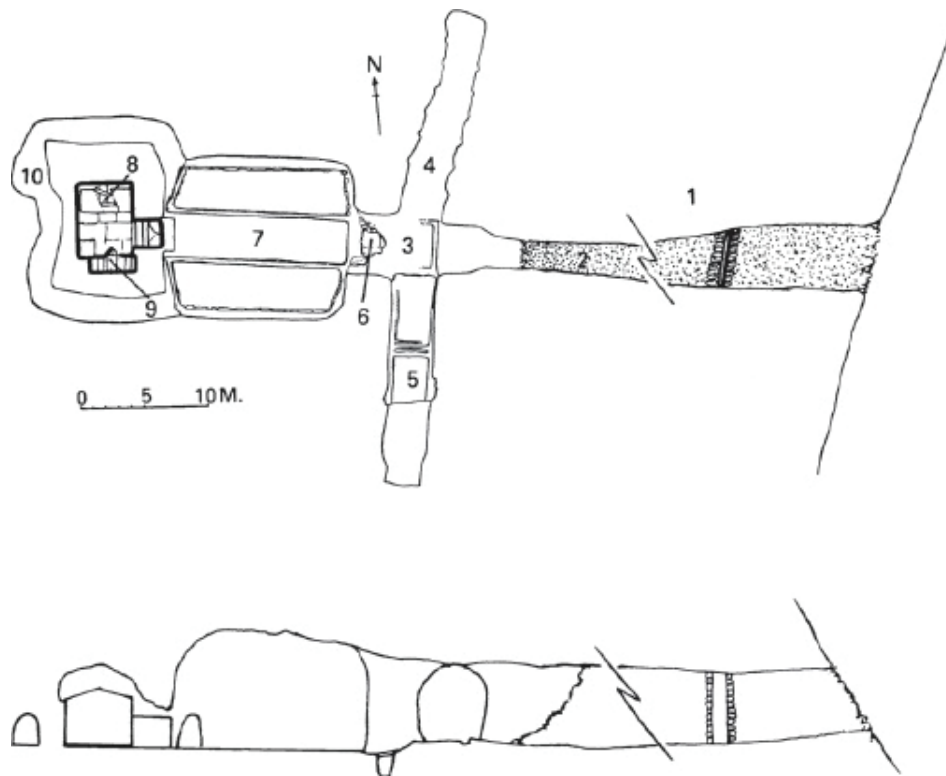


FIGURE 1.1 Plan and section of Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. After Wen Fong, *The Great Bronze Age of China*, p. 325, fig. 111. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

1 Sealed doorway; 2 Tomb passage filled with rubble; 3 Entrance hall; 4 Storage area; 5 Stable; 6 Well; 7 Front chamber; 8 Rear chamber (house-shaped stone *guo* casket); 9 Bathroom; 10 Encircling corridor

Although the front chamber (fig. 1.1, no. 7) appears to be forward of the rear chamber, it was ingeniously modified to also serve as the outermost “box” that encases the rear chamber. The structure that fulfills this role is the gallery surrounding the rear chamber (fig. 1.1, no. 10). Although this gallery might relate to some slightly earlier prototypes found in other Western Han royal tombs (discussed in chapter 3), the architects revised the plan to make the gallery look like a physical extension of the front chamber. Instead of following the traditional practice of opening entries in the walls of a passage between the front chamber and the rear chamber, the gallery opens directly in the front chamber’s rear wall with its two entries (exits) flanking the door to the rear chamber. In doing so, the tomb designer virtually encased the rear chamber within the front

chamber and its connected gallery. Thus the king's tomb (no. 1) was designed essentially as a four-layer "Chinese box," while the neighboring tomb no. 2, which lacks the gallery, appears to be less archaizing.

This intention of editing the tomb plan to make it cohere with the traditional pit grave design finds further evidence in the special modification of the rear chamber. Liu Sheng's stone "house" almost completely occupies the entire rock-cut shell of his rear chamber, leaving only a narrow gap of less than ninety centimeters that was filled in with gravel (fig. 0.3).⁹ In the adjacent Mancheng tomb no. 2, earth was used to fill this gap.¹⁰ This filling transformed the stone house into an architectural interior; no free space was left for a viewer to circumambulate the house and inspect its exterior. At first glance, this extra effort might appear pointless because the stone house could stand on its own without any external structural support. In fact, the practice of filling the exterior space shows the designer's intention of imitating a traditional vertical pit grave, in which the assembled stone casket situated on the floor of a larger earthen shaft was completely enveloped by a wall of earth, sand, or gravel fill. The use of pebbles and ash (or charcoal) as fill was also derived from the local burial practice during the Eastern Zhou period that is referred to in the *Annals of Lü Buwei* (*Lüshi chunqiu*, compiled in the third century BCE) as "filling with stones and charcoal" (*jishi jitan*).¹¹ These walls, which are a hallmark of vertical pit graves, are also called "the second-level ledge" (*ercengtai*) in Chinese archaeological literature.¹² Considering the very limited room for maneuvering between the rock-cut shell and the stone house in the Mancheng tombs, the job of filling this gap with solid materials up to the height of the walls might have been much harder than filling the same interstice in a vertical pit grave, which only required workers to pour down the materials from above and pound them hard. This further increased the labor to install the casket but yielded no real function. However, the determination to include these details reveals the designer's mindset: to preserve, at least partially, the tradition of vertical pit graves, even though the plan of the tomb had fundamentally changed.

The purpose of painstakingly constructing the nested caskets and coffins, even if they were superfluous in function, was to preserve the basic structure of embracing and being embraced. The determination of modifying the otherwise horizontal tomb into a traditional pit grave

shaped the architectural context in which the burial objects were organized into meaningful patterns.

To understand the patterns, as I will explain in the following sections, we are obliged to go through the four zones one by one. Within the four-layer architectural structure of Liu Sheng's tomb, it makes better sense to begin with the innermost coffin and move outward to the outer layers of the tomb. Moving from inside out is also possible because the centrifugal process represented the ancient perspective implied in the *Book of Rites*: The tomb contains "the *guan* coffin all around the clothes (*yi*); the *guo* casket all around the *guan* coffin; the earth all around the *guo* casket."¹³ Moving in the outward direction, the deceased's "body" is constantly dissolving.

THE SOLID APPEARANCE OF THE KING

What sits in the very center of the nested coffins is the king's hardest "body," represented by the imperishable humanoid "jade suit" (or *yuyi*), which is the conventional name for a special type of funerary outfit uniquely made during the Han period (fig. 1.2, no. 173).¹⁴ The nature of jade suits hinges upon the metaphorical identity of body and clothing in Western Han China.

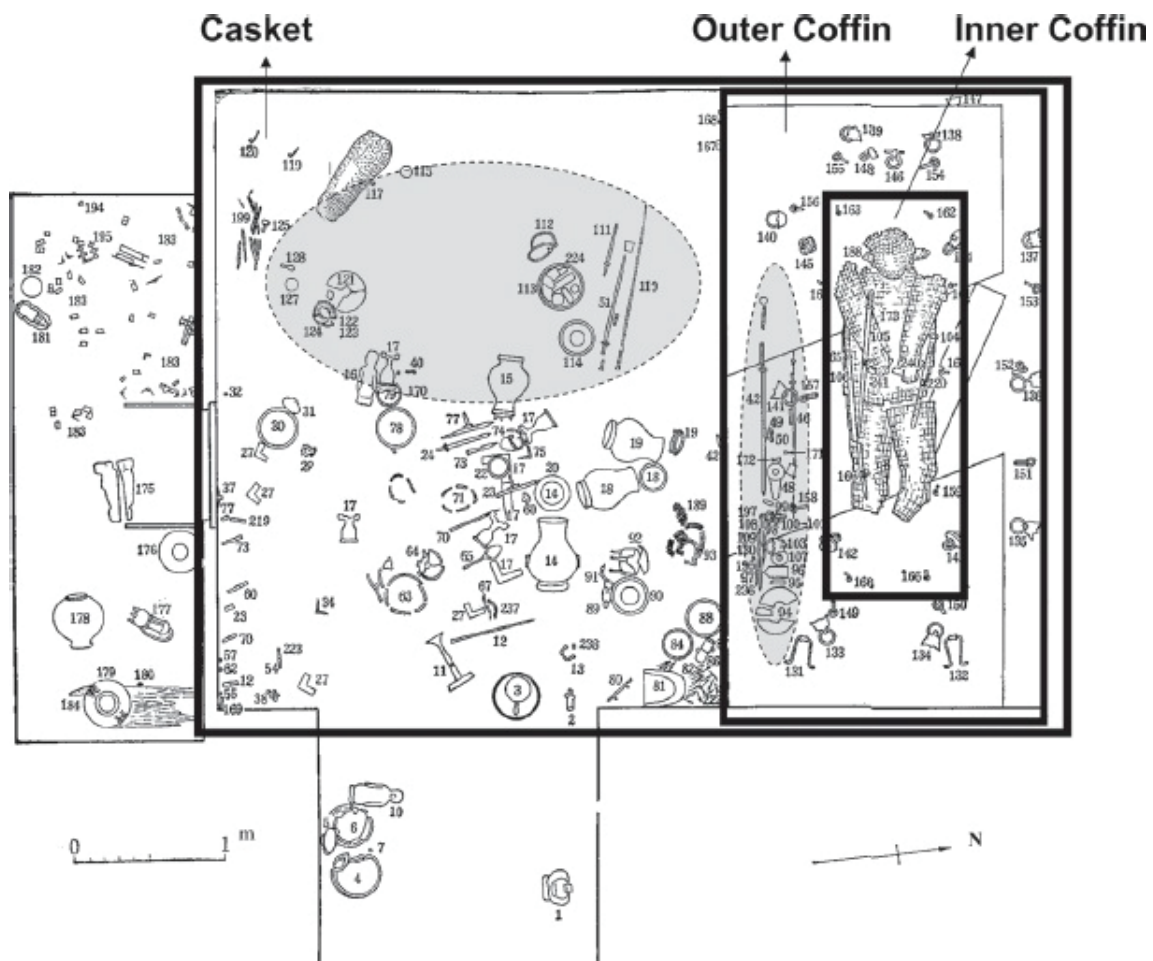


FIGURE 1.2 Plan and layout of rear chamber in Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE, with the location of the outfits highlighted. After Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo, *Mancheng Han mu fajue baogao*, 1: 31, fig. 17. Courtesy of Wenwu Press.

1 Stone figurine; 2 Bronze crossbow trigger; 3 Bronze incense burner; 4 Lacquer platter; 5 Lacquer winged cup; 6 Lacquer platter; 7 Bronze ring; 10 Stone figurine; 11 Bronze lamp; 12 Iron stick; 13 Iron U-shaped object; 14 Bronze *hu* vessel; 15 Bronze *hu* vessel; 16 Stone figurine; 17 Bronze ornament of lacquer table; 18 Bronze *hu* vessel; 19 Bronze *hu* vessel; 20, 22 Bronze cauldrons; 23 Iron halberd; 24 Bronze sword; 27 Bronze ornament of lacquer table; 29 Bronze ornament; 30 Lacquer platter; 31 Lacquer winged cup; 32 Bronze fitting on lower end of ceremonial pole; 34 Bronze zoomorphic ornament; 35–37 Bronze zoomorphic masks; 38 Bronze coins; 40 Bronze belt hook; 42 Iron sword; 46 Bronze sword; 48 Jade disc; 49–50 Jade belt hooks; 51 Bronze sword; 54–55, 57 Bronze fittings on lower end of ceremonial pole; 60 Bronze ceremonial pole finial; 62 Bronze fitting on lower end of ceremonial pole; 63 Lacquer wine container; 64 Bronze tripod; 65 Bronze spoon; 67 Iron arrowhead; 70 Iron stick; 71 Lacquer platter; 73 Iron spear; 74 Bronze cauldron; 75 Bronze zoomorphic ornament; 77 Iron halberd; 78–79 Bronze cauldron; 80 Iron axle; 81 Bronze dustpan; 82 Bronze arrowhead; 84, 86–87, Bronze lamps; 88 Lacquer platter; 89 Bronze figurine; 90 Bronze incense burner; 91 Bronze zoomorphic ornament; 92 Iron heater; 93 Bronze coins; 94 Jade disc; 95–96 Jade tablets; 97 Bronze knife; 98 Jade disc; 99 Jade ring; 100 Jade pendant; 101 Jade hairpin; 103 Bronze zoomorphic mask; 104 Iron long knife; 105–106 Iron swords; 107 Jade disc; 108 Iron knife; 109 Iron short sword; 110 Iron

sword; 111 Iron sword; 112 Lacquer box; 113 Lacquer toiletry box; 114 Lacquer platter; 115 Lacquer box; 117 Iron armor; 119–120 Silver shield ornaments; 121 Jade disc; 122–123 Glass winged cups; 124 Glass platter; 125 Iron hammer; 126 Painted lacquer fragment; 127 Lacquer box; 128 Bronze scoop-shaped object; 130 Carnelian bead; 131–132 Bronze pulley with iron bracket; 133–141 Bronze zoomorphic masks; 142–145 Bronze wheels; 146 Silver zoomorphic mask; 147–148 Bronze zoomorphic masks; 149–158 Large bronze coffin ring pulls; 159–166 Small bronze coffin ring pulls; 167 Bronze zoomorphic mask on a lacquerware; 168 Bronze hinge; 169 Iron baton; 170–171 Jade seals; 172 Jade figurine (“old jade man”); 173 Jade suit; 175 Stone figurine; 176 Bronze basin; 177 Bronze lamp; 178–179 Bronze *lei* wine jars; 180 Clay seal stamp; 181 Bronze lamp; 182 Bronze gilt incense burner; 183 Bronze fitting from object; 184 Rubbing stone; 188 Bronze pillow; 189 Gold bullion; 190 Bronze door security lock; 194 Bronze ceremonial pole finial; 195 Iron hinge; 196 Iron short sword; 197 Iron knife; 199 Iron bow handle; 219 Bronze fitting on lower end of ceremonial pole; 220 Gold belt buckle; 222 Iron arrowhead; 223 Jade cylinder ornament; 224 Bronze mirror; 236 Iron knife; 237 Iron handle; 238 Square iron object; 240–241 Jade half-rings

Worn by the corpse from head to toe, the jade suit, as its name implies, represents clothing. Perhaps to evoke the sense of using textiles, artists broke the hard material into 2,498 jade pieces and “sewed” them together with 1,100 grams of gold wire (fig. 1.3). The size of the pieces, which are mostly rectangular but occasionally circular, triangular, rectangular, or rhombic, varies in area from fifteen square centimeters to just one and a half square centimeters. The edges of the jade pieces are pierced by a series of small holes. Gold threads pass through these holes and suture the pieces into twelve individual sections, each covering a particular part of the body: the front and the back of the head, the front and the back of the torso, the two arms, the two hands, the two legs, and the two feet.¹⁵ Once assembled, the twelve sections form an almost seamless human shape. Although no traces of silk or fabrics were discovered inside the jade suit, the excavators did uncover a jade belt hook and a jade seal, which further suggest the symbolic (if not actual) presence of clothing.¹⁶

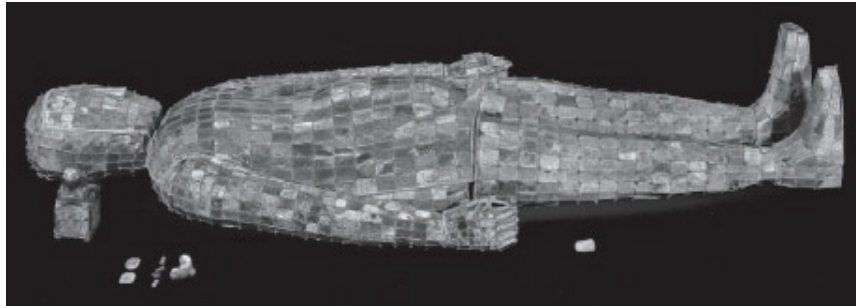


FIGURE 1.3 Jade suit from Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. Courtesy of Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang.

The jade suit was not only a variation of traditional shrouds used to wrap a corpse. In fact, that purpose could have been fulfilled by the conventional method of covering the corpse tightly with multiple layers of clothes in order to isolate the physical remains from the corrosive natural forces of air, water, and earth, as well as flesh-eating insects.¹⁷ By Liu Sheng's time, the belief in wrapping the body so as to preserve it had become so deeply rooted in people's minds that rejecting that custom might have triggered deep controversy. For example, a commoner named Yang Wangsun (fl. late second century BCE) shocked his son and friends by requesting that his body be buried naked without any clothes. His argument for this unusual request was based on the belief that wrapping his body with clothes would deter the natural transformation (i.e., the decay of the body) that, from the Daoist perspective, was part of a healthy process.¹⁸ If the jade suit was a substitute for traditional shrouds, why did the Western Han designers bother to invent a new and far more costly covering that simply filled the same role as an existing burial device?

To answer this question, we must note some fundamental differences between a jade suit and traditional shrouds. The most obvious distinction is materiality. Regular cloth shrouds were soft and plastic, but the jade suit was hard and brittle. Hence, jade was unsuited for making clothing.

But jade, or nephrite, had the advantage of being so hard that it was considered immortal, while regular shrouds made of fabrics easily perished. For thousands of years, jade had been the primary "magic" material for the ancient Chinese, who believed it safeguarded the body from decay. Whereas the first use of jade in tombs occurred as early as

the Neolithic period,¹⁹ the practice of systematically covering corpses with jade ornaments dates directly back to the elaborate and coherent assemblage in the cemetery of the marquises of the Jin state at Tianma-Qucun, in present-day Houma, Shanxi.²⁰ A typical Zhou set of burial jades consisted of a face cover and chest ornaments. The face cover utilized a piece of cloth ornamented with a group of jade appliqués to sketch a fantastic human face, sometimes with stylized mustaches, eyebrows, hair, and even facial decorations.²¹ The chest ornament consisted of a lavish group of jade pendants, including *bi* discs, *huan* rings, *huang* half-rings, and other small wearable ornaments such as beads that were strung together into a great “necklace.”²² It has been suggested that these jade body decorations were a probable origin of the Han jade suits.²³

Unlike their Jin precedents, which were jade ornaments attached to textiles that might or might not possess magic powers, Han jade suits usually had no ornamentation and were totally independent of textiles. Rather, they formed a protective container; they completely encased the corpse unlike any regular clothing. This may be why jade suits were referred to in later Eastern Han texts as *yuxia* (jade caskets).²⁴ Although the word *xia* literally means “casket,” a container meant for concealment and enclosure,²⁵ it could also be interpreted as “armor” because the archaic pronunciations of the two words “casket” (*xia*) and “armor” (*jia*) are almost identical.²⁶ Perhaps because of this synonymous relationship, Wei Hong (fl. first century CE) made the following observation: “(The makers of jade suits) transform the jade into a jacket which looks like a piece of armor bound by gold wires.”²⁷ Not coincidentally, the small thin pieces of jade suits and the way they are bound together recall the weapon-making technique of scale armor, which is also found in the king’s rear chamber.²⁸ Fragments of a possible prototype of jade armor were recently brought to light in some late Warring States royal tombs in Henan and Hebei,²⁹ but the best-known example of such stone armor was found in the First Emperor of Qin’s necropolis. In 1999, the discovery of a sacrificial pit in the mausoleum revealed dozens of sets of heavy, brittle helmets and armor.³⁰ Like a jade suit, each suit of armor was made of small stone plaques with holes around their edges so that they could be bound together with bronze wires. The kinship of jade suits to armor reinforces the former’s magic

protective power that is derived from the imperishable materiality of jade.

But Liu Sheng's jade suit was more than armor because it not only clothed and protected the human body but also accurately traced its entire shape.³¹ It was humanoid. The jade suit wrapped the whole corpse from head to toe, while a real suit of armor and helmet (or their stone funerary counterparts) only shielded certain critical parts of the body.³² Even though some two thousand years of natural erosion had reduced the royal remains to a two-millimeter-thin layer of ash, the jade suit—once tightly wrapped around the body—still preserved the king's disintegrated physical image on his coffin-bed in the rear chamber. What's more, once assembled together, the head, face, torso, limbs, hands, and feet added up to a full naturalistic body in the round, characterized by saggy eyes and mouth, protruding nose, slightly bulgy belly, fleshy butt cheeks, and precisely modeled thighs, calf muscles, and fingers (fig. 1.3). Another jade suit excavated from the Shizishan royal tomb in present-day Xuzhou, Jiangsu Province, even includes two nipples on the front of the chest.³³

The practice of making humanoid jade suits was not without conceptual parallels. In late Eastern Zhou and Western Han literature, Chinese authors used the phrase “jade body” (*yuti*) as a metaphor for the rulers' fragile health.³⁴ A medical text excavated in an early second-century BCE burial at present-day Zhangjiashan, Hubei, outlined the belief that leaving the five organs empty would “benefit the jade body” and keep it healthy.³⁵ From this perspective, the humanoid jade suit might have been the actualization of this metaphysical concept. However, in another more likely theory, as I have suggested elsewhere, the jade suit in Mancheng tomb no. 1 probably was meant to represent a “jade man” (*yuren*) that was not only imperishable per se but also magically capable of granting life and extending the reign.³⁶ Even the less magic “stone men” (*shiren*) had imperishable bodies and lived forever. According to Sima Qian, Empress Dowager Wang (d. 125 BCE) once admitted that her son—Emperor Wu—could never live an eternal life like a “stone man.”³⁷ If a stone man would never die, a jade man—made of what was the hardest and most beautiful stone known to the ancient Chinese—would certainly last forever. Furthermore, jade was believed to be a medium that connected the human and the spirit, a role that ordinary stones could not fulfill.³⁸ In the use of a “jade man” or a “stone man,”

there was no negative indication of jade or stone being fragile and brittle, such as in the concept of “jade body” (*yuti*); they fit in better with the funerary context at Mancheng, where preservation of the corpse was a primary concern.

Despite its undeniable naturalism, Liu Sheng's jade suit was by no means a perfectly faithful imitation of the human body. Although the jade head was fashioned in a naturalistic manner, the incisions for the eyes and mouth are so thin that they are barely recognizable; and, in fact, the ears are completely omitted. Also, the “jade man” is not entirely naked. For example, unlike the hands, where each finger was crafted in a realistic manner, the feet are represented as wearing shoes (fig. 1.3).³⁹ Furthermore, a group of small wearable items was found both inside and outside the jade suit. Within the jade suit, there were a group of *bi* discs, face covers, a necklace, a garment hook, and a seal; outside the jade suit, there were some swords and ritual jades. These objects were usually grouped together as an outfit to decorate the human body. If the jade suit only represented the human body, it would appear nonsensical for some of the personal items to be found inside the jade “body.” Hence the placement implies the idea that the jade suit is part of a larger outfit that covered the deceased body.

Therefore, the jade suit was neither a mere representation of clothing nor that of a human body. It was not even a juxtaposition of the two archetypes. Instead, the complex jade suit merged the notions of body and clothing so that the two grew into each other and could not be easily separated. This inseparable intertwining testifies to the metaphorical relationship between the two. Clothes wrap, frame, and resemble the natural body within them. The twofold meaning of the jade suit perfectly embodies this relationship.

In early China, as demonstrated by the hybrid jade suit and the jade man described earlier, a noble person's costume and his or her appearance were metaphorically bound together. In the Eastern Zhou ethic, a cultivated gentleman could never put aside his clothing, which was considered a symbolic extension of his physical body. Even ghosts were always visualized as being clad in clothes rather than naked.⁴⁰ This is probably because, as a passage from the *Discourses of the States* (*Guoyu*) nicely puts it: “Clothing is the external pattern (*wen*) of the heart,” the very core of the body.⁴¹ According to an author of the

Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chunqiu fanlu* , compiled in the second to first centuries BCE), while the human body was located at the center of the universe (between heaven and earth), the clothes upon it represented the gods of the four cardinal directions of the universe.⁴² Hence the inseparable relationship between body and clothing resembles the relationship between the universe's center and its peripheries.⁴³

The metaphorical relationship between body and clothing is by no means unique to early China. In many cultures of the world, clothing is not only a metaphor for the wearer's physical body but also the "social skin" that merges into his or her social body.⁴⁴ From a phenomenological point of view, clothing is a default part of the human experience of "the picture of our own body which we form in our own mind," which psychologist Paul Schilder called the "image of the body."⁴⁵

Modern theorists have also realized that the metaphorical identity of body and clothing worked in death as well as it worked in life. Archaeologist Joanna Sofaer, ruminating on the ontological status of the corpse, has critiqued the view that biological death shifted the ontological perception of the body by turning it from a subject to an object and claimed that "the human skeleton may retain a social presence in death even though it becomes inanimate."⁴⁶ In fact, what modern archaeologists see as "human skeletons" might have been fleshy bodies clad in different clothing in the eyes of the ancient funeral participants. Nevertheless, the traditional divide between the living body as a cultural subject and the dead body as a natural object was untenable, for "bodies will always be both, albeit in different and changing configurations."⁴⁷ These contemporary theories, though not derived from a Chinese context, are an illuminating footnote to the metaphorical relationship between body and clothing in Western Han.

Indeed, this indisputable truth is clearly demonstrated in the social distinction of jade suits in Han China. Only emperors, kings, and marquises (and their principal wives) were eligible to receive jade suits, which were divided into three grades. According to the imperial norm during the Eastern Han dynasty, emperors could use gold wires to connect the jade plaques, kings could use silver wires, and marquises, only bronze wires.⁴⁸ If this rule also applied during the Western Han period, then the Zhongshan king and queen must have been given the

exceptional imperial privilege by the emperor to use gold wiring. Because it was reserved exclusively for royalty, in this sense, a “jade man” also meant a royal person.

If the jade suit represented the perfect, incorruptible body, where was the soul in the inner coffin? It must be noted that besides the jade suit, Liu Sheng’s corpse was also equipped with a group of jade pieces used to cover the so-called “nine orifices” (*jiuqiao*), including the two eyes, two nostrils, two ears, the mouth, the anus, and the genitalia. Fashioned into the right sizes and shapes to fit the different bodily parts, all these items appeared in the corresponding locations: the eyes, nostrils, ears, and mouth covers above the neck, and the anus and genital capsule below the belly. Some of these objects, such as the anus plug, were physically inserted into the human body. Jade was deliberately chosen as *the* proper material, for people in the Han dynasty might have generally believed that, as specified in a later statement by Ge Hong (285–343 CE), “when gold and jade are inserted into the nine orifices, corpses do not decay.”⁴⁹ The reasoning behind this belief was that plugging the bodily orifices with magic jade would make the soul unable to leak from the body and thus keep the body in a “living” state.

Regardless of such artificial intervention, the body and the soul were imagined as being in a natural relationship. To explain the abstruse mechanism of body and soul, the philosopher Wang Chong (27–ca. 97 CE) made a lively analogy in his philosophical treatise titled *Balanced Discourses* (*Lunheng*):

Take a sack and fill it with millet or rice. When the millet or rice has been put into it, the sack will be full and sturdy and will stand up in clear view so that people looking at it from a distance can tell that it is a sack of millet or rice. Why? Because the shape of the sack bespeaks the contents. But if the sack has a hole in it and all the millet or rice runs out, then the sack collapses in a heap and people looking from a distance can no longer see it. The spirit of man is stored up in his bodily form like the millet or rice in the sack. When he dies and his body decays, his vital forces disperse like the grain running out of the sack. When the grain has run out, the sack no longer retains its shape. Then when the spirit of man has dispersed and disappeared, how could there still be a body to be seen by others?⁵⁰

In Wang Chong’s analogy, clothing frames the body, which in turn frames the soul. Put otherwise, the soul fills the body, which in turn fills the clothes. The three layers of things are hence metaphorically united. In light of this analogy, the orifices of the perfect human body (“jade suit”)

were plugged with pieces of jade to stop the soul (Wang Chong's "grains") from escaping from the body ("sack") and prevented the corpse from decaying (the "sack" collapsing and no longer visible).

In the funerary context, the apparently futile and paradoxical use of the jade suit (to pretend the body was incorruptible) and the jade plugs (to pretend the soul remained in the body without leaking) on the deceased king nonetheless demonstrate a wishful thinking, if not a magic technique, of keeping the royal tomb occupant immortal even in death.

However, the solid and seamless body of the royal subject lost its form in the outer coffin, while the plugged soul was no longer restricted.

THE INTANGIBLE APPEARANCE OF THE KING

The outer coffin was an important ritual component in early Chinese burial.⁵¹ As part of a set of multilayer burial devices consisting of nested coffins (*guan*) and caskets (*guo*) used to conceal the dead, the outer coffin appeared in China as early as the Neolithic period as additional protection for the corpse.⁵² During the Eastern Zhou period, with the theoretical justification of this practice, this simple protective device became a symbol of the social status of the deceased—the more layers one had, the higher his or her rank.⁵³ By the second century BCE, however, this rule was no longer strictly obeyed. Some layers could be reduced or omitted. Although in ritual codes it is prescribed that a king should have five layers of caskets and coffins,⁵⁴ Liu Sheng's horizontal tomb, strictly speaking, only consisted of one casket and two nested coffins.⁵⁵ If the use of nested coffins in Liu Sheng's tomb departed from pre-Han mortuary conventions and no longer appears to be a direct indicator of the deceased king's royal status,⁵⁶ for what reason was Liu Sheng's outer coffin added?

Answering this question requires us to examine the outer coffin more closely. Before the excavators opened Liu Sheng's outer coffin, they probably did not expect to see the variety of objects concentrated at the side of the inner coffin. With the inner coffin pushed to the northern side of the outer coffin, a long narrow area was cleared on the south side in which objects could be placed (fig. 1.2). All the objects in this area were small, portable, jade or metal articles, including a hairpin (fig. 1.2, no.

101), a seal (fig. 1.2, no. 171), some swords and knives (fig. 1.2, nos. 42, 46, 97, 104–106), belt hooks (fig. 1.2, nos. 49–50), and ornamental pendants (fig. 1.2, nos. 98–100)—all designed to be part of a ceremonial outfit. The presence of such ritual props as *bi* discs and *gui* tablets, which were held in the hands, attests to the ritual function of this outfit.⁵⁷ Unlike the jade suit, which was an imperishable piece of work and remained almost intact upon discovery, many of these objects in the outer coffin were probably attached to a ritual robe, which did not survive. Because there is only one hairpin, one bead, two belt hooks, one seal, two long swords and two short swords, a few knives/tools, one *bi* disc, one *she* ring, and one *huan* ring, the ritual objects can form no more than one set, indicating that there might have been only one outfit and presumably one robe. No lacquer remains were reported in this area, suggesting these objects should have been laid out directly in the outer coffin, presumably on the ritual robe, without being contained in boxes.

This outfit was associated with Liu Sheng rather than any real or symbolic human attendant or sacrifice. The evidence is fourfold. First, the shape of the square jade seal (fig. 1.2, no. 171) ornamented with a freestanding roaming hornless dragon or tiger matches exactly the form of an imperial seal (fig. 1.4b).⁵⁸ Although this beautiful object was uninscribed and blank, its royal ownership is unquestionable.⁵⁹



FIGURE 1.4 Two jade seals from (left) Liu Sheng's *guo* casket and (right) outer coffin of Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. Courtesy of Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang.

Second, the handheld *gui* tablets (fig. 1.2, nos. 95–96) were ritually

entitled to male royal family members. Western Han emperors would hold jade tablets to attend the imperial heavenly cult.⁶⁰ The extensive presence of weapons further suggests the subject must be male because few weapons appear in women's tombs, a gender issue I will elaborate on in [chapter 2](#).

Third, among the ritual ornaments and props, the excavators also uncovered a jade figurine ([fig. 1.2](#), no. 172; [fig. 1.5a](#)) presumably carried by the owner of the outfit for religious purposes.⁶¹ The inscription carved on the base of the statuette claims: //// ([fig. 1.5b](#)), or in English: "This is an old jade man [that possesses the power to] extend the prince's life by nineteen years."⁶² Such prophetic texts for prolonging life were not uncommon in early China. Almost always associated with members of the ruling class, they usually begin with the explicit heavenly omen (e.g., the jade man or the movement of Mars) and end with the prophecy of extended life.⁶³



FIGURE 1.5 (a) Jade figure from the outer coffin of Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. (b) Inscription on bottom of jade figure identifying it as “an old jade man.” Courtesy of Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang.

Fourth and finally, a small carnelian bead (fig. 1.2, no. 130) uncovered beside the knives around the waist of the invisible person in the outer coffin is identical to the other beads of a necklace worn around Liu Sheng’s neck inside the jade suit within the inner coffin, implying a shared identity.⁶⁴

All the evidence supports the fact that the outfit should belong to a male king who shared his identity with Liu Sheng.⁶⁵ This also means the owner of the blank seal should also be the deceased king, who was yet to determine what his honorific title would be in the afterlife.⁶⁶

The practice of placing empty outfits in the outer coffin to give the tomb occupant an extra layer of clothing was not exceptional during the

second century BCE. A slightly earlier example was found in Fenghuangshan tomb no. 168 (dated early second century BCE), occupied by a fifth grandee (*Wudafu*) (rank no. 9) aristocrat.⁶⁷ In this tomb, while the corpse in the inner coffin remained bareheaded, the outer coffin contained two silk hats in the east interstice between the two coffins, just above the head-level of the recumbent corpse. While the corpse wore a pair of linen shoes, another pair of silk shoes appeared in the west interstice between the two coffins, just below the foot level of the corpse. In addition, a wooden cane was placed on top of the outer coffin, approximately at the position of the arms.⁶⁸ In terms of position, all these items corresponded exactly to the affiliated parts of the deceased's body as if these objects, though detached from the corpse, formed an extra outfit for the human remains beyond the inner coffin. Although no silk or cloth has survived from Liu Sheng's outer coffin, in another Zhongshan royal tomb occupied by one of Liu Sheng's descendants, remains of such fragile materials were found on top of the outermost three coffins.⁶⁹

However, the outfit in Liu Sheng's outer coffin was different from its precedents at Fenghuangshan or other sites in terms of placement. Most of the objects of the outfit were positioned as if they were worn by an invisible person lying in the same orientation as the corpse ([fig. 1.2](#), marked gray area in the outer coffin). Texts, paintings, and archaeological remains from the Han period give us a clear idea of how various pendants usually appear on the body: (1) Belt hooks always define the level of the waist, from which all kinds of pendants are hung. In Liu Sheng's outer coffin, two belt hooks lie together ([fig. 1.2](#), nos. 49–50). (2) A sword is usually attached to the waistband from a clasp on the scabbard. This clasp is located approximately at the midpoint of the entire sword, dividing the weapon into two equal halves. In Liu Sheng's outer coffin, the long swords precisely flank the two belt hooks, which divide the swords into two equal halves ([fig. 1.2](#), no. 42). (3) Seals are often fastened to a ribbon that hangs slightly below the waist, sometimes contained in a leather purse suspended from the waistband.⁷⁰ In Liu Sheng's outer coffin, accordingly, between the long swords, the seal appears right below the belt hooks ([fig. 1.2](#), no. 171). (4) Jade pendants including *bi* discs, *huan* rings, and *she* rings normally are suspended farther below the waist. In Liu Sheng's outer coffin, all the pendants appear below the belt hooks and the seal ([fig. 1.2](#), nos. 98–100). (5) The

small swords and knives usually appear right below the waist, and in the outer coffin, they do so below the long sword on the left. In Liu Sheng's outer coffin, all these objects are positioned as if they were worn by a person who lies in the same orientation as the corpse (fig. 1.2, marked gray area in the outer coffin).⁷¹

All these metal or jade objects in the outer coffin served as a suite of portable ritual paraphernalia. They were all physically associated with particular body parts: The hairpin was worn in the hair; the swords and knives, seal, ornament, and garment hooks decorated the waist; the discs and the tablets were held in the hands. Even with minor displacement or dislocation, many of the objects were arranged precisely as their counterparts in the inner coffin: The jade ornaments appeared in the center, and the weapons flanked the ornaments on both sides. This arrangement looks as if an invisible body inhabited the outfit.

The arrangement of the objects in the outer coffin was the result of great care. While in earlier or contemporary tombs the outer coffin was usually only slightly larger than the tightly encased inner coffin and was furnished with only a small number of ritual jades, such as *bi* discs or *gui* tablets, pendants, textiles, or cosmetics,⁷² Liu Sheng's outer coffin contained a relatively spacious area, in which a large group of jades and metal objects was deposited to the south of the inner coffin (fig. 1.2, marked gray area in the outer coffin). This design was impractical because, with so much additional room, when the nested coffins were moved into position in the tomb, the unsecured inner coffin could easily slide or tip over, damaging the corpse and objects inside. This also suggests that people used extra care while transporting this nested burial device steadily and securely over the long distance from the royal home, where the funeral was usually held, to the cemetery. This additional cost of human energy spent in maintaining this open space attests to the importance of maintaining the unworn state of the outfit within it.

The carefully positioned and preserved outfit further recalls the metaphor of clothing and the body. The political philosophy of the same period furnished this metaphor with a special meaning. From this perspective, an ideal ruler, void of desire or ambition, takes no actions, and "his body is like a motionless, hung robe (*weiyi*)." ⁷³ In the *Annals of Lü Buwei* text, the sage king Yao, in the remote past is portrayed as one whose effective ruling cost him little effort: "Yao's appearance was

like a hung robe, which means there were few (administrative) affairs.”⁷⁴ Reflecting upon the endless turbulence and power struggles of his own era, the scholar Jia Yi (201–169 BCE) lamented on the lost golden age of Chinese antiquity when, even in the absence of the king, the world remained in good order and ministers reported dutifully to the ruler’s hung robe as if he were present in it.⁷⁵ In these texts, a ruler’s empty clothing became a metaphor for the royal subject.

In the funerary context, the deceased’s outfits were considered the most common symbol of his or her appearance during rituals. In the Eastern Zhou ritual, the presence of the ancestor was enacted by an impersonator (*shi*)—another form of metaphor—who dressed up to imitate the departed spirit. However, during the Western Han period, the ancestor’s empty clothing replaced the human actor to evoke the supernatural presence. During the funeral, after the corpse had been put in the coffin, the deceased’s clothes often took the place of and stood in for the concealed, invisible body. After the funeral, the ritual of the monthly parade of hats and robes (*yue you yiguan*) of the departed emperor demonstrated the metaphorical relationship between clothing and the wearer’s physical appearance.⁷⁶ The procession started at the retiring chamber in the necropolis, where the cultic apparel and outfits were worshiped, then stopped at the ancestral temple to receive a sacrifice, and finally returned to the tomb. According to Michael Loewe, “Presumably the purpose for the conveyance of the imperial clothes was to symbolize a journey that was being undertaken by the emperor to a place where he would receive honors, i.e., from the *ch’in (qin)*, where he received four meals daily, to the *miao*, where he was entertained with the more special offering that was presented only once monthly.”⁷⁷

Even in daily life, the clothing of the deceased could index his or her absent appearance. One touching episode took place in 78 CE, two hundred years after the death of Liu Sheng. Emperor Zhang (r. 75–88 CE) of the Eastern Han dynasty sent a few clothes of his deceased grandmother to his uncle. In his enclosed letter, the emperor expressed his kind wish that his uncle would look respectfully at these clothes from time to time to visualize the appearance of his mother, whose physical remains had been forever hidden in her mountain-like mausoleum.⁷⁸

Rather than being distributed around the inner coffin, as seen in the Fenghuangshan case, the objects in Liu Sheng’s outer coffin were

arranged to simulate another invisible body lying next to the corpse in the inner coffin. In doing so, the furnisher of the coffins emphasized that the burial objects in the outer coffin were assigned not to the corpse, as was the case in the Fenghuangshan tomb, but to another independent, invisible form of the king, existing outside the inner coffin.

Why did Liu Sheng have to possess a second form, albeit a metaphorical one, through the empty outfit, in addition to his unique physical form? The ontological state of this additional form is fourfold. First, it maintains a human shape; second, it is invisible; third, it is of a (dead) person; fourth and last, it exists outside the deceased's physical remains. While the first two conditions apply to all spirits,⁷⁹ to accord with the latter two conditions, the subject must be the soul of a deceased human subject. For a person about to die, his or her soul was imagined as lingering beyond and hovering above the body. And this was the moment when the ritual of "summoning the soul" (*zhaohun* or *fupo*) took place. Because people in early China usually assumed that the departed soul would never remain naked without clothes,⁸⁰ a ritual specialist would ascend to the rooftop, waving a robe in his hands and calling the wandering soul to come back. At last, the soul was imagined as if it were in (or wearing) the robe, which was then brought down and put on the dying person, so as to introduce the escaping soul back into the body. When this effort of reuniting the body and soul failed, the person would be declared dead, and the dislodged soul would wander farther and fade away.⁸¹

The deceased's clothing, once attached to the soul, would assume certain agency and appear "alive." According to Ban Gu, the deceased Emperor Ai's (r. 7–1 BCE) spirit clothing originally concealed in a box once suddenly disappeared by itself:

On the day of *yiwei*, the "spirit outfit" (*shenyi*) at the Yi Mausoleum was concealed in the wooden case (*xia*); in the morning of the day of *bingshen* [the next day], however, the outfit made its appearance on the outside bed (*waichuang*).⁸²

This incredible incident, which took place in 1 CE, was interpreted as the previous emperor's soul expressing his anger at the powerful minister Wang Mang (45 BCE–23 CE), who was plotting to usurp the imperial throne. Located in the emperor's aboveground "funerary resting

chamber” (*lingqin*), this magic “spirit outfit” was surprisingly similar to the mysterious outfit in Liu Sheng’s outer coffin as they were both concealed in a wooden case.

Because Liu Sheng’s outer coffin surrounded the inner coffin from above and beside, the outfit in the outer coffin occupied an enclosed space that was both beyond and above the inner coffin, where a hovering soul was supposed to linger. If the inner coffin held the perfectly undamaged (or rather, unbreakable) body—the jade suit that symbolically withheld the trapped soul, the outer coffin seems to have contained the almost intact soul that had wandered out of the body. In the outer coffin, despite the absence of the physical body, the invisible soul “wearing” the outfit without dispersing still maintained the form of the body.

However, as the soul began to dissipate, its integrity must rely on consuming the sacrifice. This is exactly what happens in Liu Sheng’s casket—the stone house-shaped chamber.

THE DISSOLVING APPEARANCE OF THE KING

Encasing the outer coffin, Liu Sheng’s *guo* casket contains another outfit in the west that registered the deceased’s dissolving appearance (fig. 1.2, marked gray area in the casket), while a banquet of food and wine in the east arrests the soul and prevents it from dissipating completely.

Like the two previous outfits in the inner and outer coffins, this outfit also belongs to Liu Sheng. With the absence of sacrificed attendants in this chamber, all the life-sized objects can only be worn by the deceased, whereas miniaturized figurines were usually equipped with miniaturized artifacts.⁸³ Not coincidentally, this outfit includes an uninscribed jade seal that is almost identical to the one found in Liu Sheng’s outer coffin, confirming the invisible master’s royal identity (fig. 1.4a, fig. 1.2, no. 170).⁸⁴ In the aforementioned story of Emperor Ai’s spirit outfit, it suddenly vanished from the secret case and appeared in the “outside bed.” Such an “outside bed” corresponds well with Liu Sheng’s stone casket.

However, in contrast to the elaborate, well-arranged ritual outfit in the outer coffin, the one found in the *guo* casket is much reduced and less organized in several aspects.

First, in typology, the pendants are reduced to the essential assemblage of a belt hook (fig. 1.2, no. 40), a seal (fig. 1.2, no. 170), a *bi* disc (fig. 1.2, no. 121), and three swords (fig. 1.2, nos. 51, 110, 111). Further, there are no decorative jade pendants, which are replaced by small lacquer toiletry cases for cosmetics. The different standard of dress suggests that the subject of this outfit was engaged more with such personal and relatively casual issues as beautification rather than with formal ceremonies.

Second, in terms of location, whereas the lavish outfit in the outer coffin was restricted to a narrow zone about thirty centimeters wide, the reduced outfit was loosely spread across an area three-and-a-half-times wider, even though the lengths of the two outfits are almost identical (approximately two meters).⁸⁵ It looks as if the deceased's form was spreading out. In accordance with the casual occasion, toward the east, a lavish banquet is centered on a large low dais surmounted by a small table. As in imperial rituals, the most honored figure usually took his or her position in the west. The outfit to the west of the table clearly represents such a figure facing toward the east.

Third, in terms of placement, the outfit no longer abides by an anthropomorphic form. Although the belt hook (fig. 1.2, no. 40) and the seal (fig. 1.2, no. 170) are located together in the middle of the spread-out area, the rest of the objects do not fall into the relative positions seen in the outfit of the outer coffin. Rather, they separate on the two sides. On the northwest side are a toiletry case set (fig. 1.2, no. 113), an individual lacquer box (fig. 1.2, no. 112), and the swords (fig. 1.2, nos. 51, 110, 111); on the southwest side are a *bi* disc and two individual lacquer boxes (fig. 1.2, nos. 115, 127).⁸⁶ As a result, even though the symbolic presence of the deceased is obvious, we are unable to recognize the shape of his body or its orientation.

In Liu Sheng's tomb, all these differences contribute to a progressively disintegrating state of clothing from inside to outside. More importantly, given the metaphorical relationship between man and clothing, as the outfit is breaking down, dispersing, and diminishing, so is the deceased's invisible appearance that is wrapped and framed by the outfit. The inner coffin contains Liu Sheng's jade suit, which encases the naked corpse with a jade *bi* disc, a belt hook, two seals, and three swords (the same essential pendant group as in the casket) and

represent the concrete human body with a head, a torso, four limbs, and even facial features. The second outfit in the outer coffin frames the deceased's invisible and flexible body in a human form. The last outfit in the casket refers to the appearance of the deceased but rejects the anthropomorphic form. Beyond the deceased's physical body, his outfit gradually breaks down until it diminishes into a *bi* disc and a group of swords that are completely unrelated in space in the front chamber as I will demonstrate in the following section.

But why was the deceased's outfit that frames his body, which in turns frames his soul, gradually melting away? The concept of *xingjie* (literally, "body dissolution") may best capture the nature of this process. Although in medieval Daoism this term is often translated as "release from the form,"⁸⁷ in the Western Han religious context, its more literal translation, "body (*xing*) dissolution (*jie*)," seems more accurate. In the *Shiji* text, Sima Qian reported that a few magicians from the Yan region "practiced the way of transcendence, broke and melted down their forms, and followed the affairs of ghosts and spirits."⁸⁸ After the topic word, *xing* (form), the author juxtaposed three synonymous verbs: *jie* , *xiao* , and *hua* , to describe the magical changes to the body: The first verb, *jie*, literally means to break down (from whole to parts), the second verb, *xiao*, to melt down (from solid to liquid), and the third verb, *hua*, to ontologically transform (from human to divine). Although Sima Qian reduced the complex process to only these three abstract words, the material evidence in Liu Sheng's tomb visually simulated the same process with the gradual variation of the king's outfit.

This process of the devolving human appearance vividly echoes a theory of death seen in the writings of Wang Chong. To support his point that death was but a natural process and that belief in ghosts was a deceptive fantasy, he adopted a rhetoric that compared people with ice: "The vital force produces man just as water becomes ice. As water freezes into ice, so the vital force coagulates to form man. When ice melts it becomes water and when a man dies he becomes spirit again. He is called spirit just as ice which has melted changes its name to water."⁸⁹

These and other related discussions of death paint a graphical picture of body and soul as different but mutually transformable states of matter. The body and the soul are essentially two different states of one and the

same substance called “breath” (*qi*). The less pure, heavier breath solidifies into a humanoid shell (*xing*) to hold the lighter, gaseous “purified breath” (*jingqi* , or the *hun*) that inflates it. When death occurs, the no-longer-functioning (broken) shell immediately releases the pure breaths from within and slowly melts down to a fluid state (*po* , perhaps) that is to be preserved underground.⁹⁰

In Liu Sheng’s tomb, from inside to outside, while the deceased’s outfit gradually loses its solidarity and anthropomorphic form, the deceased’s humanoid appearance is becoming less and less concrete, just like solid ice slowly melting into liquid water, that is, it “becomes spirit again.”

In Wang Chong’s ice analogy, the process of *xingjie* is reversible because as naturally as ice melts into water, water freezes into ice. So if *xingjie* describes the passage of death, then its antithesis must describe that of birth. Indeed, reversing the process of *xingjie* is conceptualized as *liuxing* (“flowing into form”). In excavated texts from the Eastern Zhou and Han periods, the birth of people is imagined as *liuxing*.

In a bamboo manuscript titled *Ten Questions* (*Shiwen*) excavated from Mawangdui tomb no. 3, the legendary ruler Huangdi asks the sage Rongchengshi a set of questions related to health preservation and life extension. The fourth question, which brings out the longest answer in the whole text, concerns the desirable secret of longevity. Huangdi inquires: “When people first dispense the purity that flows into the form, what is obtained so that life occurs? When flowing into the form produces a body, what is lost so that death occurs?”⁹¹ In this text, an axiom is established: In the beginning, “people” are formless breath or water; later, they are flowing into an anthropomorphic form and become solid and complete “figures.” In Rongchengshi’s answer, the fluid vital elements only “flow into forms” when the subject takes in pure natural vapor and breath. In another manuscript from Mawangdui tomb no. 3, the related term *liuxing* () was clearly interpreted as the first month of gestation. As Donald Harper has cogently explained, the question was about “how intercourse and conception lead to the production of a life.”⁹² Without doubt, those who believed in this theory of birth might easily imagine death as the opposite process of reducing the humanoid fetus back into formless semen.

This idea of humans flowing into the form was taken up and

integrated into a number of philosophical treatises and acquired a political implication. In the “Water and Earth” (*Shuidi*) chapter (dated by scholars to the fourth century BCE) of the *Guanzi* text, the author promotes a political philosophy grounded in ontology and ethics of water as the metaphor for good rulership.⁹³ One of the key arguments that support water’s fundamental role in the world maintains that “human beings are made of water. As the semen and breath of men and women unite, water flows into form.”⁹⁴ The belief that the human body is essentially a form filled with some fluid vital matter (semen, breath, or water) might find its root in the belief of water as the origin of the world and the true nature of the ultimate way (*Dao*).⁹⁵

According to this theory of reversible transformation between body and spirit (soul), the dissolution of the body means the increasing leakage and diffusion of the spirit. As the *Book of Rites* claimed, once liberated from the body, “The soul in its energy can go everywhere,” while “that the bones and flesh should return to earth is what is appointed.”⁹⁶ This result of the natural process of death reveals the urgency to arrest the soul and stop it from wandering away. The stakes were high. If nothing was done to stop the soul from dispersing, the deceased’s “pure breath” might lose its anchor in this world, vanish into the distant sky, and never return to the human world again. The poet Sima Xiangru (ca. 179–117 BCE), in one of his rhapsodies, precisely expressed such a horror brought forth by the incompetent Second Emperor of Qin (r. 210–207 BCE). This unwise ruler did not cultivate himself and listened to malicious words. As a result of his defeat, his ancestral temples were burnt to extinction and tombs were in ruins. “The souls lost their homes and had nothing to eat. They went dark, distant, and extinct without sacrifices. With time passing by, the souls became weaker and weaker, and the spirits diffused and flew up, scaling the Nine Heavens and vanished for good.”⁹⁷

As Sima Xiangru suggested, the soul must be fed to remain strong and stay together. While excavators found nothing but outfits in the coffins, the rear chamber was full of various ritual instruments, offering food, drinks, light, heat, and fragrance to the deceased’s soul to arrest and nurture it.

In the center of the lavish banquet sits a low sacrificial dais and a smaller but taller table.⁹⁸ A group of large bronzes including five

cauldrons (fig. 1.2, nos. 20, 22, 74, 78, 79), a tripod (fig. 1.2, no. 64), four beautifully inlaid wine *hu* vessels (fig. 1.2, nos. 14, 15, 18, 19), and a spoon (fig. 1.2, no. 65), are placed on or around the dais. They constitute a kitchen set. Lighter vessels including dishes and cups constitute the basic tableware. One platter (fig. 1.2, no. 71) originally contained a whole roast suckling pig.⁹⁹ Some other dishes identified by inscription as “royal ramie-cored lacquer plates for grains” (*yuzhu fanpan* 匱) were used to hold rice.¹⁰⁰ All these vessels originally must have been filled with food or wine.

The function of these ritual instruments is simple: They present life-saving substances for the deceased’s soul. Wine and food were believed to be the most important ways of nourishing and satisfying the ancestral spirit.¹⁰¹ An inscription made on one of these bronze wine pots explicitly relates the activity of banqueting to the sustaining of the deceased’s physical soundness (fig. 1.6): “With happy hearts [let us] gather in banquet. The occasion is grand and the fare sumptuous. Let delicacies fill the gates and increase the girth, and offer long life without illness for ten thousand years and more!”¹⁰²

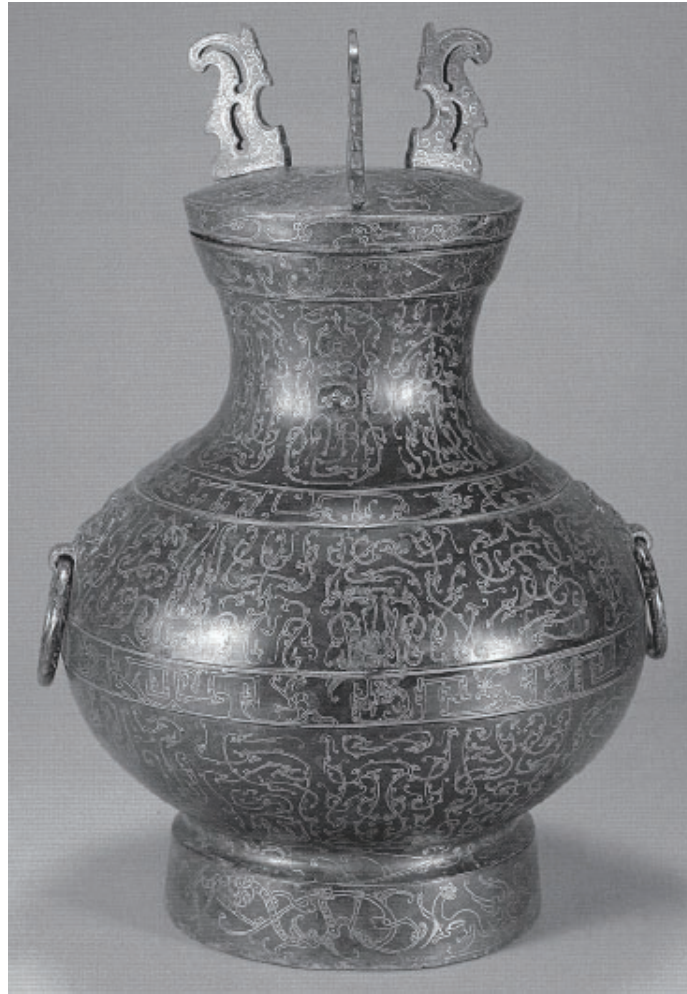


FIGURE 1.6 Inlaid bronze *hu* vessel bearing bird script inscriptions from the rear chamber of Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. Courtesy of Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang.

To increase the power of attraction, other instruments were added to the banquet. Four lamps (fig. 1.2, nos. 11, 84, 86, 87), two incense burners (fig. 1.2, nos. 3, 90), a heater (fig. 1.2, no. 92), and a bronze dustpan (fig. 1.2, no. 81)¹⁰³ flanking the couch to the east and the northeast sides supplied fragrance and heat. In this bright, aromatic, and warm atmosphere, figurines made of “deathless” stone or bronze are scattered here and there among the vessels to assist or entertain the soul. A unique bronze figurine (fig. 1.2, no. 89) amuses the banquet host. This disproportionate dwarf features a large head, a short body, and puny legs.¹⁰⁴ These attendants “humanize” the static ritual setting into a lively scene of banqueting. In the minds of Western Han subjects, these ritual

instruments could attract the deceased's soul like magnets attract iron.

In fact, this assemblage was not a Western Han invention but was developed from an earlier practice during the Eastern Zhou period. One of the best precedents of such banquets came from the well-known tomb of Marquis Yi of the Zeng state (dated to the early fifth century BCE) in present-day Suixian, Hubei. The eastern compartment of the tomb functioned as the casket, in which the deceased marquis's nested coffins were placed, and a seat, indicated by a bamboo mat and several mat weights, was set up to the east of the coffins. A few food vessels appeared nearby. The food in these vessels was supposed to be consumed by the deceased's soul, simulated by an outspreading group of a belt hook, three jade *bi* discs, two jade pendants, and two knives found next to the seat.¹⁰⁵ During the Western Han, the combination of an outfit and a set of banqueting vessels in the *guo* casket was not unique to the Mancheng site but spotted in at least one other intact royal tomb dated slightly later than the Mancheng counterparts and located in present-day Juye, Shandong. In it, the excavators found a small bamboo casket right below the feet of the deceased. Upon opening it, the archaeologists identified such basic outfit items as a bronze belt hook and jade pendants, as well as bronze ritual vessels.¹⁰⁶ This casket turned out to be a modest version of its lavish counterpart at the Mancheng site.

Like all these counterparts, Liu Sheng's stone house-shaped casket tomb was another effort to arrest the deceased king's volatile soul and prevent it from further diffusion. However, Liu Sheng's casket was also distinctive because it was encased by a fourth layer of the tomb structure—the front chamber.

THE EMPTY TENT OF THE KING

The front chamber, which is also the outermost zone of Liu Sheng's four-layer tomb, contains a few outfit items but also includes far more powerful sacrificial instruments to lure the further dissipated souls to come back. Visual and textual evidence jointly confirms that the souls of Liu Sheng and his wife were the expected recipients of the sacrifice.

Whereas Liu Sheng's casket is concealed behind a closed door, his front chamber remains open without gates or doors save for the outer

doorway to the tomb.¹⁰⁷ Occupying the central position in the entire tomb plan, it is the tallest and largest apartment and is larger than all the other four chambers combined. The front chamber in tomb no. 1, for instance, measures 14.92 meters long, 12.6 meters wide, and 6.8 meters tall and is spacious enough to hold a huge party (figs. 0.3, 1.1).¹⁰⁸ In the original plan, a roofed structure was erected in this space with its interior divided into three parallel bays by two parallel grooves chiseled into the floor. These grooves, 0.3 to 0.4 meters wide and 0.2 meters deep, were probably the spots where wooden floor beams and pillars were initially installed to support the roof, which was covered by ceramic tiles. These two grooves shape the space into a standard Chinese hall, with a middle chamber flanked by two side chambers.¹⁰⁹ The intention to imitate a real house is evident.

Unlike the casket, in which the main furnished space is divided evenly into an outfit (representing the appearance of the king) and his banquet, the front chamber has a far more complex floor plan of distributed objects—mostly sacrificial instruments (fig. 1.7). Hundreds of objects surround the two tents installed in the central and southern bays. Although many of the types of objects look familiar, the front chamber gave little indication of the deceased's bodily appearance. Typical "outfit" articles including seals, garment hooks, and mirrors were totally absent in the two tents and the areas around them. Even remains of toiletry boxes were rare. The only portable items uncovered next to the center tent were four swords (fig. 1.7, nos. 246–249), but even they, mixed with long-range arms including dagger-spears (*ge*) and crossbows, were originally fastened onto a wooden stand rather than being suspended from a waistband. Although some jades were spotted in front of the center tent, most of these jade plaques were only carved on one side, leaving the other side crude and unpolished.¹¹⁰ They are most likely ornaments fitted on some disintegrated lacquerware rather than pendants, which are usually carved on both sides and suspended from ritual clothes. The large *bi* disc (fig. 1.7, no. 124) and the small *huang* half-ring (fig. 1.7, no. 133), and a group of gilt bronze plaques (fig. 1.7, nos. 144, 145) located before the center tent, were the only objects that might have possibly been attached to clothing. But isolated from one another across the tomb space, these items' association with an outfit, be it physical or conceptual, remains uncertain. This unique group of objects was more

likely a sacrificial offering to the tomb occupant rather than a reference to the deceased subject's physical existence.

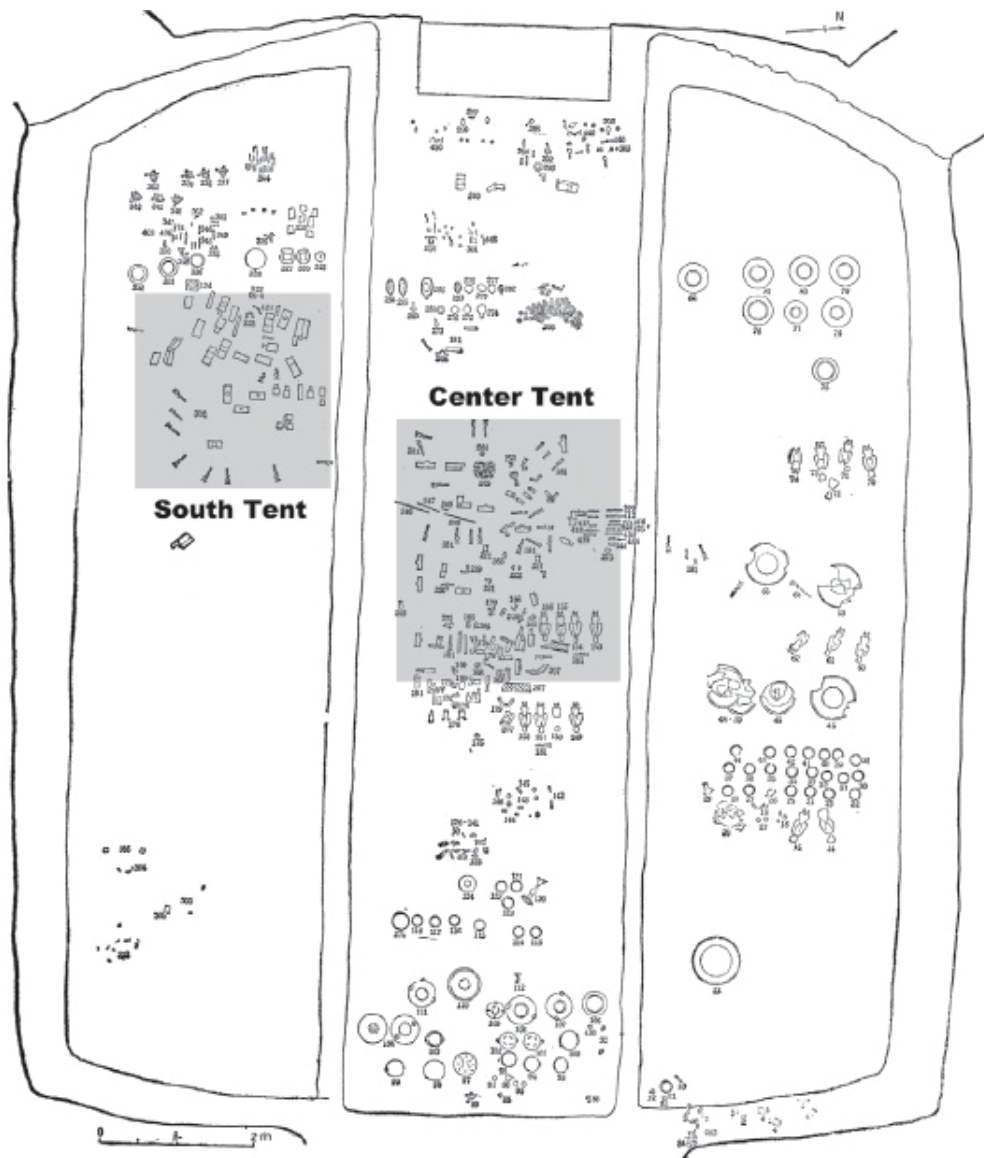


FIGURE 1.7 Plan of front chamber and distribution of grave goods in Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. After Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo, *Mancheng Han mu fajue baogao*, 1: 27, fig. 16. Courtesy of Wenwu Press.

1–10 Jade ornament; 11 Ceramic lamp; 12 Bronze ceremonial pole finial; 13 Bronze basin; 14–15 Ceramic figurines; 16 Three bronze miniature water buckets; 17 Two bronze miniature water buckets with handles; 18 Bronze dildo; 20 Bronze basin; 22–44 Ceramic lamps; 45–46 Ceramic basins; 47 Ivory carving; 48–59 Ceramic basins; 60–62 Ceramic figurines; 63 Ceramic basin; 64 Iron knife; 65 Ceramic basin; 70–74 Ceramic figurines; 75 Ceramic *hu* pot; 76–82 Ceramic jars; 83 Bronze decor; 84 Bronze canopy cap; 85 Bronze decor; 86 Bronze ceremonial pole finial; 88

Bronze decor; 89 Bronze crossbow; 90–92 Bronze ornaments of ceremonial pole finial; 93 Bronze basin; 94 Bronze cauldron; 95 Bronze basin; 96 Bronze scoop; 97 Bronze incense burner; 98 Bronze washbasin; 99–100 Bronze cauldrons; 101–102 Bronze tripods; 103 Bronze cauldron; 104 Bronze steamer; 106 Ceramic *hu* vessel; 107 Bronze *lei* pot; 108 Bronze *zhong* vessel; 109 Bronze chained *hu* vessel; 110 Bronze cauldron; 111 Bronze *lei* pot; 112–118 Bronze lamps; 120 Bronze lamp; 121–123 Ceramic lamps; 124 Jade disc; 125 Bronze zoomorphic ornament; 126–132 Jade ornaments; 133 Jade half-ring; 134–141 Jade ornaments; 142 Bronze tube; 143 Bronze ring; 144–145 Bronze plaques; 146 Vessel foot; 149–156 Ceramic figurines; 163–167 Bronze feline-shaped vessel feet; 168–169 Bronze human figurines; 170–171 Bronze deer-shaped ornaments; 172–173 Vessel feet; 174 Bronze zoomorphic mask (*pushou*); 175 Bronze ring; 176, 178 Bronze ornaments of lacquer table; 179 Bronze dildo; 180 Bronze stacked bowls; 181 Bronze tent fitting; 207 Bronze chained lid of incense burner; 208 Bronze bird-shaped ornament; 209 Iron axle; 219–220 Bronze daggers; 221 Bronze ornament of lacquer table; 222 Bronze ornament of lacquer winged cup; 223 Bronze vessel foot; 225 Iron axe; 226–227 Iron chisels; 246–249 Iron swords; 250 Iron saddle-shaped item; 263 Bronze cup; 264 Bronze ring; 274 Bronze lamp; 275–279 Bronze stacked cups; 280 Silver box; 281 Bronze disc-shaped vessel foot; 282–286 Oval cups; 292 Bronze hook; 293 Bronze disc-shaped vessel base; 294 Bronze bar-shaped ornament; 295 Bronze cup-like object; 296 Bronze hinge; 297 Bone fake horse tooth; 298–299 Bronze frontlets; 300 Bronze chariot wheel-axle cap; 301 Bronze chariot handle; 302–304 Bronze crossbow triggers; 305 Square iron object; 306 Iron hoe; 320 Bronze tent fitting; 322 Iron U-shaped object; 323 Bronze foot from lacquer vessel; 324 Stone figurine; 325 Bronze water clock; 326–327 Bronze *fang* vessels; 328 Bronze *juan* vessel; 330 Bronze cauldron; 331–332 Ceramic jars; 333 Iron hoe; 335 Bronze vessel foot; 336–343 Bronze crossbow triggers; 344 Iron arrowheads; 345 Bronze arrowheads; 346 Bronze tube-shaped object; 347 Bronze knife; 348 Bronze zoomorphic mask; 349 Bronze short sword; 350 Bronze ornament; 351 Bronze ring; 352 Bronze ornament of lacquer winged cup; 403–406 Bronze knives; 412 Iron chisel; 416–419: Iron chisels; 422, Iron chisel; 425 Iron saw; 432 Iron file; 440 Bronze horse bit; 444–445 Iron saw; 450 Bronze horse bit; 468 Bronze crossbow hanger

The absence of an outfit is strongly contrasted by the opulence of ritual instruments in the same space. Traditional sacrificial vessels, usually employed in the context of ancestral temples, surround the tents on both the front and back sides. On the east side of the tent, with all the traditional bronze ritual vessels such as *ding*, *yan*, and *hu* lined up in rows on a lacquer offering table (fig. 1.7, nos. 93–96, 98–105, 107–111), the ritual scenario is unambiguous. On the west side of the center tent, despite the absence of traditional ritual vessels, a group of small cups of different scales was displayed successively from the largest to the smallest in two parallel rows (fig. 1.7, nos. 282–286), all with their handles pointing toward the tent, imitating the solemn and lavish display of tripods in a temple before the seats for the ancestral souls.¹¹¹

These seats were set up in the center of the sacrificial hall, where also stood the two parallel tents, which were empty except for a table

with a couple of wine cups. The central tent sat on the east-west central axis of the tomb in the central bay, which was the most richly furnished area among all three bays (fig. 1.7). This tent, presumably the highest and largest object in the center of the central bay, must have been the visual focus of the whole chamber. According to the distribution of surviving tent fittings on the floor, the central tent measured about 2 by 1.3 meters in area and about 1.84 meters high. A second tent once stood on the west side of the southern bay of the front chamber before it collapsed (fig. 1.7). After reconstruction, this house-shaped structure measured 1.8 by 1.8 meters in area and 1.8 meters tall.¹¹² These two tents are different in several aspects. Although the objects surrounding the two tents generally are similar, the tent to the south is smaller and was outfitted with fewer objects. It is also important to note that the two tents are not entirely parallel: the south tent is located slightly behind the central one.¹¹³ Clearly, the two tents are of the same function but are different in status. Furthermore, there is also an obvious gender distinction: The central tent was accompanied by three swords, which were clear signs of the occupant's masculinity, while the south tent held none, implying femininity.

Scholars have assumed that the central tent was set up for Liu Sheng,¹¹⁴ and the south one for his wife, Dou Wan.¹¹⁵ I find evidence for this hypothesis in an Eastern Han textual record that describes two parallel tents in the ancestral temple in Chang'an, the capital of the Western Han. During the collective sacrifice held every three years, all imperial ancestors were jointly worshiped in the temple of Emperor Gao, the founder of the dynasty, and his empress:

In the Great Collective Sacrifice ... Seats were set on the left and right sides. [The seat of] Emperor Gao faced towards the south in a sloping-roofed tent ornamented with embroidery ... [The seat of] Empress Gao was on the right side, six *cun* (15 centimeters) further back, also in an embroidered sloping-roof tent.¹¹⁶

According to this passage, the imperial couple occupies two parallel empty tents, presiding over the whole ritual space. The husband "sits" on the left; the wife "sits" on the right, slightly behind him. This arrangement generally explains the relationship between the two tents in Liu Sheng's front chamber (fig. 1.7). The same practice of establishing a common

“shrine” in the front of the tomb for the deceased couple while maintaining separate burials at the rear for husband and wife was repeated in many excavated Eastern Han burials.¹¹⁷ This evidence demonstrates that the overwhelming number of sacrificial instruments were presented to the empty seats of the deceased king and queen.

The temple simulated in Liu Sheng’s tomb is conceptually similar to the legendary Bright Hall (*mingtang*), which was one of the royal ritual sites for ancestral worship during the Western Han dynasty. Although the first explicit historical documentation of such a building dates to 110 BCE and the earliest known actual example was erected in 5 CE, similar structures likely had already been in existence since at least Emperor Wen’s reign.¹¹⁸ In Eastern Zhou texts, the *mingtang*, which was metonymous with ideal rulership,¹¹⁹ was described as an audience hall with a circular ceiling and square base, where the sovereign held ceremonial meetings with local vassals.¹²⁰ Liu Sheng’s front chamber is precisely vaulted (as I will demonstrate in [chapter 3](#)—an unfinished dome) at the top and square at the base ([fig. 1.1](#)). The Bright Hall was called “bright” because, according to a Western Han text, its walls bore thirty-six doors and seventy-two windows, so that sunlight could easily penetrate the walls and illuminate the interior from all directions.¹²¹ To emulate the brilliance of sunshine in the Bright Hall, an extraordinary number of lamps were displayed in the front chamber of Liu Sheng’s tomb. In the central bay, the east side was illuminated by eight bronze ([fig. 1.7](#), nos. 112–118, 120) and three ceramic lamps ([fig. 1.7](#), nos. 121–123), all located to the west of the kitchenware. Each lamp had a circular base, a tall and slim stand, and a circular plate with oil and a wick in it. In the northern bay, twenty-three ceramic lamps ([fig. 1.7](#), nos. 22–44) appeared in three parallel rows. Such a lavish display of lamps finds no parallel in any other early tomb. The lamps, which went beyond traditional ritual objects, deepened the religious mood in the ritual hall.

Four of the nine bronze lamps lined up in front of Liu Sheng’s tent each bear an identical inscription, which identifies the device as a “bronze lamp of the Bright Hall of the Forest of Pepper Trees” (*Jiaolin mingtang tongdeng*) ([fig. 1.8](#)).¹²² Whereas the modifier *jiaolin* remains unknown, the key concept of *mingtang* carries a sacrificial meaning that was unmistakable to well-educated Western Han kings.¹²³ According to the formula of Western Han bronze inscriptions, which I will analyze in

chapter 4, this inscription suggests that before the entombment, these objects once had been in the possession of the official treasury of a certain Bright Hall. By being lit with these lamps, the sacrificial hall was somehow compared to the Bright Hall. In fact, inscriptional evidence has shown that by the second century CE, the concept of *mingtang* had been widely used to describe the front chamber of a tomb.¹²⁴



FIGURE 1.8 Bronze lamp with the inscription, “Bright Hall of the Forest of Pepper Trees” (*Jiaolin mingtang*), from Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. Courtesy of Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang.

The practice of simulating a temple in the tomb was against the tradition in which the tomb and the temple of the ancestor were built in separate locations. The former was usually located in desolate suburban

areas, and the latter remained in the city with the living. However, during the late Eastern Zhou period, with tombs gradually growing into a new center of sociopolitical and religious power, more and more ritual facilities developed in or near the cemetery.¹²⁵ This trend continued into the Western Han period with a simple purpose: to keep the soul near, if not in, the body so that the two vital elements of life could remain united as long as possible after death. In 191 BCE, Emperor Hui (r. 195–188 BCE) erected a duplicate temple (*yuanmiao*) for his deceased father, Emperor Gao, right next to the latter's mausoleum, located as far as twenty kilometers to the north of the capital city of Chang'an.¹²⁶ In 72 BCE, Emperor Xuan (r. 74–48 BCE) had an extra temple erected for each of his predecessors and himself next to their mausoleums.¹²⁷ But could the soul be drawn even closer to the body? The closest situation possible would be when a duplicate temple was erected in the tomb itself and directly embraced the corpse, as in the Mancheng site.

It is clear that there is a pronounced contrast between the scarcity of outfits and the abundance of instruments in the front chamber that simulated an ancestral temple. This phenomenon conveys two important meanings.

On the one hand, this suggests that the deceased's originally humanoid soul has almost entirely dissipated, with the near absence of the deceased's outfit. The bereft could only bemoan their beloved's departure. Emperor Wu of the Han clearly expressed such despair with the loss of his favorite lover, Lady Li (ca. second to first centuries BCE):

All at once she was changed and does not turn back,
her soul was set free, it flies away.
Such a baffling blur are the hallowed spirits,
I linger lamenting, I falter in distress.
Her course carries her each day further from me,
and I was bewildered as she took her leave.
Going beyond in a journey westward,
moving swiftly, now unseen.¹²⁸

Facing this abysmal void, the emperor could only appeal to the magic power of sacrifice for making the absent present. A magician named

Shaoweng set up an empty tent at night, lit up candles, and dedicated wine and meat. Miraculously, from the distance, the emperor caught a glimpse of a beautiful lady who “appeared like Lady Li” showing up in the tent.¹²⁹

On the other hand, and in accord with this literary passage, while the deceased’s metaphorical body—the outfit—has almost been reduced to nothing in Liu Sheng’s front chamber, the intensity of sacrifice reaches its peak in order to bring the dispersed soul back. This is exactly the antithesis of the situation in the double coffin, where the king has his firm physical presence but no sacrificial goods. Whereas the *guo* casket is fashioned into an intimate dining room for the deceased’s soul behind a closed door, the front chamber was built on the model of an open magnificent imperial temple.

Turning the front chamber into a desirable Bright Hall—a compliment to the deceased soul as an ideal king—was one of the many baits used to lure the king’s dispersed soul to return as an acknowledged worthy king. In the “Great Summoning” (*Dazhao*) chapter of the *Song of the South* (Chuci), the author enumerated all kinds of desirable things to attract a wandering soul to come back to its previous home. Among the various attractions, “ascend and descend in the hall” (*deng jiang tang zhi*) was one of the greatest worldly pleasures only a few noblemen could afford to enjoy.¹³⁰

Once the soul had descended to the honorable hall, it would be further arrested by a variety of seductive, sensual experiences. The aroma emitted by two incense burners must have suffused the air of the front chamber. The fragrance of the incense would have mixed with the tempting odor released by the cooked food and aromatic wine. Because the soul remains invisible and ethereal, the people in early China imagined that the soul would only consume the vapor of the food and wine rather than the actual substance itself. As the *Guanzi* text relates, “Ghosts and spirits will absorb the breath (*qi*) contained in them, whereas gentlemen will enjoy the taste.”¹³¹

The enthralled soul would be satisfied by taking the privileged seat in the tent and consuming endless supplies of food and wine, stored physically and symbolically in more than six hundred ceramic containers crowded in the tomb’s north side chamber. Representing the royal “warehouse,” this space is directly connected to the front chamber.

Among the vessels are sixteen giant jars each measuring sixty-six to seventy-six centimeters tall and about fifty centimeters in diameter, with a combined capacity of more than a thousand liters. Inscriptions on the shoulders of some of these jars list names of different kinds of alcohol.¹³² Stains on the jar interiors verify that these containers were once filled with liquid. The extraordinary amount emphasized the irresistible power of enticement.

The tempting banquet was accompanied by amusing entertainment. Two little human figurines, both cast in bronze, were placed around the table before the primary tent (fig. 1.7, nos. 168, 169; fig. 1.9). Although initially manufactured as mat weights, the figurines were also vivid statuettes.¹³³ Fashioned to the same scale and employing the same motif, these two objects clearly make a pair. Each man wears a circular pointed hat and a loose robe with half of his torso exposed. Compared with the ceramic figurines, the two half-naked men display non-Chinese physiognomy. Each face is particularly exaggerated with a prominent snout and bulging cheeks, while Han Chinese's visual depictions of themselves usually have a flat face and a low nose. One of the figures opens his mouth in a moment of speaking, chanting, or singing. In response, his companion holds his right palm upright close to his right ear and rests the other palm on his left knee as if he is attentively listening. This posture, reminiscent of the later Buddhist "fear not" mudra, might have impressed the Western Han viewer as exotic and even funny.¹³⁴ Watching such performances was surely an exclusive privilege for the noblest members of society.



FIGURE 1.9 Bronze storytellers from Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. Courtesy of Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang.

Besides delicious food and wine and amusement, sex was another strong motivation for the king's disembodied soul to linger in the sacrificial hall. One of the most astonishing finds in front of the tent was a V-shaped bronze dildo representing two end-to-end joined penises (fig. 1.7, no. 179; fig. 1.10). Another similar bronze penis appears in the north bay of the chamber with two egg-shaped pebbles (fig. 1.7, no. 18), possibly representing testicles, and a third silver penis, whose exact original location remains unknown, also came from this chamber.¹³⁵ The placement of the phalli raises the question of the nature of the space. Although "closed tents" (*weibo*) was a metonym for sex¹³⁶ during the Han dynasty because they were often used to shield sexual activities from public view, none of the dildos was found inside the tents.¹³⁷ Instead, one phallus was laid in front of the primary tent with wine cups and an incense burner next to the ceramic attendants. Another one in the northern bay was situated by the ceramic lamps in one of the brightest areas of the chamber. It seems these sexual instruments were not meant to be concealed but rather displayed. Identified as dildos made for female users during sexual games, these multiple sexual toys represent a randy revelry.¹³⁸ This lustful scenario contradicts, or at least complicates, the solemnity represented by the orderly arranged and dedicated ritual vessels. The place was no longer an ascetic religious one but a secularized occasion endorsing and celebrating the pleasures of the

body. Robert van Gulik masterfully studied the shockingly brazen sadistic tendencies of some Western Han princes, who were entertained by open shows of sexual intercourse between palace ladies and male animals.¹³⁹ The existence of multiple sex toys reveals the carnival nature of the space, which might have been associated with Zhongshan's local culture, as I will analyze in [chapter 3](#).¹⁴⁰



FIGURE 1.10 Bronze dildo and what may be stone “testicles” from Mancheng tomb no. 1, Mancheng, Hebei, ca. 113 BCE. Courtesy of Hebei Museum, Shijiazhuang.

In the aforementioned “Great Summoning” poem, to attract the wandering male soul to roam back to his previous home, the poet devoted a total of twenty-four lines—nearly a quarter of the entire piece—to a lengthy description of beautiful ladies as the greatest temptation:

Ah, the vermeil lips and dazzling teeth, lovely and alluring!
The uniformity of excellence, skillful and imposing!
The well-rounded flesh and fine bones, elegant and
pleasing!
O Soul, come back to solacing and comfort!¹⁴¹

Compared with the less sumptuous banquet in the rear chamber, the enhanced sensuous power in the front chamber was an urgent response to the largely diminishing soul, represented by the absence of the

deceased's outfit. In the "Summoning the Soul" poem, the high thearch orders Shaman Yang to immediately summon back the poet's disembodied and scattered soul (*hunpo lisan*) because it would be too late once the soul completely diffused and withered.¹⁴² To borrow Wang Chong's fire analogy, no matter how feeble a fire is, as long as fuel is supplied, the flame will linger on; but once the fire has been extinguished, there is nothing left to save it.

Liu Sheng's tomb was not an isolated case. Similar sacrificial halls with abundant ritual instruments and few or no outfits also exist in Dou Wan's tomb and in the Hongtushan royal tomb, but the earliest known precursor for all three Western Han royal tombs can be found in the aforementioned Eastern Zhou tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng. In this burial complex of four compartments, while the aforementioned eastern compartment housed a modest banquet next to the marquis's nested coffin, the central compartment was fashioned into a glorious "ceremonial hall" mainly by two groups of ritual vessels and musical instruments, including a set of nine tripods and another set of bells and chimes, on the west and the east sides, respectively.¹⁴³ And in the narrow space between them, the excavators uncovered an armrest covered by a folded mat.¹⁴⁴ This distinct combination of armrest and mat makes an empty seat for the soul. Unlike the empty seat in his casket with wearable articles, Marquis Yi's empty seat in the "ceremonial hall" was not surrounded with remains of outfits, suggesting the general absence of the deceased's soul. The almost identical visible pattern of *outfits* and *instruments* between Marquis Yi's and Liu Sheng's tombs suggests that the idea of a varying soul as visualized in the Western Han royal tombs was deeply rooted in early Chinese religious thought and ritual practice.

Liu Sheng's front chamber stands as the final stage of a four-step transformation beginning in the inner coffin: the total absence of the deceased king's gradually dissolving outfit, which was a metaphor for his dissipating soul that had previously filled the body.

THE EMBRACE OF BODY AND SOUL

In Liu Sheng's tomb, the desire for longevity could not be stronger because the word *shou* (longevity) is the most frequently used concept

in the inscriptions found on a variety of interred objects. By attracting the soul to surround the corpse in the iron-sealed, mountain-cut tomb, the deceased king could unite his body and soul to secure a postmortem immortality.

Although in Liu Sheng's tomb the tomb space was divided evenly into two halves, the rear and the front, the design still retained—deliberately—the traditional practice of nested caskets and coffins. In this four-layer tomb, the distribution of burial objects follows a two-track development from the inside to the outside. On the one track, the king's outfit is gradually breaking down and diminishing, symbolizing his increasingly disintegrated soul. On the other track, the number and types of sacrificial instruments keep increasing, forming an ever-more-powerful means to arrest the soul and prevent it from disintegrating completely.

The attempt to unite body and soul in the tomb was not new but already in existence in the earlier Shang and Zhou tombs. In those tombs, people designed a different model of juxtaposing body and soul vertically in a parallel relationship, with the former below and the latter above. For example, in the tomb of Fu Hao (one of King Wuding's [fl. thirteenth century BCE] consorts), after the inner coffin had been settled into the casket, which rested on the bottom of the 7.5-meters-deep burial chamber, the deceased's soul was housed in an offering hall erected at ground level above the grave.¹⁴⁵ During the late Eastern Zhou period, similar dualistic structures with underground caskets and freestanding halls are seen in the royal cemeteries of the Zhongshan, Zhao, Wei, and Qin kingdoms.¹⁴⁶

Keeping the harmony between body and soul was the key to personal immortality. In the *Zhuangzi* text (compiled in the third century BCE), Master Guangcheng, one of the legendary sages of antiquity, claimed that he had been cultivating himself for twelve hundred years and his body had never withered. When asked for the secret, the master answered: "As for myself, I guard this unity, abide in this harmony, and therefore I have kept myself alive for twelve hundred years, and never has my body suffered any decay."¹⁴⁷ The *Master of Pheasant Hat* text (*Heguanzi*, compiled ca. second century BCE) rendered the same idea in a slightly more abstract way: "When form and spirit are attuned/Life's principles are cultivated."¹⁴⁸ To such Confucians as Xun Yue (148–209 CE), the secret to living longer for those with

benevolent minds lay in their ability to achieve a harmony between body and soul.¹⁴⁹

However, in Liu Sheng's tomb, the same idea of uniting and harmonizing body and soul developed into a more complex and sophisticated graphical model—multilayer embracement. The gradually dispersing soul is artistically fixed around the corpse in a four-layer structure of containing and being contained. Wang Chong described such a model as “an embrace of the bodily breath and flesh and bones.”¹⁵⁰ With the deceased king's soul in the peripheral zones surrounding his physical remains (corpse) in the center, the tomb designer established a repeated pattern of “soul embracing body.” In the inner coffin, the jade suit metaphorically transformed the dead biological body into an incorruptible magic one, while the orifice plugs sealed the soul permanently within. This unity of body and soul was elaborated by two more middle layers: the outer wooden coffin and the stone house-shaped casket. In each of the two intermediary layers, the changing outfits represented the gradually dissipating soul of the departed king. In the outermost layer (the front chamber), even though the soul was absent, it was being called back by enhanced sacrifice as if in a temple setting.

The embrace of body and soul nonetheless ensures that the two basic vital ingredients hold fast to each other and never fully separate. It was believed that the means of achieving deathlessness was the permanent embrace of body and soul, *po* and *hun*, or *xing* and *shen*. In the *Laozi* text, it is claimed that “when the corporeal and the spiritual are held together in one embrace, they can be kept from separating.”¹⁵¹ In the *Zhuangzi* text, when the Yellow Emperor went to Master Guangcheng for the secret of longevity, the master answered: “Your spirit will protect your body, and the body will enjoy a long life.”¹⁵² A passage from the slightly later *Scripture of Great Peace (Taiping jing)*, which was composed under the influence of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, considered the mutual embracement of body and soul as “nature,” and once “you have lost your nature, you will not live long.”¹⁵³

Hence, by repeating the embrace of body and soul four times, the unknown tomb planner(s) guaranteed the actualization of the absolute longevity of the deceased.

The phrase “longevity of the deceased” may sound like an oxymoron. A comparison with Egyptian ideas of the afterlife might shed some light

on the problem. The practice of reintegrating various aspects of being after death to transform the deceased into an immortal being was perhaps a hallmark of ancient Egyptian civilization. The subject of an immortal afterlife was the multicomponent soul. A person, the Egyptians believed, consisted of a physical body and not one but two souls that lived on after his death: a *ka* (kꜣ) soul and a *ba* (bꜣ) soul. The *ka*, or life force, stayed in the tomb with the dead body and demanded nourishment from offerings of food, water, and incense, while the other soul, the *ba*, was believed to fly from the body with the last breath and held to be that part of man that enjoyed an eternal existence in heaven. The ancient Egyptians also trusted that the *ba* occasionally came back to “visit” the body in the tomb and to partake of the food and drink offerings there. Ideally, through ritual, all the parts of the person that had dispersed at death were reunited, and when the *ba* was rejoined with its *ka*, the soul was transformed into an *akh* (ꜣḫ), which was an eternal, perfected, or blessed being that had special powers. The key to the Egyptian practice was to ensure a smooth and successful transformation from this life to the afterlife, which had to pass the judgment of the gods.¹⁵⁴

Although some of the Chinese practices, such as protecting the body and feeding the soul, expressed in the royal tombs at Mancheng apparently echo these Egyptian ideas, fundamental differences separate the two traditions. For the Chinese, as Wang Chong pointed out, body and soul were understood essentially as natural, homogeneous substances (*qi* breaths), like water and ice, rather than different ontologically distinct entities protected by gods as in the Egyptian context. Likewise, the transformation between life and death was considered a more natural rather than supernatural process. Living a long life was good because it was the result of respecting and following the way of nature. For Chinese rulers (especially those who modeled themselves after the ancient sages) during the late Eastern Zhou to early Western Han periods, the ruler’s longevity became an important political issue because the stability of the society and the peace of the world hinged upon his personal health, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters. To avoid death and attain longevity, one must learn the techniques of “cultivating (fixing or managing) the self” (*xiushen* or *zhishen*) as described in many early philosophical texts. The apparently paradoxical pursuit for postmortem immortality in the tomb

could be best viewed as a mirror image of the persistent, albeit unsuccessful, striving for longevity in the mortal realm.