

Excavating the Afterlife

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF EARLY CHINESE RELIGION

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楚地宗教的考古學研究

Calligraphic rendering
of this book's subject,
"archaeological research
on the religion of Chu,"
composed for the author
by art historian and cal-
ligrapher Qianshen Bai.

Introduction

It is hardly revolutionary to suggest that, had the academic study of religions started quite literally on the ground, it would have been confronted with very different problems. . . . This Archaeology of Religions would have been primarily occupied with three broad subjects of study then: religious constructions and architectures, inscriptions, and art historical remains.

—GREGORY SCHOPEN

THIS BOOK EXPLORES changes in religious beliefs and ritual practices in early China by focusing on groups of well-preserved tombs excavated in southern China. Dating from the fifth to the first century BCE, these tombs are not only the place where the early Chinese buried their dead but also the space onto which they projected a range of imaginings, fears, and concerns that arose in connection with the life and death of their kin, friends, and foes, people known and unknown. As such, death is not the end of one's life but entering a new relationship with both the dead and the living. The tomb is a bridge, a way station on the journey to the afterlife, and a physical manifestation of established conceptions of the afterworld. Consequently, the tomb is both the physical space where religious ritual and sacrifice took place and the imagined space in which people's beliefs about the invisible spiritual world unfolded.

This book examines the dialectical relationship between sociopolitical change and mortuary religion from an archaeological perspective. It shows that new attitudes toward the dead, resulting from the social trauma of violent political struggle and warfare, changed the ways early Chinese dealt with their dead, promoted new methods of communicating with the dead and the gods, and engendered fresh conceptions of this world and the hereafter. Each chapter analyzes a different aspect of the burial practices of the Warring States (ca. 453–221 BCE),¹ Qin (221–206 BCE),

and early Han (206 BCE–9 CE) periods in relation to the historical contexts of religious transformations in early China. The rich archaeological discoveries made in recent decades, which include both artifacts and texts, enable us to develop more satisfactory and more nuanced interpretations of early Chinese religion than were possible when scholars depended heavily on the classical written sources that have been transmitted over the past two thousand years.

To survey the ground we will cover and the materials we will encounter, let us begin with two examples of recent archaeological excavations in China.

AT THE END OF DECEMBER 2002, after three months of intensive excavation at the Jiuliandun site in Zaoyang City, Hubei, Chinese archaeologists reached the bottom of two underground tombs (fig. I.1). Resembling inverted pyramids, these tombs were typical of the elite burials in the state of Chu (?–223 BCE) during the Warring States period. The pit in Tomb 1 measures 38.1 meters long, 34.8 meters wide, and 12.8 meters deep at the mouth; the pit in Tomb 2, 34.7 meters long, 32 meters wide, and 11.6 meters deep.² The four slopes of each pit were cut into fourteen steps, focusing movement downward to the bottom of the tomb, where rectangular wooden encasements (*guo*), enclosing the lacquered inner coffins (*guan*) and assorted grave goods, were buried (fig. I.2). Leading to the bottom of the pit, an access ramp (more than thirty meters long) cut through the eastern side. To the west of the inverted pyramidal pits were two rectangular horse-and-chariot burials respectively containing thirty-three chariots and seventy-two horses and seven chariots and sixteen horses. Originally, a hemispheric clay mound covered the top of each pyramidal pit, but this domelike layer had eroded over the last 2,300 years, leaving only a small hill several meters in height at the time of the excavation.³

These mounds formed the first in a series of nine tumuli extending over three kilometers in a south-north direction. The local name of the site, Jiuliandun, meaning “nine linked mounds,” derived from this topography. Four kilometers east of the Jiuliandun cemetery, archaeologists discovered an Eastern Zhou period (771–249 BCE) urban settlement of about 90,000 square meters.⁴ Although further archaeological work is needed to establish the exact relationship between the settlement and the cemetery, it is likely that the elite from that community were buried at Jiuliandun, as was the case with most early Chinese cemeteries set into hillocks on the outskirts of cities.

Legend has it that buried beneath one of these nine tumuli was the gold head of a local lord surnamed Zhao, who, during his lifetime, had served as a loyal, honest, and upright advisor to the king of Chu.⁵ It is told that the Chu king fell under the influence of corrupt and jealous ministers who slandered Lord Zhao. The king then captured, tortured, and beheaded him. Soon after the execution, the king discovered the truth of the matter. Full of regret, he ordered a lavish burial for Lord Zhao. However, since his rivals had already destroyed Lord Zhao’s head, the king



Fig. I.1. Aerial view of the two Warring States Chu elite tombs (Tomb 1, the husband's, on the right; Tomb 2, the wife's, on the left) at Jiuliandun, Zaoyang City, Hubei. Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

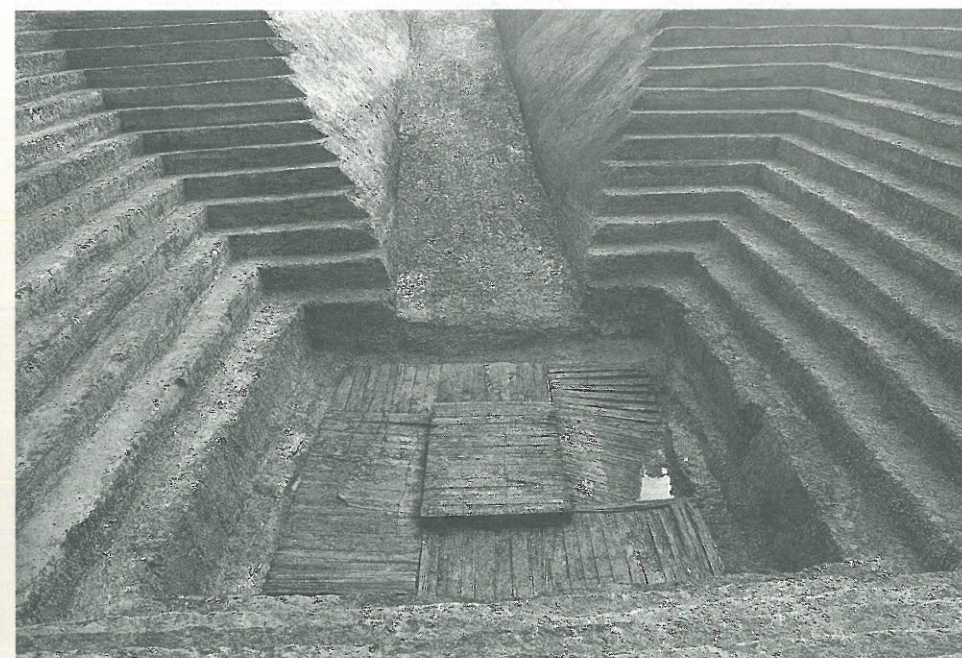


Fig. I.2. Bottom of the burial pit of Tomb 2 at Jiuliandun, Zaoyang City, Hubei. Warring States period. Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

commissioned a substitute head to be made of gold and buried it with the corpse. To deceive tomb robbers, the king decreed that nine similar tumuli were to be constructed; this is said to be the origin of the nine linked mounds. After surveying the area, modern archaeologists concluded that the nine linked mounds constituted a cemetery for the Chu elite. In 1992, the Hubei provincial government designated this area a protected, provincial-level historic site.⁶ In September 2002, in a rescue operation prior to construction work, the Chinese State Administration for Cultural Heritage approved the local government's request that these two tombs be excavated, to avoid damage during the construction of a highway in the area.

With narratives mingling myth with fact, fantasy with reality, archaeological discoveries have become media spectacles in contemporary China. The Jiuliandun excavation was nationally televised, especially the moments when the encasements and coffins were opened. Tomb 1 had been looted long before the excavation. A tomb robber's tunnel penetrated the wooden encasement vertically, but, fortunately, most of the grave goods were undisturbed (Plate 1). Tomb 2, however, remained intact. When the wooden covers were removed, a pond of clear water appeared, as is often the case in well-preserved, waterlogged southern tombs. Lacquered vessels with carbonized chestnuts and jujubes (some of the foods buried in tombs) floated in the



Fig. I.3. The waterlogged wooden encasement with four side compartments and a central one (where the coffin is located) in Tomb 2 at Jiuliandun, Zaoyang City, Hubei. Warring States period. Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.



Fig. I.4. Lacquered wooden bird with deer antlers on top of tiger-shaped figure, excavated from Tomb 1 at Jiuliandun, Zaoyang City, Hubei (M1: W226). H. 109.6 cm, W. 47.6 cm. Warring States period. Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

water (Plate 2). In both tombs, the wooden encasement was divided into five compartments: a center compartment flanked by four side compartments (fig. I.3). The coffins were located in the center compartment, while the four side compartments contained not only bronze ritual vessels (Plate 3), musical instruments, lacquerware (Plate 4), and other quotidian utensils such as a bronze lamp (fig. I.5) but also religious and ritual objects such as the magic wooden figurine wearing a black wig and red cinnabar lipstick (Plate 5), the so-called tomb guardian figure, and the wooden sculpture of a bird with outstretched wings and deer antlers standing on top of a tiger (fig. I.4). Altogether, 4,067 sets of burial goods were recovered in Tomb 1 and 1,066 in Tomb 2.⁷ Although the aforementioned gold head was not found, both coffins contained skeletal remains of the tomb occupants: a male of fifty to sixty years (Tomb 1) and a female of forty-five to fifty-five years (Tomb 2). Based on this and other data, archaeologists have suggested that the tumuli covered the joint burial of a husband and wife of the Chu aristocracy, datable to ca. 300 BCE.

The Jiuliandun tombs, with their domed mounds, deep vertical pits, and well-preserved and abundant grave goods, are representative of Chu elite burials. We await the publication of the official archaeological report for a full analysis of the Jiuliandun finds, but similar examples of elite tombs have been excavated in the last four decades. An estimated ten thousand Chu tombs have been scientifically exca-

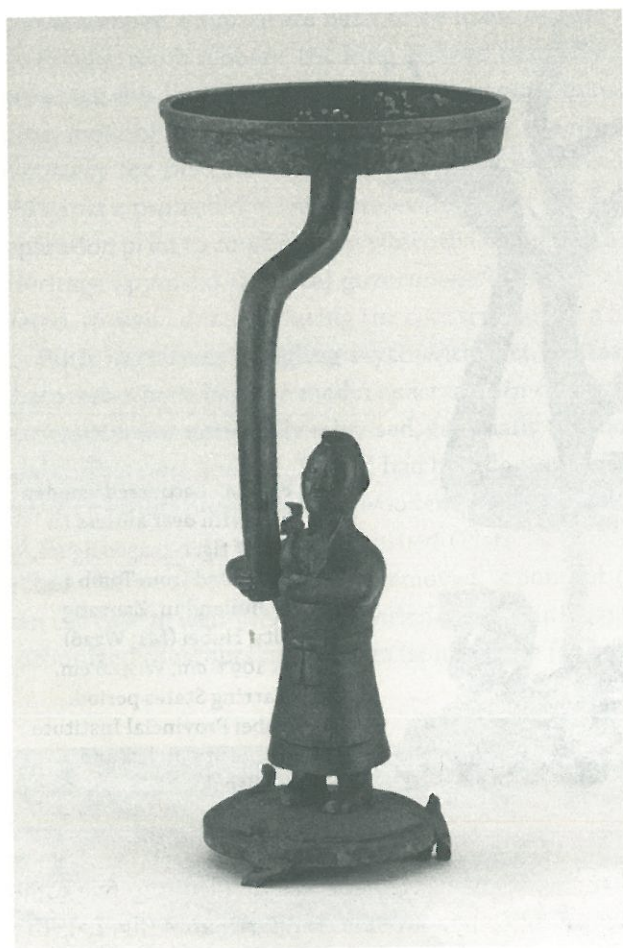


Fig. I.5. Bronze lamp excavated from Tomb 1 at Jiuliandun, Zaoyang City, Hubei (M1: W286). H. 24.85 cm. Warring States period. Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology.

vated.⁸ Among them are a great number of well-furnished Chu tombs in an unusually fine preservation condition for this period. These tombs were constructed and sealed using unusual methods as well as materials: a tightly constructed wooden encasement, made of huge logs of hard wood, buried deep and surrounded by a thick layer of black charcoal followed by several layers of refined viscous greenish-white clay (*baigaoni* or *qinggaoni*).⁹ The clay layers functioned as a sealant and, after the disintegrating foodstuffs consumed the limited oxygen supply, created an oxygen-free, temperature-constant environment in which organic materials, such as wood, bamboo, silk,¹⁰ and even human bodies, could be preserved. This is true in the cases of the ancient corpses from Tomb 1 at Guojiagang (the Warring States period) in Jingmen City, Hubei, Tomb 1 at Mawangdui (the second century BCE) in Changsha City, Hunan, and Tomb 168 at Fenghuangshan (the Western Han dynasty) in Jiangling County, Hubei (fig. I.6).¹¹

In less than three hundred years, however, these vertical pit-style tombs were gradually supplanted by horizontal chamber-style burials. Popular first among the

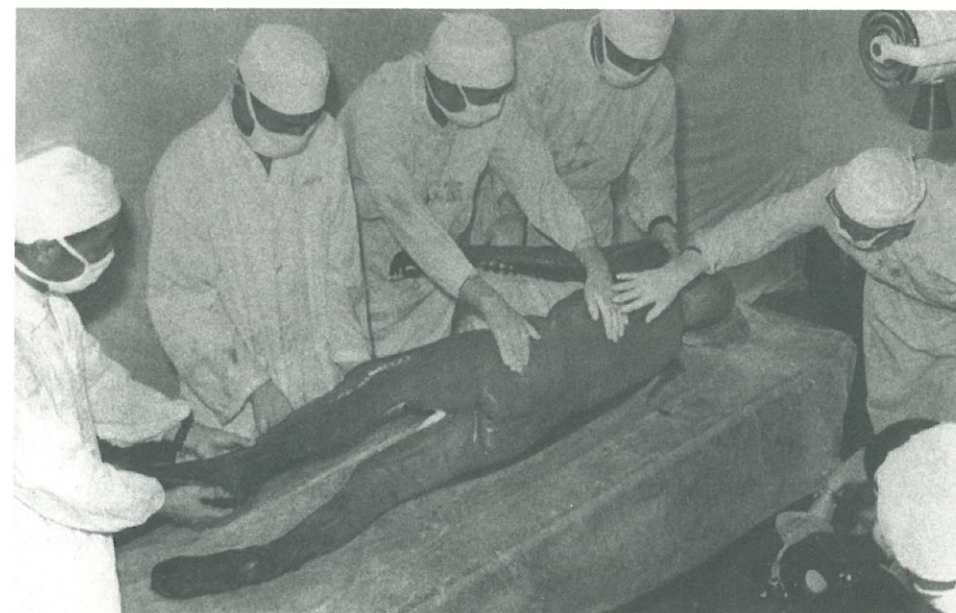


Fig. I.6. Doctors examining the well-preserved corpse excavated from Tomb 168 at Fenghuangshan in Jiangling County, Hubei. Western Han dynasty.

kings and marquises of the late Warring States period and the early empires, the horizontal chamber-style tombs were soon used by the lower social strata as well. By the late Western Han dynasty, the horizontal chamber-style tomb had become the dominant burial structure in early China. In different geographic locations in China, these burials took different material forms. Accordingly, different terms are used in archaeological literature—including wooden chambered coffin tombs, earthen cave tombs, hollow brick tombs, cliff tombs, brick chamber-style tombs, stone chamber-style tombs, rock-cut cave tombs, mural tombs, and relief tombs—but in this book, I refer to them collectively as “horizontal chamber-style tombs.”¹² While the tombs varied in their use of the local features and materials—wood, stone, and brick—available in different regions of China, they all shared the same architectural design of horizontality and accessibility; that is, one could walk into the horizontal burial chamber through an access passage.

The second example of archaeological excavation, a rock-cut tomb at Beidongshan in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu, is among the earliest horizontal chamber-style tombs in early China. The tomb was discovered in 1954 when a local farmer, herding cattle, accidentally stepped into a tomb robber’s tunnel that led to the elaborate, mazelike subterranean burial chambers (fig. I.7). Chinese archaeologists excavated this tomb in 1986, and the official excavation report was published in 2003.¹³

Cut out of the foothill, the tomb consisted of a long passage and a series of small niches and burial chambers arranged in an axial plan totaling 77.65 meters in length with an attached auxiliary section of eleven rooms on the east side (fig. I.8). The

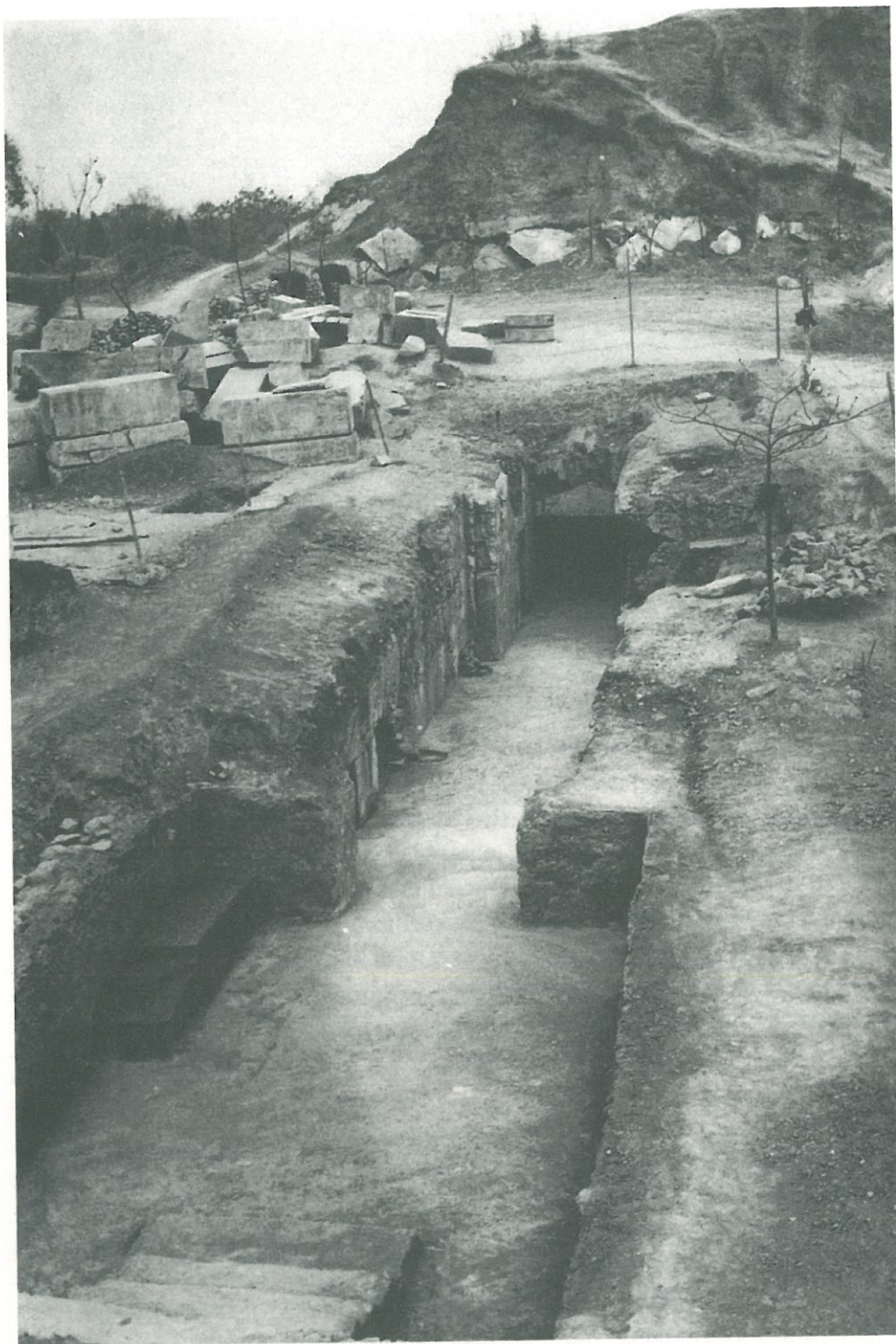


Fig. I.7. Entrance to the rock-cut tomb at Beidongshan in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu, one of the earliest horizontal chamber-style tombs in early China.

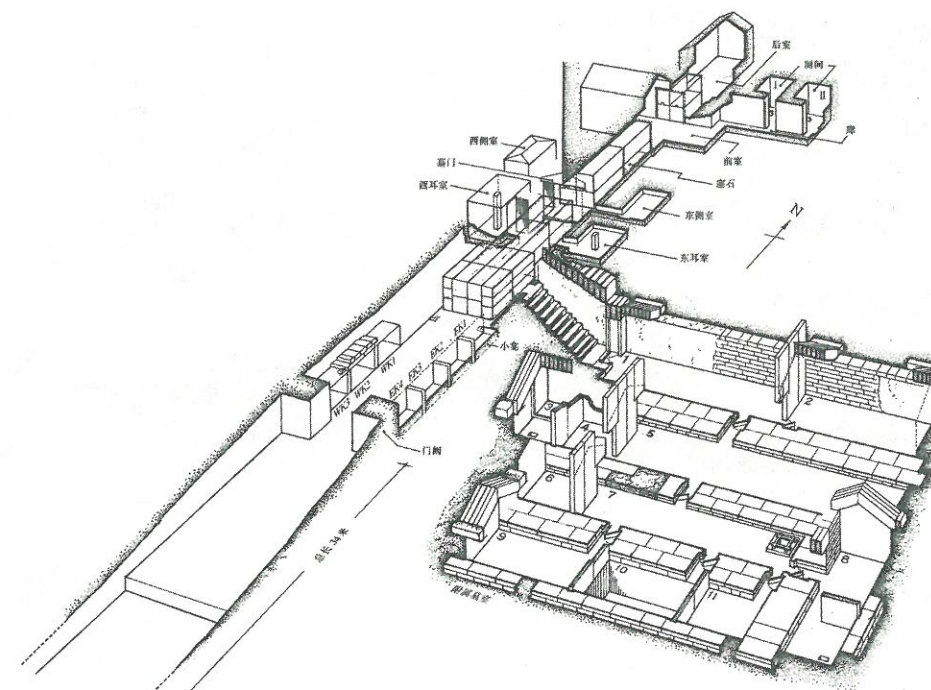


Fig. I.8. Rock-cut tomb at Beidongshan in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu, probably belonged to the first king of the Chu kingdom, Liu Jiao (r. 201–179 BCE), of the Western Han dynasty.

stone walls and the ceilings of the burial chambers were plastered and then painted with an undercoat of brown lacquer and an overcoat of red cinnabar lacquer. As a security measure, three rows of huge stopping stones, ranging from seven to three tons, blocked the passageway to the coffin chambers and the two privy chambers in the rear section of the tomb. Small niches cut into the passageway walls featured painted clay figurines and other grave goods (fig. I.9). A staircase in the middle section of the passage leads down to the auxiliary section, about 2.98 meters lower than the main part of the tomb. Its eleven rooms, constructed of dressed stones, include an armory, a privy, a performance hall for music and dance, kitchens, a courtyard with a water well in the northeast corner, and storage areas for vessels, firewood, and ice (see fig. I.8).¹⁴ This tomb probably belonged to the first king of the Chu kingdom of the Western Han dynasty, Liu Jiao (r. 201–179 BCE).¹⁵ During the Western Han period, there was a local kingdom also named Chu, which was mainly centered on its capital, Pengcheng, present-day Xuzhou City, Jiangsu, in the eastern part of the former Warring States Chu territory. Since 1972, sixteen such subterranean rock-cut princely tombs have been discovered or excavated, all located in the mountains near the modern city of Xuzhou. Along with the local kingdom of Changsha, the Chu kingdom represented the Han image of southern Chu culture.¹⁶

To date, more than twenty thousand Han tombs have been excavated.¹⁷ Horizon-



Fig. 1.9. Painted clay figurines in one of the niches on the long passageway in Beidongshan in Xuzhou City, Jiangsu. Western Han dynasty.

tally laid out, the Han tombs were in general more spacious and accessible than the vertical pit-style tombs. Han tomb construction featured new physical as well as religious and magical mechanisms, such as spirit seats, a formalized sacrificial space, tomb guardian figures, and charms, curses, stopping stones for securing and protecting the tomb.¹⁸ The burial contents of horizontal Han tombs, however, were not as well preserved as those of the Chu tombs of the Warring States period. Still, over the last forty years, Chinese archaeologists have recovered a large quantity of grave goods from Han tombs, such as bronze vessels, jade ornaments, wooden sculptures, ceramic figurines, and lacquerware. Some are similar to those recovered from the Chu tombs; some are very different. These burial objects make up the majority of what we now call “early Chinese art,” which is exhibited in museums all over the world.

The ancient Chu and Han tombs were in a way the “storage space” of modern museums before archaeologists excavated and brought these art objects into the museum collections. A curious modern museumgoer might wonder: Why were these art objects buried in tombs? Who made them and for what purposes? What can they tell us about the dead, who were provided with all of these objects, and about the bereaved, who provided them? How should we explain these archaeological data? Why did burial practices change over time? What do these changes tell us about the people and the periods in which they lived? These questions are particularly important because most surviving art objects from early China, as with other early

civilizations, come from graves, which are the sites of multifaceted religious activities. This book seeks to define the nature of these religious activities and provide a synthetic account of the changing religious beliefs and ritual practices beginning with the Warring States period and extending through to the Qin and Han periods.

A WATERSHED IN CHINESE HISTORY, the Warring States period was a time of political transformation. The old feudal structure of the Shang (ca. 1600–ca. 1046 BCE) and Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BCE) dynasties was giving way to the unified bureaucratic empires of the Qin and Han. As the name suggests, this was a time of unprecedented social upheaval and political chaos.¹⁹ The ultimate contest for unification was fought between the states of Qin (ca. 800–221 BCE) and Chu, which originally were two peripheral states, considered in traditional Chinese historiography to be “uncivilized” and outside the “Chinese” (*huaxia*) cultural sphere. In reality, however, long before the Qin unification of China in 221 BCE, both Qin and Chu had already adopted many Chinese (that is, Zhou) social, political, and religious institutions, respectively unified the northwest and the south, and become multiethnic quasiempires.²⁰

Religion, even mortuary religion—the religious beliefs and ritual practices associated with death and the dead—played an important role in the creation of these empires. The political changes began during the Spring and Autumn period (771–ca. 453 BCE), the heyday of aristocratic rule, when the heads of the major noble lineages throughout the Chinese world firmly appropriated power in all of its forms: economic, political, social, and religious. Intra- and interlineage struggles were dominant themes in the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan*) and the *Narratives of the States* (*Guoyu*), two major historical sources for this period.²¹ During the three turbulent centuries before the Qin unification, a few powerful states increasingly dominated the political stage. Consequently, smaller polities and weaker states had to rely on shrewd diplomacy to survive the military conflicts that characterized this era, a time in which, as Confucius (ca. 551–ca. 479 BCE) claimed, “the rites were in disarray, and music had collapsed.” To strengthen their military, economic, and moral power, various states launched political and social reforms, established specialized industries, and made innovations in arts and crafts. By the fourth century BCE, aristocratic lineages in most states had declined, although those in Chu were arguably stronger than those in the other states.²² Another extreme case of social restructuring was the western state of Qin, which abolished its hereditary aristocracy, restructured its society, ranked the entire populace according to a merit-based hierarchy of twenty ranks,²³ and established the rule of law with draconian punishments. The early empires of Qin and Han followed almost all of these practices.²⁴

Accompanying the decline of the old aristocracy was the rise of the educated gentleman, knight, or scholar-official (*shi*) class that had once occupied the bottom rung of the ranked aristocracy but had now risen to become ministers, offi-

cials, political and military advisors, ritual specialists, and intellectuals.²⁵ At the same time, the commoner class—peasants, artisans, merchants, and conscripted soldiers—entered political life. Although local cultural differences remained, interstate communication—in the form of military conflicts or peaceful trade and political alliances—contributed to the emergence of common cultural traditions.²⁶ Drawing upon the institutional legacy of the Spring and Autumn period, this transitional Warring States period produced long-lasting social, political, military, economic, cultural, and religious traditions “without which no idea of a unified empire could have been implemented.”²⁷

In the realm of religious art, several notable and enduring innovations transpired: (1) new burial practices associated with the horizontal chamber-style tombs within which rituals associated with the cult of the dead took place; (2) new funerary customs, such as the pervasive use of spirit artifacts (*mingqi*) to mark the severance of ties between the dead and the living; (3) wider use of anthropomorphic and hybrid images and written texts to communicate with the spirit world; (4) formation of the underworld bureaucracy; and (5) newly evolved conceptions of cosmology, empire, and the afterlife, the last being defined as a journey to a cosmic destination.

FOLLOWING NEW TRENDS in the archaeology of religions,²⁸ the chapters herein make use of a combination of archaeological, paleographical, and art historical evidence. Earlier discussions of early Chinese religion often built their theoretical frameworks entirely on transmitted texts or simply took scattered bits and pieces of archaeological materials and inserted them into such frameworks. These transmitted texts, written by “small, literate, almost exclusively male and certainly atypical professionalized subgroups,”²⁹ had been selected, transmitted, and emended by different hands according to various agendas over the centuries. The French sinologists Marcel Granet (1884–1940) and Henri Maspero (1882–1945), for example, constructed a framework that viewed early Chinese religion in terms of social class and distinguished between the “peasant religion” of rural villagers and the “feudal religion” of urban nobles. Granet posited an imperial or “official religion” that grew out of the “Confucian religion” of the educated class of Warring States society and was later adopted by the empires.³⁰ Maspero also noted the close relationship between the rise of “the great writers and philosophers” and the establishment of the empires.³¹ Granet and Maspero did not live to see the great archaeological discoveries in the second half of the twentieth century that challenged their theories, but much scholarship after them has continued their preoccupation with transmitted texts. These texts are often philosophical and political in content. They are seldom religious. In fact, before the great archaeological discoveries of the 1970s, our information about early Chinese mortuary religion in traditional sources consisted largely of piecemeal quotations and scattered references, the religious nature of which was often glossed over by layers of later commentary and rationalistic interpretation.

The nature of early Chinese religion before the rise of religious Daoism and the introduction of Buddhism during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 CE) is not clearly articulated in transmitted texts.³² Although we know that religion played a vital role in forging large coalitions of states, in settling lineage vendettas, and in structuring the social and political order,³³ and although we understand that writing played an important role in early Chinese religious and ritual activities, very few specifically religious records have been preserved.

As Donald Harper has pointed out, the field of early Chinese religion was dominated by scholars trained and engaged in the study of the philosophical traditions,³⁴ the result being that this topic was often reduced to the discussion of Confucianism, so-called philosophical Daoism, and other philosophies.³⁵ In this scholarly tradition, the religious dimensions of the Warring States transition were largely overlooked. In their efforts to distill a worldview from a few selected passages, some scholars made much of anecdotal accounts in the *Analects* (Lunyu) that suggest Confucius eschewed any interest in the spiritual realm or “strange things.”³⁶ This text-centered approach began with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European missionaries, who saw Confucians as rationalists skeptical of the existence of supernatural religious beings, and lasted until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when newly discovered archaeological materials, such as the silk banner painting from Mawangdui, finally drew scholars’ attention to the mortuary religion of ancient China.³⁷

Consequently, the Warring States transition was treated as one of many stages in the linear development from a superstitious and rigid “dark age”—as exemplified by the “irrational” divination customs and shamanism of the Shang and Zhou dynasties—to the Weberian rational, humanistic, realistic, secular world of the early empires. This textual approach, together with the Western paradigm of philosophical development adopted by influential scholars including Hu Shi (1891–1962), Guo Moruo (1892–1978), Feng Youlan (1895–1990), Herrlee G. Creel (1905–94), and Frederick W. Mote (1922–2005),³⁸ downplayed the religious elements in early Chinese culture and perpetuated a centuries-old elite prejudice against popular religion.³⁹ Although some scholars later changed their positions, this general trend endures today.⁴⁰ The grand narrative of “humanistic enlightenment” in the Warring States transition is not limited to philosophy and religious studies; similar arguments also persist in the related fields of archaeology, history, literature, and art history.

In addition, Marxist analysis, especially in mainland China, has contributed to an inadequate understanding of the role of religion in the social transformations that took place during the Warring States period. The eminent Chinese historian Yang Kuan’s (1914–2005) *History of the Warring States* (Zhangguo shi) paints a lively picture of agricultural, economic, social, political, and intellectual changes during the Warring States period⁴¹ while adhering strictly to the Marxist framework of social structure and historical development. Yang proceeds systematically from economic foundations to political superstructure to cultural epiphenomena. Although his Marxist analyses are useful for relating social, political, and economic devel-

opments to religious transformation during the Warring States period, religion itself has no place in his discussion. This approach prevails in many recent Chinese publications. A recently published book, for example, contains only a brief section on "religion, ritual costumes, and social life" that features minimal, eclectic, and unsystematic discussions.⁴²

Recent developments in religious studies and cognitive archaeology in the West, however, advocate taking a new archaeological approach to religious traditions. Through the study of religious beliefs and ritual practices as manifested in material culture, this approach emphasizes the need to go beyond canonical and sacred texts.⁴³ Scholars of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, in which scriptures and sacred texts dominated all else, were the first to use this approach, and more scholars have begun applying this new approach to other fields.⁴⁴ In theory, texts provide only one, albeit important, mode of expression for religious beliefs and practices, even in scripture-based traditions. Other nonlinguistic modes of reflection also serve as "symbolic vehicles for the full load of human experience."⁴⁵ Scholars have argued that the linear and logocentric structure of the literary text has failed to capture the wide range of human experience and distorted the historical picture. The textualization of all symbolic actions has reduced cognitive processes to linguistic prescriptions and created layers of bias associated with the agency and materiality of writing. With the development of sociocultural anthropology in the West, including Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology and the symbolic anthropology of the 1960s and 1970s, many scholars rejected cultural expression's dependence on language. For example, in many societies outside the Western cultural context, traditional crafts such as canoe building, pottery making, basket weaving, house construction, and musical performance were dominant forms of cultural and economic practice, creating meaning and becoming part of the cosmological processes thought to sustain the existence of the universe.⁴⁶

Sympathetic to these theoretic perspectives, my approach is aligned most closely with that of Buddhologist Gregory Schopen, who criticizes the modern Western assumption that studying Indian Buddhism means to study its texts; he proposes instead that archaeological evidence should be granted priority. He prefers the "archaeology of religion" to the text-based "history of religion." Considering words and deeds as different modes of cultural expression possessing different values for the historical understanding of religions, Schopen suggests that religious structures, inscriptions, and artworks be considered the three main subjects of the archaeology of religion.⁴⁷ The bias of particular texts hinders the proper and full understanding of religion and its functions in society. Through his analysis of archaeological and epigraphic materials, Schopen has painted a picture of Indian monastic religion other than that prescribed in the Buddhist canon.⁴⁸ Scholars in other fields also distinguish between religious doctrine and religion-as-cultural-and-material-system. The historian Patrick J. Geary draws on archaeological sources for the religious and cultural history of the European Middle Ages,⁴⁹ and the archaeologist William G.

Dever uses excavated materials as primary sources for his study of folk religion in ancient Israel.⁵⁰ Similarly, archaeologists and art historians advocate the use of material culture to study the changing worldview and religious rituals of early China.⁵¹ From these models, it is clear that, in many fields, evidence for the study of religion is increasingly drawn from a broad and promising collection of archaeological sources.

Reading works of art or objects, however, is as challenging as reading texts, and perhaps more so. On the one hand, works of art serve as an independent source of cultural and religious meaning. In their spatial and iconographic contexts, artworks are neither "illustration nor evidence that validates a particular interpretation of a theological or cultural argument. Rather, works of art are in their own right a mode of human expression that generates theological interpretation and reflection, and that reveals its cultural and theological milieu."⁵² On the other hand, mining works of art for cultural and religious meaning is risky. As Robert Bagley has warned, "the statement that objects are material manifestations of belief systems implausibly makes visual forms wholly dependent on beliefs without suggesting any mechanism for translating beliefs into visual form."⁵³ Besides the mechanical device of translation, two other devices are essential for the productive interpretation of works of art. The first is the intermediate cultural conceptions, which connect these works of art to a belief system. The second is the cultural context in which the works of art were created and used.⁵⁴ Drawing on the discussions of Jacques Maquet, who distinguishes objects as instruments from objects as signs,⁵⁵ I emphasize the importance of cultural context in interpreting the meaning and function of works of art. Maquet argues that the meanings of objects he calls instruments are obvious because their functions transcend culture. But the meanings of objects that Maquet calls signs are culturally determined and therefore more difficult to ascertain. The meaning of a sign is not inherent in the object itself but resides in the object's relationships as assigned by cultural consensus. Maquet further distinguishes five ways to read objects: "as instruments, as symbols, as images, as indicators, and as referents (they are ranked here from the less culture-specific interpretation to the one entirely dependent on a particular culture). In other words, written sources for historians and interviews for anthropologists become increasingly significant when we move from instruments to referents."⁵⁶ Here, texts, especially contemporaneous texts, are employed to investigate the cultural consensus about the meaning and function of a sign. In Bagley's terms, this is iconology with the benefit of texts.⁵⁷

Consequently, texts and inscriptions must be utilized in the archaeology of early Chinese religion. Religious texts excavated from early Chinese burials include inventory lists of grave goods buried in the tombs, records of divination, sacrifice, exorcisms conducted on behalf of the tomb occupants, and official memorials addressed to the bureaucracy of the underworld.⁵⁸ Only through careful analysis of the available textual and archaeological data can we begin to understand the religious

beliefs and practices of the past.⁵⁹ Therefore, this book approaches early Chinese religion from a more inclusive perspective, examining burial architecture, religious texts, and art historical remains excavated from early Chinese tombs.

Burial Archaeology and Archaeological Interpretation

Throughout Chinese history, ancient tombs have been opened for various reasons. For some, the purpose was political revenge, and for others, it was personal enrichment through the acquisition of valuable burial goods. An example of the former is found in the story of Wu Zixu (?–484 BCE), a young nobleman who fled the state of Chu to avoid political persecution and eventually returned as a general of the neighboring state of Wu, leading his army to conquer the Chu capital. In a final act of revenge, he opened the Chu king's tomb and lashed the king's corpse three hundred times.⁶⁰ In early Chinese debates over frugal versus lavish burials, those supporting frugal burials warned that elaborate burials would only become the targets of tomb robbers and thereby disturb the peaceful afterlife of the departed ancestors. As Sima Qian (ca. 145–ca. 85 BCE) reports, tomb robbery was a profitable business during the Han dynasty.⁶¹ Looters often targeted ancient Chinese burials marked by prominent tumuli or other structures.

Although Chu ritual bronzes were discovered accidentally as early as the Song dynasty (960–1279), our earliest knowledge of Chu burials came from tomb robberies that took place during the first half of the twentieth century.⁶² In 1923, a group of bronze artifacts was unearthed in Shou County, Anhui, where the last Chu capital (known as Shouchun in Warring States records) was established in 241 BCE after Qin military pressure forced the Chu court to relocate several times. Between 1933 and 1938, at Lisangudui near Shou County, local warlords opened a royal Chu tomb and discovered more than one thousand bronze objects, including seventy inscribed pieces, now scattered in various public and private collections in and outside of China. In the 1930s and 1940s, tomb robbers looted many Chu burials near Changsha City, Hunan,⁶³ another geographic locus of the state of Chu in southern China, including the renowned Chu silk manuscript (Plate 6) from a Warring States-period tomb at Zidanku (formerly Tomb 1, now Tomb 365) near Changsha, now housed in the Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington, DC,⁶⁴ and the famous silk paintings at Chenjiadashan (also in Changsha City).⁶⁵

Although modern scientific archaeology was introduced in China in the 1920s, the 1950s marked the beginning of extensive excavations that now include tens of thousands of ancient Chinese tombs.⁶⁶ Owing to variations in burial customs and geographic conditions, the state of preservation of ancient tombs is uneven. In general, in northern and central China, conditions for preservation are not as good as in the south and northwest. In the northwest, the dry desert climate is beneficial for the conservation of organic materials. In southern China, many burial sites from the Warring States and early Han are well preserved because of the regional geog-

raphy and burial customs as described in the Jiuliandun tombs above. As a result, evidence from a substantial number of well-preserved Warring States and early Han tombs located in southern China has greatly enhanced the archaeological records of these important periods.

The term *Chu* in this study refers to the territory historically occupied by the state of Chu during the Warring States period and the Chu kingdom in the Western Han dynasty, in present-day Hubei, Hunan, Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, and adjacent areas (Map 1).⁶⁷ Between these two periods, the Qin Empire reigned over this region for another fifteen years (221–207 BCE). However, before the Qin unification of China in 221 BCE, the major parts of the Chu territory had been under Qin control for over a half century. We include Qin tombs of these periods in our discussion.⁶⁸ In addition, it is important to consider early Chinese tombs at all levels of society when archaeological materials are available, as changes in burial customs and religious beliefs were not limited to a particular social group. Current archaeological reports and scholarly literature divide Chu tombs into five or more ranks ranging from high aristocracy to commoners and the poor⁶⁹ and Han tombs into four ranks: imperial tombs, the tombs of local kings and marquises, officials' tombs, and tombs of commoners and convicts.⁷⁰ Of the Han tombs, we discuss not only the princely tombs of the kingdoms of Changsha and Chu but also tombs from other regions, such as the Mancheng tombs and the commoners' burials at Shaogou in Luoyang City, Henan. In the unified and bureaucratic Han Empire, differences in mortuary practice are mostly class-based rather than regional.⁷¹

The Jiuliandun and Beidongshan tombs described above provide only two examples of the spectacular archaeological discoveries of the last forty years. In southern China, the hot and humid climate and vertical pit-style tomb, with its enveloping sticky clay layers, effectively preserved many deeply buried tombs. Archaeologists estimate that more than 70 percent of the ten thousand tombs excavated in China are located in this region. Many archaeological reports and studies feature Chu region tombs.⁷² A few studies focus on individual Chu and Han tombs or different categories of tomb objects.⁷³ In a recent synthesis, while discussing selected Chu and Han tombs, Wu Hung intended to "[make] interpretation methods the direct subject of consideration."⁷⁴ His book covers three conceptual aspects—spatiality, materiality, and temporality—of Chinese funerary art from the Neolithic period down to the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, even to the modern era. In his own words, Wu's study focuses on the "art and architectural tradition we call Chinese tombs" and aims "to uncover some basic creative impulses underlying the development of an art and architectural tradition over several thousand years."⁷⁵ In so doing, he essentially homogenized the complexity of historical changes and flattened the regional diversity of Chinese funerary beliefs and ritual practices, thus rendering funerary art and ritual not as people's responses to ever-changing historical conditions but as conceptual expressions of the "fundamental logic of traditional Chinese tombs." However, a regional study that places this well-defined



Map 1. Major archaeological sites discussed

group of archaeological data in its historical context is still lacking. I hope this book will fill the gap.

The study of artifacts and burial customs in the former Chu territory has a history of dramatically changing interpretations. In the first half of the twentieth century, when tomb robbers initially unearthed Chu tombs, bronzes, and manuscripts, scholars were not yet able to date the artifacts correctly or decipher their inscriptions. Since that time, the discovery of numerous Chu tombs and manuscripts and the unprecedented speed with which these materials have been published have spurred new studies that focus on establishing chronologies, deciphering graphs, and understanding the philosophical ideas of the Warring States period.⁷⁶

Any assertion about changes in early Chinese religion must, however, be tempered by an awareness of the limitations of our extant archaeological and textual sources. Given the nature of archaeological preservation, which in most cases is accidental, and excavation, any interpretation of archaeological data always must be tentative and cautious. There are two basic questions to ask at the outset.

First, can we make generalizations about Chu mortuary religion based on well-preserved, richly furnished Chu tombs? These tombs, which are exceptional in their state of preservation rather than in their contents, certainly provide insight into Chu mortuary religion. Archaeologists build interpretations largely based on patterns they recognize in archaeological data, and we find similar or recurrent patterns in these tombs. Although the size of the tomb and the quantity of grave goods varied according to the tomb occupant's social rank, the tombs shared a basic burial structure, similar categories of grave goods, and similar individual objects.⁷⁷ In addition, not all the well-preserved tombs are elite burials. Archaeologists found a variety of burials in southern China, ranging from richly furnished ones, such as Tomb 1 at Leigudun, the burial of Marquis Yi of the state of Zeng, to relatively small tombs, such as Tomb 56 at Jiudian or Tomb 11 at Shuihudi, each belonging to a ritual specialist or a local official. As a sociological study of the archaeological data shows, during this period the separation between the higher and lower elites became more distinct, and the latter merged with the commoner class.⁷⁸ Thus, a relatively large body of the lower elite and commoners shared similar social and political positions as well as religious beliefs. During this period, however, a clear dichotomy between the religious system of the higher elite and that of the rest of the population had yet to develop, contrary to what Granet has argued. The differences in their treatments of death and burials were mainly matters of scale and the quantity and quality of grave goods. Thus, Chu mortuary religion was not a class-based religion, but a religion largely shared by the elite and commoners: all those who could afford to and were entitled to build a tomb for themselves and their relatives to express and follow the religious beliefs and ritual practices of their times.

Second, is the Chu mortuary religion discussed in this book representative of early Chinese religion?⁷⁹ I must answer this question with a tentative yes. I hesitate because archaeological data on early Chinese mortuary practices are unevenly dis-

tributed. We know less about the details of the religious beliefs and mortuary practices in other regions. To balance the random character of the evidence, this study not only takes a comparative approach, depending on the availability of the archaeological data, but also considers mortuary practices of the Qin and other parts of early China.⁸⁰ Several studies of the archaeological data have outlined the different contours of the eastern (including Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Han, and Wei) and western (including Qin) states in the Warring States period.⁸¹ Radical changes took place in the western state of Qin, probably through the agency of the centralized government, while in the eastern states change happened gradually and frequently through struggles among the social forces within each state.⁸² For example, the mortuary practice of human sacrifice accompanying burial was widespread in Qin throughout the Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods but became rare after the middle Warring States period. Scholars have suggested that the sociopolitical reforms initiated by Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE) may have ended this cruel practice. In the eastern states, the changes were slower and more gradual. There were sporadic cases of human sacrifice in Chu, Zeng, and Jin tombs during the Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods. After the middle of the Warring States period, human sacrifice continued in Jin burials, but in Chu burials, wooden human figurines began to replace actual human sacrifice. The state of Qi in eastern China practiced human sacrifice throughout the Warring States period and sometimes combined it with burying wooden or ceramic figurines.⁸³ Therefore, we can study not only the similarities and differences among the practices of the eastern states but also the commonalities and distinctions between Chu practices and those of other regions. With more regional studies, such as this book offers, our picture of the changes and continuities in the cultural development of early China should become clearer. In addition, "Chu" in the phrase "Chu mortuary religion" is used as a spatial and temporal designation for the region in southern China of the Warring States, Qin, and early Han periods, not as an adjective to characterize the ethnic group or the contents of the religious beliefs and mortuary practices.⁸⁴

Although transmitted texts and modern scholarly assumptions tell us that regional cultural variations must have existed in early China, there is a growing consensus that in the Warring States period many regional cultural features, previously considered unique to a particular region, were in fact local manifestations of wider trends of social, political, and religious development.

Of course, as in modern China, regional cultural differences existed in early China, such as those between the Qin in the northwest and the Chu in the south,⁸⁵ but the Warring States period is famous for the emergence of common cultural traditions through various types of cultural contact.⁸⁶ For example, as Liu Lexian shows, a comparison of the almanacs excavated from Chu and Qin burials indicates that while their techniques for determining lucky and unlucky times differed, the underlying principles were similar.⁸⁷ Studies have shown that what were once considered regional differences in early Chinese ritual music appear to be only vari-

ations on a single music system based on that of the royal Zhou court during the Eastern Zhou period (771–249 BCE).⁸⁸ Different languages and writing styles of the Warring States period more clearly manifest this theme.⁸⁹ Although different dialects or local languages undoubtedly existed in early China, the paleographic data clearly demonstrate that the vast majority of written materials, even those from the state of Chu, are in the "elegant standard speech" (*yayan*) of Old Chinese.⁹⁰ The same is true of weights and measures and many other cultural institutions of the time. In all of these cases, it is obvious that local lords, ritual specialists, and intellectuals promoted and emphasized regional differences rhetorically to fulfill their own political, religious, or other purposes. As Gideon Shelach and Yuri Pines show, the Warring States rulers used local cultural traits to forge ethnic identity among the mass conscripted peasant-soldiers in order to mobilize, manipulate, and control their military forces.⁹¹ Some of these perceived differences were not real cultural divergences, in nature or in origin. Certainly we cannot assume that this commonality of nature and origin was the case in mortuary religion, and we still need to study different approaches to and treatments of the dead in regions other than Chu. Current evidence, however, suggests that Chu and its adjacent areas in southern China—at times viewed as barbaric, exotic, decadent, and peripheral—were in fact quite influential and important in the formation of mainstream early Chinese conceptions of religion, cosmology, and the afterlife.

Religion, Cosmology, the Afterlife, and the Early Empire

Religion, a complex social phenomenon, is difficult to subsume under a single definition.⁹² Here, the term is understood in the sense Peter L. Berger delineates: "Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established."⁹³ In this functional view, religion is a system of cultural symbols created and manipulated by humankind (often through rituals) to construct and maintain social reality. In other words, religion and its associated rituals make an invisible world visible, tangible, and thinkable, thereby serving as an instrument for dealing with extrahuman powers in response to the social reality.

The period of the late Warring States and early empires was a time of intense speculation in cosmology and of great advances in both geographic knowledge of China and the surrounding world and religious imagination of the afterworld. Anecdotes in the *Zuo Commentary* and other excavated manuscripts indicate that the imagination about the world of the dead inspired various numinous experiences, both dreadful and fascinating. In the binary constructions to which Warring States ritualists were prone, the world of the dead was set both opposite and parallel to the world of the living, as was the case in many other ancient civilizations.⁹⁴ In maintaining the ritual order of this world, as I argue in this book, the purpose of burying "spirit artifacts" in Warring States tombs was to demarcate the boundary between this world and the next.

On the other hand, in the early Chinese context, the constructed cosmos and the associated rituals for maintaining this cosmos were not always as opposed to the secular world, as we might expect. This led some early scholars to characterize Chinese religion as essentially "secular" or as having a this-world orientation.⁹⁵ This attitude originates at least in part in the abovementioned bias of text-centered scholarship on Chinese religion, which substitutes later Confucian rationalistic interpretations for the whole range of early Chinese religious beliefs and practices. But partly this is because the religious nature of these creations is socially and culturally determined.⁹⁶ Although religion concerns relationships and communications between human and extrahuman beings, in the final analysis religion centers on relationships among human beings. This is true of the creation of the underworld bureaucracy, a unique feature of Chinese religion. Not only does it mirror the development of the Chinese imperial bureaucracy in its early stages, but it also serves as a metaphor projecting a conscious, deliberate construction of religious imagination based on ideas, symbols, values, or structures of the time.

This view of religion as a cultural system enables us to include in our analysis of early Chinese beliefs a broad range of religious experiences that are outside of organized religion, systematic theology, dogma, or canonical scripture. In addition, religion permits us to perceive the mechanism of world building through symbolic means. Religion and cosmology were inextricably intertwined before the development of the specialized academic disciplines of religious studies and cosmology. By drawing upon previous scholarship,⁹⁷ my study proposes to restore the connection between religion and cosmology. Here, cosmology is understood according to the anthropologist Stanley Tambiah's definition: "frameworks of concepts and relations which treat the universe or cosmos as an ordered system, describing it in terms of space, time, matter, and motion, and peopling it with gods, humans, animals, spirits, demons and the like."⁹⁸ Cosmology had an intricate relationship with social, political, and ritual order in early China. Between the Shang dynasty and the Han dynasty, there was a shift from four quarters (*sifang*) cosmology to five agents (*wu-xing*) cosmology, and this cosmological transformation was closely associated with the unification of the early Chinese empire.⁹⁹ And as scholars have pointed out, as in other early cosmologies, the early Chinese conceptions of the universe centered on the question of abodes of the dead.¹⁰⁰ More specifically, this cosmological transformation had a direct impact on physical and mental constructions of the postmortem environment: the tomb and the religious conception of the afterlife as a journey. As a funerary monument, the early Chinese tomb is not only the repository for the body of the deceased but also a site of funerary rituals, the cult of the dead, and an expression of individual and collective concerns about death and the afterlife.

Among the previous studies on early China is the extreme position held by Frederick W. Mote, whose *Intellectual Foundations of China* was once influential and is still used as a textbook in U.S. and Chinese college introductory courses on China.¹⁰¹ He wrongly claimed that, before the introduction of Buddhism, there was "no such

thing as an 'other world' in ancient Chinese thought at all. . . . There was no heaven or hell, no creator God, and no expected end of the universe once it had emerged from primeval chaos. All was natural, and within Nature."¹⁰² Using this problematic hypothesis as his starting point, Mote explained that because the Chinese people had no creation myth, no god, and no ultimate cause, life and death were integral parts of a natural process.¹⁰³ Mote recognized the existence of religious deities in Chinese society but thought that they were just "the vulgarized versions of this rather philosophical conception."¹⁰⁴

Archaeological discoveries over the past four decades, however, have rendered such preconceptions untenable, and many scholars have already argued convincingly against this position.¹⁰⁵ It is now clear that indigenous Chinese conceptions of the afterlife and other religious beliefs, as well as the related institutions that grew around them, existed long before the introduction of Buddhism to China. Scholars have used various archaeological materials to demonstrate the existence of pre-Buddhist religious concepts and to reassess the nature and functions of religion in ancient China. These materials include funerary texts that feature land contracts and grave-securing writs,¹⁰⁶ art historical remains such as the Mawangdui silk banner paintings,¹⁰⁷ and tomb structure and furnishings.¹⁰⁸ Using both archaeological and paleographical data excavated in Chu, Qin, and early Han tombs, this book marks a further step in the archaeological studies on early Chinese religion.