The Social Functions of Early Medieval *Muzhiming*

This chapter begins by exploring the transition from a system in which power and authority were derived from large-scale landholding and the ability to mobilize private military forces, to one where family honor and respect became increasingly dependent on admirable marriage alliances and a tradition of office holding. In particular, I aim to identify and analyze some of the fundamental cultural practices and institutions that helped aspiring families establish social, political, and economic influence in pre-Tang imperial China. Furthermore, I examine how the shift from a relatively unified state under the Han, to a divided empire (featuring several coexisting and contending dynastic houses), impacted the ways that elite lineages acquired and maintained prestige in early medieval times. Special attention is devoted to examining how changes in the content of monumental mortuary stelae (*bei*) and entombed epitaph inscriptions (*muzhiming*) reflect these changes.

In order to demonstrate the most salient social functions of the emergent commemorative genre known as *muzhiming*—namely, the establishment of family identity and the construction of claims to elite status—I present case studies of the epitaphs produced for Ming Tanxi 明曇憘 (444–474) and Liu Huaimin 劉懷民 (410–463). These two inscriptions constitute the earliest epitaphs excavated so far that self-identify (in their inscribed titles) as “*muzhiming*.” Close readings of these epitaphs prompt serious consideration of four crucial questions related to the use of *muzhiming* in early medieval China (each of which are addressed in this chapter):

1. How did epitaphs help leading families define their shared identity and establish intergenerational collective memory?
2. What role did anecdote and allusion play in fashioning memorable commemorative narratives for public consumption?
3. Where do *muzhiming* fit within the burgeoning array of privately produced biographical works that appeared in the early medieval era?
4. What evidence exists for the circulation of epitaph manuscripts among members of the socio-cultural elite?

Reflecting on how social institutions, religious convictions, commemorative practices, and aesthetic principles left their mark on the entombed epitaph inscriptions of early medieval China helps to clarify how elite families used
these funerary texts to sustain their local prestige. Furthermore, it sheds light on what these families hoped to accomplish when they composed or commissioned *muzhiming* dedicated to their ancestors.

**Prominent Families and Elite Prestige during the Late Han**

Over the course of the Han dynasty, locally prominent families emerged to dominate the political, economic, and social life of districts and commanderies throughout the empire. As central authority waned near the end of the Eastern Han, these elite families operated with greater autonomy—exerting their influence by accumulating large estates with numerous tenants, dependent kin, and private soldiers. Mark Lewis has shown that these powerful lineages derived substantial influence, not merely through land acquisition, but by encouraging their members to settle widely in small nuclear family units within the same area. Local magnates were then able to secure regional authority by harnessing the power of these extensive kinship networks. The “Great Families” further consolidated their influence through marriage alliances with other prominent clans and by forging ties of obligation with neighbors through gifts, services, and favors. These formidable lineages were thus capable of challenging the central government’s authority by virtue of their ability to “command support and obedience of large numbers of villagers.”

Donor lists, occasionally inscribed on the back of Eastern Han mortuary steleae, hint at the impressive relationship networks maintained by locally prominent families. According to Lewis, powerful families can be identified through inscriptions that record numerous individuals sharing the same chonronym-surname combination. Specifically he claims that, “the most probable model suggested by these inscriptions is a local society in which many related

1 Yang Lien-sheng, “Great Families of Eastern Han,” 103–34; Ch’ü, Han Social Structure, 202–208; and Ebrey, Aristocratic Families, 15–16.
2 Lewis, Construction of Space, 215, 218–24. See also Ch’ü, Han Social Structure, 207–208.
3 Lewis, Construction of Space, 222. See also Ch’ü, Han Social Structure, 202–208; and Dien, “Introduction,” 7–10.
4 See Ebrey, “Later Han Stone Inscriptions,” 335–39; Lewis, Construction of Space, 222. On the importance of mourning friends and colleagues in early imperial China, see Brown, Politics of Mourning, 85–100. Not all stelae with donor lists are mortuary steleae; some lists celebrate the completion of public works projects such as the restoration of a local temple or the construction of a bridge, while others reflect extensive educational ties highlighting teacher/student or master/disciple relationships.