

The Religious Functions of Entombed Epigraphy

The origins of standard *muzhiming* can be traced to the conjunction of two antecedent traditions. The first stems from the canonically sanctioned conventions of elite commemoration—a category that includes the text-bearing bronze vessels and inscribed musical bells of the pre-imperial era, as well as monumental mortuary stelae from the Eastern Han dynasty. The second line of influence links early epitaphs to traditionally less-esteemed forms of entombed epigraphy typical of the common religious traditions of the Han and early medieval periods, namely: “burial-plot purchase contracts” (*maidiquan* 買地券), “tomb-stabilizing writs” (*zhenmuwen* 鎮墓文), and “tomb inventories” (*qiance* 遣策).¹ By placing the beginnings of entombed epitaph inscriptions at the convergence of these two traditions we can account for both their commemorative features as well as their apotropaic or talismanic properties.

This chapter is divided into three parts. Part one introduces the major types of entombed epigraphic objects from the canonical tradition and demonstrates their influence on the development of *muzhiming*. Part two does the same for the common tradition. The chapter concludes with a close reading of the entombed stele for Cheng Huang 成晃 (d. 291), a representative work of entombed epigraphy from the Western Jin that demonstrates how *muzhiming* developed from a blending of characteristics and functions associated with both the canonical and common modes of commemorative epigraphy.

The Canonically Sanctioned Inscription Tradition

Zhou-Era Bronze Inscriptions

Throughout the Zhou era, sacrificial vessels and musical bells were cast in bronze at great expense for use in commemorative ceremonies held in the ancestral temples of noble clans. These were occasions of inspiring ritual

¹ By “common religion” I do not refer to occult activities unique to peasants or commoners, but to specific mantic techniques—such as, alternative modes of exorcism, spirit propitiation, divination, and strategies for coping with the dead—that are absent from the ritual classics and yet were widely practiced by people from all socio-economic classes. For a similar definition, see Harper, “Contracts with the Spirit World in Han Common Religion,” 229–31.

performance involving harmonious music, choreographed pantomime, the recitation of eulogistic hymns, and the offering of sacrificial food and drink with the aim of communing with the ancestors, commemorating the accomplishments of powerful forbearers, and announcing to the spirits the special accomplishments of their living descendants.² Many of the offering vessels and musical bells used in these elaborate ceremonies bore texts designed to convey important changes in status to the ancestral spirits. The very idea of durable commemorative inscriptions together with the textual structure, themes, and diction of this esteemed tradition (as filtered through more temporally proximate practices involving mortuary stelae) exerted a powerful influence on the authors of early medieval *muzhiming*.

The inscribed bronze vessels displayed in museums today come from tombs and buried hoards. Because hoards contain several generations of vessels used in the ancestral temples of prominent clans, they provide a unique opportunity to investigate the way in which family identity was constructed and social status maintained through text and ritual across generations. Furthermore, such collections of inscribed bronzes constitute a sacrosanct family archive selectively edited for communicating with the ancestral spirits and capable of initiating younger lineage members into the fundamentals of a family's collective identity.

Hoards, such as those discovered near Zhuangbai 莊白 in Fufeng County 扶風縣, Shaanxi, only exist because internal political disorder and external threats led to a dramatic decline in the ability of the Western Zhou state to defend its capital.³ In 771 BCE, a devastating assault by the Western Rong 西戎 and the eminent threat of further invasion by Xianyun 玁狁 and Rong tribes compelled the Zhou to relocate their capital from Zongzhou 宗周 (near present-day Xi'an) to Luoyi 洛邑 (modern-day Luoyang).⁴ As conflicts at court and hostilities between pastoral tribal confederations and agriculturalists mounted, many elite Zhou families carefully concealed their precious collections of

2 On the multi-media experience of Zhou ritual, see Shaughnessy, "From Liturgy to Literature," 165–96; Kern "Shi jing Songs as Performance Texts," 48–111.

3 While dozens of hoards have been unearthed, the two best known caches of bronze vessels are those discovered in 1974 at Dongjiacun 董家村, Qishan County 岐山縣, Shaanxi; and in 1976 at nearby Zhuangbai, Fufeng County, Shaanxi. Thirty-seven bronzes were discovered at Qishan, all associated with the Qiu 裘 lineage; 103 bronzes [73 bearing inscriptions (57 vessels and 16 bells), of which 55 belonged to the Wei 微 lineage] were found at Zhuangbai. See *Wenwu* 1976.5:26–44; and *Wenwu* 1978.3:1–18 respectively. On the Zhuangbai hoard, see Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius*, 29–43. For a discussion of bronze-vessel hoards in their historical context, see Rawson, "Western Zhou Archaeology," 368–75.

4 On the fall of the Western Zhou, see Li Feng, *Landscape and Power*, 193–232.