Entombed Epigraphy in an Era of Political Instability

This chapter analyzes non-standard entombed epitaphs produced prior to the fifth-century. Since many of these inscriptions do not include biographies, others lack rhymed elegies, and several do not even have titles, they are not technically *muzhiming* but closely related cultural forms for identifying and commemorating the dead. The textual content of these early interred epitaphs and the burial contexts in which we find them suggest that they were initially deployed in dire situations. For example, one finds early epitaphs in tombs where war, unrest, or great distance necessitated temporary interment away from the lineage homelands (*waizang* 外葬).¹ Similarly, entombed epitaphs were also used to document situations where reburial was deemed necessary because the tomb had been damaged or required relocation to a more auspicious environment (*gaizang* 改葬). They also appear in cases of premature or violent death. In short, entombed epitaphs were initially used in circumstances at odds with the ideal burial.

The “good death” in traditional China was one in which the deceased, having come to the end of a long life, was peacefully laid to rest in the family cemetery where he or she would be reverently remembered and offered regular sacrifice. Under less-than-ideal conditions, living kinsmen of the deceased felt obligated to place text-inscribed brick or stone objects within the grave—to secure the tomb, protect and comfort the dead, and accurately preserve their identity. Through these efforts, descendants could more effectively fulfill their filial obligations and safeguard themselves against the inauspicious effects of their forbearer’s demise.

Aside from the reasons just mentioned, it appears that epitaphs were also buried in tombs to communicate important decisions to the world of the spirits. Such communications included, for example, decisions that would impact the dynamics of lineage authority (such as the declaration of an heir to a defunct patriarch’s noble title) or decisions explaining why a burial site had been altered—such as when a tomb was modified to accommodate a “joint burial” (*hezang* 合葬) or relocated to install the deceased in a meaningful

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¹ The simple interment records buried in the graves of Qin and Han era convict laborers discussed in chapter 3 are early examples of this type or epitaph.
spatial relationship with another gravesite, as in an “associate burial” (fuzang 附葬 or peizang 陪葬).

Furthermore, the state sometimes intervened to ensure that men who had died while displaying remarkable loyalty in times of crisis would be appropriately commemorated. Such public recognition often took the form of “prestige burials,” which involved transporting the corporeal remains of the deceased to burial grounds located near the capital, usually in close proximity to one of the imperial mausolea. Inscribed stones were often produced as part of the funerary obsequies carried out for the individuals so honored. The public commemoration of these special dead enhanced the moral authority of those in power and elevated the family’s prestige among their peers.

This chapter begins with a summary of information gleaned from analyzing inscribed interment records and other narratives taken from epitaphs produced during the formative era of the muzhiming genre (the mid-third to early fifth centuries). I then discuss each of the exigent conditions under which entombed epitaph inscriptions were deployed. Finally, in order to demonstrate the nature of state intervention in death commemoration during this period, I conclude by examining the case of the Yanci Shi 厭次石 family whose three most prominent members perished in 307 defending their hometown from attacks initiated by the warlord Ji Sang 汲桑 (d. 307).

Excavated Epitaphs from the Western and Eastern Jin

Table 4.1 highlights information gleaned from the analysis of sixty epitaphs dating to the Western Jin 西晉 (265–317) and Eastern Jin 東晉 (318–420) dynasties. These epitaphs constitute the bulk of extant, excavated inscriptions from the period prior to the fifth-century—an era before the standard formal features of the genre were firmly established. While the information summarized in Table 4.1 (and presented in detail in Appendix A) is suggestive of essential changes in commemorative practices during the third and fourth centuries, it is imperative to acknowledge the potential limitations of this kind of analysis: The information provided by the archaeological record is neither complete nor objective. For example, proposals for conducting scientific excavations are funded when the likelihood of discovering something historically significant is high—accordingly, the regions around the early capitals Luoyang and Nanjing, have seen greater archaeological activity than outlying areas. In addition,

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2 The burial of Wen Qiao discussed in the previous chapter is but one example.
3 See Appendix A for details.