The Rise of *Muzhiming* as a Literary Genre

Beginning in the fifth century, the literary aspects of *muzhiming* began to eclipse their religious functions. While communication with the spirits of the dead and the desire to claim sacred space remained important reasons for burying epitaphs in tombs, manuscript copies of *muzhiming* experienced an afterlife of their own as they circulated among living descendants and other interested parties. Over time, some of these texts began to be collected, anthologized, and subjected to critique based on their literary merits. In other words, *muzhiming* became objects of literary connoisseurship.

This chapter examines the cultural and social influences behind the gradual adoption of *muzhiming* by early medieval elites as a respectable means of commemorative expression. Special attention is paid to the literary climate at the courts of the Southern Dynasties, where an increased emphasis on refined writing and mastery of the textual tradition prevailed. In particular, I explore how imperial patronage of authors commissioned to compose *muzhiming* and the participation of members of the ruling family in personally authoring epitaphs for their kin and courtiers, increased the prestige of the genre in the eyes of the literati. Key epitaphs produced by Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508), author of the only *muzhiming* anthologized in the *Wen xuan*, are considered in detail. Of special interest is Ren Fang's epitaph for Xiao Rong 蕭融 (d. 501), the Prince of Guiyang 桂陽王, which was excerpted and transmitted in the Tang miscellany *Yiwen leiju*. Thirteen centuries later, archaeologists unexpectedly recovered the original inscribed stone from the prince's tomb. A comparison of these two versions of the text not only sheds light on questions concerning the production and consumption of epitaphs in medieval China but also provides an opportunity to investigate the aesthetics of commemoration.

**Textual Mastery and Elite Identity**

Beginning in the late Western Han, the cultural foundations upon which members of the elite class constructed and maintained their identity underwent a profound transformation. This pivotal change was marked by a transition away from an older model where prestige was centered on comprehensive knowledge of “authoritative praxis” to a newer one that emphasized mastery of
“authoritative texts.”¹ In earlier eras, classicists had been associated with conserving ancient rituals for ordering family, society, and the state; during the second-century BCE, their authority increasingly derived from “their reputation as faithful keepers of ancient texts.”²

Two events are usually cited as contributing to this transformation: (1) Han Emperor Wu’s decision in 136 BCE to officially appoint a small body of Erudites (boshi 博士) to teach the Five Classics; and (2) the establishment of the Imperial Academy (taixue 太學) in 124 BCE. The latter institution was inaugurated to educate future officials and to test their knowledge of the classics through periodic examinations.³ Graduates of the academy were appointed to administrative positions in government based on their performance.⁴ As office holding became crucial to preserving wealth and status across generations, “textual studies in the ru canon became a fundamental feature of the new elite that emerged during the Western Han.”⁵

The decisions to elevate the status of the Five Classics and to establish the Imperial Academy are usually attributed to Emperor Wu’s realization that a class of intensely literate courtiers could lend ideological support to his expansive vision of sovereignty.⁶ Some scholars, however, have questioned this view.⁷ For example, Michael Nylan argues that Western Han Emperors (including Emperor Wu) were not concerned with ideological unity. Rather, by simultaneously appointing scholars who taught conflicting interpretations of

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¹ Nylan, *Five “Confucian” Classics*, 32.
³ On the appointment of Erudites for the Five Classics and the establishment of the Imperial Academy, see *Han shu* 6.159, 6.212, 19A.726, 88.3593–94. See also Kramers, “Development of the Confucian Schools,” 756; Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 348; Nylan, *Five “Confucian” Classics*, 33–35; and Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu*, 145–46. Initially, fifty students were recruited to attend the Academy; by the end of the first century BC, the number had increased to three thousand.
⁴ Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 351. Michael Loewe has observed that provincial authorities recommended candidates to study at the Imperial Academy on the grounds of their “character and promise,” rather than actual merit. See Loewe, *Dong Zhongshu*, 146.
⁵ Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 351.
⁶ Mark Lewis has suggested that “the establishment of the ru texts as an imperial canon was part of a larger program to create a centralized state focused on the person of the emperor.” See Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 350.
⁷ See Nylan, “Classics Without Canonization,” 765–75. Martin Kern has argued that the appointment of Erudites and the establishment of the academy were actually attempts by Han Emperor Wu to restrict the interpretation of the classics to those views advocated by court-approved scholars. See Kern, *Stele Inscriptions*, 191. Mark Lewis acknowledges that it took a century following Emperor Wu’s activities for the ru to become the dominant intellectual force at the Han court; see Lewis, *Writing and Authority*, 351.