DEATH AND THE DEAD: PRACTICES AND IMAGES IN THE QIN AND HAN*

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Funerary practices and beliefs in the other world

Introduction

The care brought to the construction, decoration and interior arrangement of the tombs in China explains for a large part the privileged place occupied by funerary archaeology. One need only dig a little in North or Central China to encounter a tomb, often a rich one. For just the period of the Qin and Han (221 BC–220 AD), several tens of thousands of tombs have been discovered during the last 50 years. It is this prodigious work of the archaeologists that allows us to measure the importance of the funerary culture at the beginning of the imperial period.

We may say that the tombs, their décor and their furnishings together constitute a compendium of the cosmological beliefs, the conceptions and the rites linked to death, but also of the myths, divinities and demons that peopled the Han imaginary world. Han texts on funeral practices are quite scattered and allow neither an understanding of how these practices evolved nor an analysis of the reasons behind the choices. Archaeology, by virtue of series of data covering a long span of time, enables us to retrace the evolution, to make clear the articulations and the points of rupture, to get an idea of the social or regional variations and to document the aspects which the texts do not touch on: the internal organization of the tomb, beyond the notions of inner and outer coffins, the various grave goods, the iconography of the tomb and the monuments erected around the burial mound.

It is no longer possible to treat the four centuries under consideration as a single block, as has so often been the case, overlooking the cultural diversity of the regions even within the only well-explored zone—that where a Chinese population dominated. It has also become impossible not to take into account social diversity, even if it is mainly rich tombs which have been excavated and therefore the privileged classes—from the members of the imperial family to the small landowners—which are the best represented. The two extremes of the social ladder are less well known: no imperial tomb has been opened, and the tombs of the poorest have often been neglected.

I shall begin by presenting, in its main lines, the evolution of the structure of the tombs, their decoration and furnishings, and then look at the tomb as a cosmological system, the objects and apotropaic images it contained, and the exorcist rites practiced there. Finally, I will try to see what this ensemble, interwoven with the texts, reveals of the beliefs in the next world, taking into account the different interpretations which have been advanced. In a field of studies which evolves very quickly, this short synthesis has no other pretension than to indicate the state of the field and to propose some working hypotheses.

Burial practices

Structure of the tombs

During the Han period the structure of the tombs underwent radical transformations. Between the 2nd century before and the 1st century of our era, they went from hermetically-sealed burials, vertical pits centered on nested coffins (guomu 棺墓) (Fig. 1), to constructions developed horizontally (shimu 室墓), rock-cut or more often subterranean, conceived in the image of the dwellings of the living. The tomb was entered by way of an entrance corridor, and it was possible to circulate inside the tombs, most of which were organized around a central axis. The prototype of this form of sepulchre, or catacomb-tomb (hengxue mu 橫穴墓), as opposed to the vertical pit tomb (shuxue tukeng mu 豎穴土坑墓), appeared in Qin and more largely in the Yellow River valley in the 4th century BC,¹ but took its final form only in the Han. From