WOMEN, KINSHIP, AND PROPERTY AS SEEN IN A HAN DYNASTY WILL

BY

BRET HINSCH
Department of History, National Chung Cheng University,
Minhsiung, Chiayi, Taiwan

Construction on the Xupu Commune in Yizheng, Jiangsu, uncovered some relics that piqued the curiosity of Chinese archaeologists. Since then preliminary digs in the area have brought to light a spectacular array of more than one hundred ancient tombs. Among these rich finds, the tomb known as Xupu 101 has attracted particular attention. As described in the site report, published in 1987, this tomb contained a number of short documents written on bamboo and wood. The most important text is a will dating from A.D. 5, a date that distinguishes it as the earliest known Chinese will yet uncovered. Though obscured by philological ambiguities, this unique document still deserves careful study for the valuable insights it offers into late Western Han society.

The archaeological site provides a context that can aid in the accurate interpretation of this document.¹ This vertical pit tomb is constructed of clay bricks and contains a joint burial. Although the human remains have decayed beyond the point of determining their gender, numerous similarities to other sites lead archaeologists to assume that the pair were husband and wife. The remains are contained in two separate lacquered coffins. The body in coffin A is the better preserved of the pair and is accompanied by numerous objects, including all of the documents on bamboo and wood, an iron knife, and a wooden sword. The presence of weapons leads archaeologists to conclude that this coffin contains the husband. The human remains in coffin B have fully decayed. A large number of burial goods surround the coffins.

¹ The full site report was presented by the Yangzhou Bowuguan 湟州博物館 as “Jiangsu Yizheng Xupu 101 hao Xi Hanmu” 江蘇儀征膏浦101號西漢墓, Wenwu 文物 1 (1987): 1-13.

© Brill, Leiden, 1998  T'oung Pao LXXXIV
图二三  竹简 《先令贡书》 (M101:87) 拓本 (1—18 为竹简编号) (均为 1/4)

Attribution for line drawing of bamboo slips: