Book Reviews


It has become conventional in modern academic works to structure a book’s name around a colon, with the title proper acting as a “hook” to attract the reader’s interest, and the following subtitle announcing the actual subject. This is very much the case with Constance Cook’s monograph. It offers a valuable study of a major tomb, the most comprehensive study of any pre-Han tomb yet to be published in English. In presenting the structure and contents of the tomb, i.e., the “one man’s journey” of the subtitle, it has made a significant contribution to the study of early China in the West. At the same time, it also offers more general hypotheses about the nature of death and funerary rites in ancient China. These arguments and theories dealing with the broader topic of “death in ancient China” remain much more problematic. I will here discuss both aspects.

The tomb in question is that of Shao Tuo, an official of Chu state in the central Yangzi valley, who was buried in 316 BC. The tomb is an exceptionally important find, which has already been the focus of much Chinese scholarship and of a major dissertation by Lai Guolong, from which Professor Cook draws a great deal and which she frequently cites. The tomb is significant not only for its well-preserved material remains, but even more for its extraordinary texts. These include an unusually informative tomb inventory (a type of text that is not uncommon in elite tombs of the Warring States [481-221 BC] and Han [AD 206-220]), records of legal cases that Shao Tuo dealt with in life (with which Professor Cook does not deal), and most importantly with a detailed record of divinations stretching over the last years of his life. These deal first with problems in Shao Tuo’s career, but become more frequent and urgent as they gradually focus on the disease that ultimately killed him. The divinations try to identify the hostile spirit or spirits (whether ancestors, nature divinities, or cosmic deities) who are causing the disease, and to ascertain what sacrifices might appease them. They thus provide uniquely valuable insights into ideas about medicine and religion in Warring States Chu, particularly as these pertain to the issue of death. The inclusion in the appendices of a complete, annotated translation of these and related fragments of divinations from the Wangshan tomb is probably the most valuable contribution of the book. In addition to presenting and analyzing the contents of the tomb, Professor Cook also invokes the ritual and philosophical texts from the
Warring States and Han, as well as materials from other tombs of the period. The benefits and problems of some of these adjunct materials will be discussed below.

The book begins with a brief introduction outlining its central thesis, that the “spirit” (but not the body) of the deceased was intended ultimately to leave the tomb and take a lengthy and difficult journey to Heaven where it could join its ancestors. Chapter 2, “Death as Journey in Ancient China,” deals first with early Chinese ideas about the body’s vital spirits and how they could be controlled to induce health and longevity, or abused to bring about disease and premature death. It then presents what is probably the most detailed discussion available in an English publication of funeral rites as described in the Han ritual classics. It is worth noting in passing that none of the passages cited indicates a belief in a post-mortem journey of the spirit. However, this is not crucial, since the ritual classics represent a highly selective “orthodoxy” as defined by a particular group of scholars.

Chapter 3, “Entering the Earth,” is devoted to the structure and contents of the tomb, with a brief opening section on cults to deities associated with the Earth. The second section, with uncertain links to the first, deals with aspects of the themes of “inner” and “outer,” where the former could be identified with the tomb, the capital, the family, and the body. All of these are linked to the case of Shao Tuo and the related divinatory materials. The valuable description of the tomb and its contents is to a degree undercut by the author’s tendency to impose meanings derived from diverse written materials or her own focus on the theme of the spirit journey. An example of the former is her insistence that Shao Tuo’s tomb had four outer chambers because it was modeled on the ancient Chinese image of the world as a central zone surrounded by four zones associated with the cardinal directions. This idea is even extended to the claim that Chu tombs in general follow this model (pp. 66-67). However, apart from Shao Tuo’s tomb and a tomb at Xincai, virtually no Chu tombs are structured in this way; the number and arrangement of the tomb chambers varies from tomb to tomb. Such variety makes it unlikely that there was a conscious, serious commitment to the tomb as a replica of this cosmic model.

As examples of the imposition of the “spirit journey” model onto recalcitrant materials, she discovers evidence for it in the paintings of hunting scenes and social gatherings on a lacquer box (pp. 119-28). In fact, the contents of the paintings suggest nothing of spirit travel, and the object would be a strange location to depict such a theme. She also describes a vessel from the Tianxiangguan tomb, which is in the form of a pig, as being “ready to pounce or take off” because it has curving dragon lines painted on it, as well as “frog-like legs” (pp. 57-58). However, one need not invoke the conventional British image for something that will never take place as occurring “when pigs have wings (or ‘can fly’)” to think that interpreting a pig as an embodiment of flight is seriously forced. There is also an extended discussion of the carved wooden monsters (zhenmushou), or wooden