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Three Han Dynasty tombs at Ma-wang-tui

David D. Buck

Four kilometres east of Ch'ang-sha, a major city in the central Yangtze valley region of China, lies a small saddle shaped hill known as Ma-wang-tui, or literally 'mound of the Horse King'. Local legend had long connected the hill with some kind of ancient tomb. A register of probable archaeological sites compiled after liberation in 1949 included the hill, along with many others, in the Ch'ang-sha area. Since the early twentieth century, and especially since 1949, archaeological work in the Ch'ang-sha region has produced a large number of graves dating from the Warring States period (470–222 B.C.) when the Ch'u state flourished there, and from the Western Han (206 B.C.–A.D. 8) (Hunan 1959).

Excavation work at Ma-wang-tui began in 1972 when construction of a hospital on the adjacent land made a thorough investigation and salvage work necessary. An archaeological team from the Hunan Provincial Museum in Ch'ang-sha identified the two humps of the saddle as tombs and began excavation of the eastern mound (fig. 12). This burial, now known as Han Tomb No. 1 at Ma-wang-tui, turned out to hold some of the most spectacular finds in Chinese archaeological work of recent years (Hunan 1972). The tomb contained the well-preserved remains of a noble woman who died sometime in the mid-second century B.C. In addition to the corpse, the tomb chamber contained a thousand objects including a large funerary banner (*ming-ching*) of a type never seen before, clothing, food, a large amount of lacquerware retaining its original brilliant colouring, three unusually decorated inner coffins and more than one hundred tomb figures (Hunan 1973). The identity of the woman remained uncertain, but inscriptions and seals indicated that she had been the wife of one of the four men of the Li family who held the title of Marquis of Tai between 193 and 110 B.C.

In the fall of 1973 further excavations began on the western hump at Ma-wang-tui. Another tomb was opened, but grave robbers had seriously despoiled the site. The most valuable finds among the remains were several seals which indicate that the tomb originally held the remains of Li Ts'ang, the first Marquis of Tai. Ssu-ma Ch'ien in the *Shih chi* (Historical Records) gives Li Ts'ang's death in 186 B.C. According to custom, a feudal noble of Li Ts'ang's status would have been buried side by side with his wife. The man would have been buried on the west and the wife on the east. This plan is seen in Tombs No. 1 and No. 2 at Ma-wang-tui. And so the corpse in Tomb No. 1 has now been accepted as that of Li Ts'ang's wife, whose personal name was Hsin or Hsin-chiu (Hunan 1974).

At the time Tomb No. 2 was opened, the archaeological team composed of staff from the institute of Archaeology of Academia Sinica in Peking and the local Hunan Provincial

Museum also excavated a third tomb immediately south of Tomb No. 1. The discoveries in Tomb No. 3 in many ways surpass those from Tomb No. 1. The corpse in Tomb No. 3 was not as well preserved as Lady Li's, but Chinese specialists have identified the skeleton as belonging to a young man in his thirties. Inscriptions in the tomb give his death as occurring in 168 B.C. The man is believed to be the son of Li Ts'ang and Hsin-chiu. The general construction of Tomb No. 3 is exactly the same as Tomb No. 1, but the dimensions are slightly smaller. A second funerary banner, similar to the polychrome painted silk banner discovered in Tomb No. 1, was included among the tomb

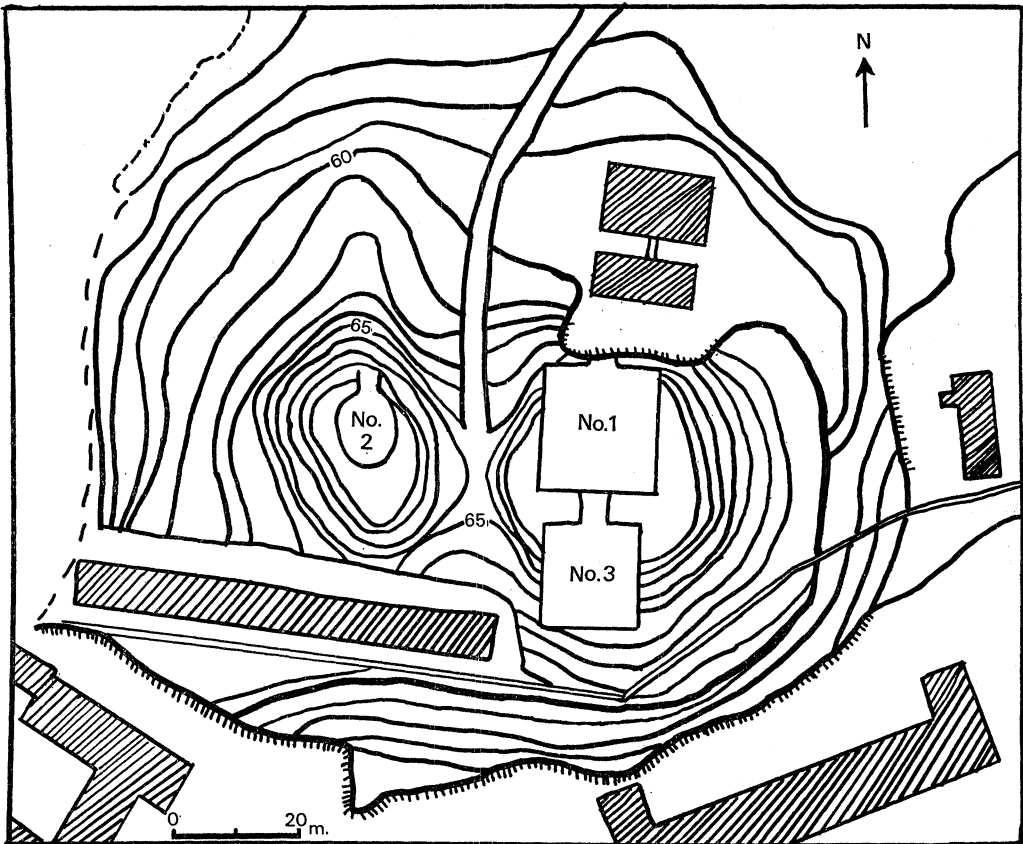


Figure 12 Ma-wang-tui, showing the location of the three tombs. Buildings to the south are part of the hospital complex which was constructed in 1971 and brought about the opening of the tombs. Redrawn from *Wen-wu* (1974). 7: 40

furnishings. Tomb No. 3 also contained a number of objects of great archaeological and historical interest not found in Tomb No. 1. The walls of the outer burial chamber were draped with painted silk cloths depicting processions and boating expeditions. The tomb's furnishings included thirty-eight different military weapons, ranging from swords to bows and arrows. Also included were maps, the earliest yet found in China, and treatises on medical matters along with accompanying illustrations (Hunan 1974).

Most important of the finds in Tomb No. 3 are the texts of several ancient books including the *I ching* (Classic of Changes), *Chan-kuo tse* (Intrigues of the Warring States)

and two different editions of Lao Tzu's *Tao-te ching* (The Way and Its Power). These texts were written on silk in the clerical script (*li-shu*) coming into common use in the early Western Han period. The copies of Lao Tzu's classic have attracted the greatest initial attention because the versions from Tomb No. 3 show several variations from today's accepted texts. Some chapters of the copies in Tomb No. 3 show a different order of verses and also incorporate opening and closing essays which were previously unknown (Hunan 1974). This marks the second major find in recent years of classical texts from graves of the early Western Han period. In 1972 at Lin-i in the north China province of Shantung, a Han period grave was found to contain several important texts written on bamboo strips. Most significant were Sun Wu's *Ping fa* (The Art of War) and a copy of his descendant Sun Pin's previously unseen work by the same title (Buck 1974). These textual discoveries at Ma-wang-tui and Lin-i have come to play an important part in new interpretations of the significance of the tombs.

Tomb-construction

Stratification at Ma-wang-tui reveals that Li Ts'ang's tomb (No. 2) was constructed first. It had an oval-shaped pit with sloping walls leading to a wooden tomb-chamber placed in the bottom of the shaft. The tomb-chamber itself was packed first in a layer of charcoal and then in an outer layer of fine white and yellow clay. The tomb-shaft was filled with pounded earth and lastly a pounded-earth mound was raised over the mouth of the tomb-shaft. The tomb was oriented on a north to south axis and the tomb-passageway lay to the north. Wooden tomb-guardian figures were found beside the passageway. Li Ts'ang's tomb, however, was the earliest and least elaborate of the three at Ma-wang-tui. In addition, several grave robberies had destroyed many of its original qualities.

The best example of the style of tomb construction at Ma-wang-tui is found in Tomb No. 1. Stratigraphic evidence shows that Lady Li's tomb was the last to be constructed at Ma-wang-tui, and its digging resulted in damage to the entryway guardians of her son's tomb. Moreover, the tomb-mound for her burial covers part of the mounds of both Tombs No. 2 and No. 3. Thus it is clear that she died after her son in 168 B.C. Based on the evidence of the types of clay coin-representations found in Lady Li's tomb, Chinese scholars have concluded that she died sometime prior to 145 B.C. (Hunan 1973: I, 156-7).

Tomb No. 1 has an oblong pit measuring 19.5 m. north to south and 17.5 m. east to west. The tomb extends for 20 m. from the top of the covering mound to the bottom of the shaft. The tomb-pit mouth is marked by four steps each about a metre in width (plate 1), and below these steps steep, slanted walls lead to a crypt-space at the bottom. Access to the crypt was by means of a sloped, stepped passage that enters from the north. The tomb shaft and passageway were constructed through several metres of packed earth which had been added to increase the natural height of the original hillock. The crypt-space and part of the tomb-shaft lie within the original hill (fig. 13). The tomb was oriented towards the north and arranged so that the corpse would lie with its head to the north.

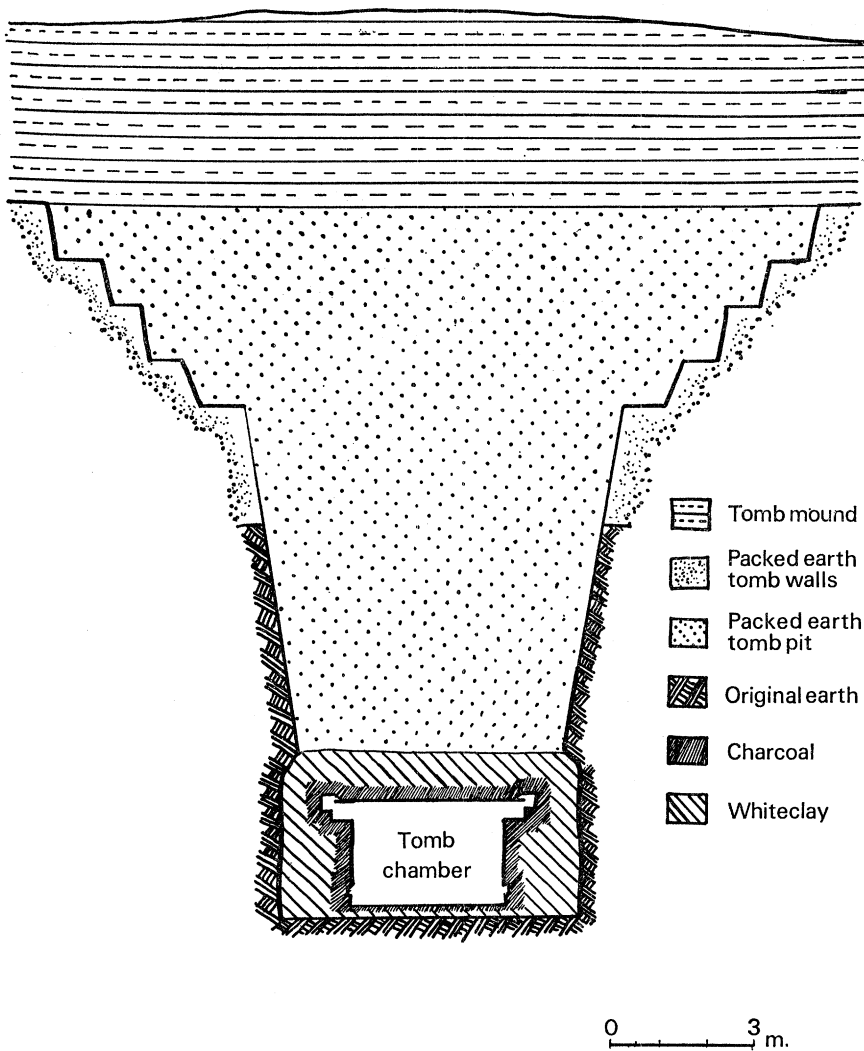


Figure 13 Cross-section of Tomb No. 1 at Ma-wang-tui. Redrawn from *Ch'ang-sha Ma-tui i-hao Han-mu* (1973). 1: 3

Tomb No. 1: the tomb-chamber

At the bottom of the tomb-shaft is a slightly larger crypt-space. The tomb entry-passage stops at the top of this crypt. The crypt contained a tomb-chamber constructed of large cypress planks (plate 2), the largest of which measure nearly five metres in length and weigh almost 1,500 kgm. Mortise and tenon construction was used throughout the the chamber, whose overall shape, as seen from above, is an \square figure. Inside the outer chamber lies another which repeats the \square shape. This inner chamber is also constructed of cypress and has been identified as a casket (*kuo*). Inside this casket lie four coffins (*kuan*) which fit snugly one into another.

The correct identification of the various parts of the tomb-chamber, including the caskets and coffins, proved to be a matter of considerable difficulty. It also is a matter of some importance, because funerary regulations prescribed the proper form of a burial. Shih Wei's opinion that there were four inner coffins has finally gained acceptance (Doi 1974; Shih 1972).

The compartments between the tomb-chamber and the casket enclosure are divided into four sections and contain most of the tomb-furnishings. The large northern section was draped with silk cloth and contained a large number of wooden figures, including several attired in ceremonial dress. This section also contained some platters of food. This area was found upon opening to be flooded with a liquid containing mercury and various acidic and organic compounds. It is believed this might have been connected with attempts to preserve the corpse, but its purpose is not entirely clear.

The western compartment contained rolled mats, along with a large number of plaited bamboo cases and baskets. The cases bore the seal of the Overseer of Marquis Tai's Household. They contained food, clothing, and two models of musical instruments (Hunan 1973: I, 117-18). The eastern chamber contained a large number of carved and painted wooden tomb-figurines. The southern chamber contained more tomb-figurines and a complete inventory of the tomb-furnishings recorded on bamboo strips. In accordance with the practices of Emperor Wen (r. 179-156 B.C.), Tomb No. 1 contained no precious metals, jade, or jewellery.

A layer of charcoal 0.4 to 0.5 m. thick was placed outside the tomb-chamber and beyond this the crypt space was filled with at least a metre of fine white clay. The marvellous state of preservation of the contents of the tomb is attributed primarily to the use of the white clay and charcoal, which effectively kept out moisture and oxygen. The practice of using white clay around the outside of tombs and caskets is associated with the Ch'u culture. The addition of charcoal is a distinguishing characteristic of the early Western Han tombs of the Ch'ang-sha area. In 1961 a tomb, possibly that of Wu Ching (d. 157 B.C.), the fifth and last member of the Wu family to hold the title of King of Ch'ang-sha, was opened in the suburbs of Ch'ang-sha and had the same combination of clay and charcoal (Bulling 1974: 166). The stairs at the pit-mouth are another characteristic feature of early Western Han tombs in Ch'ang-sha.

In other parts of the Han empire tomb-construction followed different practices. Some graves were constructed with long pits and the deceased remains were placed in rear niches. Tombs of members of the royal family in north China dating from the late second century B.C. show an entirely different style, with large chambers hewn from stone and linked by connecting passages. Such tombs at Man-ch'eng belonged to Liu Sheng and his wife. Liu Sheng was the elder brother of Emperor Wu (r. 140-87 B.C.) and died in 113 B.C. His tomb and that of his wife both contained jade burial suits which have been on public display in China and elsewhere (Ku 1973). The practice of not including jade and precious metals followed at Ma-wang-tui had thus been completely abandoned half a century later.

These few examples illustrate the main characteristics of the tombs at Ma-wang-tui. First, the tombs reveal clearly the continuation of the strong cultural tradition of the Ch'u state which had ceased to exist as a political entity in 223 B.C. Second, the Ch'u culture in the early second century B.C. had been modified by certain new practices

introduced by the Han feudal rulers and administrators. These new practices did not, however, see the wholesale replacement of Ch'u culture, but rather adapted or refined existing regional cultural motifs. Third, the early Western Han period was obviously a period of wide swings in accepted practice in many various matters, including burial regulations. This would fit the picture we have from historical sources of a vigorous and expansive new amalgam of Chinese imperial culture taking shape in the early Western Han, and more especially in the reign of Emperor Wu.

Tomb No. 1: the coffins

The four coffins in the centre of the tomb-chamber are all finely constructed and decorated. The outermost coffin is black lacquer outside and red inside, but otherwise devoid of decoration. The third coffin has a black-painted background covered with cloud patterns, among which fifty-seven different mythological scenes are interspersed. Some of the figures have human faces, but most common is an animal which adopts human postures, wears clothing, and is depicted engaging in human pastimes including hunting, dancing and playing musical instruments. The official report adopts the term 'demons' (*kuai-shen*) for these beasts. Their dress and actions, especially those of the figures shown with antlers or with wolf heads devouring snakes, links them with religious tomb-guardian figures from the earlier Ch'u culture (Sun 1973b).

The second coffin is decorated with a red background overlaid with polychrome colours. These have run in some places, but detailed line drawings reveal that the top, sides and ends of the coffin all bear elaborate scenes. On the top a matched pair of huge curving dragons, whose long necks coil back through their own tails, are being attacked by a pair of tigers. On the left side of the casket a similar pair of dragons enclose in their curving bodies a horse, tiger, huge bird and a man. One end section shows two more dragons; the other a pair of deer. The right side of the coffin has a painted abstract design of angles, curves and volutes in the same style as the rest of the coffin, but includes no identifiable animal shapes. The significance of these various scenes and designs has yet to be explained.

The last and innermost coffin is decorated with an overlay of satin stitch embroidery. The top and sides were further embellished with feathers applied with glue to strips of an under fabric. The style of this decoration fits contemporary descriptions of the ways in which the coffins of the nobility were prepared (Yu 1973).

Tomb No. 1: the corpse of Lady Li

Inside the fourth coffin the corpse of Lady Li lay wrapped in twenty layers of shrouds and cloth. Beneath these, the corpse was further bound with nine bands. Below the bands there were further shrouds and clothing. The corpse lay on its back, head towards the north in a fully extended position.

The remarkable condition of the corpse permitted Chinese specialists to undertake

a full post-exhumation autopsy. The corpse measured 1.54 m. in height and weighed 34.3 kgm. One account stated, 'This aristocratic woman was about fifty and had led the idle dissipated life of the exploiting classes. Well nourished, she had plenty of subcutaneous fat . . .' (*China Reconstructs* 1973: 32). The examinations also told a great deal about Lady Li's medical history. As a young woman she had borne children and was around fifty when she died. Her right forearm had been deformed as a result of an improperly set fracture, and she had also a distinct narrowing of the fourth lumbar space, a condition that caused her to stand and walk in a bent posture. Her left lung contained a calcified tuberculosis foci. She suffered from schistosomiasis, gall stones, and there was evidence of pin and whipworms in the intestinal tract. Lady Li had Type-A blood and her arteries showed the build-up of heavy plaques to the extent that her left coronary artery was three-quarters blocked by these arteriosclerotic plaques. The autopsy concluded that she had probably died of myocardial infarction sometime shortly after eating musk melon. Seeds of that fruit were found in her esophagus, stomach and intestines (Hunan 1973: I, 31-2).

The corpse also revealed how an aristocratic coiffure of the period was made, as well as details of dress and adornment. Lady Li was wearing a bag of herbs around her neck. These herbs were among those prescribed for a certain illness in the *Huang-ti nei ching* (The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine).

The corpse in Tomb No. 3 had decomposed leaving little more than the skeleton. The layer of white clay in Tomb No. 3 was much thinner than in Lady Li's tomb and this is believed to have permitted decomposition of the male corpse (Hunan 1974: 42).

Funerary banners from Tombs No. 1 and 3

Folded on the top of the innermost coffins in both Tombs No. 1 and No. 3 lay large T-shaped silk garments decorated with elaborate polychrome paintings (fig. 14). Several detailed commentaries on the design and purpose of this funerary banner from Tomb No. 1 have appeared, but no careful comparisons of the two banners have yet been published. The general shape and design of the banner from Tomb No. 3 coincides, however, with that from Tomb No. 1 (Hunan 1974).

In the tomb-furnishings register found in Tomb No. 1 this large silk banner is described as a 'flying garment' (*fei-i*). Its place in the tomb corresponded to the prescribed location for funerary banners (*ming-ching*) displayed during funeral ceremonies and carried in the funeral procession. The most satisfactory analysis of the banner has been advanced by A. Gutkind Bulling who interprets the scenes painted on to the banner as depicting the fate of the human soul after death (1974).

The banner from Tomb No. 1 has a painted red field which has turned a dark reddish-brown. The elaborate design was painted over in heavy colours which have retained their pigmentation rather well. The cross arm of the T is 0.92 m. long, the overall height is 2.05 m., and the width at the bottom is 0.48 m. Tassels extend from the four lower corners.

The bottom section of the design depicts the underworld inhabited by snout-nosed fish, snakes and antlered animals that resemble the demons (*kuai-shen*) from the third

inner coffin. Above the underworld lies the human realm. The figures on the platform supported by the human-faced monster are members of the deceased's household performing some burial rituals. The central figure on the second platform is identified as Lady Li, attended by five females. Ms. Bulling believes that this scene represents the 'Great Summoning' (*Ta-chao*) conducted after death in order to locate the spirit of the departed and to welcome it back into its former household for a short visit prior to its final departure (1974: 165). In the banner from Tomb No. 1 the central figure on the raised platform is shown standing in a stooped position with a staff, as one would expect of a woman with the kind of back problems disclosed by the autopsy. In the banner from Tomb No. 3 a young man is shown with five male attendants on the same elevated platform. The elevation represents the visit of the spirit back to its home before proceeding upwards into the realm of heaven. Above the heads of the small party on the elevated platform on both banners a bird with a human face is shown flying along the upper reaches of the sky.

Ms. Bulling has interpreted the two large, intertwining dragons that extend along the sides of the lower section of the banner from Tomb No. 1 as representations of the two elements in the Chinese conception of the soul. These two elements will be reunited after death and that meeting will take place in a heavenly realm beyond the ken of mankind. Two guardians wait at the 11-shaped gates of this heavenly realm. To the left a crescent moon is shown with two animals, a hare with pupil-less eyes and a toad, both associated with the moon in Chinese myths. Below is Chang Ngo, the goddess of the moon. To the right is the red sun inhabited by a mythological crow-like bird called *chün-niao*. This bird was believed to have had three legs, but is shown in both banners from Ma-wang-tui with only two legs. The bird was known primarily from literary sources, and the depictions on the funerary banners show that it does have three-clawed feet: the literary tradition of a three-legged bird probably developed from the incorrect transcription of the character for claw (*chih*).

The centre of attention in the upper part of the Tomb No. 1 banner is intended to be the robed man with a long serpent's tail, attended by five birds. Ms. Bulling identifies this figure with Fu-hsi or Tai-i, who, she says,

represents the primordial ancestor to whom these two should return. . . . The souls returning to their origin having been divested of their human elements are now prepared for a new birth, not a repetition of the physical birth but a mystical re-birth as ancestor spirit, free of the limitations of time and space, thus it is hoped able to come to the assistance of their descendants. (1974: 169)

Additional tomb-furnishings

Tombs No. 1 and No. 3 each contained over one thousand different items ranging from bamboo cases bound with hemp rope to funerary models of musical instruments and coins. It is impossible to describe all these, but in general the furnishings can be divided into two groups. One group is common to both tombs and consequently represents the prescribed elements of a Western Han noble burial. The other group differs as between the two tombs. The objects in the second group may either represent variations in the

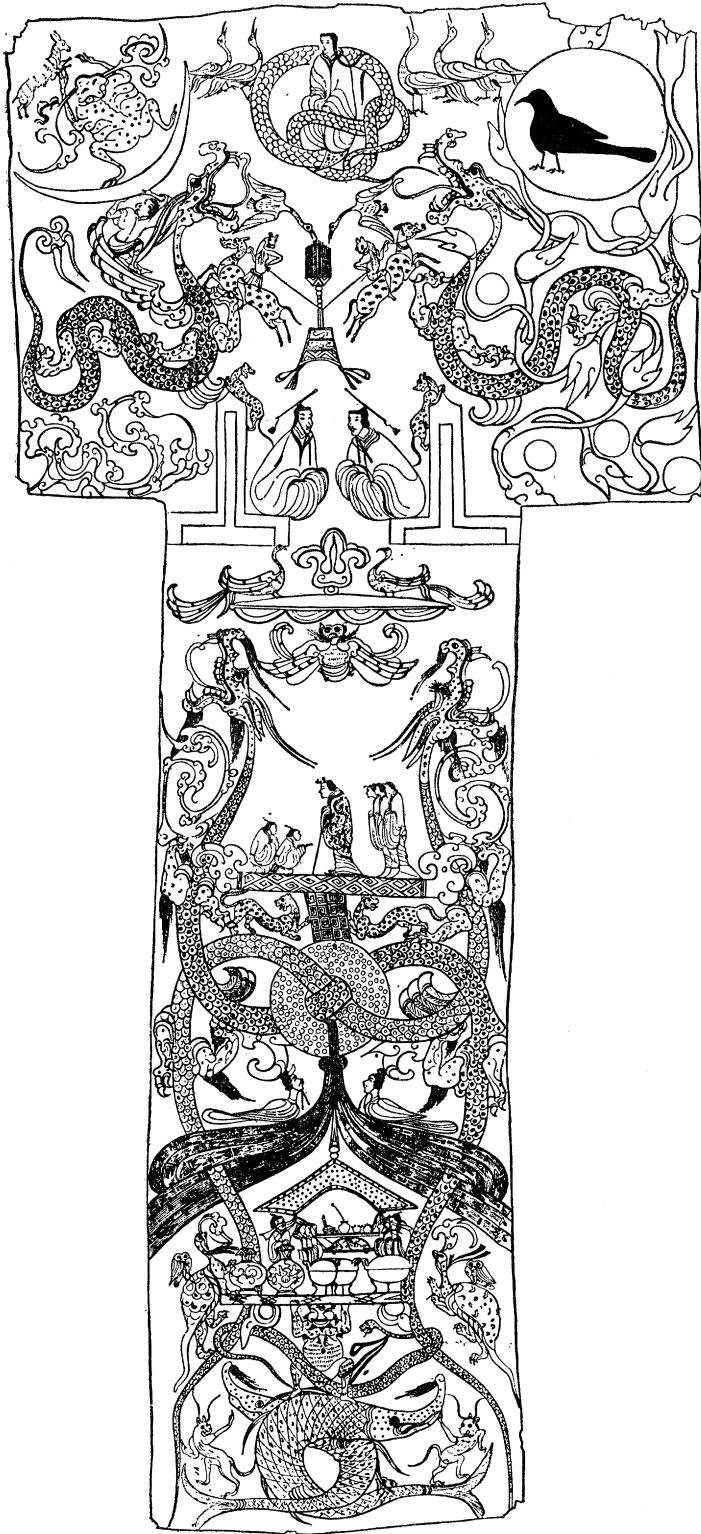


Figure 14 Line-drawing of polychrome painted design on the funerary banner from Tomb No. 1. Figure with walking-stick on the lower section of the T is taken to represent Lady Li who was buried in the tomb. Copied from *Ch'ang-sha Ma-wang-tui i-hao Han-mu* (1973). 1: 40

prescribed furnishings for the two sexes, or in the interests and tastes of the individuals concerned.

Examples of the common furnishings are the funerary models of a twenty-four string zither (*se*) and a twenty-two pipe mouth-organ (*yü*) found in the western compartments of both tombs. Both tombs also contained large carved tomb-figures (up to 735 mm. in height) representing attendants, musicians and dancers, dressed in miniature court costumes and placed in the northern compartments of the tomb chamber. In addition, on the top of the inner coffins, near the funerary banners, both tombs had groups of sticks of peach-wood, crudely carved with rudimentary faces and bound together with hemp.

Both tombs also contained many varieties of food. The grains included rice, wheat, oats, millet, soya beans and hemp seeds. The fruits and vegetables included plums, pears, jujube, and several kinds of greens. The meats were especially plentiful, ranging from ox, sheep, pig, deer and dog, through duck, chickens and various other kinds of domestic and game birds.

Examples of variation on the basis of the deceased's sex can be found in the gender of the tomb figurines. The figures in Lady Li's tomb were primarily female; while those in her son's were mostly male. The inclusion of a lacquer gambling board and pieces in the man's tomb is probably another example of the same phenomenon. Lady Li's tomb contained no weapons, but her son's held over thirty different items of this kind.

The maps, the medical treatises, and some of the articles of clothing found in Tomb No. 3 probably reflect the personal interests of Lady Li's son. One map shows mountains, hills and settlements; another is specifically military in character, with garrisons and distances clearly noted. There is a gauze-silk ceremonial cap contained in a special lacquer box that was probably one of the insignia of rank belonging to Lady Li's son. The inclusion of more than two hundred bamboo strips inscribed with medical information similar to that contained in the first classic of Chinese medicine, *Huang-ti nei ching*, with the accompanying illustrations on silk, is another item probably of individual interest (Hunan 1974).

All the tomb-furnishings reflect a highly complex and stratified society in the Ch'ang-sha kingdom of the second century B.C. The region had long been noted as a centre of handicrafts, but the well-preserved silks, and the lacquerware in particular, reflect strong regional craft traditions that maintained high standards in the early years of the Han dynasty. Most highly praised are the fine wine cups with small ear-like handles (fig. 15). Chinese descriptions of the tomb-finds have stressed the finds as evidence of the high levels of skills among Chinese artisans in the second century B.C. The discoveries thus become evidence of the people's creativity.

Ch'u culture

The cultural tradition of the Ch'ang-sha artisans was that of Ch'u. The Ch'u people inhabited an area south-west of the great north China plain and in historical times expanded their power into the central Yangtze valley region, encompassing the present-day provinces of Hunan and Hupei. Ch'u became one of the three largest and most powerful contenders for power in the last years of the Warring States period during the

third century B.C. Ch'u was conquered and destroyed in 223 B.C. by the generals of the Ch'in state, who went on to unite China under Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, the first emperor. The first unification of China lasted only a short while, from 221 to 207 B.C. After the first emperor's death rebellions broke out in the empire. A descendant from the great Hsiang military family of Ch'u quickly emerged as the most powerful man in China. Hsiang Yü was not, however, interested in creating his own dynasty and, after destroying the remnants of Ch'in power, he declined the throne himself and declared a member of the Ch'u royal house to be the highest ruler in China. These events at the close of the third century B.C. indicate that Ch'u was a strong and extremely vigorous branch of Chinese civilization.

Two thousand years ago the present-day city of Ch'a-shang was an important settlement known as Lin-hsiang, at the mouth of the Hsiang river. Lin-hsiang was a secondary centre of Ch'u culture in the Warring States era; the capital of the Ch'u state lay across Lake Yün-meng (today's Tung-t'ing Lake), on the northern shore near the present-day city of Chiang-ling (Huang and Niu 1972).

Unfortunately, few literary traces of Ch'u culture remain. The principal source is the *Ch'u tz'u* (Songs of Ch'u) which contains distinctive poetry of the late Warring States period (Hawks 1959). Most of our knowledge of Ch'u culture comes from the work of archaeologists. The extensive and careful excavations in the People's Republic of

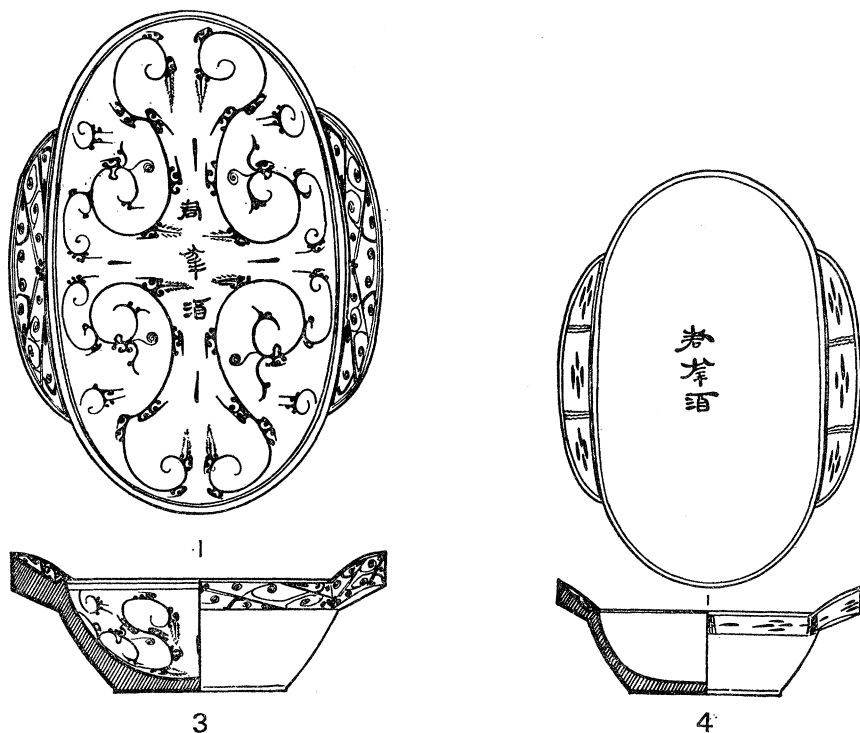


Figure 15 Lacquer drinking-cups from Tomb No. 1. Tu Nai-sheng believes the three-character inscription means something like 'Please drink the wine', couched in terms appropriate to the high station of the Marquis of Tai and his family (1973: 80). Copied from *Ch'ang-sha Ma-wang-tui i-hao Han-mu* (1973). 1: 83. Approximately two-fifths actual size

China in the past twenty-five years have contributed greatly to the increased attention given to the culture of Ch'u in recent accounts of ancient China. Although none of the Ch'u state capitals has yet been excavated, the Ch'u burial sites have yielded large numbers of beautiful lacquerware items, weapons, mirrors, wooden tomb-figurines and wooden monster-animals (Chang 1968 and 1972; Hayashi 1972).

The people of Ch'u are believed to have been inclined more towards religion than the inhabitants of the north China plain. The role of the shaman (*wu*) in Ch'u culture appears to have been quite important. The large numbers and distinctive character of the tomb-furnishings associated with Ch'u graves are believed to reflect the important role of these shaman (Hayashi, 1972). A great deal remains to be explained about the origin and nature of Ch'u culture, but it clearly had a major influence on the final synthesis of Chinese imperial culture that emerged in the Western Han dynasty. H. G. Creel has written, 'In the eventual amalgamation that produced the Chinese state and Chinese culture as they have existed for the past two thousand years, it seems likely that Ch'u contributed quite as much as it received' (1970: 219). The tombs at Ma-wang-tui represent a major step in the process when Ch'u culture was being synthesized into the newly emerging, dynamic culture of the Western Han. Much work remains to be done to distinguish the Ch'u influence on the Western Han, but the discoveries at Ma-wang-tui are so rich and varied that they will provide one of the chief reference points in the work of understanding the historical process of the creation of imperial Chinese culture.

Li Ts'ang

Some additional history of the Western Han will further illuminate the significance of the tombs at Ma-wang-tui. After Hsiang Yü failed to establish a system for ruling China, one of his subordinates, Liu Pang, began the conquest of China. Liu Pang based himself in the Wei valley, the area which had previously proved so advantageous for the Ch'in, and in 202 B.C. his conquest had proceeded far enough for him to assume the imperial throne as the first emperor of the Han dynasty. He enfeoffed eight men as kings (*wang*), in control of large territories located at some distance from his own power-base in the Wei river valley.

One of these new kings was Wu Jui, a former general, who received the kingdom of Ch'ang-sha. This policy of granting large territories did not prove to be an adequate means for governing the empire and by 197 B.C. Liu Pang had removed all the original eight kings except for Wu Jui in Ch'ang-sha. Liu Pang continued to create kings and kingdoms, but granted these favours only to members of the royal family. At the time of Liu Pang's death in 195 B.C. ten kingdoms existed; members of the Liu family held nine. Only Wu Ch'eng, the son of Wu Jui, controlled a territory independent of the imperial line.

Although the Han rulers did not remove the Wu family from power in the state of Ch'ang-sha for several more decades, they did increase their control over the kingdom by appointing a chancellor (*ch'eng-hsiang*). Li Ts'ang received this appointment in 193 B.C. Along with his chancellorship, Li Ts'ang also received a fief of 700 households and the title 'Marquis of Tai'. The marquissate of Tai lay at least 100 km. north of the city of

Lin-hsiang and the tombs at Ma-wang-tui; as a consequence, the Li family had to live in Lin-hsiang in order for the chancellor to fulfil his duties (Huang and Niu 1972).

The available records do not tell us what fitted Li Ts'ang for his new post in Ch'ang-sha, but the emperor's reasoning in a similar appointment is recorded,

'Ch'en Hsi,' said the Emperor [Liu Pang], 'formerly acted as my envoy, and I had the deepest faith in him. Tai¹ is a region of critical importance to me, and therefore I enfeoffed Ch'en Hsi as a marquis and made him chancellor of the kingdom so he could guard it for me.' (*Shih chi* 8; Watson 1961: I, 112.)

Ch'en Hsi revolted against the Han, but Li Ts'ang and his descendants proved to be much more loyal followers of the Han dynasty. Although it is not clear that Li Ts'ang's son succeeded him as chancellor in Ch'ang-sha, the size and opulence of Tombs No. 1 and No. 3 indicate that the Li family enjoyed increasing favour and wealth after Li Ts'ang's death. The marquisate of Tai remained in the hands of the Li family until 110 B.C. Tombs of the later marquises have not been located. Regulations requiring the residence of feudal lords in their fiefs or at the national capital in Ch'ang-an underwent several revisions. It is possible that other tombs of the Li family will be found in the vicinity of Ch'ang-sha or in the fief itself. The location of the latter is still not completely settled, but is believed to be near the present-day Kuang-shan district in Hupei (Hunan 1973: I, 158).

Significance of the Ma-wang-tui tombs

The Western Han period is one of the great formative periods of Chinese history. After the first unification by the Ch'in in 221 B.C., it required more than a century before that unity became a workable reality. The burials at Ma-wang-tui show that in the kingdom Ch'ang-sha an apparently easy accommodation between the requirements of Han rule and the continued existence of the Ch'u cultural tradition had been reached in the first half of the second century B.C. These accommodations were to be overturned during the time of Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 B.C.), but the tombs offer no clues to those later events.

The tombs do reveal, however, the complexity and high craftsmanship attained within the Ch'u cultural tradition. Earlier excavations had indicated this, but the extraordinary richness and diversity of the Ma-wang-tui tombs has established this characteristic of Ch'u culture beyond all question. Interpretations of the tombs made in China have stressed how tomb-furnishings are actually the achievements of the working people and show how the working people were exploited by the feudal aristocrats (Hunan 1973: I, 160–1).

The Chinese interpretations of the tombs have also been involved in the current re-evaluation of the historical roles of Confucius and Ch'in Shih Huang-ti. The latter ordered the burning of books, including the Confucian classics, after his unification of China. Until recently, Chinese and foreign historians have alike generally looked upon Ch'in Shih Huang-ti's actions as a totalitarian effort to destroy China's great heritage of Confucian philosophy in favour of the narrow and harsh dictates of Legalism.

¹ Written with another character, and hence a different place from the marquisate of Tai.

Today in the People's Republic, Ch'in Shih Huang-ti's actions receive a markedly different interpretation. His suppression of the old philosophical traditions is applauded as a necessary step when China was moving from a slave to a feudal society. On the other hand, Confucius and his followers, who lived in the period of transition from a slave to a feudal society, are condemned as conservatives who hoped to restore slave culture when the economy was progressing beyond such a mode of production. Confucians of the feudal period are criticized today for the reactionary nature of their philosophical positions.

By the time of the second century B.C. and the Ma-wang-tui tombs, the process of economic change from slave to feudal society had gone so far that a true restoration of slavery was impossible, yet it was still a time of fierce struggle between the contending philosophies of slave and feudal society. According to recent Chinese commentaries, the upper classes of the Western Han were beguiled into believing that the preservation of outmoded philosophical ideas was valuable. Consequently, the discoveries at the Ma-wang-tui tombs are said to 'indicate the upper classes in the kingdom of Ch'ang-sha during the early Western Han continued to strive to maintain the old rites' and the burial customs followed reflect the influence of the slave tradition and the tenacity of the reactionary ideology of slavery in the feudal era (Hunan 1974).

This argument, with its emphasis on the tenacity of old, outmoded philosophies, and on the dangers of revisionism or reactionary ideas reasserting themselves, is obviously laden with analogies to China's present internal situation. These comparisons are frequently and thoroughly discussed in various articles. The efforts of anti-Confucian leaders are praised and the defenders of Confucianism are roundly criticized. In this fashion the discoveries at Ma-wang-tui have been brought into the realm of current political discussion as a case illustrating the tendency for ruling elites to make the mistake of revering and preserving cultural forms and creations that are truly no longer desirable or healthy for society.

These new characterizations of the Warring States and Western Han period will encounter considerable disagreement from foreign scholars. Nevertheless they, like the Chinese, will be engaged in an effort to understand more fully the meanings of the texts and artefacts found in the Ma-wang-tui tombs, and to relate those finds to the process of the creation of the Chinese Imperial civilization that was occurring in the Western Han dynasty.

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Abstract

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Three Han Dynasty tombs at Ma-wang-tui

Taken together, the three Ma-wang-tui tombs are probably the richest discovery in Chinese archaeology since 1949. Tomb No. 1 belonging to Lady Li and Tomb No. 3, the burial of her son, date from the mid-second century B.C. and were found in a remarkably well-preserved state. Tomb No. 2 which belonged to Li Ts'ang (d. 186 B.C.), the Marquis of Tai, had been opened by tomb robbers on several occasions and contained little of interest. Excavations of Tombs No. 1 and No. 3, revealed the construction of the tombs and the marvellously preserved contents of the tomb-chambers. These include the corpse of Lady Li, two magnificent funerary banners, and a host of grave-furnishings including copies of classical texts, maps, medical treatises, musical instruments, lacquerware, sacrificial vessels and funerary food-offerings. The form of the burials does much to illuminate the nature of the Ch'u culture that thrived in the Ch'ang-sha area until the late third century B.C., and will help explain how the Ch'u people were absorbed into the empire of Western Han (206 B.C.-A.D. 8).