

Chinese Tombs
& Ancient Views of the
Afterlife

Background

In India, the oral preservation of Veda by Brahmins up the present period, supported by preservation (at least to some extent) of the fire-offering tradition, has provided detailed information about views of the unseen in the ancient period. In China, however, ancient ritual traditions of worshiping unseen powers & forces were preserved only by Confucian scholars, kings, and Daoist masters, and variety of other popular traditions of healing and exorcism, all of whom significantly transformed either the rituals themselves or the views of unseen powers which originally accompanied them. Thus our knowledge of ancient Chinese views of the unseen is much less complete. But while Vedic culture seems to have left practically nothing in the way of material remains, archeological research has uncovered clear material evidence of early Chinese culture, especially in elaborate tombs constructed by those who had sufficient means to provide for themselves in what they perceived would be their passage beyond this world. Such tombs provide fascinating traces of the way at least some ancient (probably wealthy) Chinese viewed the unseen realms to which they felt they would be traveling after death--although such clues can often be interpreted in numerous, potentially conflicting ways.

Because reliable documents of Chinese culture are much more easily found from the Han dynasty (207 BCE - 220CE) onward, it is most interesting to examine tombs from the Shang (14th-11th BCE) & Zhou (10th-3rd BCE) periods, as surveyed in the first part of this presentation. It is also important, however, to consider similarities & differences between such early examples and Han dynasty tombs themselves, in order to detect that ways in which Han period views of the afterlife both preserved and transformed earlier perspectives, as examined in part two of this presentation.

1. Shang & Zhou Dynasty Tombs (17th-3rd BCE)

In general, tombs dated to the Shang period contain more objects than the tombs of earlier periods, especially towards the later centuries of Shang rule. During this later period the structure of the tombs themselves became increasingly elaborate, involving excavation of up to 60 feet below the surface of the earth; surviving fragments of carved and painted designs suggest that some tomb interiors were decorated with (now decayed) wood. Coffins of the deceased were typically surrounded by an array of ceremonial (usually bronze) vessels & other implements, clothing & food; some tombs contain bodies of sacrificed domestic animals and humans, who may have been slaves or even relatives of the deceased. Clearly those who paid for such tombs conceived of their afterlife journey as being at least somewhat similar to their lives in the visible world. The same types of tombs are found also in the Zhou period, with increasingly elaborate ceremonial vessels.

earliest Shang tomb whose occupant can be identified:
Fu Hao or Queen Xin (c. 1250 BCE),
one of three major wives of a late Shang ruler
(according to oracle bone inscriptions)



Objects from Fu Hao's Tomb:
reproductions of jade figures (left)
& stone chariot with driver's remains (right)



diorama of Fu Hao in battle
(reconstruction based on tomb remains)



tomb objects from other Shang tombs:
bronze ceremonial wine vessels (13th-12th CE)



more wine vessels!! (13th-12th CE)
(this page & the next)





Shang ceremonial grain vessels

(note the hole on the bottom, making the vessel intentionally non-functional)



other Shang ceremonial vessels (for grain or liquid)



axe & knife blades--stone & jade
(apparently used for human sacrifice accompanying burial)



early Zhou (10th CE) bronzes implements:
ceremonial grain vessels



early Zhou ceremonial vessel (left) & belt buckle (right)



early Zhou wine vessel & mask:



ritual bells found in
Shang (left) & late Zhou (right) tombs

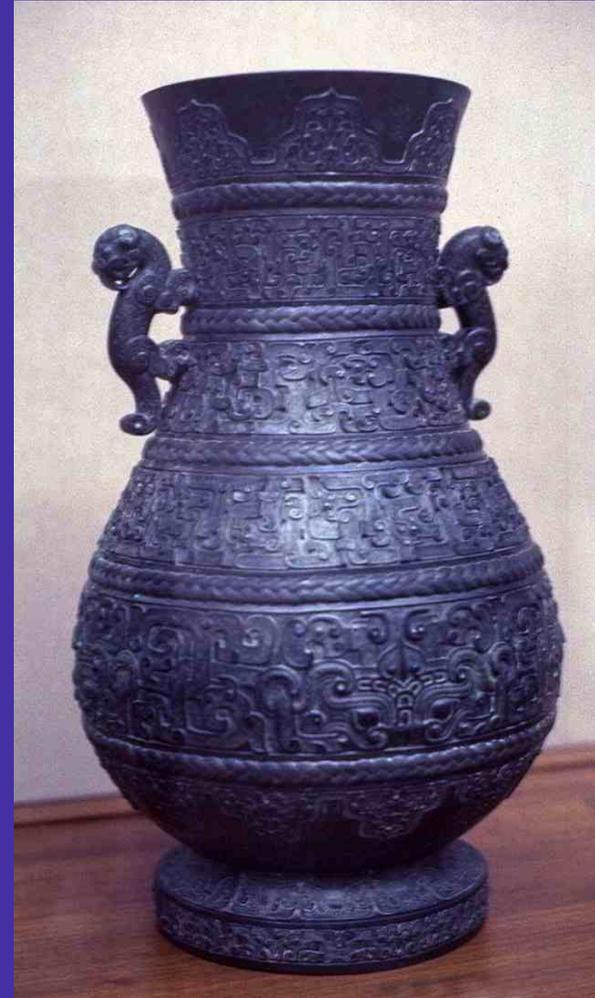


late Zhou (4th CE) ceremonial grain vessel
(with detail of handle)



late Zhou wine vessels

(note simple style, left, and more realistic animal handles, right)



late Zhou dragon handle
(contrast with Shang animal patterns)

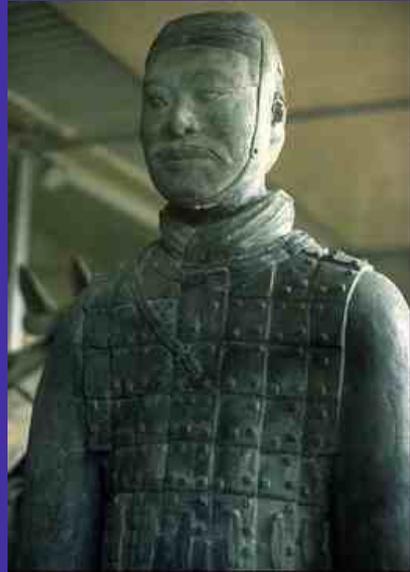


2. Qin & Han Dynasty Tombs (221 BCE - 220 CE)

The tomb of the first (& last) emperor of Qin presents what is perhaps the most amazing example of early Chinese tombs, which unlike earlier tombs was marked above ground by a huge mound of packed dirt. Several later Han emperors, famous warriors, and provincial governors are also buried in similar mound tombs, though most were vertical shafts which left no mark above ground. All of these continue to be packed with ceremonial and practical items of bronze, jade, and bone, although simpler styles of bronze casting become more and more common during this period, often with motifs reflecting Daoist themes. In addition some tombs contain exquisite silks, decorated mirrors, and even body suits made of jade. One later Han tomb containing six separate chambers, each with murals suggesting a separate function (i.e. guest reception, dining, worship, etc.), seems to confirm the speculation that these wealthy Chinese expected to find realms beyond death which involved many of the same tasks and obligations found in the world of the living.

Tomb of Qin Shih Huang Di (221-206 BCE)





Qin's tomb: stone & bronze horses



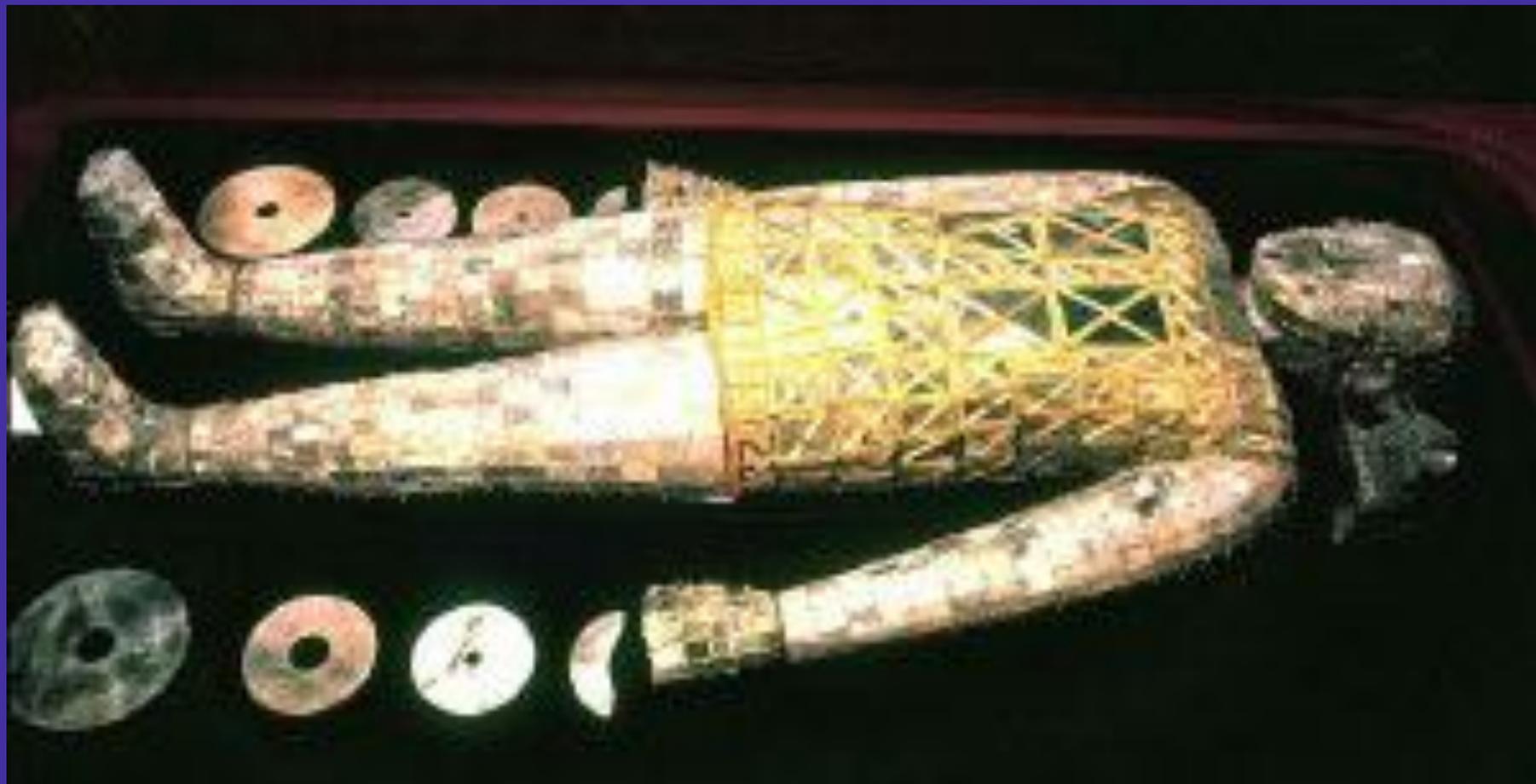
model of above-ground tomb (1st BCE)

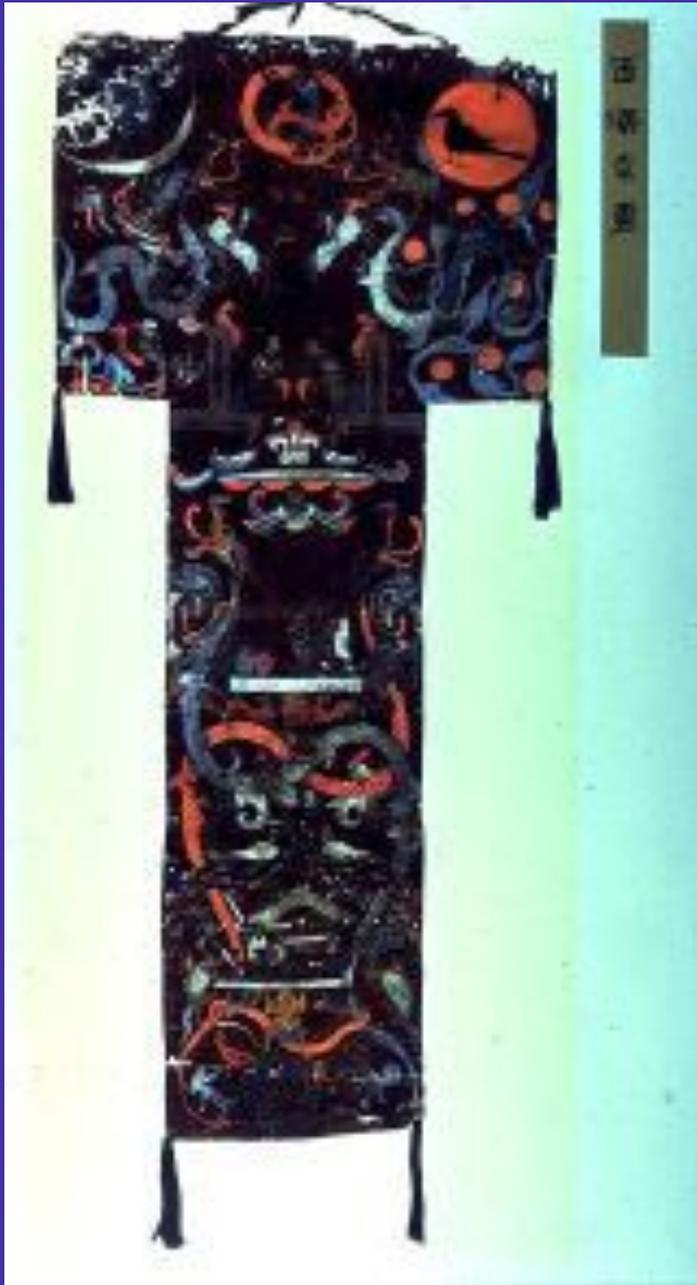


detail of tomb door (1st BCE)



jade suit of Tou Wan (2nd BCE)





silk banner in tomb
of lady Dai
(died 180 BCE)



incense burner
(2nd BCE)

mirror back (2nd BCE)

(with cosmic mountain & elements surrounding it--placed on chest of deceased)



mirror back w/animals (1st-2nd CE)

(probably used for divination rituals before placement in tombs)

