
***Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion.* By Guolong LAI. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015. Pp. xi+320.**

Paul FISCHER

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Western Kentucky University

Lai Guolong has produced in this new book both a solid argument for a new understanding of early Chinese tombs as well as an eminently useful introduction to the intersection of archaeology and art history as applied to early China. The central claim of the argument is stated in the opening paragraph: “The tomb is a bridge, a way station on the journey to the afterlife, and a physical manifestation of established conceptions of the afterworld” (p.1). Throughout the book, Lai contrasts this claim with other competing claims, while adducing evidence—most of it from the most recent sources available—to support his thesis. It is in the broader context of gathering this evidence that Lai is able to articulate his broader aim: “This book seeks to define the nature of these religious activities [evidenced by tomb objects] and provide a synthetic account of the changing religious beliefs and ritual practices beginning with the Warring States period and extending through to the Qin and Han periods” (p.11). Thus, one type of reader will be interested in this book for the specific argument about what exactly was going on with the construction of early Chinese tombs, but another type of reader will more broadly benefit from a wide-ranging examination of recent archaeological discoveries and how they should shape our apprehension of early Chinese intellectual history.

The book has four chapters bookended by a well-wrought Introduction and Conclusion. The Introduction includes both theoretical considerations and specific findings from the ongoing bonanza of excavations in China. The theoretical considerations span several academic fields, including religion and paleography, but the art-historical analysis is particularly well stated. Lai gives an overview of things to come in the following chapters: “In the realm of religious art, several notable and enduring innovations transpired: (1) new burial practices associated with the horizontal chamber-style tombs within which rituals associated with the cult of the dead took place; (2) new

funerary customs, such as the pervasive use of spirit artifacts (*mingqi* 明器) to mark the severance of ties between the dead and the living; (3) wider use of anthropomorphic and hybrid images and written texts to communicate with the spirit world; (4) formation of the underworld bureaucracy; and (5) newly evolved conceptions of cosmology, empire, and the afterlife, the last being defined as a journey to a cosmic destination” (p.12). These five foci are investigated and woven together throughout the book.

In Chapter One, “The Dead Who Would Not Be Ancestors,” Lai charts the burgeoning scope of the recipients of sacrifice. Ancestors (along with various nature deities) were the primary recipients from late Shang and early Zhou times, but this “pantheon” of invisible spirits subsequently expanded to include groups of people who were previously ignored. This community of newcomers “consists of individuals who died without posterity” (*juewuhouzhe* 絕無後者), who perished violently (*qiangsi* 強死), and who were slain with weapons (*bingsi* 兵死). This class of spirits, who could not become part of the ancestral lineage because of their violent death or lack of progeny, challenged the religious system passed down from the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties” (p.28). Lai argues that one central “challenge” to the religious system was the uncertainty posed by this previously disenfranchised group of individuals. Whereas ancestors might be interested in the welfare of their descendants (who, after all, were somehow “feeding” them with sacrificial offerings), those in this other group of prescient spirits were unpredictable and, depending on the circumstances of their deaths, vindictive, and perhaps capriciously so. How should one appease a potentially powerful and angry stranger? Including them in your sacrificial rituals and divinatory appeals is one good way to defuse any possible tension and misunderstanding.

Other spirits, both heavenly and earthly, also swelled the ranks of those receiving sacrifice. Grand One (太一), Earth Lord (后土), Lifespan Controller (司命), Misfortune Controller (司禍), Grand Water (大水), and several others are given their due, but Lai (in a later chapter) especially tracks the evolution of the fecundity god (*zu* 祖). This increase in the population of the spirits of dead people who may need to be pacified correlates with the number of people dying in the aptly-named Warring States period. Though such calculations are always constrained by meagre evidence, Lai relays that “[b]ased on anecdotal accounts in historical sources, historians estimate that between the middle Warring States period and the early Han dynasty the population decreased by almost half” (p.48). Survivors of military conflict in earlier times may have stopped to thank their ancestors for whatever influence they might have exerted in the battle, but in the decades and centuries prior to the Qin unification, it