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IMPERIAL TOMBS IN TANG CHINA, 618–907

The politics of paradise

Tonia Eckfeld

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Imperial Tombs in Tang China, 618–907

This important landmark book examines the religious, political, social and artistic significance of the imperial tombs of the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907). It explores, in detail, the finest recently excavated Chinese tombs of the Tang period, focusing on the architectonic form of these mausolea and the content and aesthetics of their magnificent mural paintings.

In introducing a selection of imperial, aristocratic and official tombs, the book highlights the fascinating circumstances of burial. The author sets the tombs in the broader context of Chinese culture and discusses such issues as the Tang concept of the soul and the afterlife, the politics of mausoleum architecture, the official status of women and the implications for the living of the burial conditions of family members. This intellectually and visually stimulating book is the first up-to-date, accessible presentation of the Tang tombs.

Dr Tonia Eckfeld is Senior Fellow in Art History and Asian Studies at the University of Melbourne. She lectures internationally on the art and architectural history of China, India and Japan. She has conducted extensive research throughout Asia and has received numerous academic awards, including a research fellowship to Harvard.

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To my parents

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Chronology of Chinese periods

| | | |
|------------------|----------------|--|
| <i>c.1700 BC</i> | <i>1050 BC</i> | <i>Shang dynasty</i> |
| <i>c.1050</i> | <i>221</i> | <i>Zhou dynasty</i> |
| <i>c.1050</i> | <i>771</i> | Western Zhou |
| <i>770</i> | <i>221</i> | Eastern Zhou |
| <i>770</i> | <i>475</i> | Spring and Autumn period |
| <i>475</i> | <i>221</i> | Warring States period |
| <i>221 BC</i> | <i>206 BC</i> | <i>Qin dynasty</i> |
| <i>206 BC</i> | <i>AD 220</i> | <i>Han dynasty</i> |
| <i>206 BC</i> | <i>AD 9</i> | Western Han |
| <i>AD 9</i> | <i>AD 23</i> | Xin |
| <i>25</i> | <i>220</i> | Eastern Han |
| <i>220</i> | <i>280</i> | <i>Three Kingdoms period</i> |
| <i>220</i> | <i>280</i> | Wei |
| <i>221</i> | <i>263</i> | Shu-Han |
| <i>222</i> | <i>280</i> | Wu |
| <i>265</i> | <i>420</i> | <i>Jin dynasty</i> |
| <i>265</i> | <i>316</i> | Western Jin |
| <i>222</i> | <i>280</i> | Eastern Jin |
| <i>386</i> | <i>589</i> | <i>Northern and Southern dynasties</i> |
| <i>420</i> | <i>589</i> | Southern dynasties |
| <i>420</i> | <i>479</i> | Song |
| <i>479</i> | <i>502</i> | Qi |
| <i>502</i> | <i>557</i> | Liang |
| <i>557</i> | <i>589</i> | Chen |
| <i>386</i> | <i>581</i> | Northern dynasties |
| <i>386</i> | <i>534</i> | Northern Wei |
| <i>534</i> | <i>550</i> | Eastern Wei |

xii *Chronology of Chinese periods*

| | | |
|-------------|-------------|------------------------------|
| 550 | 577 | Northern Qi |
| 535 | 557 | Western Wei |
| 557 | 581 | Northern Zhou |
| <i>581</i> | <i>618</i> | <i>Sui dynasty</i> |
| <i>618</i> | <i>907</i> | <i>Tang dynasty</i> |
| <i>907</i> | <i>960</i> | <i>Five dynasties period</i> |
| <i>907</i> | <i>1125</i> | <i>Liao dynasty</i> |
| <i>960</i> | <i>1279</i> | <i>Song dynasty</i> |
| 960 | 1127 | Northern Song |
| 1127 | 1279 | Southern Song |
| <i>1115</i> | <i>1234</i> | <i>Jin dynasty</i> |
| <i>1279</i> | <i>1368</i> | <i>Yuan dynasty</i> |
| <i>1368</i> | <i>1644</i> | <i>Ming dynasty</i> |
| <i>1644</i> | <i>1911</i> | <i>Qing dynasty</i> |

Acknowledgements

My chance discovery of a folio of photographs of tomb paintings¹ in a little bookshop in Melbourne's Chinatown in 1996 was a tiny event which led me on a greater journey of discovery, both intellectual and actual, to the tombs of Tang dynasty China, built more than a thousand years ago in the seventh to ninth centuries. The pictures of magnificent mural paintings belonging to the tomb of Crown Prince Li Xian (654–684) raised more questions than they answered. Excavation of the tomb, and the few Chinese publications available which documented it, dated from the Cultural Revolution, and my immediate investigations uncovered little to satiate my curiosity about the character, history and purpose of the tomb and the fate of its occupant. What followed was a quest to unlock the mystery and meaning of that tomb. My preoccupation for the next three years took me across the world, and culminated in my doctoral thesis 'The Tomb of Li Xian: Posthumous Rehabilitation and Political Legitimacy'. That analysis of the Tang dynasty's use of imperial tomb location, architectonic form and mural decoration to affirm the posthumous status of the deceased and the political legitimacy of the emperor, was the first detailed and thorough study of a single Tang tomb.

I was fortunate to receive grants from the University of Melbourne and the Australian Government to support my research, fieldwork in China, and six months as a resident scholar at Harvard University during that period. This work was enriched by my experience as a lecturer in Fine Arts, then Research Fellow in the Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Societies at the University of Melbourne from 2000 to 2002, and was completed while a Senior Fellow there in 2003. Publication of this book has been assisted by a grant from the University of Melbourne.

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1 Shaanxi sheng wenwu guanli weiyuanhui, *Tang Li Xian mu bishu*, Wenwu chubanshe, Beijing, 1974.

help with data and photographic materials. Without the work of fine archaeologists in China, this book would not have been possible.

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Translations and photographs are by the author, and diagrams are by Reinhold Eckfeld, unless otherwise acknowledged.

Introduction

Standing at the mouth of a freshly opened Tang dynasty (618–907) tomb, from which rich Shaanxi loam is being removed, I am impatient to see the tantalizing beauty of its buried treasures and grand wall paintings. I am eager to examine its contents for the stories they have to tell. I reflect on the people who came to this place more than a millennium ago when the tomb was being sealed, and recall the words of the Tang poet Zhang Yue (667–730):

All who come and go follow this road,
But living and dead do not return together.¹

I am reminded that tombs are much more than mere containers of bodies and artefacts. They are sites of consolation and ritual celebration, bridges at the boundary of life and afterlife, and repositories for the universal mysteries of death (Figure 0.1).

The tombs of eighteen of the twenty Tang emperors to the north of the Wei River in the vicinity of the Tang capital city, Chang'an (present day Xi'an), are monuments as impressive as the mountains inside which most were built² (Figures 0.2 and 0.3). They were designed as walled cities with underground palaces, above-ground temples, halls, altars, and residences occupied by loyal retainers whose duty it was to maintain the tomb complexes and serve the emperors' spirits. Extravagantly ambitious affirmations of Tang imperial authority, their scale rivalled that of the great palaces at the capital. Today, passing through the main gateway at Qianling, the best preserved Tang emperor's tomb, it is awe inspiring to approach the giant mountain peak beneath which, in sealed chambers, lie the bodies of Emperor Gaozong (Li Zhi, 628–683) and his Empress Wu Zetian (Wu Zhao, 625–705). Mammoth stone sculptures stand as sentinels to the left and right of the main road approaching the tomb, with only the foundations extant of Qianling's other above ground structures.

Thus far, only one Tang emperor's tomb has been excavated – that of Emperor Xizong; small and of inferior quality, it was built when the Tang was in decline in the late ninth century. All other Tang emperors' tombs remain to be opened, so we must rely on their above ground features for study. In the category of 'imperial tombs' there are not only emperors' tombs, but also those of imperial family



Figure 0.1 Excavation of a Tang tomb.

members occupying celebrated positions within emperors' tomb complexes. The tombs of princes and princesses provide us with the best available knowledge of the interior form and decoration of imperial tombs. Three tombs belonging to children of emperors have been conserved and are open to visitors, although modified for cultural tourism. These are at Qianling, belonging to Li Xian (Crown Prince Zhanghuai, 654–684), Li Chongrun (Crown Prince Yide, 682–701), and Li Xianhui (Princess Yongtai, 684–701). A fourth, at Qiaoling, known as Huiling, in which the body of Emperor Ruizong's first son (*d.*741) was interred, may also be opened to visitors.³ Resplendent with illusionistic murals covering every inch of wall and ceiling, these impressive tomb interiors vividly recreate imperial palaces and mansions inhabited by dozens of figures, many life size, providing for the daily needs and festive pleasures of the tomb occupants.

Through excavations, the interiors of a number other princes' and princesses' tombs are known, as are those of some aristocrats, civil and military officials, and others buried at emperors' tomb complexes and elsewhere. About fifty Tang tombs containing mural paintings have been excavated in the Xi'an area since 1950, at imperial and aristocratic family cemeteries, their richness and splendour demonstrating the exceptional posthumous privileges awarded to their deceased owners. Most of these date from the seventh or eighth century. These have been

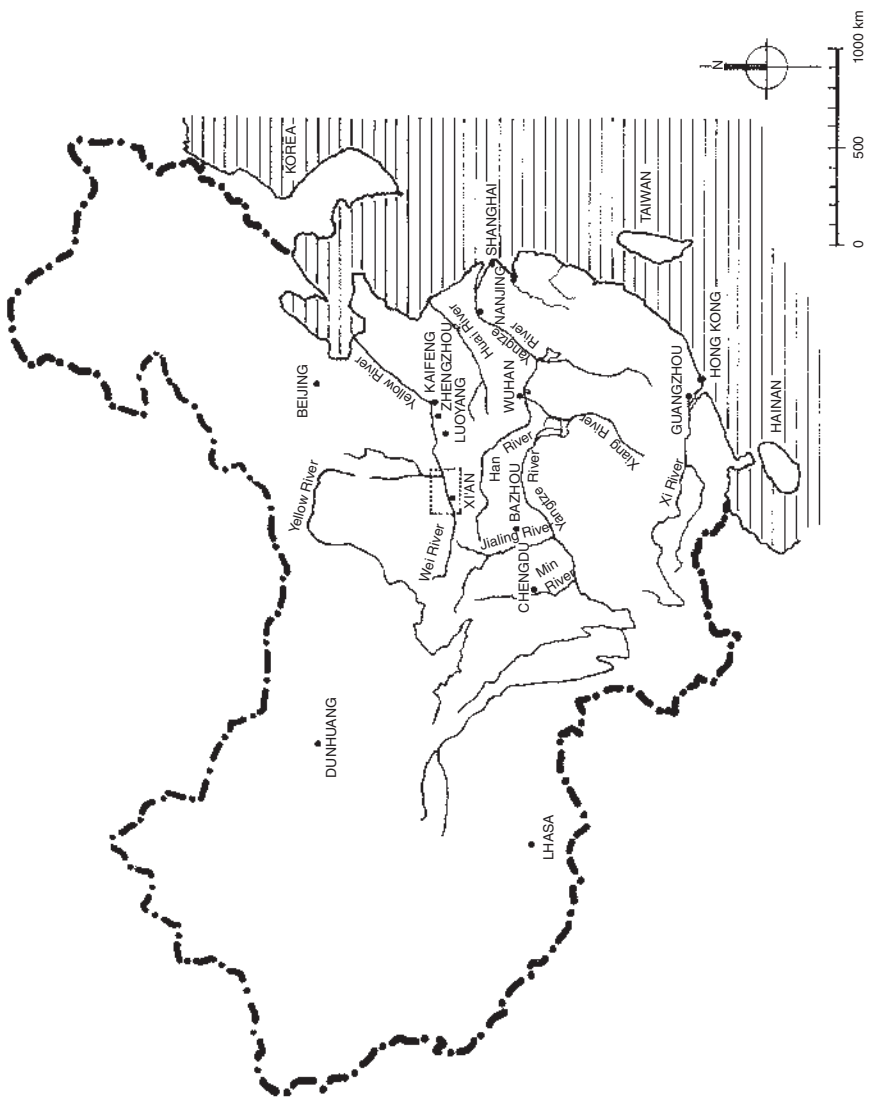
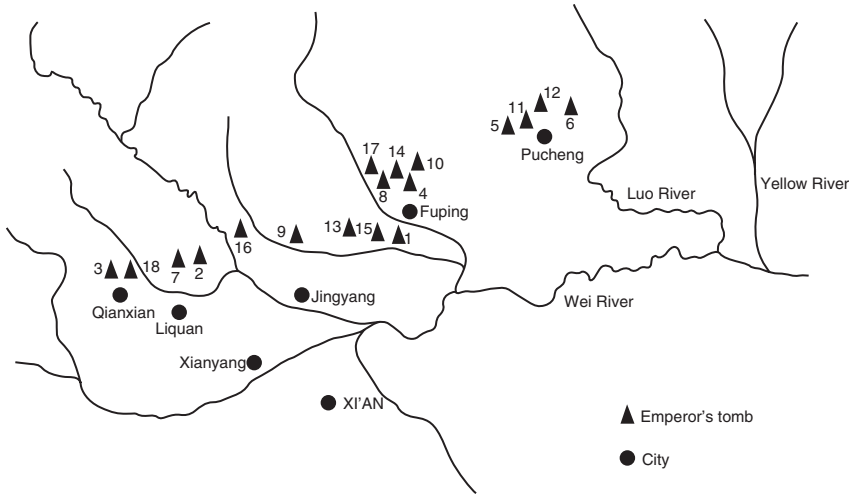


Figure 0.2 Map of China showing the area containing Tang imperial tombs near Xi'an.



| Tang emperors' tombs | | | | |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|--|
| | Title and name | Reign | Tomb name | Location |
| | Emperor Taizu (Li Hu) | Imperial ancestor | Yongkangling | Lingqian, Sanyuan county |
| | Emperor Shizu (Li Bing) | Imperial ancestor | Xingningling | Yaodiandong, Xianyang |
| 1 | Emperor Gaozu (Li Yuan) | 618–626 | Xianling | Yonghe village, Xumu in Sanyuan county |
| 2 | Emperor Taizong (Li Shimin) | 626–649 | Zhaoling | Jiuzong mountain, Liquan county |
| 3 | Emperor Gaozong (Li Zhi) | 649–683 | Qianling | Liang mountain, Qian county |
| 3 | Empress Wu Zetian (Wu Zhao) | 690–705 | Qianling | Liang mountain, Qian county |
| 4 | Emperor Zhongzong (Li Xian) | 684,705–710 | Dingling | Longquan mountain, Xingping county |
| 5 | Emperor Ruizong (Li Dan) | 684–690, 710–712 | Qiaoling | Feng mountain, Pucheng county |
| 6 | Emperor Xuanzong (Li Longji) | 712–756 | Tailing | Jinsu mountain, Pucheng county |
| 7 | Emperor Suzong (Li Heng) | 756–762 | Jianling | Wujiang mountain, Liquan county |
| 8 | Emperor Daizong (Li Yu) | 762–779 | Yuanling | Tan mountain, Fuping county |
| 9 | Emperor Dezong (Li Shi) | 779–805 | Chongling | Cuo'er mountain, Jinyang county |
| 10 | Emperor Shunzong (Li Song) | 805 | Fengling | Jinweng mountain, Fuping county |
| 11 | Emperor Xianzong (Li Chun) | 805–820 | Jingling | Jinzhi mountain, Pucheng county |
| 12 | Emperor Muzong (Li Heng) | 820–824 | Guangling | Yao mountain, Pucheng county |
| 13 | Emperor Jingzong (Li Zhan) | 824–827 | Zhuangling | Chaijiayao, Lingqian Sanyuan county |
| 14 | Emperor Wenzong (Li Ang) | 827–840 | Zhangling | Tianru mountain, Fuping county |
| 15 | Emperor Wuzong (Li Yan) | 840–846 | Duanling | Taogou village, Xumu in Sanyuan county |
| 16 | Emperor Xuanzong (Li Chen) | 846–859 | Zhenling | Zhong mountain, Jinyang county |
| 17 | Emperor Yizong (Li Cui) | 859–873 | Jianling | Zijin mountain, Fuping county |
| 18 | Emperor Xizong (Li Xuan) | 873–888 | Jingling | Jizidui, Qian county |
| | Emperor Zhaozong (Li Ye) | 888–904 | Wenling | Luoyang, Henan province |
| | Emperor Aizong (Li Zhu) | 905–907 | Heling | Heze, Shandong province |

Figure 0.3 Map showing the locations of the tombs of the first eighteen Tang emperors.

documented although they were not preserved after excavation, due to practical problems such as the degradation of inferior materials, poor workmanship, erosion, water seepage, rising ground water, and deliberate damage by looters and vandals through the centuries. Study of the tombs' scale and configuration, fittings and furnishings in metal, wood, ceramic, and stone, all contribute to our