Chapter 2

What is an Ancestor? Memory, Power and Death in Chinese History and Prehistory

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In a 2002 *Antiquity* article, James Whitley wrote that "there are too many ancestors in contemporary archaeological interpretation and they are being asked to do too much" (2002:119). According to Whitley, ancestors have become an over-determined and unmotivated ur-explanation of choice in post-processual archaeology, driven in part by the "proprietary romanticism" (2002:125) of an increasingly parochial British archaeology. Instead, Whitley argues for a more rigorous approach to investigating the past in the past, one in which ancestor veneration is only one of several hypotheses to be critically evaluated. This critical evaluation, moreover, begins with a minimal definition of ancestors as "someone who has procreated, died but has descendents who remember him/her" (2002:121). Whitley also makes several useful observations about ancestors in the ethnographic record: that they are variably instantiated, that the sites of their commemoration are not necessarily associated with burials, that ancestors and the dead are not equivalent, and that the reuse of tombs or monuments is not necessarily figured in ancestral terms. Underlying Whitley's argument, however, from the initial definition to the critique of archaeologists' over-invocation of ancestors, is the proscriptive claim that "ancestors" do or should only refer to cases of biological descent where there is evidence of continuous remembrance.

In a sense then, Whitley is arguing both for the social and historical contextualization of the ahistorical, decontextualized uses of ancestors in the literature and, at the same time, for a

specific, objective, universal understanding of the semantic content of this English lexeme. In the spirit of the first half of Whitley's argument, however, I would argue that this desire to restrictively define the proper referent of "ancestors" is itself problematic. As an analytical category of cross-cultural interpretation, "ancestors" is not merely a word to be assigned a definition; it is a translocal placeholder for a variable set of locally constituted relations. The myriad terms for something like "ancestors" and their varied connotations in the many languages of the world alone should suggest the polyvalence of this discursive nexus of memory, kinship, identity, power and place. However, rather than give a counter definition or engage in further theoretical abstraction, I will attempt to make my case for soft definitions and a hermeneutic sensitive to local contexts with examples drawn from Chinese history and prehistory.

Chinese Ancestors

A number of scholars have observed that ancestors were and are very important in China (Ebrey and Watson 1986; Jordan 1999; Liu 1999; Watson and Rawski 1988). Indeed, one could make the case that China is the paradigmatic case for ancestor veneration in the Western imagination. I would argue, however, that despite some striking continuities, the referent and meaning of "ancestors," even within the traditions of China, changed over time and from context to context. As key sites of social practice and discursive formation with putatively deep roots in the Neolithic (Liu 1999), ancestors have shifted in meaning and use with changed circumstances. In China and elsewhere, the answer to the question of what an ancestor is must be sought within local entanglements of kinship, power, memory, identity, place, death and life.

In order to map out something of the diverse practical and discursive territory covered by the term "ancestors" in Chinese history I will present four cases drawn from the work of

ethnographers, religious scholars, and historians. These are: the role of ancestors and the dead in early Daoism and Buddhism; the strategic use of genealogy and lineage in Ming dynasty Fujian province; the rebuilding of a temple to Confucius in post-cultural revolution North China by his putative descendants; and the construction and use of Mao's mausoleum.

The first point that I wish to make concerning ancestors in China is the importance of taking into consideration conceptions of death and the dead. If there is a generic sense that ancestors are benevolent in the literature within and beyond China, in part encouraged by elite ideals of filial piety and well-ordered relations, it is important to realize that from early times in China the dead were also considered a source of contagion and ill fortune. Of Medieval China (third through seventh centuries CE), Strickmann (2002:71) writes,

> Though elite upper-class accounts of Chinese culture would have us believe that the only attitude ever manifested toward one's own dead was solemn respect, the evidence leads us to a quite different conclusion. The terminology itself should provoke a closer look at the scope afforded to the dead, since there is no basic terminological distinction between them and demons.

Indeed, although the dead (and especially the recent dead) had been seen as sources of illness and misfortune since at least the Bronze Age, the relationship between the living and dead was increasingly troubled in early Medieval times (Bokenkamp 2007). In the apocalyptic post-Han world (third to fourth centuries CE) of plague, war and political turmoil, death, ghosts and demons gained particular salience. It is perhaps not surprising that early Daoism essentially set itself up in opposition to cults of the ancestors: "the celestial Tao against the ill-omened,

unhallowed dead and everything connected with them"(Strickmann 2002:4). Notions of spectral lawsuits and of intergenerational group responsibility—in heaven as it was on earth—meant that the deeds of one's ancestors could come back to haunt living descendents, usually in the form of sickness and death. Even more troubling for people in Medieval China, and for the notion that ancestor veneration concerns only descendents, is the fact that potentially destructive spirits might not even be those of one's own dead. Indeed, one of the chief targets of Daoist polemic was the shrines of "false gods": "the hero-cults dedicated to dead warriors" (Strickmann 2002:52). What the worship of gods, ghosts and ancestors in Medieval China had in common was a general logic of service to the dead: potential sources of both blessing and calamity structured and imagined through the refracting lens of local and translocal dynamic realities.

Even the increasing popularity of Buddhism in the fourth to seventh centuries with its emphasis on personal (as opposed to group) responsibility and rebirth, hells and post- mortem suffering, could not dislodge practices of offering to the dead or their underlying (and contradictory) visions of ghosts and an otherworldly bureaucracy (Bokenkamp 2007). Instead, Buddhist monks (in addition to Daoist priests and local religious specialists) came to play major roles in funerals where they would burn petitions and chant "sutras and penances in order to transfer merit to the soul of the deceased" (Naquin 1988:59), fulfilling filial obligation to reduce the suffering of a dead relative in the afterlife as well as mitigate the potential for baleful influence from beyond the grave.

For a study of "ancestor worship," a couple of important points emerge from the Early Medieval Chinese case. First, "ancestors" are embedded in a larger complex of techniques and ideas concerning relations between the living and the dead. Second, while rituals involving one's own dead relatives occupied a central practical and discursive place, they are scarcely intelligible

without reference to wider beliefs about death, ghosts and contagion and to related institutions such as hero-cults, rites of healing/exorcism, and religious organizations. The larger point is that the wider religious and political milieu must figure in any dynamic account of what ultimately is but one element of a constellation of interrelated practices, beliefs and institutions. Without situation in their local historical contexts, "ancestors" lose all specificity and, I would argue, comparative utility.

The importance of historical and political particularity in contextualizing the contested ground of ancestors can be further elaborated with Szonyi's (2002) work on kinship strategies in Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Fujian province. In that work Szonyi shows how genealogies were manipulated—even fabricated—and lineage halls proliferated in creative negotiations of status and ethnic identity and in response to an array of changing conditions and state administrative and extractive policies. To give just one example, descendents of households that had been designated "military households" at the beginning of the dynasty and thus had to supply an adult male to the imperial armies in perpetuity, found it necessary to organize in order to select one of their number for military service, to raise funds to maintain that delegate and to construct genealogical records to either demonstrate the fulfillment of state obligations or to evade that responsibility. In short, military households found it expedient to construct lineages where none had existed before (Szonyi 2002:69; see Weiss-Krecji, this volume, for a European example of lineage construction).

The creation of lineages and lineage halls was also impacted by the institution of the *lijia* system at the beginning of the Ming, whereby the population was divided into groups of households, which rotated annually in supplying the state with labor and other services. Over time these originally single family households became extended kin groups, many of which

found it expedient to organize on the basis of kinship in order to meet state extractions. The *lijia* system, moreover, was tied to an early Ming attempt to integrate local religion into a state hierarchy whereby each *li* group of one hundred households was to maintain altars and sacrifices to two cults: one directed toward the spirits of the soil and grain, the other toward the hungry ghosts not receiving ancestral cult (Szonyi 2002:175). In practice, however, many illicit cults, often to deceased generals or deified historical figures, became attached to these *lijia* units, which in turn became increasingly lineage-based over time.

> The Ming system tied local popular religion to the *lijia* system and hence to the lineage…. Kinship then came to define issues such as temple affiliation and to shape the ritual practices associated with the temple and its gods (Szonyi 2002:195).

In a sense then, popular religious cults (frequently directed toward deified but unrelated dead) in sharing social, physical and conceptual space with lineage-based ancestral ritual proper became "ancestralized." Indeed, despite the variety of religious activities that occurred in the ancestral halls of Ming Fujian, "the descriptions of the rituals in the sources invariably attempt, with varying degrees of success, to cast them in terms of a single, unified, national standard of orthodoxy, Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*" (Szonyi 2002:205). In other words, these rituals were presented as neo-Confucian orthodoxy expressed in an idiom of ancestor veneration.

The lesson that could be drawn from this example is that kinship and concomitant ancestor veneration were not stable entities so much as variably practiced strategies: kinship and ancestors were (and are) good to think and act with in China. This very utility or promiscuity

makes the socio-political contextualization of ancestors as an element of practical kinship all the more important.

The contested meaning of ancestors and their potential role in the production of collective memory and place is also highly relevant and is poignantly portrayed in Jing's (1996) ethnography of the Kong lineage and their reconstruction of a temple to Confucius in the wake of persecution, relocation and the destruction of the original temple.

Sharing a surname with and tracing their descent from Confucius, the Kongs came to Dachuan, Gansu in the late nineteenth century and founded a large ancestral cult there (Jing 1996:8). Singled out for persecution in anti-Confucian campaigns, the Kongs suffered physical and psychological trauma and closure of their ancestral temple in 1958 and finally its destruction in 1974. In the post-Mao era, however, the Kongs were able to rebuild their temple, resuscitate their ancestral ritual and organize a regional Confucius cult.

Simultaneously site and symbol of collective trauma and rejuvenation, the reborn Confucius temple became both location of lineage-based ancestor veneration and, through religious innovation, public cult (Jing 1996:175). By installing a votive statue of Confucius and two separate tables for the ancestral tablets of the Dachuan Kongs' founding ancestors on the one hand and for Confucius and his main disciples on the other, Confucius could be simultaneously worshipped as an ancestor by the Kongs and as a deity by non-Kongs [a distinction not always clearly made in Chinese popular religion anyway (Jordan 1999)]. Claimants to a 2500-year-old genealogy, the Kongs of Dachuan turned their revolutionary stigma into a post-Mao locus of social capital and an alternative to central government constructions of local memory (Jing 1996: 171).

In terms of an archaeology of ancestors, the Confucius temple at Dachuan illustrates the fact that ancestor veneration often serves as the site of contested memory and that archaeologically visible places of potential ancestor worship such as lineage temples and tombs are also often key sites in highly charged emotional and political topographies. In a strict sense, if we ask "Is the Dachuan Confucius temple the site of ancestor veneration?" we can only respond affirmatively if we believe the accuracy of a 2500-year-old genealogy. Nevertheless, in a very real sense, what is relevant in the Kongs' case, inscribed in the terms of their three decades of persecution and their newfound status, is the fact that their claims to descent from Confucius have been taken seriously. Moreover, although the public festivals venerating Confucius organized around the temple stretch the definition of ancestor veneration beyond even fictitious descent, these practices cannot be understood apart from the idiom of ancestral ritual and services to the dead.

From ancient times to the present, the group-forming yet hierarchy-enacting potential of ancestor veneration, and thus its utility as political religion, was realized by a variety of political formations in China. The cult of emperors could be taken as a paradigmatic case of Chinese political ritual as well as the paradox of its simultaneous public and private nature: public in the sense that it portrayed itself as an essential link between humanity and divinity, private in the sense that it was also the cult of one privileged lineage (Rawski 1988).

The Qing emperors (1644–1911) for instance, played the roles of both exemplars of filial piety and leaders of state ritual. The intensely political nature of imperial ancestor veneration and its role in legitimating succession meant that, unlike ordinary ancestor temples, the Qing Temple of Ancestors (Taimiao) in Beijing contained only the direct line of emperors excluding all collaterals (Rawski 1988:232). Moreover, inclusion in or exclusion from the Temple of

Ancestors or the imperial cemetery depended as much on the results of political struggles as genealogy. Imperial death ritual also deviated from the norm in that mourning requirements were universal rather than governed by the five grades of relations (Rawski 1988:240). Dead emperors then, were figured both as universal ancestors and unique sites of conflict and legitimacy. With this in mind, let us now consider the case of Mao's mausoleum presented in Wakeman (1988).

Upon his death in 1976 Mao's physical and discursive body became the site of intense political struggle culminating in its interment under glass in a public mausoleum in spite of his orders, his family's wishes and the official party policy of cremating the leaders of the revolution. Referencing imperial mausoleums and the cult of imperial ancestors, Mao's mausoleum, like those of Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen became a public shrine for the cult of nation and party. Indeed, Wakeman (1988:263) notes the displacement of Mao's family at the actual funeral by Mao's political affines: "Mao as a person, with family and friends, was displaced by Mao as a transcendent revolutionary leader without a private domain of his own". If the imperial cult can be seen as a politico-religious extension of family-based ancestor ritual, Mao's example can be seen as a further extension of the political to the point that kinship is completely subsumed.

Despite not strictly falling under Whitley's remit for ancestors, Wakeman's (1988) analysis of Mao's mausoleum references both imperial traditions as well as more general Chinese practices of death ritual and ancestor veneration, yet at the same time demonstrates the importance of understanding political context. In the context of communist China, Mao's mausoleum and cult of personality could draw on powerful pre-revolution historical traditions, but in the discourse of leadership at the time there was no political place for traditional lineage ritual—Mao instead became an apotheosized ancestor of the party.

The above cases illustrate the polyphony of ancestors, the plasticity of their local deployments and multiple engagements with wider social, political and religious visions and structures. Ultimately they argue for the necessity of soft definitions and sensitive hermeneutics: ancestral practices and beliefs blend into other formations and local understandings and it is only with reference to these wider contexts that a study of ancestors can move beyond empty generalizations.

Archaeology of Ancestors

If, as I argued above, "ancestors" are at once discursively promiscuous, historically protean and inextricably intertwined with social, political and religious features of a long and historically complex tradition, how are we to approach the study of ancestors comparatively? Both carefully and with attention to context. That is to say the study of such a potentially rich topic must take account of history in both geographic and temporal terms. It is only within local webs of meaning and logics of practice that we can hope to avoid the empty platitudes and ahistorical generalizations that Whitley rightly decries. Relocated within their constellations of concerns and accretions of tradition and innovation, the topic of ancestors might serve as a fertile ground of comparison: not of isolated socio-religious features, but of promiscuous discursive and practical operators.

Archaeologically speaking, operationalizing a study of ancestors necessitates a broad, nuanced and integrative approach. An archaeology of ancestors is potentially an archaeology of memory, of death, of ritual, of kinship, of identity and of power. None of these intangibles are easy topics to study archaeologically but, in keeping with recent work (e.g., Ingold 2007; Latour 2005; Webmoor and Whitmore 2008), I would argue that the supposed straightforward

concreteness of "tangibles" is founded on a blindness to the social life of things and the materiality of the social. In support of this position I offer the example of ancestors in the context of Late Shang Anyang.

Late Shang Ancestors (c. 1250–1050 BCE)

On the outset it should be said that the sources for the study of ancestors at Anyang are rich. Excavated with only brief interruptions for over eighty years, Late Shang Anyang, traditionally named Yinxu (the ruins of Yin) covers over 30 km^2 and has yielded thousands of sacrificial pits, large rammed earth "palace-temple" structures, a royal burial ground, over 10,000 burials and numerous workshops, middens and residences (Bagley 1999; Campbell 2007; Chang 1980; Li 1977; Tang 2004; Thorp 2006). In addition, epigraphic sources include scattered examples of jades and other artifacts, dozens of bronze vessels and over 100,000 fragments of bone used in (mostly) royal divination. Together, these sources prove to be a rich repository of information concerning Shang ancestors (Campbell 2007; Itō and Takashima 1996; Keightley 1999, 2000; Smith 2008).

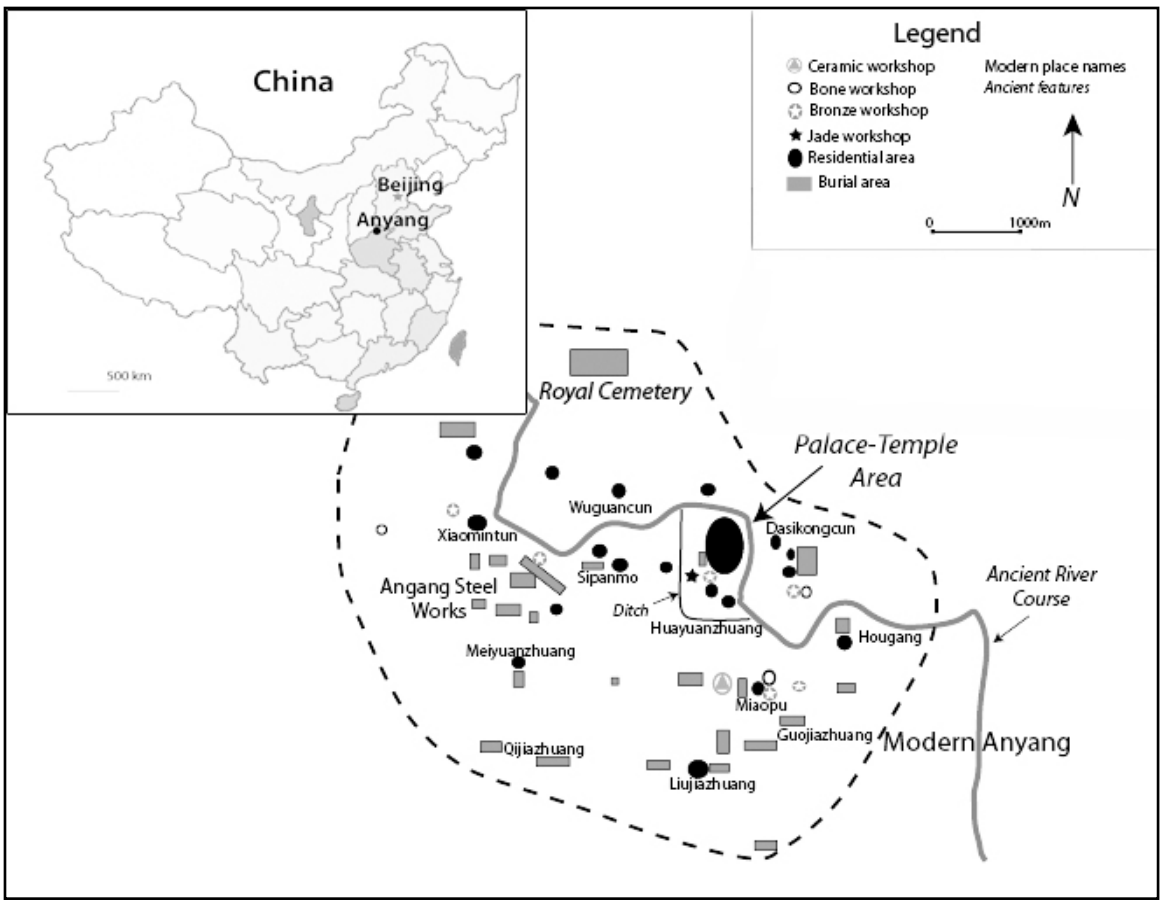

Figure 1. Anyang (c. 1150–1050 BCE)

The most commonly used indicator of ancestor veneration in China, and elsewhere, is the presence of ritual deposits in cemeteries (Liu 1999). Minimally, this suggests the presence of a cult associated with the dead. The nature of that cult, whether we wish to call it ancestral or not, however, requires elucidation. Looking at the Late Shang (c. 1250–1050 BCE) royal cemetery, the ritual deposits are remarkable in a number of ways (Figure 2). First is their scale: over 2500 have been found and, in addition to animal offerings that included everything from dogs to elephants, they contained at least 12,000 human victims (Tang 2005). Second, the deposits are laid out in orderly rows that occasionally overlap, suggesting multiple events occurring at different times. Third, the distribution of the sacrificial deposits is mostly in the eastern end of the cemetery while most of the royal tombs are in the west. Fourth, most of the ritual deposits do

not seem to be associated with any one tomb. Fifth, the majority of the human victims are young adult and adult males. Taken together, these facts suggest that there were multiple sacrificial episodes involving large numbers of animal and human victims that were not directly related to the royal burials, which were associated with additional victims both within and adjacent to the tombs. The scale of the deposits and the resources terminated there signal the importance of the rituals for those sponsoring them, while the fact that most of the victims are military-age males is highly suggestive of captive sacrifice on a massive scale. The location of these remains in the royal cemetery as well as similar deposits within the tombs themselves suggests the continuation of rituals for the dead after burial. If this is so, the location of the ritual events suggests that either contiguity to the tomb of the ritual recipient was not important or that the rites were dedicated to the dead collectively.

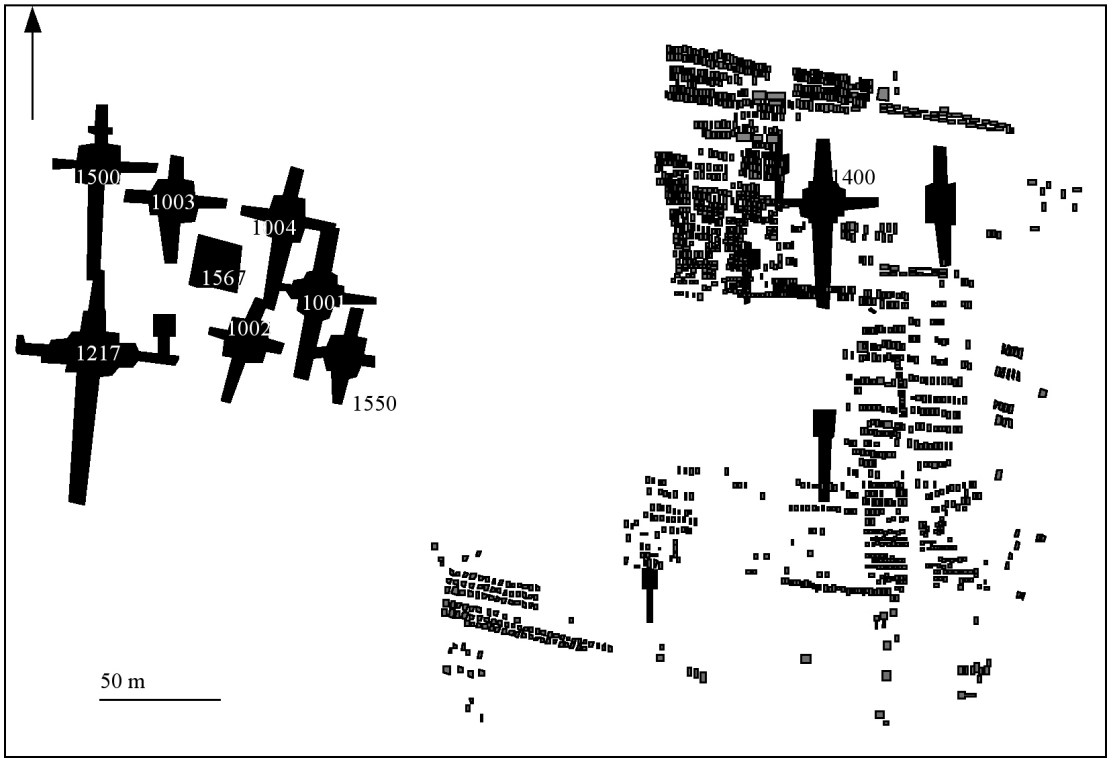

Figure 2. Royal Cemetery, Anyang: Royal tombs and sacrificial pits

The tombs themselves are of monumental size and, from what has escaped looting and analogies drawn from smaller, intact tombs, would have housed astronomical concentrations of resources derived from specialized labor. Clearly, the death rituals of royalty were of intense concern to the Shang. The royal tombs were subterranean, and thus their monumentality would have been experienced by the living only during the mortuary rites before the sealing of the tomb. The nature of the tombs, with their wooden chambers, death attendants, guards, food offerings, bronze feasting vessels, chimes, bells, weapons and jade artifacts of ritual and ornament, further suggest notions of a chthonic royal afterlife. What is more, if the sacrificial pits are full of dynastic enemies offered to the royal dead, the afterlives of Shang kings would seem to be political ones.

If we look at the specific nature of the grave goods themselves, the enormous resources and ingenuity invested in bronze vessels and bronze and jade weapons is immediately apparent. Indeed, feasting vessels and weapons had held central places in elite economies of symbolic capital for thousands of years before the Late Shang. Nevertheless, the immense investment in these artifact forms at Anyang suggests the importance of the activities they signify: feasting and war. In this light, the livestock and captives in the sacrificial pits of the royal cemetery become suggestive of a continued commensal relationship between the living and the dead. Further, the inclusion of feasting vessels and weapons in tombs suggests the continuation of these practices among the deceased.

Other Late Shang burial grounds scattered around Anyang show a similar concern for death ritual. Dubbed lineage cemeteries, the non-royal burial grounds are distributed in discrete clusters sharing common variations in assemblage and bronze insignia as well as associations with clusters of settlements (Tang 2004). These features suggest discrete communities of the

living and the dead. These communities, moreover, were internally hierarchical, ranging from elite, ramped tombs associated with chariot burials to pits just large enough for a body with few or no grave goods. Interestingly, the most common category of tomb is not the nearly empty pit, but rather a small grave with a basic ceramic vessel set and perhaps a bronze weapon or small jade ornament (Campbell 2007; Tang 2004). These ordinary tombs share structural homologies with elite graves, including the replacement of human death attendants with dogs and bronze vessels with ceramic ones. Moreover, these analogous deposits were placed in similar locations in elite and common tombs alike (Campbell 2007). From these facts, it would appear that death ritual was a matter of importance to a broad spectrum of society, that it was practiced with vastly unequal resources and was associated with communities who apparently envisioned their dead as having communal afterlives and requiring continued service, as suggested by sacrificial pits in some non-royal cemeteries.

From the connections between groups of living and dead and the huge investment in death ritual, the dead seem to have played a central role in Shang life. Given the vast disparity between the resources devoted to the royal tombs and sacrifices compared to those of ordinary folk, Shang mortuary ritual seems to have been hierarchy-enacting and, to some degree, ordered by sumptuary rules (Campbell 2007; Tang 2004). It was also community forming, bringing together groups of living with their dead and, based on the evidence of captive sacrifice, it was political. If we can draw the further conclusion that these hierarchical communities of the living and dead were kin-based, then the Late Shang socio-political landscape was fundamentally an ancestral one.

Inscriptions:

While the material record at Anyang can tell us certain things about Shang relations between the living and the dead, contemporaneous oracle-bone and bronze inscriptions can tell us even more. The oracle-bone inscriptions as records of (mostly) the king's divination are, perhaps not surprisingly, good sources for studying the king's relations with the unseen forces of the world, including the dead. What is surprising is the degree to which ancestors or, more literally, deceased "fathers," "brothers," "mothers," "grandfathers"[1], "grandmothers" and even more remote individuals, figured in the king's divinations. As in later Chinese traditions, Shang ancestors were thought to be responsible for illness and misfortune as well as good fortune and success. As such, they were frequent recipients of sacrificial rituals focused on "reporting," "hosting" and even "exorcising" malevolent ancestral influences.

As sources of illness, as in Medieval China, more recently deceased Shang royal ancestors appear to have been the most dangerous, as the following divinations suggest (Keightley 2000: 103).

1) Tested: [As for] the sick tooth, it is [due to] Father Yi's curse. (*heji* 13649)

2) Tested: [As for] the sick tooth, perform an exorcism ritual against Father Yi. (*heji* 13652)

3) Exorcise Father Yi [offering] three specially reared sheep. (*heji* 2195 reverse)

In these inscriptions we can see both the ambivalent relationship between the living and the dead and the manner in which that relationship was structured: the dead, like the spirits of the

[1] The kinship term for two generations prior to ego and earlier is *zu*, so what I have translated "grandfathers" could also be translated "ancestors." [Okay that 'grandfathers' is plural, but "ancestor" is not?]

mountains, rivers, earth and winds, required sacrifice. For dead kings and their consorts, the scale of those offerings could be large indeed as the following example shows.

> 4) Tested: Perform an exorcism from Tang [to] Da Jia, [to] Ancestor Yi using one hundred qiang-captives, one hundred specially reared sheep. (heji 300)

This example shows not only the scale of some thirteenth century BCE ancestral exorcisms but also their group nature. As suggested by the positioning of sacrificial pits in the royal cemetery, royal ancestors could be sacrificed to collectively. From other inscriptions we know that the ancestors were sometimes addressed in terms of "the upper and lower altars" or the remoter ancestors as simply "high ancestors." Shang royal ancestors, then, could be both collectively and individually invoked, suggesting that the line Whitley seems to want to draw between individualized and collective ancestors (with the latter being supposedly rare and therefore an inappropriate analogy for prehistoric cases) may be too simplistic.

A more positive relationship with the dead can be seen in the "hosting" rituals where the king or other high elites "hosted" (*bin* 賓) royal ancestors with sacrificial offerings, possibly followed by feasting, as in these examples.

> 5）Cracked on Jiayan day, Yin tested: The king should host Da Jia performing a *rong* ritual [and if he does] there will be no fault. (heji 22723)
>
> 6）Tested: Da [Jia] hosts with Di. (heji 1402)

In this pair of examples we can see not only the king hosting his ancestor but also a high ancestor hosting (or perhaps being hosted by) the high god Di. Di is apparently never sacrificed to directly by the living, only indirectly receiving cult through a generational hierarchy of ritual intercession (Keightley 2000:100). Though mirroring later imperial Chinese notions of an afterlife organized in a celestial bureaucracy with petitions passing up through hierarchically organized departments, the Shang post-mortem hierarchy reflects a politics based on genealogical seniority, a community of the living and the dead and a world structured in terms of kinship.

This last point is powerfully instantiated in an ancestralizing tendency over the course of Late Shang ritual (Itō and Takashima 1996). In the middle of the Late Shang period, sweeping changes took place across a number of practices, including divination and sacrifice as well as burial ritual, and reflected wider socio-political changes (Campbell 2007). In terms of sacrifice, formerly ad hoc royal ritual was replaced with a system of cyclical sacrifice, with each ancestor receiving cult on the day of the 10-day weekly cycle for which they were named (Chang 1987). Where in this cycle then do non-ancestors fit, for example spirits of mountains and rivers without day names? It is likely that they too were somehow placed into the rhythm of the royal sacrifice and, indeed, with the 60-day cycle tied to the king's ancestral cult. In one sense it could not have been otherwise: time itself came to be told in terms of royal ancestral ritual, as this inscription on the bronze of an official indicates.

> 7) On Dingsi day the King inspected Nao X [a place]. The King presented Minor Retainer Yu with Nao cowry shells. It was during the King's coming to campaign against the Ren Fang. It was the King's fifteenth ritual cycle on the day of the *rong*-ritual. (The Minor Retainer Yu Zun)

Just as the high ancestors had always mirrored the powers of the nature spirits (e.g., to bring rain or sun, strong winds or calm and to control the weather in general), by the end of the Late Shang period the powers of the land had begun to be assimilated to "high ancestral" status, as the following example suggests.

> 8） Xinwei day, tested: We should pray for good harvest to the high ancestor River and on Xinsi day perform *you* [cutting?] and *liao* [burning?] rituals. (*heji* 32028)

In a sense then, the Late Shang world was fundamentally mediated by the king's ancestral ritual practices.

If the king presided over a world-ordering complex of ancestral ritual fed with war captives and livestock from near and far, he was not alone in his preoccupation with ancestors. Inscriptions on bronze feasting vessels of the period reveal the context of their creation in their records of reward and ancestral dedication.

> The King awarded lesser retainer Yue[?] five years of the yields of Yu. Yue thereupon made this vessel for offerings in Eldest son Yi's family ritual. X [common Shang clan insignia] Father Yi (Xiaochen Yue fangding)

In this example we can see not only a record of royal reward and thus merit, but also the vessel's *raison d'être* framed in terms of dedication to the dead and their continued ritual service. The fact that it is a deceased son who is the "ancestor" in this dedication again raises the point that "ancestor ritual" in Late Shang China is embedded within larger concerns about ritually mediating relations with the dead and is not restricted to deceased relatives ancestral to the ritual officiant.

Returning to Late Shang burial assemblages and the importance of bronze vessel sets, the immense social investment in the casting of bronze vessels, and the homologous role of ceramic forms in smaller, poorer tombs, an important point emerges: offerings to ancestors played a central role in the lives of elites and non-elites alike. Indeed, it seems that king and commoner shared important principles of ancestral ritual, as the examples of six jade "handle-shaped" objects found in Hougang 91M3 (ZSKY 2005:21–26) suggest (Figure 3). These artifacts each bear, in the same format as royal ancestor designations, the day name of an ancestor, indicating that ancestor veneration was practiced even among ordinary Shang people.

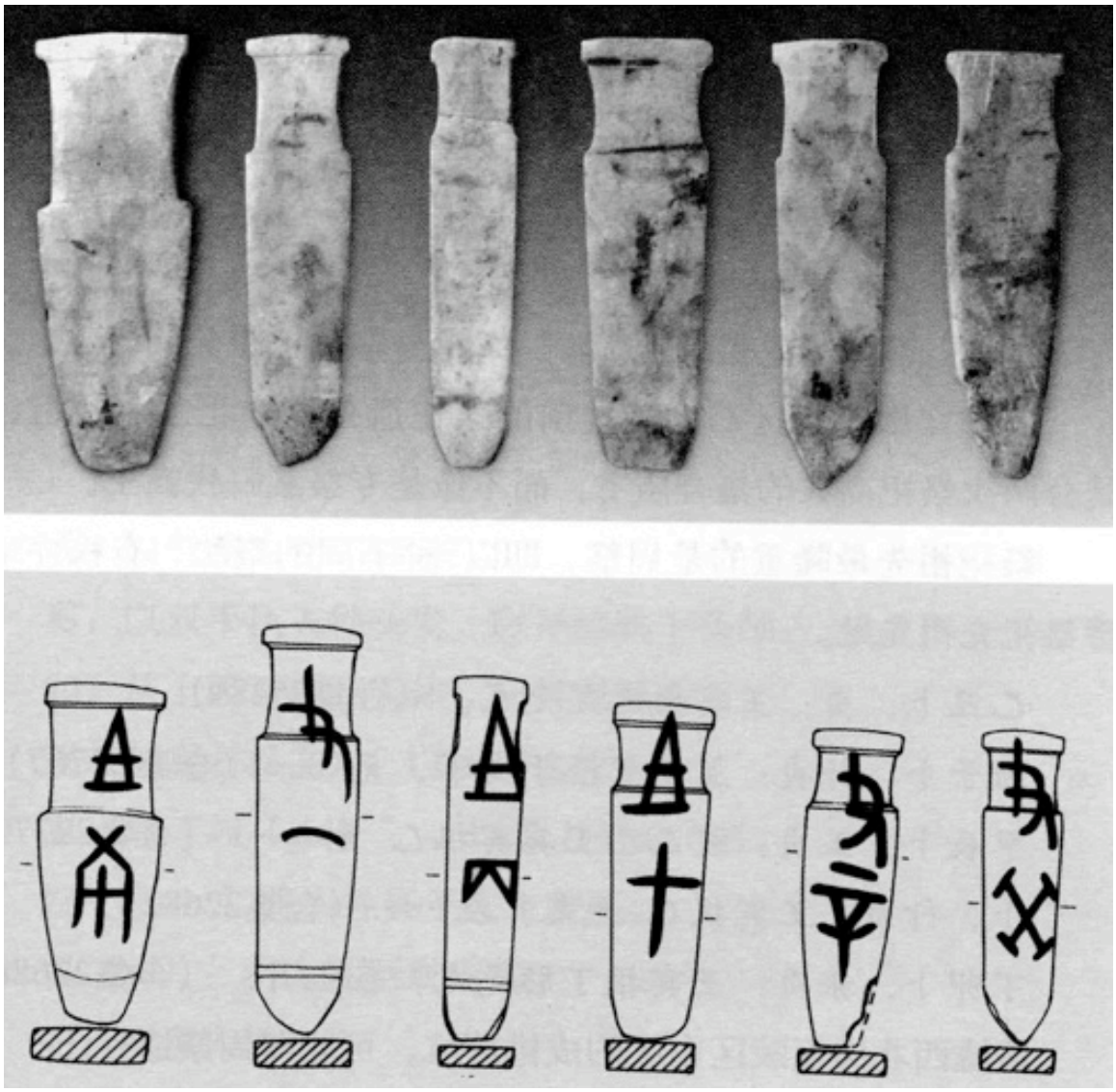

Figure 3. Jade "handle-shaped" objects from Hougang 91M3. From left to right they read: Ancestor Geng; Father X; Ancestor Bin; Ancestor Jia; Father Xin; Father Gui.

Indeed, in light of the broad participation in ancestor veneration and the cosmology, seen in the royal inscriptions, of a generational hierarchy of living and dead, the discrete clusters of residences and tombs revealed by recent work at Anyang take on a new significance: a basic ordering of Shang society in terms of hierarchically organized kinship communities of the living and the dead.

To summarize the evidence concerning ancestors at Late Shang Anyang: there is most conspicuously the enormous social energy directed toward monumental tombs, episodes of large-scale sacrifice independent of burial events but nonetheless spatially associated with them, bronze ritual feasting vessels and highly refined osteomantic divinatory practices. The corpus of written materials, whether inscriptions on bronze vessels or records of oracle-bone divination, largely revolves around ancestors: ancestral curses, ancestral ritual, ancestral approval and ancestor dedications. The ritual bronze vessels—based on their shapes, the inscriptions they bear, their prominence in tombs and the references to hosting ancestors found on the oracle-bones—were focal participants in sacrifice and feasting events that linked the living and the dead in common communities. Non-royal burial and sacrificial practices also bear witness to similar phenomena on a smaller scale and the division of residential and burial areas into discrete but internally hierarchical clusters further suggests a basic division in terms of kin-groups centered around the worship of common apical ancestors.

Late Shang ancestors were embedded in collective ideas about and engagements with the world for king and commoner alike. The line between baleful specter and beneficent ancestor was not a categorical one for Shang people, but rather contingent and ambiguous. For the residents of Anyang, the dead mediated the misty borders between the domains of nature, civilization and supernature. Put another way, if hierarchical kinship was the organizing principle of Shang collectives, ancestral ritual at once instantiated the hope that the unseen dangers of the world could be tamed, tempered with the fear that they could not (Puett 2002). At the same time, rites of burial and sacrifice were sites for the negotiation of genealogy, memory, and, above all, status. If royal and imperial ancestor veneration were always political in China, the stakes were never higher than for the Late Shang kings. Political power, religious authority and social status

were all linked through common, hierarchical practices of lineage-based death ritual, and ancestors played central roles in mediating these relationships.

Conclusion

An archaeology of ancestors can be many things but, as Whitley observed, it should not be a content-free generic explanation. Neither, I would argue, should ancestors become a narrowly defined, reified, nomothetic category. Comparison needs both a common ground and a sensitivity to local meanings, practices and being-in-the-world. Ancestors, for instance, are dead and therefore embedded in complexes of death ritual and ideas concerning death and the afterlife. Death, moreover, though universal, is locally figured in discourse and intersubjectively experienced as a relationship between the departed and those who remain behind. Ancestors then, are instantiations of relational discourses on life, death, and memory, however diffracted through lenses of affect, tradition, and power. Ancestors are also nominally predicated on kinship, but it should be clear from the examples above that kinship is also a flexible and variable set of relations, metaphorically extendible and often, from an objective genealogical point of view, fictional. Nevertheless, fictional or metaphoric kin relations are no less socially real and, from the standpoint of practical kinship, may be more relevant than actual biological descent. If kinship is a frequently fuzzy and promiscuous category then how much more so its projection across the variably construed alterities of death.

The cases I have provided from China illustrate that ancestors in practice and discourse vary over time and from place to place: from ordering principle of the world to increasingly abstract national metaphor; from site of prestige to site of trauma and back again. They are impacted by specific notions of death and the dead from early Taoist curative practices, to

Buddhist ideas of salvation/damnation, to modern discourses of science and reason. Chinese ancestors were also variable elements of micro- and macro-political strategies, good to think and act with, constituents of memory and identity, place and meaning in life as much as in death. Archaeologies of ancestors, then, are necessarily metaphorically excavations of large and complex sites. Nevertheless, as in the case of Late Shang China, the very complexity of the entanglements of ancestors signals their importance.

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