

A palace of eternity: a Chu King's tomb in Beidongshan

Considered to be the 'classic era' in Chinese history, the Han Dynasty was the first longstanding imperial power in China, spanning four centuries (206 BC - AD 220). My own research on Han Dynasty material cultures has taken me to the major royal tombs in eastern China. These tombs were dug horizontally into mountains and divided into several different functional chambers. Despite their fortifications, the majority of Han tombs had been looted in antiquity and so they were excavated in the 1980s and 1990s in an effort to protect the remaining objects.

James Lin



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The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures of Han China

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THE MOST INTERESTING AND IMPORTANT AREA in eastern China for the tombs of the Han Dynasty is Xuzhou, where numerous large tombs and rich materials have survived. Xuzhou is a small city in north Jiangsu province, located about halfway between Shanghai and Beijing, and was a strategic point during the Civil War between the Kuomintang and communists in the early 20th century. However, not many people, even the Chinese themselves, realise that it was a very important city 2000 years ago.

The founder of the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), Liu Bang, was originally from this region. After he became emperor and founded the capital in Xi'an, his half-brother, Liu Jiao, was appointed as the first king of the Chu Kingdom in Xuzhou. Each king of Chu was buried in their own hill or mountain, with his spouse and family members nearby. Although most of the tombs have been looted, the number of surviving jade plaques across the tombs suggests that the majority may have contained jade suits, the most unique burial object in Chinese history.

The most complicated of all the kings' tombs in Xuzhou was unearthed in 1986 in Beidongshan. The tomb was dug into the side of a hill with a 56m long and 3-4m wide tomb passage. Halfway along the passage are two mounds of earth representing the watch towers at the entrance of a palace. The northern end of the passage was sealed with huge blocking stones, each weighing around 8,000kg. The main tomb structure resembles the residential section of a royal palace, consisting of two chambers, two side-chambers, a corridor, an antechamber, a main burial chamber and two privies. The whole tomb was painted with cinnabar, a red-coloured ore of mercury sulphide (HgS) that can be used as a preservative and disinfectant.

Although the tomb had been plundered several times in the past, a great number of objects survived intact. These finds included 224 earthenware tomb guardians, painted in red, black and purple, approximately 70,000 *banliang* coins, and 73 fish scale-shaped jade plaques that were part of a jade suit. A jade suit on average comprised approximately 2,000 pieces (depending on the size of the body). The finest jade suit ever found was discovered at Shizishan, and is composed of 4,248 jade plaques, sewn with 1,576 grams of gold thread. The 73 surviving jade plaques from Beidongshan were scattered in the main chamber and tomb passages after incursions by local farmers in 1954, resulting in damage and theft. Judging from the quality and the craftsmanship of these unusual fish scale plaques, it would have been an even more impressive jade suit than the one from Shizishan.

The Beidongshan tomb is not open to the public, in part because it is a fair distance outside the city centre, but mainly because the area lacks a proper power supply. I had tried to visit this tomb several times, and finally succeeded in 2006. By special arrangement a guard came to unlock the gate for me and Professor Li, the Director of Xuzhou Museum. A strange thing happened during this visit. Soon after we walked down the tomb passage past the tomb guardians, the power went off and we were plunged into complete darkness. Everyone fell silent, expecting that something might happen. There was a deathly chill in the air, and the eerie silence made it all the worse. The guard tried to switch the lights back on several times, but nothing happened. We had no choice but to feel our way back up and along the damp, slippery walls of the passage and give up our journey to the underground palace. It made me appreciate how daring the tomb robbers had been, to break in without knowing the danger below. No wonder it sometimes cost them their lives.

My determination to visit the tomb took me back in 2010, this time with two colleagues from the Fitzwilliam Museum to measure the objects in the museum for our 2012 exhibition *The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures of Han China*. This time we entered the tomb successfully. After passing



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the remaining huge blocking stones that have been pulled out by the tomb robbers, there is a very steep set of stairs leading to a lower level with a large entertainment room, arsenal, kitchen, well, lavatory, storage chamber and ice cellar. It was a place designed for eternal happiness – eating, drinking and dancing without end.

Unfortunately, on the ground floor rear chamber only a few personal belongings had survived, including an unusually designed jade pendant

in the shape of an archer's ring and a jade bear used as a mat weight. There is no concrete evidence to identify the owner of this tomb, but the seals and coins help to date the tomb to between 175 and 128 BC.

I am delighted that a large number of the exceptional finds from the Beidongshan have gone on display in our exhibition on the tombs of the Han Dynasty, *The Search for Immortality: Tomb Treasures of Han China*, at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. More than 350 objects from Xuzhou, and tombs from Nanyue in Southern China, have been displayed in four galleries, which are arranged in a tomb layout with the objects placed according to their functions.

Unfortunately for the Chu kings, their worldly power was not to last. After twelve successive Chu kings, Wang Mang – an official who seized power from the Han imperial family – founded the Xin Dynasty, which lasted for fifteen years, until he was overthrown in 23 AD. However, the Han Dynasty was resilient, and was re-established in 25 AD. Even though Chu kings had gone out of existence, thankfully for history, their tombs and much of the great treasures locked within did not.

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1: Jade suit
2nd century BC,
Western Han Dynasty.
Length: 175 cm;
width: 68 cm.
Unearthed at
Shizishan in 1994-5
Xuzhou Museum,
Jiangsu Province.

2: Pottery musician
2nd century BC,
Western Han Dynasty.
Height: 33 cm.
Unearthed from
Tuolanshan King of
Chu tomb in 1989
Xuzhou Museum,
Jiangsu Province.

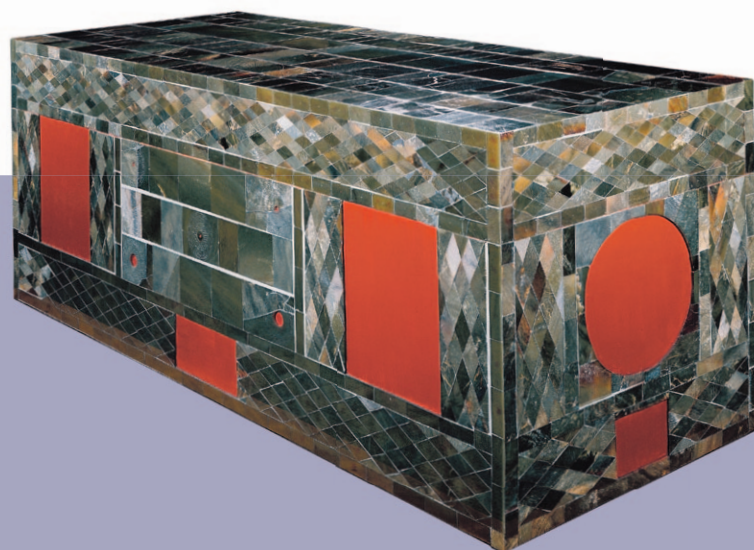
3: Jade ornament
with an animal mask
2nd century BC,
Western Han Dynasty.
Length: 16.7 cm;
width: 13.8 cm.
Unearthed at Xiang-
gangshan in 1983
The Museum of the
King of Nanyue,
Guangdong Province.

4: Jade coffin
2nd century BC,
Western Han Dynasty.
Length 280 cm;
width: 110 cm;
height: 108 cm.
Unearthed at
Shizishan in 1994-5
Xuzhou Museum,
Jiangsu Province.

5: Excavation
– Nanyue 3
The King's Coffin
Chamber. Site
excavated in 1983.
Photo courtesy of
The Museum of the
King of Nanyue.



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