

REVIEW

LUKE WARING, *WRITING AND MATERIALITY IN ANCIENT CHINA: THE TEXTUAL CULTURE OF THE MAWANGDUI TOMBS*. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2025. 360 PP. ISBN: 9780231219563.

Luke Waring's new book is now the leading study of the material aspects of the texts, on diverse media, recovered from the famous tombs at Mawangdui 馬王堆. It evinces extraordinary familiarity with relevant scholarship and presents the clearest and most persuasive account to date of the production of these documents and their function as grave goods. Although the tombs were excavated over fifty years ago, the book is still timely because we have advantages over the pioneers who first analyzed the Mawangdui corpus, including the benefit of subsequent discoveries that have greatly improved our understanding of classical Chinese mortuary ritual.

Six chapters take us through the tombs, their noble occupants, and the place of the Kingdom of Changsha 長沙 in the early Western Han political world (Chapter One); the production of the manuscripts, including the *modus operandi* (and occasional sloppiness) of teams of anonymous scribes (Chapter Two); the peculiarities of the texts chosen for burial with Li Xi 利豨 (d. 168 BCE?)¹, the presumed occupant of M3, which yielded by far the most written artifacts of the three tombs (Chapter Three); the ceremonial purposes of many of these manuscripts, especially the so-called *qiance* 遣冊/策, or inventories written on bamboo (Chapter Four); the use of diagrams to convey information both textually and visually at the same time (Chapter Five); and the purpose of depositing texts in tombs in the first place (Chapter Six).

Waring argues that Li Xi could not have produced all the manuscripts in his tomb, for

1 See pp. 32–34 in the book for the dispute over the date of Li Xi's death.

several reasons. A few of them (such as *Taichan shu* 胎產書, p.168)² were substantially older than he was. (This refutes the notion that all tomb texts were created expressly for burial [p. 190].) They might have belonged to his father (p. 37–38), or they might have been selected for interment by other people, either to shape his postmortem identity (p. 185) or to furnish him with a “useful repository” of books that was not necessarily identical to his own library (p. 193). Moreover, Li Xi was a nobleman, not a clerk, diviner, or physician; nor was he buried with writing paraphernalia (p. 39–41); nor do the documents in his tomb disclose any connection to his life and experiences (p. 43–46). Waring’s plausible inference is that the Li family *patronized* the production of texts, but did not engage in such labor themselves (p. 52, 59, 185). Nevertheless, the artifacts shed a great deal of light on the organization of scribes, the role of texts in daily life, and so on.

Waring’s conclusion that the manuscripts were intended to serve as a “useful repository” for Li Xi’s afterlife is necessarily speculative, but well within the realm of possibility. One important observation is that although some manuscripts were produced in a format suitable for regular reading (such as silk sheets that were folded concertina-style, allowing a reader to find the right spot and then hold the document conveniently [p. 80–82]) or even portability (for example, *Wu ze you xing tu* 物則有形圖 [p. 182–85] and *Taiyi jiang xing tu* 太一將行圖 [p. 149])³, many others were too unwieldy, not to mention lavish, to have been intended for daily use (p. 95–97).

I would not follow Waring in identifying them as *mingqi* 明器, however (p. 202–04). The primary sources that use this phrase are too meager—and indeed conflicting—for us to deploy it today with any confidence. He is aware that the manuscripts would not fit the definition of *mingqi* offered by Xunzi 荀子 (deliberately defective objects crafted so as to advertise that they are *not* for the use of the deceased [p. 282 n. 72]), but he adopts the term anyway, with a footnote appealing to Lothar von Falkenhausen (p. 282 n. 68). The problem is that he goes on to compare the manuscripts to tomb figurines: the assemblage buried with Li Xi was supposed to stand in for a grand library in the same way that clay statuettes could take the place of real servants (p. 203). Surely copies were kept above ground; nobody would have sacrificed the library *in toto* (p. 194–95). *Maybe this hypothesis is correct*, but Falkenhausen is careful to

2 Asterisks indicate titles supplied by modern editors for texts that were untitled in the manuscripts themselves.

3 The latter is often called by other contrived titles, such as *Bibing tu* 辟兵圖 and *Taiyi zhu tu* 太一祝圖. Here I simply use the title that Waring does.

differentiate between *mingqi* and tomb figurines (called *yong* 俑), which he regards as “conceptually and functionally quite distinct.”⁴

My only other comment on Waring’s discussion of the reasons for burying texts in tombs is that the question applies to other periods of Chinese history too. With reference to Xu Weili 徐謂禮 (1202–1254), a Southern Song official whose tomb contained extensive copies of government documents, Charles Hartman has suggested that the texts were prepared for the otherworldly bureaucracy because Xu’s descendants needed to retain the originals as verification of their ancestor’s status and their own derived privileges.⁵ This is not the same as the scenario that Waring proposes for Mawangdui, but the concerns overlap. Alas for institutional historians, Xu’s tomb is the only known Song example of such practices.

All Early China specialists will appreciate Waring’s book, and I expect that doctoral students will be asked to read it for general examinations. You can add it to the list of titles that everyone in the field needs to know.

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4 Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, UCLA, 2006), 301 n.20.

5 Charles Hartman, Review of Bao Weimin 包偉民 and Zheng Jiali 鄭嘉勵, eds., *Wuyi Nan-Song Xu Weili wenshu* 武義南宋徐謂禮文書 [Southern Song documents concerning Xu Weili from Wuyi Country], *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 43 (2013): 366, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sys.2013.0023>