

## INTRODUCTION

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Death is universal, the common fate of all human beings. Yet while all people die and the mortal condition is a foundational feature of human experience, these mere brute facts can elide the rich variety of responses to death found among individuals and societies. In responses to mortality we can see the complexity and creativity of human beings. The effort to understand death and render it manageable generates a diverse range of approaches to mortality that register what people and societies prize, as well as what they fear. The chapters in this volume consider the phenomenon of death from a variety of disciplines and perspectives and capture some of the most important and distinctive ways people in traditional China understood and responded to death.

As the historian David N. Keightley has argued, death in traditional China was not the sort of problem it was in the early West.<sup>1</sup> We do not find, for example, grand narratives of tragic heroes who realize who they really are and manifest their highest virtue in the poignant moment when they meet a violent and inevitable end. We do not find explanations of how death first entered or disrupted an earlier, happier state of the world, one in which mortality had no place or meaning. In early China, death tends to be regarded as less extraordinary and more acceptable as a natural feature of life. We do not find philosophical sentiments that readily lend themselves to the anguished existentialist formulations of mortality characteristic of certain trends in more recent Western philosophy. Even when we do discover the familiar in early Chinese responses to death, such as intimations of an afterlife in which some form of the personal self survives death to enjoy a continued existence, it is far from clear how deeply the apparent affinities reach. These different and distinctive features of Chinese responses to death make the study of Chinese views important not only for what they reveal about Chinese culture but also for what they imply for more general theories or accounts of human responses to mortality.

What we do find in traditional Chinese attitudes toward and responses to death is difficult to represent in any summary fashion; this difficulty reflects not only the diverse media and forms of expression evident in Chinese culture but also the great variety of beliefs, attitudes, and practices

found throughout the Chinese tradition. As the essays gathered here amply demonstrate, there are multiple understandings of death operating in and influencing all cultural forms in traditional China. These understandings register in diverse contexts and different forms, appearing in the physical spaces and artistic ornaments of the tomb, in ritual performances aimed at answering and addressing the sorrows of loss, in military documents that recognize war's cost even as they counsel and guide those who would make war, and in religious and philosophical efforts to limn the conditions under which a life may flourish while simultaneously attending to the inevitability of that life's end. The works in this volume traverse these large and unexplored territories in an effort to assay the distinctive practices and strategies used in traditional China to engage in the dramatic and familiar human effort to tame death, to render it—at least to some degree—subject to human management and understanding. Given their diversity in themes, media, theories, expressions, and practices, we forego an attempt to create any singular theoretical frame in this volume. We aim instead simply to sketch the remarkable range and richness of Chinese responses to mortality, allowing the chapters to illustrate the distinctive features and qualities of the Chinese tradition.

While this study targets death as the locus of attention, it must be acknowledged that, as the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi explicitly avers, life and death form a “single strand.” To investigate one end of this thread naturally leads one to discover and attend to the other. As a result, the strategies for managing and responding to death described in this volume are at once about life as well. Contemplating these essays, we may begin to appreciate the degree to which death can serve as a uniquely powerful lens for bringing into focus the values that structured lived experience in traditional China. When we survey phenomena as diverse as early China's tomb culture or later Chinese Buddhist philosophical treatments of mortality, we are invited to consider just what sort of life and values these strategies illuminate, both directly as well as indirectly. We all must die, but how we or others do so casts light on what kinds of lives we most value and admire—as well as those we most loathe and detest. The various insights and unique perspectives proffered by the essays herein will refine in important ways the more general picture we have of life in traditional China.

We begin this study with the most direct and yet perhaps most opaque manifestations of early Chinese attitudes toward death, the materials of the tomb. In recent decades, mortuary archaeology in China has made available a rich supply of material for investigating early Chinese attitudes toward death. Tomb excavations have provided clues and indications about the meaning of death in ancient China, and scholars have only begun to explore what the finds can tell us. We present here three studies that investigate the promise that these tombs and their contents hold for illuminating the

complexity of understandings and responses to mortality in early China. Individually, these chapters offer distinctive interpretive strategies for examining what China's tombs and artifacts communicate about the dead; collectively, they demonstrate the role material culture can play in revealing heretofore unappreciated elements of early Chinese attitudes toward and responses to mortality.

Mu-chou Poo's chapter, "Preparation for the Afterlife in Ancient China," surveys evolving conceptions of the hereafter in ancient China as evident in funerary remains. The earliest surviving tombs and grave goods, he observes, suggest that the world of the dead played an important role in preserving the hierarchical social and political realities of the living, with the noble dead enjoying burials and burial goods that befitted their lived stature. However, as China's old hierarchies deteriorated in the increased political chaos of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 B.C.E.), the organized symbols of stature in death lost force. By the Western Han (206 B.C.E.–8 C.E.), tombs came to increasingly resemble the spaces of the home, with grave goods and the tomb environment operating to simulate something like the lived spaces the dead once inhabited. Poo's essay considers these marked changes, and he queries in particular why, given the apparent persistence of connections between pre- and postmortem existence, simulation of the home space was a relatively late development. Poo traces these changes to alterations in evolving structures of social consciousness. From the Shang to the Eastern Han, a budding interest in meritocratic individual social ascension and increasingly bureaucratized social organization produced a tomb culture and conceptions of the afterlife that reflected the changing nature of life and the experiences of the living. His analysis amply demonstrates that while preparation for the afterlife operated as something of a constant in the Chinese treatment of death, what one could *expect* in the afterlife shifted just as surely as did one's lived experience.

In "Ascend to Heaven or Stay in the Tomb? Paintings in Mawangdui Tomb 1 and the Virtual Ritual of Bodily Space in Second-Century-B.C.E. China," Eugene Wang considers the potency of visual culture for revealing less widely recognized features of Chinese attitudes toward the afterlife. Despite recent efforts to explicate the material culture of the tomb in terms consonant with what ritual documents suggest about early Chinese practices, there is much that such an approach cannot adequately explain. Although the visual elements of the tomb are unambiguously arranged in the ritual performances of survivors, they do not end there but persist in an idiom in some measure independent of their initial deployment in burial activities. Wang's chapter begins with a survey of the ritual practices long regarded as holding interpretive promise for opening the tomb's visual space to understanding, and it culminates in a novel analysis of the painted coffins and banner of Mawangdui Tomb 1. The visual representations of the coffins and

banner, he argues, map out the transformation of the body as part of wider cosmic transformative processes, processes that implicitly deny any separation between external and internal. The boundaries between body and space are not fixed, and the transformative process—the principal orientation of the visual and spatial arrangement of the tomb—unites the individual body with the wider cosmos.

Jue Guo, in her chapter titled “Concepts of Death and the Afterlife Reflected in Newly Discovered Tomb Objects and Texts from Han China,” contests the inclination of some scholars to date the advent of Chinese conceptions of the afterlife to the arrival of Buddhism from India. While notions of the afterlife underwent marked changes under Buddhist influence, documents and objects found in Han tombs provide rich evidence of an earlier body of belief and practice regarding the postmortem existence of the dead. These beliefs and practices, moreover, do not neatly coalesce into a single vision of the afterlife but instead suggest, as Guo argues, a complexity not readily captured in existing scholarly models. One outstanding question is whether the dead were considered to reside in the tomb or journey onward to another realm. Attending in particular to a painting found in Mawangdui Tomb 1 and to *gaodi* 告地 (informing-the-underground) texts found at multiple sites, Guo contends that Han era Chinese neither resolved upon an answer nor apparently felt compelled to ask such questions. Instead, tomb artifacts indicate a pluralistic contentment in which diverse models of the afterlife coexisted and interacted. While the Han tombs bespeak none of the moral cast that Buddhism would bring to conceptions of the afterlife, exhibiting no concern with death as separating good from bad, they do indicate that, on the eve of Buddhism’s arrival in China, the afterlife was entertained with complex aspirations and a marked openness to a field of possibilities.

Roger T. Ames’s chapter, “War, Death, and Ancient Chinese Cosmology: Thinking through the Thickness of Culture,” attends in particular to the dramatic effects of violence and warfare in shaping the correlative worldview of ancient China. Ames argues that military treatments of death provide one arena in which it is both plausible and useful to found understanding on a “thick” reading of cultural commitment. What we see in early Chinese military documents is but a particularly potent iteration of correlative thinking, an orientation in which dyadic associations operate to create a processional order wherein each dyad is brought into productive tension with its apparent “other” to form a potent harmony. The efficacy of such thinking is a significant premise of the battlefield commander. Building on the work of Li Zehou and He Bingdi, Ames observes that the militarists begin with what is the most foundational and least theoretical dyadic association informing the conduct of war: the balance of life and death. The *Sunzi*, for example, abjures any glorified construction of war and rejects divination. Instead, it highlights the commander’s foremost concern with matters of life

and death. The commander, it avers, must become an able reader of the tensions at play in the battlefield circumstance and must learn to turn his holistic vision of these to account, maximizing the forces at work to find success. In this, Ames argues, we see the way in which culturally situated cosmology takes shape under practical and urgent interests.

With these reflections on the tomb and the wider cultural context in play, we turn to the self-conscious efforts of Chinese intellectuals to address the mortal condition. We begin with the early Confucians who offer influential philosophical attempts to navigate mortality through careful reflection on human flourishing and social meaning.<sup>2</sup> While the Confucians most notably and obviously attend to the promise of ritual responses to mortality, they also, as the essays presented here demonstrate, frame ritual injunctions within broader commitments regarding the nature of a good human life, the shared dimensions of human experience, and the efficacy of self-cultivation in answering the sorrows engendered by mortality.

Philip J. Ivanhoe and Amy Olberding assay the posture toward death adopted in the *Analects*, the earliest Confucian classic. Ivanhoe's chapter, titled "Death and Dying in the *Analects*," comprehensively surveys what this foundational text can offer regarding the joint problems of the individual's apprehension of her own mortality and the sorrows of loss when beloved others die. In particular, Ivanhoe considers whether Kongzi's clear concern with death and loss evidence a problematic "lack of nerve" with respect to mortality.<sup>3</sup> As Ivanhoe observes, many contemporary perspectives on human mortality recognize that efforts to manage death, both religious and secular, achieve relief from its associated sorrows by seeking to flee earnest engagement with mortality. Where death is counted a terror and tragedy, we may seek recourse from the horror of the mortal condition through elaborate efforts to make our lives "really meaningful," seeking purpose and structure in elaborate and often dubious cultural strategies for achieving a life judged "successful." Ivanhoe argues that Kongzi's position implicitly refuses to count death itself as tragic and terrifying, consequently foregoing elaborate meaning-making strategies in favor of an appreciation for the pleasures of a life shared with others. On this account, Kongzi endorses our intuitions that some deaths are indeed tragic and that death is a legitimate and important concern for any human being, but he insists that such profound and complex responses are connected to and must be located within a set of conditions for living well. Kongzi, that is, worries about death while offering a model in which certain species of concern with death are consonant with, contribute to, and even constitute aspects of a flourishing life.

Amy Olberding's chapter, "I Know Not 'Seems': Grief for Parents in the *Analects*" undertakes a close study of a particular species of death much emphasized in the *Analects*, the deaths of parents. The *Analects* rather clearly and unambiguously endorses robust grief when parents die. Yet there

is, Olberding argues, something initially puzzling in this posture, for the deaths of parents appear to be cases of the “good death,” where life has run a generous course and death registers as a predictable conclusion. One worry thus evoked by the text’s emphasis on grieving these deaths is that where we rue even the *good* death, we risk tacitly endorsing the conviction that death is inherently and always bad. Indeed, we risk sanctioning the view that the mortal condition is irredeemably tragic. Olberding’s analysis aims to distinguish the Confucian prescription to grieve for parents from such an endorsement. The *Analects*’ interest in mourning parents, she argues, owes less to a posture toward death than it does to a devoted effort to frame individual deaths within patterns of human relationships. On this reading, the deaths of parents are uniquely disturbing because parents are uniquely central to the human being’s self-understanding and development. The *Analects*, she avers, thus simultaneously encourages grief for certain good deaths while abjuring any framework that would promote treating death simpliciter as tragic.

In addition to capturing the philosophical reflections of Kongzi, his followers, and some of their opponents, the *Analects* has served throughout the course of Chinese history as an inspiration and spur to further reflection, its accounts of the sage Kongzi and his teachings seeding a robust commentarial tradition. Mark Csikszentmihalyi’s chapter, “Allotment and Death in Early China,” surveys this interpretive tradition as it struggled to navigate the dangerous and unpredictable waters between fate and human effort. In early China, Csikszentmihalyi observes, we see a marked interest in understanding why some lives are apparently “cut short,” why some individuals are denied a full span of life. Life is provided in unequal “allotments,” and discovering the logic, if any, in this was an early concern. Csikszentmihalyi’s essay focuses on the *Analects*’ representation of one life cut short, that of Kongzi’s beloved student Yan Yuan. We see the profound effect this untimely loss had upon Kongzi and how the commentarial tradition struggled to make sense both of this loss and of Kongzi’s response to it. In the commentaries, Csikszentmihalyi argues, we see competing narratives of this event, narratives that range from a concession that allotment is arbitrary to those that assign deep and even cosmological meaning to a life span. While the diversity of these accounts may be obscured by their common appeals to a shared terminology, their ascription of “life span” to *ming*, Csikszentmihalyi’s analysis reveals a tradition engaged in robust debate over the ability of human power to influence and govern death.

While Confucians consistently advocated ritualized mourning as the most efficacious, ethically worthy, and aesthetically satisfying strategy for responding to mortality, their Daoist counterparts often sought to address the place of death in the context of wider natural patterns and processes. At the extreme, Daoists criticized and dismissed ritual conduct as nothing

more than an elaborate exercise in hypocrisy. Underlying such criticisms was a deep skepticism about the worth of formal ritual and a commitment to framing the human experience of mortality and human life in general within the larger context of nature. Nature, they suggested, achieves harmony and order by way of a continuous and balanced exchange between life and death. Human beings who apprehend this will come to see their own mortality as part of the cosmic patterns and processes that found and sustain the joy they find in life. Life and death, joy and sorrow, and all such dichotomies, then, are complementary and work together to form a harmonious natural order.

In “Death in the *Zhuangzi*: Mind, Nature, and the Art of Forgetting,” Mark Berkson considers the therapeutic strategies offered by the early Daoist Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi’s voice is, as Berkson observes, perhaps one of the most distinctive of his or any age. Although Zhuangzi’s manner of addressing mortality—his humor, playfulness, and skepticism regarding death’s badness—may suggest an uncommon ease with mortality, there are nonetheless apparent tensions in his treatment of death that reflect the social fragmentation and instability of his age. For example, Zhuangzi counsels that one should accept death whenever it may come, yet he clearly also privileges “living out one’s years.” He recommends achieving an understanding of death embedded in natural patterns and processes, yet at least some of his sages seem to respond to death in a highly artificial fashion. Berkson’s essay steers between these tensions and proposes that they are best resolved when Zhuangzi is understood as adopting a tacit, heuristic division between recommendations for transforming people’s hearts and minds as they consider mortality and recommendations directed toward our need to understand and accord with nature. Zhuangzi seeks to soften the injurious, strong sense of self that impedes our efforts to accept our own mortality while affirmatively framing reconciliation to mortality as consonant with an achieved free accord with the operations of nature. There are, Berkson concludes, two distinct but mutually reinforcing strategies in evidence in the *Zhuangzi*, and both promote an exceptionally thorough ease with death.

China’s funerary culture provides complex intimations of a postmortem existence, and some early Chinese intellectuals clearly sought to formalize a robust understanding of the role of the dead in shaping the conduct of the living. Michael Puett’s chapter, “Sages, the Past, and the Dead: Death in the *Huainanzi*,” describes one such attempt. In his consideration of this Daoist classic, Puett examines the complex justifications and motivations that informed beliefs in the existence and nature of ghosts in early China. The *Huainanzi*, Puett observes, at once confirms the prevalence of belief in ghosts and spirits in early China and demonstrates that there are multiple ways to believe in them. One of Puett’s most notable conclusions is that even when belief in ghosts is shared by sage and commoner, they do not



necessarily believe in the same way or for the same reasons. The sage recognizes the commonplace trust that ghosts and spirits exist and, in some sense and measure, must be understood as sharing that trust. However, the sage markedly and emphatically lacks and disavows any fear of ghosts and spirits, seeing them instead as helpful agents for ensuring social order. Moreover, while the commoner may rightly anticipate a postmortem existence as a ghost, the sage's understanding vouchsafes for him a different fate, a death that terminates in a state of nothingness, free of worldly cares. As Puett's essay makes clear, the experience, understanding, and significance of death is not the same for commoner and sage. Sagely understanding promises not only a different life but also a different death.

Tao Jiang's chapter, "Linji and William James on Mortality: Two Visions of Pragmatism," begins by observing the apparent affinities between an American pragmatist and Chan Buddhists. Both are wedded, in their own distinctive ways, to leveraging intellect and analysis in the service of practical human interests. Both seek, in some measure, to gauge and evaluate our intellectual efforts in terms of the help they offer in providing for our most immediate and important needs. Jiang explores how these pragmatic commitments influence and shape the efforts of the pragmatist William James and the Buddhist Linji as they work to address the challenge of human immortality. Despite the affinities in sensibility and intellectual orientation noted previously, Jiang argues that James and Linji offer dramatically different analyses of the concept. Where James may be understood as endorsing belief in immortality for its therapeutic and consolatory effects, Linji repudiates any such belief as a corrosive attachment that fatally undermines spiritual development. Jiang, in his essay, explores the sources of this marked divergence. He suggests that James appears at once personally ambivalent about the promise of an afterlife and intellectually committed to honoring the comfort some quite clearly find in such a belief. Linji, in contrast, is deeply suspicious and critical of the comfort promised by an anticipated afterlife, seeing it as a kind of "opiate" that clouds people's vision and prevents them from seeing fundamental truths that are required for and constitutive of enlightenment and salvation. For Linji, the hope of enjoying an afterlife cannot be divorced from an implicit dissatisfaction with the life one currently lives. As such, belief in an afterlife functions as a spiritual attachment not different in kind from the worldly attachments that bedevil human existence, promote suffering, and prevent spiritual progress.

Buddhist influence on China contributed, in part, to a renewal of Confucian interest in addressing mortality. As demonstrated in Guoxiang Peng's chapter, "Death as the Ultimate Concern in the Neo-Confucian Tradition: Wang Yangming's Followers as an Example," Neo-Confucians sought both to respond to Buddhist treatments of mortality and to develop a distinctively Confucian idiom with which to frame their concerns. Peng attempts to show



that the followers of Wang Yangming in particular developed a rich tradition of incorporating reflection on mortality into their philosophical program. Peng argues that these Neo-Confucians broke from a tradition of relative silence about death in order to restore and reinvigorate the understanding of Kongzi's famous claim that one who does not yet understand life cannot understand death (*Analects* 11.12). These Neo-Confucians were certainly prompted by their Buddhist counterparts, but they were also, Peng avers, drawn to consideration of mortality by the circumstances of their lives, by the perils they faced in a frequently hostile political climate. Peng's analysis demonstrates the influence of these experiences in addition to the influence of Buddhist discourse and also provides a positive account of Neo-Confucian efforts to attach an attitude of ease with mortality to an established program for moral self-cultivation.

Human beings see processes of life and death unfolding around them all the time: plants bud, flower, wither, and die; crops germinate, sprout, mature, and are harvested; animals are born, grow, age, and perish; even the phases of the moon suggest to us the familiar process of coming into and passing out of being. Sometimes the ordinary process of life is cut short through accident, folly, or fate; in rare and often dramatic cases people choose to end their own lives, either sacrificing them for what they regard as higher values or deciding that their lives are no longer worth living. In general, though, human beings cherish life and seem capable of valuing almost any form of it. Given this tendency, the many forms and faces of death present us with distinct and elusive challenges.

The chapters in this volume offer an impressive range of perspectives on how Chinese people traditionally attempted to respond to the challenges of death. The breadth and depth of their responses testify both to the remarkable creativity and richness of Chinese culture and to the strength, persistence, and omnipresence of death in human life. Our greatest difficulties often inspire our most impressive achievements, and this is surely the case in human responses to death. The effort to understand, manage, embellish, and find meaning in mortality is in one sense bound to fail, for death always has the final and decisive word. Yet in these ongoing efforts and the irrepressible hope that they express, we find some of the most revealing and poignant expressions of humanity.

While this volume makes unique and unprecedented contributions to our understanding of Chinese views of mortality, it should be taken as providing only the initial words on this compelling aspect of Chinese tradition. Given the length and richness of this tradition and the limits of space, we have made a number of choices concerning focus and content that readers should keep in mind as they make use of our text. Including a number of essays that draw upon and analyze early archaeological material is clearly important for a volume such as this, because the wealth of this material

is evident and its value beyond question. We have also focused particular attention on the *Analects* as the foundational text of Confucianism. Our reasons for doing so concern the profound and subtle nature of this text and its deep and enduring influence on later Chinese tradition. While the *Analects* surely does not represent the beginning of Chinese views on death, it does begin one of the most influential streams of thought in Chinese history, a stream from which many acolytes and critics branch yet which is too often neglected in treatments of mortality.

Our focus on early archaeological material and the *Analects* highlights our more general emphasis on the pre-Han period and our relatively lighter coverage of the post-Han China. Given the expanse of Chinese history, some such unevenness in treatment is inevitable. Our strategy is to be more thorough in our coverage of the early period, as it sets up many of the issues that inform the later tradition, and then to provide examples of how this influence appears in representative works from the post-Han. Our two chapters on later periods treat two of the most important movements in later Chinese philosophy and religion: Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. Since these essays are unprecedented, they do indeed encourage, if not wholly achieve, a reconsideration of premodern China when it comes to the issue of mortality. We do, though, fully recognize that there is a great deal of excellent work that remains to be done and trust that this volume will both aid and encourage such research.

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#### NOTES

1. See David N. Keightley, "Early Civilization in China: Reflections on How It Became Chinese," in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

2. Some scholars object to the idea that there was anything called "Confucianism" at this stage of Chinese history. This strikes us as an odd view that has arisen by confusing the distinction between a term and a concept. While there was not a single word designating the Confucian tradition at this point in time (the term *ru* surely had a much broader and unregulated sense), there was a very clear feeling among a certain group of scholars that Kongzi (Confucius) had preserved and codified a particular set of ideas, practices, and related classical texts that embodied "the Way of the former sages." This was described as "the Way of Kongzi" and was advocated and defended against competing ways. All of this is evident in early texts such as *Mengzi* 3B9. If this does not represent a Confucian *tradition*, it is difficult

to think of what possibly could qualify as such. Of course, this does not mean that the tradition was conceived of at this stage or in later times as a single homogenous way. Later Confucians interpreted Kongzi's teachings in dramatically different ways and appealed to different sources of authority as grounds for their interpretations, but this general tendency is true of every tradition.

3. We use "Kongzi," a romanized name of the "founder" of Confucianism, rather than the more familiar, latinized "Confucius."