

# Environmental Context and Site Selection of the Wuwangdun Tomb: A Brief Study on Chu Culture

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**Abstract.** The culture of the Chu Kingdom was once glory in Chinese history for a long duration, which was significantly different from the Central Plain Culture in Chinese Warring States Period. It has a high cultural value to study and conserve. The recent discovery of the Wuwangdun Tomb has provided new materials for studying the Chu Culture. Through the investigation of the site of this noble tomb, it has obvious evidences such as landscape features and funeral traditions to propose the importance of this noble tomb of the Chu State and its reflection of the evolution of this culture. The study of the essay decided to analysis the tomb's environment and site selection, therefore finding its correlation part of the Chu Culture and its influence on later generations.

**Keywords:** the Chu Culture, site selection, burial culture, the Wuwangdun Tomb.

## 1. Introduction

The Chu Culture is the general name of material and spiritual culture of the Chu state located in southern China during the Spring and Autumn Period, a significant part of the diverse and unified Chinese Culture. There have been different statements about the origins of Chu, some scholars affirmed that the ancestors of Chu were “barbarians” represented by Guo Moruo said in his book *Studies on Ancient Chinese Society: The Chu were originally barbarians, that is, the Huaiyi (which meant the Chu ).* They had formed an alliance with the Shang Dynasty afterwards [1,2]. But the views such as from the Han Dynasty history book *Shih Chi* or the Chu bamboo slips from the Ge Tomb, Xincai, Henan Province considered that The Chu State is actually originated from the Central Plains [3]. According to historical records, some historians have inferred that in the early Shang Dynasty, the Shang Dynasty continued to expand its power, and the ancestors of the Chu people, like many other small tribes, were forced to leave their homeland. Then they travelled all the way down from the Yellow River to the Yangtze River Basin, striving to multiply, learn production methods and expand territories [4], and during King Cheng's rule of the Zhou Dynasty, the leader of the Chu people, Xiong Yi, was made a viscount and established the Chu State [4], thus the state and its culture continued to thrive. After the warring chaos of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, this culture has combined with other cultures of the central plain, which has constituted the foundation for China's future features of civilization. Therefore, researching the Chu Culture can have prominent contribution on studying the historical progress of the Chinese Civilization while preserving cultural inheritances and values.

For decades, there has been blanks in the field of study of this culture's development during the Warring States Period. However, the new excavation of the Wuwangdun Tomb situated in Huainan, Anhui Province may fill that gap. As the tomb was discovered to belong to a king of Chu in the late Warring States Period---King Kaolie [5]. As a famous figure of that period, his tomb could contain momentous cultural value. From investigating its site environment and selection, the burial culture, religious belief and the evolution of Chu Culture in the late period of the state can be better confirmed or reflected.

## 2. Insights from Burial Practices and the Wuwangdun Tomb

### 2.1. The investigation of Chu Culture

The Chu culture is one of the representatives of the southern culture in ancient China, with its unique politics, economy, religions and artistic system touching the summit in the Warring State Stage. The study of Chu culture has involved many aspects, among them, burial culture and funeral customs are particularly important for reflecting the related conception of death and their mental culture, for example, the tomb guardian sculptures discovered from different Chu tombs may reveal their perceptions of the world in the afterlife: The Painted Dragon Cloud Pattern Double-headed Tomb Guardian (Figure 1) unearthed from No.18 Tomb of Yutai Mountain in Jingzhou, Hubei Province is thought to protect the tomb owner from evil spirits due to its bizarre and mysterious style[6], inferring that the Chu people had set up a view of life and death.



**Fig. 1** The Painted Dragon Cloud Pattern Double-headed Tomb Guardian [6]

In the other recent studying materials, scholars have discussed the hierarchy of Chu tombs, with the types and quantity of burial objects, and their relationship with the social power structure of Chu [7].

In the burial practices of the Chu State, royal tombs are often characterized by a clear hierarchy[7]. Studies have shown that noble tombs were usually chosen in areas with good omens, which not only protected the tombs from natural disasters, but also reflected the importance attached to nature and traditional culture.

In addition, the natural geographical environment of Chu, such as mountains, rivers and plains, had a profound influence on the development of Chu culture, which has not only affected the living way of the Chu people [8], but also shaped the funeral customs.

Through in-depth study of Chu burial culture, these discoveries provide us with new perspectives on the spiritual world and cultural values of ancient Chu.

### 2.2. Researches on the Wuwangdun Tomb

On May 18, the Administration of Cultural Heritage of China has declared that the identity of the Wuwangdun Tomb owner is basically King Kaolie of Chu in the late Warring States Period, while a large number of burial objects were successfully excavated. This new progress has provided new materials for studying the construction methods of Chu graves, the official system of the state and other historical topics [9] (Figure 2).

As a typical representative of the noble burials of Chu during the late Warring State Period, its unearthed cultural relics in the archaeological discovery are rich and diverse including bronze and lacquer had reflected the level of craftsmanship and etiquette system of Chu culture.



**Fig.2** On May 18, the largest tripod in Wuwangdun Tomb was excavated. Its diameter was 88.9 cm, exceeding the Zhuke Tripod of Anhui Museum. Tripod was the symbol of power in ancient China.[9]

While the burial relics are placed in a crucial position in the archaeological research, the location and the environmental background of the burial are also worth considering. For avoiding negative effects of environmental issues such as flooding or soil erosion on the grave, and to abide by the cultural traditions such as Feng Shui[10] and the tomb owner's social status, the location of the Wuwangdun Tomb may refer to the social evolution and the cultural development of Chu at that time.

### **2.3. Environmental background and tomb site selection**

In ancient society, the site selection of tombs was not only influenced by religious and cultural factors, but also the environmental conditions. According to correlative studies, the selection of the location of ancient Chinese burials usually considers natural factors such as topography, soil and hydrology. For instance, topographic height determines the graves' flood control capacity, while the soil property affects the preservation status of the tomb. Exploration and selection of superior and auspicious environment was also an inevitable factor of choosing monument locations[11]. These aspects are reflected in the specific site selection of the Wuwangdun tomb.

Reviewing environmental factors in the location of Chu tombs can provide a deeper understanding of the interaction of environment and culture in burial location. For example, in the State of Chu, tombs were often chosen in areas with beautiful scenery and favourable natural environments, which not only protected the tombs from natural disasters, but also reflected the desire for beautiful nature. Such siting decisions may also be related to the concept of witchcraft since most Chu people worship that, so tomb owners consulted wizards when choosing a burial site to ensure an auspicious and peaceful graveyard[12]. And by comparing the environmental traits of the Wuwangdun Tomb with the Chu burials in an earlier period or the tombs of other states around Chu at the same time, maybe the Chu cultural exchange with other independent cultures and the evolution itself might be disclosed.

### 3. Analysis, Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Environmental factors of site selection

By analyzing the environmental factors of the Wuwangdun Tomb, the location of the burial has remarkable characteristics in topography and soil conditions, combining with the mysterious theology (the Chu witchcraft Culture). The tomb is located at a high terrain in a shape of a hill in Xuwa Village, Sanhe Town, Huainan City, Anhui Province. It is about 15 kilometers west of the Chu Shouchun City Ruins, adjacent to Shungeng Mountain in the north and open plain in the south[13], which can prevent some kind of flooding effects and in accordance with the ancient Fengshui principles governing optimal conditions for cemetery site selection[14].

Meanwhile, trenches are distributed near the cemetery and has formed a outlook of a moat, which may be constructed to protect the tomb from being violated or to reflect the worship of water and its importance in the Feng Shui. The recent mainly excavated NO.1 tomb of the Wuwangdun Tomb is a large “甲” shaped vertical pit tomb. The pit is nearly square with a side length of about 50 meters. There is a sloping tomb passage about 42 meters long on the east side of the pit. There are 21 steps on the four walls of the pit, which are gradually inward-facing and have a regular shape. This structure shows that the soil quality of the tomb was certain when it was built, and it needed to be able to stably support the tomb structure of such a scale.

Fig3. The distribution map of the Wuwangdun Tomb [9].

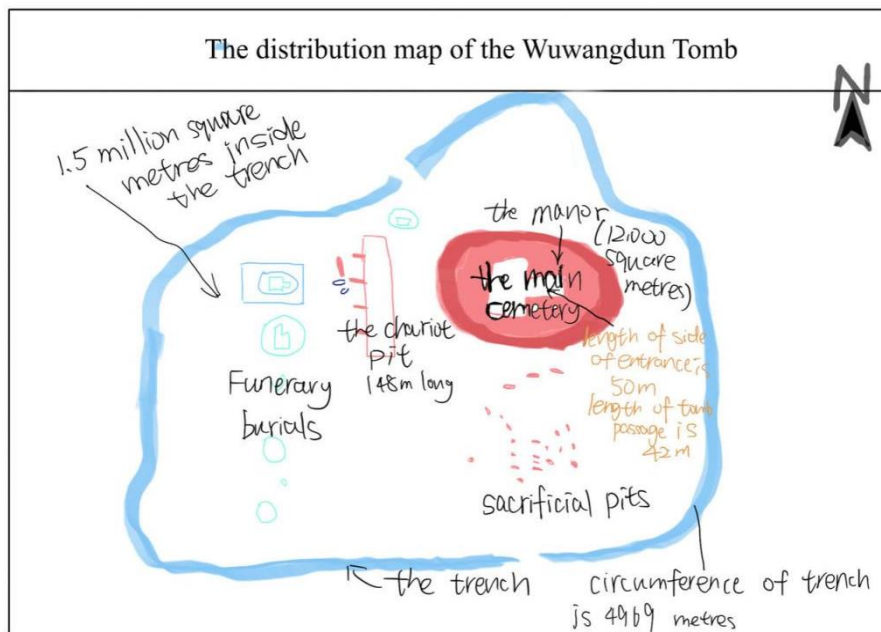


Fig. 3 Map of Wuwangdun Tomb

The Wuwangdun Tomb has similarities comparing with the other noble cemeteries of Chu such as the Saddlehill Tomb and the Lisangu Pile Tomb. For example, these burials are all 5 kilometers away from the capital city of that era with large amount of manor in the structures [15].

The site selection of the Wuwangdun Tomb is in the comprehensive consideration of Chu culture on the natural environment, showing the dual influence of terrain protection and geomantic omen.

#### 3.2. An interpretation of the cultural meaning

The selection of the location of the Wuwangdun Tomb is strongly associated with natural environment, social structure and religious believes. Since the Chu people especially advocated witchcraft, deeply believing in the concept of the worship of mountains and rivers and the immortality of the souls and affirm that the location of the tomb should be consistent with the forces of nature to

ensure the rest of the souls. The location of the Wuwangdun Tomb and other Chu burials are on the high ground, surrounded by trenches (which may use to be a moat) to isolate from the outside world [14], which has reflected the importance of landscape in the Chu cultural perspective and the respect to the dead. Also, the location of the tomb is also a symbol of social status. By choosing a higher terrain and superior environment for the afterlife, the Chu nobles were able to consolidate their authority and dignity.

The structure of the Chu tombs during the Warring States Period are generally vertical pits, rarely cave tombs, and their directions have a strong regularity[16][17], which can further refer to the patriarchal system accomplished in the Zhou Dynasty[18].Moreover, because the territory of the Chu State was vast, the Chu people may brought their own burial style and customs to new areas during their expansion, and integrated them with other culture, forming a burial culture with regional characteristics and common styles of that ancient period.

### **3.3. The influence of Chu culture on the later generations**

The sites of the Wuwangdun Tomb and other Chu burials not only reflects the regional characteristics of Chu culture, but also has a profound influence on the tomb culture of later generations.The combination of the Chu cultural use of the natural environment and religious beliefs created a burial location model dominated by Feng Shui, which was continued and developed in the later Chinese burial culture. For example, landscape investigation is especially crucial in nowadays Chinese selection of graves, which has similarities with the Chu witchcraft nearly 2000 years ago[11]. The site selection of the Wuwangdun Tomb also emphasizes the concept of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, and profoundly affects the customs of building graves of the southern Chinese culture in later generations. Moreover, the site selection and the distribution of the tomb in this study can disclose the method of how the kings and the nobles of Chu express and consolidate their hierarchy though burial locations and the general cemetery layout. Providing researchers with more materials to study the social structure and custom of Chu, filling the blanks of this culture's development.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study reveals the main environmental factors of the Wuwangdun Tomb and its cultural significance by analyzing the location of the burial. The site selection of King Kaolie's royal cemetery has fully considered the natural environmental conditions such as terrain, hydrology and soil, reflecting the landscape worship in the Chu Culture. On the other hand, from the scale of the tomb, the mound of landfill, and the inner unique funerary relics of the Wuwangdun Tomb, the complex interaction can be seen among Chu nobles expressing their social status and religious belief. It can be seen that the environmental background, class status and the religious belief all have important influence on the tomb culture of Chu and are key factors to understand the spatial layout and social structure of the Chu state and its culture.

Future studies can explore the relationship between the location of Chu tombs and their environmental factors on a larger scale, emphasizing on the comparative analysis of different related geographical areas. And by studying the different environmental background of Chu tombs in different regions, researchers can have a deeper understanding of the adaptation and development of the Chu Culture under different natural conditions. In addition, it is suggested to conduct similar environment and site selection research on other historical sites of the Chu state, so as to comprehensively explore the relationship between the religious belief, social structure and natural environment of Chu, so as to deepen the understanding of the overall traits of the Chu Culture.

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