

# EASTERN HAN (AD 25-220) TOMBS IN SICHUAN

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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY

ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Gordon House  
276 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7ED

[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

ISBN 978 1 78491 216 1  
ISBN 978 1 78491 217 8 (e-Pdf)

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Printed in England by Oxuniprint, Oxford  
This book is available direct from Archaeopress or from our website [www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

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## Preface

This study concerns the factors underlying the popularity of the cliff tomb, a local burial form in the Sichuan Basin in China in the Eastern Han dynasty (AD 25-220). The development of the cliff tomb was held in a complex set of connections to the development of the burial forms, and existed through links to many other contemporary burial forms, the brick chamber tomb, the stone chamber tomb, and the princely rock-cut tomb. These connections and links formed to a large extent through the incorporation of the Sichuan area into the empire which began in the 4th century BC. It was in this context, a series of factors contributed to the formation and popularity of the cliff tombs in Sichuan. The hilly topography and the soft sandstone, easy to cut, provided the natural condition for the development of the cliff tombs. The decision to make use of this natural condition was affected by many factors rooted in the social background. The inherent nature of the cliff tomb structure was fully explored, which was then followed by a series of corresponding innovations on the pictorial carvings and the burial objects. The meaning of a continuous family embedded in the cliff tomb structure was explored, as the construction of the tomb was the result of the continuous endeavour from many generations of the family, and the physical form of the cliff tomb was a metaphor for a prosperous family. Following this intention of the tomb occupants underlying the design of the cliff tomb structure, the pictorial carvings and the burial objects in the cliff tomb were made adaptations to make the cliff tomb an embodiment of relations between different family members and different generations.

This publication is a modified version of my DPhil thesis completed at the University of Oxford in 2014. Above all, I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Dame Jessica Rawson for her tremendously hard work and patience over the years of this study, and for guiding me in my academic research. I would also like to thank Professor Helena Hamerow, Dr Peter Ditmanson, Dr Frances Wood, Dr Janet DeLaine, Dr Carol Michaelson and Dr Robert Chard for their valuable suggestions during my transfer and confirmation interviews and in the final viva.

I have received financial support at various stages during my study and writing. The Travel Grant from Merton College, the Meyerstein Awards for Archaeological Research and the Au Ping Reyes Awards allowed my fieldwork in Sichuan, Shandong and Jiangsu.

Access to important archaeological sites and textual materials has been generously given by the following: Director Tang Guangxiao from the Mianyang Museum, Director Mao Jianjun and Wu Junmei from the Santai Archaeological Institute, Director Yue Huagang from the Qingshen Archaeological Institute, Director Zhou Xiaochuan from the Yibin Archaeological Institute, Director Wu Tianwen from the Pengshan Archaeological Institute, Director Lu Genzhu from the Changning Archaeological Institute, Liang Guannan from the Chongqing China Three Gorges Museum and Director Liang Yong from the Xuzhou Art Gallery of Stone Sculpture of Han Dynasty.

My eternal thanks go to my parents-without whom this study would never have been finished.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The study is concerned with one of the two major burial forms in Eastern Han (AD 25-220) Sichuan, the cliff tomb, which is carved horizontally into the hillsides and the cliffs along the riverbanks, modelled on the dwelling for the living (figure 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> Cliff tombs vary in scale from several metres to more than thirty metres in length and have various local features within the Sichuan Basin in southwest China. A cliff tomb usually contains one or more burial chambers. Some cliff tombs are furnished with carved stone coffin beds, stoves and niches and may also display architectural elements resembling timber architecture. In some cases, the walls of the cliff tombs are decorated with carved images.

For example, the cliff tomb Zijingwan 紫荆灣 M3 in Santai 三臺 in Sichuan is cut into the hillside, with a corridor, three main chambers on the central axis, and three side chambers (figure 3, 4 and 5).<sup>2</sup> The total length of the tomb is 17.25 metres. The width of the widest part in the tomb is 7.45 metres. Most of the ceilings of the burial chambers are carved to resemble the ceilings of timber architecture, with rafters and decorated coffers (figure 6). Several entrances to the burial chambers are carved to resemble the columns, lintels and walls of timber architecture (figure 7). In the doorways leading to the main chambers, auspicious images such as cranes and gates to the heavenly world are carved on the side walls (figure 8). Two stoves are carved out from the wall of the side chamber in the west, indicating the function of the chamber as a kitchen (figure 9). The side chamber next to the rear main chamber has a wall carved with a weapon shelf, showing that the chamber was thought of as an armoury.

The local residents call these cliff tombs *manzidong* 蠻子洞 or the aboriginal caves,<sup>3</sup> which used to mislead the early Western researchers in the early 20th century to attribute these tombs to the aboriginal people,<sup>4</sup> though as

later researchers suggested and as will be shown in this chapter, they were tombs of the Han people.<sup>5</sup> The cave dwelling-like facilities in the cliff tombs led the local residents to believe that those caves were actually the dwellings of the aboriginal people. And some of these caves were indeed inhabited in the past few centuries by some poor people who could not afford to build their own houses. The early researchers accepted the name of the aboriginal cave mainly because the burial form of the cliff tombs is so different from the common Eastern Han burial forms known at that time, the stone or brick chamber tombs, which were popular all over the Han dynasty empire including the Sichuan Basin.

The central aim of this study is to explore the factors underlying the popularity of the cliff tombs in the Sichuan Basin. The major proposition is that such tombs played an active role in Eastern Han society in Sichuan, as there were a series of activities relevant to the tombs carried out by people, from the construction of the tombs, preparing burial objects, to undertaking the funeral and making sacrifices. On the one hand people, who were involved in these activities had expectations and intentions that shaped their tombs. On the other hand, the existing burial form shaped people's activities related to the tombs, which in return influenced people's expectations and intentions. Therefore, there was a continual dialectical relationship between tombs and people. Through examining the characteristics of the structure, the burial objects and the pictorial carvings of the cliff tomb in relation to other contemporary major burial forms, we can investigate the underlying expectations and intentions of the people who created these distinctive tombs. It is anticipated, therefore, that an understanding of the factors underlying

of the caves in the region about Kiating Fu, coupled with the information which I was able to gather from various sources, suggests three points which might seem to confirm the popular tradition ascribing them to the aborigines' (Bishop 1916: 114-115) ('Kiating Fu 嘉定府' is today's Leshan 乐山 area in Sichuan). T. Torrance, an English missionary became interested in the cliff tombs in 1908 and began to systematically collect burial objects from these tombs. In his paper published in 1930-1931, Torrance mentioned that in Sichuan, one outstanding difference compared to the general sameness of the burial customs once prevailed everywhere was the 'frequent cutting of caves in the solid rock for tombs'. The majority of the burial objects in the cliff tombs were very similar to those in the Han stone or brick chamber tombs (Torrance 1930-1931: 88). In addition, the Qin and Han coins were frequently found in the cliff tombs. Therefore it was reasonable to attribute the cliff tombs to the Han Chinese people (Torrance 1930-1931: 88). In the early 20th century, Western researchers in this area include General D'Ollone in 1907, Segalen in 1914, Bishop in 1916, and Bedford in 1936. For a general introduction to the early investigation of the cliff tombs, see Cheng 1957: 139-140.

<sup>5</sup>The Han people here is used in contrast with those 'aboriginal' groups of people, who lived in their own life styles for generations within a relatively isolated area, barely influenced by the assimilation of the Sichuan area into the Qin and Han empires (221 BC-AD 220).

<sup>1</sup> The other main burial form is brick or stone chamber tomb, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> For the archaeological report see Sichuan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiuyuan, Mianyang shi bowuguan and Santai xian wenwu guanli suo 2007: 80-91.

<sup>3</sup> *Manzi* 蠻子 is translated as 'aboriginal' here. In the mind of the local residents, the people who used the cliff tombs as dwellings were isolated from the society with culture. As T. Torrance mentioned, 'when we first discovered the nature of these caves and brought to light their coffins and interment articles we were puzzled whether to assign them a Chinese or an aboriginal origin' (Torrance 1930-1931: 88). During his investigation of the relics in Sichuan as part of the Eastern Asiatic Expedition organized by the Pennsylvania University Museum in 1916, C. Bishop recorded that 'these caves, which are of artificial formation, are attributed by local tradition to the Man-tse, or aboriginal barbarians, and are regarded as having been excavated to serve as dwellings'. Bishop 1916: 112. ('Man-tse' is *manzi* 蠻子.)

<sup>4</sup> See records by the early Western travelers into the Sichuan Basin in the early 12th century. C. Bishop used to suggest that 'a careful examination

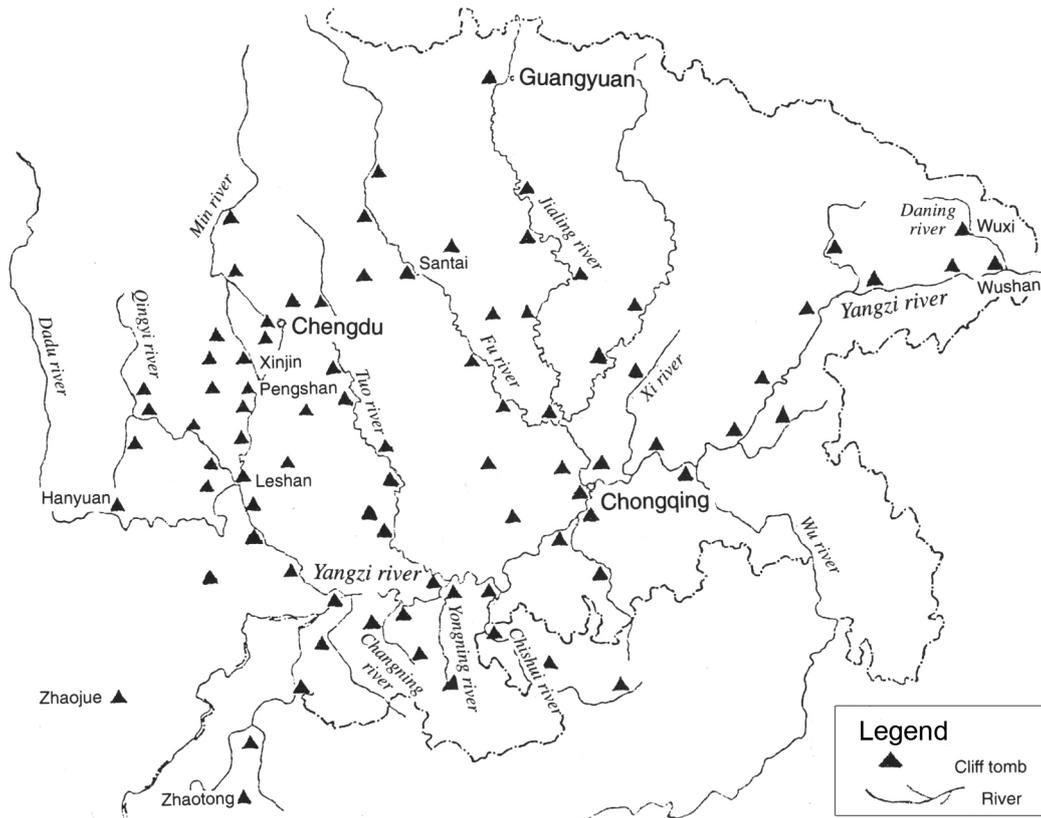


FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF THE CLIFF TOMBS IN THE SICHUAN BASIN. REDRAWN AFTER TANG 1997: FIG. 1, BY XUAN CHEN.

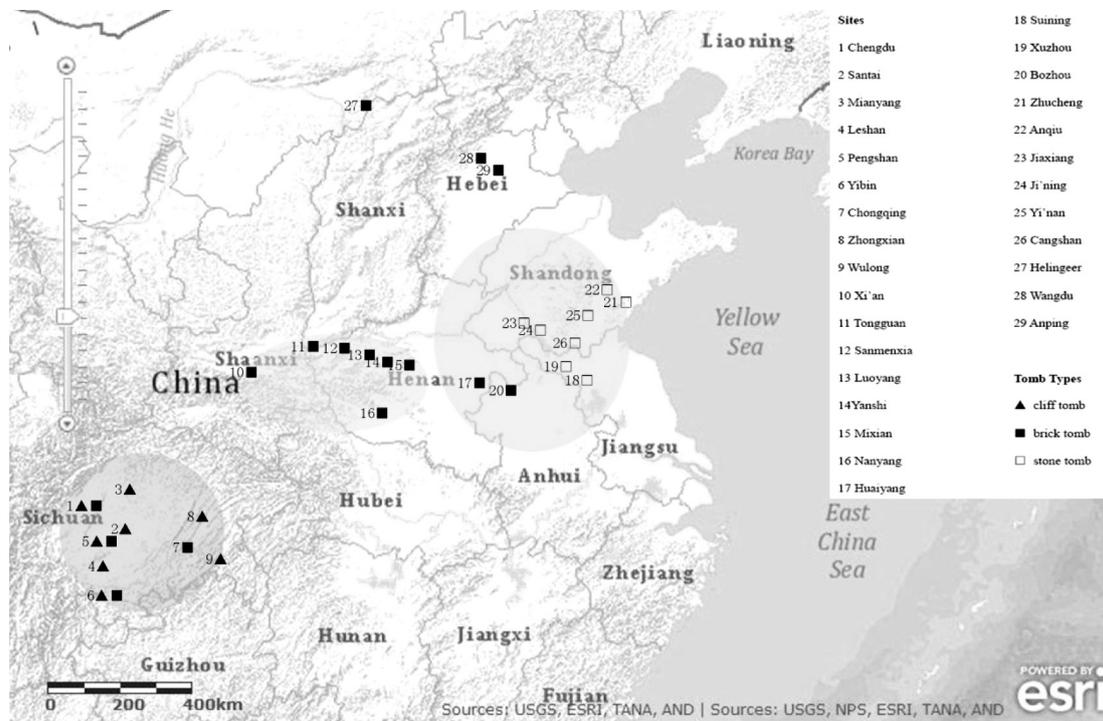


FIGURE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF THE MAJOR EASTERN HAN TOMBS. DRAWN BY XUAN CHEN.

the popularity of the cliff tombs will also contribute to an understanding of the role of tombs in the Eastern Han society of Sichuan.

My focus on the contrast between the cliff tomb and other major burial forms of the time situates this study within the picture of the development of the burial forms



FIGURE 3. OUTSIDE THE TOMB ZIJINGWAN M3 IN SANTAI.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY XUAN CHEN.

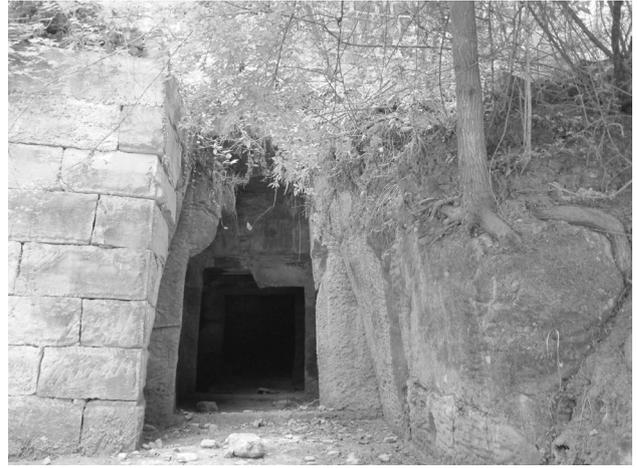


FIGURE 4. ENTRANCE TO THE TOMB ZIJINGWAN M3 IN SANTAI.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY XUAN CHEN.

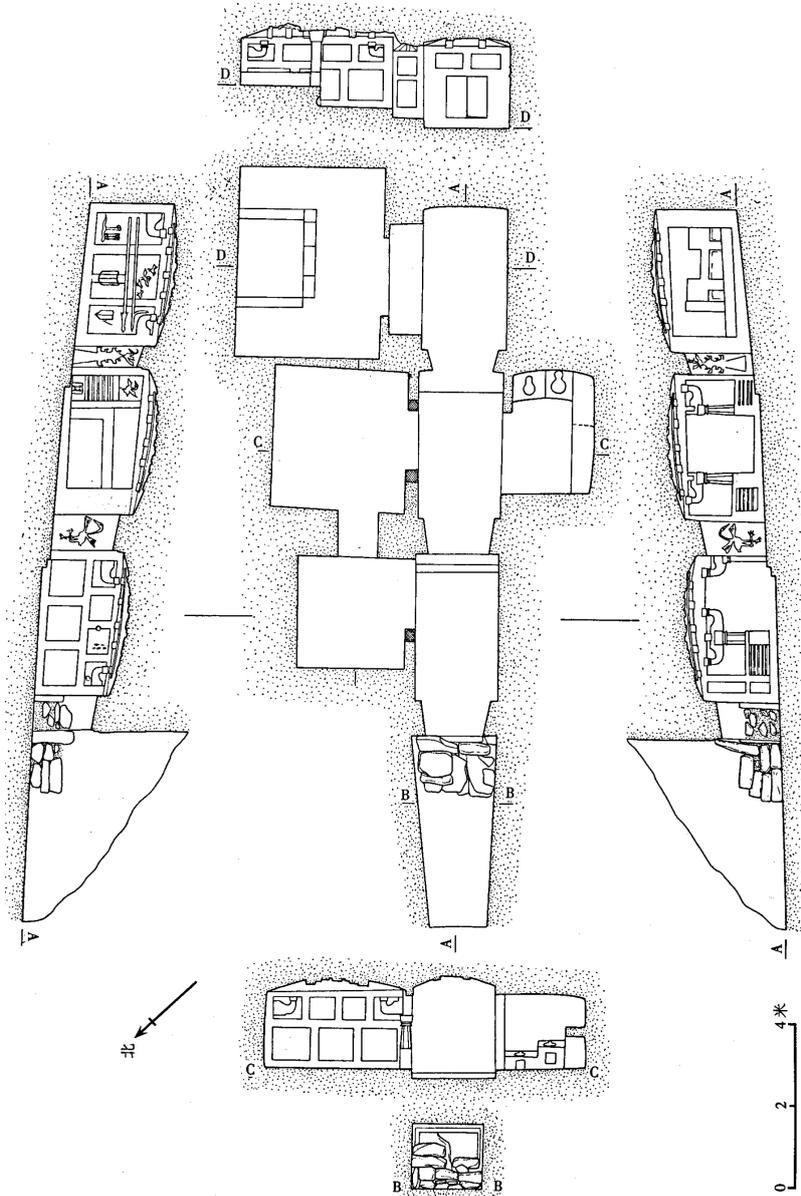


FIGURE 5. PLAN OF THE TOMB ZIJINGWAN M3 IN SANTAI. AFTER SICHUAN SHENG WENWU KAOGU YANJIUYUAN, MIANYANG SHI BOWUGUAN AND SANTAI XIAN WENWU GUANLI SUO 2007: 81, FIG. 101.



FIGURE 6. CEILING OF THE REAR CHAMBER OF THE TOMB ZIJINGWAN M3 IN SANTAI. AFTER SICHUAN SHENG WENWU KAOGU YANJIUYUAN, MIANYANG SHI BOWUGUAN AND SANTAI XIAN WENWU GUANLI SUO 2007: PL. 112.



FIGURE 8. A CRANE CARVED IN THE DOORWAY OF THE TOMB ZIJINGWAN M3 IN SANTAI. AFTER SICHUAN SHENG WENWU KAOGU YANJIUYUAN, MIANYANG SHI BOWUGUAN AND SANTAI XIAN WENWU GUANLI SUO 2007: PL. 114.



FIGURE 7. A COLUMN AND A LOW WALL AT THE ENTRANCE TO A SIDE CHAMBER OF THE TOMB ZIJINGWAN M3 IN SANTAI. PHOTOGRAPH BY XUAN CHEN.



FIGURE 9. STOVES CARVED IN A SIDE CHAMBER OF THE TOMB ZIJINGWAN M3 IN SANTAI. AFTER SICHUAN SHENG WENWU KAOGU YANJIUYUAN, MIANYANG SHI BOWUGUAN AND SANTAI XIAN WENWU GUANLI SUO 2007: PL. 111.

in the Eastern Han and the earlier period and the social background of such development. This introduction locates the cliff tomb in this larger picture of development and the relevant social background.

### 1. Major Burial Types in Eastern Han

In Eastern Han, the major burial types were the cliff tomb and the brick or stone chamber tomb, which were built underground or half underground, resembling dwellings, covered by a burial mound (figure 10). There are chamber tombs constructed entirely of bricks, of a combination of bricks and stone, and of stone alone,

without essential differences in tomb plan. They all contain several burial chambers with walls, doors, ceilings and sometimes columns. Chamber tombs built by a combination of bricks and stone blocks usually have large stone slabs as their door panels and walls, and use bricks to construct their barrel-vaults (figure 11).<sup>6</sup> Tombs built entirely of stone usually have stepped

<sup>6</sup> For example, see the Dahuting 打虎亭 tomb M1 and M2 in Mixian 密縣, Henan. Henan sheng wenwu yanjiusuo 1993. Tomb M1 is located in the west and tomb no. 2 is located in the east. They housed Zhang Boya 張博雅, the grand administrator (*taishou* 太守) of Hongnong 弘農, and his wife, with burial mounds rising above the ground to the height of 10 and 7.5 metres respectively. The two tombs share similar subterranean burial structure. Both are constructed by rectangular stone slabs together