

ACHIEVING PERFECTION WITH THE BUDDHIST FAITH: A PROBE INTO THE MATTER-OF-FACT ATTITUDE IN RESEARCH ON RELIGIOUS FUNERARY DOCUMENTS IN CHINA¹


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Abstract: In Research on Religious Funerary Documents in China, the author studies the religious funerary documents used at funerals for more than two thousand years from the Warring-States period (475-221 BC) to the present with the truth-seeking and objective attitudes. Besides some criticisms and reasonable doubts, he points out that the previous articles present a somewhat lopsided view with prejudice when the scholars interpret the existing literature. He further explores the underlying implications of the archaeological materials based on studying large numbers of references. In this way, reliable conclusions are obtained with rigorous academic attitude.

Keywords: Religious Funerary Documents. China. Truth-Seeking. Questioning. Rigorousness.

Research on Religious Funerary Documents in China — “Maidi Quan”, “Zhenmu Wen”, and “Yiwu Shu” is written by professor Huang Jingchun and published by Shanghai People’s Publishing House in March 2018 (hereinafter shorted as *The Document Research*). In the book, the author systematically studies religious funerary documents including “Qiance” (A list of funerary objects), “Maidi Quan” (land-purchasing contracts, according to which the

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dead owns a plot of land where the tomb is built so that the final resting place will not be disturbed after burial), “Zhenmu Wen” (tomb-guarding inscriptions), “Yiwu Shu” (funerary clothing and goods lists), and “Mingtu Luyin” (permit to the netherworld) unearthed in Jiangxi, Sichuan, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Fujian provinces in China and in the Korean peninsula over more than two thousand years from the Warring-States period to the present. *Research on Religious Funerary Documents in China* introduces a “Maidi Quan” donated to professor Huang Jingchun by a geomancer in Yushan County, Jiangxi Province in 2013 and another one used then, obtained from a geomancer Mr. Liang in Jingchuan County, Gansu Province in 2014. These represent the latest time bound for “Maidi Quan” in the book. From the religious perspective, the contents related to Buddhism and Daoism are extracted from these documents, and objective and detailed textual research was performed with the author’s fact-finding attitude.

Firstly, the academic viewpoints of leading scholars are questioned. Academic research is a process focusing on innovation, the foundation of which is truth-seeking. To seek the truth, one should have the courage to question existing conclusions and even those of leading scholars. As Mencius said, “no book is better than believing in a book completely”, which speaks highly of the questioning spirit. The truth-seeking spirit is well reflected in *The Document Research*. To begin with, it rectifies some concepts. For instance, “Zhenmu Wen” first occurred in the Eastern Han Dynasty and the earliest one was unearthed in Xianyang City, Shaanxi Province. The inscription is identified to be written in the third year of Yongping in the reign of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty (60 AD). It is termed as “Zhenmu Quan” by Luo Zhenyu, “Zhujie Wen” (inscriptions to pray for an end of all plagues) by Zhang Dongliao, and “Mu Quan” (tomb inscriptions) together with “Maidi Quan” by Liu Yi. The author discriminates against the nomenclatures proposed by the three scholars. From the perspective of writing materials, the texts written on bar-shaped deeds made of bamboo, lead, and iron were called “Quan”, while these texts were mainly written on pottery vases, bricks, stones, and inscribed on wooden tablets unearthed from tombs of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Thus, it is not accurate to call them “Quan”. By reviewing the “Zhenmu Wen”, it is found that “exorcising demons and becoming immortal are common topics in ‘Zhenmu Wen’” (HUANG, 2018, p. 56). To realize these goals (exorcising demons and becoming immortal), there are other ways in addition to praying for an end of all plagues (Jiezhu), such as expressing gratitude to the land god (for tomb construction), eliminating punishment on

the descendants for their ancestors' crimes, erasing countless misfortune for sins of the newly deceased, checking accounts and belongings, and exorcising evil spirits and evil gods. It is notable that replacing "Zhenmu Wen" with "Zhujie Wen" is overgeneralized. Meanwhile, it is also ambiguous without distinguishing the "Zhenmu Wen" and "Maidi Quan". By studying the bias of these nomenclatures and distinguishing difference of the two, a relatively impartial statement was concluded (HUANG, 2018, p. 62).

It is the textual function that should be focused. For this reason, "Zhenmu Wen" is accepted by more researchers as the concept has a broad coverage, and is not limited by the types of writing materials and the attributes of objects to be repressed or relieved.

Meanwhile, the author also points out bias in the understanding and utilization of "Zhenmu Wen".

Academic Research on "Mu Quan" in Ancient China written by Ikeda on who is a Japanese scholar of Chinese funerary documents and Dunhuang Studies, contributes substantially to the study of documents pertaining to "Maidi Quan" and "Zhenmu Wen". Despite this, there still exists certain inaccuracy. For example, Ikeda on believes that sentences, such as "either happy or not, do not miss us" and "never return to this world" in inscriptions that emblems fear of and repulsion to the deceased in Han Dynasty, have disappeared after the 5th and 6th centuries (IKEDA, 1981, p. 208). *The Document Research* lists some relevant sentences to exemplify that unreachable conditions are still set in folk funerals to repel ghosts and separate worlds of the living and the death, rather than "[...] disappearing after the 5th and 6th centuries" (HUANG, 2018, p. 65): "[...] the living and the dead belong to different worlds" on "Maidi Quan" of Tao Zhihong died in the sixth year of the reign of Emperor Yang from the Sui Dynasty (AD 610) (excavated in Hunan Province), "[...] never to meet again unless earth-shaking changes occur" on "Maidi Quan" of Ren Pu died in the second year of Mingde of Houshu State (AD 935) (unearthed in Chengdu), "[...] living in cities and towns, while resting in the tomb after death" on "Zhenmu Wen" of Lv Zhongqing died in the ninth year of Chunxi in the reign of Emperor Xiaozong of the Southern Song dynasty (AD 1182) (excavated in Chengdu), "[...] never meet unless the stone human statue speaks, the stone horse walks, and the stone inscriptions..." on "Maidi Quan" in the tomb of Wang Xing and Li Baniang couples built in the third year of Shaoding in the reign of Emperor Lizong of

the Southern Song Dynasty (AD 1230) (unearthed in Rongchangba, Guizhou Province), tomb inscriptions “[...] protecting the family, bringing them peace and prosperity, and exorcising demons by invocation to thunderlords all around” of wizard Li Zhen carved in the thirty-eighth year of Wanli in the reign of Emperor Shenzong of the Ming Dynasty (unearthed in Tongjiang County, Sichuan Province), and the nowadays folk “Zhenmu Wen” that “[...] one will not die and be buried unless the stone decays.” Thus, the inaccurate conclusion of Ikeda on collapses.

Secondly, typos in previous documents are pointed out. “Maidi Quan” and “Muzhi Ming” (epitaphs) are both funerary documents used for a long term in funeral and both introduce the life history of the deceased. The difference lies in that the former is used in the netherworld for repression of ghosts and gods while the latter is used to praise achievements of the deceased for the living to remember. It is possibly because the living are eager for and tend to praise the contributions and achievements of the deceased, “Muzhi Ming” are paid much more attentions than “Maidi Quan” in the archaeological excavation and heritage research. In some cases, the “Maidi Quan” is even mistaken as “Muzhi Ming”. For example, in excavation reports, including the *Report of a Tomb in Song Dynasty in Mojishan, Xiangyang*, *Report of a Tomb in Ming Dynasty in Sunqiao Town, Jingshan County*, and *Xu Aqu’s Stone Relief in the Eastern Han Dynasty unearthed in Nanyang*, “Maidi Quan” and “Zhenmu Wen” are mistaken as “Muzhi Ming”. *The Document Research* discriminates difference thereof separately from characteristics, ideologies, makers, materials, and literature values, and then points out their similarities. It is suggested that the religious and historical values of “Maidi Quan” cannot be underestimated. This helps the archaeological community to figure out the similarities and differences of the two so as not to repeat the previous mistakes.

Works such as compilations or yearbooks completed by a group of researchers together are often found to have errors because many researchers involved and the editors are not professionals. In “Maidi Quan” excavated in Nanling County, Anhui Province in 1978, it reads: In the midnight of December 6th in the eighth year of Chiwu of Kingdom Wu during the Three-Kingdom Period, director Xiao Zheng bought a pot of land of four qing (a unit of area, 1 qing approximates 6.67 hectares) and fifty mu (a unit of area, 1 mu approximates 667 square meters) from the landlord Ye Dun in Xixiang, Wuhu at the price of 3.5 million (of the currency unit used then).

The “Maidi Quan” is included in *Yearbook of Archaeology in China, 1985*, while named as “Ye Dun’s Maidi Quan”. In fact, Ye Dun is the seller and Xiao Zheng the buyer and tomb owner. Considering that inscriptions are generally named, that is, the name of tomb (land buyer) plus inscription types, so it should be corrected as “Xiao Zheng’s Maidi Quan”. Another example is the “Maidi Quan” made in the first year of Honghua (AD 1679) unearthed in Yunnan Province. The tomb owner Guo Hongwei is a trusted general of Wu Sangui, as included in the *Report of a Tomb in the Qing Dynasty unearthed in Wangjiaying, Chenggong, Yunnan Province* by Zhang Zengqi. While in the *Compilation of Stone Inscriptions in Southwest China in Past Dynasties—Volume of Yunnan Provincial Museum*, it is recorded as “Guo Zhuangtu’s Maidi Quan”. As a matter of fact, it is made by Guo Zhuangtu, the son of Guo Hongwei, when he reburies his father in the first year of Honghua -- 19 years after the death of Guo Hongwei. Therefore, it should be named as “Guo Hongwei’s Maidi Quan”. *The Document Research* points out and corrects many such writing mistakes of similar characters, which can only be discovered with professional knowledge and meticulous work. The author has detected quite a number of corrigenda in *The Document Research*, which demonstrates a high level of his academic literacy. Such corrections could help to inspire other researchers of this field to expand professional knowledge and keep in mind that a rigorous academic attitude should always be retained and encouraged.

Thirdly, the author objectively reveals the truth behind the inscriptions. “Maidi Quan” contains many fictitious contents, particularly the land prices of commonly tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands and millions (of the currency unit used then), which are basically not true. While, Japanese scholar Niida Noboru and some Chinese scholars believe that these are real land prices then and even use them as reliable data for studying land systems at that time. According to *The Document Research*, these are fictitious and cannot be taken as reliable data with the aim of correcting erroneous practices of the Japanese and Chinese scholars. In fact, there are few households of more than ten-thousand *yuan* in rural areas of some provinces such as Henan, Shaanxi, Shandong, Gansu, and Jiangxi even in the start of the 21st century, let alone the ancient society more than one thousand years ago. The ancients did not have and were reluctant to spend more than ten thousand (of the currency unit used then) to buy a graveyard for their dead relatives. The author believes that most of the land prices are unreal and it is of high possibility that the listed prices are measured by hell money. So they cannot be taken as the actual land price.

As discussed in the book, writers of religious funerary documents are mainly necromancers without much schooling. Even in the Song and Yuan dynasties Confucian scholars are also relatively closely implicated in writing these documents, the high stylization derived from archaic and abstruse words make the documents illegible. As a result, interchangeable, variant, popular-form, simplified, and even misused characters could be frequently seen in these inscriptions. Therefore, it is of great importance to study these characters, particularly “Liding” (rewriting ancient scripts into regular scripts) and interpretation of characters in early funerary documents. It needs profound philological knowledge to thoroughly discuss relevant problems. From this perspective, it can be seen that the author is in possession of a profound cultural background and foundation. This is evidenced by the repunctuation and inscription interpretations that it is feasible to deduce the times that the words were used by studying relevant words, and to ascertain the original functions of the funerary documents when retaining semantics in spoken language from perspectives of the points or ways of word formation. For example, in the detailed discussion of “Haoli” (graveyards overgrown with weeds) and “Haoli Fulao” (officials in the netherworld) in Chapter 4 (*Gods in the Religious Funerary Documents*), the author discriminates the sources of the term “Haoli” proposed by numerous scholars such as Yan Shigu living in the Tang Dynasty in his *Annotations to Han Shu (The History of the Han Dynasty)*, Gu Yanwu (Qing Dynasty) in *Archaeological Record of Shandong*, Yu Shiyong in *Views of Life and Death in Later Han China*, professor Rao Zongyi in *Gu'an's Collections*, and Jia Haijian in *Analysis of Belief of “Souls Going to Haoli”*. The author compares “Haoli” with “Huangquan”, “Jiuquan”, “Youdu”, and “Xiali” (which literally mean muddy spring water (seen when digging tombs), deep underground, gloomy and dark places, and countryside, respectively). It is pointed out that they all have the connotation of the netherworld, as expanded from one aspect of the graveyard, such as, being deep into springs, sombre and dark, or overgrown with weeds. They differ only in word-formation points: some highlight the location of a graveyard, and some describe threatening scenes. They all depict the characteristics of funeral culture and burial mounds in ancient China. So it should be feasible to regard them as terms created in the same period, the Warring-States period and Qin-Han Dynasties. Such an objective and impartial point of view sheds light on the academic bias confusing the academic community for almost one thousand and five hundred years.

Questioning should be based on ample evidence, rather than blindly critical of others. For viewpoints without adequate evidence, the author proposes his opinions in *The Document Research* to raise questions for academic discussion. For example, when studying the duties of envoys sent by the lord of heaven serving as a postman or an imperial commissioner in Chapter 3 (*Discussion of Relevant Confusions in Religious Funerary Documents*), the author lists the opinion of other scholars (Japanese scholar Hayashi Minao, French scholar Anna Seidel, and Chinese scholar Liu Yi) that Chiyou (a mythological warrior engaged in a war with the Yellow Emperor), adoring in the Han Dynasty is an imperial commissioner, all according to the Chiyou stone relief and the inscription of “imperial commissioner” unearthed in Shijiazhuang. *The Document Research* proposes a point of view that the stone relief functions as the Monarch soldier while the inscription strengthens the function. Then, whether the inscription and the stone relief are in a referential relation or a coordinating relation, that is whether Chiyou corresponds to the imperial commissioner or not, warrants further discussion. This provides an interesting topic for in-depth research of the academic community. It is recommended in the *Doctrine of the Mean* that “[...] a gentleman should inquire about confusions prudently, think carefully, and distinguish discrepancies clearly (ZISI, 2020, p. 56).” For disputes that are not affirmed, the author firmly states the shortcomings of existing conclusions. In cases of insufficient evidence, the author proposes his own point of view instead of blind speculation for in-depth research in the academic community.

Academic work is to explore the laws of nature and society and meanwhile to seek for truth. Only with righteous and rigorous attitude, adequate practices, and numerous doubts/criticisms, can the truths be obtained. The academic attitude presented by *The Document Research* and the courage to criticize scholars and literature together with the profound knowledge of the author are undoubtedly useful and inspiring until now.

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Resumo: Em *Research on Religious Funerary Documents in China*, o autor adere às atitudes objetivas e de busca da verdade e questiona as ideias dos principais estudiosos, ao analisar os documentos funerários religiosos usados em funerais por mais de dois mil anos, desde o período dos Estados Combatentes (475-221 A. C.) até o presente. O autor critica os pontos de vista de alguns estudiosos famosos e apresenta dúvidas razoáveis a esse respeito. Ele ressalta que seus artigos exibem uma visão um tanto desigual e preconceituosa, na interpretação da literatura existente. Ele ainda seleciona a literatura para um nível mais profundo e explora as implicações subjacentes dos materiais arqueológicos. Dessa forma, são obtidas conclusões, mostrando a abordagem acadêmica dos autores.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa sobre Documentos Funerários Religiosos na China. Busca da Verdade. Questionamento. Rigor.

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