

A Civilized Warlord in Early Tenth Century Hebei: The Tomb of Wang Chuzhi and Its Cultural Significance

Yang Lu, University of Kansas

Two important trends appeared in the center of the Chinese realm in the ninth and tenth century. These two trends are seemingly contradicting yet connected to each other: One is the rise of a new type of regionalism coupled with that of the local cliques; the other is the spread of the mainstream courtly culture that steadily influenced the peripheral regions. The literary culture championed by the Tang imperial court experienced a new rigor during the ninth century. Surprisingly, it became an admired cultural model to the rest of the realm even as the Tang political authority was in an irrevocable process of decline. As a culture based on the new understanding of “Wen” and the literary examinations, this model received increasing acceptance of regional elites and informed their political and cultural perspectives. The purpose of this study is to illuminate this change through an examination of both textual and visual sources of the burials that were recently excavated. Many of the burials of important local leaders from the late ninth to the tenth century show dynamic interaction between regional elements and imperial court culture. The study starts with a survey of the main characteristics of such interaction that are represented in the burials of several regional warlords, including the tomb of Li Maozhen and his wife in Guanzhong, the tomb of Wang Jian in Sichuan, and the tombs of the two Southern Tang rulers. Then the study concentrates on investigating the cultural significance of one particular tomb: that of Wang Chuzhi in Hebei dated to the early part of the tenth century.

Since the latter half of the eighth century, Hebei had been treated as a region that challenged the political authority of the Tang court. Modern scholarship on the political and social structure of this region has hitherto concentrated on two aspects — the so-called “barbarization” and the professionalization of the army — as if they had caused the cultural and political distance between Hebei and the Tang court. The emphasis on these two aspects makes scholars less perceptible to the changes that occurred in the region during the late ninth and tenth centuries. The governing elite of Hebei, in particularly the regional courts of the military governors, became increasingly attracted to the culture of the Tang Court, even though such preference did not lead to a renewed sense of political allegiance. Wang Chuzhi is a perfect example. Through analyzing the visual motifs of the murals in his tomb in conjunction with the writing of his epitaph, this study investigates the ways through which the image of Wang Chuzhi is represented. This study further aims to understand the self-representation of Wang Chuzhi in a broader context of the changing culture of the Hebei region at the time. It suggests that Wang Chuzhi was not unique in this respect. In fact, this switch from the “martial” (*Wu*) to the civil (*Wen*) is a continuing process, which is also reinforced by the dynamic religious tradition in the region. This transformation appears to have at least two significant consequences: 1. It allows the future consolidation of this region with the Center under the Northern Song; 2. The court culture of the Late Tang was assimilated and became influential to that of Liao.