

WORKSHOP REPORT: “ON MUZHIMING”:  
INAUGURAL WORKSHOP OF NEW  
FRONTIERS IN THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL  
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The *New Frontiers in the Study of Medieval China* series held its inaugural workshop on May 15–16, 2015, at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ. The workshop was organized by Jessey Choo (Rutgers University), Alexei Ditter (Reed College), and LU Yang (Peking University) and funded by the Tang Research Foundation, the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, the Office of the Deans of the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Center for Chinese Studies at Rutgers University.

This inaugural workshop session focused on one of the most important and influential new sources in the study of medieval China, *muzhiming* 墓誌銘—stone slabs interred within a tomb and typically inscribed with a biography, an account of the burial, and a rhymed elegy. Excavated by the thousands in recent decades, *muzhiming* are a unique cultural form of commemorative epigraphy through which contemporary scholars can explore a diverse range of artistic, literary, religious, and economic practices.

The workshop brought together fourteen leading U.S. and international scholars studying medieval China and *muzhiming* from different disciplinary perspectives: Jessey Choo (Rutgers University), Timothy Davis (Brigham Young University), Alexei Ditter (Reed College), Tineke D’Haeseleer (Princeton University), Paul Kroll (University of Colorado-Boulder), JIA Jinhua (University of Macau and IAS, Princeton), LU Yang (Peking University), LUO Xin (Peking University and IAS, Princeton), David McMullen (University of Cambridge), SHI Jie (University of Chicago), SHI Rui (Peking University), Anna Shields (University of Maryland-Baltimore County), YAO Ping (California State University-Los Angeles), and ZHU Yuqi (Peking University). Beginning with work on translations and close readings of specific *muzhiming*, the participants then moved on to the broader questions and challenges these texts raised. There was also a useful discussion of methodologies and resources for researching a crucial aspect of medieval China with which Western scholarship is only beginning to come to terms.

Each day of the workshop began with a keynote speech by one of the two participating Chinese scholars with extensive experience working with medieval *muzhiming*. These were followed by five presentations divided between morning and afternoon sessions. Each day concluded with a roundtable that summed up and

further discussed the challenges that arose or were resolved in the conversations following each presentation.

Professor Shi Rui of Peking University delivered the keynote on the first day, titled “On the Research Methods for the Study of Medieval Tomb Epitaphs” 中古墓誌研究方法談. Professor Shi presented a comprehensive overview of the development of the *muzhiming* and identified key methodological issues in using *muzhiming* in research. He highlighted the pitfalls of working only from the modern transcriptions found in anthologies such as the *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓誌匯編 or *Quan Tangwen buyi* 全唐文補遺. Professor Shi noted that, while these modern transcriptions are a vital resource for scholars, they conceal aspects of the composition apparent on the physical object—calligraphy, spatial arrangement of the text, decorative imagery—that influence how the texts of *muzhiming* might be interpreted. He provided several examples to illustrate his arguments: *muzhiming* compositions inscribed across recto and verso surfaces of the stone because they were too long, *muzhiming* in which some information was written with ink rather than inscribed onto the stone, and *muzhiming* that have been transcribed differently across different modern anthologies. Professor Shi cautioned that scholars should always examine the physical object (or at the least a high quality image that object) in addition to the transcription, being careful to verify the latter against the former. Following his presentation, he also treated workshop attendees to a display of several rubbings of interesting *muzhiming* brought especially for this workshop.

Five presentations followed the keynote speech. The presenters for the morning session were Professors Alexei Ditter and Anna Shield. Professor Ditter focused on the use of cited speech within *muzhiming*, illustrating his arguments with passages excerpted from the “Tomb Epitaph Inscription and Preface for the Joint Burial of his excellency Yu [Congzhou] of Kuaiji and Madam Fang of Henan” 會稽余公夫人河南方氏合祔墓誌銘並序. After a brief introduction to the practice of *muzhiming* in the mid-Tang, he discussed what close reading of cited speech reveals about what he termed the collaborative, dialogic, and multi-voiced composition process of the *muzhiming*. Professor Ditter went on to show how cited speech was used rhetorically within *muzhiming* to justify the composition of the text, to praise subjects indirectly, or to improve the apparent reliability of the text through inclusion of “eyewitness” accounts.

Professor Anna Shields in turn examined questions regarding the rhetorical strategies of posthumous commemoration in medieval China and the influence of *muzhiming* and other funerary texts written about Tang literati on how those figures were treated in Northern Song histories and literary anthologies. Focusing primarily on three texts commemorating Liang Su 梁肅 (753–793)—an epitaph, a preface to collected works, and a prayer text written respectively by Cui Yuanhan 崔元翰 (729–95), Cui Gong 崔恭 (?–after 819), and Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818)—Professor Shields highlighted striking differences between these texts in terms of their treatment of Liang’s character, career, literary works, and commitment to Buddhism. She also argued that the treatment of Liang’s character and corpus within Northern Song sources and anthologies suggest the different degrees of influence these commemorative writings had on later readers.

Professors Jia Jinhua, Lu Yang, and David McMullen presented in the afternoon session. Professor Jia discussed the importance of recently excavated *muzhiming* in studying the lives and practices of Daoist women during the Tang dynasty. She

argued that these texts present a different perspective on, and even a different cast of, religious women from those found in transmitted writings, especially religious hagiography. She supported her argument with a reading of the “Tomb Inscription and Preface of Priestess Tian (d. 829)” 田法師玄室銘並序, composed for a prominent religious teacher who served as a mentor to the royal family during the reigns of Emperors Muzong, Jingzong, and Wenzong, but about whom little is known today. Professor Jia further highlighted publication challenges that face those undertaking *muzhiming*-centered studies of medieval China due to a general lack of understanding about this genre among Western historians.

Professor Lu Yang similarly stressed the value of *muzhiming* for studying the lives of Tang women. He focused on Lady Shangguan Wan'er 上官婉兒 (664–710)—a prominent political and literary figure and patron of literary culture during the reigns of Empress Wu and Emperor Zhongzong. His analysis was based on three commemorative compositions that take her as their subject: the recently excavated “Epitaph of Consort Shangguan” 上官昭容氏墓誌, the “Eulogy to Consort Shangguan” 昭容上官氏碑銘, and the “Preface to the Literary Collection of Consort Shangguan” 上官昭容集序, the latter two being written by her contemporary, the famed statesman Zhang Yue 張說 (667–731). Professor Lu pointed out the significant differences between the excavated epitaph and the transmitted eulogy and preface in how they portray their subject. He contextualized these compositions and linked the changing perceptions of Shangguan Wan'er to the rise of a new political culture centering on the use of *wen* 文 in the early eighth century. His presentation again showed the importance of reading *muzhiming* along with transmitted sources and being mindful of differences in genres.

Professor David McMullen gave the final presentation of the day. Focusing on the “Tomb Text with Introduction for His Excellency Li [Congyi] of Longxi” 隴西李公[從易]墓誌銘並序, Professor McMullen demonstrated how *muzhiming* elucidate Tang social and political history on several levels. Drawing on both excavated and transmitted sources to study the *muzhiming*'s author (Lü Rang 呂讓 [793–855]), its subject (Li Congyi 李從易 [779–838]), and connections between their families, Professor McMullen discussed challenges royal clansmen faced during the second half of the Tang, their changing means for accessing power, and their commensurate reconception of their own identity. He also explored how this particular *muzhiming* sheds light on the failed reform movement of 805 from the perspective of officials occupying the margins of power. Finally, he noted how the *muzhiming* supports existing accounts regarding the career and outlook of the remarkable Hezheng 和政 Princess (729–764), daughter of Suzong and sister of Daizong.

The first day of the workshop concluded with a roundtable led by Professors Paul Kroll, Lu Yang, and David McMullen focusing on shared methodological, translational, and publication challenges as well as possible solutions. Three topics in particular generated longer discussion. The first is the fact that there are no standard translations for even basic vocabulary, such as *ming* 銘 (“elegy” or “eulogy”) or *muzhiming* (“tomb epitaph inscription,” “entombed epitaph,” “tomb text,” or simply “epitaph”). The second, raised by Professor Kroll, is the concern that participants tended to work primarily with the *zhi* (prose preface) portion of the *muzhiming* (where most of the information about the life of the deceased is described) and to overlook the *ming*. Professor Kroll urged participants to pay greater attention

to the *ming* and to consider what it means when subjects are portrayed differently in *zhi* and *ming*. Finally, the discussants stressed the importance of developing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of *muzhiming*. Professor Lu in particular challenged scholars working primarily from a historical perspective to be more aware of the significance of the literary quality and style in which the *muzhiming* was written and, conversely, that scholars approaching *muzhiming* from a literary perspective recognize the degree to which interpretation of these texts might be facilitated and improved through a better understanding of the historical, institutional and socio-political contexts within which they were originally produced.

The second day followed the same structure as the first. The day began with Professor Zhu Yuqi's keynote speech, entitled "What Does the Family Residence of Xu Yushi in Luoyang Tell Us about the Poet Li Bai's First Marriage: New Evidence from the 'Funerary Inscription of Xu Suzhi'" 許圜師家族的洛陽聚居與李白安陸見招—大唐西市博物館藏《許肅之墓誌》相關問題考論. He first gave a brief overview of the history and *muzhiming* collection of the privately funded Tang West Market Museum 大唐西市博物館. He supplemented Professor Shi's keynote speech by pointing out the problems with the provenances and forgeries of *muzhiming* in private hands and the limited scholarly access to them. He then turned his attention to the ways in which *muzhiming* could shed light on the little-known personal life of even major literary figures in medieval China. Using Xu Suzhi's *muzhiming* as a case study, he showed that even the *muzhiming* of one of Li Bai's in-laws could complement transmitted records on Li Bai, his first wife, and the history of her once illustrious clan. Professor Zhu demonstrated how *muzhiming* could be used to resolve errors and omissions in dynastic histories, in this case documenting shifts in the choronymic identities of Li Bai and the Xu Clan and even revealing new information about Li Bai's life during a marriage Li had hoped in vain would advance his political career.

Professor Timothy Davis gave the first presentation of the morning session, offering a stimulating supplement to Professor Shi's introduction of *muzhiming* from the previous day. Providing an overview of the early development of the *muzhiming*, Professor Davis explained its origin as one among a variety of burial objects and texts. He subsequently focused his discussion on two *muzhiming* that could be seen as representing a turning point of the genre—the "Tomb Epitaph Inscription for the Late [Liu] Song [Dynasty] Supernumerary Cavalier Attendant Gentleman, the Gentleman Ming [Tanxi] 明[曇禧 (444–474)]" 宋故員外散騎侍郎明府君墓誌銘 and the "Tomb Epitaph Inscription for the Late [Liu] Song [Dynasty] General Establishing Awe, Grand Warden of the Two Commanderies Qi and Beihai, Marquis of Li District and Chief of Dongyangcheng, Gentleman Liu [Huaimin] 劉[懷民 (410–463)]" 宋故建威將軍齊北海二郡太守笠鄉侯東陽城主劉府君墓誌銘. Professor Davis argued that these examples could be considered to be the first fully formed *muzhiming*. As the former begins with the *zhi* and the latter with the *ming*, his presentation and the subsequent discussion once again reiterated the importance of *ming* recognized in the previous day's roundtable discussion.

Professor Jessej Choo's presentation centered on the "Entombed Epitaph of Lady (née) Houmochen of Henan, the late Duchess of the Linru Commandery of Tang" 唐故臨汝郡夫人河南侯莫陳氏墓誌銘. Professor Choo discussed how medieval families used *muzhiming* as a public forum and memory device to re-remember the dead in view of common (mis-)perception and even family strife. By comparing

this *muzhiming* with accounts of the Houmochen clan (who were of mixed Han-Xianbei heritage) and the career of the lady's husband Xu Hao (a prominent statesman and revered calligrapher of his day) in the dynastic histories, Professor Choo demonstrated its ambitious aim to not only offer a revisionist history of the Houmochen clan, but also to rebut negative public opinions about the deceased herself and highlight the disrespect accorded her by the adult sons of her husband's first wife.

The afternoon session comprised presentations given by Professors Yao Ping and Tineke D'Haeseleer. Addressing themes of ethnic identity, political history and women, they highlighted the importance of *muzhiming* for studying these aspects of Tang society. Professor Yao discussed the hitherto overlooked *muzhiming* of Korean captives and immigrants in China after the Tang conquest of Koguryo and Paekche kingdoms by analyzing two *muzhiming* written for Korean women, the "Epitaph of Ms. Go, the Late Wife of Mr. Cheon of the Great Tang" 大唐泉府君故夫人高氏墓誌 and the "Epitaph of Ms. Buyeo, Consort of the Late Prince Presumptive of Guo" 嗣虢王妃扶餘氏墓誌銘並序. Professor Yao illustrated the significance of these works for understanding how Tang period Koreans were perceived by their conquerors and by themselves as well as the common social trajectory of prominent Korean families in exile. Finally, she explored intersections between ethnicity and gender reflected in these *muzhiming*.

Professor D'Haeseleer's presentation also examined questions about the lives of noble women of the Tang's northeastern neighboring states. The recently excavated *muzhiming* she has studied, the "Tomb Inscription with Preface of the Zhenxiao Princess (d. 792)" 貞孝公主墓誌并序, and the nearly identical "Tomb Inscription with Preface of the Zhenhui Princess (d. 777)" 貞惠公主墓誌并序, are particularly significant given the scant extant materials on the Bohai kingdom 渤海 that have survived until today. Professor D'Haeseleer stressed how even though these *muzhiming* provide only limited information about the royal family and political history, their sameness—only the name, death date and burial are different—raise questions of authorship and of cultural and Sinitic literacy among the people of Bohai and other border kingdoms. She moreover highlighted the challenges of working on a subject for which few written records survive.

The second day of the workshop again concluded with a roundtable, this time chaired by Professors Jessey Choo, Alexei Ditter, and Luo Xin. The discussions during this roundtable were more focused on practical and logistical matters than those of the previous day. Issues included what participants had gained from attending this workshop, what questions had been left unanswered, the value of further workshops on *muzhiming* as well as what topics or questions later workshops should address, and, finally, whether organizers should publish the results of the workshop. The participants agreed on the importance of being mindful of the various material aspects and potential transcription errors. They also discussed a number of useful combinations in approaches and revisited the need to pay attention to the *ming* portion of texts. Participants also expressed an appreciation for the gender balance among the *muzhiming* discussed. Professor Choo confessed that this balance was unintentional on the part of the organizers, but noted that it confirms the value of *muzhiming* as source materials for the study of women's history in medieval China. Recognizing that many of the questions raised during the workshop had yet to be fully explored, the participants felt that additional workshops on *muzhiming* are needed to continue the momentum. Professor Luo suggested *muzhiming*

from the Northern Dynasties should be included in the next workshop in order to further explore the development of *muzhiming* as a genre and practice as well as questions of ethnicity and Sinification. Professors Lu and Zhu pointed out that this workshop did not get to address issues of regional difference and suggested that these could be a focus of the next workshop. It was the consensus that the works presented should be published and that the contributions from at least one more workshop would help produce a more comprehensive and substantive volume. The organizers are currently planning for the next workshop to take place in Spring 2016.