NO PREP

Han Dynasty Tombs

Buried Treasure and Beliefs About the Afterlife

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Han Dynasty Tombs: Buried Treasure and Beliefs About the Afterlife

The Han Dynasty and the World They Built

The Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) is often considered the golden age of ancient China — the period when China consolidated its territory, perfected its bureaucracy, extended the Silk Road, and produced the cultural template that later Chinese dynasties would claim as their heritage. The very word for ethnic Chinese, 'Han,' comes from this dynasty. Han emperors ruled one of the largest empires in the ancient world, roughly contemporary with and comparable in scale to the Roman Empire at its height. Understanding what the Han believed, valued, and feared is essential to understanding Chinese civilization.The richest source of information about Han beliefs and daily life is not textual but archaeological: the tombs. Han elites invested

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Jade Suits: A Literal Suit of Armor Against Death

The most visually striking Han funerary objects are the jade burial suits: full-body garments made from thousands of small jade tablets sewn together with wire. The ancient Chinese believed jade had preservative properties: that a body encased in jade would not decay and the soul would not escape. The wire holding the tablets together was made of gold (for members of the royal family), silver (for princes and high nobles), or bronze (for lower-ranking nobles). Constructing a single jade suit

required thousands of jade tablets, each carefully shaped, drilled, and polished. This was a project that could take an army of craftsmen years to complete. When archaeologists opened Han tombs containing jade suits, they found something disheartening: the bodies inside had decayed completely despite the jade. The preservation theory simply didn't work. But the failure of the practice doesn't diminish its cultural significance: it shows us that the Han believed it would work, invested enormous resources based on that belief, and organized their entire funerary industry around it. The suits themselves, whatever their practical effect, are stunning works of craftsmanship that tell us about Han beliefs, technology, and wealth.

Tomb Models: A Miniature World

Alongside jade suits, Han tombs typically contained elaborate models of everything the deceased would need in the afterlife: ceramic houses complete with courtyards and servants, models of granaries, pigsties, duck ponds, and watchtowers, ceramic entertainers frozen in mid-dance, ceramic cooks preparing food, and ceramic soldiers standing guard. These mingqi ('spirit vessels') gave archaeologists something the written record rarely provides: a detailed picture of what an ordinary wealthy Han household looked like, complete with its farm buildings, animals, and domestic staff. The models are so detailed that archaeologists can identify the specific species of pigs being raised, the design of Han kitchens, the style of Han musical instruments, and the varieties of food the elite ate. One tomb model even shows a multistory watchtower with guards peering from the top, the kind of private security installation that tells us something about the anxiety wealthy Han families felt about social instability. Taken together, the mingqi from thousands of Han tombs form an accidental encyclopedia of daily life in one of history's great civilizations.

Mawangdui: The Best-Preserved Han Body in the World

The most extraordinary Han tomb discovery came in 1972, when construction workers near Changsha in Hunan Province broke into an intact burial complex called Mawangdui. The complex contained three tombs from around 168 BCE: a marquis named Licang, his son, and his wife — known to history as Lady Dai or Lady Xin Zhui. When archaeologists opened Lady Dai's coffin — she had been buried inside four nested lacquered coffins, surrounded by tons of white clay and charcoal — they

found a body preserved in an astonishing state of completeness. Lady Dai's body was so well preserved that her skin was still flexible, her joints could be bent, and her organs were intact enough for medical examination. Autopsy revealed she had been approximately 50 years old, had suffered from coronary artery disease, back problems, parasites, and had eaten a meal of melons shortly before her death. Silk manuscripts found in the tomb included medical texts, divination manuals, maps, and philosophical texts — some previously unknown to scholars — that transformed understanding of Han intellectual life. Her tomb alone contained over 1,000 artifacts, including the oldest surviving painted silk banners in Chinese history.

What Tombs Tell Archaeologists About the Living

The richness of Han tomb archaeology offers a distinctive opportunity: because the Han believed the afterlife mirrored earthly life, tomb assemblages were intended to replicate the deceased's actual living situation as faithfully as possible. Objects were selected by people who knew the deceased and who had strong religious incentive to get it right. Unlike tomb goods that were purely symbolic or standardized across all burials, Han tomb goods appear to have been personally selected and individually appropriate, making each tomb a partial inventory of its occupant's actual possessions and lifestyle. This makes Han tombs unusually valuable for studying social stratification in practice rather than theory. When archaeologists excavate a complete Han-era cemetery — containing tombs spanning different wealth levels — they can trace the exact distribution of bronze, jade, ceramic, and organic goods across the social hierarchy. Which goods appear at all wealth levels and which appear only among the very rich reveals information about trade networks, material scarcity, and the specific status markers that Han society used to distinguish social classes. Comparing tomb assemblages from different regions of the vast Han Empire also reveals how standardized imperial culture was across its territory — whether a wealthy merchant in distant Hunan province expressed his status in the same material ways as a wealthy official near the capital. For a society that left relatively few personal written records from ordinary life, the material record of the tombs speaks with unusual clarity. The preservation conditions at Mawangdui also deserve attention as an archaeological case study in their own right. Lady Dai's remarkable state of preservation resulted from a specific combination of factors: the inner coffin was sealed in a watertight lacquer

skin, surrounded by a thick layer of white clay that excluded moisture, which was itself surrounded by tons of charcoal that absorbed any moisture that did penetrate. The entire system worked together to create an almost perfectly anaerobic, stable environment inside the innermost coffin — conditions very similar to those that preserve organic materials in peat bogs or permafrost. Archaeologists studying Mawangdui have used the preservation techniques observed there to inform modern conservation practices, and the site has become a reference case for understanding how ancient burial practices could accidentally achieve preservation results that modern science is still working to replicate intentionally.

Key Information: Han Dynasty Tombs

Detail	Information
Dynasty Period	206 BCE–220 CE
Funerary Belief	Afterlife was continuation of earthly life; tomb needed to replicate living conditions
Jade Burial Suits	Full-body jade garments; wire was gold (royal), silver (princes), bronze (nobles)
Mingqi	Ceramic tomb models of houses, animals, servants, entertainers
Mawangdui	Intact tomb complex near Changsha; discovered 1972
Lady Dai (Xin Zhui)	Best-preserved Han body; flexible skin, intact organs, identifiable last meal (melon)
Lady Dai's Health	Coronary artery disease, back problems, parasites; ~50 years old at death
Silk Manuscripts Found	Medical texts, maps, philosophical texts — some previously unknown to scholars

Case Study: The Artisan's Commission

Liu Ban had been making mingqi for fifteen years, and he knew a rich commission when he saw one. The steward of the Marquis of Dai had come to his workshop with a list that filled three bamboo strips: a watchtower with four guards, a granary, two duck ponds, a kitchen with servants preparing food, a full set of entertainers — twelve musicians, six dancers — and a main residence with a courtyard and sleeping quarters. 'The Marquis died peacefully,' the steward said, which Liu Ban took to mean the family had money and time to spend. A sudden death sometimes meant a rushed order with shortcuts. A peaceful death meant the full treatment. Liu Ban set his apprentices to work on the animals first — they were the easiest and could be produced in volume. He saved the entertainers for himself. He spent three days on the lead dancer alone, capturing the exact tilt of her sleeves that he had seen at a New Year performance at the palace. If she was going to serve the Marquis in the afterlife, she should be worth watching. He never knew the Marquis and never would. But he understood, in the way that craftsmen understand things, that these objects were meant to last. He pressed his mark into the base of each piece before firing.

1. Liu Ban distinguishes between a 'rushed order' and 'the full treatment.' What does this suggest about how the Han funerary industry actually worked, and what it tells us about the reliability of mingqi as historical evidence?

2. The case study shows Liu Ban modeled his dancer on a real performance he had seen. How does this connect to the reading's point about what mingqi reveal about Han daily life?

Multiple Choice

1. Why did Han elites have jade burial suits made for themselves?

    a) Because jade was the cheapest material available for all large-scale burial objects

    b) To display their wealth to visitors who came to pay respects at the tomb

    c) To comply with imperial law requiring all nobles to be buried in jade

    d) Because jade was believed to prevent bodily decay and keep the soul inside the body

2. What did the autopsy of Lady Dai's body reveal?

    a) Details about her age, health conditions, and even her last meal

    b) She had been poisoned, suggesting political intrigue in the Han court

    c) Her body had decayed completely despite being inside four nested coffins

    d) She had survived to nearly 90 years old, making her the oldest known Han burial

3. Why are Han tomb models (mingqi) particularly valuable to archaeologists?

    a) They are the only surviving examples of Han artistic production

    b) They provide detailed visual evidence of Han architecture, farming, and daily life

    c) They were used to train Han army recruits and show military formations and tactics

    d) They are written records that describe Han laws and customs

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Mingqi	A) A tree resin finish applied to wood and objects; Han examples found at Mawangdui were remarkably preserved
2. ___ Jade burial suit	B) A Han noblewoman whose perfectly preserved body and tomb contents revolutionized understanding of Han life
3. ___ Mawangdui	C) A full-body garment made from thousands of jade tablets connected by gold, silver, or bronze wire
4. ___ Lady Dai	D) A Han-era tomb complex near Changsha discovered in 1972; contained the best-preserved ancient Chinese body
5. ___ Lacquer	E) Ceramic or wooden models of objects and people placed in Han tombs for use in the afterlife

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Han elites believed jade had _____ properties that would prevent a buried body from decaying.

2. The word for ethnic Chinese — '_____ ' — comes from the Han Dynasty itself.

3. Lady Dai's body was so well preserved that her skin was still _____ when archaeologists opened her coffin in 1972.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading notes that jade burial suits failed to preserve the bodies they were meant to protect. Why does this 'failure' still make the suits valuable historical evidence?

2. What can archaeologists learn from tomb models (mingqi) that written historical records typically do not provide?

3. The medical examination of Lady Dai revealed specific health conditions like coronary artery disease and parasites. Why is this type of information historically significant?