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Research on the Site Selection and Spatial Hierarchy of Chu Tombs from the Perspective of Landscape Archaeology

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Abstract

Landscape archaeology emphasizes the holistic correlation between the site itself and its surrounding mountains, waters, and social space, offering a new approach to imperial mausoleum sites with limited surface information. Taking the Chu tomb sites as the research object, this paper combines documentary and archaeological evidence to analyze site-selection patterns and spatial characteristics at three scales: macro (mountains and rivers), meso (cities and cemetery clusters), and micro (tomb structure). The study reveals that the distribution and evolution of Chu tomb landscapes constitute a spatial projection of the rise and fall of the Chu state and the development of its hierarchical system, providing references for the conservation of large archaeological sites and the construction of national archaeological site parks.

Keywords

Landscape Archaeology; Chu Tombs; Tomb Site Selection; Geomantic Concepts; Conservation of Large Archaeological Sites

1. Introduction

Chu tomb sites embody the burial system and funerary customs of the Eastern Zhou period. Their spatial distribution, grave arrangement, and organizational structure contain the Chu people's concepts of hierarchy, life and death, and human–land relationships.

The conservation of large archaeological sites concerns not an isolated site but the surrounding landscape and the interaction of human activities throughout history. The Jingzhou area, a national key zone for large-site conservation, is the principal birthplace and center of Chu culture, encompassing the Jinancheng site and the Baling Mountain, Jishan, Tianxingguan, and Xiongjiazhong cemetery clusters.

Under current heritage policy, imperial mausoleums are not actively excavated; such sites yield limited surface information, rendering conventional archaeological methods only partially applicable. Landscape archaeology, by interpreting cultural connotations through the investigation of surface spatial structure, provides a suitable framework. This paper accordingly analyzes Chu tomb sites at macro, meso, and micro scales.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Theory and Methods of Landscape Archaeology

Landscape archaeology is a branch of historical archaeology studying human-modified environments and constructed landscapes. Influenced by human geography in the mid-20th century, it focused on human–land relationships; from the late 20th century, with the rise of post-processual archaeology, its focus shifted to the expression of social relations, including cultural memory, social identity, and social order [1-2]. It has evolved into an integrative regional research theory fusing geography, ecology, sociology, and history, exploring human spatial cognition and historical trajectories through the study of surface structures [3].

2.2. Research on Chu Tombs

Existing studies have proceeded along three lines. On morphology and ritual systems: Wang Congli systematically examined tomb distribution, structure, and funerary customs [4]; Song Gongwen revealed the distinct yet interrelated system of Chu tomb morphology through comparison with Central Plains tombs [5]; Guo Dewei established an integrated framework of regional, typological, and chronological classification [6]. On thematic studies: Qiu Donglian explored human sacrifice and figurine burial [7]; Shang Ruchun and Teng Mingyu demonstrated that the correspondence between coffin-chamber systems and rank was not strict [8]; Gao Chongwen noted that Chu ding-vessel usage largely followed Zhou ritual norms [9]. On cemetery organization: Wang Hongxing's analysis of the Baoshan cemetery pioneered cemetery-level study [10]; Tian Chengfang further advanced this to the level of social organization through kin-group analysis [11].

3. An Overview of Chu Burial System

Enfeoffed in the 11th century BC, Chu had by the Warring States period grown into a powerful polity. Nearly ten thousand Eastern Zhou tombs have been excavated in the Jingzhou area, strictly stratified into royal, aristocratic, and commoner levels.

3.1. Distribution Patterns

Noble tombs were preferentially sited on elevated hills—Baling Mountain, Yutaishan, Jishan, and Jingshan—while commoner graves occupied lower slopes nearer settlements[4-5].

3.2. Structure and Rank Markers

Warring States Chu tombs comprise three rank-marking components. Mound: noble tombs bore semicircular mounds; per Baihutong, mound height and grave trees were codified by rank. Tianxingguan M1, a foremost aristocratic tomb, retains a mound 7.1 m high and 25 m in diameter. Pit: rectangular shaft pits, with larger tombs approaching square; chamber area increased with rank, and stepped pits featured odd numbers of steps decreasing with rank [12]. Tomb passage: Tianxingguan M1's passage measures 18.8 m long by 4–5 m wide; the slightly lower-ranked Baoshan M2, 19.8 m by 3–4.6 m. Longer and wider passages indicate higher rank.

3.3. Burial Types

The Beyond single burials, Chu tombs feature joint burial (e.g., Yutaishan M483, with twin coffins and paired grave goods), attendant burial (e.g., the attendant tombs M1, M3, M4 flanking Xichuan M2 in a lord-centered arrangement), and sacrifice. The latter comprises human sacrifice ("the Son of Heaven kills hundreds or tens in attendance," Mozi), animal sacrifice (antler deposits at Yutaishan reflecting the Chu veneration of ghosts; separately coffined dog burials at the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng), and chariot-and-horse sacrifice, restricted to nobles. Evidence from chariot pits indicates an evolutionary sequence across Eastern Zhou states, with the "six horses for the Son of Heaven" remains attesting to ritual transgression in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods [13-14].

4. Multi-scale Landscape Analysis

4.1. Macro Scale: Tombs, Mountains, and Rivers

Macro-scale site selection followed a "backed by mountains, facing water" pattern (Table 1).

Table 1. Analysis of landscape elements in the macro-scale site selection of Chu tomb sites

Analytical Dimension	Element	Evidence	Landscape Characteristics	Geomantic Interpretation	Hierarchical / Functional Significance
Mountain	Jingshan Mountains	'Records of the Grand Historian'; 'Lüshi Chunqiu'	Aristocratic tombs on elevated hills, markedly raised above surroundings	Following the dragon and tracing its veins	Avoiding floods and beasts; asserting prestige
	Mound–mountain relationship	'Baihutong'; 'Zangshu'	Large mounds piling earth into hills	Gathering qi; mound as artificial mountain	Mound scale as a rank marker
Water	Ju–Zhang river system	'Zuozhuan'	Generally "bordered by rivers to the west," embraced by winding water	Observing water and examining sand	Core of Chu mountain-and-river worship
	Settlement–river structure	212 sites, 101 cemetery clusters	Linear landscape of "five cities–one hundred tomb clusters"	Mountains and waters in mutual enhancement	Settlement hierarchy mirrors tomb hierarchy

Composite pattern	Backed by mountains, facing water	Tomb-location survey data	"Mountains to the north, rivers to the west"	Backing and facing to gather qi	Ideal macro-scale tomb location model

In the mountain dimension, Jingshan—where the Chu ancestor Xiong Yi first settled—anchored aristocratic tombs on elevated terrain, fulfilling the Lüshi Chunqiu criterion of avoiding flooding and dampness while asserting prestige through topography. In the river dimension, the Ju–Zhang rivers held a central place in Chu mountain-and-river worship, as recorded in the Zuozhuan [15]; along them, 212 sites and 101 cemetery clusters form a linear settlement-cemetery landscape [16], whose pyramidal settlement hierarchy mirrors the tomb hierarchy. Aristocratic tombs typically back onto the northwest–southeast-trending Jingshan foothills and face the encircling Ju–Zhang waters—an ideal geomantic configuration [17].

4.2. Meso Scale: Tombs, Cities, and Cemetery Clusters

Royal tombs were sited with the capital as the focal point. Of the five Chu cities along the Ju–Zhang rivers, tomb clusters lie mostly on the east bank, indicating that the interred were residents of nearby cities. Royal tombs were placed east or northeast of cities: the royal cemetery of Jijiahu stands on the high ground northeast of the city, ensuring open vistas, avoiding seasonal flooding, and forming a continuous "capital backed by mountains and facing water—tombs on high ground—encircling rivers" configuration. Diagonally across the river from the capital, the tombs symbolically sheltered the city without impeding its growth. Jinancheng, the flourishing Chu capital, with 16 km^2 within its walls and over 1,000 km^2 of mapped tombs and sites beyond, provides key evidence for the linkage between tomb siting and urban planning [18].

Table 2 Diachronic evolution of the Chu funerary landscape in the Ju–Zhang river basin

Period	Political Situation	Tomb Hierarchy Composition	Spatial Characteristics	Landscape Manifestation	Period
Spring and Autumn period	Center of Chu power within the Jingshan Mountains, at the Ju–Zhang headwaters	Only grandee- and commoner-level tombs	Mainly northeast of the city sites	Few tombs; hierarchy incomplete	Spring and Autumn period
Early–middle Warring States	Political center moved south; state power expanded rapidly	Full hierarchy from royal tombs to commoner graves	Sharp increase in number; high-ranking tombs on the highest hills	Ritual codes strictly observed; mature pyramidal structure	Early–middle Warring States
Late Warring States	Qin advance; Chu capital moved east to Chen	Only commoner tombs remain	Sharp decline in number	Funerary landscape declined in step with the polity	Late Warring States

Cemetery layouts were strictly stratified: royal tombs occupied the highest hills in isolation, while commoners were buried near settlements. Table 2 traces the historical evolution: in the Spring and Autumn period, only rank-and-file tombs existed, indicating the region lay outside the Chu core; in the early–middle Warring States period, the political center shifted southward and a complete hierarchy of tombs emerged; by the late Warring States period, after the capital moved east, high-ranking tombs vanished. The tomb landscape thus became a spatial projection

of political geography—"political center shifts south, tomb landscape flourishes south."

4.3. Micro Scale: Tomb Structure and Layout as Rank Markers

Table 3 Comparison of principal data on excavated high-ranking Chu tombs in the Jianghan Plain

Tomb	Date	Mound	Passage (length / width)	Chamber Subdivision	Burial Accompaniments	Tomb
Tianxingguan M1	Mid-Warring States	Surviving height 7.1 m / diameter 25 m	18.8 m / 4–5 m	Seven chambers	Several sacrificed attendants	Tianxingguan M1
Baoshan M2	Mid-Warring States	Mound present	19.8 m / 3–4.6 m	Five chambers	Two attendant tombs	Baoshan M2
Xichuan Xiaosi M2	Late Spring and Autumn	—	—	Multiple chambers	Attendant tombs M1, M3, M4 in a ring	Xichuan Xiaosi M2
Yutaishan M483	Warring States	None	—	—	Husband–wife joint burial, twin coffins	Yutaishan M483

Table 3 compares excavated high-ranking tombs, from which four rank markers may be distilled. First, mound scale increased with status, realizing the geomantic ideal expressed in the Zangshu. Second, pit form approached squareness and chamber subdivision increased with rank (seven chambers at Tianxingguan, five at Baoshan). Third, passage dimensions correlated strictly with rank. Fourth, sacrificial tombs were neatly aligned, with finer jade grave goods nearer the principal tomb, forming a lord-centered concentric layout; chariot pits were functionally divided between ritual and war chariots, corresponding to the two cardinal state affairs of "sacrifice and warfare."

Notably, the attendant-tomb ring of Xichuan M2 and the joint burial of Yutaishan M483, together with the concentric sacrificial layout, demonstrate that Chu tomb spatial organization invariably followed the principle of "principal tomb at the center, hierarchy in order." Mound height, passage length, the number of sacrificial victims, and chariot provision together constitute a three-dimensional, "legible" symbolic system of ritual hierarchy.

5. Conclusion

Through multi-scale landscape analysis—macro terrain, meso city–cemetery linkage, and micro tomb structure—this paper reveals that Chu tomb siting comprehensively considered landscape, capital location, and social order: mountains behind and water before to gather qi, northeast placement to shelter the capital, and concentric layout to manifest hierarchy. The integration of tombs with the natural environment reflects the evolution of state power and the development of the hierarchical system. Landscape archaeology thus offers not only a new perspective on tomb-site research but also a reference for large-site conservation and national archaeological site park construction [19].

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