



“Lady Dai,” a noblewoman who died in 163 B.C., was buried with more than 1,000 items to ensure a luxurious afterlife. Top to bottom: A lacquer cup for wine or soup, one of about 100 found in her tomb, depicts a stylized cloud motif and the inscription “*junxingjiu*” (“please drink”). A boxwood comb got the knots out of Lady Dai’s hair; a thinner-toothed version smoothed it down. Paper-thin fingerless silk mitts covered her delicate hands.

DIG DEEP HOLES, STORE GRAIN, DO NOT SEEK HEGEMONY. In the early 1970s, Mao Zedong’s latest propagandistic slogan, which encouraged people to build bomb shelters for fear of an impending attack by an unspecified “capitalist” nation, resonated throughout China. In Changsha, capital of Hunan Province, in the southern part of the country, a local hospital was simply following these directions. In late 1971, workers began burrowing into the side of Mawangdui, a hill on the hospital’s property that seemed like an ideal place for a shelter. When they had tunneled through almost 100 feet of dirt, however, they began to notice that the soil was crumbling, so they stopped for a cigarette break.

As they lit up, air seeping out from the hill’s dank belly caused the tiny sparks from their matches to burst into frightening blue flames. “*Gui huo!*” (“ghost fire”) they shouted, and reported the incident to local officials, who promptly sent a small team of archaeologists to investigate. The archaeologists were familiar with the phenomenon, which they had seen at other ancient sites: when decomposing organic material is exposed to the air for the first time in thousands of years, it releases toxic gases, some highly flammable. They also knew that tombs dating from the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.) to the Ming Dynasty (A.D. 1368–1644) had been identified in the area’s numerous hills that hug the gentle curves of the Liuyang River. But since the majority had been looted over the years, they thought it was unlikely that anything significant would come from digging at Mawangdui.

The archaeologists, therefore, received only 6,000 yuan from the government, a fraction of what was needed for proper excavations. To defray costs, they reached

Entombed in Style

The lavish afterlife of a Chinese noblewoman

by ETI BONN-MULLER

out to local high schools for help. Over the course of three months, beginning on January 16, 1972, about 1,500 students took turns volunteering at the site; more than 100 showed up on a given day. After digging down through 50 feet of the hill’s natural red clay, they came upon a four-foot protective layer of dense, white clay and a one-and-a-half-foot layer of charcoal. Underneath, the archaeologists discovered the tomb of a second-century B.C. noblewoman known today as “Lady Dai,” wife of Li Cang, the marquis of Dai. Accompanying her to the afterlife was a wealth of goods, including some of the ancient world’s oldest and best-preserved lacquerware, embroidered silk, musical instruments, and writings on the importance of exercise and maintaining good health.

What made the finds even more exciting was that the tomb had never been looted and, in fact, had been so perfectly sealed that Lady Dai’s nearly 2,200-year-old body remained supple and moist. She lay in the innermost of four lacquer coffins, over which was draped a nearly seven-foot-long T-shaped silk painting, probably carried on a pole in the funerary procession to the tomb. It depicts fantastical animals and gods, as well as Lady Dai herself, seen in profile, ascending toward heaven. The archaeologists who opened her coffin and first gazed upon her face reported that she looked more like she was sleeping than long dead.



ALMOST 70 OBJECTS from Lady Dai's tomb, as well as pieces from the more modest nearby burials of her husband and, perhaps, their son, are now at the China Institute Gallery in New York City. *Noble Tombs at Mawangdui: Art and Life in the Changsha Kingdom, Third Century BCE to First Century CE* is the first exhibition in the United States ever to focus exclusively on finds from the site. The show offers profound insight into not only the opulent lifestyle and burials that Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 8) nobles enjoyed, but also the high level of artistry and craftsmanship achieved during the period. "Mawangdui is considered one of the most important findings in Chinese archaeological history," says Willow Weilan Hai Chang, director of the gallery and the project director who organized the exhibition. The works on view do not disappoint.

Lady Dai's tomb had been divided into four rectangular compartments made of pine, each brimming with exquisite items—more than 1,000 in all—with the nested coffins at

In 1972, archaeologists began digging at the site of Mawangdui, a hill in China's Hunan Province, where they found three Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 8) tombs. Here, they lift the lid off of Lady Dai's outermost lacquer coffin.

the center. The exhibition includes a rich selection of these artifacts: glistening earthy-red and black lacquer drinking vessels, wine containers, and boxes for storing cosmetics; a golden silk gown embroidered with dogwood blossoms and a phoenix soaring above the clouds; dainty fingerless mitts that protected the wearer's hands at the first nip of an autumn breeze; a silk sachet filled with various spices, flowers, and fragrant reeds (Lady Dai was found with one in each hand); wooden figurines of servants mourning, their pursed red lips in eternal frowns; and statuettes of musicians playing wind and string instruments, representing a group that entertained the family. "These objects show that Lady Dai lived a luxurious life, which she enjoyed very much," says Chang. "She wanted to maintain the same lifestyle in the afterlife."



In 2003, Lady Dai was examined by an expert from Xiang Ya Medical School of Zhong Nan University before she was moved to a new display case. Her well-sealed coffins (right) helped preserve her body; two more are inside this one, shown in situ.

Each item in all three tombs had been painstakingly inventoried, probably by servants, prior to burial, a common practice of the period. Such inventories served as checklists of sorts, meant to ensure that every piece made its way to the afterlife. For instance, written on 312 bamboo strips shaped like nontapered chopsticks, are the type and number of objects in Lady Dai's tomb (20 strips are in the show). They were once strung together by strands of hemp to form a foldable book. In addition, inscribed wooden tablets were tied to bamboo boxes individually bundled with rope. They contained foods for enjoyment, such as dried venison, beef, and duck, and foods that served medicinal purposes, including soybean seeds and water chestnuts.

Her inventory is so detailed, it lists the style of embroidery used on each piece of silk found in the tomb. Besides bolts of fresh fabric, there were clothes for each season; one outfit, Chang notes, is "as thin as a cicada's wing." One of the embroidery styles, created by sewing intricate patterns with multicolored silk thread on pieces of silk, is called *xinqi*.



"It means 'to keep a promise,' like between loved ones," she says. "In the southern part of China, the culture has always been very romantic because the area has so many mountains, lakes, and clouds. People's imaginations developed differently there." Many of the goods in the tomb are decorated with a stylized cloud motif, a popular Western Han Dynasty design. People believed that clouds were vehicles by which humans ascended to the heavens and immortality.

LADY DAI'S BODY is the best-preserved one from this period ever unearthed. She had been dressed in 18 layers of silk and linen clothing; nine horizontal silk straps bound the garments in place. Her black hair was adorned with tiny wooden flowers that framed her face. At the back of her head, a bun-shaped wig was fastened with a wooden comb and long pins made of tortoiseshell, horn, and bamboo. When her coffin was opened, her eyes, nose, mouth, and ears were clearly discernible, revealing that she must have been quite beautiful—though plump toward the end of her life—with a square face, rounded features, and prominent cheekbones. But her appearance rapidly changed after being exposed to the air; her skin shriveled and developed an eerie pallor.

The archaeologists invited surgeons from the Hunan Provincial Medical Institute to remove all of her organs, both in hopes of slowing the deterioration of her fleshy remains and to conduct a full checkup, including a gynecological examination, as well as an autopsy that was documented by a Chinese film crew. Researchers determined that she had diabetes, high blood pressure, and liver disease, and that she was in her mid-50s when she died. They discovered 138 (and a half) sweet melon seeds in her stomach, so they concluded she passed away in the summer, when the fruit was in season. They

Wooden figurines (left) represent musicians who played for Lady Dai. Two of them hold *yu*, a type of flute; three kneel before silk-strung, hand-plucked *se*. In lacquer boxes (right) she kept cosmetics, such as blush and silk pads for powder.

also found stones in her gallbladder, the pain from which, they believe, led to her sudden death from a heart attack.

The circumstances of her preservation, however, remain a mystery. According to reports by the archaeologists present at the autopsy, there was no evidence of embalming. But, inside her coffin, surrounding her remains, there was a significant amount of smelly, translucent fluid that quickly browned. Some think it was groundwater or her bodily fluids; others believe it was an herbal solution. Regardless, most agree that the well-sealed coffins played a big part in helping to keep her body from decaying.

Today, Lady Dai—whose still-intact veins have been repeatedly injected over the past 37 years with a “secret” preservative solution—lies in a sealed Plexiglas coffin at the Hunan Provincial Museum. Her organs are displayed in clear jars. “Local people go to that museum because they think this old lady has miracle powers,” says Chang. “It’s become kind of a fairy tale now, but people still visit her to get her blessing.”

SO MUCH EXTRAORDINARY MATERIAL had been unearthed from Lady Dai’s tomb that the entire country anxiously waited to see what would come out of the ground when archaeologists returned to the site the following year. Even the outside world was curious. After all, the excavations at Mawangdui were the first ones to be conducted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

Preliminary surveys of the area next to her tomb suggested that two other burials were located in the same hill. Preeminent archaeologist Xia Nai, director of the Chinese Archaeological Research Institute, attended a ceremony that was held as the first shovelful of soil was removed. Zhou Enlai, the first premier of the People’s Republic of China, personally approved the additional excavations, allotting 200,000 yuan to them and instructing special units of the army to lend assistance.



This three-inch-tall wooden tablet was found in the tomb of a man in his 30s—thought to be Lady Dai’s son—tied to a bamboo box containing the skeletons of two rabbits. It reads “*latusi*” (“cured rabbit meat”), which is a delicacy of Hunan cuisine to this day.

Unfortunately, the two other tombs, excavated between 1973 and 1974, proved disappointing. Scholars believe they were much smaller and shallower because Lady Dai outlived both of the men interred there, and thus had more time to prepare her burial. Also, the tomb of Lady Dai’s husband, Li Cang, had been partially looted in antiquity, though some noteworthy items remained, including one jade and two gilded bronze seals that identified him by name and title. (Archaeologists found evidence that looters had tried to rob Lady Dai’s tomb three times, twice at the beginning of the 20th century and once during the Tang Dynasty [A.D. 618–907]. The Tang looters came the closest, digging a hole more than 30 feet deep—but, luckily, off the mark.)

Li Cang was a powerful nobleman upon whom the rank of “marquis of Dai” was bestowed in 193 B.C. Li was the chancellor of Changsha, a kingdom of the Han Empire, and was responsible for carrying out administrative work under the direction of the king, who answered to the emperor. When he died in 186 B.C., Lady Dai, who outlived him by more than 20 years, unofficially took over many of his duties.

The third person buried in the hill, a man in his 30s who died in 168 B.C., is believed to be the couple’s son (although some argue he could have been Li Cang’s brother). One major discovery from his tomb is a book written on sheets of silk that outlines 32 medical prescriptions for sexual problems, including tonics to treat impotence in elderly men. Another particularly interesting find, also on view, is the earliest-known example of a *qin*, a seven-stringed instrument (plucked with long fingernails) that in later centuries became extremely important to members of the cultured literati. By the Northern Song Dynasty (A.D. 960–1127), knowing how to play the *qin* was considered one of the essential “four arts,” along with mastery of chess, calligraphy, and painting.

In planning the exhibition, Chang was struck by the similarities between this family’s life and ours today. “Even after 2,000 years, people’s basic needs are still the same,” she says. “People love beautiful things. They enjoy food and music. They want longevity. I think that is something amazing. Some things don’t change, even with the passage of time.” ■

Eti Bonn-Muller is managing editor at ARCHAEOLOGY. Noble Tombs at Mawangdui is at the China Institute Gallery through June 7. The exhibition will be at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art from September 19 to December 13. See www.archaeology.org for additional images from the show and an interview with Willow Weilan Hai Chang, who discusses her memories of excavating along the Yangtze River.

