It is hard to argue that the primary meaning of the first shi in the two-character combination shishi is anything but “stone.” The type of stone is not specified in dictionary or encyclopedia definitions, but that the material is hard and permanent, is.¹ The second shi is less obvious to translate. A primary meaning and frequent translation is room, or chamber, but there are other possibilities.²

Shishi is used in modern Chinese studies to name one of the most enigmatic structures in East Asia (figure 1, overleaf). Situated in Chi-feng 赤峰 county of Inner Mongolia, this building has been called shishi at least since the twentieth century.³ In 1922, Father Joseph Mullie referred to it as “la Maison de Pierre,” or Stone House, following, he wrote, the Mongolian name used by the local population.⁴ (In the present article, the capitalized words “Shishi” and “Stone House” are used to designate this specific stone structure in Inner Mongolia.)

Mullie’s sketch of the outer walled area that confined la Maison de Pierre was remarkably accurate (figure 2). Except for battlements that project on three of its sides, one finds little difference between Mullie’s wall with five, simple straight segments and the plan published sixty-nine years later by the Chinese researchers who engaged

² Cihai 2, pp. 2333–34.
Figure 1. Shishi
Located Chifeng county, Inner Mongolia. Photo courtesy of Roy and Marilyn Gridley.

Figure 2. Sketch of Plan of Zuzhou

Figure 3. Reconstruction Plan of Zuzhou
From Zhang and Feng, “Zuzhou shishi tansuo” (cited n. 3), p. 129.
in limited archaeological reconnaissance at the site and also labeled it Shishi (figure 3). Air photographs of wall remains published in 2002 leave no doubt about the five-sided shape and three battlements. The position of Shishi, southwest inside the outer wall, roughly south of the inner enclosure, also is uncontested. So is the existence of a twowalled enclosure that defined the boundaries of Zuzhou, the ancestral prefecture designated by Abaoji (872–926), the leader who confederated Khitan tribes and posthumously was given the title Taizu, first ruler of the Liao dynasty (907–1125).

Mullie’s measurements for the structure differed somewhat from the ones published in 1991 and 2002. Mullie measured the bases of the north and south walls as 5.25 meters, the west wall as 6.1 meters, and 3.1 meters was the distance from ground level to roof; the measurements published by Chinese investigators in 1991 were 4.7 by 6.8 meters at the base and 3.5 meters in height; in 2002 they were given as 5.3 meters by seven, and 3.6 meters high. Each of the seven megaliths that formed the structure’s three solid sides, roof, and front with a T-shaped opening is about 30 centimeters thick and weighs several tons. The corners of each piece are chamfered and held in place with iron hooks.

Four theories about the stone structure have been put forth by Mullie and the Chinese publications. One, favored by Mullie, is based on the description in Liaoshi that informs the reader that a tower (lou) was erected in each of the four directions outside the Liao capital Shangjing and that West Tower (Xilou) was inside the walls of Zuzhou. Mullie believed the position of the Stone House corresponded to the place where West Tower should have stood.

For illustrations, see Zhongguo lishi bowuguan yaogan yu hangkong sheying kaogu zhongxin 中國歷史博物館遼遼和航空攝影考古中心 and Nei Menggu Zizhiqu wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 内蒙古自治区文物考古研究所, Nei Menggu Dongnanbu hangkong sheying kaogu baogao 内蒙古東南部航空攝影考古報告 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2002), pp. 116–21. The best source for Zuzhou and Abaoji’s association with it is Tuotuo (1313–55) et al., eds., Liaoshi 遼史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974) 37, pp. 442–43; and 2, pp. 22–23. Hereafter, all references to standard histories will be to the punctuated Zhonghua shuju series.

Liaoshi 37, pp. 441–42.


In 926, Yao Kun (姚坤), a Chinese envoy of the Later Tang court, went to Shangjing for an audience with Abaoji that he expected to have in Xilou. The meeting took place in the east, but Yao Kun was in Xilou twice that year. He discusses West Tower as if it were a fortified place adjacent to Shangjing. The account is discussed and translated in Frederick W. Mote, Imperial China, 900–1800 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1999), pp. 44–47. Hu Jiao 胡臥, another Chinese official, who spent six years in Shangjing in the mid-10th c., also left an account titled Xianbei(li) ji 鮮卑(陸)記, which is found in Ye Longli 葉隆禮 (13th c.), comp., Qidanguo zhi 契丹國志 (Record of the Khitan State), take Xilou to have been a place that, one might infer, was marked by a lou.
The second theory is that the Stone House was a place of incarceration.\textsuperscript{10} The idea is a modern one, based on interpretation of passages in the biography of Lihu 李胡, third son of the first Liao ruler, Abaoji. Shishi is not mentioned specifically in the passage, and thus the theory is not explored further here.\textsuperscript{11} Third, it has been suggested that Stone House was a burial shrine.\textsuperscript{12} The last theory, that this was an ancestral temple or a place where ancestral tablets were housed, is the easiest of the three to support from textual evidence discussed below. Presented in addition are several ideas drawn from texts or based on associations with other monuments.

Even though the first theory has received the most attention in scholarly literature, the longstanding definition of lou as a multi-story building and the combination of wood radical and a multi-level structure in the character suggest that if the Shishi inside the walls of Zuzhou was Xilou, it would be a nearly unique example of a one-story stone edifice with such a name.\textsuperscript{13} More likely, it seems, is that it was near a

---


\textsuperscript{11} When the second Liao ruler Taizong (Deguang 德光) died in 947, Yuan 院, eldest son of the eldest son of the first Liao ruler, and thus Deguang’s nephew, declared himself emperor according to Chinese custom. This act caused immediate conflict among family factions, particularly Abaoji’s widow, dowager Yingtian 應天, and her third son with Abaoji, Lihu, also known as Honggu 洪古. According to Khitan custom, succession passed from older brother to younger brother, whereby Deguang, second son of Abaoji and Yingtian, would have been followed to the throne by his oldest surviving brother. This led to open warfare just south of Shangjing. The crisis was resolved in a few days, with Yuan 院 the victor. Yingtian and Lihu were arrested and “imprisoned” in Zuzhou for the rest of their lives. Lihu was posthumously given the title Zhaingsu 章肃 emperor (huangdi 皇帝) in 1052. How or where they were incarcerated, or if this was some form of house arrest, are not explained. Nothing more specific than “in Zuzhou” is stated in the text. In 1991, based on research published in the previous year by Wang Xiangping 王襄平, Chen Yongzhi (“Zuzhou shishi”) suggested that incarceration might have occurred in the stone house. Lihu’s biog. is at Liaoshi 利寳, pp. 1213–14. For summaries of the events, see Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., \textit{The Cambridge History of China.} Vol. 6: \textit{Alien Regimes and Border States,} 907–1368 (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1994), pp. 75–76, and Wittfogel and Feng, \textit{Liao,} pp. 401–2, 415–17, and 544.

\textsuperscript{12} Chen Dawei 陳大為, “Lun Liaoning de ‘shiben’ jiqi yanbian” 論遼寧的石棚及其演變, \textit{Liaohai wenwu xuekan} 遼海文物學刊 1 (1991), pp. 82–89.

place referred to as Xilou, perhaps because a tower stood or formerly had stood there, or that Xilou was a tower or other tall military fortification or lookout, one of four beacons on the sides of Shangjing, but that it had disappeared by Mullie’s day.\textsuperscript{14}

Both the association with Xilou and the Liao date hinge on Shishi’s location. That the enclosing wall was part of Abaoji’s ancestral prefecture Zuzhou is not disputed, but is that sufficient justification to identify Shishi as a Liao building? Equally possible, it seems, is that the wall of Abaoji’s precinct was constructed in deference to an existing structure.

If Shishi was constructed in the Liao period, it seems very peculiar that it is never mentioned in the \textit{Liaoshi} description of Zuzhou or the other important sources.\textsuperscript{15} Surely something that necessitated the transport of this many tons of stone should have been noted in the standard history of the dynasty who built it or sited their ancestral prefecture in response to it, or in the record of an emissary to that place. If the stone building had been used for imprisonment, this too, it seems, should have been noted somewhere in the dynastic histories. The omission seems to suggest either that such a building was not noteworthy, or that it was not standing when Abaoji’s Zuzhou was walled. Neither seems likely.

No matter when Shishi was constructed, a tremendous amount of labor was required. Chen Yongzhi 陳永志 suggests that the stone for Shishi had been taken from a quarry about fifteen kilometers to the south,\textsuperscript{16} but he did not consider how or by whom it might have been transported. These practical concerns, whether in the tenth century or five centuries earlier or later, underscore fundamental issues not just about this building but about stone architecture more generally. In premodern times, moving the stone, polishing it, erecting it, and getting it to hold together should have required a massive labor force that we have to assume was directed by someone powerful or working for a serious purpose. Whoever the patron and whatever his purpose, it is reasonable to assume that construction of the Zuzhou Shishi was the result of organized, directed effort and may therefore have been of prime importance when it was built. Whether roughly shaped stone of the kind used at Stonehenge or highly polished marble of the Parthe-

\textsuperscript{14} The towers could have been freestanding or attached to the outer city wall. Piero Corradini, “On the Qidan and Jurcin Capitals,” \textit{Rivista degli Studi Orientali} \textbf{76.1–4} (2002), pp. 169–71, has proposed that there were two Xilou, one in Shangjing and the other in Zuzhou. For a plan of Liao Shangjing, see Steinhardt, \textit{Chinese Imperial City Planning} (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 1990), p. 124.

\textsuperscript{15} These are mentioned in n. 9, above.

nancy shatzman steinhardt

non or St. Peter’s, it is universally assumed when a stone building is planned that it will stand for millennia.\textsuperscript{17}

When Mullie came to Zuzhou, Shishi was empty. Locals told him that at one time a white marble statue had stood in a corner and that it had been broken when it was used to sharpen knives. Such a statement lends itself to the kind of images readily conjured about a semi-nomadic people such as the Khitan, living on the fringes of Chinese society.\textsuperscript{18} The lone stone statue also calls to mind another of Chifeng county’s most powerful images of the Khitan, the sculpture at Shangjing identified as the bodhisattva Guanyin that lost its head sometime between the time of Japanese occupation-period photographs and recent times.\textsuperscript{19} The existence of a statue in Shishi seems to support the third theory, namely, that it was a temple. The corollary to the suggestion, that it was Abaoji’s ancestral temple, is harder to prove. If the building was there, it is likely Abaoji used it. Whether he built it or worshipped his ancestors in it are other matters.

Two aspects of the Zuzhou Shishi are crucial to figuring out if it was used by Abaoji and what it was. First is the question of architectural precedents. Second is what is implied by the name \textit{shishi}.

\textbf{STONE CONSTRUCTION IN CHINA AND NORTHEAST ASIA}

The Zuzhou Shishi was one of two stone buildings published by Japanese archeologist Torii Ryūzō 鳥居龍蔵 in 1936 in his four-volume illustrated study of Liao culture (figures 1 and 4).\textsuperscript{20} Torii did not speculate on their purpose, nor did he explain his reasoning in dating them to the Liao period, but the second example informs us that the Zuzhou Shishi was not unique in the regions of former Manchuria that had been Liao


\textsuperscript{18} Exotic aspects of Khitan customs have made an impression on Chinese observers since the time of Yao Kun and Hu Jiao. The Khitan, for example, practiced trepanation and encaused corpses in suits of precious metal, on the one hand, and they or their subjects painted signs of the Western zodiac alongside the lunar lodges and duodenary animals, on the other. An often-cited source on Qidan burial practices is Southern Song-era scholar Wen Weijian’s \textit{Luting shishi} 虧廷事實, preserved in Tao Zongyi 陶宗儀 (1316–1403), ed., \textit{Shuofu 説郛} (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927) 8, p. 49a. All these subjects are discussed in Steinhardt, \textit{Liao Architecture}.

\textsuperscript{19} For a picture with its head, see Torii Ryūzō 鳥居龍蔵, \textit{Kōkōgakujō yori mita} \textit{Ryō no bunka: Zufu 考古學上より見た遼の文化, 図譜} (Tokyo: Tōhō bunka gakuin, 1936) 1, pll. 12–13.

\textsuperscript{20} Torii, \textit{Ryō no bunka}. 
most famous examples, at Stonehenge, in Salisbury, England, but dolmens are far from unique in Asia, particularly north and northeast Asia, and specifically Manchuria. Asian dolmens survive in Kyushu, Korea, China’s northeastern provinces, and the eastern portions of Inner Mongolia. Many have been dated to preliterate times, but it should be noted that unlike in China, in Japan and some regions of Korea the Bronze Age commenced before the occurrence of writing and continued into the early centuries AD, so that the Yayoi period of Japan, for example, which is often suggested as the date of the stone monuments in Kyushu, extends to about 300 AD. In addition, the Manchurian examples have in almost every case been considered funerary. The Chinese (and Japanese) name for these structures is zhishimu 支石墓, literally “propped up stone tombs.” Among them are several comprised of four walls and a roof (figure 5).
China’s Central Plain has its own traditions of construction in stone or other permanent materials. Due to the prevalence of timber-frame architecture in China, the general name for halls that do not use wood is *wuliangdian* 無樑殿 (beamless halls). The earliest extant *wuliangdian* are from the Ming dynasty, with famous examples in Nanjing and on Mount Wutai.24 Below ground or directly into the earth, however, Chinese built with permanent materials long before the Ming dynasty. Stone was a standard material in underground and cliff tombs in the Han period.25 Stone, brick and combination brick-and-stone tombs were even more common.26 Stone was the dominant building material for tombs in the Koguryो 高句麗 kingdom (37 BC–668 AD), whose territory included much of the region known as Manchuria. Koguryो builders also covered tombs with mounds made of piled stone, and stone was the primary building material for city walls.27 Smaller-scale stone funerary monuments also were common in Han China, particularly in Shandong province, where famous examples remain in Jinxiang 金鄉, Jiaxiang 嘉祥, and Xiaotangshan 孝堂山.28

---


25 The most famous rock-carved tombs are probably those of prince Liu Sheng and his wife Dou Wan, from the second century BC in Mancheng 燕城, Hebei. Western Han rulers of the states of Chu and Liang built stone tombs in Shandong and Henan; discussed in Zhou Xueying 稣學鷹, *Xuzhou Hanmu jianzhu* (Beijing: Zhongguo Jianzhu Gongye chubanshe, 2001); Henansheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 河南省文物考古研究所, *Yongcheng Xi Han Liangguo wangliang ye qinyuan* 永城西漢梁國王陵與墓園 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1996); and Henansheng Shangguoshi wenwu guanli weiyuanhui et al., *Mangdangshan Xi Han Liangwang mudi* 芒砀山西漢梁王墓地 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2001). Examples of stone tombs of the Eastern Han are found mostly in southern Shandong and northern Jiangsu. Famous examples remain in Yinan 涿南, Cangshan 蒼山, Anqiu 安丘, and Maocun 茅村. Rock-carved tombs are found in numerous places in Shichuan, including Leshan 樂山, Qiyang 祁陽, and Pengxian 彭縣.

26 Han tombs in which stone combines with another material are too numerous to list. Two well-known examples are the early second century BC tomb of the Nanyue 南越 king in Guangzhou and the very late-Han Tomb no. 1 in Dahuting 打虎亭, Henan.


28 On these stone shrines see, for example, Wilma Fairbank, “The Offering Shrines of ‘Wu Liang Tz’u’,” *HJAS* 6.1 (1941), pp. 1–36, and “A Structural Key to Han Mural Art,” *HJAS* 7.1.
Freestanding stone monuments that were not dolmen also existed in China in the Han dynasty. Carved out of living rock, the stone known as Kongwangshan 孔王山, near Lianyungang 连云港 is unique, its singular importance consistent with the use of a permanent material.29 The use of stone also was widespread in freestanding pillars, monumental sculpture, and gate- or pillar-towers (que 闕) positioned at either side of the approaches to imperial tombs to define “spirit paths” (shendao 神道) beginning in the Han dynasty.30 Ceremonial archways, building platforms, stele, funerary pagodas, and inscribed rocks also were standard stone structures in premodern China. Each can logically be associated with a desire to endure weather and other natural disasters. The platforms are especially important, for the Chinese building system is inherently transitory: columns and other wooden elements supported by platforms will need replacement, but the stone pilasters into which columns may be lodged and the platform that may support those pilasters might last for centuries or longer.

The multi-millennial decision to build even China’s monuments of supreme significance, halls of the Forbidden City, the Altar to Heaven complex, and their predecessors, for example, from wood, and to restrict stone construction to subterranean funerary architecture, funerary shrines, symbolic gate-towers, and building platforms, and only occasionally to experiment with stone structures above ground, underscores how extraordinary Shishi was. If the Shishi stood in Zuzhou in the tenth century, it is truly remarkably that neither Yao Kun nor Hu Jiao wrote of it.31
In contrast to the structure Shishi that stands in Zuzhou, the word is not unique or even rare. In colloquial writing about Chinese architecture, *shishi* is a standard way to designate both an offering shrine of the type mentioned above and a rock-carved cave, the latter space alternately known as *shiku* 石窟 or *dongku* 洞窟. One has no reason to infer from this that the Zuzhou *shishi* was a freestanding worship cave, erected in a place where no natural rock could provide that kind of environment. Still, the widespread use of rock-carved caves for Buddhist worship in South and East Asia and sometimes also for Daoists and other ascetics in China, may support the possibility that one or more images were at one time inside it.

In premodern Chinese literary and historical writings, not only is the term *shishi* not uncommon, it possesses a wide range of meanings and allusions. *Shishi* alone (with no prefix) is found 136 times in the twenty-four dynastic histories and their well-known commentaries. Of these, 102 date to the Five Dynasties period or earlier, and thus are considered most pertinent to ascertaining the purpose of the structure inside Zuzhou, if it preexisted or was built by Abaoji 阿保機. *Shishi* occurs 871 times in the *Taishō Tripitaka*. Ten references are found in *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*), compiled in about 104–87 BC. In *juan* 5, for example, in the historian’s discussion of the distant forbears of Qin Shi Huangdi, one learns that king Mu 穆 enjoyed himself so much on a hunting expedition in the West that he almost forgot to return home. Commentator Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324) writes that his diversion took him to Mount Kunlun 岷山, which he sites near Jiuxian 酒泉 in Gansu, where the

---

32 To cite just a few examples, offering-shrines are called *shishi* in Henan Bowuguan 河南博物館, *Henan chutu Handai jianzhu mingqi* 河南出土漢代建築明器 (Zhengzhou: Dajia chubanshe, 2002), p. 81, and Liang Sicheng 梁思成, “Zhongguo de Fojiao jianzhu” 中國的佛教建築, in *Liang Sicheng wenji* 梁思成文集 (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 1986), vol. 4, p. 184. These are the primary or secondary definitions for *shishi* in *Cihai*, p. 3733, for *sekimuro* in Morohashi, *Dai Kan-Wa jiten* 8, p. 315, and Shinmura Izuru 新村出, ed. *Kojien* 広辞苑 (Toko: Iwanami shoten, 1975), p. 109. Relatively formal writers of Chinese architectural history, such as Liang Sicheng and Fu Xinian 傅熹年, interchange the term freely with *shiku*. Other studies in which *shishi* is used to refer to cave-rooms are cited below.

33 I thank Yang Jidong for printing the passages from the Academia Sinica website and for adding Chinese characters to this article.

34 I thank John Kieschnick for providing me with this number. Although a few passages relevant to Buddhism are cited below, a Buddhist explanation for the Zuzhou Shishi is not in question.

35 I thank Paul Goldin for pointing me in the direction of *Shiji* 史記. Several of the *Shiji* references are cited in entries for *shishi* in Morohashi, *Dai Kan-Wa jiten* and *Zhongwen da cidian* (see n. 1, above).
Queen Mother of the West was believed to reside. King Mu found a shishi at Kunlun named Queen Mother Hall (Wangmutang 王母堂) that was strung with pearls and decorated with bells so that it shone like a divine palace.\textsuperscript{36}

The next mention of shishi is in the biography of the Western Han’s most long-lived and arguably most illustrious emperor, Wudi (r. 140–87 BC). In the third moon of the year 110, Han Wudi 武帝 ascended to the taishi 太室 (great chamber) of the Central Sacred Peak to make sacrifices.\textsuperscript{37} An explanation of this passage by Wei Zhao 韋昭 informs us that the marchmont had greater (tai) and lesser (shao) shi 少室, so named by Wudi because they were shishi.\textsuperscript{38} It is not certain what stood at the peak when the emperor visited. Most likely, if we follow the more common usages of shishi that will be cited below, Wei Zhao assumed that the emperor had been inspired by stone shrines or perhaps grottoes. In 118 and between 118 and 123 AD, respectively, Eastern Han emperor Andi 安帝 (r. 106–125) had Taishique 太室闕 and Shaoshique 少室闕, pairs of pillar-towers, erected on the sacred mountain just north of Dengfeng 登封. The purpose was to commemorate the associations of the mountain with legendary emperor Yu 禹, credited with teaching the Chinese people to control flood waters. Yu’s two wives, who were sisters, were associated with the greater and lesser shi (corresponding to the elder and younger sister), perhaps grotto areas, and perhaps not on the same parts of the mountain. The Taishi pair of towers would come to be the entrance of the major architectural complex on the mountain, the Temple to the Central Peak, where they remain today. A third pair of que, Qimuque 啓母闕, were built in 123 in front of Qimu Temple at the foot of the mountain to commemorate the birth of Yu the Great’s son.\textsuperscript{39} Shishi meaning a room carved into rock occurs in explanations of passages in juan 32 and 67 of Shiji.\textsuperscript{40} It is likely that Wei Zhao assumed this meaning when interpreting what sort of structure was seen by Han Wudi.

\textsuperscript{36} Shiji 5 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), pp. 174–76. The same reference, shishi as a hall for the Queen Mother of the West, occurs in a note to j. 117, p. 3061.

\textsuperscript{37} Shiji 12, p. 474.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{39} Today the que are kept in locked sheds. They are described in guidebooks to the mountain. See, e.g., Hu Mingke 胡明可 and Hu Fang 胡芳, Luoyang mingsheng 洛陽名勝 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1993), pp. 80–82. The dates on the three pairs of que are confirmed by inscription. The visit of Han Wudi to the marchmont in 110 BC may be the reason Nagel’s Encyclopaedia-Guide to China (Geneva, Paris, and Munich: Nagel, 1979), p. 810, mistakenly says that the que had been built in 118 BC.

\textsuperscript{40} Shiji 32, p. 1478; 67, p. 2203.
Shishi occurs again in a commentary to a prose-poem by Sima Xiangru (d. 117 BC) that was recorded in his biography in Shiji. Positioned at the approach to Mount Kunlun, one comes upon the Queen Mother of the West. As in juan 5, discussed above, the commentator reports that the abode of the Queen Mother includes a hall bearing her name and shishi. The Queen Mother of the West and her Kunlun residence are mentioned again in juan 123, a report on the Western Regions (Dayuan 大宛). In the discussion of Daxia 大夏 (Bactria), one learns of the Buddhist kingdom of Shendu 神都 (India), where a Buddha sits in a stone cave and where there is also a stupa.

A different definition of shishi is found in Shiji, juan 130. We are told that state documents may be stored in shishi jingui 石室金匱. The explanation in the commentary is explicit. Both shishi and jingui are places where the state’s writings are stored. Near the end of the juan, indeed near the end of Sima Qian’s work, a third enigmatic structure is mentioned, mingtang 明堂. Although a subject of considerably more scholarly attention than shishi during the last two millennia, the structure of the mingtang is less well understood. In this passage, all three are said to have been repositories of precious writings and documents, but in contrast to shishi and jingui, or metal chests, mingtang were made of wood.

Twenty-six references to shishi occur in later histories of the Han, Ban Gu’s 班固 (32–92) Hanshu (Standard History of the Han) and Fan Ye’s 范曄 (398–445) Hou Hanshu (Standard History of the Later Han), covering the period through the Wang Mang interregnum (9–23 AD) and the Eastern or Later Han (25–220), respectively. In the annals of the dynastic founder, Liu Bang, one again finds jingui shishi, with the understanding that the two are used for the same purpose, but here the order of the binoms is reversed from the above-cited passage in Shiji, juan 130. More intriguing is the following line that informs us

41 The biog. is at j. 117, pp. 2999–3074.
44 Shiji 130, p. 3296.
45 Crucial knowledge of the mingtang had been lost even before the writing of Shiji. On mingtang, see Hwang Ming-chorng, “Ming-tang: Cosmology, Political Order and Monuments in Early China,” Ph. D. diss. (Harvard University, 1996). An extensive bibliography is provided. Another important work in a Western language is Antonino Forte, Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Emperor Wu (Rome: Instituto Italiano il Medio, 1988).
46 For the basic definition of jingui, in which this passage from Shiji is quoted, see Cihai 3, p. 3873.
47 I thank Victor Mair for insightful discussion of jingui and for pointing out that in this passage the two objects are listed in the reverse order.
that both were stored in the ancestral temple (zongmiao 宗廟).\(^{48}\) In juan six, one finds another explanation presented in Shiji: concerning offerings at Songgao 嵩高. The later commentator Wei Zhao tells us that this place was given its name because larger and smaller caves were carved into natural rock there.\(^{49}\) Hanshu, juan 28 and an explanation in juan 40, again mention shishi as the abode of the Queen Mother of the West.\(^{50}\) Juan 62 of Hanshu records Sima Qian’s reference to jingui and shishi as places to store documents.\(^{51}\) In juan 97 of Hanshu, jingui occurs alone, but an explanation associates it with shishi as a place to store precious items.\(^{52}\)

Thus before the end of the last BC century, shishi had at least three associations: a room carved into rock; such a room or groups of rooms in the exotic and elusive western regions where one sought the abode of the Queen Mother of the West and her immortality-granting powers; and a container for something precious, perhaps a case or cupboard (gui 器), perhaps a small shrine, or perhaps a multi-room structure such as the mingtang.

Many references to shishi in Hou Hanshu are similar.\(^{53}\) Related to references cited above is a passage in juan 79 in which shishi is one in a list of structures – biyong 辟雍, dongguan 東觀, lantai 蘭臺, xuanming 宣明, and hongdu 鴻都 – in which imperial documents that were transferred from Chang’an to the new capital in Luoyang were stored.\(^{54}\) This passage is particularly interesting, because the association with biyong, a component of the ritual hall complex that included the above-mentioned mingtang,\(^{55}\) as well as with lantai and dongguan, suggests shishi to be a

\(^{48}\) Hanshu 5, pp. 80–1.

\(^{49}\) Hanshu 6, p. 190. For the reference in Shiji, see n. 37, above.

\(^{50}\) Hanshu 28, p. 1611, and 40, p. 2037, the latter passage informing the reader that the transcendent Chisongzi 赤松子 ("Red Pine"), who lived at the time of the legendary emperors, often came to the Queen Mother of the West’s shishi.

\(^{51}\) Hanshu 62, p. 2716, where it is noted that an alternate form of the character gui is used.

\(^{52}\) Hanshu 97, p. 3996.

\(^{53}\) E.g., associations between the Queen Mother of the West, Mount Kunlun, and/or shishi are found in the commentarial notes at j. 2 (p. 122), 28 (p. 988), and 29 (p. 1030). Storage of jingui shishi in the ancestral temple occurs in a note at j. 12 (p. 743). The use of shishi as a place to offer sacrifices to ancestors is at j. 85 (p. 1809), and the use of shishi specifically for storage of documents is explained in notes at j. 59 (p. 1939), 61 (p. 2033), and 63 (p. 2077).

\(^{54}\) Hou Hanshu 79, p. 2548.

\(^{55}\) Excavations of Eastern Han sites south of Luoyang have shown the mingtang, biyong, and lingtai 靈台 (spirit altar) to have been separate structures, but at the Western Han capital Chang’an, excavations suggest that several ritual structures may have been merged in a composite ritual building. For reconstructions and discussion of ritual architecture at both capitals, see Yang Hongxun 楊鴻勳, Gongdian kaogu tonglun 宮殿考古通論 (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2001), pp. 262–85, and 319–39.
building as opposed to a portable container, the primary association for jingui. Corroboration that lantai was a structure is found in a late-Han text, “Lihuolun” 理惑論 (“Essays on Reason and Bewilderment”), cited in (Shi) Sengyou 僧祐’s (445–518) Hongming ji 弘明集 (Collection of Grand Illuminations), in which one is told that during the reign of Eastern Han Mingdi 明帝 (r. 58–75), forty-two Buddhist sutras were stored in a lantai 蘭台 of fourteen bays that was purportedly at Baimasi 白馬寺. As for dongguan and lantai, their function as structures for the storage of documents is certain.

The most intriguing reference to shishi in Hou Hanshu is found in the section of biographies of non-Chinese peoples. In juan 86, we are informed that the people known as Panhu 磐瓠 carried their dead to a dangerously located place, shishi, about halfway up a mountain. There, as many as tens of thousands of deceased had been buried. According to the commentary, stone sheep and other animals, and perhaps human images carved in stone, were said to remain at the spot that today is in Yunnan. It is possible the reference is to the kind of cliff tombs (yamu 崖墓) used for burials in the Han dynasty that remain in great numbers in Sichuan province.

The use of shishi as places to store precious documents is further confirmed in Sanguozi 三國志. So are the definitions of shishi as a room carved into rock and a place where ancestral tablets are housed. The latter definition is also found in Jinshu 春書 and in Quan Jinwen 全金文 collection.

Baimasi was said in Buddhist traditions to have been the monastery to which sutras were brought from India on white horses; see Takakusu Junji 澤田進二郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 瀨田嘉穂, Taishō shinshū daizōkyō (Tokyo: Issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–34), no. 2102, vol. 52, p. 5a. I thank Tansen Sen for bringing this passage to my attention.

Such function, esp. for dongguan, was regularized since E. Han; see Howard L. Goodman, “Chinese Polymaths, 100–300 AD: The Tung-kuan, Taoist Dissent, and Technical Skills,” AM 3d ser. 18.1 (2005), pp. 101–74, and the sources cited there. I thank Howard Goodman for sending me a prepublication draft of his article.


Sanguozi 2, p. 58; 24, p. 678.

Ibid. 48, p. 1171; 65, p. 1459.
晋文 (Complete Prose of the Jin), juan 88.62 Jinshu also informs us that shishi is a place to store documents and that it is a grotto.63 The precious nature of shishi is always implicit: Jinshu also refers to shishi as yutang, literally “jade hall,” in all likelihood an association equivalent to jingui, and to a stone container inside shishi.64 The most interesting mention of shishi in Jinshu is found in the biography of Shan Daokai, a painter from the vicinity of Dunhuang who lived more than a century. When he died, his remains were placed in a shishi.65 In a context like this, it is possible that shishi refers either to a grotto or an underground tomb, for as mentioned above, stone was a construction material in subterranean tombs in the Eastern Han dynasty and in the next century.

Nine references to shishi are found in Shen Yue’s Songshu (441–513), dealing with the period 420–79 of the Liu-Song dynasty. One finds further confirmation that shishi were used to store precious objects, that the word referred to a place to store ancestral tablets, functioning like an ancestral temple,66 but in addition, new details suggesting links between shishi and imperial burial begin to emerge. In juan 15, in a discussion of death rituals, we are told that when Wendi (r. 424–453) died, the imperial seals were placed in shishi, and precious objects were not put in the tomb.67 This is a sharp contrast to the Han practice of filling tombs with valuable goods. The association between shishi and lantai also is found in Songshu, and another stone entity is mentioned, tianlu,68 a winged feline more resembling a tiger than its namesake, a deer, that stands along spirit paths of Han and Southern Dynasties tombs. Later in the same juan, in discussing post-Han burial, the reader is informed that lavish burial continued in the post-Han era, including the use of shishi, stone animals, and engraved stele, even though in 205 AD an imperial order had been issued to terminate the excessive practice.69

63 Regarding storage of documents, see Jinshu 49, p. 1370, and re. grotto, see 79, p. 2072; and 94, p. 2456.
64 Ibid. 86, p. 2240; 94, p. 2440, respectively.
65 Ibid. 95, pp. 2491–92.
67 Songshu 15, p. 404. 68 Ibid. 49, pp. 1246, 1266. 69 Ibid. 15, p. 407.
SHISHI UNDER THE NORTHERN WEI, EASTERN WEI, AND NORTHERN QI

Some of the most important information about shishi for our purposes comes from records about the Northern Wei period (386–534) and the periods right after in northeastern China and at its borders. According to Li Daoyuan’s 麗道元 (d. 527) Shuijing zhu 水經注 (Commentary on the Classic of Waterways), a temple stood in front of the tomb of Sima Zichang 司馬子長 and in Yongjia 4 (148 AD) a stele on which were recorded the meritorious deeds of Yin Ji 殷濟, an official of Hanyang 漢陽, was erected in a shishi.  

Here, shishi seems to mean a stele pavilion or other structure of stone or some other permanent material.

Much more explicit is the reference to shishi in Wei Shou’s 魏收 (506–72) Weishu (Standard History of the Wei). In the annals of the reign of Xiao Wendi 孝文帝 (r. 471–499), we are told that while taking a walk in Fangshan 方山 (about twenty-five kilometers northwest of the present city of Datong) in the fourth moon of 481, Empress Dowager Wenming 文明 told her son that she wanted to be buried there.  

Already in the summer of 479, Wenshishi 文石室 (Chamber with Writings on Stone, perhaps a stone structure in which there were inscriptions on the walls) and Lingquan 靈泉 (Spirit Spring) Hall had been erected at Fangshan during a time of famine, when the imperial granaries had been opened to feed the hungry. Thus stone architecture may have been there when the emperor and dowager took their walk. Construction of the tomb, known as Yonggu 永固石室 (“eternally solid shishi”), is said to have started immediately and been completed three years later, in 484. Xiaowendi also had a stele erected in a hall, or perhaps in a courtyard (ting 庭), and he built Jianxuan 隱玄 (Mirror of Darkness) Hall.

70 Li Daoyuan 麗道元, Shuijingzhu 水經注 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1969) 4, p. 42.
71 Weishu 魏書 7, p. 150. Empress-dowager Wenming, née Feng 馮, entered the palace after her father, a government official, was put to death. At age thirteen, she became a concubine of emperor Wencheng and later became empress. According to one account, at Wencheng’s funeral in 465, she threw herself into the flames in which his imperial robes and utensils were being burned, but was pulled out. Eventually, she was honored with the title of empress-dowager by the emperor Xianwen, who met with a violent death in 470, an incident often blamed on her. The empress-dowager, meanwhile, had taken charge of raising his successor, Xiaowen, since his birth. After Xiaowen ascended the throne, Wenming was consulted in all affairs of the state. See her biog. at Weishu 13, pp. 328–30. The self-immolation is not recorded in Weishu, but is found in her biog. in Li Fang (925–96) et al., Taiping yulan 太平御覽 139. Much of her biography is translated in Archibald Wenley, The Grand Empress Dowager Wen Ming and the Northern Wei Necropolis at Fang Shan (Washington DC: Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers, 1947).
72 Weishu 7, p. 147.
73 Li Yanshou’s (fl. 618–76) Beishi 北史, which covers a longer period of Northern history...
In 1925, the Freer Gallery and the National History Museum in Beijing attempted a joint excavation at Fangshan: one of their main goals was to find and uncover the tomb of empress-dowager Wenming. They found her tumulus, but the local population was so opposed to the project that they were not able to excavate. In 1976, however, a team from the Datong City Museum and the Shanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Commission successfully excavated the site. In spite of the name of the tomb, Yongguling 永固陵 ("eternally solid royal tomb"), the interior construction is layers of brick, not stone (figure 6). Nevertheless, excavators refer to the interior as shishi, perhaps following the description in Weishu, although it is not cited, or perhaps a more generic use of the term to refer to an interior of permanent materials.

The empress-dowager may, however, have asked for a subterranean tomb made of stone. According to Wenming’s biography in Weishu, her mother was from Lelang 樂浪. Located in what is today North Korea, Lelang is in the heart of former Koguryō territory. More stone tombs, often with mounds also made of stone, remain in Koguryō territory than any other part of East Asia. It is thus possible that the empress-dowager had seen or

![Figure 6. Interior Chambers of Yonggu Mausoleum](image)

*Figure 6. Interior Chambers of Yonggu Mausoleum*

In Fangshan, Shanxi; reconstructed drawing. From WW (1978.7), p. 29.
NANCY SHATZMAN STEINHARDT

knew about the burial practices of her ancestors and wanted such a tomb for herself.

Rock-carved caves with writing on the interior walls may also be relevant to Wenming’s desire for *shishi* at her burial site, or the earlier existence of Wenshishi at Fangshan. Although her maternal ancestry can be traced to the people of the Koguryŏ kingdom, the Xianbei, ancestors of the Tuoba, to whom, of course, the Northern Wei traced their origins, had an equally strong hereditary association with *shishi*.\(^7\) According to Wolfram Eberhard, all Turkish people, the Tuoba included, had a creation myth in which their ancestors entered the world from a sacred grotto.\(^9\) Rock-carved caves near the border between Heilongjiang and Inner Mongolia, northwest of Qiqihar (in Heilongjiang) and northeast of Hailar (in Inner Mongolia), have long been believed to be ancient burial sites of the Xianbei ancestors.\(^8\) On July 30, 1980, among grottoes known to excavators and researchers for decades, a research team entered a cave named Gaxiandong (Snapping Immortal Grotto) and discovered a Chinese inscription dated 443 (figure 7).\(^1\) The inscription recorded a visit of Northern Wei emperor

---


Taiwu 太武 in that year, to this place north of Daxing’an 大興安 Peak where the Xianbei had come to pay homage to their ancestors before their move south and division into Tuoba and other tribes.\textsuperscript{82}

The date falls in the period 440–451, the date of an imperial inscription carved on a stele at Gaoling 高靈 Temple on Mount Song, Henan province, approximately 2,000 kilometers southwest, in the Chinese heartland. Some of the characters and passages were common to both the Gaxian Grotto and Gaoling Temple inscriptions. A comparison of the calligraphy led to the suggestion that the same Daoist monk may have carved both.\textsuperscript{83} Even if the calligrapher was not the same person, the similar inscriptions are probably not a coincidence. Mount Song, of course, is just east of Luoyang. Although the Tuoba would not move their capital there until 493, sinification was on the mind of Taiwu during his ceremonial visit to Gaxian Grotto,\textsuperscript{84} half-a-century before the transfer of the capital under the emperor who built Yongguling for his mother. Already standing at Mt. Song were the above-mentioned Taishi and Shaoshi que, so that the allusion to that mountain as possessing shishi may have been more than three centuries old. Perhaps considered in the justification for the move to Luoyang was the presence of shishi, or a mountain with shishi, spaces carved out and containing writing — a mountain that in addition had been sacred to Chinese emperors since Yu the Great.\textsuperscript{85} In any case, to the Northern Wei, a shishi was a sacred architectural space, one closely associated with their ancestors.

\textsuperscript{82} Mi Wenping writes about the inscription in more detail in Xianbei shishi xunfang ji 鮮卑石室尋訪記 (Jinan: Shandong huabao, 1997).


\textsuperscript{84} The Tuoba emperors were already performing the rituals of a Chinese emperor in their first capital, at Shengle, in Inner Mongolia, around the turn of the fourth century. Ceremonies of the Chinese state were performed and architecture erected with more concern for proper ritual at Pingcheng, capital of the Tuoba-Wei in Northern Shanxi, for most of the fourth century. On these ceremonies and their architecture, see Victor Cunrui Xiong, “Ritual Architecture under the Northern Wei,” in Wu Hung, ed., \textit{Between Han and Tang: Visual and Material Culture in a Transformative Period} (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2003), pp. 31–95. As Lillian Lan-ying Tseng points out, exemplary of the mixing of Chinese and Tuoba practices by Northern Wei emperors, the Taiwu emperor first sacrificed to Heaven, according to Chinese imperial practice, and second to his own ancestors; Tseng, “Visual Replication and Political Persuasion: The Celestial Image in Yuan Yi’s Tomb,” in Wu, ed., \textit{Between Han and Tang}, p. 401.

\textsuperscript{85} The sacred mountain and its writing are not discussed among the numerous reasons for the move of his capital, as promulgated by the Xiaowen emperor, the man who built Yongguling for his mother. On the emperor’s reforms, see Le Kang, “An Empire for a City: Cultural Reforms of the Xiao-wen Emperor (A.D. 471–499),” Ph. D. diss. (Yale University, 1983).
In the next century, another kind of *shishi*, one not mentioned in standard histories or dictionary definitions, was erected in Dingxing 定興, Hebei province, under Northern Qi rule. Placed on top of a 4.54–meter-high octagonal stone pillar whose eight sides were of uneven dimensions, was a *shishi* in a front niche of which was carved a Buddhist image (figure 8). The stone pillar is named for its main purpose, *yicuihui* 義惠惠, or presentation of kindness. In the aftermath of chaos caused by Erzhu Rong 爾朱榮 between 525 and 528, the bones of seven people who had died as a result were gathered and reburied under one mound. Subsequently, Yi 義 Hall was built to the left of the mound at a place where the Buddhist community offered relief to those starving during the years of famine. The year 557 was another one of extreme disaster for the local population. Two years later, inscriptions recounting the history of the site and hall were carved, and in 567 the stone column was erected. The inscriptions were placed on its wider sides. At the top was the three–bay-by-two building, perhaps a replica of a Buddhist structure of the sixth century. This unique *shishi* combines several purposes: commemorative, Buddhist, and, because of its location next to a tomb, probably also funerary. The only objects with which Yicuihui column has been compared are also funerary – namely, the monumental columns, some with inscriptions carved on placards on their lower portions, found along the spirit paths of tombs of rulers of the Southern Dynasties in the vicinities of Nanjing and Danyang county, Jiangsu. They stand in pairs together with the above-mentioned *tianlu*. None of the Southern Dynasties pillars has a Buddha hall at the top.

![Figure 8. Yicuihui Pillar, Dated 567](Dingxing, Hebei province. Line drawing; after Liu Dunzhen wen ji 劉敦楨文集 (Beijing: Zhongguo yingzao gongye chubanshe, 1984) 1, p. 44.)

86 The major study of Yicuihui pillar is Liu Dunzhen 劉敦楨, “Dingxingxian Bei Qi shizhu 定興縣北齊石柱, Zhongguo yingzao xueshe huikan 中國營造學會彙刊 5-2 (1934), pp. 28–66.

87 For illustrations and information about these pillars and other stone images, see Yao Qian 姚遷 and Gu Bing 古兵, eds., Nanchao lingmu shike 南朝陵墓石刻 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981), and Nanjing Bowuyuan 南京博物院, “Jiangsu Danyangxian Huqiao, Jianshan liangzuo Nanchao muzhang” 江蘇丹陽縣胡橋·建山兩座南朝墓葬, *WW* (1980.2), pp. 1–17.
In the fifth and sixth centuries, the dominant purposes of shishi were funerary, commemorative, and the locus of ceremonies to the ancestors. The container aspect of shishi, for precious items, more common in Han writings, had not been lost: probably it was implicit in the other three aspects of shishi. New in the fifth and sixth centuries was the funerary aspect. In addition to empress-dowager Wenming’s designation of her tomb as Yonggu shishi, rulers of the next two dynasties in northeastern China came to carve their tombs into natural rock. Gao Huan, the military leader who began his career as an official of the Northern Wei, helped put Xiaowudi on the throne, later moved his power base to Ye, and established the Eastern Wei dynasty in 534 (rather than overthrow the Northern Wei and put himself on the throne in Luoyang), is believed to have been buried in a Buddhist cave.

An important patron of the Xiangtangshan caves, when Gao Huan died, his son and successor, Gao Deng, is said to have had him buried “above” a Buddha image in a cave. Another passage points to reburial of Gao Huan together with his wife empress Lou and second son, Gao Yang, in triplet caves at North Xiangtangshan.

Families with as many political enemies as the Gao had reason to mislead potential grave desecrators in documents as well as in actuality. The important point is that burial occurred in a shishi, here, a chamber carved into natural rock. The practice of burial in a cave-temple was

---

88 This paper focuses on references to shishi from histories of the Northern Dynasties and prior. Yet it should be stated that references in other standard histories and in Taishô Tripiṭaka support the meaning and usages of shishi discussed here. E.g., Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–72) and Song Qi 宋祁 (998–1061) et al., Xin Tangshu 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) 13, p. 345, indicate that a shishi was built in the funerary precinct (qinyuan) for the storage of spirit tablets and at the time of the di and xia sacrifices (both performed to the imperial ancestors), the emperor made sacrifices there.

89 Gao Huan’s biog. is at Bei Qishi 北齊史 1–2.


91 For discussion of the sources, see Soper, “Imperial Cave-chapels.”

continued for empress Yifu 乙弗, wife of Western Wei (535–550) emperor Wendi, who was interred in 540 in a cliff tomb beneath Cave 43 at Maijishan 夷穀山. 93 Perhaps burial in Buddhist caves was influenced by the Han practice of burial in cliff tombs.

Stone sarcophaguses, also named (shishi), fashioned to resemble houses or temples, also were used in the fifth and sixth centuries. The function of this kind of shishi, of course, is uncontested, whereas movement and deterioration of bones and other remains in a cave in the course of 1,500 years render it harder to confirm how widespread the practice of human burial in caves might have been. In China, sarcophaguses usually were placed in the conventional subterranean burial spaces. There is not consensus about whether the inspiration for those that looked like buildings was secular or religious. The number of shared features in timber-frame houses and temples is such that a case that looked like buildings was secular or religious. The number of spaces. There is not consensus about whether the inspiration for those cophaguses usually were placed in the conventional subterranean burial spaces. There is not consensus about whether the inspiration for those that looked like buildings was secular or religious. The number of shared features in timber-frame houses and temples is such that a case can be made for both possibilities. 94 Proof that it was one or the other, of course, would inform us about the ideology of container burial. 95 Northern Dynasties tombs have yielded more house- or temple-shaped shishi from the fifth and sixth centuries than other parts of China, and so far, most of the occupants of coffin-shishi are identified as non-Chinese.


94 Well-known and well-published sarcophaguses with features of timber-frame architecture are numerous. Tang examples include the sarcophagus of Li Jingxun 李靜訓 and other stone examples in the Shaanxi Provincial Museum, Xi’an. Liao examples have been excavated in Tomb No. 3 at Daiqintalasumu 代款塔喇蘇木, Keyouzhongqi 科右中旗, Inner Mongolia, in Beipiao 北票, Liaooning, in Balinyouqi 巴林右旗, Inner Mongolia, and at Yemaotai 营業台, Liaoning. The Tang examples are illustrated in publications by the Shaanxi Museum, and other books that focus on archaeological treasures of the Tang period in Xi’an. On the Liao sarcophaguses, see Zhou Hanxin 周震新 and He Si 喜斯, “Keyouzhongqi chutu Liaodai muguanshi ji shichuang qianxi” 科右中旗出土遼代木棺室及石床淺析, in Wei Jian 魏堅, ed., Nei Menggu wenwu kaogu wen ji 内蒙古文考考古文集 (Beijing: Zhongguo Dabaike quanshu chubanshe, 1997) 2, pp. 597–79, and Cao Xun 曹汛, “Yemaotai Liaomuzhong de guanchuang xiaozhang” 营業台遼墓中的棺床小帳, WW (1974–12), pp. 49–62.

95 The piece-by-piece resemblance between a coffin such as Li Jingxun’s and the main hall of Nanchan Monastery, both Tang period, and between the Yemaotai sarcophagus and Buddhist halls at Geyuan and Hualin monasteries, in Hebei and Fujian, respectively, all three 10th c., suggest to me that by the Tang period, the intent was burial in a temple. I discuss the Liao cases briefly in “The Architecture of Liao and Underground Resonances,” in Hsueh-man Shen, ed., Gilded Splendor: Treasures of China’s Liao Empire (New York: Asia Society, 2006), pp. 40–53. For the period discussed here, the evidence is less clear due to the lack of extant residential or religious wooden architecture.
In 477, four years before emperor Xiaowen and the dowager took their walk at Fangshan, Northern Wei official Song Shaozu 宋紹祖 was buried in a stone sarcophagus in a brick tomb in the Pingcheng 平城 capital, today Datong. Three-bays-by-two, the proportions are those of the shrine atop Yicihui stone pillar. A portico is formed as an additional front bay of the sarcophagus by four octagonal pillars, each, like the pillars that support the Yicihui stone house, of uneven sides and lodged in a lotus-flower pedestal (figure 9). Another stone sarcophagus, found in an undated Northern Wei tomb in Zhijiabao 智家堡 in the southern suburbs of Datong, also is three-bays-by-two. A stone structure, perhaps offering shrine and perhaps sarcophagus, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, dated to the sixth century in the Northern Wei period, is, by virtue of materials and shape, a shishi.

Buried in the vicinity of Pingcheng under Northern Wei rule, and possessing tombs of the size and materials they did, one may assume that Song Shaozu and the occupant of the Zhijiabao tomb followed burial practices in vogue under the Tuoba-Wei. The occupants of four other famous shishi, Kudi Huiluo 庫狄迴洛, Ning Mao 寧懋, Yu Hong 盧弘, and Sir Shi 史 included a member of Northern Qi nobility and a Sogdian official (of the title sabao 薩保) working in China under the Northern Qi, Northern Zhou, and eventually Sui who unified China in 589.

Based on these examples, Wu Hung raises the possibility that stone sarcophaguses might have

---

99 On Kudihuiluo’s tomb see Wang Kelin 王克林, “Bei Qi Kudihuiluo mu” 北齊庫狄迥洛
been a burial preference of peoples of the Northern Dynasties leading up to Sui. Stone-faced subterranean tombs, as mentioned above, were common in Koguryó at the same time. The use of shishi atop pillars cannot be called widespread, but the sole evidence, Yichui pillar, stands in northern Hebei. In fact, the evidence from the Northern Wei and Northern Qi, and from Datong specifically, leads one to consider if empress-dowager Wenming’s desire for burial in yonggu shishi might not have referred to a stone container for her corpse inside her tomb of the also permanent material of brick, and if members of the Gao family and empress Yifu were not encased in stone coffins, or shishi, inside their rock-carved caves (shishi).

**ZUZHOU SHISHI**

None of the possible meanings of shishi – rock-carved chamber, worship space, place where precious items such as writings or documents are stored, ancestral temple, place for housing ancestral tablets, tomb, sarcophagus, or even house of incarceration – is inconsistent with the building at Zuzhou made of seven mammoth stones. Several of the meanings with implications of high potency in Chinese civilization such as associations with the Queen Mother of the West and her abode near Kunlun, mingtang, biyong, and lantai, probably had greater significance during the Han dynasty, as attested by the frequency of references to them in Han historical writings, and are less likely to have been considered if Abaoji was the builder of the shishi in Zuzhou. Some, by contrast, have been retained into modern times. Mullie’s...
STONE STRUCTURE IN ZUZHOU

information, that it at one time contained images, is especially consistent with a building of permanent materials in an ancestral prefecture. Still, no definition gives us cause to associate the Zuzhou structure with the first quarter of the tenth century. The main justification for linking the structure to Abaoji is its location. 102

Although we have no structural evidence of Abaoji’s tomb or those of his ancestors, the funerary city of his son and successor, Deguang, has been identified. Huazhou, located about thirty kilometers northwest of Zuzhou in Balinyouqi, according to one of the excavators was within view of the Liao capital Shangjing. Huazhou has been reconstructed as a walled enclosure with two building foundations. Excavators believe that Deguang’s tomb, Huailing, is three kilometers north between two mountains. 103 There was no stone house, but stone was the material used for the outer wall that enclosed the tomb precinct.

Still, we have no evidence that the house of stone, perhaps one of the most unambiguous uses of shishi, was a creation of a Khitan ruler. It seems just as likely that Abaoji decided to locate his ancestral city where he did because a stone chamber stood there already.

Of all the references to shishi, one from the fifth century may offer the most insight. According to Beishi, in the year 443 an emissary from the kingdom known as Wuluohou came to the Northern Wei court (in Pingcheng) and reported on the remains of a shishi to the northwest. 104 It measured 90 by 40 bu at the base and 70 chi in height. The chamber, he said, contained shenling, and people often came to it to make supplications. The emperor ordered an official, 105

102 Potentially, evidence that would support an association with Abaoji would be definitive information about his tomb site. Liaoshi places the tomb five li northwest of Zuzhou in a place replete with mountains and streams. Due to its location between two mountains and stone sculpture in the vicinity, a site has been proposed, but nothing there resembles a tomb. On Abaoji’s tomb, see Wang Yuping, “Nei Menggu Wenhuaju diaocha Liaodai Zuzhoucheng Liao Taizumu,” pp. 109–10; Zhou Jie, “Nei Menggu Zhaomeng Liao Taizuling diaocha sanji,” pp. 263–66; Liao Shangjing yizhi jianjie (Balinzuoqi: Balinzuoqi Wenhuaguan, 1983), pp. 8–11; and Wei Changyou, “Liaodai Zuzhou yu Zuling,” pp. 122–23. The aerial survey of southeastern Inner Mongolia, Nei Menggu dongnanbu hangkong sheying (pp. 122–23), confirmed a valley between two mountains, not the tomb itself.

103 On Huazhou and Huailing see Zhang Songbo, “Liao Huaizhou Huailing diaocha ji” (Beishi 94. p. 3132).

105 This word is crucial to understanding the passage and it is ambiguous. A standard way to translate shenling is spirits, but a more appropriate meaning here seems to be spirits capable of acting on others. In Grand Empress Dowager, p. 5, n. 5, Wenley takes the phrase to mean that the shishi was haunted.
Li Chang 李敞, to go there and make sacrifices. The official carved a prayer 祀 on the wall of the *shishi* and returned home.\(^{106}\)

Three important points are made in this passage. First, in the mid-fifth century a *shishi* large enough for a person to enter existed. Second, *shenling* were believed to reside in *shishi*. Third, *Beishi* informs us that Wuluohou was about twenty days journey southeast of Lake Baikal.\(^{107}\) This would place it in Chifeng county of Inner Mongolia, in the general vicinity of Zuzhou. Any place twenty-days journey from Lake Baikal, moreover, should be in the grasslands, so that if a *shishi* were desired, there might have been no choice but to make a freestanding structure. Finally, even if the *shishi* in Wuluohou territory was not the one inside the Zuzhou walls, the *shishi* published by Torii (figures 1 and 4) and other Japanese researchers (figure 5) may trace their histories to the fifth century or earlier.

It may never be known if Abaoji built the *shishi* that today stands in his ancestral prefecture, nor if it was there when he ordered the construction of Zuzhou. But if the existing *shishi* stood before his arrival, it probably was an incentive for construction of the ancestral prefecture around it. If so, the imperial Khitan show themselves to have been inheritors of the structures and perhaps the symbolism of non-Chinese peoples who populated the territory of their empire some five hundred years earlier.

\(^{106}\) Ibid., p. 5, n. 26, translates *zhu* as exorcism.

\(^{107}\) *Beishi* 94, p. 3132.