

Research Article

‘The Bells Are Harmonious and Resonant’: Numinous Ancestors, Resonant Bells and the Personhood of Lord Qiu of Zeng in Tomb M190 at Zaoshulin, Hubei

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Abstract

Although bronze bells from the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE) have been widely studied, their roles within their ontological contexts remain underexplored. This article integrates archaeological evidence, textual records and posthumanist theories to reconsider how the capacities of ancestors and bells were configured and how the personhood of living and deceased elites was embodied in the Zhou worlds. Focusing on the tomb (M190) of Lord Qiu of Zeng (r. c. 675–650/650–625 BCE), the study examines how the Zhou ontologies instantiated in this specific case. Qiu’s inscribed bell set was originally commissioned to emulate ancestral *de* and invoke their numinous power against the competing Chu state. However, the haphazard deposition of the bells and the deliberate disintegration of their rack in his tomb suggest a subsequent derealization of their capacities following the rapprochement between Zeng and Chu. In this funerary context, Qiu’s personhood was re-embodied alongside the reconfiguration of the capacities of ancestors, bells and burial goods, demonstrating how the relationship between the living, deceased, ancestors and ritual media shifted in response to changing historical circumstances.

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Introduction

The Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE) is widely studied partly due to its massive and still-growing corpus of inscribed bronzes, among which chime bells are some of the most researched bronze artefacts from this period (e.g. Falkenhausen 1994). Much research has been conducted on the typology, musicology, production and inscriptions of Zhou bells (e.g. Grundmann 2020; K. Li *et al.* 2024; Nagasawa 2017), which yield significant insights into their *chaîne opératoire*, functionality and representation. However, this body of research does not fully capture the alterity of Zhou ontologies¹ behind the production and use of bronze vessels, in which bronze bells were ritual media connecting ancestral and living members of a lineage. In other words, we should try to understand these past entities ‘on their own terms’ rather than through our constraining frameworks (*sensu* Latour 2005). A meaningful synergy of archaeology, classical and epigraphical records and posthumanist theories is crucial to achieve this aim.

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Nonetheless, this ontological turn in Zhou archaeology faces two significant challenges. Firstly, classical and epigraphical records have not yet been organically integrated into Chinese archaeology. The value of textual materials—many of which were compiled much later than the periods they record—is often either uncritically accepted or categorically denied (e.g. Falkenhausen 2006; F. Li 2009). Yet ontological statements within these texts remain largely dismissed or misinterpreted in archaeology and sinology. Secondly, recent approaches that are often grouped under posthumanism, such as object agency (e.g. Gell 1998; Latour 2005) and relational personhood (e.g. Strathern 1988; Wagner 1991), are not necessarily viable for understanding different worlds. Any unreflective application of these theories risks imposing our understanding of the modern condition onto other ontologies (Bessire and Bond 2014). Moreover, these theories often offer generalized understandings of the definitions and interrelations of humans and other-than-humans, thus overlooking their nuanced and changing relationship (Dekeyser 2024).

This article thus proposes that we should adopt a ‘more-than-literalist’ reading of the pasts. On the one hand, we should not forcefully dovetail artefacts and texts into our etic analytical frameworks, thereby subsuming them under a

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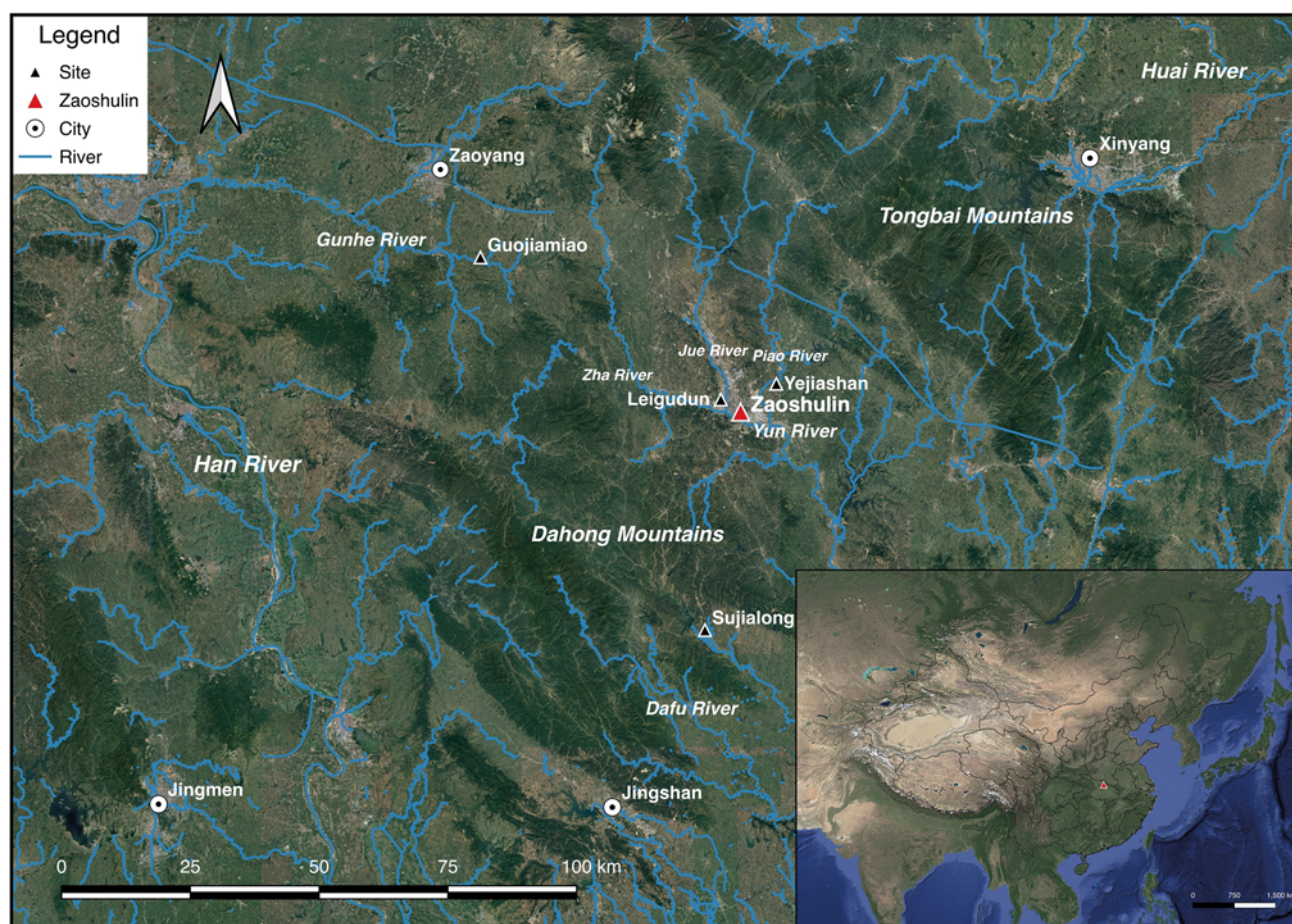


Figure 1. Maps of the Suizao Corridor and major Zeng sites (cemeteries). (Base map: Google Map.)

global, monolithic trend or pattern, or reducing them to mere representations deployed by human agents. Objects and texts also actively engage with and realize their worlds. On the other hand, we should also avoid the pitfalls of the ‘literalist’ or ‘non-representationalist’ approach (Alberti & Marshall 2009, 351–2), which claims to recover alternative worlds without mediation.² Since ontological claims by anyone are always made with certain intents and purposes, it is intellectually questionable to take any of those ‘literally’ (Keane 2013, 189; Palecek 2022). Furthermore, a world is never an unchanging, hermetic parameter that predetermines its entities, nor do these entities perceive and actualize the world in an identical manner (Deleuze 1988, 99). A more-than-literalist reading therefore aims to produce a fluid ‘ontography’ tracing variable capacities of different actors, and explore how they differentially actualize and create the potentials of their ontology.

This article first outlines the Zhou ontologies, concerning the capacities of ancestors and chime bells, and the embodiment of personhood during the Spring and Autumn (i.e. Chunqiu) period (c. 771–453 BCE). Then, it examines tomb M190 in the Zeng aristocratic cemetery of Zaoshulin, Suizhou, Hubei (Fig. 1), which belonged to Lord Qiu of Zeng (r. c. 675–650/650–625 BCE). These dates derive from the

calendrical notations of his bronzes, which correspond to two possible date ranges in the current calendrical reconstruction (see P. Zhang 1987). The tomb contained a rich deposit of burial goods, including his chime bell set, the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*.³ Cast in 677 or 646 BCE, this bell set was originally intended to materialize his emulation of numinous ancestors to invoke their power against the Chu state. However, the haphazard deposition of his bells and the intentional disintegration of their bell rack in his tomb around 656 or 625 BCE suggest a subsequent derealization of their capacities following the rapprochement between Zeng and Chu. In this funerary context, the personhood of Lord Qiu was re-embodied by a range of human and other-than-human actors during his funeral.

The Chunqiu period and the Zeng state

In the Zhou dynasty, present-day China was largely controlled by multiple regional states headed by different lineages—most branching out from the Zhou royal house. During the Western Zhou period (c. 1046–771 BCE), the Zhou kings adopted various strategies, including public rituals, rhetoric and (symbolic) violence, to incorporate these political entities into a Zhou-centred system (Grundmann 2019;

Vogt 2023). Although many polities were under the nominal rule of Zhou, interstate and interethnic conflicts were common (Y. Sun 2021). This Zhou-centred order was further fragmented after the defeat and displacement of the royal house from its western capitals in 771 BCE (F. Li 2006). During the Chunqiu period, while many socio-political institutions such as ancestral ritual and marriage alliance were still maintained (Falkenhausen 2006; Khayutina 2014), certain states also claimed hegemonic status and conquered other polities. The Chu state was one of the hegemonies in southern China: during this period, it expanded into Hubei, eastern Sichuan and northern Hunan, by subjugating numerous states and indigenous groups (Korolkov 2022, 43–73).

The Zeng state, historically known as Sui, was established in present-day northern Hubei since the early Western Zhou period (Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology *et al.* 2020). It was located in a narrow basin known as the ‘Suizao corridor’, where the Central Plain and the Yangtze River are connected (B. Chen 2019). In their inscriptions, the leading members of Zeng—who also shared descent with the Zhou royal house—had proclaimed that they were mandated to protect and lead southern China (Tse 2026). Zeng’s leading position in the south was challenged by the Chu state soon after the fall of the Zhou royal house, until Zeng was eventually overwhelmed by Chu in 640 BCE (*Zuo zhuan*: Huan 8.2, Huan 11.2, Zhuang 4.1, Xi 20.4).⁴ Nevertheless, at some point during the reign of Lord Qiu of Zeng, the Chu king gave his sister Mi Yu to Qiu in marriage. Archaeological and epigraphical records suggest that the amiable relations of both states were maintained ever since, though Chu had also exerted its influence over the Zeng state (Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology *et al.* 2020; 2023).

Although these political events appear to be human-driven historical processes, they were fundamentally situated within the worlds where human and other-than-human actors with varying capacities constantly interacted. It is necessary to reconsider ontology, capacity and personhood in the Chunqiu period in order to explore their interrelation.

Zhou ontologies, other-than-human capacities, and personhood in the Chunqiu period

Ontology in archaeology has often been defined as the ‘world’ or ground upon which agents act and comprehend; it is mainly concerned with ‘what there is’ rather than ‘how we know’ (Alberti & Marshall 2009, 344–6). This ontological turn aspires to recover independent, alternative worlds in their own right (Alberti 2016; Viveiros de Castro 2004). Nevertheless, such an approach often reproduces and projects the subjectivity and assumptions of modern Western society on to other worlds (Bessire & Bond 2014, 443). Positioned as omnipresent narrators, ontologists may oversimplify the complexity of other worlds, rendering them as docile, consumable Others within a discourse of multiculturalism (González-Ruibal 2019, 39–40; Nadasdy 2021). Furthermore, ontology is often hypostatized as a singular, bounded parameter, hence confining and

predetermining the multiplicity within a given ontology and the creativity of entities in actualizing their world (Harris & Robb 2012; Ramos 2012, 489). Therefore, this paper instead approaches ontology as an open-ended field of potentialities that conditions and enables entities to realize themselves innovatively into variable forms of being (Deleuze 1969, 196; 1988, 104–7). In this sense, ontography is a cartographic method for capturing a variety of entities and their individualistic trajectories within specific ontologies, rather than reifying our presupposed alterity of other worlds.

As seen in the textual evidence of the Chunqiu period,⁵ the Zhou worlds were co-constructed by the commitments of both the living and their ancestors to the Mandate of Heaven. During this period, the Mandate was often defined as the sovereignty of a state (Luo & Pines 2023, 13–17). Since Heaven would only favour those who manifested *de* 德, the inheritance of the Mandate was always revocable (*Shi jing*: ‘Wen wang’ Mao 235).⁶ *De*, often rendered as *mana*, power, or virtue (e.g. Boodberg 1979, 32–4; Kern 2009, 152), was rather a versatile concept roughly referring to *moral and behavioural standards or patterns* (Q. Wang 2025, 128–33). Demonstrating *de* required descendants to emulate their ancestors’ virtue and behaviour through political actions and ritual performance, thereby legitimizing their claims to the Mandate (Cook 2017, 157–62; Kryukov 1995, 316). Heaven and ancestors might then grant ‘grace’ to the living, though such favour was never guaranteed (Grundmann 2019, 159–71). At the same time, different human and other-than-human actors could understand the Mandate, grace, *de*, and its emulation very differently (Luo 2012, 14–16). Hence, relationships between descendants and ancestors were never static (Luo 2020). Furthermore, what we describe here as Zhou ontologies are not, and perhaps never were, unified and coherent (see note 1). This ontography only serves to outline the enabling conditions of action and capacity—particularly the emulation of *de*—among human and other-than-human actors; its instantiations must be examined through specific case studies.

Agency—whether understood as capacity of conscious individual or as emerging relational property—is also a contested concept. Some scholars argue that agency should be attributed solely to humans (e.g. Ribeiro 2016). But this view is problematic insofar as it assumes an unchanging anthropocentric, ‘canonical definition’ of agency (Sørensen 2018, 96). It also ethnocentrically presumes that consciousness, activeness and intentionality are the defining properties of agency across different worlds (e.g. Cassaniti 2025; Maqsood 2023). As Ribeiro (2019, 41) has noted, agency is ‘eminently historical’; there is no single model of agency generally applicable in every ontology. Instead, we should attend to the *specific modes different entities shape and realise their capacities* within a particular ontology; these capacities are variably configured by the same entities over time, who can influence other entities and even the world itself (Deleuze 1988, 106–11). Thus, what we examine under the term ‘agency’ is how specific capacities are realized by different entities within an ontological field.

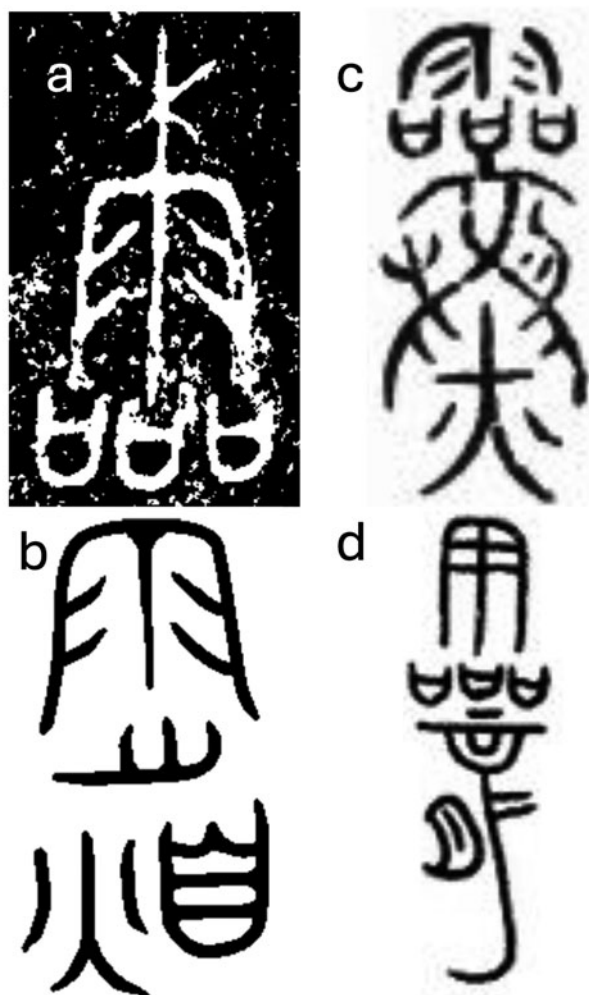


Figure 2. *Ling* on the chime bells of Lord Qiu of Zeng (a, b), Shu Yi (JC276) (c), and Marquis Yu of Zeng (d). (After Guo et al. 2020, 15, facsimile 2; Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology & Suizhou Museum 2014, 20, facsimile 4; IACASS 2001, 245, fig. 276.1b-6.)

There is no exact equivalence of ‘agency’ in the Chunqiu literature; rather, a range of different capacities is mentioned. For example, the active qualities of potent beings were often described through the notion of ‘numinosity’ (*ling* 靈) (Fig. 2), which refers to the supreme quality of ancestral spirits or political actors (e.g. *Jicheng* (hereafter JC) 276; cf. Cook & Goldin 2020, 260–63). *Ling* denotes a miraculous and positive capacity through which certain entities could influence the course of events (e.g. JC276; *Zuo zhuan*: Ding 4.3).⁷ To re-enact the *ling* of their ancestors, descendants were expected to narrate and perform histories shaped by such numinosity, with musical performance as one of the essential media. By contrast, the capacities of bronze bells are described as ‘resonance’ or ‘singing birdsong’ (*ming* 鳴) (e.g. JC262–70, cf. Cook 2017, 174–7). The analogy between bell sound and birdsong (see Fig. 3) was to denote its ability to reach the supernatural sphere inhabited by ancestors, as bird-form creatures were believed to transverse different realms (Falkenhausen 1994, 123–4; Sterckx 2002, 179). The *ming* of bells thus served as a sacrificial offering, enticing

ancestral spirits and facilitating the invocation of their numinosity (*Shi jing*: ‘Chu ci’ Mao 209; ‘Ji jui’ Mao 237). At the same time, Zhou bells have to be suspended and arranged in a graduated sequence on a rack in order to be played (Bagley 2005); their *ming* capacities were thus realized only within such configuration. As reflected in many Eastern Zhou (c. 771–256 BCE) tombs (Table 1), considerable care was taken to maintain the *ming* potential of bronze bells within burials through patterned deposition (see W. Zhang 2019). Then, the patterned burial of bells did not necessarily terminate their ritual function, but could rather sustain their *ming* capacities in one’s afterlife (see below). This study thus explores two forms of capacities: the *ling* of powerful persons, which influenced the human realm, and the *ming* of bronze bells, which mediated relations between living and ancestral persons.

In archaeology, personhood is often defined as the social condition or state of ‘being a person’; it is ‘attained and maintained through relationship’ with other entities (Fowler 2004, 4; 2016, 398). Nevertheless, Fowler does not adequately articulate the condition of ‘being’ and ‘person’, nor does he explore the capacities that such personhood might enable. In anthropology, personhood is generally understood as the recognized status or model of a relational being, whose social capacities are realized through culturally specific expressions and participations in social institutions (Appell-Warren 2014, 105–6; Mauss 1938, 268–72; Poole 1984, 215). However, this definition also risks conflating two types of personhood commonly discussed in the literature. The first is developmental personhood, which supposes a trajectory through which certain human actors grow or lose capacities following different stages of their lives (e.g. Poole 1984; Strathern 1988). The second is other-than-human personhood, which attributes a relatively stable status to non-human or superhuman entities, whose capacities are realized through engagement with human persons on specific occasions (e.g. Bird-David 1999; Hallowell 1960). Certainly, these are not fixed types of existence, but different configurations of capacities stabilized and stratified in variable ways; it is always possible for a person to transit between them. Personhood can therefore be reconceptualized as a *stratified embodiment of particular configuration of capacity*: a being is embodied as a person through the relations of stratified ritual expressions and material/social contents such as ritual instruments and other persons within specific settings (e.g. potlatch, funeral), which allows its capacity to be realized in varying degrees (Deleuze 1969, 39–40; Deleuze & Guattari 1980, 57–64). When circumstances change and an event such as death emerges, it requires the re-embodiment of persons and reconfiguration of their capacities to affirm and transform the event (*sensu* Deleuze 1969, 247).

According to the Chunqiu classical and inscriptional records, the personhood of the living—particularly elites—was developmentally constructed through relations with both human and ancestral persons, mediated by ritual bronzes, offerings and performances in ancestral sacrifices (see Cook 2017; Kern 2009; Luo 2020). In ritual performance and speech, a person had to assume a ‘figuration’ or ‘persona’ (Mauss 1938), often termed ‘*xiao zi*’ [little child]—whose *de*



Figure 3. Photo (left) and inscriptions (right) on the right striking surface of the chime bell M190:244 from Zaoshulin. A bird mark is inscribed on its striking surface. (Images from Guo et al. 2020, 16.)

was incomplete and insufficient. Through this figuration, a person could enact his ritual and political capacities,⁸ thereby emulating ancestors' *de* and invoking their numinosity (Cook 2017, 153–8). This configuration extended into burials: as seen in many Zhou tombs, the deceased would also be figured as a devout little child, with ritual bronzes and ceramics deposited to sustain ancestral rites in the afterlife (Hayashi 1993). On the other hand, ancestral spirits were embodied in superhuman figurations, though descendants often selectively emphasized particular aspects of these figurations according to their needs (Luo 2020; Tse 2026). Ancestral spirits were not omnipresent; they resided in either an underground realm (Poo 2011, 18–19) or in Heaven (e.g. Jin Hou Su zhong, cf. Cook & Goldin 2020, 216),⁹ and had to be summoned to the ancestral hall through ritual practices structured around bronze bells and vessels (Vogt 2023, 229–31). Whichever state was a Zhou person, he/she would always need rituals and ritual bronzes. Neither rituals or bronzes were independently sufficient, as they had to be

assembled and stratified in an ancestral ritual assemblage, in which the rituals—mediated by bronze bells and vessels—could embody persons into the figurations of little children and ancestors, thus enabling the re-enactment of numinous capacities.

Tomb M190 at Zaoshulin, Suizhou

The Zeng aristocratic cemetery at Zaoshulin, Suizhou dates to the middle Chunqiu period (c. 670/650–550 BCE). The tomb of Lord Qiu of Zeng (M190) was discovered during the 2018–19 excavation; it was the earliest first-level tomb in the cemetery. Located on a small mound, tomb M190 has the shape of inverted frustum, measuring 5.8–6.8 m in width and 8 m in length at ground level, with narrower dimensions at the bottom, 7 m below ground. A sloped ramp (roughly 5×12 m in size and 1.7–3.6 m in depth) is attached to the southeastern side of the tomb. The coffin-chamber at the centre measures 3.2×5 m in size and 1.2 m in height,

Table 1. Patterns of bell deposition in the Eastern Zhou period, showing the patterned arrangement required for realizing their *ming* capacities. Most bell sets were either aligned with a single direction (SD <25°) or associated with/suspended on a bell rack, suggesting maintenance of their configuration in burials. For details, see Supplementary Material.

Bell set	Number	Cemetery	Period	Pattern	Disturbance to the bells	Orientation (compass bearing)	Mean	SD
Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	21	Zaoshulin, Hubei	Middle Chunqiu	Unclear	–	007°–352°	145.89°	105.39
The funerary bells (Lord Qiu of Zeng)	13	Zaoshulin, Hubei	Middle Chunqiu	Two parallel lines	–	109°–134°	118.15°	10.98
M2:80–86; M2:87–116	7 29	Leigudun, Hubei	Early Warring States	Unclear; Two parallel lines	–	84°–104° 331°–334°	093.83° 332.4°	4.99 1.34
Zeng Hou Yi <i>bianzhong</i>	65	Leigudun, Hubei	Early Warring States	Hung on bell rack	–	–	–	–
Zeng Hou Bao <i>bianzhong</i>	15	Zaoshulin, Hubei	Middle Chunqiu	Two parallel lines	Severe	011°–355°	147.53°	99.99
M81:14	10	Zaoshulin, Hubei	Middle Chunqiu	Triangle	–	037°–339°	276.3°	93.6
Mi Jia <i>bianzhong</i>	13 6	Zaoshulin, Hubei	Middle Chunqiu	Straight line; Straight line	Slight; Severe	278°–329° 000°–300°	302.85° 120.67°	18.12 130.65
M1:32–33, 44–48; M1:34–43	7 10	Peng Lineage Cemetery, Henan	Late Chunqiu	Standing in a row; Straight line	–	– 277°–296°	– 285.2°	– 5.65
Zhongli Jun Bai <i>bianzhong</i>	9	Shuangduncun, Anhui	Middle–Late Chunqiu	Standing in a row	–	–	–	–
M6:18–26; M6:37–47	9 11	Xianrentai, Shandong	Late Chunqiu	Straight line; Three parallel lines	–	315°–316° 028°–082°	315.88° 046.45°	0.35 14.28
M5:61–68	8	Xianrentai, Shandong	Late Chunqiu	Straight line	Slight	198°–310°	226.88°	36.78
Chen Le Jun <i>bianzhong</i>	9	Zuiziqian, Shandong	Late Chunqiu	Straight line (with bell rack)	–	158°–215°	192.71°	19.90
M7:4–17, 52–62, 164–169	28	Luhe, Shanxi	Early Warring States	Square–U pattern	–	330°–000°	002.63°	21.54
M25:1–9, 111–119	14	Fenshuiling, Shanxi	Early–Middle Warring States	Unclear	–	060°–335°	185°	134.03
M269:10–27	18	Fenshuiling, Shanxi	Late Chunqiu	Straight line	–	276°–305°	292.61°	9.87
M270:21–37	17	Fenshuiling, Shanxi	Late Chunqiu	Straight line	–	221°–328°	308.64°	32.10
M1004:1–9	9	Shangma, Shanxi	Late Chunqiu	Originally standing in cluster	Severe	037°–278°	168.25°	126.91
M5218:17–20, 22	13	Shangma, Shanxi	Late Chunqiu	Standing in cluster	–	–	–	–
Wey Shu <i>bianzhong</i>	24	Taosibei, Shanxi	Late Chunqiu	Unclear	Severe	001°–345°	156.61°	96.49
2015M1:76–84	9	Taosibei, Shanxi	Late Chunqiu	Unclear	–	001°–345°	211.78°	145.20
M251:200–218	19	Jingshengcun, Shanxi	Late Chunqiu	Standing in a row	–	–	–	–

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Bell set	Number	Cemetery	Period	Pattern	Disturbance to the bells	Orientation (compass bearing)	Mean	SD
DIIM:1–8; DIIM:10–15	8 6	Jiunudun, Jiangsu	Late Chunqiu	Straight line; Straight line	– Severe	234°–315° 147°–354°	262.63° 292.25°	22.96 84.55
M3:1–6, 11–19; M3:7–10	15 4	Jiunudun, Jiangsu	Late Chunqiu	Straight line; Straight line	– –	029°–130° 119°–267°	114.06° 202.5°	24.61 61.41
Qin Zi <i>bianzhong</i>	11	Dabuzishan, Gansu	Early Chunqiu	Straight line	–	343°–013°	000.75°	9.34
M1:20–28	9	Xichuan, Henan	Late Chunqiu	Standing in a row	–	–	–	–
M10:68–80, 83– 84	17	Xichuan, Henan	Late Chunqiu	Originally hung on bell rack	–	–	–	–
M2:42	32	Tianxingguan, Henan	Late Chunqiu	Stacked next to disassembled bell rack	–	–	–	–
Instrument pit T615K8	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Three parallel lines (with bell rack)	–	193°–208°	197.96°	4.83
Instrument pit T594K5	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Hung in three rows (on bell rack)	–	–	–	–
Instrument pit T594K7	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Three parallel lines (with bell rack)	–	2°–40°	21.8°	11.6
Instrument pit T595K1	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Originally hung in three row (on bell rack)	–	–	–	–
Instrument pit T606K4	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Three parallel lines (with bell rack)	–	005°–020°	015°	4.19
Instrument pit T613K14	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Three parallel lines (with bell rack)	–	006°–028°	015.4°	6.13
Instrument pit T605K9	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Originally hung in three rows (on bell rack)	–	–	–	–
Instrument pit T615K16	24	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Three parallel lines (with bell rack)	–	350°–012°	357.17°	4.95
Instrument pit T566K17	14	Xinzheng, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Straight line	–	274°–295°	282.64°	9.15
M4:5, 7–11, 16– 17, 12–15, 21–24, 31; M4:18, 20, 25–27, 29–30, 33–40, 42–46	17 20	Ye County, Henan	Middle Chunqiu	Standing in lines; Three straight lines	– Slight	– 357°–062°	– 019.7°	– 18.58

while the nested wooden coffins inside measure 1.05–1.4 m width, 2.8–3.1 m length, and 0.75–1.1 m height (Fig. 4). Qiu's body inside the coffins has been disrupted, but he was likely oriented to the southeast to the ramp.

Upon excavation, the structure of M190 was still supported by lacquered wooden planks. Lord Qiu of Zeng was buried with bronze ritual vessels, chime bells and stones, harnesses and chariot parts, jade accessories, lacquerware and golden foils. In the coffin-chamber, the chime bells and stones were deposited in the northwestern quadrant, while food vessels were in the southwest. The bell rack and chime

rack were disintegrated; their better-preserved parts suggest that *they had been disassembled beforehand*. Although the southern portion of M190 was disturbed, the remainder of the coffin-chamber exhibits a compact, intact soil matrix and architectural integrity, which suggests that the observed arrangement largely reflects the original deposition pattern (see Supplementary Material). Therefore, the disordered deposition of bells and the disassembly of their rack cannot be entirely explained by post-depositional disturbance alone.

Apart from that, all jades were found inside the coffin, while eight lacquered bows were placed to its east. Other

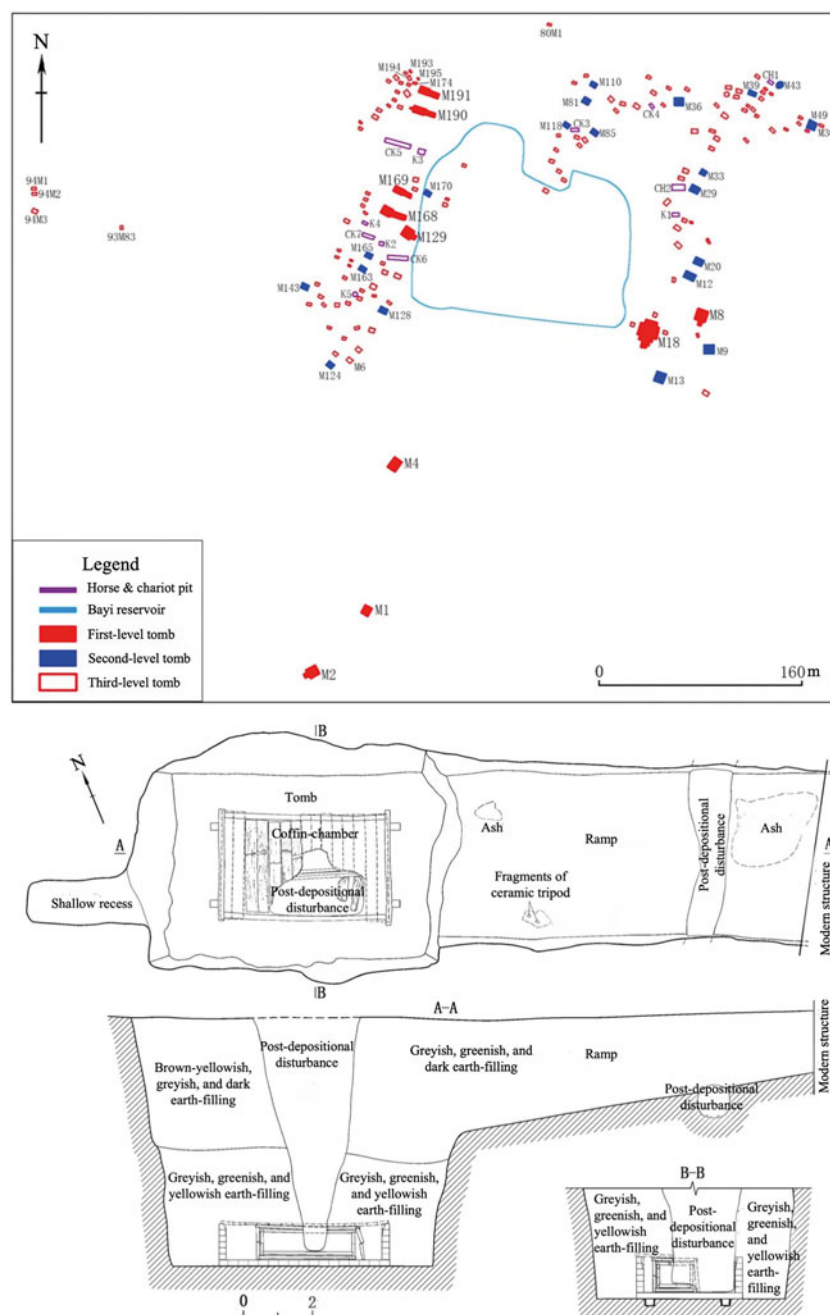


Figure 4. Site plan of the Zaoshulin cemetery (top) and top view and side view of the tomb M190 (bottom). (Modified after Guo *et al.* 2024, 70, fig.1; Wuhan University School of History *et al.* 2023, 31, fig.3.)

artefacts were distributed without a clear pattern (Fig. 5). The Marquis of Tang also commissioned several bronze vessels for Qiu's funeral, but they were eventually deposited in the tomb of his wife Mi Yu (M191). Additionally, a sacrificial chariot pit (CK5) and horse pit (K3), containing 12 chariot carts and 20 horses, have been found to the south of M190. All horses were killed before their burial, while chariots were kept intact in the pit before post-depositional disturbance.

The coffin-chamber likely suffered from an episode of post-depositional disturbance during the late Warring States period (c. 300–221 BCE), which severely damaged its southern and southeastern parts and the coffin. Upon excavation, the corpse of Qiu and some artefacts were severely disturbed and fragmented, potentially due to looting and/or symbolic

disruption prevalent during the Eastern Zhou period (e.g. Shi *ji* 66.2176, cf. Nienhauser 2021, 98–9). Nonetheless, most parts of the coffin-chamber remained undisturbed (Hubei Provincial Institute of Relics and Archaeology *et al.* 2020; Wuhan University School of History *et al.* 2023, 29–36).

The first chime bell set of Lord Qiu of Zeng (the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*)

The Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong* was likely the first set of chime bells commissioned by Qiu. Its calendrical notation allows it to be dated to 677 or 646 BCE. This bell set is formed with three graduated subsets: four flange-handle bells (*bozhong*), nine larger shank-handle bells (*yongzhong*) and eight smaller

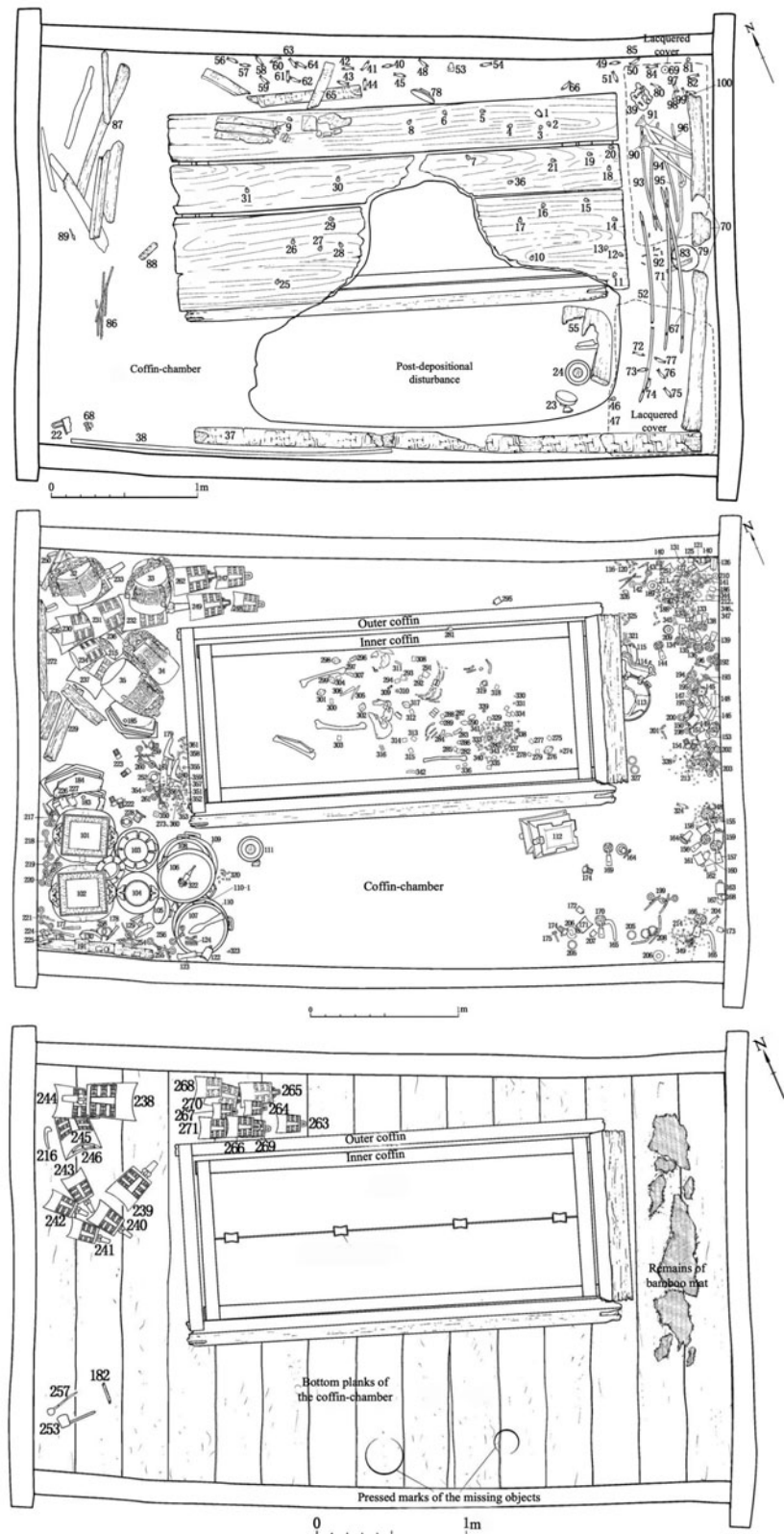


Figure 5. Tomb M190, from top to bottom. (Modified after Wuhan University School of History *et al.* 2023, 33–5, figs 5–7. For full catalogue, see Supplementary Material.)

shank-handle bells (see Table 2). The *bozhong* (Fig. 6a) are decorated with dragon and dragon-phoenix motifs across the surface, with flange-spines attach to all four sides. The *yongzhong* (Fig. 6b) are also decorated with dragon motif and

bird mark on the striking surface, with three rows of bosses around the spine. Their inscriptions are mostly on the undecorated parts of the striking surface (Wuhan University School of History *et al.* 2023, 46–66). A recent chemical

Table 2. Dimensions (cm) and weight (g) of the bronze bells of Lord Qiu of Zeng. (Data from Wuhan University School of History *et al.* 2023, 46–70.)

Object number	Typology	Bell set	Total height	Height without handle	Width between spines	Width between archs	Weight (g)	Position	Orientation (compass bearing)
M190:33	<i>Bozhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	58.5	40.7	30	27.3	19,340	NW	Standing
M190:32	<i>Bozhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	55.3	38.3	28.3	26.4	17,250	NW	Standing
M190:35	<i>Bozhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	54.1	37.3	28	25.8	14,000	NW	145°
M190:34	<i>Bozhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	50.5	35.4	26.2	24.1	12,780	NW	340°
M190:245	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	55.5	37.5	30.1	22.7	19,650	NW	127°
M190:232	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	52.8	35.8	28.2	22.1	19,350	NW	108°
M190:244	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	49.8	34	26.8	19.7	18,800	NW	127°
M190:236	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	49.4	33.5	26.6	19.5	19,850	NW	072°
M190:233	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	47.2	32.2	24.8	18.3	18,700	NW	081°
M190:239	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	36.5	23.7	18.7	13.8	8950	NW	067°
M190:234	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	34.6	22.2	17.2	13.1	8700	NW	086°
M190:242	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	25.8	16.2	12.3	9.3	3350	NW	137°
M190:241	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	23.2	14.6	11.2	8.3	3000	NW	138°
M190:237	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	55.4	37.6	29.7	22.6	20,100	NW	057°
M190:238	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	52.4	35.4	28.2	21.7	20,150	NW	294°
M190:235	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	49.9	34.1	26.7	19.8	16,500	NW	081°
M190:231	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	47.2	32.3	24.8	18.1	17,650	NW	088°
M190:246	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	36.2	23.3	18.4	13.6	8450	NW	007°
M190:230	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	34.5	22.5	17	13.5	8900	NW	101°
M190:240	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	26	16.4	12.3	9.6	3650	NW	146°
M190:243	<i>Yongzhong</i>	Zeng Gong Qiu <i>bianzhong</i>	24	14.5	11.3	8.3	2900	NW	352°
M190:262	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	34	26.9	21	16.1	5400	NW	103°
M190:270	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	32.4	25.6	20.1	14.6	4900	NW	134°
M190:265	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	31.1	24.8	18.7	13.1	3700	NW	106°

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Object number	Typology	Bell set	Total height	Height without handle	Width between spines	Width between arches	Weight (g)	Position	Orientation (compass bearing)
M190:249	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	28.8	23.2	17.4	12.4	3400	NW	102°
M190:248	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	24.9	20.5	16.1	11.7	3000	NW	121°
M190:268	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	24.5	19.9	15.4	11.3	2700	NW	125°
M190:247	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	23.3	18.9	14.2	10.6	2600	NW	109°
M190:271	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	21.4	17.2	13.3	9.3	2050	NW	127°
M190:266	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	20.7	16.6	13.4	9.1	2100	NW	126°
M190:263	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	19.4	15.4	12.3	8.4	1850	N	125°
M190:269	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	16.5	13.2	10	7	1350	NW	126°
M190:264	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	14.9	11.7	9.2	6.4	1050	NW	107°
M190:267	<i>Niuzhong</i>	The funerary bells	14.2	10.9	8.6	6.1	950	NW	125°

analysis indicates that the recesses and inscriptions of the *yongzhong* were originally inlaid with quartz (H. Chen pers. comm., 2026; Gao *et al.* 2024).

The following translation of the inscriptional text of the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong* is adapted from Tse (2026, 11–15):

It was in the King's fifth month, the auspicious day of *Ding Hai* (i.e. day 24 in the sexagesimal cycle), Lord Qiu of Zeng said: 'In the past, my greatly manifest High Ancestor was able to assist and act as a counterpart for Kings Wen and Wu (of Zhou); pure was Bo Kuo, [he] conducted carefully and possessed *de*, assisting and serving the Deity Above, [thereby he] continued and received manifold blessing, and aiding and assisting the Great Zhou. The Numinous Spirits hear the sound of metal (i.e. bronze bells),¹⁰ [thereby] receiving such great peace. [I] greatly manifested their numinosity,¹¹ and made an all-out effort with reverence.

'The king hosted us at the Kang Hall, summoned [the Chief Governor, he] commanded the August Ancestor to establish (his state) in the southern land, guard the southern gate of Cai, cautiously build the ancestral hall, and lead the east of Han River. The South [originally] had no boundary, [but my August Ancestor] crossed the river, attacked Huai barbarians, and reached Fanyang.' [Qiu] said: 'King Zhao [of Zhou] journey southwards, [he] issued mandates on Zeng: "Fulfill all our decrees/affairs and aid and assist the Great Zhou. [Hereby I] grant you yue-axe to govern the south." The glory of Nan Gong, is heard/known in the struck sound [of bells];¹² [he] ascends and descends above and below, protecting and making his descendants prosper.'

[Qiu] said: 'Alas! Worried am I a young Little Child. I have received no assistance, my conduct/virtue is my great concern. [May my ancestors] grant me boundless graces, making me a match to the

Heaven's magnificent graces. [May] the blessing of Wen and Wu be fulfilled and celebrated. [May] blessing and fortune come day by day, restoring/protecting the boundary of my land. I have selected the auspicious bronze-making copper and smelted hard metal to make myself harmonious bells [as] sacrificial vessels in the ancestral hall. Bright and soothing [they are], the bells are harmonious and resonant/singing birdsong, to make offering to my August Ancestor Nan Gong, extending to Lords Huan and Zhuang, to pray for everlasting life, extended longevity without limit, and [may these bells be] forever treasured and used for offering.'

In tomb M190, these bells were oriented to different directions, with two *bozhong* (M190:32–3) standing upon other *yongzhong* (Figs 5 & 7). The compass bearings of the non-standing bells range from 007° to 345°, with a sample standard deviation (SD) of 93.73 (Tables 1 & 2). The bell rack was found in fragmentary state upon excavation. The fragments of the bell rack (e.g. M190:37, 87, 250, 272) were scattered all over the coffin-chamber, which did not match the deposition pattern of the bells in M190.

Other burial goods from tomb M190 at Zaoshulin

Additionally, Qiu commissioned a funerary bell set consisting of 13 ring-handle bells (*niuzhong*) (Fig. 8a). The calendrical notation 'the King's first month, the first auspicious of *Ding Hai*' can date to 656 or 625 BCE (cf. P. Zhang 1987, 133, 139). Their inscriptions indicate that these bells were intended for use in his afterlife. Although stylistically similar to the *yongzhong*, the funerary bells are notably inferior in both size and craftsmanship (Wuhan University School of History *et al.*

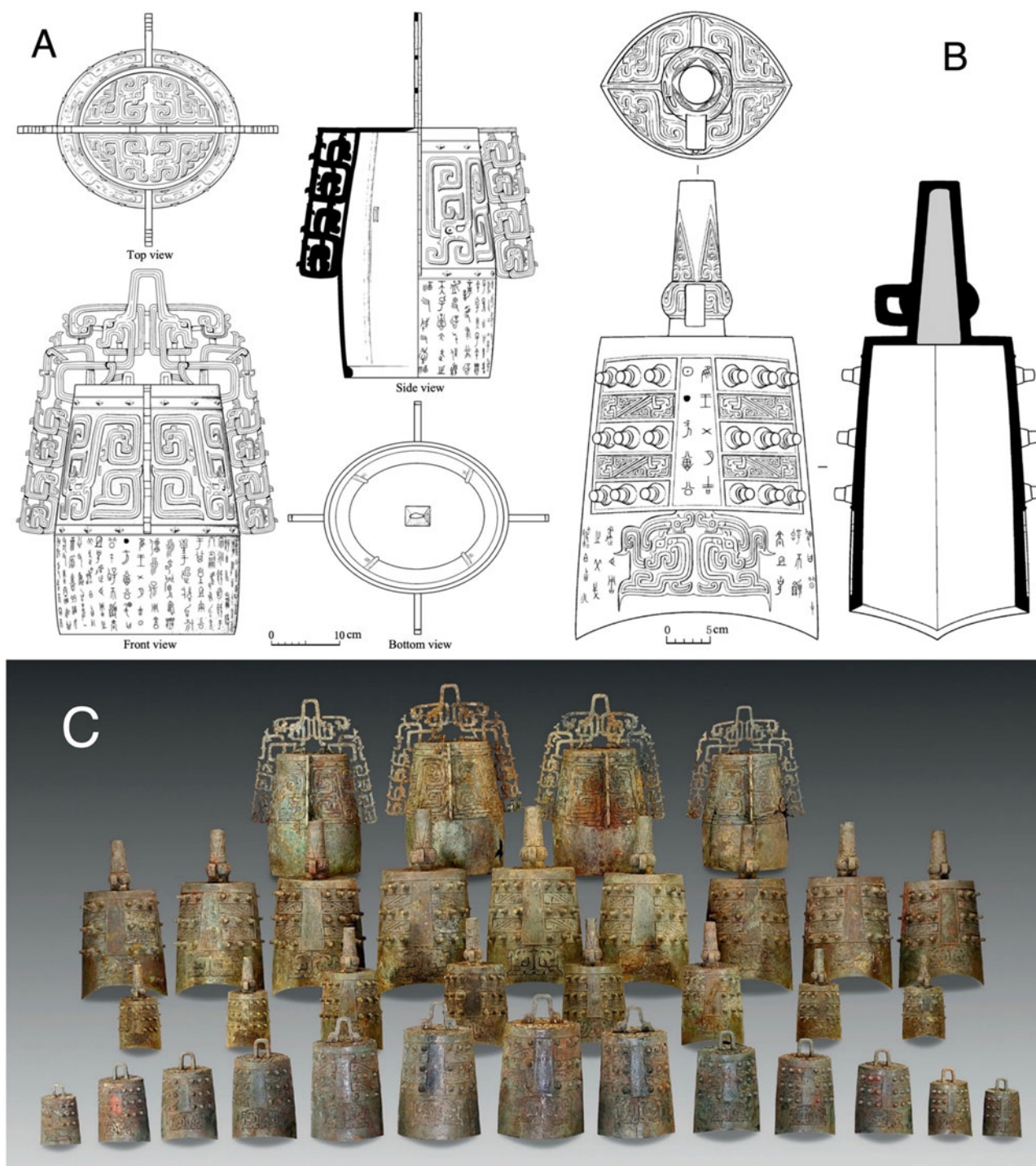


Figure 6. *Bozhong* (A) and *yongzhong* (B) of the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*, and the whole bell sets in M190 (C). (After Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology & Suizhou Museum 2020, 79, fig. 9; Wuhan University School of History et al. 2023, 47, 58, figs 16, 26.)

2023, 66–70). In tomb M190, they were consistently oriented southeast, with compass bearings ranging from 109° to 134° and a SD of 10.98 (Table 2; Fig. 7).

Qiu also commissioned at least five cauldrons, two square vases, four round vases, a washbasin, a hand-washing jug and a *fu* (frustum-shaped vessel) (Fig. 8b–d) at the same time, although the lids of two round vases were commissioned by his wife, Mi Yu. Upon excavation, animal

bones, fruit stones and chariot fittings were found in the cauldrons. Most vessels are exquisitely decorated with geometric motifs and chimeric animal forms. The nested cauldrons and vases were arranged in an orderly manner within the tomb and are dedicated to his ancestors, '[from] Nan Gong to Lords Huan and Zhuang', on the 'the first auspicious [day] of *Ding Hai*' (Wuhan University School of History et al. 2023, 36–46).

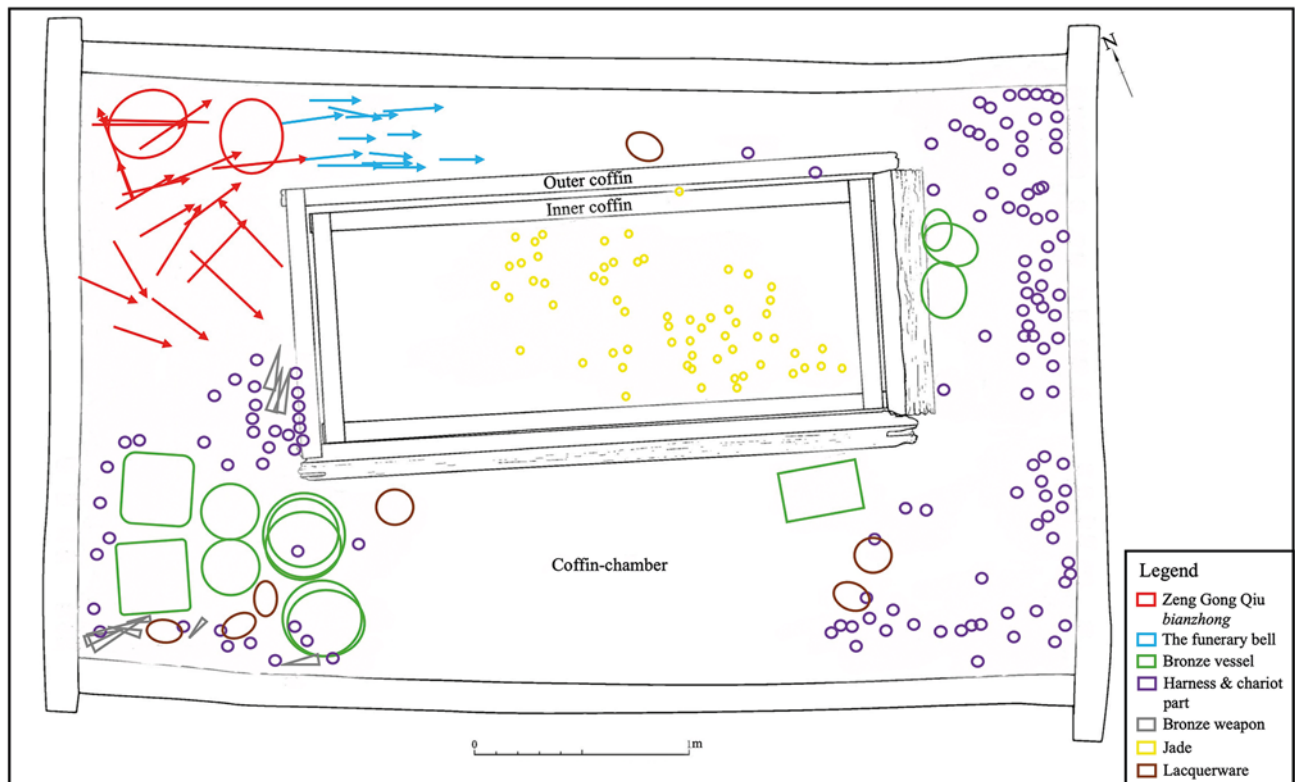


Figure 7. Artefact locations in M190. Colours signify categories: bronze vessels (green), harness and chariot fittings (purple), weapons (grey), jades (yellow), and lacquerware (brown). Bell orientations are shown by arrows; red: Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*; blue: funerary bells. (Adapted from Wuhan University School of History et al. 2023, 34–5, figs 6–7.)

Discussion

Ancestral de, numinous ancestors, resonant bells and the personhood of Lord Qiu of Zeng

As indicated by its calendrical notation, the bell set of Lord Qiu of Zeng (the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*) was cast in 677 or 646 BCE. The bells were essentially dedicated to ancestral sacrifice, particularly Bo Kuo ('Kuo the Elder') and Nan Gong ('the Lord of the South'). Their inscriptions, or underlying *Urtext*, likely served as invocative prayers recited in ritual sacrifice to 'grasp ancestral *de*' (Cook 2017; Kern 2009). While the emulation of ancestral *de* through incantation and performance was widespread in the Zhou period, Qiu had also extended such emulation into the material form of the bells themselves. His selection of shank-handle (*yongzhong*) and flange-handle bells (*bozhong*) might have been intended to replicate the preference of his distant ancestor, Marquis Kuan of Zeng (r. c. 977–957 BCE) (Fig. 9),¹³ who can potentially be identified as 'Nan Gong' in the inscriptions (Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology & Suizhou Museum 2020). Through this combined ritual and material emulation, Qiu presented himself as adequately modelling after the illustrious patterns of Zeng's ancestors, thus demonstrating his moral capability to inherit the mandates—understood here as the right to govern southern China—from the Deity Above and Zhou kings. In the inscriptions, Qiu expresses the expectation that his ancestors

and Heaven will grant him 'graces', a generic statement across the Zhou worlds (e.g. JC262–70; Jin Hou Su *zhong*). Nonetheless, he proceeds to direct such anticipated blessings towards the restoration or protection of Zeng. It thus demonstrates that, while political elites such as Qiu operated within established frameworks of rituals and *de* emulation within the Zhou worlds, they were also empowered by and creatively adapting these rules, through which they could realize new political capacities in response to changing circumstances.

The numinous ancestors (i.e. Bo Kuo and Nan Gong) in Qiu's bell inscriptions are presented as the potent actors at critical junctures of the early Western Zhou period, including the Conquest of Shang (c. 1046 BCE) and King Zhao's southern campaigns (c. 960–957 BCE). Here, Qiu positions his ancestors not only as loyal supporters of the Zhou kings, but also as flawless persons who shared the Mandate of Heaven with the kings and exercised their *ling* [numinosity] to shape the course of history. Although ancestral persons were capable of transcending multiple realms, their presence had to be invoked through ritual performance in the ancestral hall. For Qiu, such invocation relied heavily on the *ming* [resonance or birdsong] of musical media. To attract and engage these ancestral persons, their histories had to be recounted through the recitation of prayers accompanied by the ornithomorphic sounds of the bells. This may explain why the inscriptional text repeatedly emphasizes sonic qualities

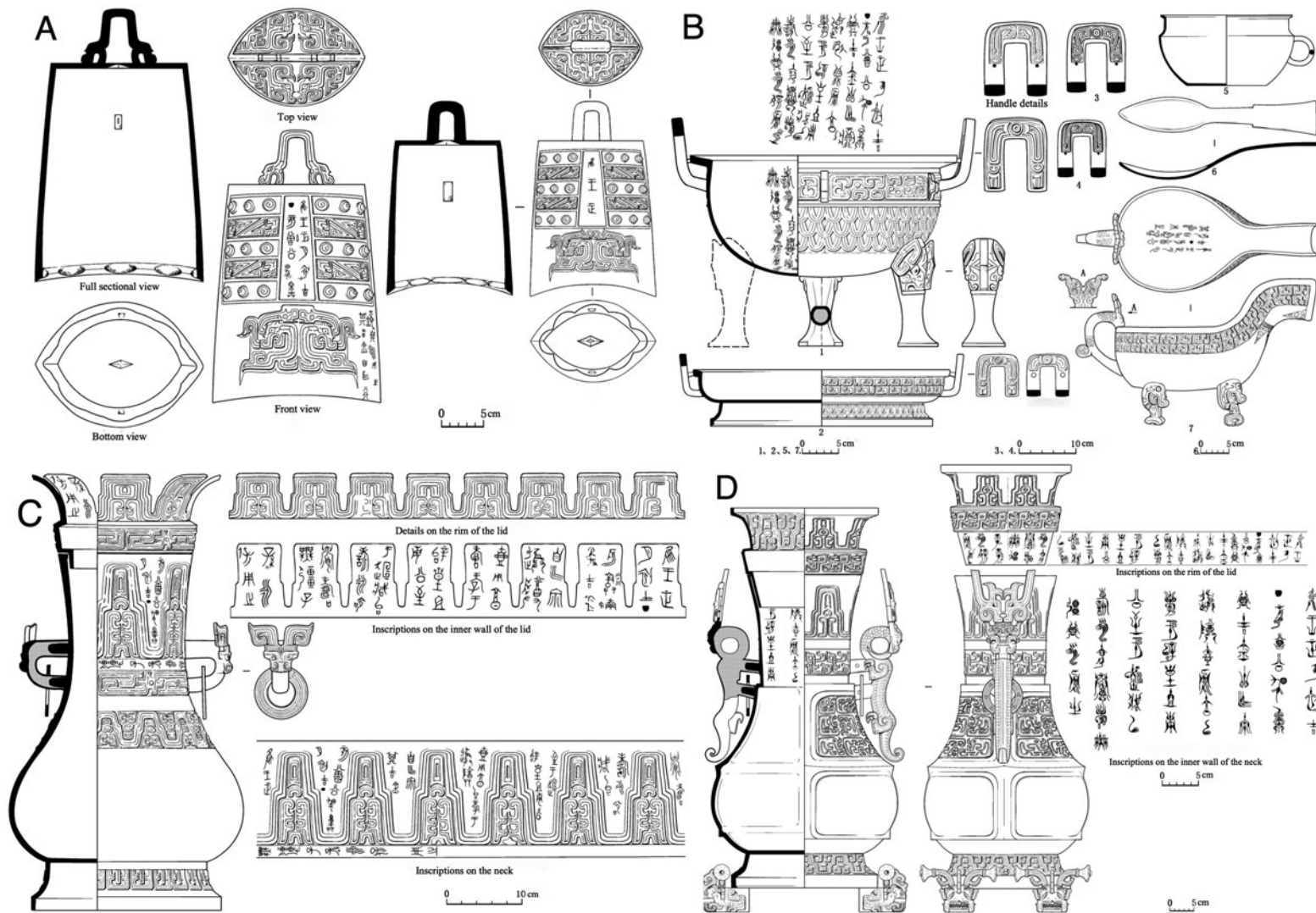


Figure 8. Niuzhong (A), cauldron (B, 1), washbasin (B, 2), ring-handle cup (B, 5), ladle (B, 6), hand-washing jug (B, 7), round vase (C); and square vase (D) in M190. (After Wuhan University School of History et al. 2023, 37, 41–2, 67, figs 8, 11–12, 34. For their inscriptions, see Supplementary Material.)



Figure 9. The bells from the tomb of Marquis Kuan of Zeng at Yejiashan, Suizhou. (After Hubei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology & Suizhou Museum 2020, 54, fig. 56.)

rather than the physical form of the bells. Whereas the tonal properties of the *bozhong* remain unclear, the attuning troughs and bird marks on the *yongzhong* (Figs 3 & 6) suggest that they functioned as proper musical instruments. The luminous quartz originally inlaid on the *yongzhong*'s surface, along with the dragon and phoenix motifs on the bells, might facilitate the transmission of music towards the supernatural realm (Sterckx 2002, 177–81). Notably, the bell inscriptions are only legible under close inspection, as they are inscribed in minuscule size and the wrong order (Škrabal 2020). This suggests that the inscriptions on the bells were not primarily designed to be readable, but rather to be 'audible' to the numinous spirits. Since most of the characters are inscribed on the striking surface of the bells (Fig. 6), the inscribed message might have been able to spread along with the music to another realm (Khayutina 2003). It suggests that the *ming* capacities of bronze bells was closely linked to the invocation of the numinosity of his ancestors.

While the bells had the capacities to resonate with ancestral spirits, they ultimately served as media through which Lord Qiu of Zeng—the 'speaking' person of the inscriptional text—relationally constructed his personhood as Lord of Zeng. In the inscriptions, he assumes the figuration of a 'little child' to address his ancestors. Curiously, unlike most of his contemporaries (e.g. JC262–70: Jin Gong *pen*; cf. Cook 2017, 180–81), he does not emphasize personal achievements, but presents himself as self-effacing and devout, and bemoans his isolation and helpless situation. His statement could be a realistic or reserved reflection, but it could also be an attempt to model his own person after his numinous ancestors. In his inscriptions, his ancestors are portrayed as pious, obedient and respectful figures who carried out the mandate from the Heaven and Zhou kings, while Qiu fashions himself as a devout, humble, and reverent 'little child' striving to secure such mandate. This manner of self-presentation was prevalent in the Western Zhou (see Cook 2017, ch. 3), and Qiu's use of archaizing vocabularies further aligns with this traditional mode of figuration (Tse 2026, 15–16). As discussed above, his inscribed bell set was likely a material strategy of emulation recalling the antique bells of his ancestor Nan Gong—though broader trends in bell consumption during the Chunqiu period might have influenced his choice as well (W. Sun 2022, 35; Tse 2026, 20–21). His emulation was to invoke the numinosity of his accomplished ancestors, one of whom had potentially assisted in King Zhao's military campaigns against Chu (JC949, cf. Cook & Goldin 2020, 53–4). By closely modelling his

embodiment of personhood with that of his ancestors through the ritual expressions of archaizing prayer, emulative figuration and musical performance within the assemblage of ancestral ritual, Qiu ultimately sought to reconfigure his own capacities after the *ling* of his ancestors, and channel it against the looming threat posed by the Chu state. It indicates how the embodiment of personhood was inherently connected to the configuration of specific capacities of a person. Such embodiment and configuration were not static, but constantly reworked throughout and after his life.

Becoming ancestor, reconfiguring other-than-human capacities, and re-embodiment person in Qiu's funeral

The inscriptions of other ritual bronzes in tomb M190 indicate that Qiu's funeral was held around 656 or 625 BCE, approximately 21 years after the commissioning of his first bell set. In addition to the bells, Qiu was buried with five cauldrons and four vases, all dedicated to 'Nan Gong to Lords Huan and Zhuang'. This array of bronze vessels had been deposited in an orderly arrangement, with some still containing food remains. Funeral is commonly understood as the ritual that transforms the personhood of the deceased into ancestorhood. It is likely that these bronzes were first used in sacrifices to the deceased during the funerary processes for facilitating this personhood transformation (Thote 2009, 124). At the same time, they were also used to re-enact the ritual sacrifice once conducted in ancestral hall within the coffin-chamber, assembling the deceased, ancestors and mourners together in a shared ritual setting (Z. Wang 2025, 109–10). Such re-enactment could serve to represent Qiu as a 'little child' within the lineage, allowing him to emulate ancestral *de* and sustain his personhood in the supernatural realm. But this performance also figured Qiu as a numinous ancestor, whose flawless image fabricated by this ritual paraphernalia would be remembered and modelled after by the participants, particularly subsequent Zeng leaders. Those who contributed bronzes to the funeral might likewise expect reciprocal blessings from Qiu (e.g. M191:7; see Supplementary Material). As reflected in his bronzes in M190 and other tombs, Qiu's ancestorhood appears to operate in two interconnected modes: on the one hand, he was positioned as a 'little child' to his earlier ancestors; on the other hand, he was a numinous ancestor whose blessings were sought and whose *de* had to be emulated. Ancestorhood in the Chunqiu period was therefore a relational, dynamic

state in which the deceased alternated between multiple roles within the lineage.

However, the capacities of Qiu's former bell set—the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*—had likely struck a dissonant note to the otherwise harmonious embodiment of his new personhood. Previously used to invoke ancestral numinosity in opposition to the Chu state, the *ming* capacities of these bells could be used to re-embodiment Qiu as a defender of the Zhou order and governor of 'barbarians' (including Chu),¹⁴ a position that became problematic after Zeng's marital alliance with Chu. As 'inalienable goods' tied to the donor and his/her lineage, such bells could neither be easily discarded nor exchanged (Cook 1997; Zuo *zhuan*: Huan 2.4). To resolve this dilemma, Qiu and his mourners appear to have 'deactivated' the *ming* capacities of his bronze bells in two ways. First, the rack of this bell set was disassembled into pieces and dispersed across the coffin-chamber (Wuhan University School of History *et al.* 2023, 34), while the bells were deposited in a disordered cluster without a clear arrangement. Second, Qiu commissioned an additional set of ritual bronzes, including ring-handle bells (i.e. the funerary bells), which were carefully deposited into two parallel lines and oriented southeast in a coordinated pattern (Table 2; Fig. 7). These new bronzes were cast on 'the first auspicious [day] of Ding Hai', which is the same sexagesimal date notated in the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*. The bronze vessels were also dedicated to the same group of ancestors, replacing the sacrificial function of his former bell set (see Supplementary Material). Notably, the deposition of funerary bells and vessels had strictly followed certain patterns. In other contemporary cultures, the burial of bronzes often removed them from ritual performance (e.g. Yao 2016, 158). However, within the Zhou ontologies, the patterned deposition of bronzes was precisely for continuing their sacrificial function. In this sense, the disordered deposition of the Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong* and the disassembly of its rack could be seen as an attempt to derealize the *ming* potential of this bell set, while other orderly deposited funerary vessels and bells—cast in the same sexagesimal date and dedicated to the same range of ancestors—were to compensate for the derealization of the former bell set and continue ancestral rituals in his afterlife.

These reconfigured other-than-human capacities were ultimately carried out by the re-embodied person of Qiu in relation to a host of humans and other-than-humans. Funerary practice in the Chunqiu period was not simply a means of reducing the individual to 'basic ritual dimensions' (Falkenhausen 2006, 299), nor merely a display of wealth status of the deceased (Cook 1997, 258–9). Rather, it was a process in which the ritual expressions and persons—along with material mediations—were mutually realigned in response to a person's death, transforming the deceased into an ancestor and turning his/her personal, physical death into a public, symbolic event (*sensu* Deleuze 1969, 174–9). As discussed above, the derealization of the *ming* potential of Qiu's former bell set meant that the numinous capacities of his ancestors could no longer be invoked by musical performance in the afterlife. The inscriptions on his funerary vessels and bells are also more concise, omitting the extended genealogical statement and self-presentation

found in the ritual speech represented by the former bell inscriptions. These neutralizing forms of ritual expressions thus embodied a more restrained and flattened figuration of Qiu within the tomb. At the same time, Qiu's embodiment as a Zeng lineage head and numinous ancestor was rather emphasized in his burial. In fact, many of his bronze vessels (Fig. 8b–d) are of exceptional quality, with finely executed decoration and, in some cases, inscribed with flamboyant 'bird script' on their interior surfaces, likely intended for pleasing an ancestral audience. Moreover, other participants such as Mi Yu and the Marquis of Tang had contributed to the bronze paraphernalia in his funeral (C. Chen 2022, 97), while weapons, lacquered bows and chariot fittings in his tomb, as well as the chariots and horses in the sacrificial pits, might have been donated by his allies and subordinates, as suggested by the bamboo-slip inventories from other Zeng and Chu tombs (e.g. Habberstad 2014). Thus tomb M190 and its contents were not simply an extravagant representation of Qiu's wealth or status, but a ritualized re-embodiment of Qiu's transformed personhood co-produced by Qiu, his ancestors, mourners from different states, and his burial goods, each enacting specific capacities within this funerary assemblage. Moreover, the presence of his tomb reshaped the surrounding world: his tomb and associated sacrificial pits were referenced by later burials through their spatial alignment and proximity, up until the late Warring States period (Fig. 4) (Guo *et al.* 2024). Thus, Qiu's funeral was also the foundational event in the creation of an ancestral landscape, where his person continued to be remembered and engaged by contemporaries and later generations (*sensu* Graham 2009). The funeral was therefore a ritual process through which the personhood of Qiu was re-embodied, allowing reconfiguration of capacities across Qiu himself, his ancestors, present and future lineage members, and ritual objects.

Conclusion: Towards a possible 'posthumanism' in Chinese archaeology?

Recent non-anthropocentric and posthumanist theories are immensely valuable in helping us move beyond the anthropocentric and ethnocentric epistemology of our discipline. However, these theories are themselves an assemblage of modern discourses and projects, shaped by particular political agendas and ethical concerns regarding modern Western conditions. When engaging with the archaeology of ancient China or other regions, it is therefore important not to impose these theoretical frameworks uncritically onto different worlds. A more-than-literalist reading offers a helpful alternative: it foregrounds the variable capacities of multiple modes of being within their worlds, and explores how different persons act creatively within specific assemblages and respond to particular events.

This article has revisited the definitions of ontology, agency and personhood, proposing that ontology can be understood as a dynamic field of potentialities, agency as historically configured capacities within this field, and personhood as the embodiment of such capacities. Drawing on Chunqiu classical and epigraphical texts, it has examined

the concepts of *ling* and *ming*—the former as numinous, positive capacities for reshaping history and the latter as the resonant or birdsong-like capacities of properly arranged bronze bells. Through rituals structured around bronze bells, a human individual, figured as ‘little child’, could relationally reconstruct his/her personhood in connection with ancestral beings.

Building on this framework, this article has investigated the changing capacities of Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong*, the role of Qiu’s ancestors, as well as the shifting personhood of Lord Qiu of Zeng across different historical contexts. The bells were originally cast as media for emulating ancestral *de* and invoking their history-shaping numinosity against the Chu state. However, in tomb M190, their haphazard deposition and the disassembly of their rack suggest a derealization of their *ming* capacities, likely in response to the changing political circumstance after Zeng’s rapprochement with Chu. Qiu and his mourners had also commissioned a new set of ritual objects that helped him to be re-embodied as an ancestral person, transforming his capacities in relation to his ancestors, lineage members, contemporaries, and future generations.

This paper draws attention to the other-than-humans that certain Zhou people regarded as the key participants of history. Such an approach does not ‘de-humanize’ the pasts, but ‘humanizes’ what we previously excluded from the category of ‘human’, thus recovering the vibrancy of worlds different from ours. As this analysis is based on a first-level tomb in an aristocratic cemetery, it reflects a highly specific configuration of capacities and embodiment of personhood among Zhou elites. This should be understood as one instantiation within the Zhou ontologies, which were differently expressed and shaped by actors across social strata and cultural groups. How such instantiations varied among non-elite or non-Zhou populations is an important question for future research.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0959774326100651>

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Notes

1 Although the Zhou ontologies have often been represented as a single, coherent entity in both received texts and archaeological/sinological literature, different ontologies in fact coexisted within and without the Zhou dynasty (e.g. Di Cosmo 2002; Y. Sun 2021; Yao 2016). The received texts also demonstrate how these actors perceive, understand, and change their worlds during the Chunqiu period, making their ontologies inherently divergent and discordant (Durrant et al. 2016).

2 The belief that we can have direct access to the alterity of other worlds is also a romanticist proposition that ultimately reinforces ‘Western’ elements and imaginations in our interpretations (Preucel 2021, 463).

3 *Bianzhong* means ‘set of bells’ in Chinese. The Zeng Gong Qiu *bianzhong* literally means ‘the set of bells of Lord Qiu of Zeng’.

4 The *Zuo zhuan*, or *Tradition of Zuo*, is a collection of historical commentaries and chronicle records based on the *Chun Qiu* or *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which cover the events that took place during 722–479 BCE. Although its compilation was completed no later than the fourth–third centuries BCE, most of the *Zuo zhuan* was likely written during the period it describes. Its citation format includes: (1) the posthumous name of the lord of Lu, (2) the year of their reign, and (3) the ordinal number of the concerned passage (Durrant et al. 2016, XVII–XCV).

5 Many of these received texts (i.e. the *Shang shu* and *Shi jing*), inscriptions and bronze artefacts functioned as media for ancestral rituals (Kern 2009). The *Zuo zhuan* was also compiled from dialogues and exchanges among a variety of political agents who have their own interests and purposes to be realized through such interlocution (Durrant et al. 2016). Therefore, these materials present the Zhou worlds with certain emphases and biases that must be taken into account (Keane 2013).

6 The *Shi jing* (*Classic of Poetry* or *Book of Odes*) is an anthology of poems with themes such as ritual, court life, and mythology. The received version—the *Tradition of Mao*—was compiled no later than the third–second centuries BCE, though many of these poems were likely originated and circulated during the Zhou period (Kern 2000). Citation of the *Shi jing* usually includes the title of the poem (in apostrophes), and its ordinal number within the *Mao* version.

7 The phrase ‘(thanks to) the numinous influence of somebody (以)某之靈’ frequently appears in the *Zuo zhuan*. It is to suppose or acknowledge somebody’s influence (e.g. *Zuo zhuan*: Xi 9.4). But this expression is sometimes used sarcastically (e.g. *Zuo zhuan*: Xi 28.3), or associated with disorder or misrule (e.g. *Zuo zhuan*: Xiang 2.2.).

8 Such capacities were termed ‘*xin*’ [heart/mind], which denoted the person’s agency in participating and maintaining commitment. *Xin* was the prerequisite of embodying ancestral *de*, and it required cultivation (Grundmann 2019, 263, 301; Q. Wang 2025).

9 Whether ancestors lived in the subterranean world or Heaven remained undetermined during the Chunqiu period (Poo 2011).

10 The character *ling* here is written with an ideograph that depicts a burning head (Fig. 2b). The character *sheng* has been generally rendered as ‘sage’ (e.g. Tse 2026), yet this interpretation ignores its ‘metal’ radical commonly referred to ‘bronzes’. *Sheng* can also mean ‘to hear’.

11 The character *ling* here is attached with radical ‘wood’ (Fig. 2a). This character likely indicates the state in which the *ling* of summoned ancestors being lodged in the wooden tablets in ancestral hall (see Luo 2020, 70).

12 The first character of this sentence bears no similarity to ‘*i*’ (yu 斂) nor ‘great’ (jun 駿) (contra Guo et al. 2020; Tse 2026). It is comprised of the components ‘horn’, ‘fire’ and ‘mallet’, which might indicate or be onomatopoeic to the sound of striking percussion instruments. ‘Horn’ (jue 角) was also one of the five basic tonal notes in early Chinese musicology.

13 For the issue of dating Marquis Kuan of Zeng, see Supplementary Material. Apart from Marquis Kuan, every Zeng figure before Lord Qiu preferred ring-handle bells (*niuzhong*) instead (see Tse 2026, table 1).

14 In the Western Zhou period, Chu was also seen as a group of barbarians (e.g. Shi Qiang *pan*; cf. Cook & Goldin 2020, 96–9).

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