Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women

Antiquity through Sui
1600 B.C.E.–618 C.E.

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An East Gate Book

M.E. Sharpe
Armonk, New York
London, England
Fu Hao: see Fu Zi, the Shang Woman Warrior

Fu Zi, the Shang Woman Warrior
Fu Zi, or Noble Daughter Zi (Noble Daughter surnamed Child), is the most distinguished and powerful woman known in Shang history (ca. 1600–1100 B.C.E.); she is commonly referred to as Fu Hao in received literature. She lived a full life as a prominent queen mother and favorite consort (consort may be taken to be wife here, although Fu Zi’s husband had more than one) as well as a heroic military leader, land-owner, and administrator. Fu Zi was the most prominent of three queens betrothed to King Wu Ding of the Late Shang period. Wu Ding allegedly ruled for fifty-nine years during the thirteenth century B.C.E. from ancient Yinxu (present-day Anyang), located in what is now northern Henan Province. Fu Zi was posthumously revered as Queen Mother Xin (Hou Mu Xin), as Mother Xin (Mu Xin), and as Ancestor Xin (Bi Xin). She was awarded the status of queen after giving birth to her son and heir apparent Zu Ji, the first male offspring in line to succeed Wu Ding. Zu Ji died prematurely, before his father and mother, and before his father’s second and third consorts, Queen Mother Gui (Hou Mu Gui) and Queen Mother Wu (Hou Mu Wu).

Archeological data and written sources in the form of oracle bone and bronze inscriptions provide a wealth of material to assess the historic significance of Fu Zi in Late Shang society. Her burial site was excavated in the fall of 1975 and 1976 at Xiaotun, south of the Late Shang royal cemetery at Xibeigang in modern Anyang or ancient Yin. Fu Zi’s tomb was 5.6 m long, 4 m wide, and 5.7 m deep—considerably smaller than her husband’s—and was undisturbed and intact before being excavated. Remains of a rectangular columned hall at ground level above her tomb indicate that a memorial structure was built and used by royal kin to honor her spirit. Of the 1,600-odd burial objects uncovered from her tomb, 460 were bronzes and 160 are inscribed Fu Zi, two graphs signifying her name and title, and her signature of ownership while alive. Other bronzes and artworks were inscribed with her posthumous title Queen Mother Xin. Still other bronzes were inscribed Queen Mother Qiao/Tu(?) Gui, the posthumous title and name of a former royal consort, possibly a wife of the thirteenth Shang king Zu Ding, and a queen on Fu Zi’s maternal side.

As illustrated in bone and bronze inscriptions, Zi appears to have been a friendly (to the Shang) state and family name, located in today’s Fen River valley in southwestern Shanxi Province.
The “frontier-style” bronze mirrors, socketed adzes, and ring-handled bronze knives found in Fu Zi’s tomb are most likely to have been personal acquisitions or martial booty taken after or in honor of victorious battles rather than evidence that she was from a non-Shang background in the northwest of ancient China. Fu Zi was the most heroic of Shang female generals and spent much of her time defending the Shang’s northwest frontier from the hostile Qiang and from other invasive and unfriendly tribal groups elsewhere along Shang’s northeastern and southern borders. Her royal origins may be traceable to the earliest of Shang times.

Fu Zi was the first of the first-generation queens to receive ongoing royal ancestor cult sacrifices during the Late Shang period. The large pair of tetrapod ding meat vessels and the pair of tetrapod gong fermented beverage tureens inscribed Queen Mother Xin were most likely vessels commissioned and inscribed by her son Zu Ji, known to history as Filial Ji (Xiao Ji) and in King Wu Ding period inscriptions as Small King Ji (Xiao Wang Ji). Only kings and heirs apparent could own and use these large tetrapod ding, yet they were used in sacrificial rites addressed to both dead kings and queens.

Fu Zi’s son and royal heir never succeeded to the throne, however. Filial Ji was a meritorious heir whose queen mother died prematurely, and for this reason, the histories state, he was banished: it is recorded in the Bamboo Annals (Zhushu jinian) that “During Wu Ding’s twenty-fifth year, Royal Son Filial Ji died in the wild.” His early death is corroborated in Shang inscriptions, as is the early death of his mother. That Filial Ji did not succeed to the throne may explain why Queen Fu Zi’s tomb is modest in size compared to that of her queen generational sister, Queen Wu, the third consort of King Wu Ding. Although a famous and loved queen mother, her early death and her son’s banishment must have precipitated a demotion that affected the mode of her burial.

Fu Zi’s royal status is amplified by an ancestor queen’s title, Queen Qiao/Tu(?) Gui, frequently abbreviated to Queen Qiao/Tu(?) in inscriptions on twenty-eight large ritual bronze fermented beverage vessels found in her tomb. Queen Qiao/Tu(?) Gui was the object of worship rather than the subject or maker of the vessels. Thus, Fu Zi must have commissioned these bronzes and used them in sacrifices addressing her maternal ancestress Queen Qiao/Tu(?) Gui, who in other bone inscriptions is called Ancestress Gui (Bi Gui):

Crack-making on the yimao day, Bin divined: Should [I] summon Fu Zi to make a human sacrifice to Ancestress Gui?

The twenty-eight large and extremely refined bronzes are stylistically the earliest in date among the tomb’s bronzes and are comparable with those vessels inscribed Fu Zi, suggesting that they were cast during Fu Zi’s lifetime for use in worshipping her maternal relative. Vessels inscribed Fu Zi were also used by Fu Zi in rites but were not limited in worship to one royal spirit. Fu Zi was in charge of a variety of ritual sacrifices to royal kin. It is also noteworthy that there are no vessels in her tomb inscribed with male royal titles. Thus, on the basis of current data, Fu Zi had royal
pedigree, tied to a former queen named Queen Qiao/Tu(?) Gui as well as to a clan and state, Zi, intimately allied with the Shang royal house.

In addition to her preeminent social status as first queen of King Wu Ding, Fu Zi had an illustrious military and administrative career. She ranked second in command to the king, as exemplified by a series of inscriptions recording battles against various unfriendly border states. She led successful campaigns against the unfriendly states of Ba in the southwest, Hu in the south, Tu and Gong in the north, Qiang in the northwest, and Yi in the northeast. This skill in military leadership is unequaled in Shang bone inscriptions by any other ranking military leader.

The following divination shows Fu Zi called upon to lead the well-known Shang general Zhi Fa and meet King Wu Ding in ambushing the southern Ba Fang:

Crack-making on xinwei day, Zheng divined: If Fu Zi joins and leads Zhi Fa to attack the Ba Fang should the King from the East attack in trapping [the enemy] in sunken pits at the flank (position) of Fu Zi? [It was divined:] If Fu Zi joins and leads Zhi Fa to attack the Ba Fang should the King not from the East attack in trapping [the enemy] in sunken pits at the flank of Fu Zi?

Fu Zi was clearly a general of the first rank. Her outstanding responsibilities as a military leader are also attested to by the fact she was capable of raising enormous numbers of warriors, particularly in attacks against the troublesome Qiang of the northwest. King Wu Ding divined and queried whether Fu Zi should be summoned to attack the Qiang if she raised 13,000 soldiers at Xi, a record number of warriors for any military member of Shang society to assemble, and unmatched in Shang bone inscriptions. The bone inscriptions also reveal that the Shang frequently sacrificed large numbers of Qiang people to ancestor and other spirits by various methods, whether through cooking, beheading, or burning. Since the Qiang were one of the Shang’s most feared enemies and a constant source of worry, Fu Zi played a pivotal role in heroically raising a huge number of men to defend the Shang domain against them.

Fu Zi’s military heroics are also corroborated by her participation in royal hunts, as suggested by reference to an accident she had on the hunting fields. In another hunting-related inscription, King Wu Ding calls upon Diviner Wei to query if Fu Zi should make an offering. For the Shang king the royal hunt was a key demonstration of his singular power over the animal and spirit world. This religio-political power symbol evidently also extended to royal family participating in the hunt, particularly his queen, Fu Zi.

The large number of weapons buried with Fu Zi is testimony to her military prowess. Of the four yue-broad axes, two are small memorial gifts. The other two are heraldically inscribed with two female graphs framing the Zi graph just below another heraldic image in relief, a human face framed by open mouths of two profile tigers. The latter image is the well-honed royal Shang symbol of metamorphic power—human power to identify with and dominate the spirit realm of the hunted animal. These bronze yue are royal in size, suggesting that this pair of yue halberds distinguishes Fu Zi with the royal status of queen, as it characterizes her as woman warrior par excellence. The large number of
bronze ge dagger axes in her tomb, ninety-one in all, belong to four different types. Two of the types—the group of bronze ge with inlaid turquoise handles and decorated blades, and the second group with inlaid turquoise bronze handles and jade blades—are believed to have functioned as insignia, status symbols. The remaining three groups—thirty-six ge of the standard type with hooked handle, eight ge of another standard type with straight handle, and two ge with open socket handles—in most cases have clearly been used and have the remains of wooden handles. The use and ownership of so many ge daggers, forty-six in all, again underscores Fu Zi’s military prowess in action.

In life, Fu Zi ranked second-in-command to King Wu Ding. Nonetheless, as with other royal house members, she paid tribute to the king in providing tortoise plastrons, cleaned and prepared for use in divination, and in providing harvest crops, theoretically from her estate of Zi but also from several tributary states.

Fu Zi received tribute and gifts from various Shang and distant state elites. As noted above, the uninscribed bronze knives, adzes, and mirrors of the type produced by or for northwest tribal groups in Fu Zi’s tomb represent booty she collected on her northwestern campaigns, or perhaps keepsakes from her northwestern homeland. The calligraphically lyrical “phoenix”-shaped jade, the thick jade stick-pin of a bird with folded wings and tail feathers, and the jade disk fragment with notches derive from the Shandong and Shijiahe Longshan period, and thus represent imports or martial acquisitions from either northeast Shandong or south Hubei Province. A variety of small reworked late Neolithic period Hongshan jades, including a suspended ornament in an oval shape with two fangs, a comma-shaped handle, and a small horned animal mask, are in turn either trade items and heirlooms or booty from the far north in Liaoning or southeastern Inner Mongolia. In addition, a small black jade human head is similar in type to examples from the southwestern site of Shang-period Jinsha in Sichuan, suggesting acquisition at the time of her campaign against the southwestern Ba Fang.

In addition to these small artworks, illustrating contact with border cultures, are the numerous inscribed vessels that were either tribute or gifts proffered to Fu Zi. One piece of tribute is a large inscribed jade ge dagger blade, along with four other similar but uninscribed jade daggers in Fu Zi’s tomb. The latter five daggers are jade insignia, probably delivered in recognition of Fu Zi’s military leadership along the Shang’s northwestern borders. Fu Zi also received tribute of a stone sheng chime from a high-ranking woman of the Zhu clan and state of northern Hebei. Two other bronzes, possibly also tribute but with inscriptions abbreviated to clan emblems on one vessel each, include the modest jue and the dragon-legged tripod ding. By far the most important gifts in Fu Zi’s tomb derive from two elite royal house members (Ya Qi and Zi Shu Quan): twenty-two fermented beverage vessels, including a pair of round zun, a jia, and a set of ten gu and nine jue, and twenty-one fermented beverage vessels including a pair of large round jia and a set of ten gu and nine jue.

It is significant that the 111 vessels commissioned by Fu Zi are not limited to fermented beverage but include all sacrificial types—meat, grain, and water, in addition to fermented beverage—and those bronzes inscribed with Queen Mother Xin include the largest vessels, as represented by the pair of tetrapod ding meat-offering vessels, commissioned by her son Filial Ji.
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Tribute gifts also come from another high-ranking male elite general (Ya Bi) who fought side by side with Fu Zi against the Qiang tribesmen. Vessels in Fu Zi’s tomb inscribed with this general’s name include a large-scale round tripod ding and a set of five nao bells and appear to have functioned as memorial gifts rather than as tribute, signifying Fu Zi’s intimate connections with high-powered military personnel and royal family.

At present there is no intact excavated Shang tomb that can be used to compare with Fu Zi’s to help in clarifying her special status as queen and military heroine. Nonetheless, on the basis of bone inscriptive evidence it is clear that she was revered as queen and militarily ranked second-in-command to Wu Ding. Her military power is also well illustrated by her burial goods, including tribute items from the highest-ranking members of the Shang elite and major clans within the Shang domain. It is evident that Fu Zi’s influence was extensive in the northern Shang realm.

In addition to the enormous number of inscribed offerings in Fu Zi’s tomb are sixteen sacrificial victims, mostly servants and guards, and five guardian dogs. These sacrificed victims are small in number by comparison to those hundreds sacrificed in Shang king burials. This enigmatic balance of rich ritual paraphernalia and tribute, yet modest burial pit and number of sacrificial humans, again is probably due to the fact that her son and heir did not occupy the Shang throne or survive to the time of his mother’s burial.

Fu Zi also ranked second to the king as administrator. As with a few other generals and officials, she was commanded by King Wu Ding to send out royal emissaries, to hold royal audiences, and to supervise tributary harvests of border lands. Unlike others, however, she was also summoned to hold audience with the Many Royal Daughters (Duo Fu) and blind seers, but above all she was required to carry out sacrifices to dead ruling spirits. The most common places mentioned in connection with her administrative functions are sites located to the northwest of the Shang domain.

All of Fu Zi’s sacrifices were carried out as a result of divinations by King Wu Ding and his retinue of diviners. Most of the extant divinations inscribed on oracle bones concerning sacrifices offered by Fu Zi are addressed to a limited number of royal spirits. The most frequent type of ceremony Fu Zi carried out was exorcism. It is wrong, however, to identify Fu Zi with the shu fu, the royal house female in charge of sacrifices referred to in ritual literature of the Warring States through Han eras, although her participatory role may have given rise to this position in later history.

King Wu Ding was in charge of royal rites to ancestor spirits. Fu Zi responded to this charge by carrying out comparable sacrifices and rites, but always under the eye and command of King Wu Ding. As with the ancient Egyptians and Sumerians, the royal house was run by a group of powerful clans that operated under the authority of a king who was supreme religious and military head.

Finally, King Wu Ding’s concern for every aspect of Fu Zi’s life—health, childbirth, return from near and distant lands, military activities, harvests, royal audiences, death, and afterlife—testify to his overwhelming affection for his first queen. Fu Zi must have been involved in a life-threatening accident while hunting in Guo, a favorite hunting ground of King Wu Ding, after which she died. Her death and burial are both mentioned in early Wu Ding period inscriptions.
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