

The Tomb of Lady Fu Hao

Fu Hao is a very unusual heroine from Ancient Chinese history. She was one of the consorts of Wu Ding, the Shang king under whom Shang power reached its zenith. Fu Hao was a wife and mother, military leader, politician and shaman.

Fu Hao's tomb was discovered in 1976 near Anyang. It is one of the best preserved tombs from that era. Archaeologists easily identified it as the tomb of Fu Hao. Her name had been long known from Shang period oracle texts and they found her name inscribed on the ritual bronzes on the tomb.

Most of the information we have about Fu Hao comes from oracle bone inscriptions. Many of the oracle bones show concerns for her well-being, for example childbirth and illness. Inscriptions on the oracle bones also show that Fu Hao was involved in two aspects of royal life that were normally not open to women. She participated in ritual ceremonies and military activities. The Shang King exercised ultimate control over ritual matters. However, Fu Hao obviously enjoyed the confidence of her husband as he repeatedly instructed her to conduct special rituals and offer sacrifices.

She led numerous military campaigns against the neighbouring Tu, Ba, Yi and Qiang tribes. One oracle bone, for example, asks whether Fu Hao should gather soldiers before an attack. On another it is reported that the king had assembled soldiers for Fu Hao's campaign against the Tu tribe.

Fu Hao's tomb has yielded over a hundred weapons. This is very unusual for a woman's tomb, and shows her status as a military leader. In all there were around 2000 items buried with Fu Hao. Among these there are 468 bronzes, 750 jades, 560 of bone and over 110 of stone and semi-precious stone. Over six thousand cowrie shells were buried with her also – these would have served as currency in the Shang period.