

A Study and Explanation of the Epitaph of Tang Dynasty Official Linghu Jiān

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Abstract. The epitaph of Linghu Jiān from the sixth year of the Xiantong era (855 AD) provides corrective information regarding the genealogy of the Linghu clan. The official career recorded in the epitaph reflects the career values of the “Eight Paragons of the Official Path” during the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty. The epitaph's approach of combining the subject's self-narrative with content authored by others is relatively novel. The self-narrative, written in plain language, reflects the “self-reflection” ethos prevalent among literati during the mid-to-late Tang period.

Keywords: Linghu Jiān, Linghu Clan, Autobiographical Epitaph, Eight Eminent Paragons of the Official Path.

1. Introduction

In April 2009, the Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology excavated the tomb of Linghu Jiān, dating to the sixth year of the Xiantong era (865) of the Tang Dynasty, west of Hanjiawan Village, Weiqu Subdistrict, Chang'an District, Xi'an. This tomb is a vertical shaft-passage single-chamber earthen cave tomb with a knife-shaped plan, oriented north-south. It comprises a tomb passage, sealing knife, passageway, and burial chamber. The tomb suffered severe looting, but the epigraph survived. According to the *Brief Report on the Excavation of Late Tang Linghu Family Tombs in Chang'an District, Xi'an* [1], it is titled *Epitaph of Lord Linghu, Formerly lì-pù yüán-wài láng of the Tang Dynasty*. The tomb's occupant was Linghu Jiān, and the epitaph was composed by his younger brother Linghu Xūn. The following is a brief examination of several issues reflected in the epitaph.

2. Corrections to the Linghu Clan Genealogy

The *Tang Dynasty Scholars' Inscriptions at the Wild Goose Pagoda of Ci'en Temple* records “Linghu Wěi (later note: renamed Linghu Jiān).” The *A Study of the Linghu Family at Dunhuang in the Sui and Tang Dynasties* [2] identifies Linghu Wěi and Linghu Jiān as the same person. Based on the *Linghu Wěi's Epitaph* included in *Luoyang Newly Discovered Epitaph 2015* [3] and the *Linghu Jiān's Epitaph* unearthed in 2009, it is evident that the *Wild Goose Pagoda inscriptions* contain an error. The Linghu Jiān's Epitaph records his death on the 12th day of the 4th month in the 6th year of the Xiantong era (855 AD), with burial on the 24th day of the 10th month that same year, at the age of 47. However, the Linghu Wěi's Epitaph states Linghu Wěi died on the 12th day of the 9th month in the 6th year of Xiantong (855 AD), buried on the 25th day of the 10th month that year, at the age of 43. This comparison reveals that the two individuals did not share the same date of death. Moreover, it is unusual for a single person to have two separate epitaphs, indicating they were not the same person. Furthermore, clues about their relationship can be found. The epitaph for Linghu Jiān states: ‘His great-grandfather, Chongliang, served as hsièn-lìng of Changming hsièn in Mian chōu and was posthumously honored as tsǒ p'u-she. His paternal grandfather, Chengjian, served as kŭng-ts'áo ts'an-chün of Taiyuan fŭ and was posthumously honored as t'ài-wèi; His illustrious father is Ding.’ Similarly, the Linghu Wěi's epitaph records: “Chongliang served as hsièn-lìng of Changming hsièn in Mian chōu and was posthumously honored as tsǒ p'u-she; His paternal grandfather Chengjian served as kŭng-ts'áo ts'an-chün of Taiyuan fŭ and was posthumously honored as t'ài-wèi; His illustrious father is Ding.” These records indicate they were likely brothers. The Linghu Jiān's epitaph was composed by Linghu Xūn, the second younger brother of Linghu Jiān, confirming that Jiān, Xūn,

and Wěi were three brothers, all sons of Linghu Ding. Linghu Jiān's epitaph mentions having “two younger brothers,” while Linghu Wěi's epitaph was composed by Linghu Xún, Linghu Wěi's own nephew. According to the *Genealogical Study of the Linghu Clan in Dunhuang during the Sui and Tang Dynasties*, Linghu Xún was the son of Linghu Xūn. These details collectively corroborate the familial relationship among the three brothers. The Linghu Wěi's epitaph records: “Second elder brother, ch'áo-ì láng shǒu shàng-shū, chīn-pù láng-chūng, shàng chù-kuó, awarded (lower part damaged).” The Linghu Jiān's epitaph states: “Second younger brother, ch'áo-ì láng hǎng shàng-shū, ts'ang-pu yüán-wài láng, chù-kuó, awarded purple gold fish pouch, Linghu Xūn, compiler.” Both the chīn-pù and ts'ang-pu belonged to the hù-pù, whereas Linghu Jiān's epitaph states he only served as lǐ-pù yüán-wài láng and lǐ-pù yüán-wài láng. This suggests Linghu Xūn was more likely Linghu Wěi's second brother, though further verification is needed. Comparing these two epitaphs allows us to further refine the Linghu family lineage: Linghu Ding had three sons—eldest Linghu Jiān, second Linghu Xūn, and youngest Linghu Wěi. Linghu Wei's epitaph mentions he had two sons and two daughters, with the eldest son named Kui'er and the second son named Meiliu, providing additional details to fill gaps in the record.

Also based on other Linghu families' epigraphs, as well as the Linghu family lineage compiled from other documents[4] [5], the Linghu family lineage can be further supplemented as follows in Figure 1:

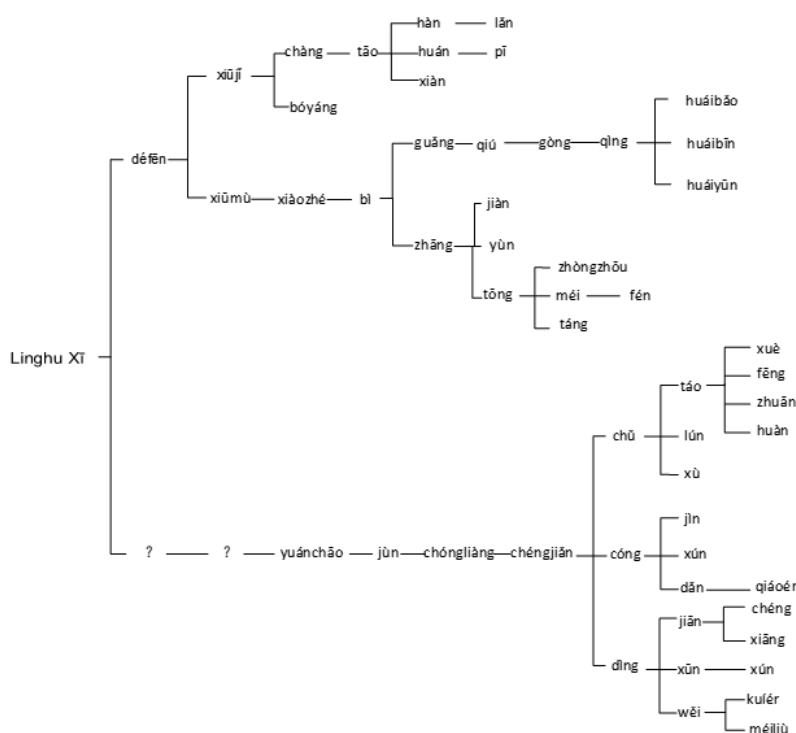


Figure 1. Lineage chart of the Linghu family.

3. The Eight Exemplars of Officialdom as Seen Through Linghu Jiān's Career

In his epitaph, Linghu Jiān recounts his official career thus:

‘At twenty, I passed the examinations; in ceremonial robes, I presented myself at court. Seven years I remained in Shu, never daring to act rashly or compete for advancement.’ Judging by his date of death, this achievement likely occurred during the Kaicheng era of Emperor Wenzong's reign.

‘In the second year of the Dazhong era, I was appointed as a pì-kó chéng-tzù.’ At this time, Linghu Jiān would have been around thirty years old, serving in the pì-shū shěng where he was responsible for collating and verifying classical texts.

‘Upon completing my term, I was transferred to serve as hsièn-wèi of Weinan hsièn.’ During the Tang Dynasty, Weinan hsièn was part of the chīng-chí.

‘The following year, my father inquired about the affairs of the Guizhou region... Heaven sent its cruelty, great calamity swiftly befell us; thus I repeatedly received kind admonitions to complete the mourning rites.’ ‘After a year, recommended by Lord Gao Shao Yi, the mù of Shanxi, I was appointed as chiên-ch’á lǐ-hsín and served as fáng-yǔ p’àn-kuān.’ While Linghu Jiān was serving as hsiên-wèi of Weinan hsiên, his mother passed away. He observed a year of mourning, after which Gao Shao Yi recommended him for official appointment. The fáng-yǔ p’àn-kuān was appointment, while chiên-ch’á lǐ-hsín was equivalent to chiên-ch’á yǔ-shǐh lǐ-hsín, holding half the rank of a chiên-ch’á yǔ-shǐh with slightly reduced salary but similar duties.

‘Heaven showed no mercy, and misfortune struck again. I ceased drinking and wept bitterly, finding no peace for a single moment. Yet mindful of the weight of my family's legacy, I dared not contemplate death. Upon restoring normalcy, an imperial decree appointed me as fèng-ch’áng pó-shìh. Amidst numerous major state affairs, I diligently fulfilled my official duties.’ Here, the “misfortune” likely refers to the death of Linghu Jiān's father, Linghu Ding. His words, ‘Yet mindful of the weight of my family's legacy, I dared not contemplate death.’ indicate that as the eldest son, Linghu Jiān assumed the responsibility of upholding the family's main pillar after his parents' passing. Following the restoration of normalcy, he was fèng-ch’áng pó-shìh. In Tang Dynasty, the fèng-ch’áng was equivalent to t’ài-ch’áng which always employed four pó-shìh, each holding the seventh p’ín upwards. These Doctors were responsible for overseeing the five rites, guiding ceremonial protocols during major sacrifices, and proposing posthumous titles for nobles below the kuó-kūng. Holding a position of considerable prestige within the t’ài-ch’áng ssù, these posts were typically filled by individuals of scholarly distinction.

‘When emperor succeeded to the throne, I was transferred to the tz’ú-pù yüán-wài láng, promoted to the rank of ch’i-chū láng, and was gradually promoted to the rank of lǐ-pù yüán-wài láng and lǐ-pù yüán-wài láng.’ In 859, Emperor Xuānzong died of illness, and Emperor Yizong assumed the throne, and "emperor succeeded to the throne." tz’ú-pù yüán-wài láng, a member of the lǐ-pù, and a member of the Sixth p’ín upwards. The ch’i-chū láng was in charge of recording the Emperor's words and deeds, and repairing the ch’i-chū chu, with the sixth p’ín upwards. lǐ-pù yüán-wài láng, from the sixth p’ín upwards, assisting the lǐ-pù láng-chūng in charge of the lǐ-pù. The lǐ-pù yüán-wài láng, from the sixth p’ín upwards, was composed of two officers, one of whom is responsible for judging the nán-ts’áo and verifying and submitting to the shàng-shù and the shìh-láng, and the other is responsible for judging the affairs of the ssū.

From Linghu Jiān's own account, it is evident that his official career progressed rather smoothly. Hence, on his deathbed, he remarked: ‘From the day I first donned the shìh's robe until now, I have been transferred eight times and promoted five times to the court. This is the highest honour attainable for a shìh; I have no regrets.’ This demonstrates Linghu Jiān's profound satisfaction with his official career, reflecting his value orientation towards public service. Such an orientation was widely prevalent in his era, as documented in *Feng Yan's Records of What I Have Seen and Heard*, which, according to *Eight Groups of Key Official Positions: the Elites' Identity of Officialdom and its Institutional Channel in the Middle and Late Tang Dynasty* [6], first recorded this phenomenon.

Feng Yan's Records of What I Have Seen and Heard presents the theory of the Eight Eminent Paragons of the Official Path:

Among those pursuing official careers, those who attain distinguished positions through integrity are the Eight Eminent Paragons of the Official Path: First, chìn-shìh ch’ü-shēn and chih-ts’è; Second, chiào-shū and chêng-tzù; Third, chí-wèi; Forth, chiên-ch’á yǔ-shǐh and tièn-chūng; Fifth, shìh-í and pǔ-ch’üeh; Sixth, yüán-wài and láng-chūng; Seventh, chūng-shū shè-jén and chǐ-shìh-chūng; Eighth, chūng-shū shìh-láng and chūng-shū lǐng. Saying that these eight are particularly paragon, straight to the tsǎi-hsiàng, do not calendar remaining officials.

Feng Yan lived during the mid-to-late Tang Dynasty, following the An Lushan Rebellion. His concept of the Eight Eminent Paragons reflects contemporary societal values regarding officialdom. After Feng Yan proposed this framework, similar expressions proliferated. For instance, Shen Jiji's contemporary work *The Dream in the Pillow* employs the career trajectory of Lu Sheng within the

dream of the Huang Liang to articulate identical aspirations for official advancement. As a figure sharing the same historical context, Linghu Jiān's official career—commencing as a chìn-shih ch'ū-shēn and subsequently holding posts including pì-shū shěng chèn-g-tzù, hsièn-wèi of Weinan hsièn, chiēn-ch'á lǐ-hsín, tz'ú-pù yüán-wài láng, lǐ-pù yüán-wài láng and lì-pù yüán-wài láng—closely aligns with Feng Yan's ideal of the Eight Eminent Paragons. Linghu himself described this path as 'the ultimate perfection for a shih' revealing Linghu Jiān shared embrace of these career values.

Yet Linghu Jiān's ascent to distinguished office was also tied to his lineage. Having passed the imperial examinations at twenty, he remained in Sichuan for seven years before being appointed pì-kó chèn-g-tzù in the second year of the Dazhong era. The Dazhong era marked the reign of Emperor Xuan of Tang, who appointed Linghu Tao as tsǎi-hsiàng upon ascending the throne. Linghu Tao was Linghu Jiān's cousin. Linghu Jiān's subsequent smooth career progression, consistently following the pattern of the Eight Eminent Paragons, may well have been connected to Linghu Tao. His epitaph states, 'I humbly reflect that my cousin, the hsiāng-kuó, cherished our fraternal bond with profound affection, yet I ultimately failed to repay it.' The 'hsiāng-kuó' here likely refers to Linghu Tao. Furthermore, the *Yan Tower Inscriptions* reveal frequent interactions among the cousins of Linghu Tao and Linghu Jiān's generation. Thus, Linghu Jiān's attainment of 'the highest virtue of a shih' was not only influenced by the contemporary emphasis on literary skill in official selection but also significantly shaped by his family background. Moreover, the value orientation espoused by Linghu Jiān indirectly reflects the prevailing understanding of the official career path among the social elite of that era.

4. Differences Between Linghu Jiān's Autobiographical Epitaph and the Biographical Epitaph

The epitaph for Linghu Jiān was composed by his second younger brother, Linghu Xūn. Its content may be broadly divided into three sections: the first provides an overview of the Linghu family lineage and origins; the second records Linghu Jiān's own account of his life aspirations and the entrusting of his children; the third narrates the time and place of Linghu Jiān's burial alongside expressions of profound grief. The second section exclusively contains Linghu Jiān's own account of his life, a relatively uncommon feature in epitaphs. This allows for a brief comparison of its differences with epitaphs composed by others.

4.1. In terms of content

Linghu Jiān's self-narrative can be broadly divided into three sections: the first details his awareness of impending death, prompting him to entrust his brother with recording his words and composing the epitaph; the second recounts his official career; the third addresses his entrusting of his children. Below follows a brief discussion of the differences between these three sections and those found in other epitaphs.

The first section details Linghu Jiān's physical ailments and his awareness that his days were numbered. He originally intended to compose his own account of his life's aspirations for engraving, but his illness rendered him unable to wield a brush. Therefore, he entrusted his younger brother, Linghu Xūn, to take up the pen and compile his long-held aspirations. This section explains the reason and origin of the autobiographical portion within the epitaph, a feature unique to self-authored epitaphs. It is rare for epitaphs composed by others to contain such direct expressions of the deceased's own sentiments and circumstances. Furthermore, his words, 'Only you (Linghu Xūn) can undertake this task with your pen and eloquence; your filial piety and fraternal devotion precede all others, making you the one to compile this and fulfil my long-held wish,' reveal the relationship and affection between the deceased and the epitaph's author – another uncommon feature in epitaphs written by others.

The second section details Linghu Jiān's own account of his official career, in which he states: 'From the day I first donned the shih's robe until now, I have been transferred eight times and

promoted to the capital five times. This is the highest honour a shih can attain; I have no regrets.' While epitaphs composed by others invariably include accounts of the deceased's life, comparison with Linghu Jiān's self-narrative reveals notable differences. Those writing epitaphs for others often embellish the subject's achievements or character with lofty, ornate language, adhering to formulaic structures. Linghu Jiān's own account, however, contains little of this. It is largely a straightforward narration of his life, employing even in its laudatory passages a more unadorned style. For instance, he describes himself as having 'served in office to support my family's sustenance, upheld the family name through reputation, and within the confines of the inner chambers, enjoyed the highest honour.' Beyond this, Linghu Jiān's self-narrative is more complete in its chronology and richer in its emotional depth. His account contains numerous descriptions of the passing of loved ones: 'The following year, my father inquired about the affairs of the Guizhou region... Heaven sent its cruelty, great calamity swiftly befell us; thus I repeatedly received kind admonitions to complete the mourning rites.' 'Heaven showed no mercy, and misfortune struck again. I ceased drinking and wept bitterly, finding no peace for a single moment. Yet mindful of the weight of my family's legacy, I dared not contemplate death.' These events are interwoven throughout the narrative of his eight transfers of office, which Linghu Jiān recounts in detail. For the tomb's occupant, the deaths of his parents constituted life-altering events, and such emotional expression is seldom found in epitaphs composed by others.

The third section concerns Linghu Jiān's entrusting of his children. First, he expressed gratitude to the hsiāng-kuó (presumably Linghu Tao); second, he urged his two younger brothers to 'diligently attend to their official duties'; third, he addressed his own household affairs: "I have no cause for worry, save that my two sons are still young. You (Linghu Xūn) shall take charge of their upbringing, instructing the boys in poetry and ritual, hoping to establish a prosperous lineage. May the two girls be guided by virtuous men. Though I may not live to see it, it shall be the joy of my remaining years." Such entrustment of children is also seldom seen in epitaphs composed by others. Typically, epitaphs include introductions to the deceased's spouse and children, often placed after the account of the deceased's life, between the time and place of death and the time and place of burial, and frequently mention the children's names. In this epitaph, however, Linghu Jiān mentions his wife and children within his own narrative, using the entrustment of his children as the vehicle for doing so. Moreover, he refers to his wife only as 'the third daughter of the late p'u-she, Lord Sun, whose given name was Jian,' without specifying the names of his two sons and two daughters.

Throughout the text, the tomb owner's emotions permeate the writing, while the close relationship between the epitaph's author and the tomb owner is frequently reflected. These aspects constitute the unique characteristics of this epitaph's content.

4.2. In terms of form

In terms of the structure of the epitaph, there is often an epitaph at the end of the epigraph, but there is no epitaph at the end of this one. And the whole epitaph, simple words, full of emotion, as the writer said in the end: "Xūn's guilt is very deaf, the words can not text, dare to use the straight book of the last purpose, so the quality of no words". The theory of "quality" and "rhetoric" reflects the difference between this and other tombstones.

According to *The Way of the shih: The Introspective Ethos of the shih of the Middle Tang Dynasty* [7], the establishment of the k'ō-chǔ in the Sui and Tang dynasties brought about profound changes in society. Compared with the previous dynasty's system of selecting officials, the k'ō-chǔ strengthened the connection between the shih themselves and the imperial court and weakened the connection between the shih and their hometown for the sake of central power. In the Tang Dynasty, there was a serious problem that the supply of official positions exceeded the demand, so most of the shih went to the capital and aspired to get an official position in the capital. This kind of official style, also caused the phenomenon of corruption and malpractice of the officials. And the k'ō-chǔ to get a shih, especially emphasizing the rhetoric, so the shih at that time pay attention to the shape of the rhetoric, often ignoring the quality of the article. During the Middle Tang Dynasty, some shih

summarize these problems and put forward their own ideas and opinions, wanting to reverse the trend. Especially after the Anshi Rebellion, in the face of increasingly serious social problems, Han Yu, Liu Zongyuan and others shìh launched the Ancient Writing Movement. The Ancient Wen movement emphasized both the quality of writing and the will of the shìh. When writing an article, one should be critical of the current ills and have ideological connotations instead of just piling up gorgeous rhetoric; when serving as an official, a shìh should be people-oriented and do practical things instead of just pursuing an extravagant life as an official. These ideas had an important influence on the shìh after the Middle Tang Dynasty, and the self-description of tombstone is one of the embodiments.

During the Tang Dynasty, self-described epitaphs were very rare, and one of the famous ones is *Epitaph and Preface for the Tomb of Mr Zui Yin* written by Bai Juyi. In Bai Juyi's self-explanatory epitaph, he briefly describes his life and family, and explains his feelings about his life in simple words. As a great literary figure, Bai Juyi did not pile up rhetoric, but rather focused on its quality, which is a reflection of the influence of the ancient literature movement at that time. This is a reflection of the influence of the ancient literature movement. This autobiographical epitaph of Linghu Jiān also reflects the influence and characteristics of the ancient literature movement in many places. From the text, its self-explanatory epitaph had more ancient words, and the line of text had less format. The text just used simple words to briefly describe his life aspirations and emotions, focusing on the quality of the article. And from its thinking, can also reflects its way of government. His words himself: 'At twenty, I passed the examinations; in ceremonial robes, I presented myself at court. Seven years I remained in Shu, never daring to act rashly or compete for advancement.' Here, 'never daring to act rashly or compete for advancement' can be seen that his values are resistant to the pursuit of official positions as a shìh. 'Upon restoring normalcy, an imperial decree appointed me as fèng-ch'áng pó-shìh. Amidst numerous major state affairs, I diligently fulfilled my official duties.' Linghu Jiān's epitaph was not like the epitaph wrote by others, according to the format to boast of the political achievements, but "diligently fulfilled my official duties ", thinking it is a very good thing to do his duty, and all these can reflect his ambition as a shìh, which is also the difference between his autobiographical epitaph and that of others.

5. Conclusion

From the latest epitaphs of the Linghu family, it can be seen that Linghu Jiān and Linghu Wěi are not the same person as previously believed, but are brothers, and the epitaphs can also be used to further supplement the Linghu family line. In addition, the epitaph of Linghu Jiān can serve as a reflection of the value orientation of the Middle and Late Tang shìh at that time, and by comparing the difference between his autobiographical epitaph and biographical epitaph of others, we can also get a glimpse of the self-reflective culture of the Middle and Late Tang shìh.

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