

Yongtao Du

DEATH OF
HOMETOWN

Political Elites and the Fate of
Native Place in Modern China

Asian Studies

Collection Editor
DONG WANG

**LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING**



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Abstract

Anyang was founded as a county when China became a unified empire in the third century BCE. For centuries, local gentry made the county their home, where they buried their ancestors and dwelled with their kinfolk. Talented sons might have careers in the larger world of the empire, but eventually it was Anyang that they returned to in search of rest. The twentieth century witnessed fundamental changes to this scenario. Political and intellectual revolutions shattered the life-world of China, and transformed the meanings of life and place in Anyang. Now its brightest sons all left without returning.

Key words

place, lineage, "all-under-heaven," Communism, nationalism, Confucianism, revolution, oracle bones, New Culture Movement, local identity

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Learning objectives

- Understand key revolutions in twentieth-century China and their impact on society.
- Explore significant intellectual movements in modern China and their influences.
- Examine the organization and significance of traditional spatial structures in Chinese civilization.
- Analyze interactions and impacts between local identities, national policies, and global influences.

Prologue

1.

In our modern world, Anyang, a county in the North China Plain about 350 miles south of Beijing, is best known for the ruins of an ancient capital of one of China's earliest dynasties, located just a couple of miles from the county seat (Figure 1). For thousands of years, the Chinese referred to the original name of the capital, Yin, and called the ruins "Yinxu," which literally means the "Ruins of the Yin." Although the locals were aware of the ruins and occasionally mentioned them in their writings, they never considered them particularly significant. In a country with so many ancient capital ruins, the "ruins of the Yin" did not stand out. The Shang dynasty, which existed between the sixteenth and eleventh centuries BCE, was too distant in time, and except for a few sketchy references in ancient history books, little was known about it. Other dynasties that had their capitals near Anyang were more captivating, better known, and more relatable. The ruins of these dynasties, that is, the northern dynasties during the so-called Barbaric Conquest in the third through fifth centuries CE, were more frequently mentioned in writings by both locals and visitors.

However, this scenario changed rapidly in the early twentieth century. At the beginning of the century, Chinese civilization was in a state of disintegration after several decades of resistance to Western influence, which had begun in earnest in the mid-nineteenth

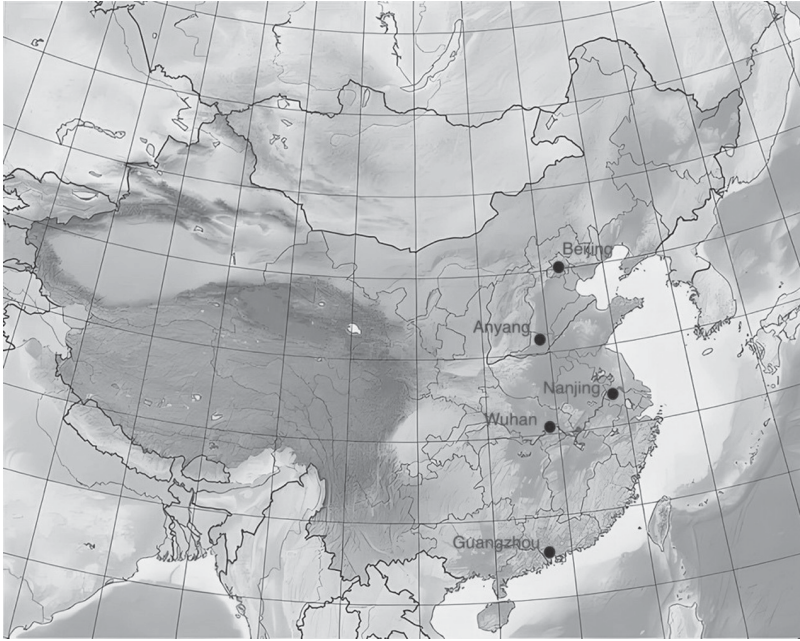


Figure 1 Anyang and other major cities in China

century. Alongside Western military and economic domination in the Far East came modern Western epistemological modes centered on scientism. In history writing and history teaching, this new outlook demanded empirical evidence as the foundation for historical knowledge, especially for periods the furthest back in time. Legendary ancient periods and figures, such as the sage kings and the states they founded, which had been accepted as real for centuries, were now scrutinized for their historicity. A new era of historical knowledge production and periodization had begun. The modern discipline of archaeology, which could most effectively test and verify the historicity of legends, was introduced and began to collaborate with traditional text-based scholarship to reorganize and reassess the country's ancient history.

The “Ruins of Yin” gained renewed significance under these circumstances. It became the location of China’s first major archaeological excavation, conducted between 1928 and 1937, which unequivocally established the historicity of the Shang dynasty. However, comparable archaeological discoveries have not been made for legendary periods preceding the Shang, such as the Xia dynasty. As a result, the Shang became the earliest verified dynasty in Chinese history. The most important evidence unearthed from the site—the Oracle Bones, consisting of hundreds of thousands of turtle shells and cattle bones inscribed with texts—has also been recognized as the beginning of writing in China.

The excavations in Anyang, in terms of proving long-existing legends to be historical, can be compared to the remarkable work of the German amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, whose excavations in modern-day Turkey and Greece in the 1870s lent significant credibility to the idea that Homer’s *Iliad* reflects historical events. Given this level of intellectual excitement, it is no wonder that Anyang soon gained fame as the site of China’s most important archaeological discovery. The additional prestige of being the place where Chinese writing began, further enhanced Anyang’s reputation, placing it among the privileged locations that can claim to be “the country’s first” in some respect.

In 1977, Li Ji, the Harvard-trained founder of modern archaeology in China who directed the excavations in Anyang, wrote an account of his work there some 40 years earlier. This account, written in English and titled *Anyang*, became a modern classic and further consolidated Anyang’s fame beyond China’s borders.

All these factors—the intellectual excitement, the symbolic significance, and the international recognition—seemed to combine to create an unstoppable force that permanently associated Anyang with the archaeological site and its discoveries. By the end of the century, the two had become inseparable in writings about the area: Anyang is synonymous with the excavation site, and the site defines Anyang. Even when locals discussed Anyang among themselves, they would almost immediately bring up the topic of the excavation site.

Behind this branding, however, lies a deep irony for the place and its inhabitants. What the natives of a place truly need is a home—a place where they can dwell, live their lives, and perhaps even die their deaths. A dwelling place for mortal human beings is, as Martin Heidegger described it, a site they build in the world where they can “accept the heaven, preserve the earth, await the divine, and accompany the mortal.”¹ An excavation site, no matter how important it may be in the professional world, has little to do with this essential need. For example, Li Ji’s book, which took Anyang as its namesake, dedicated only two words to the place itself: “worth digging.” The academic significance of the site and the other accolades it brought to Anyang are all about fame. But fame is not home.

The irony for the natives who loudly proclaim, “Anyang is the excavation site” is that, with each proclamation, and perhaps at the very moment of shouting, the true meaning of Anyang as their native place—their home where they could build a life—quietly recedes a little further. In fact, in the 1990s, when the branding of Anyang as an excavation site was gaining full momentum and

becoming ubiquitous, China's intellectual culture was entering a period of profound anxiety often referred to by contemporaries as a "spiritual crisis." After the fervor of Communism had waned, and amid the rapid marketization of the economy and commercialization of society, educated people across the country, including the natives of Anyang, were gripped by a deep sense of angst—a feeling that they had lost the ground on which to "settle their being and establish meaning for life" (*anshen liming*).

An influential debate on this crisis within the Chinese intellectual scene lasted for several years, with many voices calling for the "reconstruction of a spiritual home." The differences and similarities between spiritual "homelessness" and the lack of a dwelling place on earth are likely too complex to fully explore here. However, it is clear that the widespread sense of homelessness in China toward the end of the century was related to, if not caused by, the way people talked about and engaged with their native places—exemplified by the natives of Anyang. If you do not view your native place (or, for that matter, any place where you reside) as a true place of dwelling, you will not have a place to call home. Fame, wealth, and all the other attributes one might ascribe to a place do not necessarily create a sense of home.

What happened to people of Anyang (and, more generally, to people of other places in China) during the twentieth century was that they lost their way of engaging with their native place as a place of home. To say they lost their way is to recognize that their predecessors (many of whom also their ancestors) who lived in the place knew and practiced it. As will be explained in more detail below, for centuries educated men in Anyang (as in

other places of China) celebrated their native place primarily as their home: the place where they were born and raised, where their kinsmen lived and their ancestors were buried, where their careers began, and where they returned after journeys into the outside world.

These men were known as the literati (*shi*). Their career trajectory often followed a pattern: receiving schooling and preparing for the civil service examinations in their home place, moving on to provincial- and national-level examinations if they could pass the examinations at the local level, and eventually entering civil service and being posted in the capital or local places elsewhere. The outside world in which they operated was called the “all-under-heaven” (*tianxia*), a term commonly used to describe the territories encompassed by the universal state of China (known as the “Central Country”) and, in any case, included most of the known world. In their self-perception, the literati saw themselves as gentlemen of the world, bearing noble obligations to lead the people and maintain order. Yet, they were also deeply rooted in their native places—places of beginning and ending. In fact, the “all-under-heaven” was essentially a collection of local places like their home. There was no need to brand the native place with anything extraordinary, although many naturally harbored pride in its distinctiveness and superiority over other places and often celebrated it in their writings. However, that kind of superiority and distinctiveness was defined within a framework of sameness: a place may be better in performing common moral duties or producing candidates in the same examination system, but all local places were building blocks of the “all-under-heaven” and could not be fundamentally different from one another.

That world of the “all-under-heaven” and its local places was the world of traditional Chinese civilization, sometimes called the Sino-centric world due to China’s self-proclaimed centrality. This world collapsed in the twentieth century through confrontation and conflict with the modern West. The most direct consequence of this collapse was China’s loss of centrality, and the Chinese state’s loss of universal claims. This loss was keenly felt and painfully absorbed by Chinese intellectuals, the modern counterparts of the literati. However, this loss did not necessarily mean that modern Chinese would also lose their connection to their native places and a sense of rootedness there.

The loss of the ability to engage one’s native place as a place of home, as seen in the natives of Anyang, was not an inevitable consequence of the beginning of modern times or the collapse of traditional Chinese civilization. One clear piece of evidence for this in Anyang is the 1933 edition of the county’s local gazetteer. The local gazetteer is the periodically updated book of the local places that local elites had been engaged in compiling for centuries whereby they not only recorded the historical, geographical, financial, and other practical knowledge about their local places but also registered and celebrated their local identity. In this edition of the Anyang County gazetteer, local elites wrote about and celebrated their native place in much the same way as the literati had done for centuries. Although the excavations at the “Ruins of Yin” and the oracle bones they uncovered had already made headlines worldwide, the locals remained composed. Rather than branding the place with the excavation site, they treated the archaeological site and the oracle bones as parts of their heritage. The gazetteer included two appendices: one

on stone inscriptions discovered in the Anyang region over the centuries, and another on the recently excavated oracle bone inscriptions. The connotation is subtle but revealing: despite the oracle bones' global impact, they were regarded as just another form of inscription in a place that had known such artifacts for centuries.

The loss of the ability to engage with the native place as a place of home—or simply put, the death of the hometown—must have occurred sometime after the gazetteer's compilation and must be explained by factors other than the collapse of China's centrality. This book argues that between the fall of traditional China at the beginning of the twentieth century and the rise of Communist China in the middle of the century, there were genuine opportunities for locally rooted people to recalibrate the relationship between home, country, and the world. They had the chance to reposition themselves in this emerging new world in a way that acknowledged the new world order while retaining their connection to their native place. What follows is the story of one man's efforts to do just that. In his failure, we may glimpse the fate of locality in modern China and gain a deeper understanding of the tragedy of those who became disconnected from their roots.

2.

The man's name is Zhang Jinjian. He was born in 1902, nine years before the collapse of the country's last dynasty—the Qing—and the founding of the Republic of China. His life witnessed not only the political but also the cultural turmoil that the country experienced during its migration into the modern world. First,

the universal state collapsed, and then the orthodox learning—often conveniently called Confucianism—that had buttressed the state and the social-moral order of China during the past centuries went bankrupt and was replaced by a set of new and competing ideas and ideologies imported from the West. The decade or so between the mid-1910s and mid-1920s in China is often labeled the “New Culture Movement” because of these new ideas that swept the country’s cultural and intellectual scene. The new generation of youth that was shaped by the new cultures would soon advance onto the central stage of history and determine the fate of the Chinese nation through their own struggles for truth, path, and identity. The most radical of them would turn to Marxism-Leninism, form the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), cut off connections to the Chinese tradition as much as they could, and commit to the complete remaking of the Chinese people. Most of the less radical but nonetheless politically committed would join the Nationalist Party (KMT). Originally conceived with inspiration from American-style democracy but also receiving aid and influence from the Soviet Union, the KMT sought to build up a new nation-state of China that retained much of its traditional heritage, –not as a universal value but as its national distinction. The two parties’ competition for political power in China would work itself out in epic scale in the middle decades of the century, ultimately resulting in the KMT’s spectacular failure in 1949, and the CCP’s takeover of the country, with Mao Zedong (1893–1976) as its supreme leader.

Zhang was a moderate product of this eventful and radicalized age. He received a mixed traditional and modern education, committed to nationalism and joined the KMT, pursued and

received formal academic training in the US, and on his return to China became an influential scholar who closely followed—and sometimes became involved in—the politics of the Nationalist Party. As a modern intellectual, his view of and approach to his native place bore a strong resemblance to the literati of old. He took it as a place of home, recognized his roots therein, and was determined to return to it after his journey into the outside world.

However, responding to the changing times, he also sought to explore a path of electoral local politics by building on the tradition of literati localism. The KMT's political debacle cut short his experiment. In 1949, when the KMT lost the civil war and retreated to Taiwan, Zhang followed along and resettled his family on the island. There, during the following four decades of the Cold War and complete separation between Taiwan and the Chinese mainland, he and other sojourners from Anyang longed for and anticipated a return to their native place.

When Zhang died in 1988, the Cold War was nearing its end, and relations between the two regimes on either side of the Taiwan strait were thawing. The surviving sojourners finally returned to their native land in the late 1980s and early 1990s, only to find out that the native place that they knew and left behind had long since been destroyed under Communist rule. What remained was no longer recognizable. In a sense, both the natives staying in Anyang and the Anyang sojourners in Taiwan eventually became local-less, though for the latter, the death of the hometown took longer to be fully realized. To better understand the scope of their loss and the significance of the efforts made by people like Zhang, let us now delve deeper into history and see

how, in the old days, the literati of Anyang lived their lives as locally rooted gentlemen of the world.

3.

The ruling class in China had been called the “*shi*” since before the establishment of the continental empire in the third century BCE. In Western literature, this term is often translated as the “literati.” In its millennium-long history, the literati’s social and cultural disposition went through profound transformations. One of the most significant of these occurred during the transition between the Tang (618 CE–907 CE) and the Song (960 CE–1276 CE) dynasty.

During this period, the establishment of a fully developed civil service examination system led to a major shift: success in the examinations became a standard requirement for access to and promotion within civil service, which was the most important criterion for elite status and the primary path to political power in China. The semi-hereditary aristocracy that had previously dominated civil service was soon replaced by a more fluid class of new men whose success depended not on heredity but on current officeholding, and eventually on the much less predictable examination outcomes. This transformation made the literati somewhat akin to the self-made gentry in England during the late medieval and early modern periods. Indeed, modern scholars have borrowed that term, referring to this new type of social elite in China as the “Chinese gentry.”

As the newly modeled examination system penetrated deeply into local societies, it became both possible and increasingly necessary for almost all literati to begin the examination process in

their local counties and prefectures. Consequently, the new ruling class—the gentry—became fundamentally oriented toward the local societies of their home places. For one, these local areas were where their civil service careers necessarily began, through participation in the lower-level examinations. Additionally, the unpredictability of examination success made it a strategic move for the gentry to focus on building social connections and influence within their home locales. This not only provided a strong local base in case their desired examination success did not materialize, but also ensured that they and their family members had a reliable foundation from which to continue attempting the examinations. Unlike the semi-aristocratic class of the previous period, who mostly resided in the capital region, the gentry steadily adopted a localist orientation. As one modern scholar put it, from the second half of the Song dynasty at the latest, the gentry had become political elites who “married locally, lived locally, and in many ways thought and acted locally.”²

To support their locally based social life and career patterns, the gentry developed various strategies that modern scholars have described as “localist.” These included compiling local gazetteers to celebrate the history and accomplishments of their regions, establishing marriage networks within the local society, and actively participating in public affairs within their communities. Over time, these localist strategies and activities transformed the localities—originally mere administrative entities of the state—into true home places for the gentry.

The most effective and enduring localist strategy, sometimes referred to as the localist strategy par excellence, was

the construction of local lineages—organized kinship groups within local societies. Kinship organization had a long history in China and was deeply integrated with the Chinese tradition of ancestral worship and the Confucian concept of filial piety. Since all kin are the descendants of the same (paternal) ancestor, the rituals of ancestral worship and the ethics of filial piety could all be utilized in organizing kinsmen into cohesive social groups. During the age of feudalism, before the establishment of the unified empire, political power was hereditary and limited to aristocrats, making kinship identity—membership in the aristocratic clans—a crucial ticket to office. This hereditary privilege persisted to a substantial degree among the semi-aristocrats during the so-called Age of Division (fourth to seventh centuries) and continued into the Tang dynasty. Thus, marking kin group members and demarcating kin group boundaries, usually through compiling clan genealogies, became crucial for preserving the privileges of the aristocratic and semi-aristocratic clans. In other words, up until the Song dynasty, the practice of organizing kin groups was limited to the privileged few and followed an exclusivist orientation.

By the Song, with the rise of the gentry and their localist orientation, a new type of kin group organization emerged. With hereditary access to office no longer available, maintaining local influence and standing became crucial for the gentry. This necessity led them to unite their kinsmen within local societies, pooling resources and fostering mutual bonds. Consequently, gentry-led lineages began to form, aiming to include as many members of the kin group as possible who lived in the same area.

The development of this type of lineage took centuries of exploration and experimentation to establish viable organizational forms. To simplify a complex and lengthy history, one could say that by the time these lineages fully matured in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, they typically featured three key elements (though at ground-level, not all practices were always present in all lineages):

- a) Ritual unity through collective burials and/or a common ancestral hall;
- b) Economic foundation through an incorporated lineage estate, which provided funds for lineage projects such as charity for the poor and education for the young; and
- c) Kinship identity iteration through periodically renewed genealogies of the kin group.

This type of local lineage, through its ability to cultivate a shared identity among kinsmen living in the same area, had the power to intertwine the processes of local identity formation and kinship identity formation, making them mutually reinforcing. This is because lineage building had the potential of transforming the place of the gentry's initial career success into their ancestral home and place of dwelling. If the civil service examination system led their careers necessarily to begin in their native places, the lineage system could ensure that they would eventually return there at the end of their careers. Thus, the localist orientation of the gentry could gain ritual significance and moral depth, and become solemn.

We can see such solemnity in the ancestral instructions left by Han Qi, an Anyang native of the Song dynasty who served as a

prime minister and was a precursor of gentry localism. In a poem addressed to his descendants, Han urged all members of the Han clan to avoid moving away from their native place or being buried elsewhere. He emphasized that only in the native soil could one truly find a home:

with ancestors stay, never forego 得从祖考游，
find peace quietly, in the soul 魂魄自宁处。

4.

We have detailed information about two literati from Anyang during the late imperial period: Cui Xian (1478–1541) of the Ming dynasty, and Ma Piyao (1831–1895) of the Qing dynasty. Both men earned the highest degree of *jinshi* in the civil service examinations and held high-level offices in the state, establishing connections and exerting influence beyond their home locale. This makes them comparable to Zhang in terms of social status and scope of influence. However, China's position in the world changed significantly during the 500 years that span the lives of these three men. A brief examination of their life trajectories may help to place Zhang's life and efforts in a broader historical perspective.

Cui's time was the golden days of the Sinocentric world order. China had no rivalry in the world. Domestically, its social and political institutions were fully matured, and their limitations and problems had not been fully exposed. Political culture at the highest level was not as encouraging as some of the thriving historical periods, mostly due to the confrontations between the despotic power of the emperors and the moralistic approaches

of the literati.³ Some literati, such as the great philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529), sought new ways to fulfill their noble duty of maintaining the social and moral order by working within local societies and engaging with the people, rather than staying in the court as direct assistants to the emperor, as orthodox teachings prescribed.

But that was far from a crisis of the civilization. From its own perspective, China was still the only true civilization in the world, and there was a sense of security and self-complacency in its views of other peoples living beyond its pale. Cui himself wrote condescendingly about the Hmong people on the southwest border of the Ming empire: they were “transformable” and could be civilized if the local officials (who were Chinese Confucian literati like himself) worked diligently and followed the right methods.⁴ This superior confidence was not without reason. Cui’s essays, for example, were admired in places as far away as Korea, one of the most devoted members of the Sinocentric world order. During this era, classical Chinese was the universal language of this world, just as the Confucian teachings were its universal moral principles.

In terms of temperament, Cui Xian was more of a scholar than an administrator. Over his 36-year career as an official, beginning with his *jinshi* degree at age 27, he never served as the chief executive officer of a local jurisdiction. His posts were primarily related to literary and ritual functions: reader-in-waiting in the Royal Academy, chancellor of a National University, vice supervisor to the heir-apparent of the throne, and eventually vice minister of Rites. These roles involved advising and admonishing the

emperor on various matters, which often required considerable moral courage. Cui did indeed risk his career and life by challenging the will of the throne on several occasions. Fortunately, he managed to survive the purges and persecutions that were common at the time. Despite this, the difficult conditions led him to adopt a strategy of distancing himself from the court. He began petitioning for retirement at the relatively young age of 39. Although the court was reluctant to let him go and occasionally recalled him, he ultimately spent 24 of his 36 post-*jinshi* years living in retreat in Anyang.

The conventional view that a literati, especially one with a *jinshi* degree, should serve as the emperor's assistant troubled Cui Xian. Even when away from the court, he frequently pondered the meaning of life for a learned gentleman in retreat. In response to an imagined challenge to his decision to leave the court, Cui argued that those who risk their lives to admonish the emperor might merely be seeking fame rather than embodying true loyalty. A gentleman, according to Cui, does not need to be a conformist to seek harmony, nor does he need to rely on extremist arguments for distinction. What is essential is to understand what is right in the world and promote it. For Cui, the essence of a learned gentleman's life in retreat lies in the concept of moral autonomy. Despite forces beyond one's control, moral autonomy allows a gentleman to distance himself from the Son-of-Heaven's court while remaining steadfast in his pursuit of moral truth.

Cui Xian's life in Anyang was comfortable, leisurely, and dignified. As a retired court official, he earned respect from both local officials and literati. The prefect of Zhangde Prefecture, which

included Anyang as the primary county, even asked Cui to name his newborn child. Local government school instructors regularly led their students to his home to pay their respects. Scholars traveled long distances to study with him. In return for these honors, Cui single-handedly compiled the Zhangde Prefectural gazetteer at the prefect's invitation and frequently wrote essays commemorating local events, such as the opening of new community schools.

Privately, Cui engaged in lineage building, working on a genealogy and constructing an ancestral shrine for his clan. His family owned a modest farm of about 30 acres outside the county seat, where he spent most of his time gardening and studying. He even wrote an essay specifically about his life there, entitled "On Dwelling":

I resigned again and returned home. South of the [irrigation] canal, I have a small farm where we grow grains and vegetables, relying on them for sustenance and nourishment. I call on fellow countrymen and kinsmen to join me in cultivating loyalty and trustworthiness, illuminating the Dao of benevolence and righteousness, and practicing good manners in social interactions. I promote the writings of Master Zhu [Xi] and carefully study works by other Sung dynasty scholars. I explore the causes of order and chaos in past eras and also learn about medicine, agronomy, divination, and horticulture. In my spare time, I gather friends and relatives for drinking parties. When in good spirits, we contemplate the subtle meanings of things or compose essays and poetry.

All of Cui Xian's activities—learning, lineage building, ritual practicing, engaging in moral cultivation, teaching, and participating in community leadership—were aligned with the expectations of a gentleman of the world. They can all be regarded as the first steps in ordering the world, for if one local place can be transformed through these endeavors, other places might follow, eventually leading to an orderly “all-under-heaven.” In this sense, Cui's local life in Anyang carried universalistic connotations. Far from being merely provincial, his life had a cosmopolitan quality. Although he experienced some initial unease, he eventually found contentment in this way of life. This may explain why Cui was so devoted to it. Less than a year into his final service post in Nanjing, he petitioned for retirement due to signs of illness and set out for home as soon as his petition was approved. He died shortly after arriving home. According to local custom, it was considered a good death, as he passed away in his native place.

Ma Piyao's temperament and career trajectory were almost the exact opposite of Cui Xian's. A capable and energetic administrator, Ma consistently held executive roles throughout his career. Over his 30-year post-*jinshi* career, Ma remained in office nearly all the time, with only two leaves for mourning his father and stepmother. Far from being disillusioned by his administrative duties, Ma saw his career marked by optimism and success. He died while serving as the governor of Guangdong Province. Despite their differing career paths, Cui and Ma shared a similar view of their home place. For both, life in their native locale, with its ancestral rituals and kinship organization, was seen as profoundly meaningful and the final destination. Although Ma's

official duties kept him away from home for most of his career, his intention to return to his native place was clear from an early age. A poem he wrote at age 17, while still a student in Anyang, expressed his ambition: "To assist the king, sweeping the world and saving lives; then return home, to the mountains, wine, poetry, and an unrestrained life." While this youthful vision of a carefree life has Daoist undertones, the mature Ma never shirked his responsibilities to his kinsmen or his native place.

As the first *jinshi* and official of the Ma clan, he took care of not only his own children but also other promising kids of the clan. He brought Jidong, the son of a cousin, to his service place for better education. In 1885, he donated 2,000 taels as the initial fund for the construction of a joint ancestral shrine of the Ma clan, which was made up of two branches by then. It was Jidong, together with Piyao's son Jishen, who carried the fund home from Taiyuan where Piyao was posted. In addition to the shrine, Ma contributed 9,000 taels to fund a lineage estate for his own branch of the clan. This estate was intended to provide charitable relief to kinsmen in need, with Jidong appointed as the managing head, and Jishen as his deputy. Ma also invested most of his income into building a family complex in his home village. In 1892, while staying home for the mourning of his stepmother, Ma purchased a small estate near his childhood home and began planning long-term improvements, likely in preparation for his retirement. Simultaneously, he began drafting instructions for his sons on how to preserve and grow the family's fortunes through hard work and vigilance.

As an influential and capable official, Ma was capable of intervening in the bureaucracy to advocate for and assist his home