Chapter 2
Introducing the Tools: Theory, Method, and Model

2.1 Laying the Foundations: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

As numerous ethnographic studies have shown, one cultural or ethnic group can be characterized by multiple burial rituals, while other practices might cross such boundaries. Ucko (1969: 257) therefore suggests moving attention "away from one exclusive burial form (e.g. cremation vs. inhumation) to the exceptional and possibly diagnostic cultural trait […] or the varying proportions of different burial practices within a particular group or area, in order to construct any sort of diagnostic typology of funerary customs."

Indeed, the material from the Liangshan Region shows very clearly that a simple typology of grave forms does not lead us far in identifying past identity groups; however, neither is identifying "diagnostic cultural traits" itself a straightforward or unproblematic matter. In any research on identity, we first need to make clear what we mean when talking about cultural, ethnic, and other forms of identity, be they related to a group or single individuals. Only then can we discuss how different forms of identity are related to material culture and archaeological phenomena and how we may infer one from the other.

2.1.1 Culture, Objects, and the Archaeological Record

The traditional, cultural–historical definition of archaeological culture as brought forth by Childe (1929: v–vi) focuses on the constant co-occurrence of a specific set of material remains that is seen as related to a cultural group, which in turn is equated with a "people." Following this tradition, in research on prehistoric material from Southwest China, archaeological cultures are often equated with ethnic groups mentioned in transmitted texts. The boundaries between different archaeological

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cultures, however, are not clear-cut, as Childe himself remarked in later publications (Childe 1956). Clarke (1968) therefore proposed a polythetic model of culture, in which the distribution of different artifact categories overlaps only in part, forming diffuse units of archaeological culture. Nevertheless, he still held that archaeological cultures mapped real entities, even though these were not identical to historic, political, linguistic, or ethnic units.

One of the main issues here is the nature of the relationship between archaeological cultures and past individuals and groups. Since the 1960s some archaeologists sought an answer in discussions on style. Sackett (1977), for instance, held that stylistic variation reflected social variation and therefore represented ethnic differences (isochrestic style) as well as personal identities (iconological style). Based on ethnographic observations, Wobst (1977) took a somewhat different angle; he saw the function of style as one of boundary maintenance that expresses social and ethnic differentiation in highly visible and repetitive ways.

Striving to identify ethnic groups in the archaeological record has been a highly controversial endeavor since the beginnings of the discipline. For most of the first half of the twentieth century, archaeologists generally considered tribes, races, and peoples to be unified wholes with clear-cut boundaries. Clarke (1968) pointed out that archaeological cultures as a functional whole mapped by a set of well-defined diagnostic types were not necessarily identical with historical, political, linguistic, or racial entities; nevertheless, he was content with concentrating on archaeological cultures as real entities without discussing their relationship with past identity groups.

Although coming from a completely different approach, like Clarke, proponents of the processual school of thought tended not to address the ethnicity question but focused on the systemic context and outer constraints to human actions.[1] Nevertheless, processual archaeologists have pointed out that past societies were not self-contained static entities but continuously interacted with other groups, other systems, or subsystems, and therefore a multivariate and contextual approach is needed to explain variability and patterns in the material record. Similarly, the postprocessual school of thought as represented by Hodder (1982) and other scholars characterized individual self-perception and perception by others as produced, recreated, and maintained in intergroup and interpersonal contact as the main defining factors in the establishment of ethnic and other forms of identity.

Already in the 1960s, Barth (1969) had proposed a similar definition of ethnic identities, declaring that they were formed by two processes: ascription by outsiders and self-identification of the group itself. In this process, he believed, not all objective differences between groups are significant, but only those regarded by the actors as significant—those which are articulated in the course of social interaction.

The problem remains how to identify objects or other archaeologically retrievable remains that are related to expressions of group identities, be they defined by social or ethnic relations. It is generally agreed that some objects are more suitable

[1] Processual archaeologists defined culture as man's extrasomatic means of adaptation (White 1949), which made discussions about individual or group identity in the sense of self-perception and perception by others superfluous.

as markers of identity than others: Wobst (1977) held that it is mainly objects not preserved in the archaeological record such as clothes—in his ethnographic example, widely visible headdresses—that broadcast the broader group identities. As reflections of past concepts of life and death and the place of single individuals in the world, graves are likewise seen as fairly good indicators of different kinds of identities—cultural, social, religious, and personal.

Nevertheless, as Hodder (1982) pointed out, material objects and symbols can have different meanings depending on the context in which they appear. Furthermore, identities and beliefs are not the only factor shaping the material, and in this case mortuary, record: as Read (2007) argued, practical preconditions of object production and usage have to be taken into account as well. The chaîne opératoire approach, which has gained popularity since the 1990s, provides a means of approaching this dilemma; it takes into account practical and cultural choices involved in material procurement as well as production, use, and discard of objects (Sellet 1993).[2] This approach is thus a very promising avenue for understanding both technological and cultural aspects of object production and use, allowing inferences on past communities of practice in the widest sense, not only in the production of utilitarian objects but also, for instance, in grave construction and burial behavior. The model that I am proposing in this study therefore starts from the concept of chaîne opératoire and the notion of life histories, adopting a materialist perspective from the former but combining it with the emphasis on social function and context of the life histories approach.

The chaîne opératoire approach tends to focus on the production of objects, most often stone tools or ceramics. Here, I take this concept to a new level by applying it to graves, suggesting a "mortuary chaîne opératoire," as it were. In doing so, I conceptualize graves as composite objects emerging from various actions by individuals and groups of people uniting in shared burial rituals and other related acts. Shared burial traditions as well as shared—or differing—customs of object production and usage is what defines communities of practice.[3] These in turn provide indicators for various types of identity groups; nevertheless, the question remains as to what kind of communal identities are identified in this manner.

2.1.2 Identity and the Material Record: Questions of Ethnicity, Culture, and Social Differentiation

The main question from the archaeologists' point of view is how individual or group identities are reflected in the material record and how one may distinguish between different forms of identity on the basis of material remains alone. The main

[2] The term, chaîne opératoire, was coined by Leroi-Gourhan (1964) in the 1950s but the approach gained wide popularity in archaeological research only at a later point in time.

[3] Originally developed in cognitive anthropology to describe mechanisms of transmission and learning within a group sharing a craft (Lave and Wenger 1991; Cox 2005), the concept of communities of practice in archaeology is most commonly associated with processes of ceramic production (e.g., Stark 2006).

approach open to archaeologists is an analysis of the spatial distribution of different aspects of material culture and traces of human behavior as it changes over time and space. The relationship between objects, spatial distribution, and identity, however, is not straightforward but highly complex, each influencing and preconditioning the others in a web of connections that changes over time. It is therefore absolutely necessary for the archaeologist to voice clearly his or her ideas about these underlying mechanisms and develop a model of past relationships between human behavior, material culture, and the natural . This is most often done in connection with patterns of exchange and their geographic preconditions (e.g., Cusick 1998).

Hodder (1978, 1982), cautioned by the results of his ethnoarchaeological research, held that there was no simple correlation between resource distribution, material culture patterning, and degrees of economic competition. Nevertheless, he believed that areas of cultural similarity reflected areas of high social interaction. As statistical analysis can distinguish between random clustering and meaningful distributions, so Hodder held, it was possible to conduct spatial analysis on these distributions. Furthermore, he argued that stress and competition, especially for resources, led to the overt expression of ethnic differences and to the formation of clear cultural boundaries, and that "it may be possible to interpret such boundaries as being related to an enhanced consciousness of ethnic differences with increased competition between ethnic groups" (Hodder 1982: 187).

The "may" in his statement shows that caution is nevertheless in order as stress might not lead to ethnic differences in all cases. The archaeological material from two subregions of the Liangshan Region provides several such examples: Zhaojue County in the high mountains of the Northeast and Huili in the Southwest. In the marginal region of Zhaojue, in the pre-Han period many different kinds of grave forms and burial ritual coexisted without disturbing each other's monuments, indicating that various groups lived next to each other, respecting the graves of the others and adopting selected aspects of the other's burial customs and object repertoire (Hein 2014a: 211). In Huili, in the southeastern part of the research area, the presence of the valuable resource of metal did not lead to the emergence of competing ethnic groups or a visible stratification of local societies while in Yanyuan County in the Southwest social stratification emerged based on uneven access to natural resources (Hein 2014b).

Another problem is that we have to find a means to decide in which cases the patterning in our data reflects the existence of ethnic groups and when there are other reasons behind it. Eriksen (1991) argued that ethnicity, although being manipulated and transformed according to context, is not infinitely malleable. Once an individual or group has chosen a certain ethnic identity, their behavior is shaped by this attribution, even though it might not be emphasized in all situations. Eriksen saw ethnic distinctions as being rooted in perceptions of differences between lifestyles and other behavioral patterns. The effects of these behaviors and their differences should be visible in the archaeological record.

Even if we accept that identities are reflected in the material record and can therefore be recognized, mapped, and placed in relation to each other, the question remains: how can we distinguish between ethnic and other forms of identity?

Following the definition by Jones (1997), I hold that ethnic identity is only one aspect of a person's self-conceptualization, which results from identification with a broader group in opposition to others. Furthermore, ethnicity as a form of shared identity based on common culture or descent need not be important in all contexts and to all groups of people, but mainly arises in contact situations—especially in contact situations that involve conflicts and competition. As a consequence, several scholars very rightfully have questioned the applicability of the ethnicity concept in archaeology (e.g., Emberling 1997; Gellner 1983; Smith 1987). After all, even if analysis of genetic material are available that may testify to actual ethnic relations (and they are not available for the Liangshan Region), these genetic relations may not be identical with perceived ethnic relations. Perceived ethnic relations, however, are largely impossible to assess in the absence of contemporaneous written accounts.

Furthermore, as Rowlands (1980) pointed out, prehistoric groups probably were much smaller than the communities observed in present-day ethnographic research, and although past communities were in contact with other groups, they did not necessarily experience instances of open conflict where ethnic differentiation might have arisen. Ethnoarchaeological research in the Baringo district in Kenya led Rowlands to realize that in that part of the world the emphasis on blood relations was a relatively new phenomenon that probably came about as a result of colonial contact. He concluded, therefore, that in prehistoric research the concept of ethnicity was not valid. Some scholars (e.g., Gellner 1983) see ethnicity as an entirely modern phenomenon that started only with industrialism, replacing class identity or village–community affiliation that had previously been the principle distinguishing factor between individuals and groups. Early historical texts, however—be they from ancient Rome, Greece, or China—indicate a perception of, and emphasis on, ethnic differences by the inhabitants of powerful states when drawing contrasts between themselves and surrounding groups. Consequently, Smith (1987), Emberling (1997), and others argue that ethnicity emerges with the formation of early states, with ethnic groups arising in their peripheries as a reaction against these new entities.

Given that ethnic identity is generally accepted as something that arises situationally during instances of contact, the strict boundary between state societies with ethnic identities and prestate societies without such differentiations does not seem to be appropriate. I therefore agree with Jones that ethnicity is something that cannot be assumed to exist but has to be tested for in every context. She presents a bird's eye view, in which the distribution patterns of different cultural practices of a particular group are supposed to show overlapping ethnic boundaries constituted by representations of cultural difference. This suspiciously resembles the obsolete idea of clearly defined archaeological cultures corresponding to ethnic groups as proposed by the school of cultural history, even if for Jones the borders are more blurred.

Contrary to previous theoretical models then, I propose to define material variability at a variety of levels, considering the different aspects constituting a burial separately before setting them in relation to each other and their surrounding environment. I thus start from the individual view of the single element, and then widen the view to the individual grave, the cemetery, the subregion, and finally the regional and supra-regional level. Only such a meticulous operation

will make it possible to identify regular associations of materials, to infer their connections with specific materials, and to clarify their significance and interconnection—as opposed to random association—in their specific contexts.

As group identities refer to a shared way of doing things (i.e., *habitus* as defined by Bourdieu 1977), which in turn leave recoverable traces in the material record, these traces can in turn be used to infer the communities of practice behind them. The identification of self-conscious ethnic groups claiming a common descent, however, is more problematic and might even be impossible, especially in the absence of written records as in the case here. I therefore do not endeavor to equate the material clusters emergent from my analyses with specific ethnic groups mentioned in ancient textual sources.[4]

My main focus therefore aims at communities, cultural groups, and social strata. I am using the term **communities** to refer to people acting together in specific contexts, e.g., living together (settlement communities) or conducting mortuary rituals together (burial communities). **Cultural groups**, on the other hand, are larger entities showing similar behavioral patterns in object production and usage, as well as subsistence and modes of burial that indicate a shared identity, but not necessarily within an enclosed spatial region. They may not even be engaged in repeated joint actions like communities would be, but constitute something of an imagined community rather than a physical one. Within these groups, **social strata** can be observed through differences in dress and object assemblages in burials throughout the same cemetery or adjacent cemeteries of comparable date. The relationship between the burial record and different forms of identity groups has been the subject of much debate and thus requires some further discussion.

2.1.3 Burial Analysis and Identification of Identity Groups

Burial data have long been a major focus of theoretical discussions in archaeology, centering mainly on the relation between mortuary rituals and underlying social structures.[5] In the 1960s, proponents of the New Archaeology held that there was a direct correlation between the burial record and underlying social structures; consequently, they believed that one could be read from the other in a straightforward manner by applying quantitative methods (e.g., Saxe 1970; Binford 1971). This assumption has been heavily criticized for being too simplistic, and various scholars have convincingly argued that the material record constituting a grave is by no means a direct reflection of past social structures or beliefs. As Thomas (1991: 104) put it pointedly: "Societies, after all, 'do' a lot of other things besides being internally ranked."

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[4] Another aspect of research similarly limited by the nature of the material record is gender identity. Given that the skeletal material in the area is poorly preserved, the available data does not allow for research on questions of sex vs. gender in prehistoric groups of the Liangshan Region.

[5] For a detailed review on the related literature, consult O'Shea (1984: 23–49).

The factors influencing the burial record are manifold, including geographic preconditions, cultural, social, and ritual factors, and potentially even personal preferences and happenstance. Furthermore, ethnographic examples and archaeological data show equally clearly that the cross-cultural generalizations on the relationship between social structures and burial remains are not appropriate (e.g., Hodder 1982; Ucko 1969; and Chap. 3 in this book). After all, "burial ritual is not a passive reflection of other aspects of life," as Hodder (1982: 141) put it, but actively created by the funeral participants. Burial objects and other aspects of the material record are not just "elements of an identity kit but are the culmination of a series of actions by the mourners to express something of their relationship to the deceased as well as to portray the identity of the deceased" (Parker Pearson 1999: 84). Likewise, grave goods or any other aspect of material culture are not firm in their meaning but can change in significance and function with context and time.

I therefore hold that burials cannot be treated as static units but should be seen as the outcome of an array of processes and activities involving a considerable number of people and a variety of materials that can be effectively rationalized in a chaîne opératoire, in this case a mortuary one. Additionally, the spatial aspect has to be taken into consideration, both on the practical level of geographic preconditions and under sociocultural and religious aspects of burial content and cemetery organization. As Ucko (1969: 274) inferred from ethnographic studies, "rather mundane matters may radically affect burial customs." Furthermore, spatial arrangements—between graves within a cemetery, for instance—can reflect distinctions in group affiliation. Communities may signal their distinctiveness through burial monuments in the landscape and related rituals that have a spatial component as well. It is therefore this spatial component that promises to be particularly helpful in identifying past identity groups in the material record. At the same time, we have to keep in mind that various kinds of identity—whether self-proclaimed or projected onto the individual—can and do influence the formation of the burial record, and that even they are only one factor of many. The potential simultaneous presence of various kinds of identity as well as external influencing factors (such as the environment) is especially important for the model of grave formation that underlies the method of burial analysis I propose in this book.

2.2 Developing a Model: The Mortuary Chaîne Opératoire

One of the basic assumptions guiding my model is that grave assemblages consist of elements reflecting choice (intentional data), actions (functional data), and outer preconditions (nonintentional data).[6] Furthermore, objects in a grave rarely come into being at the moment of the actual burial, but each has a past life of its own. Based on these assumptions, I propose an analytical scheme that treats burials as

[6] For a treatment of the problem of nonintentional and intentional data, see Härke (1993).

composite objects and considers their components separately and according to their respective life histories.

I base my approach on the notion of life histories of objects, which has grown out of the more technical approach of chaîne opératoire analysis.[7] The concept of chaîne opératoire comes from a materialist perspective in which "artefacts are created, they have a finite use-life, they become worn and are discarded," while the life histories approach "encompasses the idea that objects are used to construct and maintain social identities" (Jones 2002: 84). Meanings associated with artifacts are not fixed but transform according to context and may express different modes of identity at various points in their life histories. The life histories approach is therefore a very useful means of thinking about the ways in which people, artifacts, and places are related in time. The more materialistically oriented background of use-life analysis can aid in the process of evaluating the possible effects of "mundane matters," such as material availability and other practical issues.[8]

As a first step toward constructing the model, I concentrate on the logic by which people create the funerary record. My model outlines the life histories of the various pieces of the burial record, including the grave as a physical structure, plus its furnishings, objects, and the human body. I outline the processes that form these various elements, from procurement of raw material to placement in the grave. Next, I consider transportation, preparation, production, use, modification, and reuse. This model structures the material systematically, but it has the potential to tear the elements apart and runs the danger of neglecting temporal and spatial aspects. In order to avoid this pitfall, I lay out how these processes and elements are connected in time and space.

In this process, I treat the body according to the "concept of the human body as a cultural artifact, shaped and perceived according to the social context" (Douglas 1970: 93), which would include all status, gender, ethnic affiliation, and other types of identity. This places the body into a category similar to the aspects of grave construction, installations, and burial objects and thus allows the same kind of analyses to be applied to all of them.

My model treats all constituents of the burial separately in their respective life histories, concentrating on three core aspects which I will discuss as follows: grave structure, body, and object assemblage. All elements go through three main stages: preparation, mortuary ritual (including funerary rites (i.e., actions of the burying group that utilizes and/or consumes items that may leave traces in the burial record) and interment rites (final deposition of objects and body in the grave)), and postburial changes (Table 2.1, Figs. 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3). Following this model, in Part II, I analyze these three elements of the burial record of the

[7] The life history approach to objects can be traced back to Appadurai (1986) and was applied to archaeology, e.g., by Kopytoff (1986) and Hoskins (1998).

[8] Friedel (1993), for example, lists a number of factors that can influence the choice of a certain kind of material for making particular objects. These are function, availability, economy, style, tradition, all of which are subject to change as circumstances (i.e., geography, technology, science, fashion, competition) change.

Table 2.1 The main elements and stages constituting the burial record

I. Preparation (can happen parallel to each other or in a temporarily staggered sequence)		
1. Grave	2. Body	3. Objects
• Choice of the location of the cemetery within the landscape	• Life history of the individual	• Grave furnishings
– Preparation of the locale	– Social standing and function	• Material to be used on the corpse including means of transportation
• Choice of the location of the grave within the burial site	– Material wealth	• Grave goods/*Beigaben* (specifically for use in the afterlife)
– Preparation of the location	– Health	• *Mitgaben*
• Procurement and preparation of construction material	– Age/sex/ gender/ethnicity/ individuality	– Personal belongings
• Choice of grave form, orientation, layout	– Individual preferences/habits of the dead person	– Cloths
– Orientation of the grave	• Modification of the body (dismembering, burning, putting in a special position, closing body apertures)	– Body ornaments
– Form, depths, layout	• Cleaning	– Magical objects
– Or: modification/ creation of a new grave within an existing monument/preparation of a tomb to take in further burials	• Painting	• Traditional gifts and spontaneous "love gifts"
	• Clothing	• Material to be used in funerary process (enter the grave as *Nachgaben* after the actual mortuary ritual just before the grave is closed)
	• Adorning	
	• Wrapping and further bedding	
II. Mortuary ritual		
1. Grave	2. Body	3. Objects
• Finishing the last parts of the grave structure	• Transport toward the grave, possibly first going through other places and stages of the ritual process	• Transport of the objects toward the grave
• Closing the tomb	• Laying the corpse into the grave	• Altering the objects during the burial process
• Adding aboveground elements/additional structures	• Closing wrapping/coffin	

(continued)

Table 2.1 (continued)

III. Postburial changes		
1. Grave	2. Body	3. Objects
• Reopening and or removing/adding/destroying elements during postdepositional activities (later rituals such as ancestor worship or for multiple burials or grave robbery)	• Exhumations for ritual or other reasons (reburial, worship, ritual, making space for new interments)	• New objects entering the grave due to postburial rituals or grave robbery
• Natural postdepositional dislocation, shifting, and other changes	• Disturbance due to grave robbery	• Objects are changed or destroyed due to postburial rituals or robbery
	• Natural decay	• Objects are removed due to postburial rituals, making space for new interments, or robbery (can be reentered into the circle of reuse/reshaping/discard)

Liangshan Region separately, following the life histories and subsections identified later, and then reconnect them by investigating the crosscutting variable of time and space.

2.2.1 Separate Life Histories: Grave, Body, and Objects

2.2.1.1 The Grave

Graves can be described along a considerable number of parameters comprising size (length, width, depth), form, layout (including construction elements, internal and external features), raw material, orientation, and general location within the landscape. Most of these observable characteristics come about during the preparatory phase and can be modified or added during the process of mortuary ritual and postdepositional changes.

The preparatory phase of the grave consists of the following steps:

1. Choice of location for the cemetery (or individual burial location)
2. Choice of the location of the grave within the cemetery
3. Preparation of the locale
4. Choice of grave form
5. Choice of grave orientation
6. Procurement and preparation of construction material and tools

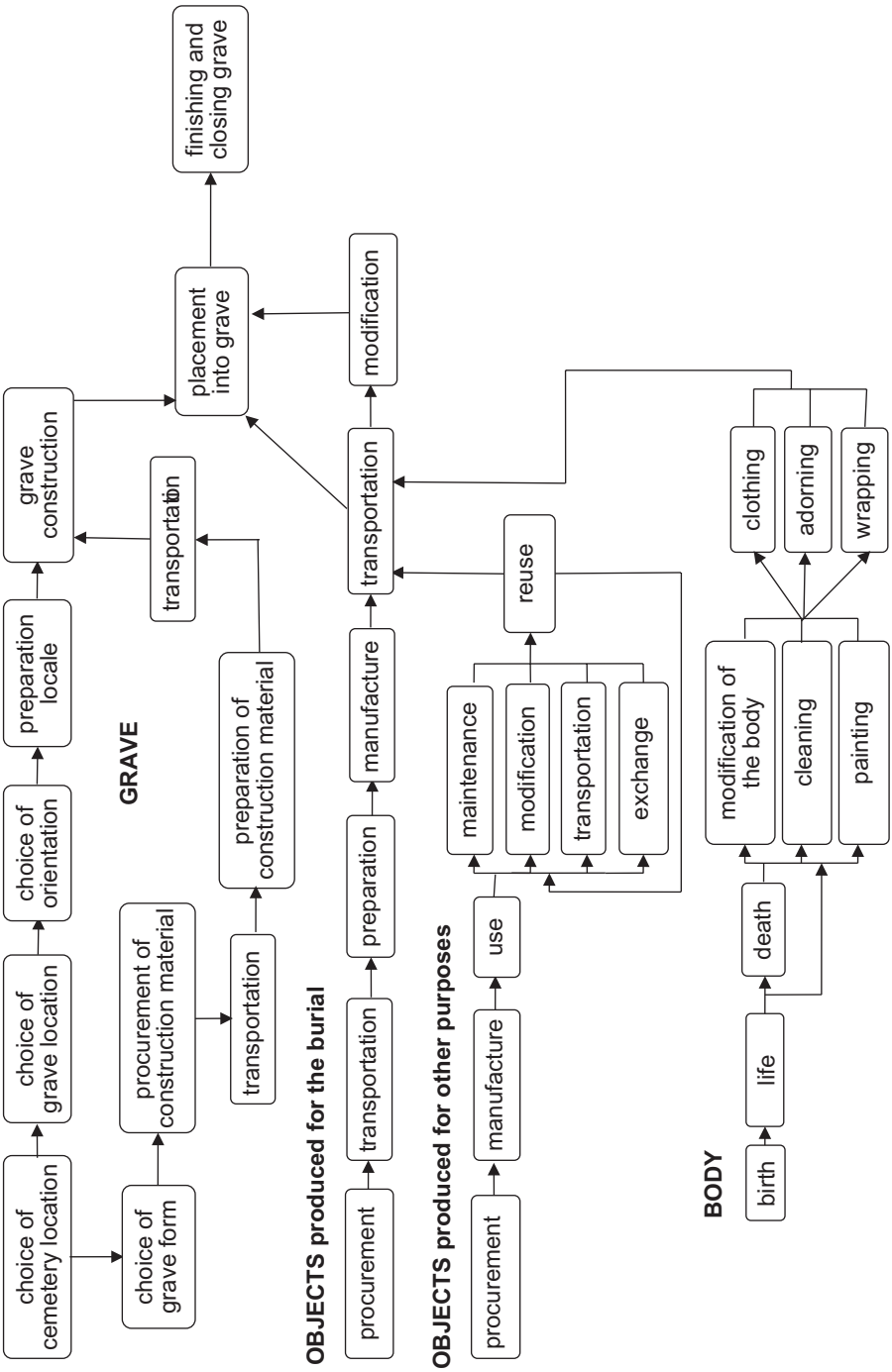

Fig. 2.1 Preparation and burial process

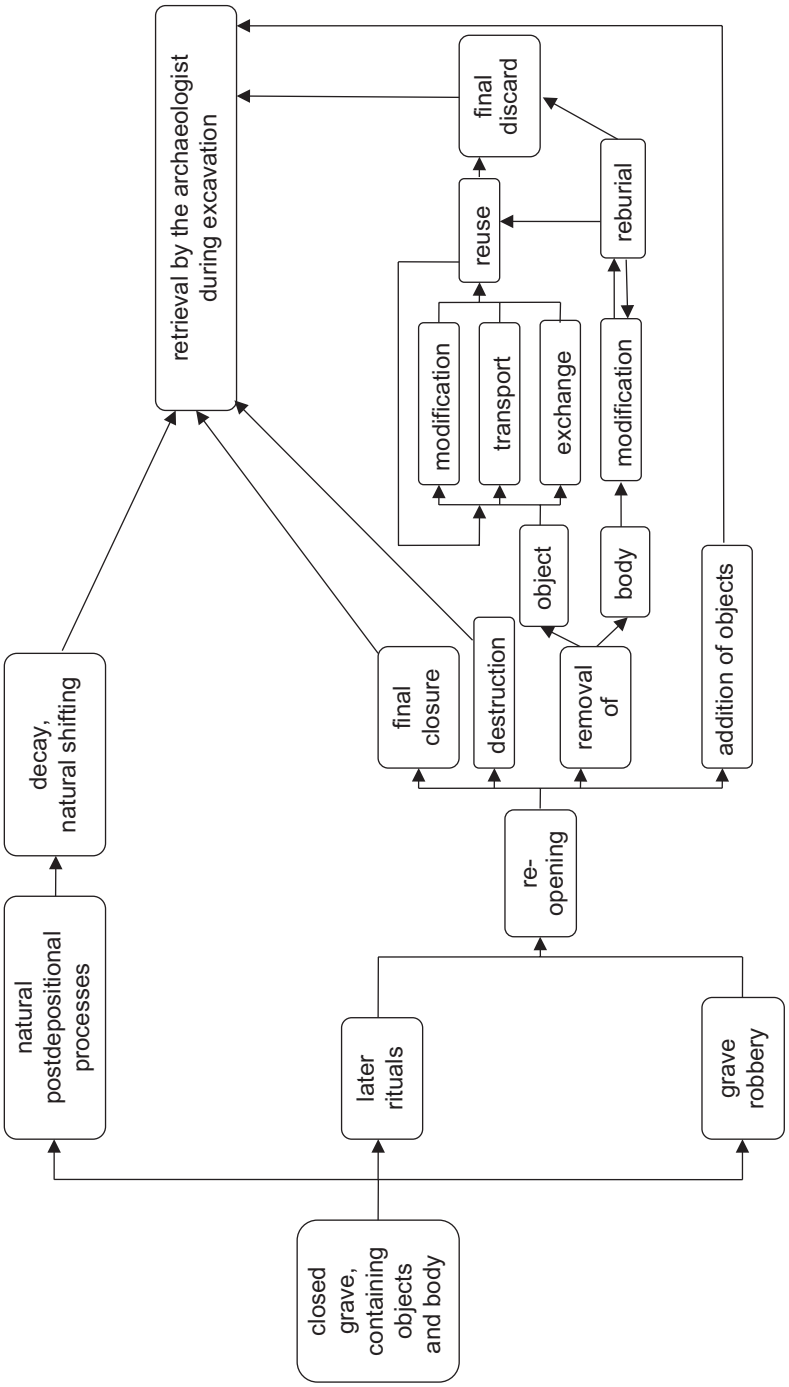

Fig. 2.2 Postburial changes

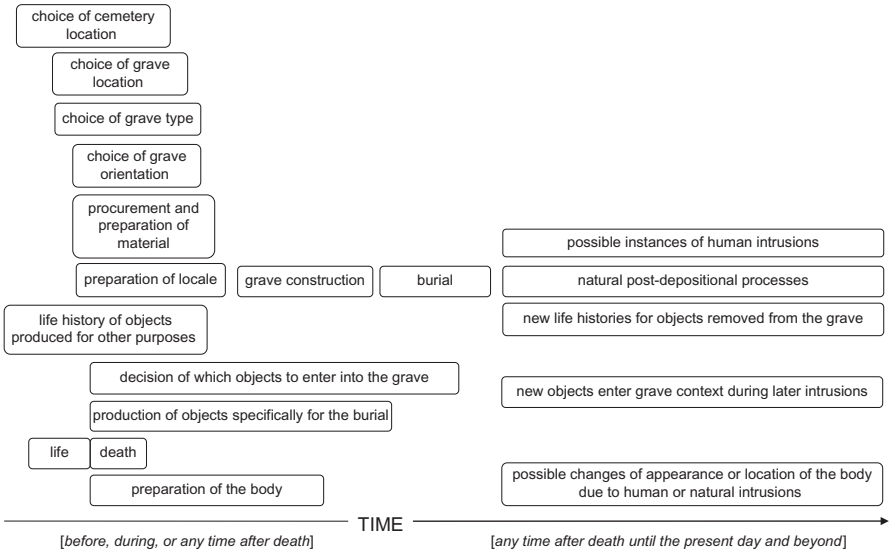

Fig. 2.3 Time slots for the various factors forming and influencing the grave

Steps 2–6 may take place in any sequence and are likely to happen in parallel.

If the burying community modifies an existing grave or larger monument to make room for a new tomb or new interment, the procedure takes a different form. It requires less time and effort but it also limits the range of choices for location and grave form. People creating graves make these choices according to a range of factors including:

1. Material availability
2. Availability of suitable ground, direction of slopes
3. Accessibility of locale, problems of transport
4. Time constraints
5. Religious beliefs
6. Other social and cultural factors

Most of these factors, but particularly 5 and 6, influence the actual mortuary ritual during which the mourners or religious specialists finish the last parts of the grave, close the tomb, and add aboveground elements and other structures. From this point onward, the process has hardly any connection with the deceased on an individual basis but is determined by cultural and social norms and restrictions guiding the people conducting the burial. Finally, the model accounts for the reopening, shifting, removing, adding, or destroying of elements due to postburial changes, such as later rituals (such as ancestor worship and/or multiple burials), grave robbery, or natural postdepositional processes (decay, trampling, disturbance by animals, soil movement).

There is always the possibility of later reuse of the grave and thus modification of any of the elements. For objects and materials deposited in the grave, reuse (if it

takes place) requires retrieval and is eventually followed by final discard. The grave as a whole therefore goes through a life history process consisting of:

1. **Preparation**: site/material preparation → construction →
2. **Mortuary ritual**: funerary rituals → interment rituals → closure rituals →
3. **Potential reuse**: one/several instances of reopening → modification → reuse →
4. **Final closure**
5. **Postdepositional processes**
6. **Excavation**.

2.2.2 The Body

The life history of the body interred in the grave begins with the life history of the individual, including social standing, occupation, material wealth, health, age, sex, gender, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity. Individual preferences and habits in life influence the bone composition and bodily appearance, as do occupation and nutrition, which might in turn be connected to social status. Paleoanthropological analyses are key to discerning information about the deceased's social status and lived personal preferences, while the analyses of objects and their placement reveal more about decisions made by the mourners than preferences of the deceased.

Modifications to the body after death can likewise reflect religious ideas held by the burying group, and possibly by the deceased as well, as burial instructions may have been given prior to death. Members of the burying group may, for example, dismember, burn, or arrange the body into a special position. They may alter or remove parts of the body and/or close body apertures. Additionally, the mourners might clean, paint, adorn, wrap, and/or bed the body in preparation for the interment or for other preburial rituals. Depending on the procedures, preparers may perform several episodes of body treatment.

During the mortuary ritual, mourners or ritual specialists transport the corpse to the grave, possibly first moving through other locations and stages of the ritual process. They place the body in the grave and close the wrapping or coffin over it. After interment, the body may be exhumed for reburial, worship, various rituals, and/or grave reallocation, or disturbed by robbers. At the same time, decomposition processes may also lead to a slight shifting of the body and other parts of the grave content. Even the grave structure may degrade to the point of collapse or complete obliteration below later soil layers.

Thus, the life history of the body starts from the lifetime of the individual itself from birth to death, including illness, instances of violence and stress inflicted on the body, possibly old age, and finally death, be it natural or violent. After death, the corpse is prepared for burial as described earlier, including the potential steps of intrusion into the body, dismemberment, cleaning, painting, clothing, adorning, and wrapping. Miscellaneous rituals (e.g., display and burning) may leave traces on the body before it is finally interred. Interment consists of the placing of the body in the

grave, and the closing of wrappings and the coffin, if present, and the sealing of the grave itself. Postburial changes include decay, as well as potential instances of exhumation for ritual or other reasons, and disturbance through grave robbery or other human-induced or natural disturbances. These various phases are reflected in the condition of the body, e.g., signs of premortal violence or postmortem modification, movement of the body after interment, health, sex, clothing, traces of body treatment, personal ornaments and burial objects, as well as grave structure and the position of the grave within the cemetery. The nature of the grave itself and the burial goods are particularly sensitive indicators of social standing and identity and rise in significance for archaeological investigation if the bone material is insufficiently preserved.

2.2.3 The Objects

The broad category of objects used in connection with the grave include grave furniture; material used on the corpse including means of transportation such as a stretcher, bier, or coffin; and a range of objects usually called "grave goods." As Hachmann and Penner (1999) have pointed out, there are a number of reasons why various kinds of objects enter the grave; therefore, we must classify them in different groups according to function. The main categories that Hachmann and Penner (1999: 173–177) named are as follows:

1. "**Beigaben**," grave goods in the narrow sense of objects specifically meant to be used in the afterlife by the deceased;
2. "**Mitgaben**," objects belonging to the dead, clothes, body ornaments, magical objects;
3. "**Traditionsgaben**" (traditional gifts) or "**Liebesgaben**" (love gifts), both given by mourners, the former prepared in advance and following a tradition, the second given spontaneously;
4. "**Zeremonialgerät**," ceremonial tools used during the burial ritual but without function in the afterworld; and
5. "**Nachgaben**," objects that entered the grave context after the actual mortuary ritual; this includes objects discarded after the burial ritual as ritually untouchable, objects placed in the grave during later ritual acts, and objects that grave robbers left behind accidentally.

What happens to all of these objects during and after the burial ritual is fairly clear: mourners or ritual specialists transport them to the grave and may alter them during the burial. Later on, natural postdepositional processes or human activities such as ritual reopening of the grave or grave robbery may lead to the deformation, destruction, or removal of these objects. If they are removed from the grave, the objects can reenter into the cycle of transportation, modification, reuse, and discard (Fig. 2.1).

The histories of objects can vary significantly depending on their nature and usage in the given cultural context as well as issues of material preservation. Actual

grave goods (*Beigaben*) and traditional gifts (*Traditionsgaben*), as well as grave furniture and some of the material used in the burial ritual have a single life cycle of procurement of raw material → preparation → production → use → discard. Between these stages, one or several instances of transportation, relocation, exchange, or modification may occur. For objects that existed in different context(s) before their deposition in the grave, we have to consider several instances of prior use. For objects retrieved from the burial after closure, there follows an additional life cycle of one or several instances of reuse, modification, transport, and final discard.

It is difficult to determine why objects were originally made and how many life cycle stages they went through before they became refuse, lost objects, or permanently deposited objects eventually retrieved by archaeologists.[9] Nevertheless, if we analyze specific formal properties, traces of use-wear, reshaping, repair, and organic residues, we can often find some indications regarding the previous use lives of objects. Additionally, the exact location in the grave and condition of the object help us to distinguish between "Beigaben," "Mitgaben," and "Nachgaben."

2.2.4 Reconnecting the Parts: Time and Space

Technically speaking, the only point when all components constituting an interment have to come together temporally and spatially is at the location of the grave during the interment itself. While the time windows are getting smaller and smaller, moving toward and centering on the moment of burial, the possible locales are moving closer and closer toward the grave as well. We can envision the whole process as many trajectories starting out from different places at different times and moving toward the "destination" of the grave in various intervals. It is at the grave, during the burial ceremony, that all elements meet, having the potential to remain together through the postdepositional processes. If they are removed from the grave, the objects can move away from this time–space entity again, starting a new life cycle of their own.

In a general model, we can thus depict the overall process as a movement from a diverse array of locations and points in time toward the one time–space unit of the instance of burial, and then possibly moving away again (Fig. 2.3). The grave is thus the focal point in space while the act of burial the focal point in time. As the time line moves away from the instance of interment, processes of disturbance or decay may alter the arrangement, but usually all elements will stay with the grave until they are retrieved by tomb robbers or archaeologists. To move the practically infinite number of possible temporal and spatial combinations from the abstract to the concrete, in the following I illustrate the model with a few ethnographic examples.

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[9] In the general archaeological sense of discarded material as established by Schiffer (1972: 129): "Refuse labels the post-discard condition of an element-the condition of no longer participating in a behavioral system."

2.3 Illustrating the Model: Ethnographic Examples and Textual Evidence

The goal of presenting these examples is not to find a perfect ethnographic analogy for the Liangshan Region. Instead, I have chosen a few cases that provide some insight into the possible range of burial practices, paying special attention to the material traces and their spatial and temporal arrangements. The cases were chosen from various parts of China, Africa, and Europe to cover a wide variety of environments and societies, showing how complex customs and social rules may or may not leave traces in the burial record.

The first case of North China in late Imperial and Early Modern times was chosen as an illustration of the variety of objects that may appear in the burial context, and an example of how religious, social, and circumstantial factors can influence the varying time lines of burial procedures. The studies of burial customs among orthodox Christians in rural Greece on the one hand and the LaDagaa in West Africa on the other are well-known examples of traditions that leave hardly any traces in the material record. They are well worth recounting in some detail here as they demonstrate how social and situational circumstances can lead to the deposit of human remains of the same community in a variety of places.

The lesser known example of minority groups in western Sichuan is of particular importance not only because it describes an area that is geographically close and geomorphologically similar to the Liangshan Region, but also because it provides important evidence of how ethnic differences may or may not be reflected in burial remains.

While all of the studies mentioned so far describe groups that would be difficult to identify in the archaeological record, the textual and archaeological evidence of the Central Plains of China in the Bronze Age shows a nearly ideal example of correspondence between social status and funerary wealth. The last example thus provides a contra-point to the first three case studies of groups whose traces in the material record are particularly difficult to interpret. Together, the four cases chosen provide a wide range of material for pointing out real-life correlates of different aspects of the model developed earlier before embarking on the actual analysis of the material from the Liangshan Region.[10]

2.3.1 Late Imperial and Early Modern North China

In Late Imperial and Early Modern north China,[11] certain preparations for a funeral such as buying a coffin, sewing burial clothes, or locating a burial site could be made far in advance of the occurrence of death, while the rituals themselves would

[10] The usefulness of ethnographic examples as a way to widen the cultural and intellectual horizon of the archaeologist has been discussed extensively elsewhere (e.g., Ascher 1961, 1962; Fischer 1990; Kramer 1979; Stanislawski 1978; Ucko 1969; Wylie 1985).

[11] In the case of China, the Late Imperial period has usually been defined as the time from the early Ming to the declining years of the Qing Dynasty, i.e., 1400–1850, and Early Modern China is term

begin just before death (here and in the following after Naquin 1990). Because it was unlucky for death to occur on the *kang* (a heated living and sleeping platform made of brick), relatives or servants would transfer the dying person onto a stretcher and transported him or her into a special ceremonial room in the house. After the person died, the family began mourning and preparing the corpse by washing and clothing him/her in a special gown that signified class and occupation (a *Mitgabe*). The family would cover the face of the dead with a piece of cloth or paper, tie the feet with a colored string, and place pearls or coins in the mouth and jewelry and/or mirrors on the body (all of these are *Mitgaben*, as well).

A diviner determined the best time and orientation of the grave, reconfirming or altering the burial site that the family had chosen prior to death. On the third day, close relatives placed the body into a coffin, surrounded it with further objects such as food and a stick to feed and beat the vicious dogs in the next world (i.e., providing *Beigaben*), and finally closed the coffin. A number of complex rituals followed, none of which would have left any traces on the coffin or the deceased. At the point of potential excavation, an archaeologist would thus be able to infer the status of the deceased in life using any preserved clothing, as well as some spiritual beliefs the mourners held, but they would have no indicators of how much time elapsed between the placement of the deceased in the coffin and the actual burial.

In the case of north China, a family might wait months or years to bury the dead. The relatively dry and cool local climate made this waiting period less problematic than it might have been in the tropical or subtropical environment dominating much of southern China. Even though, one might imagine that waiting for such a long period might have been less common in the summer months when decay processes would have made the wait problematic. Conversely, frozen ground and subzero temperatures halting the decay of the body may have been factors that influenced the decision for a later burial. The spiritual reasons for such a delay vary, but common examples include waiting for an auspicious date or for the passing away of a husband or wife to be buried in the same grave (Naquin 1990: 42). Then the burying community usually placed the coffin in an earth-pit grave. In rare cases, the bereaved may have burned the body if the death had been unnatural or unusual. The grave site was always at considerable distance from any human settlement, and burial participants transported the coffin there in an elaborate procession. After burial, the family only rarely exhumed and reburied the body. The only reasons for doing so included declining family fortunes resulting in the need for a more auspicious place or the repurposing of the burial grounds for a

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usually applied to the period between 1840 and 1911 (Clausen 2000: 3–5). The appropriateness of either of these terms is heatedly discussed. This discussion has been summarized by Clausen (2000) and I will therefore not repeat the conflicting arguments here. In the study of Naquin (1990) that I am basing myself on, the term "Late Imperial and Early Modern China" is used to refer mostly to the late Qing (1644–1911) and early Republican periods (1912–1949). The material the study is based on stems from Chinese gazetteer accounts from 1870 to 1940 but describes customs with considerably older roots.

different usage (Gamble 1954: 393). Here again, spiritual needs and practical concerns influenced by the local environment and economic factors majorly influenced the future of the grave in question.

Most rituals involving the ancestors took place at home or in a temple. The family visited the grave only a few times out of the year, and they would burn paper money and firecrackers but not disturb the grave itself. The time preceding the actual interment of the dead could thus be very long, but the grave would remain largely undisturbed after final closure.

2.3.2 Orthodox Christian Communities in Rural Greece

In contrast with the onetime earth burial of people from all ranks of society in Late Imperial and Early Modern China, the orthodox Christian communities of present-day rural Greece only very wealthy individuals receive a permanent burial, while families of more limited means always exhume the body after about 5 years (Danforth and Tsiaras 1982). Immediately after death, the family first washes and clothes the deceased in new clothes. They then place the corpse into a coffin, depositing a few coins or a cross on the body but no further objects. Shortly after, priests lower the coffin into an earthen grave in the presence of loudly lamenting women, other family members, and friends. During the following years, part of the family (mostly the women) remains in a state of constant mourning, and priests perform several memorial services. Choosing a time span of several years is likely largely based on the time it takes for the flesh to decompose in the local environment, even if the participants in these burial traditions may quote religious rather than practical reasons. Exhuming the dead in the first place, however, is likely a cultural/religious choice rather than a reaction to environmental factors.

Similar to the interment, during the exhumation, the women of the family and a priest play the most important roles. The wife, mother, or daughter collects the bones in a box, and a priest places them in the village ossuary in another ceremony. This marks the final farewell of the family for the deceased. Later, family members and priests conduct general memorial services for all the dead in the ossuary, but the bones remain undisturbed, except for slight rearranging when new bones are added. The primary grave is refilled, so an archaeologist would only see an empty rectangular hole with decomposed organic material, as well as maybe a coin, a cross, or a few unretrieved human bones. The ossuary, if excavated, would not provide any concrete clues about the burial proceedings or social status of the various deceased, except for what an anthropologist can read from the state and composition of the bones themselves. Thus, burial customs in rural Greece mostly obliterate social differences and personal individuality of both the deceased and the mourners, but the identity of the community is preserved and reinforced through the final placement of the dead in a common ossuary.

2.3.3 *The LoDagaa in West Africa*

The LoDagaa in West Africa only discriminate by age and circumstance of death in assigning grave forms for their members (Goody 1959, 1962). The LoDagaa construct a separate chambered tomb for each group of brothers and their wives and place the dead on earthen benches with soil heaps as head rests. They orient women to face west and men to face east. The grave remains accessible until the last member of the group dies; only then do the mourners close the opening with an upturned pot never to open it again. These graves are arranged in cemeteries unless the man is very old at the time of death. If the man has seen his grandchildren, he and his wife are buried in the courtyard of their own house.

On the other hand, the LoDagaa do not see infants as full people and therefore do not place them into the earth. Instead, they bury infants at level ground under a pile of earth located at the crossroad nearest the mother's home. The mourners stick thorns into the pile to keep dogs and other scavengers away. Then, they place the cradle on top of the pile and drive a stake through it, likely, in order to prevent the spirit of the child from haunting the mother (Goody 1962: 150). In this case, both practical concerns and questions of belief thus influence the form the grave takes. This also applies to the third category of trench graves; the LoDagaa use these graves for disposing of the people who died of an epidemic and need to be buried quickly as well as for those that committed a sin (e.g., witchcraft, murder, suicide). In such cases, the community usually chooses a location far away from the village and close to a watercourse so that the rain can wash the impurities into the river and prevent them from contaminating the nourishing earth. In all cases, the burial occurs soon after death without burial goods or personal belongings; instead, family members and the community consume or distribute personal effects, based on a complex set of rules (Goody 1962: 284–327). As the choice of location and grave form furthermore varies depending on the circumstances of death, archaeologists would have great difficulty relating the remains from trench burials to any one community with any reliability.

2.3.4 *The Mountains of Sichuan in the Early Twentieth Century*

David-Néel (1952) described an even more dramatic case in the mountains of Sichuan from 1937. She reported that in Kham, both Chinese and Tibetans usually burned their dead and hardly ever buried the remains (David-Néel 1952: 146). In Kangding, on the other hand people placed the coffins in a shallow grave (20–40 cm deep), arranged a few stones around it, and threw some earth on top (David-Néel 1952: 144–145). The rain eventually washed the earth away and disturbed the stones until the bare bones lay open on the surface. Local women would then collect the

bones and dispose of them in deep natural chutes or cliffs, leaving hardly any distinguishable traces for future archaeologists. David-Néel did not make any observations on rituals preceding or surrounding the temporary interment, bone collection, or final disposal, but we can surmise that the minimal time span for the overall procedure is simply the time needed for the elements to break open the grave and the body to decay. Depending on the local climate and weather, such a process may take only a few months or several years. Ritual acts and religious beliefs or proscriptions additionally extend the period that the burying group may wait before retrieving the bones.

Other groups in Southwest China such as the Naxi buried their dead in a very different way (Goullart 1957). They largely adopted the burial customs observed by the Han population that dominated most of Yunnan at that time—customs essentially similar to those described earlier for northern China. Their customs differed only in that women who died in childbirth and people who died violently were always quickly cremated and buried, probably hastened by a fear of ghosts and pollution through bad deeds and evil spirits similar to what the LoDagaa feared. The short procedure followed by a night-long ceremony in which *dtombas* (a traditional kind of Naxi spiritual specialist) and lamas chanted and danced together to expel the evil demons, resulting in the *dtombas* going into trance, sacrificing animals, and using their blood in the rituals (Goullart 1957: 260). Thus, the combined burial practices left weak but noticeable traces in the burial record that would help archaeologists to distinguish at least some of the Naxi burials from those of the Han living in the same area. Similarly, ethnographic studies from Africa suggest that a common set of burial customs may—but do not have to—characterize a particular society. The graves of the Sandawae in east Africa, for example, are clearly distinguishable from those of their neighbors because the Sandawae alone bury their dead deep below the cattle pen instead of exposing them to hyenas (Huntingford 1953: 139).

2.3.5 The Central Plains of China in the Bronze Age

Textual and archaeological evidence from Bronze Age China shows that some societies indeed bury their dead according to a complex rank system. In this case, grave makers indicate status through features such as placement of the tomb within the cemetery; tomb size; presence and number of burial chambers and coffins; horse-and-chariot pits; human or animal offerings; presence and number of ritual bronze vessels; metal weapons; ceramic kitchen vessels; and personal ornaments of nephrite, stone, or bone (Falkenhausen 2006: 89–167). Furthermore, these rules varied by locale, between lineages, and over time, thus adding several dimensions of meaning (space, time, individual, and group identity) to the burial record.

2.3.6 Summary

The ethnographic examples described above show clearly that religious beliefs, social/cultural factors, and environmental surroundings all play a role in forming the burial record and have to be taken into consideration. At the same time, the material remains very likely mirror only a fraction of all the processes taking place in connection with the interment process. In preparation for the funeral, participants may conduct a wide range of rituals that are either untraceable in the archaeological record or difficult to connect with the actual burial. Furthermore, excavators and analysts cannot always reliably distinguish between certain elements such as *Beigaben* and *Mitgaben*. Nevertheless, a comprehensive model needs to include all of these elements to remind us of the range of possibilities. Both the ethnographic examples and the model proposed here make clear that in order to fully understand a burial and its assemblage, we always have to take the cultural, ecological, and situational context into account.

As Kingery (1996: 185) argues, the physical and practical aspects of artifact production, use, and discard are enmeshed with the utilitarian, spiritual, emotional, creative, and esthetic life of objects. This is applicable to the life histories of graves as composite units as well. As the relationships among people, objects, meanings, and places are fluid and change over time, a model trying to depict them all must also necessarily be fluid and flexible. It can become only more concrete when applied to a specific body of material, which I will do in the remainder of this book. As context is so important, however, we have to take into account not only the influence of the local environment on its past inhabitants but also the preconditions of research in the Liangshan Region. The local preconditions of research including preservation conditions and extend and nature of fieldwork strongly influence the picture we develop of prehistoric burial customs—be it in Southwest China or in other parts of the world. Before endeavoring to conduct an analysis of the mortuary remains from the Liangshan Region, it is therefore necessary to set the stage by discussing the nature of the data itself and the environment in which it was found. In a short review of previous archaeological work in this region (both primary through fieldwork and secondary through various types of analysis), I furthermore position myself and this book within the "research landscape," thus establishing the past and present context for this study.

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