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## Legal Liminality of Elite Widows in the Periphery of the Han Empire:

### A New Perspective on the Excavated *Gaodice* Tablets

*Gaodice* 告地策, or “notification letters to the underworld authorities,” were a mortuary practice peculiar to the Jiangling area (mid-Yangzi River region) in the first several decades of the nascent Han Empire. By comparing death to a household relocating journey to the underworld, these *gaodice* tablets imitated the format of bureaucratic communication and were placed in the chamber coffins of the deceased. So far five such tablets have been discovered in Jiangling, three of which belonged to widows of top rank-holders. In the past scholarship, this genre of writing was studied mainly as a ritual-religious phenomenon. However, the genre’s emphasis on this-world rank statuses of the tomb occupants and on the preservation of their property in the afterlife was unduly neglected. In this paper, I focus on the *gaodice* texts of the three elite widows’ and discuss widows’ succession rights of their rank-holding husbands’ privileges. By using both historical and archaeological evidence, I aim to reveal how the change of the rank system in the early Han period and the legal liminality that characterized widows’ relationship to their husbands’ rank entitlement put this social group in a disadvantaged position. Their vulnerable in-between legal status was further exacerbated by the unstable sociopolitical ecology of Jiangling as the periphery of the Han Empire. This legal liminality in effect brought about much anxiety for the social group of widows. I argue that the symbolic structure of the *gaodice* texts and the entombment of the tablets were a ritualized solution to address and appease such anxiety.