

Study on the Funeral Culture of Child Death in the Mid and Late Tang Dynasty: Centered on Epitaphs

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Abstract. The death culture of the Tang Dynasty was affected by many things, like religious beliefs, social ideas and economic conditions. It formed a special way to deal with death and a special cultural atmosphere. In the late Tang Dynasty, parents had many ways to deal with their children who died young. Parents who believed in religion liked to bury their children near religious places. Parents who did not believe in religion mostly buried their children in the family's graveyard. If a child died young and had reached the marriage age, parents might arrange a ghost marriage for the child. This was seen as a normal marriage form in the Tang Dynasty. This death culture not only showed the living people's sadness and blessings for the dead people, but also reflected the religious beliefs, family ideas and people's understanding of death in that society at that time. Studying the death culture of the late Tang Dynasty can help us understand the spiritual world of people at that time and the social and cultural background behind it more deeply. It also helps us talk about the cultural forms and meanings when children died young.

Keywords: Mid and Late Tang Dynasty, Epitaphs, Death, Cultural Views

1. Introduction

The Tang Dynasty was the most prosperous time for China's farming culture. It was also the time when China's traditional culture developed and became fixed. But the Anshi Rebellion hit the Tang Dynasty almost completely. Even after Emperor Suzong of Tang put down the rebellion, the Tang Dynasty could never get back its prosperous look. The rebellion caused a lot of death and loss. Because of this, people stopped chasing happiness in life and started thinking about death instead. To remember the dead, nobles usually wrote the dead people's life stories on epitaphs. Most of these stories were about the great achievements of scholars and royal people. A small number of them also recorded children who died young. Ancient people had different ideas about children who died young compared with modern people. In ancient times, the ability to produce food and things was low, so people could not raise too many children. There were many cases of killing babies or drowning babies. The children who could live were mostly cherished by their families. This social phenomenon certainly had some influence on the death culture of children who died young.

2. The definition of children and analysis of death ages in the Tang Dynasty

2.1. The age definition of children in the Tang Dynasty

Today, "children" generally mean people who are under 18 years old—they are minors. Ancient people did not have the special concept of "minor", but they divided adults and minors in a legal sense starting from the Han Dynasty. The laws of the Han Dynasty said, "People under 18 do not receive punishment" and "Young kids under 8 do not need to wear punishment tools" [1]. From this, we can see the Han Dynasty divided minors into two age stages.

In the Tang Dynasty, the definition of minors was more detailed and more various. According to Tang Code with Commentary · General Principles, it says, "Commentary: According to Rites of Zhou: People over 70 and kids who have not grown permanent teeth cannot be made slaves. Now the law says: People over 70 but under 79, people under 15 but over 11, and people with disabilities—because we pity the old, the young and the sick, they can pay money to replace punishments lighter than exile." [2] So we can see people under 15 and over 11 were called "small (young)", and they did not take criminal responsibility.

The division of "small (young)" was one way to tell minors and adults apart. This concept first started in the Western Zhou Dynasty, but the rules at that time were not very clear. Also, the note to Book of Rites · Internal Rules about "A grown child performs the elephant dance" says: "A grown child is over 15 years old." Being over 15 was just a slightly older child, not yet an adult by standard. According to Book of Rites · Meaning of the Capping Ceremony, it says, "The capping ceremony is the start of rituals... After the capping ceremony, a man gets a courtesy name—this is the way to be an adult... He will then be required to follow the rituals of being a son, a younger brother, a minister, and a young person in society." [3] We can infer that the capping ceremony made a man be seen as an adult in a social sense. In medicine, Qianjin Yaofang (Valuable Prescriptions for Emergencies), Volume 5 Prescriptions for Young Children, has a recipe with medicines like rhubarb, bupleurum, scutellaria baicalensis. It is "a prescription to treat heat accumulation and excessive phlegm, and poor appetite in children under 15" [4]. This is the oldest age of "child" clearly mentioned by Sun Simiao (the author). We know that in early Tang Dynasty medicine, children were aged 6 to 15, and they took less medicine than adults. So at the latest in the early Tang Dynasty, Chinese medicine began to take 15 as the age boundary for medical treatment [5]. 15 became the dividing line for minors in a medical sense. But after all, not many people in the Tang Dynasty had medical knowledge. The medical definition of minors could not make ordinary people in the wider society fully believe it. What people in the Tang Dynasty widely recognized as social responsibility was the taxes and corvée they had to pay after becoming adults.

The early Tang Dynasty used the land equalization system and the tax and corvée system that had worked well for nearly 200 years in the Northern Dynasties and the Sui Dynasty, and made some local adjustments on this basis. In the 7th year of Wude (624 AD), the land equalization law was issued: baby boys and girls were called "Huang (yellow)"; people over 4 were called "Xiao (small/young)"; boys over 16 were called "Zhongnan (middle young men)"; men over 21 were called "Chengding (grown men)"; people over 60 were called "Lao (old)". The law stipulated that Zhongnan over 18 were given 100 mu of land... Married women were given 30 mu of land [6]. Boys got land at 18, and became official grown men "Chengding" at 21—they took social responsibility and paid taxes to the country, and became adults in a social sense.

Among women, only widows and married women could get land. Land was given according to women's family status changes, not their age. It is clear that the society's definition of women's identity seemed to have nothing to do with their age, but with their status. Women were required to

focus on the family instead of society, so the definition of their adulthood should focus more on the change of their family status—That is, after marriage. In Tang Dynasty documents, "Ji Nian (the year of hairpinning)" mostly refers to age, not the time of engagement. The court never set any definition for "Ji Nian". But in general, the legal marriage age in the Tang Dynasty was very low. Emperor Xuanzong issued an edict saying, "Boys over 15 and girls over 13 can marry and marry off" [7]. This rule was used all the time. But the proportion of women marrying at 19 and 20 in epitaphs seems unusual. The number of women marrying at 19 is two and a half times that of women marrying at 20. It is very possible that people in the Tang Dynasty thought it was shameful for a woman to marry after 20, so they hurried to marry their daughters off before 20. Another possibility is that the writers changed the marriage age when writing the epitaphs [8]. 20 became a dividing line for women. Their natal families felt ashamed if a woman did not fulfill her social obligations by 20, so they forced their daughters to fulfill the corresponding obligations at the marriageable age by changing the marriage age. Almost certainly, unmarried women in the Tang Dynasty should become adults in a social sense by the age of 20 at the latest.

2.2. Analysis of children's death ages in the Tang Dynasty

From the above, we can see that in the Tang Dynasty, men became adults after 21 and got rid of the identity restrictions of children; women became adults at 20 or after marriage. Limited by medical conditions and the gradually declining social situation, many teenagers and children died in the mid and late Tang Dynasty. So the situation of children's death is also a problem. In *Collected Epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty* and its sequel, the number of minors who died in the mid and late Tang Dynasty accounted for one tenth of all the epitaphs from that period. There are no surviving pictures or paintings in the Tang Dynasty for us to study, but by analyzing more than 2,000 epitaphs in *Collected Epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty* and *Sequel to Collected Epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty*, we can still find out the situation of children and teenagers who died young in the Tang Dynasty. Based on the previous conclusion that in the Tang Dynasty, men became adults at 21 and women became adults at marriage or 20 (in a social sense), we selected 21 epitaphs in Table 1, including 3 for boys and 19 for girls. Among them, 9 are for "young children" under 15, and 12 are for minors over 15. Their causes of death and post-mortem handling methods are different. Although most writers of the epitaphs did not state the children's causes of death, we can still see that most children died of illness, and a few died of accidents. In general, a large number of children from the late Tang Dynasty were recorded in the epitaphs.

3. Reasons for children's early death in the Tang Dynasty

Human history is a history of fighting against diseases. In the Tang Dynasty, the central government set up medical institutions. They were divided into three main parts: the Imperial Medical Bureau, the Imperial Pharmacy of the Palace Secretariat, and the Medicine Storage Bureau. The Imperial Pharmacy only served the emperor basically. The Medicine Storage Bureau only served the crown prince basically. The Imperial Medical Bureau was in charge of medical affairs and medical education all over the country. It served officials and some special people, and it did not take care of ordinary people's medical needs in general [9]. This situation shows how medical resources were distributed in the Tang Dynasty.

Death from illness was certainly one reason for children's early death in the Tang Dynasty. We can see from Table 1 that more than half of the dead children died of illness. For some unknown reasons, most epitaphs did not say what kind of illness caused the children's early death. For

example, "The young dead daughter of the Zheng family in Xingyang, her childhood name was Sanqing... She got sick and could not get up, and died at the age of nine..." [10] The daughter of the Zheng family in Xingyang was named Sanqing. She got sick and died young at nine. We only know she died of illness here, no specific illness is mentioned. Similarly, "The youngest daughter of the Li family, her courtesy name was Xiuyi. She got sick and died young on the 18th day of the 10th lunar month in the 14th year of Dali, at the age of thirteen..." [10] Xiuyi, the youngest daughter of the Li family, died of an unknown illness at thirteen. "...The young son of the Li family in Zhaojun, his childhood name was Houqi... He got sick in the second month of winter in the third year of Zhengyuan (the year of Dingmao), and died young in Dangtu County, Xuanzhou..." [11] The young son of the Li family in Zhaojun got sick in winter and finally died at fourteen. Maybe it was because of the limits of the times, and even nobles and ordinary people doubted the medical skills of common doctors. None of the above epitaphs recorded the specific illness clearly.

The only epitaph that recorded the cause of death clearly among the 21 epitaphs was the one for the young dead son Cong of the Quan family. "...One young dead son, Cong... One day he got sores. The sores broke and got worse. No treatment worked. So he cut his hair and became a monk. His monk name was Fayen. People thought the pure Buddhist teaching could cure all six kinds of illnesses. But the profound Buddhist truth was hard to understand, and it did not help in the end. He died young on the 24th day of the 6th lunar month in the 12th year of Yuanhe, at the official residence of his great-grandfather in Xingyuan, at the age of nine." [11] Quan Cong's sores got worse quickly after he got them. His family tried all kinds of medicines, but they did not work. So they let him cut his hair and become a monk, hoping this could cure his serious illness. Unfortunately, neither the gods, the Buddha nor medicine helped. Quan Cong still died of illness at nine. In modern medicine, the same disease has different names according to different stages. But in the Tang Dynasty, the names of diseases were very general. "Getting sores" could include all kinds of complicated skin diseases and external symptoms of other diseases. In the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism and Taoism became more and more popular in daily life. So the idea of using religion to treat diseases was widely accepted by ordinary people and nobles. When medical treatment failed, people would let their children "cut their hair and become monks", thinking it "could cure all six kinds of illnesses".

Besides ordinary illnesses, some children got sick because of "loneliness and grief". "...Her cousin Qunyi worked as an official in Xuancheng, so she (the 16th daughter) was left there. She had been sick for years and got better. But she became lonely and sad after losing her father, and got sick again. No persuasion and no medicine could help her." [11] The 16th daughter of the Cui family, Cui Yang, went to see her father who was fighting in the southern border. Her father died before she arrived. Cui Yang was left in Xuancheng where her cousin worked. She felt extremely lonely and sad, and finally died of illness from too much grief. And the daughter of the Sun family, Sun Yong: "My younger sister had been weak and sick since she was a child. She followed our father to fight in the south. When we stopped at Xiakou and moored the boat by the river, we heard the sad news of our grandmother's death. Since then, she cried and screamed uncontrollably, and lay in bed seriously ill. Neither medicine nor prayers worked. On her deathbed, she was still calm... She finished speaking, took her last breath, and died suddenly." [11] She had been weak and sick since she was a child. She heard the news of her grandmother's death when she followed her father to fight in the south, and she was extremely sad. She lay in bed ill from then on, and died from the blow of her father's death. In any era, hearing the news of a close relative's death is a huge blow to children. Many children even die because their bodies become too weak from grief. The above two women

are a reflection of the sufferings of the families of soldiers who fought in the south in the Tang Dynasty.

Accidents like drowning also caused children to die young in ancient times. "Niansanniang Langlang Chacha... On the third day of the seventh lunar month in the eighth year of Yuanhe, a flood came from Shu, overflowed Xiari, and brought disaster to the whole city. To avoid being drowned, this child was taken on an official boat with the family. But the servants made a mistake, and the water god brought misfortune. The big boat capsized suddenly, and everyone on board drowned one after another..." [11] When the flood came from Shu, Niansanniang Langlang Chacha fled with the family on an official boat, but accidentally fell into the water and drowned. This matches the record in Tang Huiyao: "There was a great flood in Xuzhou, which destroyed Mount Dawen. On the Gengyin day of the sixth lunar month, there was a great flood in the capital. Wind and rain destroyed houses and blew off roof tiles, many people were crushed to death. The water in the south of the city was several zhang deep, and even the wheel spokes of carriages were submerged when passing through Mingde Gate. On the Xinmao day, the Wei River rose sharply, and ferries stopped for a month. At that time, it rained continuously everywhere, all water sources burst their banks, and the rivers flowed out of their original courses." [12]

Niansanniang's drowning is an individual case, but it shows that even nobles could not protect themselves from natural disasters, let alone ordinary people who had fewer living resources. In the Tang Dynasty, Fujian was regarded as a wild and remote place, but Gu Kuang's poem Lament for the Boy wrote: "A boy was born in Fujian. Officials there captured him and castrated him. He became a slave, and they gained a house full of gold. They shaved his head and put irons on his neck, treating him like grass and trees. Heaven is blind, I suffer from its poison. Gods are blind, they enjoy the blessings. Father says goodbye to his boy, I regret giving birth to you. After you were born, people advised me to abandon you. I didn't listen to them, and now I suffer this pain. Boy says goodbye to his father, my heart breaks and blood flows. We are separated by heaven and earth, even in the underworld, I can't stand in front of you, father." [13] This poem records the drowning of babies. From the north to the south of China, from accidental drowning to intentional drowning, from the scholar-official class to ordinary people, there are records of children dying from drowning. Drowning has always been one of the important causes of children's death in every era.

Besides these, some children died because of filial piety. Among the selected epitaphs, two clearly record children "falling ill from serving their mother". For example, the youngest daughter of the Fan family: "Her mother, Mrs. Li, passed away. She was extremely sad about her mother's death and remembered every detail clearly for a long time. On the Gengshen year, her birth mother Li died, and no one told her where her mother died. People thought she had forgotten, but when someone mentioned it, she bowed her head in grief. She would always prepare in advance to hold a memorial ceremony on her mother's death anniversary. On the Xinyou year, her great-grandmother was ill, and she sat by her bed to take care of her all night. On the Renxu year, she missed her father for ten days and fell ill from excessive worry, and then died." [11] She was deeply grieved by her birth mother's death, and she personally took care of her great-grandmother when the old lady was ill, and finally died of illness from exhaustion and grief. The second daughter of the Tian family was even more pitiful: "She was eight years old. She mourned for a relative's death and fell ill because of excessive filial grief. She was respectful and careful to her mother, and kind to her brothers and sisters all her life. Even when she was extremely weak, she still forced a smile to her sick mother." [11] Filial piety culture has a long history in China. From Confucius to later Confucian scholars, they advocated the idea of "governing the country with filial piety". Since then, all rulers of successive dynasties in China have regarded "governing with filial piety" as an important part of

national governance. In the Tang Dynasty, the rulers attached great importance to "governing with filial piety", so "falling ill from serving one's mother" was regarded as a great expression of a child's filial piety to parents, and it was worth recording in detail to praise such behavior. We don't know how much young children understood about filial piety at that time, but the grief of young children over the death of their relatives is almost the same and sincere in every time.

The causes of children's early death in the Tang Dynasty were complex and diverse. Illness was one of the main factors, but medical resources were unevenly distributed, and ordinary people had limited medical security. Although some epitaphs recorded children's death from illness, the specific causes were mostly unclear, which reflected the limitations of medical level and cognitive ability at that time. Religious beliefs played a certain role in disease treatment, but the effect was limited. Accidents such as floods and other natural disasters also caused children to die young. Even nobles could not protect themselves, and ordinary people were even more helpless. Emotional trauma had a huge impact on children's physical and mental health, and the grief of losing close relatives often caused children to die of illness. In addition, although the concept of filial piety was highly praised by the rulers, it might also bring excessive psychological burden to children and lead to their early death. These factors together form the complex background of children's early death in the Tang Dynasty, and reflect the medical, cultural and ethical characteristics of the society at that time.

4. Ways of handling children's deaths in the Tang Dynasty

Death ideas and funeral customs were important parts of social culture in ancient China. They not only showed how people understood the end of life, but also reflected the deep influence of clan ideas, religious beliefs, and ethics. From the ancient mysterious imagination of the "Yellow Spring" (the underworld), to the importance attached to family cemeteries under the clan ideas in the Tang Dynasty, and then to the new explanation of the afterlife after Buddhism was introduced to China. These ideas and customs kept developing and changing in history. This article will analyze epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty to discuss the diversity of children's funeral customs in that society. It will also talk about the deep influence of clan ideas, ghost marriage and Buddhist beliefs on these customs. And it will show the complex feelings and cultural choices of ancient Chinese people when facing death.

4.1. Ways the noble class handled children who died young

Ancient Chinese people always thought the afterlife was under the family ancestral graves. Because digging the ground would hit underground water, ancient ancestors guessed that the souls of the dead gathered where there was underground water. So they used the word "Yellow Spring" to call the afterlife. The clan ideas formed and were used all the way to the Tang Dynasty. It seemed only natural that souls should return to the family cemetery. Among the epitaphs we analyzed, most children were buried attached to the family cemetery after death, accounting for 83.3%.

Usually, a dead child, whether young or old, could be buried in the family cemetery. For example, Liu Yan: "The divination showed good luck, so he was buried next to the tomb of his uncle Dezhong in the Fifth Village of Chang'an County." [11] After divination, he was directly buried next to his uncle's tomb according to the lucky omens. Young daughters who had no husband's family were also directly buried in the family ancestral graves, such as "Buried next to the tomb of great-uncle Zhisongtan" [11] and "Buried in Bailuyuan of Jingzhao, next to the tombs of aunts" [10]. Even if they were not buried in the ancestral graves at first, family members would specially move and bury the children who died young together with the ancestors' tombs. For example, "...Her elder brother

Duan Shi, the former magistrate of Zhongmou County, moved her old coffin and buried her attached to the ancestral grave. On the sixth day of the twelfth lunar month of that year, her mother was also buried attached here, so she was buried in the cemetery on this very day..." [10] Xiuyi, the daughter of the Li family, was first buried in a nearby cemetery after death. After her parents died, she was buried together with the ancestors' tombs. Coincidentally, the elder brother of Li Houqi "temporarily buried him in the southern outer city of Lujiang, attached to the temporary tomb of his late father." [11] He let his younger brother who died young return to the side of his parents and ancestors, hoping that the young soul could get the warmth of the family in the underworld. This is really full of gentle affection.

Under the patriarchal clan system, a life without a marriage ceremony was incomplete. This led to the practice of ghost marriage. Ghost marriage means a man and a woman get married after their death. A man and a woman who were not husband and wife when alive are buried together. This lets them finish the marriage ceremony they did not complete in life. Before the Tang Dynasty, this practice was rarely recorded in history because it did not follow Confucian etiquette. There were only a few individual cases: Queen Dowager Xuan of Qin and Wei Choufu in *Strategies of the Warring States*, Princess Guantao and Dong Yan in *Book of Han*, Mu Pingcheng and Princess Shiping in *Book of the Northern Dynasties*. Besides these, the most influential case was that Cao Cao, after losing his beloved son Cao Chong painfully in the Three Kingdoms period, proposed a ghost marriage to Bing Yuan. In the Tang Dynasty, the resistance to ghost marriage seemed to ease a lot. Ghost marriage was recorded not only in official history and literary works, but also in epitaphs. "Ghost marriage seemed to have been accepted by all social classes in the Tang Dynasty and became a fashion." [8] However, we can still see a father's words in an epitaph: "If the gods have knowledge and the wandering souls have a place to rest, being a couple in life is no different from being one in death. Why must we follow Lu Chong's example of a ghost marriage?" [11] He thought his daughter did not marry in life, so there was no need for her to marry in the underworld like Lu Chong. In the end, this young dead daughter of the Li family was buried next to her brother's tomb, together with her natal family. Although in ancient times, married women returning to their natal homes was considered reasonable, the daughter never married and still belonged to her natal family. And "the connection between women and their natal families was generally recognized in the medieval times" [14]. A deceased daughter could be taken care of by her natal family in the underworld even if she never married, so why ask someone to form a marriage alliance with her in the afterlife? The father's love for his daughter is obvious in the epitaph.

Buddhism originated in India and was not a traditional Chinese religion. It was introduced to China in the Han Dynasty, and had conflicts and integration with the original religious system and folk beliefs for hundreds of years. It gradually penetrated into all aspects of Chinese society. The Tang Dynasty inherited the national system, religious beliefs and social models from the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties. It finally formed Chinese Buddhism by integrating local Chinese characteristics, and also brought the Chinese people another world view—after death, people do not go to the underworld, but go to the Western Paradise to accompany the Buddha. Especially in this period, Buddhism began to fully penetrate into the social life of ordinary people. Buddhist doctrines and rituals deeply influenced the daily life of ordinary people. Buddhism became an indispensable part of people's life day by day. Families with a strong Buddhist belief would also bury their children in Buddhist temples. "...Buried in the land south of the west gate of the Buddha Pavilion of Yinsheng Temple in Longshou Township, Wannian County, Jingzhao Prefecture..." [11] This daughter of the Li family was only three years old. Her mother might have buried her deceased daughter in the southwest of the Buddha Pavilion out of personal religious beliefs. But even if

people were influenced by religious beliefs to a certain extent, they still had to return to the etiquette of the patriarchal clan after death. For example, Quan Cong, the young dead son of the Quan family, had bad sores before his death, so he "cut his hair and became a monk, with the monk name Fayen. People thought the pure Buddhist teaching could cure all six kinds of illnesses". But after his death, he was still "buried in Pingyin, Luoyang, attached to the left of his grandfather's tomb and behind his eldest brother's tomb" [11]. He was buried in the family cemetery. We can see that after Buddhism was introduced to China, the foreign view of the afterlife inevitably impacted the local view of death. This kind of behavior was like a religious conversion, and it was hard to be accepted by orthodox ethics. Sorrow alone could not shake the etiquette. It was probably because the family had a strong Buddhist belief and it was difficult to arrange the burial of the deceased child in the family cemetery that they did this.

4.2. Ways common people handled children who died young

In fact, it was very rare for children who died young to be recorded in their own epitaphs. Most of them were mentioned only in the epitaphs of other family members.

For example, "Zhirong Zheng's youngest sister passed away without even having a name. She got sick and did not recover on the 8th day of the 3rd lunar month in the 2nd year of Huichang, and died at home. She was then temporarily buried in the east of the city. Now, after several years, divination showed good luck. On the 25th day of the 4th lunar month in the 10th year, she was buried together with the family in Guangwu Plain, Sulou Village, Bancheng Township, Heyin County, Henan Prefecture, attached to the ancestral grave, in accordance with etiquette." [11] Zhirong Zheng was buried together with his youngest sister, who had no name and no own epitaph. What's more, all the families mentioned above had official positions recorded, and they were obviously in the upper and middle classes of society, belonging to the elite nobles. For common people who could not afford to write or carve an epitaph, their funerals were rarely recorded in history. In contrast, their ways of handling children who died young were much simpler, and it is more difficult to find relevant information about them.

Youyang Zazu records: "Regardless of official or private status, rich or poor, all use white oiled carriages with veils, white spears for the funeral procession, and beat barbarian drums. The crying should sound like that of the Southern Dynasties, and the elegy is chanted without a broken voice." [15] No matter who the deceased was, the funeral ceremony used white streamers to decorate the hearse and the standard of crying for the dead. But this was mostly about the funerals of adults. Perhaps families who loved their deceased children very much would hold such a ceremony to mourn them, but for most families, the cost of the funeral might add to the family's burden. Most families only buried their deceased sons and daughters in a hurry, and even did not hold a soul-calling ceremony.

As a form of "self-writing", epitaphs can indeed reflect the situation of a wider group of people than handed-down documents, but problems still exist. Because an epitaph cost a lot of money to make, and required connections with the literati class, many ordinary people could not afford to make one. For example, it is rare to find ordinary farmers and other common people in the epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty, and those who could have an epitaph written were mostly from well-off families. From the analysis of the above historical materials, the families of the deceased who could be buried in Guangwu Plain and the Northern Mangshan ancestral grave were high-ranking officials of the third rank or above, accounting for 41%. The families of officials from the fifth to the seventh rank were buried in Bailuyuan or Shenheyuan, accounting for 35.3%. Officials of the eighth rank and below would also be simply buried attached to the family ancestral grave. In addition, from the

proportion of children's information recorded in the epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty, after the Mid-Tang Dynasty, people in the Tang Dynasty paid more attention to their children than in the Early and High Tang Dynasties. "This tendency reflects the inward turn of the family concept of the scholar-official clans in the Tang Dynasty." [8]

Yan Yaozhong talked about whether epitaphs could reflect the overall religious belief of women in the Tang Dynasty and said: "When women from the lower classes of society died, their families generally did not have enough money to hold a funeral or erect a stone stele. It was even more impossible for them to hire famous writers with a lot of money to write an epitaph... First of all, among the 235 epitaphs of Buddhist-believing women in *Collected Epitaphs and its Sequel*, only 12 did not introduce their scholar-official family backgrounds. The other 223 epitaphs all mentioned the official positions of their fathers, grandfathers and relatives from their natal or husband's families. Some epitaphs even spent more than half of the content on these things. Therefore, they were undoubtedly noble women in a broad sense. In fact, these 12 epitaphs cannot prove that those women were common people, just as they cannot prove that they belonged to scholar-official clans." [16] In the final analysis, epitaphs still belonged to the noble class, recording the life and death of nobles. The vast number of ordinary people who made up the main part of society were forgotten, not recorded in official history, and their tiny traces can only be found in the corners of notes and novels.

In ancient China, especially in the Tang Dynasty, people's views on the afterlife were deeply influenced by clan ideas and religious beliefs. The funeral customs for children who died young also reflected these ideas. Most of the children who died young were buried in the family cemetery, accounting for as high as 83.3%, which reflected the far-reaching influence of clan ideas. The phenomenon of ghost marriage was gradually accepted in the Tang Dynasty and became a fashion, but not all parents agreed with it. The introduction of Buddhism brought people a new view of the afterlife, and some families chose to bury their children who died young in Buddhist temples, but they still returned to the etiquette of the clan in the end. Common people's ways of handling children who died young were relatively simple, mostly because of limited economic capacity and inability to bear the cost of complex funerals. As an important document recording death, epitaphs mostly reflect the situation of the noble class. The funeral customs of ordinary people are rarely recorded, and we can only get a glimpse of them from notes and novels. These phenomena reveal the diversity and complexity of death concepts in Tang society, as well as the differences in funeral customs among different social classes.

5. Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can see that from the perspective of the history of death culture, although Buddhist beliefs and traditional Chinese beliefs coexisted in the Tang Dynasty, their influence and conflict on people's views of the afterlife were not significant. It was still a common practice for nobles to bury their deceased young sons and daughters in the family cemetery, while ordinary people mostly buried them in a hurry on the spot. The degree of care for deceased young children varied from person to person. For some children who died young, even if they were under ten years old, their parents would hire someone to write an epitaph and carve it on a stone stele. Some children were only mentioned in other people's epitaphs, but more children only left a fleeting trace in the world, and their traces can no longer be found today. The death culture concepts in the late Tang Dynasty were still traditional and with local characteristics. Although people did not necessarily strictly follow Confucian etiquette—such as the emergence of ghost marriage—it was still different from the imported Buddhist beliefs. A unique Chinese view of death and

corresponding handling methods took shape, which was an inevitable trend for the Chinese nation to form its own national culture.

The new social history advocates a perspective of "from the bottom up" or "from the lower levels". Obviously, it is insufficient to only study the existing historical materials and the elite nobles. Most of the content reflected in epitaphs is about the life, aging, sickness and death of the upper nobles, and cannot fully reflect the lives of people of all social classes at that time. Confucius said: "How can we know about death before we know about life?" Death is an important and inevitable subject for human beings to face. Faced with the early death of young children, nobles and ordinary people who possessed different means of production adopted completely different handling methods. Nobles could use various means to let their deceased young children leave the world with dignity and be remembered by later generations, while the only record of how ordinary people handled this was burying the children in a hurry. How to better understand the value of human beings in social life, and how to recognize the cultural concepts of the lower-class people reflected in the matter of death, which are different from those of the upper nobles, still deserve our deep thinking.

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