

Child Death and Funerary Culture in the Mid–Late Tang Period: A Study Centered on Epitaphs

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Abstract. The Tang dynasty's culture surrounding death was shaped by multiple factors — including religious belief, social attitudes, and economic conditions — giving rise to a distinctive set of practices and a particular cultural atmosphere. In the late Tang period, parents' responses to the premature death of children were varied: those with religious beliefs tended to bury their children near religious sites, while those without such beliefs more often interred them in family cemeteries. If a child who died young had already reached marriageable age, parents might arrange a posthumous marriage for them, which in the Tang was regarded as a normal form of marriage. This mortuary culture not only embodied the living's mourning and blessings for the deceased, but also reflected contemporary society's religious beliefs, notions of family, and understandings of death. Studying late Tang mortuary culture helps deepen our understanding of people's spiritual world at the time and its underlying socio-cultural background, and enables exploration of the cultural forms and connotations that appear in cases of child premature death.

Keywords: Mid–Late Tang, Epitaphs, Death, Cultural Perceptions

1. Introduction

The Tang dynasty represented the peak of China's agrarian civilization and the formative stage in the development of traditional Chinese culture. However, the outbreak of the An Lushan Rebellion dealt a near-devastating blow to the dynasty. Even after Emperor Suzong suppressed the rebellion, the grandeur of the High Tang could never be fully restored. The severe casualties and losses it brought about shifted people's pursuit of happiness in the present life toward a deeper reflection on death. Out of mourning for the deceased, aristocrats customarily recorded the life stories of the dead in epitaphs, which most often chronicled the meritorious achievements of scholar-officials and members of the nobility, though a small number also contained accounts of children who died prematurely. Views on the death of young children differed between the ancients and modern people. In the past, due to low productivity and the inability to support many children, the killing or drowning of infants occurred in significant numbers, and those who survived were generally cherished by their families. Such social phenomena undoubtedly exerted a certain influence on the mortuary culture associated with the special case of child death.

2. Definition of childhood in the Tang dynasty and analysis of death ages

2.1. Definition of childhood in the Tang dynasty

In modern times, “children” generally refers to natural persons under the age of eighteen, classified as minors. The ancients did not have a specific concept of “minor,” yet as early as the Han dynasty, the law distinguished between adults and minors. Han legal provisions such as “those under eighteen years of age shall not be punished” and “children under eight years of age need not be shackled” [1] reveal a two-tiered age distinction for minors in Han law.

By the Tang dynasty, the definition of minors became more detailed and diverse. According to Tang Code with Commentaries, “According to the Zhou li [Rites of Zhou]: those over seventy years of age and those who have not yet cut their teeth shall not be made slaves. The present code stipulates: those over seventy and under seventy-nine, those under fifteen and over eleven, and those with disabilities are considered ‘the elderly, the young, and the infirm,’ and thus may redeem punishments below exile.” [2] This indicates that those under fifteen but over eleven were classified as “xiao” (the young) and bore no criminal responsibility.

The category of “xiao” was one way of distinguishing between minors and adults, a concept traceable to the Western Zhou period, though regulations at that time were not yet clear. In Liji · Neize (Book of Rites · Inner Rules), the annotation “cheng tong, wu xiang” states: “Cheng tong refers to those over fifteen.” Being over fifteen merely denoted an older child and did not yet meet the standard for adulthood. Based on Liji · Guanyi (Book of Rites · Meaning of the Capping Ceremony): “The capping ceremony marks the beginning of adulthood... once capped, a man receives a courtesy name and follows the way of adulthood... and shall fulfill the rites as a son, a younger brother, a minister, and a young man,” [3] we may infer that the capping ceremony signified that a male was regarded as an adult in the social sense. From a medical perspective, in Qianjin fang (Prescriptions Worth a Thousand Gold Pieces), juan 5, “Formulas for Infants and Young Children,” remedies containing rhubarb (da huang), bupleurum (chai hu), and scutellaria (huang qin) were prescribed “to treat children aged fifteen and under suffering from heat-binding, phlegm accumulation, and reduced appetite.” [4] This is the highest age for “children” mentioned explicitly by Sun Simiao, suggesting that in early Tang medical theory, ages 6–15 were considered “children,” and dosages for such patients should be reduced accordingly from adult prescriptions. Thus, by the early Tang at the latest, Chinese medicine had begun to use fifteen years of age as a treatment boundary for minors. [5] Nevertheless, those with medical knowledge in the Tang were far from the majority, and the medical definition of minors could not fully convince the broader public. For the common people, adulthood was more widely recognized in terms of the social responsibilities assumed after coming of age—most notably, the obligation to pay taxes, rent, and corvée labor.

The early Tang inherited the well-established equal-field system (juntian zhi) and tax-and-labor service system from the Northern Dynasties and the Sui dynasty—institutions that had been effectively implemented for nearly two centuries—and made partial adjustments to them. In the 7th year of the Wude reign (A.D. 624), the Tang court promulgated the Equal-Field Law: newborn boys and girls were classified as huang (yellow); those over four years of age as xiao (young); males aged sixteen and above as zhongnan (middle-aged youth); those aged twenty-one and above as chengding (full adults); and those over sixty as lao (elderly). It was stipulated that zhongnan aged eighteen and above would be allocated 100 mu of land, while wives and concubines would be granted 30 mu. [6] Males thus received land at the age of eighteen and, at twenty-one, became formal adults

(chengding), assuming social responsibilities such as paying taxes to the state—thereby attaining adulthood in the social sense.

Among women, only widows and wives or concubines could receive land allotments, and this was determined not by age but by changes in their marital status within the household. This clearly reflects that in society, a woman's identity was defined less by her age than by her familial position. Social expectations for women shifted from the public sphere to the domestic realm, and the definition of female adulthood leaned more toward the transformation of her family identity—that is, marriage. In Tang texts, the term *ji nian* (hairpin year) more often referred to age than to the moment of betrothal, and the court never issued a formal definition for it. Overall, the legal marriage age in the Tang was set quite low; during Emperor Xuanzong's reign, an edict stated: "Men aged fifteen and above, and women aged thirteen and above, may marry," [7] and this policy remained in effect thereafter. However, epitaph evidence reveals an anomaly in the proportion of marriage ages: women recorded as marrying at nineteen were two and a half times more numerous than those marrying at twenty. This suggests that Tang society may have considered it improper for a woman to marry after the age of twenty, prompting families to arrange marriages before that threshold. Another possibility is that epitaph authors deliberately altered the recorded age at marriage. [8] The age of twenty thus became a dividing line for women: a natal family might regard it as shameful for a woman to reach twenty without fulfilling her expected social obligations, and by manipulating the recorded marriage age, they could exert social pressure for her to marry at the "proper" time. It can be said that in the Tang dynasty, unmarried women were expected, at the latest by the age of twenty, to have reached adulthood in the social sense.

2.2. Analysis of child mortality in the Tang dynasty

In summary, during the Tang dynasty, males reached adulthood—and thereby shed the legal and social restrictions of childhood—at the age of twenty-one, while females did so at twenty or upon marriage. Given the limitations of medical care and the progressively declining social conditions, the premature death of juveniles and children was by no means rare in the mid-late Tang period. This renders the issue of child mortality an important subject of study. According to *Collected Epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty* and its sequel, minors accounted for roughly one-tenth of all individuals recorded in mid-late Tang epitaphs. Although the Tang has left no pictorial or illustrative materials for direct study, an analysis of more than two thousand epitaphs in these collections still allows us to discern the situation of children and youths who died young. Based on the earlier conclusion that males in the Tang attained adulthood at twenty-one, and females upon marriage or at twenty, we can identify, from the epitaphs, a total of twenty-one cases that fall within this definition of "minor": three for males and nineteen for females (see Table 1). Among these, nine cases involve "young children" under the age of fifteen, while twelve involve minors above fifteen. Their causes of death and the handling of their funerals varied. Although in most instances the epitaph authors did not specify the cause of death, the available evidence suggests that most children died from illness, with occasional cases of accidental death. Overall, the number of mid-late Tang children recorded in epitaphs was not insignificant.

3. Causes of premature death among children in the Tang dynasty

It can be said that the history of humankind is, to a large extent, a history of combating disease. By the Tang period, the central government had already established medical institutions, organized into three main systems: the *Taiyi shu* (Imperial Medical Office), the *Shangyao ju* (Palace Drug Service

under the Palace Secretariat), and the Yaozang ju (Pharmacy Bureau). Among these, the Shangyao ju served almost exclusively the emperor, while the Yaozang ju was primarily for the crown prince. The Taiyi shu oversaw medical administration and education throughout the empire, and while it did provide medical care for officials and certain designated groups, it generally did not serve the common populace. [9] This arrangement reflects the distribution of medical resources in the Tang dynasty.

Illness was undoubtedly one of the principal causes of child mortality in the Tang. As can be seen from Table 1, children who died of illness accounted for more than half of the recorded cases. For reasons unknown, most epitaphs do not specify the exact illness that led to a child's premature death. For example: "The deceased was the young daughter of the Zheng family of Xingyang, whose childhood name was Sanqing... she fell ill and did not recover, passing away at the age of nine..." [10] Here, although the nature of the illness is not specified, we know that Zheng Sanqing died from disease. Similarly, "The young daughter of the Li family, courtesy name Xiuyi, died prematurely from illness on the eighteenth day of the tenth month of the fourteenth year of the Dali era, at the age of thirteen..." [10] Another case records: "... the son of the Li family of Zhao Commandery, childhood name Houqi... in the eleventh month of the third year of the Zhenyuan era, he fell ill and passed away in Dangtu County, Xuanzhou..." [11] This boy died of illness at fourteen years of age.

Perhaps due to the limitations of the era, or because both the general populace and even the aristocracy doubted the skills of lower-level physicians, most epitaphs do not record specific diagnoses. Among the twenty-one epitaphs studied, only one gives a clear account of the illness: that of Quan Cong, son of the Quan family. "The deceased child, Cong... one day developed a sore, which worsened and ulcerated; no treatment was effective. He then had his hair shaven and entered the Buddhist order, receiving the monastic name Fayán, in the hope that the pure teachings might cure the Six Maladies. The profound truths could not be fathomed, and no aid was gained; on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month of the twelfth year of the Yuanhe era, he died prematurely at the age of nine in the home of his paternal grandfather in Xingyuan." [11] After developing the sore, Quan Cong's condition rapidly deteriorated. The family tried various remedies to no avail and ultimately had him shave his head and become a monk, in the hope that this religious act could cure the illness. Unfortunately, neither divine aid nor medicine proved effective, and he died at the age of nine. From the perspective of modern medicine, a term such as "sore" (chuang) might encompass a wide range of dermatological conditions or even external symptoms of other diseases. The Tang dynasty's trend toward the secularization and everyday integration of Buddhism and Daoism meant that religious approaches to healing were widely accepted among both the common people and the elite. When medical treatment failed, it was not unusual to turn to religious remedies, as in the case of allowing a child to "shave his head and enter the sangha" in hopes of "curing the Six Maladies."

In addition to ordinary illnesses, there were also cases in which children fell ill due to grief and loneliness. One such example is recorded as follows: "... Her elder cousin Qunyi served as an administrative official in Xuancheng, and thus the Sixteenth Daughter was left in his care. She had been ill for over a year and had recovered, but, left lonely and grief-stricken, her illness recurred. Words of comfort did not reach her, and medicine did not reach her." [11] The Sixteenth Daughter of the Cui family, Cui Yang, had set out to visit her father, who was campaigning on the southern frontier. Before she could reach him, her father passed away. She was then left in Xuancheng, where her cousin held office, feeling deeply desolate. Ultimately, excessive grief led her to fall ill and die. A similar fate befell Sun Yong, daughter of the Sun family: "My younger sister, having been frail and often ailing from early childhood, accompanied our father on his southern campaign. When our

boat stopped at Xiakou, we received word that our grandmother, the Lady Zhong, had died. From that moment, she wailed in unrestrained sorrow, lay bedridden for a long time, and could not be cured by medicine or by offerings to the gods. In her final moments, she remained unyielding... after speaking her last words, she passed away.” [11] Frail since birth, Sun Yong became gravely ill after the shock of her grandmother’s death, and, compounded by the later loss of her father, she succumbed to her illness. In any era, news of the death of a close family member can be a devastating blow to a child, sometimes leading to the death of those already physically fragile. The above two cases are microcosms of the hardships endured by the families of soldiers campaigning in the south during the Tang dynasty.

Accidental events, such as drowning, also caused the premature deaths of children. One epitaph records: “The twenty-third young lady Langlang Chacha... On the third day of the seventh month of the eighth year of the Yuanhe era, floods from Shu surged in, overflowing the Xiari and causing disaster throughout the city. Seeing this, [she] boarded an official boat to avoid drowning. Alas! Whether through the negligence of household retainers or the malicious hand of the river god Feng Yi, the great boat overturned, and one after another they were submerged...” [11] During the flood, Langlang Chacha and her family were fleeing by boat when she accidentally fell into the water and drowned. This account corresponds with the record in the Tang Huiyao: “In Xuzhou, great floods destroyed Mount Daqiao. On the gengyin day of the sixth month, the capital suffered a massive flood; wind and rain tore apart houses and scattered roof tiles, crushing many people to death. Water pooled south of the city to a depth of several zhang, entering Mingde Gate and flooding to the height of cart axles. On the xingmao day, the Wei River rose violently, cutting off passage for a month. At that time, torrential rains fell everywhere, countless springs surged forth, and rivers often abandoned their original courses.” [12] Although the drowning of Langlang Chacha was an individual case, it reflects that even members of the aristocracy could not ensure their own safety in the face of natural disasters—let alone the common people, whose means of survival were far more precarious. In the Tang, Fujian was still considered a remote and uncivilized region, yet Gu Kuang’s poem *Ai Jian Shi* (“Lament for My Child”) records the drowning of infants: “My child was born in Min; the local officials seized him and cut off his male line. They made him a slave or a servant, to fill the house with gold; they shaved his head and shackled him, treating him as they would grass and trees. Heaven has no knowledge, and I suffered its poison; the gods have no knowledge, and they received its blessing. Husband and wife parted from our child—I regret having given you life. When you were born, people urged me not to raise you. I did not heed them, and in the end met this grief. Separated from us, my heart breaks and blood flows; we are parted by the bounds of earth and sky. Even in the Yellow Springs, you cannot be before your father.” [13] From north to south, from accident to deliberate act, from the scholar-official class to the common folk, there are records of children drowning. Regardless of era, drowning has been one of the major causes of child mortality.

In addition, there were children who died from excessive grief due to filial piety. Among the epitaphs examined, two cases explicitly mention that the child “fell ill while attending to the mother.” For example, the young daughter of the Fan family: “... Her mother, Lady [name omitted], passed away. From that time, she was constantly grieving and developed an initial illness, which worsened over time. When the year of Gengshen arrived, her birth mother, Lady Li, also passed away, yet she never revealed the place of death. People thought she had forgotten, but when combined with the previous loss, she was deeply sorrowful. Later, when the Dowager fell ill, she personally attended to her, and eventually succumbed to illness herself.” [11] Not only did she suffer extreme grief over the death of her biological mother, but she also personally cared for her grandmother during illness, ultimately dying as a result of her devotion. Similarly, the second

daughter of the Tian family: “At eight years old, she lived through the mourning period, yet, being filial, she became ill. She also treated her mother with utmost reverence, and her elder siblings survived without repeating such dedication. Despite her small strength, she maintained care and attention for her sick mother.” [11] These cases highlight the depth of filial devotion in Tang society. Filial piety has a long-standing cultural history in China, with Confucius and later Confucian scholars advocating governance through filial morality. Subsequent dynastic rulers incorporated filial governance into statecraft. In the Tang dynasty, the emphasis on filial devotion meant that “falling ill while attending to one’s mother” became an act worthy of recording and public recognition. While we cannot know how deeply young children understood the moral tenets of filial piety, the grief they experienced over the loss of close relatives was likely sincere and profound.

In summary, the causes of child mortality in the Tang dynasty were complex and multifaceted. Illness was a primary factor, yet uneven medical resource distribution and limited healthcare for commoners constrained effective treatment. While some epitaphs record deaths from disease, the precise causes were often unspecified, reflecting the limitations of medical knowledge at the time. Religious beliefs played a role in attempts to treat illnesses, though with limited success. Accidents and natural disasters, such as floods, also contributed to early child deaths, with even aristocratic families unable to fully protect their children. Emotional trauma had significant impacts on children’s physical and mental health, as grief over the death of close relatives often proved fatal. Moreover, the cultural emphasis on filial piety, while socially esteemed, could impose excessive psychological burdens on children, contributing to premature death. These factors collectively illustrate the complex background of child mortality in the Tang dynasty, reflecting the medical, cultural, and ethical characteristics of Tang society.

4. Posthumous treatment of children in the Tang dynasty

In ancient China, attitudes toward death and funeral practices constituted an essential component of social and cultural life. They not only reflected people’s understanding of the end of life but also embodied the profound influence of family lineage, religious belief, and ethical norms. From the ancient, mystical imagination of the “Yellow Springs” (Huangquan), to the Tang dynasty’s emphasis on family cemeteries under the influence of clan consciousness, and further to the reinterpretation of the afterlife brought by the introduction of Buddhism, these concepts and practices evolved continuously over history. This study, through analysis of Tang dynasty epitaphs, examines the diversity of children’s funerary customs during this period. It highlights how family lineage, the practice of posthumous marriage (minghun), and Buddhist beliefs shaped these customs, revealing the complex emotions and cultural choices of ancient Chinese society in the face of death.

4.1. Treatment of prematurely deceased children among the aristocracy

Since ancient times, the Chinese conceived the afterlife as existing beneath the family tomb. Early ancestors, observing that digging the earth could reach underground water, speculated that ancestral spirits congregated along subterranean water veins. From this arose the term Huangquan (“Yellow Springs”) to denote the world of the dead. The idea that a soul returns to the family tomb persisted through the Tang dynasty, and within the epitaphs analyzed, most children were posthumously *fu* (enshrined) in the family cemetery, accounting for 83.3% of cases.

Generally, deceased children, regardless of age, could be interred in the family tomb. For instance, Liu Yan “after divining favorable omens, was buried beside the tomb of his uncle Dezhang in the fifth village of Chang’an County.” [11] Infant daughters, having no marital family, were

similarly buried in the ancestral tomb: “buried beside the tomb of Great-Granduncle Songtan” [11] or “buried at Baolu Plain in Jingzhao, alongside various aunts.” [10] Even if initially interred elsewhere, family members often reburied prematurely deceased children alongside their ancestors. For example: “... Elder brother, formerly county magistrate of Zhongmu, returned the body for enshrinement with the ancestral tomb. On the sixth day of the twelfth month of that year, the benevolent parents completed the interment, and the child was buried within the ancestral cemetery...” [10] After her death, Li Xiuyi was first buried nearby and later reinterred with her parents in the ancestral tomb. Similarly, Li Houqi’s elder brother “temporarily placed him south of Lujiang, to be enshrined with the tomb of his late father.” [11] Such practices allowed the young spirits of deceased children to return to the embrace of their ancestors, symbolizing familial warmth and affection.

Under the patriarchal system, an individual who had not completed marriage rituals was considered incomplete, giving rise to the practice of minghun (posthumous marriage). This involved pairing deceased males and females who had not married in life, allowing them to be interred together and symbolically complete the marriage ceremony. Prior to the Tang, minghun was rare in historical records due to its nonconformity with Confucian rites. Scattered examples include Queen Dowager Xuan of Qin with Wei Choufu (Zhan Guo Ce), Princess Guantao with Dong Yan (Han Shu), and Mu Pingcheng with Princess Shiping (Bei Shi). One of the most notable cases occurred during the Three Kingdoms period when Cao Cao, grieving the loss of his beloved son Cao Cong, sought the advice of Bing Yuan on a posthumous marriage. By the Tang dynasty, resistance to minghun appears to have diminished. Records of posthumous marriages appear not only in official histories and literary works but also in epitaphs: “Minghun seems to have been accepted across various social strata in the Tang and had become a custom.” [8] Nonetheless, some epitaphs show that parents questioned the necessity of posthumous marriage for daughters: “If the spirit is aware and the soul has a resting place, if in life they were of different states, must they still be married in the netherworld like Lu Chong?” [11] Consequently, this Li family girl was ultimately interred beside her brother in the family tomb, alongside her natal relatives. Although returning to the husband’s family upon marriage was considered proper behavior in ancient thought, a daughter who had not married remained part of her natal household. “Connections between women and their natal families were widely recognized during the medieval period.” [14] Therefore, even if a deceased daughter had not married, she could still receive care within the family tomb. The epitaphs express the fathers’ profound affection for their daughters, making the ritual of posthumous marriage unnecessary in many cases.

Buddhism, originally originating in India, was not a native Chinese religion. It was introduced to China during the Han dynasty and underwent over a century of interaction—sometimes conflict, sometimes integration—with indigenous religious systems and popular beliefs. Over time, Buddhism gradually permeated many aspects of Chinese society. By the Tang dynasty, the state system, religious beliefs, and social structures inherited from the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties had integrated with native Chinese characteristics, resulting in a distinct form of Chinese Buddhism. This introduced an alternative worldview for the Chinese: after death, one did not descend to the Yellow Springs (Huangquan), but instead went to the Western Paradise to attend the Buddha. During this period, Buddhism increasingly penetrated everyday life. Its doctrines and rituals deeply influenced ordinary people’s daily existence, becoming an indispensable part of life. Families with strong Buddhist faith often buried their children in Buddhist temples. For instance: “... Buried in Longshou Village, Wannian County, Jingzhao Prefecture, south of the west gate of the Buddhist pavilion of Yinsheng Temple...” [11] A three-year-old girl of the Li family was interred in

the southwest of a temple pavilion, likely reflecting her mother's personal religious devotion. However, even when religious beliefs influenced burial practices, family and clan rituals often remained decisive. For example, the prematurely deceased boy Quan Cong of the Quan family had suffered from severe sores before death and was sent to a Buddhist monastery: "He shaved his head and entered the monastery, receiving the monastic name Fayan, to purify and remedy six ailments." [11] Yet, after death, he was still buried in the family cemetery at Pingyin, Luoyang, beside his grandfather and following his elder brother's placement, thus returning to the ancestral tomb. This demonstrates that the foreign Buddhist concept of the afterlife inevitably challenged indigenous Chinese views on death. Such practices, similar to religious conversion, were difficult for orthodox ethical systems to fully accept. Pure grief alone could not override familial and ritual obligations. Likely, in households with strong Buddhist devotion, when a prematurely deceased child could not be accommodated in the family tomb, burial in a temple was a practical compromise reflecting both filial piety and religious faith.

4.2. Treatment of prematurely deceased children among commoners

In fact, it was rare for prematurely deceased children to be individually recorded in epitaphs. More often, they appeared incidentally in the epitaphs of others. For example: "The child Ziyong's younger sister, as yet unnamed, fell ill on the eighth day of the third month in the second year of Huichang. She did not recover and passed away at this residence. She was temporarily buried in the eastern part of the city. Now, on the twenty-fifth day of the fourth month in the tenth year, according to divination, she was reburied at Guangwu Plain, Bancheng Village, Heyin County, Henan Prefecture, enshrined in the great tomb." [11] Here, Zheng Ziyong was reburied alongside his unnamed younger sister. However, these cases generally belong to families with official positions, indicating that they were socially elite. Commoner households, lacking the financial means to commission epitaphs or engrave inscriptions, are rarely visible in historical records. Their treatment of prematurely deceased children was considerably simpler, and relevant documentation is scarce.

Youyang Zazu records: "Regardless of public or private status, noble or lowly, white oil-painted funeral carts with ceremonial drapery were used, drums beaten, wailing resembling that of the Southern Dynasties, and dirges recited without broken cadence." [15] While this description applies mainly to adult funerals, it suggests that families who were particularly attached to a deceased child might have employed similar ceremonial rites. For most families, however, the financial burden of formal funeral rituals was prohibitive, and children were typically buried hastily, sometimes without even performing soul-invocation rites.

Epitaphs, as a form of "self-narration," provide a wider social perspective than surviving literary texts, but their coverage is limited. The cost of commissioning an epitaph and the need for connections with literati meant that many grassroots commoners could not afford them. Tang epitaphs rarely mention ordinary farmers or other lower-class individuals. Among the cases analyzed, children buried at prominent sites such as Guangwu Plain or Beiwang Great Tombs were mostly from families of third-rank officials or higher, accounting for 41%. Children of families with fifth- to seventh-rank officials were interred at Bai Lu or Shenhe Plains, accounting for 35.3%. Children of families with eighth-rank officials or lower were sometimes simply enshrined in ancestral tombs. Moreover, the proportion of Tang epitaphs recording children's details indicates that, from the mid-Tang period onward, attention to children became more pronounced than in the early or high Tang eras. This trend reflects the "inward orientation of family values among Tang elite lineages." [8]

Yan Yaozhong, discussing whether epitaphs can reflect the overall religious beliefs of Tang dynasty women, stated: “When lower-class women died, they generally lacked the financial means to conduct formal funerals or erect inscribed tombstones. It was even more impossible for them to commission famous scholars to compose epitaphs... Among the 235 epitaphs of women who practiced Buddhism recorded in the *Compilation and its Sequel*, only 12 did not mention their elite family background. The remaining 223 all noted the official positions of their natal or marital relatives, and in some cases, more than half of the epitaph’s content focused on these details. Therefore, these women were undoubtedly aristocratic in the broad sense. Even these 12 exceptions cannot prove that the women were commoners, just as they cannot prove that they belonged to the gentry.” [16] Fundamentally, epitaphs remained a medium of the elite, recording the lives and deaths of aristocratic families. The vast majority of commoners, who formed the main body of society, were largely omitted from such records and are rarely visible in official histories, appearing only faintly in anecdotal or literary sources.

In ancient China, especially during the Tang dynasty, conceptions of the afterlife were deeply shaped by family lineage and religious belief. Funeral practices for prematurely deceased children reflect these cultural ideas. Most children were buried in family cemeteries, accounting for 83.3%, demonstrating the profound influence of clan consciousness. The practice of posthumous marriage gradually became accepted and even fashionable, although not all parents endorsed it. The introduction of Buddhism provided a new worldview of the afterlife; some families chose to inter prematurely deceased children in Buddhist temples, yet ultimately, burial in accordance with family ritual law prevailed. Commoner households generally handled the death of children in a simpler manner, constrained by limited economic means, which made elaborate funerals difficult. Epitaphs, as key documentary sources of death, primarily reflect elite practices, leaving the funerary customs of the lower classes largely unrecorded, with glimpses only preserved in anecdotal or literary works. These patterns reveal the diversity and complexity of death-related beliefs in Tang society, as well as the differences in funerary practices across social strata.

5. Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that from the perspective of the history of death culture, although Buddhist beliefs coexisted with traditional Chinese religious practices during the Tang dynasty, their influence on and conflict with indigenous views of the afterlife were relatively limited. Among the elite, it remained common practice to bury prematurely deceased sons and daughters in the family cemetery, whereas commoners generally resorted to hastily burying their children locally. The degree of attention given to prematurely deceased children varied greatly. Some children, even under ten years old, had epitaphs commissioned and engraved by their parents; others were only mentioned in someone else’s epitaph, while many more left only fleeting traces in the world, now irretrievable. The death culture of the late Tang period remained fundamentally traditional, imbued with local characteristics. Although certain practices, such as posthumous marriage, did not strictly adhere to Confucian ritual norms, they were distinct from the imported Buddhist worldview, forming a uniquely Chinese conception of death and funerary practice—a natural outcome in the development of Chinese culture.

The new social history approach advocates research “from below,” emphasizing the experiences of lower social strata. Focusing solely on surviving materials about the elite is clearly insufficient. Epitaphs mostly reflect the life, aging, illness, and death of aristocratic families, providing an incomplete picture of the lives of commoners at the time. As Confucius said, “If we do not yet understand life, how can we know death?” Death is a universal and unavoidable reality. The

treatment of prematurely deceased children differed sharply between the elite and commoners, reflecting disparities in access to resources. The elite could employ multiple means to ensure their children's dignified departure and commemoration, while records of commoner children often show only hurried burials. Understanding the value of individuals within social life, and recognizing the cultural beliefs revealed by contrasting elite and lower-class practices surrounding death, remains an important area for reflection.

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