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The Buddhist Impact on the Last Testaments of Women in Medieval China

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Abstract: Through a comparative study of last testaments documented in epitaphs of the Tang period, this article offers a glimpse into people's outlooks on life and their concerns in the face of death. The thoughts expressed in last testaments have been neglected in the studies of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, with research restricted to compilations of materials. In-depth analyses of such materials are rare. Through a study of the last testaments in the epitaphs, several trends in attitudes towards death and burial can be discerned: a turn from burial to cremation; the simplification of ritual and its procedures; a greater prevalence of separate, rather than joint spousal interment. The last testaments from the Tang period exhibit these different features under the influence of Buddhist ideas prevalent during those times.

Keywords: Tang period; epitaphs; last testaments (*yiyan yixun* 遺言遺訓); Buddhism; burials

1. Introduction

Official historical records of the Tang period (618–907) do not preserve the last testaments of people from this time in any great detail. However, as one of the rituals that the dying are most concerned about, funerals occasionally stand at the center of the subjects' life experiences, as recorded in their epitaphs. As Japanese scholar Nishiwaki Tsuneki has suggested, last testaments were a way for those who understood their fate to deal with important matters at a time when they were clear-headed, not yet hampered on their deathbeds by a confused consciousness (Nishiwaki 2000, pp. 306–15).

In many cases, last testaments of the deceased are an expression of sincere thoughts towards family members and close friends, and an outpouring of true sentiment. Though some of their sentiments may be veiled, in general such texts should not be read as false or empty displays of affection. To a large extent, they are an expression of the subject's attempt to see through the illusions of life and death while still alive (Yao and Lü 2021, p. 10). Moreover, early period last testaments were often the means by which the subjects sought to explain how matters should be handled once they were gone. These arrangements may have involved encoffinment and burial, social matters, and teachings to be imparted to descendants, among other matters. From these epitaph inscriptions, we find that many last testaments concern instructions for burial, often an internal family matter. They also included directions entrusting specific family matters to others, such as the distribution of wealth and property, and education for children. As a broad expression of a subject's expectations, the texts address how the living want affairs to be handled once they pass away, which necessitates that their descendants abide by their requests.

Scholars have paid the most attention to the issue of lavish (*houzang* 厚葬) versus frugal (*bozang* 薄葬) burials in their discussions of last testaments. In the early years of the Tang, the practice of top to bottom lavish burial had already become well-established in society; people esteemed a method "showing respect to the very end through lavish burial and demonstrating one's filiality [by constructing] an elevated tomb" 以厚葬爲奉終，高坟爲行孝 (Wu 2011, p. 405). Against this, Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649) with his numerous memorials calling for more frugal burials and reconsideration of the overall attitudes

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towards such matters, was representative of efforts to reform burials. These state memorials served as a form of policy aimed at curbing social disorder, but they did not have any significant impact on actual conditions. Up until the An Lushan Rebellion (755–763), the style of lavish burials that the general populace upheld continued unabated without any interference from governmental leaders. The situation persisted, and while the court issued numerous edicts, the state authorities did not take any concrete measures to enact the policies suggested in the government documents. Yao Ping has suggested that a more important reason for the lavish burials in the Tang dynasty was the influence of Buddhism on society. The custom of lavish burials is contrary to the purposes and aims of Buddhism. However, from the perspective of Chinese traditional culture, lavish burial was one of the means of redeeming the dead (Yao 2004, p. 4). Some last testaments preserved in epitaph records advocate more frugal burials, thereby departing from the more widespread reality of lavish burials in the Tang. Therefore, before delving more fully into the subject at hand, we must first analyze the motivations of the dying in seeking frugal burials in the Tang.

In the 1930s, Lü Simian 呂思勉 was already exploring early Tang ideas concerning frugal burials. He writes: "Xiao Yu 蕭瑀 and Bai Minzhong 白敏中 placed their faith in the Buddha, while Fu Yi 傅奕 and Wang Ji 王績 were drawn to the Dao. Moreover, many of them were gentlemen who upheld ritual propriety or valued moderation; however, they also were not necessarily accomplished. For someone like Feng Xiu 馮宿, although his last directive was for a frugal burial, all of his life's writing were entombed with him . . . or observe Li Ji 李勣 (594–669), who in words appeared capable of upholding ritual propriety and valuing moderation, but in reality he was exceedingly greedy and foolish" (Song 1959, p. 462). In his dissertation, T'u, Tsung-ch'eng 涂宗呈 examines last testaments of Tang figures concerning frugal burials, arguing that epitaph inscriptions promoting such ideas were meant to model the predominant ideal of virtuous conduct. They also functioned as a restraint on the family (T'u 2012, pp. 56–58). Zhu Lei 朱磊 and Zhang Xianguo 張現國 have suggested that the emperor proposed frugal burials in the imperial edicts mainly for political reasons (Zhu and Zhang 2009, pp. 54–55). Due to the influence of the previous lavish culture, people tended to regard a lavish burial as an act of filial piety. Under the influence of this kind of social climate, frugal burial was not popular in the early Tang Dynasty.

Buddhist funeral culture was closely related to the funeral customs of secular culture, and even prompted changes in funeral behavior at that time. In her *Cong Tang muzhi kan tangdai shisu fojiao xinyang* 從唐墓誌看唐代世俗佛教信仰, Wu Minxia 吳敏霞 analyzes the reasons for people's faith and participation in lay Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty,[1] as well as the diversity of practices and members of Buddhist communities (M. Wu 1996, pp. 218–25). Bao Lei 包蕾 analyzes the "Tianwang tomb figurines" in an attempt to understand the influence of Buddhist culture on traditional funeral behavior from the perspective of modeling changes, which appear to reflect the gradual popularization of Buddhist customs (Bao 2020, pp. 189–90). Yao Zhenhua 么振華 and Lü Luyao's 吕璐瑶 *Yiyan zhong de Sui Tang nüxing shijie* 遺言中的隋唐女性世界 is a systematic research compilation of 236 last testaments from Sui and Tang women.

Last testaments offer summaries of the departed's accomplishments in life, their social acquaintances, their reflections, attitudes, thinking, and insights. By examining such documents, we can begin to better understand the intellectual history of perceptions of death and dying. Women's social standing in the Sui and Tang was relatively higher than at other times in premodern China. Women of divergent social statuses naturally expressed different attitudes and concerns. Thus, we often find women articulating a variety of positions towards life and death and facing death in different frames of mind. By scrutinizing their attitudes and concerns, alongside the conditions under which their relatives sought to carry out their dying wishes, we can begin to understand women's social status in Tang society from an alternative perspective. Their attachment to, or rejection of life and death, revealed most fully in their last testaments, is one aspect of women's lives deserving of greater study (Yao and Lü 2021, p. 11).[2] Through her study of Tang dynasty epitaphs, Yao Ping points out that children of Buddhist mothers largely complied with their mothers'

desires to reject domesticity or to be cremated rather than buried after death (Yao 2008, pp. 57–85).

Generally speaking, scholars have paid close attention to Tang last testaments as valuable materials for understanding people's social lives during these periods. However, much of this research has been aimed at simply identifying the reasons why individuals may have chosen frugal burials or cremations. Much less discussion has been devoted to sorting out or classifying these reasons. A fresh look at some of these epitaph materials, which are important textual repositories addressing death rituals, and the last testaments recorded therein, might elucidate more historical details and insights. Indeed, it is worth delving deeper to examine their historical value.[3] Some scholars have compiled statistics on the number of women who believed in Buddhism, for example. Taking the more than 3600 epitaphs included in the "*Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓志匯編" as an example, 206 women's epitaphs clearly record their belief in Buddhism, while the number of people who practiced at home is 176, accounting for 85.44% (Su 2003, p. 88). The chosen burial methods of women who believed in Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty mainly involved burial in Buddhist temples, burial with their masters, stupa burial, cremation, rock burial, frugal burial, mud burial, etc. (Yan 2018, pp. 41–50). For example, according to the "Epitaph Inscription and Preface for late Lady Xue of the Tang, upasika but without merits and virtues" 有唐薛氏故夫人實信優婆夷未曾有功德塔銘並序: "Before I got sick, I had secretly made a will that my grave should be near my master's so that I could see and feel him after death to fulfill my old wishes." 先是未疾病之辰，密有遺囑，令葡宅之所，要近吾師，曠然遠望，以慰平昔 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1479). In this epitaph, we can see that the deceased wishes to be buried next to her master after death, something she clearly expresses in her last testament. We aim to show that in Tang funerals, the shift from burial to cremation, the simplification of ritual and its procedures, and the greater prevalence of separate rather than joint spousal interment, must all be considered in light of Buddhism's impact.

2. From Burial to Cremation: The Impact of Buddhism on Confucian Views of Life and Death

For a long time, Confucian ethics served as the guiding ideology for funerals advocated by the state power in premodern China. Ideas such as "fallen leaves return to the roots" (*luoye guigen* 落葉歸根), and "one returns to the great earth after death" (*sihou huigui dadi* 死後回歸大地) were espoused by Confucian thinkers.[4] Concerning the dead being laid to rest, in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) states: "All sentient beings shall die, and the dead must return to the earth" 眾生必死，死必歸土 (Zheng 2008, p. 1833). At the core of this Confucian consciousness is the idea that the body—hair and skin included—come from the parents (Li 2000, p. 4). Thus, burying a corpse and a coffin allows for a natural process of decay, which accords with the principles of heaven and earth. Rules of burial propriety not only stressed laying the dead to rest, but also emphasized that the "dead are of great concern" (*sizhe weida* 死者爲大) and that "burial must accord with the right time" (*zang bi yi shi* 葬必以時). Conversely, to damage the body or remains of a relative was regarded as great breach of filiality and immensely disrespectful. However, with Buddhism's entrance into China, various aspects of funeral and burial rituals underwent tremendous changes in the Tang. In medieval China, due to the growing prevalence of Buddhism, some Buddhist beliefs and rituals, including burial methods, affected Chinese society (S. Liu 2008, p. 183). Buddhism partially inheted the ideas of Brahmanism and advocated cremation. In India, the birthplace of Buddhism, cremation is a formal ritual. For example, believers held a cremation for Sakyamuni after he passed away. Afterwards, the monks followed suit when they died. Furthermore, cremation was not only advocated by Buddhists, but was also used by ethnic minorities in China. Thus, cremation had been observed for a long time, although Han Chinese regarded it as a most severe punishment for the deceased.

> I am bound by disaster and beset by long term suffering. My contemporaries, in life and death share shroud and tomb and seek lavish burials to secure their corpses and bones. In an earlier [existence] I was met with favorable [karmic]

> conditions and have come to understand the illusions of the world. I provisionally establish a separate tomb beside the grave of my deceased husband. After my death, you must cremate my body and scatter my ashes across water and land. This is my wish.
>
> 災眚所纓，困於瘵蠱，時人以生死同於衾穴，厚葬固於屍骨。吾早遇善緣，了知世幻。權於府君墓側，別置一墳，他時須爲焚身，灰燼分於水陸，此是願也。 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1987)

In this epitaph record, composed in the seventh year of the Yuanhe 元和 reign of Tang emperor Xianzong 唐憲宗 (812), Lady Bian expresses her last wishes for cremation and the installation of a simple grave for her remaining ashes. At the time, such a choice would have been uncommon. Because Buddhism advocates ideas of karmic retribution in future lives, and the possibility of becoming a Buddha after death and cremation, Lady Bian's last testament reveals her aspiration to encounter good circumstances in a future life. In a similar instance, as recorded in the "Epitaph Inscription for Lady Su of Wugong, Wife of Magistrate Wang of Wujin District in Changzhou" 常州武進縣尉王府君夫人武功蘇氏墓誌銘, Lady Su entrusts her last request for cremation to her chamberlain: "I revere the clear and pure teaching (Buddhism) and wish to sever all my karmic hindrances. After I die, you must burn my body" 吾奉清淨教，欲斷諸業障。吾歿之後，必燼 (燒) 吾身。 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 2234). It can be seen that in the eyes of Buddhist believer Lady Su, cremation is not only a form of funeral, but is also a way to get rid of worldly concerns. She hopes to overcome the haunting karmic obstacles in a cremation. Such statements reflect these women's devoted beliefs, as well as their resolve to put those beliefs into practice.

There were two groups of women who worshipped Buddha and chose their funerals with reference to Buddhist teachings (*lifo er zang* 禮佛而葬) in the Tang Dynasty. One was made up of the maidens, i.e., the unmarried women, and the other the married nuns and laywomen. In addition, there were two ways for married women to be buried alone: one was to be buried in accordance with Buddhist practices, and the other was to be buried in a different cave (from their husbands). Compared with traditional married women, who would be buried with or beside their husbands, the epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty record that women who believed in Buddhism specially decided their funeral forms. For example, according to a Tang Dynasty epitaph written by a son, his mother refused to wear brocade clothing or eat fine food all the year round, lived a frugal life, and devoutly believed in Buddhism before her death. Therefore, after she passed away, the son was not willing to "violate her will (*bu wei qi zhi* 不违其志)" in order to meet the standards of filial piety.[5] In this way, Buddhist and Confucian ideas were in agreement when it came to satisfying the mother's wishes concerning funeral rites (Liao 2000, pp. 45–63).

There was also a common burial method, that is, cremation first, followed by stupa burial. For example, in "The Inscription Epitaph Inscription and Preface of Nichan Dade Stupa of Yingtian Temple in Huaiyu Mountain, Xinzhou of Tang Dynasty" 唐故信州懷玉山應天禪院尼禪大德塔銘並敘 it is recorded that his "last testament is to be cremated and the ashes to be placed in the stupa" 遺令火焚 . . . . . 請收靈骨以塔焉。 (G. Wu 1996, p. 307). This kind of burial method was not considered suitable for ordinary female believers in the early Tang Dynasty and was more common among nuns who had already received full ordination. Later, the stupa burial was gradually extended to the general public. After the mid-seventh century, monks and laypeople were buried together (Zhang 2013, p. 188). Therefore, laywomen who were ordained at home chose not to be buried with their husbands after death, but instead wished to be cremated and placed into stupas built for their ashes. In addition, in accordance with another epitaph, "Epitaph Inscription and Preface for the Late Magistrate Du, warehouse official in the Leading Guard in the Great Tang" 大唐故右領軍衛倉曹參軍杜府君墓誌銘並序: "As a Buddhist devotee, his wife refused the traditional confucian couple burial, but chose the Buddhist stupa burial. On the 27th day of the tenth month in the 4th year of the Dali period, people moved the grave to the side of the stupa to complete her practice 變周公之禮，幽隧不同；道釋氏之教，靈塔斯起 . . . . . 以大曆四年十月廿七日遷舊塋鄰於塔次，庶神理之通也。 (Zhou and Zhao 2001, p. 700).

This epitaph records that the owner's wife, Lady Zheng, came to believe in Buddhism after her husband's death. The funeral applied the stupa burial that was common among Buddhists. At the same time, the son moved his father's grave to the side of his mother's stupa, which was a relatively rare occurrence.

In the Tang Dynasty, there was also a way of combining traditional with Buddhist funeral rituals. The "Stupa Inscription of Zhang Changqiu " 張常求塔銘 records the following:

> An upasika (laywoman), whose lay surname was Zhang and style name was Changqiu, was originally from Nanyang. Her natures were otherworldly beyond the ordinary and her willingness was lofty and pure like an ice-mirror. So she went to the capital, where she had the opportunity to get in touch with Buddhist ideas. On the 10th year of the Kaiyuan period, she became ill and died at home on the 25th of the Lunar February month in Huaide at the age of 72. Her coffin was moved to the north of the Chan master's forest. This was an act of propriety.
>
> 優婆夷俗姓張，字常求，望本南陽人也。性樂超塵，志同冰鏡，遂詣京華，得聞普法。開元十年遘疾，至其年二月廿五日，迁化於懷德之私第焉，春秋七十八。遷柩於禪師林北起墳，禮也。 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1257)

It is mentioned here that Zhang Changqiu, as a woman who practiced Buddhism at home, returned to the Chan Master Lin after her death. Instead of adopting a stupa burial, her funeral incorporated the traditional ritual of "lifting the grave".

Buddhist influence extended not only to funerary forms, but also to aspects of the ceremonial sacrifices. This penetration of ritual into society was concretely manifested in various practices: in the seven-seven, hundredth day, and year-round sacrificial ceremonies for deceased ancestors; in the selection of an auspicious date and location for the burial; in the convening of merit rituals; in the wearing of mourning dress; in admonitions against drinking alcohol and eating meat during the mourning period; and in the tolling of bells in Buddhist monasteries and temples. During the Tang, most people, including some Buddhists, wanted to be interred upon their death to protect their corpses and bones, and lavish burials were used to demonstrate filial piety. However, in sharp contrast with traditional Confucian concepts, Buddhism called for frugality, continence, and moderating sentiment. From the epitaphs quoted above, we find that these women who died in the Tang Dynasty, in their last words instructed their children to cremate them, largely due to the influence of Buddhism. If we examine this situation, we can find such a practice developing over a long period of time. With the continuous influence of Buddhism on people's thinking and habits, even if burial was still the mainstream choice, cremation became more and more popular among both nobles and commoners in the Tang Dynasty.

3. Simplifying Death: Buddhist Teachings Promoting Simpler Funeral Rituals

Based on our sources, we can discern that many Buddhists dealt with life and death with a calm attitude and hoped to handle affairs after death with a frugal funeral and cremation.[6] The simplification of ritual was characteristic of these new trends. In her lifetime, it was written of Lady Han 韓 (686–761), wife of Li Chao 李巢, Palace Censor of the Left Terrace 左臺殿中侍御史:

> Devote her mind to the awakened path and trod the 'Conjured City.' In her amusements, she was keen to brush aside pearls and gems, and in her choice of clothing, she resisted such things even more, omitting elaborate and colorful patterns. She completely eliminated all stimulating foods from her diet and adopted evident precepts to restrain herself. For the four meditations, she maintained a state of empty quietude and did not allow her six sensory fields to be defiled.
>
> 留心覺路，投足化城，玩好屏絕於璣珠，服御更遺於文彩。熏辛徹膳，炯誡自持。四禪虛靜，六塵不染。 (Wu 2006, p. 117)

As an aristocratic woman, Lady Han rejected jewelry and fine clothes during her lifetime, devoting herself instead to Buddhism. On her deathbed, she proposed: "I have lived

a life that was exceptionally modest and frugal. All of my old clothing should be given to aid those in need and donated as alms" 尤多素儉，凡舊衣服，皆令賑施. The text goes on to note that "her sons respectfully upheld her instructions and strove to follow her thrift and restraint" 其子恭惟受命，務從省約 (Wu 2006, p. 117).[7] From the passages here, we see that Lady Han regarded fancy clothing and articles of amusement as unimportant. She believed that one should not dwell on material objects in life and even more so in death, for one could not carry them into the afterlife. For this reason, she asked her sons to give away all her possessions as alms and to the best of their ability, hold simple and economical funeral ceremonies.[8]

The impetus behind burning incense, reciting and copying scriptures, or creating images while alive was to reach the desired religious goal of the Buddha, sometimes referred to "attaining nirvana in the end" (*nihuan er zhong* 泥洹而終) or "reclining on one's right side" (*youxie er wo* 右脅而臥). People left wills that directed family members to hold frugal funerals after their deaths, to cremate their bodies, or to raise stupas and inter their remains therein. After the death of Lady Wang 王, wife of Song Yun 宋運, Assistant Guardsman of the Right Imperial Insignia Guard in the Tang 唐右金吾衛翊衛宋運, her sons imitated Buddhists in "constructing this precious stupa" 營茲寶塔 and burying their mother "in a place south of the relic stupa of the San Hui Temple, located southwest of the capital city on the Gaoyang plateau" 葬於京城之西南高陽原三會寺舍利塔南之所 (Wu 1998, p. 341). The "Epitaph Inscription for the Late Magistrate Dong of Longxi, Gentleman Commander in the Right Martial Guard, General of Proclaiming Might in the Great Tang" 大唐故宣威將軍右武衛中郎將隴西董府君墓誌銘 records the following:

> Lady Zhang, Noblewoman of Nanyang Commandery . . . In times of repose, she pursued Buddhist meditation and wisdom. Like a lotus flower reflected upon the water, how could her heart not then be pure and still? . . . She will be reborn in one of the Buddha lands. On the fourth day of the second month in the 23rd year of the Kaiyuan period, she sat cross-legged in meditation and returned to perfection at the estate in Tonggu Commandery at the age of 72. On the 14th day of the tenth month in the 27th year of the Kaiyuan period, her remains were returned to her original native place, and a stupa was constructed to house her body.
>
> 夫人南陽郡君張氏 . . . 宴息禪慧。蓮花照水，豈方清靜之心 . . . 將生極樂之界。以開元廿三載二月四日趺坐歸真於同谷郡之別業，春秋七十二。開元廿七載十月十四日歸櫬故鄉，以形建塔。 (Wu 1997, p. 453)

In the above two quotations, Mrs. Wang and Mrs. Zhang were both the wives of officials, and they also chose "stupa burials". They were representatives of those upper-class noblewomen who believed in Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty. Frugality had always been advocated in Buddhist teachings, so it was not uncommon for female Buddhists to expressly request frugal burials in their last words. When venerating ancestors, people in the Tang generally used dried meat (*fu* 脯), fermented meat paste (*hai* 醢), and wine in their offerings, but last testaments suggest that some rejected these practices. For example, Li Jin 李晉 (653–725), second wife of Sima Lujing 司馬盧璥 of Weizhou 魏州, hoping to regulate her own future offerings, requested in her last testament that her "sacrificial offerings not use meat" 祠祭不得用肉 because she "upheld and had faith in Buddhist scriptures and had experienced a profound awakening to the transient illusions [of life]" 崇信释典，深悟泡幻 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1309). Similarly, the "Epitaph Inscription and Preface for the Late Lady Dou, Wife of young Magistrate Li of Governor's House in Hanzhong County in the Great Tang" 大唐前漢中郡都督府李少府公故夫人竇氏墓誌銘並序 records the following: "Since a lavish burial did not meet the requirements of ritual, Lady Dou asked her husband before her death to respect the wishes of the deceased for a frugal burial before her death" 以厚葬非禮，臨歿遺囑少公，勉就高志，故爲薄葬焉 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1625). Lady Dou's choice of a frugal burial not only reflects her belief in Buddhism, but also her open-minded outlook on life and death.

Another example is the "Epitaph Inscription for the Late Lady Zhang of Wu Country, Wife of Magistrate Liu, warehouse officials of Sizhou in Tang" 唐故泗州司倉參軍彭城劉府君夫人吳郡張氏墓誌銘. According to this record, Lady Zhang left these last words before her death:

> I'm old enough and now terminally ill, but luckily I still have a breath to leave last words. Besides, my mind follows Buddhism and deeply comprehend the emptiness of suffering. A person's life and death are no different from the shedding of a cicada.
>
> 吾年過歲制，病在膏肓，餘氣倖存，思有誡約。況吾心崇釋教，深達苦空，人之生死，豈殊蟬蛻。 (Wu 1994, p. 372)

Lady Zhang compares the death of a person to the shedding of a cicada, which is an inevitable natural process. At the same time, she tells her son not to be too sad but to live his life well.

Not only did Buddhists hold more frugal funerals, but Daoist ideas also impacted devotees' choices for funeral and burial procedures. Lady Li 李 (631–707), wife of Zheng Dao 鄭道, Chief Registrar of Fugou District in Xuzhou 許州扶溝縣主簿 followed the teachings of the Dao. She did not wear elegantly embroidered or splendidly colored clothing, and in her later years "especially concentrated on [the teachings] of Zhuangzi and Laozi, seeking to altogether forget her corporeal form" 尤精莊老，都忘形骸. She believed that "those who die return somewhere, presumably to perfection" 夫死者歸也，蓋歸於真. The passage continues in her words: "I shall die as expected, and at that time, return to the halls of the perfected to forever be without the fetters of corporeal form" 吾果死，當歸於真庭，永無形骸之累矣. Upon her deathbed, she made the following remark in her last testament: "People of antiquity did not raise earthen mounds or plant trees, and the mourning period was undetermined" 古人不封不樹，喪期無數 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1079). Such examples demonstrate how religious thinking fostered views of moderate living, which in turn influenced perspectives on death, as people's attitudes became more aligned with the practice of frugal burials. At the same time, religious prohibitions and tenets also drove devotees to prescribe more austere ritual procedures for their own funeral and burial proceedings. The inscriptions for the three women all acknowledge that their family members obeyed the wishes expressed in their last testaments; thus, we can see that requests for frugal funeral ceremonies stemming from religious beliefs and practices were accepted by family members.

In addition to the regular burial ceremonies in the Tang Dynasty, there was also a special exposed burial (*loushi zang* 露屍葬). The so-called exposed burial directly exposes the body of the deceased in the wild, or sinks it into water, so that creatures, such as birds, beasts, fish, and insects might eat it. The main purpose is to sacrifice flesh and blood (S. Liu 2008, p. 291). The "Epitaph Inscription for the Late Lady Dong of the Great Tang" 大唐故董夫人墓誌銘 records her last words: "After my death, do not use the coffin, put me on a rock or a cave in the field" 吾歿之後，不須棺葬，致諸岩穴，亙望原野 (Zhou and Zhao 2001, p. 115). Her son Mingda disagreed with such an unconventional last testament, however, his mother "stuck to her opinion" 死諫未從. As a means of recording personal behavior or deeds, the reason why the epitaph presents such tiny details is mainly to show appreciation for the deceased's behavior.

Through the above analysis, we find that in the Tang Dynasty, the funeral ceremonies of some women became increasingly simple. Of course, there were other factors, such as the state's promotion of frugal burials or personal living habits. But from some epitaphs, we can also see the influence of Buddhist teachings on these women. Related scholarly research has demonstrated that as Buddhism in the Tang sought to better assimilate itself into society, many monks and nuns were often not as disconnected from the world as later generations imagined. Despite some ideas that violated original doctrines, Tang Buddhism, refashioned by Chinese Buddhist devotees and predominantly oriented to Mahayana Buddhism, adapted to the needs of medieval society. The monastic behavior of lay devotees was regarded as a choice, allowing people to accumulate good merit and bring

blessings upon the family. In addition to monastic Buddhists who opted to have their remains interred in stupas after death, lay Buddhists, especially women, often chose a different form of burial. In other words, the funeral rituals of the Tang Dynasty incorporated both Buddhist teachings and local traditional practices.

4. "Joint Burial Was Not Practiced in Antiquity": Buddhism's Changes to Traditional Family Ethics

From antiquity until today, the idea of a husband and wife being buried together has continued to receive widespread approval in Confucian culture. The saying that husband and wife "in life share the same quilt, and in death share the same grave" 生同衾、死同穴 (Zhu 2005, p. 198) is an ethical norm in traditional Chinese society, and is also the fundamental belief behind the practice of joint burial for spouses. Tang poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) writes in one of his poems: "In life, we share the same chamber of intimacy;/In death, we shall share the same tomb of dust" 生爲同室親，死爲同穴塵。 (Bai 1979, p. 15).[9] In another, he writes: "Nothing is weightier than the propriety accorded to one's wife;/To be separated in life is worse than death./I have vowed to share the same grave with her in death,/So what am I to do about her giving birth to no sons?" 義重莫若妻，生離不如死。誓將死同穴，其奈生無子。 (Bai 1979, p. 464).[10] Among the burial customs of the Tang, joint burial of husband and wife was the most prevalent (Duan 2005, p. 95). However, as a special requirement for dying confessions, the last words in the epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty reflect that many women who believed in Buddhism ordered their descendants to bury their remains separately. The reason many of these women chose to disregard traditional Confucian norms was to a large degree the result of their involvement with Buddhist teachings. Women who believed in Buddhism used the rationale of "realizing Buddhism early, and getting rid of the fate of the world" 早悟佛門，脫於世緣. As the reason for their unwillingness to follow the traditional burial etiquette, they claimed that it was important "to return the deceased's bones to their native place and return to perfection" and that "joint burial was not something practiced in antiquity" 合葬非古，何必同穴. In response to the problem of separate burial of husbands and wives in the Tang Dynasty, Liu Qinli believes that the reason lies in cultural factors, such as Taoist beliefs, a woman's childlessness or premature death of children, divination for remarriage, and time taboos (Q. Liu 2008, pp. 11–15). Analysis of the epitaphs of married women in the Tang Dynasty reveals that if they were not buried with their husbands, there would mostly be clear explanations in the epitaphs, and the explanations could be divided into two categories.

First, they might be buried in different caves 異穴而葬. Although some women who believed in Buddhism were buried in the same place as their husbands, they did not open the original tombs, but dug a separate tomb. In our opinion, this not only satisfied the traditional virtue of marrying a husband, but also satisfied the spiritual pursuits of women who believed in Buddhism. For example, the "Epitaph Inscription and Preface for Lady Song, Wife of Gentleman Wang, Chief Registrar of Ren County of Xingzhou in Tang" 唐故邢州任縣主簿王君夫人宋氏之墓誌銘並序 reads:

> On the brink of death, she said to her sons: "My mind converts to Buddhist teachings, and my sentiments are distant from the mundane dust of this world. Though I have not gone forth from the family to become a monastic, I have always hoped to enter the path. You are filial sons who should consider my reasoned statements. In ancient times, emperors had empresses and worthy imperial consorts but they still did not follow into the celestial regions. The king's offspring and accomplished gentlemen were also separated from the yellow burial grounds. To return the deceased's bones to their native place and return to perfection, joint burial was not something practiced in antiquity. To join the Buddhist path and transform, why would one share the same tomb? On the 12th day of the February month in the 2nd year of the Changshou period of Da Zhou, buried in Mangshan, north of Luoyang, fifty steps away from her husband's grave"

> 臨終之際，謂諸子曰： “吾心依釋教，情遠俗塵，雖非出家，恆希入道。汝爲孝子，思吾理言。昔帝女賢妃， 尚不從於蒼野，王孫達士，猶靡隔於黃墟。歸骸反真，合葬非古。與道而化，同穴何爲？ 以大周長壽二年二月十二日葬於洛陽之北邙，去夫塋五十步。” (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 839)

We can see that, although she was only a lay Buddhist who practiced cultivation at home, she was still unwilling to be buried with her husband because of her devotion to Buddhist teachings. This decision to choose a place not far from her husband's tomb and bury herself in a separate cave reflects Song's Buddhist beliefs. She gives a special account in her last words, demonstrating her Buddhist beliefs were accompanied by practical actions.

Another example is the "Epitaph Inscription for Lady Zhang, Wife of Wife of Late Magistrate Zhao, engineering officials of Hangzhou in Great Tang" 大唐故杭州司士參軍趙府君故夫人張氏墓誌銘. Lady Zhang mentions in her last words:

> If the deceased has perception, even if we are not in the same cave, it does not matter; If the deceased has no perception, it is not necessary to be buried together! After my death, don't bury me in the same cave with your father.
>
> 若逝者有知，雖異穴而奚妨；如逝者無知，縱合祔而豈益！我歿之後，勿祔先塋。 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1347)

Zhang's last words before her death were to urge future generations (her daughter and son-in-law) not to follow the traditional funeral ceremony of husband and wife, but to implement her last words.

Second was a special type of separate burial: an epitaph inscription for Marquess Mo Qi of Henan 河南萬侯氏 notes:

> There was neither anything she said nor anything she saw as she solemnly transferred her merit to others. And so she sat and passed away in an official guesthouse in the Fengcai Hamlet of Luoyang District near the Eastern Capital. . . . She did not wish to be buried in Xingyang, so by all means, we must do as she pleases and bury her in Luoyang.
>
> 口無所說，目無所視，但儼然回向，因坐而終於東京洛陽縣豐財里之官舍。 . . . . . 夫人不欲定於滎陽，務隨便於洛師可也。 (Wu 1995, p. 539)

Lady Mo Qi was an orphan from childhood, and unfortunately lost her husband after getting married. She firmly believed in Buddhism and did not want to be buried with her husband after her death, hoping instead to be buried in Luoyang.

From the extant epitaphs of Tang women, we find that lay Buddhist women did not wish to burden their remaining family, so they abided by the Buddhist call for frugal burials and the rejection of joint burial. Such attitudes are amply demonstrated in epitaph documents. For example, the "Epitaph Inscription and Preface for Lady Zhangsun, wife of Wang Meichang, Provincial Inspector of Runzhou" 潤州刺史王美暢夫人長孫氏墓誌銘并序, reads:

> My karmic planting has obtained the root, and I have profoundly awakened to the gate of the dharma. I have cast aside and left behind covers and tethers, transcending the net of attachment. I believe that joint burial is not something practiced in antiquity, so why must I share the same grave? Thus, my testamentary directive is to leave the side of Mount Longmen Temple at the Hegong county border in Luozhou vacant, in order to secure my spirit.
>
> 宿植得本，深悟法門，捨離蓋纏，超出愛網，以爲合葬非古，何必同墳？乃遺令於洛州合宮縣界龍門山寺側爲空，[11] 以安神埏。 (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1030)

The passage relates that because Lady Zhangsun was devoted to Buddhist teachings in her life, she left a final testament for her family urging them to bury her alone beside Mount Longmen Temple in accordance with Buddhist ritual ceremonies.

In their last testaments, other women also articulate requests for solo burial based upon their Buddhist devotion. For instance, Lady Wu's 仵 epitaph notes similar intentions:

> As the causal conditions of the Pure Land were about to unfurl, she upheld to an even greater degree the regulations put forth in Jeta's Grove, Anathapinda's Park. Her sentiments had surpassed those of the mundane realms, and she contemplated entering the meditative channel. She believed that joint burial was not practiced in antiquity, and that such matters were contrary to being fitted with firewood [i.e., cremation] . . . When she was peacefully settled, she wished to be separated in another tomb. On the brink of transformation [i.e., death], she was steadfast and left her testamentary directive.
>
> 將開淨土之因，兼奉祇園之律。情超俗境，思入禪津，以爲合葬非古，事乖衣薪之業 . . . . . 平居之時，願疏別壙。遷化之際，固留遺命。[12]

Before her death, Lady Wu especially indicated that "joint burial was not practiced in antiquity" and that she desired to be laid to rest in "another tomb." We can see that, faced with the choice between interment, cremation, and joint or separate burial, Lady Wu suggested arrangements according to her personal preferences. In these examples of women's epitaphs in the Tang, the subjects all express sentiments akin to the statement "Joint burial was not practiced in antiquity, so why must I share the same grave?" in order to demonstrate that the choice of being laid to rest alone was a rational one.

Besides these, there are also epitaph records of wives of court officials who upheld Buddhist teachings, and, ignoring the reproach of social opinion, asked that they be buried together with eminent monks they had revered in their lives. For example, according to her epitaph, after Lady Helan 賀蘭 died, her remains were "moved to be encoffined at the Chiming Barrows. In this, she was to accompany the stupa of the Chan master she had faithfully practiced with" 遷殯於鴟鳴埠，實陪信行禪師之塔.[13] The epitaph for Magistrate Wang, Chief Registrar of Ren County of Xingzhou 邢州任縣主簿王府君 offers further details on his wife:

> Lady Song earlier on had awakened to her benevolent roots, and in her early years had planted exceptional causal conditions. She recited and chanted scriptures and practiced walking meditation and was the heir of the Monk Xuan 僧玄 of the Eastern Temple of the Great Zhou. Whenever she spoke with subordinates about her [death] arrangements, she asked why she must share the same tomb [with her husband]? [Her sons] respectfully honored her testamentary directions.
>
> 宋氏夫人早悟善本，夙植勝因，念誦經行，大周東寺之僧玄嗣也。夫人每謂諸下安排，何必同穴？ 敬遵遺指。 (Zhou and Zhao 2001, pp. 320–21)

According to Su Shimei's 蘇士梅 statistics, of the 176 epitaphs for lay Buddhist women collected in the *Tangdai muzhi huibian*, nineteen, a little more than one tenth of the records clearly record testaments directing family members to carry out frugal burials or reject joint burial (Su 2003, p. 88).

A number of women who believed in Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty chose not to be buried with their husbands after death. The form of burial chosen reflects the different identities of women. For example, bhikkhunis and upasikas who believed deeply in Buddhism often finally chose to be buried in Buddhist temples, stupas, water, etc. Women who did not believe deeply in Buddhism and could not get rid of secular ties often chose to be buried next to their husbands. In this analysis of the phenomenon of separate spousal burial, it is not difficult to see that, for these women, their hope for what would transpire after death transcended their relationship with their husband, and their choices accorded with their Buddhist beliefs. At the same time, from another perspective, these women also reflect the fact that Buddhist women in the Tang dared to scorn a traditional ethical system and defy the spirit of Confucian norms and teachings. Though Buddhist precepts include elements of gender inequality, compared with Confucian ethical norms—which

apply to human relationships and behavior—a patriarchal attitude is much less prevalent. This is especially embodied in the spirit of providing equal benefit to all living things, an idea found within Mahayana Buddhist precepts. Spurred on and emboldened by such ideas, married women of the Tang used their own religious pursuits and the practice of upholding precepts as grounds for boldly breaking from the binds of Confucian ethical norms and persisting in their rejection of joint burial. From a social gender perspective, the course of action that some of these women in the Tang pursued can be considered a form of religious practice, in which Buddhist women courageously seek personal freedom and emancipation in their married household lives.

5. Conclusions

As a religion of "ultimate care" for human society, the objects of concern of Chinese Buddhism are not limited to emperors and generals and a few social elites, but extend to human beings of all descriptions. The focus of Buddhism is not the change of dynasties but the inner aspirations of the people. As a traditional agricultural society, the people under the management of ancient dynasties in China mostly lived on agricultural production. Natural disasters, wars, and other factors meant these people often faced life pressures. At this time, Buddhism was undoubtedly very attractive to ordinary people who had for long been unable to secure their livelihood and who had difficulty in controlling their own destiny, and who thus became loyal followers of Buddhism.

With the growing influence of Buddhism in the Sui and Tang Dynasties, Buddhist funeral concepts and etiquette deeply influenced Buddhist women. We partially agree with Su Shimei's point of view: "Women who believed in Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty played an active and non-negligible role in changing the traditional funeral customs, especially the way of not being buried with their husbands, which reflects the ideological and conceptual daring to break through feudalism ethical concept" (Su 2003, p. 88). In our opinion, the expressions of women in the Tang Dynasty as reflected in their last words include three aspects: First, in terms of burial form, some women with profound Buddhist attainments hoped to be buried in Buddhist temples or to build stupas around Buddhist temples after death. Some of these women, because of their belief, would rather follow a Buddhist master and be buried beside him. Most women who believed in Buddhism hoped to adopt the cremation method advocated in Buddhism, and there were relatively few water burials, exposed burials, rock burials, or even burials generally. Second, in terms of joint and separate burials, the notion "joint burial was not practiced in antiquity" had become the stated reason why Buddhist women sought to be buried separately from their husbands. There were even many last words and testaments explicitly advocating separate burial, which was recorded as a specially written part of the epitaph. Limited by the custom of "husband and wife sharing the tomb" in traditional etiquette, some women who believed in Buddhism chose a compromise between Buddhist and Confucian concepts. Although these tombs were nominally called joint burials, they adopted the method of occupying different caves. Third, in the matter of frugal burials versus lavish ones, Buddhist women in the Tang Dynasty consistently expressed their desire for frugal burial, which shows that their concept of life and death and wealth had been deeply influenced by Buddhism.

Before the Sui and Tang Dynasties, Buddhism still held the status of a foreign religion (方外之教) and was in constant competition and conflict with the two religions indigenous to China: Confucianism and Taoism. In the Tang Dynasty, the government adopted an attitude of encouraging and protecting Buddhism and set up posts such as the "Commissioner of Merit and Virtue (*gongde shi* 功德使)" to manage Buddhism (Goble 2022, pp. 66–86). Under the inspiration of Buddhist beliefs, people from all walks of life, ranging from imperial relatives, and dignitaries, to scholar-bureaucrats and ordinary people, devoted themselves to Buddhism. On the other hand, before the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism had spread widely in China, and Buddhist beliefs such as Avalokiteshvara and Maitreya had penetrated among the people and developed a relatively extensive secular foundation. The Buddhist doctrine of non-arising (*wusheng* 無生) undoubtedly had an impact on the views of life and death

professed by these women who had long been devoted to Buddhist teachings. The doctrine held that birth was false and empty, a delusion; if nothing were born or originated, then there would be nothing that would perish. During the Tang, Buddhism developed by leaps and bounds. As society upheld more of its teachings discouraging lavish burials, it was only a matter of time before the religion would come to have an impact on funeral matters. To be sure, many chose frugal burials for economic reasons: practical considerations rather than religious beliefs and practices.

For scholars studying the last testaments of historical figures, epitaphs are an invaluable resource. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the particular nature of epitaph texts; that is, their authors refrain from speaking about certain things out of respect, or perhaps offer flattery for the dead. This has led some to discount their facticity, seeing them merely as texts of praise and commemoration. However, women's epitaphs exhibit different qualities from those of men. If we notice that last testaments preserved in official histories, those written for men who inherently bear responsibility for household and state, are more concerned with collective sentiments than the individual self, it is easier to see how women's last testaments are quite different—more often emphasizing personal interests and desires. One must also acknowledge that, because the subjects who were selected for the composition of epitaphs had received Confucian education, there are common guiding principles of composition. What is expressed in the content of the text has been filtered through a specific lens and recombined and embellished in expected ways, despite the subjects' varying statuses and roles. Nevertheless, the last testaments of Tang epitaphs offer us a unique perspective for understanding the evolutionary process of Buddhism in China.

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Notes

1 During the Tang, Buddhism underwent a transformation from the more sectarian, theoretically oriented forms of the tradition of earlier periods, to a greater situatedness among the people, as in later periods. Some scholars regard this transition as a feature of the formation of a so-called folk Buddhism. See (Zürcher [1959] 2007); Ch'en (1976); Gu (1993).

2 For a review of Yao's book, see Peng (2021), September 10.

3 Epitaph materials have been widely applied by scholars studying medieval Chinese history. See Yao (2014); Choo (2015, pp. 1–37); Ebrey et al. (2019); Choo (2022).

4 Some scholars have suggested that the understanding of a Confucian-based civil religion was developed in the Tang. See Fröhlich (2017, pp. 240–49).

5 Some scholars in the last century believed that filial piety was a special feature of Chinese Buddhism as a response to Chinese culture (Ch'en 1968, pp. 81–97). In fact, filial piety is very important in Buddhism generally (Guang 2016, pp. 212–26; John 1983, pp. 171–86).

6 While the political fortunes of the Chinese were at a low ebb during these centuries of disunity, the fate of Buddhism took a sharp turn upward. It seems that the disunity and attendant turmoil were just the conditions needed for the religion to gain adherents among the populace. See (Ch'en 1976, pp. 209–30). A subsection of these adherents opted for simpler funerals.

7 The title of this epitaph is 左臺殿中侍御史李巢太夫人韓氏墓誌銘並序.

8 One of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism is the notion that good deeds earn "merit" 功德 and generous giving is the paradigmatic merit-gaining practice. This is one of the important ways for Bodhisattvas to become Buddhas (Adamek 2005, pp. 135–80).

9 The title of this poem is "Zeng nei" 贈內.

10 The title of this poem is "He wei zhi ting qi dan bia hecao" 和微之聽妻彈別鶴操.

11 Reading *kong* 空 for *bian* 笾.

12 "Epitaph Inscription and Preface for Lady Wu, Wife of Bo Shande" 柏善德夫人仵氏墓誌銘并序. See (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 988).

[13] "Epitaph Inscription and Preface for Lady Lan, the Late Wife of Duke Pei" 裴公故妻賀蘭氏墓誌銘并序. See (Zhou and Zhao 1992, p. 1184).

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