Funerary Perception and Ritual Institution of Imperial Tang

Qi Dongfang

Key words: Tang funerary customs ritual institution funeral activities social change

Several thousands tombs dated to the Tang era have been excavated. Traditional studies focus on questions of regional division, periodization and typology of the tombs. Their results indicate that the mid-eighth century was the watershed years of the Tang burial practice. Before that, tombs were large in scale and rich in furnishing. After that, tombs reduced in size and poor in furnishing. This phenomenon is often interpreted as the result of volatility in the political field, weakening of the imperial power, decline in the economy, and deterioration of the funeral institution from middle to late Tang. Nevertheless, this long-held perspective on the development of Tang tombs is inadequate because it seriously contradicts with the historical documentation. The traditional studies concentrate on the technical analyses of the tombs but lack in depth examination of the social meanings of the customs and ritual institution of funerary practice of the past.

Burial is the material result of the interaction of custom and formalized ritual institution. Both of them consist of prescribed rules for people to follow. Custom is the belief and desire shared by people that consolidate into tradition through long time practice. It lacks coercive authority. Formalized ritual institution concentrates on the evaluation of the deceased and affirmation of his/her status, and adherence to the rules is backed by coercive authority. Funerary activities of the Tang were directed by a set of rules and regulations that often time integrated the perception and institution of funerary ceremonies.

Archaeological study of past funeral practice based on burial data alone suffers severe limitation. Burial is only one of the three major ritual components—mourning, burial and sacrificial service—of a complete funeral cycle. Moreover, the material remains of burial are subjected to layers of filtering constituting the formation processes of archaeological record. Therefore, it is crucial to have a full audition of the limitation of burial data before making any interpretation. If we study social change based on burial information alone, it is likely that ambiguous views would result. To find out the historical truth, we need to study the variation of the tombs from the perception and institution of funeral ritual that directed the construction of the tombs in the first place.

Penetration of the Status System and Legislation into the Funerary Activities

Central to the funeral ritual of the Tang times was the status system. A great number of tombs have been excavated in the vicinity of the modern city of Xi’an. In general, the tomb structure agrees with the status of the deceased. Double-chambered brick tombs were those of the princes, princesses, powerful ranking officials, and individuals who had made special contribution to the imperial establishment. Single-chambered brick tombs were usually occupied by imperial officials of the first to third pin (the ranking of Tang’s government officials). Single-chambered square earthen pit burials were mainly occupied by imperial officials of the fourth and fifth pin. Single-chambered square or rectangular earthen pit burials were occupied by imperial officials of the sixth to ninth pin. Commoners were buried in the L-shaped earthen pit burials. This observation is particularly clear in early Tang, that is, before the mid-eighth century. The difference in tomb structure closely agrees with the written records on the differential funerary treatment by rank. In fact, the difference in the burials as seen in archaeology is more nuanced than the difference as seen in the written texts. From the reigns of Emperor
The scale of the tomb, and the quantity and quality of grave offering are closely related to the economic power of the deceased. Nevertheless, it is not only the question of individual wealth. The key is a formalized status-based ritual institution. Through ritual, funerary activities symbolize and implicate an ethical standard and moral norm. Although ritual tradition has certain regulatory capacity, it does not have coercive authority. A rational solution is to anchor some of the ritual contents onto the state legislature. This is exactly the most significant feature of the funeral institution of the Tang era. Many components of funeral ritual were explicitly regulated by the Tang codes. By doing so, the funeral institution assumed a double character of ritual and law.

Ideology-based ritual becomes more effective when it is translated into codes of law. However, this is a difficult translation. Ritual practice is an internal self-reflecting activity difficult to be gauged with external criterion. Nevertheless, the Tang court maneuvered in great extent to write the codes of law to regulate the observable acts of funerary ritual. Thus, the idealistic realm of ritual practice was successfully translated into the practical realm of law and order. It transposed the funeral institution from the ritual field to the legal field.

When funeral assumes the double character of ritual and law, it is no longer being promoted only on the moral platform, it is also restraining on the legislative platform. The ideal world for the imperial rulers was a world that the lives of the people follow an order regulated by both ritual and law. During the Tang times, funeral became one of the pillar institutions sustaining the social order and the state authority.

### Political Battles Reflected in Funerary Activities

During the Tang regime, several significant political events occurred around the establishment, abiding, exploitation, and violation of the funeral institution. Archaeology reflects the negotiation of funeral ritual in some spectacular battles for power.

In the formalized funeral institution of the Tang, the highest non-royal treatment class was given to the imperial officials of the first to the third *pin*. In general, single-chambered brick tomb was used for the burial. However, individuals of the same rank had their personal characteristics. How could the funerary treatment be used to distinguish their difference? To honor the individuals who had received exceptional praise from the emperor and the royal court, funeral rules were bent or even violated. We use two exceptional burials of the early Tang to illustrate. Yuchi Jingde 尉迟敬德 and Zheng Rentai 郑仁泰 were two prominent imperial officials. They were buried in double-chambered brick tombs, obvious violations of the general rules. The scales of these two tombs exceeded those of the contemporary royal family members. In addition, the tomb of Zheng Rentai contained a stone coffin, which was reserved for royalty during the Tang times. Their extravagant treatments were attributed to their outstanding meritorious services to the state. Like the early years of other dynasties, there existed a newly-risen group of military generals instrumental to the founding of Tang Dynasty. To honor these individuals upon death, the Tang court gave them exceptional funerals. The concluding evaluations or obituaries of these extraordinary military figures came directly from the emperor himself. One of the purposes of this practice was to undermine the prevailing social status system based on family pedigree in early Tang. Giving sumptuous funerals to these generals, in fact, was a political strategy to promote loyalty to the newly founded dynasty.

Examples of political use of funeral are also seen in the archaeology of mid Tang in the beginning of the eighth century. Li Xian 李贤, Li Zhongrun 李重润 and Li Xianhui 李仙蕙 were three of the royal family members executed for political reasons when Wu Zetian 武则天 assumed power. When Emperor Zhongzong 中宗 came to the throne, he started the process of reinstating the Tang ruling house. He restored the names of Wu's opponents and started a series of reburial performances with sumptuous funerary ceremonies. Wu Zetian died in the sixteenth day of the twelfth month of 705. However, the supporters of Wu were still in charge of the government in many departments. In the heat of the battle for power, Emperor Zhongzong buried Crowned Prince Yide 遼德 (Li Zhongrun) on the eighth day of the sixth month of 706 and Princess Yongtai 永泰 (Li Xianhui) on the second day of the seventh month of the same year. They were given a special honor treatment “hao-mu-wei-ling 号墓为陵” (literally, named the "mu" 墓 as "ling 陵." According to the Tang funeral institution, the emperors were buried in "ling,” or mausoleum parks, all others were buried in "mu,” or tombs).
The prince and princess were the biological children of Emperor Zhongzong. They died prematurely before their twentieth birthdays. Their reburial ceremonies were disguised under the camouflage of parental love and thus easily gained the sympathy and support of the royal and court members. However, royal reburial was a significant state ceremony. The lengthy and noisy processions would have evoked the memories of their cause of death. Yet, the remaining associates of Wu could not interfere with the processes of these acts of human nature that were appropriate from the perspectives of ritual and law.

Only one month later, the reburial ceremony of Li Xian on the thirteen day of the eighth month was more theatrical. Li Xian, the then crowned prince, was first deposed to commoner by Wu. During his exile, he was forced to commit suicide. The emperor proceeded the reburial ceremony of Li Xian with extra caution. The timing of the reburial was arranged after those of Prince Yide and Princess Yongtai. The reburial ceremony was disguised under the title of Fief of Yong. "These delicate wordings bear the implicit effect of transforming the “emperor” in Wu Zetian to “the wife of the Li family.”

### Operation of the Funeral Institution

During the Tang Dynasty, funeral was the realms of ritual and law. The maintenance of the various rules of funerary activities was a complicated task. To ensure their operation under the auspice of the state, specialized government agencies were commissioned. A series of officials responsible for the operation of funerary activities appeared in the Tang times to regulate the resources of the ritual. It was the policy of imperial Tang that the “government subsidizes the funerals of its officials.”

The government ordered minister Li Zhishi to “posthumously honor the title Fief of Yong.” Moreover, the former inscribes with the name of the prince and princess. The latter starts with a title at the top of the stela, “The Epitaph of the Late Fief of Yong.” Yet, a line containing two words “Great Tang” were inserted above the heading. A reasonable interpretation is that the funeral directive was hesitant on using “Great Zhou” or “Great Tang.” Therefore, the title of “Late Fief of Yong” was used without the dynastic designation, which violated a format rule in the stone epitaphs of the time. It was only in the last minute that “Great Tang” was decided. The insertion of dynastic designation was entirely motivated by political factors. The newly appeared “Great Tang” was a symbolic manifestation of the restoration of Tang order.

In addition, two stone epitaphs had been recovered from the tomb of Li Xian. The second stela was inscribed five year later when Li Xian was posthumously honored with the title “Prince Zhanghuai.” The contents of the two epitaphs are dramatically different. The former reveals little about the life of Li Xian and makes no mention of the cause of death. The later starts with a title at the top of the stela, “Great Tang—the Late Fief of Yong and Posthumously Bestowed Prince Zhanghuai.” Moreover, the former inscribes with the passage, “posthumously honored the title Fief of Yong.” The latter, however, makes an interesting twist, “Empress Dowager ordered minister Li Zhishi delivered the decree of posthumously bestowing the title Fief of Yong.” These delicate wordings bear the implication of transforming the “emperor” in Wu Zetian to “the wife of the Li family.”

Although the Siyishu 司仪署 office of the Honglusi department was responsible for the processes of funeral ritual and the distribution of the paraphernalia, it did not produce the paraphernalia. The office of Jiangzuojian 青墩监 was the agencies that overseeing the entitlement system of funeral.
was responsible for the material resources of the funeral ceremonies. Each funeral needed a large amount and a variety of material resources. The receptacle and the offerings were made by the Jiangzuojian department. According to the chapter “Zhi Guan Zhi 职官志” (Government Officials and Their Duties) of the Jiu Tang Shu 旧唐书 (Old Tang History), the Zuojiashu 左校署 office of the Jiangzuojian 将作监 (Imperial Manufactories Directorate) department was responsible to “supply all the funerary materials.” The division of labor within the Jiangzuojian department was quite detail. For instance, the Zhenguanshu 甄官署 office of the Jiangzuojian 将作监 department was responsible to “supply all the funerary materials.” The division of labor within the Jiangzuojian department was quite detail. For instance, the Zhenguanshu 甄官署 office of the Jiangzuojian 将作监 (Imperial Manufactories Directorate) department was responsible to “supply all the funerary materials.”

All three departments of Libu, Honglusi and Jiangzuojian were commissioned to administer the funerary activities. A detailed division of labor existed between them. They were the decision-making, executive and logistic agencies. The Libu department examined the status of the deceased state officials and determined the funeral rank. The Honglusi department carried out Libu’s decisions and realized them in the actual funerary activities. Finally, the Jiangzuojian department secured the supply of all the paraphernalia needed for a proper funeral. They formed a chain of administrative operation. Each of them had only part of the authority for a state funeral, thus maintaining a balance of power within the government.

Common Errors in the Interpretation of Changes in Funeral Practice

Tombs of the Tang era can be roughly divided into two phases by the mid eighth century. In the early phase, with the exceptions of the “hao-mu-wei-ling” tombs and the special decreed tombs, the tombs of the officials of the third rank and higher were single-chambered brick tombs equipped with long descending ramps, offered with about 300 counts of burial figurines. The tombs of the fourth and fifth rank officials were single-chambered square earthen pit tombs offered with less than 100 counts of figurines. Officials of the sixth to ninth rank were interred in square or rectangular single-chambered earthen pit tombs offered with about 40 figurines. Commoners were interred in single-chambered rectangular or L-shaped earthen pit tombs and only some of them were offered with a few ceramic figurines. In the late phase, officials of the third rank and higher were mainly buried in rectangular earthen pits. Some were even buried in the simpler L-shaped earthen pits or shaft pits. Few ceramic figurines were yielded from these tombs. That is to say, officials of the highest rank of the late phase were buried in the tombs used by commoners of the early phase, and ceramic figurine was no longer a significant component in tomb furnishing.

Data of the late Tang tombs, especially those of the terminal years of the regime, indicate that the rich tombs were mostly those of the eunuchs of the palace. An interpretation well accepted in the academic circle is that the eunuchs, being the close entourage of the emperor, gained increasing power in late Tang. They abused the funeral institution and thus destabilized the tomb ranking system. As a whole, the development of tombs of the early to late Tang exhibited a change in tomb structure and the degrading of the type, quantity and quality of tomb furnishing. This development is often interpreted as the consequences of the volatile political situation, the weakening of the emperor’s authority, and the decline of the economy. In first glance, this proposition seems to correspond with the historical background. However, closer investigation indicates that they lack convincing evidence, if only that these several phenomena were not coincident.

The chapter “Zang 葬” (Burial) of Tang Hui Yao 唐会要 (Political Institutions of the Tang) documents the funerary regulations of different times. Comparing them indicates that the past interpretations on the development of Tang tombs in archaeology are problematic. In fact, they contradict with the written documentation in significant ways. The mid-eighth to the mid-ninth century witnessed changes in the regulations of the material of the burial offerings for multiple times, from strictly made of plain pottery to allowing both pottery and wood, and finally only wood was mentioned in the documents. The number and size of the offerings, and the size of the tomb increased through time. The funerary regulations became increasingly relaxed. Each and every new round of regulations was a relaxation of the previous round. Intriguingly, when it writes about the new funerary regulations, there is often an echoing passage. In the third year of Yuanhe 元和 reign (808), it writes, “By this time, ostentatious funeral has become a habit of the people, and frequent imperial edicts could not rectify it.” Three years later, it maintains, “There are regulations for the funerals of government officials. However, discrepancy between the regulations and actual practice
grew by time.” In the first year of the Huichang 会昌 reign (841), “The institution of funeral has strict regulations on the treatment of the dead based on rank. Recently we found that they were rarely followed. The more the funerary rules were violated, the more resources of the society were drained by the ritual. As the imperial official enforcing the funeral regulations, I am responsible to rectify this behavior. Yet, my measures are met only with opposition and complaint.” These passages indicate that new regulations of funerary practice had limited effect. Imperial edicts aimed to restrain the funerary practice soon became pieces of paper. In the third year of the Changqing 长庆 reign (823), Li Deyu 李德裕 maintained, “It is human nature to violate the funerary regulations. Overhaul effort is undermined by indulgence and infringement.”

The contents and chronology of the textual documents, supported by a large number of epitaph stele of the time, suggest that funeral practice in the late Tang became increasingly ostentatious. The ostentatious funerary practice was first emerged during the first half of the eighth century. On the contrary, the archaeological observation based on the tombs suggests that the tombs became increasingly crude and simple during the second half of the Tang Dynasty. This observation leads to the argument that the volatile political condition and decline in economy had constrained the funeral practice of the late Tang. This common mistake is attributable to using the “laws” generated from the archaeological study of early Tang tombs to interpret the patterns seen on the late Tang tombs. It over-simplifies the social meaning as reflected by the tomb structure, construction material, size, and the quantity and quality of burial goods. These “laws” or criteria are appropriate for the study of status and ranking of early Tang. Using them to gauge the variation in the tomb structure and burial goods of the late Tang, however, is problematic.

In the archaeological study of the Tang, we have over-emphasized the Tang Dynasty as an undifferentiated whole. In fact, the textual document clearly indicates that significant changes in funerary practice occurred during the three hundred years of the Tang regime. In the pursuit of the real reasons of historical change, archaeology, knowledge focuses on the evolution of material culture, should deemphasize the periodization function of dynasty. The truth of the past is more likely to be revealed with such a strategy. To be more specific, if we do not indifferently apply the criteria of the length of the ramp, the number of compartments, skylights and niches, size and material of the gate, passageway, burial chamber, structure of the tomb, quality and quantity of the procession figurines to all phases of the Tang era, new insights on the funerary practice will be generated.

Change in the Focus of Funerary Practice

Mid-eighth century was the watershed years of the Tang Dynasty. After eight years of the rebellion of An Lushan 安禄山 and Shi Siming 史思明, the Tang ruling house achieved peace through compromise. As a result, its supreme authority in the political, military and economic fields was no longer the same. The legitimacy of the funeral institution was more susceptible to challenge. It does not mean that people had to completely negate the traditional ritual. Changes could have achieved by abandoning some practices under the general spirit of the ritual, but it was enough to alter the operation of the funerary institution.

A complete funeral cycle includes three components: mourning, burial and sacrificial service. The mourning of the living and the post-burial sacrificial service usually leave no material remains recoverable in archaeological excavation. What archaeologists see are mostly the material remains of the burial rite. Material remains from the burial rite, such as the tomb structure and the kind of burial offerings are sealed in the underground world, which are not visible to the public. Although they are displayed to the living world for short time during the burial rite, they are bound to be out of the sight of living people. The mourning and sacrificial services, on the other hand, are highly visible and therefore are extremely effective media of social display. Faced with a series of significant social changes after the rebellion, it was inevitable that the thought and behavior of the Tang people would have shifted. On the one hand, the burial itself lost much of its appeal. On the other hand, the displaying components of the funeral received unprecedented attention.

The above point can be illustrated by two events of the early and late Tang. In the second year of the Qianfeng 乾封 reign (667), Li Ji 李-reference retained, the tutor of the Crowned Prince, instructed his brother in his death bed, “Many people offered the dead with gold and jade. You should not do that. What I want in my funeral is to use a flat-bed carriage wrapped with cotton cloth to carry my coffin. Put only my casual dresses in the tomb. However, put an additional formal court dress. If there is life after death, I need it to meet the deceased emperor. In the third year of the Changqing 长庆 reign (823), Li Deyu 李德裕 maintained, “It is human nature to violate the funerary regulations. Overhaul effort is undermined by indulgence and infringement.”

The contents and chronology of the textual documents, supported by a large number of epitaph stele of the time, suggest that funeral practice in the late Tang became increasingly ostentatious. The ostentatious funerary practice was first emerged during the first half of the eighth century. On the contrary, the archaeological observation based on the tombs suggests that the tombs became increasingly crude and simple during the second half of the Tang Dynasty. This observation leads to the argument that the volatile political condition and decline in economy had constrained the funeral practice of the late Tang. This common mistake is attributable to using the “laws” generated from the archaeological study of early Tang tombs to interpret the patterns seen on the late Tang tombs. It over-simplifies the social meaning as reflected by the tomb structure, construction material, size, and the quantity and quality of burial goods. These “laws” or criteria are appropriate for the study of status and ranking of early Tang. Using them to gauge the variation in the tomb structure and burial goods of the late Tang, however, is problematic.

In the archaeological study of the Tang, we have over-emphasized the Tang Dynasty as an undifferentiated whole. In fact, the textual document clearly indicates that significant changes in funerary practice occurred during the three hundred years of the Tang regime. In the pursuit of the real reasons of historical change, archaeology, knowledge focuses on the evolution of material culture, should deemphasize the periodization function of dynasty. The truth of the past is more likely to be revealed with such a strategy. To be more specific, if we do not indifferently apply the criteria of the length of the ramp, the number of compartments, skylights and niches, size and material of the gate, passageway, burial chamber, structure of the tomb, quality and quantity of the procession figurines to all phases of the Tang era, new insights on the funerary practice will be generated.

Change in the Focus of Funerary Practice

Mid-eighth century was the watershed years of the Tang Dynasty. After eight years of the rebellion of An Lushan 安禄山 and Shi Siming 史思明, the Tang ruling house achieved peace through compromise. As a result, its supreme authority in the political, military and economic fields was no longer the same. The legitimacy of the funeral institution was more susceptible to challenge. It does not mean that people had to completely negate the traditional ritual. Changes could have achieved by abandoning some practices under the general spirit of the ritual, but it was enough to alter the operation of the funerary institution.

A complete funeral cycle includes three components: mourning, burial and sacrificial service. The mourning of the living and the post-burial sacrificial service usually leave no material remains recoverable in archaeological excavation. What archaeologists see are mostly the material remains of the burial rite. Material remains from the burial rite, such as the tomb structure and the kind of burial offerings are sealed in the underground world, which are not visible to the public. Although they are displayed to the living world for short time during the burial rite, they are bound to be out of the sight of living people. The mourning and sacrificial services, on the other hand, are highly visible and therefore are extremely effective media of social display. Faced with a series of significant social changes after the rebellion, it was inevitable that the thought and behavior of the Tang people would have shifted. On the one hand, the burial itself lost much of its appeal. On the other hand, the displaying components of the funeral received unprecedented attention.

The above point can be illustrated by two events of the early and late Tang. In the second year of the Qianfeng 乾封 reign (667), Li Ji 李-reference retained, the tutor of the Crowned Prince, instructed his brother in his death bed, “Many people offered the dead with gold and jade. You should not do that. What I want in my funeral is to use a flat-bed carriage wrapped with cotton cloth to carry my coffin. Put only my casual dresses in the tomb. However, put an additional formal court dress. If there is life after death, I need it to meet the deceased emperor.
As long as burial goods are concerned, offer me no more than five or six horse figurines. Use silk for the canopy of the underworld tent and white gauze for its sides. Place ten wooden human figurines in the tent as following the ancient rite of offering straw figurines to the dead.” In the sixth year of the Xiantong 咸通 reign (865), Wei Chou 魏俦, the deputy commander of the Right Wing Royal Guards at the North Garrison in Luoyang 洛阳, gave his final instructions, “Do not think it is an honor to be ostentatious and give me sumptuous sacrificial rites.” The death wishes of both individuals were simple funeral; however, their words convey the message that there was a shift in the focus of the funerary practice from the material interred in the tomb during the early Tang to the sacrificial activities during the late Tang.

When the ritual loses its restraining capacity, even though one wants to follow the core values of the funerary institution, new choices emerge in the expression. The reduction in tomb size, the simplification in tomb structure, and the decrease in burial goods of the late Tang were not necessarily pertained to the employment of a more down-to-earth funerary practice. Indeed, it was a shift to overt display to show off the power and moral authority of filial piety of the surviving family members.

The underground burial is partitioned into two areas: burial chamber and ramp leading to the chamber. The area outside of the gate had to be refilled with earth. The area inside was a different world. The symbolism of these two areas was completely different. Many of the excavated ramps were decorated with murals, indicating that this area was being displayed before the refill or during the sacrificial ritual, albeit the time could have been brief. However, the funeral practitioners of the late Tang realized that sumptuous mourning and sacrificial ceremonies under the sun could achieve more powerful displaying effect. Some of the themes used to be expressed in the media of mural and figurine were relocated outside of the tomb for overt display.

The various structural components of ramp, compartment, skylight, niche, gate, passageway and chamber show variation directly proportional to the ranks of the deceased. However, many of these differences were not intentional and were not directly related to rank. When the focus of funerary practice shifted to the above ground context, changes in the ramp and niche occurred. Figurines were one of the most important classes of offerings in early Tang. The founding of the Tang was based on military success. The strong sense of milita-

rism of figurine procession in the burial was appropriate to symbolize the status of the dead when living. After a long period of peace that stabilized the society, the superior status of military group was gradually overtook by the civilian officials and eunuchs. People started to lose interest in using figurine procession, thus contributed to its eventual disappearance from the funeral ritual. Consequently, long ramp and niche were no longer needed. Therefore the change in burial goods was synchronized with the change in tomb structure.

As more attention was put on the displaying components of mourning and sacrificial activities, tomb structure and burial goods offered more choices because they had more freedom in form and size. The core of the funerary activities is not the deceased, but is a reflection of the ideology and behavior of the living. Using the occasion of death to showcase the intention of the living has more direct social effect. Perhaps some Tang people would have thought that rather to bury the “ritual” in the underground, why not show it to the passer-by? Under the influence of this perception, the funerary practice of the Tang underwent a revolution that changed the funeral institution and custom. This was the real reason for the change in tomb structure and decrease in burial goods during the late Tang. However, this change should not be mistaken as the restraining of funeral practice.

New Elements in the Late Tang Tombs

We should not overlook the new elements found in the archaeology of the late Tang tombs. They were one of the important reasons for the eventual completion of this change. Late Tang witnessed the widespread of ceramic ware, the development of silk industry, and the increase in paper products. These various aspects of the development of economy and technology enriched the material culture. Old burial goods were gradually substituted with new ones.

The historical document indicates that wood burial goods were widespread in the late Tang. The stylistic development of figurines exhibit an evolution that the serious but stiff procession figurines were gradually replaced by the relaxed and lively figurines during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong in the first half of the eighth century. The archaeology of this period yielded ceramic chest figurines that have only the head and torso when unearthed. It is very likely that the lower part of the body was made of wood and the figurines were dressed in silk, which had completely decomposed when
unearthed. This is not a pure speculation that in extremely arid environment at Turfan in Xinjiang 新疆, the tomb of Asitana 阿斯塔那 yielded wood figurines dressed in colorful textile. In the extreme humid environment of South China, several Tang tombs yielded figurines made of wood. They complement the historical document that at least in some regions ceramic figurines were replaced by wood figurines. In fact, the written funeral regulations delineated the life-like horse figurines and human figurines dressed in silk were widely used in the funeral of late Tang. The written regulations also documented the permission of using wooden burial goods. Clues of wood figurines were also found in the Tang tombs in North China. In a tomb of the Kaiyuan 开元 to Tianbao 天宝 reigns (713–756) at Xingyuan 杏园, Yansi 偃师, Henan 河南, pottery and iron zodiac figurines were found. In the tombs of the middle and late Tang, sets of twelve small niches were found evenly distributed on the walls of the burial chambers. No artifact remains were seen in the niches. It is thus very likely that wood zodiac figurines were placed in these niches.

In addition to wood products, the burial goods might have included paper products. Several documents mention the use of paper currency. They were very likely symbols specifically made to offer to the dead. Although the documents do not mention whether the paper currency was placed in the tomb, we understand that paper currency became widespread in the late Tang funerary ritual. Moreover, there were other paper offerings. The Asitana tombs at Turfan yielded a paper coffin.

The type, quantity, material, and treatment method of burial goods of the late Tang are clearly different from that of the early Tang. The combination of burial goods lacks obvious pattern. Rank sensitive artifacts and sumptuous burial goods are rare. This is not the result of looting because many of these tombs have never been disturbed. Instead, this is indicative of a significant change in the perception of mortuary symbolism during the late Tang. More attention was placed on the pre-burial activities outside of the tomb. The offerings were either burned or saved, but were never disposed in the tomb. As a result, the late Tang tombs revealed by archaeology give us a frugal feeling. The perception and media of expression in funeral had changed; we should not use the same criteria for the study of the status and rank of the deceased of the early and late Tang. The tombs of these two phases are not comparable.

Conclusions

The perception of funeral and ritual institution of the Tang era possessed the characteristics of idealistic, flexibility and practicality. They were differentially expressed in three turning points in the Tang tombs. During the founding years of the dynasty, the tombs of the high elite and ranking officials inherited the tradition of the North Dynasties of using long descending ramp embellished with niches on the wall. The burial goods were dominated by the procession figurines of military style. They fulfilled the need of the society and the value preference of the people. During the reign of Emperor Zhongzong, the restoration movement of the Tang royal house contributed to the appearance of several super ostentatious tombs. They were the by-products of the battle for power. Funeral became a political tool that changed the formal characteristics of ritual. The turmoil of the military rebellion of An Lushan and Shi Siming did not destroy the perception of funeral practice and the ritual institution; however, it led to the challenge against the actual practice of funerary activities and its legitimacy. Changes in the method of operation and media of expression thus followed. The development of funerary practice during the mid-eighth century of the late Tang era was a turning point of the funerary practice in imperial China. The change that had long-lasting impact was the elevation of the mourning and sacrificial ceremonies in the expense of burial ceremony. From then on, the tombs, the material remains of burial ritual, became increasingly restrained.

Notes: The original paper, published in Kaogu Xuebao考古学报 (Acta Archaeologica Sinica) 2006.1: 59–82 with two tables, is written by Qi Dongfang 齐东方. This summary is prepared by the author himself and English-translated by Lee Yun-kuen 李润权.