



Article

The Last Entrustment: Funeral Concepts and Arrangements of for the Afterlife in the Tang Dynasty

Guodong Meng

College of Language and Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, China; mgd8311@126.com

Abstract: Arrangements for the afterlife were important matters to the Tang 唐 (618–907) people. The newly unearthed epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty contain a large number of dialogues and words of the deceased before their death, as well as their instructions concerning the arrangements for funerals and the inheritance of family traditions. These instructions not only reflect Tang funeral concepts and the importance of arrangements for the afterlife, but they also allow us to perceive the characters and personalities of the deceased, which are valuable new materials for the study of ancient Chinese biographical literature.

Keywords: words of the deceased before death; funeral concepts; epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty; biographical literature

1. Because It Is Widely Believed That There Is an Afterlife, the Vast Majority of the Tang People Often Arrange Their Affairs Ahead of Time

As the life course came to an end, the arrangement of the afterlife had increasingly become the focus of the Tang people. Documents related to these points are not only new materials for the study of Tang biographies, but they also illuminate our understanding of subsequent matters in that era.

Unearthed epitaphs show that postmortem arrangements are mainly instructed in the form of last words or wills. The earliest example of leaving last words can be traced back to pre-Qin time. Kozo Kawai argues that

濒死者留给尚存者的话，即所谓遗言，先秦已有之……它们都是即将辞世者向生者的嘱咐，不外乎葬礼的方式、死后的处置一类的话……说到底，它还是自己一息尚存时对身后事的展望。

The words left by the dying for the living, or the so-called “last words”, already existed prior to the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE). These are words of advice addressed to the living by the deceased-to-be, inclusively represented as words pertaining to the forms of funeral ceremony, manners of final disposition, etc. In the final analysis, it is a vision about the arrangement of the afterlife left at the final breath by the dying. (Kozo Kawai 1999).

Last will and testament, in the contemporary world, derive from “last words”, and there is no doubt that the arrangement of the afterlife is a topic that has been given extensive attention throughout history until today.

Examining extant texts, it is worth noticing that the majority of the final instructions focus on frugal funerals (薄葬).¹ Other afterlife arrangements are either not mentioned or have been edited and deleted, which hinders our interpretation of the original will of the deceased. The last words in the newly unearthed epitaphs are not only closer to the original minds of the Tang people but also better reflect the diversity of their final instructions. It should be noted that the appearance of last words is intricately linked to the Tang people’s understanding of death and the concept of funerals at that time. Therefore, this paper investigates the popular concept of the funeral in Tang society based on the newly unearthed epitaphs.



Citation: Meng, Guodong. 2023. The Last Entrustment: Funeral Concepts and Arrangements of for the Afterlife in the Tang Dynasty. *Literature* 3: 376–384. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature3030025>

Academic Editors: Jianjun He and Jerome F. Bump

Received: 11 July 2023

Revised: 7 August 2023

Accepted: 14 September 2023

Published: 19 September 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Funerals have always been an important family matter in Confucian society, including Tang China. The newly unearthed epitaph of Pei Yourang 裴友让 (d.761) records that he had only four daughters and never had any son. His relatives feared that he had no heir, while his daughters were more concerned about his funeral. As inscribed on Pei Yourang's epitaph, one of the daughters told the others, "I was not blessed by heaven and lost my father early. Moreover, I do not have a brother who could complete my father's funeral?" (尝谓人曰: 某以不天, 早无恃怙, 且绝兄弟, 丧事谁终) She vowed to say: "Although my ability is limited, I want to complete this matter with determination". (顾我眇身, 生死克志) (G. Wu 2005) Despite countless challenges, she eventually brought her father's coffin to Luoyang and buried him there.

The importance of funerals to the Tang people can also be deduced from the abundance of similar records on the newly unearthed epitaphs. The newly unearthed Tang epitaphs show us the issues that the dying were concerned about and their wishes for a frugal funeral, which remain the most common topic in extant documents. At the same time, other lesser or even unmentioned topics in extant texts are found in epitaphs, which include funeral arrangements, the writing of epitaphs, and admonitions for the descendants. I will discuss these in detail below.

2. Deathbed Instructions for a Frugal Funeral

When it comes to the Tang funeral culture, the first thing that comes to people's mind is the prevalence of elaborate or even lavish funerals. Although there were precedents of frugal burials practiced by senior Tang officials and nobles, and the Tang imperial court had ordered several times to prohibit lavish funerals, only a small number of people followed it. The fever of elaborate funerals grew in intensity, and even the imperial clan was no exception to it. As seen in the *Duyang zabian* (杜阳杂编), the funeral of Princess Tongchang 同昌公主 (849–870), daughter of Emperor Yizong 懿宗 (r.859–873) of Tang, was exceedingly lavish: "All the officials and eunuchs offered carriages and costumes with gold and jade decorations and burned them at the gate of Wei's family (百司与内官皆用金玉饰车舆服玩以焚于韦氏之门)". (Su 1985) The costumes and utensils buried were the same as those used by living people, and the mourners were large in number; there was also a grand ceremony held by female Taoist priests for the princess. As early as the eighth century, Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r.712–756) had already imposed a ban on lavish funerals in the second year of his reign. The decree reads, "Tombs and burial ground should be frugal. Utensils for burials shall not be decorated with silver or gold. Those who violate the said will be first flogged 100 strokes".²

Despite repeated court orders, lavish funerals were still popular among the rich and powerful. In addition to the prosperity of the Tang society, as Wu Liyu 吴丽娱 argues, "lavish funeral has become a fashion that people use to show off their wealth".³ Moreover, the tradition of "lavish burial manifesting filial piety (厚葬以明孝)" since the Qin and Han 汉 dynasties (202 BCE–220 CE) also played an important part in this funeral culture. In the Tang Dynasty, there was a magistrate named Lu Wenju 卢文举 (fl.8th century), who had neither brothers nor children and was buried in the wilderness after he died. Later, his distant but successful nephew held a funeral service for him. In Lu Wenju's epitaph, the author wrote

尚书卢公曰: 官既高、禄既多者, 虽落籍疏宗, 仁亦及之, 况吾总之叔乎? 遂命使赍金直数万, 越关山三千里, 至则纫衣裳, 作楣树, 辟泉局, 檣墓树。

Minister Lu said, "an official of high rank and rich salary will show benevolence to even a most distant relative, let alone my close uncle". So he sent subordinates with gold worth thousands to travel over mountains and passes to his uncle's place. Once Lu Wenju's corpse has arrived, the subordinates sewed clothes and quilts, made wood planks, opened the grave door, and planted the grave trees.⁴

The epitaph of the newly unearthed tomb of Jiang Jian 蒋建 (775–829) also reads, "the eldest son cried to the sky and said to his sister, 'The loving-kindness of our parents is as

broad as the sky and is impossible to repay. We have to do our utmost to hold an elaborate funeral for their love.” (G. Wu 2006, p. 391) In extreme cases, people even spent all their family property for the burial of their deceased.

As lavish funerals became a fashion, frugal funerals were marginalized. Therefore, those who wanted a frugal burial had to give deathbed instructions to their children. For example, the epitaph of Wei Xisun 韦希损 (657–719) records his last words to his son, Wei Puyu 韦璞玉 (fl.8th century): “I can’t bear to hold an extravagant and lavish funeral with valuable jade and jewelry in my grave. Remember this on the day of my death”.⁵ The epitaph of Lady Moqi 万俟 (723–791) also reads, “The lady admonished her son at the early stage of her illness that, ‘After my death, bury me with usual costume and ordinary coffin. If you bury me with pearls and jade, this is same as exposing me in the Central Plains.’”⁶ Frugal funerals, as a funeral concept that was contrary to the mainstream social culture, still won the recognition of some scholars, especially the families with such deathbed instructions. Filial children of the above-mentioned families sincerely followed their parents’ words; they only buried items such as paper, brushes, and collections of classic writings in the tomb instead of preparing a lavish funeral as most people did. Such deathbed instructions and burial practices suggest that there were people in the Tang who considered lavish funerals to be a purely wasteful decision that benefited neither the deceased nor the living. Lady Moqi’s words, “being exposed in the Central Plains”, further pointed out the risk of grave robbery resulting from lavish funerals.

In addition to the concern of later robbery, some Tang people advocated frugal funerals for their detached view of life and death. Xu Yutang’s 徐玉堂 (828–870) epitaph records that she said to her son on her deathbed that “Everyone will die in the end, why hate this ending?” She died after these words.⁷ Lady Cui 崔氏 (689–755) also said to her husband before she died that “death and life are the natural law, do not feel too sad about it...” She passed away before finishing the sentence.⁸

The above-mentioned women faced death calmly, taking it as an eternal truth similar to the cycle of day and night; therefore, they insisted on a frugal funeral and were even willing to “decay quickly (速朽)” to return to nature and the original simplicity sooner. Moreover, Yang Xun 杨训 (644–692), who believed that the gorgeous clothes and heavy coffin in a lavish funeral would stop him from “decaying quickly”, advocated “normal clothes, plain coffin and yellow soil for quick decay and return to the ground”.⁹

3. Refusal of a Joint Burial

The joint burial of husband and wife, a custom dating back to pre-Qin, was widely accepted by people during the Tang. As seen in Tang epitaphs, joint burial was often practiced by people of the time: “Joint burial is not an ancient ritual, it prevailed since the Zhou 周 Dynasty (1046 BC-771 BCE); people followed the ritual and passed it down to Tang”.¹⁰ The Tang people also believed that the cultural hero Lord Zhou 周公 began the practice of joint burial.¹¹ Others held the view that joint burial dated back to high antiquity and was followed by ancient people.¹² Therefore, it was generally accepted during the Tang that “joint burial is not an ancient ritual, yet we follow it since the Zhou Dynasty 虽合葬非古，而吾从于周”. (Zhou 1992, p. 1413) Because of the prevalence of joint burial of husband and wife in society, those who did not want to be buried together with their spouse for special reasons would make it clear in their deathbed instructions. Such special circumstances can be divided into two types.

The first was due to religious beliefs. The Tang Dynasty saw the flourishing of Buddhism. Many women turned to embrace Buddhism after they were widowed, for which they followed the Buddhist commandments and rituals for funerals. As seen in the epitaph of Song Nizi 宋尼子 (628–691), she refused to be buried with her husband due to her own Buddhist beliefs. Instead, she was buried at a location fifty paces (bu 步) away from her husband’s tomb, fulfilling her wish during her lifetime. (Zhou 1992, p. 840) Another example is Lady Yun 云氏 (714–777), the wife of a late official Li 李府君 (fl.8th century), who served as the magistrate of Zhenyuan County (真源县) in Bozhou (亳州). Because of her

Buddhist belief, she asked her son, Li Xiang 李珣 (fl.8th century), not to bury her with her husband, but to build a pagoda according to the Buddhist custom so that she could hear the sound of Buddhist chanting every day and night.¹³ Such requirements for separate burial were often declared on the deathbed, which reflects the important role of religious beliefs in the arrangements for the afterlife.

The second reason was out of respect for the deceased. Because of the widespread belief in the existence of the underworld, people in the Tang Dynasty held reverence for gods and spirits. Their epitaphs often included admonitions that gods and spirits should not be disturbed. For example, the epitaph of Zhao Wenxin 赵文信 (763–845) records that his wife, Lady Xin 辛氏 (d.840), died five years before him. Zhao once said, “Joint burial is not an ancient ritual, and it’s been years, the ghosts and gods enjoy tranquility, we shouldn’t disturb them”.¹⁴ Therefore, his children did not bury him with his wife after his died. The epitaph of Cui Da 崔达 (759–836), the wife of Liu Tanjing 刘谈经 (fl.8th century), also reads, “the gods love quietness, and joint burial is not the way of ancient people”.¹⁵ After her death, she was buried north of her husband’s grave in a separate tomb.

In the above examples, Zhao Wenxin and Cui Da both adopted a separate tomb to avoid disturbing the spirits of the deceased because of their reverence for gods and spirits. The Tang people also argued that if the spirits knew, they would recognize each other and meet in the underworld, so there is no need to be buried together. For instance, the epitaph of Zhang Roufan 张柔范 (658–726), the wife of Zhao Yuebao 赵越宝 (fl.7th century), records Zhang’s final words to her son, “If the deceased know, separate tombs will not stop them from meeting; if they do not know, burying together will not help any! After my death, do not bury me with the ancestors”.¹⁶ Wang Wan 王婉 (626–696), the stepmother of Wei Chengqing 韦承庆 (640–706), also believed that “if the spirits know, any ways will work. Knowing or not knowing, what is the benefit of joint burial?”¹⁷ Furthermore, because that Wei Chengqing’s birth mother was not buried with her husband, Wang Wang told Wei Chengqing and others that she wanted to be buried separately in a proper location. This shows her willingness to follow the burial tradition that husband and wife are buried separately, as in the legendary Xia 夏 (2070?–1600 BCE), Shang 商 (1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou dynasties. The epitaph of Fan Anji 范安及 (673–740) also reflects his belief of honoring the deceased. Fan Anji did not want to be buried with his wife and told his sons that “joint burial is not the way of ancient times. Lavish funerals are not benevolent. Do not disturb the deceased or encourage those who died later to adopt the lavish way. Obey my will and it is filial piety”.¹⁸

4. Buried in the Ancestral Grave

The Tang people insisted on returning to their ancestral land after death. Most of those who died elsewhere had last words wishing to be buried back in their hometowns. For example, Niu Pu 牛浦 (763–843) told his son that “I lead a frugal life, and I do not seek luxury in the afterlife. Simply remember to send me back to my hometown and hold the funeral there”.¹⁹ Another example was scholar Li Can 李粲 (d.769), who was held up in the south for long because of the An Shi Rebellion (755–763). Li Can’s epitaph records his homesickness and his suffering from the fear of not being able to be buried back in his hometown. He gave his eldest daughter a lot of money and said, “use this and bury me in the grave of my ancestors. I ask for only a coffin, and the rest is all yours”.²⁰ As seen in the examples above, the last words of Niu Pu concern sending his corpse back to his hometown, and Li Can was willing to spend a lot of money to be buried with his ancestors. Both examples demonstrate the importance of being buried in one’s hometown.

However, to be buried in one’s hometown was not an easy task. Not only was it costly, but it could also face difficulties and dangers. Those who do not have enough money would have to scrimp and save for the travel expenses; some even endeavored for several generations before fulfilling the task. The epitaph of Pei Yourang cited above describes the difficulties of returning home for burial in detail: “Western Shu (西蜀) and Eastern Zhou (东周) are thousands of miles apart from each other, separated by mountains and

rivers, boats and carriages can hardly arrive, and only a few could travel through”.²¹ For childless families or those with young sons, the journey back home had to be completed by the women of the family. With the help of many people and overcoming many challenges, the daughter of Pei Yourang eventually brought her father’s coffin back to Luoyang 洛阳. (G. Wu 2005, p. 82) Without the support of family and friends, it would be even more difficult for a woman to take the coffin of her relative back to her hometown for a burial. According to the epitaph of Wen Yuan 温瑗 (798–846), her husband Wei Xun 韦瑱 (793–841) often worried that his parents’ coffins had not been moved back and buried together, and Wei himself unfortunately died on his post as a prefectural governor in Mingzhou 明州. We read in Wen Yuan’s epitaph that in order to fulfill her husband’s last wishes, Wen Yuan

自明州提孤护柩。号叫而归。至苏常间，念亡夫迁奉之一言。大江之中，横波拄天。孑然一身，更无近亲。截流忘生，下道累日。启中丞之先世三棺并归。

Escorted his coffin from Mingzhou and cried along the way. On the way from Suzhou to Changzhou, she remembered the words of her late husband on relocating his parents’ coffin. When she traveled on the Yangtze River, with billowy waves, she was all alone and there were no close relatives accompanying her. She traveled along the river, disregarding her own safety, and drifted on the water for many days. In the end, she opened the grave of Wei’s parents and buried him together with them. (G. Wu 2005, p. 173)

The hardships of her journey, during which she was near death for a long time, make her story even more touching. It is thus clear how difficult it was for the widowed wife and the young children to travel long distances in order to bring the coffin of the deceased family member back home.

Even so, people in the Tang Dynasty still regarded a burial back in their hometown as extremely important. This is often recorded in their final instructions. For instance, the epitaph of Guo Yi 郭仪 (750?–798) records his regret that his siblings were not able to be buried in their ancestral grave: “My brother died and was buried in Yan Zhao (燕赵); my sister’s tomb was in elsewhere... These are my regrets”.²² Cui Bei’s 崔备 (747–816) epitaph also reports that he was seriously ill and was afraid that he would not be cured; he told his sons and nephews the following: “My grandmother was not returned to the ancestral grave; my parents were buried south of the Yangtze River. I have not yet fulfilled my will; now I am about to die, and I will have grief in my heart in the nether world”.²³ Without fulfilling his wish of bringing the coffins of his grandmother and his parents back to their hometown, Cui Bei eventually died with regret. On his deathbed, he again instructed his son about the duty of fulfilling his long-cherished wish. To some people, once a family member is reburied, their lifelong mission seems to be completed; this demonstrates, therefore, how important burying back in their hometown was in their minds. The epitaph of Zheng Cirou 郑慈柔 (d.754), the wife of Li Quanli 李全礼 (fl.8th century), records her words after bringing the coffin of her husband back to Yanshi (偃师): “My lifelong task is now fulfilled (我生事毕矣)”. (G. Wu 2005, p. 69) She then became very ill.²⁴ Wang Xiuben 王修本 (fl.9th century), who spent his life savings seeking a burial back at home, once spoke to his wife that she should sell the house and return him to Luo Yang; she then should relocate the seven tombs of Wang’s grandfather, father and other relatives. In the end, his wife Wei found “the clan of her husband became homeless” because of Wang Xiuben’s planning for a burial back in their hometown.²⁵

5. Entrusted Writers of Epitaph

Ancient Chinese epitaphs play a unique role in recording the life of the deceased as well as eulogizing their virtue. The Tang people thus paid special attention to the burial and writing of epitaphs. Writers of epitaphs had to be familiar with the lives of the deceased and to properly convey the families’ merits. It often took a lot of effort to find the right person. Therefore, in the Tang Dynasty, more and more epitaphs were written by relatives or self-written by the deceased before death; some even chose the writer of their epitaphs

personally on their deathbeds. One example is the epitaph of Kou Zhang 寇章 (775–849), in which Kou Zhang told his nephew two days before his death that he wished Cui Geng 崔耿 (fl.9th century) to write his epitaph.²⁶ The epitaph of Kong Shu 孔纾 (d.874) also records that on his deathbed, he asked for his friend Zheng Xiufan 郑休范 (fl.9th century) to write his epitaph. (Zhou 1992, p. 2467).

In another case, the scholar Cui Lin 崔璘 (820–875) managed to leave a final word on the writer of his epitaph right before he passed away. He told his son Cui Shu 崔铄 (fl.9th century) that “the gentleman Cui by the Qing He (清河崔氏) will certainly illustrate the virtues of my ancestors. No one else except the gentleman Cui to write my epitaph”.²⁷ The reason why Cui Lin wanted Cui Yue 崔阅 (fl.9th century) to write his epitaph was not only that Cui Yue was a colleague of Cui Shu and was familiar with Cui Lin’s family, but also that Cui Lin wanted Cui Yue’s literary talent to glorify the virtues of his ancestors. Zhang Jiyou 张季友 (761?–814?), who passed the jinshi (进士) examination together with Han Yu 韩愈 (768–824), made a more exaggerated statement than that of Cui Lin. In the epitaph written by Han Yu for Zhang Jiyou, Han Yu not only mentioned how Zhang, on his deathbed, appointed Han to author the epitaph but also depicted Zhang’s final instruction vividly. According to Han Yu, Zhang Tu 张涂 (fl.9th century), Zhang Jiyou’s nephew, told Han Yu that “when my uncle was dying and could barely speak, he opened his eyes wide and said, ‘I cannot leave without saying goodbye to the gentleman Han. I cannot be buried without the epitaph written by the gentleman Han. Write this down and send my regards’”.²⁸ Zhang Jiyou requested this because Zhang Tu and Han Yu became jinshi (进士) in the same year and knew each other very well. Zhang Tu perhaps also wanted his story to be passed down to later ages as his epitaph was written by the famous Han Yu.

Similar to selecting the epitaph writer, some also gave last decision on the candidate of funeral host. For example, Wei Shi 韦识 (799–853), once the clerk of Chenggu County (城固县), appointed Wei Zhao 韦沼 (fl.9th century), his nephew, to host his funeral.²⁹ However, after he died, there were a lot of troubles that prevented this: first, Wei Zhao had no time to leave his job and return home; then, the family’s money was stolen by Wei Shi’s maid. Finally, Wei Feng 韦讽 (fl.9th century), his elder brother, offered 100 taels of silver for Wei Zhao to come home and host the funeral for Wei Shi. Wei Shi’s son was only seven when he died; moreover, his son was born blind. The wife of Wei Shi has died a long time ago. These left Wei Shi without anyone else to manage his funeral, which was extremely embarrassing in the Tang Dynasty, when the entire society viewed funerals with great importance. Therefore, until the last moment of his life, Wei Shi was still worried about the choice of the host of his funeral.

6. Admonishing Descendants

In addition to funeral-related matters, arrangements for children’s lives and the transmission of family tradition were also issues of great concern to people in the Tang Dynasty, which are therefore often found in their last words.

The mother–child relationship is an eternal topic worldwide and is often covered in Tang biographies. Many Tang parents hid their illnesses from their children out of concern for them. For example, in the epitaph of Qu Liqing 曲丽卿 (801–859), it is recorded that she was bedridden with the cold and hot symptoms for more than two months, becoming increasingly ill. Qu Liqing constantly warned her family not to tell her daughter so that she would not have to endure the long journey to her mother’s sickbed.³⁰ As a result, the daughter, who was married in a distant place, never knew that her mother was mortally ill. Some were so worried about their young and sick children that even at the end of their own lives, they revealed their reluctance to leave in their last words. In the epitaph of Li Hu 李鹄 (834–859), Li Hu said to her husband on her deathbed, “I will die soon, do not bother worrying about the deceased. When my lonely tomb is covered with weeds, you may marry a virtuous lady so that the children will not be left no one to depend on”.³¹ Her words not only reflect her open-minded attitude towards life and marriage but also express her concern for her children. Widowed wives and vulnerable daughters are often given

special attention in last words. Li Ye 李焯 (826–860), the son of Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–850), admonished his two sons on his deathbed as follows: “Treat your widowed sister-in-law and her orphaned daughter generously with the rest of the assets, for there is no match in your generation”.³²

In the Tang Dynasty, when eminent clans and hereditary families were still in power, great attention was paid to the sustentation of the clan and the continuation of family tradition. This is certainly reflected in the family instructions (家训) and the newly unearthed epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty. For example, Zhou Tu 周徒 (813–870) admonished his son “not to waste the achievements of your ancestors” before he died. (Zhou and Zhao 2001, p. 1088) Many, even when they were on their deathbed, did not forget to admonish their children and grandchildren not to disgrace the family tradition so that the family would remain prosperous. Before his death, Chu Dechong 储德充 (874–920) asked his son to continue the fine family tradition: “You shall remember to be respectful with rituals, be diligent and do not degrade the family tradition”.³³ In addition to this, the epitaph of Long Tingwei 龙庭玮 (684–742) reports that in the last moments of his life, he was earnestly admonishing his son not to act in bad faith, not to deviate from the right way, not to flatter, and not to be arrogant.³⁴ Chen Shangjun 陈尚君 points out that the admonishments to children and grandchildren in epitaphs overlap with family instructions (Chen 2012). This may result from the fact the protagonists of the biographies know the difficulties in sustaining a great family, as commented on in the *Instructions of Liu Family* (*Liushi xuxun* 柳氏叙训), “to establish a great family is as hard as ascending to heaven; overturning it is as easy as setting fire to a feather”.³⁵ The deathbed wishes of the Tang people were indeed efforts made by the eminent clans to sustain their tradition.

7. Conclusions

In his discussion on deathbed instructions, Sima Guang 司马光 (1019–1086) commented that deathbed instructions, or wills, must convey the important things to the descendants; there is no time to attend to trivial and insignificant matters.³⁶ Leaving wills was already a common practice in the Tang Dynasty. Many samples of wills have been unearthed in Dunhuang 敦煌 and Turpan 吐鲁番. The last words in the newly unearthed epitaphs of the Tang Dynasty are quite different from both the deathbed instructions in extant documents. Modern wills focus on the distribution of property. Even the wills in the newly excavated documents in Dunhuang and Turpan are different from the epitaphs, as the former also focus on the distribution of property. Most of the materials in the epitaphs are the words spoken by the deceased on their deathbed; therefore, they were more concerned about funeral arrangements. There are two reasons for this: first, issues like the distribution of property were already explained in writing in a form similar to the “sample text” unearthed in Dunhuang, so they focused on the matters of immediate concern while ignoring other matters; second, many deathbed instructions found in epitaphs were from the mouths of women³⁷, who in most cases had no right to dispose of the family’s property. Therefore, when most women were approaching their death, they were most concerned about the creation of their private space after death. Some deathbed instructions also involve the continuation of the family and the care for their children, all of which are more intimate remarks. This is in line with Yu Dafu’s 郁达夫 (1896–1945) argument that good biographies should highlight the private life of the protagonist. (Yu 1991, vol. 6, p. 283). Qian Nanxiu 钱南秀 (1947–2022) once distinguished the mode of writing female biographies in ancient times into two types: the “principled women” (*lienü* 列女) and the “virtuous beauties” (*xianyuan* 贤媛). (Qian 2022). Because of the inherent eulogizing function of epitaphs, female epitaphs were written in a way that highlighted the “virtuous” side of the protagonist.

The prevalence of deathbed instructions and last words naturally had a subtle effect on the writers of brief biographies or epitaphs for the deceased, which is the reason that the last words of the deceased were often recorded in the epitaphs. The form in which the writers of epitaphs recorded the dying words of the deceased also helps shape the image

of the figure and display the personality of the deceased. This contributed significantly to the development of ancient Chinese biographical literature.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Throughout the Han Dynasty, especially in the Eastern Han, many scholars required frugal funerals in their last words. For example, Houhan Shu 后汉书 records that Cui Yuan 崔瑗 (77–142) asked his son Cui Shi 崔寔 (103?–170?) to bury him where he had died, and it was unnecessary to bury him in his hometown, or even to prepare any sacrificial offerings. Yao Chong 姚崇 (650–721), a highly renowned minister of the Tang Dynasty, not only described famous people who advocated simple funerals in the history but also repeatedly told his descendants to bury him in such a way. See Fan (1965, p. 1724). See also Liu (1975, p. 3027).
- 2 坟墓莹域，务遵简俭；凡诸送终之具，并不得以金银为饰。如有违者，先决杖一百。See Liu (1975, p. 182).
- 3 “厚葬之风愈来愈成为一种民众共同追求的时尚”。See L. Wu (2013, p. 479).
- 4 See Wu (2006, p. 372). The family members of the deceased often prepare a shroud for the deceased in advance, choose a cemetery, and plant trees such as pine and cypress next to the tomb to identify the cemetery.
- 5 以宝玉崇窆，浮侈蒿目，我不忍为也。不讳之日，尔其志之。See Zhou (1992, p. 1219).
- 6 夫人遭疾之初而诫子曰：吾歿已后，可殓以时服，棺以凡材。然珠玉而瘞之，是暴骸于中原也。See Wu (2005, p. 96).
- 7 人谁无往，此往岂复恨耶？言竟奄然。See Zhou (1992, p. 2443).
- 8 死生天地之理，物之自然，奚可甚哀……言未及终，溘然薪尽。See Zhou and Zhao (2001, p. 663).
- 9 敛以时服，素棺黄壤，归其速朽。See Zhou (1992, p. 830).
- 10 合葬非古，行自周年，遵礼而循，流之唐日。See Zhou (1992, p. 506).
- 11 合葬非古，周公有之。See Zhou (1992, p. 962).
- 12 合葬非古，起自三王之前；死即同穴，还归六艺之始。See Zhou (1992, p. 245).
- 13 See Wu (2006, p. 260). There were also many records of women in the Tang Dynasty not being buried with their husbands because of their beliefs in Buddhism. See Yan (2003, pp. 467–92).
- 14 合葬非古也，况年代深远，鬼神好静，不须开发。See Zhou and Zhao (2001, p. 963).
- 15 神理好静，合葬非古道也。See Wu (2006, p. 361).
- 16 若逝者有知，虽异穴而奚妨；如逝者无知，纵合防而岂益！我歿之后，勿祔先莹。See Zhou (1992, p. 1347).
- 17 魂而有识，何往不通？知或无知，合之何益。See Zhou and Zhao (2001, p. 350).
- 18 合葬非古，厚葬不仁，先往者无扰其安，后亡者勿崇其侈，无违吾志，乃为孝也。See Zhou and Zhao (2001, pp. 574–75).
- 19 吾平生好俭，后莫求丰。但送吾归乡，称家为礼。See Wu (2005, p. 170).
- 20 葬我于先人之莹，一棺之外，尽以与汝。See Wu (2005, p. 76).
- 21 西蜀东周相去万里，中有连山迭嶂，重江峻湍，舟车才通，来往罕达。See Wu (2005, p. 82).
- 22 有弟之丧，寄在燕赵；有妹之墓，旅于江湖……是其遗恨。See Zhou (1992, p. 1902).
- 23 祖妣未祔于旧莹，先人旅殡于江左。我志未就，今则歿也，当衔痛于九泉。See Wu (2006, pp. 324–25).
- 24 According to Li Quanli's epitaph, which was written by Zheng Cirou, he was born in the official house of Yanshi County 偃师 and died in the private house of Beijing Li 北荆里 in Luhun County 陆浑. On November 24, 749, he was buried in Xili Village 西里, Shouyang District 首阳乡, Yanshi County. His elder son also died at the age of twenty.
- 25 鬻其第，将我归于洛师，启迁我祖父伯仲女兄弟凡七穴。See Zhou (1992, p. 2363).
- 26 尔将葬我，必乞崔耿文识我墓，我愿也。See Zhou (1992, p. 2274).
- 27 必能扬我祖宗之德行也，欲志吾之墓，无出于崔君。See Zhou (1992, p. 2475).
- 28 叔父且死，几于不能言矣，张目而言曰：“吾不可无告韩君别。藏而不得韩君记，犹不葬也。涂为书致吾意。”已而自署其末与封，敢告以请。See Liu and Yue (2010, p. 2082).
- 29 当属纆之辰，命其左右曰：必以书召沼主归计。See Wu (2005, p. 191).
- 30 吾女性和孝，必惊奔请视吾疾。吾疾不瘳，兼病吾女。由是寝疾累月，路遥莫闻。See Zhou (1992, p. 2376).
- 31 余命将尽于此。子必不得以往者滞念。孤坟宿草之后，则可以访婚淑德，勿使儿女辈久无所恃。See Zhou and Zhao (2001, p. 1018).
- 32 必以余贲厚于孀嫂孤女，尔辈无伦之。See Zhou (1992, p. 2391).
- 33 汝等恭敬于礼，夙夜匪懈，无坠素风。See Wu (2005, p. 237).
- 34 毋弃义以求利，毋违道以纵欲，毋谄佞以取誉，毋骄傲以速祸。See Wu (2005, p. 386).

- 35 成立之难如升天，覆坠之易如燎毛 See (Chen 2012, p. 164).
- 36 遗令者，世所谓遗嘱也，必择紧要言语付嘱子孙，至若纤细不要紧之事，则不暇矣。 See (Ma 1939, p. 21).
- 37 This is the biggest difference between epitaphs and other materials; although there are occasional deathbed instructions of women in historical materials passed down, they were from women of prominent status such as Empress Zhangsun 长孙皇后 (601–636) of Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r.626–649) in the Tang Dynasty.

References

- Chen, Shangjun 陈尚君. 2012. Tang Liu Pin *Liushi xuxun* yanjiu 唐柳玘《柳氏叙训》研究. *Guowen xuebao* 国文学报 51: 147–78.
- Fan, Ye 范晔. 1965. *Hou Han Shu* 后汉书. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Kawai, Kozo. 1999. *Zhongguo de zizhuan wenxue* 中国的自传文学. Beijing: Zhongyang Bianyi Chubanshe, p. 118.
- Liu, Xu 刘昫. 1975. *Jiu Tang Shu* 旧唐书. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
- Liu, Zhenlun 刘真伦, and Zhen Yue 岳珍. 2010. *Hanyu Wenji huijiao Jianzhu* 韩愈文集汇校笺注. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Ma, Yongqing 马永卿. 1939. *Yuancheng Yulujie* 元城语录解. Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan.
- Qian, Nanxiu. 2022. On Calligraphy by ‘Talented Females’ in the Chinese Cultural Circle of East Asia. *Journal of Jiangsu Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 48: 1–15.
- Su, E 苏鹗. 1985. *Duyang Zabian* 杜阳杂编. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, p. 27.
- Wu, Gang 吴钢, ed. 2005. *Quan Tangwen buyi Vol. 8* 全唐文补遗第八辑. Xi'an: Sanqin Chubanshe, p. 82.
- Wu, Gang 吴钢, ed. 2006. *Quan Tangwen buyi-Qiantang zhizhai xincang zhuanji* 全唐文补遗·千唐志斋新藏专辑. Xi'an: Sanqin Chubanshe.
- Wu, Liyu 吴丽娱. 2013. *Zhongji Zhidian: Zhonggu Sangzang Zhidu Yanjiu* 终极之典：中古丧葬制度研究. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Yan, Yaozhong 严耀中. 2003. Muzhi jiwen Zhong de Tangdai funüfojiao Xinyang 墓志祭文中的唐代妇女佛教信仰. In *Tangsong Nüxing Yu Shehui* 唐宋女性与社会. Edited by Xiaonan Deng 邓小南. Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu chubanshe, pp. 467–92.
- Yu, Dafu. 1991. *Yu Dafu Wenji* 郁达夫文集. Guangzhou: Huacheng Chubanshe.
- Zhou, Shaoliang 周绍良, ed. 1992. *Tangdai Muzhi Huibian* 唐代墓志汇编. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- Zhou, Shaoliang 周绍良, and Chao Zhao 赵超. 2001. *Tangdai Muzhi HuibianXuji* 唐代墓志汇编续集. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.