
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Research on Dunhuang Burial Practices: “One and Diverse”: Dunhuang Murals in Gansu as an Example

Mengling Bi

School of History and Culture, Hanshan Normal University, Guangdong 521021, China

Corresponding Author: Mengling Bi, **E-mail:** 874942093@qq.com

ABSTRACT

As an important junction on the ancient Silk Road in China, Dunhuang's historical remains reflect the social order, social life, and social values of that time. To study the funeral customs and concepts in ancient Dunhuang, this paper analyzed the funeral customs by examining Dunhuang murals and a substantial amount of literature searching related essays online. In particular, the text compares and relates the funeral practices of ethnic minorities and the Han Chinese. It is found that the evolution of funeral customs in Dunhuang reflects the characteristics of the concept of all-in-one pluralism, representing a unified approach to diversity and inclusion. In this region of Dunhuang, the funeral customs observed include not only those derived from Taoism and Confucianism, which were the dominant religious traditions among the Han Chinese, but also those derived from Zoroastrianism, which was practiced by the ethnic minorities, as well as from exotic forms of Buddhism. This means that different regions and religions constantly fused and were absorbed into one another in Dunhuang, eventually becoming part of the excellent traditional Chinese culture. This demonstrates that different cultures can exist within a given practice, not only without mutual exclusion but also by displaying different characteristics.

KEYWORDS

Dunhuang mural paintings, funeral customs, unity and diversity in funeral customs.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research

Through the summarization of Dunhuang mural paintings, a significant amount of folklore related to funeral customs has been discovered, with the majority concentrated in sutra paintings. During that time, craftsmen had never been to Central Asia and India, so some of the customs were imagined by reading the scriptures. It is not uncommon to see that some of the basis of imagination comes from real life, such as the local folklore of Dunhuang in ancient China. With the change of the central dynasty, the control of the Dunhuang area by the country fluctuated between periods of strength and weakness. From China's understanding of the world's twists and turns, we can observe that the more crises a dynasty faced, the more the focus shifted toward the Central Plains. Once a dynasty faces a crisis, it may neglect the management of border areas, such as Dunhuang. The city of Dunhuang was subject to the administration and cultural influences of various ethnic groups, which facilitated the study of the manifestations of diverse ethnic cultures, as exemplified by funeral practices.

1.2 Literature Review

Research on Dunhuang funeral customs is primarily concentrated in China through the work of Chinese historians such as Xie Shengbao, Gao Guofan, Duan Xiaoqiang, and others. In his book, Xie Shengbao analyzes the burial practices of the Dunhuang people in relation to those of some ethnic minorities and provides examples from Dunhuang murals. Gao Guofan analyzes the religions prevalent in Dunhuang and summarizes three different burial styles. Duan Xiaoqiang analyzes some of the burials in

Dunhuang documents and the funeral concepts they contain. Ding Shuangshuang and Wei Ziren have conducted research on the influence of funeral concepts on Buddhist practices in China. Huo Wei studied the history and funeral customs of the Sogdians, while Zulubia Usman and Nurbia Usman analyzed the funeral concepts of Zoroastrianism.

1.3 Problem Statement and Objectives

Chinese studies on Dunhuang funeral customs have focused mainly on mural paintings depicting mourning and funeral practices. However, only a few of the paintings are connected to the pluralistic and integrated history of the Hu–Han fusion. Therefore, this paper analyses the contents of murals, compares and connects the funeral concepts of the Central Plains Dynasty and Dunhuang, and explores the links between funeral concepts and the characteristics of cultural practices. The aim of this study was to analyze how different cultures and religions influenced burial practices in the Dunhuang region. This paper examines the coexistence of monism and plurality to analyze the funeral customs of Dunhuang. The approach adopted is a Han-centered perspective on the impact of various cultures and customs in China. This not only highlights inclusiveness as an important characteristic of Chinese civilization but also promotes interactions among Chinese ethnic groups and religions, forging a community of human destiny. Furthermore, it could be argued that this approach could facilitate the establishment of new international relations, especially with countries in Central Asia.

2. Impact of Dunhuang Historical Causes on Dunhuang Funeral Customs

The region of Dunhuang has been documented in Chinese historical records since ancient times. More than 4,000 years ago, the Yao and Shun fought against the San Miao. After defeating them, Yao and Shun sent them to Dunhuang to collect jade. At that time, the road to and from this area was called the "Jade Road." Later, the Sai, Xiongnu, Wusun, and Yuezhi peoples settled in the vicinity of Dunhuang. This was the initial influence of minorities on the customs of Dunhuang. Later, in 174 BC and 138 BC, Yuezhi and Wusun moved west. For the relationship between the Han Dynasty and the ethnic groups in the northwest; during the early Han Dynasty, the dynasty initially improved its relationship with ethnic minorities by implementing a policy of appeasement, which included marrying princesses. During the Han Dynasty, economic and cultural prosperity was achieved under the rule of Emperor Wen and Emperor Jing. This period spanned from 180 BC to 141 BC. In addition, its strength continued to increase. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, Wei Qing and Huo Qubing conquered the Xiongnu and occupied the Hexi Corridor. Subsequently, four counties were established in Hexi. Zhang Qian traveled to the Western Regions and opened up the Silk Road. Due to its geographical advantages, Dunhuang became an important junction on the Silk Road: the western region to the west, the Mongolian Plateau to the north, the Tibetan Plateau to the south, and the Han-centered central government to the east. At the same time, Dunhuang brought together cultures from various religions and regions. The Han Dynasty was a very important period in which the Han Chinese gradually influenced not only the politics but also the culture of Dunhuang, including their funeral practices.

To date, the prosperity of the Central Plains Dynasty has been closely linked to the development of the Silk Road and Dunhuang. As the saying goes, "When the dynasty is strong, the Silk Road is open." This implies that as the control of the Middle Kingdom over this region was strengthened, the Han culture exerted a greater influence on funeral practices. Conversely, if there was no time for Dunhuang, then nearby minorities and foreign religions had greater influence. In this way, the different cultures and religions influenced the place and its funeral practices.

Since 100 BC, Buddhism has been spreading eastward from North India to Xinjiang, converging on Dunhuang. Later, Buddhist caves appeared in Hebei and other regions, gradually spreading to Japan and beyond. From then on, Buddhism began to play a major role in how Dunhuang was buried. After the Anshi Rebellion in the Tang Dynasty, the decline of the Tang Dynasty became evident. The Tubo occupation of Dunhuang had a profound impact on the social and cultural development of Dunhuang, including Dunhuang Burial.

Until the Ming Dynasty, the Jiayuguan Valley served as the boundary of Hami. With the rise of the Maritime Silk Road and the gradual decline of the Land Silk Road, the significance of Dunhuang in this region has also diminished. By the 18th year of the Jiajing period, the Ming Dynasty closed the Jiayuguan Pass, leaving Dunhuang unprotected for 200 years.

During the Qing Dynasty, which marked the peak of the feudal monarchy in China, the exploration of frontiers was reignited. The Qianlong Emperor suppressed the Jungar rebellion and implemented a policy of "emigration" from Dunhuang. Unlike the Han Dynasty exile, the intention was to conquer Xinjiang and establish Dunhuang as a storage facility for the Qing Dynasty. Once again, Dunhuang prospered. As a result of emigration, people from all over the world converged on Dunhuang, and their languages and customs became more colloquial. Today, funeral customs in Dunhuang are a mixture of different ethnic groups and religions.

3. Funeral arrangements

3.1 Burial in Earth

Burial is also divided into coffin burial and tomb burial. This type of burial was the primary method of funeral arrangement in ancient China. First, the Book of Changes recorded coffin burial: "In ancient times, the funeral custom was to cover the body with thick firewood and bury it in the wilderness, without gathering earth for the grave, without setting up a marker, and without a fixed period of mourning. This custom was changed by the emperors of later generations, who introduced the use of coffins for the burial of the body" (Yang, 2022). In ancient China, during the Western Zhou period, wild burial evolved into coffin burial. The coffin burial system continued to develop. In the Book of Rites, it is also recorded that "The coffins of the vassals were constructed in three layers. The outermost coffin was eight inches thick, the middle coffin was six inches thick, and the close-fitting coffin was four inches thick. The coffin of an upper and lower official has two layers. The outermost coffin of the upper official was eight inches, and the inner coffin was six inches. The outermost coffin of the lower minister was six inches thick, while the inner coffin was four inches thick. The scholar's coffin has only one layer. The coffin of the vassals was made of vermilion green, and the nails were made of gold. The doctor's coffins were made of dark green, and the nails were made of ox bone" (Hu & Zhang, 2017). The coffin burial practices of that time reflected the Chinese concept of hierarchy, with variations in officials, classes, coffin sizes, materials, and patterns. Early on, ancient China developed a comprehensive coffin ritual characterized by a strong hierarchical structure.

In addition to Cave 332 of the Tang Dynasty, we can see that coffin burial was one of the funeral practices of the time. The Dunhuang documents also reveal that the western region of the slave society of the Tubo was influenced by the coffin burial practices of the Han Chinese. Before the Tang Dynasty, Dunhuang had stone coffins belonging to Turkic and Asta's paper coffins for poor individuals (Gao, 1989). Among them, the most popular were wooden coffins centered around the Han Chinese. Wooden coffins vary based on their materials, such as pine, cypress, elm, cedar, and others. Like the Mawangdui Han Tomb in Changsha, the outer coffin was made of cedar, while the inner coffin was made of rowan wood.

During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhist funerals incurred significant expenses, especially because of the tradition of extravagant burials. Consequently, there was a high prevalence of "Sheyi" in the Dunhuang region. Sheyi not only organized Buddhist events but also played a crucial role in assisting people with their funerals. Having each family contribute to the cost was a way of solving some of the difficulties people had with funeral expenses.



Figure 1 North wall of the main chamber of Cave 25 in Yulin Cave, Central Tang Dynasty

Second, we can see a large number of murals in Dunhuang depicting scenes of "old men entering tombs". For example, Cave 12 of the late Tang Dynasty shows a tomb built in advance on the right and on the left, an old man sitting on a cart pushed by his relatives. Several people stood behind him, holding items to see him off. Figure 1 shows a photograph of Tang Yulin Cave 25, which is located on the north wall of the main room, following the Tubo occupation of Dunhuang. The old man is holding hands with relatives to say goodbye. Outside, there are people kneeling on the ground, some covering their faces and crying. This old man dresses neatly in clothing that is in the style of the Tang Dynasty. He wears a transfrontal cap and a white robe with a round neck. He sat on the tomb bed. Inside the tomb, there is a hanging screen, a wooden bed, and a curved door. However, there are also people who are said to be completely without sadness; they are considered to have a "birthday picture." In any case, linked to the two pictures, it is not difficult to see that "the old man into the tomb" depicts the burial customs that were significant in Dunhuang at that time.

"The old man entering the grave" is also known as Shengkuang. This means that an old man enters a grave of his own accord when he is dying. The idea originated in India as a method for Buddhists to seek rebirth by chanting and practicing in their graves to avoid suffering from reincarnation. In India, it is the old man who throws himself into the river in a boat. This incident is recorded in The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions: "In the final stages of life, when death is imminent, the elderly individual

informs acquaintances and relatives, plays music, and arranges a practice session. He then takes his own life by drowning in a river" (Dong, 2012). Xuanzang also noted that he did not frequently observe this custom, mentioning that only one person in ten followed it. In any case, Buddhists in Dunhuang absorbed Indian folklore but rejected elements deemed incompatible (Tan, 2008). In China, there are similar practices in places such as Yunnan Province, where elderly individuals are sent to their graves at the age of 60 and left there until they are smothered or starved to death. These two customs of "abandoning the old man" were gradually phased out during the Song Dynasty. This also reflects the fact that in the process of Confucianization, the folklore of some ethnic groups gradually aligned with Confucian filial piety and traditional Han concepts of funeral and burial.

3.2 Burial in the Wild

Wild burial practices actually existed in our country at a very early stage. Sky burial is a practice in which, after a person's death, no coffin is used, and the corpse is left to be consumed by birds and animals. The Book of Changes records that in ancient times, the funeral custom involved covering the body with thick firewood and burying it in the wilderness without gathering earth for the grave, setting up a marker, or observing a fixed period of mourning. This custom was changed by the emperors of later generations, who introduced the use of coffins for the burial of the body. The wild burial was a transitional stage in the establishment of a well-established funeral rite in China. It was also applicable to the poor at that time and at a lower cost. The wild burials documented in Dunhuang also originated in the Western Zhou Dynasty. Wild burial, as a Dunhuang folk funeral practice, is a way for humans to return to nature and become a part of nature itself. The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions also recorded, "Funeral burial rituals have three stages. In the third stage, natural burial occurs, where the corpse is left in the forest to be consumed by animals" (Dong, 2012). After the Buddhist interpretation, the same custom will have a different meaning.

3.3 Cremation

In Dunhuang murals, pictures depicting "cremation" are prevalent. Apart from the gold coffin map of cremation in the main room on the north wall of the 61 caves of the Five Dynasties, there is also a cremation map in the Tang Dynasty 148 caves. Cremation in ancient China can be traced back to its origins. For instance, the Book of Changes documented, "In ancient times, the funeral practice involved covering the body with thick firewood and burying it in the wilderness, without collecting earth for the grave, without erecting a marker, and without observing a specific mourning period." This custom was changed by the emperors of later generations, who introduced the use of coffins for the burial of the body. Here, there is a combination of natural burial and cremation. It is also used for lower-class individuals.

Cremation is embraced and utilized in Buddhism according to Dunhuang folklore. It is a traditional burial ceremony in India. There are two meanings: one is to break free from the cycle of reincarnation and reach the Pure Land. The Records of The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions also state, "Funeral and burial practices include three rituals, one of them is cremation, where the corpse is burned with firewood" (Dong, 2012). The second is a taboo to avoid hustling away the unlucky. There are also three final destinations for their ashes. One is buried in the ground. The second option is to be buried in a tomb. The third rule is to be buried in a pagoda. The third type of burial is known as "cave burial." After cremation, the remainder may be placed in Yi Cave. Numerous caves in Dunhuang have been discovered that contain these tower burials.

4. Mode of Mourning

4.1 Monks Were Unable to Cry as They Beat Their Chests and Pulled Out Their Hair and Their Clothing Without Any Decoration

In the Dunhuang murals, people mourned around Sakyamuni after he had attained nirvana. First, there is the Nirvana Sutra Transformation in Cave 295 of the Sui Dynasty, which depicts the mourning of Sakya by the Moro tribe from the country of Kushinagara. One can see a man prostrating beside Shakyamuni, tightly grasping his hair. Behind him, there is also a person clutching his hair. Second, in Figure 2 of the Nirvana Sutra Changes in Cave 280 of the Sui Dynasty, we can also see a person bending down next to Shakyamuni, tightly grasping his hair. "Pulling out hair" was considered one of the ways of mourning during that time. At the same time, we can also see the monks around Sakyamuni's body. Their clothes are not adorned with ornaments. It is evident that they are in mourning, as they are not allowed to wear jewelry to express their feelings of grief. In Figure 2, we can also observe two people on the right, with their hands together, engaged in chanting. The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions state that monks do not cry when their parents die; instead, they recite scriptures to repay the favor.



Figure 2 Nirvana Sutra Variations in Sui Cave 280

The literature related to this mourning practice, as seen in *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, documented, “During funerals, individuals cried and mourned collectively, ripped their garments, pulled out their hair, and struck their foreheads and chests” (Dong, 2012). In the *Book of Rites*, it was also recorded that during the period of mourning for one's parents, it was customary to wear hats and clothes made of twine. Various restrictions were placed on the mourner, including the prohibition of drinking porridge three days following the funeral, washing one's hair until three months after the funeral, changing one's crown until thirteen months after the funeral, and resuming normal activities until the third year after the funeral. These restrictions demonstrate the mourner's love, reason, and will. It is evident whether the individual in question is truly filial, honors his brother, loves his brother, and is a chaste woman (Hu & Zhang, 2017). This shows that China has similar customs. This etiquette aligns with the traditional five rites, encompassing all mourning practices in accordance with Confucian etiquette. Outsiders also use this gesture as a standard to judge the ethics and morality of individuals.

4.2 Face Stabbing, Ear Cutting and Disembowelling



Figure 3 Cave 158 of the Tang Dynasty Nirvana Sutra Change Figure

The Dunhuang mural paintings on the north wall of Cave 158 depict the Tang Dynasty Nirvana Sutra Change. By examining the attire of the people in the painting, we can observe the leaders of the Tubo, Han Chinese, and Central Asian people, who are portrayed as having brown skin, dark eyes, and prominent noses. One of them can be seen with tears on his face, holding a dagger in his right hand, making a gesture as if cutting his face. Figure 3 is an enlargement of him. In fact, in addition to wailing and crying, there were also those who cut off their noses, ears, chests, and abdomens. This indicates that the kings of the various tribes mourned Sakyamuni in their most sorrowful way.

Obviously, this custom is not Han Chinese because the Han Chinese have a tradition of prohibiting self-harm, and such bloody scenes would not occur. According to the Records of The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions, "The corpses are burned, the mourning period is indefinite, their faces are cut, ears are severed, hair is shorn, clothes are torn, animals are slaughtered, and sacrifices are made to the ghosts" (Dong, 2012). In India, there is a custom known as "Visible," which is primarily associated with mourning and swearing. This practice is common among the populations of Central Asia, India, and the western regions. In the Dunhuang area, this painting dates back to the historical roots of the Middle Tang Dynasty, following the Anshi Rebellion in 786 AD. Tubo conquered the Hexi Corridor and ruled Dunhuang for up to seventy years. Tubo had a significant impact on Dunhuang's economy and culture. As a result, Tubo mourning customs continue to influence the Dunhuang area. Before the Middle Tang Dynasty, this tragic mourning practice had never appeared in paintings at Dunhuang under Han Chinese rule.

4.3 The Act of Paying Homage Involves the Act of Circling Coffin and Touching the Feet of the Deceased



Figure 4 Cave 428 of the Northern Zhou Dynasty

Several images depicting mourning can be found in the Dunhuang murals. For example, in Figure 4, Cave 428 of the Northern Zhou Dynasty, a squatting man can be seen on the right stroking the foot of a reclining man. Surrounded by a group of people expressing their condolences. In fact, Figure 5, "Nirvana Sutra painting in Cave 295 of the Sui Dynasty," and Figure 2, "Nirvana Sutra painting in Cave 280 of the Sui Dynasty," show similar behavior of saluting around the coffin. In the mural painting on the north wall of the main room of Cave 61 in the Five Dynasties, after Sakyamuni's nirvana, his coffin fell to the ground. People surrounded the coffin, some with palms together and others kneeling. This kind of mourning behavior is also known as the circumambulation of the coffin.

In the mural on the west slope of the roof of the Northern Zhou Cave Cave 299 in Figure 5, we can also see the parents touching their son's feet after his death in the lower left corner. Cave 299 of the Northern Zhou depicts a painting telling the story of the Buddha's Past Life, where he was originally born as the son of blind parents. After being mistakenly shot and killed by the king, at the Bodhisattva request, the king supported his earthly parents. They ended up hugging Bodhisattva's feet and head and weeping bitterly. Meanwhile, in the Sutra painting in Cave 29, as shown in Figure 5, a person on the right is also massaging the feet of the reclining figure. Thus, we can see that around the coffin, saluting represents the essence of Buddhist murals, while touching the feet to express condolences symbolizes Indian story murals.



Figure 5 Slope of the roof of Cave 299 during the Northern Zhou Dynasty

4.4 Painted Coffins and the Guard of Honor is in Front



Figure 6 The south wall of the main chamber of Cave 220 in the early Tang Dynasty

In ancient China, wealthy families typically adorn coffins with intricate designs. For example, on the coffins unearthed from the Mawangdui Tomb in the Changsha Kingdom during the Han Dynasty, there were depictions of the Immortal Mountain, the Azure Dragon, the White Tiger, the Vermilion Bird, and rich and auspicious patterns. Especially in the coffin of Xin Zhui's tomb, the depiction of the immortal mountain expresses the desire to reach the immortal realm on earth from the world. All these paintings express people's wishes for the afterlife. There are similar paintings in the Dunhuang murals. For example, in Cave 148 of the flourishing Tang Dynasty, there is a coffin with a red lacquer bottom. The coffin is adorned with a painting depicting a group of flowers resembling lotus flowers. Figure 6 shows that in the early Tang Dynasty caves in 220, on the south wall of the main chamber, there is a depiction of a child inside a lotus flower. Through these two murals, we can see that the lotus symbol in Buddhism holds profound significance. The lotus flower in Buddhism symbolizes the journey to paradise and the achievement of ultimate happiness. This symbolism is also utilized in local funeral coffin paintings in Dunhuang. In ancient China, both Han Chinese and Buddhists shared similar concepts of the afterlife, as they both desired a better place to go after death.



Figure 7 Tang Dynasty Cave 332

Figure 7 shows 332 caves in the Dunhuang murals from the Tang Dynasty. The coffin is surrounded by soul banners to guide the soul and ribbons on the flags dancing in the wind. In the “New Book of Tang,” there is a record that states, “Mingsheng’ is a funeral tool with varying lengths designated for officers of different ranks.” In the first to third grades, students are provided with a nine-foot-long model, in the fourth to fifth grades with an eight-foot-long model, and in the sixth to ninth grades with a six-foot-long model (Ouyang & Song, 2014). In the Tang Dynasty, the use of soul banners reflected strict hierarchical norms, indicating officials’ ranks by the length of their banners. In the Tang Dynasty, the use of soul banners reflected strict hierarchical norms, indicating officials’ ranks by the length of their banners. Some ordinary people were not allowed to use it. By observing that the painting on the soul banner in Dunhuang does not conform to the regulations, it can be inferred that the soul banner may have been borrowed from the funerals of the upper nobles in the Tang Dynasty or the funerals of the monks (Xie, 1995).

4.5 Pulling the Coffin with Oxen, Sacrificing the Animals to God and Placing a Rooster in the Coffin



Figure 8 Northern Zhou Cave 290

In the Dunhuang mural, there are images depicting the funerals of ordinary local people in Dunhuang. Figure 8 shows Cave 290 of the Northern Zhou Dynasty, depicting Sakyamuni meeting a folk funeral after his reincarnation. The coffin can be seen in a square carriage pulled by an ox at the front. In front of the ox, there is another person holding up a tray with both hands, on which tribute is placed. This is clearly a picture of a local Han nationality funeral in Dunhuang. It can be seen that holding up the tray in front of the coffin aligns with the Chinese belief that everything possesses a spirit. It is believed that mountains have mountain gods, roads have road gods, and rivers have river gods. Offerings are made to honor these gods and ensure that the spirits of the dead can reach them smoothly (Xie, 1995).



Figure 9 Cave 148 of the flourishing Tang Dynasty

In Cave 332 of the Tang Dynasty and Cave 148 of the flourishing Tang Dynasty (Figure 9), we can see a rooster standing on both coffins. It is possible that the plainlet borrowed the story of “Zhu Ji Weng” from China. According to Han Nationality Myths and Legends, Zhu Ji Weng was good at raising chickens who are known-all. After raising chickens for a hundred years and earning a lot of money, he went to Mount Wu and became an immortal. The meaning of the Dunhuang murals of chickens may be to Sakya, who will also attain immortality after Nirvana. This picture is a very good demonstration of the combination of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty and mythological stories in ancient Chinese Taoism. Currently, in the Gansu area, the remains of this custom still exist; if people die outside, they should go home to stop the dead body from using the rooster, which is called the introduction of Yang (Xie, 1998). It can be surmised that the reason for this practice may be that Sakyamuni did not die in his hometown; thus, the rooster was placed on the coffin.

4.6 Manpower to Carry Coffin as a Sign of Filial Piety

The Dunhuang County Annals Records, Volume VII, recorded, “The rich men carry the coffin to the burial place, while the poor use a cart” (Su & Zeng, 1970). In Dunhuang, it is common for pallbearers to carry coffins at funerals, indicating a relatively high social status. In the Dunhuang murals, there are also numerous images depicting people carrying coffins. The number of people who carry coffins also varies based on their status and identity. In painting from the early Tang Dynasty, 332 caves and other mural paintings depict the phenomenon of people carrying coffins. The root of this phenomenon is that the Book of Rites records only the action of “pulling the coffin,” not “people carrying the coffin.” Since the Tang and Song Dynasties in China, the practice of people carrying coffins has gradually become popular. It is considered to be the embodiment of Confucian filial piety until today. According to Dunhuang document S525, wealthy families did not hire a car, ox, or laborer to transport the coffin. Instead, the dutiful son personally pulled the coffin to the cemetery as a custom, aiming to uphold the virtue of filial piety. (Duan, 1999) From this, we can see that human coffins may have originated from Buddhist customs and influenced the burial practices of the Han Chinese in the Central Plains.

5. Pluralistic Integration Processes

Throughout the development of Dunhuang's history, with the rise and fall of the central dynasty, the development of Dunhuang's funeral customs has been characterized by diversity and integration.

5.1 Pluralistic Integration of Funeral Rituals

The first aspect is the diverse integration of funeral rites. In Dunhuang, the Han nationality and ethnic minorities actively interact. Some customs from both sides have been harmonized through this interaction, while others have been lost to Chinese history due to their incompatibility with Confucian culture. The following are some specific examples. First, cremation is a form of burial. First, cremation is a funeral practice that originated as a Persian “Zoroastrian” custom and was later introduced to Dunhuang by the Sogdians. (Liu, 2004) Cremation was originally used by the Sogdians to reach Elysium. Later, to align with Zhou rituals, an additional layer of meaning was added: cremation was seen as a method to eliminate aversion and taboos. In addition to the various interpretations of this tradition, numerous murals provide insight into the prevalence of cremation in everyday life. While the archaeological evidence from Dunhuang indicates that traditional earth burial was the dominant practice, there is a documented instance of cremation in the Zhou Rites, although it did not become the dominant form of burial in the Han dynasty. The evolution of cremation as a funeral practice demonstrates that the Sogdians consistently favored this method, which was encouraged by their religious beliefs during their migration. This custom coincided with Dunhuang folk Buddhist funeral concepts, yet it also expanded in scope. Upon its introduction to Dunhuang, at least during the Sui and Tang dynasties, as reflected in the murals, the Dunhuang area was under the control of the Central Plains. Consequently, the practice had to be integrated into Han Chinese thought. As a result, the custom evolved, innovated its concepts and methods, and expanded its popularity. This is the concept of unity in funeral customs.

In Dunhuang mural paintings, Figure 8 from Cave 290 of the Northern Zhou dynasty depicts oxen pulling a cart and sacrificing animals to the god. Figure 9 from Cave 148 of the flourishing Tang dynasty depicts the practice of placing a rooster in a coffin. These examples illustrate how Buddhist mural paintings have incorporated traditional Chinese Taoist ceremonial practices. In ancient Chinese legends, roosters were regarded as either beneficial or manifestations of divine power. An illustrative example is the phoenix. In the Nirvana paintings, the artists may have drawn upon such concepts when they depicted the scene of Sakyamuni's nirvana. Consequently, the Dunhuang murals exhibit elements of both Han Chinese Taoism and Buddhist narratives, which is consistent with the concept of diversity in funeral customs, as stated in the title.

Second, some customs were also abandoned. For example, in Tubo and other ethnic minorities on the north wall of Cave 158 of the Middle Tang Dynasty, facial scarification was not widely observed in China. This is due to its bloody nature and deviation from the traditional custom of inheriting skin from one's parents. Another example is the practice of "old men entering tombs," which is similar to the custom of the "Shengkuang" in Yunnan and other regions of the country. This tradition has gradually faded from society as Confucian values have become more prominent. Therefore, when some customs are introduced into a region, not all of them are absorbed. While people respect the diversity of cultures, they also integrate local concepts influenced by political and religious elements, which are then applied to their daily lives. Taking funeral customs as an example, Dunhuang is predominantly influenced by Han Chinese culture, which incorporates the funeral customs of various ethnic groups and religions. This concept explores the unity and diversity of funeral customs.

Therefore, we can see that different ethnic groups have their own customs. In the process of transformation of Han culture, they absorb elements that align with the Confucian culture of each ethnic group while rejecting those that contradict Confucian values.

5.2 Pluralistic Integration of Funeral Concepts

The second aspect involves the integration of funeral concepts. First, Dunhuang funeral customs are influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, and other religions. Subsequently, the funeral concepts of different religions collide, leading to absorption and integration. Their concepts are the same as follows: they integrate and embody the concept of filial piety. Filial piety is an important concept in Confucianism China. However, some customs in Buddhism contradict the idea of filial piety in Confucianism, such as the practice of "old men entering tombs." However, there are also common concepts; it has absorbed the customs of Buddhism, which include the notion of "filial piety." For example, "manpower to carry the coffin," whether it is recorded in Buddhist scriptures or absorbed by Confucianism in secular concepts, signifies the importance of filial piety, especially when children carry coffins for their parents. In folklore, people who carry coffins are not only displays of wealth; personally carrying coffins for their parents is even more praised by people. The Dunhuang mural paintings reflect the diverse ethnic and religious groups present in the region, as well as the varying funeral customs observed among them. These customs, in turn, influenced the local population, who incorporated them into their own traditions, giving rise to new concepts such as the traditional Chinese value of "filial piety." This process of integration is evident in the Dunhuang mural paintings.

Second, they all reflect the concepts of greed for life and fear of death. Both the array of flowers in Cave 148 from the flourishing Tang Dynasty and the depiction of Lady Xin Zhui's immortal mountain in the Han Tomb at Mawangdui signify people's yearning for the afterlife. Buddhism advocates the accumulation of good virtues for reincarnation in the next life, while Taoism focuses on achieving immortality. Although the end of life is understood differently by people for religious and cultural reasons, there is diversity in funeral concepts. In any case, both ideas eventually addressed the concept of an afterlife, comforting people's fear of death. Their efforts toward unification have had a positive effect on the sentiments of the local population. This is evidenced by the unification of funeral concepts.

Finally, they all reflect the concept of hierarchy. In the Dunhuang murals, both the number of people carrying coffins and the size of the soul banner reflect the utilization of distinct hierarchies in various ways. The former refers to the influence of Buddhism on Han funeral customs, while the latter refers to the influence of the Han on Buddhism. In ancient China, society was structured according to a strict hierarchy, with officials occupying a superior position to peasants, peasants occupying a superior position to artisans, and artisans occupying a superior position to merchants. This social status was reflected in all aspects of society, including Dunhuang, which was also under the jurisdiction of the central Chinese dynasty. It is evident that funeral customs were also influenced by this concept, despite Dunhuang mural paintings being related to Buddhism. Craftsmen were inevitably influenced by the concept of hierarchy, particularly after the Tang Dynasty.

According to the above discussion, the interaction between funeral rituals and funeral concepts in Dunhuang well reflects the plurality of different ethnic cultures and ultimately leads to localization and nationalization.

6. Conclusion

By Dunhuang mural paintings depicting funeral customs, this paper elucidates the relationship between the Han nationality and other ethnic groups, as well as the interplay between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in the Dunhuang region and the customs of various sects. Before the Sui Dynasty, Dunhuang was influenced by Indian, Western, and Central Asian customs. After the Tang Dynasty, it was customary for the indigenous Han nationality. With regard to the forms of burial, the spread of the Zoroastrian practice of cremation in Dunhuang, for instance, has led the local population to choose other forms of burial in addition to earth burial. The earth burial of the Han Chinese had the most significant and far-reaching impact on funerals in Dunhuang. In the context of mourning and funerals, various customs from different ethnic groups and religions have been adopted in the Dunhuang area of China. For example, the tubo practice of face stabbing, ear cutting and disembowelling, the Buddhist tradition of touching the feet of the deceased, the inability of the monks to cry as they beat their chests and pull out their hair and clothes without any decoration, and the custom of manpower to carry the coffinare were all observed in this region. At the same time, soul banners to guide the soul of the Han Chinese, casket materials, and other aspects with hierarchical colors are widely utilized by the people of Dunhuang.

However, the general trend is that funeral practices in the Dunhuang area reflect a process of Confucianization, embodying the characteristics of unity and diversity. Especially in the Buddhist mural paintings of Buddhism, Central Asia and Western customs, one can also see the influence of traditional Chinese Taoism and Confucianism. In the Dunhuang area, funeral customs are influenced by a combination of factors rather than by a single influence; they are shaped by interactions between different elements. At the same time, it is influenced by the culture of the Han nationality. Especially after the Song Dynasty, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism became secularized and integrated with each other. (Ding & Wei, 2003)It has become a part of our excellent traditional Chinese culture.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the impact of this integration on Chinese society was a double-edged sword. First, the process of Confucianization of Han nationality customs was conducive to the preservation of imperial authority and the concept of orthodoxy. However, some of the lavish funeral practices in Buddhist rituals have sparked comparisons with the traditional practice of extravagant burials in China. This negative custom has persisted and continues to influence people's perceptions of funerals.

Finally, this paper only analyzes Dunhuang funeral customs based on Dunhuang murals and does not systematically include all the folklore of the Dunhuang region, especially those that are not depicted in the murals but are only found in the text. This paper mainly focuses on the folklore depicted in the murals. Due to limitations in resources and time, the author was unable to examine all known funeral customs in Dunhuang. Therefore, the study of Dunhuang funeral customs is not yet comprehensive. In the future, research on Dunhuang funeral customs should focus on collecting a broader array of physical and historical materials to mutually support each other. Second, Dunhuang can be studied from the perspective of other ethnic groups rather than solely from the perspective of the Han.

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