


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Coping with the Loss of a Child: Evidence from Tang Funerary Writing

Ping Yao* 

Department of History, California State University Los Angeles

*Corresponding author. Email: pyao@calstatela.edu

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Abstract

Based on a close reading of 118 Tang epitaphs for those who died young, this paper explores how Tang parents remembered and recounted their children's lives as well as factors that contributed to the rise of intense expression of mourning. It finds that while descriptions in epitaphs for adults largely followed Confucian ideals of life course and gender roles, the epitaphs for the young are much less formulaic, allowing space and latitude for parents and families to impart anecdotes and emotions. More importantly, it argues that the rise of epitaphs for children (especially for daughters in the ninth century) reflected a strong influence of Buddhist perception of death and Buddhist mourning rituals. As a result, Tang parents ignored the restrictions and decorum stipulated in *The Book of Rites* and mourned their children with outward grief, regardless their age and gender.

Keywords: epitaph; mourning; parent–child bond

On a spring day in 677, a sixteen year-old boy named Wang Baode 王寶德 took his own life by drowning himself. Wang was born to an ordinary family and his father never held an office. Nevertheless, the boy loved books and admired the great ancients. If the depiction in “Funeral Inscription with Preface for the *Shang*-son Wang Lie of the Great Tang” (Da Tang shangzi Wang Lie muzhiming bing xu 大唐殤子王烈墓誌銘並序)¹ is to be believed, he may have been a bit neurotic. Lie 烈, or “heroic,” is the posthumous name (*shi* 謚) his parents bestowed on him, as they considered the word embodied their beloved son's character. Devastated by their loss, the parents had a finely written epitaph carved onto a stone slab (Figure 1) to “record the heroic character he displayed” (*ji shengqian zhi qilie* 紀生前之氣烈), in the hopes that “his fine reputation can be passed on after his death” (*chui mohou zhi fangming* 垂歿後之芳名). The parents lamented that “a perennial flower drops in the beginning of summer, a singular blossom falls at first touch of autumn” (*luo changhua yu shouxia yun guxiu yu xianqiu* 落常華於

¹The ink rubbing of this epitaph was collected in Henansheng Luoyang diqu wenguanchu 河南省洛陽地區文管處 ed., *Qian Tang zhi zhai cangzhi sh* 千唐誌齋藏誌 (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1984), 302. The transcription is based on Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良 and Zhao Chao 趙超, *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓誌彙編 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1992, hereafter, *MZHB*), Yifeng 007.



Figure 1. Ink rubbing of “Funeral Inscription with Preface for the Shang-son Wang Lie of the Great Tang”

首夏，實孤秀於先秋); they declared that “one hundred lives cannot redeem” that of Wang Lie (*baishen wu shu* 百身無贖).

The epitaph for Wang Lie is one of the 118 extant Tang dynasty (618–907) epitaphs dedicated to young people who died before the age of twenty without marrying. These texts provide historians with an excellent opportunity to uncover perceptions of childhood and youth experiences in medieval China, and, more importantly to this study, to examine a rarely explored aspect of Tang parent–child relationships: parents’ mourning of their children who died young.

The parent–child relationship has been an integral part of the study of the history of childhood ever since French historian Philippe Aries published *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960.² Aries set out to convince historians that the history of childhood is an important field that can help uncover how a particular set of beliefs about childhood and practices of child-rearing came into being and evolved. Responding to his call, many social and cultural historians have explored various topics on children and youth, ranging from the perceptions of childhood as seen in legal codes, religion, and literature to

²Philippe Aries, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1960), translated as *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

child mortality and infanticide in different societies throughout world history.³ Scholars of Chinese history have dabbled in the field since the 1990s. The 1995 publication of *Chinese Views of Childhood*, an anthology edited by Anne Behnke Kinney, was a pioneering effort to survey the history of childhood. Its essays cover research by eleven scholars on topics from the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) to the present.⁴ In addition, two monographs on childhood in Chinese history greatly expanded our understanding of the perception of childhood in early China and late imperial China (1368–1911). Anne Kinney's *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (2004) explored the cultural conditions that made childhood an important topic of intellectual inquiry, as well as depictions of and perspectives on the “precocious child” and the “aristocratic child” in Han writings.⁵ *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (2006) by Ping-Chen Hsiung investigated new views and practices concerning childhood developed after the heyday of the Wang Yangming School.⁶

Studies of the parent–child relationship in Tang China are abundant as well, thanks to the copious sources available to scholars, including literature, the arts, ritual and didactic texts, religious texts, and law codes.⁷ Researchers on medieval China also benefited greatly from a large quantity of epitaphs (*muzhiming* 墓誌銘) and Dunhuang manuscripts.⁸ However, most of the existing scholarship on the subject, mostly concerning adult children, has focused on how filial piety was defined, sanctioned, and

³For example, Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent–Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and Amy J. Catalano, *A Global History of Child Death: Mortality, Burial, and Parental Attitudes* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2015).

⁴Anne Behnke Kinney, *Chinese Views of Childhood* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995).

⁵Anne Behnke Kinney, *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁶Ping-Chen Hsiung, *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

⁷For example, Yan Liying 閻莉穎, “Tangshi zhong de ertong xingxiang” 唐詩中的兒童形象 (MA Thesis, Liaoning Normal University, 2013); Zhao Xiaohua 趙小華, “Fuqin de jilu: Tang shi zhong de ertong shuxi” 父親的記錄：唐詩中的兒童書寫, *Guizhou shehui kexue* 306.6 (2005), 85–90; Zheng Yang 鄭陽, “Tangdai ertong tuxiang yanjiu” 唐代兒童圖像研究 (MA Thesis, The Central Academy of Fine Arts, China, 2010); Jin Yingkun 金滢坤, “Tangdai jiaxun jiafa jiafeng yu tongmeng jiaoyu kaocha” 唐代家訓、家法、家風與童蒙教育考察, *Zhejiang Shifan Daxue Xuebao* 226.45 (2020), 13–21; Wang Yiping 王一平, “Tangdai ertong de jiao yu yang” 唐代兒童的教與養 (MA Thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, 2004); Erin M. Cline, *Families of Virtue: Confucian and Western Views on Childhood Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Alan Cole, *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Li Hong 李紅, “Cong Falü shijiao kan Tangdai jiating zhong de fumu ziniu guanxi” 從法律視角看唐代家庭中的父母子女關係, *Cangsang*, 2014.6, 40–43.

⁸For example, Liao Yifang 廖宜方 *Tangdai de muzi guanxi* 唐代的母子關係 (Taipei: Daoxing Chubanshe, 2009); Zhang Guogang 張國剛 “Lun Tangdai jiating zhong fumu de jiaose jiqi yu ziniu de guanxi” 論唐代家庭中父母的角色及其與子女的關係, *Zhonghua Wenshi Luncong* 87.3 (2007), 207–49; Mai Xiaoying 賈小英, “Ru Shi lunli gongtong zuoyong beijing xia de Dunhuang jiating guanxi—yi ba zhi shi shiji wei zhongxin 儒釋倫理共同作用背景下的敦煌家庭關係研究—以8至10世紀為中心” (PhD Dissertation, Lanzhou University, 2017), 49–77; Zhao Zhen 趙貞, “Tangdai huangkou de zhulu yu ruiji—yi Dunhuang Tulufan wenshu wei zhongxin” 唐代黃口的著錄與入籍—以敦煌吐魯番文書為中心, *Xiyu Yanjiu* (2017.4), 46–60.

practiced.⁹ The earliest scholarship that explored mourning those who died young is Pei-yi Wu's 1995 survey of literature from the Tang to the Ming era (1368–1644).¹⁰ In a close analysis of Han Yu's 韓愈 (768–824) requiem (*jiwen* 祭文) and grave notice (*kuangzhi* 壙誌) for his daughter, Wu argues that children were written about more in China than in Europe, and that, from the ninth century on, grieving and mourning went considerably beyond what ritual demanded, especially by fathers for their daughters.

This paper expands on Wu's study to survey all available Tang epitaphs for children. It not only investigates how Tang parents remembered and recounted their children's lives, but also examines factors that contributed to the rise of intense outward mourning of loved ones who die young. It finds that, while descriptions in epitaphs for adults largely followed Confucian ideals of life courses and gender roles for men and women with their lives cut short, the epitaphs for the young are much less formulaic, allowing space and latitude for parents and families to impart anecdotes and convey emotions. I argue that Buddhism greatly influenced how Tang parents mourned the loss of their children. During the Tang, along with the spread of Buddhist concepts of the netherworld and afterlife, the Forty-Ninth Day Memorial Rites (*zuoqi* 做七) became widely popular, as did the copying of sutras (*xiejing* 寫經) and building of pagodas (*qita* 起塔), all intended to amass merits (*zhufu* 追福) for the departed, regardless of their age and gender. As a result, Tang parents gradually broke from the restrictions set by *The Book of Rites* and utilized epitaphs to express their profound sorrow and grief.

Tang Epitaphs for Those Who Died Young

Childhood and youth were well defined in ritual texts, legal codes, and imperial decrees throughout Chinese history. In 624, for example, Emperor Gaozu (r. 618–626) decreed that children between one and three *sui* were to be grouped into *huang* 黃 (yellow, infant); those between four and 15, *xiao* 小 (small); at sixteen, they reached *zhong* 中 (middle); and by twenty-one, a male reached adulthood, *ding* 丁. It is worth noting that the Tang imperial court twice changed the age for male adulthood: it first increased to twenty-two *sui* in 705 and then to twenty-three *sui* in 763.¹¹ *The Tang Code* (*Tanglü shuyi* 唐律疏議) also divided children and young adults into three groups: under fifteen (*xiao*), under ten (*youruo* 幼弱 young and weak), and under seven (*dao* 悼, minor).

How should early death be addressed and mourned? *The Book of Rites* (*Yili* 儀禮) prescribed a set of strict rules. It divided *shang* 殤, or family mourning for those dying before adulthood, into three categories: *zhangshang* 長殤 (mourning ritual for older youth) was designated for children who died between the ages of sixteen and nineteen; *zhongshang* 中殤 (mourning ritual for middle youth) for those between twelve and fifteen; and *xiashang* 下殤 (mourning ritual for young children) for children

⁹For example, Josephine Chiu-Duke, "Mothers and the Well-being of the State In Tang China," *Nannü* 8.1 (2006), 55–114; Chen Jo-shui 陳弱水, "Shi tan Tangdai funü yu benjia de guanxi" 試探唐代婦女與本家的關係," *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* 68.1 (1997), 167–248; Zheng Yaru 鄭雅如 (Cheng Ya-ju), "Zhonggu shiqi de muzi guanxi—xingbie yu Han Tang zhijian de jiatingshi yanjiu" 中古時期的母子關係—性別與漢唐之間的家庭史研究, in Li Zhende 李貞德 (Jen-der Lee), *Zhongguoshi xinlun-xingbieshi fence* 中國史新論—性別史分冊 (Taipei: Lianjing Chubanshe, 2009), 192–199.

¹⁰Pei-yi Wu, "Childhood Remembered: Parents and Children in China, 800 to 1700," in Kinney, *Chinese Views of Childhood*, 129–56.

¹¹Wang Pu 王溥 [922–982], *Tang huiyao* 唐會要, *juan* 85.

eight to eleven years old. It specified that parents should mourn a *zhangshang* child for nine months and a *zhongshang* child for seven months. In addition, children who die before reaching the age of eight can be mourned by the parents, but without outward ceremony (*wufu zhishang* 無服之殤). The length of the mourning period for those who died younger than eight depends on the specific age of the child. For each month the child lived, a day of mourning is added. A father may weep at the death of a child with a name (usually aged three months). He will not weep if the child has not yet been named.¹²

The data set for this study consists of 118 Tang epitaphs for those who would be considered *zhangshang* or younger. Among them, twelve are from *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (QTW),¹³ seven from *Da Tang Xishi Bowuguan cang muzhi* 大唐西市博物館藏墓誌 (XSMZ),¹⁴ eleven from *Xi'an Beilin Bowuguan xincang muzhi huibian* 西安碑林博物館新藏墓誌匯編 (BLMZ) and *Xi'an Beilin Bowuguan xincang muzhi huibian xuji* 西安碑林博物館新藏墓誌續編 (BLMZHB),¹⁵ one is from the private collection of the contemporary Liu Xiufeng 刘秀峰,¹⁶ and the rest are from *Tangdai muzhi huibian* 唐代墓誌彙編 (MZHB) and *Tangdai muzhi huibian xuji* 唐代墓誌彙編續集 (XJ).¹⁷ As to age groups, 65 epitaphs are those of *zhangshang* (16–19), 34 are of *zhongshang* (12–15), 11 are of *xiashang* (8–11), and seven are dedicated to those who died between four and seven sui. One mentions only that the deceased had passed away before she had become engaged to be married.¹⁸ In terms of gender, 55 epitaphs or 47 percent were for daughters, and 63 epitaphs or 53 percent were for sons. The number of epitaphs for children increased dramatically in the Tang dynasty. A total of 17 (14 percent) of the extant epitaphs dedicated to those who died young date from the seventh century; 33 (28 percent) date from the eighth century; and 56 (48 percent) are from the ninth century. This trend does not seem to match the overall distribution of epitaphs during the Tang dynasty. Among the 5,807 epitaphs collected in QTW, MZHB, and XJ, for example, 2,090 of them, or 36 percent, date from the seventh century; 2,127 or 37 percent from the eighth century, and only 1,590 or 27 percent from the ninth century. Most noticeably, the increase in epitaphs for children during the ninth century is also the result of a dramatic increase in the number of epitaphs for daughters, while the number of epitaphs for sons remained unchanged (15 epitaphs for the seventh century, and 22 and 19 for the eighth and ninth centuries, respectively).

¹²“Sangfu zhuan 喪服傳,” *The Book of Rites*.

¹³Dong Gao 董誥 [1740–1818] et al., *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文, reprint (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1983, hereafter QTW). A total of 925 Tang funeral inscriptions are collected in this anthology.

¹⁴Hu Ji 胡戟 and Rong Xinjiang 榮新江, *Da Tang Xishi Bowuguan cang muzhi* 大唐西市博物館藏墓誌 (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2012). Out of 500 epitaphs collected in XSMZ, 457 of them are from the Tang dynasty.

¹⁵Zhao Liguang 趙力光, et al., *Xi'an Beilin Bowuguan xincang muzhi huibian* 西安碑林博物館新藏墓誌匯編 (Beijing: Xianzhuang Shuju, 2007, hereafter, BLMZ) and *Xi'an Beilin Bowuguan xincang muzhi huibian xuji* 西安碑林博物館新藏墓誌續編 (Xi'an: Shaanxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2020, hereafter, BLMZXB). Out of 381 epitaphs collected BLMZ, 346 of them are from the Tang dynasty, the number for BLMZXB are 207 out of 231.

¹⁶Liu's title name is Hebei Zhengjing Moxiangge zhuren 河北正定墨香閣主人 (Master of Fragrant Pavilion Ink in Zhengding, Hebei).

¹⁷Zhou Shaoliang 周紹良 and Zhao Chao 趙超, *Tangdai muzhi huibian xuji* 唐代墓誌彙編續集 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2002, hereafter, XJ).

¹⁸XSMZ 452.

Illness is the leading cause of these early deaths. Among 79 epitaphs naming a cause of death, 67 reported that the deceased died after becoming sick. Some contracted a sudden vicious illness (*yu baoji er yao* 遇暴疾而夭)¹⁹ or untreatable skin ulcers (*chuangwei* 瘡痍) that erupted everywhere (*qinyin kuifa* 侵淫潰發)²⁰; others were afflicted by “chronic ailments” (*mianli jibing* 綿歷疾病).²¹ The second common cause of early death was travel-related illness or accident (8 cases). Cui Qun’s 崔群 (772–832) younger sister, Cui Yang 崔楊, for example, died in 805 at the age of thirteen after becoming ill during a journey accompanying her brother to a new official assignment.²² Han Yu’s daughter, Na 挈, died at the age of twelve during his family’s move from the capital to Chaozhou (Guangdong) as a result of his demotion and exile.²³

In reading the epitaphs of those who died young, it is apparent that depression constituted a grave concern for the families. An epitaph from 816, for example, reported that the deceased had suffered prolonged distress at the age of ten after being separated from his father.²⁴ An epitaph dated 774 for a young woman who died at the age of eighteen cited her constant anguish as the cause of her illness, which led to her demise (*ji you cheng ji yizhi yunshen* 積憂成疾, 以至殞身).²⁵ Other epitaphs commemorated teenage boys who had succumbed to violence. In 702, a boy named Du Bing 杜並, sixteen, was killed seeking revenge for his father, the poet Du Shenyan 杜審言 (645–708), after he assassinated one of the officials who framed the elder Du.²⁶ In 757, a seventeen-year-old named Zhou Xiao 周曉 was murdered by the Turks while he was a hostage.²⁷

Tang epitaphs for those who died young were unique in two ways. First, they were mostly written by a family member or a close relative: 23 of them by a father, 12 by a brother, 9 by an uncle, 6 by a cousin, one by a grandfather, one by a granduncle, one by a brother-in-law, and 7 by a relative or a family friend. The rest of the epitaphs either did not identify the author (36) or the relationship (22) between the author and the deceased, though it is clear that most of these authors were very close to the family. The author of the “Epitaph for Wang Lie,” for example, did not identify his name or his relationship with the Wang family, but the description clearly reflects an intimate knowledge of the boy. Because of such close relationships between the author and the deceased, the accounts of the deceased’s childhood and youth are much more vivid than childhood and youth experience in epitaphs for those who died much later, when their early experiences were largely unknown to the descendant, let alone to colleagues or friends.

¹⁹“Shangshang Gaoshi muzhiming” 上殤高氏墓誌銘, QTW 216. Gao died in 686 at the age of 17 *sui*.

²⁰“Quanshi shangzi muzhiming bing xu” 權氏殤子墓誌銘並序, MZHB Yuanhe 102. The granddaughter of the deceased Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818) passed away in 817 at the age of 9 *sui*.

²¹“Tang gu Liushi zhangshangnü muzhiming bing xu” 唐故柳氏長殤女墓誌銘並序, MZHB Huichang 42. The epitaph was dedicated to a Miss Liu who died in 845 at the age of 16 *sui*.

²²MZHB Yuanhe 001. The lid of the epitaph is not extant. Other cases include MZHB Zhenguan080, Dali036, Zhenyuan109, Dazhong112, Xiantong 002, Xiantong 099, and QTW juan 566.

²³“Nü Na kuangming” 女挈壙銘, QTW 566.

²⁴“Tang gu Zhengshi dizhangshang muji” 唐故鄭氏嫡長殤墓記, MZHB Yuanhe 090.

²⁵MZHB Dali 038. The lid of the epitaph is not extant.

²⁶“Da Zhou gu Jinghazao Du Bing muzhiming bing xu” 大周故京兆男子杜並墓誌銘並序, MZHB Changan 007.

²⁷“Tang gu zanshan daifu zeng shichijiedudu Yuanzhou zhujunshi Yuanzhou cishi ci zijinyudai shang-zhuguo Zhoufujun muzhiming bing xu” 唐故贊善大夫贈使持節都督原州諸軍事原州刺史賜紫金魚袋上柱國周府君墓誌銘並序, XJ Qianyuan 005.

The second unique aspect of these epitaphs is that the narrative pattern is quite different from that of the epitaphs for adults. Epitaphs for those who had experienced all stages of life habitually portrayed the deceased in accordance with Confucian ideals of life course and gender roles: men strove to fulfill the ideal of “cultivate the self, regulate the family, govern the state, then lead the world to peace” (*xiushen qijia zhiguo pingtianxia* 修身齊家治國平天下); women modeled themselves after Chunyu Yi 淳于意’s (216–150 BCE) filial daughter, Liang Hong’s 梁鴻 (27–90) submissive wife, and Mencius’s (372–289 BCE) wise mother. In the 806 epitaph for Yuan Zhen’s 元稹 (779–831) mother Zhengshi 鄭氏 (Lady Zheng), for example, after detailing her virtuous conduct as a daughter, wife, and mother, the author Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846) commented:

Alas! People such as Qishi and Tiyang of the olden days were righteous women, yet they were unknown after they became wives. The wives of Bozong and Liang Hong were wise women, yet they were unknown after they became mothers. The mothers of Wenbo and Mencius were virtuous exemplars, yet they were unknown as well when they were daughters and wives. Now Lady Zheng possessed much daughterly grace, wifely virtue, and motherly presence. She performed all three roles beautifully; she was truly the finest woman in history from the past to the present.

噫！昔漆室、緹縈之徒，烈女也，及為婦則無聞；伯宗、梁鴻之妻，哲婦也，及為母則無聞；文伯、孟氏之親，賢母也，為女為婦時亦無聞。今夫人女美如此，婦德又如此，母儀又如此，三者具美，可謂冠古今矣。²⁸

Such formulaic descriptions of the deceased persisted throughout the Tang dynasty, though some late Tang authors would add a few anecdotes to exemplify the deceased’s character. In contrast to this, Tang epitaphs for those who died young often gave vivid descriptions of parent–child interactions and were filled with profound expression of sorrow. Consider the epitaph from 851 written by Cui Yan 崔巖 for his daughter, who died at the age of thirteen. Entitled “Funeral Inscription for Zhongshang Daughter Guangniangzi” (*Zhongshangnü Guangniangzi muzhiming* 中殤女廣娘子墓誌銘), the epitaph recounts that Guangniangzi 廣娘子 was a much cherished child: she was Cui Yan’s first child and possibly the first grandchild of his parents. Her grandmother often commented: “ever since this grandbaby was around me, the joy and comfort she brought surpassed those of her aunts.” (自吾有是孫，慰悅於前，過其諸姑矣). Guangniangzi seemed to have spent every waking moment with her grandmother, “eating, playing, and resting at the grandmother’s side” (*shiyin dongxi yichuyu xixia* 食飲動息，一出於膝下). The epitaph reports that Guangniangzi had the inborn ability to discern everyone’s emotions; by the time she learned to talk, she could immediately sense if an elder expressed the slightest unpleasantness. Thus she never did anything that would displease her elders. At the age of seven or eight, she was reportedly very amiable, gentle, and peaceful, like a grown woman. And at the age of ten, she was “even more filial, loving, obedient, and respectful” (*xiao ai shun jing yudu* 孝愛順敬愈篤). When her mother was gravely ill, Guangniangzi cared for her meticulously. When her grandmother asked her to stay near, she agreed, but was worried sick about her mother. Because of the stress, she did not eat and rest regularly (*shen mei guajie* 膳

²⁸“Tang Henan Yuanfujun furen Yingyang Zhengshi muzhiming” 唐河南元府君夫人榮陽鄭氏墓誌銘, in Zhu Jincheng 朱金城, *Bai Juyi ji jianjiao* 白居易集箋校 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), 2718.

寐乖節), causing her to become extremely emaciated and weak. After losing her mother, she was “brought down by a mixture of grief and ailments” (*qi yu ji xiangcheng* 感與疾相乘) and died twenty-eight days after her mother passed away.²⁹

The “Funeral Inscription with Preface for Late Son Pangyu” (*Wang nan Pangyu muzhiming bing xu* 亡男龐玉墓誌銘並序), dated 808, was written by Pangyu’s father Dou Yizhi 竇易直 (d. 833). It provides another example of such parent-child interaction and grief:

I had you when I was already thirty-eight. From your birth you were afflicted by many illnesses. You did not walk until the age of five. At the age of ten you studied with teachers, beginning with *The Classic of Filial Piety*, and then moving on to *The Classic of Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, and completing all six classics. You were kind, filial, reticent, and calm. You were also extremely cautious; the slightest admonishing would immediately send you into sustained fear and trembling, as if you could not find a place to hide yourself. I trusted that you would surely become well established and bring glory to our family. Who would expect that, despite all the protection and nourishment, you would contract a minor illness. At the age of fifteen, on the fourth day of the first month in the third year of the Yuanhe reign (808), you suddenly took the journey to the other world. How can a sorrow be this extreme! Due to transportation difficulties at the time, we arranged a temporary burial southwest of the Xiangji Buddhist Temple in Guodu village, Ju’an township, Chang’an county, on the thirtieth day of that month. Once the transportation is easier, we will take you back to our clan cemetery in Xianyang. Filled with sorrow I compose this essay, suffocated by grief I complete my last words. The elegy says: “the tomb passage is dark and deep, it rapidly took you away.” Sorrowfully we wait for a good year to consign you to the old cemetery.

吾年三十八方有汝，汝之始生即多病，五歲而後能行，十歲從師誦孝經，何論尚書禮記至第六。性仁孝，寡言而靜，加又小心競慎，每微訓示，即度日恐慄，行上無容。心謂汝必能成立，光大吾門。豈圖勞此保養，暫遭微疾，以元和三年正月四日享年一十有五，奄然長往，哀何可極。時未通便，故以其年三月三十日權宅於長安縣居安鄉郭杜村香積佛寺之西南，候歲月通便將歸汝於咸陽大塋。銜悲為文，悲塞絕筆。銘曰：神道冥深，何促爾生，悲俟通年，歸汝舊塋。³⁰

Another example is this epitaph from 818 for a daughter named Li Desun 李德孫, who died at the age of four. It recounts a toddler’s short life with a very gentle touch:

My daughter was born on the twentieth day of the seventh month, the yiwei year of the Yuanhe reign (815). She died on the eighteenth day of the seventh month, the wuxu year of the Yuanhe reign (818) in my official residence in Tongzhou’s inner city. On the twenty-seventh day, she is to be buried at the southland of the west gate of the Yinsheng Temple’s Buddhist Pavilion, located in Longshou township, Wannian county. The tomb is next to her late uncle’s; the wind meets the pine trees in the west cemetery. With that, I hope my baby’s soul will not be afraid of the dark world. The elegy says: Her family name is Li, she was

²⁹XSMZ 422.

³⁰Collection of Liu Xiufeng.

born to Miss Cui. She was bright and divine; her countenance was endowed with heavenly blessing. Even though her speech was not yet perfect, she had the inborn nature of loving her parents. Her glances were radiant, her expressions expansive. While playing, she vomited and became ill; her breath was suffocated, her organs bled. The wind of dark spirit blows stealthily, and her vitality could not prevail. As she lay gently on my bosom, our pleading and wailing met with no response. She had yet to reach the age of *shang*; who asked for the longevity of a Pengzu?³¹ My heart is exploding with such grief that I cannot bear it.

女生元和乙未歲七月廿日，亡戊戌歲七月十八日於同州內城官舍，來廿七日己酉，瘞京兆府萬年縣龍首鄉因聖寺佛閣西門之南地。土接亡叔之墓，風接西塋之松，冀爾孩魂，不怕幽壤。銘云：姓李氏，生崔氏，聰明神光，骨髮天祉。言語未正，自解親親，顧瞻溢彩，顏色沉人。走弄之間，嘔吐生疾，氣噎深喉，血流中質。玄風潛吹，元精不凝，柔閒在抱，呼哭莫應。既未及殤，詎可等彭，肝腸燼起，無奈此情！³²

As the above three epitaphs show, while epitaphs for those who died young routinely attribute filial piety, cleverness, and intuition to the deceased, overall, the descriptions of their personalities and experiences are quite different from the formulaic descriptions of childhood and youth in epitaphs for adult men and women. The stories are much more detailed, and the youngsters' unique experiences are dutifully noted: Guangniangzi was torn between pleasing her grandmother and caring for her mother, Dou Pangu did not walk until the age of five, and Li Desun died in her father's embrace. Most importantly, the texts center on the deceased's relationship with family members, especially their interactions with the parents.

These patterns are evident in the epitaph for Wang Lie as well. While the text did not provide the author's identity or name, most likely it was written by a close family friend or a relative on behalf of the parents. As most seventh-century epitaphs did not list their authors' names, we cannot rule out the possibility that it was penned by Wang Lie's father. From the text we learned that Wang Lie's parents cherished the fact that he loved literature and was an admirer of Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340–278 BCE):

[Wang Lie] was born majestic and intelligent. At a young age he conducted himself with modesty and humility. His filiality and reverence derived from his inborn nature; his respect for brothers was fused in his innate character. He was not interested in having fun and playing games and was unconcerned when facing marvelous treasures. He set his mind on broad learning, and always carried fine books to ponder and savor. Thus, he could spontaneously compose a short piece when catching a breeze or in the light of the moon; holding wine cup and ink brush, he never stopped writing. At the age of fifteen, he admired the ancients.

生而岐嶷，幼履溫恭，孝敬發自天機，友悌融乎本質。性不戲弄，對奇寶而不觀；志在多聞，挾良書而玩讀。至於風前月下，率爾成章，玉露銀鈎，何嘗絕筆。年裁志學，追慕古人。

³¹Pengzu (ca. 1237 or 1214–1100 BCE) is a legendary Daoist deity who lived for more than 800 years.

³²“Tang Bohaiwang wudaisun Chen Xu Yin Cai guancha panguan jiancha yushi lixing Li Rengshu sisui nü Desun muzhiming bing xu” 唐渤海王五代孫陳許澈蔡觀察判官監察御史裏行李仍叔四歲女德孫墓誌銘並序, *MZHB Yuanhe* 120.

Wang Lie's literary pursuit was so fervent that his parents suspected he was communicating with the spirit of Qu Yuan:

He looked as if he contained spirits; he spoke as if he were communicating with the celestial. Sometimes he would compose poems; and sometimes he would write "farewell." He secretly hid away all that he had written.

狀有精物，語涉神交，或有賦詩，或題永訣。凡所述作，密自藏之。

Then one day "he suddenly took off on his own" (*huer sixing* 忽爾私行). When his parents opened his casket of letters, they found more than ten pages of farewell poems and letters, making repeated reference to "pursuits of the river" (*fu shui er qu* 赴水而去). With that clue, they searched for him in panic, and eventually found out that he had drowned himself in the Luo River. In eulogizing Wang Lie, the parents again emphasized Wang Lie's fascination with Qu Yuan:

Pitiful was Young Scholar Wang,
innately endowed with exceptional brilliance.
At a young age he was intent on learning;
reaching the year of capping,³³ he made light of his life.
His devotion to righteousness was exceedingly fervent;
his valiant aspirations could not be suppressed.
Reading books [about Qu Yuan], he gave his life to this ancient one;
encountering [Qu Yuan's] favor, he became increasingly distraught.
He had the same aspiration as Hairuo;
his spirit matched that of Feng Yi.³⁴
Leaping into the cowry gate,
he went to that court of pearl.³⁵
We buried his body on the Mang ridge,
a scenic, remote cemetery.
Indignant the gathering of clouds over the peak;
melancholy the sound of the trees on the grave mound.
The long ailanthus and the short mushroom were made even;
the ages of Pengzu and those who die young were averaged.
We record the intensity of his character in life,
so his fine reputation can be passed on after his death.

惜矣王生，素稟奇英。
小年志學，弱冠輕生。
義風多烈，雄心不平。
觀書殉古，遇寵逾驚。
海若同志，馮夷叶靈。
投茲貝闕，赴彼珠庭。

³³*Ruoguan* 弱冠, the year of capping, refers to the age of 20. The author probably intentionally used the term as a consolation to the family, as Wang Lie died a few years before reaching the age of capping.

³⁴Hairuo 海若 was the God of the Sea; Feng Yi 馮夷 was the God of the Yellow River.

³⁵"Leaping into this cowry gate, [he] went to that pearl court" alludes to Qu Yuan's poem "The River Earl" (Hebo 河伯).

殞骸邱嶺，闕景佳城。
 峰雲憤結，壠樹悲聲。
 齊椿菌之脩短，混彭殤之口齡。
 紀生前之氣烈，垂歿後之芳名。

Did these epitaphs reflect a common practice in commemorating those who died young? To what extent did the parents and Tang society follow the traditions extolled in *The Book of Rites*? Among the extant Tang epitaphs, the “Epitaph for Wang Lie” is the only epitaph that recorded a posthumous name for a child, so it may be a unique case. However, addressing their sons and daughters as *shang* was quite common and possibly a new phenomenon. Among the thirty pre-Tang epitaphs for those who died young I have collected, none of them called the deceased a *shang*.³⁶ On the other hand, among the 118 Tang epitaphs for the young, twenty-three of them addressed the deceased as *shang*, with the earliest one dated to 686.³⁷ The usage of *shang* probably denoted the expanding role of epitaph writing in the Tang: epitaphs were not only a medium of commemorating the dead but also an important venue for the living to express their moral values and ideals. In other words, *shang* accentuated the values inherent in the parent-child relation. In addition, the renewed reverence toward Confucian ritual texts, embodied in the *Rites of the Kaiyuan Period of the Great Tang* (*Da Tang Kaiyuan li* 大唐開元禮) issued by the Tang court in 732, might also have influenced the popularity of such usage.

Indeed, the way Tang parents addressed their children in the epitaphs seems highly complex and wrought with emotion. Among the epitaphs for children that addressed the deceased as *shang*, some specified the age ranks (*zhang* 長 or *shang* 上, *zhong* 中, *xia* 下): five are listed as *Zhangshang* or *Shangshang* 上殤, their ages are between sixteen and nineteen,³⁸ two are *zhongshang*, ages thirteen and fifteen,³⁹ and two are *Xiashang*, ages ten and eleven.⁴⁰ Others were simply addressed as *shangzi* 殤子 (*shang* son) or *shangnü* 殤女 (*shang* daughter). The epitaph written by Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759–818) for his grandson who died at thirteen addressed him as *shangsun* 殤孫 (*shang* grandson).⁴¹ In addition, some epitaphs did not specify in the title, but mentioned the age rank in the text. For example, the epitaph written by Bai Juyi for his brother who died at the age of nine begins with this sentence: “The *Xiashang* of

³⁶These thirty epitaphs came from the following collections: Zhao Wanli 趙萬里, *Han Wei Nan Bei chao muzhi jishi* 漢魏南北朝墓誌集釋 (Taipei: Dingwen Shuju, 1972); Zhao Chao 趙超, *Han Wei Nan Bei chao muzhi huibian* 漢魏南北朝墓誌彙編 (Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, 1992); Yu Ping 于平, *Zhongguo lidai muzhi huibian* 中國歷代墓誌彙編 (Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, 1992); Wu Shuping 吳樹平 and Wu Ning’ou 吳甯歐, *Sui Tang Wudai muzhi huibian* 隋唐五代墓誌彙編 (Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, 1992); Luo Xin 羅新 and Ye Wei 葉煒, *Xinchu Wei Jin Nan Bei chao muzhi shuzheng* 新出魏晉南北朝墓誌疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2005). Among them, only one epitaph, “Li Jingxun muzhi” 李靜訓墓誌, dated in 608, was dedicated to a girl. One possibility of such omission might be because these epitaphs were not written by parents.

³⁷“Shangshang Gaoshi muzhiming,” QTW 216.

³⁸MZHB Tianbao 15, Yuanhe 90, Huichang 42, Xiantong 009, and QTW 216.

³⁹XSMZ 422 and 455.

⁴⁰MZHB Tianbao 149, QTW 581 (Liu Zongyuan for his daughter).

⁴¹For a translation of Quan Deyu’s epitaph for his grandson, see, Anna Shields, “A Married Daughter and a Grandson,” in *Chinese Funerary Biographies: An Anthology of Remembered Lives*, edited by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, Ping Yao, and Cong Ellen Zhang (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 72–74.

the Bai family was named Youmei” (*Baishi Xiashang yue Youmei* 白氏下殤曰幼美).⁴²

It is worth noting that while *The Book of Rites* discourages parents from displaying outward mourning for those who died before the age of eight, and insists that the younger the child, the less time the parents should mourn his or her passing, quite a few Tang epitaphs addressed their young children, some as young as four and five, as *shang*. The epitaph for Zheng Xingzhe 鄭行者 who died at the age of four, for example, was titled “Epitaph for *Shang* son Zheng Xingzhe” (Tang Shangzi Zheng Xingzhe 唐殤子鄭行者墓誌).⁴³ It was authored by the father, Zheng Su 鄭肅, who wrote with intense sorrow and grief:

The *shang* son’s family name is Zheng; his given name Xingzhe; he was my eldest son. He truly possessed the quality of majesty and brilliance and a nature of talent and intelligence. He treated his elders with full devotion. In conversations and interactions, he was always quick and deft. He understood the gist of all human affairs. The only thing he did not get a chance to attain was schooling. Neighbors and friends were all astounded at his prodigiousness and considered him a precious treasure. Everyone thought he would amaze the world with brilliant feats and rise to the top in no time. Who could anticipate that this would not come to pass? He died at the tender age of four. Alas, how painful this is! Editor Li Dai who excels at writing once wrote “Record of a Child Prodigy,” recounting Xingzhe’s stories and conduct. Alas, he died in the tenth month, third year of the Yuanhe reign (808) and was temporarily buried in Mongshan. It has been twenty-one years! My guilty crime caused Heaven to abandon me, and now I have lost both parents. Our ancestral cemetery is located in the northern plain of Boyi township, Yanshi country. In a few days, we will conduct a joint burial of your grandfather and bury you next to his tomb. You are a sensible child and will surely be a good grandson to him. You will serve him on my behalf, and please him in the underworld. How happy may that be! I am old, weak, sad, and sick, and I wail in front of you. What can I say! What can I say!

殤子姓鄭氏，行者其名，余之元子也。實有岐嶷之資，聰慧之性，奉尊上曲盡其情，意備應對，每見其敏捷，大凡人事，盡得機要。所闕者未知書耳。繇是鄉黨驚視，目為奇重，咸以為異時必能飛鳴驚人，一舉千里。豈期不實，四歲而夭，嗚呼痛哉！校書郎李戴工為文，嘗錄其行事為異童志。嗚呼！爾夭於元和三年十月權窆於邛阜之別墅，逮今廿一年矣。余罪畔不天，再集荼蓼，偃師縣毫邑鄉北原，吾先人之所宅，越翌日，合祔上先府君之塋，是用歸爾骨於大墓之側，爾其有知，當為弄孫，代吾左右，承顏泉隧，其樂如何。吾殘骸哀瘵，臨爾一慟，竟何言哉！竟何言哉！

Zheng Xingzhe died at the age of four, and if *The Book of Rites* were to be followed should not have been addressed as *shang*, let alone in a lengthy commemoration twenty-one years after his death. More interestingly, some parents also addressed their children who were older than nineteen as *shang*. In “Funeral Inscription with Preface for the Late *Shang* Daughter of the Yang clan of Hongnong” (Tang gu Hongnong Yangshi shangnu muming bing xu 唐故弘農楊氏殤女墓銘並序), for example, the deceased was a twenty-year-old young woman named Yang Hui 楊慧.

⁴²QTW 679.

⁴³MZHB Dahe 016.

At the age of the hairpin (fifteen), she lost her father. After the mourning period for him ended, she became ill and never got a chance to marry. As the title indicates, the family addressed her as “*shang*,” possibly to emphasize the pain of losing a daughter.⁴⁴

Buddhist Influence on Mourning the Young

In his study of early perception of childhood as seen in early art, Wu Hung points out that mourning the young before the Tang largely focuses on didactic themes, though parental love and sorrow did appear in some forms of writing. Wu Hung cites a eulogy inscribed beside a relief portraying a child who died in 170 CE as a rare example of such a parent–child bond.⁴⁵ Writing about mourning a child gradually increased during the era of disunion. One of the most well-known literary pieces is Jiang Yan’s 江淹 (444–505) “Rhapsody on Grieving over My Beloved Son” (Shang aizi fu 傷愛子賦). In addition, the number of epitaphs for those who died young increased as well, though most of the texts are concise and abstract, having been authored by literati or officials outside of the family. The Tang dynasty would witness a dramatic increase in writings about mourning a child. Poems expressing the sorrow of losing a child began to appear in the eighth century; the most well-known piece is Du Fu’s 杜甫 (712–770) poem memorializing the loss of his young son to starvation.⁴⁶ During the ninth century, poems solely dedicated to those who died young became popular. Yuan Zhen, who lost seven of his twelve children, for example, left two poems mourning his young daughters⁴⁷ and composed ten poems mourning his only son.⁴⁸ Bai Juyi also wrote several poems mourning his young daughter Jinluanzi 金銮子, who died at the age of two. In addition to poems, many literati composed requiem *jifen*.⁴⁹ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that that epitaph writing for those who died young became distinctively intimate and expressive.

The popularity of writing about mourning a child might be closely linked to the increasing importance of a proper burial for children, resulting from the popularity of Buddhist ideas of the afterlife and nether world. Scholars have long established that Tang people often consciously sought a Buddhist way to die, either taking Buddhist names (*fahao* 法號) before their death or opting for cremation. The Buddhist influence on Tang perspectives on death was also reflected in the development of the concept of purgatory. As the *Scripture of the Ten Kings* (*Fo shuo shiwangjing* 佛說十王經)⁵⁰ and *Emperor Taizong Enters the Netherworld* (*Tang Taizong ruming jin* 唐太宗入冥記)⁵¹ show, Tang people envisioned visiting the underworld, where ten powerful

⁴⁴MZHB Xiantong 103.

⁴⁵Wu Hung, “Private Love and Public Duty: Images of Children in Early Chinese Art,” in Kinney, *Chinese Views of Childhood*, 82.

⁴⁶“Zi Jing fu Fengxianxian yonghuai wubaizi” 自京赴奉先縣詠懷五百字. Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 [1645–1719], et. al., *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008 reprint, hereafter, QTS), 216.

⁴⁷“Ku xiaonü Xiangzhen” 哭小女降真 and “Ku nü Fan sishi yun” 哭女樊四十韻, QTS 404.

⁴⁸“Ku zi shishou” 哭子十首, QTS 404.

⁴⁹Wu Hung, 1995, 138–40.

⁵⁰For an excellent study of the script as well as Buddhist influence on Tang perception of death, see, Stephen F. Teiser, “Having Once Died and Returned to Life: Representations of Hell in Medieval China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 48.2 (1988), 433–64.

⁵¹Stein 2630, transcribed in Huang Zheng 黃征 and Zhang Yongquan 張湧泉, eds. *Dunhuang bianwen jiaozhu* 敦煌變文校註 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1997), 319–332. Although the text was dated 906, the tale was widely circulated not long after Taizong’s death in 649. See, Gao Guofan 高國藩, *Dunhuang Suwenhua xue* 敦煌俗文化學 (Shanghai: Sanlian Shudian, 1999), 349–84.

officials oversaw the judgment of a deceased person's deeds in his or her past life. As a result, every individual's dying became a very important matter.

Evidence of parents' concerns for the wellbeing in the afterlife of their children who died young is the popularity of afterlife marriage (*minghun* 冥婚), which was well documented in Tang epitaphs and Dunhuang guidebooks, as well as in Tang vernacular stories.⁵² Among Tang epitaphs for those who died young but recorded as married, for example, fourteen listed their marriage as *minghun*. From the sample prayers for the *minghun* ceremony (when the coffins of the *minghun* bride and groom were buried jointly) we learned that the major concern for the parents who arranged a *minghun* was that their children would sleep alone in the dark world and lack the intimacy between man and woman (獨寢幽泉, 每移風月).⁵³ Even after the burial, Tang parents resorted to various ways to ensure their children were well protected on their journey to the West Paradise. A colophon on a copy of *Sutra of Golden Light* (Jinguangming Jing 金光明經) discovered in Dunhuang, noted that the copy was commissioned by a mother for her deceased son (*wangnan* 亡男), in the hopes that the son might avoid all calamities and reside merrily in paradise (三塗八難, 願莫相過, 花臺蓮宮, 承因遊喜).⁵⁴ Among Dunhuang sutra copies that record dedications, at least eight were dedicated to a deceased daughter or son.⁵⁵ Tang Parents also commissioned images of the Buddha⁵⁶ and Buddhist statues⁵⁷ for their deceased children.

All these examples show that, while *The Book of Rites* set restrictions on how parents should mourn their children, Buddhist teaching did not have such rules of constraints. In fact, it encouraged the mourning of all deaths.⁵⁸ In addition, Dunhuang texts show that Buddhism had a great influence in Tang funeral procedures for children, which became much more detailed and complex than *The Book of Rites* stipulated.⁵⁹ A poem written by the Tang dynasty monk Wang Fanzhi 王梵志, which described a family saying goodbye to a deceased child, for example, not only does not distinguish rank by age but also offers an outpouring of emotion:

⁵²For a discussion on the connections between Buddhist perception of the netherworld and the popularity of *minghun*, see Ping Yao, "Until Death Do Us Unite: Afterlife Marriages in Tang China, 618–906." *Journal of Family History* 27.3 (2002), 207–26.

⁵³Stein1727. Huang Yongwu 黃永武, et al., *Dunhuang baozaong* 敦煌寶藏 (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chuban gongsi, 1981), vol. 13, 104–5.

⁵⁴The colophon was dated in 900. See Ikeda On 池田温, *Chūgoku kodai shahon shikigo shūroku* 中國古代寫本識語集錄 (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo, 1990), 438. For discussions of Buddhist influence on burial for children, see, Jiang Qinjian 蔣勤儉, "Dunhuang wenxue zhong de chanyu minsu yanjiu" 敦煌文學中的產育民俗研究 (PhD Dissertation, Yunnan University, 2015), 187–204.

⁵⁵Two of them were probably for adult children (I.O.Ch.00267 and S1171), but the rest were likely for unmarried children, though there is no evidence of their age. They are S.592 (a mother for her daughter, dated 688), Shangtu 上圖 026 (a father for his son, 707), P.3031 (a father for his son, 712), Beihongzi 北洪字 71 (a father for his son, 766), S. 2924 (a father for his son, 8th century), and S.2564 (a parent for the daughter, 8th century).

⁵⁶For example, Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 (634–689), "Yizhou zhangshi Hu Shuli wei wangnü zaohua zan" 益州長史胡樹禮為亡女造畫讚, QTW 166.

⁵⁷For example, an inscription on a stone Guanyin statue dated in 761 reads, "pure and faithful woman Hou respectfully built a Guanyin Bodhisattva statue for her deceased son Li Huzi" (清信女侯為亡男李胡子敬造觀音菩薩一軀). Lu Zengxiang 陸增祥, *Baqionshi jinshi buzheng* 八瓊室金石補正 (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1985), 206.

⁵⁸Liao Yifang, 2009, 121.

⁵⁹See, Jiang Qinjian, "Dunhuang wenxue zhong de chanyu minsu yanjiu."

Parents cherish their sons and daughters,
 love and protect them like a pearl in the palm.
 Death came upon the child and the parents sorrowfully cover their faces,
 putting clothing over the child's head.⁶⁰
 The elders cry over the newly dead,
 for the entire night, they cannot stop.
 When daylight comes, they haplessly send off the child,
 bury? their baby amongst wild grasses.
 Dad and Mom's heart broken into pieces,
 grandparents and great-grandparents grieve together.
 You alone stay in this deserted place,
 not knowing the passing of spring, summer, or autumn.

父母憐男女， 保愛掌中珠。
 一死手遮面， 將衣即覆頭。
 鬼樸哭真鬼， 連夜不知休。
 天明奈何送， 埋著棘蒿丘。
 耶孃腸寸斷， 曾祖共悲愁。
 獨守丘荒界， 不知春夏秋。⁶¹

Related to these practices were Buddhist services for the deceased. In multiple Dunhuang sample prayers for deceased children, it becomes very clear that age ranks were not distinguished. The death of an infant was mourned as sorrowfully as the death of an older child. One sample prayer to be recited at Buddhist services by a monk on behalf of a mother supposed that the child “just began to walk three to five steps” (*nengxing sanbu wubu* 能行三步五步). The prayer was recited on behalf of the “loving mother” (*cimu* 慈母) who had also lost her husband.⁶² Another sample prayer, possibly for services at home, was clearly written for a toddler. It reads:

You had just started learning to walk, but had yet to distinguish between sitting and standing. You could form sentences and words, but had yet to appreciate propriety. We hoped you would be filial like [Meng Zong 孟宗], whose cry in the winter made bamboo shoots grow, or like [Wang Xiang 王祥], who lay on the ice to catch fish.⁶³ Who could expect that the emerald branch's fragrance would be scattered by wind, and the moon's brightness buried by clouds. Father and mother are grief-stricken and pained by the fact that you will never return. The netherworld is vast; where will your soul rest?

⁶⁰These two lines indicate the ritual of saying goodbye to a dead person. See, Jiang Qinjian, “Dunhuang wenxue zhong de chanyu minsu yanjiu,” 188–90.

⁶¹P.3418 and P.3724. See Xiang Chu 項楚, *Wang Fanzhi shi jiaozhu* 王梵志詩校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2010), 563.

⁶²S.2832. See Huang Zheng 黃征 and Wu Wei 吳偉, *Dunhuang yuanwen ji* 敦煌願文集 (Chengdu: Yuelu Shushe, 1995), 102. For a study of Prayers for the Dead (*wangwen* 亡文), see, Zheng Zhiming 鄭志明 “Dunhuang xiejuan wangwen de shengming jiaoyu” 敦煌寫卷「亡文」的生命教育, *Pumen Xuebao* 19.1 (2004), 1–21.

⁶³Meng Zong's (d. 271) mother was ill and needed bamboo shoots for a nourishing soup. This was during a freezing winter, and Meng Zong felt hapless and cried in the bare forest. Soon bamboos grew out of the ground for him. Wang Xiang (184–268) lay on ice to catch fish for his stepmother. Both stories are collected in the *Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* (Ershisi xiao 二十四孝).

學步起坐未分，乍語乍言，尊卑未辨。將冀永抽林笋，常臥冰魚；豈期翠枝芳而風折高柯，蟾月朗而雲埋玉質。父母有斷腸之痛，念子無再返之期。玄夜茫茫，魂兮何託？

In addition to prayers for the very young, Dunhuang sample prayers also provided guidance to families who lost their sons and daughters in their teens with similar language and the same emphasis on the sorrow of the parents. These prayers are mostly entitled “Prayer for a Deceased Daughter” (*wangnüwen* 亡女文) or “Prayer for a Deceased Son” (*wangnanwen* 亡男文). These texts are very similar to Tang epitaphs for those who died young. The only difference is that the prayers do not provide family background and funeral arrangement. Otherwise, both describe the character quality of the son or daughter, as well as the parents’ sorrow and grief. For example, in Dunhuang manuscript S.1441, one of the texts is a ninth-century *wangnüwen*, to be recited during one of the Forty-Ninth Day Memorial Rites.⁶⁴ The prayer reads:

Our deceased daughter was in her prime and had ravishing features. She was beautiful and charming: her face was more alluring than red lotus, her countenance as gentle as willow leaves.⁶⁵ As she grew to be a full moon, bright in both dawn and evening, the moonlight was just shining through, reflected clearly on the water. Just when we hoped she would be with us for a long time, serving her mother and respecting the elders, who would expect that her karma arrived suddenly and she would return to the netherworld? Therefore her mother longs for her beautiful figure; her father recalls her flowery face. Their bodies are filled with sadness and sorrow, their hearts broken into pieces.

亡女乃芳年艷質，綺歲妖妍，臉奪紅蓮，顏分柳葉。始欲桂枝茂盛，皎皎於晨昏，瞻(蟾)影方輝，澄澄於水面。將謂夕流(久留)世塵，侍母恭尊，□(何)圖業運奔臨，奄歸大夜。所以母思玉質，父憶花容，五內哀悲，肝腸寸絕。⁶⁶

It is very likely that such expressions of sorrow for children of all ages, widely performed in Buddhist rituals, propelled Tang parents to expand their mourning repertoire for their children. In reading Tang epitaphs for children, it is clear that the phrases and tones in the texts are quite similar to those of the Buddhist prayers for deceased children, pointing to the intersection of the two genres. An epitaph of 801 for a girl named Dugu Baosheng 獨孤保生 is another excellent example. It describes Baosheng’s “appearance and virtues” (*rong de* 容德) as “superior to others” (*guoren* 過人), yet, unexpectedly “Heaven endowed her with beautiful features but without granting her longevity” (天与茂質，而不降永年). Baosheng died at the age of fifteen *sui*. The author, Baosheng’s father Dugu Shiheng 獨孤士衡, lamented:

Alas, the joy of having you still feels so real, yet the contentment of seeing you in front of me is no more. Moreover, when you passed away, I was away on an official

⁶⁴According to Huang Zheng and Wu Wei, one of the prayers in S.1441 points to the Zhang Yichao 張議潮 period (851–872).

⁶⁵Willow leaves, *liuye* 柳葉, is traditionally an analogy of a beauty’s eyebrow; however, here it can also be understood as a description of her expression.

⁶⁶Huang and Wu, *Dunhuang yuanwen*, 64–5.

duty; thus, seeing you off now multiplies my sorrows. Grief-stricken and in deep sorrow, my mind and spirit are at a complete loss.

嗚呼！膝下之歡，依然如在；目前之慰，今則無期。况喪爾之時，吾從吏役；送汝之際，倍切常情。哀傷痛悼，心神失墜。

The elegy exclaims:

The way of heaven is fair, only kindness can bring fortune. Yet such a beautiful daughter perishes like a candle in the wind. In the past you comforted my mind; now my heart aches for you. Caressing the coffin I wail loudly, tears drench my shirt. The wild field is desolate, the houses dreary; your loved ones long for you, saddened by the loss. A cherished jade is sunk away. The pain and sorrow are hard to forget; it is our hope that your fine reputation will be passed down for tens of thousands of years.

天道無親，惟善是福。如何淑女，掩隨風燭。昔慰我懷，今悲我心。撫棺慟哭，涕淚盈襟。原野蕭條兮閭里悽涼，親愛念結兮目斷心傷。片玉將沉兮痛恨難忘，千秋萬歲兮永播餘芳。⁶⁷

Even though the elegy itself does not necessarily reflect Buddhist perceptions of death and the afterlife, it reads very similarly to the Buddhist prayers cited above. An in-depth analysis of the intersection of the two genres would require a close comparison of two large data sets, which is beyond the scope of this investigation; suffice it to say, both prayers for teenage daughters (*wangnüwen*) and epitaphs for *zhongshang* and *zhangshang* daughters seem to share an emphasis on a girl's appearance and deep sorrow when she has died during her youthful prime. It is noteworthy that these two texts are also very similar to Han Yu's requiem and grave notice for his daughter Na, especially in terms of the outward expression of utter despair.⁶⁸ A leading representative of the Tang Confucian revival known for his anti-Buddhist views, Han Yu probably would not have attributed the rise of mourning for daughters to Buddhism. In fact, in his requiem, Han Yu recounted that he was exiled to the south due to his attack on the Tang imperial house's devotion to Buddhism. By then Na was already gravely ill, and she died during the journey. The fact that his requiem and grave notice closely resemble *wangnüwen* shows that during the ninth century a father's mourning for his daughter and the expression of parental love through literary composition were widespread and common to the extent that they became disassociated with Buddhism.

In addition to expression of grief, Tang epitaphs for those who died young also reveal aspects of parent-child relations that have been overlooked by scholars. The epitaph for Dugu Baosheng, for example, points to a father who was away on official assignment, and as a result could not bid farewell to a dying child. Such a mixture of sorrow and guilt also appear in several other epitaphs for those who died young. Some epitaphs reveal that, when the father's death preceded the child's, it was often his brother who took care of burial arrangements and authored the funeral biography. The "Funeral Inscription for the *Shang* Son Mu Ruoyu" (*Shangzi Mu Ruoyu muzhi* 殯

⁶⁷XSMZ 331.

⁶⁸For an excellent translation of the *jiwen*, see Pei-yi Wu, "Childhood Remembered: Parents and Children in China, 800 to 1700," 139.

子穆若愚墓誌), for example, was written by Mu Yuan 穆員 (fl. 750–810), younger brother of Ruoyu's father. Ruoyu died at the age of seven and was to be buried next to his father.⁶⁹ In other cases, paternal uncles who arranged clan reburials were most likely to pen the epitaphs for all family members, including those who died young. In “Funeral Inscription for the *Shang* Son Dugu Weiba” (Shangzi Weiba muzhi 殤子韋八墓誌), we are told that the young boy was a son of a military official. He died of an illness at the age of five, on the twenty-second day of the twelfth month in the sixth year of the Dali reign (771). The author Dugu Ji 獨孤及 (725–777), was Weiba's *zhongfu* 仲父 (oldest uncle, but younger than Weiba's father). He arranged Weiba's reburial a year and half after his death.⁷⁰ The 829 epitaph for the youngest daughter of the Khitan General Wang Chengzong 王承宗 (d. 820) reveals that her funeral was arranged by the general's younger brother Wang Chengyuan 王承元 (801–834) who raised her after her father passed away. Her youngest uncle Wang Chengtai 王承泰 penned the epitaph's narrative section, and Wang Chengyuan composed the elegy.⁷¹ In the “Funeral Inscription for the Late *Shang* Son Xiangwu Marquis Li Yuan of the Great Tang” (Da Tang gu shangzi Xiangwuhou Li Yuan muzhiming 大唐故殤子襄武侯李願墓誌銘), dated 720, we are told that Li Yuan, who died at the age of fifteen, lost his father when he was just seven. His funeral and burial were arranged by his uncles after consulting with clan members (*bo xi zhong xi juzu er mou* 伯兮仲兮聚族而謀). Though the epitaph did not list the author's name, very like it was written by one of his uncles.⁷²

In some cases, maternal relatives seemed to have played a big role as well. The “Funeral Inscription for the *Shang* Son of the Li Family, the Tang Dynasty” (You Tang Li shangzi muzhi zhi ming 有唐李殤子墓誌之銘) reports that the deceased, Li Hongjun 李洪鈞, was a descendant of the imperial clan. He was said to be a prodigy who began to talk when he was just seven months old. Li became sick when he was only five, and he died at his maternal grandfather's residence.⁷³ We also learn that when a deceased son was close to marriage age his parents would arrange to find an heir for him. A 690 epitaph entitled “Funeral Inscription for Mr. Gao, the Third Son of Duke of Shen of the Great Tang” (Da Tang Shengugong disanzi Gaojun muzhi 大唐申國公第三子高君墓誌) was dedicated to Gao Xu 高續, the great grandson of the Tang founding hero Gao Shilian 高士廉 (575–647). The epitaph reports:

On the third day of the fifth month, the first year of the Wenming Reign (684), at the young age of nineteen, you passed away at the private residence in Chongren Lane. That year, you were temporarily buried at the Bailu Plain. On the twenty-eighth day of the first month in the first year of the Zaichu Reign (690), you were reburied at the clan cemetery in Shaoling Plain. Your elder brother's son Shouyi will continue your line.

君甫年十九，以文明元年五月三日，終於崇仁里之私第，其年權殯於白鹿原。以載初元年歲次庚寅壹月己卯朔廿八日景午，遷窆于先塋少陵原，禮也。兄子受益爲嗣。⁷⁴

⁶⁹QTW *juan* 785.

⁷⁰QTW *juan* 391.

⁷¹BLMZ 263.

⁷²BLMZXB 81.

⁷³MZHB Tianbao 106.

⁷⁴XSMZ 120.

An epitaph for Gao Fan 高璠, another descendent of Gao Shilian, points to the fact that children born to concubines were much mourned as well. The epitaph, however, showed praises on the principal mother, having been authored and calligraphed (*shu* 書) by her cousin Cui Tan 崔坦 and nephew Cui Yuanguai 崔元龜. The epitaph, entitled “Funeral Inscription for the Eldest Son of Gao Chuo of Bohai, the Late Vice Director of Bureau of Sacrifices, with Preface” (Tang gu shangshu cibuyuanwai Bohai Gao Chuo zhangnan muzhiming bing xu 唐故尚書祠部員外渤海高綽長男墓誌銘并序), reads:

The ancestors of Mr. Gao were descendants of the Duke of Xiu in Bohai. The Vice Director's name is Chou. He had two sons: the eldest is named Fan; the younger one is named Zan. Both sons were born to a concubine. Gao Fan's mother was Miss Cui of Boling; she was the daughter of my fourth uncle. Her wifely virtue and motherly manner were unmatched. Her effort in raising and educating the two sons surpassed those who raise and educate their own children. How can it be that Fan, as young as sixteen, contracted illness, and a half year later died on the eighth day of the seventh month, the sixth year of the Xiantong reign (865) in the capital? On the twenty-fourth day of the eighth month of the same year, he was buried in his ancestors' cemetery in Dazuo Village, Yishan Township, Wannian County. It was in accordance with the Rites. Alas, you were fond of learning at a young age, and soon excelled in poetry. In the spring before your death, you had already passed the subject of Filial and Incorrupt.⁷⁵ The Vice Director's father was Gao Jiang, Administrator of the Personnel Evaluation Section in Huzhou (Henan). The Administrator's father was Gao Xun, Counselor to Lingnan Commander, acting Investigating Censor. Vice Director [Gao Jiang] had passed the Advanced Scholar examination and was a vice commander in several important regions. Since his promotion to the Department of State Affairs, his fine reputation had prospered. What a pity that fortune and merits were transient, and his misfortunate also affected his majestic son. The family should be glorious and prominent, and this will be realized by Gao Zan, yet we are unable to foretell. I am not particularly good at fancy words, but since you were my nephew, I dare to be straightforward in recounting the events. Worrying about the changing landscape, we inscribe the epitaph onto a stone slab. The Elegy: Mountains are high, rivers deep, how come people of abundant virtues do not live long? The only thing that lingers on is the white sun. The son of the Gaos is no more; this is another proof.

高氏之先，起於渤海蔣公之裔也。祠部諱綽，有子二人，長曰璠，次曰瓚，皆出于側室。太夫人博陵崔氏，第四房也。婦道母儀，世稱罕比。撫育二子，過於己出。而何璠年纔十六，遭疾半歲，以咸通六年七月八日，歿于京師，其年八月廿四日，葬於萬年縣義善鄉大作村，祔先塋之禮也。嗚呼！尔早歲好學，復善篇什，謝世之春，已擢孝廉科。祠部之先曰綽，

⁷⁵It is unclear whether Gao Fan actually passed the Filial and Incorrupt (*xiaolian* 孝廉) Exam. Most scholars believed that there was no such Filial and Incorrupt examination during the Tang dynasty, others argued that this was not a regular examination subject. Some scholars suggested that during the second half of the Tang dynasty, Understanding Classics (*mingjing* 明經) degree holders were often called Filial and Incorrupt. See, Gong Yanming 龔延明, “Tang Xiaolianke zhifei jiqi zhicheng yanbian” 唐孝廉科置廢及其指稱演變, *Lishi yanjiu*, 2012.2, 174–182.

湖州功曹參軍。功曹之先曰訓，嶺南節度參謀，攝監察御史。祠部進士上第，累佐名藩，泊昇臺閣，雅望鬱然。何福善之不永，復夭及於令子，將來榮顯，希在於瓚，而未可知也。余非留心於文字，以爾諸甥，直叙其事。紀陵谷之變，刻石為銘曰：山之高，水之深，何碩德之不永，空留白日之長。已矣高子，用此釋之。⁷⁶

From the title it is clear that Gao Fan's father had died before him, and therefore could not write his epitaph as most Tang fathers did. Probably because of that, this 865 epitaph lacks the sorrow and grief that are so apparent in other ninth-century epitaphs for children.

Yet, epitaphs also reveal that a living father could be too distressed to compose an epitaph for his child and would have to rely on those near and dear to take on the task. An 867 epitaph for a young girl named Lu Xin'er 路心兒 recalls that the father was so grief-stricken that he thought only his closest friend Zheng Yue 鄭嶽 could possibly express his sorrow (*dao shangyan* 道傷咽) and allow her beauty and virtue (*xiuhui* 秀惠) be known to later generations (*bu mianyu houzhe* 不泯于後者).⁷⁷ In some cases, parents hesitated to ask a more famous writer, even if it had been their dying child's request. According to Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), before her death due to illness at the age of fifteen in 810, a young girl named Ma Leiwu 馬雷五, Liu's distant relative, had this request: "I heard that Mr. Liu used to praise me for being charming and clever. Now I had the misfortune of dying. Could he possibly write something to be inscribed on my tomb?" (吾聞柳公嗜巧我慧我，今不幸死矣，安得分之文誌我於墓?) However, the parents did not dare to inform the well-known Tang intellectual. After hearing about the request on the day of burial, Liu Zongyuan wrote the text, had it scribed onto a tile, and "entombed it after the funeral" (*zhui er na zhu mu* 追而納諸墓).⁷⁸

Reading epitaphs for those who died young, especially epitaphs from the ninth century, it is quite clear that Tang parents' open display of sorrow and grief for their children, regardless of age and gender, represents an acceptance of Buddhist practices of mourning. While they addressed their children as *shang* in accordance with *The Book of Rites*, the emphasis is on mourning their own child rather than on proprieties of age and ranges of expression. And probably because of such emphasis, epitaphs for those who died young do not reflect a clear difference in how boys and girls were portrayed or mourned. The gender difference in these texts seem to be less prominent than those in epitaphs for adult men and women. Nevertheless the popularity of mourning sons and daughters through epitaph writing, as well as the complex pictures these epitaphs present, allow us to explore a dimension of Tang parent-child relationship that has been largely understudied.

Conclusion

A survey of Tang epitaphs for those who died young makes it clear that funerary writing had increasingly become a medium for parents to cope with the loss of a child. Compared to epitaphs from pre-Tang eras, the epitaphs discussed in this article are distinctive in several ways. First, Tang epitaphs routinely used *shang*, a mourning term

⁷⁶XSMZ, 448.

⁷⁷XSMZ 455.

⁷⁸Liu Zongyuan, "Mashi nü Leiwu zangzhi" 馬氏女雷五葬誌, QTW 589.

defined in *The Book of Rites*. While such change is reflection of a broader revival of Confucian rites, it also indicates that, during the Tang, the function of funeral writing expanded to include both the commemoration of the dead and the expression of the parent–child bond. Second, as most epitaphs for those who died young were authored by fathers or other family members, the narratives of their childhood and youth experiences are much more detailed and vivid than those in pre-Tang epitaphs of the same age group and much less formulaic than Tang epitaphs for men and women who died in their later years. More importantly, the rise of epitaphs for children (especially for daughters in the ninth century) reflected a strong influence of Buddhist perceptions of death and Buddhist mourning rituals. As a result, Tang parents ignored the restrictions and decorum stipulated in *The Book of Rites* and mourned their children with outward grief, regardless of their age and gender. In this regard, we can argue that Buddhism not only reshaped Tang mourning practice, but also parent–child relationships.

Competing interests. The author declares none.