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Death and Funerals among the Minhe Tu (Monguor)

Abstract

Death and proper funeral ceremonies are a serious business for Minhe Tu, because, improperly treated, a deceased will be certain to cause trouble. Lamas have to be buried differently from non-lamas; those who die from natural deaths, differently from those who die from unnatural deaths—which, in the Minhe Tu framework, includes the deaths of children, pregnant women, and young unmarried people. Despite the Cultural Revolution and present-day legislation aimed at changing Tu funeral practices, the latter continue to be practiced.

Key words: funerals — burial practices — lamas — Minhe Tu — coffins — unnatural deaths

INTRODUCTION

DEATH for the Minhe 民和 Tu 土¹ is not an end but merely the conclusion of one revolution of an endlessly spinning wheel of existence. It is taken with great seriousness, for if proper precautions are not observed and the deceased is treated improperly, the spirit will surely return to wreak havoc and ruin on the family; this partially explains why families often spend money in amounts many times their annual income on death services and ceremonies. Death is not an isolated family affair but involves a large network of villagers and kinsmen who are expected to attend and assist.

The Tu have combined various religious elements to create a complex picture of the afterlife. The most common account given for what happens after death is one of the person nearing death and the Lord of Hell sending two guards to escort the deceased back to Hell. The Lord knows the proper time for this because the Book of Life and Death has recorded when the person's allotted time on earth shall come to an end.² The guards come and, at the moment of death, wrap the soul in chains and lead him or her to Hell. This path is a very difficult one requiring passage through many gates by which stand guards who often demand money from the deceased before allowing admission.³ Once in Hell, the person's past life is carefully examined for good and bad deeds. Punishment is then assigned, which may vary from very slight to painfully severe, depending on what evils the person committed. Punishments can include such tortures as being hung up by a hook through the tongue for lying; being nailed through the hands for stealing; being hung by a balance beam (often used in measurements in buying and selling) passed through the flesh for being dishonest with weights and measures; or spending time in Fire Sea, Snake Cave, Scorpion Cave, or Knife Mountain. After a period of atonement, during which recompense is made for previous evil, the deceased is given another life, which may range from that of a very good human life to a very miserable human life to, worse still, the life of some lowly animal

(e.g., a pig).

The following accounts, collected in 1988 and 1989 in Guanting Region of Minhe Hui 回 and Tu Autonomous County, illustrate the foregoing. The first demonstrates the merits of living a life free from dishonesty and vividly depicts the punishment meted out to those who cheat in the course of business transactions.

Douyuanshan

Long ago there lived a man named Douyuanshan, whose father was cruel and ruthless to local people. He often cheated others by lending 1,000 small *sheng* 升 (a unit of measure) of rice and wheat, but when the grain was returned he insisted on using a much larger *sheng* to make the measure. He also cheated people in using the balance beam. But the son, Douyuanshan, was not happy with his father's dishonesty.

One day the father died, and the son burned sacred paper as high as a mountain for his father and asked many lamas to come and chant. He also prepared much rice soup and invited the local impoverished peasants to come and eat. Afterwards, he burned the *sheng* his father had used, broke the dishonest scale, and tried in every way to help the local people.

One night he had a dream in which he roamed about and, in time, came to a city. In the distance he could see a man hanging from a balance-beam scale. He drew near and saw that it was his father, who by this time had fallen from the balance. The father stood up and said, "Oh, my son, you have saved me. If you had not broken the balance and burned the *sheng* that I had previously used, I would probably have never come down from there. I would only have been released when both the balance beam and *sheng* were used up and worn out. And now, my son, please return and do more good things for people so that I may more quickly go to another life. This will also be very beneficial to you."

The son then did return and was even kinder to people. He had been childless, but after he reached the age of 30, he had five sons consecutively, each of which went on to achieve the rank of Number One Scholar.⁴

The following are three accounts of "near-death" experiences that illustrate local beliefs concerning the journey to Hell.

Account One

In 1971 a woman who is still living [in 1989] seemed to die for two

days. The family was about to place her in the coffin when suddenly she regained consciousness and began to moan. She later said, "I walked around a city and the guards of the city said, 'Your time hasn't come yet. Go back,' so I came back."

Account Two

One old man, on the verge of death, began to tremble. When asked why, he replied, "There are two men, dancing in the room, holding chains."

Account Three

An old woman seemed to be dead for one day. Then she regained consciousness and said, "Two soldiers, wrapped with chains, took me to a city. Then the city guards said that the soldiers had taken the wrong person so they sent me back, and I came back to life."

In addition to going to Hell, the Tu also express the idea of a person, after death, going to Tiangere. After death, family members will express the wish that the deceased should quickly and smoothly go to Tiangere, and it is believed that those who go to Tiangere can expect another reincarnation (except for Living Buddhas). In this context, Tiangere suggests a place in the sky, namely Heaven, which is very beautiful, where there is a palace, and where those who go after death will be happy. At the same time, people will say Tiangere is only for the Jade Emperor, his minions, Living Buddhas, and lamas. Tiangere may also be used to suggest simply the sky, as in "Tiangere has changed his face so it will probably rain," suggesting Tiangere is the sky. People may also say: "If you do something bad, Tiangere will see and punish you because Tiangere sees everything that people do." This suggests that Tiangere is comparable to a god, and particularly the Jade Emperor. All this indicates that Tu have combined various elements of the Yellow Sect, Taoism, and the ancient concept of Tiangere to create these views of the afterlife.

Broadly speaking, deaths may be divided into two general categories: deaths of lamas and deaths of non-lamas. For non-lama deaths a further division may be made on the basis of whether the death was "natural" or "unnatural." Natural deaths are those of people advanced in age, who are married or have been married, and have children. "Unnatural" deaths may be described as the deaths of people not in the above category, as well as of those dead from sudden illness, undiagnosed maladies, suicides, accidents, drownings, or skin ulcers (including those who had boils from which pus oozed). The funeral process varies

considerably, depending on which category the deceased is placed in. We shall describe the funeral customs for dead lamas first, then those for non-lamas.

LAMA FUNERALS

Generally, if the lama is advanced in age, or clearly ill with death looming, the coffin is prepared in advance. The coffin is a box with a sloping top on which are the symbols ☉ (sun and moon). It is usually painted red and is rather small, only large enough to accommodate the corpse, which is set in the box in a squatting position just prior to being carried to the cremation ground.

Clan members and immediate family members join in the death watch, and as soon as the lama expires, the *ajiu* (important male maternal relative) is informed.⁵ Quickly, villagers and other relatives are also informed, and on the first day of death, an endless stream of people come to burn paper symbolizing money and flat pieces of fried bread (used on no other occasion but the Spring Festival, the Day of Pure Brightness, and the anniversary of the death of the deceased, and never eaten).

The corpse is then prepared. It is tied into a squatting position, the deceased's best lama clothing is put on, the lama's face is white-washed and covered with yellow silk, the head is crowned with a five-direction hat, and then the body is placed in the center of the north room facing the door.⁶ Directly in front of the corpse is placed a table or chest upon which offerings are placed (fruit, money, large sugar crystals, a bowl of rice in which crossed chopsticks are inserted, bread, joss sticks, oil lamps, etc.). The corpse is not moved until the third day.

Lamas (the number depends on the financial situation of the family, because it is accepted that lamas must be paid and fed) are invited, and they chant until the corpse is removed to the cremation site. Meanwhile, the *jiawu*⁷ busily prepares funeral bread (dough is rolled into approximately 25 × 5 cm strips and then, with a cleaver, a single incision is made lengthwise [the single incision is indicative of death], and then the bread is fried in oil); this generally requires 250 kg of flour and 50 kg of oil. Animals are never slaughtered. The bread must be made, and those who bring offerings to burn before the corpse (and who usually also bring such items as tea bricks, packages of crackers, etc.) are given pieces of this "funeral bread."

On the third day the *ajiu* visits the deceased. He arrives with an entourage, a young man generally going in front holding a large wreath of paper flowers. Behind the *ajiu* walk several old women, loudly

lamenting. Boys have been posted as sentries to watch for and then announce the arrival of the *ajiu*. As soon as his imminent arrival is announced, family members rush out of the home and kneel outside on the ground, and, as the *ajiu* draws near, they kowtow, holding joss sticks. The order of those kneeling in wait for the *ajiu* is that of older people, those of higher generations, and those most closely related to the deceased. They kneel at the front, closest to the approaching *ajiu*. The entire family wails. The *ajiu* enters the home after (usually) a few words of consolation to the family.

The *ajiu* is still much respected. SCHRAM's (1954, 91-99) vivid account of the power accorded the *ajiu* in the case of suicide demonstrates this. In years past, if the *ajiu* discerned the maternal nephew/niece had been driven to death by improper treatment, he could ruin the family by refusing to come for several days (the corpse could not be touched until the *ajiu* came) and then, with a band of followers and kinsmen, might wreck the home and stay camped for several days on the premises, demanding huge sums in compensation for the untimely death. Required to feed the *ajiu* and his group, the family would quickly be financially ruined.

Once inside the courtyard, the *ajiu*, if the death is due to old age or some other cause the family was clearly not responsible for, gives a short speech, assuring the family of his belief that the relative had been kindly treated, etc. Then a *xiaozi* 孝子 (*xiaozi* are always male and include descendants, husbands of descendants, nephews, husbands of nieces, sons of cousins, and husbands of daughters of cousins) holds above his head a serving tray on which lies a long strip of *xiaobu* 孝布 (white cloth) 20-30 *zhang* 丈 (1 *zhang*=3.3 meters) in length. The *ajiu* stands up, takes this cloth and, at a one-*chi* 尺 (1 *chi*=0.3 meter) length from one end, slightly tears the cloth. Then an elder member of the deceased's family cuts the *xiaobu* into one-*chi* pieces and gives all present one piece (*poxiao* 破孝 "distribution of the *xiaobu*").⁸ Before this time, all related families and villagers have sent a representative. All accept *xiaobu*, either tying it around their caps (or scarves, for women), or else around the upper arm.

After *poxiao*, the time for encoffining comes. The coffin is brought into the north room and the door and windows barred to prevent the gaze of the curious. As the corpse is being encoffined, or shortly before, a retinue of loudly wailing women sets out for the cremation site. The woman going in front carries a wicker basket containing crumpled funeral bread and bits of "sacred paper" burned for the deceased. As she walks along, she loudly laments the death of the deceased and tosses the contents of the basket out along the way. The women, going first,

have "opened a road for the deceased to follow."

After the corpse is encoffined, the coffin is taken out of the courtyard and two poles are lashed to the sides. All metal is strictly avoided in coffin construction. An older lama, often accompanied by a student of the deceased lama, if he was old enough to have students, then takes a very long *hada*⁹ (formed by tying several *hada* together), and wraps this around one pole. Holding the loose end, the lama then leads the procession to the cremation ground as the *xiaoxi* wail loudly and people along the coffin's route smolder straw in courtyard doorways to ward off any evil the lama's soul might wish to convey. It should be noted that in areas where Hui live along the funeral route, they do not smolder straw but do keep a healthy distance between themselves and the coffin.

In front of the coffin walks the *ajiu*, and behind the coffin follow a retinue of relatives and villagers. Once the cremation grounds are reached (usually some distance from homes, as the smoke from the burning corpse is thought to be disagreeable), the coffin is set down, and a screen made of several blankets is placed around the oven. The corpse then in privacy is seated in the cremation oven. The coffin sedan is smashed to pieces and the pieces placed in the oven bottom, above a basin of liquefied butter and cypress needles.¹⁰ Pears may also be placed in the oven corners. The sides of the oven are quickly completed, made with adobe bricks and mud smeared over the whole. At the rounded top a hole is left, and at the square bottom, each side of which faces a cardinal direction, is a small opening in each of the four sides.¹¹

At this time, relatives have assembled in front of a small offering fire some distance from the oven. Arranged in order of generations, men first, women to the rear, they wail, and bread and paper are constantly added to the offering fire.

Meanwhile, to one side, five to twenty lamas assemble. In the lama cremation we attended there were seven lamas, but as many as twenty may attend, depending on the individual funeral and the desires of the family and clan concerned. After the lamas assemble and begin chanting, a lama hands the oldest *xiaoxi* a long tree-branch, the end of which has been tied with cotton, dipped in butter, and set ablaze. The *xiaoxi* accepts the torch, kowtows to the dead lama, then kneels and lights the fuel inside the cremation oven through the four small openings at the bottom.

As smoke rolls from the oven, custom dictates that women should leave for home. This leaves only the men in attendance. After an hour or so most villagers leave, and only a few *xiaoxi* and the lamas remain. The lamas chant continually, blessing butter and a variety of

grains that are continually added to the cremation fire. The lamas leave after they have completed chanting the necessary sutras, a process taking several hours.

The fire goes out and then the openings at the oven top and bottom are sealed, and all go home. The next day many *manie* (as used here, “*manie*” refers to people, mostly old women and a few old men, who repeatedly chant the efficacious phrase, “*manie, bonnie, hong*” and chant such scriptures as the “Peace Sutra”) come to chant and spin their *manie krerle* (prayer wheel atop a one-meter stick). Three days after cremation the oven is opened, and the bones are removed using red chopsticks, wrapped in yellow gold paper, and placed in a small container. This container may then be buried locally or sent to Kumbum (Taer 塔爾 Temple). We cannot offer a good explanation as to why lamas are never buried in the ancestral graveyard, but we suspect it is because lamas are childless and childless people are rarely if ever buried in the ancestral graveyard. To bury them there might bring bad luck to the clan—i.e., future generations might not reproduce.

The mourning period for the nephews of the lama is 100 days, during which time they should not brush their hair or cut facial hair. Also, they are not allowed to wash their faces until after the coffin is taken out.

The lama funeral differs from that of the lay person in the way the corpse is kept in the home; the nature of the lama coffin; the fact that lamas are always cremated; and the placing of the lama’s remains in other than the ancestral graveyard. In other respects, funerals for an old lama are identical to that of an old married person with children.

NON-LAMA FUNERALS

Natural Deaths

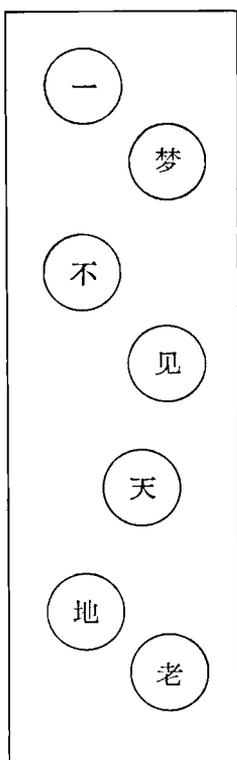
As mentioned earlier, a natural death is defined as the death of one who has married, has children, and is advanced in age. Prior to the death, some families build a coffin (once built, it is generally used for storing grain), and after the coffin is built, other people come to offer congratulations. Other families may be reluctant to do this (i.e., build the coffin prior to death and/or hold a congratulation party) because of the expenses of the coffin (200–400 rmb), because coffins take much storage space, and also because a coffin is generally regarded as rather frightening. Still other families cut the boards for the coffin and store them away, whence they can be quickly taken out and assembled at the time of death. Coffins built prior to death are constructed during the intercalary month of the lunar calendar.

If the coffin is painted it is always painted red. A dragon is painted

on either side of the coffin if the deceased is male, and two phoenixes are painted if the deceased is female. At the larger end of the coffin where the head of the corpse is placed, a virgin boy and a virgin girl are painted, each holding a plate and a liquor flagon; they are thought to serve the deceased after death. The boy and girl with plate-and-liquor-flagon motif also are embroidered on stuffed pillow ends, and this pillow is used in the coffin, under the head of the corpse.¹² If the person dies before the coffin has been constructed, it is quickly made, but because the corpse is generally buried within three days,¹³ there is not enough time to paint the coffin, which is instead covered with red paper glued onto it.

Seven stars are usually painted on the coffin lid to resemble the constellation Ursa Major (*Enzhasihuotu*, Plow Stars). Chinese characters are written on the coffin lid inside each star.

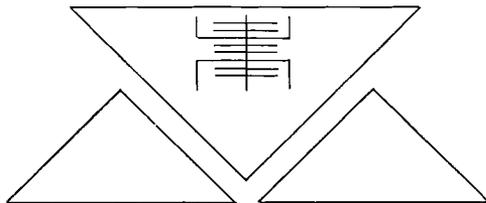
The *yinyang* 陰陽 (local name given to this particular religious practitioner, not only by Tu but also by a number of eastern Qinghai Han; he may be thought of as a pseudo-Taoist priest) writes eleven or thirteen



characters on a long, narrow, white space between the little girl and boy at the head of the coffin. Here is an example of eleven characters—and there will always be eleven or thirteen characters, as an even number is not permitted—with their literal translations:

病	老	生	死	苦
illness	oldness	aliveness	death	sorrow
×	×	×	之	靈 位
the deceased person's (name)			holy place	

At a funeral of an 81-year-old lady that we attended in 1988, there was no time to paint a pair of phoenixes; instead, the following was painted. The meaning of the character is “quiet.”



Grave Preparation

Before death, the family has a general idea as to the burial site. If the person is to be buried in the ancestral graveyard there is little question or discussion, because burials are strictly according to order of generation. If the ancestral graveyard is full, or for other reasons the corpse is not to be buried there, the family asks the *yinyang* to choose another site. The choice of sites has been severely restricted in recent years because of rapid population increase and land being divided among individual households. In addition, peasants were told that, beginning in 1989, burial would be strictly prohibited and only cremation permitted. The general consensus seemed to be that, even though land is very limited, burial is so important that land will be taken out of cultivation for grave sites and heavy fines will be paid when and if the prohibition against burial is actually enforced. Other families opt for burial sites in distant (several kilometers away) uncultivated mountain locations, but this is extremely inconvenient, given the number of times graves are visited during the course of a year for various memorial ceremonies.

Houtu

If the deceased's spouse has also died and been buried elsewhere, a second small grave, identical to the spouse's, is dug. In a small side cave is placed the *shenzhu* 神柱, which is made of cypress wood in the shape of an inverted T. The base is seven *cun* 寸 (1 *cun*=0.3 decimeters) long. With blood from the *xiaozi* (taken at the home of the deceased in a similar fashion to what we describe below) the name of the deceased is written on the board. The whole is covered with red paper and placed outside the courtyard gate, where lamps are lit before it and incense burned. At the time the coffin is taken to the grave, a *xiaozi* takes the *shenzhu* to the grave. This entire process is called *shenzhuqila* (*qila* is Tu for "build up"). This symbolizes the movement of the grandparent's spirit, so that now, when the family observes rituals (Spring Festival, Day of Pure Brightness, anniversary of the death) related to the ancestors, there is no need to go to the original grave site (in fact, however, many do).

If the grave site is to be a "new" ancestral graveyard, a *bengba* is made and buried about 1.5 m above the first grave site. The *bengba* is a small jar. In the hole that will contain the *bengba* are placed six stones, usually collected from the Yellow River. One stone is placed under the *bengba*, four on each side, and the sixth stone is placed on top. Twenty-four objects that fall into four categories are placed in the *bengba*. The categories are: grain; silk and satins of five colors; the eight treasures; and four precious medicines. The grains include highland barley, white beans, big beans, small beans, rape, rice, barley, millet, and white castor beans. The medicines include black castor-oil-plant seeds, *arora*, *jurora*, and *banqua*.¹⁴

If the ancestral graveyard is to be used, as soon as the person dies, people race to the understood grave site and rub some of the deceased's clothing in the earth and then race back with these clothes. Our informants were not sure why this was done, the only suggestion being that it signalled to others that the burial site was "taken." The clothes might then be burned, kept by the family, given to the maternal uncle or other relatives, or given to some non-related family.

The *yinyang* is immediately called upon and told the exact date and time of the person's birth and death. The *yinyang* calculates the exact time for the person to be taken to the grave. Also, if for some reason the person is not to be buried in the ancestral graveyard and a burial place has not been selected, the *yinyang* will choose a correct burial site. Meanwhile, the corpse is dressed in clothing prepared before death. Children generally prepare these clothes when the parent reaches the age of 60. If the parent dies without grave clothing having

been prepared, the children will be scolded by the community for not being filial. After dressing, the corpse is placed on a platform in the center of the north room and covered. Castor-oil-plant fibers are used to tie the feet and ankles together to prevent the corpse from moving. The corpse lies with head nearest the door and is covered with a blanket. On the second day, if the coffin is ready, the corpse is encoffined. In winter, castor-oil-plant fibers are used to line the coffin, and on this a cotton-padded mattress is placed. In summer, to reduce unpleasant odors, lime and cement are placed on the coffin bottom and then the cotton-padded mattress is placed on top. All felt, animal skins, and metal are strictly taboo.

The corpse is then encoffined, arms fully extended down the sides of the body. A pillow, described earlier, is placed under the head, and other pillows or bags may be placed about the head to minimize movement. Before the coffin lid is placed on top of the coffin, a number of castor-oil-plant fibers are placed on the corpse. Two men then press down with all their strength to close the lid. The *xiaozi* pull fibers from where they protrude through the coffin-lid crack. The *xiaozi* who pull out the longest pieces are thought to be the ones most dearly loved by the deceased and have received an omen of good luck. The castor-oil-plant fibers are then tied around the waist, further identifying the *xiaozi*.

When the time draws near for the coffin to be taken out (usually in the afternoon), the *yinyang* comes. Prior to this time, some 20 to 50 old *manie* ladies have arrived and settle themselves on straw scattered on the ground in the south part of the courtyard, where they chant. In the center of the courtyard, if a tree has been planted, some *manie* ladies may hang *qianliang* 錢糧 and *baogai* 宝蓋 (papercuts symbolizing such precious things as clothes, money, and horses; these are usually burnt and thus are sent to deities) and, while chanting, circumambulate the tree. In the north room, the *kang* is reserved for lamas, who chant continually. On the straw-covered floor, *xiaozi* and (mostly female) relatives gather to kneel and lament.

The amount of genuine grief actually present is fairly easy to discern. The Tu have a saying that compares those who die after the age of 80 to a fruit, heavy-laden in its ripeness, fallen to the ground, suggesting energy heretofore expended on older generations can now be turned to younger generations. At the funeral we attended of the 81-year-old woman, there was little real grief evident, although some who attended did their best to wail—it would have been unthinkable not to. Shortly before the coffin was actually taken out a young man (a grandson of the deceased or a granddaughter's husband) began to wail loudly.

He immediately became the center of attention. People promised to give him much bread if he would stop wailing. Quickly, he was encircled by a large crowd of those present and laughed at, and there was much joking. Still the young man persisted in wailing, which, by this time, had become very humorous to those present. Only the oldest son of the old lady continued to kneel by his dead mother, looking with doleful eyes at the merrymaking. Black soot was smeared on the young man's face, people attempted to pour liquor up his nose, and liquor was flicked in his face. People repeatedly tried to get him to rise—all to no avail. He kowtowed several times to the coffin and then to the kitchen (in order to get more bread, we were told) and was finally persuaded to rise—all amid much laughter. Immediately after rising, his lamentations ceased.

When the *yinyang* arrives shortly before the coffin is to be taken out (in long black gown and wearing a cap embossed with *yin* and *yang*), he is presented with two *maohong* (strips of red cloth, one over each shoulder and crossed at the chest). He first faces the coffin, then touches his right hand and right knee to the earth, turns facing the crowd in the courtyard, and repeats this gesture. Then he prepares to write on the coffin (*caitouqila*) in the space between the little boy and girl. Before writing, he directs one man to stand by the coffin while another man stands in the courtyard. The two men each hold either end of a string made by winding together five threads of different color. One end is held over the head of the coffin, and they kneel in front of the coffin. Then each *xiaozhi* holds the left hand, fingers spread, over the right shoulder (for the Tu, the left is always more important than the right). The *yinyang* pricks the middle finger three times. Each time a person is pricked, the person shouts, "Father!" or "Mother!" Each time a drop of blood is exuded, the *yinyang* wipes the drop of blood with a brush dipped in ink and writes. After finishing, he tosses the pen over his shoulder; the crowd struggles to catch it because it is believed that the child of the one who catches the pen will become a Number One Scholar.¹⁵

At some point, depending on the distance of the grave from the home, a woman and her retinue set off for the grave tossing paper and "funeral bread" from the basket and loudly lamenting.

The coffin is lifted at the time divined by the *yinyang* and brought out of the north room. Great care is taken not to touch the doorframe with the coffin—an ominous omen. The sacrificial fire that has been burning in front of the north room is straddled. Immediately after the coffin comes out of the north room, paper inscribed with incantations written by the *yinyang* is pasted on the upper center of the doorframe to

prevent an evil-intentioned ghost from returning.

Immediately prior to this, young men set off to the grave site with paper wreaths, previously displayed in the courtyard and on the roof. Firecrackers are also set off before the coffin leaves the courtyard.

Once outside, the coffin is set on two stools, two poles are lashed to the coffin with rope, and a live rooster is tied to the coffin lid.¹⁶ The rooster is thought capable of suppressing any evil intentions on the part of the deceased en route to the grave, thus protecting the funeral party and those along the funeral route; the cock also protects the deceased from any evils in the vicinity. Evil-suppressing incantations are also pasted on the courtyard gate and on the inside wall of the north room.

At this point, we should say that *yinyang* are not used during lama funerals, and in some mountain areas where there are no *yinyang*, the *fala* 法拉 (medium/shaman)¹⁷ is invited by the family. At a neighbor's home, he goes into a trance and will approve or disapprove the proposed grave site. In front of smoldering incense and in the light of oil lamps, one person asks the *fala*, "Now this person has died. He was born in such-and-such a year and at such-and-such a time. We need you to tell us when the coffin should be taken out and what animals (those born in what animal year) should be cautious." The *fala*, in trance, answers. When the time comes for taking the coffin out, the *fala* arrives in trance from his own home. After the coffin is taken out of the courtyard, he dances in every room, perhaps throwing evil-suppressing broad beans into each room (or perhaps thrusting fire into every room)—all in an effort to vanquish any evil. The *fala* then leads the procession bearing the coffin to the grave site. At the grave, the *fala* directs the exact positioning of the coffin.

In such mountain villages, it is deemed too troublesome to invite a *yinyang* from the plain areas. It takes much time to invite the *yinyang*, he might refuse to come, and, besides, once the *yinyang* comes he must be well paid, which poses a problem for mountain villagers, whose incomes are considerably less than that of plain villagers owing to much poorer agricultural conditions. Thus the *fala* has virtually replaced the *yinyang* at funerals (the same is true for weddings—the *fala* performs the duties done by the *yinyang* in plain areas).

However, in plain areas, *fala* never carry out the duties of *yinyang*. Prior to the removal of the coffin, the *yinyang* gives a warning to the "animals" who should be careful. This warning is carefully heeded, and those so warned will not help carry the coffin and will strictly avoid being in front of the coffin.

After the poles are lashed to the coffin and the cock secured (the cock may not be employed if the grave site is very near), young men

pick up the coffin and set off for the burial site. They try to go as fast as possible and, when conditions permit, they run, with people often relieving one another. It is thought that, the faster the group runs to the grave, the happier the deceased is.

Once the grave is reached, the bearers circle the grave three times in a counterclockwise direction. The oldest son present then climbs into the grave and looks for any pieces of metal (thought to anger the deceased)¹⁸ and may toss out a few earth clods. The grave is generally about two meters deep and has a side cave dug at the bottom large enough to accommodate the coffin.¹⁹ The coffin is then lowered into the grave by means of ropes tied around the coffin and suspended from the poles used to bring the coffin to the site. It is quickly pushed into the side cave. At the head of the coffin, on a small ledge, is placed a flour lamp and sticks and stones inscribed with evil-suppressing incantations.

The *yinyang* uses a compass imprinted with the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches and a plumb line of threads of five colors to calculate the exact position of the coffin. More sticks and stones inscribed with incantations are passed into the grave. The son also opens the coffin to see if the corpse has moved and lights the flour lamp on the ledge in the side cave. The side cave is then sealed, usually with adobe bricks or else large clumps of earth. The *yinyang* tosses crumpled "funeral bread" into the grave, the wreaths are burned, and, as they burn, the *yinyang* chants and pours liquor on the earth. The oldest son then kneels, his back to the grave, and throws soil over his shoulder three times, using a spade, symbolizing that he has ended his responsibilities to the older generations, younger generations, and to Tiangere and Earth. In front of the kneeling son are relatives and villagers who have come to the grave. Crowds often number 200-300 (crowd size depends largely on how close the grave is to the village). At many funerals, liquor and cigarettes are offered to all males present, but at other funerals this is not done. The crowd kneels, arranged in order of generation and relationship to the deceased. Funeral bread and money paper are continually burned. After the son tosses the third spadeful of dirt into the grave, young men come forward and, with a wooden plow, begin to fill the grave. The reason for this is that the plow is thought to be another evil-suppressing tool.²⁰ Other young men join in with spades and the grave is quickly filled. Before the mound marking the grave is completely finished, the *yinyang* adds more inscribed sticks and stones. After the mound is completed, the *yinyang* approaches, circles the mound in a counterclockwise direction, chants, and pours liquor around the mound.

The crowd, with the exception of the *xiaozi*, the *yinyang*, and the young men filling the grave, begins to disperse when the grave begins to fill. Custom decrees that women leave as soon as dirt begins to fill the grave. Women have no part in filling the grave nor in transporting the coffin to the grave site. The cock is taken back home, where it may be given to the *yinyang* or simply returned to the flock. Meanwhile, the family members who have stayed at home carefully clean and sweep up the straw and ashes from the "funeral bread" and paper money (unclean things), and pile them in front of the courtyard, where they are burned.

Relatives and those who rendered assistance in the funeral return to the home, where they wash their hands in a basin or tub of water prepared outside the courtyard in front of the gate. Once inside, the visitors laugh, joke, and drink liquor (the sons of the deceased and husbands of the deceased's daughters do not drink) and have tea and a meal, and then leave after being given bread by the deceased's family.

Unnatural Deaths

Small children: The *yinyang* tells the time the corpse should be removed and the direction in which the corpse should be taken. The child is then taken to a remote area, left in the open, and eaten by birds. The best situation is for the child to be eaten immediately. If the corpse is not eaten it must be taken to another area until it is eaten. A straw fire is often burned and the smoke attracts birds. In many areas today, however, such birds are very rare, so most children are thrown into the Yellow River.

Pregnant women: Pregnant women are most usually placed in a simply made coffin and pushed into the Yellow River.

Young unmarried persons: In some areas, with virtually no ceremony, the corpse is simply tossed into the Yellow River. In other areas the corpse is burned. For example, in Xian Feng 先锋 Brigade, a young unmarried person's body is placed in a coffin and taken to a level place, the coffin is broken to pieces, and the corpse burned. The bones are simply thrown away. In Zhaomuchuan 趙木川 Village, a cave is dug in an embankment, the corpse is placed inside, and the corpse and cave filled with straw. The straw is set on fire, and as the straw is burning, the cave opening is blocked up with earth. A small opening is dug from the top down into the cave so the smoke can escape. The next day, if the sides of the hole are black, it indicates the cave's contents are still burning. If the sides of the hole are white, it indicates the fire has gone out.

Other unnatural deaths (drowning, sudden death, etc.): General-

ly, the corpse is burned. If the deceased had children, the bones will be buried, but never in the ancestral graveyard. If the deceased had no children, the bones will be thrown away. Women who died in childbirth, while undergoing an abortion, and/or with wounds (such as in the case of a medical operation), can also never be buried in ancestral graveyards or anywhere else—they must be cremated. If they were buried, then their souls would *chengqi* 沈氣 (literally, “sinking down air”)—i.e., the soul would cause problems such as disease to the family and, indeed, to the whole village.

In the case of unnatural deaths, lamas may or may not be called to chant. In the case of natural death, lamas are called to chant by every Tu household.

One last point to mention in regard to Tu funerary customs is that a corpse once buried, may not stay buried. The *fala* and/or *yanjiangui* 眼見鬼 (literally, “eye see ghost”; in this area this practitioner is a Han woman who has the ability to see evils) may identify a grave as harboring an unhappy ghost that is causing distress to a particular family. In such an instance, a person with his face painted black with soot digs up the grave, the coffin is removed, the corpse is jerked out, and the coffin and corpse are burned near the opened grave. The remains may or may not be collected.

CONCLUSIONS

One striking feature of the Tu funeral is the tenacity with which its structure is adhered to. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) lamas were forbidden to come and chant at funerals, but otherwise the funeral proceeded more or less as we have described. *Yinyang* (who were also outlawed) and *fala* were consulted, albeit secretly, as to the time of the coffin being taken out of the home to the grave site and what “animals” should be careful.

There is no indication that ideas about funerals are changing. As mentioned earlier, new rules have been laid down severely limiting burial in agricultural land. However, given that most local officials are local Tu and share the same ideas concerning funerals as do peasants, it is unlikely these rules and associated punishments will be enforced. What is likely is that, as economic conditions improve as the result of peasants being assigned land and other economic opportunities (e.g., working outside the area on construction teams, mining for gold, engaging part-time in such occupations as carpentry), more money will be spent during the funeral process by, for example, having more lavish coffins built and offering better food and liquor to funeral guests.

This Tu area of Minhe is culturally Tu. More than 90% of the

population of areas where most Tu-speaking Tu live is Tu. Little land and a high population density have rendered the area unattractive to immigrants. In addition, China's policy toward national minorities differs from its policy towards the Han with respect to what is generally labeled as "superstition." In various Han areas of Qinghai in the late 1980s and 1990, *fala* and *yinyang* are unable to practice with the freedom of Tu *fala* and *yinyang*, the reason being that such practices are deemed "part of a minority culture," whereas for the Han it is "superstition" and the target of periodic campaigns. This suggests the traditional Tu funeral may well continue for a number of years.

NOTES

1. One error made in accounts of the Tu is the study of one particular area and then generalizing about all Tu. In this article we wish to make clear we are describing what we have observed in Guanting 官亭 and learned from Guanting and Sanchuan 三川 informants. (Today, Tu areas in south Minhe County are generally referred to as Guanting. However, the name most Tu use to describe the Tu plain areas is Sanchuan [Three Plains]. There are other areas of Tu habitation in Minhe County, but these "Tu" villages are Sinicized to the point that "Tu" living there are unable to speak the Tu language.) In general, the culture of Guanting/Sanchuan Tu is quite similar—due in part to frequent marriages between people in widely separated villages and to the concentration of Tu in Tu areas of Minhe Guanting and Sanchuan regions. However, differences do exist, and what we have described here may not be the case for every Tu village in Guanting/Sanchuan; we do not know at the time of this writing how funerals in Tu areas outside Guanting/Sanchuan would compare.

Below we list the main areas of Tu habitation. Slight differences in population figures are due to the different source materials used.

CHINA'S TU POPULATION

China (Ma 1988, 93), 159,426

Gansu (Ma 1988, 93), 12,567

Wuwei Region, 10,391

Linxia, 779

Gannan, 539

Lanzhou, 468

Zhangye, 302

Qinghai (YAN 1986, 17, 464, 471, 476, 533), 131,074

Huzhu Tu Autonomous County, 48,536

Minhe Hui and Tu Autonomous County, 31,965

Datong Hui and Tu Autonomous County, 28,249

Tongren, 6,303

Interestingly, the major reason why Huzhu is often used as the "Tu example" is that the Huzhu Tu retain a distinctive national dress, whereas the Minhe Tu do not. The two groups have virtually no contact, being separated by a considerable distance. Their dialects differ markedly, making communication very difficult. When a Huzhu and a Minhe Tu meet, if both parties speak Chinese, they use Chinese as a common means of communication.

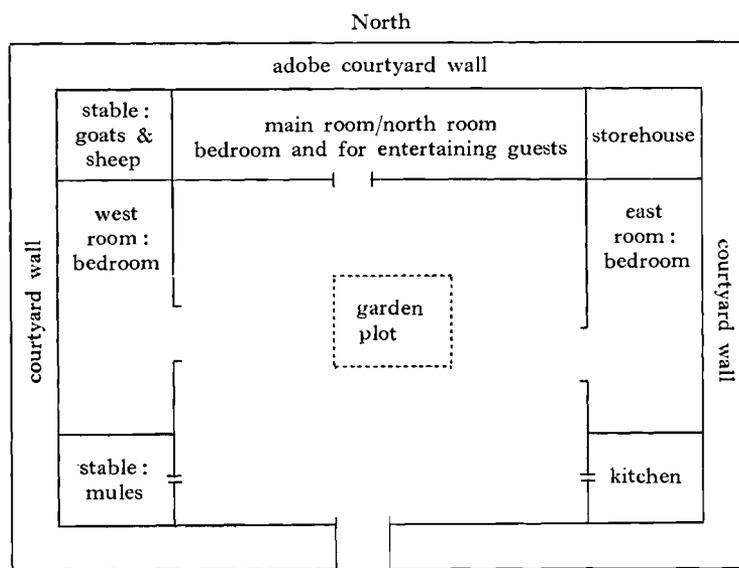
2. Where is Hell? Probably, we were told, somewhere on earth, but it is not possible to see it. Near the main road in Manping 满坪 Commune is the Chenghuang 陳隍 Shrine, where it is said the deity Chenghuang manages the Book of Life and Death for man. Many local inhabitants go there to light lamps, burn incense, and kowtow.

3. This explains why "money" paper is burned at funerals. The most common sorts of "money paper" are sheets of paper hammered with a homemade device that produces coin-like patterns on the paper so that it resembles Qing Dynasty currency.

4. This Douyuanshan story was collected and translated by Hu Jun from the version told to us by Hu Chengxiong 胡成雄 in Guanting town in the winter of 1988-89.

5. The *ajiu* is generally the eldest brother of the mother. However, when this person is unable to undertake the role of the *ajiu*, the eldest and most respected closely related maternal relative who can best serve in this capacity is chosen. This may well happen when the person who has died is advanced in years and his mother's brothers have been dead for many years; when the mother had no brothers; or when the mother's brother is too old to perform these duties.

6. The following is a diagram of the typical Tu home.



7. The *jiawu* may be understood as a group of families (generally four to ten) who live near one another and have adjoining property, who help one another during times of harvest, weddings, and funerals, and who generally share the same surname (share the ancestral root).

8. After the burial is completed, closest relatives may burn the *xiaobu*. However, this custom varies widely, and many believe the *xiaobu* that are burned go to the deceased and if an excessive number are burned the deceased's spirit will be heavy-laden. Most do not burn *xiaobu* but take them home, where they are used in sewing; there is, however, one taboo: they must never be used for anything related to the feet.

9. The *hada* is a strip of silk given as a token of respect. Tu say *hada*, which is a common Chinese transliteration of the Mongol *khadakh*.

10. Butter is obtained from Tibetans in the area. The Tu milk no animals and,

not from choice but necessity, are virtual vegetarians.

11. The account of cremation described by SCHRAM (1957, 145–46) differs markedly from what we observed in Minhe and were told. Only lamas in Minhe are cremated as we have described. We do not know what Tu area Schram was describing.

12. For an example of the virgin boy and virgin girl embroidered on pillow ends see YE and CAO (1987, 30).

13. Some informants told us the period was not always three days, sometimes it was much longer.

14. *Arora*, *jurora*, and *banqua* are transliterations of Tibetan, and we cannot explain what they are.

15. Though the Number One Scholar examinations vanished with New China, in the minds of many people the system still persists. University entrance exams are difficult to pass and many fail, particularly in rural areas, where the educational system is far behind that of cities. However, once an entrance exam is passed, most students are assured of a monthly stipend and, more importantly, a government job upon graduation. The income from this job is much more, in the case of the Minhe Tu, than a peasant could earn, and carries considerably more status.

16. See SCHRAM's (1957, 99) reference to Harlez. "A living rooster is attached to the coffin when it is carried to the grave, in order that it may frighten evil spirits." What we cite relevant to the rooster is from our informants.

17. In the Minhe Tu areas, *fala* are to be found in most villages, although some villages may have none, while others may have several. Possessed by a deity (usually the Taoist warrior deity, Erlang), *fala* enter the trance state.

18. It is commonly thought that family enemies might place metal objects in the grave in a deliberate and malicious attempt to anger the ghost, who then would surely bring illness and misfortune to the family.

19. Interestingly, the Islamic Salar, who are near neighbors of the Minhe Tu and possibly share Turkic roots, bury the deceased in a side cave. The corpse is not encoffined, however, only wrapped in a white cloth in keeping with Islamic dictates.

20. Is the evil-suppressing nature of the plow related to Ursa Major being painted on the coffin lid? We suspect that it is, as Ursa Major means "Plow Star" in Tu. Another piece of evidence suggesting that the plow is evil-suppressing was gathered by the first author in 1990 from a Han informant whose home was in a Huangzhong 皇中 County Han village. The account given by this informant follows:

About ten years ago a young woman of my village was engaged to be married to a much older man. She was strongly opposed to marrying this man and the only reason her father had engaged her to such a man was that he was quite wealthy. Angry at her father, she put three pins in her inner clothing and hung herself.

Later, when her corpse was taken down, her body was carefully examined and the three pins were found. People immediately understood she had purposely put this metal on her body so that her angry ghost would return and wreak revenge on her father. Without ceremony her body was stripped, her heart pierced with a plow point, and she was buried, without a coffin, upside down in a deep hole.

The piercing of the heart with a plow seems related to preventing the young woman's evil-intentioned spirit from returning, and we conjecture she was buried upside down so that it would be difficult or impossible for her spirit to reach the surface. However, we are not able to explain why Tu and Han in widely separated areas would share this concept, nor are we able to say where or why this concept may have originated.

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