

# Encounter in the Netherworld: The Fusion and Evolution of Buddhism and Japanese Funeral Culture

Wenyue Song \*

Department of Archaeology, Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom

\* Corresponding Author Email: echoswy@outlook.com

**Abstract.** Funeral culture, as a reflection of social structure, religious beliefs, and aesthetic values, records the footprints of social changes and mirrors people's imagination and pursuit of the afterlife. This paper explores how Buddhist culture has integrated with indigenous Japanese funeral customs and together shaped Japan's unique view of life and death. It first outlines the evolution of Japanese funeral practices and, through analysis of typical funerals such as Takamatsu Barrow and Kitora Kofun, reveals the combination of Buddhist art and traditional Japanese culture. Additionally, the article compares Buddhist elements in the funeral customs of Japan and China, demonstrating how Japan has achieved localization and innovation for its culture while accepting Buddhist culture. Finally, the paper conducts a summative analysis of the impact of Buddhism on the Japanese ethnic view of life and death in combination with the whole text. The evolution of Japanese funeral culture is a complex process that reflects the changes in religious beliefs and presents the development of cultural identity and aesthetic concepts.

**Keywords:** Funeral culture, Buddhism, Japanese culture, life and death.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout Japan's long history, funeral culture, as a reflection of social structure, religious beliefs and artistic aesthetics, carries profound thoughts on life, death and eternity. From the magnificent earthen graves of the ancient grave era to the exquisite mausoleums of the Heian era, the shape and rituals of Japanese funerals have evolved with the changes of the times, which not only record the footprints of social changes, but also reflect people's imagination and pursuit of the world after death.

This paper aims to explore in depth the core characteristics and evolution process of Japanese funeral culture, as well as how they have undergone subtle changes with the integration of Buddhist culture. What impact did Buddhism, as a foreign religion, have on funeral culture during its acceptance and localization in Japan? How can traditional Japanese religious beliefs and post death worldviews be reinterpreted and expressed under the influence of Buddhism? Through archaeological data, historical documents and cultural analysis, this article will reveal the historical trajectory of the integration of Buddhism and Japanese funeral culture. In the in-depth study of Japanese funerals, we can not only glimpse the philosophical thinking of Japanese people on life and death, but also understand how Buddhism, as a cultural force, permeates and promotes with traditional Japanese funeral customs, and jointly shapes the unique cultural landscape of Japanese funerals.

## 2. The Evolution of Funeral Forms in Japan

The Kofun period is also known as the Yamato period, named after the large number of "kofun" built by the rulers of the time. During this period, large-scale funeral buildings began to appear in Japan, mainly consisting of huge cave shaped mounds with various shapes, including front and back round funerals, square funerals, round funerals, etc. Among them, the funeral system in the form of "front and back circle" is the most representative, symbolizing the shape of heaven and earth. These funerals were not only the resting places of the deceased, but also a reflection of the social and political structure and religious beliefs of the time. At the same time, with the increase of communication with China, the Chinese character writing system has also been introduced to Japan,

which not only has a huge impact on Japanese culture and life, but also greatly promotes the spread of Buddhism in Japan.

During the Asuka period and the Nara period, with the introduction of Buddhism and the implementation of the Taika Reform, Japan's funeral culture underwent significant changes. Japanese professor Tetsuro Kurita believes that Japan's funeral system underwent significant changes around the 7th century [1]. At the beginning of the seventh century, a new type of "horizontal mouth stone coffin" began to emerge and gradually replaced the horizontal hole stone chamber that was prevalent in the later period of the Kofun era. This is believed to indicate that Japanese society was undergoing a gradual transition from the surname system to the crown system at that time.

With the continuous influence of Chinese culture and the continuous introduction of Buddhist sects, Japan has adopted a protective and developmental attitude towards Buddhism, and Buddhist undertakings such as temple construction and Buddhist system have rapidly emerged. During this period, Buddhist elements such as Buddha statues and Buddhist scriptures began to appear in Japanese funerals [2]. Meanwhile, due to Buddhist doctrine that cremation is a way to purify the body and accelerate the separation of the soul, cremation has gradually become popular. After cremation, people's remains are placed in ash containers and then placed in pits. The compiler of the Japanese "Kojiki", Taian Manji, was cremated and his funeral was accidentally discovered in 1979 [3].

During the Heian period, cremation became more common, and the form of funerals became more simplified. The luxurious decorations and funeral items in funerals were reduced. Large-scale public cemeteries appeared in the densely populated Heian kyo, which were shared by people from different social classes. At the same time, as the influence of Buddhism gradually deepened, monks began to be responsible for funeral matters, and emperors and nobles began to build funerals in or near temples. These funerals were often combined with monumental buildings such as pagodas or sutra pillars [4]. The close integration of funerals and temples also made the connection between funerals and Buddhism even closer. Through chanting Buddha, holding mantras, and practicing, people hoped to receive the guidance of Amitabha Buddha after death and be reborn in the Pure Land.

Until recent centuries, Buddhism and Japanese burials have been closely linked, with Buddhist rituals becoming a central part of funerals, where the priest performs a chanting sermon for the deceased in the hope of guiding their souls to the Pure Land through a short Buddhist ceremony [5]. The main reason most people visit temples is to attend a mortuary or memorial service, while most temples also derive much of their financial resources and social authority from providing funerals, maintaining family cemeteries, and holding annual memorial services [6].

### **3. Buddhist Art in Typical Japanese Funerals: Taking Nara Takamatsu Barrow and Kitora Kofun as Examples**

#### **3.1. Mural Art**

In the late last century, two mural funerals were discovered in Nara, Japan, and were named Takamatsu Barrow and Kitora Kofun. Both of these mural funerals date back to the early 8th century, which corresponds to the heyday of the Tang Dynasty in my country. Both have unearthed exquisite murals, including two astronomical maps engraved on the top of the coffin.

In the murals of two funerals, there are patterns of the four gods, namely the Azure Dragon, White Tiger, and Xuanwu (presumably also the Vermilion Bird) [7], symbolizing the four directions of the universe. These patterns are very common in East Asian funerals, symbolizing the four directions of the universe. They not only reflect the symbolic expression of the ancient people's understanding of the order of the universe, but also have religious and cultural significance in guarding and guiding the souls of the deceased. In the murals of the Kitora Kofun, the combination of the four gods and the twelve zodiac animals is eye-catching. These zodiac images with animal heads, human bodies, wearing cross collar robes, and holding weapons, may be related to the translation of Chinese Buddhist scriptures, demonstrating the religious significance of the guardianship of the twelve divine generals [3]. This artistic expression that combines traditional Chinese culture with Buddhist elements

reveals the Japanese society's acceptance and integration of Buddhist teachings, as well as its absorption and innovation of foreign cultures at that time.

### 3.2. The Buried Sea Animal Grape Mirror

The Takamatsu Barrow was stolen before its excavation, and most of the funeral items were lost. Among the remaining funeral items, the most eye-catching one is a complete sea animal grape mirror. This bronze mirror is almost identical to the sea animal grape mirror found in the Tang Dynasty funeral of Dugu Sizhen excavated in Xi'an, China in 1958, and both belong to the "same type of mirror".

The sea animal grape mirror was mainly popular during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian. The back of the mirror was decorated with entwined grapes as the background, and was adorned with elements such as lions, birds, bees, and butterflies. The decoration was rich and intricate, exquisite and beautiful. Both lions and grapes were produced in the Western Regions and were introduced into China with Buddhism. Among them, the lion is a famous protector deity in Buddhism. With the spread of Buddhism to the east, lion and grape patterns have gradually appeared in large numbers as classic images of Buddhist art on bronze mirrors and murals. Wang Zhongshu speculated that the sea animal grape mirror unearthed from Takamatsu Barrow was produced in Chang'an and brought to Japan by the Tang envoy [8]. The discovery of this bronze mirror is not only a good story and important witness of cultural exchange between China and Japan, but also demonstrates the localization process of Buddhist culture in Japan.

## 4. Comparative Analysis of Funerals from China and Japan

The Chinese mausoleum Zhaoling (Figure 1), which is close in time to the two Japanese mausoleums mentioned above, is the joint funeral site of Emperor Taizong of Tang, Li Shimin, and Empress Wende, Zhangsun. There are nearly 200 tombs as its accompanying funerals. The vast majority of excavated funerals have murals painted on their inner walls. From the murals displayed on the *Chinese Archaeological Network*, it can be seen that many Buddhist elements such as lotus flowers, flying celestial bodies, and white horses appear, fully reflecting the Buddhist concept of reincarnation and displaying the social and religious beliefs of the Tang Dynasty [9].



**Figure 1.** The flying to sky picture of an unknown funeral in the Zhaoling Mausoleum

By comparing the shapes and Buddhist elements of funerals between China and Japan, it shows some significant differences. In order to better understand the characteristics of Japanese funerals. Firstly, in terms of artistic expression, the Buddhist art in Chinese funerals is more direct and obvious, directly reflecting the religious doctrines of Buddhism, and the mural style tends to be realistic. The Buddhist art in Japanese funerals places more emphasis on the integration with national culture, such

as the combination of the four God patterns and the twelve zodiac animals. The artistic expression tends to be abstract and symbolic, reflecting a restrained and implicit aesthetic.

Secondly, in terms of religious symbols, Buddhism was introduced to China during the early Han Dynasty and reached its peak during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. At this time, Buddhism was already very popular in Chinese funerals, and the use of Buddhist symbols such as lotus flowers and flying celestial bodies not only reflected the Tang Dynasty's reverence for Buddhist doctrine, but also showed the society's pursuit and longing for transcending the cycle of life and death at that time. Buddhist elements in Japanese funerals, such as the four gods symbolizing the four directions of the universe, are more integrated with local Shinto beliefs, reflecting people's worship of cosmic order and natural forces.

Finally, in terms of social and cultural background, the Tang Dynasty was a peak period in Chinese history, and Buddhism received widespread support. The Buddhist elements in funerals reflected the religious enthusiasm and cultural confidence of the society at that time. The Nara era in Japan is in a period of actively absorbing foreign culture and forming its own characteristics. The combination of Buddhist elements in funerals and local culture indicates that Japan is also striving to realize cultural localization and innovation while accepting Buddhist culture.

## 5. Conclusion

Most Japanese people adhere to the concept of "unity of life and death", believing that death is not the opposite of life, but the beginning of another form of "life". They believe in the dissipation of the body but the immortality of the soul. After the introduction of Buddhism, Japan's traditional religious concept resonated with its view of the six paths of reincarnation, and gradually integrated Buddhist ideas such as karma and the Pure Land of Bliss, forming Japan's unique view of life and death. The Japanese people believe that the souls of the dead will go to paradise after death, so they grant some positive meaning to death.

This study explores in depth the evolution of Japanese funeral culture from the Kofun era to the Heian era, as well as how Buddhism blends with local funeral customs in Japan and jointly shape its unique funeral art and views on life and death. Through the analysis of typical funerals such as Takamatsu Barrow and Kitora Kofun, this study demonstrates how Buddhist culture, Chinese culture, and Japanese indigenous culture are combined, and how these artworks reflect the society's understanding of the cosmic order and the afterlife at that time. The evolution of Japanese funeral culture is a complex process that reflects the changes in religious beliefs, and more importantly, it also presents the development of cultural identity and aesthetic concepts. Studying this historical process provides a deeper understanding of the traditional and modern expressions of Japanese culture, as well as how Buddhism has spread and evolved in different cultural contexts.

## References

- [1] Tetsuro Kurita, Li Junqing (2021). Japanese Funeral System during the Asuka Era: A Perspective from Ancient East Asian International Relations. *Collection of Japanese Studies*, 01: 56 - 64+195 - 196.
- [2] Saito, H. (1965). Historical Development of Buddhist Grave in Japan. *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies (Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyu)* 14, 317 – 321.
- [3] Nara Prefecture. (2018). The Epitaph of Ō no Yasumaro (Location: Museum of the Nara Prefecture Kashihara Archaeological Institute). Nara Prefecture Historical and Cultural Resources Database. <https://www.pref.nara.jp/miryoku/ikasunara/bunkashigen/main10403.html>.
- [4] Rekishi Matome.net (2023). Burial and Grave Systems in Japan. Rekishi Matome.net. Retrieved from: [https://rekishi-memo.net/japan\\_column/maisou.html](https://rekishi-memo.net/japan_column/maisou.html).
- [5] Fujii, M., 2000. Funeral Rites related to Japanese View of Life and Death. *Journal of Research Society of Buddhism and Cultural Heritage* 2000, 1 – 24. <https://doi.org/10.5845/bukkyobunka.2000.1>.

- [6] Rowe, M. (2009), Death, Burial, and the Study of Contemporary Japanese Buddhism. *Religion Compass*, 3: 18 - 30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2008.00118.x>.
- [7] Chuang, C. (2021). Revisiting the Two Mural Funerals and Their Celestial Images in Nara, Japan. *The Chinese Journal of the History of Science and Technology*, Issue 2, 2021.
- [8] Jiang Bo (2007). Interview with Mr. Wang Zhongshu, Honorary Member of the Department of Archaeology, a renowned archaeologist in the history of Han and Tang archaeology and Sino Japanese exchanges. *Chinese Archaeology*: [http://kaogu.cssn.cn/zwb/kgw/rwzf/200706/t20070621\\_3911405.shtml](http://kaogu.cssn.cn/zwb/kgw/rwzf/200706/t20070621_3911405.shtml).
- [9] Zhang Wanli (2016). Buddhist elements in the murals of the Tang funerals in Zhaoling. *Chinese Archaeology*. Retrieved from: [http://kaogu.cssn.cn/zwb/kgd/kgsb/201610/t20161011\\_3939076.shtml](http://kaogu.cssn.cn/zwb/kgd/kgsb/201610/t20161011_3939076.shtml).