

# Historical Review of the Funeral Ceremony of the Qiang People from the Perspective of Cultural Consciousness

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**ABSTRACT.** The funeral ceremony contains the core world outlook, outlook on life and values of the nation. It also carries many national historical information and is an important channel for inheriting the history and culture of the nation. The funeral ceremony of Qiang people is an outward appearance of its beliefs and a core part of the traditional culture of the nation. By combing the historical changes of the traditional funeral ceremony of Qiang people, we can better understand today's Qiang people and their culture. This is the basis of a national culture consciousness, and it is also the way for others to understand the nation.

**KEYWORDS:** Qiang people; funeral ceremony; change

## 1. Introduction

Qiang people are one of the oldest people in China. In the history, the only far-reaching influence thing of Qiang people is the language, and it belongs to the Tibetan-Burmese language branch, claiming to be “Erma” with meaning of “local people.” At present, Qiang people are mainly distributed in the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and Mianyang City. The living environment of the Qiang people is mostly in the mountains and semi-alpine areas, and they are mixed with Tibetan, Han, Hui and other ethnic groups. The funeral ceremony of the Qiang people are closely related to their traditional beliefs. They believe that everything is spiritual and the soul will not disappear. The soul still exists after death. Therefore, after the death of a person, a grand funeral for the body and soul should be held. During the funeral, meat, tobacco pipe, miscellaneous grains, etc. should be put to the deceased, and the person who offers libation should also accompany the deceased to eat, as if they were alive.

At present, with the process of global integration in the world, the formation of a world of multicultural coexistence is becoming more and more important, and the culture of ethnic minorities must have a culturally conscious awareness and action to

stand in a globalized world. Mr. Fei Xiaotong advocates “Cultural conscious” that refers to people who live in a certain culture and have “self-knowledge” of their culture, understand its origin, formation process, characteristics and trends of its development, in order to strengthen the autonomy of cultural transformation, achieve an independent status adapting to the new environment and cultural choices in the new era. The funeral ceremony is the appearance of a set of concepts about life and death, and is the cultural core of a nation. As the scholar Ye Piaoyuan said, “funeral has a very close relationship with soul and belief. It is generally difficult to change. It is the most profound custom of a nation that is the most difficult to change by the other factors”. He believes that studying Qiang funeral culture can best see the spiritual world of a nation. [1] Therefore, understanding the cause and effect of a nation’s funeral ceremony is the basis for cultural self-consciousness.

## 2. Previous studies of the funeral ceremony for Qiang people

The study of funeral ceremony of the Qiang people began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British pastor Thomas Torrance visited the Qiang area in the upper reaches of the Minjiang River and published *The History, Customs and Religion of the Qiang People - Indigenous People in Western China*. It mentions some funeral customs, such as after the death of the Qiang people, sheep were used as offerings, and cremation was used. Each stockade had a crematorium, and the ashes were buried devoutly. The American missionary Graham’s *Customs and Religions of the Qiang People* is regarded as a more objective and systematic study on the customs of the Qiang people, which mentions the funeral of the Qiang people and their views of the soul and the world.

In the domestic studies on the funeral of the Qiang people, Mr. Zhuang Xueben’s *Inspection Record of the Qiang and Rong*, that is the earlier one, made some investigations on the funeral customs of the Qiang people in Mao County and Wenchuan, and recorded the tombs of the Qiang people and the caves collecting ashes. Between 1984 and 1986, he published books such as *Di and Qiang*, *History of the Qiang People*, and *Brief History of the Qiang People* made an in-depth and comprehensive description and combing of the origin, migration, development and evolution of the Qiang people. It laid the foundation for the studies on the change of funeral ceremony of the Qiang people.

The field investigation materials of the Qiang people’s funeral ceremony are also richly accumulated, such as Xu Ping’s *Cultural Adaptation and Change - Sichuan Qiang Village Survey*, the fourth chapter details the funeral process of the Qiang people in 1990; Zhao Xi’s *Holy and The Affinity—A Shibi Culture Survey and Research on Chinese Qiang People* describes a vivid process of funeral of the Qiang people district in the 1988. In addition, the *Compilation of the Original Religious Materials of All Ethnic Groups in China (the Qiang people volume)* that is edited by He Zhiwu and Qian Anjing etc. specially discusses and introduces the “funeral” with rich content.

In 2005, the first paper to study the cremation of the Qiang people was Ma Ning’s *Analysis of the Cremation Customs of the Qiang People*. He discussed in detail the origin of the cremation customs of the Qiang people. Deng Honglie’s

*Discussion On the Funeral Etiquette of the Qiang People* explores the burial and cremation customs of the Qiang people. He believes that the Qiang people's funeral ceremony preserves the historical imprint of the Qiang people and profoundly affect the future of this nation. Li Mingchun's *Historical Study of the Cremation of the Qiang People* analyzes the historical evolution of the cremation of the Qiang people, especially mentioning the influence of the central government's attitude towards cremation on the funeral customs of the Qiang people, showing the adaptation and changes of the funeral culture of the Qiang people.

The existing researches pays more attention to the origin, the process and the cultural connotation of Qiang people's funeral ceremony. They also have some useful discussions on the funeral ceremony of the Qiang people from the aspects of life and death, social function and hospice care, but historical changes are talked less. Therefore, this paper will focus on this and clearly comb the evolution of the traditional funeral ceremony of the Qiang people.

### 3. Historical evolution of the funeral ceremony of the Qiang people

According to the identifiable literatures, in the earliest time, the Qiang people used cremation for the deceased. The funeral of the Qiang people used to be in the form of cremation, earth burial, rock burial, and water burial. In history, cremation was mainly used, and the burial was mainly followed by burial.

During the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period, the Qiang people in history adopted cremation and attached great importance. *Lie Zi-Tang Wen* records "the Qin Dynasty has a country with a canal, and when the people's relative die, and they will collect firewood and burn. They will watch the smoke rising, it is called Dengxia, which means they fulfill the filial duty". Qiangqu State is a Qiang Rong tribe outside the northwest of the Qin State during the Warring States Period. The paragraph means: for the people of Qiangqu, when their relatives are dead, people will find firewood and burn, watching the fire rise, and they call this process "Dengxia", which means to leave the world to a distant place. Only in this way, the relatives of the deceased can be regarded as filial piety. *Xunzi-Dalue Volum* in the Warring States period: "Di and Qiang people have no worry about the grave. They worry about whether they can be burned off after being dead.

The burial custom of the Qiang people in the Han Dynasty was that the people wouldn't feel sorrow when their parents died, but rode horse and sang." *Later Han-Deng Xun Biography*: "The custom of Rong people is that when the parents died, people are ashamed of weeping, but ride horses and sing." Today, the attitude of the descendants of Qiang people to the death of the old people remains unchanged, and even make it "happy funeral".

During the Tang Dynasty, the Qiang people still adopted cremation, and the priests were asked to choose the auspicious day, which is the same with today's Qiang people. As recorded by *Old Tang Book · Dangxiang Qiang*: "when people died, the body will be burned, which is called cremation". *Dangxiang* people used to burn the body after the death, which is called cremation. *Old Tang Book*: "When the body is burned, people must ask the scryer to choose an auspicious day....." The day for burning the body must also be an auspicious day. *Old Tang*

*Book · Dangxiang Qiang*: when the old people died, it's considered that they had enjoyed the life, and the relatives would not cry; when the young people died, it would be considered as dQiangng young and unjust dead, and they would cry." The Qiang people believe that the death of the elderly is the natural law, and there is no need to be too sad. Until today, the Qiang people's death for the elderly is also philosophical. There is a proverb: "There is wrong birth, but no wrong death", which also reflects the idea that the old Qiang people don't cry for the dead old people, but cry for the dead young people.

In the Song Dynasty, the Northern Song Dynasty *Tai Ping Yu Lan*: when the Qiang people died, and they would be burned and their ash would be winnowed." Fan means burning. It can be seen that at that time, the Qiang people adopted cremation and did not receive ashes at that time. In the travel notes of Marco Polo about Xixia, "before the burning, the relatives of the deceased built a wooden house in the path of the funeral, and covered them with gold, brocade and silk. When the bier passed through the house, the people in the house would offer meat and other food in front of the corpse, which is to make the deceased enjoy life as living in another world. When the corpse was lifted to the place where it would be burned, and the relatives would burn the paper-made human, horse, camel and money that were prepared in advance with the corpse.... When the bier was lifted forward, all the instruments were played." [2]The funeral of the Qiang people recorded by Marco Polo has already mentioned the bier, and the crematorium had appeared the small wood house for the sacrifice of food for the deceased. There are also lively musical instruments in the funeral.

In the Qing dynasty, Jiaqing period, *Zhi Jiluo · Terroir* recorded that Qiang people "burn the corpse after dead and pick up the bone for burial". Here, after burning, the other people would bury the bone, which is another way to dispose of ashes. Before 1910, in the Qing Dynasty, Daoguang period, *Maozhou Zhi*: "when people died, the corpse will be burned, which is called cremation, and each village has a burning area." [3]In 1772 (Qianlong the 42<sup>nd</sup> year), "reformed to burial"[4], due to the compulsory order of the Qing Dynasty governors, the people gradually abandoned the traditional funeral custom of cremation and switched to burial. After the death of the man, the coffin is used to put the corpse inside, and the coffin is rectangular. Qiang people call it "Fangzi". A chanting of Shibi sang: "in the 42<sup>nd</sup> year of Kangxi period, after the death of the Qiang people, they didn't use coffin, the corpse was softly wrapped by grass curtain and burned, and each village had the firing place. In that year, the world of Qiang people became chaotic and they returned to the Great Dynasty. After then, people need to wear six pieces of clothing to be buried in the coffin when they are dead." [5]

During the Republic of China era, the funeral customs of Qiang people were recorded in *Wenchuan County Records · Terroirs*: "Qiang people have funeral songs... dance with each other to show joy and sorrow, which is the preserved ancient customs." This should be the filial piety and sacrifice dance that was sung during the funeral. There are still some traces today. When Zhuang Xueben visited Wenchuan in 1937, he encountered many caves and found bones at the bottom of the cave. Later, he was confirmed by the local people, knowing that they were the tombs used to place the ashes of the ancestors of Qiang people. There are many such caves

in the deep mountains where the Qiang people live, and they are big or small. He also said that after the death of Qiang people, they still used cremation and took the bones and ashes after incineration and sealed them in the cave. Relatives who touched the corpse after a funeral must fire at the door when they were back home. - Burning a pile of cypress at the door. - People should walk around the smoke, and it is said that they can remove the evil spirits by the smoke.” [6]

In summary, Qiang people used cremation at least before the Qing Dynasty, and the burial was gradually developed after the rulers practiced the reform. Secondly, the early cremation of the Qiang people did not retain the ashes. The cremation customs held by the Qiang people in tribes or families were passed down to the Song Dynasty. Later, in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, they gradually turned to the burial of coffin in village or family. [7]The Qiang people have always used cremation, but the specific way of cremation has probably gone through two stages. First, in the Song Dynasty and before, the Qiang people were directly cremated after death, without coffins, and after the burning of the body, the ashes were thrown in the wild, and some were filled into the soil on the spot. After the Song Dynasty, the ashes began to be placed in the small box; After the bureaucratization of native officers, the rulers forced to use burial, and the funeral of the Qiang people gradually became burial.

#### **4. Analysis and discussion**

Culture has always changed with the environment. The funeral ceremony of the Qiang people have also evolved with the history of the Qiang people. Especially when the national policy changes, the national migration, the ethnic exchanges are frequent and deep, and cultures of the ethnic minorities influence each other, so rich and diverse cultural form is formed, as is the funeral ceremony of the Qiang people. For example, there are three types of fire burial methods of the Qiang people summarized by Ma Ning: One is the burial method of Taoping Qiang Village in Li County, Sichuan Province. After the deceased's appearance is groomed, they will be wrapped in cloth and fixed in the fire cemetery on the stone pile in the village., burned with firewood, and the ashes are not picked up. The second is circulated in Jiashan Village, Li County, Sichuan Province: There are two earthen walls about one meter high built in the firing tomb of the village, and the two walls are separated by about one meter. In the middle of the earth wall, there are six small earthen walls of sixty centimeters high. These walls separate the two walls into a grid. Put the deceased between the two walls, and put firewood on the top and bottom. The third type is the funeral method of Puxi in Li County: the remains of the deceased are placed in the coffin, and the coffin is placed on the fire tomb, the deceased's head towards to the coffin head, and the feet toward to the coffin end. A small opening is made at the top of the coffin head and at the bottom of the coffin end respectively, and then the firewood is ignited at the end of the coffin. The flame enters from the end and exits from the coffin head. These three kinds of funeral methods are actually different from the cultural changes, but the core characteristics remain unchanged.

Now, both the cremation and burial are used by the Qiang area. Rock burial or water burial are used for infants or children die after abortion. Most people die with

burial in the ground. Some elderly people would like cremation when they die. Their children generally follow their wishes and bury the elderly in the form of cremation. Cremation is a traditional burial custom with a long history. There are crematoriums set up by surname or village. In 1952, Li Zhichun and Wu Congzhong's *Survey Materials of Qiang People* wrote down: "the people with the same surname or a village has a shared firing tomb. Some places have buildings that are like small houses at the firing tomb, and they are divided into two rooms which are used to place the ashes. There is a rock pile beside the firing tomb, and a large slate is on top of it. The corpse is placed on top of the slate and burned. For the place without firing tomb house, the ashes are thrown and scattered. People die for three days will be burned. The cremation is arranged by the mother's brother, the old man of this family and Shibi. The firewood is brought by the relatives of the family and the neighbors in the village. The burning of corpse usually begins after sunset. When the burning of corpse begins, Shibi beats the drums and dances, the mother's brother ignites and burns, the relatives sit around and cry, sing songs, and finally, with the dance of holding hands, they will pray for the gods to bless the dead to go into another world. After incineration, the ashes are naturally place in the crematorium. In the *Discussion on Funeral Etiquette of the Qiang People*, Teacher Deng Honglie wrote that the Qiang people in the north of Mao County still adopted cremation in 2012. Many villages still retained the traditional cremation customs, and the firing cemeteries and fire graves remain intact. There is a public crematorium in every family or village. The cremation tomb usually has a stone wall. There is a fire cemetery pit in the field. There is a movable cabin on the pit. The memorial talet of ancestors of the surname is dedicated in the house. Some of them also have tombstones beside the pit, which records the source of ancestor of the surname and the year and month of the fire cemetery. [8]The cremation is generally a grand memorial to the dead. The basic rituals can be divided into the first mourning, the funeral discussion and preparation, relatives offering libation, keeping vigil beside the coffin and sing dirge, delivery of the corpse outside, cremation, and big sacrifice.

The basic rituals and procedures of Qiang people's burial are basically the same as those of the Han nationality. The relatives mourn for the dead, and the family of the deceased start the mourning, then conduct Dianzhu ceremony. After that the filial son wear the mourning dress, entertain the guests, and bury the deceased the next day. However, they still retain the characteristics of Qiang people. "The deceased is dressed in white (usually is the linen)". It is necessary to kill a sheep and sacrifice the dead, and to "lead the way". In some areas, when the deceased is buried, people will dance while eating wine. After the coffin is buried in the soil, it is necessary to use stones or mud block to form a grave. Some of them are also built with stone outer coffin outside the coffin, with mud and rocks, covered by five to seven blocks of rock." [9]

To sum up, combing the historical evolution of a nation's funeral ceremony, we can understand why the funeral ceremony of Qiang people today become this, which also allows us to see the historical context and horizontal development of a national culture. It is also possible to understand the direction of the future, and thus actively grasp the direction of national culture in the cultural transformation.

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