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Eureka Journal of Humanities and Social Research (EJHSR)

ISSN 2760-4934 (Online) Volume 2, Issue 11, November 2026

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SOGDIAN TOMBS IN CHINA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON FUNERARY PRACTICES

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Abstract

The study of Sogdian funerary practices provides a profound lens through which to view the complex identity of this influential people, who dominated the Silk Road trade from the 4th to the 8th century. As merchants, missionaries, and diplomats, the Sogdians established extensive networks stretching from their Central Asian homeland—centered on the great cities of Samarkand and Bukhara in the region historically known as Sogdiana—all the way to the Chinese heartland. Their burial customs, preserved in the archaeological record of both their homeland and their diaspora communities in China, reveal a fascinating and nuanced story of cultural negotiation.

Keywords: Sogdian, Zoroastrianism, funerary rites, ossuary, Silk Road, Sabao, Wirkak, Anyang funerary bed, Miho couch, cultural hybridity, epitaphs, Northern Dynasties, Tang Dynasty, archaeology.

Introduction

Sogdians in China used to be the traders on Silk Road, originally from Central Asia, then ended up living in China. The thing is that those traders were following the funerary culture of their homeland, which were held that dead matter was polluting and should not contaminate the sacred elements of fire, earth or water. The research about their tombs would be so interesting since the tombs can demonstrate both Central Asian and Chinese culture values and religious matters.

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And this paper discusses about the traditions of both culture and still preserving tombs of Sogdian traders in China.

Sogdians mostly followed the Zoastraian funerary rules, so they used to place the dead body into ossuaries. These ossuaries, often elaborately decorated, served as the final resting place for the soul's physical remains and were sometimes housed in a designated structure, a naus. This practice is the fundamental baseline for understanding Sogdian funerary culture—a culture that was dramatically transformed when Sogdians settled permanently in China. The discovery of an ossuary in the unlikely context of Mogao Cave 158 at Dunhuang, as analyzed by Liu Yongzeng, provides a remarkable piece of evidence for the persistence of this core tradition. By comparing the box-shaped object venerated by disciples in the mural of the Nirvana Sutra with archaeological finds from Central Asia, Liu argues that it is indeed a Sogdian ossuary. This suggests that as late as the Mid-Tang Dynasty, at least some Zoroastrian communities near Dunhuang continued to adhere to the ancestral practice of bone-collection, even as they interacted with the overwhelmingly Buddhist environment of the cave temples. The mural, therefore, inadvertently immortalizes a specific ritual object central to Sogdian-Zoroastrian belief, transplanted hundreds of miles from its geographical origin (Liu 2021, 45-67).

However, the most spectacular and informative Sogdian funerary remains have been unearthed not in Sogdiana itself, but in the cemeteries of ancient China's capitals, such as Xi'an (known as Chang'an in antiquity). Here, high-ranking Sogdian immigrants, who often held the official position of Sabao (薩保)—a term derived from the Sogdian word sʾrtpʾw, meaning "caravan leader," which evolved into a title for the leader of the immigrant merchant community—were buried in elaborate underground tombs that bore the hallmark features of Chinese aristocratic burial. These included long sloping ramps, tomb tunnels, and brick or stone chambers. Yet, within this distinctly Chinese architectural framework, they placed funerary furniture that was a hybrid creation: the stone funerary couch (棺

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床) and the house-shaped sarcophagus. Instead of using simple ossuaries, the Sogdian elite in China commissioned massive, intricately carved stone slabs that formed a platform for the body or an enclosed sarcophagus in the form of a Chinese-style tiled roof temple. The iconic examples of this phenomenon include the tombs of Wirkak (Shi Jun, d. 579 CE), An Jia (d. 579 CE), Kang Ye (d. 571 CE), and the master of the Anyang funerary bed, as well as the Miho Museum couch. These monuments represent a profound adaptation: the Sogdians adopted the Chinese form of a permanent, sealed tomb and stone coffin, but they completely rejected the idea of simply placing the body in it. Instead, they used the surfaces of these couches and sarcophagi as narrative canvases to depict their Zoroastrian rituals and their own life stories, thereby creating a space where their soul could reside, surrounded by familiar religious iconography and memories of their homeland (Grenet and Riboud 2003, 133-136; Marshak 2002, 35-47).

The iconographic programs carved onto these stone monuments are a rich tapestry of Iranian religious themes, Silk Road imagery, and elements borrowed from Chinese and Buddhist art. A central and recurring motif is the Zoroastrian fire ceremony. On the Anyang funerary bed, for instance, panels flanking the entrance to the tomb chamber depict priests with their mouths covered by a padām (a ritual cloth to prevent pollution of the sacred flame) tending a blazing fire altar on a portable stand. Similarly, the Miho couch features a prominent scene that has been interpreted as a fire ritual. These depictions are a direct transplantation of core Zoroastrian liturgical practice into the Chinese tomb, ensuring the deceased would have the protection and presence of the divine in the afterlife. Beyond these explicit religious scenes, the narrative panels on monuments like the sarcophagus of Wirkak unfold like a biographical comic strip, detailing the life of the Sabao. As described by scholars like Frantz Grenet and Pénélope Riboud, these panels show Wirkak in various stages of his life: as a young man meeting dignitaries, leading a caravan across the Silk Road, hunting with

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companions, resting by a river, and finally presiding over lavish banquets accompanied by music and dance.

These scenes are invaluable for understanding Sogdian material culture, costume, and social life. The presence of different ethnic groups in these reliefs also provides crucial historical data. For example, the Tomb of Wirkak, whose long life (493-579 CE) spanned the era of Hephthalite dominance in Central Asia, prominently features figures with Hephthalite characteristics, such as specific crowns and hairstyles. In contrast, the slightly younger An Jia's tomb and the Miho couch, dating to around 570 CE, show numerous figures who are clearly Turks, reflecting the shift in power following the Sasanian-Turkic alliance that destroyed the Hephthalite Empire. This demonstrates how these funerary monuments are not just personal memorials but also historical documents reflecting the shifting geopolitics of the Silk Road (Grenet 2022, 211-228; Lerner 2005, 89-104).

The scholarly interpretation of these syncretic monuments has evolved significantly, moving beyond a simple narrative of "Sinicization." While early scholarship often viewed these Sogdian tombs as evidence of immigrant communities being wholly absorbed into the Chinese cultural sphere, a more nuanced analysis, as presented by scholars like Lin Sheng-chih and Jeong Wan-seo, reveals a deliberate and selective process of cultural adaptation. Lin Sheng-chih's detailed examination of the Northern Qi-period Anyang funerary couch traces its formal origins not to Sogdiana, but to the stone funerary beds of the Northern Wei dynasty. He demonstrates that the Sogdians in China adopted the existing Chinese aristocratic funerary format and its visual language, including the tripartite division of screen panels and the incorporation of Buddhist motifs like lotus blossoms and guardian deities. This was not a passive acceptance but an active appropriation of a powerful local tradition to express their own status.

They then "filled" this Chinese form with their own content—Zoroastrian priests, Sogdian banquets, and Silk Road caravans—effectively creating a new, hybrid

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artistic language. The arrangement of images on these couches is not random; Jeong Wan-seo's research emphasizes the need to analyze the thematic classification, the number of appearances, and the specific arrangement of images to understand how the Sogdians "represent their traditional view of the world after death through China's funerary style." The goal was to maintain their distinct identity and ensure a proper Zoroastrian afterlife while displaying their wealth and integration within Chinese society. The adoption of the title Sabao and its inclusion in bilingual epitaphs, as seen in Wirkak's tomb with its Sogdian and Chinese inscriptions, further underscores this dual identity, presenting their foreign lineage and Chinese official rank simultaneously (Lin 2019, 157-182; Jeong 2020, 93-118; Yoshida 2005, 23-41).

The discovery of bilingual inscriptions, particularly the Sogdian-Chinese epitaph of Wirkak (Shi Jun), has revolutionized the understanding of Sogdian funerary culture. These texts provide direct voice to the deceased, offering details about their lineage, official career, family relationships, and even their spiritual aspirations. The Sogdian portion of Wirkak's epitaph, deciphered by the renowned linguist Yoshida Yutaka, contains references to Zoroastrian religious concepts and dating formulas that follow the Sogdian calendar, demonstrating the persistence of their native cultural framework even as they served under Chinese rulers. The Chinese portion, while broadly similar in content, emphasizes their official titles and contributions to the Chinese state. This bilingual practice represents a conscious effort to communicate simultaneously with two different audiences: the Chinese bureaucratic world and the Sogdian immigrant community. The epitaphs also sometimes record the circumstances of death and the subsequent funerary rites, providing rare textual confirmation of the hybrid rituals that must have accompanied the burial. For instance, some inscriptions mention the grief of Chinese officials alongside the lamentations of Sogdian kin, painting a picture of a community that straddled two worlds (Yoshida 2005, 33-38; Dien 2007, 210-225).

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Despite the dominance of stone couches in elite contexts, the tradition of ossuary burial did not completely disappear among Sogdians in Central Asia and even in some diaspora communities. Archaeological excavations at sites like Panjakent and Samarkand have yielded numerous ossuaries decorated with molded reliefs depicting Zoroastrian symbols, including fire altars, crescent moons, and human faces that may represent divinities or the soul of the deceased. These objects, typically dating from the 5th to 8th centuries, demonstrate the continuity of orthodox Zoroastrian practice in the homeland. The materials used varied from clay to carved stone and even alabaster, reflecting the resources available and the status of the deceased. Some ossuaries were shaped like human figures or architectural models, suggesting a desire to provide a "house" for the soul. The discovery of a Sogdian ossuary in a Buddhist context at Dunhuang, as mentioned earlier, indicates that even when Sogdians lived far from their homeland, some families maintained this ancestral custom, perhaps as a marker of orthodox religious adherence in contrast to the more assimilated elite who adopted Chinese-style burial. This variation in funerary practice among the Sogdian diaspora highlights the diversity of responses to the experience of migration and cultural contact (Pavchinskaia 1994, 105-123; Compareti 2018, 67-89).

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