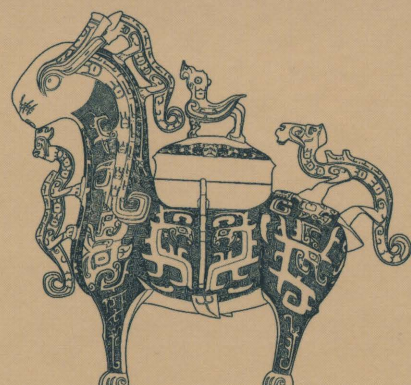


ARCHÄOLOGIE  
IN

CHINA 1 中国考古



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# Bridging Eurasia

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Geleitwort des Präsidenten des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts .....	VII
Preface of the Editors .....	VIII
Addresses of the Authors .....	X

Carnelian beads, animal figures and exotic vessels: traces of contact between the Chinese States and Inner Asia, ca. 1000-650 BC .....	1
Jessica Rawson	

Wagenfahrt ins Jenseits: Das Gräberfeld von Zhangjiapo als Kulturzeugnis der späten Bronzezeit in Zentralchina .....	43
Bettina Griebel, Magdalene von Dewall	
unter Mitarbeit von Kathrin Kröning und Simone Reuß	

Einleitung .....	43
Bestattungen der Westlichen Zhou-Zeit in Zhangjiapo .....	44
Forschungsgeschichte .....	44
Die Grabanlagen: Bauweise, Grabausstattung, Beisetzungspraxis .....	45
Einfache Schachtgräber .....	45
Einfaches Schachtgrab 163 .....	47
Schachtgräber mit Einzelrampe .....	49
Schachtgrab mit Einzelrampe 152 .....	49
Schachtgrab mit Einzelrampe 170 .....	54
Schachtgräber mit Doppelrampe .....	66
Schachtgrab mit Doppelrampe 157 .....	66
Seitenkammergräber .....	70
Seitenkammergrab 215 .....	74
Seitenkammergrab 183 .....	75
Das Spektrum an Beigaben .....	76
Keramikgefäße .....	77
Glasierte Keramik und hartgebrannte Stempeldekorkeramik .....	82
Bronzegefäße .....	83
Inschriften auf Bronzegefäßen und Glocken .....	87
Bronzewaffen und -werkzeuge .....	92
Auswertung und Interpretation .....	97
Chronologische Auswertung .....	97
Chorologische Auswertung .....	105
Anordnung der Seitenkammergräber im Gräberfeld .....	107
Gräber mit Hüftgrube .....	109
Geschlechts- und altersspezifische Bestattungssitten .....	109
Resümee .....	110
Danksagung .....	111
Tabellen .....	111
Zeichenglossar .....	119
Literatur .....	121

New discoveries in Yinxu/Anyang and their contribution to the chronology of Shang capitals in Bronze Age China .....	125
Tang Jigen, Jing Zhichun, Mayke Wagner	

Results of the 2006 and 2007 excavations at the Dongheigou Site, Balikun County, Autonomous Region of Uygur Xinjiang .....	145
Wang Jianxin, Zhang Feng, Ren Meng, Zhang Yuzhong, Taiwur Yakupian Fatkulla, Yu Jianjun	
The coffin paintings of the Tubo period from the northern Tibetan Plateau .....	187
Tong Tao, Patrick Wertmann	



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# The coffin paintings of the Tubo period from the northern Tibetan Plateau<sup>1</sup>

Tong Tao and Patrick Wertmann

The Tibetan Plateau is located in the interior of Asia, overlooking the main part of China from the west. At present it administratively includes the Tibetan Autonomous Region in the southwest, Qinghai province in the north-east, parts of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in the east and the southern border area of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region in the north and northwest. Due to its elevation, vast size and average elevation of up to 4500 m with peaks exceeding 5000 m, it is physically unique and became known as the “roof of the world”. The massive heights of Tibet nourish the sources of some of the major rivers of China and the rest of Southeast Asia, like the Yangzi and the Yellow Rivers. The centre of the Tibetan Plateau is partly mountainous and partly level, characterized by stretches of grazing land supporting pastoral nomadism, agriculture in the alluvial plains and salt exploitation in several lakes.

Converging lines of cultural, economic and social intercourse drawn from a number of geographical regions and differing societies always made Tibet a melting pot of various peoples. Most of these can be considered as Tibetans; however, Owen Lattimore also regards them as “...‘pocketed’ communities; that is, peoples of a distant origin in Central Asia, India, North China, the trans-Yangtze jungles of Southwest China, and the fringes of Burma, who now look down from their niches in the escarpment of Tibet on the countries and racial congeners of their past.”<sup>2</sup>

## Overview of the History of the Tubo from the beginning to the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD

Chinese historians start to mention Tibet from the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Tibetans were called “Tubo” or “Tufan” 吐蕃<sup>3</sup>, a term that seems to derive from the ancient Tibetan *Bon* religion<sup>4</sup> or the word “Bod” in classical Tibetan<sup>5</sup> respectively. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Chinese changed the name Bod to Fan 蕃 meaning “foreigner” or “barbarian”.

Tibetan mythology holds that the legendary kings descended from heaven on a cord. Nyatri Tsenpo, who is believed to have lived sometime around 126 BC, is supposed to be the first king of Tibet from the Yarlung Dynasty. Due to his terrifying appearance, he was exiled to Tibet where he became king. Tibetan kings were said to remain connected to heaven by this cord; so after their sons reached adulthood, the kings returned to heaven and remained immortal. According to various accounts, Drigum Tsenpo was the first king to lose his immortal status after his cord was cut in a fight with his minister Longam. He was also the first Tibetan king to get killed and buried on earth<sup>6</sup>.

Namri Songtsen (died in 629 AD), also called Namri Löntsen, was a son of a powerful feudal lord, who held a position of trust with the local clan chiefs. He gained control of all the area around present-day Lhasa, which would later become known as the Tibetan empire. In 608 and 609 Namri Songtsen sent two embassies to China, which marked the beginning of Tibetans appearing on the international scene<sup>7</sup>. After the death of Namri Songtsen, his son Songtsan Gampo (618–650) became the first emperor of the Tibetan empire with its capital founded in Lhasa. Under his rule, the power of the empire gradually increased by adding adjacent kingdoms and expanding Tibet’s power beyond Lhasa and the Yarlung Valley. It was

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<sup>1</sup>This essay is based in parts on a chapter of the doctoral dissertation “The Silk Roads of the northern Tibetan Plateau during the early Middle Ages (from the Han to Tang Dynasty) reconstructed from archaeological and written sources” submitted at Eberhard-Karls University Tübingen by Tong Tao in 2008. The Tibetan transcriptions in this text are according to Wylie 1959.

<sup>2</sup>Lattimore 1988, 208.

<sup>3</sup>Lattimore 1988, 215 JTS.

<sup>4</sup>Bon is the oldest spiritual tradition of Tibet and the name of one of the Tibetan religions. Bon is often described as the shamanistic and animistic tradition of the Himalayas prior to the rise of Buddhism in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Adherents of Bon were called *bon-po*. Kvaerne 1985.

<sup>5</sup>Stein 1972, 31.

<sup>6</sup>Beckwith 1987, 13.

<sup>7</sup>Beckwith 1987, 17.

Songtsan Gampo who is believed to have introduced Buddhism to Tibet by supporting Buddhist missionary activities in building temples and monasteries. Under his reign, Tibet, for the first time, became a powerful state with a central government and an army, its own culture, religion and script.

Songtsan Gampo is said to have proved adept at diplomacy and in combat. According to Chinese records, he sent out an envoy in 634 requesting marriage to a Chinese princess in order to strengthen the relationship between the two countries. The Chinese court of the Tang Dynasty refused the request. In 635–636 the Tibetan emperor attacked and defeated the 'Aza people<sup>8</sup> (Chin. Tǔyùhún 吐谷浑), who lived in the area around Lake Koko Nor (Chin. Qīnghǎi hú 青海湖) and who controlled important trade routes into China. The Tuyuhun describes a nomadic Xianbei tribe, originally herders in the north-east of China, who migrated to the northern Tibetan Plateau and established a large kingdom covering the area of Lake Koko Nor and the Qaidam Basin in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. After this conquest Songtsan Gampo continued to attack further border towns but was

finally defeated by the Chinese army<sup>9</sup>. Shortly after, Songtsan Gampo sent an envoy to the Chinese emperor in order to apologize and to make another request to emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty 唐太宗 (599–649) to marry a Chinese princess – this time successfully<sup>10</sup>.

The Chinese Princess Wencheng 文成公主 (623–680) is said to have departed from China in 640 to marry Songtsan Gampo by way of the Tang-Bo Road 唐蕃古道 (Fig. 1). Together with Songtsan Gampo's second wife from Nepal, Bhrikuti Devim, Princess Wencheng introduced Buddhism to Tibet. Moreover, Princess Wencheng brought to Central Tibet plentiful silk wares, books on medicine, crafts and techniques, as well as a large number of craftsmen and skilled workers. The request for silkworms, workmen trained in the production of alcohol, millstones, paper and ink was also fulfilled<sup>11</sup>. This greatly propelled the spread of the advanced Tang culture

<sup>8</sup>Zhou 1970, 27–62; Mole 1970.

<sup>9</sup>Powers 2004, 168.

<sup>10</sup>Yaldiz 2006, 48–53.

<sup>11</sup>Stein 1972, 58.

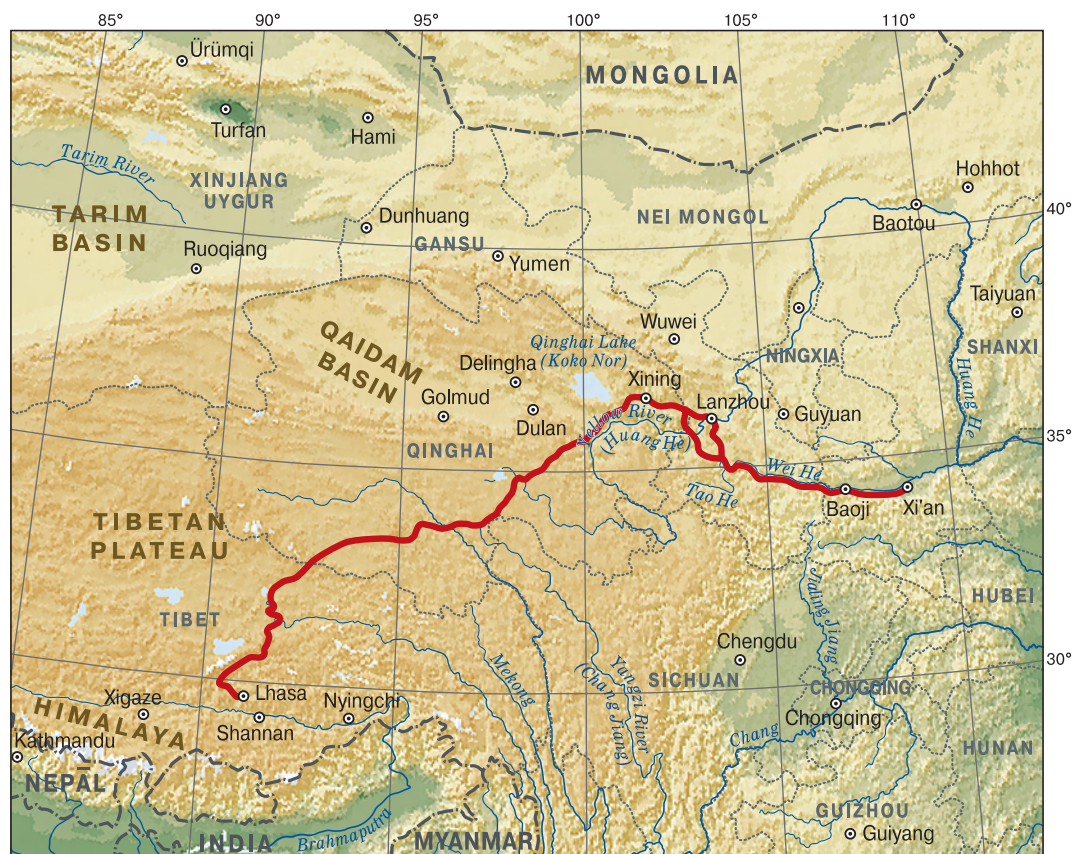


Fig. 1: The Tibetan Plateau and adjacent regions with sites mentioned in the text and the Tang-Bo Road connecting the capitals of the Chinese Empire Chang'an and of the Tibetan Empire Lhasa.

Map: MS Encarta/N. Gorban'/P. Wertmann.

throughout the Tibetan Plateau and exerted a huge influence on the development of Tubo culture. The marriage alliance was followed by twenty years of rapprochement and harmonious relations between the two countries. Large amounts of silk, gold and silver as well as local products were exchanged between the two sides. Consequently, the Tang-Bo Road connecting the two imperial capitals Chang'an and Lhasa became more prosperous than ever before.

After the death of emperors Tang Taizong and Songtsan Gampo, far more aggressive successors came to rule.

In Tibet, the former minister *blon po mgar* seized power and planned to firmly integrate the Tuyuhun Kingdom on the northern Tibetan Plateau. The main purpose of the north-eastward expansion was not only to establish more direct economical and cultural relations with the Tang, but also to participate in the lucrative Silk Road trade<sup>12</sup>. In 663 the Tubo attacked and defeated the Tuyuhun near the Yellow River and got hold of an area which before had long been under Chinese suzerainty. Shortly after, from 665 to 670, Khotan was defeated by the Tibetans, which concluded in a row of conflicts over the territories in the Tarim Basin with the Chinese Tang Dynasty. These conflicts lasted until about 692 when the Chinese managed to recapture those territories. Most of the Tibetan possessions in Central Asia had been lost to the Chinese by 750.

From 755 to 763 the An Shi Rebellion led by the Sogdian general An Lushan 安祿山 substantially weakened the Tang Empire. At the same time Trisong Detsen (reign 755–797) came to power. Under his reign, the Tubo Empire reached its zenith. Within ten years, its cavalry penetrated as far as Shaanxi province and several Central Asian states and even captured the Tang capital Chang'an in late 763<sup>13</sup>. During this time the Tubo Empire incorporated most cities of Chinese Central Asia into its territory. With Tubo's control of the main part of the Silk Road through the Gansu Corridor and the Southern Road of Xinjiang, the Silk Road in Qinghai became an internal segment of the entire network. It was not until 821 that the hostilities between China and Tibet came to an end with the Sino-Tibetan peace treaty under the reign of *khri ral pa can*.

The Tibetan Empire continued to be a major Central Asian empire until the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup>, when its political power was at its greatest extent, stretching as far as Mongolia and Bengal. During those two centuries, it implemented "Tibetanizing" policies within the vast territory, mainly including the standardization of the Tibetan language and costume<sup>15</sup>. Due to the high density of intercrossing trade routes, an obvious cultural and ethnic amalgamation could be expected in the northern part of the Tibetan Plateau. Recent archaeological finds corroborated the mergence of local religious practices with Buddhist and non-Buddhist rituals<sup>16</sup>.

However, textual records about different aspects of every-day life of the indigenous population living in this area are not sufficient. Therefore, the discovery of coffins painted with narrative scenes in Delingha county, Guolimu site, provide the first insights into the practices concerned with the funeral of high-ranking individuals. A rich panorama of landscapes, feasting and other amusements, the fashions of the time, as well as visions of the afterlife and funerary customs of the Tubo period unfolds in front of our eyes. Astonishingly vivid, the depicted scenes illustrate the combination of features of different cultural backgrounds. The principal goal of this paper is to decipher and trace these features that are intermingled in the coffin paintings.

## General features of the tombs during the Tubo period (663–842 AD)

### Tubo tombs in Central Tibet

The general structure of early Tibetan burial customs is known from various Central Tibetan sites. The large- and medium-sized graves from the Tubo period in Central Tibet are scattered along the lower Yarlung Zangbo River. Thereby, Xigaze, Lhasa, Shannan and Nyingchi are the most concentrated regions, where graves amount to more than ten

<sup>12</sup>Chen/Gao 2003, 34.

<sup>13</sup>Stein 1972, 66.

<sup>14</sup>Beckwith 1987, 143-172.

<sup>15</sup>Cui 1999, 196-200.

<sup>16</sup>Heller 2003.



thousand. Principally the choice of a site for a tomb was governed by geomantic rites, in which locations on the slopes or at the foot of a mountain overlooking the broad fields, or on slopes facing a watercourse were preferred<sup>17</sup>. The cemetery normally had one or more tombs that were largest at the centre or on the highest point of the terrace. The medium- and small-sized tombs were placed at the sides and in the lower areas. The typical Tubo cemeteries like the cemetery of the kings in Qionggai county, the Ningshan cemetery in Sa'gya county, the Chamuqin cemetery in Lhaze county, the Jidui cemetery in Lhunze county and the Hongmushan cemetery in Nedong county all display the same layout<sup>18</sup>. Mounds of these cemeteries can be categorized roughly into two types. The majority of mounds of the larger tombs have a trapezoidal plan, with the longer side facing the lower lying river and the shorter side facing the high mountains. The frontal planes are tapered with a flat top like a pyramid. It is proposed that the importance of the mountain-divinities in Tibetan pre-Buddhist cults were well known, and that the position of the tumuli's short sides facing the high mountains might be related to a cult of sacred mountains, whose summit might have been the seat of the divinity<sup>19</sup>.

The mounds of the smaller graves are usually circular or oval, which perhaps is indicative of the deceased's lower social class. The mounds were built with tamped earth together with wood, stone or mud-brick to support the structures. The mounds of larger tombs have a more complicated interior structure, especially in the Tubo kings' graves in Qionggai.

Auxiliary buildings were very common in the cemeteries. Some buildings were built on the top of the mound and others in the lower space in front of the mounds. The buildings served for sacrificial purposes, or they provided accommodations for the tomb guards.

Sacrificial animals played an important role in all cemeteries. Animals like horses, cattle, sheep and dogs were interred either in special sacrificial pits or trenches arranged regularly in front of the grave mounds, or buried in certain places in the mounds, or placed in the grave chambers

or in the auxiliary buildings. In some cemeteries sacrificial animals were found in very large numbers. The horse sacrifice was one important program of the royal and aristocratic funeral ceremonies. Normally, the higher the social status of the deceased was, the greater was the number of horses buried.

Many aspects of the Tubo tombs are similar to the royal cemeteries of the Central Plain, for example, the trapezoidal mound and the stone monuments in front of them. Many mausolea of the Tang emperors had a great earthen mound of tapered square or trapezoidal shape. In particular, the grave of Prince Huizhuang (buried in 724 AD)<sup>20</sup> in Pucheng county, Shaanxi, has a mound in a similar tapered trapezoidal form. Two stone statues of a crouching lion on the southwestern side of the mound are almost the same as those found in Dulan, Central Tibet. In the Tang royal cemeteries, a square wall surrounds the mausoleum and its accompanying graves, thus forming a cemetery yard; this composition finds parallels in the Yingdeer and Kaomiaotu cemeteries as well. The mausoleum complex during the Tang period was fairly advanced and influential in many respects. Due to the regular communication between Tang and Tubo, especially the Tubo's thirst for knowledge and technique from the Tang, it is highly probable that the complex of royal cemeteries was introduced to the Tubo region and then adapted to local funeral practices.

Sacrificial customs on the Tibetan Plateau are selectively documented in Chinese sources. Documented in the *Sui Shu* 隋书 [History of the Sui]<sup>21</sup>: "(in the Fu Kingdom) when there is a funeral, relatives and guests must be assembled, and the slain horses could easily amount to hundreds".

The *Ce Fu Yuan Gui* 册府元龟 [Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature]<sup>22</sup> states: "When (a Tibetan) died, cattle and horses would be killed for sacrifice. Heads of cattle and horses are piled upon the

<sup>17</sup>He 1993.

<sup>18</sup>Huo 1995.

<sup>19</sup>Cafarelli 1997.

<sup>20</sup>Huizhuang Tomb 1999.

<sup>21</sup>SUS, vol. 83, 1858.

<sup>22</sup>CFYG 1967, vol. 961, 11308.



grave mound, which is in square shape, built with stone and looks like a flat-topped house.”

The *Jiu Tang Shu* 旧唐书 [Old History of the Tang]<sup>23</sup> states: “When the Zan Pu (Tubo king) died...the great houses were constructed on the grave, an earthen mound was built, and various woods were inserted to make a ceremonial place.”

The *Xin Tang Shu* 新唐书 [New History of the Tang]<sup>24</sup> states: “There are many junipers on the mountains. Many grave mounds are distributed over the hillsides, nearby which houses were built and painted with vermilion colour and white tiger images.”

### **The Tubo period tombs in Northern Tibet: Tombs M1 and M2 in the Guolimu cemetery of Delingha county**

The excavation of the Tubo graves in Delingha, Qinghai province, revealed essential information concerning the Silk Road on the northern Tibetan Plateau and contributed to the history of Tubo art. Paintings of the Tubo period so far were only known from scrolls and Buddhist cave murals of Dunhuang<sup>25</sup> and the painted wooden fragments unearthed in the Reshui cemetery in Dulan county since the 1990s<sup>26</sup>.

The three coffins on which this paper is focused were unearthed in the vicinity of the city of Delingha at the northern edge of the Qaidam Basin in August 2002. The four outer sides of the coffins, whose edges were connected in rabbit joints, had been painted lavishly. The paintings themselves were applied as follows: First the background was painted in brown or red, and then all of the images were sketched in ink or in red lines. Finally all of the images were filled in with colour. Only one of these three painted wooden coffins had, until then, been reported in part in Chinese journals<sup>27</sup>.

The painted wooden coffins were found in tombs M1 and M2 in the Guolimu cemetery, located about 30 km southwest of Delingha city (**Fig. 2**). The two tombs were severely disturbed, each remaining with an earthen mound about 1.5 m high above ground. Both tombs consist of a single



Fig. 2: Burial mound at Reshui site, Dulan county.  
Photo: Mayke Wagner.

rectangular shaft (4 m long, 2.5 m wide) with a rectangular, sloping passage leading to the shaft.

Tomb M1 contains a wooden chamber and a coffin. Its occupants were a couple – a man and a woman (likely husband and wife). One horse and one camel were buried on the two sides of the outer wooden chamber. Many silks of the Tang period, some wooden objects like bowls, a saddle and the model of a bird were found.

According to the excavator, tomb M2 is a transferred burial. Human bones were collected in a small coffin, which was in turn put inside a larger outer coffin. The opening of the earthen shaft was covered with juniper timbers, on which sheep bones had been placed. The tomb yielded many fragments of silk and wooden objects, such as a saddle, a quiver and the model of a bird as well as large ceramic jars. In addition to the motif of confronted dragons enclosed in pearl roundels, the decorative patterns further include honeysuckle and other floral designs. In view of the burial objects and decorative patterns, the excavator dated the tombs to the High Tang period, approximately the mid 8<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>23</sup> JTS, vol. 19, 5220.

<sup>24</sup> XTS, vol. 216, 6103.

<sup>25</sup> Karmay studied the Tubo costume basing on the Śāriputra and Raudrakṣa scroll, murals in the Dunhuang caves 158 and 159 as well as some Buddhist cave murals of the later period: Karmay 1977, 65-81. More examples could be supplemented: For the illustration of the Vimalakīrti-sūtra: Whitfield 1982, pl. 20. For the murals in Dunhuang of the caves 359, 225 and 220: Duan 1987, 161-174.

<sup>26</sup> One wooden casket, rectangular in shape, was unearthed in the Dulan cemetery from a Tubo tomb (99DRNM3). Its outer surface was painted with hunters, animals, and musicians: Dulan 2005, fig. 64; 65.

<sup>27</sup> Xu 2005, 56-69; Xu/Liu 2006, 32-33; Cheng et al. 2006, 3, 84-98; Luo 2006, 7, 68-82; Huo 2007, 2, 49-61.

It is likely that the three coffins made of juniper wood were, according to the reconstruction (**Fig. 3**), slightly rectangular or trapezoidal in shape, each consisting of two side planks, two end panels and one lid. The bottom, probably made of one flat board, is missing. The side planks are in a trapezoidal shape, with the front end wider than the rear end. They were made of two or three wooden boards held together by mortise-and-tenon joints. Along the upper edge of the side planks there were either one or two rabbets near the ends, probably serving as joints with the front and rear panels.

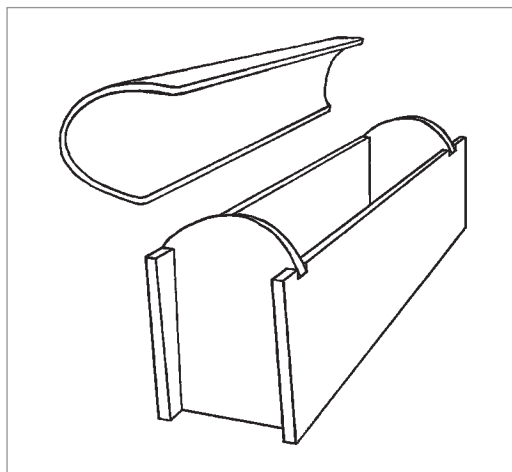


Fig. 3: Reconstruction of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1.  
Drawing: Tong Tao.

The exterior surface of the three wooden coffins was covered with paintings. The motifs represented in the painted side planks include scenes of processions with horses and riders, hunting, banquets and funerary rites. The end panels display auspicious creatures and sumptuous floral patterns. Two of the coffins are similar in terms of content and pictorial arrangement, as well as in painting style. This indicates that they were most likely made by the same

atelier and also within the same period. The two side planks of each coffin carried different scenes, which reveal a systematic time and spatial procedure when closely observed.

Due to the figures' costumes, face paintings, tomb structures, ancient Tibetan inscriptions as well as identical images in the nearby Dulan cemetery and classic Chinese accounts on the local history, the paintings are ascribed as Tubo remains. Of course, they are also closely related to the indigenous Tuyuhun people. However, this was the time of the process of ethnic amalgamation into the Tibetan people, and the paintings present a remarkable imprint of the Tubo culture. In view of the historical development it is plausible to classify these finds as Tibetan finds.

#### The side planks of Guolimu tomb M1

##### Plank I (**Fig. 4; 5**)

Plank I (2.20 m long, 0.56–0.70 m wide, 4 cm thick) which seems to be the left side panel of the coffin consists of three pieces of wooden boards. Its right end is wider than its left end. The painting on the surface is well preserved. Depicted are three scenes, proceeding from left to right, which represent the living world:

##### ● Hunting scene (**Fig. 6**):

On the left side are four horsemen, three behind and one ahead, chasing and shooting at two yaks. All of them hold a bow in their hands directed at two yaks galloping to the right, one of which is wounded and bleeding. A red hound is running in the same direction as the yaks, seemingly barking at them. Underneath the three



Fig. 4: Plank I of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1, photograph.  
Photo: Tong Tao.





Fig. 5: Plank I of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1, coloured drawing.

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.  
After: Cheng et al. 2006, 88-91.



Fig. 6: Hunting scene on plank I of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 5).

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.  
After: Cheng et al. 2006, 88-91.

hunters at the back are three deer fleeing to the left and being shot at by one rider. Two deer are bleeding, one of which seems to be exhausted judging by the hanging tongue.

● Caravan going to a banquet (**Fig. 7**): Next to the hunting scene follows a caravan, made up of five riders and one camel. Four riders go ahead and one leads the camel carrying a bulk of goods. The destination of the caravan is the banquet site, where two servants already stand in front of the tents to welcome them. The revelry now reaches a climax. The host and his

wife, both holding cups in their hands, are sitting in a huge tent drinking and talking. Next to the door are two guards receiving guests at the same time. Most of the guests are already gathered in front of the tent, all of them enjoying food and drink. Men sit on the long carpet at the left, while women stand at the right, both in a row and flanking the host's yurt. One of the guests seems to be quite drunk, bent over and vomiting, while the others continue drinking. Another guest holds up a rhyton. Some people stand in the square in front of the tent, serving, drinking, talking and celebrating.





Fig. 7: Caravan scene on plank I of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 5).

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.  
After: Cheng et al. 2006, 88-91.

● Enjoying a banquet, love-making and amusement (**Fig. 8**):

Behind the tent in the right corner of the plank some amusements are depicted. A man, standing on a small square carpet, draws a full bow directed at a white yak, which is secured at a stake. Behind him another archer is waiting for his turn. Two servants stand on the side to serve drinks. One of them holds a bottle made in the west Asian style and the other one carries

a salver with three goblets (stemmed cups) in it. Next to them are two men watching the shooting. Behind the tents, one couple – a man and a woman – are engaged in sexual intercourse, with an onlooking man holding his genitals and kneeling on the side.

This plank as a whole portrays scenes of life activities related to the Tibetan way of pastoral life. In the *Jiu Tang Shu* [Old His-



Fig. 8: Banquet, love-making and amusement scenes on plank I of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 5).

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.  
After: Cheng et al. 2006, 88-91.



tory of the Tang] the following observations were recorded by the Chinese.

其地气候大寒，……畜多犛牛猪犬羊马。……其人或随畜牧而不常厥居，然颇有城郭。其国都城号为逻些城。……贵人处于大毡帐，名为拂庐。<sup>28</sup>

"The climate there is quite cold, ...livestock includes yaks, pigs, dogs, sheep and horses. ...people move with a herd and seldom settle down, but they have permanent cities too. The capital of the country is called Luoxie city. ...Nobles live in a large felt tent, which is called *fu lu*."

The scene of the banquet depicts some interesting details that are clearly documented in Chinese sources. According to the record of the *Xin Tang Shu* [New History of the Tang]:

其宴大宾客，必驱犛牛，使客自射，乃敢馈。<sup>29</sup>

"When the banquet was given to honour distinguished guests, the hosts had to drive yaks and let the guests shoot them by themselves, before they would dare to present them."

Letting guests shoot yaks by themselves was a special way of expressing respect for them as well as an amusement at the banquet. Enjoying love-making was also an essential of the feasting, which probably had to do with rebirth and fertility in the circle of life and might have been related to shamanism. It probably reflects the matrimonial status in the nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes. Levirate and fraternal marriage were very common among the Xiongnu, Qiang, Xianbei, Tujue and Tibetan as well as the Tuyuhun peoples<sup>30</sup>.

Most of the figures, men or women, have vermilion marks on their faces. They were applied on the forehead, cheeks and jaw. The vermilion marks were round, band-shaped or dotted. The custom is quite unusual in other cultures. Some pictorial material like the Śāriputra and Raudrakṣa scrolls from Dunhuang<sup>31</sup> and the painted wooden casket in the Reshui cemetery in Dulan<sup>32</sup> represents such Tubo figures, whose faces are painted in vermilion. In Chinese sources this custom is called *zhe mian*, meaning "vermilion the face". In the *Xin Tang Shu* [New History

of the Tang] this custom is mentioned as follows:

衣率毡韦，以赭涂面为好。<sup>33</sup>

"(The Tubo people) wear felt and leather, and regard the vermilion face as beauty."

The *Jiu Tang Shu* [Old History of the Tang] further records that, when the Tang Princess Wencheng married Songtsan Gampo, she witnessed this sort of face painting:

公主恶其人赭面，弄赞令国中权且罢之。<sup>34</sup>

"The Princess (Wencheng) had an aversion to the native painting their faces with vermilion, so the king interdicted it temporarily across the state."

As attested by the coffin paintings, this custom still remained active in the vicinity of Dulan during the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore it is obvious that the interdiction was temporary and confined to a small range only.

#### Plank II (Fig. 9; 10)

Plank II (2.09–2.14 m long, 0.58–0.71 m wide, 4 cm thick) consisting of three pieces of wooden boards, is likely the right side panel of the coffin. The left end is wider than the right end. The painting is not well preserved. Six scenes can be seen on the panel, proceeding from right to left:

#### ● Offering decorated horses to the deceased (Fig. 11):

The first scene portrays three guests visiting a ceremony and bringing four decorated horses. They are greeted by three persons, one of them standing and the other two kneeling. They are making a bow with their hands folded in front. The horses are heavily decorated with pearl roundels on their faces, manes and saddles, possibly representing silk objects. Three stepped ornaments stand upon the neck.

The scene conforms to details of a ceremony that are recorded in the Tibetan

<sup>28</sup>JTS 196, 5220.

<sup>29</sup>XTS 216, 6072.

<sup>30</sup>Cheng et al. 2006, 92.

<sup>31</sup>Duan 1987.

<sup>32</sup>Xu 2006.

<sup>33</sup>XTS 216, 6072.

<sup>34</sup>JTS 196, 5222.



Fig. 9: Plank II of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1, photograph.  
Photo: Tong Tao.

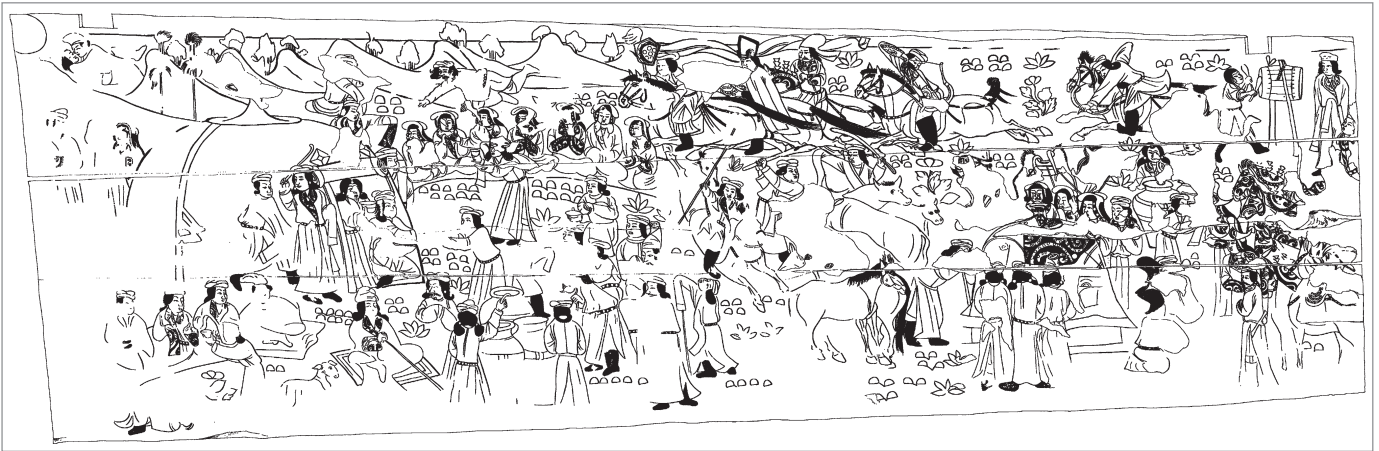


Fig. 10: Plank II of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1, line drawing.  
Drawing: Tong Tao.



Fig. 11: Scene of offering decorated horses to the deceased. Plank II of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 10).

manuscript in Dunhuang. According to the records of the *Bon po* manuscript P. T. 1042<sup>35</sup>, line 1–13, on the morning of the first day of the funerary ceremony various participants in the celebration, including the king and the uncle-minister, arrive and are greeted. Offerings and libations accompanied with various sacrificial ingredients were brought. Line 13–22 relates to the arrival or introduction of various participants, sacrificial animals and objects to form the funeral procession, among which the *thugs gur* (catafalque or certain ritual objects made of silk) and the *dbon lob* (selected horses) are mentioned in particular. The preliminary disposition of the procession is made and various salutations, offerings, and libations are performed.

● Mourning the deceased (Fig. 12):

Behind the reception scene follows a mourning scene. At the centre stands a small-sized tent covered by a piece of silk with pearl roundels, surrounded by three men in the front, only whose backs are visible, and four women behind, whose tear-streaked faces are clearly depicted. Behind them is a camel facing to the right with goods on its back. Two servants, at least one of whom is a woman, stand next to two large vessels that apparently contain

something to drink. In the upper right corner of the panel is a young man beating a drum on a high stand with two drumsticks. Two men beside him face to the left, both with a sad expression. One of them even raises his arm, likely symbolising a gesture of grieving (Fig. 13).

P. T. 1042, line 40–47 describes the ritual in the afternoon of the first day of the funerary ceremony. During the funeral procession three circumambulations were made around the tomb<sup>36</sup>. The text mentions *ring gur* [body-tent]<sup>37</sup> several times, which is interpreted as a kind of silk covering or “tent” with an image or representation of the deceased. There is also the possible equivalent expression *ring khang* [body-house], which was believed to be the special interim chamber before the final burial<sup>38</sup>. Both of them could refer to this

<sup>35</sup> The ancient Tibetan manuscript “Pelliot tibétain 1042” (abbreviated as P. T. 1042) was found in the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas in Dunhuang and is now kept in the Paris National Library. It describes the Bon funerary rite in great detail including sequences of sacrifices and the procession of animals and offerings. It was translated into French by Marcelle Lalou in 1952: Lalou 1952. The text was analyzed by Haarh and translated into Chinese by Chu Junjie: Haarh 1969, 368–370; Chu 1989a, 3, 15–34; Chu 1989b, 4, 119–144.

<sup>36</sup> Haarh 1969, 368.

<sup>37</sup> Stein 1972, 160; 178–179.

<sup>38</sup> Chu 1989b, 124.



Fig. 12: Scene of mourning the deceased. Plank II of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 10).





Fig. 13: Drummer on plank II of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 10).

kind of tent used for containing the corpse, by which the living could express their grief and in which the deceased were prepared for various ceremonies or mummification. The most interesting archaeological evidence is one piece of inscribed silk of the Tubo period, which was quite possibly from the vicinity of Dulan and is now kept in the Abegg Foundation<sup>39</sup>. The silk is decorated with a pearl-roundel pattern encircling a pair of confronted prancing lions. The inscription was written inside the pearl roundel. The first two words read *spur khang* are interpreted as “corpse” and “house or chamber” respectively by Heller<sup>40</sup>. They are probably synonymous with the *ring khang*, the “body-tent”. The “body-tent” portrayed in the coffin painting is covered with silks decorated with pearl roundels, similar to the one kept in the Abegg Foundation. It can be expected that these kinds of inscribed silks were supposed to be put on such a “body-tent”<sup>41</sup>. For the first time the coffin paintings provide an important illustration for the historical texts.

● Shooting an evil spirit (Fig. 14):

Depicted directly above the yurt is the scene of shooting an evil spirit. Two horsemen ride to the left, each holding a bow directed at a figure close to the tent. As most of the colour in this section is in poor condition, the creature can hardly be recognised. It seems to be naked with messy hair, bound to a post, kneeling down and shot by an arrow in the shoulder. The figure seems to be petrified judging the facial expression characterised by the round wide eyes. Depicted in this scene is the act of killing an evil spirit. The same motif can also be found on some other coffin planks, although the position of the figure always slightly differs. It is either fastened between posts or lying on the ground<sup>42</sup>. The creatures, always being aimed at by the bows of the surrounding horsemen, are usually naked and black, and they have been shot by arrows.

The *Sui Shu* [History of the Sui] describes the funerary custom of the Fu Kingdom as follows:

<sup>39</sup>Heller 1998, 95-118.

<sup>40</sup>Heller 1998, 96.

<sup>41</sup>By coincidence Heller also speculates that these fabrics were used for a tent, but her reasoning is based on the fact that Tibetans used lions and other animal designs on their tents during military campaign of the Tubo period, and that the lion was a clear symbol of political authority. She also mentions that the particularly large scale and proportion of the lion-silks tends to imply an architectural function rather than fabric for garments, recalling the decorative motifs on modern Tibetan ceremonial tents: Heller 1998, 102.

<sup>42</sup>Thanks to the help of Professor Huo, Tong had the opportunity to look at some unpublished photos of similar painted coffin planks, which seem to be from the same region and are now in private hands. The same scenes were repeated on these planks, including depictions of the “body-tent”, shooting an evil spirits and travelling to paradise, which are preserved in a more complete state than the present pieces.

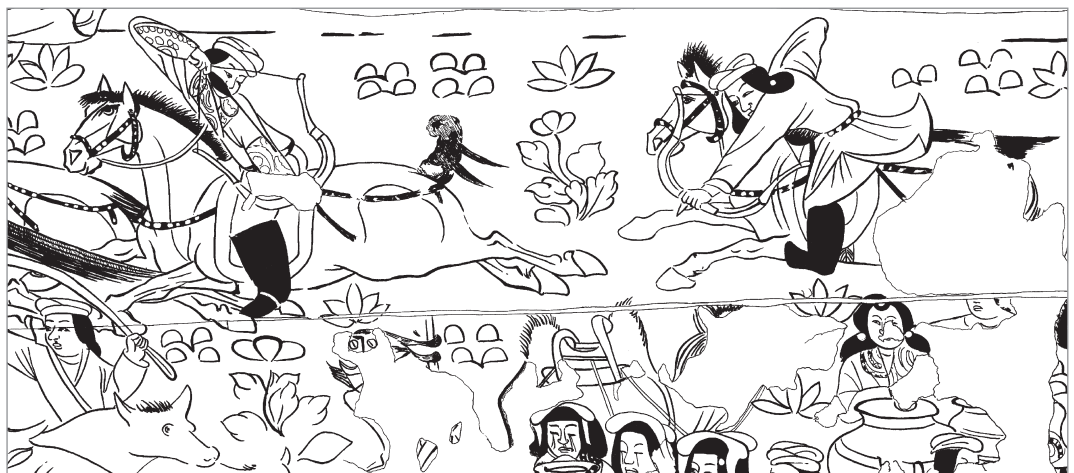


Fig. 14: Scene of shooting an evil spirit. Plank II of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 10).



有死者，无服制，置尸高床之上，沐浴衣服，被以牟甲，覆以兽皮。子孙不哭，带甲舞剑而呼云：「我父为鬼所取，我欲报冤杀鬼。」自余亲戚哭三声而止。<sup>43</sup>

“When a man died, there was no systematic funerary costume. The body was placed upon a high bed, washed and dressed in clothes, then in armour and covered with animal skins. The offspring did not weep, but dressed in armour too and brandished swords, declaring: ‘My father was killed by the devil and now I will kill it in revenge.’ Then the relatives wept briefly and finished.”

The customs of the Fu Kingdom were analogous with those of the Tubo and Tuyuhun people in many aspects, including animal sacrifice<sup>44</sup> and conserving the corpse of the deceased for several years before burying it. The killing-spirit-ritual was likely shared by them too. Bon religion believed that it was the evil spirit that took people’s life. Killing this evil spirit and releasing the soul of the dead from suffering was one of the most important funerary rites. The killing required various weapons. The horsemen

and their bows and arrows were part of these weapons. According to the Dunhuang manuscript, this ritual was one indispensable component of the funeral, and was probably held in the afternoon of the second day of the burial ceremony:

P. T. 1042, line 101–102:

“(On the second afternoon) during the burial ceremony ... the necromancers drive away the devils.”<sup>45</sup>

Line 110–111:

“*gshen* and *bon po* exert sorcery to each burial object, one by one to ward off evils.”<sup>46</sup>

● Offering sacrificial animals (**Fig. 15**):

On the left side of the “body-tent” is a man in a bent position with a long stick in his hands. Behind him is a group of five ani-

<sup>43</sup> SUS, 83; 1858.

<sup>44</sup> According to the oldest sources, an important function of the *bon po* priests seems to have been connected with the funerary rites of the kings and the subsequent cult which took place at the burial mound. An important part in the rituals of this religion was played by the sacrifice of various animals: Kvaerne 1985, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Chu 1989a, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Chu 1989a, 26.



Fig. 15: Scene of offering sacrificial animals on plank II of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 10).

mals, cattle and one horse, driven towards the tent by three persons, all holding a stick in their hands. One of them is sitting on a horse; the others are walking. This scene seems to depict an animal sacrifice, in view of the fact that the animals are being chased to the tent.

The Bon religion believed that the road to “the land of joy” was long and arduous. For this reason the deceased had to rely upon the aid of the living through the performance of certain funerary ceremonies, especially through animal sacrifices. The function of these animals was to remove all obstacles, to guide the deceased and to serve as their mounts on the perilous journey. Furthermore, the sacrificed animals were intended to serve as a “ransom” to evil spirits, who might otherwise try to harm the deceased. In other words, the animals acted as a substitute for the deceased. Finally, Tibetans apparently also believed that the deceased needed all of the objects that they possessed in life. Consequently, the sacrifice of animals may also be understood as a way to provide the dead with yaks and horses for use in the afterlife. Offerings of food, clothes and precious objects have the same meaning<sup>47</sup>. In fact, animal sacrifices in Tubo tombs were very common, which is well testified by Chinese and Tibetan sources as well as by archaeological finds<sup>48</sup>. According to the manuscripts of Dunhuang, animal sacrifice began from the first day of the funerary activities and took place at various times and locations. In the Dulan cemetery, animals were sacrificed in different ways and in a huge number. This

indicates that the function of certain animals could differ<sup>49</sup>.

● The deceased riding decorated horses and travelling to paradise (**Fig. 16**):

Ahead of the two hunters, right above the scene of the animal group, is a procession of three horsemen. The first person rides on a plain horse and holds a silk banner with long floating streamers and decorated with a pearl roundel in the upper panel. The following two figures seem quite special. They both ride heavily decorated horses, similar to those dedicated by the guests in the first scene. The middle figure wears a slightly square cap and a red mantle, and the last figure a black cap with oval top and back flap. The procession marches to the left, apparently in the direction of paradise. This scene probably represents the deceased going to heaven.

The sacrifice of horses in the Tubo funerary ceremony probably originated from a legend. According to the record of P. T. 1136, line 20–29<sup>50</sup>, a poor man and his horse had a very close friendship. They promised that when the one died, the other should build a tomb for the deceased. When one day the man died, his horse was very sad and built a yurt-shaped tomb for him. The deceased encouraged the horse to pass through the mountains and rivers. When they arrived in paradise, *byang gnam* [the horse] was

<sup>47</sup> For the functions of sacrifice of animals and other objects: Kvaerne 1985.

<sup>48</sup> Huo 1994.

<sup>49</sup> For the animal sacrifice in the Dulan cemetery: Xu 1996a.

<sup>50</sup> Chu 1989b, 127.

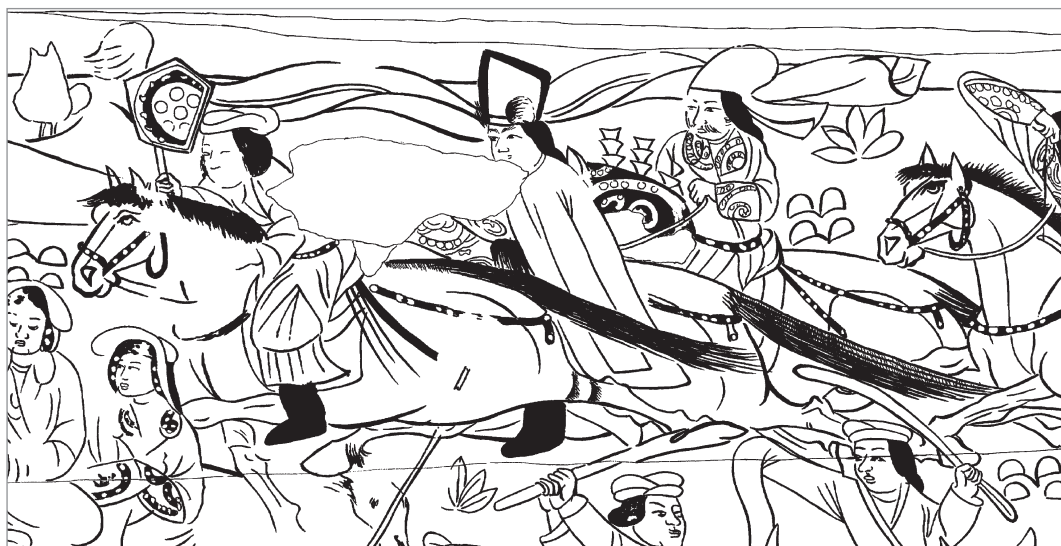


Fig. 16: The deceased riding to heaven. Plank II of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 10).

given the name *ser ngang* [valuable horse]. Its manger was filled full with food, it got grain to eat and sugarcane water to drink; its mane was decorated with brocade and its head with feathers of birds and rocs; its tail was combed downwards and tied with a small band; it had a straw stall with windows. It had shown courage and passed through the mountains and rivers calmly, and now finally enjoyed happiness.

Many details mentioned in this text correspond with depictions in the coffin paintings, such as the yurt-shaped tomb, the owner travelling to paradise together with his beloved horse, the horse's mane being decorated with brocades and the head with bird feathers. The horses in the paintings wear pearl-roundel decorations on their mane, with silk or brocade, and on their head, with high stepped ornaments. The most convincing evidence is that these horses were donated by the guests who attended the ceremony, and they were ridden only by the two distinguished persons in the procession. All other horses in the paintings do not have decorations. Undoubtedly the scene depicts the deceased travelling to the land of joy, riding on their horses.

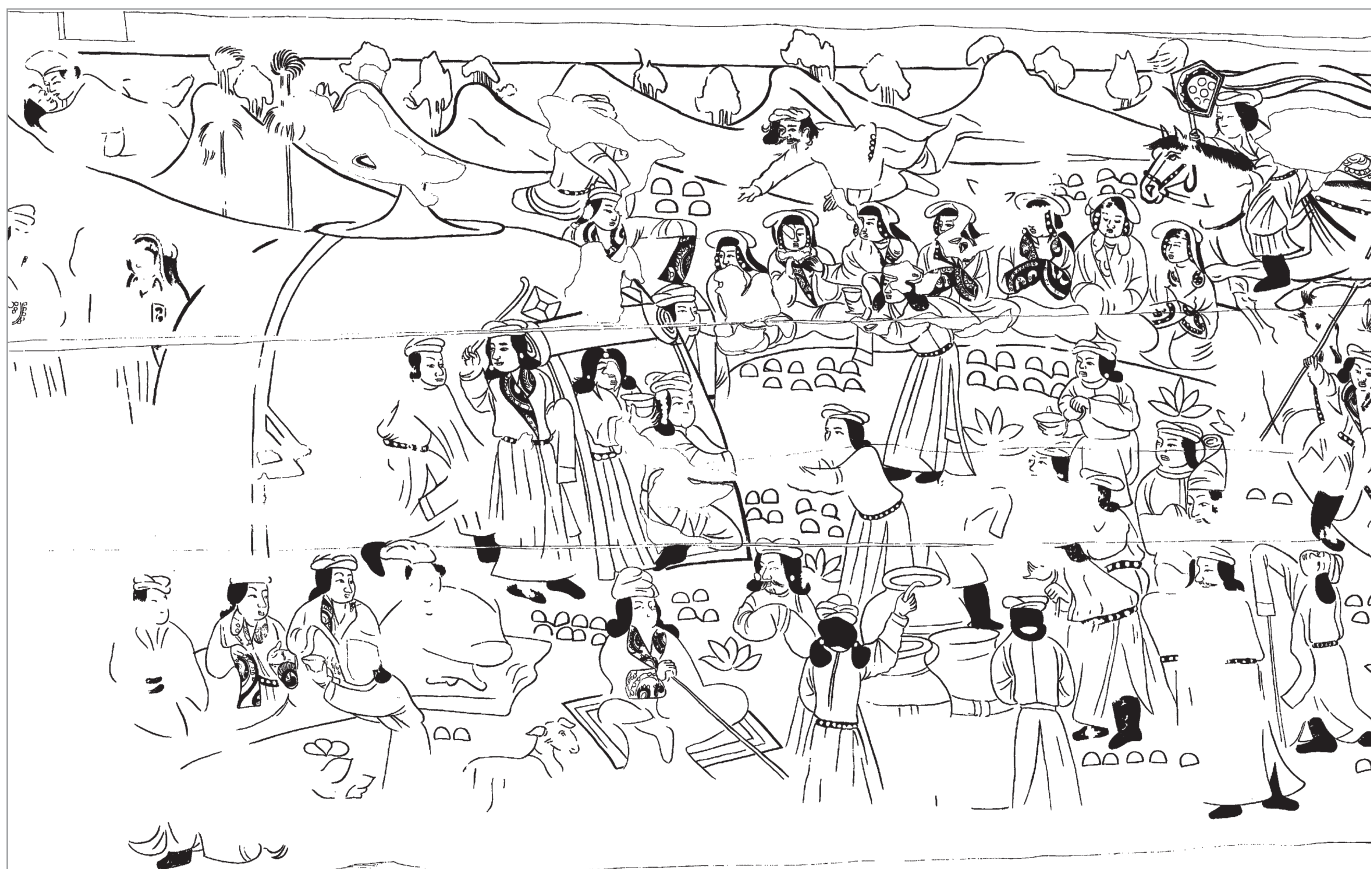
Another painted coffin plank kept in private hands<sup>51</sup> displays almost the same scene, with a slight difference. The horse of the equestrian has an extraordinary big head and a pointed mouth, looking more like a mysterious creature than a normal horse. It was not decorated with such luxurious ornaments. It looks like the artist wanted to create some sort of supernatural horse for the deceased.

● Enjoying a banquet and love-making in paradise (Fig. 17):

The last great scene depicts a broad space, where a grand banquet is being held. Situated in the centre is a large yurt with the door opened to the right and two persons inside being served. Outside the door stand guards, one of whom holds a stick. Two rows of guests, males on the left side and females on the right, sit on a long red carpet, flanking the yurt and forming half a circle in front of the yurt. In the centre of the area stand many figures, most of whom are servants. They stand around three big urns, scooping out drinks and passing it on to guests. Some of the guests already

Fig. 17: Banquet and love-making in paradise. Plank II of Guolimu tomb M1 (Detail of Fig. 10).

<sup>51</sup>He 1993.





seem to be drunk. One figure sits on a square carpet and holds a long straight stick, with a lamp nearby, probably cooking meat for the banquet. Behind the row of women are two men grovelling on the ground. They as well seem to be drunk. On the other side of the yurt stands one couple, perhaps flirting. Yet another couple is engaged in sexual intercourse in the mountains behind the tent.

The two side planks of the coffin depict different subjects. Plank I shows the scene of real-life activities, mainly including hunting and banqueting. Plank II presents the activities of the after-life, including the funerary ceremony and the after-world. All scenes were unfolded in the same direction from the rear end to the front end successively, without marked breaks in the depictions. Brief floral images are used to fill the compositional voids. Mountains and trees are portrayed along the upper edge of the plank, creating a background of the natural landscape for the stories.

#### The side planks of Guolimu M2

The coffin painting of this tomb is similar to those of Guolimu M1, except that some

detailed elements were omitted due to the smaller size of the coffin.

#### Plank I (Fig. 18; 19)

This plank (1.93–1.98 m long, 0.47–0.57 m wide, 4 cm thick), made up of two pieces of wooden plank, should be the left side plank of the coffin. The right end is wider than the left. The painting is well preserved. It depicts two scenes, proceeding from the left to the right. In contrast to plank I of tomb M1, the scenes of caravan and shooting yaks are omitted for the limited space. Similarly, the two scenes are a vivid depiction of the living world.

#### ● Hunting (Fig. 20):

On the upper left side three horsemen ride towards the right, one ahead and two behind, all with a drawn bow directed at three fleeing deer, one of which has been struck by an arrow. Below the scene are two horsemen riding to the left, both with a drawn bow directed at three startled fleeing yaks. Two of them are wounded and bleeding. Behind the horsemen rides a hunter on a galloping horse; he holds a bow and directs it at two galloping wild donkeys. The scene is full of excitement and dynamic action.

Fig. 18: Plank I of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M2, photograph.  
Photo: Tong Tao.



Fig. 19: Plank I of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M2, line drawing.  
Drawing: Tong Tao.







Fig. 20: Hunting scene on plank I, Guolimu tomb M2 (Detail of Fig. 19).

● Enjoying a banquet and love-making (Fig. 21):

The right part of the painting portrays a grand banquet with a huge tent standing in the centre. The host and his wife sit inside, drinking and talking. Two guards stand outside the door, one of them holding a stick. The tent is flanked by two rows of guests, the men sitting on the left side and the

women standing on the right. Some men are quite drunk; some even vomit or sleep. Behind them stand several free horses, with which the guests came.

All of the women stand quietly, with their arms folded in front of the chest. In the front of the yurt, between the row of men and women, is a large area. There many servants stand next to two huge vessels

Fig. 21: Banquet scene on plank I, Guolimu tomb M2 (Detail of Fig. 19).



filled with drink and covered with a colourful mantle. Between the urns and the yurt is a small table, upon which stand four cups. The servants talk and serve drinks. Some hold a western style bottle and goblets, while others ladle drinks from the huge urn into a cup.

Behind the tent, a drunken man sleeps deeply, his hair in a mess. Beside him a dog is eating the leftover bones greedily. On the right side of the yurt stands a couple, a man and a woman, who are cuddling and kissing each other. Another man is flirting with one of the women standing in line.

Small images of flowers and mountains fill the compositional voids. A range of mountains with trees is depicted along the upper edge of the plank, creating a background of natural landscape for the stories.

#### *Plank II (Fig. 22; 23)*

This plank (1.91–1.97 m long, 0.49–0.58 m wide, 4.5 cm thick) consists of two pieces of wooden boards and is likely the right side plank of the coffin. The left end is wider than the right one. Only the upper half of the painting is well preserved, while the lower part was eroded to such an extent

that only little could be recognized. According to the reconstruction, the painting depicts six scenes, proceeding from right to left, that basically corresponds to plank II in tomb M1.

#### ● Offering decorated horses for the deceased:

A group of visitors followed by decorated horses arrives at the funerary site and are greeted by the servants. A female servant is ladling drink from a big vessel into a cup to serve the guests. Only one decorated horse remains visible.

#### ● Mourning the deceased:

Behind the servant stands a yurt surrounded by people, whose backs are turned to the viewer. Only the lower parts of four of the present figures are preserved. Represented in this depiction is a mourning scene.

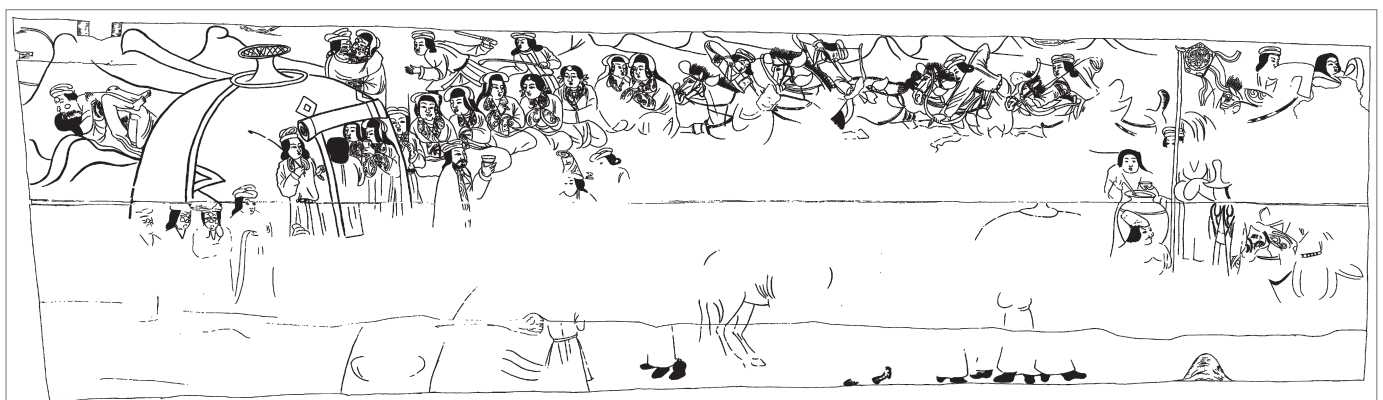
#### ● The deceased riding on a decorated horse and travelling to paradise:

In the upper right corner of the plank, just above the greeting scene, are two persons, apparently a man and a woman, riding on decorated horses and waving their long sleeves to the back. In front of them is a man holding a long stick with a red ban-

Fig. 22: Plank II of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M2, photograph.  
Photo: Tong Tao.



Fig. 23: Plank II of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M2, line drawing.  
Drawing: Tong Tao.





ner hanging from the top. The banner is decorated with a pearl roundel and tied with long floating ribbons.

- Shooting an evil spirit:

Above the mourning scene are four equestrians, two riding ahead and two following. They are all aiming their drawn bows at the same target – an image, which unfortunately cannot be recognized anymore. According to the equivalent scene in tomb M1, it should represent the scene of shooting an evil spirit.

- Offering sacrificial animals:

Judging by the other coffin paintings, the scene of offering sacrificial animals should have been represented in the large space in the middle of the plank. Only the outline of one horse facing the tent can still be seen.

- Enjoying a banquet and love-making in paradise:

The left part of the painting shows the depiction of paradise. One man and two women are standing inside a huge tent facing to the right. Two guards holding a

stick in their hands stand outside the door. The tent is flanked by two rows of men and women, whereby the women are sitting on the right side and the men are standing on the left side. In front of the tent is a square. Some of the figures are holding cups, drinking or serving. Two lovers standing behind the yurt, cuddling and kissing each other. Two men, one of them holding a sword the other one a stick, are just rushing into the couple's direction, probably struggling for the woman. Behind the yurt in the upper left corner of the panel yet another couple is engaged in sexual intercourse. A mountain range is portrayed along the upper horizon of the plank.

#### The end panels of Guolimu tombs M1 and M2

Three pairs of end panels were found in total. The two end panels belonging to tomb M1 are square boards with a wider arched top: the front panel (**Fig. 24**) is 0.82 m high and 0.62 m wide; the rear panel (**Fig. 25**) is 0.73 m high and 0.45 m wide. The other pair of end panels belonging to the coffin of tomb M2 is trapezoidal in shape: the



Fig. 24: Front panel of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1.

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.

After: Cheng et al. 2006, 96.



Fig. 25: Rear panel of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M1.

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.

After: Cheng et al. 2006, 96.



front panel (**Fig. 26**) is 0.59 m high and 0.53 m wide while the rear panel (**Fig. 27**) is 0.52 m high and 0.45 m wide.

The two pairs of end panels are painted with the same motifs – the mysterious creatures *Zhuque* [the vermillion bird] and *Xuanwu* [the black tortoise]. The creatures are all standing upon a lotus pedestal and are surrounded by floral patterns. The vermillion bird is painted on the two larger boards (the front panels), and the black tortoise on the two smaller boards (the rear panels). The images of the mysterious creatures, the lotus platforms and the floral patterns are typical of the Tang Chinese style. The *Sishen* [four supernatural beings] had long been the prevalent motif within the Han culture during the period from the Han to Tang Dynasties. The vermillion bird symbolizes the South, while the black tortoise symbolizes the North. Together with *Qinglong* [the green dragon] of the East and *Baihu* [the white tiger] of the West, they represent the whole universe. In many cases only one pair of them was applied as a symbol. According to the theory of *Yin* and *Yang*, the vermillion bird is the symbol for fire, belonging to the *Yang* (masculine or positive principle in nature), while the nature of the black tortoise represents the nether world, relating to water and belonging to the *Yin* (feminine or negative

principle in nature). Many bronze mirrors of the Han period have revealed the inscription “the vermillion bird and the black tortoise harmonize the *Yin* and *Yang*”<sup>52</sup>.

The second pair of painted end panels probably belonged to the inner coffin of the Guolimu tomb M2. Although the top of one of the end panels was missing, it is obvious that the two panels were square with curved tops (**Fig. 28; 29**). Compared to the first pair of panels, they are smaller in size. One of them is about 0.41 m wide and 0.36 m high, while the other one is about 0.36 m high and 0.36 m wide. A standing bird and a running rabbit, both surrounded by profuse floral, rosette and honeysuckle patterns, are depicted on either one of the two panels. In the Chinese culture of the Han-Tang period, the bird represents the sun, while the rabbit symbolizes the moon. Together they stand for the universe as well as for the principles of *Yin* and *Yang*.

Apparently the ideology was borrowed from the heartland of the Han culture. The representation of this motif conformed to the contemporary artistic style of the Tang Dynasty. It is most likely that the painters came from the region of the Tang Empire,

<sup>52</sup>For some examples of the Han period: Mi/Su 1987, 45-53.



Fig. 26: Front panel of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M2.

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.

After: Cheng et al. 2006, 96.



Fig. 27: Rear panel of the wooden coffin of Guolimu tomb M2.

Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.

After: Cheng et al. 2006, 96.



Fig. 28: Front panel of a fragmented wooden coffin, probably the inner coffin of Guolimu tomb M2.  
Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.  
After: Cheng et al. 2006, 96.



Fig. 29: Rear panel of a fragmented wooden coffin, probably the inner coffin of Guolimu tomb M2.  
Drawing: Liu Chuncheng.  
After: Cheng et al. 2006, 96.

or at least studied their drawing techniques from Tang artisans. If the presumption is correct that the imagery on the two side planks represent the worlds before- and after-death respectively, the end panels painted with representations of *Yin* and *Yang* worlds also corresponded with the whole composition, and therefore served the same funerary principles.

Some other fragments of painted panels were also collected, but their original positions were unclear. Some carry images of flowers and birds, while another one is depicted with the fierce looking face of a tomb guard, likely being the part of the front panel. All of these images were very common in the tombs of Central China.

## The human figures in the coffin paintings and the ethnic affiliations of the cemetery's occupants

### The costumes depicted in the coffin paintings

#### The Tibetan costume

Most men in the paintings wear two types of headdresses. One is a high turban with a spiral pleat on the top, and the other is a thick coiled headband with a flat top. The headdresses are in different colours, such as red,

white, yellow, brown and blue, among which red seems to be the most fashionable.

All male figures have long hair that is formed into a knot or ring-shaped plait on the nape of the neck. Some males wear the hair separated into two bunches, which are fastened by ribbons with a big bead and fall upon the two shoulders. The faces of many of these figures are painted with vermillion, as mentioned before. Most figures are dressed in a loose robe with a narrow girdle and long sleeves covering the hands. Thereby, some figures have the sleeves rolled up for convenience, for example, hunters, musicians, servants and guards. Their collars are folded back on each side to form triangular flaps, with the right side overlapped on the left, and the lower part is tucked into the narrow girdle. Usually the neckline is hemmed with a thick ornament with two round ends, which form part of the triangular flap. The collar and cuffs are often made of contrasting materials, like silk with pearl-roundel patterns. The robe of some figures has a round collar, which was probably formed by two triangular lapels being folded upwards and fastened to enclose the neck.

Most of the figures in the painting wear black boots. In some cases trousers under the robe are visible through the robe's side slit. Some figures wear a long garment over the robe. Its collar and hem are decorated with materials also featuring pearl-roundel

patterns. The narrow black girdle is adorned with a pearl pattern, resembling the painted horse harness straps.

These costumes are typical of the Tubo style during the 7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century, which has been studied by several Tibetologists before. By comparing them with the surviving pictorial materials, Karmay summed up the Tubo costume as follows:

“Several striking features of early Tibetan costume may thus be identified, the first being two types of turban, one with a high flute of pleats standing up on the crown, probably worn only by royal persons, and the other a flat, tightly rolled ring or head-cloth leaving the crown bare. Often one end of cloth projects to the side of the turban. The robe is long and slim-fitting around the waist, perhaps in the same way as the present day *chu ba*, with folds of material at the back. The triangular collar flaps are of different sizes, the broadest apparently falling right back over the shoulders, and extending down the front to tuck under the narrow girdle. The hem, cuffs and collar are of contrasting material. The sleeves are long and cover the hands. The boots are usually dark and with turned-up toes. The essential difference in this dress and that worn by later Tibetans lies in the turban, and the broad triangular collar.”<sup>53</sup>

Compared with the figures in the coffin paintings, the features summarized above are convincingly confirmed, except for some details. For example, most robes are not slim-fitting but very loose; the boots are often without a turned-up toe, but flat. In spite of the divergency, there can be little doubt that the figures in the coffin paintings are identical with those in numerous contemporary illustrations, for example, in the caves 158 and 159 at Dunhuang<sup>54</sup>, in the *Bu Nian Tu* 步辇图<sup>55</sup> attributed to the court painter Yan Liben of the Tang Dynasty, in the Śariputra and Raudrakṣa scrolls<sup>56</sup> or in the rock carving in Yushu, Qinghai<sup>57</sup>.

Chinese and Tibetan sources document some aspects of the Tubo costume. The *Ce Fu Yuan Gui* 册府元龟 [Outstanding Models from the Storehouse of Literature]<sup>58</sup> mentions that the king of Nü Guo “dresses in a blue gown with sleeves reaching to the ground; in winter he wears sheepskin decorated with patterned silk; he has a small coiled bun, he puts on golden earrings and barbarian shoes.” The depicted costume and headdress features concur

precisely with the painted Tubo figures. Tibetan headgear is also clearly documented. *Xin Tang Shu*<sup>59</sup> describes: “The Tubo king sits in a yurt...clothed in a white woollen gown; a hat with the top in colour (or in shape) of *zhao xia* 朝霞 [the morning clouds] covered his head; he wore a sword encrusted with gold at his waist”. According to Tibetan sources, King Songtsan Gampo had his head wrapped in red silk, and he wore a multicoloured brocade mantle. The successive kings imitated this headdress; and when the New Year festival came, they wore the archaic clothes and a red crown called *btsan*, which is thin and tall, with a statue of Amida Buddha on the top. The crown was fashioned with entwined red silk, which crisscrossed at the front<sup>60</sup>.

In addition to the two typical Tubo head-dresses mentioned above, a third type, a black hat with a high round top and upturned brim, occasionally decorated with a patch of pearl-roundel patterns and worn by some figures in the coffin paintings, probably falls into the Tubo costume repertoire as well. The similar hat, albeit with a rounder and lower top, can be seen in western Tibet monasteries or cave paintings, for example, in the Dingqionglakang Grotto in Rutong county.

Women do not appear as often in medieval pictorial data, except for sporadic finds, in which they wear the crown of a male or just leave their head uncovered. The coffin paintings provide much information about the costume of female Tubo. They wear similar robes like men, but no girdle at their waists. Most of them drape a loosely folded cloth over the hair, with two long side strips suspended along the hair, passing over the ears and hanging down the back. The hair cloth on both cheeks is embellished with a string of beads, mostly in blue. On some female figures depicted sitting with their backs towards the viewer, it can be seen that the hair hangs loosely and forms a bunch at the end. Other women wear no head cloth, but separate the hair into two parts and tie each bunch with ribbons at

<sup>53</sup>Karmay 1977.

<sup>54</sup>Dunhuang Cave 1985, pl. 100; 111.

<sup>55</sup>Hu 1959.

<sup>56</sup>Shen 1977; Karmay 1977.

<sup>57</sup>Tang 1998, fig. 1.

<sup>58</sup>CFYG 1967, vol. 960, 11294.

<sup>59</sup>XTS, vol. 216, 6103.

<sup>60</sup>Zhang 1989, 126.



ear level. They usually have only one bigger blue bead in the upper centre of the forehead. Besides there are also some female figures who are dressed like men.

The so-called “Sese” beads, which are usually blue in colour, were used as ornaments by both men and women. The same headdress and blue bead ornaments appeared quite often in other areas of Tibet. For example, in the wall painting of Tabo monastery, each man and woman wear bead ornaments in their hair and around their neck. The beads’ colour, shape and decoration are very similar to those in the coffin paintings.

The material of the “Sese” beads was interpreted as sapphire<sup>61</sup>. Other scholars thought it could be turquoise or lazurite<sup>62</sup>. It is highly probably that these beads were turquoise. Even today the same turquoise ornaments are an important part of Tibetan women’s headdress, and they maintain a similar style as in the Tubo period<sup>63</sup>.

#### Xianbei attire elements

On the middle upper portion of the coffin plank II of Guolimu tomb M1, in the procession marching to the paradise, a mounted figure wears a tall oval-shaped black hat with a back flap (**Fig. 30; 31**). In the scene of receiving guests on the same plank two persons kneeling wear an identical hat. It also appears in the scene of receiving guests on plank II of the Guolimu tomb M2 (**Fig. 32**). The tall oval-shaped black hat with a back flap has not been found in the pictorial data of the Tibetan Plateau before. However, it is very similar to the early Xianbei costume, which was largely found in northern China. The confirmed early Xianbei figures were found frequently in murals, grottoes, pottery tomb figures and textiles, most of them dating before 494, when the capital of Wei was moved from Pingcheng (present day Datong) to Luoyang and emperor Xiaowendi (reign 471–499) advocated the Sinicization of many Xianbei customs including the Xianbei attire.

#### The vermilion face painting – a Tubo or Xianbei custom?

Most of the figures on the three coffin planks of the two Guolimu tombs had their faces smeared with vermilion marks, both



Fig. 30: Tibetan figure (Detail of Fig. 10).

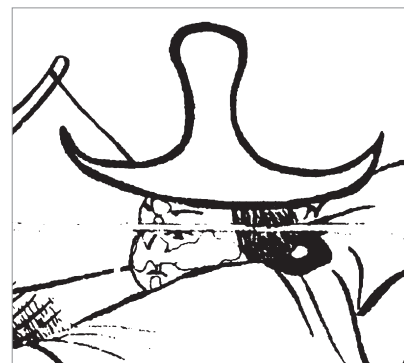


Fig. 31: Tibetan figure (Detail of Fig. 19).



Fig. 32: Painted wooden coffin with Xianbei figures, Zhijiapu site, Datong county. After: Liu/Gao 2004, 37, fig. 3; 4.

men and women. Another archaeological discovery presented a clue to the question concerning the origin of this kind of face painting.

In 1997, three painted wooden coffin planks were discovered in a Northern Wei tomb at the Zhijiapu village in Datong, Shanxi (**Fig. 33**)<sup>64</sup>. The coffin paintings are analogous with the Guolimu coffin paintings in many ways, for example, the shape and structure of the coffin, themes of paintings, even the drawing technique and colours. All figures in the paintings wear the Xianbei costume, a black hat with round top and

<sup>61</sup>Tiangong Kaiwu 1993, 210.

<sup>62</sup>Schafer 1963, 333, no. 88.

<sup>63</sup>Wei 1992, 125–127.

<sup>64</sup>Liu/Gao 2004.

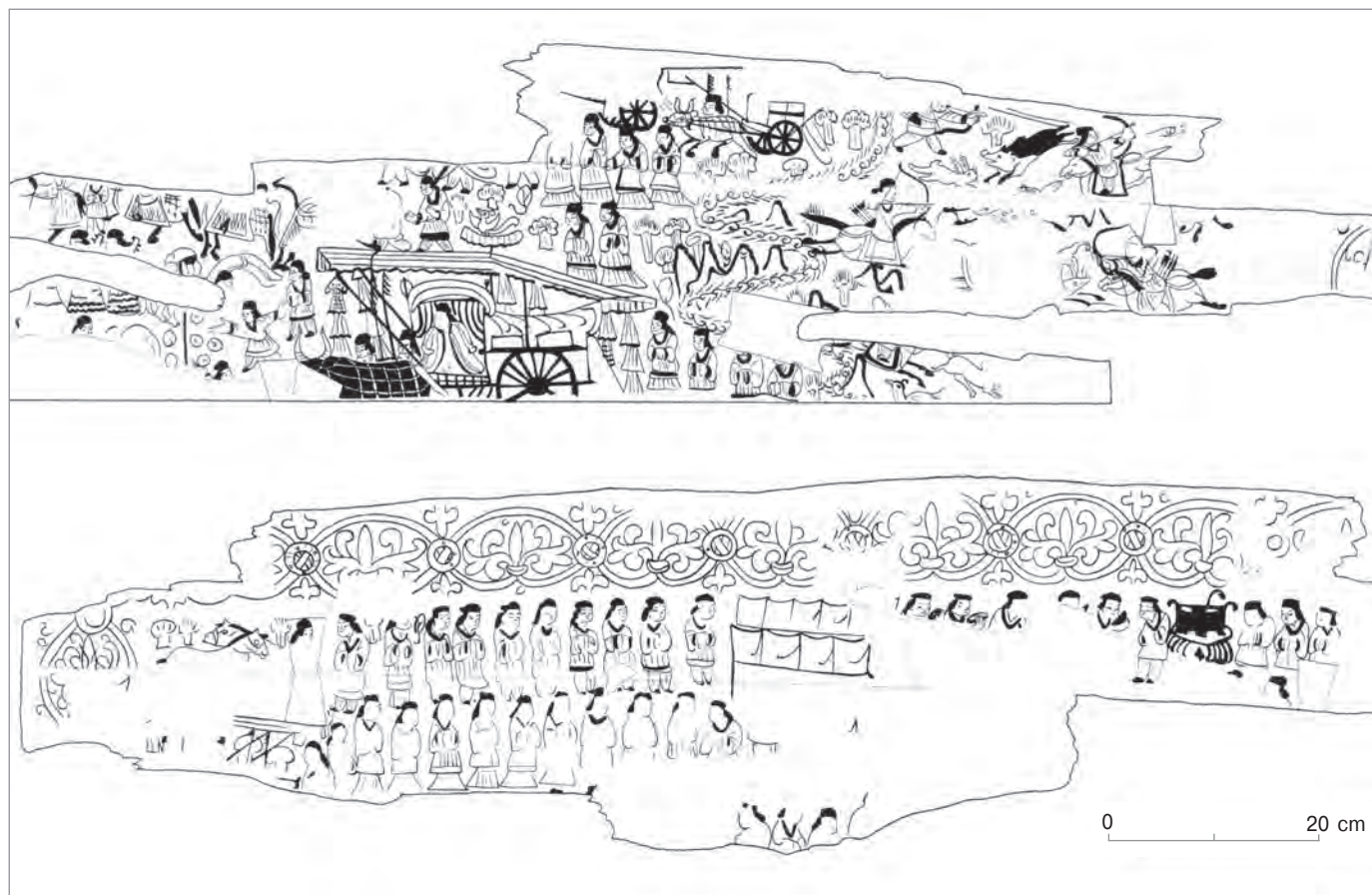


Fig. 33: Painted wooden coffin with Xianbei figures, Zhijiapu site, Datong county. After: Liu/Gao 2004, 44, fig. 14; 15.

long flap, and a long gown with crossed collars and tight cuffs, as already illustrated by other pictorial materials. That which deserves first mention are several figures with the analogous face painting. In the procession scene on the right plank are two grooms, whose foreheads, cheeks and jaws are painted red. Some women standing behind the carriage also have their faces painted with vermilion, as well as at least one servant beside the food utensils on the left plank.

The vermilion face painting is quite significant, because it seems never to have been in fashion in regions beyond the Tibetan Plateau. For the evident Xianbei characteristics of the tomb and figures, there can be little doubt that the vermilion face painting was one of Xianbei traditions.

The Tuyuhun, a branch of Xianbei who immigrated from the northeast China to the Tibetan Plateau in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, passed over the Yinshan Mountain and came to an area inhabited by the Tuoba Xianbei clan, the founder of the Northern Wei Dynasty. They could have spread the native tradition

to the Tibetan Plateau. If not, at least the close military, political and economical relations with Northern Wei in the later period could have also enhanced the influences from Xianbei of Northern Wei. In any case, Tuyuhun acted as transmitters for the fashion of the vermilion face painting on to the Tibetan Plateau. Later they were subdued by the Tubo Empire, and then gradually infused into Tibet; thus was their culture.

## Conclusions

The coffin paintings of the Guolimu site in Delingha county revealed features of the indigenous Bon religion, Tibetan lifestyle, Tang-Chinese symbolism as well as the northeast Chinese Xianbei manner of body ornamentation.

As demonstrated by the scenes on the side planks, the indigenous Bon religion played an important role in the process of funerary ceremonies, such as offering decorated horses, the “body-tent” containing the corpse, shooting an evil spirit, and travelling to paradise. All of these scenes, which

were organized in a narrative sequence, are conformed to the records of the ancient Tibetan manuscript from the Dunhuang cave, providing a visual evidence of the Tibetan outlook on spirits and the cosmos during the Tubo period.

Besides the influences of the Bon religion, the depictions on the coffins also provide obvious hints at the Tibetan culture in terms of customs, architecture and fashion style to the point of nomadic pastoralism. Shown are, for example, scenes of animal sacrifices or people dressed in typical costumes and adorned with unique jewellery like the *sese* beads or headdresses mentioned above, which, even today, still form an important part of Tibetan's style. Although burial practices in Dulan and vicinity resemble those in Central Tibet to a great extent and can be regarded as one provincial type of the classical Tubo culture, other provincial features existed as well that differed from the Yarlung Zangbo River regions. For example, the prevailing wooden furniture rarely appears in Central Tibet, where either only stone coffins were used or even no coffins at all<sup>65</sup>.

The use of painted wooden coffins in combination with brick chambers can be considered as a specific tradition of Han-Chinese funerary architecture, which might have been introduced into the Northern Tibetan area as early as the Tang Dynasty. The images of the Four Supernatural Creatures on the end panels of the painted coffins are typical Chinese symbols of the four cardinal directions. This could have been shown in the coffin paintings of Delingha, where they were executed in the artistic styles of the Tang period. Just like the images of those mysterious creatures, there are still other motifs taken from contemporary Central Chinese imagery, like tomb guardians or various floral patterns representing certain concepts of Tang China.

Finally, there are depictions on the Delingha coffin paintings, which were clearly influenced by the Tuyuhun tribe of Xianbei origin, like the vermilion face paintings discussed above or the hats worn by some of the illustrated figures.

All in all, the area of modern Qinghai province was the contact zone of the Central and northeastern Chinese, Central Tibetan and the Central Asian cultures. To all of them it was peripheral. The amalgamation of cultures, the Central Tibetan one predominating, can clearly be seen in the pictorial narrations from Delingha. In this paper mainly three trajectories, the Tibetan, the Central Chinese and the Xianbei one, have been taken into consideration. However, the impact from Central Asia is another broad field which needs attention in future studies. The camel bringing goods from afar as depicted on one of the coffin planks stands *pars pro toto* for the trading along the northern Tibetan Silk Roads, which was mainly dominated by the people of Sogdiana situated in the very centre of Central Asia.

The Delingha paintings, for the first time, provide the possibility to follow the traces of the Central Asians in Northern Tibet and, therefore, are extremely valuable for historians of art, trade and intercultural communication in the Inner Asian highlands.

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<sup>65</sup>Hou 1993.



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