

The Ancestor Cult in Ancient China

The ancestor worship cult is still an important part of the belief system of Chinese people. It is based on the belief of reciprocity between the living and the dead. The living have to sustain the spirits of the ancestors and protect their graves. The dead can bring prosperity and good fortune to their living successors. If their descendants neglect their ancestors, the ancestor can become a 'hungry ghost'. A 'hungry ghost' is cut adrift in the spirit world and can be vengeful and dangerous.

In Ancient China this ancestor worship cult was already in evidence. The same ideas of reciprocity exist. The living needed to sustain their ancestors so they would bring them good fortune.

- **Sacrifice and ritual in the Shang Dynasty**

The Shang believed there were many gods who had power over different elements and the ability to bring a variety of gifts. They were unable to contact these gods directly. The ancestors, however, were able to ask the gods to bring good fortune to their living predecessors.

Large scale sacrifices were held at regular intervals for dead kings, and sometimes queens. Oxen, sheep, pigs and dogs were all sacrificed in large numbers. Human sacrifices were also common. Food and drink served in bronze vessels would be offered to the ancestors at ritual ceremonies.

Sacrifice was also a feature of royal funerals. The royal coffin would lie above a central pit in which a dog had been sacrificed. On the access ramps to the tomb many men at arms were sacrificed. Often the royal person's closest servants would be killed in order to be buried in the tomb. Human sacrifice was also practiced to consecrate new buildings.

The Shang king was able to use divination (through oracle bones) to find out when would be the best day to offer sacrifices to their ancestors.

- **Ancestor worship in the Western Zhou**

After their conquest of the Shang, the Zhou retained the ancestral rituals and practices of the previous dynasty. Divination also continued throughout the period although it changed in form. The use of oracle bones declined in popularity and a system of interpreting how cast yarrow sticks have fallen came into use.

The practice of inscribing bronze vessels is a characteristic of the Western Zhou era. Ritual bronzes were inscribed after an appointment had been made by the King to the owner. The inscriptions were dedicated to the ancestors and showed the proper honour and respect to them.

- **Confucius and filial piety**

The Eastern Zhou period was a time of great strife as well as technological and philosophical developments. It was a time when political survival and military success was all. The teaching of Confucius harked back to an age of a more stable and rigid social order

Confucius attached great importance to exercises in ritual behaviour. Wisdom could only be acquired by following the rules and strictures of society. He believed that the perfect qualities of man should include loyalty, reciprocity, dutifulness, filial and fraternal affection, courtesy, friendship and good faith. Confucius advocated continuing the practice of ancestor ritual as being the apotheosis of 'filial piety'.

