A Study on Ancient Rituals in China

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Abstract: Among the cultural heritages that humans have passed down from generation to generation, it is faith that best embodies the spiritual world of their ethnic groups. Each ethnic group has its own myth and religion as well as its unique sacred world it has built; accordingly, each people practices its unique rites and rituals. From a cultural perspective, rites and rituals are the representative works of the spiritual realms of human society. They serve as a bridge over which people move between the secular world and the sacred world. It is rites and rituals with which each ethnic group has unleashed its extraordinary imagination and developed a symbolic world of magnificent diversity in its wake. In this way, each ethnic group has exercised its enormous tensile force of the mind as well as its collective power when faced with adversity of various kinds.

China boasts a long and interrupted history of civilization that dates back to five thousand years ago. Its culture and tradition can be traced back still further to more than ten thousand years ago. A unified nation of multiple ethnicities, China has more than 50 peoples, which stands out prominently with their own unique culture. Among the cultural aspects of the nation, rituals constitute an important part of the Chinese culture. This paper provides an overview of the rituals of ancient China.

Keywords: Niuheliang site, Temple of Heaven, Jongmyo Shrine, ancestor worship, imperial rituals, Mount Taishan, Mazu worship

I. Divine Spirits and Rituals

1. The Emergence of Divine Spirits

Any ritual has its object and reason. If it were not for divine spirits, there would be no awe for or dependence on them and therefore there would be no discussion on rituals.

Divine spirits are a product of imagination of people in the real world. At the time of its origin, a divine spirit corresponded to the object it symbolized. Trees, mountains, stones, and animals in the real world as well as heaven and earth were worshiped as tree, mountain, stone and animal deities as well as deities of heaven and earth, respectively. As people’s thought and imagination developed over time, the most salient features of animals such as claws, fangs, heads, and tails were combined with the human head or body to form divine spirits that did not exist in the real world. Such divine spirits eventually took the form of a human after mankind came to have a relatively developed civilization. This is how divine spirits emerged in the shape of unworldly, sophisticated, and dignified emperors, generals, and premiers. On the other hand, ancient and solemnly worshipped deities of heaven and earth whose existence people kept in their minds and whose names they chanted in prayer remained in the obscure realm of imagery. Though without a concrete form, these deities represents divine spirits that discipline and encourage people while always watching their deeds with dignity and feelings. Ancestors and deceased relatives as well as past brave warriors were also revered as deities.

The emergence of a divine spirit that symbolizes an object or power of nature gives rise to a primitive religion that worshiped that spirit, providing the preconditions for rituals. The most important precondition must be that that particular divine spirit is personified. Such personification focuses mainly on the aspects of thoughts and feelings. Divine spirits and people have common standards for deeds and emotions. People think they can figure out the likes and dislikes and the joy and anger of divine spirits and induce them. It is
with this belief that people have the wish to communicate with divine spirits in one way or another. As people improved their imagination and created myths about the achievements of deities, divine spirits, originally conceptual in nature, came to have a concrete form. Accordingly, concrete objects of and reasons for worship emerged; so did the possibility of communicating with divine spirits. These factors set the stage for rituals.

2. The Emergence of Rituals

When the concept of divine spirits was born, people began to perform rituals accordingly. People are in a passive position vis-à-vis divine spirits. Because divine spirits are far more powerful than humans and ubiquitous, people cannot afford to offend or shun them. People in the past thought that divine spirits existed in their living environment despite their elusiveness and inexplicability.

People worship divine spirits for the simple reason that the latter are beyond the former and in control of their fate. Accordingly, people take the attitude of submission, obedience and reverence in communicating with deities. This is because people hope to please divine spirits so that they will not cause calamity at least and, if possible, bring benefits to them. People must revere deities devoutly and sincerely, prostrate themselves, and seek divine protection because they cannot delude or deceive ubiquitous divine spirits.

It should be clarified here that constant fear of divine spirits can give rise to a primitive religion but will not always lead to the practice of rituals. The emergence of rituals requires that people strongly call for them. In fact, rituals emerged when people not only simply yielded to divine spirits from afar but also wished to influence and even move them to their advantages. People engaged in primitive crop or livestock farming increasingly wished for more natural materials. They came to pray for appropriate amounts of rain and wind as well as the safety of fishing and hunting. Fulfilling such wishes called for ensuring that divine spirits would not at least interfere or bring harm and, if possible, provide support. Seen from a certain perspective, it is safe to say that rituals provide a tool for people to bargain with divine spirits.

A ritual is a ceremonial rite with the fundamental aim of soothing divine spirits, avoiding calamity, and seeking happiness. Such aims can be described as bribing divine spirits while expressing submission to them.

3. Transition of Rituals

In time immemorial, people worshipped supernatural beings in their settlements or burial grounds; they had no particular sites solely for rituals. An archaeological survey of the Upper Cave site in Beijing found that primitive men buried the dead near the cave in which they had lived and sprinkled red mineral power around the remains for mourning purposes. It was not until the end of the Neolithic period that fixed and large altars began to appear. In the historic period, rituals were increasingly complex in type and diversified in location.

Humans believed in the “spirit” apart from the body as early as in the Paleolithic period. In a primitive men site in Zhoukoudian, Beijing, archaeologists found a sepulcher of Upper Cave men dating back to some 20,000 years ago. They found red power around the remains of the dead as well as grave goods. These finds suggest that people back then had the concept of “immortal soul.” Primitive men expanded that concept to include things, believing that everything has a soul. Then the power of nature that controlled their lives came to be represented by supernatural souls, i.e., divine spirits. The existence of a deity gave rise to dialogue and interaction between it and people, and rituals provided a primary means to that end. In primeval times, human beings had little capacity to change nature; their lives depended completely on the blessings of nature. In such periods, religions and rituals thrived greatly. This has been substantiated by a large body of archaeological literature and anthropological studies on primitive peoples in the world.

As human civilization developed, another external power, i.e., society came to have a more impact on human lives. The external social pressure in the form of a clan, people or state determines fundamental living conditions of individuals and families; it can even change the fate of individuals. Now, new lords are
enshrined in religious sanctuaries of various kinds, and rituals are now different in both content and methodology.

A religion takes the course of its own. In a primitive society, rituals involved all its members. They were increasingly divided into official and folk rituals as class society emerged and civilization developed. Over long periods of history, official rituals came to serve as an important tool for the rulers to maintain their rule. Folk ritual activities, on the other hand, were designed for the public to make a desperate wish associated their lives and fulfill their spiritual desires. Such rituals deeply permeated into the lives of the public in the form of traditional rites. They thus became part of their lifestyles.

4. The Status of Rituals in Ancient China

In ancient China, rituals were of great significance and constituted a great undertaking that permeated the entire social life. Chun Qiu Zuo Shi Zhan [Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals] states clearly: "The great affairs of a State are sacrifice [rituals] and war." Between the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States Period, frequent wars resulted in small states being annexed to larger ones. Defending national borders with military buildups was a logical consequence under such precarious circumstances.

Rituals were the supreme state affairs and placed before military affairs. In ancient China, ritual activities were considered a statutory institution of a state, and society as a whole was placed under the rule of divine spirits. In fact, any history book as well as any record of regional affairs included accounts of ritual rites and related matters. Local legends and folklores never fail to describe ritual customs and miracles, suggesting that every family observed ritual conventions of various kinds. Ritual activities, which cover the history of human civilization since the prehistoric period, have had an extremely great impact on the traditional Chinese culture while involving Chinese predecessors over the eternal history of China.

Rituals were of paramount importance in ancient China. They were an integral part of politics and life. Rites were performed throughout the year with many different purposes. The Yin Dynasty valued rituals, and its monarchs decided all kinds of affairs associated with state politics by divination. In the Zhou Dynasty, the Duke of Zhou established rules for rites and music. Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, "did not talk about prodigies, force, disorders, and gods." In the subsequent periods, it seems that emphasis was placed on practical culture established by sages and ancient philosophers, not on rituals, i.e., séances with divine spirits. The reality, however, is that rituals for supernatural beings survived were handed down from generation to generation throughout the long feudal age. Divine spirits of ancient times did not disappear. More than that, new divine spirits were born one after another. Rituals for ancestors and those for heaven and earth were also passed down from generation to generation. Even meritorious retainers and sages who accomplished moral, military, or military achievements were engaged in rituals in one way or another. The supreme ruler of a state could not possibly distance himself from rituals.

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In the Yin-Shang Dynasty, the monarch was recognized as a patriarch because the practice of selecting the head of a state based on blood relationship had not been wiped out yet. Apart from administering his tribe, the patriarch had an important task of communicating with supernatural beings in heaven on behalf of his tribe. In short, the patriarch doubled as a medium. When supernatural beings in heaven were discontent with the patriarch, they brought about calamity to abort the rituals. There is a legend in the Yin Dynasty known as the "prayer for rain by King Tang of Shang." The legend has it that in the reign of Tang, a drought lasted for seven years, drying up the Luo Shui River. The weather was so hot that stone could melt. People suspected that the drought was a vengeance of heaven on King Shang Tang of Shang, who defeated King Jie of Xia and established a new dynasty. Rituals of any kind did not work. Without recourse to other means, King Tang of Shang decided to follow ancient customs in order to bring the disaster to an end. He visited a shrine in a mulberry forest and tried to sacrifice himself in front of Shangdi--the deity that governed all things--as well as his ancestors by throwing himself in a raging fire in an attempt to curry favor with the supreme deity. This is the famous legend as the "prayer for rain by King Tang of Shang." Such deeds were discussed in the context of rituals and customs of ancient people by Mr. Zheng Zhenduo’s in his work Tang Dao Pian. King Tang of Shang was lucky. After cutting his hair and finger nails, he was about to set fire to the firewood at his feet when a heavy rain began to fall from the heavens. The success of
this ritual provided proof that Shangdi did not abandon King Tang of Shang and that the disaster was not due to the king. The fact that the leader who made the great achievement of establishing a new dynasty had to risk his life points to the sheer power of Shangdi and the firm concept that heaven selects the monarch.

From the Zhou Dynasty onwards, heaven continued to be piously believed; the duty of administering rituals by the monarch was strictly executed. Whether the monarch could worship supernatural beings successfully or not constituted an important criterion for people to judge whether he was a man of virtue or not.

In the Warring States period, because any state was always at the risk of collapse, the monarch had to concede to the authority of deities and, as the case may be, even to his retainers. After the unified institutional foundation in the feudal age was later solidified, the monarch no longer needed for concession. His authority was strengthened absolutely, and the monarch had the exclusive right to rituals for heaven and earth deities. The sphere of supernatural beings was limited to small affairs of ordinary people.

II. Rituals in Ancient China

1. Classification of Rituals in Ancient China

Rites and rituals of Chinese peoples were extreme complex. They can be classified into many kinds from different perspectives.

By objective, rituals are largely divided into two types. One type is rituals for praying for happiness. It refers to day-to-day ritual activities when there are no major difficulties standing in the way of daily life. This includes ancestral rituals in season festivals (Spring Festival, Qingming Festival), as well as the Baishen ceremony, which continues to be observed regularly in private commercial facilities in coastal cities. The other type is rituals designed to ward off misfortune. Those who perform this type of rituals are often faced with difficulties. With a clear and direct aim, they pray for the imminent critical situation to change for the better.

By object, rituals are divided into two types: those for divine spirits in the natural realm and those for divine spirits in the social realm. By approach, rituals are divided into those with a passive approach and those with a positive one. In the first type, people show decorum and humility towards deities as much as possible in the course of the ceremonial rite. The second type is designed to work on divine spirits or impress them in one way or another in order to prompt them to help fulfill people’s wishes. For example, they hold a memorial service for the dead, chant sutras, perform a play, and do an imitation.

2. Developments in Rituals in Ancient China

(1) Rituals in the dawn of Chinese civilization

i. A six-thousand-year-old sepulcher decorated with dragon and tiger designs

Twenty-some years ago, a sepulcher belonging to the Yang-shao culture in Xishuipo, Puyang, was excavated in the western part of Henan Province. The grave goods unearthed were an astonishing discovery, although they numbered only a few. A pile of shells was found on either side of the person buried, with the pile on the east side forming a dragon design and the one on the west side forming a tiger design. This pattern, believe it or not, matched the faith in Si-shen—the four deities: the blue dragon of the east, the white tiger of the west, the red phoenix of the south, and the black turtle-snake of the north, which spread between the Warring States period and the Han Dynasty. Did a prototype of the Si-shen pattern exist 6,000 years ago? The answer remains no for many scholars, but it may be irrational to treat this assumption as a mere coincidence. At any rate, it is clear that such designs were made with a profound intention when people back then buried the dead. These designs should be thought of as an artifact of the ritual activity at the time of burial. It is reasonable to presume that they embody the prayer for the protection of the spirit of
the dead from evil spirits.

ii. The Goddess Temple, cairns, and altars that date back to more than 5,000 years ago

Between some 6,500 and 5,000 years ago, an archaeological culture was distributed in the Liao River basin in the western part of Northeast China. This culture was named “Hongshan culture” because it was discovered in the Hongshanhou Site in Chifeng city, Inner Mongolia in the 1930s by Kosaku Hamada, a Japanese scholar. The culture began to develop at an accelerating rate 6,000 years ago and reached its height of prosperity some 5,500 years ago. The most salient feature of Hongshan culture is advanced levels of Chinese jade, which was highly developed by some 5,500 years ago. The Chinese jade of the Hongshan culture has three major characteristics. First, it comes in many types. Second, it is elaborately designed. Third, jade in the shape of an animal account for a large proportion of all jade.

(i) The discovery of the Goddess Sculptures and the Goddess Temple

Advanced levels of human sculptures are an important characteristic of the Hongshan culture. It has been widely believed that China lacks the tradition of human figures, as an overview of the world’s art history suggests. Indeed, few human figures have been discovered, although designs of animals, tao-tie (a mythological Chinese monster), and fenghuang (a mythological sacred bird) have been found in many parts of China. It is a fact, however, that the Hongshan culture has the tradition described below. In the early 1980s, sculptures of women were unearthed from the Goddess Temple, famous and large structure remains belonging to the Hongshan culture, in Niuheliang. Some of them were sculptures of pregnant women. The unearthed sculptures of women’s heads as well as human heads were exquisite. Jade was used for their eyeballs, making them more look like heads of living women. These were widely known as Goddess Sculptures. Many pieces of the sculptures of women’s heads and bodies were discovered in this structural remains along with other human figures. What is striking is that these female sculptures come in many sizes. There can be largely divided into large-, medium-, and small-sized sculptures. The large size is three times as large, as exemplified by sculptures of ears. The medium size is life-size. The small size is much smaller that the actual figures. These female sculptures suggest that women were worshipped back then. Two hypotheses have been put forward regarding the status of these women. One is that they represent earth goddesses (land deities). The other is that they represent ancestral deities. The second hypothesis assumes that female sculptures three times as large symbolize ancestral deities of the highest rank, the life-sized divine sculptures signify indicate those of lower ranks, and smaller-sized ones no longer represent ancestral deities. Unearthed along with female sculptures were a few animal sculptures, including sculptures of the mouths and fangs of an animal resembling a dragon in later times as well as large claws of Raptatores (hawks and falcons). Unfortunately, these sculptures of goddesses, humans, and animals are all made of clay but not calcined. Calcined clay sculptures are hard and therefore easy to handle, but non-calcined clay sculptures are so brittle that they will easily be broken in the excavation process. Because of this excavation that cannot be overcome by the current excavation techniques, we made only timid and abortive attempts and have not been able to unearth all of them. Still, it is clear that this structure has something to do with rituals. Now this site is widely known as “Goddess Temple” in the academic world.

(ii) The emergence of an imaginary animal: pig dragon

A new type of jades was discovered in sepulchers of the Hongshan culture. It was named “pig dragon” because the head part looked like a pig mouth and the curved body part resembled a dragon in shape. It is customary to use this terminology as some scholars believe that the dragon has been mutated from a pig. That the dragon is an imaginary animal is a common knowledge. How did it come into being then? The answer remains a mystery. There is a general consensus, however, that two or more animals have been combined to form the dragon. And that is the common image of the dragon from a long time ago. Recently, some scholars proposed the hypothesis that the image of a bear is involved. Some of the jades unearthed from Chifeng do not come in the shape of an animal, and their purpose remains unclear. When talking about pig dragons, it is imperative to consider these jades. Certainly, they are elaborately and exquisitely designed and believed to date back to 5,000 years ago, not far from the period of the pig dragons that have been found in Hongshan sepulchers. Still, there are some uncertainties about the dating because these jades of a non-animal design come from the collective repository of once scattered archeological artifacts, not directly from excavation sites. At any rate, they are similar to the above-mentioned pig dragons in the shape
of the mouth but much more elaborate and beautiful. When we try to identify the usage of artifacts, we need to consider where (the type of place) and how they were unearthed apart from their shapes.

(iii) Cairns where aristocrats are buries and nearby circular altars

The pig dragons mentioned above have been excavated from sepulchers at Locality 2 at Niuheliang. Known as cairns, these sepulchers are made of piles of stone. Mounds 1 and 2 to the west are square in shape. At the center of each mound is a rectangular tomb, which is destroyed. There are a number of small graves to the south, and several jades have been unearthed from some of them. It is noteworthy that no sepulcher has been found in the adjacent circular ruins about ten meters. The ruins are surrounded by three-tiered circles of stone (inner, middle, outer). The inner circle is the highest, while the outer circle is the lowest. Excavated from outside of the outer circle are cylindrical earthenware (of a hollow, bottomless structure). With a half-semicircular part of the cylindrical surface is colored, this earthenware somewhat looks like a haniwa, a hollow clay figurine often found in the outer part of the burial mounds of the Kofun period in Japan. We postulated that this circular object ruins beside the tomb were those of a ritual altar. The circular shape of the altar and the rectangular shape of the tombs are some of the things that deserve attention. The ancient “round heaven, square earth” concept is well known. The Temple of Heaven [literally the “Altar” of Heaven] in Beijing has a three-tiered structure and uses a circular altar for rituals for heaven. In the context of this three-tiered structure, it is worthwhile to recall that Chinese literature of the Warring States period mentions “three-tiered heaven.” The mythological Kunlun Mountain, which was revered back then as a divine land to and from which deities and immortals were believed to descend and ascend, has a three-tiered structure as well, a fact that remind of three-tiered altars of the Hongshan culture. It should be premature to assume that these altars more than 5,000 years ago are linked to altars for heaven rituals in later times. However, the existence of such a three-tiered circular facility 5,500 years ago can be confirmed. What deserves attention here is a possible link between this facility and traditional temples of heaven designed to worship heaven in ancient China.

Tombs in the square mounds and small graves around the mounds are different in term of the social status of the persons buried there. The tombs came with more than ten jades. On the other hand, the small graves produced only a couple of jades at best; some of them were without any jade. People who were not buried in sepulchers must have been further lower in the Liao River basin in the western part of Northeast China. By about 5,500 years ago, society had been stratified with a clear distinction between high and low, and rich and poor.

What is noteworthy is that no ruins of a village or dwelling have been found in the area—a 10-plus-square-kilometer area where Niuheliang cairns are located—even though there are sepulchers in ten-something hill tops among many in the area. What does that imply? My theory is that this region was a zone solely for burying people with a higher class, not a zone of everyday life for commoners. In other words, the region may have been more like what was later known as a religious sanctuary. At least, evidence suggests that it was associated with rituals. It is likely that people in the region worshiped the same divine spirit that the Hongshan people did. Indications are that that spirit was the female progenitor of the people in the region. The Goddess Temple that has been discussed is situated near the highest peak in the Niuheliang site complex. Discovered on that peak is a large altar with a pile of stone fixed with earth. Seen from a bird’s eye view, the archaeological site complex may look as if cairns and altars on the ten-something peaks surround the Goddess Temple and the large rectangular altar. This points to the possibility that the complex was at the center of rituals of the Hongshan culture, which thrived in the west part of what is now Liaoning. Evidence suggests that by the end of the Hongshan culture period, the division of labor and social stratification had reached an unprecedented level. It is likely that there had already been the aristocracy who control the power over religious and ritual matters and the handicraft group specializing in contriving elaborate and beautiful jades. In sum, the period of 5,500-5,000 years ago represent an epoch when the culture and society of prehistoric China developed.

iii. Nascent civilization in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River: the ritual and social aspects of the Liangzhu culture

Many archaeological sites and burial grounds that date back to 5,200-4,300 years ago are scattered in the Jiangsu-Zhejiang-Shanghai area, i.e., the Lake Taihu area. The period of the Liangzhu culture marks an
extremely important epoch in the formation of civilization in the area.

First, take a look at the development of agriculture. The discovery of the remains of paddy fields 6,000-4,000 years ago and those of stone spades more than 5,000 years ago in the area points to a significant improvement in farming technology and efficiency. The handicraft production technology was markedly advanced in the Liangzhu culture.

The Liangzhu culture is best characterized by the development of jades and its production technology. The development of jades is reflected in marked increases in variety and quantity. Jades characteristic of the Liangzhu culture come in ten-something types. This represents the highest number of jade types in the history of this area. The technology of jade production also experienced significant development. Liangzhu jades are extremely exquisite. Some bear on their surface a design that may be associated with a totem.

The Liangzhu culture is also characterized by the extensive practice of rituals. Altars have already been found in ten-something locations. The altars have a square horizontal surface, surrounded by a stone-piled wall, with each side measuring ten-something meters. Altars of the Liangzhu culture are often accompanied by sepulchers. Back then, these altars were used as a ritual site, where people worshiped divine spirits. Later, people came to bury the dead in these altars, which became burial grounds over time. Sepulchers that accompany altars are a high class, producing many jades. These jades include a variety of jades associated with rituals. We believe that priests who led rituals were buried in these altars after their death. It is likely that these priests, who were relatively high in social class, came to be the object of rituals by people in later times. Jades have been unearthed from the sepulchers that accompanied altars as grave goods. These grave goods are divided into two types. The first type is mostly ornaments. Because the local soil has long been so acidic that even human bones often have not survived, unearthed artifacts provide an only clue to determine to determine the gender of people buried in graves. We thus concluded that the persons buried with ornaments may have been female. The other types are artifacts related to power such as weapons and ritual jades. We believe that they are likely to be for men. Exquisite jades have been unearthed in large quantities from the graves, suggesting that a huge amount of effort was made to make these rare objects. Such objects are seen only in relatively large sepulchers, indicating that the upper social class possessed a large amount of property.

It is noteworthy that among the Liangzhu jades were new high-grade jades designed for purposes that were not related to everyday living (cong and bi). A cong has the shape of a quadrangular prism with a large cylindrical hollow inside. Such a design is common to jades of the Liangzhu culture in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River; it is familiar to people in this cultural sphere. It is clear that such a design was related to the local faith. The more recent cong is increasingly more abstract in design, with two circles and one horizontal line presenting the eyes and the mouth, respectively. The cong spread extensively between the 5,000 and 4,200 years ago in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. The area is now known for the cong. Many theories have been put forward regarding the interpretation of this design. One theory is that it reflects the image of the ancestors of the Liangzhu people. Another theory has it that the design depicts a medium or a priest engaging in ritual activities, thereby expressing the image of the spirit of the dead in the grave ascending to heaven on the back of a divine beast. In fact, literature in the Zhou Dynasty of China describes an immortal ascending to heaven on the back of a divine beast. Yet another theory is that the design depicts the legend in which an ancestor of the Liangzhu people was combined with the animal to form their tribal progenitor. Indeed, ancient Chinese literature includes similar descriptions. If the third theory is right, the design has a bearing on the ancestor worship that was extensively practiced in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the period of 5,200-4,400 years old. This design is extremely common in, and highly typical of, the region. A similar design was used for jade Yue axes--presumably the symbol of military power--that were unearthed from the same sepulcher. A bird is depicted on the tip of one end. A bi, on the other hand, is circular in shape. A large amount of bi was found around the person buried at Tomb 23 in Yuhang-Fanshan, a grave that accompanied an altar. The unearthed artifacts suggest the person buried had amassed a huge amount of wealth. They also had religious connotations; they may have been used to avert evil in later times.
(2) Rituals in the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties

Ritual activities were frequently performed in the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, all of which belong to the period of slave society in ancient China. The "Record on Example" chapter of the Book of Rites states: "Under the Yin dynasty, they honored Spiritual Beings, and led the people on to serve them; they put first the service of their manes, and last the usages of ceremony." They placed special importance on ritual activities and war as Chun Qiu Zuo Shi Zhan states: "The great affairs of a State are sacrifice [rituals] and war." Any ritual involved divination. Mediums inscribed Bu-ci or what is now known as "oracle bone inscription" on special tortoiseshells or animal bones for divination. It is due to the extensive ritual activities that tortoiseshells and animal bones inscribed with characters are unearthed in large quantities today. According to the old records concerned, the objects of rituals by people in those days were diverse, including Shangdi in heaven, the sun, the moon, planets, stars, mountains, and rivers, as well as deceased relatives. Discovered along with such carapaces and bones are bronze ritual implements for memorial services for the dead, such as ding (tripod cauldron), li ding, dou, jue, zun, hu, plates, and trays. These bronze implements are often inscribed with characters. Such inscriptions are known as bronze inscriptions. Oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, which include records of the history of slave society in China, bear witness to ritual activities in this period.

i. Shang rituals that offered humans and domestic animals as sacrifices

Shang is a dynasty that flourished between 3,600 and 3,000 years ago with its center in the middle reaches of the Yellow River. Yin Xu is the ruins of the capital of the Yin Dynasty that were discovered in Anyang, Henan Province. Among the discoveries are the remains of palaces, ancestral temples (zongmiao), royal tombs, craft workshops, as well as the remains of many houses and sepulchers. The most striking difference between rituals in the Yin-Shang Dynasty is that many humans were offered as sacrifices, as well as domestic animals such as cattle, sheep, and pigs. Bu-ci on the unearthed bones and carapaces include many records of cases of human sacrifices. A total of 1,350 pieces of oracle bones and carapaces as well as 1,992 passages recount human sacrifice cases, according to Mr. Hu Hou Yi, a scholar who is famous in China for his research on ancient characters. He estimated that up to 300-500 people were offered as human sacrifices. In ordinary rituals, around 30 people were sacrificed, he said. Mr. Hu Hou Yi added: "In the Yin Dynasty, slave society prospered for 273 years (1395-11213 BCE) under the rule of 12 kings (8 reigns) from the first king Pan Gen, who relocated the capital to the last kin Di Xin. A total of 13,052 people (those recorded in the oracle bones and carapaces) were offered as human sacrifices. When the number for 1,992 Bu-ci passages is counted on the assumption that one person was sacrificed for each passage, at least 14,197 people are estimated to be killed for rituals. This is a conservative estimate. According to the Bu-ci on carapaces and bones that have been found so far, it is a rare case that only one person was sacrificed at a time. The actual number killed is likely much higher. It must be an astonishing number after all.

Extremely cruel means were used to kill people for rituals. In no way they are different from those used to slaughter domestic animals. The victims were beheaded, buried alive, and even minced. According to the Annals of Yin of the Records of the Grand Historian, King Zhou, the last king of the Yin Dynasty killed two of his principal ministers in a fit of anger, cut the prince of Chiu into small pieces and slicing the prince of Ou into slices for dried meat. Cases of killing to death by burning and cutting off the limbs are often recounted in Bu-ci. The practice of human sacrifice as described in Bu-ci was fully substantiated by the excavation of sepulchers of the Yin Dynasty. In the spring of 1950, archaeologists discovered 17 grave pits arranged in four rows in the south of a tomb of Yin Xu in Wuguan Village. Bones that was found buried there were all those of beheaded bodies. The human bones of 152 bodies in total were discovered: ten each in 12 pits, nine each in two pits, eight in one pit, six bodies in another pit, and an unknown number in the remaining pit where the bones were too scattered around for estimation. Some of these headless bones came with a pair of jawbones, a few of which even had teeth, suggesting how atrociously these victims must have been sacrificed. Many other grave pits were found in the royal tombs area. Human bones were scattered around there. Some of them were headless, and there were even piles of skulls. These disposal burial pits and disordered burial pits may be referred to as “ritual pits” for burying people who were sacrificed for rituals. Such ritual pits were discovered in large quantities in Yin Xu.

Ritual sites in the Yin Dynasty can be classified into two types: those for temple rituals and those for tomb rituals. Temple rituals were performed in fixed ancestral temples. Ancestral temples in the Yin Dynasty are
known as different names: zong, sheng, gu, shi, and ya. People of the same surname had a common zongmiao (ancestral temple). Those who were descended from the same individual who bore that surname had a common zunmiao (directly ancestral temple). Those who came from some common branch family from that ancestor had a common nimiao (paternal temple). The following paragraph discusses major differences regarding the construction and rituals of zongmiao.

A mortuary tablet for royal predecessors that was enshrined in a zongmiao is called shii. Shi is divided into da shi and xiao shi. The former was used for lineal royal predecessors and the latter was used for collateral ones. Generally, cattle and sheep were sacrificed for da shi and xiao shi, respectively. A place where da shi were gathered is called da zong. Likewise, a place where xiao shi were gathered is called xiao zong. Terminology for ancestral temple architecture is many. For example, dong shi, nan shi, da shi, and xiao are all places for rituals. Likewise, zong, gu, shi, and ya are all places for setting up mortuary tablets. The remains of the foundations for large palaces and ancestral temples were discovered in Henan Yanshi, the capital of the Shang Dynasty in its initial stage and in Yin Xu, the capital of the same Dynasty in its last stage. Either of the two is likely the ancestral temple where Shang kings worshiped their ancestors.

The other type of rituals in the Yin Dynasty is known as tomb rituals. Kings and leading aristocrats performed rituals in front of their ancestors’ tombs as well as the temples they built. Tomb rituals were commonly performed as a means to worship their predecessors for generations. Depending on the area, they are referred differently as: 墓祀, 上墳, 上塚, 上塚, 上飯, 上食, 祭掃, 拜掃, 拜墓, 修墓, 添土. Archaeologists have proved that tomb rituals were extensively practices in the Yin Dynasty. Yin Xu in Anyang, Henan Province is an area where royal tombs are concentrated. In 1949, more than small graves were discovered in the royal tombs west area. Archaeologists who surveyed this area concluded that these graves were ritual pits of the Shang Dynasty. They confirmed that the people buried in these pits were human sacrifices for ancestral worship, not the retainers of the deceased kings who followed their lords to show their royalty. The archaeologists said: “These graves totaling more than 1,000 were all found near the tombs. Many of them were arranged in rows. Only human heads and bodies were buried, often in large quantities. Grave pits for vehicle horses and wild animals were also unearthed. There is no doubt that all these small groups were appendages to the tombs. In 1976, more than 200 grave pits were excavated here this area. Researchers concluded that these ritual pits were part of the ritual site of the Yin Dynasty designed to worship ancestors. If that is the case, it follows that tomb rituals used human sacrifices as well in the Yin Dynasty, offering “human meat feast” in front of the ancestral tomb and burying these sacrifices in pits around the tomb. Such a practice differs greatly from the practice of ancestral rituals in later times whereby offerings were not buried with the exception of alcohol, which was offered directly underground and ritual performers had a feast in front of the tomb. It seems to directly and realistically convey the meaning of the dictum: “[T]hus they [the filial sons] served the dead as they would have served them alive.” By extension, it is possible to infer that cannibalism continued to be practiced in everyday life settings in the Yin Dynasty. The Annals of Yin of the Records of the Grand Historian contains many accounts of the practice of making dried or salted meat from human bodies. Even people with a high social rank such as feudal lords were turned into food if they committed even a misdemeanor. It goes without saying that meat of plebeians and slaves were served as food.

In addition to Bu-ci on carapaces and bones, inscriptions on bronze objects also provide information on ancestral rituals in the Yin Dynasty. During this period, people recorded happy occasions such as feats of arms, merits, and honors on bronze objects. The dates inscribed on bronze objects in the Yin-Shang Dynasty often fell on the dates for ancestral rituals. This is because the Yin Dynasty “killed people of sin and praised those of merit” in ancestral rituals. It seems that aristocrats in the Yin-Shang Dynasty had the ethos that they should report matters for congratulation to their ancestors, especially when they received a reward, in the belief that such happy occasions were the result of the protection provided by the spirits of their ancestors. This ethos characterizes ancestral rituals in the Yin-Shang Dynasty.

ii. An ancestral ritual system of the Zhou Dynasty whose implications reach all the way down to the modern period

The system of enfeoffment, which was promulgated in the early Zhou Dynasty, had an extremely great impact given that the dynasty’s socioeconomic structure was the one typical of an agrarian society. The concept of the system was passed down to so-called the “Duke of Zhou’s li.” As Confucius approbated the
Rites of Zhou, saying “How complete and elegant are its [Zhou’s] regulations! I follow Zhou,” people in feudal society always read books of Confucius and Mencius and practiced the “Duke of Zhou’s li,” which provided the code of conduct for intellectuals. The ancestral ritual system of the Zhou Dynasty served as a tool for governing an agrarian society in which the family was the fundamental, pivotal, and production unit. The system was partly passed down all the way down to the Qing Dynasty.

(i) Clear ranking in relation to distant ancestors and close relatives

Zhou rituals had a clear ranking and specific numerical rules. The numbers of temples--independent sites for ancestral rituals--that were allowed to have were seven for the son of heaven, five for feudal lords, three for ministers of state, and one for scholars. The common people performed rituals at their sleeping space. The seven temples for the son of heaven were responsible for separate rituals for each of the seven royal predecessors: up to the sixth predecessors from the son of heaven currently on the throne plus his great ancestor. The predecessor(s) between the sixth one and the great ancestor were worshipped collectively, not separately. Of the seven temples, the great ancestral temple was permanently designated as the first temple. The temples for the descendants of the second, fourth, and sixth generations from the great ancestor are called “zhao temples.” Likewise, the temples for the descendants of the third, fifth, and seventh generations are called “mu temples.”

This Zhou system that classified these seven types of temples into “zhao” and “mu” embodied two major focuses for rituals. The first focus was on rituals at the great ancestral temple. The great ancestor was the one who made the greatest achievement for its people by establishing its foundation as the symbol. Rituals for him were maintained regardless of generational change. Because the great ancestor built the state territory, individual rituals for him continued permanently. The second focus was on rituals for close relatives. The father and grandfather were closest relatives and most loved ones of all. It is only human nature that rituals for them were performed independently when they died. For the distant predecessors from the preceding seventh generations upward, it was a traditional custom to worship them by placing their remains in jia shi (a small room attached beside). In folk rituals, people did not go as far as establishing a temple but did build graves for their father and grandfathers; they collectively worshipped more distant predecessors.

Recently, the remains of the foundations of high-class buildings of the Western Zhou Dynasty were discovered in the Zhouyuan archaeological site, Shaanxi Province. The architectural style is special, quite different from the siheyuan palace of the Western Zhou Dynasty that was discovered earlier. Because the architecture is similar in structure to the ancestral temples described in such literature as the Rites of Zhou, it is likely the remains of a temple of high-class aristocrats in the Western Zhou Dynasty.

The ranking system of the Zhou Dynasty not only embodied the system for temples but also specifically stipulated the music and dance that were performed for rituals. The then dance called "wanwu" was performed with a feather flag in the hand. The number of rows of wanwu dancers who were allowed to hold the feather when performing in an ancestral temple was specified as eight for the son of heaven, six for feudal lords, four for ministers of state, and two for scholars. Why up to eight rows? The answer comes from literature of the Spring and Autumn period. According to the literature, the music instruments for the dance were made of eight types of materials. Eight rows was proscribed in order to propagate the music in eight directions. The scale of and participants in a ritual was also stipulated in details according to the ranking.

The ranking system of the Zhou Dynasty regarding rituals was clearly reflected in the ritual instruments as well. The system of li [proprieties, rites, etc.] of the Western Zhou Dynasty clearly specified the numbers of bronze vessels to be used according to the social status of aristocrats: 9 ding and 8 gui for the son of heaven, 7 ding and 6 gui for feudal lords, 5 ding and 4 gui for nobles and ministers of state, and 3 ding and 2 gui or 1 ding and 1 gui for scholars. Unearthed bronze vessels buried as grave goods in sepulchers of the late Western Zhou Dynasty were found to differ in type and number, depending on the social rank of the person buried there. The numbers of ding and gui certainly matched the numbers specified in the ranking system described in written records.
(ii) Valuing frugality and stressing virtue

While the Yin Dynasty saw many domestic animals people sacrificed, the Zhou Dynasty valued frugality and emphasized when it comes to ancestral rituals. There is a Zhou saying “frugality is of great virtue; luxury is of great evil.” Perhaps due to such a sense of good and evil, the architecture of ancestral temples in the Zhou Dynasty was not magnificent. Even great ancestral temples had a thatched roof. Such frugality is evidenced by a recorded account of Duke Zhuang of Lu, who was criticized for his action to adorn the temple of his immediate predecessor Duke Huan. Duke Zhuang, who succeeded his father Duke Huan after he died, built his father’s temple. In the process, he first the pillars painted red and in the following year carved flowers on the interior of the temple. This action was criticized by his retainer as an extravagant deed that blemished his virtue.

In the minds of the Zhou people, ancestral temples were a place where ancestors tried to avert evil by supervising their descendants, controlling all the officials, and promoting the virtue of all these people. They considered it a matter of course to perform rituals while bound by “li” and in accordance with a fixed system. The failure to do so contravened li and constituted an act of major irreverence. Under this system, rituals were performed first for the grandfather and then for the father. Any change to this order was not allowed.

Apart of the order of things, li specifies the ritual paraphernalia for ancestral temples. In the Zhou Dynasty, ding, jade, and other ritual implements were all thought of as precious treasured items. These treasured articles were usually dedicated to ancestral temples. Jade, the kind of stone that is so beautiful that even divine spirits were believed to scramble for it, can be said to a natural treasured item; it was used only for important rituals and hui-meng, a conference of heads of states for signing treaties. In the Zhou Dynasty, only aristocrats were allowed to use bronze vessels because of their preciousness. Ding, which was so large that it was often difficult to produce, were regarded as a priceless national treasure that “pacified” the state and ward off evil. It was therefore used at the ancestral temple of the son of heaven. Wishing to obtain such ding was considered the act of treason that was designed to usurp the son of heaven. In the Spring and Autumn period, Chu amassed power and became a strong state. The monarch of Chu framed a plot to take the power of the royal family of the Zhou Dynasty. As he wanted to bring it to Chu, the monarch openly asked about the weight of the Nine Tripod Cauldrons, the symbol of the royal authority of the dynasty. He was rebuffed by the Zhou king's minister, Wang-sun Man, who said, “Chu lacks virtue, and this is an unjust act of provocation.” From then on, the phrase “asking about the weight of ding [tripod cauldron]” was interpreted to represent an attempt to usurp the supreme power of the state. The implications are that ding, which symbolized state power, should be obtained by fair means and that otherwise, any act was deemed an act of evil. This episode adds to the body of evidence that the rituals of the Zhou Dynasty is characterized by its emphasis on virtue.

(iii) Copious amounts of offerings and the attitude of integrity

The Zhou Dynasty stressed the importance of agriculture and valued agricultural produce. More and more agricultural products were used as offerings. Chinese chives, wheat, millet, and rice were offered for spring, summer, autumn, and winter rituals, respectively. People also offered various vegetables in seasons they had picked up for ancestral rituals. Animal offerings were diversified. Some were offered alive. Others were cooked and then offered.

In order to perform rituals in respectful ways that did not contravene li, the li system not only defined the means and scope of a ritual as well as the order of proceedings but also designated the master of a ritual and people in charge of different processes. Different types of such stewards were necessary to perform ancestral rituals. The Offices of Spring" chapter of the Rites of Zhou specifies a wide range of such stewards, including: The li system also defined the participants in ancestral rituals in details. Ancestral rituals in the Zhou Dynasty were performed throughout the year, and li had to be observed. Accordingly, there were different kinds of ritual personnel specializing in a wide range of aspects, including costumes, rugs, drinking vessels, reception, the handling of alcohol, the main rite, and the supplementary rite, as the range of rite stewards enumerated above. The Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals describes, in its texts regarding decorum and the division of role, some of the standing offices for these personnel, including taishi, who recited paeans; and taizhu, who displayed offerings. In the rituals, people
had to behave sincerely and respectfully. Falsely reporting the quantities of offerings, especially overstating
them, was prohibited. Violating this rule was considered the act of deceiving gods and ancestors that
entailed serious punishment.

In a period of transition from slave society to feudal society, the ruling class placed more emphasis on the
role that rituals played in ruling the state and came to use the ritual ceremony for enlightening the public.

The Rites of Zhou, the Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial, and the Book of Rites, which are collectively
referred to as the "Three Rites" and laid the foundation for the Chinese rite system that lasted 2,000 years,
were compiled by this period (from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the Qin and Han dynasties). The "Three
Rites" followed, systemized and standardized rituals and customs of ancient times. They permeated these
rituals and customs into the lives of the public.

(3) Imperial rituals and their developments from the Qin and Han dynasties to the Tang and Sui
dynasties

i. Suburban rituals

Suburban rituals are the ritual activity that ancient Chinese dynasties valued the most. Kuang Heng and
Zhang Tan, two of the renowned li scholars, stated: “for the king, nothing is more important than to receive
the order of heaven; no event is more appropriate than suburban rituals to receive the order of heaven”
(“Treatise on Sacrifices,” The History of the Former Han Dynasty). A suburban ritual is a major heaven and
earth ritual activity that was performed by the emperor in the suburbs of the capital.

Literature has it that in the Qin Dynasty, rituals for the White Emperor were first performed near Xianyang,
the capital. This is the oldest record of suburban ritual activities performed in the capital city. However, the
Qin people had only facilities for worshipping heaven; they did not have a northern suburban altar (or
square alter) designed to worship earth.

Emperor Wen of Western Han built the wei yang Five Emperor temple and the chang men Five Emperor
altar near the capital city of Chang'an as a symbol of rituals for the Five Emperors, effectively moving
ritual sites outside of the capital.

Emperor Wu of Han established a system each for heaven rituals and earth rituals but could not set up a
ritual site in the southern or northern suburb of the capital in accordance with the principles of yin and yang.
What is noteworthy is that Taiyi emerged as the supreme god of heaven during the reign of Emperor Wu of
Han. Accordingly, Emperor Wu of Han built the altar of Taiyi in the southeastern suburb of Chang'an. This
altar may be the origin of circular altars (circular mound) that people in later times built in the southern
suburb of the capitals to worship heaven. The altar of Taiyi is a three-tiered circular altar with eight sets of
stairs; it can be thought of as a prototype for circular mounds in later times.

Towards the end of the Western Han Dynasty, Wang Mang and others carried out a series of reforms of the
li system. The suburban ritual system also underwent a major change. In accordance with the principles of
yin and yang, an altar of heaven for worshipping heaven and an altar of earth for worshipping earth were
built in the southern and northern suburbs of Chang'an, respectively. Rites for worshipping heaven and
earth collectively came to be performed in the southern suburb. These reforms solidified the foundation for,
and had great impact on, the subsequent suburban ritual system.

The East Han Dynasty built suburban ritual facilities in the southern and northern suburbs of the capital city
of Luoyang. The southern suburban altar had a circular shape and eight sets of stairs. It also had a
multi-tiered altar and was surrounded by triple walls. The northern suburban altar was a square altar that
had with four sets of stairs and a ritual building. The architecture of the southern and northern suburban
altars of East Han was modeled after by the successive dynasties.

The Western Jin Dynasty combined the southern suburban facilities with a circular mound. Likewise, the
dynasty combined the northern suburban facilities with a square mound. This system was followed in the
Eastern Jin Dynasty and the Southern Dynasty. The Northern Dynasty, on the other hand, adopted a system
of separating the suburbs and mounds. Both the Tang and Sui dynasties followed the system of the Northern Dynasty, separating the suburbs and mounds for worshipping heaven.

A look at the suburban ritual system in the Han and Tang dynasties indicates a strong influence of the reforms of the \textit{li} system in the last stage of the Western Han Dynasty. During this period, the Theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements solidified its leading status in the field of rituals. It was institutionalized in the Tang and Sui dynasties, improved in stages in the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern dynasties, and completed in the Qin and Han dynasties.

\textbf{ii. Ancestral temples and alters of land and grain}

One of the basic principles of the \textit{li} system of Zhou was to arrange an ancestral temple on the left and Shejitan or [altar of] land and grain on the right. This arrangement system was established in the Han and Tang dynasties after undergoing a long development process. The altar of land and grain of Western Han was built in the southern suburb of Chang'an. Until Wang Mang assumed the post of regency, imperial temples of Western Han were scattered inside and outside of the capital and the above-described arrangement system was not established. During the period of Wang Mang, a suburb temple was built on the left side of an altar of land and grain for the first time in accordance with this arrangement.

The Nine Temples of Wang Mang, which was built by Wang Mang himself, strictly observed the \textit{zhao-mu} system. The ancestral temple of \textit{yi tai chu} was considered the temple of the progenitor.

The system of ancestral temples and alters of land and grain was fundamentally reformed in the Eastern Han Dynasty. The Eastern Han Dynasty built a \textit{gao} temple and a \textit{shizu} temple in Luoyang for worshipping the emperors of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties. The system whereby the mortuary tablets of the seven ancestors were gathered in the great ancestral temple to worship them had a great impact on great ancestral temples in later times. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, an altar of land and grain was situated on the right side of an ancestral temple. This is the oldest confirmed case in which the system of arranging an ancestral temple on the left and an altar of land and grain on the right in the Han and Tang dynasties.

\textbf{iii. Halls of distinction, royal academies, and ling-tai}

The wei yang Five Emperor temple built by Emperor Wen of Han is likely the predecessor of halls of distinction (ming-tang) in later times.

Emperor Wu of Han built a hall of distinction in Wenshang. Since then, halls of distinction were modeled after Ming Tang Tu designed by Gong Yu Dai of Jinan.

In the 4th year of the Yuanshi era in the reign of Emperor Ping of Han, Wang Mang took the lead in building a hall of distinction, a royal academy, \textit{ling-tai}, and \textit{tai-xue} (imperial colleges that were built in every district for training scholars) in the southern suburb of Chang'an. This architecture of the \textit{li} system had a great impact on later times. The \textit{ling-tai}, \textit{tai-xue}, and the like that were built back then were independent from one another. Even the halls of distinction and royal academies were often separate from each other. Both the halls of distinction and royal academies built back then had five rooms and a structure of a circular top and a square bottom.

The Guang Wu of Eastern Han built a hall of distinction, royal academy, and \textit{tai-xue} in the southern suburb of Luoyang.

The halls of distinction, royal academies, \textit{ling-tai} and \textit{tai-xue} that were constructed by the Eastern Han Dynasty were repaired each in the period of Cao Wei, the Western Jin Dynasty, and the Northern Wei Dynasty (after its capital was transferred to Luoyang), except that the \textit{ling-tai} were not repaired and abolished altogether.

The hall of distinction, royal academy, and \textit{ling-tai} that were built in Pingcheng during the Taihe era were integrated into a single unit, a modality different from that of the Two Han period. Halls of distinction of Northern Wei had a structure of a circular top and a square bottom.
It was not until the reign of Wu Zetian that a real hall of distinction was built for the first time. The hall of distinction built by Wu Zetian were three-tiered, with a square lower tier and circular middle and upper tiers in accordance with the traditional circular-top-and-square bottom architecture. A “tiequ” or solid ditch was established around the hall of distinction as if it were royal academy in an attempt to create an image that the hall of distinction was one with the imaginary royal academy. The structure in which the main central pillar pierces through the upper and lower tiers is not part of the traditional architecture. What deserves special attention is that the hall of distinction built by Wu Zetian was placed in the middle--rather than in the south--of the imperial palace in Luoyang. This particular hall of distinction has a reactionary air of “palace-temple integration” because “the upper tier is designed to worship heaven and the lower tier is designed to administer politics” as far as its function is concerned.

After the reign of Wu Zetian, halls of distinction underwent reconstruction and removal, thus losing their social functions. More recently, “rite of da xiang hall of distinction” in the Tang Dynasty was mostly performed at yutan (altar of rain).

Ling-tai had already lost its status as part of the architecture of the li system after the Northern Wei Dynasty. In the Tang Dynasty, groups of monks and others conducted astronomical observation activities using astronomical observatories. Ling-tai was no longer used for studying good omens or performing rituals.

iv. Rituals for the sun and the moon

In ancient China, the status of the supreme god of heaven was conspicuous. It seems therefore that rituals for the sun and moon deities were not so valued in relative term. This is a major characteristic of the tradition of ancient Chinese rituals. Still, the “rite of the morning sun and the evening moon” continued to be observed intermittently during the Han and Tang dynasties.

v. Xian Nong altars and XianCan altars for worshipping agriculture deities

In order to promote agriculture and sericulture, ancient emperors often conducted activities of the li system designed to worship Xian Nong (farming deity) by way of crop cultivation by the emperor as well as Xian Can (sericulture deity) by way of silkworm breeding by the empress. In the Han and Tang dynasties, the technique whereby the emperor cultivated crops and worshipping agriculture deities was launched by Emperor Wen of Western Han. The Ji Tian ceremony, which was conducted by Emperor Jing, Emperor Wu, and Emperor Zhao of Han among other emperors, was designed for the emperor to cultivate paddy fields in a symbolic manner in prayer for the divine protection of agriculture deities towards a bumper crop.

This style was modified in the Eastern Han Dynasty. People came to build a small shrine for worshipping Xian Nong and Xian Can.

In a reversion to the style of Emperor Wen of Western Han, Emperors of Cao Wei conducted the Geng Ji ceremony in the eastern suburb and silkworm breeding in the northern suburb of Luoyang.

Most of the subsequent dynasties followed the system of worshipping agriculture and sericulture deities by symbolically engaging in crop cultivation and silkworm breeding.

vi. Other

Apart from the architecture of the li system, the Han and Tang dynasties had many different facilities of the li system such as the yutan (altar of rain), ling-xing shrine, gao-mei altar, liu-zong shrine, feng-bo altar, and yu-shi altar. These facilities, however, were not subject to “regular ritual performance by the state” and eventually abolished. On the other hand, temples of Confucius, temples of Guandi, and shan-chuan altars, and other ritual structures that failed to attract much attention and assumed only a secondary status during the Han and Tang dynasties, were increasingly valued over the period of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. These ritual structures became an important component of the imperial rituals by these dynasties.
Ancient Chinese folk rituals prospered the most during the Ming and Qing dynasties. More recently, folk rituals underwent a major change as Chinese society experienced a drastic transformation. Especially after the People's Republic of China was established, folk rituals began to decline due to the rapid improvement in the intellectual level of the people. Some rituals disappeared, some were simplified, and others saw their functions change. Some traditional folk rituals are still observed actively in daily life today, partly because they are well-established customs and partly because even people in modern society need spiritual support to fall back on when they are faced with difficulties.

3. The Objects of Ancient Chinese Rituals

The content and form of a Chinese ritual are dictated by its object. The deities worshipped in rituals can be traced back to a range of religions that appeared in the history of China, including primitive religions, Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Chinese folk beliefs are typically polytheistic as utilitarianism and affinity are two major characteristics of Chinese culture. The general public care less about the differences in doctrine, theory, and approach between religions. They care much more about whether a religion protects the peace of their material life. Accordingly, Chinese folk beliefs often combine Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Deities, ghosts, spirits are jumbled together. Even divine spirits in primitive religions enjoy certain levels of status.

The theological system of Chinese folk beliefs is extremely complex with innumerable deities involved. On one hand, divine spirits that emerged in the period of primitive religions (Fu Xi, Nüwa, Pangu, etc.) are worshiped by the public even today. On the other hand, new deities continue to emerge in later times. These new deities originate from foreign religious such as Buddhism. Some of the various Taoist immortals as well as historical figures such as Laozi, Lü Dongbin, Guan Yu, and Yue Fei are deified. As in the case of Cheng Huang (land deities), some local celebrities are worshipped as deities and immortals.

Divine spirits in Chinese folk rituals are based on different religions. The Taoist deities worshipped in such folk rituals include the “Three Pure Ones,” “Siyu,” “Taishang Laojun,” the Jade Emperor (Yu Huang Dadi), Wangmu Niangniang (Xi Wangmu), the Truly Martial Grand Emperor, xian zhen (people who turned into an immortal: Mazu, the Eight Immortals, Celestial Master Zhang). Among the Buddhist deities worshipped are Tathagata and bodhisattvas such as Maitreya, Guanyin, Samantabhadra, Manjusri, as well as the five hundred disciples of Buddha who attained Nirvana. Confucius, the Saint of Culture, is also worshipped in Chinese folk rituals. People also worship Guan Yu, the Saint of War, as well as emperors and Shennong from primitive religions, and Fu Lu Shou from folk beliefs.

In Chinese folk beliefs, divine spirits with a high status dwell in heaven. Some of them, including Haotian Shangdi and deities of heavenly bodies—are originally divine spirits. Others, including Mazu and the Eight Immortals, are those who ascended to heaven after winning great fame or completing ascetic practices in the real world.

1. Jade Emperor (Yu Huang Dadi)

Jade Emperor (Yu Huang Dadi), also popularly known as Yu Di, Yu Huang, Tian Di (Celestial Emperor), Tian Gong, and Lao Tian Ye, is the supreme deity in Chinese folk beliefs and is considered the emperor of the Taoist immortal world. The rite for worshipping Haotian Shangdi or Huangtian Shangdi (Jade Emperor) as a sky deity was practiced as early as the Shang and Zhou. Over time, the Emperor was personified and socialized, and then was permeated through folk legends and Taoist mythologies. In the Song Dynasty, the Emperor assumed its status as the principle deity for state rituals. In Chinese folk beliefs, the Jade Emperor is the most popular object of rituals because the emperor holds the power of life and death in heaven and under earth. Every year, the public holds a grand temple fair for worshipping the Jade Emperor on January 9, which falls on the date when the emperor was born according to legend.
(2) Wangmu Niangniang

Wangmu Niangniang, believed to be the wife of Jade Emperor (Yu Huang Dadi), is the goddess with the highest status in traditional beliefs. Dwelling in her palace in the Kunlun Mountain in the west, Wangmu Niangniang oversees all the women who turned into immortals or attain the way (Tao) in the three realms of existence and the ten directions of heaven and earth. Literature has it, however, that Wangmu Niangniang, also known as Xi Wangmu, is modeled after the chieftain of a state (or tribe) that existed in western China.

(3) Mazu

Mazu, also known as Tian Hou, is not the wife of the Jade Emperor but a goddess of the sea. Tian Hou is a typical deity that was created and revered in the feudal society of China. Emperors from the Song Dynasty all the way down to the Qing Dynasty performed a total of more than 40 investiture of Mazu. The official title given to Mazu, who was originally a daughter in the Lin family, successively increased in rank from Madam, to Tian Fei, Sheng Fei, and eventually to Tian Hou and Mazu.

(4) Lei Shen

A look at deities concerning the weather shows that the sun and moon deities are largely not subject to particular worship in Chinese folk beliefs, although they are well revered by peoples in other countries. An exception is Lei Shen, who is subject to special awe. Lei Shen is believed to holds the power of life and death. When people swear an oath, they chant an incantation: “Break the oath, and Lei Shen wreaks the vengeance of heaven. In general, the public in China take a courteous attitude to savage deities so as not to offend them. Presumably associated with totem worshipping in ancient times, Lei Shen has a sturdy body like a sumo wrestler and a head that looks like that of a rooster.

(5) Mountain deities

Mountain deity worship was common in ancient Chinese folk beliefs. *Shan Hai Jing* states that deities dwell in almost all the mountains. Among them is Zhuyin, the deity of Mount Zhong, as described in this classic text. In some respects, Zhuyin is just like the creator of the world. This deity has a human face and a snake body. The whole body is red and 1,000 leagues long. When it opens its eyes it is day, when it shuts its eyes it is night. Usually, Zhuyin does not eat, drink, or breathe. Once it breathes, however, a gale blows, displaying its power. This must be the image primitive men had of Mount Zhong.

The most influential mountain deities in the feudal age of China are probably the deities of the Five Great Mountains: East Great Mountain of Tai Shan (Mount Taishan), South Great Mountain of Heng Shan (Mount Heng), West Great Mountain of Hua Shan (Mount Hua), North Great Mountain of Heng Shan (Mount Heng), and Center Great Mountain of Song Shan (Mount Song). The Emperor Lord of Mount Taishan is the most powerful and highest in rank among the deities of the five mountains. Even emperors often performed *Fengshan* [a grand ceremony that marked the enthronement of a new emperor] in Mount Taishan when they acceded to the throne. In this way, they worshipped the mountain deity and sought its protection.

(6) Water deities

Water deities in China are popularly known as dragon kings. Dragon kings dwell in not only oceans and rivers but also pools and wells. They control water on earth as well as water in heaven. Under the direction of the Jade Emperor, dragon kings go here and there, move the clouds, and produce rain. People generally believe that the dragon king of the four seas is the head of all dragon kings. In fact, people worshipped dragon kings every time a drought or storm disaster occurred. Ritual activities for rain in the face of a drought is common in the agrarian society of China.

(7) She deities

In the feudal age of China, altars called “she” was set up in states and regions. In general, she was built in a
certain forest. Enshrined at the center of the altar was a stone that represented the deity there called “she stone.” For example, the stone that represents Nüwa (a goddess in Chinese mythology) is called “Gaomei,” arguably the oldest deity of impregnation. Legend has it that both Yu the Great and his son Qi were born from stone. Even today, some ethnic minorities worship stones that look like a male or female sexual organ in the belief that they bless infertile couples with children (e.g., “Ayangbai,” a sculpture worshipped by the Bai people in Dali, Yunnan Province). The stone deity the Han Chinese revered the most is Shigandang. Shigandang generally refers to a piece of stone tablet with the characters meaning “Shigandang” or “Mount Taishan Shigandang” inscribed on its surface. It is placed at the entrance facing the alley or strategic spots along roads. As the deity of Mount Taishan is believed to control the life and death of people, Qin Shi Huang visited Mount Taishan during his imperial tours and had a stone there inscribed with such writings. For this reason, the public came to place a Mount Taishan stone at their homes or nearby roads to ward off evil in the belief that it helps them avoid misfortune.

(8) Other nature deities

In the eyes of the general public, divine spirits do exist in animate animals and plants if they ever exist in inanimate objects in the natural world. Of such animal and plant spirits, those that do good to humans are called “deities” or “immortals,” while those that do harm to humans are called “specters.” Dragons and fenghuang as well as serpent and fox deities are common in the folk beliefs of the Han Chinese. The plants often deified include those humans need such as cereals. Rare plants such as gigantic old trees are also worshipped in rituals in many areas.

4. Ritual Sites in Ancient China

Ritual sites in ancient China include shan (flat area for rituals), tan (mound altar), kan (depressed area for rituals), ancestral temples [zongmiao], ancestral halls [citang], qinkan (home altar in the main hall), and sepulchers [fenmu].

In time immemorial, people worshipped supernatural beings in their settlements or burial grounds; they had no particular sites solely for rituals. An archaeological survey of the Upper Cave site in Beijing found that primitive men buried the dead near the cave in which they had lived and sprinkled red mineral power around the remains for mourning purposes. It was not until the end of the Neolithic period that many altars began to appear. Such altars include circular altars of the Hongshan culture as well as square altars of the Liangzhu culture in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River.

In the Shang and Zhou dynasties onward, rituals were generally performed in shan, tan, kan, ancestral temples, ancestral halls, qinkan, and sepulchers.

(1) Shan

“Chu di wei shan” means to sweep earth to make it even. The areas thus made even for rituals are called “shan.” They are arguably the simple and most primitive type of altars. When the Zhou people worshipped heaven, they swept earth for rituals. Although heaven was believed to be the noblest, rituals for it were quite simple. Such simplest rituals are common even today. When the public worship Tiangong or Tianpo (land deity), they generally perform rituals usually at land temples. Yet they often do so as well in a corner of farmland after making it even by sweeping. Some people offer prayer to their ancestors by burning zhiqian or false representations of paper money for ritual purposes in a corner of their garden and kneeling down before them.

(2) Tan

“Tu feng wei tan” means to pile up earth or stone and use it as an altar. Piling up earth or stone requires much effort, but such tan looks more magnificent and solemn than shan. Tan takes a different form depending on the object of the ritual. A circular altar is used for worshipping heaven as a circle represents heaven. Such tan is known as “circular mound.” Likewise, a square altar is used for worshipping earth as a square represents earth. Such tan is known as "circular mound." The height and width of tan depend both on when and where the ritual takes place as well as its rank. Generally, altars are several shaku high [I
shaku equals about 30 cm] with stairs built from four or eight directions. A typical altar of the Han Dynasty onward is two-tiered with each tier having flights of stairs. The upper and lower tiers are called “neitan” and “waitan,” respectively. The principle deity is enshrined in neitan whereas and jidashen is enshrined in waitan. Lesser deities are enshrined below tan or at the flights. As a rule, altars of heaven, earth, the sun, and moon are separately built in the suburbs. For several thousand years, only the ruling class has been qualified to perform such rituals.

In ancient times, she had to be set up for every 25 households, including shetan. Plebeians performed rituals at she in spring and autumn. The typical shetan was generally situated in a forest. A pile of stones or a wood stake was used to indicate its location. Today, she are simplified or remain only in the form of shetan or sheshu (an old tall tree where rituals are performed).

(3) Kan

“Tu jue wei kan” means to dig a large hole in the ground and use it as an altar. Whereas tan is elevated and thus corresponds to “yang,” Kan is depressed and thus corresponds to “yin.” Tan is used for worshipping deities belonging to “yang,” including the deity of the sun, sishushen, and deities of elevated land such as mountains and hills. Likewise, kan is used for worshipping deities belonging to “yin,” including the deity of the moon, sihanshen, and deities of depressed land such as rivers and valleys.

(4) Gong/miao

If walls and a roof are built using tan and kan as their foundation, “gong [palace]” is formed. If a mortuary tablet is enshrined in gong, “miao [temple]” is formed. Because people of the past believed that supernatural beings needed a place to live and sleep like humans, miaotang [temple buildings] were arranged just like houses of humans. Originally, gong/miao was designed only for ancestors. As nature deities were increasingly personified, however, all deities of heaven and earth came to entail gong/miao. The chapter “Law of Sacrifices” of the Book of Rites refers to a sun altar as a “royal palace,” showing that gong/miao already existed in the Warring States Period. After the Buddhist culture was introduced in the Han Dynasty, Buddhist temples were built one after another here and there. Incense was burned everywhere. The passage of a poem written by the Tang poet Du Mu “Four hundred and eighty temples of the Southern Dynasty; in the misty rain stand a few high buildings” inspires an image of how the situation back then looked like. Also built in a great number were Taoist temples. Amid rivalry with Buddhism, Taoism developed thanks to the praises given by Tang emperors. Early Buddhist temples in China were modeled after the Indian counterparts; they had a tower at the center surrounded by temple buildings. In the Jin and Tang Dynasty onward, the architectural arrangement was modified. Temple buildings were increasingly taking the place of the temple tower as the main feature of Buddhist temples. The growing trend was that the tower was built outside the temple precincts. Famous Buddhist temples in China include the White Horse Temple in Luoyang and the Shaolin Temple in Dengfeng. Among the well-known Taoist temples are the White Cloud Temple in Beijing and the Azure Clouds Temple in Mount Taishan.

(5) Ancestral Halls

Ancestral halls are solely for worshipping ancestors. Gong/miao originates from temples in which ancestral spirits were enshrined. Back then only the ruling class was allowed to build it. Plebeians were not qualified. The construction of an ancestral hall was financed by funds from the family and/or the clan concerned. An ancestral hall had to be smaller than the great ancestral temple where the emperor performed rituals. The failure to comply this rule was considered disrespectful and even punishable by death. Typically, the main building accommodates four kan (home altars). The mortuary tablets for the ancestors up to four generations back on both the paternal and maternal sides are enshrined in kan. The kan on the west side is for the older ancestors. In front of each kan is an offering stand on which an incense burner and an incense box are placed. Ritual paraphernalia in ancestral halls are sealed when they are not in use so that they will not be put to other uses.

(6) Qinkan

Plebeians usually performed rituals in zhengtang [main hall] (or tangwu [main room]). For qinkan, they
usually built *shenkan* [home altar] and enshrined mortuary tablets for their ancestors there. Most *qinkan* or *shenkan* were built of wood with a height of 1-2 *shaku*; they looked like a miniature room. They were placed on *xiang’an* (incense burner table) or hung from the central, uppermost part of the front wall. In some cases, a statue of a deity or Buddha was enshrined in *qinkan* or *shenkan*.

(7) Sepulchers

The oldest and simplest approach is to perform rituals where the dead were buried in the belief that their spirits dwell there. This simplest approach may have been the most extravagant and squandering form of rituals in the feudal age for the ancient sons of heaven or feudal lords, who built a tomb for the deceased based on the palace in which he had lived. Accordingly, the tombs of emperors have bedrooms and a drawing room in the basement and *gong*, *miao*, and a hall on the aboveground floor. In contrast, plebeians build a round mound for burial. It is customary to plant a tree besides the sepulcher. This practice may be aimed at ensuring that the spirit of the dead will live long with the verdant tree, at protecting the spirit from direct sunlight or rain, or at ensuring the spirit will not feel lonely. A gravestone or a wooden equivalent on which the name of the dead is inscribed is set up in front of the sepulcher. In line with the recent advancement both in society and the level of civilization, interment is no longer practices especially in large cities. In most cases, the families of the deceased pray before the gravestone or grave tablet or at the common ossuary.

5. Ritual Offerings in Ancient China

According to historical literature, ritual offerings can be classified into several types as shown below depending on their primary and secondary nature.

(1) Food

i. Meat

In a primitive gathering and hunting economy, meat was the most precious food because people risked their lives to obtain it. Meat was long been treasured even after primitive crop and livestock farming were developed. For this reason, meat has been the principal offering for divine spirits. There are a few unique nouns concerning meat offerings. Domestic animals offered in a ritual are called “*xi sheng*.” The original meaning of the term “*xi sheng* [sacrifice]” is an even-colored animal. Large precious domestic animals such as cattle, sheep, and pigs were sacrificed. A large domestic animal as a whole was the most extravagant offering. When livestock farming developed in the Spring and Autumn period, meat offerings were classified into two types: “*shao lao*” and “*tai lao*.” “*Tai lao*” refers to the most extravagant type of offerings, i.e., cattle, which was valued the most among pigs, sheep, and cattle. In any ritual by the son of heaven, cattle were offered alone or together with a pig or sheep. “*Shao lao*” refers to the less extravagant type of offerings, i.e., pigs and sheep. Nobles and ministers of states offered only pigs and sheep because they were lower in status and authority than the son of heaven. The word “*lao*” came to mean such sacrifices because its original meaning is a small building with fences for raising cattle and other domestic animals. “*Tai*” and “*shao*” means “large” and “small,” respectively. “*Tai lao*” is so called because a large fence is needed to keep cattle; an even larger fence is necessary when cattle are kept together with sheep and pigs. Likewise, “*shao lao*” is so called because a smaller fence suffices for pigs and sheep.

ii. Alcohol

People came to enjoy drinking thanks to the invention of alcohol. Because it requires a large amount of cereals, alcohol was deemed extremely rare in ancient times. Alcohol is indispensable for a feast for aristocrats in the Shang Dynasty. It was a matter of course that alcohol came to be offered to deities as it was something people enjoyed. The *Rites of Zhou* specifies the office solely in charge of managing alcohol for rituals in its section “*Juren* [literally “wine people”] of the “Offices of the Heaven” chapter.
iii. Fruits and vegetables

In ancient times, it was common to pick up fresh fruits and vegetables—which were mostly wildly grown back then—and offer them to deities.

iv. Cereals and other products

Cereals were also common offerings to deities. Everyday foods made from cereals came to be the principal and most common food offerings, especially in folk rituals.

People consume food offerings in ways that are common in day-to-day social life and add certain social functions to these ways of consumption. Such symbolic modalities of eating and drinking include distributing, donating, and eating or drinking during rituals. In fact, it was a common practice to distribute meat offerings during rituals in ancient Chinese society. The Han Chinese and ethnic minorities in China maintained such practice in varying degrees up to the modern and contemporary ages.

(2) Exquisite ritual offerings

i. Jades

Human beings continued to handle stone from when they were ape-man. Over a long history of practice, they acquired skills to make stone shrine brilliantly and glassy. Jades were made in this way. In ancient times when gold or silver ornaments were almost unavailable, jades were extreme precious. Wearing jades symbolized aristocracy. Tallies and seals made of jade were highly treasured. Accordingly, worshipping deities using jades is in line with the mentality of ancient people. This is why jades were the most important ritual implements in ancient ceremonies.

ii. Bo

Bo is a generic term for silk fabrics. Both jades and bo were regarded as precious offerings in ancient rituals.

Finally, two types of special offerings are explained below.

(3) Special ritual offerings

i. Humans

The first type of special ritual offerings is humans. The practice of offering humans to divine spirits as sacrifice is known as “human sacrifice.” Human sacrifice is the practice of sacrificing humans while they are alive. This practice was recorded in many oracle bone inscriptions of the Yin-Shang Dynasty. As many as 1,000 people were sacrificed for a single ritual. They were burnt to death, drowned, buried alive, cut in the throat, or beheaded. They were even cut into small pieces or stewed. Initially, human sacrifices were mostly men who became war prisoners. After gods became the norm, beautiful women, especially pretty girls, were offered to gods. This custom was likely created to fulfill the strong sexual desire of divine spirits, the product of imagination. The means of sacrifice, be it just killing, burying alive, or drowning, are designed to please gods with beautiful women. The ostensible reason was that the spirits of such women would become the wife or mistress of divine spirits. In reality, however, they fell prey to the lust of divine spirits. In yet another type of human sacrifice, young boys and girls were offered to divine spirits.

ii. Blood

In ancient times, blood was believed to have important value for spirits or lives or some kind of mysterious power. The act of offering fresh blood was probably the logical consequence of expressing submission to divine spirits in rituals. Human blood or the blood of a domestic animal was used depending on the situation.

A review of various means of religious rituals in ancient China shows that fresh blood of an animal was
offered more often than human blood. In giving blood to deities of heaven, people usually offered the blood of a domestic animal to represent vigorous life. This gave rise to the rite of dedication to deities, which is described as “celebrating altars of land and grain, the five rituals, and the five great mountains” in the chapter of Offices of Spring of the *Rites of Zhou*. When a new temple was completed, blood was offered to the deity.

6. Forms of Rituals in Ancient China

The traditional concept held by the Chinese is that mysterious phenomena in the natural realm as well as life and death, weal and woe in the social realm are always associated with the special force of divine spirits. Such divine spirits include the spirits of various phenomena and things in the natural realm, those of historical, legendary, and existing figures, and even those of the unknown and deceased. They manifest themselves as deities of celestial bodies, meteorological phenomena, areas, plants, animals, ancestors, characters, and vocations, which gives rise to a system of heaven and earth deities with extremely complex relationships of higher and lower. These divine spirits have long been the objects of people’s worship or rituals. People have revered and enshrined these divine spirits, a product of people’s imagination because they often have supernatural power and thus influence or even determine people’s fate. Some of the divine spirits have an image considered be the incarnation of a deity, but more others are represented by specific symbols such as national objects and idols. Specific examples include the sun, the moon, and other celestial bodies; mountains; rivers; lakes and marshes; rocks and stones; caves; plants; animals; artifacts; idols; paper cutouts; designs; and imaginary specters and monsters.

1) Sun rituals

Chinese ancient mythology has two major explanations about the origin of the sun. The first explanation is that the sun is the eye of the Creator. The second explanation is that the sun was born from the goddess Xihe. As for the movement of the sun in the sky, the ancient mythology has it that the sun is on a vehicle or that the sun is on the back of a bird. The Yin people, who came originally from the east, had special faith in birds. They carefully observed the sunrise from the east and described sun rituals in *Bu-ci*. Every day, the Yin people performed “*binri*,” a ritual for welcoming the rising sun in the morning called and “*jianri*,” a ritual for sending off the setting sun in the evening. The custom of worshipping the sun dates back to ancient times. This is substantiated by the sun-worshipping rites of many different peoples.

Sun rituals had a fixed form from ancient times. In the Yin Dynasty, cattle or sheep was sacrificed for welcoming the rising sun and sending off the setting sun. During the Zhou Dynasty, people performed solar rituals in fixed sites where they built a high *tan*. In such rituals, they first greeted the rising sun outside of the east gate and then moved outside of the south gate to worship the noon sun. From the Han and Tang dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties, people performed a sun ritual in the north of the site in the morning and a moon ritual in the west. Solar rituals were generally observed on the Vernal Equinox Day and lunar rituals on the Autumn Equinox Day. In the 9th year of the Jiajiang era (1530), a sun altar 100 *mu* [1 *mu* equals approx. 660 m²] in area was built on a piece of land outside of the Chao Yang Men gate (what is now the Ritan Park [Temple of the Sun Park]). The Ming people performed “*yingri*” or the rite for worshipping the sun there at the dawn of the Vernal Equinox Day. This rite was made up of three parts: *yingsheng* [“welcoming the deity”], *lingfu shouzuo* (distribution of the meat offered), and *songshen* [“sending off the deity”].

2) Rituals for the moon and other celestial bodies

The rite of *jiyue* [worshipping the moon] was an ancient tradition in China. The moon rite was performed independently or together with a suburb ritual of heaven and earth. The moon altar in what is now Xierhuan, Beijing is where lunar rituals were performed during the Ming and Qing dynasties. A major rite for worshipping the moon is observed on the Autumn Equinox Day. A moon ritual is also performed in auspicious events such as New Year and other seasonal festivals.

Faith in celestial bodies besides the sun and the moon is also common. People in ancient times believed that heaven and the real world were closely associated with each other. Celestial bodies, large and small, were likened to terrestrial figures. They believed that they were involved in everything from the rise and fall of
every state to the status and life of every person. According to the volume on religious sacrificial ceremonies of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, Celestial deities were worshipped in many of the more than 100 temples in Yongdi (what is now Qinyang Country, Henan Province, and surrounding areas) before the Western Han Dynasty. Deities of the Three Stars, Mercury, Dipper, Beidou, Mars, Venus, Jupiter, the Twenty-eight Mansions Celestial deities are enshrined in their respective temples. Because of their natural properties, celestial bodies are believed to have mysterious power in rituals. Astrology, as well as superstitions and customs that regard a celestial phenomenon as an omen of some sort, constitutes a system whereby celestial bodies are arranged in the order of posts of government officials and associated with government officials, the empress, and the emperor, as well as natural, meteorological, and social phenomena.

(3) Rituals for heaven

Heaven worship was the most important part of the imperial ritual in ancient China; only the emperor was qualified to perform it.

The Chinese had already created Shangdi (the deity that governed all things) by the Yin Dynasty, a period some 2,000 years before the birth of Christ. Shangdi of the Yin-Shang Dynasty was believed to exert its power in two aspects: controlling natural power and intervening in political power. People back then believed that Shangdi controlled the power of nature to produce wind and rain and at the same time and make people's wishes for such phenomena come true at times, as substantially recorded in *Bu-ci*. Due to this influence, similar power was granted to the Jade Emperor in Taoism, which emerged in later times. The Yin people sought prophecies and instructions on all matters, including whether they would have a bumper crop in the next season, whether they would be caught in a rain during hunting, or how many humans, cattle or sheep should be sacrificed for a ritual. They fully embodied the idea or custom of “valuing rituals and venerating supernatural beings. Shangdi, the product of the imagination of the Yin people, was believed to be “heaven.” As such the will of Shangdi was called the “will of heaven.”

In the Yin-Shang Dynasty, the royal authority needed to be underpinned by the mandate of heaven. Shangdi (i.e. “heaven”), which was conceived by the Yin people, was at its nascent stage and closely associated with ancestral deities back then. It was not yet too holy to be approachable. In fact, there was no clear distinction between--or ranking among--deities, emperors, and ghosts. The Yin people believed that the ancestors of everyone on earth were all around Shangdi. They thought disobedience to Shangdi was tantamount to disobedience to their ancestors. In this way, faith in Shangdi was parallel to faith in ancestors in the Yin Dynasty. The Yin people believed that their prayers in the face of disaster, war or doubt would reach to Shangdi through their ancestors.

The Yin Dynasty owes much of its success in ruling the neighboring states to its faith in Shangdi. The Yin people performed rituals for Shangdi on a grand scale, offering a copious amount of offerings, including human and animal sacrifices. Such rituals impressed the other tribes within the dynasty that the Yin people, who took charge of both serving deities and governing the population, was chosen by heaven and therefore difficult to defy. Even the Shang people themselves performed such rituals piously.

Heaven, though endowed with divinity and authority, exists along with nature deities and ancestral deities unlike the monotheistic God. It is therefore enshrined together with deities of mountain, river, and other nature deities. When signing an alliance treaty, the heads of states swore to heaven and their ancestors and asked supernatural beings to witness the treaty. The coexistence of heaven and supernatural beings is one of the characteristics of the faith in the Celestial Emperor in the Zhou Dynasty. The Western Zhou and successive dynasties stuck to this mode of placing a ritual for heaven side by side with a ritual for supernatural beings.

Ancient Chinese emperors called themselves the son of heaven. As the son of heaven, they represented the will of heaven. Successive monarchs highly valued rituals for heaven because they publicly advocated the idea that their royal authority was granted by heaven. Rituals for heaven, earth, staple grains, and ancestors were performed more lavishly than any other types of rituals. Rituals for heaven, which were originally quite simple in form, became increasingly complex. For rituals for heavens, pre-Qin monarchs climbed a high mountain or laid earth on the flat ground in an attempt to get closer to heaven as much as possible.
They burned offerings with firewood in the type known as *fan ji* [roasted sacrifice], *liao ji* [burnt sacrifice], *wang ji* [“viewing from the distance” sacrifice], *yan ji* [smoked sacrifice], and *chai* [firewood (sacrifice)]. Specifically, they burnt offerings over burning firewood that had been stacked neatly and poured alcohol over burning hay to bring their savor to heaven.

The *Rites of Zhou* established the rule to perform a ritual for heaven in the southern suburb of the state capital. With the highest value placed on the spirit of revering something old in rituals, Dynasties that followed Xia, Yin, and Zhou continued to abide by this rule. In this way, it became customary to perform a ritual for heaven in the southern suburb on the winter solstice. The architecture and rite for worshipping heaven were also stipulated. Their specifics are well represented by relevant buildings and ceremonies during the Ming Dynasty.

In the early Ming Dynasty, Nanjing became the capital, and a circular mound was built in the south of Mount Zhong, where a ritual for heaven and one for winds, clouds, thunders, and rains were observed together on the winter solstice. After the capital was transferred to Beijing, an altar was built in the southern suburb of the new capital for worshipping heaven. This is the present-day Beijing Temple of Heaven, which was built in the 18th year of Yongle (1420) with a total area of 273 hectares. Its main components, namely, the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, the Imperial Vault of Heaven, and the Circular Mound Altar, are designed so that their planes are all circular in form to represent heaven. The main four pillars of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests symbolize the four seasons. The 12 surrounding pillars arranged in two rows represent the 12 months and hours. The altar of heaven in the real sense of the term is the Circular Mound Altar, which is surrounded by threefold alabaster balustrades. The main utilitarian benefits of worshipping heaven were supposedly appropriate amounts of rain and wind and a bumper crop. This was the reason the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests was built.

As the above paragraphs show, rituals for heaven are the most important of all the rituals for deities of celestial bodies. The idea of dreading the will of heaven was permeated in every corner of society in the feudal age. Rituals for heaven were all performed in the southern suburb of the imperial capital; rituals in the southern suburb were considered an important event by the successive dynasties. Even the Yuan Dynasty established by the Mongolian aristocracy and the Qing Dynasty founded by the Manchu people continued with these rituals. On the winter solstice every year, the Qing Dynasty performed a large-scale ritual for worshipping heaven at the altar of heaven in the southern suburb.

(4) Rituals for sacred mountains associated with rituals for heaven

Mountains constitute a special natural landscape. Influenced by the idea of nature worship, ancient people often regarded mountains as the symbol of divine spirits. Mountains symbolize divine spirits because the natural features of mountain themselves inspire people’s imagination. Some mountains are too precipitous and spectacular to be accessible. People believed that high mountains reach as high as heaven and divine spirits ascend to them.

Mysterious and deep mountains that are often covered with clouds or fog and inhabitant by singular animals and plants tend to inspire a sense of fantasy in people’s minds.

Such distinctive aspects of the natural features have made mountains one of the major objects of worship. *Shan Hai Jing* alone carries more than 400 mountain deities, most of whom are half-man, half-beast in appearance. They are described as having, for example, having a bird body and a dragon head, a dragon body and a bird head, a human face and a dragon body, a human face and a cattle body, a human face and a sheep body, a human face and a serpent body, a human body and a dragon head, a human face and a bird body, a human face and a beast body, a human face and a pig body, and a horse body and a dragon head. These descriptions reflect ancient people’ faith in mountain deities.

It was believed that mountains that towered above the clouds were near heaven and that divine spirits in heaven descend along them. For this reason, mountains were called *tianzhu* [pillars supporting heaven] or *tianti* [stairway to heaven]. Supposedly, mountains were in the realm of divine spirits and summits were where deities of heaven visited. Because heaven was too high to be accessible, the mountain nearest to heaven was the first-priority option for the site of a ritual for heaven. In ancient China, the East Great
Mountain of Mount Taishan ranked first among the famous mountains to which deities supposedly descended from heaven. The Kunlun Mountain ranked second.

According to the chapter “Zhuixing [Forms of Earth]” of the *Huainanzi*, the Kunlun Mountain was a place for the Celestial Emperor, and to climb up this mountain was to become a deity. The Kunlun Mountain continued to be deified and mystified. Mount Taishan is also a sacred mountain according to mythology. During the period when mountain rituals were practiced, it was the best renowned mountain and considered the king of many different mountains.

The *Fengshan* grand ceremony at Mount Taishan started out as one form of heaven worship. Ancient people believed that because Mount Taishan was equal to heaven, performing this ceremony of the Celestial Emperor at Mount Taishan meant that the emperor who had been given the mandate of heaven became the true son of heaven and that he was given the supreme power to govern the state and the people on behalf of heaven. As such, *Fengshan* at Mount Taishan came to symbolize imperial power. Qin Shi Huang, who rose to power after unifying the six states, needed to enhance his power with the help of the Celestial Emperor. Tian Di power
To take advantage of the tradition of *Fengshan* at Mount Taishan, the new son of heaven ostentatiously headed for Mount Taishan but was bewildered by unexpected torrential rain in the mountain. Emperor Wu of Han performed *Fengshan*. This helped solidify the status of Mount Taishan from the Han Dynasty onward.

Rituals for mountain deities were divided into several ranks. These ranks were established based on the ethos of the initial phase of the feudal age as well as various mountain ranges. The scale of the ritual, the amount of offerings, and the status of the ritual performer varied greatly depending on the rank.

The son of heaven was the principal ritual performer for sacred mountains and great rivers. Such sacred mountains were best represented by the Five Great Mountains: Mount Taishan, Mount Song, Mount Hua, Mount Heng (South Great Mountain), and Mount Heng (North Great Mountain). The son of heaven performed rituals at Mount Taishan most lavishly, displaying his imperial power. *Fengshan* are characterized typically by its splendid ceremonial weaponry, complicated procedures, and copious amount of offerings. From the early Zhou Dynasty, Mount Taishan was believed to be the sacred mountain where the monarch or the son of heaven were supposed to perform a ritual. Successive emperors who wanted to show off their achievements performed a grandiose rite there.

In ancient China, mountain deities were worshipped on a large scale in various places. When a disaster occurred, a ritual was performed in the sacred mountain in the region. When a war was won, war prisoners were sacrificed to the mountain. Because the local sacred mountain was supposedly the deity that governed and protected the region or the state, the important decision to select the imperial successor was entrusted to the deity of that mountain.

Rituals for mountain deities in ancient China were often performed in one of three styles: *mai ji*, *xuan ji*, and *tou ji*. In *mai ji*, offerings were buried in the ground to remind *di zhi* (ground deity) that people were performing a ritual and thus please the deity. This style was used not only for worshipping the ground but also for rituals for mountain deities time and again. In *xuan ji*, offerings were made to deities by hanging them from above. The ancient Chinese believed that divine spirits came to receive offerings hung high. In *tou ji*, offerings were thrown into the mountains. This style was maintained by a few ethnic minorities up to the modern and contemporary ages.

(5) **Rituals for water deities**

Water-related rituals were mostly designed to pray for rain. Records of severe drought in the central plains of ancient China are too numerous to count. Every time a severe drought hit, various rituals were performed and prayer was offered to different deities high and low across the land, especially water deities. In the snow-melting spring and the water-freezing autumn, calves and corn were offered, respectively, for rituals. At the end of the winter, heaven and earth were worshipped on a grand scale, not to mention water deities.

*Chen ji* is the type of ritual solely designed to worship water or river deities. The ancient Chinese believed
that water deities, who lived in water, would not accept the offerings unless they were immersed in the water. As such, there were people who threw jades into deep pools, if any, for prayer. Bu-ci on carapaces and bones in the Yin Dynasty includes such descriptions as “three sheep were immersed,” “three cattle were immersed,” “five cattle were immersed,” and “ten cattle were immersed.”

(6) Rituals for sea deities: the Mazu faith

The ancient Chinese believed that their land was surrounded by the sea on all sides. They found a boundless ocean more mysterious than rivers. The sea was beyond their understanding. The ancient Chinese believed that only divine spirits could dwell in the sea. This is how they created the divine spirits of the four seas.

The History of the Former Han Dynasty states that the joy of worshipping the sea is the same of that of worshipping heaven” in the volume titled “Treatise on Sacrifices.” In the Song and Yuan dynasties onward, the faith in sea deities emerged as sea traffic developed. In coastal areas, the faith in Tian Fei emerged; Tian Fei became the goddess that governed the sea. Tian Fei was originally called “Mazu.” Her real name was supposedly Lin Mo. She was born on March 23 of the 1st year of the Jianlong era (960 CE) during the reign of Emperor Taizu of Song in Meizhou Island, Putian, Fujian Province and died on September 9 of the 4th year of the Yongxi era (987). Lin Mo was bright and eager to learn as a child. After coming of age, she mastered the art of divination. Because she helped and entertained local people, Lin Mo was admired in her home town. Local people began to venerate late Lin Mo as a sea goddess. Legend has it that Lin Mo worked divine miracles many times to rescue wrecked vessels in the sea. Accordingly, voyagers and fishermen have faith in Lin Mo. In the Yuan Dynasty, she was granted the divine title of Tian Fei. The Ming Dynasty lifted the decree of seclusion, setting the stage for maritime traffic, trade, and exchange of envoys. Tian Fei was reputed highly all the more because navigating wooden vessels in the sea entailed great risks at the time when maritime weather forecasting was at a primitive stage. Back then, every port in the coastal areas had a Tian Fei temple. Sailors of vessels, large and small, always performed a ritual for a safe voyage at such a temple before setting sail. They also hired xiang gong (person in charge of rituals) to perform a Mazu ritual on board. The Ming and Qing dynasties granted Mazu such titles as “Tian Hou” and “Tianshang Shengmu,” thus promoting the faith in this sea goddess even further. As more and more Chinese migrated abroad, Mazu temples were built not only in such Asian countries Japan, Korea, Indonesia, and Singapore but also in Europe and North America. In this way, Mazu became a global sea goddess. The Mazu ritual at a wharf or at a port is one of the most fervent and magnificent rites that are locally performed. A famous temple fair in Tianjin also worships Mazu. Among its many features is a lively street parade of people disguising themselves as different figures and carrying an image of Mazu. Local government officials also take part in this event.

(7) Rituals for land deities

Land deities have developed over time. First of all, earth goddesses changed to she gong (a kind of land deities). Accordingly, “she” came to mean “the master of the land” rather than the land itself. Worship of land deities is none other than a “she” ritual.

There is a dearth of literature as far as the specific styles of “she” rituals. It is likely, however, that a mound or altar was made to perform them. In ancient China, when people moved to a new land and built a country or village for that matter, they set up a she and performed a ritual there. This is exactly what is meant by the saying “when you build a country, tell hou tu (land deity) first. In such a ritual, domestic animals were sacrificed and jades and silk fabrics were offered. Trees were planted around the mound or altar.

The rituals that were designated in the feudal age as those that should be performed at miaotang [temple] changed over time in terms of when, where and how they were observed. It was not until the Zhou Dynasty that these specifics were established. The “Dasiyu [musician-in-chief]” subsection of the Rites of Zhou states that deities of heaven are to be worshipped on the winter solstice and di zhi (ground deity) on the summer solstice. Based on the Chinese ancient concept of “round heaven, square earth,” people built fang ze tan (altar for worshipping the deities of earth) in the northern suburb of the capital and worshipped earth there. Rituals for the deities of earth correspond to those for the deities of heaven; both types of rituals are collectively referred to as huang tian hou tu [emperor of heaven and empress of earth]. For a long period,
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from the Qin and Han to Tang and Song and further to the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was customary to perform a ritual for (i) earth alone in the southern suburb, (ii) both heaven and earth in the southern suburb (known as “suburban ritual for heaven and earth,” or (iii) earth alone in the southern suburb on the summer solstice. According to the History of Ming, the ritual for both heaven and earth was performed in most cases over a period of more than 1,000 years from the Han to Tang dynasties.

While the ritual for heaven burned offerings in the southern suburb, the ritual for earth buried offerings into the ground in the northern suburb. The ancient Chinese believed that because di zhi dwelled deep in the ground, the ground deity would not notice or rejoice at the fact that people were performing a ritual for it unless offering were buried into the ground.

The rise and fall of she deities and states

She deities and war were inseparable. They shared the glory of victory with victorious monarchs and the humiliation of defeat with defeated monarchs. Victorious monarchs performed a grand ritual before she deities and offered war prisoners they had taken. They sometimes killed the prisoners and offered their blood. She deities savored it and the people to another war. By contrast, the monarchs and their she deities who suffered a devastating defeat were both humiliated. The defeated monarchs were taken war prisoners. Their she could not escape the miseries of destruction.

Also, Hou tu deities that governed farming are worshiped along with the deities of cereals, the product of land. Ji deities were worshipped from the Zhou Dynasty onward as divine spirits that represent both land and crops.

(8) Ancestral rituals: the most central rituals in China

i. The status of ancestral rituals

Ancestral rituals are a great affair in the social life of ancient China. Ancestors were the most important object of ancient Chinese rituals. The successive emperors regarded ancestral temple rituals as one of the three major types of rituals, the others being rituals for heaven and earth and those for alters of land and grain. In folk rituals, the upper class built an ancestral hall and produced a family tree while the common classes set up mortuary tablets and built zibei (characters that represent kinship). In ancient China, the whole society was governed based on Zongfa (clan law) and developed under the light of grace from ancestral rituals.

Ancient Chinese rituals were based on the idea that souls are immortal. The ancient Chinese believed that souls continued to live after death. They called a soul separated from the body gui (ghost). Even after ancestors left their families or groups, the spirits of ancestors were believed to move around in the real world and watch over their descendants all the time. To warn their descendants, the spirits of ancestors supposedly appeared in the flesh before them or in their dreams as necessary. In the past, the idea of immortal souls was generally accepted in China. The spirits of the dead supposedly had the capacity to retaliate against their enemies and return a favor to those who had done good to them. Their appearance and voice were unchanged from those when they were alive.

ii. Establishment of ancestral rituals

Ancestral rituals were already established in the period of slave society in ancient China. They were performed in a solemn and ardent manner.

People in the Shang and Zhou dynasties made offerings of war prisoners of other tribes as human sacrifices in their rituals, i.e. their common tribal ancestors. Ancestral rituals helped to promote tribal bonds, encourage descendants, and solidify their status. The degree of blood relationship and the social status of a person depended on his relationship with his ancestors. This also reflected in ancestral rituals. In the Zhou Dynasty, the performance of ancestral rituals was one of the privileges of the aristocracy. Kings were allowed to perform a grand ritual for ancestors to up many generations back once a year. They were even allowed to worship their legendary tribal progenitor as the primary ritual object along with their
blood-related ancestors. Feudal lords, due to their lower rank, were not allowed to go back to their legendary and symbolic ancestors of a distant past in their ancestral rituals; they were admitted to go up to their ancestor who was first designated as a feudal lord. Scholars and ministers of state were allowed to go back to their gaozu (great-great grandfather). The common people were, obviously enough, permitted to go back to their grandfathers; they were prohibited to go any further. In other words, the higher social status and the more power people had, the more leeway they had to attach objectives, ostensible or otherwise, to their ancestral rituals. In this way, ancestral rituals bore witness to their social status and thus symbolized the fact that their political power was in place. When a Chinese dynasty was defeated, their ancestral temples and altars of land and grain were often obliterated. Such obliteration is known as “jué si” or “yì zōng miao.” These words are a synonym for the fall of a state.

iii. Lishi and mortuary tablets

A mortuary tablet refers to a wooden tablet on which the name of the dead is written. Lishi is the act of subjecting a living person to a ritual in place of the dead. Both Lishi and mortuary tablets were used for rituals for aristocrats who died recently. The type of ritual as required by the social status bore testimony to how much the dead was venerated and demonstrated the power of the descendants of the dead.

The Zhou Dynasty valued the social class system. The word expressing death differed depending on the social class of the dead: beng for monarchs, hong for feudal lords, zu for ministers of state, and si for plebeians. When a monarch died, a mortuary tablet was made and enshrined in the ancestral temple. The type of ritual called “tesi,” which set up only one mortuary tablet of the dead, was a special privilege to those who died recently. Ancestors one or more generations back were worshipped in the ancestral temple together with other ancestors. At any rate, when a monarch died, his demise was reported to the feudal lords and he was given burial. The burial was followed by the act of wailing at the ancestral temple, where the new mortuary tablet was enshrined along with the mortuary tablets of the ancestors. This concluded the whole process of the funeral rite. When to give burial and where to perform the funeral were also specified. When the son of heaven died, he was given burial seven months later, and all the feudal lords attended the funeral. Likewise, when a feudal lord died, he was given burial five months later, and all the feudal lords in alliance attended the funeral. When a minister of state died, he was given burial three months later, and officials with the same rank attended the funeral. At the funeral of a feudal lord, people of a different surname wept outside the city as a sign of their condolences. Those of the same surname offered their condolences at the ancestral temple. Tongzong (those who were descended from the same individual who bore that surname) offered their condolences at the zumiao (directly ancestral temple). And tongzu (those who came from some common branch family from that ancestor) did so at fumiao (paternal temple). Condolences must be expressed and gifts associated with the funeral must be given before the burial. Doing otherwise contravened the rules of decorum and considered the act of disrespect for the deceased.

Ancestral rituals provided a tool for uniting tong zong and relatives. A ritual performed by tong zong helped to promote their sentimental solidarity. In such a ritual, meat offerings were distributed among the relatives.

In the Zhou Dynasty, ancestral rituals were performed quite frequently for different reasons, ostensible or otherwise. Among them was a seasonal ritual that was performed four times a year. In its chapter titled “Royal Regulations”, the Book of Rites states: “The sacrifices in the ancestral temples of the son of Heaven and the feudal princes were that of spring, called Yue; that of summer, called Di; that of autumn, called Chang; and that of winter, called Zheng”. Comments by Zheng Xuan suggest that these names signify rituals of the Xia and Yin dynasties. In the Zhou Dynasty, the spring ritual was called “Chí”, and the summer ritual was called “Yue”. The names of the autumn winter were unchanged. The Commentary of Zuo on the Spring and Autumn Annals describes three styles of ancestral rituals: Di, Zheng, and Chang. In the cool autumn season, the Chang ritual was performed in which newly harvested crops and newly brewed alcohol were offered to the ancestors. Even today, such rituals are observed by many ethnic minorities. The Zheng ritual was performed in the coldest season. “Zheng” (烝) means firewood and “Zheng” (烝), another ritual title, is associated with “Zheng” (烝), which also means “to steam.” The performers of this ritual burned firewood, steamed offering meat, and serve them on a plate. The idea was to allow the ancestors to take nutritious food in order to live through the winter. The Di ritual was performed at the ancestral temple on a grand scale, often after the grain harvest in summer. In this ritual, all the successive ancestors were worshipped. The special music called “Diyue” was performed. Diyue was handed down the generations in
the state of Lu in the Spring and Autumn period. Among other rituals were those meant to worship those who died recently that go by the name of “Teji” and “Anshenji.”

iv. Folk ancestral rituals for the purposes of pacifying ancestors’ souls and avoiding misfortunes

Ancestral rituals are widely practiced by the public. Plebeians are allowed to perform rituals for up to their great-grandfathers or great-great grandfathers. The frequent objects of rituals are fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and grandmothers who have already passed way.

Love is the most fundamental reason for performing a ritual for the deceased relatives. For the ritual performer, his deceased father, mother, grandfather, and grandmother was the person with whom he shared his life over a long period of time. He vividly remembers how much the relative cared about him. He cannot possibly forget what the relative had to go through to raise him. After losing his loved one, the ritual performer realizes, in the face of the permanent separation, that he can no longer repay their favors. With such regrets, he has difficulty pulling himself together. His sorrow is even unbearable in cases his living standards improved after the relative’s death or the relative died young because of his or her adversity. Rituals that may makes it possible to commune with the deceased provides an avenue for those left behind to repay the deceased relative and look back on the days when he or she was alive. Generally, the whole family get together and carry out a grand ancestral ritual during the New Year or other seasonal festivals. They “call back” their ancestors to let them talk to their descendants and enjoy food and drink. The idea is to demonstrate that they will never forget their ancestors. On the occasions of the Qingming Festival and the Ghost Festival, the Chinese visit the grave their ancestor, tidy it up, and perform a ritual before it. By so doing, they can feel they have fulfilled their duty and they can convince themselves that their deceased relatives are pleased with their deed. Such a deed is, in essence, the embodiment of the desire of relatives to commune with one another beyond the border between this life and after life by means of ritual. It may be an act of self-contentment. Essentially, such a ritual is driven by sentiment. In general, certain deeds tend to become mandatory if they become a custom. The act of performing an ancestral ritual is no exception. Once it becomes a custom, the conformity mentality sets in. Eventually, it can become a formality. The failure to perform an ancestral ritual or visit the ancestral grave may be thought of as an abnormal, unforgivable act and become a target of criticism. In feudal society, the lack of filial piety was subject to punishment. Under such circumstances, it is likely that the modalities to express personal sentiments will be fixed and such fixed modalities will eventually dominate personal emotions and turn into a mere regular function. By the same token, chances are that ancestral rituals will come before personal emotions and become some kind of “rule” to be observed by every family.

Apart from regular ancestral rituals, extraordinary rituals are also performed, especially for good health. The ancient Chinese generally believed that they became sick and suffered domestic misfortune because the spirit of a deceased relative put a curse on them. They believed that the spirit got angry and cause calamity to its descendants because its desire was not fulfilled or the ritual for it was inadequate. Mediums tend to provide such explanations as to the cause of disease. It is often the case that when a person gets sick, his or her relatives try to unconditionally meet the demands of the dead as communicated through a medium. They tend to perform unscheduled ancestral rituals in which they burn clothes or zhiquian to comfort the irate spirit or make a prayer. When the sick person recovers, his or her relatives may visit their ancestral grave and recall the spirit to be winded and dined during the New Year or other seasonal festivals. The other major reason for performing an extraordinary ritual is dream-related. A deceased relative may appear in the dream of his descendant with whom he once lived. In the dream, the deceased relative complain of hunger or cold or call attention to a familiar domestic problem such as a leak in the roof. The descendant may be convinced that the dream is real. When the ancient Chinese had such a dream, the rich and poor, high and low alike conducted various types of ritual activities to fulfill the desires of their deceased relatives. The popular belief is that deceased relatives appear in a dream because their spirits seek help and that it is an unavoidable duty for their descendants to help them. This is exactly what was known as “xiaoxin [filial piety]” in ancient China. The ancient Chinese believed that disregarding such a dream and shunning their responsibility was bound to incur the wrath of the spirit, resulting in sudden illness of their descendants or sudden death of their domestic animals. In ancient China, mediums played an important role of communicating with the spirits, or rather, conveying their words. Conversely, the ancestors always received the benefit of rituals thanks to mediums.
As discussed above, ancestral rituals were the most important type of rituals in ancient China. In the Zongfa-based society of China, The code of ancestors, which dictated family rules constituted the common law that was independent from the state code. The ancestral hall was an important site where great affairs of the clan were administered and tribal bonds were promoted. Successive rules stressed that the whole country should be ruled based on filial piety. They also emphasized that, while those with high aspirations should have the sublime goal of pacifying and ruling the country, it is important to manage families properly as the most fundamental component of the country. Filial piety and ancestor veneration provide an important basis for managing families. And ancestral rituals are the most important of all rituals for every class and group. Various rewards and punishments are conducted under the pretext of ancestral rituals. Over a period of several thousand years, the other types of rituals for divine spirits have been simplified, abolished or taken into Buddhism and Taoism. However, only ancestral rituals have survived for thousands of years, enabling us, living today, to find in them the remnants of what they used to be in the past.