

Ancestors and the Personal Altar

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We in the modern west have a great difficulty with Ancestors. We do not know what these figures, the generations that came before us, are. We over-personalize them or ignore them. We often hate our parents or feel betrayed by them and seldom know who our grandparents were or how they led their lives. Most important, we do not know how to make them into Ancestors who can help us rather than haunt us. Yet, at least according to the tradition, establishing a harmonious relation with whatever “Ancestors” are is central to our education into the Ritual World of Change, the only way its blessings can flow.

The main religious difference between us and the old Chinese is that whereas our word God has no connotation of Ancestor the Chinese word *Ti/Heaven*, which is roughly equivalent, was applied directly to the Dead. To sacrifice to the Dead is *Ti*, no matter how recent or historical the departed person is. This so-called “worship” of Ancestors, demonized in all monotheistic religions, simply means giving the Dead the recognition they need in order to exercise their power. It is an image of a creative relation to the figures of the psyche, the complexes that people our imagination that came before us and will outlive us. This Ancestral “worship” is the central link to the Animal forms of the Ancestors that carry their imaginative potency and power.

Placing the Ancestors

In the world of Change, the *Zong* or Ancestors live in the tomb and at the same time sit at the court of the High Lord. They connect what is above and what is below and insure a continuous flow of blessings from the invisible world. The Sacred Cosmos portrayed in Change revolves around the axis they create, the *Axis Mundi* or World Tree, a zone of absolute reality where there is perfect access

to the spirit world. It is where the Dead rest in peace and receive the great offerings; it is invoked any time the ritual of high divination is performed. It is also the shape of the human heart (*xin*).

The creation and enshrining of an Ancestor spirit on this Axis is an extremely important part of the ritual world of Change. It involves fixing and feeding the Ghost (*gui*) or passion-body of a Departed One in the Tomb and a Mourning Ritual that both enshrines its Bright Spirit (*hun* or *shen*) in a Tablet on the Ancestral Altar and transforms the Descendant who goes through it.

The Installed Ancestor is fed through sacrifice and ritual attention that culminates in the Sacred Meal which humans and spirits share. At this time a *shi* or Embodier, literally a person acting as a “corpse,” would be possessed by the installed Ancestor spirit. Through this medium, the new spirit would take its place in the human community, sharing the meal and extending its radiant and liberating blessings (*fu*) to ten thousand generations of its descendants. The spirits of the dead who spoke through him were surrounded by a dazzling radiance, the nimbi and haloes of their divinity (Waley, *Songs*).

This process of releasing and placing the spirit is one of the most important manifestations of Change and its way of transformation. It is a *heng* ritual, fixing the omen an ancestor represents and giving it an enduring place in human life. This paradigm of sacrifice and blessing is a central purpose of the *Kan-Li* or Fire-Water Axis, the continual interconnection of the Bright Omens and the Ghost River.

Initiation and Divination

Ancient worship in China created few great monuments aside from the ancestral hall of the high nobles and the royal tombs. Almost all ceremonial sites were temporary, erected for an occasion or re-created for each ceremony. Ceremonies consisted of offerings, prayers and masked dances which had two aims, to feed the spirits, thus securing their blessings and their participation in the course of

human life and to effect an alteration of consciousness in the participants, “to experience something and be set right.”

The ceremony of induction into the World of the Dead and coming into contact with one’s personal ancestors, the Water Initiation, is a central part of the initiation of a diviner in virtually all traditional cultures, from the *Wu* of ancient China to the *sangomas* of contemporary Africa. The result of the initiation and the night-sea journey it involves is the creation of a Personal Altar, a place where our own dead are honoured so that they can open to the great powers beyond.

Several things occur during this initiation. We are opened to the Ghost River and contact our personal dead, often in very vivid dreams. We make our peace with them through a practice resembling the creation and enshrining of an ancestor spirit: We fix the Ghost (*gui*) or passion-body of the Departed Ones in the Tomb by seeing-through and clearing all negative feelings - rage, sorrow, longing - we might have inherited from them or feel towards them. We recognize and enshrine their Bright Spirit (*hun* or *shen*), the imaginal body in which they can live in and through us, in an image or *Xiang*. As we do this, we begin to experience the Great Powers or Dream Animals literally re-arranging our connection to the World of the Dead in our dreams and visions, de-personalizing the past and installing the Pathways through which the blessings can flow.

Friendship of the Spirits

We must then fix or *heng* this omen or process by establishing a sacred space filled with objects that represent these powers and by honouring them with sacrifice - our attention and devotion - through these objects. This is a necessary step in coming to peace with the past and the World of the Dead, what we might call psychic hygiene. Through this process we *bin*, “host and guest” the spirits and establish a bond with them called *you*, a circle of friendship that we can extend to others. Through this the invisible world of the Past Ones can truly enter our life. We become like the early spirit-workers who gave to “those above (*shen*, the light spirits) and those below (*gui*, the dark ghosts) what is due to them.” This

imaginative generosity causes a luminous spirit (*shen ming* or bright spirit) to arise within.

Look, there is a spirit (*shen*) within your person.
Now it goes, now it comes.
No one can imagine it. ...

But if you reverently clean its abode
It will return of itself.
You will recover your own true nature,
Fixed in you once for all.

As the old texts say: “This is very important for diviners and spirit-workers (*Wu*). It is what makes their power firm. It is what keeps harm away. It is stated in *Change*: A person without *heng* will not succeed as a Wu-Intermediary. How true! Not fixing the *de*, the power and virtue of an omen, leads to failure. Just reading it is not enough.” We must confront this deep ritual process and “fix” or *heng* our personal connection to the Ancestors if we wish to truly enter the world of Change, to use it correctly and be of real help to others.

Working with Ancestors

The sacred cosmos opened by the Numinous Turtle is filled with hidden places of close encounter with the spirit world: ancestral temples and tombs, grave mounds, earth altars, mountain shrines, initiation towers and River-Mountain festival sites. We see peasants, nomads, merchants, wandering sages, nobles and kings, shamans, officials and magicians, husbands and wives, slaves and prisoners, children, craftsmen, soldiers and officers, servants and courtesans and wide range of local spirits, magical animals and heroes as they eat and drink, carry out a variety of ritual actions and feasts, love and hate, work, hope and scheme, make war and find peace, despair or are enlightened, face death and disaster or sudden joy. This magical landscape is a kind of Portable Altar hidden deep in the imagination that can be accessed through ritual and divination. It is a direct parallel to the shape of our inner lives as we walk the streets of our modern cities. Through its use, a human face floats up from the midst of the old sacred

world with an uncanny Voice, a language like an upturned mouth open to the Sky. The basic unit of its language is the *xiang* or symbol, a gateway to the sacred cosmos and the beings that populate it.

For this world is not only populated by humans, but by various types of souls, ghosts and spirits, the *guishen*: “Between Heaven and Earth there is no place the *guishen* do not exist.” These spirits of Heaven and Earth are of many kinds. Their identities are constantly changing like the shifting figures in dream, but all partake of the Soul-Turtle’s numinous quality (*ling*), a direct expression of the Way or Dao. Though the boundaries between these spirits are permeable, they are loosely divided into three types.

Shen are the Bright Spirits, the spirits of Heaven that vivify and inspire and are centered in the heart. They draw out and animate the Myriad Beings as stars, mountains and rivers. They make things appear and unfold. They inspire awe and wonder, cut across boundaries, combine categories, and “cannot be comprehended by the yin and the yang.” *Shen* change and release things; their main characteristic is transformation.

Gui are the Dark Spirits, souls or ghosts who live in the tomb and wander the Earth, representing the Land of the Dead. *Gui* fix and bind things, like the snares and traps of fate. They are protectors, but can be angered or offended by mistreatment, turning into furies, plagues or haunting spirits of vengeance - the hungry ghosts and angry demons (*li*) who have been offered no sustenance in the other world and are trapped by their passions between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Zong or Ancestors partake of both categories. They live in the Tomb, the Earth and the Land of the Dead and, at the same time, sit at the court of the High Lord in Heaven. Ancestors are animating spirits. Rooted in the Earth, they act as intermediaries to Heaven and all of the powerful *shen*, ensuring a continuous flow of blessings from the invisible world.

We, of course, no longer “believe” in these Ancestors, dismissing them as superstition or mental disorder even though they are the center of all traditional culture. Yet there is something in the experience of Ancestors in these traditional cultures that we desperately need. It precisely mirrors the *hole* or lack in our

lives, the “missing information” that might re-connect us to the *(w)hole* (Briggs and Peat).

The experience of the Ancestors hidden in the Ghost River offers a creative relation to the figures of the deep psyche, figures that came before us and will certainly outlive us. They speak a hidden language that seeks to produce and does in fact produce a real and effective change in the mind of one upon whom it acts - a leading-out or education of the soul. Once fully experienced, these Ancestors and their hidden language release the Bright Omen of our Destiny from the Ghost River of the fate in which we are trapped. And it is precisely through this education that we can learn to respond once more to the beauty and the mystery of the world that surrounds us.

Traditional peoples may venerate the spirits of the Dead to appease their sorrow or anger at being separated from the world of the living, but even more they honor the Dead for the protection they offer and the gifts they bestow. When we do not forget the Ancestors they change to clouds that nourish the Earth and the Soul with their fertilizing Rain. They become the Dragon rising from the underworld waters in the vapors of the shaman’s breath and the breath of the rituals that circulate the waters of life. When we venerate the Ancestors, their Rain falls on the Earth and in our souls, bringing fertility and blessing. When we forget the Ancestors these Rains cease.

We think the Ancestors are behind us; they are actually what goes before us, a carrying wave of spirit and blessing (*fu*) that pulls us along. They suggest that any great accomplishment, any great blessing must be founded on an acknowledgement of the dark powers without whom nothing can grow or flourish.

On the Use of Ritual and Ritual Space

Ancestors, the imaginal beings who connect us with the great River of Life do not simply exist. They must be created and empowered in order to become Protectors. This creation can only occur in ritual space. This Ritual space is first of all a heightening of awareness, a perception of the possibility of the numinous, an

awareness of the silence and darkness that is the ground of all being, a listening for and to it. It is a rough and dangerous boundary or borderland, a space between old and new, past and future, life and death, the place of “goings and comings” (*wanglai*) across the River of Life and Death. The awareness born here opens a gate through which the ever hidden yet ever-present “ghosts and spirits” that animate the world can come and go, where the old myths instruct us and our identity is dissolved and re-woven. The words and actions performed here directly affect the Dream Body, the great body of dreams that that is both within and around us.

In the old world, each person had his or her protectors in the Dream Body, Ancestor spirits that were carefully made from the two kinds of souls that join together at birth to form the human being and part again his or her death. This creation of an ancestor began with the Water Initiation and went on in what was called the Mourning Hut, a liminal interiorizing space where a symbolic death and re-birth is enacted. The process in the Mourning Hut takes the Initiate from one stage, status or stature to another and ensures the peace of the Dead. It centers on a dream incubation period in the Ghost River that makes the Spirits of the Dead an integral part of individual life.

The process of creating an Ancestor through dream-incubation involves carefully separating and handling the two souls of the Departed Ones, the passion-body (*bo*-soul) and the spirit-soul (*hun*), along with all the Initiate’s feeling connections to them. It parallels the journey of the Paper Horses who ride the great Fire-Water or *Kan-Li* Axis that connects the underworld Ghost River or River of Souls and the Bright Omens that are the signs of the Ancestral Spirits.

The passion-body or Ghost, along with the Initiate’s passionate connections to the Departed One must be carefully led into the Tomb and returned to the Earth. This passion-body lives on offerings made at the time of this ritual entombment and can turn into an angry ghost or Mind Demon if it is not fed through praise and mourning. This process of Earthing the Ghost involves dealing with and clearing away all the “corruption” (*gu*), all the pain, rage, sorrow, greed and

hunger within you that is connected with your inner Mother and Father and the generation of the Parents, sacrificing the bitter feelings through honoring and praising the Ghost's thirst for life and spirit. During this period the Initiate may have dreams of Dark Animals moving, hidden memories emerging and strange dark energies coursing through the house.

The spirit-soul or Bright Spirit of the Departed Ones must be guided to an image specially created for it and placed on the Ancestral Altar where it is enshrined as a potential source of guidance and blessing, a transformation that reflects the spirit's own passage toward the Other Shore. In the Initiate, this guiding involves connecting with, honoring and activating the energies of the Grandparent generation, filling all lacks and paying all debts, rescuing them from psychic oblivion and forgetfulness by honoring their spirits. During this process the grandparents may appear in the Initiate's dreams, opening the doors to archetypal Ancestors who begin to re-configure the Initiate's heart-mind and instruct them in the way to see and fulfill the Bright Omen of their destiny and receive help from the spirit world.

The new Ancestor spirit, the new and powerful image that emerges from the dream incubation, enters and animates the icon placed upon the Altar at the beginning of the ritual period. The process culminates in the Sacred Meal in which humans and spirits share.