

Ceremonial Sites and Practices

Ancient worship in China created few great monuments aside from the ancestral hall of the high nobles and the royal tombs. Almost ceremonial sites were temporary, erected for an occasion or re-created for each ceremony. Sacrifice and the meal shared with the spirits were common to all levels of culture. If anything, the temple of traditional worship is a ritual and a divination book.

Ceremonies consisted of offerings, prayers and masked dances or ritual combat 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.” Each ceremony had its own prayers or chants, formulae for calling spirits.

Offerings included bull, ram and pig for royal ancestors (Figure 26), foal or horses to River and Mountain, a dog to the god of roads. Blue jade was offered to High Lord, yellow to Earth and the underworld spirits. Various wines were important as offerings and were consumed in quantity during the ritual meals and the great festivals. In earlier times, human sacrifices, usually criminals or prisoners of war, were offered to Ancestors and the Earth God. Offerings to High Lord were burned, to Earth Lord buried or drowned. For ancestors a complete banquet was served and shared – the great ritual meal served in the bronze vessels.

Common Places of Worship

Rites were practiced in a certain common places. Souls of the dead ancestors required funerary temples, altars, tombs, and indoor shrines; all others were served in the open air.

Each spirit had a preference for position and shape. Sky gods had round altars and mounds on which fires were lit. Earth spirits had square altars and sacrificial victims were buried or drowned in the pit beside the altar. The God of the Soil had a mound in the palace grounds facing the Ancestral Temple. The

High Lord had a circular mound at the southern Outskirts Altar. First Husbandman had an altar in the royal fields; the Sun had a mound at the eastern Outskirts Altar and the Moon had a pit called Night Brightness (*Yeh-ming*) at the western Outskirts Altar.

Shang Di and the Earth Lord

Shang Di, the High Lord or *Tian*, Heaven, ruled from his palace in the Great Bear, where he established the fates and conferred the mandates and the Ancestors lived simultaneously in his court and in their images or spirit tablets. The Altar for the Earth Spirit for each area, from the Protectors of the hamlet to the Great Lord (*Da-she*) who protected the King, was originally a Tree planted on a Mound in the middle of a sacred grove (Figures 2, 53) with an unpolished stone set up to the north of the tree to represent the god. All great initiatives, war, hunting, marriage, opening and closing the fields or the great festivals, had to be announced at this Earth Altar (Figures 7, 55). The Earth Spirit was Lord and Protector; drums were smeared with blood at his altar when the armies marched and he would accompany the troops in a spirit tablet.

Ancestral Worship

Ancestral worship was held in a temple on the east side of the noble dwelling, surrounded by a large court and a *pei*, a standing stone (Figure 3). There were rooms in which the celebrants, the Embodiers, dressed. The interior was divided into two rows of small chapels for the two alternating lines of the ancestors, *chao* and *mu*, with a central room dedicated to the First Ancestor. Beyond that were the *tiao*, the rooms for the more remote ancestors where Kings Wen and Wu had their perpetual homes. Each ancestor was present in his spirit tablet, an inscribed wooden tablet enclosed in a stone casket. There were two for each ancestor, one that remained always in the temple and one that travelled with the armies on campaign.

At ancestral ceremonies the spirit would inhabit the body of one of his descendents chosen for the task by divination. This was the Corpse or Embodier, who was possessed by the spirit (*shen*) of the ancestor. Through the Corpse, the

ancestor ate, drank and spoke, sharing the meal and blessing the people. At the end of a ceremony he would proclaim “the spirits are drunk,” and a great radiance spread throughout the room, indicating that the ancestors were satisfied and looked favourably on their descendents.