

Chinese Ancestor Worship

W. A. P. Martin, American missionary in China, from his writings on *The Worship of Ancestors*, describing a millennia old tradition, 1900

EVERY household has somewhere within its doors a small shrine, in which are deposited the tablets of ancestors, and of all deceased members of the family who have passed the age of infancy. Each clan has its ancestral temple, which forms a rallying point for all who belong to the common stock. In such temples, as in the smaller shrines of the household, the objects of reverence are not images, but tablets, slips of wood inscribed with the name of the deceased, together with the dates of birth and death. In these tablets, according to popular belief, dwell the spirits of the dead. Before them ascends the smoke of daily incense; and, twice in the month, offerings of fruits and other eatables are presented, accompanied by solemn prostrations.

In some cases, particularly during a period of mourning, the members of the family salute the dead, morning and evening, as they do the living; and on special occasions, such as a marriage or a funeral, there are religious services of a more elaborate character, accompanied sometimes by feasts and theatrical shows.

Besides worship in presence of the representative tablet, periodical rites are performed at the family cemetery. In spring and autumn, when the mildness of the air is such as to invite excursions, city families are wont to choose a day for visiting the resting places of their dead. Clearing away the grass and covering the tombs with a layer of fresh earth, they present offerings and perform acts of worship. This done, they pass the rest of the day in enjoying the scenery of the country.

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