EASTERN ZHOU (770–256 BC)
Sacrifice and divination records, both material and textual, show that the practice of ancestor worship—a ritual practice involving the deification of select human spirits¹—was linked to maintaining a stable political and social hierarchy in an agrarian Zhou society. In the system reflected in contemporary texts, people of social rank (i.e., members of the “100 named” lineage groups, bai xing 百姓) all worshipped a progenitor or shared Zhou founder ancestor, the grain god and earth deity (Houji 后稷), and their lineage founder whose original rank could be traced back to the creation of a Heavenly Mandated Zhou nation, its founder kings, and the Zhou mission of control over non-Zhou peoples in the surrounding Four Regions (sifang 四方). During the five centuries of political strife and economic changes known as the Eastern Zhou period (770–256 BC), this system came to an end, and with it disappeared the role of ancestors as the vital link between Heaven (Tian 天) and political power.

Numerous factors led to the downfall of this Zhou-style system and ultimately the demise of the celestial ancestral bureaucracy: destruction of aristocratic lineages through warfare, population mobility and the loss of traditional communities, more sophisticated agricultural and trade networks, and the rise of political economic powers representing

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¹ Steven Bokenkamp notes that “ancestor worship” is a misnomer for the practice of “maintenance of family ties through ritual means in the hope that one’s forebears might continue to aid their descendants”; see “Record of the Feng and Shan,” Religions of Asia in practice: an anthology, Donald S. Lopez, ed. (Princeton, 2002), p. 388. Lee Kwang Kyu notes that the performance of funerary rites and shamanistic rituals is characteristic of Korean style ancestor worship. These rituals create a system of mutual dependence between the living and the dead that is common in other East Asian systems. He notes that spirits that become protective ancestors are those who have lived long lives and died normal deaths. Basically, the performance of ritual has the power to determine the nature of the spirit; see “The concept of ancestors and ancestor worship in Korea,” Asian Folklore Studies 43.2 (1984), 199–214. Lee’s definition of the prescribed rituals was drawn from Korean versions of the traditional Chinese ritual texts, particularly the Liji and Yili.