ANCESTOR WORSHIP: 
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF 
RITUAL ACTIVITIES IN NEOLITHIC NORTH CHINA

BY

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Abstract

Based on the analysis of burial patterns found at several archaeological sites in the Yellow River valley, this study demonstrates the existence of various forms of ritual practice directed towards ancestors during the Neolithic period. Different ritual behavior revealed in the data clearly indicate the development of the ancestral cult in three respects: (1) the ancestors venerated shifted from collective groups to exclusive individuals with high social status; (2) the worshippers who performed the rituals changed from large social organizations at the community level (probably represented by multi-lineage groups) to small social groups at the lineage or family level; and (3) social beneficiaries of the ritual changed from the entire community to selected social sectors of the whole, mainly lineages or families with high social status. Ancestor worship in ancient China, therefore, can be characterized by two basic forms, “group ancestor worship” and “individual ancestor worship,” with a number of variations within the two. The former form may have been associated with an egalitarian social organization, and the latter seems to have deeply influenced the religious and political systems of the Shang dynasty.

Although the shift from the equal treatment of group ancestors to the unequal treatment of individual ancestors is parallel with the overall development of social organization from egalitarian to stratified, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two progressions. Unequal treatment of dead forebears, who were identified with different social sectors, may have occurred in basically egalitarian societies while veneration of particular individual ancestors probably appeared in societies in which socio-economic stratification among community members had yet to develop.

Ancestor worship has long been recognized as a dominant religious form in ancient China. It can be traced back at least to the Shang dynasty on the basis of written documents (Keightley 1978a, b), and it is still being practiced in modern Chinese villages (e.g., Ahern 1973; Hsu 1967; Freedman 1966; Watson and Rawski 1988). Although this belief system has shaped people’s thought and behavior for thousands of years, little study has been done to search for its early forms in the prehistoric period (cf. Liu 1994: 166-236; Keightley 1985, 1991: 14-
By analyzing archaeological data from Neolithic north China, focusing on the Yellow River valley, this article explores the earliest manifestations and the development of ancestor worship ritual in the Neolithic period.

Definitions of ancestor worship

Since evidence for the practice of ancestor worship in the late Shang period in the form of oracle bone and bronze inscriptions is overwhelming, proof of its earlier existence in the Neolithic has been pursued by many scholars in China. In these studies, three phenomena are seen as being directly connected: (1) certain Neolithic period artifacts which are believed to symbolize human sexual organs, (2) the existence of male or female fertility cults, and (3) the existence of male or female ancestor worship. For example, round-shaped artifacts such as cong tubes have been thought to symbolize female fertility cults, and thus, female ancestor worship (Che 1992; Ling 1959). Similarly, the stone or pottery phalluses found at some late Neolithic sites are believed to express the veneration of male fertility power and so to be manifestations of male ancestor worship (e.g. Chang 1960; Che 1992; Guo 1982 [1931]; Ling 1959). Correspondences have also been made both between the existence of female fertility cults and matriarchal social organization on the one hand, and between male fertility cults and patriarchal society on the other. The occurrence of phallus-shaped objects in archaeological contexts has often been mentioned in the literature as an indicator of the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal societies in the Neolithic China (e.g. Shi 1983:29; Song 1983a, b).

Fertility cult and ancestor worship, which are viewed as two interchangeable concepts in these studies, may have, in fact, expressed different motivations. They should thus be dealt with separately (Chen Xingcan 1990; Song 1983a, b; Zhou 1982). For our present purpose, we first need to define the term ancestor worship from an anthropological point of view.

Based on ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and archaeological studies, it has long been recognized that deification of ancestors and religious practices devoted to deified ancestors are nearly universal phenomena (e.g., Ahern 1973, Freedman 1966, 1970, and Watson 1988 for traditional China; Fortes 1987 for Africa; Salomon 1991 for South America; Marcus and Flannery 1994, and McAnany 1994 for Mesoamerica; Antonaccio 1995 for early Greece). There are various forms of ancestor veneration in different parts of the world, and more precise definitions have been made for such practices by anthropologists who study different