

# China (Ancient China)

## Practices

Evidence of burial practices has been dated to as early as 5000 BCE. Additionally, since the beginning of recorded Chinese history (Xia Dynasty--circa 2000 BCE) ancestor worship has been a large part of Chinese religious belief.

Early burials show a remarkable amount of care and ritual with regard to burial practices. Some of the common attributes found in ancient burials where:

- Consistency of orientation and posture – the dead of the northwest were given a westerly orientation and those of the east an easterly one.
- Segregation of the dead into what appear to be kinship groupings.
- Graveside ritual offerings of liquids, pig skulls, and pig jaws.
- Collective secondary burial, in which the bones of up to 70 or 80 corpses were stripped of their flesh and reburied together.<sup>1</sup>

Ancient tombs have also been found with elaborate funerary objects set up to provide for the continuing worship of the ancestors. Tombs were arranged with the objects that people would need in the afterlife - weapons, ritual vessels, musical instruments and personal ornaments.

The first tombs where reserved for important nobility who were buried along with their servants. Jade tubes and disk where often found atop and alongside the body.

Sites also included linings of stone slabs and pebbles, and also included painted fragments suggesting that the chambers where decorated.

Funerary feast were also an important part of the rites performed with evidence of such feast going back to Neolithic times.<sup>2</sup> The most famous of these feast found at Shijiahe, Tianmen included pottery that was made specifically for the feast and then ritualistically smashed.

## Deities and Important Concepts

- Ti ("Deity Above" or "the Lord on High")  
One of the most important deities of ancient China. Ti was in charge of all the gods and spirits of the pantheon and ruled with the help of the worthy ancestors.<sup>3</sup>
- P'an Ku  
The God of Creation. Born of chaos, he was both male and female. When he died he split into a number of parts. These included the Sun, the Moon, rivers, seas, forest, rain, wind and thunder. It is said that his fleas became the ancestors of man.<sup>4</sup>
- Xi Wangmu (Queen Mother of the West)  
She cosmic forces of time and space. She ordains life and death, disease and healing, and determines the life spans of all living beings. Her palace is a meeting place for the gods and humans.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> History of Chinese Religion [http://www.religionfacts.com/chinese\\_religion/history.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/chinese_religion/history.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Social integration of religion and ritual in prehistoric China pg 719

[http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/krigbaum/6930/lee%26zhu\\_antiquity\\_2002.pdf](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/krigbaum/6930/lee%26zhu_antiquity_2002.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ancient Chinese Religion <http://blue.butler.edu/~jfmcgrat/china/religion1.htm>

<sup>4</sup> History of P'an Ku <http://www.broward.edu/studentlife/publications/panku/Pages/History-of-Pan-Ku.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> Xi Wangmu, the shamanic great goddess of China <http://www.suppressedhistories.net/goddess/xiwangmu.html>

## Modern Adaptations

- Each person brings a clay bowl or cup. A ritual feast is held with the deceased and then the cups and plates are broken and buried with the corpse. NOTE: You might want to use a small hammer to make sure that these break cleanly.
- Music is played in honor of the dead.
- Bury a musical instrument to soothe the dead. Bury a weapon to protect them. Bury an incense bowl and incense to show that the person will be continued to be honored. Bury a bit of Jade to show that the person is now an honored ancestor worthy of such adornments.
- Burn a copy of a favorite piece of art so that the person can continue to enjoy and be inspired by it.
- Glue a picture of Xi Wangmu to the back of a bronze mirror and bury it with the deceased.
- Speak of how an ancestor's altar will be created to honor the deceased.

## Sample Readings

### *Poem calling back the soul of the dead, 3rd century BC (300 BC)*<sup>6</sup>

O Soul, go not to the West  
Where level wastes of sand stretch on and on;  
And demons rage, swine-headed, hairy-skinned,  
With bulging eyes;  
Who in wild laughter gnash projecting fangs.  
O Soul, go not to the West  
Where many perils wait!  
O Soul, come back to idleness and peace.  
In quietude enjoy  
The lands of Jing and Chu.  
There work your will and follow your desire  
Till sorrow is forgot,  
And carelessness shall bring you length of days.  
O Soul, come back to joys beyond all telling!

## Resources

- Ancient China: Tombs and ancestors  
<http://www.ancientchina.co.uk/tombs/index.html>
- History of Chinese Religion  
[http://www.religionfacts.com/chinese\\_religion/history.htm](http://www.religionfacts.com/chinese_religion/history.htm)
- Food and Chinese Funeral Practices  
<http://www.flavorandfortune.com/dataaccess/article.php?ID=607>

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<sup>6</sup> Burial customs in China <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/b/burial-customs-china/>