

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN CHINESE SOCIETY IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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Introduction

One of the characteristics of Chinese culture is the practice of ancestor worship conducted in front of the family altar at homes, Chinese associations and at Chinese tombs (Freedman 1979). It is not merely known and practiced by Chinese in China, but also by the Chinese who live outside China (Clark 2000: 273-295). More than mere rituals, these activities could be recognized as one of the Chinese family institutions that function to unite family members (Yang 1970:29). The family members who are united are not only those who are still alive, but also those who are already dead. Although ancestor worship is also a common form of ritual activity found amongst the Chinese in Sarawak, it is a somewhat neglected area of research. Moreover, it is often regarded as a traditional Chinese custom inherited from China which continues to be practiced by the Chinese outside China (Clark 2000: 273-295). However, Chinese ancestor worship practiced outside China is usually influenced by local cultures.

This paper will discuss ancestor worship practices amongst Malaysian Chinese, particularly Sarawak Chinese. This study will look into how the Chinese of Sarawak practice and interpret the ancestor worship rituals, materials or symbols used and how ancestor worship functions in Chinese family life. This paper will also describe how ancestor worship not only functions as a family ritual but also as a means to unite family members who are still alive with their dead ancestors. It is also the time to offer gifts and counter-offer gifts between family members and their ancestors. This study focuses on the Chinese ancestor worship in Sarawak, particularly the rituals related to Chinese ancestor worship such as death rituals or the ceremony of death, *Ching Ming Jie* (Chinese tomb ritual), *Zhong Yuan Jie* (Hungry Ghosts' ritual) and the family shrine ritual in homes.

There are many reasons why research on Chinese ancestral worship outside China or in Sarawak is important. *First*, there have been many studies on Chinese cultures by experts such as Freedman (1958), Jochim (1986), Ahern (1973), and Bell (1992), but they did not focus on ancestor worship and they are limited to Chinese life and culture in China and Taiwan. Ancestor worship has played important roles in the lives of Chinese people in China and outside China as well. Most Chinese believe that their ancestors' souls still observe and guide them in their present lives. *Secondly*, from sociological and anthropological

perspectives, ancestor worship by Chinese people not only benefits themselves, but others outside their families as well.

Ancestor Worship as Ritual and Belief in the After Life

Ancestor worship has been the subject of some attention in 19th-and early 20th-century anthropology. For example, Tylor (1871) gives ancestor worship an important place in his Animistic theory of the origin of religion. In his theory, Tylor explains that at the earliest level of mankind's religious evolution, people believed that spirits lived around them or around their residences. The spirits have the power to influence the affairs of the living and have an important place in man's life. In addition, the spirits became worship objects to which the humans offered rituals, prayers, food, drink, and other ritual materials.

Similar to Tylor, British sociologist Herbert Spencer (1873) also proposed a theory of the origin of human religions related to the spirits. In his theory, he holds that ancestor worship is present in the oldest religions in the world. They worshiped the spirits and their ancestors. Those spirits came from the human souls who had died, particularly from their ancestor's souls. He also maintains that ancestor worship is based on the belief that the spirits of the dead have the power to influence the affairs of the living. Ancestors are respected and remembered by the members of the family, clans, and tribes. Ancestral spirits that are worshiped also vary in distance of time from the living. In some societies, only the spirits of the recently deceased are worshiped, while in others, all ancestors are included.

The belief that the spirits of the dead have the power to influence the affairs of the living is not only found in Tylor and Spencer, but also in Willmott (1960: 199) who believes that a person's spirit after death lives on in a world of spirits. Beliefs about this afterlife vary from indefinite notions of an eternal but shadowy existence to the very concrete pictures of a series of courts of justice and diabolical torture and chambers for the condemned. Whatever the concept of life in the hereafter may be, however, it is assumed that the welfare and happiness of the spirits of the dead depend very much upon the attentions of the living. People who carry such a belief feel a strong obligation to their ancestors and this obligation is fulfilled partly by the regular carrying out of the prescribed ritual duties of ancestor worship.

During the 19th century, anthropological theorists such as Edward Burnett Tylor, and Herbert Spencer accepted ancestor worship as the first inchoate religion and not as merely one phase. They assumed that the primitive people being observed, savages as they were called, were

unable to comprehend the unseen. Furthermore, they assumed that the dead were seen as something unnatural, uncanny, to be feared and conciliated. Further investigation, however, has shown that primitives do recognize the dead but distinguish between their own kinsmen, who are commonly thought to have reciprocated friendship, and those who are to be feared. Ghosts are not the ancestral dead but identities that are impersonal, unidentifiable, unpredictable, inimical, or malignant. Such acts as ridding houses of the spirits of the dead or foiling ghosts are common but they are magical acts rather than rites of worship and reverence.

The Chinese ethnic group may be called an ancestor-worshipping group because most of them still maintain the Chinese tradition, particularly the ancestor worship practices. According to Nio Joe Lan (1961: 89), ancestor worship is not only an axis in Chinese society but also in Eastern society where ancestor worship is also practiced. She also claims that the Westerners cannot free themselves from ancestor worship. People who visit the graves of loved ones and decorate the graves with all kinds of flowers may also be defined as ancestor worshippers (1961: 89). Japanese society (Smith 1974), the Tallensi in Africa (1959), the Bukit people in the hinterland of South Kalimantan-Indonesia (Radam 2001) and others also practice ancestor worship in their daily lives. However, the practices of ancestor worship of every ethnic group in the world are different from each other due to differences in culture and belief.

The practice of filial piety in Chinese society can also be considered as a form of ancestor worship. Indeed, it is the basis of ancestor worship. According to Evelyn Lip (1981:42) and McCreery (2000: 286), most Chinese believe in the practice of filial piety. They are expected to provide for their parents while they are alive and to pray to them and look after their graves when they die. The Chinese call this practice *sheng yang si zang* or “alive feed, dead bury”.

In Chinese society, ancestor worship is not only practiced at the homes of Chinese families, but also outside their houses, particularly at Chinese temples and tombs. In addition, ancestor worship may also be carried out in houses of worship or small temples or “ash houses”, at funeral rituals, at certain festivals such as during the Chinese New Year or when members of the family pass away. Ancestor worship outside the house always follows similar patterns or rules as those practiced at home. These regulations are oriented toward their kinship system, a patrilineal kinship system following the father's line of descent. Freedman (1970:164) points out that in Chinese culture, the oldest son has an important role in the kinship system as he is responsible for the ancestor worship tradition in family life.

Based on the above explanation, I felt it necessary to carry out research on ancestor worship among the Chinese in Sarawak. Most of the Chinese people in Sarawak, particularly in

Kuching, Serian and Samarahan districts, still practice ancestor worship. For the Chinese community in Sarawak, there are three rituals related to ancestor worship -- death rituals, Ching Ming (Chinese tomb ritual) and Hungry Ghost ritual. The death ritual is conducted by the Chinese when one of their family members passed away. Ching Ming and Hungry Ghost are rituals conducted annually by the Chinese from one generation to another. This study focus on these rituals related to ancestor worship and its meanings in daily life.

In order to see and understand the ancestor worship practices among the Chinese in Sarawak, I also use Marsel Mauss' (1967) reciprocity theory as an approach in the research. According to Mauss, gift and counter gift or reciprocity is not only practiced within economic parameters, such as within archaic society, but also within other aspects of human life. In this paper, I would like to show that gift and counter gift not only exists as an economic relationship but also in the Chinese ancestor worship practices in Sarawak, Malaysia.

The collection of data for this project was done in a nine-month period in 2006-2007 during my fieldwork in Kuching, Samarahan and Serian, as part of a research project funded by the Asian Scholarship Foundation (ASF). Research was carried out within the framework provided by a participant-observation methodology. Data was collected through interviews carried out through daily interaction with ethnic Chinese in Sarawak, along with formal and non-formal interviews with individuals identified as key informants. Informants were taken from the Chinese who are experts in Chinese cultures and traditional Chinese religions, such as Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist monks, the Chinese temple workers, Chinese associations and Chinese burial associations, Christian Chinese, university students, lecturers, professionals and business-based low and middle-class Chinese.

Ancestor Worship in the Death Ceremony

Evelyn Lip states that ancestor worship begins the moment a family member dies with the funeral rites and the burial ceremony. Normally, the death ritual continues until the 49th day after death. The family members then visit their ancestor's tomb on the 100th day and one year after burial. The ritual after burial can be described as a memorial ritual or ancestor memorial. The ceremony of death or burial ritual is an important part of Chinese social and religious life, particularly for ancestor worship. In this ritual, ancestor worship is performed when the deceased is still in house. In the house or land where such reverence is displayed to the departed soul, the religious and customary rites connected with the dead are of primary importance to the Chinese community. However, these ceremonies vary amongst different Chinese communities. For example, the ceremony of death varies between Chinese clans such as Hakka, Teochiu, Hokkien,

and Cantonese. This is due to the fact that the ceremonies of death or funeral rituals are part of folk and oral religion without any fixed set of dogmas, doctrines or a powerful priesthood. These ceremonies are a syncretic fusion drawn from many religious traditions including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, local religions, and indigenous beliefs. Despite the variations, however, there is a standard set of ritual behaviors performed by the different clans.

Ancestor worship in Chinese society usually starts with the death of one of the family members -- such as father, mother, grandmother and grandfather -- and as soon as his or her family performs the rituals to respect or worship the corpse. In the case of Sarawak Chinese, as soon as a family member dies, the other family members contact a Taoist or Buddhist monk for instructions on what they have to do relating to the performance of rituals at the house and at the graveyard. This is to ensure that the deceased will find no obstacle in the other world. According to my informants, an astrologer or monk has an important role as a mediator between the family and the parent who has died. An astrologer is believed by the Chinese to be an expert on rituals and one who knows exactly what their parent needs to live in the other world. According to the same Chinese monk in Sarawak, the deceased are still recognized as persons with needs just like the living. Hakka (*Kejia*) Chinese in Sarawak believe that life in the other world is not different from the real world and therefore, the Chinese provide their ancestors with materials they may need in the other world. In order to know this, the family members have to use a Taoist or Confucius monk. They have an important role in the Chinese community. Not only are they needed in rituals, they also serve as mediators between the family members and the ancestors. The services provided by the monks are paid for by the family members who use their services.

The dead-body or corpse is washed with water or a wet cloth by someone from the family of the deceased. Sometimes, the family calls a Taoist, Confucian, or Buddhist priest to wash the body. After the body of the dead person is washed, it is dressed in the best clothing of deceased. If the deceased liked to wear a hat in his lifetime, then he is most likely to wear one as well in death.

After the corpse is cleaned with water and dressed in the best clothing of deceased, it is laid down on a mattress and covered with a white mosquito net. A Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist priest is then engaged to carry out various traditional ceremonies for the corpse. Before the corpse is placed in the coffin, the priest will call upon the spirit of the deceased to depart for the next world and a horoscope is cast to find out whether the spirit will visit the family and what form the spirit will take in the next world. The deceased is then placed in the coffin together with a few valuables for use in the next world. Before the coffin is completely sealed, the children of the deceased will give a ceremonial last supper for the deceased. This last supper is the last ceremony before the family and helpers bring the deceased to the graveyard. Other ceremonies

take place when the children or family bring the deceased to the grave (Chang 1993; Ahern 1973). Sometimes these rituals are done at the house and sometimes at the *Yayasan Kematian* (the house of the Chinese death foundation or burial association).

Family members perform more rituals when the corpse is lowered into the grave dug by a group of helpers a day before the burial ceremony. Before covering the coffin with earth, the monk or priest invites the relatives and the family to satisfy themselves of its right alignment and suitability. While reciting incantations in the Hakka (*Kejia*) language or in another local Chinese language, the monk takes rice and coins from a small sack and sprays these over the mourners. Whatever rice and coins collected is brought back by the mourners for safekeeping. After paying their last respects, each member of the family throws a handful of earth into the coffin. Before leaving, the grave is filled with earth by the helpers. The mourners are warned not to call anybody by name and not to look back toward the grave while leaving the cemetery. If anyone breaks the rule, the evil spirit around may do harm to the person whose name is mentioned and the departed spirit may disturb the one who looks back. Since the deceased is departing for the other world, it is advisable that the soul not prolong its stay in the human world.

The completion of the funeral rites marks the transformation of the deceased into an ancestor of the family. The picture of the deceased along with the ashes from the incense sticks are taken home and placed on the ancestral altar. A memorial service is held and an ancestral shrine receives the spirit tablet of the deceased on which is written the name, age and place of birth of the deceased. Normally, the memorial service is held each week after the death of the deceased until the seventh week. After the 100th day, the last memorial service is held after which all lanterns and everything used for the service are burnt, including the sack clothing worn by the children and other family members. A tablet similar to the one put up at the ancestral shrine will eventually be put up at the tomb when their family has erected it. The tomb is normally well looked after by the children of the deceased on each anniversary of his death and also during the Ching Ming (lantern) and Hungry Ghost festivals.

For the Chinese, the death ritual may also be seen as a deep expression of filial piety, *xiao*, from the family members to the deceased or their ancestors. We may say that it is not merely the last respects from the family members to their ancestors but may be seen as an even deeper form of respect. As I found among the Chinese families in Sarawak when one of their family members dies and the corpse is still at the house, the family members will take care of the corpse all day and night by conducting the ritual burning of paper money beside the corpse. Moreover, all of the family members weep as they carry the corpse to the grave. According to ancient Chinese culture, by weeping for the corpse, the family members hope it will live again. The concept of the death ritual as an expression of filial piety can be found in Confucius'

analects (McCreery, in Scupin 2000: 286). Confucius dictates that the dead should be buried according to *li* and that offerings should be made according to *li*. *Li* means “ritual” or “ceremonial”; more broadly it means “propriety,” following proper forms of behavior.

I found that Chinese death rituals could cost a lot of money because the ritual may run from 7 up to 10 days and nights. The money is not only used to buy materials for the rituals and the coffin, but also for the monk’s fee and to buy the land for the tomb. In the Chinese culture of Sarawak, the family members are not allowed to request discounts when buying the coffin and the land for the grave because doing so may result in a bad influence on them. This belief increases the cost of the death ritual. Although the family may collect donations from the guests, close family members, friends and visitors when the corpse is still in the house, all of it must be used for the death ritual procession. For a rich man, the ritual is conducted luxuriously so as not to erode the family’s prestige in society. Some of my informants said that as the death ritual is a form of last respect to their ancestor and it then has to be luxurious. Chinese Associations often offer assistance to the poorer Chinese families to cover the cost of burial and other ritual materials. Some of my informants claimed that when they died they would rather be cremated and have the ashes thrown into the sea rather than be buried as the cost is very expensive. By avoiding burial altogether their family members would avoid financial difficulty upon their death.

Ancestor worship in Ching Ming Festival

The literal meaning of Ching Ming is “clear” and “bright”. This festival is named after the fifth of the Twenty-Four Chinese Solar Terms, which are semi-monthly periods of the Chinese popular calendar, connecting the day on which the sun enters the first and fifteenth zodiacal signs. The Ching Ming festival always falls one hundred and six days after the winter solstice and usually falls on the beginning of April in the Gregorian calendar. Although many Westerners like to think of the Ching Ming festival as corresponding to the Christian Easter celebrations, it is in actual fact a day set aside for ancestor worship (Dorothy Lo & Leon Comber 1963). As the Chinese people in China and other overseas Chinese outside China, the Chinese in Sarawak also conduct the third month (according to Chinese Calendar) or Ching Ming ritual also known as the Chinese tomb festival. They visit their ancestors’ tombs on the occasion of the Ching Ming festival (or a day or so before, according to their convenience -- usually they choose free days, such as Saturday and Monday), to sweep the graves (*sao mu*), offer food, drink (wine and tie), pig, chicken, fish, fruit, and other materials needed by the ancestors in other world. They hope that by offering some food, drink and other materials, the ancestors will be happy in the other world and they, in turn, will get lucky in this world.

The Ching Ming festival is not only a place for ancestor worship but also a place for family members to meet one another and indulge in recreational activities for the family. I found that after they finished ancestor worship, some of them went to restaurants to eat together or enjoyed being with other family members in other recreational places. Some Chinese still use *feng shui* (geomancy) to choose good days for visiting their ancestors' tombs. By choosing good days, the family members who are still alive may get lucky. If the family members have the family altar at home, they also perform ancestor worship there.

If there are family members who live far from their family's tomb and are unable to go home to perform ancestor worship, they will send money for the Ching Ming ritual through other family members who return home for the festival. If they have money and time, they go home and perform ancestor worship before the ancestors' tombs themselves. This tradition is also found in West Kalimantan and other places in Indonesia. I found that the Christian Chinese in Sarawak also visit their family tombs during the Ching Ming festival. They visit the tombs, offer fresh flowers at their ancestors' graves and perform prayers according to the Christian tradition. They in effect combine the Chinese and Western traditions of ancestor worship. Some of my Christian Chinese informants do not recognize the importance of Ching Ming because they regard it as the worship of souls prohibited by Christianity. Some others, however, recognize its importance as a link to their ancestral and cultural traditions.

Ancestor Worship in The Hungry Ghost Festival

The Hungry Ghost festival is held on the seventh month of the Chinese calendar or in August in the Western calendar. According to S. L. Hii (2004), the Hungry Ghost festival is celebrated by the Chinese community. It normally begins at the end of August until September, which is the seventh month of the Chinese calendar (Hokkien people called it *chik nguay pua*, or the seventh and a half month). According to Chinese belief, at this time, the "Gates of Hell" are opened and the dead return to visit their living relatives. The Chinese feel that they have to satisfy the imprisoned and hungry ghosts in order to get good fortune. This festival is celebrated on the 15th day of the 7th Lunar month. During this celebration, the Chinese prepare the food, drink and other offerings for the hungry ghosts from hell.

Believers offer food like chicken, buns, steam muffins, fruits, money, and ghost paper to the ghosts so they will not cause havoc or try to harm people. This is a kind of peace offering because when in hell it is believed that their appetite is locked and they are only able to eat

during this time. Sometimes, temple guardians organize Chinese operas late at night as entertainment for the ghosts which tourists can also watch. This kind of show can normally be watched during the hungry ghost festival at Carpenter Street, Kuching. It is free of charge. People burn joss paper and recite prayers and small flags along the road guide the ghosts to where they should go. People are advised not to stay out too late, however, to avoid any bad encounters with the ghosts.

In some cases, Chinese families and communities in Sarawak also hold special entertainments and great banquets complete with stage performances are held in honor of their ancestors. Special offerings are also made in the form of replica paper money and other earthly possessions that are then burned in a ritual.

Some Chinese in Sarawak say that the hungry ghost festival is a ritual for worshipping ghosts and not for ancestors, but some other say that the festival is not only for worshipping the hungry ghosts, but also for ancestors. Particularly, it is a feast for commemorating the souls of deceased members of the family. On this festival, many of the Hakka (*Kejia*) people visit their family tombs as they do during the Ching Ming festival to perform rites of ancestor worship. Other Chinese people, such as the Hokkian, Teochiu, and Hainan do not visit their ancestors' tombs but conduct the ritual of the hungry ghost in front of Chinese temples and at the roadsides. They do not see this festival as a venue for ancestor worship but for ghost worship.

I found that the Chinese of Sarawak also recognize the hungry ghost festival as good days for giving money and other necessities to the poor men from some ethnic groups. They believe that this day is not only for helping hungry ghosts from the hills but also for helping the living poor around them. Many of my informants said that the Hungry Ghost Festival is not only for helping hungry ghosts but also for helping the poor. They believe that by helping poor people they will get good fortune in the future. Many Chinese in Sarawak collect money, rice, and other daily needs from the rich to be given to the poor. These goods are usually collected in and by Chinese temples, Chinese associations and other Chinese organizations. They wait for the good days to provide them to the poor of various ethnicities. These goods are sometimes distributed after the hungry ghost festival or on other auspicious days. This new tradition not only exists among the Malaysian Chinese but also among the Indonesian Chinese.

Conclusion

Funeral rituals in the Chinese community could be viewed as part of ancestor worship rituals because within these rituals could be found ancestor worship practices conducted by the family members. It could also be viewed as an important part of Chinese religious and family life. Funeral rituals, rituals before the deceased is brought to the grave, and rituals after the funeral including annual rituals could all be viewed as an important part of Chinese ancestor worship. We could also say that the cult of the dead in Chinese society is an important part of ancestor worship because it is a form of filial piety from the family members to their ancestors. However, in the Chinese community, there is no ancestor worship without death. The Chinese society in Sarawak conducts the cult of the dead not only as religious ritual but also as a means and venue for family unity. Family members not only worship their ancestral spirits but also find time to talk about economic and political matters within the family. The wellbeing of the ancestors in their life after death also means the wellbeing of the family members who are still alive.

Funeral rituals or the ceremonies of death of the Chinese community in Sarawak, as well as the Ching Ming and Hungry Ghost festivals, can be seen as rituals related to Chinese religious practices and their ancestor worship rituals. These rituals are not only seen as the enactment of Chinese tradition outside China but also function as a mediator between the family as worshiper and the spirit of the deceased as worshiped. Within this ritual, family members still alive in the real world can send food, drink, paper money, and other materials to their ancestors in the other world. At the same time, the living family members may request assistance, protection, and good fortune in business from their ancestors. These practices can be viewed as reciprocity between the family members who are still living in the real world and their ancestors who now live elsewhere. In the Chinese ancestor worship practices in Sarawak, we may say that the gift or reciprocity theory from Mauss (1967) not only exists as an economic practice or within an economic relationship as he has seen in archaic society but also exists in Chinese ancestor worship, especially in Sarawak. In Chinese ancestor worship practices in Sarawak, I found the family members offering food, drink and other materials needed by their ancestors in other world and they also hope their ancestors would help and protect them in this real world.

The Chinese of Sarawak not only worship their ancestors at their homes and graves, but also worship the souls and gods at temples and other places. The Chinese of Sarawak not only worship their ancestors at the wooden tablets as in Chinese tradition in China (Freedman 1970), but most of them visit their ancestors' graves during the Ching Ming and Hungry Ghost festivals. They do not only worship their ancestors at their tombs, offering some food, drink and other

materials needed by the ancestors, but also worship *Tuti* (earth god) to protect their family tombs from bad ghosts.

Furthermore, the Ching Ming and Hungry Ghost festivals as practiced by Malaysian Chinese, particularly in Sarawak also serve to strengthen the local economy. For example, during *Cing Ming Jie* (Chinese Tomb Festival) and the Hungry Ghost festival, the Malaysian Chinese who work and live outside Sarawak return to Sarawak where they were born or where their parents are buried only to worship their ancestors at their tombs. During these festivals, people who sell prayer supplies such as incenses stick (*hio*), candles, fruits, chicken, pork, oranges, apples and other fruits, and old traditional paper money or Hell Bank notes earn a lot of profit. In addition, airlines, bus companies, and hotels make a tidy profit from the Chinese festivals. Chinese ancestor worship rituals are not only for the Chinese family members but also gives economic benefits for others from the other ethnic groups in Sarawak Malaysia.

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