

## CHAPTER 3

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### *The Family: Kindred and Ancestors*

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The central importance of the family is no doubt a specific distinguishing characteristic of Chinese society, and the function of the ancestral cult is certainly a specific distinguishing characteristic of the Chinese family. The family is, of course, important in Western religion, with its sacrament of marriage, its commandment to honor the parents, and its duty to raise the children in the true faith. But the religious character of the Chinese family goes far beyond these aspects. This character, developing out of the so-called ancestor worship, makes religion in China more a family matter than an individual choice. *Family religion is basic; individual and communal religion are secondary.* For this reason we shall give prior consideration to this familial cult.

#### **CENTRAL IMPORTANCE OF THE ANCESTRAL CULT IN CHINESE CULTURE**

Ancestor worship is not restricted to the Chinese, but whereas it has usually been considered a feature of primitive cultures, in China it has been the very warp of a high culture throughout millennia. There is evidence of the centrality of the family cult as far back as the Shang or Yin dynasty before 1000 BCE. Such findings include tombs with a rich content of artifacts, the foundations of royal palaces, and much else. History, meaning the evidence given by written documents, starts with this material, in the form of inscribed bronze ritual vessels and **oracle bones**. It is these oracle bones that show us most clearly how the religious system of the most ancient age was based on ancestor worship.

The oracle bones were instruments of divination. The diviner smoothed off the surface of tortoiseshell or cattle scapula and bored into this surface a series of concave depressions. He then scratched onto the reverse surface a question the king wished to put to the supernatural

powers. Touching a red-hot poker to the cavity beside the inscribed question, the diviner produced cracks in the bone, which he then interpreted as the response. The answer was noted down, and confirmation that the answer had been correct was often added later by way of maintaining the credibility of the oracle.

These bones with their writing have been of the utmost value to historians in revealing some facets of the ancient culture. But the question that particularly concerns us is the identity of the "supernatural powers" to whom the questions were addressed. In the words of Tung Tso-pin, a leading authority on the subject, "The one hundred thousand pieces of oracle bones and shells contain little but the questions the reverential Yin kings put to their ancestors and the answers in the form of cracks. . . ."1 Tung concluded, after more than thirty years of study of these bones and shells and all the other archaeological evidence, that despite their other religious beliefs "it was still ancestor-worship that held the most important position in the religious life of the Yin people. 'To serve the dead as if they were living'—we can say that the piety of the Yin people did reach that degree."<2 And again, "almost all the elaborate religious rituals of the Yin dynasty were meant for the ancestors."<3

Thus, we see that the basic importance of ancestor worship in Chinese religion, on which all modern observers have agreed, has been characteristic since the most remote past. But ancestor worship is not merely the ritual observances of individuals. It is rather the root from which grows the trunk of the lineage tree with its many family branches. In order to grasp the meaning of ancestor worship, we shall need to understand the lineage and family system to which it has given rise.

### THE LINEAGE AND ITS FAMILIES AS A RELIGIOUS CORPORATION

The Chinese word we have rendered as lineage is *tsu*. *Tsu* refers to the male descendants of a common ancestor, bearing the same surname, and including their wives and children.\* Because in the course of several generations this will become a very large group, the *tsu* will naturally separate into sublineages and their constituent families who may live in the same vicinity or spread apart, according to circumstances.

Since the *tsu* is patrilineal, the families of wives are excluded. A woman marries into her husband's lineage, and her relationship with her father's lineage becomes minimal. Since ancient times the countryside of China has been dotted with villages, with a market town or city here and there.

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\*We ignore the complexities of the subject and give the simplest possible definition. One should be aware, however, that historically many changes have taken place in the family system and that there are innumerable local variations on the system and its religious components.

Many of these villages, even today, are in fact lineage villages whose families live in separate compounds but close together. Brides for the village's boys are obtained from neighboring villages, or perhaps from one particular village, while the girls are in turn sent to those villages in marriage. The term for the woman's lineage is *outside-tsu*, or *outside relatives*.

The marked difference between the Chinese and Western systems is thus the vital role of the lineage in the former. Whereas in the West the nuclear families typically split off from the partrilineal stem, which was therefore biologically but not socially senior, in China the families typically remained attached to their lineage and thus organically parts of a larger functioning whole. The lineage with its families might be either more or less cohesive, depending on various economic and social factors. But in any case the reality of the lineage corporation was effectively symbolized by the religious cult of the common ancestors—particularly the founding ancestor.

The origins of this corporation are lost in antiquity, but in the ritual codes written several centuries before the beginning of the common era, we have the detailed outline of its structure and functioning. This structure places each individual in a specified position with regard to all others according to generation and collateral distance. These relative positions are not only indicated by kinship terms but are strikingly exemplified in the degrees of mourning. The closer the relationship, the more the ceremonial grief required. Thus, for example, a man wore the coarsest sackcloth for the longest time (nominally three years, but actually somewhat over two) in mourning for his parents, as did a wife for her husband and her husband's parents; a less primitive dress would be worn for only nine months for such relatives as a married aunt, a first cousin, or (by a wife) for her husband's grandparents.

The elaborate mourning rites and the wearing of mourning garments for long periods of time served to renew the lineage ties, especially when life expectancy was short and deaths in an average *tsu* were frequent. Furthermore, the ultimate reunion of the kinsmen in the ancestral temple served to confirm lineage solidarity. The ancestral temple was the home of the tablets inhabited by the spirits of all the lineage's deceased members. Here the souls of the ancestors were visibly personified in the rows of wooden tablets standing in order according to their respective generations and relationships on shelves under the tablet of the High Ancestor of the lineage. Periodically all available members of the lineage would assemble in the temple to celebrate their communal sacrifices to their forebears. Genealogical records, kept sometimes for many centuries, as well as "family instructions" written by leading personalities, were additional instruments for maintaining the in-group feeling of the lineage.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the Chinese State reinforced the institution of the *tsu* and its constituent families by leaving in the hands of its elders all governmental authority, except that unavoidably the responsibility of the State, and by backing up with criminal law (*fa*) the family lineage prescriptions for proper conduct (*li*). It is to these *li* that we now turn for further understanding of the religious character of the Chinese family.

RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL FUNCTIONS OF *LI*

The word *li* is of broad connotation, extending from the most weighty religious ceremonies to the trivialities of daily etiquette. It means ritually proper deportment in all social circumstances. The graph with which it is written is composed of two parts, a signification indicating communication with the supernatural and an additional element that is originally a pictograph of a sacrificial vessel containing some object. There could hardly be a more explicit indication of the religious basis for proper social behavior. We know little of the *li* of the Shang or Yin age, but from the succeeding Chou dynasty we have voluminous records. In the earlier centuries of the period, the aristocratic rulers of the feudal states were apparently governed by an elaborate code resembling the chivalric codes of the European knights. At every court there were officials whose expert knowledge of the code was essential to the rulers. Master K'ung himself (551-479 BCE) was an authority on *li*, and the school that developed to spread his teachings laid great stress on this subject.

The *li* were not originally of universal application, for in the society of Chou China there was a sharp distinction between nobility and commoners. Just as in feudal Europe, the former supposedly behaved in accordance with the unwritten principles of noblesse oblige, but the latter were subject to harsh punishments. In the Chinese phrase, the *li* did not extend to the commoners, and punishments did not extend to the nobles. But as the feudal system disintegrated during the latter half of Chou and gave way to what was in effect a system of rival, independent states, the political conditions produced a social mobility unfavorable to the survival of an aristocratic caste. By the Han dynasty, in the second century BCE, when the polity was finally established in its imperial form, we may say there was a general extension of both *li* and *fa*: Much of the former became accepted throughout the Chinese society, while the abolition of the hereditary nobility meant the applicability of the criminal law to all persons with little distinction. (In later times the new aristocracy of the Literati held a privileged position in law, but they could at any time be reduced to commoner status for due cause.)

In "The Canon of the Literati" in Appendix 1 will be found a brief description of the works dealing specifically with *li*. Like the Torah of Judaism, these writings on the one hand represent the compilers' understanding of the ways of the ancients, and on the other have served as the living law for all subsequent generations.<sup>5</sup> If to modern eyes much of this material is incredibly hairsplitting, we must remember that it is our age that is exceptional in its freedom of thought and behavior. In any case, there was a sound rationale in the background of these codes:

They are the rules of propriety [*li*] that furnish the means of determining (the observances towards) relatives, as near and remote; of settling points which may cause suspicion or doubt; of distinguishing where there should be agreement, and where difference; and of making clear what is right and what is wrong. . . . To cultivate one's person and fulfil one's words is called good conduct. When the conduct is (thus) ordered, and

the words are accordant with the (right) course, we have the substance of the rules of propriety. . . .

The parrot can speak, and yet is nothing more than a bird; the ape can speak, and yet is nothing more than a beast. Here now is a man who observes no rules of propriety; is not his heart that of a beast? . . . Therefore, when the sages arose, they framed the rules of propriety in order to teach men, and cause them, by their possession of them, to make a distinction between themselves and brutes.<sup>6</sup>

The profound influence of *li* as seen by the codifiers is clearly set forth in the following:

In the right government of a state, the Rules of Propriety serve the same purpose as the steelyard in determining what is light and what is heavy; or as the carpenter's line in determining what is crooked and what is straight. . . . When a superior man (conducts the government of his state) with a discriminating attention to these rules, he cannot be imposed on by traitors and imposters.

Hence he who has an exalted idea of the rules, and guides his conduct by them, is called by us a mannerly gentleman, and he who has no such exalted idea, and does not guide his conduct by the rules, is called by us one of the unmannerly people. These rules (set forth) the way of reverence and courtesy; and therefore when the services in the ancestral temple are performed according to them, there is reverence; when they are observed in the court, the noble and the mean have their proper positions; when the family is regulated by them, there is affection between father and son, and harmony among brothers; and when they are honoured in the country districts and villages, there is the proper order between old and young.<sup>7</sup>

The functional purpose of the *li* so well expressed in these passages is fully borne out in the numberless rules actually found in the code: that is, in functional terms they serve primarily to demarcate the senior from the junior, the superior from the inferior. Whether it was the social system in the large, or the small but complete system of the *tsu* and its families, the underlying principle was hierarchical. This was so whether the *li* dealt with the religious or the secular aspect:

The son of Heaven [the king] sacrifices (or presents oblations) to Heaven and Earth; to the (spirits presiding over the) four quarters; to (the spirits of) the hills and rivers; and offers the five sacrifices of the house—all in the course of the year. The feudal princes present oblations, each to (the spirit presiding over) his own quarter; to (the spirits of) its hills and rivers; and offer the five sacrifices of the house—all in the course of the year. Great officers present the oblations of the five sacrifices of the house—all in the course of the year. (Other) officers present oblations to their ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

On a less exalted plane:

He who pares a melon for the son of Heaven should divide it into four parts and then into eight, and cover them with a napkin of fine linen. For the ruler of a state, he should divide it into four parts, and cover them

with a coarse napkin. To a great officer he should (present the four parts) uncovered. An inferior officer should receive it (simply) with the stalk cut away. A common man will deal with it with his teeth.<sup>9</sup>

Although the feudal order, in which such rules were the most effective means of reiterating rank, disappeared after Chou times, the spirit and even much of the substance of the codes continued in effect. Anyone with experience of social life among the Chinese today will recognize the following pattern of courtesy:

Whenever (a host has received and) is entering with a guest, at every door he should give place to him. When the guest arrives at the innermost door (or that leading to the feast-room) the host will ask to be allowed to enter first and arrange the mats. Having done this, he will come out to receive the guest, who will refuse firmly (to enter first). The host having made a low bow to him, they will enter (together). When they have entered the door, the host moves to the right, and the guest to the left, the former going to the steps on the east, and the latter to those on the west. If the guest be of the lower rank, he goes to the steps of the host (as if to follow him up them). The host firmly declines this, and he returns to the other steps on the west. They then offer to each other the precedence in going up, but the host commences first, followed (immediately) by the other. They bring their feet together on every step, thus ascending by successive paces. He who ascends by the steps on the east should move his right foot first, and the other at the western steps his left foot.<sup>10</sup>

Recognizing that the *li* served as the means of emphasizing status in the society, we may ask why such a system should have been developed in the first place, and once developed, why it was successful—that is, accepted by the society for ages. As in every society, the whole code of behavior rested on an ideal. The ideal in China was called *hsiao*, which is commonly rendered as “filial piety.” As with other fundamental concepts of a culture, simple translation cannot fill out the rich range of meanings in this term, and we must study it in some detail.

### **HSIAO: THE MOTIVATING IDEAL**

The written symbol for *hsiao* (filiality) is as clear in its significance as is the graph for *li*: It consists of the graph for old, supported by the graph for son placed underneath. There could be no simpler nor yet more adequate summary of the ideal of *hsiao*. In amplification we may adduce a few of the countless statements on the subject to be found in the pages of the Literati Canon.

From the sayings of Master K'ung: In reply to a question about what *hsiao* is, “The Master said, ‘While [the parents] are living, serve them with *li*; when they die, bury them with *li*; sacrifice to them with *li*’” (*Analects* II.5.3). From the sayings of Master Mêng, the authority second only to Master K'ung: “Master Mêng said, ‘Which is the greatest duty? Duty to parents is the greatest. . . . Among our many duties, the duty of serving the parents is fundamental . . .’” (*Master Mêng* IVA.19.1.2).

From the *Hsiao Ching* (see Appendix 1), a work that puts into the mouth of Master K'ung a systematic discussion of the subject, a famous passage:

The Master said, "Filiality is the root of virtue, and that from which civilization derives. . . . The body, the hair and skin are received from our parents, and we dare not injure them: this is the beginning of filiality. [We should] establish ourselves in the practice of the true Way, making a name for ourselves for future generations, and thereby bringing glory to our parents: this is the end of filiality. Filiality begins with the serving of our parents, continues with the serving of our prince, and is completed with the establishing of our own character." (*Scripture of Filiality I; Hsiao Ching*)

Again, from the same work:

The Master said, "In serving his parents the filial son is as reverent as possible to them while they are living. In taking care of them he does so with all possible joy; when they are sick he is extremely anxious about them; when he buries them he is stricken with grief; when he sacrifices to them he does so with the utmost solemnity. These five [duties] being discharged in full measure, then he has been able [truly] to serve his parents." (*Scripture of Filiality X*)

And still again: "There are three thousand [offenses] meriting the five punishments, but there is no crime greater than unfiliality" (*Scripture of Filiality XI*). Lest this be thought to be merely a rhetorical statement, we mention the fact that unfilial conduct was a serious crime under the law. It was a right of parents to put an unfilial child to death, or at least to denounce him or her to the authorities for punishment prescribed in the criminal statutes. Cursing one's parents was a capital offense. We may understand the full implications of *hsiao* by noting what sorts of behavior were indictable:

The grounds for such an accusation were the prosecution or cursing of one's grandparents or parents; not living with grandparents or parents and separating one's property from theirs; failure to support one's grandparents or parents; marrying, entertaining, or ceasing to observe mourning before the end of the required mourning period; concealing a parent's death; and falsely announcing a grandparent's or parent's death. . . . However, if a parent prosecuted a child as unfilial on other grounds, the authorities would not reject the case for this reason.<sup>11</sup>

*Hsiao* is thus the basis of the family's government, the cardinal virtue of the good person, and the most powerful force operating to maintain the orderliness of society required by the State. Now let us see what *hsiao* meant in practice.

Marriage is in all cultures rationalized as an institution for the production and nurturing of children. But whereas we tend to think of this in terms of the future of humanity—or at least the future of our own line—the Chinese tended to think of it as the most important requirement for the support of the older generation and the generations that had already passed away. The duty of Chinese children was theoretically to devote themselves without reservation to the welfare of their parents. The duty of a son's wife

was to share in this complete devotion to her husband's parents. The personal feelings of the son and his wife were hardly taken into account. The codes of *li* contained explicit instructions:

[Sons and sons' wives] should go to their parents and parents-in-law [on the first crowing of the cock]. On getting to where they are, with bated breath and gentle voice, they should ask if their clothes are (too) warm or (too) cold, whether they are ill or pained, or uncomfortable in any part; and if so, they should proceed reverently to stroke and scratch the place. They should in the same way, going before or following after, help and support their parents in quitting or entering (the apartment). In bringing in the basin for them to wash, the younger will carry the stand and the elder the water; they will beg to be allowed to pour out the water, and when the washing is concluded, they will hand the towel. They will ask whether they want anything, and then respectfully bring it. All this they will do with an appearance of pleasure to make their parents feel at ease. . . .

While the parents are both alive, at their regular meals, morning and evening, the (oldest) son and his wife will encourage them to eat everything, and what is left after all, they will themselves eat. . . .

No daughter-in-law, without being told to go to her own apartment, should venture to withdraw from that (of her parents-in-law). Whatever she is about to do, she should ask leave from them. A son and his wife should have no private goods, nor animals, nor vessels; they should not presume to borrow from, or give anything to, another person. If any one give the wife an article of food or dress, a piece of cloth or silk, a handkerchief for her girdle, an iris or orchid, she should receive and offer it to her parents-in-law. If they accept it, she will be glad as if she were receiving it afresh. If they return it to her, she should decline it, and if they do not allow her to do so, she will take it as if it were a second gift, and lay it by to wait till they may want it.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the son and his wife were required to live with his parents, owed absolute obedience to them, and had no independent property rights. Chinese literature is full of edifying stories about filial sons and daughters and daughters-in-law who were reputed actually to have sacrificed everything for the comfort and well-being of their parents, according to such ideals.

Marriage, far from being primarily a union of man and woman to satisfy their personal desires, was primarily a family matter, as is shown in the fact that the bride was chosen by the son's parents and usually would never have been seen by him before the wedding. Everything about the betrothal and wedding, including the religious sanctions, was calculated to reinforce the subordination of the young couple to the bridegroom's family—especially his parents. For example, the expensive presents given to the bride's family emphasized that she was in fact being purchased by the boy's parents for their son. The matching of horoscopes and the traditional belief that marriages were "made in heaven" lent an air of inevitability to decisions that actually were made on hardheaded business or "political" grounds by parents and go-betweens (the latter essential in this, as in many other social relations). Formal worship of the bridegroom's an-



cestors brought the bride under the supernatural authority of his forebears and reminded her that her membership in her natal lineage was terminated. She was now a probationer, so to speak, among the kinsmen of her husband—and both of them were economically dependent on his parents. Only by earning the respect, or at least the tolerance, of the parents, could the new wife really gain security in her role; thus filial conduct toward her in-laws was literally a matter of life and death. The children of this union were likewise regarded as essential to completion of the couple's filial responsibilities, as is indicated by a saying of Master Mêng that became proverbial: "There are three ways in which one may be unfilial, of which the worst is to have no heir" (*Master Mêng* IVA.26.1).

Not to have an heir was a heinous offense against *hsiao* because without such an heir the ancestral sacrifices would be discontinued. In the event that the wife should not, in fact, produce a son, an acceptable substitute would be found either by making the son of a concubine the heir or by adopting a son from some close branch of the *tsu*. Where there was more than one son, the eldest was charged with the responsibilities of the ancestral cult. In feudal times the aristocracy followed the rule of primogeniture, and so firmly did the special position of the eldest son become settled in the Chinese society of ancient times that even the disappearance of the feudal system and the establishment of a more equalized inheritance law did not radically change it.

Destined as he was to replace his father as head of the family and to be invested with the solemn duties of principal sacrificiant to the ancestors, the eldest son was from childhood set above his younger brothers. They owed him, in fact, almost the same obedience and respect that they owed the father himself, since the latter's authority would eventually pass to him. The same principle, when applied more broadly to the *tsu*, gave the eldest son of the direct line the same sort of status among all the males of his generation:

Eldest [male] cousins in the legitimate line of descent and their brothers should do reverent service to the son, who is the representative chief of the family and his wife. Though they may be richer and higher in official rank than he, they should not presume to enter his house with (the demonstrations of) their wealth and dignity. . . .

A wealthy cousin should prepare two victims, and present the better of them to his chief. He and his wife should together, after self-purification, reverently assist at his sacrifice in the ancestral temple. When the business of that is over, they may venture to offer their own private sacrifice.<sup>13</sup>

We are now in a position to appreciate why the rites of mourning and the sacrifices to the ancestors are the fundamental manifestation of the Chinese religion, embodying as they do the sacred character of the lineage and its families as a kinship corporation. The great principle of *hsiao*, which should govern the lives of all its members, was expressed in formal modes of behavior systemized as *li*, and the culminating acts of *li* were those of ancestor worship.

## THE THEORY OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

### Meaning of the Term

Let us recognize at the outset that the expression *ancestor worship* is much disputed in its connotations and hence unsatisfactory. The word *worship* should not mislead us into supposing that there is a generally accepted interpretation of the real purport of these *li* comprising the ritual services to the ancestors. As early as the seventeenth century, this question arose among the Catholic missionaries, who had to decide whether or not their converts would be allowed to continue the practices concerned. The question took this form: Are these rites truly religious, or are they less than that, something like respectful memorials?

It was far from being an academic question. Indeed it took on the proportions of a major doctrinal dispute, known in history as the "Rites Controversy," involving popes and Chinese emperors and leading eventually to the downfall of the Jesuit position in China and expulsion of all missionaries from Chinese soil. The problem was never resolved, and to this day there is no agreement on the interpretation of the rites—which suggests that the question may have been wrongly put in the first place. It is, in fact, a question that could only have arisen in the Western mind, which is accustomed to placing the family, the individual, and religion into separate categories. In addition to this inappropriate categorizing, there is the difficulty that Western definitions of *religion* itself are conflicting and disputed. We propose therefore to avoid dealing with such a question at all, and it is to be understood that we use the term *ancestor worship* as a matter of convenience.

The first point to understand about ancestor worship is that it is confined to the kinship group. As Master K'ung said, "Sacrifice to spirits which are not those of one's own dead is [mere] flattery" (*Analects* I.24.1). Ancestor worship thereby played an indispensable role in reinforcing the cohesion of family and lineage. It should also be pointed out that this kinship group strength was achieved at the price of divisive effects in Chinese society as a whole. The ancestral cult was the one universal religious institution, but by ensuring the exclusiveness of each *tsu*, it fastened on the nation a system of closely knit in-group units, each of which claimed the major share of each individual's loyalties and efforts at the expense of a larger social consciousness.

There were certain underlying assumptions in the ancestral cult. Obviously such a cult assumed continuance of personality in some form after death of the physical body. It further assumed the possibility of continued contact between dead and living family members. Finally, in the light of the family system and its hierarchical structure, it was assumed that original relationships remained in full force despite the death of a senior. In fact, because of the mysteriousness of their postmortem condition, the deceased seniors were conceived to possess even more spiritual power than they had possessed in life. The love and fear of the son for the father were perhaps increased by the latter's continuing presence in spiritual, rather than physical, form.

The ancestors were thus in a sense deified. *This conception of deification of the ancestors ultimately colored all of the Chinese religion, which may be seen as an extension of this idea.*

### Status of the Ancestors

In order to understand the status of the ancestors, we may turn to the earliest literary records, dating from the first centuries of the Chou dynasty. In *Shu Ching* (*Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents*) and *Shih Ching* (*Scripture of Song Lyrics*), the ancestors of the ruling house are pictured as dwelling "on high" in some sort of close association with, and subordinate capacity to, the Supreme Ruler in Heaven. Their power over their descendants seems to derive from this position; that is, they are able to intercede with *shang ti* or *t'ien* to send down blessings or calamities:

It is not that our former kings will not assist us, their descendants. It is just that Your Majesty is dissolute and cruel, and is thereby bringing about his own ruin. Therefore Heaven rejects us. (*Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents*, "The Earl of the West Slays [the Prince of] Li"; *Shu Ching*, *Hsi Pai K'an Li*)

The recorder then [wrote] the prayer on wooden strips. It said, Your first grandson So-and-So has met with a severe illness. If you three Kings are in fact obligated [to present] a royal son to Heaven, let T'an be substituted for the person of So-and-So.\* (*Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents*, "The Metal-Strapped Depository"; *Shu Ching*, *Chin T'êng*)

Many sections of *Shu Ching* have been aptly described as political propaganda, in which the Chou rulers are attempting to persuade the descendants of their former overlords, the Shang or Yin kings, that they should acquiesce in the new regime. A couple of passages from such sections will illustrate the assumption that the spiritual world is but another dimension of the temporal world, the two being in intimate association:

In ancient times our former kings mutually shared [both] ease and toil with your grandfathers and fathers. . . . Now when we are offering the Great Sacrifice to our former kings, your ancestors follow in their train to share and enjoy them. (*Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents*, *P'an Kêng*)

In ancient times our former rulers labored for your grandfathers and fathers. . . . If in your hearts (or, minds) you plan to kill us, our former rulers will soothe your grandfathers and fathers, and your grandfathers and fathers will certainly abandon you and not save you from death. (*Scripture of Archaic Historical Documents*, "The Metal-Strapped Depository")

\*"First grandson" means the reigning sovereign; his name is tabu, hence he is referred to obliquely as So-and-So. The "three Kings" are the three generations of ancestors of the ruling sovereign, who are of course in "Heaven"; T'an is the personal name of the reigning sovereign's brother, the Duke of Chou, who thus offers himself in sacrifice if this will satisfy Heaven. This is the case referred to in a previous quotation from *Shu Ching* (see p. 7).

## Mutual Dependence of Dead and Living

From those most ancient times the assumption was that living and dead were dependent on each other, the latter for sacrifices and the former for blessings. *Shih Ching* presents vivid pictures of the transaction between the two parties, which took place in the ancestral temple:

Where the weeds grew thick  
 We cleared away the brambles.  
 Why has this been done since ancient times?  
 [To clear the ground] for glutinous and panicked millet  
 [So that] our glutinous millet will flourish,  
 Our panicked millet be abundant.  
 When the barns are full,  
 And the stacks of grain innumerable,  
 We shall use it to make liquor and viands  
 For offerings, for sacrifices.  
 [The Personator of the ancestors] is seated and invited to partake,  
 And thereby bring down great blessings.

...  
 All is in order, all maintain strict decorum;  
 The oxen and sheep are pure.  
 We proceed with the seasonal sacrifice,  
 Flaying the victims, boiling them,  
 Arranging them [in the vessels], placing these [on the stands].  
 The one who says the prayers makes offerings inside the temple gate.  
 The sacrifices are very splendid.  
 The august forefathers—  
 Their spirits enjoy the offerings,  
 Their filial descendants shall receive good fortune.  
 They will reward them with many blessings,  
 With limitless myriads of years of life.

...  
 We are exhausted,  
 Having performed every ritual without error.  
 The skillful offerer of prayers makes announcement,  
 Going to the filial grandsons:  
 "Your filial sacrifices are fragrant,  
 And the spirits [of the ancestors] have enjoyed drinking and eating.  
 They will confer upon you a hundred blessings.  
 As you ask, so shall you receive.  
 [Your rituals] have been in order and on time,  
 Properly and carefully conducted.  
 [The ancestors] will forever bless you to the utmost,  
 Myriads and tens of myriads of times." (*Scripture of Song Lyrics*, "The  
 Thick Weeds"; *Mao Shih* 209, *Ch'u Tz'û*)

The relationship of mutual dependence, with its expectation of tangible blessings in exchange for filial nourishment, may be said to describe the common attitude of Chinese to the present. A proper ceremonial funeral, burial in a grave auspiciously located according to the principles of *fêng-shui* (see Chapter 2), the spirit-tablet reverently set up and regularly given homage, and the more formal sacrifices on special occasions—

for these demonstrations of the continuing love and remembrance of their descendants, the ancestors would send down to them the sorts of things any parents would wish for their children: good luck, health, happiness, official position, wealth, sons, love of virtue, long life, and a peaceful death.

### Significance of the Rites in the Eyes of the Literati

Although such an ingenuous view was held by the great masses of simple people—and we need to keep in mind that in all ages the Chinese populace has consisted largely of illiterate, or semi-literate, peasants—there was a more sophisticated interpretation. The educated elite tended toward a less literal, or more cautious, or even completely rationalistic, belief:

He sacrificed as if [the deceased] were present; he sacrificed [to the spirits] as if those spirits were present. (*Analects* III.12.1)

The problem in this passage is the sense in which “as if” is to be taken. It might mean “as if—although in fact they are not”; or it might mean “as if—assuming that they actually are present even though unseen.”

The Master did not discuss strange phenomena, feats of strength, disorders, or spirits. (*Analects* VII.20)

Although we are told here that Master K’ung did not discuss spirits, we are not told *why* this was so, and the answer to this question is not necessarily that he did not believe in them.

Chi Lu asked about serving the souls of the dead. The Master said, “Not being able [adequately] to serve [living] men, how can we serve the souls of the dead?” [The disciple then said,] “I venture to ask about death.” [The Master] said, “Not yet knowing [?what we ought to know] about life, how can we know about death?” (*Analects* XI.11)

This famous utterance has usually been taken to indicate a *disinterest* in the supernatural, an interpretation that is surely borne out in the rest of the *Analects*. The Master of this record is concerned with human beings and not with the realm of the spiritual. On the other hand, to jump from this to the conclusion (as so many have done) that Master K’ung was “agnostic” is just as certainly wrong. The same work gives us many statements of the Master referring to Heaven, to the power of Heaven, and even to Heaven’s protection and sponsorship of Master K’ung himself. He was regarded by later generations as the final authority on *li*, and the *Analects* furnishes proof that he took the ancestral rites very seriously.

The explicit rationalizing of the rites of the ancestral cult was the work especially of the philosopher Master Hsün (c. 340–245 BCE), whose interpretations found their way into *Li Chi*. According to his view:

Within the sacrificiant there is an accumulation of thought about, and affectionate longing for, [the deceased]. Upon him come, all untimely, feelings of calamity, and gaspings for breath. Thus, while others are

happy and harmonious, to the loyal subject and the filial son\* there come feelings of calamity. Those feelings which come upon him are deeply moving and, if they find no release, the accumulation of thoughts makes him feel frustrated and inadequate, and he is conscious that ritual has been deficient and incomplete.

...

Therefore the Former Kings devised for this situation [sacrificial] texts expressing to the utmost veneration for the venerable and love for the parent. Hence I say the accumulation of thoughts about, and affectionate longing for, [the deceased] is the utmost degree of loyalty and faithfulness, of love and respect, and the full bloom of ritual and culture.

...

Were it not for the Saints (i.e., those Former Kings) there could be no understanding of this. The Saints clearly understood them (i.e., the meaning and purposes of the sacrifices); military aristocrats and nobles carry them out serenely; officials consider they must be observed; while among the hundred surnames (i.e., the aristocratic families) they have become customary. To the noble man (i.e., the ideal man of Master K'ung's philosophy) they are a human way, while among the hundred surnames they are thought to be serving the souls of the dead. (*Master Hsün, "On Ritual"; Hsün Tzû, Li Lun*)

It is easy to see how it was possible for those who wished to understand ancestor worship as merely "reverence" and not "worship" to find firm ground for their interpretation in the authority of Literati texts themselves. But if we reconsider the last sentence in the paragraph quoted, we note that the philosopher expresses a clear and significant distinction: "To the noble man they are a *human* way, while among the hundred surnames they are thought to be *servicing the souls of the dead*." How few, after all, are the noble men, and how greatly are they outnumbered by the "hundred surnames,"† especially in a premodern, peasant society. An adequate description of Chinese religion must include not only the outlook of the small percentage of superior men, but also the more naive beliefs of the ordinary folk.

## THE PRACTICES OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP

From the formal point of view, ancestor worship may be divided into (1) the funeral rites, (2) the mourning observances, and (3) the continuing sacrifices to the *manes* (spirit of the deceased). From the functional point of view, these practices serve to express the grief of the survivors in accepted or ceremonial manner; to help the spirit of the dead in its progress through purgatory; to give peace to the *p'ò* (*yin*) soul in the grave and forestall its becoming a malevolent ghost; to obtain the blessings of the *hun* (*yang*, hence *shên*) soul for the family; to give the family and lineage a continuing

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\*Throughout this passage the author has in mind sacrifices offered by a subject to his lord, as well as those offered by a son to his parents.

†This expression came to mean the "common people" after the feudal age, when commoners acquired surnames.

sense of wholeness; and, of course, to demonstrate the love and remembrance—whether real or affected—in which the family continues to hold its deceased members.

Although there are innumerable local variations in the practices involved, they are still only variations on the same themes. Here, as in every aspect of Chinese culture, there is an essential unity despite superficial diversities. Every province, county, and even smaller unit in China will have its voluminous accounts of the local customs prevailing from ancient times, while the reports of foreign observers in various parts of China are likewise rich in details; but after all, the underlying theories are the same, based on the *li* texts of the Literati Canon or the Buddhist notions discussed in Chapter 2.

### Funeral Rites

It would be desirable to describe in detail the funeral rites and to set forth their rich symbolism in all its complexity. Nothing would better convey the significance of the family religion in Chinese culture upon which we have insisted. Far from being an isolated event in the lives of the family members, a harrowing experience best gotten over as quickly as is decently possible so that the family life may get back to normal, the funeral and the subsequent mourning are protracted, momentous, and integrally a part of the normal flow of that family life. Properly performed, they assure the comfort and well-being of the deceased in his spiritual existence and, consequently, the good fortune of his descendants. The funeral rites are, in fact, the binding force that holds together the family and the clan as a religious corporation through the generations.

Unfortunately, the space available to us does not permit even an outline of these rites, so we must be content to summarize their most essential features.<sup>14</sup> This summary is based on accounts of the actual practices of the present day in one Chinese province, the island of Formosa, which the Chinese call Taiwan. Keeping in mind the introductory remarks made above, we may say that these Taiwanese practices are representative, *mutatis mutandis*, of what is done in other parts of China.

Longevity is one of the blessings most devoutly hoped for by the Chinese, and longevity is the standard euphemism used in the funeral when referring to death. For example, the graveclothes are called "longevity clothes." One begins to prepare oneself for death by getting ready such garments when one reaches the age of about fifty. A stout coffin and even a tomb, favorably sited according to *fêng-shui* theory, are also a comfort to an old person, who is thus assured of the well-being of his or her soul.

One who is dying is placed upon boards supported on trestles and covered with a mat, in the main room of the home. The icons of the deities enshrined at the altar in this room are now covered to avoid contamination by the evil influences—something that is indeed guarded against at every step of the rites.

When life has departed, the corpse is washed and garbed in the graveclothes. In this, as in everything else connected with the funeral, the "filial son"—that is, the eldest son (with his wife)—plays the leading role. Now he seats himself outside the house wearing a "coolie hat" with a bamboo



*Burning of paper replicas of things thought to be needed by the deceased. In the foreground, note family members in mourning garb, and musicians.*

fillet into which are inserted two small red candles. His seat is a bamboo stool set upon a winnowing basket. He holds his arms outstretched with a piece of hemp rope across his shoulders, and the graveclothes are put on him, inside out. He is fed with "longevity noodles." The graveclothes are then transferred from the filial son to the corpse. It is worth noting that the graveclothes themselves are in the style of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–221 CE), an example of the profound conservatism of this family religion.

All the family let their hair go unkempt, don sackcloth, and keep up a ritual wailing during specified times. The outside family arrives to condole and takes part in the ceremonies. The mourning garments and the announcement cards are white, the color of death. What is not white is red, the color of life, and hence good fortune. Thus these two colors symbolize the two themes of fear-propitiation and hope-supplication, which run through the funeral rites and indeed through all Chinese religion, as has been pointed out.

The *hun*, or *yang* soul, upon which rest the hopes of the survivors and to which they address their supplications, is to reside permanently in a wooden spirit-tablet on the altar in the home. Even before the soul is formally installed in this tablet, it must be given a temporary resting place, which is called the "soul-silk." That is actually a paper object about a foot high and three inches wide, in the shape of a blunt sword, on which are written the tabu name of the deceased and certain other particulars. It is placed before the corpse to receive the prayers of the family, is later carried in the elaborate funeral procession, and is finally borne home from the grave by the eldest grandson. Once back in the main room of the



home, it is placed upon a small table that serves as a temporary altar. There also is placed an incense brazier that holds a bit of earth from the grave. Incense is kept burning continuously, and the soul-silk receives the solicitous service of the filial son and other family members, as well as Buddhist and Taoist priests. Eventually, after the time has arrived to install the permanent spirit-tablet, the soul-silk is carefully disposed of by burning. Now the spirit-tablet is placed upon the altar beside the other ancestral tablets, while a pinch of the ashes from the brazier that stood before the soul-silk is put into the braziers of these other tablets. This is the final act of the funeral rites and is appropriately called "joining the braziers," symbolizing, of course, the unity of all the ancestors and hence of the family and lineage.

Every act of the funeral rites is performed in accordance with the prescriptions set forth in the ancient codes of *li*. But there is one conspicuous addition of later times: the participation of Buddhist and Taoist priests. The greater the financial means of the family, the more of these professional priests will be engaged and the more frequently they will hold their services. Following the death, these services continue for seven weeks, which is a Buddhist innovation, and priests must be called in as often as possible. They perform on certain instruments, chant *sūtras*, and pray for quick passage of the soul through purgatory (the so-called soul-masses). Some of these services last from noon to midnight, while others may begin one morning and go on until the third morning.

The funeral of poor people may be concluded within one to three days, but the wealthier the family, the longer will the burial be delayed. During



Buddhist monks acting as priests in funeral services. Note the special hat of the presiding priest. Writing on the cloth drape says, "Bring all beings to enlightenment."

this period of delay, the coffin remains in the main room, where it is constantly oiled to make it more waterproof and airtight while its inmate receives ritual sacrifice and wailing. In many cases the burial of the coffin does not mark the end of the affair. It is followed within some years by what is called the "lucky burial." This involves exhuming the bones, washing, drying, and sunning them, and then storing them in a "gold\* peck-measure"—that is, an earthenware jar about three feet high and one foot in diameter. Following an indefinite period of storage, the jar and its contents are finally buried in a spot selected as especially auspicious by a *feng-shui* augur.

### Mourning

In our discussion of the lineage and its families as a religious corporation, we pointed out that relationships were clearly exemplified by the degrees of mourning. This in itself is sufficient to show how much more important, how much more formalized, mourning was in China than in the West. Entirely aside from the normal human manifestations of grief, these ceremonial mourning practices served to reaffirm the family's internal cohesion and its status structure and to demonstrate its virtue to the outside society. Far from being an individualistic expression of feeling, the mourning was regulated by detailed instructions set forth in the *li* scriptures, sanctioned by public opinion, and enforced if necessary by the law.

Five degrees of mourning were established. We will illustrate the mourning practices by a brief quotation from *Yi Li (Ceremonial and Ritual; see Appendix 1)* on the prescriptions for the deepest mourning:

#### THE THREE YEARS' UNTRIMMED MOURNING

This mourning dress consists of an untrimmed sackcloth coat and skirt, fillets of the female nettle hemp, a staff, a twisted girdle, a hat whose hat-string is of cord, and rush shoes.

The principal mourner lives in a booth built of branches leant against the house. He sleeps on straw and pillows his head on a clod.

He wails day and night, with no set times.

For food he sups on congee, made twice a day, morning and evening, with one handful of grain.

He does not put off the head or waist fillet when he sleeps.

After the sacrifices of repose, he cuts a hole in the side of the booth and fits lintel and door-posts to it. He lays a mat over the straw, and sleeps on this. For food he eats coarse rice, and has water for his drinking. He wails once in the morning and once at night only.

When he assumes the raw-silk hat, at the end of the first year of mourning, he lodges in a structure called the "outer sleeping apartment," and eats for the first time vegetables and fruit, partaking also of his ordinary food. No definite times are then prescribed for his wailing.<sup>15</sup>

Such mourning was observed for the father, for the Son of Heaven by the feudal lords of Chou times, by a father for his heir, and by an adopted heir for certain family members.

\*The "gold" refers to the color of the skeletal bones, indicating that the deceased, when reburied, will bring blessings to the descendants.

There are many passages in the canonical texts in which the mourning practices are rationalized. We cite only one, showing the attitude of Master K'ung himself toward the three-year mourning:

Tsai Wô asked about the three-year mourning, [his opinion being that] one year was already long enough. "If the noble men do not for three years carry on the practices of *li*, then *li* will certainly be harmed by this; if for three years they do not perform music, then music will certainly be lost. [In the space of a year] the old crops of grain are already no more, and the new grain has come up. . . . After one year [the mourning] might be ended."

The Master said, "To eat fine rice, and to wear brocaded silk—would you feel comfortable doing [these things after one year]?"

[Tsai Wô] said, "I would."

The Master said, "If you would feel comfortable, then do them. But the noble man, while in mourning, cannot relish the taste of his food, cannot enjoy the sound of music, cannot feel comfortable in his place—therefore he does not do [these things]. Now if you would feel comfortable, then do them."

When Tsai Wô had left the Master said, "Yü (Tsai Wô's personal name) is really heartless. Only after a child is three years old does it leave its parents' arms; and [thus it is that] the three-year mourning is observed everywhere under Heaven. Didn't Yü [himself] have the three-year love of his parents?" (*Analects* XVII.21)

As we have said, these as well as other of the *li* passed from the monopoly of the nobility into widespread observance among the people as a whole following the end of the feudal age (about 200 BCE). Nevertheless, there were great discrepancies among the classes with regard to the strictness and elaborateness of their conformity to the ideal. The complete abandonment of one's daily duties prescribed for the eldest son was hardly practicable for a peasant family struggling to survive from year to year. Sumptuary laws also provided gradations in the required and allowed observances according to social class.

Nevertheless, among those able to follow them, the *li* were in force. The elite scholar class, as the avowed upholders of the Literati principles, were especially the conservators of these practices. A minister of state engaged in work of great importance to the government must yet retire from office upon the death of his parent and observe the three-year mourning. Neglect of this filial duty would not only be considered disgraceful but would be punished by law. Of all the *li*, however, the mourning rites have suffered most curtailment with the changing conditions of contemporary times. Modern life simply does not allow extended withdrawal from society by survivors, least of all the new head of a family.

### Continuing Sacrifices to the *Manes*

Sacrifices are an aspect of Chinese religion most easily traced to the remote past. The burial of a king or other great personage was accompanied in Shang or Yin times by many sacrifices, whose remains have in recent decades been uncovered by archaeologists. The great royal tombs at Anyang in Honan province, the last capital of that dynasty, contained both animal and human sacrifices, in addition to the bronze vessels and oracle

bones already mentioned. The quantities of other goods accompanying the deceased to the grave indicate that the Shang kings were thought to require in their spiritual existence the same sorts of things they had needed during their mortal span. This theory took hold and was expanded to the populace as a whole, and in post-Han times was combined with the imported Buddhist notions we have already discussed.

The blending of the native and Buddhist theories means that sacrifices are in part a special function of the professional priests and in part the responsibility of the family and lineage heads. There is no need for any special consecration of the latter to such a function; their sacrifices to the ancestors are, after all, simply a continuation of the filial duties required of the son during the parents' lifetime. On the other hand, the effectiveness of these sacrifices marking such vital occasions as the mortuary rites would be substantially increased by the mysterious spiritual power commonly attributed to those who have been ordained in any religion.

The ancestors dwelt in three specific places: within the home, within the family or lineage cemetery, and within the lineage temple. As we know, the *yang* soul resided in the spirit-tablet enshrined on the altar. Its presence in the company of the icons of other gods worshiped by the family further emphasized the deified status of the ancestor. Before the ancestral tablets, as before the other gods, were set the sacrificial implements—candles, incense, flowers, wine, and food. Not only was the head of the household supposed to see to it that these sacrificial offerings were renewed constantly, but whenever any event of importance occurred in the family, he was to announce the particulars to the spirits in the tablets. Thus the continued presence of the ancestors was made tangible to the family in their daily lives.

In the cemeteries owned by lineages able to afford them, the tombs of the ancestors would theoretically be arranged in a manner that would indicate their positions within the kinship system. On several occasions during the year, as specified in the calendar of religious festivals, the family would visit the cemetery, see that the tombs were in good condition, and offer sacrifices and prayers. The cemetery and the grave were thus an intimate part of the family's sphere of interest and activity, rather than objects of dread designed to segregate the dead from the living. The old people in the family not only received the special respect of the young but would often, as we have seen, be comforted by the acquisition during their lifetimes of graveclothes and coffins. A son who would provide such things in advance, for the peace of mind of his parents, was especially filial. This extended even to preparation of the tomb while the parent was still in good health. Among the peasant masses the expense of a cemetery was of course prohibitive; hence the graves of the ancestors were often scattered here and there on untillable patches of land lying amidst the fields\*—a circumstance which, however, emphasized even more the closeness of past and present generations.

The factor of expense also limited possession of a lineage temple to the economically prosperous. Those who had the means would purchase land,

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\*Whenever possible, of course, even the poor tried to obtain burial space with good *feng-shui*—perhaps in foothills that were not cultivated.



*Renovating and sacrificing at tomb of ancestor on ch'ing ming (see Chapter 10).*

erect a temple, and appoint lineage members as caretakers. At the periodical gatherings in this temple there would be accomplished the formal sacrifices to the ancestors, the communal feasting that renewed the kinship ties, the setting in order of genealogical records, and the settling of any business concerning the whole lineage by conference of its chiefs. The central fact of such gatherings is, of course, that everything was said and done in the presence of the ancestors, who not only sanctioned the decisions of the family and lineage heads but who also shared in the pleasure of their descendants as they enjoyed themselves and felt the reality of their attachment with the group.

### **Keeping Their Glory and Their Teachings Alive**

Finally, in such strong lineages, aside from the spirit-tablets, the tombs, the ancestral temple, and all the religious rites associated with them, the memory of the ancestors was kept alive though the frequent recalling of their names and deeds. Genealogical accounts were maintained, often for many generations, and the young were taught reverence for their forebears. Some lineages treasured documents from the distant past in which eminent ancestors had laid down precepts for their descendants. Americans who are proud to be able to trace their ancestry back to colonial days may be astounded by the pedigrees recorded in the Chinese lineage books:

Our family tree owes its existence to a sprout of a royal family planted in consequence of a feud somewhere in the lower Yellow River Valley some three thousand years ago. . . . My first ancestor in the Chiang line was

made the first feudal lord to rule over that land toward the end of the twelfth century B.C. . . .

From our first ancestor down to the present day all the names in the direct line have been recorded in our genealogy. How authentic they are I cannot tell, for their lives were so obscure that verification is not easy.<sup>16</sup>

. . .

On the New Year's Eve of my twelfth year . . . my father called me into his study and sent me to ask my grandfather whether I might be shown the family clan book. . . .

It was a memorable evening. All the lanterns in the hall were lit and my father, after changing his dress and burning incense at the ancestral shrine, climbed up a ladder and took down very respectfully the wooden case in which the clan books were kept. There were thirty or forty volumes. . . .

Father . . . raised his voice and made a gesture of respect when the first name appeared. "This," he said, "so far as the records show, was our first ancestor." He did not speak the name, "Hsu," because it is not customary in China for a person to address or speak of an elder by name; he called him "Yuan-ching Kung." Yuan-ching was another name of our first ancestor, and Kung a respectful term used in referring to elders. . . . "Yuan-ching Kung lived," continued Father, "at the end of the first century B.C. and was appointed by the Emperor Ai government-inspector and Governor of Yen Chou." . . . The rule he made for his family is printed in large characters in the clan book. It consists of only four words: "Benevolence," "Righteousness," "Sincerity," and "Endurance." He commanded that each member of the family should be trained in these four qualities.<sup>17</sup>

The most eminent family in China is that of Master K'ung himself. The ancestral home in Ch'üfu, Shantung province, has been preserved through the centuries as a shrine. The seventy-seventh lineal descendant, Mr. K'ung Tê-ch'êng, presently lives in Taiwan as a refugee from Communism. He holds the title of Duke, the only hereditary patent of nobility still extant (it was conferred in 1233). Appropriately enough, Mr. K'ung has several honorary positions of importance in connection with the preservation of the traditional Chinese culture and is in great demand throughout East Asia as a lecturer on Literati Tradition.

The connection of all this with the ancestral cult is evident. The careful maintenance of the genealogies\* and the indoctrination of the children with the glorious traditions of their forebears help to keep the religious sentiment alive, and they reinforce the lineage and family solidarity in the most vivid way. This may serve as a touchstone for the vitality of the ancestral religion on which the whole structure of Chinese society and culture has been raised.

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\*It is hardly necessary to point out that, although genealogies may contain a considerable element of fiction, this is immaterial as far as their validity and function for the family and lineage members are concerned.

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# Chinese Religion

## *An Introduction*

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FIFTH EDITION

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