

## Ancestor Worship and Divination (Shang and Zhou Dynasties)

Two traditions that began in ancient China, and still continue today, are ancestor worship and divination. Ancestor worship means worshiping and praying to family members who lived before you, but are now dead.

Ancestor worship was based on five main ideas:

1. The world is divided into three levels: heaven, earth, and the underworld. All of these levels are connected to each other.
2. A person is not only connected to a father and mother, but all the relatives from the distant past .
3. The human body has two souls. One soul, called the **hun**, rises when a person dies. The other, called the **po**, becomes a ghost.
4. A person needs to offer gifts to their ancestors in heaven, to show respect. Most of these gifts include wine and meat. The gifts could be placed out in nature, perhaps at the bottom of a mountain or along a river. It was very important for the king to give these gifts, to ensure a good year ahead. They believed that not giving these gifts could lead to natural disasters, like floods or famines.

Ancestor worship was practiced in the village and in the family. In the village, both in the past and today, it was common to find temples built for ancestors. Villagers could go to these places to worship their ancestors. In most homes, there was an altar to hold wood or paper which had the names of dead relatives written on them.

5. Shamans are responsible for helping keep the different worlds in balance. Shamans are priests or priestesses which use magic to control events, cure the sick, and predict the future. They also perform rituals to make sure the **hun** and **po** souls were treated properly.

Shamans are experts in the art of divination. Divination is using magic powers to understand what is happening in the supernatural world. Shamans sometimes use divination to communicate with ancestors. In the past, shamans looked at lines in animal bones or tortoise shells, to try to read the future (the same way a fortune teller might read somebody's palm today). By consulting the underworld and reading the future, Shamans helped Chinese make important decisions about their lives.

(adapted from Visible Traces: Teacher's Guide, Asia Society 2000)