The following section includes information about objects based on seven themes identified to enhance a basic social studies curriculum. Each of these objects can be viewed in greater detail in the CD-ROM included in this guide and on the 8 x 10-inch color reproductions provided in the back cover pocket. All of these objects can be traced to one of the dynasties presented on pages 7–19.

24 Clothing and Personal Adornment
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45 Model of a granary
Jade objects depicting humans gained popularity in the Zhou dynasty, and they have provided present-day scholars with more information about clothing and personal decoration. This jade dancer, who wears what is presumed to be an elegant silk robe, represents a woman of the royal court. The back of this figure, also carefully carved, shows the dancer’s hair in a long braid. This pendant was designed as a personal ornament and was most likely hung from the waist.

Men and women of high status and wealth wore silk clothing, most likely robes with sashes tied at the waist. They might also have worn fur during cold weather. Shoes were made of silk or leather with thick wooden soles. During the Eastern Zhou dynasty, most common people, male and female, wore hemp or cotton tunics and pants.
This dragon pendant was made from jade, and both front and back are carved identically. It is crafted with linear carving in a variety of motifs, openwork, and relief. Curving lines incised on the surface of the jade enrich the texture, and the tail curls into scroll shapes. Holes at the top of the dragon’s head and appendages were placed so that the pendant could be suspended. Like the dancer pendant (see page 24), this dragon pendant was meant to be worn as a decoration.

During the Eastern Zhou dynasty, the dragon became one of the most popular decorative motifs. The symbolism of the earliest dragons on jade and bronze objects is not clear, but by the Han dynasty, the dragon was believed to be a water creature who lived in rivers during the winter and flew into clouds in the spring to bring rain. Dragons were considered auspicious symbols — bringing good luck and representing peace, courage, and wisdom — and came to be associated with imperial power.
Silk

Silk is made from the fibers of the silkworm cocoon, and domestication of silkworms began in China around 2700 B.C.E., or possibly earlier. The silkworm feeds on the leaves of the mulberry tree, and once the cocoon is formed, workers take the cocoon and begin a process to unwind the silk filament by boiling the cocoons in water to release the thread from sericin, a gummy substance that binds the threads of the cocoon together. These threads are spun, then woven to make a durable and beautiful fabric. The production of silk takes hard work and requires several thousand cocoons to make just a small amount of silk. For this reason, silk was, and still is, an expensive luxury item. The royal family, nobility, and other affluent Chinese wore silk, while the average person wore fabrics like hemp and cotton. Silk became one of the most important commodities of the Silk Route, the network of trade routes that emerged in the first century C.E. and extended from China to Rome.

< Workers gather mulberry leaves to feed the silkworms.

< A woman spins silk thread from the cocoons.

< A woman weaves fabric from silk thread.

< Women cut bolts of silk fabric.

Sericulture, by Cheng Qi (act. ca. 1250–1300). China, Southern Song dynasty, 13th century. Handscroll; ink and color on paper; 31.9 x 1249.3 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution. Purchase, F1954.20.
The Chinese word for jade, *yu*, refers to several types of rock that are capable of taking a beautiful polish. Western mineralogists tend to define “jade” more narrowly, commonly applying the term to two specific rocks, nephrite and jadeite. Both nephrite and jadeite take a lustrous polish, and both are composed of interlocking mineral crystals that produce an extremely tough and stable rock. All of the objects featured in this guide are nephrite, which can range in color from white, to green, to brown, to almost black, depending on the amount of iron present. Jadeite did not become a popular material in Chinese art until the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

As early as the late Neolithic Period, Chinese artisans had learned to shape and polish jade. Although we tend to speak of “carving” jade, few carving tools are strong enough to carve jade. Instead, artisans apply a paste to the jade that is made from abrasive particles such as quartz sand. These abrasives gradually wear away small areas of jade to shape a sculpture. For example, wood or bamboo sticks, in combination with abrasive particles, were used to drill holes in jade. Strings or cords coated with abrasive materials were used to cut or saw jade.

In ancient China, jade was prized not only for its beauty and durability, but also for its supposed magical and supernatural qualities. For example, jade was believed to preserve the human body after death. Many of the early Chinese jades were made for use in religious ceremonies and burial rites.

Jade was also valued in daily life. It signified wealth, virtue, and honor. Ceremonial weapons and symbolic jade jewelry both conferred and reflected the status of the ancient Chinese nobility.
**Food Preparation and Utensils**

Rice was and continues to be a staple food in China, and this ceramic model of a rice pounder was placed in a tomb to ensure that the deceased would have rice in the afterlife. Rice pounders are designed to separate the husk from the kernel of rice through use of a lever—a device that works something like a playground seesaw. The rice plant would be placed in the bowl (pictured on the left), and a person would stand on the end to lift the hammer. When they stepped off, the hammer dropped and crushed the rice plant, removing the husk. This process was often accompanied with songs to help keep the work synchronized.

Real rice pounders, still in use in rural areas of China and Nepal, are much larger than this tomb model—sometimes measuring as much as seven feet in length. In modern times most rice pounders are made of stone.

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**Rice pounder**
China, Han dynasty, 2d–3d century C.E.
Glazed clay, 6.9 x 18.6 cm
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution
Gift of Charles Lang Freer, F1907.70

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This model of a stove was created for burial in a tomb so that it could be used by the deceased in the afterlife. It is made of fired and glazed clay, but after centuries of burial, the green glaze has degraded significantly. This kind of green glaze is a lead glaze commonly used on ceramics made for burial during the Han dynasty. The actual stove on which the model was based was designed so that two pots of food could be heated at once. Real stoves were mud or ceramic and sometimes were made of stone or metal.

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**Tomb model of a stove**
China, Han dynasty, 2d–3d century C.E.
Glazed clay, 14.0 x 46.0 x 21.6 cm
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution
Transfer from the Carl Whiting Bishop Collection, F1979.42

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Cuisine in ancient China largely depended on the location and social status of the person eating. The staple grains of drier northern China were wheat and millet. In the warmer, moister south, rice was the most important grain, its cultivation having begun in approximately 5000 B.C.E. In some areas both rice and wheat were eaten.

It is difficult to generalize about the diet of the ancient Chinese, but thanks to an extremely well-furnished and well-preserved tomb, discovered in 1972 in Changsha, Hunan Province, we now have some specific examples of the rich and varied diet of the upper classes during the early years of the Han dynasty.

The Changsha tomb belonged to Lady Dai, who was about fifty when she died. Her body was in such an excellent state of preservation that an autopsy was able to reveal that she had suffered from tuberculosis, gallstones, and hardening of the arteries. Researchers believe she died from a heart attack.

What did Lady Dai eat? Musk melon seeds were found in her esophagus, stomach, and intestines. However, in her tomb, archaeologists also found bamboo cases and ceramic vessels containing a wide variety of luxury foods that differed from the common person’s diet of basic grains.

FOOD IN LADY DAI’S TOMB

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<td>lotus roots</td>
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<td>dog</td>
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Lady Dai’s tomb also contained empty ceramic jars most likely filled with wine at the time of her entombment. Among the objects left for her comfort in the afterlife were 182 lacquer objects, including a serving tray and a set of dishes containing a prepared meal, and 312 bamboo strips containing an inventory of the tomb and instructions on food preparation (see Focus on Chinese Lacquers, page 30). The bamboo strips on food preparation cover a range of information from how to deep fry or steam foods to the use of seasonings, such as soy and honey.
Lacquer is made from the sap of the *Rhus vernicifera* tree, which grows in central and southern China. The clear sap, harvested much like maple syrup, turns brownish-black when it comes in contact with air. To remove impurities it must be boiled and strained before it can be used. Toxic fumes from the boiling sap sometimes pose a risk to the preparer. Pigments can be added to lacquer sap to create different colors; red and black are the most common.

Once the sap has been purified and colored, the lacquer is applied to the base material—often wood, bamboo, or fabric—using a brush. Lacquer objects usually have many layers of lacquer on their surfaces, and each layer must dry and be sanded before the next one can be applied. Lacquer is an excellent waterproof coating for wood and other perishable materials.

Excavations have provided evidence that lacquer was used in China as early as 1300 B.C.E. Later, with the addition of multicolored pigments, lacquer also came to be used as a decorative material.

Lacquer objects were prized luxury items, and wine cups and food containers were often carried on trays like this. The decoration is composed of abstract patterns (although the motifs may have evolved from cloud designs); these also echo the tray’s circular shape in rhythms created by the repeated spirals and diagonals. This black tray with red design is similar in style to the lacquer objects found in the tomb of Lady Dai.
This ornament for a chariot pole is modeled in the form of a dragon’s head with whiskers, gaping mouth, and curling ears. The teeth are silvered bronze, the eyeballs silver, and the pupils glass. The square hole at the top of the ornament was designed to hold a cotter pin that attached to the chariot pole. The bronze head and silver tongue are gilded and engraved with curving designs that are hidden in some areas by the patina (green copper corrosion that forms on copper or brass).

Mercury gilding was invented in China around the fifth century B.C.E. Gold powder and mercury were mixed together to form a paste (also called an amalgam). The paste was applied to bronze or silver surfaces and heated. The mercury would vaporize with heating, leaving a thin layer of gold that was then burnished to give a smooth, shiny, gilded surface. Mercury silvering is the same process but uses silver instead of gold. Mercury silvering and gilding were used together, and with alloys of gold and silver, to produce colorful effects.

During the Eastern Zhou dynasty, chariots with bronze fittings pulled by horses were used in battle — an important function during the Warring States Period (see Eastern Zhou dynasty, page 12). Chariots were also used in royal processions, to transport the royalty and nobility, and for the hunting expeditions of the elite (see the ritual water basin [jian], page 32). Commoners, however, probably used a wooden cart pulled by oxen or water buffalo.

This chariot ornament was probably found in a “horse pit” and not in a person’s tomb. Horse pits are underground chambers located outside the main tomb of the deceased. Members of the royalty and nobility sometimes had their horses and chariots buried as a sign of their status and to assist them in their afterlife.
This bronze basin—used in Zhou-dynasty ceremonies—has three main bands of decoration that show humans, fish, animals, and chariots arranged in hunting scenes. Some of the men carry swords and shields, and others are archers. The same scene is repeated seven times in each band. On the inside of the vessel, there are bands of ducks, fish, and turtles modeled in high relief. The top band depicts fourteen duck images that alternate in pose between walking and swimming. The second and third bands depict images of ducks, fish, and turtles in alternating patterns. The four large handles, in the form of animal masks, support pendant rings.

This basin offers a unique opportunity to see an early pictorial depiction of ancient Chinese life and illustrates the importance of hunting for the elite.
In ancient China, bronze vessels played an important role in ceremonies for rulers and high officials. This bronze elephant, a ritual serving vessel made during the Shang dynasty, shows creativity and invention. Wine was stored in the elephant’s belly and poured from the trunk while the baby elephant, on the larger elephant’s back, served as a knob for the vessel’s lid. The surface of this vessel is covered with scroll-like motifs.

Animal-shaped bronze vessels are relatively rare, but naturalistic animals became decorative motifs on bronzes and jades during the time that the Shang-dynasty capital city was at Anyang, circa 1300 to 1050 B.C.E. Animal-shaped containers were favored by the people who lived in the Yangzi River valley.
This bell is one of a set of six graduated Chinese bronze bells. Although the bells, or zhong, differ in size, their overall shape and decoration are the same, including narrow, raised bands that divide the surfaces into horizontal and vertical areas. Each area has a central trapezoid panel, flanked by three rows of three projecting knobs. The bottom third of the bells is decorated with an interlacing pattern of snakes that have bird heads.

The six bells were designed to hang together on a wooden frame and be struck from the outside with a wooden hammer or mallet. The musician played the bells from a seated or kneeling position. Most bells like these would have been played in an ensemble with a variety of other instruments (see Focus on Music in Ancient China, page 35).

Bells of this kind demonstrate the high level of Chinese expertise in bronze casting. These bells were cast so that the sides become thinner as they reach the base, creating two strike points that produce two different tones.

The earliest Chinese bells were produced around 1500 B.C.E. They were small in size and had clappers inside, similar to Western bells. Originally used as signaling instruments, bells were adopted by people from southern China who, over time, transformed them into clapperless musical instruments played with mallets.
Music in Ancient China

Like many of the arts, music flourished during the Zhou dynasty. From this period we have instruments, models of performers, depictions of musicians and dancers on vessels, and the Shijing, or The Book of Poetry, which contains poems and songs of court and common people during the Zhou dynasty.

From the evidence we have available, it is likely that music played an extremely important role in the Zhou dynasty for all social classes. Texts attributed to Confucius express his high regard for music, and a well-educated man at the time was expected to have a good knowledge of music. Music was part of religious and court rituals, banquets, and other important events. Singing and dancing were often an integral part of a musical performance, whether for religious or recreational purposes.

One of the most important sources of information we have regarding Zhou-dynasty music is from the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng (ca. 433 B.C.E.). This tomb was uncovered in 1977 in Hubei Province and contained the most extensive and well-preserved set of musical instruments ever found in an ancient Chinese tomb.

This four-chamber tomb was designed in imitation of a palace with a central courtyard, reflecting the belief that the Marquis Yi would require the same comforts in the afterlife that he had enjoyed during his lifetime. The central chamber of the tomb, which mirrored a palace courtyard, contained most of the musical instruments found, including a complete set of sixty-five graduated bells mounted on wooden racks, thirty-two stone chimes (also mounted), drums, seven zithers, and eight wind instruments, including two pan pipes. In addition, twenty-one young women were interred with the Marquis Yi, some of whom were likely his favorite musicians and dancers.

The Marquis Yi’s set of sixty-five bells is remarkable for a variety of reasons. First, they are clearly dated—an inscription indicates that the bells were a gift given to him in 433 B.C.E. by the Chu king, the leader of a nearby state. Second, the bells were very expensive to produce and to purchase, particularly a set this size—further evidence of the Marquis Yi’s status. Finally, the bells, along with the other instruments in the room, illustrate what an instrumental ensemble might have consisted of during this period. Scholars believe that it would have required twenty-four musicians to play all instruments at once.

There are still many gaps in our knowledge of ancient Chinese music, partly because there was no system for recording music in a written form. A text entitled The Book of Music is believed to contain information about music during the Zhou dynasty, but it was lost or destroyed.

For resources on ancient Chinese music, see “The Legacy of Ancient Chinese Music: Special Recommendations,” page 98.
Musical Instruments

Instruments such as the graduated set of six bells (see page 34) were played in large ensembles with a variety of other instruments, including the zither, stone chimes, and pan pipes.

Zither

Bing Xia of the Chinese Music Society of Greater Washington plays the zither, a stringed instrument with a hollow wooden base that is played by plucking or strumming.
Stone Chimes
Stone chimes are different sizes in order to create different tones. They are hung from a frame and played with a wooden mallet.

Pan Pipes
The pan pipes are a wind instrument made of several bamboo pipes of different lengths. Pan pipes emit a sound when the player blows into the pipes. Below, Bao Hui Chan of the Chinese Music Society of Greater Washington plays the pan pipes.
This ritual food vessel, called a gui, is extremely important because of the ninety-character inscription cast on the inside. According to the text, an archer named Jing was rewarded by a Zhou king for his exceptional skill as an archery trainer. In ancient China, archery—the art of shooting with a bow and arrow—was considered a necessary social skill for the wealthy. To record his royal gift, Jing had the gui cast with a dedication to his mother, along with an expression of the hope that his descendants would continue to use the vessel for ten thousand years. The dedication reads as follows:

In the sixth month, in the first quarter, the King was at Feng Jing. On the day dingmao the King commanded Jing to supervise archery. The sons and younger brothers of the nobles, the high and low officials, and the attendants studied archery. In the eighth month in the first quarter, on the day gengyin, the King and Wu [?] and Lu Wang with officers from [?] and [?] and Bang Zhou had an archery contest at the Da Chi. Jing’s training had been effective. The King presented Jing with an archer’s arm guard. Jing bowed his head and presumed to extol the Son of Heaven. He made this sacrificial gui for his mother Wai Ji. May sons and grandsons use it for ten thousand years.

This vessel is decorated with the popular Zhou-dynasty motif of two mirror-image birds with heads turned backward. The narrow dragon frieze—the horizontal band decorating this vessel—closely parallels the bird pattern with its backward-facing creatures.
The calligraphy above by John Wang uses the characters taken from the Jing gui inscription: *yī jīng yòng xué*. Put together in this order, these characters mean “tranquillity is the key to learning.”
Chinese Characters

Unlike the Roman alphabet used in English, the Chinese writing system consists of characters. Each character corresponds to one spoken syllable, but most Chinese words are compound words—made up of two or more characters. There are approximately fifty thousand Chinese characters in existence, although most Chinese people know between five and eight thousand characters. Although there are many distinctly different Chinese dialects—for example, Cantonese is spoken in Guangdong Province and Hong Kong—written Chinese is understandable for all literate Chinese people.

Chinese characters evolved from a pictograph-like script called “oracle-bone script,” examples of which are found on oracle bones used for divination during the Shang dynasty (see the oracle-bone fragment, page 41). During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, a modified form of the earlier oracle-bone script—called “large-seal script”—was inscribed onto bronze objects.

In the Qin dynasty, small-seal script became the standard when the emperor of Qin made the Chinese writing system, previously full of regional variations, uniform for all of China. During the Han dynasty, a new script emerged called “clerical script.” This practical script for daily use was easier to write at a high brush speed and was more angular than small-seal script. The traditional Chinese characters in use today emerged in the fourth century, in part due to the search by Chinese calligraphers to find an even more fluid and flexible kind of character. In the mid-twentieth century, mainland China developed a system of simplified characters still in use today.

The pictographic origins of Chinese characters are still evident in some words. For example, the character for tree, *mu*, closely resembles the tree it is meant to represent. The character *mu* is also a radical, which is a “base” component of a character that can indicate meaning or pronunciation. Thus, two *mu* radicals joined together form the character *lin*, meaning “woods.” Three *mu* radicals joined together form the character pronounced *sen*, which means “luxuriant growth of trees.” The compound word *senlin* means “forest.”
This tortoiseshell fragment was used as an oracle bone in the court of the Shang-dynasty kings. The term “oracle bone” refers to ox scapulae and tortoiseshells used by Shang kings for divination. In the early twentieth century, farmers living near the town of Anyang in northern China found large quantities of these ox scapulae. Believing they were dragon bones, the farmers sold them as medicinal ingredients. Twentieth-century Chinese scholars recognized that on these bones were etched early Chinese writings that revealed valuable information about the religious life of the Shang (see Focus on Chinese Characters, page 40). In fact, oracle bones were used by Shang-dynasty kings on a regular basis to ask advice of royal ancestor spirits and to predict the future.

Under the direction of the king and his shaman, the bones of cattle, water buffalo, and tortoises were scraped, polished, and perhaps soaked. When dry, the bones or shells were chiseled to produce rows of grooves and hollows. On behalf of the king, a scribe would then etch a question onto the bone or shell surface which requested information and guidance from the spirit of a royal ancestor. During the ritual, a shaman would insert a heated rod into the bottom of the grooves and hollows to produce hairline cracks on the opposite side of the bone. The cracks were interpreted to provide an answer to the king’s question. Sometimes the answers were recorded on the surface of the oracle bone.

In the Shang dynasty, questions were frequently posed by the king prior to undertaking an important task. For example, the king might ask about building a new town or going to battle. He might seek insight about a hunt or a journey, or the meaning of a particular event or dream. The method used by the shaman to interpret the cracks is not known.

Oracle Bones

Although the writing on the oracle-bone fragment from the Freer Gallery of Art has not yet been deciphered, scholars have been able to translate complete divination inscriptions from other oracle bones.

Inscription asking for the assistance of a royal ancestor spirit
Crack making on guiyou (day 10): “To Father Jia (the seventeenth king) we pray for good hunting.”

Inscriptions about the king’s health
Divined: “Grandfather Ding (the fifteenth king, father of Xiaoyi) is harming the king.”
Divined: “There is a sick tooth; it is not Father Yi (=Xiaoyi, as above) who is harming (it/him).”

Inscription about (Shang) Di’s possible role in a poor harvest
Divined: “It is not Di who is harming our harvest.”

Inscription about a nature spirit’s interference with the weather
Crack making on binguwu (day 43)
Divined: “It is the Mountain Power that is harming the rain.”

This vessel is in the form of two owls standing back-to-back. Each has large horns and a decorated beak. Ornithologists believe that these birds represent a species related to the great horned owl. The vessel has four legs, two for each owl. Scalelike patterns are used to simulate feathers on the wing and breast areas. Crested birds with bottle horns are located above and below the wings, and dragons coil partway around each foot. A monster mask is located on each side. The knob at the top of the vessel is decorated with a masklike motif traditionally called “taotie,” which is not seen on any other part of the vessel, suggesting that the knob is not original.

The taotie mask is found on a wide variety of ancient Chinese art objects, beginning in the late Neolithic Period. Earlier scholars believed that the mask represented the blood and terror related to human and animal sacrifice in early Chinese history. However, the taotie is now considered a kind of stylized animal mask whose meaning is not yet known.
Bronze Casting

Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. The largest proportion is copper, but tin gives bronze its hardness. Lead is often added to bronze because it lowers bronze’s melting point, causing it to flow better during casting. Bronze can range in color from red (low tin content) to golden or white-silver hues (higher tin content).

The earliest known Chinese cast-bronze vessels date to 2000 to 1500 B.C.E., and the process for making them was complex and laborious. Given the vast number of early Chinese bronzes that still exist, it is clear that the bronze workshops were staffed with numerous artisans. The various tasks required to make the vessels included model and mold making, mining and smelting of ores, casting, and finishing, indicating marked division of labor in Chinese society.

The earliest bronzes were cast in sections using molds made out of clay. Decorations and designs were frequently carved into the inner surfaces. The clay pieces were set around a solid clay core and were separated from each other by spacers. The metals were then heated to a molten state, about 1,000 degrees Celsius, and poured between the core and clay mold. After cooling, the molds were broken to reveal the bronze object (see diagram below). The object was then polished and sometimes colored by applying heat or chemicals to the surface.

In the Eastern Zhou dynasty, the lost-wax method of bronze casting was introduced. In this process, a wax model was made of the object, which was then carefully coated with clay. Rods of wax called “runners” were placed on the object to leave openings in the clay coating. The clay was baked to harden, at which point the wax melted and ran out of the openings formed by the runners, leaving a hollow space. This space was then filled with molten bronze, which would solidify to form a metal replica of the original wax model.

Illustration of bronze casting process.
During this period, tombs included many types of ceramic structures, depicting stoves, pigsties, goat pens, architectural models, domesticated animals, fish ponds, rice paddies, and human beings.

This tower is constructed of simple units with hand-sculpted figures. It is a two-story tower protected by a moat that contains small models of swans, frogs, turtles, and fish. Archers and other guards keep watch at the corners of each level. The small roofs with sculpted tiles illustrate basic elements of Chinese architectural tradition during the first centuries of the common era.

Towers like this one reflect living conditions at the end of the Han dynasty. Most of the people at this time farmed for a living, and a large land holding was the basic political and economic unit. Towers were built at the four corners of these properties to give protection and were manned by archers and guards from wealthy landowners’ personal armies. These structures also served as refuges for a landowner’s family during times of war, as the Eastern Han dynasty was a time of significant unrest.
This model of a granary (a structure made for grain storage) is made of earthenware with a green glaze. Its legs have animal-like shapes, resembling a bear or horned creature. This model is the type that was typically buried in a tomb, and it gives us some idea of life during the Han dynasty, when agriculture was the foundation of the society and grains were the most important crop (see Focus on Food in Ancient China, page 29).
In China a form of ancestor worship dates back at least as far as the Shang dynasty. There is ample evidence of Shang religious ceremonies in which kings made offerings and sacrifices to royal ancestors and also appealed to them for guidance about the future.

In conjunction with the 2001 Arthur M. Sackler Gallery exhibition *Worshiping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits*, Chinese American teens from the Washington, D.C., area researched contemporary ancestor worship. These teens, who have family origins in Taiwan, introduce on the following pages a present-day altar and also offer personal stories of ancestor worship that reflect the importance of family relationships and lineage.

**FOCUS ON**

**Worshiping the Ancestors**

June 17–September 9, 2001

This exhibition displayed the magnificent ancestral portraits of the late Ming (1368–1644) and Qing imperial courts, as well as the social and military elite. Displayed near family altars, these portraits functioned as a focal point for honoring the deceased.

This portrait of Prince Hongming was featured in the Sackler exhibition. It is an example of the kind of portrait that would have been used near the ancestral altar of a member of the Qing imperial family. Commoners used similar but less elaborate portraits.

Portrait of Prince Hongming (1705–1767). China, Qing dynasty, 1767 or later copy. Hanging scroll; ink and color on silk; 200.8 x 115.4 cm (image only). Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Collections Acquisitions Program and partial gift of Richard G. Pritzlaff, S1991.61

Detail, ritual wine vessel (fangyi). China, Shang dynasty, 12th–11th century B.C.E. Bronze; 19.3 x 10.7 x 7.7 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution. Purchase, F1954.13
Notes on a Contemporary Altar

Fruit baskets and food offerings
The fruit and bowls of food are offerings made to the deceased to earn the soul merits. They consist of food that the deceased enjoyed eating in his or her lifetime. The food offerings are usually replaced daily, but fruits can be left on the altar for a little while longer. Offerings of fruits and vegetables are preferred; meats are avoided because they symbolize the killing of animals. These symbols strongly reflect the Buddhist religion.

Portrait
The portrait of the deceased on the altar lets mourners see an image of their loved one. In earlier times, portraits like the ones displayed in the Worshiping the Ancestors exhibition took the place of these small portraits. In the past, only wealthy families and members of the imperial court could afford elaborate commemorative portraits. In modern times, a photograph is a common replacement for an expensive commemorative portrait.

Plaques
The plaque under the portrait shows the name of the deceased person. These plaques usually give the name of the deceased and a short inscription, perhaps an epitaph of some sort. The larger, red object is another plaque. Instead of having inscriptions dedicated to the person depicted in the portrait, the larger plaque shows the family name or names of both ancestors. Memorial altars may include either of the two plaques or both.

Money
The money stacked off to the side is also an offering made to the soul of the deceased for use in the afterlife. The Chinese perceive the afterlife to be similar to real life. Since the deceased loved ones only recently arrived in the afterlife, they need money to help them get started.

Wine bottles and cups
Much like the food offerings, wine is placed on the altar for the benefit of the late family member’s soul. During the funeral, more important necessities, paper symbols of money, clothing, and shoes, and today, even computers, are sacrificed. Daily luxuries, including food, wine, and small sums of money are offered during the mourning period.

Mike Liu

Looking at the Altar
This photo is of the altar used during my grandfather’s funeral in Taiwan in the summer of 1975. Normally altars are taken down forty-nine days after the person’s death, because the altar was used by the family for paying respects to the recently deceased during the forty-nine-day period, when the spirit of the deceased is going through judgment. After this altar was taken down, my grandfather was considered one of our ancestors, and my family paid their respects to him along with the other ancestors.

Gloria Huang

Ancestor Worship Today: Teen Research

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Notes on a Contemporary Altar

Fruit baskets and food offerings
The fruit and bowls of food are offerings made to the deceased to earn the soul merits. They consist of food that the deceased enjoyed eating in his or her lifetime. The food offerings are usually replaced daily, but fruits can be left on the altar for a little while longer. Offerings of fruits and vegetables are preferred; meats are avoided because they symbolize the killing of animals. These symbols strongly reflect the Buddhist religion.

Portrait
The portrait of the deceased on the altar lets mourners see an image of their loved one. In earlier times, portraits like the ones displayed in the Worshiping the Ancestors exhibition took the place of these small portraits. In the past, only wealthy families and members of the imperial court could afford elaborate commemorative portraits. In modern times, a photograph is a common replacement for an expensive commemorative portrait.

Plaques
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Mike Liu
Personal Stories

Carol and Kenneth Chiu

This story begins many years ago in Taiwan, when Kenneth Chiu and his wife, Carol, were dating. Kenneth and his family paid respects to their ancestors each year with ceremonies and offerings. One year, Carol happened to be visiting Kenneth during one of the ceremony days. She was a Christian and didn’t understand the significance of the rituals. Kenneth responded to her questions by asking for her ancestors’ names and their land of origin. Then he took some paper “spirit” money, sealed it in an envelope, and burned it as an offering to her ancestors.

The next morning, Carol's mother, who had just arrived from China, began to talk about a strange thing that had just happened to her. She first told Carol something that she had never mentioned before: ever since the death of her own mother (Carol's grandmother), she had been haunted every year by her ghost. This happened on Qingming jie (Grave Sweeping Day). In the recurring dream, her mother stood before her, looking at her, but never saying a word. She was always wearing the clothes she had been buried in, now worn and tattered, and she was always frowning, seeming sad and unhappy. Every Qingming jie for twenty years, Carol's mother had this dream.

Carol still hadn’t spoken a word before her mother continued with her story. The night before, the eve of Qingming jie, the dream had occurred again. The same spirit approached her, but this time her mother was smiling! She had a look of contentment and was richly garbed with glowing, beautiful robes. Carol's mother finished her story with a look of awe on her face. Then Carol fully realized the importance of paper “spirit” money that Kenneth had burned as an offering to her dead ancestors. Her grandmother, as a spirit, had acquired the money in the offering.

Wu Meifun

In my family, women did not take part in the major roles of the funeral ceremony. Watching my brother, who was just a child, play an important role during [my grandmother’s] funeral made me feel sad, neglected. I was related to my grandmother as much as he was. I was already a teenager.

Now that I am a mother, I believe that all of my children, no matter what gender, have a responsibility to respect me because I love them and have endured hard work to raise them.

I also think a lot about my mother, who lives in Taiwan. I remember when she set up the table to invite the spirits of our ancestors. It was done sometimes spontaneously, and I didn’t understand why. But now, I understand. My mother had not seen her parents for forty years because they stayed on the mainland instead of moving to Taiwan. Setting up the spirit table was the only way she could think of to commemorate her parents and lessen the pain within.
Focus on

Grave Sweeping Day (Qingming jie)

This early spring holiday gives Chinese families an opportunity to honor their ancestors with a visit to their grave sites. At the graves, families sweep away dirt and repair any damage to the graves. They engage in prayer and make offerings to the deceased of wine, food, incense, flowers, and paper “spirit” money. Paper reproductions of television sets, refrigerators, and computers are also burned as offerings to the dead. Often, the families light firecrackers to scare away evil spirits.

Teresa Kan (recounting a childhood memory)

It’s morning again, and it’s time to worship our ancestors. My mom is lighting the incense sticks and putting them into a small pot filled with rice, which allows the sticks to stand up. They are about the size of sparklers used for fireworks. Mom usually burns three sticks at one time. She places the pot in front of the ancestral table that contains all of my family’s names. Then we sit in front, peacefully, and watch the incense sticks burn. They give off a nice aroma which fills the entire house. We often kowtow toward the table to show our respect for the ancestors.

From an Interview with Martin Chang

Martin Chang is an immigrant from Taiwan. He cannot travel to his father’s grave every year on Qingming jie (Grave Sweeping Day). When he does go to Taiwan, he visits the grave and performs the necessary ceremonies for his father. By putting fresh flowers near the grave and food on the gravestone, he pays respect to his father. Then he prays and using incense sticks, tells his father that he has come home. To pay even more respect, he does three kowtows. Although it is supposed to be done on Qingming jie, he cleans the grave by cutting all the weeds. To keep the gravestone in good shape, he repaints the words that are already carved, putting his father’s name in gold and his mother’s name in red, since she is still alive.
Discussion Questions: Ancestor Worship Today

1. Using the information you have about Shang-dynasty ancestor worship and contemporary ancestor worship, compare and contrast the two. What has remained intact from the Shang dynasty? What has changed? How?

Suggested answers

Similarities
- belief in afterlife
- belief that spirits need material goods from this life to enjoy in the afterlife
- honoring of ancestors
- offerings made to ancestors

Differences
- During the Shang dynasty, rituals were conducted by male kings.
- Today, all family members can participate in ancestor worship (although in many families the senior male still leads the ceremonies).
- During the Shang dynasty, it was believed that ancestors could act as intermediaries with Shang Di.
- During the Shang dynasty, offerings to ancestors included wine, animals, and even humans.
- Today families most often give offerings of food, paper money, and other paper items, which are burned to send the items to the spirit world.

2. How do you, your family, or your friends commemorate the deceased?

3. In the story of Carol and Kenneth Chiu, Carol and Kenneth have different religious beliefs. How can two (or more) religious traditions coexist in one family? What are the potential problems? What are the advantages?

4. In her interview, Wu Meifun tells of her disappointment that her younger brother was given a much bigger role in her grandmother’s funeral than she was. What kinds of gender divisions have you noticed in American society? In your community? What do you think may be the reasons for these divisions?