

# An Analysis of the Commonalities in the Cultural Connotation of “Left Ancestors and Right Society” and the Spring Festival Sacrifice

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**Abstract:** The “Left Ancestor Right Society” and the Spring Festival sacrifice are two important rituals in traditional Chinese culture, both of which have the same sacrifice object and are influenced by Confucianism and the theory of yin and yang and the five elements. This article is to find common ideological and cultural connotations from the time nodes of the “Zuo Zu Right Society” sacrifice site and the Spring Festival sacrifice, which are also an important part of traditional Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Zuo Zu Right Society; Spring Festival; Sacrifice; Confucianism

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Sacrifice is the most primitive religious ritual of human beings to conform to nature and feel all things in heaven and earth. Comparing the sacrificial concept of the Left Ancestor Right Society with the Spring Festival sacrificial concept, and running the sacrifice through space and time, is the true embodiment of the oldest Chinese concept of heaven and earth, this sacrificial behavior has been passed down through time, we may only retain the ritual, but its connotation and spirit have long been forgotten.

## 1. The sacrificial behavior of the “Left Ancestor Right Society”

### 1.1 The “left” and “right” of the “Left Ancestor Right Society”

Regarding the layout of the “Left Ancestor Right Society”, Jia Gongyan pointed out in his annotation of “Zhou Li: Tianguan Preface”: “The temple is yang, so it is on the left; Sheji is yin, so it is on the right. <sup>1</sup>At the same time, there is a similar saying in Confucianism: “The south is the yang, and the left is the top.” <sup>2</sup>From the perspective of the ancient yin and yang eight trigrams and five elements, the kun hexagram represents the southwest direction, and the five elements belong to the earth, which is the extreme yin hexagram and symbolizes the mother. Moreover, the ancient Chinese have always called the land Mother Earth, giving birth to all things, so the Sheji Altar was built on the right side. The Qiangua represents gold in the five elements, and it is the polar yang hexagram, symbolizing the father.

### 1.2 The sacrificial ceremony of the “Left Ancestor Right Society”

Taimiao is a temple where ancient emperors worshiped their ancestors. Confucianism promotes respect for ancestors, believing that worshipping ancestors can pray for ancestral spirits to protect future generations. There is a cloud in the Analects: “Sacrifice is like being, sacrifice to God as God is, and if you don’t sacrifice to God, the gods are angry with people.”

The shrine is a special place dedicated to the land and grains. In Confucianism, it is pointed out in “Mencius: Writing with All Your Heart”: “The people are precious, the community is secondary, and the monarch is light.” <sup>3</sup>“Representing the livelihood of the common people, the shrine is offered to pray for the blessings of the land god and the god of grains. The importance of the temple and shrine rituals in cultivating good morals and passing on the family culture was emphasized.

## 2. The sacrificial behavior of the Spring Festival

### 2.1 The origin of the Spring Festival

The Spring Festival is a traditional Chinese festival and the grandest celebration of the year. Regarding the origin of the Spring Festival, the most widely spread is the legend of the “Nian” beast. In addition to the legend of the Spring Festival, other scholars

believe that the Spring Festival is related to some kind of primitive religious sacrifice. The primitive ancestors had a sense of fear of the unknown nature, but at the same time, human production and life depended on nature, so that human beings had a sense of awe for nature, so many religious rituals were held to pray for the blessing of heaven and earth.

## 2.2 The sacrificial customs of the Spring Festival

In ancient times, the main object of the wax sacrifice was the gods of heaven and earth, according to the “Book of Rites and the Order of the Month”: “It is the moon, and the big drink is boiled.” The Son of Heaven prayed for the coming year in Tianzong, and the Great Cutting Shrine was in the commune and the gate. The ancestors of the five rituals, the workers and peasants rested. <sup>4</sup>In the “Book of Rites: Miscellaneous Notes”, in the dialogue between Confucius and Zigong, “Zigong looks at wax. Confucius said: ‘Give it also happy? He said, “The people of a country are crazy, and they are happy to know the unknown!”’ Zi said: “The wax of a hundred days, the Ze of one day, Feier knows it.” Zhang is not relaxed, and the civil and military are also capable; Relaxed but not relaxed, civil and military for the also. One piece and one relaxation, the way of civil and military affairs. <sup>5</sup>”The people of a country are crazy” reflects the grand atmosphere of the ritual activities, which not only have serious sacrificial ceremonies, but also include carnival celebrations and performances, which is a major sacrificial activity for the whole people to celebrate the harvest.

The main object of sacrifice on Chinese New Year’s Eve is ancestor worship (Figure 1), which is also one of the important customs of Chinese New Year’s Eve. Before Chinese New Year’s Eve, people “welcome their ancestors home,” arrange offerings and meals, and burn three pillars of incense. (Fig. 2) Traditional Chinese culture believes that although ancestors are deceased, their souls still exist and can protect future generations, a custom influenced by Confucianism, as Confucius said: “The ritual of sacrifice is also admonished.” <sup>6</sup>.



(Fig.1 Ancestor worship scene, Asia Grand View Series 3, Chapter 9 Image source: Toyo Bunko)



(Fig.2 Ancestor Worship Scene: The Ninth Chapter of the Third Series of the Grand View of Asia Image Source: Toyo Bunko)

## 3. “Zuozu Right Society” and Confucianism in the Spring Festival

“Zuozu Right Society” is the sacrificial field, and the Spring Festival is the time node of the sacrifice, although the two are completely different in nature, but the sacrificial customs and etiquette are inextricably linked.

### 3.1 The same object of sacrifice

Taimiao, as a royal exclusive sacrificial field. The shrine focuses on the sacrifices of the god of the land and the god of the grain. Its establishment reflects the dependence and reverence of ancient people for the land and grain.

The Spring Festival is an important time for families to worship their ancestors. It represents people’s wishes to their ancestors and gods, hoping that the new year will bring good luck and good fortune.

The objects of worship at the Taimiao, Sheji Altar and Spring Festival all focus on the gods and ancestors, highlighting the ancient Chinese reverence for heaven, earth and man. It is recorded in the “Historical Records and Book of Rites”: “The heavens and the earth,

respecting the ancestors and honoring the monarch are the three books of rites.” “The<sup>7</sup> act of ancestor worship expresses deep respect and nostalgia for ancestors in between.

### 3.2 The common embodiment of “benevolence” and “courtesy”

“Benevolence” and “propriety” are the core concepts of Confucianism. “Benevolence” represents a kind of great love that embraces all things, and is the highest requirement for human morality, as Confucius said: “The benevolent person loves others.”<sup>8</sup> “Rites” are the rules and regulations spontaneously formed by the society, and Confucianism advocates governing the country with rites to achieve a harmonious society of “great harmony in the world”.

The “Left Ancestor Right Society” sacrifice is to express gratitude to the ancestors through ancestor worship, emphasizing the role of “benevolence” in family ethics.

The folk family sacrifice of the Spring Festival focuses more on the memory of loved ones, hoping to “reunite the whole family” on Chinese New Year’s Eve, reflecting the expression of “benevolence” in family care. In this traditional and solemn ceremony, people express their admiration and longing for their ancestors, which is the dual embodiment of Confucianism’s “benevolence” and “propriety”.

Worshipping gods and ancestors demonstrated the Confucian concept of hierarchy regarding the superiority and inferiority of the elderly, and had a profound impact on the social system in terms of emphasizing ethics and morality, and the “Chinese Lu Yu Shang” clearly stipulated: “The temple of Fuzong has a clear Muye, and the elders and young of the next life, and the relatives of the equal are also alienated.”<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 The influence of the theory of yin and yang and the five elements

The theory of yin and yang and the five elements runs through the structure and sacrificial rituals of the “Left Ancestor and Right Society”, as well as the related customs and sacrificial activities of the Spring Festival. The ancients believed that the balance of yin and yang is the only way for all things to grow, which reflects the ancient Chinese materialist view.

The Taimiao Temple and the Sheji Altar are divided according to the attributes of the balance of the five elements of yin and yang. The five-colored soil in the altar corresponds to the five elements, representing the five directions, and also symbolizes the five gods.

The Spring Festival rituals are usually carried out in the family, and the altar may be arranged with the balance of the five elements of yin and yang in mind, choosing colors, symbols and other elements that match the attributes of the five elements, and the sacrificers will choose the offerings that represent the five elements. The five rituals in the Spring Festival are the sacrifices to the gods that correspond to the invisible, and it is recorded in the “Han Book Discussion”: “The five rituals of the temple are called the five elements of gold, wood, water, fire, and earth…….”<sup>1</sup>

## References:

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## Explanatory note:

- 1 From Jia Gongyan, annotated by Zhou Li Tianguan Preface, see Jia’s Anthology, published in the 42nd year of Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty.
- 2 The commentary refers to the interpretations of the Zhou Yi and Zhu Xi by the ancient commentators Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, as well as the research results of later scholars on this scripture.
- 3 From “Mencius”, please refer to “Mencius: Writing with All My Heart”
- 4 From The Book of Rites: The Order of the Moon
- 5 “Miscellaneous Notes”
- 6 From the Analects, specifically the Analects of Wei Linggong
- 7 From “Historical Records: Book of Rites No. 1”
- 8 In the Analects, Confucius once said in the chapter of “Yongye”: “I have five out of ten and am determined to learn, thirty and stand, forty and not confused, fifty and know the destiny of heaven, sixty and obedient, seventy and do what I want, and do not exceed the rules.” In the Analects of Yongye, the phrase “benevolent, loving others” is an expression of the concept of “benevolence”, as shown in the relevant chapters of the Analects.
- 9 From “Chinese Lu Yu”