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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Cultural Transformation of Ancestor Worship in China from Tradition to Digitalization

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Abstract

Ancestor worship is a tradition that has long been an important part of Chinese culture, reflecting the values of family memory, moral ethics, and collective identity. As social changes and technological advancements have occurred, the practice of ancestor worship has undergone a significant transformation from traditional rituals bound by time and space to a more flexible and individualized digital form. The study examines these changes using a five-dimensional comparative framework: time, space, behavior and media, social participation and interaction, and governance and ethics. The methods used include literature review, thematic analysis, and field observation, so as to gain an in-depth understanding of the shift from clan-based collective rituals to offline hybrid practices that adapt to modern lifestyles. The results of the study show the decentralization of time and space, symbolization and digitization of ritual media, diversification of participation, and changes in governance patterns. Despite the change in form, core values such as devotion to ancestors and memory preservation are maintained. This study highlights the challenges and opportunities in maintaining the depth of cultural meaning and sense of ritual in the digital age, and provides recommendations for the development of digital platforms and cultural preservation policies.

Keywords: Ancestor worship, Online memorial platform, Cultural transformation, Digital rituals, Ritual continuity

Introduction

Ancestor worship has long been a central component of Chinese cultural heritage, deeply embedded in family memory, moral ethics, and collective identity. Historically, it has served as a bridge connecting the living and deceased, reinforcing lineage bonds and transmitting values across generations. The ritual process of ancestor worship has traditionally involved strict time selection, designated spaces, elaborate ceremonial procedures, and symbolic offerings, all governed by a codified set of rules.

In recent decades, rapid urbanization and socio-economic change have led to many people leaving their ancestral homes. Industrialization and funeral reforms have changed burial customs and places of worship. The fast pace of life has reduced participation in traditional collective rituals. Against this backdrop, digital technology has created new opportunities for commemorating ancestors. This has given rise to "digital ancestor worship," which allows descendants to commemorate their ancestors virtually via memorial websites or mobile apps. This transformation from physical to digital spaces has reshaped the way people interact with ancestral memory and raised questions about how ritual depth, cultural symbolism, and emotional resonance can be preserved in virtual environments.

While existing research has examined the historical evolution and symbolic structure of ancestor worship, previous research has not systematically compared traditional and digital practices within a single unified analysis framework. Moreover, the actual processes of contemporary ancestor worship, especially hybrid models that combine offline and online elements, remain under-documented.

To address these gaps, this study applies a literature review, thematic analysis, and observation. Using the five-dimensional comparative framework (time, space, behavior and media, participation and sociality, governance and ethics) summarized by researchers, this study systematically contrasts traditional ancestor worship with its modern forms, aiming to identify points of continuity, key differences, and the underlying cultural transformation from a clan-centered, place-bound practice to a more individualized, mobile, and digitally mediated ritual system.

Literature review

The history of ancestor worship in China represents a progressive process from spiritual belief to ritual codification, then ethical tradition, and finally cultural symbolism. At its core, it has consistently centered on the principles of "remembering ancestors, preserving memory, and sustaining the community." The following review traces its evolution across major historical stages, highlighting the cultural essence of each period, revealed through historical records and existing scholarship.

The development of traditional ancestor worship

I. Prehistoric period: The origin of ancestor worship (C. 10,000 years ago-2070 BCE)

Ancestor worship originates from the primitive belief in the immortality of the soul. Neolithic burial sites, such as the Banpo site of the Yangshao culture in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, already exhibit ritual traces, including grave goods (pottery, stone tools, and grain placed in the tomb to symbolize "provisions for the ancestors"), burial orientation (Banpo tombs facing west, possibly linked to the belief that "the soul returns to the west"), and secondary burial (the relocation of ancestral remains into collective graves to symbolize the "reunion of the family's souls"). During this period, ancestor worship was a religious ritual intended to "appease the ancestral spirits and pray for the protection of the clan," reflecting the primitive sense of community based on blood ties (Coe & Begley, 2016).

II. Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou dynasties: Ritual formalization and state sacrifice (2070-771 BCE)

During the Xia and Shang dynasties, ancestor worship evolved from a clan-based ceremony into a state religion centered on "worshipping gods." Oracle bone inscriptions from the Shang period record numerous ancestral divinations (e.g., Oracle bone script: *Zhen·Report to Ancestors*) (Hu, 1999), showing how Shang kings communicated with Heaven through ancestral rites to secure political legitimacy. Sacrificial forms included human sacrifice (using slaves or war captives), reflecting the severity and hierarchy of ancestor veneration.

In the Western Zhou, Zhou Gong (Ji Dan, politician, thinker, and son of the emperor) established the *Liyue* system— a comprehensive moral and institutional code—integrating ancestor worship into the state ritual order and promoting the doctrine of "matching Heaven with virtue." Ancestors were no longer arbitrary supernatural beings but moral entities bound by virtue. Key developments included:

The clan temple system: The emperor worshipped seven generations of ancestors; vassals, five; literati, three; and officials, one—strictly ranked.

The codified ritual process: The Liyue specified state sacrifices, including the sacrifice to the founding ancestor, collective ancestor worship, autumn sacrifice, and winter sacrifice.

Sacrifice as if serving the living: The deceased's lifetime food, clothing, and music were used to treat them as living elders (Li Ling, 2020). Human sacrifice was abolished.

III. The spring and autumn period and the warring states period: Confucian theorization (770–221 BCE)

The decline of the Zhou ritual order (collapse of the Liyue system) transformed ancestor worship from state institutions to a moral practice. Confucianism redefined it as a central expression of **filial piety**:

Confucius taught, "Sacrifice as if they were present; sacrifice to the spirits as if the spirits were present" (*Analects, Ba Yi*), emphasizing sincerity over form.

Mencius linked ancestor worship to family ethics: "Serving parents is primary, serving elder brothers secondary, serving rulers last" (Mencius, Li Lou I).

Xunzi explained its social function: rituals "nourish" the senses and emotions, cultivating familial bonds through offerings, music, and ceremony.

During this period, ancestor worship evolved from a religious rite into an ethical practice and became a core symbol of Confucian culture (Lin Qiping, 2022).

IV. Qin–Han to Sui–Tang dynasties: Unification and secularization (221 BCE–907 CE)

Following imperial unification, ancestor worship developed into a dual structure. At the **national level**, the imperial ancestral temple system continued, with regular sacrifices symbolizing political legitimacy. At the **civilian level**, the Han dynasty saw the emergence of family temples for nobles and officials, while ordinary people mainly practiced "tomb sacrifices" (offering sacrifices in front of their ancestors' tombs) (Xu Jiang, 2019).

In the Tang dynasty, Empress Wu Zetian relaxed restrictions on temple construction, allowing most officials to establish family temples. By the mid-Tang, ancestral temples had spread to commoners, transforming ancestor worship from an aristocratic privilege into a widespread folk custom (Lu Yunfeng & Wu Yue, 2023).

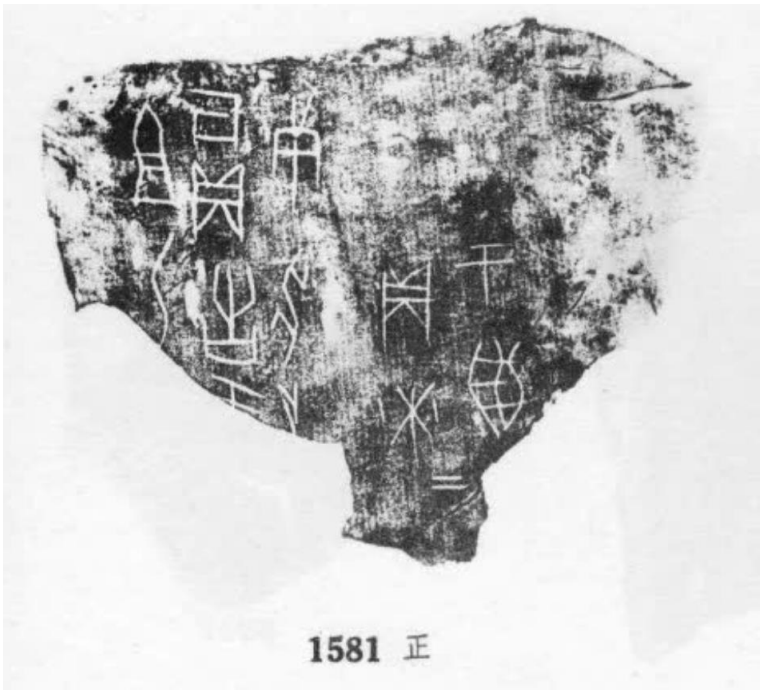


Figure 1 Oracle bone script: *Zhen report to ancestors*
Source: Oracle bone inscriptions collection P366 (Hu, 1999)

V. Song– Yuan– Ming– Qing Dynasties: Clan Consolidation and Popularization (960 – 1912 CE)

During this period, the clan system became the foundation of rural society, and ancestor worship was institutionalized through **ancestral halls**. In the Song dynasty, Neo-Confucianism (especially Zhu Xi's *Family Rituals*) formalized the ancestral hall as the sacred center of the clan.

In the Ming dynasty, the state encouraged hall construction, extending the right to commoners. By the Qing dynasty, the clan system had reached its peak, with **genealogies** and ancestral halls becoming twin pillars of identity: genealogies recorded lineage, while ancestral halls enshrined tablets and codified ritual order (e.g., spring sacrifices with "three main livestock": cattle, sheep, and pig, autumn sacrifices with five grains).

Ancestor worship became a tool of rural governance, reinforcing clan cohesion and regulating behavior through clan rules; embodying the ideal of "family–state isomorphism" (Lu Yunfeng & Wu Yue, 2023).

VI. Modern and contemporary period: Western influence and transformation (1912 – Present)

Since the modern era, the impact of Western culture and changes in social structure— such as urbanization and the dissolution of clan systems—have shifted ancestor worship from clan- dominated to a carrier of cultural identity. In the late Qing and early Republican periods, the New Culture Movement criticized "feudal rites," leading to the demolition of some ancestral halls and the abolition of clan rules. However, family-based tomb sacrifices (e.g., Qingming tomb- sweeping) remained (Zhang, 2018). After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the "Four Olds" campaign further weakened traditional rituals, though the cultural core of "revering ancestors and honoring parents" persisted. Since the Reform and Opening- Up, the rise of cultural confidence has encouraged the revival of traditional practices, while digital technologies (e.g., "digital ancestor worship" and "virtual ancestral halls") have fostered the emergence of online ancestor worship, enabling participation across regions and time zones.

In overseas Chinese communities, ancestor worship has become central to cultural identity. In Ho Chi Minh City, the Chinese community regards ancestor worship as "long- standing cultural beauty," with a humanistic view that transcends bloodline boundaries, serving as a marker of overseas Chinese identity (Van & Long, 2021).

In this period, the core of ancestor worship changed from clan integration to cultural identity, and its form transitioned from offline ancestral halls to a hybrid online–offline model.

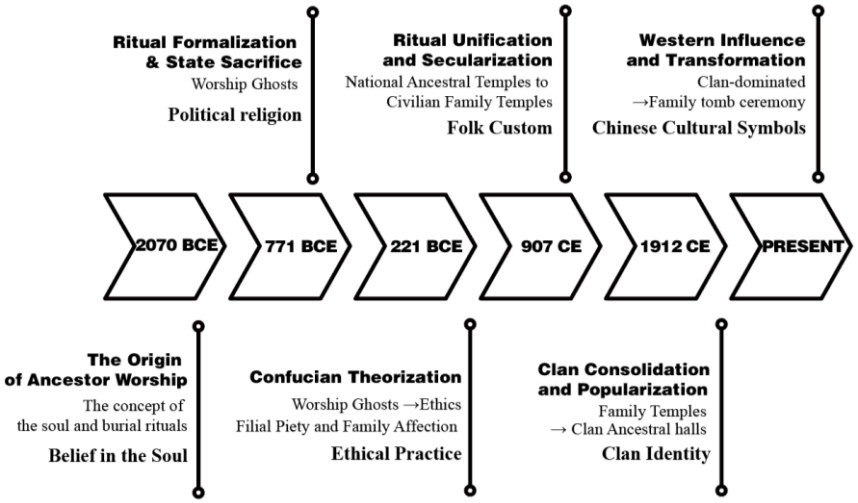


Figure 2 Six historical stages of ancestor worship in China: from prehistoric origins to digital transformation.
Source: Yang (2024)

VII. The historical logic and cultural core of Chinese ancestor worship

From prehistoric soul beliefs to modern digital rituals, the core of Chinese ancestor worship has remained unchanged— "remembering ancestors, preserving memory, and sustaining the community"— while its forms have evolved with the times: from a religious rite, to a political– clan integration tool, an ethical practice, and ultimately a cultural symbol. This characteristic of "unchanging core, ever- renewing forms" embodies the continuity of Chinese civilization (Coe & Begley, 2016). Ancestor worship is not merely a ritual but a cultural gene that carries the ethical values of filial piety, fraternal respect, and solidarity while sustaining the communal identity of the Chinese nation.

Traditional ritual process: Ritual practice in clan and family contexts

Traditional ancestor worship, a product of agrarian civilization and clan- based society, is grounded in the ritual logic of "sacrificing as if serving the living"— treating ancestors as living elders—and the structural

principle of "family–state isomorphism," in which the clan sacrifices function as a microcosmic extension of the state's ancestral temple rites. While the process varies slightly depending on the scale of the setting—whether in a clan ancestral hall or a family ancestral residence— it consistently revolves around reviving ancestral memory and reinforcing clan identity. The following description focuses on clan ancestral hall ceremonies, the most traditional and representative form of collective ritual, supplemented by the simplified format practiced in family ancestral residences.

Based on the literature review, the traditional ancestor worship process can be summarized into four main stages: (1) Preparations: selecting an auspicious date, observing ritual purification, and preparing necessary goods; (2) Decorate the space: cleaning and setting up the ancestral hall or designated ritual space; (3) Main Ceremony: inviting the ancestors, performing ritual bows and kowtows, reading a prayer, burning some goods for ancestors, and sending the ancestors off; and (4) Ending: removing the offerings, followed by sharing the ritual food in a communal feast. In clan ancestral halls, this sequence is performed in full form, including the formal reading of the eulogy. When conducted at home, the process is less elaborate, omitting the formal eulogy and replacing it with spoken words to express personal remembrance and recent family updates to the ancestors. This structured sequence provides the baseline for subsequent comparison with modern practices.

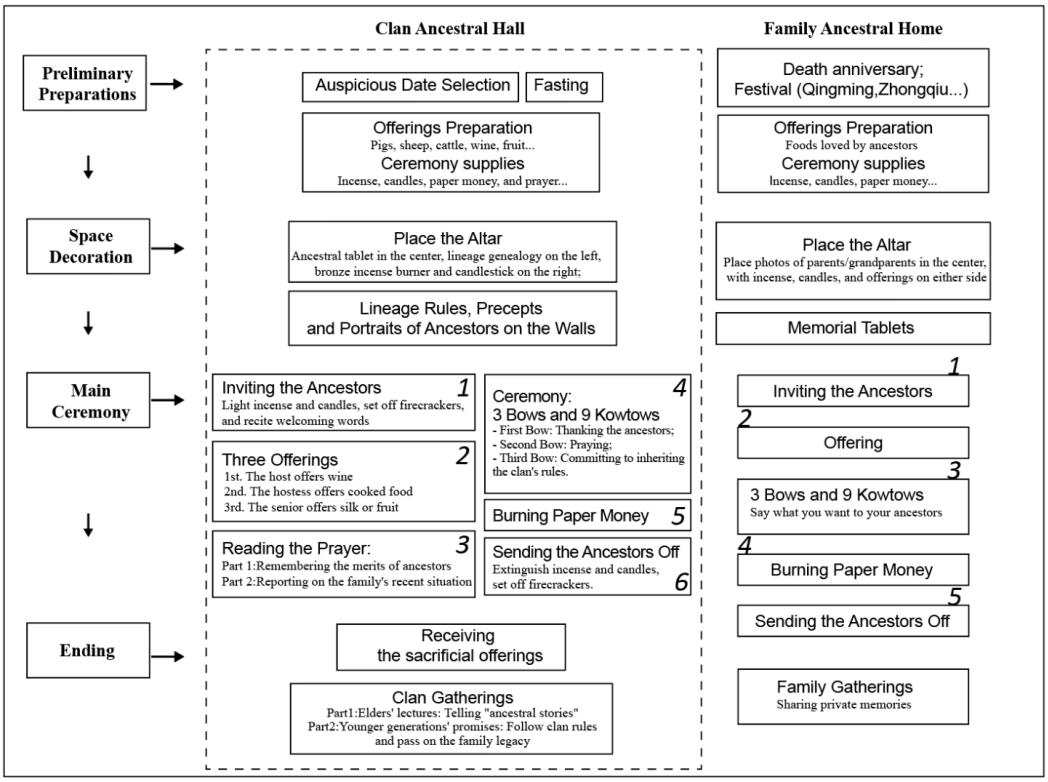


Figure 3 The traditional Chinese ancestor worship ceremony process.
Source: Yang (2024)

Contemporary forms of ancestor worship: Offline simplification and the rise of online commemoration

According to data from People's Daily Online, in 2024, the number of users across more than 2,000 platforms in China exceeded 120 million, representing a significant 37% increase over the previous year and indicating that online memorial services are gradually becoming a mainstream form of commemoration. This trend is closely tied to the profound social transformations brought about by rapid urbanization, large- scale population mobility, and reforms in the funeral system.

Across the country, the processes and elements of traditional offline ancestor worship have shown a marked trend toward simplification. The core logic of modern ancestor worship is to "preserve the emotional essence while optimizing the formal medium" — maintaining the traditional essence of "remembering ancestors and preserving memory" while adapting to the contemporary demands of convenience, globalization, and environmental sustainability.

Based on the literature review and observation method, the researchers combine offline settings (community/ family) with online platforms (digital memorial services), and the following systematically outlines the specific procedures of modern ancestor worship:

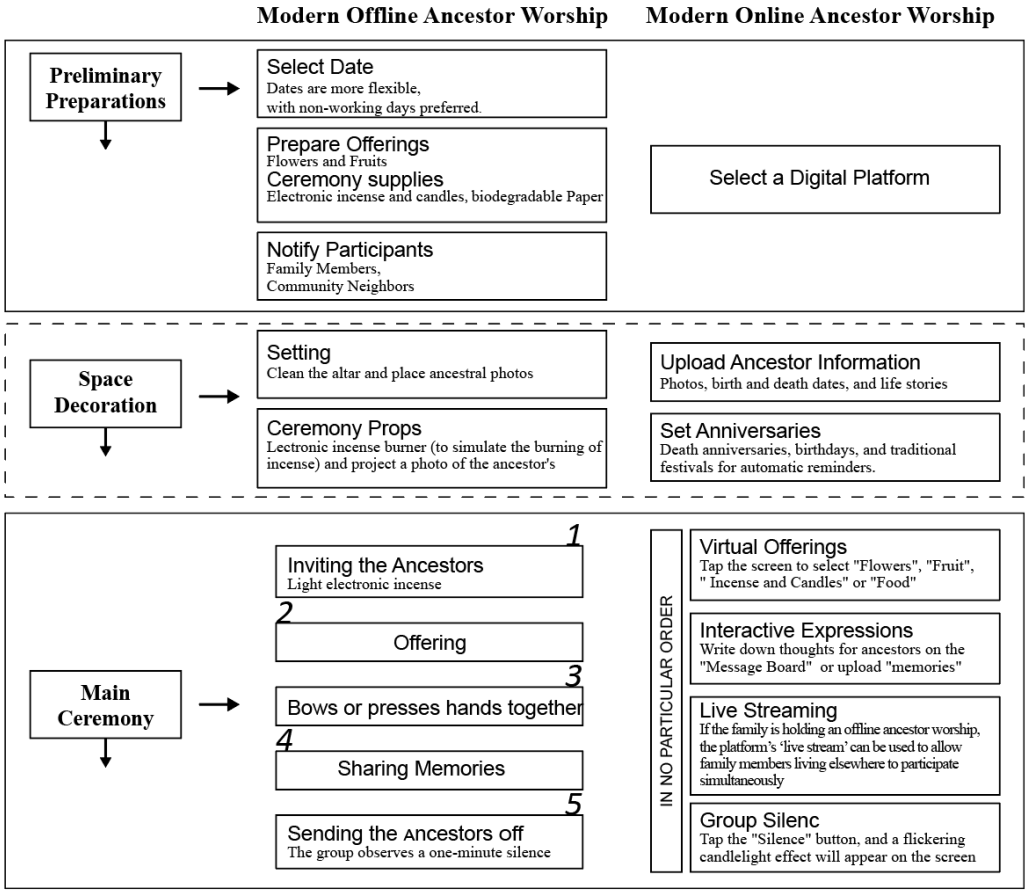


Figure 4 Ritual process of modern ancestor worship in China (offline simplification + online interaction).
Source: Yang **(**2024**)**

In some regions, a "hybrid ancestor worship" model combining offline and online elements is gradually emerging. This new form of worship exhibits the following characteristics:

(1) During traditional events such as the Qingming Festival and Spring Festival, family members still gather for collective offline tomb-sweeping while also creating memorial halls on digital platforms, where photographs of the event, memorial texts, and related materials are digitally preserved.

(2) For members who are unable to return home due to work, overseas residence, or other reasons, the "supplementary worship" functions provided by digital platforms effectively overcome temporal and spatial constraints, ensuring the integrity of family worship activities while sustaining a sense of participation.

This model represents a typical case of the adaptive evolution of traditional sacrificial practices in modern society. Its essence lies in the complementary integration of the ceremonial sense of offline rituals with the functional capacity of online platforms. It not only

addresses the challenges of spatial and temporal dispersion in contemporary society but also preserves the core of emotional connection in traditional ancestor worship, embodying the inclusive and dynamically continuous cultural character of Chinese civilization.

Based on the reviewed literature, the evolution of ancestor worship in China reveals a consistent cultural core: remembering ancestors, preserving memory, and sustaining communal identity, while its forms have adapted to changing political, social, and technological contexts. Traditional practices were highly structured, clan-centered, and place-bound, whereas modern forms, especially those mediated by digital platforms, display greater flexibility, individualization, and spatial mobility. However, existing studies tend to focus either on historical developments or isolated aspects of contemporary practices, with limited comparative analysis linking traditional and digital forms within an integrated framework. This gap underscores the need for a systematic, multi-dimensional comparison to clarify both continuities and transformations in Chinese ancestor worship.

Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted in this study, combining a literature review, thematic analysis, and comparative framework to systematically contrast traditional Chinese ancestor worship with its modern forms, including online rituals. The core objective is to identify and summarize major changes—and their underlying cultural meanings—across five dimensions: temporality, spatiality, behavior and media, participation and sociality, along with governance and ethics.

Table 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria for literature selection

	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1	Studies directly related to Chinese ancestor worship, including traditional and digital rituals (“云祭祀”).	Studies focusing on unrelated folk customs, general religious beliefs, or festivals without mention of ancestor worship.
2	Sources providing detailed descriptions of ritual elements (time, space, offerings, symbolic actions, governance).	Sources lacking methodological clarity or providing only vague or secondary descriptions of rituals.
3	Works contributing to understanding the evolution, symbolism, or social meaning of ancestor worship.	Works that do not address cultural or social aspects of rituals in sufficient analytical depth.
4	Peer-reviewed publications, academic monographs, policy papers, or official media with reliable data.	Non-academic materials such as blogs, user-generated content, or unverified web sources.
5	Literature in Chinese or English that allows accurate interpretation and coding.	Literature in other languages not accessible for accurate thematic analysis.

Data sources and selection process

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to ensure academic rigor and relevance. Details of the criteria are summarized in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 5 (see literature selection flowchart).

The literature review draws on four main sources: (1) Classical ritual and family etiquette texts (*Zhouli*, *Liji*, *Jiali*) from ancient China and their scholarly annotations, providing historical evidence for the processes and elements of traditional ancestor worship; (2) Anthropological and folkloric studies revealing regional variations and cultural functions; (3) Contemporary policy documents and industry standards, including funeral reform policies, guidelines for eco-friendly tomb-sweeping, and online memorial platform regulations issued by the Ministry of Civil Affairs; (4) Mainstream media reports and functional descriptions of digital memorial platforms, offering insights into the practical operation and public reception of modern ancestor worship, particularly its online forms.

Table 1 summarizes the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied during the literature selection process to ensure transparency and academic rigor.

A total of 23 key sources were included after screening, as illustrated in the literature selection flowchart (Figure 5).

To complement the literature review, this study conducted six rounds of field and online observations between April 2023 and April 2024. Offline observations took place at two cemeteries in Changde

City, Hunan Province, as well as during a family ancestral worship ceremony. Online observations focused on two digital memorial platforms: Zhonghua Yinglie Websie (https://yinglie.chinamartyrs.gov.cn/25qm/) and Yun Jisi the online ancestral worship website. Each observation lasted approximately 15–90 minutes and focused on ritual sequence, participant roles, and symbolic media. Observation subjects included three generations of family members and anonymous users in digital spaces. Data collection was guided by a structured observation form based on five analytical dimensions: time, space, behavior and media, participation and sociality, and governance and ethics. Recording materials included field notes, photographs, and screen recordings to ensure anonymity and adherence to ethical standards. The findings provide an empirical basis for comparative and thematic analyses.

Table 2 summarizes the field and online observations conducted to supplement the textual analysis and ensure empirical validity.

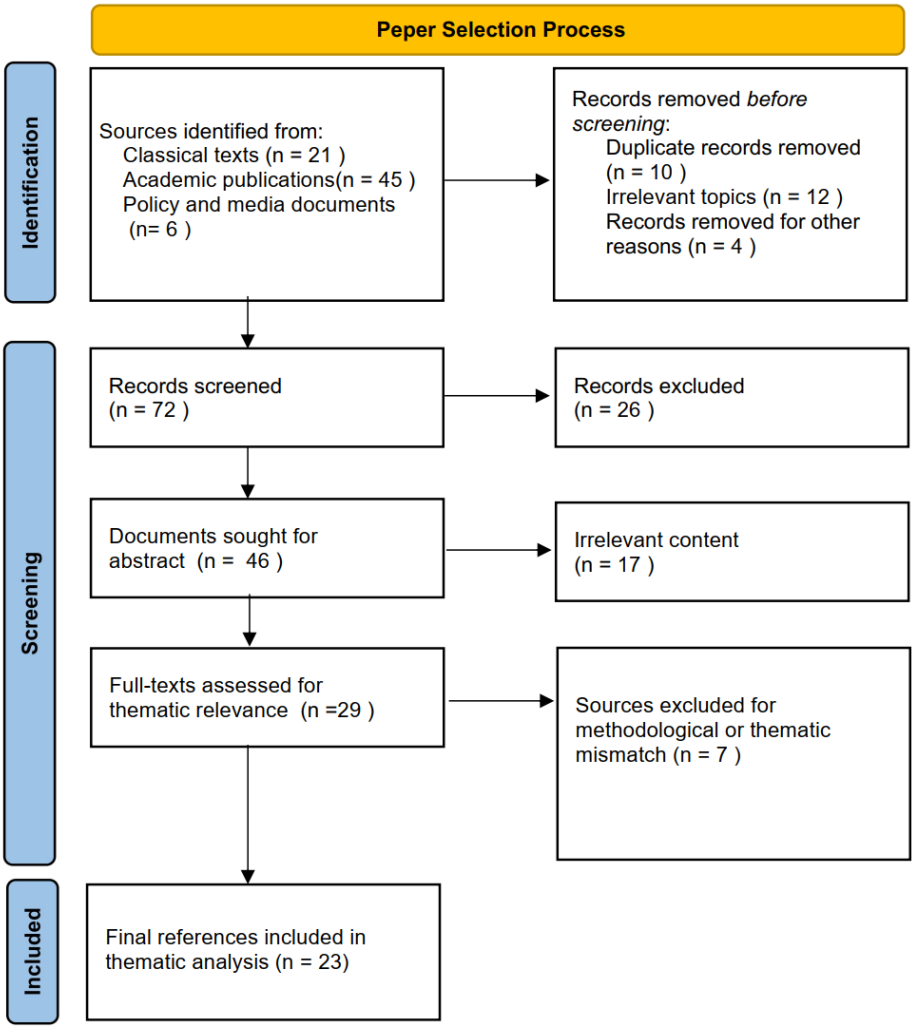


Figure 5 Pape selection process
Source: Yang (2025)

Table 2 Observation record summary

No.	Date	Type	Location / Platform	Observed participants	Duration	Instruments used	Focus of observati
1	Apr 2023	Offline	Public cemetery (Qingming Festival)	8 family members (3 generations)	90 min	Field notes, photos	Public ritual order, symbolic objects
2	Apr 2023	Offline	Non-cemetery (Qingming Festival)	5 family members	75 min	Observation sheet, photos	Ritual sequence, offerings, gestures
3	Aug 2023	Offline	Home altar ceremony	2 family members	60 min	Field notes	Emotional expression, gender roles
4	Dec 2023	Online	Yun Jisi	Anonymous users	15 min	Screen capture, notes	Digital offerings, message patterns
5	Apr 2024	Offline	Cemetery (Qingming Festival)	6 family members	80 min	Observation sheet, audio notes	Ritual hierarchy, social participation
6	Apr 2024	Online	Zhonghua Yinglie Websie	Public users	30min	Screen capture, notes	Platform interaction, visual symbol

Analytical framework: The five-dimensional model of ritual transformation

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis was applied in this study, with the reviewed materials coded to extract recurring concepts and phenomena related to ritual processes and the sense of ceremony, grouping them into core themes. Subsequently, using the five-dimensional comparative framework, the study juxtaposed the temporal, spatial, behavioral, participatory, and governance features of traditional and modern ancestor worship, revealing their transformation trends and potential issues.

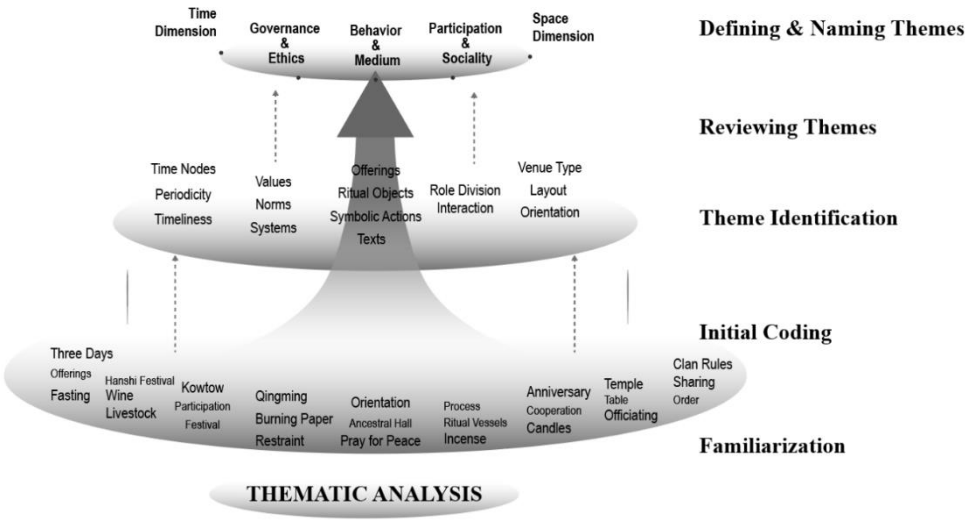


Figure 6 Thematic analysis process
Source: Yang (2024)

In addition, observational methods were employed in this study to document contemporary ancestor worship practices. The researcher attended offline cemetery ceremonies to document ritual sequences, offerings, spatial layout, and participant roles. Virtual rituals, interactive features, and symbolic expressions were observed on online worship platforms. These observational notes were integrated into the thematic coding, providing additional evidence for comparing traditional and contemporary worship practices.

The inclusion criteria for the literature review encompassed studies directly addressing Chinese ancestor worship, providing substantive descriptions of its ritual procedures or core elements. Exclusion criteria eliminated works devoted exclusively to other religious traditions, publications lacking detailed processual information, or materials irrelevant to the Chinese cultural context. To achieve comprehensive coverage, the corpus incorporated four categories of sources: (1) classical ritual canons, including Zhouli, Liji, and Jiali; (2) historical chronicles and archaeological evidence documenting ritual practices; (3) modern anthropological and folkloric analyses of regional variations; and (4) contemporary policy documents and media accounts concerning digital memorial platforms. This multi-source approach, while attentive to historical authenticity, enabled a more systematic reconstruction of the cultural transformation of ancestor worship from offline to online contexts.

A five- dimensional comparative analysis of traditional and modern chinese ancestor worship

To comprehensively examine the continuity and transformation of Chinese ancestor worship in terms of temporal- spatial structure, ritual media, and social functions, this section adopts the five themes derived from thematic analysis— temporal dimension, spatial dimension, behavior and media, participation and social interaction, and governance and ethics—as its analytical framework. It conducts an element-based comparison between traditional offline ancestor worship and contemporary (including digital) practices, aiming not only to present the differences clearly and directly, but also to demonstrate the cultural continuity and pathways of transformation embedded within them.

Table 3 Comparison of five dimensions of traditional and modern ancestor worship

Dimension	Traditional ancestor worship	Modern offline ancestor worship	Modern online ancestor worship
Time	Fixed festivals	Retains core traditional dates, but more routine/flexible	Breaks time constraints; can be performed anytime
Space	Clan-based hierarchical spaces	Mainly cemeteries and columbaria; reduced use of ancestral halls	Virtual digital spaces (memorial apps, WeChat mini programs, memorial websites)
Behavior and Media	Physical rituals (burning paper, three animal offerings, kneeling); traditional ritual tools	Simplified physical offerings (flowers, eco-friendly items, bowing); modern media	Digital interactions; digital technology
Participation and Social Interaction	Clan gatherings	Family/community-based	Cross-regional/cross-national
Governance and Ethics	Clan self-governance; clan-based filial piety	Community/institutional governance; community ethics	Platform/national supervision; consciousness of the Chinese national community

From the five- dimensional comparison, three major trends emerge in the transformation of Chinese ancestor worship from traditional offline forms to modern offline and online practices:

Decentralization of time and space

Traditional ancestor worship was closely tied to fixed festivals and clan spaces, with events held on specific dates such as Qingming Festival, Winter Solstice, and death anniversaries, and at venues such as ancestral temples, clan halls, and cemeteries. In modern transitions, time points have become more concentrated or even blurred, while physical spaces are shifting toward virtual environments. This change removes geographical and gathering constraints but also diminishes the emotional intensity associated with specific dates and places.

Symbolization and digitalization of behavior and media

Digital platforms have transformed ancestral rituals from embodied, material acts into symbolic and interactive ones. Through interactive features such as "click to burn incense," "virtual flower laying," and "lighting memorial candles," people symbolically recreate ancestral worship activities. While these platforms can broaden participation, they also carry risks of de- ritualization, privacy breaches, and commercialization. While digitalization has democratized commemorative activities and maintained cultural continuity, it has also challenged the authenticity of rituals. A balance needs to be struck between technological innovation and the preservation of cultural significance.

Diversification of participation and transformation of governance

The collective clan participation model is breaking down, being replaced by small family gatherings for offline rituals and cross- regional online interactions. Governance has shifted from clan rules and ancestral codes to state policy guidance and platform regulations, accompanied by new issues like commercialization and data privacy.

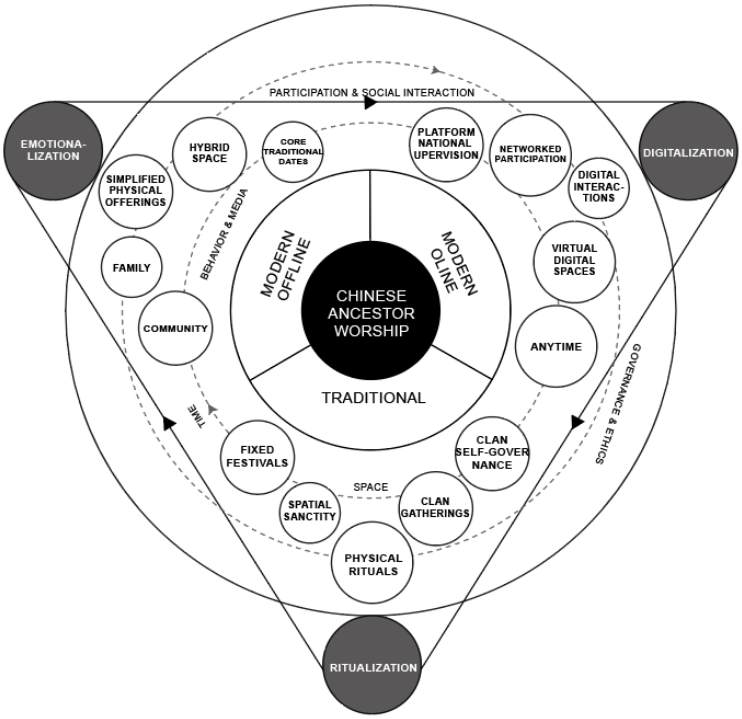


Figure 7 Ritual evolution model
Source: Yang (2025)

The evolution of ancestor worship can be summarized as a three- stage transformation: Ritualization → Emotionalization → Digitalization, reflecting the shift from collective ritual discipline to individualized emotional expression, and finally to digitally mediated remembrance.

Overall, this transformation is not merely about changes in media and space but also reflects the

combined effects of shifts in social structure, population mobility, evolving values, and technological environments. While traditional ancestor worship centered on maintaining clan cohesion, modern practices are more individualized, decentralized, and cross-regional. The key challenge ahead is how to restore ritual depth and cultural richness in the digital context.

Conclusion and implications

This study, based on a five-dimensional comparative framework (time, space, behavior and media, participation and social interaction, governance and ethics), systematically analyzes the differences and transformation logic between traditional Chinese ancestor worship and its contemporary forms (simplified offline rituals and online platforms). The results show that the evolution of ancestor worship is not a simple matter of "ritual simplification" or "media digitalization" but rather a holistic restructuring of time, space, social structure, participation patterns, and governance mechanisms.

From an academic perspective, this study uses a "traditional versus modern" comparison to reveal the "cultural transformation logic" of traditional rituals in a digital context—showing that the "mediatization" of rituals does not mean the disappearance of tradition, but rather a reconnection between core values (filial piety, remembrance) and formal carriers (digital symbols). This provides a Chinese case for ritual mediatization studies and broadens the methodological scope of the "five-dimensional comparison" in digital anthropology and cultural heritage research.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that policymakers and platform designers should, on the premise of respecting core traditional cultural values, enhance the sense of ritual and emotional resonance in online ancestor worship through seasonal event design, the optimization of virtual symbols, and innovation in interactive functions. At the same time, more comprehensive content review and privacy protection mechanisms should be established to balance cultural inheritance with digital security.

Building on these findings, the following conclusions synthesize the key transformations observed across the five dimensions, clarifying both their theoretical significance and practical implications. This synthesis not only bridges the analytical results with the study's objectives but also provides a clear foundation for proposing strategies to preserve cultural depth while adapting to the digital era.

(1) The decentralization of time and space has dissolved the traditional dependence on specific seasons and locations. Traditional practices relied on fixed festivals (Qingming Festival, Winter Solstice) and clan spaces (ancestral halls, ancestral homes) to consolidate the family collective. In contrast, modern forms use "flexible timing + diverse spaces" to break the centralized nature of these events, but at the cost of weakening the emotional resonance of seasonal markers and the symbolic value of spaces (such as the ancestral hall's role as a "sacred center").

(2) The symbolization of behavior and media has increased the replicability and cross-domain dissemination of rituals. Online platforms reconstruct procedures through visual symbols such as "virtual incense, offering tables, and eulogies," enabling participation across regions and time zones. However, this also diminishes the immersive and solemn qualities provided by physical rituals, such as the tactile (burning paper), olfactory (incense smoke), and ordered movements (kneeling) of traditional practices.

(3) The transformation in participation patterns and governance approaches has restructured the "subjects and rules" of the ritual. Participation has moved from "clan-led collectives" to "small family units + cross-regional online groups," while governance has shifted from "clan laws and ancestral codes" to "policy regulations + platform management." While this enhances flexibility and accessibility, it also introduces new challenges such as commercialization (paid virtual offerings), privacy risks (personal memory data), and cultural dilution (ancestors being generalized from "specific relatives" into "symbols").

The challenge ahead lies in how to reconstruct "embodied ritual experiences" and "culturally encoded symbolic systems" in the digital environment while balancing the boundaries between "commercialization" and "cultural preservation." This will require the coordinated efforts of technological innovation, policy guidance, and cultural education. Future research could focus on generational differences (e.g., older adults' reliance on physical rituals versus younger generations' acceptance of digital symbols) and cross-cultural

dissemination (e.g., how "digital ancestor worship" among overseas Chinese communities integrates with local cultures) to better understand ritual evolution under the dual forces of globalization and digitalization.

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• Generative AI tools may be used only to improve the readability and language of a manuscript.

• Such tools must be applied with human oversight and control. Authors remain fully responsible for the content.

• AI tools must not be listed as authors or co-authors.

• If AI- assisted technologies were used, a declaration must be included in the manuscript, in a dedicated section before the references.

CRediT author statement

Yang Zhou: Conceptualization, Writing-Original Draft, Visualization, Investigation.

Watanapun Krutasaen: Supervision, Writing - Review & Editing.

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