



Ancestral Worship

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Conversations · the home altar · the ancestral tablet

WHEN All year, at home. This is not a festival — it is the daily one, which makes it the most delicate.

A wooden tablet with a name carved on it, and a spirit believed to live in it. The origin story is about a son who was too late to save his mother — and it explains more about the practice than any doctrine does.

01 What you will see

You will be in someone's home when you see this. That changes what you are allowed to ask, and how.

- A tablet, or a set of them, on a raised altar — a name carved into wood.
- One tablet bearing the family name, and sometimes smaller ones placed lower.
- Food and joss incense offered at the altar, not on a festival day but as routine.
- A photograph, often, alongside the tablet.
- Someone in the family whose job this is — usually the eldest, usually not discussed.

The words your friend will use

The tablet is the whole thing. These four words explain how it works.

Ancestral tablet 神主牌

A wooden tablet carved with the name of the deceased. When the Hun returns home — seven or forty-nine days after death, depending on dialect group — it is invited to inhabit it.

Three Hun

The load-bearing belief. A spirit divides: one part receives offerings at the grave, one inhabits the tablet at home, one remains in the Yin World. Without this, the practice could not work.

The lower level

Where the recently departed are placed at first. After thirty to fifty years they may join the main tablet bearing the family name, and the lower tablet is retired.

Filial piety 孝

The reason for all of it. Not superstition — duty, and a real one. Treat it as superstition and you have insulted the person, not the idea.

Mu Lian ran after his mother and was too late

The story behind the tablet: Mu Lian was so violent that his own mother feared him. The day he finally understood what he had become, he ran toward her to embrace her — and she, certain he meant to beat her again, ran, and drowned. All he recovered was a piece of the basket she had been carrying. He took it home and carved her name into it. That is the first ancestral tablet. Whatever else you think about the practice, it begins in unbearable regret and a son with no way left to say sorry. Anyone approaching this as mere idolatry has not understood what they are looking at.

Where the two meet

Here the divergence is sharper than at the festivals, because the whole practice rests on one claim about the spirit that Scripture does not make.

Do we owe our parents honour?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes, and it does not stop at their death.	Yes — it is one of the ten commandments, and the first with a promise attached.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Does the spirit outlive the body?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes.	Yes.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Must misdeeds be suffered for?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes, in the Yin World, for a time.	Yes — and this is agreed. The disagreement is over the length, not the fact.
BOTH HOLD THIS	
Can a spirit be in two places?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes — three Hun: one at the grave, one in the tablet, one still suffering below.	No. A person's spirit is a single thing. It does not divide, and it does not relocate over time.
HERE THEY PART	
Can suffering be completed?	
WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS	WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS
Yes. After enough years, the ancestor graduates and joins the others.	No. We could never atone for it ourselves — the sentence is death, meaning separation from God, and it does not run out.
HERE THEY PART	

Can the dead be moved from one place to the other?

WHAT YOUR FRIEND HOLDS

Yes, over thirty to fifty years.

WHAT SCRIPTURE HOLDS

No. Heaven and Hell are permanent dwellings and there is no traffic between them.

HERE THEY PART

04

The hinge

Filial piety is better shown to the living than to the dead.

This is your book's own sentence and it is the kindest thing in the chapter, because it does not attack the duty — it agrees with it and then asks where it should be spent. The tablet exists because a son ran too late. The offering is an attempt to keep paying a debt to someone who can no longer receive it. And the Christian claim about that debt is not that it was small: it is that it was unpayable, that the sentence was death, and that the Son who was not too late paid it. Which leaves the living free to honour their parents while their parents are still in the room.

05

Things you could actually say

In a home, and about someone's own dead. Slower than the others, and none of these should be the first thing you say.

Which of them is on the main tablet? How long has she been there?

Who does this in your family — is it always the eldest?

Was your grandmother the sort of person you would have got on with?

Does it feel like duty, or does it feel like keeping her company?

Can I say something that might sound strange? I think honouring your parents is a command, not an option — my Bible puts it in the top ten. Where I've landed differently is that I think they can only receive it while they are alive. Which honestly makes it harder, not easier.

Leave it open

This one especially: stop. You are talking about somebody's mother in her own son's living room, and the fifth step is not a formality here.

Condensed from Spiritual Conversations with Practitioners of Chinese Folk Religion (Malcolm Goh, 2025), chapter: Ancestral Worship.