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<i>Student Name: Manyu Yang</i>	
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What People Should Know Before They Join the Traditional Remembrance Ceremony for Ancestors

Student name: Manyu Yang

SID: 1903292

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Venerable Shengmiao, Miss Deng, good morning. My name is Manyu Yang. Today I would like to share with you the most important spirit of traditional Chinese remembrance ceremony. This ceremony has been inherited for more than thousands of years. It has deeply influenced the ideology and even characteristics of Chinese people. However, during the period of the republic of China, being affected by the World War Two, traditional large families gradually disappeared, and it made most of the people no longer be able to live together, and to hold a grand remembrance ceremony for their ancestors together. Hence this valuable rite is gradually losing its original meaning during the process of simplifying and being overlooked.

Fortunately, it is happy to see more and more scholars and enthusiasts have noticed the importance of remembrance ceremony, and intended to revive it. However, due to the lack of knowledge of the traditional propriety, many people still think it is done for religious reason or consider it to be a kind of superstition. Along with the conduct of various remembrance ceremonies, the increasing number of participants, it is significant to tell people more truth about this tradition, so their doubts can be eliminated and to benefit more from joining this ceremony.

During the presentation, I will firstly introduce the main reason of ancient Chinese holding remembrance ceremony. Through explaining the reason, we will be able to see the emotions beside the complicated steps, so the second part will be the explanation on how to balance this two subjects. The last part contains a short reflection and a conclusion.

1. The main reason of ancient Chinese holding remembrance ceremony

The main material I use to explain this topic is the chapter *Jiyi* 祭義 in *Liji*, the *Book of Rites*. The character *ji* 祭 means remembrance ceremony, and the character *yi* 義 means meanings, hence this chapter is the explicit introduction of the meaning of remembrance ceremony. In Sun Xidan's annotation for the *Book of Rites*, he divided this chapter into five parts, which are about the meaning of remembrance ceremony (祭祀之義), how rules of propriety and music nourish human beings (禮樂之養人), filial respect for parents (孝親之道), the importance of valuing the orders of young and old (尚齒之義), and the last few sentence to bring back the theme of remembrance ceremony (又專以祭祀言之).¹ Through analysing the chapter, people will be surprised by the respect degree for filiality of ancient Chinese. It is the main reason which drives them to put in a lot of time and effort to hold a grand remembrance ceremony.

In the first part which mainly talks about the meaning of the ceremony, the filial love for ancestors is always the central idea. One of the examples is when describing *zhaijie* 齋戒 which is a process of self-purification usually carried on before the ceremony. It is divided into *zhizhai* 致齋, the concentrated self-purification, and *sanzhai* 散齋, the loose self-purification. These two different types of purifications show the gradual process of the officiant purifying his body and mind. *Sanzhai* usually lasts for seven days. During this period, the officiant is allowed to go out, but he is restrained from all social activities. Wang Mengou says, 'it is to reorganise himself physically (攝理其身)'.² *Zhizhai* lasts for three days, and it is to 'reorganise himself spiritually (攝理精神)'.³ The officiant stays at home completely during *zhizhai* and is restrained from meat and alcohol. Besides these rules, he is expected to 'remember the deceased's living place, remember his smile and

¹ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下) [The Assembled Annotations for the Book of Rites III] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press, 2020), 1207

² Wang Mengou 王夢鷗, *Liji Jinzhu Jinyi* 禮記今註今譯 [A New Version of Annotation and Translation for the Book of Rites] (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 2009), 809

³ Wang Mengou 王夢鷗, *Liji Jinzhu Jinyi* 禮記今註今譯, 809

words, his aspiration and idea, his interest and favour (思其居處，思其笑語，思其志意，思其所樂，思其所嗜).⁴ This process shows the officiant's deep affection toward the deceased. Before he offer food to them, he restrains himself from all kinds of attractions, to become completely calm and sincere. This peaceful mind status shows the sincerity of him looking forward to seeing the ancestors again during the ceremony.

When explain how rules of propriety and music nourish human beings in the second part, the relation between filiality and remembrance ceremony become more clear. The first sentence says, 'All the rules of propriety under heaven, are to return to the root (天下之禮，致反始也).'⁵ Later it says 'A man of virtue going back to his ancestors and returning to the origin of his life, he never forgets who have given birth to him. Hence...he makes greatest efforts to repay his parents and ancestors (君子反古復始，不忘其所由生也，是以……竭力從事，以報其親).'⁶ Looking into the steps of the traditional remembrance ceremony, we will see how detailed and complicated they are. Another chapter *Jitong* 祭統 records the specific requires for the foods preparation, which asks 'the husband and wife prepare them in person (必夫婦親之).'⁷ For the varieties of foods, it states 'whatever can be prepared should all be prepared (苟可以薦者，莫不咸在).'⁸ When modern people read this part, they may feel stressed since the requests are too strict. However, after reading *Jiyi* 祭義, people will understand these requests are not unchangeable models, they are just the natural behaviours of a loving son. He wants to take this opportunity to give whatever he has to his ancestors, because it is the way to express his love and respect.

Next, the third part is a direct description for the filiality. The fourth part is about

⁴ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下), 1208

⁵ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下), 1218

⁶ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下), 1222

⁷ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下), 1238

⁸ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下), 1238

‘valuing the orders of young and old’, which is actually the other central idea of Confucianism which is *ti* 悌, the fraternal love. The *Analects* says, ‘Young people should have filial piety at home and show fraternal love when out (弟子入則孝，出則悌)’.⁹ The fraternal love is the extension of filial respect. Developing the attitude of respect toward parents and others, means children must learn to erase their selfish thoughts and anger. It allows children to develop stronger empathy and modesty, prevent them from fighting and wrangling with others. After they step into the society, they know how to get along with other people. This family education contributes to harmonising interpersonal relationship of the society which is the cornerstone of a peaceful country. This is the deep meaning of the remembrance ceremony. *Jiyi* 祭義 says, ‘the King credits his kindness to heaven, lords credit their kindness to the King.....scholars and common people credit their kindness to their parents and ancestors (天子有善，讓德於天；諸侯有善，歸諸天子……士、庶人有善，本諸父母，存諸長老)’.¹⁰ With filial respect for parents and ancestors, from the king down to the common people, all know to remain modest and not to take credit. This part shows remembrance ceremony laid the foundation for the country stability, which also is the long-term significance of it.

Hence we can see, filiality is always the central spirit of the chapter *Jiyi*. It motivates ancient Chinese to hold this grand ceremony for their passed families. As Hu Dan States, ‘Remembrance ceremony is the form of a dutiful son showing his filial respect’.¹¹ There is no selfish wishes or religious connotations contained in this ceremony. It is simply the way for ancient Chinese to express their deep filial affection.

2. Is the ceremony’s form or the officiant’s feelings more important

⁹ The *Analects* 論語, to see Wu Guozhen 吳國珍, *A New Annotated English Version of the Analects of Confucius* 《論語》最新英文全譯全注本, 56

¹⁰ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下), 1233

¹¹ Hu Dan 胡丹, 由《禮記·祭義》看祭祀活動中的理念及其社會作用 [Discovering the ideas of remembrance ceremony and its application of society from *Liji Jiyi*], *Kejiao Wenhui* 科教文匯, 01(2008), 162

As we mentioned before, the recorded process of the remembrance ceremony sometimes can be complicated and hard to achieve. Especially for people nowadays, due to the development of economy, people have little leisure time to take rest, not to mention putting long time in preparation for remembrance ceremony. When encountering the dilemma between achieving the form of ceremony and officiant's mood, how should people choose?

In the very beginning of *Jiyi*, it says 'The remembrance should not be held frequently, frequency causes irritation, irritation means losing respect. The remembrance should not be held rarely, scarceness causes indolence, indolence leads to forgetfulness (祭不欲數，數則煩，煩則不敬。祭不欲疏，疏則怠，怠則忘)'.¹² Through this quote, it is obvious that ancient Chinese value the officiant's real feeling. They have no offence to bother people, asking them to follow the rules, but they also do not want the good traditions to be abandoned. They were trying to find a balance between this two subjects, helping officiants to think of their passed families through this ceremony.

However, it is inescapable for some undesirable situation happening. Due to people's filial affection and respect declining, the ideal, pure remembrance found in ancient times became more and more rare. When people cannot bare the long preparation and the complicated steps, and try to simplify the ceremony, it is better to tolerate in order to persist the form of remembrance. This case can also be found in the *Analects*. Once, a disciple called Zigong wanted to save the sacrificial sheep which is used in the remembrance ceremony at the beginning of each month (子貢欲去告朔之餼羊).¹³ This is because the ceremony is gradually discarded in the state of Lu, when the lord stopped to attend it but only send a sacrificial sheep to ancestral temple. Zigong thought if the

¹² The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解 (下), 1222

¹³ The Analects 論語, to see Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu Jishi* 論語集釋 [The Assembled Annotations for the Analects] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press, 2019), 247, my translation

ceremony had been held even without the officiant's attendance, it is better to cancel it so the sheep can be saved. However, Confucius answered him, 'You feel distressed to see the sheep (being killed), but I feel distressed to see the ceremony (being discarded) (汝愛其羊，我愛其禮)'.¹⁴ As long as the sheep is sent to the temple, the form of the ceremony can be persisted. People can heard of the ceremony, the lord would remember his ancestors when he issue the order of sending the sheep. It is always better than cancelling the ceremony completely, which may cause the filial respect fade away even faster.

Another undesirable situation is when the officiant value the name of a 'dutiful son' more than he remember his ancestors, so he wants to make the ceremony massively grand and solemn to emphasize his filial affection. However, this opinion is poorly directed since officiant has lost the essence of remembrance. In *Jiyi*, there is an interesting discussion about how should the officiant act during the ceremony. A disciple called Zigan asked why Confucius did not look serious and cautious when he was the officiant. Confucius answered, 'if my appearance looked distant, my mentality was being cautious, then how can I feel and communicate with my ancestors (容以遠，若容以自反也，夫何神明之及交)'.¹⁵ The sage did not want the officiant being distracted by mild matters, but focus on offering foods to ancestors. Pure mind allows the officiant to express his filial affection, and it enlarges the meaning of the ceremony. Hence deliberate gestures and striking attitudes on purpose are against the original intention of remembrance, and they are meaningless.

3. Conclusion: what is the reason of lack of touch today

To sum up, the reason of ancient Chinese holding remembrance ceremony is their filial love and respect for their ancestors. The remembrance is not simply a traditional

¹⁴ The Analects 論語, to see Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu Jishi 論語集釋*, 252, my translation

¹⁵ The Book of Rites 禮記, to see Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie 禮記集解* (下), 1211

form, it represents the sublime thought and morality of ancient Chinese. In the long river of history, people also had experienced the chaotic time of overlooking the rules of propriety, discarding morality and ethics. During that period when people simplify the ceremony because they do not have enough filial affection, the sage choose to tolerate as he wanted people to keep the form at least. On the other hand, formalism is not encouraged in remembrance ceremony since it is the event which expects people to hold and join with sincerity.

However, when holding the large-scale remembrance ceremony gradually become the new society trend in nowadays, some of the participants reflected that they cannot feel related to the ceremony, or with the ancestors. One of the reasons can be the education today is based on scientific thought, people tend to hold negative stereotypes of remembrance ceremony since they relate it with supernatural beings which are doubtful. In order to solve this problem, we should read and get to understand more classical Chinese texts. Like through analysing *Jiyi*, many stereotypes and misunderstandings are naturally going to disappear. Another reason can be the high divorce rate causing the breakdown of many families, which leads the society become more and more detached. When the relationships between living people are alienate, it is not surprised for people cannot feel related with their ancestors. People who wants to solve this problem can work on the relationships with their families at first. For example, we can spend more time with our parents, listen to their feelings and satisfy their needs. Through this process, people may gradually realize that the career success is not everything, family connection is the root for us standing long in the society. When our families become warm and full of laughter, we will feel thankful for our ancestors giving us the chance living together, and find out more affection from the ceremony.

4. Bibliography

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