

DAILY LIFE IN THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

Written By Chuan Lin

Farming Life

Agriculture is an important part of life in Zhongguo. The great cities of the Kingdom could not exist were it not for food raised by the rural farmers. The founding ancestor of the ruling Zhou dynasty was even called Hou Chi, or “Lord of Millets”. According to legend, this title identified him as a celestial officer in charge of agriculture.

The Zhou people were the first to adopt and perfect the practice of agriculture. They claim it is a gift from their ancestor, Hou Chi, who taught them the secrets of raising crops. This ancient knowledge is put into practice in Zhou province, where systematic and collective farming takes place on a massive scale. An example of the collective farming system can be seen on the Zhou King’s personal fief. There, a thousand farmers handle herds of ten thousand beasts that plowed a giant field no less than thirty miles wide!

On a smaller scale, most other states utilize what is called the “well-field” system. Most of Zhongguo is made up of peasants who farm small plots, rather than the large collective farms. Every member of a peasant family helps to grow and harvest the crops. The land is divided into a series of square fields one hundred yards on a side (a unit of area known as a *mu*). Together, a group of eight farming families first work a field one mu in size for their lord. They then each work on a mu of their own. The land farmed with the well-field system looks like a square divided three by three into nine smaller squares, or the calligraphic symbol for “well”. The center square is the one that belongs to the lord, while the eight surrounding it are the fields belonging to the individual farmers.

In hilly regions, farmers use a method called terracing to cut flat plains into hillsides. These flat plains look like shelves coming out of the side of a hill. This system also helps to slow erosion.

Irrigation systems involving canals and pumps are used in some parts of Zhongguo. They are not, however, used on the larger-scale collectives, such as the Zhou King’s huge personal farms (the King depends on the help of the spirit instead). Every year, during the Spring Equinox, the Zhou King and his chief ministers visit his estate. There, he asks for celestial blessing and ceremonially begins the first plow. His ministers follow suit. Then the chief of the Tai Zhu Ministry, being both a master Tien Shih and Fah Shih, draws up a petition to heaven for rain at given times and dates throughout the growing season. Such requests are usually answered. In the few cases when they were not, the Tai Zhu had to either provide a good explanation or lose his head.

At the other end of the system, the smaller scale, the well-field system often depends on wells to supply water. Because the water table is so far down, wells must often be dug nine or ten yards deep. They are dug with an oval shape, which allows a pulley system with two buckets to be employed. One bucket comes up while the other goes down.

Farmers throughout the Kingdom use a system of crop rotation. A given field is worked for two years, and then allowed to recover during every third year. Fertilizers, including manure, sewage, and green waste, are also used to further increase productivity. In an effort to maximize productivity, the farmers have perfected the science of waste management. Each household is required by law to have three large night soil vases. Every three days, a wagon comes to each house to fetch the full vase and return an empty one. The full vases are then emptied onto the fallow fields to aid their recovery. With a touch of rustic irony, the fruits of this process are known as “the Lord’s Golden Gifts.”

The principal food crops in the Middle Kingdom are millets, wheat, rice, hemp seeds, peas, and beans. South of the Black Dragon River, the main crop grown is rice. In the north, a wider range of produce is raised, including wheat, millets, and barley.

Wheat is perhaps the most valuable crop of all, and is reserved for consumption by the upper class. In historical records, the abundance or the failure of wheat crops was often recorded to indicate nature’s blessing or curse.

Both flex and hemp are mainly cash crops, used for their fiber and oil-producing seeds; the latter are also eaten as food. Hemp is often given in offerings to the king during the autumn celebration at the end of the growing season. The king traditionally takes a portion of this tribute, and returns the rest as his gift to the people.

Farmers also keep herds of animals. Some are raised for food, while others are used to pull plows and do other work on the farms. Bei ji and domesticated shi niao are popular food animals. Larger beasts, such as Cao xi-yi, are more rare due to a lack of available pasture land. Cao xi-yi are also used to pull carts and plows.

Many farmers use simple wooden or stone tools, even though better bronze and iron implements are available. Metal tools are simply too expensive for most peasants. Those lucky enough to acquire them prize them highly and hand them down from generation to generation.

When not working the fields, the farmer and his household gather fruit, plant small vegetable gardens, maintain their house and tools, make clothes, and hunt small game. Family farms are largely self-sufficient. Farmers have nearly free reign to grow what they want on their mu. Part of any crop raised is paid to the lord as rent; the rest belongs to the farmer. At harvest time, the eight families gather to bring any surplus to market, where it is sold for cash. This money is then used to buy things that the family cannot produce for itself.

Food and Cooking

The food eaten by the Zhongguoese often reflects their social status. The poor eat simply. Their diet consists largely of rice, grains, millet, vegetables, and beans. On special occasions, such as the new year or an elder's birthday, they eat chicken or wild game. On rare occasions, such as a wedding or the passing of a "tens" year (like '20 or '30), they eat fish.

The wealthy dine on much better fare, and eat more meat. Their diet includes cao xi-yi and wild, more exotic shi niao, in addition to choice vegetables and fruits.

Though wheat is the food of the privileged, rice has a special role of its own. It is widely served at banquets, in receiving important guests, and in major ceremonies. If rice is not served at a formal meal, it is seen as a slight to the guests. Wars have been fought where one lord insulted another by not offering rice during a feast. And woe betide a family who fails to offer rice during one of three important ancestor worship days—their ancestors' spirits would refuse to help them!

There were two ways of cooking rice: steaming or boiling. The method used reflects the status of family in question. For boiling, in which water and rice are mixed, less rice can be used since the water will help to fill the stomach. This is popular among common people. For steaming, more rice must be used, since it does not swell as much in cooking. This is therefore a sign of privilege.

For formal ceremonies, including religious rituals and state dinners, typical foods include beef, mutton, pork, dog, chicken, pheasant, rabbit, and fish.

Various methods are used to cook the food—roasting or broiling, steaming, or cutting it into small pieces for frying in an iron skillet or wok. The Zhongguoese have refined cooking to a fine art, and make extensive use of spices and seasonings in preparing their meals. At fancy dinners, no two dishes will be prepared in the same way. Most commoners simply stir-fry their dishes. To save valuable fuel, food is generally cut into small pieces so that it can be cooked more quickly.

Food is often served in large bowls held up by tripods. Each contains a different course. The number used in any dinner denotes the host's rank. A king's banquet served in nine tripods. Dukes may use seven tripods. Ministers are allotted five, great officials are allotted three, and the lowest ranking nobles are allotted one. Similarly, the number of meats served also reflects one's status. Even the richest commoners can only afford to offer three types of meat and fish.

White fish is served at religious ceremony and for ancestor worship.

To secure a source of meat for themselves, most farmers try to raise some livestock. They will typically keep a few domesticated shi niao. They will also supplement their diet with fish from local ponds and rivers.

Spices are widely used throughout Zhongguo. The most popular ones included mustard, ginger, leeks, onion, scallions, cinnamon, and smartweed. Other seasonings included soy sauce, vinegar, salt, pepper, pickles, and sugar.

The most common vegetables eaten in Zhongguo include radishes, gourds, hot peppers, celery, bamboo shoots, cress, duckweed, shepherd's purse, turnip greens, rape-turnip, thorn ferns, pigweeds, sowthistle, and bracken.

The most common fruits are peaches, pears, jujubes, kiwi, melons, mulberries, wild grapes, oxlips, persimmon, water caltrops, and chick-heads. Plums are particularly prized, and come in several different varieties: northern plums, southern plums, eastern plums, western plums, zhou plums, and sparrow-plums. The most common nuts are hazelnuts, chestnuts, and apricots.

Water is often boiled before drinking to prevent disease. Rice wine, and beer made from millets, wheat, or rice are common alcoholic beverages. Tea is a very popular drink and comes in numerous varieties.

Dress and Clothing

As with so much else in Zhongguo, Clothing serves as a mark of social status. The type of fabric used, the color and decorations on a garment, and the jewelry, headgear, and footwear worn will all tell something about the wearer's position.

The clothing worn by the wealthy is often ornate and expensive. On formal occasions, proper dress includes a loose jacket which wraps the upper body from the left to the right and fastens under the right shoulder. The lower body is clothed in a seven-gowned skirt, with three pieces in the front and four in the rear. Underneath the skirt is a long apron, and buskins covered both the knees and lower legs.

On more casual occasions, the well-to-do wear a long, loose robe called a shen-i. This reaches down to the feet and has long sleeves. It is a practical, comfortable garment which wraps over the entire body and is secured by a long belt at the waist.

The poor dress far more simply. Members of the working class usually wear a jacket, tunic, and trousers. Unlike the fashions of the wealthy, whose styles change annually, the basic design of the poor farmer's tunic has remained essentially the same since the Shang dynasty.

Most Zhongguoese wear their hair long, and tied into a tight bun or topknot. Males in Zhongguo must wear a head-cover to be presentable in public. Upon reaching maturity, a boy is only accepted into adulthood after a ritual head-covering ceremony.

Headwear reflects social rank. Nobles wear a cap known as a kuan. It covers the bun and is held in place with a long hairpin. It is traditionally black in color, except during a period of mourning, when it is white. A royal kuan is a square, flat cap decorated with twelve pendants strung with gems. Ministers wear kuans that have five pendants embellished with black gems. For the commoners, the head-covering of choice is chin-tse, a kind of folded scarf that is worn tied over the bun. While working in the fields, a bamboo-leaf hat covers the chin-tse.

Females do not have to wear head-coverings. Instead of a kuan, most women use hairpins. The privileged wear their hair long—the higher a woman's status, the longer her hair will be. Commoners do not wear hair longer than waist-length. Long hair is often decorated with flowers or long, flowing ribbons. Younger or unmarried women wear pony tails or beads. Elder and married women cut their hair shorter and tie it up into a crown or a bun. Wealthy women also typically wear elaborate makeup and perfumes.

There are two principal types of footwear. Hsi are double-soled slippers, usually worn in courts and palaces. Lu are single-soled work shoes, and are far more common..

Many of the more civilized people of Zhongguo wear clothing festooned with decorations and ornaments. A huang, or a jade pendant, is a popular choice. It consists of several pieces of jade placed in a cluster and hung on the front of the belt with a colorful silk thread.

The standard set of accessories carried by middle-class males includes a sword, a writing tablet, a calligraphy brush, several small knives, a handkerchief, and a money-pouch. Females carry much the same items, except that a sewing kit is substituted for the sword.

The most common materials used for clothing include silk, linen (from an ivory plant), hemp, wool, fur, or hides. The material selected determines the cost of the garment and thus the social status of the wearer. The nobility dresses in the finest silks. Peasants wear a long tunic of undyed hemp cloth. The middle classes wear clothing made of cotton.

The color of a garment often has meaning as well. Only the royal family may wear yellow. Nobles dress in other bright colors (though it is not a good idea to outshine a member of the royal family!). The wealthy and middle classes wear duller shades. Dull blue or black clothes are worn by the poor, and are avoided by the other classes as a result. White is only worn in times of mourning. Wedding clothes are red.

Housing

Most of the common people of Zhonggou live in crude huts built of mud bricks, with roofs made of tile or thatched reeds. The floor is often set down below ground level to help keep the occupants warm in the winter and cool in summer. Heating is provided by a fireplace. Cooking is often done outside, in the open air. There is no bathroom; instead, an outdoor latrine is used. In farming regions, wastes are collected in jars for re-use as fertilizer. Bathing is done at public bath-houses.

Wealthier citizens build larger homes, often two or three stories in height. They are built from mud bricks, with a timber or bamboo frame holding up the roof. Most people prefer dwellings built from wood rather than stone, because it looks to be more harmonious with nature. It is also less likely to injure people if it collapses during an earthquake.

The design of a house is often used to represent a family's wealth and social rank. The larger homes of the wealthy are divided into sections arranged around a central courtyard. The bottom floor contains the kitchen and the servants' quarters. The upper stories contain sitting rooms, offices, and bedrooms for the family. Numerous fireplaces provide warmth throughout the entire structure. There are also private indoor bathrooms.

All villages, towns, and cities are laid out in the shape of a square. Protective walls are built around the perimeter. Inside, the urban area is further broken down into square-shaped districts where people of different social ranks or professions gather. A large, dominating government building or religious temple will sit at the center of the town. The nobility and the wealthy will live around it, near the city center, on large plots of land containing their residences and gardens. Poorer citizens will live farther away, often even outside the city walls. Their dwellings are small, and crowd close together.

Other districts within the city hold shops or stalls for craftsmen. The professions are grouped together block by block—one block contains all the potters, for example, while another contains the blacksmiths, and another has all the teahouses and restaurants in a city. Marketplaces are located towards the eastern side of the city, and serve as gathering places for farmers, vendors, and wandering peddlers looking to sell their wares.

Every city or town has a single, dominating temple dedicated to a particular deity. All the lesser temples will be located with it on the same street.

The people of Zhongguo enjoy baths. They wash with herbal soaps. In towns and villages, people use public baths in exchange for a small fee. The wealthy will have private baths of their own. There are also hot water vendors, who push wagons loaded with stone vessels back and forth through the streets.

Belief and Customs

The basis of life in Zhongguo is a belief in harmony and balance. The Zhongguoese worship their ancestors and look to them for advice on how to manage their daily lives.

The family unit holds Zhongguoese society together. It is all-important. Many generations live together, often under the same roof. The oldest male is generally head of the house. There is little individualism; decisions are made to benefit the entire family. Family honor and achievements take priority over personal concerns.

Age demands respect. The old are considered wise and are treated with honor. Young people cannot address their elders by their given names, but use titles such as “grandfather” or “elder sister”. Elders address the young by their given names. Children are taught to respect and obey their elders; they must take care of their mothers and fathers in sickness and in old age.

The family name comes first, then the individual name. A citizen of the Middle Kingdom receives many names during his or her lifetime. At birth, he is given a *milk name*. When he enters school or an apprenticeship, the child receives a *school name*. He receives his *given name* during the capping or hairpin ceremony. When he finds his calling, he gives himself a *second name* which reflects some specific interest, achievement, or activity. He may also receive a *by-name* bestowed upon him by his friends or enemies. On paper, the naming convention is as follows: Family name, given name, title, and by-name (if any).

Generally, boys will learn the family trade while girls learn to manage a household. Sons will go to school and only they can inherit property. Fathers arrange marriages for their daughters. Sometimes, particularly poor families will sell their daughters to the wealthy as household servants.

Children show respect for their dead parents by fasting for three days, not cutting any part of their hair, claws, or beards for a week, and by wearing thick clothing for a month. While in mourning, they must return home for three years, and not travel across any great distance during that time.

Festivals and the Seasonal Rhythm

Most of the citizens of Zhongguo consult the Hsia-hsiao-cheng, or “Regulation of the Minor Affairs of Hsia.” This is a monthly almanac that discusses weather conditions, animal behavior, plant growth, and the movements of the stars and planets. It gives a full ecological description of each month, and individual horoscopes for each day. It is written in a terse, antiquated literary style. People consult it for advice on matters of agriculture, sericulture, hunting, business, commerce, religion, craftsmanship, and travel. There is also more detailed and elaborate edition known as Yueh-ling, or “The Monthly Ordinance.” This is published in twelve volumes, each detailing a specific month. It is favored by scholars and the wealthy.

Each spring opens with the ceremony of Chi, or “The Royal Tillage.” Both Tai-shih and Tai-zhu visit the Zhou King nine days prior to the beginning of spring on li-ch’un, the first day of the second lunar month. The entire Zhou court begins a three-day fast. On the fourth day, the Chi Ceremony begins, with the King walking to his royal farm. There, he tills the field by symbolically turning up one chunk of soil. This is followed by a group of elder male representatives from each noble house; they turn the earth three times. Chief ministers follow suit, turning the earth five times. Next the officials turn it seven times. Heroes and renowned citizens turn the soil nine times. And then the thousand farmers begin to till the massive royal fields. As they work, the King signs his name to the yearly petition for rains. The Tai-shu scribes celestial calligraphy to the petition and burns it.

With the ceremonies complete, a huge banquet is held. The nobles and ministers watch the farmers at work. The festivities go on all day, and include literary, martial, and spiritual competitions. When the work day is done, the farmers come in from the fields, and another even grander banquet is held for everyone.

The Harvest Celebration occurs on the tenth lunar month. The crops gathered from the harvest are given to the King. He holds a series of ritual sacrifices—first to the Celestial Emperor; then to Hou Chi, the first farmer; to the royal ancestry, to the hundred seeds, to the workers in the fields, and to the spirits of the Earth, the animals, the water, the plants, fire (the sun), metal (farming tools), and insects. A happy gathering takes place at the royal court, where common farmers join their King, the nobles, and high-ranking ministers in a great feast. The Harvest Celebration concludes with the distribution of grains from the royal stocks to needy families.

In midwinter comes the Great Hunting Game Festival. It involves major military exercises and reorganization. In addition, minor nobles gather at the request of the dukes, and the dukes gather in the royal court at the request of the King. Here, tributes are paid, favors are granted, and political alliances are sealed.

In addition to these formal ceremonies, there are a number of cultural celebrations as well. These are celebrated differently from state to state.

First among them is the Spring Festival. In the state of Chi, boys and girls meet at the riverside to enjoy scenery and to tell tales. At parting, the present flowers to each others as tokens of their affections. In Zheng state, children dance to the beat of earthen drums under the oaks and the white elms. Girls dance on their way to the marketplace to sell hemp. There, they meet the boys and exchange flowers. In Zhou, things are much more formal. Boys sit on one side and girls on the other as the King and Queen offer sacrifices to Kao Mei (the Supreme Intermediary of the Gods). The boys try to impress the girls with proper etiquette and displays of literary talent.

During the last month of spring, farm animals are set free to mate. A ceremony of purification is held by the Shang-ching. They wear masks and parade around to chase off evil spirits. Finally, there is a communal feast of celebration hosted by dignitaries and community elders. This is an opportunity to reestablish and strengthen the hierarchical social rankings between the attendees.

Ching Ming is the first of three holidays that focus on the dead. Each family revisits its ancestral spirits. During the spring, the living ask their departed ancestors to bless the harvest and to look out for them during the coming year. The entire family visits the ancestral tomb, if it is nearby. They clean away any debris that has gathered and repaint the inscriptions of the dead. They then place incense, food, and paintings of the deceased on or near the tombstone. If the ancestors are pleased by these offerings, then they will protect their descendants. Before leaving, the family places a rock over the celestial calligraphy located at the base of the tombstone. This represents the protection of the tomb from the elements during the coming year.

The Hungry Ghost Festivals are devoted to those spirits who died without proper burial and who have no one to care for them. Such spirits are bitter and hostile. They have not been sustained by food left at their ancestral halls or tombs, they have no place to rest, and they have no descendants to pay them respect. In order to placate them, a Shang-Ching is consulted. He selects a site, which is then filled with lively activities for the next fifteen nights. An altar is built at one end where incense is burned throughout the festival. At the other end, a stage is constructed where entertainers perform to amuse both the living and the dead. Vendors peddle their wares, and many people buy things to leave upon the altar as offerings to the restless spirits. A Tien-Shih is hired to draw a large image of a local deity, which watches over the hungry ghosts and ensures that they commit no mischief. In areas along rivers or seacoasts, the revelers launch thousands of small paper boats carrying food and written offerings for those who perished in the waters.

The festival of Ch'ung Yeung begins on the first day of the ninth month, and lasts for nine days. During this time, the gods open the Gate of the Dead to let spirits from the underworld return to their earthly homes. The Shang-Ching, Mao-shan, and Tien-Shih are in heavy demand, for they provide the means to communicate between the two worlds. Families again visit their ancestral tombs and remove any debris. Calligraphic "underworld money" and cloth are burned for the dead to use. The family shares a picnic with both the living and the dead. Before returning home, the family checks to make sure that the celestial calligraphy of elemental protection is in place over the ancestral tomb.

The Dragon Boat Race is one of largest festivals of the year. It began after the departure of Gongsun, the First Emperor, when a group of people believed that they could catch up to the departing Chi-ling by rowing after him on a fast boat. The practice gradually became a tradition, and evolved into a celebration of the summer solstice—the time of year typically associated with disease and death, and when people feel most helpless against the power of nature.

The tragic tale of Guo Chuyuan further integrated the Dragon Boat Race into the lives of the people of the Middle Kingdom. Guo Chuyuan was a poet, astrologer, and minister in the court of King Hsin at the twilight of the Shang dynasty. Through his studies, Chuyuan came to realize that the Mandate of Heaven had been withdrawn from the Shang line. He told the King that he needed to act quickly to regain the favor of the heavens, but his warnings were ignored, and he was sent away from the capital. He traveled throughout Shang province to advise people to live honorably and justly. Eventually the Shang dynasty came to an end. Guo Chuyuan rejected the new Zhou king's offer of a ministerial posting. Instead, driven by his loyalty and sorrow, he threw himself into the Milto River.

The people of Shang province loved Guo Chunyuan, and news of his death drew large crowds to the riverside. They rowed dragon boats up and down, beating on drums in hopes of scaring the fishes and water dragons away from Chunyuan's body. Women wrapped up rice and threw it into the river so that Chunyuan would no go hungry. There was even a collision between two dragon boats, and one or two riders were drowned. This was viewed as a favorable sign, as it indicated that the gods had accepted the sacrifice.

This festival is celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth month. The boats are brightly decorated, primarily in red, as this symbolizes heat, summer, and fire. Red is also associated with the number five. The boats range from thirty to about one hundred feet in length and are only wide enough for two people to row side by side.

The celebration begins with the awakening of the dragon, when a high priest uses special holy inks to dot the dragon eyes painted on each boat. This ceremony cleanses and blesses the area of the competition, and gives the strength of Baxia and the blessing of the Sea Goddess to the rowers and their boats.

As part of the celebration, supporters of the various teams throw rocks to distract their rivals. This stops as soon as someone is knocked into the river, amid the cheers of the onlookers on the riverbanks, as it indicates that the gods have accepted the sacrifice.

Important Dates

Various kingdoms all use a wider variety of calendars. While most do not use Zhongguo's twelve month calendar, many of their business men do. The following is a list of holidays and celebrations.

Month 1 Day 1 the New Year

Month 1	Day 15	the Night of Thousand Lanterns
Month 2	Day 1	the Ceremony of Chi
Month 3	Day 1	Ching Ming
Month 3	Day 15	the Spring Festival
Month 3	Day 20	Ceremony of Purification
Month 3	Day 25	Celebration of Communal
Month 5	Day 5	Dragon Boat Race
Month 7	Day 15	Hungry Ghost Festivals
Month 7	Day 30	End of Hungry Ghost Festivals
Month 8	Day 1	Lunar Celebration
Month 8	Day 15	Gatherings of Star-crossed Lovers
Month 9	Day 1	beginning of Ch'ung Yeung
Month 9	Day 9	end of Ch'ung Yeung
Month 10	Day 15	the Celebration of Harvest
Month 11	Day 25	the Great Hunt Game

Entertainment

In their free time, the wealthy of Zhongguo engage in a number of different forms of recreation. Hunting, kite-flying, archery, riding, and racing are popular sports. Calmer pursuits include calligraphy, composing poetry and music, and the growing and arrangement of flowers and miniature trees.

The pastimes of the poor are more simple. The demands of their work leave little time for idle amusements, except on festival days. The most common activities include storytelling, gambling, board games, card games, and chess.

In public, people are entertained by jugglers, acrobats, and martial artists. Performers often gather near marketplaces. Musicians and dancers can be found at restaurants and teahouses. Those who can afford them attend the theatre or magic shows, which are commonly used to tell stories and spread religious teachings. Theatre actors dress in brightly-colored costumes. Plays often incorporate songs and music and actors often sing their lines. Stage sets often involve wonderfully intricate scenery and backdrops.

Puzzles are popular throughout Zhongguo, and are encouraged as a form of recreation because they sharpen the mind. Common types include anagrams, word guessing, poetry matching, and the lantern puzzle.

Life Rituals

The birth of a child is always a joyous event. To announce a birth, the family of a baby boy hangs a bow upon the door of their home, while the family of a baby girl hangs embroidery.

Children generally follow in the footsteps of their parents. In some of the more privileged families, however, there is a tradition used to determine the child's future. On the child's first birthday, a tray of various toys and trinkets is brought before him. The onlooker will know his calling from what he picks up and plays with. Typically, the tray will contain a collection of miniatures: a book, a sword, a ba-gua, a Mandarin figure, an abacus, an acupuncture needle, a ruler, and a little toy zither.

For the people of Zhongguo, life can really be said to begin at adolescence. Only then can their chances of reaching adulthood be considered reasonably certain, as the child mortality rate is unfortunately high. At age seventeen or eighteen, they are initiated into society as full citizens through a ceremony—a capping ceremony for the males, and a hairpin ceremony for the females. These ceremonies are important events, and the father invites guests to witness them.

The ritual involves placing three different caps (kuans) or hairpins on the head of the initiate, indicating that the child has grown to adulthood and needs new headwear. The first is either a hemp kuan or a jade hairpin, and represents the civil side of the candidate. The second is a leather kuan or silver hairpin, representing the candidate's martial side. The final one is a silk kuan or gold hairpin, and represents the candidate's spiritual side. After that, the candidate is no longer a child, and is welcomed into adulthood. The family, relatives, and guests receive the young adult.

The child is given a public name during this ceremony, so that his personal name will not be heard by outsiders. The second name often contains a word to indicate birth order. Po means eldest, Chung means second eldest, Shu means third eldest, and Chi means the youngest. An additional word, either Fu ("father") for male or Mu ("mother") for females is also included as part of the public name. The inclusion of birth order in the names of adults establishes their appropriate place in the family social hierarchy of Zhongguo. Seniority is important in many social dealings.

Upon reaching adulthood, a person is eligible to marry. Marriage is often arranged by family elders, though the man and woman involved will have some say in the matter. Either one of them can demand a Test of Fitness to see whether the other can hold up his or her end of the marriage. A female can request a contest of wits or arms from her potential husband, while a male can request a sample of sewing or cooking. Sizeable dowries are brought to the house of the bride as betrothal gifts from the groom. These show her family that the groom is capable of providing for his new family.

Weddings are arranged jointly by the two families, and are witnessed by invited guests. The ceremony signifies the union of the two families under a single roof, not the formation of a new family. After receiving instructions from her parents to be a submissive wife, the bride leaves her home. She brings all her belongings with her as well as gifts to the family of the groom, indicating that she is now part of his clan-family and thus able to help support them.

The newlyweds are first received by the groom's parents as their guests. They then visit the groom's ancestral shrine to announce the marriage to his ancestors. In most cases, the couple will find a gift left by the ancestral spirits to indicate their blessing. However, there are also cases where lights in the shrines have been extinguished to show that something is wrong with the marriage.

A woman's name does not change when she marries. Instead, she receives the title of tai-tai ("wife"). The husband's family and birth order names are included in her title: po-tai-tai ("eldest wife"), or chi-tai-tai ("youngest wife"), for example. Her public name falls into disuse, and is reserved for formal occasions.

The last of life's rituals is the funeral ceremony. Immediately after someone dies, the youngest adult female climbs up on the roof and calls the deceased's name three times in the hope that the spirit will return.

Failing that, the name of the deceased is written on a white banner and is placed atop a pole in the family courtyard. Another is placed next to the deceased. Grains are placed in his mouth so that he won't be hungry. More grain is cooked and placed in a container next to the body on a wooden bar. Together with the white banner, this acts as a temporary name tablet to which the spirit can attach itself until a more permanent tablet is completed. Without something to anchor to, the spirit might lose its identity and wander away.

Once the name tablet is placed in the ancestors' shrine, the deceased joins the family's ancestral spirits. The funeral is attended by family and relatives, each of whom wears a white mourning costume dictated by his or her relationship to the departed. The local lord or elder attends the funeral as well, and uses the occasion to recognize the change in status of the deceased's successor.

Services are held several times a year at ancestral temples. These are not just places to pay homage to the celestials; instead, they act as communal gathering places between the living and the dead. Brothers and cousins from near and far come to reaffirm their kinship. Grandchildren play for the ancestral spirits to see, and receive their blessings. The Yi-ren sings epics to commemorate the family's glorious history.

In the Middle Kingdom, a family is joined not only by blood or common interests, but also by their shared heritage. This is emphasized by the inclusion of the all past members of the group. Ancestral spirits remain with the living forever. The past, present, and future are united by the ever-extending family line.

All contents Copyright 2002 Sanguine Productions Ltd.