



C. Fred Blake. *Burning Money: The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. ix + 276 pages.
 Illustrations, notes, glossary, bibliographical references, index. Cloth,
 US\$52.00. ISBN: 978-0-8248-3532-3.

IN CHINA, it has long been a custom in many places to burn “paper money” (*zhiqian* 纸钱) and other paper replicas of valuable things to send to the dead. The dead include deceased family members, ancestors, and myriads of demons and divinities in the netherworld. The burning is especially common at funerals, the major ghost festivals, and many other festivities and personal occasions. The custom has been practiced for over a thousand years all across China and in Chinese communities beyond, even though it often has been stigmatized as wasteful and superstitious, and sometimes prohibited by the government. The practice is so familiar to so many that it is taken for granted and the subject has received little attention from Chinese scholars. Employing anthropological perspectives, C. Fred Blake has authored a comprehensive work to shed light on the custom of burning paper money in China, exploring the cultural logic of this common practice while addressing larger anthropological questions concerning the nature of value.

The book comprises three parts: the first part is devoted to a general description of the custom of burning paper money; the second part draws on structuralism, historical materialism, and phenomenology to explain the meanings and motives behind the custom; and the final part, the last three chapters, tell how the custom has changed in modern times. Most of the information in the book is from the author’s casual and protracted ethnographic fieldwork, supplemented by historical documents, narratives, folktales, news reports, online posts, and other textual records. By employing a mix of these resources, the author intended to integrate Chinese and Western thought and analytics to develop a theoretical framework that he calls a “materialist aesthetics” that includes considering how burning paper money meshes with other customs in China and around the world (7–8).

In the first chapter, “Chiasm,” Blake uses a multi-site ethnographic methodology to examine how Chinese people talk about, conceptualize, and interconnect the custom with other materials that signify the spiritual side of their everyday lives. Chapter 2, “Endless Scroll,” surveys the galaxy of papers that are cut from an “endless scroll” that can be traced back a thousand years, and covers most of continental East Asia from Lanzhou to Taipei, from Harbin to Hanoi, and diasporic communities elsewhere. As the author points out, although a lot of paper money is made by family members for domestic consumption, most is produced and sold by countless family-based workshops and makers all over China (27). In the third chapter, “Origins,” the author draws on sources from ethnology, folklore, and history to track the origins of the custom of burning paper money. His main evidence is drawn from folktales and chronological accounts based on datable documents, such as stories in current anthologies of folktales, and he suggests that the custom began as a “subterfuge” to sell more paper (55). He specifically examines three stories related to this idea, assuming that folktales simply speak “for the collective intellect of the people” (63). I find the selection and analysis of the folktales a bit oversimplified, particularly in using the tales to explain the origin of a certain custom. Such stories might be better regarded as a sort of narrative discourse that convey values and beliefs of certain folk groups or communities in certain contexts in daily lives, rather than as factual accounts.

The second part of the book is devoted to a view of the paper money burning custom from three different perspectives. The fourth chapter, “Liturgy,” is a structural analysis of the semiotic role of paper money in ritual. Blake combines the Western theory of the ritual process in tandem with the Chinese idea of cosmic change (*yinyang wuxing* 阴阳五行) to analyze the alchemy of ritual fire, bringing forth the implicit liturgical, and even canonical, meaning of paper money in the common ritual services. Chapter 5, “Ideology,” is an analysis of the function of paper money under different historical formations based on the theory of historical materialism. The author differentiates the modern system of capital formation from the “precapitalist” formations that he calls “social economies” (102), and explores different functions of paper money rituals under different ideological conditions. Chapter 6, “Sacrifice,” concludes the second part by shifting from the historical formation to the structure of the lifeworld in which “the consecrative handling of the papers is concerned with producing value,” in the form of a sacrifice from the perspective of phenomenology (4).

The last three chapters comprise my favorite part of the book, where our view is shifted to the interesting phenomenon of burning paper in real-life contexts. In particular, the final two chapters tell us how modern times have changed the custom of burning paper and have turned its traditional ludic spirit into a “burlesque” in the process of change (5). The author points out that the common practice of burning paper survived the Cultural Revolution, when it was attacked as “feudal superstition,” and it has been innovated on in unexpected ways in contemporary times (196). Nowadays, users and suppliers have invented “ghost bills” and various replicas of modern commodities as paper offerings to the dead (Chapters 7 and 8). The replicas include modern appliances (computers, air conditioners, refrigerators,

microwaves, color TVs, cell phones, and so on); other forms of “symbolic” capital (such as diplomas, IDs, credit cards with unlimited overdraft, stocks, bankbooks, checkbooks); big-ticket luxuries (for example, villas, limousines, yachts); games and gambling devices (mahjong sets, checkers); weapons, famous brand items (electronics, cigarettes, wines, watches); mannequins of servants, private bodyguards and guard dogs, pilots, and doctors; mistresses, including beautiful ladies and famous actresses; and “sex supplies” (*xingyongpin* 性用品): Ecstasy, Viagra, and various types of condoms (178–79). This up-to-date list is fascinating, and it indicates how paper money has become a part of the modern consumer economy. Blake summarizes by saying: “The paper money custom is a large network of industrial and commercial enterprise that produces money and things for the purpose of undertaking commerce with the spirits. But the commerce with the spirits is conducted according to ceremonial giving” (198). There is no information, however, on which agencies have played important roles in this new paper money business.

In terms of interpretation of the burning paper customs, I would suggest that the author did not draw a clear boundary between the use of cut paper in rituals that provide offerings to the dead and the festive rituals celebrating life. While various paper craft traditions may overlap with each other in certain situations, based on my own fieldwork in northern China, practitioners make clear distinctions between paper crafts burned for the dead in mournful events, known as *baishi* 白事 (“white rituals”), and those used as decoration in *hongshi* 红事 (“red rituals”) or festive events. The focus of the author on the practice of burning paper in *baishi*, and his observations on the paper-cutting tradition and the New Year pictures tradition (Chapter 1) are mostly drawn from the practice of *hongshi*, which actually deserves another book or a series of books.

In short, C. Fred Blake fully illustrates the common practice of burning paper money in the daily lives of many people throughout China, exploring the forces that have continued and transformed this old tradition from old times up to the present. His book is innovative and comprehensive in its interpretation of this common custom in China and will be welcomed by anyone interested in the living traditions and cultures of China.

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