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GOODS




# A SH E SH

## FIVE TES

I  The Chinese sacrificial custom can be traced to its prehistoric roots in shamanism, dating back more than 3000 years as the oldest spiritual tradition in China. It is distinguished by the two features of ancestor worship and of animism, that is, the conviction that physical things have a soul. It began with funerary gifts of real objects, valuables and even live slaves, a practice that persisted into the Han era (206 BC – 220 AD).

The subsequently prevailing social ethics of Confucianism called for the substitution of real goods with symbolic embodiments of value that involved less squandering of societal wealth and were of a substance more appropriate to the kingdom of spirits.

These objects were initially made of clay and straw, but soon after the introduction of paper at the Chinese court in 105 AD, the latter material became associated with the ritual of burnt offerings and the process of transubstantiation as the representations end up in smoke and are reduced to ashes.

II  Since the beginning of the Tang Dynasty in the seventh century, the custom has existed in the very same form we see exercised today in all locations of Chinese culture, from the Chinatown districts of New York and San Francisco to Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore and of course in China itself. Practitioners believe that things of value – money, gold and silver, but also all types of commodities can be replicated in paper and transmitted to ancestors, spirits and gods in the great beyond through the act of burning. This afterworld is a faithful mirror image of life on earth with all its bureaucracies and monetary economies, a realm where wealth and bribery are conducive to spiritual advancement.



◇ P F ◇ R T H E



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III ✓ Strictly speaking, the custom is not a religion or an official system of faith and has never been codified in writing. Instead it is a popular belief handed down informally and practised as an everyday event, a so-called “little tradition” or diffuse spirituality with ludic, playful features. As such it has been opposed and obstructed by political regimes throughout the ages for its mocking attitude towards wealth and labelled as superstition. From imperial feudalism to the Cultural Revolution under Maoist-era socialism to modern state capitalism, the ruling powers have always been more or less hostile to this practice.

IV ✓ It is all the more surprising that the ancestor worship ritual of committing sacrificial offerings to the flames has not only newly flourished in recent years and become a fixture of everyday life in Chinese mega-cities, but that it has come under the influence of the globalised world economy and taken on a new hybrid form. Today practitioners burn imitations of banknotes modelled after euros and dollars and almost exclusively the sort of objects seen in western shopping habits. In most cases, however, it is not simply a matter of western commodities instead of the traditional Chinese variety, but copies of particular types of merchandise: in nearly all cases consisting of brand-name goods and top-label luxury products.



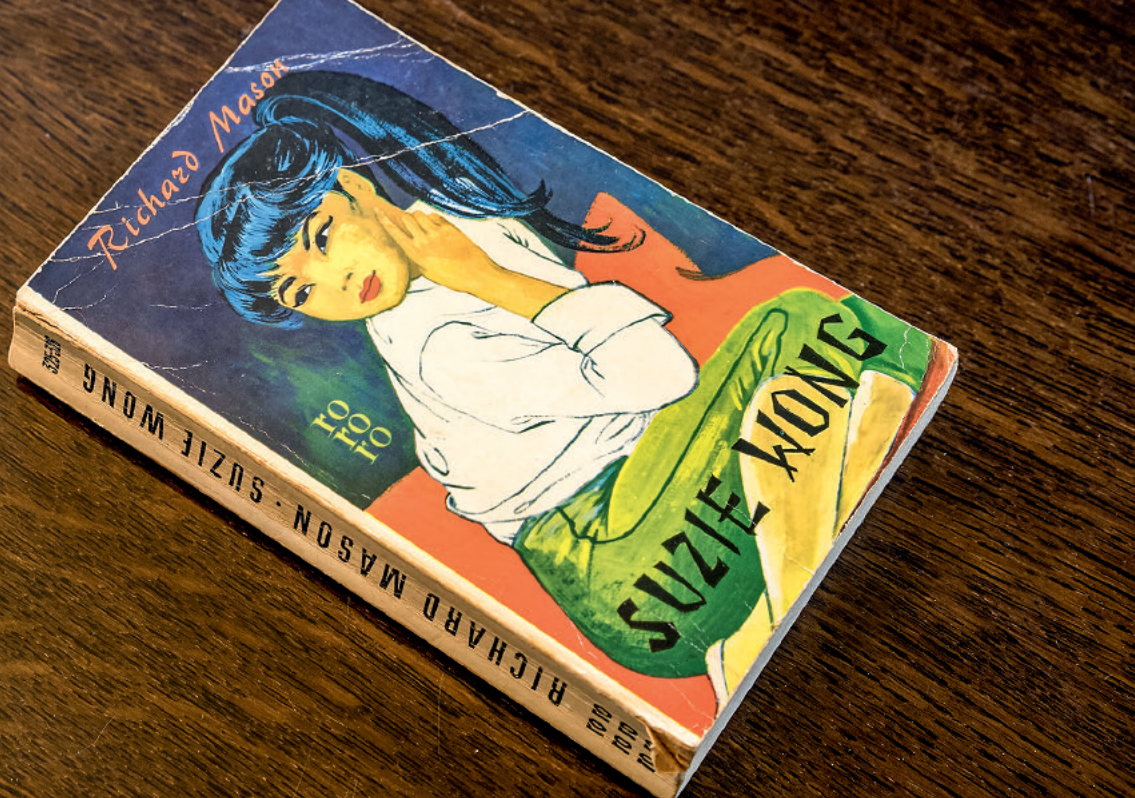
Known as zhǐzhā (紙扎), the paper models reveal an intimate indicator of China's development as a society. We see the needs of the Chinese populace and their dreamt-of objects of longing, for participants in this rite give their ancestors paper replicas of the very goods they would like to have for themselves, but usually cannot afford. The people of China have clearly become seized by an admiration for the same set pieces of a cult of consumption that define the longings of the western middle class: the litany of Prada, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Rolex, Ferrari, Apple and so forth. The consumer hopes of the west have apparently become universally binding on a worldwide scale, penetrating virtually all cultures and extending to the most remote corners of the earth.

The unique nature of the Chinese simulacra yields new insights about the state of our own society: the purchase of expensive luxury and brand-name products seems to have nothing to do with status symbols that garner actual recognition. Instead, it concerns partaking in a higher sense of purpose, one that is never really explained and only transpires in the veneration of famous names. Adherents do not acquire utility value, but simply become admitted to an indeterminate cosmos of higher meaning.

As in the original beginnings of the Chinese custom, this buying behaviour proves to be yet another instance of animism, regarding dead objects as though they were animate spirit beings with supernatural powers. It can therefore be described as idealistic consumption in which the only thing acquired is ideational participation in a system of meaning. In these quasi-sacred acts of purchase, the ceremonial paper shoes reflect the fetish character better than any actual high heels from Prada: in the fact that the paper shoes remain unusable, they are also spared from the profanation of use.

Wolfgang Scheppe





## TRAILER

The first time a broader western audience became acquainted with the Chinese practice of commemorating the dead through the ritual of paper burning came by way of a bestselling work of popular literature and its screen adaptation in a major Hollywood production. Richard Mason was an English author who had travelled extensively to the British colonies and tapped into his experiences in light novels replete with local colour, which very successfully exploited the demand for sentimental exoticism. His most widely read book was the erotic colonial love story published in 1957, *The World of Suzie Wong*, in which a globetrotting western artist and bon vivant becomes romantically involved with a prostitute in the crown colony of Hong Kong. In the course of the story, the seductive innocent loses her baby in a landslide in the slum where the child lived and allows the hero to take part in a ceremonial burning of paper symbols to honour the deceased.

In choosing the actress to portray Suzie Wong, the producers settled on the dancer Nancy Kwan, daughter of a British mother and Chinese father. According to the calculations of the Hollywood studio bosses, her facial features fell within the acceptable level of foreignness for the identification capacity of American audiences, which up to now had only wanted to see Asian characters as caricatures mimed by white actors.

Today the fictionalised account in the story of *The World of Suzie Wong* comes across as a paradigm for a flagrant exoticism whose ideational authority over a foreign culture simultaneously glorifies and exploits its inferiority and underdevelopment as a sexualised enigma. As the alien other personified in the figure of a prostitute is defined by the mere fact of presenting oneself for appropriation and subjugation and wishing to be tamed and educated, the relationship between the main characters appears to be a simple expression of the legitimation of the real power relations that still held sway in the colonial possessions of that era.



The disinterest in the nature of a foreign culture whose set pieces are used as mere decoration in one's own fantasy of it remains visible in a subtlety of the film's closing scene. Depicting the execution of the paper-burning ritual, the sequence contains a notable breach of liturgical syntax: while the title character and her female friends place the paper offerings in the flames with a respectful, ceremonially correct two-handed gesture, the male hero – or rather the herein no less ignorant American movie star William Holden – tosses his gift into the fire with just one hand. He does not know any better. Still, this act of giving is of particular spiritual significance: it is the letter of recommendation from the representative of colonial power, according the deceased baby the status of a person capable of succeeding in the bureaucracy of the beyond. Nancy Kwan entitled her biographical documentary with the very same address line from this desire for recognition: To whom it may concern.

Wolfgang Scheppe

Collection of shoes made from paper (Zhīzhā). Hong Kong (2000-14),  
Rosanna Wei-han Li

Trailer for "The World of Suzie Wong", 1960, directed by:  
Richard Quine, starring: William Holden, Nancy Kwan, Sylvia Syms,  
production/ distribution: Paramount Pictures

An exhibition by Wolfgang Scheppe







