Consuming in Hell: the Burning of Papier Mache Replicas of Consumer Products in the Chinese Culture

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Within the Chinese culture, paper has been burnt for millennia to accompany the departed on their journey to the netherworld and as a medium to carry relief for those already there. Eventually, and more so now, paper has been used to construct replicas of contemporary consumer products that are burnt for enjoyment and comfort in hell! This research traces the history of the ritual, offers, as an example, an inventory of in-store, available reproduced products, and reports on a series of in-depth interviews of consumers. Interviewees identify the products they wish to consume in the after-life and elaborate on their selection and reasons.

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Within the Chinese culture, paper has been burnt for millennia to accompany the departed on their journey to the netherworld and as a medium to carry relief for those already there. Eventually, and more so now, paper has been used to construct replicas of contemporary consumer products that are burnt for enjoyment and comfort in hell! This research traces the history of the ritual, offers, as an example, an inventory of in-store, available reproduced products, and reports on a series of in-depth interviews of consumers. Interviewees identify the products they wish to consume in the after-life and elaborate on their selection and reasons.

Introduction

In most cultures, families send along significant items and memorabilia with their departed, such as pictures, food items, favorite toys or objects, or religious ornaments. Thus, it is not surprising that money has been found in burial sites over the world. While the ritual may have subsided as cultures modernized, the practice of burning paper replicas of money and consumer goods has remained strong wherever the Chinese have settled. In the People’s Republic of China, such traditional beliefs and customs were strongly discouraged and often punished, and children were instructed to view such rituals as feudal superstitions to be done away with. However, the practice of burning paper and paper products survived, but almost exclusively in Guangdong and Guanxi provinces. For instance, as a part of this research, the author investigated the phenomenon in Beijing and Shanghai, and could only find a handful of stores carrying a very limited range of products in the specialized street of each city. In comparison, overseas Chinese did not experience such political and cultural pressures and, as a result, the offering of money and paper products to the deceased has flourished, uninterrupted, into an extremely rich experience. For that reason, this research was conducted in Singapore and Malaysia where Chinese traditions have remained solid.

To better investigate the depth of the behavior, four investigative approaches were used: in-store observation, structured interviews with store managers and with religious experts, and in-depth interviews with consumers. During in-store observations, permission was requested to take photographs. Stores and their managers were interviewed in Singapore and in two Malaysian cities (Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh). One locally renowned Taoist priest and one respected Buddhist monk were interviewed and 14 consumers participated in in-depth interviews in their home.