

*Burning Money: The Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld*, by C. Fred Blake.  
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Book review by David A. Palmer  
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One of the most ubiquitous practices of Chinese religion is that of burning imitation paper money – including the so-called “Hell Bank Notes” – for ancestors, ghosts and officials of the underworld. The custom is still widespread, as likely to be found in the modern suburbs of Shanghai or the Chinatowns of New York, as in the remote villages of the Chinese hinterland. Perhaps because it is so common, so ordinary a practice in Chinese culture, it has remained largely under the radar of academic studies of Chinese religion. *Burning Money: the Material Spirit of the Chinese Lifeworld* is the first significant study of Chinese paper money rituals since Hon Chin-lang’s *Monnaies d’offrande et la notion de trésorerie dans la religion Chinoise* (Paris, Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1975) and Hill Gates’ essay on “Money for the Gods” (in *Modern China*, 13:3, 1987). *Burning Money* proposes an anthropological overview of the custom, analysing it from multiple theoretical perspectives, and using it as a starting point for a general discussion on the nature of money, sacrifice, and mystification in feudal and capitalist societies.

The first part of the book is devoted to the description of the custom, using several methodological approaches. Chapter 1 considers how money burning is embedded in the everyday lives of Chinese people, how it connects to other beliefs and practices, and how people of different walks of life describe and explain it. Chapter 2 surveys the myriads of types of paper moneys found in the Chinese world, as well as the techniques and practices of their production. This ranges from sheets of coarse paper, converted into “paper money” (*qianzhi* 錢紙) through incisions, perforations, impressions, embossings or imprints; to “paper silver” (for ancestors and common spirits) and “paper gold” (for higher deities), to “hell bank notes” imitating the appearance of contemporary US greenbacks or Chinese Renminbi. Chapter 3 explores the origin of the custom, drawing on both folktales and the written accounts of literati, starting in later Han (25-220). Blake hypothesizes that paper money appeared as an economic substitute for the use of real coins in mortuary practices, and spread to the common people: “the very ordinary folks participated and in one sense, a simulated sense, were enabled to outdo the sumptuary privileges of those that otherwise ruled their lives. Paper money burning was a vulgarization of the sumptuary privilege that gave the ruling ranks their appearance of privilege and power” (74). At one level, the custom is a mystification of China’s feudal relations of production – but at another level, folk tales reveal that the common people “see through” the mystification, not only of ghost money, but of “real” money as well. Blake focuses on two common motifs in the folktales: one, the “ruse motif,” narrates the origin of the custom as a deception to sell useless paper, another motif conveys the message that, in the end, all money is ghost money (62). In one story, “a ghost named Zhu asks his friend Zhao to burn paper for him. Zhao is reluctant and asks, ‘Paper money is just paper. How can it be used in the *yin* world?’ Somewhat perturbed, Zhu answers: ‘Your question totally misses the point! In the *yang* world, the real money is nothing but copper. You cannot eat it when you are hungry, and you

cannot wear it when you are cold; it too is useless. It is just the custom that makes a thing [like money] what it is. Whatever money is made from, humans and ghosts naturally desire it” (60).

The second part of the book uses a succession of theoretical frameworks to analyse the paper burning custom. Blake attempts a semiotic interpretation combining structuralist theory, phenomenology, van Gennep’s rites of passage, and Chinese correlative cosmology, to explain the basic liturgy of paper burning, which consists of (1) lighting candles, (2) lighting incense, (3) making a food offering, (4) burning paper and (5) setting off firecrackers. The author then shifts to a historical materialist framework, arguing that under Chinese feudalism, paper money burning “enabled petit producers and tradespersons to participate in the mysteries of imperial/cosmic order that were more or less in concert with the rites of imperial sacrifices” (p. 3). But, unlike many other customs, paper money burning has survived the collapse of feudalism, and even found a new life and creative innovations under capitalism.

Chapter 6 examines the production of value in paper burning customs, using a phenomenological approach to the sacrificial dimension of paper money burning. Practitioners “consecrate” the paper before burning it, by deliberately fluttering the bundles of paper, touching each leaf with their fingers, changing the bills “from a visible purchased good to an otherworldly, invisible treasure with spiritual value” (p. 124). This process of consecration is even more evident in the custom, commonly practiced by groups of old women in temple courtyards or their homes, of folding and wrapping elaborate bundles of paper money. Blake argues that this labour constitutes a sacrifice, “not of paper per se, or of blood per se, but of toil per se” (p. 140) – one which mystifies and reproduces the patriarchal, feudal relations of productions of imperial China.

While traditional paper money involves a significant effort of embodied labour through folding and wrapping, and looks quite different from “real” paper money, another type – “ghost bills” – are printed simulacra of real banknotes in circulation, replacing the figures with portraits of the Jade Emperor or Buddha, and inflating the denominations (up to \$500 million or even in the billions). Blake argues that this tendency represents the insertion of the custom into the forces of capitalism, with the notes becoming commodities, but also a parody of capitalist relations, almost resembling a modern-day potlatch. This draws our attention to the “burlesque” dimensions of the custom (chap. 8), as seen in cases where the ghost money is so similar to “real” money that people sometimes mistakenly burn their real bills, or cases in which fengshui masters have deliberately instructed their clients to burn real money, for greater effect (and causing much scandal). Other examples are other types of paper offerings which have become popular for burning – not only paper horses and cars, but also paper air conditioners, colour TVs, iPads, machine guns, bodyguards, private jets, sexy girls, and even viagra and condoms. There is humour and irony in this participation, through burning, in simulating, celebrating and sacrificing the most ostentatious signs of capitalist decadence. The book concludes with a reflection on value, bringing the paper money custom into discussions on the kula ring, the anthropological theory of the gift, Simmel’s philosophy of money, and the Marxian theory of the fetish.

*Burning money* offers a fascinating excursion into the multiple and far-reaching meanings and implications of the paper money custom. Blake’s versatile approach, drawing on several methodologies and theoretical traditions, is highly commendable, even though the result is not always convincing. First, at the level of fundamental research, although ethnographic vignettes are scattered throughout the argument, the book lacks a systematic ethnographic study, covering all stages and dimensions of the custom, as well as the ritual context within which it is usually practiced. The first chapter, ostensibly devoted to ethnographic description, is only 15 pages long, mostly devoted to

literature review and narratives of dreams. Without a solid ethnographic grounding, the custom remains elusive throughout the book, as if the author takes for granted that readers are already intimately familiar with money burning. The theoretical discussions are far more elaborate, but are often obscure or overly speculative. I will give only two examples. Blake often mentions money-burning and foot-binding in the same breath, treating both as comparable instances of mystification of the feudal order, on the basis, it seems, that both involve wrapping and folding, one of paper, the other of womens' feet (the two are also, at one point, compared to Chinese dumplings), to evoke the "mystery" of sacrifice: "It is the *emptiness* of inaccessible interior space – the dead air of the First Treasure or atrophied flesh of small feet – that *supports* the outer visible *yang* form, the ostensible order of the world as gold bullion or gold feet (a euphemism for bound feet)" (p. 141). In his structuralist analysis of the liturgy, Blake's attempt to use the Chinese five-elements cosmology as an analytical framework – based on his own speculations rather than on emic accounts – appears as forced as some of the less fortunate cases of Han dynasty correlative cosmology: while the association of food offerings with "earth", paper money with "wood" and firecrackers with "fire" may be plausible, linking candles with "water" and incense with "metal" is only possible with a big stretch of symbolic imagination or mystical insight.

These speculative flights are part of the originality and fascination of this book, which offers plenty of food for thought on the concepts of money, sacrifice and value, making it highly relevant, not only for students of Chinese religion, but also of general anthropological theory.

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