a translation into English of this formidable part of the Münchener Ostasiatische Studien series should at least be considered in anticipation of a more widespread readership of experts and generalists alike.

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NOTE


A sustained interest among Occidental scholars and travelers in the thousand-year-old Chinese custom of burning paper for the spirits goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century. We have countless anecdotal descriptions and references to these papers, a few studies that explain and theorize the social and historical function of the custom, and a few monograph-length studies that describe the production and uses of the papers in their material form. To this last group Janet Lee Scott now adds her work. Scott’s descriptions are rich and evenly distributed among the various regimes of value through which the papers move—manufacturing, marketing, and offering. The fact that the size of the corpus of paper-made offerings is so enormous and growing does not allow anything close to an equal treatment of all the material items in that corpus, but none has made the effort at comprehension with greater alacrity and modicum of success than Scott. Where former monographs spotlight the monetary side of the offering papers or the paper charms, Scott attempts to view the whole spectrum of paper offerings by extending the light to include the so-called pitched end of the offering spectrum. These are the three-dimensional bamboo-tied-and-paper-pasted replicas of the things of daily life. Still, Scott’s endeavor is inevitably confronted with the overflow of paper items that constitute just the Hong Kong corpus; she is
compelled to select the parts that stand out as icons of the Hong Kong tradition. The author’s description of “pitched” and “non-pitched” paper offerings is a lucid, intricately detailed, and seemingly encyclopedic narrative.

The impetus for Scott’s interest in the custom, as well as for the encyclopedic quality of the work, is the sheer artistry of the papery materials. In addition, the adventure of finding places where it is made, sold, and used quickens the desire to collect the stuff, and in the author’s case, to amass the world’s largest private collection of offering papers. The first chapter takes up the problem of sorting and classifying the papers available in Hong Kong and describing some of the iconic forms in that corpus. The primary distinction in the offering industry is between the pitched replicas and the flat paper replicas of metallic monies and charms. Chapter 1 concentrates on the flat papers. One of many examples is the “honorable person” (guiren) charm, which comes in various forms, two of which are the “round” red perforated paper and the “long” green perforated paper, used in ensembles of offerings to the gods. This charm augurs the helping hand of an “honorable person,” which takes the character of a benevolent stranger, a concept that is intriguing given Chinese sensibilities about anonymous benevolence, fate, and luck. Scott’s narrative sticks closely to the way this honorable person is variously represented in the materiality of the charm.

Chapter 2 concentrates on how ceremonial papers are used to address personal concerns. The description runs between special accoutrements such as pinwheels for the gods and the special ensemble of papers to rid ceremonially the world of small persons (bothers and nemeses). Both of these ensembles, and a host of others described in this chapter, are characteristic of the Hong Kong offering orbit. The next chapter describes how paper offerings address concerns to different categories of spirits known to English readers as “gods” and “ghosts.” These distinctions and subdivisions (e.g., the higher gods and the lower gods) form hierarchies that are finessed by different kinds and varying ensembles of paper offerings. When we address the basics of offering practices, these general categories dissolve into particularly named spirits, each known by a more or less unique ensemble of papers. The description is further complicated by the protean nature of this hierarchy and by the fact that the sea of available papers for finessing it are open to a good deal of the devotee’s individual preference and circumstance. Scott’s point seems to be that each spirit entity must be finessed with the proper ensemble of offering papers, although what constitutes proper is a complex of individual aesthetic sensibilities, commonsense pragmatics, and local standards of traditional practices. Although the paper vendors are always ready to advise persons on which ensemble of papers is needed for this or that particular offering, there is no uniform code across the industry much less custom-wide.

Spirits that are called “ancestors” are dealt with in a separate chapter because here the spirit of the offering is to show recognition and respect. This chapter spotlights the funerary papers, and of these, the pitched replicas are placed
front and center. Here the pitched offerings include the basic funerary accoutrements, which are mostly traditional and traceable to earlier historical periods, and the secondary accoutrements that reflect changes in technology and fashion, for example, from rickshaws to motorcars. Many readers will delight in Scott’s description of this cornucopia of Hong Kong’s modern consumables. These include small- and full-scale luxury brand motorcars, even villas made to small and full scale. The inventory includes all the big and little necessities of life, including, for example, refrigerators with all their workable parts, down to a detailed egg rack. Of course, the last detail does not include a workable motor. Every part of the material lifeworld is or can be replicated in paper. There are documents for every kind of financial transaction and travel, and popular brand cigarette packs containing replicas of the cigarettes inside. Scott’s description of this stuff assumes the same serious demeanor as she perceives it to be in the devotees who purchase it for their ancestors. However, she does include the occasional question or disclaimer concerning some of the newer items. For example, many devotees question the recent attempt to introduce papery food items, in part because an important aspect of most offerings includes real food items, which facilitate the commensal-based communion between the spirits of the living and the dead. The emphasis on the realism of the replicas, for me, is the most fascinating part of the discussion.

This opens the way to the rest of the book, which focuses on the business of marketing and manufacturing the world of paper. Chapter 5 describes the world of paper shops and the special relationships between vendors who are honest and helpful and loyal customers who often depend on a vendor’s advice and the good fortune that accrues from patronizing a particular vendor. The vendors see their honesty and helpfulness as good business practice since the competition is often just around the corner or in the next stall—retail facilities from makeshift stalls to big stores are found in every part of Hong Kong—while customers feel their loyalty to a certain shop and its keeper is “vital to their feeling of security” (p. 156). These observations are important; they raise more questions than there is space for answers. For example, what accounts for the specialness of this relationship? The reader surmises that this special relationship has to do with the momentous nature of the custom itself, to the extent that it deals with problems of life’s fortunes and misfortunes and the hereafter. A great deal more could have been discussed, but the chapter ends in order to move on to the manufacturers.

The chapter on learning the trade tells how the paper offerings are manufactured by craftsmen, and nowadays craftswomen, and the hand skills that have to be mastered to accomplish the work of making metallic laminated papers, a tedious and meticulous set of operations, the labor market for which has largely moved to firms in the provincial hinterlands beyond Hong Kong. Much of the chapter focuses on the Hong Kong manufacture of the pitched replicas, mostly used in funeral services, and the golden flowers and pinwheels that empower
the sacred spaces with magical effects. Here the reader is treated to detailed descriptions of the handiwork entailed in making these items and the relationships between masters and learners that retain many of the affects of the old, now defunct craft guilds. The rapid changes in technologies and tastes of modern Hong Kong put a premium on the innovation of the masters to create new designs and the initiative of learners to work on increasingly complicated replicas.

Chapter 7 describes the auspicious symbols that go into making a paper offering. These symbols include the use of particular colors, the use of iconic animals and flowers, some functioning as rebuses, plus depictions of the immortals and various deities. These icons are most dramatically combined in the pitched items of pinwheels and flower canons. The latter are towering bamboo-and-paper structures that require more than one person to carry, richly accoutered with auspicious figurines for presenting to a particular god on her or his birthday. These ritualistic items, especially pinwheels and flower canons, are works of art in the eyes of Scott and the paper masters who make them. They are also beautiful in the eyes of the devotees for whom they exude a meaning that goes beyond words. Just what that meaning is or how we get to it is an important point that is left unanswered as the author moves on to the question that will trouble many readers: who actually practices the custom of paper offerings? Scott is able to draw on a wealth of scholarly studies, including a number of surveys, focused on Hong Kong residents. To summarize it, attempts to specify the kinds of persons who use paper offerings are difficult because the spirit of the custom does not lend itself to cut-and-dried determinations of who does and who does not make offerings. Even casual observations disclose that many people from all walks of life use paper offerings; this includes all the categories that are sometimes thought of as showing less enthusiasm for the custom: the rich, the educated, the young, and males. That being said, one can hardly avoid the simple observation that older women are most active in upholding the custom.

The concluding chapter addresses the future of the paper offering custom. The argument is that despite official opposition to the custom, the industry is thriving, and the funeral offering component in Hong Kong is expanding. Why? Scott offers two reasons: (1) trade flexibility, which is quick to respond to changes in consumer demands; and (2) modern identity. When it comes to explaining this custom, the question of modern identity—that China is a mosaic of identities, that Hong Kong struggles with its Chineseness, and so forth—is beside the point. There is, of course, the important point that people from different parts of China have different offering papers. Where these regional identities coalesce into communities in Hong Kong, their paper offerings are found in the local shops. Scott alludes to this in several parts of her book as a complicating factor in any attempt to comprehend Hong Kong’s paper offering custom. To the extent that this ethnic factor is about identity, the discussion must come to grips with the ordinary people’s devotion to the paper they offer. It is not until Scott addresses the issue
in something close to these terms, that is, the meaning of the paper offering custom itself, that I find a more compelling and insightful account. In answering the question about why the custom persists, Scott discounts the often heard assumption that paper offerings to the ancestors, gods, and ghosts are done to get some material benefit in return. Scott proffers a more subtle and complex argument that offerings of paper are a sincere act of caring. In my view, this argument is more in keeping with the whole of the offering custom, and it opens up interesting theoretical vistas. One of these theories Scott pursues to the final page of her book, that is, the possibility of worship without paper offerings. This brings into the discussion indigenous concepts of sincerity, admixed with similar notions in the great religions, specifically Buddhism and possibly Christianity.

Most readers looking for answers to questions of why will be satisfied with voluminous answers to questions of what, especially what is the content of the papers and what the industry and the custom say about it and do with it. This is a what book. Scott reports what various people tell her and proffers analyses and interpretations that do not venture far beyond this level of discursiveness, except in the last few pages. At that point, she challenges the facile and popular notion that the custom simply engages a system of materialistic exchanges. Scott states at the beginning of her book that she is not dealing with theoretical issues or debates around Chinese religion. She simply frames her subject matter according to the convention established by Arthur Wolf’s original and influential trinity of “gods, ghosts, and ancestors.” Focusing on the what gives the work its data rich, encyclopedic quality. That the author’s own observations of materials include extensive references to other scholarly works and that these materials are narrated with skill make this a valuable addition to the archive of works on the material culture of Hong Kong and China.

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