Lampooning the Paper Money Custom in Contemporary China

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Over the past millennium and across the length and breadth of China and beyond, people have been burning paper replicas of the material world to send to their deceased family members, ancestors, and myriads of imaginary beings. The paper replicas, which include all types of goods and treasures, mostly old and new forms of money, is commonly referred to as the paper money custom. Studies of the paper money custom have neglected the native opposition to it, especially that of the contemporary intelligentsia, one form of which consists of news reports and human interest stories in the popular press that lampoon the practice of burning paper money. Many stories lampoon the paper money custom by showing how it burlesques traditional virtues such as filial piety. One of the interesting maneuvers in this criticism is how it employs the old and newer kinds of paper monies to shape the response of the readers.

For a thousand years people in China have been replicating their material world of social things in paper in order to provender and avail the family ghosts, ancestors, and myriads of imaginary beings by the magic of fire. Cut from an endless scroll of paper, the effigies replicate everyday items, utensils, valuables, money—a virtual inventory of things that constitute the effects of Chinese civilization, both old and new. The whole medley is a cornucopia of simulated consumption and desire on a cosmic scale. From its advent, common references to this custom employ plain locutions like zhǐ 紙 (paper), shāozhǐ 烧纸 (burning paper) and zhǐqián 纸钱 (paper money), although there are numerous vernacular terms for this custom depending on locale.¹

During funerals and spirit festivals, the amount of simulated wealth that goes up in smoke and ash is a potlatch for the spirits. Even the commodity value of the paper burned can be impressive. The Guangming Daily News estimated that during any given Qingming festival (a memorial day near the Spring Equinox for sweeping family tombs), people in China spend more than ¥6 billion for the paper and incense offerings. “Adding in expenses for transportation and

¹Scholarly studies of the paper money custom since the mid-nineteenth century now constitute a respectable bibliography (see Scott 2007).
meals, the cost is unimaginable” (Yin 2006). Even on an individual level, burning paper can assume potlatch proportions. In southern Fujian province, one Overseas Chinese ordered two truckloads of paper money be burned for his mother’s funeral at a cost of ¥20,000 (Dean 1988, 28). Although this was considered extravagant by local standards, the whole point of the custom is to make a show of extravagance. Without putting too fine an edge on it, one journalist (Geng 1994) proposed that marshalling the modern commodity system in the form of paper offerings simply extends the official policy of “get rich quickly” to the spirit world. Increasingly we encounter this kind of drollery in the Chinese blogosphere where misgivings, shortcomings, and anxieties of contemporary life are told and retold in the idiom of paper money (Blake 2011).

Burning paper can be traced back to the Tang dynasty from whence it extended across nationalities, language stocks, and kingdoms in a contiguous culture area from Lanzhou to Taipei, from Harbin to Hanoi and beyond to settlements of Sinitic and sinicized peoples across southeast Asia and around the earth. No single culture trait characterizes this broad area as succinctly as does the paper money complex, although it has little or no social salience in identifying cultural boundaries.

In modern times, “burning paper” is labeled a “custom” (fèngsú 風俗) and at times, depending on which way the political winds are blowing, it may be stigmatized as “superstition” (míxìn 迷信). “Custom” with its air of legitimacy and “superstition” with its stigma of backwardness are modern labels with a vexed relationship in the Chinese polity (Feuchtwang 1989). Although many literati opposed the custom from its beginning, every modern regime, out of concern for taste, waste, fraud, and nowadays fire hazards and pollution, has tried to discourage, even suppress the practice. Occasionally and in different places, the suppression takes the form of a direct interdiction of the materials; but whatever form the prohibitions take, people find ways to dodge them; and when the prohibitions are relaxed, the practice of burning paper money resumes its customary vibrancy and popularity.

This is not to suggest that the paper money custom constitutes a centrifugal ideology of petit capitalism (Gates 1987, 1996) or contributes to some kind of “ritual economy” that is “putting global capital in its place” (Yang 2000), although the custom is so diffuse that one part or another can be made to do almost anything. Especially nowadays, the paper money custom can be turned in various directions to parody the established order of things whether that is the official order or the common custom itself, and sometimes both in the same breath when the established order is seen as phony as the paper treasures burned for ghosts. The custom is open to endless rationalizations. It is an integral part of

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2There are numerous mass media sponsored estimates and small scale surveys of expenditures for paper money that give results comparable to those cited here. To my knowledge, there are no large scale scientific surveys or official statistics to verify these results.
the common offering service (Watson 1988; McCreery 1990; Blake 2006; 2011), and taken as a whole, with its simulated motifs of desire, spectacle, tribute, patronage, and consumption, the custom finds a home in the “late capitalism” of communist China as easily as it once did in the “developed feudalism” of imperial China. If the make-believe mood that envelops the world of magic papers resonates the lifeworld of devotees working to envisage familial spirits it no less invites the Bergsonian laughter of scoffers and squibsters who find in it the thorns upon which the good intentions and mendacities of everyday lives are impaled.

The lampoonery of the paper money custom can be found in stories that circulate through the print media. Stories range from folktales about the origins of paper money (printed in both popular and scholarly media) to human-interest stories and news items concerning current events and happenings. In this paper, I examine a selection of stories about current happenings gathered mostly from recent editions of the Shanghai-based New People’s Evening News (Xinmin Wanbao). Shanghai is renowned through China as a modern literary Mecca and is quite naturally the center for what I am calling the lampoonery of paper money. Authored and illustrated by different writers and caricaturists, many of the stories come from a section of the Evening News entitled “under the roses” (qiángweihua xià 蔷薇花下), the thorns under the rose pedals, a Chinese term for lampoonery, or here, the painful ironies and mendacities of everyday lives.

TWO MODES OF SIMULATION: FACSIMILES AND REPLICA

But first, to understand the thrust of my thesis concerning what and how the stories communicate, it helps to know that there is a subtle paradigm shift between two modules of paper money. One module includes paper facsimiles of things, mostly modern things from motor cars to mahjong sets, mansions, manikins of maids and mistresses (now film stars), internet cards and credit cards, general-purpose bank notes, bank books, and stock certificates, visas and passports, and recently, “mighty brother” [Viagra], body guards and hand guns and military arms, and instant noodles – condoms (ānquántào 安全套) can be special ordered from the factory. These are “facsimiles” because they are realistic copies of worldly things, often fashioned with the exact detail of scaled models,

3In the PRC there is no mass media platform for criticizing Communist Party policies; but the newsprint media is allowed increasing latitude for maneuver in reporting news and in literary output.

4This bifurcation of the paper monies into two modalities of representation is based on an implicit narrative structure that I infer from the stories. Although there is no evidence that this shift is a conscious ploy on the part of the authors, these two modalities accord with a certain level of mass media cognizance that has developed around the discursive distinction between “traditional” and “exotic” or “new-wave” paper offerings (see Blake 2011).
and although there is nothing “sacred” about them, they are not children’s toys; they are more akin to serious toys (Huizinga 2000). They are gifts of the living to the dead, and as such, they are the signs of signs, twice and in some cases, thrice removed from their worldly referents with a concomitant reduction in worldly costs coupled to an inflation of otherworldly values. This dialectic sometimes (albeit rarely) reverses when, for example, the paper facsimile of a computer in real money costs more than a second-hand working computer. Still, the paper one is preferable because it is new and flammable.

These paper simulations are things in which the distinction between “real” and “unreal” implodes in a bonanza of hyper reality that followers of Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra might appreciate or what Umberto Eco (1986) calls the authenticity of the fake: during the 2005 Qingming festival at the Silver River Cemetery in Guangzhou there was a big demand for crudely made airplanes; a number of buyers insisted that the vendor sell them a pilot to fly their planes (Xin Kuai Bao; see also Scott 2007, 119–124). This hyperrealist desire for authenticating the fake has become ever more obtrusive with the proliferation, hypertrophy, pastiche, and parody of paper monies in recent decades. An example would be the globally available facsimiles of the ¥100 RMB which depicts four cloned heads attired in the hats of Han dynasty emperors in place of the “four great leaders” of modern China.5 Nineteenth century observers often referred to paper monies as “mock money,” by which they ostensibly meant imitation; but with the current proliferation of these simulacra, the primary meaning of mock (“to make a mockery of”) has become more and more apparent. The mockery points in all directions, not only toward established authority, but also, as many of the authors in our selection of stories make plain, a mockery of the foundation upon which all traditional virtue rests, filial piety. Some Chinese internet bloggers suggest that this “mockery” must be a conscious prank (ègăo 恶搞) on the recipients of the offering, but none of our squibsters go quite this far.

The other module of paper monies is stannous laminated paper, which in our selection of stories is referred to in the Shanghai vernacular as xǐbó 锡箔 (tinfoil). These are stacks of soft, coarse, yellow-ceremonial paper (11 × 7.5 cm) laminated with an alloy of lead and tin. As such, they become replicas of silver bullion. These are generally folded, typically by women, to resemble Buddhist relics or the silver ingots of medieval China and are popularly referred to as yuánbăo 元宝.

5There are numerous variances on this theme around China. Its proliferation and hypertrophy is now global: see for example the internet website “Number One Money Man” (2008) that sells paper currencies from around the world. One group of notes is the “Hell Million,” which does not bother to identify the items with China, but situates them between currencys from Guyana and India. The Hell Million uses a single format and denomination (one million) from a popular style of “Hell Bank Note” which originated in Hong Kong, but have as the central figureheads for each the likeness of “Chinese Boat,” “Confucius,” “Mao Zedong,” “John F. Kennedy,” “Jackie Onassis,” “Marilyn Monroe,” “Humphrey Bogart,” and “James Dean, thus far.
(literally, “first treasure,” a pivotal, multivocal symbol). These tinfoil replicas of silver do not enter the stories with the frequency of the paper facsimiles. They do not evoke the kind of ridicule that the facsimiles do. In the first place, the stannous papers can be traced back a thousand years to the advent of the custom (Tang 1992). Secondly, they are “more real” – they retain some worldly exchange value in the metallic residues of their ash which are scrupulously scavenged and commercially recycled. Added to the first two points, the fact that the squares of \( xībó \锡箔 \) are generally folded by the devotee herself goes a long way in making the offering seem more authentic, that is, endowed with the aura of originality and ritual purpose (Benjamin 2010) as a genuine gesture of devotion and thus makes the act more an object of sympathy than satire, more on the side of tears than titters as Bergson (1914:197) might have put it. I believe the difference between the two kinds of paper monies (paper facsimiles and replicas of silver) is reflected in the pungency of the ridicule that is directed at the agency of their respective purveyors.

Some people are appalled at the amount of wealth lavished on the spirit world in the form of paper monies, gravestones, and funerals – some are even appalled at the cost of funerals and burials that follow government guidelines. Many of the practices, especially those that make use of the new forms of paper facsimiles strike the writers and their protagonists as new and without precedent. This perception is likely the result of a tradition reinventing itself after a period of diminished use and in the throes of a shifting historical formation. This dissonance also speaks to the fact that many people in China know or care little about the inner-rationales of the paper money custom. Related to this is a second perspective which stems from the way the opposition is mounting its attack, that is by telling stories that spotlight individual practices. The emphasis is on individual offering practices which willy-nilly disclose the logical contradictions (thorny entanglements) in the offering tradition. Showing how individuals get entangled in the contradictions of their own offerings gives the stories their entertainment value and distances them from the strident propaganda of previous regimes. With few references to social class, the point of view adopted here is perhaps a Bergson (1914, 39) metathesis of Marxism in which the act of an eccentric or foolish individual unintentionally discloses the ludic spirit in the custom to his or her neighbors, who despite massive evidence to the contrary, do not indulge in the burning paper custom.

With the exception of one short story, the news reports and human-interest stories represent themselves as actual happenings. The action takes place in an actual geographical, temporal, and social setting, often citing a particular date and street address with names, presumably of real persons; this realism is magnified when given names are occasionally disguised as Li so-’n’-so. The stories often defer to neighbors or on-lookers whose voices (of reason, chagrin, or wonderment) frame the significance of what is happening. The voices from Shanghai are given in the local vernacular and this adds an extra measure of realism.
The use of vernacular forms of address, names for things, expressions, double entendres, engenders the sense of a real happening plus a sense of identity and intensity of feeling. Regretfully, most of this nuance of vernacular and feeling is unavoidably lost in translation; and to save space, I have paraphrased large parts of stories and excised most references to the occasion and the locale in Shanghai in which the story unfolded.

While the ostensive purpose of these stories is to inform and entertain, their ideological function is transparent to most readers. The stories compel readers to reflect even if only in the shape of a smile or a frown that betokens the didactic purpose for printing them. The three aspects of communicative value, narrative technique, and ideological function are interwoven, each informing and supporting the other two. I present a small selection of stories published between 1995 and 2003 according to their thematic content.

One of the overriding themes in the lampoonery of the paper money custom is the way it simulates the things that the modern system reifies in terms of exchange value or monetary price. The first report (Yang 1995) tells how a stylish Shanghai woman asked a peddler of netherworld banknotes (míngchāo 冥钞): How much American money is needed to take a trip to America in the netherworld? To which the peddler responded unblinkingly, “Two years ago in the netherworld, a trip to America cost about 20,000 in American otherworld currency. However, in today’s netherworld the prices have also inflated quite a bit, so now a trip costs at least 50,000 in American otherworld currency. But to do it comfortably requires 80,000.” The stylish woman went on to explain that her father worked hard all his life only to die at an early age and so she would like to treat him to a trip to America. After purchasing the 80 thousand [dollars] of American currency, she departed leaving the people standing around to talk about whether or not this “filial piety” could be realized.

This is a stark example of how the logic of paper money is reinventing itself with a paper note that simulates exchange value.6 The term míngchāo 冥钞 compounds “otherworldly” (míng 冥) with “paper treasury note” (chāo 钞), a legal paper currency with an exact face value and a national identity, thus enabling a discussion of prices, exact prices, inflated prices in reference to the costs of foreign travel. By contrast, there is no discussion of the real RMB price for these pieces of míngchāo because the reader knows that the cost will amount to little more than pocket change. This leads to the unspoken but avowed irony that the “stylish woman” whose affluent lifestyle is the result of her father’s sacrifice can repay or “honor” her father by purchasing with pocket

6The daughter’s desire to fund her father’s trip abroad overwrites a traditional function of paper money to free the deceased from purgatorial dungeons popular in Taoist and Buddhist liturgies. In this case, the purgatory is the father’s miserable workaday life in China. Having won release from that purgatory by dying, now for the price of a plane ticket, he may travel to America to savor the foreign treats, nothing less than a tiàntáng 天堂 or paradise.
change the cost of a trip to America, figured with scrupulous minuteness in simulated modern American monetary notes. The whole scenario drips with irony and adds an extra dose of sarcasm to the Marxian money fetish.

Not so laughable but deeply ironic is the case of a young shopaholic in Hong Kong whose suicide was reported in a Shanghai newspaper (Xinmin Wanbao 1996). Unable to control his appetite for spending, the young man amassed a debt of $800,000 H.K with the help of thirteen credit cards. Haunted by mounting debts, he jumped to his death from a pedestrian overpass after writing several letters to family and friends in which he requested they “burn plenty of ‘netherworld administration notes’ (yīnsī bì 阴司币) and ‘strings of [paper simulated] coins’ (mínqián 绵钱) for him, although,” the reporter adds with a tinge of sarcasm, “it is not known whether he still intends after death to continue spending money so flagrantly.” If suicide solved the immediate problem of insolvency, it did not offer relief from an impulse control disorder. A supply of paper money in the form of offerings would at least obviate the need to buy on credit. On the other hand, the reporter misses the deeper irony that one of the items then available in the Hong Kong galaxy of paper facsimiles was an American Express credit card.

Sometimes self-destructive behavior is the unintended consequence of filial devotion taken too far. What is the meaning of filial love when a son’s offering causes an injury to his body? One story from Shanghai tells how old lady Zhang was so addicted to the game of mahjong that going for several days without playing made her feel miserable. On the afternoon of the fifth day of the New Year, she had a run of good luck, winning one whole set. “Who could’ve known that extreme happiness brings disaster? After her ‘winning set,’ she died from a stroke and departed from the world forever” (Cha 1997). “Her son Lao Zhang being a filial son, made arrangements for a proper funeral with the usual ostentation and extravagance.” One day after the funeral Lao Zhang, “suddenly recalled when his mother was in the world, her greatest pleasure was playing mahjong.”

He thereupon set out to buy a set of high quality plastic mahjong tiles. He tossed them into the flame to burn while at the same time murmuring to himself the wish that mother’s soul in heaven have something to enjoy. While murmuring this, Lao Zhang with great sincerity, stirred the burned materials with a stick. The unburned mahjong tiles, one after another, burst open and burning cinders rained down. One cinder shot into his right eye, which required urgent attention at the emergency room.

After this affair, Lao Zhang greatly regretted having been so thoroughly filial, and if his old mother had a sentient soul as he supposed, he dreaded that she would have felt the pain (ròuténg 肉疼) also.

Here the thorn of superstition is a physical injury, not only to the son but also to his mother’s spiritual sentience. The term ròuténg refers to an affliction of the
flesh manifest in the intimacy of an alter ego. Here it is the sympathy between mother and son, physical needs and pains manifest in each other’s flesh and dreams beyond the medium of words. Such extreme expressions of filial piety to the point of self-induced injury, were once sanctioned by popular Confucianism. The ever-popular Twenty-Four Stories of Filial Piety tells how children martyred themselves for the well-being of their parents. Many local histories contain accounts of how sons and daughters-in-law excised pieces of their own flesh to feed an ailing parent (e.g., Gray 1878, I: 83). These acts were widely celebrated even while imperial authorities (of the Qing dynasty) sought to stop the practice as excessive. Even today we come across the occasional report telling how “a very filial 22 year-old daughter-in-law cut a three- or four-ounce piece of flesh out of her left thigh and boiled it to feed to her mother-in-law who was near death from throat cancer. The old woman died and the daughter-in-law was hospitalized with a near fatal hemorrhage” (Xinmin Wanbao 1992). Such exceptional expressions of self-sacrifice require a level of devotion and decisiveness that is not to be found in our crop of stories. Lao Zhang’s self-induced injury is unintended, removing any moral significance from his “sacrifice” and making him a fool rather than a martyr.

Other stories tell how persons use the logic of the custom to free themselves from its obligation. A story from Shanghai tells how Little Li uses the rationale of the paper money tradition to avoid the burden of having to make future trips to his mother’s and father’s graves in Suzhou (Xia 2003). He uses the superstition to release him from its obligation. Every year Little Li and his wife made extensive preparations for the Qingming festival, purchasing the offering goods and selecting the proper day to repair to the graves. “But ‘this year we are not going to Suzhou to sweep graves,’ Li told his neighbor who is also the reporter. Why not?

Little Li replied: ‘Because last year when we swept the graves we burned a lot of foreign currency notes (wàiguó chá¯opiào 外国钞票) to give to dad and mom and the other day in my dream I saw dad and mom going abroad. They are not in the country, so it’s not necessary to go sweep their graves.’” The reporter mused that if the old couple has settled abroad, then Little Li and his wife will not have to sweep the graves anymore. The illustration depicts Little Li gleefully describing to the astonished author the departure of his mom and dad—their silhouettes in the callout are hurrying as if to catch a flight. The astonishment is how Little Li makes an act of sacrilege seem so self-evident and reasonable; the ease with which he uses the logic of the tradition to reason his way out of further obligation to observe it. Li even verifies the basis for his action by telling his dream in which he actually saw his mom and dad departing the country. One significance

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7 The text glosses wàiguó chá¯opiào 外国钞票 with a parenthetical (míngbì 冥币) for Chinese readers who might not realize that in this story, the term wàiguó chá¯opiào, refers to paper facsimiles of paper treasury notes and not to real treasury notes. Shanghai speakers often use the Chinese term for real treasury notes, chá¯opiào, to refer to the facsimiles of real notes destined for the netherworld.
of this story is that it plays on a basic anxiety in the paper money tradition which is the failure to make a timely offering or much worse, to stop making offerings altogether. Some persons have told me of their desire to be free of the obligation, but dare not stop for fear of the consequences. A few have related the frightful consequences suffered from simple lapses of attention to the inclusiveness and timeliness of a particular offering. With all that money in the netherworld, Li’s parents take the opportunity to travel and perhaps settle in a place outside China where they won’t need to depend on the continued support of those left behind.

We come now to a thousand-year-old question that permeates these stories: How can paper offerings be a sincere expression of filial piety? In the next story from Shanghai, a son mistreated his father to the point of causing the old man to sicken and die, then turned around and bestowed fantastic amounts of wealth, in the form of paper facsimiles, on the old man once he was dead (Yu 1995). The neighbors began talking behind the son’s back as the most unforgivable of unfilial sons (nì zi 逆子) they had ever known. “Fearing the people’s talk, Li so-n-so immediately pretended to be a filial son, buying a paper building, paper car, paper color TV, paper air-conditioner and other trinkets to let his father enjoy a ‘luxurious life’ in the netherworld. Moreover, he particularly bought several pieces of ‘netherworld kingdom notes’ and burned them in the street as an offering to his father while announcing that he was making him a ‘trillionaire’ and thereby expressing his ‘filial piety.’ Spectators hearing this could not help but laugh…” Here the paper offerings represent the utterly corrupt means by which an unfilial son is able to boast of his filial sacrifice. The point of this story is that Li so-in-so’s sacrifice was a show and a sham, and earned no credit in the eyes of anyone, either in this world or the otherworld.

The deception in paper money offerings reaches its nadir in the next story (Cheng 1999) which tells how Little Wu, who lives in a house on Huashan Street, bragged to his neighbor, Elder Sang, that his long dead grandpa had recently “made a foreign fortune.” It turns out that Little Wu began burning two ¥1000 “American bills” everyday. Elder Sang was confused and asked Little Wu, who was always miserly and uncaring toward the old man, “how come you suddenly thought to send American bills to your grandpa?” “Little Wu proudly said, ‘Last week while I was loading goods I found a box full of American bills, but when I looked closely I found these were from the netherworld bank. So although they can’t be used in this world for certain they can be used in the otherworld. Therefore I took a big bunch. I’m going to send two thousand dollars everyday to my grandpa for his use and let him live a good life in paradise. So this is my filial piety.’” Hearing this, Lao Sang humorously told Little Wu: ‘the filial piety was stolen by you. I’m afraid it doesn’t work in the otherworld.’” Little Wu’s filial piety is tinged with sarcasm and indolence made possible by the stash of “American bills.” Filial piety is the foundation of virtue and the notion of stealing filial piety is an oxymoron. That Little Wu has to look closer to discover that
these American bills belong to the netherworld plays on the widespread perception that many of these facsimiles bear an uncanny resemblance to the real stuff. It is also noteworthy that Elder Sang questions the liturgical effectiveness of stolen paper money; although paper money offerings ostensibly transfer wealth from this world to the other, the transfer is enveloped in a moral force of true value and sacrifice. The burlesque of sacrifice, already inherent in these paper facsimiles of real notes is accented in Little Wu’s offerings of stolen bills.

The next commonest theme in the lampoonery, even more common in the news reportage, is the propensity for misidentifying the bills, either accidentally or deliberately. This can only happen with the simulations of modern banknotes.

In “The puzzle of the cremation box that made sounds,” a grandmother and grandfather find themselves impaled on the thorns of superstition thanks to their grandson’s nescience (Lin 1996). The two old ones, lacking paper money burn real money to resolve a metaphysical crisis, which as it turns out actually belongs to the quotidian order of reality.

On the evening of March 15, in Shanghai’s Tonghe road, a retired woman named Fang suddenly heard fitful noises in the room so she followed the sound and to her surprise found it came from the box in which her father’s remains were being stored temporarily. After an “urgent discussion” with her husband, the couple decided it must be the old man in the otherworld who, lacking money was “sending a message.”

The couple burned incense, kowtowed and promised the old man tinfoil and otherworld notes in the morning, but the sounds did not cease; so the couple began to burn real ¥10 RMB bills. They went on for the better part of the night burning more than ¥100 worth of RMB; by dawn the box of remains had fallen silent.

However, the real reason for sounds emanating from inside the box of remains did not become clear until that noon. Fang’s nine-year-old grandson opened the box and there appeared a dead sparrow. It turns out that the previous afternoon, this “sweet heart” of a grandson got a sparrow from somewhere and when tired of playing with it, and with no place to put it and no knowledge of the box’s purpose, and with no one at home, decided to open the box and dump out its content in order to make a new home for his sparrow.

The wisdom of storing remains at home can become a point of disagreement between members of a family. The arguments, pro and con, to my knowledge, do not include the possibility that the remains might be accidentally tossed out. Many of these stories tell how a child’s naıve commonsense ineluctably turns a parents’ superstitious nonsense into a painful comeuppance.
The naïveté of children is the commonsense antidote to the nonsense of paper money. In a short story (Chen 1997), which seems more plausible than some reported as real events, a child’s perspective shows the corruption of an adult world that gives “fake money” to a deceased grandpa. “On the death anniversary of Jingjing’s grandpa, Jingjing’s dad and mom … are burning stacks and stacks of otherworld notes (míngchāo 冥钞) in the courtyard….” Six-year-old Jingjing asks his mom what she is burning. “We are just burning paper money (zhìqián 纸钱) for your grandpa; your grandpa in the otherworld also needs to use money, so we burn it once every year; it is like sending him money once a year.”

Jingjing keeps asking naïve questions which prompt his dad to interject: “Little kid, why are you asking so many questions?” Jingjing stops asking and realizes that his dad and mom are doing things that cheat people, again; but now the person being cheated is grandpa who loved him most dearly. When Jingjing’s parents finish burning the paper, his mother takes real money from the bedroom dresser, and she and Jingjing’s father repair to the second floor to play mahjong with guests who have just arrived. Left alone, Jingjing decides “to burn some real money for his grandpa so as to avoid grandpa having to use fake money to buy things in the otherworld and being caught and sent to the police station.” From his mother’s dresser, “Jingjing takes a thick stack of real money; clutching it against his body he carries it to the courtyard. Again from the kitchen he takes a match, then imitating his parent’s way just a moment ago, piece by piece, he burns it up.”

Jingjing does not divide the everyday commonsense, which takes things as they appear to hand, from the make-believe world. His parents are no help: they become confused and tongue-tied when they try to explain how grandpa can be dead but still sufficiently sentient and mundane that he needs money. But trying to explain why he needs a special purpose money which looks like real money but is not real money would stretch his parent’s patience, not to mention ability to reason; anyway, they’ve got a mahjong game to attend. To Jingjing the money his parents are sending grandpa is counterfeit. Jingjing’s attempt to rectify his parents’ perversity and deceit while they are preoccupied with a game of mahjong, is perfect poetic justice. In a more ominous perhaps hilarious tone, this story can also be read as an allegory of the current state of Chinese society.

There are many news items and human interest stories that tell how people mistakenly or intentionally substitute real money for netherworld notes (míngbi 邪币). The most common is exemplified by a story datelined Taiyuan, Shanxi.

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8I often ask persons in China why not burn the real money equivalent of the cost of paper money; there are numerous reported precedents for doing this, although there are also numerous traditional and liturgical reasons for not. Discussing her concept of a “ritual economy” in Wenzhou, Mayfair Yang (2000, 479) describes alleged cases of people burning real money. She contends that “Should the state further relax its vigilance over ritual and productive accumulation reach a certain point of saturation, an outbreak of ritual expenditure and material waste and destruction
(Xinmin Wanbao 2003), in which old man Wang, a villager in Chengguan town-
ship, planned to get money to go to the market in order to buy “guìyáng” 鬼洋
(foreign ghost [money]) for his wife who had been dead for several years. But
after pulling open the drawer, he discovered three stacks of one-hundred Yuan
red edition RMB, which he mistakenly took to be “otherworld notes” (míngbì
冥币) that his son had already purchased as an offering to his deceased mother.
Old Wang took these in the amount of ¥10,000 RMB and burned them,
money that his son had been saving to start a business. Here, the term
guìyáng 鬼洋 (literally foreign ghost) is the local colloquialism for facsimiles of
foreign-style notes, which is the template for most national currencies including
the ¥100 RMB note. This news account can also be read as an indictment of
paper money manufactures that produce notes that resemble the national cur-
rency. Certainly, here is an example of how the superstition industry interferes
with the real-world economy.

Some people are not satisfied with these near simulations of RMB notes and
we readers do not have to look far for news stories that tell how people deliber-
ately bypass the purchase of otherworld notes with real money and simply offer
the real money. The rationales are varied: it’s more real, it empowers the facsi-
miles it is burned with, it’s more efficient, less wasteful; and the datelines for
these news reports come from all parts of China: Shenyang, Hainan, Hong
Kong, even Beijing. Some of it is burned, some scattered in funerary processions
to clear a passage through the miasma of demonic bothers. A report from Beijing
tells how a cohort of older folks risks the stigma of picking up money meant for
demons in order to supplement retirement incomes (Zhang 2009). But being the
deliberate recipient of a paper money offering, as in the next story, is downright
frightening if you are still alive.

Paper money is fraught with enormous ambiguities and depends heavily on
its offering context for the message it bears. Although it is mostly used in Shang-
hai to convey care for deceased loved ones, its various special purpose forms and
ritual contexts can communicate many other shades of meanings, e.g., showing

such as a bonfire of real consumer appliances at an extravagant funeral is not inconceivable" (2000,
495). Of course there is precedent for this in the hyperinflation of the 1930s when people did resort
to burning real money for offerings. But Yang follows this scenario to an extreme conclusion: “Once
unleashed, the internal principles of rural Wenzhou’s [ritual] economy...could challenge and
subvert the principles of rational productivism and private accumulation of global capitalism”
(2000, 495). I would like to register a contrary analysis that 1) the scenario of a global economic
collapse due to over production is thinkable, but sounds awful Marxist, a point of view that Yang
roundly rejects and 2) “global capital” in its current roll feeds on such “challenges” and “subver-
sions” as Wenzhou’s ritual expenditures; and the paper money custom is evidence of this. Paper
money manufacturing and marketing is increasingly incorporated into local and global commodity
economies. The popularization of paper money facsimiles of real currencies is a direct reflection of
this commoditization process, a process that is increasingly enveloped in what Baudrillard calls
simulacra, i.e., in the case of the paper money custom, even the traditional forms of handmade
stannous laminated paper monies are being simulated by industrial machines (see Blake 2011).
respect for a divinity or appeasing a demonic being, or in the next story a desire to do harm to a living person. In this story, a rural Henan woman made an offering of paper money on her uncle’s doorstep to gainsay that he was still alive (Liu, et al. 2002). By burning the paper and wailing for her uncle, Li Mingxia used a traditional custom designed to bestow respect and honor on deceased elders, instead to deliver anguish and dishonor on her uncle, who for unstated reasons she hated. By burning an offering for a person who is still alive, the niece inverted the logic of the offering with appalling effect. This was not viewed as a practical joke, but the epitome of sarcasm, literally acting out the Chinese version of the English epithet, “I worship the ground you have coming to you!”

Of even greater interest is the seriousness with which Henan Province Minquan County People’s Court took this form of harassment by lending credence to the idea that a superstitious practice like burning paper money has such power over people’s lives that it warrants legal action. The court explicitly upheld the social force of a rural village’s “major taboo” (dà jì 大忌) rooted in what otherwise would be brushed off as superstitious nonsense. “The court ordered Li Mingxia to pay compensation for emotional injury to a tune of ¥1000, to present her uncle, Li San, with a written apology, and to eliminate the ill effects of her action.” The report of this in a mass circulation newspaper reinforces the common prejudice that the lives of rural folks are typically gripped in superstition. In addition, most readers doubtless feel the ironic justice of making the defendant pay a large sum of real money to compensate her victim for having offered paper money for his “salvation.”

Finally, the last few stories evince an increasing sense of sympathy rather than ridicule, and the material form of paper money significantly shifts to the older traditional replicas of metallic treasure. The first of these stories shifts the agency of offering from the uncaring to the uncared-for, and it reverses the tenor of criticism from bathos to pathos (Zhang 1996). Our sense of pathos is evoked by two elderly women folding the old form of Shanghai silver. Now it is the victim of neglect, an old woman, who offers it to herself. Grandma Ma, who in her 80’s lives in a lane off Ruijin road, one day took a stack of stannous foiled papers (xíbó 锡箔) to the house of Auntie Wang to ask her to help fold them into silver ingots (yínɡuánbào 银元宝). Auntie Wang asked: “For whom are you going to burn this xíbó?” Grandma Ma without equivocating said: “Burn it for myself!” Auntie Wang was startled, for she “had seen and heard of everything” but never heard of persons burning stannous for themselves. To Auntie Wang’s pressing questions, Grandma Ma faltered but then told how it all came to pass. Early widowed, she had brought up her son and grandson to adulthood, now past eighty, disease wracks her body, unable to do housework, her son not only fails to show consideration for his old mother, but also often scolds the old woman. Thus mistreated, she assumes that after she dies her son will not be the type to “burn paper and praise Buddha;” the old woman often sheds tears in private.
Burning paper for oneself is not a strange idea for readers familiar with the paper money custom, but it is in some sense novel to the extent that the logic allows a measure of security to people who do not expect their children to carry on the offering tradition or allows others, such as the cohort of Shanghai women reported in another story (Gu and Shang 2003), to amass for themselves a fortune on the other side in lieu of their current inability to “get rich quickly.” Another option is to follow the admonition in the Christian Gospel of Matthew (6:20-21) to “…lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven…. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” with its promise of an eternity that does not depend on people left behind. Although the number of people choosing this option has increased in recent years,9 conversion from superstition to a religion is not an option that the writers of these stories seem eager to exploit much less countenance.

“Dead’ and still wants to manage” is perhaps the most heart-rending of all the stories included here (Zhao [author], Dong [illustrator] 1996). An old woman burning silver for her husband evokes more sympathy than derision. The silver is the tinned paper folded into ingots by the devoted labor of this anonymous woman.

On April fourth, in the Minghang district, Xianhe cemetery, an old woman in her 60s sweeping her dead husband’s grave was close to the end of her ritual service. As she gathered her ritual utensils and offerings before departing, she uttered some very considerate but strong farewell words that were quite surprising:

“Old man, I have burned so much tinfoil. You just go ahead and use it. If you want to eat, eat as much as you want; if you want to wear nice clothes, wear some good stuff; don’t be so thrifty! However, don’t spend it without thinking—don’t be a spendthrift! Don’t drink so much alcohol. Remember what I always told you, drinking too much alcohol is like drinking from a urinal. Don’t do things recklessly. Don’t wander around absent-mindedly. Listen! I’m telling you, don’t play so much mahjong. Take care of yourself. The most important thing is don’t you dare go out looking for women. Otherwise, be careful—I’ll come to your grave mound and get even! When you receive the tinfoil you won’t forget to send me a dream will you?”

Having overheard the old woman’s effusion of “farewell words” “admonishing her husband,” neighboring grave sweepers were so deeply moved they didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Some people said: “Nowadays it is not rare to see “the henpecked” husband, but crossing the cosmic threshold (yín yáng 阴阳) in order to strictly control a husband who is in purgatory (yín cāo dì fǔ 阴曹地府) is unheard of.”

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9Numbers of Christians and rates of recruitment in China are difficult to estimate with any accuracy. According to one of the more sober accounts (Amity News Service) the increase of Protestant Christians has been significant in historical terms since the 1970s, but much lower than many of the extravagant claims made by certain evangelical interest groups.
The textual and graphic references to traditional Shanghai silver accent the mood of familiarity and pathos, a mood which is deepened by invoking an utterly mundane image of the afterlife. The drawing that accompanies the text shows the old woman all alone with the former contents of her bamboo basket, folded silver ingots, lying in a heap of ash between her feet and her old man’s stone. She points to her old man in the picture on the gravestone as she harangues him and he looks back with the look of an old rascal being harangued. The old woman is seen through the eyes of persons visiting family graves at the Qingming festival, and it is they who look upon the old woman as an object of unrelieved poignancy. They observe that “the wife managing strictly” has lost little of its resonance in today’s world, but the idea of extending it across the threshold from this to the otherworld is original. In Shanghai, “wife managing strictly” (qīguànyán 妻管严) has the same sound as the word for tracheitis, which suggests the old fashion notion that a wife is a scold and her words are like a chronic cough. The old woman “strictly managing” her old man evokes a mundaneness that permeates these stories, that life below ground is just more of the same old thing. Here I should mention that sending a dream from the spirit world (tuōmèng 托梦) is the principal means by which the deceased make their needs known and entrust their requests to a living recipient; just as the ritual service is the principal means by which the living transmit things to the deceased.10

DISCUSSION

In content and occurrence, and apart from their authors’ intent, these stories evidence the fact that paper money offerings are a significant part of China’s contemporary cultural landscape. The stories come from an encounter between Shanghai’s modern literary cultures – here in the form of a lampoonery – and the seemingly relentless grip that “manes-worship” has on the Chinese lifeworld. It is noteworthy that in taking aim at the adverse social effects, fraud, and waste of the paper burning custom, the Shanghai squibarchy paints the biggest target on the use of paper offerings to express filial devotion. The question of filial devotion goes “lip and teeth” with the fact that the stories are about offerings to deceased family members one or two generations removed with barely a mention of the countless other kinds of spirit beings (including the category of ancestors or zǔxiān 祖先) to which offerings are traditionally made. This has the effect of separating the regard for deceased family members, from the totality of manes-worship, the “gods, ghosts, and ancestors” of “popular religion” and

10Since being a recipient of an entrusted dream is not an experience that most people to my knowledge relish, much less request, since it implies a lack of care on the part of the recipient and it involves ghosts, this story seems a bit unusual in the way the old lady asked her old man to send her a dream. This, however, is entirely rational given the belief, and it could be an index of the old woman’s pathetic existence.
temple fairs and other forms of organized superstition that some recent anthropologists describe as reclaiming a public sphere by “contesting,” resisting and accommodating national and global political and economic “penetrations.” The paper money custom is caught up at every level and in every current of this process; although the irreducible rationale of the custom always comes back to the perfectly rational concern for deceased loved ones.

The Shanghai squibsters are responding to these historical currents by confining their barbs to the contest over the province of the lifeworld that takes care of near family spirits, separated from the superstition of “popular religion” and the totalizing claims of world religions. They seem to be salvaging the rational ethic of filial piety from the magic of paper money as Max Weber might have appreciated. Here family spirits are embedded in the natural attitude of the lifeworld which accords well enough with currents in the communist doctrine on religion; and which also serves a hegemony that increasingly falls back on filial piety, while the ideological foundation of the communist state continues to wither, or to find itself reconfigured in a Confucian discourse of “civilization”.

The separation of family spirits from all other spirits suggests that the traditional use of paper money is not the proper way to memorialize deceased family members. Chinese emphasize ancient wisdom that proper performances consummate proper thoughts. This bears directly on what our newspaper writers are lampooning even though the message reverses the traditional rule that prescribes burning paper for funerals; now in the lampoonery of paper money, the custom of burning paper for the deceased is viewed as wasted effort at best and at worst an insincere, hurtful, even self-injurious show of piety. This reversal is mediated by what I discern as an implicit paradigmatic shift in the tone of censorship by reference to the two modes of simulating valuables in paper props destined for the spirit world. The first mode simulates the modern monetary system of banknotes and its commodities or “stuff”, as comedian George Carlin called it. Although nowhere intimated in our sample of squibs, it is useful to note that from inside this papery galaxy of simulated stuff, some persons experience its ludic spirit in a kind of Warhol style pop art. But as an expression of moral sentiments and obligations, this ludic spirit is easily turned to burlesque in the way these paper props lend themselves to scenarios of ostentation, insincerity, exoticness, foreignness, and sometimes fraud. This tone of censorship loses its force, however, as we come to the second mode of simulating valuables in the traditional Shanghai “silver paper” or xìbó 锡箔. The satire pulls its punch and shades into irony and pathos and some of the stories tell of little old ladies in words that evoke in me and likely other readers “the heart of the heartless world,” to borrow from Marx’s apothegm on religion.\textsuperscript{11} The shift in modalities of representation and predicates of offering

\textsuperscript{11}Marx’s apothegm that religion is the symptom of a “heartless world” suggests that to the extent organized religion and superstition (the prototypes of alienation) have a significant and growing
are subtle and I believe thoroughly implicit in how the architectonics of the act are perceived and made sense of in these stories.

Thus, the lampoonery questions less the virtue of filial piety and more the means of realizing its place in a lifeworld that no longer mainstays patronage to an imperial order through ancestral gods, but increasingly realizes itself in a civil nexus between system and lifeworld. Recent moves to rearrange China’s official holidays lend increased credence to this view. In December, 2007, the Chinese government officially announced it scrapped one of the country’s three “golden week” holidays [May First Labor Day] and introduced three new one-day public holidays. The new holidays were based on traditional festivals. One of these was Qingming, the principal memorial day for sweeping the family graves (People’s Daily 2008). The “underlying reason” given for this swap was “the rapid economic growth in China, [in which] many people, especially the young, find themselves lost as far as cultural identity. Thus, they turn to the vast sea of traditional Chinese culture for spiritual support.” Reducing the Labor Day holiday (from three days to one day) to create a Qingming holiday, it is fair to say, increases an official presence in the architectonics of caring for deceased loved ones. This is an example of hegemony in the making whereby rulers maintain their position by relinquishing, diffusing, compromising, sharing, certain powers with the ruled, in this case, in the “contest” with “popular religion.” The emphasis on filial devotion is not only a traditional means of stabilizing society, which every Chinese regime resorts to when faced with social anomie and disaffection, but may be an attempt to obviate the everpressing challenge from world religions such as Christianity.

Another point that bolsters my intuition that these stories are structured around a lifeworld that must come to grips with perfectly rational concerns for the spiritual remainders of deceased loved ones is how they disclose willy-nilly a common view of the hereafter. I mean to say, these stories disclose to us how the netherworld, the yìnjìàn 阴间, is open to countless imaginings, which is the mainstay of a Chinese belief system that depends on [ritual] practice to give it a moral framework. In this regard it is worth noting that the frightful images of purgatory made popular by Buddhist and Taoist liturgies are barely mentioned by protagonists in these stories. Instead, the everyday talk posits eternity as more of the same. This is most striking in the old woman who from above ground harangues her old man who is in the purgatory below ground. For many Chinese, eternity is tantamount to the lived world looking at the reversed image of itself in a mirror of endless regress and return. Worlds are interrelated and the animated reflexes in the one have purchase on those in the other. More of the

presence in China, the world spawned by the Communist Party is “heartless,” which is perhaps another reason why official China remains steadfast in its opposition to religion and superstition: It may constitute less of a threat and more of a stigma.
same, but with the singular possibility of augmenting the sense of “sameness” with the things that money can buy. In this way, the living supply their deceased family, friends, and indeed their own eternities with a largess, an overflowing treasury, a cornucopia of goods that signifies an eternal life of diversion, leisure and comfort.

The popular term for a life of leisure and comfort, whether worldly or otherworldly is paradise (tiántáng 天堂). Chinese imaginings are comparable with world religions in so far as both imagine the dreadful punishments that await the dead with more explicit scenarios than they do the pleasures of paradise, which are usually the more mundane diversions from the everyday drudge. The two most common signifiers of paradise in our selection of stories are trips abroad and games of mahjong. Both of these pursuits signify diversions and relief from everyday obligations and anxieties. Sojourns abroad have always been looked upon with skepticism, perhaps a combination of envy and betrayal—the feelings of envy by those left behind and suspicions of betrayal by official China.

Nevertheless, it is the game of mahjong that arouses the strongest sense of disdain in those who are concerned with diversions from responsibility. Next to paper banknotes, mahjong is the most ubiquitous simulated object in these squibs. Mahjong is not the exotic stuff that other news reports have sensationalized (Viagra, firearms, condoms, mistresses…), but an enduring piece of gaming culture that is as old as it is popular and that subsists in the interstices of the Chinese lifeworld. Thus is the mania for mahjong entangled with the popular superstition of paper money offerings – both are interstitial. Many of the stories we have just read insinuate the decadence of the one with the superstition of the other in a society that feeds on mendacity and corruption.

The paper money custom is more than a ritual practice. To comprehend only its inner rationale, as if it has an inner rational, gives us a narrow formulaic and one-sided view of its social function. To relegate the lampoonery to a soft-peddled government propaganda or fail to see how it is diffused in the body politic in which it may or may not be consonant with a modern ideology or government propaganda, well beyond the nightly news, runs the risk of ethnographic refusal (Ortner 1995). Ethnographic refusal in the present case would be a failure to account for the ways a native opposition, spurred as much by modernity as by

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12Tiántáng 天堂 (literally, hall in the sky) is a popular term for paradise. It is a salient component of the paper money custom which often depicts it as a treasury over-flowing with gold. Although impossible to characterize in a few sentences, it would probably be fair to say that Chinese Buddhist concepts of heaven emphasize a stress-free existence that does not depend on the ego satisfaction of material desires. Terms associated with Buddhist notions of heaven are rarely if ever found in association with paper money, although I would argue that whether it is the popular paradise (tiántáng) or some Buddhist cognomen for heavenly existence, the desire for a stress-free duration is similar, with the exception that the popular paradise is based on gratifying ego desires while Buddhist heavens are based more on extinguishing ego desire[s].
traditionalism, lampoons a popular custom. A fuller view takes in the cacophony of voices from the *Zaubergarten* of paper that enchants the lifeworld and inter-twines it with a lampoonery of the disenchanted, and all the gradations in-between of which there must be millions. The present paper has included some voices of journalistic squibbing, which bring out the burlesque and carnival in the make-believe of paper offerings for didactic purposes, and which cannot be under-estimated much less depreciated or dismissed as unfair or unrepresentative or unremarkable. The journalistic lampoonery is rather remarkable, if also limited, in the way it makes certain customary practices laughable by contradictions in the practices themselves.

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