Powers of the Dead: Struggles over Paper Money Burning in Urban China

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Abstract
This paper explores how the Chinese customary ritual of burning paper money to commemorate the dead ancestors challenges the nature-culture dichotomy. The paper argues that the practice of burning paper money reflects a Chinese cosmology that is not based on a dichotomy between the living and the dead, instead, the dead is often mobilized to exert influential power over the living. The paper money that people use in such rituals are active actors that participates in people's social, cultural and economic life. The paper also investigates how the conflict between government policy and traditional practice demonstrates that the modernists’ efforts to mobilize modern dichotomies have failed to triumph over the entanglement among networks of the living and the dead, the human and the spirit, the object and the subject, nature, culture, and super-nature.

Keywords
Nature-culture, networks, modernity, paper money, urban China

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Introduction

During a recent visit to my hometown city in Northeastern Mainland China after living in Canada for two years, my parents took me to sweep my grandparents’ gravesite. On the days of traditional Chinese festivals such as Qingming Festival, also known as the Tomb-sweeping Day, and Zhongyuan Festival, also known as the Dead Spirit Day, my parents would usually pay a visit to the cemetery on the outskirts of the city where their parents were buried. During the visit, they would set replica paper money on fire at the cemetery, an act which serves to represent sending money to the other world – the world where the dead live. There are various kinds of replica paper money for such rituals. The most common kind is usually in the color of yellow and is sold at a price of approximately one or two dollars per pile. It is made from cheap and thin paper, which makes it convenient to burn. Other kinds of replica money may look similar to real currency in color and pattern; however, they are all produced from low-quality paper and very easy to distinguish from real money. When actually visiting the cemetery is not possible due to distance and time constraints, an alternative practice is to burn paper money at a crossroads closer to home. Such scenes are common in cities during the two traditional festivals when Chinese people commemorate the dead: dozens of small groups of people gather at street intersections, burning paper money into ashes; right beside high-rise apartment buildings, parks and busy traffic.

Burning paper money is a practice shared by people in many parts of Asia. For example, according to Kwon (2007), the Vietnamese practice money burning as an offering to gods, ancestors and ghosts in commemorative rituals, believing that money is as important for the dead as it is for the living. Blake (2011) explains that, over the past millennium in China and beyond, people have been replicating their material world in paper for their deceased family members. He has found that in many Chinese cities, replica paper money that goes up in smoke every year is worth of tens of millions of yuan (Chinese currency). Debates over the issue of burning paper money for the dead, especially in urban settings, have gradually entered into contemporary Chinese public discourse. Many municipal governments have moved to ban paper money burning in the city. According to the authorities, such regulations have been implemented in order to promote a more “civilized” funeral and interment procedure instead of “old-fashioned,” “feudal,” and “superstitious” rituals. Supporters of such regulations contend that paper money burning is “backward,” “unscientific,” “unenlightened,” and environmentally detrimental, and therefore it is incompatible with “modern,” “civilized,” and “clean” urban space.

While objections to paper money burning represent the re-assertion of modernist dreams based on the presumed “necessary” gaps between past and present, dead and living, traditional and modern, superstition and science, the continuation of such traditional practice in urban China (regardless of the prohibitive regulations from government authorities) challenges the modernist dichotomies and reveals entanglements among different actors presumed to be separate. In this paper, I intend to argue firstly that the practice of burning paper money reflects a Chinese cosmology that is not based on a dichotomy between the living and the dead; as practitioners of money burning insist, the dead can be mobilized to exert influential power over the living. Secondly, I will argue that the paper money that people used to and continue
to burn plays an active, mediating role between the living and the dead; this money is itself an actor and participant in people’s social, cultural and economic life. Finally, I will argue that the conflict between government policy and traditional practice demonstrates that efforts to mobilize modern dichotomies have failed to account for or disentangle the complex networks relevant to this practice – networks that connect the living and the dead, the human and the spirit, the object and the subject, as well as nature, culture and super-nature.

Theoretical Traces: Nature-Culture and Multinaturalism

In the previous section, I introduced how struggles over burning paper money suggest the gap that the vanguards of modernity try to insert in between nature and culture. In this section, I will review some key theoretical arguments that emphasize the entanglement of nature and culture and attempt to bridge this supposed gap.

According to Bruno Latour (1993), the notion of culture is an artifact created by excluding nature. The Western way of dividing nature and culture as two separate regimes cannot reflect reality since the two have always been intertwined in networks. However, Western knowledge—based on the separation of objective, scientifically knowable nature on the one hand, and subjective, constructivist culture on the other—still problematically assumes that the separation itself is the key distinction between “the modern us” and “the pre-modern other.” As such, the only entity that guarantees a symmetrical anthropology is what Latour calls the “nature-culture.” Further developing this idea, Latour challenges the inconsistency between a universalized nature and many diverse and relativistic forms of culture. Instead, a more appropriate approach should be comparing nature-culture as a whole, and if we believe in cultural relativism, we should also believe in natural relativism. As Latour (1993:106) argues, “we construct both our human collectives and the nonhumans that surround them. In constituting their collectives, some mobilize ancestors, lions, fixed stars, and the coagulated blood of sacrifice; in constructing ours, we mobilize genetics, zoology, cosmology and hematology”.

Building on Latour’s concept of natural relativism, Escobar (1999) further elaborates upon the relationship between nature, culture and local knowledge by emphasizing that the cultural models of many societies do not rely on a nature-culture dichotomy. The fact that other societies represent the relation between their human and biological worlds differently from the Western world, since the living, nonliving and supernatural beings do not constitute distinct and separate domains, further challenges the dichotomy (Escobar 1999:8). In other words, local knowledge in “other” societies draws relationships and mobilizes actors in different and interrelated domains of the living, the dead, the object, the beast, the environment, the landscape, and the supernatural, rather than categorizing them into rigid Western models of nature and culture.

For instance, according to Chinese writer Jiang Rong (2008), the nomadic Chinese-Mongolian people have developed their knowledge through many generations of engagement with the ecosystem of the prairie, which includes the wolf pack, the herds, the weather, the spirit of the dead and the sky. Another example can be found in Tsing’s (2005) narratives about the forests in Indonesia. The local inhabitants of the forest form their knowledge of subsistence in relation to domesticated and wild plants and animals. In another case provided by de la Cadena (2010), indigenous groups in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador see their community as more than just a territory where a group of people live, but as a dynamic
space where earth-beings such as humans, plants, animals, mountains, and rivers co-exist and interact, as another socio-natural world to which human beings and other-than-human beings belong. The Aymara people in Bolivia have successfully incorporated ceremony that summoned the landscape and practices of libations to the earth into political events and conversations (de la Cadena 2010:337). I bring up these examples with no intention of essentializing the identities of indigenous groups, or by supporting the stereotype that indigenous people are those who have a closer relationship to nature and/or have a static culture that has gone uninfluenced by the outside world. On the contrary, according to these authors, these groups are actively engaged with capitalist economy and political struggles. These examples prove that nature-culture entanglement has always been a part of the presumed “modern” society that apparently bases itself on the dichotomy between nature and culture. It is also worth mentioning that the nature-culture entanglement does not only exist in the non-Western world. In Degnen’s research about British gardening, she discovers that for many British gardeners, plants are perceived as people who can exhibit intentionality and sentience, as babies who have likes, dislikes and dietary needs, similar to the parallels between human beings and taro plants identified by anthropologists working with the Wamiran people in Papua New Guinea (Degnen 2009:154-160). In other words, according to Degnen (2009), the connection between plants and people is reciprocal, social, and mutually constructive. In support of Latour (1993), such cases exemplify how nature and culture cannot be separated and indicate the existence of the same kinds of networks and entanglement in the Western world. The examples above challenge and problematize the prevalent form of “scientific knowledge” that is imagined to have been detached from the social regime.

Taking such a theoretical approach to another level, Viveiros de Castro (1998) develops the concept of perspectivism from numerous references in Amazonian ethnographies about the way humans, animals, gods, spirits, plants, the living and the dead are entangled entity and transformable to each other. Drawing upon Viveiro de Castro, Hage (2012) argues that concepts of perspectivism and multinaturalism suggest that different perspectives emerge from the ways in which different bodies constitute different modes of relating to, inhabiting and being enmeshed in their environment. Such multiplicity of bodily engagements in turn produces a multiplicity of realities or natures. In other words, instead of understanding different cultures as multiple interpretations and representations of one universal nature, multinaturalism alludes to the existence of radically different natures and realities based on how different actors engage with nature.

The theoretical approaches I discussed above are significant for a profound understanding of the struggles over the practice of paper money burning in China. Burning paper money represents a common and prevalent understanding of the connections between the living world and the dead world. The process of lighting paper money on fire symbolizes the practice of sending, or mailing money that the dead ancestors can use while “living” in another world. To send money at the right time of each year such (during traditional festivals and on the anniversary of death) is an important way to show filial loyalty, something that, like money, is important to both living and dead. The spirit of the dead is presumed to be able to successfully accept the money from their descendants, and as a result they should be satisfied and bless the living. As such, in the simple process of burning paper money, the living, the dead, the spirit, the paper money, the fire, the burning are all interconnected as a unique Chinese form of knowledge of the nature-culture. In the following sections of the paper, I will
explore this issue in further detail from three aspects. Firstly, what is the Chinese understanding of the networks of living and the dead and how do the dead exert power over the living in this nature-culture entity? Secondly, what is the role of paper money in mediating between the living and the dead, and how might paper money be understood as a social actor in people’s lives? Finally, how does the government’s ban on the practice of burning paper money clash with Chinese understanding of the dead and the living? The data that I will use in my analysis is selected from my life experiences in the urban settings of the Liaoning Province in Northeastern China, a geographical region that used to be called Manchuria and contemporarily covers Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang Province and Eastern Inner Mongolia area. Considering the fact that China is a vast country with diverse minority groups and regional traditions, the local cases should not be used to generalize “China” or “Chinese nature-culture,” as a self-contained entity.

A Traditional Understanding of the Living and the Dead

One of the most important terms one needs to grasp in order to make sense of the traditional understanding of the living and the dead is the concept of “soul”. According to Harrell (1979:519), “souls” of the dead in Chinese concept can be interpreted in the following different ways: gods are souls of especially powerful or meritorious people; ancestors are souls of one’s own agnatic forebears; and ghosts are souls of those who died violently or who have no descendants to worship them as ancestors. In reality, ways of interpreting the “soul” of the dead can be much less rigid. The soul of the dead can offer blessings like a god, or bring bad luck like a ghost, depending on how people draw the connection in various situations and contexts. In order to guarantee that they will receive blessings instead of bad luck, the living have to offer appropriate care to the dead, which may include activities such as performing proper rituals, sweeping tombs regularly, and sending money at the appropriate time. In the narratives of the living and the dead in China, the well-being of the living is often connected to situations related to the dead, such as the location of the tomb, the maintenance of the cemetery, or even a seemingly random factor like how well the pine tree behind the gravestone grows. As such, the living “take care of” the dead in various ways in order to show their respect to the dead, and consequently expect to receive blessings. I will provide examples to further elaborate how rituals are performed to shape people’s understandings and emotions towards the dead. The examples will demonstrate how the dead influence the life of the living, which will further challenge the nature-culture dichotomy.

According to the custom of Northeastern China, souls leave the corporeal body after people die. The living relatives of the dead, mostly direct descendants, will perform a series of rituals afterwards. In contemporary urban China, even though most deaths happen at hospitals equipped with modern technology, such rituals are still performed. For instance, right after a person dies, descendants have to dress the deceased in special clothes and shoes. The color, number of items, and materials of the outfits for the dead are all specially selected to symbolize a decent, wealthy life in another world. Descendants usually buy the outfits in advance and put them on the body of the dead at the scene to show their filial love. For women, sometimes the living will put jewelry made of paper on or beside the body. The body of the dead stays at the hospital morgue for three days before cremation. Afterwards, the descendants will put the ashes in a designed wooden or ceramic box then bury the box in the grave. Six days after the death, it is believed that the soul of the dead will come back to where it used to live to take a final look
at its home and relatives in the living world before heading to another world. Around midnight of the sixth night after a person dies, the living will gather together and perform a ritual at the place where the dead used to live by lighting up incense and trying to stick it to the vertical doorframe of the kitchen. If the incense somehow sticks on the doorframe, it means that the soul of the dead is back. The reason that the incense sticks on the vertical doorframe indicates that the soul of the dead is holding it at that moment. One week, three weeks, five and seven weeks, as well as every anniversary, and on traditional festivals after the death, the direct descendants need to burn paper money for the dead.

The fact that the dead die keeps the living busy. As I have described above, all the rituals after a person’s death are performed by the living. It is widely believed that if the living do not follow the rules to perform the rituals, they may suffer some bad luck or consequences. Therefore, for the living people, in addition to grief, emotions associated with death may also include caution, fear, loss, and exhaustion. It is worth emphasizing that such entanglement among the living, the dead, human beings and things does not find itself at home in “primitive” societies. It exists and functions in highly “modernized” urban China. The entanglement is being practiced, experienced and continued by highly educated people, familiar with scientific knowledge, in hospitals where modern medical knowledge and treatment is applied. What I have described echoes Levy-Bruhl: “there is a mystical mentality that is more easily demarcated and therefore more easily observable among the ‘primitives’ than in our societies, but it is present in every human mind” (Hage 2012:301).

Paper Money as Social Actors

As I have explained above, the realms between the living and the dead, the object and the spirit are not clearly demarcated in the narratives of traditional beliefs and practices. Among all the rituals offered to the dead, paper money burning is the one that is most commonly and regularly performed. Paper money is used as the only way that the living can connect to the dead. Sending the dead money by burning paper money on the appropriate days each year, as well as the amount and the value of the paper money to be burned symbolizes the filial love the descendants offer their dead ancestors. The practice of buying paper money from street venders exchanges the currency of the living to the currency of the dead. Therefore, it matters who purchases the paper money. For example, if my mother and my aunt plan to burn some paper money for my grandparents together, they will make their own purchases separately even though paper money is very cheap. After they buy a pile of paper money, they will each write the “address” of the dead (in this case, the address of the cemetery where my grandparents are buried) on the top bill of the paper money piled separately, even though they are writing exactly the same thing. Writing on the top bill is similar to writing on an envelope--burning the paper money symbolizes mailing money to the dead. During the burning process, each of them will express their feelings and wishes to the dead separately. When they took me to my grandparents’ grave and burned paper money in front of the gravestone this year, my mother told me: “tell your grandparents about your life and progress now. They will be happy to know. And tell them to bless you [to be] happy and safe. If you say your words here, they can hear you.”

After we burned a small amount of paper money in front of the gravestone, my mother and my aunt swept the space around the gravestone, wiped off the dust on it and watered the pine tree behind it. Then we were to go to a yard in the cemetery that was specially designed for burning large amount of paper
money. A number of burning pots had been installed in the walls surrounding the yard. The walls were based on the Chinese Zodiac, in which each person is represented by a kind of animal determined by the year the person was born according to Chinese lunar calendar. There are twelve animals in total and my grandfather was represented as a “rooster”, my grandmother as a “horse”. Consequently, the paper money “addressed” with the grave location for my grandfather went to the burning pot signified as “rooster,” while those for my grandmother went to the pot signified as “horse.” Only by putting the paper money in the pot that corresponds to the animal of their birth year can the money be received by the dead. We can conclude that the practice of burning paper money is much more complicated than simply lighting the paper on fire. To conduct such a practice properly, one has to obtain a comprehensive knowledge of the relationship between the living and the dead realm, by understanding the entanglements among the objects, the animals, the human beings and the spirits. From the standpoint of a Chinese cosmology, such seemingly divided domains have always been entangled and enmeshed together. In urban China, such Chinese cosmology has been co-existing with the Western-style “modern” world neatly demarcated and governed by “science” and “society”.

Besides the mediating role between the social, the natural and the supernatural world, paper money is also an actor that can represent social change. According to Kwon (2007), new forms of paper money such as paper-made gold money, replicas of the Vietnamese currency and American dollars, along with new forms of graveyards and ancestral shrines are all demonstrative symbols of Vietnamese modernity. Unlike Vietnam where new forms of paper money such as replicas of American dollars have raised opposing voices due to concerns that the new ritual money in foreign currency is not suitable for community gods and spirits (Kwon 2007:75), new forms of ritual currency in China have gained great popularity. The vendors put replica American dollars on top of their piles and recommended to their customers: “take some American money. It is worth more!” In addition to replica American dollars, new forms of ritual money for burning include paper-made bank cards, resident registration cards, cheques, gold bars, the latest model of iPhones, train or flight tickets, as well as expensive brands of cigarettes, liquors, and vehicles. The living buy such products from vendors believing that, if the dead did not have a chance to enjoy a wealthy, cozy life while they were still alive, the only thing the living can do is to burn the paper replicas so that the dead can enjoy their life in another world. The new forms of paper money for the dead mirror how the life of the living has been changing. They represent the material need and desire of the living world.

The Failed Urban Modernist Dreams

In China’s fast, forward march towards “modernization” led by the state in the past four decades, cities have been constructed as symbols of “modernity”. Siu’s research (2007) of the urban village enclaves in Guangzhou—the third biggest city in China and a global center of commodity production and trade—demonstrates that urban spaces have been demarcated between the “backward, uncivil, dirty, chaotic, and backward” that needs to be “cleansed”, and the “modern” and “civilized” (Siu 2007:333-335). Similarly, Zhang’s study on the residents’ resistance against waste incineration facilities in Guangzhou sheds light on the state’s utopian faith in scientific and technical progress for social improvement and urban homeowners’ ambivalent attitudes towards Chinese modernity (Zhang 2014). As such, the state has been playing a central role in promoting the discourse of modernity in Chinese urban spaces. As Anagnost (1987) points out, magic coexists with science as a valid system of meaning, and the state uses the
dichotomy of nature and culture to construct negative discourses and images regarding “feudal,” “superstitious” practices such as magical healing, exorcism, and ancestor worship. Anagnost argues that the state imposes negative values on beliefs in magic and represents them as inferior to the ideology of science and dialectical materialism (1987:42-46). The struggle over burning paper money in cities suggests a conjuncture of state-promoted ideology of modernity and the regulation of urban spaces in China.

In the past decade, many cities in Northeastern China have enacted regulative or prohibitive policies regarding the practice of burning paper money during traditional festivals when people perform such rituals. Government authorities and law enforcers of these cities encouraged people to give up paper money burning in the public urban space since the government has been trying to create a “clean”, “civilized”, “regulated”, “convenient”, and “fresh” urban environment for city inhabitants while the practice of burning paper is “fatuous”, “conservative”, “feudal”, “superstitious”, “detrimental” to the public environment with the potential of fire hazard. In 2010, the municipal government of the city of Shenyang annunciated a ban of burning paper money in city public spaces as the following:

In order to cleanse the urban environment, advocate civilized practices, deepen the construction of cultural and ideological progress in cities, and create favorable environment for economic and social comprehensive development…the municipal government has decided to prohibit paper money burning in the city. (2010, Shenyang Wang, see also the announcement of the regulation online: http://news.syd.com.cn/content/2010-03/26/content_24705100.htm)

Similar regulations can be found in other cities and they all suggest that burning paper money is an “outdated” convention, an “ugly” custom and a “feudal” practice, which interferes with urban development towards the goal of building a “greener”, “cleaner” and “civilized” community for human beings. For example, municipal government of another city found near Shenyang announced a ban of burning paper money in order to “enhance funeral reform, promote the transformation of social traditions, purify the city environment, promote city image, advocate civilized practice, and ensure public safety” (2014, Jinzhou Municipal Government website, http://www.jz.gov.cn/lnjz/2014/03/27/181965.html).

As a result, on the nights of the traditional festivals, city administrators employ teams of patrols and fine those people who sell and burn paper money on major streets or public space in the city. They may also take measures to expel vendors who sell ritual-related products. Cases of such were reported in the local media as follows:

Reporters joined law enforcers in the patrol. In a store where paper money and other ritual related objects were available for sale, the law enforcers found paper money piled on the floor. Then the law enforcers immediately confiscated them at the scene. (Shenyang Wanbao, August 5, 2006, http://www.syd.com.cn/sywb/2006-08/05/content_23673766.htm)

As we can see from above, the government authorities have mobilized modernist discourses to persuade people to give up the tradition of burning paper money. However, the forceful methods employed to eradicate a traditional ritual that people of this region have been practicing for generations over thousands of years have turned out to be ineffective. As Hinchliffe and Whatmore (2006:128) argue, the construction of urban spaces have never
been separated from nature, and we should see urban inhabitants as more-than-human; more-than-animal; more-than-plant, and so on. In the struggles over burning paper money in urban China, traffic intersections of the city are used by the living as the place where they can connect to the world of the dead on the nights of the traditional festivals. In this particular traditional cosmology, both domains of the living and the non-living are intertwined temporarily in the city. Opponents of the government’s prohibition argue that the traditional custom cannot be abandoned because there are very few chances when the living can send their regards and filial love to their dead ancestors. Furthermore, burning a small amount of paper money several nights throughout the year should not be considered a major source of pollution to the environment compared to some other substantial and irreversible environmental damages such as congested traffic, as well as carbon emissions that result from the use of unclean energy sources or unregulated factory production, all of which are very much celebrated as signs of “modernity” and “development”.

What stands out in this Chinese struggle over paper money burning echoes Maria Esco-bar’s argument that the power of things is dispersed, fragmented and made through relations (2013:377). In similar fashion, the power of paper money against the discourse of “modernist dreams” should be understood in the networks of the human, the non-human, the spirit, the living and the dead. Authorities’ attempts at enforcing the modernist dichotomies associated with the long-established nature-culture entanglement have failed to eradicate traditional knowledge and cosmologies, which is the fundamental reason why such prohibitive regulations prove ineffective.

Conclusion

While critical anthropological thinking in Europe and the Americas is occupied with challenging the nature-culture dichotomy, on the other side of the world, traditions built upon nature-culture entanglements are being challenged by the very same modernist dichotomy. The observations and analysis that I have made in this paper represents a different standpoint, one that does not begin by recognizing the prevalence of nature-culture dichotomy. As I have emphasized in this paper, the entanglement among the dead and the living, the nature and the super-nature that the practice of burning paper money represents is prevalent in contemporary Chinese society. The government authorities are the actors who are trying to apply and reinforce the dichotomy of nature and culture to promote ideologies of modernity.

In conclusion, I have described in this paper the practice of burning paper money as a traditional Chinese way of showing respect and filial love to their dead ancestors, as well as the local cosmology behind such practice. Paper money plays a mediating role in the entanglement and has the power to influence both the living and the dead. Many municipal governments in Northeastern China have been trying to ban the practice of burning paper money. I argue that the fundamental reason that the regulations have never been successful is that nature-culture dichotomy cannot triumph over the traditional cosmology of entanglement. By analyzing the practice of burning paper money in networks, I have provided an alternative perspective to understand the struggles over such practice between people who practice it, and government authorities who attempt to ban it.

Notes

1. See media coverage of regulations from the municipal government of Changchun, Harbin, Dandong, Liaoyang in the past ten years. All four are major cities in Northeastern China.
http://heilongjiang.dbw.cn/system/2013/03/20/054653881.shtml

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