Introduction

In my dream a few nights ago, I visited my granny and granddad, as I often did in my youth. I knocked at the familiar door of their frame house on Old Orchard Avenue in Webster Groves, and after a longer-than-usual wait, the door swung open. I was immediately taken aback. Instead of opening onto the cheerful living room, I had before me a little windowless cell with bare cement walls against which my granny and granddad were propped; their expressions were pale and disconsolate; the scene was vivid, and I woke with a troubled heart.

I simply walked away from this experience with a heavy heart and the consolation that it was, after all, “only a dream.” As an anthropologist I am familiar with the notion that dreams of deceased loved ones are a common experience among people around the world and in many places are treated as actual communications, for dreaming is an experience the reality of which cannot be denied. Many Chinese will tell me that this was a message entrusted to me from the spirit world. They have an idiom for it. Deceased for these many years, my granny and granddad “entrusted” me with “a dream” (tuōmèng)—they contacted me during my dreamtime, which is their waking time, to entrust me with the knowledge of their grim situation. Chinese not only have an idiom, but also provide a remedy for my grandparents’ dreadful plight and my feelings of regret, which I can choose to ameliorate by sending them something—money, clothes, even a new house—made from paper and easily transmitted by the ancient magic of fire. Over the past millennium and across the length and breadth of China and beyond, people have been replicating their material world in paper in order to provend and avail their deceased family members, ancestors, and myriads of imaginary beings by an act of immolation.
There are countless names for this “empire of paper things”—every locale has its own nomenclature. The most common and irreducible reference is simply “paper” (zhī), which is usually predicated with “burning,” as in “burning paper” (shāozhī). Slightly less common in everyday talk (used more in writing), but altogether unambiguous in Chinese vernaculars, is “paper money” (zhīqíán).

Across China, a prodigious amount of paper is burned for every ritual occasion, not just for dead souls at wakes and funerals and memorials, but for all the problems associated with coming into this world and prolonging the stay as far as fate allows. Today, over ten centuries after its advent, the inventory of paper items is prodigious and growing. From unofficial numbers and countless vignettes, the amounts manufactured and burned defy imagination. In 1980s Anxi County, Fujian, one Overseas Chinese ordered that two truckloads of paper money be burned for his mother’s funeral, at a cost of ¥20,000. Although this act was considered extravagant (Dean 1988:28), even this extravagance begins to pale against aggregate expenditures calculated on estimated averages. For example, a report from the Chengdu (Sichuan) Commercial News (Xiao, Zhang, and Lei 2008), based on stated assumptions, estimated that Chengdu residents burned a hundred tons of paper during the 2008 spring equinox or Qingming festival for sweeping the tombs, and this only included the traditional paper replicas. From Shenyang, Liaoning, we read that every year several tens of millions of yuan worth of real money in the form of paper monies goes up in smoke. Even after a single event like the Ghost Festival of 2003, the burning paper turned into 60 or 70 tons of “black trash” (ash), making the work of cleanup crews extremely arduous (Wang Xinling 2004). There is nothing special about Chengdu or Shenyang. Comparable amounts spent on burning paper money are reported from Dalian to Swatow, often around the major ghost festivals. The Guangzhou Daily estimated that during any given Qingming festival, people in China spend more than ¥60 billion for the paper and incense offerings. “Adding in expenses for transportation and meals, the cost is unimaginable” (Yin 2006). These estimates are typical, although there are to my knowledge no official numbers. The custom has always been denigrated as a waste of paper, and in particular a waste of the labor it takes to make paper simply in order to burn it, to say nothing of the nonsense that rationalizes such waste. Today, opponents add the environmental detriments (air and water pollution and wildfires) that burning paper causes.

My task in the following chapters is to narrate the ins and outs of this
custom, beginning with the extent to which it is embedded in the everyday lives of the vast multitude of people who use it: that is, how people talk about it, conceive of it, and interconnect it with the other materials that signify the spiritual side of daily lives. This is the focus of chapter 1. Chapter 2 surveys the galaxy of papers that are cut from an endless scroll that stretches back a thousand years and canopies most of continental east Asia from Lanzhou to Taipei, from Harbin to Hanoi and its diasporas. I emphasize the word “survey” because there is no way a chapter, even a book, can do justice to all the items in the galaxy of paper. The paper monies available in a single metropolitan locale are more than can be comprehended in a single book (e.g., Hou 1975; Scott 2007). The third chapter looks for the origins of the paper money custom. The quest for origins is an adventure that goes down different paths. The first pathway is ethnology, which reveals the panhuman aspects of paper money in the offering customs around the world. The second pathway is folklore, which narrates the peoples’ own sense of how paper money came about. Folk stories are entertaining, and it is here that the ludic spirit of the burning money custom wraps its wisdom in a sense of humor. Third is history, which tells the story from the fragments of written records left by a not-so-amused literati.

While the first part of the book is devoted to a description of the custom, the second part of the book considers three ways to explain the meanings and motives behind the custom. Each combines anthropology with a particular theoretical or philosophical foundation: structuralism, historical materialism, and phenomenology. The first is a structuralist analysis of the semiotic role of paper money in the common ritual service. In this analysis I employ a well-known ethnological theory of the ritual process in tandem with a well-known Chinese theory of cosmic change (yìnyángwùxíng) to comprehend the alchemy of ritual fire by which worldly materials (one of which is paper money) are sublimated into the numinous aspects of the human psyche. This structural analysis brings forth the implicit liturgical meaning, or, at an even higher level of abstraction, the canonical meaning of paper money in the common ritual service.

Next, historical materialism brings to light the function of paper money under different historical formations. Under the premodern conditions of a highly developed centripetal-oriented feudal formation, paper money rituals enabled petit producers and tradespersons to participate in the mysteries of imperial/cosmic order that were more or less in concert with the rites of imperial sacrifices. But unlike many other customs—even some close com-
panions to the paper money custom, such as footbinding—the paper money custom survived the collapse of the feudal formation in its encounter with the modern European cum global economic system by augmenting the forms cut from the endless scroll of paper in concert with the modern (capitalist) ideology. I thus draw a dotted line between the modern system of capital formation and the “precapitalist” formations, or what I prefer to call social economies. For me, a social economy is better understood as “lifeworld” than as “culture” to the extent that social economy is predicated on an all-encompassing world constituted in the connectivity of intersubjective experience and thus has much to do with the way value is produced. In drawing this line between the modern or capitalist economy and the social economies of human history, I do not mean to suggest that the precapitalist social economies were simple, homogeneous, or idyllic. On the contrary, each had its way of representing (and hiding) the sacrifice by which the lifeworld was materially, laboriously sustained and reproduced.

Chapter 6 concludes the middle section of the book by shifting from the historical formations to the structures of the lifeworld in which the consecrative handling of the papers is concerned with producing value, a thing of value, in the form of a sacrifice. The question that vexes us here is, what is actually sacrificed in burning paper money? I try to formulate an answer by describing the experience of consecrating—touching, handling, folding—the paper for the flames. This description is based on an intuitive or phenomenological method, which is “wary of the mere substitution of symbols for what is symbolized without returning to the full intuitive presentation of the phenomena thus symbolized” (Spiegelberg 1975:58). To get at this intuitive level of presentation, Edmund Husserl developed a transcendental procedure, the phenomenological reduction, the suspension of our beliefs in the existence of the phenomena, which to my mind bears an uncanny likeness to the logic of paper money itself. In other words, Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology and devotees burning paper money share a similar goal: both seek a “reduction” of the mundane phenomenon (an object of concrete experience, in one case, and a tangible treasure, in the other) to a purer form, an eidetic form of essential meaning and true value, respectively. One uses brackets, the other uses fire, to transcend the finite world of things—to get to the “irreal,” as Husserl (1962:40) characterized the eidetic form. This brings us to another striking similarity in that both methods of eidetic reduction (phenomenological intuition and burning money) agree on the necessity for an attitude of plenitude. In phenomenology this is a kind of “thick description,”
which takes us behind the world of symbols and into the structure of the lifeworld to see how that world is put together in conscious experience. The spirit of burning money likewise requires a thick treasure trove of paper, an uncountable largesse. This attitude of plenitude runs against the prevailing attitude of efficiency and thrift in the positive sciences and capitalist economic behavior, respectively.

Thus, “what” exactly is sacrificed is hidden in the modality of being that we call “sacrifice.” To get at the “whatness” of the sacrifice requires shifting Husserl’s phenomenology onto an ontological foundation where we gain access to phenomena that are not directly perceived—that is, going behind the Confucian a priori of “becoming human” to the meaning of human existence, the existential of being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962) and beyond-the-world (Binswanger 1941) and at or of the world (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Here I argue that the sacrificial mode of giving up a part for the good of the whole is the experiential foundation of the historical mode of production. Or to put it another way, the modes of being-in-beyond-and-of-the-world, which is experiential, and production, which is historical, are mutually grounded in one another.

From the dialectic of experience and history, we move into the third and last section of the book, where our narrative rejoins the symbol-dependent world of positive realities, now in the modernist dross of simulacra, where simulations of reality have displaced their originals, leaving only “the desert of the real” (Baudrillard 1994). Thus, the final two chapters tell how modern times have changed the paper money custom in ways that conform to the ideology of realism and, in the process of changing it, have turned its traditional ludic or “unruly” spirit (Shahar and Weller 1996) into a burlesque. The ludic spirit is inherent in burning money. The idiom yìzhùāngyìxié expresses the idea that opposing moods of “gravity” and “jest” become one another just as yìnyáng do. We see this in the common ritual service, which begins in solemnity by lighting candles to open the way into the spirit world and ends in jocundity by lighting crackers to restore the mundanity of the here and now. The argument from chapters 1 through 8 follows this dialectic.

The paper money custom is dramatic and colorful; waxing rhetorical, I often call it a potlatch for the spirits. As such, it is photogenic. It lends itself to visual imaging and representation, representations of representations, via mechanical reproduction, to which our modern lifeworld is hopelessly addicted. The colorful, often dramatic imagery is a distraction from what I take to be the important lessons about money and value that this custom
has to teach. To avoid the distraction, I have included only a few images (at
the insistence of the editors) to illustrate some of the paper monies described
in the text. Images of the papers and rituals I describe are, however, readily
available on the Internet (e.g., Taobaowang, at www.taobao.com), in the back
of your local Chinatown grocery, and in other books cited here, notably Hou

The materials assembled for this study and the process of writing about
them are spread over many years, beginning in the 1960s, when my youth-
ful research project was focused on other matters (Blake 1981). My way of
approaching the present study has been more casual and protracted than for-
mal. I did not seek financial backing from research foundations, although I
have accepted academic posts teaching anthropology at several Chinese uni-
versities during the course of my endeavors, and otherwise traveled around
the country visiting friends, colleagues, confreres, and former students while
encountering others for the first time (on my walks, on my bicycle, on the
train) who simply showed me the kindness of strangers. My friends often
helped me find neighbors to ask questions of using the local vernacular. As
language is the key to ethnographic fieldwork, I have always preferred to
work in or with local vernaculars, even if, as in this project, it meant work-
ing through local sponsors, spokespersons, and interpreters who in many
instances were already helping me with logistics and establishing the chain
of responsibility for my inquiries. In China, you can do research well enough
in many areas by using the “common language” (Pǔtōnghuà, a kind of mod-
ern Chinese Esperanto), but the conversations often fall flat, hesitant and
accented, even when the conversation is between persons from different parts
of China—sometimes the differences in verbalization interject themselves
as the topic of discussion—until the talk shifts into the regional vernacu-
lar, or, even better, one of its local dialects, in which case the speakers’ eyes
noticeably brighten, even glisten a little, because the vernacular is where the
Whorfian concomitants of being-in-the-world come to life.

Finally, my idea of anthropology is conceived in a materialism founded
on a sensibility of the aesthetic and the ethical, that is, the way of being-in-
the-world, the way we insinuate ourselves, our cares, our works, into others’
lives. It is a materialism I have long pursued in an imaginary seminar with
the likes of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, György Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin, Wal-
ter Benjamin, Gaston Bachelard, Ivan Illich, and Kenneth Burke, among
others. I believe this pursuit also brings us to an encounter with Chinese
ways of thinking, an encounter that can be felt in every chapter of this book
but is most explicit in chapter 4. I think to understand Chinese culture history we must employ its ways of thinking in concert with European analytics. Any hope of drawing fresh insights depends on developing the kind of “conversation” that Evans-Pritchard had with the Azande, in which the presuppositions of Azande witchcraft were disclosed in a way that made their beliefs and practices coherent on the everyday level and also questionable on the epistemological grounds that underwrite modern European thought (Evans-Pritchard 1976; Douglas 1980; Feuchtwang 1992). Only a little less explicit in Evans-Pritchard’s descriptive analysis was the extent to which Azande witchcraft called into question the grounds of European thought. On the European side, I give special regard to the older Hegelian and Marxian theories of production and reproduction (especially as updated for our time in works by Amin [1980], Harvey [1982], Saad-Filho [2002], Fine and Saad-Filho [2004], Robbins [1999], and others) and as they encounter Chinese cultural history (e.g., Sangren 2000).

It follows from this that I am less smitten with the recent turn in American anthropology toward a politics and poetics of consumption expressed in a pathos of resistance, identity politics, and a “deconstruction” that abjures the older possibilities of human enlightenment, emancipation, and reconstruction. This politics/poetics of consumption, emblematized in “styles of resistance” and misplaced relativism, is the obfuscation of an economic system that views its own historicalness as the realization of human nature (with its emphasis on “nature” in the Darwinian sense of the word). To compound the irony, this “turn” would rather deconstruct Malinowski’s Argonauts as a literary product of European colonialism than view it (i.e., Argonauts) as the instrument by which that colonial project in its theory of economics was in effect and in fact “deconstructed.” This politics and poetics further equates theorizing imaginative and critical holistic concepts and essential reasoning with a Euro-centered rhetoric of empowerment, and thus turns all values and identities into contested expressions of an omnipresent “power” that resonates through every quotidian institution and relation (see Spiro 1996; Sahlins 1999; Sangren 2000; and Graeber 2001 for insightful and critical discussions of this orientation). Trite and banal though it has become, the politics/poetics of consumption, in some of its original inspirations, produced pertinent critiques and conceptual insights, which I think should have built on the past, should have augmented the older theories of production and reproduction, of labor value and use value, of intentional consciousness, of essential meaning, and of holistic analyses. Thus, my broad purpose is to contribute
to an anthropology of value by sketching out a materialist aesthetics in the tradition of Western Marxism married to a Husserlian descriptive phenomenology with both of its transcendental and ontological legacies. In short, I seek to comprehend the connections between the modes of production and the modes of being-in-the-world: that is, how under varying conditions of material history, we humans as persons produce the value that becomes us.