

For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors: The Chinese Tradition of Paper Offerings.
Janet Lee Scott. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007. 336 pp.*

Reviewed by Jiang Lu

For Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors focuses on the Chinese tradition of paper offerings. For believers, when paper offerings are burned they turn into ashes and disappear from the human world. In doing so, they transport to the other worlds of gods, ghosts, and ancestors. The author's decision to use Chinese paper offerings as a portal to access the essence of Chinese culture is profoundly insightful. An understanding of paper offerings can indeed lead us to the depths of the spiritual worlds of the Chinese people. As paper offerings connect people to the heavenly world of deities and their ancestors, this study links us to the imagined worlds that complete the Chinese view of the universe in the context of popular religions.

As Janet Lee Scott points out, the practice of making paper offerings goes back to the time of antiquity. The concept of life in different worlds may be traced back even further to the origin of the Chinese civilization. More significantly, paper offerings remain a living tradition, adapting to changing social and cultural conditions. In this continuous historical spectrum, Hong Kong has a unique position. Hong Kong is perhaps the only place on earth that has such a long cultural linkage to the ancient past, as its cultural tradition was not interrupted by the cultural revolutions of the 20th century. In addition, its colonial experience provides a perspective on the cultural development of a tradition that absorbed the forceful impacts of Western cultures long before the impact of globalization reached Mainland China in the late 20th century. Doing the study in Hong Kong was certainly an advantageous and fruitful choice on the part of the researcher.

This book is the result of many years of solid fieldwork as well as extensive literature research. It is systematic and comprehensive, including the documentation of many different aspects of paper offerings, ranging from general typologies to the production process. The presentation of the information is precise, logical, and clear. The author leads the readers' attention from the rituals of paper offerings, to the worshipers, to the symbolism of the artifacts, and to the religious meanings of the practice. Scott employed a combination of research different methods, including observation, interviews, and study of the comparative and historical literature on paper offerings and Chinese vernacular religion. The information obtained through these different avenues is woven naturally into coherent and convincing arguments. Comparing the paper offerings of Hong Kong with those found by scholars in other areas, the author emphasized the flexibility of the Chinese practice of popular religion and the importance of local variations. The author's close attention to the people who create, sell, and use paper offerings make this book a solid contribution to the fields of material culture study, particularly in folklore and ethnology. Without the groups and individuals who animate the practice, the paper offerings as material forms would lose their meaning.

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The practice of popular religions in the mainland has been revived with great vitality since the Cultural Revolution. The paper offerings of Hong Kong described in this book are highly comparable to the phenomena as practiced in various parts of the Chinese mainland. The book is a good example of solid scholarship and it can serve as an important reference for scholars doing research on the popular religions in the mainland, as well as in any other Chinese communities in the world.

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