

To Be Wealthy When Dead

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When I was young and my hands clumsy, I could not fold with any grace the golden boats my family burned at the nearby temple. They were not meant to be boats, but all the grown-ups gave them this name so that we could better picture what we were making as the incense pricked our noses, increasingly infuriated and red. Being fearful of the fire, I stood at least three meters away from the furnace and threw these paper boats haphazardly—my goal was not burning the boats, but fulfilling my duty in the eyes of my parents, in the eyes of all my relatives who stood around chattering.

When I was a little older, I realized what the boats were supposed to represent: money. Every Saturday, my father and I would watch old period dramas on our living room TV, and I saw that the boats were actually gold. They were used as currency and shaped like a trapezoid turned upside down; having already been so roughly treated, this geometric shape was further crushed by a round half-sphere at its center. They are called “sycee” in English, but Wikipedia at least agrees with me that they appear boat-like—that is all they will ever be, for sometimes I can be stuck in my ways.

Their paper variants, Wikipedia informs me, are burned during the annual Ghost Festival, as well as on the amusingly named Tomb Sweeping Day, days when we pay tribute to dead ancestors and other spirits. We, however, do it in April, between the death anniversaries of both my grandparents. Luckily for us, they died on months close enough together that we need not have two separate dates but—because it is in April, the notorious month of allergies and finals—I have not burned anything for my grandparents at the temple in a long while.

Four years ago, I held out three sticks of incense and informed the gathered council of my ancestors that I would be leaving for college. I was solemn but, materially speaking, it was not as if they were going to lose out on anything at all. There was just one fewer pair of hands, a rather useless pair, sensitive to heat and slow to work, to aid in the burning.

The story, as it goes, is that every paper boat we burn turns into a real nugget of gold, some sort of netherworld gold, that our ancestors can use to purchase goods... except my grandparents will not lack in watches, cars, or cellphones because we burn those too. I don't know where my relatives get them, but every year, reliably, there is a replica of the newest iPhone on the table, ready to be rendered into filial ash.

Of course, neither my grandfather nor my grandmother knew how to use an iPhone. We don't burn a manual or anything, largely because it doesn't come with the phone, which itself is a little strange. If whatever experience my grandmother had with my various uncles' Nokias grant her enough knowledge to pull through, I will know where my father's “smarts” will have come from. Even then, I don't imagine she'd have much use for it, or at least that she would use it as we do now. I hope that they are building houses not just of gold but of iPhones, placed one on top of the

other to form walls. We are keen on burning every symbol of wealth to cover all the bases; I hope that they will appreciate our efforts.

Perhaps blasphemously, I find the whole system funny. Are all our ancestors there, in an inexplicable graveyard for wealth and bodies, spanning all generations and time? Are there others there too, the parents of other children who are also laughing on this side of the flame, all the while fearing the glowing temple furnaces, open for otherworldly business? Is my great-grandfather frustrated that lately all we have been burning for his children are strange, metal bricks too thin to build walls efficiently and not even the same color on both sides? Is my great-grandmother confused by the sudden influx of American dollar bills (we burn those too, usually in stacks), which she never saw in her life?

I think I take the whole idea lightly not only because it is funny but because it happens to be the superstition I have chosen not to subscribe to, and this naturally means that there are those to which I do. On days when I feel I may need some luck, I wear red; sometimes, this works, other times, I am disappointed and let down by whatever spirit is in charge of that tradition.

Some other examples: four is an awful number, absolutely cursed, while eight, albeit four doubled, is somehow lucky. I say “somehow” but the logic behind this is quite clear: four simply sounds a little too much like the word for “death,” and eight sounds, on the other hand, like much-desired “prosperity.” I follow this policy, as if enforced by supernatural law, when booking airplane tickets, persistently aware of the numerical contents of the date, the time, and the row I will be sitting in.

When my grandmother died, I was proven right by coincidence but bolstered by it as if proven by a gaggle of scientists; it was good that I had insisted on flying out on the 28th instead of the 24th. I had time to attend the funeral without being rushed out of the temple’s doors. It is the same, I realize, with what is supposed to come afterwards within this system of dead gold and cardboard mansions. If it ever comes to pass that some coincidence falsely reveals to me that this realm is illusory, I will believe it. It is a cautious sort of approach, wherein one realizes that the line drawn between mystery and certainty is closer than one had imagined.

If it turns out that I was wrong all along to laugh a little at the furnaces, the counterfeit money, and the paper phones, I’d like to put in my own request for otherworldly goods, just in advance. For now, this is what I have in mind: an excellent internet router, Collector’s Edition books I could never justify buying at Barnes and Noble, videogames that could last me a lifetime (or a ‘death’ time perhaps?), and fancy loose-leaf tea. I have a longer list, but I can afford not to be greedy if this gift-giving is to be annual; I wouldn’t mind, hypothetically speaking, waiting in between the years.