

MONEY TO BURN

Wishes for the dead go up in smoke.



My grandmother was born rich but died poor, surviving for much of her life on money sent by my father, her only son. But at her funeral, she was sent off with millions of dollars in a currency only the afterlife recognizes, called joss papers. Joss papers aren't just money, though — if you can think of something you use or aspire to use in your current life, you can probably buy a joss paper facsimile of it: convertible cars, chopsticks, bowls of hot noodles, McMansions, puppies to keep you company forever, beautiful clothes that you couldn't afford in this world, all made from bamboo fibers or rice starch.

My grandmother lost the world she knew when the Communist Party took over. After hiding and watching the murder of her family, she escaped and married my grandfather, a subsistence farmer. Her funeral was the first time I burned joss papers. The vendors sold joss papers in the fantastic shapes of wonderful things, but they were more expensive than

joss paper money. You need the money of the living to obtain money for the dead, and this bothered me: that even in death, you're not free from the shackles of the living. I worried about my grandmother not having enough, but my dad said it was fine — we'd burn more on her birthday, at Chinese New Year, and on the anniversary of her death.

I threw thick stacks of crinkled, yellow bills into the flames, determined to help her return to the wealth of her childhood. The joss paper vendors also sold bottles of water — but only for the living, as I discovered later that day. No matter how painfully the black smoke singes your face and stings your eyes, it is disrespectful to douse the fires. You must wait until the flames have extinguished themselves, an act of sacrifice for your ancestors. But I had lost my patience with them, and unfortunately, perhaps with my grandmother, too. **Words by Noël Duan. Photographs by Anja Charbonneau. Prop styling by Marta King.**

—
For pyros, we suggest Papier D'Armenie's perfumed paper incense booklets (papierdarmenie.fr/shop/en). You can't take one to the afterlife, but your boudoir will smell lovely.

