

Paper Money: Overcoming the Superstition

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Thursday, 25 August 2016 17:57



Many Chinese people believe it is important to burn paper money for their ancestors. Especially in the seventh month of the lunar calendar, also known as the Ghost Month, people ritually burn a large amount of incense and paper money. This practice generates a lot of carbon dioxide, which exacerbates global warming. Despite the harm to the environment, people practice this custom because they think that doing so will bring them safety and blessings. Actually, burning paper money is a superstition which originates in a folk tale.

In China, there once was a crafty woman whose husband made a living by selling coarse paper used for hygienic purposes. Wanting her husband's business to thrive, she thought of a plan and proposed it to her husband: "Listen! I know the best way to sell all the coarse paper we have on our hands! Just go along with my idea and we'll make big money!"

"All right," the husband was intrigued, "what do I need to do?"

"Play dead," she replied. "While you pretend to be dead, I'll cry and mourn for you. I'll wail so loudly that all of our neighbors will know you've died."

Her husband was furious, "What? Are you damning me to death?"

"If you want to make money," she explained, "then you must act like you're dead. And as I sob over you, people in the village will come to pay their condolences, so you'll have to hold your breath while they're here. Put on a good show for them so they'll think that you're really dead."

Following his wife's instructions, the man lay down on the bed. The crafty woman covered her husband with a sheet and began to wail loudly. In a few minutes, their neighbors all came to see what had happened, and after a few hours, all the people in the village came to give the crafty woman their condolences. Her husband held his breath whenever someone came near, so everyone believed that he was dead. The people of the village were all sad about his passing. As she sobbed loudly, the woman burned the coarse paper.

Each time the people left the house and the couple were alone, the woman would tell her husband: "Everyone's gone, you can breathe now!"

They went on like this for seven days; then the woman told her husband: "When the people are all here, I'll cry very loudly and say, 'It's time to bury you! I've burned a lot of coarse paper for you so that you can pay the ghosts and deities on the way. If you bribe them successfully, they will let you come back.' These words will be your cue to start moving. I will then pull back the sheet and ask if you are really back. You need to remember your lines..."

This couple conspired in their home, and when their house was filled with the people of the village, they both played their parts. After the man had returned from the dead, he related his

Paper Money: Overcoming the Superstition

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Thursday, 25 August 2016 17:57

tale to the villagers:

“I was walking in a haze and did not know where to go. I only knew I had to go somewhere far away. Suddenly, I heard someone calling my name, and I saw a light, so I followed it.”

“That is the guiding light for the deceased!” His wife chimed in.

“I followed the light; it got brighter and brighter, and I found my way back here,” he concluded.

“So it worked,” the crafty woman exclaimed, “the coarse paper I burned for you to bribe the ghosts and deities on the way worked! That’s why you could come back to us.”

She went on to claim that by burning coarse paper for the deceased, they might be able to find their way back to life. Word spread about a deceased man from this village coming back from the dead because his wife burned coarse paper for him to bribe ghosts and deities. As time passed, this woman’s clever scheme became a Chinese folktale and then evolved into a tradition where people burn paper money to seek peace and safety and to pray for blessings.

Burning paper money is not just a superstition; it also poses harm to the environment. Currently, one of the biggest problems in the world is global warming. Scientists tell us that it is caused by greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide. Burning paper money produces carbon dioxide. Therefore, to lessen the effect of global warming, we should modify the way we practice this custom. The Buddha tells us that in order to have blessings, we must create blessings by doing good deeds. One way to create blessings is to donate the money that we would have spent on purchasing paper money to charitable causes. By following correct beliefs, we can give up superstitious practices.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks
Compiled into English by the Jing Si Abode English Editorial Team

Read other articles in the lunar seventh month series:

[The Month of Auspiciousness](#)

[Wisdom vs. Superstition](#)