



Friendly Fire

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

All surviving Vietnamese traditions change with the times, but no custom demonstrates this as fervidly as ancestral worship.



In 2021, when countries were scrambling for COVID-19 vaccines, villages in Vietnam were pumping out thousands of Pfizer jabs. The world hardly took notice of how the manufacturers got their hands on the technology, nor did health officials challenge the vaccines' efficacy and safety. Perhaps it's because the doses are simply cardboard replicas – and they aren't meant for the living.

According to practitioners of joss-paper burning, the ceremonial cremation of diminutive cardboard replicas of everyday essentials, life after death mirrors life before it. They believe these incinerated models will drift into a parallel afterlife and manifest as tangible (and usable) items. Before setting them alight (usually outside the house on the street), the bereaved place the replicas on the family altar and pray to the ancestor that they're for – ensuring the gifts make it to the intended recipient. This can take place decades after the family member's passing, usually on death anniversaries.

The custom has humble beginnings. It started in China centuries ago, but only fake money and gold were burned so that the dead had currency to pay for a comfortable afterlife. Over the years, joss-paper burning has morphed into a more elaborate affair. While money and gold remain the most desirable combustibles, the gift options now include fancy townhouses, dapper clothes, luxury jewellery, air-conditioning units, wi-fi routers, iPhones and more. The surviving family members tend to match the items they purchase with the personalities and passions of the deceased: if grandma was a keen photographer, she receives cameras, lenses and tripods; if grandpa was fond of singing, he's gifted a karaoke machine, microphone and television set.



Despite the custom's ability to adapt and endure, its future remains uncertain. In recent years the local media has looked unfavourably on joss-paper burning, citing environmental and health concerns, and the government occasionally speaks out against overindulgent ancestral-worship practices. Proponents argue that it isn't just cultural heritage, but also a mechanism to cope with loss. The joss-paper-producing villages have entire shops dedicated to children's items, from cardboard cots and prams to paper toys and clothes – a poignant illustration of how some Vietnamese might choose to process the death of a loved one.

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To get a sense of the custom's diversity, it's best to visit a joss-paper shop.

P Hang Ma, one of the Old Quarter's most vivid streets, is the traditional place to buy *ma* (joss paper). It

has also become the place to go for festival decorations, so you'll have to hunt out the bigger shops that usually keep the cardboard miniatures at the back. Better yet, visit one of the joss-paper-producing villages. **Dao Tu** (p69), 35km west of Hanoi, is the most hectic, with cardboard replicas that spill out onto the street and millions of (fake) dollars packed on the back of motorbikes. **Phuc Am**, 17km south of Hanoi, is a quieter village specialising in joss-paper models to commemorate national heroes during elaborate ceremonies. Multicoloured horses, glistening dragons, gigantic boats and armoured platoons fill the workhouses.

When to See It

Death anniversaries Death anniversary ceremonies occur on the date the deceased passed away, so they may happen at any time during the year.

Vietnamese New Year (Tet)

The days preceding and following Vietnam's biggest holiday, which falls in January or February, can be particularly incendiary.

Hungry Ghost Festival

This spirited festival is when the gates of hell are thrown open, enabling wraiths to roam the land of the living. It begins on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month (usually August or September). People often burn joss paper to satisfy these vacationing spirits – and to keep them from wreaking havoc.