Introduction

This paper examines the practice of the paper money offering tradition in Cambodia, ostensibly a Chinese tradition, with a focus on how such practice is extended beyond the Chinese community in Phnom Penh. It describes various kinds of paper money commonly used in everyday offerings to dead relatives and spirits, how such offerings are performed, and what functions such practices serve, especially among non Sino-Khmer populace. This paper shows that beliefs in communicating with the spirits of deceased relatives and guardian spirits of the house are shared among both Sino-Khmer and non Sino-Khmer communities and paper money tradition is used to articulate such beliefs. The paper concludes that the practice of burning paper money is strong and vibrant in Phnom Penh and thus supports the existing findings that the Chinese cultural practice in Cambodia has been revived after the founding of the current capital, Phnom Penh, in the fifteenth century (ibid). The Chinese community in Cambodia’s recent history has not always been auspicious. The Chinese population was not included in the public manifestation of the nation building process during the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period (1953-70). Chinese schools and newspapers were shut down during the Lon Nol regime (1970-75). The Chinese were the target of execution during the Khmer Rouge era for both social and ethnic reasons (1975-79). Chinese cultural celebrations and teachings were oppressed during the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) (1979-91) (Jelonek, 2004). Given such recent historical context, one would consider the Chinese influence might have been dramatically reduced in present day Cambodia. However, after the fall of socialist government and the opening up of Cambodia to the global expansion of capitalist economy following the signing of Paris Peace Agreement in 1991, the restrictions on ethnic Chinese’ business operation, and cultural teachings and celebrations were eliminated (Ledgerwood 2002) and Chinese influence in Cambodia has gradually been in-
creased. Since what Edwards and Sambath (1996) called the “massive renaissance of Chinese cultural identity” (82) during that period of time, the Chinese community in Cambodia has now become a vibrant and dynamic community and serves as a major influence in both economic and political spheres in the country.

**Chinese in Cambodia Recent History**

Before we can examine the practice of burning paper money in Cambodia, it is important to first of all understand the place of Chinese people in Cambodia’s recent history. During the French colonial era, the resident ethnic Chinese in Cambodia assisted the colonial government in a number of ways. First, the colonial government saw the Chinese as “intermediaries and as purveyors for [the colonial government] forces” (Willmott 1967:69). The French used the Chinese as economic intermediaries in dealing with “distasteful matters [such as] to collect taxes in the markets, control prisoners and work the salt pits” (Jelonek 2004:28). However, they did collect a special tax from the Chinese and required them to belong to a conggregation (ibid). The conggregation controlled the flow of Chinese immigrants, each of whom was required to carry a special ID card that notes which conggregation they belonged to. Given the absence of proper legal definition of ethnic Chinese during that time, many of the Chinese immigrants claimed to be Cambodian subjects in order to avoid paying that special tax. Willmott also wrote that, as opposed to other ‘aliens’, the Chinese were allowed to pursue whatever occupations they desired, including publishing papers and running printing establishments, hotels, and bars (Willmott 1967:72). Despite such policies, the legal status of Chinese residents in Cambodia varied throughout the 19th and 20th century (ibid). Before the colonial government was established, the Khmer King, wanting to bring all the country’s residents under the rule of Cambodian law, formally announced that any Chinese with one Cambodian parent would be considered Cambodian if he or she abandoned Chinese dress and hairstyle. However, the French colonial government, pursuing policy that clearly distinguished the immigrants and the indigenous people, stipulated that it was only the case for children of Cambodian fathers. This policy left the children of Chinese fathers out of indigenous question. After gaining independence, the Cambodian government returned back to the incorporation and widening policy of defining Cambodian residents established in the pre-French period (Willmott, 1967:65). This foregoing discussion clearly shows that the legal status of Chinese nationals resident in Cambodia fluctuated before, during, and after the French colonial period.

An interesting point worth mentioning here is that Edwards and Sambath showed in their work that the Chinese had enjoyed better quality of life during the colonial rule (1996:19). Edwards and Sambath interviewed some first and second generation Chinese residents in their 70s and 80s and found that Chinese cultural celebrations were less restricted and that life had been easier during the colonial era. They also added that the tax on Chinese was lower in the period prior to independence (post 1953). However, during the Sangkum period (1953-1970) the Chinese were not treated propitiiously, i.e. they were considered outsiders and were not included in the public manifestation of the nation building process (Edwards & Chan, 1996). This situation got worse with the fear that the post-colonial Cambodia might adopt anti-Chinese policies similar to those adopted by Cambodia’s neighbors. Such fear coupled with Mao’s promises of a unified China might have been a legitimate impetus for some resident Chinese in Cambodia to flee to China during that time (Edwards & Chan, 1996; Jelonek, 2004).

**Sangkum Reastr Niyum or the Popular Socialist Era (1953-1970)** revised its nationality policies moving towards “the older Cambodian principle of widening the circle of subjects” (Willmott 1967:79). The revised law in 1954 stated that anyone can be considered Cambodian if either one of the parents is Cambodian regardless of where the individual was born. This also applied to children born in Cambodia with either one of the parents born in Cambodia regardless of their nationality. This revised law, Willmott said, made the ethnic boundaries between Chinese and Khmer less clear because it allowed children born in Chinese family to be Cambodian nationals. Assimilation into Cambodian society was also encouraged by the policies from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the mid 1950s, friendly relations between Cambodia and the PRC were developed which brought King Sihanouk to Peking and Chou En-lai to Cambodia. On his trip to Cambodia in December 1956, Chou En-lai gave a speech in Phnom Penh encouraging the Chinese residents in Cambodia to become good citizens of their
country of residence. This was in line with the shift of PRC’s overseas Chinese policies as the PRC became more involved in Asian political arena (Willmott 1967:78-79). By this time, the Chinese did not have to belong to a congregation anymore (ibid). Despite such changes, the resident Chinese were usually excluded from the display of Cambodian’s nation building process. However, on special occasions such as the welcoming of the honoray visits from PRC’s leaders, the Chinese were mobilized for the demonstration of robust Sino-Khmer friendship (Edwards & Chan, 1996).

Towards the end of the 1960’s, the relationship between Cambodia and China went sour as a result of China’s Cultural Revolution and the rise of pro-communist Chinese in Cambodia.

The situation of Chinese in Cambodia worsened after King Sihanouk was ousted in a coup d’état and Lon Nol came to power in 1970 creating the Republic of Kampuchea. After Lon Nol took office, the Republic of Kampuchea shut down Chinese schools and newspapers and accused them (and the Vietnamese) of contaminating Khmer customs and morals with their attempts to spread Communist propaganda (Jelonek, 2003). As the country went into civil war between Lon Nol’s army and the faction that supported the King, the Chinese community in Cambodian landscape saw demise. Chinese schools and temples were destroyed and Chinese associations were abolished as the country fell deeper into chaos. Although a small number of the Chinese took advantage of the war through their business networks, many of them did not support the Lon Nol government (ibid). By this time, the faction that supported the King was firmly backed by China and the Chinese were the targets of execution precisely on the ground of their economic roles (Edwards & Chan, 1996). Not everybody agreed that the high loss of Chinese life during the Khmer Rouge was a result of their capitalist association. The high loss of ethnic Chinese people could also be explained from the argument that many of them were urban dwellers who could not survive the hardship of working in the field after they were evacuated from the city in 1975 (Edwards & Sambath, 1996). Whether the Chinese were killed during the KR because of their social or ethnic attribution is still debatable as there is insufficient evidence to come to a definitive conclusion for either side of the argument. No matter what the argument is, most scholars agree that there was a great loss of Chinese life and those who survived had to either hide their true ethnicity or completely abandon their Chinese identity.

The People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the government put in place by the Vietnamese army after the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, adopted policies toward ethnic Chinese similar to those of its Vietnamese backer. These policies were that anything associated with capitalism was a threat. After the fall of Khmer Rouge, Gottesman (2003) wrote that there were perhaps 40,000 Chinese in Cambodia who had survived and were scattered all across the countryside and the cities. “Because of their own character, the Chinese began to conduct business, to buy and sell, and to open stores and work as small merchants ...” (Gottesman 2003:182). The PRK government, although recognizing the ethnic differences in the coun-

The Khmer Rouge (KR) period, during which almost 2 million people were killed, was known as the darkest days in Cambodia’s recent history. The ethnic Chinese, like other ethnic groups, was almost wiped out during this period. This ethnic killing could have been attributed to the Khmer Rouge’s policies to purify Cambodia and to get rid of the economic bourgeois class, with which the Chinese were usually seen as associated (Becker, 1986; Chandler, 2007). Edwards and Sambath wrote that this is ironic in that Khieu Samphan, one of the Khmer Rouge leaders, once wrote in his dissertation that the Chinese played important economic role in Cambodia and had been well assimilated into Cambodian society. Yet when the Khmer Rouge took power, the Chinese were the targets of execution.
try, was very cautious of the emergence of these Chinese people and their potential rise as a capitalist class. The government formulated policies to ensure that the possibility of rising Chinese business class is squashed (ibid). Circular 351, which was put in place in 1982 clearly showed this attitude of the PRK government. This circular “instructed state officials to inquire into Chinese people’s citizenship status, geographic origins, the amount of time they had lived in Cambodia, their families, overseas connections, language abilities, political leanings, and past affiliations...” (ibid: 183). This circular served as a legitimate base for discrimination against the Chinese throughout the rest of PRK regime. On the restrictions placed on the ethnic Chinese during the PRK, Ross (1987) wrote that it is unlikely that the Chinese community would reach its pre-revolutionary size in the near future given “the anti-Chinese stance of the Vietnamese government and of its officials in Phnom Penh.” Although the PRK had a firm stance against the Chinese, toward the end of its regime, such a discriminatory position started to deteriorate as a result of the failure of state institutions to deal with the economic problems facing the country (Gottesman, 2003). These repressive policies on Chinese in Cambodia started to change when the Vietnamese withdrew its army and technical support from Cambodia in 1989 and peace agreement between different factions that were still fighting in Cambodia at the time was signed in 1991. Since then, the restrictions on Chinese teachings and cultural appreciation and celebrations were lifted (Ledgerwood, 2002) and Chinese influence in Cambodia greatly increased. Since what Edwards and Sambath (1996) called the “massive renaissance of Chinese cultural identity” (pg. 82) in the early 1990s, the Chinese community in Cambodia has now become a vibrant and dynamic community and serves as a major influence on both economic and political spheres in the country.

This brief introduction of the Chinese community in recent Cambodia’s history does not do justice to the complexity of the topic. However it does shed some light on where the Chinese have been placed in Cambodian society. This understanding of the relations between the ethnic Chinese and their Khmer compatriots definitely serves as a historical background for examining the Chinese cultural practice in Cambodia.

The Paper Money Burning Tradition

Paper money offerings, a tradition believed to have originated in China, involves the act of burning items made in the forms of money and other objects. This is conducted with the belief that what was being burned would transform into some sort of commodity for Gods, ghosts or ancestors. The logic behind this tradition “derives from a belief in the important supernatural transactions between people and gods believed responsible for each person’s incarnation and fate” (Gates, 1987:267). The most important feature of this tradition is the burning part because through burning, it is believed that the items being burned are transmitted to the gods, ghosts and ancestors. Janet Scott explained that “people burn paper offerings to the gods to give thanks for blessings or to beg for assistance in times of need; to the ancestors and departed relatives to express love and devotion; and to the ghosts to ease the sufferings of these unknown and neglected dead” (Scott, 2007:21). In this offering, it is believed that when people pass away, they still need to use money and other materials in the other world. Money and other accessories are also burned for the gods, but Scott (2007) explained that it is not because gods need these items, but it is believed that gods will reward the worshippers with whatever they offer to gods. Although burning is an important part of the offering, it should also be noted that not every item needs to be burned in order to serve its purpose (ibid). There are items, like the Golden Flowers shown below, whose purpose could be served by simply displaying, pasting, or hanging.

There are a big variety of names of the paper money items used in this tradition, and there is no “absolute or overarching typology recognized by both trade professionals and worshippers” (ibid: 23). Scott wrote that for trade professionals, there is a system of classifying paper money items according to how they are manufactured. For instance, the flat, foldable, soft pieces of paper money are called ‘non-pitched’ items, while the pieces which were bound together by frames made from bamboo strips are called ‘pitched’ items. Non-pitched items include paper currency and other everyday items. Some of the non-pitched and non-currency everyday items are items believed to serve a particular purpose such as bringing luck to the people who burned them. The pitched items are more sophisticated and are harder to make because they are three
dimensional replicas of the actual items such as cars or houses. This system of typology is not necessarily shared by all practitioners who have their own understanding of different names of the items based on different standards and geographical areas. The system used by customers has different typology, but is parallel to the one used by trade professionals.

The detailed practice of what items to burn or offer varies according to the occasions and to the recipients. The most common time to burn paper money is on the holy days in the lunar calendar, which mostly fall in the beginning and the middle of the months (Scott, 2007). On everyday occasions, people can burn paper offerings to gods for luck and protection. On other occasions such as a funeral or the festival of the death, people burn paper offerings for more specific purposes. There is no unified procedure as to how the paper money should be burned. The worshippers are the ones who decide how to burn the paper offerings. Scott suggested that the important thing when burning paper money items is that each of them needs to be completely burned. This is not a problem for paper currency and other non-pitched items, but it could be troublesome for big pitched items as it is difficult to ensure that all parts of the items are actually burned. In Hong Kong, Scott said people burned such big items such as funeral objects "at the huge incinerators in the funeral parlor itself, or in large three-sided metal ovens rented from the paper offerings workshop or from funeral parlors" (pg. 36). In Phnom Penh, I have seen people burn such big funeral items right outside of the funeral tent set up on the curbside of the street. They would block off a portion or the entire street from traffic in order to make space on the street to set the items on fire. For smaller non-pitched items, they could be burned in a variety of containers appropriate for the space available. In Hong Kong, urban people use containers such as ‘cooking oil tins’ and in Phnom Penh, my family used to burn paper in an old metal bucket that we used to wash our clothes in. After the burning, we left the bucket to cool down and dumped the ash into the trash.

The description of paper money following Gates (1987) and Scott (2007) above is based on findings from Taiwan and Hong Kong respectively. I used these descriptions as a foundation for understanding paper money tradition in Cambodia as there is no such literature available yet. Although Gates’ and Scott’s work are suggestive in representing the practice in Cambodia, there are no doubt nuances that are not accurately reflected in their works. The tradition of paper money offering entails substantial minute and oftentimes complicated rules such as whether the number of sheets should be even or odd, and whether to burn the paper offerings at a domestic location or at a temple. However, to summarize for now, the paper money tradition involves the burning of material items made in the forms of money or other objects with the belief that such material items will be transmitted to the gods, ghosts, and ancestors in the other world. The logic behind this tradition is the belief that there is a transaction in the other world between people and gods who is in charge of incarnation and fate. When people depart to the other world, they need money and materials in order to fulfill such transactions and that the living relatives are the ones responsible for sending those money and materials. In making offerings to the gods, the worshippers believed the gods would grant them the materials or wishes for burning the offerings to them. To what degree are Gate’s and Scott’s descriptions and findings, pertaining to this tradition in Cambodia, is an empirical question that this paper is tentatively attempting to answer.

**Paper Money in Phnom Penh**

As previously mentioned, there was a huge loss of Chinese life during the Khmer Rouge period, reasons for which could be attributed to either their ethnicity or their social class. The paper money tradition is associated with the Chinese, so how did it survive the Khmer Rouge and how is it revived in the present? Informants interviewed for this research agreed that Chinese cultural practice was not allowed during the Khmer Rouge. A paper money vendor said “Khmer Rouge time was a communist time, nobody could practice this tradition. But it did not go away because there were some old people remaining from Khmer Rouge time, and they passed on the tradition to the later generations” (Interview Jan 11, 2010). It is interesting that with all the discrimination and oppression that the Chinese in Cambodia have experienced before, during, and after the Khmer Rouge, such a conspicuously Chinese tradition has always been preserved until present day. In this section of the paper, I will present a number of paper money items commonly used in everyday offerings in Phnom Penh and how the ritual is con-
ducted. I argue that this Chinese tradition has transcended beyond the Chinese community through intermarriage. I conclude that this tradition is widely manifested in every life in Phnom Penh which corresponds to the other scholar’s conclusions that Chinese cultural identity has been resurged in Cambodia.

Given the size of Chinese population in Phnom Penh, it is fairly common to find Chinese people practice paper money rituals in Phnom Penh. I visited a market, Oreussey market, where paper money stores could be found. I talked to vendors from two stores, henceforth known as store A and B, and bought a number of paper money items, all of which are non-pitched items. From the first store I visited, store A, I bought some flat two-dimensional paper money items in different currency forms known as Hell Money, sheet gold, gold and silver coins, a trio of everyday offerings: Longevity Gold, Gold Paper and First Treasure Paper, circular Money to Live, clothes and accessories. All these items in the picture cost a total of 6,500 Riel with one US dollar equals to roughly 4,000 Riel. These items are to be used for everyday offerings. The vendor said she did not know where exactly these papers were manufactured as they were brought to her by a middleman. After further inquiry, I found out that they were either made in local printing houses in Phnom Penh or imported from Vietnam. The vendor from another store told me that another place they could be imported from is Thailand. I also found out from both vendors that the location where the paper money is manufactured depends on the complexity and the quality of the print and pattern.

I divided these items into three groups for the purpose of description here. Group 1 (Figure 2 – 3) consists of different currency forms. The vendor told me there was no specific name for these items. They are simply known as ‘money’. As it is obvious from the pictures (figure 2-3), the first item on top is a replica of the US dollar. The vendor told me the second from top is known as Hong Kong money and the fourth from top is known as Thai money. It was not clear whether they are known in such a way because of the origin of where they were made or because it is simply known that way. Group 2 (Figure 4 – 5) consists of items, which resemble what Scott described in her book as the trio of everyday offerings: Longevity Gold, Gold Paper, and First Treasure Paper. These three items are the two on top and the one on the lower left in pictures 4 and 5.

These three items, the vendor said, have their own name in Teo Chiu dialect. The first one on the top left is known as sang tao kim, the second one on the top right is tor kim, and the next one on the lower left is siv kim. The vendor said these three types of money were manufactured in either Vietnam or China, given its design and pattern. According to the vendor, sang tao kim is what you burn to your ancestors and tor kim and siv kim are what you burn to spirits. The vendor called the other two items in this group: Ancient Chinese...
Money and Sheet Gold (the two items in the lower right of figure 4–5).

The last group from store A consists of (Figure 6–7 from left to right, top to bottom): clothes, accessories, gold coins, silver coins, and the books of charm. The item of interest in this group is the book of charm, which is the name the vendor told me. Upon having a closer look at it, this item resembles what Scott calls “Circular Money to Live” in Hong Kong. In the illustrations of Scott’s book, there are pictures of items made in the actual shape of coin. Scott said these items were made from cardboard covered in gold and silver foil. I did not see the items Scott described at the store I visited. The items known as coins in the picture above (Figure 6–7, bottom left and bottom center) are flat pieces of paper with rows of pattern of circular coins printed on them.

The next day I visited a different store in the same market. I also asked for paper money, but I was shown different forms of paper money items. The items I was presented with this time were not flat pieces of paper, but were bigger pieces of paper folded into the shape of a boat. They came in a set of three boats, each with slightly different contents. However, the contents of all of them have two pieces each of tor kim and siv kim (Teo Chiu). These three items, I was told, are to be offered at three different domestic locations: in the kitchen for the God of the Kitchen, in the living room for the Guardian Spirit inside the house, and outside the house for the outside Guardian Spirit. The purpose of the one for the kitchen is to prevent any bad things or problems from happening in the kitchen. The purpose of the one for the inside shrine is to ask the spirit to take care of the people in the house and to bring in good fortune. For the one outside of the house, she only mentioned it is offered for the spirits to take care of the house, but did not say anything about good fortune. But I suspect that the two share a similar purpose. When these items are offered, a variety of other paper money items are usually added inside.
the containers. Other items that can be added along with these containers are coins and charms.

Besides this set of boat shaped paper offerings, I also collected two more items from store B. The first one is the travelling package (figure 10), contains paper replicas of a Hell & Paradise passport, Hell & Paradise Airlines tickets and boarding passes, Paradise Bank credit cards, and a bank pass book. This package is similar to the traveling package shown in Scott’s book. An important point Scott noticed about these items, which is also apparent in the picture above (Figure 10), is that all items have the image of the King of Hell on them. The last item (Figure 11) I collected from store B is a pair of ornaments that Scott called Golden Flowers in her book. The vendor told me that this item is locally known as kim huy (Teo Chiu dialect) and they are to be placed at the shrine of the Guardian Spirit inside the house. She further added that the purpose of kim huy is to ask the spirit to help the household prosper in business (in Khmer rok st mien ban). She further explained that this item comes in pairs because it is meant to represent a pair of mistresses sent to serve the Guardian spirit. Kim huy are not for burning and need to be replaced typically during Chinese New Year after being displayed at the shrine for a year. This pair of kim huy which were made in Vietnam are the most expensive items I purchased, costing about USD 1.00 each. The vendor said they are expensive because the feather is from India.

These items I collected from the two stores are the most common items for everyday offerings. The vendors at both stores agree that the business of selling paper money is very seasonal. The peak season is around Chinese New Year which is usually in February. Like most other things, the price of this commodity increases when demand is high and the store owners said they make good business during the peak season. During non-peak season, one of the store owner said she occasionally does good business when Chinese customers (referring to Chinese people from China), especially garment factory owners came to buy paper money from her store. Whenever these people come, they buy in big amounts and put them in big sacks (baav in Khmer). The lady said those Chinese people burn paper money every day. The kind of paper money that those Chinese people burn is the one for spirits (som-rab neak ta in Khmer) implying that these business people need to burn paper money offerings to gods for protection of their business and bringing them fortune. Besides the peak period, people also come to buy paper money for celebrating the anniversaries of the death of their ancestors or relatives, or for funerals. She said the first three days after a person passes away, people believe that they have to burn Sang tao kim and tor kim non-stop, so as to make sure the person who is traveling to the other world will have enough money along her/his journey.

Having described the common paper money items, let’s examine the procedure for burning as reported to me by the storeowners.
and other people interviewed. Scott writes in her book that the process of burning paper money such as where to burn and what to do is mostly left to the discretion of the worshippers. The storeowners I talked to told me that there is a general rule for burning paper money: “The process of burning [paper money] is that first of all you need to burn some incense and think of those spirits and invite them to receive the money you are burning. And when the incense is burned out, you can burn the paper money afterwards.” This rule applies to the domestic worshipping as I have observed similar procedure practiced in my house. For example, on the first day of Chinese New Year, my family would cook a lot of food as offering to the gods, ancestors, and other spirits. When all the dishes are ready, they are placed on a table and a stick of incense is put into each dish. After the incense is burned out is when we start burning the paper money. After the paper money burning is done, the family could consume the offered food. In my family, during this offering ritual we usually play Chinese music or karaoke as background music throughout the ritual. What was explained to me about this practice was that during the offering, the gods, ancestors, and spirits are present in the house to enjoy the offerings. When they are there, the Chinese music would entertain them and make them feel at home.

Apart from occasions such as Chinese New Year, death anniversary or funeral, people can also practice paper money offering any time they want. The vendors told me that for everyday offering it is best to do it on Holy Days (t'ngei sil in Khmer) according to the Chinese calendar which is one day different from Khmer or Buddhist Holy Days. The examples from the calendar below show the differences. Figure 12 is an example of Khmer Holy Day as can be seen by looking at the small image of Buddha in red color on the top left area of the picture. The Chinese Holy Days can be noticed by the number 15 in the middle left part of the example in Figure 13. I was told that when the number in this area is either 1 or 15, it is Chinese Holy Days. My mother also follows this type of calendar to find out when to make certain offerings. She said that if she was not sure about the dates, she can check with her Sino-Khmer neighbors who own the grocery store in the neighborhood. My mother explained that for everyday offerings, we can offer paper money sometimes together with fruit such as banana or oranges. I remember seeing her practicing that offering growing up, but most of the times for the t'ngei sil offering, there were only fruits and incense burning. It was only occasionally that I saw paper money placed on t'ngei sil offering. In short, the process of burning paper money that I have learned involves the burning of incense, calling the spirit to receive the offering which sometime includes food or fruit, and burning of paper money items afterwards. I have only observed this tradition in domestic worshipping and I am not sure if worshipping in a temple would be similar or involve a different process.

Skinner wrote in his 1957 book Chinese Society in Thailand that one of distinguishing feature between the Chinese and Thai is ancestor worship. The Chinese have a responsibility in a continuum of kin, and worshipping the ancestors has a place in determining the well being of the immediate family. This is in contrast to the Thai whose “immediate ancestors were honored by cremation and then usually forgotten...[with] no kin responsibility outside the immediate or extended family” (1957: 93). I believe that such distinction is also applicable to Cambodia. Thus we can understand that paper money burning as a form of ancestor worship is originally not a Khmer tradition. A form of Khmer reckoning of dead ancestors, as explained to me by my mother, involves the offering of materials to the Buddhist monks. The merit obtained from the offering can then be dedicated to the spirit of the ancestors. That
practice can be said to be the Cambodian way of worshipping the ancestors. Cambodians practice the paper money tradition only as an imitation of what the Chinese do. One of the vendors at the market concurred with the observation saying that both the Khmer and Chinese practice paper money burning, but “Khmer imported this tradition from the Chinese. Khmer people don’t know the paper money burning tradition. They learned from the Chinese. Whatever they see the Chinese do, they do it also. Similar case is also with Thai people.”

Imitation through observation of the Chinese is the case for my mother who was born and raised in an ethically Khmer family. She said she did not know anything about paper money growing up and she did not start practicing this tradition until she was married to my father who has Chinese ancestry in his family. She said practicing this Chinese tradition of paper money burning is seen as part of her obligations as a housewife who was taking care of the children and household chores. Worshipping the husband’s ancestors is a form of helping the husband, who is busy outside the house earning money, because worshipping the ancestors is asking them to take care of the family and to bring in good fortune. I remember my father telling me a story of his own father who was half Chinese but did not believe in ancestor worship. Having been born in Cambodia, my grandfather wanted to be completely Khmer and did not want to practice ancestor worship. At one point in his life, he was sick for a long time. However, upon talking to a spirit healer and finding out that his ancestors were not happy with him, my grandfather started worshiping and his sickness disappeared. This example of practicing paper money burning as a form of ancestor worship reflects a pattern of transferring this Chinese tradition through intermarriage. I believe that what the vendor said about Cambodians imitating the Chinese tradition is somewhat accurate. A case in point is the Chinese New Year in Cambodia. Chinese New Year is not considered a national holiday in Cambodia but schools are closed because both teachers and students simply agree not to come to school during that time. The same goes for businesses. Thus, whether you have Chinese heritage in your family or not, everybody celebrates Chinese New Year in Phnom Penh in one-way or another. This Chinese New Year example poses a question of whether the Chinese have assimilated completely into Cambodian society, or they have influenced Cambodian society through their cultural practices such as the paper money tradition.

The paper burning practice is a Chinese tradition, but as with any foreign influence, it gets adapted to the local context. The different kinds of Hell Money in Hong Kong that Scott mentioned in her book do not have a US dollar replica, but in Cambodia, there is (Figure 2 -3). This is evidence of local adaptation because US dollars are desirable in Cambodia where both US Dollars and Khmer Riel are accepted in everyday transactions. Since it is understood that we should burn what we believe the ancestors desire, US Dollar replicas are burned. This is also the case in Vietnam, but with a little twist. The deities who are used to traditional Hell Money are not necessarily satisfied with the US Dollar replica (Kwon 2007). Kwon said that many people died during the Vietnam War and their spirits, including those of American soldiers are believed to desire US Dollar paper money. That is why US Dollar money replica exists in paper money burning practice there. In Cambodia, US Dollar replica money is burned because people desire them and view them as possessing higher status. Thus, we could say that worshippers want to burn USD as opposed to Khmer Riel in return. Another reason to support this statement is that there was not any Khmer Riel replica made into paper money at those stores I visited. This shows that

Figure 13. Example of Chinese Holy Day
although local Chinese practice paper money traditions similar to those in Taiwan and Hong Kong, they do adapt it to fit with local understandings and ways of giving meanings to them.

Conclusion

Since the Khmer Rouge period ended in 1979, there has been a steady stream of academic attention on Cambodia, particularly on post-conflict nation building and reconstruction, revival of culture, promotion of democracy and development, state-society relations and the like. Despite receiving such overwhelming attention, little is known about the ethnic Chinese in Cambodia and their contribution to these processes, let alone their everyday cultural practices. A general survey of academic scholarship on Cambodia would be sufficient to support that claim. However, this does not mean that the presence of Chinese and their social significance in Cambodia have gone unacknowledged. In fact, the Chinese’s parallel coexistence with their Khmer counterparts has always been reflected in everyday life in Cambodia. Everyday interactions and jargon as observed in other empirical studies of rural Cambodia do reflect the stereotype of the Chinese as grocery shopkeepers, money lenders, fertilizer sellers, and so on. However, there has been extremely little academic attention aimed at examining the discourse of modern Chinese identity in Cambodia head on.

This article has attempted to address this dearth of academic inquiry by showing that the Chinese custom of burning paper money is practiced by both Chinese and non-Chinese alike in the urban setting of Phnom Penh. Whether the non-Chinese who practice this tradition truly believe in and understand the practice or they do it simply as an act of imitation is still to be proven. The paper money custom is a Chinese tradition that has existed through social upheaval and turmoil in Cambodia. This goes to show that there is more than a sufficient degree of flexibility and adaptability embedded in this tradition allowing it to maintain a place in Cambodian society. The practice of this tradition is prevalent enough that the paper money items constitute commodities that are bought and sold in Cambodian markets. The fact that people spend money to purchase the paper money renders the otherwise worthless recycled paper as valuable. Appadurai (1988), the value of an object is not the property of that object itself, but it is a judgment made about them. Paper money is made of used paper that would otherwise have no value. But once printed with certain patterns and colors, this paper obtains value again. Thus, whether the paper money custom has any meanings depends on how worshippers assign meanings to them. The question of whether the meanings given to paper money by the Chinese in Cambodia is similar to those given to them by Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong or mainland China is an interesting one that requires further research.

The well assimilation and integration of ethnic Chinese in countries like Cambodia through intermarriage and the adaptation of local culture and practice has been a well established fact (Skinner 1957; Willmott 1967). Such assimilation suggests a process by which customs and practices could be smoothly exchanged. This paper has shown evident to support such claim that the paper money tradition extends beyond the Sino-Khmer community. In addition, the recent increase of Chinese investors and businessmen immigrating to Cambodia further supports this conclusion. As more interactions between this new wave of immigrants take place in a community, there is no doubt that the importance of paper money in Cambodia is further strengthened. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this has made Chinese culture, tradition and language increasingly popular. During my visit to Cambodia in December 2009, I noticed there are more private Chinese language classes in my downtown Phnom Penh neighborhood than in previous years. These classes, I believed, are designed to train Cambodians to work for the Chinese investors. When people interact more with the Chinese and learn more about them, their Chinese tradition and practices will undoubtedly be better understood. The practice of paper money tradition, together with this anecdotal observation, supports a possible conclusion that there is strong impetus on the ground for reviving Chinese cultural identity in Cambodia. This paper hopes to establish the point that the ostensibly Chinese tradition of burning paper money is present in Cambodia and is a common practice among both the Chinese and non-Chinese alike. What role this Chinese tradition plays in the Cambodian culture and ritual practice in general is a thought provoking question to pose in present day Cambodia.
**Bibliography**


**End Notes**

1 A French word that I think is the equivalence of ‘association.’
2 *Front Uni Nationale de Kampuchea*.
3 Democratic Kampuchea was the official name of the government at that time.
4 Janet Lee Scott whose research was conducted in Hong Kong wrote her 2007 book describing this tradition in rather detail. The description of the paper money offering in this section is based on this book.
5 All these technical names are based on Scott’s 2007 book. How these items are known locally is described further below.
6 I was not completely sure of the local name of that particular item as by the time we were talking about that particular item, it was the teenage daughter of the store owner who was talking to me as the store owner was attending to other customer.
7 In Khmer, dot kom oy mien reung rav knong chong-kraan.
8 In Khmer dot oy sok sa-bay and oy heng.
9 *Baav* is bigger bag, as opposed to *thong* which could be smaller bags such as shopping bag. *Baav* is commonly used in association with rice bag (*baav ang-ka*) that can weigh from 20kg to 50kg.