



Annie Wong: to hear all
the sounds in the world

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YYZ Artists' Outlet



The act of ritual persists, even if its physical enshrinement has been lost. Annie Wong told me that the shrine that used to house the offerings in her home is no longer there, yet the ritual remains in her family.

I first convened with Wong on Toronto Island over the stories of the one hundred ghosts, the joss paper she uses in her installation, where we shared our affinity to fire as an emblem of invocation, and the difficulties maintaining practices of ritual burnings when traversing borders and oceans.

Invocation through fire maintains a degree of diversity across geographies, religions, and ethnicities in East Asia, yet something remains consistent. As a primordial force, it signifies the spark of life, a symbol of desire, and a transcendental force of reincarnation that permeates the teachings and rituals of Buddhism, Daoism, Zen, etc., often mediated through flammable material offerings, such as joss paper, incense and torches.

Yet for Wong and me, the act of spiritual offering are spectral traces rather than concrete enclosures within the diaspora. The somatic participation in rituals through fire has given way to concerns about public safety in Western urban spaces. Traditionally a collective and often spectacular celebration and commemoration of ancestors, ghosts, and the adjacent spiritual world, burning offerings has evolved into a private meditation through ephemeral sparks that escape the public gaze.

In Wong's *to hear all the sounds in the world*, the integrity of invocation remains in a state of suspension through the absence of fire-turned-rituals. Surrounding the gallery walls are prints of *100 Ghosts*. The body of work was produced during Wong's residency at Open Studio in collaboration with printer Meggan Winsley. In her artist statement, Wong describes the rigorous printing process as a ritual of invocation, which involves meticulous execution to control an image without errata. However, instead of an obsessive hunt for a perfect image of the ghost, Wong surrenders to the very act of printing-ritual. The work, as a result, sublimates a heterogeneous iconography of a hundred faces through accidental design.¹

The highly inflammable nature of joss paper naturally holds an affinity to fire, and it is through the very act of burning that the subjects of offerings can be transported into the afterworld, with the hope, according to Buddhist thought, that they can break the endless cycles of reincarnation and suffering. They are materials meant for immediate consumption rather than preservation. Its consumable nature means that joss paper often comes in abundance to be burned, to satiate the repetitive labour behind rituals of offering.

The aesthetic of repetition is further exemplified in the middle of the gallery, where a plane of joss paper is set afloat. The paper is called “one hundred ghosts,” with a unified visual motif depicting nameless female spirits, with their heads tilted upwards, gazing back at the audience. They are either residues of paper that have already been burned in private or suspended in the process of realizing their intended purpose. With the joss paper being indoors, it inhabits an intermittent space between its attached functionality and the inability to realize it, with concerns for safety that antagonize the presence of fire. In this regard, Wong's joss paper of the hundred ghosts forms a coherent plane of friction caught between the presence and absence of fire-turned-rituals. It occupies a space of offering that has yet to come full circle but is in progress to be realized. As a result, it manifests a space of anticipation and potential, where the iconographies of offering can be (re)invented.

In the exhibition, Wong offers the joss paper to the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guanyin (观音), as a way to reimagine the deity not as a singular entity, but an autonomous network of individual female beings that underpin the iconography of the hundred ghosts.² The name hundred ghosts (*Baigui* 百鬼) serves as a metaphor for all varieties of ghosts within Chinese and other East Asian hauntologies, often alluding to entities and spirits that manifest themselves through unpurged resentments at death's door and linger in our world until they break the cycle of reincarnation. In some of the more recent premodern texts related to Chinese hauntology, such as *Liaozhai Zhiyi*, (*Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, or 《聊斋志异》), many of the resentments are said to be a general grudge toward feudalism, with stories written on female spirits who became ghosts through patriarchal oppressions, unable to pass through to their afterlives and took on forms of hungry ghosts, fox spirits, and hanged ghosts amongst others.

Although texts such as *Liaozhai* have been deemed as fiction, some of the stories remain true today in many of the Confucianist societies in East Asia and its diaspora. Corresponding to the title of the exhibition, *to hear all the sounds in the world*,³ Wong's active process of offering transgresses the passivity of compassion that is often associated with Guanyin and other deities to bear human suffering, making compassion more of a verb than a noun.

Whether it is the physical suspension of the joss paper set afloat in the space, or the procedural suspension of the rituals of burning, the state of rest in the process of offering without the moment of sublimation (burning), disrupts the linearity of time. In Chinese cosmology, the experience of time is cyclic and is without a clear demarcation of past, present and future. The excess of rituals, whether it is joss paper, incense or other forms of material invocations, evokes the cyclic nature of time through its emphasis on repetition and visceral participation without end.

But perhaps there is another trajectory to embody the same process, as Wong has offered. To conceive the moment of offering as an expanded field of relation, not just to the subjects of offering, but also to time. The moment of rest sparks a need for movement, forward, toward the moment of sublimation as an ephemeral end, where our world and afterworld are split again. However, the moment of rest offered by Wong, where the fire of invocation and the ember of the joss paper only maintain a spectral trace of their eventual immolation, opens up a generative space where our world and the afterworld, us and our ancestors, participate in a moment of codependency, arising in a moment of unrealized potentials, where their images can be redrawn and reimagined in the process.

ENDNOTES

1 In reference to Wong's artist statement. "Main Gallery, Visiting Artists' Residency Exhibition: Kotama Bouabane, Meaghan Hyckie, Luke Painter, Annie Wong. October 16, 2020 – November 14, 2020," Open Studio, <https://openstudio.ca/exhibition/visiting-artists-2019-20/>

2 In reference to Wong's artist statement. "Annie Wong: to hear all the sounds in the world," YYZ Artist Outlet, <https://yyzartist-soutlet.org/exhibitions/annie-wong-to-hear-all-the-sounds-in-the-world/>

3 Guanyin (观音) in Chinese directly translates to “perceiver of all sounds,” as a way to emphasize the deity's scope of compassion of being able to hear and receive all of human sufferings. However, the very word “观” (Guan) pertains to both the act of perceiving/hearing and the state of it, at once an active gesture and a passive state.

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ANNIE WONG is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, community organizer and occasional curator. Her practice is conceptually diverse with a focus dedicated to community collaboration; political histories of solidarity; and hauntology in the East Asian diaspora.