

imperial civil service, the ancestor would – posthumously – also be promoted. A new portrait would be painted: a close copy of the first, but now featuring insignia of the higher rank, and the older portrait would be ritually burned.

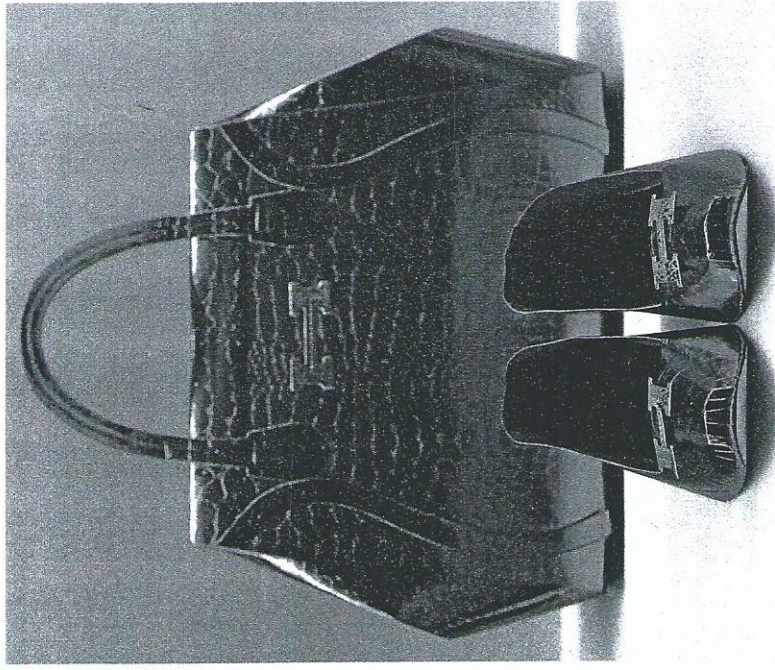
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Ancestors not properly venerated could wreak havoc, causing illness or financial failure. On the other hand, if treated with proper reverence and allowed to share in the family's continuing successes, they would bring good fortune to their descendants – from the birth of sons to long life and increasing wealth. After the annual ceremonies, portraits would be rolled up and carefully stored – which is why these paintings are in such good condition. Not until four or five generations had passed did a person's relative become a 'distant ancestor', their spirit no longer requiring offerings of food and wine, their portrait no longer needing to be displayed. Only then could portraits properly be sold, as probably happened to these two in the course of the nineteenth century. Among other consequences of Mao Tse-tung's 'One Child' policy is a widespread worry among those now old that there may be no one in the future to pay proper honour to their spirit.

China's Communist leaders, especially during the Cultural Revolution, tried hard to suppress traditional religion, including the veneration of ancestors, which they viewed as a counter-revolutionary activity. But, in recent years, the Chinese dead have been making a comeback, and the ancient practices have been resumed. Many mainland Chinese, in common with the worldwide diaspora, today bring themselves at certain times of the year into the presence of their ancestors.

In doing so, they mostly use digital photographs – updating a portrait tradition that stretches back over 2,000 years. The offerings have been updated too, going beyond the traditional fruit and wine. Paper models of computers, cars and refrigerators, of luxury goods of all sorts, even of wi-fi routers, are now burned, so that the smoke will carry the necessary item to the spirit of the

Modern gifts for the fashion-conscious ancestor: paper versions of luxury goods are burned to ensure that the dead have only the best



deceased. The ancient ritual is very much alive: an essential part of looking after the dead is keeping them in touch with the changes of modern life.

When our pair of Chinese ancestor portraits arrived at the British Museum in the 1920s, the Curator of Oriental Prints and Drawings was Laurence Binyon, a pioneering authority on the art of the East. Binyon is now better known as a poet, and it is his words, from 'For the Fallen', written in 1914, that are carved on the war memorial beside the Museum's main entrance – and on countless other memorials across the country. They are lines which are heard and repeated every year on Remembrance Sunday, at the heart of our most public and solemn act of national remembrance at the Cenotaph in Whitehall: