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Dear Colleague:

In 1939 I was taken to see Walt Disney's "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Fifty years later I went to see Disney Production's "The Little Mermaid." Alas, the magic of cartoons has disappeared without a trace. I stayed on to the end of the film largely because a little girl several seats away from me was holding on to her grandmother's hand in bubbly excitement. Why wasn't I warned? There should have been a sign at the ticket booth which says, "Adults admitted only under Child Guidance."

Enchantment may have disappeared from my life, but superstition of a dark sort lingers. For instance, I won't want to stay overnight in my office in Science Hall, much as I like the place in day hours. I can just imagine myself waking up at 3 am, see the moonlight flooding in the uncurtained windows, and hear the door opening noiselessly even though I had locked it...

The acid test for whether one likes a culture or not is whether one approves of its funeral rites. By that test I have to confess I have little liking for my own (Chinese) culture. In recent years there has been a resurgence of the horrors of traditional funeral practice (see Natural History, Dec.'88). Son and daughter would fight over whether to buy a paper car or a paper bicycle for their deceased mother. The paper car will impress the neighbors, but it will also deplete the family coffer. The paper bicycle is cheaper, but mother never rode one in life and would hardly want to try it now that she is dead. The question of wailing came up. Would the daughters-in-law, who are known to dislike their mother-in-law, wail with sufficient conviction? The son couldn't sit by his mother's coffin through the night, as he was supposed to do, because he became violently sick for fear of her ghost.

An adage goes, "If you know how to live, you will also know how to die." We Chinese know how to live but we die in the midst of a social melodrama that I consider obscene. The time of death throws a vivid light on culture. I don't know of any that really passes muster, though I confess to a sympathy with, "Dust you are and to dust you will return" mixed incongruously with the defiant question, "O grave, where is your victory?"

Happy New Year!

