





Totem-object, 2007

“Le vin est senti par la nation française comme un bien qui lui est proper, au meme titre que ses trios cent soixante espèces de fromages et sa culture. C’est une boisson-totem.”

- Roland Barthes

Barthes says in his book *Mythologies* that wine is the ‘objet-totem’ of the French nation; it is an object that all French people identify with, and which is closely linked to French lifestyle and culture. Having spent much time in both Hong Kong and North America, I have always been fascinated with the ‘myths’ associated with so-called ‘Chinese’ products in the US - an example being the fortune cookie. Many Americans are surprised to hear that for most Chinese, the end of a meal is not accompanied by a cookie with some elusive message inside; that the cookie is, in fact, an American product. There are several stories about the origin of the cookie – that it was invented by a Japanese architect, or by a Cantonese baker. Whichever way, the fortune cookie has become symbolically Chinese to the Americans, and paradoxically, a symbol of America for the Chinese.

This meeting of East and West, and the miscommunication derived from it, is highlighted by the joss paper on which each cookie is adhered to. Joss paper is an important element in Chinese ancestor worship rituals, and to use it in any other context is commonly seen as a form of taboo in Chinese culture. When I first presented this piece in Philadelphia in 2007, I overheard a woman tell her friend that she “uses these beautiful papers to wrap Christmas gifts”; an extreme opposite of its traditional use. Hence, by putting these two motifs together, *Totem-object* does not act as criticism nor judgment, but as a visual discourse of the collision of two cultures.