

The Gift Economy in Shaman-People Interactions

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the gift economy that exists in the interactions between Chinese shamans and the people, drawing on Mauss's theory of the gift economy (Mauss, 1925). Ethnographic fieldwork methodology is employed to get the material on the current state of the gift economy between Chinese shamans and people. The paper also challenges the traditional beliefs that place divinities on a pedestal and instead presents the equal relationship between people and divinities through the new perspective of a reciprocal gift economy.

Keywords: Gift economy, Reciprocity, Shaman, Religion, Mortal.

1. Introduction

The Tungus-ian languages are where the word "Shaman" first appeared (Laufer, 1917), which meant "crazy dancer" in the beginning. The shamanic states have been referred to as "schizophrenic," "mental deranged," "an outright psychotic," "veritable idiot," charlatan, or epileptic. There appears to be a growing opposing viewpoint in popular literature. In this instance, shamanic states are being equated with Christian mysticism, Buddhism, or yoga (Walsh, 1989). The majority of the time, the shaman souls of Siberian shamans take the form of birds or animals. The shaman souls of the Nganasans were called d'a-mad'i (Ojamaa, 1997). Shamanism traveled from Tibet, China, and Mongolia to Siberia via Tibet (Laufer, 1917). There has been discussion for a while now regarding the connection between shamanism and ancient Chinese religion (Boileau, 2002). The four main folk religions of North China were also brought to China due to the enormous influx of immigrants from that region into the northeast. These faiths are combined with the region's ancient Shamanism tradition to form a composite belief system (Wang, 2018). Through the integration of numerous local elements, animal beliefs have evolved into a set of belief systems with unique characteristics in northeastern China (Liu, 2007). One such example of a folk belief with unique regional features is the Baojiaxian belief (Guo, 2013). The author herself, as a northern shaman from China, has her own shamanic and client groups. The personal experiences of the author and her shamanic friends will provide rich ethnographic fieldwork materials for this study.

Due to policy reasons, there is no unified organizational system or institution for shamanic groups in contemporary China. In contemporary China, as a result of population mobility, shamans are not only distributed in the northeastern part of the country but also dispersed in various parts of the country. Shamanic craft mainly includes shamanic healing, shamanic divination, and shamanic ritual. Shamans themselves are mediators between humans and the spirits of animals and divinities. They are able to bridge the two different worlds. Shamans help people to fulfill their wishes and eliminate disasters with the help of the spirits. Currently, due to the development of the Internet and the dispersed distribution of shamanic groups, Shamans in China not only keep on helping people face-to-face, but most of them use the Internet to help people with divination and remote practices of shamanic healing through social media. After a shaman has

helped someone with treatment, predictions, and advice, people often give the shaman money, fruits, food, or silk banners to show their respect and thankfulness to the shaman and the spirits like Xian (the spirits of animals) and divinities. I was surprised to find that these objects and the process of giving were part of a gift economy. It demonstrated the social connection between religion and the general public and reflected the belief culture in China. Furthermore, it showed the relationship between the human and the non-human (Xian and divinities). Following, I will analyze the gift economy that exists between shamans and mortals with interview materials from the fieldwork and Mauss's theory of the gift economy.

2. Interviews

Tuan, a shaman friend of mine, complained to me the other day about a person who didn't give her any money or anything after a divination but instead blocked and deleted her.

"I really don't know how she dared to do this, although I have met this kind of person in the past, I am still very angry. Are they not afraid of retribution and misfortune when they do this? And the amount of the Gua Jin (money) is at your will to give. He can also give something others, and money is not necessary. Every time I meet such a person let me feel very disappointed", Tuan said.

But apart from the few people like this who escape without showing respect and gratitude to shamans and animal spirits or divinities, most people show respect and thankfulness in their own way.

"The woman who came from Heilongjiang province two months ago sent me a silk banner and a bouquet of flowers after she got home, though she had already put 500 yuan on the altar before she left. In the past two days, she told me that the quality of her sleep has improved a lot and her back doesn't hurt anymore. She complimented Xian on being so awesome."

When I visited another shaman friend Li's home, I saw red silk banners hanging all over the walls of her house. And I asked her about the story of the silk banners.

"These silk banners are all from people who have come to me from all over the country in the past ten years. Most of them have come to redeem a vow to the Xian and divinities with the silk banners. The one on the north wall was sent some time ago by the child of an old man in the next county who

was praying for his life. When his children came to me two years ago, the old man could not get up from his bed, and even the doctors said to give up the treatment. After discussion with the Xian, we think we can try to go down to the nether world to ask for five years of life. Now the old man is fine and can go for a walk on his own. The banner next to it was sent by a young couple who had been married for several years without children. They wished to have a child, so I gave them a few pairs of medicines under the guidance of Xian. One month ago, the woman told me that she was pregnant. Each of these banners has a story. I feel quite happy to have helped so many people anyway. I am here to work with the Xian to help the people, which is a merit for the Xian and me. But there are some people who come with problems and then just look around the hall and leave. We don't like this kind of people, they are very impolite. And they are not lucky to have the help of the Xian and the divinities. If this kind of person comes back, Xian and I will not be happy to help them."

As a shaman, I also have similar experiences. I often give divination to some friends. And when the divination is finished, my friends will always voluntarily give me something, such as buying me a cup of milky tea or treating me to a hot pot meal.

3. Gift Economy Between Shamanism and Mortal

Based on the above experiences with my shamanic friends and myself, I will use Mauss's theory to analyze why things such as silk banners, flowers, milky tea, and even money have the attribute of a gift. Besides, the following section will also analyze how the gift economy works in the process of shamans and spirits offering help to customers and customers giving gifts back.

Before I do that, I'd like to clarify some facts about shamanism and animism. In animism, all spirits are considered equal, whether it's a shaman/Xian, deity, flower, tree, or human being. Their souls are all seen as equal. As a medium, the relationship between the shaman and the deity is also viewed as equal. One is not forced to become a medium, and to become a shaman, it requires the approval of the shaman himself. Therefore, the relationship between the shaman and the deity is cooperative, and the shaman has enough autonomy to make his own decisions. In shamanism, the relationship between Xian and humans is seen as one of equality, with different lifestyles and abilities. This is similar to someone who can play the piano and someone who can play the violin – they just have different skills. It's important not to put the shaman/Xian on a pedestal, but to place the relationship in an equal position. The economy between shaman/Xian and humans is defined as a gift economy, as the tangible and intangible things exchanged between them are the bonds of trust and respect. Shaman/Xian appreciate the respect and trust that people show them, not material possessions. This is similar to a friend seeking help and then giving a gift as thanks. It is not a commodity economy where there is only a transactional relationship. The relationship between shaman/Xian, deity, and human is one of friendship, not unequal authority. In shamanism, there is no compulsion, and individuals have the right to choose whether or not to seek help from a shaman or a deity. The reciprocal process of giving and receiving is essential for a close relationship between the shaman/Xian and the person.

3.1. Why it is a gift

First of all, let us define what a gift is. Gifts are based on obligation and reciprocity to create links between the people involved (Malinowski, 1920). It means that gifts relate to social relationships and culture. Furthermore, gifts are animated (givers remain in the gifts), which shows the spirit of the things given (Mauss, 1925).

In the above example, Li mentions the Xian, and her goal is to help people. The help given by the shaman and the Xian, such as divination, healing, and rituals, is a gift from the Xian to the people through the shaman. After receiving help from Xian and shaman, the person gives the shaman and Xian objects or money in return for the gift (help). In this case, the object represents respect and gratitude to the Xian and the shaman. For example, the silk banner that Tuan and Li received or the milk tea that I received from a friend—all of these objects contain respect and appreciation for the shaman and the Xian. So these objects are a reflection of the relationship between the shaman, the Xian, and the people. And they also establish the connection between the people and the Xian, or divinities. And this process of exchanging is an activity of reciprocity based on folk beliefs, culture, and obligations (Mauss, 1925). So these items have the attributes of a gift.

3.2. The exchange process

Tuan is surprised that someone has blocked her and says that the person who has blocked her may receive retribution. It is clear from this that after receiving help from the Xian and shamans, a person is obliged to give gifts back to the Xian and shamans. Otherwise, the power of the Xian that exists in this help is beyond a person's ability to withstand. So to a certain extent, people worry about the possible consequences of not returning gifts to the Xian after receiving help. For example, Tuan claims that those who do not return gifts to the Xian may suffer retribution and have bad luck. But this obligation exists not only in the return of the gift but also in the giving of the gift and the receiving of the gift (Mauss, 1925). Xian does not offer help for profit. They offer help to people as a gift from the divinities, and this helps Xian's practice. In a sense, it is also their obligation for the divinities to help people. When anyone in need comes to a shaman, they can voluntarily choose whether to accept the gift or not, but of course it is considered rude and unacceptable to ignore or refuse the help of a shaman and Xian. So to a certain extent, those who seek the help of shamans and Xian should at least show respect or accept the help of the shamans and Xian. For example, Li mentioned in her interview that she and Xian don't like the kind of people who look in front of the hall and then turn around and walk away. Once one accepts such gifts from the Xian, it is also supposed to be an obligation to show one's gratitude and respect to the spirits by giving them back.

In addition, this process also establishes a relationship between the divinities, shamans, and people, which is influenced by the Chinese folk culture of religious belief in the worship of divinities. The formation of the gift economy relies, to some extent, on folk culture. There are many mythological stories about divinities in China, and typical images of divinities include Fuxi, Nuwa, Guanyin, Mazu, etc. These mythological stories about divinities reflect folk belief in and worship of the divinities. In addition, there are rituals for the worship of divinities in various parts of China. For example, in the Xiuyan region of Liaoning Province, the folk ritual of burning "taiping joss sticks" is to redeem a vow to

the divinities (Shao & Zhang, 2010). It is a manifestation of the folk belief in supernatural spirits and divinities. The worship activities of the gods of the land, the gods of the grains, and the gods of agriculture in Sichuan Province, China, were very active before the Qing dynasty, and the temple is also a manifestation of folk beliefs in the divinities (Lin, 2014). In addition, the people of Shanxi province in China built temples for Guan Di, and the temple festivals that existed in the rural area also reflected the people's worship of divinities (Yan, 2010). All of these examples show the Chinese culture of religious belief, that is, people should express their worship and respect for the divinities. So this practice of redeeming a vow of the people mentioned by Li cannot be separated from the influence of the Chinese folk culture of belief in the worship of the divinities.

This process of giving, receiving, and returning gifts between divinities and mortals is an act of reciprocity based on the cultural demands of obligation and the power of the divinities in the gift. The divinities are able to improve their cultivation by helping people, and the mortals are able to fulfill their own desires with the help of the divinities. The divinities receive the gratitude and respect of the mortals from the return of their gifts. Mortals are motivated to return gifts to the divinities by the demands of cultural beliefs and by the power of the divinities living in the gifts.

4. A New Vision of the Relationship between Divinities and Humanity

In the Chinese folk culture of belief, it is the obligation of the people to show and worship the gods and spirits. This can be seen directly in the word "worship". The word "worship" itself demonstrates the hierarchical relationship between the two parties. It is the one with the higher status that receives the worship of the one with the lower status. And both the mythological stories mentioned above and the folk worship activities of the divinities reflect the people's perspective on looking up to the divinities. In other words, the status between the gods and the people is unequal, with the gods being higher than the people. The gift economy that exists between the divinities and humans provides us with a new perspective on the relationship between the divinities and humans. The gift economy between divinities and humans is an act of reciprocity, and this new perspective breaks down the inequality of the relationship between the divinities and humans and provides a more egalitarian view of the relationship.

5. Conclusion

With the ethnographic fieldwork methods and the fieldwork material on the current interaction between Chinese contemporary shamans and the people, Mauss's gift economy

as a theory is used in this paper to explain the existence of gift economy in the interaction between Chinese contemporary shamans and the people by analyzing the experiences of Tuan, Li, and the author herself. The process of gift exchange between the spirits, shamans, and people is analyzed from the perspectives of obligation, culture, and the spirit in the gift (Mauss, 1925). This gift economy reflects the relationship between shamanism and the people. This paper also reverses the traditional belief that people should look up to and worship the divinities, but shows the equal relationship between people and the divinities in a new vision of the reciprocal gift economy.

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