

# The Analysis of the Mystery of Gift in Human Society

—A Case Study of the Flow of Gift in the Modern Yi People's Marriage

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**Abstract**—Since the study of gift exchange by Malinowski and Marcel Mauss, anthropologists have made unremitting exploration on the gift exchange behavior in human society. Mauss made an incisive judgment on the exchange behavior in “Gift”, and analyzed the gift exchange behavior in ancient society from the perspectives of politics, economy, law, morality and society, which laid the theoretical foundation for studying other social gift exchange phenomena. Based on the theoretical results of “Gift”, it is found that gift exchange exists in many aspects of human society, such as the marriage concerned in this paper. Marriage and family has always been an important research field of anthropology. Anthropologists believe that the emergence of marriage system is accompanied by exchange behavior, which is influenced by economic and political factors as well as social and emotional factors. This paper aims to sort out the theoretical results of anthropologists in the study of gift exchange behavior, and further understand the gift research of anthropology by combining the gift flow in contemporary Yi marriage.

**Keywords**—Marcel Mauss, “Gift”, the marriage of Yi people, the flow of gift

## I. MAUSS'S “GIFT” AS THE CORE OF GIFT RESEARCH

“Gift” was first issued in the “*Annual Review of Sociology*” and was officially published in 1925. In his book, Mauss comprehensively analyzed the ethnographic materials from Polynesia, Melanesia, Northwest America, Ancient Rome, India, and China, and summed up how the giving, receiving, and rewarding of gifts “made people and things into movement, which will bring things back to the related people sooner or later, and reconnected the point of arrival of these gifts and rewards with their original starting point. [1]” Mauss believed that the object of gift exchange is not only limited to the useful things in economy, but also involves in all aspects of life. The constant exchange of gifts connected the lives of each other more closely. These exchanges have the general significance, including the obligation to give gifts and the obligation to receive gifts.

In Mauss's view, the Kula system is actually is a kind of large Potlatch and the trading system between tribes. Centering on the Kula exchange, there are all sorts of other exchanges, pure celebrations, competitive sailings, and the establishment of status. Mauss believes that the Potlatch contains the functions of religion, myth and Shaman. The obligation to give

is the essence of the Potlatch, and it also has the obligation of invitation and acceptance, while the obligation to repay is the root of the Potlatch. The return with dignity is a kind of mandatory obligation, and failure to perform the obligation of return will be reduced to slave debt. Whether the exchange of Kula or the Potlatch, sometimes it is not carried out by individuals, but is the overall presentation of a tribal leader, representing the interests of the entire tribe.

In the introduction of the “Gift”, Mauss indicates that his research is aimed at discussing morality and economics related to trading, and thinks that they still play a profound and lasting role in the current society. Therefore, it is necessary to derive some moral conclusions from it, so as to provide reference for the current social crisis [2]. In fact, he is comparing the understanding of “things” in ancient society and modern society. Just as Wang Mingming said, “Mauss drew a conclusion about the relationship between people and things, and he compared the different definitions of this relationship in primitive and modern society. He pointed out that there is no distinction between things and people in the pre-modern society, the circulation of things and the circulation of people and rights also start at the same time, gift giving is both moral and economic activities. There are strict distinctions between people and things, between human rights and real rights in modern society. [3]” Mauss indicated that he tried to draw three conclusions from these comparative studies: the conclusion of morality; the conclusion of economic sociology and political economy; and the conclusion of general sociology and morality.

## II. THE EXPLORATION ON THE INHERITANCE OF THE “MYSTERY OF GIFT” AND “THE FLOW OF GIFT”

In the study of gifts after Mauss, the most classic works are Godelier's “*Mystery of Gift*” and Yan Yunxiang's “*The Flow of Gift*”. The former directly studies the “Gift” discussed by Mauss and explains the mystery of gift; the latter combines the theory of gift study with the case of “Xiajia village” in China to explore the reciprocity principle and social network in rural China.

Different from Mauss and Malinowski, in the “*Mystery of Gift*”, Maurice Godelier paid more attention to the things that are valuable but never used for exchange in the ancient society, that is, sacred things, and the resulting investigation of things

that must be preserved. Godelier suggested that the existence of some gifted food is probably because they have the greatest symbolic value and are not assignable [1]. The focus of his “reflection” lies in the fact that some sacred things cannot be exchanged and can only be “inherited” because of their “invincibility”. In other words, Mauss’s gift exchange cannot explain the general phenomenon of society, because there is at least one kind of social fact that is not like it. He believes that “society has a dual foundation, in addition to exchange, there is also inheritance. [1]”

Godelier further divided the gifts in social life into competitive gifts and non-competitive gifts. Competitive gift is represented by potlatch, while non-competitive gift is not a strict transfer but a movement. People just gave up the right to use the goods, but did not lose the ownership. No matter what kind of gift is given, there are many imaginative and non-material contents. Godelier believes that in modern Western society, more and more people are excluded from society. How to integrate these people into social unity? The psychological integration and exclusion brought by material integration may be Mauss’s best answer to the mystery of gifts. In the integration after exclusion, gift giving still bears a kind of moral standard. When it plays the role of social integration and psychological integration, it also inevitably produces psychological exclusion and harm. In the modern Western society, faced with many social problems that governments are powerless, gift giving has entered the front of the stage from the field of private life and personal relationship, which seems to have become an objective condition to maintain the society.

Yan Yunxiang’s “*The Flow of Gift*” mainly focuses on three topics. The first one is the characteristics of gift exchange in China and its significance to the continuous discussion of gifts in anthropology. Then the author discusses the complexity of moral rules (human feelings) of relationship and interpersonal behavior in Chinese culture. At last, it discusses the relationship between gift economy and social changes in a wider range. This paper classifies the gifts in a unique way, and analyzes the gift economy and relationship network, the relationship structure in rural society, the principle of reciprocity and human ethics, power and prestige in gift exchange relationship, society, relationship, human feelings and gifts. The author divides gift giving into two categories: expressive and instrumental. The former is to maintain a long-term relationship; the latter is based on a utilitarian purpose and belongs to a short-term relationship. At the same time, the gifts are divided into ceremonial and non-ceremonial. The ceremonial occasions are birth celebrations, engagements, weddings, house-building, and funerals. The non-ceremonial occasions are mutual visits between relatives, New Year greetings, food exchange in daily life and love tokens.

### III. THE STUDY OF GIFT EXCHANGE IN MARRIAGE

Marriage and family, as the research field that anthropologists are most concerned about, is also influenced by the gift exchange theory. Many anthropologists have put forward their own views on it. For example, Levi Strauss, drawing from Mauss’s view about gift exchange, pointed out that family and marriage also meets the principle of reciprocity. In “*The Savage Thinking*”, he indicated that “the exchange of

women and the exchange of food are both means to guarantee and express the integration of social groups.” Godelier also mentioned in “*The Mystery of Gift*” that two things actually happened when sisters are exchanged. One woman takes the place of another woman, and this substitution of one person for another also constitutes the production of a relationship: an alliance between two males and two lineages [1]. There is no doubt that they all believed that the combination of the two sexes in ancient society had some exchange significance, which was to pursue the union between the two groups. Combined with these theoretical studies, Yan Yunxiang studied the gift exchange system and interpersonal relationship model of a village in Northeast China, carefully inspected the process of gift exchange and network cultivation, and showed readers the reciprocity principle of gift exchange, the cultivation of social network and the practical operation of social relations in the social practice of this village through a lot of vivid examples. Taking the most common types of gifts-- betrothal gifts and dowry as examples, Yan Yunxiang analyzed the roles of the bride and groom in marriage exchange from the early 1950s to the early 1990s. He believed that Xiajia village has formed a marriage exchange system that includes three components: betrothal gifts, direct subsidy and dowry (including indirect dowry) [4]. He also mentioned in his book that “the dominance of women is transferred and the in-law relationship between the groups is established in the process of gift exchange, which can be explained by the theory of marriage payment, that is, the bride should compensate the woman for the transfer of the bride’s reproduction rights and housework rights; and the woman, as the bride, is exchanged to the male’s clan group through betrothal gifts. [4]” The author analyzes the changing process of betrothal gifts and dowry, and emphasizes the transformation of marriage gift towards a way of property inheritance.

From the anthropological study of the “betrothal gifts” in Chinese marriage system, we can see that the former focuses on the social nature of “betrothal gift”. In the building of the marriage relationship, “betrothal gifts” is the transfer of the bride’s life ownership paid by the bridegroom’s clan to the bride’s clan. Through the “betrothal gifts”, the functions of women’s fertility and labor capacity are transferred to the bridegroom’s family. It is the social transfer and shift of the bride, which focuses on the bride herself. The theory of financial assistant is more from the perspective of the construction of a new family to discuss the final direction of betrothal gifts. The theoretical premise of this perspective is that the bride’s “betrothal gifts” transferred from the groom’s family to the bride’s family can be largely controlled by the bride, eventually flow to the new family, and support the normal operation of the new family. The two theories of marriage exchange on “betrothal gifts” both expound the use and transfer of “betrothal gifts”, but their respective emphases are different, embodying the characteristics of anthropological research, and expressing the opposite perspective of anthropological research on “betrothal gifts”, which is an important enlightenment for the anthropological study of “betrothal gifts” in Chinese society.

#### IV. THE FLOW OF GIFT IN MODERN YI PEOPLE'S MARRIAGE

The modern Yi people's marriage has something in common with the marriage pattern in Xiajia village described in *"The Flow of Gift"*. However, as a minority nationality with unique history and culture, the flow of gifts in Yi people's marriage also has new ways and characteristics. The most obvious flow of gifts in marriage is the exchange between betrothal gifts and dowry. However, traditionally, Yi brides have not been able to get dowry directly from their parents, and even if there are, they are just some jewelry or clothes. Therefore, as a gift, betrothal gifts can be said to be one-way flow. However, in the actual exchange, it is not considered to be one-way. The bride herself is part of the "gift", and her symbolic capital and the family's symbolic capital are also part of the "dowry". Traditionally, parents are responsible for paying the betrothal gifts for their sons. However, in the modern Yi people's weddings, betrothal gifts often fall on the sons themselves. On the one hand, it is the rise of high betrothal gifts; on the other hand, parents think that the cost of their son's school education is already equivalent to the betrothal gifts.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Starting from Mauss, the research on gifts gradually leads to other research fields. *"The Mystery of Gift"* as the follow-up study of *"Gift"* also aims to solve the current crisis in Western society. When faced with the contemporary social moral crisis, they both started with gifts. Although both are anthropological works, they both seek answers to the current social problems by analyzing what we commonly call the primitive society. Mauss wanted to return to the collective moral community in the past, but in reality his conclusion could not really explain the moral crisis in Western society; he tried to put everyone into the community of gift exchanges, but he did not realize that the gift did not have the huge function as he said. Godelier is more pragmatic than Mauss. He realized the limited role of

gifts in modern society, but it can still be seen that Godelier discovered those things in gifts that cannot be changed by modern society, which may be moral or may because of their irreplaceable functions. Since then, anthropologists have done a lot of research on gifts, but the most classic research on the flow of gifts in Chinese society is *"The Flow of Gifts"*. Through a series of research, both the gift behavior in ancient society and the flow of gifts in modern society have received the attention of anthropologists, and have been used to explain the economic or moral value hidden behind some social behaviors. From the theoretical study of gifts, we can see that the exchange of betrothal gifts and dowry of the marriage in Chinese society itself is the behavior of gift flowing. The Yi people's marriage, as a kind of empirical material in this paper, also conforms to the basic category of gift research, reflecting the universality and particularity of gift research.

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