

## **Tea, Gift-giving and Social Relationships' Production of De'ang people in southwest China**

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### **Abstract**

De'ang 德昂 people are an ethnic minority officially-recognized in China who are tea planters and tea drinkers mainly living in the upland areas of southwest Yunnan on the border between China and Myanmar. This paper demonstrates that how De'ang use tea as a gift in gift giving with outsiders and insiders to produce their social relationships in their lives, and from the viewpoint of anthropology argues that tea giving among the De'ang not only can reflect the basic principle of reciprocity in gift exchange, but also can reveal their identity both inside and outside their own community through different social relationships.

### **Introduction**

Gift giving is part of gift exchange discussed by Mauss ([1954]1969), which points out a key principle of exchange: "In Scandinavian and many other civilizations contracts are fulfilled and exchange of goods are made by means of gifts. In theory such gifts are voluntary but in fact they are given and repaid under obligation" ([1954]1969):1). Mauss examines gift exchange in pre-modern societies and finds the answers when focusing on native belief system. For Malinowski and Sahlins, reciprocity is the motivation for returning a gift. Malinowski argues that all obligations in gift exchange are "arranged into well-balanced chains of reciprocal services" (1926:46). Sahlins introduces a tripartite division of exchange: "generalized reciprocity", "balanced reciprocity" and "negative reciprocity" (1972:191-210)<sup>1</sup> to demonstrate both the kinds and the universality of reciprocity in gift giving and exchange. Moreover, he reinforces the accountability of reciprocity. This keeping-balanced connection among giving, receiving and

repaying provides another perspective for understanding gift giving and exchange besides the moral ties that Mauss puts forward.

From Gregory's point of view, gift exchange should be “in a clan-based society the objects of exchange tend to assume the non-alienated form of a gift; reproduction assumes the particular form of gift reproduction”(1982:41). And Parry and Bloch posit that gift exchange is related to “transactions concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order.” (1989:24). Actually when Mauss ([1954]1969)) analyses gift exchange based on pre-modern societies, he is also aiming to discuss modern societies. This is indicated when he argues, “Much of our everyday morality is concerned with the question of obligation and spontaneity in the gift. It is our good fortune that all is not yet couched in terms of purchase and sale. Things have values which are emotional as well as material; indeed in some areas the values are entirely emotional. Our morality is not solely commercial. We still have people and classes who uphold past customs and we bow to them on special occasions and at certain periods of the year” ([1954]1969:63). Inspired by these studies, this paper will attempt to reveal the nature of tea giving among the De’ang people and their social relationships’ production both inside and outside their society while referencing the basic principle of reciprocity in gift exchange.

### **The De’ang and Tea**

The De’ang are an officially-recognised ethnic minority who live in the border areas of southwest Yunnan between China and Myanmar. They are mainly distributed in (德宏傣族景颇族自治州), Baoshan County (保山市), Lincang District (临沧地区) and Pu’er District (普洱市) in Yunnan province. According to Chinese population Census in 2010, the De’ang totaled 20,566 people in China, less than one percentage of the total Chinese population. The majority of this minority group live in Dehong Dai Zu Jingpo Zu Autonomous Prefecture.

The De’ang are a group of Mon-Khmer speaking people and tea planters. They call tea *j ju* in their language. They worship tea and regard tea as their ancestors’ creator. For hundreds of

years, the Mon-Khmer speaking people have been known for producing and selling tea<sup>2</sup> (Milne [1924]2004; Scott [1932]1982). As the likely descendents of the Puren (濮人: one aboriginal group in ancient southwest Yunnan), the De'ang have a long history in the production of tea in the region. *The De'ang Social History Survey* (1987) detailed their usages of tea in their social lives. "Male and female adults are fond of drinking strong tea. Each household would plant some tea trees around their houses or somewhere close to the villages. Tea leaves were processed in manual ways, mainly for the purpose of self-consumption. If they had extra, they would engage in market exchange" (1987:5). Nowadays, some areas of southwest Yunnan still maintain old tea trees that were first cultivated several hundred years ago by De'ang ancestors. Other ethnic groups around the De'ang praised them as "the old tea planters", *Gu Lao De Cha Nong* 古老的茶农 (see Li 2000; Teng 2006).

The De'ang worship tea as an important ritual good in their religious and social ceremonies, drink tea as a popular drink, eat tea as a dish in their daily lives, and sell tea in the markets. Moreover, they use tea as a gift to express their identity and make important statement about their relationships with themselves and others. They seem to regard tea as expressing something more valuable than money in what may be an aspect of their traditional morality reacting against commodity fetishism (Marx [1867]1967), which is a focus of discussion in this paper.

### **Tea giving: an important tea usage of De'ang**

Tea giving has penetrated the entirety of De'ang people's social lives as a vital social usage. When the De'ang use tea as a food, a medicine<sup>3</sup>, a beverage or a ritual good<sup>4</sup> on different occasions, what they often express is their wishes and desires, in an instrumental way, for health, safety, abundant harvests, fertility, regeneration and family unity. However, offerings of tea do not only express their instrumental wishes but also develops social relations between tea givers and tea receivers. Before discussing how tea giving constructs the social relationships of the De'ang and how the social and symbolic importance of tea is expressed in gift giving in De'ang'

social lives, it is necessary to demonstrate why the De'ang link tea with their 'spirit of the gift', which is called *xinyi* in Mandarin language and *we jio* in De'ang language.

### Tea and De'ang's spirit of gift

The De'ang frequently use tea as a gift in their social lives. When non-De'ang guests visit, the De'ang host not only offer tea to drink, but also prepares tea as a special gift to give. The author witnessed and experienced it during fieldwork in the De'ang villages. The villagers explained that tea carries on the, 'intentions of their hearts' (*xinyi*, 心意) and hoped that the guests would not refuse it. They would mention *xinyi* to non-De'ang guests to persuade them in receiving tea. *Xinyi* 心意 is a popular term used in gift-giving in the Mandarin language, which is adopted by the De'ang in their gift-giving to outsiders. But the De'ang seldom give tea as a gift to each other in their daily lives as almost each family plants tea. And they don't talk about *xinyi* when they offer their ordinary De'ang guests tea to drink, but use *ba ge bao* practice to express the spirit of their gift giving on such occasions. *Ba ge bao* is a term which refers to the daily practice of the De'ang to pass small bags containing tea to each other in their internal social lives. The formal giving of tea among the De'ang usually occurs in their ritual lives, where the De'ang explain that the giving of tea in their ritual lives could demonstrate their *we jio* to the recipients of the gift. *We jio* in De'ang is very similar to the notion of *xinyi* in Mandarin.

In the discussion of gift exchange, Mauss adopts "hau", the spirit of the things given by the Maori, to explain why gift recipients in total prestation systems need to make a return: "one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence. To keep this thing is dangerous, not only because it is illicit to do so, but also because it becomes morally, physically and spiritually from a person" ([1954]1969:10). This moral and inalienable connection between gifts and their givers creates the obligation to give, receive and repay between gift givers and gift recipients in exchange. The De'ang use the Mandarin *xinyi* when they give tea as a symbol of friendship and kindly regard to outsiders; they use the De'ang term *we jio* when they give tea to insiders. Tea is

not just tea in these usages of De'ang, but a multi-vocal symbol with different meanings similar to that described by Turner (1973:21) regarding the role of the milk tree in the codes and values of Ndembu social organization<sup>5</sup>. When tea is used for gift giving, it carries an attribute of inalienability bearing the identity of its givers and it embodies the closest of relationships between givers and receivers. As Mauss noted, "to give something is to give a part of oneself" (Mauss [1954]1969:10). For the De'ang, tea giving would be a way of expressing the identity of givers and demonstrating a close relationship between givers and receivers.

### **Tea giving and friendship's production between De'ang and Non-De'ang**

Friendship is a close relationship without blood connections. Friendship is a sign of social relationships between De'ang and non-De'ang. Tea-giving from De'ang to non-De'ang can help friendship production potentially happen between them. This tea giving implies the De'ang wish to form friendships with outsiders. When non-De'ang visitors come, the De'ang will give tea to these visitors as a formal gift as they believe this tea giving can convey their *xinyi* and a sense of their identity and demonstrate their courtesy and respect to these visitors, as the start of what it is hoped will be their future friendship and mutually beneficial relationships.

When the De'ang give tea as a symbol of friendship and respect to non-De'ang outsiders, they describe tea as expressing *xinyi* in Mandarin, to explain the reason of their tea giving in a way that can be understood in Chinese society. When the De'ang give tea to their non-De'ang visitors, this doesn't mean that the De'ang have the right to take back tea from their visitors. Nor does it imply that the non-De'ang guests have no right to dispose of the tea they have been given. What matters is that the De'ang consider the gift of tea to such honoured visitors as bearing their *xinyi* in an inalienable way and expressing their wishes for the future friendship between them. Thus, in this giving behavior, tea acts as something inalienably attached to the De'ang who give it, showing that "to give something is to give a part of oneself" (Mauss [1954]1969:11) and which must imply some future return. And in this way, the De'ang' *xinyi* is similar to what Mauss described for the Maori *hau* as a spiritual strength implying something of return.

If one compares De'ang tea with the Kula valuables<sup>6</sup>, Vaygu'a, discussed by Malinowski (1953), and Mauss ([1954]1969:22), it can be seen that both have some similarity in having a personality, a past, and even a legend attached to them, as the De'ang regard tea as expressing some value which is more important than money since it is always related to the non-commercial side of things, as well as recognized as having commercial value. What makes tea in De'ang society such a special kind of gift? According to Baudrillard's statement, "the gift is unique, specified by the people exchanging it and the unique moment of the exchange" (1981: 64). Tea giving on different occasions by the De'ang can be seen as a unique form of exchange because it links the De'ang with insiders, and the De'ang with outsiders, at the moment of gift exchange.

According to Mauss ([1954]1969:10-11), a gift relationship implies "the obligation to repay gifts received, but it implies two others equally important: the obligation to give presents and the obligation to receive them." If the guests of the De'ang were to reject the tea offered to them, this would be equivalent to rejecting the De'ang *xinyi* altogether. According to Yan, "expressive gift exchanges are ends in themselves and often reflect a long-term relationship between a giver and a recipient." (1996:45). When the De'ang use tea as a gift to develop their relationships and friendships with outsiders, this gift giving demonstrates De'ang wishes for a long-term relationship with their guests.

It is worth noting that the De'ang don't talk about *xinyi* when they offer tea to drink to their De'ang guests, but generally use *ba ge bao* practice to show the spiritual aspects of their gift giving to De'ang visitors on daily occasions. *Ba ge bao*, as mentioned, is a common practice of the De'ang in which they give small bags containing tea as a gift to others, in a way which shows their cultivation of personal relationships and networks and their production of obligation.

The *ba ge bao* practice between De'ang and De'ang as well as the *xinyi* practice between De'ang and non-De'ang in De'ang society may seem to resemble *guanxi* practice (see Yang 1994; Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997) in Chinese society, a practice explained as "the cultivation of

personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness” (Yang 1994: 6). What informs this practice can be explained in Yang’s words, as “the conception of the primacy and binding power of personal relationships and their importance in meeting the needs and desires of everyday life” (Yang 1994:6). Although Yang’s research related to “gift relations” in Chinese urban society, De’ang customs are in this respect, somewhat similar then, to Han Chinese ones.

However, De’ang identity itself is a very important aspect of both their *xinyi* practice and their *ba ge bao* practice. As mentioned above, when the De’ang give tea to non-De’ang visitors to convey their *xinyi*, this tea is given for expressive reasons as a sign of De’ang identity as, on the one hand, they expect to gain the recognition from these visitors for the value of their tea, while on the other hand, they hope to get these people’s recognition of the De’ang themselves. When the De’ang give tea to their normal De’ang visitors, they don’t use any special terms to express their tea giving, which just occurs through the everyday *ba ge bao* practice. This gift giving with no words embodies a De’ang identity in this practice, as expressive, material, symbolic, practical and ideological<sup>7</sup>. When De’ang give non-De’ang guests tea and use the Mandarin formula of *xinyi* to make clear the spiritual aspects of this tea giving, what the De’ang are doing has crossed over the symbolic boundaries of their community. The gift giving is marked by such practices as using their name, their legends, their history of planting and selling tea, which in turn marks the limits of the sense of group belonging that Barth (1969) suggests we focus on for our analyses of ethnic groups, into a wider community in which they seek to express their identity at the same time as forging relationships with outsiders.

The normal friendships of De’ang are built on “reciprocity” (Sahlins 1972). Mutual visits to each other are a basic way of making and maintaining normal friendships. No matter who visits whom, it is necessary to have tea to drink while friends talk with each other in their homes. As the De’ang are tea producers, they won’t take tea as a gift to other De’ang during normal visits. However, they would use tea as a symbol conveying various messages in their ritual ceremonies.

### Tea giving and kin relationship's production among De'ang themselves

The De'ang practiced the articulation of alliance and descent through marriage which strengthened their kin relationship network. Before they establish a new lineage alliance, they have a wedding ceremony between two lineages which normally lasts three days. The importance of tea giving was linked with the marriage and the wedding ceremony itself. The wife-giver and wife-taker lineages both frequently use tea in packages called *ba ge liam* to invite guests, the Grand Master of Ceremonies and the Lesser Master of Ceremonies. The wife-taker's family uses tea as a symbol of proposing marriage called *ja lim dib chiu* and *ja kon son hu* on the first day of the wedding ceremony, and later, uses tea in a form called *ba zhe* at the beginning of the bride wealth giving as a reciprocal exchange to the wife-giver's family before the wedding banquet starts on the second day. When the bride revisits her natal family with the bridegroom on the third day, their company takes tea to the bride's natal family, in the form called *ba ge liam* on behalf of the bridegroom's family, to which she now belongs. Through the marriage, a new kin relationship between two lineages is established.

On the basis of this researcher's fieldwork, a strong tendency towards endogamy was observed in De'ang villages as the majority of the married villagers were born in the same village, some from other De'ang villages and a few inter-ethnic marriages. According to the villagers, the wedding ceremony for inter-ethnic marriages did not include tea giving such as *ja lim dib chiu*, *ja kon son hu*, *ba zhe* and *ba ge liam* from the bridegroom's side to the bride's side because the bride's side was non-De'ang. Tea was an important part in marriage parcels and ceremonies. So giving these parcels as a special gift at marriage was a symbol of ethnic endogamy marking the boundaries of group identity and belonging according to the De'ang.

Gift giving on such ceremonial occasions is "expressive" according to Yan in his research on the flow of gifts in Xiajiacun in Helongjiang. Tea giving in De'ang wedding ceremonies reveals an aspect of gift relations in their kin relationship's production. According to Yan (1996), gift relations in rural China can be seen as both instrumental and expressive, material and symbolic,

practical and ideological. Gift relations in De'ang society in rural China, just as Yan reported, cannot be simply classified as instrumental or expressive because both seem to be involved. In the context of constructing the kin relationship through marriage, the giving of tea reveals the practical sense as a symbol of proposing marriage. The tea-giving practice on such ceremonial occasions actually shows De'ang identity to be closely connected to the interactions related to gifting of tea and to the construction of their community as an essentially kinship-oriented one. It is evident that the gifting of tea reflects some of Cohen's (1982, 1985) ideas of belonging, identity and the symbolic construction of community.

### **Conclusion**

As discussed above, tea giving as part of gift exchange among De'ang people is embedded in their lives as an important social usage with expressive meanings, which can work to produce social relationships with outsiders, kin relationships among insiders in De'ang society, who express their identity both inside and outside their own community through these relationships. Since the De'ang tend to regard tea as expressing something more important than money, it is no surprise to see that they use tea as a gift for their various social activities. With regard to the tea giving, the tea giver may be an individual or family, or a lineage acting on behalf of the De'ang, according to the occasion. Regardless of who the tea-givers may be, what they do embodies the basic principle of reciprocity or exchange that Mauss has mentioned before, as integral to social connections and balance.

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Notes:

1. “generalized reciprocity”, “balanced reciprocity” and “negative reciprocity” are three main types of reciprocity identified by Marshall Sahlins in the book *Stone Age Economics* (1972). “Generalized reciprocity” refers to putatively altruistic transactions that the material side of the transaction (the exchange of equally valuable goods) is repressed by the social side, the time for the return gift is indefinite and not qualified in quantity or quality and a failure to reciprocate does not result in the giver ceasing to give. “Balanced reciprocity” refers to direct exchange of customary equivalents without any delay, and the exchange is less social and is dominated by the material exchange and individual interests. “Negative reciprocity” refers to get something for nothing with impunity, which is the most impersonal form of exchange with interested parties seeking to maximize their gains.
2. The De’ang and the Palaung are part of the same people and very closely related. However, most of historical records we have outside China refer to the Palaung and most of the Chinese records refer to the ancestors of the Ang under different terms.
3. The De`ang regard tea as an important herbal medicine. For example, they deal with headache through tea drinking, deal with prickly heat through washing the affected part in tea water.
4. The De`ang use tea as an important ritual good in their ritual ceremonies, which embodies their essential offerings.
5. Victor Turner in his book *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1973) illustrates the milk tree in the codes and values of Ndembu social organization, which shows the relationship between natural environments that feature trees and rituals and symbols.
6. The Kula valuables were originated from Kula ring, a ceremonial exchange system conducted in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. They are items traded purely for purposes of enhancing one's social status and prestige, which never remain for long in the hands of the recipients; rather, they must be passed on to other partners within a certain amount of time, thus constantly circling around the ring. Bronislaw Malinowski used it to argue for the universality of rational decision making (even among 'natives'), and for the cultural nature of the object of their effort. According to Marcel Mauss, the act of giving is a display of the greatness of the giver, accompanied by shows of exaggerated modesty in which the value of what is given is actively played down.
7. Ideological refers to customary thought.

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