



The Gift Aporia:

An Appraisal of Religious Giving in Taiwan's Money God Temples

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A distinctive feature of Taiwan's religious landscape is the increasing number of new money god temples where, after negotiating with a deity by throwing divination blocks, the temple gives visitors between twenty and six hundred Taiwan dollars of 'fortune money'. Although there is no contractual agreement with the temple, recipients usually return the money with between one hundred and one thousand per cent interest at a later date. The two case study temples claim to receive millions of visits a year, and the total amount given annually totals over one billion Taiwan dollars. Utilising Derrida's concept of a 'true gift' as a starting point for a multi-layered analysis, this paper untangles the complex web of giving, reciprocity and exchange involved, and examines the impossibility of Derrida's 'true gift' both from the perspective of the money god temples, and from the suppositional perspective of devotee-deity interactions.

Keywords: Taiwan, Chinese temples, Money Gods, Derrida, Anthropology of Religion

In the economic climate that has prevailed since the end of Taiwan's economic boom, epitomising what Weller (2000) described as 'temples for profit', money god temples have rapidly multiplied throughout Taiwan. In these temples, devotees petition deities asking to borrow Taiwan dollars, the money symbolising the intentionality of the deity to positively intervene in their lives, and the devotee returns the money with interest to the temple at a later date. The temple therefore acts as a banking intermediary between deities

and devotees. Based on interviews with temple owners, staff, and devotees, this paper will present an ethnographic study of two such temples, after which the exchange will be analysed in context of Derrida's 'true gift' (Derrida 1992) from the suppositional¹ perspective of devotee-deity relationships. The research for this paper was undertaken between 2009 and 2012 over multiple visits to the case study temples; She Liao Village Zi Nan Gong in Zhu Shan township, Nantou County, and Shi Ding Wu Lu Cai Shen Miao in Taipei County. Adopting a participatory approach and following the correct ritual procedure, 'fortune money', *facai jin* (發財金) was borrowed from these temples and returned a year later with interest.

The ethnography that follows illustrates that in the material world, the ritual exchange in money god temples requires reciprocation and monetary interest. It should not be misconstrued that the money god temples themselves are intentionally offering a free gift or that a free gift is actually given by the temples. The temples are clearly motivated by profit for the benefit of charity, the local community or for self-enrichment. The local ritual and material cultures, the temple histories and mythologies, and the social interactions between visitors and temples will be detailed in the case studies section.

Beyond socio-cultural observations, from the emic perspective of the social actors involved in negotiating with money gods, deities are, in fact, of primary importance, as in their absence, the religious culture built up around their worship would crumble. Deities

are perceived as discarnate entities represented in anthropomorphic form in which they are worshipped, communicated and bargained with as if existing in both human and parallel spiritual realms. To gain the fullest understanding of deity–devotee interactions, I endorse Bowie’s position that ‘the decision to ignore, discount or explain (away) insider or emic explanations and understandings, imposes a severe limitation on the possibility of adequate comprehension’ (Bowie 2010: 2). Therefore, I eschew the restrictions of conventional anthropological approaches formulated to study observable cultural and human phenomena, and reject academic agnosticism as lacking appropriate analytical tools to deconstruct deity–devotee relationships. In the closing discussion, this paper will approach money god exchanges on the transcendent level as a suppositional anthropological analysis of the incorporeal. Validating this approach, I have adopted a paranthropological² stance, that is, an anthropological perspective which accepts the possibility of the deities in question possessing an actual ontological reality. Employed as an underlying assumption, and rejecting the notion that deities have any use for actual New Taiwan dollars, this approach begs the question of what is *actually* exchanged between deities and devotees at money god temples, and the technologies employed in the exchange.

Emic interpretations of deification

Central to the Chinese belief system is the concept of souls surviving death and subsequently being worshipped as deities, either as anthropomorphic images or manifested as deities incarnate through spirit mediums. The earliest archaeological evidence of this religion is from the Shang dynasty (1766 - 1122 B.C.E) when the distinction between earthly *po* (魄) and spiritual *hun* (魂) components of the soul were first conceptualised (Thompson 1979: 12). The spiritual *hun* soul of an individual was of the same nature as the deities (*shen* (神)), and the worship of gods by a family was almost indistinguishable in nature from the worship of its ancestors. Thus a belief in life after death and a concept allowing for deification of humans and subsequent promotion from ancestral spirit

to deity had been established from the beginnings of folk religion in the Shang dynasty.

An elaborate system of sacrificial offerings developed alongside divination as a means of communication between the material and the spiritual realms where deities, attributed with powers to send down blessings or calamities upon their devotees, and thus influence the fates of the living, were believed to dwell. Therefore, inherent to the belief system developed by the Shang, and equally relevant to contemporary religious practice, is a mutual dependency between people and deities, the first requiring blessings and divine assistance and the latter requiring worship and sacrifices for their welfare in deity realms. This interdependence between the human and spiritual realms is the foundation of deity worship, which, rather than being based on supplication, is pragmatic and contractual. Sacrificial offerings are bestowed on deities for favours, the deity’s materiality in the human world being dependent on the prior crafting of anthropomorphic images through which they ‘gain power only if their images are worshipped’ (Chan 2009: 4). As the deities are neither omnipotent nor omnipresent, they can neither manifest in multiple spirit mediums or unlimited numbers of icons simultaneously. Therefore, deities are thought to have proxies, lower ranked spirits that have the authority to represent them if they are occupied on other business. Consequently, the personal pronoun ‘our’ is sometimes employed by devotees when speaking about a deity on *their* altar or channelled through *their* spirit medium to differentiate it from similar deities holding the same title. When deities cease to be worshiped, their spiritual efficacy *ling* (靈) diminishes, eventually expiring, and the mass of deities previously found in temples but now absent from the religious landscape attest to the validity of this theory.

There are two classes of deity involved in Money God exchanges, those being manifestations of inanimate objects, from the big, such as stars and constellations, to the very small, for example single rocks or trees; and second, mythologised characters from oral folk-lore, later immortalised in popular novels before becoming anthropomorphised and worshipped as deities. The latter category raises an exciting spiritual

supposition, namely, that a discarnate entity can be created through the accumulation of directed spiritual energy (*ling*) manifested through worship and offerings under circumstances where there was no original living being or nature spirit relating to an inanimate object. This inverts the equation of God creating humans to humans, through their concentrated efforts, projecting *ling* from their own internal spiritual reserve and creating deities, conscious beings which are capable of conversing with devotees through divination blocks, and bestowing good fortune upon them.

Central to the money exchange at She Liao Village Zi Nan Gong, and an exemplar of the first class of deity, is Tudi Gong, a tutelary deity associated with individual tracts of land from a single hearth, to a village or suburb or an entire mountain range where he protects the land, its population, and all that is built or grows on it. Predating both religious Taoism and the introduction of Buddhism into China, Tudi Gong evolved from the ancient cults of earth and grain, *She Ji* (社祭) which was already well-established by the Zhou dynasty (1045-221 B.C.E.). She and Ji originated as two separate gods of earth and grain, and She Ji and Tudi existed as separate entities. However, when the highly cultured Zhou dynasty began to disintegrate in 771 B.C.E, amid the backdrop of chaos and violence of the Warring States period, She and Ji were worshiped by the ruling families of each competing state (Yang 1961). The unifying military force of the Qin dynasty and the totalitarian nature of Qin rule eliminated both the power of feudal lords, and the significance of *She Ji* as a politico-religious cult, and under the Qin rule, Shi, Ji and Tudi began to be perceived as a single entity, Tudi Gong. By the Han period, Tudi Gong was to be found in every village, town and neighbourhood, and became to be associated as a unifying force within the community. Whilst many Tudi Gong have been attributed with possessing the souls of meritorious individuals posthumously promoted in Heaven to fill this divine office, Zi Nan Gong makes no such claims.

At Shi Ding Wu Lu Cai Shen Miao, the primary deity worshipped, Zhao Gongming, characterises the second class of deity. Although his character may be based on an amalgam of historic characters existing

towards the end of the Shang dynasty, his worship became popularised in the 1550s after a novel dramatising events leading to the victory of the Zhou over the Shang dynasty, *The Investiture of the Gods* (*Fengshen Bang* (封神榜)) was published. The novel concludes with heroes from both camps being deified, Zhao Gongming being assigned four assistants who in the folk tradition were attributed with giving blessings and fortune to humans. In orthodox Taoism, the five are represented as celestial marshals charged with guarding the Taoist ritual arena. Brandishing an iron cudgel in one hand and a gold ingot in the other, and riding a ferocious black tiger, he is considered the primary god of wealth in the popular pantheon.

Bargaining with the gods: Divination blocks, *bue* (筊)

Returning then to interactions with money gods, the emic interpretation of events is that it is possible to communicate directly with discarnate spirits, whether animistic, of historic characters or mythological deities empowered through worship, and strike bargains with them on a contractual basis through direct communication using divination blocks which are commonly referred to by their Hokkien name '*bue*'. *Bue* are two crescent shaped wooden blocks, and although their origins are obscure, they have played a major role in divination and communication with deities since the Tang dynasty (618-906 C.E.) (Jordan 1972: 61).

The process of using *bue* begins with a stylised form of ritual worship referred to as *baibai* (拜拜) (worship) or *baishen* (拜神) (deity worship). The specific embodied practices follow a pre-specified order. First incense sticks are lit as it is believed that the rising smoke attracts the attention of the deity, and owing to the transformative properties of immolation (Sangren 1993; Scott 2007) incense smoke is attributed with being the active agency in the transmission of thought consciousness directed by intentionality to deity realms. The incense is usually held in the right hand in front of which the left hand gently rests, and the hands are raised until the incense sticks are at eye level. The practitioner then introduces themselves

informing deities of their name, date of birth and address so that there is no doubt as to who the deity is conversing with, and then the practitioner bows gently forward approximately twenty degrees several times in rapid succession. In money god exchanges, this process is mentally directed towards a specific deity before either internally or audibly negotiating with them for the 'fortune money'. Goh (2009) suggests that *baishen* is the distinguishing practice of Chinese religion as the embodied performance of the ritual differs from that of other syncretic religions. Once *baibai* has concluded, the *bue* are then raised above the forehead as the devotee formulates a request to a specific deity, and then drops the *bue* to the ground.

One side of the *bue* is flat and the other convex, so there are three possible outcomes, the deity communicating with the petitioner through the manipulation of the *bue*. Both blocks may land either flat side down or convex side down, essentially both meaning 'no', but with different connotations. Two convex sides down indicates that the deity is angry, while two flat sides down suggests that perhaps due to the question being inappropriate or inept, the deity is laughing. In either case, the questioner is at liberty to rephrase the question and ask again. If they land with one convex and one flat side down, the answer is 'yes', and in context of money god exchanges, an agreement for the temple to provide 'fortune money' has been reached.



Yes



No (laughing)



No (angry)

Luck, fortune and fate in Chinese cosmology

Luck, or lack thereof, is integral to the Chinese concept of calendrical time. Since the Han dynasty, beginning with the Year of the Rat in 4 C.E., a sixty-year cycle was introduced based on five twelve year cycles, each year being associated with a specific animal and element. Year one is represented by the rat, year two by the ox, followed by the tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog and pig. This sixty-year cycle was based on Jupiter's twelve yearly orbit of the sun and the five elements; air, earth, water, metal and fire, and each year has an associated deity, a Tai Sui. At the end of the sixty years, the cycle repeats it-

self, so year 61 is the year of the rat and the first year of a new cycle. Based on this calendrical cycle, the Chinese almanac predicts auspicious days throughout the year which will bring luck and consequent success in various endeavors. From choosing a fortuitous date for a marriage, opening of a business or performing rituals, correct timing will help determine a successful outcome, i.e., influence one's fate.

Every year there is one 'lucky' animal, and two 'unlucky' ones, and being one of the unlucky animals is known as 'offending the Tai Sui'. Suggesting that luck and therefore fate are not only influenced by auspicious timing but also by correct ritual, individuals offending the Tai Sui in any given year donate money to temples, chant for or perform rituals of obeisance

to the Tai Sui to negate bad luck, thus safeguarding their good fortune in the coming year. Extensive interviews with temple visitors confirmed that while good luck and monetary wealth are connected in the collective consciousness, luck and good fortune are equally associated with good health, successful relationships, an extended education, blooming careers, and a favourable family environment.

However, due to the syncretic nature of Chinese religion, having borrowed competing concepts of fate from Chinese Buddhism and Taoism, there is no single interpretation of the interrelationship between luck and fate, or whether or not individual aspects of fate are changeable or not. On one hand, from Chinese Buddhism, it is commonly believed that past life karma will predetermine one's situation in one's present incarnation, thus suggesting a predetermined fate, while this life causal karma suggests that fate is the consequence of one's actions. In contrast, Taoism teaches that ill luck is caused by a misalignment of one's own *qi* (氣) energy with astronomical configurations at the time of one's birth, a problem which may be remedied through correct ritual. Contrary to both is the predominant syncretic folk belief that by making offerings to, or deals with deities, that the deities can change one's luck and therefore one's fate.

The Chinese word for luck is *xing yun* (幸運), *xing* meaning 'fortunate' and *yun* meaning 'to become', so luck may be interpreted as becoming fortunate. Both words have secondary meanings, *xing* meaning 'fate' and *yun* 'to move' or 'to change', so luck implies a changing of fate. *Xing* also has a third meaning in *xing fu* (幸福), *xing* being 'fortunate' and '*fu*' being luck, the combination meaning 'happiness'. The relationship between wealth and happiness is emphasised at Chinese New Year when the most common greeting is *gongxi facai* (恭喜發財) literally meaning 'congratulations get rich' but functionally meaning 'happy New Year' with the '*fa cai*' having broader connotations of prosperity encompassing health, wealth, family togetherness, success and happiness. It was this broader meaning of luck that interviewees at the case study temples associated with the benefits of 'fortune money', each emphasising different elements of good fortune depending on their own personal circum-

stances. For instance, one student interviewed said they were borrowing 'fortune money' to help them pass their university entrance exams, explaining that if they went to a better university, they would be more likely to be successful in their future; and a newlywed replied that she wanted 'fortune money' to help her have a son, the association being that a family is lucky if they have male offspring to continue the family line, and to burn offerings of incense and joss money to paternal ancestors. Therefore, emic interpretations of the efficacy of 'fortune money' are dependent on a value system based on individual desires and goals. Interviews further revealed that the amount of money borrowed is not of key importance to recipients as the money is considered symbolic of the agreement between the devotee and the money god for deific intervention in their lives promising good luck and the associated benefits of success.

The case study temples

She Liao Village Zi Nan Gong

Zi Nan Gong is the elder of the two case study temples, originally built in 1697 C.E., it housed only one deity, Tudi Gong, his wife Tudi Po being added in 1730. They have an animistic deity called Shitou Gong (Honorable Stone), essentially a rock with human characteristics dressed in a yellow robe which was unearthed in the 1750s. Due to its human shape it was assumed to possess a powerful spirit and has been worshipped alongside Tudi Gong and Tudi Po on the main altar ever since.

This was the first temple in Taiwan to give 'fortune money'. At that time, the village comprised several local landlords who had ambitions to make money in Taipei, and a small agricultural community. Although the exact date has been forgotten, the vice manager of the temple Mr. Chen recollects the first occasion on which 'fortune money' was given in the late 1930s. The landlords had been to Taipei, but found no success in business, and returned to the village to ask for the assistance of the temple deities. The temple committee met, and a decision was reached that 'fortune money' could be given, so long as the temple deities agreed. The agreement was attained from the deities



Tudi Po centre, Tudi Gong right



Shitou Gong

by casting *bue*, and the landlords returned to Taipei where their businesses were successful. The temple stipulated that the money had to be returned within one year.

When the landlords returned from Taipei as wealthy men, it inspired the temple to give 'fortune money' to other members of the village. These villages also became more prosperous, and before long the news spread, especially among Hakka communities, and people from Miaoli and Xinzhu came to ask for money. Initially, when the temple was only lending to local villagers, no interest was charged on the loan. However, as the practice became more widespread, on returning the 'fortune money', interest was paid.

Since the 1950s, the process has become ritualised. The contemporary practice is as follows. First, the devotee worships the three main deities, and addressing all three, *bue* are thrown to ask for permission to borrow money. If the *bue* give a positive answer the first time they are cast, then the devotee claims 600 NT dollars. If the devotee receives a negative answer, and then a positive answer on the second cast, they received NT\$500. The process continues through to NT\$100, and it is assumed that if the deities have not agreed to lend the devotee money by then, that this is an unlucky period in the person's life. However, as the following chart shows, the probability of six consecutive negative answers is statistically unlikely; the probability of not receiving money being 1.5625% or

600NT:	50%	1/2
500NT:	75%	3/4
400NT:	87.5%	7/8
300NT:	93.75%	15/16
200NT:	96.875%	31/32
100NT:	98.4375%	63/64

1 in 64.

Next to the main temple there is an administrative building where money is given and returned. Devotees fill out an application form, show formal ID, and leave with the understanding that the money will be returned within one year. The money is received in a red envelope, and the devotee takes it to the main censer and moves it in a clockwise direction through the incense smoke three times. According to the temple, the money is then supposed to be used for business or investments, and like the root of a tree, it will branch out and grow. However, interviews showed that this was seldom the case as the money was invested in what was most desired, from boyfriends and girlfriends to cars and homes. When returning the money, it is up to the individual to decide the rate of interest paid, but generally speaking it is at least double the amount of the 'fortune money' borrowed.

The dual enforcers of the agreement are self-imposed morality, and the fear of practical retribution

by a spiritual being if interest is not paid. It was however pointed out by the vice manager that Tudi Gong is not a vindictive deity, and notions of vindictive retribution exist only in the minds of the devotees. If any contractual agreement exists, this raises the question of who the contract is between; the devotee and the deity, with the temple as a banking intermediary, or, between the devotee and the temple, with the deity as a spiritual intermediary? In either case, any agreements made are morally but not legally binding.

The increase in the number of visits by members of the public has increased rapidly over the years. Generally in Taiwan, it is common for temple visits to rise incrementally with the size, state and condition of the roads and transport availability. When the temple first lent money to local villagers, there was only a dirt road which had been constructed by the Japanese. By the 1960s there was a tarmac road, and now access to the village is on a four-lane road with parking facilities for several hundred cars and coaches.

Between 1940 and 1950, the number of visitors lent money rose from approximately 20 to 200. Coinciding with better transportation and a higher level of mobility, the number of visitors increased to an es-

timated 500,000 by 1960. According to Mr Chen, there were over 1,000,000 visits in 1990, around 6,000,000 visits a year by 2000, and an estimated 10,000,000 visits in 2010. He added that in 2010 the temple earned approximately NT\$200,000,000 (£4.23 million) profit, i.e., interest paid on the initial amounts lent.

Shi Ding Wu Lu Cai Shen Miao

At Wu Lu Cai Shen Miao, one of the two founders is a 23rd generation Taoist master in the Longmen lineage of the Quan Zhen sect of Taoism. He has two names, his birth name, Liao Yao-dong, and Taoist name, Laio Zong-dong. He was born in 1955 in Taichung, and in 1979 he went to the PRC and stayed there until 1987 when China opened its borders and he could return to Taiwan. He met an old priest while in China who told him that young men should get married, but after reflection, he followed the old priest to Xian and became his student. His teacher Wang Li Sheng is the Taoist master who was asked to reintroduce Taoism to China by Deng Xiao Ping.

The temple is located outside of a small township



Laio Zong-dong and myself in front of the main altar

called Shi Ding in New Taipei City, and I found it curious that he should leave a famous teacher to relocate to such a remote location. However, he is sure that it was fated, and claims an affinity with the area. He returned to Taiwan dressed as a simple priest, and his partner, Mr Xu, who worked in another Taoist temple asked to be introduced to him as the Money Gods of the Five Directions had visited him in a dream, and he sought interpretation. This dream led to the construction of the temple its present location, as the location's characteristics matched those of the dream: 'behind lies a mountain in the shape of a chair, and opposite a mountain resembling the shape of traditional Chinese money'. The original shrine was built in 1995, and became immediately successful, and a new temple was begun in 1996. The current incarnation is palatial and still being enlarged. According to Laio Zong-dong, as so much money had been donated in such a short time, they decided it would be a good idea to give money back to the people who prayed there. This practice, however, almost immediately became ritualised.

The process involves *bai bai* and then casting *bue* to ascertain that a deity is willing to provide 'fortune money'. The temple brochure includes a chart based on the 12 Chinese Zodiac signs, the five elements and the 60 Tai Sui, and from this chart a visitor can calculate which deity should be approached to ask for 'fortune money'. The five deities found in this temple are the Money Gods of the North, South, East and West, and their commander the Money God of the Centre, Zhao Gongming. However, in practice, the devotee has five deities they can petition with *bue*, so that if the first deity gives a negative answer, the devotee simply moves on to the next. If *bue* are cast five times, the probability of receiving an affirmative answer is 96.875% or 31 in 32.

If the *bue* produce a positive answer, the devotee is entitled to take a box containing NT\$20. As *bue* are employed to negotiate the agreement directly with the deity, once again, there is an ambiguous contractual agreement between the devotee and the deity. After taking the money, the recipient records their name, birthday and address in a book provided and then the money is then circled above the main censer

three times. The money then has to be kept at home for one week, preferably on a family shrine, in an office desk, or in a purse, allowing the recipient to spiritually interact with it. The money should then be used on the thing the recipient wants luck with. After they feel that the deity has helped them, they should return the money with interest so that "it is easy to borrow again". Most recipients repay NT\$100 or NT\$200, some NT\$1000 or NT\$2000. If the recipient pays back NT\$100 or more, they receive a certificate from the temple thanking them for the amount donated which is blessed with the temple's stamp.

I asked Laio Zong-dong whether the casting of *bue* creates a contractual agreement between the petitioner and the deity or whether NT\$20 is a free gift from the temple or from the deity? He replied that it is a contract agreed in the silence of your heart because you have communicated with the god. It is also a gift from the Money God, because there is no penalty for not returning the money. In essence, he claimed, for people it is a sacred contract, but from the perspective of the deity, it is a gift, but then conceded that generally speaking, in peoples own minds, the exchange is based on superstition. I suggested that superstitious people would return the 'fortune money' even if they have bad luck as they are afraid of getting even worse luck, and Laio Zong-dong agreed: 'Yes, it is because people are born good ... For the devotees, it is like an exchange or trade. For gods it is a very natural thing to help ... For money god temples, the idea is that it is a gift'.

Once again, the contract, if such exists, is self-managing, and is based on honesty and the fear of supernatural intervention in one's own fate. According to Laio Zong-dong, from the deity's perspective, if it is your fate to be lucky, then they should help you. If your luck is not due, then they will not help you. He claimed that in these cases, the gods will help the petitioner decrease their bad luck so that future help will be possible. 'Yes, it changes your whole life. When you hit rock bottom with your luck, when you get this tiny thing, NT\$20, it is like a key to open the door. So, that will change your fate – your fate will start changing once you take the money'. Similarly,

from the perspective of the recipient, there is an expectation that the money will bring material rewards. The expectation is legitimated by the ritual use of *bue* and the certificate provided by the temple when returning to pay interest on the loan. The nature of the exchange is therefore open to analysis and the interpretation depends from whose perspective it is appraised from.

In terms of visitors and profit, the number has increased steadily with an estimated 20% increase every year since 1996. The record number of visitors for a day was at Chinese New Year in 2010 when approximately 30,000 people came. In 1996 the temple received around 10,000 visits, by 2000 between 50,000 and 60,000 visits, and in 2010 approaching 400,000 visits. Many of these were recipients returning to pay interest and borrow money for a second or third time, with many people coming back multiple times a year. Laio Zong-dong claims that this is because the gods really are efficacious.

Derrida: the gift aporia

Derrida's gift aporia revolves around the paradox that a genuine gift cannot exist, as once it appears, a cycle of reciprocity and exchange begins which nullifies the gift as a gift. In the text *Given Time* (1992), Derrida questioned whether it is possible to give without immediately entering into a circle of exchange that converts the gift into a debt to be repaid. Derrida therefore deconstructed the idea of a gift and set conditions under which a 'true gift' is differentiated from other forms of bartering, commodity and monetary exchange within the economy. For Derrida, the 'economy', in its fullest manifestation, describes not just the exchange of objects and services in the material world, but also the dimension in which these exchanges occur, i.e., 'time'. In a manner that Buddhism describes as karmic action (*karmapharla*), all actions and events are causally linked through time where actions both precede and are consequences of other actions, preceding and following being inherent within and dependent on a time cycle. Even if imagining the past as no longer in existence and the future yet to materialise, without arresting the progress of time,

through cause and effect, action is followed by reaction, and in the case of the gift, inherent reactions include, debt, reciprocity and the subsequent forming of social ties. Rejecting any gift appearing within a karmic cycle as not being a 'true gift', Derrida proposes four conditions which, if met, would render an exchange as a 'true gift'. However, as his conditions may only be met when actions are seemingly disconnected from time, the 'true gift', according to Derrida, is a theoretically irresolvable paradox. His four conditions may be summarised as follows.

First, no form, sense, intention of, or actual reciprocity may materialise in the process as any return whatsoever immediately places the exchange within Derrida's 'economy' of time in terms of action requiring a reaction, and within the material economy by entailing calculations of value and worth in order to reciprocate accordingly. As the recipient of a 'true gift' may in no way contract a debt, the second condition requires on the part of the recipient no conscious awareness of having received a gift, for the recognition of the gift as a gift would cause indebtedness, violating the first condition and therefore annulling the gift. Subsequently there must be no thanks involved, as the thanks in itself is reciprocation and will nullify the gift as a gift.

Likewise, the donor may not recognise the gift as a gift or the intentionality of giving as giving, as self-gratification in any form, the 'feel good factor', is a symbolic recognition of the act of giving and therefore an actual return on the gift. A genuine gift must therefore reside outside of the oppositional demands of giving and taking, and as such, may not even appear to be a gift. According to Derrida, for a gift to exist, which by his own definition is a paradoxical impossibility, there must be no accrued benefit in giving, and even the mention of a gift as a gift, by rendering the gift tangible, nullifies the gift as a gift. The fourth condition is therefore that a gift may never appear, even verbally, as 'if it presents itself, it no longer presents itself' (Derrida 1992: 15), and consequently vanishes as a gift. Therefore, whatever is given cannot in itself constitute a gift. These criteria seemingly render the actuality of any 'true gift' an impossibility.

However, even though Derrida was addressing the

sociological phenomena of the gift between persons rather than intangible exchanges between humans and spiritual beings, the paradoxical gift aporia provides a constructive basis from which to analyse exchanges between devotees and deities in money god temples. With this in mind, I propose that concealed within the ritualised pecuniary exchange orchestrated by the temples, the actual interchange between petitioners and deities is one of 'recognition' for 'luck'. Moreover, evaluated within the context of Derrida's gift aporia, and from the suppositional perspective of devotee–deity interactions, this exchange approaches on the transcendent level a close approximation of Derrida's 'true gift'.

Discussion

On the material level then, acting as banking intermediary, there is clearly no intention on the part of the temples in providing a free gift to devotees. The temples recognise the gift as a loan, and even if good luck as promised is not forthcoming, the 'fortune money', from the perspective of the temple managers, is still better returned with interest so as to facilitate good luck in the event of 'fortune money' being borrowed on a future occasion. The recipient also expects to return to the temple at a later date to repay the loan with interest, the compelling factor according to recipients being fear of resultant future misfortune caused by offending the deity if not done so.

Both temples have instituted systems of exchange where a small amount of local currency sanctified by agreement with a deity is lent with the expectation of the recipient gaining a larger amount of local currency in the future. Thus at both temples, the material trappings of financial transactions between the temples and devotees in the form of invoices and receipts are provisioned for. However, as the amount of money lent by the temple is so small, beyond purchasing a winning lottery ticket, there can be no expectation that it could multiply itself into a fortune through investment.

Literature provided by both temples claims that the 'fortune money' will change the recipients luck. Even where fate would have otherwise, acceptance of

the 'fortune money' was claimed to be a catalyst for better luck in the future. Interviews showed that each recipient had their own agenda and hoped that the money would help bring them luck '*xing yun*' resulting in a greater degree of happiness '*xing fu*' in various spheres of their lives. Therefore, when devotees leave with 'lucky' New Taiwan dollars in their possession, the money carries symbolic power, representing the promise of a deity to manifest its efficacy for the benefit of the recipient.

In the ritual process of communicating with the deity through *bue*, the word for gift, *liwu* (禮物) is never mentioned; instead, a negotiation occurs between the two parties through the casting and recasting of *bue*. The object negotiated for is the promise of 'luck' in the sense of material reality being altered by a discarnate entity, a money god, to the extent that positive events will occur that would not have otherwise occurred, or, negative events that would have occurred are prevented from happening, both of which will change the state of the recipients well-being. Luck however is a theoretical construct lacking observability or measurability, existing only as a subjective interpretation of events by any given individual. As it is impossible for an individual recipient to know the alternative events which *might* have happened to them in event of not having been the recipient of 'fortune money', it is not only impossible to tell if the gift of luck has materialised, but also if the gift of luck has actually been received. Even in the event of fortunate events occurring, it is impossible for an individual to know if they would have transpired had 'fortune money' not been received. For example, taking a suppositional scenario where 'fortune money' is used to purchase a winning lottery ticket, there is no way to prove that if other bank notes had been used to purchase the same ticket, that the end result would have been any different. Luck's intangible, invisible and immaterial nature therefore renders the gift of luck unrecognisable, or in Derrida's terms, renders it impossible for the recipient of the gift to recognise the gift as a gift.

The same stipulations also apply to the donor who, so as not to receive a symbolic return in the form of self-congratulation, must neither recognise the gift

as a gift or themselves as the giver of a gift. By definition, the very act of giving accrues some personal loss. However, in the act of giving luck, it cannot be shown that there is any personal loss on the part of the deity. If no personal loss is derived, it may be reasoned that from the perspective of the donor, it is 'as if' nothing has been given.

Further facilitating the non-appearance of the gift, on a material level, the physical exchange of Taiwan Dollars between devotees and temples obscures the actual gifts exchanged between devotees and deities behind a facade of benevolence and bureaucracy. As a result, the immaterial gifts are not recognised by recipients who instead, perhaps preconditioned by the traditional presentation, identify the red envelopes containing money as a monetary loan to be returned with interest³. The effect of this is that gift givers are not perceived to be the deities themselves, but the temples who hand them the 'fortune money'. The devotees therefore perceive themselves as the recipient of a loan rather than as a recipient of a gift, thus fulfilling Derrida's fourth stipulation that a gift may never actually appear.

From the suppositional perspective of deities, *bue* represent a means of two-way communication with the human world, so while petitioners employ complex verbal communications to pose questions to them, the deity answers through manipulation of the *bue*. Although deities are generally assumed to be benevolent, it is accepted that deities, like humans, have human wants and motivations, including anger, greed, and a need for affection, devotion, power and survival (Hansen 1987). Survival requires *ling*, a commodity accrued only if their images receive recognition through the offering of incense, *baibai*. As such, money gods are reliant on human worship for their very survival.

However, while recognition is embedded within the act of *baibai*, due to the prescriptive nature of ritual actions, devotees claimed to be unaware of any act of giving in the *baibai* process. Accordingly, as the actual act of giving recognition is unrecognised as a gift by the devotee, no reciprocity is expected or required. Furthermore, the actual amount of recognition given is incalculable in objective terms, no matter how

much recognition is subjectively given, nothing is missed, lost or removed to alert the devotee in any fashion that a gift has been either given or received. There is therefore no symbolic return manifested in self-congratulation when giving ritual recognition to the deity. Moreover, it may logically be assumed that as petitioners visit money god temples to request 'fortune money' from deities, from the suppositional perception of the deities, there is no reason to think that the recognition received is perceived as a gift.

Lastly, in common with luck, there is no actual proof that recognition has actually been received, especially so as deity statues are vessels which deities utilise rather than permanently reside in (Chan 2008). The deity statues themselves are stylised representations of spiritual beings, and as such, while devotees associate certain images with specific identities and ideas, the exact spiritual appearance of the deity remains a mystery. Therefore, in terms of the interactions between devotees and deities, it is impossible for the devotee to know if they are bargaining with the deity represented by the statue, or with a deity's proxy. Coupled with the intangibility of deities as discarnate entities, and recognition as a conceptual commodity, the actual identity of the recipient of the gift is rendered objectively anonymous, and the gift immaterial.

Reiterating Derrida's requirements for a 'true gift', there must be no recognition on the part of the donor or recipient of the gift as a gift, no reciprocity required or symbolic return obtained, and the gift must never appear as a gift. Assuming the actual exchange is one of luck for recognition, we only have an untestable assumption that either luck or recognition possess an independent ontological existence external to the interpretive considerations of believers. Equivalence between recognition and luck is also incalculable so that in the exchange, calculations of equality or profit are not entered into, and neither devotees nor deities are in any way placing conditions on the exchange. During the transactions, gifts are never spoken of, and neither luck nor recognition are perceived as gifts by devotees. In essence, neither gift can ever be proven to appear, and as such, on a transcendent level, money god exchanges circumvent the paradoxical restrictions stipulated by Derrida in his gift aporia.

Notes

¹ The term 'suppositional' has been used in this context rather than the term 'emic' as while emic would apply to the perspective of practitioners, the perspective of deities can only be 'supposed' or 'imagined' for the purpose of analysing the exchange on a non-material level.

² The term 'paranthropology' was coined by Roger Wescott in Long (1977) as an alternative to 'parapsychological anthropology' which he considered 'unwieldy' and 'tedious'.

³ Children receive red envelopes containing money on birthdays and at Chinese New Year. However, when they enter employment as adults, they in turn give red envelopes containing larger amounts of money to their parents. There may therefore be a subconscious link between receiving money in this fashion, and returning it with interest at a later date.

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