

## **Debt-Repaying Mechanism in Chinese Relationships: An Exploration of the Folk Concepts of *Pao* and Human Emotional Debt**

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Anthropologists such as Malinowski (1926) and Levi-Strauss (1963) have observed that reciprocity is one of the basic social mechanisms that enables a society to function predictably. Each society espouses a specific set of rules to regulate the distribution of rights and obligations, as well as the allocation of social resources, among the society's members. Reciprocity can be examined at both the interpersonal and the societal levels. At the interpersonal level, members of a given culture participate in symmetrical resource exchange within a given relationship, whereas at the societal level, the overall social design regulates resource allocation and distribution in order to satisfy each member's sense of fairness.

The norms of reciprocity that can be observed in a given culture are often merely surface manifestations. Under the surface of lived experience exist the ideals and reasoning about reciprocity espoused by a given

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culture. One way to discover how the ideals of reciprocity mediate experience is to explore how folk concepts help people to orient themselves toward the allocation of social resources. One prominent example of the norm of reciprocity is expressed in the Chinese concept of *pao*<sup>1</sup> and its related social mechanism, human emotional debt. *Pao* and human emotional debt derive their meaning from philosophical teachings and cultural traditions and continuously evolve in their practical application to Chinese daily life.

The idea that folk concepts are often a cognitive shorthand summarizing cultural experience is well-established in social science. As Heider (1958) noted,

The fact that we are able to describe ourselves and other people in everyday language means that it embodies much of what we have called naive psychology. This language serves us well, for it has an infinite flexibility and contains a great number of general concepts that symbolize experiences with the physical and social environment. (p. 7)

Folk concepts often assume the form of particular linguistic terms, rich in meaning as well as flexible in application. Although Skinner contended that "the vernacular is clumsy and obese . . . its terms overlap with each other, draw unnecessary or unreal distinction, and are far from being the most convenient in dealing with the data" (cited in Heider, 1958, p. 9), it is precisely through this "clumsiness" that one is allowed to formulate a richer interpretation of a given cultural concept.

It is within this framework that we examine the debt-repaying mechanisms in Chinese relationships through exploring the folk concept of *pao* and its related linguistic expression, human emotional debt. In particular, this article traces the philosophical roots of *pao* and human emotional debt, as illustrated by native Chinese interviewees as they talk about these ideas.

## THE CONCEPTS OF *PAO* AND HUMAN EMOTIONAL DEBT

### Philosophical Roots

The contents of folk concepts are shaped by a number of cultural elements, one of the most important of which is philosophical tradition.

In this section, we lay the groundwork derived from the philosophical traditions of *pao* and human emotional debt in order to allow a more in-depth explication of the concepts themselves.

*Pao* reflects the Chinese belief in the natural order of the universe, in which ethical quality of action is reciprocal: Virtue incurs virtue, and malice incurs malice. The Chinese conceive of the universe as an entity that embodies moral principles. This totality is called 'Heaven' (*t'ien*), implying that the universe metes out justice by punishing evil and rewarding virtue (Yang, 1957; Chan, 1963; Fung, 1983). Human beings, as part of the universe, are subjected to the same principle of return. Whatever one does, one may expect response to one's actions from the universe. Furthermore, just as the universe must respond to human action, human beings must also reciprocate what other human beings do. This sense of return constitutes the core meaning of the concept of *pao*.

This relatively straightforward idea is influenced by the Confucian virtue of *shu*, or 'likening-to-oneself,'<sup>2</sup> a concept central to the Chinese throughout their history (Yang, 1957; Graham, 1989). As Graham (1989) explained it, "likening-to-oneself is using one's own person to measure. What you do not yourself desire do not do to others, what you dislike in others reject in yourself, what you desire in others seek in yourself, this is likening-to-oneself" (p. 20). To reason about norms of behavior toward others, the social actor must ask how he or she would like to be treated; in this process of analogical thinking, the self and the other are one in another. In this regard, norms of interpersonal interaction become mutual obligations, rather than a set of clearly defined behavioral prescriptions. Hence, if one is unable to be respectful of one's elder brother but expects a younger brother to take orders from oneself, one fails to engage in the process of likening-to-oneself (Graham, 1989, p. 20). Thus 'likening-to-oneself' serves as the guide for measuring the exchange dimension of an interpersonal transaction.

Confucius considered *shu* to be signified by a quality he termed *propriety* (*li*), defined as the appropriate norms for interacting or responding to the relational partner. If one helps another, the other is obligated to return that help in the future; otherwise, "if there is only take and no return, it does not accord to *li*" (Wen, 1989, p. 349). Similarly, in the Chinese classic, the *Book of Rites*, the norm of *pao* constitutes the basis for propriety:

In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good; in the time next to this, [the] giving and repaying was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety value is [just this] reciprocity. If I give a gift and nothing comes in return, that is contrary to propriety; if the thing comes to me, and I gave nothing in return, that also is contrary to propriety. (quoted in Yang, 1957, p. 291)

*Pao* reminds us how important is the Chinese ideal that the self is defined in relation to others: Based upon this well-known Confucian system for the ordering of interpersonal relationships, one needs to perform certain duties toward one's relational partners as a form of repayment. In the relationship between parent and child, for example, an expression of concern from the child to the parent is often expected as an indicator of gratitude (Shiang, 1986).<sup>3</sup>

In various places in the *Analects*, Confucius referred to the norm of *pao*. Confucius clearly was opposed to undifferentiated treatment of people's deeds: When Confucius was asked about his opinion on returning virtue for hatred, Confucius replied, "in that case what are you going to repay virtue with? Rather, repay hatred with uprightness and repay virtue with virtue" (*Analects*, XIV, 36, Chan, 1963, p. 42). The quality of one's return must be determined by the behavior of one's interactant. The norm of reciprocity is not only a reflection of human nature but also a means to maintain human justice. As Yang (1957) pointed out, "Here the point stressed is that justice should not be infringed upon by mercy" (p. 293).

In addition to its Confucian flavor, the concept of *pao* is conflated with the Buddhist idea of reincarnation and the law of *karma*. These beliefs hold that one must assume responsibility for one's own deeds, so that what one has sown, one will reap: "Buddhist beliefs concerning the nature of the universe were shaped by belief in *karma* and rebirth. By fostering the doctrines of transmigration and *karma*, Buddhists were led to the assumption of good and bad places to which people could be born according to their deeds" (Nakamura, 1976, p. 23). Fung (1983) summarized Hui-yüan's treatise, "On the Explanation of Retribution," as follows:

Thus the retribution of punishment or blessing depend upon what are stimulated by one's own (mental) activities. They are what they are according to these stimuli, for which reason I say that they are automatic. By automatic I mean that they result from our own influence. How then can they be the work of some other mysterious Ruler? (p. 274)

The endless cycles of life can be conceived as endless chains of debt-balancing. People "owe" something to each other; hence, one must relate with others in order to recompense certain debts. The idea of "others," it should be noted, is not limited to human beings, but to all beings in the universe, whether humans, supernatural beings, or animals. It is in these various levels of existence that *karma* works to bring reward and punishment to one's deeds—one may transcend to a higher level of existence or fall into a lower life form. This Buddhist argument—that results follow causes—closely corresponds with the idea that Heaven responds to human deeds. Whatever seeds one has planted, whether material or spiritual, one must be prepared to harvest certain kinds of fruit, whether good or bad.

Finally, one must acknowledge Taoist philosophy as a contributor to the idea of return through the concept of phenomenological reversion. According to Taoist teachings, whatever goes to its extreme must return to its original state (Chan, 1978). Reciprocity operates in the universe because the universe is self-regulating; extremity reverts to moderation, so that any excessive ethical position engenders its balancing and opposite response. Taoist religion also plays a role in the Chinese conception of return: Many stories popular among the common people address the rules of recompense, encouraging readers to engage in virtuous behavior and to avoid misconduct (Yang, 1957; Li, 1986, Wen, 1989). These stories are vivid and persuasive, and, even though they may be devoid of subtle philosophical implications, the warnings they contain are often extremely effective (Cheng, 1986; Li, 1986). The theme of these stories is nearly always the same: Through universal principles of cause and effect, there is ultimately justice attached to one's deeds. Again, the retribution emphasized in these books is not limited to human beings but to all beings in the universe. It is not unusual, for example, to find a story describing how a butcher may become a pig in the next life to repay the debt incurred from killing pigs in this life.

Synthesizing these different sources of ideas, the Chinese utilize *pao* to simultaneously express a view about the responding universe, personal responsibility in incurring debts in any situation, and the ways in which one should behave toward the other. Although Confucius centered his philosophy on interpersonal conduct,<sup>4</sup> from both Buddhist and Taoist perspectives, the relations among human beings cannot be understood without reference to other beings (including supernatural

entities and animals) in the universe, according to the norm of reciprocity. Through the connection between human beings and the universe, interpersonal transactions for the Chinese are to some extent a never-ending chain of mutual obligations and rewards regulating the give-and-take among people. To this end, the Chinese have fashioned a set of elaborate verbal expressions to describe interpersonal relating as essentially a matter of indebtedness for which appropriate return is necessary. *Pao* is the principle to be followed, and the human emotional debt describes specifically how the exchange between interactants is to be negotiated.

### **The Concepts and Their Related Linguistic Expressions**

As we mentioned, the Chinese believe that the universe must respond to human action, and, at the same time, human beings must reciprocate the actions of other humans. Such reciprocity should be as certain and natural as the order of the Universe (Yang, 1957), and failure to observe such norms is seen as a violation of both the natural and social orders. In this regard, the unique Chinese perspective on reciprocity is expressed in normalizing the act of returning as part of one's everyday social activity, allowing *pao* to regulate behavior and define the contents of relations. As one can observe from the multiple linguistic expressions on reciprocity, as well as from the readiness of the interviewees in this study to comment on these expressions, returning another's favor has become a built-in part of Chinese social life. If one follows the norm, it is often considered unexceptional, whereas violation of the norm will be marked and will strongly affect future evaluations of the social actor's behavior. As Hsu (1971) noted, "Some sort of reciprocity is indispensable for the continuation of all human societies . . . But the Chinese culture has given it such a special place that it has become an active motivator in Chinese behavior" (p. 453).

#### *Pao: Response, Recompense, and Revenge*

Depending on the meaning of the accompanying ideogram, *pao* alternately can mean 'return,' 'respond,' 'recompense,' or 'revenge'

(Yang, 1957). Yang (1957), the first scholar to provide a systematic account of the concept of *pao*, explained:

This Chinese word *pao* as a verb has a wide range of meanings including “to report,” “to respond,” “to repay,” “to retaliate,” and “to retribute.” The center of this area of meaning is “response” or “return,” which has served as one basis for social relations in China. The Chinese believe that reciprocity of actions (favor and hatred, reward and punishment) between man and man, and indeed between men and supernatural beings, should be as certain as a cause-and-effect relationship, and therefore, when a Chinese acts, he normally anticipates a response or return. Favors done for others are often considered “social investments,” for which handsome dividends are expected. Of course, acceptance of the principle of reciprocity is required in practically every society. Nevertheless, in China the principle is marked by its long history, the high degree of consciousness of its existence, and its wide application and tremendous influence in social institutions. (p. 291)

Among the many manifestations of *pao* are revenge, return for favor, virtue returned for malice, malice returned for virtue, no malice returned for malice, and so on. These manifestations all are exchange behaviors influenced by well-established Chinese cultural norms (Wen, 1989). Under the influence of these norms, the Chinese have become highly reflexive in returning. The obligation to return a favor, or to avenge oneself, may even extend for several generations until the debt is balanced out (Wen, 1989).<sup>5</sup>

Some manifestations of *pao* are revealed in a number of common sayings, such as, “Men rear sons to provide for old age; they plant trees because they want shade,” and “Men rear sons to provide for old age; they store up grain to provide for years of famine” (Hwang, 1989, p. 301). Another common Chinese saying states, “I receive from you a drop of water, I will repay with a fountain.” Moreover, an early missionary, Arthur Smith (1914), in his observation of Chinese common sayings, also noted, “He honors me one foot, and I will honor him ten feet,” (p. 290) and “He sends me a horse, and I will return an ox” (p. 290). Smith explained, “Reciprocity means . . . a case of presents received is to be acknowledged by a case of presents in return” (p. 290).

Standards regarding repayment differ depending on whether one is the mercy-giver or the mercy-taker (King, 1989). Whereas the mercy-giver is advised not to ask for return, the mercy-taker is burdened with the obligation to return. Many common sayings attest to this double standard, for example, “If you help others, don’t ask for return; if you get help from others, don’t forget to return” (King, 1989, p. 90).

The principle of *pao* can even be observed in sayings about lower life forms, such as insects, birds, and beasts (Hsu, 1971). As one common saying puts it: "The sheep know to kneel down to drink milk in order to respect the mercy their mother has for them, and the crows know to feed their parents back to show their righteousness." If human beings are the highest form of life, this reasoning goes, how could we not observe the norm of return to show our appreciation toward people to whom we owe the greatest debt?

If language is the screen through which we come into contact with the universe, through these linguistic codes, the Chinese version of the universe demonstrates great concern with reciprocity. *Pao* represents not merely an epistemology but a goal to be actualized in every interpersonal exchange. The mechanism by which *pao* is activated in interpersonal encounters is known as *human emotional debt*.

### *Human Emotional Debt*

Just as the universe responds positively to positive actions, the Chinese believe that one is obligated to appreciate what others have done for oneself. Human emotional debt is a colloquial expression that suggests one owes another's benevolence and, therefore, repayment is required in either a spiritual or material sense. Specifically, this mechanism involves the following: (a) when one is helped, one receives a "human emotion" (*jen-ch'ing*) from the helper; (b) such "human emotion" is conceptualized as a "debt" (i.e., the helper is viewed as creditor and the helped as debtor); and (c) therefore, one must repay the debt in order to balance the interpersonal exchange by returning a favor of equal or greater value. Many scholars have noted the extreme importance of not owing human emotional debt to others (Hwang, 1988, 1989; King, 1989). Likewise, under normal circumstances, the helper can always expect that the helped will return the favor.

Because one is obligated to return favors, one automatically goes "into debt" upon receipt of a favor (i.e., in the vernacular, receives "a human emotion") from another. The debt "covers not only sentiment but also its social expressions such as the offering of congratulations or condolences or the making of gifts on appropriate occasions" (Yang, 1957, p. 292).

Recalling Heider's notion that everyday language functions as a form of cognitive shorthand, it is worth noting that the linguistic expression "human emotional debt" is very thought-provoking. It conflates the emotional and spiritual element of "human emotion" (i.e., a warm feeling)<sup>6</sup> with the concept of "debt" (i.e., a colder, more quantifiable and calculable feeling). Whereas the mercy-giver is credited for his or her kindness (the mercy-giver "gives human emotion," that is, he or she demonstrates emotional concern for the other), the mercy-receiver is burdened with the obligation to make a return (on the "debt"). "Owing human emotional debt," a common expression among the Chinese, refers to the consequence of receiving a favor; the only way to absolve oneself from the debt is to provide repayment according to the balancing mechanism of *pao* (King, 1989). To put it briefly, human emotional debt puts the concept of *pao* into practice.

Because of the obligation to make a return, the Chinese may be uncomfortable at receiving favors from others, at least until they are able to honor the debt. One common saying vividly describes the consequence of receiving a favor from another: "Your mouth becomes soft when you eat others' meals, your hands become short when you take something from others." By receiving mercy from another, one is forced to acknowledge the other's human emotion, and hence, one's mouth is not allowed to say anything bad about the other, and one's hands are not permitted to take any more from that person.

Moreover, because "human emotional debt" is often assessed subjectively, it is difficult to calculate the "amount" of "human emotion" received; as the common saying has it, "Monetary debt is easy to return, whereas human emotional debt is difficult to return" (King, 1989, p. 92). One can always calculate mathematically the interest involved in monetary debt but not the "interest" in human emotional debt. The timing and contents of making a return still need to be negotiated by the interactants, entailing greater risk in an established relationship, because there is a great possibility of ambiguity or misunderstanding with regard to the extent to which a favor is to be returned.

*Pao* and human emotional debt confirm the importance the Chinese attach to each others' benefits and indebtedness in the interpersonal exchange. For the Chinese, something given but not returned constitutes a serious threat to the balance of a relationship (Wen, 1988, pp. 37-38).

In the following section, we elaborate how *pao* and human emotional debt organize the Chinese patterning of their interpersonal relationships.

### **Impact of Pao and Human Emotional Debt on Chinese Relationships**

The importance of the concept of *pao* to the Chinese, as Hsu (1971) noted, must be understood in terms of the Chinese emphasis on interpersonal links. Given the importance of discovering for oneself one's proper place in human relationships, the norm of making a return serves to solidify the relationship by obligating relational partners to reciprocate each other's deeds. Fei (1948) described Chinese relationships as "different architectures of order" (pp. 26-27) in which relationships involve different degrees of depth as well as different relational obligations. This emphasis on interpersonal links is reflected in the Chinese concept of relation, or *kuan-hsi*. *Kuan-hsi* implies a special connection between people, which carries with it a sense of interactants' special rights and obligations as in-group members.<sup>7</sup> A close associate is often referred to as "someone who we have *kuan-hsi* with," whereas those more distant are "those we do not have *kuan-hsi* with." Consequently, considerations of the depth of a given relationship modify the contents of *pao*: How and what is to be returned depends on the *kuan-hsi* one has with the other.

*Pao* and human emotional debt give each unique relationship (i.e., *kuan-hsi*) a concrete expression: The spiritual virtue associated with a given relationship is often translated into a specified obligation toward the relational partner. For example, *filial piety*, the cardinal virtue of Chinese society, can be conceived as a form of repayment of the "debt" one owes to one's parents (Yang, 1957; Hsu, 1971; Shenkar & Ronen, 1987). As Yang (1957) explained:

For instance, the basic virtue of filial piety has a ready justification in the concept of response. A son should be filial even on a strict business basis because he has received so much from his parents, especially during childhood. . . . Bringing up children may be considered the commonest form of social investment. An unfilial son is also a bad businessman who fails to pay his parents' old age insurance. (p. 302)

Repayment, however, is not limited to the parent-child relationship. Other relationships, such as teacher-student, emperor-subject, and customer-business owner, are equally defined by reciprocity. Hsu (1971) noted, "Loyalty to the emperor was invariably couched in terms of repayment of the latter's benevolence" (p. 454). Even relationships between humans and animals follow the principle of return: "The psychology was so deeply-seated that quite a few eulogies of animals (for example, dogs who saved their masters from drowning) centered in the anthropomorphizing theme of how the beasts gave their lives to repay their masters' kindness" (Hsu, 1971, pp. 454-455).

The principle of reciprocity also helps us explain the well-known observation that many Chinese relationships are particularistic. The give-and-take balance between two interactants is so strong that even institutionalized relationships, which are often intended to be applied in a universalistic manner, may become particularistic. As Yang (1957) noted, "Thus in traditional China, even in a case of fulfillment of an official duty, if it happens to be beneficial to a particular person, he would be expected to cherish a sense of indebtedness to the person who was instrumental in the outcome" (p. 303). This sense of appreciation makes the relationship important in and of itself, and hence may possess the power to "particularize" even an activity ordinarily considered universalistic.

Through the concern for fair exchange, Chinese are bound to each other through their endless obligations to return what they have received. However, when one is obligated to pay back the mercy one has received, the other is more likely to be willing to give, since he or she is sure to be rewarded. The relationship can thus be deepened: One is willing to give and the other is obligated to make a return. This binding mechanism, of course, has its downside; it "has led to the suffocating of social relationships with their endless rounds of feasting, gift-making, courtesy calls, which run the danger of stifling all initiative in the name of propriety or the concern for human feelings (*jen ch'ing wei*)"<sup>8</sup> (Hsu, 1971, p. 472).

According to King (1989), obligation can be considered as the starting point of Chinese social ethics (see also Liang, 1963). Due to the obligation implied in interpersonal exchange, there is another mechanism that distances the relational partners from each other. In order to avoid future repayment of human emotional debt, many Chinese are constantly on guard against taking too much from others while not

allowing others to take too much from them. Before one enters into an exchange, one will think about the obligation one may incur for the favor received. Hwang (1988) argued that the Chinese will consider three factors to avoid being caught "in the red" regarding human emotional debt: (a) the price one pays for it, (b) the extent to which one will make a return (e.g., if one gives, one is not sure the other will make a return; if one does not want to give, one is not sure if the other will be angry and become an enemy in the future), and (c) the reactions of persons other than the recipient of the favor (pp. 52-53). Unless all conditions can be satisfied, one may reject a benevolence in order to avoid incurring human emotional debt from the outset.<sup>9</sup>

Although reciprocity has its emotional and spiritual dimensions, when the concern becomes a common cultural practice, the original meaning may be lost in its pursuit of external formality and the practice of reciprocity can become a standardized ritual devoid of spiritual significance. Hsu (1971) noted, "But [reciprocity] tends to become more and more a matter of pure business: exchange without sentiment" (p. 465). Wen (1989) also pointed out that recompense becomes not just a matter of morality but also of reputation because the more one rewards another, the more one will receive praise from society. In his analysis of Chinese common sayings and proverbs, Cheng (1986) noted that, although teachings on moral conduct emphasize the power of Heaven to punish and reward, people are willing to engage in good conduct, not necessarily because they are morally elevated, but because they see doing good as "good business": It avoids punishment and anticipates reward.

Making a return can also be used as a tool to regulate the contents of relationships. Because the norm of reciprocity is implicit rather than explicit, it is often left up to the receiver's sense of morality to determine whether repayment will be made, and if so, to what extent and under what circumstances. Although the social actor may return a favor out of sincerity, he or she may have other motivations: The social actor may give a favor to another in advance as a form of social investment, ignore returning a favor in order to deliberately damage the relationship, or return to others more than he or she has received in order to put the other in debt. Indeed, when one repays more than is necessary, one can even change from a debtor to a creditor (Lebra, 1969; Hsu, 1971).

*Pao* and human emotional debt situate Chinese relationships between two seemingly incompatible poles: They simultaneously close up relationships but also distance relational partners from each other.

Through a constant give-and-take, the debt-repayment mechanism shortens the distance, both psychologically and socially, between relational partners. However, the idea of exchange implies that nothing can be taken for granted; one must pay for whatever one has received. Between these two poles, the Chinese manage to maintain an appropriate distance and balance out their relationships. As we listen to the voices of the Chinese interviewees describing the mechanisms of *pao* and human emotional debt, as evidenced in their everyday interactions, we are able to explore this dynamic interplay of closing-up and distancing.

### **DEBT-REPAYING IN EVERYDAY LIFE: CHINESE TALK ABOUT HUMAN EMOTIONAL DEBT**

In all, we examined the interviews of 55 Chinese in Taiwan.<sup>10</sup> Although all of the interviewees were capable, and sometimes eloquent, in describing the various aspects of human emotional debt in their own life circles, in this section we concentrate on four issues commonly addressed in the interviews: (a) definition of human emotional debt, (b) recompensation of human emotional debt, (c) minimization of human emotional debt, and (d) manipulation of human emotional debt.

One remarkable characteristic of these respondents is the broad range of experiences they bring to the explanation of *pao* and human emotional debt. Whereas some previous social scientific studies of Chinese behavioral patterns rely on relatively homogeneous student populations for their findings (see, e.g., Yang, 1981), our 55 interviewees are remarkably diverse in terms of age, occupation, socioeconomic status, educational background, and personal experience. For the sake of convenience we have given the interviewees whom we have quoted pseudonyms, although the characteristics associated with each interviewee accurately reflect their life circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Definition of Human Emotional Debt**

##### *What is Human Emotional Debt?*

The most frequent emphasis in respondent answers concerns the positive side of human emotional debt, summarized as "an appreciation

of what others have done for us." This appreciation comes from one's heart, spontaneously, willingly, and in the absence of material considerations. Li-Hsin (a 41-year-old housewife) defined the return in human emotional debt as a "good-willed response." She felt that reciprocity is a universal phenomenon:

You help him,<sup>12</sup> and he will feel warm inside. He will tell you that, "You are so nice to me. I really feel so warm." I think this a good-willed response. This is not that you are expecting him to give you a big gift. This is not the case.

Or, for example, if you write a small card to show appreciation. This is also a good-willed response. Personally, when people are nice to me, I will do this kind of thing, too. I will tell him that I really appreciate him. I think just this is enough.

This interviewee also used the interview itself to illustrate what she meant by a good-willed response from the interviewer: "I think as long as you have a good will, that is enough. That is why I don't think it is necessary [for you] to bring any gift [for your interviewee]. As long as you appreciate it, that you learn a lot from the interview, that is enough." She continued, "This is a matter of [the] heart. When you interview a person, he saves time for you. Regardless of whether the contents of the interview are good or bad, you have to appreciate him."

Such appreciation is often actualized through the mechanism of mutual assistance. In this form of appreciation, the favor-recipient often looks for chances to help the favor-giver so as to repay the incurred human emotional debt. This attitude becomes a moral standard by which one judges human conduct. Jo-Wei, a 60-year-old male chauffeur, considered returning human emotional debt as the "ought" of behaving like a "real" human being. As he put it,

It depends on the situation. If today I have "good news"<sup>13</sup> and [someone] helps me, next time when he has "good news" I will help him, too. If today I am in a very bad situation and he helps me, in the future when he needs my help, I will try all my best to help him. If I am very poor, and he helps me to get some money or a job, I will try my best to help him if he encounters some difficulties in the future. Returning the human emotional debt is the "ought" of "doing human beings."

From many of the interviewees' accounts, one can see the warm side of Chinese interpersonal relationships: Once you have helped someone, what you have done will always be kept in the mind of the other, and

people will be ready to help you in return to show you appreciation. Hence, in the Chinese world, very seldom will help tendered to another be in vain.

One way to understand the nature of human emotional debt is to compare it to financial or commercial debt. When asked about their interpretations of the common saying, "Money debt is easy to return, whereas human emotional debt is difficult to return," almost every interviewee agreed with the saying and gave interesting responses embellished with personal experiences.

The major distinction is the fact that money debt is calculable, whereas human emotional debt is uncountable and hence difficult to return. Pao-Ling, a 27-year-old female records clerk, used the metaphor of *touchability* to clarify the differences: "Yes, money debt is touchable, and human emotion debt is untouchable. It is difficult to measure human emotional debt. If I do a 'following-water human emotion'<sup>14</sup> to you, how are you going to return the favor? It is very difficult to measure." Should one return the other's mercy based on how much improvement one sees in one's life? Or, should one return the other's mercy based on how much effort the other has gone through? Yung-Chang, a 60-year-old male manager, illustrated the intangible nature of human emotional debt:

If [someone] loans me ten thousand dollars, I can just return the money. You cannot argue any more. But if you walk, a car almost hits you and you are rescued by a person who pulls you away, how can we count it? That person can talk about this for his whole life! So human emotions are difficult to return.

The problematic situation arises when the creditor does not have to exert too much effort to help the other, whereas the help tendered may mean a great deal to the recipient. Wen-Po, a 40-year-old male manager, offered a similar example: "Suppose you are sentenced to death and (the judge) changes the punishment to life imprisonment, then your debt cannot be returned for your whole life."

However, there are also situations in which human emotional debt is directly translatable to money debt. As Wen-Po explained, how people act toward human emotional debt in the business world is different from how other interviewees said they reacted in their nonbusiness relationships:

In the business world, any kind of human emotional debt can always be repaid by material [things]. It is unlikely that the human emotional debt is so large

that even material things cannot cover it. It is only a problem of whether [repayment] is more than or less than one's expectation. We can still deal with the situation through quantifying.

The general rule seems to be that the debtor is not permitted to dismiss the favor as nothing but must fulfill his or her responsibility to repay others for what they have done, regardless of whether the amount of repayment can be mutually agreed upon. In the business world, this rule is applied even more strictly.

The elusive nature of human emotional debt permits social actors to manipulate relationships by reminding the debtor of his or her obligation. When used in this way, human emotional debt adds tension to the relationship. Li-Hsin explained:

I think perhaps foreigners do not have this concern. If you give him a favor and he thanks you directly, he may not have any more burden. But Chinese are not like that, that is why we have human emotional debt. After he gives you a benefit, he wants you to remember it forever. . . . If you do not remember his favor, he may come to remind you.

For Li-Hsin, some people translate a good-willed response into a request for material return: "For some [the minority], they not only need a good-willed return; they want a lot!" Thus, what might originally be simply a sense of appreciation may become something more serious when given the name of debt—The obligation then translates into something that must be returned, and there is a danger that the obligation can be enlarged and compounded.

### *Human Emotional Debt and In-/Out-Group Relationships*

In-group/out-group membership is frequently cited as a major criterion in the calculation of human emotional debt. A majority of interviewees felt that, for in-group members (i.e., "one's own people")<sup>15</sup> such as family members and close friends, sincere and unhesitating help is the norm, frequently performed without consideration of human emotional debt. However, for out-group members, human emotional debt always has to be taken into consideration. Out-group members must be treated with politeness, caution, and reserve. In other words,

how human emotional debt is calculated depends on the kind of relationship (i.e., *kuan-hsi*) one has with one's relational partners.

Several interviewees, who were asked whether they consider "doing" a human emotion for their own family members such as siblings and parents, say that "it is just like doing it myself" or "it is like my own business"; it is not an issue of human emotion at all. Pao-Ling, a 27-year-old female employee, contended that she does not feel "the pressure of human emotional debt" with her in-group members:

I think for one's own people, everyone is straightforward. Normally, for this kind of help, you will not think it is a matter of human emotional debt . . . Everyone's contribution is not judged . . . But besides one's own people, such as your co-workers, then it is a matter of human emotional debt.

Wei-Shao, a 27-year-old male clerical worker, shared a similar point of view: "For those who are in distant relationships, you will think that it is better not to owe him. But for those who have close relationships, you will think that you should always help them. We are all very close. You understand me and I understand you. If I can return your favor, I will, [but] I do not think [about it] that much."

In a similar vein, Li-Hsin told why her seeking help may not involve issues of human emotional debt: "I think for outer people, you must return. This is [certain]. But for one's own people, it is possible that you do not have to return. For example, between sisters, if they get along with each other very well, you don't have to return. And if you do not return, the other will not feel anything, such as being picky. For those good friends, they will not ask you to return, [either]."

Almost every interviewee agreed that it is essential to apply the norm of reciprocity—returning what they have gotten—to out-group members. Because there is no special consideration concerning the relationship involved, one simply needs to follow the norms of fairness and the cultural practice of reciprocity.

I-Fang, a 35-year-old female clerk, contended that human emotional debt is "more for 'outer people'"; for her, human emotional debt is not so much a form of politeness.

For "outer people," if we are not very familiar with that person, and his condition . . . we feel very distant from him, and do not quite understand him. If you understand a person, then you will not care too much about it, because you already know what kind of person he is.

Although most of the people we talked to contended that there is no issue of human emotional debt for one's own people, Ch'ien-Ling, a 37-year-old female accountant, felt that "[In] all types of relationships [it is] possible [to have problems of human emotional debt]. Even siblings have this kind of problem."

In fact, the human emotional debt toward one's own people may be far more troublesome than toward out-group people. According to the interviewees' interpretations, for out-group members, one simply returns the favor and in this way balances the relationship. But for an in-group member, because the relationship cannot be as easily balanced, the difficulty is even greater. In some respects, then, help from out-group members is to be preferred, because it is easier to clear up. As Li-Hsin explained:

For "outer people's" help, sometimes it will be okay as long as you return the favor. But for one's own people, the considerations are very large. If he thinks that your return is not enough, it will be more troublesome. Of course, there are many different types in the category of one's own people. Some may not but some may.

Among the interviewees, there is a common agreement that one must return the human emotional debt for outer people, because showing appreciation is natural and socially appropriate when one is helped by an unfamiliar other. However, for one's own people, although there is a general consensus that members should help each other, there is also still disagreement about whether such mutual assistance can be legitimately called *human emotional debt*, and if so, the extent to which the debt should be returned. The nature of human emotional debt clearly follows the classifications of relationships.

### **Recompensation of Human Emotional Debt**

In this section, we examine, first, the debtor's attitude toward returning human emotional debt; second, the creditor's attitude toward human emotional debt; and third, the various ways of recompensing human emotional debt.

#### *The Debtor's Attitude: One Cannot Not Return the Favor*

Many interviewees expressed a sense of feeling obligated to return whatever they have received from someone. Although they differed

significantly regarding the means they would use to accomplish this repayment, they would search to find all possible chances to return.

Almost unanimously, respondents confessed to feeling extremely uncomfortable, even guilty, at not repaying human emotional debt. Li-Ying, a 33-year-old accountant, saw repayment as a way of assuaging guilt, saying, "I think you need to return. Otherwise, in your heart you will feel like you owe people something." Chia-Hui, a 35-year-old female office clerk, stated, "I have [the idea] that if someone helps me one point, I will return him [at least] two points. Although I will not always worry about this in my mind, as long as I have the chance, or if he asks [me] for help, I think all [Chinese] will do so." According to Wen-Chün, the 25-year-old female receptionist, "I don't like to owe other people's human emotion because it is very difficult to return. Very difficult to return. After you ask others to help, you feel like you are a step lower than that person."

Given the compulsory character of obligation, many interviewees saw the issue of return as a lifelong task. When asked if she ever felt the pressure of having to return a favor, I-Fang jokingly stated, "I may have this kind of pressure at the time, but it need not be returned immediately. Maybe when I am old, before I return to the Western sky, I will have some plans. As long as I live in this world, I will return to [the other person] any way [I can]!"

Even in the absence of a strong sense of human emotional debt, interviewees are still ready to repay whenever they are asked for help by the person who helped them before. This concept is so pervasive in Chinese culture that people make a return even if they are not quite sure why. Shan-T'ing, a 45-year-old lawyer, claimed that he does not consider issues of human emotional debt but he is certain that others do. "Sometimes I am puzzled about whether I must return something if I received some help. I am not quite sure about this, but it seems to be a tradition."

The feeling of debt also depends on the degree of assistance provided. Unless the other provides a significant degree of assistance, one would ordinarily not consider it an issue of human emotional debt. This notion is perfectly illustrated by Chou-Jen, a 67-year-old former official of the government: "Ordinarily you do not think to that extent [of owing people the human emotional debt]. If he helps us, and when he asks us to help, if we are able to do it, then we should try our best to help him to handle the matter as soon as possible. That is all." Wen-Po, a 40-year-old male manager, put it, "I think there should be some limits

for human emotional debt . . . If you drive a car and give the person a ride, this kind of human emotional debt is the same as if there never were a human emotional debt at all. I think you need to define first what kind of human emotional debt it is." Many other interviewees agreed that for small favors, little calculation is necessary. However, they still suggested that one can simply bring some gifts, or invite someone out to lunch, in order to show appreciation and repay the debt immediately.

As mentioned earlier, the concern for human emotional debt is more a matter of the mercy-taker (debtor) than the mercy-giver (creditor). The burden of human emotional debt is often taken upon by the favor-receiver himself or herself. Wei-Shao, a 27-year-old male clerical worker, expressed this idea convincingly:

Sometimes . . . this is what you add to yourself. Sometimes people do not ask you to return the favor. [When] people help you [it] does not mean that they think about your return.

I cannot say everyone is like that. But I think most people are like this: He gives you a small help, "an effort of raising hands." If I can do this for you, then I will do it. If you want to think this is a human emotional debt, how can you return the debt? You are unable to do so.

Whereas some people sincerely appreciate the other and are prepared to contribute as much as possible, others consider returning human emotional debt as a "once-and-for-all" resolution of the exchange. In such instances, when the debtor subjectively feels that one his or her duty has been accomplished, there may be no more obligation toward the other. Wen-Chün contended, "Well, if I [have] already returned the human emotion, and you still mention it, I will not even bother to interact with you. You [can] talk [about it] however [much] you want, and I do what I want to do. This is very boring, because if the thing has passed by, there is no need to talk about it again. And if I have not yet returned the favor, then I will try [by] all means to return you the favor." When one considers the idea of debt, Wen-Chün's statement is more understandable: Once a debt is returned, there should no longer be any debt.

#### *The Creditor's Attitude: One Does Not Ask for Return from Others*

If it is true that human emotional debt is imposed by the debtors themselves, we should be able to see a different attitude held by the

creditor. This line of reasoning is verified in interviewee accounts: Although almost every interviewee claimed not to want to owe others human emotion when they are the debtor, they also claimed not to expect others to return their favor when they are the creditor. This attitude is clearly revealed in Wen-Chün's account: "I don't like to owe other people's human emotion . . . But if someone asks me to help, it does not matter whether you can return to me or not: I will try my best to help you. I will try 'friend's' [righteousness] to help you."

However, although almost every interviewee said that he or she would help others without asking for or thinking about the return, most claimed that they had heard about or had seen many people who always want the one they have helped to return something to them. According to Li-Hsin:

Some people are like that. He is very calculating, he gives you help . . . sometimes you do not really need this help, but he helps, and asks for your return afterwards. It is not that he asks you [for] something, but that once in a while he will remind you that he has done something for you before. I think Chinese do have this habit. Though of course I cannot say there are a lot [of instances of this].

Ch'ien-Ling, the 37-year-old accountant, offered her experience with such people:

Among my friends, I do not [have] anyone ask me to return the favor. But I have heard a lot of people tell me stories of returning the human emotional debt. Some people even want a material return. Perhaps I am lucky. Most of my friends do not ask others to return human emotional debt; they treat each other with sincerity . . . I hear people tell me that other people have said, "I have helped you so you must return me something, such as buy[ing] me a gift." I think this is a hint to that person, because I did not hear this directly.

In situations such as these, if the debtor does not make a return or does not repay enough, it may irritate the creditor. It seems reasonable, given a cultural pattern that places emphasis on the debtor's obligation to repay, that although the creditor may not have the right to claim the return, he or she can always expect the other to return. Therefore, for people who are more narrow-minded and calculating, indirectly reminding others of their obligations may seem to be a very effective way of manipulating human emotional debt. Such behavior also functions as a social mechanism to punish those who do not make a return on human

emotional debt appropriately and to reinforce the cultural norm of debt repayment.

The tendency of the interviewees to depict those who ask others to make a return in terms of stories they have heard is extremely interesting. For one thing, it points to the negative evaluation Chinese have of the practice of asking for a return. Hence, the interviewees themselves, as well as their close friends or family members, are seemingly excluded from the category of those who ask for a return. These results raise some interesting questions. If none of the interviewees is the kind of person who asks for a return, where can such people be found in Chinese society? If the cultural practice of asking for a return is so pervasive, why are not the interviewees themselves influenced by the cultural practice? If they do not care to ask others to make a return, why do they feel uncomfortable if they do not make a return?

It is possible that the perceptions of the creditor and the debtor are different; their perceptions may be shaped by their respective roles. Because the burden is placed on the debtor, the debtor may observe the norm much more closely than the creditor. Although the mercy-giver may not care whether the receiver makes a return, the receiver may treat the favor as a burden that needs to be resolved. The observation that there are many people who do want repayment may simply be a subjective attribution on the part of the debtor who—given the obligation of returning—may tend to interpret words spoken by the creditor as hints to return the human emotional debt. Alternatively, it is possible that the discrepant attitudes reflect different role enactments between the creditor and debtor. Although creditors may believe they deserve a return as dictated by the role relation with the debtor—because asking others to return a favor is considered a negative attribute—none of the interviewees may have been willing to admit to engaging in such behavior. This may account for the fact that although respondents claimed they are “not one of these people,” there are still “so many” of these people in Chinese society. Of course, we must also take into account the fact that people differ in their attitudes toward human emotional debt. Yü-Jung, a 35-year-old accountant, put it, “some people will care more about whether you have returned the debt; some will not care so much about the return.”

The complexities of these considerations give rise to interesting social situations. Suppose someone has helped another person previously. When one needs help from this person, would one feel as if they could “claim the debt”? Interviewees generally contended that although they do

feel more comfortable being helped by those they have helped before, they do not feel like they are claiming a debt. Former government official Chou-Jen contended that one should never force another to help:

We don't think in this way. In my position, I do not want to force people to do [something] for me. In the old times we [may] have helped him, and now we need his help. But if he is unable to do it, let it be. You don't have to just look for him; you may find someone else. He may have his own difficulties . . . I think between friends you need not be so calculating.

It is clear that there is a largely unexpressed discrepancy between the debtor's and the creditor's perspectives regarding the impact of human emotional debt on future interaction. However, such discrepancies lend an air of dynamism and tension, as interactants negotiate and redefine the meanings of exchange in their relationships as informed by Chinese philosophical traditions.

### *Ways of Returning Human Emotional Debt*

How is the debtor's obligation to be resolved? According to several interviewees, the most common way to show appreciation is to give the help-giver a gift. Such gifts usually need not be expensive. In discussing why human emotional debt must be returned, Li-Hsin said that we must show appreciation to those who have helped us, lest they see us as taking their help for granted: "I think you still need to follow [rules of] etiquette. So-called etiquette does not mean that you have to give [someone] a lot of gifts . . . I think if you bring a little thing to his home to show your appreciation, this is in fact a very warm human emotion."

To further illustrate the point, the interviewee provided an example from her own experience. When she graduated from college, in recognition of her outstanding academic work, her teacher asked her to stay at the college to be a teaching assistant. At the time, the position was quite attractive. She had always appreciated what her teacher had done for her, and this appreciation led her to continue visiting the teacher for several years, often bringing with her a very small gift. As she recalled:

I always brought him some little gift. Now [that] I think about that it is really a sincere appreciation for him because [of the] help actively offered by my teacher . . . What I gave him is very very small, for example, some drinks.

They are not valuable at all, but the teacher seemed to be very pleased and he cherished me very much . . . my teacher let me stay in the school. Is this a big issue? Yes, it is pretty big. The return I gave him is very small, but I think he was very happy. I think as long as you have good will, that is enough.

That gift-giving is a rather typical way of returning human emotional debt can be observed in nearly every interviewee's account. Frequently, when asked whether they would like others to show their appreciation, interviewees immediately associated appreciation with gift-giving, replying quickly and automatically, "Oh, they need not bring me any gift." The pervasiveness of the practice of gift-giving is also shown in the common Chinese saying: "People will never blame you for giving too many gifts." Bringing an inexpensive gift is better than visiting empty-handed. More importantly, most interviewees contended that the value of the gift should also be proportionate to the help offered.

Some interviewees contended that a sense of appreciation and obligation toward the other should continue even after gifts have been given. Although the debt has been repaid, that does not mean that there should be no more mercy. In other words, although the debt has been repaid, there is still human emotion. The difficulty of knowing when the debt is resolved was noted by Yü-Chen, a 35-year-old female office clerk: "So how should you return? Only one time and the event is ended? You make a phone call for me today and I [will] make a phone call for you tomorrow, and then we do not owe each other? I don't think so." This attitude is echoed by another interviewee, accountant Yü-Jung, who contended that the creditor should always be treated with respect:

I am a person who does not like to owe people human emotion. If I owe them, I will return. For example, you can buy something for a return. In the future, if this person asks you to help, in fact we will *still remember* [italics added] that [the other person] helped us before. It will not be the case that because we return the favor, there is nothing more involved.

Even though giving a gift does not mean the relationship is over, the earlier that one pays recompense, the less trouble one will have in the future. Li-Hsin explained her pattern of returning as "immediate": "Possibly I will return to him immediately after the event is over. I will not save it and return it in the future. I like to solve one thing at a time." Otherwise, she said, "if you save them, the events will 'become bigger

and bigger as they run down'." Her attitude was shared by several others, particularly women. Although one may still have some burden in the future, the fact that one has returned something immediately means that one can, to use another monetary analogy, avoid paying compound interest in the future.

### **Minimization of Human Emotional Debt**

#### *Avoidance of Human Emotional Debt*

Although it is true that one will not be granted human emotion if there is no basis at all for such emotion, sometimes the wiser course is to avoid the complications of human emotional debt in advance (i.e., avoid owing someone human emotional debt so that repayment and future interaction will not be necessary). Many interviewees contended that, so long as they could handle the matter on their own, they would prefer to do things themselves. If they needed help, they would be more than willing to accept sincere help offered voluntarily from a friend or family member; for such people, there is human emotion, but no debt. However, if the helper is not really close, before accepting an offer most interviewees said they would consider how much they would be required to do in order to return the debt at some future time, that is, whether they could "afford" the human emotional debt.

Because the burden is obligatory to the debtor, one finds it difficult to accept help that is beyond one's ability to return. When asked what she would do if she really needed help from a person that she expects to ask for return in the future, I-Fang replied that, unless she had no other choice, she would still refuse such help:

So you need to make [a] judgment [about] whether you will let this person help you . . . If you really need help from him, and you know his personality, you don't have any other choice. You need to "harden [yourself]" when he asks [you] to do something . . . This time you need to consider the relative harms and benefits . . . I guess if I can afford to return, then I will not refuse. But if the help he can give me is very big, then I will refuse because I would be afraid of being unable to return.

Wen-Chün, the 25-year-old receptionist, expressed a similar attitude, making a distinction between small and big events: "If it is a small

matter, that is fine . . . But for those big matters, you are going to have psychological pressure. That is not good." She continued, "Some human emotions are reasonable, some are not. If I were to be helped under a reasonable situation, I would [remember that] forever. If I were helped under [an] unreasonable situation, I would refuse."

We observed that this attitude of "relying upon oneself" is very pervasive among Chinese. However, this does not mean that one isolates oneself entirely from human interaction. Frequently, it is because this kind of assistance lacks real emotional concern for the other or else is unreasonable that interviewees are prevented from accepting. As Wen-Chün said, "In general, this kind of human emotional debt is not human emotional debt at all. It is only when the other is willing to do it . . . that you will feel this is a human emotional debt." However, when there is a sincere motive, human emotional debt is not imposed by the creditor but represents a voluntary obligation that the debtor takes upon himself or herself.

From the interviewees' accounts, it seems clear that the less human emotional debt one owes others, the better (unless the proffered help is sincere). Hence, the return one is expected to give becomes an important condition in considering whether to accept help, unless (a) the favor is very small, (b) the offerer is very sincere in not anticipating any repayment in the future, or (c) one really needs the help. Although such considerations do not enter into all forms of helping behavior, it seems certain that whenever the help offered implies a big return in the future, help is likely to be more critically evaluated or even rejected. One may conclude that the Chinese are perhaps too conscious about letting themselves be helped by others; however, one should remember that the norm also implies that anyone who helps others can always be sure of winning the appreciation—either psychological or material—of those one has helped.

### *Incurring Human Emotional Debt Through a Third Party*

The concern for human emotional debt also influences the extent to which one is willing to help the other. Whereas interviewees are very willing to help their friends or their friends' friends and to solve any difficulty that is under their own control, their attitude becomes more

reserved when they have to ask others to help their friends and/or their friends' friends. Helping one's friend to do something under one's own control will not incur human emotional debt from a third party. But if one has to ask another (a third party) to help friends get the job done, one may incur human emotional debt to the third party and hence may need to repay the debt to the third party on one's own. More problematically, one may not be able to claim human emotional debt from those helped, as the person helped is likely to view the third party as the real creditor.

Shu-Ling, a 40-year-old bank employee, described her concern about incurring human emotional debt to a third party in the process of helping someone:

For some people . . . they will ask you to help because you can provide help in such circumstances. This is because we are in this group. But sometimes they misunderstand the extent to which you can help [them]. They think that since you are inside the group, whatever they ask you to do, you will be able to do it. They do not know that we have a limit too.

If it is beyond our limitations, we need to ask others to help. When you need to ask for someone to do something for your original friend, it becomes a matter of owing another a human emotion. Or else, the other will show in his face that "you owe me a human emotion." That is what is troublesome.

Because the original helping person may owe a human emotion to a third party to satisfy a request (i.e., a cost to be repaid on one's own), asking a third party to help may be seen as a sacrifice on the part of the original helping person. For this reason, one may be willing to grant such favors only to one's close friend or relative—those, in other words, who can be classified as one's own people. If such a debt would be incurred for a distant relationship, such as a relative's friend, or a friend's friend (outer people), the sacrifice could seem unnecessary, and hence the request may be rejected. One should remember that differential treatment among different orders of relationships (*kuan-hsi*) is a major theme in Chinese relationships. Shu-Ling continued:

For many things, it will be faster only if you can follow the thing up yourself . . . For example, my first brother-in-law one time transferred some money. Because he was rushing to meet the deadline, he needed to rush here and then rush the money over to deposit. He was afraid that he would not have enough time. So I needed to follow it up specifically.<sup>16</sup> Doing this then, I owe

someone's human emotion. Of course, for our own people, that is fine. But if it is someone else, you don't need to follow it up for him.

Her view was echoed by another interviewee, Chou-Jen. In his view, if the request is within his power, that is, if it does not involve incurring debt to another party, he would be happy to help. Although he is willing to help his own friends and relatives, he nevertheless finds it difficult to help a friend's friend if the help sought is not under his immediate control. His concern is that he has to ask someone else to help the friend's friend, thereby incurring another human emotional debt for this friend's friend. He described such requests as "a well with no bottom"—the connections can go on forever. "I need to ask my friend to give me a favor; his capability is limited too. He (the person I ask) needs to ask someone else too. The one I ask is not the person who handles the thing . . . We do not have that kind of broad relationship."

There is always a choice to be made: weighing the debt one may have to owe to a person who is in a position to provide assistance, against the extent to which one wants to help the other.

### **Manipulation of Human Emotional Debt**

The metaphoric depiction of interpersonal exchange as a debt allows the Chinese to manipulate the relationship: Because a debt exists between two interactants, just as in the case of material goods, one can claim possession of, borrow, or ask for return of goods. If human emotional debt really is a debt, theoretically it should be possible to deposit some human emotion (help someone first) at one point and then to "draw it out" (i.e., ask the other's help) at a future time. By manipulating human emotional debt, one may constrain the relational partner's future behavior. Many interviewees claimed that this is a distortion of human emotional debt, employing the name of human emotion to mask a manipulative desire to achieve one's personal goals.

Shu-Ling reported an extremely interesting and provocative incident concerning a transaction connected with her promotion, which she said typifies the dark side of human emotional debt. The complex and involved story is interesting not only in describing how the less-savory elements of human emotional debt work, but also because one can see, in the evolution of the event itself, how the principle implied in the

“normal type of human emotion” operates to complicate the event and influence its direction. To illustrate her viewpoint, we first provide a succinct outline of her story before further analyzing the human emotional debt involved in this incident.

Shu-Ling was looking for a promotion. She knew someone (let us call him A) who worked in a certain office, so she called upon A to help. A asked his superior B to help get Shu-Ling a promotion. B wrote a letter to C, who was Shu-Ling’s manager, to support her promotion. The initial phase of the matter was successfully concluded when C promoted Shu-Ling.

Shu-Ling, in gratitude, wanted to send a gift to A, but A refused the gift. After two years, A called Shu-Ling, telling her that he was starting a magazine and asking her to sell 20 subscriptions of the magazine for him, Shu-Ling herself subscribed and paid money for 10 subscriptions to the magazine, telling A that she would need time to sell these 10 subscriptions, that she would provide A a list of names of the 10 people once she sold the subscriptions, and would then try to promote another 10 subscriptions. After some time, A called Shu-Ling to see if she had gotten the list of names. Shu-Ling said that she had not yet finished her promotion of A’s magazine. Then A disappeared and never bothered Shu-Ling again. After one year, the magazine went out of business.

Who are the debtors and the creditors in this transaction, and how is the debt to be calculated? Shu-Ling considered that she owed A a significant human emotional debt, because A went through several layers of relations for her benefit. Shu-Ling did not feel that she owed either B or C any human emotional debt. Instead, she thought that A owed B human emotional debt (for interceding on her behalf) and hence her debt toward A was particularly large. As Shu-Ling put it, “He went through another person. In other words, there were several layers of relationships [that we] went through. So it [turns out] that I owe him a very big human emotion . . . [The] person I owe is not the final person [i.e., the person who asked Shu-Ling’s manager to grant the promotion], because I do not know him.”

A second interesting question is, should there be any repayment at all between Shu-Ling and A? According to Shu-Ling’s account, there is a standard price for an employee to be promoted. Normally, A would be able to charge this price if he had managed the situation entirely by himself. However, said Shu-Ling, “Since he went through the third person, he of course felt ‘no good sense’ [embarrassed] to ask me for

money. He only did the smallest help—that is, he wrote an ‘eight-line letter’.” The eight-line letter, according to Shu-Ling’s account, is the least powerful letter of recommendation. Although the matter eventually succeeded, because A did not exert too much effort on Shu-Ling’s behalf, he would be embarrassed to ask for a return.

This does not mean that Shu-Ling did not owe A anything; if not for A’s intercession, Shu-Ling would not have been promoted. Hence, because A refused to accept a gift from Shu-Ling after the event was over, regardless of how big the human emotional debt Shu-Ling owed him, this meant that the repayment was pending temporarily and could be claimed in the future. This credit is the factor that allowed A, after two years, to ask Shu-Ling to help him promote his fledging magazine.

Note Shu-Ling’s response regarding A’s request after two years: “I just felt that it [was] not wrong for him to ask me [this]. Because I asked him [for help] before, too.” Shu-Ling continued:

So I owed him. I thought about giving him some gifts, and I called him again. But he said he did not want [them]. I did not know where his home [was] . . . And I did not have the energy to search for his home and send the gift over to him . . .

Of course he did not say I need to subscribe [to the magazine myself], but he did say, “You must find several subscriptions for me.” Many people told me just to disregard him. But I think this is not right. Because there is some standard price . . . of course this is very dark . . . but perhaps when he asked the other he [pays] a standard [price] too. In the future, the other may also ask him to do something. So I think [returning] to him this way is very fair.

What, in this incident, actually constitutes repayment? In the beginning, A asked Shu-Ling to sell 20 subscriptions, but Shu-Ling skillfully bargained that figure into 10 subscriptions, all of which were bought by Shu-Ling herself. In other words, Shu-Ling did pay A money for his help two years before rather than helping him to promote his magazine.

If he gave me twenty, I discounted it to ten. And I bought all ten. I told him that, at the present, I bought all of them first, because it takes time to ask people to subscribe. I gave him the money first. I think in this way I returned a human emotional debt. Of course later he did not look for me again. He did not say that I needed to take another ten of his magazines . . . Later he called me and asked me if I had any list of names. I said, “I still have not yet sold

them all, but it is okay. No matter how I do it, it is my responsibility to help you sell at least ten copies!"

Thus, Shu-Ling did not hesitate to communicate to A that she had performed her responsibility in returning the favor she owed him. In her words, "That is exactly what I wanted him to know."

One may ask, why did Shu-Ling not promote the magazine for A, thereby saving herself money? As it was her responsibility to return the favor she received before, asking others to subscribe to the magazine would mean that she had transferred her responsibility to others. This transference of responsibility would not be only her problem, but A may have judged her as not having taken enough responsibility and hence be likely to ask for more: "Otherwise, he will think that I have transferred my responsibility to someone else, and that I did not spend even a penny! I wanted to let him know that I bought all of them." Shu-Ling assumed the responsibility herself, because the matter was completely under her control. She was also afraid that if she had asked 10 people to subscribe, A may think she was quite good at selling subscriptions and may have asked her to do more for him in the future. To avoid any more trouble and to reduce the price she had to repay to A, the interviewee chose the seemingly unprofitable solution, which in fact was probably the better bargain!

Moreover, had she asked her acquaintances to subscribe to the magazine, she may have owed human emotional debt to them, which she would have had to return in the future. Even if she were willing to give out subscriptions for free, her close relatives or friends may not have wanted to owe Shu-Ling human emotional debt and may have insisted on paying her for the subscriptions. Once she accepted money from these people, Shu-Ling would have incurred human emotional debt with a different set of interactants. In other words, by solving one human emotional debt, one may create a series of other human emotional debts. By purchasing 10 subscriptions to the magazine herself, Shu-Ling economically and cleanly solved a difficult issue of human emotional debt.

From this analysis, one can note the presence of many interweaving threads of reasoning underlying an ordinary incident. Throughout the incident, human emotional debt serves as the central organizing metaphor to guide the interactants' behavior, pointing them in certain directions. It starts as a matter of human emotion and ends up as an

economic exchange. The complexity of this incident explains why Shu-Ling commented finally that, "What is worth celebrating is that after one or two years, this magazine 'dies a natural death,' so he did not come to ask me about it [any more], or continue to subscribe to the magazine for one or more years." Shu-Ling's responsibility for the distorted human emotional debt thus ended with a somewhat fair recompense without unnecessarily prolonging the obligation.

Although the dark side of human emotional debt is deemed by most interviewees as a pure economical exchange rather than a concern for human emotion, this example demonstrates that there are still some emotional elements involved.<sup>17</sup> For one thing, it is questionable whether A would help someone randomly. In fact, it is the relationship and the emotional concern between Shu-Ling and A that enabled A to help her simply on the basis of one telephone call.

Shu-Ling described her relationship with A in the following terms: "I knew this person before I got married when I took an English course . . . He did not take the English course. But when I walked back he followed me. Before I walked back . . . to the bank where I worked, he talked to me. He told me his background and so on. Afterwards, I came back to work and nothing happened. Once in a while he came to the bank to see me." Apparently, Shu-Ling and A share some emotional concern for each other.

Moreover, although depicting this incident as involving a sense of appreciation is to idealize the exchange, it seems clear that the interviewee's sense of uncomfortableness in owing A, and her insistence on her responsibility to discharge the debt, are driven by more than a concern for "pure economics." Notice that they exchange only after the relationship has allowed them to help each other to a very great extent.

The distorted version of human emotional debt cannot be viewed as a bribe. To bribe someone, one has to come to agreement about the price first, before any action is taken. But for human emotional debt to be exchanged economically, price is seldom explicitly discussed, as there is a more-or-less emotional factor involved. Rather, one performs the action first and leaves it to the debtor's conscience to repay the debt. If Shu-Ling did not want to acknowledge A's credit, A may not have any way to punish Shu-Ling. But Shu-Ling chose to acknowledge the human emotional debt she owed to A, even after a period of two years. This series of events could not have transpired in this way were it not for the fact that norms of reciprocity are so deeply rooted in the Chinese mind.

### SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The debt-repaying mechanism in Chinese relationships can be discerned from the linguistic code of expressions related to human emotional debt. Following the principle of *pao*, Chinese relationships can be made closer or more distant depending on how people negotiate obligations during interrelational exchange. Human emotional debt both serves to lessen the distance between interactants by providing mutual help and, at the same time, to increase the distance between interactants by emphasizing the obligation to return.

Through language, the Chinese are able to discuss debt repayment in concrete terms, while interaction serves to substantiate the contents of these linguistic descriptions as the Chinese live their lives. Indeed, it is in the process of defining whether given help constitutes human emotional debt, and if so, the means by which it is to be returned, that meanings of human emotional debt can be reaffirmed in Chinese everyday interaction. Although debt repayment is hardly unique to Chinese culture, the existence of linguistic expressions, arising from folk concepts, permits the Chinese both to speak about and to enact repayment in many different ways—with genuine appreciation, with an attempt to avoid any possible debt in advance, and with a calculated sensitivity to the manipulation of human emotional debt to serve personal ends. These subtle cultural norms have organized Chinese relationships to be, on the one hand, warm and emotional, and, on the other hand, cold and practical.

The contents of these folk concepts do not come from without. They are informed by the deep-seated beliefs of social actors that arise from cultural learning and from more distant factors such as philosophical tradition. For the Chinese, a relationship can be an issue of personal choice, based not only on mutual interests, personalities, empirical conditions, and so on, but also, at a different level, on a sense of human nature, social justice, and the functioning of the universe. Espoused by social actors in their culture, such concepts acquire their meaning through people's everyday interaction. Through the folk concepts of *pao* and human emotional debt, the Chinese have worked out ways to maintain balance in any social exchange. Consideration of the complexities of a return provides a more complete description of Chinese interpersonal relationships.

## NOTES

- 1 All Chinese romanizations follow the Wade-Giles system (Choy, 1981).
- 2 This concept can also be translated alternatively as "reciprocity" (Yang, 1957; Graham, 1989), "altruism," or "sympathy for others" (Chan, 1963; Fung, 1983). *Shu* also implies "tolerance," "benevolence," or "forgiveness" toward the other, representing possible emotional responses produced by one's being able to liken oneself to the other.
- 3 A frequently cited example of the Confucian norm of reciprocity in interpersonal relationship is the three years' mourning period following the death of a parent (*Analects*, XVII, 21). When Tsai Wo, one of Confucius's disciples, asked about the three years' mourning for one's parents, Confucius replied, "Only when a child is three years old does it leave its parents' arms, and the three years' mourning is the universal mourning everywhere." What appears at first to be a rigid societal norm for the mourning period turns out to be a reciprocal obligation by the child to return what he or she has gotten from the parents: three years of caretaking for three years of mourning.
- 4 Note that although Confucius did not deny the existence of beings other than humans, he chose to concentrate on the activities of human beings.
- 5 In addition to favorable returns, *pao* also entails revenge. As another common saying puts it, "If you get favor from others, do not forget to return; if you are hurt by others, do not forget to return." As this article addresses the favor-repaying mechanism, we do not elaborate on the vengeance aspect of return.
- 6 King (1989) provided a modern view of the concept of "human emotion." He contended that although there are many different usages of "human emotion," from a sociological point of view, "human emotion" refers simply to "the relation between people" (p. 78). As he put it, "When we say this person 'does not know human emotion', in fact we are saying, 'this person has no idea of the relations between people'" (p. 79). However, "when we praise a person for knowing human emotion, we are referring to the fact that this person is good at dealing with people and handling matters, good at arriving at the right distinction between people" (p. 79). To arrive at the right place for human interaction, one needs to have an understanding of human emotion through constantly orienting oneself from the perspective of the other. "Human emotion is the mundanized popular concept of likening-to-oneself (*Shu*)" (King, 1989, p. 83).
- 7 For further information on the concept of *kuan-hsi*, see Jacobs (1979) and Chang and Holt (1991).
- 8 "Human feeling" is another translation of "human emotion." Here Hsu referred to human emotion as the flavor of human emotion—*jen-ch'ing wei*, in which *jen-ch'ing* means "human emotion," whereas *wei* refers to flavor.

- 9 This is similar to Lebra's (1969) observation concerning the Japanese concept of *on*: "[*On*] results in encouraging avoidance not only of accepting but of granting an *on* to the extent that unsolicited generosity is likely to be resented or suspected to contain an ulterior motive" (p. 133).
- 10 These interviews were conducted during May 1990 and June 1990 in Taiwan by Hui-Ching Chang. The focus of the interviews is related to various aspects of Chinese relationships, examined through four folk concepts, which included *pao* and human emotional debt. Most interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, with some involving code-switching between Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese. The interviews ranged from 30 min to 3 hr. As will be evident, the interviewees' responses are based on rich and varied experiences, including employment, marriage, family, and politics.
- 11 Note that although the data analyzed in this article are based on all 55 interviewees, in quoting interviewees' accounts, only 19 are represented in the article. These accounts reflect and illustrate the centrality of the concept.
- 12 In spoken Chinese, there is no gender difference implied in the use of the pronoun *him*. Hence, in quoting interviewees' accounts, we use *he* or *him*.
- 13 "Good news" is a Chinese euphemism for marriage.
- 14 This refers to an action that does not require extra effort and is done as it would have been done otherwise, and yet, such action provides some help to another.
- 15 "One's own people" is a common Chinese expression. From the interviewee's accounts, "one's own people" refers to those in blood relationship, although some may include good friends and others in this category.
- 16 As an employee of the bank, Shu-Ling is able to ask others to speed up the process for her brother-in-law.
- 17 This conclusion is in line with Jacobs's (1979) observations on Chinese relationships.

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