

**Encounters: Experience and Anthropological Knowledge**

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The Encounters: Experience and Anthropological Knowledge series examines the issues that affect all anthropologists in the field. These short collections of essays describe and analyze the surprise and interest of the fieldwork encounter, on topics such as money, violence and love. The series aims to show that anthropological knowledge is based in experience, bringing into the public realm useful and thought-provoking areas for discussion that previously anthropologists have been reluctant or unable to highlight.

# Money

## Ethnographic Encounters

Edited by

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 **BERG**

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victims of 9/11 in New York City and those of an ill-fated air raid in Iraq, he questions money's capacity for expressing human value. Inayatullah's essay is the least conventional in the volume, and in its metaphoric leaps and unexpected connections it poses readers a challenge: How is knowledge that is produced in the instability of encounter to be expressed rhetorically? If we are to produce our own knowledge as readers, the essay implicitly asks, how tightly can we afford to cling to familiar and authorized literary form?

Given the risk posed by monetary exchanges, how then can anthropologists make visible the conditions under which their claims to knowledge are produced? How, in other words, does one secure meaning? The essays in this volume expose anthropologists' anxiety over the possibility of establishing meaningful relations across difference; the danger is that meaning is already a commodity and available for purchase. The anxiety surrounding monetary exchanges, as suggested in these essays, is palpable. Sometimes the anxiety is *ethical*: Have I done the right thing? Have I, as a person of relative wealth, done enough? Has or will my actions damage[d] existing relationships? Sometimes it is *epistemological*: Has my action damaged the quality of my knowledge? Is it "proper" for a "social scientist" to engage in this kind of relationship? In order to make sense of such concerns, we must return to, and represent, the uncertainty of meaning that arises out of particular encounters.

Where do we locate agency in exchange relations when the force of money is so compelling that *everything* is up for sale? How is money itself a creative force for anthropological knowledge? Anthropologists, seeking intimacy, may bring into being new forms of exchange, signified in part by the foreign currency they carry and the kinds of fantasies organized around those currencies. Yet as the essays in this volume demonstrate, anthropologists do not always succeed in either finding or creating the intimacy they seek. The authors of these essays, well aware of their uncertainty, draw on the ironic mode to describe moments of embarrassment, danger and intimacy that stand distinct from theories of indifference that characterize the marketplace. Such indeterminacy propels anthropologists to rationalize and interpret, to analyze and understand, to *do* anthropology. And it is such indeterminacy that makes anthropology unique in its viewpoint, a viewpoint that is simultaneously *current* and *rich*.

## CHAPTER 1

### Equation Fixations

#### On the Whole and the Sum of Dollars in Foreign Exchange

Julie Y. Chu

There were many things I expected to find difficult about fieldwork in China but money matters was not one of them. As a graduate student used to stretching the dollar to its limits while living on meager financial aid in one of the world's most expensive cities – New York – I was hopeful that, for once, the elasticity of the dollar would work in my favor. Nothing seemed more clear-cut and alluring about living in China than the promise of my newly expanded purchasing power via the currency exchange rate: 8 Chinese *renminbi* (RMB) to 1 U.S. dollar (USD). This magical equation of 8:1 was, after all, the veritable mantra of the U.S.-bound migrants in Longyan village with whom I was residing and investigating in Fuzhou, China. When I would ask people why they risked life and limb to travel clandestinely through hazardous human smuggling networks to reach the U.S., no phrase was drilled into me more instinctively and repetitively than these three succinct words: *ba bi yi* (8 to 1). U.S. dollars, everyone added, were plainly "bigger" (*bijiao da*) and therefore "better" (*bijiao hao*) than the local Chinese currency. The good life seemed like a no-brainer: get USD, spend RMB.

Given this simple formula, I expected that as a possessor of dollars in China, I would surely be in command of the art of shopping like I had never been before on the tony streets of Manhattan. With the power of 8:1, I was ready to have the world of consumption at my exclusive beck and call in China. My reprieve from penny-pinching, however, did not turn out to be quite as relaxing and rewarding as I imagined. Meager dollars may have converted into more plentiful RMB but, as I discovered,

purchasing power turned out to be much more than a numbers game of exchange rates.

My initiation into the toil and turmoil of shopping occurred early on during my fieldwork in Fuzhou when I found myself being angrily chased by a vendor for a good twenty minutes through a sprawling flea market – all because of my accidental, split-second flirtation with one of the items for sale in her stall. In this case, the item in question was a pink T-shirt silk-screened with a squiggly, cartoon graphic of what appeared to be the ghostly sidekicks of Pac-Man (yes, that yellow icon of video games). What had really caught my eye and caused me to linger over this T-shirt was the bouncing English slogan bordering the image of the Pac-Man gang: something incomprehensibly exclamatory ending with “Dance Dance Disco Fun!” Unbeknownst to me at that time, my brief contemplation and chuckle at this T-shirt had roused the previously indifferent vendor out of her torpor. When I thoughtlessly yanked at the shirt to show Liyan – my Chinese friend shopping with me – the humor in it all, things took a decidedly unfunny turn. Inadvertently, I had set the combative ritual of buying and selling in motion.

It started simply enough.

“Miss, this is all cotton. I’ll give it to you for just fifty RMB,” the vendor announced as she sidled up to us.

“All cotton, it’s a very good price, *very good*,” she informed us.

“Oh, uh, sorry.” I automatically translated my standard browsing-but-not-buying English pleasantry into Chinese.

“I’m just looking ... um, *buhao yisi* [pardon me],” I added for humble and polite Chinese effect.

I gestured to my friend Liyan for us to move on to another stall and thought that would be the end of our market repartee over this T-shirt. But as we turned and took our first few steps away from the vendor, she began to wave her hand and the shirt at us with ever more exaggerated and disappointed gestures.

“All right, all right – forty RMB, forty RMB. You can have it for forty,” she told us gruffly, as she followed us out of her stall.

“Really, we don’t want it.” I told her as firmly and clearly as I could, as Liyan and I continued to walk briskly away from her.

“This is real cotton! Go elsewhere and look!” She jabbed her finger at us with indignity. “You can’t find better quality for the price! Thirty-five – that’s the lowest I can give you – it’s almost giving it away!”

“I already told you,” I impatiently shot back. “I really, *really* don’t want it.”

“What do you mean you don’t want it? Thirty-five isn’t low enough?” the vendor asked.

“All right, all right! Thirty then,” the vendor proclaimed. “But *that’s* the last of it! What, you won’t even let me break even?!”

At this point we had gone a good block and a half around the flea market with this woman stalking us with her insistent haggling and T-shirt in hand for all the other vendors and shoppers to see. Clearly puzzled by my increasingly visible frustration, Liyan pulled me aside.

“What are you thinking? It’s not a bad price and she might even go down to twenty,” my friend told me.

Liyan, of course, was right about the price. Hell, at the original 50RMB the T-shirt was a *steal* when I thought about it in terms of the exchange rate. Yet all the magic of 8:1 seemed beside the point and could not make me feel better as a shopper at the moment. For somehow Liyan had interpreted my failure at communicating “no” to the vendor as a skillful ploy for getting the lowest possible price. Who knew my ineptitude could look so calculated?

Exasperated, I tried explaining again: “When I say, I don’t want it, *I mean, I-don’t-want-it!*” I told my friend, shaking my head vigorously for extra emphasis. How could I be more explicit?

Convincing Liyan, unfortunately, did nothing to shake the persistent vendor, who wedged the T-shirt between us once more with increasing drama and rancor. As I realized way too late, there was no such thing as “just looking” to Chinese vendors like this woman at the flea market. The act of looking was never neutral, just something one did with no strings attached in the course of shopping in Fuzhou. To linger over an object, as I did with this T-shirt, was to invest it with consumer desire and potential market value. It was an invitation to the ritual of haggling, with all its implied drama of offers and counter-offers. Once I had accidentally signaled my interest in the T-shirt to the vendor, walking away and repeatedly saying “no” could easily be read as part of the theatrics of bargaining. So even as we had walked two and a half aisles away from the vendor’s original booth, she continued to trail us while hurling prices and insults with equal vigor.

“Geesh [*zhenshi*]!” Liyan finally huffed on my behalf when she realized we were unable to shake this vendor.

“She said she didn’t want it so why don’t you go back to your store?” Liyan tried to reason with her.

“She doesn’t want it? Then why waste my time?” the vendor complained. “What, Miss, it isn’t good enough? Go look around then!” she

demanded. "I tell you, go and see if you can find better here! Go then! *Go look! Go, go, go!*"

The vendor was beside herself with our perceived insults and injuries to all her efforts and her goods. But she had yet to call it quits. Even after a solid ten-minute walk she still stuck to us like an embarrassing "kick me" note on the back. After a while, I started to wonder if I would *ever* shake this vendor without agreeing to buy her goods. Would she follow me out of this market and all the way home just to yell at me about this T-shirt while I proceeded to cook and eat dinner? Would I wake up tomorrow morning only to find her continuing the harangue – But it's pure cotton! – while I brushed my teeth? In a paranoid and desperate moment, I thought of succumbing to the sale just to get her off my back. Perhaps if I convinced myself that this was all about the 8:1 exchange rate, it wouldn't be so bad to lose 30RMB. Somehow, though, I knew I would still feel like a fool – whether a 30-RMB fool or a 5-USD fool.

Alas, it took more than twenty minutes and a couple more blocks around the flea market before we thought we had freed ourselves – *finally* – from this vendor. In fact, we had just recovered our composure enough for some intentional haggling over an umbrella I truly wanted to buy when there she was again, stomping towards us once more, with that Pac-Man T-shirt still in her hand. There was no other choice: I dropped the umbrella, grabbed Liyan's arm and headed for the nearest exit.

"No more shopping," I told my friend in exhausted defeat.

"All right, then. Let's go," Liyan sighed in resignation.

"That woman was really something. A true nutcase [*shenjing bing*]," my friend muttered with a faint wisp of bemusement, quietly chuckling to herself about our shopping debacle.

Shortly after this incident, Liyan decided to accompany me once more on my quest to purchase an umbrella after the last one had been so unceremoniously dropped in mid-haggle in my moment of panic at the flea market. Considering the 8:1 exchange rate, I knew I could probably get a good deal – at least, dollar-wise – with or without my friend by my side. But this time I was determined to feel like a savvy, or at least self-respecting, shopper by following Liyan's lead in the rules of consumer engagement. A no-nonsense Chinese native, Liyan promised to be a model of purchasing power on this shopping venture by serving as my surrogate in the art of the haggle or what the locals called *taojia huanjia* (literally, solicit price, return price). Whatever I wanted to buy, she would negotiate on my behalf and in the process, hopefully, show me the ropes in this still unfamiliar and intimidating world of money talk and commodity exchange.

This time around we headed to Student Row, the ever-jammed and festive commercial strip hugging the hillside of a teacher's college and nearby secondary schools on the southern edge of the city. Up this winding, frantic street of shops, we pushed our way through roving, arm-linked cliques of fresh-faced school girls in baggy gym uniforms and preening teenage boys with matching bleached hair and bellbottom jeans, all the while avoiding eye contact with the aggressive salespeople trying to draw attention with blaring blow horns in their hands. By then, I had learned how unintended looks and careless browsing could get one into trouble. So we studiously made a beeline for the first accessories and knick-knack store in our sight.

After scouring the aisles past the piles of Hello Kitty vinyl wallets, sparkly butterfly hairclips and Taiwanese pop-star stationary, we finally zeroed in on a bin of assorted umbrellas gathering dust near the foot of the cashier's counter. Sifting through this bin, Liyan and I weighed each umbrella between us for its relative value – gripping the handle of one umbrella for its comfort and weight, sliding open another for its relative ease and coverage. Ultimately, the question before us boiled down to this: was there one umbrella out of this bunch that was worth haggling over? For as with all goods at the flea market, there were no monetary figures on display, no visible price tags on anything in this store. No cost of purchase could be determined without first engaging the seller in some fierce rounds of *taojia huanjia*. The price would have to be hard fought and hard won. It would have to be *work*.

Just as Liyan and I thought we had found an umbrella worth fighting for, a sprightly young woman, not more than late teens, launched the opening shot.

"Miss, you want that? It's on sale right now," she told us. "A great price ..."

I stepped aside to leave Liyan with the umbrella and the next move in her hands.

"How much?" my friend asked coolly.

"Twenty-four RMB – it's twenty percent off. Used to be thirty," the teenager replied with confidence.

"What? How could this *count* as a discount? *So expensive!*" Liyan jumped a small step back as if shocked by some lewd insult.

The theatrics of haggling had begun.

"That's our best price, Miss," the young saleswoman held firm.

Liyan responded by inspecting the umbrella in her clutched hand with equal parts of perplexity and disdain.

"No way!" she cried out in disbelief. "How could it be this much? The material is just average. It's not even anything good ... One to two years and it'll break!" Liyan predicted. "Ten RMB – can't be more than ten RMB!"

Although the umbrella seemed perfectly fine when we picked it out of the bin just minutes before, Liyan now acted as if it might crumble in her hand with the slightest of motions.

"Miss, you're really mistaken," the sales clerk admonished Liyan with sadness in her voice. "This umbrella of ours is the same as the ones sold in Fuzhou's *most* expensive department stores. No difference except ours is cheaper. If you don't believe me, go look for yourself," the clerk challenged my friend.

After Liyan heaped a new round of scornful looks and insults on the umbrella in question and the teenager responded with a new set of indignation, finally, the price began to budge.

"Look, this is the best I can do," the clerk noted as she furiously tapped a calculator with the tip of a pen and then insolently tossed it Liyan's way with a final figure: 20RMB.

Liyan snorted at the number and shot back another number, "Twelve RMB."

The sales clerk silently shook her head and crossed her arms in steely defiance.

After what seemed like an interminable pause, Liyan tried again.

"All right, all right. Fourteen then ... fourteen then ..." she repeated the number briskly and decisively as she began to pull some bills out of her wallet.

"Take it, take it then," Liyan gruffly ordered the teenager, as she disdainfully pushed the money her way without once looking the sales clerk in the face.

For a brief but pointed moment, the clerk did not move or respond in silent protest over her maltreatment by Liyan. Then with an equally efficient gesture, she snapped the money out of Liyan's hand and then, without a word, stomped away from us to the cashier's counter. After listening with a determined scowl and downcast eyes to the fading footsteps of the sales clerk, Liyan finally nudged me with a friendly elbow and broke into a conspiratorial, victorious smile. I sighed in relief: it looked like the rough and tense tussle over money had finally reached its conclusion.

As it turned out, I was wrong to think that a settled *price* would be the end of money matters between buyer and seller. When the sales clerk returned with change for Liyan, my friend again grew hostile while scrutinizing a crumpled 2RMB bill she had been handed.

"What's the idea?!" she angrily confronted the teenager. "Why'd you give me money this worn-out and damaged [*po*]! Go get me another!" Liyan impatiently demanded as she tossed the ragged 2RMB note back to the sales clerk.

Not budging from her spot, the teenager rolled her eyes. "Money's money," she shrugged indifferently. "This old bill – we also got it from a customer, so now we pass it back to a customer ... If *you* don't want it, it's not *our* problem," the clerk added.

"*What?*!" Liyan was apoplectic at this point. "Money this old, this damaged – *where* can you possibly *use* it?" Liyan asked. "Tell me, who else is going to accept it, huh? *Who else?*! How can you give people this kind of useless change?" she scolded the clerk. "You call *this* doing *business*?"

Exasperated and weary, the sales clerk heaved a low sigh and finally tossed a brand-new, crisp 2RMB bill Liyan's way to stop her from ranting. While Liyan was finally appeased by this exchange, she stood in the store for a few minutes more while suspiciously inspecting another brand-new 50RMB bill that the same sales clerk had handed to her as change.

"A lot of new bills out there are also fake," she explained as she showed me how to rub a finger against the grain of the bill to feel for its proper inked texture and then to fold it in halves and thirds to check for the correct alignment of watermarks.

I came out of this experience feeling more intimidated than ever about shopping in China. Not only did one need to brace for some hostile exchanges of looks, insults and money talk in order to seal a deal, it seemed that the actual bills changing hands in the end were themselves full of suspicion and potential deceit. Nothing seemed transparent or secure when it came to the exchange of money for goods – neither the price of the commodity nor the money used in payment. From the initial act of haggling to the final transaction of purchase, one constantly fought against the demoralizing feeling of being outsmarted and duped by a craftier seller armed with uncanny, high-ball prices and worthless, fake money for change. A raw deal, as I learned, was never just a matter of monetary loss but, moreover, an inescapable reflection of one's character and moral worth.

I never did develop a knack for shopping, despite the best efforts of friends like Liyan in schooling me in the art of the haggle and the science of counterfeit bills. Perhaps I was just too attached or too stubborn to give up my American expectations of "shopping": the sense of anonymity and private space, the trained smiles of "customer service," the various comforts

of standardization from price tags to muzak. For despite my earlier fantasies of superior purchasing power in China, shopping became a singular source of personal stress and embarrassment in my everyday life. This was mainly because people never ceased to look at me with profound disappointment whenever I failed to haggle fiercely enough for a better price or when I blithely accepted worn-out and crisply new bills without much angry protest or careful examination. In fact, the combative pressure of *taojia huanjia* ultimately made me avoid shopping as much as possible and, when necessary, to purchase things stealthily outside the protective, familiar circle of pitying friends.

Truth be known, I became a bona-fide secret over-payer in China, meekly accepting sky-high opening offers from stunned proprietors who had been gearing up for a good money fight. To me, it never seemed to be worth the hassle to haggle a vendor over a few RMB here and there – particularly when I converted the amounts into pennies and nickels in USD. But to those around me, to fixate on the numerical sum of monetary equations was to miss out on the *whole* of monetary exchange. Purchasing power was less about how much money one could spend than about how skillfully one negotiated exchange relations in the act of sealing a deal. The best price, after all, was worth fighting for because in the ritual of *taojia huanjia*, it was always business *and* personal at the same time. In money matters these two aspects could not be separated.

While it has often been suggested that money is an impersonal medium of exchange, the transcendent equivalent of all things, yet not quite a “thing” in itself, I could not help but notice the plainness and simple materiality of the money changing hands in the countless shopping transactions I witnessed and personally bungled through during my time in Fuzhou. Watching Liyan, among others, tossing back ragged, old RMB notes and rubbing the inked watermarks on crisp new ones with equal suspicion, I learned to appreciate money for its particular sensual properties as various paper bills and metal coins and for its personal and social meanings as distinctive state currencies – as RMB and as USD. In fact, despite my laziness and general distaste for inspecting every RMB I got for signs of counterfeit, people’s anxieties over the trustworthiness of their currency did ultimately have an infectious effect on me. For instance, it affected not only where I changed currency (only at reputable branches of the Bank of China) but moreover, how closely I examined my newly acquired stack of RMB when I did so. Moreover, like others in possession of USD around me, I learned to exchange USD only sparingly, obtaining only what RMB was necessary to meet my monthly expenses.

While 8:1 may have been the instinctive slogan of the U.S.-bound Fuzhouese migrants, as I found out, it was not the only reason people thought dollars were “bigger” and “better.” If RMB changed hands amidst plenty of mutual scrutiny and suspicion, the opposite was true of dollars, which usually flowed smoothly from one party to another with much confidence and trust. This is partly because, while people used RMB in everyday market transactions among strangers they had no reason to trust, they mainly circulated USD as remittances, loans or gifts to already familiar others such as kin, friends and neighbors.<sup>1</sup> RMB, as people told me, was the currency they “spent” and used to “buy things,” whereas USD were strictly for giving and receiving in intimate circles and on special occasions. In contrast to the combative tit-for-tat of RMB exchanges, where people eyed the money and goods changing hands with equal suspicion, the practical handling of dollars was often quite one-sided, if mutually affirmative, among the villagers with whom I lived in the Fuzhou countryside. Regardless of whether it was a loan from a neighbor or repayment to gods at local temples, the giver typically did all the counting and handling of dollars, while the receiver humbly and unquestioningly accepted the money. I was often impressed by the giver, who under the purview of the recipient, would briskly shuffle through the stack of money with the efficiency of a bank teller and the bravado of a card player. In turn, the recipient would quickly stow away the stack of bills without inspection or care as if embarrassed by any suggestion of suspicion or calculation. Unlike RMB transactions, to scrutinize the USD changing hands in these circumstances was to undermine the very foundation of personal trust through which such monetary exchange could occur in the first place.

But there was yet a larger reason why villagers invested so much more trust in the USD over the RMB. As I discovered, the same suspicion of unfair gain that tainted all my shopping ventures was also echoed in village gripes about local officials and party elites, who just happened to be seen by villagers as the main beneficiaries of RMB wealth. Specifically, people often complained that the wealth made locally by officials and village elites involved unfair advantages like better access to higher education and superior personal connections. Moreover, there was widespread suspicion that RMB wealth was produced by dishonest means, such as embezzlement, bribery, favoritism and other corrupt practices involving the abuse of political authority. After all, if no secret corruption existed behind the accumulation of RMB, people reasoned, then why was all the Chinese state’s currency ending up mainly in the hands of those with privileged

state positions? In turn, why did the efforts of honest and hard-working commoners not result in local prosperity? In contrast to the suspicious fortunes of local elites, the meager earnings of internal migrants from the hinterlands of China were often cited as evidence of the futility of honest labor as a means to RMB accumulation. Everyone may have some RMB to spend and to lose but, as most villagers complained, only officials and local elites seemed to have it in *excess*.

This is why the goal of getting USD to spend RMB made both practical and moral sense to these outward-bound Fuzhounese villagers. For unlike the RMB, the dollar provided Longyan residents with an alternative means for imagining money accumulation as a morally earned and therefore deserving project. While the suspect RMB wealth of officials and elites only seemed to reinscribe a status quo of local inequality, dollar prosperity suggested that through the alienating and challenging trials of honest labor abroad, the most humble commoners could be transformed into the successful entrepreneurial vanguard of a new Chinese modernity. Elaborately displayed in temple rituals and other local festivities, dollars were powerful tokens of a rite of passage through which Fuzhounese villagers imagined transforming themselves from marginal "peasants" into model cosmopolitans. Not only did the USD have the superior exchange value of 1:8 RMB, but through the process of its accumulation overseas, the dollar, unlike the RMB, also offered a success story premised on a moral ethos of hard work and sacrifice. In this way, saying that the dollar was "bigger" and "better" than the RMB was never just a declaration of monetary value but also a judgment of the moral value of those who held such different currencies.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. Unlike the RMB, the USD was never used for commercial purchases in Fuzhou. Rather, it mainly changed hands through personal circles as markers of success overseas, affirmation of social ties or as extensions of personal credit. The one exception to this intimate sphere of exchange is the national banking institution which generally mediated the overseas transfers of USD from relatives abroad to villagers in Fuzhou as well as the exchange of USD for RMB (along with the local black market for currency exchange, which could also be considered a sphere of intimate relations). Typically, people would exchange USD for RMB only as needed for making everyday market transactions, which only took place with RMB as the currency of exchange. It is also important to mention that people give monetary gifts not only in USD but also sometimes in RMB, though for reasons I mention below in this paper, USD gifts are preferred because of the superior moral associations of this currency.

2. While the moral discourse of RMB wealth revolves around suspicions of state corruption, I have noted elsewhere how villagers with dollar wealth are sometimes accused of "wastefulness" and "selfishness." However, corruption does not seem to figure at all in moral complaints against those with overseas wealth.