

Weak-Obligation Reciprocity and the Making of Belonging: Offline Wuliao Exchange in Chinese Fan Communities

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Abstract: Offline exchange remains a crucial but under-examined part of platformized fan culture. In contemporary Chinese fandom, fans often bring wuliao, including cards, stickers, postcards, handmade ornaments, and other fan-made or fan-circulated materials, to concerts, theatre performances, fan meetings, and other events. These objects are given, exchanged, photographed, remembered, and sometimes used to start further online and offline relationships. Drawing on participant observation, 13 qualitative interviews, and supplementary online observation in the performance-viewing community around Shanghai People's Square, this article examines how wuliao exchange turns ordinary materials into gifts and how these gifts help produce a sense of fan belonging. The analysis develops the concept of weak-obligation reciprocity to describe a form of exchange in which return is expected but not compulsory, remembered but not strictly calculated, and morally evaluated without becoming a formal debt. The article argues that wuliao exchange creates situated ethics, transforms spectators into recognizable community members, and converts affective labor into visibility and subcultural capital. At the same time, it also generates tensions around value mismatch, competition, and unequal access to recognition. By placing Chinese fan wuliao exchange in dialogue with gift theory, material culture, and fan studies, the article shows how weak-tie communities can produce temporary but meaningful forms of belonging through small objects and embodied co-presence.

Keywords: Fan communities, gift exchange, wuliao, weak-obligation reciprocity, belonging, subcultural capital, embodied interaction, Chinese fandom.

1. Introduction

Platformized fan culture is often described through the language of online participation. Fans vote, repost, comment, edit videos, produce fan fiction, circulate images, and coordinate collective actions through social media platforms. These digital practices are central to contemporary fandom, but they do not exhaust the ways in which fan communities are made. Around theatres, concert venues, exhibition halls, and fan events, fans also meet face to face and exchange small material objects. These practices are ordinary, often low-cost, and sometimes fleeting. Yet they are also socially consequential because they allow otherwise loosely connected individuals to recognize one another as members of the same interpretive and affective world.

This article examines one such practice: offline wuliao exchange in Chinese fan communities. In everyday fan language, wuliao refers to material items associated with a performance, performer, character, group, or shared fan memory. The term can include printed cards, postcards, stickers, badges, photo cards, handmade ornaments, acrylic items, packaging, small notes, and other objects that circulate among fans. Some items are purchased, but many are designed, printed, assembled, or repackaged by fans themselves. Their value is therefore not reducible to market price. A printed card may matter because it recalls a line from a musical, a gesture by a performer, a particular show date, or a shared affective scene. When such an object is handed from one fan to another, it becomes more than a thing. It becomes a medium of recognition.

The study focuses on the performance-viewing community around Shanghai People's Square. This area contains dense theatre and performance venues and attracts repeated

spectators of musicals, plays, concerts, and related cultural events. It is neither a stable neighborhood community nor a fully anonymous crowd. Many participants do not know one another in everyday life, but they may recognize usernames, bags, tags, fan-made objects, seat positions, or recurring attendance patterns. The field is therefore well suited to examining how weak ties become socially meaningful through material exchange. It also differs from large-scale idol fandom in which organized fan clubs, ranking systems, and highly visible platform metrics may play stronger roles. In this smaller performance-viewing context, exchange is often organized through situational judgment, interpersonal tact, and repeated but not guaranteed encounters.

The article asks two questions. First, how does offline wuliao exchange operate as a social practice? What rules, expectations, and ethical boundaries organize giving, receiving, and returning? Second, how does this material practice contribute to the construction of fan belonging? In answering these questions, the article argues that wuliao exchange should not be treated as a decorative supplement to fandom or as a simple circulation of peripheral goods. It is a social mechanism through which objects, affective labor, co-presence, and recognition are brought together.

This argument builds on, but also extends, existing work on fan gift culture and Chinese fan material exchange. Hellekson (2009) and Turk (2014) show that fan works often circulate through a gift economy in which labor, recognition, and value cannot be fully captured by market exchange [5]. Tan, Li, and Zou (2025) provide an important account of Chinese offline fan wuliao exchange through the framework of reciprocity, benefit-seeking, and connection [13]. The present article takes this insight further in three ways. First, it shifts the analytical center from exchange functions to

identity transition, asking how a spectator becomes recognizable as a community member. Second, it specifies the form of reciprocity involved. The exchange is neither obligation-free nor governed by strong debt. It is better understood as weak-obligation reciprocity. Third, it highlights the structural tension between egalitarian fan discourse and unequal access to visibility, skill, resources, and centrality.

This distinction is important because the same observable practice can be interpreted in different ways. If wuliao exchange is treated only as reciprocity, the analysis may miss the variable strength of obligation. If it is treated only as benefit-seeking, the affective and moral dimensions of giving may be flattened. If it is treated only as connection, the unequal distribution of recognition may remain under-examined. This article therefore uses the Shanghai case to ask not simply what offline exchange does, but how it produces membership through a light, morally evaluated, and materially mediated form of mutual orientation.

The article contributes to three areas of scholarship. For gift theory, it shows how gift relations operate in weak-tie, interest-based communities rather than only in kinship, village, or long-term acquaintance networks. For fan studies, it foregrounds offline material practice as a site of relational production rather than treating fandom primarily as text consumption or online participation. For studies of digital culture and urban sociability, it suggests that platformized communities still rely on embodied interaction and small objects to produce what may be called a temporary nearby relation: a brief but meaningful sense of being socially close to others who share the same affective world.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

(1) From textual production to material-relational practice

Fan studies has long challenged the image of fans as passive or irrational consumers. Jenkins (2013) described fans as textual poachers who appropriate media texts and remake them into their own cultural resources [8]. Fiske (1992) similarly emphasized the cultural economy of fandom, in which fans produce meanings, distinctions, and forms of value outside official commercial channels [4]. These interventions shifted attention from mass audiences as receivers to fans as active interpreters and producers.

Later work extended this emphasis on production to fan labor and gift culture. Hellekson (2009) argues that online fan communities often organize value through gifts rather than through direct market exchange [5]. Fan works acquire value because they are freely given, recognized, circulated, and reciprocated through comments, attention, gratitude, or further creation. Skågeby (2010) similarly treats gift-giving as a conceptual framework for understanding social behavior in online networks, where exchange produces relational meanings that exceed commodity value [12]. Turk (2014) complicates this picture by showing that fan labor is not simply free or outside value. It involves time, effort, skill, emotional investment, and forms of worth that may not be monetized but are nevertheless socially evaluated. Terranova's (2000) account of free labor in digital culture is useful here because it shows how affective and cultural participation can become productive even when it is not formally paid [14].

This body of work is essential, but it tends to emphasize textual, digital, and creative production more than face-to-

face material exchange. Fan fiction, video editing, fan art, and online circulation have received more sustained attention than the small objects that pass from hand to hand at offline events. Yet these objects are not trivial. They are material anchors for recognition, memory, and entry into social relations. They also make visible the labor of fans who design, print, cut, package, carry, and distribute them. The gap addressed by this article is therefore not whether fans produce culture, but how material and embodied forms of production organize social membership in weak-tie fan settings.

(2) Gift exchange and the social life of things

Gift exchange theory provides the second foundation for this study. Mauss (1990) argued that gifts are not free objects [10]. They are social facts structured by obligations to give, receive, and return. A gift carries part of the giver and creates a relation that cannot be reduced to economic calculation. Yan's (1996) study of gift flows in a Chinese village further demonstrates how gifts become embedded in social networks, face, obligation, and moral evaluation [17]. These works help explain why a seemingly small object can carry relational weight.

However, classic gift theory often assumes relatively dense and durable social relations. Kinship, village life, ritualized exchange, and long-term acquaintance networks make obligation visible and enforceable. Fan communities are different. Participants may meet once, recognize one another only through usernames or objects, or remain connected through a temporary event-based relation. The obligation generated by a gift is therefore present but softened. It does not usually require an immediate equivalent return, but it still produces expectations of gratitude, tact, recognition, careful handling, or future acknowledgment.

Several theoretical resources help make this softer form visible. Parry (1986) cautions against treating gift obligation as a universal and uniform structure. Hyde (2007) and Hénaff (2010) emphasize that gifts can create symbolic recognition beyond calculative exchange [6, 7, 11]. Caillé (2020) further positions gift relations as a broad alternative to purely utilitarian models of social action [3]. These approaches make it possible to see fan wuliao exchange as neither pure altruism nor simple strategic exchange. It is a mixed practice in which affect, recognition, and interest coexist.

The social life of things also matters. Appadurai (1986) argues that objects move through regimes of value, while Kopytoff (1986) shows that things can acquire cultural biographies as they pass through different contexts [1, 9]. Wuliao is a clear example of this process. A piece of printed paper may begin as a personal souvenir or a low-cost fan-made object. Through exchange, it becomes evidence of shared attendance, shared taste, and shared emotional memory. Its value is produced not only by design or cost but by circulation, timing, recognition, and the story attached to it.

The unresolved issue, then, is how gift theory should be adapted for weak-tie fan communities. If the Maussian model stresses strong obligation, and if market exchange stresses calculative equivalence, fan wuliao exchange occupies a middle position. This article names that middle position weak-obligation reciprocity.

(3) Subcultural capital, visibility, and affective labor

The third body of literature concerns capital, distinction, and affective labor. Bourdieu (1984) shows that taste works as a system of distinction [2], while Thornton (1995) develops the concept of subcultural capital to explain how status is

accumulated within cultural scenes. In fan communities, status is rarely based only on money [15]. It may depend on knowledge, craft, aesthetic judgment, dedication, attendance, access to information, or the ability to produce objects that others want to receive and display.

This perspective helps reinterpret the fan term *qiuyi*. Literally, *qiuyi* can suggest seeking benefit or advantage. In the context of *wuliao* exchange, however, the benefit is rarely direct monetary profit. It is better understood as a composite process of recognition-seeking, visibility-seeking, relationship-seeking, and symbolic capital accumulation. A fan may give away materials without charging money, but the gift can still make the giver more recognizable. It can lead to return photos, public thanks, invitations, information sharing, or entry into more central circles.

This does not mean that fan exchange is cynical. Affective labor and instrumental possibility are intertwined. Fans may sincerely enjoy making materials, expressing affection for performers, and sharing memories with others. At the same time, their labor can become visible and evaluated. Terranova (2000) and Turk (2014) are useful precisely because they show that unpaid or gift-based cultural work can still generate value, hierarchy, and unequal recognition [14, 16].

The literature therefore suggests a central tension. Fan communities often speak in egalitarian terms: love, voluntariness, generosity, and shared enthusiasm. Yet the practice of exchange may create distinctions between skilled producers and ordinary recipients, between central and peripheral members, and between those who know the rules and those who are judged tactless. This article treats that tension as part of the social mechanism rather than as an exception to it.

(4) Conceptual vocabulary

Three terms organize the analysis. First, *wuliao* refers to fan-associated materials that are made, carried, given, exchanged, stored, photographed, or displayed in relation to a performance or fan object. The term includes both self-made and repurposed objects, but the analysis focuses on items whose value is activated through fan circulation rather than through official market status alone.

Second, *qiuyi* is used cautiously. Instead of translating it as narrow profit-seeking, this article treats it as symbolic benefit-seeking. It includes the pursuit of recognition, visibility, relationship opportunities, and access to community information. This interpretation allows the analysis to avoid a false opposition between affect and interest.

Third, weak-obligation reciprocity describes a form of gift exchange with four features. Return is expected but not compulsory. Return is not necessarily immediate. Return is not required to be materially equivalent. Yet the exchange remains normatively regulated through gratitude, tact, memory, and community evaluation. This concept is the article's main theoretical proposition.

The term is not intended as another name for gift economy in general. It is more specific. It differs from balanced reciprocity because participants do not expect an equivalent or immediate return. It differs from generalized reciprocity because the community is not a stable moral collective with diffuse long-term obligations; many participants are weakly connected and event-based. It differs from market exchange because value is not measured primarily by price. It also differs from an obligation-free gift because responses are still noticed and judged. Weak-obligation reciprocity therefore identifies a middle zone: exchange is light enough to remain

voluntary, but meaningful enough to create expectations of recognition.

3. Methodology

(1) Research site

The study is based on the performance-viewing community around Shanghai People's Square. This field is marked by a dense concentration of theatres, musicals, plays, concerts, and related cultural consumption spaces. Fans often gather before and after performances near venue entrances, nearby squares, subway exits, and other transitional public spaces. These settings are important because *wuliao* exchange usually occurs in short intervals rather than in formal meetings. Fans may recognize one another through bags, tags, usernames, posted exchange notices, or repeated attendance at similar performances.

The site is analytically useful because it combines repetition and looseness. It is not a village, school, workplace, or fan club with fixed membership. At the same time, it is not a purely anonymous public. Fans may repeatedly encounter the same people, but relations remain unevenly developed. Some become close acquaintances, some remain recognizable strangers, and some stay as observers. This allows the study to examine how belonging is produced under weak-tie conditions.

(2) Data collection

The study draws on three kinds of qualitative material. First, participant observation was conducted in offline spaces where exchange occurred, including theatre entrances, surrounding public spaces, and moments before and after performances. Fieldnotes were used to reconstruct observable features of exchange where such details were available, including initiation, handover, response, and boundary negotiation.

Second, the study uses 13 qualitative interviews. Interviewees included active producers and distributors of *wuliao*, moderate participants who sometimes received or exchanged materials, and observers who did not regularly exchange but could perceive the practice and its boundaries. The interviews asked participants to describe how they understood *wuliao*, how they decided whether and with whom to exchange, what counted as appropriate behavior, and whether exchange affected their sense of belonging.

Third, the study used approximately two months of supplementary online observation. Relevant Weibo super topics and fan chat groups were observed to understand how offline exchange was announced, remembered, photographed, and evaluated. Online material was used to contextualize offline practice rather than to replace direct observation.

(3) Participant categories

The sample is not presented as statistically representative. It is used to capture different positions within the exchange field. Based on participants' described roles in the exchange practice, the article analytically distinguishes participants by role rather than by identifying personal information.

Analytical category | Examples of cited participant IDs | Role in exchange | Relevance to analysis

Active producers and distributors | A01, A02, A03, A04 | Design, make, carry, distribute, or organize **wuliao** | Show how affective labor becomes recognition and connection

Moderate participants | B03 and other occasional participants | Receive, request, exchange, return photos, or maintain light contact | Show how situated rules and weak reciprocity are learned

Observers or peripheral participants | C02 and similar

participants | Notice exchange but rarely initiate it | Show boundaries, exclusion, and difficulty of entering the circle

This categorization is important because wuliao exchange does not mean the same thing to all participants. For active producers, it may create visibility and a recognizable identity. For moderate participants, it may provide entry into a shared affective world. For observers, it may reveal a boundary that is visible but difficult to cross.

The categories are also used as a comparative device. The analysis does not treat the most active producers as representatives of the whole community. Their accounts are read alongside occasional participants and observers in order to avoid romanticizing exchange as uniformly warm or inclusive. This comparison is especially important for identifying negative cases, including embarrassment, hesitation, exclusion, and pressure to match others' effort.

(4) Analytical strategy

The analysis follows an informed grounded theory approach. Rather than claiming that theory emerged from the data without prior concepts, the study used gift exchange theory, the social life of things, subcultural capital, and fan gift economy research as sensitizing concepts. These concepts guided attention to gifts, objects, labor, value, recognition, and hierarchy. They did not determine the final categories in advance.

The analysis proceeded through repeated reading of fieldnotes and interview materials. Initial coding identified recurring actions and evaluations, such as making materials, asking for materials, giving freely, returning photos, thanking, comparing value, feeling embarrassed, entering circles, and noticing outsiders. These codes were then grouped into broader themes: the social life of wuliao, situated ethics, weak obligation, belonging, visibility, and structural tension. Negative or complicating cases, such as value mismatch, involution, and peripheral observation, were retained because they revealed the limits of the community's egalitarian discourse.

The concept of weak-obligation reciprocity was developed through comparison across these themes. It does not simply restate Maussian obligation. It describes cases in which fans do not demand equivalent return but still evaluate whether a response is tactful, sincere, and socially appropriate. Rather than claiming statistical representativeness, later interviews and observations were used to check whether the main interpretive pattern recurred across different participant positions: exchange was described as voluntary, but improper requesting, cold response, or obvious value mismatch still produced moral judgment.

(5) Reflexivity and ethics

The researcher entered the field as a fellow fan with research awareness. This position provided access to ordinary interaction and helped the researcher understand implicit rules that might be difficult for a complete outsider to recognize. At the same time, it created a risk of over-identification with fan interpretations. The analysis therefore treats participants' warm descriptions of exchange together with accounts of embarrassment, exclusion, value comparison, and pressure.

To reduce identifiability, participants are identified by codes rather than real names. The article avoids naming specific private groups, accounts, performance dates, or identifying details that are unnecessary for the argument. Online observation is used only to contextualize patterns of coordination and remembrance. The study does not reproduce

private posts or chat content in identifiable form. These decisions are especially important because the field is small and because fan conflicts can easily become personal.

The study's evidence should therefore be read as interpretive rather than representative. It establishes a mechanism visible in this field rather than a frequency distribution of all fan exchange practices. This boundary shapes the claims made below. The article does not argue that all fan communities follow the same rules. It argues that the Shanghai performance-viewing field makes visible a form of weak reciprocity that may be useful for comparison with other interest-based communities.

4. Findings

(1) The life of gifts: From consumption by-products to emotional tokens

In the performance-viewing community, wuliao often begins as an extension of cultural consumption. Materials are linked to specific performances, roles, lines, costumes, songs, actors, or scenes. One participant explained that when she makes wuliao, she usually relates it to a detail in the performance rather than to an abstract idea of fandom. The object is meaningful because it presupposes shared recognition. The receiver understands the line, the scene, or the performer, and that understanding confirms that both parties belong to the same interpretive community.

This process changes the value of the object. A card or sticker may be inexpensive in material terms, but its social value depends on the memory it condenses. A fan who receives it does not only receive paper. She receives a sign that someone else watched, remembered, and cared about the same cultural moment. The object therefore becomes a compact carrier of shared attention.

The exchange scene can be understood as a sequence rather than a single act. A fan first prepares or carries materials before the performance. Around the venue, she reads the situation: whether others display exchange tags, whether they appear to be from the same fan circle, and whether the timing is appropriate. The handover is usually brief, but it contains several social signals: asking, offering, thanking, commenting on the design, or acknowledging the shared performance memory. After the event, the object may be stored, photographed, or mentioned online. This sequence shows how the gift relation is distributed across preparation, co-presence, and afterlife rather than confined to the moment of transfer.

The object's social life continues through circulation. A04 described the pleasure of seeing materials taken away and later photographed or discussed. The satisfaction did not come from selling the object. It came from knowing that the object had entered another fan's collection and memory. A material made for one event could thus move through several contexts: it is designed before the performance, exchanged near the venue, kept after the event, photographed online, and sometimes remembered in later encounters.

This circulation shows why wuliao cannot be understood only as a commodity or souvenir. It is not valuable simply because it is rare, official, or costly. Its value is activated by a chain of recognition. A receiver may keep the object because it marks the day of attendance. A giver may remember the receiver because she posted a return photo. Other fans may recognize the design online and connect it to a person or group. The object becomes a node in a distributed memory system.

The transformation from object to gift also depends on the

physical act of handing over. Offline exchange creates a short moment of co-presence. Fans see one another's bags, tags, expressions, and gestures. They say thank you, ask whether they can take one, or comment on the design. These small interactions matter because they give the object a relational scene. The same image posted online may circulate widely, but the handed object carries the memory of a specific encounter.

This finding supports Appadurai's and Kopytoff's insight that things acquire value through movement and classification. Wuliao is not born as a gift [1, 9]. It becomes a gift when it is embedded in a fan situation, recognized by another fan, and remembered as part of a shared event.

(2) Situated ethics and weak obligation

The exchange of wuliao is often described as voluntary, but it is not ruleless. Because exchanges occur in transitional public spaces, they rarely follow written rules or formal procedures. Instead, they depend on a situated ethics of request, tact, and response. Participants must judge when it is appropriate to ask, how much to take, whether to offer something in return, and how to acknowledge the giver.

The first rule is non-demanding request. B03 explained that she usually communicates with the person online first or looks for a visible signal such as a tag on a bag saying that materials are available. She then asks whether she can take one rather than assuming entitlement. This distinction is important. A request is acceptable when it recognizes the giver's control over the object. It becomes inappropriate when it treats free distribution as an unconditional right.

The second rule is tact. A02 recalled moments when passers-by or weakly connected spectators directly asked, "What is this? I also want one." For her, this behavior suggested that the person might not understand fan rules. The problem was not only that the person wanted an object. The problem was that the request ignored the relational meaning of the object. Tact therefore functions as a boundary marker. It distinguishes those who understand the fan situation from those who see only free goods.

The third rule is value-matching without exact equivalence. Fans do not usually calculate price in a strict way. A printed card, a handmade object, and an acrylic item may all circulate as wuliao, but participants still evaluate labor, design, scarcity, packaging, and symbolic meaning. If one party gives something considered elaborate and receives a perfunctory or careless response, the exchange may feel unbalanced. The evaluation is moral as much as material. It concerns sincerity, respect, and the recognition of effort.

These rules reveal the logic of weak-obligation reciprocity. The gift does not create a formal debt. A receiver is not required to return an object immediately or with equal cost. Yet the receiver is expected to respond properly. A proper response may include sincere thanks, careful preservation, an online return photo, a later gift, or continued friendliness. The return may be delayed, indirect, or symbolic, but the absence of any recognition can be noticed.

Weak-obligation reciprocity therefore differs from a strong Maussian model. In Mauss's model, the gift produces binding obligations to give, receive, and return [10]. In this fan community, the obligation is softer and more situational. One should not demand repayment, but one should also not behave as if the gift has no relational meaning. The social sanction is rarely formal exclusion. More often it appears as private judgment, reduced willingness to give again, or the sense that someone "does not know the rules."

This weak obligation is especially suited to interest-based communities. Fans may not share family ties, workplaces, or long-term obligations. They may meet only around a performance. Strong debt would make the exchange too heavy and discourage participation. Complete absence of obligation would make the exchange meaningless. Weak-obligation reciprocity solves this problem by keeping the relation light but not empty.

This also explains why small breaches of etiquette matter. Directly asking for materials without reading the situation, taking multiple items without acknowledgment, or treating the object as disposable does not usually lead to formal punishment. Yet such behavior can be remembered as a sign that the person does not understand the shared grammar of exchange. The sanction is weak, but it is not absent. It appears as reduced willingness to interact, private evaluation, or reluctance to give again. In this sense, weak obligation is reproduced through small judgments rather than explicit rules.

(3) The construction of belonging: From spectator to community member

The most important social function of wuliao exchange is that it helps transform isolated spectators into recognizable community members. Watching a performance alone can be emotionally intense but socially private. Receiving or exchanging wuliao changes this experience because it gives the spectator a material sign of being seen by others who share the same enthusiasm.

For some participants, receiving materials produces a sense of acceptance. The object says that one's presence at the event is not merely individual. It is part of a shared fan situation. A small card or sticker can become evidence that one has entered a community, even if only briefly. This does not require deep friendship. It requires a moment in which another person acknowledges the same object of affection.

For active producers, the identity effect is stronger. Making wuliao allows them to become producers of meaning rather than only consumers of performances. A03 described the pleasure of seeing others discuss her materials after a performance. The recognition attached to the object returned to the maker as a form of social identity. She became someone whose materials others could recognize.

A01 made this relational logic explicit. She explained that liking the performer and wanting to promote him was important, but another motivation was that other fans might get to know her through the materials. They might later share information with her or invite her to attend activities together. This statement does not reduce the gift to strategy. Rather, it shows how affect and relationship-building operate together. The gift is sincere and connective at the same time.

The construction of belonging is uneven. Observers also perceive the boundary created by wuliao exchange. C02 said that people who often make materials seem to form a small circle and know one another well. Someone like her, who usually watches alone and does not interact, finds it difficult to enter because there is no reason to start a conversation. Wuliao provides such a reason. Without it, the community remains visible but not easily accessible.

This difference shows that belonging is not simply an inner feeling. It is produced through recognizable practices. To carry materials, ask properly, thank properly, return photos, or remember a maker is to participate in the community's social grammar. The object opens a conversation, but the conversation also teaches the rules of membership. Through repeated exchanges, fans learn who is generous, who is

skilled, who is central, who is approachable, and who may be judged tactless.

The identity produced here is therefore neither deep friendship nor anonymous crowd membership. It is a light but meaningful community identity. A fan may not know another person's real name, occupation, or everyday life. Yet she may know that person's fan identity, aesthetic style, exchange habit, or role in the performance-viewing scene. Wuliao makes this limited recognition durable enough to matter.

(4) Capital, visibility, and structural tension

The construction of belonging does not mean that the community is fully egalitarian. Wuliao exchange also produces differences in status. Craft skill, aesthetic judgment, time, money, access to printing resources, and online visibility can all be converted into subcultural capital. A fan who repeatedly makes well-designed or desirable materials may become more recognizable than one who only receives.

This is where *qiuyi* becomes analytically useful. Participants may not describe themselves as calculating profit. Many emphasize love, sharing, and voluntary giving. Yet the practice can still generate symbolic benefits. A successful object may attract return photos, reposts, thanks, invitations, and new connections. These outcomes can move a fan toward the center of a small circle. The benefit is therefore relational and symbolic rather than directly economic.

This conversion produces tension because the community often values non-calculation. Fans may say that one should not care too much about return. At the same time, they still notice whether a response is sincere, whether a receiver only takes without acknowledging, whether the returned object feels careless, or whether someone repeatedly receives high-value materials without contributing. The discourse of generosity coexists with moral accounting.

Value mismatch is one expression of this tension. It does not always refer to price. It may involve a mismatch between labor and response. A fan who has spent hours designing, printing, and packaging materials may feel disappointed if the receiver treats them as disposable. Another fan may worry that her own materials are too simple to exchange with someone who makes elaborate objects. In this way, the gift economy reproduces subtle hierarchies even while denying strict equivalence.

Involution is another expression. When high-quality materials are widely photographed and circulated online, they can raise the implicit standard for future exchange. Ordinary participants may feel pressure to make something more elaborate, more beautiful, or more expensive so as not to be embarrassed. The voluntary gift then becomes a site of comparison. What begins as affective sharing can become symbolic competition.

The online circulation of offline exchange intensifies this process. A material object handed over near a theatre can later be posted on Weibo or shared in a group chat. The online post extends the object's social life and gives the maker visibility beyond the immediate encounter. This can strengthen belonging, but it can also turn exchange into a display field. The more visible the object, the more likely it is to become a marker of taste and status.

Thus, wuliao exchange creates warmth and hierarchy at the same time. It helps fans build belonging, but it also differentiates active producers, ordinary participants, observers, and those judged as tactless or free-riding. This duality is not a failure of the practice. It is part of how the practice works. The same object that connects fans can also

rank them.

5. Discussion

(1) Weak-obligation reciprocity beyond strong gift obligation

The findings suggest that fan wuliao exchange requires a modification of classic gift theory. Mauss's model remains important because it shows that gifts create relations and obligations. Yet the obligation found in this study is weaker, more situational, and less enforceable than the obligations usually emphasized in strong gift systems. Fans are expected to respond, but response does not have to be immediate, equivalent, or formally recognized as repayment.

Weak-obligation reciprocity therefore names a social form that is neither market exchange nor pure altruism. It is not market exchange because the value of wuliao is not reducible to price and because participants often reject explicit calculation. It is not pure altruism because gifts are remembered, evaluated, and sometimes converted into recognition. It is reciprocity because giving creates an expectation of response. It is weak-obligation because the response is flexible and low in coercive force.

This concept helps explain how weak-tie communities can remain open without becoming meaningless. If the obligation were too strong, exchange would become burdensome and would discourage strangers or newcomers. If there were no obligation, the object would lose much of its relational force. Weak obligation allows the practice to remain light, voluntary, and emotionally meaningful.

(2) Materiality and embodied co-presence in platformized fandom

The study also shows why offline materiality matters in a platformized fan world. Online platforms are essential to contemporary fandom. They coordinate attendance, circulate images, archive memories, and expand visibility. However, the offline exchange of objects produces a form of relational presence that online interaction cannot fully replace. The handover of an object involves bodily proximity, eye contact, gesture, tone, hesitation, thanks, and immediate feedback.

These embodied details help participants evaluate whether an exchange is appropriate. A request can be polite or intrusive. A thank-you can feel sincere or perfunctory. A gift can be handled carefully or casually. These judgments depend on the small signs of face-to-face interaction. The material object therefore works together with embodied co-presence to produce trust and recognition.

At the same time, offline and online practices are not separate. The object often moves from offline handover to online display. A return photo, a post, or a group chat message extends the exchange beyond the venue. This online afterlife can deepen the relationship, make the maker visible, and help others recognize the object. The social life of wuliao is therefore hybrid. It begins with material co-presence but often continues through platformed circulation.

(3) Rebuilding the nearby as a modest analytical proposition

The case suggests a modest way to think about "the nearby" in urban and platformized culture. Fans in this study do not necessarily share neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, or family networks. Their connection is organized around performances, online coordination, and repeated attendance. Yet through wuliao exchange, they can create temporary but real moments of nearness.

This claim should not be overstated. The study does not

show that all young people rebuild local sociality through fan objects. Nor does it show that wuliao exchange produces deep or durable friendship in every case. Many relations remain light, event-based, and unequal. Some participants remain peripheral despite repeated attendance. The point is more specific: in this case, small objects provide a mechanism through which an interest-based urban public can become momentarily nearby.

This interpretation also clarifies the article's relation to Tan, Li, and Zou (2025). Their framework of reciprocity, benefit-seeking, and connection identifies the main functions of offline fan material exchange. The present article specifies how those functions are organized through weak obligation and how they contribute to identity transition. Reciprocity becomes weak-obligation reciprocity. Benefit-seeking becomes symbolic capital and visibility-seeking. Connection becomes the practical transformation from spectator to recognizable participant.

The broader implication is that weak-tie communities may not need strong institutions to generate social order. They can rely on minor objects, repeated situational encounters, and shared evaluations of tact. This does not make such communities stable or equal, but it shows how belonging can be produced in modest and temporary forms. For studies of platformized culture, this matters because it demonstrates that online coordination does not replace embodied exchange. Instead, platformed visibility and offline co-presence work together to create light but consequential social bonds.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined offline wuliao exchange in the performance-viewing community around Shanghai People's Square. Drawing on participant observation, 13 qualitative interviews, and supplementary online observation, it shows that wuliao moves from a by-product of cultural consumption to a gift-like object with a social life. Through circulation, it condenses shared memory, creates situated ethics, and helps fans recognize one another as members of the same affective community.

The article's main theoretical contribution is the concept of weak-obligation reciprocity. This concept describes a form of exchange in which return is expected but not compulsory, non-equivalent but still evaluated, delayed but remembered, and informal but normatively regulated. It helps explain why fan gifts can remain light and voluntary while still producing obligations, judgments, and relations.

For fan studies, the article shows that material practice deserves more central attention. Fans do not only interpret texts or participate online. They also make, carry, hand over, store, photograph, and remember objects. These objects become media through which belonging is produced. For gift theory, the article shows that gift relations continue to matter in weak-tie and interest-based communities, but their obligations may be softer than those in classic models of kinship or village exchange.

The study has limitations. The field site is limited to a Shanghai performance-viewing community, especially theatre and musical audiences. The findings may not apply directly to large idol fandoms, sports fandoms, anime conventions, or fan cultures with stronger organizational structures. The sample is qualitative and relatively small, and it cannot represent all Chinese fan practices. The study also

does not trace the long-term life of particular objects or relationships beyond the period of observation.

Future research could compare different fan communities to examine when weak-obligation reciprocity becomes stronger, weaker, or more explicitly commercialized. It could also follow particular objects over time, tracing how they move across offline events, online platforms, private collections, and later memories. Such work would deepen understanding of how small objects help build social worlds in the digital age.

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