

When recipient actions count as returns: gift-giving and relational expectations in Chinese K-pop fandom

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Abstract. This article examines how recipient actions come to count as returns in structurally asymmetrical and publicly mediated gift relations. It focuses on gift-giving between young Chinese women in K-pop fandom and their idols, where gifts may later reappear in livestreams, photographs, performances, or fan interactions. Still, the meaning of these appearances remains uncertain. Drawing on multi-sited ethnography, participant observation, and interviews with 18 Chinese women aged 18 to 23, the article develops the concept of relational return to describe how a giver links a later recipient action to an earlier gift and interprets it as a meaningful response. It also introduces relational precedent to explain how an earlier return enters relationship history and shapes expectations of later response without creating a debt or guarantee. The findings show that material traceability, timing, repeated use, and public visibility help participants attribute actions to earlier gifts, while later absences, repairs, and changes in an object's trajectory can revise their meaning. The article contributes a temporal account of reciprocity under asymmetry.

Keywords: gift exchange, relational return, asymmetrical reciprocity, fan–idol relations, Chinese K-pop fandom

1. Introduction

A plush toy is passed to an idol via a friend at an airport. A bracelet is seen on the wrist of an idol in a livestream. Another gift never appears in the public material that its donor continues to watch. In each case, the object has gone beyond the giver, but what, if anything, has returned is uncertain. Return is not the same as successful delivery. Nor are the use, acknowledgement, and personal recognition interchangeable. The problem is not just what happens to a gift after it is given, but how a later recipient action is connected to that gift and comes to matter as something received back.

This uncertainty is especially salient in fan and idol relationships. Fans can contribute gifts, money, time, and organised support to a particular idol, but generally have a limited insight into what happens after an item has been handed over. Most of the gift's journey would be obscured, but it might appear later in a livestream, photograph or performance. The recipient's intent is also difficult to establish. We cannot tell from the visible use whether the giver had been recognised. Public display is not necessarily a response. At the same time, idols have more direct control over whether, in what form, and to whom an individual response takes place.

The media provide fans with more opportunities to see possible responses without giving them more control over those responses. Responses are easier to see, but not easier to secure.

Gift theory is an important starting point. Returns may be delayed, materially unequal or otherwise different in form from the original gift [1, 2]. Giving does not always create an obligation to repay, to express gratitude or to continue a personal relationship [3, 4]. What returns need not be material. Recognition and acknowledgement may also have a reciprocal value. Studies of fan gift economies show that recognition or later use of a gift can be important even if no counter gift is given [5, 6]. This work extends the scope of what can be of value in return. It leaves a more particular question less well explained: how does one particular recipient action become associated with one particular gift and come to count as something received back?

The question is important because a visible action does not necessarily have one meaning. An idol seen with an object could only show that it had been received and used. The giver may read more into it, as an acknowledgement of the gift, or as evidence that she herself was remembered. Another layer is public visibility. If other fans know who gave an object, then it may become a matter of comparison and discussion as to its use. And when one can see how others are responding, the lack of a similar response can also mean something. Public mediation does not decide whether an action is a return, but it provides the evidence and comparisons through which that judgement is made.

Consequently, this article asks:

How are recipients' actions read as returns, and how do such readings inform expectations of future response in structurally asymmetrical and publicly mediated gift relations?

It explores this question through the practice of gift-giving between young Chinese women in K-pop fandom and their idols. I use the term relational return to describe the process whereby a giver connects a later recipient action to an earlier gift, perceives that action as in some way a response to the gift, and gains relational value from the connection. Relational return is not a stable form of behaviour. It does not require a counter gift of equal value, overt thanks, public acknowledgement or evidence that the recipient recalls the giver. It depends on how the connection between an earlier gift and a later act is made and understood.

The argument is developed in three interconnected movements. First, giving alters what is relevant thereafter. Whether or not it reappears in later use, once it has crossed to the recipient's side, the object may become personally noticeable to the giver. It does not mean that a response is needed, anticipated, or due; rather, it means the gift has created something specific to watch for. Second, a subsequent act must be linked to the prior gift before it can be characterised as return. Participants made a judgement about an object's appearance, timing, repeated use, and later confirmation before deciding that the item they saw was the one they sent. Then they had to decide what the connection meant. The recipient action was a relational return only when the giver understood its relation to the earlier gift as a meaningful answer, not just proof that the object had been used.

Third, relational return could affect what happened next. When recalled in the context of other interactions, a return could become evidence of what that particular relationship had made possible before. I use the term relational precedent for a return remembered in this way. A precedent was not a promise, debt or guarantee. It made another response easier to imagine because something similar had occurred before. Fans could therefore learn from the history of a relationship without gaining control over its future.

The article draws on a broader multi-sited ethnographic study conducted between May and July 2025 across online and offline settings in China, the United Kingdom, and South Korea. The research involved 18 participants and combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography.

The article makes three related contributions. First, it moves beyond identifying attention or recognition as possible forms of return and explains how a concrete recipient action acquires that meaning. Second, it shows

that gifted objects do more than carry emotion. Their recognisable features and later appearances help connect recipient actions to earlier gifts, while their subsequent movements may reopen the meaning of earlier returns. Third, it explains how interpreted returns become precedents for later expectations without overcoming the structural inequality between giver and recipient.

2. Gifts, asymmetry, and how responses come to count as return

2.1. Giving, response relevance, and the question of return

Giving can make what happens next matter in a new way. Once something has been given, a later action by the recipient may become relevant because it can be related to that prior act of giving. This is not to say that all gifts carry a claim on the recipient. Delayed forms of return in gift exchange have long been possible, unequal in material value or different in kind from what was originally given [1, 2, 7]. The question of return cannot therefore be reduced to the question of whether an equivalent object is eventually given back.

Moreover, not all gifts require something in return. Some forms of giving do not require reciprocation, appreciation or a personal bond and therefore reciprocity cannot be regarded as an intrinsic feature of the gift [3, 4]. It is useful here to distinguish between the later response becoming relevant and becoming expected. Giving may make the recipient's later behaviour more salient, without the giver feeling that any particular response is owed. How this plays out as an expectation depends on the history of the relationship, including earlier interactions and prior responses. When some responses have been made repeatedly, they may serve as reference points in determining what then appears likely, fitting, or unexpectedly missing [7, 8].

The use of money does not abolish this relational dimension. An object purchased as a commodity can become part of a different social relation when given, and monetary and material transactions can take part in defining relationships themselves [9-11]. Gifts that are bought can thus have economic and relational value.

What comes back need not be material either. Attention, regard, acknowledgement or recognition can be valuable responses even when they have little economic resemblance to the original gift [5, 6]. Existing work therefore leaves a more specific problem: under what conditions does giving make a later act by the recipient relevant, and what allows that act to be connected to the earlier gift?

2.2. Asymmetry and the scarcity of individualised response

The significance of a later response depends on the relationship in which giving occurs. The asymmetry of the fans' and idols' relationship exists before any specific gift exchange. Fans can put money, time, labour, attendance and material support behind a particular idol, while idols reach out to and interact with a much wider audience. The relevant asymmetry is therefore not just a difference in social status. More specifically, it is in the uneven abilities of fans and idols to allocate scarce and individualised responses to specific others.

Part of this imbalance is shaped by dependence and access to alternatives. Something is especially valuable if it is important to one party and is not easily available from other sources [12, 13]. For a fan, attention from one particular idol may not be replaced by attention from another person. What might matter is that this idol is evocative of a past encounter, or that it is responding to something the fan has done, or that it appears to notice something belonging to that fan. So the scarce resource is not communication per se. Idols are often in close contact with fans as a collective. What is limited is a response that can be construed as addressed to a specific person or a specific prior interaction.

That said, fan-idol relations are not entirely one-way. Fans might be known across several interactions, get answers, or have moments when their actions are directly integrated by idols. Such relations can then be described as structurally unequal but at the same time as having real interaction [14]. The asymmetry here lies

in the conditions of these interactions: fans and idols are not equally in control of when individualised responses are given, how often they are given, and to whom they are given.

Digital platforms have increased the chances of contact but have not righted this imbalance. With livestreams, fan communication platforms, social media and online fan events, responses are more visible and sometimes easier to obtain. At the same time, they also make their selectivity more apparent. Fans can see that individual responses are there, but they are not evenly distributed [15, 16]. Such responses are therefore not only rare, but often ambiguous as to the addressee. A fan might be watching an idol do something meaningful and not even know if that thing was meant for her. Thus, asymmetry affects not only the availability and value of responses but also the uncertainty surrounding what those responses mean. This leads to another question: how can a subsequent act by the recipient be related to a specific gift previously made?

2.3. Object uptake, traceability, and attribution

A later act of an idol should not be taken as acknowledgement just because it is apparent. An idol can wear or hold or display or use an object without having the intention of responding to the one who gave it. A more basic question is how this later act can be linked to an earlier gift. Material objects make such connections possible because they are capable of remaining recognisable as they pass between people and contexts. A fan might see the same object again in a livestream, a photograph, a performance, or a post on social media and recognise it as something given before. The object thus provides a material link between the earlier act of giving and what happens later [17, 18].

This traceability enables the gift-giver to make an attribution, to link the recipient's later act to her own earlier gift. Attribution links the two events, but does not yet explain what that connection means, and this requires more explanation. In K-pop fandom, the public use or display of a gift is sometimes called *renzheng* (认证), literally "certification." In its simplest form, *renzheng* provides evidence of the later life of the object: it was received and used or displayed. But it does not say why the idol used it, or if the giver was remembered. Therefore, object recognition and acknowledgement should be analytically separated.

The interpretations may go beyond object uptake. The act may be taken by the giver as acknowledgement of the prior gift, or as an extension of this, to the belief that the idol recognises the origins of the object or remembers the giver. The second is personal recognition. The giver can move from "the idol used my gift" to "the idol knows this came from me" or "the idol remembers me." Recognition is therefore not present in the visible act as such. It depends on the way the giver interprets the act in terms of earlier encounters and other signs available. The same act may be clear evidence that an object was used but leave open the question of whether the giver herself was recognised [19].

Another dimension is public visibility. Other fans can see the object being used, but this alone does not make the relationship between the giver and the idol visible. They also have to know where the object came from, or be able to link the act to a particular fan. Making this link allows a personal attribution that otherwise would be private to be made public, allowing others to observe and compare responses [20, 21]. Publicity does not, in itself, generate recognition, but it does make an attributed response socially visible. The next question is whether such an attribution gives a later act enough relational meaning to qualify as a return.

2.4. Relational return as an interpretive process

I term this interpretive process relational return: a process in which a giver comes to see a later act by a recipient as responding to an earlier gift and as providing some form of relational value in return. It is not a predetermined kind of act and cannot be determined from the behaviour of the recipient alone. There must be

an earlier act of giving, a later act by the recipient, a perceived connection between the two, and some relational value attached to that connection by the giver. Only then does relational return emerge.

This definition is intentionally narrow. Relational return does not necessitate an equivalent counter-gift, explicit gratitude, personal recognition, or public visibility. Objects may be used, attended to, interacted with, or acknowledged, and all of these may acquire reciprocal value, but none of these is a return in itself [5, 6, 10, 11]. And not every act that changes the giver's understanding of the relationship is a return; the act must be understood as answering the earlier giving in some way. Personal recognition is therefore one possible interpretation of a relational return, not a necessary condition of it. Public visibility is not necessary either. When the provenance of the gift is known, however, it can make the connection between giver and response visible to others.

The question then is not whether non-material responses can be returns, but how a subsequent act is attributable to a prior gift and counts as a return to the giver. In asymmetrical fan–idol relations, this process is constrained by the paucity and ambiguity of individualised responses and previous interactions. Once seen as a relational return, an act can enter the relationship's history and shape how later responses are evaluated. Later returns, non-returns or changes in the course of the gifted object may then reinforce, attenuate or revise the meaning attached to earlier returns. Relational return is not the end of an exchange, but part of an ongoing interpretive process.

3. Ethnographic field and method

This article draws on a broader multi-sited ethnographic study of material practices and affective relations among young Chinese women in K-pop fandom. Fieldwork was conducted between May and July 2025 across online and offline settings in China, the United Kingdom, and South Korea. Rather than treating these settings as separate field sites, the research followed objects, practices, and relationships as they moved across digital platforms, fan events, and everyday life.

Digital ethnography was conducted on Xiaohongshu, Xianyu, WeChat, Douyin, and Weidian. The research examined the preparation and circulation of fan gifts, participation in fan-sign events, discussions of idol–fan interactions, and the later public appearances and movements of gifted objects. Offline observation provided further context for gift delivery, fan-organised events, object exchange, and the ways participants interpreted interactions with idols.

The wider study involved 18 Chinese women aged between 18 and 23, all of whom participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants were recruited through several routes. Some were members of K-pop communities known to the researcher in London. Others were initially contacted through the researcher's pre-existing personal networks from secondary school and were subsequently recruited through participant referrals and snowball sampling. A small number were approached directly through fandom networks and spaces during fieldwork. This recruitment process yielded participants with different forms and levels of involvement, including collectors, frequent fan-sign attendees, resellers, proxy buyers, and a fan-site operator.

Interviews focused on participants' everyday fan practices, gift-giving, fan-sign participation, material expenditure, relationships with fan objects, and interactions with idols and other fans. They were conducted in Mandarin and lasted approximately 45 to 120 minutes. Most interviews took place through Tencent Meeting. Several participants who were uncomfortable with video calls were interviewed through extended WeChat text conversations, while a small number of participants already known to the researcher were interviewed in person. The interview quotations presented in this article were translated into English by the author.

Interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and digital materials were read comparatively across cases. The analysis focused on the sequence linking an earlier gift, a later recipient action, participants' attribution of that action to the gift, the relational meaning assigned to the connection, and the expectations that followed. Particular attention was paid to the distinctions between successful delivery, object uptake, acknowledgement, personal recognition, and relational return.

The concepts of relational return and relational precedent were not fixed before the analysis. They were developed through repeated comparison between detailed gifting trajectories, shorter comparative cases, and cases in which objects or interactions did not generate expectations of response. This comparative process also made it possible to examine how later responses, visible absences, and changes in an object's trajectory could confirm or revise participants' interpretations of earlier interactions.

3.1. Three focal gifting trajectories

Three gifting trajectories were selected for sustained analysis because they provided sufficiently detailed accounts of giving, waiting, recipient action, interpretation, and later relational change. They were not selected as representative types of K-pop fans, but because their extended histories made it possible to examine how the meaning of a response developed and changed over time.

Lisa and En'en both gave relatively expensive clothing and accessories to members of the same K-pop boy group while participating regularly in online fan-sign events. Their cases provide a close comparison of how similar practices of material investment produced repeated object use, expectations of recognition, disappointment, and continued attention to gifted objects after disengagement from the fandom.

Cheese's case provides a longer and more varied relational trajectory. As a Chinese student in South Korea and the operator of a fan site for a female idol, she attended repeated offline events, gave clothing and accessories, and organised a birthday café. Her account includes the later use of gifts, direct recognition by the idol, an interactional failure that was subsequently repaired, and the absence of an anticipated response. Her case therefore makes it possible to examine how an interpreted return enters a wider relationship history and becomes a reference point for later expectations.

Together, these three trajectories allow the article to compare how gifts become relevant to later recipient actions, how those actions are interpreted as returns, and how earlier returns shape expectations without removing the structural asymmetry between fans and idols.

3.2. Comparative and counter-cases

Shorter comparative and counter-cases were used to clarify the boundaries of relational return. Ashley's experience of successfully delivering a plush toy demonstrates that giving may produce relational satisfaction before any later recipient action becomes relevant. Haitai's experience of an idol using an object thrown onto a stage shows that recipient uptake may acquire relational value without evidence that the recipient knew who provided it.

Additional accounts were used more selectively to compare non-response, fan-to-fan gifting, later movements of gifted objects, and changes in interpretation following disengagement from fandom. These cases were not treated as representative categories. They were used comparatively to distinguish successful delivery from response, object use from acknowledgement, and relational return from forms of attachment that did not depend on recipient recognition.

3.3. Ethics and researcher position

Ethical approval for the wider study was obtained from the Department of Anthropology at University College London (reference SHSAnth-2425-197-1). All participants gave informed consent and are referred to through pseudonyms. The names of idols and groups have been omitted. Potentially identifying combinations of gifts, events, locations, and interaction histories were reviewed and, where necessary, reduced or generalised to limit the possibility of recognition within particular fan communities. Digital material was used with attention to the privacy and searchability of individual users.

The researcher is a Chinese woman with previous experience of K-pop fan communities and fan-object practices. This familiarity supported the interpretation of fan vocabulary, gift-giving conventions, platform practices, and references that may not have been immediately legible to outsiders. Some participants were known to the researcher before the study, while others were recruited through referrals or approached directly during fieldwork. Pre-existing familiarity could facilitate access and conversational openness, but it could also shape what participants assumed the researcher already knew or felt comfortable disclosing.

Familiarity was therefore not treated as automatic knowledge. Interpretations were repeatedly checked across interview accounts, fieldnotes, and digital materials. The researcher's position was treated as part of the analytical process rather than as evidence of complete insider understanding.

4. From giving to response relevance

4.1. Before return becomes relevant

Ashley, one of my participants, was studying overseas when an idol she followed travelled elsewhere for a concert. Unable to attend, she asked a friend going to the airport to deliver a small West Highland terrier plush toy on her behalf. The friend succeeded. Later, Ashley came across a fan-recorded video on Xiaohongshu that happened to capture the handover from another angle. She immediately shared it in our group chat and posted about how happy she was. It was simple at that moment; what mattered was that the toy had arrived with the person she had selected for it.

Nothing had to be returned for the gift to feel successful at that time. Ashley was excited about the object's arrival, not an action by the idol that happened later. Thus, the act of giving and the act of return were two separate moments. The exchange of gifts has often been understood as socially connected acts of giving, receiving and returning [1]. But the relationship between gift and return should not be treated as a universal constant: historically particular ideas about the "free gift" should not be generalised, and giving does not by definition have to create reciprocal obligations or personal ties [3, 4].

Ashley's experience pushes this distinction in a useful direction. Her case does not show that she expected nothing afterwards; there is no evidence for making that stronger claim. What it does show is that the gift had already done something before a later response became necessary. It had carried an intention towards a particular person and, through successful delivery, made that intention materially effective. Successful transfer could already produce relational satisfaction before the recipient's later actions became relevant as possible responses. This also means that later interest in a recipient's behaviour should not automatically be read backwards as the original purpose of giving.

The route taken by the toy also mattered. Ashley could choose what to send and whom to send it to, but she could not simply approach the recipient herself. The gift depended on a friend and on a brief opportunity for access. Artist–audience relations are similarly shaped by bounded encounters and by media that alter the terms, timing and distance of interaction rather than simply removing relational boundaries [15]. Ashley then

witnessed the transfer retrospectively through a video recorded by someone else. Mediated visibility makes it possible to witness actions and events without sharing the same physical setting in which they occurred [18]. Here, mediation made the success of giving visible before it made any return visible.

Ashley's case therefore establishes an important limit for the argument of this section. Giving alone does not explain why a recipient's later actions become relevant as possible responses. A gift may already feel meaningful when it reaches its intended recipient. What remains to be explained is the shift from asking whether the gift arrived to watching what the recipient does afterwards.

4.2. Giving as an opening for possible response

Lisa, another study participant, began following a male idol group in late 2024 and attended online fan-signs with the member she supported regularly over several months, usually once or twice a week. Knowing that this contact would be interrupted, she checked whether the company accepted gifts and later sent a bracelet, a hat and a necklace. "I wanted him to feel some love," she said, describing gifting as a way to sustain their "weak monetary relationship" when they weren't able to see each other. The gift filled the space in the relationship where direct interaction was no longer possible and extended Lisa's investment beyond the autograph itself.

Around the same time, another participant, En'en, began to follow the same male idol group and also maintained close contact with her favourite member through online fan-signs. The gaps between these meetings left her with a desire to "leave something behind." "I wanted to make my feelings material," she said. She sent five gifts, mostly clothing and accessories, making sure to consider the idol's style and how easily each item could be worn. Materialising feeling did more than make affection tangible; it placed an object with a possible future in the hands of the recipient. Research on fan gift economies has shown that gifts can be incorporated into larger processes of reciprocation and that their subsequent use may serve as evidence of their reception [6]. But this starts one step later than the problem here. The giver must have a reason to notice something for it to be used to signify reception, acknowledgement or return.

That much was clear after the gifts went out. Lisa and En'en had already watched livestreams, airport photos, selfies and fan-recorded videos before the gift. Then they began to search the same material for the objects they had sent. Later, both saw some of their gifts reappear in public, experiences they described in the fan term *renzheng* (认证). It was not just what they were watching for but how much they were watching that changed. The question here is not whether these appearances were already returns. It was the act of giving that had made them relevant enough to be noticed in the first place.

Thus giving did not guarantee a response, nor did it render all subsequent acts meaningful. Later recipient actions became relevant when a relationally invested object remained on the recipient's side and gave the giver something specific to look out for afterwards. Lisa and En'en could create a reason to watch, but they could not control whether the gifts would ever be worn, used or displayed. Giving therefore opened the possibility of response without providing any assurance that a response would occur. Why such an uncertain possibility acquired particular value under structural asymmetry is the question taken up next.

4.3. Asymmetry and the value of possible response

For Lisa, it was not enough that the idol talked to fans. He already did it through fan-signs, livestreams and other public content. She wanted something a bit more definite. "I did spend money on him, after all," she said. "I thought when he saw me again he might treat me a little better—as that kind of fan." Her expectations were modest, but telling. She did not expect an equal return gift. She imagined that her previous giving might make a small difference in how she would be treated later. The scarce resource here was therefore not

communication itself, but a later action that might feel specifically linked to a particular fan and what she had previously given.

This distinction locates the asymmetry more precisely. In exchange relations, power is shaped by unequal dependence on valued resources and by the extent to which one party controls benefits that the other cannot readily obtain elsewhere [12, 13]. This does not mean that fan-idol relations can simply be reduced to social exchange theory. It does, however, clarify where the imbalance lies. Fans such as Lisa could decide to attend fan-signs, spend money and send gifts, but they could not determine whether the idol would later direct any particular action back towards them. The asymmetry concerned control over a valued relational possibility: the giver could initiate the gift, but could not secure an individualised response to it.

En'en described the same imbalance from the side of recognition. She wanted gifting to "deepen his impression of me" and hoped that, through gifts and letters, she might establish "a relatively distinctive emotional connection." What she sought was therefore not more access to the idol in general. Frequent fan-signs already provided direct contact. She wanted to be differentiated, however slightly, from the larger fan public. She could make herself identifiable through a carefully chosen gift or a letter, but she could not make the recipient remember her or carry that distinction into future encounters. Individualised response was scarce not because interaction never occurred, but because its continuation beyond organised encounters remained selective and outside the giver's control.

Digital mediation intensified this condition rather than removing it. Social media loosen the temporal and spatial limits of artist-audience contact, creating far more opportunities for ongoing interaction, while artists still have to establish and manage relational boundaries with audiences [15]. For Lisa and En'en, this meant that possible responses remained repeatedly visible: another livestream, photograph or public appearance could always provide a new occasion on which a gifted object might appear. But greater visibility did not give them greater control. More access did not produce more symmetry; it made the possibility of selective response easier to observe while leaving its occurrence uncertain.

Thus, the consequentiality of these possible responses was not simply a matter of scarcity but the combination of personal relevance and limited control. Lisa and En'en had already made sure that certain later actions mattered to them through the act of giving; structural asymmetry meant that neither woman could make those actions happen, while mediation kept open the possibility that they might. The question remaining is how, when such a deed is performed, it is linked to a prior gift and understood as a return.

5. Producing return: from material traces to relational meaning

5.1. Establishing the connection: traceability and attribution

The day after Lisa's bracelet arrived, the idol appeared on a livestream wearing what she was immediately sure was the same item. The timing was hard to miss. The bracelet had just been through the company's gift reception system, but was already on his wrist. Over the next few weeks, she saw it again in photos and fan-recorded clips. Each time it appeared, the object was back in her sight, but she no longer owned it and did not know what had happened to it between these appearances. To most viewers, these were just typical idol content fragments. The bracelet put them in a sequence for Lisa that had begun with her earlier present.

That connection was not obvious. Many of the gifts in this study were mass-produced branded items, so recognition of the same design did not necessarily establish that the object on screen was the same physical item. Lisa's identification of the bracelet was built from a series of details. The bracelet came shortly after delivery; it was the one she had selected, and it reappeared on different occasions. En'en did the same with her clothes and accessories she had sent. She scanned live feeds, airport photos, selfies and television appearances,

comparing them to the objects she had selected. Later, fan sign conversations reaffirmed to both women that the items they could see in public were indeed their gifts. Traceability was the result of an accumulation of visual, temporal and interactional evidence, not a single moment of recognition.

This process makes it more complicated to do anthropology by following objects beyond exchange. The social life of an object does not end with its transfer. Later movements may take it to new settings and generate new meanings [17]. But Lisa and En'en could not observe their gifts continuously. Once delivered, the objects were no longer under their control. They had no way of knowing how the company staff treated them, where they were kept or what happened to them before they were first shown to the public. What they saw were isolated moments, like a bracelet in a livestream or clothing at an airport or an accessory in a selfie. Mediated visibility made such distant moments observable without physical co-presence, while most of the objects' trajectories remained invisible [18]. In this asymmetrical relationship, following the gift, there was a reconstruction of its path from fragments.

Participants used the fan term *renzheng* (认证) to refer to the visible use or display of a gift. The term may imply the immediacy of the moment, but that judgement was usually reached by careful comparison. Lisa and En'en considered the time an item first appeared, whether its design matched what they had sent, whether it resurfaced and what later fan sign conversations added to the evidence. Later use of a fan gift may imply that it was received [6], but this implication depends on prior identification. Before the use can be evidence of reception, the visible object must first be established as the gift in question. *Renzheng* thus relied on evidentiary work even when the final appearance seemed obvious.

The visible act had a more specific connection once the object's identity was stabilised. Lisa was no longer looking at just an idol with a bracelet. What had come back was made known by the recognition of the object. Attribution identified which previous action the reappearance could be linked to. Attribution made the act specific by connecting what the recipient was doing at present to an object made available through an earlier gift. This did not require the stronger assertion that the idol had deliberately chosen the object to talk to its giver. Nor did it prove that the giver had been remembered. Attribution was about the relationship between two events, the earlier giving and the later use, not the private intention of the recipient.

Thus, the same evidence might be used to support one claim but not another. The evidence did not yet determine whether the use was simply uptake, acknowledgement, personal recognition or an answer to the earlier giving. Traceability establishes the identity of the object. Attribution indicates that the later act forms part of the history of a particular gift. Neither one alone determines the meaning of that act. That meaning only emerged when the women understood the connection and assessed its relational value, if any.

5.2. Interpreting the connection: when an act becomes return

The objects were identified, but Lisa and En'en had to decide what the idols' use of them meant. En'en had chosen clothes and accessories partly because they could be part of the idol's everyday look. When later she saw these things in livestreams, airport pictures, selfies and TV content, she did not treat their use as evidence of receipt only. "I think my material investment and emotional connection are directly proportional. The more I give, the more it costs, and the more he will remember me." She put the exchange more simply: "We gave materially and received some degree of emotional feedback. Isn't that enough?" It didn't matter that they were proof of receipt; what mattered was how they were used later, which En'en took as emotional feedback.

This interpretation was more than simply object uptake. The gift was taken, worn or displayed by the idol in object uptake. Acknowledgement began when the giver took that uptake as a sign that the gift had been seen or accepted. Even without the return of an equivalent material object, attention, regard, and recognition may have reciprocal value [5]. En'en's account matches this insight, but also shows another step. Wearing became a

relational return only when she experienced the acknowledgement as something received back from the idol and assigned relational value to it. The act of the recipient was not a pre-stamped return. It acquired that meaning from her interpretation of the link.

Lisa's bracelet offered a similar spectrum of meaning. She sent it so the idol would "get some love." Seeing it worn soon after delivery and repeatedly thereafter mattered more than just evidence of receipt. It suggested that the object had been made part of the daily life of the idol. Lisa did not take repeated use as proof positive he remembered her. It still made that stronger interpretation possible, not least because she hoped her earlier giving might influence how he treated her in later encounters. Visibility makes an object and its use observable, but does not in itself determine recognition of the giver [19]. Three possible interpretive claims are: "he used my gift," "he acknowledged my giving," and "he remembered me." The third is not an automatic consequence of visible use. It is the strongest of the three because it involves personal recognition.

The Haitai experience is a useful boundary comparison. The prop she threw onto the stage was a brief offering rather than a formally delivered gift, but its uptake shows the reasons why personal recognition should not be treated as necessary for relational value. For an encore, the idol picked up the prop and used it in the performance. There was no evidence that he knew who had thrown it, but Haitai felt it as interaction, and was pleased that something she had offered had entered the performance. The case illustrates that recipient uptake can be felt as a response even if the recipient does not recognise the giver. What mattered was not the proof of acknowledgement, but the relational value Haitai placed on the acceptance of the offering.

Public visibility did not generate the return, but it did alter the social reach of the interpretation. If the provenance of a gift was known, then other fans could also connect the visible act with its giver. The attributed response was then available for recognition, comparison or contestation beyond the giver and receiver. The interactions of public celebrities can be indicators of differing amounts of attention, and affect those who witness them [20, 21]. With Lisa and En'en, some fans were able to associate particular gifts with them. Visibility made the interpretation socially legible, but it was not needed for the act to have relational value. Without known provenance, public display added little to our understanding of who had donated the object.

A recipient-side act became a relational return when the giver construed its link to an earlier gift as an answer from which she received relational value. This did not require a reciprocal counter-gift, or a verbal thank you, or a visible sign of personal recognition or public display. Nor did all acts that changed the feelings of the giver count as return. The act had to be construed as a response to the earlier giving in some way. These interpretations in the cases of Lisa and En'en relied on the object's confirmed identity, its timing, its repeated appearances and subsequent conversations. Structural asymmetry nonetheless meant that one could rarely know the full intention of the recipient.

The relational return was therefore interpretative, but not groundless. It showed uptake, which was visible, and an understood answer, with uncertainty remaining about the intention and recognition. Such returns did not close the exchange when incorporated into the history of the relationship. They served as benchmarks to measure later use, non-use, changes in the object's path, and subsequent reactions or silences.

6. From return to expectation: relational histories under asymmetry

6.1. When return becomes precedent

Cheese's expectations were built on a relationship that grew out of repeated encounters, gifts and acts of recognition. She was a Chinese student in South Korea running a fan site for a female idol and regularly following public schedules. At an overseas fan event, Cheese also mentioned her birthday was coming up. The next day at the airport, the idol wrote her a letter in her own hand and gave her an autograph. This, thought

Cheese, was the moment when the idol began to remember her. The idol told her, "I often see you in Hongdae." Cheese had thought that she was the only one watching the idol. Knowing that she had been noticed, too, changed her perception of the relationship.

Recognition gained momentum along with Cheese's material support. She sent clothes and accessories, including a necklace the idol wore on several occasions. On another overseas schedule, the idol's father met Cheese and said his daughter had asked the family to thank her for her support. The birthday café combined these forms of investment. Cheese spent more than RMB 3,000 on design, decorations and custom materials. Together with friends and the café's staff, she organised a three-day event that attracted some seventy to eighty visitors. The idol arrived after filming, at about 10.30 p.m. on the night of the setup. She said that she had originally planned to visit the next morning but had to travel, so she came after finishing work and asked whether Cheese might still be there. Cheese was not at the café. When she later heard what had happened, she crouched on the floor and cried. The visit was significant because the idol's question related the event to the person and labour behind it.

The worn necklace constituted the clearest relational return in this sequence because Cheese connected its later use to an earlier gift. The handwritten letter, remembered face, parental thanks and café visit did not all respond to particular gifts. They formed the wider relational history within which the necklace's use acquired meaning and later became consequential. Emerson's exchange framework is useful because it directs attention away from isolated acts towards ongoing relations in which later interactions derive meaning from what preceded them [8].

Emerson's framework cannot, however, be adopted in full. It describes exchange in terms of mutually contingent and rewarding actions. Cheese could continue attending events, maintaining the fan site and organising support without knowing whether another response would follow. What developed was not balanced reciprocity, but a wider relational history in which intermittent returns and other individualised responses provided evidence of what this particular relationship might allow.

I use the term relational precedent for an earlier act, already interpreted as a return, that later becomes a reference point for what the relationship may offer again. It is neither a debt nor a promise. Relational precedent does not turn every individualised response into a gift return. It describes how an interpreted return enters a broader relational history and shapes expectations of later response. The idol did not have to remember Cheese every time, and one act of recognition did not make another visit owed. It made recurrence easier to imagine because experience had shown it to be possible.

This possibility was culturally organised too. Jeong shows how K-pop fans materialise affective labour through attendance, documentation, spending, and organised support, and how this labour informs expectations of idols in asymmetrical yet mutual attachments. Her experience of being remembered at fan sign events also exemplifies how recognition can make previous effort feel registered [14]. This explains why acknowledgement was important to Cheese, but not why she came to expect it from this particular idol. Recognition as response became meaningful in larger fan conventions, and repeated relational returns gave that possibility a personal history.

This history was limited in what it could support by structural asymmetry. Cheese could see a pattern, but she could not get the idol to repeat it. The idol had more control over when recognition happened, what form it took and to whom it was directed. Past returns made another response reasonable to expect without it being owed. Return was bound to future expectation, but uncertainty was preserved by relational precedent. The precedent itself was put into question when a later response failed to arrive.

6.2. Testing the precedent: expectation, failure and repair

By now Cheese and the idol were familiar enough that their interactions occasionally went beyond the short talks organised through fan events. "She (the idol) said she would AirDrop me some videos and photographs," Cheese recalled. The files did not reach Cheese directly. Instead, the idol directed them to another fan and asked her to pass them on. Cheese waited. Nothing happened. She was briefly irritated. It wasn't simply the loss of access to several pieces of content that upset her. She had known that the idol had meant her to be the recipient and had taken steps to see that the material arrived with her. Somewhere, something that had already been aimed at Cheese had stopped.

The episode mattered because it came after the above history. Cheese had already been noted in encounters, her gifts had been seen in use, and she had been given other forms of individualised attention. But the AirDrop material wasn't another gift return, which is precisely what makes the case useful. It shows that the effects of earlier returns were not confined to the objects that first produced them. A worn necklace, a remembered face and material specifically intended for Cheese were different kinds of acts, yet they could all enter the same history of being responded to as a particular fan. Relational return could therefore shape expectations about how someone will respond later without that later response needing to be in the same form as the initial return.

Emerson's discussion of social exchange helps explain why the failed transfer acquired import in this longer sequence. Expectations in continuing relations change over time and are tested and modified as subsequent actions occur, rather than being fixed at the beginning of an exchange [8]. At the same time, the relationship between Cheese and the idol did not possess the degree of mutual contingency that a conventional exchange model assumes. She could tell what had happened before, but she could not make it happen again. What was carried forward, then, was not reciprocal control but the longitudinal logic of anticipation. Thus, failure to receive the files did not generate a new expectation. It made an existing one more visible, because an interaction had gone off the rails from what previous responses had made plausible.

The story changed later when the idol found out that Cheese had not gotten the files and sent them to her again herself. The second transfer meant more to Cheese than just filling the gap. It also altered the meaning of the first interruption. The files now made sense as something that had not reached her, rather than attention that had been offered and then withdrawn. Baym views relations between artists and audiences as ongoing communicative constructions, built upon a shared past and revised through successive encounters [15]. This temporal process is particularly visible in Cheese's experience. It wasn't just that the second transfer made the present whole again; this rendered the previous breakdown retrospectively intelligible as a failed transmission, rather than a withdrawal of response.

This repair did not establish the precedent. Cheese could recognise the interruption and make sense of its correction, but she couldn't guarantee the success of the first transfer, nor could she demand the idol resubmit the material. And the experience of a response achieved by demand would not necessarily have had the same relational value as one experienced as voluntarily directed towards her. The precedent held because later action made continuity with the earlier relationship history remain persuasive, but whether that continuity would hold was never Cheese's to decide.

6.3. When precedent loses force: visible absence and relational revision

The break in the AirDrop episode could be folded back into Cheese's existing relationship history, as the idol later corrected it. Her birthday was a harder problem. Other fans got Polaroids from the idol, but Cheese got none herself. It was more than the disappointment normally expected in such circumstances, given the history in which she had sometimes been remembered and addressed directly. Suddenly, she did not want to follow

the idol anymore. It mattered because there were two points of comparison: what had happened to Cheese before and what was clearly happening to other fans at the time.

This was no proof that the idol had deliberately ignored her or that Cheese was owed a birthday response. It did something narrower, but still important. It made it more difficult to preserve the continuity of the earlier returns. Public celebrity interactions affect not just the recipients. They also influence observers' interpretation of their own relationship with the celebrity [21]. The case of Cheese adds another complication. Public mediation made available a comparison of the uneven distribution of response, giving relational meaning to the lack of comparable recognition. It was not just that nothing had happened; it was that nothing had happened to her while it had happened to others. Around her, other responses were happening, and their visibility gave her own nonresponse a sharper profile.

Not every absence could do that. For example, Lisa had not yet seen the necklace she sent in the public material she followed. There was no evidence visible, but this did not prove that the necklace had never been received, noticed or worn. Much of its course remained out of her sight. The bracelet she had sent was a different matter. Later, Lisa saw the idol wearing the bracelet several times, then noticed it on another member. It was not merely one of the occasions when the object failed to appear. It was new information about where the object had gone. Lisa took the transfer to mean that it had not been valued in the way she had previously thought.

Appadurai's account of the social life of things draws attention to the new meanings that objects acquire as they move between settings and owners [17]. Lisa's experience shows that these movements also have a retrospective effect. While the later trajectory of the bracelet did not obviate its earlier use, it did alter the story that could be told from it. The very material traceability that had helped to produce relational return might later unsettle it. Lisa had been able to link the use of the idol with her gift in previous appearances and to read it as an acknowledgement. The object's later movement reopened that interpretation by placing the earlier return within a less stable material history.

Cheese's birthday offered a visible comparison, without the need for correction later. The evidence from Lisa's bracelet contradicted the meaning she had attributed to its constant use. Neither event showed the private intention of the recipient. What they changed was the interpretation the giver could reasonably continue holding. Relational revision moved in two temporal directions. It reset expectations of what participants thought would be next, and reopened the meaning of what earlier returns were understood to mean.

This backward movement was especially evident when participants began to leave fandom. Studies of K-pop fandom exits also show that affective labour and attachment do not necessarily end at the moment a fan decides to withdraw [14]. Withdrawal changed participation faster than relationship history was erased. It placed participants in another position to assess returns that had once appeared compelling.

Relationship history was therefore not a record in which each return permanently added evidence of closeness. It remained open to later responses, visible absences and changes in the trajectories of gifted objects. These developments could confirm a precedent, weaken it or alter the meaning of the events from which it had first been formed. Earlier returns shaped what participants could reasonably expect from the future, while later events continually determined whether those returns remained convincing accounts of the past. Under structural asymmetry, fans could interpret patterns and revise their expectations, but they could neither ensure consistency from the recipient nor stabilise the meaning of a response once and for all.

7. Discussion

This article asks how recipient actions come to count as returns, and how those interpretations shape expectations of later response in structurally asymmetrical and publicly mediated gift relations. The results demonstrate that return is not an automatic consequence of giving. A later act is a relational return only when it can be related to an earlier gift and read as a meaningful response to that gift. Thus, relational return is not a special type of reward. It is the process by which an action acquires reciprocal meaning, enters into relationship history and is open to revision.

This argument develops existing work on gifts and reciprocity. Gift theory has established that returns may be delayed, unequal or different in form from the original gift. It has also shown that not every gift creates an obligation or a lasting personal relation [1-4]. Research on fan gifting further shows that attention, acknowledgement and recognition may matter as returns even when nothing material is given back [5, 6]. This article asks a more specific question: how does one later action come to be treated as return at all? The cases show that meaningful giving and relational return are not the same thing. Giving may create satisfaction, attachment or connection before, and sometimes without, any return. A later action only becomes return when the giver understands it as answering the earlier act of giving.

This distinction also clarifies the transition from object use to acknowledgement and recognition. The claims "the idol used my gift," "the idol acknowledged my giving," and "the idol remembered me" are not equivalent. The first involves object uptake, the second considers that uptake as an answer, and the third involves personal recognition. A recipient action became a relational return when the giver treated its connection to the earlier gift as an answer from which she received relational value. Personal recognition might make that return more powerful, but Haitai's experience shows that it was not necessary. An offering might be felt as answered even if the recipient was unaware of the source.

Material objects were significant because they provided this connection across time and space. Appadurai's work demonstrates that objects constantly acquire meanings as they circulate [17], and Thompson's work shows how mediation makes possible the partial visibility of distant actions [18]. The cases here add that the link was not obvious from the object itself. Most of the gifts were mass-produced, and much of their later trajectory remained hidden. Fans therefore had to reconstruct the connection from scattered evidence. Participants established the identity of the object from partial material traces rather than from its complete trajectory. This allowed a later act to be connected to an earlier gift, but it could not make that connection permanent.

Structural asymmetry shaped the value and uncertainty of these returns. What mattered most was not simply the fact that fans gave more money, time or labour than they received from the idols. It was about who controlled the individualised response. Fans could select gifts, attend events and follow public content, but they could not decide whether an idol would use the object, remember the giver or respond again. Emerson and Blau help explain why a response becomes valuable when one side relies on that which the other controls, while Baym shows how relations between artist and audience are still shaped by access, communication and relational boundaries [12-15]. In these instances, public mediation provided more opportunities to observe responses, but did not give fans greater control over whether those responses occurred. Mediation made responses more visible without making them easier to secure.

Visibility also made it easier to compare responses. When the origin of a gift was known, other fans could link public use of the object to its giver. A similar absence of response could also have become meaningful when other fans' responses were visible for comparison. Previous research on existing celebrities shows that public replies impact both the direct recipient and observers [20, 21]. The present findings suggest that this is

the case for both absence and acknowledgement. Public visibility did not produce a return on its own. It opened up the unequal distribution of response to interpretation.

The expectations which these returns generated were thus neither simple obligations nor private fantasies. They were based on the participants' previous experience, but they could not be guaranteed in practice. A demanded response may also be of less relational value than a response that is perceived as voluntarily directed to the giver. Fans may learn to expect a response, without having control over whether it happened. The results here build upon the conventional exchange models. Emerson's description of continuing exchange accounts for the way previous interactions develop subsequent expectations. However, the fan-idol relation shows that expectations can be developed even when mutual control is low [8].

A return became a precedent when it was remembered as evidence of what that particular relationship had made possible before. It was not a promise, debt or rule, but it made recurrence easier to imagine. Cheese's worn necklace constituted a relational return, while the handwritten letter, remembered face, parental thanks and café visit formed the wider relational history in which that return became consequential. This history also shaped her interpretation of later interactions that were not directly related to gifts. Relational precedent describes how an interpreted return enters such a history and influences expectations of later response, even when the anticipated response takes a different form.

But these precedents still depended on what followed. Baym's emphasis on continual relational work helps explain why one successful interaction cannot settle a relationship permanently [15]. Another point the findings add is that later events do not only shape the future of a relationship. They can also change its past meaning. Earlier returns influenced what participants expected next, and later events shaped how those earlier returns were understood to have meant what they did.

This was also true when participants began to detach from fandom. Studies on leaving K-pop fandom also show that attachment and affective labour do not necessarily disappear all at once [14]. The cases here suggest that withdrawal also changes the way in which prior interactions are read. It doesn't just wipe relationship history. It gives participants a different perspective from which to assess it.

Thus, the article makes a broader contribution by providing a temporal account of reciprocity under asymmetry. It may be useful beyond K-pop fandom in cases where gifted objects are still recognisable after transfer, recipient actions are partially visible through media, and the two sides do not have equal control over individual response. This does not mean that every gift creates expectation or that every visible action becomes a return. Relational return refers to the ways in which a subsequent act gains meaning as a response to giving, how that response impacts future expectation, and why that meaning can never be definitively established.

8. Conclusion

The article explores how the actions of the recipient are interpreted as returns and how these interpretations shape expectations about future response in structurally asymmetrical and publicly mediated gift relations. The results indicate that return is not an automatic by-product of giving. A gift can arrive at its recipient and already produce satisfaction; a later act may be unrelated to the gift or ambiguous in its meaning. A recipient action only became a relational return when the giver related the recipient action to a previous gift, interpreted it as a response to the gift, and derived relational value from the linkage.

An action once interpreted as return may become part of the history of the relationship. Earlier acknowledgement made it easier to imagine a later reply, not because the recipient owed a debt, but because a similar response had happened before. This change from past return to future expectation can be explained by

the concept of relational precedent. It also retains the basic asymmetry of these relations. Fans could see what had happened before, but they could not make the idol respond again. Media made responses more visible and easier to compare, while control over their occurrence was left largely in the hands of the recipient. Another response can be reasonably expected from past returns without it being guaranteed or owed.

Relational precedents were never fixed or secure. A later correction can preserve an earlier interpretation, as when a failed transfer was corrected. And a visible nonresponse could weaken it, particularly if there were responses to other fans available for comparison. A change in the trajectory of the gifted object could also reopen the meaning of its earlier use. The same material trace that once enabled an interpretation of acknowledgement might later render it less secure. Earlier returns shaped expectations of the future, while later events could revise those expectations and reopen the meaning of the earlier returns. Relational return was thus not the end of exchange but part of an uncompleted history of relations.

The article contributes a temporal account of reciprocity under asymmetry. It shows that the critical question is not merely what the recipient sends back, but how uncertain acts take on the feeling of return, and how long that feeling lasts. The present study is limited to the interpretations of givers and cannot establish the private intentions of idols. The findings are also based on a specific group of young Chinese women and fan relations, which are shaped by specific platforms, events and gift reception systems. Future research could explore whether similar processes exist in other fandoms and in relationships with creators, influencers or other public figures.

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