



Review Essay

### **Remittances as the Transnational Gift**

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Ivan V. Small. *Currencies of Imagination: Channeling Money and Chasing Mobility in Vietnam*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. 216 pp.

One of the foundational concepts in anthropology is the gift as formulated by French sociologist Marcel Mauss nearly a hundred years ago. Conventionally defined as a three-step process of giving, receiving, and returning, the gift's role in sociality lies not so much in the giving or even reciprocating, but in the ongoing cycles of exchange and mutual obligations. In *Currencies of Imagination: Channeling Money and Chasing Mobility in Vietnam*, anthropologist Ivan V. Small deploys the Maussian gift to reflect on remittance, one of the primary conduits through which Vietnamese in the United States maintain ties with family and friends who remain in Vietnam. Small does more than update the gift by situating it within ethnographic contexts of the twenty-first century. Through what he calls an orthogonal analysis, he skillfully juxtaposes his theoretical reflections with those of people he interviewed, to show how disjunctures between what the gift is supposed to do and what it actually achieves incite people to imagine different life worlds (72). The crux of his argument is that remittances are often in the form of money. Sent as gifts but arriving as money, remittances are emblematic of overseas Vietnamese, or *Việt Kiều*—familiar yet strange, and highly mobile.

Small carried out fieldwork in three sites—Ho Chi Minh City, also known as Saigon; the south-central coastal city of Quy Nhơn; and Orange County, California, home to one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the United States. Through interviews with people in their homes and cafes, he came to understand how those at either end of the remittance—the receivers and the senders—perceive these exchanges. Remittances do not collapse the space between Vietnamese and their brethren *Việt Kiều*. Rather, they magnify it by indexing the “imagined ‘over there’ of ideal capitalist landscapes” (72). Remittances provoke men in Quy Nhơn to wonder how their lives might have been different had they made it to the “other side” as boat refugees in the 1980s. The gift, as Small points out, is more mobile than they are—tauntingly so—fueling “migratory aspirations in Vietnam” (131). Conversely, *Việt Kiều* may spend lavishly while in Vietnam to meet people's expectations of beneficence, but after these trips, they taper their

remittances by channeling money as symbolic gifts on special occasions like the lunar new year. Once the gift falters, Small warns, so does sociality.

Small also spends time with Vietnamese in California to document how remittances from Vietnamese America and Vietnam are shifting; they are no longer understood as obligatory gifts to family members but are viewed as charitable donations. Small shows how this shift leads to new performances—the gift 2.0—enacted by 1.5-generation and second-generation Vietnamese Americans, who fashion themselves through place-based, rather than familial, connections. The reputation of the donor is secured not at family gatherings in Vietnam but at banquets in California attended by friends and colleagues.

Small's impressive contribution is in showing how the gift, so often conceptualized as an antecedent to capitalism, becomes instead the conduit through which people aspire to its values. Even the Vietnamese state attempts to capture value by setting up local offices that promote the homeland as the womb and thereby attract returning Vietnamese (103). But, as Small astutely argues, the gift's value lies not in a spirit longing to return to its origins, as Mauss proposed in his evocative use of the Polynesian term *hau* (1967, 11), but in the capitalist ideals of mobility and exchangeable value, the very features of money. Ultimately, remittances, once understood by participants as obligatory, have instead drawn recipients into imagining a capitalist order that can be fully realized only in the United States.

In his conclusion, Small describes how the gift is never enough, invoking a parallel study, sociologist Hung Cam Thai's *Insufficient Funds: The Culture of Money in Low-Wage Transnational Families* (2014). Thai is also interested in how sending, saving, and spending link Vietnamese in the United States to those who remain in Vietnam. Whereas Thai is interested in how low-income migrants and their non-migrant relatives locate these practices within broader practices of care, so that recipients do not feel a need to express gratitude or return the gift (Thai 2014, 51), Small is less concerned with specific networks than how remittances lead to the confusion of social relations and capital. These methodological differences lead to an interesting juncture. Thai emphasizes how spending and saving patterns by Vietnamese migrants are compensatory, motivated by a desire on the part of low-income migrants to partake in an American Dream that can be realized only in Vietnam. By contrast, Small shows how remittance recipients imagine alternative life worlds in which hard work is rewarded, investments accumulate capital, and the full expression of being Vietnamese is possible. Vietnamese migrants realize the American Dream in Vietnam, but Vietnamese non-migrants cannot; thus, Thai's transnational cascade of expenditures produces Small's uncanny, intimate but still out-of-reach for those Vietnamese who never left.

Ultimately, Small's study offers insights to multiple audiences. As Small cautions, when economists and policymakers consider remittances only as capital flows, they miss how these flows mediate more intimate, and often unsettling, encounters for senders as well as receivers. Small acknowledges that had he paid more attention to the technology of payment systems, he might have lessened his emphasis on the imagination as social practice. He also admits that remittances linking Vietnamese in other Asian countries or

once-socialist countries to people who stay in Vietnam may carry different meanings. But these points merely underscore the capaciousness of his project in generating new analytical questions. Throughout *Currencies of Imagination*, Small masterfully navigates between vividly rendered ethnographic stories and astute interpretations of anthropological and allied theory, challenging readers to rethink the gift and money anew. And that is a gift social scientists can use.

### **References**

- Mauss, Marcel. 1967. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. New York: Norton.
- Thai, Hung Cam. 2014. *Insufficient Funds: The Culture of Money in Low-Wage Transnational Families*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

### **About the Reviewer**

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