
Original Article

Disclosing Society through Amulets in Flow:
A Study of Circulation of ‘Chimaki’ in Kyoto

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Introduction
In this article, I assert that when examining the details of exchange and circulation of fetish (a kind of powerful, historical, and material things [Tanaka 2014: 5]¹), David Graeber’s social creativity theory could help us understand that societies in which fetish circulates are more complex and multi-layered than Graeber expected. It is true that social creativity was enacted in the cross-cultural space between Europeans and Africans during 16th and 17th century, where European merchants took a fetish oath for the establishment of commercial relations and then new social relations were created [Pietz 1985, 1988; Graeber 2005]. However, the relationship that is

¹ Tanaka pointed out that fetish is a kind of thing although it is not just a thing but has potential to beyond the borders such as dichotomy of subject and object, and so on [Tanaka 2014: 5].
constructed through the fetish oath seems simple, as if monolithic or united only through the oath itself, since it does not provide a detailed description of the reality of exchange and circulation, such as methods for actual exchange in a particular society, despite the fact that Graeber himself was interested in the currency of trade [2005: 414] and exchange and circulation are both important essences of trade. Additionally, assuming that there are two aspects of social creativity, namely creating new social relations or reinforcing them, I point out that these qualities should be distinguished, since Graeber does not clearly differentiate between them. I think that distinguishing them leads us to a deeper understanding of social creativity.

Since I am discussing this problem from the point of view of things, I refer to Kopytoff’s argument of “cultural biography of things” [1986] that things can move into the “commodity” sphere, where exchangeability is exerted, or alternatively, the “singular” sphere, where things are non-exchangeable and sacred. This concept is useful for analyzing the exchange of fetish\(^2\), exactly of chimaki, since fetish is defined as something powerful and historical. I put this idea forward for analysis; however, I must stress that I am obliged to call the sacralization of chimaki seika (聖化, getting powerful), which does not have a Christian meaning. In the next section, I will discuss the general characteristics of chimaki and explain my field and its preparation. I will also revisit Kopytoff’s notion of non-exchangeability.

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\(^2\) There are critiques to Kopytoff’s theory by some researchers such as Tamura [2013], in that his theory took those spheres as opponent ones despite the middle variety between the singular and the commodity, and focused too much on the exchange of things between people, disregarding the aspect of remaining in one’s possession.
in the singular sphere. He asserts that non-exchangeability drives singularization; however, through examples of chimaki, I insist that they are not necessarily involved in continuous relations, and I suggest the flexibility of these relations. In this article, I use the terms “transfer” and “impart,” respectively, to mean the act of passing on chimaki and the act of exchanging chimaki for money, since, in the latter case, they are considered to be “imparted” temporarily from a divinity.

Chimaki and Gion-matsuri

My field Kikusuhoko-Chou (菊水鉾町) is located in central Kyoto. Its name comes from the festival float called Kikusuhoko (菊水鉾), which is one of the floats that process around Kyoto on July 17th when Gion-matsuri is celebrated. There are more than 30 floats and their respective Hozonkai (preservation societies). Gion-matsuri is the most famous festival celebrating the divinities of the Yasaka-jinja (八坂神社) shrine; with its 1,150-year history, the festival is one of Kyoto’s defining cultural features[see Wakida 1999, about the history of Gion-matsuri]. It spans the entire month of July, especially from the 14th to the 16th are called Yoiyama (宵山). On those days, stalls are set up for Hozonkai to “impart” chimaki to visitors around Kikusuhoko-Chou.

In Kikusuhoko-chou, there is the preservation society (菊水鉾保存会, Kikusuhoko-Hozonkai, which I call Hozonkai here). The Kikusuhoko is managed by the Hozonkai of the public utility foundation Hozonkai manage revenue from chimaki and other articles as well as subventions, which consists of officers, general members, Sakuji-sankata (作事三方, three sections take responsibility for certain jobs, such as daiku-kata [大工方], carpenters who assemble floats, and so on) and hayashi-kata [囃子方] or instrument players. I
participated in those Hozonkai activities, including preparation, Yoiyama, and the procession.

In June, before the procession, people in Kikusuihoko-chou make chimaki to “impert” to visitors. Generally, more than 20,000 chimaki are made, and several are coded red and white (水引, mizuhiki) to be “transferred” during the procession. Normally, there are various types of chimaki— for instance, one for general, daiku-kata, or hayashi-kata.

Chimaki begin to circulate following the purification ritual or seika, after which some rules concerning the items are imposed. However, not all chimaki are done seika; some are presented before a Shinto priest, and some are actually in circulation before the ritual. This means that there is the potential to miss sacralization, but the fact is that circulation starts with Kikusuihoko or Hozonkai, which is necessary for chimaki to be circulated as things with power or as fetishes. Here, the power of chimaki could come from the magnificence of Gion-matsuri itself or the relation with Hozonkai.

Chimaki Circulation Scenes: The Actual Movements of Chimaki

In this section, I focus on actual scenes of the exchange and circulation of chimaki during the Yoiyama period. All central streets turn into a pedestrian mall filled with people, while smells waft out of stalls and floats are lit up with lanterns. In Kikusuihoko-chou, some tents are set up where chimaki and other articles are displayed and “imperted.” The revenue from these articles, including chimaki, are counted as Kikusuihoko funds. Apart from in these tents, whenever the opportunity arises, chimaki are “transferred” as returns; when a neighboring Hozonkai brings gifts, patrons bring sake or donations, and so on.

There are several rules about how chimaki are to be handled. Among these rules, chimaki are not to be placed on the floor, no
objects should be placed on them, and they are to be returned to the shrine or the Hozonkai about one year after they have been “impacted.” Old chimaki are called osagari (オサガリ); they must be returned to remedy their lack of power and can be renewed through “impacting” in exchange for money during Yoiyama. Withdrawn osagari are ultimately burned according to the Shintoistic method of processing amulets.

Most visitors are “impacted” one or more, usually for their friends; however, sometimes company representatives are “impacted” 50 or more chimaki and issued a receipt. In such cases, these companies distribute or “transfer” the chimaki to their clients as tokens of appreciation for their commercial relationship.

During the Yoiyama period, people speak so as to attract visitors’ attention. Since chimaki are commodities that are to be “impacted” as sacred, it is prohibited to say, “We ‘sell’ chimaki,” so instead, people say, “We offer chimaki.”

Here, we can see that non-exchangeability / sacredness and singularity are not continuous, as I mentioned above, since chimaki can be circulated after purification or, to use my term, seika. Chimaki are circulated while denying their commodification. From the institutional perspective of law, they are not simply commodities, since Hozonkai is a public utility association, receiving, as a juristic person, favorable treatment with respect to paying tax because of the association’s responsibility for Gion-matsuri, which is the largest public enterprise. Therefore, in part, chimaki possess Kopytov’s commodity and singularity aspects and, as they are seen from both practical and institutional perspectives, are not entirely commodities.

On July 17th, we get together in the morning to dress for the procession. Chimaki are also “transferred” during the procession; when floats line up on the main street, their officers exchange chimaki,
according to a system that involves front and back chimaki (the order is decided by lots), to wish for a successful procession. As they move on, they “transfer” chimaki to volunteers, supporters, and the mayor, as gestures of gratitude for their (often financial) support. They are specially tied with red and white strings. These “transfers” are made at various points during the procession.

After the procession, chimaki are “transferred” once more. For instance, a pottery shop where I was working part-time solicited the services of a carpenter to build an extra roof for pottery-fair, and the carpenter, who also works as a Kikusuihoko daiku-kata (in charge of assembling floats), “transferred” a special daiku-kata chimaki, featuring different paper than is the norm, to the owner in honor of their relationship. I therefore refer to the move of chimaki from the Kikusuihoko into the public as primary circulation, while secondary circulation refers to those who are “imparted” chimaki distributing them to their acquaintances.

As we have seen, chimaki circulate all over Kyoto in different ways, depending on their forms, that is, tied ones and sakuji-sankata or hayashi-kata chimaki, to which different papers are affixed, through primary or secondary circulation, and when the next Gion-matsuri arrives, they are renewed.

Discussion

In this article, I described the circulation of chimaki. Chimaki are actually kinds of fetish in that they have power, and after (partial) seika, they begin to circulate in different ways and through different processes depending on their forms. I can now modify Kopytoff’s idea [1986]; singularization and sacralization are not continuous, but circulation is possible after seika. Moreover, chimaki are neither perfectly commoditized nor singularized because their commodity
status is concealed by the practical and legal aspects, and they are not considered individual property since they are eventually returned to the shrine or the Hozonkai and are only temporarily possessed by a person (whom the divinities permit to possess them, again, only temporarily). It follows that the power of chimaki would not totally stem from the seika ritual, but rather also from the solemnity of Gion-matsuri itself or from the very fact that chimaki are directly related to the center, that is, the Hozonkai or the Kikusuihoko, possibly due to the significance and stature of Gion-matsuri in Kyoto.

Looking into details of circulation, I can complement Graeber’s social creativity theory, that is, the monolith of society: how the society united by fetish is structured of or would be multi-layered, and the channels of circulation (relationships) is extended from Gion-matsuri or Kikusuihoko. In exchange with gratitude, (often financial) support, commercial relation, chimaki are widely exchanged through primary and secondary circulation from Kikusuihoko to all over Kyoto, in the ways depended on the forms of chimaki. Here, I could stress the two aspects of social creativity or fetish circulation: one for creation, in which fetish create new relations and one for reinforcement, in which it strengthens existing social relations.3

Conclusion

In conclusion, from anthropological things-studies point of view, I have complemented Graeber’s lack of focus on the exchange and circulation of fetishes, quoting Kopytoff. For years, chimaki have

3 For instance, the former one corresponds to the example of the exchange of chimaki back and forth during the procession, and the latter one is equivalent to the ‘transferring’ of chimaki between the pottery-shop and the carpenter.
circulated and been renewed, through primary and secondary circulation, without becoming commodities or being singular. In these ways, *chimaki* originating from *Hozonkai* or *Gion-matsuri* are distributed via networks to every corner of Kyoto. This structure is revealed by undoing the trajectories of the circulation of things, or, what Kopytoff called “cultural biography of things.”

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