

INTRODUCTION: MEMORY AND AGENCY IN ANCIENT CHINA: SHAPING THE LIFE HISTORIES OF OBJECTS

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Some years ago, while on a research trip to Mongolia, one of the editors came across a small bowl that had been carved out of wood by a reindeer herder while away on an extended stay with his herd. Aware of the obvious interest in the bowl, the man offered to part with it, although it was made clear by the guide accompanying our group that a monetary gift would be expected in return. On the advice of the guide, a specified amount was offered and accepted. The bowl now sits on a fireplace mantel in an American city, filled with cowrie shells collected on a long-ago diving trip to the Florida Keys, and effortlessly lodged between an inexpensive silver-colored clock and a decorated gourd recently obtained from Peru.

A moment's reflection reveals that the story of the wooden bowl – its trajectory over what turned out to be (at least for a wooden bowl) an eventful 'life' – contains within it elements beyond the details of its manufacture, use and movement. Put simply, an object's life history (or, alternatively in this essay, its trajectory) cannot be told without reference to those human lives that guided – and intersected with – its complex path over time and space. Beyond the physical actions of those individuals who produced and transported the bowl, these human elements include the perceptions, emotions, expectations and social rules that attended each step of its trajectory, including its human-guided penetration of new social worlds. Beyond moving across geographical space, the bowl in question also crossed a number of other boundaries: a functional divide (from utilitarian to display), a socio-economic one (from less to

more privileged), along with a sudden transition to a dramatically different ‘regime of value’. Together, such transformations help account for uneasiness about the initial exchange – involving as it did the purchase, objectification and re-contextualization of a culturally meaningful object – as well as the more mundane concern felt about the very terms of the economic transaction – how much is such an object really worth?

Lest the story of the wooden bowl appear to illustrate an atypical trajectory experienced by an object under singular circumstances, a consideration of the artifacts, products and materials which surround us – and often play central roles in our lives – reveals similarly complex paths and transformations, with objects reaching final ‘destinations’ which even their maker would have never anticipated. Most common of all, commodities – computer chips, light bulbs and other items produced in sufficiently large quantities to meet a collective want or need, and whose economic value is set by impersonal market forces – reveal movement along lengthy and often shadowy routes across the globe, with many commodified items themselves constructed of multiple parts, each with their own manufacturing origin. On a more personal level, an heirloom, antique or other item of sentimental appeal owes part of its value to the real or imagined events and associations which marked its path to the present. And while people do successfully sell personal items that for some time remained isolated from market forces, the process can be emotionally charged, reflecting uncertainty and often surprise at the item’s suddenly revealed market value. The violence of this valuation process becomes evident, for example, when an Antique Roadshow expert tells an incredulous participant that a painted metal can recovered from a cobwebbed attic is worth thousands of dollars, or (less joyfully) when a homeowner wishing to downsize discovers that a loved and cared-for dining room table built by his grandfather holds little economic value and would be best dealt with through charity.

The study of objects should by any measure draw the attention of anyone interested in understanding human nature and behavior. Human beings endlessly interact with the material world which surrounds them and of which they are a part, deriving from those associations benefits that are alternatively – and sometimes simultaneously – utilitarian, emotional and economic. Many have written about such links, including economists, historians, art historians, sociologists, philosophers, cultural anthropologists and archaeologists. More recently, the deliberate and methodical study of object trajectories by some social scientists has alerted scholars to the potential of adopting an object-centered diachronic approach, resulting in the increasing popularity of studies which focus on the ‘life histories’ of objects and chart their shifting associations with people over the course of the objects’ ‘lives’. Such approaches view objects as having social lives akin to human lives, with some even arguing that objects themselves possess the power of human-like ‘agency’.

Each of the case studies assembled in this volume focuses on the life history of an object, object type (category), image or substance (in this case salt) which over the course of a defined period in the past saw some use within the territory encompassed by present-day mainland China (or, in the case of one of the chapters, on the island of Taiwan). The volume's case studies overlap methodologically and interpretively with studies carried out by previous researchers interested in how individual objects and object types in other parts of the world were transformed as they moved along their own trajectories. Beyond this, the volume aims to infuse some amount of methodological rigor into the task of piecing together object trajectories, generate knowledge and insights into our understanding of the temporal trajectories followed by specific objects, object types and materials in China, and consider the possibility that some 'life histories' may in fact be culturally specific.

BACKGROUND

Although attempts at systematically viewing objects from the perspective of their complex and socially meaningful 'lives' extend back several decades, the approach is itself rooted in earlier archaeological, ethnographic and art historical methods and paradigms. It was this interest in objects and how archaeologists and art historians approach them currently that initiated a session at one annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology to discuss the theme of 'The Life of Objects'. Encouraged to think through this issue and contribute relevant case studies to this volume, the authors have benefited from crossing over traditional art historical and anthropological disciplinary bounds, methods and paradigms. The following discussion offers a brief background of some of the contributions made by these disciplines to the 'life history' of objects approach and raises questions that arise from current thinking about the enriching value of the study of objects, whether excavated or held by museums, as vital evidence of human efforts to make and use artifacts.

Foundations

The charting of object trajectories over time stands as a cornerstone of archaeological and art historical research about ancient societies. Already by the nineteenth century, the practice of excavating by stratigraphic units had permitted the development of broad relative chronologies based on information about the pace of change in the form and features of artifacts (within single artifact types). Even without stratigraphic information, seriation methods – as developed by Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) in Egypt – could also be used to generate relative chronologies, relying on the (not always supported) assumption that change in artifact form is gradual rather than punctuated (Petrie 1899).

Some early archaeologists viewed the development of artifact types over time in other ways as well. Augustus Pitt Rivers (1827–1900) saw in developmental trajectories evidence of processes akin to Darwinian natural selection, with ‘better adapted’ objects gradually replacing less efficient ones and single artifacts giving rise – through a process analogous to Darwinian speciation – to divergent trajectories defined by distinctive artifact forms and functions (Lane Fox 1875). More recently, archaeologists have also developed a range of methods meant to chart the trajectories of individual objects. The better known of these include studies of ‘site formation processes’ and of ‘chaînes opératoires’ (‘operational sequences’), the latter a concept developed by French cultural anthropologists and archaeologists and which takes into account those social and mental processes acting in sequence to guide object trajectories (Schiffer 1983; Sellet 1993). Together, these approaches are meant to account for an object’s entire ‘life’, whose ‘stages’ include the initial procurement of constituent materials, the object’s manufacturing sequence, its actual use (over the course of its ‘use life’), its intentional or unintentional discard and the many post-depositional natural and cultural processes which may impact it prior to its discovery by an archaeologist. More specifically, archaeologists came to recognize the significant impact which various ‘site formation processes’ could have on artifacts. Such processes include, among others, site erosion, animal activity, water transport, plowing, construction events (e.g. the digging of house foundations and canals), and (following rediscovery) the reuse and repurposing of artifacts through physical alteration. As a result of such transformations, recovered objects typically differ in often significant ways (shape, size, completeness, functional efficacy, color, location and associated remains) not only from their manufactured progenitor, but even from their more recent forms at the time of loss, breakage or intentional discard.

The ‘life history’ approach – as applied to human beings – has long played an important role in anthropology. This is especially true of ethnographic research, whose varied field methods continue to include the collection of detailed information about an individual’s entire life, consisting not only of that person’s accomplishments, movements, social interactions and the challenges they have faced, but also the broader social context within which their life has been lived. In contrast to sociology, where the recording of individual ‘life histories’ remains secondary to a reliance on quantitative methods better suited to the study of large populations, the ‘life history’ approach – focused as it is on individuals – has thus retained its appeal as one of many methods that ethnographers rely on to generate richer understandings of the structure and workings of small-scale societies.

It is perhaps not surprising that in focusing on individuals and the systems of which they are a part, ethnographers should also develop an interest in how object trajectories intersect with and impact those individual lives.

In fact, much work by ethnographers has focused on the details and broader implications of the physical movement of objects. One early and well-known example is that of the Kula ring in the Massim archipelago of Papua New Guinea, an exchange system characterized by the clockwise movement of red shell-disk necklaces and the counterclockwise movement of shell armbands (Malinowski 1920). This movement of non-utilitarian objects within the Kula exchange system served to define and reinforce social and political relationships among individuals living on different islands of the archipelago, while also providing status-building opportunities to those able to access (and pass along) large numbers of such goods.

Importantly, Malinowski recognized that the goods moving through the Kula system were not ‘gifts’ offered altruistically by generous individuals, but rather objects given with the expectation of receiving something in return. In his work *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss makes the essential point that gifts are closely tied to the giver and that their role is in fact to establish and maintain long-lasting social bonds between the giver and the recipient, with the latter obliged to reciprocate at a later date. In this scheme, the objects are not so much relinquished as they are ‘on loan’, with the transfers carried out during formal exchange ceremonies (Mauss 1990). Others have pointed out that the ‘gifts’ discussed by Mauss can be characterized as ‘inalienable’, in that they cannot be ‘detached’ from the giver and must therefore be returned in some way or other, a contrast with ‘alienable’ goods, whose exchange or sale cedes full control to the buyer/recipient with no expectation of such continued bonds (Gregory 1982). Mauss himself distinguished between the valuable armbands and necklaces exchanged in the Kula system and forms of economically driven barter that accompanied such ‘gift’ exchanges.

The above brief review reveals that by the second half of the twentieth century, scholars had recognized the complexities of object trajectories and the importance of studying such trajectories systematically. Archaeologists had developed solid approaches aimed at charting the many natural and cultural transformations experienced by objects over the course of their ‘lives’, while studies conducted by cultural anthropologists and sociologists had revealed numerous instances of how object trajectories impact – and are impacted by – human lives in ways that are both dynamic and culturally specific, and how objects moving through time and space play a role in affirming and transforming social and political relationships.

No less significant, some had already considered the notion that objects are somehow equivalent to people. Commenting on early developments in anthropology, Hoskins writes that ‘in certain contexts, persons can seem to take on the attributes of things and things can seem to act almost as persons. Studies of traditional exchange systems ... have elaborated on this insight by detailing how objects can be given a gender, name, history and ritual function’

(Hoskins 2006: 74). Speaking of the objects exchanged in the Kula system, Mauss wrote that ‘The *vaygu’a* [i.e. the shell armbands and necklaces] are not unimportant things, mere pieces of money. Each one, at least the dearest and the most sought after – and other objects which enjoy the same prestige – each one has its name, a personality, a history, and even a tale attached to it. So much is it so that certain individuals even take their own name from them’ (Mauss 1990: 24). More generally but no less important, anthropologists now appreciated the reality of different types of artifacts moving along different types of trajectories, as illustrated by the distinction which early anthropologists made between ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’ (even if they did not always refer to these two types of items in this way).

Many of the same issues have informed art historians, although as historians they are bound to the task of reconstructing the past context through study of artifacts regarded as cultural documents alongside of historical texts, archaeological and archival records and other data. In addition, art historians, and especially those who work in the Far East, have struggled with how to represent materials fairly and appropriately in the Asian (or in our case Chinese) context. The field of art history (and anthropology as well) was born in an intellectual atmosphere in the nineteenth century that was based in Western European philosophical principles that do not always fit well when explaining how and why things change in the Asian historical context. The notion of time varies dramatically in the Chinese and European contexts, for example. Importantly, art historians are bound by the history of a region, area, site or location for each artifact considered and begin with the questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? Art historical analysis typically does not result in the testing of a theoretical model, as anthropological archaeologists characteristically do, but in an explanation of the place, purpose and makeup of each artifact in its local context and date and more occasionally across time.

With the object/artifact/material culture as the starting point for art historians, formalist approaches sought to seriate and position types and styles in an attempt to develop chronologies and diagnostic typologies, not unlike the archaeologists, but largely within the context of local or regional histories. Linear trajectories of history ruled these analyses such that canons of representation and visual expression emerged – classic vs. baroque, for instance. This sort of linear thinking has broken down, especially since it was challenged in the 1960s, but still the debate exists about how to interpret visual materials. What is the relative value of emic vs. etic research in attempting to explain why objects look and function the way they do? Should one develop a contextual analysis, or a social history of art? Where possible, will archival research and historical texts give thorough explanations for more than documentation of place and style of manufacture? What will interpretive theory developed in other disciplines such as cultural anthropology or archaeology, history, religious

studies, sociology, biology or psychology, for example, add to the analyses of objects?

These interpretive issues especially led art historical members of the SAA panels to search for ways to cross over the methodological and theoretical divide. In the papers here, art historians continue to use the object as the starting point and archaeologists use artifacts as a means to explain process, but these papers represent explorations into how to understand the function and role of artifacts and how to make use of the long history of interest among anthropological theorists in interpretation of material culture.

The Social Life of Things

Published in 1986, the edited volume titled *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* served as a catalyst in the expansion and systematization of studies focusing on object trajectories (Appadurai 1986). In fact, recent authors regularly cite in their own work passages and ideas taken from the volume's first two essays, both written by anthropologists: 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value' (by Arjun Appadurai, who is also the volume's editor), and 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process' (by Igor Kopytoff).

In keeping with ideas put forward by earlier social scientists and social historians, including art historians such as Arnold Hauser (1951), the volume's authors encouraged the view that object trajectories are analogous to human biographies, and thus that they can be studied in a similar manner. As Kopytoff points out in his essay:

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: What, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its "status" and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such a thing? What are the recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life", and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing's use change with its age, and what happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness? (1986: 66–7)

As indicated in its title, the volume focuses on commodities, arguing for studies that chart their temporal trajectories and recognize the multiple points at which culture impacts commodity pathways. More specifically, the volume serves as a cultural counterpoint to a strict Marxian conception of things as commodities, whereby objects become physically and socially dissociated from the labor invested in their initial production and assigned values determined solely by market forces. According to Marx, upon entering the commoditized economy, an object becomes 'alienated' from the people and social world

which produced it, taking on a specified value which permits and channels its economic exchange for any other commodity (including other categories of objects), a transaction that is itself facilitated (in monetary economies) by the use of money (Marx 1961). Marx also referred to the ‘fetishism’ of commodities, pointing out that in a commoditized economy, the economic relations that tie objects to one another become preeminent as indicators and depictions of the social dimensions of production, thus masking the reality of unequal relations between worker and owner.

In contrast to Marx’s economic perspective on the production and fate of things, the essays in *The Social Life of Things* underscore the importance which culture itself plays in mediating and regulating the trajectories which commodities follow from the time of their production to the moment of their discard. Thus, Kopytoff makes the case that a single object’s trajectory may involve movement in and out of separate commoditization and singularization phases. In some cases, ‘singular’ objects of initially limited worth or interest enter the commoditization phase at the first sign of a nostalgia-driven amplification of interest, as in the case of ‘old beer cans, matchbooks, and comic books ... [which] suddenly become worthy of being collected ... [moving] from the sphere of the singularly worthless to that of the expensive singular’ (Kopytoff 1986: 80). In other cases, singularization is associated with conscious resistance to the absorption of ‘sacralized’ objects into the commodity market. Thus, the (never before attempted) valuation of objects of collective significance and symbolism – for example, founding historical texts and sculptures of national heroes – is forcefully resisted by those outraged at the thought of putting a price on an object imbued with sacredness and the power of cultural representation.

Interestingly, Kopytoff also suggests that in comparison to small-scale societies, more complex systems allow their members – or constituencies – greater freedom to singularize items which they believe deserve to be so treated. Kopytoff’s central message, in the end, is that it is not possible to chart object trajectories without recognizing the constituent role which culture plays in guiding such trajectories: ‘A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories’ (1986: 68). At the broadest level, Kopytoff’s essay – along with the volume’s other contributions – reveals not only the operation of different types of object trajectories operating in parallel (as already indicated in earlier anthropological discussions of ‘gifts’ and ‘commodities’), but also the possibility of individual objects moving in and out of the commodity pathway (a process which Appadurai refers to as ‘commodity pathway diversion’) and being temporarily transformed into other types of objects such as gifts and ‘singularized’ items. It is important to note that this more dynamic view of

object trajectories also recognizes that ‘jumps’ between trajectories are ultimately mediated by culture itself.

Recent Studies

Recent decades have witnessed continued interest in ‘biographical’ studies of material culture, with much of this research focused on the construction of (what many authors refer to as) ‘meaning’ and identity as objects interact dynamically – and, according to some, as active ‘agents’ – with persons over the course of their ‘lives’.

In their discussion of masks, totem poles and other objects among the Kwakwaka’wakw of the Pacific Northwest coast, Gosden and Marshall (1999) suggest that objects have to be ‘performed’ – and the performance ‘witnessed’ – before they are able to acquire meaning. As the authors point out in regard to masks: ‘But, it was the act of showing which was powerful and which established a mask’s meaning. Possession of a mask was not in itself significant because the mask possessed meaning only in the context of its performance’ (1999: 175). According to Marilyn Strathern, objects in Melanesian society do not exist independently of people, so that ‘gifts’ – which travel through exchange networks and involve transactions among multiple individuals – carry with them the distributed parts of their owners as they are transported to other locations and serve to produce and cement social relationships. In this way, individuals are seen to have ‘agency’ through the many objects which they have passed along to others (Strathern 1988). In the view of Janet Hoskins, objects are intimately tied to human emotions and aspirations, giving meaning to people’s lives and structure to their lived experiences (Hoskins 1998).

References in the above-mentioned studies to the capacity of objects to act on human perception, emotions and level of engagement in social and ritual life can be discussed within the context of broader debates about the ‘agency’ of objects, a topic about which much has been written. Speaking of Alfred Gell’s view of material culture and agency, Hoskins writes:

Gell has formulated a theory about the creation of art objects that could in fact be a theory about the creation of all forms of material culture. Art (and other objects) is produced in order to influence the thoughts and actions of others. Even those objects which seem to be without a directly identifiable function – that is, objects which have previously been theorized as simple objects of aesthetic contemplation – are in fact made in order to act upon the world and to act upon other persons. Material objects thus embody complex intentionalities and mediate social agency. (2006: 75)

Although there is insufficient space here to adequately address the topic of objects as ‘active’ items with ‘agency’, it can at least be pointed out that

discussions have revolved around a number of issues, including the level of human intentionality involved, the manner in which objects ‘act on’ their surroundings (such as through the human senses), the types of messages transmitted and the resulting impact on individuals as well as on society. In the opinion of the editors, while it is fair to say that objects do impact those individuals with whom they come into contact, this interaction may be driven by different motivations, involve different types of mechanisms and operate at varying levels of ‘consciousness’. When faced with a newly discovered artifact, therefore, one should not uncritically assume that its maker deliberately aimed to manipulate the thoughts and behavior of the object’s intended audience.

The notion that objects have agency has also played a role in interpretations put forward by archaeologists. As discussed further below, and in contrast to ethnographic studies, archaeologists face serious difficulties when trying to understand how artifacts interact with their social environment over the course of their ‘lives’, since archaeological encounters with objects are most often focused on a single moment in time, typically their final depositional context (for example as grave goods or as discarded artifacts). Interestingly, archaeological studies which admit the possibility of grave goods having agency – as opposed to simply serving the needs of the deceased in the afterlife – often view them as items intentionally placed in the burials for the purpose of communicating information about the status or aspirations of the tomb occupant, his or her relatives or larger social group. In such interpretations, objects are often thought to serve as ‘propaganda tools’ deployed for the benefit of the elite or anyone else wishing to upgrade their status and standing.

The issue of whether – and if so, how – objects impact their social surroundings as active agents is one that any study attempting to chart the trajectory of an object should keep in mind. Put simply, support for the idea that objects have ‘agency’ compels us also to recognize the existence of an ongoing two-way interaction between objects and their social environment, with neither acting independently of the other. The operation of what is in fact a type of ‘feedback loop mechanism’ in turn underscores the difficulty of charting object trajectories, whose direction and pace are therefore determined by recurrent instances of contact between objects and individuals, with each impacting the other in sometimes unpredictable ways. The challenge which such type of interaction presents to the modeling of culture change in societies known solely through archaeological remains becomes immediately obvious.

STUDYING THE LIFE HISTORIES OF OBJECTS: METHODOLOGY AND INTERPRETATION

Studies of object trajectories conducted over the past three decades signal a heightened and welcome sensitivity to the fact of objects as constituent