

## MEMORY AND AGENCY IN ANCIENT CHINA

### SHAPING THE LIFE HISTORY OF OBJECTS

*Memory and Agency in Ancient China* offers a novel perspective on China's material culture. The volume explores the complex 'life histories' of selected objects, whose trajectories as single objects ('biographies') and object types ('lineages') cut across both temporal and physical space. The essays, written by a team of international scholars, analyse the objects in an effort to understand how they were shaped by the constraints of their social, political and aesthetic contexts, just as they were also guided by individual preference and capricious memory. They also demonstrate how objects were capable of effecting change. Ranging chronologically from the Neolithic to the present, and spatially from northern to southern mainland China and Taiwan, this book highlights the varied approaches that archaeologists and art historians use when attempting to reconstruct object trajectories. It also showcases the challenges they face, particularly with the unearthing of objects from archaeological contexts that, paradoxically, come to represent the earliest known point of their 'post-recovery lives'.

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## SHAPING THE LIFE HISTORY OF OBJECTS

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*In memory of Pochan, our friend and colleague*

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## FOREWORD: IN MEMORY OF POCHAN CHEN

Among the venues where the chapters in this volume were first presented was a session called “The Life Histories of Objects in East Asian Prehistory” at the 2010 Society for American Archaeology (SAA) in St. Louis, MO, organized by Francis Allard. At this session, participants, including many of the authors represented in this volume, acted as discussants of pre-circulated drafts of papers, versions of some of which appear here. The paper by Pochan Chen circulated for that session was called “The Transformation of Use and Social Meaning of Salt in Early China.” That paper was an initial attempt to take his Chinese article on this topic, published in 2007 in the history journal *Xinshixue* (Chen 2007), translate it into English, and further develop some of his ideas in relation to notions of the social life of things. The object biography approach that Pochan adopts in this article builds from the influential work of Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Igor Kopytoff (1986), of course, but more influential on the perspective underlying the work is the scholarship by Sidney Mintz (1985), who considered the transformation of values associated with sugar during the early modern period. The transformation of sugar from a luxury to a commodity over time provided a template for understanding how valuables like salt can transform in relation to social and cultural contexts within which they are used, and Pochan was eager to understand and tease out how one can understand this in deeper historical contexts, relying as much on archaeological as historical evidence.

In that same SAA session, I offered an essay on dynamic values of material inspired by the work of David Graeber. Graeber (2001: 115) has argued that negotiations about value are essentially political, and consequentially, our understanding of past political systems must be understood in relation to the role of objects in a particular context. Object roles, and hence their values, are products of their biographies, and not the result of single attributes or sets of attributes, such as scarcity of raw material or labor investment. Instead, a study of object value must consider the intersection of several factors: raw material, labor investment, the identity of producers, the identity of consumers, the divisibility or “commodifiability” of the object, and its capacity to accumulate history. In fact, the value attributed to objects is dynamic and contingent – the consequence of practices of production, use, and discard through an object’s

life history (see Flad 2012). Pochan's paper develops many of these same themes, which is not surprising because we were in the same graduate student cohort in the Interdisciplinary Program in Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) from 1996 to 2004, both starting and graduating in the same years, took most of the same classes, excavated for eighteen months at the same site for our PhD research, in the same trench (while living in the same hotel room and taking the same vehicle to site every day). We have coauthored a book on the same geographical region as the case study in this paper (Flad and Chen 2013), as well as a number of articles (Chen and Flad 2006; Flad et al. 2005, 2009), and even my single-authored book (Flad 2011) owes a lot to my conversations and our long-term collaboration. Yet again, in reading the final version of this piece, I see how his thinking evolved from the earlier versions of this work. His development of these themes has a productive twist, however. He has now adopted the notion of diversions from Appadurai to explore how these transitions in the value of salt through the historical periods he considers took place. It is not surprising to me or anyone else who knew Pochan well that even posthumously he can contribute something new and interesting to the conversation.

Those who knew him well are legion. Among them are the editors and contributors to this volume, of course, but also the many hundreds who attended his memorial service on July 20, 2015. He passed away unexpectedly from heart failure at the age of forty-one on June 28th of that year, shortly after having completed teaching for the spring semester, and not long after having returned from a stint in Gansu, China conducting archaeological fieldwork. His passing was completely unexpected, and he was in the midst of many different projects, among which was the completion of edits to the article in this volume and others. As detailed more extensively elsewhere (Flad 2016), Pochan was born in Jilong, Taiwan in 1973 and attended high school and college in Taipei, receiving his BA in Anthropology at National Taiwan University (NTU) in 1995. After completing his studies there, he spent one year as a research assistant at Academia Sinica before moving to UCLA for his MA (1999) and PhD work (2004). His PhD thesis, "Salt Production and Distribution from the Neolithic Period to Han Dynasty in Eastern Sichuan Basin, China," was based on extensive fieldwork at the site of Zhongba, in Zhong County, Chongqing and subsequent lab work in Beijing. After receiving his PhD he returned to NTU as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology, where he was promoted to Associate Professor in 2014. There, in addition to continuing his work on the archaeology of salt, he taught a wide range of courses, including statistical analysis, GIS, physical anthropology, gender issues in archaeology, historical archaeology, archaeological theory, and seminars focused on Chinese archaeology.

It is fitting that the editors have dedicated this volume to Pochan. His impact on everyone who knew him was profoundly positive, he was a dedicated



O.I. Pochan Chen at the Three Gorges. (Photo: with permission of Kuei-chen Lin.)

friend, colleague, and teacher, and his influence on the thinking of colleagues and students was always inspiring. The compiling of an edited volume such as this one takes dedication and labor, and one hopes the result can be similarly inspiring for others who are wrestling with similar issues in various archaeological and historical contexts.

Rowan Flad (Cambridge, MA, November, 2017)

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