

INTRODUCTION

Stone, Scissors, Paper: Thinking Through Things in Chinese History*

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Abstract

What would Chinese history look like with things taking the center stage? Our present understanding of this history is animated primarily by literate people in pursuit of examination degrees and sons, and often filtered through such modern social science categories as culture, ethnicity, and gender. In this introduction, I put the set of five articles in the special issue in conversation with recent research to identify new analytic categories and research strategies that accord agency to things, remap the parameters of Chinese history, and ponder the new directions afforded by the study of material cultures.

Keywords: material culture studies; material history; things; tools; textual evidence

Material culture studies

The Antiques Roadshow Archive, a public education project licensed by the BBC and produced by PBS in the US, defines material culture as “in a given community or society, the material objects that people make, collect, and use, which give insight into the beliefs and customs held by that community.”¹ The no-nonsense language and the venue of its dissemination speak volumes about the popular interest in collecting and the value of objects as emblems of personal and communal histories. In China, too, viewing, collecting, and studying material objects is a national pastime. The award-winning television program, “Archive of National Treasures” (Guobao dang’an 國寶檔案), began airing in 2004 and quickly became one of the signature programs of CCTV. It is currently being broadcast five days a week during prime-time.² Professional historians of China, however, have been slower than the general public in making the “material turn.”³

*The framework of this introduction was formulated in my keynote address to the “Thinking Through Things in Qing China” workshop held at the Johns Hopkins University in September 22–23, 2016. I thank organizer Tobie Meyer-Fong and the participants for their insights. Gratitude is also due to Edward (Ned) Cooke of Yale University for his help with sources on material culture studies in the field of US history.

¹www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/teachers_using.html (accessed January 22, 2019). An artifact is “an object made by a human being, typically an item of historical or cultural interest.”

²“Archive of National Treasures” is currently aired on CCTV-4, the Chinese-international channel for viewers in the PRC and overseas. Although the actual viewing figures for the program are not known, the channel itself boasts an average daily viewership of 379 million in China alone in its solicitations for advertisements. See www.51cctv.com.cn/Article/CCTV-4%E5%B9%BF%E5%91%8A%E4%BB%B7%E6%A0%BC_1.html (accessed January 22, 2019).

³Recent historical research on material cultures in China has announced the arrival of a diverse emergent field. Limited in space does not allow me to include an exhaustive list here. Some representative works not

Although a relatively recent endeavor in the field of Chinese history, material culture studies has long been an established and productive specialty among historians of the US, especially of colonial America. As early as 1952, the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Program in American Material Culture was established in Delaware, the extension of a major museum of Americana. A new research building that housed the Winterthur Library and Archives as well as conservation labs was opened in 1969. In partnership with the nearby University of Delaware, the Winterthur offers programs in art conservation, museum studies, and history. It remains a key institution in the development of material culture studies as a multi-disciplinary endeavor today.

The *métier* of early scholars of American material culture involves identifying, describing, categorizing, and comparing classes of objects, and early studies are organized according to such object categories as household objects or architecture. Historians Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison describe the field as it stood in the late 1970s as composed of three “discrete intellectual streams”: anthropology (including archaeology and folklore studies), social history (including history of technology), and art history (including decorative arts and connoisseurship).⁴ As the field matured, scholars broadened their object-centered approach to include texts, or to construe material culture in linguistic terms, as “a text with its own grammar and vocabulary.”⁵ By the late 1990s, scholars had come to realize that “objects are good for answering certain kinds of questions but not others, that documents play an important role in augmenting the information yielded by objects, and that things are not necessarily more truthful than other kinds of sources.”⁶ Although specialists continue to debate the truthfulness of text versus objects, all agree that “people cannot adequately comprehend the lives of others unless they are prepared to engage the meaning of objects.”⁷

cited elsewhere in this Introduction, in order of publication, include: Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Evelyn Rawski, *Last Emperors: A Social History of Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Patricia Buckley Ebrely, *Accumulating Culture: The Collections of Emperor Huizong* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Jacob Eyferth, *Eating Rice from Bamboo Roots: The Social History of a Community of Handicraft Papermakers in Rural Sichuan, 1920–2000* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Oxford: Reaktion Books, 2010); Yulian Wu, *Luxurious Networks: Salt Merchants, Status, and Statecraft in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Jonathan Schlesinger, *A World Trimmed with Fur: Wild Things, Pristine Places, and the Natural Fringes of Qing Rule* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); Denise Y. Ho, *Curating Revolution: Politics on Display in Mao's China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴Ann Smart Martin and J. Ritchie Garrison, “Shaping the Field,” in *American Material Culture: The Shape of the Field*, edited by Martin and Garrison (Winterthur, DE: The Henry Francis du Pont Museum, 1997), 1–20. For the history of the related field of decorative arts, see Edward S. Cooke, “American Decorative Arts and the Academy,” *The Walpole Society Notebook*, 2012, 81–99. The anthropological approach is encapsulated in Christopher Tilley et al., eds, *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: Sage, 2006). For the art historical approach, see Jules David Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁵This quotation describes the approach of the pioneering and influential scholar Henry Glassie, who argues that material cultures constitute a system of communications from the past with recoverable rules. As such, material cultures constitute a more truthful representation of the lives of non-literate people than texts. Martin and Garrison, “Shaping the Field,” 3.

⁶Martin and Garrison, “Shaping the Field,” 20.

⁷Martin and Garrison, “Shaping the Field,” 20.

Compared to its long trajectory in US history, the study of material culture in the China field has yet to be institutionalized. This slow start is curious. The imperial Chinese empires, as the “Archive of National Treasures” reminds its reviewers every week, have long been known for the sophistication of their material cultures (or civilization, in the parlance of “National Treasures.”) The ingenuity of artisans and the proto-industrial scale of state-sponsored workshops were already evident in the Warring States period.⁸ High quality imperial and vernacular objects are well-preserved in museum collections both inside China and outside. That the study of material culture in the China field has been slow in establishing itself may have to do with entrenched habits of professional historians: the privileging of principles (*dao* 道) over vessels or instrumental things (*qi* 器), and the insistence on textual sources as the only legitimate evidence for historical research.⁹ Instead of timeless truths, the nature of admissible evidence and the basis of judgement about the adequacy of proof in support of a proposition are but conventions that should be subject to periodic reexamination by a rigorous field. It is high time for such a reexamination.

Since material cultures studies in Chinese history is a relatively young field, it is not yet defined by conventions or established “schools.” Individual scholars, from those senior in rank to junior, are engaged in innovative research from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.¹⁰ When commissioning articles for this special issue, I opted to showcase as much diversity in method and research questions as possible. Jue Guo, an archaeologist by training who works with both transmitted and excavated texts, uses a “cultural biography” approach to illuminate the meanings of a recent sensational archaeological find, the so-called “Confucius Dressing Mirror” from the Western Han tomb of Liu He, the Marquis of Haihun (92–59 BCE).¹¹ A second contributor, Jonathan Hay, is an art historian who has published influential works about the theory and practice of paintings, calligraphy, and decorative arts. In his authoritative biography of the tenth-century paleographer, calligrapher, and painter Guo Zhongshu (928–977), Hay relies primarily on extant steles, some of which have been kept at their present site of the Beilin Museum in Xi’an since the eleventh century, to expose and supplement the unreliability, if not ephemerality, of transmitted texts. Thomas Kelly, the third contributor, is a literature specialist whose dissertation focuses on the craft of writing implements as inscriptional surfaces. His study of a late Ming cultural entrepreneur

⁸Lothar Ledderose’s study of the Qin workshops of terra cotta soldiers is seminal, as is the book in which it appears: *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). The first book-length study of early imperial workshops and artisans in English is Anthony Barbieri-Low, *Artisans in Early Imperial China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

⁹Notable exceptions include pioneering works in Chinese by archaeologists as well as scholars in *gongyi meishu shi* 工藝美術史 (the history of arts and crafts) and *shougongye shi* 手工業史 (the history of handicrafts). In archaeology, an exemplary study is Qi Dongfang 齊東方, *Tangdai jinyinqi yanjiu* 唐代金銀器研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 1999). Historians of arts and crafts, trained and housed in a system of academies of arts and crafts separate from universities, have produced a series of textbooks organized by dynasties. Works of methodological reflections include: Hang Jian 杭間, *Shouyi de sixiang* 手藝的思想 (Ji’nan: Shandong huabao, 2003); Xu Yiyi 徐藝乙, *Wuhua gongqiao: Chuantong wuzhiwenhua yanjiu de tansuo yu yanjiu* 物華工巧：傳統物質文化探索與研究 (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin meishu, 2005).

¹⁰For a recent effort in combining studies of visual and material cultures, see Patricia Buckley Ebrely and Shih-shan Susan Huang, eds, *Visual and Material Cultures in Middle Period China* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

¹¹The concept of “cultural biography,” which scholars have found relevant to studies of material cultures in China, is Igor Kopytoff’s. See his chapter “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Fang Yongbin (1542–1608), like Hay's, is attentive to the irreducible materiality of writing: words carved on stone, handwritten on stationery paper, or as woodblock-printed handbills are analyzed differently because the meanings they signify are different. The medium is the message.

The fourth essay is by Susan Naquin, a *doyenne* of social history and popular religion, who is among the first to advocate the study of material cultures in the field of Chinese history. She uses an ecological or environmental approach to examine the distinctiveness of “regional materialities” as a new way to conceptualize local or regional cultures. Last but not least, Yuanxie Shi is a graduate student in museum studies and history. Her study of whitewood figurines from Ningbo, a souvenir for visiting tourists, combines an ecological approach in its interest in local trees with an intense artifact analysis, revealing a global connection of carvers, buyers, and collectors of a genre of seemingly trivial toys.¹² If the methods of Guo, Hay, and Kelly are informed by philology, both Naquin and Shi draw inspiration from anthropology, especially ethnography. Relying on fieldwork and interviews with craftsmen as sources of information, the latter illuminate the everyday life of artisans and farmers on the fringes of learned society.

The three material agencies of history: rock! scissors! paper!

Despite the methodological differences stemming from the authors' disciplinary training and generations, to my surprise the five articles have much in common in their premises and findings, not to mention in their shared commitment to using material analyses to revise entrenched biases or reveal blind spots in their fields or sub-fields. What we are witnessing in the pages that follow are thus the writing of an unfamiliar history of China, with new actors and agencies, as well as new conventions about admissible proof, the nature of evidence, and the style of argumentation.

Allow me to describe the contours of this history in terms of a changing configuration or interaction between three elements or modes of agency: stone (*zhi* 質, substance or materiality), scissors (*qi* 器, tools, vessels, or instruments), and paper (*wen* 文, writing or textuality). As we may remember from our kindergarten days, what makes this hand game so fun to play is its unpredictability and the utopian assumptions of its rules: no one object is inherently more powerful than others; the pliant sheet of paper that is no match for the sharp edges of the scissors can overwhelm a hard rock by wrapping it up, and so on. Depending on the luck of the draw or circumstances, any one attribute can come up on top.

Chinese society, or any society for that matter, however, is not a children's playground. The rules are rigged; conventional value or ideological systems deem some agencies intrinsically superior to others. The Confucian classic *Mencius* states in no uncertain terms that “those who labor with their brains rule others; those who labor with their brawn are ruled by others.”¹³ With this valuation of “head” over “hand,” the craftsmen with their tools (“scissors”) and materials (“rock”) are rendered invisible and illegible in history, history being written as it was (and still is) by scholars. In some quarters of the academy, the textual archive remains the only admissible source of evidence. With this overwhelming discursive advantage of *wen* (culture, literature, civility),

¹²Originally a sixth article was planned, one by a historian of science who works on textile technology. Regrettably this approach is not represented in the present special issue.

¹³*Mencius* 3A.4. Translation by Derk Bodde. See discussion in my *The Social Life of Inkstones: Artisans and Scholars in Early Qing China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 3–11.

it seems as though the “paper” in Chinese society is not a thin sheet but a thick corrugated cardboard, capable of not only obfuscating the “rock” but also smashing the “scissors.”

The contributors use a range of strategies to diffract—to bend light as it passes around the edge of an object, causing a redistribution of energy—the discursive advantage that writing and texts enjoy in Chinese history and society. The most audacious is Naquin, whose article does not rely on *any* textual evidence for its argumentation. There are no citations of local gazetteers nor legal cases in the footnotes, archival materials that constitute the *métier* of the social historian of late imperial China and for which Naquin’s earlier works are famous.¹⁴ The force of her arguments is based entirely on the material presence of “rock,” or the clay, stone, and iron enfolded in the geological strata of the North China Plain, and “scissors,” or the skills of craftsmen who baked clay into bricks and tiles with which temples and houses are built. In her world, one can enjoy sustenance, religion, and culture without “paper,” but “stone” and “scissors” are the *sine qua non* of personal, familial, and communal life.

Jue Guo’s strategy, although seemingly more accommodating than Naquin’s, is no less radical. Texts do constitute important evidence for the material historian, she suggests, but only when they are contextualized, not disembodied. The most important piece of evidence that clinches her argument is a rhymed prose inscribed on a fragment of lacquered wood. In being attentive to the material substrate of words, Guo proposes a method of constructing a cultural biography that is wrought of four equally important elements forming a complete “assemblage”: the person, the object, place, and text. From this perspective, the artificial or heuristic distinctions between “paper,” “rock,” and “scissors” begin to melt away. The three are not in constant battle as in the children’s game. In order to fully understand a text, the historian has to be attentive to both the instrument and craft that went into its making as much as its materiality and medium.

This research strategy that is premised on writing as a material and embodied practice has enormous historiographical implications. Recognized as a craft with an irreducible material dimension, writings are no longer texts with transhistorical meanings.¹⁵ The circumstances of their coming into existence and oblivion—in real time, concrete places, and engaging bodily capacities that have to be honed—constitute the stuff of history. Kelly’s analysis of the handwritten letters of a shopkeeper, which contrast with printed handbills advertising tea by the same writer, allows him to rethink the erosion of status hierarchies in late Ming society, indeed the erosion of conversancy with words as the very basis of social status. But it is Hay who shows once and for all that knowledge about ancient scripts—the basis of Guo Zhongshu’s craft as a calligrapher and expertise as a paleographer—is irreducibly material in nature, bound up as it is with the format of and inscriptions on stone steles. Neither intellectual nor abstract, Guo’s knowledge and skills are embodied in the stones. Born and lived in the “murderous times” of the Five Dynasties, as an official of a fallen dynasty Guo’s life was spared by new rulers who valued his skills in making steles, material manifestations of their political legitimacy. The northern Song antiquarian movement, Hay argues, had its

¹⁴See, for example, Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹⁵This was made clear in a pioneering volume, *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, edited by Judith T. Zeitlin and Lydia H. Liu (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003). Wu Hung’s chapter, “On Rubbings: Their Materiality and Historicity” (29–72) is particularly pertinent to the present discussion.

precursor in the mid-tenth century, when artisans such as Guo Zhongshu dedicated themselves to the solidity of stone steles—veritable objects that are at once “paper,” “rock,” and “scissors”—in order “to repair the frayed cord of cultural transmission.”¹⁶

China in space; China in time

The best way to convey the productiveness of these five articles is by putting them in conversation with other ongoing research on “rock,” “paper,” and “scissors” in Chinese history. Once we recognize things and instruments as hidden but no less powerful motive forces in Chinese history, we come to a new understanding of the latter’s spatial dimensions. China in space appears at once smaller and bigger than its territories. It is smaller because if we follow the trajectories of things, the most important material changes often manifest themselves in intimate, domestic settings, if not on the sensory experience of the body itself, as Susan Mann and Francisca Bray have shown.¹⁷ Space is neither pre-existing nor inert. It is through the agencies of things and human action in the course of the everyday that space is made.

China in space also appears much bigger than we had assumed when one follows the lead of S.E. Kile and Kristina Kleutghen, who show how productive it is to place the Qing empire not at the center but at the “edges” of early modern worlds in their recent research on the telescope and other optical instruments,¹⁸ or that of Naquin who, in searching for the location of such humble materials as limestone, brick, and metals that went into the building of small temples that dotted the North China Plain, end up animating the deep geological history of the region. If we take materiality seriously, that is, if we attend to the exact material requirements and techniques of how things are made (what I would call an “engineer’s approach,” exemplified by Naquin and Shi), the history of things cannot be separated from the history of the environment and ecology. A sense of deep geological time—which, as Stephen Jay Gould puts it, is wrought of the vectors of time’s arrow and time’s cycle—is a productive next step toward revolutionizing the historian’s understanding of the China-in-time.¹⁹

Hay’s study of Guo Zhongshu demonstrates the importance of probing at the edges of conventional understanding of time and space in Chinese history. As a paleographer, calligrapher, and architectural painter, Guo was an artist who transcend modern boundaries of disciplines; he was both Confucian and Daoist; he might have been part non-Han (Shantuo). Guo’s importance would have been obscured if the historian had adopted dynastic-centered and Sinocentric lens, as is conventional for research on Middle

¹⁶Jonathan Hay, ‘Guo Zhongshu’s Archaeology of Writing’, in this issue.

¹⁷Susan Mann draws attention to the material dimensions of domestic life by focusing on female labor. See her *Precious Records: Women in China’s Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Francisca Bray does so by construing domestic women as technologists and cultural producers, thus shifting the definition of technology from text-based knowledge to action-based culture, in *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). For Bray’s articulation of a “new materialism,” see her “Toward a Critical History of Non-Western Technology,” in *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge*, edited by Timothy Brook and Gregory Blue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 158–209.

¹⁸S.E. Kile and Kristina Kleutghen, “Seeing Through Pictures and Poetry: A History of Lenses (1681),” *Late Imperial China* 38.1 (2017), 47–112. See also Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

¹⁹Stephen Jay Gould, *Time’s Arrow, Time’s Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

Period China. Hay shows that it was exactly the multivalent education and mobile life style of such elites as Guo that allowed them to transmit strands of Tang court art and culture to the Northern Song. From this perspective, the politically fragmented Five Dynasties can be re-envisioned as a crucial period of cultural continuities and innovation.

I would have liked to end this section by offering a succinct statement about how recent research on material cultures in Chinese history have revised established historical narratives and periodization, based as they are on political history and an assumption of linear, progressive time. But the present stage of our research does not allow conclusive statements. One observes contradictory tendencies, however: disjuncture between political history and material history in some cases; alignment between the two in others. In her study of whitewood figurines from Ningbo in this volume, Yuanxie Shi discerns a disjuncture between the rhythms of political history and material history. Export trade in these carved wood objects, for example, reached its nadir during the Cultural Revolution. In an earlier essay on the visual and material history of the Ming–Qing transition, Jonathan Hay calls this gap “disjuncture diachronics” and invites scholars to probe it by being attentive to multiple narratives.²⁰ Future research is needed to reveal the trajectories of epistemic change and political change as well as the relationships between the two.

Insights from Qing history, where material cultures studies enjoy a relative head start, are instructive in this regard. At a recent workshop on Qing history, contrary to my expectations, a focus on things—political things, social things, moral things, to use organizer Tobie Meyer-Fong’s categories—seem to have *reaffirmed* our conventional narratives derived in large part from political history.²¹ This coincidence between political history and material history is puzzling. Research in global history of technology has shown that changes in the material processes of making things and the forging of tools follow their own rhythms: the telescope, like the adaptation of New World crops, made its way around the globe fast, almost instantaneously. Changes in weaving looms or farming implements, in turn, occurred glacially. The current research of historian of science Dagmar Schäfer has shown, for example, that despite the political rhetoric of Taizu, the founding emperor of the Ming, of restoring the cap and gown of the Han, two of his princes were buried with robes Mongolian in cut and color.²²

Be that as it may, one may summarize recent research on material cultures in Chinese history, those in this special issue included, by way of a paradox: the more historians strive to diffract the cultural prestige of “paper” by shifting their regime of attention to “rock” and “scissors,” the more relevant writing and textuality appear to be (except perhaps for Naquin). The power of “paper” as a technology which persists through the course of Chinese history has to be recognized, even as its material formats, means of circulation, and efficacy changed. The *métier* of the material historian is not to ignore “paper” but to achieve a balance, even a degree of cognitive justice, by giving “rock” and “scissors” an opportunity to reveal themselves in all their complexities. Our goal at the present stage is to improve our understanding about material

²⁰Jonathan Hay, “The Diachronics of Early Qing Visual and Material Culture,” in *The Qing Formation in World-Historical Time*, edited by Lynn Struve (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 303–34.

²¹Meyer-Fong develops these categories from her analysis of material culture in her recent book, *What Remains: Coming to Terms with Civil War in Nineteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). This book shows that when the core values of a civilization came under attack, writing on pieces of paper acquired a talismanic aura, as vehicles of truth that far exceed their flimsy materiality. Like other tangible things such as bones, “paper” became freighted with unbearable moral weight.

²²Dagmar Schäfer, “Dynastic Knowledge and the Knowledge of Dynasties: Politics and the History of Scientific Change,” paper presented at Columbia University, April 3, 2017.

technologies, tools, and instruments (as well as the people who made them) so that they can attain the same rigor and authority as our knowledge about texts.²³

Doing material history

The salience and lingering relevance of “paper” complicates our research method and strategy as we set out to do material history. How much weight should the historian assign to the material archive? How should we adjudicate the contradictions and gaps between the material evidence and textual evidence? Can we make a convincing argument in the absence of textual sources? In the extreme case of the history of food and banquets, a promising subject that has attracted recent scholarship, by definition all the food and wine were consumed; all that is left are fragments of texts.²⁴ Kleutghen articulates this tendency as “objects doomed to text even when they survive.”²⁵ She is referring to the Qianlong emperor’s list of counter-gifts for the British Macartney Embassy of 1793, but she might as well be speaking of the challenges and opportunities of writing history out of *all* ephemera, texts included. After all, are slips of bamboo not more transient than stone steles, at least in Guo Zhongshu’s way of making and knowing?

The ephemeral quality of all evidence is perhaps the most productive realization afforded by recent studies of material history. There is, however, no uniform answer to the questions posed at the beginning of the last paragraph. Every historian who conducts research on material cultures in Chinese history has to fashion his or her own approaches on the basis of the evidence at hand and the research questions formulated. When the research begins to accrue to a certain density, the field as a whole may make a concerted effort to reassess whether conventional standards about the nature of admissible proof and argumentation may require revision. Until then, we summon all our persuasive powers to convince our manuscript reviewers, one reviewer at a time.

In the spirit of encouraging future research, I end by proposing three fruitful areas of inquiry at the present juncture:

Things and identity

In the present volume, Yuanxie Shi describes the ways whereby whitewood figurines from Ningbo ended up being stand-ins for China through museum visits and children’s programs in the US. To the extent that the “nation” or a “civilization” is an abstract,

²³Research on “scissors,” or tools and instruments, is particularly needed. As Yulia Frumer reminds us in her recent book on time-keeping devices in Tokugawa Japan, working with a *thing*—in this case an instrument to measure minuscule temporal units—can produce new *concepts* or mental structures about the world in the form of new *theories* about planetary motion. “Scissors,” or tools and instruments, are particularly good to think with. Frumer, *Making Time: Astronomical Time Measurement in Tokugawa Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

²⁴A pioneering work is K.C. Chang, ed., *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). It has inspired, among others, Mark Swislocki’s monograph, *Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). For a recent study by an anthropologist, see E.N. Anderson, *Food and Environment in Early and Medieval China* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). For a historical study of food as medicine, see Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell, eds, *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019).

²⁵Kristina Kleutghen, “Jade, Lacquer, and Ink: Qianlong’s Gifts Bestowed on the Macartney Embassy,” paper presented at the Thinking Through Things in Qing China workshop, Johns Hopkins University, September 22–23, 2016, 3.

imagined entity, its existence or reality has to be concretized. Material culture is a particularly useful means towards this end. We all recognize that things, especially food and clothing, are powerful markers of the identity of a person, a community, or a country. But how did a certain thing come to represent something else, something as intangible and volatile as identities? Is the mechanism indexical, metaphorical, or symbolic?

Some researchers are prone to assuming that things enjoy a secure one-on-one correspondence with some pre-existing identity. But Thomas Kelly, in his contribution to this volume, warns against this reductionist view. Writing of the “improvised” nature of social roles in the late Ming, Kelly suggests that identities are neither pre-existing nor stable in his study of Fang Yongbin—at once shopkeeper, pawnshop broker, inkstone connoisseur, and seal collector. It was craft skills and knowledge about the market that allowed Fang to negotiate a new subject position beyond the strictures of traditional status hierarchy. One can be both a scholar (*shi* 士) and a merchant (*shang* 商). Rachel Silberstein concurs when she explains that second-hand clothing was popular in the late Qing because “clothing allowed people to dress their way into different social roles: urbanite, scholar, or official.”²⁶ You *are* what you wear. Social roles are formed in social interaction, in acts of social performance or posturing. Whether the performance is accepted by others as legitimate or not depends on prevalent values and judgment. The latter makes an excellent subject of historical analysis.

Not all identities are malleable and performative, however. Susan Naquin’s study of the “regional materialities” of the North China Plain serves as a timely reminder that material constraints—be it the availability of clay or the lack of tin—makes a material difference on the livelihood and culture of a specific region. Over fifty years after the initial publication of G. William Skinner’s seminal work which describes the “macroregions” of China as wrought of networks of periodic markets that ultimately linked a village to the metropolis, Naquin provides an important corrective to Skinner’s emphasis on trade and circulation of goods as determinants of spatial structures.²⁷ The making of regional culture in a resource-poor area, Naquin suggests, is dependent on shortages and the circumscribed mobility of people and things such as gods. Immobility is as important as mobility in the making of local or regional identities.

How to let the object speak?

About ten years ago, there appeared a spate of books with such provocative titles as “Things that Talk” or the “Objects that Speak,” as if things were the marvelous Mr. Ed the Talking Horse. Lorraine Daston’s *Things that Talk* is an inspiring and important book; I do not mean to disparage it. I merely want to suggest, following Naquin in this volume, that while it is important to “let the object speak,” it is even more important to ask, how exactly do things talk? What “language” do things speak?

Recent scholars in the English-speaking world, following a long tradition in Chinese philology,²⁸ have approached this question of the semiotics of things by being attentive to the *naming* of things, especially the cognitive dissonance that occurs when people first

²⁶Rachel Silberstein, “Other People’s Clothes: Second-Hand Clothes Dealers and the Western Art Collectors in Early Twentieth-Century China,” unpublished paper, 3.

²⁷G. William Skinner, “Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China, I,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 24.1 (1964), 3–43; “Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China, II,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 24.2 (1965), 195–228.

²⁸The work of Yang Zhishui 揚之水, combining the traditional *Mingwuxue* 名物學 (the study of names of things) with visual and material analyses, is inspiring. See her *Shijing mingwu xinzheng* 詩經名物新証 (Tianjin: Tianjin jiaoyu, 2007).

encounter a thing alien to them. But the meaning of things cannot be reduced to a *linguistic* issue, and we have to attend to the material and visual properties of a thing to fully understand its meanings. So much is lost in translation—from Chinese to English to Chinese, and more importantly, from object to “paper” or text and back—that one is tempted to argue, following Kleutghen, that all the bolts of silk, carved red lacquerware, and imperial calligraphy that Qianlong bestowed upon the Macartney Embassy are dumb and mute, incapable of speaking their Chinese values to their English recipients. But the historian today who values the diplomatic gifts as “both record of encounter” and “tools of diplomacy” may write a fantastic material history by following Kleutghen’s tripartite analytic gaze, based on the premise that objects communicate through their imagery (how it looks), their materials, and the skills that went into their making.²⁹ These are the three “languages” that objects speak in, if we insist on the language metaphor.

A second strategy that complements this intense scrutiny of an object in and of itself is to place an object in context and to track its shifting trajectories. Jue Guo’s essay in this special issue is exemplary in this regard. Using three analytic lenses to contextualize the Western Han “Confucius Dressing Mirror,” she draws a complex picture of its material, visual, and textual aspects. Guo’s hermeneutic stance is an open-ended one, one that recognizes that both the person and the object, even when dead and buried for two millennia, are living entities with fluctuating meanings that can be made anew when a new analytic light is cast.

Taken together, this set of five articles, and other recent research with which they are in dialogue, show that to attend to things is to attend at once to their ephemeral quality and to the circulation of their fragments in time and in space. The same is in fact true for texts, but in reading texts we often assume commensurability in meaning across time and space, especially in the case of classical Chinese. When thinking through things, we cannot make this facile assumption. We are compelled to conceptualize history as a process of making and re-making of things, texts, people, places, and meaning.

Dissolving boundaries: things in motion

Conventional wisdom might associate the study of material culture with the search for solidity, but in fact the opposite is true. Doing material history means to see the world as an alchemist: things may have inherent qualities, but the ultimate goal of the historian-as-alchemist is to master processes of transformation and to conjure new syntheses. No thing stays the same in terms of its ontological status and physical location. All things travel, and in mapping their trajectories—their changing contexts and settings—we track how knowledge travels.³⁰ We can place things on a spectrum depending on the ease and speed of their circulation. Some things are “sticky;” they resist movement. Sue Naquin’s local building materials are prime examples of this end of the spectrum. Other things are swift and speedy: Along with the telescope, Rachel Silberstein’s second-hand clothes are surprising candidates for the other end of the spectrum. The clothes move from imperial and commercial workshops to retail shops and pawnshops to second-hand clothing dealers and, from about 1880s on, having caught the attention of American art dealers, have found their way to auction houses and department stores

²⁹Kleutghen, “Jade, Lacquer, and Ink,” 6.

³⁰The research of Thomas T. Allsen on things in a transnational context has been particularly illuminating. See his earlier work, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and his last, *The Steppe and the Sea: Pearls in the Mongol Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

on the other side of the Pacific.³¹ Silberstein's study is a reminder that material history is by nature *transactional*; economic history is as useful as environmental and ecological history in taking the study of material histories to the next stage.

So, too, is institutional history, a venerable field in Sinology before it went into decline, which has recently been rekindled.³² To attend to things in motion is to recognize the importance of institutions where things are made or exchanged and where knowledge and skills about things accrued. The pawnshop is one such institution—where people traded one thing for another; where every object is evaluated according to a hierarchy of value; where people bought other people's clothes and where Jiren, a protagonist in Li Yu's novel, "The Tower for the Summer Heat," bought his telescope.

The other institution that deserves scrutiny is the artisanal workshop, where people, skills, tools, and things comingled. Recent studies of the Qing imperial and commercial workshops have revealed that these workshops are comparable to those in early modern Europe.³³ They both constituted a "trading zone" in historian of science Pamela Long's formulation: A symbolic or actual place "in which substantive and reciprocal communication occurred between individuals who were artisanally trained and learned (university-trained in the case of Europe) individuals."³⁴

The fact that you are reading this special issue is a sign that the study of material cultures in Chinese history has moved beyond the confines of disciplinary or geographical boundaries, and that its time has arrived. Together these five articles push the parameters of a new field forward, with all of its promises and pitfalls. In ending with questions instead of conclusions, these essays are open invitations to all historians to join in the pursuit of "rock," "paper," and "scissors" as the stuff of history.

³¹Silberstein, "Other People's Clothes," *passim*.

³²Recent research on Ming–Qing institutional history include: William T. Rowe, *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); R. Kent Guy, *Qing Governors and Their Provinces: The Evolution of Territorial Administration in China, 1644–1796* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

³³For recent studies of the Qing imperial workshops, see Gugong bowuyuan 故宫博物院 and Bolin Mapuxuehui kejishi yanjiusuo 柏林馬普學會科技史研究所, eds, *Gongting yu difang 宮廷與地方* (Beijing: Qijincheng, 2010). Kaijun Chen has analyzed the Qing Imperial Porcelain Manufactory in his "The Rise of Technocratic Culture in High-Qing China: A Case Study of Bondservant (Booi) Tang Ying (1682–1756)" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014). See also Christine Moll-Murata, *State and Crafts in the Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018).

³⁴Pamela O. Long, "Trading Zones in Early Modern Europe," *Isis* 106.4 (Dec. 2015): 840–47, quotation from 840. Cf. Long, *Artisan/Practitioners and the Rise of the New Sciences, 1400–1600* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2011), 94. For a description of four nodes and modes of knowledge transmission, see Dagmar Schäfer, "Introduction," in *Cultures of Knowledge: Technology in Chinese History*, edited by Dagmar Schäfer (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 1–18. For an influential study of artisanal workshops in early modern Europe, see Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).