

A Cultural Biography of Museum Objects: An Ethnographic Study on the Collections of Hong Kong Maritime Museum exhibition *East Meets West: Maritime Silk Routes in the 13th – 18th Centuries*

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This research is a cultural anthropological study of four archaeological objects exhibited in a special travelling exhibition *East Meets West: Maritime Silk Routes in the 13th – 18th Centuries* held at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum in 2018. The objects include a Song-dynasty stone anchor stock found in Sai Kung, Hong Kong waters; two brown-glazed pottery jars from Cizao kiln, Fujian: one unearthed from Sacred Hill North site, Kowloon Hong Kong, another salvaged from the *Nanhai No. 1* shipwreck; and a gold hat accessory embellished with carved jade featuring a dragon-and-peony design, decorated with gemstones from the tomb of the Prince Liangzhuang, Hubei. To investigate their cultural biographies ethnographically, an anthropological perspective was applied to study their life histories, exploring their stories and interactions with their ‘human’ users across different times.

In order to dig deeper into the life histories of these objects, I performed participant observation during my internship at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum in 2018. In December 2019, as fieldwork, I travelled to Quanzhou, Fujian to document the stone anchor stocks found there. I also did the textual analysis on the exhibits and had semi-structured interviews with the museum curators to learn more about the exhibits and the exhibition.

The Song-dynasty Sai Kung stone anchor stock is one of the highlights of this research. As a significant relic, it is the oldest Hong Kong underwater archaeological discovery and the only Song-dynasty stone anchor stock found in Hong Kong. By studying the stone anchor stock from an anthropological perspective for the first time, Arjun Appadurai’s theory in *Social Life of Things* was applied as the theoretical framework to reinterpret it. Its cultural biography begins from the production stage. Granite was first acquired as raw material, processed as a stone anchor stock and combined to an anchor, possibly in Fujian or Hong Kong. It later became a commodity consumed by shipowners. However, it was then left on the seabed for an unknown reason and period. In 2016, Dr William Jeffery salvaged and identified it as an underwater archaeological finding. Its discovery is truly a milestone of Hong Kong underwater archaeology. In 2018, it was displayed in the *East Meets West* exhibition and is now a permanent museum exhibit in the Hong Kong Maritime Museum.

Similar-looking stone anchor stocks were found in important Maritime Silk Routes ports like Fukuoka, Japan and Quanzhou, Fujian. They were all made of granite with similar craftsmanship, but the Sai Kung stone anchor stock is the smallest. In Quanzhou, the Chinese authorities have requested UNESCO to declare the city as ‘China’s international maritime trading centre in the Song-Yuan dynasty’. The stone anchor stocks found in Quanzhou are exhibited in the Quanzhou Maritime Museum and Ancient Boat Gallery, displayed separately with different interpretations, such as ship craftsmanship. To prepare for the UNESCO application, the museum was specially renovated to demonstrate China’s cultural soft power, exemplified through the Maritime Silk Routes. The stone anchor stocks found in different regions were all initially used as an ordinary tool, but they are now given different functions, meanings and values. Interestingly, Quanzhou villagers once treated the stone anchor stock as an ordinary stone bench, whereas two stone anchor stocks in Japan were put under a sacred tree at a shrine in Fukuoka. The stone anchor stocks in Japan are given a sacred meaning, while the one in Quanzhou was simply used as a daily object that was sat on.

Since this exhibition was previously held in China, Germany and Italy, it is truly a globalized cultural event that embodies the spirit of East meets West. Hence, this research applies a museum anthropology perspective to investigate the curating details of the exhibition for the localized elements. It also compares the three *East Meets West* exhibitions regarding certain features of cultural diplomacy, cultural exchange and self-Orientalism.

Therefore, this research applies cultural anthropology and museum anthropology theories to study the exhibits and the exhibition. This study attempts to inspire the museum audience to reinterpret and reimagine the life, function and circulation around these objects, thereby engaging the audience with these exhibits in a deeper sense. I would like to thank the Department of Anthropology, CUHK, for granting a research funding from the FYP subsidy scheme, while extending my gratitude to my advisor, Dr Sharon Wong, and my informants.



The Song-dynasty Sai Kung stone anchor stock exhibited in the *East Meets West* exhibition (Photo taken by SZETO Huen Ting at the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, 2018)



The Song-dynasty stone anchor stock found in Quanzhou, Fujian (Photo taken by SZETO Huen Ting at the Quanzhou Maritime Museum, 2020)