The Lives of Chinese Objects
Museums and Collections

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As houses of memory and sources of information about the world, museums function as a dynamic interface between past, present and future. Museum collections are increasingly being recognized as material archives of human creativity and as invaluable resources for interdisciplinary research. Museums provide powerful forums for the expression of ideas and are central to the production of public culture: they may inspire the imagination, generate heated emotions and express conflicting values in their material form and histories. This series explores the potential of museum collections to transform our knowledge of the world, and for exhibitions to influence the way in which we view and inhabit that world. It offers essential reading for those involved in all aspects of the museum sphere: curators, researchers, collectors, students and the visiting public.

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*Louise Tythacott*
For my father, Ken, with love,
and in memory of my dear mother, Joyce.
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Acknowledgements

One of the things that has made the research for this book such a pleasure is the generosity and encouragement of so many people, both friends and strangers. My family has provided constant and much needed intellectual and emotional support throughout – in particular, my husband, Richard Kirkby, my daughter, Sophie and my father, Ken Tythacott, who have endured endless talk of Guanyin and Edie over the past few years.

A complex project such as this – where information has lain dormant in archives, libraries and museums around the world – has only been possible with the help of many different individuals and institutions. Indeed I have been overwhelmed by the kindness of people who have enthusiastically attempted to uncover information about the statues. I am extremely grateful to Ken Tythacott for undertaking detailed archival research on William Edie at the Public Record Office, Kew, and in the British Library. Amongst other favours, Zachary Kingdom, at the National Museums Liverpool, kindly forwarded pages from an 1882 catalogue with vital information on the images. I would like to thank John Kieschnick at Bristol University, who freely gave up his valuable time while on research leave in Taiwan in order to identify the early lives of the bronzes in the temples in China. Through him I recruited Yi-Lin Wu at the Institute of History and Philology, Academica Sinica, Taipei, to examine Chinese monastic gazetteers. John Kieschnick also put me in touch with Robert Bickers at the University of Bristol, who generously provided an essential reference clue to the original locations of the bronzes. I am extremely grateful to Marjorie Caygill at the British Museum for so kindly supplying information on Bram Hertz. For information on Buddhist imagery, Chün-Fang Yü (Rutgers University), Angela Howard (Rutgers University), Hsueh-Man Shen (National Museums of Scotland), Ming Wilson (Victoria and Albert Museum) and Eldon Worrall (National Museums Liverpool) gave their opinions, for which I am extremely grateful.

I could not have made the trip to China in 2007 without the support of Wang Hongyang (Nanjing University). In Ningbo, Dinghai and on Putuo Island, many volunteered as guides, interpreters and informants, enormously facilitating my research – especially Wang Rong (and Susan) and Feng Jixuan, also Dai Zongpin, Xia Zhi Zheng, Jin Ming Fashi, Revd Hui Xian, Xin Li, Hu Lianrong, Chen Zhouyue and Wu Rong Jin.

The history of the Liverpool Museum has been a major focus and I have had help and encouragement from staff (past and present) at the National Museums

I am grateful to many other curators and archivists who gave often detailed responses to my queries: June Jenkinson at Bebington Library; Bevan Blanchard, Marcella Leembruggen, Hedley Sutton and Jane Walsh at the British Library; Stephanie Clark at the British Museum; Simone Harris and Arthur Holden at Bromley Library; Sue Kauffman at the Central Library Record Office, Liverpool; Rory Lalwan at the City of Westminster Archives Centre; Melvyn Harrison at the Crystal Palace Foundation; Nicola Pink at Hampshire Archives and Local Studies; Bridget Howlett at London Metropolitan Archive; Alison Copeland at the Manchester Art Gallery; Jane Parr at Manchester Central Library; Alistair Massey at the National Army Museum; Jeremy Coote at the Pitt Rivers Museum; Valerie Phillips at the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851; Julie Carrington at the Royal Geographical Society; Adrian James at the Society of Antiquaries; Erik Blakeley, Jim Massey and Ted Green at the Staffordshire Regiment Museum; Michael Rhodes at Torbay Council; Micaela Chandler and Maureen Watry at the Sydney Jones Library, University of Liverpool; Adrian Allan at the University of Liverpool Archives; Julie Ramwell at the John Rylands, Special Collections, University of Manchester; Helen Rufus-Ward at the University of Sussex; Colin Simpson at the Williamson Art Gallery; Nina Appleby, Bernadette Archer, Annemarie Bilclough, Stephen Calloway, Richard Loveday, Christopher Marsden and Abraham Thomas at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

I have benefited greatly from feedback on various chapters and I thank my Museology colleagues at the University of Manchester – Sam Alberti and Kostas Arvanitis – as well as Elizabeth Hallam at the University of Aberdeen and Zachary Kingdon at the National Museums Liverpool for reading parts of the text. The comments of Suzanne MacLeod at the University of Leicester and those of an anonymous reader were also extremely useful. I have benefited from discussions on the subject with Judith Green, Sian Jones, Sharon Macdonald, Helen Rees Leahy and Francesca Tarrocco. My enduring thanks go, above all, to my beloved husband, Richard, who so diligently read and re-read every sentence, making astute and much needed editorial amendments.

The book would not have been possible without the semester on research leave granted by the University of Manchester in 2007 and the matching semester awarded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in 2007–8. I am grateful to Craig Clunas for supporting my original AHRC application. James Thompson at the University of Manchester kindly granted additional financial resources for research on the gazetteers. I also owe an enormous debt to Mark Stanton, Editorial Manager at Berghahn Books, and to Mary Bouquet and Howard Morphy for supporting this publication.
Introduction

Research and Serendipity

This book started life one evening in 2005. I was browsing the Internet exploring representations of the China court at the Great Exhibition of 1851 when suddenly my gaze was transfixed by the most extraordinary image. The screen showed a chromolithograph depicting an unmistakable group of objects with which I had once been intimately involved. That they had been exhibited 150 years earlier – and so very prominently – was a complete surprise.

In the early 1990s, I had undertaken anthropological research in Hong Kong, focusing upon Chinese temples and their deities. I had also been adopted into the family of a Chinese temple keeper and had spent many hours amidst Buddhist and Daoist statuary. A fascination with Chinese religious imagery was still with me when I joined Liverpool Museum in 1996 as their curator of ethnology, and I was immediately drawn to the museum’s fine collection of Buddhist objects. Perhaps curators are not supposed to admit to having favourites, but during my seven years at Liverpool Museum I was enthralled by three large bronze deity figures. The most striking was a complex, intricately cast, almost life-size representation of Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion. Guanyin has long enjoyed the status of the most popular deity in the Chinese pantheon. Once assembled, in a seated position with legs crossed, this statue had two arms held in front in supplication, and twenty-two outstretched on either side. It had an ornate crown, eyes almost closed, a face serene and meditative, and was by far the most beautiful and exquisite bronze deity figure I had ever seen. My two other favourites were a pair. Though not on the scale of Guanyin, they were also large Buddhist images. One – known as Wenshu – astride a lion, the other – Puxian – on an elephant. Both were seated sideways on their mounts, with bodies that were not symmetrical like Guanyin’s, but turned slightly as if to face something in between.

Soon after I arrived at Liverpool Museum, I encountered various bits of these statues in a thoroughly dismembered state – Guanyin’s arms, symbols, crown, throne and other body parts were encrusted with dirt and corrosion and scattered around the vast museum stores. All three statues had evidently been neglected over the years: their original accession numbers were lost and nothing was known about how, when or why they had arrived at Liverpool Museum. While it was evi-
dent that the two smaller images were connected as a pair, there was no document-
tation to associate them with the larger figure of Guanyin – indeed they were
different stylistically. Despite the paucity of information, it was clear to me that
these were of such importance that they were candidates for the new World Cul-
tures galleries (funded by the Heritage Lottery) of which, at the time, I was the
lead curator.

So compelling were these bronzes that, once assembled and shown to out-
siders, they were to draw extraordinary attention. A number of leading specialists
were invited to Liverpool to assess them in the late 1990s, and to provide advice
on culture of origin and approximate dating. Yet, despite this, Guanyin remained
an enigma, one eminent authority proclaiming her Japanese. Some dated her to
the fourteenth century or Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), while others insisted that
she was a nineteenth-century creation. The paired bronzes proved less controver-
sial: there was unanimity around the idea that they were Chinese, dated loosely
to the last part of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), that is the early seventeenth
century, and they were considered to be of imperial quality.

After extensive exposure to the skills of metal conservators in Liverpool’s
renowned Conservation Centre, the three bronzes became the centrepiece of a
new display within the World Cultures gallery, which opened to the public in
May 2005. I located them in a large case devoted to Mahayana Buddhism (the
Buddhism of China and Japan), with the twenty-two-armed Guanyin at the cen-
tre, flanked by the other two deity figures – Wenshu was on her right, Puxian on
her left. I had also decided that the interior of the large case should be painted a
vibrant red to evoke the atmosphere of Buddhist temples. However, they only had
very basic labels: although we had managed to identify and approximately date
them, their previous biographies, their origins and their travels to Liverpool
remained unknown – that is until that evening in 2005.

The chromolithograph which I had encountered online was a view looking
towards the transept of the massive Crystal Palace of 1851, not far from the cen-
tre of the building, where the Crystal Fountain was located. To the right, the artist
depicted a group of men in the location of the famed Koh-i-noor diamond, the
star of the show. To the left was a display of dark-coloured Buddhist deity figures,
three of which were arranged together on the top plinth. I knew in an instant that
these were the sculptures that had so fascinated me at Liverpool Museum.

With the First Opium War still a fresh memory, the Great Exhibition organ-
izers had a struggle on their hands as far as artefacts from China were concerned.
Nonetheless, there was a China court of sorts, images of which are well known to
Crystal Palace scholars. The view that I had stumbled across, however, was not of
the China court, but rather the main avenue, at the end of the Tunis display. As
if to erase its associations with China, I was later to discover that the Victoria and
Albert Museum kept its copy of the revelatory image in its Department of Prints
and Drawings under ‘Tunis No.3’.3

Beyond my astonishment at coming across the chromolithograph in this way,
I was even more intrigued by the fact that the positioning of the three bronzes,
and the colour of the large red backdrop at the Crystal Palace, all bore an uncanny resemblance to the Mahayana display in the World Culture gallery that I had devised over 150 years later. In both cases, Guanyin was placed centrally, flanked by the paired bodhisattvas astride animals – Wenshu on her right, Puxian on her left – all against a vermillion backdrop. The grammar of their display had not fundamentally changed.

Then, as I examined the artist’s rendering of the Great Exhibition more closely, I noted two smaller statues depicted below the three large ones and suddenly realized that these too were objects I had been familiar with in Liverpool. They had been left in the stores, badly neglected, wrapped in thick polythene bags, covered in dust and corrosion, with bits broken off. Their original accession numbers from the nineteenth century were missing. For some reason, when I worked at the museum, it had not crossed my mind that these two figures – known in Chinese as Weituo and Guangong – were associated with the three larger ones, and I had omitted them from the Buddhism display.

As soon as could I went to London to examine the Great Exhibition catalogues, and after a number of false starts finally came across the page devoted to these five imposing Buddhist figures. Laying arguments over their origins to rest, the text revealed that they had come from ‘Pato’ in China. ‘Pato’ was a nineteenth-century rendering of the two Chinese characters ‘Pu’ and ‘tuo’ (Putuo), the famed pilgrimage island some miles off the coast of Zhejiang province, not too far from the mouth of the Yangzi river and Shanghai. Traditionally one of the most important Buddhist sites in China, Putuo’s renown rests on its many temples devoted solely to the worship of the Goddess of Compassion – Guanyin. The Liverpool Guanyin, therefore, would clearly have resided in a key position in a temple on this fabled Buddhist island. Some years later, I read an account of a visit in 1844 by the Scottish botanist, Robert Fortune, in which special note was made of a group of ‘exquisite’ bronze statues installed in Putuo’s most illustrious monastery – the Puji.4 This, then, may have been the original location of these extraordinary images.

According to the Great Exhibition catalogue, the deity figures had been ‘obtained’ by a Major Edie from the ‘priests of the island’. William Edie was an officer in the 98th Regiment and was dispatched to China as part of the British expeditionary force which fought in the First Opium War (1839–42). He remained in China until 1845. Research at the Staffordshire Regiment Museum in Lichfield, which represents the now-disbanded 98th Regiment, failed to reveal the exact circumstances under which Edie obtained these objects. There was no diary or other primary Edie material, except, most surprisingly, for a print of an artistically accomplished title page designed and written by the man himself. This described his Regiment’s movements in China. Through various documentation on the campaign, I was able to reconstruct Edie’s experiences, and the opportunities that fell across his path and which led to his acquisition of these statues.

In early 2007, in a quest for greater knowledge about the five bronzes, I embarked on my own ‘pilgrimage’ to Putuo.5 I visited and documented a number
of temples and monasteries and was able to interview senior monks. My hope was to identify the actual temple, amongst the many on Putuo Island, from which the deities had been wrested – a hope which then remained unrealized. I learned that over the course of time, many of these Putuo buildings suffered neglect, and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), most of the religious edifices had been wilfully destroyed by Red Guards. Still, the long journey to Putuo gave me an essential insight into the world of devotion once inhabited by the five. With the Cultural Revolution long since repudiated, each year the island now receives millions of pilgrims, travelling to pay homage to images of Guanyin.

Amongst those with whom I shared my mission in China – monks, academics and museum professionals – there was palpable excitement at the discovery of these treasures which had been removed from their country under the clouds of national humiliation some 160 years before. Indeed, I was later to discover that the figure of Guanyin in Liverpool is believed to be the oldest extant religious bronze statue from Putuo.

I was eager to retrace, as far as I could, Edie’s footsteps with the 98th. From Putuo, I took a boat to an island further north in the Zhoushan archipelago. I visited the town of Dinghai where the British had been garrisoned. Later, I was to follow the invaders’ route up the Yangzi river to the decisive battleground of Zhenjiang, and further to Nanjing where the campaign culminated and the first of the momentous ‘unequal treaties’ was imposed upon the Qing court in 1842. Along the route, I discovered some of the temple complexes which were recorded as billets of the 98th Regiment. It became evident that before obtaining the deities Edie must have encountered much Buddhist imagery.

The initial significance of these objects was as religious figures, and Guanyin especially had been revered by Buddhists for over four hundred years. In the temples in China these images would have formed part of an ‘iconographical programme’ (Seckel 1989): their precise imagery, the symbols they held, and the thrones or animal mounts upon which they sat, all had symbolic meaning to Buddhist worshippers. Their position in relation to each other and to other deities, their location on the altars in the halls of worship, the siting of temples in terms of fengshui principles as well as the wider position of Putuo in the Buddhist landscape of belief, all served to define their sacredness. Most significantly, as far as the believers were concerned, the bronzes had been consecrated through ceremonies so that they were ‘active’ and capable of being worshipped. In the 1840s they were brutally dislocated from this sacred realm, taken from their pilgrimage island and shipped to the other side of the world.

As the research progressed I discovered more things about the extraordinary lives of these objects. Not only had they featured in the Great Exhibition of 1851, but they had been moved after this to the Crystal Palace in Sydenham. In 1854 they were offered, but not sold, at Sotheby’s. Guanyin was then taken to the Manchester Art Treasures exhibition of 1857, the largest public display ever held in Britain. All five objects were auctioned at Sotheby’s two years later, and for an exceptionally high price. By the 1850s, they had entered Joseph Mayer’s
renowned collection in Liverpool, which in 1867 was given to this wealthy town – and this remained the single most important donation of antiquities in the history of Liverpool Museum. Even before I started working at the institution in 1996, I had heard of this collection. As a curator at the museum, I soon realized that anything tracing back to the Mayer gift was distinguished with the prefix ‘M’ to its accession number. Such was the reputation of the great Mayer donation that a distinct aura of rarity always seemed to cling to any of his objects. Yet with none of their original accession numbers remaining, by the 1990s, the Putuo bronzes were not identified as ‘Mayer’.

Once absorbed into Liverpool Museum in 1867, the lives of the bronzes experienced a succession of imposed identities that reflected the changing ideologies and circumstances of the institution. They appeared in an evolutionary display in 1882, where over a thousand words were penned in honour of them in the accompanying catalogue. After being exhibited as specimens of the ‘Mongolian’ race in the early twentieth century, several decades later the museum reconceptualized them as objects of Oriental art. They narrowly missed being bombed in the Second World War, when the library next to the museum was hit: they had been hastily removed in 1939, along with the rest of the collections, and ended up in makeshift boxes and dispersed in the stores in terrible conditions. They were first of all placed in a Regency villa in rural Wales, then stored in suburban Liverpool, before being transported in the 1960s to a nineteenth-century brick warehouse by the docks. In 2000, along with the rest of the Archaeology and Ethnology collections, they were taken to an anonymous-looking modern steel and concrete building on an industrial site in Bootle, a mile or two to the north.

This book follows the succession of exhibitionary realms through which these images – ‘the Putuo Five’, as I call them – travelled: the temple in China, where for centuries they were worshipped by devout pilgrims; the temple to industry that was the Great Exhibition; and the evolutionary museum display of the late nineteenth century, where they signified stages of racial development. By the 1930s, they were considered as objects of Oriental art, and in their latest exhibitionary incarnation in 2005 they were displayed in the Buddhism section of the World Cultures gallery. Yet while this book explores the meanings accrued in these display realms, it also considers the less glamorous moments in the lives of the figures, when they shifted out of the public gaze and into the quiet of the museum stores.

After China, the public lives of the images seem to have been most visible in the mid nineteenth century, when they first arrived on English shores. In the antiquarian landscape of Britain they were exceptional rarities. The 1850s and 1860s, in particular, was a period when they were most mobile and when their meanings and their future trajectories seemed uncertain. During this time, they moved onto the open market, from collector to collector, from one place to the next. At each moment when they were displayed, sold and bought by private collectors and dealers, they underwent an ontological crisis. At the same time their descriptions were carefully documented. Here it is through the museums’ ‘textual coun-
The interpretation of material culture — a focus of great scholarly interest since the late 1980s — is today marked by its inter-disciplinarity, drawing on subjects as diverse as art history, archaeology, anthropology, history, economics and museology. In anthropological theory, especially, there has been a move away from ear-
lier paradigms, such as structural functionalism, in which material culture per se was allocated a low value. Over the past twenty years, authors such as Ames (1992), Appadurai (1986), Gell (1998), Kopytoff (1986), Miller (1994, 2008), Thomas (1991) and Weiner (1992) have been instrumental in refocusing attention on the significance and potency of ethnographic things.

According to this paradigm, objects do not have real, innate or fixed identities. Rather, meaning is a cultural construction forged in relation to interpretative frameworks. The meanings of objects are always in flux and are contextual; if context changes, so too, inevitably, will meaning. Meanings may lie dormant or be activated as objects move through different interpretative spheres. Not only do objects travel through different ‘regimes of value’ during their lives, they may also be endowed with multiple meanings at any particular moment (Kopytoff 1986). As different individuals come into contact with things, different meanings are imposed.7

This perceived potential of artefacts to hold and generate multiple meanings has led to a range of new research (Ames 1992; Gell 1998; Henare 2005; McCarthy 2007; Myers 2001, Steiner 1994; Thomas 1991). Objects have been interpreted variously as the ‘bearers of meanings’ (Pomian 1990), ‘polysemic’ (Hooper-Greenhill 2000), and ‘vehicles of knowledge’ (Henare 2005: 66). One of the most influential approaches – and one that provides an essential framework for this book – is the idea of objects having biographies. This was a metaphor first expounded by Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai in 1986. Kopytoff’s seminal essay, ‘The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process’ (1986) suggested that objects may be compared with people in terms of their having social lives. Just like people, he argued, objects may have multiple ‘persona’ depending on the context in which they are placed. And just as we may analyse the biography of a person, so too it is possible to examine the lives of objects and ask of them similar questions:

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 things? What are the recognised ‘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: 66–67)8

Kopytoff wrote of things being marked by the spheres through which they pass (1986: 64). Artefacts are seen here to have layered biographies and, as they continue to exist, so their biographies grow. This approach holds that it is not possible to fully understand an object by simply focusing on one particular moment or aspect of its life cycle. Rather it is accumulated experience that gives things their identities (Gosden and Marshall 1999: 170).

Influenced by such ideas in recent decades, material culture theory has considered objects to be less static and more mobile than before. This approach
emphasizes circulation and re-contextualization. Objects are described as being ‘in motion’ and are said to build or absorb meaning as they travel. Things may have complex itineraries that can be tracked. Ames talks of artefacts having ‘careers’, which construct a ‘social patina’, and this ‘accrues over time as an object moves from maker to user to collector to preserver to exhibitor’ (1992: 100, 141).

In discussing the lives of objects in this way, however, one must be mindful of not making them too active, for material culture is, after all, inanimate until activated by people (Gosden and Knowles 2001: 22–23, Alberti 2005: 561). Steiner, in particular, warns that things are no more animated than before (2001: 210–211). Too many people, he argues, have attributed too much power to objects and have diminished the importance of human agency. For him, it is the relationship between objects and people that is crucial (2001: 210–211). Yet one theory has gone further than any other by actually positing that objects may be conceptualized as persons, an idea that is briefly addressed below.

In his seminal book, Art and Agency, Alfred Gell (1998) examines objects as ‘social beings’. His anthropological approach to the interpretation of artefacts perceives things to be the equivalent of persons or social agents (1998: 7, 9). Gell insists that works of art have to be treated as person-like, as ‘targets for social agency’ (1998: 96). Yet in discussing objects in this way, he is not implying that they actually have intentions or motivations. Evidently material culture does not have the same agency as people. ‘Idols’ do not actually ‘do’ anything, he writes, they are immobile (1998: 128). Rather, the agency of an object is manifested in the effect it has on people’s lives, in how it influences behaviour in ways that would not be possible if it did not exist. Agency is ‘any modality through which something affects something else’ (1998: 42). Objects, for him, embody human intentions in social relationships; it is the mediatory role of objects in social process which is important.

In particular Gell considers consecrated religious images to be significant, for these represent deities or ‘people’ in especially powerful ways (Thomas 1998: x). The Putuo Five thus take on new significance in relation to Gell’s thesis. As we shall see, they were made to ‘come alive’ through rituals and were considered in the world of the Buddhist temple to be animate beings. In the first devotional realm of significance, Guanyin, Wenshu, Puxian, Weituo and Guangong had extraordinary agency, affecting the lives of believers in profound and multifarious ways.

* * *

In recent years, Kopytoff and Appadurai’s ideas have informed a number of scholars who have traced the biography of objects (Alberti 2005; Ames 1992: Hamilakis 1999; Foster and Jones 2008; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Gosden and Marshall 1999; Hoskins 1998; Macleod 2010; Peers 1999). However, despite the aptness of this perspective, few extended object biographies have been attempted, and none track progress through exhibitionary and museological domains. Yalouri’s analysis of the Acropolis (2001), for example, takes a single monument
as her focus, but her emphasis is archaeological and anthropological. Similarly, Bender’s work on Stonehenge (1998) is not conventionally biographical in its documenting of the origins and history of the monument. Rather her concern is to elicit the multiple meanings surrounding these megaliths through contemporary discourse.

There has also been a genre of journalistic books devoted to the lives of objects. For example, Paul Chamber’s *Jumbo: This Being the True Story of the Greatest Elephant in the World* (2007) documents the life and tragic death of the celebrated nineteenth-century African elephant, the star of Regent’s Park Zoological Gardens and later P.T. Barnum’s circus. Some follow the stories of famous art works. Joanna Pitman’s *The Raphael Trail* (2006) is an example, based upon the journeys of the painting *St George and the Dragon* (1506) between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, through the hands of royal collections and avaricious art collectors. In her descriptions of this painting as a commodity, exchanged between the elites of Europe and North America, Pitman uncovers tales of patronage and power. Yet she is correct to acknowledge that this is not the book of an art historian or academic (2006: 51). Geraldine Brook’s *People of the Book* (2008) charts the movements of a fifteenth-century Jewish manuscript, the Sarajevo Haggadah. Here a fictional narrative is constructed based on the actual travels of the book from Seville (1480), to Tarragona (1492), on to Venice (1609), and then to Sarajevo (1940). Her writing imagines the lives of people who may have come into contact with this beautifully illustrated religious manuscript, as far back as the fifteenth century. Like the present study, both texts track the lives of five-hundred-year-old artistic treasures. Yet, tempting as it is to weave imaginary narratives around the Buddhist images from China, I confine myself here to the evidence uncovered, extrapolating only in so far as imagining the realms which the Putuo Five inhabited.

Most studies devoted to the complex itineraries of objects have not been concerned with wider theoretical issues in museology or material culture studies. In this respect, Foster and Jones’s work (2008) comes closest to my own. Like Yalouri, their writing draws on anthropological theory by identifying the discourses accumulated around an archaeological monument, the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish cross-slab. They track its ‘birth’ in the eighth century, its fragmentation, defacement and re-use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the rediscoveries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the new associations coalescing around the sculpture in the twenty-first century. Though parallels with the concerns of this book may be drawn, the cross-slab clearly passed through different social existences. Furthermore, through participant observation and interviews, Foster and Jones examine visitor perceptions in the National Museum of Scotland, as well as the diverse meanings woven around the stone by local people in Cadboll. Their work is strong in oral history and in identifying the multiple discourses surrounding the object.

While my own study is, to an extent, concerned with individual perceptions of the images, the focus is the movement of the Putuo Five through shifting cat-
egories of meaning, especially in the museum. There is an increasing body of research focusing on the values ascribed to material culture in the museum (Alberti 2005; Coombes 1994; Henare 2005; Hill 2005; Levell 2000; McCarthy 2007; Moser 2006; Penny 2002). Yet this book is distinctive in its investigation of the lives of a particular set of things.

**Objects and the Museum**

The traditional glass cases of the museum present little impediment to the eye but they are not ideologically transparent. (Classen and Howes 2006: 218)

Alongside the growth of museum studies since the 1980s, the delineation of the significance of museum objects has become an area of considerable focus (Ames 1992; Coombes 1994; Gosden and Knowles 2001; Henare 2005; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Pearce 1992, 1994; Penny 2002; Shelton 2001; Thomas 1991). This is a subject that centrally informs this book, for after their arrival in England the Putuo Five were destined for lengthy careers in public displays and museums. Five of the seven chapters examine the positioning of the objects in exhibitions: three focus on meanings accrued specifically in Liverpool Museum (now ‘World Museum Liverpool’). In these chapters I interrogate this institution’s shifting exhibitionary strategies in relation to non-Western objects.

A number of authors have contested the neutrality of the museum in relation to our understanding of objects (Ames 1992; Bennett 1995; Duncan 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2001). It is evident that these institutions do not portray universal truths, but instead perpetuate representations of the societies from which they emerge (Ames 1992: 47). Ames describes museums as ‘machines for recontextualisation’ and as ‘expressions of ideology’ (Ames 1992: 127, 141). Others too contend that these places are not neutral frames through which objects are viewed but are ideologically active environments (Duncan and Wallach 2004; Karp and Lavine 1991).

Museums thus do not passively present objects for public consumption, but actively construct the spaces in which things can be viewed. They are sites of cultural production, places where knowledge is articulated and visually mapped – and this is, of course, most evident when things are on display. Moser, amongst others, has written about how meaning is constructed through the juxtaposition of objects in space. Museum displays ‘impart messages’, ‘endorse … theoretical perspectives … Certain arrangements of styles of presenting objects have constructed a particular view of a subject’ (Moser 2006: 2, 3).

While it is therefore axiomatic that ways of exhibiting Chinese and Buddhist material culture in museums have been culturally constructed, it is important to note that the conditions of viewing objects too have, over the course of time, been socially mediated. As we shall see, during their lives, the Putuo Five were shifted into very different ‘regimes of visuality’ and distinct sensory landscapes.12 The
scopic and sonic regime of the Buddhist temple was worlds apart from that of the Great Exhibition of 1851. Their significance also changed as they entered the marked ocular-centrism of the Western museum. Alpers (1991), amongst others, has argued that the modern museum is predominantly a scopic site with a restricted sensory regime (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: xi, 130; Bennett 2006: 263). Classen and Howes too note how often it is only the most visually striking things that are placed on public display (2006: 200). The strong aesthetic forms of the bronze Buddhist statues, as we shall see, rendered them prime candidates for public exhibition.

While one focus of this book is the exhibitionary contexts – the most public and easy-to-decipher spheres of museological meaning – there are other arenas in which the museum shaped the identities of the Putuo Five. I consider periods when they were not on display: hastily crated and evacuated in the Second World War, dumped in the various stores, subjected in their confinement to the multiple gazes of specialists, or moved in the late twentieth century to Liverpool’s newly established and technologically innovative Conservation Centre, where their physical forms became modified in new ways.

Of course, it will not be possible to document all the interpretations placed upon the images throughout their long and eventful lives and, where detailed information has not been available, I have attempted to delineate instead the broad epistemological frameworks into which they would have been placed. The ways in which they were exhibited throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were products of the ideologies of the times, and so I explore some of the dominant museological approaches that informed the display of non-Western objects during this period – curiosity, evolutionism, aesthetics and object biography.

Not only were different meanings for the Putuo Five constructed as a result of shifting museological paradigms, but they were also made to signify in relation to the production of different kinds of knowledge about China. The deity figures, in other words, operated as metonyms for wider British images of the ‘Orient’. A strong thread running throughout the chapters is how their interpretations became entangled in the changing relationships between China and the West.

Classifications

A related and recurrent theme of this book is the museological classifications of Chinese and Buddhist objects in the West. Clearly museums have always been concerned to codify knowledge, to organize material culture and place it in taxonomies. The moment an object arrives at this institution, it is assigned a category. Departments and curatorial experts use accession numbers, registers, lists, catalogues and labels to help them sort, locate and separate objects into groups, imposing order and meaning (Sherman and Rogoff 1994: x–xi). It is often the case that such categorizations are seen as neutral activities, predicated upon sci-
ence. But it is precisely the perceived objectivity of classificatory regimes that makes them so powerful. Once objects are labelled and classified, particularly in an institution that carries such authority as a museum, material is forced and fixed into types, which are often difficult to shake. While this may create connections between particular things, it also separates and divides. For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, museum objects in this sense become ‘artifacts of our disciplines’: ethnographic objects thus become ‘objects of ethnography’ (1992: 2, 17).

While it is certainly the case that ‘ethnology’ has been the dominant category into which the Putuo Five were contained and defined in the museum, it is also important to consider how, when and why they were placed in other classifications. For example, before they entered Liverpool Museum they qualified for a place in the main avenue of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and Guanyin was considered eligible to enter the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition in 1857, unlike many other non-Western objects. The Five were incorporated into mid-nineteenth-century antiquarian collections, where they existed alongside gems, cameos and ancient Greek sculptures. Objects from Africa, the Americas and the Pacific were rarely positioned in such a manner.

Yet throughout their lives in Britain, the Putuo Five were to be regarded with some ambivalence. They often did not fit neatly into the descriptive classifications of the private collection, the art market and the museum. Their classificatory fluidity was greater than that of objects from other parts of the world, which were usually placed in ethnographic collections. In the early twentieth century, they were represented as being from neither ‘primitive’ nor ‘civilized’ cultures but instead were installed in a gallery devoted to a category in-between, the ‘Mongolian’ or ‘Yellow’ race. The ambiguity is further illustrated by the range of exhibitions in which they participated. They resided in collections alongside military trophies, industrial manufactures, curiosities and antiquities. They also became part of a shifting linguistic landscape of categorization in Liverpool Museum – variously administered as part of Ethnological, Archaeological, Antiquities, Oriental Antiquities and Asian collections. In mapping the shifts in the language used to describe these bronzes, I am mindful of the ideological implications of such words. And while I track the movement of the Putuo Five from one category to the next, I also aim to expose the arbitrariness of these Western classifications.

Some of the name changes were the product of the power and posturing of curators. After the Second World War, the keeper of archaeology, Elaine Tankard, managed to wrestle many of the Asian objects away from the curatorial domain of ‘ethnology’. When I arrived at Liverpool Museum in 1996, to take up the position of curator of ethnology, I was asked to incorporate what were previously designated ‘Oriental Antiquities’ into my orbit of responsibility. I had been surprised to find the bulk of the collections from Asia residing in Antiquities, with only a fraction of the objects from this continent classified as ‘Ethnology’ – material culture predominantly from South East Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and parts of India (the Andaman and Nicobar islands, the Naga) and Japan (the Ainu). Certain aspects of the material culture of Asia had thus been
placed in the ethnographic collections – those from supposedly ‘primitive’ cultures – while other things were designated Oriental Antiquity. While in 1997 they merged, this separation of the Orient from Africa, the Americas and the Pacific had been long-standing and reflected a distinction that still operates within the classificatory hierarchy of many other museums. This book emerges out of a fascination with such institutional separations and the fact that the boundaries between what have been termed ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ objects seem so much more fluid when it comes to collections from Asia.

**Objects, People, Curators**

This book is also a story of the relationships between people and things. Indeed, the individuals who came into contact with the sculptures have been diverse, from Buddhist monks, Chinese and Japanese pilgrims, imperial soldiers, dealers, antiquarian collectors, missionaries, curators, conservators, and many others who cast their eyes on them, all of whom would have endowed them with different meanings. While many of the individual perceptions are irretrievably lost, those that are likely to have been documented and upheld emanate from the most powerful (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:50). In a UK museum, up until the 1990s, this would have been the curator.

Over the past 140 years, different curators at Liverpool Museum asserted, contested and changed the meanings of the Putuo Five. In fact, the perceived significance of the objects waxed and waned according to the personal interests of these guardians. The bronzes were sometimes marginalized from regimes of interpretation; at other times, they were given a prominent place. It is evident, of course, that all curators transmit specific interpretations in their dealings with objects, which inevitably carry ideological messages. Curators are products of their time, and in their professional practice reflect contemporary knowledge. At Liverpool Museum, some were more assertive than others in questioning previous paradigms in order to legitimate their own ideas. One of the earliest curators, Charles Gatty, demonstrated a deep knowledge of ethnology but also an ambivalent reaction to Asian material culture. In the 1880s, he wrote of the problem he faced in classifying the Oriental material. Henry Ogg Forbes, who became director in 1894, constructed displays devoted to the ‘Mongolian’ race, midway between the ‘Caucasian’ and ‘Melanian’ peoples. By the 1930s, a new curator of ethnology, Trevor Thomas, was promoting interests in modernism and aesthetics, and demonstrating a desire to distance himself from the ‘visual clutter’ of his predecessors. In reconfiguring the display arrangements, he was to alter once more the dominant meanings attributed to the statues. His colleague, Elaine Tânkard, took over the care of the objects after he resigned. She was an archaeologist, fascinated by Buddhism, who drew the Chinese collections into her orbit of concern. From the 1970s to the 1990s, other curators and researchers focused
on the formal, physical aspects of the images. In particular, by the 1980s they had become valued in a new way as a result of the preoccupations of an Oriental metalwork specialist. Finally, in the late 1990s, I attempted to develop new ideas in the redisplay of the collections – laden, of course, with my own ideological perspectives – centring on both the biographical approach and ideas of ‘contact’ and ‘encounter’ between cultures.

**Chapters**

The book is divided into episodes in the lives of the Putuo Five, and the titles of chapters are intended to denote their shifting identities. Ames notes how in museums often the purpose for studying objects is to ‘identify or reconstruct’ their original context (1992: 45). Chapter 1 is intended to do just that – to explore the meanings of these Buddhist objects in the temples of Putuo. It covers the first four hundred years in the lifespan of Guanyin, and the first two hundred years for the two sets of paired bronzes. The chapter examines how their original meanings would have been formed in relation to construction, consecration and positioning on altars in monastic complexes. It also ponders the significance of these figures to the millions of pilgrims, lay people and monks who, for centuries, worshipped them on China’s most important sacred island.

Chapter 2 tells of the movements of the British soldier, William Edie, who ‘obtained’ the bronzes after participating in the First Opium War (1839–42). As well as introducing the broader context of the relationship between China and Britain, the chapter considers the motivations behind this soldier’s desire for such things. It explores how the movement from sacred to secular worlds altered the meanings and values given to the Buddhist bronzes.

Chapter 3 interprets the organization and spatial vocabulary of the Putuo Five’s guest appearance at the Great Exhibition of 1851, reflecting upon the ideology underlying this event, the images of China that were produced, and how it was that these bronzes came to be positioned in a central place in this vast exhibitionary complex.

Further transformations of meaning are documented in Chapter 4 as the original collection formed by Edie, and displayed in 1851, became split. In the 1850s, the sculptures moved in and out of antiquarian collections and were bought and sold through private deals and at Europe’s most renowned auction house. During this period, their identities changed more frequently than at any other time. Between 1854 and 1867, they functioned variously as ‘antiquities’, ‘curiosities’, ‘art treasures’ and ‘commodities’ in London, Liverpool and Manchester.

Chapter 5 explores the lives of the objects once they crossed the threshold of the prestigious Liverpool Museum in 1867. It analyses their display in an 1882 evolutionary gallery and moves on to examine how they were re-conceptualized as specimens of the ‘Mongolian’ race in the late nineteenth century when Liver-
pool Museum was reorganized on the basis of three racial types – ‘Caucasian’, ‘Mongolian’ and ‘Melanian’.

Chapter 6 discusses the links between the Oriental displays at Liverpool Museum and modernist aesthetics. In the 1930s, the processes of highlighting objects for their formal power, rather than absorbing them into racial classifications, was the concern of the curator of ethnology, Trevor Thomas. The second part of the chapter documents the escape of the Putuo Five from the bombing of the Liverpool Museum during the Second World War, and their nomadic existence during the ensuing decades as they moved in and out of museum stores and museological classifications. It ends with the rediscovery of the objects in the 1970s, and the new interpretations placed upon them by a Chinese metalwork specialist.

Chapter 7 is devoted to the most recent phase in the cultural biography of the Putuo Five. Here I reflect on my own work as the curator of the objects at Liverpool Museum between 1996 and 2003 and document the practices and processes that led up to their display in 2005. Guanyin had a crisis of identity when she was labelled Japanese, while two of the images were utilized as key marketing symbols for the Museum’s fund raising campaign in China. Three of the statues encountered the world of conservation for the first time, and their meanings and formal imagery were reconfigured in preparation for exhibition in the Buddhism section of the World Cultures gallery. This chapter, more than any other, exposes both the workings of Liverpool Museum and my own personal relationships with these enigmatic Chinese sculptures.

The concluding chapter reviews the complex histories of the objects, analysing the impact of the shifts from one visual and interpretative context to the next. It traces how the deity figures became marked by their long and sometimes difficult journeys around the world, and explores their conceptual and physical states of transformation. It also considers debates around restitution, and the possible future lives of such internationally important Buddhist treasures – in Britain or in China.

Let us now then begin the story of our dramatis personae, the Putuo Five, in the foundries and temples of Ming dynasty China.

Notes

1. The romanization to be used is Hanyu pinyin, the standard in the People’s Republic of China.
3. PL. XXXI, u.10.b.
5. I am extremely grateful to Wang Hongyang at the University of Nanjing for making this trip possible.
6. Zachary Kingdon at Liverpool Museum very kindly brought this catalogue entry to my attention.
8. Appadurai too argues that objects engage in fluid and varied ‘social lives’ (1986: 3).
9. Myers writes: ‘Objects are circulated, defined, and transformed in meaning and value through a network of persons and a range of institutions’ (2001: 168).
12. See Berger (1972) and Gell (1998: 2) for changes over time to our ‘ways of seeing’.
13. The range of meanings through which the figures travelled is signified by the shifting terms I have applied to them, not just in the titles of chapters but in the text itself. I mostly refer to them as the Putuo Five, but also as sacred beings, deities, deity figures, images, objects, things, articles, curiosities, antiquities, commodities, artefacts, sculptures, statues, art treasures, art works, bronzes, pieces. I also (though perhaps not frequently enough) describe them by their names in Mandarin (rather than in Sanskrit) – Guanyin, Wenshu, Puxian, Weituo and Guangong.
14. It should also be pointed out that not only do these objects sit uneasily within the classificatory regimes of museums but they also cut across other Western epistemological frameworks. Such objects could equally well be studied by art historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and Oriental or religious specialists.
15. Gosden and Marshall argue, for example, that at the heart of biography are questions about the relationships between people and things (1999: 172).
CHAPTER 1
Sacred Beings in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties

This chapter deciphers the possible meanings bestowed upon the five images in their first sphere of significance in China. Our trail begins on Putuo Island and the neighbouring port city of Ningbo as we trace the birth and attempt to reconstruct the early period in the lives of these enigmatic Buddhist statues.

It should be stressed from the outset that there has been uncertainty over the exact dating of the figure of Guanyin, although recent iconography experts have tended to agree it is early fifteenth century. Regarding the construction of the other four figures, all the specialists I consulted confirmed that they were made some two hundred years later, at the end of the Ming dynasty, or the early seventeenth century.

These deity figures would have occupied specific positions in the temples of Putuo because they had previously been consecrated. Soon after they were cast, all five would have undergone a ceremony to ‘open their eyes’ and sacred scriptures were inserted within their hollow interiors. During their time in the temples they were intact: the symbols they held, the jewels embedded in them and the sacred manuscripts inside them had not then been disassociated; all of these were an integral part of the whole. The Five were a focus of religious rites, placed in halls of worship and positioned on altars in relation to the Buddhist structure of belief. The temple they resided in was also located in accordance with Chinese fengshui principles. The fact that they were in a shrine on Putuo, an island devoted to Guanyin and one of the most important pilgrimage sites in China, served to increase their potency and deepen their spiritual identities during this initial period in their cultural biographies.

To Alfred Gell, such images ‘have to be treated in the context of an anthropological theory as person-like … as sources of, and targets for, social agency’ (1998: 96). Image-worship has a central place in Gell’s thesis, for ‘nowhere’, he argues, ‘are images more obviously treated as human persons than in the context of worship and ceremonies’ (1998: 96). As he notes: